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Alexander MacLaren

Baptist Preacher And Expositor

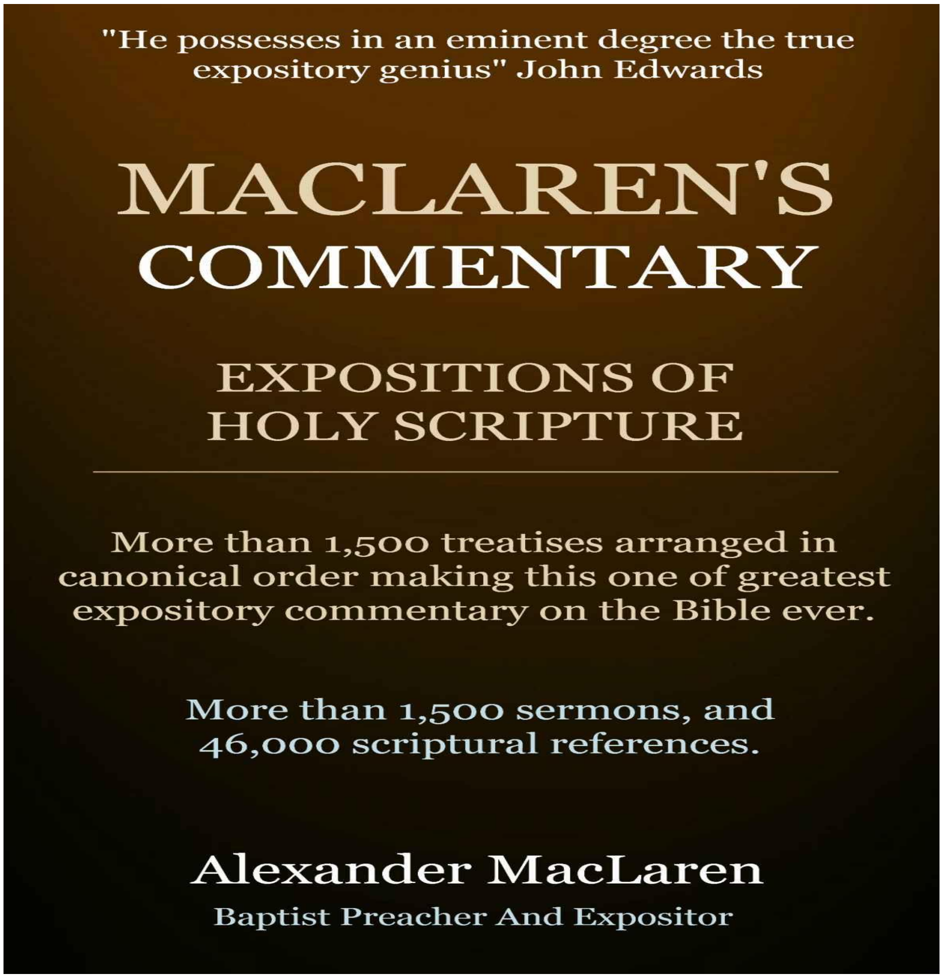

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Expositions Of Holy Scripture

BY
Alexander MacLaren, D. D., Litt. D.
[1826-1910]
Baptist preacher and expositor

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About Alexander MacLaren

Maclaren was born in Glasgow on February 11, 1826, and died in Manchester on May 5, 1910. He had been for almost sixty-five years a minister, entirely devoted to his calling. He lived more than almost any of the great preachers of his time between his study, his pulpit, his pen.

He subdued action to thought, thought to utterance and utterance to the Gospel. His life was his ministry; his ministry was his life. In 1842 he was enrolled as a candidate for the Baptist ministry at Stepney College, London. He was tall, shy, silent and looked no older than his sixteen years. But his vocation, as he himself [a consistent Calvinist] might have said, was divinely decreed. "I cannot ever recall any hesitation as to being a minister," he said. "It just had to be."

In the College he was thoroughly grounded in Greek and Hebrew. He was taught to study the Bible in the original and so the foundation was laid for his distinctive work as an expositor and for the biblical content of his preaching. Before Maclaren had finished his course of study he was invited to Portland Chapel in Southampton for three months; those three months became twelve years. He began his ministry there on June 28, 1846. His name and fame grew.

His ministry fell into a quiet routine for which he was always grateful: two sermons on Sunday, a Monday prayer meeting and a Thursday service and lecture. His parishioners thought his sermons to them were the best he ever preached. In April 1858 he was called to be minister at Union Chapel in Manchester. No ministry could have been happier. The church prospered and a new building had to be erected to seat 1,500; every sitting was taken. His renown as preacher spread throughout the English-speaking world. His pulpit became his throne. He was twice elected President of the Baptist Union. He resigned as pastor in 1905 after a ministry of forty-five years.

Maclaren’s religious life was hid with Christ in God. He walked with God day by day. He loved Jesus Christ with a reverent, holy love and lived to make Him known. In his farewell sermon at Union he said: "To efface oneself is one of a preacher’s first duties."

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1) Genesis. 1:26 To 2:3.

THE VISION OF CREATION

Gen. 1:26 - Gen. 2:3.

We are not to look to Genesis for a scientific cosmogony, and are not to be disturbed by physicists' criticisms on it as such. Its purpose is quite another, and far more important; namely, to imprint deep and ineffaceable the conviction that the one God created all things. Nor must it be forgotten that this vision of creation was given to people ignorant of natural science, and prone to fall back into surrounding idolatry. The comparison of the creation narratives in Genesis with the cuneiform tablets, with which they evidently are most closely connected, has for its most important result the demonstration of the infinite elevation above their monstrosities and puerilities, of this solemn, steadfast attribution of the creative act to the one God. Here we can only draw out in brief the main points which the narrative brings into prominence.

1. The revelation which it gives is the truth, obscured to all other men when it was given, that one God 'in the beginning created the heaven and the earth.' That solemn utterance is the keynote of the whole. The rest but expands it. It was a challenge and a denial for all the beliefs of the nations, the truth of which Israel was the champion and missionary. It swept the heavens and earth clear of the crowd of gods, and showed the One

enthroned above, and operative in, all things. We can scarcely estimate the grandeur, the emancipating power, the all-uniting force, of that utterance. It is a worn commonplace to us. It was a strange, thrilling novelty when it was written at the head of this narrative. *Then* it was in sharp opposition to beliefs that have long been dead to us; but it is still a protest against some living errors. Physical science has not spoken the final word when it has shown us how things came to be as they are. There remains the deeper question, What, or who, originated and guided the processes? And the only answer is the ancient declaration, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.'

2. The record is as emphatic and as unique in its teaching as to the mode of creation: 'God said . . . and it was so.' That lifts us above all the poor childish myths of the nations, some of them disgusting, many of them absurd, all of them unworthy. There was no other agency than the putting forth of the divine will. The speech of God is but a symbol of the flashing forth of His will. To us Christians the antique phrase suggests a fulness of meaning not inherent in it, for we have learned to believe that 'all things were made by Him' whose name is 'The Word of God'; but, apart from that, the representation here is sublime. 'He spake, and it was done'; that is the sign-manual of Deity.

3. The completeness of creation is emphasised. We note, not only the recurrent 'and it was so,' which declares the perfect correspondence of the result with the divine intention, but also the recurring 'God saw that it was good.' His ideals are always realised. The divine artist never finds that the embodiment of His thought falls short of His thought.

'What act is all its thought had been?
What will but felt the fleshly screen?

But He has no hindrances nor incompletenesses in His creative work, and the very sabbath rest with which the narrative closes symbolises, not His need of repose, but His perfect accomplishment of His purpose. God ceases from His works because 'the works were finished,' and He saw that all was very good.

4. The progressiveness of the creative process is brought into strong relief. The work of the first four days is the preparation of the dwelling-place for the living creatures who are afterwards created to inhabit it. How far the details of these days' work coincide with the order as science has made it out, we are not careful to ask here. The primeval chaos, the separation of the waters above from the waters beneath, the emergence of the land, the beginning of vegetation there, the shining out of the sun as the dense mists cleared, all find confirmation even in modern theories of evolution. But the intention of the whole is much rather to teach that, though the simple utterance of the divine will was the agent of creation, the manner of it was not a sudden calling of the world, as men know it, into being, but majestic, slow advance by stages, each of which rested on the preceding. To apply the old distinction between justification and sanctification, creation was a work, not an act. The Divine Workman, who is always patient, worked slowly then as He does now. Not at a leap, but by deliberate steps, the divine ideal attains realisation.

5. The creation of living creatures on the fourth and fifth days is so arranged as to lead up to the creation of man as the climax. On the fifth day sea and air are peopled, and their denizens 'blessed,' for the equal divine love holds every living thing to its heart. On the sixth day the earth is replenished with living creatures. Then, last of all, comes man, the apex of creation. Obviously the purpose of the whole is to concentrate the light on man; and it is a matter of no importance whether the narrative is correct according to zoology, or not. What it says is that God made all the universe, that He prepared the earth for the delight of living creatures, that the happy birds that soar and sing, and the dumb creatures that move through the paths of the seas, and the beasts of the earth, are all His creating, and that man is linked to them, being made on the same day as the latter, and by the same word, but that between man and them all there is a gulf, since he is made in the divine image. That image implies personality, the consciousness of self, the power to say 'I,' as well as purity. The transition from the work of the first four days to that of creating living things must have had a break. No theory has been able to bridge the chasm without admitting a divine act introducing the new element of life, and none has been able to bridge the gulf between the animal and human consciousness without admitting a divine act introducing 'the image of God' into the nature common to animal

and man. Three facts as to humanity are thrown up into prominence: its possession of the image of God, the equality and eternal interdependence of the sexes, and the lordship over all creatures. Mark especially the remarkable wording of Gen. 1:27 : 'created He *him* male and female created He *them*.' So 'neither is the woman without the man, nor the man without the woman.' Each is maimed apart from the other. Both stand side by side, on one level before God. The germ of the most 'advanced' doctrines of the relations of the sexes is hidden here.

2) Genesis 2:1-3 See: Genesis. 1:26 To 2:3.

3) Genesis 3:1-15

Genesis

HOW SIN CAME IN

Gen. 3:1 - Gen. 3:15.

It is no part of my purpose to enter on the critical questions connected with the story of 'the fall.' Whether it is a legend, purified and elevated, or not, is of less consequence than what is its moral and religious significance, and that significance is unaffected by the answer to the former question. The story presupposes that primitive man was in a state of ignorant innocence, not of intellectual or moral perfection, and it tells how that ignorant innocence came to pass into conscious sin. What are the stages of the transition?

1. There is the presentation of inducement to evil. The law to which Adam is to be obedient is in the simplest form. There is restriction. 'Thou shalt not' is the first form of law, and it is a form congruous with the undeveloped, though as yet innocent, nature ascribed to him. The conception of duty is present, though in a very rudimentary shape. An innocent being may be aware of limitations, though as yet not 'knowing good and evil.' With deep truth the story represents the first suggestion of disobedience as presented from without. No doubt, it might have by degrees arisen from within, but the thought that it was imported from another sphere of being suggests that it is alien to true manhood, and that, if brought in from without, it may be cast out again. And the temptation had a personal source. There are beings who desire to draw men away from God. The serpent, by its poison and its loathly form, is the natural symbol of such an enemy of man. The insinuating slyness of the suggestions of evil is like the sinuous gliding of the snake, and truly represents the process by which temptation found its way into the hearts of the first pair, and of all their descendants. For it begins with casting a doubt on the reality of the prohibition. ‘Hath God said?’ is the first parallel opened by the besieger. The fascinations of the forbidden fruit are not dangled at first before Eve, but an apparently innocent doubt is filtered into her ear. And is not that the way in which we are still snared? The reality of moral distinctions, the essential wrongness of the sin, is obscured by a mist of sophistication. ‘There is no harm in it’ steals into some young man’s or woman’s mind about things that were forbidden at home, and they are half conquered before they know that they have been attacked. Then comes the next besieger’s trench, much nearer the wall-namely, denial of the fatal consequences of the sin: ‘Ye shall not surely die,’ and a base hint that the prohibition was meant, not as a parapet to keep from falling headlong into the abyss, but as a barrier to keep from rising to a great good; ‘for God doth know, that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods.’ These are still the two lies which wile us to sin: ‘It will do you no harm,’ and ‘You are cheating yourselves out of good by not doing it.’

2. Then comes the yielding to the tempter. As long as the prohibition was undoubted, and the fatal results certain, the fascinations of the forbidden thing were not felt. But as soon as these were tampered with, Eve saw ‘that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes.’ So it is still. Weaken the awe-inspiring sense of God’s command, and of the ruin that follows the breach of it, and the heart of man is like a city without walls, into which any enemy can march unhindered. So long as God’s ‘Thou shalt not, lest thou die’ rings in the ears, the eyes see little beauty in the sirens that sing and beckon. But once that awful voice is deadened, they charm, and allure to dally with them.

In the undeveloped condition of primitive man temptation could only assail him through the senses and appetites, and its assault would be the more irresistible because reflection and experience were not yet his. But the act of yielding was, as sin ever is, a deliberate choice to please self and disobey God. The woman’s more emotional, sensitive, compliant nature made her the first victim, and her greatest glory, her craving to share her good with him whom she loves, and her power to sway his will and acts, made her his temptress. ‘As the husband is, the wife is,’ says Tennyson; but the converse is even truer: As the wife is, the man is.

3. The fatal consequences came with a rush. There is a gulf between being tempted and sinning, but the results of the sin are closely knit to it. They come automatically, as surely as a stream from a fountain. The promise of knowing good and evil was indeed kept, but instead of its making the sinners ‘like gods,’ it showed them that they were like beasts, and brought the first sense of shame. To know evil was, no doubt, a forward step intellectually; but to know it by experience, and as part of themselves, necessarily changed their ignorant innocence into bitter knowledge, and conscience awoke to rebuke them. The first thing that their opened eyes saw was themselves, and the immediate result of the sight was the first blush of shame. Before, they had walked in innocent unconsciousness, like angels or infants; now they had knowledge of good and evil, because their sin had made evil a part of themselves, and the knowledge was bitter.

The second consequence of the fall is the disturbed relation with God, which is presented in the highly symbolical form fitting for early ages, and as true and impressive for the twentieth century as for them. Sin broke familiar communion with God, turned Him into a ‘fear and a dread,’ and sent the guilty pair into ambush. Is not that deeply and perpetually true? The sun seen through mists becomes a lurid ball of scowling fire. The impulse is to hide from God, or to get rid of thoughts of Him. And when He *is* felt to be near, it is as a questioner, bringing sin to mind. The shuffling excuses, which venture even to throw the blame of sin on God [‘the woman whom *Thou* gavest me’], or which try to palliate it as a mistake [‘the serpent beguiled me’], have to come at last, however reluctantly, to confess that ‘I’ did the sin. Each has to say, ‘I did eat.’ So shall we all have to do. We may throw the blame on circumstances, weakness of judgment, and the like, while here, but at God’s bar we shall have to say, ‘*Mea* culpa, *mea* culpa.’

The curse pronounced on the serpent takes its habit and form as an emblem of the degradation of the personal tempter, and of the perennial antagonism between him and mankind, while even at that first hour of sin and retribution a gleam of hope, like the stray beam that steals through a gap in a thundercloud, promises that the conquered shall one day be the conqueror, and that the woman's seed, though wounded in the struggle, shall one day crush the poison-bearing, flat head in the dust, and end forever his power to harm. 'Known unto God are all his works from the beginning,' and the Christ was promised ere the gates of Eden were shut on the exiles.

4) Genesis 3:24

Genesis

EDEN LOST AND RESTORED

Gen. 3:24. - Rev. 22:14.

Better is the end of a thing than the beginning.' Eden was fair, but the heavenly city shall be fairer. The Paradise regained is an advance on the Paradise that was lost. These are the two ends of the history of man, separated by who knows how many millenniums. Heaven lay about him in his infancy, but as he journeyed westwards its morning blush faded into the light of common day-and only at eventide shall the sky glow again with glory and colour, and the western heaven at last outshine the eastern, with a light that shall never die. A fall, and a rise-a rise that reverses the fall, a rise that transcends the glory from which he fell,-that is the Bible's notion of the history of the world, and I, for my part, believe it to be true, and feel it to be the one satisfactory explanation of what I see round about me and am conscious of within me.

1. ***Man had an Eden and lost it.***

I take the Fall to be a historical fact. To all who accept the authority of Scripture, no words are needed beyond the simple statement before us, but we may just gather up the signs that there are on the wide field of the world's history, and in the narrower experience of individuals, that such a fall has been.

Look at the condition of the world: its degradation, its savagery-all its pining myriads, all its untold millions who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. Will any man try to bring before him the actual state of the heathen world, and, retaining his belief in a God, profess that these men are what God meant men to be? It seems to me that the present condition of the world is not congruous with the idea that men are in their primitive state, and if this is what God meant men for, then I see not how the dark clouds which rest on His wisdom and His love are to be lifted off.

Then, again-if the world has not a Fall in its history, then we must take the lowest condition as the one from which all have come; and is that idea capable of defence? Do we see anywhere signs of an upward process going on now? Have we any experience of a tribe raising itself? Can you catch anywhere a race in the act of struggling up, outside of the pale of Christianity? Is not the history of all a history of decadence, except only where the Gospel has come in to reverse the process?

But passing from this: What mean the experiences of the individual-these longings; this hard toil; these sorrows?

How comes it that man alone on earth, manifestly meant to be leader, lord, etc., seems but cursed with a higher nature that he may know greater sorrows, and raised above the beasts in capacity that he may sink below them in woe, this capacity only leading to a more exquisite susceptibility, to a more various as well as more poignant misery?

Whence come the contrarieties and discordance in his nature?

It seems to me that all this is best explained as the Bible explains it by saying: [1] Sin has done it; [2] Sin is not part of God’s original design, but man has fallen; [3] Sin had a personal beginning. There have been men who were pure, able to stand but free to fall.

It seems to me that that explanation is more in harmony with the facts of the case, finds more response in the unsophisticated instinct of man, than any other. It seems to me that, though it leaves many dark and sorrowful mysteries all unsolved, yet that it alleviates the blackest of them, and flings some rays of hope on them all. It seems to me that it relieves the character and administration of God from the darkest dishonour; that it delivers man's position and destiny from the most hopeless despair; that though it leaves the mystery of the origin of evil, it brings out into clearest relief the central truths that evil is evil, and sin and sorrow are not God's will; that it vindicates as something better than fond imaginings the vague aspirations of the soul for a fair and holy state; that it establishes, as nothing else will, at once the love of God and the dignity of man; that it leaves open the possibility of the final overthrow of that Sin which it treats as an intrusion and stigmatises as a fall; that it therefore braces for more vigorous, hopeful conflict against it, and that while but for it the answer to the despairing question, Hast Thou made all men in vain? must be either the wailing echo 'In vain,' or the denial that He has made them at all, there is hope and there is power, and there is brightness thrown on the character of God and on the fate of man, by the old belief that God made man upright, and that man made himself a sinner.

2. *Heaven restores the lost Eden*.

'God is not ashamed to be called their God, *for* He hath prepared them a *city*.'

The highest conception we can form of heaven is the reversal of all the evil of earth, and the completion of its incomplete good: the sinless purity-the blessed presence of God-the fulfilment of all desires-the service which is *blessed*, not toil-the changelessness which is progress, not stagnation.

3. *Heaven surpasses the lost Eden*.

[1] Garden-City.

The perfection of association-the *nations* of the saved. Here 'we mortal millions live alone,' even when united with dearest. Like Egyptian monks of old, each dwelling in his own cave, though all were a community.

[2] The richer experience.

The memory of past sorrows which are understood at last.

Heaven’s bliss in contrast with earthly joys.

Sinlessness of those who have been sinners will be more intensely lustrous for its dark background in the past. Redeemed men will be brighter than angels.

The impossibility of a fall.

Death behind us.

The former things shall no more come to mind, being lost in blaze of present transcendent experience, but yet shall be remembered as having led to that perfect state.

Christ not only repairs the ‘tabernacle which was fallen,’ but builds a fairer temple. He brings ‘a statelier Eden,’ and makes us dwell for ever in a Garden City.

5) Genesis 4:3-6

Genesis

THE GROWTH AND POWER OF SIN

Gen. 4:3 - Gen. 4:16.

Many lessons crowd on us from this section. Its general purport is to show the growth of sin, and its power to part man from man even as it has parted man from God. We may call the whole ‘The beginning of the fatal operations of sin on human society.’

1. The first recorded act of worship occasions the first murder. Is not that only too correct a forecast of the oceans of blood which have been shed in the name of religion, and a striking proof of the subtle power of sin to corrupt even the best, and out of it to make the worst? What a lesson against the bitter hatred which has too often sprung up on so-called religious grounds! No malice is so venomous, no hate so fierce, no cruelty so fiendish, as those which are fed and fanned by religion. Here is the first triumph of sin, that it poisons the very springs of worship, and makes what should be the great uniter of men in sweet and holy bonds their great separator.

2. Sin here appears as having power to bar men’s way to God. Much ingenuity has been spent on the question why Abel’s offering was accepted and Cain’s rejected. But the narrative itself shows in the words of Jehovah, ‘If thou doest well, is there not acceptance?’ that the reason lay in Cain’s evil deeds. So, in 1Jn. 3:12, the fratricide is put down to the fact that ‘his works were evil, and his brother’s righteous’; and Heb. 11:4 differs from this view only in making the ground of righteousness prominent, when it ascribes the acceptableness of Abel’s offering to faith. Both these passages are founded on the narrative, and we need not seek farther for the reason of the different reception of the two offerings. Character, then, or, more truly, faith, which is the foundation of a righteous character, determines the acceptableness of worship. Cain’s offering had no sense of dependence, no outgoing of love and trust, no adoration,-though it may have had fear,-and no moral element. So it had no sweet odour for God. Abel’s was sprinkled with some drops of the incense of lowly trust, and came from a heart which fain would be pure; therefore it was a joy to God. So we are taught at the very beginning, that, as is the man, so is his sacrifice; that the prayer of the wicked is an abomination. Plenty of worship nowadays is Cain worship. Many reputable professing Christians bring just such sacrifices. The prayers of such never reach higher than the church ceiling. Of course, the lesson of the story is not that a man must be pure before his sacrifice is accepted. Of course, the faintest cry of trust is heard, and a contrite heart, however sinful, is always welcome. But we are taught that our acts of worship must have our hearts in them, and that it is vain to pray and to love evil. Sin has the awful power of blocking our way to God.

3. Note in one word that we have here at the beginning of human history the solemn distinction which runs through it all. These two, so near in blood, so separate in spirit, head the two classes into which Scripture decisively parts men, especially men who have heard the gospel. It is unfashionable now to draw that broad line between the righteous and the wicked, believers and unbelievers. Sheep and goats are all one. Modern liberal sentiment-so-called-will not consent to such narrowness as the old-fashioned classification. There are none of us black, and none white; we are all different shades of grey. But facts do not quite bear out such amiable views. Perhaps it is not less charitable, and a great deal truer, to draw the line broad and plain, on one side of which is peace and safety, and on the other trouble and death, if only we make it plain that no man need stop one minute on the dark side.

4. The solemn divine voice reads the lesson of the power of sin, when once done, over the sinner. Like a wild beast, it crouches in ambush at his door, ready to spring and devour. The evil deed once committed takes shape, as it were, and waits to seize the doer. Remorse, inward disturbance, and above all, the fatal inclination to repeat sin till it becomes a habit, are set forth with terrible force in these grim figures. What a menagerie of ravenous beasts some of us have at the doors of our hearts! With what murderous longing they glare at us, seeking to fascinate us, and make us their prey! When we sin, we cannot escape the issues; and every wrong thing we do has a kind of horrible life given it, and sits henceforth there, beside us, ready to rend us. The tempting, seducing power of our own evils was never put in more startling and solemnly true words, on which the bitter experience of many a poor victim of his own past is a commentary. The eternal duty of resistance is farther taught by the words. Hope of victory, encouragement to struggle, the assurance that even these savage beasts may be subdued, and the lion and adder [the hidden and the glaring evils-those which wound unseen, and which spring with a roar] may be overcome, led in a silken leash or charmed into harmlessness, are given in the command, which is also a promise, ‘Rule thou over it.’

5. The deadly fruit of hate is taught us in the brief account of the actual murder. Notice the impressive plainness and fewness of the words. ‘Cain rose up against his brother, and slew him.’ A kind of horror-struck awe of the crime is audible. Observe the emphasis with which ‘his brother’ is repeated in the verse and throughout. Observe, also, the vivid light thrown by the story on the rise and progress of the sin. It begins with envy and jealousy. Cain was not wroth because his offering was rejected. What did he care for that? But what angered him was that his brother had what he had not. So selfishness was at the bottom, and that led on to envy, and that to hatred. Then comes a pause, in which God speaks remonstrances,-as God’s voice-conscience-does now to us all,-between the imagination and the act of evil. A real or a feigned reconciliation is effected. The brothers go in apparent harmony to the field. No new provocation appears, but the old feelings, kept down for a time, come in again with a rush, and Cain is swept away by them. Hatred left to work means murder. The heart is the source of all evil. Selfishness is the mother tincture out of which all sorts of sin can be made. Guard the thoughts, and keep down self, and the deeds will take care of themselves.

6. Mark how close on the heels of sin God's question treads! How God spoke, we know not. Doubtless in some fashion suited to the needs of Cain. But He speaks to us as really as to him, and no sooner is the rush of passion over, and the bad deed done, than a revulsion comes. What we call conscience asks the question in stern tones, which make a man's flesh creep. Our sin is like touching the electric bells which people sometimes put on their windows to give notice of thieves. As soon as we step beyond the line of duty we set the alarm going, and it wakens the sleeping conscience. Some of us go so far as to have silenced the voice within; but, for the most part, it speaks immediately after we have gratified our inclinations wrongly.

7. Cain's defiant answer teaches us how a man hardens himself against God's voice. It also shows us how intensely selfish all sin is, and how weakly foolish its excuses are. It is sin which has rent men apart from men, and made them deny the very idea that they have duties to all men. The first sin was only against God; the second was against God and man. The first sin did not break, though it saddened, human love; the second kindled the flames of infernal hatred, and caused the first drops to flow of the torrents of blood which have soaked the earth. When men break away from God, they will soon murder one another.

Cain was his brother's keeper. His question answered itself. If Abel was his brother, then he was bound to look after him. His self-condemning excuse is but a specimen of the shallow pleas by which the forgetfulness of duties we owe to all mankind, and all sins, are defended.

8. The stern sentence is next pronounced. First we have the grand figure of the innocent blood having a voice which pierces the heavens. That teaches in the most forcible way the truth that God knows the crimes done by ‘man’s inhumanity to man,’ even when the meek sufferers are silent. According to the fine old legend of the cranes of Ibycus, a bird of the air will carry the matter. It speaks, too, of God’s tender regard for His saints, whose blood is precious in His sight; and it teaches that He will surely requite. We cannot but think of the innocent blood shed on Calvary, of the Brother of us all, whose sacrifice was accepted of God. His blood, too, crieth from the ground, has a voice which speaks in the ear of God, but not to plead for vengeance, but pardon.

‘Jesus’ blood through earth and skies,
Mercy, free, boundless mercy, cries.’

Then follows the sentence which falls into two parts-the curse of bitter, unrequited toil, and the doom of homeless wandering. The blood which has been poured out on the battlefield fertilises the soil; but Abel’s blasted the earth. It was a supernatural infliction, to teach that bloodshed polluted the earth, and so to shed a nameless horror over the deed. We see an analogous feeling in the common belief that places where some foul sin has been committed are cursed. We see a weak natural correspondence in the devastating effect of war, as expressed in the old saying that no grass would grow where the hoof of the Turk’s horse had stamped.

The doom of wandering, which would be compulsory by reason of the earth’s barrenness, is a parable. The murderer is hunted from place to place, as the Greek fable has it, by the furies, who suffer him not to rest. Conscience drives a man ‘through dry places, seeking rest, and finding none.’ All sin makes us homeless wanderers. There is but one home for the heart, one place of repose for a man, namely, in the heart of God, the secret place of the Most High; and he who, for his sin, durst not enter there, is driven forth into ‘a salt land and not inhabited,’ and has to wander wearily there. The legend of the wandering Jew, and that other of the sailor, condemned for ever to fly before the gale through stormy seas, have in them a deep truth. The earthly punishment of departing from God is that we have not where to lay our heads. Every sinner is a fugitive and a vagabond. But if we love God we are still wanderers indeed, but we are ‘pilgrims and sojourners with Thee.’

9. Cain’s remonstrance completes the tragic picture. We see in it despair without penitence. He has no word of confession. If he had accepted his chastisement, and learned by it his sin, all the bitterness would have passed away. But he only writhes in agony, and adds, to the sentence pronounced, terrors of his own devising. God had not forbidden him to come into His presence. But he feels that he dare not venture thither. And he was right; for, whether we suppose that some sensible manifestation of the divine presence is meant by ‘Thy face’ or no, a man who had unrepented sin on his conscience, and murmurings in his heart, could not hold intercourse with God; nor would he wish to do so. Thus we learn again the lesson that sin separates from our Father, and that chastisements, not accepted as signs of His love, build up a black wall between God and us.

Nor had Cain been told that his life was in danger. But his conscience made a coward of him, as of us all, and told him what he deserved. There were, no doubt, many other children of Adam, who would be ready to avenge Abel’s death. The wild justice of revenge is deep in the heart of men; and the natural impulse would be to hunt down the murderer like a wolf. It is a dreadful picture of the defiant and despairing sinner, tortured by well-founded fears, shut out from the presence of God, but not able to shut out thoughts of Him, and seeing an avenger in every man.

We need not ask how God set a mark on Cain. Enough that His doing so was a merciful alleviation of his lot, and teaches us how God’s long-suffering spares life, and tempers judgment, that there may still be space for repentance. If even Cain has gracious protection and mercy blended with his chastisement, who can be beyond the pale of God’s compassion, and with whom will not His loving providence and patient pity labour? No man is so scorched by the fire of retribution, but many a dewy drop from God’s tenderness falls on him. No doubt, the story of the preservation of Cain was meant to restrain the blood-feuds so common and ruinous in early times; and we need the lesson yet, to keep us from vengeance under the mask of justice. But the deepest lesson and truest pathos of it lies in the picture of the watchful kindness of God lingering round the wretched man, like gracious sunshine playing on some scarred and black rock, to win him back by goodness to penitence, and through penitence to peace.

6) Genesis 4:7

Genesis

THE GROWTH AND POWER OF SIN

WHAT CROUCHES AT THE DOOR

Gen. 4:7.

These early narratives clothe great moral and spiritual truths in picturesque forms, through which it is difficult for us to pierce. In the world's childhood God spoke to men as to children, because there were no words then framed which would express what we call abstract conceptions. They had to be shown by pictures. But these early men, simple and childlike as they were, had consciences; and one abstraction they did understand, and that was sin. They knew the difference between good and evil.

So we have here God speaking to Cain, who was wroth because of the rejection of his sacrifice; and in dim, enigmatical words setting forth the reason of that rejection. 'If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?' Then clearly his sacrifice was rejected because it was the sacrifice of an evil-doer. His description as such is given in the words of my text, which are hard for us to translate into our modern, less vivid and picturesque language. 'If thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door; and unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.' Strange as the words sound, if I mistake not, they convey some very solemn lessons, and if well considered, become pregnant with meaning.

The key to the whole interpretation of them is to remember that they describe what happens after, and because of, wrong-doing. They are all suspended on 'If thou doest not well.' Then, in that case, for the first thing-'sin lieth at the door.' Now the word translated here 'lieth' is employed only to express the *crouching* of an animal, and frequently of a wild animal. The picture, then, is of the wrong-doer's sin lying at his door there like a crouching tiger ready to spring, and if it springs, fatal. 'If thou doest not well, a wild beast crouches at thy door.'

Then there follow, with a singular swift transition of the metaphor, other words still harder to interpret, and which have been, as a matter of fact, interpreted in very diverse fashions. ‘And unto thee shall be *its*” [I make that slight alteration upon our version] ‘desire, and thou shalt rule over it.’ Where did we hear these words before? They were spoken to Eve, in the declaration of her punishment. They contain the blessing that was embedded in the curse. ‘Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.’ The longing of the pure womanly heart to the husband of her love, and the authority of the husband over the loving wife-the source of the deepest joy and purity of earth, is transferred, by a singularly bold metaphor, to this other relationship, and, in horrible parody of the wedded union and love, we have the picture of the sin, that was thought of as crouching at the sinner’s door like a wild beast, now, as it were, wedded to him. He is mated to it now, and it has a kind of tigerish, murderous desire after him, while he on his part is to subdue and control it.

The reference of these clauses to the sin which has just been spoken of involves, no doubt, a very bold figure, which has seemed to many readers too bold to be admissible, and the words have therefore been supposed to refer to Abel, who, as the younger brother, would be subordinate to Cain. But such a reference breaks the connection of the sentence, introduces a thought which is not a consequence of Cain’s not doing well, has no moral bearing to warrant its appearance here, and compels us to travel an inconveniently long distance back in the context to find an antecedent to the ‘his’ and ‘him’ of our text. It seems to be more in consonance, therefore, with the archaic style of the whole narrative, and to yield a profounder and worthier meaning, if we recognise the boldness of the metaphor, and take ‘sin’ as the subject of the whole. Now all this puts in concrete, metaphorical shape, suited to the stature of the bearers, great and solemn truths. Let us try to translate them into more modern speech.

1. First think, then, of that wild beast which we tether to our doors by our wrong-doing.

We talk about ‘responsibility’ and ‘guilt,’ and ‘consequences that never can be effaced,’ and the like. And all these abstract and quasi-philosophical terms are implied in the grim, tremendous metaphor of my text ‘If thou doest not well, a tiger, a wild beast, is crouching at thy door.' We are all apt to be deceived by the imagination that when an evil deed is done, it passes away and leaves no permanent results. The lesson taught the childlike primitive man here, at the beginning, before experience had accumulated instances which might demonstrate the solemn truth, was that every human deed is immortal, and that the transitory evil thought, or word, or act, which seems to fleet by like a cloud, has a permanent being, and hereafter haunts the life of the doer, as a real presence. If thou doest not well, thou dost create a horrible something which nestles beside thee henceforward. The momentary act is incarnated, as it were, and sits there at the doer's doorpost waiting for him; which being turned into less forcible but more modern language, is just this: every sin that a man does has perennial consequences, which abide with the doer for evermore.

I need not dwell upon illustrations of that to any length. Let me just run over two or three ways in which it is true. First of all, there is that solemn fact which we put into a long word that comes glibly off people's lips, and impresses them very little-the solemn fact of responsibility. We speak in common talk of such and such a thing lying at some one's door. Whether the phrase has come from this text I do not know. But it helps to illustrate the force of these words, and to suggest that they mean this, among other things, that we have to answer for every deed, however evanescent, however long forgotten. Its guilt is on our heads. Its consequences have to be experienced by us. We drink as we have brewed. As we make our beds, so we lie on them. There is no escape from the law of consequences. 'If 'twere done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly.' But seeing that it is not done when 'tis done, then perhaps it would be better that it were not done at all. Your deed of a moment, forgotten almost as soon as done, lies there at your door; or to take a more modern and commercial figure, it is debited to your account, and stands inscribed against you for ever.

Think how you would like it, if all your deeds from your childhood, all your follies, your vices, your evil thoughts, your evil impulses, and your evil actions, were all made visible and embodied there before you. They are there, though you do not see them yet. All round your door they sit, ready to meet you and to bay out condemnation as you go forth. They are there, and one day you will find out that they are. For this is the law, certain as the revolution of the stars and fixed as the pillars of the firmament: ‘Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap’ There is no seed which does not sprout in the harvest of the moral life. Every deed germinates according to its kind. For all that a man does he has to carry the consequences, and every one shall bear his own burden. ‘If thou doest not well,’ it is not, as we fondly conceive it sometimes to be, a mere passing deflection from the rule of right, which is done and done with, but we have created, as out of our very own substance, a witness against ourselves whose voice can never be stifled. ‘If thou doest not well’ thy sin takes permanent form and is fastened to thy door.

And then let me remind you, too, how the metaphor of our text is confirmed by other obvious facts, on which I need but briefly dwell. Putting aside all the remoter bearings of that thought of responsibility, I suppose we all admit that we have consciences; I suppose that we all know that we have memories; I suppose we all of us have seen, in the cases of others, and have experienced for ourselves, how deeds long done and long forgotten have an awful power of rising again after many long years.

Be sure that your memory has in it everything that you ever did. A landscape may be hidden by mists, but a puff of wind will clear them away, and it will all lie there, visible to the furthest horizon. There is no fact more certain than the extraordinary swiftness and completeness with which, in certain circumstances of life, and often very near the close of it, the whole panorama of the past may rise again before a man, as if one lightning flash showed all the dreary desolation that lay behind him. There have been men recovered from drowning and the like, who have told us that, as in an instant, there seemed unrolled before their startled eyes the whole scroll of their earthly career.

The records of memory are like those pages on which you write with sympathetic ink, which disappears when dry, and seems to leave the page blank. You have only to hold it before the fire, or subject it to the proper chemical process, and at once it stands out legible. You are writing your biography upon the fleshly tables of your heart, my brother; and one day it will all be spread out before you, and you will be bid to read it, and to say what you think of it. The stings of a nettle will burn for days, if they are touched with water. The sting and inflammation of your evil deeds, though it has died down, is capable of being resuscitated, and it will be.

What an awful menagerie of unclean beasts some of us have at our doors! What sort of creatures have you tethered at yours? Crawling serpents, ugly and venomous; wild creatures, fierce and bloody, obscene and foul; tigers and bears; lustful and mischievous apes and monkeys? or such as are lovely and of good report,-doves and lambs, creatures pure and peaceable, patient to serve and gentle of spirit? Remember, remember, that what a man soweth-be it hemlock or be it wheat-that, and nothing else, ‘shall he reap.’

2. Now, let us look for a moment at the next thought that is here; which is put into a strong, and, to our modern notions, somewhat violent metaphor;-the horrible longing, as it were, of sin toward the sinner: ‘Unto thee shall be its desire.’

As I explained, these words are drawn from the previous chapter, where they refer to the holy union of heart and affection in husband and wife. Here they are transferred with tremendous force, to set forth that which is a kind of horrible parody of that conjugal relation. A man is married to his wickedness, is mated to his evil, and it has, as it were, a tigerish longing for him, unhallowed and murderous. That is to say-our sins act towards us as if they desired to draw our love to themselves. This is just another form of the statement, that when once a man has done a wrong thing, it has an awful power of attracting him and making him hunger to do it again. Every evil that I do may, indeed, for a moment create in me a revulsion of conscience; but it also exercises a fascination over me which it is hard to resist. It is a great deal easier to find a man who has never done a wrong thing than to find a man who has only done it once. If the wall of the dyke is sound it will keep the water out, but if there is the tiniest hole in it, the flood will come in. So the evil that you do asserts its power over you, or, in the vigorous metaphor of my text, it has a fierce, longing desire after you, and it gets you into its clutches.

‘The foolish woman sitteth in the high places of the city, and saith, Whoso is simple let him turn in hither.’ And foolish men go after her, and-’know not that her guests are in the depth of hell.’ Ah! my brother! beware of that siren voice that draws you away from all the sweet and simple and pure food which Wisdom spreads upon her table, to tempt the beast that is in you with the words, ‘Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.’ Beware of the first step, for as sure as you are living, the first step taken will make the second seem to become necessary. The first drop will be followed by a bigger second, and the second, at a shorter interval, by a more copious third, until the drops become a shower, and the shower becomes a deluge. The river of evil is ever wider and deeper, and more tumultuous. The little sins get in at the window, and open the front door for the full-grown house-breakers. One smooths the path for the other. All sin has an awful power of perpetuating and increasing itself. As the prophet says in his vision of the doleful creatures that make their sport in the desolate city, ‘None of them shall want her mate. The wild beasts of the desert shall meet with the wild beasts of the island.’ Every sin tells upon character, and makes the repetition of itself more and more easy. ‘None is barren among them.’ And all sin is linked together in a slimy tangle, like a field of seaweed, so that the man once caught in its oozy fingers is almost sure to be drowned.

3. And now, lastly, one word about the command, which is also a promise: ‘To thee shall be its desire, and thou shalt rule over it.’

Man’s primitive charter, according to the earlier chapters of Genesis, was to have dominion over the beasts of the field. Cain knew what it was to war against the wild creatures which contested the possession of the earth with man, and to tame some of them for his uses. And, says the divine voice, just as you war against the beasts of prey, just as you subdue to your purposes and yoke to your implements the tamable animals over which you have dominion, so rule over *this* wild beast that is threatening you. It is needful for all men, if they do not mean to be torn to pieces, to master the animal that is in them, and the wild thing that has been created out of them. It is bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh. It is your own evil that is thus incarnated there, as it were, before you; and you have to subdue it, if it is not to tyrannise over you. We all admit that in theory, but how terribly hard the practice! The words of our text seem to carry but little hope or comfort in them, to the man who has tried-as, no doubt, many of us have tried-to flee the lusts that war against the soul, and to bridle the animal that is in him. Those who have done so most honestly know best how hard it is, and may fairly ask, Is this useless repetition of the threadbare injunction all that you have to say to us? If so, you may as well hold your tongue. A wild beast sits at my door, you say, and then you bid me, ‘Rule thou over it!’ Tell me to tame the tiger! ‘Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook? Wilt thou take him a servant for ever?’

I do not undervalue the earnest and sometimes partially successful efforts at moral reformation which some men of more than usual force of character are able to make, emancipating themselves from the outward practice of gross sin, and achieving for themselves much that is admirable. But if we rightly understand what sin is-namely, the taking self for our law and centre instead of God-and how deep its working and all-pervading its poison, we shall learn the tragic significance of the prophets question, ‘Can the leopard change his spots?’ Then may a man cast out sin from his nature by his own resolve, when the body can eliminate poison from the veins by its own energy. If there is nothing more to be said to the world than this message, ‘Sin lieth at thy door-rule thou over it,’ we have no gospel to preach, and sin’s dominion is secure. For there is nothing in all this world of empty, windy words, more empty and windy than to come to a poor soul that is all bespattered and stained with sin, and say to him: ‘Get up, and make thyself clean, and keep thyself so!’ It cannot be done.

So my text, though it keeps itself within the limits of the law and only proclaims duty, must have hidden, in its very hardness, a sweet kernel of promise. For what God commands God enables us to do.

Therefore these words, ‘Rule thou over it,’ do really point onwards through all the ages to that one fact in which every man’s sin is conquered and neutralised, and every man’s struggles may be made hopeful and successful, the great fact that Jesus Christ, God’s own Son, came down from heaven, like an athlete descending into the arena, to fight with and to overcome the grim wild beasts, our passions and our sins, and to lead them, transformed, in the silken leash of His love.

My brother! your sin is mightier than you. The old word of the Psalm is true about every one of us, ‘Our iniquities are stronger than we.’ And, blessed be His name! the hope of the Psalmist is the experience of the Christian: ‘As for my transgressions, Thou wilt purge them away.' Christ will strengthen you, to conquer; Christ will take away your guilt; Christ will bear, has borne your burden; Christ will cleanse your memory; Christ will purge your conscience. Trusting to Him, and by His power and life within us, we may conquer our evil. Trusting to Him, and for the sake of His blood shed for us all upon the cross, we are delivered from the burden, guilt, and power of our sins and of our sin. With thy hand in His, and thy will submitted to Him, 'thou shalt tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the dragon thou shalt trample under foot.'

7) Genesis 4:8-16

Genesis

THE GROWTH AND POWER OF SIN

Gen. 4:3 - Gen. 4:16.

Many lessons crowd on us from this section. Its general purport is to show the growth of sin, and its power to part man from man even as it has parted man from God. We may call the whole 'The beginning of the fatal operations of sin on human society.'

1. The first recorded act of worship occasions the first murder. Is not that only too correct a forecast of the oceans of blood which have been shed in the name of religion, and a striking proof of the subtle power of sin to corrupt even the best, and out of it to make the worst? What a lesson against the bitter hatred which has too often sprung up on so-called religious grounds! No malice is so venomous, no hate so fierce, no cruelty so fiendish, as those which are fed and fanned by religion. Here is the first triumph of sin, that it poisons the very springs of worship, and makes what should be the great uniter of men in sweet and holy bonds their great separator.

2. Sin here appears as having power to bar men's way to God. Much ingenuity has been spent on the question why Abel's offering was accepted and Cain's rejected. But the narrative itself shows in the words of Jehovah, 'If thou doest well, is there not acceptance?' that the reason lay in Cain's evil deeds. So, in 1Jn. 3:12, the fratricide is put down to the fact that ‘his works were evil, and his brother’s righteous’; and Heb. 11:4 differs from this view only in making the ground of righteousness prominent, when it ascribes the acceptableness of Abel’s offering to faith. Both these passages are founded on the narrative, and we need not seek farther for the reason of the different reception of the two offerings. Character, then, or, more truly, faith, which is the foundation of a righteous character, determines the acceptableness of worship. Cain’s offering had no sense of dependence, no outgoing of love and trust, no adoration,-though it may have had fear,-and no moral element. So it had no sweet odour for God. Abel’s was sprinkled with some drops of the incense of lowly trust, and came from a heart which fain would be pure; therefore it was a joy to God. So we are taught at the very beginning, that, as is the man, so is his sacrifice; that the prayer of the wicked is an abomination. Plenty of worship nowadays is Cain worship. Many reputable professing Christians bring just such sacrifices. The prayers of such never reach higher than the church ceiling. Of course, the lesson of the story is not that a man must be pure before his sacrifice is accepted. Of course, the faintest cry of trust is heard, and a contrite heart, however sinful, is always welcome. But we are taught that our acts of worship must have our hearts in them, and that it is vain to pray and to love evil. Sin has the awful power of blocking our way to God.

3. Note in one word that we have here at the beginning of human history the solemn distinction which runs through it all. These two, so near in blood, so separate in spirit, head the two classes into which Scripture decisively parts men, especially men who have heard the gospel. It is unfashionable now to draw that broad line between the righteous and the wicked, believers and unbelievers. Sheep and goats are all one. Modern liberal sentiment-so-called-will not consent to such narrowness as the old-fashioned classification. There are none of us black, and none white; we are all different shades of grey. But facts do not quite bear out such amiable views. Perhaps it is not less charitable, and a great deal truer, to draw the line broad and plain, on one side of which is peace and safety, and on the other trouble and death, if only we make it plain that no man need stop one minute on the dark side.

4. The solemn divine voice reads the lesson of the power of sin, when once done, over the sinner. Like a wild beast, it crouches in ambush at his door, ready to spring and devour. The evil deed once committed takes shape, as it were, and waits to seize the doer. Remorse, inward disturbance, and above all, the fatal inclination to repeat sin till it becomes a habit, are set forth with terrible force in these grim figures. What a menagerie of ravenous beasts some of us have at the doors of our hearts! With what murderous longing they glare at us, seeking to fascinate us, and make us their prey! When we sin, we cannot escape the issues; and every wrong thing we do has a kind of horrible life given it, and sits henceforth there, beside us, ready to rend us. The tempting, seducing power of our own evils was never put in more startling and solemnly true words, on which the bitter experience of many a poor victim of his own past is a commentary. The eternal duty of resistance is farther taught by the words. Hope of victory, encouragement to struggle, the assurance that even these savage beasts may be subdued, and the lion and adder [the hidden and the glaring evils-those which wound unseen, and which spring with a roar] may be overcome, led in a silken leash or charmed into harmlessness, are given in the command, which is also a promise, ‘Rule thou over it.’

5. The deadly fruit of hate is taught us in the brief account of the actual murder. Notice the impressive plainness and fewness of the words. ‘Cain rose up against his brother, and slew him.’ A kind of horror-struck awe of the crime is audible. Observe the emphasis with which ‘his brother’ is repeated in the verse and throughout. Observe, also, the vivid light thrown by the story on the rise and progress of the sin. It begins with envy and jealousy. Cain was not wroth because his offering was rejected. What did he care for that? But what angered him was that his brother had what he had not. So selfishness was at the bottom, and that led on to envy, and that to hatred. Then comes a pause, in which God speaks remonstrances,-as God’s voice-conscience-does now to us all,-between the imagination and the act of evil. A real or a feigned reconciliation is effected. The brothers go in apparent harmony to the field. No new provocation appears, but the old feelings, kept down for a time, come in again with a rush, and Cain is swept away by them. Hatred left to work means murder. The heart is the source of all evil. Selfishness is the mother tincture out of which all sorts of sin can be made. Guard the thoughts, and keep down self, and the deeds will take care of themselves.

6. Mark how close on the heels of sin God’s question treads! How God spoke, we know not. Doubtless in some fashion suited to the needs of Cain. But He speaks to us as really as to him, and no sooner is the rush of passion over, and the bad deed done, than a revulsion comes. What we call conscience asks the question in stern tones, which make a man’s flesh creep. Our sin is like touching the electric bells which people sometimes put on their windows to give notice of thieves. As soon as we step beyond the line of duty we set the alarm going, and it wakens the sleeping conscience. Some of us go so far as to have silenced the voice within; but, for the most part, it speaks immediately after we have gratified our inclinations wrongly.

7. Cain’s defiant answer teaches us how a man hardens himself against God’s voice. It also shows us how intensely selfish all sin is, and how weakly foolish its excuses are. It is sin which has rent men apart from men, and made them deny the very idea that they have duties to all men. The first sin was only against God; the second was against God and man. The first sin did not break, though it saddened, human love; the second kindled the flames of infernal hatred, and caused the first drops to flow of the torrents of blood which have soaked the earth. When men break away from God, they will soon murder one another.

Cain was his brother’s keeper. His question answered itself. If Abel was his brother, then he was bound to look after him. His self-condemning excuse is but a specimen of the shallow pleas by which the forgetfulness of duties we owe to all mankind, and all sins, are defended.

8. The stern sentence is next pronounced. First we have the grand figure of the innocent blood having a voice which pierces the heavens. That teaches in the most forcible way the truth that God knows the crimes done by ‘man’s inhumanity to man,’ even when the meek sufferers are silent. According to the fine old legend of the cranes of Ibycus, a bird of the air will carry the matter. It speaks, too, of God’s tender regard for His saints, whose blood is precious in His sight; and it teaches that He will surely requite. We cannot but think of the innocent blood shed on Calvary, of the Brother of us all, whose sacrifice was accepted of God. His blood, too, crieth from the ground, has a voice which speaks in the ear of God, but not to plead for vengeance, but pardon.

'Jesus' blood through earth and skies,
Mercy, free, boundless mercy, cries.'

Then follows the sentence which falls into two parts-the curse of bitter, unrequited toil, and the doom of homeless wandering. The blood which has been poured out on the battlefield fertilises the soil; but Abel's blasted the earth. It was a supernatural infliction, to teach that bloodshed polluted the earth, and so to shed a nameless horror over the deed. We see an analogous feeling in the common belief that places where some foul sin has been committed are cursed. We see a weak natural correspondence in the devastating effect of war, as expressed in the old saying that no grass would grow where the hoof of the Turk's horse had stamped.

The doom of wandering, which would be compulsory by reason of the earth's barrenness, is a parable. The murderer is hunted from place to place, as the Greek fable has it, by the furies, who suffer him not to rest. Conscience drives a man 'through dry places, seeking rest, and finding none.' All sin makes us homeless wanderers. There is but one home for the heart, one place of repose for a man, namely, in the heart of God, the secret place of the Most High; and he who, for his sin, durst not enter there, is driven forth into 'a salt land and not inhabited,' and has to wander wearily there. The legend of the wandering Jew, and that other of the sailor, condemned for ever to fly before the gale through stormy seas, have in them a deep truth. The earthly punishment of departing from God is that we have not where to lay our heads. Every sinner is a fugitive and a vagabond. But if we love God we are still wanderers indeed, but we are 'pilgrims and sojourners with Thee.'

9. Cain's remonstrance completes the tragic picture. We see in it despair without penitence. He has no word of confession. If he had accepted his chastisement, and learned by it his sin, all the bitterness would have passed away. But he only writhes in agony, and adds, to the sentence pronounced, terrors of his own devising. God had not forbidden him to come into His presence. But he feels that he dare not venture thither. And he was right; for, whether we suppose that some sensible manifestation of the divine presence is meant by ‘Thy face’ or no, a man who had unrepented sin on his conscience, and murmurings in his heart, could not hold intercourse with God; nor would he wish to do so. Thus we learn again the lesson that sin separates from our Father, and that chastisements, not accepted as signs of His love, build up a black wall between God and us.

Nor had Cain been told that his life was in danger. But his conscience made a coward of him, as of us all, and told him what he deserved. There were, no doubt, many other children of Adam, who would be ready to avenge Abel’s death. The wild justice of revenge is deep in the heart of men; and the natural impulse would be to hunt down the murderer like a wolf. It is a dreadful picture of the defiant and despairing sinner, tortured by well-founded fears, shut out from the presence of God, but not able to shut out thoughts of Him, and seeing an avenger in every man.

We need not ask how God set a mark on Cain. Enough that His doing so was a merciful alleviation of his lot, and teaches us how God’s long-suffering spares life, and tempers judgment, that there may still be space for repentance. If even Cain has gracious protection and mercy blended with his chastisement, who can be beyond the pale of God’s compassion, and with whom will not His loving providence and patient pity labour? No man is so scorched by the fire of retribution, but many a dewy drop from God’s tenderness falls on him. No doubt, the story of the preservation of Cain was meant to restrain the blood-feuds so common and ruinous in early times; and we need the lesson yet, to keep us from vengeance under the mask of justice. But the deepest lesson and truest pathos of it lies in the picture of the watchful kindness of God lingering round the wretched man, like gracious sunshine playing on some scarred and black rock, to win him back by goodness to penitence, and through penitence to peace.

8) Genesis 5:22

Genesis

WITH, BEFORE, AFTER

‘Enoch walked with God,’- Gen. 5:22.

‘Walk before Me.’- Gen. 17:1.

‘Ye shall walk after the Lord your God.’- Deu. 13:4.

You will have anticipated, I suppose, my purpose in doing what I very seldom do-cutting little snippets out of different verses and putting them together. You see that these three fragments, in their resemblances and in their differences, are equally significant and instructive. They concur in regarding life as a walk-a metaphor which expresses continuity, so that every man’s life is a whole, which expresses progress, which expresses change, and which implies a goal. They agree in saying that God must he brought into a life somehow, and in some aspect, if that life is to be anything else but an aimless wandering, if it is to tend to the point to which every human life should attain. But then they diverge, and, if we put them together, they say to us that there are three different ways in which we ought to bring God into our life. We should ‘walk *with* Him,’ like Enoch; we should ‘walk *before*’ Him, as Abraham was bade to do; and we should ‘walk *after*’ Him, as the command to do was given to all Israel. And these three prepositions, *with*, *before*, *after*, attached to the general idea of life as a walk, give us a triple aspect-which yet is, of course, fundamentally, one-of the way in which life may be ennobled, dignified, calmed, hallowed, focussed, and concentrated by the various relations into which we enter with Him. So I take the three of them.

1. ‘Enoch walked *with* God.’

That is a sweet, simple, easily intelligible, and yet lofty way of putting the notion which we bring into a more abstract and less impressive shape when we talk about communion with God. Two men travelling along a road keep each other company. ‘How can two walk together except they be agreed?’ The companion is at our side all the same, though the mists may have come down and we cannot see Him. We can hear His voice, we can grasp His hand, we can catch the echoes of His steps. We know He is there, and that is enough. Enoch and God walked together, by the simple exercise of the faith that fills the Invisible with one great, loving Face. By a continuous, definite effort, as we are going through the bustle of daily life, and amid all the pettiness and perplexities and monotonies that make up our often weary and always heavy days, we can realise to ourselves that He is of a truth at our sides, and by purity of life and heart we can bring Him nearer, and can make ourselves more conscious of His nearness. For, brethren, the one thing that parts a man from God, and makes it impossible for a heart to expatiate in the thought of His presence, is the contrariety to His will in our conduct. The slightest invisible film of mist that comes across the blue abyss of the mighty sky will blot out the brightest of the stars, and we may sometimes not be able to see the mist, and only know that it is there because we do not see the planet. So unconscious sin may steal in between us and God, and we shall no longer be able to say, ‘I walk with Him.’

The Roman Catholics talk, in their mechanical way, of bringing down all the spiritual into the material and formal, about the ‘practice of the presence of God.’ It is an ugly phrase, but it means a great thing, that Christian people ought, very much more than they do, to aim, day by day, and amidst their daily duties, at realising that most elementary thought which, like a great many other elementary thoughts, is impotent because we believe it so utterly, that wherever we are, we may have Him with us. It is the secret of blessedness, of tranquillity, of power, of everything good and noble.

‘I am a stranger with Thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were,’ said the Psalmist of old. If he had left out these two little words, ‘with Thee,’ he would have been uttering a tragic complaint; but when they come in, all that is painful, all that is solitary, all that is transient, bitterly transient, in the long succession of the generations that have passed across earth’s scene, and have not been kindred to it, is cleared away and changed into gladness. Never mind, though you are a stranger, if you have that companion. Never mind, though you are only a sojourner; if you have Him with you, whatever passes He will not pass; and though we dwell here in a system to which we do not belong, and its transiency and our transiency bring with them many sorrows, when we can say, ‘Lord! Thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations,’ we are at home, and that eternal home will never pass.

Enoch ‘walked with God,’ and, of course, ‘God took him,’ There was nothing else for it, and there could be no other end, for a life of communion with God here has in it the prophecy and the pledge of a life of eternal union hereafter. So, then, 'practise the presence of God.' An old mystic says: 'If I can tell how many times to-day I have thought about God, I have not thought about Him often enough.' Walk with Him by faith, by effort, by purity.

2. And now take the other aspect suggested by the other word God spoke to Abraham: 'I am the Almighty God, walk *before* Me and be thou perfect.'

That suggests, as I suppose I do not need to point out, the idea not only of communion, which the former phrase brought to our minds, but that of the inspection of our conduct. 'As ever in the great Taskmaster's eye,' says the stern Puritan poet, and although one may object to that word 'Taskmaster,' yet the idea conveyed is the correct expansion of the commandment given to Abraham. Observe how 'walk before Me' is dovetailed, as it were, between the revelation 'I am the Almighty God' and the injunction 'Be thou perfect.' The realisation of that presence of the Almighty which is implied in the expression 'Walk before Me,' the assurance that we are in His sight, will lead straight to the fulfilment of the injunction that bears upon the moral conduct. The same connection of thought underlies Peter's injunction, 'Like as He . . .is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation,' followed immediately as it is by, 'If ye call on Him as Father, who without respect of persons judgeth'-as a present estimate-'according to every mail's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear'-that reverential awe which will lead you to be 'holy even as I am holy.'

This thought that we are in that divine presence, and that there is silently, but most really, a divine opinion being formed of us, consolidated, as it were, moment by moment through our lives, is only tolerable if we have been walking with God. If we are sure, by the power of our communion with Him, of His loving heart as well as of His righteous judgment, then we can spread ourselves out before Him, as a woman will lay out her webs of cloth on the green grass for the sun to blaze down upon them, and bleach the ingrained filth out of them. We must first walk 'with God' before the consciousness that we are walking 'before' Him becomes one that we can entertain and not go mad. When we are sure of the 'with' we can bear the 'before.'

Did you ever see how on a review day, as each successive battalion and company nears the saluting-point where the General inspecting sits, they straighten themselves up and dress their ranks, and pull themselves together as they pass beneath his critical eye. A master's eye makes diligent servants. If we, in the strength of God, would only realise, day by day and act by act of our lives, that we are before Him, what a revolution could be effected on our characters and what a transformation on all our conduct!

'Walk before Me' and you will be perfect. For the Hebrew words on which I am now commenting may be read, in accordance with the usage of the language, as being not only a commandment but a promise, or, rather, not as two commandments, but a commandment with an appended promise, and so as equivalent to 'If you will walk before Me you will be perfect.' And if we realise that we are under 'the pure eyes and perfect judgment of' God, we shall thereby be strongly urged and mightily helped to be perfect as He is perfect.

3. Lastly, take the other relation, which is suggested by the third of my texts, where Israel as a whole is commanded to 'walk *after* the Lord' their God.

In harmony with the very frequent expression of the Old Testament about 'going after idols' so Israel here is to 'go after God.' What does that mean? Communion, the consciousness of being judged by God, will lead on to aspiration and loving, longing effort to get nearer and nearer to Him. 'My soul followeth hard after Thee,' said the Psalmist, 'Thy right hand upholdeth me.' That element of yearning aspiration, of eager desire to be closer and closer, and liker and liker, to God must be in all true religion. And unless we have it in some measure, it is useless to talk about being Christian people. To press onwards, not as though we had already attained, but following after, if that we may apprehend that for which also we are apprehended, is the attitude of every true follower of Christ. The very crown of the excellence of the Christian life is that it never can reach its goal, and therefore an immortal youth of aspiration and growth is guaranteed to it. Christian people, are you following after God? Are you any nearer to Him than you were ten years ago? 'Walk with Me, walk before Me, walk after Me.'

I need not do more than remind you of another meaning involved in this same expression. If I walk after God, then I let Him go before me and show me my road. Do you remember how, when the ark was to cross Jordan, the commandment was given to the Israelites to let it go well on in front, so that there should be no mistake about the course, 'for ye have not passed this way heretofore.' Do not be in too great a hurry to press upon the heels of God, if I may so say. Do not let your decisions outrun His providence. Keep back the impatience that would hurry on, and wait for His ripening purposes to ripen and His counsels to develop themselves. Walk after God, and be sure you do not go in front of your Guide, or you will lose both your way and your Guide.

I need not say more than a word about the highest aspect which this third of our commandments takes, 'His sheep follow Him'-'leaving us an example that we should follow in His steps,' that is the culmination of the walking 'with,' and 'before,' and 'after' God which these Old Testament saints were partially practising. All is gathered into the one great word, 'He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk even as He walked.'

9) Genesis 5:24

Genesis

THE COURSE AND CROWN OF A DEVOUT LIFE

Gen. 5:24.

This notice of Enoch occurs in the course of a catalogue of the descendants of Adam, from the Creation to the Deluge. It is evidently a very ancient document, and is constructed on a remarkable plan. The formula for each man is the same. So-and-so lived, begat his heir, the next in the series, lived on after that so many years, having anonymous children, lived altogether so long, and then died. The chief thing about each life is the birth of the successor, and each man's career is in broad outline the same. A dreary monotony runs through the ages. How brief and uniform may be the records of lives of striving and tears and smiles and love that stretched through centuries! Nine hundred years shrink into less than as many lines.

The solemn monotony is broken in the case of Enoch. This paragraph begins as usual-he ‘lived’; but afterwards, instead of that word, we read that he ‘walked with God’-happy they for whom such a phrase is equivalent to ‘live’-and, instead of ‘died,’ it is said of him that ‘he *was not*.’ That seems to imply that he, as it were, slipped out of sight or suddenly disappeared; as one of the psalms says, ‘I looked, and lo! he was not.’ He was there a moment ago-now he is gone; and my text tells how that sudden withdrawal came about. God, with whom he walked, put out His hand and took him to Himself. Of course. What other end could there be to a life that was all passed in communion with God except that apotheosis and crown of it all, the lifting of the man into closer communion with his Father and his Friend?

So, then, there are just these two things here-the noblest life and its crown.

1. The noblest life.

‘He walked with God.’ That is all. There is no need to tell what he did or tried to do, how he sorrowed or joyed, what were his circumstances. These may all fade from men’s knowledge as they have somewhat faded from his memory up yonder. It is enough that he walked with God.

Of course, we have here, underlying the phrase, the familiar comparison of life to a journey, with all its suggestions of constant change and constant effort, and with the suggestion, too, that each life should be a progress directly tending to one clearly recognised goal. But passing from that, let us just think for a moment of the characteristics which must go to make up a life of which we can say that it is walking with God. The first of these clearly is the one that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts his finger upon, when he makes faith the spring of Enoch’s career. The first requisite to true communion with God is vigorous exercise of that faculty by which we realise the fact of His presence with us; and that not as a jealous-eyed inspector, from whose scrutiny we would fain escape, but as a companion and friend to whom we can cleave. ‘He that cometh to God,’ and walks with God, must first of all ‘believe that He *is*’; and passing by all the fascinations of things seen, and rising above all the temptations of things temporal, his realising eye must fix upon the divine Father and see Him nearer and more clearly than these. You cannot walk with God unless you are emancipated from the dominion of sense and time, and are living by the power of that great faculty, which lays hold of the things that are unseen as the realities, and smiles at the false and forged pretensions of material things to be the real. We have to invert the teaching of the world and of our senses. My fingers and my eyes and my ears tell me that this gross, material universe about me is the real, and that all beyond it is shadowy and [sometimes we think] doubtful, or, at any rate, dim and far off. But that is false, and the truth is precisely the other way. The Unseen is the Real, and the Material is the merely Apparent. Behind all visible objects, and giving them all their reality, lies the unchangeable God.

Cultivate the faculty and habit of vigorous faith, if you would walk with God. For the world will put its bandages over your eyes, and try to tempt you to believe that these poor, shabby illusions are the precious things; and we have to shake ourselves free from its harlot kisses and its glozing lies, by very vigorous and continual efforts of the will and of the understanding, if we are to make real to ourselves that which is real, the presence of our God.

Besides this vigorous exercise of the faculty of faith, there is another requisite for a walk with God, closely connected with it, and yet capable of being looked at separately, and that is, that we shall keep up the habit of continual occupation of thought with Him. That is very much an affair of habit with Christian people, and I am afraid that the neglect of it is the habitual practice of the bulk of professing Christians nowadays. It is hard, amidst all our work and thought and joys and sorrows, to keep fresh our consciousness of His presence, and to talk with Him in the midst of the rush of business. But what do we do about our dear ones when we are away from them? The measure of our love of them is accurately represented by the frequency of our remembrances of them. The mother parted from her child, the husband and the wife separated from one another, the lover and the friend, think of each other a thousand times a day. Whenever the spring is taken off, then the natural bent of the inclination and heart assert themselves, and the mind goes back again, as into a sanctuary, into the sweet thought. Is that how we do with God? Do we so walk with Him, as that thought, when released, instinctively sets in that direction? When I take off the break, does my spirit turn to God? If there is no hand at the helm, does the bow always point that way? When the magnet is withdrawn for a moment, does the needle tremble back and settle itself northwards? If we are walking with God, we shall, more times a day than we can count when the evening comes on, have had the thought of Him coming into our hearts 'like some sweet beguiling melody, so sweet we know not we are listening to it.' Thus we shall 'walk with God.'

Then there is another requisite. 'How can two walk together except they be agreed?' 'He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk even as He walked.' There is no union with God in such communion possible, unless there be a union with Him by conformity of will and submission of effort and aim to His commandments. Well, then, is that life possible for us? Look at this instance before us. We know very little about how much knowledge of God these people in old days had, but, at all events, it was a great deal less than you and I have. Their theology was very different from ours; their religion was absolutely identical with ours. Their faith, which grasped the God revealed in their creed, was the same as our faith, though the creed which their faith grasped was only an outline sketch of yours and mine. But at all times and in all generations, the element and essence of the religious life has been the same-that is, the realising sense of the living divine presence, the effort and aspiration after communion with Him, and the quiet obedience and conformity of the practical life to His will. And so we can reach out our hands across all the centuries to this pre-Noachian, antediluvian patriarch, dim amongst the mists, and feel that he too is our brother.

And he has set us the example that in all conditions of life, and under the most unfavourable circumstances, it is possible to live in this close touch with God. For in his time, not only was there, as I have said, an incomplete and rudimentary knowledge of God, but in his time the earth was filled with violence, and gigantic forms of evil are represented as having dominated mankind. Amidst it all, the Titanic pride, the godlessness, the scorn, the rudeness, and the violence, amidst it all, this one 'white flower of a blameless life' managed to find nutriment upon the dunghill, and to blossom fresh and fair there. You and I cannot, whatever may be our hindrances in living a consistent Christian life, have anything like the difficulties that this man had and surmounted. For us all, whatever our conditions, such a life is possible.

And then there is another lesson that he teaches us, viz. that such a life is consistent with the completest discharge of all common duties. The outline, as far as appearance was concerned, of this man's life was the same as the outline of those of his ancestors and successors. They are all described in the same terms. The formula is the same. Enoch lived, Mahalaleel, and all the rest of the half-unpronounceable names, they lived, they begat their heirs, and sons and daughters, and then they died. And the same formula is used about this man. He walked with God, but it was while treading the common path of secular life that he did so.

He found it possible to live in communion with God, and yet to do all the common things that men did then. Anybody's house may be a Bethel-a house of God-and anybody's work may be worship; and wherever we are and whatever we do, it is possible therein to serve God, and there to walk with Him.

2. And now a word about the crown of this life of communion. 'He was not, for God took him'

What wonderful reticence in describing, or rather hinting at, the stupendous miracle that is here in question! Is that like a book that came from the legend-loving and legend-making brains of men; or does it sound like the speech of God, to whom nothing is extraordinary and nothing needs to have a mark of admiration after it? It was the same to Him whether Enoch died or whether He simply took him to Himself. If one wants to know what men would have made of such a thing, if *they* had had to tell it, let them read those wretched Rabbinical fables that have been stitched on to this verse. There they will see how men describe miracles; and here they will see how God does so.

'*He was not.*' As I have said, he disappeared; that was what the world knew. 'God took him'; that was what God tells the world.

Thus this strange exception to the law of death stood, as I suppose, to the ancient world as doing somewhat the same office for them that the translation of Elijah afterwards partially did for Israel, and that the resurrection of Jesus Christ does completely for us, viz. it brought the future life into the realm of fact, and took it out of the dim region of speculation altogether. He establishes a truth who proves it, and he proves a fact that shows it. A doctrine of a future state is not worth much, but the fact of a future state, which was established by this incident then, and is certified for us all now, by the Christ risen from the dead, is all-important. Our gospel is all built upon facts, and this is the earliest fact in man's history which made man's subsistence in other conditions than that of earthly life a certainty.

And then, again, this wonderful exception shows to us, as it did to that ancient world, that the natural end of a religious life is union with God hereafter. It seems to me that the real proofs of a future life are two: one, the fact of Christ's resurrection, and the other, the fact of our religious experience. For anything looks to me more likely, and less incredible, than that a man who could walk with God should only have a poor earthly life to do it in, and that all these aspirations, these emotions, should be bounded and ended by a trivial thing, that touches only the physical frame. Surely, surely, there is nothing so absurd as to believe that he who can say 'Thou art my God,' and who has said it, should ever by anything be brought to cease to say it. Death cannot kill love to God; and the only end of the religious life of earth is its perfecting in heaven. The experiences that we have here, in their loftiness and in their incompleteness, equally witness for us, of the rest and the perfectness that remain for the children of God.

Then, again, this man in his unique experience was, and is, a witness of the fact that death is an excrescence, and results from sin. I suppose that he trod the road which the divine intention had destined to be trodden by all the children of men, if they had not sinned; and that his experience, unique as it is, is a survival, so to speak, of what was meant to be the law for humanity, unless there had intervened the terrible fact of sin and its wages, death. The road had been made, and this one man was allowed to travel along it that we might all learn, by the example of the exception, that the rule under which we live was not the rule that God originally meant for us, and that death has resulted from the fact of transgression. No doubt Enoch had in him the seeds of it, no doubt there were the possibilities of disease and the necessity of death in his physical frame, but God has shown us in that one instance, and in the other of the great prophet's, how *He* is not subject to the law that men shall die, although men are subject to it, and that if He will, He can take them all to Himself, as He did take these two, and will take them who, at last, shall not die but be changed.

Let me remind you that this unique and exceptional end of a life of communion may, in its deepest, essential character, be experienced by each of us. There are two passages in the book of Psalms, both of which I regard as allusions to this incident. The one of them is in the forty-ninth Psalm and reads thus: 'He will deliver my soul from the power of the grave, for He will take me.' Our version conceals the allusion, by its unfortunate and non-literal rendering 'receive.' The same word is employed there as here. Can we fail to see the reference? The Psalmist expects his soul to be 'delivered from the power of the grave,' because God *takes* it.

And again, in the great seventy-third Psalm, which marks perhaps the highwater mark of pre-Christian anticipations of a future state, we read: 'Thou wilt guide me by Thy counsel, and afterwards *take* me' [again the same word] 'to glory.' Here, again, the Psalmist looks back to the unique and exceptional instance, and in the rapture and ecstasy of the faith that has grasped the living God as his portion, says to himself: 'Though the externals of Enoch's end and of mine may differ, their substance will be the same, and I, too, shall cease to be seen of men, because God takes me into the secret of His pavilion, by the loving clasp of His lifting hand.'

Enoch was led, if I may say so, round the top of the valley, beyond the head waters of the dark river, and was kept on the high level until he got to the other side. You and I have to go down the hill, out of the sunshine, in among the dank weeds, to stumble over the black rocks, and wade through the deep water; but we shall get over to the same place where he stands, and He that took him round by the top will 'take' us through the river; and so shall we 'ever be with the Lord'

'Enoch walked with God and he was not; for God took him.' This verse is like some little spring with trees and flowers on a cliff. The dry genealogical table-and here this bit of human life in it! How unlike the others-they *lived* and they *died*; this man's life was walking with God and his departure was a fading away, a ceasing to be found here. It is remarkable in how calm a tone the Bible speaks of its supernatural events. We should not have known this to be a miracle but for the Epistle to the Hebrews.

The dim past of these early chapters carries us over many centuries. We know next to nothing about the men, where they lived, how they lived, what thoughts they had, what tongue they spoke. Some people would say that they never lived at all. I believe, and most of you, I suppose, believe that they did. But how little personality we give them! Little as we know of environment and circumstances, we know the main thing, the fact of their having been. Then we are sure that they had sorrow and joy, strife and love, toil and rest, like the rest of us, that whether their days were longer or shorter they were filled much as ours are, that whatever was the pattern into which the quiet threads of their life was woven it was, warp and weft, the same yarn as ours. In broad features every human life is much the same. Widely different as the clothing of these grey fathers in their tents, with their simple contrivances and brief records, is from that of cultivated busy Englishmen to-day, the same human form is beneath both. And further, we know but little as to their religious ideas, how far they were surrounded with miracles, what they knew of God and of His purposes, how they received their knowledge, what served them for a Bible. Of what positive institutions of religion they had we know nothing; whether for them there was sacrifice and a sabbath day, how far the original gospel to Adam was known or remembered or understood by them. All that is perfectly dark to us. But this we know, that those of them who were godly men lived by the same power by which godly men live nowadays. Whatever their creed, their religion was ours. Religion, the bond that unites again the soul to God, has always been the same.

10)Genesis 6:9-22

Genesis

THE SAINT AMONG SINNERS

Gen. 6:9 - Gen. 6:22.

1. Notice here, first, the solitary saint. Noah stands alone ‘in his generations’ like some single tree, green and erect, in a forest of blasted and fallen pines. ‘Among the faithless, faithful only he.’ His character is described, so to speak, from the outside inwards. He is ‘righteous,’ or discharging all the obligations of law and of his various relationships. He is ‘perfect.’ His whole nature is developed, and all in due symmetry and proportion; no beauty wanting, no grace cultivated at the expense of others. He is a full man; not a one-sided and therefore a distorted one. Of course we do not take these words to imply sinlessness. They express a relative, not an absolute, completeness. Hence we may learn both a lesson of stimulus and of hope. We are not to rest satisfied with partial goodness, but to seek to attain an all-round perfectness, even in regard to the graces least natural to our dispositions. And we can rejoice to believe that God is generous in His acceptance and praise. He does not grudge commendation, but takes account of the deepest desires and main tendencies of a life, and sees the germ as a full-blown flower, and the bud as a fruit.

Learn, too, that solitary goodness is possible. Noah stood uninfected by the universal contagion; and, as is always the case, the evil around, which he did not share, drove him to a more rigid abstinence from it. A Christian who is alone ‘in his generations,’ like a lily among nettles, has to be, and usually is, a more earnest Christian than if he were among like-minded men. The saints in ‘Caesar’s household’ needed to be very unmistakable saints, if they were not to be swept away by the torrent of godlessness. It is hard, but it is possible, for a boy at school, or a young man in an office, or a soldier in a barrack, to stand alone, and be Christlike; but only on condition that he yields to no temptation to drop his conduct to the level around him, and is never guilty of compromise. Once yield, and all is over. Flowers grow on a dunghill, and the very reeking rottenness may make the bloom finer.

Learn, too, that the true place for the saint is ‘in his generations.’ If the mass is corrupt, so much the more need to rub the salt well in. Disgust and cowardice, and the love of congenial society, keep Christian people from mixing with the world, which they must do if they are to do Christ’s work in it. There is a great deal too much union with the world, and a great deal too much separation from it, nowadays, and both are of the wrong sort. We cannot keep too far away from it, by abstinence from living by its maxims, and tampering with its pleasures. We cannot mix too much with it if we take our Christianity with us, and remember our vocation to be its light.

Notice, again, the companion of the solitary saint. What beauty there is in that description of the isolated man, passing lonely amid his contemporaries, like a stream of pure water flowing through some foul liquid, and untouched by it, and yet not alone in his loneliness, because 'he walked with God!' The less he found congenial companionship on earth, the more he realised God as by his side. The remarkable phrase, used only of Enoch and of Noah, implies a closer relation than the other expression, 'To walk before God.' Communion, the habitual occupation of mind and heart with God, the happy sense of His presence making every wilderness and solitary place glad because of Him. the child's clasping the father's hand with his tiny fingers, and so being held up and lifted over many a rough place, are all implied. Are we lonely in outward reality? Here is our unfailing companion. Have we to stand single among companions, who laugh at us and our religion? One man, with God to back him, is always in the majority. Though surrounded by friends, have we found that, after all, we live and suffer, and must die alone? Here is the all-sufficient Friend, if we have fellowship with whom our hearts will be lonely no more.

Observe that this communion is the foundation of all righteousness in conduct. Because Noah walked with God, he was 'just' and 'perfect.' If we live habitually in the holy of holies, our faces will shine when we come forth. If we desire to be good and pure, we must dwell with God, and His Spirit will pass into our hearts, and we shall bear the fragrance of his presence wherever we go. Learn, also, that communion with God is not possible unless we are fighting against our sin, and have some measure of holiness. We begin communion with Him, indeed, not by holiness, but by faith. But it is not kept up without the cultivation of purity. Sin makes fellowship with God impossible. 'Can two walk together, except they be agreed?' 'What communion hath light with darkness?' The delicate bond which unites us in happy communion with God shrivels up, as if scorched, at the touch of sin. 'If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie.'

2. Notice the universal apostasy. Two points are brought out in the sombre description. The first is moral corruption; the second, violence. Bad men are cruel men. When the bonds which knit society to God are relaxed, selfishness soon becomes furious, and forcibly seizes what it lusts after, regardless of others' rights. Sin saps the very foundations of social life, and makes men into tigers, more destructive to each other than wild beasts. All our grand modern schemes for the reformation of society will fail unless they begin with the reformation of the individual. To walk with God is the true way to make men gentle and pitying.

Learn from this dark outline that God gazes in silence on the evil. That is a grand, solemn expression, 'Corrupt before God.' All this mad riot of pollution and violence is holding its carnival of lust and blood under the very eye of God, and He says never a word. So is it ever. Like some band of conspirators in a dark corner, bad men do deeds of darkness, and fancy they are unseen, and that God forgets *them*, because they forget God; and all the while His eye is fixed on them, and the darkness is light about them. Then comes a further expression of the same thought: 'God looked upon the earth.' As a sudden beam of sunshine out of a thunder-cloud, His eye flashes down, not as if He then began to know, but that His knowledge then began, as it were, to act.

3. What does the stern sentence on the rotten world teach us? A very profound truth, not only of the certain divine retribution, but of the indissoluble connection of sin with destruction. The same word is thrice employed in Gen. 6:11 - Gen. 6:12 to express 'corruption' and in Gen. 6:13 to express 'destruction.' A similar usage is found in 1Co. 3:17, where the same Greek word is translated 'defile' and 'destroy.' This teaches us that, in deepest reality, corruption is destruction, that sin is death, that every sinner is a suicide. God's act in punishment corresponds to, and is the inevitable outcome of, our act in transgression. So fatal is all evil, that one word serves to describe both the poison-secreting root and the poisoned fruit. Sin is death in the making; death is sin finished.

The promise of deliverance, which comes side by side with the stern sentence, illustrates the blessed truth that God's darkest threatenings are accompanied with a revelation of the way of escape. The ark is always shown along with the flood. Zoar is pointed out when God foretells Sodom’s ruin. We are no sooner warned of the penalties of sin, than we are bid to hear the message of mercy in Christ. The brazen serpent is ever reared where the venomous snakes bite and burn.

4. We pass by the details of the construction of the ark to draw the final lesson from the exact obedience of Noah. We have the statement twice over, He did ‘according to all that God commanded him.’ It was no easy thing for him to build the ark, amidst the scoffing of his generations. Smart witticisms fell around him like hail. All the ‘practical men’ thought him a dreamy fool, wasting his time, while they prospered and made something of life. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us the secret of his obedience: ‘By faith, Noah,’ etc. He realised the distant unseen, because he believed Him who warned him of it. The immediate object of his faith was ‘the things not seen as yet’; but the real, deepest object was God, whose word showed him these. So faith is always trust in a divine Person, whether it lays hold of the past sacrifice, the present indwelling Spirit, or the future heaven.

Noah’s example teaches us the practical effects of faith. ‘Moved with godly fear,’ says Hebrews; by which is meant, not a mere dread of personal evil, for Noah was assured of safety-but that godly reverence and happy fear which dwells with faith, and secures precise obedience. Learn that a faith which does not work on the feelings is a very poor thing. Some Christian people have a great horror of emotional religion. Unemotional religion is a great deal worse. The road by which faith gets at the hands is through the heart. And he who believes but feels nothing, will do exactly as much as he feels, and probably does not really believe much more.

So after Noah’s emotion followed his action. He was bid to prepare his ark, we have only to take refuge in the ark which God has prepared in Christ; but the principle of Noah’s obedience applies to us all. He realised so perfectly that future, with its double prospect of destruction and deliverance, that his whole life was moulded by the conduct which should lead to his escape. The far-off flood was more real to him than the shows of life around him. Therefore he could stand all the gibes, and gave himself to a course of life which was sheer folly unless that future was real. Perhaps a hundred and twenty years passed between the warning and the flood; and for all that time he held on his way, nor faltered in his faith. Does our faith realise that which lies before us with anything like similar clearness? Do we see that future shining through all the trivial, fleeting present? Does it possess weight and solidity enough to shape our lives? Noah's creed was much shorter than ours; but I fear his faith was as much stronger.

5. We may think, finally, of the vindication of his faith. For a hundred and twenty years the wits laughed, and the 'common-sense' people wondered, and the patient saint went on hammering and pitching at his ark. But one morning it began to rain; and by degrees, somehow, Noah did not seem quite such a fool. The jests would look rather different when the water was up to the knees of the jesters; and their sarcasms would stick in their throats as they drowned. So is it always. So it will be at the last great day. The men who lived for the future, by faith in Christ, will be found out to have been the wise men when the future has become the present, and the present has become the past, and is gone for ever; while they who had no aims beyond the things of time, which are now sunk beneath the dreary horizon, will awake too late to the conviction that they are outside the ark of safety, and that their truest epitaph is 'Thou fool!'

11)Genesis 8:1-22

Genesis

'CLEAR SHINING AFTER RAIN'

Gen. 8:1 - Gen. 8:22.

The universal tradition of a deluge is most naturally accounted for by admitting that there was a 'universal deluge.' But 'universal' does not apply to the extent as embracing the whole earth, but as affecting the small area then inhabited-an area which was probably not greater than the valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris. The story in Genesis is the Hebrew version of the universal tradition, and its plain affinity to the cuneiform narratives is to be frankly accepted. But the relationship of these two is not certain. Are they mother and daughter, or are they sisters? The theory that the narrative in Genesis is derived from the Babylonian, and is a purified, elevated rendering of it, is not so likely as that both are renderings of a more primitive account, to which the Hebrew narrative has kept true, while the other has tainted it with polytheistic ideas. In this passage the cessation of the flood is the theme, and it brings out both the love of the God who sent the awful punishment, and the patient godliness of the man who was spared from it. So it completes the teaching of the flood, and proclaims that God ‘in wrath remembers mercy.’

1. ‘God remembered Noah.’ That is a strong ‘anthropomorphism,’ like many other things in Genesis-very natural when these records were written, and bearing a true meaning for all times. It might seem as if, in the wild rush of the waters from beneath and from above, the little handful in the ark were forgotten. Had the Judge of all the earth, while executing ‘terrible things in righteousness,’ leisure to think of them who were ‘afar off upon the sea’? Was it a blind wrath that had been let loose? No; in all the severity there was tender regard for those worthy of it. Judgment was discriminating. The sunshine of love broke through even the rain-clouds of the flood.

So the blessed lesson is taught that, in the widest sweep of the most stormy judgments, there are those who abide safely, fearing no evil. Though the waters are out, there is a rock on which we may stand safe, above their highest wave. And why did God ‘remember Noah’? It was not favouritism, arbitrary and immoral. Noah was bid to build the ark, because he was ‘righteous’ in a world of evil-doers; he was ‘remembered’ in the ark, because he had believed God’s warning, obeyed God’s command as seeing the judgment ‘not seen as yet,’ and so ‘became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.’ They who trust God, and, trusting Him, realise as if present the future judgment, and, ‘moved with fear,’ take refuge in the ark, are never forgot by Him, even while the world is drowned. They live in His heart, and in due time He will show that He remembers them.

2. The gradual subsidence of the flood is told with singular exactitude of dates, which are certainly peculiar if they are not historical. The slow decrease negatives the explanation of the story as being the exaggerated remembrance of some tidal-wave caused by earthquake and the like. Precisely five months after the flood began, the ark grounded, and the two

sources, the rain from above and the ‘fountains of the deep’ [that is, probably, the sea], were ‘restrained,’ and a high wind set in. That date marked the end of the increase of the waters, and consequently the beginning of their decrease. Seven months and ten days elapsed between it and the complete restoration of the earth to its previous condition. That time was divided into stages. Two months and a half passed before the highest land emerged; two months more and the surface was all visible; a month and twenty-seven days more before ‘the earth was dry.’ The frequent recurrence of the sacred numbers, seven and ten, is noticeable. The length of time required for the restorative process witnesses to the magnitude of the catastrophe, impresses the imagination, and suggests the majestic slowness of the divine working, and how He uses natural processes for His purposes of moral government, and rules the wildest outbursts of physical agents. The Lord as king ‘sitteth upon the flood,’ and opens or seals the fountains of the great deep as He will. Scripture does not tell of the links between the First Cause and the physical effect. It brings the latter close up to the former. The last link touches the fixed staple, and all between may be ignored.

But the patient expectance of Noah comes out strongly in the story, as well as the gradualness of God’s working. Not till ‘forty days’-a round number-after the land appeared, did He do anything. He waited quietly till the path was plain. Eager impatience does not become those who trust in God. It is not said that the raven was sent out to see if the waters were abated. No purpose is named, nor is it said that it returned at all. ‘To and fro’ may mean over the waste of waters, not back and forward to and from the ark. The raven, from its blackness, its habit of feeding on carrion, its fierceness, was a bird of ill-omen, and sending it forth has a grim suggestion that it would find food enough, and ‘rest for the sole of its foot,’ among the swollen corpses floating on the dark waters. The dove, on the other hand, is the emblem of gentleness, purity, and tenderness. She went forth, the very embodiment of meek hope that wings its way over dark and desolate scenes of calamity and judgment, and, though disappointed at first, patiently waits till the waters sink further, discerns the earliest signs of their drying up, and comes back to the sender with a report which is a prophecy: ‘Your peace shall return to you again.’ Happy they who send forth, not the raven, but the dove, from their patient hearts. Their gentle wishes come back with confirmation of their hopes, ‘as doves to their windows.’

3. But Noah did not leave the ark, though ‘the earth was dry.’ God had ‘shut him in,’ and it must be God who brings him out. We have to take heed of precipitate departure from the place where He has fixed us. Like Israel in the desert, it must be ‘at the commandment of the Lord’ that we pitch the camp, and at the commandment of the Lord that we journey. Till He speaks we must remain, and as soon as He speaks we must remove. ‘God spake unto Noah, saying, Go forth . . .and Noah went forth.’ Thus prompt must be our obedience. A sacrifice of gratitude is the fit close of each epoch in our lives, and the fit beginning of each new one. Before he thought of anything else, Noah built his altar. All our deeds should be set in a golden ring of thankfulness. So the past is hallowed, and the future secure of God’s protection. It is no unworthy conception of God which underlies the strongly human expression that he ‘smelled the sweet savour.’ He delights in our offerings, and our trustful, grateful love is ‘an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable’ to Him. The pledge that He will not any more curse the ground for man’s sake is occasioned by the sacrifice, but is grounded on what seems, at first sight, a reason for the very opposite conclusion. Man’s evil heart the reason for God’s forbearance? Yes, because it is ‘*evil from his youth*.’ He deals with men as knowing our frame, the corruption of our nature, and the need that the tree should be made good before it can bring forth good fruit. Therefore He will not smite, but rather seek to draw to repentance by His goodness, and by the faithful continuance of His beneficence in the steadfast covenant of revolving seasons, ‘filling our hearts with food and gladness.’

12)Genesis 9:8-17

Genesis

THE SIGN FOR MAN AND THE REMEMBRANCER FOR GOD

Gen. 9:8 - Gen. 9:17.

The previous verses of this chapter lay down the outlines of the new order which followed the flood. The blessing and the command to be fruitful are repeated. The dominion over animals is confirmed, but enlarged by the permission to use them as food, and by the laying on them of ‘the terror of you and the dread of you.’ The sanctity of human life is laid down with great emphasis. Violence and bloodshed had brought about the flood. The appalling destruction effected by it might lead to the mistaken notion that God held man’s life cheap. Therefore the cornerstone of future society is laid in that declaration that life is inviolable. These blessings and commands are followed by this remarkable section, which deals with God’s covenant with Noah, and its token in the rainbow.

1. The covenant is stated, and the parties concerned in it enumerated in Gen. 9:3 - Gen. 9:11. When Noah came forth from the ark, after the stupendous act of divine justice, he must have felt that the first thing he needed was some assurance as to the footing on which he and the new world round him stood with God. The flood had swept away the old order. It had revealed terrible possibilities of destruction in nature, and terrible possibilities of wrath in God. Was any knowledge of His intentions and ways possible? Could continuance of the new order be counted on? The answer to such questions was-God’s covenant. Now, as then, when any great convulsions shake what seems permanent, and bring home to men the thinness of the crust of use and wont roofing an infinite depth of unknown possibilities of change, on which we walk, the heart cries out for some assurance of perpetuity, and some revelation of God’s mind. We can have such, as truly as Noah had, if we use the Revelation given us in Jesus.

In God’s covenant with Noah, the fact of the covenant may first be noted. What is a covenant? The term usually implies a reciprocal bond, both parties to which come under obligations by it, each to the other. But, in this case, there are no obligations on the part of man or of the creatures. This covenant is God’s only. It is contingent on nothing done by the recipients. He binds Himself, whatever be the conduct of men. This covenant is the self-motived promise of an unconditional mercy. May we not say that the ‘New Covenant’ in Jesus Christ is after the pattern of this, rather than after the manner of compacts which require both parties to do their several parts?

But note the great thought, that God limits His freedom of action by this definite promise. Noah was not left to grope in dread among the terrible possibilities opened by the flood. God marked out the line on which He would move, and marked off a course which He would not pursue. It is like a king giving his subjects a constitution. Men can reckon on God. He has let them know much of the principles and methods of His government. He has buoyed out His course, as it were, on the ocean, or pricked it down upon a chart. We have not to do with arbitrary power, with inscrutable will. Our God is not one who 'giveth no account of any of His matters.' To use a common saying, 'We know where to have Him.'

The substance of this covenant is noteworthy. It is concerned solely with physical nature. There is nothing spiritual or 'religious' about it. There are to be no more universal deluges. That is all which it guarantees. But consider how important such an assurance was in two aspects. Note the solemn light which it threw on the past. It taught that the flood was an exception in the divine government, which should stand unrepeated for ever, in its dread pre-eminence testifying how awful it was as a judicial act, and how outrageous had been the guilt which it drowned out of existence and sight. A wholesome terror at the unexampled act of judgment would fill the hearts of the little group which now represented mankind.

Consider the effect of the covenant in encouraging hope. We have said that the one thing needful for Noah was some assurance that the new order would last. He was like a man who has just been rescued from an earthquake or a volcanic eruption. The ground seems to reel beneath him. Old habitudes have been curled up like leaves in the fire. Is there to be any fixity, any ground for continuous action, or for labour for a moment beyond the present? Is it worth while to plant or sow? Men who have lived through national tempests or domestic crashes know how much they need to be steadied afterwards by some reasonable assurance of comparative continuity. And these men, in the childhood of the race, would need it much. So they were sent out to till the earth, and to begin again strenuous lives, with this covenant to keep them from falling into a hand-to-mouth style of life, which would have brought them down to barbarism. We all need the same kind of assurance; and then, when we get it, such is the weakness of humanity, we are tempted to think that continuity means eternity, and that, because probably to-morrow shall be as this day, there will never come a to-morrow which shall be quite unlike to-day. The crust of cooled earth, on which we walk, is thick enough to bear man and all his works, but there comes a time when it will crack. The world will not be flooded again, but we forget, what Noah did not know, that it will be burned.

The parties to the covenant must be noticed. Note how frequently the share in it, which all living creatures have, is referred to in the context. In Gen. 9:10 the language becomes strained [in the original], in order to express the universal participation of all living creatures; and in Gen. 9:13 'the earth' itself is spoken of as one party. God recognises obligations to all living things, and even to the dumb, non-sentient earth. He will not causelessly quench one bright, innocent life, nor harm one clod. Surely this is, at least, an incipient revelation of a God whose 'tender mercies are over all his works.' He 'doth take care for oxen'; and man, with all the creatures that are with him, and all the wild ones that 'come not near' him, and all the solid structure of the world, are held in one covenant of protecting and sustaining providence and power.

2. The sign of the covenant is described at great length in Gen. 9:12 - Gen. 9:17. Note that Gen. 9:12 - Gen. 9:13 state the general idea of a token or sign, that Gen. 9:14 - Gen. 9:16 deepen this by stating that the token to man is a reminder to God, and that Gen. 9:17 sums up the whole with emphatic repetition of the main points. The narrative does not imply, as has often been supposed, that the rainbow was visible for the first time after the deluge. To suppose that, is to read more into the story than is there, or than common sense tolerates. If there were showers and sunshine, there must have been rainbows. But the fair vision strode across the sky with no articulate promise in its loveliness, though it must always have kindled wonder, and sometimes stirred deeper thoughts. Now, for the first time, it was made 'a sign,' the visible pledge of God's promise.

Mark the emphasis with which God's agency is declared and His ownership asserted. '*I* do set *My* bow.' Neither Noah nor the writer knew anything about refraction or the prismatic spectrum. But perhaps they knew more about the rainbow than people do who know all about how it comes, except that God sets it in the cloud, and that it is His. Let us have the facts which science labels as such, by all means, and the more the better; but do not let us forget that there are other facts in nature which science has no means of attaining, but which are as solid and a great deal deeper than those which it supplies.

The natural adaptation of the rainbow for this office of a token is too plain to need dwelling on. It 'fills the sky when storms prepare to part,' and hence is a natural token that the downpour is being stayed. Somewhere there must be a bit of blue through which the sun can pierce; and the small gap, which is large enough to let it out, will grow till all the sky is one azure dome. It springs into sight in front of the cloud, without which it could not be, so it typifies the light which may glorify judgments, and is born of sorrows borne in the presence of God. It comes from the sunshine smiting the cloud; so it preaches the blending of love with divine judgment. It unites earth and heaven; so it proclaims that heavenly love is ready to transform earthly sorrows. It stretches across the land; so it speaks of an all-embracing care, which enfolds the earth and all its creatures.

It is not only a 'sign to men.' It is also, in the strong anthropomorphism of the narrative, a remembrancer to God. Of course this is accommodation of the representation of His nature to the limitations of ours. And the danger of attaching unworthy ideas to it is lessened by noticing that He is said to set His bow in the cloud, before it acts as His remembrancer. Therefore, He had remembered before it appeared. The truth, conveyed in the childlike language, is that God has His covenant ever before Him, and that He responds to and honours the appeal made to Him, by that which He has Himself appointed for a sign to men. The expectant eyes of the trustful man and the eye of God meet, as it were, in looking on the sign. On earth it nourishes faith; in heaven it moves to love and blessing. God can be reminded of what He always remembers. The rainbow reminds Him of His covenant by its calm light. Jesus Christ reminds Him of His grace by His intercession before the throne. We remind Him of His plighted faithfulness by our prayers. 'Ye that are the Lord's remembrancers, keep not silence.'

13)Genesis 12:1-4

AN EXAMPLE OF FAITH

Gen. 12:1 - Gen. 12:9.

I

We stand here at the well-head of a great river-a narrow channel, across which a child can step, but which is to open out a broad bosom that will reflect the sky and refresh continents. The call of Abram is the most important event in the Old Testament, but it is also an eminent example of individual faith. For both reasons he is called ‘the Father of the Faithful.’ We look at the incident here mainly from the latter point of view. It falls into three parts.

1. The divine voice of command and promise.-God’s servants have to be separated from home and kindred, and all surroundings. The command to Abram was no mere arbitrary test of obedience. God could not have done what He meant with him, unless He had got him by himself. So Isa. 51:2 put his finger on the essential when he says, ‘I called him alone.’ God’s communications are made to solitary souls, and His voice to us always summons us to forsake friends and companions, and to go apart with God. No man gets speech of God in a crowd. If you desired to fill a person with electricity, you used to put him on a stool with glass legs, to keep him from earthly contact. If the quickening impulse from the great magnet is to charge the soul, that soul must be isolated. ‘He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.’

The vagueness of the command is significant. Abram did not know ‘whither he went.’ He is not told that Canaan is the land, till he has reached Canaan. A true obedience is content to have orders enough for present duty. Ships are sometimes sent out with sealed instructions, to be opened when they reach latitude and longitude so-and-so. That is how we are all sent out. Our knowledge goes no farther ahead than is needful to guide our next step. If we ‘go out’ as He bids us, He will show us what to do next.

‘I do not ask to see

The distant scene; one step enough for me.'

Observe the promise. We may notice that it needed a soul raised above the merely temporal to care much for such promises. They would have been but thin diet for earthly appetites. 'A great nation'; a divine blessing; to be a source of blessing to the whole world, and a touchstone by their conduct to which men would be blessed or cursed;-what was there in these to fascinate a man, unless he had faith to teach him the relative importance of the earthly and the heavenly, the present and the future? Notice that the whole promise appeals to unselfish desires. It is always, in some measure, elevating to live for a future, rather than a present, good; but if it be only the same kind of good as the present would yield, it is a poor affair. The only really ennobling faith is one which sets before itself a future full of divine blessing, and of diffusion of that blessing through us, and which therefore scorns delights, and for such gifts is content to be solitary and a wanderer.

2. The obedience of faith.-We have here a wonderful example of prompt, unquestioning obedience to a bare word. We do not know how the divine command was conveyed to Abram. We simply read, 'The Lord said'; and if we contrast this with Gen. 12:7, 'The Lord appeared . . .and said,' it will seem probable that there was no outward sign of the divine will. The patriarch knew that he was following a divine command, and not his own purpose; but there seems to have been no appeal to sense to authenticate the inward voice. He stands, then, on a high level, setting the example of faith as unconditional acceptance of, and obedience to, God's bare word.

Observe that faith, which is the reliance on a person, and therefore trust in his word, passes into both forms of confidence in that word as promise, and obedience to that word as command. We cannot cut faith in halves, and exercise the one aspect without the other. Some people's faith says that it delights in God's promises, but it does not delight in His commandments. That is no faith at all. Whoever takes God at His word, will take all His words. There is no faith without obedience; there is no obedience without faith.

We have already said enough about the separation which was effected by Abram's journey; but we may just notice that the departure from his father's house was but the necessary result of the gulf between them and him, which had been opened by his faith. They were idolaters; he worshipped one God. That drove them farther apart than the distance between Sichem and Haran. When sympathy in religion was at an end, the breach of all other ties was best. So to-day, whether there be outward separation or no, depends on circumstances; but every true Christian is parted from the dearest who is not a Christian, by an abyss wider than any outward distance can make. The law for us is Abram's law, 'Get thee out.' Either our faith will separate us from the world, or the world will separate us from our faith and our God.

The companionship of Lot, who attaches himself to Abram, teaches that religion, in its true possessors, exercises an attractive influence over even common natures, and may win them to a loftier life. Some weak eyes may discern more glory in the sunshine tinting a poor bit of mist into ruddy light than in the beam which is too bright to look at. A faithful Abram will draw Lot after him.

'They went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came.' Compare this singular expression with Gen. 11:31, where we have Terah's emigration from Ur described in the same terms, with the all-important difference in the end, 'They came' not into Canaan, but 'unto Haran, and dwelt there.' Many begin the course; one finishes it. Terah's journeying was only in search of pasture and an abode. So he dropped his wider scheme when the narrower served his purpose. It was an easy matter to go from Ur to Haran. Both were on the same bank of the Euphrates. But to cross the broad, deep, rapid river was a different thing, and meant an irrevocable cutting loose from the past life. Only the man of faith did that. There are plenty of half-and-half Christians, who go along merrily from Ur to Haran; but when they see the wide stream in front, and realise how completely the other side is separated from all that is familiar, they take another thought, and conclude they have come far enough, and Haran will serve their turn.

Again, the phrase teaches us the certain issue of patient pilgrimage and persistent purpose. There is no mystery in getting to the journey's end. 'One foot up, and the other foot down,' continued long enough, will bring to the goal of the longest march. It looks a weary journey, and we wonder if we shall ever get thither. But the magic of 'one step at a time' does it. The guide is also the upholder of our way. ‘Every one of them appeareth before God in Zion.’

3. The life in the land.-The first characteristic of it is its continual wandering. This is the feature which the Epistle to the Hebrews marks as significant. There was no reason but his own choice why Abram should continue to journey, and prefer to pitch his tent now under the terebinth tree of Moreh, now by Hebron, rather than to enter some of the cities of the land. He dwelt in tents because he looked for the city. The clear vision of the future detached him, as it will always detach men, from close participation in the present. It is not because we are mortal, and death is near at the furthest, that the Christian is to sit loose to this world, but because he lives by the hope of the inheritance. He must choose to be a pilgrim, and keep himself apart in feeling and aims from this present. The great lesson from the wandering life of Abram is, ‘Set your affection on things above.’ Cultivate the sense of belonging to another polity than that in the midst of which you dwell. The Canaanites christened Abram ‘The Hebrew’ [Gen. 14:13], which may be translated ‘The man from the other side.’ That is the name which all true Christians should deserve. They should bear their foreign extraction in their faces, and never be naturalised subjects here. Life is wholesomer in the tent under the spreading tree, with the fresh air blowing about us and clear sky above, than in the Canaanite city.

Observe, too, that Abram’s life was permeated with worship. Wherever he pitches his tent, he builds an altar. So he fed his faith, and kept up his communion with God. The only condition on which the pilgrim life is possible, and the temptations of the world cease to draw our hearts, is that all life shall be filled with the consciousness of the divine presence, our homes altars, and ourselves joyful thankofferings. Then every abode is blessed. The undefended tent is a safe fortress, in which dwelling we need not envy those who dwell in palaces. Common tasks will then be fresh, full of interest, because we see God in them, and offer them up to Him. The wandering life will be a life of walking with God, and progressive knowledge of Him; and over all the roughnesses and the sorrows and the trivialities of it will be spread ‘the light that never was on sea or land, the consecration' of God's presence, and the peacefulness of communion with Him.

Again, we may notice that the life of obedience was followed by fuller manifestations of God, and of His will. God 'appeared' when Abram was in the land. Is it not always true that obedience is blessed by closer vision and more knowledge? To him that hath shall be given; and he who has followed the unseen Guide through dimly discerned paths to an invisible goal, will be gladdened when he reaches the true Canaan, by the sight of Him whom, having not seen, he loved. Even here on earth obedience is the path to fuller knowledge; and when the pilgrims who have left all and followed the Captain of salvation through a deeper, darker stream than Abram crossed, have touched the other side, God will appear to them, and say, as the enraptured eye gazes amazed on the goodly land, 'Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee.'

Continue to Part II - ABRAM AND THE LIFE OF FAITH

14)Genesis 12:5

Genesis

AN EXAMPLE OF FAITH

GOING FORTH

Gen. 12:5.

I

The reference of these words is to Abram's act of faith in leaving Haran and setting out on his pilgrimage. It is a strange narrative of a journey, which omits the journey altogether, with its weary marches, privations, and perils, and notes but its beginning and its end. Are not these the main points in every life, its direction and its attainment? There are-

'Two points in the adventure of the diver, One-when, a beggar, he prepares to plunge,

One-when, a prince, he rises with his pearl.'

Abram and his company had a clear aim. But does not the Epistle to the Hebrews magnify him precisely because he 'went out, not knowing whither he went'? Both statements are true, for Abram had the same combination of knowledge and ignorance as we all have. He knew that he was to go to a land that he should afterwards inherit, and he knew that, in the first place, Canaan was to be his 'objective point,' but he did not know, till long after he had crossed the Euphrates and pitched his tent by Bethel, that it was the land. The ultimate goal was clear, and the first step towards it was plain, but how that first step was related to the goal was not plain, and all the steps between were unknown. He went forth with sealed orders, to go to a certain place, where he would have further instructions. He knew that he was to go to Canaan, and beyond that point all was dark, except for the sparkle of the great hope that gleamed on the horizon in front, as a sunlit summit rises above a sea of mist between it and the traveller. Like such a traveller, Abram could not accurately tell how far off the shining peak was, nor where, in the intervening gorges full of mist, the path lay; but he plunged into the darkness with a good heart, because he had caught a glimpse of his journey's end. So with us. We may have clear before us the ultimate aim and goal of our lives, and also the step which we have to take now, in pressing towards it, while between these two there stretches a valley full of mist, the breadth of which may be measured by years or by hours, for all that we know, and the rough places and green pastures of which are equally hidden from us. We have to be sure that the mountain peak far ahead, with the sunshine bathing it, is not delusive cloud but solid reality, and we have to make sure that God has bid us step out on the yard of path which we *can* see, and, having secured these two certainties, we are to cast ourselves into the obscurity before us, and to bear in our hearts the vision of the end, to cheer us amid the difficulties of the road.

Life is strenuous, fruitful, and noble, in the measure in which its ultimate aim is kept clearly visible throughout it all. Nearer aims, prescribed by physical necessities, tastes, circumstances, and the like, are clear enough, but a melancholy multitude of us have never reflected on the further question: ‘What then?’ Suppose I have made my fortune, or won my wife, or established my position, or achieved a reputation, behind all these successes lies the larger question. These are not ends but means, and it is fatal to treat them as being the goal of our efforts or the chief end of our being. There would be fewer wrecked lives, and fewer bitter and disappointed old men, if there were more young ones who, at starting, put clearly before themselves the question: ‘What am I living for? and what am I going to do when I have secured the nearer aims necessarily prescribed to me?’

What that aim should be is not doubtful. The only worthy end befitting creatures with hearts, minds, consciences, and wills like ours is God Himself. Abram’s ‘Canaan’ is usually regarded as an emblem of heaven, and that is correct, but the land of our inheritance is not wholly beyond the river, for God is the portion of our hearts. He *is* heaven. To dwell with Him, to have all the current of our being running towards Him, to set Him before us in the strenuous hours of effort and in the quiet moments of repose, in the bright and in the dark days, are the conditions of blessedness, strength, and peace.

That aim clearly apprehended and persistently pursued gives continuity to life, such as nothing else can do. How many of the things that drew us to themselves, and were for a while the objects of desire and effort, have sunk below the horizon! The lives that are not directed to God as their chief end are like the voyages of old-time sailors, who had to creep from one headland to another, and steer for points which, one after another, were reached, left behind, and forgotten. There is only one aim so great, so far in advance that we can never reach, and therefore can never pass and drop it. Life then becomes a chain, not a heap of unrelated fragments. That aim made ours, stimulates effort to its highest point, and therefore secures blessedness. It emancipates from many bonds, and takes the poison out of the mosquito bites of small annoyances, and the stings of great sorrows. It gleams ever before a man, sufficiently attained to make him at rest, sufficiently unattained to give the joy of progress. The pilgrims who had but one single aim, ‘to go to the land of Canaan,’ were delivered from the miseries of conflicting desires, and with simplicity of aim came concentration of force and calm of spirit.

COMING IN

II

If life has a clear, definite aim, and especially if its aim is the highest, there will be detachment from, and abandonment of, many lower ones. Nothing worth doing is done, and nothing worth being is realised in ourselves, except on condition of resolutely ignoring much that attracts. 'They went forth'; Haran must be given up if Canaan is to be reached. Artists are content to pay the price for mastery in their art, students think it no hardship to remain ignorant of much in order to know their own subject thoroughly; men of business feel it no sacrifice to give up culture, leisure, and sometimes still higher things, such as love and purity, to win wealth. And we shall not be Christians after Christ's heart unless we practise similar restrictions. The stream that is to flow with impetus sufficient to scour its bed clear of obstructions must not be allowed to meander in side branches, but be banked up in one channel. Sometimes there must be actual surrender and outward withdrawal from lower aims which, by our weakness, have become rival aims; always there must be subordination and detachment in heart and mind. The compass in an iron ship is disturbed by the iron, unless it has been adjusted; the golden apples arrest the runner, and there are clogs and weights in every life, which have to be laid aside if the race is to be won. The old pilgrim fashion is still the only way. We must do as Abram did: leave Haran and its idols behind us, and go forth, ready to dwell, if need be, in deserts, and as sojourners even when among cities, or we shall not reach the 'land that is very far off.' It is near us if we forsake self and the 'things seen and temporal,' but it recedes when we turn our hearts to these.

'Into the land of Canaan they came.' No man honestly and rightly seeks God and fails to find Him. No man has less goodness and Christ-likeness than he truly desires and earnestly pursues. Nearer aims are often missed, and it is well that they should be. We should thank God for disappointments, for hopes unfulfilled, or proving still greater disappointments when fulfilled. It is mercy that often makes the harvest from our sowing a scanty one, for so we are being taught to turn from the quest in which searching has no assurance of finding, to that in which to seek is to find. 'I have never said to any of the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain.' We may not reach other lands which seem to us to be lands of promise, or when we do, may find that the land is 'evil and naughty,' but this land we shall reach, if we desire it, and if, desiring it, we go forth from this vain world. The Christian life is the only one which has no failures, no balked efforts, no frustrated aims, no brave settings out and defeated returnings. The literal meaning of one of the Old Testament words for *sin* is missing the mark, and that embodies the truth that no man wins what he seeks who seeks satisfaction elsewhere than in God. Like the rivers in Asiatic deserts, which are lost in the sand and never reach the sea, all lives which flow towards anything but God are dissipated and vain.

But the supreme realisation of an experience like Abram's is reserved for another life. No pilgrim Zion-ward perishes in the wilderness, or loses his way or fails to come to 'the city of habitation.' 'They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God.' And when they appear there, they will think no more, just as this narrative says nothing, of the sandy, salt, waterless wildernesses, or the wearinesses, dangers, and toils of the road. The experience of the happy travellers, who have found all which they sought and are at home for ever in the fatherland towards which they journeyed, will all be summed up in this, that 'they went forth to go into the land of Canaan, and into the land of Canaan they came.'

15)Genesis 12:6-7

Genesis

AN EXAMPLE OF FAITH

THE MAN OF FAITH

Gen. 12:6 - Gen. 12:7.

Great epoch and man. Steps of Abram's training. First he was simply called to go-no promise of inheritance-obeyed-came to Canaan-found a thickly peopled land with advanced social order, and received no divine vision till he was face to face with the Canaanite.

1. ***God's bit-by-bit leading of us.***

How slowly the divine purpose was revealed-the trial before the promise-did not know where, nor that Canaan was land, but only told enough for his first march.

So with us-our ignorance of future is meant to have the effect of keeping us near God and training us to live a day at a time.

God's finger on the page points to a word at a time. Each day's route is given morning by morning in the order for the day.

2. ***Obedience often brings us into very difficult places.***

Abram was ready to say, no doubt, 'This cannot be the land for me, peopled as it is with all these Canaanites.' We are ever ready to think that, if we find obstacles, we must have misunderstood God's directions, but 'many adversaries' often indicate an 'open door.'

3. ***The presence of enemies brings the presence of God.***

This is the first time we read that God *appeared* to men.

As the darkness thickens, the pillar of fire brightens. But not only does God appear more clearly, but our spirits are more eager and therefore able to see Him. We are mercifully left to feel the enemies before we see Him present in His strength.

4. ***The victory for us lies in the vision of God and of His loving purpose.***

How superb the confidence of 'Unto thy seed will I give *this* land.'

That vision is our true strength. And it will make us feel as pilgrims, which is in itself more than half the battle.

16)Genesis 12:8-9

Genesis

ABRAM AND THE LIFE OF FAITH

Gen. 12:1 - Gen. 12:9.

II

Part I - A great act of renunciation at the divine call lies at the foundation of Israel's history, as it does at the foundation of every life that blesses the world or is worth living. The divine Word to Abram first gives the command in all its authoritativeness and plain setting forth of how much had to be surrendered, and then in its exuberant setting forth of how much was to be won by obedience. God does not hide the sacrifices that have to be made if we will be true to His command. He will enlist no recruits on false pretences. All ties of country, kindred, and father's house have to be loosened, and, if need be, to be cut, for His command is to be supreme, and clinging hands that would hold back the pilgrim have to be disengaged. If a man realises God's hold on him, he feels all others relaxed. The magnetism of the divine command overcomes gravitation, and lifts him high above earth. The life of faith ever begins as that of 'the Father of the Faithful' began, with the solemn recognition of a divine will which separates. Further, Abram saw plainly what he had to leave, but not what he was to win. He had to make a venture of faith, for 'the land that I will shew thee' was undefined. Certainly it was somewhere, but where was it? He had to fling away substance for what seemed shadow to all but the eye of faith, as we all have to do. The familiar, undeniable good of the present has to be waived in favour of what 'common sense' calls a misty possibility in the future. To part with solid acres and get nothing but hopes of an inheritance in the skies looks like insanity, and is the only true wisdom. 'Get thee out' is plain; 'the land that I will shew thee' looks like the doubtful outlines seen from afar at sea, which may be but clouds.

But Abram had a great hope blazing in front, none the less bright or guiding because it all rested on the bare promise of God. It is the prerogative of faith to give solidity and reality to what the world thinks has neither. The wanderer who had left his country was to receive a land for his own; the solitary who had left his kindred was to become the founder of a nation; the unknown stranger was to win a great name,-and how wonderfully that has come true! Not only was he to be blessed, but also to be a blessing, for from him was to flow that which should bless all the earth,-and how transcendently that has come true! The attitude of men to him [and to the universal blessing that should descend from him] was to determine their position in reference to God and ‘blessings’ or ‘cursings’ from him. So the migration of Abram was a turning-point in universal history.

Obedience followed the command, immediate as the thunder on the flash, and complete. ‘So Abram went, as the Lord had spoken unto him,’-blessed they of whose lives that may be the summing-up! Happy the life which has God’s command at the back of every deed, and no command of His unobeyed! If our acts are closely parallel with God’s speech to us, they will prosper, and we shall be peaceful wherever we may have to wander. Success followed obedience in Abram’s case, as in deepest truth it always does. That is a pregnant expression: ‘They went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came.’ A strange itinerary of a journey, which omits all but the start and the finish! And yet are these not the most important points in any journey or life,-whither it was directed and where it arrived? How little will the weary tramps in the desert be remembered when the goal has been reached! Dangers and privations soon pass from memory, and we shall think little of sorrows, cares, and pains, when we arrive at home. The life of faith is the only one which is always sure of getting to the place to which it seeks to journey. Others miss their aim, or drop dead on the road, like the early emigrants out West; Christian lives get to the city.

Once in the land, Abram was still a stranger and pilgrim. He first planted himself in its heart by Sichem, but outside the city, under the terebinth tree of Moreh. The reason for his position is given in the significant statement that ‘the Canaanite was then in the land.’ So he had to live in the midst of an alien civilisation, and yet keep apart from it. As Hebrews says, he was ‘dwelling in tabernacles,’ because he ‘looked for a city.’ The hope of the permanent future made him keep clear of the passing present; and we are to feel ourselves pilgrims and sojourners, not so much because earth is fleeting and we are mortal, as because our true affinities are with the unseen and eternal. But the presence of ‘the Canaanite’ is connected also with the following words, which tell that ‘the Lord appeared unto Abram,’ and now after his obedience told him that this was the land that was to be his. He unfolds His purposes to those who keep His commandments; obedience is the mother of insight. The revelation put a further strain on faith, for the present occupiers of the land were many and strong; but it matters not how formidably and firmly rooted the Canaanite is, God's children can be sure that the promise will be fulfilled. We can calmly look on his power and reckon on its decay, if the Lord appears to us, as to Abram-and He surely will if we have followed His separating voice, and dwell as strangers here, because our hearts are with Him.

After the appearance of God and the promise, we have an outline of the pilgrim's life, as seen in Abram. He signalised God's further opening of His purposes, by building an altar on the place where He had been seen by him. Thankful recognition and commemoration of the times in our lives when He has most plainly drawn near and shown us glimpses of His will, are no less blessed than due, and they who thus rear altars to Him will wonder, when they come to count up how many they have had to build. But the life of faith is ever a pilgrim life, and Bethel has soon to be the home instead of Shechem. There, too, Abram keeps outside the city, and pitches his tent. There, too, the altar rises by the side of the tent. The transitory provision for housing the pilgrim contrasts with the solid structure for offering sacrifices. The tent is 'pitched,' and may be struck and carried away to-morrow, but the altar is 'builded.' That part of our lives which is concerned with the material and corporeal is, after all, short in duration and small in importance; that which has to do with God, His revelations, and His worship and service, lasts. What is left in ancient historic lands, like Egypt or Greece, is the temples of the gods, while the huts of the people have perished long centuries ago. What we build for God lasts; what we pitch for ourselves is transient as we are.

17)Genesis 13:1-2

Genesis

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CHOICE

Gen. 13:1 - Gen. 13:13.

The main lesson of this section is the wisdom of seeking spiritual rather than temporal good. That is illustrated on both sides. Prosperity attends Abram and Lot while they think more of obeying God than of flocks and herds. Lot makes a mistake, as far as this world is concerned, when he chooses his place of abode for the sake of its material advantages. But the introductory verses [Gen. 13:1 - Gen. 13:4] suggest a question, and seem to teach an important lesson. Was Abram right in so soon leaving the land to which God had led him, and going down to Egypt? Was that not taking the bit between his teeth? He had been commanded to go to Canaan; should he not have stopped there-famine or no famine-till the same authority commanded him to leave the land? If God had put him there, should he not have trusted God to keep him alive in famine? The narrative seems to imply that his going to Egypt was a failure of faith. It gives no hint of a divine voice leading him thither. We do not hear that he builded any altar beside his tent there, as he had done in the happier days of life by trust. His stay resulted in peril and in something very like lying, for which he had to bear the disgrace of being rebuked by an idolater, and having no word of excuse to offer. The great lesson of the whole section, and indeed of Abram's whole life, receives fresh illustration from the story thus understood, which preaches loudly that trust is safety and wellbeing, and that it is always sin and always folly to leave Canaan, where God has put us, even if there be a famine, and to go down into Egypt, even if its harvests be abundant.

But another lesson is also taught. After the interruption of the Egyptian journey, Abram had to begin all his Canaan life over again. Very emphatically the narrative puts it, that he went to 'the place where his tent had been at the beginning,' to the altar which he had made at the first. Yes! that is the only place for a man who has faltered and gone aside from the course of obedience. He must begin over again. The backsliding Christian has to resort anew to the place of the penitent, and to come to Christ, as he did at first for pardon. It is a solemn thought that years of obedience and heroisms of self-surrender, may be so annihilated by some act of self-seeking distrust that the whole career has, as it were, to be begun anew from the very starting-point. It is a blessed thought that, however far and long we may have wandered, we can always return to the place where we were at the beginning, and there call on the name of the Lord.

Note how we are taught here the great truth for the Old Testament, that outward prosperity follows most surely those who do not seek for it. Abram's wealth has increased, and his companion, Lot, has shared in the prosperity. It is because he 'went with Abram' that he 'had flocks, and herds, and tents.' Of course, the connection between despising the world and possessing it is not thus close in New Testament times. But even now, one often sees that the men who *will* be rich fall into a pit of poverty, and that a heart set on higher things, which counts earthly advantages second and not first, wins a sufficiency of these most surely. Foxlike cunning, and wolf-like rapacity, and Devil-like selfishness, which make up a large portion of what the world calls 'great business capacity,' do not always secure the prize. But the real possession of earth and all its wealth depends to-day, as much as ever it did in Abram's times, on seeking 'first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness.' Only when we are Christ's are all things ours. They are ours, not by the vulgar way of what the world calls ownership, but in proportion as we use them to the highest ends of helping us to grow in wisdom and Christ-likeness, in the measure in which we subordinate them to heavenly good, in the degree in which we employ them as means of serving Christ. We can see the Pleiades best by not looking directly at, but somewhat away from, them; and just as pleasure, if made the direct object of life, ceases to be pleasure, so the world's goods, if taken for our chief aim, cease to yield even the imperfect good which they can bestow.

But now we have to look at the two dim figures which the remainder of this story presents to us, and which shine there, in that far-off past, types and instances of the two great classes into which men are divided,-Abram, the man of faith; Lot, the man of sense.

Mark the conduct of the man of faith. Why should he, who has God's promise that all the land is his, squabble with his kinsman about pasture and wells? The herdsmen naturally would come to high words and blows, especially as the available land was diminished by the claims of the 'Canaanite and Perizzite.' But the direct effect of Abram's faith was to make him feel that the matter in dispute was too small to warrant a quarrel. A soul truly living in the contemplation of the future, and filled with God's promises, will never be eager to insist on its rights, or to stand on its dignity, and will take too accurate a measure of the worth of things temporal to get into a heat about them. The clash of conflicting interests, and the bad blood bred by them, seem infinitely small, when we are up on the height of communion with God. An acre or two more or less of grass land does not look all-important, when our vision of the city which hath foundations is clear. So an elevated calm and ‘sweet reasonableness’ will mark the man who truly lives by faith, and he will seek after the things that make for peace. Abram could fight, as Old Testament morality permitted, when occasion arose, as Lot found out to his advantage before long. But he would not strive about such trifles.

May we not venture to apply his words to churches and sects? They too, if they have faith strong and dominant, will not easily fall out with one another about intrusions on each other’s territory, especially in the presence, as at this day, of the common foe. When the Canaanite and the Perizzite are in the land, and Unbelief in militant forms is arrayed against us, it is more than folly, it is sin, for brethren to be turning their weapons against each other. The common foe should make them stand shoulder to shoulder. Abram’s faith led, too, to the noble generosity of his proposal. The elder and superior gives the younger and inferior the right of option, and is quite willing to take Lot’s leavings. Right or left-it mattered not to him; God would be with him, whichever way he went; and the glorious Beyond, for which he lived, blazed too bright before his inward sight to let him be very solicitous where he was. ‘I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.’ It does not matter much what accommodation we have on ship-board, when the voyage is so short. If our thoughts are stretching across the sea to the landing at home, and the welcome there, we shall not fight with our fellow-passengers about our cabins or places at the table. And notice what rest comes when faith thus dwindles the worth of the momentary arrangements here. The less of our energies are consumed in asserting ourselves, and scrambling for our rights, and cutting in before other people, so as to get the best places for ourselves, the more we shall have to spare for better things; and the more we live in the future, and leave God to order our ways, the more shall our souls be wrapped in perfect peace. Mark the conduct of the man of sense. We can fancy the two standing on the barren hills by Bethel, from one of which, as travellers tell us, there is precisely the view which Lot saw. He lifted up his greedy eyes, and there, at his feet, lay that strange Jordan valley with its almost tropical richness, its dark lines of foliage telling of abundant water, the palm-trees of Jericho perhaps, and the glittering cities. Up there among the hills there was little to tempt,-rocks and scanty herbage; down below, it was like the lost Eden, or the Egypt from which they had but lately come.

What need for hesitation? True, the men of the plain were ‘wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly,’ as the chapter says with grim emphasis. But Lot evidently never thought about that. He knew it, though, and ought to have thought about it. It was his sin that he was guided in his choice only by considerations of temporal advantage. Put his action into words, and it says, ‘Grass for my sheep is more to me than fellowship with God, and a good conscience.’ No doubt he would have had salves enough. ‘I do not need to become like them, though I live among them.’ ‘A man must look after his own interests.’ ‘I can serve God down there as well as up here.’ Perhaps he even thought that he might be a missionary among these sinners. But at bottom he did not seek first the kingdom of God, but the other things.

We have seldom the choice put before us so dramatically and sharply; but it is as really presented to each. There is the shameless cynicism of the men who avowedly only ask the question, ‘Will it pay?’ But there are subtler forms which affect us all. It is the standing temptation of Englishmen to apply a money standard to everything, to adopt courses of action of which the only recommendation is that they promote getting on in the world. Men who call themselves Christians select schools for their children, or professions for their boys, or marriages for their daughters, down in Sodom, because it will give them a lift in life which they would not get up in the starved pastures at Bethel, with nobody but Abram and his like to associate with. If the earnestness with which men pursue an end is to be taken as any measure of its importance in their eyes, it certainly does not look much as if modern average Christians did believe that it was of more moment to be united to God, and to be growing like Him, than to secure a good large share of earthly possessions. Tried by the test of conduct, their faith in getting on is a great deal deeper than their faith in getting up. But if our religion does not make us put the world beneath our feet, and count all things but loss that we may win Christ, we had better ask ourselves whether our religion is any better than Lot’s, which was second-hand, and was much more imitation of Abram than obedience to God.

Lot teaches us that material good may tempt and conquer, even after it has once been overcome. His early life had been heroic; in his young enthusiasm, he had thrown in his portion with Abram in his great venture. He had not been thinking of his flocks when he left Haran. Probably, as I have just said, he was a good deal galvanised into imitation; but still, he had chosen the better part. But now he has tired of a pilgrim’s life. There are men who cut down the thorns, and in whom the seed is sown; but thorns are tenacious of life, and quick growing, and so they spread over the field and choke the seed. It is easier to take some one bold step than to keep true through life to its spirit. Youth contemns, but too often middle-age worships, worldly success. The world tightens its grasp as we grow older, and Lot and Demas teach us that it is hard to keep for a lifetime on the heights. Faith, strong and ever renewed by communion, can do it; nothing else can.

Lot’s history teaches what comes of setting the world first, and God’s kingdom second. For one thing, the association with it is sure to get closer. Lot began with choosing the plain; then he crept a little nearer, and pitched his tent ‘towards’ Sodom; next time we hear of him, he is living in the city, and mixed up inextricably with its people. The first false step leads on to connections unforeseen, from which the man would have shrunk in horror, if he had been told that he would make them. Once on the incline, time and gravity will settle how far down we go. We shall see, in subsequent sections, how far Lot’s own moral character suffered from his choice. But we may so far anticipate the future narrative as to point out that it affords a plain instance of the great truth that the sure way to lose the world as well as our own souls, is to make it our first object. He would have been safe if he had stopped up among the hills. The shadowy Eastern kings who swooped down on the plain would never have ventured up there. But when we choose the world for our portion, we lay ourselves open to the full weight of all the blows which change and fortune can inflict, and come voluntarily down from an impregnable fastness to the undefended open.

Nor is this all; but at the last, when the fiery rain bursts on the doomed city, Lot has to leave all the wealth for which he has sacrificed conscience and peace, and escapes with bare life; he suffers loss even if he himself is 'saved as dragged through the fire.' The world passeth away and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. The riches which wax not old, and need not to be left when we leave all things besides, are surely the treasures which the calmest reason dictates should be our chief aim. God is the true portion of the soul; if we have Him, we have all. So, let us seek Him first, and, with Him, all else is ours.

18)Genesis 13:3

Genesis

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CHOICE

LIFE IN CANAAN

Gen. 13:3.

These are the two first acts of Abram in the land of Canaan.

1. *All life should blend earthly and heavenly.*

They are not to be separated. Religion should run through everything and take the whole of life for its field. Where we cannot carry it is no place for us. It is a shame that heathenism should be more penetrated by its religion than Christendom is.

2. *The family should be a church.*

Domestic religion. New Testament households. Abram a priest. The decay of family religion, worship, and instruction.

3. *The service to God should be more costly than to ourselves.*

Pitching a tent cheaper than building an altar. Give God the best. We build ourselves ceiled houses and the ark dwells in curtains. Pagans build elaborate temples, but their houses are hovels. Too many Christians do the opposite.

4. ***Building for God lasts, for selves perishes.***

A tent is stricken, and no trace remains but embers. The stones of Jacob's altar may be standing yet. The Parthenon of Athens remains: where are the hovels of the people? 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.' Permanent results of transitory deeds.

19)Genesis 13:4-13

Genesis

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CHOICE

Gen. 13:1 - Gen. 13:13.

The main lesson of this section is the wisdom of seeking spiritual rather than temporal good. That is illustrated on both sides. Prosperity attends Abram and Lot while they think more of obeying God than of flocks and herds. Lot makes a mistake, as far as this world is concerned, when he chooses his place of abode for the sake of its material advantages. But the introductory verses [Gen. 13:1 - Gen. 13:4] suggest a question, and seem to teach an important lesson. Was Abram right in so soon leaving the land to which God had led him, and going down to Egypt? Was that not taking the bit between his teeth? He had been commanded to go to Canaan; should he not have stopped there-famine or no famine-till the same authority commanded him to leave the land? If God had put him there, should he not have trusted God to keep him alive in famine? The narrative seems to imply that his going to Egypt was a failure of faith. It gives no hint of a divine voice leading him thither. We do not hear that he builded any altar beside his tent there, as he had done in the happier days of life by trust. His stay resulted in peril and in something very like lying, for which he had to bear the disgrace of being rebuked by an idolater, and having no word of excuse to offer. The great lesson of the whole section, and indeed of Abram's whole life, receives fresh illustration from the story thus understood, which preaches loudly that trust is safety and wellbeing, and that it is always sin and always folly to leave Canaan, where God has put us, even if there be a famine, and to go down into Egypt, even if its harvests be abundant.

But another lesson is also taught. After the interruption of the Egyptian journey, Abram had to begin all his Canaan life over again. Very emphatically the narrative puts it, that he went to ‘the place where his tent had been at the beginning,’ to the altar which he had made at the first. Yes! that is the only place for a man who has faltered and gone aside from the course of obedience. He must begin over again. The backsliding Christian has to resort anew to the place of the penitent, and to come to Christ, as he did at first for pardon. It is a solemn thought that years of obedience and heroisms of self-surrender, may be so annihilated by some act of self-seeking distrust that the whole career has, as it were, to be begun anew from the very starting-point. It is a blessed thought that, however far and long we may have wandered, we can always return to the place where we were at the beginning, and there call on the name of the Lord.

Note how we are taught here the great truth for the Old Testament, that outward prosperity follows most surely those who do not seek for it. Abram’s wealth has increased, and his companion, Lot, has shared in the prosperity. It is because he ‘went with Abram’ that he ‘had flocks, and herds, and tents.’ Of course, the connection between despising the world and possessing it is not thus close in New Testament times. But even now, one often sees that the men who *will* be rich fall into a pit of poverty, and that a heart set on higher things, which counts earthly advantages second and not first, wins a sufficiency of these most surely. Foxlike cunning, and wolf-like rapacity, and Devil-like selfishness, which make up a large portion of what the world calls ‘great business capacity,’ do not always secure the prize. But the real possession of earth and all its wealth depends to-day, as much as ever it did in Abram’s times, on seeking ‘first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness.’ Only when we are Christ’s are all things ours. They are ours, not by the vulgar way of what the world calls ownership, but in proportion as we use them to the highest ends of helping us to grow in wisdom and Christ-likeness, in the measure in which we subordinate them to heavenly good, in the degree in which we employ them as means of serving Christ. We can see the Pleiades best by not looking directly at, but somewhat away from, them; and just as pleasure, if made the direct object of life, ceases to be pleasure, so the world’s goods, if taken for our chief aim, cease to yield even the imperfect good which they can bestow.

But now we have to look at the two dim figures which the remainder of this story presents to us, and which shine there, in that far-off past, types and instances of the two great classes into which men are divided,-Abram, the man of faith; Lot, the man of sense.

Mark the conduct of the man of faith. Why should he, who has God’s promise that all the land is his, squabble with his kinsman about pasture and wells? The herdsmen naturally would come to high words and blows, especially as the available land was diminished by the claims of the ‘Canaanite and Perizzite.’ But the direct effect of Abram’s faith was to make him feel that the matter in dispute was too small to warrant a quarrel. A soul truly living in the contemplation of the future, and filled with God’s promises, will never be eager to insist on its rights, or to stand on its dignity, and will take too accurate a measure of the worth of things temporal to get into a heat about them. The clash of conflicting interests, and the bad blood bred by them, seem infinitely small, when we are up on the height of communion with God. An acre or two more or less of grass land does not look all-important, when our vision of the city which hath foundations is clear. So an elevated calm and ‘sweet reasonableness’ will mark the man who truly lives by faith, and he will seek after the things that make for peace. Abram could fight, as Old Testament morality permitted, when occasion arose, as Lot found out to his advantage before long. But he would not strive about such trifles.

May we not venture to apply his words to churches and sects? They too, if they have faith strong and dominant, will not easily fall out with one another about intrusions on each other’s territory, especially in the presence, as at this day, of the common foe. When the Canaanite and the Perizzite are in the land, and Unbelief in militant forms is arrayed against us, it is more than folly, it is sin, for brethren to be turning their weapons against each other. The common foe should make them stand shoulder to shoulder. Abram’s faith led, too, to the noble generosity of his proposal. The elder and superior gives the younger and inferior the right of option, and is quite willing to take Lot’s leavings. Right or left-it mattered not to him; God would be with him, whichever way he went; and the glorious Beyond, for which he lived, blazed too bright before his inward sight to let him be very solicitous where he was. ‘I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.’ It does not matter much what accommodation we have on ship-board, when the voyage is so short. If our thoughts are stretching across the sea to the landing at home, and the welcome there, we shall not fight with our fellow-passengers about our cabins or places at the table. And notice what rest comes when faith thus dwindles the worth of the momentary arrangements here. The less of our energies are consumed in asserting ourselves, and scrambling for our rights, and cutting in before other people, so as to get the best places for ourselves, the more we shall have to spare for better things; and the more we live in the future, and leave God to order our ways, the more shall our souls be wrapped in perfect peace. Mark the conduct of the man of sense. We can fancy the two standing on the barren hills by Bethel, from one of which, as travellers tell us, there is precisely the view which Lot saw. He lifted up his greedy eyes, and there, at his feet, lay that strange Jordan valley with its almost tropical richness, its dark lines of foliage telling of abundant water, the palm-trees of Jericho perhaps, and the glittering cities. Up there among the hills there was little to tempt,-rocks and scanty herbage; down below, it was like the lost Eden, or the Egypt from which they had but lately come.

What need for hesitation? True, the men of the plain were ‘wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly,’ as the chapter says with grim emphasis. But Lot evidently never thought about that. He knew it, though, and ought to have thought about it. It was his sin that he was guided in his choice only by considerations of temporal advantage. Put his action into words, and it says, ‘Grass for my sheep is more to me than fellowship with God, and a good conscience.’ No doubt he would have had salves enough. ‘I do not need to become like them, though I live among them.’ ‘A man must look after his own interests.’ ‘I can serve God down there as well as up here.’ Perhaps he even thought that he might be a missionary among these sinners. But at bottom he did not seek first the kingdom of God, but the other things.

We have seldom the choice put before us so dramatically and sharply; but it is as really presented to each. There is the shameless cynicism of the men who avowedly only ask the question, ‘Will it pay?’ But there are subtler forms which affect us all. It is the standing temptation of Englishmen to apply a money standard to everything, to adopt courses of action of which the only recommendation is that they promote getting on in the world. Men who call themselves Christians select schools for their children, or professions for their boys, or marriages for their daughters, down in Sodom, because it will give them a lift in life which they would not get up in the starved pastures at Bethel, with nobody but Abram and his like to associate with. If the earnestness with which men pursue an end is to be taken as any measure of its importance in their eyes, it certainly does not look much as if modern average Christians did believe that it was of more moment to be united to God, and to be growing like Him, than to secure a good large share of earthly possessions. Tried by the test of conduct, their faith in getting on is a great deal deeper than their faith in getting up. But if our religion does not make us put the world beneath our feet, and count all things but loss that we may win Christ, we had better ask ourselves whether our religion is any better than Lot’s, which was second-hand, and was much more imitation of Abram than obedience to God.

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20)Genesis 14:13

Genesis

ABRAM THE HEBREW

Gen. 14:13.

This is a singular designation of Abram as ‘The Hebrew.’ Probably we have in its use here a trace of the customary epithet which he bore among the inhabitants of Canaan, and perhaps the presence of the name in this narrative may indicate the influence of some older account, traditional or written, which owed its authorship to some of them. At all events, this is the first appearance of the name in Scripture. As we all know, it has become that of the nation, but a Jew did not call himself a ‘Hebrew’ except in intercourse with foreigners. As in many other cases, the national name used by other nations was not that by which the people called themselves. Here, obviously, it is not a national name, for the very good reason that there was no nation then. It is a personal epithet, or, in plain English, a nickname, and it means, probably, as the ancient Greek translation of Genesis gives it, neither more nor less than ‘The man from the other side,’ the man that had come across the water. Just as a mediaeval prince bore the *sobriquet* Outremere-the ‘man from beyond the sea’-so Abram, to the aboriginal, or, at least, long-settled, inhabitants of the country, was known simply as the foreigner, the ‘man from the other side’ [of the Jordan, or more probably of the great river Euphrates], the man from across the water.

Now that name may suggest, with a permissible, and, I hope, not misleading play of fancy, just two things, which I seek now to press upon our hearts and consciences. The one is as to how men become Christians, and the other is as to how they look to other people when they are.

1. Men become Christians by a great emigration.

‘Get thee out from thy father’s house, and from thy country, and from thy kindred,’ was the command to Abram. And he became the heir to God’s promises and the father of the faithful, because he did not hesitate a moment to make the plunge and to leave behind him all his past, his associations, his loves, much of his possessions, and, in a very profound sense, his old self, and put a great impassable gulf between him and them all.

Now I am not going to say anything so narrow or foolish as that the Christian life must always begin with a conscious and sudden change; but this I am quite sure of, that in the vast majority of cases of thoroughly and out-and-out religious men, there must be a conscious change, whether it has been diffused through months or years, or concentrated in one burning moment. There has been a beginning; whether it has been like the dawn, or whether it has been like the kindling of a candle, the beginning of the flashing of the divine light into the heart; and the men that are most really under the influence of religious truth can, as a rule, looking back upon their past experience, see that it divides itself into two halves, separated from each other by a profound gulf-the time on the other side, and that on this side, of the great river. We must take heed lest by insisting on any one way of entrance into the kingdom we seem to narrow God's mercy, or sadden true hearts, or make the method of approach a test of the fact of entrance. God's city has more than twelve gates; they open to all the thirty-two points of the compass, yet there is, in the religious experience of the truest saints, always something analogous to this change. And what I desire to press upon you is, that unless you are only religious people after the popular superficial fashion of the day, there will be something like it in your lives.

There will be a change in a man's deepest self, so that he will be a 'new creature,' with new tastes, new motives stirring to action, new desires pressing for satisfaction, new loves sweetly filling his heart, new insight into the meanings and true good of life and time guiding his conduct, new aversions withdrawing him from old delights which have become hateful now, new hopes pluming their growing wings, and new powers bearing him along a new road. There will be a change in his relations to God and to God's will. God in Christ will have become his centre, instead of self, which was so before. He lives in a new world, being himself a new man.

Our Lord uses this very illustration when He says, 'He that heareth My Word, and believeth Him that sent Me, hath eternal life, and cometh not into judgment, but hath passed out of death into life.' That is a great migration, is it not, from the condition of a corpse to that of a living man? Paul, too, gives the same idea with a somewhat different turn of the illustration, when he gives 'thanks to the Father who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of,'-not, as we might expect to complete the antithesis, 'the light,' but-the 'kingdom of the Son of His love,' which is the same thing as the light. The illustration is probably drawn from the practice of the ancient conquering monarchs, who, when they subjugated a country, were wont to lead away captive long files of its inhabitants as compulsory colonists, and set them down in another land. Thus the conquering Christ comes, and those whom He conquers by His love, He shifts by a great emigration out of the dominion of that darkness which is at once tyranny and anarchy, and leads them into the happy kingdom of the light.

Thus, then, all Christian men become such, because they turn their backs upon their old selves, and crucify their affections and lusts; and paste down the leaf, as it were, on which their blotted past is writ, and turn over a new and a fairer one. And my question to you, dear brethren, is, Are you men from the other side, who were not born where you live now, and who have passed out of the native Chaldea into the foreign-and yet to the new self home-land of union with God?

2. This designation may be taken as teaching that a Christian should be known as a foreigner, a man from across the water.

Everybody in Canaan that knew Abram at all knew him as not one of themselves. The Hebrew was the name he went by, because his unlikeness to the others was the most conspicuous thing about him, even to the shallowest eye. Abram found himself, when he had migrated into Canaan, in no barbarous country, but plunged at once into the midst of an organised and compact civilisation, that walled its cities, and had the comforts and conveniences and regularities of a settled order; and in the midst of it all, what did he do? He elected to live in a tent. 'He dwelt in tabernacles, as the Epistle to the Hebrews comments upon his history, 'because he looked for a city.' The more his expectations were fixed upon a permanent abode, the more transitory did he make his abode here. If there had been no other city to fill his eyes, he would have gone and lived in some of those that were in the land. If there had been no other order to which he felt himself to belong, he would have had no objection to cast in his lot with the order and the people with whom he lived on friendly terms. But although he bought and sold with them, and fought for them and by their sides, and acquired from them land in which to bury his dead, he was not one of them, but said, 'No! I am not going into your city. I stay in my tent under this terebinth tree; for I am here as a stranger and a sojourner.' No doubt there were differences of language, dress, and a hundred other little things which helped the impression made on the men of the land by this strange visitor who lived in amity but in separation, and they are all crystallised in the name which the popular voice gave him, ‘The man from the other side.’

That is the impression which Christian people ought to make in the world. They should be recognised, by even unobservant eyes who know nothing of the inner secret of their lives, as plainly belonging to another order. If we seek to keep fresh in our own minds the consciousness that we do so, it will make itself manifest in all our bearing and actions. So that exhortation to cultivate the continual sense that our true city-the mother city of our hearts and hopes-is in heaven is ever to be reiterated, and as constantly obeyed, as the necessary condition of a life worthy of our true affinities and of our glorious hopes.

Nor less needful is the other exhortation-live by the laws of your own land, not by those of the foreign country where you are for a time. If you do that thoroughly, you will not need to say, ‘I am from another country.’ Your conduct will say it for you. An English ship is a bit of England, in whatever latitude it may be, and however far beyond the three-mile limit of the King’s authority upon the seas it may float. And so, wherever there is a Christian man, there is a bit of God’s kingdom, and over that little speck in the midst of the ocean of the world the flag with the Cross on it should fly, and the laws of the Christ should be the only laws that have currency. If it could be said of us as Haman said to his king about the Jews, that we were a people with laws ‘di&lt;scripRef passage="Gen. 13:1-13"&gt; from those of all people,’ we should be doing more than, alas! most of us do, to honour Him whom we profess to serve. Follow Christ, and people will be quick enough to say of you ‘The man from the other side,’ ‘He does not belong to our city.’ There is no need for ostentation, nor for saying, ‘Come and see my zeal for the Lord,’ nor for blowing trumpets before us at street corners or elsewhere. The less of all that the better. The more we try to do the common things done by the folk round us, but from another motive, the more powerful will be our witness for our Master.

For instance, when John Knox was in the French galleys, he was fastened to the same oar with some criminal, perhaps a murderer. The two men sat on the same bench, did the same work, tugged at the same heavy sweep, were fed with the same food, suffered the same sorrows. Do you think there was any doubt as to the infinite gulf between them? We may be working side by side, at the very same tasks, and under similar circumstances, with men that have no share in our faith, and no sympathy with our hopes and aspirations, and yet, though doing the same thing, it will *not* be the same thing. And if we keep Christ before us, and follow His steps who has left us an example, depend upon it people will very soon find out that we are men 'from across the water.'

Notice, further, how this dissimilarity and obvious aloofness from the order of things in which we dwell is still perfectly compatible with all sorts of helpful associations. The context shows us that. There had come a flood of invasion, under kings with strange and barbarous names, from the far East. They had swept down upon the fertile valley of Siddim, and there had inflicted devastation. Amongst the captives had been Lot, Abram's relative, and all his goods had been taken. One fugitive, as it appears, had escaped, and the first thing he did was to go straight to 'the man from the other side,' and tell him about it, as if sure of sympathy and help. No doubt the relationship between Abram and Lot was the main reason why the panting survivor made his way to the hills where Abram's tent was pitched, but there was also confidence in his willingness to help the Sodomites who had lost their goods. So it was not to the sons of Heth in Mamre that the fugitive turned in his extremity, but he 'told Abram the Hebrew.'

I need not narrate over again the familiar story of how, for once in his peaceful life, the 'friend of God' girds on his sword and develops military instincts in his prompt and well-planned pursuit, which show that if he did not try to conquer some part of the land which he knew to be his by the will of God, it was not for want of ability, but because he 'believed God,' and could wait. We all know how he armed his slaves, and made a swift march to the northern extremity of the land, and then, by a nocturnal surprise, came down upon the marauders and scattered them like chaff, before his onset, and recovered Lot and all the spoil.

Let us learn that, if Christian men will live well apart from the world, they will be able to sympathise with and help the world; and that our religion should fit us for the prompt and heroic undertaking, as it certainly does for the successful accomplishment, of all deeds of brotherly kindness and sympathy, bringing help and solace to the weak and the wearied, liberty to the captives, and hope to the despairing.

I do not believe that Christian men have any business to draw swords now. Abram is in that respect the Old Testament type of a God-fearing hero, with the actual sword in his hands. The New Testament type of a Christian warrior without a sword is not one jot less, but more, heroic. The form of sympathy, help, and 'public spirit' which the 'man from the other side' displayed is worse than an anachronism now in the light of Christ's law. It is a contradiction. But the spirit which breathed through Abram's conduct should be ours. We are bound to 'seek the peace of the city' where we dwell as strangers and pilgrims, avoiding no duty of sympathy and help, but by prompt, heroic, self-forgetting service to all the needy, sorrowful, and oppressed, building up such characters for ourselves that fugitives and desperate men shall instinctively turn to men from the other side for that help which, they know full well, the men of the country are too selfish or cowardly to give.

May I venture to suggest yet another and very different application of this name? To the aboriginal inhabitants of heaven, the angels that kept their first estate, redeemed men are possessors of a unique experience; and are the 'men from the other side.' They who entered on their pilgrimage through the Red Sea of conversion, pass out of it through the Jordan of death. They who become Christ's, by the great change of yielding their hearts to Him, and who live here as pilgrims and sojourners, pass dryshod through the stream into His presence. And there they who have always dwelt in the sunny highlands of the true Canaan, gather round them, and call them, not unenvying, perhaps, their experience, 'The men that have crossed.' The 'Hebrews of the Hebrews' in the heavens are those who have known what it is to be pilgrims and sojourners, and to whom the promise has been fulfilled in the last hour of their journey, 'When thou passest through the river, I will be with thee.' *They* teach the angels a new song who sing, 'Thou hast led us through fire and through water, and brought us into a wealthy place.'

21)Genesis 15:1

THE WORD THAT SCATTERS FEAR

Gen. 15:1.

I

Abram was now apparently about eighty-five years old. He had been fourteen years in Palestine, and had, for the only time in his life, quite recently been driven to have recourse to arms against a formidable league of northern kings, whom, after a swift forced march from the extreme south to the extreme north of the land, he had defeated. He might well fear attack from their overwhelmingly superior forces. So this vision, like all God's words, fits closely to moments needs, but is also for all time and all men.

1. The call to conquer fear.

Fear not.-[*a*] There is abundant reason for fear in facts of life. There are so many certain evils, and so many possible evils, that any man who is not a feather-brained fool must sometimes quail.

[*b*] Reasons for fear in our relations to divine law.

[*c*] The only rational way of conquering fears is by showing them to be unfounded. It is waste of breath to say, Don't be afraid, and to do nothing to remove the occasions of fear. It is childish to try to get rid of fears by shutting the eyes tight and refusing to look formidable facts in the face.

[*d*] The revelation of God is the true antidote to fear.

[*e*] 'Fear not' is the characteristic word of divine revelation. It is of frequent occurrence from Abraham till John in Patmos.

2. The ground of the call in the Revelation of God as Shield.

[*a*] As to outward evils, His protection assures us, not of absolute exemption, but of His entire control of them, so that men and circumstances are His instruments, and His will only is powerful. Chedorlaomer and all

the allied kings are nothing; ‘a noise,’ as the prophet said of a later conqueror. All the bitterness and terror is taken out of evil. If any fiery dart pass through the shield, all its poison is wiped off in passage. So there remains no reason for fear, since all things work together for good. Behind that shield we are safe as diver in his bell, though seas rave and sea-monsters swim around.

[*b*] As to inward evils, our Shield assures us of absolute exemption. ‘Shield of faith.’ Faith is shield because it takes hold of God’s strength.

3. The ground of the call in the Revelation of God as Reward. Abraham had refused all share in booty, a large sacrifice, and here he is promised, A Reward in God, *i.e.* He gives Himself in recompense for all sacrifices in path of duty. ‘The Lord is able to give thee much more than these.’ This promise opens out to general truth that God Himself is the true reward of a devout life. There are many recompenses for all sacrifices for God, some of them outward and material, some of them inward and spiritual, but the reward which surpasses all others is that by such sacrifices we attain to greater capacity for God, and therefore possess more of Him. This is the only Reward worth thinking of-God only satisfies the soul. With Him we are rich; without Him poor; ‘exceeding great’-’riches in glory,’ transcending all measure. The revelations of God as Shield and Reward are both given in reference to the present life, but the former applies only to earth, where ‘without are fighters, within are fears’; while ‘the latter is mainly true for heaven, where those who have fought, having God for their Shield, will possess Him for their Reward, in a measure and manner which will make all earthly experiences seem poor. Here the ‘heirs of God’ get subsistence money, which is a small instalment of their inheritance; there they enter into possession of it all.

II

Many years have passed since Abram was called to go forth from his father’s house, assured that God would make of him a great nation. They had been years of growing power. He has been dwelling at Mamre, as a prince among the people of the land, a power. There sweeps down on Southern Palestine the earliest of those invasions from the vast plains of the North which afterwards for generations were the standing dread of Abram’s descendants. Like the storm pillars in their own deserts, are these wild marauders with the wild names that never appear again in the history. Down on the rich valleys and peaceful pasture lands they swoop for booty, not for conquest. Like some sea-bird, they snatch their prey and away. They carry with them among the long train of captives Abram's ungenerous brother-in-law, Lot. Then the friend of God, the father of the faithful, musters his men, like an Arab sheikh as he was, and swiftly follows the track of the marauders over the hills of Samaria, and across the plain of Jezreel. The night falls, and down he swoops upon them and scatters them. Coming back he had interviews with the King of Sodom, when he refuses to take any of the spoil, and with Melchizedek. Abram is back at Mamre. How natural that fear and depression should seize him: the reaction from high excitement; the dread that from the swarming East vengeance would come for his success in that night surprise; the thought that if it did, he was a wandering stranger in a strange land and could not count on allies. Then there would come, perhaps, the remembrance of how long God had delayed the very beginnings of the fulfilment, 'Seeing I go childless.'

To this mood of mind the divine vision is addressed. 'Fear not-I am thy shield' whatever force comes against thee, 'and thine exceeding great reward,'-perhaps in reference to his refusal to take anything from the spoil. But God says this to us all. In these antique words the very loftiest and purest principles of spiritual religion are set forth.

He that loves and trusts God possesses God.

He that possesses God has enough for earth.

He that possesses God has enough for heaven.

1. It is possible for a man to have God for his. 'I am thy Reward,'-not merely Rewarder, but Reward.

How can one spiritual Being belong to another?-plainly, By mutual love.

The Gospel assures us of God's love, and makes it possible for ours to be fixed on Him.

Faith gives us God for ours.

The highest view of the blessings of the Gospel is that God Himself becomes our reward.

How sad the insanity of men appears, in the ordinary aims of their life, its rewards and its objects of desire! How they chase after variety!

How much loftier and truer a conception of the blessing of religion this is than notions of mere escape and the like!

2. The possession of God is enough for earth.

God the all-sufficient object for our spirits, His love, the communication of Himself, the sense of His presence, the depths of His infinite character, of His wondrous ways, of His revealed Truth as an object for thought: of His authoritative will as imperative for will and conscience: aspiration towards Him.

God the Eternal Object.

To find Him in everything, and everything in Him, is to be at rest.

This is what He promises-

Not a life of outward success and ease-much nobler than if He did.

Take Abram’s as a type.

In war He will be our Defence.

In absence of other joys He will be Enough.

Sphered and included in Him is all sweetness. He sustains all relations, and does for us what these other joys and goods partially do.

The possession of His love should put away all fear, since having Him we are not at the mercy of externals.

What, then, is Life as men ordinarily make it?-what a blunder!

3. To possess God is enough for heaven.

Such a relationship is the great proof of immortality.

Christ and Sadducees.

The true glory of heaven is in fuller possession of God: no doubt other things, but these subsidiary.

The Reward is God.

The idea of recompense ample and full for all sorrow.

More than adequate wages for all work.

That final reward will show how wise the wanderer was, who left his father's house and 'looked for a city.' God is not ashamed to be called their God.

Christ comes to us-offers Himself.

Think of how rich with Him, and oh, think of how poor without Him!

Which will you have on earth?

Which will you have in another world?

22)Genesis 15:5

Genesis

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAM

Gen. 15:5 - Gen. 15:18.

1. Abram had exposed himself to dangerous reprisals by his victory over the confederate Eastern raiders. In the reaction following the excitement of

battle, dread and despondency seem to have shadowed his soul. Therefore the assurance with which this chapter opens came to him. It was new, and came in a new form. He is cast into a state of spiritual ecstasy, and a mighty ‘word’ sounds, audible to his inward ear. The form which it takes-’I am thy shield’-suggests the thought that God shapes His revelation according to the moment’s need. The unwarlike Abram might well dread the return of the marauders in force, to avenge their defeat. Therefore God speaks to his fears and present want. Just as to Jacob the angels appeared as a heavenly camp guarding his undefended tents and helpless women; so, here and always, God is to us what we most need at the moment, whether it be comfort, or wisdom, or guidance, or strength. The manna tasted to each man, as the rabbis say, what he most desired. God’s gifts take the shape of man’s necessity.

Abram had just exercised singular generosity in absolutely refusing to enrich himself from the spoil. God reveals Himself as ‘his exceeding great reward.’ He gives Himself as recompense for all sacrifices. Whatever is given up at His bidding, ‘the Lord is able to give thee much more than this.’ Not outward things, nor even an outward heaven, is the guerdon of the soul; but a larger possession of Him who alone fills the heart, and fills the heart alone. Other riches may be counted, but this is ‘exceeding great,’ passing comprehension, and ever unexhausted, and having something over after all experience. Both these aspects of God’s preciousness are true for earth; but we need a shield only while exposed to attack. In the land of peace, He is only our reward.

2. Mark the triumphant faith which wings to meet the divine promise. The first effect of that great assurance is to deepen Abram’s consciousness of the strange contradiction to it apparently given by his childlessness. It is not distrust that answers the promise with a question, but it is eagerness to accept the assurance and ingenuous utterance of difficulties in the hope of their removal. God is too wise a father not to know the difference between the tones of confidence and unbelief, however alike they may sound; and He is too patient to be angry if we cannot take in all His promise at once. He breaks it into bits not too large for our lips, as He does here. The frequent reiterations of the same promises in Abram’s life are not vain. They are a specimen of the unwearied repetition of our lessons, ‘Here a

little, there a little,' which our teacher gives His slow scholars. So, once more, Abram gets the promise of posterity in still more glorious form. Before, it was likened to the dust of the earth; now it is as the innumerable stars shining in the clear Eastern heaven. As he gazes up into the solemn depths, the immensity and peace of the steadfast sky seems to help him to rise above the narrow limits and changefulness of earth, and a great trust floods his soul. Abram had lived by faith ever since he left Haran; but the historian, usually so silent about the thoughts of his characters, breaks through his usual manner of narrative to insert the all-important words which mark an epoch in revelation, and are, in some aspects, the most significant in the Old Testament. Abram 'believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness.'

Observe the teaching as to the nature and object of faith in that first clause. The word rendered 'believed' literally means to steady oneself by leaning on something. So it gives in a vivid picture more instructive than many a long treatise what faith is, and what it does for us. As a man leans his trembling hand on a staff, so we lay our weak and changeful selves on God's strength; and as the most mutable thing is steadied by being fastened to a fixed point, so we, though in ourselves light as thistledown, may be steadfast as rock, if we are bound to the rock of ages by the living band of faith. The metaphor makes it plain that faith cannot be merely an intellectual act of assent, but must include a moral act, that of confidence. Belief as credence is mainly an affair of the head, but belief as trust is an act of the will and the affections.

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3. Mark the full-orbed gospel truth as to the righteousness of faith which is embedded in this record of early revelation, 'He counted it to him for righteousness.' A geologist would be astonished if he came on remains in some of the primary strata which indicated the existence, in these remote epochs, of species supposed to be of much more recent date. So here we are startled at finding the peculiarly New Testament teaching away back in this dim distance. No wonder that Paul fastened on this &lt;scripRef passage="Gen. 13:1-13"&gt;, which so remarkably breaks the flow of the narrative, as proof that his great principle of justification by faith was really the one only law by which, in all ages, men had found acceptance with God. Long before law or circumcision, faith had been counted for righteousness. The whole Mosaic system was a parenthesis; and even in it, whoever had been accepted had been so because of his trust, not because of his works. The whole of the subsequent divine dealings with Israel rested on this act of faith, and on the relation to God into which, through it, Abram entered. He was not a perfectly righteous man, as some passages of his life show; but he rose here to the height of loving and yearning trust in God, and God took that trust in lieu of perfect conformity to His will. He treated and regarded him as righteous, as is proved by the covenant which follows. The gospel takes up this principle, gives us a fuller revelation, presents the perfect righteousness of Christ as capable of becoming ours by faith, and so unveils the ground on which Abram and the latest generations are equally 'accepted in the beloved.' This reckoning of righteousness to the unrighteous, on condition of their faith, is not because of any merit in faith. It does not come about in reward of, but by means of, their faith, which is nothing in itself, but is the channel only of the blessing. Nor is it a mere arbitrary act of God's, or an unreal imputing of what is not. But faith unites with Christ;

and ‘he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit,’ so as that ‘in Him we have redemption.’ His righteousness becomes ours. Faith grafts us into the living Vine, and we are no longer regarded in our poor sinful individual personality, but as members of Christ. Faith builds us into the rock; but He is a living Stone, and we are living stones, and the life of the foundation rises up through all the courses of the great temple. Faith unites sinful men to God in Christ; therefore it makes them partakers of the ‘blessedness of the man, . . .to whom the Lord will not impute sin,’ and of the blessedness of the man to whom the Lord reckons his faith for righteousness. That same faith which thus clothes us with the white robe of Christ’s righteousness, in lieu of our own tattered raiment, also is the condition of our becoming righteous by the actual working out in our character of all things lovely and of good report. It opens the heart to the entrance of that divine Christ, who is first made *for* us, and then, by daily appropriation of the law of the spirit of life, is made *in* us, ‘righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.’ May all who read these lines ‘be found in Him,’ having ‘that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith!’

4. Consider the covenant which is the consequence of Abram’s faith, and the proof of his acceptance.

It is important to observe that the whole remainder of this chapter is regarded by the writer as the result of Abram’s believing God. The way in which Gen. 15:7 and the rest are bolted on, as it were, to Gen. 15:6, clearly shows this. The nearer lesson from this fact is, that all the Old Testament revelation from this point onward rests on the foundation of faith. The further lesson, for all times, is that faith is ever rewarded by more intimate and loving manifestations of God’s friendship, and by fuller disclosure of His purposes. The covenant is not only God’s binding Himself anew by solemn acts to fulfil His promises already made, but it is His entering into far sweeter and nearer alliance with Abram than even He had hitherto had. That name, ‘the friend of God,’ by which he is still known over all the Mohammedan world, contains the very essence of the covenant. In old days men were wont to conclude a bond of closest amity by cutting their flesh and interchanging the flowing blood. Henceforth they had, as it were, one life. We have not here the shedding of Abram’s blood, as in the covenant of circumcision. Still, the slain animals represent the parties to the covenant, and the notion of a resulting unity of the closest order as between God and Abram is the very heart of the whole incident.

The particulars as to the rite by which the covenant was established are profoundly illuminative. The significant division of the animals into two shows that they were regarded as representing the contracting parties, and the passing between them symbolised the taking up of the obligations of the covenant. This strange rite, which was widely spread, derives importance from the use of it probably made in Heb. 9:16 - Heb. 9:17. The new covenant, bringing still closer friendship and higher blessings, is sealed by the blood of Christ. He represents both God and man. In His death, may we not say that the manhood and the Godhead are parted, and we, standing as it were between them, encompassed by that awful sacrifice, and enclosed in its mysterious depths, enter into covenant with God, and become His friends?

We need not to dwell upon the detailed promises, of which the covenant was the seal. They are simply the fuller expansion of those already made, but now confirmed by more solemn guarantees. The new relation of familiar friendship, established by the covenant itself, is the main thing. It was fitting that God's friend should be in the secret of His purposes. 'The servant knoweth not what his lord doeth,' but the friend does. And so we have here the assurance that faith will pierce to the discernment of much of the mind of God, which is hid from sense and the wisdom of this world. If we would know, we must believe. We may be 'men of God's counsel,' and see deeply into the realities of the present, and far ahead into what will then become the certainties of the future, if only we live by faith in the secret place of the Most High, and, like John, lean so close on the Master's bosom that we can hear His lowest whisper.

Notice, too, the lessons of the smoking furnace and the blazing torch. They are like the pillar of fire and cloud. Darkness and light; a heart of fire and a wrapping of darkness,-these are not symbols of Israel and its checkered fate, as Dean Stanley thinks, but of the divine presence: they proclaim the double aspect of all divine manifestations, the double element in the divine nature. He can never be completely known; He is never completely hid. Ever does the lamp flame; ever around it the smoke wreathes. In all His self-revelation is ‘the hiding of His power’; after all revelation He dwelleth ‘in the thick darkness.’ Only the smoke is itself fire, but not illumined to our vision. The darkness is light inaccessible. Much that was ‘smoke’ to Abram has caught fire, and is ‘light’ to us. But these two elements will ever remain; and throughout eternity God will be unknown, and yet well known, pouring Himself in ever-growing radiance on our eyes, and yet ‘the King invisible.’

Nor is this all the teaching of the symbol. It speaks of that twofold aspect of the divine nature, by which to hearts that love He is gladsome light, and to unloving ones He is threatening darkness. As to the Israelites the pillar was light, and to the Egyptians darkness and terror; so the same God is joy to some, and dread to others. ‘What maketh heaven, that maketh hell.’ Light itself can become the source of pain the most exquisite, if the eye is diseased. God Himself cannot but be a torment to men who love darkness rather than light. Love and wrath, life and death, a God who pities and who cannot but judge, are solemnly proclaimed by that ancient symbol, and are plainly declared to us in the perfect revelation in Christ Jesus.

Observe, too, the manner of the ratification of the covenant. The symbol of the Divine presence passed between the pieces. No mention is made of Abram’s doing so. Why this one-sided covenant? Because God’s gracious dealings with men are one-sided. He seeks no oaths from us; He does not exchange blessings for our gifts. His covenant is the free result of His unmotived love, and is ratified by a solemn sacrifice, which we do not offer. We have nothing to do but to take what He gives. All ideas of barter and bargain are far from Him. Our part is but to embrace His covenant, which is complete and ratified whether we embrace it or not. What a wonderful thought that is of a covenant-making and a covenant-keeping God! We do not hear so much of it as our fathers did. The more is the pity. It means that God has, as it were, buoyed out across the boundless ocean of His possible modes of action a plain course, which He binds Himself to keep; that He has frankly let us into the very secret of His doings; that He has stooped to use human forms of assurance to make it easier to trust Him; that He has confirmed His promise by a mighty sacrifice. Therefore we may enter into closest friendship with Him, and take for our own the exultant swan-song of Abram’s royal son: ‘Although my house be not so with God [although my life be stained, and my righteousness unfit to be offered to His pure eyes];

yet He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire.'

23)Genesis 15:6

Genesis

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAM

FAITH AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

Gen. 15:6.

It is remarkable to find this anticipation of New Testament teaching so far back. It is like finding one full-blown flower in a garden where all else is but swelling into bud. No wonder that Paul fastened on it to prove that justification by faith was older than Moses, than law or circumcision, that his teaching was the real original, and that faith lay at the foundation of the Old Testament religion.

1. The Nature of Faith.-The metaphor in the Hebrew word is that of a man leaning all his weight on some strong stay. Surely that metaphor says more than many definitions. It teaches that the essence of faith is absolute reliance, and that unites us with Him on whom we rely. Its result will be steadfastness. We are weak, mobile, apt to be driven hither and thither, but light things lashed to fixed things become fixed. So 'reeds shaken with wind' are changed into iron pillars.

2. The Object of Faith.-'Lord.' It is a Person, not the promise but the Promiser. Of course, reliance on the Person results in acceptance of His word, and here it is God's word as to the future. Our faith has to do with the future, but also with the past. Its object is Christ, the historic Christ, the living Christ, the Christ who will come again. How clear the nature of faith becomes when its object is clear! It cannot be mere assent, but trust. How clear becomes its identity in all ages! The creeds may be different in completeness, but the object of faith is the same, and the emotion is the same.

3. The effect of Faith.-Righteous is conformity to the will of God. Abram was not righteous, but he yielded himself to God and trusted Him, and God accepted that as the equivalent of righteousness. The acceptance was shown by the Covenant, and by the fulfilment of the promises.

So here is the great truth that faith is accepted for righteous. It is rightly regarded and treated as righteous, by the estimate of God, who estimates things as they really are. It *is* righteousness, for-

[*a*] Faith is itself a supreme act of righteousness, as being accordant with God's supreme desire for man.

[*b*] Faith unites with Christ the righteous.

[*c*] Faith will blossom out into all righteousness.

24)Genesis 15:7-18

Genesis

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAM

Gen. 15:5 - **Gen. 15:18**.

1. Abram had exposed himself to dangerous reprisals by his victory over the confederate Eastern raiders. In the reaction following the excitement of battle, dread and despondency seem to have shadowed his soul. Therefore the assurance with which this chapter opens came to him. It was new, and came in a new form. He is cast into a state of spiritual ecstasy, and a mighty 'word' sounds, audible to his inward ear. The form which it takes-'I am thy shield'-suggests the thought that God shapes His revelation according to the moment's need. The unwarlike Abram might well dread the return of the marauders in force, to avenge their defeat. Therefore God speaks to his fears and present want. Just as to Jacob the angels appeared as a heavenly camp guarding his undefended tents and helpless women; so, here and always, God is to us what we most need at the moment, whether it be comfort, or wisdom, or guidance, or strength. The manna tasted to each

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4. Consider the covenant which is the consequence of Abram's faith, and the proof of his acceptance.

It is important to observe that the whole remainder of this chapter is regarded by the writer as the result of Abram's believing God. The way in which Gen. 15:7 and the rest are bolted on, as it were, to Gen. 15:6, clearly shows this. The nearer lesson from this fact is, that all the Old Testament revelation from this point onward rests on the foundation of faith. The further lesson, for all times, is that faith is ever rewarded by more intimate and loving manifestations of God's friendship, and by fuller disclosure of His purposes. The covenant is not only God's binding Himself anew by solemn acts to fulfil His promises already made, but it is His entering into far sweeter and nearer alliance with Abram than even He had hitherto had. That name, 'the friend of God,' by which he is still known over all the Mohammedan world, contains the very essence of the covenant. In old days men were wont to conclude a bond of closest amity by cutting their flesh and interchanging the flowing blood. Henceforth they had, as it were, one life. We have not here the shedding of Abram's blood, as in the covenant of circumcision. Still, the slain animals represent the parties to the covenant, and the notion of a resulting unity of the closest order as between God and Abram is the very heart of the whole incident.

The particulars as to the rite by which the covenant was established are profoundly illuminative. The significant division of the animals into two shows that they were regarded as representing the contracting parties, and the passing between them symbolised the taking up of the obligations of the covenant. This strange rite, which was widely spread, derives importance from the use of it probably made in Heb. 9:16 - Heb. 9:17. The new covenant, bringing still closer friendship and higher blessings, is sealed by the blood of Christ. He represents both God and man. In His death, may we not say that the manhood and the Godhead are parted, and we, standing as it were between them, encompassed by that awful sacrifice, and enclosed in its mysterious depths, enter into covenant with God, and become His friends?

We need not to dwell upon the detailed promises, of which the covenant was the seal. They are simply the fuller expansion of those already made, but now confirmed by more solemn guarantees. The new relation of familiar friendship, established by the covenant itself, is the main thing. It was fitting that God's friend should be in the secret of His purposes. 'The servant knoweth not what his lord doeth,' but the friend does. And so we have here the assurance that faith will pierce to the discernment of much of the mind of God, which is hid from sense and the wisdom of this world. If we would know, we must believe. We may be 'men of God's counsel,' and see deeply into the realities of the present, and far ahead into what will then become the certainties of the future, if only we live by faith in the secret place of the Most High, and, like John, lean so close on the Master's bosom that we can hear His lowest whisper.

Notice, too, the lessons of the smoking furnace and the blazing torch. They are like the pillar of fire and cloud. Darkness and light; a heart of fire and a wrapping of darkness,-these are not symbols of Israel and its checkered fate, as Dean Stanley thinks, but of the divine presence: they proclaim the double aspect of all divine manifestations, the double element in the divine nature. He can never be completely known; He is never completely hid. Ever does the lamp flame; ever around it the smoke wreathes. In all His self-revelation is 'the hiding of His power'; after all revelation He dwelleth 'in the thick darkness.' Only the smoke is itself fire, but not illumined to our vision. The darkness is light inaccessible. Much that was 'smoke' to Abram has caught fire, and is 'light' to us. But these two elements will ever remain; and throughout eternity God will be unknown, and yet well known, pouring Himself in ever-growing radiance on our eyes, and yet 'the King invisible.'

Nor is this all the teaching of the symbol. It speaks of that twofold aspect of the divine nature, by which to hearts that love He is gladsome light, and to unloving ones He is threatening darkness. As to the Israelites the pillar was light, and to the Egyptians darkness and terror; so the same God is joy to some, and dread to others. ‘What maketh heaven, that maketh hell.’ Light itself can become the source of pain the most exquisite, if the eye is diseased. God Himself cannot but be a torment to men who love darkness rather than light. Love and wrath, life and death, a God who pities and who cannot but judge, are solemnly proclaimed by that ancient symbol, and are plainly declared to us in the perfect revelation in Christ Jesus.

Observe, too, the manner of the ratification of the covenant. The symbol of the Divine presence passed between the pieces. No mention is made of Abram’s doing so. Why this one-sided covenant? Because God’s gracious dealings with men are one-sided. He seeks no oaths from us; He does not exchange blessings for our gifts. His covenant is the free result of His unmotived love, and is ratified by a solemn sacrifice, which we do not offer. We have nothing to do but to take what He gives. All ideas of barter and bargain are far from Him. Our part is but to embrace His covenant, which is complete and ratified whether we embrace it or not. What a wonderful thought that is of a covenant-making and a covenant-keeping God! We do not hear so much of it as our fathers did. The more is the pity. It means that God has, as it were, buoyed out across the boundless ocean of His possible modes of action a plain course, which He binds Himself to keep; that He has frankly let us into the very secret of His doings; that He has stooped to use human forms of assurance to make it easier to trust Him; that He has confirmed His promise by a mighty sacrifice. Therefore we may enter into closest friendship with Him, and take for our own the exultant swan-song of Abram’s royal son: ‘Although my house be not so with God [although my life be stained, and my righteousness unfit to be offered to His pure eyes]; yet He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire.’

25)Genesis 17:1

Genesis

WITH, BEFORE, AFTER

WAITING FAITH REWARDED AND STRENGTHENED BY NEW REVELATIONS

Gen. 17:1 - Gen. 17:9.

Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. He was ninety-nine when God appeared to him, as recorded in this chapter. There had been three divine communications in these twenty-five years-one at Bethel on entering the land, one after the hiving off of Lot, and one after the battle with the Eastern kings. The last-named vision had taken place before Ishmael’s birth, and therefore more than thirteen years prior to the date of the lesson.

We are apt to think of Abraham’s life as being crowded with supernatural revelations. We forget the foreshortening necessary in so brief a sketch of so long a career, which brings distant points close together. Revelations were really but thinly sown in Abram’s life. For something over thirteen years he had been left to walk by faith, and, no doubt, had felt the pressure of things seen, silently pushing the unseen out of his life.

Especially would this be the case as Ishmael grew up, and his father’s heart began to cling to him. The promise was beginning to grow dimmer, as years passed without the birth of the promised heir. As Gen. 17:18 of this chapter shows, Abram’s thoughts were turning to Ishmael as a possible substitute. His wavering confidence was steadied and quickened by this new revelation. We, too, are often tempted to think that, in the highest matters, ‘a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,’ and to wish that God would be content with our Ishmaels, which satisfy us, and would not withdraw us from possessed good, to make us live by hope of good unseen. We need to reflect on this vision when we are thus tempted.

1. Note the revelation of God’s character, and of our consequent duty, which preceded the repetition of the covenant. ‘I am the Almighty God.’ The aspect of the divine nature, made prominent in each revelation of Himself, stands in close connection with the circumstances or mental state of the recipient. So when God appeared to Abram after the slaughter of the kings, He revealed Himself as ‘thy Shield’ with reference to the danger of renewed attack from the formidable powers which He had bearded and beaten. In the

present case the stress is laid on God's omnipotence, which points to doubts whispering in Abram's heart, by reason of God's delay in fulfilling His word, and of his own advancing years and failing strength. Paul brings out the meaning of the revelation when he glorifies the faith which it kindled anew in Abram, 'being fully assured that, what He had promised, He was able also to perform' [Rom. 4:21]. Whenever our 'faith has fallen asleep' and we are ready to let go our hold of God's ideal and settle down on the low levels of the actual, or to be somewhat ashamed of our aspirations after what seems so slow of realisation, or to elevate prudent calculations of probability above the daring enthusiasms of Christian hope, the ancient word, that breathed itself into Abram's hushed heart, should speak new vigour into ours. 'I am the Almighty God-take My power into all thy calculations, and reckon certainties with it for the chief factor. The one impossibility is that any word of Mine should fail. The one imprudence is to doubt My word.'

What follows in regard to our duty from that revelation? 'Walk before Me, and be thou perfect.' Enoch walked *with* God; that is, his whole active life was passed in communion with Him. The idea conveyed by 'walking *before* God' is not precisely the same. It is rather that of an active life, spent in continual consciousness of being 'naked and opened before the eyes of Him to whom we have to give account.' That thrilling consciousness will not paralyse nor terrify, if we feel that we are not only 'ever in the great Task-Master's eye,' but that God's omniscience is all-knowing love, and is brought closer to our hearts and clothed in gracious tenderness in Christ whose 'eyes were as a flame of fire,' but whose love is more ardent still, who knows us altogether, and pities and loves as perfectly as He knows.

What sort of life will spring from the double realisation of God's almightiness, and of our being ever before Him? 'Be thou perfect.' Nothing short of immaculate conformity with His will can satisfy His gaze. His desire for us should be our aim and desire for ourselves. The standard of aspiration and effort cannot be lowered to meet weakness. This is nobility of life-to aim at the unattainable, and to be ever approximating towards our aim. It is more blessed to be smitten with the longing to win the unwon than to stagnate in ignoble contentment with partial attainments. Better to climb, with faces turned upwards to the inaccessible peak, than to lie at ease in the fat valleys! It is the salt of life to have our aims set fixedly towards ideal perfection, and to say, ‘I count not myself to have apprehended: but . . .I press toward the mark.’ *Toward* that mark is better than *to* any lower. Our moral perfection is, as it were, the reflection in humanity of the divine almightiness.

The wide landscape may be mirrored in an inch of glass. Infinity may be, in some manner, presented in miniature in finite natures. Our power cannot represent God’s omnipotence, but our moral perfection may, especially since that omnipotence is pledged to make us perfect if we will walk before Him.

2. Note the sign of the renewed covenant. Compliance with these injunctions is clearly laid down as the human condition of the divine fulfilment of it. ‘Be thou perfect’ comes first; ‘My covenant is with thee’ follows. There was contingency recognised from the beginning. If Israel broke the covenant, God was not unfaithful if He should not adhere to it. But the present point is that a new confirmation is given before the terms are repeated. The main purpose, then, of this revelation, did not lie in that repetition, but in the seal given to Abram by the change of name.

Another sign was also given, which had a wider reference. The change of name was God’s seal to His part. Circumcision was the seal of the other party, by which Abram, his family, and afterwards the nation, took on themselves the obligations of the compact.

The name bestowed is taken to mean ‘Father of a Multitude.’ It was the condensation into a word, of the divine promise. What a trial of Abram’s faith it was to bid him take a name which would sound in men’s ears liker irony than promise! He, close on a hundred years old, with but one child, who was known not to be the heir, to be called the father of many! How often Canaanites and his own household would smile as they used it! What a piece of senile presumption it would seem to them! How often Abram himself would be tempted to think his new name a farce rather than a sign! But he took it humbly from God, and he wore it, whether it brought ridicule from others or assurance in his own heart. It takes some courage for any of us to call ourselves by names which rest on God’s promise and seem to have little vindication in present facts. The world is fond of laughing at ‘saints,’ but Christians should familiarise themselves with the lofty designations which God gives His children, and see in them not only a summons to life corresponding, but a pledge and prophecy of the final possession of all which these imply. God calls ‘things that are not, as though they were’; and it is wisdom, faith, and humility-not presumption-which accepts the names as omens of what shall one day be.

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To possess God is only possible on condition of yielding ourselves to Him. When we give ourselves up, in heart, mind, and will, to be His, He is ours. When we cease to be our own, we get God for ours. The self-centred man is poor; he neither owns himself nor anything besides, in any deep sense. When we lose ourselves in God, we find ourselves, and being content to have nothing, and not even to be our own masters or owners, we possess ourselves more truly than ever, and have God for our portion, and in Him ‘all things are ours.’

26)Genesis 17:2-9

Genesis

WAITING FAITH REWARDED AND STRENGTHENED BY NEW REVELATIONS

Gen. 17:1 - Gen. 17:9.

Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. He was ninety-nine when God appeared to him, as recorded in this chapter. There had been three divine communications in these twenty-five years-one at Bethel on entering the land, one after the hiving off of Lot, and one after the battle with the Eastern kings. The last-named vision had taken place before Ishmael's birth, and therefore more than thirteen years prior to the date of the lesson.

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27)Genesis 17:18

Genesis

A PETULANT WISH

Gen. 17:18.

These words sound very devout, and they have often been used by Christian parents yearning for the best interests of their children, and sometimes of their wayward and prodigal children. But consecrated as they are by that usage, I am afraid that their meaning, as they were uttered, was nothing so devout and good as that which is often attached to them.

1. Note the temper in which Abraham speaks here. The very existence of Ishmael was a memorial of Abraham's failure in faith and patience. For he thought that the promised heir was long in coming, and so he thought that he would help God. For thirteen years the child had been living beside him, winding a son's way into a father's heart, with much in his character, as was afterwards seen, that would make a frank, daring boy his old father's darling. Then all at once comes the divine message, 'This is not the son of the Covenant; this is not the heir of the Promise. Sarah shall have a child, and from him shall come the blessings that have been foretold.' And what does Abraham do? Fall down in thankfulness before God? leap up in heart at the conviction that now at last the long-looked-for fulfilment of the oath

of God was impending? Not he. ‘O that *Ishmael* might live before Thee. Why cannot *he* do? Why may he not be the chosen child, the heir of the Promise? Take him, O God!’

That is to say, he thinks he knows better than God. He is petulant, he resists his blessing, he fancies that his own plan is quite as good as the divine plan. He does not want to draw away his heart from the child that it has twined round. So he loses the blessing of the revelation that is being made to him; because he does not bow his will, and accept God’s way instead of his own. Now, do you not think that that is what we do? When God sends us Isaac, do we not often say, ‘Take Ishmael; he is my own making. I have set all my hopes on him. Why should I have to wrench them all away?’ In our individual lives we want to prescribe to God, far too often, not only the *ends*, but the *way* in which we shall get to the ends; and we think to ourselves, ‘That road of my own engineering that I have got all staked out, that is the true way for God’s providence to take.’ And when His path does not coincide with ours, then we are discontented, and instead of submitting we go with our pet schemes to Him; and if not in so many words, at least in spirit and temper, we try to force our way upon God, and when He is speaking about Isaac insist on pressing Ishmael on His notice.

It is often so in regard to our individual lives; and it is so in regard to the united action of Christian people very often. A great deal of what calls itself earnest contending for ‘the faith once delivered to the saints’ is nothing more nor less than insisting that methods of men’s devising shall be continued, when God seems to be substituting for them methods of His own sending; and so fighting about externals and church polity, and determining that the world has got to be saved in my own special fashion, and in no other, though God Himself seems to be suggesting the new thing to me. That is a very frequent phenomenon in the experience of Christian communities and churches. Ishmael is so very dear. He is not the child of promise, but he is the child that we have thought it advisable to help God with. It is hard for us to part with him.

Dear brethren, sometimes, too, God comes to us in various providences, and not only reduces into chaos and a heap of confusion our nicely built-up little houses, but He sometimes comes to us, and lifts us out of some lower kind of good, which is perfectly satisfactory to us, or all but perfectly satisfactory, in order to give to us something nobler and higher. And we resist that too; and do not see why Ishmael should not serve God's turn as he has served ours; or think that there is no need at all for Isaac to come into our lives. God never takes away from us a lower, unless for the purpose of bestowing upon us a higher blessing. Therefore not to submit is the foolishest thing that men can do.

But if that be anything like an account of the temper expressed by this saying, is it not strange that murmuring against God takes the shape of praying? Ah! there is a great deal of 'prayer' as it calls itself, which is just moulded upon this petulant word of Abraham's momentarily failing faith and submission. How many people think that to pray means to bring their wishes to God, and try to coax Him to make them His wishes! Why, half the shallow sceptical talk of this generation about the worthlessness of prayer goes upon that fundamental fallacy that the notion of prayer is to dictate terms to God; and that unless a man gets his wishes answered he has no right to suppose that his prayers are answered. But it is not so. Prayer is not after the type of 'O that Ishmael might live before Thee!' That is a poor kind of prayer of which the inmost spirit is resistance to a clear dictate of the divine will; but the true prayer is, 'O that I may be willing to take what Thou art willing, in Thy mercy and love, to send!'

I believe in importunate prayer, but I believe also that a great deal of what calls itself importunate prayer is nothing more than an obstinate determination not to be satisfied with what satisfies God. If a man has been bringing his wishes-and he cannot but have such-continuously to God, with regard to any outward things, and these have not been answered, he needs to look very carefully into his own temper and heart in order to make sure that what seems to be waiting upon God in importunate petition is not pestering Him with refused desires. To make a prayer out of my rebellion against His will is surely the greatest abuse of prayer that can be conceived. And when Abraham said, 'O that Ishmael might live before Thee!' if he said it in the spirit in which I think he did, he was not praying, but he was grumbling.

2. And then notice, still further, how such a temper and such a prayer have the effect of hiding joy and blessing from us.

This was the crisis of Abraham's whole life. It was the moment at which his hundred years nearly of patient waiting were about to be rewarded. The message which he had just received was the most lovely and gracious word that ever had come to him from the heavens, although many such words had come. And what does he do with it? Instead of falling down before God, and letting his whole heart go out in jubilant gratitude, he has nothing to say but 'I would rather that Thou didst it in another way. It is all very well to speak about sending this heir of promise. I have no pleasure in that, because it means that my Ishmael is to be passed by and shelved.' So the proffered joy is turned to ashes, and Abraham gets no good, for the moment, out of God's greatest blessing to him; but all the sky is darkened by mists that come up from his own heart.

Brethren, if you want to be miserable, perk up your own will against God's. If you want to be blessed, acquiesce in all that He does send, in all that He has sent, and, by anticipation, in all that He will send. For, depend upon it, the secret of finding sunbeams in everything is simply letting God have His own way, and making your will the sounding-board and echo of His. If Abraham had done as he ought to have done, that would have been the gladdest moment of his life. You and I can make out of our deepest sorrows the occasions of pure, though it is quiet, gladness, if only we have learned to say, 'Not my will, but Thy will be done.' That is the talisman that turns everything into gold, and makes sorrow forget its nature, and almost approximate to solemn joy.

3. My last word is this: God loves us all too well to listen to such a prayer.

Abraham's passionate cry was so much empty wind, and was like a straw laid across the course of an express train, in so far as its power to modify the gracious purpose of God already declared was concerned. And would it not be a miserable thing if we could deflect the solemn, loving march of the divine Providence by these hot, foolish, purblind wishes of ours, that see only the nearer end of things, and have no notion of where their further end may go, or what it may be?

Is it not better that we should fall back upon this thought, though, at first sight, it seems so to limit the power of petition, ‘We know that if we ask anything according to His will He heareth us’? There is nothing that would more wreck our lives than if what some people want were to be the case-that God should let us have our own way, and give us serpents because we asked for them and fancied they were eggs; or let us break our teeth upon bestowed stones because, like whimpering children crying for the moon, we had asked for them under the delusion that they were bread.

Leave all that in His hands; and be sure of this, that the true way to peace, to rest, to gladness, and to wringing the last drop of possible sweetness out of gifts and losses, disappointments and fruitions, is to have no will but God’s will enthroned above and in our own wills. If Abraham had acquiesced and submitted, Ishmael and Isaac would have been a pair to bless his life, as they stood together over his grave. And if you and I will leave God to order all our ways, and not try to interfere with His purposes by our short-sighted dictation, ‘all things will work together for good to us, because we love God,’ and lovingly accept His will and His law.

28)Genesis 18:16-33

Genesis

‘BECAUSE OF HIS IMPORTUNITY’

Gen. 18:16 - Gen. 18:33.

I

The first verse of this chapter says that ‘the Lord appeared’ unto Abraham, and then proceeds to tell that ‘three men stood over against him,’ thus indicating that these were, collectively, the manifestation of Jehovah. Two of the three subsequently ‘went toward Sodom,’ and are called ‘angels’ in Gen. 19:1. One remained with Abraham, and is addressed by him as ‘Lord,’ but the three are similarly addressed in Gen. 18:3. The inference is that Jehovah appeared, not only in the one ‘man’ who spake with Abraham, but also in the two who went to Sodom.

In this incident we have, first, God’s communication of His purpose to Abraham. He was called the friend of God, and friends confide in each other. ‘The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him,’ and it is ever true that they who live in amity and communion with God thereby acquire insight into His purposes. Even in regard to public or so-called ‘political’ events, a man who believes in God and His moral government will often be endowed with a ‘terrible sagacity,’ which forecasts consequences more surely than do godless politicians. In regard to one’s own history, it is still more evidently true that the one way to apprehend God’s purposes in it is to keep in close friendship with Him. Then we shall see the meaning of the else bewildering whirl of events, and be able to say, ‘He that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God.’ But the reason assigned for intrusting Abraham with the knowledge of God’s purpose is to be noted. It was because of his place as the medium of blessing to the nations, and as the lawgiver to his descendants. God had ‘known him,’-that is, had lovingly brought him into close relations with Himself, not for his own sake only, but, much more, that he might be a channel of grace to Israel and the world. His ‘commandment’ to his descendants was to lead to their worship of Jehovah and their upright living, and these again to their possession of the blessings promised to Abraham. That purpose would be aided by the knowledge of the judgment on Sodom, its source, and its cause, and therefore Abraham was admitted into the council-chamber of Jehovah. The insight given to God’s friends is given that they may more fully benefit men by leading them into paths of righteousness, on which alone they can be met by God’s blessings.

The strongly figurative representation in Gen. 18:20 - Gen. 18:21, according to which Jehovah goes down to ascertain whether the facts of Sodom’s sin correspond to the report of it, belongs to the early stage of revelation, and need not surprise us, but should impress on us the gradual character of the divine Revelation, which would have been useless unless it had been accommodated to the mental and spiritual stature of its recipients. Nor should it hide from us the lofty conception of God’s long-suffering justice, which is presented in so childlike a form. He does ‘not judge after . . .the hearing of His ears,’ nor smite without full knowledge of the sin. A later stage of revelation puts the same thought in language less strange to us, when it teaches that ‘the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by Him actions are weighed,’ and in His balances many a false estimate, both of virtuous and vicious acts, is corrected, and retribution is always exactly adjusted to the deed.

But the main importance of the incident is in the wonderful picture of Abraham’s intercession, which, in like manner, veils, under a strangely sensuous representation, lofty truths for all ages. It is to be noted that the divine purpose expressed in ‘I will go down now, and see,’ is fulfilled in the going of the two [men or angels] towards Sodom; therefore Jehovah was in them. But He was also in the One before whom Abraham stood. The first great truth enshrined in this part of the story is that the friend of God is compassionate even of the sinful and degraded. Abraham did not intercede for Lot, but for the sinners in Sodom. He had perilled his life in warfare for them; he now pleads with God for them. Where had he learned this brave pity? Where but from the God with whom he lived by faith? How much more surely will real communion with Jesus lead *us* to look on all men, and especially on the vicious and outcast, with His eyes who saw the multitudes as sheep without a shepherd, torn, panting, scattered, and lying exhausted and defenceless! Indifference to the miseries and impending dangers of Christless men is impossible for any whom He calls ‘not servants, but friends.’

Again, we are taught the boldness of pleading which is permitted to the friend of God, and is compatible with deepest reverence. Abraham is keenly conscious of his audacity, and yet, though he knows himself to be but dust and ashes, that does not stifle his petitions. His was the holy ‘importunity’ which Jesus sent forth for our imitation. The word so rendered in Luk. 11:8, which is found in the New Testament there only, literally means ‘shamelessness,’ and is exactly the disposition which Abraham showed here. Not only was he persistent, but he increased his expectations with each partial granting of his prayer. The more God gives, the more does the true suppliant expect and crave; and rightly so, for the gift to be given is infinite, and each degree of possession enlarges capacity so as to fit to receive more, and widens desire. What contented us to-day should not content us to-morrow.

Again, Abraham is bold in appealing to a law to which God is bound to conform. 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' is often quoted with an application foreign to its true meaning. Abraham was not preaching to men trust that the most perplexing acts of God would be capable of full vindication if we knew all, but he was pleading with God that His acts should be plainly accordant with the idea of justice planted by Him in us. The phrase is often used to strengthen the struggling faith that

'All is right which seems most wrong,
If it be His sweet will.'

But it means not 'Such and such a thing must be right because God has done it,' but 'Such and such a thing is right, therefore God must do it.' Of course, our conceptions of right are not the absolute measure of the divine acts, and the very fact which Abraham thought contrary to justice is continually exemplified in Providence, that 'the righteous should be as the wicked' in regard to earthly calamities affecting communities. So far Abraham was wrong, but the spirit of his remonstrance was wholly right.

Again, we learn the precious lesson that prayer for others is a real power, and does bring down blessings and avert evils. Abraham did not here pray for Lot, but yet 'God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow' [Gen. 19:29], so that there had been unrecorded intercession for him too. The unselfish desires for others, that exhale from human hearts under the influence of the love which Christ plants in us, do come down in blessings on others, as the moisture drawn up by the sun may descend in fructifying rain on far-off pastures of the wilderness. We help one another when we pray for one another.

The last lesson taught is that 'righteous' men are indeed the 'salt of the earth' not only preserving cities and nations from further corruption, but procuring for them further existence and probation. God holds back His judgments so long as hope of amendment survives, and 'will not destroy for the ten's sake.'

Genesis

THE INTERCOURSE OF GOD AND HIS FRIEND

II

We have seen that the fruit of Abraham’s faith was God’s entrance into close covenant relations with him; or, as James puts it, ‘It was reckoned unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God.’ This incident shows us the intercourse of the divine and human friends in its familiarity, mutual confidence, and power. It is a forecast of Christ’s own profound teachings in His parting words in the upper chamber, concerning the sweet and wondrous intercourse between the believing soul and the indwelling God.

1. The friend of God catches a gleam of divine pity and tenderness. Abraham has no relations with the men of Sodom. Their evil ways would repel him; and he would be a stranger among them still more than among the Canaanites, whose iniquity was ‘not yet full.’ But though he has no special bonds with them, he cannot but melt with tender compassion when he hears their doom. Communion with the very Source of all gentle love has softened his heart, and he yearns over the wicked and fated city. Where else than from his heavenly Friend could he have learned this sympathy? It wells up in this chapter like some sudden spring among solemn solitudes-the first instance of that divine charity which is the best sign that we have been with God, and have learned of Him. All that the New Testament teaches of love to God, as necessarily issuing in love to man, and of the true love to man as overleaping all narrow bounds of kindred, country, race, and ignoring all questions of character, and gushing forth in fullest energy towards the sinners in danger of just punishment, is here in germ. The friend of God must be the friend of men; and if they be wicked, and he sees the frightful doom which they do not see, these make his pity the deeper. Abraham does not contest the justice of the doom. He lives too near his friend not to know that sin must mean death. The effect of friendship with God is not to make men wish that there were no judgments for evil-doers, but to touch their hearts with pity, and to stir them to intercession and to effort for their deliverance.

2. The friend of God has absolute trust in the rectitude of His acts. Abraham’s remonstrance, if we may call it so, embodies some thoughts about the government of God in the world which should be pondered.

His first abrupt question, flung out without any reverential preface, assumes that the character of God requires that the fate of the righteous should be distinguished from that of the wicked. The very brusqueness of the question shows that he supposed himself to be appealing to an elementary and indubitable law of God's dealings. The teachings of the Fall and of the Flood had graven deep on his conscience the truth that the same loving Friend must needs deal out rewards to the good and chastisement to the bad. That was the simple faith of an early time, when problems like those which tortured the writers of the seventy-third Psalm, or of Job and Ecclesiastes, had not yet disturbed the childlike trust of the friend of God, because no facts in his experience had forced them on him. But the belief which was axiomatic to him, and true for his supernaturally shaped life with its special miracles and visible divine guard, is not the ultimate and irrefragable principle which he thought it. In widespread calamities the righteous are blended with the wicked in one bloody ruin; and it is the very misery of such judgments that often the sufferers are not the wrongdoers, but that the fathers eat the sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. The whirlwind of temporal judgments makes no distinctions between the dwellings of the righteous and the wicked, but levels them both. No doubt, the fact that the impending destruction was to be a direct Divine interposition of a punitive kind made it more necessary that it should be confined to the actual culprits. No doubt, too, Abraham's zeal for the honour of God's government was right. But his first plea belongs to the stage of revelation at which he stood, not to that of the New Testament, which teaches that the eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell were not sinners above all men in Jerusalem. Abraham's confidence in God's justice, not Abraham's conceptions of what that justice required, is to be imitated. A friend of God will hold fast by the faith that 'His way is perfect,' and will cherish it even in the presence of facts more perplexing than any which met Abraham's eyes.

Another assumption in his prayer is that the righteous are sources of blessing and shields for the wicked. Has he there laid hold of a true principle? Certainly, it is indeed the law that 'every man shall bear his own burden,' but that law is modified by the operation of this other, of which God's providence is full. Many a drop of blessing trickles from the wet fleece to the dry ground. Many a stroke of judgment is carried off harmlessly by the lightning conductor. Where God's friends are inextricably mixed up with evil-doers, it is not rare to see diffused blessings which are destined indeed primarily for the former, but find their way to the latter. Christians are the 'salt of the earth' in this sense too, that they save corrupt communities from swift destruction, and for their sakes the angels delay their blow. In the final resort, each soul must reap its own harvest from its own deeds; but the individualism of Christianity is not isolation. We are bound together in mysterious community, and a good man is a fountain of far-flowing good. The truest 'saviours of society' are the servants of God.

A third principle is embodied in the solemn question, 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' This is not meant in its bearing here, as we so often hear it quoted, to silence man's questionings as to mysterious divine acts, or to warn us from applying our measures of right and wrong to these. The very opposite thought is conveyed; namely, the confidence that what God does must approve itself as just to men. He is Judge of all the earth, and therefore bound by His very nature, as by His relations to men, to do nothing that cannot be pointed to as inflexibly right. If Abraham had meant, 'What God does, must needs be right, therefore crush down all questions of how it accords with thy sense of justice,' he would have been condemning his own prayer as presumptuous, and the thought would have been entirely out of place. But the appeal to God to vindicate His own character by doing what shall be in manifest accord with His name, is bold language indeed, but not too bold, because it is prompted by absolute confidence in Him. God's punishments must be obviously righteous to have moral effect, or to be worthy of Him.

But true as the principle is, it needs to be guarded. Abraham himself is an instance that men's conceptions of right do not completely correspond to the reality. His notion of 'right' was, in some particulars, as his life shows, imperfect, rudimentary, and far beneath New Testament ideas. Conscience needs education. The best men's conceptions of what befits divine justice are relative, progressive; and a shifting standard is no standard. It becomes us to be very cautious before we say to God, 'This is the way. Walk Thou in it,' or dismiss any doctrine as untrue on the ground of its contradicting our instincts of justice.

3. The friend of God has power with God. ‘Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?’ The divine Friend recognises the obligation of confidence. True friendship is frank, and cannot bear to hide its purposes. That one sentence in its bold attribution of a like feeling to God leads us deep into the Divine heart, and the sweet reality of his amity. Insight into His will ever belongs to those who live near Him. It is the beginning of the long series of disclosures of ‘the secret of the Lord’ to ‘them that fear Him,’ which is crowned by ‘henceforth I call you not servants; but . . .friends; for all things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you.’ So much for the divine side of the communion.

On the human side, we are here taught the great truth, that God’s friends are intercessors, whose voice has a mysterious but most real power with God. If it be true, that, in general terms, the righteous are shields and sources of blessing to the unholy, it is still more distinctly true that they have access to God’s secret place with petitions for others as well as for themselves. The desires which go up to God, like the vapours exhaled to heaven, fall in refreshing rain on spots far away from that whence they rose. In these days we need to keep fast hold of our belief in the efficacy of prayer for others and for ourselves. God knows Himself and the laws of His government a great deal better than any one besides does; and He has abundantly shown us in His Word, and by many experiences, that breath spent in intercession is not wasted. In these old times, when worship was mainly sacrificial, this wonderful instance of pure intercession meets us, an anticipation of later times. And from thence onwards there has never failed proof to those who will look for it, that God’s friends are true priests, and help their brethren by their prayers. Our voices should ‘rise like a fountain night and day’ for men. But there is a secret distrust of the power, and a flagrantly plain neglect of the duty, of intercession nowadays, which need sorely the lesson that God ‘remembered Abraham’ and delivered Lot. Luther, in his rough, strong way, says: ‘If I have a Christian who prays to God for me, I will be of good courage, and be afraid of nothing. If I have one who prays against me, I had rather have the Grand Turk for my enemy.’

The tone of Abraham’s intercession may teach us how familiar the intercourse with the Heavenly Friend may be. The boldest words from a loving heart, jealous of God’s honour, are not irreverent in His eyes. This prayer is abrupt, almost rough. It sounds like remonstrance quite as much as prayer. Abraham appeals to God to take care of His name and honour, as if he had said, If Thou doest this, what will the world say of Thee, but that Thou art unmerciful? But the grand confidence in God's character, the eager desire that it should be vindicated before the world, the dread that the least film should veil the silvery whiteness or the golden lustre of His name, the sensitiveness for His honour-these are the effects of communion with Him; and for these God accepts the bold prayer as truer reverence than is found in many more guarded and lowly sounding words. Many conventional proprieties of worship may be broken just because the worship is real. 'The frequent sputter shows that the soul's depths boil in earnest.' We may learn, too, that the most loving familiarity never forgets the fathomless gulf between God and it. Abraham remembers that he is 'dust and ashes'; he knows that he is venturing much in speaking to God. His pertinacious prayers have a recurring burden of lowly recognition of his place. Twice he heralds them with 'I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord'; twice with 'Oh let not the Lord be angry.' Perfect love casts out fear and deepens reverence. We may come with free hearts, from which every weight of trembling and every cloud of doubt has been lifted. But the less the dread, the lower we shall bow before the Loftiness which we love. We do not pray aright until we tell God everything. The 'boldness' which we as Christians ought to have, means literally a frank speaking out of all that is in our hearts. Such 'boldness and access with confidence' will often make short work of so-called seemly reverence, but it will never transgress by so much as a hair' s-breadth the limits of lowly, trustful love.

Abraham's persistency may teach us a lesson. If one might so say, he hangs on God's skirt like a burr. Each petition granted only encourages him to another. Six times he pleads, and God waits till he has done before He goes away; He cannot leave His friend till that friend has said all his say. What a contrast the fiery fervour and unwearying pertinacity of Abraham's prayers make to the stiff formalism of the intercessions one is familiar with! The former are like the successive pulses of a volcano driving a hot lava stream before it; the latter, like the slow flow of a glacier, cold and sluggish. Is any part of our public or private worship more hopelessly formal than our prayers for others? This picture from the old world may well shame our languid petitions, and stir us up to a holy boldness and persistence in prayer.

Our Saviour Himself teaches that ‘men ought always to pray, and not to faint,’ and Himself recommends to us a holy importunity, which He teaches us to believe is, in mysterious fashion, a power with God. He gives room for such patient continuance in prayer by sometimes delaying the apparent answer, not because He needs to be won over to bless, but because it is good for us to draw near, and to keep near, the Lord. He is ever at the door, ready to open, and if sometimes, like Rhoda to Peter, He does not open immediately, and we have to keep knocking, it is that our desires may increase by delay, and so He may be able to give a blessing, which will be the greater and sweeter for the tarrying.

So the friendship is manifested on both sides: on God’s, by disclosure of His purpose and compliance with His friend’s request; on Abraham’s, by speech which is saved from irreverence by love, and by prayer which is acceptable to God by its very importunity. Jesus Christ has promised us the highest form of such friendship, when He has said, ‘I have called you friends: for all things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you’; and again, ‘If ye abide in Me, . . .ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.’

29)Genesis 19:15-26

Genesis

THE SWIFT DESTROYER

Gen. 19:15 - Gen. 19:26.

The religious significance of this solemn page of revelation is but little affected by any of the interesting questions which criticism raises concerning it, so that I am free to look at the whole narrative for the purpose of deducing its perennial lessons. There are four clearly marked stages in the story: the lingering of Lot in the doomed city, and the friendly force which dragged him from it; the prayer of abject fear, and the wonderful answer; the awful catastrophe; and the fate of the wretched woman who looked back.

1. Lot’s lingering and rescue by force. Second thoughts are not always best. When great resolves have to be made, and when a clear divine command has to be obeyed, the first thought is usually the nobler; and the second, which pulls it back, and damps its ardour, is usually of the earth, earthy. So was it with Lot. Overnight, in the excitement of the terrible scene enacted before his door, Lot had been not only resolved himself to flee, but his voice had urged his sons-in-law to escape from the doom which he then felt to be imminent. But with the cold grey light of morning his mood has changed. The ties which held him in Sodom reassert their power. Perhaps daylight made his fears seem less real. There was no sign in the chill Eastern twilight that this day was to be unlike the other days. Perhaps the angels’ summons roused him from sleep, and their ‘arise’ is literally meant. It might have given wings to his flight. Urgent, and resonant, like the morning bugle, it bids him be stirring lest he be swept away ‘in the punishment of the city.’ Observe that the same word means ‘sin’ and ‘punishment,’-a testimony to the profound truth that at bottom they are one, sin being pain in the root, pain being sin in the flower. So our own word ‘evil’ covers all the ground, and means both sin and sorrow. But even that pealing note does not shatter his hesitation. He still lingers. What kept him? That which had first taken him there-material advantages. He had struck root in Sodom. The tent life which he had kept to at first has been long given up; we find him sitting in the gate of the city, the place for gossip and friendly intercourse. He has either formed, or is going to form, marriage alliances for his daughters with men of the city who are as black as the rest. Perhaps his wife, whom the story will not name, for pity or for horror, was a Sodomite. To escape meant to leave all this and his wealth behind. If he goes out, he goes out a pauper. So his heart, which is where his treasure is, makes his movements slow. What insanity his lingering must have seemed to the angels! I wonder if we, who cling so desperately to the world, and who are so slow to go where God would have us to be for our own safety, if thereby we shall lose anything of this world’s wealth, seem very much wiser to eyes made clear-sighted with the wisdom of heaven. This poor hesitating lingerer, too much at home in the city of destruction to get out of it even to save his life, has plenty of brothers to-day. Every man who lets the world hold him by the skirts when Christ is calling him to salvation, and every man who is reluctant to obey any clear call to sacrifice and separation

from godless men, may see his own face in this glass, and perhaps get a glimpse of its ugliness.

What a homely picture, full of weighty truth, the story gives us, of the angels each taking two of the reluctant four by the hand, and dragging them with some degree of kindly force from destruction into safety! So, in a great fire, domestic animals and horses seem to find a strange fascination in the flames, and have to be carried out of certain death by main force. They 'set him'-or we might read, 'made him rest'-outside the city. It was but a little distance, for these 'cities' were tiny places, and the walls were soon reached. But it was far enough to change Lot's whole feelings. He passes to feeble despair and abject fear, as we shall see. That forlorn group, homeless, friendless, stripped of everything, shivering outside the gate in the cold morning air, may teach us how wise and prudent the man is who seeks the kingdom of God second, and the other things first.

2. There was a pause outside the city. A new voice speaks now to Lot. 'They' brought him forth; but 'He' said 'escape.' The same 'Lord' to whom Abraham had prayed, has now rejoined the mysterious pair whom He had sent to Sodom. And Lot's entreaty is addressed to Him whom he calls 'my Lord.' He uses singular pronouns throughout, although the narrator says that he 'said unto *them*.' There seems to be here the same idea as is embodied in the word 'Elohim'; namely, that the divine powers are regarded as in some sense separable, and yet all inhering in a personal unity. At all events, we have here a distinct representation of an intercourse between God and man, in which thoughts are conveyed to the human spirit direct from the divine, and desires pass from the human to the divine. The manner of the intercourse we do not know, but the possibility of the fact can scarcely be denied by any believer in a God; and, however we may call this miraculous or abnormal, the essence of the event can be repeated in the experience of each of us. God still speaks to men, and men may still plead with God. Unless our religion is communion, it is nothing.

The divine voice reiterates the angels' urgent command in still more stringent words: 'Escape for thy life.' There is to be no more angel-leading, but Lot's feet are to be made as hinds' feet by the thought of the flaming death that is pursuing. His lingering looks are sternly forbidden, since they would delay his flight and divide his heart. The direction of his flight is for the first time pointed out. The fertile plain, which had lured him down from the safe hills, is prohibited. Only on the mountain-side, probably the eastern mountains, where the morning red was beginning to blush, is there safety.

Lot’s answer shows a complete change of feeling. He is too fully alarmed now. His fright is so desperate that it has killed faith and common sense. The natural conclusion from God’s mercy, which he acknowledges, would have been trust and obedience. ‘Therefore I can escape,’ not ‘but I cannot escape,’ would have been the logic of faith. The latter is the irrationality of fear. When a man who has been cleaving to this fleeting life of earthly good wakes up to believe his danger, he is ever apt to plunge into an abyss of terror, in which God’s commands seem impossible, and His will to save becomes dim. The world first lies to us by ‘You are quite safe where you are. Don’t be in a hurry to go.’ Then it lies, ‘You never can get away now.’ Reverse Lot’s whimpering fears, and we get the truth. Are not God’s directions how to escape, promises that we shall escape? Will He begin to build, and not be able to finish? Will the judgments of His hand overrun their commission, like a bloodhound which, in its master’s absence, may rend his friend? ‘We have all of us one human heart,’ and this swift leap from unreasoning carelessness to as unreasoning dread, this failure to draw the true conclusion from God’s past mercy, and this despairing recoil from the path pointed for us, and craving for easier ways, belongs to us. ‘A strange servant of God was this,’ say we. Yes, and we are often quite as strange. How many people awakened to see their danger are so absorbed by the sight that they cannot see the cross, or think they can never reach it!

God answered the cry, whatever its fault, and that may well make us pause in our condemnation. He hears even a very imperfect petition, and can see the tiniest germ of faith buried under thick clods of doubt and fear. This stooping readiness to meet Lot’s weakness comes in wonderful contrast with the terrible revelation of judgment which follows. What a conception of God, which had room for this more than human patience with weakness, and also for the flashing, lurid glories of destructive retribution! Zoar is spared, not for the unworthy reason which Lot suggested-because its minuteness might buy impunity, as some noxious insect too small to be worth crushing-but in accordance with the principle which was illustrated in

Abraham’s intercession, and even in Lot’s safety; namely, that the righteous are shields for others, as Paul had the lives of all that sailed with him given to him.

God’s ‘cannot’ answers Lot’s ‘cannot.’ His power is limited by His own solemn purpose to save His faltering servant. The latter had feared that, before he could reach the mountain, ‘the evil’ would overtake him. God shows him that his safety was a condition precedent to its outburst. Lot barred the way. God could not ‘let slip the dogs of’ judgment, but held them in the leash until Lot was in Zoar. Very awful is the command to make haste, based on this impossibility, as if God were weary of delay, and more than ready to smite. However we may find anthropomorphism in these early narratives, let us not forget that, when the world has long been groaning under some giant evil, and the bitter seed is grown up into a waving forest of poison, there is something in the passionless righteousness of God which brooks no longer delay, but seeks to make ‘a short work’ on the earth.

3. So we are brought face to face with the grim story of the destruction. There is a world of tragic meaning in the simple note of time given. ‘The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zoar.’ The low-lying cities of the plain would lie in shadow for some time before the sun topped the eastern hills. What a dawn! At that joyous hour, just when the sunshine struck down on the smiling plain, and lake and river gleamed like silver, and all things woke to new hopes and fresh life, then the sky darkened, and the earth sank, and horrible rain of fiery bitumen fell from the black pall, salt mud poured in streams, and over all hung a column of fat, oily smoke. It is not my province to discuss the physical cause of the destruction; but I may refer to the suggestions of Sir J. W. Dawson, in his *Egypt and Syria*, and in *The Expositor* for May 1886, in which he shows that great beds of bituminous limestone extend below the Jordan valley and much of the Dead Sea, and that the escape of inflammable gag from these through the opening of a fissure along a great ‘line of fault,’ is capable of producing all the effects described. The ‘brimstone’ of the Authorised Version is probably rather some form of bituminous matter which would be carried into the air by such an escape of gas, and a thick saline mud would accompany the eruption, encrusting anything it reached. Subsidence would follow the

ejection of quantities of such matter; and hence the word ‘overthrew,’ which seems inappropriate to a mere conflagration, would be explained.

But, however this may be, we have to recognise a supernatural element in the starting of the train of natural causes, as well as in the timing of the catastrophe, and a divine purpose of retribution, which turns the catastrophe, however effected, into a judgment.

So regarded, the event has a double meaning. In the first place, it is a revelation of an element in the divine character and of a feature in the divine government. To the men of that time, it might be a warning. To Abraham, and through him to his descendants, and through them to us, it preaches a truth very unwelcome to many in this day: that there is in God that which constrains Him to hate, fight against, and punish, evil. The temper of this generation turns away from such thoughts, and, in the name of the truth that ‘God is love,’ would fain obliterate the truth that He does and will punish. But if the punitive element be suppressed, and that in God which makes it necessary ignored or weakened, the result will be a God who has not force enough to love, but only weakly to indulge. If He does not hate and punish, He does not pardon. For the sake of the love of God, we must hold firm by the belief in the judgments of God. The God who destroyed Sodom is not merely the God of an earlier antiquated creed. ‘Is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also of the Gentiles? Yea, of the Gentiles also.’

Again, this event is a prophecy. So our Lord has employed it; and much of the imagery in which the last judgment is represented is directly drawn from this narrative. So far from this story showing to us only the superstitions of a form of belief which we have long outgrown, its deepest meaning lies far ahead, and closes the history of man on the earth. We know from the lips which cannot lie, that the appalling suddenness of that destruction foreshadows the swiftness of the coming of that last ‘day of the Lord.’ We know that in literality some of the physical features shall be reproduced; for the fire which shall burn up the world and all its works is no figure, nor is it proclaimed only by such non-authoritative voices as those of Jesus and His apostles, but also by the modern possessors of infallible certitude, the men of science. We know that that day shall be a day of retribution. We know, too, that the crime of Sodom, foul and unnatural as it was, is not the darkest, but that its inhabitants [who have to face that judgment too] will find their doom more tolerable, and their sins lighter, than some who have had high places in the Church, than the Pharisees and wise men who have not taken Christ for their Saviour.

4. The fate of the loiterer. Her backward look must have been more than momentary, for the destruction of the cities did not begin till Lot was safe in Zoar. She must have lingered far behind, and been overtaken by the eruption of liquid saline mud, which, as Sir J. W. Dawson has shown, would attend or follow the outburst of bituminous matter, so that her fate was the natural consequence of her heart being still in Sodom. As to the 'pillar of salt' which has excited cavils on the one hand and foolish legends on the other, probably we are to think rather of a heap than of a pillar. The word does not occur in either meaning elsewhere, but its derivation implies something raised above the level of the ground; and a heap, such as would be formed by a human body encrusted with salt mud, would suit the requirements of the expression. Like a man who falls in a snowstorm, or, still more accurately, just as some of the victims at Pompeii stumbled in their flight, and were buried under the ashes, which still keep the outline of their figures, so Lot's wife was covered with the half-liquid slimy mud. Granted the delay in her flight, the rest is perfectly simple and natural. She was buried in a horrible tomb; and, in pity to her memory, no name has been written upon it. She remains to all generations, in a far truer sense than superstition dreamed of when it pointed to an upright salt rock as her prison and her monument, a warning of the danger of the backward look, which betrays the true home of the heart, and may leave us unsheltered in the open plain when the fiery storm bursts. 'Remember Lot's wife.'

When the angels awoke Lot, the day was breaking. By the time that Abraham had risen 'early in the morning,' and reached the place by his tent from which he had yesterday looked on the smiling plain, all was over, and the heavy smoke cloud wrapped the dead with its pall-like folds. So swift and sudden is to be the coming of the Son of man,-as the lightning which rushes in one fierce blinding flash from one side of heaven to the other. Wherefore, God calls to each of us: 'Escape for thy life; look not behind thee.'

30)Genesis 22:1-13

Genesis

FAITH TESTED AND CROWNED

Gen. 22:1 - Gen. 22:14.

I

A life of faith and self-denial has usually its sharpest trials at or near its beginning. A stormy day has generally a calm close. But Abraham's sorest discipline came all sudden, like a bolt from blue sky. Near the end, and after many years of peaceful, uneventful life, he had to take a yet higher degree in the school of faith. Sharp trial means increased possession of God. So his last terrible experience turned to his crowning mercy.

1. The very first words of this solemn narrative raise many questions. We have God appointing the awful trial. The Revised Version properly replaces 'tempt' by 'prove.' The former word conveys the idea of appealing to the worse part of a man, with the wish that he may yield and do the wrong. The latter means an appeal to the better part of a man, with the desire that he should stand. Temptation says: 'Do this pleasant thing; do not be hindered by the fact that it is wrong.' Trial, or proving, says: 'Do this right and noble thing; do not be hindered by the fact that it is painful.' The one is 'a sweet, beguiling melody,' breathing soft indulgence and relaxation over the soul; the other is a pealing trumpet-call to high achievements.

God's proving does not mean that He stands by, watching how His child will behave. He helps us to sustain the trial to which He subjects us. Life is all probation; and because it is so, it is all the field for the divine aid. The motive of His proving men is that they may be strengthened. He puts us into His gymnasium to improve our physique. If we stand the trial, our faith is increased; if we fall, we learn self-distrust and closer clinging to Him. No objection can be raised to the representation of this passage as to God's proving Abraham, which does not equally apply to the whole structure of life as a place of probation that it may be a place of blessing. But the manner of the trial here presents a difficulty. How could God command a father to kill his son? Is that in accordance with His character? Well, two considerations deserve attention. First, the final issue; namely, Isaac's deliverance, was an integral part of the divine purpose from the beginning of the trial; so that the question really is, Was it accordant with the divine character to require readiness to sacrifice even a son at His command? Second, that in Abraham's time, a father's right over his child's life was unquestioned, and that therefore this command, though it lacerated Abraham's heart, did not wound his conscience as it would do were it heard to-day. It is impossible to conceive of a divine injunction such as this being addressed to us. We have learned the inalienable sacredness of every life, and the awful prerogative and burden of individuality. God's command cannot enforce sin. But it was not wrong in Abraham's eyes for a father to slay his son; and God might shape His message to the form of the existing morality without derogation from His character, especially when the result of the message would be, among other things, to teach His abhorrence of human sacrifices, and so to lift the existing morality to a higher level.

2. The great body of the history sets before us Abraham standing the terrible test. What unsurpassable beauty is in the simple story! It is remarkable, even among the scriptural narratives, for the entire absence of anything but the visible facts. There is not a syllable about the feelings of father or of son. The silence is more pathetic than many words. We look as into a magic crystal, and see the very event before our eyes, and our own imaginations tell us more of the world of struggle and sorrow raging under that calm outside than the highest art could do. The pathos of reticence was never more perfectly illustrated. Observe, too, the minute, prolonged details of the slow progress to the dread instant of sacrifice. Each step is told in precisely the same manner, and the series of short clauses, coupled together by an artless 'and,' are like the single strokes of a passing bell, or the slow drops of blood heard falling from a fatal wound. The homely preparations for the journey are made by Abraham himself. He makes no confidante of Sarah; only God and himself knew what that bundle of wood meant. What thoughts must have torn his soul throughout these weary days! How hard to keep his voice round and full while he spoke to Isaac! How much the long protracted tension of the march increased the sharpness of the test! It is easier to reach the height of obedient self-sacrifice in some moment of enthusiasm, than to keep up there through the commonplace details of

slowly passing days. Many a faith, which could even have slain its dearest, would have broken down long before the last step of that sad journey was taken.

The elements of the trial were two: first, Abraham’s soul was torn asunder by the conflict of fatherly love and obedience to God. The narrative intimates this struggle by continually insisting on the relationship between the two. The command dwells with emphasis on it: ‘thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest.’ He takes with him ‘Isaac his son’; lays the wood on ‘Isaac his son.’ Isaac ‘spake unto Abraham his father’; Abraham answers, ‘Here am I, my son’; and again, ‘My son, God will provide.’ He bound ‘Isaac his son’; he ‘took the knife to slay his son’; and lastly, in the glad surprise at the end, he offers the ram ‘in the stead of his son.’ Thus, at every turn, the tender bond is forced on our notice, that we may feel how terrible was the task laid on him-to cut it asunder with his own hand. The friend of God must hold all other love as less than His, and must be ready to yield up the dearest at His bidding. Cruel as the necessity seems to flesh and blood, and specially poignant as his pain was, in essence Abraham’s trial only required of him what all true religion requires of us. Some of us have been called by God’s providence to give up the light of our eyes, the joy of our homes, to Him. Some of us have had to make the choice between earthly and heavenly love. All of us have to throne God in our hearts, and to let not the dearest usurp His place. In our weakness we may well shrink from such a test. But let us not forget that the trial of Abraham was not imposed by his own mistaken conceptions of duty, nor by a sterner God than the New Testament reveals, but is distinctly set before every Christian in essence, though not in form, by the gentle lips from which flowed the law of love more stringent and exclusive in its claims than any other: ‘He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.’

The conflict in Abraham’s soul had a still more painful aspect in that it seemed to rend his very religion into two. Faith in the promise on which he had been living all his life drew one way; faith in the later command, another. God seemed to be against God, faith against faith, promise against command. If he obeys now, what is to become of the hopes that had shone for years before him? His whole career will be rendered nugatory, and with his own hand he will crush to powder his life’s work. That wonderful short dialogue which broke the stern silence of the journey seems to throw light on his mood. There is nothing in literature sacred or secular, fact or fiction, poetry or prose, more touching than the innocent curiosity of Isaac’s boyish question, and the yearning self-restraint of the father’s desperate and yet calm answer. But its value is not only in its pathos. It seems to show that, though he knew not how, still he held by the hope that somehow God would not forget His promise. Out of his very despair, his faith struck, out of the flint of the hard command, a little spark which served to give some flicker of light amid the darkness. His answer to his boy does not make his sacrifice less, but his faith more. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives a somewhat different turn to his hopes, when he tells us that he offered up the heir of the promises, ‘accounting that God was able to raise him from the dead.’ Both ways of clinging to the early promise, even while obeying the later command, seem to have passed through his mind. The wavering from the one to the other is natural. He is sure that God had not lied before, and means what He commands now. He is sure that there is some point of reconciliation-perhaps this, perhaps that, but certainly somewhat. So he goes straight on the road marked for him, quite sure that it will not end in a blind alley, from which there is no exit. That is the very climax of faith-to trust God so absolutely, even when His ways seem contradictory, as to be more willing to believe apparent impossibilities than to doubt Him, and to be therefore ready for the hardest trial of obedience. We, too, have sometimes to take courses which seem to annihilate the hope and aims of a life. The lesson for us is to go straight on the path of clear duty wherever it leads. If it seem to bring us up to inaccessible cliffs, we may be sure that when we get there we shall find some ledge, though it may be no broader than a chamois could tread, which will suffice for a path. If it seem to bring us to a deep and bridgeless stream, we shall find a ford when we get to the water’s edge. If the mountains seem to draw together and bar a passage, we shall find, when we reach them, that they open out; though it may be no wider than a canon, still the stream can get through, and our boat with it.

3. So we have the climax of the story-faith rewarded. The first great lesson which the interposition of the Divine voice teaches us, is that obedience is complete when the inward surrender is complete. The outward act was needless. Abraham would have done no more if the flashing knife had

buried itself in Isaac’s heart. Here is the first great proclamation of the truth which revolutionises morality and religion, the beginnings of the teaching which culminates in the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, and in the gospel of salvation, not by deeds, but through faith. The will is the man, the true action is the submission of the will. The outward deed is only the coarse medium through which it is made visible for men: God looks on purpose as performance.

Again, faith is rewarded by God’s acceptance and approval. ‘I know that thou fearest God,’ not meaning that He learned the heart by the conduct, but that, on occasion of the conduct, He breathes into the obedient heart that calm consciousness of its service as recognised and accepted by Him, which is the highest reward that His friend can know. ‘To be well pleasing to Him’ is our noblest aim, which, cherished, makes sacrifice sweet, and all difficult things easy. ‘Nor know we anything more fair Than is the smile upon Thy face.’

Again, faith is rewarded by a deeper insight into God’s will. Much has been said about the sacrifice of Isaac in its bearing upon the custom of human sacrifice. We do not believe that Abraham was led to his act by a mistaken idea, borrowed from surrounding idolatries. His position as the sole monotheist amid these, the absence of evidence that human sacrifice was practised then among his neighbours, and, above all, the fact of the divine approval of his intention, forbid our acceptance of that theory. Nor can we regard the condemnation of such sacrifices as the main object of the incident. But no doubt an incidental result, and, we may perhaps say, a subsidiary purpose of it, was to stamp all such hideous usages with the brand of God’s displeasure. The mode of thought which led to them was deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Old World, and corresponded to a true conception of the needs of humanity. The dark sense of sin, the conviction that it required expiation, and that procurable only by death, drove men to these horrid rites. And that ram, caught in the thicket, thorn-crowned and substituted for the human victim, taught Abraham and his sons that God appointed and provided a lamb for an offering. It was a lesson won by faith. Nor need we hesitate to see some dim forecast of the great Substitute whom God provided, who bears the sins of the world.

Again, faith is rewarded by receiving back the surrendered blessing, made more precious because it has been laid on the altar. How strange and solemn must have been the joy with which these two looked in each other's faces! What thankful wonder must have filled Abraham's heart as he loosed the cord that had bound his son! It would be many days before the thrill of gratitude died away, and the possession of his son seemed to Abraham, or that of life seemed to Isaac, a common thing. He was doubly now a child of wonder, born by miracle, delivered by miracle. So is it ever. God gives us back our sacrifices, tinged with a new beauty, and purified from earthly alloy.

We never know how sweet our blessings are till we have yielded them to Him. 'There is no man that hath left' anything or any person for Christ's sake and the gospel's who will not 'receive a hundred-fold more in this life, and in the world to come life everlasting.'

Lastly, Abraham was rewarded by being made a faint adumbration, for all time, of the yet more wondrous and awful love of the divine Father, who, for our sakes, has surrendered His only-begotten Son, whom He loved. Paul quotes the very words of this chapter when he says: 'He that *spared* not His *own Son*, but delivered Him up for us all.' Such thoughts carry us into dim regions, in which, perhaps, silence is best. Did some shadow of loss and pain pass over the divine all-sufficiency and joy, when He sent His Son? Was the unresisting innocence of the son a far-off likeness of the willing eagerness of the sinless Sufferer who chose to die? Was the resolved surrender of the father a faint prelude of the deep divine love which gave His only Son for us? Shall we not say, 'Now I know that Thou lovest me, because Thou hast not withheld Thy Son, Thine only Son, from me'? Shall we not recognise this as the crown of Abraham's reward, that his act of surrender of his dearest to God, his Friend, has been glorified by being made the mirror of God's unspeakable gift of His Son to us, His enemies?

Genesis

THE CROWNING TEST AND TRIUMPH OF FAITH

II

The first words of this lesson give the keynote for its meaning. ‘God did prove Abraham’; the strange command was a test of his faith. In recent times the incident has been regarded chiefly as embodying a protest against child-sacrifices, and no doubt that is part of its intention, and their condemnation was part of its effect, but the other is the principal thing. Abraham, as the ‘Father of the Faithful,’ has his faith tested by a series of events from his setting out from Haran, and they culminate in this sharpest of all, the command to slay his son. The life of faith is ever a life of testing, and very often the fire that tries increases in heat as life advances. The worst conflicts are not always at the beginning of the war.

Our best way of knowing ourselves is to observe our own conduct, especially when it is hard to do nobly. We may easily cheat ourselves about what is the basis and ruling motive of our lives, but our actions will show it us. God does not ‘test’ us as if He did not know what was gold and what base metal, but the proving is meant to make clear to others and ourselves what is the worth and strength of our religion. The test is also a means of increasing the faith which it demonstrates, so that the exhortation to ‘count it all joy’ to have faith tried is no overstrained counsel of perfection.

The narrative plainly declares that the command to sacrifice his son was to Abraham unmistakably divine. The explanation that Abraham, living beside peoples who practised child-sacrifice, heard but the voice of his own conscience asking, ‘Canst thou do for Jehovah what these do for Moloch?’ does not correspond to the record. No doubt God does speak through conscience; but what sent Abraham on his terrible journey was a command which he knew did not spring up within, but came to him from above. We may believe or disbelieve the possibility or the actuality of such direct and distinguishable commands from God, but we do not face the facts of this narrative unless we recognise that it asserts that God made His will known to Abraham, and that Abraham knew that it was God’s will, not his own thought.

But is it conceivable that God should ever bid a man commit a crime? To the question put in that bald way, of course there can be but one answer, No. But several conditions have to be taken into account. First, it is conceivable that God should test a man’s willingness to surrender what is most precious to him, and what all his hopes are fixed on; and this command was given with the purpose that it should not be obeyed in fact, if the willingness to obey it was proved. Again, the stage of development of the moral sense at which Abraham stood has to be remembered. The child-sacrifices around him were not regarded as crimes, but as worship, and, while his affections were the same as ours, and his father's heart was wrung, to slay Isaac did not present itself to him as a crime in the way in which it does so to us. God deals with men on the moral and spiritual level to which they have attained, and, by descending to it, raises them higher.

The purpose of the command was to test faith, even more than to test whether earthly love or heavenly obedience were the stronger. There is a beautiful and instructive climax in the designations of Isaac in Gen. 22:2, where four times he is referred to, 'thy son, thine only son,' in whom all the hopes of fulfilment of the divine promise were concentrated, so that, if this fruit from the aged tree were cut off, no other could ever grow; 'whom thou lovest,'-there the sharp point pierces the father's heart; 'even Isaac,' in which name all the ties that knit him to Abraham are gathered up. Each word heightens the greatness of the sacrifice demanded, and is a fresh thrust of the dagger into Abraham's very life. Each suggests a reason for not slaying Isaac, which sense might plead. God does not hide the painfulness of surrender from us. The more precious the treasure is, the more are we bound to lay it on the altar. But it was Abraham's faith even more than his love that was tested. The Epistle to the Hebrews lays hold on this as the main element in the trial, that he who 'had received the promises' was called to do what seemed to blast all hope of their being fulfilled. What a cruel position to have God's command and God's promise apparently in diametrical opposition! But faith loosened even that seemingly inextricable tangle of contradiction, and felt that to obey was for man, and to keep His promise was for God. If we do our duty, He will see to the consequences. 'Tis mine to obey; 'tis His to provide.'

Nothing in literature is more tenderly touched or more truly imagined than that long, torturing journey-Abraham silent, Isaac silently wondering, the servants silently following. And, like a flash, at last 'the place' was seen afar off. How calmly Abraham speaks to the two followers, mastering his heart's throbbing even then! 'We will worship, and come again to you'-was that a ‘pious fraud’ or did it not rather indicate that a ray of hope, like pale light from a shrouded sun, shone for him? He ‘accounted that God was able to raise him up even from the dead.’ Somehow, he knew not how, Isaac slain was still to live and inherit the promises. Anything was possible, but that God’s word should fail was impossible. That picture of the father and son alone, the one bearing the wood, the other the fire and the knife, exchanging no word but once, when the innocent wonder of Isaac’s question must have shaken Abraham’s steadfastness, and made it hard for him to steady his voice to answer, touches the deepest springs of pity and pathetic sublimity. But the answer is in the same spirit as that to the servants, and indicates the same hope. ‘God will provide Himself a lamb, my son.’ He does not know definitely what he expects; he is ready to slay Isaac, but his faith is not quenched, though the end seems so inevitable and near. Faith was never more sharply tested, and never more triumphantly stood the test.

The divine solution of the riddle was kept back till the last moment, as it usually is. The place is slowly reached, the hill slowly climbed, the altar built, the unresisting Isaac bound [with what deep thoughts in each, who can tell?], the steady hand holding the glittering knife lifted-a moment more and it will be red with heart’s blood, and not till then does God speak. It is ever so. The trial has ‘its perfect work.’ Faith is led to the edge of the precipice, one step farther and all is over. Then God speaks, all but just too late, and yet ‘right early.’ The willingness to make the sacrifice is tested to the utmost, and being proved, the sacrifice is not required.

Abraham had said to Isaac, ‘God will provide a lamb,’ and the word ‘provide’ is that which appears in the name he gave to the place-Jehovah-*jireh*. The name, then, commemorated, not the servant’s faith but the Lord’s mercy, and the spirit of it was embodied in what became a popular saying, ‘In the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.’ If faith dwells there, its surrenders will be richly rewarded. How much more dear was Isaac to Abraham as they journeyed back to Beersheba! And whatever we lay on God’s altar comes back a ‘hundred-fold more in this life,’ and brings in the world to come life everlasting.

31)Genesis 22:14

FAITH TESTED AND CROWNED

JEHOVAH-JIREH

Gen. 22:14.

As these two, Abraham and Isaac, were travelling up the hill, the son bearing the wood, and the father with the sad burden of the fire and the knife, the boy said: ‘Where is the lamb?’ and Abraham, thrusting down his emotion and steadying his voice, said: ‘My son, God will provide Himself a lamb.’ When the wonderful issue of the trial was plain before him, and he looked back upon it, the one thought that rose in his mind was of how, beyond his meaning, his words had been true. So he named that place by a name that spoke nothing of his trial, but everything of God’s provision-’The Lord will see,’ or ‘The Lord will provide.’

1. The words have become proverbial and threadbare as a commonplace of Christian feeling. But it may be worth our while to ask for a moment what it was exactly that Abraham expected the Lord to provide. We generally use the expression in reference to outward things, and see in it the assurance that we shall not be left without the supply of the necessities for which, because God has made us to feel them, He has bound Himself to make provision. And most blessedly true is that application of them, and many a Christian heart in days of famine has been satisfied with the promise, when the bread that was given has been scant.

But there is a meaning deeper than that in the words. It is true, thank God! that we may cast all our anxiety about all outward things upon Him, in the assurance that He who feeds the ravens will feed us, and that if lilies can blossom into beauty without care, we shall be held by our Father of more value than these. But there is a deeper meaning in the provision spoken of here. What was it that God provided for Abraham? What is it that God provides for us? A way to discharge the arduous duties which, when they are commanded, seem all but impossible for us, and which, the nearer we come to them, look the more dreadful and seem the more impossible. And yet, when the heart has yielded itself in obedience, and we are ready to do the thing that is enjoined, there opens up before us a possibility provided by God, and strength comes to us equal to our day, and some unexpected gift is put into our hand, which enables us to do the thing of which Nature said: ‘My heart will break before I can do it’; and in regard to which even Grace doubted whether it was possible for us to carry it through. If our hearts are set in obedience to the command, the farther we go on the path of obedience, the easier the command will appear, and to try to do it is to ensure that God will help us to do it.

This is the main provision that God makes, and it is the highest provision that He can make. For there is nothing in this life that we need so much as to do the will of our Father in heaven. All outward wants are poor compared with that. The one thing worth living for, the one thing which being secured we are blessed, and being missed we are miserable, is compliance in heart with the commandment of our Father; and that compliance wrought out in life. So, of all gifts that He bestows upon us, and of all the abundant provision out of His rich storehouses, is not this the best, that we are made ready for any required service? When we get to the place we shall find some lamb ‘caught in the thicket by its horns’; and heaven itself will supply what is needful for our burnt offering.

And then there is another thought here which, though we cannot certainly say it was in the speaker’s mind, is distinctly in the historian’s intention, ‘The Lord will provide.’ Provide what? The lamb for the burnt offering which He has commanded. It seems probable that that bare mountain-top which Abraham saw from afar, and named Jehovah-jireh, was the mountain-top on which afterwards the Temple was built. And perhaps the wood was piled for the altar, on which Abraham was called to lay his only son, on that very piece of primitive rock which still stands visible, though Temple and altar have long since gone; and which for many a day was the place of the altar on which the sacrifices of Israel were offered. It is no mere forcing of Christian meanings on to old stories, but the discerning of that prophetic and spiritual element which God has impressed upon these histories of the past, especially in all their climaxes and crises, when we see in the fact that God provided the ram which became the appointed sacrifice, through which Isaac’s life was preserved, a dim adumbration of the great truth that the only Sacrifice which God accepts for the world’s sin is the Sacrifice which He Himself has provided.

This is the deepest meaning of all the sacrificial worship, as of Israel so of heathen nations-God Himself will provide a Lamb. The world had built altars, and Israel, by divine appointment, had its altar too. All these express the want which none of them can satisfy. They show that man needed a Sacrifice; and that Sacrifice God has provided. He asked from Abraham less than He gives to us. Abraham’s devotion was sealed and certified because he did not withhold his son, his only son, from God. And God’s love is sealed because He hath not withheld His only-begotten Son from us.

So this name that came from Abraham’s grateful and wondering lips contains a truth which holds true in all regions of our wants. On the lowest level, the outward supply of outward needs; on a higher, the means of discharging hard duties and a path through sharp trials; and, on the highest of all, the spotless sacrifice which alone avails for the world’s sins-these are the things which God provides.

2. So, note again on what conditions He provides them.

The incident and the name became the occasion of a proverb, as the historian tells us, which survived down to the period of his writing, and probably long after, when men were accustomed to say, ‘In the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.’ The provision of all sorts that we need has certain conditions as to the when and the where of the persons to whom it shall be granted. ‘In the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.’ If we wish to have our outward needs supplied, our outward weaknesses strengthened, power and energy sufficient for duty, wisdom for perplexity, a share in the Sacrifice which taketh away the sins of the world, we receive them all on the condition that we are found in the place where all God’s provision is treasured. If a man chooses to sit outside the baker’s shop, he may starve on its threshold. If a man will not go into the bank, his pockets will be empty, though there may be bursting coffers there to which he has a right. And if we will not ascend to the hill of the Lord, and stand in His holy place by simple faith, and by true communion of heart and life, God’s amplest provision is nought to us; and we are empty in the midst of affluence. Get near to God if you would partake of what He has prepared. Live in fellowship with Him by simple love, and often meditate on Him, if you would drink in of His fulness. And be sure of this, that howsoever within His house the stores are heaped and the treasury full, you will have neither part nor lot in the matter, unless you are children of the house. ‘In the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.’ And round it there is a waste wilderness of famine and of death.

Further, note *when* the provision is realised.

When the man is standing with the knife in his hand, and next minute it will be red with the son’s blood-then the call comes: ‘Abraham!’ and then he sees the ram caught in the thicket. There had been a long weary journey from their home away down in the dry, sunny south, a long tramp over the rough hills, a toilsome climb, with a breaking heart in the father’s bosom, and a dim foreboding gradually stealing on the child’s spirit. But there was no sign of respite or of deliverance. Slowly he piles together the wood, and yet no sign. Slowly he binds his boy, and lays him on it, and still no sign. Slowly, reluctantly, and yet resolvedly, he unsheathes the knife, and yet no sign. He lifts his hand, and then it comes.

That is God’s way always. Up to the very edge we are driven, before His hand is put out to help us. Such is the law, not only because the next moment is always necessarily dark, nor because God will deal with us in any arbitrary fashion, and play with our fears, but because it is best for us that we should be forced to desperation, and out of desperation should ‘pluck the flower, safety.’ It is best for us that we should be brought to say, ‘My foot slippeth!’ and then, just as our toes are sliding upon the glacier, the help comes and ‘Thy mercy held me up.’ ‘The Lord is her helper, and that right early.’ When He delays, it is not to trifle with us, but to do us good by the sense of need, as well as by the experience of deliverance. At the last moment, never before it, never until we have found out how much we need it, and never too late, comes the Helper.

So ‘it is provided’ for the people that quietly and persistently tread the path of duty, and go wherever His hand leads them, without asking anything about where it does lead. The condition of the provision is our obedience of heart and will. To Abraham doing what he was commanded, though his heart was breaking as he did it, the help was granted-as it always will be.

3. And so, lastly, note what we are to do with the provision when we get it.

Abraham christened the anonymous mountain-top, not by a name that reminded him or others of his trial, but by a name that proclaimed God’s deliverance. He did not say anything about his agony or about his obedience. God spoke about that, not Abraham. He did not want these to be remembered, but what he desired to hand on to later generations was what God had done for him. Oh! dear friends, is that the way in which we look back upon life? Many a bare, bald mountain-top in your career and mine we have got our names for. Are they names that commemorate our sufferings or God’s blessings? When we look back on the past what do we see? Times of trial or times of deliverance? Which side of the wave do we choose to look at, the one that is smitten by the sunshine or the one that is all black and purple in the shadow? The sea looked at from the one side will be all a sunny path, and from the other dark as chaos. Let us name the heights that lie behind us, visible to memory, by names that commemorate, not the troubles that we had on them, but the deliverances that on them we received from God.

This name enshrines the duty of commemoration-ay! and the duty of expectation. ‘The Lord will provide.’ How do you know that, Abraham? and his answer is, ‘Because the Lord did provide.’ That is a shaky kind of argument if we use it about one another. Our resources may give out, our patience may weary. If it is a storehouse that we have to go to, all the corn that is treasured in it will be eaten up some day; but if it is to some boundless plain that grows it that we go, then we can be sure that there will be a harvest next year as there has been a harvest last. And so we have to think of God, not as a storehouse, but as the soil from which there comes forth, year by year and generation after generation, the same crop of rich blessings for the needs and the hungers of every soul. If we have to draw from reservoirs we cannot say, ‘I have gone with my pitcher to the well six times, and I shall get it filled at the seventh.’ It is more probable that we shall have to say, ‘I have gone so often that I durst not go any more’; but if we have to go, not to a well, but to a fountain, then the oftener we go, the surer we become that its crystal cool waters will always be ready for us. ‘Thou hast been with me in six troubles; and in seven thou wilt not forsake me,’ is a bad conclusion to draw about one another; but it is the right conclusion to draw about God.

And so, as we look back upon our past lives, and see many a peak gleaming in the magic light of memory, let us name them all by names that will throw a radiance of hope on the unknown and un-climbed difficulties before us, and say, as the patriarch did when he went down from the mount of his trial and deliverance, ‘The Lord will provide.’

32)Genesis 24:27

Genesis

GUIDANCE IN THE WAY

Gen. 24:27.

So said Abraham’s anonymous servant when telling how he had found Rebekah at the well, and known her to be the destined bride of his master’s servant. There is no more beautiful page, even amongst the many lovely ones in these ancient stories, than this domestic idyll of the mission of the faithful servant from far Canaan across the desert. The homely test by which he would determine that the maiden should be pointed out to him, the glimpse of old-world ways at the well, the gracious courtesy of the fair damsel, and the simple devoutness of the speaker, who recognises in what to others were trivial commonplaces God’s guidance to the end which He had appointed, his recognition of the divine hand moving beneath all the nothings and littlenesses of daily life-may teach us much.

1. The first thing that these words seem to me to suggest is the conditions under which we may be sure that God leads-’I being in the way.’

Now, of course, some of you may know that the words of our text are, by the Revised Version and others, rendered so as to obliterate the clause telling where the speaker was when the Lord led him, and to make the whole a continuous expression of the one fact-’As for me, the Lord hath led me in the way to the house of my master’s brethren.’ The literal rendering is, ‘I in the way, Jehovah led me.’ No doubt the Hebrew idiom admits of the

‘I’ being thus emphatically premised, and then repeated as ‘me’ after the verb, and possibly no more is to be made of the words than that. But the fuller and more impressive meaning is possible, and I venture to retain it, and to see in it the expression of the truth that it is when we are ‘in the way’ that God will certainly lead us.

So that suggests, first, how the people that have any right to expect any kind of guidance from God are those who have their feet upon a path which conscience approves. Many men run into all manner of perplexities by their own folly and self-will, and never ask whether their acts are right or wrong, wise or foolish, until they begin to taste the bitter consequences. Then they cry to God to help them, and think themselves very religious because they do. That is not the way to get God’s help. Such folk are like Italian brigands who had an image of the Virgin in their hats, and sometimes had the Pope’s commission in their pockets, and therefore went out to murder and ravish, in sure and certain hope of God’s favour and protection.

But when we are ‘in the way,’ and know that we are doing what we ought to do, and conscience says, ‘Go on; never mind what stands against you,’ it is then, and only then, that we have a right to be sure that the Lord will lead us. Otherwise, the best thing that can happen to us is that the Lord should thwart us when we are on the wrong road. Resistance, indeed, may be guidance; and it is often God’s manner of setting our feet in the way of His steps. We have no claim on Him for guidance, indeed, unless we have submitted ourselves to His commandments; yet His mercies go beyond our claims. Just as the obedient child gets guidance, so the petulant and disobedient child gets resistance, which is guidance too. The angel of the Lord stands in front of Balaam, amongst the vines, though the seer sometimes does not see, and blocks the path for him, and hedges up the way with his flaming sword. Only, if we would have the sweet, gracious, companionable guidance of our Lord, let us be sure, to begin with, that we are ‘in the way,’ and not in any of the bypaths into which arrogance and self-will and fleshly desires and the like are only too apt to divert our feet.

Another consideration suggested by these words, ‘I being in the way,’ is that if we expect guidance we must diligently do present duty. We are led, thank God, by one step at a time. He does with His child, whom He is teaching to read His will, as we sometimes do with our children, when we are occupied in teaching them their first book-learning: we cover the page up, all but the line that we want them to concentrate their eyes upon; and then, when they have got to the end of that, slip the hand down, low enough to allow the next line to come into view. So often God does with us. One thing at a time is enough for the little brains. And this is the condition of mortal life, for the most part-though there do come rare exceptions. Not that we have to look a long way ahead, and forecast what we shall do this time ten years off, or to make decisions that involve a distant future-except once or twice in a lifetime-but that we have to settle what is to be done in this flying minute, and in the one adjacent to it. ‘Do the duty that lies nearest thee,’ and the remoter duty will become clearer. There is nothing that has more power to make a man’s path plain before his feet than that he should concentrate his better self on the manful and complete discharge of the present moment’s service. And, on the other hand, there is nothing that will so fill our sky with mists, and blur the marks of the faint track through the moor, as present negligence, or still more, present sin. Iron in a ship’s hull makes the magnet tremble, and point away from its true source. He that has complied with evil to-day is the less capable of discerning duty to-morrow; and he that does all the duty that he knows will thereby increase the probability that he will know all that he needs. ‘If any man wills to do His will, he shall know of the teaching’-enough, at any rate, to direct his steps.

But there is another lesson still in the words; and that is that, if we are to be guided, we must see to it that we expect and obey the guidance.

This servant of Abraham’s, with a very imperfect knowledge of the divine will, had, when he set out on his road, prayed very earnestly that God would lead him. He had ventured to prescribe a certain token, naï¶¥ in its simplicity: ‘If the girl drops her pitcher, and gives us drink gladly, and does not grudge to fill the troughs for the cattle, that will show that she is of a good sort, and will make the right wife for Isaac.’ He had prayed thus, and he was ready to accept whomsoever God so designated. He had not made up his mind, ‘Bethuel’s daughter is a relation of my master’s, and so she will be a suitable wife for his son.’ He left it all with God, and then he went straight on his road, and was perfectly sure that he would get the guidance that he had sought. And when it came the good man bowed and obeyed.

Now there is a picture for us all. There are many people that say, ‘O Lord! guide me.’ when all the while they mean, ‘Let me guide Thee.’ They are perfectly willing to accept the faintest and moat questionable indications that may seem to point down the road where their inclination drives them, and like Lord Nelson at Copenhagen, will put the telescope to the blind eye when the flag is flying at the admiral’s peak, signalling ‘Come out of action,’ because they are determined to stay where they are.

Do not let us forget that the first condition of securing real guidance in our daily life is to ask it, and that the next is to look for it, and that a third is to be quite willing to accept it, whether the finger points down the broad road that we would like to go upon, or through some tangled path amongst the brushwood that we would fain avoid. And if you and I, dear brethren, in the littlenesses of our daily life, do fulfil these conditions, the heavens will crumble, and earth will melt, before God will leave His child untaught in the way in which he should go.

Only, let us be patient. Do you remember what Joshua said to the Israelites? ‘Let there be a good space of vacant ground between you and the guiding ark, that you may know by which way you ought to go.’ When men precipitately press on the heels of half-disclosed providences, they are uncommonly apt to mistake the road. We must wait till we are sure of God’s will before we try to do it. If we are not sure of what He would have us do, then, for the present, He would have us do nothing until He speaks. ‘I being in the way, the Lord led me.’

2. Now a word about the manner of the guidance.

There was no miracle, no supernatural voice, no pillar of cloud or fire, no hovering glory round the head of the village maiden. All the indications were perfectly natural and trivial. A thousand girls had gone to the wells that day all about Haran and done the very same things that Rebekah did. But the devout man who had prayed for guidance, and was sure that he was getting it, was guided by her most simple, commonplace act; and that is how we are usually to be guided. God leaves a great deal to our common sense. His way of speaking to common sense is by very common things. If any of us fancy that some glow at the heart, some sudden flash as of inspiration, is the test of a divine commandment, we have yet to learn the full meaning of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. For that Incarnation, amongst all its other mighty influences, hallowed the commonest things of life and turned them into ministers of God's purposes. So remember, God's guidance may come to you through so insignificant a girl as Rebekah. It may come to you through as commonplace an incident as tipping the water of a spring out of an earthen pot into a stone trough. None the less is it God's guidance; and what we want is the eye to see it. He will guide us by very common indications of His providence.

3. And now, the last thing that I would say a word about is the realisation in daily life of this guidance as a plain actual fact.

This anonymous trusted servant of Abraham's, whose name we should like to have known, had a mere segment of the full orb of the knowledge of God that shines upon our path. With true Oriental freedom to speak about the deepest matters, he was not afraid nor ashamed to stand before Bethuel and Laban, and all these other strangers that crowded round the doorway, and say, 'The Lord led me.' There is a pattern for some of us tongue-tied, shamefaced Christians. Whatever may be the truth about the degradations of which heathen religion is full, there is a great deal in heathen religion that ought to teach, and does teach, Christendom a lesson, as to willingness to recognise and to confess God's working in daily life. It may be very superficial; it may be very little connected with high morality; but so far as it goes it is a thousand-fold better than the dumb religion that characterises such hosts of Christian people.

A realisation of the divine guidance is the talisman that makes crooked things straight and rough places plain; that brings peace and calmness into our hearts, amid all changes, losses, and sorrows. If we hold fast by that faith, it will interpret for us the mysterious in the providences concerning our own lives, and will help us to feel that, as I said, resistance to our progress may be true guidance, and thwarting our wills may be our highest good. For the road which we travel should, in all its turnings, lead us to God; and whatsoever guides us to Him is only and always blessed.

May I, for one moment, turn these words in another direction, and remind you, dear friends, of how the sublimest application of them is still to be realised? As a climber on a mountain-peak may look down the vale up which he had painfully toiled for many days and see the dusty path lying, like a sinuous snake, down all along it, so, when we get up yonder, ‘Thou shalt remember all the way by which the Lord thy God hath led thee these many years in the wilderness,’ and shalt see the green pastures and the still waters, valleys of the shadow of death, and burning roads with sharp flints, which have all brought thee hither at last. We shall know then what we believe now, that the Lord does indeed go before them who desire to follow Him, and that the God of Israel is their reward. Then we shall say with deepened thankfulness, deepened by complete understanding of life here, seen in the light of its attained end, ‘I being in the way, the Lord led me,’ and ‘I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.’

33)Genesis 25:8

Genesis

THE DEATH OF ABRAHAM

Gen. 25:8.

‘Full of years’ does not seem to me to be a mere synonym for longevity. That would be an intolerable tautology, for we should then have the same thing said three times over-’an old man,’ ‘in a good old age,’ ‘full of years.’ There must be some other idea than that in the words. If you notice that the expression is by no means a usual one, that it is only applied to one or two of the Old Testament characters, and those selected characters, I think you will see that there must be some other significance in it than merely to point to length of days.

It may be well to note the instances. In addition to our text, we find it employed, first, in reference to Isaac, in Gen. 35:29, where the words are repeated almost *verbatim*. That calm, contemplative life, so unlike the active, varied career of his father, also attained to this blessing at its close. Then we find that the stormy and adventurous course of the great king David, with its wonderful alternations both of moral character and of fortune, is represented as being closed at last with this tranquil evening glory: ‘He died in a good old age, full of days, riches, and honour.’ Once more we read of the great high priest Jehoiada, whose history had been crowded with peril, change, brave resistance, and strenuous effort, that with all the storms behind him he died at last, ‘full of days.’ The only other instance of the occurrence of the phrase is at the close of the book of Job, the typical record of the good man suffering, and of the abundant compensations given by a loving God. The fair picture of returning prosperity and family joy, like the calm morning sunshine after a night of storm and wreck, with which that wonderful book ends, has this for its last touch, evidently intended to deepen the impression of peace which is breathed over it all: ‘So Job died, being old and full of days.’ These are all the instances of the occurrence of this phrase, and I think we may fairly say that in all it is meant to suggest not merely length of days, but some characteristic of the long life over and above its mere length. We shall, I think, understand its meaning a little better if we make a very slight and entirely warranted change, and instead of reading ‘*full* of years,’ read ‘*satisfied* with years.’ The men were satisfied with life; having exhausted its possibilities, having drunk a full draught, having nothing more left to wish for. The words point to a calm close, with all desires gratified, with hot wishes stilled, with no desperate clinging to life, but a willingness to let it go, because all which it could give had been attained.

So much for one of the remarkable expressions in this verse. There is another, ‘He was gathered to his people,’ of which we shall have more to say presently. Enough for the present to note the peculiarity, and to suggest that it seems to contain some dim hint of a future life, and some glimmer of some of the profoundest thoughts about it.

We have two main things to consider.

1. The tranquil close of a life.

It is possible, then, at the end of life to feel that it has satisfied one’s wishes. Whether it does or no will depend mostly on ourselves, and very slightly on our circumstances. Length of days, competence, health, and friends are important; but neither these nor any other externals will make the difference between a life which, in the retrospect, will seem to have been sufficient for our desires, and one which leaves a hunger in the heart. It is possible for us to make our lives of such a sort, that whether they run on to the apparent maturity of old age, or whether they are cut short in the midst of our days, we may rise from the table feeling that it has satisfied our desires, met our anticipation, and been all very good.

Possibly, that is not the way in which most of us look at life. That is not the way in which a great many of us seem to think that it is an eminent part of Christian and religious character to look at life. But it is the way in which the highest type of devotion and the truest goodness always look at it. There are people, old and young, who, whenever they look back, whether it be over a long tract of years or over a short one, have nothing to say about it except: ‘Vanity of vanities! all is vanity and vexation of spirit’; a retrospect of weary disappointments and thwarted plans.

How different with some of us the forward and the backward look! Are there not some listening to me, whose past is so dark that it flings black shadows over their future, and who can only cherish hopes for to-morrow, by giving the lie to and forgetting the whole of their yesterdays? It is hard to paint the regions before us like ‘the Garden of the Lord,’ when we know that the locusts of our own godless desires have made all the land behind us desolate. If your past has been a selfish past, a godless past, in which passion, inclination, whim, anything but conscience and Christ have ruled, your remembrances can scarcely be tranquil; nor your hopes bright. If you have only ‘prospects drear,’ when you ‘backward cast your eye,’ it is not wonderful if ‘forwards though you cannot see,’ you will ‘guess and fear.’ Such lives, when they come towards an end, are wont to be full of querulous discontent and bitterness. We have all seen godless old men cynical and sour, pleased with nothing, grumbling, or feebly complaining, about everything, dissatisfied with all which life has thus far yielded them, and yet clinging desperately to it, and afraid to go.

Put by the side of such an end this calm picture of the old man going down into his grave, and looking back over all those long days since he came away from his father’s house, and became a pilgrim and a stranger. How all the hot anxieties, desires, occupations, of youth have quieted themselves down! How far away now seem the warlike days when he fought the invading kings! How far away the heaviness of heart when he journeyed to Mount Moriah with his boy, and whetted the knife to slay his son! His love had all been buried in Sarah’s grave. He has been a lonely man for many years; and yet he looks back, as God looked back over His creative week, and feels that all has been good. ‘It was all for the best; the great procession of my life has been ordered from the beginning to its end, by the Hand that shapes beauty everywhere, and has made all things blessed and sweet. I have drunk a full draught; I have had enough; I bless the Giver of the feast, and push my chair back; and get up and go away.’ He died an old man, and satisfied with his life.

Ay! And what a contrast that makes, dear friends, to another set of people. There is nothing more miserable than to see a man, as his years go by, gripping harder and tighter at this poor, fleeting world that is slipping away from him; nothing sadder than to see how, as opportunities and capacities for the enjoyment of life dwindle, and dwindle, and dwindle, people become almost fierce in the desire to keep it. Why, you can see on the face of many an old man and woman a hungry discontent, that has not come from the mere wrinkles of old age or care; an eager acquisitiveness looking out of the dim old eyes, tragical and awful. It is sad to see a man, as the world goes from him, grasping at its skirts as a beggar does at the retreating passer-by that refuses him an alms. Are there not some of us who feel that this is our case, that the less we have before us of life here on earth, the more eagerly we grasp at the little which still remains; trying to get some last drops out of the broken cistern which we know can hold no water? How different this blessed acquiescence in the fleeting away of the fleeting; and this contented satisfaction with the portion that has been given him, which this man had who died willingly, being satisfied with life!

Sometimes, too, there is satiety-weariness of life which is not satisfaction, though it looks like it. Its language is: ‘Man delights me not; nor woman neither. I am tired of it all.’ Those who feel thus sit at the table without an appetite. They think that they have seen to the bottom of everything, and they have found everything a cheat. They expect nothing new under the sun; that which is to be hath already been, and it is all vanity and striving after the wind. They are at once satiated and dissatisfied. Nothing keeps the power to charm.

How different from all this is the temper expressed in this text, rightly understood! Abraham had had a richly varied life. It had brought him all he wished. He has drunk a full draught, and needs no more. He is satisfied, but that does not mean loss of interest in present duties, occupations, or enjoyments. It is possible to keep ourselves fully alive to all these till the end, and to preserve something of the keen edge of youth even in old age, by the magic of communion with God, purity of conduct, and a habitual contemplation of all events as sent by our Father. When Paul felt himself very near his end, he yet had interest enough in common things to tell Timothy all about their mutual friends' occupations, and to wish to have his books and parchments.

So, calmly, satisfied and yet not sickened, keenly appreciating all the good and pleasantness of life, and yet quite willing to let it go, Abraham died. So may it be with us too, if we will, no matter what the duration or the externals of our life. If we too are his children by faith, we shall be 'blessed with faithful Abraham.' And I beseech you to ask yourselves whether the course of your life is such as that, if at this moment God's great knife were to come down and cut it in two, you would be able to say, 'Well! I have had enough, and now contentedly I go.'

Again, it is possible at the end of life to feel that it is complete, because the days have accomplished for us the highest purpose of life. Scaffoldings are for buildings, and the moments and days and years of our earthly lives are scaffolding. What are you building inside the scaffolding, brother? What kind of a structure will be disclosed when the scaffolding is knocked away? What is the end for which days and years are given? That they may give us what eternity cannot take away-a character built upon the love of God in Christ, and moulded into His likeness. 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever.' Has your life helped you to do that? If it has, though you be but a child, you are full of years; if it has not, though your hair be whitened with the snows of the nineties, you are yet incomplete and immature. The great end of life is to make us like Christ, and pleasing to Christ. If life has done that for us, we have got the best out of it, and our life is completed, whatever may be the number of the days. Quality, not quantity, is the thing that determines the perfectness of a life. And like as in northern lands, where there is only a week or two from the melting of the snow to the cutting of the hay, the whole harvest of a life may be gathered in a very little space, and all be done which is needed to make the life complete. Has your life this completeness? Can you be ‘satisfied’ with it, because the river of the flowing hours has borne down some grains of gold amidst the mass of mud, and, notwithstanding many sins and failures, you have thus far fulfilled the end of your being, that you are in some measure trusting and serving the Lord Jesus Christ?

Again, it is possible, at the end of life, to be *willing* to go as satisfied.

Most men cling to life in grim desperation, like a climber to a cliff giving way, or a drowning man clutching at any straw. How beautiful the contrast of the placid, tranquil acquiescence expressed in that phrase of our text! No doubt there will always be the shrinking of the bodily nature from death. But that may be overcome. There is no passion so weak but in some case it has ‘mated and mastered the fear of death,’ and it is possible for us all to come to that temper in which we shall be ready for either fortune, to live and serve Him here, or to die and enjoy Him yonder. Or, to return to an earlier illustration, it is possible to be like a man sitting at table, who has had his meal, and is quite contented to stay on there, restful and cheerful, but is not unwilling to put back his chair, to get up and to go away, thanking the Giver for what he has received.

Ah! that is the way to face the end, dear brethren, and how is it to be done? Such a temper need not be the exclusive possession of the old. It may belong to us at all stages of life. How is it won? By a life of devout communion with God. The secret of it lies in obeying the commandment and realising the truth which Abraham realised and obeyed: ‘I am the Almighty God, walk before Me, and be thou perfect.’ ‘Fear not, Abram, I am thy shield and thine exceeding great reward.’ That is to say, a simple communion with God, realising His presence and feeling that He is near, will sweeten disappointment, will draw from it its hidden blessedness, will make us victors over its pains and its woes. Such a faith will make it possible to look back and see only blessing; to look forward and see a great light of hope burning in the darkness. Such a faith will check weariness, avert satiety, promote satisfaction, and will help us to feel that life and the great hereafter are but the outer and inner mansions of the Father’s house, and death the short though dark corridor between. So we shall be ready for life or for death.

2. Now I must turn to consider more briefly the glimpse of the joyful society beyond, which is given us in that other remarkable expression of our text: 'He was gathered to his people'

That phrase is only used in the earlier Old Testament books, and there only in reference to a few persons. It is used of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Aaron, and once [Jdg. 2:10] of a whole generation. If you will weigh the words, I think you will see that there is in them a dim intimation of something beyond this present life.

'He was gathered to his people' is not the same thing as 'He died,' for, in the earlier part of the verse, we read, ' Abraham gave up the ghost and died . . . and was gathered to his people.' It is not the same thing as being buried. For we read in the following verse: ' And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron, the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre.' It is then the equivalent neither of death nor of burial. It conveys dimly and veiledly that Abraham was buried, and yet that was not all that happened to him. He was buried, but also 'he was gathered to his people.' Why! his own 'people' were buried in Mesopotamia, and his grave was far away from theirs. What is the meaning of the expression? Who were the people he was gathered to? In death or in burial, 'the dust returns to the earth as it was.' What was it that was gathered to his people?

Dimly, vaguely, veiledly, but unmistakably, as it seems to me, is here expressed at least a premonition and feeling after the thought of an immortal self in Abraham that was not there in what 'his sons Isaac and Ishmael laid in the cave at Machpelah,' but was somewhere else and was for ever. That is the first thing hinted at here-the continuance of the personal being after death.

Is there anything more? I think there is. Now, remember, Abraham's whole life was shaped by that commandment, 'Get thee out from thy father's house, and from thy kindred, and from thy country.' He never dwelt with his kindred; all his days he was a pilgrim and a sojourner, a stranger in a strange land. And though he was living in the midst of a civilisation which possessed great cities whose walls reached to heaven, he pitched his tent beneath the terebinth tree at Mamre, and would have nothing to do with the order of things around him, but remained an exotic, a waif, an outcast in the midst of Canaan all his life. Why? Because he 'looked for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God.' And now he has gone to it, he is gathered to his people. The life of isolation is over, the true social life is begun. He is no longer separated from those around him, or flung amidst those that are uncongenial to him. 'He is gathered to his people'; he dwells with his own tribe; he is at home; he is in the city.

And so, brethren, life for every Christian man must be lonely. After all communion we dwell as upon islands dotted over a great archipelago, each upon his little rock, with the sea dashing between us; but the time comes when, if our hearts are set upon that great Lord, whose presence makes us one, there shall be no more sea, and all the isolated rocks shall be parts of a great continent. Death sets the solitary in families. We are here like travellers plodding lonely through the night and the storm, but soon to cross the threshold into the lighted hall, full of friends.

If we cultivate that sense of detachment from the present, and of having our true affinities in the unseen, if we dwell here as strangers because our citizenship is in heaven, then death will not drag us away from our associates, nor hunt us into a lonely land, but will bring us where closer bonds shall knit the 'sweet societies' together, and the sheep shall couch close by one another, because all are gathered round the one shepherd. Then many a broken tie shall be rewoven, and the solitary wanderer meet again the dear ones whom he had 'loved long since, and lost awhile.'

Further, the expressions suggest that in the future men shall be associated according to affinity and character. 'He was gathered to his people,' whom he was like and who were like him; the people with whom he had sympathy, the people whose lives were shaped after the fashion of his own.

Men will be sorted there. Gravitation will come into play undisturbed; and the pebbles will be ranged according to their weights on the great shore where the sea has cast them up, as they are upon Chesil beach, down there in the English Channel, and many another coast besides; all the big ones together and sized off to the smaller ones, regularly and steadily laid out. Like draws to like. Our spiritual affinities, our religious and moral character, will settle where we shall be, and who our companions will be when we get yonder. Some of us would not altogether like to live with the people that are like ourselves, and some of us would not find the result of this sorting to be very delightful. Men in the Dantesque circles were only made more miserable because all around them were of the same sort as, and some of them worse than, themselves. And an ordered hell, with no company for the liar but liars, and none for the thief but thieves, and none for impure men but the impure, and none for the godless but the godless, would be a hell indeed.

'He was gathered to his people,' and you and I will be gathered likewise. What is the conclusion of the whole matter? Let us follow with our thoughts, and in our lives, those who have gone into the light, and cultivate in heart and character those graces and excellences which are congruous with the inheritance of the saints in light. Above all, let us give our hearts to Christ, by simple faith in Him, to be shaped and sanctified by Him. Then our country will be where He is, and our people will be the people in whom His love abides, and the tribe to which we belong will be the tribe of which He is Chieftain. So when our turn comes, we may rise thankfully from the table in the wilderness, which He has spread for us, having eaten as much as we desired, and quietly follow the dark-robed messenger whom His love sends to bring us to the happy multitudes that throng the streets of the city. There we shall find our true home, our kindred, our King. 'So shall *we* ever be with the Lord.'

34)Genesis 25:27-33

Genesis

A BAD BARGAIN

Gen. 25:27 - Gen. 25:34.

Isaac's small household represented a great variety of types of character. He himself lacked energy, and seems in later life to have been very much of a tool in the hands of others. Rebekah had the stronger nature, was persistent, energetic, and managed her husband to her heart’s content. The twin brothers were strongly opposed in character; and, naturally enough, each parent loved best the child that was most unlike him or her: Isaac rejoicing in the very wildness of the adventurous, dashing Esau; and Rebekah finding an outlet for her womanly tenderness in an undue partiality for the quiet lad that was always at hand to help her and be petted by her.

One’s sympathy goes out to Esau. He was ‘a man of the field,’-by which is meant, not cultivated ground, but open country, which we might call prairie. He was a ‘backwoodsman,’-liked the wild hunter’s life better than sticking at home looking after sheep. He had the attractive characteristics of that kind of men, as well as their faults. He was frank, impulsive, generous, incapable of persevering work or of looking ahead, passionate. His descendants prefer cattle-ranching and gold-prospecting to keeping shops or sitting with their lungs squeezed against a desk.

Jacob had neither the high spirits nor the animal courage of his brother. He was ‘a plain man.’ The word is literally ‘perfect,’ but cannot be used in its deepest sense; for Jacob was very far indeed from being that, but seems to have a lower sense, which might perhaps be represented by ‘steady-going,’ or ‘respectable,’ in modern phraseology. He went quietly about his ordinary work, in contrast with his daring brother’s escapades and unsettledness.

The two types are intensified by civilisation, and the antagonism between them increased. City life tends to produce Jacobs, and its Esaus escape from it as soon as they can. But Jacob had the vices as well as the virtues of his qualities. He was orderly and domestic, but he was tricky, and keenly alive to his own interest. He was persevering and almost dogged in his tenacity of purpose, but he was not above taking mean advantages and getting at his ends by miry roads. He had little love for his brother, in whom he saw an obstacle to his ambition. He had the virtues and vices of the commercial spirit.

But we judge the two men wrongly if we let ourselves be fascinated, as Isaac was, by Esau, and forget that the superficial attractions of his character cover a core worthy of disapprobation. They are crude judges of character who prefer the type of man who spurns the restraints of patient industry and order; and popular authors, who make their heroes out of such, err in taste no less than in morals. There is a very unwholesome kind of literature, which is devoted to glorifying the Esaus as fine fellows, with spirit, generosity, and noble carelessness, whereas at bottom they are governed by animal impulses, and incapable of estimating any good which does not appeal to sense, and that at once.

The great lesson of this story lies on its surface. It is the folly and sin of buying present gratification of appetite or sense at the price of giving up far greater future good. The details are picturesquely told. Esau's eagerness, stimulated by the smell of the mess of lentils, is strikingly expressed in the Hebrew: 'Let me devour, I pray thee, of that red, that red there.' It is no sin to be hungry, but to let appetite speak so clamorously indicates feeble self-control. Jacob's coolness is an unpleasant foil to Esau's impatience, and his cautious bargaining, before he will sell what a brother would have given, shows a mean soul, without generous love to his own flesh and blood. Esau lets one ravenous desire hide everything else from him. He wants the pottage which smokes there, and that one poor dish is for the moment more to him than birthright and any future good. Jacob knows the changeableness of Esau's character, and is well aware that a hungry man will promise anything, and, when fed, will break his promise as easily as he made it. So he makes Esau swear; and Esau will do that, or anything asked. He gets his meal. The story graphically describes the greedy relish with which he ate, the short duration of his enjoyment, and the dark meaning of the seemingly insignificant event, by that accumulation of verbs, 'He did eat and drink, and rose up and went his way: so Esau despised his birthright.'

Now we may learn, first, how profound an influence small temptations, yielded to, may exert on a life.

Many scoffs have been directed against this story, as if it were unworthy of credence that eating a dish of lentils should have shaped the life of a man and of his descendants. But is it not always the case that trifles turn out to be determining points? Hinges are very small, compared with the doors which move on them. Most lives are moulded by insignificant events. No temptation is small, for no sin is small; and if the occasion of yielding to sense and the present is insignificant, the yielding is not so.

But the main lesson is, as already noted, the madness of flinging away greater future good for present gratifications of sense. One cannot suppose that the spiritual side of ‘the birthright’ was in the thoughts of either brother. Esau and Jacob alike regarded it only as giving the headship of the family. It was merely the right of succession, with certain material accompanying advantages, which Jacob coveted and Esau parted with. But even in regard to merely worldly objects, the man who lives for only the present moment is distinctly beneath him who lives for a future good, however material it may be. Whoever subordinates the present, and is able steadily to set before himself a remote object, for which he is strong enough to subdue the desire of immediate gratifications of any sort, is, in so far, better than the man who, like a savage or an animal, lives only for the instant.

The highest form of that nobility is when time is clearly seen to be the ‘lackey to eternity,’ and life’s aims are determined with supreme reference to the future beyond the grave. But how many of us are every day doing exactly as Esau did-flinging away a great future for a small present! A man who lives only for such ends as may be attained on this side of the grave is as ‘profane’ a person as Esau, and despises his birthright as truly. He knew that he was hungry, and that lentil porridge was good, ‘What good shall the birthright do me?’ He failed to make the effort of mind and imagination needed in order to realise how much of the kind of ‘good’ that he could appreciate it would do to him. The smell of the smoking food was more to him than far greater good which he could only appreciate by an effort. A sixpence held close to the eye can shut out the sun. Resolute effort is needed to prevent the small, intrusive present from blotting out the transcendent greatness of the final future. And for lack of such effort men by the thousand fling themselves away.

To sell a birthright for a bowl of lentils was plain folly. But is it wiser to sell the blessedness and peace of communion with God here and of heaven hereafter for anything that earth can yield to sense or to soul? How many shrewd ‘men of the highest commercial standing’ are making as bad a bargain as Esau’ s! The ‘pottage’ is hot and comforting, but it is soon eaten; and when the bowl is empty, and the sense of hunger comes back in an hour or two, the transaction does not look quite as advantageous as it did. Esau had many a minute of rueful meditation on his bad bargain before he in vain besought his father’s blessing. And suspicions of the folly of their choice are apt to haunt men who prefer the present to the future, even before the future becomes the present, and the folly is manifest. ‘What doth it profit a man, to gain the whole world, and forfeit his life?’

So a character like Esau’s, though it has many fine possibilities about it, and attracts liking, is really of a low type, and may very easily slide into depths of degrading sensualism, and be dead to all nobleness. Enterprise, love of stirring life, impatience of dull plodding, are natural to young lives. Unregulated, impulsive characters, who live for the moment, and are very sensitive to all material delights, have often an air of generosity and joviality which hides their essential baseness; for it *is* base to live for flesh, either in more refined or more frankly coarse forms. It is base to be incapable of seeing an inch beyond the present. It is base to despise any good that cannot minister to fleeting lusts or fleshly pleasures, and to say of high thought, of ideal aims of any sort, and most of all to say of religion, ‘What good will it do me?’ To estimate such precious things by the standard of gross utility is like weighing diamonds in grocers’ scales. They will do very well for sugar, but not for precious stones. The sacred things of life are not those which do what the Esaus recognise as ‘good.’ They have another purpose, and are valuable for other ends. Let us take heed, then, that we estimate things according to their true relative worth; that we live, not for to-day, but for eternity; and that we suppress all greedy cravings. If we do not, we shall be ‘profane’ persons like Esau, ‘who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.’

35)Genesis 25:34

Genesis

A BAD BARGAIN

POTTAGE VERSUS BIRTHRIGHT

Gen. 25:34.

Broad lessons unmistakable, but points strange and difficult to throw oneself back to so different a set of ideas. So

I. Deal with the narrative.

Not to tell it over again, but bring out the following points:-

[*a*] Birthright.-What?

None of them any notion of sacred, spiritual aspect of it.

To all, merely material advantages: headship of the clan. All the loftier aspects gone from Isaac, who thought he could give it for venison, from Esau, and from the scheming Rebekah and the crafty Jacob.

[*b*] The Bargain.

It is not clear whether the transaction was seriously meant, or whether it only shows Jacob's wish to possess the birthright and Esau's indifference to it.

At any rate, the barter was not supposed to complete Jacob's title, as is shown by a subsequent piece of trickery.

Isaac's blessing was conceived to confer it; that blessing, if once given, could not be revoked, even if procured by fraud and given in error.

The belief would fulfil itself, as far as the chieftainship was concerned.

It is significant of the purely 'secular' tone of all the parties concerned that only temporal blessings are included in Isaac's words.

[*c*] The Scripture judgment on all parties concerned.

Great mistakes are made by forgetting that the Bible is a passionless narrator of its heroes' acts, and seldom pauses to censure or praise-so people have thought that Scripture gave its vote for Jacob as against Esau.

The character of the two men.

Esau-frank, impulsive, generous, chivalrous, careless, and sensuous.

Jacob-meditative, reflective, pastoral, timid, crafty, selfish. Each has the defects of his qualities.

But the subsequent history of Jacob shows what heaven thought of him.

This dirty transaction marred his life, sent him a terrified exile from Isaac's tent, and shook his soul long years after with guilty apprehensions when he had to meet Esau.

All subsequent career to beat his crafty selfishness out of him and to lift him to higher level.

II. Broad General Lessons.

1. The Choice.-Birthright *versus* Pottage.

[*a*] The Present *versus* The Future.

Suppose it true that to both brothers the birthright seemed to secure merely material advantage, yet even so the better part would have been to sacrifice material present for material future. Even on plane of worldly things, to live for to-morrow ennobles a man, and he is the higher style of man who 'spurns delights and lives laborious days' for some issue to be realised in the far future.

The very same principle extended leads to the conviction that the highest wisdom is his who lives for the furthest, which is also the most certain, Future.

[*b*] The Seen *versus* The Unseen.

However material the advantages of the birthright were supposed to be, they *then* appealed to imagination, not sense. *There* was the pottage in the pan: 'I can see that and smell it. This birthright, can I eat *it*? Let me get the solid realities, and let who will have the imaginary.'

So the unseen good things, such as intellectual culture, fair reputation, and the like, are better than the gross satisfactions that can be handled, or tasted, or seen.

And, on the very same principle, high above the seeker after these-as high as he is above the drunkard-is the Christian, whose life is shaped by the loftiest Unseen, even ‘Him who is invisible.’

2. The grim absurdity of the choice.

The story seems to have a certain undertone of sarcasm, and a keen perception of the immense stupidity of the man.

Pottage and a full belly to-day-that was all he got for such a sacrifice.

‘This their way is their folly.’

3. How well the bargain worked at first, and what came of it at last.

No doubt Esau had his meal, and, no doubt, when a man sells his soul to the devil [the mediaeval form of the story], he generally gets the price for which he bargained, more or less, and oftentimes with a dash of vinegar in the porridge, which makes it less palatable.

What comes of it at last. Put side by side the pictures of Esau’s animal contentment at the moment when he had eaten up his mess, and of his despair when he wailed, ‘Hast thou not one blessing?’

He finds out his mistake. A sense of the preciousness of the despised thing wakes in him.

And it is too late. There *are* irrevocable consequences of every false choice. Youth is gone: cannot alter that. Opportunities gone: cannot alter that. Strength gone: cannot alter that. Habits formed, associations, reputation, position, character, are all determined.

But there is a blessed *contrast* between Esau’s experience and what may be ours. The desire to have the birthright is sure to bring it to us. No matter how late the desire is of springing, nor how long and insultingly we have suppressed it, we never go to our Father in vain with the cry, ‘Bless me, even me also.’

‘What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?’

36)Genesis 26:12-25

Genesis

THE FIRST APOSTLE OF PEACE AT ANY PRICE

Gen. 26:12 - Gen. 26:25.

The salient feature of Isaac’s life is that it has no salient features. He lived out his hundred and eighty years in quiet, with little to make history. Few details of his story are given, and some of these are not very creditable. He seems never to have wandered far from the neighbourhood of Beersheba. These quiet, rolling stretches of thinly peopled land contented him, and gave pasture for his flocks, as well as fields for his cultivation. Like many of the tribes of that district still, he had passed from the purely nomad and pastoral life, such as Abraham led, and had begun to ‘sow in that land.’ That marks a stage in progress. His father’s life had been like a midsummer day, with bursts of splendour and heavy thunder-clouds; his was liker a calm day in autumn, windless and unchanging from morning till serene evening. The world thinks little of such lives, but they are fruitful.

Our text begins with a sweet little picture of peaceful industry, blessed by God, and therefore prospering. Travellers tell us that the land where Isaac dwelt is still marvellously fertile, even to rude farming. But to be merely a successful farmer and sheep-owner might have seemed poor work to the heir of such glowing promises, and the prospect of a high destiny often disgusts its possessor with lowly duties. ‘But if we hope for that which we see not, then do we with patience wait for it,’ and the best way to fit ourselves for great things in the future is to bend our backs and wills to humble toil in the present. Peter expected every day to see the risen Lord, when he said, ‘I go a-fishing.’

The Philistines’ envy was very natural, since Isaac was an alien, and, in some sense, an intruder. Their stopping of the wells was a common act of hostility, and an effectual one in that land, where everything lives where water comes, and dies if it is cut off. Abimelech's reason for 'extraditing' Isaac might have provoked a more pugnacious person to stay and defy the Philistines to expel him. 'Thou art much mightier than we,' and so he could have said, 'Try to put me out, then,' and the result might have been that Abimelech and his Philistines would have been the ones to go. But the same spirit was in the man as had been in the lad, when he let his father bind him and lay him on the altar without a struggle or a word, and he quietly went, leaving his fields and pastures. 'Very poor-spirited,' says the world; what does Christ say?

Isaac was not 'original.' He cleaned out the wells which his father had digged, and with filial piety gave them again the old names 'which his father had called them.' Some of us nowadays get credit for being 'advanced and liberal thinkers,' because we regard our fathers' wells as much too choked with rubbish to be worth clearing out, and the last thing we should dream of would be to revive the old names. But the old wells were not enough for the new time, and so fresh ones were added. Isaac and his servants did not say, 'We will have no water but what is drawn from Abraham's wells. What was enough for him is enough for us.' So, like all wise men, they were conservatively progressive and progressively conservative. The Gerar shepherds were sharp lawyers. They took strong ground in saying, 'The *water* is ours; you have dug wells, but we are ground-owners, and what is below the surface, as well as what is on it, is our property.' Again Isaac fielded, moved on a little way, and tried again. A second well was claimed, and given up, and all that Isaac did was to name the two 'Contention' and 'Enmity,' as a gentle rebuke and memorial. Then, as is generally the result, gentleness wearied violence out, and the Philistines tired of annoying before Isaac tired of yielding. So he came into a quiet harbour at last, and traced his repose to God, naming his last well 'Broad Places,' because the Lord had made room for him.

Such a quiet spirit, strong in non-resistance, and ready to yield rather than quarrel, was strangely out of place in these wild days and lands. He obeyed the Sermon on the Mount millenniums before it was spoken. Whether from temperament or from faith, he is the first instance of the Christian type of excellence in the Old Testament. For there ought to be no question that the spirit of meekness, which will not meet violence by violence, is the

Christian spirit. Christian morals alter the perspective of moral excellences, and exalt meekness above the ‘heroic virtues’ admired by the world. The violets and lilies in Christ’s garden outshine voluptuous roses and flaunting sunflowers. In this day, when there is a recrudescence of militarism, and we are tempted to canonise the soldier, we need more than ever to insist that the highest type is ‘the Lamb of God,’ who was ‘as a sheep before her shearers.’ To fight for my rights is not the Christian ideal, nor is it the best way to secure them. Isaac will generally weary out the Philistines, and get his well at last, and will have escaped much friction and many evil passions.

‘Tis safer being meek than fierce.’

Isaac won the friendship of his opponents by his patience, as the verses after the text tell. Their consciences and hearts were touched, and they ‘saw plainly that the Lord was with him,’ and sued him for alliance. It is better to turn enemies into friends than to beat them and have them as enemies still. ‘I’ll knock you down unless you love me’ does not sound a very hopeful way of cementing peaceful relations. But ‘when a man’s ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.’ But Isaac won more than the Philistines’ favour by his meek peacefulness, for ‘the Lord appeared unto him,’ and assured him that, undefended and unresisting as he was, he had a strong defence, and need not be afraid: ‘Fear not, for I am with thee.’ The ornament of a meek and quiet spirit is, in the sight of God, of great price, and that not only for ‘a woman’; and it brings visions of God, and assurances of tranquil safety to him who cherishes it. The Spirit of God comes down in the likeness of a dove, and that bird of peace sits ‘brooding "only" on the charmed wave’ of a heart stilled from strife and wrath, like a quiet summer’s sea.

Isaac’s new home at Beersheba, having been thus hallowed by the appearance of the Lord, was consecrated by the building of an altar. We should hallow by grateful remembrance the spots where God has made Himself known to us. The best beginning of a new undertaking is to rear an altar. It is well when new settlers begin their work by calling on the name of the Lord. Beersheba and Plymouth Rock are a pair. First comes the altar, then the tent can be trustfully pitched, but ‘except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.’ And if the house is built in faith, a well will not be lacking; for they who ‘seek first the kingdom of God’ will have all needful ‘things added unto them.’

37)Genesis 28:10-22

Genesis

THE HEAVENLY PATHWAY AND THE EARTHLY HEART

Gen. 28:10 - Gen. 28:22.

From Abraham to Jacob is a great descent. The former embodies the nobler side of the Jewish character,-its capacity for religious ideas; its elevation above, and separation from, the nations; its consciousness of, and peaceful satisfaction in, a divine Friend; its consequent vocation in the world. These all were deep in the founder of the race, and flowed to it from him. Jacob, on the other hand, has in him the more ignoble qualities, which Christian treatment of the Jew has fostered, and which have become indissolubly attached to the name in popular usage. He is a crafty schemer, selfish, over-reaching, with a keen eye to the main chance. Whoever deals with him has to look sharply after his own interests. Self-advantage in its most earthly form is uppermost in him; and, like all timid, selfish men, shifty ways and evasions are his natural weapons. The great interest of his history lies in the slow process by which the patient God purified him, and out of this ‘stone raised up a worthy child to Abraham.’ We see in this context the first step in his education, and the very imperfect degree in which he profited by it.

1. Consider the vision and its accompanying promise. Jacob has fled from home on account of his nobler brother’s fierce wrath at the trick which their scheming mother and he had contrived. It was an ugly, heartless fraud, a crime against a doting father, as against Esau. Rebekah gets alarmed for her favourite; and her fertile brain hits upon another device to blind Isaac and get Jacob out of harm’s way, in the excuse that she cannot bear his marriage with a Hittite woman. Her exaggerated expressions of passionate dislike to ‘the daughters of Heth’ have no religious basis. They are partly feigned and partly petulance. So the poor old blind father is beguiled once more, and sends his son away. Starting under such auspices, and coming from such an

atmosphere, and journeying back to Haran, the hole of the pit whence Abraham had been digged, and turning his back on the land where God had been with his house, the wanderer was not likely to be cherishing any lofty thoughts. His life was in danger; he was alone, a dim future was before him, perhaps his conscience was not very comfortable. These things would be in his mind as he lay down and gazed into the violet sky so far above him, burning with all its stars. Weary, and with a head full of sordid cares, plans, and possibly fears, he slept; and then there flamed on 'that inward eye, which is the bliss of solitude' to the pure, and its terror to the evil, this vision, which speaks indeed to his then need, as he discerned it, but reveals to him and to us the truth which ennobles all life, burns up the dross of earthward-turned aims, and selfish, crafty ways.

We are to conceive of the form of the vision as a broad stair or sloping ascent, rather than a ladder, reaching right from the sleeper's side to the far-off heaven, its pathway peopled with messengers, and its summit touching the place where a glory shone that paled even the lustrous constellations of that pure sky. Jacob had thought himself alone; the vision peoples the wilderness. He had felt himself defenceless; the vision musters armies for his safety. He had been grovelling on earth, with no thoughts beyond its fleeting goods; the vision lifts his eyes from the low level on which they had been gazing. He had been conscious of but little connection with heaven; the vision shows him a path from his very side right into its depths. He had probably thought that he was leaving the presence of his father's God when he left his father's tent; the vision burns into his astonished heart the consciousness of God as there, in the solitude and the night.

The divine promise is the best commentary on the meaning of the vision. The familiar ancestral promise is repeated to him, and the blessing and the birthright thus confirmed. In addition, special assurances, the translation of the vision into word and adapted to his then wants, are given,-God's presence in his wanderings, his protection, Jacob's return to the land, and the promise of God's persistent presence, working through all paradoxes of providence and sins of His servant, and incapable of staying its operations, or satisfying God's heart, or vindicating His faithfulness, at any point short of complete accomplishment of His plighted word.

We pass from the lone desert and the mysterious twilight of Genesis to the beaten ways between Galilee and Jordan, and to the clear historic daylight of the gospel, and we hear Christ renewing the promise to the crafty Jacob, to one whom He called a son of Jacob in his after better days, ‘an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.’ The very heart of Christ’s work was unveiled in the terms of this vision: From henceforth ‘ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.’ So, then, the fleeting vision was a transient revelation of a permanent reality, and a faint foreshadowing of the true communication between heaven and earth. Jesus Christ is the ladder between God and man. On Him all divine gifts descend; by Him all the angels of human devotion, consecration, and aspiration go up. This flat earth is not so far from the topmost heaven as sense thinks. The despairing question of Jewish wisdom, ‘Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended? . . .What is his name, and what is his son’s name, if thou canst tell?’-which has likewise been the question of every age that has not been altogether sunk in sensual delights-is answered once for all in the incarnate and crucified and ascended Lord, by and in whom all heaven has stooped to earth, that earth might be lifted to heaven. Every child of man, though lonely and earthly, has the ladder-foot by his side,-like the sunbeam, which comes straight into the eyes of every gazer, wherever he stands. It becomes increasingly evident, in the controversies of these days, that there will remain for modern thought only the alternative,-either Jesus Christ is the means of communication between God and man, or there is no communication. Deism and theism are compromises, and cannot live. The cultivated world in both hemispheres is being more and more shut up to either accepting Christ as revealer, by whom alone we know, and as medium by whom alone we love and approach, God; or sinking into abysses of negations where choke-damp will stifle enthusiasm and poetry, as well as devotion and immortal hope.

Jacob’s vision was meant to teach him, and is meant to teach us, the nearness of God, and the swift directness of communication, whereby His help comes to us and our desires rise to Him. These and their kindred truths were to be to him, and should be to us, the parents of much nobleness. Here is the secret of elevation of aim and thought above the mean things of sense. We all, and especially the young, in whose veins the blood dances, and to whom life is in all its glory and freshness, are tempted to think of it as all. It does us good to have this vision of the eternal realities blazing in upon us, even if it seems to glare at us, rather than to shine with lambent light. The seen is but a thin veil of the unseen. Earth, which we are too apt to make a workshop, or a mere garden of pleasure, is a Bethel,-a house of God. Everywhere the ladder stands; everywhere the angels go up and down; everywhere the Face looks from the top. Nothing will save life from becoming, sooner or later, trivial, monotonous, and infinitely wearisome, but the continual vision of the present God, and the continual experience of the swift ascent and descent of our aspirations and His blessings.

It is the secret of purity too. How could Jacob indulge in his craft, and foul his conscience with sin, as long as he carried the memory of what he had seen in the solitary night on the uplands of Bethel? The direct result of the vision is the same command as Abraham received, ‘Walk before Me, and be thou perfect.’ Realise My presence, and let that kill the motions of sin, and quicken to service.

It is also the secret of peace. Hopes and fears, and dim uncertainty of the future, no doubt agitated the sleeper’s mind as he laid him down. His independent life was beginning. He had just left his father’s tents for the first time; and, though not a youth in years, he was in the position which youth holds with us. So to him, and to all young persons, here is shown the charm which will keep the heart calm, and preserve us from being ‘over exquisite to cast the fashion of uncertain evils,’ or too eagerly longing for possible good. ‘I am with thee’ should be enough to steady our souls; and the confidence that God will not leave us till He has accomplished His own purpose for us, should make us willing to let Him do as He will with ours.

2. Notice the imperfect reception of the divine teaching. Jacob’s startled exclamation on awakening from his dream indicates a very low level both of religious knowledge and feeling. Nor is there any reason for taking the words in any but their most natural sense; for it is a mistake to ascribe to him the knowledge of God due to later revelation, or, at this stage of his life, any depth of religious emotion. He is alarmed at the thought that God is near. Probably he had been accustomed to think of God’s presence as in some special way associated with his father’s encampment, and had not risen to the belief of His omnipresence. There seems no joyous leaping up

of his heart at the thought that God is here. Dread, not unmingled with the superstitious fear that he had profaned a holy place by laying himself down in it, is his prevailing feeling, and he pleads ignorance as the excuse for his sacrilege. He does not draw the conclusion from the vision that all the earth is hallowed by a near God, but only that he has unwittingly stumbled on His house; and he does not learn that from every place there is an open door for the loving heart into the calm depths where God is throned, but only that *here* he unwittingly stands at the gate of heaven. So he misses the very inner purpose of the vision, and rather shrinks from it than welcomes it. Was that spasm of fear all that passed through his mind that night? Did he sleep again when the glory died out of the heaven? So the story would appear to suggest. But, in any case, we see here the effect of the sudden blazing in upon a heart not yet familiar with the Divine Friend, of the conviction that He is really near. Gracious as God's promise was, it did not dissipate the creeping awe at His presence. It is an eloquent testimony of man's consciousness of sin, that whensoever a present God becomes a reality to a worldly man, he trembles. 'This place' would not be 'dreadful,' but blessed, if it were not for the sense of discord between God and me.

The morning light brought other thoughts, when it filled the silent heavens, and where the ladder had stretched, there was but empty blue. The lesson is sinking into his mind. He lifts the rude stone and pours oil on it, as a symbol of consecration, as nameless races have done all over the world. His vow shows that he had but begun to learn in God's school. He hedges about his promise with a punctilious repetition of God's undertaking, as if resolved that there should be no mistake. Clause by clause he goes over it all, and puts an 'if' to it. God's word should have kindled something liker faith than that. What a fall from 'Abram believed in the Lord, and He counted it to him for righteousness' ! Jacob barely believed, and will wait to see whether all will turn out as it has been promised. That is not the glad, swift response of a loving, trusting heart. Nor is he contented with repeating to God the terms of his engagement, but he adds a couple of clauses which strike him as being important, and as having been omitted. There was nothing about 'bread to eat, and raiment to put on,' nor about coming back again 'in peace,' so he adds these. A true 'Jew,'-great at a bargain, and determined to get all he can, and to have no mistake about what he must get before he gives anything! Was Jesus thinking at all of the ancestor when He warned the descendants, in words which sound curiously like an echo of Jacob's, not to be anxious 'what ye shall eat,' nor 'what ye shall put on'? As the vow stands in the Authorised Version, it is farther open to the charge of suspending his worship of God upon the fulfilment of these conditions; but it is better to adopt the marginal rendering of the Revised Version, according to which the clause 'then shall the Lord be my God' is a part of the conditions, not of the vow, and is to be read 'And [if] the Lord will be . . .then this stone . . .shall be,' etc. If this rendering be adopted, as I think it should be, the vow proper is simply of outward service,-he will rear an altar, and he will tithe his substance. Not a very munificent pledge! And where in it is the surrender of the heart? Where is the outgoing of love and gratitude? Where the clasping of the hand of his heavenly Friend with calm rapture of thankful self-yielding, and steadfastness of implicit trust? God did not want Jacob's altar, nor his tenths; He wanted Jacob. But many a weary year and many a sore sorrow have to leave their marks on him before the evil strain is pressed out of his blood; and by the unwearied long-suffering of his patient Friend and Teacher in heaven, the crafty, earthly-minded Jacob 'the supplanter' is turned into 'Israel, the prince with God, in whom is no guile.' The slower the scholar, the more wonderful the forbearance of the Teacher; and the more may we, who are slow scholars too, take heart to believe that He will not be soon angry with us, nor leave us until He has done that which He has spoken to us of.

38)Genesis 32:1-2

Genesis

MAHANAIM: THE TWO CAMPS

Gen. 32:1 - Gen. 32:2.

This vision came at a crisis in Jacob's life. He has just left the house of Laban, his father-in-law, where he had lived for many years, and in company with a long caravan, consisting of wives, children, servants, and all his wealth turned into cattle, is journeying back again to Palestine. His road leads him close by the country of Esau. Jacob was no soldier, and he is naturally terrified to meet his justly incensed brother. And so, as he plods along with his defenceless company trailing behind him, as you may see the Arab caravans streaming over the same uplands to-day, all at once, in the middle of his march, a bright-harnessed army of angels meets him. Whether visible to the eye of sense, or, as would appear, only to the eye of faith, they *are* visible to this troubled man; and, in a glow of confident joy, he calls the name of that place ‘Mahanaim,’ two camps. One camp was the little one of his down here, with the helpless women and children and his own frightened and defenceless self, and the other was the great one up there, or rather in shadowy but most real spiritual presence around about him, as a bodyguard making an impregnable wall between him and every foe. We may take some very plain and everlastingly true lessons out of this story.

1. First, the angels of God meet us on the dusty road of common life. ‘Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him.’

As he was tramping along there, over the lonely fields of Edom, with many a thought on his mind and many a fear at his heart, but feeling ‘There is the path that I have to walk on,’ all at once the air was filled with the soft rustle of angel wings, and the brightness from the flashing armour of the heavenly hosts flamed across his unexpecting eye. And so is it evermore. The true place for us to receive visions of God is in the path of the homely, prosaic duties which He lays upon us. The dusty road is far more likely to be trodden by angel feet than the remote summits of the mountain, where we sometimes would fain go; and many an hour consecrated to devotion has less of the manifest presence of God than is granted to some weary heart in its commonplace struggle with the little troubles and trials of daily life. These make the doors, as it were, by which the visitants draw near to us.

It is the common duties, ‘the narrow round, the daily task,’ that not only give us ‘all we ought to ask,’ but are the selected means and channels by which, ever, God’s visitants draw near to us. The man that has never seen an angel standing beside him, and driving his loom for him, or helping him at his counter and his desk, and the woman that has never seen an angel, according to the bold realism and homely vision of the old German picture, working with her in the kitchen and preparing the meal for the household, have little chance of meeting such visitants at any other point of their experience or event of their lives.

If the week be empty of the angels, you will never catch sight of a feather of their wings on the Sunday. And if we do not recognise their presence in the midst of all the prose, and the commonplace, and the vulgarity, and the triviality, and the monotony, the dust of the small duties, we shall go up to the summit of Sinai itself and see nothing there but cold grey stone and everlasting snows. 'Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him.' The true field for religion is the field of common life.

And then another side of the same thought is this, that it is in the path where God has bade us walk that we shall find the angels round us. We may meet them, indeed, on paths of our own choosing, but it will be the sort of angel that Balaam met, with a sword in his hand, mighty and beautiful, but wrathful too; and we had better not front him! But the friendly helpers, the emissaries of God's love, the apostles of His grace, do not haunt the roads that we make for ourselves. They confine themselves rigidly to 'the paths in which God has before ordained that we should walk in them.' A man has no right to expect, and he will not get, blessing and help and divine gifts when, self-willedly, he has taken the bit between his teeth, and is choosing his own road in the world. But if he will say, 'Lord! here I am; put me where Thou wilt, and do with me what Thou wilt,' then he may be sure that that path, though it may be solitary of human companionship, and leading up amongst barren rocks and over bare moorlands, where the sun beats down fiercely, will not be unvisited by a better presence, so that in sweet consciousness of sufficiency of rich grace, he will be able to say, 'I, being in the way, the Lord met me.'

2. Still further, we may draw from this incident the lesson that God's angels meet us punctually at the hour of need.

Jacob is drawing nearer and nearer to his fear every step. He is now just on the borders of Esau's country, and close upon opening communications with his brother. At that critical moment, just before the finger of the clock has reached the point on the dial at which the bell would strike, the needed help comes, the angel guards draw near and camp beside him. It is always so. 'The Lord shall help her, and that right early.' His hosts come no sooner and no later than we need. If they appeared before we had realised our danger and our defencelessness, our hearts would not leap up at their coming, as men in a beleaguered town do when the guns of the relieving force are heard booming from afar. Often God’s delays seem to us inexplicable, and our prayers to have no more effect than if they were spoken to a sleeping Baal. But such delays are merciful. They help us to the consciousness of our need. They let us feel the presence of the sorrow. They give opportunity of proving the weakness of all other supports. They test and increase desire for His help. They throw us more unreservedly into His arms. They afford room for the sorrow or the burden to work its peaceable fruits. So, and in many other ways, delay of succour fits us to receive succour, and our God makes no tarrying but for our sakes.

It is His way to let us come almost to the edge of the precipice, and then, in the very nick of time, when another minute and we are over, to stretch out His strong right hand and save us. So Peter is left in prison, though prayer is going up unceasingly for him-and no answer comes. The days of the Passover feast slip away, and still he is in prison, and prayer does nothing for him. The last day of his life, according to Herod’s purpose, dawns, and all the day the Church lifts up its voice-but apparently there is no answer, nor any that regarded. The night comes, and still the vain cry goes up, and Heaven seems deaf or apathetic. The night wears on, and still no help comes. But in the last watch of that last night, when day is almost dawning, at nearly the last minute when escape would have been possible, the angel touches the sleeping Apostle, and with leisurely calmness, as sure that he had ample time, leads him out to freedom and safety. It was precisely because Jesus loved the Household at Bethany that, after receiving the sisters’ message, He abode still for two days in the same place where He was. However our impatience may wonder, and our faithlessness venture sometimes almost to rebuke Him when He comes, with words like Mary’s and Martha’ s-’Lord, if Thou hadst been here, such and such sorrows would not have happened, and Thou couldst so easily have been here’-we should learn the lesson that even if He has delayed so long that the dreaded blow has fallen, He has come soon enough to make it the occasion for a still more glorious communication of His power. ‘Rest in the Lord, wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.’

3. Again, we learn from this incident that the angels of God come in the shape which we need.

Jacob’s want at the moment was protection. Therefore the angels appear in warlike guise, and present before the defenceless man another camp, in which he and his unwieldy caravan of women and children and cattle may find security. If his special want had been of some blessing of another kind, no doubt another form of appearance, suited with precision to his need, would have been imposed upon these angel helpers. For God’s gifts to us change their character; as the Rabbis fabled that the manna tasted to each man what each most desired. The same pure heavenly bread has the varying savour that commends it to varying palates. God’s grace is Protean. It takes all the forms that man’s necessities require. As water assumes the shape of any vessel into which it is put, so this great blessing comes to each of us, moulded according to the pressure and taking the form of our circumstances and necessities. His fulness is all-sufficient. It is the same blood that, passing to all the members, ministers to each according to the needs and fashion of each. And it is the same grace which, passing to our souls, in each man is shaped according to his present condition and ministers to his present wants.

So, dear brethren, in that great fulness each of us may have the thing that we need. The angel who to one man is protection, to another shall be teaching and inspiration; to another shall appear with chariots of fire and horses of fire to sweep the rapt soul heavenward; to another shall draw near as a deliverer from his fetters, at whose touch the bonds shall fall from off him; to another shall appear as the instructor in duty and the appointer of a path of service, like that vision that shone in the castle to the Apostle Paul, and said, ‘Thou must bear witness for me at Rome’; to another shall appear as opening the door of heaven and letting a flood of light come down upon his darkened heart, as to the Apocalyptic seer in his rocky Patmos. And ‘all this worketh that one and the self-same’ Lord of angels ‘dividing to every man severally as He will,’ and as the man needs. The defenceless Jacob has the manifestation of the divine presence in the guise of armed warriors that guard his unwarlike camp.

I add one last word. Long centuries after Jacob’s experience at Mahanaim, another trembling fugitive found himself there, fearful, like Jacob, of the vengeance and anger of one who was knit to him by blood. When poor King David was flying from the face of Absalom his son, the first place where he made a stand, and where he remained during the whole of the rebellion, was this town of Mahanaim, away on the eastern side of the Jordan. Do you not think that to the kingly exile, in his feebleness and his fear, the very name of his resting-place would be an omen? Would he not recall the old story, and bethink himself of how round that other frightened man

'Bright-harnessed angels stood in order serviceable'

and would he not, as he looked on his little band of friends, faithful among the faithless, have his eyesight cleared to behold the other camp? Such a vision, no doubt, inspired the calm confidence of the psalm which evidently belongs to that dark hour of his life, and made it possible for the hunted king, with his feeble band, to sing even then, 'I will both lay me down in peace and sleep, for Thou, Lord, makest me dwell in safety, solitary though I am.'

Nor is the vision emptied of its power to stay and make brave by all the ages that have passed. The vision was for a moment; the fact is for ever. The sun's ray was flashed back from celestial armour, 'the next all unreflected shone' on the lonely wastes of the desert-but the host of God was there still. The transitory appearance of the permanent realities is a revelation to us as truly as to the patriarch; and though no angel wings may winnow the air around our road, nor any sworded seraphim be seen on our commonplace march, we too have all the armies of heaven with us, if we tread the path which God has marked out, and in our weakness and trembling commit ourselves to Him. The heavenly warriors die not, and hover around us to-day, excelling in the strength of their immortal youth, and as ready to succour us as they were all these centuries ago to guard the solitary Jacob.

Better still, the 'Captain of the Lord's host' is 'come up' to be our defence, and our faith has not only to behold the many ministering spirits sent forth to minister to us, but One mightier than they, whose commands they all obey, and who Himself is the companion of our solitude and the shield of our defencelessness. It was blessed that Jacob should be met by the many angels of God. It is infinitely more blessed that '*the* Angel of the Lord'-the

One who is more than the many-'encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.'

The postscript of the last letter which Gordon sent from Khartoum closed with the words, 'The hosts are with me-Mahanaim.' Were they not, even though death was near? Was that sublime faith a mistake-the vision an optical delusion? No, for their ranks are arrayed around God's children to keep them from all evil while He wills that they should live, and their chariots of fire and horses of fire are sent to bear them to heaven when He wills that they should die.

39)Genesis 32:9-12

Genesis

THE TWOFOLD WRESTLE - GOD'S WITH JACOB AND JACOB'S WITH GOD

Gen. 32:9 - Gen. 32:12.

Jacob's subtlety and craft were, as is often the case, the weapons of a timid as well as selfish nature. No wonder, then, that the prospect of meeting his wronged and strong brother threw him into a panic, notwithstanding the vision of the camp of angels by the side of his defenceless caravan of women and children. Esau had received his abject message of propitiation in grim silence, sent no welcome back, but with ominous haste and ambiguous purpose began his march towards him with a strong force. A few hours will decide whether he means revenge. Jacob's fright does not rob him of his ready wit; he goes to work at once to divide his party, so as to ensure safety for half of it. He schemes first, and prays second. The order might have been inverted with advantage, but is like the man-in the lowest phase of his character. His prayer shows that he is beginning to profit by the long years of schooling. Though its burden is only deliverance from Esau, it pleads with God on the grounds of His own command and promise, of Jacob's unworthiness of God's past mercies, and of His firm covenant. A breath of a higher life is stirring in the shifty schemer who has all his life been living by his wits. Now he has come to a point where he knows that his own power can do nothing. With Laban, a man of craft like himself, it was diamond cut diamond; and Jacob was equal to the position. But the wild Bedouin brother, with his four hundred men, is not to be managed so; and Jacob is driven to God by his conscious helplessness. It is the germ, but only the germ, and needs much tending and growth before it matures. The process by which this faint dawning of a better life is broadened into day is begun in the mysterious struggle which forms the main part of this lesson, and is God’s answer to his prayer.

1. We have, first, the twofold wrestling. The silent night-long wrestle with the ‘traveller unknown’ is generally regarded as meaning essentially the same thing as the wonderful colloquy which follows. But I venture to take a somewhat different point of view, and to suggest that there are here two well-marked stages. In the first, which is represented as transacted in unbroken silence, ‘a man’ wrestles with Jacob, and does not prevail; in the second, which is represented as an interchange of speech, Jacob strives with the ‘man,’ and does prevail. Taken together, the two are a complete mirror, not only of the manner of the transformation of Jacob into Israel, but of universal eternal truths as to God’s dealings with us, and our power with Him.

As to the former stage, the language of the narrative is to be noted, ‘There wrestled a man with him.’ The attack, so to speak, begins with his mysterious antagonist, not with the patriarch. The ‘man’ seeks to overcome Jacob, not Jacob the man. There, beneath the deep heavens, in the solemn silence of night, which hides earth and reveals heaven, that strange struggle with an unknown Presence is carried on. We have no material for pronouncing on the manner of it, whether ecstasy, vision, or an objective and bodily fact. The body was implicated in the consequences, at all events, and the impression which the story leaves is of an outward struggle. But the purpose of the incident is the same, however the question as to its form be answered. Nor can we pronounce, as some have done, on the other question, of the personality of the silent wrestler. Angel, or ‘the angel of the covenant,’ who is a transient, and possibly only apparent, manifestation in human form of Him who afterwards became flesh and dwelt among us, or some other supernatural embodiment, for that one purpose, of the divine presence,-any of these hypotheses is consistent with the intentionally reticent text. What it leaves unspoken, we shall wisely leave undetermined. God acts and speaks through ‘the man.’ That is all we can know or need.

What, then, was the meaning of this struggle? Was it not a revelation to Jacob of what God had been doing with him all his life, and was still doing? Was not that merciful striving of God with him the inmost meaning of all that had befallen him since the far-off day when he had left his father’s tents, and had seen the opened heavens, and the ladder, which he had so often forgotten? Were not his disappointments, his successes, and all the swift changes of life, God’s attempts to lead him to yield himself up, and bow his will? And was not God striving with him now, in the anxieties which gnawed at his heart, and in his dread of the morrow? Was He not trying to teach him how crime always comes home to roost, with a brood of pains running behind it? Was not the weird duel in the brooding stillness a disclosure, which would more and more possess his soul as the night passed on, of a Presence which in silence strove with him, and only desired to overcome that He might bless? The conception of a Divine manifestation wrestling all night long with a man has been declared ‘crude,’ ‘puerile,’ and I know not how many other disparaging adjectives have been applied to it. But is it more unworthy of Him, or derogatory to His nature, than the lifelong pleading and striving with each of us, which He undoubtedly carries on? The idea of a man contending with God has been similarly stigmatised; but is it more mysterious than that awful power which the human will does possess of setting at naught His counsels and resisting His merciful strivings?

The close of the first stage of the twofold wrestle is marked by the laming of Jacob. The paradox that He, who could not overcome, could yet lame by a touch, is part of the lesson. If His finger could do that, what would the grip of His hand do, if He chose to put out His power? It is not for want of strength that He has not crushed the antagonist, as Jacob would feel, with deepening wonder and awe. What a new light would be thus thrown on all the previous struggle! It was the striving of a power which cared not for a mere outward victory, nor put forth its whole force, lest it should crush him whom it desired to conquer only by his own yielding. As Job says, ‘Will He plead against me with His great power?’ No; God mercifully restrains His hand, in His merciful striving with men. Desiring to overcome them, He desires not to do so by mere superior power, but by their willing yielding to Him.

That laming of Jacob’s thigh represents the weakening of all the life of nature and self which had hitherto been his. He had trusted to his own cunning and quick-wittedness; he had been shrewd, not over-scrupulous, and successful. But he had to learn that ‘by strength shall no man prevail,’ and to forsake his former weapons. Wrestling with his hands and limbs is not the way to prevail either with God or man. Fighting with God in his own strength, he is only able to thwart God’s merciful purpose towards him, but is powerless as a reed in a giant’s grasp if God chooses to summon His destructive powers into exercise. So this failure of natural power is the turning-point in the twofold wrestle, and marks as well as symbolises the transition in Jacob’s life and character from reliance upon self and craft to reliance upon his divine Antagonist become his Friend. It is the path by which we must all travel if we are to become princes with God. The life of nature and of dependence on self must be broken and lamed in order that, in the very moment of discovered impotence, we may grasp the hand that smites, and find immortal power flowing into our weakness from it.

2. So we come to the second stage, in which Jacob strives with God and does prevail. ‘Let me go, for the day breaketh.’ Then did the stranger wish to go; and if he did, why could not he, who had lamed his antagonist, loose himself from his grasp? The same explanation applies here which is required in reference to Christ’s action to the two disciples at Emmaus: ‘He made as though He would have gone further.’ In like manner, when He came to them on the water, He appeared as though He ‘would have passed by.’ In all three cases the principle is the same. God desires to go, if we do not desire Him to stay. He will go, unless we keep Him. Then, at last, Jacob betakes himself to his true weapons. Then, at last, he strangely wishes to keep his apparent foe. He has learned, in some dim fashion, whom he has been resisting, and the blessedness of having Him for friend and companion. So here comes in the account of the whole scene which Hosea gives [Hos. 12:4]: ‘He wept, and made supplication unto Him.’ That does not describe the earlier portion, but is the true rendering of the later stage, of which our narrative gives a more summary account. The desire to retain God binds Him to us. All His struggling with us has been aimed at evoking

it, and all His fulness responds to it when evoked. Prayer is power. It conquers God. We overcome Him when we yield. When we are vanquished, we are victors. When the life of nature is broken within us, then from conscious weakness springs the longing which God cannot but satisfy. 'When I am weak, then am I strong.' As Charles Wesley puts it, in his grand hymn on this incident:-

'Yield to me now, for I am weak,
But confident in self-despair.'

And God prevails when we prevail. His aim in all the process of His mercy has been but to overcome our heavy earthliness and selfishness, which resists His pleading love. His victory is our yielding, and, in that yielding, obtaining power with Him. He delights to be held by the hand of faith, and ever gladly yields to the heart's cry, 'Abide with me.' I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me,' is music to His ear; and our saying so, in earnest, persistent clinging to Him, is His victory as well as ours.

3. We have, next, the new name, which is the prize of Jacob's victory, and the sign of a transformation in his character. Before this time he had been Jacob, the worker with wiles, who supplanted his brother, and met his foes with duplicity and astuteness like their own. He had been mainly of the earth, earthy. But that solemn hour had led him into the presence-chamber, the old craft had been mortally wounded, he had seen some glimpse of God as his friend, whose presence was not 'awful,' as he had thought it long ago, nor enigmatical and threatening, as he had at first deemed it that night, but the fountain of blessing and the one thing needful. A man who has once learned that lesson, though imperfectly, has passed into a purer region, and left behind him his old crookedness. He has learned to pray, not as before, prayers for mere deliverance from Esau and the like, but his whole being has gone out in yearning for the continual nearness of his mysterious antagonist-friend. So, though still the old nature remains, its power is broken, and he is a new creature. Therefore he needs a new name, and gets it from Him who can name men, because He sees the heart's depths, and because He has the right over them. To impose a name is the sign of authority, possession, insight into character. The change of name indicates a new epoch in a life, or a transformation of the inner man. The meaning of

‘Israel’ is ‘He [who] strives with God’; and the reason for its being conferred is more accurately given by the Revised Version, which translates, ‘For thou hast striven with God and with men,’ than in the Authorised rendering. His victory with God involved the certainty of his power with men. All his life he had been trying to get the advantage of them, and to conquer them, not by spear and sword, but by his brains. But now the true way to true sway among men is opened to him. All men are the servants of the servant and the friend of God. He who has the ear of the emperor is master of many men.

Jacob is not always called Israel in his subsequent history. His new name was a name of character and of spiritual standing, and that might fluctuate, and the old self resume its power; so he is still called by the former appellation, just as, at certain points in his life, the apostle forfeits the right to be ‘Peter,’ and has to hear from Christ’s lips the old name, the use of which is more poignant than many reproachful words; ‘Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you.’ But in the last death-bed scene, when the patriarch lifted himself in his bed, and with prophetic dignity pronounced his parting benediction on Joseph’s sons, the new name reappears with solemn pathos.

That name was transmitted to his descendants, and has passed over to the company of believing men, who have been overcome by God, and have prevailed with God. It is a charter and a promise. It is a stringent reminder of duty and a lofty ideal. A true Christian is an ‘Israel.’ His office is to wrestle with God. Nor can we forget how this mysterious scene was repeated in yet more solemn fashion, beneath the gnarled olives of Gethsemane, glistening in the light of the paschal full moon, when the true Israel prayed with such sore crying and tears that His body partook of the struggle, and ‘His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.’ The word which describes Christ’s agony is that which is often rendered ‘wrestling,’ and perhaps is selected with intentional allusion to this incident. At all events, when we think of Jacob by the brook Jabbok, and of a ‘greater than our father Jacob’ by the brook Kedron, we may well learn what persistence, what earnestness and effort of the whole nature, go to make up the ideal of prayer, and may well blush for the miserable indifference and torpor of what we venture to call our prayers. These are our patterns, ‘as many as walk according to this rule,’ and are thereby shown to be ‘the Israel of God,’-upon them shall be peace.

4. We have, as the end of all, a deepened desire after closer knowledge of God, and the answer to it. Some expositors [as, for instance, Robertson of Brighton, in his impressive sermon on this section] take the closing petition, ‘Tell me, I pray thee, Thy name,’ as if it were the centre point of the whole incident. But this is obviously a partial view. The desire to know that name does not come to Jacob, as we might have expected, when he was struggling with his unknown foe in the dark there. It is the end, and, in some sense, the issue, of all that has gone before. Not that he was in any doubt as to the person to whom he spoke; it is just because he knows that he is speaking with God, who alone can bless, that he longs to have some deeper, clearer knowledge still of Him. He is not asking for a word by which he may call Him; the name is the expression of the nature, and his parting request is for something far more intimate and deep than syllables which could be spoken by any lips. The certain sequel of the discovery of God as striving in mercy with a man, and of yielding to him, is the thirst for deeper acquaintance with Him, and for a fuller, more satisfying knowledge of His inmost heart. If the season of mysterious intercourse must cease, and day hide more than it discloses, and Jacob go to face Esau, and we come down from the mount to sordid cares and mean tasks, at least we long to bear with us as a love-token some whisper in our inmost hearts that may cheer us with the peaceful truth about Him and be a hidden sweetness. The presence of such a desire is a sure consequence, and therefore a good test, of real prayer.

The Divine answer, which sounds at first like refusal, is anything but that. Why dost thou ask after My name? surely I need not to give thee more revelation of My character. Thou hast enough of light; what thou needest is insight into what thou hast already. We have in what God has made known of Himself already to us-both in His outward revelation, which is so much larger and sweeter to us than it was to Jacob, but also in His providences, and in the inward communion which we have with Him if we have let Him overcome us, and have gained power to prevail with Him-sources of certain knowledge of Him so abundant and precious that we need nothing but the loving eye which shall take in all their beauty and completeness, to have our most eager desires after His name more than satisfied. We need not ask for more sunshine, but take care to spread ourselves out in the full sunshine which we have, and let it drench our eyes and fire our hearts. 'And He blessed him there.' Not till now was he capable of receiving the full blessing. He needed to have self beaten out of him; he needed to recognise God as lovingly striving with Him; he needed to yield himself up to Him; he needed to have his heart thus cleansed and softened, and then opened wide by panting desire for the presence and benediction of God; he needed to be made conscious of his new standing, and of the higher life budding within him; he needed to experience the yearning for a closer vision of the face, a deeper knowledge of the name,-and then it was possible to pour into his heart a tenderness and fulness of blessing which before there had been no room to receive, and which now answered in sweetest fashion the else unanswered desire, 'Tell me, I pray thee, Thy name.'

In like manner we may each be blessed with the presence and benediction of Him whose merciful strivings, when we knew Him not, came to us in the darkness; and to whom, if we yield, there will be peace and power in our hearts, and upon us, too, the sun will rise as we pass from the place where our foe became our friend, and by faith we saw Him face to face, and drank in life by the gaze.

40)Genesis 35:1

A FORGOTTEN VOW

Gen. 35:1.

Thirty years at least had passed since Jacob’s vow; ten or twenty since his return. He is in no haste to fulfil it, but has settled down at Shechem and bought land there, and seems to have forgotten all about Bethel.

1. *The lesson of possible negligence*.

[*a*] We are apt to forget vows when God has fulfilled His side of them. Resolutions made in time of trouble are soon forgotten. We pray and think about God more then than when things go well with us. Religion is in many men’s judgment for stormy weather only.

[*b*] We are often more resolved to make sacrifices in the beginning of our Christian course than afterwards.

Many a brilliant morning is followed by cloudy day.

Youth is often full of enthusiasms which after-days forget.

2. *The reasons for the negligence*.

Jacob felt a gradual fading away of impressions of need. He was comfortably settled at Shechem. He was surrounded by a wild, godless household who cherished their idols, and he knew that if he went to Bethel idolatry must be given up.

3. *The essentials to communion and service*.

Surrender. Purity. Must bury idols under oak.

4. *The reward of sacrifice and of duty discharged*.

The renewed appearance of God. The confirmation of name Israel. Enlarged promises. So the old man’s vision may be better than the youth’s, if he lives up to his youthful vows.

41)Genesis 37:1-11

Genesis

THE TRIALS AND VISIONS OF DEVOUT YOUTH

Gen. 37:1 - Gen. 37:11.

‘The generations of Jacob’ are mainly occupied with the history of Joseph, because through him mainly was the divine purpose carried on. Jacob is now the head of the chosen family, since Isaac’s death [Gen. 35:29], and therefore the narrative is continued under that new heading. There may possibly be intended a contrast in ‘dwelt’ and ‘sojourned’ in Gen. 37:1, the former implying a more complete settling down.

There are two principal points in this narrative,-the sad insight that it gives into the state of the household in which so much of the world’s history and hopes was wrapped up, and the preludings of Joseph’s future in his dreams.

As to the former, the account of it is introduced by the statement that Joseph, at seventeen years of age, was set to work, according to the wholesome Eastern usage, and so was thrown into the company of the sons of the two slave-women, Bilhah and Zilpah. Delitzsch understands ‘lad’ in Gen. 37:2 in the sense in which we use ‘boy,’ as meaning an attendant. Joseph was, then, told off to be subordinate to these two sets of his rough brothers. The relationship was enough to rouse hatred in such coarse souls. And, indeed, the history of Jacob’s household strikingly illustrates the miserable evils of polygamy, which makes families within the family, and turns brothers into enemies. Bilhah’s and Zilpah’s sons reflected in their hatred of Rachel’s their mothers’ envy of the true wife of Jacob’s heart. The sons of the bondwoman were sure to hate the sons of the free.

If Joseph had been like his brothers, they would have forgiven him his mother. But he was horrified at his first glimpse of unrestrained young passions, and, in the excitement of disgust and surprise, ‘told their evil report.’ No doubt, his brothers had been unwilling enough to be embarrassed by his presence, for there is nothing that wild young men dislike more than the constraint put on them by the presence of an innocent youth; and when they found out that this ‘milk-sop’ of a brother was a spy and a telltale, their wrath blazed up. So Joseph had early experience of the shock which meets all young men who have been brought up in godly households when they come into contact with sin in fellow-clerks, servants, students, or the like. It is a sharp test of what a young man is made of, to come forth from the shelter of a father’s care and a mother’s love, and to be forced into witnessing and hearing such things as go on wherever a number of young men are thrown together. Be not ‘partaker of other men’s sins.’ And the trial is doubly great when the tempters are elder brothers, and the only way to escape their unkindness is to do as they do. Joseph had an early experience of the need of resistance; and, as long as the world is a world, love to God will mean hatred from its worst elements. If we are ‘sons of the day,’ we cannot but rebuke the darkness.

It is an invidious office to tell other people’s evil-doing, and he who brings evil reports of others generally and deservedly gets one for himself. But there are circumstances in which to do so is plain duty, and only a mistaken sense of honour keeps silence. But there must be no exaggeration, malice, or personal ends in the informer. Classmates in school or college, fellow-servants, employees in great businesses, and the like, have not only a duty of loyalty to one another, but of loyalty to their superior. We are sometimes bound to be blind to, and dumb about, our associates’ evil deeds, but sometimes silence makes us accomplices.

Jacob had a right to know, and Joseph would have been wrong if he had not told him, the truth about his brothers. Their hatred shows that his purity had made their doing wrong more difficult. It is a grand thing when a young man’s presence deprives the Devil of elbow-room for his tricks. How much restraining influence such a one may exert!

Jacob’s somewhat foolish love, and still more foolish way of showing it, made matters worse. There were many excuses for him. He naturally clung to the son of his lost but never-forgotten first love, and as naturally found, in Joseph’s freedom from the vices of his other sons, a solace and joy. It has been suggested that the ‘long garment with sleeves,’ in which he decked the lad, indicated an intention of transferring the rights of the first-born to him, but in any case it meant distinguishing affection; and the father or mother who is weak enough to show partiality in the treatment of children need not wonder if their unwise love creates bitter heart-burnings. Perhaps, if Bilhah's and Zilpah's sons had had a little more sunshine of a father's love, they would have borne brighter flowers and sweeter fruit. It is fatal when a child begins to suspect that a parent is not fair.

So these surly brothers, who could not even say 'Peace be to thee!' [the common salutation] when they came across Joseph, had a good deal to say for themselves. It is a sad picture of the internal feuds of the house from which all nations were to be blessed. The Bible does not idealise its characters, but lets us see the seamy side of the tapestry, that we may the more plainly recognise the Mercy which forgives, and the mighty Providence which works through, such imperfect men. But the great lesson for all young people from the picture of Joseph's early days, when his whiteness rebuked the soiled lives of his brothers, as new-fallen snow the grimy cake, hardened and soiled on the streets, is, 'My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not.' Never mind a world's hatred, if you have a father's love. There is one Father who can draw His obedient children into the deepest secrets of His heart without withholding their portion from the most prodigal.

Joseph's dreams are the other principal point in the narrative. The chief incidents of his life turn on dreams,-his own, his fellow-prisoners', Pharaoh's. The narrative recognises them as divinely sent, and no higher form of divine communication appears to have been made to Joseph, He received no new revelations of religious truth. His mission was, not to bring fresh messages from heaven, but to effect the transference of the nation to Egypt. Hence the lower form of the communications made to him.

The meaning of both dreams is the same, but the second goes beyond the first in the grandeur of the emblems, and in the inclusion of the parents in the act of obeisance. Both sets of symbols were drawn from familiar sights. The homeliness of the 'sheaves' is in striking contrast with the grandeur of the 'sun, moon, and stars.' The interpretation of the first is ready to hand, because the sheaves were 'your sheaves' and 'my sheaf.' There was no similar key included in the second, and his brothers do not appear to have caught its meaning. It was Jacob who read it. Probably Rachel was dead when the dream came, but that need not make a difficulty.

Note that Joseph did not tell his dreams with elation, or with a notion that they meant anything particular. It is plainly the singularity of them that makes him repeat them, as is clearly indicated by the repeated ‘behold’ in his two reports. With perfect innocence of intention, and as he would have told any other strange dream, the lad repeats them. The commentary was the work of his brothers, who were ready to find proofs of his being put above them, and of his wish to humiliate them, in anything he said or did. They were wiser than he was. Perhaps they suspected that Jacob meant to set him at the head of the clan on his decease, and that the dreams were trumped up and told to them to prepare them for the decision which the special costume may have already hinted.

At all events, hatred is very suspicious, and ready to prick up its ears at every syllable that seems to speak of the advancement of its object.

There is a world of contempt, rage, and fear in the questions, ‘Shalt thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have dominion over us?’ The conviction that Joseph was marked out by God for a high position seems to have entered these rough souls, and to have been fuel to fire. Hatred and envy make a perilous mixture. Any sin can come from a heart drenched with these. Jacob seems to have been wise enough to make light of the dreams to the lad, though much of them in his heart. Youthful visions of coming greatness are often best discouraged. The surest way to secure their fulfilment is to fill the present with strenuous, humble work. ‘Do the duty that is nearest thee.’ ‘The true apprenticeship for a ruler is to serve.’ ‘Act, act, in the living present.’ The sheaves may come to bow down some day, but ‘my sheaf’ has to be cut and bound first, and the sooner the sickle is among the corn, the better.

But yet, on the other hand, let young hearts be true to their early visions, whether they say much about them or not. Probably it will be wisest to keep silence. But there shine out to many young men and women, at their start in life, bright possibilities of no ignoble sort, and rising higher than personal ambition, which it is the misery and sin of many to see ‘fade away into the light of common day,’ or into the darkness of night. Be not ‘disobedient to the heavenly vision'; for the dreams of youth are often the prophecies of what God means and makes it possible for the dreamer to be, if he wakes to work towards that fair thing which shone on him from afar.

42)Genesis 37:23-36

Genesis

MAN'S PASSIONS AND GOD'S PURPOSE

Gen. 37:23 - Gen. 37:36.

We have left the serene and lofty atmosphere of communion and saintship far above us. This narrative takes us down into foul depths. It is a hideous story of vulgar hatred and cruelty. God's name is never mentioned in it; and he is as far from the actors' thoughts as from the writer's words. The crime of the brothers is the subject, and the picture is painted in dark tones to teach large truths about sin.

1. The broad teaching of the whole story, which is ever being reiterated in Old Testament incidents, is that God works out His great purposes through even the crimes of unconscious men. There is an irony, if we may so say, in making the hatred of these men the very means of their brother's advancement, and the occasion of blessing to themselves. As coral insects work, not knowing the plan of their reef, still less the fair vegetation and smiling homes which it will one day carry, but blindly building from the material supplied by the ocean a barrier against it; so even evil-doers are carrying on God's plan, and sin is made to counterwork itself, and be the black channel through which the flashing water of life pours. Joseph's words [Gen. 50:20] give the point of view for the whole story: 'Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good . . .to save much people alive.' We can scarcely forget the still more wonderful example of the same thing, in the crime of crimes, when his brethren slew the Son of God-like Joseph, the victim of envy-and, by their crime, God's counsel of mercy for them and for all was fulfilled.

2. Following the narrative, Gen. 37:23 - Gen. 37:25 show us the poisonous fruit of brotherly hatred. The family, not the nation, is the social unit in

Genesis. From the beginning, we find the field on which sin works is the family relation. Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, and now the other children of Jacob and Joseph, attest the power of sin when it enters there, and illustrate the principle that the corruption of the best is the worst. The children of Rachel could not but be hated by the children of other mothers. Jacob's undisguised partiality for Joseph was a fault too, which wrought like yeast on the passions of his wild sons. The long-sleeved garment which he gave to the lad probably meant to indicate his purpose to bestow on him the right of the first-born forfeited by Reuben, and so the violent rage which it excited was not altogether baseless. The whole miserable household strife teaches the rottenness of the polygamous relation on which it rested, and the folly of paternal favouritism. So it carries teaching especially needed then, but not out of date now.

The swift passage of the purely inward sin of jealous envy into the murderous act, as soon as opportunity offered, teaches the short path which connects the inmost passions with the grossest outward deeds. Like Jonah's gourd, the smallest seed of hate needs but an hour or two of favouring weather to become a great tree, with all obscene and blood-seeking birds croaking in its branches. 'Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer,' Therefore the solemn need for guarding the heart from the beginnings of envy, and for walking in love.

The clumsy contrivance for murder without criminality, which Reuben suggested, is an instance of the shallow pretexts with which the sophistry of sin fools men before they have done the wrong thing. Sin's mask is generally dropped very soon after. The bait is useless when the hook is well in the fish's gills. 'Don't let us kill him. Let us put him into a cistern. He cannot climb up its bottle-shaped, smooth sides. But that is not our fault. Nobody will ever hear his muffled cries from its depths. But there will be no blood on our hands.' It was not the first time, nor is it the last, that men have tried to blink their responsibility for the consequences which they hoped would come of their crimes. Such excuses seem sound when we are being tempted; but, as soon as the rush of passion is past, they are found to be worthless. Like some cheap castings, they are only meant to be seen in front, where they are rounded and burnished. Get behind them, and you find them hollow.

‘They sat down to eat bread,’ Thomas Fuller pithily says: ‘With what heart could they say grace, either before or after meat?’ What a grim meal! And what an indication of their rude natures, seared consciences, and deadened affections!

This picture of the moral condition of the fathers of the Jewish tribes is surely a strong argument for the historical accuracy of the narrative. It would be strange if the legends of a race, instead of glorifying, should blacken, the characters of its founders. No motive can be alleged which would explain such a picture; its only explanation is its truth. The ugly story, too, throws vivid light on that thought, which prophets ever reiterated, ‘not for your sakes, but for My name’s sake.’ The divine choice of Israel was grounded, not on merit, but on sovereign purpose. And the undisguised plainness of the narrative of their sins is but of a piece with the tone of Scripture throughout. It never palliates the faults even of its best men. It tells its story without comment. It never indulges in condemnation any more than in praise. It is a perfect mirror; its office is to record, not to criticise. Many misconceptions of Old Testament morality would have been avoided by keeping that simple fact in view.

3. The ill-omened meal is interrupted by the sudden appearance, so picturesquely described, of the caravan of Ishmaelites with their loaded camels. Dothan was on or near the great trade route to Egypt, where luxury, and especially the custom of embalming, opened a profitable market for spices. The traders would probably not be particular as to the sort of merchandise they picked up on their road, and such an ‘unconsidered trifle’ as a slave or two would be neither here nor there. This opportune advent of the caravan sets a thought buzzing in Judah’s brain, which brings out a new phase of the crime. Hatred darkening to murder is bad enough; but hatred which has also an eye to business, and makes a profit out of a brother, is a shade or two blacker, because it means cold-blooded calculation and selfish advantage instead of raging passion. Judah’s cynical question avows the real motive of his intervention. He prefers the paltry gain from selling Joseph to the unprofitable luxury of killing him. It brings in regard to brotherly ties at the end, as a kind of homage paid to propriety, as if the obligations they involved were not broken as really by his proposal as by murder. Certainly it is strange logic which can say in one breath, ‘Let us sell

him; . . .for he is our brother,’ and finds the clause between buffer enough to keep these two contradictories from collision.

If any touch of conscience made the brothers prefer the less cruel alternative, one can only see here another illustration of the strange power which men have of limiting the working of conscience, and of the fact that when a greater sin has been resolved on, a smaller one gets to look almost like a virtue. Perhaps Judah and the rest actually thought themselves very kind and brotherly when they put their brother into strangers’ power, and so went back to their meal with renewed cheerfulness, both because they had gained their end without bloodshed, and because they had got the money. They did not think that every tear and pang which Joseph would shed and feel would be laid at their door.

We do not suppose that Joseph was meant to be, in the accurate sense of the word, a type of Christ. But the coincidence is not to be passed by, that these same powerful motives of envy and of greed were combined in His case too, and that there again a Judah [Judas] appears as the agent of the perfidy.

We may note that the appearance of the traders in the nick of time, suggesting the sale of Joseph, points the familiar lesson that the opportunity to do ill deeds often makes ill deeds done. The path for entering on evil is made fatally easy at first; that gate always stands wide. The Devil knows how to time his approaches. A weak nature, with an evil bias in it, finds everywhere occasions and suggestions to do wrong. But it is the evil nature which makes innocent things opportunities for evil. Therefore we have to be on our guard, as knowing that if we fall it is not circumstances, but ourselves, that made stumbling-blocks out of what might have been stepping-stones.

4. Leaving Joseph to pursue his sad journey, our narrative introduces for the first time Reuben, whose counsel, as the verses before the text tell us, it had been to cast the poor lad into the cistern. His motive had been altogether good; he wished to save life, and as soon as the others were out of the way, to bring Joseph up again and get him safely back to Jacob. In Gen. 42:22, Reuben himself reminds his brothers of what had passed. There he says that he had besought them not to ‘sin against the child,’ which naturally implies that he had wished them to do nothing to him, and that they ‘would not

hear.’ In the verses before the text he proposes the compromise of the pit, and the others ‘hear.’ So there seem to have been two efforts made by him-first, to shield Joseph from any harm, and then that half-and-half measure which was adopted. He is absent, while they carry out the plan, and from the cruel merriment of the feast-perhaps watching his opportunity to rescue, perhaps in sickness of heart and protest against the deed. Well meant and kindly motived as his action was-and self-sacrificing too, if, as is probable, Joseph was meant by Jacob as his successor in the forfeited birthright-his scheme breaks down, as attempts to mitigate evil by compliance and to make compromises with sinners usually do. The only one of the whole family who had some virtue in him, was too timid to take up a position of uncompromising condemnation. He thought it more polite to go part of the way, and to trust to being able to prevent the worst. That is always a dangerous experiment. It is often tried still; it never answers. Let a man stand to his guns, and speak out the condemnation that is in his heart; otherwise, he will be sure to go farther than he meant, he will lose all right of remonstrance, and will generally find that the more daring sinners have made his well-meant schemes to avert the mischief impossible.

5. The cruel trick by which Jacob was deceived is perhaps the most heartless bit of the whole heartless crime. It came as near an insult as possible. It was maliciously meant. The snarl about the coat, the studied use of ‘thy son’ as if the brothers disowned the brotherhood, the unfeeling harshness of choosing such a way of telling their lie-all were meant to give the maximum of pain, and betray their savage hatred of father and son, and its causes. Was Reuben’s mouth shut all this time? Evidently. From his language in Gen. 42:22, ‘His blood is required,’ he seems to have believed until then that Joseph had been killed in his absence. But he dared not speak. Had he told what he did know, the brothers had but to add, ‘And he proposed it himself,’ and his protestations of his good intentions would have been unheeded. He believed his brother dead, and perhaps thought it better that Jacob should think him slain by wild beasts than by brothers’ hands, as Reuben supposed him to be. But his shut mouth teaches again how dangerous his policy had been, and how the only road, which it is safe, in view of the uncertainties of the future, to take, is the plain road of resistance to evil and non-fellowship with its doers.

6. And what of the poor old father? His grief is unworthy of God’s wrestler. It is not the part of a devout believer in God’s providence to refuse to be comforted. There was no religious submission in his passionate sorrow. How unlike the quiet resignation which should have marked the recognition that the God who had been his guide was working here too! No doubt the hypocritical condolences of his children were as vinegar upon nitre. No doubt the loss of Joseph had taken away the one gentle and true son on whom his loneliness rested since his Rachel’s death, while he found no solace in the wild, passionate men who called him ‘father’ and brought him no ‘honour.’ But still his grief is beyond the measure which a true faith in God would have warranted; and we cannot but see that the dark picture which we have just been looking at gets no lighter or brighter tints from the demeanour of Jacob.

There are few bitterer sorrows than for a parent to see the children of his own sin in the sins of his children. Jacob might have felt that bitterness, as he looked round on the lovelessness and dark, passionate selfishness of his children, and remembered his own early crimes against Esau. He might have seen that his unwise fondness for the son of his Rachel had led to the brothers’ hatred, though he did not know that that hatred had plunged the arrow into his soul. Whether he knew it or not, his own conduct had feathered the arrow. He was drinking as he had brewed; and the heart-broken grief which darkened his later years had sprung from seed of his own sowing. So it is always. ‘Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.’

It is a miserable story of ignoble jealousy and cruel hate; and yet, over all this foaming torrent, God’s steadfast bow of peace shines. These crimes and this ‘affliction of Joseph’ were the direct path to the fulfilment of His purposes. As blind instruments, even in their rebellion and sin, men work out His designs. The lesson of Joseph’s bondage will one day be the summing up of the world’s history. ‘Thou makest the wrath of man to praise Thee: and with the remainder thereof Thou girdest Thyself.’

43)Genesis 39:20-23

GOODNESS IN A DUNGEON

Gen. 39:20 - Gen. 39:23. - Gen. 40:1 - Gen. 40:15.

Potiphar was ‘captain of the guard,’ or, as the title literally runs, chief of the executioners. In that capacity he had charge of the prison, which was connected with his house [Gen. 40:3]. It is, therefore, quite intelligible that he should have put Joseph in confinement on his own authority, and the distinction drawn between such a prisoner and the ‘king’s prisoners,’ who were there by royal warrant or due process of law, is natural. Such high-handed treatment of a slave was a small matter, and it was merciful as well as arrogant, for death would have been the punishment of the crime of which Joseph was accused. Either Potiphar was singularly lenient, or, as is perhaps more probable, he did not quite believe his wife’s story, and thought it best to hush up a scandal. The transfer of Joseph from the house to the adjoining prison would be quietly managed, and then no more need be said about an ugly business.

So now we see him at the lowest ebb of his fortunes, flung down in a moment by a lie from the height to which he had slowly been climbing, having lost the confidence of his master, and earned the unslumbering hatred of a wicked woman. He had wrecked his career by his goodness. ‘What a fool!’ says the world. ‘How badly managed things are in this life,’ say doubters, ‘that virtue should not be paid by prosperity!’ But the end, even the nearer end in this life, will show whether he was a fool, and whether things are so badly arranged; and the lesson enforced by the picture of Joseph in his dungeon, and which young beginners in life have special need to learn, is that, come what will of it, right is right, and sin is sin, that consequences are never to deter from duty, and that it is better to have a clean conscience and be in prison than do wickedness and sit at a king’s table. A very threadbare lesson, but needing to be often repeated.

‘But the Lord was with Joseph.’ That is one of the eloquent ‘buts’ of Scripture. The prison is light when God is there, and chains do not chafe if He wraps His love round them. Many a prisoner for God since Joseph’s time has had his experience repeated, and received tenderer tokens from Him in a dungeon than ever before. Paul the prisoner, John in Patmos, Bunyan in Bedford jail, George Fox in Lancaster Castle, Rutherford in

Aberdeen, and many more, have found the Lord with them, and showing them His kindness. We may all be sure that, if ever faithfulness to conscience involves us in difficulties, the faithfulness and the difficulties will combine to bring to us sweet and strong tokens of God's approval and presence, the winning of which will make a prison a palace and a gate of heaven.

Joseph's relations to jailer and fellow-prisoners are beautiful and instructive. The former is called 'the keeper of the prison,' and is evidently Potiphar's deputy, in more immediate charge of the prison. Of course, the great man had an underling to do the work, and probably that underling was not chosen for sweetness of temper or facile leniency to his charges. But he fell under the charm of Joseph's character-all the more readily, perhaps, because his occupation had not brought many good men to his knowledge. This jewel would flash all the more brightly for the dark background of criminals, and the jailer would wonder at a type of character so unlike what he was accustomed to. Eastern prisons to-day present a curious mixture of cruelty and companionship. The jailers are on intimate terms with prisoners, and yet are ready to torture them. There is no discipline, nor any rules, nor inspection. The jailer does as he likes. So it seems to have been in Egypt, and there would be nothing unnatural in making a prisoner jailer of the rest, and leaving everything in his hands. The 'keeper of the prison' was lazy, like most of us, and very glad to shift duties on to any capable shoulders. Such a thing would, of course, be impossible with us, but it is a bit of true local colouring here.

Joseph won hearts because God was with him, as the story is careful to point out. Our religion should recommend us, and therefore itself, to those who have to do with us. It is not enough that we should be severely righteous, as Joseph had been, or ready to meet trouble with stoical resignation, but we are to be gentle and lovable, gracious towards men, because we receive grace from God. We owe it to our Lord and to our fellows, and to ourselves, to be magnets to attract to Jesus, by showing how fair He can make a life. Joseph in prison found work to do, and he did not shirk it. He might have said to himself: 'This is poor work for me, who had all Potiphar's house to rule. Shall such a man as I come down to such small tasks as this?' He might have sulked or desponded in idleness, but he took the kind of work that offered, and did his best by it. Many young people nowadays do nothing, because they think themselves above the small humdrum duties that lie near them. It would do some of us good to remember Joseph in the jail, and his cheerful discharge of what his hands found to do there.

Of course, work done ‘because the Lord was with him,’ in the consciousness of His presence, and in obedience to Him, went well. ‘The Lord made it to prosper,’ as He always will make such work.

‘When thou dost favour any action,
It runs, it flies.’

And even if, sometimes, work done in the fear of the Lord does not outwardly prosper, it does so in deepest truth, if it work in us the peaceable fruit of righteousness. We need to have a more Christian idea of what constitutes prosperity, and then we shall understand that there are no exceptions to the law that, if a man does his work by God and with God and for God, ‘that which he does, the Lord makes it to prosper.’

The help that Joseph gave by interpreting the two high officials’ dreams cannot be considered here in detail, but we note that the names of similar officers, evidently higher in rank than we should suppose, with our notions of bakers and butlers, are found in Egyptian documents, and that these two were ‘king’s prisoners,’ and put in charge of Potiphar, who alleviated their imprisonment by detailing Joseph as their attendant, thus showing that his feeling to the young Hebrew was friendly still. Dreams are the usual method of divine communication in Genesis, and belong to a certain stage in the process of revelation. The friend of God, who is in touch with Him, can interpret these. ‘The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him,’ and it is still true that they who live close by God have insight into His purposes. Joseph showed sympathy with the two dreamers, and his question, ‘Why look ye so sadly?’ unlocked their hearts. He was not so swallowed up in his own trouble as to be blind to the signs of another’s sorrow, or slow to try to comfort. Grief is apt to make us selfish, but it is meant to make us tender of heart and quick of hand to help our fellows in calamity. We win comfort for our own sorrows by trying to soothe those of others. Jesus stooped to suffer that He might succour them that suffer, and we are to tread in His steps.

44)Genesis 41:38-48

Genesis

JOSEPH, THE PRIME MINISTER

Gen. 41:38 - Gen. 41:48.

At seventeen years of age Joseph was sold for a slave; at thirty he was prime minister of Egypt [Gen. xxxvii, 2; xli. 46]. How long his prison life lasted is uncertain; but it was long enough for the promises contained in his early dreams to 'try him' [Pro. 5:19] whether his faith would stand apparent disappointment and weary delay. Like all the Scripture narratives, this history of Joseph has little to say about feelings, and prefers facts. But we can read between the lines, and be tolerably sure that the thirteen years of trial were well endured, and that the inward life had grown so as to fit him for his advancement. We have here a full-length portrait of the prime minister, or vizier, which brings out three points-his elevation, his naturalisation, and his administration.

Joseph had not only interpreted Pharaoh's dream, but had suggested a policy in preparation for the coming famine. He had recommended the appointment of 'a wise and discreet man,' with supreme authority over the land. Pharaoh first consulted 'his servants,' and, with their consent, possibly not very hearty, appointed the proposer of the plan as its carrier-out, quoting to him his own words, 'wise and discreet.'

The sudden installing of an unknown prisoner in high office has often been thought hard to believe, and has been pointed to as proof of the legendary character of the story. But the ground on which Pharaoh put it goes far to explain it. He and his servants had come to believe that 'God' spoke through this man, that 'the Spirit of God' was in him. So here was a divinely sent messenger, whom it would be impiety and madness to reject. Observe that Pharaoh and Joseph both speak in this chapter of 'God.' There was a common ground of recognition of a divine Being on which they met.

The local colour of the story indicates a period before the fuller revelation, which drew so broad a line of demarcation between Israel and the other nations.

Joseph’s sudden promotion is made the more intelligible by the probability which the study of Egyptian history has given, that the Pharaoh who made him his second in command was one of the Hyksos conquerors who dominated Egypt for a long period. They would have no prejudices against Joseph on account of his being a foreigner. A dynasty of alien conquerors has generally an open door for talent, and cares little who a man’s father is, or where he comes from, if he can do his work. And Joseph, by not being an Egyptian born, would be all the fitter an instrument for carrying out the policy which he had suggested.

His ceremonial investiture with the insignia of office is true to Egyptian manners. The signet ring, as the emblem of full authority; the chain, as a mark of dignity; the robe of ‘fine linen’ [or rather of cotton], which was a priestly dress-all are illustrated by the monuments. The proclamation made before him as he rode in the second chariot has been very variously interpreted. It has been taken for a Hebraised Egyptian word, meaning ‘Cast thyself down’; and this interpretation was deemed the most probable, until Assyrian discovery brought to light ‘that *abarakku* is the Assyrian name of the grand vizier’ [Fr. Delitzsch, *Hebrew Language Viewed in the Light of Assyrian Research*, p. 26]. Sayce proposes another explanation, also from the cuneiform tablets: ‘There was a word *abrik* in the Sumerian language, which signified a seer, and was borrowed by the Semitic Babylonians under the varying forms of *abrikku* and *abarakku*. It is *abrikku* which we have in Genesis, and the title applied by the people to the "seer" Joseph proves to be the one we should most naturally expect.’ The Tel el-Amarna tablets show that the knowledge of cuneiform writing was common in Egypt [Sayce, *Higher Criticism and the Monuments*, p. 214]. This explanation is tempting, but it is perhaps scarcely probable that the proclamation should have been in any other language than Egyptian, or should have had reference to anything but Joseph’s new office. It was not as seer that he was to be obeyed, but as Pharaoh’s representative, even though he had become the latter because he had proved himself the former.

But in any case, the whole context is accurately and strongly Egyptian. Was there any point in the history of Israel, down to an impossibly late date, except the time of Moses, at which Jewish writers were so familiar with Egypt as to have been capable of producing so true a picture?

The lessons of this incident are plain. First stands out, clear and full, the witness it bears to God's faithfulness, and to His sovereign sway over all events. What are all the persons concerned in the narrative but unconscious instruments of His? The fierce brothers, the unconcerned slave-dealers, Potiphar, his wife, the prisoners, Pharaoh, are so many links in a chain; but they are also men, and therefore free to act, and guilty if acting wrongly. Men execute God's purposes, even when unconscious or rebellious, but are responsible, and often punished, for the acts which He uses to effect His designs.

Joseph's thirteen years of trial, crowned with sudden prosperity, may read all of us, and especially young men and women, a lesson of patience. Many of us have to fight our way through analogous difficulties at the outset of our career; and we are apt to lose heart and get restive when success seems slow to come, and one hindrance after another blocks our road. But hindrances are helps. If one of Joseph's misfortunes had been omitted, his good fortune would never have come. If his brethren had not hated him, if he had not been sold, if he had not been imprisoned, he would never have ruled Egypt. Not one thread in the tapestry could have been withdrawn without spoiling the pattern. We cannot afford to lose one of our sorrows or trials. There would be no summer unless winter had gone before. There is a bud or a fruit for every snowflake, and a bird's song for every howl of the storm.

Plainly, too, does the story read the lesson of quiet doing of the work and accepting the circumstances of the moment. Joseph was being prepared for the administration of a kingdom by his oversight of Potiphar's house and of the prison. His character was matured by his trials, as iron is consolidated by heavy hammers. To resist temptation, to do modestly and sedulously whatever work comes to our hands, to be content to look after a jail even though we have dreamed of sun and moon bowing down to us, is the best apprenticeship for whatever elevation circumstances-or, to speak more devoutly, God-intends for us. Young men thrown into city life far away from their homes, and whispered to by many seducing voices, have often to suffer for keeping themselves unspotted; but they are being strengthened by rough discipline, and will get such promotion, in due time, as is good for them. But outward success is not God's best gift. It was better to be the Joseph who deserved his high place, than to have the place. The character which he had grown into was more than the trappings which Pharaoh put on him. And such a character is always the reward of such patience, faith, and self-control, whether chains and chariots are added or not.

Little need be said about the other points of the story. Joseph's naturalisation as an Egyptian was complete. His name was changed, in token that he had completely become a subject of Pharaoh's. The meaning of the formidable-looking polysyllable, which Egyptian lips found easier than 'Joseph,' is uncertain. 'At present the origin of the first syllable is still doubtful, and though the latter part of the name is certainly the Egyptian *n-ti-pa-ankh* ["of the life"], it is difficult to say in which of its different senses the expression *pa-ankh* ["the life"] is employed' [Sayce, *ut supra*, p. 213]. The prevailing opinion of Egyptian experts is that it means 'Support of life.'

The naturalising was completed by his marriage to Asenath [supposed to mean 'One belonging to the goddess Neith'], a daughter of a high officer of state, Poti-phera [meaning, like its shortened form, Potiphar, 'The gift of Ra' the sun-god]. Such an alliance placed him at once in the very innermost circle of Egyptian aristocracy. It may have been a bitter pill for the priest to swallow, to give his daughter to a man of yesterday, and an alien; but, just as probably, he too looked to Joseph with some kind of awe, and was not unwilling to wed Asenath to the first man in the empire, wherever he had started up from.

But should not Joseph's religion have barred such a marriage? The narrator gives no judgment on the fact, and we have to form our own estimate. But it is not to be estimated as if it had occurred five or six centuries later. The family of Jacob was not so fenced off, nor was its treasure of revelation so complete, as afterwards. We may be fairly sure that Joseph felt no inconsistency between his ancestral faith, which had become his own in his trials, and this union. He was risking a great deal; that is certain. Whether the venture ended well or ill, we know not. Only we may be very sure that a marriage in which a common faith is not a strong bond of union lacks its highest sanctity, and is perilously apt to find that difference in religious convictions is a strong separator.

Joseph's administration opens up questions as to Egyptian land tenure, and the like, which cannot be dealt with here. 'In the earlier days of the monarchy the country was in the hands of great feudal lords; . . .the land belonged to them absolutely. . .. But after the convulsion caused by the Hyksos conquest and the war of independence, this older system of land tenure was completely changed. . .. The Pharaoh is the fountain head, not only of honour, but of property as well. . .. The people ceased to have any rights of their own' [Sayce, *ut supra*, p. 216].

We may note Joseph's immediate entrance upon office and his characteristic energy in it. He 'went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt.' No grass grew under this man's feet. He was ubiquitous, personally overseeing everything for seven long years. Wasteful consumption of the abundant crops had to be restrained, storehouses to be built, careful records of the contents to be made, after Egyptian fashion. The people, who could not look so far as seven years ahead, and wanted to enjoy, or make money out of, the good harvests, had to be looked after, and an army of officials to be kept in order. Dignity meant work for him. Like all true men, he thought more of his duty than of his honours. Depend on it, he did not wear his fine clothes or ride in the second chariot, when he was hurrying about the country at his task.

He had come 'out of prison to reign,' and, as we all find, if we are God's servants, to reign means to serve, and the higher the place the harder the task. The long years of waiting had nourished powers which the seven years of busy toil tested. We must make ourselves, by God's help, ready, in obscurity, and especially in youth, for whatever may be laid on us in after days. And if we understand what life here means, we shall be more covetous of spheres of diligent service than of places of shining dignity. Whatever our task, let us do it, as Joseph did his, with strenuous concentration, knowing, as he did, that the years in which it is possible are but few at the longest.

45)Genesis 45:1-15

Genesis

RECOGNITION AND RECONCILIATION

Gen. 45:1 - Gen. 45:15.

I

If the writer of this inimitable scene of Joseph's reconciliation with his brethren was not simply an historian, he was one of the great dramatic geniuses of the world, master of a vivid minuteness like Defoe's, and able to touch the springs of tears by a pathetic simplicity like his who painted the death of Lear. Surely theories of legend and of mosaic work fail here.

1. We have, first, disclosure. The point at which the impenetrable, stern ruler breaks down is significant. It is after Judah's torrent of intercession for Benjamin, and self-sacrificing offer of himself for a substitute and a slave. Why did this touch Joseph so keenly? Was it not because his brother's speech shows that filial and fraternal affection was now strong enough in him to conquer self? He had sent Joseph to the fate which he is now ready to accept. He and the rest had thought nothing of the dagger they plunged into their father's heart by selling Joseph; but now he is prepared to accept bondage if he may save his father's grey head an ache. The whole of Joseph's harsh, enigmatical treatment had been directed to test them, and to ascertain if they were the same fierce, cruel men as of old. Now, when the doubt is answered, he can no longer dam back the flood of forgiving love. The wisest pardoning kindness seeks the assurance of sorrow and change in the offender, before it can safely and wholesomely enjoy the luxury of letting itself out in tears of reconciliation. We do not call Joseph a type of Christ; but the plain process of forgiveness in his brotherly heart is moulded by the law which applies to God's pardon as to ours. All the wealth of yearning pardon is there, before contrition and repentance; but it is not good for the offender that it should be lavished on him, impenitent.

What a picture that is of the all-powerful ruler, choking down his emotion, and hurriedly ordering the audience chamber to be cleared! How many curious glances would be cast over their shoulders, by the slowly withdrawing crowd, at the strange group-the viceroy, usually so calm, thus inexplicably excited, and the huddled, rude shepherds, bewildered and afraid of what was coming next, in this unaccountable country! How eavesdroppers would linger as near as they durst, and how looks would be exchanged as the sounds of passionate weeping rewarded their open ears! The deepest feelings are not to be flaunted before the world. The man who displays his tears, and the man who is too proud to shed them, are both wrong; but perhaps it is worse to weep in public than not to weep at all.

‘I am Joseph.’ Were ever the pathos of simplicity, and the simplicity of pathos, more nobly expressed than in these two words?-[There are but two in the Hebrew.] Has the highest dramatic genius ever winged an arrow which goes more surely to the heart than that? The question, which hurries after the disclosure, seems strange and needless; but it is beautifully self-revealing, as expressive of agitation, and as disclosing a son’s longing, and perhaps, too, as meant to relieve the brothers’ embarrassment, and, as it were, to wrap the keen edge of the disclosure in soft wool.

2. We have, next, conscience-stricken silence. No wonder his brethren ‘could not answer’ and ‘were troubled at his presence.’ They had found their brother a ruler; they had found the ruler their brother. Their former crime had turned what might have been a joy into a terror. Already they had come to know and regret it. It might seem to their startled consciences as if now they were about to expiate it. They would remember the severity of Joseph’s past intercourse; they see his power, and cannot but be doubtful of his intentions. Had all his strange conduct been manoeuvring to get them, Benjamin and all, into his toils, that one blow might perfect his revenge? Our suspicions are the reflections of our own hearts. So there they stand in open-mouthed, but dumb, wonder and dread. It would task the pencil of him who painted, on the mouldering refectory wall at Milan, the conflicting emotions of the apostles, at the announcement of the betrayer, to portray that silent company of abased and trembling criminals. They are an illustration of the profitlessness of all crime. Sin is, as one of its Hebrew names tells us, missing the mark-whether we think of it as fatally failing to reach the ideal of conduct, or as always, by a divine nemesis, failing to hit even the shabby end it aims at. ‘Every rogue is a roundabout fool.’ They put

Joseph in the pit, and here he is on a throne. They have stained their souls, and embittered their father's life for twenty-two long years, and the dreams have come true, and all their wickedness has not turned the stream of the divine purpose, any more than the mud dam built by a child diverts the Mississippi. One flash has burned up their whole sinful past, and they stand scorched and silent among the ruins. So it always is. Sooner or later the same certainty of the futility of his sin will overwhelm every sinful man, and dumb self-condemnation will stand in silent acknowledgment of evil desert before the throne of the Brother, who is now the Prince and the Judge, on whose fiat hangs life or death. To see Christ enthroned should be joy; but it may be turned into terror and silent anticipation of His just condemnation.

3. We have encouragement and complete forgiveness. That invitation to come close up to him, with which Joseph begins the fuller disclosure of his heart, is a beautiful touch. We can fancy how tender the accents, and how, with some lightening of fear, but still hesitatingly and ashamed, the shepherds, unaccustomed to courtly splendours, approached. The little pause while they draw near helps him to self-command, and he resumes his words in a calmer tone. With one sentence of assurance that he is their brother, he passes at once into that serene region where all passion and revenge die, unable to breathe its keen, pure air. The comfort which he addresses to their penitence would have been dangerous, if spoken to men blind to the enormity of their past. But it will not make a truly repentant conscience less sensitive, though it may alleviate the aching of the wound, to think that God has used even its sin for His own purposes. It will not take away the sense of the wickedness of the motive to know that a wonderful providence has rectified the consequences. It will rather deepen the sense of evil, and give new cause of adoration of the love that pardons the wrong, and the providence that neutralises the harm.

Joseph takes the true point of view, which we are all bound to occupy, if we would practise the Christian grace of forgiveness. He looks beyond the mere human hate and envy to the divine purpose. 'The sword is theirs; the hand is Thine.' He can even be grateful to his foes who have been unintentionally his benefactors. He thinks of the good that has come out of their malice, and anger dies within him.

Highest attainment of all, the good for which he is grateful is not his all-but-regal dignity, but the power to save and gladden those who would fain have slain, and had saddened him for many a weary year. We read in these utterances of a lofty piety and of a singularly gentle heart, the fruit of sorrow and the expression of thoughts which had slowly grown up in his mind, and had now been long familiar there. Such a calm, certain grasp of the divine shaping and meaning of his life could not have sprung up all at once in him, as he looked at the conscience-stricken culprits cowering before him. More than natural sweetness and placability must have gone to the making of such a temper of forgiveness. He must have been living near the Fountain of all mercy to have had so full a cup of it to offer. Because he had caught a gleam of the divine pardon, he becomes a mirror of it; and we may fairly see in this ill-used brother, yearning over the half-sullen sinners, and seeking to open a way for his forgiveness to steal into their hearts, and rejoicing over his very sorrows which have fitted him to save them alive, and satisfy them in the days of famine, an adumbration of our Elder Brother's forgiving love and saving tenderness.

4. The second part of Joseph's address is occupied with his message to Jacob, and shows how he longed for his father's presence. There is something very natural and beautiful in the repeated exhortations to haste, as indicating the impatient love of a long-absent son. If his heart was so true to his father, why had he sent him no message for all these years? Egypt was near enough, and for nine years now he had been in power. Surely he could have gratified his heart. But he could not have learned by any other means his brethren's feelings, and if they were still what they had been, no intercourse would be possible. He could only be silent, and yearn for the way to open in God's providence, as it did.

The message to Jacob is sent from 'thy son Joseph,' in token that the powerful ruler lays his dignity at his father's feet. No elevation will ever make a true son forget his reverence for his father. If he rise higher in the world, and has to own an old man, away in some simple country home, for his sire, he will be proud to do it. The enduring sanctity of the family ties is not the least valuable lesson from our narrative for this generation, where social conditions are so often widely different in parents and in children. There is an affectionate spreading out of all his glory before his father's old eyes; not that he cared much about it for himself, since, as we have seen, elevation to him meant mainly work, but because he knew how the eyes would glisten at the sight. His mother, who would have been proud of him, is gone, but he has still the joy of gladdening his father by the exhibition of his dignity. It bespeaks a simple nature, unspoiled by prosperity, to delight thus in his father's delight, and to wish the details of all his splendour to be told him. A statesman who takes most pleasure in his elevation because of the good he can do by it, and because it will please the old people at home, must be a pure and lovable man. The command has another justification in the necessity to assure his father of the wisdom of so great a change. God had set him in the Promised Land, and a very plain divine injunction was needed to warrant his leaving it. Such a one was afterwards given in vision; but the most emphatic account of his son's honour and power was none the less required to make the old Jacob willing to abandon so much, and go into such strange conditions.

We have another instance of the difference between man's purposes and God's counsel in this message. Joseph's only thought is to afford his family temporary shelter during the coming five years of famine. Neither he nor they knew that this was the fulfilment of the covenant with Abraham, and the bringing of them into the land of their oppression for four centuries. No shadow of that future was cast upon their joy, and yet, the steady march of God's plan was effected along the path which they were ignorantly preparing. The road-maker does not know what bands of mourners, or crowds of holiday makers, or troops of armed men may pass along it.

5. This wonderfully beautiful scene ends with the kiss of full reconciliation and frank communion. All the fear is out of the brothers' hearts. It has washed away all the envy along with it. The history of Jacob's household had hitherto been full of sins against family life. Now, at last, they taste the sweetness of fraternal love. Joseph, against whom they had sinned, takes the initiative, flinging himself with tears on the neck of Benjamin, his own mother's son, nearer to him than all the others, crowding his pent-up love in one long kiss. Then, with less of passionate affection, but more of pardoning love, he kisses his contrite brothers. The offender is ever less ready to show love than the offended. The first step towards reconciliation, whether of man with man or of man with God, comes from the aggrieved.

We always hate those whom we have harmed; and if enmity were ended only by the advances of the wrong-doer, it would be perpetual. The injured has the prerogative of praying the injurer to be reconciled. So was it in Pharaoh’s throne-room on that long past day; so is it still in the audience chamber of heaven. ‘He that might the vantage best have took found out the remedy.’ ‘We love Him, because He first loved us.’

The pardoned men find their tongues at last. Forgiveness has opened their lips, and though their reverence and thanks are no less, their confidence and familiarity are more. How they would talk when once the terror was melted away! So should it be with the soul which has tasted the sweetness of Christ’s forgiving love, and has known ‘the kisses of His mouth.’ Long, unrestrained, and happy should be the intercourse which we forgiven sinners keep up with our Brother, the Prince of all the land. ‘After that his brethren talked with him.’

JOSEPH, THE PARDONER AND PRESERVER

II

THE noble words in which Joseph dissipates his brothers’ doubts have, as their first characteristic, the recognition of the God by whom his career had been shaped, and, for their next, the recognition of the purpose for which it had been. There is a world of tenderness and forgivingness in the addition made to his first words in Gen. 45:4, ‘Joseph, *your brother*.’ He owns the mystic bond of kindred, and thereby assures them of his pardon for their sin against it. It was right that he should remind them of their crime, even while declaring his pardon. But he rises high above all personal considerations and graciously takes the place of soother, instead of that of accuser. Far from cherishing thoughts of anger or revenge, he tries to lighten the reproaches of their own consciences. Thrice over in four verses he traces his captivity to God. He had learned that wisdom in his long years of servitude, and had not forgotten it in those of rule.

There will be little disposition in us to visit offences against ourselves on the offenders, if we discern God’s purpose working through our sorrows, and see, as the Psalmist did, that even our foes are ‘ men which are Thy hand, O Lord.’ True, His overruling providence does not make their guilt less; but the recognition of it destroys all disposition to revenge, and injured and injurer may one day unite in adoring the result of what the One suffered at the other's hands. Surely, some Christian persecutors and their victims have thus joined hands in heaven. If we would cultivate the habit of seeing God behind second causes, our hearts would be kept free from much wrath and bitterness.

Joseph was as certain of the purpose as of the source of his elevation. He saw now what he had been elevated for, and he eagerly embraced the task which was a privilege. No doubt, he had often brooded over the thought, 'Why am I thus lifted up?' and had felt the privilege of being a nation's saviour; but now he realises that he has a part to play in fulfilling God's designs in regard to the seed of Abraham. Cloudy as his outlook into the future may have been, he knew that great promises affecting all nations were intertwined with his family, separation from whom had been a sorrow for years. But now the thought comes to him with sudden illumination and joy: 'This, then, is what it all has meant, that I should be a link in the chain of God's workings.' He knows himself to be God's instrument for effecting His covenant promises. How small a thing honour and position became in comparison!

We cannot all have great tasks in the line of God's purposes, but we can all feel that our little ones are made great by being seen to be in it. The less we think about chariots and gold chains, and the more we try to find out what God means by setting us where we are, and to do that, the better for our peace and true dignity. A true man does not care for the rewards of work half as much as for the work itself. Find out what God intends, and never mind whether He puts you in a dungeon or in a palace. Both places lie on the road which He has marked and, in either, the main thing is to do His will.

Next comes the swiftly devised plan for carrying out God's purpose. It sounds as if Joseph, with prompt statesmanship, had struck it out then and there. At all events, he pours it forth with contagious earnestness and haste. Note how he says over and over again 'My father,' as if he loved to dwell on the name, but also as if he had not yet completely realised the renewal of the broken ties of brotherhood. It was some trial of the stuff he was made of, to have to bring his father and his family to be stared at, and perhaps mocked at, by the court. Many a successful man would be very much annoyed if his old father, in his country clothes, and hands roughened by toil, sat down beside him in his prosperity. Joseph had none of that baseness. Jacob would come, if at all, as a half-starved immigrant, and would be ‘an abomination to the Egyptians.’ But what of that? He was ‘my father,’ and his son knows no better use to make of his dignity than to compel reverence for Jacob’s grey hairs, which he will take care shall *not* be ‘brought down with sorrow to the grave.’ It is a very homely lesson-never be ashamed of your father. But in these days, when children are often better educated than their parents, and rise above them in social importance, it is a very needful one.

The first overtures of reconciliation should come from the side of the injured party. That is Christ’s law, and if it were Christians’ practice, there would be fewer alienations among them. It is Christ’s law, because it is Christ’s own way of dealing with us. He, too, was envied, and sold by His brethren. His sufferings were meant ‘to preserve life.’ Stephen’s sermon in the Sanhedrin dwells on Joseph as a type of Christ; and the typical character is seen not least distinctly in this, that He against whom we have sinned pleads with us, seeks to draw us nearer to Himself, and to lead us to put away all hard thoughts of Him, and to cherish all loving ones towards Him, by showing us how void His heart is of anger against us, and how full of yearning love and of gracious intention to provide for us a dwelling-place, with abundance of all needful good, beside Himself, while the years of famine shall last.

46)Genesis 47:1-8

Genesis

GROWTH BY TRANSPLANTING

Gen. 47:1 - Gen. 47:12.

1. The conduct of Joseph in reference to the settlement in Goshen is an example of the possibility of uniting worldly prudence with high religious

principle and great generosity of nature. He had promised his brothers a home in that fertile eastern district, which afforded many advantages in its proximity to Canaan, its adaptation to pastoral life, and its vicinity to Joseph when in Zoan, the capital. But he had not consulted Pharaoh, and, however absolute his authority, it scarcely stretched to giving away Egyptian territory without leave. So his first care, when the wanderers arrive, is to manage the confirmation of the grant. He goes about it with considerable astuteness-a hereditary quality, which is redeemed from blame because used for unselfish purposes and unstained by deceit. He does not tell Pharaoh how far he had gone, but simply announces that his family are in Goshen, as if awaiting the monarch's further pleasure. Then he introduces a deputation, no doubt carefully chosen, of five of his brothers [as if the whole number would have been too formidable], previously instructed how to answer. He knows what Pharaoh is in the habit of asking, or he knows that he can lead him to ask the required question, which will bring out the fact of their being shepherds, and utilise the prejudice against that occupation, to ensure separation in Goshen. All goes as he had arranged. Thanks partly to the indifference of the king, who seems to have been rather a *roi fainéant* in the hands of his energetic *maire du palais*, and to have been contented to give, with a flourish of formality, as a command to Joseph, what Joseph had previously carefully suggested to him [vers. 6, 7]. There is nothing unfair in all this. It is good, shrewd management, and no fault can be found with it; but it is a new trait in the ideal character of a servant of God, and contrasts strongly with the type shown in Abraham. None the less, it is a legitimate element in the character and conduct of a good man, set down to do God's work in such a world. Joseph is a saint and a politician. His shrewdness is never craft; sagacity is not alien to consecration. No doubt it has to be carefully watched lest it degenerate; but prudence is as needful as enthusiasm, and he is the complete man who has a burning fire down in his heart to generate the force that drives him, and a steady hand on the helm, and a keen eye on the chart, to guide him. Be ye 'wise as serpents' but also 'harmless as doves.'

2. We may note in Joseph's conduct also an instance of a man in high office and not ashamed of his humble relations. One of the great lessons meant to be taught by the whole patriarchal period was the sacredness of the family. That is, in some sense, the keynote of Joseph's history. Here we see family

love, which had survived the trial of ill-usage and long absence, victorious over the temptation of position and high associates. It took some nerve and a great deal of affection, for the viceroy, whom envious and sarcastic courtiers watched, to own his kin. What a sweet morsel for malicious tongues it would be, ‘Have you heard? He is only the son of an old shepherd, who is down in Goshen, come to pick up some crumbs there!’ One can fancy the curled lips and the light laugh, as the five brothers, led by the great man himself, made their rustic reverences to Pharaoh. It is as if some high official in Paris were to walk in half a dozen peasants in blouse and sabots, and present them to the president as ‘my brothers.’ It was a brave thing to do; and it teaches a lesson which many people, who have made their way in the world, would be nobler and more esteemed if they learned.

3. The brother’s words to Pharaoh are another instance of that ignorant carrying out of the divine purposes which we have already had to notice. They evidently contemplate only a temporary stay in the country. They say that they are come ‘to *sojourn*’-the verb from which are formed the noun often rendered ‘*strangers*,’ and that which Jacob uses in Gen. 47:9, ‘my *pilgrimage*.’ The reason for their coming is given as the transient scarcity of pasturage in Canaan, which implies the intention of return as soon as that was altered. Joseph had the same idea of the short duration of their stay; and though Jacob had been taught by vision that the removal was in order to their being made a great nation, it does not seem that his sons’ intentions were affected by that-if they knew it. So mistaken are our estimates. We go to a place for a month, and we stay in it for twenty years. We go to a place to settle for life, and our tent-pegs are pulled up in a week. They thought of five years, and it was to be nearly as many centuries. They thought of temporary shelter and food; God meant an education of them and their descendants. Over all this story the unseen Hand hovers, chastising, guiding, impelling; and the human agents are free and yet fulfilling an eternal purpose, blind and yet accountable, responsible for motives, and mercifully ignorant of consequences. So we all play our little parts. We have no call to be curious as to what will come of our deeds. This end of the action, the motive of it, is our care; the other end, the outcome of it, is God’s business to see to.

4. We may also observe how trivial incidents are wrought into God’s scheme. The Egyptian hatred of the shepherd class secured one of the prime reasons for the removal from Canaan-the unimpeded growth of a tribe into a nation. There was no room for further peaceful and separate expansion in that thickly populated country. Nor would there have been in Egypt, unless under the condition of comparative isolation, which could not have been obtained in any other way. Thus an unreasonable prejudice, possibly connected with religious ideas, became an important factor in the development of Israel; and, once again, we have to note the wisdom of the great Builder who uses not only gold, silver, and precious stones, but even wood, hay, stubble-follies and sins-for His edifice.

5. The interview of Jacob with Pharaoh is pathetic and beautiful. The old man comports himself, in all the later history of Joseph, as if done with the world, and waiting to go. ‘Let me die, since I have seen thy face,’ was his farewell to life. He takes no part in the negotiation about Goshen, but has evidently handed over all temporal cares to younger hands. A halo of removedness lies round his grey hairs, and to Pharaoh he behaves as one withdrawn from fleeting things, and, by age and nearness to the end, superior even to a king’s dignity. As he enters the royal presence he does not do reverence, but invokes a blessing upon him. ‘The less is blessed of the better.’ He has nothing to do with court ceremonials or conventionalities. The hoary head is a crown of honour, Pharaoh recognises his right to address him thus by the kindly question as to his age, which implied respect for his years. The answer of the ‘Hebrew Ulysses,’ as Stanley calls him, breathes a spirit of melancholy not unnatural in one who had once more been uprooted, and found himself again a wanderer in his old age. The tremulous voice has borne the words across all the centuries, and has everywhere evoked a response in the hearts of weary and saddened men. Look at the component parts of this pensive retrospect.

Life has been to him a ‘pilgrimage’. He thinks of all his wanderings from that far-off day when at Bethel he received the promise of God’s presence ‘in all places whither thou goest,’ till this last happy and yet disturbing change. But he is thinking not only, perhaps not chiefly, of the circumstances, but of the spirit, of his life. This is, no doubt, the confession ‘that they were strangers and pilgrims’ referred to in the Epistle to the

Hebrews. He was a pilgrim, not because he had often changed his place of abode, but because he sought the ‘city which hath foundations,’ and therefore could not be at home here. The goal of his life lay in the far future; and whether he looked for the promises to be fulfilled on earth, or had the unformulated consciousness of immortality, and saluted the dimly descried coast from afar while tossing on life’s restless ocean, he was effectually detached from the present, and felt himself an alien in the existing order. We have to live by the same hope, and to let it work the same estrangement, if we would live noble lives. Not because all life is change, nor because it all marches steadily on to the grave, but because our true home-the community to which we really belong, the metropolis, the mother city of our souls-is above, are we to feel ourselves strangers upon earth. They who only take into account the transiency of life are made sad, or sometimes desperate, by the unwelcome thought. But they whose pilgrimage is a journey home may look that transiency full in the face, and be as glad because of it as colonists on their voyage to the old country which they call ‘home,’ though they were born on the other side of the world and have never seen its green fields.

To Jacob’s eyes his days seem ‘few.’ Abraham’s one hundred and seventy-five years, Isaac’s one hundred and eighty, were in his mind. But more than these was in his mind. The law of the moral perspective is other than that of the physical. The days in front, seen through the glass of anticipation, are drawn out; the days behind, viewed through the telescope of memory, are crowded together. What a moment looked all the long years of his struggling life-shorter now than even had once seemed the seven years of service for his Rachel, that love had made to fly past on such swift wings! That happy wedded life, how short it looked! A bright light for a moment, and

‘Ere a man could say “Behold!”
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It is well to lay the coolness of this thought on our fevered hearts, and, whether they be torn by sorrows or gladdened with bliss, to remember ‘this also will pass’ and the longest stretch of dreary days be seen in retrospect, in their due relation to eternity, as but a moment. That will not paralyse effort nor abate sweetness, but it will teach proportion, and deliver from the illusions of this solid-seeming shadow which we call life.

The pensive retrospect darkens as the old man's memory dwells upon the past. His days have not only been few-that could be borne-but they have been 'evil' by which I understand not unfortunate so much as faulty. We have seen in preceding pages the slow process by which the crafty Jacob had his sins purged out of him, and became 'God's wrestler.' Here we learn that old wrong-doing, even when forgiven-or, rather, when and because forgiven-leaves regretful memories lifelong. The early treachery had been long ago repented of and pardoned by God and man. The nature which hatched it had been renewed. But here it starts up again, a ghost from the grave, and the memory of it is full of bitterness. No lapse of time deprives a sin of its power to sting. As in the old story of the man who was killed by a rattlesnake's poison fang embedded in a boot which had lain forgotten for years, we may be wounded by suddenly coming against it, long after it is forgiven by God and almost forgotten by ourselves. Many a good man, although he knows that Christ's blood has washed away his guilt, is made to possess the iniquities of his youth. 'Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done.'

But this shaded retrospect is one-sided. It is true, and in some moods seems all the truth; but Jacob saw more distinctly, and his name was rightly Israel, when, laying his trembling hands on the heads of Joseph's sons, he laid there the blessing of 'the God which fed me all my life long, . . .'the Angel which redeemed me from all evil.' That was his last thought about his life, as it began to be seen in the breaking light of eternal day. Pensive and penitent memory may call the years few and evil, but grateful faith even here, and still more the cleared vision of heaven, will discern more truly that they have been a long miracle of loving care, and that all their seeming evil has been transmuted into good.

47)Genesis 47:9

TWO RETROSPECTS OF ONE LIFE

Gen. 47:9. - Gen. 48:15 - Gen. 48:16.

These are two strangely different estimates of the same life to be taken by the same man. In the latter Jacob categorically contradicts everything that he had said in the former. ‘Few and evil,’ he said before Pharaoh. ‘All my life long,’ ‘the Angel which redeemed me from all evil,’ he said on his death-bed.

If he meant what he said when he spoke to Pharaoh, and characterised his life thus, he was wrong. He was possibly in a melancholy mood. Very naturally, the unfamiliar splendours of a court dazzled and bewildered the old man, accustomed to a quiet shepherd life down at Hebron. He had not come to see Pharaoh, he only cared to meet Joseph; and, as was quite natural, the new and uncongenial surroundings depressed him. Possibly the words are only a piece of the etiquette of an Eastern court, where it is the correct thing for the subject to depreciate himself in all respects as far inferior to the prince. And there may be little more than conventional humility in the words of my first text. But I am rather disposed to think that they express the true feeling of the moment, in a mood that passed and was followed by a more wholesome one.

I put the two sayings side by side just for the sake of gathering up one or two plain lessons from them.

1. We have here two possible views of life.

Now the key to the difference between these two statements and moods of feeling seems to me to be a very plain one. In the former of them there is nothing about God. It is all Jacob. In the latter we notice that there is a great deal more about God than about Jacob, and that determines the whole tone of the retrospect. In the first text Jacob speaks of ‘the days of the years of *my* pilgrimage,’ ‘the days of the years of *my* life,’ and so on, without a syllable about anything except the purely earthly view of life. Of course, when you shut out God, the past is all dark enough, grey and dismal, like the landscape on some cloudy day, where the woods stand black, and the rivers creep melancholy through colourless fields, and the sky is grey and formless above. Let the sun come out, and the river flashes into a golden mirror, and the woods are alive with twinkling lights and shadows, and the sky stretches a blue pavilion above them, and all the birds sing. Let God into your life, and its whole complexion and characteristics change. The man who sits whining and complaining, when he has shut out the thought of a divine Presence, finds that everything alters when he brings that in.

And, then, look at the two particulars on which the patriarch dwells. 'I am only one hundred and thirty years old,' he says; a mere infant compared with Abraham and Isaac! How did he know he was not going to live to be as old as either of them? And 'if his days were evil,' as he said, was it not a good thing that they were few? But, instead of that, he finds reasons for complaint in the brevity of the life which, if it were as evil as he made it out to be, must often have seemed wearisomely long, and dragged very slowly. Now, both things are true-life is short, life is long. Time is elastic-you can stretch it or you can contract it. It is short compared with the duration of God; it is short, as one of the Psalms puts it pathetically, as compared with this Nature round us-'The earth abideth for ever'; we are strangers upon it, and there is no abiding for us. It is short as compared with the capacities and powers of the creatures that possess it; but, oh! if we think of our days as a series of gifts of God, if we look upon them, as Jacob looked upon them when he was sane, as being one continued shepherding by God, they stretch out into blessed length. Life is long enough if it manifests that God takes care of us, and if we learn that He does. Life is long enough if it serves to build up a God-pleasing character.

It is beautiful to see how the thought of God enters into the dying man's remembrances in the shape which was natural to him, regard being had to his own daily avocations. For the word translated 'fed' means much more than supplied with nourishment. It is the word for doing the office of shepherd, and we must not forget, if we want to understand its beauty, that Jacob's sons said, 'Thy servants are shepherds; both we and also our fathers.' So this man, in the solitude of his pastoral life, and whilst living amongst his woolly people who depended upon his guidance and care, had learned many a lesson as to how graciously and tenderly and constantly fed, and led, and protected, and fostered by God were the creatures of His hand.

It was he, I suppose, who first gave to religious thought that metaphor which has survived temple and sacrifice and priesthood, and will survive even earth itself; for ‘I am the Good Shepherd’ is as true to-day as when first spoken by Jesus, and ‘the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall lead them,’ and be their Shepherd when the flock is carried to the upper pastures and the springs that never fail. The life which has brought us that thought of a Shepherd-God has been long enough; and the days which have been so expanded as to contain a continuous series of His benefits and protections need never be remembered as ‘few,’ whatsoever be the arithmetic that is applied to them.

The other contradiction is equally eloquent and significant. ‘Few and evil’ have my days been, said Jacob, when he was not thinking about God; but when he remembered the Angel of the Presence, that mysterious person with whom he had wrestled at Peniel, and whose finger had lamed the thigh while His lips proclaimed a blessing, his view changed, and instead of talking about ‘evil’ days, he says, ‘The Angel that redeemed me from all evil.’ Yes, his life had been evil, whether by that we mean sorrowful or sinful, and the sorrows and the sins had been closely connected. A sorely tried man he had been. Far away back in the past had been his banishment from home; his disappointment and hard service with the churlish Laban; the misbehaviour of his sons; the death of Rachel-that wound which was never stanched; and then the twenty years’ mourning for Rachel’s son, the heir of his inheritance. These were the evils, the sins were as many, for every one of the sorrows, except perhaps the chiefest of them all, had its root in some piece of duplicity, dishonesty, or failure. But he was there in Egypt beside Joseph. The evils had stormed over him, but he was there still. And so at the end he says, ‘The Angel . . .redeemed me from evil, though it smote me. Sorrow became chastisement, and I was purged of my sin by my calamities.’ The sorrows are past, like some raging inundation that comes up for a night over the land and then subsides; but the blessing of fertility which it brought in its tawny waves abides with me yet. Joseph is by my side. ‘I had not thought to see thy face, and God hath showed me the face of thy seed.’ That sorrow is over. Rachel’s grave is still by the wayside, and that sorest of sorrows has wrought with others to purify character. Jacob has been tried by sorrows; he has been purged from sins. ‘The Angel delivered me from all evil.’ So, dear friends, sorrow is not evil if it helps to strip us from the evil that we love, and the ills that we bear are good if they alienate our affections from the ills that we do.

2. Secondly, note the wisdom and the duty of taking the completer and brighter view.

These first words of Jacob’s are very often quoted as if they were the pattern of the kind of thing people ought to say, ‘Few and evil have been the days of the years of my pilgrimage.’ That is a text from which many sermons have been preached with approbation of the pious resignation expressed in it. But it does not seem to me that that is the tone of them. If the man believed what he said, then he was very ungrateful and short-sighted, though there were excuses to be made for him under the circumstances. If the days had been evil, he had made them so.

But the point which I wish to make now is that it is largely a matter for our own selection which of the two views of our lives we take. We may make our choice whether we shall fix our attention on the brighter or on the darker constituents of our past.

Suppose a wall papered with paper of two colours, one black, say, and the other gold. You can work your eye and adjust the focus of vision so that you may see either a black background or a gold one. In the one case the prevailing tone is gloomy, relieved by an occasional touch of brightness; and in the other it is brightness, heightened by a background of darkness. And so you can do with life, fixing attention on its sorrows, and hugging yourselves in the contemplation of these with a kind of morbid satisfaction, or bravely and thankfully and submissively and wisely resolving that you will rather seek to learn what God means by darkness, and not forgetting to look at the unenigmatical blessings, and plain, obvious mercies, that make up so much of our lives. We have to govern memory as well as other faculties, by Christian principle. We have to apply the plain teaching of Christian truth to our sentimental, and often unwholesome, contemplations of the past. There is enough in all our lives to make material for plenty of whining and complaining, if we choose to take hold of them by that handle.

And there is enough in all our lives to make us ashamed of one murmuring word, if we are devout and wise and believing enough to lay hold of them by that one. Remember that you can make your view of your life either a bright one or a dark one, and there will be facts for both; but the facts that feed melancholy are partial and superficial, and the facts that exhort, 'Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, Rejoice,' are deep and fundamental.

3. So, lastly, note how blessed a thing it is when the last look is the happiest.

When we are amongst the mountains, or when we are very near them, they look barren enough, rough, stony, steep. When we travel away from them, and look at them across the plain, they lie blue in the distance; and the violet shadows and the golden lights upon them and the white peaks above make a dream of beauty. Whilst we are in the midst of the struggle, we are often tempted to think that things go hardly with us and that the road is very rough. But if we keep near our dear Lord, and hold by His hand, and try to shape our lives in accordance with His will-whatever be their outward circumstances and texture-then we may be very sure of this, that when the end comes, and we are far enough away from some of the sorrows to see what they lead to and blossom into, then we shall be able to say, It was all very good, and to thank Him for all the way by which the Lord our God has led us.

In the same conversation in which the patriarch, rising to the height of a prophet and organ of divine revelation, gives this his dying testimony of the faithfulness of God, and declares that he has been delivered from all evil, he recurs to the central sorrow of his life; and speaks, though in calm words, of that day when he buried Rachel by 'Ephrath, which is Bethel.' But the pain had passed and the good was present to him. And so, leaving life, he left it according to his own word, 'satisfied with favour, and full of the blessing of the Lord.' So we in our turns may, at the last, hope that what we know not now will largely be explained; and may seek to anticipate our dying verdict by a living confidence, in the midst of our toils and our sorrows, that 'all things work together for good to them that love God.'

48)Genesis 47:10-12

Genesis

GROWTH BY TRANSPLANTING

Gen. 47:1 - Gen. 47:12.

1. The conduct of Joseph in reference to the settlement in Goshen is an example of the possibility of uniting worldly prudence with high religious principle and great generosity of nature. He had promised his brothers a home in that fertile eastern district, which afforded many advantages in its proximity to Canaan, its adaptation to pastoral life, and its vicinity to Joseph when in Zoan, the capital. But he had not consulted Pharaoh, and, however absolute his authority, it scarcely stretched to giving away Egyptian territory without leave. So his first care, when the wanderers arrive, is to manage the confirmation of the grant. He goes about it with considerable astuteness-a hereditary quality, which is redeemed from blame because used for unselfish purposes and unstained by deceit. He does not tell Pharaoh how far he had gone, but simply announces that his family are in Goshen, as if awaiting the monarch's further pleasure. Then he introduces a deputation, no doubt carefully chosen, of five of his brothers [as if the whole number would have been too formidable], previously instructed how to answer. He knows what Pharaoh is in the habit of asking, or he knows that he can lead him to ask the required question, which will bring out the fact of their being shepherds, and utilise the prejudice against that occupation, to ensure separation in Goshen. All goes as he had arranged. Thanks partly to the indifference of the king, who seems to have been rather a *roi fainéant* in the hands of his energetic *maire du palais*, and to have been contented to give, with a flourish of formality, as a command to Joseph, what Joseph had previously carefully suggested to him [vers. 6, 7]. There is nothing unfair in all this. It is good, shrewd management, and no fault can be found with it; but it is a new trait in the ideal character of a servant of God, and contrasts strongly with the type shown in Abraham. None the less, it is a legitimate element in the character and conduct of a good man, set down to do God's work in such a world. Joseph is a saint and a politician. His shrewdness is never craft; sagacity is not alien to

consecration. No doubt it has to be carefully watched lest it degenerate; but prudence is as needful as enthusiasm, and he is the complete man who has a burning fire down in his heart to generate the force that drives him, and a steady hand on the helm, and a keen eye on the chart, to guide him. Be ye 'wise as serpents' but also 'harmless as doves.'

2. We may note in Joseph's conduct also an instance of a man in high office and not ashamed of his humble relations. One of the great lessons meant to be taught by the whole patriarchal period was the sacredness of the family. That is, in some sense, the keynote of Joseph's history. Here we see family love, which had survived the trial of ill-usage and long absence, victorious over the temptation of position and high associates. It took some nerve and a great deal of affection, for the viceroy, whom envious and sarcastic courtiers watched, to own his kin. What a sweet morsel for malicious tongues it would be, 'Have you heard? He is only the son of an old shepherd, who is down in Goshen, come to pick up some crumbs there!' One can fancy the curled lips and the light laugh, as the five brothers, led by the great man himself, made their rustic reverences to Pharaoh. It is as if some high official in Paris were to walk in half a dozen peasants in blouse and sabots, and present them to the president as 'my brothers.' It was a brave thing to do; and it teaches a lesson which many people, who have made their way in the world, would be nobler and more esteemed if they learned.

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49)Genesis 48:15-16

Genesis

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I put the two sayings side by side just for the sake of gathering up one or two plain lessons from them.

1. We have here two possible views of life.

Now the key to the difference between these two statements and moods of feeling seems to me to be a very plain one. In the former of them there is nothing about God. It is all Jacob. In the latter we notice that there is a great deal more about God than about Jacob, and that determines the whole tone of the retrospect. In the first text Jacob speaks of 'the days of the years of *my* pilgrimage,' 'the days of the years of *my* life,' and so on, without a syllable about anything except the purely earthly view of life. Of course, when you shut out God, the past is all dark enough, grey and dismal, like the landscape on some cloudy day, where the woods stand black, and the rivers creep melancholy through colourless fields, and the sky is grey and formless above. Let the sun come out, and the river flashes into a golden mirror, and the woods are alive with twinkling lights and shadows, and the sky stretches a blue pavilion above them, and all the birds sing. Let God into your life, and its whole complexion and characteristics change. The man who sits whining and complaining, when he has shut out the thought of a divine Presence, finds that everything alters when he brings that in.

And, then, look at the two particulars on which the patriarch dwells. 'I am only one hundred and thirty years old,' he says; a mere infant compared with Abraham and Isaac! How did he know he was not going to live to be as old as either of them? And 'if his days were evil,' as he said, was it not a good thing that they were few? But, instead of that, he finds reasons for complaint in the brevity of the life which, if it were as evil as he made it out to be, must often have seemed wearisomely long, and dragged very slowly. Now, both things are true-life is short, life is long. Time is elastic-you can stretch it or you can contract it. It is short compared with the duration of God; it is short, as one of the Psalms puts it pathetically, as compared with this Nature round us-'The earth abideth for ever'; we are strangers upon it, and there is no abiding for us. It is short as compared with the capacities and powers of the creatures that possess it; but, oh! if we think of our days as a series of gifts of God, if we look upon them, as Jacob looked upon them when he was sane, as being one continued shepherding by God, they stretch out into blessed length. Life is long enough if it manifests that God takes care of us, and if we learn that He does. Life is long enough if it serves to build up a God-pleasing character.

It is beautiful to see how the thought of God enters into the dying man's remembrances in the shape which was natural to him, regard being had to his own daily avocations. For the word translated 'fed' means much more than supplied with nourishment. It is the word for doing the office of shepherd, and we must not forget, if we want to understand its beauty, that Jacob's sons said, 'Thy servants are shepherds; both we and also our fathers.' So this man, in the solitude of his pastoral life, and whilst living amongst his woolly people who depended upon his guidance and care, had learned many a lesson as to how graciously and tenderly and constantly fed, and led, and protected, and fostered by God were the creatures of His hand.

It was he, I suppose, who first gave to religious thought that metaphor which has survived temple and sacrifice and priesthood, and will survive even earth itself; for 'I am the Good Shepherd' is as true to-day as when first spoken by Jesus, and 'the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall lead them,' and be their Shepherd when the flock is carried to the upper pastures and the springs that never fail. The life which has brought us that thought of a Shepherd-God has been long enough; and the days which have been so expanded as to contain a continuous series of His benefits and protections need never be remembered as 'few,' whatsoever be the arithmetic that is applied to them.

The other contradiction is equally eloquent and significant. 'Few and evil' have my days been, said Jacob, when he was not thinking about God; but when he remembered the Angel of the Presence, that mysterious person with whom he had wrestled at Peniel, and whose finger had lamed the thigh while His lips proclaimed a blessing, his view changed, and instead of talking about 'evil' days, he says, 'The Angel that redeemed me from all evil.' Yes, his life had been evil, whether by that we mean sorrowful or sinful, and the sorrows and the sins had been closely connected. A sorely tried man he had been. Far away back in the past had been his banishment from home; his disappointment and hard service with the churlish Laban; the misbehaviour of his sons; the death of Rachel-that wound which was never stanched; and then the twenty years' mourning for Rachel's son, the heir of his inheritance. These were the evils, the sins were as many, for every one of the sorrows, except perhaps the chiefest of them all, had its root in some piece of duplicity, dishonesty, or failure. But he was there in

Egypt beside Joseph. The evils had stormed over him, but he was there still. And so at the end he says, ‘The Angel . . .redeemed me from evil, though it smote me. Sorrow became chastisement, and I was purged of my sin by my calamities.’ The sorrows are past, like some raging inundation that comes up for a night over the land and then subsides; but the blessing of fertility which it brought in its tawny waves abides with me yet. Joseph is by my side. ‘I had not thought to see thy face, and God hath showed me the face of thy seed.’ That sorrow is over. Rachel’s grave is still by the wayside, and that sorest of sorrows has wrought with others to purify character. Jacob has been tried by sorrows; he has been purged from sins. ‘The Angel delivered me from all evil.’ So, dear friends, sorrow is not evil if it helps to strip us from the evil that we love, and the ills that we bear are good if they alienate our affections from the ills that we do.

2. Secondly, note the wisdom and the duty of taking the completer and brighter view.

These first words of Jacob’s are very often quoted as if they were the pattern of the kind of thing people ought to say, ‘Few and evil have been the days of the years of my pilgrimage.’ That is a text from which many sermons have been preached with approbation of the pious resignation expressed in it. But it does not seem to me that that is the tone of them. If the man believed what he said, then he was very ungrateful and short-sighted, though there were excuses to be made for him under the circumstances. If the days had been evil, he had made them so.

But the point which I wish to make now is that it is largely a matter for our own selection which of the two views of our lives we take. We may make our choice whether we shall fix our attention on the brighter or on the darker constituents of our past.

Suppose a wall papered with paper of two colours, one black, say, and the other gold. You can work your eye and adjust the focus of vision so that you may see either a black background or a gold one. In the one case the prevailing tone is gloomy, relieved by an occasional touch of brightness; and in the other it is brightness, heightened by a background of darkness. And so you can do with life, fixing attention on its sorrows, and hugging yourselves in the contemplation of these with a kind of morbid satisfaction, or bravely and thankfully and submissively and wisely resolving that you will rather seek to learn what God means by darkness, and not forgetting to look at the unenigmatical blessings, and plain, obvious mercies, that make up so much of our lives. We have to govern memory as well as other faculties, by Christian principle. We have to apply the plain teaching of Christian truth to our sentimental, and often unwholesome, contemplations of the past. There is enough in all our lives to make material for plenty of whining and complaining, if we choose to take hold of them by that handle. And there is enough in all our lives to make us ashamed of one murmuring word, if we are devout and wise and believing enough to lay hold of them by that one. Remember that you can make your view of your life either a bright one or a dark one, and there will be facts for both; but the facts that feed melancholy are partial and superficial, and the facts that exhort, 'Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, Rejoice,' are deep and fundamental.

3. So, lastly, note how blessed a thing it is when the last look is the happiest.

When we are amongst the mountains, or when we are very near them, they look barren enough, rough, stony, steep. When we travel away from them, and look at them across the plain, they lie blue in the distance; and the violet shadows and the golden lights upon them and the white peaks above make a dream of beauty. Whilst we are in the midst of the struggle, we are often tempted to think that things go hardly with us and that the road is very rough. But if we keep near our dear Lord, and hold by His hand, and try to shape our lives in accordance with His will-whatever be their outward circumstances and texture-then we may be very sure of this, that when the end comes, and we are far enough away from some of the sorrows to see what they lead to and blossom into, then we shall be able to say, It was all very good, and to thank Him for all the way by which the Lord our God has led us.

In the same conversation in which the patriarch, rising to the height of a prophet and organ of divine revelation, gives this his dying testimony of the faithfulness of God, and declares that he has been delivered from all evil, he recurs to the central sorrow of his life; and speaks, though in calm words, of that day when he buried Rachel by ‘Ephrath, which is Bethel.’ But the pain had passed and the good was present to him. And so, leaving life, he left it according to his own word, ‘satisfied with favour, and full of the blessing of the Lord.’ So we in our turns may, at the last, hope that what we know not now will largely be explained; and may seek to anticipate our dying verdict by a living confidence, in the midst of our toils and our sorrows, that ‘all things work together for good to them that love God.’

50)Genesis 49:23

Genesis

‘THE HANDS OF THE MIGHTY GOD OF JACOB’

Gen. 49:23 - Gen. 49:24.

These picturesque words are part of what purports to be one of the oldest pieces of poetry in the Bible-the dying Jacob’s prophetic blessing on his sons. Of these sons there are two over whom his heart seems especially to pour itself-Judah the ancestor of the royal tribe, and Joseph. The future fortunes of their descendants are painted in most glowing colours. And of these two, the blessing on the ‘son who was dead and is alive again, who was lost and is found’ is the fuller of tender desire and glad prediction. The words of our text are probably to be taken as prophecy, not as history-as referring to the future conflicts and victories of the tribe, not to the past trials and triumphs of its father. But be that as it may, they contain, in most vivid metaphor, the earliest utterance of a very familiar truth. They are the first hint of that thought which is caught up and expanded in many a later saying of psalmist, and prophet, and apostle. We hear their echoes in the great song ascribed to David ‘in the day that the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul’: ‘He teacheth my hands to war, so that a bow of steel is broken by mine arms’; and the idea receives its fullest carrying out and noblest setting forth, in the trumpet-call of the apostle, who had seen more formidable weapons and a more terrible military discipline in Rome’s legions than Jacob knew, and who pressed them into his stimulating call: ‘Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.’ ‘Put on the whole armour of God.’ Strength for conflict by contact with the strength of God is the common thought of all these passages-a very familiar thought, which may perhaps be freshened for us by the singular intensity with which this metaphor of our text presents it. Look at the picture.-Here stands the solitary man, ringed all round by enemies full of bitter hate. Their arrows are on the string, their bows drawn to the ear. The shafts fly thick, and when they have whizzed past him, and he can be seen again, he stands unharmed, grasping his unbroken bow. The assault has shivered no weapon, has given no wound. He has been able to stand in the evil day-and look! a pair of great, gentle, strong hands are laid upon his hands and arms, and strength passes into his feebleness from the touch of 'the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.' So the enemy have two, not one, to reckon with. By the side of the hunted man stands a mighty figure, and it is His strength, not the mortal's impotence, that has to be overcome. Some dream of such divine help in the struggle of battle has floated through the minds, and been enshrined in the legends, of many people, as when the panoplied Athene has been descried leading the Grecian armies, or, through the dust of conflict, the gleaming armour and white horses of the Twin Brethren were seen far in advance of the armies of Rome. But the dream is for us a reality. It *is* true that we go not to warfare at our own charges, nor by our own strength. If we love Him and try to make a brave stand against our own evil, and to strike a manful blow for God in this world, we shall not have to bear the brunt alone. Remember he who fights for God never fights without God.

There is a strange story in a later book of Scripture, which almost reads as if it had been modelled on some reminiscence of these words of the dying Jacob-and is, at any rate, a remarkable illustration of them. The kingdom of Israel, of which the descendants of Joseph were the most conspicuous part, was in the very crisis and agony of one of its Syrian wars. Its principal human helper was 'fallen sick of the sickness whereof he died.' And to his death-bed came, in a passion of perplexity and despair, the irresolute weakling who was then king, bewailing the impending withdrawal of the nation's best defence. The dying Elisha, with curt authority, pays no heed to the tears of Joash, but bids him take bow and arrows. 'And he said to the king of Israel, Put thine hand upon the bow,' and he put his hand upon it; and '*Elisha put his hands upon the king's hands*.' Then, when the thin, wasted, transparent fingers of the old man were thus laid, guiding and infusing strength, by a strange paradox, into the brown, muscular hands of the young king, he tells him to open the casement that looked eastward towards the lands of the enemy, and, as the blinding sunshine and the warm air streamed into the sick-chamber, he bids him draw the bow. He was obeyed, and, as the arrow whizzed Jordanwards, the dying prophet followed its flight with words brief and rapid like it, 'the arrow of the Lord's deliverance.' Here we have all the elements of our text singularly repeated-the dying seer, the king the representative of Joseph in the royal dignity to which his descendants have come, the arrows and the bow, the strength for conflict by the touch of hands that had the strength of God in them. The lesson of that paradox that the dying gave strength to the living, the feeble to the strong, was the old one which is ever new, that mere human power is weakness when it is strongest, and that power drawn from God is omnipotent when it seems weakest. And the further lesson is the lesson of our text, that our hands are then strengthened, when His hands are laid upon them, of whom it is written: 'Thou hast a mighty arm: strong is Thy hand, and high is Thy right hand.

As a father in old days might have taken his little boy out to the butts, and put a bow into his hand, and given him his first lesson in archery, directing his unsteady aim by his own firmer finger, and lending the strength of his wrist to his child's feebler pull, so God does with us. The sure, strong hand is laid on ours, and is 'profitable to direct.' A wisdom not our own is ever at our side, and ready for our service. We but dimly perceive the conditions of the conflict, and the mark at which we should aim is ever apt to be obscured to our perceptions. But in all cases where conscience is perplexed, or where the judgment is at fault, we may, if we will, have Him for our teacher. And when we know not where to strike the foes that seem invulnerable, like the warrior who was dipped in the magic stream, or clothed in mail impenetrable as rhinoceros' hide, He will make us wise to know the one spot where a wound is fatal. We shall not need to fight as he that beats the air; to strike at random; or to draw our bow at a venture, if we will let Him guide us.

Or if ever the work be seen clearly enough, but our poor hands cannot take aim for very trembling, or shoot for fear of striking something very dear to us, He will steady our nerves and make our aim sure and true. We have often, in our fight with ourselves, and in our struggle to get God’s will done in the world, to face as cruel a perplexity as the father who had to split the apple on his son’s head. The evil against which we have to contend is often so closely connected with things very precious to us, that it is hard to smite the one when there is such danger of grazing the other. Many a time our tastes, our likings, our prejudices, our hopes, our loves, make our sight dim, and our pulses too tumultuous to allow of a good, long, steady gaze and a certain aim. It is hard to keep the arrow’s point firm when the heart throbs and the hand shakes. But in all such difficult times He is ready to help us. ‘Behold, we know not what to do, but our eyes are upon Thee,’ is a prayer never offered in vain.

The word that is here rendered ‘made strong,’ might be translated ‘made pliable,’ or ‘flexible’ conveying the notion of deftness and dexterity rather than that of simple strength. It is practised strength that He will give, the educated hand and arm, masters of the manipulation of the weapon. The stiffness and clumsiness of our handling, the obstinate rigidity as well as the throbbing feebleness of our arms, the dimness of our sight, may all be overcome. At His touch the raw recruit is as the disciplined veteran; the prophet who cannot speak because he is a child, gifted with a mouth and wisdom which all the adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor to resist. Do not be disheartened by your inexperience, or by your ignorance; but as the prophet said to the young king, Take the bow and shoot. God’s strong hand will hold yours, and the arrow will fly true.

That strong hand is laid on ours, and lends its weight to our feeble pull. The bow is often too heavy for us to bend, but we do not need to strain our strength in the vain attempt to do it alone. Tasks seem too much for us. The pressure of our daily work overwhelms us. The burden of our daily anxieties and sorrows is too much. Some huge obstacle starts up in our path. Some great sacrifice for truth, honour, duty, which we feel we cannot make, is demanded of us. Some daring defiance of some evil, which has caught us in its toils, or which it is unfashionable to fight against, seems laid upon us. We cannot rise to the height of the occasion, or bring ourselves to the wrench that is required. Or the wearing recurrence of monotonous duties seems to take ail freshness out of our lives, and all spring out of ourselves; and we are ready to give over struggling any more, and let ourselves drift.

Can we not feel that large hand laid on ours; and does not power, more and other than our own, creep into our numb and relaxed fingers? Yes, if we will let Him. His strength is made perfect in our weakness; and every man and woman who will make life a noble struggle against evil, vanity, or sin, may be very sure that God will direct and strengthen their hands to war, and their fingers to fight.

But the remarkable metaphor of the text not only gives the fact of divine strength being bestowed, but also the *manner* of the gift. What a boldness of reverent familiarity there is in that symbol of the hands of God laid on the hands of the man! How strongly it puts the contact between us and Him as the condition of our reception of power from Him! A true touch, as of hand to hand, conveys the grace. It is as when the prophet laid himself down with his warm lip on the dead boy's cold mouth, and his heart beating against the still heart of the corpse, till the life passed into the clay, and the lad lived. So, if we may say it, our Quickener bends Himself over all our deadness, and by His own warmth reanimates us.

Perhaps this same thought is one of the lessons which we are meant to learn from the frequency with which our Lord wrought His miracles of healing by the touch of His hand. 'Come and lay Thy hand on him, and he shall live.' 'And He put forth His hand and touched him, and said, I will, be thou clean.' 'Many said, He is dead; but Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose.' The touch of His hand is healing and life. The touch of our hands is faith. In the mystery of His incarnation, in the flow of His sympathy, in the forth-putting of His power, He lays hold not on angels, but He lays hold on the seed of Abraham. By our lowly trust, by the forth-putting of our desires, we stretch 'lame hands of faith,' and, blessed be God! we do not 'grope,' but we grasp His strong hand and are held up.

The contact of our spirits with His Spirit is a contact far more real than the touch of earthly hands that grasp each other closest. There is ever some film of atmosphere between the palms. But 'he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit,' and he that clasps Christ's outstretched hand of help with his outstretched hand of weakness, holds Him with a closeness to which all unions of earth are gaping gulfs of separation. You remember how Mary cast herself at Christ's feet on the resurrection morning, and would have flung her arms round them in the passion of her joy. The calm word which checked her has a wonderful promise in it. ‘Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father’; plainly leading to the inference, ‘When I am ascended, then you may touch Me.’ And that touch will be more reverent, more close, more blessed, than any clasping of His feet, even with such loving hands, and is possible for us all for evermore.

Nothing but such contact will give us strength for conflict and for conquest. And the plain lesson therefore is-see to it, that the contact is not broken by you. Put away the metaphor, and the simple English of the advice is just this:-First, live in the desire and the confidence of His help in all your need, of His strength as all your power. As a part of that confidence-its reverse and under side, so to speak-cherish the profound sense of your own weakness.

‘In our own strength we nothing can;
Full soon were we down-ridden’-

as Luther has taught us to sing. Let there be a constant renewal, in the midst of your duties and trials, of that conscious dependence and feeling of insufficiency. Stretch out the empty hands to Him in that desire and hope, which, spoken or silent, is prayer. Keep the communications open, by which His strength flows into your souls. Let them not be choked with self-confidence, with vanities, with the rubbish of your own nature, or of the world. Do not twitch away your hands from under the strong hands that are laid so gently upon them. But let Him cover, direct, cherish, and strengthen your poor fingers till they are strong and nimble for all your work and warfare. If you go into the fight trusting to your own wit and wisdom, to the vigour of your own arm, or the courage of your own heart, that very foolhardy confidence is itself defeat, for it is sin as well as folly, and nothing can come of it but utter collapse and disaster. But if you will only go to your daily fight with yourself and the world, with your hand grasping God’s hand, you will be able to ‘withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.’ The enemies may compass you about like bees, but in the name of the Lord you can destroy them. Their arrows may fly thick enough to darken the sun, but, as the proud old boast has it, ‘then we can fight in the shade’; and when their harmless points have buried themselves in the ground, you will stand unhurt, your unshivered bow ready for the next assault, and your hands made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob. ‘In all these things we are more than conquerors, through Him that loved us.’

51)Genesis 49:24

Genesis

‘THE HANDS OF THE MIGHTY GOD OF JACOB’

THE SHEPHERD, THE STONE OF ISRAEL

Gen. 49:24.

A slight alteration in the rendering will probably bring out the meaning of these words more correctly. The last two clauses should perhaps not be read as a separate sentence. Striking out the supplement ‘is,’ and letting the previous sentence run on to the end of the verse, we get a series of names of God, in apposition with each other, as the sources of the strength promised to the arms of the hands of the warlike sons of Joseph. From the hands of the mighty God of Jacob-from thence, from the Shepherd, the stone of Israel-the power will come for conflict and for conquest. This exuberant heaping together of names of God is the mark of the flash of rapturous confidence which lit up the dying man’s thoughts when they turned to God. When he begins to think of Him he cannot stay his tongue. So many aspects of His character, so many remembrances of His deeds, come crowding into his mind; so familiar and so dear are they, that he must linger over the words, and strive by this triple repetition to express the manifold preciousness of Him whom no name, nor crowd of names, can rightly praise. So earthly love ever does with its earthly objects, inventing and reiterating epithets which are caresses. Such repetitions are not tautologies, for each utters some new aspect of the one subject, and comes from a new gush of heart’s love towards it. And something of the same rapture and unwearied recurrence to the Name that is above every name should mark the communion of devout souls with their heavenly Love. What a wonderful burst of such praise flowed out from David’s thankful heart, in his day of deliverance, like some strong current, with its sevenfold wave, each crested with the Name-'The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.'

Those three names which we find here are striking and beautiful in themselves; in their juxtaposition; in their use on Jacob's lips. They seem to have been all coined by him, for, if we accept this song as a true prophecy uttered by him, we have here the earliest instance of their occurrence. They all have a history, and appear again expanded and deepened in the subsequent revelation. Let us look at them as they stand.

1. *The Mighty God of Jacob*.-The meaning of such a name is clear enough. It is He who has shown Himself mighty and mine by His deeds for me all through my life. The dying man's thoughts are busy with all that past from the day when he went forth from the tent of Isaac, and took of the stones of the field for his pillow when the sun went down. A perplexed history it had been, with many a bitter sorrow, and many a yet bitterer sin. Passionate grief and despairing murmurs he had felt and flung out, while it slowly unfolded itself. When the Pharaoh had asked, 'How old art thou?' he had answered in words which owe their sombreness partly to obsequious assumption of insignificance in such a presence, but have a strong tinge of genuine sadness in them too: 'Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been.' But lying dying there, with it all well behind him, he has become wiser; and now it all looks to him as one long showing forth of the might of his God, who had been with him all his life long, and had redeemed him from all evil. He has got far enough away to see the lie of the land, as he could not do while he was toiling along the road. The barren rocks and white snow glow with purple as the setting sun touches them. The struggles with Laban; the fear of Esau; the weary work of toilsome years; the sad day when Rachel died, and left to him the 'son of her sorrow'; the heart sickness of the long years of Joseph's loss-all have faded away, or been changed into thankful wonder at God's guidance. The one thought which the dying man carries out of life with him is: God has shown Himself mighty, and He has shown Himself mine.

For each of us, our own experience should be a revelation of God. The things about Him which we read in the Bible are never living and real to us till we have verified them in the facts of our own history. Many a word lies on the page, or in our memories, fully believed and utterly shadowy, until in some soul's conflict we have had to grasp it, and found it true. Only so much of our creed as we have proved in life is really ours. If we will only open our eyes and reflect upon our history as it passes before us, we shall find every corner of it filled with the manifestations to our hearts and to our minds of a present God. But our folly, our stupidity, our impatience, our absorption with the mere outsides of things, our self-will, blind us to the Angel with the drawn sword who resists us, as well as to the Angel with the lily who would lead us. So we waste our days; are deaf to His voice speaking through all the clatter of tongues, and blind to His bright presence shining through all the dimness of earth; and, for far too many of us, we never can see God in the present, but only discern Him when He has passed by, like Moses from his cleft. Like this same Jacob, we have to say: 'Surely God was in this place, and I knew it not.' Hence we miss the educational worth of our lives, are tortured with needless cares, are beaten by the poorest adversaries, and grope amidst what seems to us a chaos of pathless perplexities, when we might be marching on assured and strong, with God for our guide, and the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob for our defence.

Notice, too, how distinctly the thought comes out in this name-that the very vital centre of a man's religion is his conviction that God is his. Jacob will not be content with thinking of God as the God of his fathers; he will not even be content with associating himself with them in the common possession; but he must feel the full force of the intensely personal bond that knits him to God, and God to him. Of course such a feeling does not ignore the blessed fellowship and family who also are held in this bond. The God of Jacob is to the patriarch also the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob. But that comes second, and this comes first. Each man for himself must put forth the hand of his own faith, and grasp that great hand for his own guide. '*My* Lord and *my* God' is the true form of the confession. 'He loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*,' is the shape in which the Gospel of Christ melts the soul. God is mine because His love individualises me, and I have a distinct place in His heart, His purposes, and His deeds. God is mine, because by my own individual act-the most personal which I can perform-I cast myself on Him, by my faith appropriate the common salvation, and open my being to the inflow of His power. God is mine, and I am His, in that wonderful mutual possession, with perpetual interchange of giving and receiving not only gifts but selves, which makes the very life of love, whether it be love on earth or love in heaven.

Remember, too, the profound use which our Lord made of this name, wherein Jacob claims to possess God. Because Moses at the bush called God, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, they cannot have ceased to be. The personal relations, which subsist between God and the soul that clasps Him for its own, demand an immortal life for their adequate expression, and make it impossible that Death's skeleton fingers should have power to untie such a bond. Anything is conceivable, rather than that the soul which can say 'God is mine' should perish. And that continued existence demands, too, a state of being which shall correspond to itself, in which its powers shall all be exercised, its desires fulfilled, its possibilities made facts. Therefore there must be the resurrection. 'God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He hath prepared for them a city.'

The dying patriarch left to his descendants the legacy of this great name, and often, in later times, it was used to quicken faith by the remembrance of the great deeds of God in the past. One instance may serve as a sample of the whole. 'The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.' The first of these two names lays the foundation of our confidence in the thought of the boundless power of Him whom all the forces of the universe, personal and impersonal, angels and stars, in their marshalled order, obey and serve. The second bids later generations claim as theirs all that the old history reveals as having belonged to the 'world's grey fathers.' They had no special prerogative of nearness or of possession. The arm that guided them is unwearied, and all the past is true still, and will for evermore be true for all who love God. So the venerable name is full of promise and of hope for us: 'The God of Jacob is our refuge.'

2. *The Shepherd*.-How that name sums up the lessons that Jacob had learned from the work of himself and of his sons! 'Thy servants are shepherds' they said to Pharaoh; 'both we, and also our sons.' For fourteen long, weary years he had toiled at that task. 'In the day the drought consumed me, and

the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes,' and his own sleepless vigilance and patient endurance seem to him to be but shadows of the loving care, the watchful protection, the strong defence, which 'the God, who has been my Shepherd all my life long,' had extended to him and his. Long before the shepherd king, who had been taken from the sheepcotes to rule over Israel, sang his immortal psalm, the same occupation had suggested the same thought to the shepherd patriarch. Happy they whose daily work may picture for them some aspect of God's care-or rather, happy they whose eyes are open to see the dim likeness of God's care which every man's earthly relations, and some part of his work, most certainly present.

There can be no need to draw out at length the thoughts which that sweet and familiar emblem has conveyed to so many generations. Loving care, wise guidance, fitting food, are promised by it; and docile submission, close following at the Shepherd's heels, patience, innocence, meekness, trust, are required. But I may put emphasis for a moment on the connection between the thought of 'the mighty God of Jacob' and that of 'the Shepherd.' The occupation, as we see it, does not call for a strong arm, or much courage, except now and then to wade through snowdrifts, and dig out the buried and half-dead creatures. But the shepherds whom Jacob knew, had to be hardy, bold fighters. There were marauders lurking ready to sweep away a weakly guarded flock. There were wild beasts in the gorges of the hills. There was danger in the sun by day on these burning plains, and in the night the wolves prowled round the flock. We remember how David's earliest exploits were against the lion and the bear, and how he felt that even his duel with the Philistine bully was not more formidable than these had been. If we will read into our English notions of a shepherd this element of danger and of daring, we shall feel that these two clauses are not to be taken as giving the contrasted ideas of strength and gentleness, but the connected ones of strength, and therefore protection and security. We have the same connection in later echoes of this name. 'Behold, the Lord God shall come with *strong* hand; He shall feed His flock like a shepherd.' And our Lord's use of the figure brings into all but exclusive prominence the good shepherd's conflict with the ravening wolves-a conflict in which he must not hesitate even 'to lay down his life for the sheep.' As long as the flock are here, amidst dangers and foes, and wild weather, the arm that guides must be an arm that can guard; and none less mighty than the Mighty One of Jacob can be the Shepherd of men. But a higher fulfilment yet awaits this venerable emblem, when in other pastures, where no lion nor any ravening beast shall come, the ‘Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne,’ and is Shepherd as well as Lamb, ‘shall feed them, and lead them by living fountains of waters.’

3. *The Stone of Israel*.-Here, again, we have a name, that after-ages have caught up and cherished, used for the first time. I suppose the Stone of Israel means much the same thing as the Rock. If so, that symbol, too, which is full of such large meanings, was coined by Jacob. It is, perhaps, not fanciful to suppose that it owes its origin to the scenery of Palestine. The wild cliffs of the eastern region where Peniel lay, or the savage fastnesses in the southern wilderness, a day’s march from Hebron, where he lived so long, came back to his memory amid the flat, clay land of Egypt; and their towering height, their immovable firmness, their cool shade, their safe shelter, spoke to him of the unalterable might and impregnable defence which he had found in God. So there is in this name the same devout, reflective laying-hold upon experience which we have observed in the preceding.

There is also the same individualising grasp of God as his very own; for ‘Israel’ here is, of course, to be taken not as the name of the nation but as his own name, and the intention of the phrase is evidently to express what God had been to him personally.

The general idea of this symbol is perhaps firmness, solidity. And that general idea may be followed out in various details. God is a rock for a foundation. Build your lives, your thoughts, your efforts, your hopes there. The house founded on the rock will stand though wind and rain from above smite it, and floods from beneath beat on it like battering rams. God is a rock for a fortress. Flee to Him to hide, and your defence shall be the ‘munitions of rocks,’ which shall laugh to scorn all assault, and never be stormed by any foe. God is a rock for shade and refreshment. Come close to Him from out of the scorching heat, and you will find coolness and verdure and moisture in the clefts, when all outside that grateful shadow is parched and dry.

The word of the dying Jacob was caught up by the great law-giver in his dying song. ‘Ascribe ye greatness to our God. He is the Rock.’ It reappears in the last words of the shepherd king, whose grand prophetic picture of the true King is heralded by ‘The Book of Israel spake to me.’ It is heard once more from the lips of the greatest of the prophets in his glowing prophecy of the song of the final days: ‘Trust ye in the Lord for ever; for in the Lord Jehovah is the Rock of Ages,’ as well as in his solemn prophecy of the Stone which God would lay in Zion. We hear it again from the lips that cannot lie: ‘Did ye never read in the Scriptures, The Stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the headstone of the corner?’ And for the last time the venerable metaphor which has cheered so many ages appears in the words of that Apostle who was ‘surnamed Cephas, which is by interpretation a stone’: ‘To whom coming as unto a living Stone, yea also as living stones are built up.’ As on some rocky site in Palestine, where a hundred generations in succession have made their fortresses, one may see stones with the bevel that tells of early Jewish masonry, and above them Roman work, and higher still masonry of crusading times, and above it the building of to-day; so we, each age in our turn, build on this great rock foundation, dwell safe there for our little lives, and are laid to peaceful rest in a sepulchre in the rock. On Christ we may build. In Him we may dwell and rest secure. We may die in Jesus, and be gathered to our own people, who, having died, live in Him. And though so many generations have reared their dwellings on that great rock, there is ample room for us too to build. We have not to content ourselves with an uncertain foundation among the shifting rubbish of perished dwellings, but can get down to the firm virgin rock for ourselves. None that ever builded there have been confounded. We clasp hands with all who have gone before us. At one end of the long chain this dim figure of the dying Jacob, amid the strange vanished life of Egypt, stretches out his withered hands to God the Stone of Israel; at the other end, we lift up ours to Jesus, and cry:-

‘Rock of Ages! cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.’

The faith is one. One will be the answer and the reward. May it be yours and mine!

52)Genesis 50:14-24

Genesis

A CALM EVENING, PROMISING A BRIGHT MORNING

Gen. 50:14 - Gen. 50:26.

Joseph’s brothers were right in thinking that he loved Jacob better than he did them; and they knew only too well that he had reasons for doing so. But their fear that Jacob’s death would be followed by an outbreak of long-smothered revenge betrayed but too clearly their own base natures. They thought him like themselves, and they knew themselves capable of nursing wrath to keep it warm through long years of apparent kindliness. They had no room in their hearts for frank, full forgiveness. So they had lived on through numberless signs of their brother’s love and care, and still kept the old dread, and, probably, not a little of the old envy. How much happiness they had lost by their slowness to believe in Joseph’s love!

Is there nothing like this in our thoughts of God? Do men not live for years on His bounty, and all the while cherish suspicions of His heart? ‘Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself.’ It is hard to believe in a love which has no faintest trace of desire for vengeance for all past slights. It is hard for hearts conscious of their own slowness to pardon, to realise undoubtingly God’s infinite placability.

The brothers’ procedure is marked by unwarrantable lack of trust in Joseph. Why did they not go to him at once, and appeal to his brotherly affection? Their roundabout way of going to work by sending a messenger was an insult to their brother, though it may have been meant as honour to the viceroy. The craft which was their father’s by nature seems to have been amply transmitted. The story of Jacob’s dying wish looks very apocryphal. If he had been afraid of Joseph’s behaviour when he was gone, he was much more likely to have spoken to Joseph about it before he went, than to have left the gun loaded and bid them fire it after his death. Jacob knew his son better, and trusted him more than his brothers did.

We note, too, the ingenious way of slipping in motives for forgiving, first in putting the mention of their relationship into Jacob's mouth, and then claiming to be worshippers of 'thy [not our] father's God.' They had proved how truly they were both, when they sold him to the Midianites!

Joseph's tears were a good answer. No doubt they were partly drawn out by the shock of finding that he had been so misunderstood, but they were omens of his pardon. So, when they were reported to the brothers, they came themselves, and fulfilled the old dream by falling down before him in abjectness. They do not call themselves his brethren, but his slaves, as if grovelling was the way to win love or to show it. A little affection would have gone farther than much submission. If their attitude truly expressed their feelings, their hearts were as untouched by Joseph's years of magnanimous kindness as a rock by falling rain. If it was a theatrical display of feigned subjection, it was still worse. Our Brother, against whom we have sinned, wants love, not cowering; and if we believe in His forgiveness, we shall give Him the hearts which He desires, and after that shall render the unconditional submission which only trust and love can yield.

Joseph's answer is but the reiteration of his words at his first making himself known. He soothes unworthy fears, says not a word of reproach for their misunderstanding of him, waives all pretension to deal out that retribution which God alone sends, and shows that he has lost all bitterness in thinking of the past, since he sees in it, not the working of their malice, but of God's providence, and is ready to thank, if not them, at any rate Him, for having, by even so painful a way, made him the instrument of widespread good. A man who sees God's hand in his past, and thinks lightly of his sorrows and nobly of the opportunities of service which they have brought him, will waste no feeling on the men who were God's tools. If we want to live high above low hatreds and revenges, let us cultivate the habit of looking behind men to God. So we shall be saved from many fruitless pangs over irrevocable losses and from many disturbing feelings about other people.

The sweet little picture of the great minister's last days is very tenderly touched. Surrounded by his kindred, probably finding in a younger generation the reverence and affection which the elder had failed to give, he wears away the calm evening of the life which had opened so stormily. It ‘came in like a lion, it goes out like a lamb.’ The strong domestic instincts so characteristic of the Hebrew race had full gratification. Honours and power at court and kingdom probably continued, but these did not make the genial warmth which cheered the closing years. It was that he saw his children’s children’s children, and that they gathered round his knees in confidence, and received from him his benediction.

But it is in his death that the flame shoots up most brightly at the last. ‘By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.’ He had been an Egyptian to all appearance all his life from the day of his captivity, filling his place at court, marrying an Egyptian woman, and bearing an Egyptian name, but his dying words show how he had been a stranger in the midst of it all. As truly as his fathers who dwelt in tents, he too felt that he here had no continuing city. He lived by faith in God’s promises, and therefore his heart was in the unseen future far more than in the present.

He died with the ancestral assurance on his lips. Jacob, dying, had said to him, ‘Behold, I die; but God shall be with you, and bring you again unto the land of your fathers’ [Gen. 48:21]. Joseph hands on the hope to his descendants. It is a grand instance of indomitable confidence in God’s word, not nonplussed, bewildered, or weakened, though the man who cherishes it dies without seeing even a beginning of fulfilment. Such a faith bridges the gulf of death as a very small matter. In the strength of it we may drop our unfinished tasks, and, needful as we may seem to wider or narrower circles, may be sure that God and His word live, though we die. No man is necessary. Israel was safe in Egypt, and sure to come out of it, though Joseph’s powerful protection was withdrawn.

His career may teach another lesson; namely, that true faith does not detach us from strenuous interest and toil in the present. Though the great hope burned in his heart, he did all his work as prime minister all the better because of it. It should always be so. Life here is not worth living if there is not another. The distance dignifies the foreground. The highest importance and nobleness of the life that now is, lie in its being preparation or apprenticeship for the greater future. The Egyptian vizier, with Canaan written on his heart, and Egypt administered by his hands, is a type of what every Christian should be.

Possibly Joseph's 'commandment concerning his bones may have been somewhat influenced by the Egyptian belief which underlies their practice of embalming the body. He, too, may have thought that, in some mysterious way, he would share in the possession of the land in which his bones were to be laid. Or he may simply have been yielding to natural sentiment. It is noteworthy that Jacob desired to be laid beside his ancestors, and Joseph to be kept in Egypt for a time. Both had the same assurance as to future possession of Canaan, but it led to different wishes as to burial. Perhaps Joseph felt that his position in Egypt required that his embalmed body should for a while remain there. Perhaps he wished to leave with his people a silent witness of his own hope, and a preacher, eloquent in its dumbness, of the duty of their keeping alive that hope, whatever might come upon them.

'In a coffin in Egypt'-so the book ends. It might seem that that mummy-case proclaimed rather the futility of the hope of restoration to the land, and, as centuries rolled away, and the bondage became heavier, no doubt many a wondering and doubting look was turned to it. But there it lay, perhaps neglected, for more than three hundred years, the visible embodiment of a hope which smiled at death and counted centuries as nothing. At last the day came which vindicated the long-deferred confidence; and, as the fugitives in their haste shouldered the heavy sarcophagus, and set out with it for the Land of Promise, surely some thrill of trust would pass through their ranks, and in some hearts would sound the exhortation, 'If the vision tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.'

We have not a dead Joseph to bid us wait with patience and never lose our firm grip of God's promises, but we have a living Jesus. Our march to the land of rest is headed, not by the bones of a departed leader, but by the Forerunner, 'who is for us entered' whither He will bring all who trust in Him. Therefore we should live, as Joseph lived, with desires and trust reaching out beyond things seen to the land assured to us by God's promise, doing our day's task all the more vigorously because we do not belong to the order of things in the midst of which we live; and then, when we lie down at the end of our life's work, we shall not be saddened by disappointed hopes, nor reluctantly close our eyes on good to come, when we shall not be there to share it, but be sure that we shall 'see the good of Thy chosen,' and 'rejoice in the gladness of Thy nation.'

53)Genesis 50:25

Genesis

A CALM EVENING, PROMISING A BRIGHT MORNING

JOSEPH'S FAITH

Gen. 50:25.

This is the one act of Joseph's life which the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews selects as the sign that he too lived by faith. 'By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.'

It was at once a proof of how entirely he believed God's promise, and of how earnestly he longed for its fulfilment. It was a sign too of how little he felt himself at home in Egypt, though to outward appearance he had become completely one of its people. The ancestral spirit was in him true and strong though he was 'separate from his brethren.' He bore an Egyptian name, a swelling title, he married an Egyptian woman, he had an Egyptian priest for father-in-law, but he was an Israelite in heart; and in the midst of official cares and a surfeit of honours, his desires turned away from them all towards the land promised by God to his fathers.

And when he lay dying, he could not bear to think that his bones should moulder in the country where his life had been spent. 'I know that this is not our land after all; swear to me that when the promise that has tarried so long comes at last, you will take me, all that is left of me, and carry it up, and lay it in some corner of the blessed soil, that I too may somehow share in the inheritance of His people. God shall surely visit you. Carry my bones up hence.'

Perhaps there is in this wish a trace of something besides faith in God's promises. Of course, there is a natural sentiment which no clearness of knowledge of a future state wholly dispels. We all feel as if somehow our bodies remain a part of ourselves even after death, and we have wishes where they shall lie. But perhaps Joseph had a more definite belief on the matter than that. What theory of another life does an Egyptian mummy express? Why all that sedulous care to preserve the poor relics? Was it not a consequence of the belief that somehow or other there could be no life without a body, and that in some mysterious way the preservation of that contributed to the continuance of this? And so Joseph, who was himself going to be embalmed and put into a mummy-case, may have caught something of the tone of thought prevalent around him, and have believed that to carry his bones to the land of promise was, in some obscure manner, to carry *him* thither. Be that as it may, whether the wish came from a mistake about the relation of flesh and spirit, or only from the natural desire which we too possess, that our graves may not be among strangers, but beside our father's and our mother' s-that is not the main thing in this fact. The main thing is that this dying man believed God's promise, and claimed his share in it.

And on this the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, whoever he was, fastens. Neglecting the differences in knowledge between Joseph and the Christians whom he addresses, and pointing back to the strong confidence in God and longing for participation in the promises which brightened the glazing eye and gave *him* 'hope in his death,' he declares that the principle of action which guided this man in the dim twilight of early revelation, is that same faith which ought to guide us who live in the full light of the unsetting sun.

Taking, then, this incident, with the New Testament commentary upon it, it leads us to a truth which we often lose sight of, but which is indispensable if we would understand the relations of the earlier and later days.

1. *Faith is always the same, though knowledge varies.*-There is a vast difference between a man's creed and a man's faith. The one may vary, does vary within very wide limits; the other remains the same. The things believed have been growing from the beginning-the attitude of mind and

will by which they have been grasped has been the same from the beginning, and will be the same to the end. And not only so, but it will be substantially the same in heaven as it is on earth. For there is but one bond which unites men to God; and that emotion of loving trust is one and the same in the dim twilight of the world's morning, and amid the blaze of the noonday of heaven. The contents of faith, that on which it relies, the treasure it grasps, changes; the essence of faith, the act of reliance, the grasp which holds the treasure, does not change.

It is difficult to decide how much Joseph's gospel contained. From our point of view it was very imperfect. The spiritual life was nourished in him and in the rest of 'the world's grey fathers' on what looks to us but like seven basketsful of fragments. They had promises, indeed, in which we, looking at them with the light of fulfilment blazing upon them, can see the broad outlines of the latest revelation, and can trace the future flower all folded together and pale in the swelling bud. But we shall err greatly if we suppose, as we are apt to do, that those promises were to them anything like what they are to us. It requires a very vigorous exercise of very rare gifts to throw ourselves back to their position, and to gain any vivid and approximately accurate notion of the theology of these ancient lovers of God.

This, at any rate, we may, perhaps, say: they had a sure and clear knowledge of the living God, who had talked with them as with a friend; they knew His inspiring, guiding presence; they knew the forgiveness of sins; they knew, though they very dimly understood, the promise, 'In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' How far they looked across the gulf of death and beheld anything-even cloudland-on the other side, is a question very hard to answer, and about which confident dogmatism, either affirmative or negative, is unwarranted. But it is to be remembered that, whether they had any notion of a future state or no, they had a promise which fulfilled for them substantially the same office as that does for us. The promise of the land of Canaan gleaming before them through the mists, bare and 'earthly' as it seems to us when compared with our hope of an inheritance incorruptible in the heavens, is, by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, identified with that hope of ours, for he expressly says that, whilst they were looking for an earthly Canaan, they were 'desiring a better country, that is an heavenly.’ So that, whether they definitely expected a life after death or not, the anticipation of the land promised to them and to their fathers held the same place in their creed, and as a moral agent in their lives, which the rest that remains for the people of God ought to do in ours.

And it is to be taken into account also that fellowship with God has in it the germ of the assurance of immortality. It seems almost impossible to suppose a state of mind in which a man living in actual communion with God shall believe that death is to end it all. Christ’s proof that immortal life was revealed in the Pentateuch, was the fact that God there called Himself the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob; by which our Lord meant us to learn that men who are brought into personal relations with God can never die, that it is impossible that a soul which has looked up to the face of the unseen Father with filial love should be left in the grave, or that those who are separated to be His, as He is theirs, should see corruption. The relation once established is eternal, and some more or less definite expectation of that eternity seems inseparable from the consciousness of the relation.

But be that as it may, and even taking the widest possible view of the contents of the patriarchal creed, what a rude outline it looks beside ours! Can there be anything in common between us? Can they be in any way a pattern for us? Yes; as I said, faith is one thing, creed is another. Joseph and his ancestors were joined to God by the very same bond which unites us to Him. There has never been but one path of life: ‘They *trusted* God and were lightened, and their faces were not ashamed.’ In that Old Covenant the one thing needful was trust in the living Jehovah. In the New, the one thing needful is the very same emotion, directed to the very same Lord, manifested now and incarnate in the divine Son, our Saviour. In this exercise of loving confidence, in which reason and will and affection blend in the highest energy and holiest action, Joseph and we are one. Across the gulf of centuries we clasp hands; and in despite of all superficial differences of culture and civilisation, and all deeper differences in knowledge of God and His loving will, Pharaoh’s prime minister, and the English workman, and the Hindoo ryot, may be alike in what is deepest-the faith which grasps God. How all that mysterious Egyptian life fades away as we think of the fundamental identity of religious emotion then and now! It disguises our brother from us, as it did from the wandering Arabs who came to buy corn, and could not recognise in the swarthy, imperious Egyptian, with strange head-dress and unknown emblems hanging by chains of gold about his neck, the fair boy whom they had sold to the merchants. But beneath it all is the brother's heart, fed by the same life-blood which feeds ours. He trusts in God, he expects a future because God has promised it, and, therefore, he is separated from those among whom he dwells, and knit to us in this far-off island of the sea, who so many centuries after are partakers of like precious faith.

And incomplete as his creed was, Joseph may have been a better Christian than some of us, and was so, if what he knew nourished his spiritual life more than what we know nourishes ours, and if his heart and will twined more tenaciously round the fragments of revelation which he possessed, and drew from them more support and strength than we do from the complete Gospel which we have.

Brethren, what makes us Christians is not the theology we have in our heads, but the faith and love we have in our hearts. We must, indeed, have a clear statement of truth in orderly propositions-that is, a system of dogmas-to have anything to trust to at all. There can be no saving faith in an unseen Person, except through the medium of thoughts concerning Him, which thoughts put into words are a creed. The antithesis which is often eagerly urged upon us-not doctrines, but Christ-is a very incomplete and misleading one. 'Christ' is a mere name, empty of all significance till it is filled with definite statements of who and what Christ is. But whilst I, for my part, believe that we must have doctrines to make Christ a reality and an object of faith to grasp at all, I would urge all the more earnestly, because I thus believe, that, when we have these doctrines, it is not the creed that saves, but the faith. We are united to Christ, not by the doctrine of His nature and work, needful as that is, but by trusting in Him as that which the doctrine declares Him to be-Redeemer, Friend, Sacrifice, Divine Lover of our souls. Let us always remember that it is not the amount of religious knowledge which I have got, but the amount which I use, that determines my religious position and character. Most of us have in our creeds principles that have no influence upon our moral and active life; and, if so, it matters not one whit how pure, how accurate, how comprehensive, how consistent, how scriptural my conceptions of the Gospel may be. If they are not powers in my soul, they only increase my responsibility and my liability to condemnation. The dry light of the understanding is of no use to anybody. You must turn your creed into a faith before it has power to bless and save.

There are hosts of so-called Christians who get no more good out of the most solemn articles of their orthodox belief than if they were heathens. What in the use of your saying that you believe in God the Father Almighty, when there is no child's love and happy confidence in your heart? What the better are you for believing in Jesus Christ, His divine nature, His death and glory, when you have no reliance on Him, nor any least flutter of trembling love towards Him? Is your belief in the Holy Ghost of the smallest consequence, if you do not yield to His hallowing power? What does it matter that you believe in the forgiveness of sins, so long as you do not care a rush whether yours are pardoned or no? And is it anything to you or to God that you believe in the life everlasting, if all your work, and hopes, and longings are confined to 'this bank and shoal of time'? Are you any more a Christian because of all that intellectual assent to these solemn verities? Is not your life like some secularised monastic chamber, with holy texts carved on the walls, and saintly images looking down from glowing windows on revellers and hucksters who defile its floor? Your faith, not your creed, determines your religion. Many a 'true believer' is a real 'infidel.'

Thank God that the soul may be wedded to Christ, even while a very partial conception of Christ is in the understanding. The more complete and adequate the creed, indeed, the mightier and more fruitful in blessing will the faith naturally be; and every portion of the full orb of the Sun of Righteousness which is eclipsed by the shadow of our intellectual misconceptions, will diminish the light and warmth which falls upon our souls. It is no part of our duty to pronounce what is the minimum of a creed which faith needs for its object. For myself, I confess that I do not understand how the spiritual life can be sustained in its freshness and fervour, in its fulness and reality, without a belief in the divinity and saving work of Jesus Christ. But with that belief for the centre which faith grasps, the rest may vary indefinitely. All who stand around that centre, some nearer, some further off, some mazed in errors which others have cast behind them, some of them seeing and understanding more, and some less of Him and of His work-are His. He loves them, and will save them all. Knowledge varies. The faith which unites to God remains the same.

2. We may gather from this incident another consideration, namely, that *Faith has its noblest office in detaching from the present*.

All his life long, from the day of his captivity, Joseph was an Egyptian in outward seeming. He filled his place at Pharaoh's court, but his dying words open a window into his soul, and betray how little he had felt that he belonged to the order of things in the midst of which he had been content to live. This man, too, surrounded by an ancient civilisation, and dwelling among granite temples and solid pyramids and firm-based sphinxes, the very emblems of eternity, confessed that here he had no continuing city, but sought one to come. As truly as his ancestors who dwelt in tabernacles, like Abraham journeying with his camels and herds, and pitching his tent outside the walls of Hebron, like Isaac in the grassy plains of the South country, like Jacob keeping himself apart from the families of the land, their descendant, an heir with them of the same promise, showed that he too regarded himself as a 'stranger and a sojourner.' Dying, he said, 'Carry my bones up from hence. Therefore we may be sure that, living, the hope of the inheritance must have burned in his heart as a hidden light, and made him an alien everywhere but on its blessed soil.

And faith will always produce just such effects. In exact proportion to its strength, that living trust in God will direct our thoughts and desires to the 'King in His beauty, and the land that is very far off.' In proportion as our thoughts and desires are thus directed, they will be averted from what is round about us; and the more longingly our eyes are fixed on the furthest horizon, the less shall we see the flowers at our feet. To behold God pales the otherwise dazzling lustre of created brightness. They whose souls are fed with heavenly manna, and who have learned that it is their necessary food, will scent no dainties in the fleshpots of Egypt, for all their rank garlic and leeks. It is simply a question as to which of two classes of ideas occupies the thoughts, and which of two sets of affections engages the heart. If vulgar brawling and rude merrymakers fill the inn, there will be no room for the pilgrim thoughts which bear the Christ in their bosom, and have angels for their guard; and if these holy wayfarers enter, their serene presence will drive forth the noisy crowd, and turn the place into a temple. Nothing but Christian faith gives to the furthest future the solidity and definiteness which it must have, if it is to be a breakwater for us against the fluctuating sea of present cares and thoughts.

If the unseen is ever to rule in men's lives, it must be through their thoughts. It must become intelligible, clear, real. It must be brought out of the flickering moonlight of fancy and surmises, into the sunlight of certitude and knowledge. Dreams, and hopes, and peradventures are too unsubstantial stuff to be a bulwark against the very real, undeniable present. And such certitude is given through faith which grasps the promises of God, and twines the soul round the risen Saviour so closely that it sits with Him in heavenly places. Such certitude is given by faith alone.

If the unseen is ever to rule in men's lives, it must become not only an object for certain knowledge, but also for ardent wishes. The vague sense of possible evils lurking in its mysteries must be taken out of the soul, and there must come somehow an assurance that all it wraps in its folds is joy and peace. It must cease to be doubtful, and must seem infinitely desirable. Does anything but Christian faith engage the heart to love, and all the longing wishes to set towards, the things that are unseen and eternal? Where besides, then, can there be found a counterpoise weighty enough to heave up the souls that are laden with the material, and cleaving to the dust? Nowhere. The only possible deliverance from the tyrannous pressure of the trifles amidst which we live is in having the thoughts familiarised with Christ in heaven, which will dwarf all that is on earth, and in having the affections fixed on Him, which will emancipate them from the pains and sorrows that ever wait upon love of the mutable and finite creatures.

Let us remember that such deliverance from the present is the condition of all noble, joyous, pure life. It needs Christianity to effect it indeed, but it does not need Christianity to see how desirable it is, and how closely connected with whatever is lovely and of good report is this detachment from the near and the visible. A man that is living for remote objects is, in so far, a better man than one who is living for the present. He will become thereby the subject of a mental and moral discipline that will do him good.

And, on the other hand, a life which has no far-off light for its guiding star, has none of the unity, of the self-restraint, of the tension, of the conscious power which makes our days noble and strong. Whether he accomplish them or fail, whether they be high or low, the man who lets future objects rule present action is in advance of others. 'To scorn delights and live laborious days,' which is the prerogative of the man with a future, is always best. He is rather a beast than a man, who floats lazily on the warm, sunny wavelets as they lift him in their roll, and does not raise his head high enough above them to see and steer for the solid shore where they break. But only he has found the full, controlling, blessing, quickening power that lies in the thought of the future, and in life directed by it, to whom that future is all summed in the name of his Saviour. Whatever makes a man live in the past and in the future raises him; but high above all others stand those to whom the past is an apocalypse of God, with Calvary for its centre, and all the future is fellowship with Christ, and joy in the heavens. Having these hopes, it will be our own faults if we are not pure and gentle, calm in changes and sorrows, armed against frowning dangers, and proof against smiling temptations. They are our armour-'Put on the breastplate of faith . . .and for an helmet the hope of salvation.'

A very sharp test for us all lies in these thoughts. This change of the centre of interest from earth to heaven is the uniform effect of faith. What, then, of us? On Sundays we profess to seek for a city; but what about the week, from Monday morning to Saturday night? What difference does our faith make in the current of our lives? How far are they unlike-I do not mean externally and in occupations, but in principle-the lives of men who 'have no hope'? Are you living for other objects than theirs? Are you nurturing other hopes in your hearts, as a man may guard a little spark of fire with both his hands, to light him amid the darkness and the howling storm? Do you care to detach yourself from the world? or are you really 'men of this world, which have their portion in this life,' even while Christians by profession? A question which I have no right to ask, and no power to answer but for myself; a question which it concerns your souls to ask and to answer very definitely for yourselves. There is no need to preach an exaggerated and impossible abstinence from work and enjoyment in the world where God has put us, or to set up a standard 'too high for mortal life beneath the sky.' Whatever call there may have sometimes been to protest against a false asceticism, and withdrawing from active life for the sake of one's personal salvation, times are changed now. What we want to-day is: 'Come ye out and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing.' In my conscience I believe that multitudes are having the very heart of the Christian life eaten out by absorption in earthly pursuits and loves, and by the effacing of all distinction in outward life, in occupation, in recreation, in tastes and habits, between people who call themselves Christians, and people who do not care at all whether there is another world or not. There can be but little strength in our faith if it does not compel us to separation. If it has any power to do anything at all, it will certainly do that. If we are naturalised as citizens there, we cannot help being aliens here. 'Abraham,' says the New Testament, 'dwelt in tabernacles, *for* he looked for a city.' Just so! The tent life will always be the natural one for those who feel that their mother-country is beyond the stars. We should be like the wandering Swiss, who hear in a strange land the rude, old melody that used to echo among the Alpine pastures. The sweet, sad tones kindle home-sickness that will not let them rest. No matter where they are, or what they are doing, no matter what honour they have carved out for themselves with their swords, they throw off the livery of the alien king which they have worn, and turning their backs upon pomp and courts, seek the free air of the mountains, and find home better than a place by a foreign throne. Let us esteem the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, and go forth to Him without the camp, for here have we no continuing city.

3. Again, we have here an instance that *Faith makes men energetic in the duties of the present*.

The remarks which I have been making must be completed by that consideration, or they become hurtful and one-sided. You know that common sarcasm, that Christianity degrades this present life by making it merely the portal to a better, and teaches men to think of it as only evil, to be scrambled through anyhow. I confess that I wish the sneer were a less striking contrast to what Christian people really think. But it is almost as gross a caricature of the teaching of Christianity as it is of the practice of Christians.

Take this story of Joseph as giving us a truer view of the effect on present action of faith in, and longing for, God’s future. He was, as I said, a true Hebrew all his days. But that did not make him run away from Pharaoh’s service. He lived by hope, and that made him the better worker in the passing moment, and kept him tugging away all his life at the oar, administering the affairs of a kingdom.

Of course it is so. The one thing which saves this life from being contemptible is the thought of another. The more profoundly we feel the reality of the great eternity whither we are being drawn, the greater do all things here become. They are made less in their power to absorb or trouble, but they are made infinitely greater in importance as preparations for what is beyond. When they are first they are small, when they are second they are great. When the mist lifts, and shows the snowy summits of the ‘mountains of God,’ the nearer lower ranges, which we thought the highest, dwindle indeed, but gain in sublimity and meaning by the loftier peaks to which they lead up. Unless men and women live for eternity, they *are* ‘merely players,’ and all their busy days ‘like a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, *signifying nothing*.’ How absurd, how monotonous, how trivial it all is, all this fret and fume, all these dying joys and only less fleeting pains, all this mill-horse round of work which we pace, unless we are, mill-horse-like, driving a shaft that goes *through the wall*, and grinds something that falls into ‘bags that wax not old’ on the other side. The true Christian faith teaches us that this world is the workshop where God makes men, and the next, the palace where He shows them. All here is apprenticeship and training. It is of no more value than the attitudes into which gymnasts throw themselves, but as a discipline most precious. The end makes the means important; and if we believe that God is preparing us for immortal life with Him by all our work, then we shall do it with a will: otherwise we may well be languid as we go on for thirty or forty years, some of us, doing the same trivial things, and getting nothing out of them but food, occupation of time, and a mechanical aptitude for doing what is not worth doing.

It is the horizon that gives dignity to the foreground. A picture without sky has no glory. This present, unless we see gleaming beyond it the eternal calm of the heavens, above the tossing tree-tops with withering leaves, and the smoky chimneys, is a poor thing for our eyes to gaze at, or our hearts to love, or our hands to toil on. But when we see that all paths lead to heaven, and that our eternity is affected by our acts in time, then it is blessed to gaze, it is possible to love, the earthly shadows of the uncreated beauty, it is worth while to work.

Remember, too, that faith will energise us for any sort of work, seeing that it raises all to one level and brings all under one sanction, and shows all as cooperating to one end. Look at that muster-roll of heroes of faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and mark the variety of grades of human life represented there-statesmen, soldiers, prophets, shepherds, widow women, martyrs-all fitted for their tasks and delivered from the snare that was in their calling, by that faith which raised them above the world, and therefore fitted them to come down on the world with stronger strokes of duty. This is the secret of doing with our might whatsoever our hand finds to do-to trust Christ, to live *with* Him, and *by* the hope of the inheritance.

Then, brethren, let us see that our clearer revelation bears fruit in a faith in the great divine promises as calm and firm as this dying patriarch had. Then the same power will work not only the same detachment and energy in life, but the same calmness and solemn light of hope in death. It is very beautiful to notice how Joseph dying almost overleaps the thought of death as a very small matter. His brethren who stood by his bedside might well fear what might be the consequences to their people when the powerful protector, the prime minister of the kingdom, was gone. But the dying man has firm hold of God's promises, and he knows that these will be fulfilled, whether he live or no. 'I die,' says he, 'but God shall surely visit you. *He* is not going to die; and though I stand no more before Pharaoh, you will be safe.'

Thus we may contemplate our own going away, or the departure of the dearest from our homes, and of the most powerful for good in human affairs, and in the faith of God's true promises may feel that no one is indispensable to our well-being or to the world's good. God's chariot is self-moving. One after another, who lays his hand upon the ropes, and hauls for a little space, drops out of the ranks. But it will go on, and in His majesty He will ride prosperously.

And for himself, too, the dying man felt that death was a very small matter. 'Whether I live or die I shall have a share in the promise. Living, perhaps my feet would stand upon its soil; dying, my bones will rest there.' And we, who know a resurrection, have in it that which makes Joseph's fond fancy a reality, and reduces the importance of that last enemy to nothing. Some will be alive and remain till the coming of the Lord, some will be laid in the grave till His voice calls them forth, and carries their bones up from hence to the land of the inheritance. But whether we be of generations that fell on sleep looking for the promise of His coming, or whether of the generation that go forth to meet Him when He comes, it matters not. All who have lived by faith will then be gathered at last. The brightest hopes of the present will be forgotten. Then, when we too shall stand in the latter day, wearing the likeness of His glory, and extricated wholly from the bondage of corruption and the dust of death, we, perfected in body, soul, and spirit, shall enter the calm home, where we shall change the solitude of the desert and the transitoriness of the tent and the dangers of the journey, for the society and the stability and the security of the city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

54)Genesis 50:26

Genesis

A CALM EVENING, PROMISING A BRIGHT MORNING

A COFFIN IN EGYPT

Gen. 50:26.

So closes the book of Genesis. All its recorded dealings of God with Israel, and all the promises and the glories of the patriarchal line, end with 'a coffin in Egypt'. Such an ending is the more striking, when we remember that a space of three hundred years intervenes between the last events in Genesis and the first in Exodus, or almost as long a time as parts the Old Testament from the New. And, during all that period, Israel was left with a mummy and a hope. The elaborately embalmed body of Joseph lay in its gilded and pictured case, somewhere in Goshen, and was, no doubt, in the care of the Israelites, as is plain from the fact that they carried it with them at the exodus. For three centuries, that silent 'coffin in Egypt' preached its impressive messages. What did it say? It spoke, no doubt, to ears often deaf, but still some faint whispers of its speechless testimony would sound in some hearts, and help to keep vivid some hopes.

First, it was a silent reminder of mortality. Egyptian consciousness was much occupied with death. The land was peopled with tombs. But the corpse of Joseph was perhaps not laid in one of these, but remained housed somewhere in sight, as it were, of all Israel. Many a passer-by would pause for a moment, and think; Here is the end of dignity second only to Pharaoh's, to this has come that strong brain, that true heart, Israel's pride and protection is shut up in that wooden case.

'The glories of our birth and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armour against fate,
Death lays his icy hand on kings.'

Yes, but let us remember that while that silent sarcophagus enforced the old, old lesson to the successive generations that looked on it and little heeded its stern, sad teaching of mortality, it had other brighter truths to tell. For the shrivelled, colourless lips that lay in it, covered with many a fold of linen, had left as their last utterance, 'I die, but God will surely visit you,' No man is necessary. Israel can survive the loss of the strongest and wisest. God lives, though a hundred Josephs die. It is pure gain to lose human helpers, if thereby we become more fully conscious of our need of a divine arm and heart, and more truly feel that we have these for our all-sufficient stay. Blessed is the fleeting of all that can pass, if its withdrawal lets the calm light of the Eternal, which cannot pass, stream in uninterrupted on us! When the leaves fall, we see more clearly the rock which their short-lived greenness in its pride veiled. When the many-hued and ever-shifting clouds are swept out of the sky by the wind, the sun that lent them all their colour shines the more brightly. The message of every death-bed and grave is meant to be, 'This and that man dies, but God lives.' The last result of our contemplation of mortality, as affecting our dearest and most needful ones, and as sure to include ourselves in its far-reaching, close-woven net, ought to be to drive us to God's breast, that there we may find a Friend who does not pass, and may dwell in ‘the land of the living,’ on whose soil the foot of all-conquering Death dare never tread.

Nor are these thoughts all the message of that ‘coffin in Egypt.’ In the first verses of the next book, that of Exodus, there is a remarkable juxtaposition of ideas, when we read that ‘Joseph died and all his brethren and all that generation.’ But was that the end of Israel? By no means, for the narrative goes on immediately to say-linking the two things together by a simple ‘and’-that ‘the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied and waxed exceeding mighty.’

So life springs side by side with death. There are cradles as well as graves.

‘The individual withers,
And the race is more and more.’

Leaves drop and new leaves come. The April days are not darkened, and the tender green of the fresh leaf-buds is all the more vigorous and luxuriant, because it is fed from the decaying leaves that litter the roots of the long-lived oak. Thus through the ages the pathetic alternation goes on. Penelope’s web is ever being woven and run down and woven again. Joseph dies; Israel grows. Let us not take half-views, nor either fix our thoughts on the universal law of dissolution and decay, nor on the other side of the process-the universal emergence of life from death, reconstruction from dissolution. In our individual histories and on the wider field of the world’s history, the same large law is at work, which is expressed in the simplest terms by these old words, ‘Joseph died, and all his brethren and all that generation’-and ‘the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly.’ So the wholesome lesson of mortality is stripped of much of its sadness, and retains all its pathos, solemnity, and power to purify the heart.

Again, that ‘coffin in Egypt’ was a herald of Hope. The reason for Joseph’s dying injunction that his body should be preserved after the Egyptian fashion, and laid where it could be lifted and carried away, when the long-expected deliverance was effected, was the dying patriarch’s firm confidence that, though he died, he had still somehow a share in God’s faithful promise. We do not know the precise shape which his thought of that share took. It may have been merely the natural sentiment which desires that the unconscious frame shall moulder quietly beside the mouldering forms which once held our dear ones. This naturalised Egyptian did his work manfully in the land of his adoption, and flung himself eagerly into its interests, but his heart turned to the cave at Machpelah, and, though he lived in Egypt, he could not bear to think of lying there for ever when dead, especially of being left there alone. There may have been some trace in his wish of the peculiar Egyptian belief that the preservation of the body contributed in some way to the continuance of personal life, and that a certain shadowy self hovered about the spot where the mummy was laid. Our knowledge of the large place filled by a doctrine of a future life in Egyptian thought makes it most probable that Joseph had at least some forecast of that hope of immortality, which seems to us to be inseparable from the consciousness of present communion with God.

But, in any case, Israel had charge of that coffin because the dead man that lay in it had, on the very edge of the gulf of death, believed that he had still a portion in Israel's hope, and that, when he had taken the plunge into the great darkness, he had not sunk below the reach of God's power to give him personal fulfilment of His yet unfulfilled promise. His dying command was the expression of his unshaken faith that, though he was dead, God would visit him with His salvation, and give him to see the prosperity of His chosen, that he might rejoice in the gladness of the nation, and glory with His inheritance. He had lived, trusting in God's bare promise, and, as he lived, he died. The Epistle to the Hebrews lays hold of the true motive power in the incident, when it points to Joseph's dying 'commandment concerning his bones' as a noble instance of Faith.

Thus, through slow creeping centuries, this silent preacher said-'Hope on, though the vision tarry, wait for it, for it will surely come. God is faithful, and will perform His word.' There was much to make hope faint. To bring Israel out of Canaan seemed a strange way of investing it with the possession of Canaan. As the tardy years trickled away, drop by drop, and the promise seemed no nearer fulfilment, some film of doubt must have crept over Hope's bright eyes. When new dynasties reigned, and Israel slowly sank into the state of bondage, it must have been still harder to believe that the shortest road to the inheritance was round by Goshen. But through all the darkening course of Israel in these sad centuries, there stood the ‘coffin,’ the token of a triumphant faith which had leapt, as a trifle, over the barrier of death, and grasped as real the good which lay beyond that frowning wall. We have a better Herald of hope than a mummy-case and a pyramid built round it. We have an empty grave and an occupied Throne, by which to nourish our confidence in Immortality and our estimate of the insignificance of death. Our Joseph does not say-’I die, but God will surely visit you,’ but He gives us the wonderful assurance of identification with Himself, and consequent participation in His glory-’Because I live, ye shall live also.’ Therefore our hope should be as much brighter and more confirmed than this ancient one was as that on which it is based is better and more joyous. But, alas, there is no invariable proportion between food supplied and strength derived. An orchid can fling out gorgeous blooms, though it grows on a piece of dry wood, but plants set in rich soil often show poor flowers. Our hope will be worthy of its foundation, only on condition of our habitually reflecting on the firmness of that foundation, and cultivating familiarity with the things hoped for.

There are many ways in which the apostle’s great saying that ‘we are saved by hope’ approves itself as true. Whatever leads us to grasp the future rather than the present, even if it is but an earthly future, and to live by hope rather than by fruition, even if it is but a short-reaching hope, lifts us in the scale of being, ennobles, dignifies, and in some respects purifies us. Even men whose expectations have not wing-power enough to cross the dreadful ravine of Death, are elevated in the degree in which they work towards a distant goal. Short-sighted hopes are better than blind absorption in the present. Whatever puts the centre of gravity of our lives in the future is a gain, and most of all is that hope blessed, which bids us look forward to an eternal sitting with Jesus at the right hand of God.

If such hope has any solidity in it, it will certainly detach us from the order of things in which we dwell. The world is always tempting us to ‘forget the imperial palace’ whither we go. The Israelites must have been swayed by many inducements to settle down for good and all in the low levels of fertile Goshen, and to think themselves better off there than if going out on a perilous enterprise to win no richer pastures than they already possessed. In fact, when the deliverance came, it was not particularly welcome, oven though oppression was embittering the peoples’ lives. But, when hope had died down in them, and desire had become languid, and ignoble contentment with their flocks and herds had dulled their spirits, Joseph’s silent coffin must have pealed in their ears-’This is not your rest; arise and claim your inheritance.’ In like manner, the pressure of the apparently solid realities of to-day, the growth of the ‘scientific’ temper of mind which confines knowledge to physical facts, the drift of tendency among religious people to regard Christianity mainly in its aspect of dealing with social questions and bringing present good, powerfully reinforce our natural sluggishness of Hope, and have brought it about that the average Christian of this day has fewer of his thoughts directed to the future life than his predecessors had, or than it is good for him to have.

Among the many truths which almost need to be rediscovered by their professed believers, that of the rest that remains for the people of God is one. For the test of believing a truth is its influence on conduct, and no one can affirm that the conduct of the average Christian of our times bears marks of being deeply influenced by that Future, or by the hope of winning it. Does he live as if he felt that he was an alien among the material things surrounding him? Does it look as if his true affinities were beyond the grave and above the stars? If we did thus feel, not at rare intervals, when 'in seasons of calm weather, our souls have sight of that immortal sea,' which lies glassy before the throne, and on whose banks the minstrels stand singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb, but habitually and with a vivid realisation, which makes the things hoped for more solid than what we touch and handle, our lives would be far other than they are. We should not work less, but more, earnestly at our present duties, whatever these may be, for they would be seen in new importance as bearing on our place in that world of consequences. The more our goal and prize are seen gleaming through the dust of the race-ground, the more strenuous our effort here. Nothing ennobles the trifles of our lives in time like the streaming in on these of the light of eternity. That vision ever present with us will not sadden. The fact of mortality is grim enough, if forced upon us unaccompanied by the other fact that Death opens the gate of our Home. But when the else depressing thought that 'here we have no continuing city' is but the obverse and result of the fact that 'we seek one to come,' it is freed from its sadness, and becomes powerful for good and even for joy. We need, even more than Israel in its bondage did, to realise that we are strangers and pilgrims. It concerns the depth of our religion and the reality of our profiting by the discipline, as well as of our securing the enjoyment of the blessings, of the fleeting and else trivial present, that we shall keep very clear in view the great future which dignifies and interprets this enigmatical earthly life.

Further, that 'coffin in Egypt' was a preacher of patience. As we have seen, three centuries at least, probably a somewhat longer period, passed between the time when Joseph's corpse was laid in it, and the night when it was lifted out of it by the departing Israelites. No doubt, hope deferred had made many a heart sick, and the weary question, 'Where is the promise of His coming?' had in some cases changed into bitter disbelief that the promise would ever be fulfilled. But, for all these years, the dumb monitor stood there proclaiming, 'If the vision tarry, wait for it.'

Surely we need the same lesson. It is hard for us to acquiesce in the slow march of the divine purposes. Life is short, and desire would fain see the great harvests reaped before death seals our eyes. Sometimes the very prospect of the great things that shall one day be accomplished in the world, and we not there to see, weighs heavily on us. Reformers, philanthropists, idealists of all sorts are constitutionally impatient, and in their generous haste to see their ideals realised, forget that 'raw haste' is 'half-sister to delay' and are indignant with man for his sluggishness and with God for His majestic slowness. Not less do we fret and fume and think the days drag with intolerable slowness, before some eagerly expected good rises like a star on our individual lives. But there is deep truth in Paul's apparent paradox, that 'if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.' The more sure the confidence, the more quiet the patient waiting. It is uncertainty which makes earthly hope short of breath, and impatient of delay.

But since a Christian man's hope is consolidated into certainty, and when it is set on God, cannot only say, I trust that it will be so and so, but, I know that it shall, it may well be content to be patient for the fulfilment, 'as the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it.' 'One day is with the Lord as a thousand years' in respect of the magnitude of the changes which may be wrought by the instantaneous operation of His hand when the appointed hour shall strike, and therefore it should not strain our patience nor stagger our faith that 'a thousand years' should be 'as one day,' in respect of the visible approximation achieved in them, towards the establishment of His purpose. The world was prepared for man through countless millenniums. Man was prepared for the advent of Christ through long centuries. Nineteen hundred years have effected comparatively little in incorporating the issues of Christ's work in the consciousness and characters of mankind. Much of the slowness of that progress of Christianity is due to the faithlessness and sloth of professing Christians. But it still remains true that God lifts His foot slowly, and plants it firmly, in His march through the world. So, both in regard to the progress of truth, and the diffusion of the highest, and of the secondary, blessings of Christianity through the nations, and in respect to the reception of individual good gifts, we shall do wisely to leave God to settle the ‘when’ since we are sure that He has bound Himself to accomplish the fact.

Finally, that ‘coffin in Egypt’ was a pledge of possession. It lay long among the Israelites to uphold fainting faith, and at last was carried up before their host, and reverently guarded during forty years’ wanderings, till it was deposited in the cave at Machpelah, beside the tombs of the fathers of the nation. Thus it became to the nation, and remains for us, a symbol of the truth that no hope based upon God’s bare word is ever finally disappointed. From all other anticipations grounded on anything less solid, the element of uncertainty is inseparable, and Fear is ever the sister of Hope. With keen insight Spenser makes these two march side by side, in his wonderful procession of the attendants of earthly Love. There is always a lurking sadness in Hope’s smiles, and a nameless dread in her eyes. And all expectations busied with or based upon the contingencies of this poor life, whether they are fulfilled or disappointed, prove less sweet in fruition than in prospect, and often turn to ashes in the eating, instead of the sweet bread which we had thought them to be. One basis alone is sure, and that is the foundation on which Joseph rested and risked everything-the plain promise of God. He who builds on that rock will never be put to shame, and when floods sweep away every refuge built on sand, he will not need to ‘make haste’ to find, amid darkness and storm, some less precarious shelter, but will look down serenely on the wildest torrent, and know it to be impotent to wash away his fortress home.

There is no nobler example of victorious faith which prolonged confident expectation beyond the insignificant accident of death than Joseph’s dying ‘commandment concerning his bones.’ His confidence, indeed, grasped a far lower blessing than ours should reach out to clasp. It was evoked by less clear and full promises and pledges than we have. The magnitude and loftiness of the Christian hope of Immortality, and the certitude of the fact on which it reposes, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, should result in a corresponding increase in the firmness and clearness of our hope, and in its power in our lives. The average Christian of to-day may well be sent to school to Joseph on his death-bed. Is our faith as strong as-I will not ask if it is stronger than-that of this man who, in the morning twilight of revelation, and with a hope of an eternal possession of an earthly inheritance, which, one might have thought, would be shattered by death, was able to fling his anchor clean across the gulf when he gave injunction, ‘Carry my bones up hence’? We have a better inheritance, and fuller, clearer promises and facts on which to trust. Shame to us if we have a feebler faith.

Exodus

1) EXODUS 1:1-5
2) EXODUS 1:6-7
3) EXODUS 1:8-14
4) EXODUS 2:1-10
5) EXODUS 3:1
6) EXODUS 3:10-20
7) EXODUS 11:1-10
8) EXODUS 12:1-14
9) EXODUS 13:9
10) EXODUS 14:19-31
11) EXODUS 15:2
12) EXODUS 15:13
13) EXODUS 15:17
14) EXODUS 15:23-25
15) EXODUS 16:4-12
16) EXODUS 17:15
17) EXODUS 18:3-4
18) EXODUS 18:21
19) EXODUS 20:1-11
20) EXODUS 20:12-21
21) EXODUS 23:16
22) EXODUS 24:1-12
23) EXODUS 25:30
24) EXODUS 25:31
25) EXODUS 28:12
26) EXODUS 28:29
27) EXODUS 28:36
28) EXODUS 30:1

29) EXODUS 30:12
30) EXODUS 30:15
31) EXODUS 32:1-8
32) EXODUS 32:15-26
33) EXODUS 32:30-35
34) EXODUS 33:12-23
35) EXODUS 34:6
36) EXODUS 34:7
37) EXODUS 34:29

38) Exodus 35:21

1) Exodus 1:1-5

Exodus

FOUR SHAPING CENTURIES

Exo. 1:1 - - Exo. 1:14.

The four hundred years of Israel's stay in Egypt were divided into two unequal periods, in the former and longer of which they were prosperous and favoured, while in the latter they were oppressed. Both periods had their uses and place in the shaping of the nation and its preparation for the Exodus. Both carry permanent lessons.

I. The long days of unclouded prosperity. These extended over centuries, the whole history of which is summed up in two words: death and growth. The calm years glided on, and the shepherds in Goshen had the happiness of having no annals. All that needed to be recorded was that, one by one, the first generation died off, and that the new generations 'were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty.' The emphatic repetitions recall the original promises in Gen. 12:2, Gen. 17:4 - Gen. 17:5, Gen. 18:18. The preceding specification of the number of the original settlers [repeated from Gen. 46:27] brings into impressive contrast the small beginnings and the rapid increase. We may note that eloquent setting side by side of the two processes which are ever going on simultaneously, death and birth.

One by one men pass out of the warmth and light into the darkness, and so gradually does the withdrawal proceed that we scarcely are aware of its going on, but at last ‘all that generation’ has vanished. The old trees are all cleared off the ground, and everywhere their place is taken by the young saplings. The web is ever being woven at one end, and run down at the other. ‘The individual withers, but the race is more and more.’ How solemn that continual play of opposing movements is, and how blind we are to its solemnity!

That long period of growth may be regarded in two lights. It effected the conversion of a horde into a nation by numerical increase, and so was a link in the chain of the divine working. The great increase, of which the writer speaks so strongly, was, no doubt, due to the favourable circumstances of the life in Goshen, but was none the less regarded by him, and rightly so, as God’s doing. As the Psalmist sings, ‘*He* increased His people greatly.’ ‘Natural processes’ are the implements of a supernatural will. So Israel was being multiplied, and the end for which it was peacefully growing into a multitude was hidden from all but God. But there was another end, in reference to which the years of peaceful prosperity may be regarded; namely, the schooling of the people to patient trust in the long-delayed fulfilment of the promise. That hope had burned bright in Joseph when he died, and he being dead yet spake of it from his coffin to the successive generations. Delay is fitted and intended to strengthen faith and make hope more eager. But that part of the divine purpose, alas! was not effected as the former was. In the moral region every circumstance has two opposite results possible. Each condition has, as it were, two handles, and we can take it by either, and generally take it by the wrong one. Whatever is meant to better us may be so used by us as to worsen us. And the history of Israel in Egypt and in the desert shows only too plainly that ease weakened, if it did not kill, faith, and that Goshen was so pleasant that it drove the hope and the wish for Canaan out of mind. ‘While the bridegroom tarried they all slumbered and slept.’ Is not Israel in Egypt, slackening hold of the promise because it tarried, a mirror in which the Church may see itself? and do *we* not know the enervating influence of Goshen, making us reluctant to shoulder our packs and turn out for the pilgrimage? The desert repels more strongly than Canaan attracts.

II. The shorter period of oppression. Probably the rise of a ‘new king’ means a revolution in which a native dynasty expelled foreign monarchs. The Pharaoh of the oppression was, perhaps, the great Rameses II., whose long reign of sixty-seven years gives ample room for protracted and grinding oppression of Israel. The policy adopted was characteristic of these early despotisms, in its utter disregard of humanity and of everything but making the kingdom safe. It was not intentionally cruel, it was merely indifferent to the suffering it occasioned. ‘Let us deal *wisely* with them’-never mind about justice, not to say kindness. Pharaoh’s ‘politics,’ like those of some other rulers who divorce them from morality, turned out to be impolitic, and his ‘wisdom’ proved to be roundabout folly. He was afraid that the Israelites, if they were allowed to grow, might find out their strength and seek to emigrate; and so he set to work to weaken them with hard bondage, not seeing that that was sure to make them wish the very thing that he was blunderingly trying to prevent. The only way to make men glad to remain in a community is to make them at home there. The sense of injustice is the strongest disintegrating force. If there is a ‘dangerous class’ the surest way to make them more dangerous is to treat them harshly. It was a blunder to make ‘lives bitter,’ for hearts also were embittered. So the people were ripened for revolt, and Goshen became less attractive.

God used Pharaoh’s foolish wisdom, as He had used natural laws, to prepare for the Exodus. The long years of ease had multiplied the nation. The period of oppression was to stir them up out of their comfortable nest, and make them willing to risk the bold dash for freedom. Is not that the explanation, too, of the similar times in our lives? It needs that we should experience life’s sorrows and burdens, and find how hard the world’s service is, and how quickly our Goshens may become places of grievous toil, in order that the weak hearts, which cling so tightly to earth, may be detached from it, and taught to reach upwards to God. ‘Blessed is the man . . .in whose heart are thy ways,’ and happy is he who so profits by his sorrows that they stir in him the pilgrim’s spirit, and make him yearn after Canaan, and not grudge to leave Goshen. Our ease and our troubles, opposite though they seem and are, are meant to further the same end,-to make us fit for the journey which leads to rest and home. We often misuse them both, letting the one sink us in earthly delights and oblivion of the great hope, and the other embitter our spirits without impelling them to seek the things that are above. Let us use the one for thankfulness, growth, and patient hope, and the other for writing deep the conviction that this is not our rest, and making firm the resolve that we will gird our loins and, staff in hand, go forth on the pilgrim road, not shrinking from the wilderness, because we see the mountains of Canaan across its sandy flats.

2) Exodus 1:6-7

Exodus

FOUR SHAPING CENTURIES

DEATH AND GROWTH

Exo. 1:6 - - Exo. 1:7.

These remarkable words occur in a short section which makes the link between the Books of Genesis and of Exodus. The writer recapitulates the list of the immigrants into Egypt, in the household of Jacob, and then, as it were, having got them there, he clears the stage to prepare for a new set of actors. These few words are all that he cares to tell us about a period somewhat longer than that which separates us from the great Protestant Reformation. He notes but two processes-silent dropping away and silent growth. ‘Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation.’ Plant by plant the leaves drop, and the stem rots and its place is empty. Seed by seed the tender green spikelets pierce the mould, and the field waves luxuriant in the breeze and the sunshine. ‘The children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly.’

I. Now, then, let us look at this twofold process which is always at work-silent dropping away and silent growth.

It seems to me that the writer, probably unconsciously, being profoundly impressed with certain features of that dropping away, reproduces them most strikingly in the very structure of his sentence: ‘Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation.’ The uniformity of the fate, and the separate times at which it befell individuals, are strongly set forth in the clauses, which sound like the threefold falls of earth on a coffin. They all died, but not all at the same time. They went one by one, one by one, till, at the end, they were all gone. The two things that appeal to our imagination, and ought to appeal to our consciences and wills, in reference to the succession of the generations of men, are given very strikingly, I think, in the language of my text-namely, the stealthy assaults of death upon the individuals, and its final complete victory.

If any of you were ever out at sea, and looked over a somewhat stormy water, you will have noticed, I dare say, how strangely the white crests of the breakers disappear, as if some force, acting from beneath, had plucked them under, and over the spot where they gleamed for a moment runs the blue sea. So the waves break over the great ocean of time; I might say, like swimmers pulled under by sharks, man after man, man after man, gets twitched down, till at the end-'Joseph died, and all his brethren, and *all* that generation.'

There is another process going on side by side with this. In the vegetable world, spring and autumn are two different seasons: May rejoices in green leaves and opening buds, and nests with their young broods; but winter days are coming when the greenery drops and the nests are empty, and the birds flown. But the singular and impressive thing [which we should see if we were not so foolish and blind] which the writer of our text lays his finger upon is that at the same time the two opposite processes of death and renewal are going on, so that if you look at the facts from the one side it seems nothing but a charnel-house and a Golgotha that we live in, while, seen from the other side, it is a scene of rejoicing, budding young life, and growth.

You get these two processes in the closest juxtaposition in ordinary life. There is many a house where there is a coffin upstairs and a cradle downstairs. The churchyard is often the children's playground. The web is being run down at the one end and woven at the other. Wherever we look-

'Every moment dies a man,
Every moment one is born.'

‘Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation. And the children of Israel . . .multiplied . . .exceedingly.’

But there is another thought here than that of the contemporaneousness of the two processes, and that is, as it is written on John Wesley’s monument in Westminster Abbey, ‘God buries the workmen and carries on the work.’ The great Vizier who seemed to be the only protection of Israel is lying in ‘a coffin in Egypt.’ And all these truculent brothers of his that had tormented him, they are gone, and the whole generation is swept away. What of that? They were the depositories of God’s purposes for a little while. Are God’s purposes dead because the instruments that in part wrought them are gone? By no means. If I might use a very vulgar proverb, ‘There are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it,’ especially if God casts the net. So when the one generation has passed away there is the other to take up the work. Thus the text is a fitting introduction to the continuance of the history of the further unfolding of God’s plan which occupies the Book of Exodus.

II. Such being the twofold process suggested by this text, let us next note the lessons which it enforces.

In the first place, let us be quite sure that we give it its due weight in our thoughts and lives. Let us be quite sure that we never give an undue weight to the one half of the whole truth. There are plenty of people who are far too much, constitutionally and [perhaps by reason of a mistaken notion of religion] religiously, inclined to the contemplation of the more melancholy side of these truths; and there are a great many people who are far too exclusively disposed to the contemplation of the other. But the bulk of us never trouble our heads about either the one or the other, but go on, forgetting altogether that swift, sudden, stealthy, skinny hand that, if I might go back to my former metaphor, is put out to lay hold of the swimmer and then pull him underneath the water, and which will clasp us by the ankles one day and drag us down. Do you ever think about it? If not, surely, surely you are leaving out of sight one of what ought to be the formative elements in our lives.

And then, on the other hand, when our hearts are faint, or when the pressure of human mortality-our own, that of our dear ones, or that of others-seems to weigh us down, or when it looks to us as if God's work was failing for want of people to do it, let us remember the other side-'And the children of Israel . . .increased . . .and waxed exceeding mighty; . . .and the land was filled with them.' So we shall keep the middle path, which is the path of safety, and so avoid the folly of extremes.

But then, more particularly, let me say that this double contemplation of the two processes under which we live ought to stimulate us to service. It ought to say to us, 'Do you cast in your lot with that work which is going to be carried on through the ages. Do you see to it that your little task is in the same line of direction as the great purpose which God is working out-the increasing purpose which runs through the ages.' An individual life is a mere little backwater, as it were, in the great ocean. But its minuteness does not matter, if only the great tidal wave which rolls away out there, in the depths and the distance amongst the fathomless abysses, tells also on the tiny pool far inland and yet connected with the sea by some narrow, long fiord.

If my little life is part of that great ocean, then the ebb and flow will alike act on it and make it wholesome. If my work is done in and for God, I shall never have to look back and say, as we certainly shall say one day, either here or yonder, unless our lives be thus part of the divine plan, 'What a fool I was! Seventy years of toiling and moiling and effort and sweat, and it has all come to nothing; like a long algebraic sum that covers pages of intricate calculations, and the *pluses* and *minuses* just balance each other; and the net result is a great round nought.' So let us remember the twofold process, and let it stir us to make sure that 'in our embers' shall be 'something that doth live,' and that not 'Nature,' but something better-God-'remembers what was so fugitive.' It is not fugitive if it is a part of the mighty whole.

But further, let this double contemplation make us very content with doing insignificant and unfinished work.

Joseph might have said, when he lay dying: 'Well! perhaps I made a mistake after all. I should not have brought this people down here, even if I have been led hither. I do not see that I have helped them one step towards the possession of the land.' Do you remember the old proverb about certain people who should not see half-finished work? All our work in this world has to be only what the physiologists call functional. God has a great scheme running on through ages. Joseph gives it a helping hand for a time, and then somebody else takes up the running, and carries the purpose forward a little further. A great many hands are placed on the ropes that draw the car of the Ruler of the world. And one after another they get stiffened in death; but the car goes on. We should be contented to do our little bit of the work. Never mind whether it is complete and smooth and rounded or not. Never mind whether it can be isolated from the rest and held up, and people can say, 'He did that entire thing unaided.' That is not the way for most of us. A great many threads go to make the piece of cloth, and a great many throws of the shuttle to weave the web. A great many bits of glass make up the mosaic pattern; and there is no reason for the red bit to pride itself on its fiery glow, or the grey bit to boast of its silvery coolness. They are all parts of the pattern, and as long as they keep their right places they complete the artist's design. Thus, if we think of how 'one soweth and another reapeth,' we may be content to receive half-done works from our fathers, and to hand on unfinished tasks to them that come after us. It is not a great trial of a man's modesty, if he lives near Jesus Christ, to be content to do but a very small bit of the Master's work.

And the last thing that I would say is, let this double process going on all round us lift our thoughts to Him who lives for ever. Moses dies; Joshua catches the torch from his hand. And the reason why he catches the torch from his hand is because God said, 'As I was with Moses so I will be with thee.' Therefore we have to turn away in our contemplations from the mortality that has swallowed up so much wisdom and strength, eloquence and power, which the Church or our own hearts seem so sorely to want: and, whilst we do, we have to look up to Jesus Christ and say, 'He lives! He lives! No man is indispensable for public work or for private affection and solace so long at there is a living Christ for us to hold by.'

Dear brethren, we need that conviction for ourselves often. When life seems empty and hope dead, and nothing is able to fill the vacuity or still the pain, we have to look to the vision of the Lord sitting on the empty throne, high and lifted up, and yet very near the aching and void heart. Christ lives, and that is enough.

So the separated workers in all the generations, who did their little bit of service, like the many generations of builders who laboured through centuries upon the completion of some great cathedral, will be united at the last; 'and he that soweth, and he that reapeth, shall rejoice together' in the harvest which was produced by neither the sower nor the reaper, but by Him who blessed the toils of both.

'Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation'; but Jesus lives, and therefore His people 'grow and multiply,' and His servants' work is blessed; and at the end they shall be knit together in the common joy of the great harvest, and of the day when the headstone is brought forth with shoutings of 'Grace! grace unto it.'

3) Exodus 1:8-14

Exodus

FOUR SHAPING CENTURIES

Exo. 1:1 - - Exo. 1:14.

The four hundred years of Israel's stay in Egypt were divided into two unequal periods, in the former and longer of which they were prosperous and favoured, while in the latter they were oppressed. Both periods had their uses and place in the shaping of the nation and its preparation for the Exodus. Both carry permanent lessons.

I. The long days of unclouded prosperity. These extended over centuries, the whole history of which is summed up in two words: death and growth. The calm years glided on, and the shepherds in Goshen had the happiness of having no annals. All that needed to be recorded was that, one by one, the first generation died off, and that the new generations 'were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty.' The emphatic repetitions recall the original promises in Gen. 12:2, Gen. 17:4 - Gen. 17:5, Gen. 18:18. The preceding specification of the number of the original settlers [repeated from Gen. 46:27] brings into impressive contrast the small beginnings and the rapid increase. We may note that eloquent setting side by side of the two processes which are ever going on simultaneously, death and birth.

One by one men pass out of the warmth and light into the darkness, and so gradually does the withdrawal proceed that we scarcely are aware of its going on, but at last 'all that generation' has vanished. The old trees are all cleared off the ground, and everywhere their place is taken by the young saplings. The web is ever being woven at one end, and run down at the other. 'The individual withers, but the race is more and more.' How solemn that continual play of opposing movements is, and how blind we are to its solemnity!

That long period of growth may be regarded in two lights. It effected the conversion of a horde into a nation by numerical increase, and so was a link in the chain of the divine working. The great increase, of which the writer speaks so strongly, was, no doubt, due to the favourable circumstances of the life in Goshen, but was none the less regarded by him, and rightly so, as God's doing. As the Psalmist sings, '*He* increased His people greatly.' 'Natural processes' are the implements of a supernatural will. So Israel was being multiplied, and the end for which it was peacefully growing into a multitude was hidden from all but God. But there was another end, in reference to which the years of peaceful prosperity may be regarded; namely, the schooling of the people to patient trust in the long-delayed fulfilment of the promise. That hope had burned bright in Joseph when he died, and he being dead yet spake of it from his coffin to the successive generations. Delay is fitted and intended to strengthen faith and make hope more eager. But that part of the divine purpose, alas! was not effected as the former was. In the moral region every circumstance has two opposite results possible. Each condition has, as it were, two handles, and we can take it by either, and generally take it by the wrong one. Whatever is meant to better us may be so used by us as to worsen us. And the history of Israel in Egypt and in the desert shows only too plainly that ease weakened, if it did not kill, faith, and that Goshen was so pleasant that it drove the hope and the wish for Canaan out of mind. 'While the bridegroom tarried they all slumbered and slept.' Is not Israel in Egypt, slackening hold of the promise because it tarried, a mirror in which the Church may see itself? and do *we* not know the enervating influence of Goshen, making us reluctant to shoulder our packs and turn out for the pilgrimage? The desert repels more strongly than Canaan attracts.

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4) Exodus 2:1-10

Exodus

THE ARK AMONG THE FLAGS

Exo. 2:1 - - Exo. 2:10.

I. It is remarkable that all the persons in this narrative are anonymous. We know that the names of ‘the man of the house of Levi’ and his wife were Amram and Jochebed. Miriam was probably the anxious sister who watched what became of the little coffer. The daughter of Pharaoh has two names in Jewish tradition, one of which corresponds to that which Brugsch has found to have been borne by one of Rameses’ very numerous daughters. One likes to think that the name of the gentle-hearted woman has come down to us; but, whether she was called ‘Meri’ or not, she and the others have no name here. The reason can scarcely have been ignorance. But they are, as it were, kept in shadow, because the historian saw, and wished us to see, that a higher Hand was at work, and that over all the events recorded in these verses there brooded the informing, guiding Spirit of God Himself, the sole actor.

‘Each only as God wills Can work-God’s puppets, best and worst, Are we: there is no last nor first.’

II. The mother’s motive in braving the danger to herself involved in keeping the child is remarkably put. ‘When she saw that he was a goodly child, she hid him.’ It was not only a mother’s love that emboldened her, as it does all weak creatures, to shelter her offspring at her own peril, but something in the look of the infant, as it lay on her bosom, touched her with a dim hope. According to the Septuagint translation, both parents shared in this. And so the Epistle to the Hebrews unites them in that which is here attributed to the mother only. Stephen, too, speaks of Moses as ‘fair in God’s sight.’ As if the prescient eyes of the parents were not blinded by love, but rather cleared to see some token of divine benediction resting on him. The writer of the *Hebrews* lifts the deed out of the category of instinctive maternal affection up to the higher level of faith. So we may believe that the aspect of her child woke some prophetic vision in the mother’s soul, and that she and her husband were of those who cherished the hopes naturally born from the promise to Abraham, nurtured by Jacob’s and Joseph’s dying wish to be buried in Canaan, and matured by the tyranny of Pharaoh. Their faith, at all events, grasped the unseen God as their helper, and made Jochebed bold to break the terrible law, as a hen will fly in the face of a mastiff to shield her brood. Their faith perhaps also grasped the future deliverance, and linked it in some way with their child. We may learn how transfiguring and ennobling to the gentlest and weakest is faith in God, especially when it is allied with unselfish human love. These two are the strongest powers. If they are at war, the struggle is terrible: if they are united, ‘the weakest is as David, and David as an angel of God.’ Let us seek ever to blend their united strength in our own lives.

Will it be thought too fanciful if we suggest that we are taught another lesson,-namely, that the faith which surrenders its earthly treasures to God, in confidence of His care, is generally rewarded and vindicated by receiving them back again, glorified and sanctified by the altar on which they have been laid? Jochebed clasped her recovered darling to her bosom with a deeper gladness, and held him by a surer title, when Miriam brought him back as the princess’s charge, than ever before. We never feel the preciousness of dear ones so much, nor are so calm in the joy of possession, as when we have laid them in God’s hands, and have learned how wise and wonderful His care is.

III. How much of the world’s history that tiny coffer among the reeds held! How different that history would have been if, as might easily have happened, it had floated away, or if the feeble life within it had wailed itself dead unheard! The solemn possibilities folded and slumbering in an infant are always awful to a thoughtful mind. But, except the manger at Bethlehem, did ever cradle hold the seed of so much as did that papyrus chest? The set of opinion at present minimises the importance of the individual, and exalts the spirit of the period, as a factor in history. Standing beside Miriam, we may learn a truer view, and see that great epochs require great men, and that, without such for leaders, no solid advance in the world's progress is achieved. Think of the strange cradle floating on the Nile; then think of the strange grave among the mountains of Moab, and of all between, and ponder the same lesson as is taught in yet higher fashion by Bethlehem and Calvary, that God's way of blessing the world is to fill men with His message, and let others draw from them. Whether it be 'law,' or 'grace and truth,' a man is needed through whom it may fructify to all.

IV. The sweet picture of womanly compassion in Pharaoh's daughter is full of suggestions. We have already noticed that her name is handed down by one tradition as 'Merris,' and that 'Meri' has been found as the appellation of a princess of the period. A rabbinical authority calls her 'Bithiah,' that is, 'Daughter of Jehovah'; by which was, no doubt, intended to imply that she became in some sense a proselyte. This may have been only an inference from her protection of Moses. There is a singular and very obscure passage in 1Ch. 4:17 - 1Ch. 4:18, relating the genealogy of a certain Mered, who seems to have had two wives, one 'the Jewess,' the other 'Bithiah, the daughter of Pharaoh.' We know no more about him or her, but Keil thinks that Mered probably 'lived before the exodus'; but it can scarcely be that the 'daughter of Pharaoh,' his wife, is our princess, and that she actually became a 'daughter of Jehovah,' and, like her adopted child, refused royal dignity and preferred reproach. In any case, the legend of her name is a tender and beautiful way of putting the belief that in her 'there was some good thing towards the God of Israel.'

But, passing from that, how the true woman's heart changes languid curiosity into tenderness, and how compassion conquers pride of race and station, as well as regard for her father's edict, as soon as the infant's cry, which touches every good woman's feelings, falls on her ear! 'One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.' All the centuries are as nothing; the strange garb and the stranger mental and spiritual dress fade, and we have here a mere woman, affected, as every true sister of hers to-day would be, by the helpless wailing. God has put that instinct there. Alas that it ever should be choked by frivolity or pride, and frozen by indifference and self-indulgence! Gentle souls spring up in unfavourable soil. Rameses was a strange father for such a daughter. How came this dove in the vulture’s cage? Her sweet pity beside his cold craft and cruelty is like the lamb couching by the lion. Note, too, that gentlest pity makes the gentlest brave. She sees the child is a Hebrew. Her quick wit understands why it has been exposed, and she takes its part, and the part of the poor weeping parents, whom she can fancy, against the savage law. No doubt, as Egyptologists tell us, the princesses of the royal house had separate households and abundant liberty of action. Still, it was bold to override the strict commands of such a monarch. But it was not a self-willed sense of power, but the beautiful daring of a compassionate woman, to which God committed the execution of His purposes.

And that is a force which has much like work trusted to it in modern society too. Our great cities swarm with children exposed to a worse fate than the baby among the flags. Legislation and official charity have far too rough hands and too clumsy ways to lift the little life out of the coffer, and to dry the tears. We must look to Christian women to take a leaf out of ‘Bithiah’ s’ book. First, they should use their eyes to see the facts, and not be so busy about their own luxury and comfort that they pass the poor pitch-covered box unnoticed. Then they should let the pitiful call touch their heart, and not steel themselves in indifference or ease. Then they should conquer prejudices of race, pride of station, fear of lowering themselves, loathing, or contempt. And then they should yield to the impulses of their compassion, and never mind what difficulties or opponents may stand in the way of their saving the children. If Christian women knew their obligations and their power, and lived up to them as bravely as this Egyptian princess, there would be fewer little ones flung out to be eaten by crocodiles, and many a poor child, who is now abandoned from infancy to the Devil, would be rescued to grow up a servant of God. She, there by the Nile waters, in her gracious pity and prompt wisdom, is the type of what Christian womanhood, and, indeed, the whole Christian community, should be in relation to child life.

V. The great lesson of this incident, as of so much before, is the presence of God's wonderful providence, working out its designs by all the play of human motives. In accordance with a law, often seen in His dealings, it was needful that the deliverer should come from the heart of the system from which he was to set his brethren free. The same principle which sent Saul of Tarsus to be trained at the feet of Gamaliel, and made Luther a monk in the Augustinian convent at Erfurt, planted Moses in Pharaoh's palace and taught him the wisdom of Egypt, against which he was to contend. It was a strange irony of Providence that put him so close to the throne which he was to shake. For his future work he needed to be lifted above his people, and to be familiar with the Egyptian court as well as with Egyptian learning. If he was to hate and to war against idolatry, and to rescue an unwilling people from it, he must know the rottenness of the system, and must have lived close enough to it to know what went on behind the scenes, and how foully it smelled when near. He would gain influence over his countrymen by his connection with Pharaoh, whilst his very separation from them would at once prevent his spirit from being broken by oppression, and would give him a keener sympathy with his people than if he had himself been crushed by slavery. His culture, heathen as it was, supplied the material on which the divine Spirit worked. God fashioned the vessel, and then filled it. Education is not the antagonist of inspiration. For the most part, the men whom God has used for His highest service have been trained in all the wisdom of their age. When it has been piled up into an altar, then 'the fire of the Lord' falls.

Our story teaches us that God's chosen instruments are immortal till their work is done. No matter how forlorn may seem their outlook, how small the probabilities in their favour, how divergent from the goal may seem the road He leads them, He watches them. Around that frail ark, half lost among the reeds, is cast the impregnable shield of His purpose. All things serve that Will. The current in the full river, the lie of the flags that stop it from being borne down, the hour of the princess's bath, the direction of her idle glance, the cry of the child at the right moment, the impulse welling up in her heart, the swift resolve, the innocent diplomacy of the sister, the shelter of the happy mother's breast, the safety of the palace,-all these and a hundred more trivial and unrelated things are spun into the strong cable wherewith God draws slowly but surely His secret purpose into act. So ever

His children are secure as long as He has work for them, and His mighty plan strides on to its accomplishment over all the barriers that men can raise.

How deeply this story had impressed on devout minds the truth of the divine protection for all who serve Him, is shown by the fact that the word employed in the last verse of our lesson, and there translated ‘drawn,’ of which the name ‘Moses’ is a form, is used on the only occasion of its occurrence in the Old Testament [namely Psa. 18:16, and in the duplicate in 2Sa. 22:17] with plain reference to our narrative. The Psalmist describes his own deliverance, in answer to his cry, by a grand manifestation of God’s majesty; and this is the climax and the purpose of the earthquake and the lightning, the darkness and the storm: ‘He sent from above, He took me, He drew me out of many waters.’ So that scene by the margin of the Nile, so many years ago, is but one transient instance of the working of the power which secures deliverance from encompassing perils, and for strenuous, though it may be undistinguished, service to all who call upon Him. God, who put the compassion into the heart of Pharaoh’s dusky daughter, is not less tender of heart than she, and when He hears us, though our cry be but as of an infant, ‘with no language but a cry,’ He will come in His majesty and draw us from encompassing dangers and impending death. We cannot all be lawgivers and deliverers; but we may all appeal to His great pity, and partake of deliverance like that of Moses and of David.

5) Exodus 3:1

Exodus

THE BUSH THAT BURNED, AND DID NOT BURN OUT

Exo. 3:2.

It was a very sharp descent from Pharaoh’s palace to the wilderness, and forty years of a shepherd’s life were a strange contrast to the brilliant future that once seemed likely for Moses. But God tests His weapons before He uses them, and great men are generally prepared for great deeds by great sorrows. Solitude is ‘the mother-country of the strong,’ and the wilderness, with its savage crags, its awful silence, and the unbroken round of its blue heaven, was a better place to meet God than in the heavy air of a palace, or the profitless splendours of a court.

So as this lonely shepherd is passing slowly in front of his flock, he sees a strange light that asserted itself, even in the brightness of the desert sunshine. ‘The bush’ does not mean one single shrub. Rather, it implies some little group, or cluster, or copse, of the dry thorny acacias, which are characteristic of the country, and over which any ordinary fire would have passed like a flash, leaving them all in grey ashes. But this steady light persists long enough to draw the attention of the shepherd, and to admit of his travelling some distance to reach it. And then-and then-the Lord speaks.

The significance of this bush, burning but not consumed, is my main subject now, for I think it carries great and blessed lessons for us.

Now, first, I do not think that the bush burning but not consumed, stands as it is ordinarily understood to stand, for the symbolical representation of the preservation of Israel, even in the midst of the fiery furnace of persecution and sorrow.

Beautiful as that idea is, I do not think it is the true explanation; because if so, this symbol is altogether out of keeping with the law that applies to all the rest of the symbolical accompaniments of divine appearances, all of which, without exception, set forth in symbol some truth about God, and not about His Church; and all of which, without exception, are a representation in visible and symbolical form of the same truth which was proclaimed in articulate words along with them. The symbol and the accompanying voice of God in all other cases have one and the same meaning.

That, I think, is the case here also; and we learn from the Bush, not something about God’s Church, however precious that may be, but what is a great deal more important, something about God Himself; namely, the same thing that immediately afterwards was spoken in articulate words.

In the next place, let me observe that the fire is distinctly a divine symbol, a symbol of God not of affliction, as the ordinary explanation implies. I need not do more than remind you of the stream of emblem which runs all through Scripture, as confirming this point. There are the smoking lamp and the blazing furnace in the early vision granted to Abraham. There is the pillar of fire by night, that lay over the desert camp of the wandering Israelites. There is Isaiah’s word, ‘The light of Israel shall be a flaming fire.’ There is the whole of the New Testament teaching, turning on the manifestation of God through His Spirit. There are John the Baptist’s words, ‘He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.’ There is the day of Pentecost, when the ‘tongues of fire sat upon each of them.’ And what is meant by the great word of the Epistle to the Hebrews, ‘Our God is a consuming fire’?

Not Israel only, but many other lands-it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say, all other lands-have used the same emblem with the same meaning. In almost every religion on the face of the earth, you will find a sacred significance attached to fire. That significance is not primarily destruction, as we sometimes suppose, an error which has led to ghastly misunderstandings of some Scriptures, and of the God whom they reveal. When, for instance, Isa. 33:14 asks, ‘Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?’ he has been supposed to be asking what human soul is there that can endure the terrors of God’s consuming and unending wrath. But a little attention to the words would have shown that ‘the devouring fire’ and the ‘everlasting burnings’ mean God and not hell, and that the divine nature is by them not represented as too fierce to be approached, but as the true dwelling-place of men, which indeed only the holy can inhabit, but which for them is life. Precisely parallel is the Psalmist’s question, ‘Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in His holy place?’

Fire is the source of warmth, and so, in a sense, of life. It is full of quick energy, it transmutes all kinds of dead matter into its own ruddy likeness, sending up the fat of the sacrifices in wreathes of smoke that aspire heavenward; and changing all the gross, heavy, earthly dullness into flame, more akin to the heaven into which it rises.

Therefore, as cleansing, as the source of life, light, warmth, change, as glorifying, transmuting, purifying, refining, fire is the fitting symbol of the mightiest of all creative energy. And the Bible has consecrated the symbolism, and bade us think of the Lord Himself as the central fiery Spirit of the whole universe, a spark from whom irradiates and vitalises everything that lives.

Nor should we forget, on the other side, that the very felicity of this emblem is, that along with all these blessed thoughts of life-giving and purifying, there does come likewise the more solemn teaching of God's destructive power. 'What maketh heaven, that maketh hell'; and the same God is the fire to quicken, to sanctify, to bless; and resisted, rejected, neglected, is the fire that consumes; the savour of life unto life, or the savour of death unto death.

And then, still further, notice that this flame is undying-steady, unflickering. What does that mean? Adopting the principle which I have already taken as our guide, that the symbol and the following oral revelation teach the same truth, there can be no question as to that answer. 'I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. 'I AM THAT I AM.'

That is to say, the fire that burns and does not burn out, which has no tendency to destruction in its very energy, and is not consumed by its own activity, is surely a symbol of the one Being whose being derives its law and its source from Himself, who only can say-'I AM THAT I AM'-the law of His nature, the foundation of His being, the only conditions of His existence being, as it were, enclosed within the limits of His own nature. You and I have to say, 'I am that which I have become,' or 'I am that which I was born,' or 'I am that which circumstances have made me.' He says, 'I AM THAT I AM.' All other creatures are links; this is the staple from which they all hang. All other being is derived, and therefore limited and changeful; this Being is underived, absolute, self-dependent, and therefore unalterable for evermore. Because we live we die. In living the process is going on of which death is the end. But God lives for evermore, a flame that does not burn out; therefore His resources are inexhaustible, His power unwearied. He needs no rest for recuperation of wasted energy. His gifts diminish not the store which He has to bestow. He gives, and is none the poorer; He works, and is never weary; He operates unspent; He loves, and

He loves for ever; and through the ages the fire burns on, unconsumed and undecayed.

O brethren! is not that a revelation-familiar as it sounds to our ears now, blessed be God!-is not that a revelation of which, when we apprehend the depth and the preciousness, we may well fix an unalterable faith upon it, and feel that for us, in our fleeting days and shadowy moments, the one means to secure blessedness, rest, strength, life, is to grasp and knit ourselves to Him who lives for ever, and whose love is lasting as His life? ‘The eternal God, the Lord . . .fainteth not, neither is weary. They that wait upon Him shall renew their strength.’

The last thought suggested to me by this symbol is this. Regarding the lowly thorn-bush as an emblem of Israel-which unquestionably it is, though the fire be the symbol of God-in the fact that the symbolical manifestation of the divine energy lived in so lowly a shrine, and flamed in it, and preserved it by its burning, there is a great and blessed truth.

It is the same truth which Jesus Christ, with a depth of interpretation that put to shame the cavilling listeners, found in the words that accompanied this vision: ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ He said to the sneering Sadducees, who, like all other sneerers, saw only the surface of what they were sarcastic about, ‘Did not Moses teach you,’ in the section about the bush, ‘that the dead rise, when he said: I AM the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob.’ A man, about whom it can once be said that God is his God, cannot die. Such a bond can never be broken. The communion of earth, imperfect as it is, is the prophecy of Heaven and the pledge of immortality. And so from that relationship which subsisted between the fathers and God, Christ infers the certainty of their resurrection. It seems a great leap, but there are intervening steps not stated by our Lord, which securely bridge the gulf between the premises and the conclusion. Such communion is, in its very nature, unaffected by the accident of death, for it cannot be supposed that a man who can say that God is *His* God can be reduced to nothingness, and such a bond be snapped by such a cause. Therefore Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still living, ‘for all’ those whom we call dead, as well as those whom we call living, ‘live unto Him,’ and though so many centuries have passed, God still *is*, not *was*, their God. The relation between them is eternal and guarantees their immortal life. But immortality without corporeity is not conceivable as the perfect state, and if the dead live still, there must come a time when the whole man shall partake of redemption; and in body, soul, and spirit the glorified and risen saints shall be 'for ever with the Lord.'

That is but the fuller working out of the same truth that is taught us in the symbol 'the bush burned and was not consumed.' God dwelt in it, therefore it flamed; God dwelt in it, therefore though it flamed it never flamed out. Or in other words, the Church, the individual in whom He dwells, partakes of the immortality of the indwelling God. 'Every one shall be salted with fire,' which shall be preservative and not destructive; or, as Christ has said, 'Because I live ye shall live also.'

Humble as was the little, ragged, sapless thorn-bush, springing up and living its solitary life amidst the sands of the desert, it was not too humble to hold God; it was not too gross to burst into flame when He came; it was not too fragile to be gifted with undying being; like His that abode in it. And for us each the emblem may be true. If He dwell in us we shall live as long as He lives, and the fire that He puts in our heart shall be a fountain of fire springing up into life everlasting.

6) Exodus 3:10-20

Exodus

THE CALL OF MOSES

Exo. 3:10 - - Exo. 3:20.

The 'son of Pharaoh's daughter' had been transformed, by nearly forty years of desert life, into an Arab shepherd. The influences of the Egyptian court had faded from him, like colour from cloth exposed to the weather; nor is it probable that, after the failure of his early attempt to play the deliverer to Israel, he nourished further designs of that sort. He appears to have settled down quietly to be Jethro's son-in-law, and to have lived a modest, still life of humble toil. He had flung away fair prospects,-and what had he made of it? The world would say 'Nothing,' as it ever does about those who despise material advantages and covet higher good. Looking after sheep in the desert was a sad downcome from the possibility of sitting on the throne of Egypt. Yes, but it was in the desert that the vision of the bush burning, and not burning out, came; and it would not have come if Moses had been in a palace.

This passage begins in the midst of the divine communication which followed and interpreted the vision. We note, first, the divine charge and the human shrinking from the task. It was a startling transition from Exo. 3:9, which declares God's pitying knowledge of Israel's oppression, to Exo. 3:10, which thrusts Moses forward into the thick of dangers and difficulties, as God's instrument. 'I will send thee' must have come like a thunder-clap. The commander's summons which brings a man from the rear rank and sets him in the van of a storming-party may well make its receiver shrink. It was not cowardice which prompted Moses' answer, but lowliness. His former impetuous confidence had all been beaten out of him. Time was when he was ready to take up the *rôle* of deliverer at his own hand; but these hot days were past, and age and solitude and communion with God had mellowed him into humility. His recoil was but one instance of the shrinking which all true, devout men feel when designated for tasks which may probably make life short, and will certainly make it hard. All prophets and reformers till to-day have had the same feeling. Men who can do such work as the Jeremiahs, Pauls, Luthers, Cromwells, can do, are never forward to begin it.

Self-confidence is not the temper which God uses for His instruments. He works with 'bruised reeds,' and breathes His strength into them. It is when a man says 'I can do nothing,' that he is fit for God to employ. 'When I am weak, then I am strong.' Moses remembered enough of Egypt to know that it was no slight peril to front Pharaoh, and enough of Israel not to be particularly eager to have the task of leading them. But mark that there is no refusal of the charge, though there is profound consciousness of inadequacy. If we have reason to believe that any duty, great or small, is laid on us by God, it is wholesome that we should drive home to ourselves our own weakness, but not that we should try to shuffle out of the duty because we are weak. Moses' answer was more of a prayer for help than of a remonstrance, and it was answered accordingly.

God deals very gently with conscious weakness. ‘Certainly I will be with thee.’ Moses’ estimate of himself is quite correct, and it is the condition of his obtaining God’s help. If he had been self-confident, he would have had no longing for, and no promise of, God’s presence. In all our little tasks we may have the same assurance, and, whenever we feel that they are too great for us, the strength of that promise may be ours. God sends no man on errands which He does not give him power to do. So Moses had not to calculate the difference between his feebleness and the strength of a kingdom. Such arithmetic left out one element, which made all the difference in the sum total. ‘Pharaoh *versus* Moses’ did not look a very hopeful cause, but ‘Pharaoh *versus* Moses and Another’-that other being God-was a very different matter. God and I are always stronger than any antagonists. It was needless to discuss whether Moses was able to cope with the king. That was not the right way of putting the problem. The right way was, Is God able to do it?

The sign given to Moses is at first sight singular, inasmuch as it requires faith, and can only be a confirmation of his mission when that mission is well accomplished. But there was a help to present faith even in it, for the very sacredness of the spot hallowed now by the burning bush was a kind of external sign of the promise.

One difficulty being solved, Moses raised another, but not in the spirit of captiousness or reluctance. God is very patient with us when we tell Him the obstacles which we seem to see to our doing His work. As long as these are presented in good faith, and with the wish to have them cleared up, He listens and answers. The second question asked by Moses was eminently reasonable. He pictures to himself his addressing the Israelites, and their question, What is the name of this God who has sent you? Apparently the children of Israel had lost much of their ancestral faith, and probably had in many instances fallen into idolatry. We do not know enough to pronounce with confidence on that point, nor how far the great name of Jehovah had been used before the time of Moses, or had been forgotten in Egypt.

The questions connected with these points and with the history of the name do not enter into our present purpose. My task is rather to point out the religious significance of the self-revelation of God contained in the name, and how it becomes the foundation of Israel's deliverance, existence, and prerogatives. Whatever opinions are adopted as to the correct form of the name and other grammatical and philological questions, there is no doubt that it mainly reveals God as self-existent and unchangeable. He draws His being from no external source, nor 'borrows leave to be.' Creatures are what they are made or grow to be; they are what they were not; they are what they will some time not any more be. But He is what He is. Lifted above time and change, self-existing and self-determined, He is the fountain of life, the same for ever.

This underived, independent, immutable being is a Person who can speak to men, and can say 'I am.' Being such, He has entered into close covenant relations with men, and has permitted Himself to be called 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' The name Jehovah lifts Him high above all creatures; the name 'the God of your fathers' brings Him into tender proximity with men, and, in combination with the former designation, guarantees that He will forever be what He has been, even to all generations of children's children. That mighty name is, indeed, His 'memorial to all generations,' and is as fresh and full of blessedness to us as to the patriarchs. Christ has made us understand more of the treasures for heart and mind and life which are stored in it. 'Our Father which art in heaven' is the unfolding of its inmost meaning.

We may note that the bush burning but not consumed expressed in symbol the same truth which the name reveals. It seems a mistake to take the bush as the emblem of Israel surviving persecution. Rather the revelation to the eye says the same thing as that to the ear, as is generally the case. As the desert shrub flamed, and yet did not burn away, so that divine nature is not wearied by action nor exhausted by bestowing, nor has its life any tendency towards ending or extinction, as all creatural life has.

The closing verses of this passage [Exo. 3:16 - - Exo. 3:20] are a programme of Moses' mission, in which one or two points deserve notice. First, the general course of it is made known from the beginning. Therein Moses was blessed beyond most of God's servants, who have to risk much and to labour on, not knowing which shall prosper. If we could see, as he did, the lie of the country beforehand, our journeys would be easier. So we often think, but we know enough of what shall be to enable us to have quiet hearts; and it is best for us not to see what is to fail and what to succeed. Our ignorance stimulates effort, and drives to clinging to God's hand.

Then we may note the full assurances to be given to the 'elders of Israel.' Apparently some kind of civic organisation had been kept up, and there were principal people among the slaves who had to be galvanised first into enthusiasm. So they are to be told two things,-that Jehovah has appeared to Moses, and that He, not Moses only, will deliver them and plant them in the land. The enumeration of the many tribes [Exo. 3:17] might discourage, but it is intended to fire by the thought of the breadth of the land, which is further described as fertile. The more exalted our conceptions of the inheritance, the more willing shall we be to enter on the pilgrimage towards it. The more we realise that Jehovah has promised to lead us thither, the more willing shall we be to face difficulties and dangers.

The directions as to the opening of communications with Pharaoh have often been made a difficulty, as if there was trickery in the modest request for permission to go three days' journey into the wilderness. But that request was to be made, knowing that it would not be granted. It was to be a test of Pharaoh's willingness to submit to Jehovah. Its very smallness made it so more effectually. If he had any disposition to listen to the voice speaking through Moses, he would yield that small point. It is useless to speculate on what would have happened if he had done so. But probably the Israelites would have come back from their sacrificing.

Of more importance is it to note that the failure of the request was foreseen, and yet the effort was to be made. Is not that the same paradox which meets us in all the divine efforts to win over hard-hearted men to His service? Is it not exactly what our Lord did when He appealed to Judas, while knowing that all would be vain?

The expression in Exo. 3:19, 'not by a mighty hand,' is very obscure. It may possibly mean that Pharaoh was so obstinate that no human power was strong enough to bend his will. Therefore, in contrast to the 'mighty hand' of man, which was not mighty enough for this work, God will stretch out His hand, and that will suffice to compel obedience from the proudest. God can force men by His might to comply with His will, so far as external acts go; but He does not regard that as obedience, nor delight in it. We can steel ourselves against men’s power, but God’s hand can crush and break the strongest will. ‘It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.’ It is a blessed thing to put ourselves into them, in order to be moulded by their loving touch. The alternative is laid before every soul of man.

7) Exodus 11:1-10

Exodus

A LAST MERCIFUL WARNING

Exo. 11:1 - - Exo. 11:10.

The first point to be noted in this passage is that it interposes a solemn pause between the preceding ineffectual plagues and the last effectual one. There is an awful lull in the storm before the last crashing hurricane which lays every obstacle flat. ‘There is silence in heaven’ before the final peal of thunder. Exo. 11:1 - - Exo. 11:3 seem, at first sight, out of place, as interrupting the narrative, since Moses’ denunciation and prophecy in Exo. 11:4 - - Exo. 11:8 must have been spoken at the interview with Pharaoh which we find going on at the end of the preceding chapter. But it is legitimate to suppose that, at the very moment when Pharaoh was blustering and threatening, and Moses was bearding him, giving back scorn for scorn, the latter heard with the inward ear the voice which made Pharaoh’s words empty wind, and gave him the assurances and commands contained in Exo. 11:1 - - Exo. 11:3, and that thus it was given him in that hour what he should speak; namely, the prediction that follows in Exo. 11:4 - - Exo. 11:8. Such a view of the sequence of the passage makes it much more vivid, dramatic, and natural, than to suppose that the first verses are either interpolation or an awkward break referring to a revelation at some indefinite previous moment. When a Pharaoh or a Herod or an Agrippa threatens, God speaks to the heart of a Moses or a Paul, and makes His servant’s face ‘strong against their faces.’

The same purpose of parting off the preceding plagues from the past ones explains the introduction of Exo. 11:9 - - Exo. 11:10, which stand as a summary of the whole account of these, and, as it were, draw a line across the page, before beginning the story of that eventful day and night of Israel’s deliverance.

Moses’ conviction, which he knew to be not his own thought but God’s revelation of His purpose, pointed first to the final blow which was to finish Pharaoh’s resistance. He had been vacillating between compliance and refusal, like an elastic ball which yields to compression and starts back to its swelling rotundity as soon as the pressure is taken off. But at last he will collapse altogether, like the same ball when a slit is cut in it, and it shrivels into a shapeless lump. Weak people’s obstinate fits end like that. He will be as extreme in his eagerness to get rid of the Israelites as he had been in his determination to keep them. The sail that is filled one moment tumbles in a heap the next, when the halyards are cut. It is a poor affair when a man’s actions are shaped mainly by fear of consequences. Fright always drives to extremes. ‘When he shall let you go, he shall surely thrust you out hence altogether.’ Many a stout, God-opposing will collapses altogether when God’s finger touches it. ‘Can thy heart endure in the days that I shall deal with thee?’

Exo. 11:2 - - Exo. 11:3 appear irrelevant here, but the command to collect from the Egyptians jewels, which might be bartered for necessaries, may well have been given to Moses simultaneously with the assurance that he would lead forth the people after the next plague, and the particulars of the people’s favour and of Moses’ influence in the eyes of the native inhabitants, come in anticipatively to explain why the request for such contributions was granted when made.

With the new divine command swelling in his heart, Moses speaks his last word to Pharaoh, towering above him in righteous wrath, and dwindling his empty threats into nothingness. What a contrast between the impotent rage of the despot, with his vain threat, ‘Thou shalt die,’ and the unblenching boldness of the man with God at his back! One cannot but note in Moses’ prediction of the last plague the solemn enlargement on the details of the widespread calamity, which is not unfeeling gloating over an oppressor’s misery, but a yearning to save from hideous misery by timely and plain depicting of it. There is a flash of national triumph in the further contrast between the universal wailing in Egypt and the untouched security of the children of Israel, but that feeling merges at once into the higher one of 'the Lord' s' gracious action in establishing the 'difference' between them and their oppressors. It is not safe to dwell on superiority over others, either as to condition or character, unless we print in very large letters that it is 'the Lord' who has made it. There is a flash, too, of natural triumph in the picture of the proud courtiers brought down to prostrate themselves before the shepherd from Horeb, and to pray him to do what their master and they had so long fought against his doing. And there is a most natural assertion of non-dependence on their leave in that emphatic 'After that *I will* go out.' He is not asserting himself against God, but against the cowering courtiers. 'Hot anger' was excusable, but it was not the best mood in which to leave Pharaoh. Better if he had gone out unmoved, or moved only to 'great heaviness and sorrow of heart' at the sight of men setting themselves against God, and rushing on the 'thick bosses of the Almighty's buckler' to their own ruin. Moses' anger we naturally sympathise with, Christ's meekness we should try to copy.

The closing verses, as we have already noticed, are a kind of summing-up of the whole narrative of the plagues and their effects on Pharaoh. They open two difficult questions, as to how and why it was that the effect of the successive strokes was so slight and transient. They give the 'how' very emphatically as being that 'Jehovah hardened Pharaoh's heart.' Does that not free Pharaoh from guilt? And does it not suggest an unworthy conception of God? It must be remembered that the preceding narrative employs not only the phrase that 'Jehovah hardened Pharaoh's heart,' but also the expression that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. And it is further to be noted that the latter expression is employed in the accounts of the earlier plagues, and that the former one appears only towards the close of the series. So then, even if we are to suppose that it means that there was a direct hardening action by God on the man's heart, such action was not first, but subsequent to obstinate hardening by himself. God hardens no man's heart who has not first hardened it himself. But we do not need to conclude that any inward action on the will is meant. Was not the accumulation of plagues, intended, as they were, to soften, a cause of hardening? Does not the Gospel, if rejected, harden, making consciences and wills less susceptible? Is it not a 'savour of death unto death,' as our fathers recognised in speaking of ‘gospel-hardened sinners’? The same fire softens wax and hardens clay. Whosoever is not brought near is driven farther off, by the influences which God brings to bear on us.

The ‘why’ is stated in terms which may suggest difficulties,-’that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.’ But we have to remember that the Old Testament writers are not wont to distinguish so sharply as more logical Westerns do between the actual result of an event and its purpose. With their deep faith in the all-ruling power of God, whatever had come to pass was what He had meant to come to pass. In fact, Pharaoh’s obstinacy had not thwarted the divine purpose, but had been the dark background against which the blaze of God’s irresistible might had shone the brighter. He makes the wrath of man to praise Him, and turns opposition into the occasion of more conspicuously putting forth His omnipotence.

8) Exodus 12:1-14

Exodus

THE PASSOVER: AN EXPIATION AND A FEAST, A MEMORIAL AND A PROPHECY

Exo. 12:1 - - Exo. 12:14.

The Passover ritual, as appointed here, divides itself into two main parts-the sprinkling of the sacrificial blood on the door-posts and lintels, and the feast on the sacrifice. These can best be dealt with separately. They were separated in the later form of the ritual; for, when there was a central sanctuary, the lambs were slain there, and the blood sprinkled, as in other expiatory sacrifices, on the altar, while the domestic feast remained unaltered. The former was more especially meant to preserve the Israelites from the destruction of their first-born; the latter as a permanent memorial of their deliverance. But both have perpetual fitness as prophetic of varying aspects of the Christian redemption.

I. The ritual of the protecting blood.

In the hurry and agitation of that eventful day, it must have seemed strange to the excited people that they should be called upon to observe such a service. But its institution at that crisis is in accordance with the whole tone of the story of the Exodus, in which man is nothing and God all. Surely, never was national deliverance effected so absolutely without effort or blow struck. If we try to realise the state of mind of the Israelites on that night, we shall feel how significant of the true nature of their deliverance this summons to an act of worship, in the midst of their hurry, must have been.

The domestic character of the rite is its first marked feature. Of course, there were neither temple nor priests then; but that does not wholly account for the provision that every household, unless too few in number to consume a whole lamb, should have its own sacrifice, slain by its head. The first purpose of the rite, to provide for the safety of each house by the sprinkled blood, partly explains it; but the deepest reason is, no doubt, the witness which was thereby borne to the universal priesthood of the nation. The patriarchal order made each man the priest of his house. This rite, which lay at the foundation of Israel's nationality, proclaimed that a restricted priestly class was a later expedient. The primitive formation crops out here, as witness that, even where hid beneath later deposits, it underlies them all.

We have called the Passover a sacrifice. That has been disputed, but unreasonably. No doubt, it was a peculiar kind of sacrifice, unlike those of the later ritual in many respects, and scarcely capable of being classified among them. But it is important to keep its strictly sacrificial character in view; for it is essential to its meaning and to its typical aspect. The proofs of its sacrificial nature are abundant. The instructions as to the selection of the lamb; the method of disposing of the blood, which was sprinkled with hyssop-a peculiarly sacrificial usage; the treatment of the remainder after the feast; the very feast itself,-all testify that it was a sacrifice in the most accurate use of the word. The designation of it as 'a passover to the Lord,' and in set terms as a 'sacrifice,' in Exo. 12:27 and elsewhere, to say nothing of its later form when it became a regular Temple sacrifice, or of Paul's distinct language in 1Co. 5:7, or of Peter's quotation of the very words of Exo. 12:5, applied to Christ, ' a lamb without blemish,' all point in the same direction.

But if a sacrifice, what kind of sacrifice was it? Clearly, the first purpose was that the blood might be sprinkled on the door-posts and lintels, and so the house be safe when the destroying angel passed through the land. Such is the explanation given in Exo. 12:13, which is the divine declaration of its meaning. This is the centre of the rite; from it the name was derived. Whether readers accept the doctrines of substitution and expiation or not, it ought to be impossible for an honest reader of these verses to deny that these doctrines or thoughts are there. They may be only the barbarous notions of a half-savage age and people. But, whatever they are, there they are. The lamb without blemish carefully chosen and kept for four days, till it had become as it were part of the household, and then solemnly slain by the head of the family, was their representative. When they sprinkled its blood on the posts, they confessed that they stood in peril of the destroying angel by reason of their impurity, and they presented the blood as their expiation. In so far, their act was an act of confession, deprecation, and faith. It accepted the divinely appointed means of safety. The consequence was exemption from the fatal stroke, which fell on all homes from the palace to the slaves' hovel, where that red streak was not found. If any son of Abraham had despised the provision for safety, he would have been partaker of the plague.

All this refers only to exemption from outward punishment, and we are not obliged to attribute to these terrified bondmen any higher thoughts. But clearly their obedience to the command implied a measure of belief in the divine voice; and the command embodied, though in application to a transient judgment, the broad principles of sacrificial substitution, of expiation by blood, and of safety by the individual application of that shed blood.

In other words, the Passover is a Gospel before the Gospel. We are sometimes told that in its sacrificial ideas Christianity is still dressing itself in 'Hebrew old clothes.' We believe, on the contrary, that the whole sacrificial system of Judaism had for its highest purpose to shadow forth the coming redemption. Christ is not spoken of as 'our Passover,' because the Mosaic ritual had happened to have that ceremonial; but the Mosaic ritual had that ceremonial mainly because Christ is our Passover, and, by His blood shed on the Cross and sprinkled on our consciences, does in spiritual reality that which the Jewish Passover only did in outward form. All other questions about the Old Testament, however interesting and hotly contested, are of secondary importance compared with this. Is its chief purpose to prophesy of Christ, His atoning death, His kingdom and church, or is it not? The New Testament has no doubt of the answer. The Evangelist John finds in the singular swiftness of our Lord's death, which secured the exemption of His sacred body from the violence inflicted on His fellow-sufferers, a fulfilment of the paschal injunction that not a bone should be broken; and so, by one passing allusion, shows that he recognised Christ as the true Passover. John the Baptist's rapturous exclamation, 'Behold the Lamb of God!' blends allusions to the Passover, the daily sacrifice, and Isaiah's great prophecy. The day of the Crucifixion, regarded as fixed by divine Providence, may be taken as God's own finger pointing to the Lamb whom He has provided. Paul's language already referred to attests the same truth. And even the last lofty visions of the Apocalypse, where the old man in Patmos so touchingly recurs to the earliest words which brought him to Jesus, echo the same conviction, and disclose, amidst the glories of the throne, 'a Lamb as it had been slain.'

II. The festal meal on the sacrifice.

After the sprinkling of the blood came the feast. Only when the house was secure from the destruction which walked in the darkness of that fateful night, could a delivered household gather round the board. That which had become their safety now became their food. Other sacrifices were, at a later period, modelled on the same type; and in all cases the symbolism is the same, namely, joyful participation in the sacrifice, and communion with God based upon expiation. In the Passover, this second stage received for future ages the further meaning of a memorial. But on that first night it was only such by anticipation, seeing that it preceded the deliverance which it was afterwards to commemorate.

The manner of preparing the feast and the manner of partaking of it are both significant. The former provided that the lamb should be roasted, not boiled, apparently in order to secure its being kept whole; and the same purpose suggested the other prescriptions that it was to be served up entire, and with bones unbroken. The reason for this seems to be that thus the unity of the partakers was more plainly shown. All ate of one undivided whole, and were thus, in a real sense, one. So the Apostle deduces the unity of the Church from the oneness of the bread of which they in the Christian Passover partake.

It was to be eaten with the accompaniments of bitter herbs, usually explained as memorials of the bondage, which had made the lives bitter, and the remembrance of which would sweeten their deliverance, even as the pungent condiments brought out the savour of the food. The further accompaniment of unleavened bread seems to have the same signification as the appointment that they were to eat with their garments gathered round their loins, their feet shod, and staves in hand. All these were partly necessities in their urgent hurry, and partly a dramatic representation for later days of the very scene of the first Passover. A strange feast indeed, held while the beat of the pinions of the destroying angel could almost be heard, devoured in hot haste by anxious men standing ready for a perilous journey, the end whereof none knew! The gladness would be strangely dashed with terror and foreboding. Truly, though they feasted on a sacrifice, they had bitter herbs with it, and, standing, swallowed their portions, expecting every moment to be summoned to the march.

The Passover as a feast is a prophecy of the great Sacrifice, by virtue of whose sprinkled blood we all may be sheltered from the sweep of the divine judgment, and on which we all have to feed if there is to be any life in us. Our propitiation is our food. ‘Christ for us’ must become ‘Christ in us,’ received and appropriated by our faith as the strength of our lives. The Christian life is meant to be a joyful feast on the Sacrifice, and communion with God based upon it. We feast on Christ when the mind feeds on Him as truth, when the heart is filled and satisfied with His love, when the conscience clings to Him as its peace, when the will esteems the ‘words of His mouth more than’ its ‘necessary food,’ when all desires, hopes, and inward powers draw their supplies from Him, and find their object in His sweet sufficiency.

Nor will the accompaniments of the first Passover be wanting. Here we feast in the night; the dawn will bring freedom and escape. Here we eat the glad Bread of God, not unseasoned with bitter herbs of sorrow and memories of the bondage, whose chains are dropping from our uplifted hands. Here we should partake of that hidden nourishment, in such manner that it hinders not our readiness for outward service. It is not yet time to sit at His table, but to stand with loins girt, and feet shod, and hands grasping the pilgrim staff. Here we are to eat for strength, and to blend with our secret hours of meditation the holy activities of the pilgrim life.

That feast was, further, appointed with a view to its future use as a memorial. It was held before the deliverance which it commemorated had been accomplished. A new era was to be reckoned from it. The month of the Exodus was thenceforward to be the first of the year. The memorial purpose of the rite has been accomplished. All over the world it is still observed, so many hundred years after its institution, being thus, probably, the oldest religious ceremonial in existence. Once more aliens in many lands, the Jewish race still, year by year, celebrate that deliverance, so tragically unlike their homeless present, and with indomitable hope, at each successive celebration, repeat the expectation, so long cherished in vain, ‘This year, here; next year, in the land of Israel. This year, slaves; next year, freemen.’ There can be few stronger attestations of historical events than the keeping of days commemorating them, if traced back to the event they commemorate. So this Passover, like Guy Fawkes’ Day in England, or Thanksgiving Day in America, remains for a witness even now.

What an incomprehensible stretch of authority Christ put forth, if He were no more than a teacher, when He brushed aside the Passover, and put in its place the Lord’s Supper, as commemorating His own death! Thereby He said, ‘Forget that past deliverance; instead, remember Me.’ Surely this was either audacity approaching insanity, or divine consciousness that He Himself was the true Paschal Lamb, whose blood shields the world from judgment, and on whom the world may feast and be satisfied. Christ’s deliberate intention to represent His death as expiation, and to fix the reverential, grateful gaze of all future ages on His Cross, cannot be eliminated from His founding of that memorial rite in substitution for the God-appointed ceremonial, so hoary with age and sacred in its significance. Like the Passover, the Lord’s Supper was established before the deliverance was accomplished. It remains a witness at once of the historical fact of the death of Jesus, and of the meaning and power which Jesus Himself bade us to see in that death. For us, redeemed by His blood, the past should be filled with His sacrifice. For us, fed on Himself, all the present should be communion with Him, based upon His death for us. For us, freed bondmen, the memorial of deliverance begun by His Cross should be the prophecy of deliverance to be completed at the side of His throne, and the hasty meal, eaten with bitter herbs, the adumbration of the feast when all the pilgrims shall sit with Him at His table in His kingdom. Past, present, and future should all be to us saturated with Jesus Christ. Memory should furnish hope with colours, canvas, and subjects for her fair pictures, and both be fixed on 'Christ our Passover, sacrificed for us.'

9) Exodus 13:9

Exodus

THOUGHT, DEED, WORD

Exo. 13:9.

The question may be asked, whether this command is to be taken metaphorically or literally. No doubt the remembrance of the great deliverance was intrusted to acts. Besides the annual Passover feasts, inscriptions on the door-posts and fringes on the dress were appointed for this purpose. And the Jews from a very early period, certainly before our Lord's time, wore phylacteries fastened, as this and other places prescribe, on the left arm and on the forehead, and alleged these words as the commandment which they therein obeyed. But it seems more probable that the meaning is metaphorical, and that what is enjoined is rather a constant remembrance of the great deliverance, and a constant regulation of the practical life by it. For what is it that is to be 'a sign'? It is the Passover feast. And the 'therefore' of the next verse seems to say that keeping this ordinance in its season is the fulfilment of this precept. Besides, the expression 'for a sign,' 'for a memorial,' may just as well mean 'it shall serve as,' or 'it shall be like,' as 'you shall wear.' So I think we must say that this is a figure, not a fact; the enjoining of an object for thought and a motive for life, not of a formal observance. And it is very characteristic of the Jew, and of the universal tendency to harden and lower religion into outward rites, that a command so wide and profound was supposed to be kept by fastening little boxes with four slips of parchment containing extracts from the Pentateuch on arm and forehead. Jewish rabbis are not the only people who treat God’s law like that. Even if literal, the injunction is for the purpose of remembering. Taking that meaning, then, the text sets forth principles that apply quite as much to us. You will observe ‘hand,’ ‘eyes,’ ‘mouth’; the symbols of practice, knowledge, expression; work, thought, and word. Observe also that there is a slight change in construction in the three clauses; the two former are to be done in order that the latter may come to pass. Then the memorial of the great deliverance is to be ‘on the hand’ and ‘before the eyes,’ in order that ‘the Lord’s law’ may be ‘in the mouth.’ Keeping these points in view-

I. God’s great deliverance should be constantly before our thoughts.

It is more than an accident that both Judaism and Christianity should begin with a great act of deliverance; that that act of deliverance should constitute a community, and that a memorial rite should be the centre of the ritual of both. The Lord’s Supper historically took the place of the Passover. It was instituted at the Passover and instead of it. It is precisely the same in design, a memorial feast appointed to keep up the vivid remembrance of the historical fact to which redemption is traced; and not only to keep up its remembrance, but to proclaim the importance of extending that remembrance through all life.

Notice the peculiarity of both the Jewish and the Christian rite, that the centre point of both is a historical fact, a redeeming act. Judaism and Christianity are the only religions in regard to which this is true to anything like the same extent or in the same way. Christianity as a revelation is not so much the utterance in words of great religious thoughts as the history of a life and a death, a fact wrought upon the earth, which is at once the means of revelation and the means of redemption. This is a feature unshared by other religions.

This characteristic determines the principal object of our religious thought. The true object for religious thought is Christ, and His life and death.

All religious truth flows from and is wrapped up in that: *e.g.* theology, or the nature of God; anthropology, or the nature of man; soteriology, morality, etc. All truth for the individual and for the race has its source in God's great redeeming act. Religious emotion is best fed at this source, *e.g.* thankfulness, wonder, love: all these transcendent feelings which are melted together in adoration. Here is where they are kindled. You cannot pump them up, or bring them into existence by willing, or scourge yourself into them, any more than you can make a seed grow by pulling at the germ with a pair of pincers, but this gives the warmth and moisture which make it germinate.

The clear perception of this truth is valuable, as correcting false tendencies in religion, *e.g.* the tendency to be much occupied with the derived truths, and to think of them almost to the exclusion of the great fact from which they come; the tendency to substitute melancholy self-inspection for objective facts; the tendency to run out into mere feeling.

The command requires of us a habitual occupation of mind with the great deliverance.

And the habitual presence of this thought will be best secured by specific times of occupation with it. Let every Christian practise the habit of meditation, which in an age of so many books, newspapers, and the distractions of our busy modern life, is apt to become obsolete.

II. The great deliverance is to be ever present in practical life.

The 'hand' is clearly the seat and home of power and practical effort. So the remembrance is to be present and to preside over our practical work.

How it is fitted to do so.

[*a*] It gives the law for all our activity.

> The pattern. The death as well as the life of Christ teaches us what we ought to be.
>
> The motive. He died for me! Shall I not serve Him who redeemed me?

[*b*] That remembered deliverance arms us against temptations, and lifts us above sinking into sin.

How blessed such a life would be! How victorious over the small motives that rule one’s life, the deadening influence of routine, the duties that are felt to be overwhelmingly great and those that are felt to be wearisomely and monotonously small! How this unity of motive would give unity to life and simplify its problems! How it would free us from many a perplexity! There are so many things that seem doubtful because we do not bring the test of the highest motive to bear on them. Complications would fall away when we only wished to know and be like Christ. Many a tempting amusement, or occupation, or speculation would start up in its own shape when this Ithuriel spear touched it. How it would save from distractions! How strong it would make us, like a belt round the waist bracing the muscles tighter! ‘This one thing I do’ is always a strengthening principle.

How far is this possible? Not absolutely, but we may approximate very closely and indefinitely towards it. For there is the possibility of such thought blending with common motives, like a finer perfume in the scentless air, or some richer elixir in a cup. There is the possibility of its doing to other motives what light does to landscape when a sudden sunbeam gleams across the plain, and everything leaps into increased depth of colour. Let us try more and more to rescue life from the slavery of habit and the distractions of all these smaller forces, and to bring it into the greatness and power of submission to the dominion of this sovereign, unifying motive. Our lives would thus be greatened and strengthened, even as Germany and Italy have been, by being delivered from a rabble of petty dukes and brought under the sway of one emperor or king. Let us try to approach nearer and nearer to the fusion of action and contemplation, and to the blending with all other motives of this supreme one.

This command supplies us with an easily applied and effective test. Is there any place where you cannot take it, any act which you feel it would be impossible to do for His sake? Avoid such. Where the safety-lamp burns blue and goes out, is no place for you.

It is a beautiful thought that Jesus does for us what we are thus commanded to do for Him. The high priest bore the names of the tribes on his shoulders and in his heart. ‘I have graven thee on the palms of my hands.’ We bear Him in our hands and in our hearts. ‘I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.’

III. The great deliverance is to be ever on our lips.

The three regions here named are the inward thought, the outward practice, and the testimony of the lips. Note that that testimony is a consequence of thought and practice.

> 1. The purpose of the deliverance is to make ‘prophets of His law.’ Such was the divine intention as to Israel. Such is God’s purpose as to all Christians. The very meaning of redemption is there. He has ‘opened our lips’ that we ‘should show forth His praise.’ He has regard to ‘His own name.’ He desires to make us vocal, for the same purpose for which a man strings a harp, to bring sweet music out of it. Words of testimony are a form of love.
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> 2. The other two are incomplete without this vocal testimony.
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> 3. The utterance of the lips, to be worth anything, must rest on and follow the other two. How noble, then, and blessed, how strong and calm and simple our lives would be, if we had this for the one great object of our thoughts, of our practical endeavour, of our words, if all our being was sustained, impelled, made vocal, by one thought, one love!

O my brother, see to it that you give yourself to Him. That great Light will gladden your eyes, will guide your activity, and, like the sunrise striking Memnon’s voiceless, stony lips, will bring music. Thought will have one boundless home of ‘many mansions.’ Work will have one law, one motive, its consecration and strength; and as in some solemn procession, all our steps and all our movements will keep time to the music of our praise to ‘Him who loved us.’

10)Exodus 14:19-31

A PATH IN THE SEA

Exo. 14:19 - - Exo. 14:31.

This passage begins at the point where the fierce charge of the Egyptian chariots and cavalry on the straggling masses of the fugitives is inexplicably arrested. The weary day's march, which must have seemed as suicidal to the Israelites as it did to their pursuers, had ended in bringing them into a position where, as Luther puts it, they were like a mouse in a trap or a partridge in a snare. The desert, the sea, the enemy, were their alternatives. And, as they camped, they saw in the distance the rapid advance of the dreaded force of chariots, probably the vanguard of an army. No wonder that they lost heart. Moses alone keeps his head and his faith. He is rewarded with the fuller promise of deliverance, and receives the power accompanying the command, to stretch forth his hand, and part the sea. Then begins the marvellous series of incidents here recorded.

I. The first step in the leisurely march of the divine deliverance is the provision for checking the Egyptian advance and securing the safe breaking up of the Israelitish camp. The pursuers had been coming whirling along at full speed, and would soon have been amongst the disorderly mass, dealing destruction. There was no possibility of getting the crossing effected unless they were held at bay. When an army has to ford a river in the face of hostile forces, the hazardous operation is possible only if a strong rearguard is left on the enemy's side, to cover the passage. This is exactly what is done here. The pillar of fire and cloud, the symbol of the divine presence, passed from the van to the rear. Its guidance was not needed, when but one path through the sea was possible. Its defence was needed when the foe was pressing eagerly on the heels of the host. His people's needs determined then, as they ever do, the form of the divine presence and help. Long after, the prophet seized the great lesson of this event, when he broke into the triumphant anticipation of a yet future deliverance,-which should repeat in fresh experience the ancient victory, 'The Lord will go before you; and the God of Israel will be your rearward,' In the place where the need is sorest, and in the form most required, there and that will God ever be to those who trust Him.

We can see here, too, a frequent characteristic of the miraculous element in Scripture, namely, its reaching its end not by a leap, but by a process. Once admit miracle, and it appears as if adaptation of means to ends was unnecessary. It would have been as easy to have transported the Israelites bodily and instantaneously to the other side of the sea, as to have taken these precautions and then cleft the ocean, and made them march through it. Legendary miracle would have preferred the former way. The Bible miracle usually adapts methods to aims, and is content to travel to its goal step by step.

Nor can we omit to notice the double effect of the one manifestation of the divine presence. The same pillar was light and darkness. The side which was cloud was turned to the pursuers; that which was light, to Israel. The former were paralysed, and hindered from advancing a step, or from seeing what the latter were doing; these, on the other hand, had light thrown on their strange path, and were encouraged and helped to plunge into the mysterious road, by the ruddy gleam which disclosed it. So every revelation is either light or darkness to men, according to the use they make of it. The ark, which slew Philistines, and flung Dagon prone on his own threshold, brought blessing to the house of Obededom. The Child who was to be ‘set for the fall,’ was also for ‘the rising of many.’ The stone laid in Zion is ‘a sure foundation,’ and ‘a stone of stumbling.’ The Gospel is the savour of life unto life, or of death unto death. The same fire melts wax and hardens clay. The same Christ is salvation and destruction. God is to each of us either our joy or our dread.

II. The sudden march of the Egyptians having thus been arrested, there is leisure, behind the shelter of the fiery barrier, to take the next step in the deliverance. The sea is not divided in a moment. Again, we have a process to note, and that brought about by two things,-Moses’ outstretched rod, and the strong wind which blew all night. The chronology of that fateful night is difficult to adjust from our narrative. It would appear, from Exo. 14:20, that the Egyptians were barred advancing until morning; and, from Exo. 14:21, that the wind which ploughed with its strong ploughshare a furrow through the sea, took all night for its work. But, on the other hand, the Israelites must have been well across, and the Egyptians in the very midst of the passage, ‘in the morning watch,’ and all was over soon after ‘the morning appeared.’ Probably the wind continued all the night, so as to keep up the pressure which dammed back the waters, but the path was passable some hours before the gale abated. It must have been a broad way to admit of some two million frightened people with wives and children effecting a crossing in the short hours of part of one night.

But though God used the wind as His besom to sweep a road clear for His people, the effect produced by ordinary means was extraordinary. No wind that ever blew would blow water in two opposite directions at once, as a man might shovel snow to right and left, and heap it in mounds by the sides of the path that he dug. That was what the text tells us was done. The miracle is none the less a miracle because God employed physical agents, just as Christ’s miracles were no less miraculous when He anointed blind eyes with moistened clay, or sent men to wash in Siloam, than when His bare word raised the dead or stilled the ocean. Wind or no wind, Moses’ rod or no rod, the true explanation of that broad path cleared through the sea is-’the waters saw Thee, O God.’ The use of natural means may have been an aid to feeble faith, encouraging it to step down on to the untrodden and slippery road. The employment of Moses and his rod was to attest his commission to act as God’s mouthpiece.

III. Then comes the safe passage. It is hard to imagine the scene. The vivid impression made by our story is all the more remarkable when we notice how wanting in detail it is. We do not know the time nor the place. We have no information about how the fugitives got across, the breadth of the path, or its length. Characteristically enough, Jewish legends know all about both, and assure us that the waters were parted into twelve ways, one for each tribe, and that the length of the road was three hundred miles! But Scripture, with characteristic reticence, is silent about all but the fact. That is enough. We gather, from the much later and poetical picture of it in Psa. 1:1 - Psa. 1:6, that the passage was accomplished in the midst of crashing thunder and flashing lightnings; though it may be doubted whether these are meant to be taken as real or ideal. At all events, we have to think of these two millions of people-women, children, and followers-plunging into the depths in the night.

What a scene! The awestruck crowds, the howling wind, perhaps the thunderstorm, the glow of the pillar glistening on the wet and slimy way, the full paschal moon shining on the heaped waters! How the awe and the hope must both have increased with each step deeper in the abyss, and nearer to safety! The Epistle to the Hebrews takes this as an instance of ‘faith’ on the part of the Israelites; and truly we can feel that it must have taken some trust in God’s protecting hand to venture on such a road, where, at any moment, the walls might collapse and drown them all. They were driven to venture by their fear of Pharaoh; but faith, as well as fear, wrought in them. Our faith, too, is often called upon to venture upon perilous paths. We may trust Him to hold back the watery walls from falling. The picture of the crossing carries eternal truth for us all. The way of safety does not open till we are hemmed in, and Pharaoh’s chariots are almost come up. It often leads into the very thick of what we deem perils. It often has to be ventured on in the dark, and with the wind in our faces. But if we tread it in faith, the fluid will be made solid, and the pathless passable, or any other apparent impossibility be realised, before our confidence shall be put to shame, or one real evil reach us.

IV. The next stage is the hot pursuit and the panic of the Egyptians. The narrative does not mark the point at which the pillar lifted and disclosed the escape of the prey. It must have been in the night. The baffled pursuers dash after them, either not seeing, or too excited and furious to heed where they were going. The rough sea bottom was no place for chariots, and they would be hopelessly distanced by the fugitives on foot. How long they stumbled and weltered we are not told, but ‘in the morning watch,’ that is, while it was yet dark, some awful movement in the fiery pillar awed even their anger into stillness, and drove home the conviction that they were fighting against God. There is something very terrible in the vagueness, if we may call it so, of that phrase ‘the Lord looked . . .through the pillar.’ It curdles the blood as no minuteness of narrative would do. And what a thought that His look should be a trouble! ‘The steady whole of the judge’s face’ is awful, and some creeping terror laid hold on that host of mad pursuers floundering in the dark, as that more than natural light flared on their path. The panic to which all bodies of soldiers in strange circumstances are exposed, was increased by the growing difficulty of advance, as the chariot wheels became clogged or the ground more of quicksand. At last it culminates in a shout of '*Sauve qui peut!*' We may learn how close together lie daring rebellion against God and abject terror of Him; and how in a moment, a glance of His face, a turn of His hand, bring the wildest blasphemer to cower in fear. We may learn, too, to keep clear of courses which cannot be followed a moment longer, if once a thought that God sees us comes in. And we may learn the miserable result of all departure from Him, in making what ought to be our peace and blessing, our misery and terror, and turning the brightness of His face into a consuming fire.

V. Then comes, at last, the awful act of destruction, of which a man is the agent and an army the victim. We must suppose the Israelites all safe on the Arabian coast, when the level sunlight streams from the east on the wild hurry of the fleeing crowd making for the Egyptian shore. What a solemn sight that young morning looked on! The wind had dropped, the rod is stretched out, the sea returns to its strength; and after a few moments' despairing struggle all is over, and the sun, as it climbs, looks down upon the unbroken stretch of quiet sea, bearing no trace of the awful work which it had done, or of the quenched hatred and fury which slept beneath.

We can understand the stern joy which throbs so vehemently in every pulse of that great song, the first blossom of Hebrew poetry, which the ransomed people sang that day. We can sympathise with the many echoes in psalm and prophecy, which repeated the lessons of faith and gratitude. But some will be ready to ask, Was that triumphant song anything more than narrow national feeling, and has Christianity not taught us another and tenderer thought of God than that which this lesson carries? We may ask in return, Was it divine providence that swept the Spanish Armada from the sea, fulfilling, as the medal struck to commemorate it bore, the very words of Moses' song, 'Thou didst blow with Thy wind, the sea covered them'? Was it God who overwhelmed Napoleon's army in the Russian snows? Were these, and many like acts in the world's history, causes for thankfulness to God? Is it not true that, as has been well said, 'The history of the world is the judgment of the world'? And does Christianity forbid us to rejoice when some mighty and ancient system of wrong and oppression, with its tools and accomplices, is cleared from off the face of the earth? 'When the wicked perish, there is shouting.' Let us not forget that the love and gentleness of the Gospel are accompanied by the revelation of divine judgment and righteous retribution. This very incident has for its last echo in Scripture that wonderful scene in the Apocalypse, where, in the pause before the seven angels bearing the seven plagues go forth, the seer beholds a company of choristers, like those who on that morning stood on the Red Sea shore, standing on the bank of the 'sea of glass mingled with fire,'-which symbolises the clear and crystalline depth of the stable divine judgments, shot with fiery retribution,-and lifting up by anticipation a song of thanksgiving for the judgments about to be wrought. That song is expressly called 'the song of Moses' and 'of the Lamb,' in token of the essential unity of the two dispensations, and especially of the harmony of both in their view of the divine judgments. Its ringing praises are modelled on the ancient lyric. It, too, triumphs in God's judgments, regards them as means of making known His name, as done not for destruction, but that His character may be known and honoured by men, to whom it is life and peace to know and love Him for what He is.

That final victory over 'the beast,' whether he be a person or a tendency, is to reproduce in higher fashion that old conquest by the Red Sea. There is hope for the world that its oppressors shall not always tyrannise; there is hope for each soul that, if we take Christ for our deliverer and our guide, He will break the chains from off our wrists, and bring us at last to the eternal shore, where we may stand, like the ransomed people, and, as the unsetting morning dawns, see its beams touching with golden light the calm ocean, beneath which our oppressors lie buried for ever, and lift up glad thanksgivings to Him who has 'led us through fire and through water, and brought us out into a wealthy place.'

11)Exodus 15:2

Exodus

'MY STRENGTH AND SONG'

Exo. 15:2.

These words occur three times in the Bible: here, in Isa. 12:2, and in Psa. 18:14.

I. The lessons from the various instances of their occurrence. The first and second teach that the Mosaic deliverance is a picture-prophecy of the redemption in Christ. The third [Psa. 18:14], long after, and the utterance of some private person, teaches that each age and each soul has the same mighty Hand working for it. 'As we have heard, so have we seen.'

II. The lessons from the words themselves.

> [*a*] True faith appropriates God's universal mercy as a personal possession. '*My* Lord and *my* God!' 'He loved *me*, and gave Himself for *me*.'
>
> [*b*] Each single act of mercy should reveal God more clearly as 'My strength.' The 'and' in the second clause is substantially equivalent to 'for.' It assigns the reason for the assurance expressed in the first. Because of the experienced deliverance and God's manifestation of Himself in it as the author of 'salvation,' my faith wins happy increase of confidence that He 'is the strength of my heart.' Blessed they who bring that treasure out of all the sorrows of life!
>
> [*c*] The end of His deliverances is 'praise.' 'He is my song.' This is true for earth and for heaven. The 'Song of Moses and the Lamb.'

12)Exodus 15:13

Exodus

THE SHEPHERD AND THE FOLD

Exo. 15:13.

What a grand triumphal ode! The picture of Moses and the children of Israel singing, and Miriam and the women answering: a gush of national pride and of worship! We belong to a better time, but still we can feel its grandeur. The deliverance has made the singer look forward to the end, and his confidence in the issue is confirmed.

I. The guiding God: or the picture of the leading. The original is 'lead gently.' *Cf. Isa. 40:11*, Psa. 23:2. The emblem of a flock underlies the word. There is not only guidance, but gentle guidance. The guidance was gentle, though accompanied with so tremendous and heart-curdling a judgment. The drowned Egyptians were strange examples of gentle leading. But God's redemptive acts are like the guiding pillar of fire, in that they have a side that reveals wrath and evokes terror, and a side that radiates lambent love and kindles happy trust.

'In Thy strength.' *Cf. Isa. 40:10*, 'with strong hand.' 'He shall gently lead.' Note the combination with gentleness. That divine strength is the only power which is able to guide. We are so weak that it takes all His might to hold us up. It is His strength, not ours. 'My strength is made perfect in [thy] weakness.'

'To the resting-place of Thy holiness.' The word is used for pasture, or resting-places for cattle. Here it meant Canaan; for us it means Heaven-'the green pastures' of real participation in His holiness.

II. The triumphant confidence as to the future based upon the deliverance of the past. '*Hast,*' a past tense. It is as good as done. The believing use of God's great past, and initial mercy, to make us sure of His future.

> [*a*] In that He will certainly accomplish it.
>
> [*b*] In that even now there is a foretaste-rest in toil. He guides to the 'waters of resting.' A rest now [Heb. 4:3]; a rest 'that remaineth' [Heb. 4:3, Heb. 4:9].

III. The warning against confidence in self. These people who sang thus perished in the wilderness! They let go hold of God's hand, so they 'sank like lead.' So He will fulfil begun work [Php. 1:6]. Let us cleave to Him. In Heb. 3:1 - Heb. 3:19 and Heb. 4:1 - Heb. 4:16 lessons are drawn from the Israelites not 'entering in.' See also Psa. 95:1 - Psa. 95:11.

13)Exodus 15:17

Exodus

THE ULTIMATE HOPE

Exo. 15:17.

I. The lesson taught by each present deliverance and kindness is that we shall be brought to His rest at last.

[*a*] Daily mercies are a pledge and a pattern of His continuous acts. The confidence that we shall be kept is based upon no hard doctrine of final perseverance, but on the assurance that God is always the same, like the sunshine which has poured out for all these millenniums and still rushes on with the same force. Consider-

The inexhaustibleness of the divine resources.

The steadfastness of the divine purposes.

The long-suffering of the divine patience.

[*b*] Thus daily mercies should lead on our thoughts to heavenly things. They should not prison us in their own sweetness. We should see the great Future shining through them as a transparent, not an opaque medium.

[*c*] That ultimate future should be the great object of our hope. Surely it is chiefly in order that we may have the light of that great to-morrow brightening and magnifying our dusty to-days, that we are endowed with the faculty of looking forward and ‘calling things that are not as though they were.’ So we should engage and enlarge our minds with it.

II. The form which that ultimate future assumes.

The Israelites thought of Canaan, and in particular of ‘Zion,’ its centre-point.

[*a*] Perpetual rest. ‘Bring in and plant’-a contrast to the desert nomad life.

[*b*] Perpetual safety. ‘The sanctuary which Thy hands have established,’ *i.e.* made firm.

[*c*] Perpetual dwelling in God. ‘Thy dwelling,’ ‘Thy mountain,’ ‘*Thy* holy habitation’ [Exo. 15:13], rather than ‘*our* land.’ For Israel their communion with Jehovah was perfected on Zion by the Temple and the sacrifices, including the revelation of [priestly] national service.

[*d*] Perpetual purity. ‘Thy sanctuary.’ ‘Without’ holiness ‘no man shall see the Lord.’

14)Exodus 15:23-25

Exodus

MARAH

Exo. 15:23 - - Exo. 15:25.

I. The time of reaching Marah-just after the Red Sea. The Israelites were encamped for a few days on the shore to shake themselves together, and then at this, their very first station, they began to experience the privations which were to be their lot for forty years. Their course was like that of a ship that is in the stormy Channel as soon as it leaves the shelter of the pier at Dover, not like that of one that glides down the Thames for miles.

After great moments and high triumphs in life comes Marah.

Marah was just before Elim-the alternation, how blessed! The shade of palms and cool water of the wells, one for each tribe and one for each ‘elder.’ So we have alternations in life and experience.

II. The wrong and the right ways of taking the bitter experience. The people grumbled: Moses cried to the Lord. The quick forgetfulness of deliverances. The true use of speech is not complaint, but prayer.

III. The power that changes bitter to sweet. The manner of the miracle is singular. God hides Himself behind Moses, and His miraculous power behind the material agent. Perhaps the manner of the miracle was intended to suggest a parallel with the first plague. There the rod made the Nile water undrinkable. There is a characteristic economy in the miraculous, and outward things are used, as Christ used the pool and the saliva and the touch, to help the weak faith of the deaf and dumb man.

What changes bitter to sweet for us?-the Cross, the remembrance of Christ's death. 'Consider Him that endured.' The Cross is the true tree which, when 'cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet.'

Recognition of and yielding to God's will: that is the one thing which for us changes all. The one secret of peace and of getting sweetness out of bitterness is loving acceptance of the will of God.

Discernment of purpose in God's 'bitter' dealings-'for our profit.' The dry rod 'budded.' The Prophet's roll was first bitter, then sweet. Affliction 'afterwards yieldeth the peaceable fruit.'

15)Exodus 16:4-12

Exodus

THE BREAD OF GOD

Exo. 16:4 - - Exo. 16:12.

Unbelief has a short memory. The Red Sea is forgotten in a month. The Israelites could strike their timbrels and sing their lyric of praise, but they could not believe that to-day's hunger could be satisfied. Discontent has a slippery memory. They wish to get back to the flesh-pots, of which the savour is in their nostrils, and they have forgotten the bitter sauce of affliction. When they were in Egypt, they shrieked about their oppression, and were ready to give up anything for liberty; when they have got it, they are ready to put their necks in the yoke again, if only they can have their stomachs filled. Men do not know how happy they are till they cease to be so. Our present miseries and our past blessings are the themes on which unbelief harps. Let him that is without similar sin cast the first stone at these grumbling Israelites. Without following closely the text of the narrative, we may throw together the lessons of the manna.

I. Observe God’s purpose in the gift, as distinctly expressed in the promise of it.

‘That I may prove them, whether they will walk in My law or no.’ How did the manna become a test of this? By means of the law prescribed for gathering it. There was to be a given quantity daily, and twice as much on the sixth day. If a man trusted God for to-morrow, he would be content to stop collecting when he had filled his omer, tempting as the easily gathered abundance would be. Greed and unbelief would masquerade then as now, under the guise of prudent foresight. The old Egyptian parallels to ‘make hay while the sun shines,’ and suchlike wise sayings of the philosophy of distrust, would be solemnly spoken, and listened to as pearls of wisdom. When experience had taught that, however much a man gathered, he had no more than his omer full, after all,-and is not that true yet?-then the next temptation would be to practise economy, and have something over for to-morrow. Only he who absolutely trusted God to provide for him would eat up his portion, and lie down at night with a quiet heart, knowing that He who had fed him would feed. When experience had taught that what was saved rotted, then laziness would come in and say, ‘What is the use of gathering twice as much on the sixth day? Don’t we know that it will not keep?’ So the whole of the gift was a continual training of, and therefore a continual test for, faith. God willed to let His gifts come in this hand-to-mouth fashion, though He could have provided at once what would have obviously lasted them all their wilderness life, in order that they might be habituated to cling to Him, and that their daily bread might be doubly for their nourishment, feeding their bodies and strengthening that faith which, to them as to us, is the condition of all blessedness. God lets our blessings, too, trickle to us drop by drop, instead of pouring them in a flood all at once upon us, for the same reason. He does so, not because of any good to Him from our faith, except that the Infinite love loves infinitely to be loved; but for our sakes, that we may taste the peace and strength of continual dependence, and the joy of continual receiving. He could give us the principal down; but He prefers to pay us the interest, as we need it.

Christianity does not absolutely forbid laying up money or other resources for future wants. But the love of accumulating, which is so strong in many professing Christians, and the habit of amassing beyond all reasonable future wants, is surely scarcely permitted to those who profess to believe that incarnate wisdom forbade taking anxious care for the morrow, and sent its disciples to lilies and birds to learn the happy immunities of faith. We too get our daily mercies to prove us. The letter of the law for the manna is not applicable to us who gain our bread by God's blessing on our labour. But the spirit is, and the members of great commercial nations have surely little need to be reminded that still the portion put away is apt to breed worms. How often it vanishes, or, if it lasts, tortures its owner, who has more trouble keeping it than he had in getting it; or fatally corrupts his own character, or ruins his children! All God's gifts are tests, which-thanks be to Him-is the same as to say that they are means of increasing faith, and so adding to joy.

II. The manna was further a disclosure of the depth of patient long-suffering in God.

Very strikingly the 'murmurings' of the children of Israel are four times referred to in this context, and on each occasion are stated as the reason for the gift of the manna. It was God's answer to the peevish complaints of greedy appetites. When they were summoned to come near to the Lord, with the ominous warning that 'He hath heard your murmurings,' no doubt many a heart began to quake; and when the Glory flashed from the Shechinah cloud, it would burn lurid to their trembling consciences. But the message which comes from it is sweet in its gentleness, as it promises the manna because they have murmured, and in order that they may know the Lord. A mother soothes her crying infant by feeding it from her own bosom. God does not take the rod to His whimpering children, but rather tries to win them by patience, and to shame their unbelief by His swift and over-abundant answers to their complaints. When He must, He punishes; but when He can, He complies. Faith is the condition of our receiving His highest gifts; but even unbelief touches His heart with pity, and what He can give to it, He does, if it may be melted into trust. The farther men stray from Him, the more tender and penetrating His recalling voice. We multiply transgressions, He multiplies mercies.

III. The manna was a revelation in miraculous and transient form of an eternal truth.

The God who sent it sends daily bread. The words which Christ quoted in His wilderness hunger are the explanation of its meaning as a witness to this truth: ‘Man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.’ To a Christian, the divine power is present and operative in all natural processes as really as in those which we call miraculous. God is separable from the universe, but the universe is not separable from God. If it were separated, it would cease. So far as the reality of the divine operation is concerned, it matters not whether He works in the established fashion, through material things, or whether His will acts directly. The chain which binds a phenomenon to the divine will may be long or short; the intervening links may be many, or they may be abolished, and the divine cause and the visible effect may touch without anything between. But in either case the power is of God. Bread made out of flour grown on the other side of the world, and fashioned by the baker, and bought by the fruits of my industry, is as truly the gift of God as was the manna. For once, He showed these men His hand at work, that we all might know that it was at work, when hidden. The lesson of the ‘angel’s food’ eaten in the wilderness is that men are fed by the power of God’s expressed and active will,-for that is the meaning of ‘the word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God,’-in whatever fashion they get their food. The gift of it is from Him; its power to nourish is from Him. It is as true to-day as ever it was: ‘Thou openest Thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing.’ The manna ceased when the people came near cornfields and settled homes. Miracles end when means are possible. But the God of the miracle is the God of the means.

Commentators make much of what is supposed to be a natural substratum for the manna, in a certain vegetable product, found in small quantities in parts of the Arabian peninsula. No doubt, we are to recognise in the plagues of Egypt, and in the dividing of the Red Sea, the extraordinary action of ordinary causes; and there is no objection in principle to doing so here. But that an exudation from the bark of a shrub, which has no nutritive properties at all, is found only in one or two places in Arabia, and that only at certain seasons and in infinitesimal quantity, seems a singularly thin ‘substratum’ on which to build up the feeding of two millions of people, more or less exclusively and continuously for forty years, by means of a substance which has nothing to do with tamarisk-trees, and is like the natural product in nothing but sweetness and name. Whether we admit connection between the two, or not, the miraculous character of the manna of the Israelites is unaffected. It was miraculous in its origin-'rained from heaven,' in its quantity, in its observance of times and seasons, in its putrefaction and preservation,-as rotting when kept for greed, and remaining sweet when preserved for the Sabbath. It came straight from the creative will of God, and whether its name means 'What is it?' or 'It is a gift,' the designation is equally true and appropriate, pointing, in the one case, to the mystery of its nature; in the other, to the love of the Giver, and in both referring it directly to the hand of God.

IV. The manna was typical of Christ.

Our Lord Himself has laid His hand upon it, and claimed it as a faint foreshadowing of what He is. The Jews, not satisfied with the miracle of the loaves, demand from Him a greater sign, as the condition of what they are pleased to call 'belief'-which is nothing but accepting the testimony of sense. They quote Moses as giving the manna, and imply that Messiah is expected to repeat the miracle. Christ accepts the challenge, and goes on to claim that He not only gives, but Himself is, for all men's souls, all and more than all which the manna had been to the bodies of that dead generation. Like it, He came-but in how much more profound a sense!-from heaven. Like it, He was food. But unlike it, He could still for ever the craving of the else famishing soul; unlike it, He not only nourished a bodily life already possessed, but communicated a spiritual life which never dies; and, unlike it, He was meant to be the food of the whole world. His teaching passed beyond the symbolism of the manna, when He not only declared Himself to be the 'true bread from heaven which gives life to the world,' but opened a glimpse into the solemn mystery of His atoning death by the startling and apparently repulsive paradox that 'His flesh was food indeed and His blood drink indeed.' The manna does not typically teach Christ's atonement, but it does set Him forth as the true sustenance and life-giver, sweet as honey to the soul, sent from heaven for us each, but needing to be made ours by the act of our faith. An Israelite would have starved, though the manna lay all round the camp, if he did not go forth and secure his portion; and he might no less have starved, if he did not eat what Heaven had sent. ‘Crede et manducasti,’ ‘Believe, and thou hast eaten,’-as St. Augustine says. The personal appropriating act of faith is essential to our having Christ for the food of our souls. The bread that nourishes our bodies is assimilated to their substance, and so becomes sustenance. This bread of God, entering into our souls by faith, transforms them into its substance, and so gives and feeds an immortal life. The manna was for a generation; this bread is ‘the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.’ That was for a handful of men; this is for the world. Nor is the prophetic value of the manna exhausted when we recognise its witness to Christ. The food of the wilderness is the food of the city. The bread that is laid on the table, ‘spread in the presence of the enemy,’ is the bread that makes the feast in the king’s palace. The Christ who feeds the pilgrim soldiers is the Christ on whom the conquerors banquet. ‘To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna.’

16)Exodus 17:15

Exodus

JEHOVAH NISSI

Exo. 17:15.

We are all familiar with that picturesque incident of the conflict between Israel and Amalek, which ended in victory and the erection of this memorial trophy. Moses, as you remember, went up on the mount whilst Joshua and the men of war fought in the plain. But I question whether we usually attach the right meaning to the symbolism of this event. We ordinarily, I suppose, think of Moses as interceding on the mountain with God. But there is no word about prayer in the story, and the attitude of Moses is contrary to the idea that his occupation was intercession. He sat there, with the rod of God in his hand, and the rod of God was the symbol and the vehicle of divine power. When he lifted the rod Amalek fled before Israel; when the rod dropped Israel fled before Amalek. That is to say, the uplifted hand was not the hand of intercession, but the hand which communicated power and victory. And so, when the conflict is over, Moses builds this memorial of thanksgiving to God, and piles together these great stones-which, perhaps, still stand in some of the unexplored valleys of that weird desert land-to teach Israel the laws of conflict and the conditions of victory. These laws and conditions are implied in the name which he gave to the altar that he built-Jehovah Nissi, ‘the Lord is my Banner.’

Now, then, what do these stones, with their significant name, teach us, as they taught the ancient Israelites? Let me throw these lessons into three brief exhortations.

I. First, realise for whose cause you fight.

The Banner was the symbol of the cause for which an army fought, or the cognizance of the king or commander whom it followed. So Moses, by that name given to the altar, would impress upon the minds of the cowardly mob that he had brought out of Egypt-and who now had looked into an enemy’s eyes for the first time-the elevating and bracing thought that they were God’s soldiers, and that the warfare which they waged was not for themselves, nor for the conquest of the country for their own sake, nor for mere outward liberty, but that they were fighting that the will of God might prevail, and that He might be the King now of one land-a mere corner of the earth-and thereby might come to be King of all the earth. That rude altar said to Israel: ‘Remember, when you go into the battle, that the battle is the Lord’s; and that the standard under which you war is the God for whose cause you contend-none else and none less than Jehovah Himself. You are consecrated soldiers, set apart to fight for God.’

Such is the destination of all Christians. They have a battle to fight, of which they do not think loftily enough, unless they clearly and constantly recognise that they are fighting on God’s side.

I need not dwell upon the particulars of this conflict, or run into details of the way in which it is to be waged. Only let us remember that the first field upon which we have to fight for God we carry about within ourselves; and that there will be no victories for us over other enemies until we have, first of all, subdued the foes that are within. And then let us remember that the absorbing importance of inward conflict absolves no Christian man from the duty of strenuously contending for all things that are ‘lovely and of good report,’ and from waging war against every form of sorrow and sin which his influence can touch. There is no surer way of securing victory in the warfare within and conquering self than to throw myself into the service of others, and lose myself in their sorrows and needs. There is no possibility of my taking my share in the merciful warfare against sin and sorrow, the tyrants that oppress my fellows, unless I conquer myself. These two fields of the Christian warfare are not two in the sense of being separable from one another, but they are two in the sense of being the inside and the outside of the same fabric. The warfare is one, though the fields are two.

Let us remember, on the other hand, that whilst it is our simple bounden duty, as Christian men and women, to reckon ourselves as anointed and called for the purpose of warring against sin and sorrow, wherever we can assail them, there is nothing more dangerous, and few things more common, than the hasty identification of fighting for some whim, or prejudice, or narrow view, or partial conception of our own, with contending for the establishment of the will of God. How many wicked things have been done in this world for God’s glory! How many obstinate men, who were really only forcing their own opinions down people’s throats because they were theirs, have fancied themselves to be pure-minded warriors for God! How easy it has been, in all generations, to make the sign of the Cross over what had none of the spirit of the Cross in it; and to say, ‘The cause is God’s, and therefore I war for it’; when the reality was, ‘The cause is mine, and therefore I take it for granted that it is God’s.’

Let us beware of the ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing,’ the pretence of sanctity which is only selfishness with a mask on. And, above all, let us beware of the uncharitableness and narrowness of view, the vehemence of temper, the fighting for our own hands, the enforcing of our own notions and whims and peculiarities, which have often done duty as being true Christian service for the Master’s sake. We are God’s host, but we are not to suppose that every notion that we take into our heads, and for which we may contend, is part of the cause of God.

And then remember what sort of men the soldiers in such an army ought to be. ‘Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord.’ These bearers may either be regarded as a solemn procession of priests carrying the sacrificial vessels; or, as is more probable from the context of the original, as the armour-bearers of the great King. They must be pure who bear His weapons, for these are His righteous love, His loving purity. If our camp is the camp of the Lord, no violence should be there. What sanctity, what purity, what patience, what long-suffering, what self-denial, and what enthusiastic confidence of victory there should be in those who can say, 'We are the Lord's host, Jehovah is our Banner!' He always wins who sides with God. And he only worthily takes his place in the ranks of the sacramental host of the Most High who goes into the warfare knowing that, because He is God's soldier, he will come out of it, bringing his victorious shield with him, and ready for the laurels to be twined round his undinted helmet. That is the first of the thoughts, then, that are here.

II. The second of the exhortations which come from the altar and its name is, Remember whose commands you follow.

The banner in ancient warfare, even more than in modern, moved in front of the host, and determined the movements of the army. And so, by the stones that he piled and the name which he gave them, Moses taught Israel and us that they and we are under the command of God, and that it is the movements of His staff that are to be followed. Absolute obedience is the first duty of the Christian soldier, and absolute obedience means the entire suppression of my own will, the holding of it in equilibrium until He puts His finger on the side that He desires to dip and lets the other rise. They only understand their place as Christ's servants and soldiers who have learned to hush their own will until they know their Captain's. In order to be blessed, to be strong, to be victorious, the indispensable condition is that our inmost desire shall be, 'Not my will, but Thine be done.'

Sometimes, and often, there will be perplexities in our daily lives, and conflicts very hard to unravel. We shall often be brought to a point where we cannot see which way the Banner is leading us. What then? 'It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait' for the salvation and for the guidance of his God. And we shall generally find that it is when we are looking too far ahead that we do not get guidance. You will not get guidance to-day for this day next week. When this day next week comes, it will bring its own enlightenment with it.

'Lead, kindly Light, . . .
. . .One step enough for me.'

Let us take short views both of duty and of hope, and we shall not so often have to complain that we are left without knowing what the Commander's orders are. Sometimes we are so left, and that is a lesson in patience, and is generally God's way of telling us that it is not His will that we should do anything at all just yet. Sometimes we are so left in order that we may put our hand out through the darkness, and hold on by Him, and say, 'I know not what to do, but mine eyes are towards Thee.'

And be sure of this, brethren, that He will not desert His own promise, and that they who in their inmost hearts can say, 'The Lord is my Banner,' will never have to complain that He led them into a 'pathless wilderness where there was no way.' It is sometimes a very narrow track, it is often a very rough one, it is sometimes a dreadfully solitary one; but He always goes before us, and they who hold His hand will not hold it in vain. 'The Lord is my Banner'; obey His orders and do not take anybody else's; nor, above all, the suggestions of that impatient, talkative heart of yours, instead of His commandments.

III. Lastly, the third lesson that these grey stones preach to us is, Recognise by whose power you conquer.

The banner, I suppose, to us English people, suggests a false idea. It suggests the notion of a flag, or some bit of flexible drapery which fluttered and flapped in the wind; but the banner of old-world armies was a rigid pole, with some solid ornament of bright metal on the top, so as to catch the light. The banner-staff spoken of in the text links itself with the preceding incident. I said that Moses stood on the mountain-top with the rod in his hand. Now that rod was exactly a miniature banner, and when he lifted it, victory came to Israel; and when it fell, victory deserted their arms. So by the altar's name he would say, Do not suppose that it was Moses that won the battle, nor that it was the rod that Moses carried in his hand that brought you strength. The true Victor was Jehovah, and it was He who was Moses' Banner. It was by Him that the lifted rod brought victory; as for Moses, he had nothing to do with it; and the people had to look higher than the hill-top where he sat.

This thought puts stress on the first word of the phrase instead of on the last, as in my previous remarks. 'The Lord is my Banner,'-no Moses, no outward symbol, no man or thing, but only He Himself. Therefore, in all our duties, and in all our difficulties, and in all our conflicts, and for all our conquests, we are to look away from creatures, self, externals, and to look only to God. We are all too apt to trust in rods instead of in Him, in Moses instead of in Moses' Lord.

We are all too apt to trust in externals, in organisations, sacraments, services, committees, outside aids of all sorts, as our means for doing God's work, and bringing power to us and blessing to the world. Let us get away from them all, dig deeper down than any of these, be sure that these are but surface reservoirs, but that the fountain which fills them with any refreshing liquid which they may bear lies in God Himself. Why should we trouble ourselves about reservoirs when we can go to the Fountain? Why should we put such reliance on churches and services and preaching and sermons and schemes and institutions and organisations when we have the divine Lord Himself for our strength? 'Jehovah is my Banner,' and Moses' rod is only a symbol. At most it is like a lightning-conductor, but it is not the lightning. The lightning will come without the rod, if our eyes are to the heaven, for the true power that brings God down to men is that forsaking of externals and waiting upon Him which He never refuses to answer.

In like manner we are too apt to put far too much confidence in human teachers and human helpers of various kinds. And when God takes them away we say to ourselves that there is a gap that can never be filled. Ay! but the great sea can come in and fill any gap, and make the deepest and the driest of the excavations in the desert to abound in sweet water.

So let us turn away from everything external, gather in our souls and fix our hopes on Him; let us recognise the imperative duty of the Christian warfare which is laid upon us; let us docilely submit ourselves to His sweet commands, and trust in His sufficient and punctual guidance, and not expect from any outward sources that which no outward sources can ever give, but which He Himself will give-strength to our fingers to fight, and weapons for the warfare, and covering for our heads in the day of battle.

And then, when our lives are done, may the only inscription on the stone that covers us be ‘Jehovah Nissi: the Lord is my banner’ ! The trophy that commemorates the Christian’s victory should bear no name but His by whose grace we are more than conquerors. ‘Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.’

17)Exodus 18:3-4

Exodus

GERSHOM AND ELIEZER

Exo. 18:3 - - Exo. 18:4.

In old times parents often used to give expression to their hopes or their emotions in the names of their children. Very clearly that was the case in Moses' naming of his two sons, who seem to have been the whole of his family. The significance of each name is appended to it in the text. The explanation of the first is, 'For he said, I have been an alien in a strange land'; and that of the second, 'For the God of my fathers, said he, was mine help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.' These two names give us a pathetic glimpse of the feelings with which Moses began his exile, and of the better thoughts into which these gradually cleared. The first child's name expresses his father's discontent, and suggests the bitter contrast between Sinai and Egypt; the court and the sheepfold; the gloomy, verdureless, gaunt peaks of Sinai, blazing in the fierce sunshine, and the cool, luscious vegetation of Goshen, the land for cattle. The exile felt himself all out of joint with his surroundings, and so he called the little child that came to him 'Gershom,' which, according to one explanation, means 'banishment,' and, according to another [a kind of punning etymology], means 'a stranger here'; in the other case expressing the same sense of homelessness and want of harmony with his surroundings. But as the years went on, Moses began to acclimatise himself, and to become more reconciled to his position and to see things more as they really were. So, when the second child is born, all his murmuring has been hushed, and he looks beyond circumstances, and lays his hand upon God. 'And the name of the second was Eliezer, for, he said, the God of my fathers was my help.'

Now, there are the two main streams of thought that filled these forty years; and it was worth while to put Moses into the desert for all that time, and to break off the purposes and hopes of his life sharp and short, and to condemn him to comparative idleness, or work that was all unfitted to bring out his special powers, for that huge scantling out of his life, one-third of the whole of it, in order that there might be burnt into him, not either of these two thoughts separately, but the two of them in their blessed conjunction; 'I am a stranger here'; 'God is my Help.' And so these are the thoughts which, in like juxtaposition, ought to be ours; and in higher fashion with regard to the former of them than was experienced by Moses. Let me say a word or two about each of these two things. Let us think of the strangers, and of the divine helper that is with the strangers.

I. ‘A stranger here.’

Now, that is true, in the deepest sense, about all men; for the one thing that makes the difference between the man and the beast is that the beast is perfectly at home in his surroundings, and gets all that he needs out of them, and finds in them a field for all that he can do, and is fully developed to the very highest point of his capacity by what people nowadays call the ‘environment’ in which he is put. But the very opposite is the case in regard to us men. ‘Foxes have holes,’ and they are quite comfortable there; ‘and the birds of the air have roosting-places,’ and tuck their heads under their wings and go to sleep without a care and without a consciousness. ‘But the Son of man,’ the ideal Humanity as well as the realised ideal in the person of Jesus Christ, ‘hath not where to lay His head.’ No; because He is so ‘much better than they.’ Their immunity from care is not a prerogative-it is an inferiority. We are plunged into the midst of a scene of things which obviously does not match our capacities. There is a great deal more in every man than can ever find a field of expression, of work, or of satisfaction in anything beneath the stars. And no man that understands, even superficially, his own character, his own requirements, can fail to feel in his sane and quiet moments, when the rush of temptation and the illusions of this fleeting life have lost their grip upon him: ‘This is not the place that can bring out all that is in me, or that can yield me all that I desire.’ Our capacities transcend the present, and the experiences of the present are all unintelligible, unless the true end of every human life is not here at all, but in another region, for which these experiences are fitting us.

But, then, the temptations of life, the strong appeals of flesh and sense, the duties which in their proper place are lofty and elevating and refining, and put out of their place, are contemptible and degrading, all come in to make it hard for any of us to keep clearly before us what our consciousness tells us when it is strongly appealed to, that we are strangers and sojourners here and that this is not ‘our rest, because it is polluted.’ Therefore it comes to be the great glory and blessedness of the Christian Revelation that it obviously shifts the centre for us, and makes that future, and not this present, the aim for which, and in the pursuit of which, we are to live. So, Christian people, in a far higher sense than Moses, who only felt himself ‘a stranger there,’ because he did not like Midian as well as Egypt, have to say, ‘We are strangers here’; and the very aim, in one aspect, of our Christian discipline of ourselves is that we shall keep vivid, in the face of all the temptations to forget it, this consciousness of being away from our true home.

One means of doing that is to think rather oftener than the most of us do, about our true home. You have heard, I dare say, of half-reclaimed gipsies, who for a while have been coaxed out of the free life of the woods and the moors, and have gone into settled homes. After a while there has come over them a rush of feeling, a remembrance of how blessed it used to be out in the open and away from the squalor and filth where men ‘sit and hear each other groan’ and they have flung off ‘as if they were fetters’ the trappings of ‘civilisation,’ and gone back to liberty. That is what we ought to do-not going back from the higher to the lower, but smitten with what the Germans call the *heimweh*, the home-sickness, that makes us feel that we must get clearer sight of that land to which we truly belong.

Do you think about it, do you feel that where Jesus Christ is, is your home? I have no doubt that most of you have, or have had, dear ones here on earth about whom you could say that, ‘Where my husband, my wife is; where my beloved is, or my children are, that is my home, wherever my abode may be.’ Are you, Christian people, saying the same thing about heaven and Jesus Christ? Do you feel that you are strangers here, not only because you, reflecting upon your character and capacities and on human life, see that all these require another life for their explanation and development, but because your hearts are knit to Him, and ‘where your treasure is there your heart is also’; and where your heart is there you are? We go home when we come into communion with Jesus Christ. Do you ever, in the course of the rush of your daily work, think about the calm city beyond the sea, and about its King, and that you belong to it? ‘Our citizenship is in heaven’ and here we are strangers.

II. Now let me say a word about the other child’s name.

‘God is Helper.’ We do not know what interval of time elapsed between the birth of these two children. There are some indications that the second of them was in years very much the junior. Perhaps the transition from the mood represented in the one name to that represented in the other, was a long and slow process. But be that as it may, note the connection between these two names. You can never say ‘We are strangers here’ without feeling a little prick of pain, unless you say too ‘God is my Helper.’ There is a beautiful variation of the former word which will occur to many of you, I have no doubt, in one of the old psalms: ‘I am a stranger *with Thee*, and a sojourner, as were all my fathers.’ There is the secret that takes away all the mourning, all the possible discomfort and pain, out of the thought: ‘Here we have no continuing city,’ and makes it all blessed. It does not matter whether we are in a foreign land or no, if we have that Companion with us. His presence will make blessedness in Midian, or in Thebes. It does not matter whether it is Goshen or the wilderness, if the Lord is by our side. So sweetness is breathed into the thought, and bitterness is sucked out of it, when the name of the second child is braided into the name of the first; and we can contemplate quietly all else of tragic and limiting and sad that is involved in the thought that we are sojourners and pilgrims, when we say ‘Yes! we are; but the Lord is my Helper.’

Then, on the other hand, we shall never say and feel ‘the Lord is my Helper,’ as we ought to do, until we have got deep in our hearts, and settled in our consciousness, the other conviction that we are strangers here. It is only when we realise that there is no other permanence for us that we put out our hands and grasp at the Eternal, in order not to be swept away upon the dark waves of the rushing stream of Time. It is only when all other props are stricken from us that we rest our whole weight upon that one strong central pillar, which can never be moved. Learn that God helps, for that makes it possible to say ‘I am a stranger,’ and not to weep. Learn that you are strangers, for that stimulates to take God for out help. Just as when the floods are out, men are driven to the highest ground to save their lives; so when the billows of the waters of time are seen to be rolling over all creatural things, we take our flight to the Rock of Ages. Put the two together, and they fit one another and strengthen us.

This second conviction was the illuminating light upon a perplexed and problematic past. Moses, when he fled from Egypt, thought that his life's work was rent in twain. He had believed that his brethren would have seen that it was God's purpose to use him as the deliverer. For the sake of being such, he had surrendered the court and its delights. But on his young ambition and innocent enthusiasm there came this *douche* of cold water, which lasted for forty years, and sent him away into the wilderness, to be a shepherd under an Arab sheikh, with nothing to look forward to. At first he said, 'This is not what I was meant for; I am out of my element here.' But before the forty years were over he said, 'The God of my father was my help, and He delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.' What had looked a disaster turned out to be a deliverance, a manifestation of divine help, and not a hindrance. He had got far enough away from that past to look at it sanely, that is to say gratefully. So we, when we get far enough away from our sorrows, can look back at them, sometimes even here on earth, and say, 'The mercy of the Lord compassed me about.' Here is the key that unlocks all the perplexities of providence, 'The Lord was my Helper.'

And that conviction will steady and uphold a man in a present, however dark. It was no small exercise of his faith and patience that the great lawgiver should for so many years have such unworthy work to do as he had in Midian. But even then he gathered into his heart this confidence, and brought summer about him into the mid-winter of his life, and light into the midst of darkness; 'for he said'-even then, when there was no work for him to do that seemed much to need a divine help-'the Lord is my Helper.'

And so, however dark may be our present moment, and however obscure or repulsive our own tasks, let us fall back upon that old word, 'Thou hast been my Help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.'

When Moses named his boy, his gratitude was allied with faith in favours to come; and when he said 'was,' he meant also 'will be.' And he was right. He dreamt very little of what was coming, but this confidence that was expressed in his second child's name was warranted by that great future that lay before him, though he did not know it. When the pinch came his confidence faltered. It was easy to say 'The Lord is my Helper,' when there was nothing very special for which God's help was needed, and nothing harder to do than to look after a few sheep in the wilderness. But when God said to him, ‘Go and stand before Pharaoh,’ Moses for the moment forgot all about God’s being his helper, and was full of all manner of cowardly excuses, which, like the excuses of a great many more of us for not doing our plain duty, took the shape of a very engaging modesty and diffidence as to his capacities. But God said to him, ‘Surely I will be with thee.’ He gave him back ‘Eliezer’ in a little different form. ‘You used to say that I was your helper. What has become of your faith now? Has it all evaporated when the trial comes? Surely I will be with thee.’ If we will set ourselves to our tasks, not doubting God’s help, we shall have occasion in the event to be sure that God did help us.

So, brethren, let us cherish these two thoughts, and never keep them apart, and God will be, as our good old hymn has it-

‘Our help while troubles last,
And our eternal home.’

18)Exodus 18:21

Exodus

THE IDEAL STATESMAN 1

Exo. 18:21.

You will have anticipated my purpose in selecting this text. I should be doing violence to your feelings and mine if I made no reference to the event which has united the Empire and the world in one sentiment. The great tree has fallen, and the crash has for the moment silenced all the sounds of the forest. Wars abroad and controversies at home are hushed. All men, of all schools of opinion, creeds, and parties, see now, in the calm face of the dead, ‘the likeness to the great of old’; and it says something, with all our faults, for the soundness of the heart of English opinion, that all sorts and conditions of men have brought their sad wreaths to lay them on that coffin.

But, whilst much has been said, far more eloquently and authoritatively than I can say it, about the many aspects of that many-sided life, surely it becomes us, as Christian people, to look at it from the distinctively Christian point of view, and to gather some of the lessons which, so regarded, it teaches us.

My text is part of the sagacious advice which Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, gave him about the sort of men that he should pick out to be his lieutenants in civic government. Its old-fashioned, simple phraseology may hide from some of us the elevation and comprehensiveness of the ideal that it sets forth. But it is a grand ideal; and amongst the great names of Englishmen who have guided the destinies of this land, none have approached more nearly to it than he whose death has taken away the most striking personality from our public life.

So let me ask you to look with me, first, at the ideal of a politician that is set forth here.

The free life of the desert, far away from the oppressions of surrounding military despotisms, that remarkable and antique constitution of the clan, with all its beautiful loyalty, had given this Arab sheikh a far loftier conception of what a ruler of men was than he could have found exemplified at Pharaoh’s court; or than, alas! has been common in many so-called Christian countries. The field upon which he intended that these great qualities should be exercised was a very limited one, to manage the little affairs of a handful of fugitives in the desert. But the scale on which we work has nothing to do with the principles by which we work, and the laws of perspective and colouring are the same, whether you paint the minutest miniature or a gigantic fresco. So what was needed for managing the little concerns of Moses’ wanderers in the wilderness is the ideal of what is needed for the men who direct the public affairs of world-wide empires.

Let me run over the details. They must be ‘able men,’ or, as the original has it, ‘men of strength.’ There is the intellectual basis, and especially the basis of firm, brave, strongly-set will which will grasp convictions, and, whatever comes, will follow them to their conclusions. The statesman is not one that puts his ear down to the ground to hear the tramp of some advancing host, and then makes up his mind to follow in their paths; he is not sensitive to the varying winds of public opinion, nor does he trim his sails to suit them, but he comes to his convictions by first-hand approach to, and meditation on, the great principles that are to guide, and then holds to them with a strength that nothing can weaken, and a courage that nothing can daunt. ‘Men of strength’ is what democracies like ours do most need in their leaders; a ‘strong man, in a blatant land,’ who knows his own mind, and is faithful to it for ever. That is a great demand.

‘Such as fear God’-there is the secret of strength, not merely in reference to the intellectual powers which are not dependent for their origin, though they may be for the health and vigour of their work, upon any religious sentiment, but in regard to all true power. He that would govern others must first be lord of himself, and he only is lord of himself who is consciously and habitually the servant of God. So that whatever natural endowment we start with, it must be heightened, purified, deepened, enlarged, by the presence in our lives of a deep and vital religious conviction. That is true about all men, leaders and led, large and small. That is the bottom-heat in the greenhouse, as it were, that will make riper and sweeter all the fruits which are the natural result of natural capacities. That is the amulet and the charm which will keep a man from the temptations incident to his position and the weaknesses incident to his character. The fear of God underlies the noblest lives. That is not to-day’s theory. We are familiar with the fact, and familiar with the doctrine formulated out of it, that there may be men of strong and noble lives and great leaders in many a department of human activity without any reference to the Unseen. Yes, there may be, but they are all fragments, and the complete man comes only when the fear of the Lord is guide, leader, impulse, polestar, regulator, corrector, and inspirer of all that he is and all that he does.

‘Men of truth’-that, of course, glances at the crooked ways which belong not only to Eastern statesmanship, but it does more than that. He that is to lead men must himself be led by an eager haste to follow after, and to apprehend, the very truth of things. And there must be in him clear transparent willingness to render his utmost allegiance, at any sacrifice, to the dawning convictions that may grow upon him. It is only fools that do not change. Freshness of enthusiasm, and fidelity to new convictions opening upon a man, to the end of his life, are not the least important of the requirements in him who would persuade and guide individuals or a nation.

‘Hating covetousness’; or, as it might be rendered, ‘unjust gain.’ That reference to the ‘oiling of the palms’ of Eastern judges may be taken in a loftier signification. If a man is to stand forth as the leader of a people, he must be clear, as old Samuel said that he was, from all suspicion of having been following out his career for any form of personal advantage. ‘Clean hands,’ and that not only from the vulgar filth of wealth, but from the more subtle advantages which may accrue from a lofty position, are demanded of the leader of men.

Such is the ideal. The requirements are stern and high, and they exclude the vermin that infest ‘politics,’ as they are called, and cause them to stink in many nostrils. The self-seeking schemer, the one-eyed partisan, the cynic who disbelieves in ideals of any sort, the charlatan who assumes virtues that he does not possess, and mouths noble sentiments that go no deeper than his teeth, are all shut out by them. The doctrine that a man may do in his public capacity things which would be disgraceful in private life, and yet retain his personal honour untarnished, is blown to atoms by this ideal. It is much to be regretted, and in some senses to be censured, that so many of our wisest, best, and most influential men stand apart from public life. Much of that is due to personal bias, much more of it is due to the pressure of more congenial duties, and not a little of it is due to the disregard of Jethro’s ideal, and to the degradation of public life which has ensued thereby. But there have been great men in our history whose lives have helped to lift up the ideal of a statesman, who have made such a sketch as Jethro outlined, though they may not have used his words, their polestar; and amongst the highest of these has been the man whose loss we to-day lament.

Let me try to vindicate that expression of opinion in a word or two. I cannot hope to vie in literary grace, or in completeness, with the eulogies that have been abundantly poured out; and I should not have thought it right to divert this hour of worship from its ordinary themes, if I had had no more to say than has been far better said a thousand times in these last days. But I cannot help noticing that, though there has been a consensus of admiration of, and a practically unanimous pointing to, character as after all the secret of the spell which Mr. Gladstone has exercised for two generations, there has not been, as it seems to me, equal and due prominence given to what was, and what he himself would have said was, the real root of his character and the productive cause of his achievements.

And so I venture now to say a word or two about the religion of the man that to his own consciousness underlay all the rest of him. It is not for me to speak, and there is no need to speak, about the marvellous natural endowments and the equally marvellous, many-sided equipment of attainment which enriched the rich, natural soil. Intermeddling as he did with all knowledge, he must necessarily have been but an amateur in many of the subjects into which he rushed with such generous eagerness. But none the less is the example of all but omnivorous acquisitiveness of everything that was to be known, a protest, very needful in these days, against the possible evils of an excessive specialising which the very progress of knowledge in all departments seems to make inevitable. I do not need to speak, either, of the flow, and sometimes the torrent, of eloquence ever at his command, nor of the lithe and sinewy force of his extraordinarily nimble, as well as massive, mind; nor need I say more than one word about the remarkable combination of qualities so generally held and seen to be incompatible, which put into one personality a genius for dry arithmetical figures and a genius for enthusiasm and sympathy with all the oppressed. All these things have been said far better than I can say them, and I do not repeat them.

But I desire to hammer this one conviction into your hearts and my own, that the inmost secret of that noble life, of all that wealth of capacity, all that load of learning, which he bore lightly like a flower, was the fact that the man was, to the very depths of his nature, a devout Christian. He would have been as capable, as eloquent, and all the rest of it, if he had been an unbeliever. But he would never have been nor done what he was and did, and he would never have left the dint of an impressive and lofty personality upon a whole nation and a world, if beneath the intellect there had not been character, and beneath character Christianity.

He was far removed, in ecclesiastical connections, from us Nonconformists, and he held opinions in regard to some very important ecclesiastical questions which cut straight across some of our deepest convictions. We never had to look for much favour from his hands, because his intellectual atmosphere removed him far from sympathy with many of the truths which are dearest to the members of the Free Evangelical Churches. But none the less we recognise in him a brother in Jesus Christ, and rejoice that there, on the high places of a careless and sceptical generation, there stood a Christian man.

In this connection I cannot but, though I have no right to do so, express how profoundly thankful I, for one, was to the present Prime Minister of England that in his brief eulogium on, I was going to say, his great rival, he ended all by the emphatic declaration that Mr. Gladstone was, first and foremost, a great Christian man. Yes; and there was the secret, as I have already said, not of his merely political eminence, but of the universal reverence which a nation expresses to-day. All detraction is silenced, and all calumnies have dropped away, as filth from the white wings of a swan as it soars, and with one voice the Empire and the world confess that he was a great and a good man.

I need not dwell in detail on the thoughts of how, by reason of this deep underlying fear of God, the other qualifications which are sketched in our ideal found their realisation in him; how those who, all through his career, smiled most at the successive enthusiasms which monopolised his mind, and sometimes at the contrasts between these, are now ready to admit that, whether the enthusiasms were right or wrong, there is something noble in the spectacle of a man ever keeping his mind, even when its windows were beginning to be dimmed by the frosts of age, open to the beams of new truth. And the greatest, as some people think, of his political blunders, as we are beginning, all of us, to recognise, now that party strife is hushed, was the direct consequence of that ever fresh and youthful enthusiasm for new thoughts and new lines of action. Innovators aged eighty are not too numerous.

Nor need I say more than one word about the other part of the ideal, ‘hating covetousness.’ The giver of peerages by the bushel died a commoner. The man that had everything at his command made no money, nor anything else, out of his long years of office, except the satisfaction of having been permitted to render what he believed to be the highest of service to the nation that he loved so well. Like our whilom neighbour, the other great commoner, John Bright, he lived among his own people; and like Samuel, of whom I have already spoken, he could stretch out his old hands and say, 'They are clean.' One scarcely feels as if, to such a life, a State funeral in Westminster Abbey was congruous. One had rather have seen him laid among the humble villagers who were his friends and companions, and in the quiet churchyard which his steps had so often traversed. But at all events the ideal was realised, and we all know what it was.

Might I say one word more? As this great figure passes out of men's sight to nobler work, be sure, on widened horizons corresponding to his tutored and exercised powers, does he leave no lessons behind for us? He leaves one very plain, homely one, and that is, 'Work while it is called to-day.' No opulence of endowment tempted this man to indolence, and no poverty of endowment will excuse us for sloth. Work is the law of our lives; and the more highly we are gifted, the more are we bound to serve.

He leaves us another lesson. Follow convictions as they open before you, and never think that you have done growing, or have reached your final stage.

He leaves another lesson. Do not suppose that the Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot satisfy the keenest intellect, nor dominate the strongest will. It has come to be a mark of narrowness and fossilhood to be a devout believer in Christ and His Cross. Some of you young men make an easy reputation for cleverness and advanced thought by the short and simple process of disbelieving what your mother taught you. Here is a man, probably as great as you are, with as keen an intellect, and he clung to the Cross of Christ, and had for his favourite hymn-

'Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.'

He leaves another lesson. If you desire to make your characters all that it is in them to be made, you must, like him, go to Jesus Christ, and get your teaching and your inspiration from that great Lord. We cannot all be great men. Never mind. It is character that tells; we can all be good men, and we can all be Christian men. And whether we build cottages or palaces, if we build on one foundation, and only if we do, they will stand.

Moses leaves another lesson, as he glides into the past. ‘This man, having served his generation by the will of God, fell on sleep, and was gathered to his fathers, and saw corruption’; but He ‘whom God hath raised up saw no corruption.’ The lamps are quenched, the sun shines. Moses dies, ‘The prophets, do they live for ever?’ but when Moses and Elias faded from the Mount of Transfiguration ‘the apostles saw no man any more, save Jesus only,’ and the voice said, ‘This is My beloved Son; hear ye Him.’

1 Preached on occasion of Mr. Gladstone’s death.

19)Exodus 20:1-11

Exodus

THE DECALOGUE: I-MAN AND GOD

Exo. 20:1 - - Exo. 20:11.

An obscure tribe of Egyptian slaves plunges into the desert to hide from pursuit, and emerges, after forty years, with a code gathered into ‘ten words,’ so brief, so complete, so intertwining morality and religion, so free from local or national peculiarities, so close fitting to fundamental duties, that it is to-day, after more than three thousand years, authoritative in the most enlightened peoples. The voice that spoke from Sinai reverberates in all lands. The Old World had other lawgivers who professed to formulate their precepts by divine inspiration: they are all fallen silent. But this voice, like the trumpet on that day, waxes louder and louder as the years roll. Whose voice was it? The only answer explaining the supreme purity of the commandments, and their immortal freshness, is found in the first sentence of this paragraph, ‘God spake all these words.’

I. We have first the revelation, which precedes and lays the foundation for the commandments; ‘I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt.’ God speaks to the nation as a whole, establishing a special relation between Himself and them, which is founded on His redeeming act, and is reciprocal, requiring that they should be His people, as He is their God. The manifestation in act of His power and of His love precedes the claim for reverence and obedience. This is a universal truth. God gives before He asks us to give. He is not a hard taskmaster, 'gathering where He has not strawn.' Even in that system which is eminently 'the law,' the foundation is a divine act of deliverance, and only when He has won the people for Himself by redeeming them from bondage does He call on them for obedience. His rule is built on benefits. He urges no mere right of the mightier, nor cares for service which is not the glad answer of gratitude. The flashing flames which ran as swift heralds before His descending chariot wheels, the quaking mountain, the long-drawn blasts of the trumpet, awed the gathered crowd. But the first articulate words made a tenderer appeal, and sought to found His right to command on His love, and their duty to obey on their gratitude. The great gospel principle, that the Redeemer is the lawgiver, and the redeemed are joyful subjects because their hearts are touched with love, underlies the apparently sterner system of the Old Testament. God opens His heart first, and then asks for men's.

This prelude certainly confines the Decalogue to the people of Israel. Their deliverance is the ground on which the law is rested, therefore, plainly, the obligation can be no wider than the benefit. But though we are not bound to obey any of the Ten Commandments, because they were given to Israel, they are all, with one exception, demonstrably, a transcript of laws written on the heart of mankind; and this fact carries with it a strong presumption that the law of the Sabbath, which is the exception referred to, should be regarded as not an exception, but as a statute of the primeval law, witnessed to by conscience, republished in wondrous precision and completeness in these venerable precepts. The Ten Commandments are binding on us; but they are not binding as part, though the fundamental part, of the Jewish law.

Two general observations may be made. One is on the negative character of the commandments as a whole. Law prohibits because men are sinful. But prohibitions pre-suppose as their foundation positive commands. We are forbidden to do something because we are inclined to do it, and because we ought to do the opposite. Every 'thou shalt not' implies a deeper 'thou shalt.' The cold negation really rests on the converse affirmative command.

The second remark on the law as a whole is as to the relation which it establishes between religion and morality, making the latter a part of the former, but regarding it as secured only by the prior discharge of the obligations of the former. Morality is the garb of religion; religion is the animating principle of morality. The attempts to build up a theory of ethics without reference to our relations to God, or to secure the practice of righteousness without such reference, or to substitute, with a late champion of unbelief, 'the service of man' for the worship of God, are all condemned by the deeper and simpler wisdom of this law. Christians should learn the lesson, which the most Jewish of the New Testament writers had drawn from it, that, 'pure and undefiled service' of God is the service of man, and should beware of putting asunder what God has joined so closely.

II. The first commandment bears in its negative form marks of the condition of the world when it was spoken, and of the strong temptation to polytheism which the Israelites were to resist. Everywhere but in that corner among the wild rocks of Sinai, men believed in 'gods many.' Egypt swarmed with them; and, no doubt, the purity of Abraham's faith had been sadly tarnished in his sons. We cannot understand the strange fascination of polytheism. It is a disease of humanity in an earlier stage than ours. But how strong it was and is, all history shows. All these many gods were on amicable terms with one another, and ready to welcome newcomers. But the monotheism, which was here laid at the very foundation of Israel's national life, parted it by a deep gulf from all the world, and determined its history.

The prohibition has little force for us; but the positive command which underlies it is of eternal force. We should rather think of it as a revelation and an invitation than as a mere command. For what is it but the declaration that at the centre of things is throned, not a rabble of godlings, nor a stony impersonal somewhat, nor a hypothetical unknowable entity, nor a shadowy abstraction, but a living Person, who can say 'Me,' and whom we can call on as 'Thou,' and be sure that He hears? No accumulation of finite excellences, however fair, can satisfy the imagination, which feels after one Being, the personal ideal of all perfectness. The understanding needs one ultimate Cause on which it can rest amid the dance of fleeting phenomena; the heart cannot pour out its love to be shared among many. No string of goodly pearls will ever give the merchantman assurance that his quest is complete. Only when human nature finds all in One, and that One a living Person, the Lover and Friend of all souls, does it fold its wings and rest as a bird after long flight.

The first commandment enjoins, or rather blesses us by showing us that we may cherish, supreme affection, worship, trust, self-surrender, aspiration, towards one God. After all, our God is that which we think most precious, for which we are ready to make the greatest sacrifices, which draws our warmest love; which, lost, would leave us desolate; which, possessed, makes us blessed. If we search our hearts with this ‘candle of the Lord,’ we shall find many an idol set up in their dark corners, and be startled to discover how much we need to bring ourselves to be judged and condemned by this commandment It is the foundation of all human duty. Obedience to it is the condition of peace and blessedness, light and leading for mind, heart, will, affections, desires, hopes, fears, and all the world within, that longs for one living Person even when it least knows the meaning of its longings and the reason of its unrest.

III. The second commandment forbids all representations, whether of the one God or of false deities. The golden calf, which was a symbol of Jehovah, is condemned equally with the fair forms that haunted the Greek Olympus, or the half-bestial shapes of Egyptian mythology. The reasons for the prohibition may be considered as two,-the impossibility of setting forth the glory of the Infinite Spirit in any form, and the certainty that the attempt will sink the worshipper deeper in the mire of sense. An image degrades God and damages men. By it religion reverses its nature, and becomes another clog to keep the soul among the things seen, and an ally of all fleshly inclinations. We know how idolatry seemed to cast a spell over the Israelites from Egypt to Babylon, and how their first relapse into it took place almost before the voice which ‘spake all these words’ had ceased.

In its grosser form, we have no temptation to it. But there are other ways of breaking the commandment than setting up an image. All sensuous worship in which the treacherous aid of art is called in to elevate the soul, comes perilously near to contradicting its spirit, if not its letter. The attempt to make of the senses a ladder for the soul to climb to God by, is a great deal more likely to end in the soul’s going down the ladder than up it. The history of public worship in the Christian Church teaches that the less it has to do with such slippery help the better. There is a strong current running in England, at all events, in the direction of bringing in a more artistic, or, as it is called, a ‘less bare,’ form of service. We need to remember that the God who is a Spirit is worshipped ‘in spirit,’ and that outward forms may easily choke, and outward aids hinder, that worship.

The especial difficulty of obedience to this commandment is marked by the reason or sanction annexed. That opens a wide field, on which it would be folly to venture here. There is a glimpse of God’s character, and a statement of a law of His working. He is a ‘jealous’ God, We need not be afraid of the word. It means nothing but what is congruous with the loftiest conception of a loving God. It means that He allows of no rival in our hearts’ affection, or in our submission for love’s sake to Him. A half trust in God is no trust. How can worship be shared, or love be parted out, among a pantheon? Our poor hearts ask of one another and get from one another, wherever a man and a woman truly love, just what God asks,-’All in all, or not at all.’ His jealousy is but infinite love seeking to be known as such, and asking for a whole heart.

The law of His providence sounds hard, but it is nothing more than stating in plain words the course of the world’s history, which cannot be otherwise if there is to be any bond of human society at all. We hear a great deal in modern language about solidarity [and sometimes it is spelled with a final ‘e,’ to look more philosophical] and heredity. The teaching of this commandment is simply a statement of the same facts, with the addition that the Lawgiver is visible behind the law. The consequences of conduct do not die with the doers. ‘The evil that men do, lives after them.’ The generations are so knit together, and the full results of deeds are often so slow-growing, that one generation sows and another reaps. Who sowed the seed that fruited in misery, and was gathered in a bitter harvest of horrors and crimes in the French Revolution? Who planted the tree under which the citizens of the United States sit? Did not the seedling go over in the *Mayflower*? As long as the generations of men are more closely connected than those of sheep or birds, this solemn word must be true. Let us see that we sow no tares to poison our children when we are in our graves. The saying had immediate application to the consequences of idolatry in the history of Israel, and was a forecast of their future. But it is true evermore and everywhere.

IV. The third commandment must be so understood as to bring it into line with the two preceding, as of equal breadth and equally fundamental. It cannot, therefore, be confined to the use of the name of God in oaths, whether false or trivial. No doubt, perjury and profane swearing are included in the sweep of the prohibition; but it reaches far beyond them. The name of God is the declaration of His being and character. We take His name 'in vain' when we speak of Him unworthily. Many a glib and formal prayer, many a mechanical or self-glorifying sermon, many an erudite controversy, comes under the lash of this prohibition. Professions of devotion far more fervid than real, confessions in which the conscience is not stricken, orthodox teachings with no throb of life in them, unconscious hypocrisies of worship, and much besides, are gibbeted here. The most vain of all words are those which have become traditional stock in trade for religious people, which once expressed deep convictions, and are now a world too wide for the shrunk faith which wears them.

The positive side underlying the negative is the requirement that our speech of God shall fit our thought of God, and our thought of Him shall fit His Name; that our words shall mirror our affections, and our affection be a true reflection of His beauty and sweetness; that cleansed lips shall reverently utter the Name above every name, which, after all speech, must remain unspoken; and that we shall feel it to be not the least wonderful or merciful of His condescensions that He 'is extolled with our tongues.'

V. The series of commandments referring to Israel's relations with God is distinctly progressive from the first to the fourth, which deals with the Sabbath. The fact that it appears here, side by side with these absolutely universal and first principles of religion and worship, clearly shows that the giver of the code regarded it as of equal comprehensiveness. If we believe that the giver of the code was God, we seem shut up to the conclusion that, though the Sabbath is a positive institution, and in so far unlike the preceding commandments, it is to be taken as not merely a temporary or Jewish ordinance. The ground on which it is rested here points to the same conclusion. The version of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy bases it on the

Egyptian deliverance, but this, on the divine rest after creation. As we have already said, we do not regard the Decalogue as binding on us because given to Israel; but we do regard it as containing laws universally binding, which are written by God's finger, not on tables of stone, but on 'the fleshly tables of the heart.' All the others are admittedly of this nature. Is not the Sabbath law likewise? It is not, indeed, inscribed on the conscience, but is the need for it not stamped on the physical nature? The human organism requires the seventh-day rest, whether men toil with hand or brain. Historically, it is not true that the Sabbath was founded by this legislation. The traces of its observance in Genesis are few and doubtful; but we know from the inscriptions that the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-eighth days of the moon were set apart by the Assyrians, and scholars can supply other instances. The 'Remember' of this commandment can scarcely be urged as establishing this, for it may quite as naturally be explained to mean 'Remember, as each successive seventh day comes round, to consecrate it.' But apart from that, the law written on body, mind, and soul says plainly to all men, 'Rest on the seventh day.' Body and mind need repose; the soul needs quiet communion with God. No vigorous physical, intellectual, or religious life will long be kept up, if that need be disregarded. The week was meant to be given to work, which is blessed and right if done after the pattern of God's. The Sabbath was meant to lift to a share in His rest, to bring eternity into time, to renew wasted strength 'by a wise passiveness,' and to draw hearts dissipated by contact with fleeting tasks back into the stillness where they can find themselves in fellowship with God.

We have not the Jewish Sabbath, nor is it binding on us. But as men we ought to rest, and resting, to worship, on one day in the week. The unwritten law of Christianity, moulding all outward forms by its own free spirit, gradually, and without premeditation, slid from the seventh to the first day, as it had clear right to do. It was the day of Christ's resurrection, probably of His ascension, and of Pentecost. It is 'the Lord's Day.' In observing it, we unite both the reasons for the Sabbath given in Exodus and Deuteronomy,- the completion of a higher creation in the resurrection rest of the Son of God, and the deliverance from a sorer bondage by a better Moses. The Christian Sunday and its religious observance are indispensable to the religious life of individuals and nations. The day of rest is indispensable to their well-being. Our hard-working millions will bitterly rue their folly, if they are tempted to cast it away on the plea of obtaining opportunities for intellectual culture and enjoyment. It is

'The couch of time, care's balm and bay,'

and we shall be wise if we hold fast by it; not because the Jews were bid to hallow the seventh day, but because we need it for repose, and we need it for religion.

20)Exodus 20:12-21

Exodus

THE DECALOGUE: II.-MAN AND MAN

Exo. 20:12 - - Exo. 20:21.

I. The broad distinction between the two halves of the Decalogue is that the former deals with man's relations to God, and the latter with His relations to men. This double division is recognised in the New Testament summary of 'all the law,' as found in two commandments, and is probably implied in the two tables on which it was inscribed. Commentators have been much exercised, however, about how to divide the commandments between these two parts. The fifth, which is the first in this division, belongs in substance to the second half, but its form connects it with the first table. It is like the preceding ones in having a reason appended, and in naming 'the Lord thy God'; while the following are all bare, curt prohibitions. The fact seems to be that it is a transition commandment, and meant to cast special sacredness round the parental relationship, by paralleling it, in some sense, with that to God, of which it is a reflection. Other duties to other men stand on a different level from duties to parents. 'Honour,' which is to be theirs, is not remote from the reverence due to God. They are, as it were, His shadows to the child. The fatherhood of God is dimly revealed in that parting off the commandment from the second table, and assimilating it in form to the laws of the first.

II. The connection of the two halves of the Decalogue teaches some important truth. Josephus said a wise thing when he remarked that, 'whereas other legislators had made religion a department of virtue, Moses made virtue a department of religion.' No theory of morals is built upon the deepest foundation which does not recognise the final ground of the obligation of duty in the voice of God. Duty is *debitum*-debt. Who is the creditor? Myself? An impersonal law? Society? No, God. The practice of morality depends, like its theory, on religion. In the long-run, and on the wide scale, nations and periods which have lost the latter will not long keep the former in any vigour or purity. He who begins by erasing the first commandment will sooner or later make a clean sweep of all the ten. And, on the other hand, wherever there is true worship of the one God, there all fair charities between man and man will flourish and fruit. The two tables are one law. Duties to God come first, and those to man, who is made in the image of God, flow from these.

III. The order of these human duties is significant. We have, next after the law of parental reverence, three commandments, which, in a descending series of importance, forbid crimes against life, marriage, and property. Then the law passes from deeds to the more subtle, and, as men think, less grave, offences of the tongue. Next it crosses the boundary which divides human from divine law, and crimes from sins, to take cognisance of unspoken and unacted desires. So the order of progress in the first table is exactly the reverse of that in the second. There we begin with inward devotion, and travel outwards by deed and word to the sabbatical institution; here we begin with overt acts, and travel inwards, through words, to the hidden desire. The end touches the beginning. For that which we 'covet' is our God; and the first commandment is only obeyed when our hearts hunger after Him, and not after earth. The sequence here corresponds to the order of progress in our knowledge and practice of our human duties. The first thing that the rudest state of society has to do is to establish some kind of security for life and property and woman's honour. The worst men know that much as their duty, however foul may be their lips, and hot their passions. Then the recognition of the sanctity of the great gift of speech, and the supreme obligations of veracity, grow upon men as they get above the earlier stage. Most children pass through a phase when they tell lies as pastime, and most rude societies and half-moralised men have a similar epoch. Last of all, when actions have been bridled and the tongue taught the law of truth, comes the full recognition that the work is not done till the silent longing of a hungry heart is stilled, and that unselfish love of our neighbour is only perfect when we can rejoice in his good and wish none of it for ourselves. The second table is a chart of moral progress.

IV. The scope of these laws has often been violently stretched so as to include all human duty; but without tugging at them so as to make them cover everything, we may note briefly how far they extend. We are scarcely warranted in taking any of them but the last, as going deeper than overt acts, for, though our Lord has taught in the Sermon on the Mount that hatred is murder, and impure desire adultery, that is His deepening of the commandment. But it is quite fair to bring out the positive precept which, in each case, underlies the stern, short prohibition.

The fifth commandment shares with the fourth the distinction of being a positive command. It enjoins ‘honour,’ not ‘love,’ partly because, in olden times, the father was a prince in his house in a sense that has long since ceased to be true, partly because there was less need to enjoin the affection which is in some degree instinctive, than the submission and respect which the children are tempted to withhold, partly in order to suggest the analogy with reverence to God. A strange change has passed over the relations of parents and children, even within a generation. There is more, perhaps, of frank familiar intercourse, which, no doubt, is an improvement on the old style. But there is a great deal less of what the commandment enjoins. City life, education, the general impairing of the idea of authority, which we see everywhere, have told upon many families; and many a father who, by indulgence or by too much engrossment in business, lets the children twitch the reins out of his hands, might lament, as his grown-up children spurn control, ‘If then I be a father, where is mine honour?’ There is no one of the commandments which it is more needful to preach in England than this.

The promise attached to it has another side of threatening. It is a plain fact that when the paternal relation is corrupted, a powerful solvent has been introduced which rapidly tends to disintegrate society. The most ancient empire in the world today, China, has, amid many vices and follies, been preserved mainly by the profound reverence to ancestors which is largely its real working religion. The most vigorous power in the old world, Rome, owed its iron might not only to its early simplicity of life and its iron tenacity, but to the strength of paternal authority and the willingness of filial obedience. No more serious damage can be inflicted on society or on individuals than the weakening of the honour paid to fathers and mothers.

‘Thou shalt not kill’ forbids not only the act of murder, but all that endangers life. It enjoins all care, diligence, and effort to preserve it. A man who looks on while another drowns, or who sends a ship out half manned and overloaded, breaks it as really as a red-handed murderer. But the commandment was not intended to touch the questions of capital punishment or of war. These were allowed under the Jewish code, and cannot therefore be supposed to be prohibited here. How far either is consistent with the deepest meaning of the law, as expanded and reconsecrated in Christianity, is another question. Their defenders have to execute some startling feats of gymnastics to harmonise either with the New Testament.

‘Curus kind o’ Christian dooty,
This ‘ere cuttin’ folks’s throats.’

The ground of the commandment is not given, seeing that conscience is expected to admit its force as soon as stated. But its place at the head of the second table brings it into connection with the first commandment, and suggests that man’s life is sacred because he is the image of God. As Christians, we are bound to interpret it on the lines which Christ has laid down; according to which, hatred is murder, and love is the fulfilling of this as of all other laws. So Luther’s comprehensive summing up of the duties enjoined may be accepted: ‘Patience, gentleness, kindliness, peaceableness, pity, and, of all things, a sweet, friendly heart, without any hate, anger, bitterness, toward any, even enemies.’

In like manner, the seventh commandment sanctifies wedded life, and is the first step in that true reverence of woman which marked the Jewish people through all their history, and was in such contrast to her position in all other ancient societies. Purity in all the relations of the sexes, the control of passion, the reverence for marriage, are subjects difficult to speak of in public. But modern society sorely needs some plain speaking on these subjects-abundance of bread and idleness, facilities for divorce, the filth which newspapers lay down on every breakfast-table, the insidious sensuality of much fiction and art, the licence of the stage. The opportunities for secret profligacy in great cities conspire to loosen the bonds of morality. I would venture to ask public teachers seriously to consider their duty in this matter, and to seek for opportunities wisely to warn budding youth of the pitfalls in its path.

What is 'stealing'? As Luther says, 'It is the smallest part of the thieves that are hung. If we are to hang them all, where shall we get rope enough? We must make all our belts and straps into halters.'

Theft is the taking or keeping what is not 'mine.' But what do we mean by 'mine'? Communists tell us that 'property is theft.' But that is the exaggeration of the scriptural teaching that all property is trust property, that possessions are 'mine' on conditions and for purposes, that I cannot 'do what I will with mine own,' but am a steward, set to dispense it to those who want. The Christian doctrine of stewardship extends this commandment over much ground which we seldom think of as affected by it. All sharp practice in business, the shopkeeper's false weights and the merchant's equivalents of these, adulterations, pirating trademarks, imitating a rival's goods, infringing patents, and the like, however disguised by fine names, are neither more nor less than stealing. Many a prosperous gentleman says solemnly every Sunday of his life, 'Incline our hearts to keep this law,' who would have to live in a much more modest fashion if his prayer were, by any unfortunate accident, answered.

False witness is not only given in court. The sins of the tongue against the law of love are more subtle and common than those of act. 'Come, let us enjoy ourselves, and abuse our neighbours,' is the real meaning of many an invitation to social intercourse. If some fairy could treat our newspapers as the Russian censors do, and erase all the lies about the opposite side, which they report and coin, how many blank columns there would be! If all the words of ill-natured calumny, of uncharitable construction of their friends which people speak, could be made inaudible, what stretches of silence would open out in much animated talk! ‘A man that beareth false witness against his neighbour is a maul, and a sword, and a sharp arrow.’

But deed and word will not be right unless the heart be right; and the heart will be wrong unless it be purged of the bitter black drop of covetousness. The desire to make my neighbour’s goods mine is the parent of all breaches of neighbourly duty, even as its converse ‘love’ is the fulfilling of it all; for such desire implies that I am ruled by selfishness, and that I would willingly deprive another of goods, for my own gratification. Such a temper, like a wild boar among vineyards, will trample down all the rich clusters in order to slake its own thirst. Find a man who yields to his desires after his neighbour’s goods, and you find a man who will break all commandments like a hornet in a spider’s web. Be he a Napoleon, and glorified as a conqueror and hero, or be he some poor thief in a jail, he has let his covetousness get the upper hand, and so all wrong-doing is possible. Nor is it only the second table which covetousness dashes to fragments. It serves the first in the same fashion; for, as St. Paul puts it, the covetous man ‘is an idolater,’ and is as incapable of loving God as of loving his neighbour. This final commandment, overleaping the boundary between conduct and character, and carrying the light of duty into the dark places of the heart, where deeds are fashioned, sets the whole flock of bats and twilight-loving creatures in agitation. It does what is the main work of the law, in compelling us to search our hearts, and in convincing of sin. It is the converse of the thought that all the law is contained in love; for it closes the list of sins with one which begets them all, and points us away from actions and words which are its children to selfish desire as in itself the transgression of all the law, whether it be that which prescribes our relations to God or that which enjoins our duties to man.

21)Exodus 23:16

Exodus

THE FEAST OF INGATHERING IN THE END OF THE YEAR

Exo. 23:16.

The Israelites seem to have had a double beginning of the year-one in spring, one at the close of harvest; or it may only be that here the year is regarded from the natural point of view-a farmer’s year. This feast was at the gathering in of the fruits, which was the natural close of the agricultural year.

This festival of ingathering was the Feast of Tabernacles. It is remarkable that the three great sacred festivals, the Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles, had all a reference to agriculture, though two of them also received a reference to national deliverances. This fact may show that they were in existence before Moses, and that he simply imposed a new meaning on them.

Be that as it may, I take these words now simply as a starting-point for some thoughts naturally suggested by the period at which we stand. We have come to the end of another year-looked for so long, passed so swiftly, and now seeming to have so utterly departed!

I desire to recall to you and to myself the solemn real sense in which for us too the end of the year is a ‘time of ingathering’ and ‘harvest.’ We too begin the new year with the accumulated consequences of these past days in our ‘barns and garners.’

Now, in dealing with this thought, let me put it in two or three forms.

I. Think of the past as still living in and shaping the present.

It is a mere illusion of sense that the past is gone utterly. ‘Thou carriest them away, as with a flood.’ We speak of it as irrevocable, unalterable, that dreadful past. It is solemnly true that ‘ye shall no more return that way.’

But there is a deeper truth in the converse thought that the apparently transient is permanent, that nothing human ever dies, that the past is present. ‘The grass withereth, the flower fadeth,’-yes, but only its petals drop, and as they fall, the fruit which they sheltered swells and matures.

The thought of the present as the harvest from the past brings out in vivid and picturesque form two solemn truths.

The first is the passing away of all the external, but of it only. It has all gone where the winter's cold, the spring rains, the summer's heats have gone. But just as these live in the fruitful results that have accrued from them, just as the glowing sunshine of the departed ardent summer is in the yellow, bending wheat-ear or glows in the cluster, so, in a very solemn sense, 'that which hath been is now' in regard to every life. The great law of continuity makes the present the inheritor of the past. That law operates in national life, in which national characteristics are largely precipitates, so to speak, from national history. But it works even more energetically, and with yet graver consequences, in our individual lives. 'The child is father of the man.' What we are depends largely on what we have been, and what we have been powerfully acts in determining what we shall be. Life is a mystic chain, not a heap of unconnected links.

And there is another very solemn way in which the past lives on in each of us. For not only is our present self the direct descendant of our past selves, but that past still subsists in that we are responsible for it, and shall one day have to answer for it. The writer of Ecclesiastes followed the statement just now quoted as to the survival of the past, with another, which is impressive in its very vagueness: 'God seeketh again that which is passed away.'

So the undying past lives in its results in ourselves, and in our being answerable for it to God.

This metaphor is insufficient in one respect. There is not one epoch for sowing and another for reaping, but the two processes are simultaneous, and every moment is at once a harvest and a seed-time.

This fact masks the reality of the reaping here, but it points on to the great harvest when God shall say, 'Gather the wheat into My barns!'

II. Notice some specific forms of this reaping and ingathering.

[1] Memory.

> It is quite possible that in the future it may embrace all the life.
>
> 'Chambers of imagery.'

[2] Habits and character. Like the deposit of a flood. ‘Habitus’ means clothing, and cloth is woven from single threads.

[3] Outward consequences, position, reputation, etc.

III. Make a personal reference to ourselves.

What sort of harvest are we carrying over from this year? Lay this to heart as certain, that we enter on no new year-or new day-empty-handed, but always ‘bearing our sheaves with us.’ ‘Be not deceived! God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.’

But remember, that while this law remains, there is also the law of forgiveness, ‘Go in peace!’ and there may be a new beginning, ‘Sin no more!’

22)Exodus 24:1-12

Exodus

‘THE LOVE OF THINE ESPOUSALS’

Exo. 24:1 - - Exo. 24:12.

An effort is needed to feel what a tremendous and unique fact is narrated in these words. Next to the incarnation, it is the most wonderful and far-reaching moment in history. It is the birthday of a nation, which is God’s son. It is the foundation stone of all subsequent revelation. Its issues oppress that ancient people to-day, and its promises are not yet exhausted. It is history, not legend, nor the product of later national vanity. Whatever may come of analysing ‘sources’ and of discovering ‘redactors,’ Israel held a relation to God all its own; and that relation was constituted thus.

I. Note the preliminaries of the covenant. The chapter begins with the command to Moses to come up to the mount, with Aaron and other representatives of the people. But he was already there when the command was given, and a difficulty has been found [or, shall we say, made] out of this. The explanation seems reasonable and plain enough, that the long section extending from Exo. 20:22, and containing the fundamental laws as spoken by God, is closed by our Exo. 24:1 - - Exo. 24:2, which imply, in the very order to Moses to come up with his companions, that he must first go down to bring them. God dismisses him as a king might end an audience with his minister, by bidding him return with attendants. The singular use of the third person in reference to Moses in the third verse is not explained by supposing another writer; for, whoever wrote it, it would be equally anomalous.

So he comes down from the stern cloud-encircled peak to that great plain where the encampment lay, and all eyes watch his descent. The people gather round him, eager and curious. He recounts 'all the judgments,' the series of laws, which had been lodged in his mind by God, and is answered by the many-voiced shout of too swiftly promised obedience. Glance over the preceding chapters, and you will see how much was covered by 'all that the Lord hath spoken.' Remember that every lip which united in that lightly made vow drew its last breath in the wilderness, because of disobedience, and the burst of homage becomes a sad witness to human weakness and changefulness. The glory of God flashed above them on the barren granite, the awful voice had scarcely died into desert silence, nerves still tingled with excitement, and wills were bowed before Jehovah, manifestly so near. For a moment, the people were ennobled, and obedience seemed easy. They little knew what they were saying in that brief spasm of devotion. It was high-water then, but the tide soon turned, and all the ooze and ugliness, covered now, lay bare and rotting. 'Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.' We may take the lesson to ourselves, and see to it that emotion consolidates into strenuous persistency, and does not die in the very excitement of the vow.

The pledge of obedience was needed before the Covenant could be made, and, as we shall find, was reiterated in the very centre of the ceremonial ratification. For the present, it warranted Moses in preparing for the morrow's ritual. His first step was to prepare a written copy of the laws to which the people had sworn. Here we come across an old, silenced battery from which a heavy fire used to be directed against the historical accuracy of the Pentateuch. Alphabetic writing was of a later date. There could not have been a written code. The statement was a mere attempt of a later age to claim antiquity for comparatively modern legislation. It was no more historical than similar traditions in other countries, Sibylline books, etc. All that is out of court now. Perhaps some other guns will be spiked in due time, that make a great noise just at present. Then comes the erection of a rude altar, surrounded by twelve standing stones, just as on the east of Jordan we may yet see dolmens and menhirs. The altar represents the divine presence; and the encircling stones, Israel gathered around its God. The group is a memorial and a witness to the people,-and a witness against them, if disobedient. Thus two permanent records were prepared, the book and the monument. The one which seemed the more lasting has perished; the more fragile has endured, and will last to the world's end.

II. Note the rite of ratification of the covenant. The ceremonial is complex and significant. We need not stay on the mere picture, impressive and, to our eyes, strange as it is, but rather seek to bring out the meaning of these smoking offerings, and that blood flung on the altar and on the crowd. First came two sorts of sacrifices, offered not by priests, but by selected young men, probably one for each tribe, whose employment in sacrificial functions shows the priestly character of the whole nation, according to the great words of Exo. 19:6. Burnt-offerings and peace-offerings differed mainly in the use made of the sacrifice, which was wholly consumed by fire in the former, while it was in part eaten by the offerer in the latter. The one symbolised entire consecration; the other, communion with God on the basis of sacrifice. The sin-offering does not appear here, as being of later origin, and the product of the law, which deepened the consciousness of transgression. But these sacrifices, at the threshold of the covenant, receive an expiatory character by the use made of the blood, and witness to the separation between God and man, which renders amity and covenant friendship impossible, without a sacrifice.

They must have yielded much blood. It is divided into two parts, corresponding to the two parties to the covenant, like the cloven animals in Abraham's covenant. One half is 'sprinkled' on the altar, or, as the word means, 'swung,'-which suggests a larger quantity and a more vehement action than 'sprinkling' does. That drenching of the altar with gore is either a piece of barbarism or a solemn symbol of the central fact of Christianity no less than of Judaism, and a token that the only footing on which man can be received into fellowship with God is through the offering of a pure life, instead of the sinner, which, accepted by God, covers or expiates sin. There can be no question that the idea of expiation is at the very foundation of the Old Testament ritual. It is fashionable to regard the expiatory element of Christianity as ‘Hebrew old clothes,’ but the fact is the other way about. It is not that Christianity has not been able to rid itself of a rude and false conception, but that ‘Judaism’ had its sacrifices appointed by God, in order to prepare the way for the true offering, which takes away sin.

The expiation by blood having been thus made, the hindrances to the nation’s entering into covenant are removed. Therefore follows in logical order the next step, their formal [alas! how purely formal it proved to be] taking on themselves its obligations. The freshly written ‘book’ is produced, and read there, to the silent people, before the bloody altar, beneath the peak of Sinai. Again the chorus of assent from a thousand throats echoes among the rocks. They accept the conditions. They had done so last night; but this is the actual contract on their part, and its place in the whole order of the ceremony is significant. It follows expiation, without which man cannot enter into friendship with God, without the acceptance of which man will not yield himself in obedience. The vows which God approves are those of men whose sins are covered.

The final step was the sprinkling of the people with the blood. The division of the blood into two portions signifies that it had an office in regard to each party to the covenant. If it had been possible to pour it all on the altar, and then all on the people, that would have been done. The separation into two portions was inevitable; but in reality it is the same blood which, sprinkled on the altar, expiates, and on the worshipper, consecrates, cleanses, unites to God, and brings into covenant with Him. Hence Moses accompanies the sprinkling of the people with the explanation, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you, upon all these conditions’ [Rev. Ver. margin]. It ratifies the compact on both sides. God ‘hath made’ it, in accepting the sprinkled blood; they have made it, in being sprinkled therewith. But while the rite sets forth the great gospel truth of expiation, the Covenant moves within the region of law. It is made ‘on the basis of all these words,’ and is voidable by disobedience. It is the *Magna Charta* of the nation, and its summing up is ‘this do, and thou shalt live.’ Its promises are mainly of outward guardianship and national blessings. And these are suspended by it, as they were in fact contingent, on the national observance of the national vow. The general idea of a covenant is that of a compact between two parties, each of whom comes under obligations contingent on the other's discharge of his. Theologians have raised the question whether God's covenant is of this kind. Surely it is. His promises to Israel had an 'if,' and the fulfilment of the conditions necessarily secured the accomplishment of the promises. The ritual of the first covenant transcends the strictly retributive compact which it ratified, and shadows a gospel beyond law, even the new covenant which brings better gifts, and does not turn on 'do,' but simply on the sprinkling with the blood of Jesus. The words of Moses were widened to carry a blessing beyond his thoughts, which was disclosed when, in an upper chamber, a dying man said to the twelve representatives of the true Israel, 'This is the new covenant in My blood, drink ye all of it.' The blood which Moses sprinkled gave ritual cleansing, but it remained outside the man. The blood of Jesus gives true purification, and passes into our veins to become our life. The covenant by Moses was 'do and live'; that in Christ is 'believe and live.' Moses brought commandments, and on them his covenant was built; Christ brings gifts, and His covenant is all promises, which are ours on the simple condition of taking them.

III. Note the vision and feast on the basis of the covenant. The little company that climbed the mountain, venturing within the fence, represented the whole people. Aaron and his sons were the destined priests. The elders were probably seventy, because that number is the product of the two perfect numbers, and perhaps with allusion to the seventy souls who went down into Egypt with Jacob. It is emphatically said that they saw 'the God of Israel,' for that day's covenant had made him so in a new closeness of relationship. In token of that new access to and possession in Him, which was henceforth to be the prerogative of the obedient people, some manifestation of His immediate presence was poured on their astonished eyes. It is needless to inquire its nature, or to ask how such a statement is consistent with the spirituality of the divine nature, or with what this same book of Exodus says, 'There shall no man see Me, and live.' The plain intention is to assert that there was a visible manifestation of the divine presence, but no attempt is made to describe it. Our eyes are stayed at the pavement beneath His feet, which was blue as sapphire, and bright as the cloudless sky gleaming above Sinai. It is enough to learn that ‘the secret of the Lord is with them’ to whom He shows ‘His covenant’; that, by the power of sacrifice, a true vision of God may be ours, which is ‘in a mirror, darkly,’ indeed, but yet is real and all sufficing. Before the covenant was made, Israel had been warned to keep afar lest He should break through on them, but now ‘He laid not His hand’ upon them; for only blessing can stream from His presence now, and His hand does not crush, but uphold.

Nor is this all which we learn of the intercourse with God which is possible on the ground of His covenant. They ‘did eat and drink.’ That may suggest that the common enjoyments of the natural life are in no way inconsistent with the vision of God; but more probably it is meant to teach a deeper lesson. We have remarked that the ritual of the peace-offering included a feast on the sacrifice ‘before the Lord,’ by which was signified communion with Him, as at His table, and this meal has the same meaning. They who stand in covenant relations with God, feed and feast on a sacrifice, and thereby hold fellowship with Him, since He too has accepted the sacrifice which nourishes them. So that strange banquet on Sinai taught a fact which is ever true, prophesied the deepest joys of Christian experience, which are realised in the soul that eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, and dimly shadowed the yet future festival, when, cleansed and consecrated by His blood, they who have made a covenant with Him by His sacrifice, shall be gathered unto Him in the heavenly mount, where He makes a ‘feast of fat things and wines on the lees well refined,’ and there shall sit, for ever beholding His glory, and satisfied with the provisions of His house.

23)Exodus 25:30

Exodus

THE BREAD OF THE PRESENCE

Exo. 25:30.

I suspect that to many readers the term ‘shew-bread’ conveys little more meaning than if the Hebrew words had been lifted over into our version. The original expression, literally rendered, is ‘bread of the face’; or, as the Revised Version has it in the margin, ‘presence bread,’ and the meaning of that singular designation is paraphrased and explained in my text: ‘Thou shalt set upon the table, bread of the presence before Me always.’ It was bread, then, which was laid in the presence of God. The directions with regard to it may be very briefly stated. Every Sabbath the priests laid upon the table which stood on one side of the Altar of Incense, in the Inner Court, two piles of loaves, on each of which piles was placed a pan of incense. They lay there for a week, being replaced by fresh ones on the coming Sabbath.

The Altar of Incense in the middle symbolised the thought that the priestly life, which was the life of the nation, and is the life of the Christian both individually and collectively, is to be centrally and essentially a life of prayer. On one side of it stood the great golden lamp which, in like manner, declared that the activities of the priestly life, which was the life of Israel, and is the life of the Christian individually and collectively, is to be, in its manward aspect, a light for the world. On the other side of the Altar of Incense stood this table with its loaves. What does it say about the life of the priest, the Church, and the individual Christian? That is the question that I wish to try to answer here; and in doing so let me first ask you to look at the thing itself, and then to consider its connection with the other two articles in connection with which it made a threefold oneness.

I. Let me deal with this singular provision of the ancient ritual by itself alone.

Bread is a product at once of God’s gift and of man’s work. In the former aspect, He ‘leaves not Himself without witness, in that,’ in the yearly miracle of the harvest, ‘He gives us bread from Heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness’; in the latter, considered as a product of man’s activity, agriculture is, if not the first, at all events in settled communities the prime, form of human industry. The farmer and the baker begin the series of man’s industries. So that these loaves were fitly taken as representatives of all kinds of human industry and their products, and as such were consecrated to God. That is the broad significance of this institution, which, as we shall have to see, links itself with the other two conceptions of the priestly life in its Godward and in its manward aspect. Now the first thing that is suggested, therefore, is the plain obligation, which is also a blessed privilege, for all men who are priests of God by faith in, and union with, the great High Priest, that they lay all their activities as an offering before God. The loaves in their very place on that table, right in front of the veil that parted the Inner Court from the inmost of all, where the Shekinah shone, and the Cherubim bowed in worship, tell us that in some sense they, too, were an offering, and that the table was an altar. Their sacrificial character is emphasised by the fact that upon the top of each of the piles there was laid a pan of incense.

So, then, the whole was an offering of Israel's activities and its results to God. And we, Christian men and women, have to make an offering of all our active life, and all its products. That thought opens up many considerations, one or two of which I ask leave to touch briefly. First, then, if my active life is to be an offering to God, that means that I am to surrender myself. And that surrender means three things: first that in all my daily work I am to set Him before me as my end; second, that in all my daily work I am to set Him before me as my law; third, that in all my daily work I am to set Him before me as my power. As for the first, whatever a man does for any motive other, and with any end less, than God and His Glory, that act, beautiful as it may be in other respects, loses its supreme beauty, and falls short of perfect nobleness, just in the measure in which other motives, or other ends, than this supreme one, are permitted to dominate it. I do not contend for such an impossible suppression of myself as that my own blessedness and the like shall be in no manner my end, but I do maintain this, that in good old language, 'Man's chief end is to glorify God,' and that anything which I do, unless it is motived by this regard to Him as its 'chief end,' loses its noblest consecration, and is degraded from its loftiest beauty. The Altar sanctifies, and not only sanctifies but ennobles, the gift. That which has in it the taint of self-regard so pronouncedly and dominantly as that God is shut out, is like some vegetation down in low levels at the bottom of a vale, which never has the sun to shine upon it. But let it rise as some tree above the brushwood until its topmost branches are in the light, and then it is glorified. To live to self is ignoble and mean; to live for others is higher and nobler. But highest and noblest of all is to offer the loaves to God, and to make Him the end of all our activities.

Again, there is another consideration, bearing on another region in which the assertive self is only too apt to spoil all work. And that is, that if our activities are offerings to God, this means that His supreme Will is to be our law, and that we obey His commands and accept His appointments in quiet submission. The tranquillity of heart, the accumulation of power, which come to men when they, from the depths, say, ‘Not my will but Thine be done’; ‘Speak, Lord! for Thy servant heareth,’ cannot be too highly stated. There is no such charm to make life quiet and strong as the submission of the will to God’s providences, and the swift obedience of the will to God’s commandments. And whilst to make self my end mars what else is beautiful, making self my law mars it even more.

Further, we offer our activities to God when we fall back upon Him as our one power, and say, ‘Perfect Thy strength in my weakness.’ He that goes out into the world to do his daily work, of whatsoever sort it is-you in your little sphere, or I in mine-in dependence upon himself, is sure to be defeated. He that says ‘we have no strength against this great multitude that cometh against us, but our eyes are unto Thee,’ will, sooner or later, be able to go back with joy, and say, ‘the Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad.’ The man that goes into the fight like that foolish prime minister of France under the Empire, ‘with a light heart.’ will very soon find his Sedan, and have shamefully to surrender. Brethren, these three things, making God the end of my work; making God’s will the law of my work; making God’s strength the power of my work; these are the ways by which we, too, can bring our little pile of barley bread, and lay it upon that table.

Again, this consecration of life’s activities is to be carried out by treating their products, as well as themselves, as offerings to God. The loaves were the results of human activity. They were also the products of divine gifts elaborated by human effort. And both things are true about all the bread that you and I have been able to make for the satisfaction of our desires, or the sustenance of our strength-it comes ultimately from the gift of God. In regard to this consecration of the product of our activities, as well as of our activities themselves, I have but two words to offer, and the one is, let us see to it that we consecrate our enjoyment of God’s gifts by bringing that enjoyment, as well as the activities which He has blessed to produce it, into His presence. That table bore the symbols of the grateful recognition of God’s mercies by the people. And when our hearts are glad, and our ‘bosom’s lord sits lightly on his throne,’ we have special need to take care that our joy be not godless, nor our enjoyment of His gifts be without reference to Himself. ‘Ah,’ you say, ‘that is a threadbare commonplace.’ Yes, it is, dear friends; it is a commonplace just because it is needful at every turn, if we are to make our lives what they ought to be.

May I say another thing? and that is, that the loaves that were laid within the Sanctuary were not intended to be separated from the others that were eaten in the tents, nor were they meant to be a kind of purchasing of an indulgence, or of a right, by surrendering a little, to the godless and selfish enjoyment of the rest of the batch, or of the rest of the harvest. Let us apply that to our money, which is one of the products of our activities; and not fancy, as a great many people do, that what we give as a subscription to some benevolent or religious institution buys for us the right to spend all the rest selfishly. That is another commonplace, very threadbare and very feeble, when we speak it, but with claws and teeth in it that will lay hold of us, when we try to put it in practice. The enjoyments and the products of our daily activities are to be offered to God.

Still further, this table with its burden has suggestions that as Christians we are bound to bring all our work to Him for His judgment upon it. The loaves were laid right in front of the veil, behind which blazed the light of His presence. And that meant that they were laid before ‘those pure eyes and perfect judgment of all-judging’ God. Whether we bring our activities there or no, of course in a very real and solemn sense they are there. But what I desire to insist upon now is how important, for the nobleness and purity of our daily lives, it is that we should be in the continual habit of realising to ourselves the thought that whatever we do, we do before His Face. The Roman Catholics talk about ‘the practice of the presence of God.’ One does not like the phrase, but all true religion will practise what is meant by it. And for us it should be as joyous to think, ‘Thou God seest me,’ as it is for a child to play or work with a quiet heart, because it knows that its mother is sitting somewhere not very far off and watching that no harm comes to it.

That thought of being in His presence would be for us a tonic, and a test. How it would pull us up in many a meanness, and keep our feet from wandering into many forbidden ways, if there came like a blaze of light into our hearts the thought: ‘Thou God seest me!’ There are many of our activities, I am afraid, which we should not like to put down on that table. Can *you* think of any in *your* lives that you would be rather ashamed to lay there, and say to Him, ‘Judge Thou this’? Then do not do it. That is a brief, but a very stringent, easily applied, and satisfactory test of a great many doubtful things. If you cannot take them into the Inner Court, and lay them down there, and say, ‘Look, Lord! this is my baking,’ be sure that they are made, not of wholesome flour, but of poisoned grain, and that there is death in them.

Further, this table, with its homely burden of twelve poor loaves, may suggest to us how the simplest, smallest, most secular of our activities is a fit offering to Him. The loaves were not out of place amidst the sanctities of the spot, nor did they seem to be incongruous with the golden altar and the golden lamp-stand, and yet they were but twelve loaves. The poorest of our works is fit to be carried within the shrine, and laid upon His altar. We may be sure that He delights even in the meanest and humblest of them, if only we take them to Him and say: ‘All things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee.’ Ah! there are a great many strange things in Christ’s treasury. Mothers will hoard up trifles that belonged to their children, which everybody else thinks worthless. Jesus Christ has in His storehouse a ‘cup of cold water,’ the widows’ mites, and many another thing that the world counts of no value, and He recognises as precious. There is an old story about some great emperor making a progress through his dominions, where he had been receiving precious gifts from cities and nobles, and as the gay cortège was passing a poor cottage, the peasant-owner came out with a coarse earthenware cup filled with spring water in his hand, and offered it to his overlord as the only gift that he could give. The king accepted it, and ennobled him on the spot. Take your barley loaves to Christ, and He will lay them up in His storehouse.

II. Now I need only say a word or two about the other aspect of this table of shew-bread, taken with the other two articles in conjunction with which it formed a unity.

The lamp and the table go together. They are both offshoots from the altar in the middle. That is to say, your lives will not shine before men unless your activities are offered to God. The smallest taint of making self your end, your law, or your strength, mingling with your lives, and manifest in their actions, will dim the light which shines from them, and men will be very quick to find out and say, ‘He calls himself a Christian; but he lives for himself.’ Neither the light, which is the radiance of a Christian life manwards, can be sustained without the offering of the life in its depths to God, nor can the activities of the life be acceptably offered to Him, unless the man that offers them ‘lets his light shine before men.’ The lamp and the table must go together.

The lamp and the table must together be offshoots from the altar. If there be not in the centre of the life aspiration after Him in the depths of the heart, communion with Him in the silent places of the soul, then there will be little brightness in the life to ray out amongst men, and there will be little consecration of the activities to be laid before God. The reason why the manifold bustle and busy-ness of the Christian Church today sows so much and reaps so little, lies mainly here, that they have forgotten to a large extent how the altar in the centre must give the oil for the lamp to shine, and the grain to be made into the loaves. And, on the other hand, the altar in the middle needs both its flanking accompaniments. For the Christian life is to be no life of cloistered devotion and heavenward aspiration only or mainly, but is to manifest its still devotion and its heavenward aspiration by the consecration of its activities to God, and the raying of them out into a darkened world. The service of man is the service of God, for lamp and table are offshoots of the altar. But the service of God is the basis of the best service of man, for the altar stands between the lamp and the table.

So, brethren, let us blend these three aspects into a unity, the Altar, the Lamp, the Table, and so shall we minister aright, and men will call us the ‘priests of the Most High God,’ till we pass within the veil where, better than the best of us here can do, we shall be able to unite still communion and active service, and shine as the sun in the Kingdom of our Father. ‘His servants shall serve Him’ with priestly ministrations, ‘and shall see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads.’

24)Exodus 25:31

Exodus

THE GOLDEN LAMPSTAND

Exo. 25:31.

If we could have followed the Jewish priest as he passed in his daily ministrations into the Inner Court, we should have seen that he first piled the incense on the altar which stood in its centre, and then turned to trim the lamps of the golden candlestick which flanked it on one side. Of course it was not a candlestick, as our versions misleadingly render the word. That was an article of furniture unknown in those days. It was a lampstand; from a central upright stem branched off on either side three arms decorated with what the Book calls 'beaten work,' and what we in modern jewellers' technicality call *répoussé* work, each of which bore on its top, like a flower on its stalk, a shallow cup filled with oil, in which a wick floated. There were thus seven lamps in all, including that on the central stem. The material was costly, the work adorning it was artistic, the oil with which it was fed was carefully prepared, the number of its lamps expressed perfection, it was daily trimmed by the priest, and there, all through the night, it burned, the one spot of light in a dark desert.

Now, this Inner Court of the Tabernacle or Temple was intended, with its furniture, to be symbolical of the life of Israel, the priestly nation. The Altar of Incense, which was the main article of ecclesiastical equipment there, and stood in the central place, represented the life of Israel in its Godward aspect, as being a life of continual devotion. The Candlestick on the one hand, and the Table of Shew-bread on the other, were likewise symbolical of other aspects of that same life. I have to deal now with the meaning and lessons of this golden lampstand, and it teaches us-

I. The office manwards of the Church and of the individual Christian.

Let me just for a moment recall the various instances in which this symbol reappears in Scripture. We have, in the vision of the prophet who sustained and animated the spirits of Israel in their Restoration, the repetition of the emblem, in the great golden candlestick which Zechariah saw, fed by two 'olive trees,' one on either side of it; and in the last book of Scripture we have that most significant and lovely variation of it, the reappearance, not of the *one* golden candlestick or lampstand, but of *seven*. The formal unity is at an end, but the seven constitute a better, more vital unity, because Christ is in the midst. We may learn the lesson that the Christian conception of the oneness of the Church towers above the Jewish conception of the oneness of Israel by all the difference that there is between a mere mechanical, external unity, and a vital oneness-because all are partakers of the one Christ. I may recall, also, how our Lord, in that great programme of the Kingdom which Matthew has gathered together in what we call 'the Sermon on the Mount,' immediately after the Beatitudes, goes on to speak of the office of His people under the two metaphors of 'the salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world,' and immediately connects with the latter of the two a reference to a lamp lit and set upon its stand; and clinches the whole by the exhortation, 'Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.'

A remarkable and beautiful variation of that exhortation is found in one of the Apostolic writings when Paul, instead of saying, 'Ye are the light of the world,' says, 'Shine as lights in the world,' and so gives us the individual, as well as the collective and ecclesiastical, aspect of these great functions. That is a hint that is very much needed. Christian people are quite willing to admit that the Church, the abstraction, the generalisation, is 'the light of the world.' But they are wofully apt to slip their own necks out from under the yoke of the obligation, and to forget that the collective light is only the product of the millions of individual lights rushing together-just as in some gas-lights you have a whole series of minute punctures, each of which gives out its own little jet of radiance, and all run together into one brilliant circle. So do not let us escape the personal pressure of this office, or lay it all on the broad shoulders of that generalised abstraction 'the Church.' But, since the collective light is but the product of the individual small shinings, let us take the two lessons: first, contribute our part to the general lustre; second, be content with having our part lost in the general light.

But now let me turn for a little while to the more specific meaning of this symbol. The life which, by the central position of the Altar of Incense, was symbolised as being centrally, essentially in its depths and primarily, a life of habitual devotion and communion with God, in its manward aspect is a life that shines ‘to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’ That is the solemn obligation, the ideal function, of the Christian Church and of each individual who professes to belong to it. Now, if you recur to our Lord’s own application of this metaphor, to which I have already referred, you will see that the first and foremost way by which Christian communities and individuals discharge this function is by conduct. ‘Let your light so shine before men’-that they may hear your eloquent proclamation of the Gospel? No! ‘Let your light so shine before men’-that you may convince the gainsayers by argument, or move the hard-hearted by appeals and exhortations; that you may preach and talk? No! ‘That *they may see your good works*, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.’ We may say of the Christian community, and of the Christian individual, with all reverence, what the Scripture in an infinitely deeper and more sacred sense says of Jesus Christ Himself, ‘the life was the light.’ It is conduct, whereby most effectually, most universally, and with the least risk of rousing antagonism and hostile feelings, Christian people may ‘shine as lights in the world.’ For we all know how the inconsistencies of a Christian man block the path of the Gospel far more than a hundred sermons or talks further it. We all know how there are people, plenty of them, who, however illogically yet most naturally, compare our lives in their daily action with oar professed beliefs, and, saying to themselves, ‘I do not see that there is much difference between them and me,’ draw the conclusion that it matters very little whether a man is a Christian or not, seeing that the conduct of the men who profess to be so is little more radiant, bright with purity and knowledge and joy, than is the conduct of others. Dear brethren, you can do far more to help or hinder the spread of Christ’s Kingdom by the way in which you do common things, side by side with men who are not partakers of the ‘like precious faith’ with yourselves, than I or my fellow-preachers can do by all our words. It is all very well to lecture about the efficiency of a machine; let us see it at work, and that will convince people. We preach; but you preach far more eloquently, and far more effectively, by your lives. ‘In all labour,’ says the Book of Proverbs, ‘there is profit’-which we may divert from its original meaning to signify that in all Christian living there is force to attract-’but the talk of the lips tendeth only to poverty.’ Oh! if the Christian men and women of England would live their Christianity, they would do more to convert the unconverted, and to draw in the outcasts, than all of us preachers can do. ‘From you,’ said the Apostle once to a church very young, and just rescued from the evils of heathenism-’from you sounded out,’ as if blown from a trumpet, ‘the Word of the Lord, so that we need not to speak anything.’ Live the life, and thereby you diffuse the light.

Nor need we forget that this most potent of all weapons is one that can be wielded by all Christian people. Our gifts differ. Some of us cannot speak for Jesus; some of us who think we can had often better hold our tongues. But we can all live like and for Him. And this most potent and universally diffused possibility is also the weapon that can be wielded with least risk of failure. There is a certain assumption, which it is often difficult to swallow, in a Christian man’s addressing another on the understanding that he, the speaker, possesses something which the other lacks. By words we may often repel, and often find that the ears that we seek to enter with our message close themselves against us and are unwilling to hear. But there is no chance of offending anybody, or of repelling anybody, by living Christlike. We can all do that, and it is the largest contribution that any of us can make to the collective light which shines out from the Christian Church.

But, brethren, we have to remember that there are dangers attending the life that reveals its hidden principles as being faith in Christ and obedience to Him. Did you ever notice how, in the Sermon on the Mount, there are two sets of precepts which seem diametrically opposite to one another? There is a whole series of illustrations of the one commandment, ‘Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them,’ and then there Is the precept, ‘Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works.’ So that whilst, on the one hand, there is to be the manifestation in daily conduct of the inner principles that animate us, on the other hand, if there comes in the least taint or trace of ostentation, everything is spoiled, and the light is darkness. The light of the sun makes all things visible and hides itself. We do not see the sunbeams, but we see what the sunbeams illuminate. It is the coarser kinds of light which are themselves separately visible, and they are so only because they have not power enough to make everything around them as brilliant as they themselves are. So our light is to be silent, our light is-if I might use such a phrase-to hide itself in ‘a glorious privacy,’ whilst it enables men to see, even through our imperfect ministration, the face of our Father in Heaven.

But let me remind you that the same variation by Paul of our Lord’s words to which I have already referred as bringing out the difference between the collective and the individual function, also brings out another difference; for Paul says, ‘Ye shine as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life.’ He slightly varies the metaphor. We are no longer regarded as being ourselves illuminants, but simply as being the stands on which the light is placed. And that means that whilst the witness by life is the mightiest, the most universally possible, and the least likely to offend, there must also be, as occasion shall serve, without cowardice, without shamefaced reticence, the proclamation of the great Gospel which has made us ‘lights in the world.’ And that is a function which every Christian man can discharge too, though I have just been saying that they cannot all preach and speak; for every Christian soul has some other soul to whom its word comes with a force that none other can have.

So the one office that is set forth here is the old familiar one, the obligation of which is fully recognised by us all, and pitifully ill-discharged by any of us, to shine by our daily life, and to shine by the actual communication by speech of ‘the Name that is above every name.’ That is the ideal; alas for the reality! ‘Ye are the light of the world.’ What kind of light do we-the Church of Christ that gathers here-ray out into the darkness of Manchester? Socially, intellectually, morally, in the civic life, in the national life, are Christian people in the van? They ought to be. There is a church clock in our city which has a glass dial that professes to be illuminated at night, so that the passer-by may tell the hour; but it is generally burning so dimly that nobody can see on its grimy face what o’ clock it is. That is like a great many of our churches, and I ask you to ask yourselves whether it is like you or not-a dark lantern, a most imperfectly illuminated dial, which gives no guidance and no information to anybody.

This golden lampstand teaches us-

II. How this office is to be discharged.

Remember simply these two points. It stood, as I have already said, on one side of the Altar of Incense which was central to everything. It was daily tended by the priests, and fed with fresh oil. Hence we may derive some important practical lessons.

To begin with, we note that our light is a derived light, and therefore can only be kept bright when we keep close to the source from whence it is derived.

‘That was the true Light, which coming into the world lighteth every man’- there is the source of all illumination, in Jesus Christ Himself. He alone is *the* Light, and as for all others we must say of them what was said of His great forerunner, ‘Not that light, but sent to bear witness of that light’; and again, ‘he was a light kindled,’ and therefore ‘shining,’ and so his shining was but ‘for a season.’ But Jesus is for ever the light of the world, and all our illumination comes from Him. As Paul says, ‘Now are ye light in the Lord,’ therefore only in the measure in which we are ‘in the Lord,’ shall we be light. Keep near to Him and you will shine; break the connection with Him, and you are darkness, darkness for yourselves, and darkness for the world. Switch off, and the light is darkness.

Change the metaphor, and instead of saying ‘derived light’ say ‘reflected light.’ *There* is a pane of glass in a cottage, miles away across the moor. It was invisible a moment ago, and suddenly it gleams like a diamond. Why? The sun has struck it; and in a moment after it will be invisible again. As long as Jesus Christ is shining on my heart, so long, and not a moment longer, shall I give forth the light that will illumine the world. Astronomers have a contrivance by which they can keep a photographic film on which they are seeking to get the image of a star, moving along with the movement of the heavens, so that on the same spot the star shall always shine. We have to keep ourselves steady beneath the white beam from Jesus, and then we, too, shall be ‘light in the Lord.’

Our light is fed light. Daily came the priest, daily the oil that had been exhausted by shining was replenished. We all know what that oil means and is; the Divine Spirit which comes into every heart which is open by faith in Christ, and which abides in every heart where there are desire, obedience, and the following of Him; which can be quenched by my sin, by my negligence, by my ceasing to wish it, by my not using its gifts when I have them; which can be grieved by my inconsistencies, and by the spots of darkness that so often take up more of the sphere of my life than the spots of illumination. But we can have as much of that oil of the Divine Spirit, the ‘unction from the Holy One,’ as we desire, and expect, and use. And unless we have, dear brethren, there is no shining for us. This generation in its abundant activities tends to a Christianity which has more spindles than power, which is more surface than depth, which is so anxious to do service that it forgets the preliminary of all right service, patient, solitary, silent communion with God. Suffer the word of exhortation-let shining be second, let replenishing with the oil be first. First the Altar of Incense, then the Candlestick.

III. This golden lampstand tells us of the fatal effect of neglecting the Church’s and the individual’s duty.

Where is the seven-branched candlestick of the second Temple? No one knows. Possibly, according to one statement, it lies at the bottom of the Mediterranean. Certainly we know that it is pictured on that sad panel in the conqueror’s arch at Rome, and that it became a trophy of the insolent victor. It disappeared, and the Israel whom it vainly endeavoured through the centuries to stir to a consciousness of its vocation, has never since had a gleam of light to ray out into the world. Where are the seven candlesticks, which made a blessed unity because Christ walked in their midst? Where are the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Philadelphia, Thyatira, and the rest? Where they stood the mosque is reared, and from its minaret day by day rings out-not the proclamation of the Name, but-’There is no God but God, and Mahomet is His Prophet.’ The Pharos that ought to have shone out over stormy seas has been seized by wreckers, and its light is blinded, and false lights lure the mariner to the shoals and to shipwreck.

‘Take heed lest He also spare not thee.’ O brethren! is it not a bitter irony to call *us* ‘lights of the world’? Let us penitently recognise the inconsistencies of our lives, and the reticence of our speech. Let us not lose sight of the high ideal, that we may the more penitently recognise the miserable falling short of our reality. And let us be thankful that *the* Priest is tending the lamps. ‘He will not quench the smoking wick,’ but will replenish it with oil, and fan the dying flame. Only let us not resist His ministrations, which are always gentle, even when He removes the charred blacknesses that hinder our being what we should be, and may be, if we will-lights of the world. 'Arise! shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.'

25)Exodus 28:12

Exodus

THE NAMES ON AARON'S BREASTPLATE

Exo. 28:12, Exo. 28:29.

Every part of the elaborately prescribed dress of the high priest was significant. But the significance of the whole was concentrated in the inscription upon his mitre, 'Holiness to the Lord,' and in those others upon his breastplate and his shoulder.

The breastplate was composed of folded cloth, in which were lodged twelve precious stones, in four rows of three, each stone containing the name of one of the tribes. It was held in position by the ephod, which consisted of another piece of cloth, with a back and front part, which were united into one on the shoulders. On each shoulder it was clasped by an onyx stone bearing the names of six of the tribes. Thus twice, on the shoulders, the seat of power, and on the heart, the organ of thought and of love, Aaron, entering into the presence of the Most High, bore 'the names of the tribes for a memorial continually.'

Now, I think we shall not be indulging in the very dangerous amusement of unduly spiritualising the externalities of that old law if we see here, in these two things, some very important lessons.

I. The first one that I would suggest to you is-here we have the expression of the great truth of representation of the people by the priest.

The names of the tribes laid upon Aaron's heart and on his shoulders indicated the significance of his office-that he represented Israel before

God, as truly as he represented God to Israel. For the moment the personality of the official was altogether melted away and absorbed in the sanctity of his function, and he stood before God as the individualised nation. Aaron was Israel, and Israel was Aaron, for the purposes of worship. And that was indicated by the fact that here, on the shoulders from which, according to an obvious symbol, all acts of power emanate, and on the heart from which, according to most natural metaphor, all the outgoings of the personal life proceed, were written the names of the tribes. That meant, ‘This man standing here is the Israel of God, the concentrated nation.’

The same thought works the other way. The nation is the diffused priest, and all its individual components are consecrated to God. All this was external ceremonial, with no real spiritual fact at the back of it. But it pointed onwards to something that is not ceremonial. It pointed to this, that the true priest must, in like manner, gather up into himself, and in a very profound sense be, the people for whom he is the priest; and that they, in their turn, by the action of their own minds and hearts and wills, must consent to and recognise that representative relation, which comes to the solemn height of identification in Christ’s relation to His people. ‘I am the Vine, ye are the branches,’ says He, and also, ‘That they all may be one in us as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee.’ So Paul says, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’ ‘The life which I live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God,’

So Christ gathers us all, if we will let Him, into Himself; and our lives may be hid with Him-in a fashion that is more than mere external and formal representation, or as people have a member of Parliament to represent them in the councils of the nation-even in a true union with Him in whom is the life of all of us, if we live in any real sense. Aaron bore the names of the tribes on shoulder and heart, and Israel was Aaron, and Aaron was Israel.

II. Further, we see here, in these eloquent symbols, the true significance of intercession.

Now, that is a word and a thought which has been wofully limited and made shallow and superficial by the unfortunate confining of the expression, in our ordinary language, to a mere action by speech. Intercession is supposed to be verbal asking for some good to be bestowed on, or some evil to be averted from, some one in whom we are interested. But the Old Testament notion of the priest's intercession, and the New Testament use of the word which we so render, go far beyond any verbal utterances, and reach to the very heart of things. Intercession, in the true sense of the word, means the doing of any act whatsoever before God for His people by Jesus Christ. Whensoever, as in the presence of God, He brings to God anything which is His, that is intercession. He undertakes for them, not by words only, though His mighty word is, 'I will that they whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am,' but by acts which are more than even the words of the Incarnate Word.

If we take these two inscriptions upon which I am now commenting, we shall get, I think, what covers the whole ground of the intercession on which Christians are to repose their souls. For, with regard to the one of them, we read that the high priest's breastplate was named 'the breastplate of judgment'; and what that means is explained by the last words of the verse following that from which my text is taken: 'Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the Lord.' Judgment means a judicial sentence; in this case a judicial sentence of acquittal. And that Aaron stood before God in the Holy Place, ministering with this breastplate upon his heart, is explained by the writer of these regulations to mean that he carried there the visible manifestation of Israel's acquittal, based upon his own sacrificial function. Now, put that into plain English, and it is just this-Jesus Christ's sacrifice ensures, for all those whose names are written on these gems on His heart, their acquittal in the judgment of Heaven. Or, in other words, the first step in the intercession of our great High Priest is the presenting before God for ever and ever that great fact that He, the Sinless, has died for the love of sinful men, and thereby has secured that the judgment of Heaven on them shall now be 'no condemnation.' Brethren, there is the root of all our hope in Christ, and of all that Christ is to individuals and to society-the assurance that the breastplate of judgment is on His heart, as a sign that all who trust Him are acquitted by the tribunal of Heaven.

The other side of this great continual act of intercession is set forth by the other symbol-the names written on the shoulders, the seat of power. There is a beautiful parallel, which yet at first sight does not seem to be one, to the thought that lies here, in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, where, addressing the restored and perfected Israel, he says, speaking in the person of Jehovah: ‘I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands.’ That has precisely the same meaning that I take to be conveyed by this symbol in the text. The names of the tribes are written on His shoulders; and not until that arm is wearied or palsied, not till that strong hand forgets its cunning, will our defence fail. If our names are thus written on the seat of power, that means that all the divine authority and omnipotence which Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of the Father, wields in His state of royal glory, are exercised on behalf of, or at all events on the side of, those whose names He thus bears upon His shoulders. That is the guarantee for each of us that our hands shall be made strong, according to the ancient prophetic blessing, ‘by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.’ Just as a father or a mother will take their child’s little tremulous hand in theirs and hold it, that it may be strengthened for some small task beyond its unbacked, uninvigorated power; so Jesus Christ will give us strength within, and also will order the march of His Providence and send the gift of His Spirit, for the succour and the strengthening of all whose names are written on His ephod. He has gone within the veil. He has left us heavy tasks, but our names are on His shoulders, and we ‘can do all things in Christ who strengthened us.’

III. Still further, this symbol suggests to us the depth and reality of Christ’s sympathy.

The heart is, in our language, the seat of love. It is not so in the Old Testament. Affection is generally allocated to another part of the frame; but here the heart stands for the organ of care, of thought, of interest. For, according to the Old Testament view of the relation between man’s body and man’s soul, the very seat and centre of the individual life is in the heart. I suppose that was because it was known that, somehow or other, the blood came thence. Be that as it may, the thought is clear throughout all the Old Testament that the heart is the man, and the man is the heart. And so, if Jesus bears our names upon His heart, that does not express merely representation nor merely intercession, but it expresses also personal regard, individualising knowledge. For Aaron wore not one great jewel with ‘Israel’ written on it, but twelve little ones, with ‘Dan,’ ‘Benjamin,’ and ‘Ephraim,’ and all the rest of them, each on his own gem.

So we can say, ‘Such a High Priest became us, who could have compassion upon the ignorant, and upon them that are out of the way’; and we can fall back on that old-fashioned but inexhaustible source of consolation and strength: ‘In all their affliction He was afflicted’; and though the noise of the tempests which toss us can scarcely be supposed to penetrate into the veiled place where He dwells on high, yet we may be sure-and take all the peace and consolation and encouragement out of it that it is meant to give us-that ‘we have not a High Priest that cannot be touched with a feeling of our infirmities,’ but that Himself, having known miseries, ‘is able to succour them that are tempted.’ Our names are on Christ’s heart.

IV. Then, lastly, we have here a suggestion of how precious to Aaron Israel is.

Jewels were chosen to symbolise the tribes. Bits of tin, potsherds, or anything else that one could have scratched letters upon, would have done quite as well. But ‘the precious things of the everlasting mountains’ were chosen to bear the dear names. ‘The Lord’s portion is His people’; and precious in the eyes of Christ are the souls for whom He has given so much. They are not only precious, but lustrous, flashing back the light in various colours indeed, according to their various laws of crystallisation, but all receptive of it and all reflective of it. I said that the names on the breastplate of judgment expressed the acquittal and acceptance of Israel. But does Christ’s work for us stop with simple acquittal? Oh no! ‘Whom He justified them He also glorified,’ And if our souls are ‘bound in the bundle of life,’ and our names are written on the heart of the Christ, be sure that mere forgiveness and acquittal is the least of the blessings which He intends to give, and that He will not be satisfied until in all our nature we receive and flash back the light of His own glory.

It is very significant in this aspect that the names of the twelve tribes are described as being written on the precious stones which make the walls of the New Jerusalem. Thus borne on Christ’s heart whilst He is within the veil and we are in the outer courts, we may hope to be carried by His sustaining and perfecting hand into the glories, and be made participant of the glories. Let us see to it that we write His name on our hearts, on their cares, their thought, their love, and on our hands, on their toiling and their possessing;

and then, God helping us, and Christ dwelling in us, we shall come to the blessed state of those who serve Him, and bear His name flaming conspicuous for ever on their foreheads.

26)Exodus 28:29

Exodus

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Exo. 28:12, Exo. 28:29.

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III. Still further, this symbol suggests to us the depth and reality of Christ’s sympathy.

The heart is, in our language, the seat of love. It is not so in the Old Testament. Affection is generally allocated to another part of the frame; but here the heart stands for the organ of care, of thought, of interest. For, according to the Old Testament view of the relation between man’s body and man’s soul, the very seat and centre of the individual life is in the heart. I suppose that was because it was known that, somehow or other, the blood came thence. Be that as it may, the thought is clear throughout all the Old Testament that the heart is the man, and the man is the heart. And so, if Jesus bears our names upon His heart, that does not express merely representation nor merely intercession, but it expresses also personal regard, individualising knowledge. For Aaron wore not one great jewel with ‘Israel’ written on it, but twelve little ones, with ‘Dan,’ ‘Benjamin,’ and ‘Ephraim,’ and all the rest of them, each on his own gem.

So we can say, ‘Such a High Priest became us, who could have compassion upon the ignorant, and upon them that are out of the way’; and we can fall back on that old-fashioned but inexhaustible source of consolation and strength: ‘In all their affliction He was afflicted’; and though the noise of the tempests which toss us can scarcely be supposed to penetrate into the veiled place where He dwells on high, yet we may be sure-and take all the peace and consolation and encouragement out of it that it is meant to give us-that ‘we have not a High Priest that cannot be touched with a feeling of our infirmities,’ but that Himself, having known miseries, ‘is able to succour them that are tempted.’ Our names are on Christ’s heart.

IV. Then, lastly, we have here a suggestion of how precious to Aaron Israel is.

Jewels were chosen to symbolise the tribes. Bits of tin, potsherds, or anything else that one could have scratched letters upon, would have done quite as well. But ‘the precious things of the everlasting mountains’ were chosen to bear the dear names. ‘The Lord’s portion is His people’; and precious in the eyes of Christ are the souls for whom He has given so much. They are not only precious, but lustrous, flashing back the light in various colours indeed, according to their various laws of crystallisation, but all receptive of it and all reflective of it. I said that the names on the breastplate of judgment expressed the acquittal and acceptance of Israel. But does Christ’s work for us stop with simple acquittal? Oh no! ‘Whom He justified them He also glorified,’ And if our souls are ‘bound in the bundle of life,’ and our names are written on the heart of the Christ, be sure that mere forgiveness and acquittal is the least of the blessings which He intends to give, and that He will not be satisfied until in all our nature we receive and flash back the light of His own glory.

It is very significant in this aspect that the names of the twelve tribes are described as being written on the precious stones which make the walls of the New Jerusalem. Thus borne on Christ’s heart whilst He is within the veil and we are in the outer courts, we may hope to be carried by His sustaining and perfecting hand into the glories, and be made participant of the glories. Let us see to it that we write His name on our hearts, on their cares, their thought, their love, and on our hands, on their toiling and their possessing;

and then, God helping us, and Christ dwelling in us, we shall come to the blessed state of those who serve Him, and bear His name flaming conspicuous for ever on their foreheads.

27)Exodus 28:36

Exodus

THREE INSCRIPTIONS WITH ONE MEANING

HOLINESS TO THE LORD.' - Exo. 28:36.

HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD.' - Zec. 14:20.

'His name shall be in their foreheads.' - Rev. 22:4.

You will have perceived my purpose in putting these three widely separated texts together. They all speak of inscriptions, and they are all obviously connected with each other. The first of them comes from the ancient times of the institution of the ceremonial ritual, and describes a part of the high priest's official dress. In his mitre was a thin plate of gold on which was written, 'Holiness to the Lord.' The second of them comes from almost the last portion recorded of the history of Israel in the Old Testament, and is from the words of the great Prophet of the Restoration-his ideal presentation of the Messianic period, in which he recognises as one feature, that the inscription on the mitre of the high priest shall be written on 'the bells of the horses.' And the last of them is from the closing vision of the celestial kingdom, the heavenly and perfected form of the Christian Church. John, probably remembering the high priest and his mitre, with its inscription upon the forehead, says: 'His servants shall do Him priestly service'-for that is the meaning of the word inadequately translated 'serve Him'-'and see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads.'

These three things, then-the high priest's mitre, the horses' bells, the foreheads of the perfected saints-present three aspects of the Christian thought of holiness. Take them one by one.

I. The high priest's mitre.

The high priest was the official representative of the nation. He stood before God as the embodied and personified Israel. For the purposes of worship Israel was the high priest, and the high priest was Israel. And so, on his forehead, not to distinguish him from the rest of the people, but to include all the people in his consecration, shone a golden plate with the motto, ‘Holiness to the Lord.’ So, at the very beginning of Jewish ritual there stands a protest against all notions that make ‘saint’ the designation of any abnormal or exceptional sanctity, and confine the name to the members of any selected aristocracy of devoutness and goodness. All Christian men, *ex officio*, by the very fact of their Christianity, are saints, in the true sense of the word. And the representative of the whole of Israel stood there before God, with this inscription blazing on his forehead, as a witness that, whatsoever holiness may be, it belongs to every member of the true Israel.

And what is it? It is a very unfortunate thing-indicating superficiality of thought-that the modern popular notion of ‘holiness’ identifies it with purity, righteousness, moral perfection. Now that idea *is* in it, but is not the whole of it. For, not to spend time upon mere remarks on words, the meaning of the word thus rendered is in Hebrew, as well as in Greek and in our own English, one and the same. The root-meaning is ‘separated,’ ‘set apart,’ and the word expresses primarily, not moral character, but relation to God. That makes all the difference; and it incalculably deepens the conception, as well as puts us on the right track for understanding the only possible means by which there can ever be realised that moral perfection and excellence which has unfortunately monopolised the meaning of the word in most people’s minds. The first thought is ‘set apart to God.’ That is holiness, in its root and germ.

And how can we be set apart for God? You may devote a dead thing for certain uses easily enough. How can a man be separated and laid aside?

Well, there is only one way, brethren, and that is by self-surrender. ‘Yield yourselves to God’ is but the other side, or, rather, the practical shape, of the Old and the New Testament doctrine of holiness. A man becomes God’s when he says, ‘Lord, take me and mould me, and fill me and cleanse me, and do with me what Thou wilt.’ In that self-surrender, which is the tap-root of all holiness, the first and foremost thing to be offered is that most obstinate of all, the will that is in us. And when we yield our wills in submission both to commandments and providences, both to gifts and to withdrawals, both to gains and to losses, both to joys and to sorrows, then we begin to write upon our foreheads ‘Holiness to the Lord.’ And when we go on to yield our hearts to Him, by enshrining Him sole and sovereign in their innermost chamber, and turning to Him the whole current of our lives and desires, and hopes and confidences, which we are so apt to allow to run to waste and be sucked up in the desert sands of the world, then we write more of that inscription. And when we fill our minds with joyful submission to His truth, and occupy our thoughts with His mighty Name and His great revelation, and carry Him with us in the hidden corners of our consciousness, even whilst we are busy about daily work, then we add further letters to it. And when the submissive will, and the devoted heart, and the occupied thoughts are fully expressed in daily life and its various external duties, then the writing is complete. ‘Holiness to the Lord’ is self-surrender of will and heart and mind and everything. And that surrender is of the very essence of Christianity.

What is a saint? Some man or woman that has practised unheard-of austerities? Somebody that has lived an isolated and self-regarding life in convent or monastery or desert? No! a man or woman in the world who, moved by the mercies of God, yields self to God as ‘a living sacrifice.’

So the New Testament writers never hesitate to speak even of such very imperfect Christians as were found in abundance in churches like Corinth and Galatia as being all ‘saints,’ every man of them. That is not because the writers were minimising their defects, or idealising their persons, but because, if they are Christians at all, they are saints; seeing that no man is a Christian who has not been drawn by Christ’s great sacrifice for him to yield himself a sacrifice for Christ.

Of course that intrusive idea which has, in popular apprehension, so swallowed up the notion of holiness-viz. that of perfection of moral character or conduct-is included in this other, or rather is developed from it. For the true way to conquer self is to surrender self; and the more entire our giving up of ourselves, the more certainly shall we receive ourselves back again from His hands. ‘By the mercies of God, I beseech you, yield yourselves living sacrifices.’

II. I come to my next text-the horses’ bells.

Zechariah has a vision of the ideal Messianic times, and, of course, as must necessarily be the case, his picture is painted with colours laid upon his palette by his experience, and he depicts that distant future in the guise suggested to him by what he saw around him. So we have to disentangle from his words the sentiment which he expresses, and to recognise the symbolic way in which he puts it. His thought is this,-the inscription on the high priest’s mitre will be written on the bells which ornament the harness of the horses, which in Israel were never used as with us, but only either for war or for pomp and display, and the use of which was always regarded with a certain kind of doubt and suspicion. Even these shall be consecrated in that far-off day.

And then he goes on with variations on the same air, ‘In that day there shall be upon the bells of the horses, "Holiness unto the Lord,"‘ and adds that ‘the pots in the Lord’s house’-the humble vessels that were used for the most ordinary parts of the Temple services-’shall be like the bowls before the altar,’ into which the sacred blood of the offerings was poured. The most external and secular thing bearing upon religion shall be as sacred as the sacredest. But that is not all. ‘Yea! every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holiness unto the Lord of hosts, and all they that sacrifice shall come and take of them,’ and put their offerings therein. That is to say, the coarse pottery vessels that were in every poverty-stricken house in the city shall be elevated to the rank of the sacred vessels of the Temple. Domestic life with all its secularities shall be hallowed. The kitchens of Jerusalem shall be as truly places of worship as is the inner shrine of the Most High.

On the whole, the prophet’s teaching is that, in the ideal state of man upon earth, there will be an entire abolition of the distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’; a distinction that has wrought infinite mischief in the world, and in the lives of Christian people.

Let me translate these words of our prophet into English equivalents. Every cup and tumbler in a poor man’s kitchen may be as sacred as the communion chalice that passes from lip to lip with the ‘blood of Jesus Christ’ in it. Every common piece of service that we do, down among the vulgarities and the secularities and the meannesses of daily life, may be lifted up to stand upon precisely the same level as the sacredest office that we undertake. The bells of the horses may jingle to the same tune as the trumpets of the priests sounded within the shrine, and on all, great and small, may be written, ‘Holiness to the Lord.’

But let us remember that that universally diffused sanctity will need to have a centre of diffusion, else there will be no diffusion, and that all life will become sacred when the man that lives it has ‘Holiness to the Lord’ written on his forehead, and not else. If that be the inscription on the driver’s heart, the horses that he drives will have it written on their bells, but they will not have it unless it be. Holy men make all things holy. ‘To the pure all things are pure,’ but unto them that are unclean and disobedient there is nothing pure. Hallow thyself, and all things are clean unto thee.

III. And so I come to my third text-the perfected saints’ foreheads.

The connection between the first and the last of these texts is as plain and close as between the first and the second. For John in his closing vision gives emphasis to the priestly idea as designating in its deepest relations the redeemed and perfected Christian Church. Therefore he says, as I have already explained, ‘His servants shall do Him *priestly* service, and His name shall be in their foreheads.’ The old official dress of the high priest comes into his mind, and he paints the future, just as Zechariah did, under the forms of the past, and sees before the throne the perfected saints, each man of them with that inscription clear and conspicuous.

But there is an advance in his words which I think it is not fanciful to note. It is only the *name* that is written in the perfected saint’s forehead. Not the ‘Holiness unto the Lord,’ but just the bare name. What does that mean? Well, it means the same as your writing your name in one of your books does, or as when a man puts his initials on the back of his oxen, or as the old practice of branding the master’s mark upon the slave did. It means absolute ownership.

But it means something more. The name is the manifested personality, the revealed God, or, as we say in an abstract way, the character of God. That Name is to be in the foreheads of His perfected people. How does it come to be there? Read also the clause before the text-'His servants shall see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads.' That is to say, the perfected condition is not reached by surrender only, but by assimilation; and that assimilation comes by contemplation. The faces that are turned to Him, and behold Him, are smitten with the light and shine, and those that look upon them see 'as it had been the face of an angel,' as the Sanhedrim saw that of Stephen, when he beheld the Son of Man 'standing at the right hand of God.'

My last text is but a picturesque way of saying what the writer of it says in plain words when he declares, 'We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' The name is to be 'in their foreheads,' where every eye can see it. Alas! alas! it is so hard for us to live out our best selves, and to show to the world what is in us. Cowardice, sheepishness, and a hundred other reasons prevent it. In this poor imperfect state no emotion ever takes shape and visibility without losing more or less of its beauty. But yonder the obstructions to self-manifestation will be done away; and 'when He shall be manifested, we also shall be manifested with Him in glory.'

'Then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun in My heavenly Father's Kingdom.' But the beginning of it all is 'Holiness to the Lord' written on our hearts; and the end of that is the vision which is impossible without holiness, and which leads on to the beholder's perfect likeness to his Lord.

28)Exodus 30:1

Exodus

THE ALTAR OF INCENSE

Exo. 30:1.

Ceremonies are embodied thoughts. Religious ceremonies are moulded by, and seek to express, the worshipper's conception of his God, and his own relation to Him; his aspirations and his need. Of late years scholars have been busy studying the religions of the more backward races, and explaining rude and repulsive rites by pointing to the often profound and sometimes beautiful ideas underlying them. When that process is applied to Australian and Fijian savages, it is honoured as a new and important study; when we apply it to the Mosaic Ritual it is pooh-poohed as ‘foolish spiritualising.’ Now, no doubt, there has been a great deal of nonsense talked in regard to this matter, and a great deal of ingenuity wasted in giving a Christian meaning-or, may I say, a Christian twist?-to every pin of the Tabernacle, and every detail of the ritual. Of course, to exaggerate a truth is the surest way to discredit a truth, but the truth remains true all the same, and underneath that elaborate legislation, which makes such wearisome and profitless reading for the most of us, in the Pentateuch, there lie, if we can only grasp them, great thoughts and lessons that we shall all be the better for pondering.

To one item of these, this altar of incense, I call attention now, because it is rich in suggestions, and leads us into very sacred regions of the Christian life which are by no means so familiar to many of us as they ought to be. Let me just for one moment state the facts with which I wish to deal. The Jewish Tabernacle, and subsequently the Temple, were arranged in three compartments: the outermost court, which was accessible to all the people; the second, which was trodden by the priests alone; and the third, where the Shechinah dwelt in solitude, broken only once a year by the foot of the High Priest. That second court we are concerned with now. There are three pieces of ecclesiastical furniture in it: an altar in the centre, flanked on either side by a great lampstand, and a table on which were piled loaves. It is to that central piece of furniture that I ask your attention now, and to the thoughts that underlie it, and the lessons that it teaches.

I. This altar shows us what prayer is.

Suppose we had been in that court when in the morning or in the evening the priest came with the glowing pan of coals from another altar in the outer court, and laid it on this altar, and heaped upon it the sticks of incense, we should have seen the curling, fragrant wreaths ascending till ‘the House was filled with smoke,’ as a prophet once saw it. We should not have wanted any interpreter to tell us what that meant. What could that rising cloud of sweet odours signify but the ascent of the soul towards God? Put that into more abstract words, and it is just the old, hackneyed commonplace which I seek to try to freshen a little now, that incense is the symbol of prayer. That that is so is plain enough, not only from the natural propriety of the case, but because you find the identification distinctly stated in several places in Scripture, of which I quote but two instances. In one psalm we read, ‘Let my prayer come before Thee as incense.’ In the Book of the Apocalypse we read of ‘golden bowls full of odours, which are the prayers of saints.’ And that the symbolism was understood by, and modified the practice of, the nation, we are taught when we read that whilst Zechariah the priest was within the court offering incense, as it was his lot to do, ‘the whole multitude of the people were without praying,’ doing that which the priest within the court symbolised by his offering. So then we come to this, dear friends, that we fearfully misunderstand and limit the nobleness and the essential character of prayer when, as we are always tempted to do by our inherent self-regard, we make petition its main feature and form. Of course, so long as we are what we shall always be in this world, needy and sinful creatures; and so long as we are what we shall ever be in all worlds, creatures absolutely dependent for life and everything on the will and energy of God, petition must necessarily be a very large part of prayer. But the more we grow into His likeness, and the more we understand the large privileges and the glorious possibilities which lie in prayer, the more will the relative proportions of its component parts be changed, and petition will become less, and aspiration will become more. The essence of prayer, the noblest form of it, is thus typified by the cloud of sweet odours that went up before God.

In all true prayer there must be the lowest prostration in reverence before the Infinite Majesty. But the noblest prayer is that which lifts ‘them that are bowed down’ rather than that which prostrates men before an inaccessible Deity. And so, whilst we lie low at His feet, that may be the prayer of a mere theist, but when our hearts go out towards Him, and we are drawn to Himself, that is the prayer that befits Christian aspiration; the ascent of the soul toward God is the true essence of prayer. As one of the non-Christian philosophers-seekers after God, if ever there were such, and who, I doubt not, found Him whom they sought-has put it, ‘the flight of the lonely soul to the only God’; that is prayer. Is that my prayer? We come to Him many a time burdened with some very real sorrow, or weighted with some pressing responsibility, and we should not be true to ourselves, or to Him, if our prayer did not take the shape of petition. But, as we pray, the blessing of the transformation of its character should be realised by us, and that which began with the cry for help and deliverance should always be, and it always will be, if the cry for help and deliverance has been of the right sort, sublimed into ‘Thy face, Lord, will I seek.’ The Book of Ecclesiastes describes death as the ‘return of the spirit to God who gave it.’ That is the true description of prayer, a going back to the fountain’s source. Flames aspire; to the place ‘whence the rivers came thither they return again.’ The homing pigeon or the migrating bird goes straight through many degrees of latitude, and across all sorts of weather, to the place whence it came. Ah! brethren, let us ask ourselves if our spirits thus aspire and soar. Do we know what it is to be, if I might so say, like those captive balloons that are ever yearning upwards, and stretching to the loftiest point permitted them by the cord that tethers them to earth?

Now another thought that this altar of incense may teach us is that the prayer that soars must be kindled. There is no fragrance in a stick of incense lying there. No wreaths of ascending smoke come from it. It has to be kindled before its sweet odour can be set free and ascend. That is why so much of our prayer is of no delight to God, and of no benefit to us, because it is not on fire with the flame of a heart kindled into love and thankfulness by the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The cold vapours lie like a winding-sheet down in the valleys until the sun smites them, warms them, and draws them up. And our desires will hover in the low levels, and be dank and damp, until they are drawn up to the heights by the warmth of the Sun of righteousness. Oh! brethren, the formality and the coldness, to say nothing of the inconsecutiveness and the interruptedness by rambling thoughts that we all know in our petitions, in our aspirations, are only to be cured in one way:-

‘Come! shed abroad a Saviour’s love,
And that will kindle ours.’

It is the stretched string that gives out musical notes; the slack one is dumb. And if we desire that we may be able to be sure, as our Master was, when

He said, ‘I know that Thou hearest me always,’ we must pray as He did, of whom it is recorded that ‘He prayed the more earnestly,’ and ‘was heard in that He feared.’ The word rendered ‘the more earnestly’ carries in it a metaphor drawn from that very fact that I have referred to. It means ‘with the more stretched-out extension and intensity.’ If our prayers are to be heard as music in heaven, they must come from a stretched string.

Once more, this altar of incense teaches us that kindled prayer delights God. That emblem of the sweet odour is laid hold of with great boldness by more than one Old and New Testament writer, in order to express the marvellous thought that there is a mutual joy in the prayer of faith and love, and that it rises as ‘an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing to God.’ The cuneiform inscriptions give that thought with characteristic vividness and grossness when they speak about the gods being ‘gathered like flies round the steam of the sacrifice.’ We have the same thought, freed from all its grossness, when we think that the curling wreaths going up from a heart aspiring and enflamed, come to Him as a sweet odour, and delight His soul. People say, ‘that is anthropomorphism-making God too like a man.’ Well, man is like God, at any rate, and surely the teaching of that great name ‘Father’ carries with it the assurance that just as fathers of flesh are glad when they see that their children like best to be with them, so there is something analogous in that joy before the angels of heaven which the Father has, not only because of the prodigal who comes back, but because of the child who has long been with Him, and is ever seeking to nestle closer to His heart. The Psalmist was lost in wonder and thankfulness that he was able to say ‘He was extolled with my tongue.’ Surely it should be a gracious, encouraging, strengthening thought to us all, that even our poor aspirations may minister to the divine gladness.

Now let us turn to another thought.

II. This altar shows us where prayer stands in the Christian life.

There are two or three points in regard to its position which it is no fanciful spiritualising, but simply grasping the underlying meaning of the institution, if we emphasise. First, let me remind you that there was another altar in the outer court, whereon was offered the daily sacrifice for the sins of the people. That altar came first, and the sacrifice had to be offered on it first, before the priest came into the inner court with the coals from that altar, and the incense kindled by them. What does that say to us? The altar of incense is not approached until we have been to the altar of sacrifice. It is no mere arbitrary appointment, nor piece of evangelical narrowness, which says that there is no real access to God, in all the fullness and reality of His revealed character for us sinful men, until our sins have been dealt with, taken away by the Lamb of God, sacrificed for us. And it is simply the transcript of experience which declares that there will be little inclination or desire to come to God with the sacrifice of praise and prayer until we have been to Christ, the sacrifice of propitiation and pardon. Brethren, we need to be cleansed, and we can only be delivered from the unholiness which is the perpetual and necessary barrier to our vision of God by making our very own, through simple faith, the energy and the blessedness of that great Sacrifice of propitiation. Then, and then only, do we properly come to the altar of incense. Its place in the Christian life is second, not first. 'First be reconciled to thy' Father, 'then lay' the incense 'on the altar.'

Again, great and deep lessons are given to us in the place of our altar in regard to the other articles that stood in that inner court. I have said that there were three of them. In the centre this altar of incense; on the one hand the great lampstand; on the other hand the table with loaves thereon. The one symbolised Israel's function in the world to be its light, which in our function too, and the other with loaves thereon symbolised the consecration to God of Israel's activities, and their results.

But between the two, central to both, stood the altar of incense. What does that say as to the place of prayer, defined as I have defined it, in the Christian life? It says this, that the light will burn dim and go out, and the loaves, the expression and the consequences of our activities, will become mouldy and dry, unless both are hallowed and sustained by prayer. And that lesson is one which we all need, and which I suppose this generation needs quite as much as, if not more than, any that has gone before it. For life has become so swift and rushing, and from all sides, the Church, the world, society, there come such temptations, and exhortations, and necessities, for strenuous and continuous work, that the basis of all wholesome and vigorous work, communion with God, is but too apt to be put aside and relegated to some inferior position. The carbon points of the electric arc-light are eaten away with tremendous rapidity in the very act of giving forth their illumination, and they need to be continually approximated and to be frequently renewed. The oil is burned away in the act of shining, and the lamp needs to be charged again. If we are to do our work in the world as its lights, and if we are to have any activities fit to be consecrated to God and laid on the Table before the Veil, it can only be by our making the altar of incense the centre, and these others subsidiary.

One last thought-the place of prayer in the Christian life is shadowed for us by the position of this altar in reference to 'the secret place of the Most High,' that mysterious inner court which was dark but for the Shechinah's light, and lonely but for the presence of the worshipping cherubim and the worshipped God. It stood, as we are told a verse or two after my text, 'before the veil.' A straight line drawn from the altar of sacrifice would have bisected the altar of incense as it passed into the mercy-seat and the glory. And that just tells us that the place of prayer in the Christian lift is that it is the direct way of coming close to God. Dear brother, we shall never lift the veil, and stand in 'the secret place of the Most High,' unless we take the altar of incense on our road.

There is one more thought here-

III. The altar of incense shows us how prayer is to be cultivated.

Twice a day, morning and evening, came the officiating priest with his pan of coals and incense, and laid it there; and during all the intervening hours between the morning and the evening the glow lay half hidden in the incense, and there was a faint but continual emission of fragrance from the smouldering mass that had been renewed in the morning, and again in the evening. And does not that say something to us? There must be definite times of distinct prayer if the aroma of devotion is to be diffused through our else scentless days. I ask for no pedantic adherence, with monastic mechanicalness, to hours and times, and forms of petitions. These are needful crutches to many of us. But what I do maintain is that all that talk which we hear so much of in certain quarters nowadays as to its not being necessary for us to have special times of prayer, and as to its being far better to have devotion diffused through our lives, and of how *laborare est orare*-to labour is to pray-all that is pernicious nonsense if it is meant to say that the incense will be fragrant and smoulder unless it is stirred up and renewed night and morning. There must be definite times of prayer if there is to be diffused devotion through the day. What would you think of people that said, ‘Run your cars by electricity. Get it out of the wires; it will come! Never mind putting up any generating stations’? And not less foolish are they who seek for a devotion permeating life which is not often concentrated into definite and specific acts.

But the other side is as true. It is bad to clot your religion into lumps, and to leave the rest of the life without it. There must be the smouldering all day long. ‘Rejoice evermore; pray without ceasing.’ You can pray thus. Not set prayer, of course; but a reference to Him, a thought of Him, like some sweet melody, ‘so sweet we know not we are listening to it,’ may breathe its fragrance, and diffuse its warmth into the commonest and smallest of our daily activities. It was when Gideon was threshing wheat that the angel appeared to him. It was when Elisha was ploughing that the divine inspiration touched him. It was when the disciples were fishing that they saw the Form on the shore. And when we are in the way of our common life it is possible that the Lord may meet us, and that our souls may be aspiring to Him. Then work will be worship; then burdens will be lightened; then our lamps will burn; then the fruits of our daily lives will ripen; then our lives will be noble; then our spirits will rest as well as soar, and find fruition and aspiration perpetually alternating in stable succession of eternal progress.

29)Exodus 30:12

Exodus

RANSOM FOR SOULS-I.

Exo. 30:12.

This remarkable provision had a religious intention. Connect it with the tax-money which Peter found in the fish’s mouth.

I. Its meaning. Try to realise an Israelite’s thoughts at the census. ‘I am enrolled among the people and army of God: am I worthy? What am I, to serve so holy a God?’ The payment was meant-

[*a*] To excite the sense of sin. This should be present in all approach to God, in all service; accompanying the recognition of our Christian standing. Our sense of sin is far too slight and weak; this defect is at the root of much feebleness in popular religion. The sense of sin must embrace not outward acts only, but inner spirit also.

[*b*] To suggest the possibility of expiation. It was ‘ransom’ *i.e.* ‘covering,’ something paid that guilt might be taken away and sin regarded as non-existent. This is, of course, obviously, only a symbol. No tax could satisfy God for sin. The very smallness of the amount shows that it is symbolical only. ‘Not with corruptible things as silver’ is man redeemed.

II. Its identity for all. Rich or poor, high or low, all men are equal in sin. There are surface differences and degrees, but a deep identity beneath. So on the same principle all souls are of the same value. Here is the true democracy of Christianity. So there is one ransom for all, for the need of all is identical.

III. Its use. It was melted down for use in the sanctuary, so as to be a ‘memorial’ permanently present to God when His people met with Him. The greater portion was made into bases for the boards of the sanctuary. That is, God’s dwelling with men and our communion with Him all rest on the basis of ransom. We are ‘brought nigh by the blood of Christ.’

30)Exodus 30:15

Exodus

RANSOM FOR SOULS-II.

Exo. 30:15.

This tax was exacted on numbering the people. It was a very small amount, about fifteen pence, so it was clearly symbolical in its significance. Notice-

I. The broad principle of equality of all souls in the sight of God. Contrast the reign of caste and class in heathendom with the democracy of Judaism and of Christianity.

II. The universal sinfulness. Payment of the tax was a confession that all were alike in this: not that all were equally sinful, but all were sinful, whatever variations of degree might exist.

‘There is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.’

III. The one ransom. It was a prophecy of which *we* know the meaning. Recall the incident of the ‘stater’ in the fish’s mouth.

Christ declares His exemption from the tax. Yet He voluntarily comes under it, and He provides the payment of it for Himself and for Peter.

He does so by a miracle.

The Apostle has to ‘take and give it’; so faith is called into exercise.

Thus there is but one Sacrifice for all; and the poorest can exercise faith and the richest can do no more. ‘None other name.’

31)Exodus 32:1-8

Exodus

THE GOLDEN CALF

Exo. 32:1 - - Exo. 32:8; Exo. 32:30 - - Exo. 32:35.

It was not yet six weeks since the people had sworn, ‘All that the Lord hath spoken will we do, and be obedient.’ The blood of the covenant, sprinkled on them, was scarcely dry when they flung off allegiance to Jehovah. Such short-lived loyalty to Him can never have been genuine. That mob of slaves was galvanised by Moses into obedience; and since their acceptance of

Jehovah was in reality only yielding to the power of one strong will and its earnest faith, of course it collapsed as soon as Moses disappeared.

We have to note, first, the people's universal revolt. The language of Exo. 32:1 may easily hide to a careless reader the gravity and unanimity of the apostasy. 'The people gathered themselves together.' It was a national rebellion, a flood which swept away even some faithful, timid hearts. No voices ventured to protest. What were the elders, who shortly before 'saw the God of Israel,' doing to be passive at such a crisis? Was there no one to bid the fickle multitude look up to the summit overhead, where the red flames glowed, or to remind them of the hosts of Egypt lying stark and dead on the shore? Was Miriam cowed too, and her song forgotten?

We need not cast stones at these people; for we also have short memories for either the terrible or the gracious revelations of God in our own lives. But we may learn the lesson that God's lovers have to set themselves sometimes dead against the rush of popular feeling, and that there are times when silence or compliance is sin.

It would have been easy for the rebels to have ignored Aaron, and made gods for themselves. But they desired to involve him in their apostasy, and to get 'official sanction' for it. He had been left by Moses as his lieutenant, and so to get him implicated was to stamp the movement as a regular and entire revolt.

The demand 'to make gods' [or, more probably, 'a god'] flew in the face of both the first and second commandments. For Jehovah, who had forbidden the forming of any image, was denied in the act of making it. To disobey Him was to cast Him off. The ground of the rebellion was the craving for a visible object of trust and a visible guide, as is seen by the reason assigned for the demand for an image. Moses was out of sight; they must have something to look at as their leader. Moses had disappeared, and, to these people who had only been heaved up to the height of believing in Jehovah by Moses, Jehovah had disappeared with him. They sank down again to the level of other races as soon as that strong lever ceased to lift their heavy apprehensions.

How ridiculous the assertion that they did not know what had become of Moses! They knew that he was up there with Jehovah. The elders could have told them that. The fire on the mount might have burned in on all minds the confirmation. Note, too, the black ingratitude and plain denial of Jehovah in 'the *man* that brought us up out of the land of Egypt.' They refuse to recognise God's part. It was Moses only who had done it; and now that he is gone they must have a visible god, like other nations.

Still sadder than their sense-bound wish is Aaron's compliance. He knew as well as we do what he should have said, but, like many another man in influential position, when beset by popular cries, he was frightened, and yielded when he should have 'set his face like a flint.' His compliance has in essentials been often repeated, especially by priests and ministers of religion who have lent their superior abilities or opportunities to carry out the wishes of the ignorant populace, and debased religion or watered down its prohibitions, to please and retain hold of them. The Church has incorporated much from heathenism. Roman Catholic missionaries have permitted 'converts' to keep their old usages. Protestant teachers have acquiesced in, and been content to find the brains to carry out, compromises between sense and soul, God's commands and men's inclinations.

We need not discuss the metallurgy of Exo. 32:4. But clearly Aaron asked for the earrings, not, as some would have it, hoping that vanity and covetousness would hinder their being given, but simply in order to get gold for the bad work which he was ready to do. The reason for making the thing in the shape of a calf is probably the Egyptian worship of Apis in that form, which would be familiar to the people.

We must note that it was the people who said, 'These be thy gods, O Israel!' Aaron seems to keep in the rear, as it were. He makes the calf, and hands it over, and leaves them to hail it and worship. Like all cowards, he thought that he was lessening his guilt by thus keeping in the background. Feeble natures are fond of such subterfuges, and deceive themselves by them; but they do not shift their sin off their shoulders.

Then he comes in again with an impotent attempt to diminish the gravity of the revolt. ‘When he *saw* this,’ he tried to turn the flood into another channel, and so proclaimed a ‘feast to Jehovah’ !-as if He could be worshipped by flagrant defiance of His commandments, or as if He had not been disavowed by the ascription to the calf, made that morning out of their own trinkets, of the deliverance from Egypt. A poor, inconsequential attempt to save appearances and hallow sin by writing God’s name on it! The ‘god’ whom the Israelites worshipped under the image of a calf, was no less another ‘god before Me,’ though it was called by the name of Jehovah. If the people had their idol, it mattered nothing to them, and it mattered as little to Jehovah, what ‘name’ it bore. The wild orgies of the morrow were not the worship which He accepts.

What a contrast between the plain and the mountain! Below, the shameful feast, with its parody of sacrifice and its sequel of lust-inflamed dancing; above, the awful colloquy between the all-seeing righteous Judge and the intercessor! The people had cast off Jehovah, and Jehovah no more calls them ‘My,’ but ‘*thy* people.’ They had ascribed their Exodus first to Moses, and next to the calf. Jehovah speaks of it as the work of Moses.

A terrible separation of Himself from them lies in ‘*thy* people, which *thou* broughtest up,’ and Moses’ bold rejoinder emphasises the relation and act which Jehovah seems to suppress [Exo. 32:11]. Observe that the divine voice refuses to give any weight to Aaron’s trick of compromise. These are no worshippers of Jehovah who are howling and dancing below there. They are ‘worshipping *it*, and sacrificing to it,’ not to Him. The cloaks of sin may partly cover its ugliness here, but they are transparent to His eyes, and many a piece of worship, which is said to be directed to Him, is, in His sight, rank idolatry.

We do not deal with the magnificent courage of Moses, his single-handed arresting of the wild rebellion, and the severe punishment by which he trampled out the fire. But we must keep his severity in mind if we would rightly judge his self-sacrificing devotion, and his self-sacrificing devotion if we would rightly judge his severity.

No words of ours can make more sublime his utter self-abandonment for the sake of the people among whom he had just been flaming in wrath, and smiting like a destroying angel. That was a great soul which had for its poles such justice and such love. The very words of his prayer, in their abruptness, witness to his deep emotion. ‘If Thou wilt forgive their sin’ stands as an incomplete sentence, left incomplete because the speaker is so profoundly moved. Sometimes broken words are the best witnesses of our earnestness. The alternative clause reaches the high-water mark of passionate love, ready to give up everything for the sake of its objects. The ‘book of life’ is often spoken of in Scripture, and it is an interesting study to bring together the places where the idea occurs [see Psa. 69:28; Dan. 12:1; Php. 4:3; Rev. 3:5]. The allusion is to the citizens’ roll [Psa. 87:6]. Those whose names are written there have the privileges of citizenship, and, as it is the ‘book of life’ [or ‘*of the living*’], life in the widest sense is secured to them. To blot out of it, therefore, is to cut a man off from fellowship in the city of God, and from participation in life.

Moses was so absorbed in his vocation that his life was less to him than the well-being of Israel. How far he saw into the darkness beyond the grave we cannot say; but, at least, he was content, and desirous to die on earth, if thereby Israel might continue to be God’s people. And probably he had some gleam of light beyond, which enhanced the greatness of his offered sacrifice. To die, whatever loss of communion with God that involved here or hereafter, would be sweet if thereby he could purchase Israel’s restoration to God’s favour. We cannot but think of Paul willing to be separated from Christ for his brethren’s sake.

We may well think of a greater than Moses or Paul, who did bear the loss which they were willing to bear, and died that sin might be forgiven. Moses was a true type of Christ in that act of supreme self-sacrifice; and all the heroism, the identification of himself with his people, the love which willingly accepts death, that makes his prayer one of the greatest deeds on the page of history, are repeated in infinitely sweeter, more heart-subduing fashion in the story of the Cross. Let us not omit duly to honour the servant; let us not neglect to honour and love infinitely more the Lord. ‘This man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses.’ Let us see that we render Him

'Thanks never ceasing,
And infinite love.'

32)Exodus 32:15-26

Exodus

THE SWIFT DECAY OF LOVE

Exo. 32:15 - - Exo. 32:26.

Moses and Joshua are on their way down from the mountain, the former carrying the tables in his hands and a heavier burden in his heart,-the thought of the people's swift apostasy. Joshua's soldierly ear interprets the shouts which are borne up to them as war-cries; 'He snuffeth the battle afar off, and saith Aha!' But Moses knew that they meant worse than war, and his knowledge helped his ear to distinguish a cadence and unison in the noise, unlike the confused mingling of the victors' yell of triumph and the shriek of the conquered. If we were dealing with fiction, we should admire the masterly dramatic instinct which lets the ear anticipate the eye, and so prepares us for the hideous sight that burst on these two at some turn in the rocky descent.

I. Note, then, what they saw. The vivid story puts it all in two words,-'the calf and the dancing.' There in the midst, perhaps on some pedestal, was the shameful copy of the Egyptian Apis; and whirling round it in mad circles, working themselves into frenzy by rapid motion and frantic shouts, were the people,-men and women, mingled in the licentious dance, who, six short weeks before, had sworn to the Covenant. Their bestial deity in the centre, and they compassing it with wild hymns, were a frightful contradiction of that grey altar and the twelve encircling stones which they had so lately reared, and which stood unregarded, a bowshot off, as a silent witness against them. Note the strange, irresistible fascination of idolatry. Clearly the personal influence of Moses was the only barrier against it. The people thought that he had disappeared, and, if so, Jehovah had disappeared with him. We wonder at their relapses into idolatry, but we forget that it was then universal, that Israel was at the beginning of its long training, that not even a divine revelation could produce harvest in seedtime, and that to look for a final and complete deliverance from the ‘veil that was spread over all nations,’ at this stage, is like expecting a newly reclaimed bit of the backwoods to grow grass as thick and velvety as has carpeted some lawn that has been mown and cared for for a century. Grave condemnation is the due of these short-memoried rebels, who set up their ‘abomination’ in sight of the fire on Sinai; but that should not prevent our recognising the evidence which their sin affords of the tremendous power of idolatry in that stage of the world’s history. Israel’s proneness to fall back to heathenism makes it certain that a supernatural revelation is needed to account for their possession of the loftier faith which was so far above them.

That howling, leaping crowd tells what sort of religion they would have ‘evolved’ if left to themselves. Where did ‘Thou shalt have none other gods beside Me’ come from? Note the confusion of thought, so difficult for us to understand, which characterises idolatry. What a hopelessly inconsequential cry that was, ‘Make us gods, which shall go before us!’ and what a muddle of contradictions it was that men should say ‘These be thy gods,’ though they knew that the thing was made yesterday out of their own earrings! It took more than a thousand years to teach the nation the force of the very self-evident argument, as it seems to us, ‘the workman made it, therefore it is not God.’ The theory that the idol is only a symbol is not the actual belief of idolaters. It is a product of the study, but the worshipper unites in his thought the irreconcilable beliefs that it was made and is divine. A goldsmith will make and sell a Madonna, and when it is put in the cathedral, will kneel before it.

Note what was the sin here. It is generally taken for granted that it was a breach of the second, not of the first, commandment, and Aaron’s proclamation of ‘a feast to the Lord’ is taken as proving this. Aaron was probably trying to make an impossible compromise, and to find some salve for his conscience; but it does not follow that the people accepted the half-and-half suggestion. Leaders who try to control a movement which they disapprove, by seeming to accept it, play a dangerous game, and usually fail. But whether the people call the calf ‘Jehovah’ or ‘Apis’ matters very little. There would be as complete apostasy to another god, though the other god was called by the same name, if all that really makes his ‘name’ was left out, and foreign elements were brought in. Such worship as these wild dances, offered to an image, broke both the commandments, no matter by what name the image was invoked.

The roots of idolatry are in all men. The gross form of it is impossible to us; but the need for aid from sense, the dependence on art for wings to our devotion, which is a growing danger to-day, is only the modern form of the same dislike of a purely spiritual religion which sent these people dancing round their calf.

II. Mark Moses' blaze of wrath and courageous, prompt action. He dashes the tables on the rock, as if to break the record of the useless laws which the people have already broken, and, with his hands free, flings himself without pause into the midst of the excited mob. Exo. 32:19 - - Exo. 32:20 bear the impression of his rapid, decisive action in their succession of clauses, each tacked on to the preceding by a simple 'and.' Stroke followed stroke. His fiery earnestness swept over all obstacles, the base riot ceased, the ashamed dancers slunk away. Some true hearts would gather about him, and carry out his commands; but he did the real work, and, single-handed, cowed and controlled the mob. No doubt, it took more time than the brief narrative, at first sight, would suggest. The image is flung into the fire from which it had come out. The fire made it, and the fire shall unmake it. We need not find difficulty in 'burning' a golden idol. That does not mean 'calcined,' and the writer is not guilty of a blunder, nor needed to be taught that you cannot burn gold. The next clause says that after it was 'burned,' it was still solid; so that, plainly, all that is meant is, that the metal was reduced to a shapeless lump. That would take some time. Then it was broken small; there were plenty of rocks to grind it up on. That would take some more time, but not a finger was lifted to prevent it. Then the more or less finely broken up fragments are flung into the brook, and, with grim irony, the people are bid to drink. 'You shall have enough of your idol, since you love him so. Here, down with him! You will have to take the consequences of your sin. You must drink as you have brewed.' It is at once a contemptuous demonstration of the idol's impotence, and a picture of the sure retribution.

But we may learn two things from this figure of the indignant lawgiver. One is, that the temper in which to regard idolatry is not one of equable indifference nor of scientific investigation, but that some heat of moral indignation is wholesome. We are all studying comparative mythology now, and getting much good from it; but we are in some danger of forgetting that these strange ideas and practices, which we examine at our ease, have spread spiritual darkness and moral infection over continents and through generations. Let us understand them, by all means; let us be thankful to find fragments of truth in, or innocent origins of, repulsive legends; but do not let the student swallow up the Christian in us, nor our minds lose their capacity of wholesome indignation at the systems, blended with Christ-like pity and effort for the victims.

We may learn, further, how strong a man is when he is all aflame with true zeal for God. The suddenness of Moses' reappearance, the very audacity of his act, the people's habit of obedience, all helped to carry him through the crisis; but the true secret of his swift victory was his own self-forgetting faith. There is contagion in pure religious enthusiasm. It is the strongest of all forces. One man, with God at his back, is always in the majority. He whose whole soul glows with the pure fire, will move among men like flame in stubble. 'All things are possible to him that believeth.' Consecrated daring, animated by love and fed with truth, is all-conquering.

III. Note the weaker nature of Aaron, taking refuge in a transparent lie. Probably his dialogue with his brother came in before the process described in the former verses was accomplished. But the narrative keeps all that referred to the destruction of the idol together, and goes by subject rather than by time. We do not learn how Moses had come to know Aaron's share in the sin, but his question is one of astonishment. Had they bewitched him anyhow? or what inducement had led him so far astray? The stronger and devouter soul cannot conceive how the weaker had yielded. Aaron's answer puts the people's wish forward. 'They said, Make us gods'; that was all which they had 'done.' A poor excuse, as Aaron feels even while he is stammering it out. What would Moses have answered if the people had 'said' so to him? Did he, standing there, with the heat of his struggle on him yet, look like a man that would acknowledge any demand of a mob as a reason for a ruler's compliance? It is the coward's plea. How many ecclesiastics and statesmen since then have had no better to offer for their acts! Such fear of the Lord as shrivelled before the breath of popular clamour could have had no deep roots. One of the first things to learn, whether we are in prominent or in private positions, is to hold by our religious convictions in supreme indifference to all surrounding voices, and to let no threats nor entreaties lead us to take one step beyond or against conscience.

Aaron feels the insufficiency of the plea, when he has to put it into plain words to such a listener, and so he flies to the resource of timid and weak natures, a lie. For what did he ask the gold, and put it into the furnace, unless he meant to make a god? Perhaps he had told the people the same story, as priests in all lands have been apt to claim a miraculous origin for idols. And he repeats it now, as if, were it true, he would plead the miracle as a vindication of the worship as well as his absolution. But the lie is too transparent to deserve even an answer, and Moses turns silently from him.

Aaron’s was evidently the inferior nature, and was less deeply stamped with the print of heaven than his brother’s. His feeble compliance is recorded as a beacon for all persons in places of influence or authority, warning them against self-interested or cowardly yielding to a popular demand, at the sacrifice of the purity of truth and the approval of their own consciences. He was not the last priest who has allowed the supposed wishes of the populace to shape his representations of God, and has knowingly dropped the standard of duty or sullied the clear brightness of truth in deference to the many-voiced monster.

IV. Note the rallying of true hearts round Moses. The Revised Version reads ‘broken loose’ instead of ‘naked,’ and the correction is valuable. It explains the necessity for the separation of those who yet remained bound by the restraints of God’s law, and for the terrible retribution that followed. The rebellion had not been stamped out by the destruction of the calf; and though Moses’ dash into their midst had cowed the rebels for a time, things had gone too far to settle down again at once. The camp was in insurrection. It was more than a riot, it was a revolution. With the rapid eye of genius, Moses sees the gravity of the crisis, and, with equally swift decisiveness, acts so as to meet it. He ‘stood in the gate of the camp,’ and made the nucleus for the still faithful. His summons puts the full seriousness of the moment clearly before the people. They have come to a fork in the road. They must be either for Jehovah or against Him. There can be no mixing up of the worship of Jehovah and the images of Egypt, no tampering with God’s service in obedience to popular clamour. It must be one thing or other. This is no time for the family of ‘Mr. Facing-both-ways’; the question for each man is, ‘Under which King?’ Moses’ unhesitating confidence that he is God’s soldier, and that to be at his side is to be on God’s side, was warranted in him, but has often been repeated with less reason by eager contenders, as they believed themselves to be, for God. No doubt, it becomes us to be modest and cautious in calling all true friends of God to rank themselves with us. But where the issue is between foul wrong and plain right, between palpable idolatry, error, or unbridled lust, and truth, purity, and righteousness, the Christian combatant for these is entitled to send round the fiery cross, and proclaim a crusade in God’s name. There will always be plenty of people with cold water to pour on enthusiasm. We should be all the better for a few more, who would venture to feel that they are fighting for God, and to summon all who love Him to come to their and His help.

Moses’ own tribe responded to the summons. And, no doubt, Aaron was there too, galvanised into a nobler self by the courage and fervour of his brother, and, let us hope, urged by penitence, to efface the memory of his faithlessness by his heroism now.

We do not go on to the dreadful retribution, which must be regarded, not as massacre, but as legal execution. It is folly to apply to it, or to other analogous instances, the ideas of this Christian century. We need not be afraid to admit that there has been a development of morality. The retributions of a stern age were necessarily stern. But if we want to understand the heart of Moses, or of Moses’ God, we must not look only at the ruler of a wild people trampling out a revolt at the sacrifice of many lives, but listen to him, as the next section of the narrative shows him, pleading with tears for the rebels, and offering even to let his own name be blotted out of God’s book if their sin might be forgiven. So, coupling the two parts of his conduct together, we may learn a little more clearly a lesson, of which this age has much need,-the harmony of retributive justice and pitying love; and may come to understand that Moses learned both the one and the other by fellowship with the God in whom they both dwell in perfection and concord.

33)Exodus 32:30-35

Exodus

THE GOLDEN CALF

Exo. 32:1 - - **Exo. 32:8**; Exo. 32:30 - - Exo. 32:35.

It was not yet six weeks since the people had sworn, ‘All that the Lord hath spoken will we do, and be obedient.’ The blood of the covenant, sprinkled on them, was scarcely dry when they flung off allegiance to Jehovah. Such short-lived loyalty to Him can never have been genuine. That mob of slaves was galvanised by Moses into obedience; and since their acceptance of Jehovah was in reality only yielding to the power of one strong will and its earnest faith, of course it collapsed as soon as Moses disappeared.

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‘Thanks never ceasing,
And infinite love.’

34)Exodus 33:12-23

Exodus

THE MEDIATOR’S THREEFOLD PRAYER

Exo. 33:12 - - Exo. 33:23.

The calf worship broke the bond between God and Israel. Instead of His presence, ‘an angel’ is to lead them, for His presence could only be destruction. Mourning spreads through the camp, in token of which all ornaments are laid aside. The fate of the nation is in suspense, and the people wait, in sad attire, till God knows ‘what to do unto’ them. The Tabernacle is carried beyond the precincts of the camp, in witness of the breach, and all the future is doubtful. The preceding context describes [Exo. 33:7 - - Exo. 33:11] not one event, but the standing order of these dark days, when the camp had to be left if God was to be found, and when Moses alone received tokens of God’s friendship, and the people stood wistfully and tremblingly gazing from afar, while the cloudy pillar wavered down to the Tabernacle door. Duty brought Moses back from such communion; but Joshua did not need to come near the tents of the evil-doers, and, in the constancy of devout desire, made his home in the Tabernacle. In one of these interviews, so close and familiar, the wonderful dialogue here recorded occurred. It turns round three petitions, to each of which the Lord answers.

I. We have the leader's prayer for himself, with the over-abundant answer of God. In the former chapter, we had the very sublimity of intercession, in which the stern avenger of idolatry poured out his self-sacrificing love for the stiff-necked nation whom he had had to smite, and offered himself a victim for them. Here his first prayer is mainly for himself, but it is not therefore a selfish prayer. Rather he prays for gifts to himself, to fit him for his service to them. We may note separately the prayer, and the pleas on which it is urged. 'Show me now Thy way [or ways], that I may know Thee.' The desire immediately refers to the then condition of things. As we have pointed out, it was a time of suspense. In the strong metaphor of the context, God was making up His mind on His course, and Israel was waiting with hushed breath for the *dénouement*. It was not the entrance of the nation into the promised land which was in doubt, but the manner of their guidance, and the penalties of their idolatry. These things Moses asked to know, and especially, as Exo. 33:12 shows, to receive some more definite communication as to their leader than the vague 'an angel.' But the specific knowledge of God's 'way' was yearned for by him, mainly, as leading on to a deeper and fuller and more blessed knowledge of God Himself, and that again as leading to a fuller possession of God's favour, which, as already in some measure possessed, lay at the foundation of the whole prayer. The connection of thought here goes far beyond the mere immediate blessing, which Moses needed at the moment. That cry for insight into the purposes and methods of Him whom the soul trusts, amid darkness and suspense, is the true voice of sonship. The more deeply it sees into these, the more does the devout soul feel the contrast between the spot of light in which it lives and the encircling obscurity, and the more does it yearn for the further setting back of the boundaries. Prayer does more than effort, for satisfying that desire. Nor is it mere curiosity or the desire for intellectual clearness that moves the longing. For the end of knowing God's ways is, for the devout man, a deeper, more blessed knowledge of God Himself, who is best known in His deeds; and the highest, most blessed issue of the God-given knowledge of God, is the conscious sunshine of His favour shining ever on His servant. That is not a selfish religion which, beginning with the assurance that we have found grace in His sight, seeks to climb, by happy paths of growing knowledge of Him as manifested in His ways, to a consciousness of that favour which is made stable and profound by clear insight into the depths of His purposes and acts.

The pleas on which this prayer is urged are two: the suppliant's heavy tasks, and God's great assurances to him. He boldly reminds God of what He has set him to do, and claims that he should be furnished with what is needful for discharging his commission. How can he lead if he is kept in the dark? When we are as sure as Moses was of God's charge to us, we may be as bold as he in asking the needful equipment for it. God does not send His servants out to sow without seed, or to fight without a sword. His command is His pledge. He smiles approval when His servants' confidence assumes even bold forms, which sound like remonstrance and a suspicion that He was forgetting, for He discerns the underlying eagerness to do His will, and the trust in Him. The second plea is built on God's assurances of intimate and distinguishing knowledge and favour. He had said that He knew Moses 'by name,' by all these calls and familiar interviews which gave him the certainty of his individual relation to, and his special appointment from, the Lord. Such prerogative was inconsistent with reserve. The test of friendship is confidence. So pleads Moses, and God recognises the plea. 'I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth; but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.'

The plea based upon the relation of the people to God is subordinate in this first prayer. It is thrown in at the end almost as an afterthought; it boldly casts responsibility off Moses on to God, and does so to enforce the prayer that he should be equipped with all requisites for his work, as if he had said, 'It is more Thy concern than mine, that I should be able to lead them.' The divine answer is a promise to go not with the people, but with Moses. It is therefore not yet a full resolving of the doubtful matter, nor directly a reply to Moses' prayer. In one aspect it is less, and in another more, than had been asked. It seals to the man and to the leader the assurance that for himself he shall have the continual presence of God, in his soul and in his work, and that, in all the weary march, he will have rest, and will come to a fuller rest at its end. Thus God ever answers the true hearts that seek to know Him, and to be fitted for their tasks. Whether the precise form of desire be fulfilled or no, the issue of such bold and trustful pleading is always the inward certainty of God's face shining on us, and the experience of repose, deep and untroubled in the midst of toil, so that we may be at once pilgrims towards, and dwellers in, 'the house of the Lord,'

II. We have the intercessor's prayer for the people, with the answer [Exo. 33:15 - - Exo. 33:17]. If the promise of Exo. 33:14 is taken as referring to the people, there is nothing additional asked in this second stage, and the words of Exo. 33:17, 'this thing also,' are inexplicable. Observe that 'with me' in Exo. 33:15 is a supplement, and that the 'us' of the next clause, as well as the whole cast of Exo. 33:16, suggests that we should rather supply 'with us,' The substance, then, of the second petition, is the extension of the promise, already given to Moses for himself, to the entire nation. Observe how he identifies himself with them, making them 'partakers' in his grace, and reiterating 'I and Thy people,' as if he would have no blessing which was not shared by them. He seeks that the withdrawal of God's presence, which had been the consequence of Israel's withdrawal from God, should be reversed, and that not he alone, but all the rebels, might still possess His presence.

The plea for this prayer is God's honour, which was concerned in making it plain even in the remote wilderness, to the wandering tribes there, that His hand was upon Israel. Moses expands the argument which he had just touched before. The thought of His own glory as the motive of God's acts, may easily be so put at to be repulsive; but at bottom it is the same as to say that His motive is love-for the glory which He seeks is the communication of true thoughts concerning His character, that men may be made glad and like Himself thereby. Moses has learned that God's heart must long to reveal its depth of mercy, and therefore he pleads that even sinful Israel should not be left by God, in order that some light from His face may strike into a dark world. There is wide benevolence, as well as deep insight into the desires of God, in the plea.

The divine answer yields unconditionally to the request, and rests the reason for so doing wholly on the relation between God and Moses. The plea which he had urged in lowly boldness as the foundation of both his prayers is endorsed, and, for his sake, the divine presence is again granted to the people.

Can we look at this scene without seeing in it the operation on a lower field of the same great principle of intercession, which reaches its unique example in Jesus Christ? It is not arbitrary forcing of the gospel into the history, but simply the recognition of the essence of the history, when we see in it a foreshadowing of our great High-priest. He, too, knits Himself so closely with us, both by the assumption of our manhood and by the identity of loving sympathy, that He accepts nothing from the Father's hand for Himself alone. He, too, presents Himself before God, and says 'I and Thy people.' The great seal of proof for the world that He is the beloved of God, lies in the divine guardianship and guidance of His servants. His prayer for them prevails, and the reason for its prevalence is God's delight in Him. The very sublime of self-sacrificing love was in the lawgiver, but the height of his love, measured against the immeasurable altitude of Christ's, is as a mole-hill to the Andes.

III. We have the last soaring desire which rises above the limits of the present. These three petitions teach the insatiableness, if we may use the word, of devout desires. Each request granted brings on a greater. 'The gift doth stretch itself as 'tis received.' Enjoyment increases capacity, and increase of capacity is increase of desire. God being infinite, and man capable of indefinite growth, neither the widening capacity nor the infinite supply can have limits. This is not the least of the blessings of a devout life, that the appetite grows with what it feeds on, and that, while there is always satisfaction, there is never satiety.

Moses' prayer sounds presumptuous, but it was heard unblamed, and granted in so far as possible. It was a venial error-if error it may be called-that a soul, touched with the flame of divine love, should aspire beyond the possibilities of mortality. At all events, it was a fault in which he has had few imitators. *Our* desires keep but too well within the limits of the possible. The precise meaning of the petition must be left undetermined.

Only this is clear, that it was something far beyond even that face-to-face intercourse which he had had, as well as beyond that vision granted to the elders. If we are to take ‘glory’ in its usual sense, it would mean the material symbol of God’s presence, which shone at the heart of the pillar, and dwelt afterwards between the cherubim, but probably we must attach a loftier meaning to it here, and rather think of what we should call the uncreated and infinite divine essence. Only do not let us make Moses talk like a metaphysician or a theological professor. Rather we should hear in his cry the voice of a soul thrilled through and through with the astounding consciousness of God’s favour, blessed with love-gifts in answered prayers, and yearning for more of that light which it feels to be life.

And if the petition be dark, the answer is yet more obscure ‘with excess of light.’ Mark how it begins with granting, not with refusing. It tells how much the loving desire has power to bring, before it speaks of what in it must be denied. There is infinite tenderness in that order of response. It speaks of a heart that does not love to say ‘no,’ and grants our wishes up to the very edge of the possible, and wraps the bitterness of any refusal in the sweet envelope of granted requests. A broad distinction is drawn between that in God which can be revealed, and that which cannot. The one is ‘glory,’ the other ‘goodness,’ corresponding, we might almost say, to the distinction between the ‘moral’ and the ‘natural’ attributes of God. But, whatever mysterious revelation under the guise of vision may be concealed in these words, and in the fulfilment of them in the next chapter, they belong to the ‘things which it is impossible for a man to utter,’ even if he has received them. We are on more intelligible ground in the next clause of the promise, the proclamation of ‘the Name.’ That expression is, in Scripture, always used as meaning the manifested character of God. It is a revelation addressed to the spirit, not to the sense. It is the translation, so far as it is capable of translation, of the vision which it accompanied; it is the treasure which Moses bore away from Sinai, and has shared among us all. The reason for his prayer was probably his desire to have his mediatorial office confirmed and perfected; and it was so, by that proclamation of the Name. The reason for this marvellous gift is next set forth as being God’s own unconditional grace and mercy. He is His own motive, His own reason. Just as the independent and absolute fullness of His being is expressed by the name ‘I am that I am,’ so the independent and absolute freeness of His mercy, whether in granting Moses' prayer or in pardoning the people, is expressed by 'I will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy.' Not till all this exuberance of gracious answer has smoothed the way does the denial of the impossible request come; and even then it is so worded as to lay all the emphasis on what is granted, and to show that the refusal is but another phase of love. The impossibility of beholding the Face is reiterated, and then the careful provisions which God will make for the fulfilment of the possible part of the bold wish are minutely detailed. The distinction between the revealable and unrevealable, which has been already expressed by the contrast of 'glory' and 'grace,' now appears in the distinction between the 'face' which cannot be looked on, and the 'back' which may be.

Human language and thought are out of their depth here. We must be content to see a dim splendour shining through the cloudy words, to know that there was granted to one man a realisation of God's presence, and a revelation of His character, so far transcending ordinary experiences as that it was fitly called sight, but yet as far beneath the glory of His being as the comparatively imperfect knowledge of a man's form, when seen only from behind, is beneath that derived from looking him in the face.

But whatever was the singular prerogative of the lawgiver, as he gazed from the cleft of the rock at the receding glory, we see more than he ever did; and the Christian child, who looks upon the 'glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,' has a vision which outshines the flashing radiance that shone round Moses. It deepened his convictions, confirmed his faith, added to his assurance of his divine commission, but only added to his knowledge of God by the proclamation of the Name, and that Name is more fully proclaimed in our ears. Sinai, with all its thunders, is silent before Calvary. And he who has Jesus Christ to declare God's Name to him need not envy the lawgiver on the mountain, nor even the saints in heaven.

35)Exodus 34:6

Exodus

GOD PROCLAIMING HIS OWN NAME

Exo. 34:6.

This great event derives additional significance and grandeur from the place in which it stands. It follows the hideous act of idolatry in which the levity and sinfulness of Israel reached their climax. The trumpet of Sinai had hardly ceased to peal, and there in the rocky solitudes, in full view of the mount 'that burned with fire,' while the echoes of the thunder and the Voice still lingered, one might say, among the cliffs, that mob of abject cowards were bold enough to shake off their allegiance to God, and, forgetful of all the past, plunged into idolatry, and wallowed in sensuous delights. What a contrast between Moses on the mount and Aaron and the people in the plain! Then comes the wonderful story of the plague and of Moses' intercession, followed by the high request of Moses, so strange and yet so natural at such a time, for the vision of God's 'glory.' Into all the depths of that I do not need to plunge. Enough that he is told that his desire is beyond the possibilities of creatural life. The mediator and lawgiver cannot rise beyond the bounds of human limitations. But what *can* be *shall* be. God's 'goodness' will pass before him. Then comes this wonderful advance in the progress of divine revelation. If we remember the breach of the Covenant, and then turn to these words, considered as evoked by the people's sin, they become very remarkable. If we consider them as the answer to Moses' desire, they are no less so. Taking these two thoughts with us, let us consider them in-

I. The answer to the request for a sensuous manifestation.

The request is 'show me,' as if some visible manifestation were desired and expected, or, if not a visible, at least a direct perception of Jehovah's glory.' Moses desires that he, as mediator and lawgiver, may have some closer knowledge. The answer to his request is a word, the articulate proclamation of the 'Name' of the Lord. It is higher than all manifestation to sense, which was what Moses had asked. Here there is no symbol as of the Lord in the 'cloud.' The divine manifestation is impossible to sense, and that, too, not by reason of man's limitations, but by reason of God's nature. The manifestation to spirit in full immediate perception is impossible also. It has to be maintained that we know God only 'in part'; but it does not follow that our knowledge is only representative, or is not of Him ‘as He is.’ Though not whole it is real, so far as it goes.

But this is not the highest form. Words and propositions can never reveal so fully, nor with such certitude, as a personal revelation. But we have Christ’s life, ‘God manifest’: not words about God, but the manifestation of the very divine nature itself in action. ‘Merciful’:-and we see Jesus going about ‘doing good.’ ‘Gracious,’ and we see Him welcoming to Himself all the weary, and ever bestowing of the treasures of His love. ‘Longsuffering’:-’Father! forgive them!’ God is ‘plenteous in mercy and in truth,’ forgiving transgression and sin:-’Thy sins be forgiven thee.’

How different it all is when we have deeds, a human life, on which to base our belief! How much more certain, as well as coming closer to our hearts! Merely verbal statements need proof, they need warming. In Christ’s showing us the Father they are changed as from a painting to a living being; they are brought out of the region of abstractions into the concrete.

‘And so the word had breath, and wrought
With human hands the creed of creeds.’

‘Show us the Father and it sufficeth us.’ ‘He that hath seen Me, hath seen the Father.’

Is there any other form of manifestation possible? Yes; in heaven there will be a closer vision of Christ-not of God. Our knowledge of Christ will there be expanded, deepened, made more direct. We know not how. There will be bodily changes: ‘Like unto the body of His glory.’ etc. ‘We shall be like Him.’ ‘Changed from glory to glory.’

II. The answer to the desire to see God’s glory.

The ‘Glory’ was the technical name for the lustrous cloud that hung over the Mercy-seat, but here it probably means more generally some visible manifestation of the divine presence. What Moses craved to see with his eyes was the essential divine light. That vision he did not receive, but what he did receive was partly a visible manifestation, though not of the dazzling radiance which no human eye can see and live, and still more instructive and encouraging, the communication in words of that shining galaxy of attributes, ‘the glories that compose Thy name.’ In the name specially so-called, the name Jehovah, was revealed absolute eternal Being, and in the accompanying declaration of so-called ‘attributes’ were thrown into high relief the two qualities of merciful forgiveness and retributive justice. The ‘attributes’ which separate God from us, and in which vulgar thought finds the marks of divinity, are conspicuous by their absence. Nothing is said of omniscience, omnipresence, and the like, but forgiveness and justice, of both of which men carry analogues in themselves, are proclaimed by the very voice of God as those by which He desires that He should be chiefly conceived of by us.

The true ‘glory of God’ is His pardoning Love. That is the glowing heart of the divine brightness. If so, then the very heart of that heart of brightness, the very glory of the ‘Glory of God,’ is the Christ, in whom we behold that which was at once ‘the glory as of the only begotten of the Father’ and the ‘Glory of the Father.’

In Jesus these two elements, pardoning love and retributive justice, wondrously meet, and the mystery of the possibility of their harmonious co-operation in the divine government is solved, and becomes the occasion for the rapturous gratitude of man and the wondering adoration of principalities and powers in heavenly places. Jesus has manifested the divine mercifulness; Jesus has borne the burden of sin and the weight of the divine Justice. The lips that said ‘Be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee,’ also cried, ‘Why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ The tenderest manifestation of the God ‘plenteous in mercy . . .forgiving iniquity,’ and the most awe-kindling manifestation of the God ‘that will by no means clear the guilty,’ are fused into one, when we ‘behold that Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.’

III. The answer to a great sin.

This Revelation is the immediate issue of Israel’s great apostasy.

Sin evokes His pardoning mercy. This insignificant speck in Creation has been the scene of the wonder of the Incarnation, not because its magnitude was great, but because its need was desperate. Men, because they are sinners, have been subjects of an experience more precious than the ‘angels which excel in strength’ and hearken ‘to the voice of His word’ have known or can know. The wilder the storm of human evil roars and rages, the deeper and louder is the voice that peals across the storm. So for us all Christ is the full and final revelation of God’s grace. The last, because the perfect embodiment of it; the sole, because the sufficient manifestation of it. ‘See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh.’

36)Exodus 34:7

Exodus

SIN AND FORGIVENESS

Exo. 34:7.

The former chapter tells us of the majesty of the divine revelation as it was made to Moses on ‘the mount of God.’ Let us notice that, whatever was the visible pomp of the external Theophany to the senses, the true revelation lay in the proclamation of the ‘Name’; the revelation to the conscience and the heart; and such a revelation had never before fallen on mortal ears. It is remarkable that the very system which was emphatically one of law and retribution should have been thus heralded by a word which is perfectly ‘evangelical’ in its whole tone. That fact should have prevented many errors as to the relation of Judaism and Christianity. The very centre of the former was ‘God is love,’ ‘merciful and gracious,’ and if there follows the difficult addition ‘visiting the iniquities,’ etc., the New Testament adds its ‘Amen’ to that. True, the harmony of the two and the great revelation of the *means* of forgiveness lay far beyond the horizon of Moses and his people, but none the less was it the message of Judaism that ‘there is forgiveness with Thee that Thou mayest be feared.’ The law spoke of retribution, justice, duty, and sin, but side by side with the law was another institution, the sacrificial worship, which proclaimed that God was full of love, and that the sinner was welcomed to His side. And it is the root of many errors to transfer New Testament language about the law to the whole Old Testament system. But, passing away from this, I wish to look at two points in these words.

I. The characteristics of human sins.

II. The divine treatment of them.

I. The characteristics of human sins.

Observe the threefold form of expression-iniquity and transgression and sin.

It seems natural that in the divine proclamation of His own holy character, the sinful nature of men should be characterised with all the fervid energy of such words; for the accumulation even of synonyms would serve a *moral* purpose, expressive at once of the divine displeasure against sin, and of the free full pardon for it in all its possible forms. But the words are very far from all meaning the same thing. They all designate the same actions, but from different points of view, and with reference to different phases and qualities of sin.

Now these three expressions are inadequately represented by the English translation.

‘Iniquity’ literally means ‘twisting,’ or ‘something twisted,’ and is thus the opposite of ‘righteousness,’ or rather of what is ‘straight.’ It is thus like our own ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ or like the Latin ‘in-iquity’ [by which it is happily enough rendered in our version]. So looking at this word and the thoughts which connect themselves with it, we come to this:-

[1] All sin of every sort is deviation from a standard to which we ought to be conformed.

Note the graphic force of the word as giving the straight line to which our conduct ought to run parallel, and the contrast between it and the wavering curves into which our lives meander, like the lines in a child’s copy-book, or a rude attempt at drawing a circle at one sweep of the pencil. Herbert speaks of

‘The crooked wandering ways in which we live.’

There is a path which is ‘right’ and one which is ‘wrong,’ whether we believe so or not.

There are hedges and limitations for us all. This law extends to the ordering of all things, whether great or small. If a line be absolutely straight, and we are running another parallel to it, the smallest possible wavering is fatal to our copy. And the smallest deflection, if produced, will run out into an ever-widening distance from the straight line.

There is nothing which it is more difficult to get into men’s belief than the sinfulness of little sins; nothing more difficult to cure ourselves of than the habit of considering quantity rather than quality in moral questions. What a solemn thought it is, that of a great absolute law of right rising serene above us, embracing everything! And this is the first idea that is here in our text-a grave and deep one.

But the second of these expressions for sin literally means ‘apostasy,’ ‘rebellion,’ not ‘transgression,’ and this word brings in a more solemn thought yet, viz.:-

[2] Every sin is apostasy from or rebellion against God.

The former word dealt only with abstract thought of a ‘law,’ this with a ‘Lawgiver.’

Our obligations are not merely to a law, but to Him who enacted it. So it becomes plain that the very centre of all sin is the shaking off of obedience to God. Living to ‘self’ is the inmost essence of every act of evil, and may be as virulently active in the smallest trifle as in the most awful crime.

How infinitely deeper and darker this makes sin to be!

When one thinks of our obligations and of our dependence, of God’s love and care, what an ‘evil and a bitter thing’ every sin becomes!

Urge this terrible contrast of a loving Father and a disobedient child.

This idea brings out the ingratitude of all sin.

But the third word here used literally means ‘missing an aim,’ and so we come to

[3] Every sin misses the goal at which we should aim. There may be a double idea here-that of failing in the great purpose of our being, which is already partially included in the first of these three expressions, or that of missing the aim which we proposed to ourselves in the act. All sin is a failure.

By it we fall short of the loftiest purpose. Whatever we gain we lose more.

Every life which has sin in it is a ‘failure.’ You may be prosperous, brilliant, successful, but you are ‘a failure.’

For consider what human life might be: full of God and full of joy. Consider what the ‘fruits’ of sin are. ‘Apples of Sodom.’ How sin leads to sorrow. This is an inevitable law. Sin fails to secure what it sought for. All ‘wrong’ is a mistake, a blunder. ‘Thou fool!’

So this word suggests the futility of sin considered in its consequences. ‘These be thy gods, O Israel!’ ‘The end of these things is death.’

II. The divine treatment of sins.

‘Forgiving,’ and yet not suffering them to go unpunished.

[1] God *forgives*, and yet He does not leave sin unpunished, for He will ‘by no means *clear* the guilty.’

The one word refers to His love, His heart; the other to the retributions which are inseparable from the very course of nature.

Forgiveness is the flow of God’s love to all, and the welcoming back to His favour of all who come. Forgiveness likewise includes the escape from the extreme and uttermost consequences of sin in this life and in the next, the sense of God’s displeasure here, and the final separation from Him, which is eternal death. Forgiveness is not inconsistent with retribution. There must needs be retribution, from-

[*a*] The very constitution of our nature.

Conscience, our spiritual nature, our habits all demand it.

[*b*] The constitution of the world.

In it all things work under God, but only for ‘good’ to them who love God. To all others, sooner or later, the Nemesis comes. ‘Ye shall eat of the fruit of your doings.’

[2] *God* forgives, and therefore He does not leave sin unpunished. It is divine mercy that strikes. The end of His chastisement is to separate us from our sins.

[3] Divine forgiveness and retributive justice both centre in the revelation of the Cross.

To us this message comes. It was the hidden heart of the Mosaic system. It was the revelation of Sinai. To Israel it was ‘proclaimed’ in thunder and darkness, and the way of forgiveness and the harmony of righteousness and mercy were veiled. To us it is proclaimed from Calvary. There in full light the Lord passes before us and proclaims, ‘I am the Lord, the Lord God merciful and gracious.’ ‘Ye are come . . .unto Jesus.’ ‘See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh.’ ‘This is my Beloved Son, hear Him !’

37)Exodus 34:29

Exodus

BLESSED AND TRAGIC UNCONSCIOUSNESS

Exo. 34:29. - Jdg. 16:20.

The recurrence of the same phrase in two such opposite connections is very striking. Moses, fresh from the mountain of vision, where he had gazed on as much of the glory of God as was accessible to man, caught some gleam of the light which he adoringly beheld; and a strange radiance sat on his face, unseen by himself, but visible to all others. So, supreme beauty of character comes from beholding God and talking with Him; and the bearer of it is unconscious of it.

Samson, fresh from his coarse debauch, and shorn of the locks which he had vowed to keep, strides out into the air, and tries his former feats; but his strength has left him because the Lord has left him; and the Lord has left him because, in his fleshly animalism, he has left the Lord. Like, but most unlike, Moses, he knows not his weakness. So strength, like beauty, is dependent upon contact with God, and may ebb away when that is broken, and the man may be all unaware of his weakness till he tries his power, and ignominiously fails.

These two contrasted pictures, the one so mysteriously grand and the other so tragic, may well help to illustrate for us truths that should be burned into our minds and our memories.

I. Note, then, the first thought which they both teach us, that beauty and strength come from communion with God.

In both the cases with which we are dealing these were of a merely material sort. The light on Moses' face and the strength in Samson's arm were, at the highest, but types of something far higher and nobler than themselves. But still, the presence of the one and the departure of the other alike teach us the conditions on which we may possess both in nobler form, and the certainty of losing them if we lose hold of God.

Moses' experience teaches us that the loftiest beauty of character comes from communion with God. That is the use that the Apostle makes of this remarkable incident in 2 Cor. iii, where he takes the light that shone from Moses' face as being the symbol of the better lustre that gleams from all those who 'behold [or reflect] the glory of the Lord' with unveiled faces, and, by beholding, are 'changed into the likeness' of that on which they gaze with adoration and longing. The great law to which, almost exclusively, Christianity commits the perfecting of individual character is this: Look at Him till you become like Him, and in beholding, be changed. 'Tell me the company a man keeps, and I will tell you his character,' says the old proverb. And what is true on the lower levels of daily life, that most men become assimilated to the complexion of those around them, especially if they admire or love them, is the great principle whereby worship, which is desire and longing and admiration in the superlative degree, stamps the image of the worshipped upon the character of the worshipper. ‘They followed after vanity, and have become vain,’ says one of the prophets, gathering up into a sentence the whole philosophy of the degradation of humanity by reason of idolatry and the worship of false gods. ‘They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them.’ The law works upwards as well as downwards, for whom we worship we declare to be infinitely good; whom we worship we long to be like; whom we worship we shall certainly imitate.

Thus, brethren, the practical, plain lesson that comes from this thought is simply this: If you want to be pure and good, noble and gentle, sweet and tender; if you desire to be delivered from your own weaknesses and selfish, sinful idiosyncrasies, the way to secure your desire is, ‘Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.’ Contemplation, which is love and longing, is the parent of all effort that succeeds. Contemplation of God in Christ is the master-key that opens this door, and makes it possible for the lowliest and the foulest amongst us to cherish unpresumptuous hopes of being like Him’ if we see Him as He is revealed here, and perfectly like Him when yonder we see Him ‘as He *is*.’

There have been in the past, and there are today, thousands of simple souls, shut out by lowliness of position and other circumstances from all the refining and ennobling influences of which the world makes so much, who yet in character and bearing, ay, and sometimes in the very look of their meek faces, are living witnesses how mighty to transform a nature is the power of loving gazing upon Jesus Christ. All of us who have had much to do with Christians of the humbler classes know that. There is no influence to refine and beautify men like that of living near Jesus Christ, and walking in the light of that Beauty which is ‘the effulgence of the divine glory and the express image of His Person.’

And in like manner as beauty so strength comes from communion with God and laying hold on Him. We can only think of Samson as a ‘saint’ in a very modified fashion, and present him as an example in a very limited degree. His dependence upon divine power was rude, and divorced from elevation of character and morality, but howsoever imperfect, fragmentary, and I might almost say to our more trained eyes, grotesque, it looks, yet there was a reality in it; and when the man was faithless to his vow, and allowed the crafty harlot’s scissors to shear from his head the token of his consecration, it was because the reality of the consecration, rude and external as that consecration was, both in itself and in its consequences, had passed away from him.

And so we may learn the lesson, taught at once by the flashing face of the lawgiver and the enfeebled force of the hero, that the two poles of perfectness in humanity, so often divorced from one another-beauty and strength-have one common source, and depend for their loftiest position upon the same thing. God possesses both in supremest degree, being the Almighty and the All-fair; and we possess them in limited, but yet possibly progressive, measure, through dependence upon Him. The true force of character, and the true power for work, and every real strength which is not disguised weakness, ‘a lath painted to look like iron,’ come on condition of our keeping close by God. The Fountain is open for you all; see to it that you resort thither.

II. And now the second thought of my text is that the bearer of the radiance is unconscious of it.

‘Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone.’ In all regions of life, the consummate apex and crowning charm of excellence is unconsciousness of excellence. Whenever a man begins to imagine that he is good, he begins to be bad; and every virtue and beauty of character is robbed of some portion of its attractive fairness when the man who bears it knows, or fancies, that he possesses it. The charm of childhood is its perfect unconsciousness, and the man has to win back the child’s heritage, and become ‘as a little child,’ if he would enter into and dwell in the ‘Kingdom of Heaven.’ And so in the loftiest region of all, that of the religious life, you may be sure that the more a man is like Christ, the less he knows it; and the better he is, the less he suspects it. The reasons why that is so, point, at the same time, to the ways by which we may attain to this blessed self-oblivion. So let me put just in a word or two some simple, practical thoughts.

Let us, then, try to lose ourselves in Jesus Christ. That way of self-oblivion is emancipation and blessedness and power. It is safe for us to leave all thoughts of our miserable selves behind us, if instead of them we have the thought of that great, sweet, dear Lord, filling mind and heart. A man walking on a tight-rope will be far more likely to fall, if he is looking at his toes, than if he is looking at the point to which he is going. If we fix our eyes on Jesus, then we can safely look, neither to our feet nor to the gulfs; but straight at Him gazing, we shall straight to Him advance. 'Looking off' from ourselves 'unto Jesus' is safe; looking off anywhere else is peril. Seek that self-oblivion which comes from self being swallowed up in the thought of the Lord.

And again, I would say, think constantly and longingly of the unattained. 'Brethren! I count not myself to have apprehended.' Endless aspiration and a stinging consciousness of present imperfection are the loftiest states of man here below. The beholders down in the valley, when they look up, may see our figures against the skyline, and fancy us at the summit, but our loftier elevation reveals untrodden heights beyond; and we have only risen so high in order to discern more clearly how much higher we have to rise. Dissatisfaction with the present is the condition of excellence in all pursuits of life, and in the Christian life even more eminently than in all others, because the goal to be attained is in its very nature infinite; and therefore ensures the blessed certainty of continual progress, accompanied here, indeed, with the sting and bite of a sense of imperfection, but one day to be only sweetness, as we think of how much there is yet to be won in addition to the perfection of the present.

So, dear friends, the best way to keep ourselves unconscious of present attainments is to set our faces forward, and to make 'all experience' as 'an arch wherethro' gleams that untraveiled world to which we move.' 'Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone.'

The third practical suggestion that I would make is, cultivate a clear sense of your own imperfections. We do not need to try to learn our goodness. That will suggest itself to us only too clearly; but what we do need is to have a very clear sense of our shortcomings and failures, our faults of temper, our faults of desire, our faults in our relations to our fellows, and all the other evils that still buzz and sting and poison our blood. Has not the best of us enough of these to knock all the conceit out of us? A true man will never be so much ashamed of himself as when he is praised, for it will always send him to look into the deep places of his heart, and there will be a swarm of ugly, creeping things under the stones there, if he will only turn them up and look beneath. So let us lose ourselves in Christ, let us set our faces to the unattained future, let us clearly understand our own faults and sins.

III. Thirdly, the strong man made weak is unconscious of his weakness.

I do not mean here to touch at all upon the general thought that, by its very nature, all evil tends to make us insensitive to its presence. Conscience becomes dull by practice of sin and by neglect of conscience, until that which at first was as sensitive as the palm of a little child’s hand becomes as if it were ‘seared with a hot iron.’ The foulness of the atmosphere of a crowded hall is not perceived by the people in it. It needs a man to come in from the outer air to detect it. We can accustom ourselves to any mephitic and poisonous atmosphere, and many of us live in one all our days, and do not know that there is any need of ventilation or that the air is not perfectly sweet. The ‘deceitfulness’ of sin is its great weapon.

But what I desire to point out is an even sadder thing than that-namely, that Christian people may lose their strength because they let go their hold upon God, and know nothing about it. Spiritual declension, all unconscious of its own existence, is the very history of hundreds of nominal Christians amongst us, and, I dare say, of some of us. The very fact that you do not suppose the statement to have the least application to yourself is perhaps the very sign that it does apply. When the lifeblood is pouring out of a man, he faints before he dies. The swoon of unconsciousness is the condition of some professing Christians. Frost-bitten limbs are quite comfortable, and only tingle when circulation is coming back. I remember a great elm-tree, the pride of an avenue in the south, that had spread its branches for more years than the oldest man could count, and stood, leafy and green. Not until a winter storm came one night and laid it low with a crash did anybody suspect what everybody saw in the morning-that the heart was eaten out of it, and nothing left but a shell of bark. Some Christian people are like that;

they manage to grow leaves, and even some fruit, but when the storm comes they will go down, because the heart has been out of their religion for years. ‘Samson wist not that the Lord was departed from him.’

And so, brother, because there are so many things that mask the ebbing away of a Christian life, and because our own self-love and habits come in to hide declension, let me earnestly exhort you and myself to watch ourselves very narrowly. Unconsciousness does not mean ignorant presumption or presumptuous ignorance. It is difficult to make an estimate of ourselves by poking into our own sentiments and supposed feelings and convictions, and the estimate is likely to be wrong. There is a better way than that. Two things tell what a man is-one, what he wants, and the other, what he does. As the will is, the man is. Where do the currents of your desires set? If you watch their flow, you may be pretty sure whether your religious life is an ebbing or a rising tide. The other way to ascertain what we are is rigidly to examine and judge what we do. ‘Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord.’ Actions are the true test of a man. Conduct is the best revelation of character, especially in regard to ourselves. So let us ‘watch and be sober’-sober in our estimate of ourselves, and determined to find every lurking evil, and to drag it forth into the light.

Again, let me say, let us ask God to help us. ‘Search me, O God! and try me.’ We shall never rightly understand what we are, unless we spread ourselves out before Him and crave that Divine Spirit, who is ‘the candle of the Lord,’ to be carried ever in our hands into the secret recesses of our sinful hearts. ‘Anoint thine eyes with eye salve that thou mayest see,’ and get the eye salve by communion with God, who will supply thee a standard by which to try thy poor, stained, ragged righteousness. The *collyrium*, the eye salve, may be, will be, painful when it is rubbed into the lids, but it will clear the sight; and the first work of Him, whose dearest name is *Comforter*, is to convince of sin.

And, last of all, let us keep near to Jesus Christ, near enough to Him to feel His touch, to hear His voice, to see His face, and to carry down with us into the valley some radiance on our countenances which may tell even the world, that we have been up where the Light lives and reigns.

‘Because thou sayest, I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing, and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye salve, that thou mayest see.’

38)Exodus 35:21

Exodus

AN OLD SUBSCRIPTION LIST

Exo. 35:21.

This is the beginning of the catalogue of contributions towards the erection of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. It emphasises the purely spontaneous and voluntary character of the gifts. There was plenty of compulsory work, of statutory contribution, in the Old Testament system of worship. Sacrifices and tithes and other things were imperative, but the Tabernacle was constructed by means of undemanded offerings, and there were parts of the standing ritual which were left to the promptings of the worshipper’s own spirit. There was always a door through which the impulses of devout hearts could come in, to animate what else would have become dead, mechanical compliance with prescribed obligations. That spontaneous surrender of precious things, not because a man must give them, but because he delights in letting his love come to the surface and find utterance in giving which is still more blessed than receiving, had but a narrow and subordinate sphere of action assigned to it in the legal system of the Old Covenant, but it fills the whole sphere of Christianity, and becomes the only kind of offering which corresponds to its genius and is acceptable to Christ. We may look, then, not merely at the words of our text, but at the whole section of which they form the introduction, and find large lessons for ourselves, not only in regard to the one form of Christian service which is pecuniary liberality, but in reference to all which we have to do for Jesus Christ, in the picture which it gives us of that eager crowd of willing givers, flocking to the presence of the lawgiver, with hands laden with gifts so various in kind and value, but all precious because freely and delightedly brought, and all needed for the structure of God’s house.

I. We have set forth here the true motive of acceptable service.

‘They came, every one whose heart stirred him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing.’ There is a striking metaphor in that last word. Wherever the spirit is touched with the sweet influences of God’s love, and loves and gives back again, that spirit is buoyant, lifted, raised above the low, flat levels where selfishness feeds fat and then rots. The spirit is raised by any great and unselfish emotion. There is buoyancy and glad consciousness of elevation in all the self-sacrifice of love, which dilates and lifts the spirit as the light gas smoothes out the limp folds of silk in a balloon, and sends it heavenwards, a full sphere. Only service or surrender, which is thus cheerful because it is the natural expression of love, is true service in God’s sight. Whosoever, then, had his spirit raised and made buoyant by a great glad resolve to give up some precious thing for God’s sanctuary, came with his gift in his hand, and he and it were accepted. That trusting of men’s giving to spontaneous liberality was exceptional under the law. It is normal under the Gospel, and has filled the whole field, and driven out the other principle of statutory and constrained service and sacrifice altogether. We have its feeble beginnings in this incident. It is sovereign in Christ’s Church. There are no pressed men on board Christ’s ship. None but volunteers make up His army. ‘Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy might.’ He cares nothing for any service but such as it would be pain to keep back; nothing for any service which is not given with a smile of glad thankfulness that we are able to give it.

And for the true acceptableness of Christian service, that motive of thankful love must be actually present in each deed. It is not enough that we should determine on and begin a course of sacrifice or work under the influence of that great motive, unless we renew it at each step. We cannot hallow a row of actions in that wholesale fashion by baptizing the first of them with the cleansing waters of true consecration, while the rest are done from lower motives. Each deed must be sanctified by the presence of the true motive, if it is to be worthy of Christ’s acceptance. But there is a constant tendency in all Christian work to slide off its only right foundation, and having been begun ‘in the spirit,’ to be carried on ‘in the flesh.’ Constant watchfulness is needed to resist this tendency, which, if yielded to, destroys the worth and power, and changes the inmost nature, of apparently devoted and earnest service.

Not the least subtle and dangerous of these spurious motives which steal in surreptitiously to mar our work for Christ is habit. Service done from custom, and representing no present impulse of thankful devotion, may pass muster with us, but does it do so with God? No doubt a habit of godly service is, in some aspects, a good, and it is well to enlist that tremendous power of custom which sways so much of our lives, on the side of godliness. But it is not good, but, on the contrary, pure loss, when habit becomes mechanical, and, instead of making it easier to call up the true motive, excludes that motive, and makes it easy to do the deed without it. I am afraid that if such thoughts were applied as a sieve to sift the abundant so-called Christian work of the present day, there would be an alarming and, to the workers, astonishing quantity of refuse that would not pass the meshes.

Let us, then, try to bring every act of service nominally done for Christ into conscious relation with the motive which ought to be its parent; for only the work that is done because our spirits lift us up, and our hearts are willing, is work that is accepted by Him, and is blessed to us.

And how is that to be secured? How is that glad temper of spontaneous and cheerful consecration to be attained and maintained? I know of but one way. ‘Brethren,’ said the Apostle, when he was talking about a very little matter-some small collection for a handful of poor people-’ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, how that, though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we, through His poverty, might become rich.’ Let us keep our eyes fixed upon that great pattern of and motive for surrender; and our hearts will become willing, touched with the fire that flamed in His. There is only one method of securing the gladness and spontaneousness of devotion and of service, and that is, living very near to Jesus Christ, and drinking in for ourselves, as the very wine that turns to blood and life in our veins, the spirit of that dear Master. Every one whose heart is lifted up will have it lifted up because it holds on by Him who hath ascended up, and who, being ‘lifted up, draws all men to Him.’ The secret of consecration is communion with Jesus Christ.

The appeal to lower motives is often tempting, but always a mistake. Continual contact with Jesus Christ, and realisation of what He has done for us, are sure to open the deep fountains of the heart, and to secure abundant streams. If we can tap these perennial reservoirs they will yield like artesian wells, and need no creaking machinery to pump a scanty and intermittent supply. We cannot trust this deepest motive too much, nor appeal to it too exclusively.

Let me remind you, too, that Christ’s appeal to this motive leaves no loophole for selfishness or laziness. Responsibility is all the greater because we are left to assess ourselves. The blank form is sent to us, and He leaves it to our honour to fill it up. Do not tamper with the paper, for remember there is a Returning Officer that will examine your schedule, who knows all about your possessions. So, when He says, ‘Give as you like; and I do not want anything that you do not like,’ remember that ‘Give as you like’ ought to mean, ‘Give as you, who have received everything from Me, are bound to give.’

II. We get here the measure of acceptable work.

We have a long catalogue, very interesting in many respects, of the various gifts that the people brought. Such sentences as these occur over and over again-’And every man with whom was found’ so-and-so ‘brought it’; ‘And all the women did spin with their hands, and brought that which they had spun’; ‘And the rulers brought’ so-and-so. Such statements embody the very plain truism that what we have settles what we are bound to give. Or, to put it into grander words, capacity is the measure of duty. Our work is cut out for us by the faculties and opportunities that God has given us.

That is a very easy thing to say, but it is an uncommonly hard thing honestly to apply. For there are plenty of people that are smitten with very unusual humility whenever you begin to talk to them about work. ‘It is not in my way,’ ‘I am not capable of that kind of service,’ and so on, and so on. One would believe in the genuineness of the excuse more readily if there were anything about which such people said, ‘Well, I *can* do that, at all events'; but such an all-round modesty, which is mostly observable when service is called for, is suspicious. It might be well for some of these retiring and idle Christians to remember the homely wisdom of 'You never know what you can do till you try.' On the other hand, there are many Christians who, for want of honest looking into their own power, for want of what I call sanctified originality, are content to run in the ruts that other people's vehicles have made, without asking themselves whether that is the gauge that their wheels are fit for. Both these sets of people flagrantly neglect the plain law that what we have settles what we should give.

The form as well as the measure of our service is determined thereby. 'She hath done what she could,' said Jesus Christ about Mary. We often read that, as if it were a kind of apology for a sentimental and useless gift, because it was the best that she could bestow. I do not hear that tone in the words at all. I hear, rather, this, that duty is settled by faculty, and that nobody else has any business to interfere with that which a Christian soul, all aflame with the love of God, finds to be the spontaneous and natural expression of its devotion to the Master. The words are the vindication of the form of loving service; but let us not forget that they are also a very stringent requirement as to its measure, if it is to please Christ. 'What she could'; the engine must be worked up to the last ounce of pressure that it will stand. All must be got out of it that can be got out of it. Is that the case about us? We talk about hard work for Christ. Have any of us ever, worked up to the edge of our capacity? I am afraid that if the principles that lie in this catalogue were applied to us, whether about our gold and silver, or about our more precious spiritual and mental possessions, *we* could not say, 'Every man with whom was found' this, that, and the other, 'brought it for the work.'

III. Notice, again, how in this list of offerings there comes out the great thought of the infinite variety of forms of service and offering, which are all equally needful and equally acceptable.

The list begins with 'bracelets, and earrings, and rings, and tablets, all jewels of gold.' And then it goes on to 'blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and red skins of rams, and badgers' skins, and shittim wood.' And then we read that the 'women did spin with their hands, and brought that which they had spun'-namely, the same things as have been already catalogued, ‘the blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen.’ That looks as if the richer gave the raw material, and the women gave the labour. Poor women! they could not give, but they could spin. They had no stores, but they had ten fingers and a distaff, and if some neighbour found the stuff, the ten fingers joyfully set the distaff twirling, and spun the yarn for the weavers. Then there were others who willingly undertook the rougher work of spinning, not dainty thread for the rich soft stuffs whose colours were to glow in the sanctuary, but the coarse black goat’s hair which was to be made into the heavy covering of the roof of the tabernacle. No doubt it was less pleasant labour than the other, but it got done by willing hands. And then, at the end of the whole enumeration, there comes, ‘And the rulers brought precious stones, and spices, and oil,’ and all the expensive things that were needed. The large subscriptions are at the bottom of the list, and the smaller ones are in the place of honour. All this just teaches us this-what a host of things of all degrees of preciousness in men’s eyes go to make God’s great building!

So various were the requirements of the work on hand. Each man’s gift was needed, and each in its place was equally necessary. The jewels on the high-priest’s breastplate were no more nor less essential than the wood that made some peg for a curtain, or than the cheap goat’ s-hair yarn that was woven into the coarse cloth flung over the roof of the Tabernacle to keep the wet out. All had equal consecration, because all made one whole. All was equally precious, if all was given with the same spirit. So there is room for all sorts of work in Christ’s great house, where there are not only ‘vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth,’ and all ‘unto honour . . .meet for the Master’s use.’ The smallest deed that co-operates to a great end is great. ‘The more feeble are necessary.’ Every one may find a corner where his special possession will work into the general design. If I have no jewels to give, I can perhaps find some shittim wood, or, if I cannot manage even that, I can at least spin some other person’s yarn, even though I have only a distaff, and not a loom to weave it in. Many of us can do work only when associated with others, and can render best service by helping some more highly endowed. But all are needed, and welcomed, and honoured, and rewarded. The owner of all the slaves sets one to be a water-carrier, and another to be his steward. It is of little consequence whether the servant be Paul or Timothy, the Apostle or the Apostle’s helper. ‘He worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do,' said the former about the latter. All who are associated in the same service are on one level.

I remember once being in the treasury of a royal palace. There was a long gallery in which the Crown valuables were stored. In one compartment there was a great display of emeralds, and diamonds, and rubies, and I know not what, that had been looted from some Indian rajah or other. And in the next case there lay a common quill pen, and beside it a little bit of discoloured coarse serge. The pen had signed some important treaty, and the serge was a fragment of a flag that had been borne triumphant from a field where a nation's destinies had been sealed. The two together were worth a farthing at the outside, but they held their own among the jewels, because they spoke of brain-work and bloodshed in the service of the king. Many strangely conjoined things lie side by side in God's jewel-cases. Things which people vulgarly call large and valuable, and what people still more vulgarly call small and worthless, have a way of getting together there. For in that place the arrangement is not according to what the thing would fetch if it were sold, but what was the thought in the mind and the emotion in the heart which gave it. Jewels and camel's hair yarn and gold and silver are all massed together. Wood is wanted for the Temple quite as much as gold and silver and precious stones.

So, whatever we have, let us bring that; and whatever we are, let us bring that. If we be poor and our work small, and our natures limited, and our faculties confined, it does not matter. A man is accepted 'according to that he hath, and not according to that he hath not.' God does not ask how much we have given or done, if we have given or done what we could. But He does ask how much we have kept back, and takes strict account of the unsurrendered possessions, the unimproved opportunities, the unused powers. He gives much who gives all, though his all be little; he gives little who gives a part, though the part be much. The motive sanctifies the act, and the completeness of the consecration magnifies it. 'Great' and 'small' are not words for God's Kingdom, in which the standard is not quantity but quality, and quality is settled by the purity of the love which prompts the deed, and the consequent thoroughness of self-surrender which it expresses. Whoever serves God with a whole heart will render to Him a whole strength, and will thus bring Him the gifts which He most desires.

Leviticus

1) LEVITICUS 1:1-9
2) LEVITICUS 10:1-11
3) LEVITICUS 14:1-7
4) LEVITICUS 16:1-19
5) LEVITICUS 16:22
6) LEVITICUS 23:33-44
7) LEVITICUS 25:23
8) LEVITICUS 25:42
9) LEVITICUS 25:48
10) LEVITICUS 26:10
11) LEVITICUS 26:13

1) Leviticus 1:1-9

Leviticus

THE BURNT OFFERING A PICTURE AND A PROPHECY

Lev. 1:1 - Lev. 1:9.

In considering the Jewish sacrificial system, it is important to distinguish the symbolical from the typical value of the sacrifices. The former could scarcely be quite unnoticed by the offerers; but the latter was only gradually made plain, was probably never very generally seen, and is a great deal clearer to us, in the light of Christ, the Antitype, than it could ever have been before His coming. As symbols, the sacrifices expressed great eternal truths as to spiritual worship and communion, its hindrances, requisites, manner, and blessings. They were God's picture-book for these children in religious development. As types, they shadowed the work of Jesus Christ and its results.

The value of the sacrifices in either aspect is independent of modern questions as to their Mosaic origin; for at whatever period the Priest's Code was promulgated, it equally bears witness to the ruling ideas of the offerings, and, in any case, it was long before Christ came, and therefore its prophecy of Him is as supernatural, whether Moses or Ezra were its author. I make this remark, not as implying that the new theory is not revolutionary, but simply as absolving a student of the religious significance of the sacrificial system from entering here on questions of date.

The ‘burnt offering’ stands first in Leviticus for several reasons. It was derived from patriarchal times; it was offered twice daily, besides frequently on other occasions; and in its significance it expressed the complete consecration which should be the habitual state of the true worshipper. Its name literally means ‘that which ascends,’ and refers, no doubt, to the ascent of the transformed substance of the sacrifice in fire and smoke, as to God. The central idea of this sacrifice, then, as gathered from its name and confirmed by its manner, is that of the yielding of the whole being in self-surrender, and borne up by the flame of intense consecration to God. Very beautiful is the variety of material which was permitted. The poor man’s pair of pigeons went up with as sweet an odour as the rich man’s young bull. God delights in the consecration to Him of ourselves and our powers, no matter whether they be great or small, if only the consecration be thorough, and the whole being be wrapped in the transforming blaze.

It is worth while to try to realise the strange and to our eyes repulsive spectacle of the burnt offering, which is veiled from us by its sacred associations. The worshipper leads up his animal by some rude halter, and possibly resisting, to the front of the Tabernacle, the courts of which he dared not tread, but which was to him the dwelling-place of God. There by the altar he stands, and, first pressing his hand with force on the victim’s head, he then, with one swift cut, kills it, and as the warm blood spouts from the mangled throat, the attendant priest catches it in a basin, and, standing at the two diagonally opposite corners of the altar in turn, dashes, with one dexterous twist, half of the contents against each, so as to wet two sides of the altar with one throw, and the other two with the other. The offerer then flays the reeking carcase, tossing the gory hide to the priest as his perquisite, and cuts up the sacrifice according to a fixed method. His part of the work is done, and he stands by with bloody hands while the priests arrange the pieces on the pile on the altar; and soon the odour of burning flesh and the thick smoke hanging over the altar tell that the rite is complete. What a scene it must have been when, as on some great occasions, hundreds of burnt offerings were offered in succession! The place and the attendants would look to us liker shambles and butchers than God's house and worshippers.

Now, if we inquire into the significance of the offering, it turns on two points-expiation and burning. The former it has in common with other bloody sacrifices, though it presents features of its own, even in regard to expiation. But the latter is peculiar to it, and must therefore be taken to be its special teaching. The stages in the whole process are five: the presentation, laying on of hands, slaughter, sprinkling of blood, and burning of the whole carcase. The first three are alike in this and other sacrifices, the fourth is modified here, and the last is found here only. Each has its lesson. The offerer has himself to bring the animal to the door of the Tabernacle, that he may show his willing surrender of a valuable thing. As he stands there with his offering, his thoughts would pass into the inner shrine, where God dwelt; and he would, if he were a true worshipper, feel that while God, on His part, already dwelt in the midst of the people, he, on the other hand, can only enter into the enjoyment of His presence by sacrifice. The offering was to be 'a male without blemish'; for bodily defect symbolising moral flaw could not be tolerated in the offerings to a holy God, who requires purity, and will not be put off with less than a man's best, be it ox or pigeon. 'The torn and the lame and the sick,' which Malachi charged his generation with bringing, are neither worthy of God to receive nor of us to offer. When he pressed his hand on the head of the sacrifice, what was the worshipper meant to think? In all other instances where hands are laid on, some transference or communication of gifts or qualities is implied; and it is natural to suppose that the same meaning attaches to the act here, with such modifications as the case requires. We find that it was done in other bloody sacrifices, accompanied with confession. Nothing is said of confession here; but we cannot dismiss the idea that the offerer laid his sins on the victim by that striking act, especially as the very next clause says 'it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.' The atonement was made, as we shall see, by the application of the blood to the altar; but the possibility of the victim's blood atoning for the offerer depended on his having laid his hands on its head. We may perhaps go farther than 'transference of sins.' Might we not widen the expression, and say 'identification,' or, to use a word which has become so worn by religious controversy that it slips through our fingers unnoticed, ‘substitution’? Did not the offerer say in effect, by that act, ‘This is I? This animal life shall die, as I ought to die. It shall go up as a sweet savour to Jehovah, as my being should.’

The animal invested with this representative character is next to be slain by the offerer, not by the priest, who only performed that part of the ritual in the case of national or public sacrifices. That was distinctly a vicarious death; and, as inflicted by the hand of the person represented by the animal, he thereby acknowledged that its death was the wages of his sin, and allowed the justice of his condemnation, while he presented this innocent life-innocent because not that of a moral being-as his substitute. So far the worshipper’s part goes. But now, when the act of expiation is to be symbolically represented, and, so far as outward sacrifice could, is to be accomplished, another actor appears. The priest comes forward as mediator between God and man, and applies the blood to the altar. The difference between the sprinkling of the blood, in the burnt offerings and in the other sacrifices, which had expiation for their principal object, in some of which it was smeared on the horns of the altar, and, in the most solemn of all, was carried into the holiest place, and sprinkled on the mercy-seat, suggests that the essential character of the burnt offering was not expiatory, though expiation was the foundation on which alone the essential character could be reared. The application of the blood was the formal act by which atonement was made. The word rendered ‘to make atonement’ means ‘to cover’; and the idea conveyed is that the blood, which is the life of the sacrifice, covers the sins of the offerer, so as to make them powerless to dam back the love or to precipitate the wrath of God.

With this act the expiatory portion of the ritual ends, and we may here pause to look back for a moment on it as a whole. We have pointed out the double bearings of the Mosaic ritual as symbolical and as typical or prophetic. In the former aspect, the emphatic teaching of this rite is that ‘the wages of sin is death,’ that ‘without shedding of blood there is no remission,’ that God has appointed sacrifice as the means of entering into fellowship with Him, and that substitution and vicarious penalty are facts in His government. We may like or dislike these thoughts; we may call them gross, barbarous, immoral, and the like, but, at all events, we ought not to deny that they are ingrained in the Mosaic sacrificial system, which becomes unmeaning elaboration of empty and often repulsive ceremonies, if they are not recognised as its very centre. Of course, the meaning of the sacrifices was hidden from many a worshipper. They became opaque instead of transparent, and hid the great truth which they were meant to reveal. All forms labour under that disadvantage; but that they were significant in design, and largely so to devout hearts in effect, admits of no reasonable doubt. That which they signified was chiefly the putting away of sin by the sacrifice of innocent life, which stood in the place of the guilty. Of course, too, their benefit was symbolical, and the blood of bulls and goats could never put away sin; but, under the shelter of the outward forms, a more spiritual insight gradually grew up, such as breathes in many a psalm, and such as, we cannot doubt, filled the heart of many a worshipper, as he stood by the bleeding sacrifice on which his own hands had laid the burden that had weighed so heavy on himself. How far the prophetic aspect of the sacrifices was discerned, is a more difficult question. But this at least we know-that the highest level of evangelical prophecy, in Isaiah's wonderful fifty-third chapter, is reached from this vantage-ground. It is the flower of which these ordinances are the root. We need not enlarge upon the prophetic aspect of the sacrifice. The mere negative sinlessness of the victim points to the 'Lamb without blemish and without spot,' on whom, as Isaiah says, in language dyed through and through with sacrificial references, 'the Lord hath made to meet the iniquity of us all,' and who Himself makes 'His soul an offering for sin.' The modern tendency to bring down the sacrificial system to a late date surely sins against the sacred and all-explaining law of evolution, in the name of which it is attempted, inasmuch as it is an unheard-of thing for the earlier stages of a religion to be less clogged with ceremonial than the later. Psalmist and prophet first, and priest afterwards, is not the order of development.

The remaining part of the ritual was, as we have pointed out, peculiar to the burnt offering. In it alone the whole of the sacrifice was consumed on the altar, with the exceptions of the skin, which was given to the priest, and of the contents of the intestines. Hence it was sometimes called 'a whole burnt offering.' The meaning of this provision may be apprehended if we note that the word rendered 'burn,' in Lev. 1:9, is not that which simply implies destruction by fire, but is a peculiar word, reserved for sacrificial burnings, and meaning ‘to cause to ascend in smoke or vapour.’ The gross flesh was, as it were, refined into vapour and odour, and went up to God as ‘a sweet savour.’ It expressed, therefore, the transformation of the sinful human nature of the worshipper, by the refining power of the fire of God, into something more ethereal and kindred with the heaven to which it rose. Or, to put the thought in plainer words, on the basis of expiation, the glad surrender of the whole being is possible and will ensue; and when a man yields himself in joyful self-surrender to the God who has forgiven his sins, then the fire of the divine Spirit is shed abroad in his heart, and kindles a flame which lays hold on all the gross, earthly elements of his being, and changes them into fire, kindred with itself, which aspires, in ruddy tongues of upward-leaping light, to the God to whom the heart has been surrendered, and to whom the whole being tends.

This is the purpose of expiation; this is the summit of all religion. One man has realised to the full, in his life, what the burnt offering taught as the goal for all worshippers. Jesus has lived in the constant exercise of perfect self-surrender, and in the constant unmeasured possession of ‘the Spirit of burning,’ with which He has come to baptize us all. If we look to Him as our expiation, we should also find in Him the power to yield ourselves ‘living sacrifices,’ and draw from Him the sacred and refining fire, which shall transform our grossness into His likeness, and make even us ‘acceptable to God, through Jesus Christ.’

2) Leviticus 10:1-11

Leviticus

STRANGE FIRE

Lev. 10:1 - Lev. 10:11.

This solemn story of sin and punishment is connected with the preceding chapter by a simple ‘and.’ Probably, therefore, Nadab and Abihu ‘offered strange fire,’ immediately after the fire from Jehovah had consumed the appointed sacrifice. Their sin was aggravated by the time of its being committed. But a week had passed since the consecration of their father and themselves as priests. The first sacrifices had just been offered, and here, in the very blossoming time, came a vile canker. If such licence in setting aside the prescriptions of the newly established sacrificial order asserted itself then, to what lengths might it not run when the first impression of sanctity and of God's commandment had been worn by time and custom? The sin was further aggravated by the sinners being priests, who were doubly obliged to punctilious adherence to the instituted ritual. If they set the example of contempt, would not the people better [or, rather, worsen] their instruction?

Unquestionably, their punishment was awfully severe. But we shall entirely misconceive their sin if we judge it by our standards. We are not dependent on forms as Israel was, but the spiritual religion of Christianity was only made possible by the externalism of the older system. The sweet kernel would not have softened and become juicy without the shelter of the hard shell. Scaffolding is needed to erect a building; and he is not a wise man who either despises or would keep permanently standing the scaffold poles.

We draw a broad distinction between positive commandments and moral or religious obligations. But in the Mosaic legislation that distinction does not exist. There, all precepts are God's uttered will, and all disobedience is rebellion against Him. Nor could it be otherwise at the stage of development which Israel had reached.

What, then, was the crime of these two rash sons of Aaron? That involves two questions: What did they do? and What was the sin of doing it? The former question may be answered in various ways. Certainly the designation of 'strange fire' seems best explained by the usual supposition that it means fire not taken from the altar. The other explanations, which make the sin to have been offering at an unauthorised time, or offering incense not compounded according to the prescription, give an unnatural meaning to the phrase. It was the 'fire' which was wrong,-that is, it was 'fire which they had kindled,' caught up from some common culinary hearth, or created by themselves in some way.

What was their sin in thus offering it? Plainly, the narrative points to the essence of the crime in calling it 'fire which He had not commanded.' So this was their crime, that they were tampering with the appointed order which but a week before they had been consecrated to conserve and administer; that they were thus thrusting in self-will and personal caprice, as of equal authority with the divine commandment; that they were arrogating the right to cut and carve God’s appointments, as the whim or excitement of the moment dictated; and that they were doing their best to obliterate the distinction on the preservation of which religion, morality, and the national existence depended; namely, the distinction between holy and common, clean and unclean. To plough that distinction deep into the national consciousness was no small part of the purpose of the law; and here were two of its appointed witnesses disregarding it, and flying in its face. The flash of holy fire consuming the sacrifices had scarcely faded off their eyeballs when they thus sinned.

They have had many successors, not only in Israel, while a ritual demanding punctilious conformity lasted, but in Christendom since. Alas! our censers are often flaming with ‘strange fire.’ How much so-called Christian worship glows with self-will or with partisan zeal! When we seek to worship God for what we can get, when we rush into His presence with hot, eager desires which we have not subordinated to His will, we are burning ‘strange fire which He has not commanded.’ The only fire which should kindle the incense in our censers, and send it up to heaven in fragrant wreaths, is fire caught from the altar of sacrifice. God must kindle the flame in our hearts if we are to render these else cold hearts to Him.

‘The prayers I bring will then be sweet indeed
If Thou the Spirit give, by which I pray.’

The swift, terrible punishment does indeed bear marks of the severity of that earlier stage of revelation. But it was not disproportioned to the offence, and it was not the cruelty of a martinet who avenged ceremonial lapses with penalties which should have been kept for moral offences. The surface of the sin was ceremonial impropriety: the heart of it was flouting Jehovah and His law. It was better that two men should die, and the whole nation perish not, as it would have done if their example had been followed. It is mercy to trample out the first sparks beside a powder-barrel.

There is a very striking parallel between Lev. 10:2 and the last verse of the preceding chapter. In both the same expression is used, ‘There came forth fire from before the Lord, and consumed’ [the word rendered *devoured* in Lev. 10:2 is the same in Hebrew as *consumed*] . So, then, the same divine fire, which had graciously signified God’s acceptance of the appointed sacrifice, now flashed out with lightning-like power of destruction, and killed the two rebel priests. There is dormant potency of destruction in the God who reveals Himself as gracious. The ‘wrath of the Lamb’ is as real as His gentleness. The Gospel is ‘the savour of life unto life’ and ‘of death unto death.’

Moses’ word to the stunned father is of a piece with the severity of the whole incident. No voice of condolence or sympathy comes from him. The brother is swallowed up in the lawgiver. He puts into words the meaning of the terrible stroke, and expects Aaron to acquiesce, though his heart bleeds. What was his interpretation? He saw in it God’s purpose to be ‘sanctified in them that come nigh Him.’ The priests were these. Nadab and Abihu had been consecrated for the purpose of enforcing the truth of God’s holiness. They had done the very opposite, by breaking down the distinction between sacred and common.

But their nearness to God brought with it not only corresponding obligations, but corresponding criminality and penalty, if these obligations were not discharged. If God is not ‘sanctified’ *by* His servants, He will sanctify Himself *on* them. If His people do not set forth His infinite separation from all evil and elevation above all creatures, He will proclaim these truths in lightning that kills and thunder that roars. It is a universal law which Moses sternly spoke to Aaron instead of comfort, bidding him recognise the necessity of the fearful blow to his paternal heart. ‘You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.’

The prohibition to Aaron and his sons to show signs of mourning is as stern as the rest of the story, and serves to insist upon the true point of view from which to regard it. For the official representatives of the divine order of worship to mourn the deaths of its assailants would have seemed to indicate their murmuring at God’s judgments, and might have led them to participate in the sin while they lamented its punishment. It is hard to mourn and not to repine. Affection blinds to the ill-desert of its objects. Nadab's and Abihu's stark corpses lying in the forecourt of the sanctuary, and Aaron's dry eyes and undisturbed attire, proclaim the same truths,-the gravity of the dead men's sin, and the righteous judgment of God. But the people might sorrow, for *their* mourning would help to imprint on them more deeply the lessons of the dread event.

While the victims' cousins carried their bodies to their graves in the sand, their father and brothers had to remain in the Tabernacle, because 'the anointing oil of Jehovah is upon you.' That oil, as the symbol of the Spirit, separates those on whom it is poured from all contact with death, from participation in sin, from the weight of sorrow. What have immortality, righteousness, joy in the Holy Ghost, to do with these dark shadows? Those whom God has called to His immediate service must hold themselves apart from earthly passions, and must control natural affection, if indulging it imperils their clear witness to God's righteous will.

The prohibition [Lev. 10:8] of wine and strong drink during the discharge of the priestly functions seems to suggest that Nadab and Abihu had committed their sin while in some degree intoxicated. Be that as it may, the prohibition is rested upon the necessity of preserving, in all its depth and breadth, the distinction between common and holy which Nadab and Abihu had broken down. That distinction was to be very present to the priest in his work, and how could he have the clearness of mind, the collectedness and composure, the sense of the sanctity of his office, and ministrations which it requires and gives, if he was under the influence of strong drink?

Nothing has more power to blur the sharpness of moral and religious insight than even a small amount of alcohol. God must be worshipped with clear brain and naturally beating heart. Not the fumes of wine, in which there lurks almost necessarily the tendency to 'excess,' but the being 'filled with the Spirit' supplies the only legitimate stimulus to devotion. Besides the personal reason for abstinence, there was another,-namely, that only so could the priests teach the people 'the statutes' of Jehovah. Lips stained from the wine-cup would not be fit to speak holy words. Words spoken by such would carry no power.

God's servants can never impress on the sluggish conscience of society their solemn messages from God, unless they are conspicuously free from self-indulgence, and show by their example the gulf, wide as between heaven and hell, which parts cleanness from uncleanness. Our lives must witness to the eternal distinction between good and evil, if we are to draw men to 'abhor that which is evil, and cleave to that which is good.'

3) Leviticus 14:1-7

Leviticus

THE FIRST STAGE IN THE LEPER'S CLEANSING

Lev. 14:1 - Lev. 14:7.

The whole treatment of leprosy is parabolic. Leprosy itself is a 'parable of death.' The horrible loathsomeness, the contagiousness, the non-curableness, etc. So the man was shut out from camp and from sanctuary. There was a double process in the cleansing rite, restoring to each.

I. Sketch the ceremonial. Two birds, one slain over a vessel of water so that its blood drained in. Then the living bird was to be dipped into this water and blood, along with cedar, scarlet, and hyssop, and the man sprinkled seven times and the living bird set loose.

II. The significance. This elaborate symbolism was partly intelligible even then. Two birds, like the two goats on the Atonement Day. Did both in some sense symbolise the man? The first one was not exactly a sacrifice. Its death points to the physical death which was the end of the disease, but also in some sense its death symbolised the death by which cleansing was secured.

> [*a*] The purifying water is made by blood added to it, *i.e.* cleansing by sacrifice.
>
> 'By water and by blood.'
>
> [*b*] The sevenfold sprinkling. The cedar, symbol of incorruptibility; the scarlet, of full vital energy; the hyssop, of purifying. So the thought

was suggested of the communication of cleansing, full health and incorruption, undecaying strength; all physical contrasts to leprosy sevenfold.

[*c*] The free, glad activity. The freed bird. The restored leper.

4) Leviticus 16:1-19

Leviticus

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Lev. 16:1 - Lev. 16:19.

The Talmudical treatise on the ritual of the day of atonement is entitled ‘Yoma,’ *the* day, which sufficiently expresses its importance in the series of sacrificial observances. It was the confession of the incompleteness of them all, a ceremonial proclamation that ceremonies do not avail to take away sin; and it was also a declaration that the true end of worship is not reached till the worshipper has free access to the holy place of the Most High. Thus the prophetic element is the very life-breath of this supreme institution of the old covenant, which therein acknowledges its own defects, and feeds the hopes of a future better thing. We do not here consider the singular part of the ritual of the Day of Atonement which is concerned with the treatment of the so-called ‘scapegoat’ but confine ourselves to the consideration of that part of it which was observed in the Tabernacle and was intended to expiate the sins of the priesthood and of the people. The chapter connects the rites of the Day of Atonement with the tragic death of the sons of Aaron, which witnessed to the sanctity of the inner shrine, as not to be trodden but with the appointed offerings by the appointed priest; and so makes the whole a divinely given instruction as to the means by which, and the objects for which, Aaron may enter within the veil.

I. In Lev. 16:3 - Lev. 16:10 we have the preliminaries of the sacrifices and a summary of the rites. First, Aaron was to bathe, and then to robe himself in pure white. The dress is in singular contrast to the splendour of his usual official costume, in which he stood before men as representing God, and evidently signifies the purity which alone fits for entrance into the awful presence. Thus vested, he brings the whole of the animals to be sacrificed to the altar,-namely, for himself and his order, a bullock and a ram; for the people, two goats and a ram. The goats are then taken by him to the door of the tent,-and it is to be observed that they are spoken of as both constituting one sin offering [Lev. 16:5]. They therefore both belong to the Lord, and are, in some important sense, one, as was recognised by the later Rabbinical prescription that they should be alike in colour, size, and value. The appeal to the lot was an appeal to God to decide the parts they were respectively to sustain in a transaction which, in both parts, was really one. The consideration of the meaning of the ritual for the one which was led away may be postponed for the present. The preliminaries end with the casting of the lots, and in later times, with tying the ominous red fillet on the head of the dumb creature for which so weird a fate was in store.

II. The first part of the ritual proper [Lev. 16:11 - Lev. 16:14] is the expiation for the sins of Aaron and the priesthood, and his entrance into the most holy place. The bullock was slain in the usual manner of the sin offering, but its blood was destined for a more solemn use. The white-robed priest took a censer of burning embers from the altar before the tent-door, and two hands full of incense, and, thus laden, passed into the Tabernacle. How the silent crowd in the outer court would watch the last flutter of the white robe as it was lost in the gloom within! He passed through the holy place, which, on every day but this, was the limit of his approach; but, on this one day, he lifted the curtain, and entered the dark chamber, where the glory flashed from the golden walls and rested above the ark. Would not his heart beat faster as he laid his hand on the heavy veil, and caught the first gleam of the calm light from the Shechinah? As soon as he entered, he was to cast the incense into the censer, that the fragrant cloud might cover the mercy-seat. Incense is the symbol of prayer, and that curling cloud is a picture of the truth that the purest of men, even the anointed priest, robed in white, who has offered sacrifices daily all the year round, and today has anxiously obeyed all the commands of ceremonial cleanliness, can yet only draw near to God as a suppliant, not entering there as having a right of access, but beseeching entrance as undeserved mercy. The incense did not cover ‘the glory’ that Aaron might not gaze upon it, but it covered him that Jehovah might not look on his sin. It would appear that, between Lev. 16:13 - Lev. 16:14, Aaron’s leaving the most holy place to bring the blood of the sacrifice must be understood. If so, we can fancy the long-drawn sigh of relief with which the waiting worshippers saw him return, and carry back into the shrine the expiating blood. The 'most holy place' would still be filled and its atmosphere thick with the incense fumes when he returned to perform the solemn expiation for himself and the whole priestly order. Once the blood was sprinkled on the mercy-seat, and seven times, apparently, on the ground in front of it. The former act was intended, as seems probable, to make atonement for the sins of the priesthood; the latter, to cleanse the sanctuary from the ideal defilements arising from their defective and sinful ministrations.

This completed the part of the ceremonial which belonged immediately to Aaron and the priests. It carries important lessons. Could there be a more striking exhibition of their imperfect realisation of the idea of the priestly office? Observe the anomaly inherent in the very necessity of the case. Aaron was dressed in the white robes emblematic of purity; he had partaken in the benefit of, and had himself offered, sacrifices all the year round. So far as ritual could go, he was pure, and yet so stained with sin that he dared not enter into the divine presence without that double safeguard of the incense and the blood. The priest who cleanses others is himself unclean, and he and his fellows have tainted the sanctuary by the very services which were meant to atone and to purify. That solemn ritual is intended to teach priest and people alike, that every priest 'taken from among men' fails in his office, and pollutes the temple instead of purifying the worshipper. But the office was God's appointment, and therefore would not always be filled by men too small and sinful for its requirements. There must somewhere and somewhen be a priest who will be one indeed, fulfilling the divine ideal of the functions, and answering the deep human longings which have expressed themselves in all lands, for one, pure with no ceremonial but a real purity, to bring us to God and God to us, to offer sacrifice which shall need no after atonement to expiate its defects, and to stand without incense or blood of sprinkling for himself in the presence of God for us. The imperfections of the human holders of the Old Testament offices, whether priest, prophet, or king, were no less prophecies than their positive qualifications were. Therefore, when we see Aaron passing into the holy place, we see the dim shadow of Christ, who 'needeth not to make atonement' for His own sins, and is our priest 'for ever.'

III. The ritual for the atonement of the sins of the people follows. The two goats had been, during all this time, standing at the door of the Tabernacle. We have already pointed out that they are to be considered as one sacrifice. There are two of them, for the same reason, as has been often remarked, as there were two birds in the ritual of cleansing the leper; namely, because one animal could not represent the two parts of the one whole truth which they are meant to set forth. The one was sacrificed as a sin offering, and the other led away into a solitary land. Here we consider the meaning of the former only, which presents no difficulty. It is a sin offering for the people, exactly corresponding to that just offered for the priests. The same use is made of the blood, which is once sprinkled by Aaron on the mercy-seat and seven times on the ground before it, as in the former case. It is not, however, all employed there, but part of it is carried out into the other divisions of the Tabernacle; and first, the holy place, which the priests daily entered and which is called in Lev. 16:16 'the tent of meeting,' and next, the altar of burnt offering in the outer court, are in like manner sprinkled seven times with the blood, to 'hallow' them 'from the uncleanness of the children of Israel' [Lev. 16:19]. The teaching of this rite, in its bearing upon the people, is similar to that of the previous priestly expiation. The insufficiency of sacrificial cleansing is set forth by this annual atonement for sins which had all been already atoned for. The defects of a ritual worship are proclaimed by the ritual which cleanses the holy places from the uncleanness contracted by them from the worshippers. If the altar, the seat of expiation, itself needed expiation, how imperfect its worth must be! If the cleansing fountain is foul, how shall it be cleansed, or how shall it cleanse the offerers? The bearing of the blood of expiation into the most holy place, where no Israelite ever entered, save the high priest, taught that the true expiation could only be effected by one who should pass into the presence of God, and leave the door wide open for all to enter. For surely the distance between the worshippers and the mercy-seat was a confession of imperfection; and the entrance there of the representative of the sinful people was the holding out of a dim hope that in some fashion, yet unknown, the veil would be rent, and true communion be possible for the humble soul. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us where we are to look for the realities of which these ceremonies were the foreshadowings. The veil was rent at the crucifixion. Christ has gone into 'the secret place of the

Most High,' and if we love Him, our hearts have gone with Him, and our lives are 'hid with Him, in God.'

5) **Leviticus 16:22**

Leviticus

'THE SCAPEGOAT'

Lev. 16:22.

The import of the remarkable treatment of this goat does not depend on the interpretation of the obscure phrase rendered in the Authorised Version 'for the scapegoat.' Leaving that out of sight for the moment, we observe that the two animals were one sacrifice, and that the transaction with the living one was the completion of that with the slain. The sins of the congregation, which had been already expiated by the sacrifice, were laid by the high priest on the head of the goat, which was then sent away into the wilderness that he might 'bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited' [Lev. 16:22]. Nothing depends on the fate of the goat, though, in after times, it was forced over a precipice and so killed. The carrying away of expiated sin, and not the destruction of unexpiated sinners, is the meaning of the impressive rite, and, had it been possible, the same goat that was sacrificed would have been sent into the desert. As that could not be done, an ideal unity was established between the two: the one sacrificed represented the fact of expiation, the one driven away represented the consequences of expiation in the complete removal of sin. The expiation was made 'within the veil'; but a visible token of its completeness was given to help feeble faith, in the blessed mystery of the unseen propitiation. What was divided in the symbol between the twin goats is all done by the one Sacrifice, who has entered into the holiest of all, at once Priest and Sacrifice, and with His own blood made expiation for sin, and has likewise carried away the sin of the world into a land of forgetfulness, whence it never can return.

The clear meaning of the rite is thus obtained, whatever be the force of the difficult phrase already referred to. 'Scapegoat' is certainly wrong. But it may be questioned whether the Revised Version is right in retaining the Hebrew word untranslated, and, by putting a capital letter to it, marking it as a proper name [‘for Azazel’]. The word occurs only here, so that we have no help from other passages. It seems to come from a root meaning ‘to drive away,’ and those who take it to be a proper name, generally suppose it to refer to some malignant spirit, or to Satan, and interpret it as meaning ‘a fiend whom one drives away,’ or, sometimes, ‘who drives away.’ The vindication of such an interpretation is supposed to lie in the necessity of finding a complete antithesis in the phrase to the ‘for Jehovah’ of the previous clause in Lev. 16:8. But it is surely sacrificing a good deal to rhetorical propriety to drag in an idea so foreign to the Pentateuch, and so opposed to the plain fact, that both goats were one sin offering [Lev. 16:5], in order to get a pedantically correct antithesis. In the absence of any guidance from usage, certainty as to the meaning of the word is unattainable. But there seems no reason, other than that of the said antithesis, against taking it to mean removal or dismissal, rather than ‘a remover.’ The Septuagint translates it in both ways: as a person in Lev. 16:8, and as ‘sending away’ in Lev. 16:10. If the latter meaning be adopted, then the word just defines the same purpose as is given more at length in Lev. 16:22, namely, the carrying away of the sins of the congregation. The logical imperfection of the opposition in Lev. 16:8 would then be simply enough solved by the fact that while both goats were ‘for the Lord,’ one was destined to be actually offered in sacrifice, and the other to be ‘for dismissal.’ The incomplete contrast testifies to the substantial unity of the two, and needs no introduction, into the most sacred rite of the old covenant, of a ceremony which looks liker demon-worship than a parable of the great expiation for a world’s sins.

The question for us is, What spiritual ideas are contained in this Levitical symbolism? There is signified, surely, the condition of approach to God. Remember how the Israelites had impressed on their minds the awful sanctity of ‘within the veil.’ The inmost shrine was trodden once a year only by the high priest, and only after anxious lustrations and when clothed in pure garments, he entered ‘with sacrifice and incense lest he die.’ This ritual was for a gross and untutored age, but the men of that age were essentially like ourselves, and we have the same sins and spiritual necessities as they had.

The two goats are regarded as *one* sacrifice. They are a ‘sin offering.’ Hence, to show how unimportant and non-essential is the distinction between them, the ‘lot’ is employed; also, while the one is being slain, the other stands before the ‘door of the Tabernacle.’ This shows that both are parts of one whole, and it is only from the impossibility of presenting both halves of the truth to be symbolised in one that two are taken. The one which is slain represents the sacrifice for sin. The other represents the effects of that sacrifice. It is never heard of more. ‘The Lamb of God taketh away the sins of the world.’ ‘As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us.’

I. The perfect removal of all sin is thus symbolised.

Notice [1] the vivid consciousness of sin which marked Judaism.

Was it exaggerated or right?

The same consciousness is part of all of us, but how overlaid! how stifled!

That consciousness once awakened has in it these elements-a bitter sense of sin as mine, involving guilt; despair as to whether I can ever overcome it; and fearful thoughts of my relation to God which conscience itself brings.

[2] The futility of all attempts to remove these fears.

False religions have next to nothing to say about forgiveness. Sacrifices and lustrations they have, but no assurance of absolution. Systems of philosophy and morals have nothing to say but that the universe goes crashing on, and if you have broken its laws you must suffer. That is all, or only the poor cheer of ‘Well! you have fallen, get up and go on again!’ So men often drug themselves into forgetfulness. They turn away from the unwelcome subject, and forget it at the price of all moral earnestness and often of all happiness; a lethargic sleep or a gaiety, as little real as that of the Girondins singing in their prison the night before being led out to the guillotine.

It is only God’s authoritative revelation that can ensure the cure, only He can assure us of pardon, and of the removal of all barriers between ourselves and His love. Only His word can ensure, and His power can effect, the removal of the consequences of our sins. Only His word can ensure, and His power effect, the removal of the power of evil on our characters.

[3] Still the question, Can guilt ever be cancelled? often assumes a fearful significance. Doubtless much seems to say that it cannot be.

> [*a*] The irrevocableness of the past.
>
> [*b*] The rigid law of consequences in this world.
>
> [*c*] The indissoluble unity of an individual life and moral nature, confirmed by the experience of failure in all attempts at reformation of self.
>
> [*d*] The consciousness of disturbed relations with God, and the prophecy of judgment. All this that ancient symbol suggested. The picture of the goat going away, and away, and away, a lessening speck on the horizon, and never heard of more is the divine symbol of the great fact that there is full, free, everlasting forgiveness, and on God's part, utter forgetfulness. 'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow.' 'I will remember them no more at all for ever.'

II. The bearing away of sin is indissolubly connected with sacrifice.

Two goats were provided, of which one was offered for a sin offering, indicating that sacrifice came first; then the removal of sin was symbolised by the sending away of the second goat. There is an evident reference to this sequence in the words 'without shedding of blood there is no remission.' The two goats represent Christ's work; the one in its essence, the other in its effect.

The one teaches that sacrifice is a necessary condition of pardon. Forgiveness was not given because the offerer confessed his guilt or because 'God was merciful,' but because the goat had been slain as a sin offering. There is deep spiritual truth for us in this symbolism. We do not need to enter on the philosophy of atonement, but simply to rest on the fact-that the only authority on which we can be sure of forgiveness at all indissolubly associates the two things, sacrifice and pardon. We have no reason to believe in forgiveness except from the Bible record and assurance.

Was the Mosaic ritual a divinely appointed thing? If so, its testimony is conclusive. But even if it were only the embodiment of human aspirations and wants, it would be a strong evidence of the necessity of some such thing as forgiveness.

The shallow dream that God's forgiveness can be extended without a sacrifice having been offered does not exalt but detracts from the divine character. It invariably leads to an emasculated abhorrence of evil, and detracts from the holiness of God, as well as introduces low thoughts of the greatness of forgiveness and of the infinite love of God.

III. The bearing away of sin is associated with man's laying of his sins on the sacrifice appointed by God.

We have seen that the two goats must be regarded as together making one whole. The one which was slain made 'atonement . . .because of the uncleannesses of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions, even all their sins,' but that expiation was not actually effective till Aaron had 'laid his hands on the head of the live goat, and confessed over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, . . .and put them on the head of the live goat, and sent him away into the wilderness.' The sacrifice of the slain goat did not accomplish the pardon or removal of the people's sins, but made it possible that their sins should be pardoned and removed.

Then the method by which that possibility is realised is the laying hands on the scapegoat and confessing the sins upon it. The sins which are actually forgiven, by virtue of the atonement made for all sins, are those which it bears away to the wilderness.

This answers, point for point, to repentance and faith. By these the possibility is turned into an actuality for as many as believe on Christ.

Christ has died for sin. Christ has made atonement by which all sin may be forgiven; whether any shall actually be forgiven depends on something else.

It is conceivable that though Christ died, no sin might be pardoned, if no man believed. His blood would not, even then, have been shed in vain, for the purpose of it would have been fully effected in providing a way by which any and all sin could be forgiven. So that the whole question whether any man's sin is pardoned turns on this, Has he laid his hand on Christ? Faith is only a condition of forgiveness, not a cause, or in itself a power. There was no healing in the mere laying of the hand on the head of the goat.

It was not faith which was the reason for forgiveness, but God's love which had provided the sacrifice.

God's will is not a bare will to pardon, nor a bare will to pardon for Christ's sake, but for Christ's sake to pardon them who believe. 'Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world.' 'Dost thou believe on the Son of God?' 'Through this Man is preached the remission of sins.'

6) Leviticus 23:33-44

Leviticus

THE CONSECRATION OF JOY

Lev. 23:33 - Lev. 23:44.

These directions for the observance of the great festival at the close of harvest are singularly arranged. Lev. 23:33 - Lev. 23:36 give part of the instructions for the Feast, Lev. 23:37 - Lev. 23:38 interrupt these with a summary of the contents of the chapter, and Lev. 23:39 - Lev. 23:44 pick up the broken thread, and finish the regulations for the feast. Naturally, this apparent afterthought has been pointed out as clear evidence of diversity of authorship. But a reasonable explanation may be given on the hypothesis of the unity of the section, by observing that Lev. 23:33 - Lev. 23:36 deal only with the sacrificial side of the feast, as worship proper, and thus come into line with the previous part of the chapter, which is occupied with an enumeration of the annual 'feasts of the Lord' [Lev. 23:4]. It was natural, therefore, that, when the list had been completed by the sacrificial prescriptions for the last of the series, the close of the catalogue should be marked, in Lev. 23:37 - Lev. 23:38, and that then the other parts of the observances connected with this feast, which are not sacrificial, nor, properly speaking, worship, should be added. There is no need to invoke the supposition of two authors, and a subsequent stitching together, in order to explain the arrangement. The unity is all the more probable because, otherwise, the first half would give the name of the feast as that of ‘tabernacles,’ and would not contain a word to account for the name.

We need not, then, include the separating wedge, in Lev. 23:37, in our present consideration. The ritual of the feast is broadly divided by it, and we may consider the two portions separately. The first half prescribes the duration of the feast as seven days [the perfect number], with an eighth, which is named, like the first, ‘an holy convocation,’ on which no work was to be done, but is also called ‘a solemn assembly,’ or rather, as the Revised Version reads, in margin, ‘a closing festival,’ inasmuch as it closed, not only that particular feast, but the whole series for the year. The observances enjoined, then, are the public assembly on the first and eighth days, with cessation from labour, and a daily offering. We learn more about the offering from Num. 29:12 *et seq.*, which appoints a very peculiar arrangement. On each day there was to be, as on other feast days, one goat for a sin offering; but the number of rams and lambs for the burnt offering was doubled, and, during the seven days of the feast, seventy bullocks were offered, arranged in a singular diminishing scale,-thirteen on the first day, and falling off by one a day till the seventh day, when seven were sacrificed. The eighth day was marked as no part of the feast proper, by the number of sacrifices offered on it, dropping to one bullock, one ram, and seven lambs. No satisfactory account of this regulation has been suggested. It may possibly have meant no more than to mark the first day as the chief, and to let the worshippers down gradually from the extraordinary to the ordinary.

The other half of the regulations deals with the more domestic aspect of the festival. Observe, as significant of the different point of view taken in it, that the first and eighth days are there described, not as ‘holy convocations,’ but as ‘sabbaths,’ or, as the Revised Version gives it better, ‘a solemn rest.’ Observe, also, that these verses connect the feast with the ingathering of the harvest, as does Exo. 23:16. It is quite possible that Moses grafted the more commemorative aspect of the feast on an older ‘harvest home’; but that is purely conjectural, however confidently affirmed as certain. To tumble down cartloads of quotations about all sorts of nations that ran up booths and feasted in them at vintage-time does not help us much. The ‘joy of harvest’ was unquestionably blended with the joy of remembered national deliverance, but that the latter idea was superadded to the former at a later time is, to say the least, not proven. Would it matter very much if it were? Three kinds of trees are specified from which ‘the fruit,’ that is branches with fruit on them, if the tree bore fruit, were to be taken: palms, ‘thick trees,’ that is thick foliaged, which could give leafy shade, and willows of the brook, which the Rabbis say were used for binding the others together. Lev. 23:40 does not tell what is to be done with these branches, but the later usage was to carry some of them in the hand as well as to use them for booths. The keynote of the whole feast is struck in Lev. 23:40 : ‘Ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God.’ The leafy spoils come into view here as tokens of jubilation, which certainly suggests their being borne in the hand; but they were also meant to be used in building the booths in which the whole nation was to live during the seven days, in commemoration of God’s having made them ‘dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.’ This is all that is enjoined by Moses. Later additions to the ceremonial do not concern us here, however interesting some of these are. The true intention of the feast is best learned from the original simple form. What, then, was its intention? It was the commemoration of the wilderness life as the ground of rejoicing ‘before the Lord.’ But we must not forget that, according to Leviticus, it was appointed while the wilderness life was still present, and so was not to be observed then. Was it, then, a dead letter, or had the appointment a message of joy even to the weary wanderers who lived in the veritable booths, which after generations were to make a feast of mimicking? How firm the confidence of entering the land must have been, which promulgated such a law! It would tend to hearten the fainting courage of the pilgrims. A divinely guaranteed future is as certain as the past, and the wanderers whom He guides may be sure of coming to the settled home. All words which He speaks beforehand concerning that rest and the joyful worship there are pledges that it shall one day be theirs. The present use of the prospective law was to feed faith and hearten hope; and, when Canaan was reached, its use was to feed memory and brighten godly gladness.

The feast of tabernacles was the consecration of joy. Other religions have had their festivals, in which wild tumult and foul orgies have debased the worshippers to the level of their gods. How different the pure gladness of this feast 'before the Lord' ! No coarse and sensuous delights of passion could live before the 'pure eyes and perfect witness' of God. In His 'presence' must be purity as well as 'fullness of joy.' If this festival teaches us, on the one hand, that they wofully misapprehend the spirit of godliness who do not find it full of gladsomeness, it teaches us no less, on the other, that they wofully misapprehend the spirit of joy, who look for it anywhere but 'before the Lord.' The ritual of the feast commanded gladness. Joy is a duty to God's children. There were mourners in Israel each year, as the feast came round, who would rather have shrunk into a corner, and let the bright stream of merriment flow past them; but they, too, had to open their heavy hearts, and to feel that, in spite of their private sorrows, they had a share in the national blessings. No grief should unfit us for feeling thankful joy for the great common gift of 'a common salvation.' The sources of religious joy, open to all Christians, are deeper than the fountains of individual sorrow, deep as life though these sometimes seem.

The wilderness life came into view in the feast as a wandering life of privation and change. The booths reminded of frail and shifting dwellings, and so made the contrast with present settled homes the sweeter. They were built, not of such miserable scrub as grew in the desert, and could scarcely throw shade enough to screen a lizard, but of the well-foliaged branches of trees grown by the rivers of water, and so indicated present abundance. The remembrance of privations and trials past, of which the meaning is understood, and the happy results in some degree possessed, is joy. Prosperous men like to talk of their early struggles and poverty. This feast teaches that such remembrance ought always to trace the better present to God, and that memory of conquered sorrows and trials is wholesome only when it is devout, and that the joy of present ease is bracing, not when it is self-sufficient, but when it is thankful. The past, rightly looked at, will yield for us all materials for a feast of tabernacles; and it is rightly looked at only when it is all seen as God's work, and as tending to settled peace and abundance. Therefore the regulations end with that emphatic seal of all His commands, to impress which on our hearts is the purpose of all His dealings with us as with Israel, 'I am the Lord your God.'

III. We may note our Lord’s allusions to the feast. There are probably two, both referring to later additions to the ceremonies. One is in Joh. 7:37. We learn from the Talmud that on each of the seven days [and according to one Rabbi on the eighth also] a priest went down to Siloam and drew water in a golden pitcher, which he brought back amid the blare of trumpets to the altar, and poured into a silver basin while the joyous worshippers chanted the ‘Great Hallel’ [Psa. 113:1 - Psa. 118:29], and thrice waved their palm branches as they sang. We may venture to suppose that this had been done for the last time; that the shout of song had scarcely died away when a stir in the crowd was seen, and a Galilean peasant stood forth, and there, before the priests with their empty vessels, and the hushed multitude, lifted up His voice, so as to be heard by all, and cried, saying: ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink.’ What increased force is given to the extraordinary self-assertion of such words, if we picture this as the occasion of their utterance! Leviticus gives no preeminence to any one day, but John’s expression, ‘that great day of the feast,’ may well have been warranted by later developments.

The other allusion is less certain, though it is probable. It is found in the saying at Joh. 8:12 : ‘I am the Light of the world,’ etc. The Talmud gives a detailed account of the illuminations accompanying the feast. Four great golden lamps were set up in the court, each tended by four young priests. ‘There was not a court in Jerusalem that was not lit up by the lights of the water-drawing.’ Bands of grave men with flashing torches danced before the people, while Levites ‘accompanied them with harps, psalteries, cymbals, and numberless musical instruments,’ and another band of Levites standing on the fifteen steps which led to the women’s court, chanted the fifteen so-called ‘songs of degrees,’ and yet others marched through the courts blowing their trumpets as they went. It must have been a wild scene, dangerously approximating to the excitement of heathen nocturnal festivals, and our Lord may well have sought to divert the spectators to higher thoughts. But the existence of the allusion is doubtful.

We have one more allusion to the feast, considered as a prophecy of the true rest and joy in the true Canaan. The same John, who has preserved Christ’s references, gives one of his own in Rev. 7:9, when he shows us the great multitude out of every nation ‘with palms in their hands.’ These are not the

Gentile emblems of victory, as they are often taken to be. There are no heathen emblems in the Apocalypse, but all moved within the circle of Jewish types and figures. So we are to think of that crowd of ‘happy palmers’ as joyously celebrating the true feast of tabernacles in the settled home above, and remembering, with eyes made clear by heaven, the struggles and fleeting sorrows of the wilderness. The emblem sets forth heaven as a festal assembly, as the ingathering of the results of the toils of earth, as settled life after weary pilgrimage, as glad retrospect of the meaning and triumphant possession of the issues of God’s patient guidance and wise discipline. Here we dwell in ‘the earthly house of this tabernacle’; there, in a ‘building of God . . .eternal.’ Here we are agitated by change, and wearied by the long road; there, changeless but increasing joy will be ours, and the backward look of thankful wonder will enhance the sweetness of the blessed present, and confirm the calm and sure hope of an ever-growing glory stretching shoreless and bright before us.

7) Leviticus 25:23

Leviticus

SOJOURNERS WITH GOD

Lev. 25:23.

The singular institution of the Jubilee year had more than one purpose. As a social and economical arrangement it tended to prevent the extremes of wealth and poverty. Every fiftieth year the land was to revert to its original owners, the lineal descendants of those who had ‘come in with the conqueror,’ Joshua. Debts were to be remitted, slaves emancipated, and so the mountains of wealth and the valleys of poverty were to be somewhat levelled, and the nation carried back to its original framework of a simple agricultural community of small owners, each ‘sitting under his own vine and fig-tree’ and, like Naboth, sturdily holding the paternal acres.

As a ceremonial institution it was the completion of the law of the Sabbath. The seventh day proclaimed the need for weekly rest from labour, and as was the sabbath in the week, so was the seventh year among the years-a time of quiet, when the land lay fallow and much of the ordinary labour was suspended. Nor were these all; when seven weeks of years had passed, came the great Jubilee year, charged with the same blessed message of Rest, and doubtless showing dimly to many wearied and tearful eyes some gleams of a better repose beyond.

Besides these purposes, it was appointed to enforce, and to make the whole fabric of the national wealth consciously rest upon, this thought contained in our text. The reason why the land was not to pass out of the hauls of the representatives of those to whom God had originally given it, was that He had not really given it to them at all. It was not theirs to sell-they had only a beneficiary occupation. While they held it, it was still His, and neither they, nor any one to whom they might sell the use of it for a time, were anything more than tenants at will. The land was His, and they were only like a band of wanderers, squatting for a while by permission of the owner, on his estate. Their camp-fires were here today, but to-morrow they would be gone. They were 'strangers and sojourners.' That may sound sad, but all the sadness goes when we read on-'with Me.' They are God's guests, so though they do not own a foot of soil, they need not fear want.

All this is as true for us. We can have no better New Year's thoughts than those which were taught by the blast of the silver trumpets that proclaimed liberty to the slaves, and restored to the landless pauper his alienated heritage.

I. Here is the lesson of God's proprietorship and our stewardship.

'The land is Mine' was of course true in a special sense of the territory which God gave by promise and miracle, which was kept by obedience, and lost by rebellion. But it is as really true about our possessions, and that not only because of our transient stay here. It would be as true if we were to live in this world for ever. It will be as true in heaven. Length of time makes no difference in this tenure. Undisturbed possession for ever so long does not constitute ownership here. God is possessor of all, by virtue of His very nature, by His creation and preservation of us and of all things. So that when we talk about 'mine' and 'thine,' we are only speaking a half truth. There is a great sovereign 'His' behind both. So then let us take that thought with us for use, as we pass into another year. What lessons does it give?

It should nurture constant thankfulness. To-day looking back over whatever dark, dreary, sunless days, we all have bright ones too. Does any thought of God as the Fountain of all our joys and goods rise in our souls? Have we learned to associate a divine hand and a Father's will with them? Do we congratulate ourselves on our own cleverness, tact, and skill, saying, 'mine hand hath done it,' or do we hug ourselves on our own good fortune, and burn incense to chance and 'circumstances'? -or, sadder still, are we generously grateful to every human friend that helps us, and unthankful only to God-or does the glad thought come, to gild the finest gold of our possessions with new brilliance and worth, and to paint and perfume the whitest lily of our joys with new delightsomeness, 'All things come of Thee'; 'Thou makest us drink of the river of Thy pleasures'?

Blessed are they who, by the magic glass of a thankful heart, see all things in God, and God in all things. To them life is tenfold brighter, as a light plunged in oxygen flames more intensely than in common air. The darkest night is filled with light, and the loneliest place blazes with angel faces, and the stoniest pillar is soft, to him who sees everywhere the ladder that knits earth with heaven, and to whom all His blessings are as the messengers that descend by it on errands of mercy, whose long shining ranks lead up the eye and the heart to the loving God from whom they come.

Here too is the ground for constant thankful submission. 'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.' We have no right to murmur, however we may regret, if the Landowner takes back a bit of the land which He has let us occupy. It was the condition of our occupation that He should be at liberty to do so whenever He saw that it would be best for us. He does not give us our little patches for His advantage, but for ours, nor does He take them away at His own whim, but 'for our profit.' We get more than full value for all the work and capital we have expended, and His only reason for ever disturbing us is that we may be driven to claim a better inheritance in Himself than we can find even in the best of His gifts. So He sometimes gives, that we may be led by our possessions to think lovingly of Him; and He sometimes takes, that we may be led, in the hour of emptiness and loss, to recognise whose hand it was that pulled up the props round which our poor tendrils clung. But the opposite actions have the same purpose, and like the up-and-down stroke of a piston, or the contrary motion of two cogged wheels that play into each other, are meant to impel us in one direction, even to the heart of God who is our home. A landowner stops up a private road one day in a year, in order to assert his right, and to remind the neighbourhood that he could stop it altogether if he liked. So God reminds us by our losses and sorrows, of what we are so apt to forget, and what it is such a joy to us to remember-His possession of them all. Blessed be God! He teaches us in that fashion far seldomer than in the other. Let joy teach us the lesson, and we shall the less need 'the sternest' teacher 'and the best,' even sorrow. Better to learn it by gladness than by tears; better to see it written in 'laughing flowers' than in desolate gardens and killing frost.

So, too, there should be a constant sense of responsibility in the use of all which we have. All is His, and He has given all to us, for a purpose. So, plainly, we are but stewards, or trustees, and are bound to employ everything, not according to our own inclination or notion of what is right, but according to what, in the exercise of our best and most impartial judgment, we believe to be the owner's will. Trusteeship means that we take directions as to the employment of the property from its owner. It means too that we employ it not for our own satisfaction and well-being alone, though that is included, and is a part of His purpose who 'delights in the prosperity of His servants.' Thoughts of others, thoughts of the owner's claims, and of bringing back to Him all that He has given to us, increased by our diligence, must be uppermost in our minds, if we are to live nobly or happily here. 'It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful.' And this applies to all we have in mind, body, and estate. A thoughtful expenditure and use of all His gifts, on principles drawn from our knowledge of His will, and for objects not terminating with self, is the duty that corresponds to the great fact of God's ownership of all. If we use His gifts to minister to our own vanity or frivolity, or love of ease, or display; if an 'intolerable deal' of all we have is used for ourselves, and a poor ha' porth' for others; if our gifts are grudging; if we possess without sense of responsibility, and enjoy without thankfulness, and lose with murmuring; if our hearts are more set on material prosperity than on love and peace, knowledge and purity, noble lives and a Father God; if higher desires and hopes are dying out as we 'get on' in the world, and religious occupations which used to be pleasant are stale; then for all our outward Christianity the stern old woe applies, 'Your riches are corrupted, and the rust of them shall be a witness against you,' and we need the shrill note of the trumpet of Jubilee to be blown in our ears, ‘The land is Mine.’

II. We have the teaching of the transiency of our stay here.

‘Ye are strangers and sojourners’-pilgrims who make a brief halt in a foreign country. The image has in it an allusion to the nomad life of Abraham and his son and grandson, as well as to the desert-wanderings of the people, and suggests the thought, ‘You are homeless wanderers, not having where to lay your heads, as truly when you have been settled for generations on your ancestral lands, as when you plodded wearily in the wilderness.’ It is a universal truth, ever acknowledged and forgotten, wholesome though sometimes sad to feel, and preached to even frivolous natures by the change in our calendar which a New Year brings.

How vividly this word of our text brings out the contrast between the permanence of the external world and our brief stay in it!

In Israel there would be few vineyards or olive-grounds held by the same man at two, and none at three, successive jubilees. The hoary twisted olives yielded their black berries, say, to Simeon, the son of Joseph, to-day, as they did fifty years ago to Joseph, the son of Reuben, and as they will do fifty years hence to Judas, the son of Simeon. So is it with us all. There is nothing more pathetic than the thought of how generations come and go, and empires rise and fall, while the scene on which they play their brief parts remains the same.

‘The mountains look on Marathon,

And Marathon looks on the sea.'

to-day as they did more than two millenniums ago, only the grass was for a while a little ranker on the plain. Olivet lifts the same outline against the pale morning twilight as when David went up its slope a weeping exile. The pebble that we kick out of our path had thousands of years of existence ere we were born, and may lie there unaltered to all appearance for centuries after we are dead. 'One generation cometh and another goeth, but the earth abideth for ever.'

And how much more lasting our possessions are than their possessors! Where are the strong hands that clutched the rude weapons that lie now quietly ticketed in our museums? How dim and dark the bright brave eyes that once flashed through the bars of these helmets, hanging just a little rusted, over the tombs in Westminster Abbey! Other men will live in our houses, read our books, own our mills, use our furniture, preach in our pulpits, sit in our pews: we are but lodgers in this abiding nature, 'like a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night,' and to-morrow morning vacates his rooms for a new arrival, and goes away unregretted and is forgotten in an hour.

The constant change and progression of life are enforced, too, in this metaphor.

The old threadbare emblem of a journey which is implied in the text suggests how, moment by moment, we hurry on and how everything is slipping past us, as fields and towns do to a traveller in a train. Only our journey is smooth and noiseless, like the old-fashioned canal boat travelling, where, if you shut your eyes, you could not tell that you were moving. We glide on and never know it, and so gradually and silently is the scene 'changed by still degrees,' that it is only now and then that men have any vivid consciousness that the 'fashion of this world is' ever 'in the act of passing,' like the canvas of a panorama ever winding and unwinding on its twin rollers with slow, equable motion. It needs an effort of attention and will to discern the movement, and it is worth while to make the effort, for that clear and poignant sense of the constant flux and mutation of all things around us, and of the ebbing away of our own lives, is fundamental to all elevation of thought, to all nobleness of deed, to all worthy conception of duty and of joy. Everything that is, stands poised, like Fortune, on a rolling ball. The solid earth is a movable sphere, for ever spinning on its axis and rushing on its path among the stars. Ever some star is sinking in mist, or dipping below the horizon; ever new constellations are climbing to the zenith. A long, patient discipline is needed to keep fresh in our hearts the sense of this transiency. Let us set ourselves consciously to deepen our convictions of it, and amidst all the illusions of these solid-seeming shows of things, keep firm hold of the assurance that they are but fleeting shadows that sweep across the solemn mountain's side, and that only God and the doing of His will lasts. So shall our life pierce down with its seeking roots to the abiding ground of all Being, and, looking to the 'things that are eternal,' we shall be able to make what is but for a moment contribute to the everlasting ennobling of our character and enrichment of our life yonder.

Surely these words, too, tell of the true home.

'Ye are strangers'-because your native land is elsewhere. It is not merely the physical facts of death and change that make us strangers here, but the direction of our desires, and the true affinities of our nature. If by these we belong to heaven and God, then here we shall feel that we have not where to lay our heads, and shall 'dwell in tabernacles' because 'we look for the city.'

What a contrast between the perishable tents of the wilderness and the rock-built mansions of that city. And how short this phase of being must look when seen from above! You remember how long a year, a week, seemed to you when a child-what do the first ten years of your life look to you now? What must the earthly life of Abel, the first who died, look to him even now, when he contrasts its short twenty or thirty years with the thousands since? and, after thousands and thousands more, how it will dwindle! So to us, if we reach that safe shore, and look back upon the sea that brought us thither, as it stretches to the horizon, miles of billows once so terrible will seem shrunken to a line of white foam.

Cherish, then, constant consciousness of that solemn eternity, and let your eyes be ever directed to it, like a man who sees some great flush of light on the horizon, and is ever turning from his work to look. Use the transient as preparation for the eternal, the fleeting days as those which determine the undying 'Day' and its character. Keep your cares and interests in the present rigidly limited to necessary things. Why should travellers burden themselves? The less luggage, the easier marching. The accommodation and equipment in the desert do not matter much. The wise man will say, 'Oh, it will do. I shall soon be home.' 'Ye are strangers and sojourners.'

III. We have here also the teaching of trust.

Some of us think that such thoughts as the preceding are sad. Why should they be so? They need not be. Our text adds a little word which takes all the sadness out of them. 'With Me'; that gives the true notion of our earthly life. We are strangers indeed, passing through a country which is not ours, but whilst we are sojourners, we are 'sojourners' with the king of the land. In the antique hospitable times, the chief of the tribe would take the travellers to his own tent, and charge himself with their safety and comfort. So we are God's guests on our travels. He will take care of us. The visitor has no need to trouble himself about the housekeeping, he may safely leave that with the master of the house. If the king has taken us in charge, we may be quite sure that no harm will come to us in his country. So for ourselves and for those we love, and for all the wide interests of church and world, there are peace and strength in the thought that we are the guests of God here, 'strangers and sojourners with *Him*.' Will He invite us to His table and let us hunger? Will He call us to be His guests, and then, like some traitorous Arab sheikh, break the laws of hospitality and harm His too-confiding guests? Impossible for evermore. So we are safe, and our bread shall be given us, for we are sojourners with God.

True, we are strangers, and in our constant movement we lose many of the companions of our march, and the track of the caravan may be traced by the graves on either side. But, since we are 'with Him,' we have companionship even when most solitary, and even in a strange land shall not be lonely. Seek then to cultivate as a joy and strength that consciousness that the Lord of all the land is ever with you, Whoever goes, He abides. Whatever rushes past us like a phantasmagoria, He passes not. Whatever and whoever change, He changes never. Where thou goest, He will go. He will be 'thy shield at thy right hand,’ and thy ‘keeper from all evil.’ So, looking forward to the unknown days of another New Year, we may be of good cheer.

So will it be while we live; and if this year we should die-well, the King of this land, where we are strangers, is the King of the other land beyond the sea, where we are at home. So we shall only be the nearer to Him for the change. Death the separator shall but unite us to the King, whose presence indeed fills this subject-province of His empire with all its good, but who dwells in more resplendent ‘beauty,’ and is felt in greater nearness in the other ‘land that is very far off.’ Whether here or there, we may have God with us, if we will. With Him for our Host and companion, let us peacefully go on our road, while the life of strangers and sojourners shall last. It will bring us to the fatherland where we shall be at home with the King, and find in Him our ‘sure dwelling, and quiet resting-place, and peaceful habitation for ever.’

8) Leviticus 25:42

Leviticus

GOD’S SLAVES

Lev. 25:42.

This is the basis of the Mosaic legislation as to slavery. It did not suppress but regulated that accursed system. Certainly Hebrew slavery was a very different thing from that of other nations. In the first place, no Jew was to be a slave. To that broad principle there were exceptions, such as the case of the man who voluntarily gave himself up to his creditor. But even he was not to be treated as a slave, but as a ‘hired servant,’ and at the jubilee was to be set free. There were also other regulations of various kinds in other circumstances on which we do not need to dwell. The slaves of alien blood were owned and used, but under great mitigations and restrictions.

Of course we have here an instance of the incompleteness of the Mosaic law,-or rather we may more truly say of its completeness, regard being had to the state of the world at the time. All social change hangs together. Institutions cannot be altered at a blow, without altering the stage of civilisation, of which they are the expression. ‘Raw haste’ is ‘half-sister to delay.’ What is good and necessary for one era is out of place in another. So God works slowly, and lets bad things die out, by changing the atmosphere in which they flourish.

All servitude to men was an infraction of God’s rights over Israel. God was the Israelites’ ‘Master’; they were His ‘slaves.’ He was so, because He had ‘broken the bands of their yoke, and set them free.’ There is, then, here-

I. The ground of God’s rights. ‘I brought you forth.’

II. Our servitude because of our redemption. ‘Ye are My servants.’

III. Our consequent freedom from all other masters. ‘Ye shall not be sold as bondmen.’

9) Leviticus 25:48

Leviticus

THE KINSMAN REDEEMER

Lev. 25:48.

There are several of the institutions and precepts of the Mosaic legislation which, though not prophetic, nor typical, have yet remarkable correspondences with lofty Christian truth. They may be used as symbols, if only we remember that we are diverting them from their original purpose.

How singularly these words lend themselves to the statement of the very central truths of Christianity-a slavery which is not necessarily perpetual and a redemption effected by a kinsman!

That institution of the ‘Goel’ is of a very remarkable kind, and throws great light on Christian verities. I wish, in dealing with it, to guard against any idea that it was meant to be prophetic or typical.

I. The kinsman redeemer under the old law.

The strength of the family tie in the Israelitish polity was great. The family was the unit-hence there were certain duties devolving on the nearest male relative. These, so far as we are at present concerned, were three.

[*a*] The redemption of a slave. The Mosaic legislation about slavery was very remarkable. It did not nominally prohibit it, but it fenced it round and modified it, so as to make it another thing.

Israelites were allowed to hold Gentile slaves, but under careful restrictions. Israelites were allowed to sell themselves as slaves. If the sale was to Israelites, the slavery was ended in six years or at the jubilee, whichever period came first-unless the slave had his ear bored to the doorpost to intimate his contentment in service [Exo. 21:5 - - Exo. 21:6]. This is not slavery in our sense of the word, but only a six years' engagement. If sold to a heathen in Israel, then the Goel had to redeem him; and the reason for this was that all Israelites belonged to God.

[*b*] The redemption of an inheritance.

This was the task of the kinsman-goel. The land belonged to the tribe. Pauperism was thus kept off. There could be no 'submerged tenth.' The theocratic reason was, 'the land shall not be sold at all for ever for it is Mine!'

[*c*] The avenging of murder. Blood feuds were thus checked, though not abolished. The remarkable institution of 'cities of refuge' gave opportunity for deliberate investigation into each case. If wilful murder was proved, the murderer was given up to the Goel for retribution; if death had been by misadventure, the slayer was kept in the city of refuge till the high-priest's decease.

This is the germ of the figure of the Redeemer-Kinsman in later Scripture. Notice how higher ideas began to gather round the office. The prophets felt that in some way God was their 'Goel.' In Isaiah the application of the name to Him is frequent and, we might almost say, habitual. So in Psa. 49:7, 'None can be Goel to his brother'; Psa. 49:15, 'God will be Goel to my soul from the power of the grave.'

Job. 19:25, ‘I know that my Goel liveth. . . .’

II. Our Kinsman-Redeemer.

The New Testament metaphor of ‘Redemption’ or buying back with a ransom is distinctly drawn from the Hebrew Goel’s office.

Christ is the Kinsman. The brotherhood of Christ with us was voluntarily assumed, and was for the purpose of redeeming His brethren.

He is the Kinsman-Redeemer from slavery,-a slavery which is voluntary. The soul is self-delivered to evil and sin; but blessed be God! this slavery is terminable. The kinship of Christ was needful for our redemption. ‘It behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren.’ He thus gave His life a ‘ransom’ for many. Note the objective value of His atonement, and its subjective power as setting us free.

He is the Kinsman-Redeemer of our inheritance. God is the inheritance here. The manhood of Jesus brings God back to us for our-[1] Knowledge; [2] Love; [3] Possession. Heaven is our inheritance hereafter. His manhood secures it for us. ‘I go to prepare a place for you.’ ‘An inheritance incorruptible.’ ‘The redemption of the purchased possession.’

The Kinsman-Avenger of blood. It is only in a modified sense that we can transfer this part of the Goel’s office to Jesus. The old Kinsman-Avenger of blood avenged it by shedding the shedder’s blood in retribution. But that was not the kind of vindication [for Goel means also Vindicator] for which Job looked when he used the expression. Resurrection to the vision of God was to come to him ‘at the last,’ by the standing of his Goel on the earth, and that was to be the true avenging of his death, and his vindication. The great murderer Death is to die, and his victims are to be wrested from him, and their death be proved to be the means of their fuller life. ‘Precious shall their blood be in His sight,’ and when their slayer is slain they will live for ever, partakers of their Kinsman-Redeemer’s glory, because they had been partakers of His death, and His blood had been precious in their sight. Let us cling to our Kinsman-Redeemer in all our life that He may give us freedom and an inheritance among His brethren, and, closing our eyes in death, we may commend our spirits to the ‘Angel that redeemed us from all evil,' and be sure that He will 'redeem' our 'souls from the power of the grave.'

10)Leviticus 26:10

Leviticus

THE OLD STORE AND THE NEW

Lev. 26:10.

This is one of the blessings promised to obedience. No doubt it, like the other elements of that 'prosperity' which 'is the blessing of the Old Testament,' presupposes a supernatural order of things, in which material well-being was connected with moral good far more closely and certainly than we see to be the case. But the spirit and heart of the promise remain, however the form of it may have passed away. It is a picturesque way of saying that the harvest shall be more than enough for the people's wants. All through the winter, and the spring, and the ripening summer, their granaries shall yield supplies. There will be no season of scarcity such as often occurs in countries whose communications are imperfect, just before harvest, when the last year's crop is exhausted, and it is hard to get anything to live on till this year's is ready. But when the new wheat comes in they will have still much of the old, and will have to 'bring it forth' to empty their barns, to make room for the fresh supplies which the blessing of God has sent before they were needed. The same idea of superabundant yield from the fields is given under another form in a previous verse of this chapter [Lev. 26:5]: 'Your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing time, and ye shall eat your bread to the full': which reminds one of the striking prophecy of Amos: 'Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed.' So rapid the growth, and so large the fruitfulness, that the gatherer shall follow close on the heels of the sower, and will not have accomplished his task before it is again time to sow. The prophet clearly has in his mind the old promise of the law, and applies it to higher matters, even to the fields white to harvest, where 'he that soweth and he that reapeth shall rejoice together.' In the same way we may take these words, and gather from them better promises and larger thoughts than they originally carried.

There is in them a promise as to the fullness of the divine gifts, which has a far wider reach and nobler application than to the harvests and granaries of old Palestine.

We may take the words in that aspect, first, as containing God's pledge that these outward gifts shall come in unbroken continuity. And have they not so come to us all, for all these long years? Has there ever been a gap left yawning? has there ever been a break in the chain of mercies and supplies? has it not rather been that 'one post ran to meet another,' that before one of the messengers had unladed all his budget, another's arrival has antiquated and put aside his store? True, we are often brought very low; there may not be much in the barn but sweepings, and a few stray grains scattered over the floor. We may have but a handful of meal in the barrel, and be ready to dress it 'that we may eat it, and die.' But it never really comes to that. The new ever comes before the old is all eaten up; or if it be delayed even beyond that time, it comes before the hunger reaches inanition. It may be good that we should have to trust Him, even when the storehouse is empty; it may be good for us to know something of want, but that discipline comes seldom, and is never carried very far. For the most part He anticipates wants by gifts, and His good gifts overlap each other in our outward lives as slates on a roof, or scales on a fish.

We wonder at the smooth working of the machinery for feeding a great city; and how, day by day, the provisions come at the right time, and are parted out among hundreds of thousands of homes. But we seldom think of the punctual love, the perfect knowledge, the profound wisdom which cares for us all, and is always in time with its gifts. It was that quality of punctuality extended over a whole universe which seemed so wonderful to the Psalmist: 'The eyes of all wait upon Thee, and Thou givest them their meat in due season.' God's machinery for distribution is perfect, and its very perfection, with the constancy of the resulting blessings, robs Him of His praise, and hinders our gratitude. By assiduity He loses admiration.

'Things grown common lose their dear delight.' 'If in His gifts and benefits He were more sparing and close-handed,' said Luther, 'we should learn to be thankful.' But let us learn it by the continuity of our joys, that we may not need to be taught it by their interruption; and let us still all tremulous anticipation of possible failure or certain loss by the happy confidence which we have a right to cherish, that His mercies will meet our needs, continuous as they are, and be strung so close together on the poor thread of our lives that no gap will be discernible in the jewelled circle.

May we not apply that same thought of the unbroken continuity of God's gifts to the higher region of our spiritual experience? His supplies of wisdom, love, joy, peace, power, to our souls are always enough and more than enough for our wants. If ever men complain of languishing vitality in their religious emotions, or of a stinted supply of food for their truest self, it is their own fault, not His. He means that there should be no parentheses of famine in our Christian life. It is not His doing if times of torpor alternate with seasons of quick energy and joyful fullness of life. So far as He is concerned the flow is uninterrupted, and if it come to us in jets and spurts as from an intermittent well, it is because our own fault has put some obstacle to choke the channel and dam out His Spirit from our spirits. We cannot too firmly hold, or too profoundly feel, that an unbroken continuity of supplies of His grace-unbroken and bright as a sunbeam reaching in one golden shaft all the way from the sun to the earth-is His purpose concerning us. Here, in this highest region, the thought of our text is most absolutely true; for He who gives is ever pouring forth His own self for us to take, and there is no limit to our reception but our capacity and our desire; nor any reason for a moment's break in our possession of love, righteousness, peace, but our withdrawal of our souls from beneath the Niagara of His grace. As long as we keep our poor vessels below that constant downpour they will be full. It is all our own blame if they are empty. Why should Christian people have these dismal times of deadness, these parentheses of paralysis? as if their growth must be like that of a tree with its alternations of winter sleep and summer waking? In regard to outward blessings we are, as it were, put upon rations, and 'that He gives' us we 'gather.' There He sometimes does, in love and wisdom, put us on very short allowance, and even now and then causes 'the fields to yield no meat.' But never is it so in the higher region. There He puts the key of the storehouse into our own hands, and we may take as much as we will, and have as much as we take. There the bread of

God is given for evermore, and He wills that in uninterrupted abundance ‘the meek shall eat and be satisfied.’

The source is full to overflowing, and there are no limits to the supply. The only limit is our capacity, which again is largely determined by our desire. So after all His gifts there is more yet unreceived to possess. After all His Self-revelation there is more yet unspoken to declare. Great as is the goodness which He has ‘wrought before the sons of men for them that trust in Him,’ there are far greater treasures of goodness ‘laid up’ in the deep mines of God ‘for them that fear Him.’ Bars of uncoined treasure and ingots of massy gold lie in His storehouses, to be put into circulation as soon as we need, and can use, them. Hence we have the right to look for an endless increase in our possession of God; and from the consideration of an Infinite Spirit that imparts Himself, and of finite but indefinitely expansible spirits that receive, the certainty arises of an endless life for us of growing glory; a heaven of ceaseless advance, where in constant alternation desire shall widen capacity, and capacity increase fruition, and fruition lead in, not satiety, but quickened appetite and deeper longing.

But we may also see in this text the prescription of a duty as well as the announcement of a promise. There is direction here as to our manner of receiving God’s gifts, as well as large assurance as to His manner of bestowing them. It is His to substitute the new for the old. It is ours gladly to accept the exchange, a task not always easy or pleasant.

No doubt there is a natural love of change deep in us all, but that is held in check by its opposite, and all poetry and human life itself are full of the sadness born of mutation. Our Lord laid bare a deep tendency, when He said, ‘No man having tasted old wine, straightway desireth new; because he saith the old is better.’ We cling to what is familiar, in the very furniture of our houses; and yet we are ever being forced to accept what is strange and new, and, like some fresh article in a room, is out of harmony with the well-worn things that we have seen standing in their corners for years. It takes some time for the raw look to wear off, and for us to ‘get used to it,’ as we say. So is it, though often for deeper reasons, in far more important things. A man, for instance, has been engaged in some kind of business for years, and at last God shows him, by clear indications, that he must turn to something else. How slow he is to see it, how reluctant to do it! How he cleaves to the ‘old store’ ! How he shrinks from clearing out the barn, to bring in the new! Or a household has been going on for many days unbroken, and at last a time comes when some of its members have to pass out into new circumstances; a son to push his way in the world, a daughter to brighten another fireside. It is hard for the parents to enter fully into the high hopes of their children, and to accept the new condition, without many vain longings for the old days that can never come back any more. So, all through our lives, wisdom and faith say, ‘Bring forth the old because of the new.’ Accept cheerfully the law of constant change under which God’s love has set us. Do not let the pleasant bonds of habit tie down your hearts so tightly to the familiar possessions that you shrink from the introduction of fresh elements. Be sure that the new comes from the same loving hand which sent the old in its season, and that change is meant to be progress. Do not confine yourselves within any mill-horse round of associations and occupations. Front the vicissitudes of life, not merely with brave patience, but with happy confidence, for they all come from Him whose love is older than your oldest blessings, and whose mercies, new every morning, express themselves afresh through every change. Welcome the new, treasure the old, and in both see the purpose of that loving Father who, Himself unchanged, changeth all things, and

‘. . .fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.’

In higher matters than these our text may give us counsel as to our duty. ‘God hath more light yet to break forth from His holy word.’ We are bound to welcome new truth, so soon as to our apprehensions it has made good its title, and not to refuse it lodgment in our minds because it needs the displacement of their old contents. In the regions of our knowledge and of our Christian life, most chiefly, are we under solemn obligations to ‘bring forth the old store because of the new’; if we would not be unfaithful to God’s great educational process that goes on through all our lives. It is often difficult to adjust the relations of our last lesson with our previous possessions. There is always a temptation to make too much of a new truth, and to fancy that it will produce more change in our whole mental furniture than it really will do. No man is less likely to come to the knowledge of the truth than he who is always deep in love with some new thought, ‘the Cynthia of the minute,’ and ever ready to barter ‘old lamps for new ones.’ But all these things admitted, still it remains true that we are here to learn, that our education is to go on all our days, and that here on earth it can only be carried out by our parting with the old store, which may have become musty by long lying in the granaries, to make room for the new, just gathered in the ripened field. The great central truths of God in Christ are to be kept for ever; but we shall come to grasp them in their fullness only by joyfully welcoming every fresh access of clearer light which falls upon them; and gladly laying aside our inadequate thoughts of God’s permanent revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ, to house and garner in heart and spirit the fuller knowledge which it may please Him to impart.

So the law for life is thankful enjoyment of the old store, and openness of mind and freedom of heart which permit its unreluctant surrender when newer harvests ripen. And the highest form of the promise of our text will be when we pass into another world, and its rich abundance is poured out into our laps. Blessed are they who can willingly put away the familiar blessings of earth, and stretch out, willingly emptied, expectant hands to meet the ‘new store’ of Heaven!

11)Leviticus 26:13

Leviticus

EMANCIPATED SLAVES

Lev. 26:13.

The history of Israel is a parable and a prophecy as well as a history.

The great central word of the New Testament has been drawn from it, viz. ‘redemption,’ *i.e.* a buying out of bondage.

The Hebrew slaves in Egypt were ‘delivered.’ The deliverance made them a nation. God acquired them for Himself, and they became His servants.

The great truths of the gospel are all there.

Henceforth the fact of their deliverance became the basis of all His appeals to them; the ground of His law; the reason for their obedience. In the previous context it has shaped the institution of slavery. Here it is the foundation of a general exhortation to obedience. The emphatic picture of the men stooping beneath the yoke, and then straightening themselves up, erect, illustrates the joyful freedom which Christ gives. That freedom is our subject.

I. Jesus gives freedom from the slavery of sin.

Freedom consists in power to follow unhindered the law of our being. So sin is slavery because it is contrary to that law.

When Jesus promised freedom through the truth, the Jews indignantly spurned the offer with the proud boast, which the presence of a Roman garrison in Jerusalem should have made to stick in their throats: 'We were never in bondage to any man.' A like hardy shutting of eyes to plain facts characterises the attitude of multitudes to the Christian view of man's condition. Jesus answered the Jews by the deep saying: 'He that committeth sin is the servant of sin.' A man fancies himself showing off his freedom by throwing off the restraints of morality or law, and by 'doing as he likes,' but he is really showing his servitude. Self-will looks like liberty, but it is serfdom. The libertine is a slave. That slavery under sin takes two forms. The man who sins is a slave to the power of sin. Will and conscience are meant to guide and impel us, and we never sin without first coercing or silencing them and subjecting them to the upstart tyranny of desires and senses which should obey and not command. The 'beggars' are on horseback, and the 'princes' walking. There is a servile revolt, and we know what horrors accompany that.

But that slavery under sin is shown also by the terrible force with which any sin, if once committed, appeals to the doer to repeat it. It is not only in regard to sensual sins that the awful insistence of habit grips the doer, and makes it the rarest thing that evil once done is done only once.

But he who sins is also a slave to the guilt of sin. True, that sense of guilt is for the most part and in most men dormant, but the snake is but hibernating, and often wakes and stings at most unexpected moments. 'The deceitfulness of sin' lies to the sinner, so that for the most part he 'wipes his mouth, saying I have done no harm,' but some chance incident may at any time, and certainly something will at some time, dissipate the illusion, as a stray sunbeam might scatter a wisp of mist and show startled eyes the grim fact that had always been there. And even while not consciously felt, guilt hampers the soul's insight into divine realities, clips its wings so that it cannot soar, paralyses its efforts after noble aims, and inclines it to ignoble grovelling as far away from thoughts of God and goodness as may be.

Christ makes the man bound and tied by the cords of his sins lift himself up and stand erect. By His death He brings forgiveness which removes guilt and the consciousness of it. By His inbreathed life He gives a new nature akin to His own, and brings into force a new motive, even transforming love, which is stronger than the death with which sin has cursed its doers. 'The law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.'

II. Jesus gives freedom from a slavish relation to God.

Apart from Him, God, if recognised at all, is for the most part thought of as 'austere, reaping where He did not sow,' and His commandments as grievous. Men may sullenly recognise that they cannot resist, but they do not submit. They may obey in act, but there is no obedience in their wills, nor any cheerfulness in their hearts. The elder brother in the parable could say, 'Neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment,' but his service had been joyless, and he never remembered having received gifts that made him 'merry with his friends.'

But from all such slavish, and therefore worthless, obedience, and all such reluctant, and therefore unreal, submission, Jesus liberates those who believe on Him and abide in His word. He declares God as our loving Father, and through Him we have authority to become sons of God. He 'sends forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts,' and that makes us to be no more slaves but sons. Sullen obedience becomes glad choice, and it is the inmost desire, and the deepest delight, of the loving child to do always the things that please the loving Father. 'I ought' and 'I will' coalesce, and so there is no slavery, but perfect freedom, in recognising and bowing to the great 'I must' which sweetly rules the life.

III. Christ gives deliverance from servility to men.

We need not touch on the historical connection, plain as that is, between modern conceptions of individual freedom and the influence of Christ’s teaching. Modern democracy is rooted in Christ, though it is often unaware of its genesis, and blindly attacks the force to which it owes its existence.

Because all men are redeemed by Christ, because by that redemption all stand in the same relation to Him, because all have equal access to Him, and are taught and guided by His Spirit, because ‘we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ,’ therefore class prerogatives and subject classes fade away, and there is ‘neither bond nor free,’ but ‘all are one in Christ Jesus.’

But there are other ways in which men tyrannise over men and in which Christ’s redemption sets us free.

There is the undue authority of favourite teachers and examples.

There is the tyranny of public opinion.

There is undue regard to human approbation.

There is the sway of priestcraft.

How does Christianity deliver from these? It makes Christ’s law our unconditional duty. It makes His approbation our highest joy. It gives legitimate scope to the instinct of loyalty, submission, and imitation, and of subjection to authority. It reduces to insignificance men’s judgment, and all their loud voices to a babble of nothings. ‘With me it is a very small matter to be judged of man’s judgment.’ It brings the soul into direct communion with God, and sweeps away all intermediaries.

‘Not for that we have dominion over your faith but are helpers of your joy; for by faith ye stand.’

So personal independence and individuality of character are the result of Christianity. ‘I have made you go upright.

IV. Christ gives us freedom from the power of circumstances.

Most men are made by these. We need not here enter on questions of the influence of their environment on all men’s development.

But Christ gives us-

> [*a*] A great aim for our lives high above these.
>
> [*b*] A foothold in Him outside of them. We are not the slaves of our circumstances, but their masters.
>
> [*c*] The power to utilise them.

So Christians are ‘free’ in all senses of the word.

The great Act of Emancipation has been passed for us all. Only Christ has rule over us, and we have our perfect freedom in His service. We have been sitting in the prison-house, and He has come and declared ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me to proclaim liberty to the captives.’

Numbers

1) NUMBERS 4:23
2) NUMBERS 9:16
3) NUMBERS 10:29
4) NUMBERS 10:35-36
5) NUMBERS 11:14
6) NUMBERS 13:17-33
7) NUMBERS 14:1-10
8) NUMBERS 14:19
9) NUMBERS 18:7
10) NUMBERS 20:1-13
11) NUMBERS 21:4-9
12) NUMBERS 22:6
13) NUMBERS 23:10
14) NUMBERS 31:8

1) Numbers 4:23

Numbers

THE WARFARE OF CHRISTIAN SERVICE

Num. 4:23.

These words occur in the series of regulations as to the functions of the Levites in the Tabernacle worship. The words ‘to perform the service’ are, as the margin tells us, literally, to ‘war the warfare.’ Although it may be difficult to say why such very prosaic and homely work as carrying the materials of the Tabernacle and the sacrificial vessels was designated by such a term, the underlying suggestion is what I desire to fix upon now-viz., that work for God, of whatever kind it be, which Christian people are bound to do, and which is mainly service for men for God’s sake, will never be rightly done until we understand that it is a *warfare*, as well as a work.

The phrase on which I am commenting occurs again and again in the regulations as to the Levitical service, and is applied, not only as in my text to those who were told off to bear the burdens on the march, but also to the whole body of Levites, who did the inferior services in connection with the ritual worship. They were not, as it would appear, sacrificing priests, but they belonged to the same tribe as these, and they had sacred functions to discharge. So we come to this principle, that Christian service is to be looked at as warfare.

Now, that is a principle which ought to be applied to all Christians. For there is no such thing as designating a portion of Christ’s Church to service which others have not to perform. The distinction of ‘priest’ and ‘layman’ existed in the Old Testament; it does not exist under the New Covenant, and there is no obligation upon any one Christian man to devote himself for Christ’s sake to Christ’s service and man’s help [which is Christ’s service], that does not lie equally upon all Christian people. The function is the same for all; the methods of discharging it may be widely different. Within the limits of the priestly tribe there may still be those whose office it is to carry the vessels, and those whose office it is to act more especially as ministering priests; but they are all ‘of the tribe of Levi.’ We, if we are Christian people at all, are all bound to do this work of ‘the tabernacle,’ and war this warfare.

It is important that we Christian people should elevate our thoughts of our duties in the world to the height of this great metaphor. The metaphor of the Christian life as being a ‘warfare’ is familiar enough, but that is not exactly the point which I wish to dwell upon now. When we speak about ‘fighting the good fight of faith,’ we generally mean our wrestle and struggle with our own evils and with the things that hinder us from developing a Christlike character, and ‘growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.’ But it is another sort of warfare about which I am now speaking, the warfare which every Christian man has to wage who flings himself into the work of diminishing the world’s miseries and sins, and tries to make people better, and happier because they are better. That is a fight, and will always be so, if it is rightly done.

I. Think of the foes.

Speaking generally, society is constituted upon a non-Christian basis. We talk about ‘Christian’ nations. There is not one on the face of the earth. There is not a nation whose institutions and maxims and politics and the practices of its individual members are ruled and moulded predominantly by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So every man that has come into personal touch with that Lord, and has felt that His commandments are the supreme authority in his own individual life, when he goes out into society, comes full tilt against a whole host of things that are in pronounced antagonism, or in real though unacknowledged contradiction, to the principles by which a Christian has to live for himself, and to commend to his brethren. So we have to fight. There are two things to be done-the imparting of good which will increase the sum of the world’s happiness, and the destruction of evil, which will subtract some of the world’s sorrows. The latter is always a conflict, for there are arrayed in defence of the evil vested interests, and the influence of habit, and the lowered vitality and sensitiveness of conscience which has come from breathing the polluted atmosphere which evil has vitiated. So that if we set ourselves, in humble, quiet, out-and-out dependence on Jesus Christ and submission to His will, to lead other people to submit to His will, there is nothing in the world more certain than that we shall find against us, starting up, as it were, out of the mist and taking form suddenly, a whole host of enemies. So we Christian men, as individuals, as members of a community and able to bring some influence to bear upon the conscience of society, have to fight against popular social evils, and to war for righteousness' sake.

There is another foe. There is nothing that men dislike more than being lifted up into a clearer atmosphere and made to see truths which they do not see or care for. When we first become Christians we are all hot to go and teach and preach; and we fancy that we have only to stand up, with a Bible in our hand, and read two or three texts, and our fellows will grasp them as gladly as we have done. But soon we find out that it is not so easy to draw men to Christ as we thought it would be. We have to fight against gravitation and unwillingness, when we would lift a poor brother into the liberty and the light that we are in. We have to struggle with the men that we are trying to help. We have to war, in order to bring 'the peace of God which passes understanding' into their hearts.

But the worst of all our foes, in doing Christian service, is our own miserable selves, with our laziness, and our vanity, and our wondering what A, B, and C will think about us, and the mingling of impure motives with nobler ones, and our being angry with people because they are so insensible, not so much to Christ's love as to our words and pleadings. Unless we can purge all that devil's leaven out of ourselves, we have little chance of working 'the work of the tabernacle,' or warring the warfare of God. Ah! brethren, to do anything for this world of unbelief and sin, of which we ourselves are part, is a struggle. And I know of no work that needs more continual putting a firm heel upon self, in all its subtle manifestations, than the various forms of Christian service. Not only we preachers, but Sunday-school teachers, mothers in their nurseries, teaching their children, and all of us, if we are trying to do anything for men, for Christ's sake, must feel, if we are honest with ourselves and about our work, that the first condition of success in it is to fight down self, and that only then, being emptied of ourselves, are we ready to be filled with the Spirit, by which we are made mighty to pull down the strongholds of sin.

II. The weapons of this warfare.

There are two great passages in the New Testament, both of which deal with the Christian life under this metaphor of warfare. One of these is the detailed description of the Christian armour in the Epistle to the Ephesians. There we have described the equipment for that phase of the fight of the Christian life which has to do mainly with the perfecting of the individual character. But somewhat different is the armour which is to be worn, when the Christian man goes out into the world to labour and to wage war there for Jesus Christ. We may turn, then, rather to the other of the two passages in question for the descriptions of the equipment, armour, and weapons of the Christian in his warfare for the spread of truth and goodness in the world. The passage to which I refer is in 2Co. 6:1 What are the weapons that Paul specifies in that place? I venture to alter their order, because he seems to have put them down just as they came into his mind, and we can put some kind of logical sequence into them. ‘By the Word of God’-that is the first one. ‘By the Holy Ghost,’ which is otherwise given as ‘by the power of God,’ is the next. Get your minds and hearts filled with the truth of the Gospel, and dwell in fellowship with God, baptized with His Holy Spirit; and then you will be clothed ‘as with a vesture down to your heels’ with the power of God. These are the divine side, the weapons given us from above-’the Word of God’ which is ‘the sword of the Spirit,’ and the indwelling Holy Ghost manifesting Himself in power. Then follow a series of human qualities which, though they are ‘the fruit of the Spirit,’ are yet not produced in us without our own co-operation. We have to forge and sharpen these weapons, though the fire in which they are forged is from above, and the metal of which they are made is given from heaven, like meteoric iron. These are ‘kindness, long-suffering, love unfeigned.’ We have to dismiss from our minds the ordinary characteristics of warfare in thinking of that which Christians are to wage. Like the old Knights Templars, we must carry a sword which has a cross for its hilt, and must be clad in gentleness, and long-suffering, and unfeigned love. ‘The wrath of men worketh not the righteousness of God.’ You cannot bully people into Christianity, you cannot scold them into goodness. There must be sweetness in order to attract, and he imperfectly echoes the music of the voice that came from ‘the lips into which grace was poured,’ whose words are harsh and rough, and who preaches the Gospel as if he were thundering damnation into people's ears.

Brethren, whatever be our warfare against sin, we must never lose our tempers. Harsh words break no bones indeed, but neither do they break hearts. A character like Jesus Christ-that is the victorious weapon. Let a man go and live in the world with these weapons that I have been naming, the truth of God in his heart, the Holy Spirit in his spirit, the power that comes therefrom animating his deadness and strengthening his weakness, and himself an emblem and an embodiment of the redeeming love of Christ-and though he spoke no word he would be sure to preach Christ; and though he struck no blow he would be a formidable antagonist to the hosts of evil, and the icebergs of sin and godlessness would run down into water before his silent and omnipotent shining. These are the weapons.

III. Note the temper, or disposition, of the Christian warrior-servant.

Courage goes without saying. If a man expects to be beaten, and to do nothing by his Christian witness but clear his conscience, he deserves nothing else than what he will get-viz. that his expectation will be fulfilled and he *will* do nothing else *but* clear his conscience, and that imperfectly. That is why so many preachers and Sunday-school teachers never see any conversions in their congregation or classes-because they do not expect any; because they go to their work without the enthusiastic boldness which would give power to their utterances.

I suppose concentration, too, goes without saying. When a man is on the battlefield with the swords whirling about his head, and the bayonets an inch from his breast, he does not go dreaming of scenes a hundred miles off, or think anything else than the one thing, how to keep a whole skin and wound an enemy. If Christian men will do their work in the dawdling, half-interested, and half-indifferent way in which so many of us promenade through our Christian service as if it was a review and not a fight, they are not likely to bring back many trophies of victory. You must put your whole selves into the battle. I said we must subdue ourselves ere we begin to fight. That is no contradiction to what I am saying now, for, as we all know, there is a distinction between the two selves in us-the self-centred self, which is to be crucified, and the God-centred self, which is to be nourished. You must put your whole selves into the battle.

There must, too, be discipline. One difference between a mob and an army is that the mob has as many wills as there are heads in it, and the army has only one will, that of the commander. He says to one man ‘Go!’ and he goes, and gets shot; and to another one ‘Come!’ and he comes; and to a third one ‘Do this!’ and, no matter what it is, straightway he goes and does it. So if we are soldiers we have to take orders from headquarters, and to be sure that we pay no attention to any other commands. Suppose a man is set at a certain post by his captain, and a corporal comes and says, ‘You go and do this other thing; never mind your post, I will look after that,’ to obey that is mutiny. If Jesus Christ tells you to do anything, and any others say ‘Do not do it just yet!’ neglect them, and obey Him. If your own heart says, ‘Stop a little while and try something other and easier before you tackle that task,’ be sure of the Captain’s voice, and then, whatever happens, obey, and obey at once. Warfare is a diabolical thing, but there is a divine beauty in one aspect of it-

Their’s not to make reply, Their’s not to reason why, Their’s but to do-

even if it mean ‘to die.’ Thus let us wage warfare.

IV. The Relieving Guard.

This metaphor of warfare is used in the Book of Job, in a passage where our English Version does not show it. So I venture to substitute the right translation for the one in the Authorised Version, ‘All the days of my warfare will I wait till my change comes.’ The guard will be relieved some day, and the private that has been tramping up and down in the dark or the snow, perhaps within rifle’s length of the enemy, will shoulder his gun and go into the comfortable guardhouse, and hang up his knapsack, and fling off his dirty boots, and sit down by the fire, and make himself comfortable. There is a ‘heavenly manner of relieving guard.’ Soon it will be the end of the sentry’s time, and then, as one of those that had done a good day’s work, and a long one, said with a sigh of relief, ‘I have fought a good fight.’ Henceforth the helmet is put off, which is ‘the hope of salvation,’ and the crown is put on, which is salvation in its fullness. ‘All the days of my warfare will I wait’-till my Captain relieves the guard.

2) Numbers 9:16

Numbers

THE GUIDING PILLAR

Num. 9:16.

The children of Israel in the wilderness, surrounded by miracle, had nothing which we do not possess. They had some things in an inferior form; their sustenance came by manna, ours comes by God’s blessing on our daily work, which is better. Their guidance came by this supernatural pillar; ours comes by the reality of which that pillar was nothing but a picture. And so, instead of fancying that men thus led were in advance of us, we should learn that these, the supernatural manifestations, visible and palpable, of God’s presence and guidance were the beggarly elements: ‘God having provided some better thing for us that they without us should not be made perfect.’

With this explanation of the relation between the miracle and symbol of the Old, and the reality and standing miracle of the New, Covenants, let us look at the eternal truths, which are set before us in a transitory form, in this cloud by day and fiery pillar by night.

I. Note, first, the double form of the guiding pillar.

The fire was the centre, the cloud was wrapped around it. The former was the symbol, making visible to a generation who had to be taught through their senses, the inaccessible holiness and flashing brightness and purity of the divine nature; the latter tempered and veiled the too great brightness for feeble eyes.

The same double element is found in all God’s manifestations of Himself to men. In every form of revelation are present both the heart and core of light, which no eye can look upon, and the merciful veil which, because it veils, unveils; because it hides, reveals; makes visible because it conceals; and shows God because it is ‘the hiding of His power.’ So, through all the history of His dealings with men, there has ever been what is called in Scripture language the ‘face,’ or the ‘name of God’; the aspect of the divine nature on which the eye can look; and manifested through it, there has always been the depth and inaccessible abyss of that Infinite Being. We have to be thankful that in the cloud is the fire, and that round the fire is the cloud. For only so can our eyes behold and our hands grasp the else invisible and remote central Sun of the universe. God hides to make better known the glories of His character. His revelation is the flashing of the uncreated and intolerable light of His infinite Being through the encircling clouds of human conceptions and words, or of deeds which each show forth, in forms fitted to our apprehension, some fragment of His lustre. After all revelation, He remains unrevealed. After ages of showing forth His glory, He is still ‘the King invisible, whom no man hath seen at any time nor can see.’ The revelation which He makes of Himself is ‘truth and is no lie.’ The recognition of the presence in it of both the fire and the cloud does not cast any doubt on the reality of our imperfect knowledge, or of the authentic participation in the nature of the central light, of the sparkles of it which reach us. We know with a real knowledge what we know of Him. What He shows us is Himself, though not His whole self.

This double aspect of all possible revelation of God, which was symbolised in comparatively gross external form in the pillar that led Israel on its march, and lay stretched out and quiescent, a guarding covering above the Tabernacle when the weary march was still, recurs all through the history of Old Testament revelation by type and prophecy and ceremony, in which the encompassing cloud was comparatively dense, and the light which pierced it relatively faint. It reappears in both elements in Christ, but combined in new proportions, so as that ‘the veil, that is to say, His flesh,’ is thinned to transparency and all aglow with the indwelling lustre of manifest Deity. So a light, set in some fair alabaster vase, shines through its translucent walls, bringing out every delicate tint and meandering vein of colour, while itself diffused and softened by the enwrapping medium which it beautifies by passing through its purity. Both are made visible and attractive to dull eyes by the conjunction. ‘He that hath seen Christ hath seen the Father,’ and he that hath seen the Father in Christ hath seen the man Christ, as none see

Him who are blind to the incarnate deity which illuminates the manhood in which it dwells.

But we have to note also the varying appearance of the pillar according to need. There was a double change in the pillar according to the hour, and according as the congregation was on the march or encamped. By day it was a cloud, by night it glowed in the darkness. On the march it moved before them, an upright pillar, as gathered together for energetic movement; when the camp rested it 'returned to the many thousands of Israel' and lay quietly stretched above the Tabernacle like one of the long-drawn, motionless clouds above the setting summer sun, glowing through all its substance with unflashing radiance reflected from unseen light, and 'on all the glory' [shrined in the Holy Place beneath] was 'a defence.'

Both these changes of aspect symbolise for us the reality of the Protean capacity of change according to our ever-varying needs, which for our blessing we may find in that ever-changing, unchanging, divine Presence which will be our companion, if we will.

It was not only by a natural process that, as daylight declined, what had seemed but a column of smoke in the fervid desert sunlight, brightened into a column of fire, blazing amid the clear stars. But we may well believe in an actual admeasurement of the degree of light, correspondent to the darkness and to the need for certitude and cheering sense of God's protection, which the defenceless camp would feel as they lay down to rest.

When the deceitful brightness of earth glistens and dazzles around us, our vision of Him may be 'a cloudy screen to temper the deceitful ray'; and when 'there stoops on our path, in storm and shade, the frequent night,' as earth grows darker, and life becomes greyer and more sombre, and verges to its eventide, the pillar blazes brighter before the weeping eye, and draws nearer to the lonely heart. We have a God who manifests Himself in the pillar of cloud by day, and in flaming fire by night.

II. Note the guidance of the pillar.

When it lifts the camp marches; when it glides down and lies motionless the march is stopped, and the tents are pitched. The main point which is dwelt upon in this description of the God-guided pilgrimage of the wandering people is the absolute uncertainty in which they were kept as to the duration of their encampment, and as to the time and circumstances of their march. Sometimes the cloud tarried upon the Tabernacle many days; sometimes for a night only; sometimes it lifted in the night. 'Whether it was by day or by night that the cloud was taken up, they journeyed. Or whether it were two days, or a month, or a year that the cloud tarried upon the Tabernacle, remaining thereon, the children of Israel abode in their tents, and journeyed not: but when it was taken up they journeyed.' So never, from moment to moment, did they know when the moving cloud might settle, or the resting cloud might soar. Therefore, absolute uncertainty as to the next stage was visibly represented before them by that hovering guide which determined everything, and concerning whose next movement they knew absolutely nothing.

Is not that all true about us? We have no guiding cloud like this. So much the better. Have we not a more real guide? God guides us by circumstances, God guides us by His word, God guides us by His Spirit, speaking through our common-sense and in our understandings, and, most of all, God guides us by that dear Son of His, in whom is the fire and round whom is the cloud. And perhaps we may even suppose that our Lord implies some allusion to this very symbol in His own great words, 'I am the Light of the world. He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.' For the conception of 'following' the light seems to make it plain that our Lord's image is not that of the sun in the heavens, or any such supernal light, but that of some light which comes near enough to a man to move before him, and behind which he can march. So, I think, that Christ Himself laid His hand upon this ancient symbol, and in these great words said in effect, 'I am that which it only shadowed and foretold.' At all events, whether in them He was pointing to our text or no, we must feel that He is the reality which was expressed by this outward symbol. And no man who can say, 'Jesus Christ is the Captain of my salvation, and after His pattern I march; at the pointing of His guiding finger I move; and in His footsteps, He being my helper, I try to tread,' need feel or fancy that any possible pillar, floating before the dullest eye, was a better, surer, or diviner guide than he possesses. They whom Christ guides want none other for leader, pattern, counsellor, companion, reward. This Christ is our Christ 'for ever and ever, He will be our guide even unto death' and beyond it. The pillar that we follow, which will glow with the ruddy flame of love in the darkest hours of life-blessed be His name!-will glide in front of us through the 'valley of the shadow of death,' brightest then when the murky midnight is blackest. Nor will the pillar which guides us cease to blaze, as did the guide of the desert march, when Jordan has been crossed. It will still move before us on paths of continuous and ever-increasing approach to infinite perfection. They who here follow Christ afar off and with faltering steps shall there 'follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.'

In like manner, the same absolute uncertainty which was intended to keep the Israelites [though it failed often to do so] in the attitude of constant dependence, is the condition in which we all have to live, though we mask it from ourselves. That we do not know what lies before us is a commonplace. The same long tracts of monotonous continuance in the same place and doing the same duties befall us that befell these men. Years pass, and the pillar spreads itself out, a defence above the unmoving sanctuary. And then, all in a flash, when we are least thinking of change, it gathers itself together, is a pillar again, shoots upwards, and moves forwards; and it is for us to go after it. And so our lives are shuttlecocked between uniform sameness which may become mechanical monotony, and agitation by change which may make us lose our hold of fixed principles and calm faith, unless we recognise that the continuance and the change are alike the will of the guiding God, whose will is signified by the stationary or moving pillar.

III. That leads me to the last thing that I would note-viz. the docile following of the Guide.

In the context, the writer does not seem to be able to get away from the thought that whatever the pillar indicated, immediate prompt obedience followed. He says so over and over and over again. 'As long as the cloud abode they rested, and when the cloud tarried long they journeyed not'; and 'when the cloud was a few days on the Tabernacle they abode'; and 'according to the commandment they journeyed'; and 'when the cloud abode until the morning they journeyed'; and 'whether it were two days, or a month, or a year that the cloud tarried they journeyed not, but abode in their tents.' So, after he has reiterated the thing half a dozen times or more, he finishes by putting it all again in one verse, as the last impression which he would leave from the whole narrative-'at the commandment of the Lord they rested in their tents, and at the commandment of the Lord they journeyed.' Obedience was prompt; whensoever and for whatsoever the signal was given, the men were ready. In the night, after they had had their tents pitched for a long period, when only the watchers' eyes were open, the pillar lifts, and in an instant the alarm is given, and all the camp is in a bustle. That is what we have to set before us as the type of our lives. We are to be as ready for every indication of God's will as they were. The peace and blessedness of our lives largely depend on our being eager to obey, and therefore quick to perceive, the slightest sign of motion in the resting, or of rest in the moving, pillar which regulates our march and our encamping.

What do we need in order to cultivate and keep such a disposition? We need perpetual watchfulness lest the pillar should lift unnoticed. When Nelson was second in command at Copenhagen, the admiral in command of the fleet hoisted the signal for recall, and Nelson put his telescope to his blind eye and said, 'I do not see it.' That is very like what we are tempted to do. When the signal for unpleasant duties that we would gladly get out of is hoisted, we are very apt to put the telescope to the blind eye, and pretend to ourselves that we do not see the fluttering flags. We need still more to keep our wills in absolute suspense, if His will has not declared itself. Do not let us be in a hurry to run before God. When the Israelites were crossing the Jordan, they were told to leave a great space between themselves and the guiding ark, that they might know how to go, because they had 'not passed that way heretofore.' Impatient hurrying at God's heels is apt to lead us astray. Let Him get well in front, that you may be quite sure which way He desires you to go, before you go. And if you are not sure which way He desires you to go, be sure that He does not at that moment desire you to go anywhere.

We need to hold the present with a slack hand, so as to be ready to fold our tents and take to the road, if God will. We must not reckon on continuance, nor strike our roots so deep that it needs a hurricane to remove us. To those who set their gaze on Christ, no present, from which He wishes them to remove, can be so good for them as the new conditions into which He would have them pass. It is hard to leave the spot, though it be in the desert, where we have so long encamped that it has come to feel like home. We may look with regret on the circle of black ashes on the sand where our little fire glinted cheerily, and our feet may ache, and our hearts ache more, as we begin our tramp once again, but we must set ourselves to meet the God-appointed change cheerfully, in the confidence that nothing will be left behind which it is not good to lose, nor anything met which does not bring a blessing, however its first aspect may be harsh or sad.

We need, too, to cultivate the habit of prompt obedience. It is usually reluctance which puts the drag on. Slow obedience is often the germ of incipient disobedience. In matters of prudence and of intellect, second thoughts are better than first, and third thoughts, which often come back to first ones, better than second; but in matters of duty, first thoughts are generally best. They are the instinctive response of conscience to the voice of God, while second thoughts are too often the objections of disinclination, or sloth, or cowardice. It is easiest to do our duty when we are at first sure of it. It then comes with an impelling power which carries us over obstacles as on the crest of a wave, while hesitation and delay leave us stranded in shoal water. If we would follow the pillar, we must follow it at once.

A heart that waits and watches for God’s direction, that uses common-sense as well as faith to unravel small and great perplexities, and is willing to sit loose to the present, however pleasant, in order that it may not miss the indications which say, ‘Arise, this is not your rest,’ fulfils the conditions on which, if we keep them, we may be sure that He will guide us by the right way, and bring us at last to ‘the city of habitation.’

3) Numbers 10:29

Numbers

HOBAB

Num. 10:29.

There is some doubt with regard to the identity of this Hobab. Probably he was a man of about the same age as Moses, his brother-in-law, and a son of

Jethro, a wily Kenite, a Bedouin Arab. Moses begs him to join himself to his motley company, and to be to him in the wilderness ‘instead of eyes.’ What did Moses want a man for, when he had the cloud? What do we want common-sense for, when we have God’s Spirit? What do we want experience and counsel for, when we have divine guidance promised to us? The two things work in together. The cloud led the march, but it was very well to have a man that knew all about the oases and the wells, the situation of which was known only to the desert-born tribes, and who could teach the helpless slaves from Goshen the secrets of camp life. So Moses pressed Hobab to change his position, to break with his past, and to launch himself into an altogether new and untried sort of life.

And what does he plead with him as the reason? ‘We will do thee good, for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel.’ Probably Hobab looked rather shy at the security, for I suppose he was no worshipper of Jehovah, and he said, ‘No; I had rather go home to my own people and my own kindred and my father’s house where I fit in, and keep to my own ways, and have something a little more definite to lay hold of than your promise, or the promise of your Jehovah that lies behind it. These are not solid, and I am going back to my tribe.’ But Moses pressed and he at last consented, and the following verses suggest that the arrangement was made satisfactorily, and that the journeyings began prosperously. In the Book of Judges we find traces of the presence of Hobab’s descendants as incorporated among the people of Israel. One of them came to be somebody, the Jael who struck the tent-peg through the temples of the sleeping Sisera, for she is called ‘the wife of Heber the *Kenite*.’ Probably, then, in some sense Hobab must have become a worshipper of Jehovah, and have cast in his lot with his brother-in-law and his people. I do not set Hobab up as a shining example. We do not know much about his religion. But it seems to me that this little glimpse into a long-forgotten and unimportant life may teach us two or three things about the venture of faith, the life of faith, and the reward of faith.

I. The venture of faith.

I have already said that Hobab had nothing in the world to trust to except Moses’ word, and Moses’ report of God’s Word. ‘We will do you good; God has said that He will do good to us, and you shall have your share in it.’ It was a grave thing, and, in many circumstances, would have been a supremely foolish thing, credulous to the verge of insanity, to risk all upon the mere promise of one in Moses' position, who had so little in his own power with which to fulfil the promise; and who referred him to an unseen divinity, somewhere or other; and so drew bills upon heaven and futurity, and did not feel himself at all bound to pay them when they fell due, unless God should give him the cash to do it with. But Hobab took the plunge, he ventured all upon these two promises-Moses' word, and God's word that underlay it.

Now that is just what we have to do. For, after all talking about reasons for belief, and evidences of religion, and all the rest of it, it all comes to this at last-will you risk everything on Jesus Christ's bare word? There are plenty of reasons for doing so, but what I wish to bring out is this, that the living heart and root of true Christianity is neither more nor less than the absolute and utter reliance upon nothing else but Christ, and therefore on His word. He did not even condescend to give reasons for that reliance, for His most solemn assurance was just this, 'Verily, verily, I say unto you.' That is as much as to say, 'If you do not see in Me, without any more argument, reason enough for believing Me, you do not see Me at all.'

Christ did not argue-He asserted, and in default of all other proof, if I might venture to say so, He put His own personality into the scales and said, 'There, that will outweigh everything.' So no wonder that 'they were astonished at His doctrine,'-not so much at the substance of it as at the tone of it, 'for He taught them *with authority*.'

But what right had He to teach them with authority? What right has He to present Himself there in front of us and proclaim, 'I say unto you, and there is an end of it'? The heart and essence of Christian faith is doing, in a far sublimer fashion, precisely what this wild Arab did, when he uprooted himself from the conditions in which his life had grown up, and flung himself into an unknown future, on bare trust in a bare word. Jesus Christ asks us to do the same by Him. Whether His word comes to us revealing, or commanding, or promising, it is absolute, and, for His true followers, ends all controversy, all hesitation, all reluctance. When He commands it is ours to obey and live. And when He promises it is for us to twine all the tendrils of our expectations round that faithful word, and by faith to make ‘the anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast.’ The venture of faith takes a *word* for the most solid thing in the universe, and the Incarnate Word of God for the basis of all our hope, the authority for all our conduct, ‘the Master-light of all our seeing.’

II. Hobab suggests to us, secondly-

The sort of life that follows the venture of faith. The hindrances to his joining Moses were plainly put by himself. He said in effect, ‘I will not come; I will depart to mine own land and to my kindred. Why should I attach myself to a horde of strangers, and go wandering about the desert for the rest of my life, looking out for encampments for them, when I can return to where I have been all my days; and be surrounded by the familiar atmosphere of friends and relatives?’ But he bethought himself that there was a nobler life to live than that, and because he was stirred by the impulse of reliance on Moses and his promise, and perhaps by some germ of reliance on Moses’ God, he finally said, ‘The die is cast. I choose my side. I will break with the past. I turn my back on kindred and home. Here I draw a broad line across the page, and begin over again in an altogether new kind of life. I identify myself with these wanderers; sharing their fortunes, hoping to share their prosperity, and taking their God for my God.’ He had perhaps not been a nomad before, for there still are permanent settlements as well as nomad encampments in Arabia, as there were in those days, and he and his relatives, from the few facts that we know of them, seem to have had a fixed home, with a very narrow zone of wandering round it. So Hobab, an old man probably, if he was anything like the age of his connection by marriage, Moses, who was eighty at this time, makes up his mind to begin a new career.

Now that is what we have to do. If we have faith in Christ and His promise, we shall not say, ‘I am going back to my kindred and to my home.’ We shall be prepared to accept the conditions of a wanderer’s life. We shall recognise and feel, far more than we ever have done, that we are indeed ‘pilgrims and sojourners’ here. Dear Christian friends, we have no business to call ourselves Christ’s men, unless the very characteristic of our lives is that we are drawn ever forward by the prospect of future good, and unless that future is a great deal more solid and more operative upon us, and tells more on our lives, than this intrusive, solid-seeming present that thrusts itself between us and our true home. That is a sure saying. The Christian obligation to live a life of detachment, even while diligent in duty, is not to be brushed aside as pulpit rhetoric and exaggeration, but it is the plainest teaching of the New Testament. I wish it was a little more exemplified in the daily life of the people who call themselves Christians.

If I am not living for the unseen and the future, what right have I to say that I am Christ's at all? If the shadows are more than the substance to me; if this condensed vapour and fog that we call reality has not been to our apprehension thinned away into the unsubstantial mist that it is, what have the principles of Christianity done for us, and what worth is Christ's word to us? If I believe Him, the world is-I do not say, as the sentimental poet put it, 'but a fleeting show, for man's illusion given';-but as Paul puts it, a glass which may either reveal or obscure the realities beyond; and according as we look at, or look through, 'the things seen and temporal,' do we see, or miss, 'the things unseen and eternal.' So, then, the life of faith has for its essential characteristic-because it is a life of reliance on Christ's bare word-that future good is consciously its supreme aim. That will detach us, as it did Hobab, from home and kindred, and make us feel that we are 'pilgrims and sojourners.'

III. Lastly, our story suggests to us-

The rewards of faith.

'Come with us,' says Moses; 'we are journeying unto the place of which the Lord said, I will give it you. Come thou with us, and we will do thee what goodness the Lord shall do unto us.' He went, and neither he nor Moses ever saw the land, or at least never set their feet on it. Moses saw it from Pisgah, but probably Hobab did not even get so much as that.

So he had all his tramping through the wilderness, and all his work, for nothing, had he? Had he not better have gone back to Midian, and made use of the present reality, than followed a will-of-the-wisp that led him into a bog, if he got none of the good that he set out expecting to get? Then, did he make a mistake? Would he have been a wiser man if he had stuck to his first refusal? Surely not. It seems to me that the very fact of this great promise being given to this old-dare I call Hobab a ‘saint’? -to this old saint, and never being fulfilled at all in this world, compels us to believe that there was some gleam of hope, and of certainty, of a future life, even in these earliest days of dim and partial revelation.

To me it is very illuminative, and very beautiful, that the dying Jacob bursts in his song into a sudden exclamation, ‘I have waited for Thy salvation, O Lord!’ It is as if he had felt that all his life long he had been looking for what had never come, and that it could not be that God was going to let him go down to the grave and never grasp the good that he had been waiting for all his days. We may apply substantially the same thoughts to Hobab, and to all his like, and may turn them to our own use, and argue that the imperfections of the consequences of our faith here on earth are themselves evidences of a future, where all that Christ has said shall be more than fulfilled, and no man will be able to say, ‘Thou didst send me out, deluding me with promises which have all gone to water and have failed.’

Hobab dying there in the desert had made the right choice, and if we will trust ourselves to Christ and His faithful word, and, trusting to Him, will feel that we are detached from the present and that it is but as the shadow of a cloud, whatever there may be wanting in the results of our faith here on earth, there will be nothing wanting in its results at the last. Hobab did not regret his venture, and no man ever ventures his faith on Christ and is disappointed. ‘He that believeth shall not be confounded.’

4) Numbers 10:35-36

Numbers

THE HALLOWING OF WORK AND OF REST

Num. 10:35 - Num. 10:36.

The picture suggested by this text is a very striking and vivid one. We see the bustle of the morning’s breaking up of the encampment of Israel. The pillar of cloud, which had lain diffused and motionless over the Tabernacle, gathers itself together into an upright shaft, and moves, a dark blot against the glittering blue sky, the sunshine masking its central fire, to the front of the encampment. Then the priests take up the ark, the symbol of the divine Presence, and fall into place behind the guiding pillar. Then come the stir of the ordering of the ranks, and a moment's pause, during which the leader lifts his voice-'Rise, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered, and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee.' Then, with braced resolve and confident hearts, the tribes set forward on the day's march.

Long after those desert days a psalmist laid hold of the old prayer and offered it, as not antiquated yet by the thousand years that had intervened. 'Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered,' prayed one of the later psalmists; 'let them that hate Him flee before Him.' We, too, in circumstances so different, may take up the immortal though ancient words, on which no dimming rust of antiquity has encrusted itself, and may, at the beginnings and the endings of all our efforts and of each of our days, and at the beginning and ending of life itself, offer this old prayer-the prayer which asked for a divine presence in the incipiency of our efforts, and the prayer which asked for a divine presence in the completion of our work and in the rest that remaineth.

I. So, then, if we put these two petitions together, I think we shall see in them first, a pattern of that realisation of, and aspiration after, the divine Presence, which ought to fill all our lives.

'Rise, Lord, let Thine enemies be scattered.'

But was not that moving pillar the token that God had risen? And was not the psalmist who reiterated Moses' prayer asking for what had been done before he asked it? Was not the ark the symbol of the divine Presence, and was not its movement after the pillar a pledge to the whole host of Israel that the petition which they were offering, through their leader's lips, was granted ere it was offered? Yes. And yet the present God would not manifest His Presence except in response to the desire of His servants; and just because the ark was the symbol, and that moving column was the guarantee of God's being with the host as their defence, therefore there rose up with confidence this prayer, 'Rise, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered.'

That twofold attitude, the realisation of, and therefore the aspiration after, the divine gifts, which are given before they are desired, but are not appropriated and brought into operation in our lives unless they are desired, is precisely the paradox of the Christian life. Having, we long for, and longing, we have, and because we possess God we pray, ‘Oh! that we might possess Thee.’ The more we long, the more we receive. But unless He gave Himself in anticipation of our longing, there would be neither longing nor reception. Only on condition of our desiring to have Him does He flow into our lives, victorious and strength-giving, and the more we experience that omnipotent might and calming, guiding nearness, the more assuredly we shall long for it.

Let us then, dear brethren, blend these two things together, for indeed they are inseparable one from the other, and there can be no real experience in any depth of the one of them without the other. Blessed be God! there need be no long interval of waiting between sowing the seed of supplication and reaping the harvest of fruition. That process of growth and reaping goes on with instantaneous rapidity. ‘Before they call I will answer,’ for pillar and ark were there ere Moses opened his lips; and ‘while they are yet speaking I will hear,’ for, in response to the cry, the host moved triumphantly, guarded through the wilderness. So it may be, and ought to be, with each of us.

In like manner, coupling these two petitions together, and taking them as unitedly covering the whole field of life in their great antitheses of work and rest, effort and accomplishment, beginning and ending, morning and evening, we may say that here is an example, to be appropriated in our own lives, of that continuous longing and realisation which will encircle all life as with a golden ring, and make every part of it uniform and blessed. To begin, continue, and end with God is the secret of joyful beginning, of patient continuance, and of triumphant ending. There is no reason in heaven, though there are hosts of excuses on earth, why there should not be, in the case of each of us, an absolutely continuous and uninterrupted sense of being with God. O brethren! that is a stage of Christian experience high above the one on which most of us stand. But that is our fault, and not the necessity of our condition. Let us lay this to heart, that it is possible to have the pillar always guiding our march, and possible to have it stretching, calm and motionless, over all our hours of rest.

II. Now, if, turning from the lessons to be drawn from these two petitions, taken in conjunction, we look at them separately, we may say that we have here an example of the spirit in which we should set ourselves, day by day, and at each new epoch and beginning, be it greater or smaller, to every task.

There are truths that underlie that first prayer, ‘Rise up, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered,’ which are of perennial validity, and apply to us as truly as to these warriors of God in the wilderness long centuries ago. The first of them is that the divine Presence is the source of all energy, and of successful endeavour after, and accomplishment of, any duty. The second of them is that that presence is, as I have been saying, granted, in its operative power, only on condition of its being sought. And the third of them is that I have a right to identify my enemies with God’s only on condition that I have made His cause mine. When Moses prayed, ‘Let Thine enemies be scattered,’ he meant by these the hostile nomad tribes that might ring Israel round, and come down like a sandstorm upon them at any moment. What right had he to suppose that the people whose lances and swords threatened the motley host that he was leading through the wilderness were God’s enemies? Only this right, that his host had consented to be God’s soldiers, and that they having thus made His enemies theirs, He, on His part, was sure to make their enemies His. We are often tempted to identify our foes with God’s, without having taken the preliminary step of having so yielded ourselves to be His servants and instruments for carrying forward His will, as that our own wills have become a vanishing quantity, or rather have been ennobled and greatened in proportion as they have been moulded in submission to His. We must take God’s cause for ours, in all the various aspects of that phrase. And that means, first of all, that we make our own perfecting into the likeness of Jesus Christ the main aim of our own lives and efforts. It means, further, the putting ourselves bravely and manfully on the side of right and truth and justice, in all their forms. Above all, it means that we give ourselves to be God’s instruments in carrying on His great purposes for the salvation of the world through Jesus Christ. If we do these things, whatever obstacles may arise in our paths, we may be sure that these are God’s antagonists, because they are antagonists to God’s work in and by us.

Only in so far as they are such, can you pray, ‘Let them flee before Thee!’ Many of the things that we call our enemies come to us disguised, and are mistaken by our superficial sight, and we do not know that they are friends. ‘All things work together for good to them that love God.’ And, when we desire His Presence, the hindrances to doing His will-which are the only real enemies that we have to fight-will melt away before His power, ‘as wax melteth’ before the ardours of the fire; and, for the rest, the distresses, the difficulties, the sorrows, and all the other things that we so often think are our foes, we shall find out to have been our friends. Make God’s cause yours, and He will make your cause His.

That applies to the great things of life, and to the little things. I begin my day’s work some morning, perhaps wearied, perhaps annoyed with a multiplicity of trifles which seem too small to bring great principles to bear upon them. But do you not think there would be a strange change wrought in the petty annoyances of every day, and in the small trifles of which all our lives, of whatever texture they are, must largely be composed, if we began each day and each task with that old prayer, ‘Rise, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered’? Do you not think there would come a quiet into our hearts, and a victorious peace to which we are too much strangers? If we carried the assurance that there is One that fights for us, into the trifles as well as into the sore struggles of our lives, we should have peace and victory. Most of us will not have many large occasions of trial and conflict in our career; and, if God’s fighting for us is not available in regard to the small annoyances of home and daily life, I know not for what it is available. ‘Many littles make a mickle,’ and there are more deaths in skirmishes than in the field of a pitched battle. More Christian people lose their hold of God, their sense of His presence, and are beaten accordingly, by reason of the little enemies that come down on them, like a cloud of gnats in a summer evening, than are defeated by the shock of a great assault or a great temptation, which calls out their strength, and sends them to their knees to ask for help from God.

So we may learn from this prayer the spirit of expectance of victory which is not presumption, and of consecration, which alone will enable us to pass through life victorious. ‘Be of good cheer,’ said the Master, as if in answer to this prayer in its Christian form-’I have overcome the world.’ We turn to the helmed and sworded Figure that stands mysteriously beside us whilst we are all unaware of His coming, and the swift question that Joshua put rises to our lips, ‘Art Thou for us or for our adversaries?’ The reply comes, ‘Nay! but as Captain of the Lord’s host am I come up.’ That is Christ’s answer to the prayer, ‘Rise, Lord, let Thine enemies be scattered.’

III. Lastly, we have here a pattern of the temper for hours of repose.

‘When the ark rested, he said, "Return, O Lord, unto the many thousands of Israel."‘ As I said at the beginning of these remarks, the pillar of cloud seems to have taken two forms, braced together upright when it moved, diffused and stretched as a shelter and a covering over the host of Israel when it and they were at rest. In like manner, that divine Presence is Protean in its forms, and takes all shapes, according to the moment’s necessities of the Christian trusting heart. When we are to brace ourselves for the march it condenses itself into an upright and moving guide. When we lay ourselves down with relaxed muscles for repose, it softly expands itself and ‘covers our head’ in the hours of rest, ‘as in the day of battle.’

Ah! brother, we have more need of God in times of repose than in times of effort. It is harder to realise His Presence in the brief hours of relaxation than even in the many hours of strenuous toil. Every one who goes for a holiday knows that. You have only to look at the sort of amusements that most people fly to when they have not anything to do, to see that there is quite as much, if not more, peril to communion of soul with God in times when the whole nature is somewhat relaxed, and the strings are loosened, like those of a violin screwed down a turn or two of the peg, than there is in times of work.

So let us take special care of our hours of repose, and be quite sure that they are so spent as that we can ask when the day’s work is done, and we have come to slippered ease, in preparation for nightly rest, ‘Return, O Lord, unto Thy waiting servant.’ Work without God unfits for rest with Him. Rest without God unfits for work for Him.

We may take these two petitions as tests of the allowableness of any occupation, or of any relaxation. Dare I ask Him to come with me into that field of work? If I dare not, it is no place for me. Dare I ask Him to come with me into this other chamber of rest? If I dare not, I had better never cross its threshold. Take these two prayers, and where you cannot pray them, do not risk yourself.

But the highest form of the contrast between the two waits still to be realised. For life as a whole is a fight, and beyond it there is the ‘rest that remaineth,’ where there will be not merely God’s ‘return unto the thousands of Israel,’ but the realisation of His fuller presence, and of deeper rest, which shall be wondrously associated with more intense work, though in that work there will be no conflict. The two petitions will flow together then, for whilst we labour we shall rest; and whilst we rest we shall labour, according to the great sayings, ‘they rest from their labours,’ and yet ‘they rest not day nor night.’

5) Numbers 11:14

Numbers

MOSES DESPONDENT

Num. 11:14.

Detail the circumstances.

The leader speaks the truth in his despondency. He is pressed with the feeling of his incapacity for his work. We may take his words here as teaching us what men need in him who is to be their guide, and how impossible it is to find what they need in mere men.

I. What men need in their guide.

These Israelites were wandering in the wilderness; they were without natural supplies for their daily necessities; they had a long hard journey before them, an unknown road, at the terminus of which was a land where they should rest. We have precisely the same necessities as those which Moses despairingly said that they had.

Like them, we wander hungry, and need a Leader who can satisfy our desires and evermore give us bread for our souls even more than for our bodies. We need One to whom we can ‘weep,’ as the Israelites did to Moses, and not weep in vain. We need One who can do for us what Moses felt that the Israelites needed, and that he could not give them, when he almost indignantly put to God the despairing question, ‘Can I carry them in my bosom as a nursing father beareth the sucking child?’ Our weakness, our ignorance, our heart-hunger, cry out for One who can ‘bear all this people alone.’ who in his single Self has resources of strength, wisdom, and sufficiency to meet not only the wants of one soul but those of the world. For He who can satisfy the poorest single soul must be able to satisfy all men.

II. The impossibility of finding this in men.

Moses’ experience here is that of all leaders and great men. He is overwhelmed with the work; feels his own utter impotence; has himself to be strengthened; loathes his work; longs for release from it. See how he confesses

> His human dependence.
>
> His incapacity to do and be what is needed.
>
> His impatience with the people
>
> His longing to be rid of it all.

That is a true picture of the experience of the best of men-a true picture of the limitations of the noblest leaders.

But it is not only the leaders who confess their inadequacy, but the followers feel it, for even the most enthusiastic of them come sooner or later to find that their Oracle had not learned all wisdom, nor was fit to be taken as sole guide, much less as sole defence or satisfaction. He who looks to find all that he needs in men must take many men to find it, and no multiplicity of men will bring him what he seeks. The Milky Way is no substitute for the sun. Our hearts cry out for One great light, for One spacious home. Endless strings of pearls do not reach the preciousness of One pearl of price.

III. The failures of human leaders prophesy the true Leader.

Moses was prophetic of Christ by his failures as by his successes. He could not do what the people clamoured to have done, and what he in the mood of despair in which the text shows him, sadly owned that he could not. In that very confession he becomes an unconscious prophet. For that he should have so vividly set forth the qualifications of a leader of men, as defined by the people's cries, and should have so bitterly felt his incapacity to supply them, is a witness, if there is a God at all, that somewhere the needed Ideal will be realised in 'a Leader and Commander of the people,' God-sent and 'worthy of more glory than Moses.'

The best service that all human leaders, helpers or lovers, can do us, is to confess their own insufficiency, and to point us to Jesus.

All that men need is found in Him and in Him alone. All that men have failed, and must always fail, to be, He is. Those eyes are blessed that 'see no man any more save Jesus only.' We need One who can satisfy our desires and fill our hungry souls, and Jesus speaks a promise, confirmed by the experience of all who have tested it when He declares: 'He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger.' We need One who will dry our tears, and Jesus, when He says 'Weep not,' wipes them away and stanches their sources, giving 'the oil of joy for mourning.' We need One who can hold us up in our journey, and minister strength to fainting hearts and vigour to weary feet, and Jesus 'strengthens us with might in the inner man.' We need One who will bring us to the promised land of rest, and Jesus brings many sons to glory, and wills that they be 'with Him where He is.' So let us turn away from the multiplicity of human insufficiencies to Him who is our one only help and hope, because He is all-sufficient and eternal.

6) Numbers 13:17-33

Numbers

AFRAID OF GIANTS

Num. 13:17 - Num. 13:33.

We stand here on the edge of the Promised Land. The discussion of the true site of Kadesh need not concern us now. Wherever it was, the wanderers had the end of their desert journey within sight; one bold push forward, and their feet would tread on their inheritance. But, as is so often the case, courage oozed out at the decisive moment, and cowardice, disguised as prudence, called for 'further information,'-that cuckoo-cry of the faint-hearted. There are three steps in this narrative: the despatch of the explorers, their expedition, and the two reports brought back.

I. We have the despatch and instructions of the explorers. A comparison with Deu. 1:22 shows that the project of sending the spies originated in the people's terror at the near prospect of the fighting which they had known to be impending ever since they left Egypt. Faith finds that nearness diminishes dangers, but sense sees them grow as they approach. The people answered Moses' brave words summoning them to the struggle with this feeble petition for an investigation. They did not honestly say that they were alarmed, but defined the scope of the exploring party's mission as simply to 'bring us word again of the way by which we must go up, and the cities into which we shall come.' Had they not the pillar blazing there above them to tell them that? The request was not fathomed in its true faithlessness by Moses, who thought it reasonable and yielded. So far Deuteronomy goes; but this narrative puts another colour on the mission, representing it as the consequence of God's command. The most eager discoverer of discrepancies in the component parts of the Pentateuch need not press this one into his service, for both sides may be true: the one representing the human feebleness which originated the wish; the other, the divine compliance with the desire, in order to disclose the unbelief which unfitted the people for the impending struggle, and to educate them by letting them have their foolish way, and taste its bitter results. Putting the two accounts together, we get, not a contradiction, but a complete view, which teaches a large truth as to God's dealings; namely, that He often lovingly lets us have our own way to show us by the issues that His is better, and that daring, which is obedience, is the true prudence.

The instructions given to the explorers turn on two points: the eligibility of the country for settlement, and the military strength of its inhabitants. They alternate in a very graphic way from the one of these to the other, beginning, in Num. 13:18, with the land, and immediately going on to the numbers and power of the inhabitants; then harking back again, in Num. 13:19, to the fertility of the land, and passing again to the capacity of the cities to resist attack; and finishing up, in Num. 13:20, with the land once more, both arable and forest. The same double thought colours the parting exhortation to 'be bold,' and to 'bring of the produce of the land.' Now the people knew already both points which the spies were despatched to find out. Over and over again, in Egypt, in the march, and at Sinai, they had been told that the land was 'flowing with milk and honey,' and had been assured of its conquest. What more did they want? Nothing, if they had believed God. Nothing, if they had been all saints,-which they were not. Their fears were very natural. A great deal might be said in favour of their wish to have accurate information. But it is a bad sign when faith, or rather unbelief, sends out sense to be its scout, and when we think to verify God's words by men's confirmation. Not to believe Him unless a jury of twelve of ourselves says the same thing, is surely much the same as not believing Him at all; for it is not He, but they, whom we believe after all.

There is no need to be too hard on the people. They were a mob of slaves, whose manhood had been eaten out by four centuries of sluggish comfort, and latterly crushed by oppression. So far as we know, Abraham's midnight surprise of the Eastern kings was the solitary bit of fighting in the national history thus far; and it is not wonderful that, with such a past, they should have shrunk from the prospect of bloodshed, and caught at any excuse for delay at least, even if not for escape. 'We have all of us one human heart,' and these cowards were no monsters, but average men, who did very much what average men, professing to be Christians, do every day, and for doing get praised for prudence by other average professing Christians. How many of us, when brought right up to some task involving difficulty or danger, but unmistakably laid on us by God, shelter our distrustful fears under the fair pretext of 'knowing a little more about it first,' and shake wise heads over rashness which takes God at His word, and thinks that it knows enough when it knows what He wills?

II. We have the exploration [Num. 13:21 - Num. 13:25]. The account of it is arranged on a plan common in the Old Testament narratives, the observation of which would, in many places, remove difficulties which have led to extraordinary hypotheses. Num. 13:21 gives a general summary of what is then taken up, and told in more detail. It indicates the completeness of the exploration by giving its extreme southern and northern points, the desert of Zin being probably the present depression called the Arabah, and 'Rehob as men come to Hamath' being probably near the northern Dan, on the way to Hamath, which lay in the valley between the Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon. The account then begins over again, and tells how the spies went up into 'the South.' The Revised Version has done wisely in printing this word with a capital, and thereby showing that it is not merely the name of a cardinal point, but of a district. It literally means 'the dry,' and is applied to the arid stretch of land between the more cultivated southern parts of Canaan and the northern portion of the desert which runs down to Sinai. It is a great chalky plateau, and might almost be called a steppe or prairie. Passing through this, the explorers next would come to Hebron, the first town of importance, beside which Abraham had lived, and where the graves of their ancestors were. But they were in no mood for remembering such old stories. Living Anaks were much more real to them than dead patriarchs. So the only thing mentioned, besides the antiquity of the city, is the presence in it of these giants. They were probably the relics of the aboriginal inhabitants, and some strain of their blood survived till late days. They seem to have expelled the Hittites, who held Mamre, or Hebron, in Abraham's time. Their name is said to mean 'long-necked,' and the three names in our lesson are probably tribal, and not personal, names. The whole march northward and back again comes in between Num. 13:22 - Num. 13:23; for Eshcol was close to Hebron, and the spies would not encumber themselves with the bunch of grapes on their northward march. The details of the exploration are given more fully in the spies' report, which shows that they had gone up north from Hebron, through the hills, and possibly came back by the valley of the Jordan. At any rate, they made good speed, and must have done some bold and hard marching, to cover the ground out and back in six weeks. So they returned with their pomegranates and figs, and a great bunch of the grapes for which the valley identified with Eshcol is still famous, swinging on a pole,-the easiest way of carrying it without injury.

III. We have next the two reports. The explorers are received in a full assembly of the people, and begin their story with an object-lesson, producing the great grape cluster and the other spoils. But while honesty compelled the acknowledgment of the fertility of the land, cowardice slurred that over as lightly as might be, and went on to dilate on the terrors of the giants and the strength of the cities, and the crowded population that held every corner of the country. Truly, the eye sees what it brings with it. They really had gone to look for dangers, and of course they found them. Whatever Moses might lay down in his instructions, they had been sent by the people to bring back reasons for not attempting the conquest, and so they curtly and coldly admit the fertility of the soil, and fling down the fruit for inspection as undeniably grown there, but they tell their real mind with a great 'nevertheless.' Their report is, no doubt, quite accurate. The cities were, no doubt, some of them walled, and to eyes accustomed to the desert, very great; and there were, no doubt, Anaks at Hebron, at any rate, and the 'spies' had got the names of the various races and their territories correctly. As to these, we need only notice that the Hittites were an outlying branch of the great nation, which recent research has discovered, as we might say, the importance and extent of which we scarcely yet know; that the Jebusites held Jerusalem till David's time; that the 'Amorites,' or 'Highlanders,' occupied the central block of mountainous country in conjunction with the two preceding tribes; and that the 'Canaanites,' or 'Lowlanders,' held the lowlands east and west of that hilly nucleus, namely, the deep gorge of the Jordan, and the strip of maritime plain. A very accurate report may be very one-sided. The spies were not the last people who, being sent out to bring home facts, managed to convey very decided opinions without expressing any. A grudging and short admission to begin with, the force of which is immediately broken by sombre and minute painting of difficulty and danger, is more powerful as a deterrent than any dissuasive. It sounds such an unbiassed appeal to common-sense, as if the reporter said, 'There are the facts; we leave you to draw the conclusions.' An 'unvarnished account of the real state of the case,' in which there is not a single misstatement nor exaggeration, may be utterly false by reason of wrong perspective and omission, and, however true, is sure to act as a shower-bath to courage, if it is unaccompanied with a word of cheer. To begin a perilous enterprise without fairly facing its risks and difficulties is folly. To look at *them* only is no less folly, and is the sure precursor of defeat. But when on the one side is

God’s command, and on the other such doleful discouragements, they are more than folly, they are sin.

It is bracing to turn from the creeping prudence which leaves God out of the account, to the cheery ring of Caleb’s sturdy confidence. His was ‘a minority report,’ signed by only two of the ‘Commission.’ These two had seen all that the others had, but everything depends on the eyes which look. The others had measured themselves against the trained soldiers and giants, and were in despair. These two measured Amalekites and Anaks against God, and were jubilant. They do not dispute the facts, but they reverse the implied conclusion, because they add the governing fact of God’s help. How differently the same facts strike a man who lives by faith, and one who lives by calculation! Israel might be a row of ciphers, but with God at the head they meant something. Caleb’s confidence that ‘we are well able to overcome’ was religious trust, as is plain from God’s eulogium on him in the next chapter [Num. 14:24]. The lessons from it are that faith is the parent of wise courage; that where duty, which is God’s voice, points, difficulties must not deter; that when we have God’s assurance of support, they are nothing. Caleb was wise to counsel going up to the assault ‘at once,’ for there is no better cure for fear than action. Old soldiers tell us that the trying time is when waiting to begin the fight. ‘The native hue of resolution’ gets ‘sicklied o’ er’ with the paleness that comes from hesitation. Am I sure that anything is God’s will? Then the sooner I go to work at doing it, the better for myself and for the vigour of my work.

This headstrong rashness, as they thought it, brings up the other ‘spies’ once more. Notice how the gloomy views are the only ones in their second statement. There is nothing about the fertility of the land, but, instead, we have that enigmatical expression about its ‘eating up its inhabitants.’ No very satisfactory explanation of this is forthcoming. It evidently means that in some way the land was destructive of its inhabitants, which seems to contradict their former reluctant admission of its fertility. Perhaps in their eagerness to paint it black enough, they did contradict themselves, and try to make out that it was a barren soil, not worth conquering. Fear is not very careful of consistency. Note, too, the exaggerations of terror. ‘All the people’ are sons of Anak now. The size as well as the number of the giants has grown; ‘we were in our own sight as grasshoppers.’ No doubt they were gigantic, but fear performed the miracle of adding a cubit to their stature. When the coward hears that ‘there is a lion without,’-that is, in the open country,-he immediately concludes, ‘I shall be slain in the streets,’ where it is not usual for lions to disport themselves.

Thus exaggerated and one-sided is distrust of God’s promises. Such a temper is fatal to all noble life or work, and brings about the disasters which it foresees. If these cravens had gone up to fight with men before whom they felt like grasshoppers, of course they would have been beaten; and it was much better that their fears should come out at Kadesh than when committed to the struggle. Therefore God lovingly permitted the mission of the spies, and so brought lurking unbelief to the surface, where it could be dealt with. Let us beware of the one-eyed ‘prudence’ which sees only the perils in the path of duty and enterprise for God, and is blind to the all-sufficient presence which makes us more than conquerors, when we lean all our weight on it. It is well to see the Anakim in their full formidableness, and to feel that we are ‘as grasshoppers in our own sight’ and in theirs, if the sight drives us to lift our eyes to Him who ‘sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof,’ however huge and strong, ‘are as grasshoppers.’

7) Numbers 14:1-10

Numbers

WEIGHED, AND FOUND WANTING

Num. 14:1 - Num. 14:10.

Terror is more contagious than courage, for a mob is always more prone to base than to noble instincts. The gloomy report of the spies jumped with the humour of the people, and was at once accepted. Its effect was to throw the whole assembly into a paroxysm of panic, which was expressed in the passionate Eastern manner by wild, ungoverned shrieking and tears. What a picture of a frenzied crowd the first verse of this chapter gives! That is not the stuff of which heroes can be made. Weeping endured for a night, but to such weeping there came no morning of joy. When day dawned, the tempest of emotion settled down into sullen determination to give up the prize which hung within reach of a bold hand, ripe and ready to drop. It was one of the moments which come once at least in the lives of nations as of individuals, when a supreme resolve is called for, and when to fall beneath the stern requirement, and refuse a great attempt because of danger, is to pronounce sentence of unworthiness and exclusion on themselves. Not courage only, but belief in God, was tested in this crucial moment, which made a turning-point in the nation's history. Our text brings before us with dramatic vividness and sharpness of contrast, three parties in this decisive hour-the faithless cowards, the faithful four, and the All-seeing presence.

I. Note the faithless cowards. The gravity of the revolt here is partly in its universality, which is emphasised in the narrative at every turn: '*all* the congregation' [Num. 14:1], '*all* the children of Israel,' the *whole* congregation' [Num. 14:2], '*all* the assembly of the congregation' [which implies a solemn formal convocation], '*all* the company' [Num. 14:7], '*all* the congregation,' '*all* the children of Israel' [Num. 14:10]. It was no sectional discontent, but full-blown and universal rebellion. The narrative draws a distinction between the language addressed to Moses, and the whisperings to one another. Publicly, the unanimous voice suggested the return to Egypt as an alternative for discussion, and put it before Moses; to one another they muttered the proposal, which no man had yet courage to speak out, of choosing a new leader, and going back, whatever became of Moses. That could only mean murder as well as mutiny. The whispers would soon be loud enough.

In the murmurs to Moses, observe the distinct and conscious apostacy from Jehovah. They recognise that God 'has brought' them there, and they slander Him by the assertion that His malignant, deliberate purpose was to kill them all, and make slaves of their wives and children. That was how they read the past, and thought of Him! He had enticed them into His trap, as a hunter might some foolish animal, by dainties strewed along the path, and now they were in the toils, and their only chance of life was to break through. Often, already, had they raised that mad cry-'back to Egypt!' but there had never been such a ring of resolve in it, nor had it come from so many throats, nor had any serious purpose to depose Moses been entertained. If we add the fact that they were now on the very frontier of

Canaan, and that the decision now taken was necessarily final, we get the full significance of the incident from the mere secular historian's point of view. But its bearing on the people's relation to Jehovah gives a darker colouring to it. It is not merely faint-hearted shrinking from a great opportunity, but it is wilful and deliberate rejection of His rule, based upon utter distrust of His word. So Scripture treats this event as the typical example of unbelief [Psa. 95:1 - Psa. 95:11; Heb. 3:1 - Heb. 3:19 and Heb. 4:1 - Heb. 4:16]. So regarded, it presents, as in a mirror, some of the salient characteristics of that master sin. Bad as it is, it is not out of the range of possibility that it should be repeated, and we need the warning to 'take heed lest any of us should fall after the same example of unbelief.'

We may learn from it the essentials of faith and its opposite. The trust which these cowards failed to exercise was reliance on Jehovah, a personal relation to a Person. In externals and contents, their trust was very unlike the New Testament faith, but in object and essence it was identical. They had to trust in Jehovah; we, in 'God manifest in the flesh.' Their creed was much less clear and blessed than ours, but their faith, if they had had it, would have been the same. Faith is not the belief of a creed, whether man-made or God-revealed, but the cleaving to the Person whom the creed makes known. He may be made known more or less perfectly; but the act of the soul, by which we grasp Him, does not vary with the completeness of the revelation. That act was one for 'the world's grey fathers' and for us. In like manner, unbelief is the same black and fatal sin, whatever be the degree of light against which it turns. To depart from the living God is its essence, and that is always rebellion and death.

Note the short memory and churlish unthankfulness of unbelief. It has been often objected to the story of the Exodus, that such extremity of folly as is ascribed to the Israelites is inconceivable in such circumstances. How could men, with all these miracles in mind, and manna falling daily, and the pillar blazing every night, and the roll of Sinai's thunders scarcely out of their ears, behave thus? But any one who has honestly studied his own heart, and known its capacity for neglecting the plainest indications of God's presence, and forgetting the gifts of His love, will believe the story, and see brethren in these Israelites. Miracles were less wonderful to them, because they knew less about nature and its laws. Any miracles constantly renewed become commonplace. Habit takes the wonder out of everything. The heart that does not ‘like to retain God in its knowledge’ will find easy ways of forgetting Him, and revolting from Him, though the path be strewed with blessings, and tokens of His presence flame on every side. True, it is strange that all the wonders and mercies of the past two years had made no deeper impression on these people’s hearts; but if they had not done so, it is not unnatural that they had made so slight an impression on their wills. Their ingratitude and forgetfulness are inexplicable, as all sin is, for its very essence is that it has no sufficient reason. But neither is inconceivable, and both are repeated by us every day.

Note the credulity of unbelief. The word of Jehovah had told them that the land ‘flowed with milk and honey,’ and that they were sure to conquer it. They would not believe Him unless they had verification of His promises. And when they got their own fears reflected in the multiplying mirror of the spies’ report, they took men’s words for gospel, and gave to them a credence without examination or qualification, which they had never given to God. I think that I have heard of people who inveigh against Christians for their slavish acceptance of the absolute authority of Jesus Christ, and who pin their faith to some man’s teaching with a credulity quite as great as and much less warrantable than ours.

Note the bad bargain which unbelief is ready to make. They contemplated a risky alternative to the brave dash against Canaan. There would be quite as much peril in going back as forward. The march from Egypt had not been so easy; but what would it be when there were no Moses, no Jethro, no manna, no pillar? And what sort of reception would wait them in Egypt, and what fate befall them there? In front, there were perils; but God would be with them. They would have to fight their way, but with the joyous feeling that victory was sure, and that every blow struck, and every step marched, brought them nearer triumphant peace. If they turned, every step would carry them farther from their hopes, and nearer the dreary putting on of the old yoke, which ‘neither they nor their fathers were able to bear.’ They would buy slavery at as dear a price as they would have to pay for freedom and wealth. Yet they elected the baser course, and thought themselves prudent and careful of themselves in doing so. Is the breed of such miscalculators extinct? Far greater hardships and pains are met on the road of departure from God, than any which befall His servants. To follow Him involves a conflict, but to shirk the battle does not bring immunity from strife. The alternatives are not warfare or peace, God’s service or liberty. The most prudent self-love would coincide with the most self-sacrificing heroic consecration, and no man can worse consult his own well-being than in seeking escape from the dangers and toil of enlisting in God’s army, by running back through the desert to put his neck in chains in Egypt. As Moses said: ‘Because then servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart for the abundance of all things, therefore thou shalt serve thine enemies, in hunger, and in thirst, and in want of all things.’

II. The faithful four. Moses and Aaron, Caleb and Joshua, are the only Abdiels in that crowd of unbelieving dastards. Their own peril does not move them; their only thought is to dissuade from the fatal refusal to advance. The leader had no armed force with which to put down revolt, and stood wholly undefended and powerless. It was a cruel position for him to see the work of his life crumbling to pieces, and every hope for his people dashed by their craven fears. Is there anywhere a nobler piece of self-abnegation than his prostrating himself before them in the eagerness of his pleading with them for their own good? If anything could have kindled a spark of generous enthusiasm, that passionate gesture of entreaty would have done it. It is like: ‘We beseech you, in His stead, be ye reconciled to God.’ Men need to be importuned not to destroy themselves, and he will have most success in such God-like work who, as Moses, is so sure of the fatal issues, and so oblivious of all but saving men from self-inflicted ruin, that he sues as for a boon with tears in his voice, and dignity thrown to the winds.

Caleb and Joshua had a different task,-to make one more attempt to hearten the people by repeating their testimony and their confidence. Tearing their dresses, in sign of mourning, they bravely ring out once more the cheery note of assured faith. They first emphatically reiterate that the land is fertile,-or, as the words literally run, ‘good exceedingly, exceedingly.’ It is right to stimulate for God’s warfare by setting forth the blessedness of the inheritance. ‘The recompense of the reward’ is not the motive for doing His will, but it is legitimately used as encouragement, in spite of the overstrained objection that virtue for the sake of heaven is spurious virtue.

If ‘for the sake of heaven,’ it is spurious; but it is not spurious because it is heartened by the hope of heaven. In Caleb’s former report there was no reason given for his confidence that ‘we are well able to overcome.’ Thus far all the discussion had been about comparative strength, as any heathen soldier would have reckoned it. But the two heroes speak out the great Name at last, which ought to scatter all fears like morning mist. The rebels had said that Jehovah had ‘brought us into this land to fall by the sword.’ The two give them back their words with a new turn: ‘He will bring us into this land, and give it us.’ That is the only antidote to fear. Calculations of comparative force are worse than useless, and their results depend on the temper of the calculator; but, if once God is brought into the account, the sum is ended. When His sword is flung into the scale, whatever is in the other goes up. So Caleb and Joshua brush aside the terrors of the Anaks and all the other bugbears. ‘They are bread for us,’ we can swallow them at a mouthful; and this was no swaggering boast, but calm, reasonable confidence, because it rested on this, ‘the Lord is with us.’ True, there was an ‘if,’ but not an ‘if’ of doubt, but a condition which they could comply with, and so make it a certainty, ‘only rebel not against the Lord, and fear not the people of the land.’ Loyalty to Him would give courage, and courage with His presence would be sure of victory. Obedience turns God’s ‘ifs’ into ‘verilys.’ There, then, we have an outline picture of the work of faith pleading with the rebellious, heartening them and itself by thoughts of the fair inheritance, grasping the assurance of God’s omnipotent help, and in the strength thereof wisely despising the strongest foes, and settling itself immovable in the posture of obedience.

III. The sudden appearance of the all-seeing Lord. The bold remonstrance worked the people into a fury, and fidelity was about to reap the reward which the crowd ever gives to those who try to save it from its own base passions. Nothing is more hateful to resolute sinners than good counsel which is undeniably true. But just as the stones were beginning to fly, the ‘glory of the Lord,’ that wondrous light which dwelt above the ark in the inmost shrine, came forth before all the awestruck crowd. The stones would be dropped fast enough, and a hush of dread would follow the howling rage of the angry crowd. Our text does not go on to the awful judgment which was proclaimed; but we may venture beyond its bounds to point out that the sentence of exclusion from the land was but the necessary consequence of the temper and character which the refusal to advance had betrayed. Such people were not fit for the fight. A new generation, braced by the keen air and scant fare of the desert, with firmer muscles and hearts than these enervated slaves had, was needed for the conquest. The sentence was mercy as well as judgment; it was better that they should live in the wilderness, and die there by natural process, after having had more education in God's loving care, than that they should be driven unwillingly to a conflict which, in their state of mind, would have been but their butchery. None the less, it is an awful condemnation for a man to be brought by God's providence face to face with a great possibility of service and of blessing, and then to show himself such that God has to put him aside, and look for other instruments. The Israelites were excluded from Canaan by no arbitrary decree, but by their own faithless fears, which made their victory impossible. 'They could not enter in because of unbelief.' In like manner our unbelief shuts us out from salvation, because we can only enter in by faith; and the 'rest that remains' is of such a nature that it is impossible for even His love to give it to the unbelieving. 'Let us labour, therefore, to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.'

8) Numbers 14:19

Numbers

MOSES THE INTERCESSOR

Num. 14:19.

See how in this story a divine threat is averted and a divine promise is broken, thus revealing a standing law that these in Scripture are conditional.

This striking incident of Moses' intercession suggests to us some thoughts as to

I. The ground of the divine forgiveness.

The appeal is not based on anything in the people. God is not asked to forgive because of their repentance or their faith. True, these are the conditions on which His pardon is received by us, but they are not the reasons why it is given by Him. Nor does Moses appeal to any sacrifices that had been offered and were conceived to placate God. But he goes deeper than all such pleas, and lays hold, with sublime confidence, on God’s own nature as his all-powerful plea. ‘The greatness of Thy mercy’ is the ground of the divine forgiveness, and the mightiest plea that human lips can urge. It suggests that His very nature is pardoning love; that ‘mercy’ is proper to Him, that it is the motive and impulse of His acts. He forgives because He is mercy. That is the foundation truth. It is the deep spring from which by inherent impulse all the streams of forgiveness well up.

What was true when Moses prayed for the rebels is true to-day. Christ’s work is the consequence, not the cause, of God’s pardoning love. It is the channel through which the waters reach us, but the waters made the channel for themselves.

II. The persistency of the divine pardon.

‘As thou hast forgiven . . .even until now.’

His past is the guarantee of His future. This is true of every one of His attributes. There is no limitation to the divine forgiveness; you cannot exhaust it.

Sometimes there may be long tracts of almost utter godlessness, or times of apathy. Sometimes there may be bursts of great and unsanctified evil after many professions of fidelity, as in David’s case. Sometimes there may be but a daily experience in which there is little apparent progress, little consciousness of growing mastery over sin, little of deepening holiness and spiritual power. Be it so! To all such, and to every other form of Christian unfaithfulness, this blessed thought applies.

We are apt to think as if our many pardons in the past made future pardons less likely, whereas the truth is that we have received forgiveness so often in the past that we may be quite sure that it will never fail us in the future. God has established a precedent in His dealings with us. He binds Himself by His past.

As in His creative energy, the forces that flung the whole universe forth were not exhausted by the act, but subsist continually to sustain it, as ‘He fainteth not, neither is weary,’ so in the works of His providence, and more especially of His grace, there is nothing in the exercise of any of His attributes to exhaust *that* attribute, nothing in the constant appeal which we make to His forgiving grace to weary out that grace. And thus we may learn, even from the unfading glories of the heavens and the undimmed splendours of His creative works, the lesson that, in the holier region of His love, and His pardoning mercy, there is no exhaustion, and that all the past instances of His pardoning grace only make the broader, firmer ground of certainty as to His continuous present and future forgiveness for all our iniquity. He who has proposed to us the ‘seventy times seven’ as the number of our forgivenesses will not let His own fall short of that tale. Our iniquities may be ‘more than the hairs of our heads,’ but as the psalmist who found his to be so comforted himself with thinking, God’s ‘thoughts which are to usward’ were ‘more than can be numbered.’ There would be a pardoning thought for every sin, and after all sins had been forgiven, there would be ‘multitudes of redemptions’ still available for penitent souls.

There is but one thing that limits the divine pardon, and that is continuous rejection of it.

Whoever seeks to be pardoned *is* pardoned.

III. The manner of the divine forgiveness.

He pardoned, but He also inflicted punishment, and in both He loves equally. The worst, that is the spiritual, consequences [which are the punishments] of sin, namely separation and alienation from God, He removes in the very act of forgiveness, but His pardon does not affect the natural consequences. ‘Thou wast a God that forgavest them and tookest vengeance of their inventions,’ says a psalmist in reference to this very incident. Thank God that He loves us too wisely and well not to let us by experience ‘know that it is a bitter thing to forsake the Lord.’

It is a blessing that He does so, and a sign that we are pardoned, if we rightly use it.

IV. The vehicle of the divine forgiveness.

The Mediator. Moses here may be taken as a dim shadow of Christ.

‘Moses was faithful in all his house’ but Jesus is the true Mediator, whose intercession consists in presenting the constant efficacy of His sacrifice, and to whom God ever says, ‘I have pardoned according to Thy word.’

Trust utterly to Him. You cannot weary out the forgiving love of God. ‘Christ ever liveth to make intercession’; with God is ‘plenteous redemption.’ ‘He shall redeem Israel out of *all* his iniquities.’

9) Numbers 18:7

Numbers

SERVICE A GIFT

Num. 18:7.

All Christians are priests-to offer sacrifices, alms, especially prayers; to make God known to men.

I. Our priesthood is a gift of God’s love.

> We are apt to think of our duties as burdensome. They are an honour and a mark of God’s grace.

1. They are His gift-

    [*a*] The power to do. All capacities and possessions from Him.

    [*b*] The wish to do. ‘Worketh in you to will.’

    [*c*] The right to do, through Christ.

2. They are a blessing.

[*a*] Note the good effects on ourselves-the increase of fellowship with Him, the strengthening of all holy desires.

[*b*] The future benefits. Apply this to prayer and to effort on behalf of our fellow-men.

II. Our priesthood is to be done as a service-under a sense of obligation to a master, with diligence [an [Greek: ergon], not a [Greek: parergon]].

III. Our priesthood is to be done as a gift to God-to be done joyfully, giving ourselves back to Him: 'Yield yourselves unto God'-'your reasonable service.'

Then only do we really possess ourselves, and 'all things are ours, for we are Christ's, and Christ is God's.'

10)Numbers 20:1-13

Numbers

THE WATERS OF MERIBAH

Num. 20:1 - Num. 20:13.

Kadesh had witnessed the final trial and failure of the generation that came out of Egypt; now we see the first trial and failure of the new generation, thirty-seven years after, on the same spot. Deep silence shrouds the history of these dreary years; but, probably, the congregation was broken up, and small parties roamed over the country, without purpose or hope, while Moses and a few of the leaders kept by the tabernacle. There is a certain emphasis in the phrase of the first verse of this chapter, 'the children of Israel, even the *whole* congregation,' which suggests that this was the first reassembling of the scattered units since the last act of the 'whole congregation.' 'The first month' was, then, the first of the fortieth year, and the gathering was either in obedience to the summons of Moses, who knew that the fixed time had now come, or was the result of common knowledge of the fact. In any case, we have here the first act of a new epoch, and the question to be tried is whether the new men are any better than the old. It is this which gives importance to the event, and explains the bitterness of Moses at finding the old spirit living in the children. It was his trial as well as theirs. He resumed the functions which had substantially been in abeyance for a generation, and by his conduct showed that he had become unfit for the new form which the leadership must take with the invasion of Canaan.

I. We note the old murmurings on the lips of the new generation. The lament of a later prophet fits these hereditary grumblers,-'In vain have I smitten your children; they received no correction.' The place where they reassembled might have taught them the sin of unbelief; their parents' graves should have enforced the lesson. But the long years of wandering, and two millions of deaths, had been useless. The weather-beaten but sturdy strength of the four old men, the only survivors, might have preached the wisdom of trust in the God in whose 'favour is life.' But the people 'had learned nothing and forgotten nothing.' The old cuckoo-cry, which had become so monotonous from their fathers, is repeated, with differences, not in their favour. They do not, indeed, murmur directly against God, because they regard Moses and Aaron as responsible. 'Why,' say they, 'have *ye* brought up the congregation of the Lord?' They seem to use that name with a touch of pride in their relation to God, while destitute of any real obedience, and so they show the first traces of the later spirit of the nation. They have acquired cattle while living in the oases of the wilderness, and they are anxious about them. They acknowledge the continuity of national life in their question, 'Wherefore have ye made us to come up out of Egypt?' though most of them had been born in the wilderness. The fear that moved their fathers to unbelief was more reasonable and less contemptible than this murmuring, which ignores God all but utterly, and is ready to throw up everything at the first taste of privation.

It is a signal instance of the solemn law by which the fathers' sins are inherited by the children who prove themselves heirs to their ancestors by repeating their deeds. It is fashionable now to deny original sin, and equally fashionable to affirm 'heredity,' which is the same thing, put into scientific language. There is such a thing as national character persistent through generations, each unit of which adds something to the force of the tendencies which he receives and transmits, but which never are so omnipotent as to destroy individual guilt, however they may lighten it.

Note, too, the awful power of resistance to God's educating possessed by our wills. The whole purpose of these men's lives, thus far, had been to fit them for being God's instruments, and for the reception of His blessing. The desert was His school for body and mind, where muscles and wills were to be braced, and solitude and expectation might be nurses of lofty thoughts, and in the silence God's voice might sound. What better preparation of a hardy race of God-trusting heroes could there have been, and what came of it all? Failure all but complete! The instrument tempered with so much care has its edge turned at the first stroke. The old sore breaks out at the old spot. Man's will has an awful power to thwart God's training; and of all the sad mysteries of this sad mysterious world, this is the saddest and most mysterious, and is the root of all other sadness and mystery,-that a man can set his pin-point of a will against that great Will which gives him all his power, and when God beckons can say, 'I will not,' and can render His most sedulous discipline ineffectual.

Note, too, that trivial things are large enough to hide plain duties and bright possibilities. These men knew that they had come to Kadesh for the final assault, which was to recompense all their hardships. Their desert training should have made them less resourceless and desperate when water failed; but the hopes of conquest and the duty of trust cannot hold their own against present material inconvenience. They even seem to make bitter mockery of the promises, when they complain that Kadesh is 'no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates,' which were the fruits brought by the spies,-as if they had said, 'So this stretch of waterless sand is the fertile land you talked of, is it? This is all that we have got by reassembling here.' Do we not often feel that the drought of Kadesh is more real than the grapes of Eshcol? Are we not sometimes tempted to bitter comparisons of the fair promises with the gloomy realities? Does our courage never flag, nor our faith falter, nor swirling clouds of doubt hide the inheritance from our weary and tear-filled eyes? He that is without sin may cast the first stone at these men; but whoever knows his own weak heart will confess that, if he had been among that thirsty crowd, he would, most likely, have made one of the murmurers.

II. Note God’s repetition of His old gift to the new generation. Moses makes no attempt to argue with the people, but casts himself in entreaty before the door of the Tabernacle, as if crushed and helpless in face of this heart-breaking proof of the persistent obstinacy of the old faults. God’s answer recalls the former miracle at Rephidim [Exo. 17:1 - - Exo. 17:7] in the early days of the march, when the same cries had come from lips now silent, and the rock, smitten at God’s command by the rod which had parted the sea, yielded water. The only differences are that here Moses is bid to speak, not to smite; and that the miracle is to be done before all the congregation, instead of before the elders only. Both variations seem to have the common purpose of enhancing the wonder, and confirming the authority of Moses, to a generation to whom the old deliverances were only hearsay, and many of whom were in contact with the leader for the first time. The fact that we have here the beginning of a new epoch, and a new set of people, goes far to explain the resemblance of the two incidents, without the need of supposing, with many critics, that they are but different versions of one ‘legend.’ The repetition of scarcity of water is not wonderful; the recurrence of the murmurings is the sad proof of the unchanged temper of the people, and the repetition of the miracle is the merciful witness of the patience of God. His charity ‘is not easily provoked, is not soon angry,’ but stoops to renew gifts which had been so little appreciated that the remembrance of them failed to cure distrust. Unbelief is obstinate, but His loving purpose is more persistent still. Rephidim should have made the murmuring at Kadesh impossible; but, if it does not, then He will renew the mercy, though it had been once wasted, and will so shape the second gift that it shall recall the first, if haply both may effect what one had failed to do. When need is repeated, the supply is forthcoming, even when it is demanded by sullen and forgetful distrust. We can wear out men’s patience, but God’s is inexhaustible. The same long-suffering Hand that poured water from the rock for two generations of distrustful murmurers still lavishes its misused gifts on us, to win us to late repentance, ‘and upbraideth not’ for our slowness to learn the lessons of His mercies.

III. Note the breaking down at last of the long-tried leader’s patience. It is in striking contrast with the patience of God. Psa. 106:32 - Psa. 106:33, describes the sin of Moses as twofold; namely, anger and speaking ‘unadvisedly.’ His harsh words, so unlike his pleadings on the former occasion of rebellion at Kadesh, have a worse thing than an outburst of temper in them. ‘Must *we* fetch you water out of the rock?’ arrogates to himself the power of working miracles. He forgets that he was as much an instrument, and as little a force, as his own rod. His angry scolding betrays wounded personal importance, and annoyance at rebellion against his own authority, rather than grief at the people’s distrust of God, and also a distinct clouding over of his own consciousness of dependence for all his power on God, and an impure mingling of thoughts of self. The same turbid blending of anger and self-regard impelled his arm to the passionately repeated strokes, which, in his heat, he substituted for the quiet words that he was bidden to speak. The Palestinian Tar gum says very significantly, that at the first stroke the rock dropped blood, thereby indicating the tragic sinfulness of the angry blow. How unworthy a representative of the long-suffering God was this angry man! ‘The servant of the Lord must not strive,’ nor give the water with which he is entrusted, with contempt or anger in his heart. That gift requires meek compassion in its stewards.

But the failure of Moses’ patience was only too natural. The whole incident has to be studied as the first of a new era, in which both leader and led were on their trial. During the thirty-seven years of waiting, Moses had had but little exercise of that part of his functions, and little experience of the people’s temper. He must have looked forward anxiously to the result of the desert hardening; he must have felt more remote from and above the children than he did to their parents, his contemporaries who had come with him from Egypt, and so his disappointment must have been proportionately keen, when the first difficulty that rose revealed the old spirit in undiminished force. For forty years he had been patient, and ready to swallow mortifications and ignore rebellion against himself, and to offer himself for his people; but now, when men whom he had seen in their swaddling-clothes showed the same stiff-necked distrust as had killed their fathers, the breaking-point of his patience was reached. That burst of anger is a grave symptom of lessened love for the sinful murmurers; and lessened love always means lessened power to guide and help. The people are not changed, but Moses is. He has no longer the invincible patience, the utter self-oblivion, the readiness for self-sacrifice, which had borne him up of old, and so he fails. We may learn from his failure that the prime requisite for doing God’s work is love, which cannot be moved to anger nor stirred to self-assertion, but meets and conquers murmuring and rebellion by patient holding forth of God’s gift, and is, in some faint degree, an echo of His endless long-suffering. He who would serve men must, sleeping or waking, carry them in his heart, and pity their sin. They who would represent God to men, and win men for God, must be ‘imitators of God . . .and walk in love.’ If the bearer of the water of life offers it with ‘Hear, ye rebels,’ it will flow untasted.

IV. Note the sentence on the leader, and the sad memorial name. Moses is blamed for not believing nor sanctifying God. His self-assertion in his unadvised speech came from unbelief, or forgetfulness of his dependence. He who claims power to himself, denies it to God. Moses put himself between God and the people, not to show but to hide God; and, instead of exalting God’s holiness before them by declaring Him to be the giver, he intercepted the thanks and diverted them to himself. But was his momentary failure not far too severely punished? To answer that question, we must recur to the thought of the importance of this event as beginning a new chapter, and as a test for both Moses and Israel. His failure was a comparatively small matter in itself; and if the sentence is regarded merely as the punishment of a sin, it appears sternly disproportionate to the offence. Were eighty years of faithful service not sufficient to procure the condonation of one moment’s impatience? Is not that harsh treatment? But a tiny blade above-ground may indicate the presence of a poisonous root, needing drastic measures for its extirpation; and the sentence was not only punishment for sin, but kind, though punitive, relief from an office for which Moses had no longer, in full measure, his old qualifications. The subsequent history does not show any withdrawal of God’s favour from him, and certainly it would be no very sore sorrow to be freed from the heavy load, carried so long. There is disapprobation, no doubt, in the sentence; but it treats the conduct of Moses rather as a symptom of lessened fitness for his heavy responsibility than as sin; and there is as much kindness as condemnation in saying to the wearied veteran, who has stood at his post so long and has taken up arms once more, ‘You have done enough. You are not what you were. Other hands must hold the leader’s staff. Enter into rest.’

Note that Moses was condemned for doing what Jesus always did, asserting his power to work miracles. What was unbelief and a sinful obtrusion of himself in God’s place when the great lawgiver did it, was right and endorsed by God when the Carpenter of Nazareth did it. Why the difference? A greater than Moses is here, when He says to us, ‘What will ye that I should do unto you?’

The name of Meribah-Kadesh is given to suggest the parallel and difference with the other miraculous flow of water. The two incidents are thus brought into connection, and yet individualised. ‘Meribah,’ which means ‘strife,’ brands the murmuring as sinful antagonism to God: ‘Kadesh,’ which means ‘holy,’ brings both the miracle and the sentence under the common category of acts by which God manifested His holiness to the new generation; and so the double name is a reminder of sin that they may be humble, and of mingled mercy and judgment that they may ‘trust and obey.’

11)Numbers 21:4-9

Numbers

THE POISON AND THE ANTIDOTE

Num. 21:4 - Num. 21:9.

The mutinous discontent of the Israelites had some excuse when they had to wheel round once more and go southwards in consequence of the refusal of passage through Edom. The valley which stretches from the Dead Sea to the head of the eastern arm of the Red Sea, down which they had to plod in order to turn the southern end of the mountains on its east side, and then resume their northern march outside the territory of Edom, is described as a 'horrible desert.' Certainly it yielded neither bread nor water. So the faithless pilgrims broke into their only too familiar murmurings, utterly ignoring their thirty-eight years of preservation. 'There is no bread.' No; but the manna had fallen day by day. 'Our soul loatheth this light bread.' Yes; but it was bread all the same. Thus coarse tastes prefer garlic and onions to Heaven's food, and complain of being starved while it is provided. 'There is no water.' No; but the 'rock that followed them' gushed out abundance, and there was no thirst.

Murmuring brought punishment, which was meant for amendment. 'The Lord sent fiery serpents.' That statement does not necessarily imply a miracle. Scripture traces natural phenomena directly to God's will, and often overleaps intervening material links between the cause which is God and the effect which is a physical fact. The neighbourhood of Elath at the head of the gulf is still infested with venomous serpents, 'marked with fiery red spots,' from which, or possibly from the inflammation caused by their poison, they are here called 'fiery.' God made the serpents, though they were hatched by eggs laid by mothers; He brought Israel to the place; He willed the poisonous stings. If we would bring ordinary events into immediate connection with the Divine hand, and would see in all calamities fatherly chastisement 'for our profit,' we should understand life better than we often do.

The swift stroke had fallen without warning or voice to interpret it, but the people knew in their hearts whence and why it had come. Their quick recognition of its source and purpose, and their swift repentance, are to be put to their credit. It is well for us when we interpret for ourselves God's judgments, and need no Moses to urge us to humble ourselves before Him. Conscious guilt is conscious of unworthiness to approach God, though it dares to speak to offended men. The request for Moses' intercession witnesses to the instinct of conscience, requiring a mediator,-an instinct which has led to much superstition and been terribly misguided, but which is deeply true, and is met once for all in Jesus Christ, our Advocate before the throne. The request shows that the petitioners were sure of Moses' forgiveness for their distrust of him, and thus it witnesses to his 'meekness.' His pardon was a kind of pledge of God's. Was the servant likely to be more gracious than the Master? A good man's readiness to forgive helps bad men to believe in a pardoning God. It reflects some beam of Heaven's mercy.

Moses had often prayed for the people when they had sinned, and before they had repented. It was not likely that he would be slow to do so when they asked him, for the asking was accompanied with ample confession. The serpents had done their work, and the prayer that the chastisement should cease would be based on the fact that the sin had been forsaken. But the narrative seems to anticipate that, after the prayer had been offered and answered, Israelites would still be bitten. If they were, that confirms the presumption that the sending of the serpents was not miraculous. It also brings the whole facts into line with the standing methods of Providence, for the outward consequences of sin remain to be reaped after the sin has been forsaken; but they change their character and are no longer destructive, but only disciplinary. 'Serpents' still 'bite' if we have 'broken down hedges,' but there is an antidote.

The command to make a brazen or copper serpent, and set it on some conspicuous place, that to look on it might stay the effect of the poison, is remarkable, not only as sanctioning the forming of an image, but as associating healing power with a material object. Two questions must be considered separately,-What did the method of cure say to the men who turned their bloodshot, languid eyes to it? and What does it mean for us, who see it by the light of our Lord's great words about it? As to the former question, we have not to take into account the Old Testament symbolism which makes the serpent the emblem of Satan or of sin. Serpents had bitten the wounded. Here was one like them, but without poison, hanging harmless on the pole. Surely that would declare that God had rendered innocuous the else fatal creatures. The elevation of the serpent was simply intended to make it visible from afar; but it could not have been set so high as to be seen from all parts of the camp, and we must suppose that the wounded were in many cases carried from the distant parts of the wide-spreading encampment to places whence they could catch a glimpse of it glittering in the sunshine. We are not told that trust in God was an essential part of the look, but that is taken for granted. Why else should a half-dead man lift his heavy eyelids to look? Such a one knew that God had commanded the image to be made, and had promised healing for a look. His gaze was fixed on it, in obedience to the command involved in the promise, and was, in some measure, a manifestation of faith. No doubt the faith was very imperfect, and the desire was only for physical healing; but none the less it had in it the essence of faith. It would have been too hard a requirement for men through whose veins the swift poison was burning its way, and who, at the best, were so little capable of rising above sense, to have asked from them, as the condition of their cure, a trust which had no external symbol to help it. The singularity of the method adopted witnesses to the graciousness of God, who gave their feebleness a thing that they could look at, to aid them in grasping the unseen power which really effected the cure. 'He that turned himself to it,' says the Book of Wisdom, 'was not saved by the thing which he saw, but by Thee, that art the Saviour of all.'

Our Lord has given us the deepest meaning of the brazen serpent. Taught by Him, we are to see in it a type of Himself, the significance of which could not be apprehended till Calvary had given the key. Three distinct points of parallel are suggested by His use of the incident in His conversation with Nicodemus. First, He takes the serpent as an emblem of Himself. Now it is clear that it is so, not in regard to the saving power that dwells in Him, but in regard to His sinless manhood, which was made 'in the likeness of sinful flesh,' yet 'without sin.' The symbolism which takes the serpent as the material type of sin comes into view now, and is essential to the full comprehension of the typical significance of the incident.

Secondly, Jesus laid stress on the 'lifting up' of the serpent. That 'lifting up' has two meanings. It primarily refers to the Crucifixion, wherein, just as the death-dealing power was manifestly triumphed over in the elevation of the brazen serpent, the power of sin is exhibited as defeated, as Paul says, 'triumphing over them in it' [Col. 2:14 - Col. 2:15]. But that lifting up on the Cross draws after it the elevation to the throne, and to that, or, rather, to both considered as inseparably united, our Lord refers when He says,' I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.'

Thirdly, the condition of healing is paralleled. 'When he looked unto the serpent of brass, he lived.' 'That whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life.' From the serpent no healing power flowed; but our eternal life is '*in* Him,' and *from* Him it flows into our poisoned, dying nature. The sole condition of receiving into ourselves that new life which is free from all taint of sin, and is mighty enough to arrest the venom that is diffused through every drop of blood, is faith in Jesus lifted on the Cross to slay the sin that is slaying mankind, and raised to the throne to bestow His own immortal and perfect life on all who look to Him. The bitten Israelite might be all but dead. The poison wrought swiftly; but if he from afar lifted his glazing eyeballs to the serpent on the pole, a swifter healing overtook the death that was all but conqueror, and cast it out, and he who was borne half unconscious to the foot of the standard went away a sound man, 'walking, and leaping, and praising God.' So it may be with any man, however deeply tainted with sin, if he will trust himself to Jesus, and from 'the ends of the earth' 'look unto' Him 'and be saved,' His power knows no hopeless cases. He *can* cure all. He *will* cure our most ingrained sin, and calm the hottest fever of our poisoned blood, if we will let Him. The only thing that we have to do is to gaze, with our hearts in our eyes and faith in our hearts, on Him, as He is lifted on the Cross and the throne. But we must so gaze, or we die, for none but He can cast out the coursing venom. None but He can arrest the swift-footed death that is intertwined with our very natures.

12)Numbers 22:6

Numbers

BALAAM

Num. 22:5.

Give a general outline of the history. See Bishop Butler's great sermon.

I. How much knowledge and love of good there may be in a bad man.

Balaam was a prophet:

> [*a*] He knew something of the divine character,
>
> [*b*] He knew what righteousness was [Mic. 5:8].
>
> [*c*] He knew of a future state, and longed for ‘the last end of the righteous.’

He would not break the law of God, and curse by word of mouth:

But yet for all that he wanted to curse. He wanted to do the wrong thing, and that made him bad. And when he durst not do it in one way, he did it in another.

So he is a picture of the universal blending and mixture that there is even in bad men.

It is not knowledge that makes a man good.

It is not aspirations after righteousness. These dwell more or less in all souls.

It is not desire ‘to go to heaven’-everybody has that desire.

Perfectly vicious men are devils. There is always the blending.

Many of us are trusting to these vagrant wishes, but my friends, it is not what a man would sometimes like, but what the whole set and tenor of his life tends towards, that makes him. There may be plenty of backwater eddies and cross-currents in the sea, but the tide goes on all the same.

‘All these fancies and their whole array
One cunning bosom sin blows quite away,’

‘Let no man deceive you; he that doeth righteousness is righteous.’

Do not trust your convictions; they are powerless in the fight.

II. How men may deceive themselves about their condition, or the self-illusions and compromises of sin.

These convictions will never, by themselves, keep a man from evil, but they may lead men to try to compromise, just as Balaam did. He would go, but he would not, for the life of him, curse; and he evidently thought that he was a hero in firmness and a martyr to duty.

He would not curse in words, but he did it in another way-by means of Baal-peor.

So we find men making compromises between duty and inclination; keeping the letter and breaking the spirit; obeying in some respects and indemnifying themselves for their obedience by their disobedience in others; very devout, attentive to all religious observances, and yet sinning on. And we find such men playing tricks upon themselves, and really deluding themselves into the idea that they are very good men!

This is the great characteristic of sin, its deceitfulness. It always comes as an 'angel of light,' like some of those weird stories in which we read about a strange guest at a banquet who discloses a skeleton below the wedding garment!

'Father of lies.' '*Nihil imbecillius denudato diabolo.*' The more one sins, the less capable he becomes of discerning evil. Conscience becomes sophisticated, and it is always possible to refine away its judgments.

'By reason of use have their senses exercised to discern.' 'Take heed lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.'

III. The absurdity and unreasonableness of unrighteousness.

We look at Balaam, and think, how could a man purpose anything so foolish as to go on seeking for an opportunity to break a law which he knew to be irrevocable!

Yet what did he do but what every sinner does?

All sin is the breach of law which at the very moment of breaking is known to be imperative.

All sin is thus the overbearing of conscience, or the sophistication of conscience, and all sin is the incurring voluntarily of consequences which at the moment are or might be known to be certain, and far overbalancing any fancied ‘wages of unrighteousness.’

Thus all sin is the overbearing of reason or the sophisticating of reason by passion. Men know the absurdity of sin, and yet men will go on sinning. ‘A rogue is a roundabout fool.’ All wrongdoing is a mighty blunder. It is only righteousness which is congruous with a man’s reason, with a man’s conscience, with a man’s highest happiness. ‘The fear of the Lord,’ that is wisdom.

IV. The wages of unrighteousness.

How Balaam’s experiment ended-his death. He tried to make the ‘best of both worlds,’ so he ran with the hare and hunted with the hounds, and this was how it ended, as it always does, as it always will. How death ends all the illusions, sternly breaks down all the compromises, reveals all the absurdities!

Men are one thing or the other. Learn, then, the lesson that no gifts, no talents, no convictions, no aspirations will avail.

Let this sad figure which looks out upon us with grey streaming hair and uplifted hands from beside the altar on Pisgah speak to us.

How near the haven it is possible to be cast away! Like Bunyan’s way to hell from near the gate of the celestial city.

Balaam said, ‘Let me die the death of the righteous!’ and his death was thus:-’Balaam they slew with the sword,’ and his epitaph is ‘Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness,’ got them, and perished!

13)Numbers 23:10

Numbers

AN UNFULFILLED DESIRE

Num. 23:10. - Num. 31:8.

Ponder these two pictures. Take the first scene. A prophet, who knows God and His will, is standing on the mountain top, and as he looks down over the valley beneath him, with its acacia-trees and swift river, there spread the tents of Israel. He sees them, and knows that they are ‘a people whom the Lord hath blessed.’ Brought there to curse, ‘he blesses them altogether’; and as he gazes upon their ordered ranks and sees somewhat of the wondrous future that lay before them, his mind is filled with the thought of all the blessedness of that righteous nation, and the sigh of longing comes to his lips, ‘May I be with them in life and death; may I have no higher honour, no calmer end, than to lie down and die as one of the chosen people, with memories of a divine hand that has protected me all through the past, and quiet hopes of the same hand holding me up in the great darkness!’ A devout aspiration, a worthy desire!

Look at the other picture. Midian has seduced Israel to idolatry and its constant companion, sensual sin. The old lawgiver has for his last achievement to punish the idolater. ‘Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites, afterwards thou shalt be gathered to thy people.’ So each tribe gives its contingent to the fight, and under the fierce and prompt Phinehas, whose javelin had already smitten one of the chief offenders, they go forth. Fire and sword, devastation and victory, mark their track. The princes of Midian fall before the swift rush of the desert-born invaders. And-sad, strange company!-among them is the ‘man who saw the vision of the Almighty, and knew the knowledge of the Most High’ ! he who had taught Moab the purest lessons of morality, and Midian, alas! the practice of the vilest profligacy; he who saw from afar ‘the sceptre arise out of Israel and the Star from Jacob’; he who longed to ‘die the death of the righteous’ ! The onset of the avenging host, with the ‘shout of a king’ in their midst; the terror of the flight, the riot of havoc and bloodshed, and, finally, the quick thrust of the sharp Israelite sword in some strong hand, and the grey hairs all dabbled with his blood-these were what the man came to who had once breathed the honest desire, ‘Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his’ !

I. There is surely a solemn lesson for us all here-as touching the danger of mere vague religious desires and convictions which we do not allow to determine our conduct.

Balaam had evidently much knowledge. Look at these points-

[*a*] His knowledge of the covenant-name of God.

[*b*] His knowledge of a pure morality and a spiritual worship far beyond sacrificial notions, and in some respects higher than the then Old Testament standpoint.

[*c*] The knowledge [which is implied in the text] of a future state, which had gone far into the background, even if it had not been altogether lost, among the Israelites. Is it not remarkable that the religious ideas of this man were in advance of Israel’s at this time; that there seems to have lingered among these ‘outsiders’ more of a pure faith than in Israel itself?

What a lesson here as to the souls led by God and enlightened by Him beyond the pale of Judaism!

But all this knowledge, of what use was it to Balaam? He knows about God: does he seek to serve Him? He preaches morality to Moab, and he teaches Midian to ‘teach the children of Israel to commit fornication.’ He knows something of the blessedness of a ‘righteous man’ s’ death, and perhaps sees faintly the shining gates beyond-but how does it all end? What a gulf between *knowledge* and *life*!

What is the use of correct ideas about God? They may be the foundations of holy thoughts, and they are meant to be so. I am not setting up emotion above principle, or fancying that there can be religion without theology; but for what are all our thoughts about God given us?

[*a*] That they may influence our hearts.

[*b*] That they may subdue our wills.

[*c*] That they may mould our practical life.

If they do not do that-then *what* do they do?

They constitute a positive hindrance-like the dead lava-blocks that choke the mouth of a crater, or the two deposits on the bottom of a boiler, soot outside and crust inside, which keep the fire from getting at the water. They have lost their power because they are so familiar. They are weakened by not being practised. The very organs of intelligence are, as it were, ossified. Self-complacency lays hold on the possession of these ideas and shields itself against all appeals with the fact of possessing them. Many a man mistakes, in his own case, the knowledge of the truth for obedience to the truth. All this is seen in everyday life, and with reference to all manner of convictions, but it is most apparent and most fatal about Christian truth. I appeal to the many who hear and know all about 'the word,' What more is needed? That you should do what you know ['Be not hearers only']; that you should yield your whole being to Christ, the living Word.

II. Balaam is an example of convictions which remain inefficacious.

It was not without some sense of his own character, and some forebodings of what was possibly brooding over him, that he uttered these words of the text. But they were transitory emotions, and they passed away.

I suppose that every man who hears the gospel proclaimed is, at some time or other, conscious of dawning thoughts which, if followed, would lead him to decision for Christ. I suppose that every man among us is conscious of thoughts visiting him many a time when he least expects them, which, if honestly obeyed, would work an entire revolution in his life.

I do not wish to speak as if unbelieving men were the only people who were unfaithful to their consciences, but rather to deal with what is a besetting sin of us all, though it reaches its highest aggravation in reference to the gospel.

Such stings of conviction come to us all, but how are they deadened?

[*a*] By simple neglect. Pay no attention to them; do not do anything in consequence, and they will gradually disappear. The voice unheard will cease to speak. Non-obedience to conscience will in the end almost throttle conscience.

[*b*] By angry rejection.

[*c*] By busy occupation with the outer world.

[*d*] By sinful occupation with it.

Then consider that such dealing with our convictions leaves us far worse men than before, and if continued will end in utter insensibility.

What should we do with such convictions? Reverently follow them. And in so doing they will grow and increase, and lead us at last to God and peace.

Special application of all this to our attitude towards Christian truth.

III. Balaam is an instance of wishes that are never fulfilled.

He wished to die 'as the righteous.' How did he die? miserably; and why?

[1] Because his wish was deficient in character.

It was *one* among a great many, feeble and not predominant, occasioned by circumstances, and so fading when these disappeared. Like many men's relation to the gospel who would *like* to be Christians, and are not. These vagrant wishes are nothing; mere 'catspaws' of wind, not a breeze. They are not real, even while they last, and so they come to nothing.

[2] Because it was partially wrong in its object.

He was willing to die the death, but not to live the life, of the righteous; like many men who would be very glad to 'go to heaven when they die,' but who will not be Christians while they live.

Now, God forbid that I should say that his wish was wrong! But only it was not enough. Such a wish led to no action.

Now, God hears the faintest wish; He does not require that we should will strongly, but He does require that we should desire, and that we should act according to our desires.

Let the close be a brief picture of a righteous death. And oh! if you feel that it is blessed, then let that desire lead you to Christ, and all will be well. Remember that Bunyan saw a byway to hell at the door of the celestial city. Remember how Balaam ended, and stands gibbeted in the New Testament as an evil man, and the type of false teachers. Finally, beware of knowledge which is not operative in conduct, of convictions which are neglected and pass away, of vague desires which come to nought.

14)Numbers 31:8

Numbers

AN UNFULFILLED DESIRE

Num. 23:10. - Num. 31:8.

Ponder these two pictures. Take the first scene. A prophet, who knows God and His will, is standing on the mountain top, and as he looks down over the valley beneath him, with its acacia-trees and swift river, there spread the tents of Israel. He sees them, and knows that they are ‘a people whom the Lord hath blessed.’ Brought there to curse, ‘he blesses them altogether’; and as he gazes upon their ordered ranks and sees somewhat of the wondrous future that lay before them, his mind is filled with the thought of all the blessedness of that righteous nation, and the sigh of longing comes to his lips, ‘May I be with them in life and death; may I have no higher honour, no calmer end, than to lie down and die as one of the chosen people, with memories of a divine hand that has protected me all through the past, and quiet hopes of the same hand holding me up in the great darkness!’ A devout aspiration, a worthy desire!

Look at the other picture. Midian has seduced Israel to idolatry and its constant companion, sensual sin. The old lawgiver has for his last achievement to punish the idolater. ‘Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites, afterwards thou shalt be gathered to thy people.’ So each tribe gives its contingent to the fight, and under the fierce and prompt Phinehas, whose javelin had already smitten one of the chief offenders, they go forth. Fire and sword, devastation and victory, mark their track. The princes of Midian fall before the swift rush of the desert-born invaders. And-sad, strange company!-among them is the ‘man who saw the vision of the Almighty, and knew the knowledge of the Most High’ ! he who had taught Moab the purest lessons of morality, and Midian, alas! the practice of the vilest profligacy; he who saw from afar ‘the sceptre arise out of Israel and the Star from Jacob’; he who longed to ‘die the death of the righteous’ ! The onset of the avenging host, with the ‘shout of a king’ in their midst; the terror of the flight, the riot of havoc and bloodshed, and, finally, the quick thrust of the sharp Israelite sword in some strong hand, and the grey hairs all dabbled with his blood-these were what the man came to who had once breathed the honest desire, ‘Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his’ !

I. There is surely a solemn lesson for us all here-as touching the danger of mere vague religious desires and convictions which we do not allow to determine our conduct.

Balaam had evidently much knowledge. Look at these points-

> [*a*] His knowledge of the covenant-name of God.
>
> [*b*] His knowledge of a pure morality and a spiritual worship far beyond sacrificial notions, and in some respects higher than the then Old Testament standpoint.
>
> [*c*] The knowledge [which is implied in the text] of a future state, which had gone far into the background, even if it had not been altogether lost, among the Israelites. Is it not remarkable that the religious ideas of this man were in advance of Israel’s at this time; that there seems to have lingered among these ‘outsiders’ more of a pure faith than in Israel itself?

What a lesson here as to the souls led by God and enlightened by Him beyond the pale of Judaism!

But all this knowledge, of what use was it to Balaam? He knows about God: does he seek to serve Him? He preaches morality to Moab, and he teaches Midian to ‘teach the children of Israel to commit fornication.’ He knows something of the blessedness of a ‘righteous man’ s’ death, and perhaps sees faintly the shining gates beyond-but how does it all end? What a gulf between *knowledge* and *life*!

What is the use of correct ideas about God? They may be the foundations of holy thoughts, and they are meant to be so. I am not setting up emotion above principle, or fancying that there can be religion without theology; but for what are all our thoughts about God given us?

[*a*] That they may influence our hearts.

[*b*] That they may subdue our wills.

[*c*] That they may mould our practical life.

If they do not do that-then *what* do they do?

They constitute a positive hindrance-like the dead lava-blocks that choke the mouth of a crater, or the two deposits on the bottom of a boiler, soot outside and crust inside, which keep the fire from getting at the water. They have lost their power because they are so familiar. They are weakened by not being practised. The very organs of intelligence are, as it were, ossified. Self-complacency lays hold on the possession of these ideas and shields itself against all appeals with the fact of possessing them. Many a man mistakes, in his own case, the knowledge of the truth for obedience to the truth. All this is seen in everyday life, and with reference to all manner of convictions, but it is most apparent and most fatal about Christian truth. I appeal to the many who hear and know all about ‘the word,’ What more is needed? That you should do what you know [‘Be not hearers only’]; that you should yield your whole being to Christ, the living Word.

II. Balaam is an example of convictions which remain inefficacious.

It was not without some sense of his own character, and some forebodings of what was possibly brooding over him, that he uttered these words of the text. But they were transitory emotions, and they passed away.

I suppose that every man who hears the gospel proclaimed is, at some time or other, conscious of dawning thoughts which, if followed, would lead him to decision for Christ. I suppose that every man among us is conscious of thoughts visiting him many a time when he least expects them, which, if honestly obeyed, would work an entire revolution in his life.

I do not wish to speak as if unbelieving men were the only people who were unfaithful to their consciences, but rather to deal with what is a besetting sin of us all, though it reaches its highest aggravation in reference to the gospel.

Such stings of conviction come to us all, but how are they deadened?

> [*a*] By simple neglect. Pay no attention to them; do not do anything in consequence, and they will gradually disappear. The voice unheard will cease to speak. Non-obedience to conscience will in the end almost throttle conscience.
>
> [*b*] By angry rejection.
>
> [*c*] By busy occupation with the outer world.
>
> [*d*] By sinful occupation with it.

Then consider that such dealing with our convictions leaves us far worse men than before, and if continued will end in utter insensibility.

What should we do with such convictions? Reverently follow them. And in so doing they will grow and increase, and lead us at last to God and peace.

Special application of all this to our attitude towards Christian truth.

III. Balaam is an instance of wishes that are never fulfilled.

He wished to die ‘as the righteous.’ How did he die? miserably; and why?

> [1] Because his wish was deficient in character.

It was *one* among a great many, feeble and not predominant, occasioned by circumstances, and so fading when these disappeared. Like many men’s relation to the gospel who would *like* to be Christians, and are not. These vagrant wishes are nothing; mere ‘catspaws’ of wind, not a breeze. They are not real, even while they last, and so they come to nothing.

[2] Because it was partially wrong in its object.

He was willing to die the death, but not to live the life, of the righteous; like many men who would be very glad to ‘go to heaven when they die,’ but who will not be Christians while they live.

Now, God forbid that I should say that his wish was wrong! But only it was not enough. Such a wish led to no action.

Now, God hears the faintest wish; He does not require that we should will strongly, but He does require that we should desire, and that we should act according to our desires.

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Deuteronomy

1) DEUTERONOMY 7:9
2) DEUTERONOMY 8:2
3) DEUTERONOMY 12:18
4) DEUTERONOMY 13:4
5) DEUTERONOMY 18:9-22
6) DEUTERONOMY 28:47-48
7) DEUTERONOMY 30:11-20
8) DEUTERONOMY 32:9
9) DEUTERONOMY 32:11

10) DEUTERONOMY 32:31
11) DEUTERONOMY 33:3
12) DEUTERONOMY 33:12
13) DEUTERONOMY 33:16
14) DEUTERONOMY 33:25
15) DEUTERONOMY 34:5-6

1) Deuteronomy 7:9

Deuteronomy

GOD’S FAITHFULNESS

Deu. 7:9.

‘Faithful,’ like most Hebrew words, has a picture in it. It means something that can be [1] leant on, or [2] builded on.

This leads to a double signification-[1] trustworthy, and that because [2] rigidly observant of obligations. So the word applies to a steward, a friend, or a witness. Its most wonderful and sublime application is to God. It presents to our adoring love-

I. God as coming under obligations to us.

A marvellous and blessed idea. He limits His action, regards Himself as bound to a certain line of conduct.

1. Obligations from His act of creation.

‘A faithful Creator,’ bound to take care of those whom He has made. To supply their necessities. To satisfy their desires. To give to each the possibility of discharging its ideal.

2. Obligations from His past self.

‘God is faithful by whom ye were called,’ therefore He will do all that is imposed on Him by His act of calling.

He cannot begin without completing. There are no abandoned mines. There are no half-hewn stones in His quarries, like the block at Baalbec. And this because the divine nature is inexhaustible in power and unchangeable in purpose.

3. Obligations from His own word.

A revelation is presupposed by the notion of faithfulness. It is not possible in heathenism. ‘Dumb idols,’ which have given their worshippers no promises, cannot be thought of as faithful. By its grand conception of Jehovah as entering into a covenant with Israel, the Old Testament presents Him to our trust as having bound Himself to a known line of action. Thereby He becomes, if we may so phrase it, a constitutional monarch.

That conception of a Covenant is the negation of caprice, of arbitrary sovereignty, of mystery. We know the principles of His government. His majestic ‘I wills’ cover the whole ground of human life and needs for the present and the future. We can go into no region of life but we find that God has defined His conduct to us there by some word spoken to our heart and binding Him.

4. Obligations from His new Covenant and highest word in Jesus Christ.

‘He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.’

II. God as recognising and discharging these obligations.

That He will do so comes from His very nature. With Him there is no change of disposition, no emergence of unseen circumstances, no failure or exhaustion of power.

That He does so is matter of fact. Moses in the preceding context had pointed to facts of history, on which he built the ‘know therefore’ of the text. On the broad scale the whole world’s history is full of illustrations of God’s faithfulness to His promises and His threats. The history of Judaism, the sorrows of nations, and the complications of national events, all illustrate this fact.

The personal history of each of us. The experience of all Christian souls. No man ever trusted in Him and was ashamed. He wills that we should put Him to the proof.

III. God as claiming our trust.

He is faithful, worthy to be trusted, as His deeds show.

Faith is our attitude corresponding to His faithfulness. Faith is the germ of all that He requires from us. How much we need it! How firm it might be! How blessed it would make us!

The thought of God as 'faithful' is, like a precious stone, turned in many directions in Scripture, and wherever turned it flashes light. Sometimes it is laid as the foundation for the confidence that even our weakness will be upheld to the end, as when Paul tells the Corinthians that they will be confirmed to the end, because 'God is faithful, through whom ye were called into the fellowship of His Son' [1Co. 1:9]. Sometimes there is built on it the assurance of complete sanctification, as when he prays for the Thessalonians that their 'whole spirit and soul and body may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord' and finds it in his heart to pray thus because 'Faithful is He that calleth you, who will also do it' [1Th. 5:24]. Sometimes it is presented as the steadfast stay grasping which faith can expect apparent impossibilities, as when Sara 'judged Him faithful who had promised' [Heb. 11:11]. Sometimes it is adduced as bringing strong consolation to souls conscious of their own feeble and fluctuating faith, as when Paul tells Timothy that 'If we are faithless, He abideth faithful; for He cannot deny Himself' [2Ti. 2:13]. Sometimes it is presented as an anodyne to souls disturbed by experience of men's unreliableness, as when the apostle heartens the Thessalonians and himself to bear human untrustworthiness by the thought that though men are faithless, God 'is faithful, who shall establish you and keep you from evil' [2Th. 3:2 - 2Th. 3:3]. Sometimes it is put forward to breathe patience into tempted spirits, as when the Corinthians are comforted by the assurance that 'God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able' [1Co. 10:13].

Sometimes it is laid as the firm foundation for our assurance of pardon, as when John tells us that ‘If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins’ [1Jn. 1:9]. And sometimes that great attribute of the divine nature is proposed as holding forth a pattern for us to follow, and the faith in it as tending to make us in a measure steadfast like Himself, as when Paul indignantly rebuts his enemies’ charge of levity of purpose and vacillation, and avers that ‘as God is faithful, our word toward you is not yea and nay’ [2Co. 1:18].

2) Deuteronomy 8:2

Deuteronomy

THE LESSON OF MEMORY

Deu. 8:2.

The strand of our lives usually slips away smoothly enough, but days such as this, the last Sunday in a year, are like the knots on a sailor’s log, which, as they pass through his fingers, tell him how fast it is being paid out from the reel, and how far it has run off.

They suggest a momentary consciousness of the swift passage of life, and naturally lead us to a glance backwards and forwards, both of which occupations ought to be very good for us. The dead flat upon which some of us live may be taken as an emblem of the low present in which most of us are content to pass our lives, affording nowhere a distant view, and never enabling us to see more than a street’s length ahead of us. It is a good thing to get up upon some little elevation and take a wider view, backwards and forwards.

And so now I venture to let the season preach to us, and to confine myself simply to suggesting for you one or two very plain and obvious thoughts which may help to make our retrospect wise and useful. And there are two main considerations which I wish to submit. The first is -what we ought to be chiefly occupied with as we look back; and secondly, what the issue of such a retrospect ought to be.

I. With what we should be mainly occupied as we look back. Memory, like all other faculties, may either help us or hinder us. As is the man, so will be his remembrance. The tastes which rule his present will determine the things that he likes best to think about in the past. There are many ways of going wrong in our retrospects. Some of us, for instance, prefer to think with pleasure about things that ought never to have been done, and to give a wicked immortality to thoughts that ought never to have had a being. Some men's tastes and inclinations are so vitiated and corrupted that they find a joy in living their badnesses over again. Some of us, looking back on the days that are gone, select by instinctive preference for remembrance, the vanities and frivolities and trifles which were the main things in them whilst they lasted. Such a use of the great faculty of memory is like the folly of the Egyptians who embalmed cats and vermin. Do not let us be of those, who have in their memories nothing but rubbish, or something worse, who let down the drag-net into the depths of the past and bring it up full only of mud and foulnesses, and of ugly monsters that never ought to have been dragged into the daylight.

Then there are some of us who abuse memory just as much by picking out, with perverse ingenuity, every black bit that lies in the distance behind us, all the disappointments, all the losses, all the pains, all the sorrows. Some men look back and say, with Jacob in one of his moods, 'Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life!' Yes! and the same man, when he was in a better spirit, said, and a great deal more truly, 'The God that fed me all my life long, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil.' Do not paint like Rembrandt, even if you do not paint like Turner. Do not dip your brush only in the blackness, even if you cannot always dip it in molten sunshine.

And there are some of us who, in like manner, spoil all the good that we could get out of a wise retrospect, by only looking back in such a fashion as to feed a sentimental melancholy, which is, perhaps, the most profitless of all the ways of looking backwards.

Now here are the two points, in this verse of my text, which would put all these blunders and all others right, telling us what we should chiefly think about when we look back, and from what point of view the retrospect of the past must be taken in order that it should be salutary. 'Thou shalt remember all the way by which the Lord thy God hath led thee.' Let memory work under the distinct recognition of divine guidance in every part of the past. That is the *first* condition of making the retrospect blessed. 'To humble thee and to prove thee, and to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or no'; let us look back with a clear recognition of the fact that the use of life is to test, and reveal, and to make, character. This world, and all its outward engagements, duties, and occupations, is but a scaffolding, on which the builders may stand to rear the true temple, and when the building is reared you may do what you like with the scaffolding. So we have to look back on life from this point of view, that its joys and sorrows, its ups and downs, its work and repose, the vicissitudes and sometimes contrariety of its circumstances and conditions, are all for the purpose of making *us*, and of making plain to ourselves, what we are. 'To humble thee,' that is, to knock the self-confidence out of us, and to bring us to say: 'I am nothing and Thou art everything; I myself am a poor weak rag of a creature that needs Thy hand to stiffen me, or I shall not be able to resist or to do.' That is one main lesson that life is meant to teach us. Whoever has learnt to say by reason of the battering and shocks of time, by reason of sorrows and failures, by reason of joys, too, and fruition,-'Lord, I come to Thee as depending upon Thee for everything,' has wrung its supreme good out of life, and has fulfilled the purpose of the Father, who has led us all these years, to humble us into the wholesome diffidence that says: 'Not in myself, but in Thee are all my strength and my hope.'

I need not do more than remind you of the other cognate purposes which are suggested here. Life is meant, not only to bring us to humble self-distrust, as a step towards devout dependence on God, but also to reveal us to ourselves; for we only know what we are by reflecting on what we have done, and the only path by which self-knowledge can be attained is the path of observant recollection of our conduct in daily life.

Another purpose for which the whole panorama of life is made to pass before us, and for which all the gymnastic of life exercises us, is that we may be made submissive to the great Will, and may keep His commandments.

These thoughts should be with us in our retrospect, and then our retrospect will be blessed: First, we are to look back and see God's guidance everywhere, and second, we are to judge of the things that we remember by their tendency to make character, to make us humble, to reveal us to ourselves, and to knit us in glad obedience to our Father God.

II. And now turn to the other consideration which may help to make remembrance a good, viz., the issues to which our retrospect must tend, if it is to be anything more than sentimental recollection.

First, let me say: Remember and be thankful. If what I have been saying as to the standard by which events are to be tried be true; if it be the case that the main fact about things is their power to mould persons and to make character, then there follows, very plainly and clearly, that all things that come within the sweep of our memory may equally contribute to our highest good.

Good does not mean pleasure. Bright-being may not always be well-being, and the highest good has a very much nobler meaning than comfort and satisfaction. And so, realising the fact that the best of things is that they shall make us like God, then we can turn to the past and judge it wisely, because then we shall see that all the diversity, and even the opposition, of circumstances and events, may co-operate towards the same end. Suppose two wheels in a great machine, one turns from right to left and the other from left to right, but they fit into one another, and they both produce one final result of motion. So the moments in my life which I call blessings and gladness, and the moments in my life which I call sorrows and tortures, may work into each other, and they will do so if I take hold of them rightly, and use them as they ought to be used. They will tend to the highest good whether they be light or dark; even as night with its darkness and its dews has its ministration and mission of mercy for the wearied eye no less than day with its brilliancy and sunshine; even as the summer and the winter are equally needful, and equally good for the crop. So in our lives it is good for us, sometimes, that we be brought into the dark places; it is good for us sometimes that the leaves be stripped from the trees, and the ground be bound with frost.

And so for both kinds of weather, dear brethren, we have to remember and be thankful. It is a hard lesson, I know, for some of us. There may be some listening to me whose memory goes back to this dying year as the year that has held the sorest sorrow of their lives; to whom it has brought some loss that has made earth dark. And it seems hard to tell quivering lips to be thankful, and to bid a man be grateful though his eyes fill with tears as he looks back on such a past. But yet it is true that it is good for us to be drawn, or to be driven, to Him; it is good for us to have to tread even a lonely path if it makes us lean more on the arm of our Beloved. It is good for us to have places made empty if, as in the year when Israel’s King died, we shall thereby have our eyes purged to behold the Lord sitting on the Royal Seat.

‘Take it on trust a little while,
Thou soon shalt read the mystery right,
In the full sunshine of His smile.’

And for the present let us try to remember that He dwelleth in the darkness as in the light, and that we are to be thankful for the things that help us to be near Him, and not only for the things that make us outwardly glad. So I venture to say even to those of you who may be struggling with sad remembrances, remember and be thankful.

I have no doubt there are many of us who have to look back, if not upon a year desolated by some blow that never can be repaired, yet upon a year in which failing resources and declining business, or diminished health, or broken spirits, or a multitude of minute but most disturbing cares and sorrows, do make it hard to recognise the loving Hand in all that comes. Yet to such, too, I would say: ‘All things work together for good,’ therefore all things are to be embraced in the thankfulness of our retrospect.

The second and simple practical suggestion that I make is this: Remember, and let the memory lead to contrition. Perhaps I am speaking to some men or women for whom this dying year holds the memory of some great lapse from goodness; some young man who for the first time has been tempted to sensuous sin; some man who may have been led into slippery places in regard to business integrity. I draw a ‘bow at a venture’ when I speak of such things-perhaps some one is listening to me who would give a great deal if he or she could forget a certain past moment of this dying year, which makes their cheeks hot yet whilst they think of it. To such I say: Remember, go close into the presence of the black thing, and get the consciousness of it driven into your heart; for such remembrance is the first step to deliverance from the load, and to your passing, emancipated from the bitterness, into the year that lies before you.

But even if there are none of us to whom such remarks would specially apply, let us summon up to ourselves the memories of these bygone days. In all the three hundred and sixty-five of them, my friend, how many moments stand out distinct before you as moments of high communion with God? How many times can you remember of devout consecration to Him? How many, when-as visitors to the Riviera reckon the number of days in the season in which, far across the water, they have seen Corsica-you can remember this year to have beheld, faint and far away, 'the mountains that are round about' the 'Jerusalem that is above'? How many moments do you remember of consecration and service, of devotion to your God and your fellows? Oh! what a miserable, low-lying stretch of God-forgetting monotony our lives look when we are looking back at them in the mass. One film of mist is scarcely perceptible, but when you get a mile of it you can tell what it is-oppressive darkness. One drop of muddy water does not show its pollution, but when you have a pitcherful of it you can see how thick it is. And so a day or an hour looked back upon may not reveal the true godlessness of the average life, but if you will take the twelvemonth and think about it, and ask yourself a question or two about it, I think you will feel that the only attitude for any of us in looking back across a stretch of such brown barren moorland is that of penitent prayer for forgiveness and for cleansing.

But I dare say that some of you say: 'Oh! I look back and I do not feel anything of that kind of regret that you describe; I have done my duty, and nobody can blame me. I am quite comfortable in my retrospect. Of course there have been imperfections; we are all human, and these need not trouble a man.' Let me ask you, dear brother, one question: Do you believe that the law of a man's life is, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself'? Do you believe that that is what you ought to do? Have you done it? If you have not, let me beseech you not to go out of this year, across the artificial and imaginary boundary that separates you from the next, with the old guilt upon your back, but go to Jesus Christ, and ask Him to forgive you, and then you may pass into the coming twelvemonth without the intolerable burden of unremembered, unconfessed, and therefore unforgiven, sin.

The next point that I would suggest is this: Let us remember in order that from the retrospect we may gain practical wisdom. It is astonishing what unteachable, untamable creatures men are. They learn wisdom about all the little matters of daily life by experience, but they do not seem to do so about the higher. Even a sparrow comes to understand a scarecrow after a time or two, and any rat in a hole will learn the trick of a trap. But you can trick men over and over again with the same inducement, and, even whilst the hook is sticking in their jaws, the same bait will tempt them once more. That is very largely the case because they do not observe and remember what has happened to them in bygone days.

There are two things that any man, who will bring his reason and common-sense to bear upon the honest estimate and retrospect of the facts of his life, may be fully convinced of. These are, first, his own weakness. One main use of a wise retrospect is to teach us where we are weakest. What an absurd thing it would be if the inhabitants of a Dutch village were to let the sea come in at the same gap in the same dyke a dozen times! What an absurd thing it would be if a city were captured over and over again by assaults at the same point, and did not strengthen its defences there! But that is exactly what you do; and all the while, if you would only think about your own past lives wisely and reasonably, and like men with brains in your heads, you might find out where it was that you were most open to attack; what it was in your character that most needed strengthening, what it was wherein the devil caught you most quickly, and might so build yourselves up in the most defenceless points.

Do not look back for sentimental melancholy; do not look back with unavailing regrets; do not look back to torment yourselves with useless self-accusation; but look back to see how good God has been, and look back to see where you are weak, and pile the wall, higher there, and so learn practical wisdom from retrospect.

Another phase of the practical wisdom which memory should give is deliverance from the illusions of sense and time. Remember how little the world has ever done for you in bygone days. Why should you let it befool you once again? If it has proved itself a liar when it has tempted you with gilded offers that came to nothing, and with beauty that was no more solid than the 'Easter-eggs' that you buy in the shops-painted sugar with nothing inside-why should you believe it when it comes to you once more? Why not say: 'Ah! once burnt, twice shy! You have tried that trick on me before, and I have found it out!' Let the retrospect teach us how hollow life is without God, and so let it draw us near to Him.

The last thing that I would say is: 'Let us remember that we may hope. It is the prerogative of Christian remembrance, that it merges into Christian hope. The forward look and the backward look are really but the exercise of the same faculty in two different directions. Memory does not always imply hope, we remember sometimes because we do not hope, and try to gather round ourselves the vanished past because we know it never again can be a present or a future. But when we are occupied with an unchanging Friend, whose love is inexhaustible, and whose arm is unwearied, it is good logic to say: 'It has been, therefore it shall be.'

With regard to this fleeting life, it is a delusion to say 'to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant'; but with regard to the life of the soul that lives in God, that is true, and true for ever. The past is a specimen of the future. The future for the man who lives in Christ is but the prolongation, and the heightening into superlative excellence and beauty, of all that is good in the past and in the present. As the radiance of some rising sun may cast its bright beams into the opposite sky, even so the glowing past behind us flings its purples and its golds and its scarlets on to the else dim curtain of the future.

Remember that you may hope. A paradox, but a paradox that is a truth in the case of Christians whose memory is of a God that has loved and blessed them whose hope is in a God that changes never; whose memory is charged with 'every good and perfect gift that came down from the Father of

Lights,' whose hope is in that same Father, 'with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.' So on every stone of remembrance, every Ebenezer on which is graved: 'Hitherto hath the Lord helped us,' we can mount a telescope-if I may so say-that will look into the furthest glories of the heavens, and be sure that the past will be magnified and perpetuated in the future. Our prayer may legitimately be; 'Thou hast been my help, leave me not, neither forsake me!' And His answer will be: 'I will not leave thee until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.' Remember that you may hope, and hope because you remember.

3) Deuteronomy 12:18

Deuteronomy

THE EATING OF THE PEACE-OFFERING

Deu. 12:18.

There were three bloody sacrifices, the sin-offering, the burnt-offering, and the peace-offering. In all three expiation was the first idea, but in the second of them the act of burning symbolised a further thought, namely, that of offering to God, while in the third, the peace-offering, there was added to both of these the still further thought of the offerer's participation with God, as symbolised by the eating of the sacrifice. So we have great verities of the most spiritual religion adumbrated in this external rite. The rind is hard and forbidding, the kernel is juicy and sweet.

I. Communion with God based on atonement.

II. Feeding on Christ.

What was sacrifice becomes food. The same Person and facts, apprehended by faith, are, in regard to their bearing on the divine government, the ground of pardon, and in regard to their operation within us, the source of spiritual sustenance. Christ for us is our pardon; Christ in us is our life.

III. The restoration to the offerer of all which he lays on God's altar.

The sacrifice was transformed and elevated into a sacrament. By being offered the sacrifice was ennobled. The offerer did not lose what he laid on the altar, but it came back to him, far more precious than before. It was no longer mere food for the body, and to eat it became not an ordinary meal, but a sacrament and means of union with God. It was a hundredfold more the offerer's even in this life. All its savour was more savoury, all its nutritive qualities were more nutritious. It had suffered a fiery change, and was turned into something more rich and rare.

That is blessedly true as to all which we lay on God's altar. It is far more ours than it ever was or could be, while we kept it for ourselves, and our enjoyment of, and nourishment from, our good things, when offered as sacrifices, are greater than when we eat our morsel alone. If we make earthly joys and possessions the materials of our sacrifice, they will not only become more joyful and richer, but they will become means of closer union with Him, instead of parting us from Him, as they do when used in selfish disregard of Him.

Nor must we forget the wonderful thought, also mirrored in this piece of ancient ritual, that God delights in men's sacrifices and surrenders and services. 'If I were hungry, I would not tell thee,' said the Psalmist in God's name in regard to outward sacrifices; 'Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?' But he does 'eat' the better sacrifices that loving hearts or obedient wills lay on His altar. He seeks for these, and delights when they are offered to Him. 'He hungered, and seeing a fig tree by the wayside, He came to it.' He still hungers for the fruit that we can yield to Him, and if we will, He will enter in and sup with us, not disdaining to sit at the poor table which we can spread for Him, nor to partake of the humble fare which we can lay upon it, but mending the banquet by what He brings for *our* nourishment, and hallowing the hour by His presence.

4) Deuteronomy 13:4

Genesis

WITH, BEFORE, AFTER

‘Enoch walked with God,’- Gen. 5:22.

‘Walk before Me.’- Gen. 17:1.

‘Ye shall walk after the Lord your God.’- Deu. 13:4.

You will have anticipated, I suppose, my purpose in doing what I very seldom do-cutting little snippets out of different verses and putting them together. You see that these three fragments, in their resemblances and in their differences, are equally significant and instructive. They concur in regarding life as a walk-a metaphor which expresses continuity, so that every man’s life is a whole, which expresses progress, which expresses change, and which implies a goal. They agree in saying that God must he brought into a life somehow, and in some aspect, if that life is to be anything else but an aimless wandering, if it is to tend to the point to which every human life should attain. But then they diverge, and, if we put them together, they say to us that there are three different ways in which we ought to bring God into our life. We should ‘walk *with* Him,’ like Enoch; we should ‘walk *before*’ Him, as Abraham was bade to do; and we should ‘walk *after*’ Him, as the command to do was given to all Israel. And these three prepositions, *with*, *before*, *after*, attached to the general idea of life as a walk, give us a triple aspect-which yet is, of course, fundamentally, one-of the way in which life may be ennobled, dignified, calmed, hallowed, focussed, and concentrated by the various relations into which we enter with Him. So I take the three of them.

1. ‘Enoch walked *with* God.’

That is a sweet, simple, easily intelligible, and yet lofty way of putting the notion which we bring into a more abstract and less impressive shape when we talk about communion with God. Two men travelling along a road keep each other company. ‘How can two walk together except they be agreed?’ The companion is at our side all the same, though the mists may have come down and we cannot see Him. We can hear His voice, we can grasp His hand, we can catch the echoes of His steps. We know He is there, and that is enough. Enoch and God walked together, by the simple exercise of the faith that fills the Invisible with one great, loving Face. By a continuous, definite effort, as we are going through the bustle of daily life, and amid all the pettiness and perplexities and monotonies that make up our often weary and always heavy days, we can realise to ourselves that He is of a truth at our sides, and by purity of life and heart we can bring Him nearer, and can make ourselves more conscious of His nearness. For, brethren, the one thing that parts a man from God, and makes it impossible for a heart to expatiate in the thought of His presence, is the contrariety to His will in our conduct. The slightest invisible film of mist that comes across the blue abyss of the mighty sky will blot out the brightest of the stars, and we may sometimes not be able to see the mist, and only know that it is there because we do not see the planet. So unconscious sin may steal in between us and God, and we shall no longer be able to say, ‘I walk with Him.’

The Roman Catholics talk, in their mechanical way, of bringing down all the spiritual into the material and formal, about the ‘practice of the presence of God.’ It is an ugly phrase, but it means a great thing, that Christian people ought, very much more than they do, to aim, day by day, and amidst their daily duties, at realising that most elementary thought which, like a great many other elementary thoughts, is impotent because we believe it so utterly, that wherever we are, we may have Him with us. It is the secret of blessedness, of tranquillity, of power, of everything good and noble.

‘I am a stranger with Thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were,’ said the Psalmist of old. If he had left out these two little words, ‘with Thee,’ he would have been uttering a tragic complaint; but when they come in, all that is painful, all that is solitary, all that is transient, bitterly transient, in the long succession of the generations that have passed across earth’s scene, and have not been kindred to it, is cleared away and changed into gladness. Never mind, though you are a stranger, if you have that companion. Never mind, though you are only a sojourner; if you have Him with you, whatever passes He will not pass; and though we dwell here in a system to which we do not belong, and its transiency and our transiency bring with them many sorrows, when we can say, ‘Lord! Thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations,’ we are at home, and that eternal home will never pass.

Enoch ‘walked with God,’ and, of course, ‘God took him,’ There was nothing else for it, and there could be no other end, for a life of communion with God here has in it the prophecy and the pledge of a life of eternal union hereafter. So, then, 'practise the presence of God.' An old mystic says: 'If I can tell how many times to-day I have thought about God, I have not thought about Him often enough.' Walk with Him by faith, by effort, by purity.

2. And now take the other aspect suggested by the other word God spoke to Abraham: 'I am the Almighty God, walk *before* Me and be thou perfect.'

That suggests, as I suppose I do not need to point out, the idea not only of communion, which the former phrase brought to our minds, but that of the inspection of our conduct. 'As ever in the great Taskmaster's eye,' says the stern Puritan poet, and although one may object to that word 'Taskmaster,' yet the idea conveyed is the correct expansion of the commandment given to Abraham. Observe how 'walk before Me' is dovetailed, as it were, between the revelation 'I am the Almighty God' and the injunction 'Be thou perfect.' The realisation of that presence of the Almighty which is implied in the expression 'Walk before Me,' the assurance that we are in His sight, will lead straight to the fulfilment of the injunction that bears upon the moral conduct. The same connection of thought underlies Peter's injunction, 'Like as He . . .is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation,' followed immediately as it is by, 'If ye call on Him as Father, who without respect of persons judgeth'-as a present estimate-'according to every mail's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear'-that reverential awe which will lead you to be 'holy even as I am holy.'

This thought that we are in that divine presence, and that there is silently, but most really, a divine opinion being formed of us, consolidated, as it were, moment by moment through our lives, is only tolerable if we have been walking with God. If we are sure, by the power of our communion with Him, of His loving heart as well as of His righteous judgment, then we can spread ourselves out before Him, as a woman will lay out her webs of cloth on the green grass for the sun to blaze down upon them, and bleach the ingrained filth out of them. We must first walk 'with God' before the consciousness that we are walking 'before' Him becomes one that we can entertain and not go mad. When we are sure of the 'with' we can bear the 'before.'

Did you ever see how on a review day, as each successive battalion and company nears the saluting-point where the General inspecting sits, they straighten themselves up and dress their ranks, and pull themselves together as they pass beneath his critical eye. A master's eye makes diligent servants. If we, in the strength of God, would only realise, day by day and act by act of our lives, that we are before Him, what a revolution could be effected on our characters and what a transformation on all our conduct!

'Walk before Me' and you will be perfect. For the Hebrew words on which I am now commenting may be read, in accordance with the usage of the language, as being not only a commandment but a promise, or, rather, not as two commandments, but a commandment with an appended promise, and so as equivalent to 'If you will walk before Me you will be perfect.' And if we realise that we are under 'the pure eyes and perfect judgment of' God, we shall thereby be strongly urged and mightily helped to be perfect as He is perfect.

3. Lastly, take the other relation, which is suggested by the third of my texts, where Israel as a whole is commanded to 'walk *after* the Lord' their God.

In harmony with the very frequent expression of the Old Testament about 'going after idols' so Israel here is to 'go after God.' What does that mean? Communion, the consciousness of being judged by God, will lead on to aspiration and loving, longing effort to get nearer and nearer to Him. 'My soul followeth hard after Thee,' said the Psalmist, 'Thy right hand upholdeth me.' That element of yearning aspiration, of eager desire to be closer and closer, and liker and liker, to God must be in all true religion. And unless we have it in some measure, it is useless to talk about being Christian people. To press onwards, not as though we had already attained, but following after, if that we may apprehend that for which also we are apprehended, is the attitude of every true follower of Christ. The very crown of the excellence of the Christian life is that it never can reach its goal, and therefore an immortal youth of aspiration and growth is guaranteed to it. Christian people, are you following after God? Are you any nearer to Him than you were ten years ago? 'Walk with Me, walk before Me, walk after Me.'

I need not do more than remind you of another meaning involved in this same expression. If I walk after God, then I let Him go before me and show me my road. Do you remember how, when the ark was to cross Jordan, the commandment was given to the Israelites to let it go well on in front, so that there should be no mistake about the course, 'for ye have not passed this way heretofore.' Do not be in too great a hurry to press upon the heels of God, if I may so say. Do not let your decisions outrun His providence. Keep back the impatience that would hurry on, and wait for His ripening purposes to ripen and His counsels to develop themselves. Walk after God, and be sure you do not go in front of your Guide, or you will lose both your way and your Guide.

I need not say more than a word about the highest aspect which this third of our commandments takes, 'His sheep follow Him'-'leaving us an example that we should follow in His steps,' that is the culmination of the walking 'with,' and 'before,' and 'after' God which these Old Testament saints were partially practising. All is gathered into the one great word, 'He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk even as He walked.'

5) Deuteronomy 18:9-22

Deuteronomy

PROPHETS AND THE PROPHET

Deu. 18:9 - Deu. 18:22.

It is evident from the connection in which the promise of 'a prophet like unto Moses' is here introduced that it does not refer to Jesus only; for it is presented as Israel's continuous defence against the temptation of seeking knowledge of the divine will by the illegitimate methods of divination, soothsaying, necromancy, and the like, which were rampant among the inhabitants of the land. A distant hope of a prophet in the far-off future could afford no motive to shun these superstitions. We cannot understand this passage unless we recognise that the direct reference is to the institution of the prophetic order as the standing means of imparting the reliable knowledge of God's will, possessing which, Israel had no need to turn to them ‘that peep and mutter’ and bring false oracles from imagined gods. But that primary reference of the words does not exclude, but rather demands, their ultimate reference to Him in whom the divine word is perfectly enshrined, and who is the bright, consummate flower of the prophetic order, which ‘spake of Him,’ not only in its individual predictions, but by its very existence.

A glance must be given to the exhaustive list of pretenders to knowledge of the future or to power of shaping it magically, which occurs in Deu. 18:10 - Deu. 18:11, and suggests a terrible picture of the burdens of superstition which weighed on men in these days of ignorance, as the like burdens do still, wherever Jesus is not known as the one Revealer of God, and the sole Lord of all things. Of the eight terms employed, the first three refer to different means of reading the future, the next two to different means of influencing events, and the last three to different ways of consulting the dead. The first of these eight properly refers to drawing lots, but includes other methods; the second is an obscure word, which is supposed by some to mean a ‘murmurer,’ and may refer rather to the low mutterings of the soothsayer than to the method of his working; the third is probably a general expression for an interpreter of omens, especially of those given by the play of liquid in a ‘cup,’ such as Joseph ‘divined’ by.

Two names for magicians follow, of which the former seems to mean one who worked with charms such as African or American Indian ‘medicine men’ use, and the latter, one who binds by incantations, or one who ties magic knots, which are supposed to have the power of hindering the designs of the person against whom they are directed. The word employed means ‘binding,’ and maybe used either literally or metaphorically. The malicious tying of knots in order to work harm is not dead yet in some backward corners of Britain. Then follow three names for traffickers with spirits,- those who raise ghosts as did the witch of Endor, those who have a ‘familiar spirit,’ and those who in any way consult the dead. It is a grim catalogue, bearing witness to the deep-rooted longing in men to peer into the darkness ahead, and to get some knowledge of the purposes of the awful unseen Power who rules there. The longing is here recognised as legitimate, while the methods are branded as bad, and Israel is warned from them, by being pointed to the merciful divine institution which meets the longing.

It is clear, from this glance at the context, that the 'prophet' promised to Israel must mean the order, not the individual; and it is interesting to note, first, the relation in which that order is presented as standing towards all that rabble of diviners and sorcerers, with their rubbish of charms and muttered spells. It sweeps them off the field, because it is truly what they pretend to be. God knows men's longings, and God will meet them so far as meeting them is for men's good. But the characteristics of the prophet are set in strong contrast to those of the diviners and magicians, and lift the order high above all the filth and folly of these others. First, the prophet is 'raised up' by God; the individual holder of the office has his 'call' and does not 'prophesy out of his own heart.' The man who takes this office on himself without such a call is *ipso facto* branded as a false prophet. Then he is 'from the midst of thee, of thy brethren,'-springing from the people, not an alien, like so many of these wandering soothsayers, but with the national life throbbing in his veins, and himself participant of the thoughts and emotions of his brethren. Then he is to be 'like unto' Moses,-not in all points, but in his receiving direct communications from God, and in his authority as God's messenger. The crowning characteristic, 'I will put My words into his mouth, and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him,' invests his words with divine authority, calls for obedience to them as the words of God Himself, widens out his sphere far beyond that of merely foretelling, brings in the moral and religious element which had no place in the oracles of the soothsayer, and opens up the prospect of a continuous progressive revelation throughout the ages ['all that I *shall* command him']. We mutilate the grand idea of the prophet in Israel if we think of his work as mainly prediction, and we mutilate it no less if we exclude prediction from it. We mutilate it still more fatally if we try to account for it on naturalistic principles, and fail to see in the prophet a man directly conscious of a divine call, or to hear in his words the solemn accents of the voice of God.

The loftiness and the limitations of 'the goodly fellowship of the prophets' alike point onwards to Jesus Christ. In Him, and in Him alone, the idea of the prophet is fully realised. The imperfect embodiments of it in the past were prophecies as well as prophets. The fact that God has 'spoken unto the fathers by the prophets,' leads us to expect that He will speak 'to us in a Son,' and that not by fragments of His mighty voice, but in one full, eternal, all-embracing and all-sufficient Word. Every divine idea, which has been imperfectly manifested in fragmentary and sinful men and in the material creation, is completely incarnated in Him. He is the King to whom the sins and the saintlinesses of Israel's kings alike pointed. He is the Priest, whom Aaron and his sons foreshadowed, who perfectly exercises the sympathy which they could only feel partially, because they were compassed with infirmity and self-regard, and who offers the true sacrifice of efficacy higher than 'the blood of bulls and goats.' He is the Prophet, who makes all other means of knowing the divine will unnecessary, hearing whom we hear the very voice of God speaking in His gentle words of love, in His authoritative words of command, in His illuminating words of wisdom, and speaking yet more loudly and heart-touchingly in the eloquence of deeds no less than divine; who is 'not ashamed to call us brethren,' and is 'bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh'; who is like, but greater than, the great lawgiver of Israel, being the Son and Lord of the 'house' in which Moses was but a servant. 'To Him give all the prophets witness,' and the greatest of them was honoured when, with Moses, Elijah stood on the Mount of Transfiguration, subordinate and attesting, and then faded away when the voice proclaimed, 'This is My beloved Son, hear Him,'-and they 'saw no one save Jesus only.'

6) Deuteronomy 28:47-48

Deuteronomy

A CHOICE OF MASTERS

Deu. 28:47 - Deu. 28:48.

The history of Israel is a picture on the large scale of what befalls every man.

A service-we are all born to obedience, to depend on and follow some person or thing. There is only a choice of services; and he who boasts himself free is but a more abject slave, as the choice for a nation is either the rule of settled order and the sanctities of an established law, or the usurpation of a mob and the intolerable tyranny of unbridled and irresponsible force.

I. The service of God or the service of our enemies.

Israel was the servant in turn of Egypt, Philistia, Edom, Assyria, Babylon, Syria, and Rome. It was every invader’s prey. God’s invisible arm was its only guard from these, and an all-sufficient guard as long as it leaned on Him. When it turned from Him it fell under their yoke. Its lawful Lord loved it; its tyrants hated it.

So with us. We have to serve God or enemies. Our lusts, our passions, the world, evil habits-in a word, our sins ring us round. God is the only defence against them.

The contrast between the one and the many-a king or an ochlocracy. The contrast of the loving Lord and the hostile sins.

II. A service which is honour or a service which is degradation.

God alone is worthy of our absolute submission and service. How low a man sinks when he is ruled by any lesser authority! Such obedience is a crime against the dignity of human nature, and the soul is not without a galling sense of this now and then, when its chains rattle.

III. A service which is freedom because it is rendered by love, or a service which is hard slavery.

‘With joy for the abundance of all things.’ How sin palls upon us, and yet we commit it. The will is overborne, conscience is stifled.

IV. A service which feeds the spirit or a service which starves it.

The soul can only in God get what it wants. Prison fare is what it receives in the other service. The unsatisfying character of all sin; it cloys, and yet leaves one hungry. It is ‘that which satisfieth not.’ ‘Broken cisterns which hold no water.’

V. A service which is life or a service which is death.

The dark forebodings of the text grow darker as it goes on. The grim slavery which it threatens as the only alternative to joyful service of God is declared to be lifelong 'penal servitude,' and not only is there no deliverance from it, but it directly tends to wear away the life of the hopeless slaves. For the words that follow our text are 'and he shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until he have destroyed thee.' That is dismally true in regard to any and every life that has shaken off the service of God which is perfect freedom, and has persisted in the service of sin. Such service is suicidal; it rivets an iron yoke on our necks, and there is no locksmith who can undo the shackles and lift it off, so long as we refuse to take service with God. Stubbornly rebellious wills forge their own fetters. Like many a slave-owner, our tyrants have a cruel delight in killing their slaves, and our sins not only lead to death, but are themselves death.

But there is a bright possibility before the most down-trodden vassal of sin. 'The bond-servant abideth not in the house for ever.' He is not a son of the house, but has been brought into it, stolen from his home. He may be carried back to his Father's house, and there 'have bread enough and to spare,' if a deliverer can be found. And He has been found. Christ the Son makes us free, and if we trust Him for our emancipation we 'shall be free indeed,' 'that we, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, should serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.'

7) Deuteronomy 30:11-20

Deuteronomy

THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

Deu. 30:11 - Deu. 30:20.

This paragraph closes the legislation of this book, the succeeding chapters being in the nature of an epilogue or appendix. It sums up the whole law, makes plain its inmost essence and its tremendous alternatives. As in the closing strains of some great symphony, the themes which have run through the preceding movements are woven together in the final burst of music. Let us try to discover the component threads of the web.

The first point to note is the lofty conception of the true essence of the whole law, which is enshrined here. ‘This commandment which I command thee this day’ is twice defined in the section [vs. Deu. 30:16, Deu. 30:20], and in both instances ‘to love Jehovah thy God’ is presented as the all-important precept. Love is recognised as the great commandment. Leviticus may deal with minute regulations for worship, but these are subordinate, and the sovereign commandment is love. Nor is the motive which should sway to love omitted; for what a tender drawing by the memories of what He had done for Israel is put forth in the name of ‘Jehovah, *thy* God!’ The Old Testament system is a spiritual system, and it too places the very heart of religion in love to God, drawn out by the contemplation of his self-revelation in his loving dealings with us. We have here clearly recognised that the obedience which pleases God is obedience born of love, and that the love which really sets towards God will, like a powerful stream, turn all the wheels of life in conformity to His will. When Paul proclaimed that ‘love is the fulfilling of the law,’ he was only repeating the teaching of this passage, when it puts ‘to walk in His ways,’ or ‘to obey His voice,’ after ‘to love Jehovah thy God.’ Obedience is the result and test of love; love is the only parent of real obedience.

The second point strongly insisted on here is the blessedness of possessing such a knowledge as the law gives. Deu. 30:11 - Deu. 30:14 present that thought in three ways. The revelation is not that of duties far beyond our capacity: ‘It is not too hard for thee.’ No doubt, complete conformity with it is beyond our powers, and entire, whole-hearted, and whole-souled love of God is not attained even by those who love Him most. Paul’s position that the law gives the knowledge of sin, just because it presents an impossible elevation in its ideal, is not opposed to the point of view of this context; for he is thinking of complete conformity as impossible, while it is thinking of real, though imperfect, obedience as within the reach of all men. No man can love as he ought; every man can love. It is blessed to have our obligations all gathered into such a commandment.

Again, the possession of the law is a blessing, because its authoritative voice ends the weary quest after some reliable guide to conduct, and we need neither try to climb to heaven, nor to traverse the wide world and cross the ocean, to find certitude and enlightenment enough for our need. They err who think of God's commandments as grievous burdens; they are merciful guide-posts. They do not so much lay weights on our backs as give light to our eyes.

Still further, the law has its echo 'in thy heart.' It is 'graven on the fleshly tables of the heart,' and we all respond to it when it gathers up all duty into 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God,' and our consciences say to it, 'Thou speakest well.' The worst man knows it better than the best man keeps it. Blurred and illegible often, like the half-defaced inscriptions disinterred from the rubbish mounds that once were Nineveh or Babylon, that law remains written on the hearts of all men.

A further point to be well laid to heart is the merciful plainness and emphasis with which the issues that are suspended on obedience or disobedience are declared. The solemn alternatives are before every man that hears. Life or death, blessing or cursing, are held out to him, and it is for him to elect which shall be realised in his case. Of course, it may be said that the words 'life' and 'death' are here used in their merely physical sense, and that the context shows [Deu. 30:17 - Deu. 30:18] that life here means only 'length of days, that thou mayest dwell in the land.' No doubt that is so, though we can scarcely refuse to see some glimmer of a deeper conception gleaming through the words, 'He is thy life,' though it is but a glimmer. We have no space here to enter upon the question of how far it is now true that obedience brings material blessings. It was true for Israel, as many a sad experience that it was a bitter as well as an evil thing to forsake Jehovah was to show in the future. But though the connection between well-doing and material gain is not so clear now, it is by no means abrogated, either for nations or for individuals. Moral and religious law has social and economic consequences, and though the perplexed distribution of earthly good and ill often bewilders faith and emboldens scepticism, there still is visible in human affairs a drift towards recompensing in the world the righteous and the wicked.

But to us, with our Christian consciousness, ‘life’ means more than living, and ‘He is our life’ in a deeper and more blessed sense than that our physical existence is sustained by His continual energy. The love of God and consequent union with Him give us the only true life. Jesus is ‘our life,’ and He enters the spirit which opens to Him by faith, and communicates to it a spark of His own immortal life. He that is joined to Jesus lives; he that is separated from Him ‘is dead while he liveth.’

The last point here is the solemn responsibility for choosing one’s part, which the revelation of the law brings with it. ‘I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse, therefore choose life.’ We each determine for ourselves whether the knowledge of what we ought to be will lead to life or to death, and by choosing obedience we choose life. Every ray of light from God is capable of producing a double effect. It either gladdens or pains, it either gives vision or blindness. The gospel, which is the perfect revelation of God in Christ, brings every one of us face to face with the great alternative, and urgently demands from each his personal act of choice whether he will accept it or neglect or reject it. Not to choose to accept *is* to choose to reject. To do nothing is to choose death. The knowledge of the law was not enough, and neither is an intellectual reception of the gospel. The one bred Pharisees, who were ‘whited sepulchres’; the other breeds orthodox professors, who have ‘a name to live and are dead.’ The clearer our light, the heavier our responsibility. If we are to live, we have to ‘choose life’; and if we do not, by the vigorous exercise of our will, turn away from earth and self, and take Jesus for our Saviour and Lord, loving and obeying whom we love and obey God, we have effectually chosen a worse death than that of the body, and flung away a better life than that of earth.

8) Deuteronomy 32:9

Deuteronomy

GOD’S TRUE TREASURE IN MAN

Deu. 32:9 - Tit. 2:14.

I choose these two texts because they together present us with the other side of the thought to that which I have elsewhere considered, that man's true treasure is in God. That great axiom of the religious consciousness, which pervades the whole of Scripture, is rapturously expressed in many a psalm, and never more assuredly than in that one which struggles up from the miry clay in which the Psalmist's 'steps had well-nigh slipped' and soars and sings thus: 'The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup; Thou maintainest my lot,' 'The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.'

You observe the correspondence between these words and those of my first text: 'The Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.' The correspondence in the original is not quite so marked as it is in our Authorised Version, but still the idea in the two passages is the same. Now it is plain that persons can possess persons only by love, sympathy, and communion. From that it follows that the possession must be mutual; or, in other words, that only he can say 'Thou art mine' who can say 'I am Thine.' And so to possess God, and to be possessed by God, are but two ways of putting the same fact. 'The Lord is the portion of His people, and the Lord's portion is His people,' are only two ways of stating the same truth.

Then my second text clearly quotes the well-known utterance that lies at the foundation of the national life of Israel: 'Ye shall be unto Me a peculiar treasure above all people,' and claims that privilege, like all Israel's privileges, for the Christian Church. In like manner Peter [1Pe. 2:9] quotes the same words, 'a peculiar people,' as properly applying to Christians. I need scarcely remind you that 'peculiar' here is used in its proper original sense of belonging to, or, as the Revised Version gives it, 'a people for God's own possession' and has no trace of the modern signification of 'singular.' Similarly we find Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians giving both sides of the idea of the inheritance in intentional juxtaposition, when he speaks [Eph. 1:14] of the 'earnest of our inheritance . . . unto the redemption of God's own possession.' In the words before us we have the same idea; and this text besides tells us how Christ, the Revealer of God, wins men for Himself, and what manner of men they must be whom He counts as His.

Therefore there are, as I take it, three things to be spoken about now. First, God has a special ownership in some people. Second, God owns these people because He has given Himself to them. Third, God possesses, and is possessed by, His inheritance, that He may give and receive services of love. Or, in briefer words, I have to speak about this wonderful thought of a special divine ownership, what it rests upon, and what it involves.

I. God has special ownership in some people.

‘The Lord’s portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.’ Put side by side with those other words of the Old Testament: ‘All souls are Mine,’ or the utterance of the 100th Psalm rightly translated: ‘It is He that hath made us, and to Him we belong.’ There is a right of absolute and utter ownership and possession inherent in the very relation of Creator and creature; so that the being made is wholly and altogether at the disposal, and is the property, of Him that makes him.

But is that enough for God’s heart? Is that worth calling ownership at all? An arbitrary tyrant in an unconstitutional kingdom, or a slave-owner, may have the most absolute right of property over his subject or his slave; may have the right of entire disposal of all his industry, of the profit of all his labour; may be able to do anything he likes with him, may have the power of life and death; but such ownership is only of the husk and case of a man: the man himself may be free, and may smile at the claim of possession. ‘They may ‘*own*’ the body, and after that have no more than they can do.’ That kind of authority and ownership, absolute and utter, to the point of death, may satisfy a tyrant or a slave-driver, it does not satisfy the loving heart of God. It is not real possession at all. In what sense did Nero own Paul when he shut him up in prison, and cut his head off? Does the slave-owner own the man whom he whips within an inch of his life, and who dare not do anything without his permission? Does God, in any sense that corresponds with the longing of infinite love, own the men that reluctantly obey Him, and are simply, as it were, tools in His hands? He covets and longs for a deeper relationship and tenderer ties, and though all creatures are His, and all men are His servants and His possession, yet, like certain regiments in our own British army, there are some who have the right to bear in a special manner on their uniform and on their banners the emblazonment, ‘The King’s Own.’ ‘The Lord’s portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.’

Well, then, the next thought is that the special relationship of possession is constituted by mutual love. I said at the beginning of these remarks that as concerns men’s relations, the only real possession is through love, sympathy, and communion, and that that must necessarily be mutual. We have a perfect right to apply the human analogy here; in fact, we are bound to do it if we would rightly understand such words as those of my text; and it just leads us to this, that the one thing whereby God reckons that He possesses a man at all is when His love falls upon that man’s heart and soaks into it, and when there springs up in the heart a corresponding emotion and affection. The men who welcome the divine love that goes through the whole world, seeking such to worship it, and to trust it, and to become its own; and who therefore lovingly yield to the loving divine will, and take it for their law-these are the men whom He regards as His ‘portion’ and ‘the lot of His inheritance.’ So that God is mine, and that ‘I am God’s,’ are two ends of one truth; ‘I possess Him,’ and ‘I am possessed by Him,’ are but the statement of one fact expressed from two points of view. In the one case you look upon it from above, in the other case you look upon it from beneath. All the sweet commerce of mutual surrender and possession which makes the joy of our hearts, in friendship and in domestic life, we have the right to lift up into this loftier region, and find in it the last teaching of what makes the special bond of mutual possession between God and man.

And deep words of Scripture point in that direction. Those parables of our Lord’s: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, in their infinite beauty, whilst they contain a great deal besides this, do contain this in their several ways; the money, the animal, the man belong to the woman of the house, to the shepherd, to the father. Each is ‘lost’ in a different fashion, but the most clear revelation is given in the last parable of the three, which explains the other two. The son was ‘lost’ when he did not love the father; and he was ‘found’ by the father when he returned the yearning of the father’s heart.

And so, dear brethren, it ever is; the one thing that knits men to God is that the silken cord of love let down from Heaven should by our own hand be wrapped round our own hearts, and then we are united to Him. We are His and He is ours by the double action of His love manifested by Him, and His love received by us.

Now there is nothing in all that of favouritism. The declaration that there are people who have a special relationship to the divine heart may be so stated as to have a very ugly look, and it often has been so stated as to be nothing more than self-complacent Pharisaism, which values a privilege principally because its possession is an insult to somebody else that has it not.

There has been plenty of Christianity of that sort in the world, but there is nothing of it in the thoughts of these texts rightly looked at. There is only this: it cannot but be that men who yield to God and love Him, and try to live near Him and to do righteousness, are His in a manner that those who steel themselves against Him and turn away from Him are not. Whilst all creatures have a place in His heart, and are flooded with His benefits, and get as much of Him as they can hold, the men who recognise the source of their blessing, and turn to it with grateful hearts, are nearer Him than those that do not do so. Let us take care, lest for the sake of seeming to preserve the impartiality of His love, we have destroyed all in Him that makes His love worth having. If to Him the good and the bad, the men who fear Him and the men who fear Him not, are equally satisfactory, and, in the same manner, the objects of an equal love, then He is not a God that has pleasure in righteousness; and if He is not a God that ‘has pleasure in righteousness,’ He is not a God for us to trust to. We are not giving countenance to the notion that God has any step-children, any petted members of His family, when we cleave to this-they that have welcomed His love into their hearts are nearer to Him than those that have closed the door against it.

And there is one more point here about this matter of ownership on which I dwell for a moment, namely, that this conception of certain men being in a special sense God’s possession and inheritance means also that He has a special delight in, and lofty appreciation of, them. All this material creation exists for the sake of growing good men and women. That is the use of the things that are seen and temporal; they are like greenhouses built for the great Gardener’s use in striking and furthering the growth of His plants; and when He has got the plants He has got what He wanted, and you may pull the greenhouse down if you like. And so God estimates, and teaches us to estimate, the relative value and greatness of the material and the spiritual in this fashion, that He says to us in effect: ‘All these magnificences and magnitudes round you are small and vulgar as compared with this-a heart in which wisdom and divine truth and the love and likeness of God have attained to some tolerable measure of maturity and of strength.’ These are His ‘jewels,’ as the Roman matron said about her two boys. The great Father looks upon the men that love Him as His jewels, and, having got the jewels, the rock in which they were embedded and preserved may be crushed when you like. ‘They shall be Mine,’ saith the Lord, ‘My treasures in that day of judgment which I make.’

And so, my brother, all the insignificance of man, as compared with the magnitude and duration of the universe, need not stagger our faith that the divinest thing in the universe is a heart that has learnt to love God and aspires after Him, and should but increase our wonder and our gratitude that He has been mindful of man and has visited him, in order that He might give Himself to men, and so might win men for Himself.

II. That brings me, and very briefly, to the other points that I desire to deal with now. The second one, which is suggested to us from my second text in the Epistle to Titus, is that this possession, by God, of man, like man’s possession of God, comes because God has given Himself to man.

The Apostle puts it very strongly in the Epistle to Titus: ‘The glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us that He might purify unto Himself *a people for a possession*.’ Israel, according to one metaphor, was God’s ‘son,’ begotten by that great redeeming act of deliverance from the captivity of Egypt [Deu. 32:6 - Deu. 32:19]. According to another metaphor, Israel was God’s bride, wooed and won for His own by that same act. Both of these figures point to the thought that in order to get man for His own He has to give Himself to man.

And the very height and sublimity of that truth is found in the Christian fact which the Apostle points to here. We need not depart from human analogies here either. Christ gave Himself to us that He might acquire us for Himself. Absolute possession of others is only possible at the price of absolute surrender to them. No human heart ever gave itself away unless it was convinced that the heart to which it gave itself had given itself to it.

And on the lower levels of gratitude and obligation, the only thing that binds a man to another in utter submission is the conviction that that other has given himself in absolute sacrifice for him. A doctor goes into the wards of an hospital with his life in his hands, and because he does, he wins the full confidence and affection of those whom he treats. You cannot buy a heart with anything less than a heart. In the barter of the world it is not ‘skin for skin,’ but it is ‘self for self’; and if you want to own me, you must give yourself altogether to me. And the measure in which teachers and guides and preachers and philanthropists of all sorts make conquests of men is the measure in which they make themselves sacrifices for men.

Now all that is true, and is lifted to its superlative truth, in the great central fact of the Christian faith. But there is more than human analogy here. Christ is not only self-sacrifice in the sense of surrender, but He is sacrifice in the sense of giving Himself for our redemption and forgiveness. He has not only given Himself to us, He has given Himself for us. And there, and on that, is builded, and on that alone has He a right to build, or have we a right to yield to it, His claim to absolute authority and utter command over each of us.

He has died for us, therefore the springs of our life are at His disposal; and the strongest motives which can sway our lives are set in motion by His touch. His death, says this text, redeems us from iniquity and purifies us. That points to its power in delivering us from the service and practice of sin. He buys us from the despot whose slaves we were, and makes us His own in the hatred of evil and the doing of righteousness. Moved by His death, we become capable of heroisms and martyrdoms of devotion to Him. Brethren, it is only as that self-sacrificing love touches us, which died for our sins upon the Cross, that the diabolical chain of selfishness will be broken from our affections and our wills, and we shall be led into the large place of glad surrender of ourselves to the sweetness and the gentle authority of His omnipotent love.

III. The last thought that I suggest is the issues to which this mutual possession points. God owns men, and is owned by them, in order that there may be a giving and receiving of mutual services of love.

‘The Lord’s portion is His people.’ That in the Old Testament is always laid as the foundation of certain obligations under which He has come, and which He will abundantly discharge. What is a great landlord expected to do to his estate? ‘What ought I to have done to my vineyard?’ the divine Proprietor asks through the mouth of His servant the prophet. He ought to till it, He ought not to starve it, He ought to fence it, He ought to cast a wall about it, He ought to reap the fruits. And He does all that for His inheritance. God’s honour is concerned in His portion not being waste. It is not to be a ‘garden of the sluggard,’ by which people who pass can see the thorns growing there. So He will till it, He will plough it, He will pick out the weeds, and all the disciplines of life will come to us, and the ploughshare will be driven deep into the heart, that ‘the peaceable fruit of righteousness’ may spring up. He will fence His vineyard. Round about His inheritance His hand will be cast, within His people His Spirit will dwell. No harm shall come near thee if thy love is given to Him; safe and untouched by evil thou shalt walk if thou walk with God. ‘He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of Mine eye.’ The soul that trusts Him He takes in charge, and before any evil can fall to it ‘the pillared firmament must be rottenness, and earth be built on stubble.’ ‘He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.’ ‘The Lord’s portion is His people,’ and ‘none shall pluck them out of His hand.’

And on the other side, we belong to God in Christ. What do we owe Him? What does the vineyard owe the husbandman? Fruit. We are His, therefore we are bound to absolute submission. ‘Ye are not your own.’ Life, circumstances, occupations, all-we hold them at His will. We have no more right of property in anything than a slave in the bad old days had in his cabin and patch of ground. They belonged to the master to whom he belonged. Let us recognise our stewardship, and be glad to know ourselves His, and all events and things which we sometimes think ours, His also.

We are His, therefore we owe absolute trust. The slave has at least this blessing in his lot, that he need have no anxieties; nor need we. We belong to God, and He will take care of us. A rich man’s horses and dogs are well cared for, and our Owner will not leave us unheeded. Our well-being involves His good name. Leave anxious thought to masterless hearts which have to front the world with nobody at their backs. If you are God's you will be looked after.

We are His, therefore we are bound to live to His praise. That is the conclusion which one Old Testament passage draws. 'This people have I formed for Myself; they shall show forth My praise' [Isa. 43:21]. The Apostle Peter quotes these words immediately after those from Exodus, which describe Israel as 'a people for God's own possession,' when he says 'that ye should show forth the praise of Him who hath called you.' Let us, then, live to His glory, and remember that the servants of the King are bound to stand to their colours amid rebels, and that they who know the sweetness of possessing God, and the blessedness of yielding to His supreme control, should acknowledge what they have found of His goodness, and 'tell forth the honour of His name, and make His praise glorious.' Let not all the magnificent and wonderful expenditure of divine longing and love be in vain, nor run off your hearts like water poured upon a rock. Surely the sun's flames leaping leagues high, they tell us, in tongues of burning gas, must melt everything that is near them. Shall we keep our hearts sullen and cold before such a fire of love? Surely that superb and wonderful manifestation of the love of God in the Cross of Christ should melt into running rivers of gratitude all the ice of our hearts.

'He gave Himself for me!' Let us turn to Him and say: 'Lo! I give myself to Thee. Thou art mine. Make me Thine by the constraint of Thy love, so utterly, and so saturate my spirit with Thyself, that it shall not only be Thine, but in a very deep sense it shall be Thee, and that it may be "no more I that live, but Christ that liveth in me."'

9) **Deuteronomy 32:11**

Deuteronomy

THE EAGLE AND ITS BROOD

Deu. 32:11.

This is an incomplete sentence in the Authorised Version, but really it should be rendered as a complete one; the description of the eagle's action including only the two first clauses, and [the figure being still retained] the person spoken of in the last clauses being God Himself. That is to say, it should read thus, 'As an eagle stirreth up his nest, fluttereth over his young, *He* spreads abroad His wings, takes them, bears them on His pinions.' That is far grander, as well as more compact, than the somewhat dragging comparison which, according to the Authorised Version, is spread over the whole verse and tardily explained, in the following, by a clause introduced by an unwarranted 'So'-'the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him.'

Now, of course, we all know that the original reference of these words is to the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, and their training in the desert. In the solemn address by Jehovah at the giving of the law [Exo. 19:4], the same metaphor is employed, and, no doubt, that passage was the source of the extended imagery here. There we read, 'Ye know what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto Myself.' The meaning of the glowing metaphor, with its vivid details, is just that Jehovah brought Israel out of its fixed abode in Goshen, and trained it for mature national life by its varied desert experiences. As one of the prophets puts the same idea, 'I taught Ephraim to go,' where the figure of the parent bird training its callow fledglings for flight is exchanged for that of the nurse teaching a child to walk. While, then, the text primarily refers to the experience of the infant nation in the forty years' wanderings, it carries large truths about us all; and sets forth the true meaning and importance of life. There seem to me to be three thoughts here, which I desire to touch on briefly: first, a great thought about God; then an illuminating thought about the true meaning and aspect of life; and lastly a calming thought about the variety of the methods by which God carries out our training.

I. Here is a great thought about God.

Now, it may come as something of a shock if I say that the bird that is selected for the comparison is not really the eagle, but one which, in our estimation, is of a very much lower order-viz. the carnivorous vulture. But a poetical emblem is not the less fitting, though, besides the points of resemblance, the thing which is so used has others less noble. Our modern repugnance to the vulture as feeding on carcasses was probably not felt by the singer of this song. What he brings into view are the characteristics common to the eagle and the vulture; superb strength in beak and claw, keenness of vision almost incredible, magnificent sweep of pinion and power of rapid, unwearied flight. And these characteristics, we may say, have their analogues in the divine nature, and the emblem not unfitly shadows forth one aspect of the God of Israel, who is 'fearful in praises,' who is strong to destroy as well as to save, whose all-seeing eye marks every foul thing, and who often pounces on it swiftly to rend it to pieces, though the sky seemed empty a moment before.

But the action described in the text is not destructive, terrible, or fierce. The monarch of the sky busies itself with tender cares for its brood. Then, there is gentleness along with the terribleness. The strong beak and claw, the gaze that can see so far, and the mighty spread of wings that can lift it till it is an invisible speck in the blue vault, go along with the instinct of paternity: and the fledglings in the nest look up at the fierce beak and bright eyes, and know no terror. The impression of this blending of power and gentleness is greatly deepened, as it seems to me, if we notice that it is the male bird that is spoken about in the text, which should be rendered: 'As the eagle stirreth up *his* nest and fluttereth over *his* young.'

So we just come to the thought that we must keep the true balance between these two aspects of that great divine nature-the majesty, the terror, the awfulness, the soaring elevation, the all-penetrating vision, the power of the mighty pinion, one stroke of which could crush a universe into nothing; and, on the other side, the yearning instinct of Fatherhood, the love and gentleness, and all the tender ministries for us, His children, to which these lead. Brethren, unless we keep hold of both of these in due equipoise and inseparably intertwining, we damage the one which we retain almost as much as the one which we dismiss. For there is no love like the love that is strong, and can be fierce, and there is no condescension like the condescension of Him who is the Highest, in order that He may be, and because He is ready to be, the lowest. Modern tendencies, legitimately recoiling from the one-sidedness of a past generation, are now turning away far too much from the Old Testament conceptions of Jehovah, which are concentrated in that metaphor of the vulture in the sky. And thereby we destroy the love, in the name of which we scout the wrath.

'Infinite mercy, but, I wis,
As infinite a justice too.'

'As the vulture stirreth up his nest,'-that is the Old Testament revelation of the terribleness and gentleness of Jehovah. 'How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wing?'-that is the New Testament modification of the image. But you never could have had the New unless you first had had the Old. And you are a foolish man if, in the name of the sanctity of the New, you cast away the teaching of the Old. Keep both the metaphors, and they will explain and confirm each other.

II. Here we have an illuminating thought of the meaning of life.

What is it all for? To teach us to fly, to exercise our half-fledged wings in short flights, that may prepare us for, and make it possible to take, longer ones. Every event that befalls us has a meaning beyond itself; and every task that we have to do reacts upon us, the doers, and either fits or hinders us for larger work. Life as a whole, and in its minutest detail, is worthy of God to give, and worthy of us to possess, only if we recognise the teaching that is put into picturesque form in this text-that the meaning of all which God does to us is to train us for something greater yonder. Life as a whole is 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,' unless it is an apprenticeship training. What are we here for? To make character. That is the aim and end of all-to make character; to get experience; to learn the use of our tools. I declare it seems to me that the world had better be wiped out altogether, incontinently, unless there is a world beyond, where a man shall use the force which here he made his own. 'Thou hast been faithful in a few things; behold I will make thee ruler over many things.' No man gets to the heart of the mystery of life or has in his hand the key which will enable him to unlock all the doors and difficulties of human experience, unless he gets to this-that it is all meant as training.

If we could only carry that clear conviction with us day by day into the little things of life, what different things these, which we call the monotonous trifles of our daily duties, would become! The things may be small and unimportant, but the way in which we do them is not unimportant. The same fidelity may be exercised, and must be brought to bear, in order to do the veriest trifle of our daily lives rightly, as needs to be invoked, in order to get us safely through the crises and great times of life. There are no great principles for great duties, and little ones for little duties. We have to regulate all our conduct by the same laws. Life is built up of trifles, as mica-flakes, if there be enough of them, make the Alpine summits towering thousands of feet into the blue. Character may be manifested in the great moments, but it is made in the small ones. So, life is meant for discipline, and unless we use it for that, however much enjoyment we get out of it, we misuse it.

III. Lastly, there is here a calming thought as to the variety of God’s methods with us.

‘As the eagle stirreth up his nest.’ No doubt the callow brood are much warmer and more comfortable in the nest than when they are turned out of it. The Israelites were by no means enamoured with the prospect of leaving the flesh-pots and the onions and the farmhouses that they had got for themselves in Goshen, to tramp with their cattle through the wilderness. They went after Moses with considerable disinclination.

Here we have, then, as the first thing needed, God’s loving compulsion to effort. To ‘stir up the nest’ means to make a man uncomfortable where he is;-sometimes by the prickings of his conscience, which are often the voices of God’s Spirit; sometimes by changes of circumstances, either for the better or for the worse; and oftentimes by sorrows. The straw is pulled out of the nest, and it is not so comfortable to lie in; or a bit of it develops a sharp point that runs into the half-feathered skin, and makes the fledgling glad to come forth into the air. We all shrink from change. What should we do if we had it not? We should stiffen into habits that would dwarf and weaken us. We all recoil from storms. What should we do if we had them not? Sea and air would stagnate, and become heavy and putrid and pestilential, if it were not for the wild west wind and the hurtling storms. So all our changes, instead of being whimpered over, and all our sorrows, instead of being taken reluctantly, should be recognised as being what they are, loving summonses to effort. Then their pressure would be modified, and their blessing would be secured when their purpose was served.

But the training of the father-eagle is not confined to stirring up the nest. What is to become of the young ones when they get out of it, and have never been accustomed to bear themselves up in the invisible ether about them? So 'he fluttereth over his young.' It is a very beautiful word that is employed here, which 'flutter' scarcely gives us. It is the same word that is used in the first chapter of Genesis, about the Spirit of God '*brooding* on the face of the waters'; and it suggests how near, how all-protecting with expanded wings, the divine Father comes to the child whose restfulness He has disturbed.

And is not that true? Had you ever trouble that you took as from Him, which did not bring that hovering presence nearer you, until you could almost feel the motion of the wing, and be brushed by it as it passed protectingly above your head? Ah, yes! 'Stirring the nest' is meant to be the precursor of closer approach of the Father to us; and if we take our changes and our sorrows as loving summonses from Him to effort, be sure that we shall realise Him as near to us, in a fashion that we never did before.

That is not all. There is sustaining power. 'He spreadeth abroad his wings; he taketh them; beareth them on his wings.' On those broad pinions we are lifted, and by them we are guarded. It matters little whether the belief that the parent bird thus carries the young, when wearied with their short flights, is correct or not. The truth which underlies the representation is what concerns us. The beautiful metaphor is a picturesque way of saying, 'In all their afflictions He was afflicted; and the Angel of His presence saved them.' It is a picturesque way of saying, 'Thou canst do all things through Christ which strengtheneth thee.' And we may be very sure that if we let Him 'stir up our nests' and obey His loving summons to effort, He will come very near to strengthen us for our attempts, and to bear us up when our own weak wings fail. The Psalmist sang that angels' hands should bear up God's servant. That is little compared with this promise of being carried heavenwards on Jehovah's own pinions. A vile piece of Greek mythology tells how Jove once, in the guise of an eagle, bore away a boy between his great wings. It is foul where it stands, but it is blessedly true about Christian experience. If only we lay ourselves on God's wings-and that not in idleness, but having ourselves tried our poor little flight-He will see that no harm comes to us.

During life this training will go on; and after life, what then? Then, in the deepest sense, the old word will be true, 'Ye know how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you *to Myself*'; and the great promise shall be fulfilled, when the half-fledged young brood are matured and full grown, 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.'

10)Deuteronomy 32:31

Deuteronomy

THEIR ROCK AND OUR ROCK

Deu. 32:31.

Moses is about to leave the people whom he had led so long, and his last words are words of solemn warning. He exhorts them to cleave to God. The words of the text simply mean that the history of the nation had sufficiently proved that God, their God, was ‘above all gods.’ The Canaanites and all the enemies whom Israel had fought had been beaten, and in their awe of this warrior people acknowledged that their idols had found their lord. The great suit of ‘Jehovah *versus* Idols’ has long since been decided. Every one acknowledges that Christianity is the only religion possible for twentieth century men. But the words of the text lend themselves to a wider application, and clothe in a picturesque garb the universal truth that the experience of godless men proves the futility of their objects of trust, when compared with that of him whose refuge is in God.

I. God is a Rock to them that trust Him.

We note the singular frequency of that designation in this song, in which it occurs six times. It is also found often in the Psalms. If Moses were the singer, we might see in this often-repeated metaphor a trace of influence of the scenery of the Sinaitic peninsula, which would he doubly striking to eyes accustomed to the alluvial plains of Egypt. What are the aspects of the divine nature set forth by this name?

[1] Firm foundation: the solid eternity of the rock on which we can build.

Petra: faithfulness to promises, unchanging.

[2] Refuge: ‘refuge from the storm’; ‘my rock and my fortress and my high tower.’

[3] Refreshment: rock from which water gushed out; and [4] Repose: ‘shadow of a great rock’; ‘shadow from the heat.’

Trace the image through Scripture, from this song till Christ’s parable of the man who ‘built his house on a rock.’

II. Every man’s experience shows him that there is no such refuge anywhere else.

We do not assert that every man consciously comes to that conclusion. All we say is that he would do so if he rightly pondered the facts. The history of every life is a history of disappointment. Take these particulars just stated and ask yourselves: What does experience say as to the possibility of our possessing such blessings apart from God? There is no need for us to exaggerate, for the naked reality is sad enough. If God is not our best Good, we have no solid good. Every other 'rock' crumbles into sand. Else why this restless change, why this disquiet, why the constant repetition, generation after generation, of the old, old wail, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'? Why does every heart say Amen to the poet and the dramatist singing of 'the fever and the fret,' the tragic fare of man's life?

Our appeal is not to men in the flush of excitement, but to them in their hours of solitary sane reflection. It is from 'Philip drunk to Philip sober.' We each have material for judging in our own case, and in the cases of some others. The experiment of living with other 'rocks' than God has been tried for millenniums now. What has been the issue? You know what Christianity claims that it can do to make a life stable and safe. Do you know anything else that can? You know what Christian men will calmly say that they have found. Can you say as much? Let us hear some dying testimonies. Hearken to Jacob: 'The God which hath fed me all my life long unto this day, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil.' Hearken to Moses: 'The Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are judgment, a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is He.' Hearken to Joshua: 'Not one good thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spake.' Hearken to David: 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . .. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.' Hearken to Paul: 'The Lord stood by me and strengthened me, and I was delivered . . . the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and will save me unto His heavenly kingdom.' What man who has chosen to take refuge or build on men and creatures can look backward and forward in such fashion?

III. Every man's own nature tells him that God is his true Rock.

Again I say that here I do not appeal to the surface of our consciousness, nor to men who have sophisticated themselves, nor to people who have sinned themselves, into hardness, but to the voice of the inner man which speaks in the depths of each man's being.

There is the cry of Want: the manifest want of the soul for God.

There is the voice of Reason.

There is the voice of Conscience.

IV. Yet many of us will not take God for our Rock.

Surely it is a most extraordinary thing that men should be 'judges,' being convinced in their deepest consciousness that God is the only Foundation and Refuge, and yet that the conviction should have absolutely no influence on their conduct. The same stark, staring inconsequence is visible in many other departments of life, but in this region it works its most tragic results. The message which many of my hearers need most is-follow out your deepest convictions, and be true to the inward voice which condenses all your experience into the one counsel to take God for the 'strength of your hearts and your portion for ever,' for only in Him will you find what you need for life and strength and riches. If He is 'our Rock,' then we shall have a firm foundation, a safe refuge, inexhaustible refreshment and untroubled rest. Lives founded on aught beside are built on sand and will be full of tremors and unsettlements, and at last the despairing builder and his ruined house will be washed away with the dissolving 'sandbank and shoal of time' on which he built.

11)Deuteronomy 33:3

Deuteronomy

GOD AND HIS SAINTS

Deu. 33:3.

The great ode of which these words are a part is called 'the blessing wherewith Moses blessed the children of Israel before his death.' It is mainly an invocation of blessing from Heaven on the various tribes, but it begins, as the national existence of Israel began, with the revelation of God on Sinai, and it lays that as the foundation of everything. It does not matter, for my purposes, in the smallest degree, who was the author of this great song. Whoever he was, he has, by dint of divine inspiration and of his own sympathy with the inmost spirit of the Old Covenant, anticipated the deepest things of Christian truth; and these are here in the words of our text.

I. The first thing that I would point out is the Divine Love which is the foundation of all.

‘He loved the people.’ That is the beginning of everything. The word that this singer uses is one that only appears in this place, and if we regard its etymology, there lies in it a very tender and beautiful expression of the warmth of the divine love, for it is probably connected with words in an allied language which mean the *bosom* and a *tender embrace*, and so the picture that we have is of that great divine Lover folding ‘the people’ to His heart, as a mother might her child, and cherishing them in His bosom.

Still further, the word is in a form in the Hebrew which implies that the act spoken about is neither past, present, nor future only, but continuous and perpetual. Thus it suggests to us the thought of timeless, eternal love, which has no beginning, and therefore has no end, which does not grow, and therefore will never decline nor decay, but which runs on upon one lofty level, with neither ups nor downs, and with no variation of the impulse which sends it forth; always the same, and always holding its objects in the fervent embrace of which the text speaks.

Further, mark the place in this great song where this thought comes in. As I said, it is laid as the beginning of everything. ‘We love Him because He first loved us’ was the height to which the last of the Apostles attained in the last of his writings. But this old singer, with the mists of antiquity around him, who knew nothing about the Cross, nothing about the historical Christ, who had only that which modern thinkers tell us is a revelation of a wrathful God, somehow or other rose to the height of the evangelical conception of God’s love as the foundation of the very existence of a people who are His. Like an orchid growing on a block of dry wood and putting forth a gorgeous bloom, this singer, with so much less to feed his faith than we have, has yet borne this fair flower of deep and devout insight into the secret of things and the heart of God. ‘He loved the people’- therefore He formed them for Himself; therefore He brought them out of bondage; therefore He came down in flashing fire on Sinai and made known His will, which to know and do is life. All begins from the tender, timeless love of God.

And if the question is asked, Why does God thus love? the only answer is, Because he is God. ‘Not for your sakes, O house of Israel . . . but for Mine own name’s sake.’ The love of God is self-originated. In it, as in all His acts, He is His own motive, as His name, ‘I am that I am,’ proclaims. It is inseparable from His being, and flows forth before, and independent of, anything in the creature which could draw it out. Men’s love is attracted by their perception or their imagination of something loveable in its objects. It is like a well, where there has to be much work of the pump-handle before the gush comes. God’s love is like an artesian well, or a fountain springing up from unknown depths in obedience to its own impulse. All that we can say is, ‘Thou art God. It is Thy nature and property to be merciful.’

‘God loved the people.’ The bed-rock is the spontaneous, unalterable, inexhaustible, ever-active, fervent love of God, like that with which a mother clasps her child to her maternal breast. The fair flower of this great thought was a product of Judaism. Let no man say that the God of Love is unknown to the Old Testament.

II. Notice how, with this for a basis, we have next the guardian care extended to all those that answer love by love.

The singer goes on to say, mixing up his pronouns, in the fashion of Hebrew poetry, somewhat arbitrarily, ‘all *His* saints are in *Thy* hand.’ Now, what is a ‘saint’? A man who answers God’s love by his love. The notion of a saint has been marred and mutilated by the Church and the world. It has been taken as a special designation of certain selected individuals, mostly of the ascetic and monastic type, whereas it belongs to every one of God’s people. It has been taken by the world to mean sanctimoniousness and not sanctity, and is a term of contempt rather than of admiration on their lips. And even those of us, who have got beyond thinking that it is a title of honour belonging only to the aristocracy of Christ’s Kingdom, are too apt to mistake what it really does mean. It may be useful to say a word about the

Scriptural use and true meaning of that much-abused term. The root idea of sanctity or holiness is not moral character, goodness of disposition and of action, but it is separation from the world and consecration to God. As surely as a magnet applied to a heap of miscellaneous filings will pick out every little bit of iron there, so surely will that love which He bears to the people, when it is responded to, draw to itself, and therefore draw out of the heap, the men that feel its impulse and its preciousness. And so 'saint' means, secondly, righteous and pure, but it means, first, knit to God, separated from evil, and separated by the power of His received love.

Now, brethren, here is a question for each of us: Do I yield to that timeless, tender clasp of the divine Father and Mother in one? Do I answer it by my love? If I do, then I am a 'saint,' because I belong to Him, and He belongs to me, and in that commerce I have broken with the world. If we are true to ourselves, and true to our Lord, and true to the relation between us, the purity of character, which is popularly supposed to be the meaning of *holiness*, will come. Not without effort, not without set-backs, not without slow advance, but it will come; for he that is consecrated to the Lord is 'separated' from iniquity. Such is the meaning of 'saint.'

'All His saints are in Thy hand.' The first metaphor of our text spoke of God's bosom, to which He drew the people and folded them there. This one speaks of His 'hand.' They lie in it. That means two things. It means absolute security, for will He not close His fingers over His palm to keep the soul that has laid itself there? And 'none shall pluck them out of My Father's hand.' No one but yourself can do that. And you can do it, if you cease to respond to His love, and so cease to be a saint. Then you will fall out of His hand, and how far you will fall God only knows.

Being in God's hand means also submission. Loyola said to his black army, 'Be like a stick in a man's hand.' That meant utter submission and abnegation of self, the willingness to be put anywhere, and used anyhow, and done anything with. And if I by my reception of, and response to, that timeless love, am a saint belonging to God, then not only shall I be secure, but I must be submissive. 'All His saints are in Thy hand.' Do not try to get out of it; be content to let it guide you as the steersman's hand turns the spokes of the wheel and directs the ship.

Now, there is a last thought here. I have spoken of the foundation of all as being divine love, of the security and guardian care of the saints, and there follows one thought more:-

III. The docile obedience of those that are thus guarded.

As the words stand in our Bible, they are as follow:-'They sat down at Thy feet; every one shall receive of Thy words.' These two clauses make up one picture, and one easily understands what it is. It represents a group of docile scholars, sitting at the Master's feet. He is teaching them, and they listen open-mouthed and open-eared to what he says, and will take his words into their lives, like Mary sitting at Christ's feet, whilst Martha was bustling about His meal. But, beautiful as that picture is, there has been suggested a little variation in the words which gives another one that strikes me as being even more beautiful. There are some difficulties of language with which I need not trouble you. But the general result is this, that perhaps instead of 'sitting down at Thy feet' we should read 'followed at Thy feet.' That suggests the familiar metaphor of a guide and those led by him who, without him, know not their road. As a dog follows his master, as the sheep their shepherd, so, this singer felt, will saints follow the God whom they love. Religion is imitation of God. That was a deep thought for such a stage of revelation, and it in part anticipates Christ's tender words: 'He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him, for they know His voice.' They follow at His feet. That is the blessedness and the power of Christian morality, that it is keeping close at Christ's heels, and that instead of its being said to us, 'Go,' He says, 'Come,' and instead of our being bid to hew out for ourselves a path of duty, He says to us, 'He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.' They follow at His feet, as the dog at his master's, as the sheep at their shepherd's.

They 'receive His words.' Yes, if you will keep close to Him, He will turn round and speak to you. If you are near enough to Him to catch His whisper He will not leave you without guidance. That is one side of the thought, that following we receive what He says, whereas the people that are away far behind Him scarcely know what His will is, and never can catch the low whisper which will come to us by providences, by movements in our own spirits, through the exercise of our own faculties of judgment and common-sense, if only we will keep near to Him. ‘Be ye not as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding, whose mouths must be held in with bit and with bridle, else they will not come near to thee,’ but walk close behind Him, and then the promise will be fulfilled: ‘I will guide thee with Mine eye.’ A glance tells two people who are in sympathy what each wishes, and Jesus Christ will speak to us, if we keep close at His heels.

They that follow Him will ‘receive His words’ in another sense. They will take them in, and His words will not be wasted. And they will receive them in yet another sense. They will carry them out and do them, and His words will not be in vain.

So, dear brethren, the peace, the strength, the blessedness, the goodness, of our lives flow from these three stages, which this singer so long ago had found to be the essence of everything, recognition of the timeless tenderness of God, the yielding to and answering that love, so that it separates us for Himself, the calm security and happy submission which follow thereon, the imitation of Him in daily life, and the walking in His steps, which is rewarded and made more perfect by hearing more distinctly the whisper of His loving, commanding voice.

12)Deuteronomy 33:12

Deuteronomy

ISRAEL THE BELOVED

Deu. 33:12.

Benjamin was his father’s favourite child, and the imagery of this promise is throughout drawn from the relations between such a child and its father. So far as the future history of the tribes is shadowed in these ‘blessings’ of this great ode, the reference of the text may be to the tribe of Benjamin, as specially distinguished by Saul having been a member of it, and by the Temple having been built on its soil. But we find that each of the promises of the text is repeated elsewhere, with distinct reference to the whole nation. For example, the first one, of safe dwelling, reappears in Deu. 33:28 in reference to Israel; the second one, of God’s protecting covering, is extended to the nation in many places; and the third, of dwelling between His shoulders, is in substance found again in Deu. 1:31, ‘the Lord thy God bare thee, as a man doth bear his son.’ So that we may give the text a wider extension, and take it as setting forth under a lovely metaphor, and with a restricted reference, what is true of all God’s children everywhere and always.

I. Who are the ‘beloved of the Lord’?

The first answer to that question must be-all men. But these great blessings, so beautifully shadowed in this text, do not belong to all men; nor does the designation, ‘the beloved of the Lord,’ belong to all men, but to those who have entered into a special relation to Him. In these words of the Hebrew singer there sound the first faint tones of a music that was to swell into clear notes, when Jesus said: ‘If a man love Me, he will keep My Word, and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him.’ They who are knit by faith and love to God’s only-begotten and beloved Son, by that union receive ‘power to become the sons of God,’ and share in the love which is ever pouring out from the Father’s heart on ‘the Son of His love.’

II. What are their blessed privileges?

The three clauses of the text express substantially the same idea, but with a striking variety of metaphors.

1. They have a sure dwelling-place.

There is a very slight change of rendering of the first clause, which greatly increases its ‘force, and preserves the figure that is obscured by the usual translation. We should read ‘shall dwell safely *on*,’ rather than ‘*by*, Him.’ And the effect of that small change in the preposition is to bring out the thought that God is regarded as the foundation on which His beloved build their house of life, and dwell in security and calm. If we are sons through the Son, we shall build our houses or pitch our tents on that firm ground, and, being founded on the Rock of ages, they will not fall when all created foundations reel to the overthrow of whatever is built on *them*. It is not companionship only, blessed as that is, that is promised here. We have a larger privilege than dwelling *by* Him, for if we love His Son, we build *on* God, and ‘God dwelleth in us and we in Him.’

What spiritual reality underlies the metaphor of dwelling or building on God? The fact of habitual communion.

Note the blessed results of such grounding of our lives on God through such habitual communion. We shall ‘dwell safely.’ We may think of that as being objective safety-that is, freedom from peril, or as being subjective-that is, freedom from care or fear, or as meaning ‘trustfully,’ confidently, as the expression is rendered in Psa. 16:9 [margin], which is for us the ground of both these. He who dwells in God trustfully dwells both safely and securely, and none else is free either from danger or from dread.

2. They have a sure shelter.

God is for His beloved not only the foundation on which they dwell in safety, but their perpetual covering. They dwell safely because He is so. There are many tender shapes in which this great promise is presented to our faith. Sometimes God is thought of as covering the weak fugitive, as the arching sides of His cave sheltered David from Saul. Sometimes He is represented as covering His beloved, who cower under His wings, ‘as the hen gathereth her chickens’ when hawks are in the sky. Sometimes He appears as covering them from tempest, ‘when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall,’ and ‘the shadow of a great rock’ shields from its fury. Sometimes He is pictured as stretching out protection over His beloved’s heads, as the Pillar of cloud lay, long-drawn-out, over the Tabernacle when at rest, and ‘on all the Glory was a defence.’ But under whatever emblem the general idea of a covering shelter was conceived, there was always a correlative duty on our side. For the root-meaning of one of the Old Testament words for ‘faith’ is ‘fleeing to a refuge,’ and we shall not be safe in God unless by faith we flee for refuge to Him in Christ.

3. They have a Father who bears them on His shoulders.

The image is the same as in Deu. 1:1 - Deu. 1:46 already referred to. It recurs also in Isa. 46:3 - Isa. 46:4, ‘Even to hoar hairs will I carry you, and I have made and I will bear, yea, I will carry, and will deliver'; and in Hos. 11:3, 'I taught Ephraim to go; I took them on My arms.'

The image beautifully suggests the thought of the favourite child riding high and happy on the strong shoulder, which lifts it above rough places and miry ways. The prose reality is: 'My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.'

The Cross carries those who carry it. They who carry God in their hearts are carried by God through all the long pilgrimage of life. Because they are thus upheld by a strength not their own, 'they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint,' and though marches be long and limbs strained, they shall 'go from strength to strength till every one of them appears before God in Zion.'

13)Deuteronomy 33:16

Deuteronomy

'AT THE BUSH'

Deu. 33:16

I Think this is the only reference in the Old Testament to that great vision which underlay Moses' call and Israel's deliverance. It occurs in what is called 'the blessing wherewith Moses, the man of God, blessed the children of Israel before his death,' although modern opinion tends to decide that this hymn is indeed much more recent than the days of Moses. There seems a peculiar appropriateness in this reference being put into the mouth of the ancient Lawgiver, for to him even Sinai, with all its glories, cannot have been so impressive and so formative of his character as was the vision granted to him when solitary in the wilderness. It is to be noticed that the characteristic by which God is designated here never occurs elsewhere than in this one place. It is intended to intensify the conception of the greatness, and preciousness, and all-sufficiency of that 'goodwill.' If it is that 'of Him that dwelt in the bush,' it is sure to be all that a man can need. I need not remind you that the words occur in the blessing pronounced on 'Joseph'-that is, the two tribes which represented Joseph-in which all the greatest material gifts that could be desired by a pastoral people are first called down upon them, and then the ground of all these is laid in ‘the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush.’ ‘The blessing-let it come on the head of Joseph.’

So then here, first, is a great thought as to what for us all is the blessing of blessings-God’s ‘goodwill.’ ‘Goodwill’-the word, perhaps, might bear a little stronger rendering. ‘Goodwill’ is somewhat tepid. A man may have a good enough will, and yet no very strong emotion of favour or delight, and may do nothing to carry his goodwill into action. But the word that is employed here, and is a common enough one in Scripture, always carries with it a certain intensity and warmth of feeling. It is more than ‘goodwill’; it is more than ‘favour’; perhaps ‘delight’ would be nearer the meaning. It implies, too, not only the inward sentiment of complacency, but also the active purpose of action in conformity with it, on God’s part. Now it needs few words to show that these two things, which are inseparable, do make the blessing of blessings for every one of us-the delight, the complacency, of God in us, and the active purpose of good in God for us. These are the things that will make a man happy wherever he is.

If I might dwell for a moment upon other scriptural passages, I would just recall to you, as bringing up very strongly and beautifully the all-sufficiency and the blessed effects of having this delight and loving purpose directed towards us like a sunbeam, the various great things that a chorus of psalmists say that it will do for a man. Here is one of their triumphant utterances: ‘Thou wilt bless the righteous; with favour wilt Thou compass him as with a shield.’ That crystal battlement, if I may so vary the figure, is round a man, keeping far away from him all manner of real evil, and filling his quiet heart as he stands erect behind the rampart, with the sense of absolute security. That is one of the blessings that God’s favour or goodwill will secure for us. Again, we read: ‘By Thy favour Thou hast made my mountain to stand strong.’ He that knows himself to be the object of the divine delight, and who by faith knows himself to be the object of the divine activity in protection, stands firm, and his purposes will be carried through, because they will be purposes in accordance with the divine mind, and nothing has power to shake him. So he that grasps the hand of God can say, not because of his grasp, but because of the Hand that he holds, ‘The

Lord is at my right hand; I shall not be greatly moved. By Thy favour Thou hast made our mountain to stand strong.' And again, in another analogous but yet diversified representation, we read: 'In Thee shall we rejoice all the day, and in Thy favour shall our horn be exalted.' That is the emblem, not only of victory, but of joyful confidence, and so he who knows himself to have God for his friend and his helper, can go through the world keeping a sunny face, whatever the clouds may be, erect and secure, light of heart and buoyant, holding up his chin above the stormiest waters, and breasting all difficulties and dangers with a confidence far away from presumption, because it is the consequence of the realisation of God's presence. So the goodwill of God is the chiefest good.

Now, if we turn to the remarkable designation of the divine nature which is here, consider what rivers of strength and of blessedness flow out of the thought that for each of us 'the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush' may be our possession.

What does that pregnant designation of God say? That was a strange shrine for God, that poor, ragged, dry desert bush, with apparently no sap in its gray stem, prickly with thorns, with 'no beauty that we should desire it,' fragile and insignificant, yet it was 'God's house.' Not in the cedars of Lebanon, not in the great monarchs of the forest, but in the forlorn child of the desert did He abide. 'The goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush' may dwell in you and me. Never mind how small, never mind how sapless, never mind how lightly esteemed among men, never mind though we make a very poor show by the side of the 'oaks of Bashan' or the 'cedars of Lebanon.' It is all right; the Fire does not dwell in them. 'Unto this man will I look, and with him will I dwell, who is of a humble and a contrite heart, and who trembleth at My word.' Let no sense of poverty, weakness, unworthiness, ever draw the faintest film of fear across our confidence, for even with us He will sojourn. For it is 'the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush' that we evoke for ours.

Again, what more does that name say? He 'that dwelt in the bush' filled it with fire, and it 'burned and was not consumed.' Now there is good ground to object to the ordinary interpretation, as if the burning of the bush which yet remains unconsumed was meant to symbolise Israel, or, in the New

Testament application, the Church which, notwithstanding all persecution, still remains undestroyed. Our brethren of the Presbyterian churches have taken the Latin form of the words in the context for their motto-*Nec Tamen Consumebatur*. But I venture to think that that is a mistake; and that what is meant by the symbol is just what is expressed by the verbal revelation which accompanied it, and that was this: 'I AM THAT I AM.' The fire that did not burn out is the emblem of the divine nature which does not tend to death because it lives, nor to exhaustion because it energises, nor to emptiness because it bestows, but after all times is the same; lives by its own energy and is independent. 'I am that I have become,'-that is what men have to say. 'I am that I once was not, and again once shall not be,' is what men have to say. 'I am that I am' is God's name. And this eternal, ever-living, self-sufficing, absolute, independent, unwearied, inexhaustible God is the God whose favour is as inexhaustible as Himself, and eternal as His own being. 'Therefore the sons of men shall put their trust beneath the shadow of Thy wings,' and, if they have 'the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush,' will be able to say, 'Because Thou livest we shall live also.'

What more does the name say? He 'that dwelt in the bush' dwelt there in order to deliver; and, dwelling there, declared 'I have seen the affliction of My people, and am come down to deliver them.' So, then, if the goodwill of that eternal, delivering God is with us, we, too, may feel that our trivial troubles and our heavy burdens, all the needs of our prisoned wills and captive souls, are known to Him, and that we shall have deliverance from them by Him. Brethren, in that name, with its historical associations, with its deep revelations of the divine nature, with its large promises of the divine sympathy and help, there lie surely abundant strengths and consolations for us all. The goodwill, the delight, of God, and the active help of God, may be ours, and if these be ours we shall be blessed and strong.

Do not let us forget the place in this blessing on the head of Joseph which my text holds. It is preceded by an invoking of the precious things of Heaven, and 'the precious fruits brought forth by the sun. . . of the chief things of the ancient mountains, and the precious things of the lasting hills, and the precious things of the earth and the fulness thereof.' They are all heaped together in one great mass for the beloved Joseph. And then, like the golden spire that tops some of those campaniles in Italian cities, and completes their beauty, above them all there is set, as the shining apex of all, ‘the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush.’ That is more precious than all other precious things; set last because it is to be sought first; set last as in building some great structure the top stone is put on last of all; set last because it gathers all others into itself, secures that all others shall be ours in the measure in which we need them, and arms us against all possibilities of evil. So the blessing of blessings is the ‘goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush.’

In my text this is an invocation only; but we can go further than that. You and I can make sure that we have it, if we will. How to secure it? One of the texts which I have already quoted helps us a little way along t he road in answer to that question, for it says, ‘Thou, Lord, wilt bless the righteous. With favour wilt thou compass him as with a shield.’ But it is of little use to tell me that if I am ‘righteous’ God will ‘bless me,’ and ‘compass me with favour.’ If you will tell me how to become righteous, you will do me more good. And we have been told how to be righteous-’If a man keep My commandments My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him.’ If we knit ourselves to Jesus Christ, and we can all do that if we like, by faith that trusts Him, and by love, the child of faith, that obeys Him, and grows daily more like Him-then, without a doubt, that delight of God in us, and that active purpose of good in God’s mind towards us, will assuredly be ours; and on no other terms.

So, dear brethren, the upshot of my homily is just this-Men may strive and scheme, and wear their finger-nails down to the quick, to get some lesser good, and fail after all. The greatest good is certainly ours by that easy road which, however hard it may be otherwise, is made easy because it is so certain to bring us to what we want. Holiness is the condition of God’s delight in us, and a genuine faith in Christ, and the love which faith evokes, are the conditions. So it is a very simple matter You never can be sure of getting the lower good You can be quite sure of getting the highest. You never can be certain that the precious things of the earth and the fulness thereof will be yours, or that if they were, they would be so very precious; but you can be quite sure that the ‘goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush’ may lie like light upon your hearts, and be strength to your limbs.

And so I commend to you the words of the Apostle, ‘Wherefore we labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him.’ To minister to God’s delight is the highest glory of man. To have the favour of Him that dwelt in the bush resting upon us is the highest blessing for man. He will say ‘Well done! good and faithful servant.’ ‘The Lord taketh pleasure’-wonderful as it sounds-’in them that fear Him, in them that hope in His mercy,’ and that, hoping in His mercy, live as He would have them live.

14)Deuteronomy 33:25

Deuteronomy

SHOD FOR THE ROAD

Deu. 33:25.

There is a general correspondence between those blessings wherewith Moses blessed the tribes of Israel before his death, and the circumstances and territory of each tribe in the promised land. The portion of Asher, in whose blessing the words of our text occurs, was partly the rocky northern coast and partly the fertile lands stretching to the base of the Lebanon. In the inland part of their territory they cultivated large olive groves, the produce of which was trodden out in great rock-hewn cisterns. So the clause before my text is a benediction upon that industry-’let him dip his foot in oil.’ And then the metaphor naturally suggested by the mention of the foot is carried on into the next words, ‘Thy shoes shall be iron and brass,’ the tribe being located upon rocky sea-coast, having rough roads to travel, and so needing to be well shod. The substance, then, of that promise seems to be-strength adequate to, and unworn by, exercise; while the second clause, though not altogether plain, seems to put a somewhat similar idea in unmetaphorical shape. ‘As thy days, so shall thy strength be,’ probably means the promise of power that grows with growing years.

So, then, we have first that thought that God gives us an equipment of strength proportioned to our work,-shoes fit for our road. God does not turn people out to scramble over rough mountains with thin-soled boots on; that is the plain English of the words. When an Alpine climber is preparing to go away into Switzerland for rock work, the first thing he does is to get a pair of strong shoes, with plenty of iron nails in the soles of them. So Asher had to be shod for his rough roads, and so each of us may be sure that if God sends us on stony paths He will provide us with strong shoes, and will not send us out on any journey for which He does not equip us well.

There are no difficulties to be found in any path of duty, for which he that is called to tread it is not prepared by Him that sent him. Whatsoever may be the road, our equipment is calculated for it, and is given to us from Him that has appointed it.

Is there not a suggestion here, too, as to the sort of travelling we may expect to have? An old saying tells us that we do not go to heaven in silver slippers, and the reason is because the road is rough. The 'primrose way' leads somewhere else, and it may be walked on 'delicately.' But if we need shoes of iron and brass, we may pretty well guess the kind of road we have before us. If a man is equipped with such coverings on his feet, depend upon it that there will be use for them before he gets to the end of his day's journey. The thickest sole will make the easiest travelling over rocky roads. So be quite sure of this, that if God gives to us certain endowments and equipments which are only calculated for very toilsome paths, the roughness of the road will match the stoutness of the shoes.

And see what He does give. See the provision which is made for patience and strength, for endurance and courage, in all the messages of His mercy, in all the words of His love, in all the powers of His Gospel, and then say whether that looks as if we should have an easy life of it on our way home. Those two ships that went away a while ago upon the brave, and, as some people thought, desperate task of finding the North Pole-any one that looked upon them as they lay in Portsmouth Roads, might know that it was no holiday cruise they were meant for. The thickness of the sides, the strength of the cordage, the massiveness of the equipment, did not look like pleasure-sailing.

And so, dear brethren, if we think of all that is given to us in God's Gospel in the way of stimulus and encouragement, and exhortation, and actual communication of powers, we may calculate, from the abundance of the resources, how great will be the strain upon us before we come to the end, and our ‘feet stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem.’ Go into some of the great fortresses in continental countries, and you will find the store-rooms full of ammunition and provisions; bread enough and biscuits enough, as it seems, for half the country, laid up there, and a deep well somewhere or other in the courtyard. What does that mean? It means fighting, that is what it means. So if we are brought into this strong pavilion, so well provisioned, so massively fortified and defended, that means that we shall need all the strength that is to be found in those thick walls, and all the sustenance that is to be found in those gorged magazines, and all the refreshment that is to be drawn from that free, and full, and inexhaustible fountain, before the battle is over and the victory won. Depend upon it, the promise ‘Thy shoes shall be iron and brass.’ means, ‘Thy road shall be rocky and flinty’; and so it is.

And yet, thank God! whilst it is true that it is very hard and very difficult for many of us, and hard and difficult-even if without the ‘very’-for us all, it is also true that we have the adequate provision sufficient for all our necessities-and far more than sufficient! It is a poor compliment to the strength that He gives to us to say that it is enough to carry us through. God does not deal out His gifts to people with such an economical correspondence to necessities as that. There is always a wide margin. More than we can ask, more than we can think, more than we can need is given us.

If He were to deal with us as men often deal with one another, asking us, ‘Well, how much do you want? cannot you do with a little less? there is the exact quantity that you need for your support’-if you got your bread by weight and your water by measure, it would be a very poor affair. See how He actually does-He says, ‘Child, there is Mine own strength for you’; and we think that we honour Him when we say, ‘God has given us enough for our necessities!’ Rather the old word is always true: ‘So they did eat and were filled; and they took up of the fragments that remained seven baskets-full,’ and after they were satisfied and replete with the provision, there was more at the end than when they began.

That suggests another possible thought to be drawn from this promise, namely, that it assures not only of strength adequate to the difficulties and perils of the journey, but also of a strength which is not worn out by use.

The ‘portion’ of Asher was the rocky sea-coast. The sharp, jagged rocks would cut to pieces anything made of leather long before the day’s march was over; but the travellers have their feet shod with metal, and the rocks which they have to stumble over will only strike fire from their shoes. They need not step timidly for fear of wearing them out; but, wherever they have to march, may go with full confidence that their shoeing will not fail them. A wise general looks after that part of his soldiers’ outfit with special care, knowing that if *it* gives out, all the rest is of no use. So our Captain provides us with an inexhaustible strength, to which we may fully trust. We shall not exhaust it by any demands that we can make upon it. We shall only brighten it up, like the nails in a well-used shoe, the heads of which are polished by stumbling and scrambling over rocky roads.

So we may be bold in the march, and draw upon our stock of strength to the utmost. There is no fear that it will fail us. We may put all our force into our work, we shall not weaken the power which ‘by reason of use is exercised,’ not exhausted. For the grace which Christ gives us to serve Him, being divine, is subject to no weariness, and neither faints nor fails. The bush that burned unconsumed is a type of that Infinite Being who works unexhausted, and lives undying, after all expenditure is rich, after all pouring forth is full. And of His strength we partake.

Whensoever a man puts forth an effort of any kind whatever-when I speak, when I lift my hand, when I run, when I think-there is waste of muscular tissue. Some of my strength goes in the act, and thus every effort means expenditure and diminution of force. Hence weariness that needs sleep, waste that needs food, languor that needs rest. We belong to an order of being in which work is death, in regard to our physical nature; but our spirits may lay hold of God, and enter into an order of things in which work is not death, nor effort exhaustion, nor is there loss of power in the expenditure of power.

That sounds strange, and yet it is not strange. Think of that electric light which is made by directing a strong stream upon two small pieces of carbon. As the electricity strikes upon these and turns their blackness into a fiery blaze, it eats away their substance while it changes them into light. But there is an arrangement in the lamp by which a fresh surface is continually being brought into the path of the beam, and so the light continues without wavering and blazes on. The carbon is our human nature, black and dull in itself; the electric beam is the swift energy of God, which makes us 'light in the Lord.' For the one, decay is the end of effort; for the other, there is none. 'Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day.' Though we belong to the perishing order of nature by our bodily frame, we belong to the undecaying realm of grace by the spirit that lays hold upon God. And if our work weary us, as it must do so long as we continue here, yet in the deepest sanctuary of our being, our strength is greatened by exercise. 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass.' 'Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years.' 'Stand, therefore, having your feet shod with the preparedness of the Gospel of peace.'

But this is not all. There is an advance even upon these great promises in the closing words. That second clause of our text says more than the first one. 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass,' that promises us powers and provision adapted to, and unexhausted by, the weary pilgrimage and rough road of life. But 'as thy days, so shall thy strength be,' says even more than that. The meaning of the word rendered 'strength' in our version is very doubtful, and most modern translators are inclined to render it 'rest.' But if we adhere to the translation of our version, we get a forcible and relevant promise, which fits on well to the previous clause, understood as it has been in my previous remarks. The usual understanding of the words is 'strength proportioned to thy day,' an idea which we have found already suggested by the previous clause. But that explanation rests on, or at any rate derives support from, the common misquotation of the words. They are not, as we generally hear them quoted, 'As thy day, so shall thy strength be,'-but 'day' is in the plural, and that makes a great difference. 'As thy days, so shall thy strength be,' that is to say: the two sums-of 'thy days' and of 'thy strength'-keep growing side by side, the one as fast as the other and no faster. The days increase. Well, what then? The strength increases too. As I said, we are allied to two worlds. According to the law of one of them, the outer world of physical life, we soon reach the summit of human strength. For a little while it is true, even in the life of nature, that our power grows with our days. But we soon reach the watershed, and then the opposite comes to be true. Down, steadily down, we go. With diminishing power, with diminishing vitality, with a dimmer eye, with an obtuser ear, with a slower-beating heart, with a feebler frame, we march on and on to our grave. 'As thy days, so shall thy weakness be,' is the law for all of us mature men and women in regard to our outward life.

But, dear brethren, we may be emancipated from that dreary law in regard to the true life of our spirits, and instead of growing weaker as we grow older, we may and we should grow stronger. We may be and we should be moving on a course that has no limit to its advance. We may be travelling on a shining path through the heavens, that has no noon-tide height from which it must slowly and sadly decline, but tends steadily and for ever upwards, nearer and nearer to the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance. 'The path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more till the noon-tide of the day.' But the reality surpasses even that grand thought, for it discloses to us an endless approximation to an infinite beauty, and an ever-growing possession of never exhausted fulness, as the law for the progress of all Christ's servants. The life of each of us may and should be continual accession and increase of power through all the days here, through all the ages beyond. Why? Because 'the life which I live, I live by the faith of the Son of God.' Christ liveth in me. It is not my strength that grows, so much as God's strength in me which is given more abundantly as the days roll. It is so given on one condition. If my faith has laid hold of the infinite, the exhaustless, the immortal energy of God, unless there is something fearfully wrong about me, I shall be becoming purer, nobler, wiser, more observant of His will, gentler, liker Christ, every way fitter for His service, and for larger service, as the days increase.

Those of us who have reached middle life, or perhaps gone a little over the watershed, ought to have this experience as our own in a very distinct degree. The years that are past ought to have drawn us somewhat away from our hot pursuing after earthly and perishable things. They should have added something to the clearness and completeness of our perception of the deep simplicity of God's gospel. They should have tightened our hold and increased our possession of Christ, and unfolded more and more of His all-sufficiency. They should have enriched us with memories of God’s loving care, and lighted all the sky behind with a glow which is reflected on the path before us, and kindles calm confidence in His unfailing goodness. They should have given us power and skill for the conflicts that yet remain, as the Red Indians believe that the strength of every defeated and scalped enemy passes into his conqueror’s arm. They should have given force to our better nature, and weakening, progressive weakening, to our worse. They should have rooted us more firmly and abidingly in Him from whom all our power comes, and so have given us more and fuller supplies of His exhaustless and ever-flowing might.

So it may be with us if we abide in Him, without whom we are nothing, but partaking of whose strength ‘the weakest shall be as David, and David as an angel of God.’

If for us, drawing nearer to the end is drawing nearer to the light, our faces will be brightened more and more with that light which we approach, and our path will be ‘as the shining light which shines more and more unto the noon-tide of the day,’ because we are closer to the very fountain of heavenly radiance, and growingly bathed and flooded with the outgoings of His glory. ‘As thy days, so shall thy strength be.’

The promise ought to be true for us all. It *is* true for all who use the things that are freely given to them of God. And whilst thus it is the law for the devout life here, its most glorious fulfilment remains for the life beyond. There each new moment shall bring new strength, and growing millenniums but add fresh vigour to our immortal life. Here the unresting beat of the waves of the sea of time gnaws away the bank and shoal whereon we stand, but there each roll of the great ocean of eternity shall but spread new treasures at our feet and add new acres to our immortal heritage. ‘The oldest angels,’ says Swedenborg, ‘look the youngest.’ When life is immortal, the longer it lasts the stronger it becomes, and so the spirits that have stood for countless days before His throne, when they appear to human eyes, appear as-’young men clothed in long white garments,’-full of unaging youth and energy that cannot wane. So, whilst in the flesh we must obey the law of decay, the spirit may be subject to this better law of life, and ‘while the outward man perisheth, the inward man be renewed day by day.’ ‘Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall; but they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength.'

15)Deuteronomy 34:5-6

Deuteronomy

A DEATH IN THE DESERT

Deu. 34:5 - Deu. 34:6.

A fitting end to such a life! The great law-giver and leader had been all his days a lonely man; and now, surrounded by a new generation, and all the old familiar faces vanished, he is more solitary than ever. He had lived alone with God, and it was fitting that alone with God he should die.

How the silent congregation must have watched, as, alone, with 'natural strength unabated,' he breasted the mountain, and went up to be seen no more! With dignified reticence our chapter tells us no details. He 'died there,' in that dreary solitude, and in some cleft he was buried, and no man knows where. The lessons of that solitary death and unknown tomb may best be learned by contrast with another death and another grave-those of the Leader of the New Covenant, the Law-giver and Deliverer from a worse bondage, and Guide into a better Canaan, the Son who was faithful over His own house, as Moses was 'faithful in all his house, as a servant.' That lonely and forgotten grave among the savage cliffs was in keeping with the whole character and work of him who lay there.

'Here,-here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,

Lightnings are loosened,

Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,

Peace let the dew send!

Lofty designs must close in like effects;

Loftily lying,

Leave him-still loftier than the world suspects, *Living and dying.'*

Contrast that grave with the sepulchre in the garden where Jesus lay, close by a city wall, guarded by foes, haunted by troops of weeping friends, visited by a great light of angel faces. The one was hidden and solitary, as teaching the loneliness and mystery of death; the other revealed light in the darkness, and companionship in the loneliness. The one faded from men's memory because it was nothing to any man; no impulses, nor hopes, nor gifts, could come from it. The other forever draws hearts and memories, because in it was wrought out the victory in which all our hopes are rooted. An endured cross, an empty grave, an occupied throne, are as the threefold cord on which all our hopes hang. Moses was solitary as God's servant in life and death, and oblivion covered his mountain grave. Christ's 'delights were with the sons of men.' He lived among them, and all men 'know his sepulchre to this day.'

I. Note, then, first, as a lesson gathered from this lonely death, the penalty of transgression.

One of the great truths which the old law and ordinances given by Moses were intended to burn in on the conscience of the Jew, and through him on the conscience of the world, was that indissoluble connection between evil done and evil suffered, which reaches its highest exemplification in the death which is the 'wages of sin.' And just as some men that have invented instruments for capital punishment have themselves had to prove the sharpness of their own axe, so the lawgiver, whose message it had been to declare, 'the soul that sinneth it shall die,' had himself to go up alone to the mountain-top to receive in his own person the exemplification of the law that had been spoken by his own lips. He sinned when, in a moment of passion [with many palliations and excuses], he smote the rock that he was bidden to address, and forgot therein, and in his angry words to the rebels, that he was only an instrument in the divine hand. It was a momentary wavering in a hundred and twenty years of obedience. It was one failure in a life of self-abnegation and suppression. The stern sentence came.

People say, 'A heavy penalty for a small offence.' Yes; but an offence of Moses could not be a small offence.' *Noblesse oblige!* The higher a man rises in communion with God, and the more glorious the message and office which are put into his hands, the more intolerable in him is the slightest deflection from the loftiest level. A splash of mud, that would never be seen on a navvy’s clothes, stains the white satin of a bride or the embroidered garment of a noble. And so a little sin done by a loftily endowed and inspired man ceases to be small.

Nor are we to regard that momentary lapse only from the outside and the surface. One little mark under the armpit of a plague-sufferer tells the physician that the fatal disease is there. A tiny leaf above ground may tell that, deep below, lurks the root of a poison plant. That little deflection, coming as it did at the beginning of the resumption of his functions by the Lawgiver after seven-and-thirty years of comparative abeyance, and on his first encounter with the new generation that he had to lead, was a very significant indication that his character had begun to yield and suffer from the strain that had been put upon it; and that, in fact, he was scarcely fit for the responsibilities that the new circumstances brought. So the penalty was not so disproportionate to the fault as it may seem.

And was the penalty such a very great one? Do you think that a man who had been toiling for eighty years at a very thankless task would consider it a very severe punishment to be told, ‘Go home and take your wages’? It did not mean the withdrawal of the divine favour. ‘Moses and Aaron among his priests. . . . Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.’ The penalty of a forgiven sin is never hard to bear, and the penalty of a forgiven sin is very often punctually and mercifully exacted.

But still we are not to ignore the fact that this lonely death, with which we are now concerned, is of the nature of a penal infliction. And so it stands forth in consonance with the whole tone of the Mosaic teaching. I admit, of course, that the mere physical fact of the separation between body and spirit is simply the result of natural law. But that is not the death that you and I know. Death as we know it, the ugly thing that flings its long shadows across all life, and that comes armed with terrors for conscience and spirit, is ‘the wages of sin,’ and is only experienced by men who have transgressed the law of God. So far Moses in his life and in his death carries us-that no transgression escapes the appropriate punishment; that the smallest sin has in it the seeds of mortal consequences; that the loftiest saint does not escape the law of retribution.

And no further does Moses with his Law and his death carry us. But we turn to the other death. And there we find the confirmation, in an eminent degree, of that Law, and yet the repeal of it. It is confirmed and exhausted in Jesus Christ. His death was ‘the wages of sin.’ Whose? Not His. Mine, yours, every man’s. And because He died, surrounded by men, outside the old city wall, pure and sinless in Himself, He therein both said ‘Amen’ to the Law of Moses, and swept it away. For all the sins of the world were laid upon His head, He bore the curse for us all, and has emptied the bitter cup which men’s transgressions have mingled. Therefore the solitary death in the desert proclaims ‘the wages of sin’; that death outside the city wall proclaims ‘the gift of God,’ which is ‘eternal life.’

II. Another of the lessons of our incident is the withdrawal, by a hard fate, of the worker on the very eve of the completion of his work.

For all these forty years there had gleamed before the fixed and steadfast spirit of the sorely tried leader one hope that he never abandoned, and that was that he might look upon and enter into the blessed land which God had promised. And now he stands on the heights of Moab. Half a dozen miles onwards, as the crow flies, and his feet would tread its soil. He lifts his eyes, and away up yonder, in the far north, he sees the rolling uplands of Gilead, and across the deep gash where the Jordan runs, he catches a glimpse of the blue hills of Naphtali or of Galilee, and the central mountain masses of Ephraim and Manasseh, where Ebal and Gerizim lift their heads; and then, further south, the stony summits of the Judaean hills, where Jerusalem and Bethlehem lie, and, through some gap in the mountains, a gleam as of sunshine upon armour tells where the ocean is. And then his eye falls upon the waterless plateau of the South, and at his feet the fertile valley of Jordan, with Jericho glittering amongst its palm trees like a diamond set in emeralds, and on some spur of the lower hill bounding the plain, the little Zoar. This was the land which the Lord had promised to the fathers, for which he had been yearning, and to which all his work had been directed all these years; and now he is to die, as my text puts it, with such pathetic emphasis, ‘there in Moab,’ and to have no part in the fair inheritance.

It is the lot of all epoch-making men, of all great constructive and reforming geniuses, whether in the Church or in the world, that they should toil at a task, the full issues of which will not be known until their heads are laid low in the dust. But if, on the one hand, that seems hard, on the other hand there is the compensation of ‘the vision of the future and all the wonder that shall be,’ which is granted many a time to the faithful worker ere he closes his eyes. But that is not the fate of epoch-making and great men only; it is the law for our little lives. If these are worth anything, they are constructed on a scale too large to bring out all their results here and now. It is easy for a man to secure immediate consequences of an earthly kind; easy enough for him to make certain that he shall have the fruit of his toil. But quick returns mean small profits; and an unfinished life that succeeds in nothing may be far better than a completed one, that has realised all its shabby purposes and accomplished all its petty desires. Do you, my brother, live for the far-off; and seek not for the immediate issues and fruits that the world can give, but be contented to be of those whose toil waits for eternity to disclose its significance. Better a half-finished temple than a finished pigstye or huckster’s shop. Better a life, the beginning of much and the completion of nothing, than a life directed to and hitting an earthly aim. ‘He that soweth to the spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting,’ and his harvest and garner are beyond the grave.

III. Again, notice here the lesson of the solitude and mystery of death.

Moses dies alone, with no hand to clasp his, none to close his eyes; but God’s finger does it. The outward form of his death is but putting into symbol and visibility the awful characteristics of that last moment for us all. However closely we have been twined with others, each of us has to unclasp dear hands, and make that journey through the narrow, dark tunnel by himself. We live alone in a very real sense, but we each have to die as if there were not another human being in the whole universe but only ourselves. But the solitude may be a solitude with God. Up there, alone with the stars and the sky and the everlasting rocks and menacing death, Moses had for companion the supporting God. That awful path is not too desolate and lonely to be trodden if we tread it with Him.

Moses' lonely death leads to a society yonder. If you refer to the thirty-second chapter you will find that, when he was summoned to the mountain, God said to him, 'Die in the mount whither thou goest up, and be gathered to thy people.' He was to be buried there, up amongst the rocks of Moab, and no man was ever to visit his sepulchre to drop a tear over it. How, then, was he 'gathered to his people'? Surely only thus, that, dying in the desert alone, he opened his eyes in 'the City,' surrounded by 'solemn troops and sweet societies' of those to whom he was kindred. So the solitude of a moment leads on to blessed and eternal companionship.

So far the death of Moses carries us. What does the other death say? Moses had none but God with him when he died. There is a drearier desolation than that, and Jesus Christ proved it when He cried, 'My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' That was solitude indeed, and in that hour of mysterious, and to us unfathomable, desertion and misery, the lonely Christ sounded a depth, of which the lawgiver in His death but skimmed the surface. Christ was parted from God in His death, because He bore on Him the sins that separate us from our Father, and in order that none of us may ever need to tread that dark passage alone, but may be able to say, 'I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me'-Thou, who hast trodden every step in its rough and dreary path, uncheered by the presence which cheers us and millions more. Christ died that we might live. He died alone that, when we come to die, we may hold His hand and the solitude may vanish.

Then, again, our incident teaches us the mystery that wrapped death to that ancient world, of which we may regard that unknown and forgotten sepulchre as the visible symbol. Deep darkness lies over the Old Testament in reference to what is beyond the grave, broken by gleams of light, when the religious consciousness asserted its indestructibility, in spite of all appearance to the contrary; but never growing to the brightness of serene and continuous assurance of immortal life and resurrection. We may conceive that mysteriousness as set forth for us by that grave that was hidden away in the defiles of Moab, unvisited and uncared for by any.

We turn to the other grave, and there, as the stone is rolled away, and the rising sunshine of the Easter morning pours into it, we have a visible symbol of the life and immortality which Jesus Christ then brought to light by His Gospel. The buried grave speaks of the inscrutable mystery that wrapped the future: the open sepulchre proclaims the risen Lord of life, and the sunlight certainty of future blessedness which we owe to Him. Death is solitary no more, though it be lonely as far as human companionship is concerned; and a mystery no more, though what is beyond is hidden from our view, and none but Christ has ever returned to tell the tale, and He has told us little but the fact that we shall live with Him.

We rejoice that we have not to turn to a grave hid amongst the hills where our dead Leader lies, but to an open sepulchre by the city wall in the sunshine, from whence has come forth the ever-living 'Captain of our salvation.'

IV. The last lesson is the uselessness of a dead leader to a generation with new conflicts.

Commentators have spent a great deal of ingenuity in trying to assign reasons why God concealed the grave of Moses. The text does not say that God concealed it at all. The ignorance of the place of his sepulchre does not seem to have been part of the divine design, but simply a consequence of the circumstances of his death, and of the fact that he lay in an enemy's land, and that they had had something else to do than go to look for the grave of a dead commander. They had to conquer the land, and a living Joshua was what they wanted, not a dead Moses.

So we may learn from this how easily the gaps fill. 'Thirty days' mourning,' and says my text, with almost a bitter touch,' so the days of mourning for Moses were ended.' A month of it, that was all; and then everybody turned to the new man that was appointed for the new work. God has many tools in His tool-chest, and He needs them all before the work is done. Joshua could no more have wielded Moses' rod than Moses could have wielded Joshua's sword. The one did his work, and was laid aside. New circumstances required a new type of character-the smaller man better fitted for the rougher work. And so it always is. Each generation, each period, has its own men that do some little part of the work which has to be done, and then drop it and hand over the task to others. The division of labour is the multiplication of joy at the end, and ‘he that soweth and he that reapeth rejoice together.’ But whilst the one grave tells us, ‘This man served his generation by the will of God, and was laid asleep and saw corruption,’ the other grave proclaims One whom all generations need, whose work is comprehensive and complete, who dies never. ‘He liveth and was dead, and is alive for evermore.’ Christ, and Christ alone, can never be antiquated. This day requires Him, and has in Him as complete an answer to all its necessities as if no other generation had ever possessed Him. He liveth for ever, and for ever is the Shepherd of men.

So Aaron dies and is buried on Hor, and Moses dies and is buried on Pisgah, and Joshua steps into his place, and, in turn, he disappears. The one eternal Word of God worked through them all, and came at last Himself in human flesh to be the Everlasting Deliverer, Redeemer, Founder of the Covenant, Lawgiver, Guide through the wilderness, Captain of the warfare, and all that the world or a single soul can need until the last generation has crossed the flood, and the wandering pilgrims are gathered in the land of their inheritance. The dead Moses pre-supposes and points to the living Christ. Let us take Him for our all-sufficing and eternal Guide.

Joshua

1) JOSHUA 1:1-6
2) JOSHUA 1:7-8
3) JOSHUA 1:9-11
4) JOSHUA 3:4
5) JOSHUA 3:5-17
6) JOSHUA 4:9-24
7) JOSHUA 5:14
8) JOSHUA 6:10-11
9) JOSHUA 6:25
10) JOSHUA 7:1-12
11) JOSHUA 10:12
12) JOSHUA 13:1-8
13) JOSHUA 14:6
14) JOSHUA 20:1-9
15) JOSHUA 21:43-45

16) JOSHUA 22:1-9
17) JOSHUA 24:19-28

1) Joshua 1:1-6

Joshua

THE NEW LEADER'S COMMISSION

Jos. 1:1 - Jos. 1:11.

The closest connection exists between Deuteronomy and Joshua. The narrative may be read as running on without a break. It turns away from the lonely grave up on the mountain to the bustling camp and the new leader. No man is indispensable. God's work goes on uninterrupted. The instruments are changed, but the Master-hand is the same, and lays one tool aside and takes another out of the tool-chest as He will. Moses is dead,-what then? Does his death paralyse the march of the tribes? No; it is but the ground for the ringing command, 'Therefore arise, go over this Jordan.' The immediate installation of his successor, and the uninterrupted continuance of the advance, do not mean that Moses is not honoured or is forgotten, for the narrative lovingly links his honorific title, 'the servant of the Lord,' with the mention of his death; and God Himself does the same, for he is thrice referred to in the divine command to Joshua, as the recipient of the promise of the conquest, as the example of the highest experience of God's all-sufficing companionship, and as the medium by which Israel received the law. Joshua steps into the empty place, receives the same great promise, is assured of the same Presence, and is to obey the same law. The change of leaders is great, but nothing else is changed; and even it is not so great as faint hearts in their sorrow are apt to think, for the real Leader lives, and Moses and Joshua alike are but the transmitters of His orders and His aids to Israel.

The first command given to Joshua was a trial of his faith, for 'Jordan was in flood' [Jos. 3:15],-and how was that crowd to get across, when fords were impassable and ferry-boats were wanting, to say nothing of the watchful eyes that were upon them from the other bank? To cross a stream in the face of the enemy is a ticklish operation, even for modern armies; what must it have been, then, for Joshua and his horde? Not a hint is given him as to the means by which the crossing is to be made possible. He has Jehovah's command to do it, and Jehovah's promise to be with him, and that is to be enough. We too have sometimes to face undertakings which we cannot see how to carry through; but if we do see that the path is one appointed by God, and will boldly tread it, we may be quite sure that, when we come to what at present seems like a mountain wall across it, we shall find that the glen opens as we advance, and that there is a way,-narrow, perhaps, and dangerous, but practicable. 'One step enough for me' should be our motto. We may trust God not to command impossibilities, nor to lead us into a *cul de sac*.

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The great encouragement given to Joshua in entering on his hard and perilous enterprise is twice repeated here: 'As I was with Moses, so will I be with thee.' Did Joshua remember how, nearly forty years since, he had fronted the mob of cowards with the very same assurance, and how the answer had been a shower of stones? The cowards are all dead,-will their sons believe the assurance now? If we do believe that God is with us, we shall be ready to cross Jordan in flood, and to meet the enemies that are waiting on the other bank. If we do not, we shall not dare greatly, nor succeed in what we attempt. The small successes of material wealth and gratified ambition may be ours, but for all the higher duties and nobler conflicts that become a man, the condition of achievement and victory is steadfast faith in God's presence and help.

That assurance-which we may all have if we cling to Jesus, in whom God comes to be with every believing soul-is the only basis on which the command to Joshua, thrice repeated, can wisely or securely be rested. It is mockery to say to a man conscious of weakness, and knowing that there are evils which must surely come, and evils which may possibly come, against which he is powerless, 'Don't be afraid' unless you can show him good reason why he need not be. And there is only one reason which can still reasonable dread in a human heart that has to front 'all the ills that flesh is heir to,' and sees behind them all the grim form of death. He ought to be afraid, unless-unless what? Unless he has heard and taken into his inmost soul the Voice that said to Joshua, 'I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee: be strong and of a good courage,' or, still more sweet and peace-bringing, the Voice that said to the frightened crew of the fishing-boat in the storm and the darkness,' It is I; be not afraid.' If we know that Christ is with us, it is wise to be strong and courageous; if we are meeting the tempest alone, the best thing we can do is to fear, for the fear may drive us to seek for His help, and He ever stretches out His hand to him who is afraid, as he ought to be, when he feels the cold water rising above his knees, and by his very fear is driven to faith, and cries, 'Lord, save; I perish!'

Courage that does not rest on Christ's presence is audacity rather than courage, and is sure to collapse, like a pricked bladder, when the sharp point of a real peril comes in contact with it. If we sit down and reckon the forces that we have to oppose to the foes that we are sure to meet, we shall find ourselves unequal to the fight, and, if we are wise, shall 'send the ambassage' of a humble desire to the great King, who will come to our help with His all-conquering powers. Then, and only then, shall we be safe in saying,' I will not fear what man can do unto me, or devils either,' when we have said,’ In God have I put my trust,’ and have heard Him answering, ‘I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.

2) Joshua 1:7-8

Joshua

THE NEW LEADER’S COMMISSION

THE CHARGE TO THE SOLDIER OF THE LORD

Jos. 1:7 - Jos. 1:8.

This is the central portion of the charge given to the successor of Moses. Joshua was a very small man in comparison with his predecessor. He was no prophet nor constructive genius; he was not capable of the heights of communion and revelation which the lofty spirit of Moses was able to mount. He was only a plain, fiery soldier, with energy, swift decision, promptitude, self-command, and all the military virtues in the highest degree. The one thing that he needed was to be ‘strong and courageous’; and over and over again in this chapter you will find that injunction pealed into his ears. He is the type of the militant servant of the Lord, and the charge to him embodies the duties of all such.

I. We have here the duty of courageous strength.

Christianity has altered the perspective of human virtues, has thrown the gentler ones into prominence altogether unknown before, and has dimmed the brilliancy of the old heroic type of character; but it has not struck those virtues out of its list. Whilst the perspective is altered, there is as much need in the lowliest Christian life for the loftiest heroism as ever there was. For in no mere metaphor, but in grim earnest, all Christian progress is conflict, and we have to fight, not only with the evils that are within, but, if we would be true to the obligations of our profession and loyal to the commands of our Master, we have to take our part in the great campaign which He has inaugurated and is ever carrying on against every abuse and oppression, iniquity and sin, that grinds down the world and makes our brethren miserable and servile. So, then, in these words we have directions in regard to a side of the Christian character, indispensable to-day as ever, and the lack of which cannot be made up for by any amount of sweet and contemplative graces.

Jesus Christ is the type of both. The Conqueror of Canaan and the Redeemer of the world bear the same name. The Jesus whom we trust was a Joshua. And let us learn the lesson that neither the conqueror of the typical and material land of promise nor the Redeemer who has won the everlasting heaven for our portion could do their work without the heroic side of human excellence being manifestly developed. Do you remember ‘He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem’? Do you remember that the Apostle whom a hasty misconception has thought of as the gentlest of the Twelve, because he had most to say about love, is the Apostle that more emphatically than any other rings into our ears over and over again the thought of the Christ, militant and victorious, the Hero as well as the patient Sufferer, the ‘Captain of our salvation’? And so let us recognise how both the gentler and the stronger graces, the pacific and the warlike side of human excellence, have their highest development in Jesus Christ, and learn that the firmest strength must be accompanied with the tenderest love and swathed in meekest gentleness. As another Apostle has it in his pregnant, brief injunctions, ringing and laconic like a general’s word of command, ‘Quit you like men I be strong! let all your deeds be done in love!’ Braid the two things together, for the mightiest strength is the love that conquers hate, and the only love that is worthy of a man is the love that is strong to contend and to overcome.

‘Be strong.’ Then strength is a duty; then weakness is a sin. Then the amount of strength that we possess and wield is regulated by ourselves. We have our hands on the sluice. We may open it to let the whole full tide run in, or we may close it till a mere dribble reaches us. For the strength which is strength, and not merely weakness in a fever, is a strength derived, and ours because derived. The Apostle gives the complete version of the exhortation when he says: ‘Finally, my brethren,’ that Omega of command which is the Alpha of performance, ‘be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.’ Let Christ’s strength in. Open the heart wide that it may come. Keep yourself in continual touch with God, the fountain of all power. Trust is strength, because trust touches the Rock of Ages.

For this reason the commandment to be strong and of good courage is in the text based upon this: ‘As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee. I will not fail thee nor forsake thee.’ Our strength depends on ourselves, because our strength is the fruit of our faith. And if we live with Him, grasping His hand and, in the realising consciousness of our own weakness, looking beyond ourselves, then power will come to us above our desire and equal to our need. The old victories of faith will be reproduced in us when we say with the ancient king, ‘Lord! We know not what to do, but our eyes are up unto Thee.’ Then He will come to us, to make us ‘strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.’ ‘Wait on the Lord and He will strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the Lord.’

But courage is duty, too, as well as strength. Power and the consciousness of power do not always go together. In regard to the strength of nature, courage and might are quite separable. There may be a strong coward and a weak hero. But in the spiritual region, strength and courage do go together. The consciousness of the divine power with us, and that alone, will make us bold with a boldness that has no taint of levity and presumption mingled with it, and never will overestimate its own strength. The charge to Joshua, then, not only insists upon the duty of strength, but on the duty of conscious strength, and on the duty of measuring the strength that is at my back with the weakness that is against me, and of being bold because I know that more and ‘greater is He that is with me than are they that be with them.’

II. So much, then, for the first of the exhortations here. Now look next at the duty of implicit obedience to the word of command.

That is another soldierly virtue, the exercise of which sheds a nobility over the repulsive horrors of the battlefield. Joshua had to be fitted to command by learning to obey, and, like that other soldier whose rough trade had led him to some inkling of Christ’s authority by its familiarising him with the idea of the strange power of the word of command, had to realise that he himself was ‘under authority’ before he could issue his orders.

Courage and strength come first, and on them follows the command to do all according to the law, to keep it without deflection to right or left, and to meditate on it day and night. These two virtues make the perfect soldier-courage and obedience. Daring and discipline must go together, and to know how to follow orders is as essential as to know how to despise dangers.

But the connection between these two, as set forth in this charge, is not merely that they must co-exist, but that courage and strength are needed for, and are to find their noblest field of exercise in, absolute acceptance of, and unhesitating, swift, complete, unmurmuring obedience to, everything that is discerned to be God's will and our duty.

For the Christian soldier, then, God's law is his marching orders. The written word, and especially the Incarnate Word, are our law of conduct. The whole science of our warfare and plan of campaign are there. We have not to take our orders from men's lips, but we must often disregard them, that we may listen to the 'Captain of our salvation.' The soldier stands where his officer has posted him, and does what he was bid, no matter what may happen. Only one voice can relieve him. Though a thousand should bid him flee, and his heart should echo their advices, he is recreant if he deserts his post at the command of any but him who set him there. Obedience to others is mutiny. Nor does the Christian need another law to supplement that which Christ has given him in His pattern and teaching. Men have appended huge comments to it, and have softened some of its plain precepts which bear hard on popular sins. But the Lawgiver's law is one thing, and the lawyers' explanations which explain it away or darken what was clear enough, however unwelcome, are quite another. Christ has given us Himself, and therein has given a sufficient directory for conduct and conflict which fits close to all our needs, and will prove definite and practical enough if we honestly try to apply it.

The application of Christ's law to daily life takes some courage, and is the proper field for the exercise of Christian strength. 'Be very courageous that thou mayest observe.' If you are not a bold Christian you will very soon get frightened out of obedience to your Master's commandments. Courage, springing from the realisation of God's helping strength, is indispensable to make any man, in any age, live out thoroughly and consistently the principles of the law of Jesus Christ. No man in *this* generation will work out a punctual obedience to what he knows to be the will of God, without finding out that all the 'Canaanites' are not dead yet; but that there are enough of them left to make a very thorny life for the persistent follower of Jesus Christ.

And not only is there courage needed for the application of the principles of conduct which God has given us, but you will never have them handy for swift application unless, in many a quiet hour of silent, solitary, patient meditation you have become familiar with them. The recruit that has to learn on the battle-field how to use his rifle has a good chance of being dead before he has mastered the mysteries of firing. And Christian people that have their Christian principles to dig out of the Bible when the necessity comes, will likely find that the necessity is past before they have completed the excavation. The actual battle-field is no place to learn drill. If a soldier does not know how his sword hangs, and cannot get at it in a moment, he will probably draw it too late.

I am afraid that the practice of such meditation as is meant here has come to be, like the art of making ecclesiastical stained glass, almost extinct in modern times. You have all so many newspapers and magazines to read that the Bible has a chance of being shoved out of sight, except on Sundays and in chapels. The 'meditating' that is enjoined in my text is no mere intellectual study of Scripture, either from an antiquarian or a literary or a theological point of view, but it is the mastering of the principles of conduct as laid down there, and the appropriating of all the power for guidance and for sustaining which that word of the Lord gives. Meditation, the familiarising ourselves with the ethics of Scripture, and with the hopes and powers that are treasured in Jesus Christ, so that our minds are made up upon a great many thorny questions as to what we ought to do, and that when crises or dangers come, as they have a knack of coming, very suddenly, and are sprung upon us unexpectedly, we shall be able, without much difficulty, or much time spent in perplexed searching, to fall back upon the principles that decide our conduct-that is essential to all successful and victorious Christian life.

And it is the secret of all blessed Christian life. For there is a lovely echo of these vigorous words of command to Joshua in a very much more peaceful form in the 1st Psalm: 'Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, . . . but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law doth he meditate day and night'-the very words that are employed in the text to describe the duty of the soldier-therefore 'all that he doeth shall prosper.'

III. That leads to the last thought here-the sure victory of such bold obedience.

'Thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest'; 'Thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then shalt thou have good success,' or, as the last word might be rendered, 'then shalt thou *act wisely*' You may not get victory from an earthly point of view, for many a man that lives strong and courageous and joyfully obeying God's law, as far as he knows it and because he loves the Lawgiver, goes through life, and finds that, as far as the world's estimate is concerned, there is nothing but failure as his portion. Ah I but the world's way is not the true way of estimating victory. 'Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world,' said Jesus Christ when within arm's-length of the Cross. And His way is the way in which we must conquer the world, if we conquer it at all. The success which my text means is the carrying out of conscientious convictions of God's will into practice. That is the only success that is worth talking about or looking for. The man that succeeds in obeying and translating God's will into conduct is the victor, whatever be the outward fruits of his life. He may go out of the field beaten, according to the estimate of men that can see no higher than their own height, and little further than their own finger tips can reach; he may himself feel that the world has gone past him, and that he has not made much of it; he may have to lie down at last unknown, poor, with all his bright hopes that danced before him in childhood gone, and sore beaten by the enemies; but if he is able to say in the strength that Christ gives, 'I have finished my course; I have kept the faith,' his 'way has prospered,' and he has had' good success.' 'We are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.'

3) Joshua 1:9-11

Joshua

THE NEW LEADER'S COMMISSION

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4) Joshua 3:4

Joshua

THE UNTRODDEN PATH AND THE GUIDING ARK

Jos. 3:4.

It was eminently true of Israel that they had ‘not passed this way heretofore,’ inasmuch as the path which was opening before them, through the oozy bed of the river, had never been seen by human eye, nor trodden by man’s foot. Their old leader was dead. There were only two of the whole host that had ever been out of the desert in their lives. They had a hard task before them. Jericho lay there, gleaming across the plain, among the palm-trees, backed by the savage cliffs, up the passes in which they would have to fight their way. So that we need not wonder that, over and over again, in these early chapters of this book, the advice in reiterated, ‘Be of good courage. Be strong and fear not!’ They needed special guidance, and they received very special guidance, and my text tells us what they had to do, in order to realise the full blessing and guidance that was given them. ‘Let there be a space of 2000 cubits by measure between you and the ark’-three-quarters of a mile or thereabouts-’do not press close upon the heels of the bearers, for you will not be able to see where they are going if you crowd on them. Be patient. Let the course of the ark disclose itself before you try to follow it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go, for ye have not passed this way heretofore.’

I. Note the untrodden path.

I suppose that most of us have to travel a very well-worn road, and that our course, in the cases of all except those in early life, is liker that of a millhorse than an untrodden path. Most of us are continually treading again in the prints of our own footsteps. A long, weary stretch of monotonous duties, and the repetition of the same things to-day that we did yesterday is the destiny of most of us.

Some of us, perhaps, may be standing upon the verge of some new scenes in our lives. Some of you young people may have come up to a great city for the first time to carve out a position for yourselves, and are for the first time encompassed by the temptations of being unknown in a crowd. Some of you may be in new domestic circumstances, some with new sorrows, or tasks, or difficulties pressing upon you, calling for wisdom and patience. It is quite likely that there may be some who, in the most prosaic and literal sense of the words, are entering on a path altogether new and untrodden.

But they will be in the minority, and for the most of us the days that were full of new possibilities are at an end, and we have to expect little more than the monotonous repetition of the habitual, humdrum duties of mature life. We have climbed the winding paths up the hill, and most of us are upon the long plateau that stretches unvaried, until it begins to dip at the further edge. And some of us are going down that other side of the hill.

But whatever may be the variety in regard to the mere externals of our lives, how true it is about us all that even the most familiar duties of to-day are not quite like the same duties when they had to be done yesterday; and that the path for each of us-though, as we go along, we find in it nothing new-is yet an untrodden path! For we are not quite the same as we were yesterday, though our work may be the same, and the difference in us makes it in some measure different.

But what mainly makes even the most well-beaten paths new at the thousandth time of traversing them is our ignorance of what may be waiting round the next turn of the road. The veil that hangs before and hides the future is a blessing, though we sometimes grumble at it, and sometimes petulantly try to make pinholes through it, and peep in to see a little of what is behind it. It brings freshness into our lives, and a possibility of anticipation, and even of wonder and expectation, that prevents us from stagnating. Even in the most habitual repetition of the same tasks ‘ye have not passed this way heretofore.’ And life for every one of us is still full of possibilities so great and so terrible that we may well feel that the mist that covers the future is a blessing and a source of strength for us all.

Our march through time is like that of men in a mist, in which things loom in strangely distorted shapes, unlike their real selves, until we get close up to them, and only then do we discover them.

So for us all the path is new and unknown by reason of the sudden surprises that may be sprung upon us, by reason of the sudden temptations that may start up at any moment in our course, by reason of the earthquakes that may shatter the most solid-seeming lives, by reason of the sudden calamities that may fall upon us. The sorrows that we anticipate seldom come, and those that do come are seldom anticipated. The most fatal bolts are generally from the blue. One flash, all unlooked for, is enough to blast the tree in all its leafy pride. Many of us, I have no doubt, can look back to times in our lives when, without anticipation on our parts, or warning from anything outside of us, a smiting hand fell upon some of our blessings. The morning dawned upon the gourd in full vigour of growth, and in the evening it was stretched yellow and wilted upon the turf. Dear brethren, anything may come out of that dark cloud through which our life's course has to pass, and there are some things concerning which all that we know is that they must come.

These are very old threadbare thoughts; I dare say you think it was not worth your while to come to hear them, nor mine to speak them; but if we would lay them to heart, and realise how true it is about every step of our earthly course that 'ye have not passed this way heretofore,' we should complain less than we do of the weariness and prosaic character of our commonplace lives, and feel that all was mystical and great and awful; and yet most blessed in its possibilities and its uncertainties.

II. Note, again, the guiding ark.

It was a new thing that the ark should become the guide of the people. All through the wilderness, according to the history, it had been carried in the centre of the march, and had had no share in the direction of the course. That had been done by the pillar of cloud. But, just as the manna ceased when the tribes got across the Jordan and could eat the bread of the land, the miracle ending and they being left to trust to ordinary means of supply at the earliest possible moment, so there ensued an approximation to ordinary guidance, which is none the less real because it is granted without miracle. The pillar of cloud ceased to move before the people in the crossing of the Jordan, and its place was taken by the material symbol of the presence of God, which contained the tables of the law as the basis of the covenant. And that ark moved at the commandment of the leader Joshua, for he was the mouthpiece of the divine will in the matter. And so when the ark moved at the bidding of the leader, and became the guide of the people, there was a kind of a drop down from the pure supernatural of the guiding pillar.

For us a similar thing is true. Jesus Christ is the true Ark of God. For what was the ark? the symbol of the divine Presence; and Christ is the reality of the divine Presence with men. The whole content of that ark was the 'law of the Lord,' and Jesus Christ is the embodied law of the present God. The ark was the sign that God had entered into this covenant with these people, and that they had a right to say to Him, 'Thou art our God, and we are Thy people,' and the same double assurance of reciprocal possession and mutual delight in possession is granted to us in and through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So He becomes the guiding Ark, the Shepherd of Israel. His presence and will are our directors. The law, which is contained and incorporated in Him, is that by which we are to walk. The covenant which He has established in His own blood between God and man contains in itself not only the direction for conduct, but also the motives which will impel us to walk where and as He enjoins.

And so, every way we may say, by His providences which He appoints, by His example which He sets us, by His gracious word in which He sums up all human duties in the one sweet obligation, 'Follow Me,' and even more by His Spirit that dwells in us, and whispers in our ears, 'This is the way; walk ye in it,' and enlightens every perplexity, and strengthens all feebleness, and directs our footsteps into the way of peace; that living and personal Ark of the covenant of the Lord of the whole earth is still the guide of waiting and docile hearts. Jesus Christ's one word to us is, 'If any man serve Me, let him follow Me. And where I am'-of course, seeing he is a follower-'there shall also My servant be.'

The one Pattern for us, the one Example that we need to follow, the one Strength in our perplexities, the true Director of our feet, is that dear Lord, if we will only listen to Him. And that direction will be given to us in regard to the trifles, as in regard to the great things of our lives.

III. And so the last thought that is here is the watchful following.

'Come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye ought to go.' In a shipwreck, the chances are that the boats will be swamped by the people scrambling into them in too great a hurry. In the Christian life most of the mistakes that people make arise from their not letting the ark go far enough ahead of them before they gather up their belongings and follow it. An impatience of the half-declared divine will, a running before we are sent, an acting before we are quite sure that God wills us to do so-and-so, are at the root of most of the failures of Christian effort, and of a large number of the miseries of Christian men. If we would only have patience! Three-quarters of a mile the ark went ahead before a man lifted a foot to follow it, and there was no mistake possible then.

Now do not be in a hurry to act. ‘Raw haste’ is ‘half-sister to delay.’ We are all impatient of uncertainty, either in opinion or in conduct; but if you are not quite sure what God wants you to do, you may be quite sure that He does not at present want you to do anything. Wait till you see what He does wish you to do. Better, better far, to spend hours in silent-although people that know nothing about what we are doing may call it indolent-waiting for the clear declaration of God’s will, than to hurry on paths which, after we have gone on them far enough to make it a mortification and a weariness to turn back, we shall find out to have been not His at all, but only our own mistakes as to where the ark would have us go.

And that there may be this patience the one thing needful-as, indeed, it is the one thing needful for all strength of all kinds in the Christian life-is the rigid suppression of our own wills. That is the secret of goodness, and its opposite is the secret of evil. To live by my own will is to die. Nothing but blunders, nothing but miseries, nothing but failures, nothing but remorse, will be the fruit of such a life. And a great many of us who call ourselves Christians are not Christians in the sense of having Christ’s will for our absolute law, and keeping our own will entirely in subordination thereto. As is the will, so is the man, and whoever does not bow himself absolutely, and hush all the babble of his own inclinations and tastes and decisions, in order that that great Voice may speak, has small chance of ever walking in the paths of righteousness, or finding that his ways please the Lord.

Suppress your own wills, dwell near God, that you may hear His lightest whisper. ‘I will guide thee with Mine eye.’ What is the use of the glance of an eye if the man for whom it is meant is half a mile off, and staring about him at everything except the eye that would guide? And that is what some of us that call ourselves Christian people are. God might look guidance at us for a week, and we should never know that He was doing it; we have so many other things to look after. And we are so far away from Him that it would need a telescope for us to see His face. ‘I will guide thee with Mine eye.’ Keep near Him, and you will not lack direction.

And so, dear brethren, if we stay ourselves on, and wait patiently for, Him, and are content to do what He wishes, and never to run without a clear commission, nor to act without a full conviction of duty, then the old story of my text will repeat itself in our daily life, as well as in the noblest form in the last act of life, which is death. The Lord will move before us and open a safe, dry path for us between the heaped waters; and where the feet of our great High Priest, bearing the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, stood, amidst the slime and the mud, we may plant our firm feet on the stones that He has left there. And so the stream of life, like the river of death, will be parted for Christ’s followers, and they will pass over on dry ground, ‘until all the people are passed clean over Jordan.’

5) Joshua 3:5-17

Joshua

‘THE WATERS SAW THEE; THEY WERE AFRAID’

Jos. 3:5 - Jos. 3:17.

The arrangement of the narrative of the passage of Jordan, which occupies Jos. 3:1-17 and Jos. 4:1-24, is remarkable, and has led to suggestions of interpolation and blending of two accounts, which are quite unnecessary. It is divided into four sections,-the preparations [Jos. 3:1 - Jos. 3:6], the passage [Jos. 3:7 - Jos. 3:17], the lifting of the memorial stones from the river’s bed and the fixing of one set of them in it [Jos. 4:1 - Jos. 4:14], the return of the waters, and the erection of the second set of memorial stones at Gilgal [Jos. 4:15 - Jos. 4:24].

Each section closes with a summary of the whole transaction, after the common manner of Old Testament history, which gives to a hasty reader the impression of confusion and repetition; but a little attention shows a very symmetrical arrangement, negativing the possibility of interpolation. The last three sections are all built on the same lines. In each there is a triple division,-God’s command to Joshua, Joshua’s communication of it to the people, and the actual fact, fulfilling these. So each stage passes thrice before the view, and the impressiveness of the history is heightened by our seeing it first in the mirror of the divine Word, and then in the orders of the commander, before we see it as a thing actually happening.

Jos. 3:5 - Jos. 3:6 of the chapter belong to the section which deals with the preparation. General instructions had been already issued that the host was to follow the ark, leaving two thousand cubits between them and it; but nothing had been said as to how Jordan was to be crossed. No doubt many a question and doubt had been muttered by the watch-fires, as the people looked at the muddy, turbid stream, swirling in flood. The spies probably managed to swim it, but that was a feat worthy to be named in the epitaph of heroes [1Ch. 12:15], and impossible for the crowd of all ages and both sexes which followed Joshua. There was the rushing stream, swollen as it always is in harvest. How were they to get over? And if the people of Jericho, right over against them, chose to fall upon them as they were struggling across, what could hinder utter defeat? No doubt, all that was canvassed, in all sorts of tones; but no inkling of the miracle seems to have been given.

God often opens His hand by one finger at a time, and leaves us face to face with some plain but difficult duty, without letting us see the helps to its performance, till we need to use them. If we go right on the road which He has traced out, it will never lead us into a blind alley. The mountains will part before us as we come near what looked their impassable wall; and some narrow gorge or other, wide enough to run a track through, but not wide enough to be noticed before we are close on it, will be sure to open. The attitude of expectation of God's help, while its nature is unrevealed, is kept up in Joshua's last instruction. The people are bidden to 'sanctify themselves, because to-morrow the Lord will do wonders' among them. That sanctifying was not external, but included the hallowing of spirit by docile waiting for His intervention, and by obedience while the manner of it was hidden. The secret of to-morrow is partly made known, and the faith of the people is nourished by the mystery remaining, as well as by the light given. The best security for to-morrow's wonders is to-day's sanctifying.

The command to the priests discloses to them a little more, in bidding them pass over before the people, but the additional disclosure would only be an additional trial of faith; for the silence as to how so impossible a command was to be made possible is absolute. The swollen river had obliterated all fords; and how were priests, staggering under the weight of the ark on their shoulders, to 'pass over'? The question is not answered till the ark is on their shoulders. To-day often sees to-morrow's duty without seeing how it is to be done. But the bearers of the ark need never fear but that the God to whom it belongs will take care of it and of them. The last sentence of Jos. 3:6 is the anticipatory summary which closes each section.

In Jos. 3:7 - Jos. 3:17 we have the narrative of the actual crossing, in its three divisions of God's command [Jos. 3:7 - Jos. 3:8], Joshua's repetition of it [Jos. 3:9 - Jos. 3:13], and the historical fact [Jos. 3:14 - Jos. 3:17]. The final instructions were only given on the morning of the day of crossing. The report of God's commands given in Jos. 3:7 - Jos. 3:8 is condensed, as is evident from the fuller statement of them in Joshua's address to the people, which immediately follows. In it Joshua is fully aware of the manner of the miracle and of the details of the crossing, but we have no record of his having received them. The summary of that eventful morning's instructions to him emphasises first the bearing of the miracle on his reputation. The passage of the Red Sea had authenticated the mission of Moses to the past generation, who, in consequence of it, 'believed God and His servant Moses.' The new generation are to have a parallel authentication of Joshua's commission. It is noteworthy that this is not the purpose of the miracle which the leader announces to the people in Jos. 3:10. It was a message from God to himself, a kind of gracious whisper meant for his own encouragement. What a thought to fill a man's heart with humble devotion, that God would work such a wonder in order to demonstrate that He was with him! And what a glimpse of more to follow lay in that promise, 'This day will I *begin* to magnify thee I.'

The command to the priests in Jos. 3:8 is also obviously condensed; for Joshua's version of it, which follows, is much more detailed, and contains particular instructions, which must have been derived from the divine word to him on that morning.

We may pass on, then, to the second division of the narrative; namely, Joshua's communication of God's commands to the people. Observe the form which the purpose of the miracle assumes there. It is the confirmation of the divine Presence, not with the leader, but with the people and their consequent victory. Joshua grasped the inmost meaning of God's Word to himself, and showed noble self-suppression, when he thus turned the direction of the miracle. The true servant of God knows that God is with him, not for his personal glorification, but for the welfare of God's people, and cares little for the estimation in which men hold him, if they will only believe that the conquering God is with them. We too often make great leaders and teachers in the church opaque barriers to hide God from us, instead of transparent windows through which He shines upon His people. We are a great deal more ready to say, 'God is with him,' than to add, 'and therefore God is with us, in our Joshuas, and without them.'

Observe the grand emphasis of that name, 'the living God,' tacitly contrasted with the dead idols of the enemies, and sealing the assurance of His swift and all-conquering might. Observe, too, the triumphant contempt in the enumeration of the many tribes of the foe with their barbarous names. Five of them had been enough, when named by the spies' trembling lips, to terrify the congregation, but here the list of the whole seven but strengthens confidence. Faith delights to look steadily at its enemies, knowing that the one Helper is more than they all. This catalogue breathes the same spirit as Paul's rapturous list of the foes impotent to separate from the love of God. Mark, too, the long-drawn-out designation of the ark, with its accumulation of nouns, which grammatical purists have found difficult,-'the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth'; where it leads they need not fear to follow. It was the pledge of His presence, it contained the Ten Words on which His covenant was concluded. That covenant enlisted on their side Him who was Lord of the swollen river as of all the fierce clans beyond; and with His ark in front, their victory was sure. If ever the contemplation of His power and covenant relation was in place, it was on that morning, as Israel stood ranked for the march that was to lead them through Jordan, and to plant their feet on the soil of Canaan. Nor must we omit the peculiar appropriateness of this solemn designation, on the occasion of the ark's first becoming the leader of the march. Hitherto it had been carried in the centre; now it was moved to the van, and took the place of the pillar, which blazed no more. But the guidance was no less divine. The simple coffer which Bezaleel had made was as august and reliable a symbol of God's presence as the pillar; and the tables of the law, shut in it, were henceforth to be the best directors of the nation.

Then follows the command to elect twelve representatives of the tribes, for a purpose not yet explained; and then, at the last moment, the manner of crossing is disclosed, to the silencing of wise doubters and the confirmation of ignorant faith. The brief anticipatory announcement of the miracle puts stress on the arrest of the waters at the instant when the priests' feet touched them, and tells what is to befall the arrested torrent above the point where the ark stood, saying nothing about the lower stretch of the river, and just hinting by one word 'heap' the parallel between this miracle and that of the passing of the Red Sea: 'The floods stood upright as an heap' [Exo. 15:8].

Jos. 3:14 - Jos. 3:17 narrate the actual crossing. One long sentence, like the roll of an Atlantic wave, or a long-drawn shout of triumph, masses together the stages of the march; the breaking up of the encampment; the solemn advance of the ark, watched by the motionless crowd; its approach to the foaming stream, running bank-full, as is its wont in the early harvest months; the decisive moment when the naked feet of the priests were dipped in the water. What a hush of almost painful expectation would fall on the gazers! Then, with a rush of triumph, the long sentence pours on, like a river escaping from some rocky gorge, and tells the details of the transcendent fact. Looking up stream, the water 'stood'; and, as the flow above went on, it was dammed up, and, as would appear, swept back to a point not now known, but apparently some miles up. Looking down the course, the water flowed naturally to the Dead Sea; and, in effect, the whole bed southwards was quickly left bare, giving room for the advance of the people with wide-extended front, while the priests, with the ark on their shoulders, stood silent in the midst of the bed, between the heaped waters and the hasting host. Jos. 3:17 gives the usual summary sentence, which partly anticipates what is still to follow, but here comes in with special force, as gathering up the whole wonderful scene, and recounting once more, and not without a ring of astonished triumph, how the priests stood firm on dry ground in that strange place, 'until all the nation were passed clean over Jordan.'

From Jos. 3:7 and Jos. 3:10 we learn the purpose of this miracle as being twofold. It was intended to stamp the seal of God’s approbation on Joshua, and to hearten the people by the assurance of God’s fighting for them. The leader was thereby put on the level of Moses, the people, on that of the generation before whom the Red Sea had been divided. The parallel with that event is obvious and significant. The miracle which led Israel into the wilderness is repeated as they pass from it. The first stage of their deliverance and the second are begun with analogous displays of divine power. The same arm which cleft the sea is stretched out, after all sins, for the new generation, and ‘is not shortened that it cannot save.’ God does not disdain to duplicate His wonders, even for very unworthy servants. The unchanging, long-suffering patience, and the unwearied strength to which all generations in succession can turn with confidence, are wonderfully set forth by these two miracles. And though we have passed into the higher stage, where miracles have ceased, the principle which dictated the parallelism still holds good, and we too can look back to all these ancient wonders, and be sure that they are done over and over again according to our needs. ‘As we have heard, so have we seen,’ might have been Israel’s song that day, as it may be ours every day.

The beautiful application made of the parted waters of Jordan in Christian literature, which sees in them the prophecy of conquered death, is perhaps scarcely in accordance with truth, for the divided Jordan was the introduction, not to peace, but to warfare. But it is too deeply impressed on the heart to be lightly put aside, and we may well allow faith and hope to discern in the stream, whose swollen waters shrink backwards as soon as the ark is borne into their turbid and swift current, an emblem of that dark flood that rolled between the host of God and their home, and was dried up as soon as the pierced foot of the Christ touched its cold waters.

‘What ailest thee, thou sea, that thou fleest; thou Jordan, that thou turnest back?’ Christ has gone up before us. He has shaken His hand over the river, and caused men to go over dry shod.

6) Joshua 4:9-24

STONES CRYING OUT

Jos. 4:10 - Jos. 4:24.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first [from Jos. 4:1 - Jos. 4:14] has as its main subject the bringing up of the twelve memorial stones from the bed of Jordan; the second [Jos. 4:15 - Jos. 4:24] gives the conclusion of the whole incident. The plan of arrangement, already pointed out in a former chapter, is very plain in this. Each section has God's commands to Joshua, Joshua's to the people, and the execution of these. To each is appended a summary, which anticipates the more detailed particulars that follow. Our text begins in the middle of the first section, but we must glance at the preceding verses. These tell how, when the people were all across, Joshua, who had apparently remained on the eastern bank with the twelve representatives of the tribes, received God's command to tell these the purpose for which they had been chosen, and to set them to execute it. This additional instruction is the explanation of the apparent discrepancy between Jos. 3:12 and Jos. 4:2. Jos. 4:4 - Jos. 4:8 tell Joshua's communication of the instructions to the men; Jos. 4:8 narrates the execution of them by each man's wrenching up from the river's bed a great stone, with which he toiled through the muddy ooze to the western shore, and thence over the hot plain to Gilgal, where the host camped; Jos. 4:9 tells that twelve other stones were set up where the priests had stood, and were visible at some time after date, when it was written; but when that was, or whether the verse is part of the original or a later note, we cannot say. At any rate, there were two memorials, one on the bank, one in the stream-'a grand jury of great stones,' as Thomas Fuller calls them. There is no difficulty in supposing that the monument in the river was firm enough to resist its current, and high enough to be visible either above the surface or beneath the ordinarily shallow water.

I. The first picture here brought before us is that of the motionless ark in the midst of what had been Jordan. There is an obvious intention to contrast the stillness of the priests, bearing it on their shoulders, and standing rooted in that strange place all these long hours, with the hurry around. 'The priests stood . . . and the people hasted.' However broad the front and swift the march, the crossing must have taken many hours. The haste was not from fear, but eagerness. It was ‘an industrious speed and mannerly quickness, as not willing to make God wait upon them, in continuing a miracle longer than necessity did require.’ When all were over, then came the twelve and Joshua, who would spend some time in gathering the stones and rearing the memorial in the river-bed. Through all the stir the ark was still. Over all the march it watched. So long as one Israelite was in the channel it remained, a silent presence, to ensure his safety. It let their rate of speed determine the length of its standing there. It waited for the slowest foot and the weariest laggard. God makes His ‘very present help’ of the same length as our necessities, and lets us beat the time to which He conforms. Not till the last loiterer has struggled to the farther shore does He cease by His presence to keep His people safe on the strange road which by His presence He has opened for them.

The silent presence of the ark is enough to dam up the stream. There is vehement action around, but the cause of it all is in absolute repose. God moves all things, Himself unmoved. He ‘worketh hitherto,’ and no intensity of energy breaks the depth of His perfect rest. His activity implies no effort, and is followed by no exhaustion. The ark is still, while it holds back a swollen river for hours. The centre of the swiftest revolution is a point of rest.

The form of the miracle was a condescension to weak faith, to which help was ministered by giving sense something to grasp. It was easier to believe that the torrent would not rush down on them when they could look at the priests standing there motionless, with the visible symbol of God’s presence on their shoulders. The ark was no more the cause of the miracle than were its carriers; but, just as Jesus helped one blind man by laying moistened earth on his eyes, and another by sending him to Siloam to wash, so God did here. Children learn best when they have something to look at. Sight is sometimes the servant of faith.

We need not dwell on the summary, beginning with Jos. 4:11, which anticipates the subject of the next section, and adds that the fighting men of the tribes who had already received their inheritance on the east bank of Jordan, loyally kept their promise, and marched with their brethren to the campaign.

II. Jos. 4:15 - Jos. 4:18 finish the story with the return of the waters to their bed. The triple division appears again. First God commands Joshua, who then transmits the command to the people, who, in turn, then obey. And thus at each stage the divine causality, Joshua's delegated but absolute authority, and the people's prompt obedience, are signalised; and the whole incident, in all its parts, is set forth as on the one hand a conspicuous instance of God's interposition, and, on the other, of Israel's willing service.

We can fancy how the people who had reached the western shore lined the bank, gazing on the group in the channel, who still stood waiting God's command to relieve them at their post. The word comes at last, and is immediately obeyed. May we not learn the lesson to stand fixed and patient wherever God sets us, as long as He does not call us thence? God's priests should be like the legionary on guard in Pompeii, who stuck to his post while the ashes were falling thick, and was smothered by them, rather than leave his charge without his commander's orders. One graphic word pictures the priests lifting, or, as it might be translated, 'plucking,' the soles of their feet from the slimy bottom into which they had settled down by reason of long standing still. They reach the bank, marching as steadily with their sacred burden as might be over so rough and slippery a road. The first to enter were the last to leave the river's bed. God's ark 'goes before us,' and 'is our rearward.' He besets us behind and before, and all dangerous service is safe if begun and ended in Him. The one point made prominent is the instantaneous rush back of the impatient torrent as soon as the curb was taken off. Like some horse rejoicing to be free, the tawny flood pours down, and soon everything looks 'as aforetime,' except for the new rock, piled by human hands, round which the waters chafed. The dullest would understand what had wrought the miracle when they saw the immediate consequence of the ark's leaving its place. Cause and effect seldom come thus close together in God's dealings; but sometimes He lets us see them as near each other as the lightning and the thunder, that we may learn to trace them in faith, when centuries part them. How the people would gaze as the hurrying stream covered up their path, and would look across to the further shore, almost doubting if they had really stood there that morning! They were indeed 'Hebrews'-men from the other side-now, and would set themselves to the dangerous task before them with courage. 'Well begun is half done'; and God would not divide the river for them to thrust them into a tiger's den, where they would be torn to pieces. Retreat was impossible now. A new page in their history was turned. The desert was as unreachable as Egypt, The passage of the Jordan rounded off the epoch which the passage of the Bed Sea introduced, and began a new era.

That parallelism of the two crossings is suggested by the notice of date in Jos. 4:19. ‘The tenth day of the first month’ was just forty years to a day since the first Paschal lamb had been chosen, and four days short of the Passover, which was solemnised at Gilgal [Jos. 5:10] where they encamped that night. It was a short march from the point of crossing, and a still shorter from Jericho. It would have been easy to fall upon the invaders as they straggled across the river, but no attempt was made to dispute the passage, though, no doubt, many a keen pair of eyes watched it from the neighbouring hills. In the beginning of the next chapter we are told why there was this singular supineness. ‘Their heart melted, neither was there spirit in them any more,’ or, in more modern language, panic laid hold of the enemy, and they could not pluck up courage to oppose the advance of Israel. If we add this result to those mentioned in chapter in., we find sufficient motive for the miracle to take it out of the class of purposeless, legendary wonders. Given the importance of Israel as the depositaries of revelation, there is nothing unreasonable in a miracle which so powerfully contributed to their conquest of Canaan, and we have yet to learn that there is anything unreasonable in the belief that they were the depositaries of revelation. The fundamental postulate of the Old Testament is a supernatural revelation, and that opens the door for any miracle needful for its accomplishment. It is folly to seek to conciliate by minimising the miraculous element. However much may be thrown out to the wolves, they will not cease to pursue and show their teeth. We should be very slow to pronounce on what is worthy of God; but any man who believes in a divine revelation, given to the world through Israel, may well believe in such a miracle as this at such a moment of their history.

III. The memorial stones [Jos. 4:20 - Jos. 4:24]. Gilgal, the first encampment, lay defenceless in the open plain, and the first thing to be done would be to throw up some earthwork round the camp. It seems to have been the resting-place of the ark and probably of the non-combatants, during the conquest, and to have derived thence a sacredness which long clung to it, and finally led, singularly enough, to its becoming a centre of idolatrous worship. The rude circle of unhewn stones without inscription was, no doubt, exactly like the many prehistoric monuments found all over the world, which forgotten races have raised to keep in everlasting remembrance forgotten fights and heroes. It was a comparatively small thing; for each stone was but a load for one man, and it would seem mean enough by the side of Stonehenge or Carnac, just as Israel's history is on a small scale, as compared with the world-embracing empires of old. Size is not greatness; and Joshua's little circle told a more wonderful story than its taller kindred, or Egyptian obelisks or colossi.

These grey stones preached at once the duty of remembering, and the danger of forgetting, the past mercies of God. When they were reared, they would seem needless; but the deepest impressions get filled up by degrees, as the river of time deposits its sands on them. We do not forget pain so quickly as joy, and most men have a longer and keener remembrance of their injurers than of their benefactors, human or divine. The stones were set up because Israel remembered, but also lest Israel should forget. We often think of the Jews as monsters of ingratitude; but we should more truly learn the lesson of their history, if we regarded them as fair, average men, and asked ourselves whether our recollection of God's goodness to us is much more vivid than theirs. Unless we make distinct and frequent efforts to recall, we shall certainly forget 'all His benefits.' The cultivation of thankful remembrance is a very large part of practical religion; and it is not by accident that the Psalmist puts it in the middle, between hope and obedience, when he says 'that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments' [Psa. 78:7].

The memorial stones further proclaimed the duty of parental instruction in God's mercies. They speak of a time when tradition was the vehicle of history; when books were rare, and monuments were relied upon to awaken curiosity which a father's words would satisfy. Notwithstanding all differences in means of obtaining knowledge, the old law remains in full force, that the parent is the natural and most powerful instructor in the ways of God. The Jewish father was not to send his child to some Levite or other to get his question answered, but was to answer it himself. I am afraid that a good many English parents, who call themselves Christians, are too apt to say, ‘Ask your Sunday-school teacher,’ when such questions are put to them. The decay of parental religious teaching is working enormous mischief in Christian households; and the happiest results would follow if Joshua’s homely advice were attended to, ‘*Ye* shall let your children know.’

The same principle which led to the erection of this simple monument reaches its highest and sacredest instance in the institution of the Lord’s Supper, in which Jesus, with wonderful lowliness, condescends to avail Himself of material symbols in order to secure a firmer place in treacherous memories. He might well have expected that such stupendous love could never be forgotten; but He ‘knoweth our frame,’ and trusts some share in keeping His death vividly in the hearts of His people to the humble ministry of bread and wine, Strange that we should need to be reminded of the death which it is life to remember! Blessed that, needing it, we have the need so tenderly met, and that He does not disdain to accept loving memories which slumber till stirred by such poor reminders of His unspeakable love!

7) Joshua 5:14

Joshua

THE CAPTAIN OF THE LORD’S HOST

Jos. 5:14.

The army of Israel was just beginning a hard conflict under an untried leader. Behind them the Jordan barred their retreat, in front of them Jericho forbade their advance. Most of them had never seen a fortified city, and had no experience nor engines for a siege. So we may well suppose that many doubts and fears shook the courage of the host, as it drew around the doomed city. Their chief had his own heavy burden. He seems to have gone apart to meditate on what his next step was to be. Absorbed in thought, he lifts up his eyes mechanically, as brooding men will, not expecting to see anything, and is startled by the silent figure of ‘a man with a sword drawn’ in his hand, close beside him. There is nothing supernatural in his appearance; and the immediate thought of the leader is, ‘Is this one of the enemy that has stolen upon my solitude?’ So, promptly and boldly, he strides up to him with the quick challenge: ‘Whose side are you on? Are you one of us, or from the enemy’s camp?’ And then the silent lips open. ‘Upon neither the one nor the other. I am not on your side, you are on mine, for as Captain of the Lord’s host, am I come up.’ And then Joshua falls on his face, recognises his Commander-in-Chief, owns himself a subordinate, and asks for orders. ‘What saith my Lord unto his servant?’

Now let us try to gather the meaning and the lessons of this striking incident.

I. I see in it a transient revelation of an eternal truth.

I believe, as the vast majority of careful students of the course of Old Testament revelation and its relation to the New Testament completion believe, that we have here not a record of the appearance of a created superhuman person, but that of a preliminary manifestation of the Eternal Word of God, who, in the fulness of time, ‘became flesh and dwelt among us.’

You will observe that there run throughout the whole of the Old Testament notices of the occasional manifestation of a mysterious person who is named ‘*the* Angel,’ ‘the Angel of the Lord.’ For instance, in the great scene in the wilderness, where the bush burned and was not consumed, he who appeared is named ‘the Angel of the Lord’; and his lips declare ‘I am that I am.’ In like manner, soon after, the divine voice speaks to Moses of ‘the Angel in whom is My name.’

When Balaam had his path blocked amongst the vineyards, it was a *replica* of the figure of my text that stayed his way, a man with a drawn sword in his hand, who spoke in autocratic and divine fashion. When the parents of Samson were apprised of the coming birth of the hero, it was ‘the Angel of the Lord’ that appeared to them, accepted their sacrifice, declared the divine will, and disappeared in a flame of fire from the altar. A psalm speaks of ‘the Angel of the Lord’ as encamping round about them that fear him, and delivering them. Isaiah tells us of the ‘Angel of his face,’ who was ‘afflicted in all Israel’s afflictions, and saved them.’ And the last prophetic utterance of the Old Testament is most distinct and remarkable in its strange identification and separation of Jehovah and the Angel, when it says, ‘the

Lord shall suddenly come to His Temple, even the Angel of the Covenant.' Now, if we put all these passages-and they are but select instances-if we put all these passages together, I think we cannot help seeing that there runs, as I said, throughout the whole of the Old Testament a singular strain of revelation in regard to a Person who, in a remarkable manner, is distinguished from the created hosts of angel beings, and also is distinguished from, and yet in name, attributes, and worship all but identified with, the Lord Himself.

If we turn to the narrative before us, we find there similar phenomena marked out. For this mysterious 'man with the sword drawn' in his hand, quotes the very words which were spoken at the bush, when he says, 'Loose thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy.' And by fair implication, He would have us to identify the persons in these two great theophanies. He ascribes to Himself, in the further conversation in the next chapter, directly divine attributes, and is named by the sacred name; 'The Lord said unto Joshua, see, I have given into thy hand Jericho and its king.'

If we turn to the New Testament, we find that there under another image the same strain of thought is presented. The Word of God, who from everlasting 'was with God, and was God,' is represented as being the Agent of Creation, the Source of all human illumination, the Director of Providence, the Lord of the Universe. 'By him were all things, and in him all things consists.' So, surely, these two halves make a whole; and the Angel of the Lord, separate and yet so strangely identified with Jehovah, who at the crises of the nation's history, and stages of the development of the process of Revelation, is manifested, and the Eternal Word of God, whom the New Testament reveals to us, are one and the same.

This truth was transiently manifested in our text. The vision passed, the ground that was hallowed by His foot is undistinguished now in the sweltering plain round the mound that once was Jericho. But the fact remains, the humanity, that was only in appearance, and for a few minutes, assumed then, has now been taken up into everlasting union with the divine nature, and a Man reigns on the Throne, and is Commander of all who battle for the truth and the right. The eternal order of the universe is before us here.

It only remains to say a word in reference to the sweep of the command which our vision assigns to the Angel of the Lord. ‘Captain of the Lord’s host’ means a great deal more than the true General of Israel’s little army. It does mean that, or the words and the vision would cease to have relevance and bearing on the moment’s circumstances and need. But it includes also, as the usage of Scripture would sufficiently show, if it were needful to adduce instances of it, all the ordered ranks of loftier intelligent beings, and all the powers and forces of the universe. These are conceived of as an embattled host, comparable to an army in the strictness of their discipline and their obedience to a single will. It is the modern thought that the universe is a Cosmos and not a Chaos, an ordered unit, with the addition of the truth beyond the reach and range of science, that its unity is the expression of a personal will. It is the same thought which the centurion had, to Christ’s wonder, when he compared his own power as an officer in a legion, where his will was implicitly obeyed, to the power of Christ over diseases and sorrows and miseries and death, and recognised that all these were His servants, to whom, if His autocratic lips chose to say ‘Go,’ they went, and if He said, ‘Do this,’ they did it.

So the Lord of the universe and its ordered ranks is Jesus Christ. That is the truth which was flashed from the unknown, like a vanishing meteor in the midnight, before the face of Joshua, and which stands like the noonday sun, unsetting and irradiating for us who live under the Gospel.

II. I see here the Leader of all the warfare against the world’s evil.

‘The Captain of the Lord’s host.’ He Himself takes part in the fight. He is not like a general who, on some safe knoll behind the army, sends his soldiers to death, and keeps his own skin whole. But He *has* fought, and He *is* fighting. Do you remember that wonderful picture in two halves, at the end of one of the Gospels, ‘the Lord went up into Heaven and sat at the right hand of God, . . . they went forth everywhere preaching the Word’? Strange contrast between the repose of the seated Christ and the toils of His peripatetic servants! Yes, strange contrast; but the next words harmonise the two halves of it; ‘the Lord also working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.' The Leader does not so rest as that He does not fight; and the servants do not need so to fight, as that they cannot rest. Thus the old legends of many a land and tongue have a glorious truth in them to the eye of faith, and at the head of all the armies that are charging against any form of the world's misery and sin, there moves the form of the Son of Man, whose aid we have to invoke, even from His crowned repose at the right hand of God. 'Gird thy sword upon Thy thigh, O Most Mighty, and in Thy majesty ride forth prosperously, and Thy right hand shall teach Thee terrible things.'

If this, then, be for us, as truly as for Joshua and his host, a revelation of who is our true leader, surely all of us in our various degrees, and especially any of us who have any 'Quixotic crusade' for the world's good on our consciences and on our hands, may take the lessons and the encouragements that are here. Own your Leader; that is one plain duty. And recognise this fact, that by no other power than by His, and with no other weapons than those which He puts into our hands, in His Cross and meekness, can a world's evils be overcome, and the victory be won for the right and the truth. I have no faith in crusades which are not under the Captain of our salvation. And I would that the earnest men, and there are many of them, the laborious and the self-sacrificing men in many departments of philanthropy and benevolence and social reformation-who labour unaware of who is their Leader, and not dependent upon His help, nor trusting in His strength-would take to heart this vision of my text, and see beside them the 'man with the drawn sword in his hand,' the Christ with the 'sharp two-edged sword going out of his mouth,' by whom, and by whom alone, the world's evil can be overcome and slain.

Own your General; submit to His authority; pick the weapons that He can bless; trust absolutely in His help. We *may* have, we *shall* have, in all enterprises for God and man that are worth doing, 'need of patience,' just as the army of Israel had to parade for six weary days round Jericho blowing their useless trumpets, whilst the impregnable walls stood firm, and the defenders flouted and jeered their aimless procession. But the seventh day will come, and at the trumpet blast down will go the loftiest ramparts of the cities that are 'walled up to heaven' with a rush and a crash, and through the dust and over the ruined rubbish Christ's soldiers will march and take possession. So trust in your Leader, and be sure of the victory, and have patience and keep on at your work.

Do not make Joshua's mistake. 'Art Thou for us?'-'Nay! Thou art for *me.*' That is a very different thing. We have the right to be sure that God is on our side, when we have made sure that we are on God's. So take care of self-will and self-regard, and human passions, and all the other parasitical insects that creep round philanthropic religious work, lest they spoil your service. There is a great deal that calls itself after Jehu's fashion, 'My zeal for the Lord,' which is nothing better than zeal for my own notions and their preponderance. Therefore we must strip ourselves of all that, and not fancy that the cause is ours, and then graciously admit Christ to help us, but recognise that it is *His*, and lowly submit ourselves to His direction, and what we do, do, and when we fight, fight, in His name and for His sake.

III. Here is the Ally in all our warfare with ourselves.

That is the worst fight. Far worse than all these Hittites and Hivites, and the other tribes with their barbarous names, far worse than all external foes, are the foes that each man carries about in his own heart. In that slow hand-to-hand and foot-to-foot struggle I do not believe that there is any conquering power available for a man that can for a moment be compared with the power that comes through submission to Christ's command and acceptance of Christ's help. He has fought every foot of the ground before us. We have to 'run the race'-to take another metaphor-'that is set before us, looking unto Jesus,' the great Leader, and in His own self the Perfecter of the faith which conquers. In Him, His example, the actual communication of His divine Spirit, and in the motives for brave and persistent conflict which flow from His Cross and Passion, we shall find that which alone will make us the victors in this internecine warfare. There can be no better directory given to any man than to tread in Christ's footsteps, and learn how to fight, from Him who in the wilderness repelled the triple assault with the single 'It is written'; thus recognising the word and will of God as the only directory and defence.

Thus, brethren, if we humbly take service in His ranks, and ask Him to show us where our foes within are, and to give us the grace to grapple with them, and cast them out, anything is possible rather than ultimate defeat, and however long and sore the struggle may be, its length and its severity are precious parts of the discipline that makes us strong, and we shall at last be more than conquerors through Him that loveth us.

IV. Lastly, I see here the Power which it is madness to resist.

Think of this vision. Think of the deep truths, partially shadowed and symbolised by it. Think of Christ, what He is, and what resources He has at His back, of what are His claims for our service, and our loyal, militant obedience. Think of the certain victory of all who follow Him amongst 'the armies of Heaven, clad in fine linen, clean and white.' Think of the crown and the throne for him that 'overcomes.'

Remember the destructive powers that sleep in Him: the 'drawn sword in His hand,' the 'two-edged sword out of His mouth' the 'wrath of the Lamb.' Think of the ultimate certain defeat of all antagonisms; of that last campaign when He goes forth with the 'name written on His vesture and on His thigh "King of kings and Lord of lords."' Think of how He 'strikes through kings in the day of His wrath, and fills the place with the bodies of the dead'; and how His 'enemies become His footstool.'

Ponder His own solemn word, 'He that is not with Me, is against Me.' There is no neutrality in this warfare. Either we are for Him or we are for His adversary. 'Under which King? speak or die!' As sensible men, not indifferent to your highest and lasting well-being, ask yourselves, 'Can I, with my ten thousand, meet Him with His twenty thousand?' Put yourselves under His orders, and He will be on your side. He will teach your hands to war, and your fingers to fight; will cover your heads in the day of battle, and bring you at last, palm-bearing and laurel-crowned, to that blissful state where there will still be service, and He still be the 'Captain of the Lord's host,' but where 'swords will be beaten into ploughshares' and the victors shall need to 'learn war no more.'

8) Joshua 6:10-11

Joshua

THE SIEGE OF JERICHO

Jos. 6:10 - Jos. 6:11.

The cheerful uniform obedience of Israel to Joshua stands in very remarkable contrast with their perpetual murmurings and rebellions under Moses. Many reasons probably concurred in bringing about this change of tone. For one thing the long period of suspense was over; and to average sense-bound people there is no greater trial of faith and submission than waiting, inactive, for something that is to come. Now they are face to face with their enemies, and it is a great deal easier to fight than to expect; and their courage mounts higher as dangers come nearer. Then there were great miracles which left their impression upon the people, such as the passage of the Jordan, and so on.

So that the Epistle to the Hebrews is right when it says, ‘By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were compassed about seven days.’ And that faith was as manifest in the six days’ march round the city, as on the seventh day of victorious entrance. For, if you will read the narrative carefully, you will see that it says that the Israelites were not told what was to be the end of that apparently useless and aimless promenade. It was only on the morning of the day of the miracle that it was announced. So there are two stages in this instance of faith. There is the protracted trial of it, in doing an apparently useless thing; and there is the victory, which explains and vindicates it. Let us look at these two points now.

I. Consider that strange protracted trial of faith.

The command comes to the people, through Joshua’s lips, unaccompanied by any explanation or reasons. If Moses had called for a like obedience from the people in their wilderness mood, there would have been no end of grumbling. But whatever some of them may have thought, there is nothing recorded now but prompt submission. Notice, too, the order of the procession. First come the armed men, then seven white-robed priests, blowing, probably, discordant music upon their ram’s horn trumpets; then the Ark, the symbol and token of God’s presence; and then the rereward. So the *Ark* is the centre; and it is not only Israel that is marching round the city, but rather it is God who is circling the walls. Very impressive would be the grim silence of it all. Tramp, tramp, tramp, round and round, six days on end, without a word spoken [though no doubt taunts in plenty were being showered down from the walls], they marched, and went back to the camp, and subsided into inactivity for another four-and-twenty hours, until they 'turned out' for the procession once more.

Now, what did all that mean? The blast of the trumpet was, in the Jewish feasts, the solemn proclamation of the presence of God. And hence the purpose of that singular march circumambulating Jericho was to declare 'Here is the Lord of the whole earth, weaving His invisible cordon and network around the doomed city.' In fact the meaning of the procession, emphasised by the silence of the soldiers, was that God Himself was saying, in the long-drawn blasts of the priestly trumpet, 'Lift up your heads, O ye gates! even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in.' Now, whatever Jericho and its people thought about that, Israel, according to the commentary of the New Testament, had to some extent, at all events, learnt the lesson, and knew, of course very rudimentarily and with a great deal of mere human passion mingled with it, but still knew, that this was God's summons, and the manifestation of God's presence. And so round the city they went, and day by day they did the thing in which their faith apprehended its true meaning, and which, by reason of their faith, they were willing to do. Let us take some lessons from that.

Here is a confidence in the divine presence, manifested by unquestioning obedience to a divine command.

'Theirs not to make reply,

Theirs not to reason why.'

Joshua had spoken; God had spoken through him. And so here goes! up with the Ark and the trumpets, and out on to the hot sand for the march! It would have been a great deal easier to have stopped in the tents. It was disheartening work marching round thus. The sceptical spirit in the host-the folk of whom there are many great-grandchildren living to-day, who always have objections to urge when disagreeable duties are crammed up against their faces-would have enough to say on that occasion, but the bulk of the people were true, and obeyed. Now, we do not need to put out the eyes of our understanding in order to practise the obedience of faith. And we have to exercise common-sense about the things that seem to us to be duties.

But this is plain, that if once we see a thing to be, in Christian language, the will of our Father in heaven, then everything is settled; and there is only one course for us, and that is, unquestioning submission, active submission, or, what is as hard, passive submission.

Then here again is faith manifesting itself by an obedience which was altogether ignorant of what was coming. I think that is quite plain in the story, if you will read it carefully, though I think that it is not quite what people generally understand as its meaning. But it makes the incident more in accordance with God's uniform way of dealing with us that the host should be told on the morning of the first day of the week that they were to march round the city, and told the same on the second day, and on the third the same, and so on until the sixth; and that not until the morning of the seventh, were they told what was to be the end of it all. That is the way in which God generally deals with us. In the passage of the Jordan, too, you will find, if you will look at the narrative carefully, that although Joshua was told what was coming, the people were not told till the morning of the day, when the priests' feet were dipped in the brink of the water. We, too, have to do our day's march, knowing very little about tomorrow; and we have to carry on all through life 'doing the duty that lies nearest us,' entirely ignorant of the strange issues to which it may conduct. Life is like a voyage down some winding stream, shut in by hills, sometimes sunny and vine-clad, like the Rhine, sometimes grim and black, like an American canon. As the traveller looks ahead he wonders how the stream will find a passage beyond the next bend; and as he looks back, he cannot trace the course by which he has come. It is only when he rounds the last shoulder that he sees a narrow opening flashing in the sunshine, and making a way for his keel. So, seeing that we know nothing about the issues, let us make sure of the motives; and seeing that we do not know what to-morrow may bring forth, nor even what the next moment may bring, let us see that we fill the present instant as full as it will hold with active obedience to God, based upon simple faith in Him. He does not open His whole hand at once; He opens a finger at a time, as you do sometimes with your children when you are trying to coax them to take something out of the palm. He gives us enough light for the moment, He says, 'March round Jericho; and be sure that I mean something. What I do mean I will tell you some day.' And so we have to put all into His hands.

Then here, again, is faith manifesting itself by persistency. A week was not long, but it was a long while during which to do that one apparently useless thing and nothing else. It would take about an hour or so to march round the city, and there were twenty-three hours of idleness. Little progress in reducing Jericho was made by the progress round it, and it must have got rather wearisome about the sixth day. Familiarity would breed monotony, but notwithstanding the deadly influences of habit, the obedient host turned out for their daily round. 'Let us not be weary in well-doing,' for there is a time for everything. There is a time for sowing and for reaping, and in the season of the reaping 'we shall reap, if we faint not.' Dear brethren! we all get weary of our work. Custom presses upon us, 'with a weight heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.' It is easy to do things with a spurt, but it is the keeping on at the monotonous, trivial, and sometimes unintelligible duties that is the test of a man's grit, and of his goodness too. So, although it is a very, very threadbare lesson -one that you may think it was not worth while for me to bring you all here to receive-I am sure that there are few things needed more by us all, and especially by those of us who are on the wrong side of middle life, as people call it-though I think it is the right side in many respects-than that old familiar lesson. Keep on as you have begun, and for the six weary days turn out, however hot the sun, however comfortable the carpets in the tent, however burning the sand, however wearisome and flat it may seem to be perpetually tramping round the same walls of the same old city; keep on, for in due season the trumpet will sound and the walls will fall.

II. So that brings me to the second stage-viz., the sudden victory which vindicates and explains the protracted trial of faith.

I do not need to tell the story of how, on the seventh day, the host encompassed the city seven times, and at last they were allowed to break the long silence with a shout. You will observe the prominence given to the sacred seven, both in the number of days, of circuits made, and the number of the priests' trumpets. Probably the last day was a Sabbath, for there must have been one somewhere in the week, and it is improbable that it was one of the undistinguished days. That was a shout, we may be sure, by which the week's silence was avenged, and all the repressed emotions gained utterance at last. The fierce yell from many throats, which startled the wild creatures in the hills behind Jericho, blended discordantly with the trumpets' clang which proclaimed a present God; and at His summons the fortifications toppled into hideous ruin, and over the fallen stones the men of Israel clambered, each soldier, in all that terrible circle of avengers that surrounded the doomed city, marching straight forward, and so all converging on the centre.

Now, we can discover good reasons for this first incident in the campaign being marked by miracle. The fact that it was the first is a reason. It is a law of God's progressive revelation that each new epoch is inaugurated by miraculous works which do not continue throughout its course. For instance, it is observable that, in the *Acts of the Apostles,* the first example of each class of incidents recorded there, such as the first preaching, the first persecution, the first martyrdom, the first expansion of the Gospel beyond Jews, its first entrance into Europe, has usually the stamp of miracle impressed on it, and is narrated at great length, while subsequent events of the same class have neither of those marks of distinction. Take, for example, the account of Stephen, the first martyr. He saw 'the heavens opened' and the Son of Man 'standing at the right hand of God.' We do not read that the heavens opened when Herod struck off the head of James with the sword. But was Jesus any the less near to help His servant? Certainly not.

In like manner it was fitting that the first time that Israel crossed swords with these deadly and dreaded enemies should be marked by a miraculous intervention to hearten God's warriors. But let us take care that we understand the teaching of any miracle. Surely it does not secularise and degrade the other incidents of a similar sort in which no miracle was experienced. The very opposite lesson is the true one to draw from a miracle. In its form it is extraordinary, and presents God's direct action on men or on nature, so obviously that all eyes can see it. But the conclusion to be drawn is not that God acts only in a supernatural' manner, but that He is acting as really, though in a less obvious fashion, in the 'natural' order. In these turning-points, the inauguration of new stages in revelation or history, the cause which always produces all nearer effects and the ultimate effects, which are usually separated or united [as one may choose to regard it] by many intervening links, are brought together. But the originating power works as truly when it is transmitted through these many links as when it dispenses with them. Miracle shows us in abbreviated fashion, and therefore conspicuously, the divine will acting directly, that we may see it working when it acts indirectly. In miracle God makes bare His arm,' that we may be sure of its operation when it is draped and partially hid, as by a vesture, by second causes.

We are not to argue that, because there is no miracle, God is not present or active. He was as truly with Israel when there was no Ark present, and no blast of the trumpet heard. He was as truly with Israel when they fought apparently unhelped, as He was when Jericho fell. The teaching of all the miracles in the Old and the New Testaments is that the order of the universe is maintained by the continual action of the will of God on men and things. So this story is a transient revelation of an eternal fact. God is as much with you and me in our fights as He was with the Israelites when they marched round Jericho, and as certainly will He help. If by faith we endure the days of often blind obedience, we shall share the rapture of the sudden victory.

Now, I have said that the last day of this incident was probably a Sabbath day. Does not that suggest the thought that we may take this story as a prophetic symbol? There is for us a week of work, and a seventh day of victory, when we shall enter, not into the city of confusion which has come to nought, but into the city which 'hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God.' The old fathers of the Christian Church were not far wrong, when they saw in this story a type of the final coming of the Lord. Did you ever notice how St. Paul, in writing to the Thessalonians about that coming, seems to have his mind turned back to the incident before us? Remember that in this incident the two things which signalised the fall of the city were the trumpet and the shout. What does Paul say? 'The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a *shout*, with the voice of the archangel, and with the *trump* of God.' Jericho over again! And then, 'Babylon is fallen, is fallen!' 'And I saw the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, like a bride adorned for her husband.'

9) Joshua 6:25

Joshua

RAHAB

Jos. 6:25.

This story comes in like an oasis in these terrible narratives of Canaanite extermination. There is much about it that is beautiful and striking, but the main thing is that it teaches the universality of God's mercy, and the great truth that trust in Him unites to Him and brings deliverance, how black soever may have been the previous life.

I need not tell over again the story, told with such inimitable picturesqueness here: how the two spies, swimming the Jordan in flood, set out on their dangerous mission and found themselves in the house of Rahab, a harlot; how the king sent to capture them, how she hid them among the flax-stalks bleaching on the flat roof, confessed faith in Israel's God and lied steadfastly to save them, how they escaped to the Quarantania hills, how she 'perished not' in the capture, entered into the community of Israel, was married, and took her place-hers!-in the line of David's and Christ's ancestresses.

The point of interest is her being, notwithstanding her previous position and history, one of the few instances in which heathen were brought into Israel. The *Epistle to the Hebrews* and *James* both refer to her. We now consider her story as embodying for us some important truths about faith in its nature, its origin, its power.

I. Faith in its constant essence and its varying objects.

Her creed was very short and simple. She abjured idols, and believed that Jehovah was the one God. She knew nothing of even the Mosaic revelation, nothing of its moral law or of its sacrifices. And yet the *Epistle to the Hebrews* has no scruple in ascribing faith to her. The object of that Epistle is to show that Christianity is Judaism perfected. It labours to establish that objectively there has been advance, not contradiction, and that subjectively there is absolute identity. It has always been faith that has bound men to God. That faith may co-exist with very different degrees of illumination. Not the creed, but the trust, is the all-important matter. This applies to all pre-Christian times and to all heathen lands. *Our* faith has a fuller gospel to lay hold of. Do not neglect it.

Beware lest people with less light and more love get in before you, ‘who shall come from the east and the west.’

II. Faith in its origin in fear.

There are many roads to faith, and it matters little which we take, so long as we get to the goal. This is one, and some people seem to think that it is a very low and unworthy one, and one which we should never urge upon men. But there are a side of the divine nature and a mode of the divine government which properly evoke fear.

God's moral government, His justice and retribution, are facts.

Fear is an inevitable and natural consequence of feeling that His justice is antagonistic to us. The work of conscience is precisely to create such fear. Not to feel it is to fall below manhood or to be hardened by sin.

That fear is meant to lead us to God and love. Rahab fled to God. Peter 'girt his fisher's coat to him,' and lost his fear in the sunshine of Christ's face, as a rainbow trembles out of a thunder-cloud when touched by sunbeams.

We have all grounds enough to *fear*.

Urge these as a reason for *trust*.

III. Faith in its relation to the previous life.

It is a strange instance of blindness that attempts have been made to soften down the Bible's plain speaking about Rahab's character.

In her story we have an anticipation of New Testament teaching.

The 'woman that was a sinner.'

Mary Magdalene.

'Then drew near all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him.'

She shows us that there is no hopeless guilt. None is so in regard to the effects of sin on a soul. There is no heart so indurated as that its capacity for being stirred by the divine message is killed.

There is none hopeless in regard to God.

His love embraces all, however bad. The bond which unites to Him is not blamelessness of life but simple trust.

The grossest vice is not so thorough a barrier as self-satisfied self-righteousness.

A thin slice of crystal will bar the entrance of air more effectually than many folds of stuff.

IV. Faith in its practical effects.

Rahab's story shows how living faith, like a living stream, will cut a channel for itself, and must needs flow out into the life.

Hence James is right in using her as an example of how 'we are justified by works and not by faith only,' and the author of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* is equally right in enrolling her in his great muster-roll of heroes and heroines of faith, and asserting that 'by faith' she 'perished not among them who believed not.' The one writer fastens on a later stage in her experience than does the other. James points to the rich fruit, the Epistle to the Hebrews goes deeper and lays bare the root from which the life rose to the clusters.

The faith that saves is not a barren intellectual process, nor an idle trust in Christ's salvation, but a practical power. If genuine it *will* mould and impel the life.

So Rahab's faith led her, as ours, if real, will lead us, to break with old habits and associations contrary to itself. She ceased to be 'Rahab the harlot,' she forsook 'her own people and her father's house.' But her conquest of her old self was gradual. A lie was a strange kind of first-fruits of faith. Its true fruit takes time to flower and swell and come to ripeness and sweetness.

So we should not expect old heads on young shoulders, nor wonder if people, lifted from the dunghills of the world, have some stench and rags of their old vices hanging about them still. That thought should moderate our expectations of the characters of converts from heathenism, or from the degraded classes at home. And it should be present to ourselves, when we find in ourselves sad recurrences of faults and sins that we know should have been cast out, and that we hoped had been so.

This thought enhances our wondering gratitude for the divine long-suffering which bears with our slow progress. Our great Teacher never loses patience with His dull scholars.

V. Faith as the means of deliverance and safety.

From external evils it delivers us or not, as God may will. James was no less dear, and no less faithful, than John, though he was early ‘slain with the sword,’ and his brother died in extreme old age in Ephesus. Paul looked forward to being ‘delivered from every evil work,’ though he knew that the time of his being ‘offered’ was at hand, because the deliverance that he looked for was his being ‘saved *into* His heavenly kingdom.’

That true deliverance is infallibly ours, if by faith we have made the Deliverer ours.

There is a more terrible fall of a worse city than Jericho, in that day when ‘the city of the terrible ones shall be laid low,’ and *our* Joshua brings it ‘to the ground, even to the dust.’ ‘In that same day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah: we have a strong city, salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks,’ and into that eternal home He will certainly lead all who are joined to Him, and separated from their foul old selves, and from ‘the city of destruction,’ by faith in Him.

10)Joshua 7:1-12

Joshua

ACHAN’S SIN, ISRAEL’S DEFEAT

Jos. 7:1 - Jos. 7:12.

This passage naturally parts itself into-**1**. The hidden sin [Jos. 7:1]; **2**. The repulse by which it is punished [Jos. 7:2 - Jos. 7:5]; **3.** The prayer of remonstrance [Jos. 7:6 - Jos. 7:9]; and **4.** The answer revealing the cause [Jos. 7:10 - Jos. 7:12]. We may briefly note the salient points in these four divisions, and then consider the general lessons of the whole.

I. Observe, then, that the sin is laid at the doors of the whole nation, while yet it was the secret act of one man. That Is a strange 'for' in verse 1-the people did it; 'for' Achan did it. Observe, too, with what bitter particularity his descent is counted back through three generations, as if to diffuse the shame and guilt over a wide area, and to blacken the ancestors of the culprit. Note also the description of the sin. Its details are not given, but its inmost nature is. The specification of the 'Babylonish garment,' the 'shekels of silver,' and the 'wedge of gold,' is reserved for the sinner's own confession; but the blackness of the deed is set forth in its principle in Jos. 7:1. It was a 'breach of trust,' for so the phrase 'committed a trespass' might be rendered. The expression is frequent in the Pentateuch to describe Israel's treacherous departure from God, and has this full meaning here. The sphere in which Achan's treason was evidenced was 'in the devoted thing.' The spoil of Jericho was set aside for Jehovah, and to appropriate any part of it was sacrilege. His sin, then, was double, being at once covetousness and robbing God. Achan, at the beginning of Israel's warfare for Canaan, and Ananias, at the beginning of the Church's conquest of the world, are brothers alike in guilt and in doom. Note the wide sweep of 'the anger of the Lord,' involving in its range not only the one transgressor, but the whole people.

II. All unconscious of the sin, and flushed with victory, Joshua let no grass grow under his feet, but was prepared to push his advantage to the utmost with soldierly promptitude. The commander's faith and courage were contagious, and the spies came back from their perilous reconnaissance of Ai with the advice that a small detachment was enough for its reduction. They had not spied the mound in the middle of Achan's tent, or their note would have been changed. Three thousand, or three hundred, would have been enough, if God had been with them. The whole army would not have been enough since He was not. The site of Ai seems to have been satisfactorily identified on a small plateau among the intricate network of wild wadys and bare hills that rise behind Jericho. The valley to the north, the place where the ambush lay at the successful assault, and a great mound, still bearing the name 'Et Tel' [the heap], are all there. The attacking force does not seem to have been commanded by Joshua. The ark stayed at Gilgal, The contempt for the resistance likely to be met makes the panic which ensued the more remarkable. What turned the hearts of the confident assailants to water? There was no serious fighting, or the slaughter would have been more than thirty-six. 'There went up . . . about three thousand and they'-did what? fought and conquered? Alas, no, but 'they fled before the men of Ai,' rushing in wild terror down the steep pass which they had so confidently breasted in the morning, till the pursuers caught them up at some 'quarries,' where, perhaps, the ground was difficult, and there slew the few who fell, while the remainder got away by swiftness of foot, and brought back their terror and their shame to the camp. As the disordered fugitives poured in, they infected the whole with their panic. Such unwieldy undisciplined hosts are peculiarly liable to such contagious terror, and we find many instances in Scripture and elsewhere of the utter disorganisation which ensues. The whole conquest hung in the balance. A little more and the army would be a mob; and the mob would break into twos and threes, which would get short shrift from the Amorites.

III. Mark, then, Joshua's action in the crisis. He does not try to encourage the people, but turns from them to God. The spectacle of the leader and the elders prone before the ark, with rent garments and dust-bestrewn hair, in sign of mourning, would not be likely to hearten the alarmed people; but the defeat had clearly shown that something had disturbed the relation to God, and the first necessity was to know what it was. Joshua's prayer is perplexed, and not free from a wistful, backward look, nor from regard to his own reputation; but the soul of it is an earnest desire to know the 'wherefore' of this disaster. It traces the defeat to God, and means really, 'Show me wherefore Thou contendest with me.' No doubt it runs perilously near to repeating the old complaints at Kadesh and elsewhere, which are almost verbally reproduced in its first words. But the same things said by different people are not the same; and Joshua's question is the voice of a faith struggling to find footing, and his backward look is not because he doubts God's power to help, or hankers after Egypt, but because he sees that, for some unknown reason, they have lost the divine protection. His reference to himself betrays the crushing weight of responsibility which he felt, and comes not from carefulness for his own good fame so much as from his dread of being unable to vindicate himself, if the people should turn on him as the author of their misfortunes. His fear of the news of the check at Ai emboldening not only the neighbouring Amorites [highlanders] of the western Palestine, but the remoter Canaanites [lowlanders] of the coast, to make a combined attack, and sweep Israel out of existence, was a perfectly reasonable forecast of what would follow. The naive simplicity of the appeal to God, ‘What wilt Thou do for Thy great name?’ becomes the soldier, whose words went the shortest way to their aim, as his spear did. We cannot fancy this prayer coming from Moses; but, for all that, it has the ring of faith in it, and beneath its blunt, simple words throbs a true heart.

IV. The answer sounds strange at first. God almost rebukes him for praying. He gives Joshua back his own ‘wherefore’ in the question that sounds so harsh, ‘Wherefore art thou thus fallen upon thy face?’ but the harshness is only apparent, and serves to point the lesson that follows, that the cause of the disaster is with Israel, not with God, and that therefore the remedy is not in prayer, but in active steps to cast out ‘the unclean thing.’ The prayer had asked two things,-the disclosure of the cause of God’s having left them, and His return. The answer lays bare the cause, and therein shows the conditions of His return. Note the indignant accumulation of verbs in Jos. 7:11, describing the sin in all its aspects. The first three of the six point out its heinousness in reference to God, as sin, as a breach of covenant, and as an appropriation of what was specially His. The second three describe it in terms of ordinary morality, as theft, lying, and concealment; so many black sides has one sin when God’s eye scrutinises it. Note, too, the attribution of the sin to the whole people, the emphatic reduplication of the shameful picture of their defeat, the singular transference to them of the properties of ‘the devoted thing’ which Achan has taken, and the plain, stringent conditions of God’s return. Joshua’s prayer is answered. He knows now why little Ai has beaten them back. He asked, ‘What shall I say?’ He has got something of grave import to say. So far this passage carries us, leaving the pitiful last hour of the wretched troubler of Israel untouched. What lessons are taught here?

First, God's soldiers must be pure. The conditions of God's help are the same to-day as when that panic-stricken crowd ignominiously fled down the rocky pass, foiled before an insignificant fortress, because sin clave to them, and God was gone from them. The age of miracles may have ceased, but the law of the divine intervention which governed the miracles has not ceased. It is true to-day, and will always be true, that the victories of the Church are won by its holiness far more than by any gifts or powers of mind, culture, wealth, eloquence, or the like. Its conquests are the conquests of an indwelling God, and He cannot share His temples with idols. When God is with us, Jericho is not too strong to be captured; when He is driven from us by our own sin, Ai is not too weak to defeat us. A shattered wall keeps us out, if we fight in our own strength. Fortifications that reach to heaven fall flat before us when God is at our side. If Christian effort seems ever fruitless, the first thing to do is to look for the 'Babylonish garment' and the glittering shekels hidden in our tents. Nine times out of ten we shall find the cause in our own spiritual deficiencies. Our success depends on God's presence, and God's presence depends on our keeping His dwelling-place holy. When the Church is 'fair as the moon,' reflecting in silvery whiteness the ardours of the sun which gives her all her light, and without such spots as dim the moon's brightness, she will be 'terrible as an army with banners.' This page of Old Testament history has a living application to the many efforts and few victories of the churches of to-day, which seem scarce able to hold their own amid the natural increase of population in so-called Christian lands, and are so often apparently repulsed when they go up to attack the outlying heathenism.

'His strength was as the strength of ten,

Because his heart was pure,'

is true of the Christian soldier.

Again, we learn the power of one man to infect a whole community and to inflict disaster on it. One sick sheep taints a flock. The effects of the individual's sin are not confined to the doer. We have got a fine new modern word to express this solemn law, and we talk now of 'solidarity,' which sounds very learned and 'advanced.' But it means just what we see in this story; Achan was the sinner, all Israel suffered. We are knit together by a mystical but real bond, so that ‘no man,’ be he good or bad, ‘liveth to himself,’ and no man’s sin terminates in himself. We see the working of that unity in families, communities, churches, nations. Men are not merely aggregated together like a pile of cannon balls, but are knit together like the myriad lives in a coral rock. Put a drop of poison anywhere, and it runs by a thousand branching veins through the mass, and tints and taints it all. No man can tell how far the blight of his secret sins may reach, nor how wide the blessing of his modest goodness may extend. We should seek to cultivate the sense of being members of a great whole, and to ponder our individual responsibility for the moral and religious health of the church, the city, the nation. We are not without danger from an exaggerated individualism, and we need to realise more constantly and strongly that we are but threads in a great network, endowed with mysterious vitality and power of transmitting electric impulses, both of good and evil.

Again, we have one more illustration in this story of the well-worn lesson,-never too threadbare to be repeated, until it is habitually realised,-that God’s eye sees the hidden sins. Nobody saw Achan carry the spoil to his tent, or dig the hole to hide it. His friends walked across the floor without suspicion of what was beneath. No doubt, he held his place in his tribe as an honourable man, and his conscience traced no connection between that recently disturbed patch on the floor and the helter-skelter flight from Ai; but when the lot began to be cast, he would have his own thought, and when the tribe of Judah was taken, some creeping fear would begin to coil round his heart, which tightened its folds, and hissed more loudly, as each step in the lot brought discovery nearer home; and when, at last, his own name fell from the vase, how terribly the thought would glare in on him,-’And God knew it all the while, and I fancied I had covered it all up so safely.’ It is an awful thing to hear the bloodhounds following up the scent which leads them straight to our lurking-place. God’s judgments may be long in being put on our tracks, but, once loose, they are sure of scent, and cannot be baffled. It is an old, old thought, ‘Thou God seest me’; but kept well in mind, it would save from many a sin, and make sunshine in many a shady place.

Again, we have in Achan a lesson which the professing Christians of great commercial nations, like England, sorely need. I have already pointed out the singular parallel between him and Ananias and Sapphira. Covetousness was the sin of all three. It is the sin of the Church to-day. The whole atmosphere in which some of us live is charged with the subtle poison of it. Men are estimated by their wealth. The great aim of life is to get money, or to keep it, or to gain influence and notoriety by spending it. Did anybody ever hear of church discipline being exercised on men who committed Achan's sin? *He* was stoned to death, but we set *our* Achans in high places in the Church. Perhaps if we went and fell on our faces before the ark when we are beaten, we should be directed to some tent where a very 'influential member' of Israel lived, and should find that to put an end to his ecclesiastical life had a wonderful effect in bringing back courage to the army, and leading to more unmingled dependence on God. Covetousness was stoned to death in Israel, and struck with sudden destruction in the Apostolic Church. It has been reserved for the modern Church to tolerate and almost to canonise it; and yet we wonder how it comes that we are so often foiled before some little Ai, and so seldom see any walls falling by our assault. Let us listen to that stern sentence, 'I will not be with you any more, except ye destroy the devoted thing from among you.'

11)Joshua 10:12

Joshua

THE SUN STAYED

Jos. 10:12.

'The last time,' what a sad sound that has! In all minds there is a shrinking from the last time of doing even some common act. The walk down a street that we have passed every day for twenty years, and never cared in the least about, and the very doorsteps and the children in the streets, have an interest for us, as pensively we leave the commonplace familiar scene.

On this last Sunday of another year, there comes a tone of sober meditation over us, as we think that it *is* the last. I would fain let the hour preach. I have little to say but to give voice to its lessons.

My text is only taken as a starting-point, and I shall say nothing about Joshua and his prayer. I do not discuss whether this was a miracle or not. It seems, at any rate, to be taken by the writer of the story as one. What a picture he draws of the fugitives rushing down the rocky pass, blind in their fear, behind them the flushed and eager conqueror, the burst of the sudden tempest and far in the west the crescent moon, the leader on the hilltop with his prayer for but one hour or two more of daylight to finish the wild work so well begun! And, says the story, his wish was granted, and no day has been ‘like it before or since, in which the Lord hearkened unto the voice of a man.’ Once, and only once, did time seem to stand still; from the beginning till now it has been going steadily on, and even then it only seemed to stand. That day seemed longer, but life was passing all the same.

And so the first thought forced upon us here by our narrative and by the season is the old one, so commonplace and yet so solemn.

I. Life inexorably slides away from us.

Once, and only once, it seemed to pause. How often since has Joshua’s prayer been prayed again! By the fearful,-the wretch to be hanged at eight o’clock to-morrow morning, the man whom the next train will part from all he loves. By the hopeful,-the child wearying for the holidays, the bridegroom,

‘Gallop apace, ye fiery-footed steeds!’

By the suffering,-

‘Would God it were evening!’

By the martyr amid the flames,

‘Come quickly, Lord Jesus!’

But all in vain. We cannot expand the moments to hours, nor compress the hours to moments. Leaden or winged, the hours are hours. The cold-blooded pendulum ticks on, equable and unaltered, and after sixty minutes, no sooner and no later, the hour strikes. ‘There is a time for every purpose.’

How solemn is the thought of that constant process! It goes on for ever, like the sea fog creeping up from the wide ocean and burying life and sunshine in its fatal folds, or like the ever-flowing river, or like the fall plunging over the edge of the cliff, or like the motions of the midnight sky. Each moment in its turn passes into the colourless stony past, and the shadow creeps up the hillside.

And how unnoticed it is! We only know motion by the jolts. The revolution of the earth and its rush along its orbit are unfelt by us. We are constantly startled to feel how long ago such and such a thing took place. The mother sees her little girl at her knee, and in a few days, as it seems, finds her a woman. How immense is our life in the prospect, how awfully it collapses in the retrospect! Only by seeing constellation after constellation set, do we know that the heavens are in motion. We have need of an effort of serious reflection to realise that it is of *us* and of *our* lives that all these old commonplaces are true.

That constant, unnoticed progress has an end. Our life is a definite period, having a bounded past behind it, a present, and a bounded future before it. We have a sandglass and it runs out. We are like men sliding down a rope or hauling a boat towards a fixed point. The sea is washing away our sandy island, and is creeping nearer and nearer to where we stand, and will wash over us soon. No cries, nor prayers, nor wishes will avail. It is vain for *us* to say, 'Sun! stand thou still!'

II. Therefore our chief care should be to finish our work in our day.

Joshua had his day lengthened; we can come to the same result by crowding ours with service. What is the purpose of life? Is it a shop? or a garden? a school? No. Our 'chief end' is to become like God and a little to help forward His cause. All is intended to develop character; all life is disciplinary.

God's purpose should be our desire. That desire should mould all our thoughts and acts. There should be no mere sentimental regrets for the past, but the spirit of consecration should affect our thoughts about it. There should be penitence, thankfulness, not vain mourning over what is gone.

There should be no waste or selfish use of the present. What is it given us for but to use for God?

Strenuous work is the true way to lengthen each day. Time is infinitely elastic. The noblest work is to do ‘the works of Him that sent me.’ There should be no care for the future. It is in His hand. There will be room in it for doing all His will.

‘Lord, it belongs not to my care,

Whether I die or live.’

III. If so, the passing day will have results that never pass.

Joshua’s day was long enough for his work, and that work was a victory which told on future generations. So life, short as it is, will be long enough for all that we have to do and learn and be.

Christ’s servant is immortal till his work is done.

God gives every man time enough for his salvation.

What may we bring out of life? Character, Christ-likeness, thankful memories, union with God, capacity for heaven. The transient leaves the abiding. The flood foams itself away, but deposits rich soil on the plain.

IV. Thus the passing away of what must pass may become a joy.

Why should we be sad? There are reasons enough, as many sad, lonely hearts among us know too well To some men dark thoughts of death and judgment make the crumbling away of life too gloomy a fact to be contemplated, but it may and should be calm joy to us that the weary world ends and a blessed life begins. We may count the moments and see them pass, as a bride watches the hours rolling on to her marriage morning; not, indeed, without tremor and sadness at leaving her old home, but yet with meek hope and gentle joy.

It is possible for men to see that life is but ‘as a shadow that declineth,’ and yet to be glad. By faith in Christ, united to ‘Him Who is for ever and ever,’ our souls shall ‘triumph over death and thee, O time.’

We need not cry, ‘Sun! stand still!’ but rather, ‘Come quickly, Lord Jesus!’

Then Time shall be ‘the lackey to eternity,’ and Death be the porter of heaven’s gate, and we shall pass from the land of setting suns and waning moons and change and sorrow, to that land where ‘thy sun shall no more go down,’ and ‘there shall be no more time.’

12)Joshua 13:1-8

Joshua

UNWON BUT CLAIMED

Jos. 13:1 - Jos. 13:8.

Joshua was now a very old man and had occupied seven years in the conquest. His work was over, and now he had only to take steps to secure the completion by others of the triumph which he would never see. This incident has many applications to the work of the Church in the world, but not less important ones to individual progress, and we consider these mainly now.

I. The clear recognition of present imperfection.

That is essential in all regions, ‘Not as though’; the higher up, the more clearly we see the summit. The ideal grows loftier, as partially realised. The mountain seems comparatively low and easy till we begin to climb. We should be continually driven by a sense of our incompleteness, and drawn by the fair vision of unattained possibilities. In all regions, to be satisfied with the attained is to cease to grow.

This is eminently so in the Christian life, with its goal of absolute completeness.

How blessed this dissatisfaction is! It keeps life fresh: it is the secret of perpetual youth.

Joshua’s work was incomplete, as every man’s must be. We each have our limitations, the defects of our qualities, the barriers of our environment, the brevity of our day of toil, and we have to be content to carry the fiery cross a little way and then to give it up to other hands. There is only One who could say,’ It is done.’ Let us see that we do our own fragment.

II. The confident reckoning on complete possession.

Joshua’s conquest was very partial. He subdued part of the central mountain nucleus, but the low-lying stretch of country on the coast, Philistia and the maritime plain up to Tyre and Sidon and other outlying districts, remained unsubdued. Yet the whole land was now to be allotted out to the tribes. That allotment must have strengthened faith in their ultimate possession, and encouraged effort to make the ideal a reality, and to appropriate as their own in fact what was already theirs in God’s purpose. So a great part of Christian duty, and a great secret of Christian progress, is to familiarise ourselves with the hope of complete victory. We should acquire the habit of contemplating as certainly meant by God to be ours, complete conformity to Christ’s character, complete appropriation of Christ’s gifts. God bade Jeremiah buy a ‘field that was in Anathoth’ at the time an invading army held the land. A Roman paid down money for the ground on which the besiegers of Rome were encamped. It does not become Christians to be less confident of victory. But we have to take heed that our confidence is grounded on the right foundation. God’s commandment to Joshua to allot the land, even while the formidable foes enumerated in the context held it firmly, was based on the assurance [Jos. 13:6]: ‘Them will I drive out before the children of Israel.’ Confidence based on self is presumption, and will end in defeat; confidence based on God will brace to noble effort, which is all the more vigorous and will surely lead to victory, because it distrusts self.

III. The vigorous effort animated by both the preceding.

How the habit of thinking the unconquered land theirs would encourage Israel. Efforts without hope are feeble; hope without effort is fallacious.

Israel’s history is significant. The land was never actually all conquered. God’s promises are all conditional, and if we do not work, or if we work in any other spirit than in faith, we shall not win our allotted part in the ‘inheritance of the saints in light.’ It is possible to lose ‘thy crow.’ ‘Work out your own salvation.’ ‘Trust in the Lord and do good, so shalt thou dwell in the land.’

13)Joshua 14:6

Joshua

CALEB-A GREEN OLD AGE

Jos. 14:6.

Five and forty years had passed since the Lord had ‘said this thing.’ It was the promise to these two, now old men, of the prolongation of their lives, and to Caleb of his inheritance in the land. Seven years of fighting have been got through, and the preparations are being made for the division of the land by lot. But, before that is done, it is fitting that Caleb, whose portion had been specially secured to him by that old promise, should have the promise specially recognised and endorsed by the action of the leader, and independent of the operation of the lot. So he appears before Joshua, accompanied by the head men of his tribe, whose presence expresses their official consent to the exceptional treatment of their tribesman, and urges his request in a little speech, full of pathos and beauty and unconscious portraiture of the speaker. I take it as a picture of an ideal old age, showing in an actual instance how happy, vigorous, full of buoyant energy and undiminished appetite for enterprise a devout old age may be. And my purpose now is not merely to comment on the few words of our text, but upon the whole of what falls from the lips of Caleb here.

I. I see then here, first, a life all built upon God’s promise.

Five times in the course of his short plea with Joshua does he use the expression ‘the Lord spake.’ On the first occasion of the five he unites Joshua with himself as a recipient of the promise, ‘Thou knowest the thing that the Lord said concerning me and thee.’ But in the other four he takes it all to himself; not because it concerned him only, but because his confidence, laying hold of the promise, forgot his brother in the earnestness of his personal appropriation of it. And so, whatsoever general words God speaks to the world, a true believer will make them his very own; and when Christ says, ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish,’ faith translates it into ‘He loved me, and gave Himself for me.’ This is the first characteristic of a life built upon the promise of God, that it lays its hand upon that promise and claims it all for its very own.

Then notice, still further, how for all these forty-five years Caleb had ‘hid the word in his heart,’ had lived upon it and thought about it and believed it, and recognised the partial fulfilment of it, and cherished the secret fire unknown to any besides. And now at last, after so long an interval, he comes forward and stretches out a hand, unweakened by the long delay, to claim the perfect fulfilment at the end of his days. So ‘the vision may tarry,’ but a life based upon God’s promise has another estimate of swiftness and slowness than is current amongst men who have only the years of earthly life to reckon by; and that which to sense seems a long, weary delay, to faith seems but as ‘a watch in the night’. The world, which only measures time by its own revolutions, has to lament over what seem to the sufferers long years of pains and tears, but in the calendar of faith ‘weeping endures for a night, joy cometh in the morning.’ The weary days dwindle into a point when they are looked at with an eye that has been accustomed to gaze on the solemn eternities of a promising and a faithful God. To it, as to Him, ‘a thousand years are as one day’; and ‘one day,’ in the possibilities of divine favour and spiritual growth which it may enfold, ‘as a thousand years.’ To the men who measure time as God measures it, His help, howsoever long it may tarry, ever comes ‘right early.’

Further, note how this life, built upon faith in the divine promise, was nourished and nurtured by instalments of fulfilment all along the road. Two promises were given to Caleb-one, that his life should be prolonged, and the other, that he should possess the territory into which he had so bravely ventured. The daily fulfilment of the one fed the fire of his faith in the ultimate accomplishment of the other, and he gratefully recounts it now, as part of his plea with Joshua-’Now, behold, the Lord hath kept me alive as He spake, these forty and five years, even since the Lord spake this word unto Moses. And now, lo! I am this day fourscore and five years old.’

Whosoever builds his life on the promise of God has in the present the guarantee of the better future. As we are journeying onwards to that great fountain-head of all sweetness and felicity, there are ever trickling brooks from it by the way, at which we may refresh our thirsty lips and invigorate our fainting strength. The present instalment carries with it the pledge of the full discharge of the obligation, and he whose heart and hope is fixed with a forward look on the divine inheritance, may, as he looks backward over all the years, see clearly in them one unbroken mass of preserving providences, and thankfully say, ‘The Lord hath kept me alive, as He spake.’

And, still further, the life that is built upon faith like this man’s, is a life of buoyant hopefulness till the very end. The hopes of age are few and tremulous. When the feast is nearly over, and the appetite is dulled, there is little more to be done, but to push back our chairs and go away. But God keeps ‘the good wine’ until the last. And when all earthly hopes are beginning to wear thin and to burn dim, then the great hope of ‘the mountain of the inheritance’ will rise brighter and clearer upon our horizon. It is something to have a hope so far in front of us that we never get up to it, to find it either less than our expectations or more than our desires; and this is not the least of the blessednesses of the living ‘hope that maketh not ashamed,’ that it lies before us till the very end, and beckons and draws us across the gulf of darkness. ‘The Lord hath kept me alive, as He said; now give me this mountain whereof the Lord spake.’

II. Further, I see here a life that bears to be looked back at.

Caleb becomes almost garrulous in telling over the old story of that never-to-be-forgotten day, when he and Joshua stood alone and tried to put some heart into the cowardly mob before them. There is no mock modesty about the man. He says that, amidst many temptations to be untrue, he gave his report with sincerity and veracity, ‘speaking as it was in mine heart,’ and then he quotes twice, with a permissible satisfaction, the eulogium that had come upon him from the divine lips, ‘I wholly followed the Lord my God.’ The private soldier’s cheek may well flush and his eye glitter as he repeats over again his general’s praise. And for Caleb, half a century has not dimmed the impression that was made on his heart when he received that praise, through the lips of Moses, from God.

Now, of course, such a tone of speaking about one’s past savours of an earlier stage in revelation than that in which we live, and, if this were to be taken as a man’s total account of his whole life, we could not free it from the charge of unpleasing self-complacency and self-righteousness. But for all that, it is not the same thing in the retrospect whether you and I have to look back upon years that have been given to self, and the world, and passion, and pride, and covetousness, and frivolities and trifles of all sorts, or upon years that in the main, and regard being had to their deepest desires and governing direction, have been given to God and to His service. Many a man looking back upon his life-I wonder if there are any such men listening to me now-can only see such a sight as Abraham did on that morning when he looked down on the plain of Sodom, and ‘Lo! the smoke of the land went up as the smoke of a furnace.’ Dear friends I the only thing that makes life in the retrospect tolerable is that it shall have been given to God, and that we can say, ‘I wholly followed the Lord my God.’

III. Again, I see here a life which has discovered the secret of perpetual youth.

‘I,’ says the old man-’am as strong this day as I was in the day when Moses sent me. As my strength was then, even so is my strength now, for war, both to go out and to come in.’ For fighting, and for all the intercourse and manifold activities of life, his sinews are as braced, his eyes as clear, his spirit and limbs as alert as they were in those old days. No doubt you will say that was due to miraculous intervention. No doubt it was; but is it not true that, in a very real sense, a man may keep himself young all his life, if he will go the right way to work? And the secret of perpetual youthfulness lies here, in giving our hearts to God and in living for Him. Christianity, with its self-restraint and its exhortations to all, and especially to the young, to be chaste and temperate and to subdue the animal passions, has a direct tendency to conserve physical vigour; and Christianity, by the inspiration that it imparts, the stimulus that it gives, and the hopes that it permits us to cherish, has a direct tendency to keep alive in old age all the best of the characteristics of youth. Its buoyancy, its undimmed interest, its cheeriness, its freedom from anxiety and care-all these things are directly ministered to, and preserved by, a life of simple faith that casts itself upon God, and dwells securely, in joy and in restfulness, and not without a great light of hope, even when the shadows of evening are falling.

One of the greatest and most blessed of the characteristics of youth is the consciousness that the most of life lies before us; and to a Christian man, in any stage of his earthly life, that consciousness is possible. When he stands on the verge of the last sinking sandbank of time, and the water is up to his ankles, he may well feel that the best and the most of life is yet to be.

‘The last of life, for which the first was made:

Our times are in His hand

Who saith, “A whole I planned.

Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid.”‘

‘They shall still bring forth fruit in old age, they shall be full of sap and green.’ A gnarled old tree may be green in all its branches, and blossom and fruit may hang together there. The ideal of life is, that into each stage we shall carry the best of the preceding, harmonised with the best of the new, and that is possible to a Christian soul. The fountain of perpetual youth, of which the ancients fabled, is no fable, but a fact; and it rises, where the prophet in his vision saw the stream coming out, from beneath the threshold of the Temple door.

IV. So, lastly, I see here a beautiful example of a life which to the last is ready for danger and enterprise.

Caleb’s words as to his undiminished strength were not meant for a boast. They express thankfulness and praise, and they are put as the ground of the request that he has to make. He gives a chivalrous reason for his petition when he says,’ Now, therefore, give me this mountain, *for* the Anakims [the giants] are there; and the cities great and fenced.’

Caleb’s readiness for one more fight was fed by his reliance on God’s help in it. When he says, ‘It may be the Lord will be with me,’ the *perhaps* is that of humility, not of doubt. The old warrior’s eye flashes, and his voice sounds strong and full, as he ends his words with ‘I *shall* drive them out, as *the Lord spake*.’ That has the true ring. What were the three Anak chiefs, with their barbarous names, Sheshai, and Ahiman, and Talmai, and their giant stature, to the onset of a warrior faith like that? Of course, ‘Caleb drove out thence the three sons of Anak,’ and Hebron became his inheritance. Nothing can stand against us, if we seek for our portion, not where advantages are greatest, but where difficulties and dangers are most rife, and cast ourselves into the conflict, sure that God is with us, though humbly wondering that we should be worthy of His all-conquering presence, and sure, therefore, that victory marches by our sides.

Old age is generally much more disposed to talk about its past victories than to fight new ones; to rest upon its arms, or upon its laurels, than to undertake fresh conflicts. Now and then we see a man, statesman or other, who, bearing the burden of threescore years and ten lightly, is still as alert of spirit, as eager for work, as bold for enterprise, as he was years before. And in nine cases out of ten such a man is a Christian; and his brilliant energy of service is due, not only, nor so much, to natural vigour of constitution as to religion, which has preserved his vigour because it has preserved his purity, and been to him a stimulus and an inspiration.

Danger is an attraction to the generous mind. It is the coward and the selfish man who are always looking for an easy place, where somebody else will do the work. This man felt that this miraculously prolonged life of his bound him to special service, and the fact that up in Hebron there were a fenced city and tall giants behind the battlements, was an additional reason for picking out that bit of the field as the place where he ought to be. Thank God, that spirit is not dead yet! It has lived all through the Christian Church, and flamed up in times of martyrdom. On missionary fields to-day, if one man falls two are ready to step into his place. It is the true spirit of the Christian soldier. ‘A great door and effectual is opened,’ says Paul, ‘and there are many adversaries.’ He knew the door was opened because the adversaries were many. And because there were so many of them, would he run away? Some of us would have said: ‘I must abandon that work, it bristles with difficulties; I cannot stop in that post, the bullets are whistling too fast.’ Nay! says Paul; ‘I abide till Pentecost’-a good long while- because the post is dangerous, and promises to be fruitful.

So, dear friends, if we would have lives on which we can look back, lives in which early freshness will last beyond the 'morning dew,' lives in which there shall come, day by day and moment by moment, abundant foretastes to stay our hunger until we sit at Christ's table in His kingdom, we must 'follow the Lord alway,' with no half-hearted surrender, nor partial devotion, but give ourselves to Him utterly, to be guided and sent where He will. And then, like Caleb, we shall be able to say, with a 'perhaps,' not of doubt, but of wonder, that it should be so, to us unworthy, 'It may be the Lord will be with me, arid I shall drive them out.' In all these things 'we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.'

14)Joshua 20:1-9

Joshua

THE CITIES OF REFUGE

Jos. 20:1 - Jos. 20:9.

Our Lord has taught us that parts of the Mosaic legislation were given because of the 'hardness' of the people's hearts. The moral and religious condition of the recipients of revelation determines and is taken into account in the form and contents of revelation. That is strikingly obvious in this institution of the 'cities of refuge.' They have no typical meaning, though they may illustrate Christian truth. But their true significance is that they are instances of revelation permitting, and, while permitting, checking, a custom for the abolition of which Israel was not ready.

I. Cities of refuge were needed, because the 'avenger of blood' was recognised as performing an imperative duty. 'Blood for blood' was the law for the then stage of civilisation. The weaker the central authority, the more need for supplementing it with the wild justice of personal avenging. Neither Israel nor surrounding nations were fit for the higher commandment of the Sermon on the Mount. 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,' corresponded to their stage of progress; and to have hurried them forward to 'I say unto you, Resist not evil,' would only have led to weakening the restraint on evil, and would have had no response in the hearers' consciences. It is a commonplace that legislation which is too far ahead of public opinion is useless, except to make hypocrites. And the divine law was shaped in accordance with that truth. Therefore the *goel*, or kinsman-avenger of blood, was not only permitted but enjoined by Moses.

But the evils inherent in his existence were great. Blood feuds were handed down through generations, involving an ever-increasing number of innocent people, and finally leading to more murders than they prevented. But the thing could not be abolished. Therefore it was checked by this institution. The lessons taught by it are the gracious forbearance of God with the imperfections attaching to each stage of His people's moral and religious progress; the uselessness of violent changes forced on people who are not ready for them; the presence of a temporary element in the Old Testament law and ethics.

No doubt many things in the present institutions of so-called Christian nations and in the churches are destined to drop away, as the principles of Christianity become more clearly discerned and more honestly applied to social and national life. But the good shepherd does not overdrive his flock, but, like Jacob, 'leads on softly, according to the pace of the cattle that is before' him. We must be content to bring the world gradually to the Christian ideal. To abolish or to impose institutions or customs by force is useless. Revolutions made by violence never last. To fell the upas-tree maybe very heroic, but what is the use of doing it, if the soil is full of seeds of others, and the climate and conditions favourable to their growth? Change the elevation of the land, and the `flora' will change itself. Institutions are the outcome of the whole mental and moral state of a nation, and when that changes, and not till then, do they change. The New Testament in its treatment of slavery and war shows us the Christian way of destroying evils; namely, by establishing the principles which will make them impossible. It is better to girdle the tree and leave it to die than to fell it.

II. Another striking lesson from the cities of refuge is the now well-worn truth that the same act, when done from different motives, is not the same. The kinsman-avenger took no heed of the motive of the slaying. His duty was to slay, whatever the slayer's intention had been. The asylum of the city of refuge was open for the unintentional homicide, and for him only, Deliberate murder had no escape thither. So the lesson was taught that motive is of supreme importance in determining the nature of an act. In God’s sight, a deed is done when it is determined on, and it is not done, though done, when it was not meant by the doer. ‘Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer,’ and he that killeth his brother unawares is none. We suppose ourselves to have learned that so thoroughly that it is trivial to repeat the lesson.

What, then, of our thoughts and desires which never come to light in acts? Do we recognise our criminality in regard to these as vividly as we should? Do we regulate the hidden man of the heart accordingly? A man may break all the commandments sitting in an easy-chair and doing nothing. Von Moltke fought the Austro-Prussian war in his cabinet in Berlin, bending over maps. The soldiers on the field were but pawns in the dreadful game. So our battles are waged, and we are beaten or conquerors, on the field of our inner desires and purposes. ‘Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.’

III. The elaborately careful specification of cases which gave the fugitive a right to shelter in the city is set forth at length in Num. 35:15 - Num. 35:24, and Deu. 19:4 - Deu. 19:13. The broad principle is there laid down that the cities were open for one who slew a man ‘unwittingly.’ But the plea of not intending to slay was held to be negatived, not only if intention could be otherwise shown but if the weapon used was such as would probably kill; such, for instance, as ‘an instrument of iron,’ or a stone, or a ‘weapon of wood, whereby a man may die.’ If we do what is likely to have a given result, we are responsible for that result, should it come about, even though we did not consciously seek to bring it. That is plain common sense. ‘I never thought the house would catch fire’ is no defence from the guilt of burning it down, if we fired a revolver into a powder barrel. Further, if the fatal blow was struck in ‘hatred,’ or if the slayer had lain in ambush to catch his victim, he was not allowed shelter. These careful definitions freed the cities from becoming nests of desperate criminals, as the ‘sanctuaries’ of the Middle Ages in Europe became. They were not harbours for the guilty, but asylums for the innocent.

IV. The procedure by which the fugitive secured protection is described at length in the passages cited, with which the briefer account here should be compared. It is not quite free from obscurity, but probably the process was as follows. Suppose the poor hunted man arrived panting at the limits of the city, perhaps with the avenger's sword within half a foot of his neck; he was safe for the time. But before he could enter the city, a preliminary inquiry was held 'at the gate' by the city elders. That could only be of a rough-and-ready kind; most frequently there would be no evidence available but the man's own word. It, however, secured *interim* protection. A fuller investigation followed, and, as would appear, was held in another place,-perhaps at the scene of the accident. 'The congregation' was the judge in this second examination, where the whole facts would be fully gone into, probably in the presence of the avenger. If the plea of non-intention was sustained, the fugitive was 'restored to his city of refuge,' and there remained safely till the death of the high-priest, when he was at liberty to return to his home, and to stay there without fear.

Attempts have been made to find a spiritual significance in this last provision of the law, and to make out a lame parallel between the death of the high-priest, which cancelled the crime of the fugitive, and the death of Christ, which takes away our sins. But-to say nothing of the fact that the fugitive was where he was just because he had done no crime-the parallel breaks down at other points. It is more probable that the death of one high-priest and the accession of another were regarded simply as closing one epoch and beginning another, just as a king's accession is often attended with an amnesty. It was natural to begin a new era with a clean sheet, as it were.

V. The selection of the cities brings out a difference between the Jewish right of asylum and the somewhat similar right in heathen and mediaeval times. The temples or churches were usually the sanctuaries in these. But not the Tabernacle or Temple, but the priestly cities, were chosen here. Their inhabitants represented God to Israel, and as such were the fit persons to cast a shield over the fugitives; while yet their cities were less sacred than the Temple, and in them the innocent man-slayer could live for long years. The sanctity of the Temple was preserved intact, the necessary provision for possibly protracted stay was made, evils attendant on the use of the place of worship as a refuge were avoided.

Another reason-namely, accessibility swiftly from all parts of the land-dictated the choice of the cities, and also their number and locality. There were three on each side of Jordan, though the population was scantier on the east than on the west side, for the extent of country was about the same. They stood, roughly speaking, opposite each other,-Kedesh and Golan in the north, Shechem and Ramoth central, Hebron and Bezer in the south. So, wherever a fugitive was, he had no long distance between himself and safety.

We too have a ‘strong city’ to which we may ‘continually resort.’ The Israelite had right to enter only if his act had been inadvertent, but we have the right to hide ourselves in Christ just because we have sinned wilfully. The hurried, eager flight of the man who heard the tread of the avenger behind him, and dreaded every moment to be struck to the heart by his sword, may well set forth what should be the earnestness of our flight to ‘lay hold on the hope set before us in the gospel.’ His safety, as soon as he was within the gate, and could turn round and look calmly at the pursuer shaking his useless spear and grinding his teeth in disappointment, is but a feeble shadow of the security of those who rest in Christ’s love, and are sheltered by His work for sinners. ‘I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall pluck them out of My hand.’

15)Joshua 21:43-45

Joshua

THE END OF THE WAR

Jos. 21:43 - Jos. 21:45; Jos. 22:1 - Jos. 22:9.

‘The old order changeth, giving place to new.’ In this passage we have the breaking up of the congregation and the disbanding of the victorious army. The seven years of fighting had come to an end. The swords were to be ‘beaten into plowshares,’ and the comrades who had marched shoulder to shoulder, and shared the fierce excitement of many a bloody field, were to be scattered, each becoming a peaceful farmer or shepherd. A picturesque historian, of the modern ‘special correspondent’ sort, would have overlaid the narrative with sentiment and description; but how quietly the writer tells it, so that we have to bethink ourselves before we apprehend that we are reading the account of an epoch-making event! He fixes attention on two things,- the complete fulfilment of God’s promises [Jos. 21:43 - Jos. 21:45] and the dismissal to their homes of the contingent from the trans-Jordanic tribes, whose departure was the signal that the war was ended Jos. 22:1 - Jos. 22:8]. We may consider the lessons from these two separately.

I. The triumphant record of God’s faithfulness [Jos. 21:43 - Jos. 21:45]. These three verses are the trophy reared on the battlefield, like the lion of Marathon, which the Greeks set on its sacred soil. But the only name inscribed on this monument is Jehovah’s. Other memorials of victories have borne the pompous titles of commanders who arrogated the glory to themselves; but the Bible knows of only one conqueror, and that is God. ‘The help that is done on earth, He doeth it all Himself.’ The military genius and heroic constancy of Joshua, the eagerness for perilous honour that flamed, undimmed by age, in Caleb, the daring and strong arms of many a humble private in the ranks, have their due recognition and reward; but when the history that tells of these comes to sum up the whole, and to put the ‘philosophy’ of the conquest into a sentence, it has only one name to speak as cause of Israel’s victory.

That is the true point of view from which to look at the history of the world and of the church in the world. The difference between the ‘miraculous’ conquest of Canaan and the ‘ordinary’ facts of history is not that God did the one and men do the other; both are equally, though in different methods, His acts. In the field of human affairs, as in the realm of nature, God is immanent, though in the former His working is complicated by the mysterious power of man’s will to set itself in antagonism to His; while yet, in manner insoluble to us, His will is supreme. The very powers which are arrayed against Him are His gift, and the issues which they finally subserve are His appointment. It does not need that we should be able to pierce to the bottom of the bottomless in order to attain and hold fast by the great conviction that ‘there is no power but of God,’ and that ‘from Him are all things, and to Him are all things.’

Especially does this trophy on the battlefield teach a needful lesson to us in the Christian warfare. We are ever apt to think too much of our visible weapons and leaders, and to forget our unseen and ever-present Commander, from whom comes all our power. We 'burn incense to our own net, and sacrifice to our own drag,' and, like the heathen conqueror of whom Habakkuk speaks, make our swords our gods [Hab. 1:11, Hab. 1:16]. The Church has always been prone to hero-worship, and to the idolatry of its organisation, its methods, or its theology. Augustine did so and so; Luther smote the 'whited wall' [the Pope] a blow that made him reel; the Pilgrim Fathers carried a slip of the plant of religious liberty in a tiny pot across the Atlantic, and watered it with tears till it has grown a great tree; the Wesleys revived a formal Church,-let us sing hallelujahs to these great names! By all means; but do not let us forget whence they drew their power; and let us listen to Paul's question, 'Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but servants through whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?'

And let us carve, deep-cut and indelible, in solitary conspicuousness, on the trophy that we rear on each well-fought field, the name of no man save 'Jesus only.' We read that on a pyramid in Egypt the name and sounding titles of the king in whose reign it was erected were blazoned on the plaster facing, but beneath that transitory inscription the name of the architect was hewn, imperishable, in the granite, and stood out when the plaster dropped away. So, when all the short-lived records which ascribe the events of the Church's progress to her great men have perished, the one name of the true builder will shine out, and 'at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.' Let us not rely on our own skill, courage, talents, orthodoxy, or methods, nor try to 'build tabernacles' for the witnessing servants beside the central one for the supreme Lord, but ever seek to deepen our conviction that Christ, and Christ only, gives all their powers to all, and that to Him, and Him only, is all victory to be ascribed. That is an elementary and simple truth; but if we really lived in its power we should go into the battle with more confidence, and come out of it with less self-gratulation.

We may note, too, in these verses, the threefold repetition of one thought, that of God's punctual and perfect fulfilment of His word. He 'gave unto Israel all the land which He sware to give'; 'He gave them rest, . . .

according to all that He sware'; 'there failed not aught of any good thing which the Lord had spoken.' It is the joy of thankful hearts to compare the promise with the reality, to lay the one upon the other, as it were, and to declare how precisely their outlines correspond. The finished building is exactly according to the plans drawn long before. God gives us the power of checking His work, and we are unworthy to receive His gifts if we do not take delight in marking and proclaiming how completely He has fulfilled His contract. It is no small part of Christian duty, and a still greater part of Christian blessedness, to do this. Many a fulfilment passes unnoticed, and many a joy, which might be sacred and sweet as a token of love from His own hand, remains common and unhallowed, because we fail to see that it is a fulfilled promise. The eye that is trained to watch for God's being as good as His word will never have long to wait for proofs that He is so. 'Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even he shall understand the loving kindness of the Lord.' And to such a one faith will become easier, being sustained by experience; and a present thus manifestly studded with indications of God's faithfulness will merge into a future still fuller of these. For it does not need that we should wait for the end of the war to have many a token that His every word is true. The struggling soldier can say, 'No good thing has failed of all that the Lord has spoken.' We look, indeed, for completer fulfilment when the fighting is done; but there are 'brooks by the way' for the warriors in the thick of the fight, of which they drink, and, refreshed, 'lift up the head.' We need not postpone this glad acknowledgment till we can look back and down from the land of peace on the completed campaign, but may rear this trophy on many a field, whilst still we look for another conflict to-morrow.

II. The disbanding of the contingent from the tribes across Jordan [Jos. 22:1 - Jos. 22:8]. Forty thousand fighting men, of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half of Manasseh, had willingly helped in the conquest, leaving their own newly-won homes on the eastern side of Jordan, and for seven long years taking their share in the hardships and dangers of their brethren. It was no small tax which they had thus cheerfully paid for the sake of brotherly unity. Their aid had not only been valuable as strengthening Joshua's force, but still more so as a witness of the unbroken oneness of the nation, and of the sympathy which the tribes already settled bore to the others. Politically, it was wise to associate the whole people in the whole conquest; for nothing welds a nation together like the glories of common victories and the remembrance of common dangers survived. The separation of the trans-Jordanic tribes by the rapid river, and by their pastoral life, was a possible source of weakness, and would, no doubt, have led to more complete severance, if it had not been for the uniting power of the campaign. If the forty thousand had been quietly feeding sheep on the uplands while their brethren were fighting among the stony hills of Canaan, a great gulf would have opened between them. Even as it was, the eastern tribes drifted somewhat away from the western; but the disintegration would have been still more complete if no memories of the war, when all Israel stood side by side, had lived on among them. Their share in the conquest was not only a piece of policy,-it was the natural expression of the national brotherhood. Even I Joshua had not ordered their presence, it would have been impossible for them to stop in their peacefulness and let their brethren bear the brunt of battle.

The law for us is the same as for these warriors. In the family, the city, the nation, the Church, and the world, union with others binds us to help them in their conflicts, and that especially if we are blessed with secure possessions, while they have to struggle for theirs. We are tempted to selfish lives of indulgence in our quiet peace, and sometimes think it hard that we should be expected to buckle on our armour, and leave our leisurely repose, because our brethren ask the help of our arms. If we did as Reuben and Gad did, would there be so many rich men who never stir a finger to relieve poverty, so many Christians whose religion is much more selfish than beneficent? Would so many souls be left to toil without help, to struggle without allies, to weep without comforters, to wander in the dark without a guide? All God’s gifts in providence and in the Gospel are given that we may have somewhat wherewith to bless our less happy brethren. ‘The service of man’ is not the substitute for, but the expression of, Christianity. Are we not kept here, on this side Jordan, away for a time from our inheritance, for the very same reason that these men were separated from theirs,-that we may strike some strokes for God and our fellows in the great war? Dives, who lolls on his soft cushions, and has less pity for Lazarus than the dogs have, is Cain come to life again; and every Christian is either his brother’s keeper or his murderer. Would that the Church of to-day, with infinitely deeper and sacreder ties knitting it to suffering, struggling humanity, had a tithe of the willing relinquishment of legitimate possessions and patient participation in the long campaign for God which kept these rude soldiers faithful to their flag and forgetful of home and ease, till their general gave them their discharge!

Note the commander's parting charge. They were about to depart for a life of comparative separation from the mass of the nation. Their remoteness and their occupations drew them away from the current of the national life, and gave them a kind of quasi-independence. They would necessarily be less directly under Joshua's control than the other tribes were. He sends them away with one commandment, the Imperative stringency of which is expressed by the accumulation of expressions in Jos. 22:5. They are to give diligent heed to the law of Moses. Their obedience is to be based on love to God, who is their God no less than the God of the other tribes. It is to be comprehensive-they are 'to walk in all His ways'; it is to be resolute-they are 'to cleave to Him'; it is to be wholehearted and whole-souled service, that will be the true bond between the separated parts of the whole. Independence so limited will be harmless; and, however wide apart their paths may lie, Israel will be one. In like manner the bond that knits all divisions of God's people together, however different their modes of life and thought, however unlike their homes and their work, is the similarity of relation to God. They are one in a common faith, a common love, a common obedience. Wider waters than Jordan part them. Graver differences of tasks and outlooks than separated these two sections of Israel part them. But all are one who love and obey the one Lord. The closer we cleave to Him, the nearer we shall be to all His tribes.

We need only note in a word how these departing soldiers, leaving the battlefield with their commander's praise and benediction, laden with much wealth, the spoil of their enemies, and fording the stream to reach the peaceful homes, which had long stood ready for them, may be taken, by a permissible play of fancy, as symbols of the faithful servants and soldiers of the true Joshua, at the end of their long warfare passing to the 'kingdom prepared for them before the foundation of the world,' bearing in their hands the wealth which, by God's grace, they had conquered from out of things here. *They* are not sent away by their Commander, but summoned by Him to the great peace of His own presence; and while His lips give them the praise which is praise indeed, they inscribe on the perpetual memorial which they rear no name but His, who first wrought all their works in them, and now has ordained eternal peace for them.

16)Joshua 22:1-9

Joshua

THE END OF THE WAR

Jos. 21:43 - Jos. 21:45; Jos. 22:1 - Jos. 22:9.

‘The old order changeth, giving place to new.’ In this passage we have the breaking up of the congregation and the disbanding of the victorious army. The seven years of fighting had come to an end. The swords were to be ‘beaten into plowshares,’ and the comrades who had marched shoulder to shoulder, and shared the fierce excitement of many a bloody field, were to be scattered, each becoming a peaceful farmer or shepherd. A picturesque historian, of the modern ‘special correspondent’ sort, would have overlaid the narrative with sentiment and description; but how quietly the writer tells it, so that we have to bethink ourselves before we apprehend that we are reading the account of an epoch-making event! He fixes attention on two things,- the complete fulfilment of God’s promises [Jos. 21:43 - Jos. 21:45] and the dismissal to their homes of the contingent from the trans-Jordanic tribes, whose departure was the signal that the war was ended Jos. 22:1 - Jos. 22:8]. We may consider the lessons from these two separately.

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And let us carve, deep-cut and indelible, in solitary conspicuousness, on the trophy that we rear on each well-fought field, the name of no man save

‘Jesus only.’ We read that on a pyramid in Egypt the name and sounding titles of the king in whose reign it was erected were blazoned on the plaster facing, but beneath that transitory inscription the name of the architect was hewn, imperishable, in the granite, and stood out when the plaster dropped away. So, when all the short-lived records which ascribe the events of the Church’s progress to her great men have perished, the one name of the true builder will shine out, and ‘at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.’ Let us not rely on our own skill, courage, talents, orthodoxy, or methods, nor try to ‘build tabernacles’ for the witnessing servants beside the central one for the supreme Lord, but ever seek to deepen our conviction that Christ, and Christ only, gives all their powers to all, and that to Him, and Him only, is all victory to be ascribed. That is an elementary and simple truth; but if we really lived in its power we should go into the battle with more confidence, and come out of it with less self-gratulation.

We may note, too, in these verses, the threefold repetition of one thought, that of God’s punctual and perfect fulfilment of His word. He ‘gave unto Israel all the land which He sware to give’; ‘He gave them rest, . . . according to all that He sware’; ‘there failed not aught of any good thing which the Lord had spoken.’ It is the joy of thankful hearts to compare the promise with the reality, to lay the one upon the other, as it were, and to declare how precisely their outlines correspond. The finished building is exactly according to the plans drawn long before. God gives us the power of checking His work, and we are unworthy to receive His gifts if we do not take delight in marking and proclaiming how completely He has fulfilled His contract. It is no small part of Christian duty, and a still greater part of Christian blessedness, to do this. Many a fulfilment passes unnoticed, and many a joy, which might be sacred and sweet as a token of love from His own hand, remains common and unhallowed, because we fail to see that it is a fulfilled promise. The eye that is trained to watch for God’s being as good as His word will never have long to wait for proofs that He is so. ‘Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even he shall understand the loving kindness of the Lord.’ And to such a one faith will become easier, being sustained by experience; and a present thus manifestly studded with indications of God’s faithfulness will merge into a future still fuller of these. For it does not need that we should wait for the end of the war to have many a token that His every word is true. The struggling soldier can say, ‘No good thing has failed of all that the Lord has spoken.' We look, indeed, for completer fulfilment when the fighting is done; but there are 'brooks by the way' for the warriors in the thick of the fight, of which they drink, and, refreshed, 'lift up the head.' We need not postpone this glad acknowledgment till we can look back and down from the land of peace on the completed campaign, but may rear this trophy on many a field, whilst still we look for another conflict to-morrow.

II. The disbanding of the contingent from the tribes across Jordan [Jos. 22:1 - Jos. 22:8]. Forty thousand fighting men, of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half of Manasseh, had willingly helped in the conquest, leaving their own newly-won homes on the eastern side of Jordan, and for seven long years taking their share in the hardships and dangers of their brethren. It was no small tax which they had thus cheerfully paid for the sake of brotherly unity. Their aid had not only been valuable as strengthening Joshua's force, but still more so as a witness of the unbroken oneness of the nation, and of the sympathy which the tribes already settled bore to the others. Politically, it was wise to associate the whole people in the whole conquest; for nothing welds a nation together like the glories of common victories and the remembrance of common dangers survived. The separation of the trans-Jordanic tribes by the rapid river, and by their pastoral life, was a possible source of weakness, and would, no doubt, have led to more complete severance, if it had not been for the uniting power of the campaign. If the forty thousand had been quietly feeding sheep on the uplands while their brethren were fighting among the stony hills of Canaan, a great gulf would have opened between them. Even as it was, the eastern tribes drifted somewhat away from the western; but the disintegration would have been still more complete if no memories of the war, when all Israel stood side by side, had lived on among them. Their share in the conquest was not only a piece of policy,-it was the natural expression of the national brotherhood. Even I Joshua had not ordered their presence, it would have been impossible for them to stop in their peacefulness and let their brethren bear the brunt of battle.

The law for us is the same as for these warriors. In the family, the city, the nation, the Church, and the world, union with others binds us to help them in their conflicts, and that especially if we are blessed with secure possessions, while they have to struggle for theirs. We are tempted to selfish lives of indulgence in our quiet peace, and sometimes think it hard that we should be expected to buckle on our armour, and leave our leisurely repose, because our brethren ask the help of our arms. If we did as Reuben and Gad did, would there be so many rich men who never stir a finger to relieve poverty, so many Christians whose religion is much more selfish than beneficent? Would so many souls be left to toil without help, to struggle without allies, to weep without comforters, to wander in the dark without a guide? All God's gifts in providence and in the Gospel are given that we may have somewhat wherewith to bless our less happy brethren. 'The service of man' is not the substitute for, but the expression of, Christianity. Are we not kept here, on this side Jordan, away for a time from our inheritance, for the very same reason that these men were separated from theirs,-that we may strike some strokes for God and our fellows in the great war? Dives, who lolls on his soft cushions, and has less pity for Lazarus than the dogs have, is Cain come to life again; and every Christian is either his brother's keeper or his murderer. Would that the Church of to-day, with infinitely deeper and sacreder ties knitting it to suffering, struggling humanity, had a tithe of the willing relinquishment of legitimate possessions and patient participation in the long campaign for God which kept these rude soldiers faithful to their flag and forgetful of home and ease, till their general gave them their discharge!

Note the commander's parting charge. They were about to depart for a life of comparative separation from the mass of the nation. Their remoteness and their occupations drew them away from the current of the national life, and gave them a kind of quasi-independence. They would necessarily be less directly under Joshua's control than the other tribes were. He sends them away with one commandment, the Imperative stringency of which is expressed by the accumulation of expressions in Jos. 22:5. They are to give diligent heed to the law of Moses. Their obedience is to be based on love to God, who is their God no less than the God of the other tribes. It is to be comprehensive-they are 'to walk in all His ways'; it is to be resolute-they are 'to cleave to Him'; it is to be wholehearted and whole-souled service, that will be the true bond between the separated parts of the whole. Independence so limited will be harmless; and, however wide apart their paths may lie, Israel will be one. In like manner the bond that knits all divisions of God's people together, however different their modes of life and thought, however unlike their homes and their work, is the similarity of relation to God. They are one in a common faith, a common love, a common obedience. Wider waters than Jordan part them. Graver differences of tasks and outlooks than separated these two sections of Israel part them. But all are one who love and obey the one Lord. The closer we cleave to Him, the nearer we shall be to all His tribes.

We need only note in a word how these departing soldiers, leaving the battlefield with their commander's praise and benediction, laden with much wealth, the spoil of their enemies, and fording the stream to reach the peaceful homes, which had long stood ready for them, may be taken, by a permissible play of fancy, as symbols of the faithful servants and soldiers of the true Joshua, at the end of their long warfare passing to the 'kingdom prepared for them before the foundation of the world,' bearing in their hands the wealth which, by God's grace, they had conquered from out of things here. *They* are not sent away by their Commander, but summoned by Him to the great peace of His own presence; and while His lips give them the praise which is praise indeed, they inscribe on the perpetual memorial which they rear no name but His, who first wrought all their works in them, and now has ordained eternal peace for them.

17)Joshua 24:19-28

Joshua

THE NATIONAL OATH AT SHECHEM

Jos. 24:19 - Jos. 24:28.

We reach in this passage the close of an epoch. It narrates the last public act of Joshua and the last of the assembled people before they scatter 'every man unto his inheritance.' It was fitting that the transition from the nomad stage to that of settled abode in the land should be marked by the solemn renewal of the covenant, which is thus declared to be the willingly accepted law for the future national life. We have here the closing scene of that solemn assembly set before us.

The narrative carries us to Shechem, the lovely valley in the heart of the land, already consecrated by many patriarchal associations, and by that picturesque scene [Jos. 8:30 - Jos. 8:35], when the gathered nation, ranged on the slopes of Ebal and Gerizim, listened to Joshua reading 'all that Moses commanded.' There, too, the coffin of Joseph, which had been reverently carried all through the desert and the war, was laid in the ground that Jacob had bought five hundred years ago, and which now had fallen to Joseph's descendants, the tribe of Ephraim. There was another reason for the selection of Shechem for this renewal of the covenant. The gathered representatives of Israel stood, at Shechem, on the very soil where, long ago, Abram had made his first resting-place as a stranger in the land, and had received the first divine pledge, 'unto thy seed will I give this land,' and had piled beneath the oak of Moreh his first altar [of which the weathered stones might still be there] to 'the Lord, who appeared unto him.' It was fitting that this cradle of the nation should witness their vow, as it witnessed the fulfilment of God's promise. What Plymouth Rock is to one side of the Atlantic, or Hastings Field to the other, Shechem was to Israel. Vows sworn there had sanctity added by the place. Nor did these remembrances exhaust the appropriateness of the site. The oak, which had waved green above Abram's altar, had looked down on another significant incident in the life of Jacob, when, in preparation for his journey to Bethel, he had made a clean sweep of the idols of his household, and buried them 'under the oak which was by Shechem' [Gen. 35:2 - Gen. 35:4]. His very words are quoted by Joshua in his command, in Jos. 24:23, and it is impossible to overlook the intention to parallel the two events. The spot which had seen the earlier act of purification from idolatry was for that very reason chosen for the later. It is possible that the same tree at whose roots the idols from beyond the river, which Leah and Rachel had brought, had been buried, was that under which Joshua set up his memorial stone; and it is possible that the very stone had been part of Abram's altar. But, in any case, the place was sacred by these past manifestations of God and devotions of the fathers, so that we need not wonder that Joshua selected it rather than Shiloh, where the ark was, for the scene of this national oath of obedience. Patriotism and devotion would both burn brighter in such an atmosphere. These considerations explain also the designation of the place as 'the sanctuary of the Lord,'-a phrase which has led some to think of the Tabernacle, and apparently occasioned the Septuagint reading of 'Shiloh' instead of 'Shechem' in Jos. 24:1 and Jos.

24:25. The precise rendering of the preposition in Jos. 24:26 [which the Revised Version has put in the margin] shows that the Tabernacle is not meant; for how could the oak-tree be ‘in’ the Tabernacle? Clearly, the open space, hallowed by so many remembrances, and by the appearance to Abram, was regarded as a sanctuary.

The earlier part of this chapter shows that the people, by their representatives, responded with alacrity-which to Joshua seemed too eager-to his charge, and enumerated with too facile tongues God’s deliverances and benefits. His ear must have caught some tones of levity, if not of insincerity, in the lightly-made vow. So he meets it with a douche of cold water in Jos. 24:19 - Jos. 24:20, because he wishes to condense vaporous resolutions into something more tangible and permanent. Cold, judiciously applied, solidifies. Discouragements, rightly put, encourage. The best way to deepen and confirm good resolutions which have been too swiftly and inconsiderately formed, is to state very plainly all the difficulty of keeping them. The hand that seems to repel, often most powerfully attracts. There is no better way of turning a somewhat careless ‘we will’ into a persistent ‘nay, but we *will*’ than to interpose a ‘ye cannot.’ Many a boy has been made a sailor by the stories of hardships which his parents have meant as dissuasives. Joshua here is doing exactly what Jesus Christ often did. He refused glib vows because He desired whole hearts. His very longing that men should follow Him made Him send them back to bethink themselves when they promised to do it. ‘Master, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest!’ was answered by no recognition of the speaker’s enthusiasm, and by no word of pleasure or invitation, but by the apparently cold repulse: ‘Foxes have holes, birds of the air roosting-places; but the Son of Man has not where to lay His head. That is what you are offering to share. Do you stand to your words?’ So, when once ‘great multitudes’ came to Him He turned on them, with no invitation in His words, and told them the hard conditions of discipleship as being entire self-renunciation. He will have no soldiers enlisted under false pretences. They shall know the full difficulties and trials which they must meet; and if, knowing these, they still are willing to take His yoke upon them, then how exuberant and warm the welcome which He gives!

There is a real danger that this side of the evangelist's work should be overlooked in the earnestness with which the other side is done. We cannot be too emphatic in our reiteration of Christ's call to all the 'weary and heavy-laden' to come unto Him, nor too confident in our assurance that whosoever comes will not be 'cast out'; but we may be, and, I fear, often are, defective in our repetition of Christ's demand for entire surrender, and of His warning to intending disciples of what they are taking upon them. We shall repel no true seeker by duly emphasising the difficulties of the Christian course. Perhaps, if there were more plain speaking about these at the beginning, there would be fewer backsliders and dead professors with 'a name to live.' Christ ran the risk of the rich ruler's going away sorrowful, and so should His messengers do. The sorrow tells of real desire, and the departure will sooner or later be exchanged for return with a deeper and more thorough purpose, if the earlier wish had any substance in it. If it had not, better that the consciousness of its hollowness should be forced upon the man, than that he should outwardly become what he is not really,-a Christian; for, in the one case, he may be led to reflection which may issue in thorough surrender; and in the other he will be a self-deceived deceiver, and probably an apostate.

Note the special form of Joshua's warning. It turns mainly on two points,-the extent of the obligations which they were so lightly incurring, and the heavy penalties of their infraction. As to the former, the vow to 'serve the Lord' had been made, as he fears, with small consideration of what it meant. In heathenism, the 'service' of a god is a mere matter of outward acts of so-called worship. There is absolutely no connection between religion and morality in idolatrous systems. The notion that the service of a god implies any duties in common life beyond ceremonial ones is wholly foreign to paganism in all its forms. The establishment of the opposite idea is wholly the consequence of revelation. So we need not wonder if the pagan conception of service was here in the minds of the vowing assembly. If we look at their vow, as recorded in Jos. 24:16 - Jos. 24:18, we see nothing in it which necessarily implies a loftier idea. Jehovah is their national God, who has fought and conquered for them, therefore they will 'serve Him.' If we substitute Baal, or Chemosh, or Nebo, or Ra, for Jehovah, this is exactly what we read on Moabite stones and Assyrian tablets and Egyptian tombs. The reasons for the service, and the service itself, are both suspiciously external. We are not judging the people more harshly than Joshua did; for he clearly was not satisfied with them, and the tone of his answer sufficiently shows what he thought wrong in them. Observe that he does not call Jehovah 'your God.' He does so afterwards; but in this grave reply to their exuberant enthusiasm he speaks of Him only as 'the Lord,' as if he would put stress on the monotheistic conception, which, at all events, does not appear in the people's words, and was probably dim in their thoughts. Then observe that he broadly asserts the impossibility of their serving the Lord; that is, of course, so long as they continued in their then tone of feeling about Him and His service.

Then observe the points in the character of God on which he dwells, as indicating the points which were left out of view by the people, and as fitted to rectify their notions of service. First, 'He is an holy God.' The scriptural idea of the holiness of God has a wider sweep than we often recognise. It fundamentally means His supreme and inaccessible elevation above the creature; which, of course, is manifested in His perfect separation from all sin, but has not regard to this only. Joshua here urges the infinite distance between man and God, and especially the infinite moral distance, in order to enforce a profounder conception of what goes to God's service. A holy God cannot have unholy worshippers. His service can be no mere ceremonial, but must be the bowing of the whole man before His majesty, the aspiration of the whole man after His loftiness, the transformation of the whole man into the reflection of His purity, the approach of the unholy to the Holy through a sacrifice which puts away sin.

Further, He is 'a jealous God.' 'Jealous' is an ugly word, with repulsive associations, and its application to God has sometimes been explained in ugly fashion, and has actually repelled men. But, rightly looked at, what does it mean but that God desires our whole hearts for His own, and loves us so much, and is so desirous to pour His love into us, that He will have no rivals in our love? The metaphor of marriage, which puts His love to men in the tenderest form, underlies this word, so harsh on the surface, but so gracious at the core.

There is still abundant need for Joshua's warning. We rejoice that it takes so little to be a Christian that the feeblest and simplest act of faith knits the soul to the all-forgiving Christ. But let us not forget that, on the other hand, it is hard to be a Christian indeed; for it means ‘forsaking all that we have,’ and loving God with all our powers. The measure of His love is the measure of His ‘jealousy,’ and He loves us no less than He did Israel. Unless our conceptions of His service are based upon our recognition of His holiness and demand for our all, we, too, ‘cannot serve the Lord.’

The other half of Joshua’s warnings refers to the penalties of the broken vows. These are put with extraordinary force. The declaration that the sins of the servants of God would not be forgiven is not, of course, to be taken so as to contradict the whole teaching of Scripture, but as meaning that the sins of His people cannot be left unpunished. The closer relation between God and them made retribution certain. The law of Israel’s existence, which its history ever since has exemplified, was here laid down, that their prosperity depended on their allegiance, and that their nearness to Him ensured His chastisement for their sin. ‘You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.’

The remainder of the incident must be briefly disposed of. These warnings produced the desired effect; for Joshua did not seek to prevent, but to make more intelligent and firm, the people’s allegiance. The resolve, repeated after fuller knowledge, is the best reward, as it is the earnest hope, of the faithful teacher, whose apparent discouragements are meant to purify and deepen, not to repress, the faintest wish to serve God. Having tested their sincerity, he calls them to witness that their resolution is perfectly voluntary; and, on their endorsing it as their free choice, he requires the putting away of their ‘strange gods,’ and the surrender of their inward selves to Him who, by this their action as well as by His benefits, becomes in truth ‘the God of Israel.’ Attempts have been made to evade the implication that idolatry had crept in among the people; but there can be no doubt of the plain, sad meaning of the words. They are a quotation of Jacob’s, at the same spot, on a similar occasion centuries before. If there were no idols buried now under the old oak, it was not because there were none in Israel, but because they had not been brought by the people from their homes. Joshua’s commands are the practical outcome of his previous words. If God be ‘holy’ and ‘jealous,’ serving Him must demand the forsaking of all other gods, and the surrender of heart and self to Him. That is as true to-day as ever it was. The people accept the stringent requirement, and their repeated shout of obedience has a deeper tone than their first hasty utterance had. They have learned what service means,-that it includes more than ceremonies; and they are willing to obey His voice. Blessed those for whom the plain disclosure of all that they must give up to follow Him, only leads to the more assured and hearty response of willing surrender!

The simple but impressive ceremony which ratified the covenant thus renewed consisted of two parts,-the writing of the account of the transaction in ‘the book of the law’; and the erection of a great stone, whose grey strength stood beneath the green oak, a silent witness that Israel, by his own choice, after full knowledge of all that the vow meant, had reiterated his vow to be the Lord’s. Thus on the spot made sacred by so many ancient memories, the people ended their wandering and homeless life, and passed into the possession of the inheritance, through the portal of this fresh acceptance of the covenant, proclaiming thereby that they held the land on condition of serving God, and writing their own sentence in case of unfaithfulness. It was the last act of the assembled people, and the crown and close of Joshua’s career.

Judges

1) JUDGES 2:1-10
2) JUDGES 2:11-23
3) JUDGES 5:16
4) JUDGES 5:20
5) JUDGES 5:31
6) JUDGES 6:24
7) JUDGES 6:37
8) JUDGES 7:1-8
9) JUDGES 7:13-23
10) JUDGES 16:20
11) JUDGES 16:21-31

1) Judges 2:1-10

A SUMMARY OF ISRAEL'S FAITHLESSNESS AND GOD'S PATIENCE

Jdg. 2:1 - Jdg. 2:10.

The Book of Judges begins a new era, the development of the nation in its land. Jdg. 1:1 contain two summaries: first, of the progress of the conquest; and second, of the history about to be unfolded in the book. The first part of this passage [Jdg. 2:1 - Jdg. 2:5] belongs to the former, and closes it; the second [Jdg. 2:6 - Jdg. 2:10] introduces the latter, and contrasts it with the state of things prevailing as long as the soldiers of Joshua lived.

I. 'The Angel of the Lord' had appeared to Joshua in Gilgal at the beginning of the war, and issued his orders as 'Captain of the Lord's host.' Now He reappears to ask why his orders had not been carried out, and to announce that victory was no longer to attend Israel's arms. Nothing can be plainer than that the Angel speaks as one in whom the divine name dwells. His reiterated 'I's' are incomprehensible on any other hypothesis than that He is that mysterious person, distinct from and yet one with Jehovah, whom we know as the 'Word made flesh.' His words here are stern. He enumerates the favours which He had showed to Israel, and which should have inspired them to glad obedience. He recalls the conditions on which they had received the land; namely, that they were to enter into no entangling alliances with the remnant of the inhabitants, and especially to have no tolerance for their idolatry. Here we may observe that, according to Joshua's last charge, the extermination of the native peoples was not contemplated, but that there should be no such alliances as would peril Israel's observance of the covenant [Jos. 23:7, Jos. 23:12]. He charges them with disobedience, and asks the same question as had been asked of Eve, 'What is this ye have done?' And He declares the punishment about to follow, in the paralysing of Israel's conquering arm by the withdrawal of His conquering might, and in the seductions from the native inhabitants to which they would fall victims.

Note, then, how God's benefits aggravate our disobedience, and how He bases His right to command on them. Further, note how His promises are contingent on our fulfilment of their conditions, and how a covenant which He has sworn that He will never break He does count as non-existent when men break it. Again, observe the sharp arraignment of the faithless, and the forcing of them to bethink themselves of the true character of their deeds, or, if we adopt the Revised Version's rendering, of the unreasonableness of departing from God. No man dare answer when God asks, 'What hast thou done?' No man can answer reasonably when He asks, 'Why hast thou done it?' Once more, note that His servants sin when they allow themselves to be so mixed up with the world that they are in peril of learning its ways and getting a snare to their souls. We have all unconquered 'Canaanites' in our hearts, and amity with them is supreme folly and crying wickedness. 'Thorough' must be our motto. Many times have the conquered overcome their conquerors, as in Rome's conquest of Greece, the Goths' conquest of Rome, the Normans' conquest of England. Israel was in some respects conquered by Canaanites and other conquered tribes. Let us take care that we are not overcome by our inward foes, whom we fancy we have subdued and can afford to treat leniently.

Again, God punishes our making truce with our spiritual foes by letting the effects of the truce work themselves out. He said to Israel, in effect: 'If you make alliances with the people of the land, you shall no longer have power to cast them out. The swift rush of the stream of victory shall be stayed. You have chosen to make them your friends, and their friendship shall produce its natural effects, of tempting you to imitation.' The increased power of our unsubdued evils is the punishment, as it is the result, of tolerance of them. We wanted to keep them, and dreamed that we could control them. Keep them we shall, control them we cannot. They will master us if we do not expel them. No wonder that the place was named Bochim ['Weepers'], when such stern words were thundered forth. Tears flow easily; and many a sin is wept for once, and afterwards repeated often. So it was with Israel, as the narrative goes on to tell. Let us take the warning, and give heed to make repentance deep and lasting.

II. Jdg. 2:6 - Jdg. 2:10 go back to an earlier period than the appearance of the Angel. We do not know how long the survivors of the conquering army lived in sufficient numbers to leaven opinion and practice. We may, however, roughly calculate that the youngest of these would be about twenty when the war began, and that about fifty years would see the end of the host that had crossed Jordan and stormed Jericho. If Joshua was of about the same age as Caleb, he would be about eighty at the beginning of the conquest, and lived thirty years afterwards, so that about twenty years after his death would be the limit of ‘the elders that outlived Joshua.’

Jdg. 2:6 - Jdg. 2:9 substantially repeat Jos. 24:28 - Jos. 24:31, and are here inserted to mark not only the connection with the former book, but to indicate the beginning of a new epoch. The facts narrated in this paragraph are but too sadly in accord with the uniform tendencies of our poor weak nature. As long as some strong personality leads a nation or a church, it keeps true to its early fervour. The first generation which has lived through some great epoch, when God’s arm has been made bare, retains the impression of His power. But when the leader falls, it is like withdrawing a magnet, and the heap of iron filings tumbles back to the ground inert. Think of the post-Apostolic age of the Church, of Germany in the generation after Luther, not to come nearer home, and we must see that Israel’s experience was an all but universal one. It is hard to keep a community even of professing Christians on the high level. No great cause is ever launched which does not lose ‘way’ as it continues. ‘Having begun in the Spirit,’ all such are too apt to continue ‘in the flesh.’ The original impulses wane, friction begins to tell. Custom clogs the wheels. The fiery lava-stream cools and slackens. So it always has been. Therefore God has to change His instruments, and churches need to be shaken up, and sometimes broken up, ‘lest one good,’ when it has degenerated into ‘custom,’ should ‘corrupt the world.’

But we shall miss the lesson here taught if we do not apply it to tendencies in ourselves, and humbly recognise that we are in danger of being ‘hindered,’ however ‘well’ we may have begun to ‘run,’ and that our only remedy is to renew continually our first-hand vision of ‘the great works of the Lord,’ and our consecration to His service. It is a poor affair if, like Israel, our devotion to God depends on Joshua’s life, or, like King Joash, we do that which is ‘right in the eyes of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest.’

2) Judges 2:11-23

Judges

ISRAEL'S OBSTINACY AND GOD'S PATIENCE

Jdg. 2:11 - Jdg. 2:23.

This passage sums up the Book of Judges, and also the history of Israel for over four hundred years. Like the overture of an oratorio, it sounds the main themes of the story which follows. That story has four chapters, repeated with dreary monotony over and over again. They are: Relapse into idolatry, retribution, respite and deliverance, and brief return to God. The last of these phases soon passes into fresh relapse, and then the old round is gone all over again, as regularly as the white and red lights and the darkness reappear in a revolving lighthouse lantern, or the figures recur in a circulating decimal fraction. That sad phrase which begins this lesson, 'The children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord,' is repeated at the beginning of each new record of apostacy, on which duly follow, as outlined here, the oppression by the enemy, the raising up of a deliverer, the gleam of brightness which dies with him, and then, *da capo*, 'the children of Israel did evil,' and all the rest as before. The names change, but the incidents are the same. There is something extremely impressive in this uniformity of the plan of the book, which thus sets in so strong light the persistence through generations of the same bad strain in the nation's blood, and the unwearying patience of God. The story of these successive recurrences of the same sequence of events occupies the book to the end of chapter xvi., and the remainder of it is taken up with two wild stories deeply stained with the lawlessness and moral laxity of these anarchic times. We may best bring out the force of this summary by considering in their order the four stages signalised.

I. The first is the continual tendency to relapse into idolatry. The fact itself, and the frank prominence given to it in the Old Testament, are both remarkable. As to the latter, certainly, if the Old Testament histories have the same origin as the chronicles of other nations, they present most anomalous features. Where do we find any other people whose annals contain nothing that can minister to national vanity, and have for one of their chief themes the sins of the nation? The history of Israel, as told in Scripture, is one long indictment of Israel. The peculiarity is explicable, if we believe that, whoever or how numerous soever its authors, God was its true Author, as He is its true theme, and that the object of its histories is not to tell the deeds of Israel, but those of God for Israel.

As to the fact of the continual relapses into idolatry, nothing could be more natural than that the recently received and but imperfectly assimilated revelation of the one God, with its stringent requirements of purity, and its severe prohibition of idols, should easily slip off from these rude and merely outward worshippers. Joshua’s death without a successor, the dispersion of the tribes, the difficulty of communication when much of the country was still in the hands of its former possessors, would all weaken the sense of unity, which was too recent to be firm, and would expose the isolated Israelites to the full force of the temptation to idolatry. It is difficult for us fairly to judge the immense strain required for resistance to it. The conception of one sole God was too high to be easily retained. A shrine without a deity seemed bare and empty. The Law stringently bridled passions which the hideous worship of the Canaanites stimulated. No wonder that, when the first generation of the conquerors had passed away, their successors lapsed into the universal polytheism, with its attendant idolatry and immorality. Instead of thinking of the Israelites as monsters of ingratitude and backsliding, we come nearer the truth, and make a better use of the history, when we see in it a mirror which shows us our own image. The strong earthward pull is ever acting on us, and, unless God hold us up, we too shall slide downwards. ‘Hath a nation changed their gods, which yet are no gods? but My people hath changed their glory for that which doth not profit.’ Idolatry and worldliness are persistent; for they are natural. Firm adherence to God is less common, because it goes against the strong forces, within and without, which bind us to earth.

Apparently the relapses into idolatry did not imply the entire abandonment of the worship of Jehovah, but the worship of Baalim and Ashtaroth along with it. Such illegitimate mixing up of deities was accordant with the very essence of polytheism, and repugnant to that of the true worship of God. The one may be tolerant, the other cannot be. To unite Baal with Jehovah was to forsake Jehovah.

These continual relapses have an important bearing on the question of the origin of the ‘Jewish conception of God.’ They are intelligible only if we take the old-fashioned explanation, that its origin was a divine revelation, given to a rude people. They are unintelligible if we take the new-fashioned explanation that the monotheism of Israel was the product of natural evolution, or was anything but a treasure put by God into their hands, which they did not appreciate, and would willingly have thrown away. The foul Canaanitish worship was the kind of thing in which, if left to themselves, they would have wallowed. How came such people by such thoughts as these? The history of Israel's idolatry is not the least conclusive proof of the supernatural revelation which made Israel's religion.

II. Note the swift-following retribution. We have two sections in the context dealing with this, each introduced by that terrible phrase, which recurs so often in the subsequent parts of the book, 'The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.' That phrase is no sign of a lower conception of God than that which the gospel brings. Wrath is an integral part of love, when the lover is perfectly righteous and the loved are sinful. The most terrible anger is the anger of perfect gentleness, as expressed in that solemn paradox of the Apostle of love, when he speaks of 'the wrath of the Lamb.' God was angry with Israel because He loved them, and desired their love for their own good. The fact of His choice of the nation for His own and the intensity of His love were shown no less by the swift certainty with which suffering dogged sin, than by the blessings which crowned obedience. The first section, referring to the punishment, is in Jdg. 2:14 - Jdg. 2:15, which seems to describe mainly the defeats and plunderings which outside surrounding nations inflicted. The brief description is extraordinarily energetic. It ascribes all their miseries to God's direct act. He 'delivered' them over, or, as the next clause says still more strongly, 'sold' them, to plunderers, who stripped them bare. Their defeats were the result of His having thus ceased to regard them as His. But though He had 'sold' them, He had not done with them; for it was not only the foeman's hand that struck them, but God's 'hand was against them,' and its grip crushed them. His judgments were not occasional, but continuous, and went with them 'whithersoever they went out.' Everything went wrong with them; there were no gleams breaking the black thunder-cloud. God's anger darkened the whole sky, and blasted the whole earth. And the misery was the more miserable and awful because it had all been foretold, and in it God was but doing 'as He had said' and sworn. It is a dreadful picture of the all-withering effect of God's anger,-a picture which is repeated in inmost verity in many an outwardly prosperous life to-day.

The second section is in Jdg. 2:20 - Jdg. 2:23, and describes the consequence of Israel's relapse in reference to the surviving Canaanite and other tribes in the land itself. Note that 'nation' in Jdg. 2:20 is the term usually applied, not to Israel, but to the Gentile peoples; and that its use here seems equivalent to cancelling the choice of Israel as God's special possession, and reducing them to the level of the other nations in Canaan, to whom the same term is applied in Jdg. 2:21. The stern words which are here put into the mouth of God may possibly refer to the actual message recorded in the first verses of the chapter; but, more probably, 'the Lord said' does not here mean any divine communication, but only the divine resolve, conceived as spoken to himself. It embodies the divine *lex talionis*. The punishment is analogous to the crime. Israel had broken the covenant; God would not keep His promise. That involves a great principle as to all God's promises,-that they are all conditional, and voidable by men's failure to fulfil their conditions. Observe, too, that the punishment is the retention of the occasions of the sin. Is not that, too, a law of the divine procedure to-day? Whips to scourge us are made of our pleasant vices. Sin is the punishment of sin. If we yield to some temptation, part of the avenging retribution is that the temptation abides by us, and has power over us. The 'Canaanites' whom we have allowed to lead us astray will stay beside us when their power to seduce us is done, and will pull off their masks and show themselves for what they are, our spoilers and foes.

The rate of Israel's conquest was determined by Israel's faithful adherence to God. That is a standing law. Victory for us in all the good fight of life depends on our cleaving to Him, and forsaking all other.

The divine motive, if we may so say, in leaving the unsubdued nations in the land, was to provide the means of proving Israel. Would it not have been better, since Israel was so weak, to secure for it an untempted period? Surely, it is a strange way of helping a man who has stumbled, to make provision that future occasions of stumbling shall lie in his path. But so the perfect wisdom which is perfect love ever ordains. There shall be no unnatural greenhouse shelter provided for weak plants. The liability to fall imposes the necessity of trial, but the trial does not impose the necessity of falling! The Devil tempts, because he hopes that we shall fall. God tries, in order that we may stand, and that our feet may be strengthened by the trial. ‘I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for,-not without dust and heat.’

III. Respite and deliverance are described in Jdg. 2:16 and Jdg. 2:18. The Revised Version has wisely substituted a simple ‘and’ for ‘nevertheless’ at the beginning of Jdg. 2:16. The latter word implies that the raising up of the judges was a reversal of what had gone before; ‘and’ implies that it was a continuation. And its use here is not merely an instance of inartificial Hebrew style, but carries the lesson that God’s judgment and deliverance come from the same source, and are harmonious parts of one educational process. Nor is this thought negatived by the statement in Jdg. 2:18 that ‘it repented the Lord.’ That strong metaphorical ascription to Him of human emotion simply implies that His action, which of necessity is the expression of His will, was changed. The will of the moment before had been to punish; the will of the next moment was to deliver, because their ‘groaning’ showed that the punishment had done its work. But the two wills were one in ultimate purpose, and the two sets of acts were equally and harmoniously parts of one design. The surgeon is carrying out one plan when he cuts deep into the quivering flesh, and when he sews up the wounds which he himself has made. God’s deliverances are linked to His chastisements by ‘and,’ not by ‘nevertheless.’ We need not discuss that remarkable series of judges, who were champions rather than the peaceful functionaries whom we understand by the name. The vivid and stirring stories associated with their names make the bulk of this book, and move the most peace-loving among us like the sound of a trumpet. These wild warriors, with many a roughness and flaw in their characters, of whom no saintly traits are recorded, are yet treated in this section as directly inspired, and as continually upheld by God. The writer of the *Epistle to the Hebrews* claims some of them as heroes of ‘faith.’ And one chief lesson for us to learn, as we look on the strange garb in which in them faith has arrayed itself, and the strange work which it does in nerving hands to strike with sharp swords, is the oneness of the principle amid the most diverse manifestations, and the nobleness and strength which the sense of belonging to God and reliance on His help breathe into the rudest life and shed over the wildest scenes.

These judges were raised up indiscriminately from different tribes. They belonged to different ranks, and were of different occupations. One of them was a woman. The when and the where and the how of their appearance were incalculable. They authenticated their commission by no miracles except victory. For a time they started to the front, and then passed, leaving no successors, and founding no dynasty. They were an entirely unique order, plainly raised up by God, and drawing all their power from Him. Let us be thankful for the weaknesses, and even sins, recorded of some of them, and for the boldness with which the book traces the physical strength of a Samson, in spite of his wild animalism, and the bravery of a Jephthah, notwithstanding his savage vow and subsequent lapse into idolatry, to God's inspiration. Their faith was limited, and acted but imperfectly on their moral nature; but it was true faith, in the judgment of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. Their work was rough and bloody, and they were rough tools, as such work needed; but it was God's work, and He had made them for His instruments, in the judgment of the Book of *Judges*. If we try to understand the reasons for such judgments, we may learn some useful lessons.

IV. A word only can be given to the last stage in the dreary round. It comes back to the first. The religion of the delivered people lasted as long as the judge's life. When he died, it died. There is intense bitterness in the remark to that effect in Jdg. 2:19. Did God then die with the judge? Was it Samson, or Jehovah, that had delivered? Why should the death of the instrument affect gratitude to the hand that gave it its edge? What a lurid light is thrown back on the unreality of the people's return to God by their swift relapse! If it needed a human hand to keep them from departing, had they ever come near? We may press the questions on ourselves; for none of us knows how much of our religion is owing to the influence of men upon us, or how much of it would drop away if we were left to ourselves.

This miserable repetition of the same weary round of sin, punishment, respite, and renewed sin, sets in a strong light the two great wonders of man's obstinate persistency in unfaithfulness and sin, and of God's unwearied persistency in discipline and patient forgiveness. His charity ‘suffers long and is kind, is not easily provoked.’ We can weary out all forbearance but His, which is endless. We weary Him indeed, but we do not weary Him out, with our iniquities. Man’s sin stretches far; but God’s patient love overlaps it. It lasts long; but God’s love is eternal. It resists miracles of chastisement and love; but He does not cease His use of the rod and the staff. We can tire out all other forbearance, but not His. And however old and obstinate our rebellion, He waits to pardon, and smites but to heal.

3) Judges 5:16

Judges

RECREANT REUBEN

Jdg. 5:16.

I. The fight.

The warfare is ever repeated, though in new forms. In the highest form it is Christ *versus* the World, And that conflict must be fought out in our own souls first. Our religion should lead not only to accept and rely on what Christ does for us, but to do and dare for Christ. He has given Himself for us, and has thereby won the right to recruit us as His soldiers. We have to fight against ourselves to establish His reign over ourselves.

And then we have to give our personal service in the great battle for right and truth, for establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth. There come national crises when every man must take up arms, but in Christ’s kingdom that is a permanent obligation. There the nation is the army. Each subject is not only His servant but His soldier. The metaphor is well worn, but it carries everlasting truth, and to take it seriously to heart would revolutionise our lives.

II. The reason for standing aloof. Reuben ‘abode in the sheepfolds to hear the pipings to the flocks.’ For Dan his ships, for Asher his havens held them apart. Reuben and the other trans-Jordanic tribes held loosely by the national unity. They had fallen in love with an easy life of pastoral wealth, they did not care to venture anything for the national good. It is still too true that like reasons are largely operative in producing like results. It is seldom from the wealthy and leisurely classes that the bold fighters for great social reformations are recruited. Times of commercial prosperity are usually times of stagnation in regard to these. Reuben lies lazily listening to the ‘drowsy tinklings’ that ‘lull’ not only ‘the distant folds’ but himself to inglorious slumber, while Zebulon and Naphtali are ‘venturing their lives on the high places of the field.’ The love of ease enervates many a one who should be doing valiantly for the ‘Captain of his salvation.’ The men of Reuben cared more for their sheep than for their nation. They were not minded to hazard these by listening to Deborah’s call. And what their flocks were to that pastoral tribe, their business is to shoals of professing Christians. The love of the world depletes the ranks of Christ’s army, and they are comparatively few who stick by the colours and are ‘ready, aye ready’ for service, as the brave motto of one English regiment has it. The lives of multitudes of so-called Christians are divided between strained energy in their business or trade or profession and self-regarding repose. No doubt competition is fierce, and, no doubt, a Christian man is bound, ‘whatsoever his hand finds to do, to do it with his might,’ and, no doubt, rest is as much a duty as work. But must not loyalty to Jesus have become tepid, if a servant of His has so little interest in the purposes for which He gave His life that he can hear no call to take active part in promoting them, nor find rest in the work by which he becomes a fellow-worker with his Lord?

III. The recreant’s brave resolves which came to nothing. The indignant question of our text is, as it were, framed between two clauses which contrast Reuben’s indolent holding aloof with his valorous resolves. ‘By the watercourses of Reuben there were great resolves of heart.’ . . . ‘At the watercourses of Reuben there were great searchings of heart.’ Resolves came first, but they were not immediately acted on, and as the Reubenites sate among the sheepfolds and felt the charm of their peaceful lives, the ‘native hue of resolution was sicklied o’er,’ and doubts of the wisdom of their gallant determination crept in, and their valour oozed out. And so for all their fine resolves, they had no share in the fight nor in the triumph.

So let us lay the warning of that example to heart, and if we are stirred by noble impulses to take our place in the ranks of the fighters for God, let us act on these at once. Emotions evaporate very soon if they are not used to drive the wheels of conduct. The Psalmist was wise who 'delayed not, but made haste and delayed not to keep God's commandments.' Many a man has over and over again resolved to serve God in some specific fashion, and to enlist in the 'effective force' of Christ's army, and has died without ever having done it.

IV. The question in the hour of victory. 'Why?'

Deborah asks it with vehement contempt.

That victory is certain. Are *you* to have part in it?

The question will be asked on the judgment day by Christ, and by our own consciences. 'And he was speechless.'

To be neutral is to be on the side of the enemy, against whom the 'stars fight,' and whom Kishon sweeps away.

'Who is on the Lord's side?'-Who?

4) Judges 5:20

Judges

'ALL THINGS ARE YOURS'

Jdg. 5:20. - Job. 5:23.

These two poetical fragments present the same truth on opposite sides. The first of them comes from Deborah's triumphant chant. The singer identifies God with the cause of Israel, and declares that heaven itself fought against those who fought against God's people. There may be an allusion to the tempest which Jewish tradition tells us burst over the ranks of the enemy, or there may be some trace of ancient astrological notions, or the words may simply be an elevated way of saying that Heaven fought for Israel. The silent stars, as they swept on their paths through the sky, advanced like an avenging host embattled against the foes of Israel and of God. All things fight against the man who fights against God.

The other text gives the other side of the same truth. One of Job’s friends is rubbing salt into his wounds by insisting on the commonplace, which needs a great many explanations and limitations before it can be accepted as true, that sin is the cause of sorrow, and that righteousness brings happiness; and in the course of trying to establish this heartless thesis to a heavy heart he breaks into a strain of the loftiest poetry in describing the blessedness of the righteous. All things, animate and inanimate, are upon his side. The ground, which Genesis tells us is ‘cursed for his sake,’ becomes his ally, and the very creatures whom man’s sin set at enmity against him are at peace with him. All things are the friends and servants of him who is the friend and servant of God.

I. So, putting these two texts together, we have first the great conviction to which religion clings, that God being on our side all things are for us, and not against us.

Now, that is the standing faith of the Old Testament, which no doubt was more easily held in those days, because, if we accept its teaching, we shall recognise that Israel lived under a system in so far supernatural as that moral goodness and material prosperity were a great deal more closely and indissolubly connected than they are to-day. So, many a psalmist and many a prophet breaks out into apostrophes, warranted by the whole history of Israel, and declaring how blessed are the men who, apart from all other defences and sources of prosperity, have God for their help and Him for their hope.

But we are not to dismiss this conviction as belonging only to a system where the supernatural comes in, as it does in the Old Testament history, and as antiquated under a dispensation such as that in which we live. For the New Testament is not a whit behind the Old in insisting upon this truth. ‘All things work together for good to them that love God.’ ‘All things are yours, and ye are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.’ ‘Who is he that will harm you if ye be followers of that which is good?’ The New Testament is committed to the same conviction as that to which the faith of Old Testament saints clung as the sheet anchor of their lives.

That conviction cannot be struck out of the creed of any man, who believes in the God to whom the Old and the New Testament alike bear witness. For it rests upon this plain principle, that all this great universe is not a chaos, but a cosmos, that all these forces and creatures are not a rabble, but an ordered host.

What is the meaning of that great Name by which, from of old, God in His relations to the whole universe has been described-the ‘Lord of Hosts’? Who are the ‘hosts’ of which He is ‘the Lord,’ and to whom, as the centurion said, He says to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goeth; and to another, ‘Come!’ and he cometh; and to another, ‘Do this!’ and he doeth it? Who are ‘the hosts’? Not only these beings who are dimly revealed to us as rational and intelligent, who ‘excel in strength,’ because they ‘hearken to the voice of His word’, but in the ranks of that great army are also embattled all the forces of the universe, and all things living or dead. ‘All are Thy servants; they continue this day’-angels, stars, creatures of earth-’ according to Thine ordinances.’

And if it be true that the All is an ordered whole, which is obedient to the touch and to the will of that divine Commander, then all His servants must be on the same side, and cannot turn their arms against each other. As an old hymn says with another reference-

‘All the servants of our King
In heaven and earth are one,’

and none of them can injure, wound, or slay a fellow-servant. If all are travelling in the same direction there can be no collision. If all are enlisted under the same standard they can never turn their weapons against each other. If God sways all things, then all things which God sways must be on the side of the men that are on the side of God. ‘Thou shalt make a league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.’

II. Note the difficulties arising from experience, in the way of holding fast by this conviction of faith.

The grim facts of the world, seen from their lowest level, seem to shatter it to atoms. Talk about 'the stars in their courses fighting' for or against anybody! In one aspect it is superstition, in another aspect it is a dream and an illusion. The prose truth is that they shine down silent, pitiless, cold, indifferent, on battlefields or on peaceful homes; and the moonlight is as pure when it falls upon broken hearts as when it falls upon glad ones. Nature is utterly indifferent to the moral or the religious character of its victims. It goes on its way unswerving and pitiless; and whether the man who stands in its path is good or bad matters not. If he gets into a typhoon he will be wrecked; if he tumbles over Niagara he will be drowned. And what becomes of all the talk about an embattled universe on the side of goodness, in the face of the plain facts of life-of nature's indifference, nature's cruelty which has led some men to believe in two sovereign powers, one beneficent and one malicious, and has led others to say, 'God is a superfluous hypothesis, and to believe in Him brings more enigmas than it solves,' and has led still others to say, 'Why, if there *is* a God, does it look as if either He was not all-powerful, or was not all-merciful?' Nature has but ambiguous evidence to give in support of this conviction.

Then, if we turn to what we call Providence and its mysteries, the very book of Job, from which my second text is taken, is one of the earliest attempts to grapple with the difficulty and to untie the knot; and I suppose everybody will admit that, whatever may be the solution which is suggested by that enigmatical book, the solution is by no means a complete one, though it is as complete as the state of religious knowledge at the time at which the book was written made possible to be attained. The seventy-third psalm shows that even in that old time when, as I have said, supernatural sanctions were introduced into the ordinary dealings of life, the difficulties that cropped up were great enough to bring a devout heart to a stand, and to make the Psalmist say, 'My feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped.' Providence, with all its depths and mysteries, often to our aching hearts seems in our own lives to contradict the conviction, and when we look out over the sadness of humanity, still more does it seem impossible for us to hold fast by the faith 'that all which we behold is full of blessings.'

I doubt not that there are many of ourselves whose lives, shadowed, darkened, hemmed in, perplexed, or made solitary for ever, seem to them to be hard to reconcile with this cheerful faith upon which I am trying to insist. Brethren, cling to it even in the darkness. Be sure of this, that amongst all our mercies there are none more truly merciful than those which come to us shrouded in dark garments, and in questionable shapes. Let nothing rob us of the confidence that 'all things work together for good.'

III. I come, lastly, to consider the higher form in which this conviction is true for ever.

I have said that the facts of life seem often to us, and are felt often by some of us, to shatter it to atoms; to riddle it through and through with shot. But, if we bring the Pattern-life to bear upon the illumination of all life, and if we learn the lessons of the Cradle and the Cross, and rise to the view of human life which emerges from the example of Jesus Christ, then we get back the old conviction, transfigured indeed, but firmer than ever. We have to alter the point of view. Everything always depends on the point of view. We have to alter one or two definitions. Definitions come first in geometry and in everything else. Get *them* right, and you will get your theorems and problems right.

So, looking at life in the light of Christ, we have to give new contents to the two words 'good' and 'evil,' and a new meaning to the two words 'for' and 'against.' And when we do that, then the difficulties straighten themselves out, and there are not any more knots, but all is plain; and the old faith of the Old Testament, which reposed very largely upon abnormal and extraordinary conditions of life, comes back in a still nobler form, as possible to be held by us amidst the commonplace of our daily existence.

For everything is my friend, is for me and not against me, that helps me nearer to God. To live for Him, to live with Him, to be conscious ever of communion with Himself, to feel the touch of His hand on my hand, and the pressure of His breast against mine, at all moments of my life, is my true and the highest good. And if it is true that the 'river of the water of life' which 'flows from the Throne of God' is the only draught that can ever satisfy the immortal thirst of a soul, then whatever drives me away from the cisterns and to the fountain, is on my side. Better to dwell in a 'dry and thirsty land, where no water is,' if it makes me long for the water that rises at the gate of the true Bethlehem-the house of bread-than to dwell in a land flowing with milk and honey, and well watered in every part! If the cup that I would fain lift to my lips has poison in it, or if its sweetness is making me lose my relish for the pure and tasteless river that flows from the Throne of God, there can be no truer friend than that calamity, as men call it, which strikes the cup from my hands, and shivers the glass before I have raised it to my lips. Everything is my friend that helps me towards God.

Everything is my friend that leads me to submission and obedience. The joy of life, and the perfection of human nature, is an absolutely submitted will, identified with the divine, both in regard to doing and to enduring. And whatever tends to make my will flexible, so that it corresponds to all the sinuosities, so to speak, of the divine will, and fits into all its bends and turns, is a blessing to me. Raw hides, stiff with dirt and blood, are put into a bath of bitter infusion of oak-bark. What for? For the same end as, when they are taken out, they are scraped with sharp steels,-that they may become flexible. When that is done the useless hide is worth something.

'Our wills are ours, we know not how;
Our wills are ours, to make them Thine.'

And whatever helps me to that is my friend.

Everything is a friend to the man that loves God, in a far sweeter and deeper sense than it can ever be to any other. Like a sudden burst of sunshine upon a gloomy landscape, the light of union with God and friendship with Him flooding my daily life flashes it all up into brightness. The dark ribbon of the river that went creeping through the black copses, when the sun glints upon it, gleams up into links of silver, and the trees by its bank blaze out into green and gold. Brethren! 'Who follows pleasure follows pain'; who follows God finds pleasure following him. There can be no surer way to set the world against me than to try to make it for me, and to make it my all They tell us that if you want to count those stars that 'like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver braid' make up the Pleiades, the surest way to see the greatest number of them is to look a little on one side of them. Look away from the joys and friendships of creatural things right up to God, and you will see these sparkling and dancing in the skies, as you never see them when you gaze at them only. Make them second and they are good and on your side. Make them first, and they will turn to be your enemies and fight against you.

This conviction will be established still more irrefragably and wonderfully in that future. Nothing lasts but goodness. 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.' To oppose it is like stretching a piece of pack-thread across the rails before the express comes; or putting up some thin wooden partition on the beach on one of the Western Hebrides, exposed to the whole roll of the Atlantic, which will be battered into ruin by the first winter's storm. Such is the end of all those who set themselves against God.

But there comes a future in which, as dim hints tell us, these texts of ours shall receive a fulfilment beyond that realised in the present condition of things. 'Then comes the statelier Eden back to man,' and in a renewed and redeemed earth 'they shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain'; and the ancient story will be repeated in higher form. The servants shall be like the Lord who, when He had conquered temptation, 'was with the wild beasts' that forgot their enmity, and 'angels ministered unto Him.' That scene in the desert may serve as a prophecy of the future when, under conditions of which we know nothing, all God's servants shall, even more markedly and manifestly than here, help each other; and every man that loves God will find a friend in every creature.

If we take Him for our Commander, and enlist ourselves in that embattled host, then all weathers will be good; 'stormy winds, fulfilling His word,' will blow us to our port; 'the wilderness will rejoice and blossom as the rose'; and the whole universe will be radiant with the light of His presence, and ringing with the music of His voice. But if we elect to join the other army-for there is another army, and men have wills that enable them to lift themselves up against God, the Ruler of all things-then the old story, from which my first text is taken, will fulfil itself again in regard to us-'the stars in their courses will fight against' us; and Sisera, lying stiff and stark, with Jael's tent-peg through his temples, and the swollen corpses being swirled down to the stormy sea by 'that ancient river, the river Kishon,' will be a grim parable of the end of the men that set themselves against God, and so have the universe against them. 'Choose ye this day whom ye will serve.'

5) Judges 5:31

Judges

LOVE MAKES SUNS

Jdg. 5:31.

These are the closing words of Deborah, the great warrior-prophetess of Israel. They are in singular contrast with the tone of fierce enthusiasm for battle which throbs through the rest of the chant, and with its stern approval of the deed of Jael when she slew Sisera. Here, in its last notes, we have an anticipation of the highest and best truths of the Gospel. 'Let them that love Him be as the sun when he goeth forth in His might.' If we think of the singer, of the age and the occasion of the song, such purely spiritual, lofty words must seem very remarkable.

I. Note, then, first of all, how here we have a penetrating insight into the essence of religion.

This woman had been nourished upon a more or less perfect edition of what we know as the 'Mosaic Law.' Her faith had been fed by forms. She moved amidst a world full of the cruelties and dark conceptions of a mysterious divine power which torture heathenism apart from Christianity. She had forced her way through all that, and laid hold of the vital centre. And there, a way out amidst cruelty and murder, amidst the unutterable abominations and terrors of heathenism, in the centre of a rigid system of ceremonial and retaliation, the woman's heart spoke out, and taught her what was the great commandment. Prophetess she was, fighter she was, she could burst into triumphant approval of Jael's bloody deed; and yet with the same lips could speak this profound word. She had learned that 'Thou shalt *love* the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind,' summed up all duty, and was the beginning of all good in man. That precept found an echo in her heart. Whatever part in her religious development may have been played by the externalisms of ceremonial, she had pierced to the core of religion. Advanced modern critics admit the antiquity of Deborah's song, and this closing stanza witnesses to the existence, at that early period, of a highly spiritual conception of the bond between God and man. Deborah had got as far, in a moment of exaltation and insight, as the teaching of the Apostle John, although her thought was strangely blended with the fierceness of the times in which she lived. Her approval of Jael's deed by no means warrants our approving it, but we may thankfully see that though she felt the fierce throbbing of desire for vengeance, she also felt this-'Them that *love* Him; that is the Alpha and the Omega of all.'

Our love must depend on our knowledge. Deborah's knowledge was a mere skeleton outline as compared with ours. Contrast the fervour of emotional affection that manifestly throbbed in her heart with the poor, cold pulsations which we dignify by the name of love, and the contrast may put us to shame. There is a religion of fear which dominates hundreds of professing Christians in this land of ours. There is a religion of duty, in which there is no delight, which has many adherents amongst us. There is a religion of form, which contents itself with the externals of Christianity, and that is the religion of many men and women in all our churches. And I may further say, there is a religion of faith, in its narrower and imperfect sense, which lays hold of and believes a body of Christian truth, and has never passed through faith into love. Not he who 'believes that God is,' and comes to Him with formal service and an alienated or negligent heart; not he who recognises the duty of worship, and discharges it because his conscience pricks him, but has no buoyancy within bearing him upwards towards the object of his love; not he who cowers before the dark shadow which some call God; but he who, knowing, trusts, and who, knowing and trusting 'the love which God hath to us,' pulses back the throbs of a recipient heart, and loves Him in return-he, and he only, is a worshipper. Let us learn the lesson that Deborah learnt below the palm-trees of Lapidoth, and if we want to understand what a religious man is, recognise that he is a man who loves God.

II. Further, note the grand conception of the character which such a love produces.

‘Let them be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.’ Think of the fierce Eastern sun, with ‘sunbeams like swords,’ that springs up from the East, and rushes to the zenith, and ‘nothing is hid from the heat thereof’-a sun the like of which we, in our cloudy skies, never see nor feel, but which, to the Oriental, is the very emblem of splendour and of continuous, victorious power. There are two things here, radiance and energy, light and might.

‘As the sun when he goeth forth in his strength.’ Deborah was a ‘prophetess,’ and people say, ‘What did she prophesy?’ Well, she prophesied the heart of religion-as I have tried to show-in reference to its essence, and, as one sees by this phrase, in reference to its effects. What is her word but a partial anticipation of Christ’s saying, ‘Ye are the light of the world’; and of His disciple’s utterance, ‘Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light’?

It is too plain to need any talking about, that the direct tendency of what we venture to call love to God, meaning thereby the turning of the whole nature to Him, in aspiration, admiration, longing for likeness, and practical imitation, is to elevate, ennoble, and illuminate the whole character. It was said about one woman that ‘to love her was an education.’ That was exaggeration; but it is below the truth about God. The true way to refine and elevate and educate is to cultivate love to God. And when we get near to Him, and hold by Him, and are continually occupied with Him; when our being is one continual aspiration after union with Him, and we experience the glow and rapture included in the simple word ‘love,’ then it cannot but be that we shall be like Him.

That is what Paul meant when he said, ‘Now are ye light in the Lord.’ Union with Him illuminates. The true radiance of saintly character will come in the measure in which we are in fellowship with Jesus Christ. Deborah’s astronomy was not her strong point. The sun shines by its own light. We are planets, and are darkness in ourselves, and it is only the reflection of the central sun that ever makes us look silvery white and radiant before men. But though it be derived, it is none the less our light, if it has passed into us, as it surely will, and if it streams out from us, as it no less surely will, in the measure in which love to God dominates our whole lives.

If that is so, dear brethren, is not the shortest and the surest way to have our faces shining like that of Moses when he came down from the mountain, or like Stephen's when he 'saw the heavens opened,' to keep near Jesus Christ? It is slow work to hammer bits of ore out of the rock with a chisel and a mallet. Throw the whole mass into the furnace, and the metal will come out separated from the dross. Get up the heat, and the light, which is the consequence of the heat, will take care of itself. 'In the Lord' ye shall be 'light.'

Is Deborah's aspiration fulfilled about me? Let each of us ask that. 'As the sun when he goeth forth in his strength'-would anybody say that about my Christian character? Why not? Only because the springs have run low within is the stream low through the meadows. Only because the love is cold is the light feeble.

There is another thought here. There is power in sunlight as well as radiance. On that truth the prophetess especially lays a finger; 'as the sun when he goeth forth in his *strength*.' She did not know what we know, that solar energy is the source of all energy on this earth, and that, just as in the deepest spiritual analysis 'there is no power but of God,' so in the material region we may say that the only force is the force of the sun, which not only stimulates vegetation and brings light and warmth-as the pre-scientific prophetess knew-but in a hundred other ways, unknown to her and known to modern science, is the author of all change, the parent of all life, and the reservoir of all energy.

So we come to this thought: The true love of God is no weak, sentimental thing, such as narrow and sectional piety has often represented it to be, but it is a power which will invigorate the whole of a man, and make him strong and manly as well as gentle and gracious; being, indeed, the parent of all the so-called heroic and of all the so-called saintly virtues.

The sun 'goeth forth in his strength,' rushing through the heavens to the zenith. As one of the other editions of this metaphor in the Old Testament has it, 'The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more until the noontide of the day.' That light, indeed, declines, but that fact does not come into view in the metaphor of the progressive growth towards perfection of the man in whom is the all-conquering might of the true love of Jesus Christ.

Note the context of these words of our text, which, I said, presents so singular a contrast to them. It is a strange thing that so fierce a battle-chant should at the end settle down into such a sweet swan-song as this. It is a strange thing that in the same soul there should throb the delight in battle and almost the delight in murder, and these lofty thoughts. But let us learn the lesson that true love to God means hearty hatred of God's enemy, and that it will always have to be militant and sometimes stern and what people call fierce. Amidst the amenities and sentimentalities of modern life there is much necessity for remembering that the Apostle of love was a 'son of thunder,' and that it was the lips which summoned Israel to the fight, and chanted hymns of triumph over the corpses borne down by the rushing Kishon, which also said: 'Let them that love Him be as the sun when he shineth forth in his strength.' If you love God, you will surely be a strong man as well as an emotional and affectionate Christian.

That energy is to be continuous and progressive. The sun that Deborah saw day by day spring from his station in the east, and climb to his height in the heavens, and ray down his beams, has been doing that for millions of years, and it will probably keep doing it for uncounted periods still. And so the Christian man, with continuity unbroken and progressive brilliance and power, should shine 'more and more till the unsetting noontide of the day.'

III. That brings me to the last thought, which passes beyond the limits of the prophetess' vision. Here is a prophecy of which the utterer was unaware.

There is a contrast drawn in the words of our text and in those immediately preceding. "So," says Deborah, after the fierce description of the slaughter of Sisera-'So let all Thine enemies perish, O Lord! but let them that love Thee be as the sun when he shineth in his strength.' She contrasts the transiency of the lives that pit themselves against God with the perpetuity that belongs to those which are in harmony with Him. The truth goes further than she probably knew; certainly further than she was thinking when she chanted these words. Let us widen them by other words which use the same metaphor, and say, ‘they that be wise’-that is a shallower word than ‘them that love Thee’-’they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.’ Let us widen and deepen them by sacreder words still; for Jesus Christ laid hold of this old metaphor, and said, describing the time when all the enemies shall have perished, and the weeds have been flung out of the vineyard, ‘Then shall the righteous shine forth like the sun, in the Kingdom of their Father,’ with a brilliancy that will fill heaven with new splendours, bright beyond all that we see here amidst the thick atmosphere and mists and clouds of the present life!

Nor need we stop even there, for Jesus Christ not only laid hold of this metaphor in order to describe the eternal glory of the children of the Kingdom, but at the last time that human eyes on earth saw Him, the glorified Man Christ Jesus is thus described: ‘His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.’ Love always tends to likeness; and love to Christ will bring conformity with Him. The perfect love of heaven will issue in perfect and perpetual assimilation to Him. Science tells us that the light of the sun probably comes from its contraction; and that that process of contraction will go on until, at some point within the bounds of time, though far beyond the measure of our calculations, the sun himself shall die, the ineffectual beams will be paled, and there will be a black orb, with neither life nor light nor power. And then, then, and after that for ever, ‘they that love Him’ shall continue to be as that dead sun once was, when he went forth in his hot might.

6) Judges 6:24

Judges

GIDEON’S ALTAR

Jdg. 6:24.

I need not tell over again, less vividly, the picturesque story in this chapter, of the simple husbandman up in the hills, engaged furtively in threshing out a little wheat in some hollow in the rock where he might hide it from the keen eyes of the oppressors; and of how the angel of the Lord, unrecognised at first, appeared to him; and gradually there dawned upon his mind the suspicion of who He was who spoke. Then follow the offering, the discovery by fire, the shrinking of the man from contact with the divine, the wonderfully tranquillizing and condescending assurance, cast into the form of the ordinary salutation of domestic life: 'And the Lord said unto him Peace be unto thee!'-as any man might have said to any other-'fear not! thou shalt not die.' Then Gideon piles up the unhewn stones on the hillside into a rude altar, apparently not for the purpose of offering sacrifice, but for a monument, to which is given this strange name, strange upon such warrior lips, and strange in contemplation of the fierce conflict into which he was immediately to plunge, 'the Lord is peace.'

How I think that this name, imposed for such a reason and under such circumstances, may teach us a good many things.

I. The first thing that it seems to me to suggest is the great discovery which this man had made, and in the rapture of which he named his altar,-that the sight of God is *not* death, but life and peace.

Gideon was a plain, rude man, with no very deep religious experience. Apparently up to the moment of this vision he had been contentedly tolerating the idolatrous practices which had spread over all the country. He had heard of 'Jehovah.' It was a name, a tradition, which his fathers had told him. That was all that he knew of the God of Israel. Into this hearsay religion, as in a flash, while Gideon is busy about his threshing floor, thinking of his wheat or of the misery of his nation, there comes, all at once, this crushing conviction,-'the *hearsay* God is beside you, speaking to you! You have personal relations to Him, He is nearer you than any human being is, He is no mere Name, here He stands!'

And whenever the lightning edge of a conviction like that cuts its way through the formalisms and traditionalisms and hearsay repetitions of conventional religion, then there comes what came to Gideon, the swift thought, 'And if this be true, if I really do touch, and am touched by, that living Person whose name is Jehovah, what is to become of me? Shall I not shrivel up when His fiery finger is laid upon me? I have seen Him face to face, and I must die.'

I believe that, in the case of the vast majority of men, the first living, real apprehension of a real, living God is accompanied with a shock, and has mingled with it something of awe, and even of terror. Were there no sin there would be no fear, and pure hearts would open in silent blessedness and yield their sweetest fragrance of love and adoration, when shone on by Him, as flowers do to the kiss of the sunbeams. But, taking into account the sad and universal fact of sin, it is inevitable that men should shrink from the Light which reveals their evil, and that the consciousness of God's presence should strike a chill. It is sad that it should be so. But it is sadder still when it is not so, but when, as is sometimes the case, the sight of God produces no sense of sin, and no consciousness of discord, or foreboding of judgment. For, only through that valley of the shadow of death lies the path to the happy confidence of peace with God, and unless there has been trembling at the beginning, there will be no firm and reasonable trust afterwards.

For Gideon's terror opened the way for the gracious proclamation, which would have been needless but for it-'Peace be unto thee; fear not, thou shalt not die.'

The sight of God passes from being a fear to a joy, from being a fountain of death to a spring of life, Terror is turned to tranquil trust. The narrow and rough path of conscious unworthiness leads to the large place of happy peace. The divine word fits Gideon's condition, and corresponds to his then deepest necessity; and so he drinks it in as the thirsty ground drinks in the water; and in the rapture of the discovery that the Name, that had come down from his fathers to him, was the Name of a real Person, with whom he stood in real relationships, and those of simple friendship and pure amity, he piles up the rough stones of the place, and makes the name of his altar the echo of the divine voice. It is as if he had said with rapture of surprise, 'Then Jehovah *is* peace; which I never dreamed of before.'

Dear friends, do you know anything of such an experience? Can you build your altar, and give it this same name? Can you write upon the memorial of your experiences, 'The Lord is my peace'? Have you passed from hearsay into personal contact? Can you say, 'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee'? Do you know the further experience expressed in the subsequent words of the same quotation: ‘Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes’? And have you passed out of that stormy ocean of terror and self-condemnation into the quiet haven of trust in Him in whom we have peace with God, where your little boat lies quiet, moored for ever to the Rock of Ages, to ‘Jehovah, who is Peace’?

In connection with this rapturous discovery, and to Gideon strange new thought, we may gather the lesson that peace with God will give peace in all the soul. The ‘peace with God’ will pass into a wider thing, the ‘peace of God.’ There is tranquillity in trust. There is rest in submission. There is repose in satisfied desires. When we live near Him, and have ceased from our own works, and let Him take control of us and direct us in all our ways, then the storms abate. The things that disturb us are by no means so much external as inward; and there is a charm and a fascination in the thought, ‘the Lord is peace,’ which stills the inward tempest, and makes us quiet, waiting upon His will and drawing in His grace. The secret of rest is to cease from self, from self as guide, from self as aim, from self as safety. And when self-will is cast out, and self-dependence is overcome, and self-reliance is sublimed into hanging upon God’s hand, and when He, not mine own inclination, is my Director, and the Arbiter of my fate, then all the fever of unrest is swept wholly out of my heart, and there is nothing left in it on which the gnawing tooth of anxiety or of care can prey. God being my peace, and I yielding myself to Him, ‘in quietness and confidence’ is my ‘strength.’ ‘Thou shalt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed upon Thee, because he trusteth in Thee.’

II. We may look upon this inscription from another point of view, as suggesting the thought that God’s peace is the best preparation for, and may be experienced in the midst of, the intensest conflict.

Remember what the purpose of this vision was,-to raise up a man to fight an almost desperate fight, no metaphorical war, but one with real sharp swords, against real strong enemies. The first blow in the campaign was to be struck that night. Gideon was being summoned by the vision, to long years of hardship and bitter warfare, and his preparation for the conflict consisted largely in the revelation to his inmost spirit that ‘Jehovah is peace.’ We might rather have looked for a manifestation of the divine nature as ready to go forth to battle with the raw levies of timid peasants. We should have expected the thought which inspired their captain to have been ‘The Lord is a man of war,’ rather than ‘The Lord is peace.’ But it is not so-and therein lies the deep truth that the peace of God is the best preparation for strife. It gives courage, it leaves the heart at leisure to fling all its power into the conflict, it inspires with the consciousness of a divine ally. As Paul puts it, in his picture of the fully-armed Christian soldier, the feet are ‘shod with the preparedness of alacrity which is produced by the gospel of peace.’ That will make us ‘ready, aye ready’ for the roughest march, and enable us to stand firm against the most violent charges of the enemy. There is no such preparation for the conflict of life, whether it be waged against our own inward evil, or against opposing forces without, as to have deep within the soul the settled and substantial peace of God. If we are to come out of the battle with victory sitting on our helmets, we must go into it with the Dove of God brooding in our hearts. As the Lord said to Gideon, ‘Go in *this* thy might, and thou shalt save Israel, . . . have not I sent thee?’

But, besides this thought that the knowledge of Jehovah as peace fits us for strife, that hastily-reared altar with its seemingly inappropriate name, may remind us that it is possible, in the midst of the deadliest hand-to-hand grip with evil, and whilst fighting the ‘good fight of faith’ with the most entire self-surrender to the divine will, to bear within us, deeper than all the surface strife, that inward tranquillity which knows no disturbance, though the outward life is agitated by fierce storms. Deep in the centre of the ocean the waters lie quiet, though the wildest tempests are raging above, and the fiercest currents running. Over the tortured and plunging waters of the cataract there lies unmoving, though its particles are in perpetual flux, the bow of promise and of peace. So over all the rush and thunder of life there may stretch, radiant and many-coloured, and dyed with beauty by the very sun himself, the abiding bow of beauty, the emblem and the reality of the divine tranquillity. The Christian life is continual warfare, but in it all, ‘the peace of God which passeth understanding’ may ‘garrison our hearts and minds.’ In the inmost keep of the castle, though the storm of war may be breaking against the walls, there will be a quiet chamber where no noise of the archers can penetrate, and the shouts of the fight are never heard. Let us seek to live in the ‘secret place of the Most High’; and in still communion with Him, keep our inmost souls in quiet, while we bravely front difficulties and enemies. You are to be God’s warriors; see to it that on every battlefield there stands the altar ‘Jehovah Shalom.’

III. Lastly, we may draw yet another lesson, and say that that altar, with its significant inscription, expressed the aim of the conflict and the hope which sustains in the fight.

Gideon was fighting for peace, and what he desired was that victory should bring tranquillity. The hope which beckoned him on, when he flung himself into his else desperate enterprise, was that God would so prosper his work that the swords might be beaten into ploughshares, and the spears into pruning hooks. Which things may stand as an allegory, and suggest to us that the Christian warfare, whilst it rests upon, and is prompted by, the revelation of God who is peace, aims in all its blows, at the conquering of that sure and settled peace which shall be broken by no rebellious outbursts of self-will, nor by any risings of passions and desires. The aim of our warfare should ever be that the peace of God may be throned in our hearts, and sit there a gentle queen. The true tranquillity of the blessed life is the prize of conflict. David, ‘the man of war from his youth,’ prepares the throne for Solomon, in whose reign no alarms of war are heard. If you would enter into peace, you must fight your way to it, and every step of the road must be a battle. The land of peace is won by the good fight of faith.

But Gideon’s altar not only expressed his purpose in his taking up arms, but his confidence of accomplishing it, based upon the assurance that the Lord would give peace. It was a trophy erected before the fight, and built, not by arrogant presumption or frivolous underestimate of the enemy’s strength, but by humble reliance on the power of that Lord who had promised His presence, and had assured triumph. So the hope that named this altar was the hope that war meant victory, and that victory would bring peace. That hope should animate every Christian soldier. Across the dust of the conflict, the fair vision of unbroken and eternal peace should gleam before each of us, and we should renew fainting strength and revive drooping courage by many a wistful gaze.

We may realise that hope in large measure here. But its fulfilment is reserved for the land of peace which we enter by the last conflict with the last enemy.

Every Christian man’s gravestone is an altar on which is written ‘Our God is peace’; in token that the warrior has passed into the land where ‘violence shall no more be heard, wasting, nor destruction within its borders,’ but all shall be deep repose, and the unarmed, because unattacked, peace of tranquil communion with, and likeness to, ‘Jehovah our Peace.’

So, dear brethren, let us pass from tradition and hearsay into personal intercourse with God, and from shrinking and doubt into the sunshine of the conviction that He is our peace. And then, with His tranquillity in our hearts let us go out, the elect apostles of the peace of God, and fight for Him, after the pattern of the Captain of our salvation, who had to conquer peace through conflict; and was ‘first of all King of Righteousness, and *after that* also King of Peace.’

7) Judges 6:37

Judges

GIDEON’S FLEECE

Jdg. 6:37.

The decisive moment had come when Gideon, with his hastily gathered raw levies, was about to plunge down to the plain to face immensely superior forces trained to warfare. No wonder that the equally untrained leader’s heart heat faster. Many a soldier, who will be steadfastly brave in the actual shock of battle, has tremors and throbbings on its eve. Gideon’s hand shook a little as he drew his sword.

I. Gideon’s request.

His petition for a sign was not the voice of unbelief or of doubt or of presumption, but in it spoke real, though struggling faith, seeking to be confirmed. Therefore it was not regarded by God as a sin. When a ‘wicked and adulterous generation asked for a sign,’ no sign was given it, but when faith asks for one to help it to grasp God’s hand, and to go on His warfare in His strength and as His instrument, it does not ask in vain.

Gideon’s prayer was wrapped, as it were, in an enfolding promise, for it is preceded and followed by the quotation of words of the Angel of the Lord who had ‘looked on him,’ and said, ‘Go in this thy might and save Israel from the hand of Midian: have not I sent thee?’ Prayers that begin and end with ‘as Thou hast spoken’ are not likely to be repulsed.

II. God’s answer.

God wonderfully allows Gideon to dictate the nature of the sign. He stoops to work it both ways, backwards and forwards, as it were. First the fleece is to be wet and the ground to be dry, then the fleece is to be dry and the ground wet. Miracle was a necessary accompaniment of revelation in those early days, as picture-books are of childhood. But, though we are far enough from being ‘men’ in Christ, yet we have not the same need for ‘childish things’ as Gideon and his contemporaries had. We have Christ and the Spirit, and so have a ‘word made more sure’ than to require signs. But still it is true that the same gracious willingness to help a tremulous faith, which carries its tremulousness to God in prayer, moves the Father’s heart to-day, and that to such petitions the answer is given even before they are offered: ‘Ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.’ No sign that eyes can see is given, but inward whispers speak assurance and communicate the assurance which they speak.

III. The meaning of the sign.

Many explanations have been offered. The main point is that the fleece is to be made different from the soil around it. It is to be a proof of God’s power to endow with characteristics not derived from, and resulting in qualities unlike, the surroundings.

Gideon had no thought of any significance beyond that. But we may allowably let the Scripture usage of the symbol of dew influence our reading into the symbol a deeper meaning than it bore to him.

God makes the fleece wet with dew, while all the threshing-floor is dry. Dew is the symbol of divine grace, of the silently formed moisture which, coming from no apparent source, freshens by night the wilted plants, and hangs in myriad drops, that twinkle into green and gold as the early sunshine strikes them, on the humblest twig. That grace is plainly not a natural product nor to be accounted for by environment. The dew of the Spirit, which God and God only, can give, can freshen our worn and drooping souls, can give joy in sorrow, can keep us from being touched by surrounding evils, and from being parched by surrounding drought, can silently 'distil' its supplies of strength according to our need into our else dry hearts.

The wet fleece on the dry ground was not only a revelation of God's power, but may be taken as a pattern of what God's soldiers must ever be. A prophet long after Gideon said: 'The remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many peoples as dew from the Lord,' bringing to others the grace which they have received that they may diffuse it, and turning the dry and thirsty land where no water is into fertility, and the 'parched ground' into a 'pool.'

We have said that the main point of Gideon's petition was that the fleece should be made unlike the threshing-floor, and that that unlikeness, which could obviously not be naturally brought about, was to be to him the sure token that God was at work to produce it. The strongest demonstration that the Church can give the world of its really being God's Church is its unlikeness to the world. If it is wet with divine dew when all the threshing-floor is dry, and if, when all the floor is drenched with poisonous miasma, it is dry from the diffused and clinging malaria, the world will take knowledge of it, and some souls be set to ask how this unlikeness comes. When Haman has to say: 'There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples . . . and their laws are diverse from those of every people,' he may meditate murder, but 'many from among the people of the land' will join their ranks. Gideon may or may not have thought of the fleece as a symbol of his little host, but we may learn from it the old lesson, ‘Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds.’

8) Judges 7:1-8

Judges

‘FIT, THOUGH FEW’

Jdg. 7:1 - Jdg. 7:8.

Gideon is the noblest of the judges. Courage, constancy, and caution are strongly marked in his character. The youngest son of an obscure family in a small tribe, he humbly shrinks from the task imposed on him,-not from cowardice or indolence, but from conscious weakness. Men who are worthy to do such work as his are never forward to begin it, nor backward in it when they are sure that it is God’s will. He began his war against Midian by warring against Baal, whose worship had brought the oppressor. If any thorough deliverance from the misery which departure from God has wrought is to be effected, we must destroy the idols before we attack the spoilers. Cast out sin, and you cast out sorrow. So he first earns his new name of Jerubbaal [‘Let Baal plead’], and is known as Baal’s antagonist, before he blows the trumpet of revolt. The name is an omen of victory. The hand that had smitten the idol, and had not been withered, would smite Midian. Therefore that new name is used in this chapter, which tells of the preparations for the fight and its triumphant issue. From his home among the hills, he had sent the fiery cross to the three northern tribes, who had been the mainstay of Deborah’s victory, and who now rallied around Gideon to the number of thirty-two thousand. The narrative shows us the two armies confronting each other on the opposite slopes of the valley of Jezreel, where it begins to dip steeply towards the Jordan. Gideon and his men are on the south side of the valley, above the fountain of Harod, or ‘Trembling,’ apparently so called from the confessed terror which thinned his army. The word ‘is afraid,’ in Jdg. 7:3, comes from the same root. On the other side of the glen, not far from the site of the Philistine camp on the day of Saul’s last defeat, lay the far-stretching camp of the invaders, outnumbering Israel by four to one. For seven years these Midianite marauders had paralysed Israel, and year by year had swarmed up this valley from the eastern desert, and thence by the great plain had penetrated into every corner of the land, as far south as Gaza, devouring like locusts. It is the same easy route by which, to this day, the Bedouin find their way into Palestine, whenever the weak Turkish Government is a little weaker or more corrupt than usual. Apparently, the Midianites were on their homeward march, laden with spoil, and very contemptuous of the small force across the valley, who, on their part, had not shaken off their terror of the fierce nomads who had used them as they pleased for seven years.

I. Note, as the first lesson taught here, the divinely appointed disproportion between means and end, and its purpose. Many an Israelite would look across to the long lines of black tents, and think, ‘We are too few for our task’; but to God’s eye they were too many, and the first necessity was to weed them out. The numbers must be so reduced that the victory shall be unmistakably God’s, not theirs. The same sort of procedure, and for the same reason, runs through all God’s dealings. It is illustrated in a hundred Scripture instances, and is stated most plainly by Paul in his triumphant eloquence. He revels in telling how foolish, weak, base things, that are *no* things in the world’s estimate, have been chosen to cover with shame wise, strong, honoured things, which seem to be somewhat; and he gives the same reason as our lesson does, ‘that no flesh should glory in His presence.’ Eleven poor men on one side, and all the world on the other, made fearful odds. The more unevenly matched are the respective forces, the more plainly does the victory of the weaker demand for its explanation the intervention of God. The old sneer, that ‘Providence is always on the side of the strongest battalions,’ is an audacious misreading of history, and is the very opposite of the truth. It is the weak battalions which win in the long run, for the history of every good cause is the same. First, it kindles a fire in the hearts of two or three nobodies, who are burned in earlier times, and laughed at as fools, fanatics, impracticable dreamers, in later ages, but whose convictions grow till, one day, the world wakes up to find that everybody believes them, and then it ‘builds the tombs of the prophets.’

Why should God desire that there shall be no mistake as to who wins the battle? The answer may very easily be so given as to make what is really a token of His love become an unlovely and repellent trait in His character. It is not eagerness for praise that moves Him, but longing that men may have the blessedness of recognising His hand fighting for them. It is for Israel's sake that He is so solicitous to deliver them from the delusion of their having won the victory. It is because He loves us and would fain have us made restful, confident, and strong, in the assurance of His fighting for us, that He takes pains so to order the history of His Church in the world, that it is one long attestation of the omnipotence of weakness when His power flows through it. To say 'Mine own hand hath saved me,' is to lose unspeakable peace and blessing; to say 'Not I, but the grace of God in me,' is to be serene and of good cheer in the face of outnumbering foes, and sure of victory in all conflicts. Therefore God is careful to save us from self-gratulation and self-confidence.

One lesson we may learn from this thinning of the ranks; namely, that we need not be anxious to count heads, when we are sure that we are doing His work, nor even be afraid of being in a minority. Minorities are generally right when they are the apostles of new thoughts, though the minorities which cleave to some old fossil are ordinarily wrong. The prophet and his man were alone and ringed around with enemies, when he said, 'They that be with us are more than they that be with them'; and yet he was right, for the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire. Let us be sure that we are on God's side, and then let us not mind how few are in the ranks with us, nor be afraid, though the far-extended front of the enemy threatens to curl around our flanks and enclose us. The three hundred heroes had God with them, and that was enough.

II. Note the self-applied test of courage which swept away so much chaff. According to Deu. 20:8, the standing enactment was that such a proclamation as that in Jdg. 7:3 should precede every battle. Much difficulty has been raised about the mention of Mount Gilead here, as the only Mount Gilead otherwise mentioned in Scripture lay to the east of Jordan. But perhaps the simplest solution is the true one,-that there was another hilly region so named on the western side. The map of the Palestine Exploration Fund attaches the name to the northern slopes of the western end of Gilboa, where Gideon was now encamped, and that is probably right. Be that as it may, the effect of the proclamation was startling. Two-thirds of the army melted away. No doubt, many who had flocked to Gideon's standard felt their valour oozing out at their finger ends, when they came close to the enemy, and saw their long array across the valley. It must have required some courage to confess being afraid, but the cowards were numerous enough to keep each other in countenance. Two out of three were panic-struck. I wonder if the proportion would be less in Christ's army to-day, if professing Christians were as frank as Gideon's men?

Why were the 'fearful' dismissed? Because fear is contagious; and, in undisciplined armies like Gideon's, panic, once started, spreads swiftly, and becomes frenzied confusion. The same thing is true in the work of the Church to-day. Who that has had much to do with guiding its operations has not groaned over the dead weight of the timid and sluggish souls, who always see difficulties and never the way to get over them? And who that has had to lead a company of Christian men has not often been ready to wish that he could sound out Gideon's proclamation, and bid the 'fearful and afraid' take away the chilling encumbrance of their presence, and leave him with thinned ranks of trusty men? Cowardice, dressed up as cautious prudence, weakens the efficiency of every regiment in Christ's army.

Another reason for getting rid of the fearful is that fear is the opposite of faith, and that therefore, where it is uppermost, the door by which God's power can enter to strengthen is closed. Not that faith must be free of all admixture of fear, but that it must subdue fear, if a man is to be God's warrior, fighting in His strength. Many a tremor would rock the hearts of the ten thousand who remained, but they so controlled their terror that it did not overcome their faith. We do not need, for our efficiency in Christ's service, complete exemption from fear, but we do need to make the psalmist's resolve ours: 'I will trust, and not be afraid.' Terror shuts the door against the entrance of the grace which makes us conquerors, and so fulfils its own forebodings; faith opens the door, and so fulfils its own confidences.

III. Note the final test. God required but few men, but He required that these should be fit. The first test had sifted out the brave and willing. The liquor was none the less, though so much froth had been blown off. As Thomas Fuller says, there were 'fewer persons, but not fewer men,' after the poltroons had disappeared. The second test, 'a purgatory of water,' as the same wise and witty author calls it, was still more stringent. The dwindled ranks were led down from their camp on the slopes to the fountain and brook which lay in the valley near the Midianites' camp. Gideon alone seems to have known that a test was to be applied there; but he did not know what it was to be till they reached the spring, and the soldiers did not know that they were determining their fate when they drank. The two ways of drinking clearly indicated a difference in the men. Those who glued their lips to the stream and swilled till they were full, were plainly more self-indulgent, less engrossed with their work, less patient of fatigue and thirst, than those who caught up enough in their curved palms to moisten their lips without stopping in their stride or breaking rank. The former test was self-applied, and consciously so. This is no less self-applied, though unconsciously. God shuts out no man from His army, but men shut themselves out; sometimes knowingly, by avowed disinclination for the warfare, sometimes unknowingly, by self-indulgent habits, which proclaim their unfitness.

The great lesson taught here is that self-restraint in the use of the world's goods is essential to all true Christian warfare. There are two ways of looking at and partaking of these. We may either 'drink for strength' or 'for drunkenness' .Life is to some men first a place for strenuous endeavour, and only secondly a place of refreshment. Such think of duty first and of water afterwards. To them, all the innocent joys and pleasures of the natural life are as brooks by the way, of which Christ's soldier should drink, mainly that he may be re-invigorated for conflict. There are others whose conception of life is a scene of enjoyment, for which work is unfortunately a necessary but disagreeable preliminary. One does not often see such a character in its pure perfection of sensualism; but plenty of approximations to it are visible, and ugly sights they are. The roots of it are in us all; and it cannot be too strongly insisted on that, unless it be subdued, we cannot enlist in Christ's army, and shall never be counted worthy to be His instruments. Such self-restraint is especially needful to be earnestly inculcated on young men and women, to whom life is opening as if it were a garden of delight, whose passions are strong, whose sense is keen, whose experience is slender, and to whom all earth's joys appeal more strongly than they do to those who have drunk of the cup, and know how bitter is its sediment. It is especially needful to be pealed into the ears of a generation like ours, in which senseless luxury, the result of wealth which has increased faster than the power of rightly using it, has attained such enormous proportions, and is threatening, in commercial communities especially, to drown all noble aspirations, and Spartan simplicity, and Christian self-devotion, in its muddy flood. Surely never was Gideon's test more wanted for the army of the Lord of hosts than it is to-day.

Such self-restraint gives double sweetness to enjoyments, which, when partaken of more freely, pall on the jaded palate. 'The full soul loatheth a honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet.' The senses are kept fine-edged, and the rare holidays are sweeter because they are rare. The most refined prudence of the mere sensualist would prescribe the same regimen as the Christian moralist does. But from how different a motive! Christ calls for self-restraint that we may be fit organs for His power, and bids us endure hardness that we may be good soldiers of His. If we know anything of the true sweetness of His fellowship and service, it will not be hard to drink sparingly of earthly fountains, when we have the river of His pleasures to drink from; nor will it be painful sacrifice to cast away imitation jewels, in order to clasp in our hands the true riches of His love and imparted life.

9) Judges 7:13-23

Judges

A BATTLE WITHOUT A SWORD

Jdg. 7:13 - Jdg. 7:23.

To reduce thirty-two thousand to three hundred was a strange way of preparing for a fight; and, no doubt, the handful left felt some sinking of their courage when they looked on their own small number and then on the widespread Midianite host. Gideon, too, would need heartening. So the first thing to be noted is the encouragement given him. God strengthens faith when it needs strengthening, and He has many ways of doing so. Note that Gideon's visit to the Midianite camp was on 'the same night' on which his little band was left alone after the ordeal by water. How punctually to meet our need, when it begins to be felt, does God's help come! It was by God's command that he undertook the daring adventure of stealing down to the camp. We can fancy how silently he and Phurah crept down the hillside, and, with hushed breath and wary steps, lest they should stumble on and wake some sleeper, or even rouse some tethered camel, picked their way among the tents. But they had God's command and promise, and these make men brave, and turn what would else be foolhardy into prudence. Ho put his ear to the black camel's-hair wall of one tent, and heard what his faith could not but recognise as God's message to him.

The soldier's dream was just such as such a man would dream in such circumstances. A round loaf of barley [the commonest kind of bread] was dreamed of as rolling down from a height and upsetting '*the* tent.' The use of the definite article seems to point to some particular tent, perhaps simply the one in which the dreamer lay, or perhaps the general's; but the noun may be used as a collective, and what is meant may be that the loaf went through the camp, overturning all the tents in its way. The interpretation needed no Daniel, but the immediate explanation given, shows not only the transparency of the symbol, but the dread in the Midianite ranks of Gideon's prowess. A nameless awe, which goes far to produce the defeat it dreads, was beginning to creep over them. It finds utterance both in the dream and in its translation. The tiny loaf worked effects disproportioned to its size. A rock thundering down the hillside might have mass and momentum enough to level a line of tents, but one poor loaf to do it! Some mightier than human hand must have set it going on its career. So the soldier interprets that God had delivered the army into Gideon's hand.

This dream suggests two or three considerations. In several instances we find God speaking to those outside Israel by dreams; for example, to Pharaoh and his two officers, Nebuchadnezzar, Pilate's wife. It is the lowest form of divine communication, and, like other lower forms, is not to be looked for when the higher teaching of the Spirit of Christ is open to us all.

Again, while both dream and interpretation might be accounted for on simply natural grounds, a deeper insight into the so-called 'natural' brings us to see it as all penetrated by the operations of the ever-present God. And the coincidences which brought Gideon to just that tent among the thousands along the valley at just the moment when the two startled sleepers were talking, might well strike Gideon, as they did, as being God's own fulfilment of the promise that 'what they say' would strengthen his hands for the attack [Jdg. 7:11].

Further, Gideon had already had the sign of the fleece and the dew; but God does not disdain to let him have an additional encouragement, and to let him draw confirmation of his own token from the talk of two Midianites. Faith may be buttressed by men's words, albeit its only foundation is God's.

Gideon has a place in the muster-roll of heroes of faith in Heb. 11:32, and his whole conduct in this incident proves his right to stand there. 'He worshipped,' for his soul went out in trust to God, whose voice he heard through the two Midianites, and bowed in thankfulness and submissive obedience. There could be no outward worship there, with an army of sleepers close by, but the silent uplifting of confidence and desire reaches God and strengthens the man. So he went back with new assurance of victory, and roused his sleeping band.

Mark his words as another token of his faith. The Midianite interpreter had said, '*God* has delivered'; Gideon says, 'The *Lord* has delivered.' The former name is the more general, and is natural on the lips of a heathen; the latter is the covenant name, and to use it implies reliance on the Jehovah revealed by His acts to Israel. The Midianite had said that the host was delivered into Gideon's hand; he says that it is delivered into the hands of the three hundred, suppressing himself and honouring them. God's soldiers must be willing to 'esteem others better than themselves,' and to fight for God's glory, not their own. The Midianite had said, 'This is . . . the sword of Gideon'; he bid his men cry 'the sword of *the Lord, and* of Gideon.' It was God's cause for which they were contending, not his; and yet it was his, inasmuch as he was God's instrument. 'Excellent mixture,' says Thomas Fuller, 'both joined together; admirable method, God put in the first place. Where divine blessing leads up the van, and man's valour brings up the battle, must not victory needs follow in the rear?'

Gideon does not seem to have been divinely directed to the stratagem by which the Midianites were thrown into panic. He had been promised victory, but that does not lead him to idle waiting for fulfilment of the promise. ‘To wait for God’s performance in doing nothing is to abuse that divine providence, which will so work that it will not allow us to idle’ [*Bishop Hall*]. True faith will wisely adopt means to reach promised ends, and, having used brain and hand as if all depended on ourselves, will look to Him, as if nothing depended on us, but all on Him.

There was strong faith as well as daring and skilful generalship in leading down the three hundred, with no weapons but trumpets and pitchers, to close quarters with an armed enemy so superior in numbers. And did it not need some faith, too, not only in Gideon but in God, on the part of his band, to plunge down the hill on such an errand, each man with both his hands full, and so unable to strike a blow? The other three hundred at Thermopylae have been wept over and sung; were not these three hundred as true heroes? Let us not count heads when we are called on to take God’s side. His soldiers are always in the minority, but, if He is reckoned in, the minority becomes the majority. ‘They that be with us are more than they that be with them.’

One can fancy the sleepers starting up dazed by the sudden bray of the trumpets and the wild shout of that war-cry yelled from every side. As they stumbled out of their tents, without leaders, without knowledge of the numbers of their foe, and saw all around the flaring torches, and heard the trumpet-blasts, which seemed to speak of an immense attacking force, no wonder that panic shook them, and they fled. Huge mobs of undisciplined men, as Eastern armies are, and these eminently were, are especially liable to such infectious alarms; and the larger the force, the faster does panic spread, the more unmanageable does the army become, and the more fatal are the results. Each man reflects, and so increases, his neighbour’s fear. ‘Great armies, once struck with amazement, are like wounded whales. Give them but line enough, and the fishes will be the fishermen to catch themselves.’

So the host broke up in wild disorder, and hurried in fragments towards the Jordan fords, trampling each other down as they raced through the darkness, and each man, as he ran, dreading to feel the enemy’s sword in his back next moment. `The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous is bold as a lion.’ Thus without stroke of weapon was the victory won. The battle was the Lord’s.

And the story is not antiquated in substance, however the form of the contests which God’s soldiers have to-day to fight has changed. Still it is true that we shall only wage war aright when we feel that it is His cause for which we contend, and His sword which wins the victory. If Gideon had put himself first in his warcry, or had put his own name only in it, the issue would have been different.

May we not also venture to apply the peculiar accoutrements of the victorious three hundred to ourselves? Christ’s men have no weapons to wield but the sounding out from them, as from a trumpet, of the word of the Lord, and the light of a Christian life shining through earthen vessels. If we boldly lift up our voices in the ancient war-cry, and let that word peal forth from us, and flash the light of holy lives on a dark world, we may break the sleeper’s slumbers to a glad waking, and win the noblest of victories by leading them to enlist in the army of our Captain, and to become partakers of His conquests by letting Him conquer, and thereby save them.

10)Judges 16:20

Judges

BLESSED AND TRAGIC UNCONSCIOUSNESS

Exo. 34:29. - Jdg. 16:20.

The recurrence of the same phrase in two such opposite connections is very striking. Moses, fresh from the mountain of vision, where he had gazed on as much of the glory of God as was accessible to man, caught some gleam of the light which he adoringly beheld; and a strange radiance sat on his face, unseen by himself, but visible to all others. So, supreme beauty of character comes from beholding God and talking with Him; and the bearer of it is unconscious of it.

Samson, fresh from his coarse debauch, and shorn of the locks which he had vowed to keep, strides out into the air, and tries his former feats; but his strength has left him because the Lord has left him; and the Lord has left him because, in his fleshly animalism, he has left the Lord. Like, but most unlike, Moses, he knows not his weakness. So strength, like beauty, is dependent upon contact with God, and may ebb away when that is broken, and the man may be all unaware of his weakness till he tries his power, and ignominiously fails.

These two contrasted pictures, the one so mysteriously grand and the other so tragic, may well help to illustrate for us truths that should be burned into our minds and our memories.

I. Note, then, the first thought which they both teach us, that beauty and strength come from communion with God.

In both the cases with which we are dealing these were of a merely material sort. The light on Moses' face and the strength in Samson's arm were, at the highest, but types of something far higher and nobler than themselves. But still, the presence of the one and the departure of the other alike teach us the conditions on which we may possess both in nobler form, and the certainty of losing them if we lose hold of God.

Moses' experience teaches us that the loftiest beauty of character comes from communion with God. That is the use that the Apostle makes of this remarkable incident in 2 Cor. iii, where he takes the light that shone from Moses' face as being the symbol of the better lustre that gleams from all those who 'behold [or reflect] the glory of the Lord' with unveiled faces, and, by beholding, are 'changed into the likeness' of that on which they gaze with adoration and longing. The great law to which, almost exclusively, Christianity commits the perfecting of individual character is this: Look at Him till you become like Him, and in beholding, be changed. 'Tell me the company a man keeps, and I will tell you his character,' says the old proverb. And what is true on the lower levels of daily life, that most men become assimilated to the complexion of those around them, especially if they admire or love them, is the great principle whereby worship, which is desire and longing and admiration in the superlative degree, stamps the image of the worshipped upon the character of the worshipper. 'They followed after vanity, and have become vain,' says one of the prophets, gathering up into a sentence the whole philosophy of the degradation of humanity by reason of idolatry and the worship of false gods. ‘They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them.’ The law works upwards as well as downwards, for whom we worship we declare to be infinitely good; whom we worship we long to be like; whom we worship we shall certainly imitate.

Thus, brethren, the practical, plain lesson that comes from this thought is simply this: If you want to be pure and good, noble and gentle, sweet and tender; if you desire to be delivered from your own weaknesses and selfish, sinful idiosyncrasies, the way to secure your desire is, ‘Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.’ Contemplation, which is love and longing, is the parent of all effort that succeeds. Contemplation of God in Christ is the master-key that opens this door, and makes it possible for the lowliest and the foulest amongst us to cherish unpresumptuous hopes of being like Him’ if we see Him as He is revealed here, and perfectly like Him when yonder we see Him ‘as He *is*.’

There have been in the past, and there are today, thousands of simple souls, shut out by lowliness of position and other circumstances from all the refining and ennobling influences of which the world makes so much, who yet in character and bearing, ay, and sometimes in the very look of their meek faces, are living witnesses how mighty to transform a nature is the power of loving gazing upon Jesus Christ. All of us who have had much to do with Christians of the humbler classes know that. There is no influence to refine and beautify men like that of living near Jesus Christ, and walking in the light of that Beauty which is ‘the effulgence of the divine glory and the express image of His Person.’

And in like manner as beauty so strength comes from communion with God and laying hold on Him. We can only think of Samson as a ‘saint’ in a very modified fashion, and present him as an example in a very limited degree. His dependence upon divine power was rude, and divorced from elevation of character and morality, but howsoever imperfect, fragmentary, and I might almost say to our more trained eyes, grotesque, it looks, yet there was a reality in it; and when the man was faithless to his vow, and allowed the crafty harlot’s scissors to shear from his head the token of his consecration, it was because the reality of the consecration, rude and external as that consecration was, both in itself and in its consequences, had passed away from him.

And so we may learn the lesson, taught at once by the flashing face of the lawgiver and the enfeebled force of the hero, that the two poles of perfectness in humanity, so often divorced from one another-beauty and strength-have one common source, and depend for their loftiest position upon the same thing. God possesses both in supremest degree, being the Almighty and the All-fair; and we possess them in limited, but yet possibly progressive, measure, through dependence upon Him. The true force of character, and the true power for work, and every real strength which is not disguised weakness, ‘a lath painted to look like iron,’ come on condition of our keeping close by God. The Fountain is open for you all; see to it that you resort thither.

II. And now the second thought of my text is that the bearer of the radiance is unconscious of it.

‘Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone.’ In all regions of life, the consummate apex and crowning charm of excellence is unconsciousness of excellence. Whenever a man begins to imagine that he is good, he begins to be bad; and every virtue and beauty of character is robbed of some portion of its attractive fairness when the man who bears it knows, or fancies, that he possesses it. The charm of childhood is its perfect unconsciousness, and the man has to win back the child’s heritage, and become ‘as a little child,’ if he would enter into and dwell in the ‘Kingdom of Heaven.’ And so in the loftiest region of all, that of the religious life, you may be sure that the more a man is like Christ, the less he knows it; and the better he is, the less he suspects it. The reasons why that is so, point, at the same time, to the ways by which we may attain to this blessed self-oblivion. So let me put just in a word or two some simple, practical thoughts.

Let us, then, try to lose ourselves in Jesus Christ. That way of self-oblivion is emancipation and blessedness and power. It is safe for us to leave all thoughts of our miserable selves behind us, if instead of them we have the thought of that great, sweet, dear Lord, filling mind and heart. A man walking on a tight-rope will be far more likely to fall, if he is looking at his toes, than if he is looking at the point to which he is going. If we fix our eyes on Jesus, then we can safely look, neither to our feet nor to the gulfs; but straight at Him gazing, we shall straight to Him advance. ‘Looking off’ from ourselves ‘unto Jesus’ is safe; looking off anywhere else is peril. Seek that self-oblivion which comes from self being swallowed up in the thought of the Lord.

And again, I would say, think constantly and longingly of the unattained. ‘Brethren! I count not myself to have apprehended.’ Endless aspiration and a stinging consciousness of present imperfection are the loftiest states of man here below. The beholders down in the valley, when they look up, may see our figures against the skyline, and fancy us at the summit, but our loftier elevation reveals untrodden heights beyond; and we have only risen so high in order to discern more clearly how much higher we have to rise. Dissatisfaction with the present is the condition of excellence in all pursuits of life, and in the Christian life even more eminently than in all others, because the goal to be attained is in its very nature infinite; and therefore ensures the blessed certainty of continual progress, accompanied here, indeed, with the sting and bite of a sense of imperfection, but one day to be only sweetness, as we think of how much there is yet to be won in addition to the perfection of the present.

So, dear friends, the best way to keep ourselves unconscious of present attainments is to set our faces forward, and to make ‘all experience’ as ‘an arch wherethro’ gleams that untraveiled world to which we move.’ ‘Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone.’

The third practical suggestion that I would make is, cultivate a clear sense of your own imperfections. We do not need to try to learn our goodness. That will suggest itself to us only too clearly; but what we do need is to have a very clear sense of our shortcomings and failures, our faults of temper, our faults of desire, our faults in our relations to our fellows, and all the other evils that still buzz and sting and poison our blood. Has not the best of us enough of these to knock all the conceit out of us? A true man will never be so much ashamed of himself as when he is praised, for it will always send him to look into the deep places of his heart, and there will be a swarm of ugly, creeping things under the stones there, if he will only turn them up and look beneath. So let us lose ourselves in Christ, let us set our faces to the unattained future, let us clearly understand our own faults and sins.

III. Thirdly, the strong man made weak is unconscious of his weakness.

I do not mean here to touch at all upon the general thought that, by its very nature, all evil tends to make us insensitive to its presence. Conscience becomes dull by practice of sin and by neglect of conscience, until that which at first was as sensitive as the palm of a little child’s hand becomes as if it were ‘seared with a hot iron.’ The foulness of the atmosphere of a crowded hall is not perceived by the people in it. It needs a man to come in from the outer air to detect it. We can accustom ourselves to any mephitic and poisonous atmosphere, and many of us live in one all our days, and do not know that there is any need of ventilation or that the air is not perfectly sweet. The ‘deceitfulness’ of sin is its great weapon.

But what I desire to point out is an even sadder thing than that-namely, that Christian people may lose their strength because they let go their hold upon God, and know nothing about it. Spiritual declension, all unconscious of its own existence, is the very history of hundreds of nominal Christians amongst us, and, I dare say, of some of us. The very fact that you do not suppose the statement to have the least application to yourself is perhaps the very sign that it does apply. When the lifeblood is pouring out of a man, he faints before he dies. The swoon of unconsciousness is the condition of some professing Christians. Frost-bitten limbs are quite comfortable, and only tingle when circulation is coming back. I remember a great elm-tree, the pride of an avenue in the south, that had spread its branches for more years than the oldest man could count, and stood, leafy and green. Not until a winter storm came one night and laid it low with a crash did anybody suspect what everybody saw in the morning-that the heart was eaten out of it, and nothing left but a shell of bark. Some Christian people are like that; they manage to grow leaves, and even some fruit, but when the storm comes they will go down, because the heart has been out of their religion for years. ‘Samson wist not that the Lord was departed from him.’

And so, brother, because there are so many things that mask the ebbing away of a Christian life, and because our own self-love and habits come in to hide declension, let me earnestly exhort you and myself to watch ourselves very narrowly. Unconsciousness does not mean ignorant presumption or presumptuous ignorance. It is difficult to make an estimate of ourselves by poking into our own sentiments and supposed feelings and convictions, and the estimate is likely to be wrong. There is a better way than that. Two things tell what a man is-one, what he wants, and the other, what he does. As the will is, the man is. Where do the currents of your desires set? If you watch their flow, you may be pretty sure whether your religious life is an ebbing or a rising tide. The other way to ascertain what we are is rigidly to examine and judge what we do. 'Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord.' Actions are the true test of a man. Conduct is the best revelation of character, especially in regard to ourselves. So let us 'watch and be sober'-sober in our estimate of ourselves, and determined to find every lurking evil, and to drag it forth into the light.

Again, let me say, let us ask God to help us. 'Search me, O God! and try me.' We shall never rightly understand what we are, unless we spread ourselves out before Him and crave that Divine Spirit, who is 'the candle of the Lord,' to be carried ever in our hands into the secret recesses of our sinful hearts. 'Anoint thine eyes with eye salve that thou mayest see,' and get the eye salve by communion with God, who will supply thee a standard by which to try thy poor, stained, ragged righteousness. The *collyrium*, the eye salve, may be, will be, painful when it is rubbed into the lids, but it will clear the sight; and the first work of Him, whose dearest name is *Comforter*, is to convince of sin.

And, last of all, let us keep near to Jesus Christ, near enough to Him to feel His touch, to hear His voice, to see His face, and to carry down with us into the valley some radiance on our countenances which may tell even the world, that we have been up where the Light lives and reigns.

'Because thou sayest, I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing, and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eye salve, that thou mayest see.'

11)Judges 16:21-31

Judges

STRENGTH PROFANED AND LOST

Jdg. 16:21 - Jdg. 16:31.

Nobody could be less like the ordinary idea of an Old Testament ‘saint’ than Samson. His gift from ‘the spirit of the Lord’ was simply physical strength, and it was associated with the defects of his qualities. His passions were strong, and apparently uncontrolled. He had no moral elevation or religious fervour. He led no army against the Philistines, nor seems to have had any fixed design of resisting them. He seeks a wife among them, and is ready to feast and play at riddles with them. When he does attack them, it is because he is stung by personal injuries; and it is only with his own arm that he strikes. His exploits have a mixture of grim humour and fierce hatred quite unlike anything else in Scripture, and more resembling the horse-play of Homeric or Norse heroes than the stern purpose and righteous wrath of a soldier who felt that he was God’s instrument. We seem to hear his loud laughter as he ties the firebrands to the struggling jackals, or swings the jaw-bone. A strange champion for Jehovah! But we must not leave out of sight, in estimating his character, the Nazarite vow, which his parents had made before his birth, and he had endorsed all his life.

That supplies the substratum which is lacking, The unshorn hair and the abstinence from wine were the signs of consecration to God, which might often fail of reaching the deepest recesses of the will and spirit, but still was real, and gave the point of contact for the divine gift of strength. Samson’s strength depended on his keeping the vow, of which the outward sign was the long, matted locks; and therefore, when he let these be shorn, he voluntarily cast away his dependence on and consecration to God, and his strength ebbed from him. He had broken the conditions on which he received it, and it disappeared. So the story which connects the loss of his long hair with the loss of his superhuman power has a worthy meaning, and puts in a picturesque form an eternal truth.

We see here, first, Samson the prisoner. Milton has caught the spirit of the sad picture in Jdg. 16:21 - Jdg. 16:22, in that wonderful line,

'Eyeless, in Gaza, at the mill, with slaves,'

in which the clauses drop heavily like slow tears, each adding a new touch of woe. The savage manners of the times used the literal forcing out of the eyes from their sockets as the easiest way of reducing dangerous enemies to harmlessness. Pitiable as the loss was, Samson was better blind than seeing. The lust of the eye had led him astray, and the loss of his sight showed him his sin. Fetters of brass betrayed his jailers' dread of his possibly returning strength; and the menial task to which he was set was meant as a humiliation, in giving him woman's work to do, as if this were all for which the eclipsed hero was now fit. Generous enemies are merciful; the baser sort reveal their former terror by the indignities they offer to their prisoner.

In Samson we see an impersonation of Israel. Like him, the nation was strong so long as it kept the covenant of its God. Like him, it was ever prone to follow after strange loves. Its Delilahs were the gods of the heathen, in whose laps it laid its anointed head, and at whose hands it suffered the loss of its God-given strength; for, like Samson, Israel was weak when it forgot its consecration, and its punishment came from the objects of its infatuated desires. Like him, it was blinded, bound, and reduced to slavery, for all its power was held, as was his, on condition of loyalty to God. His life is as a mirror, in which the nation might see their own history reflected; and the lesson taught by the story of the captive hero, once so strong, and now so weak, is the lesson which Moses taught the nation: 'Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, by reason of the abundance of all things: therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies which the Lord shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things, and He shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck' [Deu. 28:47 - Deu. 28:48]. The blind Samson, chained, at the mill, has a warning for us, too. That is what God's heroes come to, if once they prostitute the God-given strength to the base loves of self and the flattering world. We are strong only as we keep our hearts clear of lower loves, and lean on God alone. Delilah is most dangerous when honeyed words drop from her lips. The world's praise is more harmful than its censure. Its favours are only meant to draw the secret of our strength from us, that we may be made weak; and nothing gives the Philistines so much pleasure as the sight of God’s warriors caught in their toils and robbed of power.

But Samson’s misery was Samson’s blessedness. The ‘howbeit’ of Jdg. 16:22 is more than a compensation for all the wretchedness. The growth of his hair is not there mentioned as a mere natural fact, nor with the superstitious notion that his hair made him strong. God made him strong on condition of his keeping his vow of consecration. The long matted locks were the visible sign that he kept it. Their loss was the consequence of his own voluntary breach of it. So their growth was the visible token that the fault was being repaired. Chastisement wrought sorrow; and in the bondage of the prison he found freedom from the worse chains of sin, and in its darkness felt the dawning of a better light. As Bishop Hall puts it: ‘His hair grew together with his repentance, and his strength with his hair.’ The cruelties of the Philistines were better for him than their kindness. The world outwits itself when it presses hard on God’s deserters, and thus drives them to repent. God mercifully takes care that His wandering children shall not have an easy time of it; and his chastisements, at their sharpest, are calls to us to come back to Him. Well for those, even if in chains, who know their meaning, and yield to it.

II. We have here Samson,-the occasion of godless triumph. The worst consequence of the fall of a servant of God is that it gives occasion for God’s enemies to blaspheme, and reflects discredit on Him, as if He were vanquished. Samson’s capture is Dagon’s glory. The strife between Philistia and Israel was, in the eyes of both combatants, a struggle between their gods; and so the men of Gaza lit their sacrificial fires and sent up their hymns to their monstrous deity as victor. What would Samson’s bitter thoughts be, as the sound of the wild rejoicings reached him in his prison? And is not all this true to-day? If ever some conspicuous Christian champion falls into sin or inconsistency, how the sky is rent with shouts of malicious pleasure! What paragons of virtue worldly men become all at once! How swiftly the conclusion is drawn that all Christians are alike, and none of them any better than the non-Christian world! How much more harm the one flaw does than all the good which a life of service has done!

The faults of Christians are the bulwarks of unbelief. `The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you.' The honour of Christ is a sacred trust, and it is in the keeping of us His followers. Our sins do not only darken our own reputation, but they cloud His. Dagon's worshippers have a right to rejoice when they have Samson safe in their prison, with his eyes out.

III. We have Samson made a buffoon for drunkards. The feasts of heathenism were wild orgies, very unlike the pure joy of the sacrificial meals in Jehovah's worship. Dagon's temple was filled with a drunken crowd, whose mirth would be made more boisterous by a spice of cruelty. So, a roar of many voices calls for Samson, and this deepest degradation is not spared him. The words employed for 'make sport' seem to require that we should understand that he was not brought out to be the passive object of their gibes and drunken mockery, but was set to play the fool for their delectation. They imply that he had to dance and laugh, while three thousand gaping Philistines, any one of whom would have run for his life if he had been free, fed their hatred by the sight. Perhaps his former reputation for mirth and riddles suggested this new cruelty. Surely there is no more pathetic picture than that of the blind hero, with such thoughts as we know were seething in him, dragged out to make a Philistine holiday, and set to play the clown, while the bitterness of death was in his soul. And this is what God's soldiers come down to, when they forget Him: 'they that wasted us required of us mirth.'

Wearied with his humiliating exertions, the blind captive begs the boy who guided him to let him lean, till he can breathe again, on the pillars that held up the light roof. We need not discuss the probable architecture of Dagon's temple, of which we know nothing. Only we may notice that it is not said that there were only *two* pillars, but rather necessarily implied that there were more than two, for those against which he leaned were 'the two middle' ones. It is quite easy to understand how, if there were a row of them, knocking out the two strongest central ones would bring the whole thing down, especially when there was such a load on the flat roof. Apparently the principal people were in the best places on the ground floor, sheltered from the sun by the roof, on which the commonalty were clustered, all waiting for what their newly discovered mountebank would do next, after he had breathed himself. The pause was short, and they little dreamed of what was to follow.

IV. We have the last cry and heroic death of Samson. It is not to be supposed that his prayer was audible to the crowd, even if it were spoken aloud. It is not an elevated prayer, but is, like all the rest of his actions at their best, deeply marked with purely personal motives. The loss of his two eyes is uppermost in his mind, and he wants to be revenged for them. Instead of trying to make a lofty hero out of him, it is far better to recognise frankly the limitations of his character and the imperfections of his religion. The distance between him and the New Testament type of God's soldier measures the progress which the revelation of God's will has made, and the debt we owe to the Captain of the host for the perfect example which He has set. The defects and impurity of Samson's zeal, which yet was accepted of God, preach the precious lesson that God does not require virtues beyond the standard of the epoch of revelation at which His servants stand, and that imperfection does not make service unacceptable. If the merely human passion of vengeance throbbed fiercely in Samson's prayer, he had never heard 'Love your enemies'; and, for his epoch, the destruction of the enemies of God and Israel was duty. He was not the only soldier of God who has let personal antagonism blend with his zeal for God; and we have less excuse, if we do it, than he had.

But there is the true core of religion in the prayer. It is penitence which pleads, 'Remember me, O Lord God!' He knows that his sin has broken the flow of loving divine thought to him, but he asks that the broken current may be renewed. Many a silent tear had fallen from Samson's blind eyes, before that prayer could have come to his lips, as he leaned on the great pillars. Clear recognition of the Source of his strength is in the prayer; if ever he had forgotten, in Delilah's lap, where it came from, he had recovered his conscious dependence amid the misery of the prison. There is humility in the prayer 'Only this once.' He feels that, after such a fall, no more of the brilliant exploits of former days are possible. They who have brought such despite on Jehovah and such honour to Dagon may be forgiven, and even restored to much of their old vigour, but they must not be judges in Israel any more. The best thing left for the penitent Samson is death.

He had been unconscious of the departure of his strength, but he seems to have felt it rushing back into his muscles; so he grasps the two pillars with his mighty hands; the crowd sees that the pause for breath is over, and prepares to watch the new feats. Perhaps we may suppose that his last words were shouted aloud, ‘Let me die with the Philistines!’ and before they have been rightly taken in by the mob, he sways himself backwards for a moment, and then, with one desperate forward push, brings down the two supports, and the whole thing rushes down to hideous ruin amid shrieks and curses and groans. But Samson lies quiet below the ruins, satisfied to die in such a cause.

He ‘counted not his life dear’ unto himself, that he might be God’s instrument for God’s terrible work. The last of the judges teaches us that we too, in a nobler cause, and for men’s life, not their destruction, must be ready to hazard and give our lives for the great Captain, who in His death has slain more of our foes than He did in His life, and has laid it down as the law for all His army, ‘He that loseth his life for My sake shall find it.’

How beautifully the quiet close of the story follows the stormy scene of the riotous assembly and the sudden destruction. The Philistines, crushed by this last blow, let the dead hero’s kindred search for his body amid the chaos, and bear it reverently up from the plain to the quiet grave among the hills of Dan, where Manoah his father slept. There they lay that mighty frame to rest. It will be troubled no more by fierce passions or degrading chains. Nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it. The penitent heroism of its end makes us lenient to the flaws in its course; and we leave the last of the judges to sleep in his grave, recognising in him, with all his faults and grossness, a true soldier of God, though in strange garb.

Ruth

1) RUTH 1:16-22

1) Ruth 1:16-22

Ruth

A GENTLE HEROINE, A GENTILE CONVERT

Rth. 1:16 - Rth. 1:22.

The lovely idyl of *Ruth* is in sharp contrast with the bloody and turbulent annals of *Judges*. It completes, but does not contradict, these, and happily reminds us of what we are apt to forget in reading such pages, that no times are so wild but that in them are quiet corners, green oases, all the greener for their surroundings, where life glides on in peaceful isolation from the tumult. Men and women love and work and weep and laugh, the gossips of Bethlehem talk over Naomi's return ['they said,' in Rth. 1:19, is feminine], Boaz stands among his corn, and no sounds of war disturb them. Thank God! the blackest times were not so dismal in reality as they look in history. There are clefts in the grim rock, and flowers blooming, sheltered in the clefts. The peaceful pictures of this little book, multiplied many thousand times, have to be set as a background to the lurid pictures of the *Book of Judges*.

The text begins in the middle of Naomi's remonstrance with her two daughters-in-law. We need not deal with the former part of the conversation, nor follow Orpah as she goes back to her home and her gods. She is the first in the sad series of those, 'not far from the kingdom of God,' who needed but a little more resolution at the critical moment, and, for want of it, shut themselves out from the covenant, and sank back to a world which they had half renounced.

So these two lonely widows are left, each seeking to sacrifice herself for the other. Who shall decide which was the more noble and truly womanly in her self-forgetfulness,-the elder, sadder heart, which strove to secure for the other some joy and fellowship at the price of its own deepened solitude; or the younger, which steeled itself against entreaties, and cast away friends and country for love's sweet sake? We rightly praise Ruth's vow, but we should not forget Naomi's unselfish pleading to be left to tread her weary path alone.

Ruth's passionate burst of tenderness is immortal. It has put into fitting words for all generations the deepest thoughts of loving hearts, and comes to us over all the centuries between, as warm and living as when it welled up from that gentle, heroic soul. The two strongest emotions of our nature are blended in it, and each gives a portion of its fervour-love and religion.

So closely are they interwoven that it is difficult to allot to each its share in the united stream; but, without trying to determine to which of them the greater part of its volume and force is due, and while conscious of the danger of spoiling such words by comments weaker than themselves, we may seek to put into distinct form the impressions which they make.

We see in them the heroism of gentleness. Put the sweet figure of the Moabitess beside the heroes of the *Book of Judges*, and we feel the contrast. But is there anything in its pages more truly heroic than her deed, as she turned her back on the blue hills of Moab, and chose the joyless lot of the widowed companion of a widow aged and poor, in a land of strangers, the enemies of her country and its gods? It is easier far to rush on the spears of the foe, amid the whirl and excitement of battle, than to choose with open eyes so dreary a lifelong path. The gentleness of a true woman covers a courage of the patient, silent sort, which, in its meek steadfastness, is nobler than the contempt of personal danger, which is vulgarly called bravery. It is harder to endure than to strike. The supreme type of heroic, as of all, virtue is Jesus Christ, whose gentleness was the velvet glove on the iron hand of an inflexible will. Of that best kind of heroes there are few brighter examples, even in the annals of the Church which numbers its virgin martyrs by the score, than this sweet figure of Ruth, as the eager vow comes from her young lips, which had already tasted sorrow, and were ready to drink its bitterest cup at the call of duty. She may well teach us to rectify our judgments, and to recognise the quiet heroism of many a modest life of uncomplaining suffering. Her example has a special message to women, and exhorts them to see to it that, in the cultivation of the so-called womanly excellence of gentleness, they do not let it run into weakness, nor, on the other hand, aim at strength, to the loss of meekness. The yielding birch-tree, the ‘lady of the woods,’ bends in all its elastic branches and tossing ringlets of foliage to the wind; but it stands upright after storms that level oaks and pines. God’s strength is gentle strength, and ours is likest His when it is meek and lowly, like that of the ‘strong Son of God.’

Ruth’s great words may suggest, too, the surrender which is the natural language of true love. Her story comes in among all these records of bloodshed and hate, like a bit of calm blue sky among piles of ragged thunder-clouds, or a breath of fresh air in the oppressive atmosphere of a slaughter-house. Even in these wild times there was still a quiet corner where love could spread his wings. The question has often been asked, what the purpose of the *Book of Ruth* is, and various answers have been given. The genealogical table at the end, showing David's descent from her, the example which it supplies of the reception of a Gentile into Israel, and other reasons for its presence in Scripture, have been alleged, and, no doubt, correctly. But the Bible is a very human book, just because it is a divine one; and surely it would be no unworthy object to enshrine in its pages a picture of the noble working of that human love which makes so much of human life. The hallowing of the family is a distinct purpose of the Old Testament, and the beautiful example which this narrative gives of the elevating influence of domestic affection entitles it to a place in the canon. How many hearts, since Ruth spoke her vow, have found in it the words that fitted their love best! How often they have been repeated by quivering lips, and heard as music by loving ears! How solemn, and even awful, is that perennial freshness of words which came hot and broken by tears, from lips that have long ago mouldered into dust! What has made them thus 'enduring for ever,' is that they express most purely the self-sacrifice which is essential to all noble love. The very inmost longing of love is to give itself away to the object beloved. It is not so much a desire to acquire as to bestow, or, rather, the antithesis of giving and receiving melts into one action which has a twofold motion,-one outwards, to give; one inwards, to receive. To love is to give one's self away, therefore all lesser givings are its food and delight; and, when Ruth threw herself on Naomi's withered breast, and sobbed out her passionate resolve, she was speaking the eternal language of love, and claiming Naomi for her own, in the very act of giving herself to Naomi, Human love should be the parent of all self-sacrificing as of all heroic virtues; and in our homes we do not live in love, as we ought, unless it leads us to the daily exercise of self-suppression and surrender, which is not felt to be loss but the natural expression of our love, which it would be a crime against it, and a pain to ourselves, to withhold. If Ruth's temper lived in our families, they would be true 'houses of God' and 'gates of heaven.'

We hear in Ruth's words also that forsaking of all things which is an essential of all true religion. We have said that it was difficult to separate, in the words, the effects of love to Naomi from those of adoption of Naomi's faith. Apparently Ruth’s adhesion to the worship of Jehovah was originally due to her love for her mother-in-law. It is in order to be one with her in all things that she says, ‘Thy God shall be my God.’ And it was because Jehovah was Naomi’s God that Ruth chose Him for hers. But whatever the origin of her faith, it was genuine and robust enough to bear the strain of casting Chemosh and the gods of Moab behind her, and setting herself with full purpose of heart to seek the Lord. Abandoning them was digging an impassable gulf between herself and all her past, with its friendships, loves, and habits. She is one of the first, and not the least noble, of the long series of those who ‘suffer the loss of all things, and count them but dung, that they may win’ God for their dearest treasure. We have seen how, in her, human love wrought self-sacrifice. But it was not human love alone that did it. The cord that drew her was twisted of two strands, and her love to Naomi melted into her love of Naomi’s God. Blessed they who are drawn to the knowledge and love of the fountain of all love in heaven by the sweetness of the characters of His representatives in their homes, and who feel that they have learned to know God by seeing Him in dear ones, whose tenderness has revealed His, and whose gracious words have spoken of His grace! If Ruth teaches us that we must give up all, in order truly to follow the Lord, the way by which she came to her religion may teach us how great are the possibilities, and consequently the duties, of Christians to the members of their own families. If we had more elder women like Naomi, we should have more younger women like Ruth.

The self-sacrifice which is possible and blessed, even to inferior natures, at the bidding of love, is too precious to be squandered on earthly objects. Men’s capacities for it, at the call of dear ones here, should be the rebuke of their grudging surrender to God. He gave the capacity that it might find its true field of operation in our relation to Him. But how much more ready we all are to give up everything for the sake of our Naomis than for His sake: and how we may be our own accusers, if the measure of our devotion to them be contrasted with the measure of our devotion to God!

Finally, we may see, in Ruth’s entrance into the religion of Israel, a picture of what was intended to be the effect of Israel’s relation with the Gentile world.

The household of Elimelech emigrated to Moab in a famine, and, whether that were right or wrong, they were there among heathens as Jehovah worshippers. They were meant to be missionaries, and, in Ruth's case, the purpose was fulfilled. She became the 'first-fruits of the Gentiles'; and one aim of the book, no doubt, is to show how the believing Gentile was to be incorporated into Israel. Boaz rejoices over her, and especially over her conversion, and prays, 'A full reward be given thee of Jehovah, the God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.' She is married to him, and becomes the ancestress of David, and, through him, of the Messiah. All this is a beautiful completion to the other side of the picture which the fierce fighting in Judges makes prominent, and teaches that Israel's relation to the nations around was not to be one of mere antagonism, but that they had another mission than destruction, and were set in their land, as the candlestick in the Tabernacle, that light might stream out into the darkness of the desert. The story of the Moabitess, whose blood flowed in David's veins, was a standing protest against the later narrow exclusiveness which called Gentiles 'dogs,' and prided itself on outward connection with the nation, in the exact degree in which it lost real union with the nation's God, and real understanding of the nation's mission.

We have left ourselves no space to speak of the remainder of this passage, which is of less importance. It gives us a lively picture of the stir in the little town of Bethlehem, as the two way-worn women came into it, in their strange attire, and attracting notice by travelling alone. As we have observed, 'they said,' in Rth. 1:19, is feminine. The women of the village buzzed round the strangers, as they sat in silence, perhaps by that well at the gate, of which, long after, David longed to drink. Wonder, curiosity, and possibly a spice of malice, mingle in the question, 'Is *this* Naomi?' It is heartless, at any rate; it had been better to have found them food and shelter than to have let them sit, the mark for sharp tongues. Naomi's bitter words seem to be moved partly by a sense of the coldness of the reception. She realises that she has indeed come back to a changed world, where there will be little sympathy except such as Ruth can give. It is with almost passion that she abjures her name 'Pleasant,' as a satire on her woful lot, and bids them call her 'Bitter,' as truer to fact now. The burst of sorrow is natural, as she finds herself again where she had been a wife and mother, and 'remembers happier things.' Her faith wavers, and her words almost reproach God. The exaggerations in which memory is apt to indulge colour them. ‘I went out full.’ She has forgotten that they ‘went out’ to seek for bread. She only remembers that four went away, and three sleep in Moab. Possibly she thinks of their emigration as a sin, and traces her dear ones’ deaths to God’s displeasure on its account. His ‘testifying’ against her probably means that His providence in bereaving her witnessed to His disapprobation. But, whether that be so or not, her wild words are not those of a patient sufferer, who bows to His will. But true faith may sometimes break down, and Ruth’s ‘trusting under the wings of Jehovah’ is proof enough that, in the long years of lonely sorrow, Naomi’s example had shown how peaceful and safe was the shelter there.

1 Samuel

1) 1 SAMUEL 3:1-14
2) 1 SAMUEL 4:1-18
3) 1 SAMUEL 7:1-12
4) 1 SAMUEL 8:4-20
5) 1 SAMUEL 9:15-27
6) 1 SAMUEL 10:17-27
7) 1 SAMUEL 12:1-12
8) 1 SAMUEL 12:13-15
9) 1 SAMUEL 12:16-25
10) 1 SAMUEL 15:10-23
11) 1 SAMUEL 16:1-13
12) 1 SAMUEL 17:32-51
13) 1 SAMUEL 18:5-16
14) 1 SAMUEL 20:1-13
15) 1 SAMUEL 24:4-17
16) 1 SAMUEL 26:5-12
17) 1 SAMUEL 26:21-25
18) 1 SAMUEL 28:15
19) 1 SAMUEL 29:3
20) 1 SAMUEL 30:6
21) 1 SAMUEL 30:24
22) 1 SAMUEL 31:1-13

1) 1 Samuel 3:1-14

1 Samuel

THE CHILD PROPHET

1Sa. 3:1 - 1Sa. 3:14.

The opening words of this passage are substantially repeated from 1Sa. 2:11, 1Sa. 2:18. They come as a kind of refrain, contrasting the quiet, continuous growth and holy service of the child Samuel with the black narrative of Eli's riotous sons. While the hereditary priests were plunging into debauchery, and making men turn away from the Tabernacle services, Hannah's son was ministering unto the Lord, and, though no priest, was 'girt with an ephod.' This white flower blossomed on a dunghill. The continuous growth of a character, from a child serving God, and to old age walking in the same path, is the great lesson which the story of Samuel teaches us. 'The child is father of the man,' and all his long days are 'bound each to each' by true religion. There are two types of experience among God's greatest servants. Paul, made an Apostle from a persecutor, heads the one class. Timothy in the New Testament and Samuel in the Old, represent the other. An Augustine or a Bunyan is made the more earnest, humble, and whole-hearted by the remembrance of a wasted youth and of God's arresting mercy. But there are a serenity and continuity about a life which has grown up in the fear of God that have their own charm and blessing. It is well to have 'much transgression' forgiven, but it may be better to have always been 'innocent' and ignorant of it. Pardon cleanses sin, and even turns the memory of it into an ally of holiness; but traces are left on character, and, at the best, years have been squandered which do not return. Samuel is the pattern of child religion and service, to which teachers should aim that their children may be conformed. How beautifully his double obedience is expressed in the simple words! His service was 'unto the Lord,' and it was 'before Eli'; that is to say, he learned his work from the old man, and in obeying him he served God. The child's religion is largely obedience to human guides, and he serves God best by doing what he is bid,-a lesson needed in our days by both parents and children.

Samuel’s peaceful service is contrasted, in the second half of the first verse, with the sad cessation of divine revelations in that dreary time of national laxity. A demoralised priesthood, an alienated people, a silent God,-these are the outstanding features of the period when this fair life of continuous worship unfolded itself. This flower grew in a desert. The voice of God had become a tradition of the past, not an experience of the present. ‘Rare’ conveys the idea better than ‘precious.’ The intention is not to tell the estimate in which the word was held, but the infrequency of its utterance, as appears from the following parallel clause. The fact is mentioned in order to complete the picture of Samuel’s ‘environment’ to fling into relief against that background his service, and to prepare the way for the narrative of the beginning of an epoch of divine speech. When priests are faithless and people careless, God’s voice will often sound from lowly childlike lips. The man who is to be His instrument in carrying on His work will often come from the very centre of the old order, into which he is to breathe new life, and on which he is to impress a new stamp.

The artless description of the night in the Tabernacle is broken by the more general notice of Eli’s dim sight, which the Revised Version rightly throws into a parenthesis. It is somewhat marred, too, by the transposition which the Authorised Version, following some more ancient ones, has made, in order to avoid saying, as the Hebrew plainly does, that Samuel slept in the ‘Temple of the Lord, where the ark was.’ The picture is much more vivid and tender, if we conceive of the dim-eyed old man, lying somewhat apart; of the glimmering light, nearly extinct but still faintly burning; and of the child laid to sleep in the Tabernacle. Surely the picturesque contrast between the sanctity of the ark and the innocent sleep of childhood is meant to strike us, and to serve as connecting the place with the subsequent revelation. Childlike hearts, which thus quietly rest in the ‘secret place of the Most High,’ and day and night are near His ark, will not fail of hearing His voice. He sleeps secure who sleeps ‘beneath the shadow of the Almighty.’ May not these particulars, too, be meant to have some symbolic significance? Night hung over the nation. The spiritual eye of the priest was dim, and the order seemed growing old and decrepit, but the lamp of God had not altogether gone out; and if Eli was growing blind, Samuel was full of fresh young life. The darkest hour is that before the dawn; and that silent sanctuary, with the slumbering old half-blind priest and the expiring lamp, may stand for an emblem of the state of Israel.

The thrice-repeated and misunderstood call may yield lessons of value. We note the familiar form of the call. There is no vision, no symbol of the divine glory, such as other prophets had, but an articulate voice, so human-like that it is thought to be Eli's. Such a kind of call fitted the child's stature best. We note the swift, cheery obedience to what he supposes to be Eli's voice. He sprang up at once, and 'ran to Eli,'-a pretty picture of cheerful service, grudging not his broken sleep, which, no doubt, had often been similarly broken by similar calls. Perhaps it was in order to wait on Eli, quite as much as to tend the lamp or open the gates, that the singular arrangement was made of his sleeping in the Temple; and the reason for the previous parenthesis about Eli's blindness may have been to explain why Samuel slept near him. Where were Eli's sons? They should have been their father's attendants, and the watchers 'by night . . . in the house of the Lord'; but they were away rioting, and the care of both Temple and priest was left to a child.

The old man's heart evidently went out to the boy. How tenderly he bids him lie down again! How affectionately he calls him 'my son,' as if he was already beginning to feel that this was his true successor, and not the blackguards that were breaking his heart! The two were a pair of friends: on the one side were sedulous care and swift obedience by night and by day; on the other were affection and a discernment of coming greatness, made the clearer by the bitter contrast with his own children's lives. The old and the young are good companions for one another, and often understand each other better and help each other more than either does his contemporaries.

Samuel mistook God's voice for Eli's, as we all often do. And not less often we make the converse blunder, and mistake Eli's voice for God's. It needs a very attentive ear, and a heart purged from selfishness and self-will, and ready for obedience, to know when God speaks, though men may be His mouthpieces, and when men speak, though they may call themselves His messengers. The child's mistake was venial. It is less pardonable and more dangerous when repeated by us. If we would be guarded against it, we must be continually where Samuel was, and we must not *sleep* in the Temple, but ‘watch and be sober.’

Eli’s perception that it was God who spoke must have had a pang in it. It is not easy for the old to recognise that the young hear God’s voice more clearly than they, nor for the superior to be glad when he is passed over and new truth dawns on the inferior. But, if there were any such feeling, it is silenced with beautiful self-abnegation, and he tells the wondering child the meaning of the voice and the answer he must make. What higher service can any man do to his fellows, old or young, than to help them to discern God’s call and to obey it? What nobler conception of a teacher’s work is there than that? Eli heard no voice, from which we may probably conclude that, however real the voice, it was not audible to sense; but he taught Samuel to interpret and answer the voice which he heard, and thus won some share of a prophet’s reward.

With what expectation in his young heart Samuel lay down again in his place! This time there is an advance in the form of the call, for only now do we read that the Lord ‘came, and stood, and called’ as before. A manifestation, addressed to the inward eye, accompanied that to the ear. There is no attempt at describing, nor at softening down, the frank ‘anthropomorphism’ of the representation, which is the less likely to mislead the more complete it is. Samuel had heard Him before; he sees Him now, and mistake is impossible. But there is no terror nor recoil from the presence. The child’s simplicity saves from that, and the child’s purity; for his little life had been a growing in service and ‘in favour with God and man.’

The answer that came from the child’s lips meant far more than the child knew. It is the answer which we are all bound to make. Let us see how deep and wide its scope is. It expresses the entire surrender of the will to the will of God. That is the secret of all peace and nobleness. There is nothing happy or great for man in this world but to love and do God’s will. All else is nought. This is solid. ‘The world passeth away, . . . but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’ Everything besides is show and delusion, and a life directed to it is fleeting as the cloud-wrack that sweeps across the sky, and, whether it is shone on or is black, is equally melting away. Happy the child who begins with such surrender of self to be God's instrument, and who, like Samuel, can stand up at the end and challenge men's judgment on his course!

The answer vows prompt obedience to yet undisclosed duty. God ever calls His servants to tasks which only by degrees are made known. So Paul in his conversion was bid to go into Damascus, and there learn what more he was to do. We must first put ourselves in God's hands, and then He will lead us round the turn in the road, and show us our work. We get it set for us bit by bit, but the surrender must be entire. The details of His will are revealed as we need them for the moment's guidance. Let us accept them in bulk, and stand to the acceptance in each single case! That is no obedience at all which says, 'Tell me first what you are going to bid me do, and then I will see whether I will do it.' The true spirit of filial submission says, 'I delight to do Thy will; now show me what it is.' It was a strange, long road on which Samuel put his foot when he answered this call, and he little knew where it was to lead him. But the blessing of submission is that we do not need to know. It is enough to see where to put our lifted foot. What comes next we can let God settle.

The answer supplicated further light because of present obedience. 'Speak! for Thy servant heareth,' is a plea never urged in vain. The servant's open ear is a reason for the Lord's open lips. We may be quite sure that, if we are willing to hear, He is more than willing to speak; and anything is possible rather than that His children shall be left, like ill-commanded soldiers on a battlefield, waiting for orders which never come. 'If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know.'

The sad prophecy which is committed to such apparently incongruous lips reiterates a former message by 'a man of God.' Eli was a kindly, and, in his way, good man, but wanting in firmness, and acquiescent in evil, partly, perhaps, from lack of moral courage and partly from lack of fervent religion. He is not charged with faults in his own administration of his office, but with not curbing his disreputable sons. The threatenings are directed, not against himself, but against his 'house,' who are to be removed from the high priestly office. Nothing less than a revolution is foretold. The deposition of Eli's family would shake the whole framework of society. It is to be utterly destroyed, and no sacrifice nor offering can purge it. The ulcer must have eaten deep which required such stern measures for its excision. The sin was mainly the sons'; but the guilt was largely the father's. We may learn how cruel paternal laxity is, and how fatal mischief may be done, by neglect of the plain duty of restraining children. He who tolerates evil which it is his province to suppress, is an accomplice, and the blood of the doers is red on his hands.

It was a terrible message to give to a child; but Samuel's calling was to be the guide of Israel in a period of transition, and he had to be broken early into the work, which needed severity as well as tenderness. Perhaps, too, the stern message was somewhat softened, for the poor old man, by the lips through which it came to him. All that reverent love could do, we may be sure, the young prophet would do, to lighten the heavy tidings. Secrecy would be secured, too; for Samuel, who was so unwilling to tell even Eli what the Lord had said, would tell none besides.

God calls each child in our homes as truly as He did Samuel. From each the same obedience is asked. Each may, like the boy in the Tabernacle, grow up 'in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,' and so escape the many scars and sorrows of a life wrongly begun. Let parents see to it that they think rightly of their work, and do not content themselves with conveying information, but aim at nothing short of helping all their children to hear and lovingly to yield to the gentle call of the incarnate God!

2) 1 Samuel 4:1-18

1 Samuel

FAITHLESSNESS AND DEFEAT

1Sa. 4:1 - 1Sa. 4:18.

The first words of 1Sa. 4:1 are closely connected with the end of 1Sa. 3:1 - 1Sa. 3:21, and complete the account of Samuel's inauguration. 'The word of the Lord' came to Samuel, and 'the word of Samuel came to all Israel.' The one clause tells of the prophet's inspiration, the other of his message and its reception by the nation. This bond of union between the clauses has been broken by the chapter division, apparently for the sake of representing the revolt against the Philistines as due to Samuel's instigation. But its being so is very doubtful. If God had sent the army into the field, He would have prepared it, by penitent return to Him, for victory, as no defeat follows on war which He commands. Probably Samuel's mission made an unwholesome ferment in minds which were quite untouched by its highest significance, and so led to a precipitate rebellion, preceded by no religious reformation, and therefore sure to fail. It was twenty years too soon [1Sa. 7:3]. Samuel took no part in the struggle, and his name is never mentioned till, at the end of that period, he emphatically condemns all that had been done, and points the true path of deliverance, in 'return to the Lord with all your heart.' So the great lesson of this story is that when Israel fights Philistines, unbidden and unrepentant, it is sure to be beaten,-a truth with manifold wide applications.

The first disastrous defeat took place on a field, which was afterwards made memorable by a great victory, and by a name which lives still as a watchword for hope and gratitude. Happy they who at last conquer where they once failed, and in the retrospect can say, 'Hitherto the Lord helped,' both by defeat and by the victory for which defeat prepared a way! That opening struggle, bloody and grave as it was, was not decisive; for the Israelites regained their fortified camp unmolested, and held together, and kept their communications open, as appears from what followed.

1Sa. 4:3 - 1Sa. 4:5 give us a glimpse into the camp of Israel, and 1Sa. 4:6 - 1Sa. 4:9 into that of the Philistines. These two companion pictures are worth looking at. The two armies are very much alike, and we may say that the purpose of the picture is to show how Israel was practically heathen, taking just the same views of its relation to God which the Philistines did. Note, too, the absence of central authority. 'The elders' hold a kind of council. Where were Eli the judge and Samuel the prophet? Neither had part in this war. The question of the elders was right, inasmuch as it recognised that the Lord had smitten them, but wrong inasmuch as it betrayed that they had not the faintest notion that the reason was their own moral and religious apostasy. They had not learned the A B C of their history, and of the conditions of national prosperity. They stand precisely on the Pagan level, believing in a national God, who ought to help his votaries, but from some inexplicable caprice does not; or who, perhaps, is angry at the omission of some ritual observance. What an answer they would have got if Samuel had been there! There ought to have been no need for the question, or, rather, there was need for it, and the answer ought to have been clear to them; their sin was the all-sufficient reason for their defeat. There are plenty of Christians, like these elders, who, when they find themselves beaten by the world and the devil, puzzle their brains to invent all sorts of reasons for God's smiting, except the true one,-their own departure from Him.

The remedy suggested by the united wisdom of the leaders was as heathen as the consultation which resulted in it. 'Let us send for the ark' 'Those who regarded not the God of the ark,' says Bishop Hall, 'think themselves safe and happy in the ark of God.' They thought, with that confusion between symbol and reality which runs through all heathen worship, and makes the danger of 'images,' whether in heathenism or in sensuous Christianity, that if they brought the ark, they brought God with it. It was a kind of charm, which would help them, they hardly knew how. Its very name might have taught them better. They call it 'the ark of the covenant of the Lord'; and a covenant has two parties to it, and promises favour on conditions. If they had kept the conditions, these four thousand corpses would not have been lying stiff and stark outside the rude encampment. As they did not keep them, bringing the chest which contained the transcript of them into their midst was bringing a witness of their apostasy, not a helper of their feebleness. Repentance would have brought God. Dragging the ark thither only removed Him farther away. We need not be too hard upon these people; for the natural disposition of us all is to trust to the externals of worship, and to put a punctilious attention to these in the place of a true cleaving of heart to the God who dwells near us, and is in us and on our side, if we cling to Him with penitent love. Even God-appointed symbols become snares. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are treated by multitudes as these elders did the ark. The fewer and simpler the outward observances of worship are, the less danger is there of the poor sense-bound soul tarrying in them, instead of passing by means of them into the higher, purer air beyond.

What right had these presumptuous elders to bring the ark from Shiloh? Eli was its guardian; and he, as appears probable from his anxiety about its fate, did not approve of its removal. But ‘the people’ took the law into their own hands. There seems some hint that their action was presumptuous profanation, in the solemn, full title given in 1Sa. 4:4 : ‘The ark of the covenant of the Lord of Hosts which dwelleth between the cherubim,’-as if contrasting His awful majesty, His universal dominion over the armies of heaven and the embattled powers of the universe, and the dazzling light of that ‘glory,’ which shone in the innermost chamber of the Tabernacle, with the unanointed hands that presumed to press in thither and drag so sacred a thing into the light of common day and the tumult of the camp. Nor is the profanation lessened, but rather increased, by the priestly attendants, Eli’s two sons, themselves amongst the worst men in Israel. When Hophni and Phinehas are its priests, the ark can bring no help. Heathenism separates religion from morality altogether. In it there is no connection between worship and purity, and the Old Testament religion for the first time welded these two inseparably together. That tumultuous procession from Shiloh, with these two profligates for the priests of God, and the bearers thinking that they were sure of their God’s favour now, whatever their sin, shows how completely Israel had forgotten its own law, and, whilst professedly worshipping Jehovah, had really become a heathen people. The reception of the ark with that fierce shout, which echoed among the hills and was heard in the Philistines’ encampment, shows the same thing. Not so should the ark have been received, but with tears and confessions and silent awe. No man in all that host had ever looked upon it before. No man ought to have seen it *then*. Once a year, and not without blood sprinkled on its cover, the high priest might look on it through the cloud of incense which kept him from death, while all the people waited hushed till he came forth, but now it is dragged into the camp, and welcomed with a yell of mad delight, as a pledge of victory. What could display more strikingly the practical heathenism of the people?

1Sa. 4:6 - 1Sa. 4:9 take us into the other camp, and show us the undisguised heathens. The Philistines think just as the other side did, only, in their polytheistic way, they do not use the name ‘Jehovah,’ but speak first of ‘God’ and then of ‘gods’ as having arrived in the camp. The nations dreaded each other’s gods, though they worshipped their own; and the Philistines believed quite as much that ‘Jehovah’ was the Hebrew’s God, as that ‘Dagon’ was theirs. There was to be a duel then between the two superhuman powers. The vague reports which they had heard of the Exodus, nearly five hundred years ago, filled the Philistines with panic. They had but a confused notion of the facts of that old story, and thought that Egypt had met the ten plagues ‘in the wilderness.’ The blunder is very characteristic, and helps to show the accuracy of our narrative. It would not have occurred to a legend-maker. It sounds strange to us that the Philistines’ belief that the Hebrews’ God had come to their help should issue in exhortations to ‘fight like men.’ But polytheism makes that quite a natural conclusion; and there is something almost fine in the truculent boldness with which they set their teeth for a fierce struggle. They reiterate to one another the charge to ‘quit themselves like men’; and while they do not hide from themselves that the question whether they are to be still masters is hanging on the coming struggle, a dash of contempt for the ‘Hebrews’ who had been their ‘slaves’ is perceptible.

According to 1Sa. 4:10, the Philistines appear to have begun the attack, perhaps taking the enemy by surprise. The rout this time was complete. The grim catalogue of disaster in 1Sa. 4:10 - 1Sa. 4:11 is strangely tragic in its dreadful, monotonous plainness, each clause adding something to the terrible story, and each linked to the preceding by a simple ‘and.’ The Israelites seem to have been scattered. ‘They fled, every man to his tent.’ The army, with little cohesion and no strong leaders, melted away. The ark was captured, and its two unworthy attendants slain. Bringing it had not brought God, then. It was but a chest of shittimwood, with two slabs of lettered stone in it,-and what help was in that? But its capture was the sign that the covenant with Israel was for the time annulled. The whole framework of the nation was disorganised. The keystone was struck out of their worship, and they had fallen, by their own sin, to the level of the nations, and even below these; for they had their gods, but Israel had turned away from their God, and He had departed from them. Superstition fancied that the presence of the ark secured to impenitent men the favour of God; but it was no superstition which saw in its absence from Shiloh His averted face.

Is there in poetry or drama a more vivid and pathetic passage than the closing verses of this narrative, which tell of the panting messenger and the old blind Eli?

‘Eben-ezer’ cannot have been very far from Shiloh, for the fugitive had seen the end of the fight, and reached the city before night. He came with the signs of mourning, and, as it would appear from 1Sa. 4:13, passed the old man at the gate without pausing, and burst into the city with his heavy tidings. One can almost hear the shrill shrieks of wrath and despair which first told Eli that something was wrong. Blind and unwieldy and heavy-hearted, he sat by the gate to which the news would first come; but yet he is the last to hear,-perhaps because all shrank from telling him, perhaps because in the confusion no one remembered him. Only after he had asked the meaning of the tumult, of which his foreboding heart and conscience told him the meaning before it was spoken, is the messenger brought to the man to whom he should have gone first. How touchingly the story pauses, even at this crisis, to paint the poor old man! A stronger word is used to describe his blindness than in 1Sa. 3:2, as the Revised Version shows. His fixed eyeballs were sightless now; and there he sat, dreading and longing to hear. The fugitive’s account of himself is shameless in its avowal of his cowardice, and prepares Eli for the worst. But note how he speaks gently and with a certain dignity, crushing down his anxiety,-’How went the matter, my son?’ Then, with no merciful circumlocution or veiling, out comes the whole dismal story once again.

Eli spoke no more. His sons’ death had been the sign given him years before that the threatenings against his house should be fulfilled; but even that blow he can bear. But the capture of the ark is more than a personal sorrow, and his start of horror overbalances him, and he falls from his seat [which probably had no back to it], and dies, silent, of a broken neck and a broken heart. His forty years of judgeship ended thus. He was in many respects good and lovable, gentle, courteous, devout. His kindly treatment of Hannah, his fatherly training of Samuel, his submission to the divine message through the child, his ‘trembling for the ark,’ his death at the news of its being taken, all indicate a character of real sweetness and true godliness. But all was marred by a fatal lack of strong, stern resolve to tolerate no evil which he ought to suppress. Good, weak men, especially when they let foolish tenderness hinder righteous severity, bring terrible evils on themselves, their families, and their nation. It was Eli who, at bottom, was the cause of the defeat and the disasters which slew his sons and broke his own heart. Nothing is more cruel than the weak indulgence which, when men are bringing a curse on themselves by their sin, 'restrains them not.'

3) 1 Samuel 7:1-12

1 Samuel

REPENTANCE AND VICTORY

1Sa. 7:1 - 1Sa. 7:12.

The ark had spread disaster in Philistia and Beth-shemesh, and the willingness of the men of Kirjath-jearim to receive it was a token of their devotion. They must have been in some measure free from idolatry and penetrated with reverence. The name of the city [*City of the Woods*, like our *Woodville*] suggests the situation of the little town, 'bosomed high in tufted trees,' where the ark lay for so long, apparently without sacrifices, and simply watched over by Eleazar, who was probably of the house of Aaron. Eli's family was exterminated; Shiloh seems to have been destroyed, or, at all events, forsaken; and for twenty years internal disorganisation and foreign oppression, relieved only by Samuel's growing influence, prevailed. But during these dark days a better mind was slowly appearing among the people. 'All . . . Israel lamented after the Lord.' Lost blessings are precious. God was more prized when withdrawn. Happy they to whom darkness brightens that Light which brightens all darkness! Our text gives us three main points,-the preparation for victory in repentance and return [1Sa. 7:3 - 1Sa. 7:9]; the victory [1Sa. 7:10 - 1Sa. 7:11]; the thankful commemoration of victory [1Sa. 7:12].

I. We have first the preparation for victory in repentance and return. At the time of the first fight at Eben-ezer, Israel was full of idolatry and immorality. Then their preparation for battle was the mere bringing the ark into the camp, as if it were a fetish or magic charm. That was pure heathenism, and they were idolaters in such worship of Jehovah, just as much as if they had been bowing to Baal. Many of us rely on our baptism or on churchgoing precisely in the same spirit, and are as truly pagans. Not the name of the Deity, but the spirit of the worshipper, makes the 'idolater.'

How different this second preparation! Samuel, who had never been named in the narrative of defeat, now reappears as the acknowledged prophet and, in a sense, dictator. The first requirement is to come back to the Lord 'with the whole heart,' and that return is to be practically exhibited in the complete forsaking of Baal and the Ashtoreths. 'Ye cannot serve God and mammon.' It must be 'Him only,' if it is Him at all. Real religion is exclusive, as real love is. In its very nature it is indivisible, and if given to two is accepted by neither. So there was some kind of general and perhaps public giving up of the idols, and some, though probably not the fully appointed, public service of Jehovah. If we are to have His strength infused for victory, we must cast away our idols, and come back to Him with all our hearts. The hands that would clasp Him, and be upheld by the clasp, must be emptied of trifles. To yield ourselves wholly to God is the secret of strength.

The next step was a solemn national assembly at Samuel's town of Mizpeh, situated on a conspicuous hill, north-west of Jerusalem, which still is called 'the prophet Samuel.' Sacrifices were offered, which are no part of the Mosaic ritual. A significant part of these consisted in the pouring out of water 'before the Lord,' probably as emblematic of the pouring out of soul in penitence; for it was accompanied by fasting and confession of sin. The surest way to the true victory, which is the conquest of our sins, is confessing them to God. When once we have seen any sin in its true character clearly enough to speak to Him about it, we have gone far to emancipate ourselves from it, and have quickened our consciences towards more complete intolerance of its hideousness. Confession breaks the entail of sin, and substitutes for the dreary expectation of its continuance the glad conviction of forgiveness and cleansing. It does not make a stiff fight unnecessary; for assured freedom from sin is not the easy prize of confession, but the hard-won issue of sturdy effort in God's strength. But it is like blowing the trumpet of revolt,-it gives the signal for, and itself begins, the conflict. The night before the battle should be spent, not in feasting, but in prayer and lowly shriving of our souls before the great Confessor.

The watchful Philistines seem to have had their attention attracted by the unusual stir among their turbulent subjects, and especially by this suspicious gathering at Mizpeh, and they come suddenly up the passes from their low-lying territory to disperse it. A whiff of the old terror blows across the spirits of the people, not unwholesomely; for it sets them, not to desire the outward presence of the ark, not to run from their post, but to beseech Samuel's intercession. They are afraid, but they mean to fight all the same, and, because they are afraid, they long for God's help. That is the right temper, which, if a man cherish, he will not be defeated, however many Philistines rush at him. Twenty years of slavery had naturally bred fear in them, but it is a wise fear which breeds reliance on God. Our enemy is strong, and no fault is more fatal than an underestimate of his power. If we go into battle singing, we shall probably come out of it weeping, or never come out at all. If we begin bragging, we shall end bleeding. It is only he who looks on the advancing foe, and feels 'They are too strong for me,' who will have to say, as he watches them retreating, 'He delivered me from my strong enemy.' We should think much of our foes and little of ourselves. Such a temper will lead to caution, watchfulness, wise suspicion, vigorous strain of all our little power, and, above all, it will send us to our knees to plead with our great Captain and Advocate.

Samuel acts as priest and intercessor, offering a burnt-offering, which, like the pouring out of water, is no part of the Mosaic sacrifices. The fact is plain, but it is neither unaccountable nor large enough to warrant the sweeping inferences which have been drawn from it and its like, as to the non-existence at this period of the developed ceremonial in Leviticus. We need only remember Samuel's special office, and the seclusion in which the ark lay, to have a sufficient explanation of the cessation of the appointed worship and the substitution of such 'irregular' sacrifices. We are on surer ground when we see here the incident to which Psa. 99:6 refers ['Samuel among them that call upon His name. They called upon the Lord, and He answered them'], and when we learn the lesson that there is a power in intercession which we can use for one another, and which reaches its perfection in the prevailing prayer of our great High-priest, who, like Samuel and Moses, is on the mountain praying, while we fight in the plain.

II. We have next the victory on the field of the former defeat. The battle is joined on the old ground. Strategic considerations probably determined the choice as they did in the case of the many battles on the plain of Esdraelon, for instance, or on the fields of the Netherlands. Probably the armies met on some piece of level ground in one of the wadies, up which the Philistines marched to the attack. At all events, there they were, face to face once more on the old spot. On both sides might be men who had been in the former engagement. Depressing remembrances or burning eagerness to wipe out the shame would stir in those on the one side; contemptuous remembrance of the ease with which the last victory had been won would animate the other. God Himself helped them by the thunderstorm, the solemn roll of which was 'the voice of the Lord' answering Samuel's prayer. The ark had brought only defeat to the impure host; the sacrifice brings victory to the penitent army. Observe that the defeat is accomplished before 'the men of Israel went out of Mizpeh.' God scattered the enemy, and Israel had only to pursue flying foes, as they hurried in wild confusion down the pass, with the lightning flashing behind them. The same pregnant expression is used for the rout of the Philistines as for the previous one of Israel. 'They were smitten *before*,' not *by*, the victors. The true victor was God.

The story gives boundless hope of victory, even on the fields of our former defeats. We can master rooted faults of character, and overcome temptations which have often conquered us. Let no man say: 'Ah! I have been beaten so often that I may as well give up the fight altogether. Years and years I have been a slave, and everywhere I tread on old battlefields, where I have come off second-best. It will never be different. I may as well cease struggling.' However obstinate the fault, however often it has re-established its dominion and dragged us back to slavery, when we thought that we had made good our escape,- that is no reason to 'bate one jot of heart or hope.' We have every reason to hope bravely and boundlessly in the possibility of victory. True, we should rightly despair if we had only our own powers to depend on. But the grounds of our confidence lie in the inexhaustible fulness of God's Spirit, and the certain purpose of His will that we should be purified from all iniquity, as well as in the proved tendency of the principles and motives of the gospel to produce characters of perfect goodness, and, above all, in the sacrifice and intercession of our Captain on high. Since we have Christ to dwell in us, and be the seed of a new life, which will unfold into the likeness of that life from which it has sprung; since we have a perfect Example in Him who became like us in lowliness of flesh, that we might become like Him in purity of spirit; since we have a gospel which enjoins and supplies the mightiest motives for complete obedience; and since the most rooted and inveterate evils are no part of ourselves, but 'vipers' which may be 'shaken from the hand' into which they have struck their fangs, we commit faithless treason against God, His message, and ourselves, when we doubt that we shall overcome all our sins. We should not, then, go into the fight downhearted, with our banners drooping, as if defeat sat on them. The belief that we shall conquer has much to do with victory. That is true in all sorts of conflicts. So, though the whole field may be strewed with relics, eloquent of former disgrace, we may renew the struggle with confidence that the future will not always copy the past. We 'are saved by hope'; by hope we are made strong. It is the very helmet on our heads. The warfare with our own evils should be waged in the assurance that every field of our defeat shall one day see set up on it the trophy of, not our victory, but God's in us.

III. We have here the grateful commemoration of victory. Where that gray stone stands no man knows to-day, but its name lives for ever. This trophy bore no vaunts of leader's skill or soldier's bravery. One name only is associated with it. It is 'the stone of help,' and its message to succeeding generations is: 'Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.' That Hitherto' is the word of a mighty faith. It includes as parts of one whole the disaster no less than the victory. The Lord was helping Israel no less by sorrow and oppression than by joy and deliverance. The defeat which guided them back to Him was tender kindness and precious help. He helps us by griefs and losses, by disappointments and defeats; for whatever brings us closer to Him, and makes us feel that all our bliss and wellbeing lie in knowing and loving Him, is helpful beyond all other aid, and strength-giving above all other gifts.

Such remembrance has in it a half-uttered prayer and hope for the future. 'Hitherto' means more than it says. It looks forward as well as backward, and sees the future in the past. Memory passes into hope, and the radiance in the sky behind throws light on to our forward path. God's 'hitherto' carries 'henceforward' wrapped up in it. His past reveals the eternal principles which will mould His future acts. He has helped, therefore he will help, is no good argument concerning men; but it is valid concerning God.

The devout man's 'gratitude' is, and ought to be, 'a lively sense of favours to come.' We should never doubt but that, as good John Newton puts it, in words which bid fair to last longer than Samuel's gray stone:-

'Each sweet Ebenezer I have in review

Confirms His good pleasure to help me quite through.'

We may write that on every field of our life's conflicts, and have it engraved at last on our gravestones, where we rest in hope.

The best use of memory is to mark more plainly than it could be seen at the moment the divine help which has filled our lives. Like some track on a mountain side, it is less discernible to us, when treading it, than when we look at it from the other side of the glen. Many parts of our lives, that seemed unmarked by any consciousness of God's help while they were present, flash up into clearness when seen through the revealing light of memory, and gleam purple in it, while they looked but bare rocks as long as we were stumbling among them. It is blessed to remember, and to see everywhere God's help. We do not remember aright unless we do. The stone that commemorates our lives should bear no name but one, and this should be all that is read upon it: 'Now unto Him that kept us from falling, unto Him be glory!'

4) 1 Samuel 8:4-20

1 Samuel

'MAKE US A KING'

1Sa. 8:4 - 1Sa. 8:20.

The office of judge was as little capable of transmission from father to son as that of prophet, so that Samuel's appointment of his sons as judges must be regarded as contrary to its true idea. It was God who made the judges, and the introduction, in however slight a degree, of the hereditary principle, was not only politically a blunder, but religiously wrong. Our narrative, like Scripture generally, pronounces no opinion on the facts it records, but its unfavourable judgment may be safely inferred from its explanation that Samuel was 'old' when he made the appointment, and that his sons were corrupt and unjust. Our text deals with the unexpectedly wide consequences of that act, in the clamour for a king.

I. Note the ill-omened request. A formal delegation of the representatives of the nation comes to Ramah, unsummoned by Samuel, with the demand for a king. There must have been much talk through Israel before the general mind could have been ascertained, and this step taken. Not a whisper of what was passing seems to have reached Samuel, and the request is flung at him in harsh language. It is not pleasant for any one, least of all for a ruler, to be told that everybody sees that he is getting old, and should provide for what is to come next. Fathers do not like to be told that their sons are disreputable, but Samuel had to hear the bitter truth. The old man was pained by it, and felt that the people were tired of him, as is plain enough from the divine words which followed, and bade him look beyond the ingratitude displayed towards himself, to that shown to God. But from the 'practical' point of view, there was a great deal to be said for the reasonableness and political wisdom of the elders' suggestion. Samuel had shown that he felt the danger of leaving the nation without a leader, by his nomination of his sons, and the proposal of a king is but carrying his policy a little farther. The hereditary principle once admitted, a full-blown king was evidently the best. There were many inconveniences in the rule by judges. They had no power but that of force of personal character and the authority of an unseen Lord. They left no successors; and long intervals had elapsed, and might again elapse, between the death of one and the rise of another, during which the nation appeared to have no head to guide nor arm to defend it. Examples of strong monarchies surrounded them, and they wanted to have a centre of unity and a defender in the person of a king.

Samuel’s displeasure seems to have been mainly on the ground of the insult to himself in the proposal, and its bearing on the rule of Jehovah over the people does not seem to have occurred to him till it was pointed out by the divine voice. But, like a good and wise man, he took his perplexity and trouble to God; and there he got light. The divine judgment of the request cuts down to its hidden, and probably unconscious, motive, and shows Samuel that weariness of him was only its surface, while the true bottom of it was rejection of God. The parallel drawn with idolatry is very instructive. The two things were but diverse forms of the same sense-ridden disposition: the one being an inability to grasp the thought of the unseen God; the other, a precisely similar inability to keep on the high level of trust in an unseen defender, and obedience to an unseen monarch. They wished for a king ‘to go out before them’ and ‘fight their battles’ [1Sa. 8:20]. Had they forgotten Eben-ezer, and many another field, where they and their fathers had but to stand still and see the Lord fight for them?

The very same difficulty in living in quiet reliance on a power which is perceptible by no sense, besets us. We too are ever being tempted to prefer the solid security, as our foolish senses call it, of visible supports and delights, to the shadowy help of an unseen Arm. How many of us would feel safer with a good balance at our banker’s than with God’s promises! How many of us live as if we thought that men or women were better recipients of our love and of our trust than God! How few, even of professing Christians, really and habitually ‘walk by faith, not by sight’! Do we not see ourselves in the mirror of this story? If we do not, we should. Note that the elders had, apparently, no idea that they were rejecting God in wanting a king. Samuel says nothing of the sort to them, and they could scarcely have made the request so boldly and briefly if they had been conscious that it was upsetting the very basis of their national life. Men are slow to appreciate the full force of their craving for visible good. The petitioners could plead many strong reasons, and, no doubt, fancied themselves simply taking proper precautions for the future. A great deal of unavowed and unconscious unbelief wears the mask of wise foresight. We rather pride ourselves on our prudence, when we should be ashamed of our distrust.

Note, too, that we cannot combine reliance on the seen and the unseen. Life must be moulded by one or the other. The craving for a king was the rejection of Jehovah. We must elect by which we shall live, and from which we shall draw our supreme good.

The desire to be like their neighbours was another motive with the elders. It is hard to be singular, and to foster reliance on the invisible, when all around us are dazzling examples of the success attending the other course. One of the first lessons which we have to learn, and one of the last which we have to practise, is a wholesome disregard of other people's ways. If we are to do anything worth doing, we must be content to be in a minority of one, if needful.

II. Note God's concession of the foolish wish. The divine word to Samuel throws light on the nature of prophetic inspiration. He is bidden to 'hearken to the people's voice'-a procedure directly opposite to his own ideas. This is not a case of subsequent reflection modifying first impressions, but of an authoritative voice discerned by the hearer to be not his own, contradicting his own thoughts, and leaving no room for further consideration.

Further, the granting to Israel of the king whom they desired, is but one instance of the law which is exemplified in God's dealing with nations and individuals, according to which He lets them have their own way, that they may 'be filled with their own devices.' Such experience is the best teacher, though her school fees are high. The surest way to disgust men with their own folly, is to let it work out its results,- just as boys in sweetmeat shops are allowed to eat as much as they like at first, and so get a distaste for the dainties. 'Try it, then, and see how you like it,' is not an unkind thing to say, and God often says it to us. When argument and appeals to duty and the like fail, there is nothing more to be done but to let us have our request, and find out the poison that lurked under the fair outside. The prodigal son gets his coveted portion, and is allowed to go into the far country, that he may prove how good and happy it is to starve among the swine, not because his father is angry with him, but because such experience is the only way to re-awaken his dormant love, and to make him long for the despised place in his father's house. There are some fevers of the desires which must run their course before the patient can be well again. Let us keep a careful watch over ourselves, that we entertain no wishes but such as run parallel with God’s manifest will, lest He may have in His anger, which is still love, to give us our request, that we may find out our error by the bitter fruits of a granted desire.

III. Note the obstinacy that, with eyes open to the consequences, persists in its demands. Samuel is bidden to ‘show them the manner of the king that shall reign over them.’ He sketches, in sombre outline, the picture of an Eastern despot, the only kind of king which the world then knew. The darker features of these monarchies are not included. There is no harem, nor cruelty, nor monstrous vice, in the picture; but the diversion of labour to minister to royal pomp, the establishment of a standing army, the alienation of land to officials, heavy taxation and forced labour make up the items. To these is added [1Sa. 8:18] that the royalty, now so eagerly desired, would sooner or later become a burden, and that then they or their sons would find it was easier to put on than to put off the yoke; for ‘the Lord will not hear you in that day,’ in reference, that is, to the removal of the king. They were exchanging an unseen King who gave all things for one who would take, and not give. A wise exchange! The consequences of our wishes are not always drawn out so clearly before us as in this instance; but we are not left in darkness as to the broad issues, and we all know enough to make our persistence in evil, after such warnings, the deepest mystery and most flagrant sin. The drunkard is not deterred by his knowledge that there is such a thing as *delirium tremens*; nor the thief, by the certainty that the officer’s hand will be laid on his shoulder one day or other; nor the young profligate, by the danger that his bones shall be ‘full of the sin of his youth’; nor are any of us kept from our sins, by the clear sight of their end. ‘I have loved strangers, and after them will I go,’ notwithstanding all knowledge of the fatal issue. Surely there is nothing sadder than that power of neglecting the most certain known result of our acts. Wilfully blind, and hurried on by lust, passion, or other impulse, like bulls which shut their eyes when they charge, we rush at our mark, and often dash ourselves to pieces on it. If a man saw the consequences of his sin at the moment of temptation, he would not do it; but this is the wonder, that he does not see them, though he knows them well enough, and that the knowledge has no power to restrain him.

IV. Note the divine purpose which uses man's sin as its instrument in advancing its designs. God had promised Israel a king [Deu. 17:14, etc.], and the elders may have thought that they were only asking for what was in accordance with His plan. So they were; but their motive was wrong, and so their prayer, though for what God meant to give, was wrong. In this case, as always, God uses men's sins as occasions for the furtherance of His own eternal purpose, as that profound saying has it, 'Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee.' The kingly office was a step in advance, and gave occasion to the development of Messianic expectations of the true King of Israel and of men, which would have been impossible without it, In many ways it was for the good of the nation, and the holders of the office were 'the Lord's anointed.' Modern criticism has found traces of two opposite views in this story, as compared with the passage in Deuteronomy above referred to; but surely it is a more sober, though less novel, view, to regard the whole incident as illustrating the two truths, that men may wish for right things in a wrong way, and that God uses sin as well as obedience as His instrument. No barriers can stop the march of His great purpose through the ages, any more than a bit of glass can stay a sunbeam. However the currents run and the storms howl, they carry the ship to the haven; for He holds the helm, and all winds help. The people rejected Him, and in seeking a king followed but their own earthly minds; but they prepared the way for David and David's Son. Their children long after, moved by the same spirit, shouted, 'We have no king but Caesar!' but they prepared the throne for the true King, for whom they destined a Cross. Man's greatest sin, the rejection of the visible King of the world, brought about the firm establishment of His dominion on earth and in heaven. The cross is the great instance of the same law as is embodied in this history,-the overruling providence which bends the antagonism of men into a tool for effecting the purpose of God.

Alas for those who only thus carry on God's designs! They perish, and their work is none the less their sin, because God has used it. How much better to enter with a willing heart and a clear intelligence into sympathy with His designs, and, delighting to do His will, to share in the eternal duration of His triumphant purpose! 'The world passeth away, and the fashion thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'

5) 1 Samuel 9:15-27

THE OLD JUDGE AND THE YOUNG KING

1Sa. 9:15 - 1Sa. 9:27.

Both the time and the place of the incidents here told are unknown. No note is given of the interval that had elapsed since the elders' deputation. All that we know is that on the previous day Samuel had had the divine communication mentioned in 1Sa. 9:15, and that some days are implied as spent by Saul in his quest for his fathers asses, Equally uncertain is the name of the city. It was not Samuel's ordinary residence; it was in the 'land of Zuph,' an unknown district; it was perched, like most of the cities, on a hill; it had fountains lower down the slope, and a 'high place' farther up, where there was a building large enough for a feast. How strangely vivid the picture of this anonymous city is, and how we can yet see the maidens coming down to the fountains, the wearied travellers toiling up, and the voluble abundance of the directions given them!

I. The first thing we have to note is the premonitory word of the Lord. Observe the picturesque and forcible expression, 'had uncovered the ear of Samuel.' It is more than picturesque. It gives in the strongest form the fact of a revelation, both as to its origin and its secrecy. It is vain to represent the transition from judgeship to monarchy as a mere political revolution, inaugurated by Samuel as a fore-seeing statesman. It is misleading to speak of him, as Dean Stanley does, as one of the men who mediate between the old and the new. His opinions and views go for just nothing in the transaction, and he is simply God's instrument. The people's desire for the king, and God's answer to it, were equally independent of him. His own ideas were dead against the change, and at each step in bringing it about the divine causality is everything, and he is nothing but its obedient servant. It is hopeless to sift out a naturalistic explanation from the narrative, which is either supernatural or nothing. Note the three points of this communication,- God's sending Saul, the command to anoint, and the motive ascribed to God. As to the first, how striking that full-toned authoritative 'I will send' is! Think of the chain of ordinary events which brought Saul to the little city,-the wandering of a drove of asses, the failure to get on their tracks, the accident of being in the land of Zuph when he got tired of the search, the suggestion of the servant; and behind all these, and working through them, the will and hand of God, thrusting this man, all unconscious, along a path which he knew not. Our own purposes we may know, but God's we do not know. There is something awful in the thought of the issues that may spring from the smallest affairs, and we shall be bewildered and paralysed if once we get a glimpse of the complicated web which is ever being woven in the loom of time, unless we, too, can, by faith, see the Weaver, and then we shall be at rest. Call nothing trivial, and seek to be conscious of His guiding hand.

The command to Samuel to anoint Saul is no product of Samuel's own reflection, but comes to him, in this imperative form, before he has seen Saul, like a commission in blank, in regard to which he has no option, and in the origin of which he had no share. It was a piece of painful work to devolve his authority, like Aaron's having to strip off his robes before he died, and to put them on his son. But there is no trace of wounded feeling in Samuel. He is true to his childhood's word, 'Speak, for Thy servant heareth,' and, no doubt, he had the reward which obedience ever has to sweeten the bitterest draught, the reward of a quiet heart.

The reason as given in the last clause of the verse ought to have made Samuel's self-abnegation easier. God sets him the example. Israel had rejected Him, but He still calls them 'My people,' and looks upon them in tender care, and hears their cry. There is no contradiction here with the aspect of the concession to the people's wish, which appeared in the former section. Hasty criticism tries to make out discrepancies in the accounts, because it does not recognise one of the plainest characteristics of Scripture; namely, its habit of stating strongly and exclusively that side of a complicated matter which is relevant to the purpose in hand, and leaving the other sides to be presented in due time. The three accounts of the election give three different reasons for it. In 1Sa. 8:1 - 1Sa. 8:22, the people put it on the ground of Samuel's age and his son's unfitness, and God treats it as national rejection of Him. Here it appears as due, on the part of the people, to their fear of the Philistines, and on the part of God to His loving yielding to their cry. In 1Sa. 12:12, Samuel traces it to the fear of Ammonite invasion. Are these contradictory or supplementary accounts? Certainly the latter. Though Israel had in heart rejected God, and He gave them a king that they might learn how much better they would have been without one, it is as true that He lovingly listened to the cry of their fear, and answered them, in pity and tender care, by giving them the king whom they desired, and who would deliver them from their enemies. Let us learn how patient of our faithless follies, and how full of long-suffering love, even in ‘anger,’ He is. The same gift of His providence, regarded in one light, is loving chastisement, and in another is loving compliance with our cry and swift help to our need in the shape that we desire, but in both aspects is good and perfect. Note, too, that God’s look is active, and is the bringing of the needed aid, and that He waits for our cry before He comes with His help.

II. The meeting of Samuel and Saul. They encounter each other in the gate,-the prophet on his way to the sacrifice, the future king with his head full of his humble quest. Samuel knows Saul by divine intimation as soon as he sees him, but Saul does not know Samuel. His question indicates the noble simplicity, without attendants or trappings, of the judge’s life; but it also suggests the strange isolation of these early days, and the probable indifference of Saul to religion. If he had cared much about God’s rule in Israel, he could scarcely have been so ignorant as his servant’s words about ‘the seer,’ and his failure to know him when he saw him, show Saul to have been. He had not cared to see Samuel in any of the latter’s circuits, and now he only wants to get some information from a diviner about these unfortunate asses. What a contrast between the thoughts of the two, as they looked at each other! Saul begins by consulting Samuel as a magician; he ends by seeking counsel from the witch at Endor. Samuel’s words are beautiful in their smothering of all personal feeling, and dignified in their authority. He at once takes command of Saul, and prepares him by half-hints for something great to come. The direction to ‘go up before me’ is a sign of honour. The invitation to the sacrificial feast is another. The promise to disclose his own secret thoughts to Saul may, perhaps, point to some hidden ambitions, the knowledge of which would prove Samuel’s prophetic character. The assurance as to the asses answers the small immediate occasion of Saul’s resort to him, and the dim hint in the last words of 1Sa. 9:20, rightly translated, tells him that ‘all that is desirable in Israel’ is for him, and for all his father’s house. He went out to look for his father’s asses, and he found a kingdom. The words were enigmatical; but if Saul knew of the impending revolution, they could scarcely fail to dazzle him and take away his breath. His answer is more than mere Oriental self-depreciation. Its bashful modesty contrasts sadly with the almost insane masterfulness and arrogant self-will of his later years. Fair beginnings may end ill, and those who are set in positions of influence have hard work to keep steady heads, and to sail with low sails.

III. The feast. Up at the high place was some chamber used for the feasts which followed the sacrifices. A company of thirty-or, according to another reading, of seventy-persons had been invited, and the stately young stranger from Benjamin, with his servant [a trait of the simple manners of these days], is set in the place of honour, where wondering eyes fasten on him. Attention is still more emphatically centred on him when Samuel bids 'the cook' bring a part of the sacrifice which he had been ordered to set aside. It proves to be the 'shoulder' or 'thigh,' the priest's perquisite, and therefore probably Samuel's. To give this to another was equivalent to putting him in Samuel's place; and Samuel's words in handing it to Saul make its meaning plain. It is 'that which hath been reserved.' It has been 'kept for thee' till 'the appointed time,' and that with a view to the assembled guests. All this is in true prophetic fashion, which delighted in symbols, and these of the homeliest sort. The whole transaction expressed the transference of power to Saul, the divine reserving of the monarchy for him, and the public investiture with it, by the prophet himself. The veil was intentional, and intentionally thin. Cannot we see the flush of surprise and modesty on Saul's cheek, as he tore the pieces from the significant 'shoulder,' and hear the whispers that ran through the guest-chamber?

IV. The private colloquy. When the simple feast was over, the strangely assorted pair went down to Samuel's house, and there, on the quiet house-top, where were no curious ears, held long and earnest talk. No doubt Samuel told Saul all that was in his heart, as he had said that he would, and convinced him thereby that it was God who was speaking to him through the prophet. Nor would exhortations and warnings be wanting, which the old man's experience would be anxious to give, and the young one's modesty not unwilling to receive. Saul is a listener, not a speaker, in this unreported interview; and Samuel is in it, as throughout, the superior. The characteristic which marked the beginning of the Jewish monarchy was stamped on it till the end. The king was inferior to the prophet, and was meant to take his instructions from him when he appeared. Saul was docile on that first day, when he was half dazed with his new prospects, and wholly grateful to Samuel; but the history will show us how soon the fair promise of concord was darkened, and how fiercely he chafed at Samuel's attempted control.

One can fancy his thoughts as he lay in the starlight, on the house-top, that night, and gazed into the astounding future that had opened before him. Had there been any true religion in him, it would have been a wakeful night of prayer. But, more likely, as the event proves, the ambition and arrogance which were deep in his nature, though hitherto undeveloped, were his counsellors, and drove Samuel's wisdom out of his head.

As soon as the morning-red began to rise in the East, Samuel sent him away, to secure, as would appear, privacy in his departure. With simple courtesy the prophet accompanied his guest, and as soon as they had got down the hill beyond the last house of the city, he bids Saul send on his servant, that he may speak a last word to him alone. Our text stops before the solemn anointing, and leaves these two standing there, in the fresh morning, type of the new career opening for one of them. What a contrast in the men! The one has all his long life been true to his first vow, 'Speak, for Thy servant heareth,' and now has come, in fulness of years, and reverenced by all men, near the end of his patient, faithful service. His work is all but done, and his heart is quiet in the peace which is the best reward of loving and doing God's law. Ripened wisdom, calm trust, unhesitating submission cast a glory round the old man, who is now performing the supreme act of self-abnegation of his lifetime, and, not without a sense of relief, is laying the burden, so long and uncomplainingly borne, on the great shoulders of this young giant. The other has a humble past of a few years rapidly sinking out of his dazzled sight, and is in a whirl of emotion at the startling suddenness of his new dignity. When one thinks of Gilboa, and the desperate suicide there, how pathetic is that strong, jubilant young figure, in the morning light, below the city, as he bows his head to receive the anointing which, little as he knew it, was to prove his ruin! A life begun by obedient listening to God's voice, and continued in the same, comes at last to a blessed end, and is crowned with many goods. A life which but partially accepts God's will as its law, and rather takes counsel of its own passions and arrogant self-sufficiency, may have much that is bright and lovable at its beginning, but will steadily darken as it goes on, and will set at last in eclipse and gloom.

6) 1 Samuel 10:17-27

1 Samuel

THE KING AFTER MAN'S HEART

1Sa. 10:17 - 1Sa. 10:27.

These verses fit on to 1Sa. 8:1 - 1Sa. 8:22, 1Sa. 9:1 - 1Sa. 10:16, being probably from another source, inserted here because the anointing of Saul, told in them, did occur between Samuel's dismissal of the people and his summoning of the national assembly which is here related. That private anointing of Saul was the divine call to him individually; the text tells of his public designation to the nation. The two are perfectly consistent, and, indeed, the private anointing is presupposed in the incident recorded in this passage, of Saul's hiding himself, for he could not have known the result that he would be 'taken,' unless he had had that previous intimation. The assembly at Mizpah was not convened in order to choose a king, but to accept God's choice, which was then to be declared.

But before the choice was announced, a last appeal was made to the people, if, perchance, they might still be persuaded to forgo their rebellious desire. It is not, indeed, said that this final, all but hopeless attempt was made by Samuel at the divine command, and we are not told that he had any further revelation than that in 1Sa. 8:7 - 1Sa. 8:9. But, no doubt, he was speaking as Jehovah's mouthpiece, and so we have here one more instance of that long-suffering divine patience and love which 'hopeth all things,' and lingers pleadingly round the alienated heart, seeking to woo it back to itself, and never ceasing to labour to avert the evil deed, till it is actually and irrevocably done. It may be said that God knew that the appeal was sure to fail, and therefore could not have made it. But is not that mysterious continuance of effort, foreknown to be futile, the very paradox of God's love? Did not Jesus give the traitor the sop, as a last token of friendship, a last appeal to his heart? And does not God still in like manner deal with us all?

Observe how He seeks to win Israel back. It is not by threatenings, but by reminders of His great benefits. He will not drive men back to His service, like a slave-driver with brandished whip, but He wishes to draw them back by ‘the cords of love.’ It is service from hearts melted by thankfulness, and therefore overflowing in joyful, willing obedience and grateful acts, that He desires. ‘The mercies of God’ should lead to men offering themselves as ‘living sacrifices.’

The last appeal failed, and Samuel at once went on to give the people the desired bitter which they thought so sweet. Of course, it was by their representatives that the tribes presented themselves before God. The manner of making God’s choice known is not told, and speculations as to it are idle. Probably a simple yes or no, as each tribe, family or individual was ‘presented’ was the mode, but how it was conveyed is quite unknown. That is a small matter; more important is it to note that Saul was chosen simply because he was the very type of the national ideal of a hero-king. Both here and in 1Sa. 9:2 his stature and bravery are the only qualities mentioned. What Israel wanted was a rough fighter, with physical strength, plenty of bone and muscle. About moral, intellectual or spiritual qualities they did not care, and they got the kind of king that they wanted,-the only kind that they could appreciate. The only way to teach them that one who was a head and shoulders taller than any of them was not thereby certified to be the ideal king, was to give them such a man, and let them see what good he would do them.

There is no surer index nor sharper test of national or individual character than the sort of ‘heroes’ they worship. *Vox populi* has not been very much refined since Saul’s day. Athletes and soldiers still captivate the crowd, and a mere prophet like Samuel has no chance beside the man of broad shoulders and well-developed biceps. And very often communities, especially democratic ones, get the ‘king’ they desire, the leader, statesman or the like, who comes near their ideal. The man whom they choose is the man whom, generally, they deserve. Israel had an excuse for its burst of ardour for a soldier, for it was in deadly danger from the Philistines. Is there as good an excuse for us in Britain, in our recent adoration of successful generals? Israel found out that its idol lacked higher gifts than thews and sinews, and experience taught them the falseness of their ideal.

Saul’s hiding among the piles of miscellaneous baggage, which the multitude of representatives had brought with them, is usually set down to his credit, as indicating an engaging modesty; but there is another and more probable explanation of it, less creditable to him. Was it not rather occasioned by his shrinking from the heavy task that God was laying on him? He was not being summoned to a secure throne, but to ‘go out before us, and fight our battles.’ He might well shrink, but if he had been God-fearing and God-obeying and God-trusting, he would have cried, ‘Here am I! send me,’ instead of skulking among the stuff. There was another Saul, who could say, ‘I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.’ It had been better for the son of Kish if he had been like the young Pharisee from Tarsus. We too have divine calls in *our* lives, and alas! we too not seldom hide ourselves among the stuff, and try to avoid taking up some heavy duty, by absorbing our minds in material good. Few things have greater power of obscuring ‘the heavenly vision,’ and of rendering us unwilling to obey it, than the clinging to the things of this world, which are in their place as the traveller’s luggage needful on the road, but very much out of their place when they become a hiding-place for a man whom God is calling to service.

The ‘manner of the kingdom,’ which Samuel wrote and laid up before the Lord, was probably not the same as ‘the manner of the king’ [1Sa. 8:9 - 1Sa. 8:18], but a kind of constitution, or solemn statement of the principles which were to govern the monarchy. The reading in 1Sa. 10:26 should probably be ‘the men of valour,’ instead of ‘a band of men.’ They were brave men, ‘whose hearts God had touched.’ Now that Saul was chosen by God, loyalty to God was shown by loyalty to Saul. The sin of the people’s desire, and the drop from the high ideal of the theocracy, and the lack of lofty qualities in Saul, may all be admitted. But God has made him king, and that is enough. Henceforward, God’s servants will be Saul’s partisans. The malcontents were apparently but a small faction. They, perhaps, had had a candidate of their own, but, at all events, they criticised God’s appointed deliverer, and saw nothing in him to warrant the expectation that he would be able to do much for Israel. Disparaging criticism of God’s chosen instruments comes from distrust of God who chose them. To doubt *the* divinely sent Deliverer's power to 'save' is to accuse God of not knowing our needs and of miscalculating the power of His supply of them. But not a few of us put that same question in various tones of incredulity, scorn or indifference. Sense makes many mistakes when it takes to trying to weigh Christ in its vulgar balances, and to settling whether He looks like a Saviour and a King.

7) 1 Samuel 12:1-12

1 Samuel

SAMUEL'S CHALLENGE AND CHARGE

1Sa. 12:1 - 1Sa. 12:15.

The portion of Samuel's address included in this passage has three main sections: his noble and dignified assertion of his official purity, his summary of the past history, and his solemn declaration of the conditions of future wellbeing for the nation with its new king.

I. Probably the war with the Ammonite king Nahash, which had postponed the formal inauguration of the king, had been carried on in the neighbourhood of the Jordan valley; and thus Gilgal would be a convenient rendezvous. But it was chosen for other reasons also, and, as appears from 1Sa. 10:8, had been fixed on by Samuel at his first interview with Saul. There the Covenant had been renewed, after the wanderers had crossed the river, with Joshua at their head, and it was fitting that the beginnings of the new form of the national life should be consecrated by worship on the same site as had witnessed the beginnings of the national life on the soil of the promised land. Perhaps the silent stones, which Joshua reared, stood there yet. At all events, sacred memories could scarcely fail, as the rejoicing crowd, standing where their fathers had renewed the Covenant, saw the blackened ruins of Jericho, and the foaming river, now, as then, filling all its banks in the time of harvest, which their fathers had crossed with the ark, that was now hidden at Kirjath-jearim, for their guide. The very place spoke the same lessons from the past which Samuel was about to teach them.

There is just a faint trace of Samuel's disapproval of the new order in his first words. He takes care to throw the whole responsibility on the people; but, at the same time, he assumes the authoritative tone which becomes him, and quietly takes the position of superiority to the king whom he has made. 1Sa. 11:15 seems to imply that he took no part in the rejoicings. It was 'Saul and all the men of Israel' who were so glad. He was still hesitant as to the issue, and obeyed the divine command with clearer insight into its purpose than the shouting crowd and the proud young king had. There is something very pathetic in the contrast he draws between Saul and himself. 'The king walketh before you,' in all the vigour of his young activity, and delighting all your eyes, and 'I am old and gray-headed,' feeble, and fit for little more work, and therefore, as happens to such worn-out public servants, cast aside for a new man. Samuel was not a monster of perfection without human feelings. His sense of Israel's ingratitude to himself and practical revolt from God lay together in his mind, and colour this whole speech, which has a certain tone of severity, and an absence of all congratulation. Probably that accounts for the mention of his sons. The elders' frank statement of their low opinion of them had been a sore point with Samuel, and he cannot help alluding to it. It was not for want of possible successors in his own house that they had cried out for a king. If this be not the bearing of the allusion to his sons, it is difficult to explain; and this obvious explanation would never have been overlooked if Samuel had not been idealised into a faultless saint. The dash of human infirmity and fatherly blindness gives reality to the picture. 'I have walked before you from my youth unto this day.' Note the recurrence of the same expression as is applied to Saul in the former part of the verse. It is as if he had said, 'Once I was as he is now,-young and active in your sight, and for your service. Remember these past years. May your new fancy's record be as stainless as mine is, when he is old and grayheaded!' The words bring into view the characteristic of Samuel's life which is often insisted on in the earlier chapters,-its calm, unbroken continuity and uniformity of direction, from the long-past days when he wore 'the little coat' his mother made him, with so many tears dropped on it, till this closing hour. While everything was rushing down to destruction in Eli's time, and his sons were rioting at the Tabernacle door, the child was growing up in the stillness; and from then till now, amid all changes, his course had been steady, and pointed to one aim. Blessed they whose age is but the fruitage of the promise of their youth! Blessed they who begin as ‘little children,’ with the forgiveness of sin and the knowledge of the Father, and who go on, as ‘young men,’ to overcome the Evil One, and end, as ‘fathers,’ with the deeper knowledge of Him who is ‘from the beginning,’ which is the reward of childhood’s trust and manhood’s struggles!

Samuel is still a prophet, but he is ceasing to be the sole authority, and, in his conscious integrity, calls for a public, full discharge, in the presence of the king. Note that 1Sa. 12:3 gives the first instance of the use of the name ‘Messiah,’ and think of the contrast between Saul and Jesus. Observe, too, the simple manners of these times, when ‘ox and ass’ were the wealth. They would be poor plunder nowadays. Note also the various forms of injustice of which he challenges any one to convict him. Forcible seizure of live stock, fraud, harsh oppression, and letting suitors put gold on his eyes that he might not see, are the vices of the Eastern ruler to-day, and rampant in that unhappy land, as they have been ever since Samuel’s time. I think I have heard of politicians in some other countries further west than Gilgal, who have axes to grind and logs to roll, and of the wonderful effects, in many places of business, of certain circular gold discs applied to the eyes. This man went away a poor man. He does not seem to have had salary, or retiring pension; but he carried away a pair of clean hands, as the voice of a nation witnessed.

II. Having cleared himself, Samuel recounts the outlines of the past, in order to emphasise the law that cleaving to God had ever brought deliverance; departure, disaster; and penitence, restoration. It is history with a purpose, and less careful about chronology than principles. Facts are good, if illuminated by the clear recognition of the law which they obey; but, without that, they are lumber. The ‘philosophy of history’ is not reached without the plain recognition of the working of the divine will. No doubt the principles which Samuel discerned written as with a sunbeam on the past of Israel were illustrated there with a certainty and directness which belonged to it alone; but we shall make a bad use of the history of Israel, if we say, ‘It is all miraculous, and therefore inapplicable to modern national life.’ It would be much nearer the mark to say, ‘It is all miraculous, and therefore meant as an exhibition for blind eyes of the eternal principles which govern the history of all nations.’ It is as true in Britain to-day as ever it was in Judea, that righteousness and the fear of God are the sure foundations of real national as of individual prosperity. The kingdoms of this world are not the devil's, though diplomatists and soldiers seem to think so. If any nation were to live universally by the laws of God, it might not have what the world calls national success; it would have no story of wholesale robbery, called military glory, but it would have peace within its borders, and life would go nobly and sweetly there. 'Happy is the people, that is in such a case: yea, happy is the people, whose God is the Lord.'

The details of Samuel's *resume* need not occupy much time. Note the word in 1Sa. 12:7, 'reason,' or, as the Revised Version renders, 'plead.' He takes the position of God's advocate in the suit, and what he will prove for his client is the 'righteousness' of his dealings in the past. The story, says he, can be brought down to very simple elements,-a cry to God, an answer of deliverance, a relapse, punishment, a renewed cry to God, and all the rest of the series as before. It is like a repeating decimal, over and over again, each figure drawing the next after it. The list of oppressors in 1Sa. 12:9, and that of deliverers in 1Sa. 12:11, do not follow the same order, but that matters nothing. Clearly the facts are assumed as well known, and needing only summary reference. The new-fashioned way of treating Biblical history, of course, takes that as an irrefutable proof of the late date and spuriousness of this manufactured speech put into Samuel's mouth. Less omniscient students will be content with accepting the witness to the history. Nobody knows anything of a judge named Bedan, and the conjectural emendation 'Barak' is probable, especially remembering the roll-call in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where Gideon, Barak, and Jephthah appear in the same order, with the addition of Samson. The supposition that 'Samuel,' in this verse, is an error for 'Samson,' is unnecessary; for the prophet's mention of himself thus is not unnatural, in the circumstances, and is less obtrusive than to have said 'me.'

The retrospect here given points the lesson of the sin and folly of the demand for a king. The old way had been to cry to God in their distresses, and the old experience had been that the answer came swift and sufficient; but this generation had tried a new method, and fear of 'Nahash the Ammonite' had driven them to look for a man to help them. The experience of God's responses to prayer does not always wean even those who receive them from casting about for visible helpers. Still less does the experience of our predecessors keep us from it. Strange that after a hundred plain instances of His aid, the hundred and first distress should find us almost as slow to turn to Him, and as eager to secure earthly stays, as if there were no past of our own, or of many generations, all crowded and bright with tokens of His care! We are always disposed to doubt whether the power that delivered from Sisera, Philistines, and Moab, will be able to deliver us from Nahash. The new danger looks the very worst of all, and this time we must have a king. All the while Israel had God for its king. Our dim eyes cannot see the realities of the invisible world, and so we cleave to the illusions of the visible, which, at their best, are but shadows of the real, and are often made, by our weak hearts, its rival and substitute. What does the soldier, who has an impenetrable armour to wear, want with pasteboard imitations, like those worn in a play? It is doubtful wisdom to fling away the substance in grasping at the shadow. Saul was brave, and a head and shoulders above the people, and he had beaten Nahash for them; but Saul for God is a poor exchange. Do we do better, when we hanker after something more tangible than an unseen Guide, Helper, Stay, Joy, and Peace-bringer for our hearts, and declare plainly, by our eager race after created good, that we do not reckon God by Himself enough for us?

III. The part of Samuel’s address with which we are concerned here closes with the application of the history to the present time. The great point of the last three verses is that the new order of things has not changed the old law, which bound up well-being inseparably with obedience. They have got their king, and there he stands; but if they think that that is to secure their prosperity, they are much mistaken. There is a touch of rebuke, and possibly of sarcasm, in pointing to Saul, and making so emphatic, as in 1Sa. 12:13, the vehemence of their anxiety to get him. It is almost as if Samuel had said, ‘Look at him, and say whether he is worth all that eagerness. Do you like him as well, now that you have him, as you did before?’ There are not many of this world’s goods which stand that test. The shell that looked silvery and iridescent when in the sea is but a poor, pale reminder of its former self, when we hold it dry in our hands. One object of desire, and only one, brings no disappointment in possessing it. He, and only he, who sets his hope on God, will never have to feel that he is not so satisfied with the fulfilment as with the dream.

Israel had rejected God in demanding a king; but the giver of their demand had been God, and their rejection had not abolished the divine government, nor altered one jot of the old law. They and their king were equally its subjects. There is great emphasis in the special mention of 'your king' as bound to obedience as much as they; and, if we follow the Septuagint reading of 1Sa. 12:15, the mention is repeated there in the threatening of punishment. No abundance of earthly supports or objects of our love or trust in the least alters the unalterable conditions of well-being. Whether surrounded with these or stripped of all, to fear and serve the Lord and to hearken to His voice is equally the requisite for all true blessedness, and is so equally to the helper and the helped, the lover and the loved. We are ever tempted to think that, when our wishes are granted, and some dear or strong hand is stretched out for aid, all will be well; and we are terribly apt to forget that we need God as much as before, and that the way of being blessed has not changed. Those whose hearts and homes are bright with loved faces, and whose lives are guarded by strong and wise hands, have need to remember that they and their dear ones are under the same conditions of well-being as are the loneliest and saddest; and they who 'have none other that fighteth for' them have no less need to remember that, if God be their companion, they cannot be utterly solitary, nor altogether helpless if He be their aid.

8) 1 Samuel 12:13-15

1 Samuel

SAMUEL'S CHALLENGE AND CHARGE

OLD TRUTH FOR A NEW EPOCH

1Sa. 12:13 - 1Sa. 12:25.

Samuel's office as judge necessarily ended when Saul was made king, but his office of prophet continued. This chapter deals with both the cessation and the continuance, giving at first his dignified, and somewhat pained, vindication of his integrity, and then passing on to show him exercising his prophetic function in exhortation, miracle, and authoritative declaration of Jehovah's will.

I. The first point is the sign which Samuel gave. Usually there is no rain in Palestine from about the end of April till October. Samuel was speaking during the wheat harvest, which falls about the beginning of June. We note that he volunteered the sign, and, what is still more remarkable, that he is sure that God will send it in answer to his prayer. Why was he thus certain? Because he recognised that the impulse to proffer the sign came from God. We know little of the mental processes by which a prophet could discriminate between his own thinkings and God's speech, but such discrimination was possible, or there could have been no ring of confidence in the prophet's 'Thus saith the Lord.' Not even a 'Samuel among them that call upon His name' had a right to assume that every asking would certainly have an answer. It is when we ask 'anything according to His will' that we know that 'He heareth us,' and are entitled to predict to others the sure answer.

It seems a long leap logically from hearing the thunder and seeing the rain rushing down on the harvest field, to recognising the sin of asking for a king. But the connecting steps are plain. Samuel announced the storm, he asked God to send it, it came at his word; therefore he was approved of God and was His messenger; therefore his words about the desire for a king were God's words. Again, God sent the tempest; therefore God ruled the elemental powers, and wielded them so as to affect Israel, and therefore it had been folly and sin to wish for another defender. So the result of the thunder-burst was twofold-they 'feared Jehovah and Samuel,' and they confessed their sin in desiring a king. They were but rude and sense-bound men, like children in many respects; their religion was little more than outward worship and a vague awe; they needed 'signs' as children need picture-books. The very slightness and superficiality of their religion made their confession easy and swift, and neither the one nor the other went deep enough to be lasting. The faith that is built on 'signs and wonders' is easily battered down; the repentance that is due to a thunderstorm is over as soon as the sun comes out again. The shallowness of the contrition in this case is shown by two things,-the request to Samuel to pray for them, and the boon which they begged him to ask, 'that we die not.' They had better have prayed for themselves, and they had better have asked for strength to cleave to Jehovah. They were like Simon Magus cowering before Peter, and beseeching him, 'Pray ye for me to the Lord, that none of the things which ye have spoken may come upon me.' That is not the voice of true repentance, the 'godly sorrow' which works healing and life, but that of the 'sorrow of the world which worketh death.' The real penitent will press the closer to the forgiving Father, and his cry will be for purity even more than for pardon.

II. Samuel's closing words are tender, wise, and full of great truths. He begins with encouragement blended with reiteration of the people's sin. It is not safe for a forgiven man to forget his sin quickly. The more sure he is that God has forgotten, the more careful he should be to remember it, for gratitude, humility and watchfulness. But it should never loom so large before him as to shut out the sunshine of God's love, for no fruits of goodness will ripen in character without that light. It is a great piece of practical wisdom always to keep one's forgiven sin in mind, and yet not to let it paralyse hopefulness and effort. 'Ye have indeed done all this evil, . . . yet turn not aside from following Jehovah.' That is a truly evangelical exhortation. The memory of past failures is never to set the tune for future service. Again, Samuel based the exhortation to whole-hearted service of Jehovah on Jehovah's faithfulness and great benefits [1Sa. 12:22 - 1Sa. 12:24], It is suicidal folly to turn away from Him who never turns away from us; it is black ingratitude, as well as suicidal folly, to refuse to serve Him whose mercies encompass us. That divine good pleasure, which has no source but in Himself, flows out like an artesian well, unceasing. His 'nature and property' is to love. His past is the prophecy of His future. He will always be what He has been, and always do what He has done. Therefore we need not fear, though we change and are faithless. 'He cannot deny Himself.' His revealed character would be dimmed if He abandoned a soul that clung to Him. So our faith should, in some measure, match His faithfulness, and we should build firmly on the firm foundation.

III. Samuel answers the people's request for his prayers with a wise word, full of affection, and also full of dignity and warning, all the more impressive because veiled. He promises his continued intercession, but he puts it as a duty which he owes to God rather than to them only, and he thus sufficiently asserts his God-appointed office. He promises to do more than pray for them; namely, to continue as their ethical and religious guide, which they had not asked him to be. That at once makes his future position in the monarchy clear. He is still the prophet, though no longer the judge, and, as the future was to show, he has to direct monarch as well as people. But it also hints to the people that his prayers for them will be of little avail unless they listen to his teaching. Whether a Samuel prays for us or not, if we do not listen to the voices that bid us serve God, we 'shall be consumed.'

9) 1 Samuel 12:16-25

1 Samuel

OLD TRUTH FOR A NEW EPOCH

1Sa. 12:13 - 1Sa. 12:25.

Samuel's office as judge necessarily ended when Saul was made king, but his office of prophet continued. This chapter deals with both the cessation and the continuance, giving at first his dignified, and somewhat pained, vindication of his integrity, and then passing on to show him exercising his prophetic function in exhortation, miracle, and authoritative declaration of Jehovah's will.

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10)1 Samuel 15:10-23

1 Samuel

SAUL REJECTED

1Sa. 15:10 - 1Sa. 15:23.

Again the narrative takes us to Gilgal,-a fateful place for Saul, There they 'made Saul king before the Lord'; there he had taken the first step on his dark way of gloomy, proud self-will, down which he was destined to plunge so far and fatally. There he had, in consequence, received the message of the transference of the kingdom from his house, though not from himself. Now, flushed with his victory over Amalek, he has come there with his troops, laden with spoil. They had made a swift march from the south where Amalek dwelt, passing by Nabal's Carmel, where they had put up some sort of monument of their exploit in a temper of vain-glory, very unlike the spirit which reared the stone of help at Eben-ezer; and apparently they purpose sacrifices and a feast. But Samuel comes into camp with no look of congratulation. Probably the vigorous old man had walked that day from his home, some fifteen miles off, and on the way seems to have picked up tidings of Saul's victory and position, which ought to have reached him from the king himself, and would have done so if Saul's conscience had been clear. The omission to tell him was studied neglect, which revealed much.

Samuel had 'cried unto the Lord all night,' if perchance the terrible sentence might be reversed; and his cries had not been in vain, for they had brought him into complete submission, and had nerved him to do his work calmly, without a quiver or a pang of personal feeling, as becomes God's prophet.

I. We must go back a step beyond this passage to understand it. **Note, first, the command which was disobeyed.** The campaign against Amalek was undertaken by express divine direction through Samuel's lips. It was the delayed fulfilment of a sentence passed in the times of the Conquest, but not executed then. The terrible old usages of that period are brought into play again, and the whole nation with its possessions is 'devoted'. The word explains the dreadful usage. There are two kinds of devotion to God: that of willing, and that of unwilling, men; the one brings life, the other, death. The massacre of the foul nations of Canaan was thereby made a direct divine judgment, and removed wholly from the region of ferocious warfare. No doubt, the whole plane of morals in the earlier revelation is lower than that of the New Testament. If Jesus has not taught a higher law than was given to ‘them of old time,’ one large part of His gift to men disappears. The wholesale destruction of ‘babe and suckling’ with the guilty makes us shudder; and we are meant to feel the difference between the atmosphere of that time and ours. But we are not meant to question the reality of the divine command, nor His right to give it. He slays, and makes alive. His judgments strike the innocent with the guilty. In many a case, and often, the sin is one generation’s, and the bitter fruit another’s. The destruction of Canaanites and Amalekites does not change its nature because God used men to do it; and the question is not whether the Israelites were fiercely barbarous in their warfare, but whether God has the right of life and death. We grant all the dreadfulness, and joyfully admit the distance between such acts and Jesus Christ; but we recognise them as not incongruous with the whole revealed character of the God who is justice as well as love, as parallel in substance, though different in instrument, with many of His dealings with men,-as the execution of righteous sentence on rank corruption, and as sweetening the world by its removal. Most of the difficulty and repugnance has been caused by forgetting that Israel was but the sword, while the hand was God’s.

II. Note the disobedience. Partial obedience is complete disobedience. Saul and his men obeyed as far as suited them; that is to say, they did not obey God at all, but their own inclinations, both in sparing the good and in destroying the worthless. What was not worth carrying off they destroyed,-not because of the command, but to save trouble. This one fault seems but a small thing to entail the loss of a kingdom. But is it so? It was obviously not an isolated act on Saul’s part, but indicated his growing impatience of the divine control, exercised on him through Samuel. He was in a difficult position. He owed his kingdom to the prophet; and the very condition on which he held it was that of submission to Samuel’s authority. No wonder that his elevation quickened the growth of his masterfulness and gloomy, impetuous self-will,-traits in his character which showed themselves very early in his reign! No wonder either that such a king, held in leading-strings by a prophet, should chafe! The more insignificant the act in itself, the more significant it may be as a flag of revolt. Disobedience which will not do a little thing is great disobedience. Nor was this the first time that Saul had ‘kicked,’ like another Saul, ‘against the pricks,’ Gilgal had seen a previous instance of his impetuous self-assertion, masked by apparent deference; and the inference is fair that the interval between the two pieces of rebellion had been of a piece with them. Trivial acts, especially when repeated, show deep-seated evil. There may be only a coil of the snake visible, but that betrays the presence of the slimy folds, though they are covered from sight among the leaves. The tiny shoot of a plant, peeping above the ground, does not augur that the roots are short; they may run for yards. Nor can any act be called small, of which the motive is disregard of God's plain command: 'He that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.' Saul had never much religion. He had never heard of Samuel till that day when he came to consult him about the asses. It was a wonder to his acquaintances to find him 'among the prophets'; and all his acts of worship have about them a smack of self, and an exclusive regard to the mere externals of sacrifice, which imply a shallow notion of religion and a spirit unsubdued by its deeper influences.

Such a man habitually acts in disregard of God's will; and that is great sin, though it be manifested in small acts. It is to be remembered, too, that the excepting of the best of the spoil from the general destruction, changed the whole character of the transaction, and brought it down from the level of a solemn act of divine justice, of which Saul and his army were the executors by divine mandate, to that of a mere cattle-lifting foray, in which they were but thieves for their own gain. The mingling of personal advantage with any sort of service of God, ruins the whole, and turns it into mere selfishness. Samuel, in 1Sa. 15:19, puts the two sides of this 'evil in the sight of the Lord' as being disobedience and swooping down on the booty, like some bird of prey.

III. Note Saul's excuses. Throughout the whole interview he plays a sorry part, and is evidently cowed by the hated authority and personality of the old man; while Samuel, on his side, is curt, stern, and takes the upper hand, as becomes God's messenger. The relative positions of the two men are the normal ones of their offices, and explain both Saul's revolt and the chronic impatience of kings at the interference of prophets. Here we have Saul coming to meet Samuel with affected heartiness and welcome, and with the bold lie, 'I have performed the commandment of the Lord.' That is more than true obedience is quick to say. If Saul had done it, he would have been slower to boast of it. 'Those vessels yield the most sound that have the least liquor.' He 'doth protest too much'; and the protestation comes from an uneasy conscience. Or did he, like a great many other men who have no deep sense of the sanctity of every jot and tittle of a divine law, please himself with the notion that it was enough to keep it approximately, in the 'spirit' of the precept, without slavish obedience to the 'letter'? In a later part of the interview [1Sa. 15:20] he insists that he has obeyed, and tries to prove it by dwelling on the points in which he did so, and gliding lightly over the others.

'Samuel had reason to believe the sheep and oxen above Saul'; and there is a tone of almost contempt for the shuffling liar in his quiet question: 'What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?' There was no answering that; so Saul shifts his ground without a blush or a moment's hesitation. 'The people spared.' It is a new character for him to appear in,-that of a weak ruler who cannot keep his unruly men in order! Had he tried to restrain them? If he had, and had failed, he was not fit to be a king. If he had not, he was a coward to shift the blame on to them. How ready men are to vilify themselves in some other direction, in order to escape the consciousness of sin, which God is seeking to force home on them! No doubt the people were very willing to have a finger in the affair; but so was he. And if the cattle was their share, Agag, who could be held to ransom, was his; and the arrangement suited all round. As to the purpose of sacrificing at Gilgal, perhaps that was true; but if it were, no doubt the same process of selection, which had destroyed the worthless and kept the best, would have been repeated; and the net result would have been a sacrifice of the least valuable, and 'the survival of the fittest' in many a pasture and stall.

But note Saul's attitude towards Jehovah, betrayed by him in that one word: 'the Lord *thy* God,' No wonder that he had been content with a partial and perfunctory obedience, if he had no closer sense of connection with God than that! There is almost a sneer in it, too, as if he had said, 'What needs all this fuss about saving the cattle? You should be pleased; for this Jehovah, with whom you profess to have special communication, will be honoured with sacrifice, and you will share in the feast.' If the words do not mean abjuring Jehovah, they go very near it, and, at all events, betray the shallowness of Saul's religion. Samuel, in his answer, reminds him of his early modesty and self-distrust, and of the source of his elevation. He then sweeps away the flimsy cobwebs of excuses, by the curt repetition of the plain, dreadful terms of Saul's commission, and then flashes out the piercing question, like a sword, 'Wherefore then didst thou not?' The reminder of past benefits, and the reiteration of the plain injunctions which have been broken, are the way to cut through the poor palliations which men wrap around their sins.

It speaks of a very obstinate and gloomy determination that, in answer, Saul should reiterate his protestation of having done as he was bid. He doggedly says over again all that he had said before, unmoved by the prophet's solemn words. He is steeling his heart against reproof; and there is only one end to that. Sin unacknowledged, after God has disclosed it, is doubly sin. The heart that answers the touch of God's rebukes by sullenly closing more tightly on its evil, is preparing itself for the blow of the hammer which will crush it. 'He that being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.' Let us beware of meeting God's prophet with shuffling lies about our obedience, and of opposing to the words which are loving though they pierce, the armour of impenetrable self-righteousness and conceit.

IV. Note the punishment. To the vain talk about honouring God by sacrifice, Samuel opposes the great principle which was the special message committed to every prophet in Israel, and which was repeated all through its history, side by side with the divinely appointed sacrificial system. In the intensity of his spiritual emotion, Samuel speaks in lyric strains, in the measured parallelism which was the Hebrew dress of poetry, and gives forth in words 'which will live for ever' the great truth that God delights in obedience more than in sacrifice. Whilst, on the one hand, he lifts the surrender of the will, and the consequent submission of the life, high above all mere ritual, on the other hand, by the same process, he sinks the rebellion of the will and the stubbornness of the nature, unsubdued either by kindness or threats, as Saul was showing his to be, to the level of actual idolatry.

'Rebellion is divination,
And stubbornness is idols and teraphim.'

Then comes the stern sentence of rejection. Why was Saul thus irrevocably set aside? Was it not a harsh punishment for such a crime? As we have already remarked, Saul's act is not to be judged as an isolated deed, but as the outcome of a deep tendency in him, which meant revolt from God. It was not because of the single act, but because of that which it showed him to be, that he was set aside. The sentence is pronounced, not because 'thou didst spare Amalek,' but because 'thou didst reject the word of the Lord.' Further, it is to be remembered that the punishment was but the carrying out of his act. His own hand had cut the bond between him and God, and had disqualified himself for the office which he filled. Saul had said, 'I will reign by myself.' God said, 'Be it so! By thyself thou shalt reign.' For the consequence of his deposition was not outward change in his royalty. David indeed was anointed but in secret, so Samuel consented to honour Saul before the people. All the external difference was that Samuel never saw him again, and he was relieved from the incubus of the prophet's 'interference'; that is to say, he ceased to be God's king, and became a phantom, ruling only by his own will and power, as he had wished to do. How profound may be the difference while all externals remain unchanged! When we set up ourselves as our own lords, and shake off God's rule, we cast away His sanction and help in all the deeds of our self-will, however unaltered their outward appearance may remain. But God left him to 'walk in his own ways, and be filled with the fruit of his own devices,' by no irrevocable abandonment, however the decree of rejection from the kingship was irrevocable. The gates of repentance stood open for him; and the very sentence that came stern and laconic from Samuel's lips, rightly accepted, might have drawn him in true penitence to a forgiving God. His subsequent confession was rejected because it expressed no real contrition; and the worship which he proceeded to offer, without the sanction of the prophet's presence, was as unreal as his protestation of obedience, and showed how little he had learned the lesson of the great words, 'To obey is better than sacrifice.'

11) 1 Samuel 16:1-13

1 Samuel

THE SHEPHERD-KING

1Sa. 16:1 - 1Sa. 16:13.

The chief purpose in these verses is to bring out that the choice of David was purely God's. The most consummate art could have taken no better way of heightening the effect of his first appearance than that adopted in this perfectly unartificial story, which leads us up a long avenue to where the shepherd-boy stands. First, we have Samuel, with his regrets and objections; then Jesse with his seven stalwart sons; and at last, when expectation has been heightened by delay and by the minute previous details, the future king is disclosed,-a stripling with his ruddy locks glistening with the anointing oil, and his lovely eyes. We shall best catch the spirit by simply following the letter of the story.

I. We have Samuel and his errand to Bethlehem. After that sad day at Gilgal, he and Saul met no more, though their homes were but a few miles apart, and it must have been difficult to avoid each other. Samuel yearned over the man whom he had learned to love, and it must have been pain to him to see the shattering of the vessel which he had formed. However natural his mourning, and however indicative of his sweet nature, it was wrong, because it showed that he had not yet reconciled himself to God's purpose, though his conduct obeyed. The mourning which submits while it weeps, and which interferes with no duty, is never rebuked by God. He never says,' How long dost thou mourn?' unless sorrow has deepened into accusation of His providence, or tears have blinded us to the duty that ensues. But the true cure for overmuch sorrow is work, and, for vain regrets after vanished good, the welcome to the new good which God ever sends to fill the empty place. His resources are not exhausted because one man has failed. 'There are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it.' Saul has been rejected, but a king shall be found; and Samuel is to dry his tears and anoint him. He evidently had no thought of a successor to Saul till this command came; and when it comes, how little it tells him! He gets light enough for the next step, but no more. That is always God's way. Duty opens by degrees, and the way to see farther ahead is to go as far as we see.

Samuel's sorrow and the incomplete command show plainly that he was but an instrument. At every step the view is confuted which makes him a far-seeing statesman who inaugurated and carried through a peaceful revolution. The history, which is our only source, tells another story, and makes God the actor, and the prophet only a tool in His hands. If we cut the supernatural out of the story, the fragments do not hang together, and no reason is forthcoming why they should be any more true than are the rejected pieces. Samuel does not show to advantage in either of the two things mentioned about him here. In neither was he true to his early vow, 'Speak, for Thy servant heareth.' But there was much reason for his fear, if once God was left out of the account; for Saul's ever-wakeful suspicion had become a disease, and it was not wonderful that he should be on the watch for any act which looked like putting the sentence of deposition into effect. If ever a man lived with a sword hanging by a hair over him, it was this unhappy king, who knew that he was dethroned, and did not know when or by whom the divine rejection would be made visible to all men. But Samuel had faced worse dangers without a murmur; and no doubt his alarm now, which makes him venture all but flatly to refuse to obey, indicates that, to some extent, he had lost his hold of God by his indulgence in his sorrow. If he had been true to his high calling, he would have 'filled his horn,' and gone on God's errand, careless of a hundred Sauls or a hundred deaths. But it is easy for us, who have never perilled anything for obedience, to sit in judgment on him. 'Wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself.' God judges him mercifully, and provides a shelter for his weakness, which he should not have needed. To hide his true errand behind the cloak of the sacrifice was second-best, and only permitted in consideration of his fear which had a touch of sin in it. He was not, at the moment, up to treading the heroic plain path; and God opened an easier one for him. It is sometimes allowable to use an avowed purpose to conceal the real one, but it is a permission which should be very sparingly used.

II. We have Samuel at Bethlehem, with Jesse and his sons. An old man is suddenly seen coming up the hill to the gate of the little city on foot, driving or leading a heifer, and carrying a horn in his hand. In such humble fashion did the prophet travel; but reverential awe met him, and his long years of noble service surrounded him as with a halo. Apparently, Bethlehem had not been included in his usual circuits, and the village elders were somewhat scared by his sudden appearance. Their question may give a glimpse into the severity which Samuel sometimes had to show, and is a strange testimony to the reality of his power: 'Comest thou peaceably?' One old man was no very formidable assailant of a village, even if he did not come with friendly intent; but, if he is recognised as God's messenger, his words are sharper than any two-edged sword, and his unarmed hand bears weapons mighty to 'pull down strongholds.' Why should the elders have thought that he came 'with a rod'? Because they knew that they and their fellow-villagers deserved it. If men were not dimly conscious of sin, they would not be afraid of God's messenger or of God.

The narrative does not tell whether or not the sacrifice preceded the review of Jesse's sons. Probably it did, and the interval between it and the feast was occupied in the interview. It is evident that Samuel kept the reason of his wish to see Jesse's sons to himself; for disclosure would have brought about the danger which he was so anxious to avoid. It appears, too, from 1Sa. 16:13, that only the family of Jesse were present. So we have to fancy the wondering little cluster of burly husbandmen with their father surrounding the prophet, and: one by one, bracing themselves to meet his searching gaze. Again the choice is emphatically represented as God's, by the mention of Samuel's hasty conclusion, from the look of the eldest, that he was the man. Had not Samuel had enough of kings of towering stature? Strange that he should have been in such a hurry to fix on a second edition of Saul! The most obedient waiters on God sometimes outrun His intimations, and they always go wrong when they do. Samuel has to learn two lessons, as he is bidden to repress the too quick thought: one, that he is not choosing, but only registering God's choice; and one, that the qualifications for God's king are inward, not bodily. In these old days, the world's monarchs had to be men of thews and sinews, for power rested on mere brute force: but God's chosen had to rule, not by the strength of his own arm, but by leaning on God's. The genius of the kingdom determined the principle of selection of its king. Samuel does not again attempt to forecast the choice; but he lets the other six pass, and, hearing no inward voice from God, tells Jesse, as it would seem, that the Lord has not chosen them for whatsoever mysterious purpose was in His mind.

III. We have 'the Lord's chosen.' Samuel was staggered by the apparent failure of his errand. God had told him that he had provided a king from this family, and now they had passed in review before him, and none was chosen. Again he is made to feel his own impotence, and his question, ‘Are here all thy children?’ has a touch of bewilderment in it. God seldom shows us His choice at first; and both in thought and practice we get at the precious and the true by a process of exclusion, having often to reject ‘seven’ before we find in some all-but-forgotten ‘eighth’ that which we seek. David’s insignificance in Jesse’s eyes was such that his father would never have remembered his existence but for the question, and his answer is a kind of assurance to the prophet that he need not take the trouble to see the boy, for he will never do for whatever he may have in view. His youth and occupation put him out of the question. We know, from the other parts of his story, that his brothers had no love for him; nor does his father seem to have had much. Probably the lad had the usual lot of genius,-to grow up among uncongenial, commonplace people, understanding him little, and liking him less. It is a hard school; but where it does not sour, it makes strong men. His solitary shepherd life taught him many precious lessons, and, at any rate, gave him the priceless gift of solitude, which is the nurse of poetry, heroism, and religion. The glorious night-piece in Psa. 8:1 - Psa. 8:9, and its companion day-piece in Psa. 19:1 - Psa. 19:14, may bear the impress of the shepherd life; which is idealised and sanctified for ever in the immortal sweetness of Psa. 23:1 - Psa. 23:6 There were many worse schools for the future king than a solitary shepherd’s life on the bare hills round Bethlehem.

The delay of the feast and the pause of idle waiting heighten the expectation with which we look for David’s coming. When he does come, what a bright young figure is lovingly painted for us! He is ‘ruddy, and withal fair of eyes, and goodly to look upon,’-of fair complexion, with golden hair [rare among these swarthy Orientals], and with lustrous poet’s eyes. What a contrast to Saul’s grim face and figure,- like a sunbeam streaming athwart a thunder-cloud seamed with its own lightning! Silently the divine voice spoke, and silently, as it would seem, Samuel poured the oil on the boy’s bowed curls. No word of the purpose escaped his lips, and the awestruck youth was left to wonder for what high destiny he was chosen. One can fancy the looks of his brothers as they bitterly watched the anointing with hearts full of envy, contempt, and rage. 1Sa. 17:28 shows what they felt to David.

What was the use of this enigmatical anointing for an undisclosed purpose? It is Samuel's last act, and his last appearance, except for the mention of David's flight to him from the court of Saul, and that weird scene of Saul prophesying and lying naked before Samuel and David for a day and a night. It was therefore the solemn final act of the prophet,-transferring the monarchy; but it was for David the beginning of his training for the throne, in two ways, 'The Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward.' There was an actual communication of divine gifts fitting him for his unknown office, and he was conscious of a new spirit stirring in him. Beside this, the consciousness of a call to unknown tasks would mature him fast, and bring graver thoughts, humbler sense of weakness, and clinging trust in God who had laid the burden on him; and the necessity for repressing his dreams of the future, in order to do his obscure present duties, would add patience and self-control to his youthful ardour. What a whirl of thoughts he carried back to his flock, and how welcome would the solitude be!

The great lesson here is the one so continually reiterated in Scripture, from Isaac downwards, that God 'chooses the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty,' and thereby magnifies both the sovereign freedom of His choice and the power of His Spirit, which takes the stripling from the sheepcotes and qualifies him to be the antagonist of the grim Saul, and the king of Israel. There are subsidiary lessons, especially for young and ardent souls confined for the present to lowly tasks, and feeling some call to something higher in a dim future. Patience, the faithful doing of to-day's trivial tasks, the habit of self-repression, the quiet trust in God who opens the way in due time,-these, and such like, were the signs that David was called to a throne, and that God's Spirit was preparing him for it. They are the virtues which will best prepare us for whatever the future may have in store for us, and will be in themselves abundant reward, whether they draw after them a high position, which is a heavy burden, or, more happily, leave us in our sheltered obscurity.

12)1 Samuel 17:32-51

THE VICTORY OF UNARMED FAITH

1Sa. 17:32 - 1Sa. 17:51.

The scene of David's victory has been identified in the present Wady Es-Sunt, which still possesses one of the terebinth-trees which gave it its name of 'Elah.' At that point it is about a quarter of a mile wide, and runs nearly east and west. In the centre is 'a deep trench or gulley, the sides and bed of which are strewn with rounded and water-worn pebbles.' This is the 'valley,' or rather 'ravine' of 1Sa. 17:3 of this chapter, which is described by a different word from that for 'vale' in 1Sa. 17:2 -the one meaning a much broader opening than the other-and from it came the 'five smooth stones.' Notice the minute topographical accuracy, which indicates history, not legend. The pebble-bed may supply a missile to hit the modern 'giant' of sceptical criticism, who boasts much after Goliath's fashion.

The two armies lay looking at each other across the valley, with occasional skirmishes; and for forty days [probably a round number] Goliath paraded on his own, the south, side of the gulley, shouting out his taunts and challenge with a voice like a bull. Many a similar scene in classical and mediaeval warfare confirms the truth of the picture, so unlike modern battles. The story is, for all time, the example of the victory of unarmed faith over the world's utmost might. It is in little the history of the Church and the type of all battles for God. It is a pattern for the young especially. The youthful athlete leaps into the arena, and overcomes, not because of his own strength, but because he trusts in God.

I. Note the glowing youthful enthusiasm which dares the conflict. When the Spirit of the Lord left Saul, his courage seems to have gone too, and he is cowed, like the rest, by Goliath. His interview with David shows him as timid and unlike his former self, when he dashed at Nahash and any odds. Now he is hardly to be roused, even by David's contagious boldness, and is full of objections and precautions. The temper of the two, as they front each other in Saul's tent, shows that the one has lost, and the other received, the Spirit which strengthens. David has become the encourager, and his cheery words bring some hopefulness to the gloomy, faint-hearted king. The Septuagint has a variant reading in 1Sa. 17:32, which brings this out and suits the context, 'Let not my lord's heart fail.' But, whether this be adopted or no, David appears as quite unaffected by the terror which had unmanned the army, and as bringing a buoyant disregard of the enemy, like a reviving breeze. It was not merely youthful daring, nor foolish under-estimation of the danger, which prompted his stimulating words. The ring of true faith is in them, and they show us how we may surround ourselves with an atmosphere which will keep prevailing faint-heartedness off us, and make us, like Gideon's fleece, impervious to the chill mists of faithless fear which saturate all around. He who trusts in God should be as a pillar of fire, burning bright in the darkness of terror, and making a rallying point for weaker hearts. When panic has seized others, the Christian soul has the more reason for courage. David conquered the temptation to share in the general cowardice, before he conquered Goliath, and perhaps the former fight was the worse of the two.

While David is the embodiment of the courage of faith, Saul embodies worldly wisdom and calculating prudence. A touch of tenderness blends with his attempt to dissuade the lad from the unequal conflict. He speaks of probabilities, and, like all such calculation, his results are quite right, only that he has not taken all the forces into account, and the omission vitiates the conclusion. It is quite true that David is but a youth, and Goliath a giant and a veteran; but is that all that is to be said? If it be, then the lad cannot fight the Philistine bully; but if Saul has made the small omission of leaving out God, that makes a difference. The same mistake is constantly made still, and so the victories of faith are a constant surprise to the world and to a worldly Church. David's eager story of his fights with wild beasts is meant both to answer Saul's objection on his own ground, by showing him that, youth as the speaker was, he had proved his power, and still more to supply the lacking element in the calculation. So he tells, first, how 'I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him,' and then at the end brings in the true ground of his confidence: 'The Lord that delivered me . . . He will deliver.' As Thomas Fuller says, 'He made an experimental syllogism, and from most practical premises [major a lion, minor a bear], inferred the direct conclusion that God would give him victory over Goliath. Faith has the right thus to argue from the past to the future, because it draws from God whose resources and patience are equally inexhaustible. An echo of the words comes from Paul's 'Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that He will yet deliver.' There is infinite pathos in Saul's parting blessing. 'The Lord be with thee!' is spoken as if from the consciousness that the Lord had left *him*, and that *his* day for going into battle with the assurance of His help was gone for ever. If that softened mood had lasted, how different his future might have been! If we modestly and boldly show the power of faith in our lives, we may kindle yearnings in some gloomy hearts, that would lead them to peace, if followed out.

II. The equipment of faith. Saul meant to honour as well as to secure David by dressing him in his own royal attire, and by encumbering him by the help of sword and helmet. And David was willing to be so fitted out, for it is no part of the courage of faith to disdain any outward helps. But he soon found that he could not move freely in the unaccustomed armour, and flung it off, like a wise man. His motive was partly common sense, which told him not to choose weapons that his antagonist could handle better than he; and partly reliance on God, which told him that he was safer with no armour but his shepherd's dress and with only his sling in his hand. So there he stands, drawn for us with wonderful vividness, in one hand his staff, in the other his sling, both familiar and often used, and by his side the simple wallet which had held his frugal meal, and now received the smooth pebbles that he picked up as he passed the gulley to the Philistine side of the valley.

How graphically the contrast is drawn between him and Goliath, as the latter conies forth swelling with his own magnificence, and preceded by his shield-bearer! He was 'brass' all over; note the kind of amused emphasis with which the word is repeated in the half-satirical and marvellously lifelike portrait of him in 1Sa. 17:5 - 1Sa. 17:8; 'brass' here, 'brass' there, 'brass' everywhere; and, not content with one shield dangling at his back, he has a man to carry another in front of him as he struts. David seems to have crossed the ravine, and to have come close up to Goliath before he was observed; and then, with almost a snort of contempt, the giant resents the insult of sending such a foe to fight *him* with such weapons. Perhaps he was nearer the truth than he thought, when he asked if he was a dog; and any stick will do, as the proverb says, to beat that animal, especially if God guards the hand that holds it.

The five smooth stones have become the symbol of the insignificant means, in the world’s estimate, which God uses in faithful hands to slay the giants of evil. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but they are mighty. Faith unarmed is armed with more than triple steel, and a sling in its hand is more fatal than a sword. Sometimes in kindness and sometimes in malice, the world tempts us to fight evil with its own weapons, and to put on its unfamiliar armour. The Church as a whole, and individual Christians, have often been hampered, and all but smothered, in Saul’s harness. The more simply we keep ourselves to the simple methods which the word of God enjoins, and to the simple weapons which ought to be the easiest for a Christian, the more likely shall we be to conquer. Goliath is not to be encountered with sword and armour which is, after all, but a shabby copy of the tons of brass which he wears, but he does not know what to make of the sling, and does not see the stone till it crashes his skull in.

III. Note faith’s anticipation of victory. The dialogue before the battle has many parallels in classical times and among savage peoples. Goliath’s bluster is full of contempt of David and truculent self-confidence. Its coarseness is characteristic,-he will make his boyish antagonist food for vultures and jackals. It is exactly what a bully would say. David’s answer throbs with buoyant confidence, and stands as a stimulating example of the temper in which God’s soldiers should go out to every fight, no matter against what odds. It fully recognises the formidable armoury of the enemy,-sword for close quarters, spear to thrust with, and javelin to fling from a distance, every weapon that ingenuity could fashion and trained skill could wield. Goliath was a walking arsenal, and little David took count of his weapons as they clanked and flashed. It is no part of faith’s triumph to ignore the number and sharpness of the enemy’s arms. But faith sees them all, and keeps unterrified and unashamed of the poor leathern sling and smooth stones. The unarmed hand which grasps God’s hand should never tremble; and he who can say ‘I come . . . in the name of the Lord of hosts,’ has no need to be afraid of an army of Goliaths, though each bristled with swords and spears like a porcupine.

The great name on which David’s faith rested, ‘the Lord of hosts,’ appears to have sprung into use in this epoch, and to have been one precious fruit of its frequent wars. Conflict is blessed if it teaches the knowledge of the unseen Commander who marshals not only men, but all the forces of the universe and the armies of heaven, for the defence of His servants and the victory of His own cause. The fulness of the divine name is learned by degrees, as our needs impress the various aspects of His character; and the revelation contained in this appellation is the gift of that fierce and stormy time, a possession for ever. He who defies the armies of Israel has to reckon with the Lord of these armies, whose name proclaims at once His eternal, self-originated, and self-sustained being, His covenant, His presence with His earthly host, and the infinite ranks of obedient creatures who are His soldiers and their allies. That is 'the Name' in the strength of which we may 'set up our banners' and be sure of victory. Note how David flings back Goliath's taunts in his teeth. He is sure that God will conquer through him, and, though he has no sword, that he will somehow hack the big head off; and that it is the host of the Philistines on whom the vultures and jackals are to feed to-day.

His faith sees the victory before the battle is begun, and trusts, not in his own weak power, but only 'in the name of the Lord.' Note, too, the result which he expects-no glory for himself, though that came unsought, when the shrill songs from the women of Israel met the victors, but to all the world the proof that Israel had a God, and to Israel ['this assembly'] the renewed lesson of their true weapons and of their Almighty Helper. Such utter suppression of self is inseparable from trust in God, and without it no soldier of His has a right to expect victory. To fight 'in the name of the Lord' requires hiding our own name. If we are really going to war for Him, and in His strength, we ought to expect to conquer. Believe that you will be beaten, and you will be. Trust to Him to make you 'more than conquerors,' and the trust will bring about its own fulfilment.

IV. Observe the contrast in 1Sa. 17:48 between the slow movements of the heavy-armed Philistine and the quick run of the shepherd, whose 'feet were as hind's feet' [Psa. 18:33]. Agility and confident alacrity were both expressed. His feet were shod with 'the preparedness of faith.' Observe, too, the impetuous brevity of the account in 1Sa. 17:49, of the actual fall of Goliath. The short clauses, coupled by a series of 'ands,' reproduce the swift succession of events, which ended the fight before it had begun; and one can almost hear the whiz of the stone as it crashes into the thick head, so strangely left unprotected by all the profusion of brass that clattered about him. The vulnerable heel of Achilles and the unarmed forehead of Goliath illustrate the truth, ever forgotten and needing to be repeated, that, after all precautions, some spot is bare, and that ‘there is no armour against fate.’

The picture of the huge ‘man-mountain’ fallen upon his face to the earth, a huddled heap of useless mail, recalls the words of a psalm, ‘When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell’ [Psa. 27:2]. Is it fanciful to hear in that triumphant chant an echo of Goliath’s boast about giving his flesh to the fowls and the beasts, and a vision of the braggart as he tottered and lay prostrate? Observe, too, the contemptuous reiteration of ‘the Philistine,’ which occurs six times in the four verses [1Sa. 17:49 - 1Sa. 17:51]. National feeling speaks in that. There is triumph in the sarcastic repetition of the dreaded name in such a connection. This was what one of the brood had got, and his fate was an omen of what would befall the rest. The champion of Israel, the soldier of God, standing over the dead Philistine, all whose brazen armour had been useless and his brazen insolence abased, and sawing off his head with his own sword, was a prophecy for the Israel of that day, and will be a symbol till the end of time of the true equipment, the true temper, and the certain victory, of all who, in the name of the Lord of hosts, go forth in their weakness against the giants of ignorance, vice, and sin. ‘This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.’

13)1 Samuel 18:5-16

1 Samuel

A SOUL’S TRAGEDY

1Sa. 18:5 - 1Sa. 18:16.

1Sa. 18:5 anticipates 1Sa. 18:13 - 1Sa. 18:16. It is the last verse of a section which interrupts the even flow of the story, and which is absent from the Septuagint. 1Sa. 18:6 follows immediately on 1Sa. 17:54 in that version.

Taking that verse as our starting-point, we have three stages in Saul's growing hatred and awe of the young champion, and of David's growing influence and reputation. It is deeply tragic to watch the gradual darkening of the once bright light, side by side with the irresistible increase in brilliance of the new star. 'He must increase, but I must decrease,' became Saul's bitter conviction; but instead of meekly accepting the necessity, his gloomy spirit struggled against it, like stormy waves against a breakwater, and, like them, was shivered into foam in the vain effort.

I. The first stage was Saul's jealousy of David's fame as a warrior. The returning victorious army was met, in Oriental fashion, by a triumphal chorus of women, with their shrill songs, accompanied by the dissonant noises which do duty for music to Eastern ears. The words of their chant were startlingly and ominously plain-spoken, and became more emphatic and insulting in Saul's ears, because they were sung by two answering bands, one of which rang out, 'Saul hath slain his thousands,' while the other overtopped them by pealing out still more loudly and exultantly, 'And David his ten thousands.' To be brought into comparison with this unknown stripling was bitter enough, but to be used as a foil to set off his superiority was too much to be borne. There are few men, holding high places in any walk of life, who could have stood such a comparison without wincing. Suppose a great soldier in our day, coming home from a successful campaign, and having his prowess dimmed in every newspaper by the praises lavished on a young lieutenant who had done some brave feat that caught the public fancy- would he be likely to be in a very amiable mood towards either the singers or the object of their triumphal songs? Do great authors rejoice in the rising of young reputations that dim theirs? or do great orators smile when some 'boy' takes the public ear more than they do? Poor Saul had to drink the bitter cup, which all who love the sweet draught of popular applause have sooner or later to taste; and we need not think him a monster of badness because he found it bitter.

It will be more to the purpose that we take care lest we do the very same thing in our little lives and humble spheres; for envy and jealousy of those who threaten to out-shine, or in any way to out-do, us is not confined to people in high places or with great reputations. The roots of them are in us all, and the only way to keep them from growing up rank is to think less of our reputation and more of our duty, to count it a very small matter what men think of us, and the all-important matter what God thinks.

Saul was moved, too, by the consciousness that he had been really deposed by Jehovah, and was only a phantom king, and, as his angry soliloquy shows, what troubled him most in the women's song was that it pointed to David as likely to come in and rob him, not only of glory, but of the kingdom. Ever since Samuel had pronounced his rejection, his uneasy eyes had been furtively scanning men for his possible supplanter, and no wonder that his gloomy suspicions focussed themselves on the gallant youth, who conquered men's hearts and made women's tongues eloquent in his praise. Stormy and dark as Saul's nature had become, and grave as had been his failure to be worthy of the monarchy, one cannot but feel the infinite pathos and pity of his life.

II. The second stage was the attempt on David's life. 1Sa. 18:10 - 1Sa. 18:11, which record it, are not in the Septuagint, and the narrative does run more smoothly without them. But if they are retained, they show how the moody suspicion with which Saul 'eyed David' came to a swift, murderous climax. He stands as a terrible example of how suspicion and jealousy, working in a nature utterly without self-control, transport it into the wildest excesses. In the strange phraseology of 1Sa. 18:9, 'an evil spirit from God' laid hold of him, dominating his personality. The writer of this book felt that God was the ultimate cause of all things, and that all beings were under His control; and his devout recognition of that fact led him to the apparent paradox of tracing an 'evil spirit' to God. But we must not be so startled as to overlook the truth that Saul had prepared the fit abode for that evil spirit by his own indulgence in a whirl of sinful passions and acts, and that these were punished by their 'natural' consequence. Any man who lets his own baser nature have full fling invites the devil. Saul had what would now be called a paroxysm of insanity. But perhaps the modern medical phrase is not to be preferred to the old scriptural one. The former is innocent of any explanation of the fact which it designates, and it may possibly be that insanity is sometimes, even now, 'possession.' At all events, since science gives no explanation of it, and a great dim region of consciousness is now being recognised,-'subliminal,' to speak in the new phraseology,-he is a bold man who ventures to deny that possibility.

But be that as it may, what a striking picture is given of Saul, worn with passion and swept away by ungovernable impulses, ‘prophesying’ or ‘raving’ with wild gestures and uttering wilder sounds; and of David, young, calm, giving forth melodies on his harp and songs from his lips, that sought to soothe the paroxysms of fury. Browning has drawn the picture in immortal words, which all who can should read. It has been suggested that Saul did not ‘cast’ his spear, but only brandished it in his fierce threat to pin David to the wall. But the youthful harper would scarcely have ‘avoided out of his presence’ for a mere threat and the flourish of a lance; and a man, raging mad and madly hostile, would not be likely to waste breath in mere threats. The attempt was more probably a serious one, and the spear, flung by an arm made stronger than ever by insane hatred, quivered in the wall very near the lithe athlete who had agilely escaped it. Envy, allowed to have its way, becomes murderous. Let us suppress its beginning. A tiger pup can be held in and its claws cut, but a full-grown tiger cannot.

III. The third stage is Saul’s getting rid of David. The growing awe of him is marked in verses 1Sa. 18:12 and 1Sa. 18:15, and the word in the latter verse is stronger than that in the former. It is a pathetic picture of the gradual creeping over a strong man of a nameless terror. Ever-thickening folds of cold dread, like a wet mist, wrap a soul once bright and energetic. And the reason is twofold: first, that God had left that tempestuous, rebellious soul because it had left Him; and second, that, in its desolate solitude, in which there was no trace of softening or penitence, that lightning-riven soul knew that the sunshine, which it had repelled, was now pouring on David. Saul’s suspicions were hardened into certainties. He was sure now that what his jealousy had whispered, when the women chanted their chorus, was grim fact. And he could but helplessly watch his supplanter’s steady advance in favour with men and God. The two processes of growing darkness and growing light go on side by side in the two men, and each makes the other more striking by contrast. Twice is it repeated that Saul was in awe of David. Twice is it repeated that Jehovah was with David, and that he ‘behaved himself wisely,’ which last statement includes in the Hebrew word both the idea of prudence and that of success. So, on the one hand, there is a steady growth in all good, godly, and happy qualities and experiences; and on the other, a tragical increase of darkness and gloom, godlessness and despair. And yet Saul had begun so well! And

Saul might have been what David was,- companioned by God, prosperous, and the idol of his people. Two souls stand side by side for a moment on the same platform, with the same divine goodness and love encircling them, and the one steadily rises, while the other steadily sinks. How awful are the endless possibilities of progress in either direction that lie open for every soul of man!

14)1 Samuel 20:1-13

1 Samuel

JONATHAN, THE PATTERN OF FRIENDSHIP

1Sa. 20:1 - 1Sa. 20:13.

The friendship of Jonathan for David comes like a breath of pure air in the midst of the heavy-laden atmosphere of hate and mad fury, or like some clear fountain sparkling up among the sulphurous slag and barren scoriae of a volcano. There is no more beautiful page in history or poetry than the story of the passionate love of the heir to the throne for the young champion, whom he had so much cause to regard as a rival. What a proof of the victory of love over self is his saying, ‘Thou shalt be king over Israel, and I shall be next unto thee’! [1Sa. 23:17]. Truly did David sing in his elegy, ‘Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women’; for in that old world, in which the relations between the sexes had not yet received the hallowing and refinement of Christian times, much of what is now chiefly found in these was manifested in friendship, such as that of these two young men. Jonathan is the foremost figure in it, and the nobility and self-oblivion of his love are beautifully brought out, while David’s part is rather that of the loved than of the lover. The scene is laid in Gibeah, where Saul kept his court, and to which all the persons of the story seem to have come back from Samuel’s house at Kamah. Saul’s strange subjugation to the hallowing influences of the prophet’s presence had been but momentary and superficial; and it had been followed by a renewed outburst of the old hate, obvious to David’s sharpened sight, though not to Jonathan. In the interview between them, David is pardonably but obviously absorbed in self, while Jonathan bends all his soul to cheer and reassure his friend.

There are four turns in the conversation, in each of which David speaks and Jonathan answers. David's first question presupposes that his friend knows that his death is determined, and is privy to Saul's thoughts. If he had been less harassed, he would have done Jonathan more justice than to suppose him capable of knowing everything without telling him anything; but fear is suspicious. He should have remembered that, when Saul first harboured murderous purposes, Jonathan had not waited to be asked, but had disclosed the plot to him, and perilled his own life by his remonstrances with his father. He should have trusted his friend. His question breathes consciousness of innocence of any hostility to Saul, but unconsciously betrays some defect in his confidence in Jonathan. The answer is magnanimous in its silence as to that aspect of the question, though the subsequent story seems to imply that Jonathan felt it. He tries to hearten David by strong assurances that his life is safe. He does not directly contradict David's implication that he knew more than he had told, but, without asserting his ignorance, takes it for granted, and quietly argues from it the incorrectness of David's suspicions. Incidentally he gives us, in the picture of the perfect confidence between Saul and himself, an inkling of how much he had to sacrifice to his friendship. Wild as was Saul's fury when aroused, and narrow as had been his escape from it at an earlier time [1Sa. 14:44], there was yet love between them, and the king made a confidant of his gallant eldest son. They 'were lovely and pleasant in their lives.' However gloomy and savage in his paroxysms Saul was, the relations between them were sweet. The most self-introverted and solitary soul needs some heart to pour itself out to, and this poor king found one in Jonathan. All the harder, then, was the trial of friendship when the trusted son had to take the part of the friend whom his father deemed an enemy, and had the pain of breaking such close ties. How his heart must have been torn asunder! On the one side was the lonely father who clung to him: on the other, the hunted friend to whom he clung. It is a sore wrench when kindred are on one side, and congeniality and the voice of the heart on the other. But there are ties more sacred than those of flesh and blood; and the putting of them second, which is sometimes needful in obedience to earthly love or duty, is always needful if we would rightly entertain our heavenly Friend.

Jonathan’s soothing assurances did not satisfy David, and he ‘sware’ in the earnestness of his conviction. David gives a very good reason for his friend’s ignorance, which he has at once believed, in the suggestion that Saul had not taken him into his confidence, out of tenderness to his feelings. Their friendship, then, was notorious, and, indeed, was an element in Saul’s dread of David, who seemed to have some charm to steal hearts, and had bewitched both Saul’s son and his daughter, thus making a painful rift in the family unity. It does not appear how David came to be so sure of Saul’s designs. The incident at Ramah might have seemed to augur some improvement in his mood; and certainly there could have been no overt acts, or Jonathan could not have disputed the suspicions. Possibly some whispers may have reached David through his wife Michal, Saul’s daughter, or in the course of his attendance on the king, which he had now resumed, his quick eye may have noticed ominous signs. At all events, he is so sure, that he makes solemn attestation to his friend, and convinces him that, in the picturesque phrase which has become so familiar, ‘There is but a step between me and death.’ Such temper was scarcely in accordance with ‘the prophecies which went before on’ him. If he had been walking by faith, he would have called Samuel’s anointing to mind, and have drawn arguments from the victory over Goliath, for trust in victory over Saul, as he had done for the former from that over the lion and the bear. But faith does not always keep high-water mark, and we can only too easily sympathise with this momentary ebb of its waters.

None the less is it true that David’s terror was unworthy, and showed that the strain of his anxious position was telling on his spirit, and making him not only suspect his earthly friend, but half forget his heavenly One. There was but a step between him and death; but, if he had been living in the serenity of trust, he would have known that the narrow space was as good as a thousand miles, and that Saul could not force him across it, for all his hatred and power.

Jonathan does not attempt to alter his conviction and probably is obliged to admit the justice of the explanation of his own ignorance and the truth of the impression of Saul’s purposes. But he does what is more to the purpose; he pledges himself to do whatever David desires. It is an unconditional desertion of his father and alliance with David; it is the true voice of friendship or love, which ever has its delight in knowing and doing the will of the beloved. It answers David's thoughts rather than his words. He will not discuss any more whether he or David is right; but, in any event, he is his friend's.

The touchstone of friendship is practical help and readiness to do what the friend wishes. It is so in our friendships here, which are best cemented so. It is so in the highest degree in our friendship with the true Friend and Lover of us all, the sweetness and power of our friendship with whom we do not know until we say, 'Whatsoever thou desirest, I will do it,' and so lose the burden of self-will, and find that He does for us what we desire when we make His desires our law of conduct.

Secure of Jonathan's help, David proposed the stratagem for finding out Saul's disposition, which had probably been in his mind all along. It says more for his subtlety than for his truthfulness. With all his nobility, he had a streak of true Oriental craft and stood on the moral level of his times and country, in his readiness to eke out the lion's skin with the fox's tail. It was a shrewd idea to make Saul betray himself by the way in which he took David's absence; but a lie is a lie, and cannot be justified, though it may be palliated, by the straits of the liar. At the same time it is fair to remember the extremity of David's danger and the morality of his age, in estimating, not the nature of his action, but the extent of his guilt in doing it. The same relaxation of the vigour of his faith which left him a prey to fear, led him to walk in crooked paths, and the impartial narrative tells of them without a word of comment. We have to form our own estimate of the fitness of a lie to form the armour of a saint. The proposal informs us of two facts,-the custom of having a feast for three days at the new moon, and that of having an annual family feast and sacrifice, neither of which is prescribed in the law. I do not here deal with the grave question as to the date of the ceremonial law, as affected by these and similar phenomena; but I may be allowed the passing remark that the irregularities do not prove the non-existence of the law, but may be accounted for by supposing that, in such unsettled times, it had been loosely observed, and that many accretions and omissions, some of them inevitable in the absence of a recognised centre of worship, had crept in. That is a much less brilliant and much more old-fashioned explanation than the new one, but perhaps it is none the worse for that. This generation is fond of making ‘originality’ and ‘brilliancy’ the tests of truth.

David’s words in 1Sa. 20:8 have a touch of suspicion in them, in their very appeal for kind treatment, in their reminder of the ‘covenant’ of friendship, as if Jonathan needed either, and still more in the bitter request to slay him himself instead of delivering him to Saul. He almost thinks that Jonathan is in the plot, and means to carry him off a prisoner. Note, too, that he does not say, ‘We made a covenant,’ but ‘Thou hast brought me into’ it, as if it had been the other’s wish rather than his. All this was beneath true friendship, and it hurt Jonathan, who next speaks with unusual emotion, beseeching David to clear all this fog out of his heart, and to believe in the genuineness and depth of his love, and in the frankness of his speech. True love ‘is not easily provoked,’ is not soon angry, and his was true in spite of many obstacles which might have made him as jealous as his father, and in the face of misconstruction and suspicion. May we not think of a yet higher love, which bears with our suspicions and faithless doubts, and ever answers our incredulity by its gentle ‘If it were not so, I would have told you’?

David is not yet at the end of his difficulties, and next suggests, how is he to know Saul’s mind? Jonathan takes him out into the privacy of the open country [they had apparently been in Gibeah], and there solemnly calls God to witness that he will disclose his father’s purposes, whatever they are. The language is obscure and broken, whether owing to corruption in the text, or to the emotion of the speaker. In half-shaped sentences, which betray how much he felt his friend’s doubts, and how sincere he was, he invokes evil on himself if he fails to tell all. He then unfolds his ingenious scheme for conveying the information, on which we do not touch. But note the final words of Jonathan,-that prayer, so pathetic, so unselfish in its recognition of David as the inheritor of the kingdom that had dropped from his own grasp, so sad in its clear-eyed assurance of his father’s abandonment, so deeply imbued with faith in the divine word, and so resigned to its behests. Both in the purity of his friendship and in the strength of his faith and submission, Jonathan stands here above David, and is far surer than the latter himself is of his high destiny and final triumph. It was hard for him to believe in the victory which was to displace his own house, harder still to rejoice in it, without one trace of bitterness mingling in the sweetness of his love, hardest of all actively to help it and to take sides against his father; but all these difficulties his unselfish heart overcame, and he stands for all time as the noblest example of human friendship, and as not unworthy to remind us, as from afar off and dimly, of the perfect love of the Firstborn Son of the true King, who has loved us all with a yet deeper, more patient, more self-sacrificing love. If men can love one another as Jonathan loved David, how should they love the Christ who has loved them so much! And what sacrilege it is to pour such treasures of affection at the feet of dear ones here, and to give so grudgingly such miserable doles of heart's love to Him!

15)1 Samuel 24:4-17

1 Samuel

LOVE FOR HATE, THE TRUE QUID PRO QUO

1Sa. 24:4 - 1Sa. 24:17.

A sudden Philistine invasion had saved David, when hard pressed by Saul, and had given him the opportunity of flight to the wild country on the west of the Dead Sea, near the place where En-Gedi ['the Fountain of the Wild Goat'] sparkles into light on the hill above the weird lake. In these savage gorges Saul's three thousand men would be of little use against the light-footed outlaw and his troop. The whole district is seamed with ravines, and these are honeycombed with great caverns, where dangerous outcasts still lurk and defy capture. Travellers go into raptures over the beauty of some of these 'fairy grottoes' draped with maiden-hair fern, cool and moist, and blessedly dark after the fierce light outside. In some one of these the beautiful story which makes our lesson occurred.

I. We have the scene in the cave. The interior would be black as night to one looking inward with eyes fresh from the blinding glare of such sunlight upon limestone, but it would hold a glimmering twilight for one looking outward, with eyes accustomed to the gloom. David and his men, keeping close to the walls and hiding behind angles, might well be unobserved by Saul at the mouth, and probably never looking in at all. How vividly the whispered eagerness of the outcasts round David is reproduced! They think it would be ‘tempting Providence’ to let such a chance slip. They put a religious varnish on their advice. It would be almost impious not to kill Saul, for here was the hand of God evidently fulfilling a prophecy! There may have been some unrecorded prediction of the sort which they seem to quote; but more probably they are only referring to David’s designation to the crown, which they had come to know. It never struck them as possible that it could ‘seem good’ to a wise man not to cut his enemy’s throat when he could do it without danger to himself. So they would watch David stealing down quietly to the place where the unconscious king was crouching, and getting close behind him, knife in hand. How disgusted they must have been when the blade, that flashed for a moment in the light at the cave’s mouth, was not buried in Saul’s great back, but only hacked off the end of his robe spread out behind him! No personal animosity was in David. However he had been driven to consort with outlaws, and to live a kind of freebooter’s life, his natural sweetness was unspoiled, and was reinforced by solemn veneration for the sanctity of the Lord’s anointing, which he reverenced all the more because himself had received it. He clambered back to his disappointed men, and, as soon as he was up in the dark again, his chivalry and his religion made him ashamed of his coarse practical jest. The humour of the thing had tempted him to do it; but it was a rude insult, which lowered him more than it did Saul, and, like a true man, he blushes there in the gloom at what he has done. Then he has to defend himself to his men for not coming up to their expectations, and he does it by insisting on the sacredness which still surrounded Saul as ‘the Lord’s anointed.’ David knew that the unhappy king had been rejected and forsaken by ‘the Spirit of the Lord,’ and that he himself was the true bearer of the regal unction; but he will not take the law into his own hands, and still regards Saul as his ‘lord.’ He sets the example, much needed by us all, of leaving God to carry out His purposes at His own time, and patiently waiting till that time comes. He had hard work to keep his men from rushing down on the king; but, having commanded himself, is able to restrain them. How many virtues may be in exercise in one action! Here we have generosity, clemency, sensitiveness of conscience, reverence, self-abnegation, patience, loyalty, firmness, sway over lower natures for high ends,-a whole constellation shining star-like in the dark cavern.

II. We have, next, David's pathetic remonstrance. Saul was alone, and David could easily escape among the cliffs, if the king summoned his men; but he risks capture, in the gush of ancient friendship. His words are full of nobleness, and his silence is no less so. He has no reproaches, no anger nor hate. He will not even suppose that Saul has followed his own impulses in his persecution, but assumes that he has been led astray by calumnies. He points to the fragment of Saul's robe in his hand as the disproof of the lie that he had designs against him, and passionately asserts his innocence now and in all the past. He compares himself to some timid wild thing, like one of the goats among the cliffs, and Saul to a hunter. He solemnly calls God to judge between them, and appeals from the slanders and misjudgings of men to the perfect tribunal of God, to whom he commits his cause. He abjures all intention of striking at Saul in his own defence. He quotes, in true Eastern manner, a scrap of proverbial wisdom, which contains the homely truth that character determines action; for it needs a wicked man to do a wicked thing, and he implies that he is not wicked, and that Saul knows that well enough,-by what has just happened, if by nothing else. Then he puts his own insignificance and the disproportion between him and his ragged band and the imposing force of Saul in vivid light by his half-humorous and wholly humble description of himself as a 'dead dog,' and a 'flea'; as harmless as the one, as hard to catch as the other, as little important as either. Finally, he reiterates his devout reference of the whole cause to God, and his fixed resolution to take no steps to right himself, but to leave all to Him.

So ought we to deal with slanders and enmity. The eternal law for us in all opposition and hostility is enshrined in David's noble words and deeds. To repay evil with benefits, to abstain from retaliation when it is in our power, to keep our tongues from bitter and wounding words, to appeal to the adversary's better self, even at the cost of our own 'dignity,'-all that is not easy nor usual among professing Christians. But it ought to be. David's Lord, 'when He suffered, threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously.' We are poor followers of Him, if David surpasses us in patience and magnanimity. It has taken nineteen hundred years to teach us that passive endurance is more heroic than fighting for our own hand, and that repaying scorn and hate with their like is less noble than meeting them with endless forgiveness.

Psa. 7:1 - Psa. 7:17 is all but universally regarded as David’s, and as belonging to this period. In it we find a clause, ‘I have delivered him that without cause was mine enemy,’ which may fairly he supposed to refer to the scene in the cave, and we read the same vehement protestations of innocence, the same figure of himself as a hunted wild animal, the same appeal to God’s judgment, as in his remonstrance with Saul. The psalm is the poetic echo of our lesson.

III. We have the momentary melting of Saul’s heart. He breaks into passionate weeping. With that sudden flashing out into vehement emotion, so characteristic of him throughout, and, in these latter days of his life, so significant of enfeebled self-control, he recognises David’s generous forbearance in its contrast to his own hate, which, for the moment, he feels to be causeless. There is a piteous remembrance of the days when David soothed him by song, in his mention of the sweet ‘voice,’ and some rekindling of ancient love in his calling him ‘My son.’ Then follow the sad words which confess the hopelessness of his struggle against the divine purpose, and his appeal for mercy to his house. The picture may well move solemn thoughts and pity for that scathed and solitary soul, seeing for a moment, as by a lightning flash, the madness of his course, and yet held so fast in the grip of his dark passions that he cannot shake off their tyranny.

Two great lessons are taught by that tragic figure of the weeping and yet unchanged king. One is of the power of forbearing gentleness to exorcise hate. The true way to ‘overcome evil’ is to melt it by fiery coals of gentleness. That is God’s way. An iceberg may be crushed to powder, but every fragment is still ice. Only sunshine that melts it will turn it into sweet water. Love is conqueror, and the only conqueror, and its conquest is to transform hate into love. The other lesson is the worthlessness of mere feeling, which by its very nature passes away, and, like unstored rain, leaves the rock in its obstinate hardness more exposed. Saul only increased his guilt by reason of the fleeting glimpse of his folly which he did not follow up; and our gleams of insight into some sin and madness of ours but add to our responsibility. Emotion which does not lead to action hardens the heart, and adds to our guilt and condemnation.

16)1 Samuel 26:5-12

LOVE AND REMORSE

1Sa. 26:5 - 1Sa. 26:12; 1Sa. 26:21 - 1Sa. 26:25.

It is fashionable at present to regard this incident and the other instance of David's sparing Saul, when in his power, as two versions of one event. But it if not improbable that the hunted outlaw should twice have taken refuge in the same place, or that his hiding-place should have been twice betrayed. He had but a small choice of safe retreats, and the Ziphites had motive for a second betrayal in the fact of the first, and of its failure to secure David's capture. The whole cast of the two incidents is so different that it is impossible to see how the one could have been evolved from the other, and either they are both true, or they are both unhistorical, or, at best, are both the product of fancy working on, and arbitrarily filling up, a very meagre skeleton of fact. Many of the advocates of the identity of the incident at the bottom of the two accounts would accept the latter explanation; we take the former.

Saul had three thousand men with him; David had left his little troop 'in the wilderness,' and seems to have come with only his two companions, Ahimelech and his own nephew, Abishai, to reconnoitre. He sees, from some height, the camp, with the transport wagons making a kind of barricade in the centre-just as camps are still arranged in South Africa and elsewhere,-and Saul established therein as in a rude fortification. A bold thought flashes into his mind as he looks. Perhaps he remembered Gideon's daring visit to the camp of Midian. He will go down, and not only into the camp, but 'to Saul,' through the ranks and over the barrier. What to do he does not say, but the two fierce fighters beside him think of only one thing as sufficient motive for such an adventure. Abishai volunteers to go with him; no doubt Ahimelech would have been ready also, but two were enough, and three would only have increased risk. So they lay close hid till night fell, and then stole down through the sleeping ranks with silent movements, like a couple of Indians on the war-trail, climbed the barricade, and stood at last where Saul lay, with his spear, as the emblem of kingship, stuck upright at his head, and a cruse of water for slaking thirst, if he awoke, beside him. Those who should have been his guards lay sleeping round him, for a ‘deep sleep from Jehovah was fallen upon them.’ What a vivid, strange picture it is, and how characteristic of the careless discipline of unscientific Eastern warfare!

The tigerish lust for blood awoke in Abishai. Whatever sad, pitying, half-tender thoughts stirred in David as he looked at the mighty form of Saul, with limbs relaxed in slumber, and perhaps some of the gloom and evil passions charmed out of his face, his nephew’s only thought was,’ What a fair mark! what an easy blow!’ He was brutally eager to strike once, and truculently sure that his arm would make sure that once would be enough. He was religious too, after a strange fierce fashion. God-significantly he does not say ‘Jehovah’; his religion was only the vague belief in a deity-had delivered Saul into David’s hands, and it would be a kind of sin not to kill him. How many bloody tragedies that same unnatural alliance of religion and murderous hate has varnished over! Very beautifully does David’s spirit contrast with this. Abishai represents the natural impulse of us all-to strike at our enemies when we can, to meet hate with hate, and do to another the evil that he would do to us.

David here, though he could be fierce and cruel enough sometimes, and had plenty of the devil in him, listens to his nobler self, which listens to God, and, at a time when everything tempted him to avenge himself, resists and overcomes. He is here a saint after the New Testament pattern. Abishai had, in effect, said, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.’ David’s finely-tuned ear heard, long before they were spoken on earth, the great Christian words, 11 say unto you, Love your enemies; do good to them that hate you.’ He knew that Saul had been ‘rejected,’ but he was ‘Jehovah’s anointed,’ and the unction which had rested on that sleeping head lingered still. It was not for David to be the executor of God’s retribution. He left himself and his cause in Jehovah’s hands, and no doubt it was with sorrow and pitying love, not altogether quenched by Saul’s mad hate, that he foresaw that the life which he spared now was certain one day to be smitten. We may well learn the lesson of this story, and apply it to the small antagonisms and comparatively harmless enmities which may beset our more quiet lives. David in Saul’s ‘laager,’ Stephen outside the wall, alike lead up our thoughts to Jesus’ prayer,’ Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’

The carrying off of the spear and the cruse was a couch of almost humour, and it, with the ironical taunt flung across the valley to Abner, gives relief to the strain of emotion in the story. Saul's burst of passionate remorse is morbid, paroxysmal, like his fits of fury, and is sure to foam itself away. The man had no self-control. He had let wild, ungoverned moods master him, and was truly 'possessed.' One passion indulged had pushed him over the precipice into insanity, or something like it. Let us take care not to let any passion, emotion, or mood get the upper hand. 'That way madness lies.' 'He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, without walls.'

And let us not confound remorse with repentance 'The sorrow of the world worketh death.' Saul grovelled in agony that day, but tomorrow he was raging again with more than the old frenzy of hate. Many a man says, 'I have played the fool,' and yet goes on playing it again when the paroxysm of remorse has stormed itself out. David's answer was by no means effusive, for he had learned how little Saul's regrets were to be trusted. He takes no notice of the honeyed words of invitation to return, and will not this time venture to take back the spear and cruse, as he had done, on the previous occasion, the skirt of Saul's robe. He solemnly appeals to Jehovah's righteous judgment to determine his and Saul's respective 'righteousness and faithfulness.' He is silent as to what that judgment may have in reserve for Saul, but for himself he is calmly conscious that, in the matter of sparing Saul's life, he has done right, and expects that God will deliver him 'out of all tribulation.' That is not self-righteous boasting, although it does not exactly smack of the Christian spirit; but it is faith clinging to the confidence that God is 'not unrighteous to forget' his servant's obedience, and that the innocent will not always be the oppressor's victim.

What a strange, bewildered, self-contradictory chaos of belief and intention is revealed in poor, miserable Saul's parting words! He blesses the man whom he is hunting to slay. He knows that all his wild efforts to destroy him are foredoomed to failure, and that David 'shall surely prevail'; and yet he cannot give up fighting against the inevitable,-that is, against God. How many of us are doing the very same thing-rushing on in a course of life which we know, when we are sane, to be dead against God's will, and therefore doomed to utter collapse some day!

17)1 Samuel 26:21-25

1 Samuel

LOVE AND REMORSE

1Sa. 26:5 - 1Sa. 26:12; 1Sa. 26:21 - 1Sa. 26:25.

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18)1 Samuel 28:15

1 Samuel

SAUL

1Sa. 28:15.

Among all the persons of Scripture who are represented as having fallen away from God and wrecked their lives, perhaps there is none so impressive as the giant form of the first king of Israel. Huge and black, seamed and scarred with lightning marks of passions, moody and suspicious, devil-ridden and lonely, doubting his truest friends, and even his son, striking blindly in his fury at the gracious, sunny poet-warrior who shows so bright, so full of resource, so nimble, so generous, by contrast with the heavy strength of the moody giant, and ever escapes the javelin that quivers harmlessly in the wall, with an inevitable destiny hanging over his head, and at last creeping to 'wizards that peep and mutter,' and dying a suicide, with his army in full flight and his son dead at his feet-what a course and what an end for the chosen of the Lord, on whom the Spirit of the Lord came with the anointing oil, and gave him a new heart for his kingly office.

I know not anywhere a sadder story: and I know not where human lips ever poured out a more awful wail-like a Titan in his rage of pain- than these words of our text. Bright hopes and fair promise, and much that was good and true in performance-all came to this. A few hours more and the 'battle went sore against Saul, and the archers hit him, and he was greatly distressed by reason of the archers.' Madness, despair, defeat, death, all were the sequel of, ‘Because thou hast rejected the commandment of the Lord, the Lord hath also rejected thee from being king.’ A true soul’s tragedy! Let us look together at its course, and gather the lessons that lie on the surface. We have neither space nor wish here to enter upon the many points of minute interest and curiosity which are in the story. We have to be contented with large outlines.

Look then

I. At the bright dawn.

The early story gives us many traits of beauty in Saul’s character. Not only physical strength but a winning personality are apparent. His modesty and humility when Samuel salutes him are made plain. And we are distinctly told that as he turned away from Samuel, ‘God gave him another heart,’ by which we are to understand not ‘regeneration’ but an inspiration, that equipped him for his office.

How many a man finds that sudden elevation ruins him! But often it evokes what is good, brings an entire change of disposition, as with ‘Harry of Monmouth.’ But it was not only his new responsibility which brought into action powers that had previously been dormant. New circumstances, no doubt, did something, but Saul’s ‘new’ heart was God’s gift.

The story of the beginning of his reign reveals a very noble and lovable character. We can but mention his modesty in hiding among the stuff, his disregard of the murmurs of those who would not do homage [‘made as though he had been deaf’], his return, as it would seem, to his home-life and farm-work, his chivalrous boldness and warlike energy, which sprung at once to activity on the call of a great exigency in Jabesh-Gilead, his humane and sweet repression of the people’s desire, in their first flush of pride in their soldier king, to slay his enemies, and his devout acknowledgment that not he but God has wrought this salvation.

So for the first year of his reign all went well.

How much of divine influence a man may have and yet fling it all away! How unreliable a thing mere natural goodness is! How much apparent goodness may coexist with deep-seated evil! How bright a beginning may darken into a tempestuous day! How seeds of evil may lurk in the fairest character! How little one can be judged by part of his life! How it is not the possession, but the retention, of goodness and devout impressions that makes a man good.

II. The gathering clouds.

The acts recorded as darkening the fair dawn of Saul's reign may seem too trivial to deserve the stern retribution that followed them, but small acts may be great sins. The first of them was his offering sacrifices without authority, an act which Samuel stigmatised as wanton, deliberate disobedience to 'the commandment of the Lord thy God.' Next came his rash and absurd laying of a curse on any soldier who should eat food before evening, and his consequent mad determination to kill Jonathan, for 'taking a little honey' on the end of his rod. Next came his flagrant disobedience to the divine command transmitted to him through Samuel, to 'smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not,' We shudder at such ferocious extermination, but we are to remember that Saul was moved by no pity, but by mere lust for loot, and tried to deceive God, in the person of His representative Samuel, by the lie that the people had coerced him, and that the motive for preserving the best of the cattle was to sacrifice them to the Lord. Samuel's blaze of indignation gave the world the great word: 'Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice.'

Putting all these acts together, we have the sad picture of a character steadily deteriorating. He is growing daily more self-willed and impatient of the restraint of God's commanding will. He is chafing at his position as a viceroy, not an absolute sovereign. He is becoming tyrannical, careless of his subjects' lives, intolerant of opposition, remonstrance, or advice. The tragedy of his decadence is summed up in Samuel's stern word: 'Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, He hath also rejected thee from being king.'

Trivial acts may show great and deep-seated evil. A small swelling under the arm-pit is the sign of the plague and the precursor of swift death.

The master-sin is disobedience, self-willed departure from God. That disobedience may be as virulently active in a trifle as in a deed that men call great. Self-will is the tap root of all sin, however labyrinthine the outgrowth from it.

Disobedience honeycombs a soul. The attractive early traits in Saul's character slowly perhaps but steadily, disappeared. The fair morning sky was heavy with thunder-clouds by midday, and they all began with a light fleecy film that none noticed at first.

III. The long eclipse.

'An evil spirit from the Lord troubled him, and the Spirit of God departed from him.'

Modern psychologists would call Saul's case an instance of insanity brought about by indulgence in passion and self-will. Is there any reason why the deeper, more religious explanation should not be united with the scientific one? Does not God work in the working of 'natural' phenomena?

What we nowadays call insanity is not very far off from a man who habitually indulges in passionate self will, and spurns God from any authority over his life. What were Saul's characteristics now? The story tells of bursts of ungovernable fury, of unslumbering and universal suspicions, of utter misery, seeing enemies everywhere and complaining, 'None of you hath pity upon me,' of ferocious cruelty and gloomy despair, of paroxysms of agonising but transient remorse.

It is an awful picture, and it grimly teaches lessons that we shall be wise to write deeply on our hearts.

What a ruin a man makes of himself!

How hideous a godless soul is!

What unhappiness is certain if we dismiss God from ruling our lives!

How useless remorse is unless it leads to repentance!

IV. The stormy sunset.

The scene at Endor makes one's flesh creep. No more tragic picture of failure and despair was ever painted. The greatest dramatists, whose creations move the terror and pity of the world, have imagined no more heart-touching figure.

It matters very little-nothing at all in fact-either for the dramatic force or for the religious impressiveness of the scene, whether the woman 'brought up' Samuel, or whether she was as much awed as Saul was, by the coming up of 'an old man' covered with the well-known 'mantle.' The boding prophecy of to-morrow's defeat and death filled yet fuller the cup that had seemed to be already full of all misery. And that collapse of strength in the huddled figure, prostrate in the witch's den, may well stand for a prophecy of what will be the upshot at the last of a self-will that boasts of its own power, and tries to shake off dependence on God.

19)1 Samuel 29:3

1 Samuel

WHAT DOEST THOU HERE?

1Sa. 29:3. - 1Ki. 19:9.

I have put these two verses together, not only because of their identity in form, though that is striking, but because they bear upon one and the same subject, as will appear, if, in a word or two, I set each of them in its setting. David was almost at the lowest point of his fortunes when he fled into foreign territory, and for awhile took service under one of the kings of the Philistines. He served him faithfully, and so, when the last great fight, in which Saul lost his life, was about to be waged between Philistia and Israel, David and his men came as a contingent to the army of the former. The Philistine commanders, very naturally, were suspicious of these allies, just as Englishmen would have been if, on the night before Waterloo, a brigade of Frenchmen had deserted and offered their help to fight Napoleon. So the question 'What do these Hebrews here?'-amongst our ranks-was an extremely natural one, and it was answered in the only possible way, by the subsequent departure of David and his men from the unnatural and ill-omened alliance.

Now, that suggests to us that Christian people are out of their places, even in the eyes of worldly people, when they are fighting shoulder to shoulder with them in certain causes; and it suggests the propriety of keeping apart. ‘Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord’ ‘What do these Hebrews here?’ is a question that Philistia often asks. But now turn to the other question. Elijah had fallen into the mood of depression which so often follows great nervous tension. He had just offered the sacrifice on Carmel, and brought all Israel back to the Lord, and Jezebel had flamed out and threatened his life. The usually undaunted prophet, in the reaction after his great effort, was fearful for his life and deserted his work, flung himself into solitude and shook the dust off his feet against Israel. Was that not just doing what I have been saying that Christian people ought to do-separating himself from the world? In a sense, yes, but the voice came, ‘What dost thou here, Elijah?’ ‘Go back to your work; to Ahab, to Jezebel. Go back to death if need be. Do not shirk your duty on the pretence of separating yourself from the world.’

So we put the two questions together. They limit one another, and they suggest the *via media,* the course between, and lead me to say one or two plain things about that duty of Christian separation from an evil world.

I. The first thing that I would suggest to you is the inevitable intermingling, which is the law of God, and therefore can never be broken with impunity.

Christ’s parable about the Kingdom of Heaven in the world being like a man that sowed good seed in his field, which sprung up intermingled with tares, contains the lesson, not so much of the purity or nonpurity of the Church as of the inseparable intertwining in the world of Christian people with others. The roots are matted together, and you cannot pull up a tare without danger of pulling up a wheat-stalk that has got interlaced with it. That is but to say that Society at present, and the earthly form of the Kingdom of God, are not organised on the basis of religious affinity, but upon a great many other things, such as family, kindred, business, a thousand ties of all sorts which mat men together, and make it undesirable, impossible, contrary to God’s intention, that the good people should club themselves together, and leave the bad ones to rot and stink. The two are meant to be in close contact. ‘Let both grow together till the harvest.’ If any Christian man were to do as the monks of old did, fly into solitude to look after his own soul, then the question which came to Elijah would be suitable to him, ‘What doest thou here?’ Is there not work enough for you out there, in that wicked world? Is that not the place for you? Where is the place for the ‘salt’? Where the meat is in danger of putrefaction. Rub it in! That is what it was meant for. ‘Ye are the light of the world.’ That suggests the picture of a lamp upon a pedestal that it may send out its rays, but itself remains apart. But the companion metaphor suggests the closest possible contact, and such contact is duty for us Christian people. Elijah ran away from his work. There are types of Christian life to-day unwholesomely self-engrossed, and too much occupied with their own spiritual condition, to realise and discharge the duty of witnessing in the world. Wherever you find a Christian man -whether he is a monk with bare foot, and a rope round his brown robe, and shaven head, or whether he is in the garb of modern Protestantism- that tries more to keep himself apart, in the enjoyment and cultivation of his own religious life, than to fling himself into the midst of the world’s worst evil, in order to fight and to cure it, you get a man who is sharing in Elijah’s transgression, and needs Elijah’s rebuke. The intermingling is inevitable in the present state of things; and family, kindred, business, social and political movements, all require that Christian people should work side by side with men who are not possessors of ‘like precious faith.’ If ever there have been individuals or communities that have tried to traverse that law, they have developed narrowness and bitterness and stunted growth, and a hundred evils that we all know.

II. And now let me say a word about the second thing, and that is-the imperative separation.

‘What do these Israelites here?’ is the question. Much of all our lives lies outside these necessary connections with the world, of which I have been speaking. And the question for each of us is, What do we do when we are left to do as we like? Where do we go? When the iron weight fastened by the bit of string is taken off the sapling, it starts back to its original uprightness. Is that what your Christianity does for you? When you are left to yourself, when you have done all the work that is required, and you are free, where do you turn naturally? It is of no use to lay down special regulations. There has been far too much regulation and red-tape in our Christianity all along. Do not let us put so much stress upon individual acts. Let us look at the spirit. Whither do I turn? What do I like to do? Who are my chosen companions? What are my recreations? Is my life of such a sort as that the world will point to me, and say, 'What! you here I a professing Christian; what are you doing here?'

I remember that in the autobiography of Mr. Spurgeon, there is a story told about what he did when a child, and living with his grandfather, the pastor of a little country church. There was a very prominent member of that church who was in the habit of going into the public-house occasionally; and the small boy stepped into the sanded parlour where this inconsistent man was sitting, walked up to him, and said, 'What doest thou here, Elijah?' It was the turning-point of the man's life. That is the question that I desire us all to ask ourselves-where do we go, and what sort of lives do we live in the moments when our own voluntary choice determines our action?

'A man is known by the company he keeps,' says an old Latin proverb, and I am bound to say that I do not think that it is a good sign of the depth of a Christian professor's religion if he feels himself more at home in the company of people who do not share his religion than in the company of those that do. I do not wish to be strait-laced and narrow, but I do not wish, either, to be so broad as to obliterate altogether the distinction between Christian people and others. The fact of the case is this, dear friends; if we are Christ's servants we have more in common with the most uncongenial Christians than we have with the most congenial man who is not a Christian. And if we were nearer our Master we should feel that it was so. 'Being let go they went to their own company.' Where do you go when you can make your choice?

I am not going to speak in detail about occupations or recreations. I can quite believe that the theatre might be made an instrument of morality. I can quite believe that a race-course might be a perfectly innocent place. I can quite believe that there may be no harm in a dance. All that I say is that there are two questions which every Christian professor ought to ask himself about such subjects. One is, Can I ask God to bless this thing, and my doing it? And the other is, Does this help or hinder my religion? If we will take these two questions with us as tests of conduct and companionship, I do not think that we shall go far wrong, either in the choice of our companions, or in the choice of our surroundings of any kind, or in the choice of our recreations and our occupations. But if we do not, then I am quite sure that we shall go wrong in them all. ‘What communion hath light with darkness?’ ‘What agreement hath the temple of God with idols? Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord.’

The main question is, do I grasp the aim of life with clearness and decision as being to make myself by God’s help such a character as God has pleasure in? If I do I shall regulate all these things thereby.

III. Now there is one last suggestion that I wish to make, and that is the double questioning that we shall have to stand.

The lords of the Philistines said, ‘What do these Hebrews here?’ They saw the inconsistency, if David and his men did not. They were sharp to detect it, and David and his band did not rise in their opinion, but decidedly went down, when they saw them marching there, in such an unnatural place as ‘behind Achish,’ and ready to flesh their swords in the blood of their brethren. So let me tell you, you will neither recommend your religion nor yourselves to men of the world, by inconsistently trying to identify yourselves with them. There are a great many professing Christians nowadays whose mouths are full of the word ‘liberality,’ and who seem to try to show how absolutely identical with a godless man’s a God-fearing one’s life may be made. Do you think that the world respects that type of Christian, or regards his religion as the kind of thing to be admired? No; the question that they fling at such people is the question which David was humiliated by having pitched at his head-’What do these Hebrews here?’ ‘Let them go back to their mountains. This is no place for *them*.’ The world respects an out-and-out Christian; but neither God nor the world respects an inconsistent one.

But there is another question, and another Questioner-’What doest thou here, Elijah?’ God did not ask Elijah the question because he did not know the answer; but because he wished to make Elijah put his mood into words, since then Elijah would understand it a little better, and, when he found the tremendous difficulty of making a decent excuse, would begin to suspect that the conduct that wanted so much glozing was not exactly the conduct fit for a prophet. And so let us think that God is looking down upon us, in all our occupation of our free time, and that He is wishing us to put into words what we are about, and why we are where we are.

What do you think you would say if, in some of these moments of unnecessary intermingling with questionable things and doubtful people, you were brought suddenly to this, that you had to formulate into some kind of plausibility your reason for being there? I am afraid it would be a very lame and ragged set of reasons that many of us would have to give. Well! better that we should now have to answer the question 'What doest thou here?' than that we should have to fail in answering the future question, after we have done with the world: 'What didst thou there?'

Dear brethren, let us cleave to Christ, and that will separate us from the world. If we cleave to the world, that will separate us from Christ. I do not insist on details of conduct, but I do beseech you, professing Christians, to recognise that you are set in the world in order to grow like your Master, and that their tendency to help you to that likeness is the one test of all occupations, recreations, and companionships, by which we may know whether we are in or out of the place that pleases Him. And if we are in it, that blessed hope which is held forth in the parable to which I have already referred, will come full of sweetness and of strength to us, that, yonder, men will be grouped according to their moral and religious character; that the tares will be taken away from the wheat, and, that as Christ says, 'Then shall the righteous flame as the sun in their heavenly Father's Kingdom.'

20)1 Samuel 30:6

1 Samuel

THE SECRET OF COURAGE

1Sa. 30:6.

David was at perhaps the very lowest ebb of his fortunes. He had long been a wandering outlaw, and had finally been driven, by Saul's persistent hostility, to take refuge in the Philistines' country. He had gathered around himself a band of desperate men, and was living very much like a freebooter. He had found refuge in a little city of the Philistines, far down in the South, from which he and his men had marched as a contingent in the Philistine army, which was preparing an attack upon Saul. But, naturally, the Philistine soldiers doubted their ally, and he was obliged to take himself and his troops back again to their temporary home.

When he came there it was a heap of smoking ruins. Everything was gone; property, cattle, wives, children-and all was desolation. His turbulent followers rose against him, a mutiny broke out-a dangerous thing amongst such a crew-and they were ready to stone him. And at that moment what did he do? Nothing. Was he cast down? No. Was he agitated? No. 'But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.'

Now the first thing I notice is

I. The grand assurance which this man gripped fast at such a time.

It is not by accident, nor is it a mere piece of tautology, that we read 'the Lord *his* God.' For, if you will remember, the very keynote of the psalms which are ascribed to David is just that expression, 'My God,' 'My God.' So far as the very fragmentary records of Jewish literature go, it would appear as if David was the very first of all the ancient singers to grapple that thought that he stood in a personal, individual relation to God, and God to him. And so it was *his* God that he laid hold of at that dark hour.

Now I am not putting too much into a little word when I insist upon it that the very essence and nerve of what strengthened David, at that supreme moment of desolation, was the conviction that welled up in his heart that, in spite of it all, he had a grip of God's hand as his very own, and God had hold of him. Just think of the difference between the attitude of mind and heart expressed in the names that were more familiar to the Israelitish people, and this name for Jehovah. 'The God of Israel'-that is wide, general; and a man might use it and yet fail to feel that it implied that each individual of the community stood by himself in a personal relation to God. But David penetrated through the broad, general thought, and got into the heart of the matter. It was not enough for him, in his time of need, to stay himself upon a vague universal goodness, but he had to clasp to his burdened heart the individualising thought, ‘the God of Israel is *my* God.’

Think, too, of the contrast of the thoughts and emotions suggested by ‘My God,’ and by ‘the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob.’ Great as that name is, it carries the mind away back into the past, and speaks of a historical relation in former days, which may or may not continue in all its tenderness and sweetness and power into the prosaic present. But when a man feels, not only ‘the God of Jacob is our Refuge,’ but, ‘the God of Jacob is my God,’ then the whole thing flashes up into new power. ‘My sun’-will one man claim property in that great luminary that pours its light down on the whole world? Yes.

‘The sun whose beams most glorious are,
Disdaineth no beholder,’

as the old song has it. Each man’s eye receives the straight impact of its universal beams. It is my sun, though it be the light that lightens all men that come into the world. ‘My atmosphere’-will one man claim the free, unappropriated winds of heaven as his? Yes, for they will pour into his lungs; and yet his brother will be none the poorer.

I would not go the length of saying that the living realisation, in heart and mind, of this personal possession of God is the difference between a traditional and vague profession of religion and a vital possession of religion, but if it is not the difference, it goes a long way towards explaining the difference. The man who contents himself with the generality of a Gospel for the world, and who can say no more than that Jesus Christ died for all, has yet to learn the most intimate sweetness, and the most quickening and transforming power, of that Gospel, and he only learns it when he says, ‘Who loved *me*, and gave Himself for *me*.’

So do not let us be content with saying, ‘the God of Israel,’ and its many thousands, or ‘the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob,’ who filled the past with His lustre, but let us bring the general good into our own houses, as men might draw the waters of Niagara into their homes through pipes, and let us cry: ‘My Lord and my God!’ ‘David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.’

II. Now note, secondly, the sufficiency of this one conviction and assurance.

Here is one of the many eloquent ‘buts’ of the Bible. On the one hand is piled up a black heap of calamities, loss, treachery and peril; and opposed to them is only that one clause: ‘But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.’ There was only one possession in all the world, except his body and the clothes that he stood in, that he could call his own at that moment. Everything else was gone; his property was carried off by raiders, his home was smouldering embers. But the Amalekites had not stolen God from him. Though he could no longer say, ‘My house, my city, my possessions,’ he could say, ‘My God.’ Whatever else we lose, as long as we have Him we are rich; and whatever else we possess, we are poor as long as we have not Him. God is enough; whatever else may go. The Lord his God was the sufficient portion for this man when he stood a homeless pauper. He had lost everything that his heart clung to; wives, children; Abigail and Abinoam were captives in the arms of some Amalekites; his house was left to him desolate; his heart was bleeding. ‘But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God’ and the bleeding heart was stanched, and the yearning for some one to love and be loved by was satisfied, when he turned himself from the desolation of earth to the riches in the heavens. He was standing on the edge of possible death, for his followers were ready to stone him. He had come through many perils in the past, but he had never been nearer a fatal end than he was at that moment. But the thought of the undying Friend lifted him buoyantly above the dread of death, and he could look with an unwinking eye right into the fleshless eye-sockets of the skeleton, and say, ‘I fear no evil, for Thou art with me.’

So for poverty, loss, the blasting of earthly hopes, the crushing of earthly affections, the extremity of danger, and the utmost threatening of death, here is the sufficient remedy-that one mighty assurance: ‘The Lord is my God.’ For if He is ‘the strength of my heart,’ He will be my portion for ever.’ He is not poor who has God for his, nor does he wander with a hungry heart who can rest his heart on God’s; nor need he fear death who possesses God, and in Him eternal life.

So, brethren, in all our changing circumstances, there is more than enough for us in that sweet, simple, strong thought. The end of sorrow [that is to say, the purpose thereof] is to breed in us the conviction that God is ours, to drive us to Him by lack of all beside; and the end of sorrow [that is to say, the termination thereof] is the kindling in our hearts of the light of that blessed assurance, for with Him we shall fear no evil. You never know the good of the breakwater until the storm is rolling the waves against its outer side. Light a little candle in a room, and you will not see the lightning when it flashes outside, however stormy the sky, and seamed with the fiery darts. If we have God in our hearts, we have enough for courage and for strength.

I need not remind you, I suppose, how this darkest moment of David’s fortunes was the moment at which the darkness broke. Three days after this *emeute* of his turbulent followers, there came a fugitive into the camp with news that Saul was dead and David was king. So it was not in vain that he had ‘strengthened himself in the Lord his God.’ Our ‘light affliction which is but for a moment’ leads on to a manifestation of the true power of God our Friend, and to the breaking of the day.

III. And now the last thing to be noted is the effort by which this assurance is attained and sustained.

The words of the original convey even more forcibly than those of our translation the thought of David’s own action in securing him the hold of God as his. He ‘strengthened *himself* in the Lord his God.’ The Hebrew conveys the notion of effort, persistent and continuous; and it tells us this, that when things are as black as they were round David at that hour-it is not a matter of course, even for a good man, that there shall well up in his heart this tranquillising and victorious conviction; but he has to set himself to reach and to keep it. God will give it, but He will not give it unless the man strains after it. David ‘strengthened himself in the Lord,’ and if he had not doggedly set about resisting the pressure of circumstances, and flinging himself as it were, by an effort, into the arms of God, circumstances would have been too strong for him, and despair would have shrouded his soul. In the darkest moment it is possible for a man to surround himself with God’s light, but even in the brightest it is not possible to do so unless he makes a serious effort.

That effort must consist mainly in two things. One is that we shall honestly try to occupy our minds, as well as our hearts, with the truth which certifies to us that God is, in very deed, ours. If we never think, or think languidly and rarely, about what God has revealed to us, by the word and life and death and intercession of Jesus Christ, concerning Himself, His heart of love towards us, and His relations to us, then we shall not have, either in the time of disaster or of joy, the blessed sense that He is indeed ours. If a man will not think about Christian truth he will not have the blessedness of Christian possession of God. There is no mystery about the road to the sweetness and holiness and power that may belong to a Christian. The only way to win them is to be occupied, far more than most of us are, with the plain truths of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. If you never think about them they cannot affect you, and they will not make you sure that God is yours.

But we cannot occupy ourselves with these truths unless we have a distinct and resolute purpose running through our lives, of averting our eyes from the things that might make us lose sight of them and of Him. David had his choice. He could either, as a great many of us do, stand there and look, and look, and look, and see nothing but his disasters, or he could look past them; and see beyond them God. Peter had his choice whether he would look at the water, or whether he would look at Jesus Christ. He chose to look at the water; 'and when he saw the wind boisterous he began to sink'- of course, and when he looked at Christ and cried: 'Lord, save me!' he was held up-equally of course. Make the effort not to let the sorrowful things, or the difficult things, or the fearful things, or the joyous things, in your life, absorb you, but turn away, and, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says, in another connection, 'look off unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of faith.' David had to put constraint upon himself, to admit any other thoughts into his mind than those that were pressed into it by the facts before his eyes; but he put on the constraint, and so he was encouraged because he encouraged himself.

There is another thing which we have to make an effort to do, if we would have the blessedness of this conviction filling and flooding our hearts. For the possession is reciprocal; we say, ‘My God,’ and He says, ‘My people.’ Unless we yield ourselves to Him and say, ‘I am Thine,’ we shall never be able to say, ‘Thou art mine.’ We must recognise His possession of us; we must yield ourselves; we must obey; we must elect Him as our chief good, we must feel that we are not our own, but bought with a price. And then when we look up into the heavens thus submissive, thus obedient, thus owning His authority and His rights, as well as claiming His love and His tenderness, and cry: ‘My Father,’ He will bend down and whisper into our hearts: ‘Thou art My beloved son.’ Then we shall be ‘strong, and of a good courage,’ however weak and timid, and we shall be rich, though, like David, we have lost all things.

21)1 Samuel 30:24

1 Samuel

AT THE FRONT OR THE BASE

1Sa. 30:24.

David’s city of Ziklag had been captured by the Amalekites, while he and all his men who could carry arms were absent, serving in the army of Achish, the Philistine king of Gath. On their return they found ruin, their homes harried, their wives, children, and property carried off. Wearied already with their long march, they set off at once in pursuit of the spoilers, who had had a long start of them. When they reached the brook Besor, two hundred of them were too weary and footsore to ford it, and so had to be left behind. But these were not useless, for the heavy baggage was left in their charge, and the other four hundred were thus enabled to march more lightly, and therefore more swiftly. They picked up a sick slave, whom his Amalekite master had heartlessly abandoned to die on the ‘veldt.’ He was almost dead, so they fed him, and when he was able to answer, questioned him. He undertook to guide David and his band, and thus, as twilight was beginning to fall and the Amalekites were ‘spread abroad over all the ground, eating and drinking and feasting because of all the great spoil that they had taken.' the four hundred burst on them, routed them utterly, and won back all their goods and much more.

Then came a quarrel. The four hundred who had gone to the fight insisted that the booty was theirs, and that the two hundred who had had no hand in winning it should have no share in the distribution. But David over-ruled this and laid down a principle of distribution which was adopted as the standing law of Israel-that the soldiers who were actually in the fight and those who stayed behind guarding the baggage, looking after 'the base of operations,' should share alike. It was fair that they should do so, for the two hundred would willingly have been in the thick of battle, and, further, though they did not fight, they helped the fighters, and by guarding the heavy baggage contributed to the victory as really as if they had been in the fray and come out of it with swords dripping with Amalekite blood.

I. God's battle requires two forms of service.

In David's raid, as in every campaign, some of the available strength has to be taken to guard the camp, the place where the supplies are, the base of operations, and pickets and detachments have to be left behind all the way, to keep open the communication. The sword is not more needful than the long train of baggage carts, and the forwarding of supplies to the front is as indispensable to the conduct of the war as the headlong charge.

In every great work there is the same distinction of parts and functions, all co-operating to produce the effect which seems to be entirely due to that cause which happens to come last in the series. Organisation of labour associates many hands in the different stages of the one result. There are very few things in this world which are the product of one simple cause alone. You cannot grow a grain of corn without the seed with its vital germ, the soil with its mysterious influences, the sunshine and the rain, the sower's hand and basket, the plougher's plough, and all these, except the blessed sunshine, are the results of a series of other causes which lie forgotten, but are really represented in the issue. If one of them were struck out, all the rest would be ineffectual. In a great machine all its parts are equally necessary, and a defect in a cog on a wheel would be as fatal as a flaw in the cylinder or a crack in the mighty shaft. What would become of a ship if the pintle that the rudder works on were away? The effect of a whole orchestra may depend on the coming in of the flute at the right place.

So in the work which God has given to the Church to do, there are the two forms of service, the direct and the indirect. There are the fighters and the guards of the baggage. And these two are equally necessary. That without which a great work could not have been done is great. When Luther came out from the Diet of Worms, and a knight clapped him on the shoulder, and said, ‘Well done! little monk,’ he had a share in the memorable deed of that day. The man who gave Luther a flagon of beer when his lips were dry with speaking there before emperor and cardinals, was included in the promise to the giver ‘of a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple.’

We have brethren in Christ who have gone to the front, hazarding their lives on the high places of the field. Their hands will droop if they do not feel that a chain of sympathy stretches between them and us, for they in their solitude need all the strength which the confidence of a multitude at home feeling with them can give. They are powerfully influenced by the tone of feeling among us. When devotion languishes and faith droops here, these will generally pass through the same phases among them. When we are strong and bold, their hearts will be quickened by the pulsations of ours, and their courage heightened by thoughts of those from whom they come. Our disorders, our heresies, our struggles are all reproduced on the mission field. An epidemic here travels thither before long, and the spiritual condition of the Church at home is one of the most powerful means of determining that of the churches abroad. A blight among our vines soon shows itself in the little gardens just reclaimed from the waste.

The fighters need material helps and appliances for their work. The days in which the law for apostles and missionaries was, ‘Go forth without purse or scrip,’ ended before Jesus said, ‘Go ye into all the world.’ That condition was solemnly revoked by our Lord Himself, when He said, ‘When I sent you forth without purse and scrip and shoes, lacked ye anything? But now he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip.’ The fighters’ material wants are now to be met by Christ’s administration of natural means, even as before they had been met by Christ’s administration of supernatural ones. His messengers cannot live, do their work, or extend the kingdom, but by the help of material appliances. Those who ‘abide by the stuff’ are to organise the commissariat department, and to see that those who are far ahead, among the ranks of the foe, do not want for either food or weapons, and are not left isolated, hemmed in by the enemy, and languishing because they feel that they are forgotten by those who ‘live at home at ease.’

There has always been that division of labour. Our Lord Himself ‘had need of’ many humble instruments as helpers. There were the woman who ministered to His wants, the faithful few whose presence and sympathy were joyful to Him even on the Mount of Transfiguration, and longed for even in the awful solitude of the agony in Gethsemane, the sisters of Bethany whose humble home was His last shelter before the Cross, the owner of the Upper Room, the sad women who prepared sweet spices, the ruler who consecrated his new sepulchre in a garden by His body. Even He, treading the wine-press alone, needed helpers in the background, and, while conquering for us in the awful duel with our enemy, had humble friends who ‘tarried by the stuff.’ Similarly Paul had his helpers, on whose names he lovingly lingers and has made immortal, a ‘Gaius, mine host, and of the whole church,’ an ‘Epaphroditus, my fellow soldier, who ministered to my wants,’ and therefore was a soldier, though he did not fight, an ‘Onesiphorus, who oft refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain.’

But let us remember that these two forms of service which are equally necessary are equally binding on us all, in the measure of our opportunity and capacity. Our performing the indirect is no excuse for our neglecting the direct. The conversion of the world is *our* business and not to be handed over to any society or missionary. No Christian can be only and always a non-combatant, without sin and loss. He is bound to take some share in the actual conflict in one or other of its many parts.

II. Service may be different in kind and one in essence.

The determining element in our actions is their motive. Not what we work in, but what we work for, gives the principle of classification. Not the spots on the skin or the colour of the feathers, but the bony skeleton, is the basis of zoological classification. It is not the size or binding of a book, be it quarto or folio or octavo, be it in leather or cloth or paper covers, but its subject, that settles its place in a catalogue. The Christian motives of love to Christ, self-sacrifice, devotion, love to men, make all deeds the same which have these in them in like strength. It matters not whether the copy of a great picture be in oils or an engraving or a photograph, so long as it *is* a copy. The smallest piece of indirect Christian service may be thus elevated to the same plane as the greatest.

'Mere money-giving' may have in it all these qualities, as truly and in as great a degree, as the deeds of Apostles and martyrs. Remember how Peter puts in one category these two forms of service, as equally flowing from 'the manifold grace of God,' and equally to be exercised as 'good stewards' thereof-'If any man speaketh, speaking as it were the oracles of God; if any man ministereth, ministering as of the strength which God supplieth.' Remember how Paul classes all varieties of service as equally 'gifts according to the grace given to us,' and to be exercised in the same spirit whatever are the difference in their forms: 'or ministry, let us give ourselves to our ministry; or he that teacheth, to his teaching: he that giveth, let him do it with liberality . . . he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.'

Let us learn, then, how we ought to help Christian fighters for Christ -as associating ourselves with them and their work by sympathy and sharing in their spirit and motives.

Let us learn how loftily we ought to think of the possible sacredness of the most secular forms of help, and to try thus to consecrate our indirect service.

III. All work done from the same motive will receive the same reward.

None need be startled by the thought that Christian work is rewarded. Essentially, it is not deeds but character that is rewarded. The 'reward' is the possession of God of which such a character is capable, and the consequent blessedness which fills such a soul, and cannot but fill it, and which can be enjoyed by no other. The faithful servant enters into the joy of the Lord; the faithful administrator of his Lord's talents enters on the rule over cities in number the same as the talents. Capacity for service is the result of stewardship rightly administered here, and new opportunities yonder are sure to be provided for new capacities.

God's judgment takes little note of that which men's judgment all but exclusively notes. The conspicuousness or success of a man's deeds is nothing to Him. Differences of power are of no account. It is *faithfulness* that is required in a steward, and it is all the same whether the stewardship is of millions or of farthings. The saints nearest the glory in heaven will not always be the men whose words or deeds fill the pages of Church history and resound through the ages. There will be astounding new principles of nearness and comparative remoteness then.

Christ was repeating what David made a law in Israel, when He said: 'He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward.' Therein He recognises the identity in spiritual stature and motive for service, of the prophet and of his dumb helper, and assures us that those who, in widely different ways but under the guidance of the same spirit and motives, have contributed their respective shares to the one triumphant result shall be associated and equalised in the immortal reward.

So remember that what is necessary in our indirect work, if it is to be thus honoured, is that it should have our devotion, and our love to Jesus and to men, throbbing in it, and that it should be accompanied by direct work, in so far as we have opportunities for that. Moneygiving may be made sacred, and by it, exercised in the right spirit, we may 'lay up in store for ourselves a good foundation' and may 'lay hold upon eternal life.'

22)1 Samuel 31:1-13

1 Samuel

THE END OF SELF-WILL

1Sa. 31:1 - 1Sa. 31:13.

The story of Saul's tragic last days is broken in two by the account, in 1Sa. 29:1 - 1Sa. 29:11 and 1Sa. 30:1 - 1Sa. 30:31, of David's fortunate dismissal from the invading army, and his exploits against Amalek. The contrast between the two lives, so closely intertwined and powerful for good and evil on each other, reaches its climax at the end of Saul's. While the one sets in dark thunderclouds, the other is bright with victory. While the fall of Saul lays all northern Israel bleeding at the feet of the enemy, David is sending the spoils of his conquest to the elders of Judah. Saul’s headless and dishonoured body hangs rotting in the sun on the walk of Bethshan, while David sits a conqueror in Ziklag. The introduction of the brightness of the two preceding chapters is intended to heighten the darkness that broods over this one, and to deepen the stern teaching of that terrible death. Defeat, desolation, despair, attend to his self-dug grave the unhappy king, whose end teaches us all what comes of self-willed resistance to the law and the Spirit of God. Everything else is subordinated in the narrative to the account of his death. Next to nothing is said about the battle, the very site of which is left obscure. We cannot tell whether it was fought down in the plain by the fountain at Jezreel, where Israel was encamped, according to 1Sa. 29:1, or whether both sides manoeuvred and changed their ground, and the decisive struggle was on the slope of Gilboa. In any case, the site was almost identical with that of Gideon’s victory, but there was no Gideon in command on that dark day. The language 1Sa. 31:1 seems to imply that the battle was over and the rout begun before the Israelites reached Gilboa. If so, we have to conceive of a short, hopeless struggle on the plain, and then a rush to the hills for safety, in which Saul and his sons and bodyguard were borne along, but held together, closely followed by the ‘red pursuing spear’ of the conquerors, fierce with ancestral hate and the memories of defeat. There, on the hillside, stands the towering form of Saul with a little ring of his children and retainers round him, the words he had heard last night in the sorceress’ tent unnerving his arm, and many a past crime rising before him, and whispering in his ear,

‘In the battle think on me,
And fall thy edgeless sword; despair and die.’

There seems to have been a close encounter with some of the pursuers, and a hand-to-hand fight, in which Jonathan and his two brothers fell, and the rest of the bodyguard were slain or scattered. The prophecy of that mantle-swathed shape last night was in part fulfilled-’To-morrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me.’ They lay stark at his feet, and he knew that he would soon join them. The last heart that loved him had ceased to beat in Jonathan’s noble breast, and his own crimes had slain his sons. Who can paint the storm of contending passions in that lonely black soul? or were they all frozen into the numbness of despair?

But whatever else was in his soul, repentance was not there. He may have been seared by remorse, but he was not softened by penitence, and was fierce and proud in despair as he had been in prosperity. The Revised Version substitutes ‘overtook’ for ‘hit’ in 1Sa. 31:3; but Saul’s fear ‘lest these uncircumcised come’ is against that rendering, and the fact that the enemy did not know of his death till next day [1Sa. 31:8] is a difficulty in the way of accepting it. The word is literally ‘found’ and possibly means that the archers recognised him, and were making for him, though, as would appear, from some cause they missed him in the confusion. The other change in the Revised Version, that of ‘greatly distressed’ for ‘sore wounded’ fits the context; and if it be adopted, we have the picture of the unwounded but desperate man, once brave, but now stricken with a panic which opens his lips for his only word. In grim silence he had met the loss of battle, sons, and kingdom; but the proud sense of personal dignity is strong to the end, and he fiercely issues his last command, and embraces death to escape insult. The haughty spirit was unchanged, crushed but the same, unsoftened, and therefore roused to madder defiance of God and man. What an awful last saying for ‘the anointed of Jehovah,’ and how the overweening self-will and vehemence and passionate pride of his whole life are gathered up in it!

His last command is disobeyed by the trembling armour-bearer, whose very awe makes him disobedient, Did Saul, at that last moment, send a thought to an armour-bearer whom he had had in happier days, and who was to inherit his lost kingdom? The enemy are coming nearer. No time is to be lost if he would escape the savage mutilations and torments which ancient warfare made the portion of captive kings. Not another word passes his lips, but, in the same grim silence, he fixes his sword upright in the ground, and flings himself on its point, and dies. All through his reign no hand had injured him but his own; and, as he lived, so he died, his own undoer and his own murderer. Suicide, the refuge of defeated monarchs and praised by heathen moralists as heroic, was rare in Israel. Saul, Ahithophel, and Judas are the instances of it. The most rudimentary recognition of the truths taught by the Old Testament would prevent it. If Saul had had any faith in God, any submission, any repentance, he could not have finished a life of rebellion by a self-inflicted death, which was itself the very desperation of rebellion. We have not to pronounce on his fate, but his act was a sin of the darkest dye.

Yet note how the narrative abstains from all comment. It neither condemns nor pities, though a profound sense of the tragic eclipse is audible in that summing up in 1Sa. 31:6 : 'So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armour-bearer, and all his men [that is, immediate followers or escort], that same day together.' And there they all lay, bloody corpses in the fellowship of death, on the slopes of Gilboa. Where Scripture Is silent, it is not our part to speak; but we can scarcely turn from that mighty form, prone by his own rash act, without seeking to learn the lesson of his life and fate. Saul had many noble and lovable qualities, such as bravery, promptitude, in his earlier days modesty and generosity. All these he had by nature, but there is no sign that he ever sought to cultivate his moral character, or to win any grace that did not come naturally to him; nor is there any reason to suppose that religion had ever any strong hold on him. His whole character may be summed up in Samuel's words in announcing his rejection: 'Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry.' Rebellion persisted in, in spite of all remonstrances and checks, till it becomes master of the whole man, is the keynote of his later years. Before that baleful influence, as before some hot poison wind, all the flowers of good dispositions were burned up, and the bad stimulated to growth. His early virtues disappeared, and passed into their opposites. Modesty became arrogance, and a long course of indulgence in self-will developed cruelty, gloomy suspicion, and passionate anger, and left him the victim and slave of his own causeless hate. He who rebels against God mars his own character. The miserable later years of Saul, haunted and hunted as by a demon by his own indulged and swollen rebellion and unsleeping suspicion, are an example of the sorrows that ever dog sin; and, as he lies there on Gilboa, the terrible saying recurs to our memory: 'He that being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.'

The remainder of the chapter is occupied with three points, bearing on the solemn tragedy just recorded. First, we have the disastrous effects of it in the complete loss of the northern territories. 'The men . . . that were on the other side of the valley' are the tribes to the north of the great plain; and 'they that were on the other side Jordan' are probably those on the east bank. So thorough was the defeat, especially as Saul and the royal house were slain, that they abandoned their homes, and the Philistines took possession. 'One sinner destroyeth much good.' When Israel's king was madly rebellious, Israel was smitten, and its inheritance diminished.

Next we have the insults to the headless corpses. The Philistines did not know till the following day how complete was their victory. The account in 1Ch. 10:10 adds that Saul's head was sent to the temple of Dagon, probably as a kind of effacing of the shame wrought there by the presence of the ark. The false gods had triumphed, as their worshippers thought, and Saul's death was Jehovah's defeat. That apparent victory of the idols and the mocking exultation over the bloody trophy and dinted armour are, to the historian, not the least bitter consequences of the battle.

The last point is the brave midnight march of the men of Jabesh from their home on the eastern uplands beyond Jordan, across the river and up to Bethshan, perched on its lofty cliff, and overlooking the valley of the Jordan. It was a requital of Saul's deed in his early bright days, when, with his hastily raised levies, he scattered the Ammonites. It is one gleam of light amid the stormy sunset. There were men ready to hazard their lives even then, because of the noblest of Saul's acts, which no tyrannical arbitrariness or fierceness of later days had blotted out. So the little band of grateful heroes carried back their ghastly load to Jabesh, and burned the mutilated bodies there, employing an unfamiliar mode, as we may suppose, by reason of their mutilation and decomposition, and then reverently gathering the white bones from the pyre, and laying them below the well-known tamarisk. Saul's one good deed as king sowed seeds of gratitude which flourished again, when the opportunity came. His many evil ones sowed evil seed which bore fatal fruit; and both were seen in his end.

2 Samuel

1) 2 SAMUEL 2:1-11
2) 2 SAMUEL 5:1-12
3) 2 SAMUEL 6:1-10
4) 2 SAMUEL 6:11

5) 2 SAMUEL 6:12
6) 2 SAMUEL 7:4-16
7) 2 SAMUEL 7:18-29
8) 2 SAMUEL 9:1-13
9) 2 SAMUEL 10:8-19
10) 2 SAMUEL 12:5-7
11) 2 SAMUEL 12:13
12) 2 SAMUEL 14:14
13) 2 SAMUEL 15:1-12
14) 2 SAMUEL 15:15
15) 2 SAMUEL 15:21
16) 2 SAMUEL 18:18-33
17) 2 SAMUEL 19:34-37
18) 2 SAMUEL 22:40-51
19) 2 SAMUEL 23:1-2
20) 2 SAMUEL 23:3-4
21) 2 SAMUEL 23:5-7
22) 2 SAMUEL 23:15-17

1) 2 Samuel 2:1-11

2 Samuel

THE BRIGHT DAWN OF A REIGN

2Sa. 2:1 - 2Sa. 2:11.

The last stage of David’s wanderings had brought him to Ziklag, a Philistine city. There he had been for over a year, during which he had won the regard of Achish, the Philistine king of Gath. He had, at Achish’s request, accompanied him with his contingent, in the invasion of Israel, which crushed Saul’s house at Gilboa; but jealousy on the part of the other Philistine leaders had obliged his patron to send him back to Ziklag. He found it a heap of ashes. An Amalekite raid had carried off all the women and children, and his soldiers were on the point of mutiny. His fortunes seemed desperate, but his courage and faith were high, and he paused not a moment for useless sorrow, but swept after the robbers, swooped down on them like a bolt out of the blue, and scattered them, recovering the captives and spoil. He went back to the ruins which had been Ziklag, and three days after heard of Saul's death.

The lowest point of his fortunes suddenly turned into the highest, for now the path to the throne was open. But the tidings did not move him to joy. His first thought was not for himself, but for Saul and Jonathan, whose old love to him shone out again, glorified by their deaths. Swift vengeance from his hand struck Saul's slayer; the lovely elegy on the great king and his son eased his heart. Then he turned to front his new circumstances, and this passage shows how a God-fearing man will meet the summons to dignity which is duty. It sets forth David's conduct in three aspects-his assumption of his kingdom, his loving regard for Saul's memory, and his demeanour in the face of rebellion.

I. David was now about thirty years old, and had had his character tested and matured by his hard experiences. He 'learned in suffering what he taught in song.' Exile, poverty, and danger are harsh but effectual teachers, if accepted by a devout spirit, and fronted with brave effort. The fugitive's cave was a good preparation for the king's palace. The throne to which he was called was no soft seat for repose. The Philistine invasion had torn away all the northern territory. He took the helm in a tempest. What was he to do? Ziklag was untenable; where was he to take his men? He could not stop in the Philistine territory, and he saw no way clear.

God's servants generally find that their promotion means harder duties and multiplied perplexities. 'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.' David did what we shall do, if we are wise-he asked God to guide him. How that guidance was asked and given we are not here told; but the analogy of 1Sa. 30:7 - 1Sa. 30:8, suggests that it was by the Urim and Thummim, interpreted by the high-priest. The form of inquiry seems to have been that a course of action, suggested by the inquirer, was decided for him by a 'Yes' or a 'No.' So that there was the exercise of common-sense and judgment in formulating the proposed course, as well as that of God's direction in determining it.

That is how we still get divine direction. Bring your own wits to bear on your action, and then do not obstinately stick to what seems right to you, but ask God to negative it if it is wrong, and to confirm you in it if it is right. If we humbly ask Him, ‘Am I to go, or not to go?’ we shall not be left unanswered. We note the contrast between David’s submission to God’s guidance and Saul’s self-willed taking his own way, in spite of Samuel. He began right, and, in the main, he continued as he began. Self-will is sin and ruin. Submission is joy, and peace, and success. God’s kings are viceroys. They have to rule themselves and the world, but they have to be ruled by His will. If they faithfully continue as His servants, they are masters of all besides.

Hebron was a good capital for the new king, for it was a defensible position, in the centre of his own tribe, and sacred by association with the patriarchs. Established there, David was recognised as king by his fellow-tribesmen, and by them only. No doubt, tribal jealousy was partly the cause of this limited recognition, but probably the confusion incident to the Philistine victory contributed to it. The result was that, though David’s designation by Samuel to the kingship was universally known, and his candidature had been popular, he had seven years of precarious sway over this mere fraction of the nation. We read of no impatience on his part. He let events shape themselves, or, rather, he let God shape events.

Passiveness is not always indolence. There are two ways of compassing our desires. One is that which David himself tells us is the ‘young lions’ way, of struggling and fighting, and that often ends in ‘lacking and suffering hunger’; the other is that of waiting on the Lord, and that always ends in ‘not lacking any good.’ If we are sure that God has promised us anything, and if He does not seem to have yet opened the way to obtaining it, our ‘strength is to sit still.’ If He has given us Hebron, we can be patient till He please to give us Jerusalem.

II. Another side of David’s character comes beautifully out in his treatment of the men of Jabesh-gilead. That town owed much to Saul [1Sa. 11:1 - 1Sa. 11:15], and its gratitude lasted, and dared much for him. It was a brave dash that they made across Jordan to carry off Saul’s corpse from its ignominious exposure; for it both defied the Philistines, and might be construed as hostile to David. But his heart was too true to ancient friendship to do anything but glow with admiring sympathy at that exhibition of affectionate remembrance. Reconciling death had swept away all memories of Saul’s insane jealousy, and he owned a brother in every one who showed kindness to the unfortunate king.

If the Jabesh-Gileadites are a pattern of long-memoried gratitude, David’s commendation of them is a model of love which survives injuries, and of forgivingness which forgets them. It was as politic as it was generous. Nothing could have been better calculated to attach Saul’s most devoted partisans to him than showing that he honoured their faithful attachment to Saul, and nothing could have more clearly defined his own position during his wanderings as being no rebel. The dictates of true policy and those of devout generosity always coincide. It is ever a blunder to be unforgiving, and mercifulness is always expedient.

But David did not hide his claim to the allegiance of these true hearts. He called on them to transfer their loyalty to himself, and he asserted, not his anointing by Samuel, but his recognition by Judah, the premier tribe, as the motive. No doubt the divine appointment is implied, as it was generally known, but Judah’s action is put forward as showing the beginning of the realisation of the divine designation. The men of Jabesh needed to ‘be valiant’ if they were to acknowledge him; for it was a far cry to Hebron, and the forces of the rival son of Saul were overrunning the northern districts.

We have to take our sides in the age-long and worldwide warfare between God’s King and the pretenders to His throne, and it often wants much courage to do so when surrounded by antagonists. It seems a long way off to the true monarch, and Abner’s army is a very solid reality, and very near. But it is safest to take the side of the distant, rightful king.

III. David’s bearing in the face of opposition and rebellion comes out in 2Sa. 2:8 - 2Sa. 2:11. Abner, Saul’s cousin, who had been in high position when the stripling from Bethlehem fought Goliath, was not capable of the self-effacement involved in acquiescing in David’s accession, though he knew that the Lord had ‘sworn to David.’ So he set up a ‘King Do-nothing’ in the person of a weak lad, the only survivor of Saul’s sons. A strange state of mind that, which struggles against a recognised divine appointment!

But is it only Abner who knew that he was trying to thwart God's will? Thousands of us are doing the same, and the attempt answers as well as it did in his case.

The puppet king is named Ishbosheth in the lesson, but 1Ch. 8:33 and 1Ch. 9:39 show that his real name was Esh-baal. The former word means 'The man of shame'; the latter, 'The man of Baal.' The existence of Baal as an element in names seems to indicate the incompleteness of the emancipation from idolatry in Saul's time, and the change will then indicate the keener monotheistic conscience of later days. Another explanation is that Baal [' Lord'] was in these cases used as a name for Jehovah, and was 'changed at a later period for the purpose of avoiding what was interpreted then as a compound of the name of the Phoenician deity Baal' [Driver, *Notes on Hebrew Text of the Books of Samuel*].

Abner set up his tool in Mahanaim, sacred for its associations with Jacob, but, no doubt, recommended to him rather by its position on the east side of Jordan, safe from the attacks of the victorious Philistines. From that fastness he made raids to recover the territory which the victory at Gilboa had won for them. First Gilead, on the same side of the river as Mahanaim; then the territory of the 'Ashurites'- probably a scribe's error for 'Asherites,' the most northern tribe; and then, coming southward, the great plain, with its cities, Ephraim and Benjamin,-in fact, all Israel except Judah's country was reconquered for Saul's house.

The account of the distribution of territory between the two monarchies is broken by the parenthesis in 2Sa. 2:10, which, both by its awkward interposition in the middle of a sentence and by its difficult chronological statements, looks like a late addition.

For seven and a half years David reigned in Hebron, but was rather shut up there than ruling thence. The most noteworthy fact is that he, soldier as he was, took no steps to put down Abner's rebellion. He defended himself when attacked, but that was all. The three figures of David, Ishbosheth, and Abner point lessons. Silent, still, trustful, and therefore patient, David shows us how faith in God can lead to possessing one's soul in patience till 'the vision' comes. We may have to wait for it, but 'it will surely come,' and what is time enough for God should be time enough for us. Saul's son was a poor, weak creature, who would never have thought of resisting David but for the stronger will behind him. To be weak is, in this world full of tempters, to drift into being wicked. We have to learn betimes to say ‘No,’ and to stick to it. Moral weakness attracts tempters as surely as a camel fallen by the caravan track draws vultures from every corner of the sky. The fierce soldier who fought for his own hand while professing to be moved by loyalty to the dead king, may stand as a type of the self-deception with which we gloss over our ugliest selfishness with fine names, and for an instance of the madness which leads men to set themselves against God’s plans, and therefore to be dashed in pieces, as some slim barrier reared across the track of a train would be. To ‘rush against the thick bosses of the Almighty’s buckler’ does no harm to the buckler, but kills the insane assailant.

2) 2 Samuel 5:1-12

2 Samuel

ONE FOLD AND ONE SHEPHERD

2Sa. 5:1 - 2Sa. 5:12.

The dark day on Gilboa put the Philistines in possession of most of Saul’s kingdom. Only in the south David held his ground, and Abner had to cross Jordan to find a place of security for the remnants of the royal house. The completeness of the Philistine conquest is marked, not only by Abner’s flight to Mahanaim, but by the reckoning that David reigned for seven and a half years and Ishbosheth two; for these periods must be supposed to have ended very nearly at the same time, and thus there would be about five years before the invaders were so far got rid of that Ishbosheth exercised sovereignty over his part of Israel. It is singular that David should have been left unattacked by the Philistines, and it is probably to be explained by the friendly relations which had sprung up between Achish, king of Gath, and him [1Sa. 29:1 - 1Sa. 29:11]. However that may be, his power was continually increasing during his reign at Hebron over Judah, and at last Abner’s death and the assassination of the poor phantom king, Ishbosheth, brought about the total collapse of opposition.

I. This passage deals first with the submission of the tribes and the reunion of the divided kingdom. A comparison of 2Sa. 5:1 with 2Sa. 5:3 shows that a formal delegation of elders from all the tribes which had held by Ishbosheth, came to Hebron with their submission. The account in I Chronicles is a *verbatim* copy of this one, with the addition of a glowing picture of the accompanying feasting and joy. It also places much emphasis on the sincerity of David's new subjects, which needed some endorsement; for loyalty which has been disloyal as long as it durst, may be suspected. The elders have their mouths full of excellent reasons for recognising David's kingship,-he is their brother; he was their true leader in war, even in Saul's time; he has been appointed by God to be king and commander. Unfortunately, it had taken the elders seven and a half years to feel the force of these reasons, and probably their perceptions would still have remained dull if Abner and Ishbosheth had lived. But David is both magnanimous and politic, and neither bloodshed nor reproaches mar the close of the strife. Seldom has so formidable a civil war been ended with so complete an amnesty. Observe the expression that David 'made a league with them. . . before the Lord.' The Israelitish monarch was no despot, but, in modern language, a constitutional king, between whom and his subjects there was a compact, which he as well as they had to observe. In what sense was it made 'before the Lord'? The ark was not at Hebron, though the priests were; and the phrase is at once a testimony to the religious character of the 'league' and to the consciousness of God's presence, apart from the symbol of His presence. It points to a higher conception than that which brought the ark to Ebenezer, and dreamed that the ark had brought God to the army. Modern theories of the religious development of the Old Testament ask us to recognise these two conceptions as successive. The fact is that they were contemporaneous, and that the difference between them is not one of time, but of spiritual susceptibility. Who anointed David for this third time? Apparently the elders, for priests are not mentioned. Samuel had anointed him, as token of the divine choice and symbol of the divine gifts for his office. The men of Judah had anointed him, and finally the elders did so, in token of the popular confirmation of God's choice.

So David has reached the throne at last. Schooled by suffering, and in the full maturity of his powers, enriched by the singularly varied experiences of his changeful life, tempered by the swift alternations of heat and cold, polished by friction, consolidated by heavy blows, he has been welded into a fitting instrument for God's purposes. Thus does He ever prepare for larger service. Thus does He ever reward patient trust. Through trials to a throne is the law for all noble lives in regard to their earthly progress, as well as in regard to the relation between earth and heaven. But David is not only a pattern instance of how God trains His servants, but he is a prophetic person; and in his progress to his kingdom we have dimly, but really, shadowed the path by which his Son and Lord attains to His,-a path thickly strewn with thorns, and plunging into 'valleys of the shadow of death' compared with which David's darkest hour was sunny. The psalms of the persecuted exile have sounding through them a deeper sorrow; for they 'testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ.' 'No cross, no crown,' is the lesson of David's earlier life.

II. We have, next, the first victory of the reunited nation. Hebron was too far south for the capital of the whole kingdom. Jerusalem was more central, and, from its position, surrounded on three sides with steep ravines, was a strong military post. David's soldier's eye saw its advantages; and he, no doubt, desired to weld the monarchy together by participation in danger and triumph. The new glow of national unity would seek some great exploit, and would resent as an insult the presence of the Jebusites in their stronghold. The attack on it immediately follows the recognition of David's kingship. It is not necessary here to discuss the difficulties in 2Sa. 5:6 - 2Sa. 5:8; but we note that they give, first, the insolent boast of the besieged, then the twofold answer to it in fact and in word, and last, the memorial of the victory in a proverb. Apparently the Jebusites' taunt is best understood as in the margin of the Revised Version,' Thou shalt not come in hither, but the blind and the lame shall turn thee away,' They were so sure that their ravines made them safe, that they either actually manned their walls with blind men and cripples, or jeeringly shouted to the enemy across the valley that these would do for a garrison. The other possible meaning of the words as they stand in the Authorised Version would make 'the blind and lame' refer to David's men, and the taunt would mean, 'You will have to weed out your men. It will take sharper eyes and more agile limbs than theirs to clamber up here'; but the former explanation is the more probable. Such braggart speeches were quite in the manner of ancient warfare.

2Sa. 5:7 tells what the answer to this mocking shout from the ramparts was, David did the impossible, and took the city. Courage built on faith has a way of making the world’s predictions of what it cannot do look rather ridiculous. David wastes no words in answering the taunt; but it stirs him to fierce anger, and nerves him and his men for their desperate charge. The obscure words in 2Sa. 5:8, which he speaks to his soldiers, do not need the supplement given in the Authorised Version. The king’s quick eye had seen a practical path for scaling the cliffs up some watercourse, where there might be projections or vegetation to pull oneself up by, or shelter which would hide the assailants from the defenders; and he bids any one who would smite the Jebusites take that road up, and, when he is up, ‘smite.’ He heartens his men for the assault by his description of the enemy. They had talked about ‘blind and lame’; that is what they really are, or as unable to stand against the Israelites’ fierce and sudden burst as if they were: and furthermore, they are’ hated of David’s soul.’ It is a flash of the rage of battle which shows us David in a new light. He was a born captain as well as king; and here he exhibits the general’s power to see, as by instinct, the weak point and to hurl his men on it. His swift decision and fiery eloquence stir his men’s blood like the sound of a trumpet. The proverb that rose from the capture is best read as in the Revised Version: ‘There are the blind and the lame; he cannot come into the house.’ The point of it seems to be that, notwithstanding the bragging Jebusites, he did ‘come into the house’; and so its use would be to ridicule boasting confidence that was falsified by events, as the Jebusites’ had been. It was worth while to record the boast and its end; for they teach the always seasonable lesson of the folly of over-confidence in apparently impregnable defences. It is a lesson of worldly prudence, but still more of religion. There is always some ‘watercourse’ overlooked by us, up which the enemy may make his way. Overestimate of our own strength and its companion folly, flippant underestimate of the enemy’s power, are, in all worldly affairs, the sure precursors of disaster; and in the Christian life the only safe temper is that of the man who ‘feareth always,’ as knowing his own weakness and the strength of his foe, and thereby is driven to that trust which casts out fear.

On the other hand, David’s exploit reads us anew the lesson that to the Christian soldier there is nothing impossible, with Jesus Christ for our Captain. There are many unconquered fortresses of evil still to be carried by assault, and they look steep and inaccessible enough; but there is some way up, and He will show it us. For our own personal struggle with sin, and for the Church's conflict with social evils, this story is an encouragement and a prophecy.

Jerusalem was captured by a reunited nation with its king at its head. As long as our miserable divisions weaken and disgrace us, the Church fights at a disadvantage; and the hoary fortresses of the foe will not be won till Judah ceases to vex Ephraim, and Ephraim no more envies Judah, but all Christ's servants in one host, with the King known by each to be with them, make the assault.

III. We have, lastly, the growth of the kingdom. I pass over topographical questions, which need not concern us here. The points recorded are David's establishment in the stronghold, his additions to the city, his increasing greatness and its reason in the presence and favour of 'the God of hosts,' the special instance of this in the friendly intercourse with Hiram of Tyre and the employment of Tyrian workmen, and the recognition of the source and the purpose of his prosperity by the devout king. We see here the conditions of true success,-'The Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.' We see also the right use of it,-'David perceived that the Lord had established him king.' He was not puffed up into self-importance by his elevation, but devoutly and clearly saw who had set him in his lofty place. And, as he traced his royalty to God, so he recognised that he had received it, not for himself, but as a trust to be used, not in self-indulgence, but for the national good,-'and that He had exalted his kingdom for His people Israel's sake.' Whosoever holds firmly by these two thoughts, and lives them, will adorn his position, whatever it may be, and will be one of God's crowned kings, however obscure his lot and small his duties. He who lacks them will misuse his gifts and mar his life, and the more splendid his endowments and the higher his position, the more conspicuous will be his ruin and the heavier his guilt.

3) 2 Samuel 6:1-10

2 Samuel

DEATH AND LIFE FROM THE ARK

2Sa. 6:1 - 2Sa. 6:12.

I. The first section [2Sa. 6:1 - 2Sa. 6:5] **describes the joyful reception and procession.** The parallel account in 1 Chronicles states that Baalah, or Baale, was Kirjath-jearim. Probably the former was the more ancient Canaanitish name, and indicates that it had been a Baal sanctuary. If so, the presence of the ark there was at once a symbol and an omen, showing Jehovah's conquest over the obscene and bloody gods of the land, and forecasting His triumph over all the gods of the nations. Every Baale shall one day be a resting-place of the ark of God. The solemn designation of the ark, as 'called by the Name, the name of the Lord of Hosts, that dwelleth between the cherubim,' is significant on this, its reappearance after so long eclipse, and, by emphasising its awful sanctity, prepares for the incidents which are to follow. The manner of the ark's transport was irregular; for the law strictly enjoined its being carried by the Levites by means of bearing-poles resting on their shoulders; and the copying of the Philistines' cart, though a new one was made for the purpose, indicates the desuetude into which the decencies of worship had fallen in seventy years. In 1 Chronicles, the singular words in 2Sa. 6:5, which describe David as playing before the Lord on the very unlikely things for such a purpose,' all manner of instruments of fir wood,' become 'with all their might: even with songs' which seems much more reasonable. A slight alteration in three letters and the transposition of two would bring our text into conformity with I Chronicles, and the conjectural emendation is tempting. Who ever heard of fir-wood musical instruments? The specified ones which follow were certainly not made of it, and songs could scarcely fail to be mentioned.

At all events, we see the glad procession streaming out of the little city buried among its woods; the cart drawn by meek oxen, and loaded with the unadorned wooden chest, in the midst; the two sons or descendants of its faithful custodian honoured to be the teamsters; the king with the harp which had cheered him in many a sad hour of exile; and the crowd 'making a joyful noise before the Lord,' which might sound discord in our ears, as some lifted up shrill songs, some touched stringed instruments, some beat on timbrels, some rattled metal rods with movable rings, and some clashed cymbals together. It was a wild scene, in which there was a dangerous resemblance to the frantic jubilations of idolatrous worship. No doubt there were true hearts in that crowd, and none truer than David's. No doubt we have to beware of applying our Christian standards to these early times, and must let a good deal that is sensuous and turbid pass, as, no doubt, God let it pass. But confession of sin in leaving the ark so long forgotten would have been better than this tumultuous joy; and if there had been more trembling in it, it would not have passed so soon into wild terror. Still, on the other hand, that rejoicing crowd does represent, though in crude form, the effect which the consciousness of God's presence should ever have. His felt nearness should be, as the Psalmist says, 'the gladness of my joy.' Much of our modern religion is far too gloomy, and it is thought to be a sign of devotion and spiritual-mindedness to be sad and of a mortified countenance. Unquestionably, Christianity brings men into the continual presence of very solemn truths about themselves and the world which may well sober them, and make what the world calls mirth incongruous.

'There is no music in the life
That rings with idiot laughter solely.'

But the Man of Sorrows said that His purpose for us was that 'His joy might remain in us, and that our joy might be full'; and we but imperfectly apprehend the gospel if we do not feel that its joys 'much more abound' than its sorrows, and that they even burn brightest, like the lights on safety-buoys, when drenched by stormy seas.

II. The second section contains the dread vindication of the sanctity of the ark, which changed joy into terror, and silenced the songs. At some bad place in the rocky and steep track, the oxen stumbled or were restive. The spot is called in Samuel 'the threshing-floor of Nachon,' but in Chronicles the owner is named 'Chidon.' As the former word means 'a stroke' and the latter 'destruction,' they are probably not to be taken as proper names, but as applied to the place after this event. The name given by David, however-Perez-uzzah-proved the more permanent 'to this day.' Uzzah, who was driving while his brother went in front to pilot the way, naturally stretched out his hand to steady his freight, just as if it had been a sack of corn; and, as if he had touched an electric wire, fell dead, as the story graphically says, 'by the ark of God.' What confusion and panic would agitate the joyous singers, and how their songs would die on their lips!

What harm was there in Uzzah's action? It was most natural, and, in one point of view, commendable. Any careful waggoner would have done the same with any valuable article he had in charge. Yes; that was just the point of his error and sin, that he saw no difference between the ark and any other valuable article. His intention to help was right enough; but there was profound insensibility to the awful sacredness of the ark, on which even its Levitical bearers were forbidden to lay hands. All his life Uzzah had been accustomed to its presence. It had been one of the familiar pieces of furniture in Abinadab's house, and, no doubt, familiarity had had its usual effect. Do none of us ministers, teachers, and others, to whom the gospel and the worship and ordinances of the Church have been familiar from infancy, treat them in the same fashion? Many a hand is laid on the ark, sometimes to keep it from falling, with more criminal carelessness of its sacredness than Uzzah showed. Note, too, how swiftly an irreverent habit of treating holy things grows. The first error was in breaking the commanded order for removal of the ark by the Levites. Once in the cart, the rest follows. The smallest breach in the feeling of awe and reverence will soon lead to more complete profanation. There is nothing more delicate than the sense of awe. Trifled with ever so little, it speedily disappears. There is far too little of it in our modern religion. Perfect love casts out fear and deepens awe which hath not torment.

Was not the punishment in excess of the sin? We must remember the times, the long neglect of the ark, the decay of religion in Saul's reign, the critical character of the moment as the beginning of a new era, when it was all-important to print deep the impression of sanctity, and the rude material which had to be dealt with; and we must not forget that God, in His punishments, does not adopt men's ideas of death as such a very dreadful thing. Many since have followed in David's wake, and been 'displeased, because the Lord broke forth upon Uzzah'; but he and they have been wrong. He ought to have known better, and to have understood the lesson of the solemn corpse that lay there by the ark; instead of which he gives way to mere terror, and was 'afraid of the Lord.' David afraid of the Lord! What had become of the rapturous love and strong trust which ring clear through his psalms? Is this the man who called God his rock and fortress and deliverer, his buckler and the horn of his salvation and his high tower, and poured out his soul in burning words, which glow yet through all the centuries and the darkness of earth? It was ill for David to fall thus below himself, but well for us that the eclipse of his faith and love should be recorded, to hearten us, when the like emotions fall asleep in our souls. His consciousness of impurity was wholesome and sound, but his cowering before the ark, as if it were the seat of arbitrary anger, which might flame out destruction for no discernible reason, was a woful darkening of his loving insight into the heart of God.

III. The last section [2Sa. 6:10 - 2Sa. 6:12] **gives us the blessings on the house of Obed-edom and the glad removal of the ark to Jerusalem.** Obed-edom is called a 'Gittite,' or man of Gath; but he does not appear to have been a Philistine immigrant, but a native of another Gath, a Levitical city, and himself a Levite. There is an Obededom in the lists of David's Levites in Chronicles who is probably the same man. He did not fear to receive the ark, and, worthily received, the presence which had been a source of disaster and death to idolaters, to profanely curious pryers into its secret, and to presumptuous irreverence, became a fountain of unbroken blessing. This twofold effect of the same presence is but a symbol of a solemn law which runs through all life, and is especially manifest in the effects of Christ's work upon men. Everything has two handles, and it depends on ourselves by which of them we lay hold of it, and whether we shall receive a shock that kills, or blessings. The same circumstances of poverty, or wealth, or sorrow, or temptation, make one man better and another worse. The same presence of God will be to one man a joy; to another, a terror. 'What maketh heaven, that maketh hell.' The same gospel received is the fountain of life, purity, peace; and, rejected or neglected, is the source of harm and death. Jesus Christ is 'set for the fall and rising again of many.' Either He is the savour of life unto life, the rock on which we build, or He is the savour of death unto death, the stone on which we stumble and break our limbs.

4) 2 Samuel 6:11

2 Samuel

DEATH AND LIFE FROM THE ARK

THE ARK OF THE HOUSE OF OBED-EDOM

2Sa. 6:11.

Nearly seventy years had elapsed since the capture of the ark by the Philistines on the fatal field of Aphek. They had carried it and set it in insolent triumph in the Temple of Dagon, as if to proclaim that the Jehovah of Israel was the conquered prisoner of the Philistine god. But the morning showed Dagon’s stump prone on the threshold. And so the terrified priests got rid of their dangerous trophy as swiftly as they could. From one Philistine city to another it passed, and everywhere its presence was marked by disease and calamity. So at last they huddled it into some rude cart, leaving the draught-oxen to drag it whither they would. They made straight for the Judaean hills, and in the first little village were welcomed by the inhabitants at their harvest, as they saw them coming across the plain. But again death attended the Presence, and curiosity, which was profanity, was punished. So the villagers were as eager to get rid of the ark as they had been to welcome it, and they passed it on to the little city of *Kirjath-jearim*, ‘the city of the woods,’ as the name means, or, as we might say, ‘Woodville.’ And there it lay, neglected and all but forgotten, for nearly seventy years. But as soon as David was established in his newly-won capital he set himself to reorganise the national worship, which had fallen into neglect and almost into disuse. The first step was to bring the ark. And so he passed with a joyful company to *Kirjath.* But again swift death overtakes Uzzah with his irreverent hand. And David shrinks, in the consciousness of his impurity, and bestows the symbol of the awful Presence in the house of Obed-edom. As we have already noted, he was probably not a Philistine, as the name ‘Gittite’ at first sight suggests. There is an Obed-edom in the lists of David’s Levites, who was an inhabitant of another Gath, and himself of the tribe of Levi.

He was not afraid to receive the ark. There were no idols, no irreverent curiosity, no rash presumption in his house. He feared and served the God of the ark, and so the Presence, which had been a source of disaster to the unworthy, was a source of unbroken blessing to him and to his household.

I have been the more particular in this enumeration of the wanderings of the ark and the opposite effects which its presence produced according to the manner of its reception, because these effects are symbols of a great truth which runs all through human life, and is most especially manifested in the message and the mission of Jesus Christ.

Let us, then, just trace out two or three of the spheres in which we may see the application of this great principle, which makes life so solemn and so awful, which may make it so sad or so glad, so base or so noble.

I. First, then, note the twofold operation of all God’s outward dealings.

Everything that befalls us, every object with which we come in contact, all the variety of condition, all the variations of our experience, have one distinct and specific purpose. They are all meant to tell upon character, to make us better in sundry ways, to bring us closer to God, and to fill us more full of Him. And that one effect may be produced by the most opposite incidents, just as in some great machine you may have two wheels turning in opposite ways, and yet contributing to one resulting motion; or, just as the summer and the winter, with all their antitheses, have a single result in the abundant harvest. One force attracts the planet to the sun, one force tends to drive it out into the fields of space; but the two, working together, make it circle in its orbit around its centre. And so, by sorrow and by joy, by light and by dark, by giving and withholding, by granting and refusing, by all the varieties of our circumstances, and by everything that lies around us, God works to prepare us for Himself and to polish His instruments, sometimes plunging the iron into ‘baths of hissing tears,’ and sometimes heating it ‘hot with hopes and fears,’ and sometimes ‘battering’ it ‘with the shocks of doom,’ but all for the one purpose -that it may be a polished shaft in His quiver.

And whilst, thus, the most opposite things may produce the same effect, the same thing will produce opposite effects according to the way in which we take it. There is nothing that can be relied upon to do a man only good; there is nothing about which we need fear that its mission is only to do evil. For all depends on the recipient, who can make everything to fulfil the purpose for which God has sent him everything.

Here are two men tried by the same poverty. It beats the one down, makes him squalid, querulous, faithless, irreligious, drives him to drink, crushes him; and the other man it steadies and quiets and hardens, and teaches him to look beyond the things seen and temporal to the exceeding riches at God’s right hand.

Here are two men tried by wealth; the gold gets into the one man’s veins and makes him yellow as with jaundice, and kills him, destroying all that is noble, generous, impulsive, quenching his early dreams and enthusiasms, closing his heart to sweet charity, puffing him up with a false sense of Importance, and laying upon him the dreadful responsibility of misused and selfishly employed possessions. And the other man, tried in the same fashion, out of his wealth makes for himself friends that welcome him into everlasting habitations, and lays up for himself treasures in heaven. The one man is damned and the other man is saved by their use of the same thing.

Here are two men subjected to the same sorrows; the one is absorbed by his selfish regard to his own misery, blinded to all the blessings that still remain, made negligent of tasks and oblivious of the plainest duty. And he goes about saying, ‘Oh, if thou hadst been here!’ or if, if something else had happened, then this would not have happened. And the other man, passing through the same circumstances, finds that, when his props are taken away, he flings himself on God’s breast, and, when the world becomes dark and all the paths dim about him, he looks up to a heaven that fills fuller of meek and swiftly gathering stars as the night falls, and he says, ‘It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth Him good.’

Here are two men tried by the same temptation; it leads the one man away captive ‘with a dart through his liver’; the other man by God’s grace overcomes it, and is the stronger and the sweeter and the gentler and the humbler because of the dreadful fight. And so you might go the whole round of diverse circumstances, and about each of them find the same double result. Nothing is sure to do a man good; nothing necessarily does him hurt. All depends upon the man himself, and the use he makes of what God in His mercy sends. Two plants may grow in the same soil, be fed by the same dews and benediction from the heavens, be shone upon by the same sunshine, and the one of them will elaborate from all, sweet juices and fragrance, and the other will elaborate a deadly poison. So, my brother, life is what you and I will to make it, and the events which befall us are for our rising or our falling according as we determine they shall be, and according as we use them.

Think, then, how solemn, how awful, how great a thing it is to stand here a free agent, able to determine my character and my condition, surrounded by all these circumstances and the subject of all these wise and manifold divine dealings, in each of which there lie dormant, to be evoked by me, tremendous possibilities of elevation even to the very presence of God, or of sinking into the depths of separation from Him. The ark of God, that overthrew Dagon and smote Uzzah, was nothing but a fountain of blessing in the household of Obed-edom.

II. Secondly, note the twofold operation of God's character and presence.

The ark was the symbol of a present God, and His presence is meant to be the life and joy of all creatures, and the revelation of Him is meant to be only for our good, giving strength, righteousness, and peace. But the same double possibility which I have been pointing out as inherent in all externals belongs here too, and a man can determine to which aspect of the many-sided infinitude of the divine nature he shall stand in relation. The glass in stained windows is so coloured as that parts of it cut off, and prevent from passing through, different rays of the pure white light. And men's moral natures, the inclination of their hearts, and the set of their wills and energies, cut off, if I may say so, parts of the infinite, white light of the many-sided divine character, and put them into relations only with some part and aspect of that great whole which we call God. The man that loves the world, the man that is living for self, still more the man that is embruted in the pig-sty of sensuality and vice, cannot see the God whom the pure heart, which loves Him and is purified by its faith, discerns at the centre of all things. But the lower man sees either some very far-off Awfulness, in which he hopes vaguely that there is a kind of good nature that will let him off; or, if he has been shaken out of that superficial creed, which is only a creed for men whose consciences have not been touched, then he can see only a God whose love darkens into retribution, and who is the Judge and the Avenger. And no man can say that such a conception is not part of the truth; but, alas! he on whom the form of such a God glares has incapacitated himself, by his misuse of his powers and of God’s world, from seeing the beauty of the love of the Father of us all, the righteous Father who in Christ loves every man.

And thus the thought of God, the consciousness of His Presence, may be like the ark which was its symbol, either dreadful and to be put away, or to be welcomed and blessing to be drawn from it. To many of us I am sure-though I do not know anything about many of you-that thought,’ Thou God seest me,’ breeds feelings like the uneasy discomfort of a prisoner when he knows that somewhere in the wall there is a spy-hole at which at any moment a warder’s eye may be. And to some of us, blessed be His name, that same thought, ‘Thou art near me,’ seems to bathe the heart in a sea of sweet rest, and to bring the assurance of a divine Companion that cheers all the solitude. And why is the difference? There are two people sitting in one pew; to the one man the thought of God is his ghastliest doubt, to the other it is his deepest joy. Wherefore? And which is it to me?

Then, again, this same duality of aspect attaches to the character and presence of God in another way. Because, according to the variety of men’s characters, God is obliged to treat them as standing in different relations. He must manifest His judgment, His justice, His punitive justice. There is a solemn verse in one of the Psalms which I may quote in lieu of all words of my own of this matter. ‘With the merciful Thou wilt show Thyself merciful, with the pure Thou wilt show Thyself pure, with the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward.’ The present God has to modify His dealings according to the characters of men.

And so, dear friends, for the present life, and, as I believe, for the next life in a far more emphatic and awful way, the same thing makes blessedness and misery, the same thing makes life and death. The sunshine will kill and wither the slimy plants that grow in the dark recesses of some dripping cave; and if you take a fish out of the water, the air clogs its gills and it dies. Bring a man, such as some of you are, into a close, constant contact with the consciousness of the divine righteousness and presence, and you want nothing else to make a hell. The ark of the Lord will flash out its lightnings and Uzzah will die. That great Infinite Being, before whom we stand, holds in His right hand blessings beyond count or price, even the gift of Himself, and in His left His lightnings and His arrows. On which hand are you standing?

III. Lastly, note the twofold operation of God’s gospel.

His dealings, His character and presence, and, most markedly and eminently of all, the gospel that is treasured in Jesus Christ and proclaimed amongst us, have this twofold operation. God sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world. It was meant that His mission and message should only be for life, and that with ever-increasing abundance. But God cannot save men by magic, nor by indiscriminate bestowment of spiritual blessings. It is not in His power to force His salvation upon any one, and whether the Gospel shall turn out to be a man’s salvation or his ruin depends on the man himself. The preaching of the gospel and your contact with it, if you have ever come into contact with it really and not by mere outward hearing, leaves no man as it found him. My poor words-and God knows how poor I feel them to be-leave none of you as they find you; and that is what makes our meeting together so solemn and awful, and sometimes weighs one down as with a sense of insufficiency for these things.

That twofold operation is seen first in the permanent effects of the Gospel upon character. If it has been offered to me, and if I accept it, then blessings beyond all enumeration, and which none but they who have them fully know, follow in its wake. Received by simple faith in Jesus Christ, God’s sacrifice for a world’s sin, it brings to us the clear consciousness of pardon, the calm sense of communion, the joyful spirit of adoption, righteousness rooted in our hearts and to be manifested day by day in our lives; it brings all elevation and strengthening and ennobling for the whole nature, and is the one power that makes us really men as God would have us all to be.

Rejected or neglected or passed by apparently without our having done anything in regard to it, what are the issues? What does it do? Well, it does this for one thing, it turns unconscious worldliness into conscious worldliness. If the offer has been clearly before your minds, ‘Christ or the world?’ and you have said ‘I take the world!’ you know that you have made the choice, and the act will tell on your character.

Rejection strengthens all the evil motives for rejection, and adds to the insensibility of the man who has rejected. The ice on our pavements in the winter time, that melts on the surface in the day and freezes again at night, becomes dense and slippery beyond all other. And a heart, like that which beats in some of our bosoms, that has been melted and then has frozen again, is harder than ever it was before. Hammering that does not break solidifies and makes tougher the thing that is struck. There are no men so hard to get at as men and women, like multitudes of you, that have been hammered at by preaching ever since they were children, and have not yielded their hearts to God. The ark has done you hurt if it has not done you good.

I do not dwell upon the other solemn thought, of the harmful results of contact with a gospel which we do not accept, as exemplified in the increase of responsibility and the consequent increase of condemnation. I only quote Christ's words, 'The servant that knew his Lord's will, and did it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.'

My brother, Christ's gospel is never inert, one thing or other it does for every soul that it reaches. Either it softens or it hardens. Either it saves or it condemns. 'This Child is set for the rise or for the fall of many.' Jesus Christ may be for me and for you the Rock on which we build. If He is not, He is the Stone against which we stumble and break our limbs. Jesus Christ may be for you and for me the Pillar that gives light by night to those on the one side; He either is that, or He is the Pillar that sheds darkness and dismay on those on the other. Jesus Christ and His Gospel may be to each of us 'the savour of life unto life'; He either is that, or He is 'the savour of death unto death.' Oh! dear friends, if you have neglected, turned away, delayed to receive Him or have forgotten impressions in the midst of the whirl of daily life, do not do so any longer. Take Him for yours, your Brother, Friend, Sacrifice, Inspirer, Lord, Aim, End, Reward, and very Heaven of Heaven. Take Him for your own by simple trusting; and say to Him, 'Arise! O Lord, into Thy rest, Thou and the Ark of Thy strength.' So He will come into your hearts and smile His gladness as He whispers: 'Here will I dwell for ever; this is My rest, for I have desired it.'

5) 2 Samuel 6:12

DEATH AND LIFE FROM THE ARK

2Sa. 6:1 - 2Sa. 6:12.

I. The first section [2Sa. 6:1 - 2Sa. 6:5] **describes the joyful reception and procession.** The parallel account in 1 Chronicles states that Baalah, or Baale, was Kirjath-jearim. Probably the former was the more ancient Canaanitish name, and indicates that it had been a Baal sanctuary. If so, the presence of the ark there was at once a symbol and an omen, showing Jehovah's conquest over the obscene and bloody gods of the land, and forecasting His triumph over all the gods of the nations. Every Baale shall one day be a resting-place of the ark of God. The solemn designation of the ark, as 'called by the Name, the name of the Lord of Hosts, that dwelleth between the cherubim,' is significant on this, its reappearance after so long eclipse, and, by emphasising its awful sanctity, prepares for the incidents which are to follow. The manner of the ark's transport was irregular; for the law strictly enjoined its being carried by the Levites by means of bearing-poles resting on their shoulders; and the copying of the Philistines' cart, though a new one was made for the purpose, indicates the desuetude into which the decencies of worship had fallen in seventy years. In 1 Chronicles, the singular words in 2Sa. 6:5, which describe David as playing before the Lord on the very unlikely things for such a purpose,' all manner of instruments of fir wood,' become 'with all their might: even with songs' which seems much more reasonable. A slight alteration in three letters and the transposition of two would bring our text into conformity with I Chronicles, and the conjectural emendation is tempting. Who ever heard of fir-wood musical instruments? The specified ones which follow were certainly not made of it, and songs could scarcely fail to be mentioned.

At all events, we see the glad procession streaming out of the little city buried among its woods; the cart drawn by meek oxen, and loaded with the unadorned wooden chest, in the midst; the two sons or descendants of its faithful custodian honoured to be the teamsters; the king with the harp which had cheered him in many a sad hour of exile; and the crowd 'making a joyful noise before the Lord,' which might sound discord in our ears, as some lifted up shrill songs, some touched stringed instruments, some beat on timbrels, some rattled metal rods with movable rings, and some clashed cymbals together. It was a wild scene, in which there was a dangerous resemblance to the frantic jubilations of idolatrous worship. No doubt there were true hearts in that crowd, and none truer than David's. No doubt we have to beware of applying our Christian standards to these early times, and must let a good deal that is sensuous and turbid pass, as, no doubt, God let it pass. But confession of sin in leaving the ark so long forgotten would have been better than this tumultuous joy; and if there had been more trembling in it, it would not have passed so soon into wild terror. Still, on the other hand, that rejoicing crowd does represent, though in crude form, the effect which the consciousness of God's presence should ever have. His felt nearness should be, as the Psalmist says, 'the gladness of my joy.' Much of our modern religion is far too gloomy, and it is thought to be a sign of devotion and spiritual-mindedness to be sad and of a mortified countenance. Unquestionably, Christianity brings men into the continual presence of very solemn truths about themselves and the world which may well sober them, and make what the world calls mirth incongruous.

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That rings with idiot laughter solely.'

But the Man of Sorrows said that His purpose for us was that 'His joy might remain in us, and that our joy might be full'; and we but imperfectly apprehend the gospel if we do not feel that its joys 'much more abound' than its sorrows, and that they even burn brightest, like the lights on safety-buoys, when drenched by stormy seas.

II. The second section contains the dread vindication of the sanctity of the ark, which changed joy into terror, and silenced the songs. At some bad place in the rocky and steep track, the oxen stumbled or were restive. The spot is called in Samuel 'the threshing-floor of Nachon,' but in Chronicles the owner is named 'Chidon.' As the former word means 'a stroke' and the latter 'destruction,' they are probably not to be taken as proper names, but as applied to the place after this event. The name given by David, however-Perez-uzzah-proved the more permanent 'to this day.' Uzzah, who was driving while his brother went in front to pilot the way, naturally stretched out his hand to steady his freight, just as if it had been a sack of corn; and, as if he had touched an electric wire, fell dead, as the story graphically says, ‘by the ark of God.’ What confusion and panic would agitate the joyous singers, and how their songs would die on their lips!

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III. The last section [2Sa. 6:10 - 2Sa. 6:12] **gives us the blessings on the house of Obed-edom and the glad removal of the ark to Jerusalem.** Obed-edom is called a ‘Gittite,’ or man of Gath; but he does not appear to have been a Philistine immigrant, but a native of another Gath, a Levitical city, and himself a Levite. There is an Obededom in the lists of David’s Levites in Chronicles who is probably the same man. He did not fear to receive the ark, and, worthily received, the presence which had been a source of disaster and death to idolaters, to profanely curious pryers into its secret, and to presumptuous irreverence, became a fountain of unbroken blessing. This twofold effect of the same presence is but a symbol of a solemn law which runs through all life, and is especially manifest in the effects of Christ’s work upon men. Everything has two handles, and it depends on ourselves by which of them we lay hold of it, and whether we shall receive a shock that kills, or blessings. The same circumstances of poverty, or wealth, or sorrow, or temptation, make one man better and another worse. The same presence of God will be to one man a joy; to another, a terror. ‘What maketh heaven, that maketh hell.’ The same gospel received is the fountain of life, purity, peace; and, rejected or neglected, is the source of harm and death. Jesus Christ is ‘set for the fall and rising again of many.’ Either He is the savour of life unto life, the rock on which we build, or He is the savour of death unto death, the stone on which we stumble and break our limbs.

6) 2 Samuel 7:4-16

2 Samuel

THE PROMISED KING AND TEMPLE-BUILDER

2Sa. 7:4 - 2Sa. 7:16.

The removal of the ark to Jerusalem was but the first step in a process which was intended to end in the erection of a permanent Temple. The time for the next step appeared to David to have come when he had no longer to fight for his throne. Rest from enemies should lead to larger work for God, else repose will be our worst enemy, and peace will degenerate into self-indulgent sloth. A devout heart will not be content with personal comfort and dwelling in a house of cedar, while the ark has but a tent for its abode. There should be a proportion between expenditure on self and on religious objects. How many professing Christians might go to school to David! Luxury at home and niggardliness in God’s work make an ugly pair, but, alas! a common one.

Nathan approved, as was natural. But he knew the difference between his own thoughts and ‘the word of the Lord’ that came to him, and, like a true man, he went in the morning and contradicted, by God’s authority, his own precipitate sanction of the king’s proposal. Clearly, divine communications were unmistakably distinguishable from the recipient’s own thoughts.

The divine message first negatives the intention to build a house. In 1 Chronicles a positive prohibition takes the place of the question in 2Sa. 7:5, but that is only a difference of form, for the question implies a negative answer. From David’s last words [1Ch. 28:3] we learn that a reason for the prohibition was ‘because thou art a man of war, and hast shed blood.’ His wars were necessary, and tended to establish the kingdom, but their existence showed that the time for building the Temple had not come, and there was a certain incongruity in a warrior king rearing a house for the God whose kingdom was in its essence peace.

The prohibition rests on a deep insight into the nature of Jehovah’s reign, and draws a broad distinction between His worship and the surrounding paganism. But the reason given in the text is very remarkable. God did not desire a permanent Temple. If we may so say, He preferred the less solid

Tabernacle, as corresponding better to the simplicity and spirituality of His worship. A gorgeous stone Temple might easily become the sepulchre, rather than the shrine, of true devotion. The movable tent answered to the temporary character of the 'dispensation.' The more fixed and elaborate the externals of worship, the more danger of the spirit being stifled by them. The Old Testament worship was necessarily ceremonial, but here is a caveat against the stiffening of ceremonial into stereotyped formalism.

The prohibition was accompanied by gracious and far-reaching promises, designed to assure David of God's approbation of his motive, and to open up to him the vision of the future and the wonders that should be. We need say little about the retrospective part of the message [2Sa. 7:8 - 2Sa. 7:9]. God had been the agent in all David's past, had lifted him from the quiet following of his sheep, had given him rule, which was but a delegated authority. Israel was 'My people,' and therefore he was but an instrument in God's hand, and was not to govern by his own fancies or for his own advantage.

Every devout man's life is the realisation of a plan of God's, and we sin against ourselves as well as Him if we do not often let thankful thoughts retrace all the way by which the Lord our God has led us.

With 2Sa. 7:9 the prophecy turns to the future. David personally is promised the continuance of God's help; then a permanent, peaceful possession of the land is promised to the nation, and finally the perpetuity of the kingdom in the Davidic line is promised. The prophecy as to the nation, like all such prophecies, is contingent on national obedience. The future of the kingdom will stand in blessed contrast with the wild times of the Judges, if-and only if-Israel behaves as 'My people' should.

But the main point of the prophecy is the promise to David's 'seed.' In form it attaches itself very significantly to David's intention to build a house for Jehovah. That would invert the true order, for Jehovah was about to build a house, that is, a permanent posterity, for David. God must first give before man can requite. All our relations to Him begin with His free mercy to us. And our building for Him should ever be the result of His building for us, and will, in some humble way, resemble the divine beneficence by which it has been quickened into action. The very foundation principles of Christian service are expressed here, in guise fitted to the then epoch of revelation.

But the relation of the two things, God’s building and Solomon’s, is not exhausted by such considerations. The consolidation of the monarchy in David’s family was an essential preliminary to the rearing of the Temple. That work needed tranquil times, abundant resources, leisure, and assured dominion. So the prophet goes on to promise that David shall be succeeded by his ‘seed,’ who shall build the Temple.

Further, three great promises are given in reference to David’s seed,- a perpetual kingdom, a personal relation of sonship to Jehovah, and paternal chastisement, if necessary, but no such departure of Jehovah’s mercy as had darkened the close of Saul’s sad reign. Then, finally, the assurance is reiterated of the perpetuity of David’s house and throne. The remarkable expression in 2Sa. 7:16, ‘established before thee’ [that is, David], if it is the true reading, suggests a hint of the life after death, and conceives of the long-dead king as in some manner cognisant of the fortunes of his descendants. But the Septuagint reads ‘before Me,’ and that reading is confirmed by 2Sa. 7:26 and 2Sa. 7:29, and by Psa. 89:36.

Now it is clear that these promises were in part directed to, and fulfilled in, Solomon. But it is as clear that the great promise of an eternal dominion, which is emphatically repeated thrice, goes far beyond him. We are obliged to recognise a second meaning in the prophecy, in accordance with Old Testament usage, which often means by 'seed' a line of successive generations of descendants. But no succession of mortal men can reach to eternal duration.

Apart from the fact that the kingdom, in the form in which David's descendants ruled over it, has long since crumbled away, the large words of the promise must be regarded as inflated and exaggerated, if by 'for ever' is only meant 'for long generations.' A 'seed,' or line of perishable men, can only last for ever if it closes in a Person who is not subject to the law of mortality. Unless we can with our hearts rejoicingly confess, 'Thou art the King of glory, O Christ! Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,' we do not pierce to the full understanding of Nathan's prophecy.

All the glorious prerogatives shadowed in it were but partially fulfilled in Israel's monarchs. Their failures and their successes, their sins and their virtues, equally declared them to be but shadowy forerunners of Him in whom all that they at the best imperfectly aimed at and possessed is completely and for ever fulfilled. They were prophetic persons by their office, and pointed on to Him.

He has built the true Temple, in that His body is the seat of sacrifice and of revelation, and the meeting-place of God and man, and inasmuch as through Him we are built up into a spiritual house for an habitation of God. In Him is fulfilled the great prophecy of 'My Servant the Branch,' who 'shall build the Temple of the Lord' and 'be a Priest upon His throne.' In Him, too, is fulfilled in highest truth the filial relationship. The Israelitish kings were by office sons of God. He is *the* Son in ineffable derivation and eternal unity of life with the Father, and their communion is in closest oneness of will and mutual interchange of love. In that filial relation lies the assurance of Christ's everlasting kingdom, for 'the Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand.'

The prophecy is echoed in many places of Scripture, and is ever taken to refer to a single person. The angel of the annunciation moulded his salutation to the meek Virgin on it, when he declared that her Son 'shall be called the Son of the Most High: and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David: and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end.'

7) 2 Samuel 7:18-29

2 Samuel

DAVID'S GRATITUDE

2Sa. 7:18 - 2Sa. 7:29.

God's promise by Nathan of the perpetuity of the kingdom in David's house made an era in the progress of revelation. A new element was thereby added to devout hope, and a new object presented to faith. The prophecy of the Messiah entered upon a new stage, bearing a relation, as its successive stages always did, to the history which supplies a framework for it. Now, for the first time, He can be set forth as the king of Israel; now the width of the promise, which at first embraced the seed of the woman, and then was limited to the seed of Abraham, and thereafter to the tribe of Judah, is still further limited to the house of David. The beam is narrowed as it is focussed into greater brilliance, and the personal Messiah begins to be faintly discerned in words which are to have a partial, preparatory fulfilment, in itself prophetic, in the collective Davidic monarchs whose office is itself a prophecy. This passage is the wonderful burst of praise which sprang from David's heart in answer to Nathan's words. In many of the Psalms later than this prophecy we find clear traces of that expectation of the personal Messiah, which gradually shaped itself, under divine inspiration, in David, as contained in Nathan's message But this thanksgiving prayer, which was the immediate reflection of the astounding new message, has not yet penetrated its depth nor discovered its rich contents, but sees in it only the promise of the continuance of kingship in his descendants. We do not learn the fulness of God's gracious promises on first hearing them. Life and experience and the teaching of His Spirit are needed to enable us to count our treasure, and we are richer than we know.

This prayer is a prose psalm outside the Psalter. It consists of two parts,-a burst of astonished thanksgiving and a stream of earnest petition, grasping the divine promise and turning it into a prayer.

I. Note the burst of thanksgiving [2Sa. 7:18 - 2Sa. 7:24]. The ark dwelt 'in curtains,' and into the temporary sanctuary went the king with his full heart. The somewhat peculiar attitude of sitting, while he poured it out to God, has offended some punctilious commentators, who will have it that we should translate 'remained,' and not 'sat'; but there is no need for the change. The decencies of public worship may require a posture which expresses devotion; but individual communion is free from such externals, and absorbed contemplation naturally disposes of the body so as least to hinder the spirit. The tone of almost bewildered surprise at the greatness of the gift is strong all through the prayer. The man's breath is almost taken away, and his words are sometimes broken, and throughout palpitating with emotion. Yet there is a plain progress of feeling and thought in them, and they may serve as a pattern of thanksgiving. Note the abrupt beginning, as if pent-up feeling forced its way, regardless of forms of devotion. The first emotion excited by God's great goodness is the sense of unworthiness. 'I do not deserve it,' is the instinctive answer of the heart to any lavish human kindness, and how much more to God's! 'I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies,' springs to the devout lips most swiftly, when gazing on His miracles of bestowing love. He must know little of himself, and less of God, who is not most surely melted down to contrition, which has no bitterness or pain in it, by the coals of loving fire heaped by God on his head.

The consciousness of unworthiness passes, in 2Sa. 7:19, to adoring contemplation of God's astounding mercy, and especially of the new element in Nathan's prophecy,-the perpetuity of the Davidic sovereignty in the dim, far-off future. Thankfulness delights to praise the Giver for the greatness of His gift. Faith strengthens its hold of its blessings by telling them over, as a miser does his treasure. To recount them to God is the way to possess them more fully.

The difficult close of the verse cannot be discussed here. ‘The law for man’ is nearer the literal meaning of the words than ‘the manner of men’ [Rev. Ver.]; and, unfortunately, man’s manner is not the same as man’s law. But the usual explanations are unsatisfactory. We would hazard the suggestion that ‘this’ means that which God has spoken ‘of thy servant’s house,’ and that to call it ‘the law for man’ is equivalent to an expression of absolute confidence in the authority, universality, and certain fulfilment of the promise. The speech of God is ever the law for man, and this new utterance stands on a level with the older law, and shall rule all mankind. The king’s faith not only gazes on the great words of promise, but sees them triumphant on earth.

Then in 2Sa. 7:20 comes another bend of the stream of praise. The more full the heart, the more is it conscious of the weakness of all words. The deepest praise, like the truest love, speaks best in silence. It is blessed when, in earthly relations, we can trust our dear ones’ knowledge of us to interpret our poor words. It is more blessed when, in our speech to God, we can feel that our love and faith are deeper than our word, and that He does not judge them by it, but it by them.

‘Silence is His least injurious praise.’

Here, too, we may note the two instances, in this verse, of what runs through the whole prayer,-David’s avoidance of using ‘I.’ Except in the lowly ‘What am I?’ at the beginning, it never occurs; but he calls himself ‘David’ twice and ‘Thy servant’ ten times,-a striking, because unconscious, proof of his lowly sense of unworthiness.

But he can say more; and what he does further say goes yet deeper than his former words. The personal aspect of the promise retreats into the background, and the ground of all God’s mercy in His ‘own heart’ fills the thoughts. Some previous promise, perhaps that through Samuel, is referred to; but the great truth that God is His own motive, and that His love is not drawn forth by our deserts, but wells up by its own energy, like a perennial fountain, is the main thought of the verse. God is self-moved to bless, and He blesses that we may know Him through His gifts. The one thought is the central truth, level to our apprehension, concerning His nature; the other is the key to the meaning of all His workings. All comes to pass because He loves with a self-originated love, and in order that we may know the motive and principle of His acts. We can get no farther into the secret of God than that. We need nothing more for peaceful acceptance of His providences for ourselves and our brethren. All is from love; all is for the manifestation of love. He who has learned these truths sits at the centre and lives in light.

2Sa. 7:22 strikes a new note. The effect of God's dealing with David is to magnify His name, to teach His incomparable greatness, and to confirm by experience ancient words which celebrate it. The thankful heart rejoices in hearsay being changed into personal knowledge. 'As we have heard, so have we seen.' Old truths flash up into new meaning, and only he who tastes and sees that God is good to him to-day really enters into the sweetness of His recorded past goodness.

Note the widening of David's horizon in 2Sa. 7:23 - 2Sa. 7:24 to embrace all Israel. His blessings are theirs. He feels his own relation to them as the culmination of the long series of past deliverances, and at the same time loses self in joy over Israel's confirmation as God's people by his kingship. True thankfulness regards personal blessings in their bearing on others, and shrinks from selfish use of them. Note, too, the parallel, if we may call it so, between Israel and Israel's God, in that 'there is none like Thee,' and by reason of its choice by this incomparable Jehovah, no nation on earth is like 'Thy people, even like Israel.'

Thus steadily does this model of thanksgiving climb up from a sense of unworthiness, through adoration and gazing on its treasures, to God's unmotived love as His impulse, and men's knowledge of that love as His aim, and pauses at last, rapt and hushed, before the solitary loftiness of the incomparable God, and the mystery of the love, which has intertwined the personal blessings which it celebrates, with its great designs for the welfare of the people, whose unique position corresponds to the unapproachable elevation of its God.

II. 2Sa. 7:25 - 2Sa. 7:29 are prayer built on promise and winged by thankfulness. The whole of these verses are but the expansion of 'do as Thou hast said.' But they are not vain repetitions. Rather they are the outpourings of wondering thankfulness and faith, that cannot turn away from dwelling on the miracle of mercy revealed to it unworthy. God delights in the sweet monotony and persistence of such reiterated prayers, each of which represents a fresh throb of desire and a renewed bliss in thinking of His goodness. Observe the frequency and variety of the divine names in these verses,-in each, one, at least: Jehovah God [2Sa. 7:25]; Jehovah of hosts [2Sa. 7:26]; Jehovah of hosts, God of Israel [2Sa. 7:27]; Lord Jehovah [2Sa. 7:28 - 2Sa. 7:29]. Strong love delights to speak the beloved name. Each fresh utterance of it is a fresh appeal to His revealed nature, and betokens another wave of blessedness passing over David's spirit as he thinks of God. Observe, also, the other repetition of 'Thy servant,' which occurs in every verse, and twice in two of them. The king is never tired of realising his absolute subjection, and feels that it is dignity, and a blessed bond with God, that he should be His servant. The true purpose of honour and office bestowed by God is the service of God, and the name of 'servant' is a plea with Him which He cannot but regard. Observe, too, how echoes of the promise ring all through these verses, especially the phrases 'establish the house' and 'for ever.' They show how profoundly David had been moved, and how he is labouring, as it were, to make himself familiar with the astonishing vista that has begun to open before his believing eyes. Well is it for us if we, in like manner, seek to fix our thoughts on the yet grander 'for ever' disclosed to us, and if it colours all our look ahead, and makes the refrain of all our hopes and prayers.

But the main lesson of the prayer is that God's promise should ever be the basis and measure of prayer. The mould into which our petitions should run is, 'Do as Thou hast said.' Because God's promise had come to David, 'therefore hath Thy servant found in his heart to pray this prayer unto Thee.' There is no presumption in taking God at His word. True prayer catches up the promises that have fallen from heaven, and sends them back again, as feathers to the arrows of its petitions. Nor does the promise make the prayer needless. We know that 'if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us'; and we know that we shall not receive the promised blessings, which are according to His will, unless we do ask. Let us seek to stretch our desires to the width of God's promises, and to confine our wishes within their bounds.

8) 2 Samuel 9:1-13

2 Samuel

DAVID AND JONATHAN’S SON

2Sa. 9:1 - 2Sa. 9:13.

This charming idyl of faithful love to a dead friend and generous kindness comes in amid stories of battle like a green oasis in a wilderness of wild rocks and sand. The natural sweetness and chivalry of David’s disposition, which fascinated all who had to do with him, comes beautifully out in it, and it may well stand as an object lesson of the great Christian duty of practical mercifulness.

I. So regarded, the narrative brings out first the motives of true kindliness. Saul and three of his four sons had fallen on the fatal field of Gilboa; the fourth, the weak Ishbosheth, had been murdered after his abortive attempt at setting up a rival kingdom had come to nothing. There were only left Saul’s daughters and some sons by a concubine. So low had the proud house sunk, while David was consolidating his kingdom, and gaining victory wherever he went.

But neither his own prosperity, nor the absence of any trace of Saul’s legitimate male descendants, made him forget his ancient oath to Jonathan. Years had not weakened his love, his sufferings at Saul’s hands had not embittered it. His elevation had not lifted him too high to see the old days of lowliness, and the dear memory of the self-forgetting friend whose love had once been an honour to the shepherd lad. Jonathan’s name had been written on his heart when it was impressionable, and the lettering was as if ‘graven on the rock for ever.’ A heart so faithful to its old love needed no prompting either from men or circumstances. Hence the inquiry after ‘any that is left of the house of Saul’ was occasioned by nothing external, but came welling up from the depth of the king’s own soul.

That is the highest type of kindliness which is spontaneous and self-motived. It is well to be easily moved to beneficence either by the sight of need or by the appeals of others, but it is best to kindle our own fire, and be our own impulse to gracious thoughts and acts. We may humbly say that human mercy then shows likest God’s, when, in such imitation as is possible, it springs in us, as His does in Him, from the depths of our own being. He loves and is kind because He is God. He is His own motive and law. So, in our measure, should we aim at becoming.

But David's remarkable language in his questions to Ziba goes still deeper in unfolding his motives. For he speaks of showing 'the kindness of God' to any remaining of Saul's house. Now that expression is no mere synonym for kindness exceeding great, but it unfolds what was at once David's deepest motive and his bright ideal. No doubt, it may include a reminiscence of the sacred obligation of the oath to Jonathan, but it hallows David's purposed 'mercy' as the echo of God's to him, and so anticipates the Christian teaching, 'Be ye merciful, even as your Father is merciful.' We must receive mercy from Him before our hearts are softened, so as to give it to others, just as the wire must be charged from the electric source before it can communicate the tingle and the light.

The best basis for the beneficent service of man is experience of the mercy of God. Philanthropy has no roots unless it is planted in religion. That is a lesson which this age needs. And the other side of the thought is as true and needful; namely, that our 'religion' is not 'pure and undefiled' unless it manifests itself in the service of man. How serene and lofty, then, the ideal! How impossible ever to be too forgiving or too beneficent! 'As your heavenly Father is,'-that is our pattern. We have not shown our brother all the kindness which we owe him unless we have shown him 'the kindness of God.'

II. The progress of the story brings out next the characteristics of David's kindliness, and these may be patterns for us. Ziba does not seem to be very communicative, and appears a rather unwilling witness, who needs to have the truth extracted bit by bit. He evidently had nothing to do with Mephibosheth, and was quite content that he should be left obscurely stowed away across Jordan in the house of the rich Machir [2Sa. 17:27 - 2Sa. 17:29]. Lo-debar was near Mahanaim, on the eastern side of the river, where Ishbosheth's short-lived kingdom had been planted, and probably the population there still clung to Saul's solitary representative. There he lived so privately that none of David's people knew whether he was alive or dead. Perhaps the savage practice of Eastern monarchs, who are wont to get rid of rivals by killing them, led the cripple son of Jonathan to ‘lie low,’ and Ziba’s reticence may have been loyalty to him. It is noteworthy that Ziba is not said to have been sent to bring him, though that would have been natural.

At any rate, Mephibosheth came, apparently dreading whether his summons to court was not his death-warrant. But he is quickly reassured. David again recalls the dear memory of Jonathan, which was, no doubt, stirred to deeper tenderness by the sight of his helpless son; but he swiftly passes to practical arrangements, full of common-sense and grasp of the case. The restoration of Saul’s landed estate implies that it was in David’s power. It had probably been ‘forfeited to the crown,’ as we in England say, or perhaps had been ‘squatted on’ by people who had no right to it. David, at any rate, will see that it reverts to its owner.

But what is a lame man to do with it? and will it be wise to let a representative of the former dynasty loose in the territory of Benjamin, where Saul’s memory was still cherished? Apparently, David’s disposition of affairs was prompted partly by consideration for Mephibosheth, partly by affection for Jonathan, and partly by policy. So Ziba, who had not been present, is sent for, and installed as overseer of the estate, to work it for his new master’s benefit, while the owner is to remain at Jerusalem in David’s establishment. It was prudent to keep Mephibosheth at hand. The best way to weaken a pretender’s claims was to make a pensioner of him, and the best way to hinder his doing mischief was to keep him in sight.

But we need not suppose that this was David’s only motive. He gratified his heart by retaining the poor young man beside himself, and, no doubt, sought to win his confidence and love. The recipient of his kindness receives it in characteristic Eastern fashion, with exaggerated words of self-depreciation, which sound almost too humble to be quite sincere. A little gratitude is better than whining professions of un worthiness.

And how did Ziba like his task? The singular remark that he had ‘fifteen sons and twenty servants’ perhaps suggests that he was a person of some importance; and the subsequent one that ‘all in his house were servants to Mephibosheth’ may imply that neither they nor he quite liked their being handed over thus cavalierly.

But, however that may be, we may note that common-sense and practical sagacity should guide our mercifulness. Kindly impulses are good, but they need cool heads to direct them, or they do more harm than good. It is useless to set lame men to work an estate, even if they get a gift of it. And it is wise not to put untried ones in positions where they may plot against their benefactor. Mercifulness does not mean rash trust in its objects. They will often have to be watched very closely to keep them from going wrong. How many most charitable impulses have been so unwisely worked out that they have injured their objects and disappointed their subjects! We may note, too, in David's kindliness, that it was prompt to make sacrifice, if, as is probable, he had become owner of the estate. The pattern of all mercy, who is God, has not loved us with a love which cost Him nothing. Sacrifice is the life-blood of service.

III. The subsequent history of Mephibosheth and Ziba is somewhat enigmatical. Usually the former is supposed to have been slandered by the latter, and to have been truly attached to David. But it is at least questionable whether Ziba was such a villain, and Mephibosheth such an injured innocent, as is supposed. This, at least, is plain, that Ziba demonstrated attachment to David at the time when self-love would have kept him silent. It took some courage to come with gifts to a discrowned king [2Sa. 16:1 - 2Sa. 16:4]; and his allegation about his master has at least this support, that the latter did not come with the rest of David's court to share his fortunes, and that the dream that he might fish to advantage in troubled waters is extremely likely to have occurred to him. Nor does it appear clear that, if Ziba's motive was to get hold of the estate, his adherence to David would have seemed, at that moment, the best way of effecting it.

If we look at the sequel [2Sa. 19:24 - 2Sa. 19:30] Mephibosheth's excuse for not joining David seems almost as lame as himself. He says that Ziba 'deceived him,' and did not bring him the ass for riding on, and therefore he could not come. Was there only one ass available in Jerusalem? and, when all David's *entourage* were streaming out to Olivet after him, could not he easily have got there too if he had wished? His demonstration of mourning looks very like a blind, and his language to David has a disagreeable ring of untruthfulness, in its extreme professions of humility and loyalty. 'Me thinks the *cripple* doth protest too much. David evidently did not feel sure about him, and stopped his voluble utterances somewhat brusquely: ‘Why speakest thou any more of thy matters?’ That is as much as to say, ‘Hold your tongue.’ And the final disposition of the property, while it gives Mephibosheth the benefit of the doubt, yet looks as if there was a considerable doubt in the king’s mind.

We may take up the same somewhat doubting position. If he requited David’s kindness thus unworthily, is it not the too common experience that one way of making enemies is to load with benefits? But no cynical wisdom of that sort should interfere with our showing mercy; and if we are to take ‘the kindness of God’ for our pattern, we must let our sunshine and rain fall, as His do, on ‘the unthankful and the evil.’

9) 2 Samuel 10:8-19

2 Samuel

‘MORE THAN CONQUERORS THROUGH HIM’

2Sa. 10:8 - 2Sa. 10:19.

David’s growing power would naturally be regarded by neighbouring states as a menace. Success provokes envy, and in this selfish world strength usually encroaches on weakness, and weakness dreads strength. So it was quite according to the way of the world that David’s friendly embassy to the king of Ammon should be suspected of covering hostile intentions. Those who have no kindness in their own hearts are slow to believe in kindness in others. ‘What does he want to get by it?’ is the question put by cynical ‘shrewd men,’ when they see a good man doing a gracious, self-forgetting act.

But the Ammonite courtiers need not have rejected David’s overtures so insolently as by shaving half his ambassadors’ beards and docking their robes. The insult meant war to the knife. Probably it was deliberately intended as a declaration of hostilities, as it was immediately followed by the preparation of a formidable coalition against Israel. Possibly, indeed, the coalition preceded and occasioned the rejection of David’s conciliatory message. But, in any case, the Ammonite king summoned his Syrian allies from a number of small states of which we barely know the names, the chief of which was Zobah.

That state had apparently started into prominence under its king Hadar-ezer, as he is called in this chapter, which is obviously a clerical error for Hadad-ezer, as in 2Sa. 8:3, etc. The name Hadad occurs again in Ben-hadad, and belonged to a Syrian god; so that the king of Zobah's name, meaning 'Hadad [is] help,' may be taken as the banner flaunted in the face of the army of Israel, and as making the war a struggle of the false against the true God.

The war with the same enemies narrated in 2Sa. 8:3 - 2Sa. 8:13 is now generally supposed to be the same as that recorded in the latter part of this passage. It certainly seems more probable that there has been some dislocation of the text, than that so crushing a defeat as that retold in chapter viii. should have been followed by a revival of the same coalition within a short time. If, however, there was such a revival, it may remind us of the conditions of all warfare for God and goodness, either in our own lives or in the world. Sins and vicious institutions, once defeated, have a terrible power of swift recovery. The thorns cut down sprout fast again. Let no man say, 'I have extirpated that sin from my nature,' for, if he does, it will surprise him when he is lulled in false security. Hadad-ezer is not so easily got rid of. He does not know when he is beaten.

David took the bull by the horns, and did not wait to be attacked. It was good policy to carry the war into the enemies' country, as it generally is. God's soldiers have to be aggressive, and there is no better way of losing what they have won than by being contented with it. We must advance if we are not to retrograde. From I Chronicles we learn that the Ammonites had begun the campaign by besieging Medeba, a trans-Jordanic Israelitish city. The answer of Joab was to lay siege to Rabbath, the capital of Ammon, an almost impregnable fastness, perched on a cliff, and surrounded on all sides but one by steep ravines.

Apparently his bold strategy led to the abandonment of the attack on Medeba, and to the hurried march of its besiegers to relieve Rabbath. Probably the Syrian allies had been before Medeba, and suddenly appeared in Joab’s rear. Their advance led the besieged to attempt a sortie, so that Joab was between two fires. It was a difficult position. Whichever foe he attacked, his retreat was cut off, and another enemy was ready to hurl itself on his rear. There was no time for manoeuvring, and nothing for it but to face both assailants. So, without hesitation he made his dispositions. The new-comers, the Syrians, were evidently the more formidable, and Joab picked the best men to deal with them under his own command, while his brother Abishai was to give account of the Ammonites, who were pouring out of Rabbath. There is sometimes advantage in being ‘Mr. Facing-both-ways.’ We are often surrounded by allied evils or sins; for all our vices are kindred, and help each other, and all public or social iniquities are in league against the army of righteousness. We have to be many-sided in our attacks on what is wrong, as well as in our development of what is right.

Danger woke the best in Joab, Fierce and truculent as he often was, he had a hero’s mettle in him, and in that dark hour he flamed like a pillar of light. His ringing words to his brother as they parted, not knowing if they would ever meet again, are like a clarion call. They extract encouragement out of the separation of forces, which might have depressed, and cheerily pledge the two divisions to mutual help. What was to happen, Joab, if the Syrians were too strong for thee, and the Ammonites for Abishai? That very possible contingency is not contemplated in his words. Rash confidence is unwise, but God’s soldiers have a right to go into battle not anticipating utter defeat. Such expectation is apt to fulfil itself, and, on the other hand, to believe that we shall conquer goes a long way towards making us conquerors.

Does not Joab’s pledge of mutual help carry in it a lesson applicable to all the divisions of God’s great army? In the presence of the coalition of evil, is not the separation of the friends of good, madness? When bad men unite, should not good men hold together? The defeat or victory of one is the defeat or victory of all. We serve under the same banner, and, instead of shutting up our sympathies within the narrow limits of our own regiment, and even having a certain satisfaction at the difficulties into which another has got, we should feel that, if ‘one member suffer, all the members suffer with it,’ and should be ready to help all our fellow-soldiers who need help. Self-preservation as well as comradeship, and, above all, loyalty to Him for whom we fight, should lead to that; for, if Abishai is crushed, Joab will be in sorer peril.

His other word is equally pregnant. ‘Be of good courage’ is an exhortation always in season for Christ’s soldiers, for, whatever are their foes, ‘He that is with them is more than they that are with’ their enemies. One man with Christ to back him may always be sure of victory. Calculations of probabilities and of resources may often yield occasion for despondency if we calculate only what appears to sense, but if we bring Christ into the calculation we shall be of good cheer. ‘The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?’

We may note, too, the stimulating motive drawn from the thought of what Israel’s army fought for,-’Our people, and the cities of our God.’ Patriotism and devotion coalesced, and, like two contiguous flames in some duplex lamp, each made the other burn the brighter. So we may feel that we have the highest good of ‘our people,’ our brethren, in view, and that, in helping them and warring against evil, we are fighting for what belongs to God.

High courage, the effort to do their very best, and not to spare blood or life in the fight, blended nobly in Joab and his brother with recognition of God’s supreme determination of the event. Nothing can stand before men who live and fight in such a temper as that. The early conquests of Mohammedanism were secured by just such a blending of courage and submission. These were vulgar and poor, compared with the victories that would attend a Church which was animated by these principles in the higher form in which Christianity presents them.

The account of the victory is remarkable. It is surely not by accident that no word is said about fighting. Note that it was as Joab ‘drew nigh unto the battle’ that the Syrians fled as if in sudden panic, and infected the Ammonites with their terror. We hear nothing of men slain, or of any actual crossing of swords. Contrast 2Sa. 10:18, which tells of a real fight. It is, perhaps, not pressing omissions too far to suggest that the narrative favours the supposition of a bloodless victory. The dangers that often appal Christ’s servants have a way of often disappearing when they are marched boldly up to. Like ghosts, they vanish when accosted.

So ended one campaign. But Hadad-ezer, the soul of the coalition, was not crushed, and the latter part of the passage tells of his renewed attempt. Partial defeat stirs up our foes to stronger struggles. The league was extended to include Syrian states farther east, and a still more formidable expedition was fitted out to attack this dangerous upstart king of Israel, who was casting his shadow so far. Such is always the case. We are never in more danger of fresh assailants than when we have won some victory over evil in ourselves or around us. David repeated his former tactics. Not waiting to be attacked, and to have the soil of Israel profaned and wasted by enemies, he crossed Jordan to meet the would-be invader, and, when he met him, struck hard, and crushed him and his host, slew the commander, and dispersed the thunder-cloud. The coalition broke down. Hadad-ezer's tributaries were glad to shake off his yoke and transfer their allegiance to David.

'Nothing succeeds like success.' The alliances between worldly men banded against God's soldiers are held together by self-interest, and, when that can be best secured by deserting a man when he is down, away go all the allies, tumbling over each other in their haste to be the first to desert and bring feigned submission to the conqueror. The jackals leave the sick lion. The Syrians had had enough of helping Ammon, and Rabbath might fall without their lifting a finger. So hollow are the world's coalitions against God and His anointed!

10)2 Samuel 12:5-7

2 Samuel

THOU ART THE MAN

2Sa. 12:5 - 2Sa. 12:7.

Nathan's apologue, so tenderly beautiful, takes the poet-king on the most susceptible side of his character. All his history shows him as a man of wonderfully sweet, chivalrous, generous, swiftly compassionate nature. And so, when he hears the story of a mean, heartless selfishness, all that is best in him kindles into a generous indignation, and flames out into instinctive condemnation. ‘The man that did this thing shall die because he had no pity.’

And then, on to that hot fervour of righteous wrath, comes this dash of cold water, ‘And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.’ Like some keen spear-point, sharpened almost to invisibility, this short sentence [two words in the original] driven by a strong hand, goes right through the armour to the very heart. What a collapse there would be in the king when the pointed forefinger of the prophet emphasised and drove home the application!

I. This dramatic scene before us may be taken as suggesting first that we are all strangely blind to our own faults.

If a man’s own sin is held up before him a little disguised, he says, ‘How ugly it is!’ And if only for a moment he can be persuaded that it is not his own conduct but some other sinner’s that he is judging, the instinctive condemnation comes. We have two sets of names for vices: one set which rather mitigates and excuses them, and another set which puts them in their real hideousness. We keep the palliative set for home consumption, and liberally distribute the plain-spoken, ugly set amongst the vices and faults of our friends. The same thing which I call in myself prudence I call in you meanness. The same thing which you call in yourselves generous living, you call in your friend filthy sensualism. That which, to the doer of it, is only righteous indignation, to the onlooker is passionate anger. That which, in the practiser of it, is no more than a due regard for the interests of his own family and himself in the future, is, to the envious lookers-on, shabbiness and meanness in money matters. That which, to the liar, is only prudent diplomatic reticence, to the listener is falsehood. That which, in the man that judges his own conduct, is but ‘a choleric word,’ is, in his friend, when he judges him, ‘flat blasphemy.’

And so we go all round the circle, and condemn our own vices, when we see them in other people. So the king who had never thought, when he stole away Uriah’s one ewe lamb, and did him to death by traitorous commands, setting him in the front of the battle, that he was wanting in compassion, blazes up at once, and righteously sentences the other ‘man’ to death, ‘because he had no pity.’ He had never thought of himself or of his crime as cruel, as mean, as selfish, as heartless. But when he sees a partially disguised picture of it he knows it for the devil's child that it is.

'O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,'

and so it would, to see ourselves as we see others. We judge our brother and ourselves by two different standards.

And that is only one phase of a more general principle, one case that comes under a yet wider law, viz. that we are all blind, strangely blind, to our own faults. Why that is so I do not need to spend time in inquiring, except for a distinctly practical purpose. Let me just remind you how a strong wish for a thing that seems desirable always tends to confuse to a man the plain distinction between right and wrong; and how passions once excited, or the animal lusts and desires once kindled in a man, go straight to their object without the smallest regard to whether that object is to be reached by the breach of all laws, human and divine, or not. Excite any passion, and the passion is but a blind propensity towards certain good, and takes no question or consideration of whether right or wrong is involved at all.

And further, habit familiarises with evil and diminishes our sense of it as evil. A man that has been for half a day in some ill-ventilated room does not notice the poisonous atmosphere; if you go into it you are half suffocated at first, and breathe more easily as you get used to it. A man can live amidst the foulest poison of evil; and, as the Styrian peasants get fat upon arsenic, his whole nature may seem to thrive by the poison that it absorbs. They tell us that the breed of fish that live in the lightless caverns in the bowels of some mountains, by long disuse have had their eyes atrophied out of them, and are blind because they have lived out of the light. And so men that live in the love of evil lose the capacity of discerning the evil, and 'he that walketh in darkness' becomes blind, blind to his sin, and blind to all the realities of life.

Then is it not true, too, that many of us systematically and of set purpose, continually avoid all questions as to the moral nature of our conduct? How many a man and woman who reads these words never sits down to think whether what they have been doing is right or wrong, because they have deep down in their consciences an uneasy suspicion as to what the answer would be. So, by reason of fostering passion, by reason of listening to wishes, by reason of the habit of wrongdoing, by reason of the systematic avoidance of all careful investigation of our character and of our conduct, we lose the power of fairly deciding upon the nature of our own acts.

Then self-love comes in, and still another thing tends to blind us. We are all ready to acquiesce in the general indictment, and so to shirk the particular application of it. That is what people do about all great moral principles that ought to affect conduct,-they admit them in words, as general truths applying to mankind, and then hide themselves in the crowd, and think that they escape the incidence and particular application of the truths. No one of us would, I suppose, venture in plain words to stand up and say: ‘I am an exception to your general confessions of sin,’ and most of us would be ready to unite in the acknowledgment: ‘We have all come short of the glory of God,’ though in our consciences there has never stirred the faintest movement of self-condemnation even whilst our lips have been uttering the confession. Do not shrink away in the crowd, my brother! Come out to the front, and stand by yourself as God sees you, isolated. Look at your own actions; never mind about other men’s. Do not content yourselves with saying,’ *We* have sinned’; say, ‘*I* have sinned against *Thee.*’ God and you are as if alone in the universe. ‘Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned.’ There are no crowds in God’s eyes; He deals with single souls. Every one of us,-thou, and thou, and thou,-must give account of himself to God.

II. In the next place, let me ask you to think how this story suggests that the true work of God’s message is to tear down the veil and to show the ugly thing.

‘Nathan said unto David, Thou art the man.’ It needed a prophet to do that, with divine authority. Nothing less would suffice to get through the thick bosses of the buckler of self-conceit and ignorance which he had to penetrate. As God’s messenger, he gathered up, as I said, into one sharp-pointed, keen-edged, steel-bright sentence, the very spirit of the whole ancient Law, which seeks to individualise the sinner, and to drive home to the conscience the consciousness of wrong-doing.

The remarks that I have been making, in the former part of this sermon, imperfect as they must necessarily be, may at least serve one or two purposes in reference to this part of my discourse.

It seems to me that if what I have been saying as to a man’s blindness to his own true moral character be at all correct, there flows from that thought a strong presumption in favour of a divine revelation. We need another than our own voice to lay down the law of conduct, and to accuse and condemn the breaches of it. Conscience is not a wholly reliable guide, and is neither an impartial nor an all-knowing judge. Unconsciousness of evil is not innocence. It is not the purest of women who ‘wipes her mouth and says, I have done no harm.’ My conscience says to me, ‘It is wrong to do wrong’; but when I say to my conscience, ‘Yes, and pray what is wrong?’ a large variety of answers is possible. A man may sophisticate his conscience, or bribe his conscience, or throttle his conscience, or sear his conscience. And so the man who is worst, who, therefore, ought to be most chastised by his conscience, has most immunity from it, and where, if it is to be of use, it ought to be most powerful, there it is weakest.

What then? Why this, then-a standard that varies is not a standard; we are left with a leaden rule. My conscience, your conscience, is like the standard measures which we at present possess, which by their very names-foot, handbreadth, nail, and the like, tell us that they were originally but the length of one man’s limb. And so your measure of right and wrong, and another man’s measure, though they may substantially correspond, yet differ according to your differences of education, character, and a thousand other things. So that the individual man’s standard needs to be rectified. You have to send all the weights and measures up to the Tower now and then, to get them stamped and certified. And, as I believe, this fluctuation of our moral judgments shows the need for a fixed pattern and firm unchangeable standard, external to our mutable selves. A light on deck which pitches with the pitching ship is no guide. It must flash from a white pillar founded on a rock and immovable amid the restless waves. Our need of such a standard raises a strong presumption that a good God will give us what we need, if

He can. Such a standard He has given, as I believe, in the revelation of Himself which lies in this book, and culminates in the life and character of Jesus Christ our Lord. There, and by that, we can set our watches. There we can read the law of morality, and by our deflections from it we can measure the amount of our guilt.

But beyond that, the remarks which I have already made in the former part of my sermon may suggest to us, along with this utterance of the prophet's, that one indispensable characteristic and certain criterion of a true message and gospel from God is that it pierces the conscience and kindles the sense of sin. My dear brethren, there is a great deal of so-called Christian teaching, both from pulpits and books in this day, which, to my mind, is altogether defective by reason of its underestimate of the cardinal fact of sin, and its consequent failure to represent the fundamental characteristic of the gospel as being deliverance and redemption. I am quite sure that the root of nine-tenths of all the heresies that have ever afflicted the Christian Church, and of the weakness of so much popular Christianity, is none other than this failure adequately to recognise the universality and the gravity of the fact of transgression. If a word comes to you, calls itself God's message, and does not start with man's sin, nor put in the forefront of its utterances the way by which the dominion of that sin in your own heart can be broken, and the penalties of that sin in your present and future life can be swept away, it is condemned, *ipso facto*, as not a gospel from God, or fit for man. O my brother! it sounds harsh; but it is the truest kindness, when Nathan stands before the king, and with his flashing eye and stern, calm voice says, 'Thou art the man.' Was not that nobler, truer, tenderer, worthier of God, than if he had smoothed David down with soft speeches that would not have roused his conscience? Is it not the truest benevolence that keeps the surgeon's hand steady whilst his heart is touched by the pain that he inflicts, as he thrusts his gleaming instrument of tender cruelty into the poisonous sore? And are not God's mercy and love manifest for us in this, that He begins all His work on us with the grave, solemn indictment of each soul by itself, 'Thou art the man'?

'He showed me all the mercy,
For He taught me all the sin.'

III. Lastly, let me say that God accuses us and condemns us one by one that He may save us one by one.

The meaning of Nathan’s sharp sentence was speedily disclosed when the broken-down king exclaimed, ‘I have sinned against the Lord,’ and when, with laconic force as great as that which barbed the condemnation, the prophet stanched the wound with the brief words, ‘And the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity of thy sin.’ The intention of the accusation is the extension of the mercy and forgiveness. God, as the Apostle puts it, ‘hath concluded all in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all.’

And now, mark, for the carrying out of that divine purpose in regard to us, and for our possession of the proffered mercy, the same individualising and isolating process is needful as was needful for the conviction of the sin. God desires to save the world, but God can only save men one at a time. There must be an individual access to Him for the reception of forgiveness, as there must be in regard to the conviction of sin, just as if He and I were the only two beings in the whole universe. There is no wholesale entrance into God’s Church or into God’s kingdom. God’s mercy is not given to crowds, except as composed of individuals who have individually received it. There must be the personal act of faith; there must be my solitary coming to Him. As the old mystics used to define prayer, so I might define the whole process by which men are saved from their sins, ‘the flight of the lonely soul to the lonely God.’ My brother, it is not enough for you to say, ‘We have sinned’; say, ‘I have sinned.’ It is not enough that from a gathered congregation there should go up the united litany, ‘Lord, have mercy upon us! Christ, have mercy upon us! Lord, have mercy upon us!’ You must make the prayer your own: ‘Lord, have mercy upon *me*!’ It is not enough that you should believe, as I suppose most of you fancy that you believe, that Christ has died for the sins of the whole world. That belief will give you no share in His forgiveness. You must come to closer grips with Him than that; and you must be able to say, ‘Who loved *me*, and gave Himself for *me*.’ Let us have no running away into the crowd. Come out, and stand by yourselves, and for yourselves stretch out your own band, and take Christ for yourselves.

A man may die of starvation in a granary. You may be lost in the midst of this abundance which Christ has provided for you. And the difference between really possessing salvation and not possessing it, lies very largely in the difference between saying ‘us’ and ‘me.’ ‘Thou art the man’ in regard to the general accusation of sin; ‘Thou art the man’ in regard to the solemn law which proclaims that ‘the soul that sinneth it shall die’; and, blessed be God, ‘Thou art the man’ in regard to the great promise that says, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.’ Christ gives you a blank cheque in His word: ‘Whoso cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out.’ Write thine own name in, and by thy personal faith in the Lamb of God that died for thee, thy sins shall pass away; and all the fulness of God shall be thy very own for ever. ‘If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself, and if thou scornest, thou alone shall bear it.’

11)2 Samuel 12:13

2 Samuel

DAVID AND NATHAN

2Sa. 12:13.

We ought to be very thankful that Scripture never conceals the faults of its noblest men. High among the highest of them stands the poet-king. Whoever, for nearly three thousand years, has wished to express the emotions of trust in God, longing after purity, aspiration, and rapture of devotion, has found that his words have been before him.

And this man sins; black, inexcusable, aggravated transgression. You know the shameful story; I need not tell it over again. The Bible gives it us in all its naked ugliness, and there are precious lessons to be got out of it; such, for instance, as that it is not innocence that makes men good. ‘*This* is the man after God’s own heart!’ people sneer. Yes! Not because saints have a peculiar morality, and atone for adultery and murder by making or singing psalms, but because, having fallen into foul sin, he learned to abhor it, and with many tears, with unconquerable resolution, with deepened trust in

God, set his face once more to press toward the mark. That is a lesson worth learning.

And, again, David was not a hypocrite because he thus fell. All sin is inconsistent with devotion; but, thank God, we cannot say how much or how dark the sin must be which is incompatible with devotion, nor how much evil there may still lurk and linger in a heart of which the main set and aspiration are towards purity and God.

And, again, the worst transgressions are not the passionate outbursts contradictory of the main direction of a life which sometimes come; but the habitual, though they be far smaller, evils which are honey-combing the moral nature. White ants will pick a carcase clean sooner than a lion. And many a man who calls himself a Christian, and thinks himself one, is in far more danger, from little pieces of chronic meanness in his daily life, or sharp practice in his business, than ever David was in his blackest evil.

But the main lesson of all is that great and blessed one of the possibility of any evil and sin like this black one, being annihilated and caused to pass away through repentance and confession. It is to that aspect of our text that I turn, and ask you to look with me at the three things that come out of it: David's penitence; David's pardon consequent upon his penitence; and David's punishment, notwithstanding his penitence and pardon.

I. First, then, the penitence.

What a divine simplicity there is in the words of our text: 'David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord.' That is all. In the original, two words are enough to revolutionise the man's whole life, and to alter all his relations to the divine justice and the divine Friend. 'I have sinned against the Lord.' Not an easy thing to say; and as the story shows us, a thing that David took a long time to mount up to.

Remember the narrative. A year has passed since his transgression. What sort of a year has it been? One of the Psalms tells us, 'When I kept silence my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long; for day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my moisture was turned into the drought of summer.' There were long months of sullen silence, in which a clear apprehension and a torturing experience of divine disapprobation, like a serpent’s fang, struck poison into his veins. His very physical frame seems to have suffered. His heart was as dry as the parched grass upon the steppes. That was what he got by his sin. A moment of turbid animal delight, and long days of agony; dumb suffering in which the sense of evil had not yet broken him down into a rain of sweet tears, but lay, like a burning consciousness, within his heart.

And then came the prophet with his parable, so tender, so ingenious, so powerful. And the quick flash of generous indignation, which showed how noble the man was after all, with which he responded to the picture, unknowing that it was a picture of his own dastardly conduct, led on to the solemn words in which Nathan tore away the veil; and with a threefold lever, if I may so say, overthrew the toppling structure of his impenitence.

First of all, and most chiefly, he seeks to win him to repentance by a picture of God’s great love and goodness. ‘I have done this and that and the other thing for thee. What hast thou done for Me?’ Ah, that is the true beginning. You cannot frighten men into penitence, you may frighten them into remorse; and the remorse may or may not lead on to repentance. But bring to bear upon a man’s heart the thought of the infinite and perfect love of God, and that is the solvent of all his obstinate impenitence, and melts him to cry, ‘I have sinned.’ And along with that element there is the other, the plain striking away of all disguises from the ugly fact of the sin. The prophet gives it its hideous name, and that is one element in the process which leads to true repentance. For so strange and subtle are the veils which we cast over our own evils, that it comes sometimes to us with a shock and a start when some word, that we know to connote wickedness of the deepest dye, is applied to them. David had very likely so sophisticated his conscience that, though he had been writhing under the sense that he was a wrongdoer, it came to him with a kind of ugly surprise when the naked words ‘adultery’ and ‘murder’ were pressed up against his consciousness.

And the third element that brought him to his senses, and to his knees, was the threatening of punishment, which is salutary when it follows these other two, the revelation of a divine love and the unveiling of the essential nature of my own act; but which without these is but ‘the hangman’s whip’ to which only inferior natures will respond. And these three, the appeal to God's love, the revelation of his own sin, the solemn warning of its consequences-these three brought to bear upon David's heart, broke him down into a passion of penitence in which he has only the two words to say, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' That is all. That is enough.

And what is it? It is the recognition-which is essential to all real penitence-that I have not merely broken some impersonal law, or done something that hurts my fellows, but that I have broken the relations which I ought to sustain to a living, loving Person, who is God. We commit crimes against society, we commit faults against one another, we commit sins against God, and the very notion of sin involves, as its correlative, the thought of the divine Lawgiver.

So, dear brethren, penitence goes deeper than a recognition of demerit and unworthiness. It is more than an acknowledgment of imperfection and breach of morality. It is something different altogether from the acknowledgment that I have committed a fault against my fellow. David had done Bathsheba and Uriah, and in them his whole kingdom, foul wrong, but, as he says in Psa. 51:1 - Psa. 51:19, 'Against Thee, Thee *only,* have I *sinned.*' His account with these is of a less grave character, but 'against Thee I sinned.'

And in like manner, this penitence contains in it the recognition of transgression against a loving Friend and Father, which had been brought home to his mind by all the words of the rebuking prophet, who was a kind of incarnate conscience for him now. And it contains, still further, confession to God against whom he had sinned. The first impulse of a man when he dimly discerns how far he has departed from God's law, is that which the old story represents was the first impulse of the first sinners-to hide himself in the trees of the garden. The second impulse is to go to Him against whom we have sinned, and who only therefore can deal with the sin in the way of forgiveness, and to pour it all out before Him. Once an Apostle, when he caught a partial glimpse of his own demerit and transgression, said to the Master with a natural impulse, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!' But Peter had a deeper sense of his own sin, and a happier knowledge of what Christ could do for his sin, when his brother Apostle whispering to him in the boat, ‘It is the Lord,’ the traitor Apostle cast himself into the shallow water and floundered through it anyhow, to get as close as he could to the Master’s feet.

Do not go away from God because you feel that you have sinned against Him. Where should you go but to your mother’s bosom, and hide your face there, if you have committed faults against her? Where should you go but to God if against Him you have transgressed? Look, my brother, at your own character and conduct; measure the deficiencies and imperfections, the transgressions and faults; ay! perhaps with some of you, the crimes against men and society and human laws; but see beneath all these a deeper thought; and stifle not the words that would come to your lips as a relief, like a surgeon’s lancet struck into some foul gathering, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’

II. And now, secondly, notice with me David’s pardon consequent upon his repentance.

Can there be anything more striking-I do not say dramatic, for the circumstances are far too serious for terms of art-can there be anything more in the nature of a gospel to us all than that brief dialogue? David said unto Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’ And Nathan said unto David, ‘The Lord also hath put away thy sin.’

Immediate forgiveness, that is the first lesson that I would press upon you. Dear brethren, it is an experience which you may each repeat in your own history at this moment. It needs but the confession in order that the forgiveness should come. At this end of the telephone whisper your confession, and before it has well passed your lips there comes back the voice sweet as that of angels, ‘The Lord hath forgiven thy sin.’ One word, one motion of a heart aware of, and hating, and desiring to escape from, its evil, brings with a rush the whole fulness of fatherly and forgiving love into any heart. And that one confession may be the turning-point of a man’s life, and may obliterate all the sinful past, and may bring him into loving, reconciled, harmonious relations with the Almighty Judge.

Learn, too, not only the immediacy of the answer and the simplicity of the means, but learn how thorough and complete God’s dealing with your sin may be. The original language of my text might be rendered, ‘The Lord hath caused thy sin to pass away’; the thought being substantially that of some impediment or veil between man and Him which, with a touch of His hand, He dissolves as it were into vapour, and so leaves all the sky clear for His warmth and sunshine to pour down upon the heart. We do not need to enter upon theological language in talking about this great gift of forgiveness. It means substantially that howsoever you and I have piled up mountain upon mountain, Alp upon Alp, of our evils and transgressions, all pass away and become non-existent. Another word of the Old Testament expresses the same idea when it speaks about sin being ‘covered.’ Another word expresses the same idea when it speaks about God as ‘casting’ men’s sins ‘into the depths of the sea’-all meaning this one thing, that they no longer stand as barriers between the free flow of His love and our poor hearts. He takes away the sense of guilt, touches the wounded conscience, and there is healing in His hand. As, according to the old belief, the sovereign, by laying his hand upon sufferers from ‘the King’s evil’ healed them and cleansed them, so the touch of His forgiving love takes away the sense of guilt and heals the spirit. He removes all the impediments between His love and us. His love can now come undisturbed. His deepest and solemnest judgments do not need to come; and no more does there stand frowning between us and Him the spectre of our past.

People tell us that forgiveness is impossible, ‘that whatsoever a man soweth, that must he also reap’; that law is law, and that the consequences cannot be averted. That is all quite true if there is not a God. It is not true if there is; and if there is no God, there is no sin. So if there is a God, there is forgiveness.

Consequences, as I shall have to show you in a moment, may still remain, but pardon may be ours all the same. When you forgive your child, does it mean that you do not thrash it, or does it mean that you take it to your heart? And when God pardons, does it mean that He waives His laws, or does it mean that He lets us come into the whole warmth and sunshine of His love? Will you go there?

Forgiveness was to Jews a thing difficult to apprehend. It was hard for them to understand the harmony of it with the rigid retribution on which their whole system of religion reposed. But you and I have come further into the light than Nathan and David had. And I have to preach a modification of the words of my text which is not a limitation of them, but the unveiling of their basis and the surest confirmation of them, when I say 'In Him'-Jesus Christ-'we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins.'

The New Testament teaches us that the Cross of Christ threw its power back upon former transgressions as well as forward upon future ones; and that in Him past ages, though they knew Him not, received remission. Christ is the Medium of the divine forgiveness; Christ's Cross is the ground of the divine pardon; Christ's sacrifice is the guarantee for us that the sin which He has borne He has borne away. 'By His stripes we are healed.' 'Wherefore, men and brethren, be it known unto you, that through this Man is preached unto *us* the forgiveness of *our* sins.'

III. Third and lastly, look at the punishment which follows-shall I say *notwithstanding* or *because of*?-the penitence and the pardon.

In David's life there came the immediate retribution in kind, which was signalised as such by the divine message-the death of the child 'who was conceived in sin and shapen in iniquity.' But beyond that, look at David's life after his great fall. There was no more brightness in it. His own sin and example of lust loosed the bonds of morality in his household, and his son followed his example and improved upon it. And from that came Absalom's murder of his brother, and from that Absalom's exile, and from that Absalom's rebellion, and from that Absalom's death, which nearly killed his poor old father. And for all the rest of his days his home was troubled, and his last years ended with the turmoil of a disputed succession before his eyes were closed, all traceable to this one foul crime.

Joab was the torment of David's later days, and Joab's power over him depended upon his having been the instrument of Uriah's murder; and so the master of the king, whose bidding he had done. Ahithophel was the brain of Absalom's conspiracy. His defection struck a sharp arrow into David's heart-'mine own familiar friend in whom I trusted.' He evidently hated the king with fierce hatred. He was Bathsheba's grandfather; and we are not going wrong, I think, in tracing his passionate hatred, and the peculiar form of insult which he counselled Absalom to adopt, to the sense of foul wrong which had been done to his house by David’s crime.

And so all through his days this poor old king had to do what you and I have to do-to bear the temporal results of sin. ‘Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.’

So ‘of our pleasant vices the gods make whips to scourge us.’ And it is in mercy that we have to drink as we have brewed, that we have to lie upon the beds that we have made; that in regard to outward consequences, and in regard to our own hearts and inward history, we are the architects of our own fortunes, and cannot escape the penalties of our sins and of our faults. Better to have it so than be cursed with impunity!

Some of you young men are sowing diseases in your bones that will either make you invalids or will kill you before your time. All of us are bearing about with us, in some measure and sense, the issues, which are the punishments, of our evil. Let us thank Him and take up the praise of the old psalm, ‘Thou wast a God that forgivest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.’ There is either merciful chastisement here, that we may be parted from our sins, or there is judgment hereafter.

O my brother! let me beseech you, do not commit the suicide of impenitence, but go to Christ, in whom all our sins are taken away, and lay your hands on the head of that great Sacrifice, and ‘the Lord shall cause to pass the iniquity of your sin.’

12)2 Samuel 14:14

2 Samuel

GOD’S BANISHED ONES

2Sa. 14:14.

David’s good-for-nothing son Absalom had brought about the murder of one of his brothers, and had fled the country. His father weakly loved the brilliant blackguard, and would fain have had him back, but was restrained by a sense of kingly duty. Joab, the astute Commander-in-chief, a devoted friend of David, saw how the land lay, and formed a plan to give the king an excuse for doing what he wished to do. So he got hold of a person who is called 'a wise woman' from the country, dressed her as a mourner, and sent her with an ingeniously made-up story of how she was a widow with two sons, one of whom had killed the other, and of how the relatives insisted on their right of avenging blood, and demanded the surrender of the murderer; by which, as she pathetically said, 'the coal' that was left her would be 'quenched.' The king's sympathy was quickly roused-as was natural in so impulsive and poetic a nature-and he pledged his word, and finally his oath, that the offender should be safe.

So the woman has him in a trap, having induced him to waive justice and to absolve the guilty by an arbitrary act. Then she turns upon him with an application to his own case, and bids him free himself from the guilt of double measures and inconsistency by doing with his banished son the same thing-viz. abrogating law and bringing back the offender. In our text she urges still higher considerations-viz. those of God's way of treating criminals against His law, of whom she says that He spares their lives, and devises means-or, as the words might perhaps be rendered, 'plans plannings'-by which He may bring them back. She would imply that human power and sovereignty are then noblest and likest God's when they remit penalties and restore wanderers.

I do not further follow the story, which ends, as we all know, with Absalom's ill-omened return. But the wise woman's saying goes very deep, and, in its picturesque form, may help to bring out more vividly some truths-all-important ones-of which I wish to beg your very earnest consideration and acceptance.

I. Note, then, who are God's banished ones.

The woman's words are one of the few glimpses which we have of the condition of religious thought amongst the masses of Israel. Clearly she had laid to heart the teaching which declared the great, solemn, universal fact of sin and consequent separation from God. For the 'banished ones' of whom she speaks are no particular class of glaring criminals, but she includes within the designation the whole human race, or, at all events, the whole

Israel to which she and David belonged. There may have been in her words-though that is very doubtful-a reference to the old story of Cain after the murder of his brother. For that narrative symbolises the consequences of all evil-doing and evil-loving, in that he was cast out from the presence of God, and went away into a 'land of wandering,' there to hide from the face of the Father. On the one hand, it was banishment; on the other hand, it was flight. So had Absalom's departure been, and so is ours.

Strip away the metaphor, dear brethren, and it just comes to this thought, which I seek to lay upon the hearts of all my hearers now-you cannot be blessedly and peacefully near God, unless you are far away from sin. If you take two polished plates of metal, and lay them together, they will adhere. If you put half a dozen tiny grains of sand or dust between them, they will fall apart. So our sins have come between us and our God. They have not separated God from us, blessed be His name! for His love, and His care, and His desire to bless, His thought, and His knowledge, and His tenderness, all come to every soul of man. But they have rent us apart from Him, in so far as they make us unwilling to be near Him, incapable of receiving the truest nearness and blessedness of His presence, and sometimes desirous to hustle Him out of our thoughts, and, if we could, out of our world, rather than to expatiate in the calm sunlight of His presence.

That banishment is self-inflicted. God spurns away no man, but men spurn Him, and flee from Him. Many of us know what it is to pass whole days, and weeks, and years, as practical Atheists. God is not in all our thoughts.

And more than that, the miserable disgrace and solitude of a soul that is godless in the world is what many of us like. The Prodigal Son scraped all his goods together, and thought himself freed from a very unwelcome bondage, and a fine independent youth, when he went away into 'the far country.' It was not quite so pleasant when provisions and clothing fell short, and the swine's trough was the only table that was spread before him. But yet there are many of us, I fear, who are perfectly comfortable away from God, in so far as we can get away from Him, and who never are aware of the degradation that lies in a soul's having lowered itself to this, that it had rather not have God inconveniently near.

Away down in the luxurious islands of the Southern Sea you will find degraded Englishmen who have chosen rather to cast in their lot with savages than to have to strain and work and grow. These poor beach-combers of the Pacific, not happy in their degradation, but wallowing in it, are no exaggerated pictures of the condition, in reality, of thousands of us who dwell far from God, and far therefore from righteousness and peace.

II. Notice God's yearning over His banished ones.

The woman in our story hints at, or suggests, a parallel which, though inadequate, is deeply true. David was Absalom's father and Absalom's king; and the two relationships fought against each other in his heart. The king had to think of law and justice; the father cried out for his son. The young man's offence had neither altered his relationship nor affected the father's heart.

All that is true, far more deeply, blessedly true, in regard to our relation, the wandering exiles' relation, to God. For, whilst I believe that the highest form of sonship is only realised in the hearts of men who have been made partakers of a new life through Jesus Christ, I believe, just as firmly and earnestly, that every man and woman on the face of the earth, by virtue of physical life derived from God, by virtue of a spiritual being, which, in a very real and deep sense, still bears the image of God, and by reason of His continued love and care over them, is a child of His. The banished son is still a son, and is '*His* banished one.' If there is love-wonderful as the thought is, and heart-melting as it ought to be-there must be loss when the child goes away. Human love would not have the same name as God's unless there were some analogy between the two. And though we walk in dark places, and had better acknowledge that the less we speak upon such profound subjects the less likely we are to err, yet it seems to me that the whole preciousness of the revelation of God in Scripture is imperilled unless we frankly recognise this-that His love is like ours, delights in being returned like ours, and is like ours in that it rejoices in presence and knows a sense of loss in absence. If you think that that is too bold a thing to say, remember who it was that taught us that the father fell on the neck of the returning prodigal, and kissed him; and that the rapture of his joy was the token and measure of the reality of his regret, and that it was the father to whom the prodigal son was ‘lost.’ Deep as is the mystery, let nothing, dear brethren, rob us of the plain fact that God’s love moves all around the worst, the unworthiest, the most rebellious in the far-off land, and ‘desires not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his iniquity and live.’

And it is you, *you*, whom He wants back; you whom He would fain rescue from your aversion to good and your carelessness of Him. It is you whom He seeks, according to the great saying of the Master, ‘the Father seeketh’ for worshippers in spirit and in truth.

III. Note the formidable obstacles to the restoration of the banished.

The words ‘banished’ and ‘expelled’ in our text are in the original the same; and the force of the whole would be better expressed if the same English word was employed as the equivalent of both. We should then see more clearly than the variation of rendering in our text enables us to see, that the being ‘expelled’ is no further stage which God devises means to prevent, but that what is meant is that He provides methods by which the banished should not be banished-that is, should be restored to Himself.

Now, note that the language of this ‘wise woman,’ unconsciously to herself, confesses that the parallel that she was trying to draw did not go on all fours; for what she was asking the king to do was simply, by an arbitrary act, to sweep aside law and to remit penalty. She instinctively feels that that is not what can be done by God, and so she says that He ‘devises means’ by which He can restore His banished.

That is to say, forgiveness and the obliteration of the consequences of a man’s sin, and his restoration to the blessed nearness to God, which is life, are by no means such easy and simple matters as people sometimes suppose them to be. The whole drift of popular thinking to-day goes in the direction of a very superficial and easy gospel, which merely says, ‘Oh, of course, of course God forgives! Is not God Love? Is not God our Father? What more do you want than that?’ Ah! you want a great deal more than that, my friends. Let me press upon you two or three plain considerations. There are formidable obstacles in the way of divine forgiveness.

If there are to be any pardon and restoration at all, they must be such as will leave untouched the sovereign majesty of God’s law, and, untampered with, the eternal gulf between good and evil. That easygoing gospel which says, ‘God will pardon, of course!’ sounds very charitable and very catholic, but at bottom it is very cruel. For it shakes the very foundations on which the government of God must repose. God’s law is the manifestation of God’s character; and that is no flexible thing which can be bent about at the bidding of a weak good-nature. I believe that men are right in holding that certainly God must pardon, but I believe that they are fatally wrong in not recognising this-that the only kind of forgiveness which is possible for Him to bestow is one in which there shall be no tampering with the tremendous sanctions of His awful law; and no tendency to teach that it matters little whether a man is good or bad. The pardon, which many of us seem to think is quite sufficient, is a pardon that is nothing more noble than good-natured winking at transgression. And oh! if this be all that men have to lean on, they are leaning on a broken reed. The motto on the blue cover of the *Edinburgh Review*, for over a hundred years now, is true: ‘The judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted.’ David struck a fatal blow at the prestige of his own rule, when he weakly let his son off from penalty. And, if it were possible to imagine such a thing, God Himself would strike as fatal a blow at the justice and judgment which are the foundations of His throne, if His forgiveness was such as to be capable of being confounded with love which was too weakly indulgent to be righteous.

Further, if there are to be forgiveness and restoration at all, they must be such as will turn away the heart of the pardoned man from his evil. The very story before us shows that it is not every kind of pardon which makes a man better. The scapegrace Absalom came back unsoftened, without one touch of gratitude to his father in his base heart, without the least gleam of a better nature dawning upon him, and went flaunting about the court until his viciousness culminated in his unnatural rebellion. That is to say, there is a forgiveness which nourishes the seeds of the crimes that it pardons. We have only to look into our own hearts, and we have only to look at the sort of people round us, to be very sure that, unless the forgiveness that is granted us from the heavens has in it an element which will avert our wills and desires from evil, the pardon will be very soon needed again, for the evil will very soon be done again.

If there are to be forgiveness and restoration at all, they must come in such a fashion as that there shall be no doubt whatsoever of their reality and power. The vague kind of trust in a doubtful mercy, about which I have been speaking, may do all very well for people that have never probed the depths of their own hearts. Superficial notions of our sin, which so many of us have, are contented with superficial remedies for it. But let a man get a glimpse of his own real self, and I think that he will wish for something a great deal more solid to grip hold of, than nebulous talk of the kind that I have been describing. If once we feel ourselves to be struggling in the black flood of that awful river, we shall want a firmer hold upon the bank than is given to us by some rootless tree or other. We must clutch something that will stand a pull, if we are to be drawn from the muddy waters.

People say to us, ‘Oh, God will forgive, of course!’ Does this world look like a place where forgiveness is such an easy thing? Is there anything more certain than that consequences are inevitable when deeds have been done, and ‘that whatsoever a man sows that shall he also reap’ and whatsoever he brews that shall he also drink? And is it into a grim, stern world of retribution like this that people will come, with their smiling, sunny gospel of a matter-of-course forgiveness, upon very easy terms of a slight penitence?

Brethren, God has to ‘devise means,’ which is a strong way of saying, in analogy to the limitations of humanity, that He cannot, by an arbitrary act of His will, pardon a sinful man. His eternal nature forbids it. His established law forbids it. The fabric of His universe forbids it. The good of men forbids it. The problem is insoluble by human thought. The love of God is like some great river that pours its waters down its channel, and is stayed by a black dam across its course, along which it feels for any cranny through which it may pour itself. We could never save ourselves, but

‘He that might the vengeance best have took,

Found out the remedy.’

IV. And so the last word that I have to say is to note the triumphant, divine solution of these difficulties.

The work of Jesus Christ, and the work of Jesus Christ alone, meets all the requirements. It vindicates the majesty of law, it deepens the gulf between righteousness and sin. Where is there such a demonstration of the awful truth that ‘the wages of sin is death’ as on that Cross on which the Son of God died for us and for all ‘His banished ones’? Where is there such a demonstration of the fixedness of the divine law as in that death to which the Son of God submitted Himself for us all? Where do we learn the hideousness of sin, the endless antagonism between God and it, and the fatal consequences of it, as we learn them in the sacrifice of our Lord and Saviour? Where do we find the misery and desolation of banishment from God so tragically uttered as in that cry which rent the darkness of eclipse,’ My God! My God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?’

That work of Christ’s is the only way by which it is made absolutely certain that sins forgiven shall be sins abhorred; and that a man once restored shall cleave to his Restorer as to his Life. That work is the only way by which a man can be absolutely certain that there is forgiveness, in spite of all the accusations of his own conscience; in spite of all the inexorable working out of penalties in the system of the world which seems to contradict the fond belief; in spite of all that a foreboding gaze tells, or ought to tell, of a judgment that is to follow.

Brethren, God has devised a means. None else could have done so. I beseech you, realise these facts that I have been trying to bring before you, and the considerations that I have based upon them, so far as they commend themselves to your hearts and consciences; and do not be content with acquiescing in them, but act upon them. We are all exiles from God, unless we have been ‘brought nigh by the blood of Christ.’ In Him, and in Him alone, can God restore His banished ones. In Him, and in Him alone, can we find a pardon which cleanses the heart, and ensures the removal of the sin which it forgives. In Him, and in Him alone, can we find, not a peradventure, not a subjective certainty, but an external fact which proclaims that verily there is forgiveness for us all. I pray you, dear friends, do not be content with that half-truth, which is ever the most dangerous lie, of divine pardon apart from Jesus Christ. Lay your sins upon His head, and your hand in the hand of the Elder Brother, who has come to the far-off land to seek us, and He will lead you back to the Father’s house and the Father’s heart, and you will be ‘no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God.’

13)2 Samuel 15:1-12

2 Samuel

PARDONED SIN PUNISHED

2Sa. 15:1 - 2Sa. 15:12.

There was little brightness in David’s life after his great sin. Nathan had told him, even while announcing his forgiveness, that the sword should never depart from his house; and this revolt of Absalom’s may be directly traced to his father’s disgraceful crime. The solemn lesson that pardoned sin works out its consequences, so that ‘whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,’ is taught by it. The portion of the story with which we are concerned has two stages,-the slow hatching of the plot, and its final outburst.

I. 2Sa. 15:1 - 2Sa. 15:6 give us the preparation of the mine. It takes four years, during which Absalom plays all the tricks usual to aspirants for the most sweet voices of the multitude. He seems to have been but a poor creature; but it does not take much brain to do a great deal of mischief. He was vain, headstrong, with a dash of craft and a large amount of ambition. He had no love for his father, and no ballast of high principle, to say nothing of religion. He was a spoiled child grown to be a man, with a child’s petulance and unreason, but a man’s passions. He loved his unfortunate sister, but it was as much wounded honour as love which led him to the murder of his elder brother Amnon. That crime cleared his way to the throne; and David’s half-and-half treatment of him after it, neither sternly punishing nor freely pardoning, set the son against the father, and left a sense of injury. So he became a rebel.

The story tells very vividly how he adopted the familiar tactics of pretenders. How old, and yet how modern, it reads! We who live in a country where everybody is an ‘elector’ of some sort, and candidates are plentiful, see the same things going on, in a little different dress, before our eyes. Absalom begins operations by dazzling people with ostentatious splendour. In better days Samuel had trudged on foot, driving a heifer before him, to anoint his father; and royalty had retained a noble simplicity in the hands of Saul and David. But ‘plain living and high thinking’ did not suit Absalom; and he had gauged the popular taste accurately enough in setting up his chariot with its fifty runners. That was a show something like a king, and, no doubt, much more approved than David’s simplicity. But it was an evil omen to any one who looked below the surface. When luxury grows, devotion languishes. The senseless ostentation which creeps into the families of good men, and is sustained by their weak compliance with their spoiled children’s wishes, does a world of harm. We in Lancashire have a proverb, ‘Clogs, carriage, clogs,’ which puts into three words the history of three generations, and is verified over and over again.

How well Absalom has learned the arts of the office-seeker! Along with his handsome equipage he shows admirable devotion to the interests of his ‘constituents.’ He is early at the gate, so great is his appetite for work; he is accessible to everybody; he flatters each with the assurance that his case is clear; he gently drops hints of sad negligence in high quarters, which he could so soon set right, if only he were in power; and he will not have the respectful salutation of inferiors, but grasps every hard hand, and kisses each tanned cheek, with an affectation of equality very soothing to the dupes. ‘Electioneering’ is much the same all the world over; and Absalom has a good many imitators nearer home.

There was, no doubt, truth in the charge he made against David of negligence in his judicial and other duties. Ever since his great sin, the king seems to have been stunned into inaction. The heavy sense of demerit had taken the buoyancy out of him, and, though forgiven, he could never regain the elastic energy of purer days. The psalms which possibly belong to this period show a singular passivity. If we suppose that he was much in the seclusion of his palace, a heavily-burdened and spirit-broken man, we can understand how his condition tempted his heartless, dashing son to grasp at the reins which seemed to be dropping from his slack hands, and how his passivity gave opportunity for Absalom’s carrying on his schemes undisturbed, and a colour of reasonableness to his charges. For four years this went on unchecked, and apparently unsuspected by the king, who must have been much withdrawn from public life not to have taken alarm. Nothing takes the spring out of a man like the humiliating sense of sin. The whole tone of David’s conduct throughout the revolt is, ‘I deserve it all. Let them smite, for God hath bidden them.’ To this resourceless, unresisting submission to his enemies, sin had brought the daring soldier. It is not old age that has broken his courage and spirit, but the consciousness of his foul guilt, which weighs on him all the more heavily because he knows that it is pardoned.

II. The second part of our subject tells of the explosion of the long-prepared mine. It was necessary to hoist the flag of revolt elsewhere than in Jerusalem, and some skill is shown in choosing Hebron, which had been the capital before the capture of the Jebusite city, and in which there would be natural jealousy of the new metropolis. The pretext of the sacrifice at Hebron, in pursuance of a vow made by Absalom in his exile, was meant to touch David’s heart in two ways,-by appealing to his devotional feelings, and by presenting a pathetic picture of his suffering and devout son vowing in the land where his father’s wrath had driven him. It is not the first time that religion has been made the stalking-horse for criminal ambition, nor is it the last. Politicians are but too apt to use it as a cloak for their personal ends. Absalom talking about his vow is a spectacle that might have made the most unsuspecting sure that there was something in the wind. Such a use of religious observances shows more than anything else could do, the utter irreligion of the man who can make it. A son rebelling against his father is an ugly sight, but rebellion disguised as religion adds to the ugliness. David suspects nothing; or, if he does, is too broken to resist, and, perhaps glad at any sign of grace in his son, or pleased to gratify any of his wishes, sends him away with a benediction. What a parting,-the last, though neither knew it!

The plot had spread widely in four years, and messengers had been sent through all Israel to summon its adherents to Hebron. If David had been as popular as in his early days, it would have been impossible for such a widely spread conspiracy to have come so near a head without some faithful soul having been found to tell him of it. But obviously there was much smouldering discontent, arising, no doubt, from such causes as the pressure of taxation, the gloom that hung over the king, the partial paralysis of justice, the transference of the capital, the weight of wars, and, at lowest, the craving for something new. Few reigns or lives set in unclouded brightness. The western horizon is often filled with a bank of blackness. Strangely enough, Absalom invited two hundred men to accompany him, who were ignorant of the plot. That looks as if its strength was outside Jerusalem, as was natural. These innocents were sufficiently associated with Absalom to be asked to accompany him, and, no doubt, he expected to secure their complicity when he got them away. Unsuspecting people are the best tools of knaves. It is better not to be on friendly terms with Absalom, if we would be true to David. The last piece of preparation recorded is the summoning of Abithophel to come and be the brain of the plot. He had been David's wisest counsellor, and is probably the 'familiar friend, in whom I trusted,' whose defection the Psalmist mourns so bitterly, and whose treachery was a marvellous foreshadowing of the traitor who dipped in the dish with David's Lord. Note that he had already withdrawn from Jerusalem to his own city, from which he came at once to Hebron. Absalom could flatter and play the well-worn tricks of a pretender, but a subtler, cooler head was wanted now, and the treacherous son was backed up by the traitor friend. 'And the conspiracy was strong; for the people increased continually with Absalom.' What a tragical issue to the joyous loyalty of early days! What a strange madness must have laid hold on the nation to have led them to prefer such a piece of petulance and vanity to their hero-poet-king! What did it mean?

The answer is not far to seek, and it is the great lesson of this story. David's sin was truly repented and freely forgiven, but not left unpunished. God is too loving to shield men from the natural consequences, in the physical and social world, of their sins. The penitent drunkard's hand shakes, and his constitution is not renewed, though his spirit is. Only, punishment is changed into discipline, when the heart rests in the assurance of pardon, and is accepted as a token of a Father's love. In every way God made of the vice the whip to scourge the sinner, and David, like us all, had to drink as he had brewed, though he was forgiven the sin.

14)2 Samuel 15:15

A LOYAL VOW

2Sa. 15:15.

We stand here at the darkest hour of King David's life. Bowed down by the consciousness of his past sin, and recognising in the rebellion of his favourite son the divine chastisement, his early courage and buoyant daring seem to have ebbed from him wholly. He is forsaken by the mass of his subjects, he is preparing to abandon Jerusalem, and to flee as an exile, as he says himself so pathetically, 'whither I may.' And at that moment of deepest depression there comes one little gleam of consolation and one piece of chivalrous devotion which brightens the whole story. His special retainers, apparently a bodyguard mostly of foreigners, rally round him. Mostly foreigners, I say, for these hard words 'Cherethites and Pelethites' most probably mean inhabitants of the island of Crete, and Philistines. And as to six hundred of them, at all events, there can be no doubt, for they are expressly said to be 'men of Gath who followed after him.' At all events, there was a little nucleus of men, not his own subjects, who determined to share his fate, whatever it was. And the words of my text are their words, 'Behold, thy servants are ready to do whatsoever the king shall appoint.' Or, as the word stands in the original, in an abrupt, half-finished sentence, even more pathetic, 'According to all that my lord the king shall appoint, behold thy servants.' These men were foreigners, not bound to render obedience to the king, but giving it because their hearts were touched. They were loyal amongst rebels, so many Abdiels, 'among the faithless, faithful only' these, and they avowed their determination to cleave to the sovereign of their choice at a time when his back was at the wall, and their determination to follow him meant only peril and privation. They were filled with a passionate personal attachment to the king, and that personal attachment was ready to manifest itself as a willing sacrifice, as such love always is ready.

Now surely in all this there is a lesson for us. The heroism of men towards a man, the uncalculating devotion and magnificent self-sacrifice of which the poorest human soul is capable when touched to fine issues by some heart-love, are surely not all meant to be lavished on fellow-creatures, who, alas! generally receive the most of them. But these rude Philistines and Gittites, Goliath’s fellow-townsmen, may preach to us Christians a lesson. Why should not we say as they said, ‘According to all that my Lord the King shall appoint, behold Thy servants’?

I. So then, first, our King’s will ought to be our will.

The obedience that is promised in these words is not the obedience of action only, but it is the bowing down of the heart. And for us Christian men there is neither peace nor nobleness in our lives, except in the measure in which the will of Jesus Christ and our wills are accurately conterminous and identical. Wheresoever the two coincide, there is strength for us; wheresoever they diverge, there are weakness and certain ruin. These two wills ought to be like two of Euclid’s triangles, or other geometric figures, the one laid upon the other, and each line and curve and angle accurately corresponding and coinciding, so that the two cover precisely the same ground.

Christ’s will my will; that is religion. And you and I are Christians just in the measure in which that coincidence of wills is true about us, and not one hair’s-breadth further, for all our professions. Wheresoever my will diverges from Christ, in that particular I am not His man; and ‘Christian’ simply means ‘Christ’s man.’ I belong to Him when I think as He does, love as He does, will as He does, accept His commandment as the law of my life, His pattern as my example, His providence as sufficient and as good. Where we thus yield ourselves to Him, there we are strong, and so far, and only so far, have we a right to say that we are the King’s servants at all.

This absolute submission we do render to one another when our hearts are touched; and the fact that men can and do give it-husbands to wives, wives to husbands, children to parents, friends to one another- the fact that there is the capacity for that giving of one’s self away, lodged deep in our nature, tells us what we are meant to do with it. ‘Whose image and superscription hath it?’ Was it meant that we should thus live in slavish submission even to the dearest loved ones? Surely not; for that is the destruction of individuality. No, but it was meant that we should lay our wills down at Christ’s feet and say, ‘Not my will, but Thine,’ and Thine mine because I have made it mine by love. Then there is rest, and then we have solved the secret of the world, and are what our Lord would have us to be. Oh! do not our relations to our dear ones, with all that infinite power of self-sacrifice that our love brings with it, rebuke the partial extent of our surrender to our Master? and may we not be ashamed when we contrast the joy that we feel in giving up to those that we love, and the reluctance with which, too often, we obey the Master's commandments, and the long years of repining and murmuring before we 'submit,' as we call it, which too often means accept His providences as inevitable, though not as welcome? To be 'ready to do whatsoever my Lord the King shall choose,' believing that His choice is wisdom and kindness for us, and His commandments a blessing and a gift, is the attitude and temper for us all. Is there any other attitude to Jesus Christ which corresponds to our relation to Him, to what He has done for us, to what we say that He is to us? He has the right to us, because He has given us Himself. He asks nothing from us but that of which He has already set us the example. 'He gave Himself for us, as the Apostle says with emphasis that is often unnoticed. 'He *gave Himself* for us' that He might '*purchase us* for *Himself*.' He who would possess another must impart Himself, and love, that yields a whole man to the loved one, only springs when the loved one mutually yields her whole heart. The King does not command from above, but He comes down amongst us, and He says, 'I gave Myself for thee; what givest thou to Me?' O brethren, let us answer with that brave, chivalrous old Gittite:-'As the Lord liveth, and as my Lord the King liveth, surely in what place my Lord the King shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will Thy servant be.'

II. Then notice again, still sticking to our story, that this yielding up of will, if it is worth anything, will become the more intense and fervent when surrounded by rebels.

All Israel, with that poor feather-headed, vain Absalom, were on the one side, and David and these foreigners were on the other. Years of quiet uneventful life would never have brought out such magnificent heroism of devotion and self-surrender, as was crowded into that one moment of loyalty asserted in the face of triumphant rebels and traitors.

In like manner, the more Christ's reign is set at nought by the people about us, and the less they recognise the blessedness and the duty of submission to Him, the more strong and unmistakable should be the utterance of our loyalty. We should grasp His hand tighter by reason of the storms that may rage round about us. And if we dwell amongst those who, in any measure, deny or neglect His merciful dominion, let us see to it that we all the more hoist our colours at our doors, and stand by them when they are hoisted, that nobody may mistake under which King we serve.

You in your places of business, you young men in your warehouses, and all of us in our several spheres, have to come across many people who have no share in our loyalty and offer no allegiance to our King. That is the reason for intenser loyalty on our part. Never you mind what others say or do; do not take your orders from them. Better be with the handful that rally round David than with the crowds that run after Absalom! Better be amongst the few that are faithful than amongst the multitudes that depart! Dare to be singular, if it comes to that; and at all events remember that your relationship to your Master is a thing that concerns Him and you chiefly, and that you are not to take the pattern of your loyalty, nor the orders for your lives, from any lips but His own.

Hush all other voices that would command, and hush them that you may listen to Him. It is always difficult enough for Christian men to ascertain, in perplexed circumstances, the clear path of duty; but it is impossible if, along with His voice, we let the buzz of the crowd be audible in our ears. There is only one way by which we can hear what our 'Lord the King appoints,' and that is by making a great stillness in our souls, and neither letting our own yelping inclinations give tongue, nor the babble of men round us, and their notions of life and of what is right, have influence upon us, but waiting to hear what God the Lord, speaking in Christ the King, has to say to us. And, remember, the more rebels there are, the more need for us to be conspicuously loyal to our King.

III. Again, this complete yielding of ourselves in practical obedience and heart submission to command merits and providences is to be maintained, whatsoever it may lead to in the way of privation and difficulty.

It was no holiday vow, made upon some parade day, that these brave foreigners were bringing to their king now, but it meant 'we are ready to suffer, starve, fight, lose everything, die if need be, to be true to thee.' And the very thought of the impending danger elevated the men's consciousness, and made heroes out of very common people. And perhaps that is the best effect of our difficulties and sorrows, that they strike fire sometimes [if they are rightly accepted and used] out of what seems to be only dead, lumpish matter, and many a Christian shoots up into a stature of greatness and nobleness in his sorrow, who was but a very commonplace creature when all things went well with him. That is the kind of obedience that Christ delights to accept, obedience that is ready for anything, and does not wait to make sure that there is no danger of forfeiting a whole skin and a quiet life, before it vows itself to service. Are we only to be 'fair-weather Christians,' or are we to be prepared for all the trials and sufferings that may befall us? A Christianity that does not bring any worldly penalties along with it is not worth much. Christians of Christ's pattern have generally to give up something for their Christianity. They give up nothing that it is not gain to lose, nothing that they are not better without, but they have to surrender much in which other people find great enjoyment, and which their weaker selves would delight in too. Are you ready, my brother, for that? 'Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.' The old days of heroism and martyrdom are done with, as far as we are concerned, whatever may lie in the future. But do we make willingly and gladly the surrenders and the self-abnegations that are demanded by our loyalty to our Master? Have we ever learned to say about any line of action that our poor, lower nature grasps at, and our higher, enlightened by communion with Jesus Christ, forbids: 'So did not I because of the fear of the Lord'? We can talk about following Christ's footsteps; do you think that if we had stood where these rude soldiers stood, or had anything as dark in prospect, as the price of our faithfulness to our King, as they had as the price of faithfulness to theirs, there would have rung from our lips the utterly sincere vow that sprang joyously from theirs: 'Behold Thy servants, ready to do whatever our Lord the King shall appoint'?

IV. A final thought, which travels beyond my text, is that such thorough-going obedience, irrespective of consequences, is the secret of all blessedness.

'Great peace have they which love Thy law': the peace of conscience; the peace of ceasing from that which is our worst enemy, self-will; the peace of self-surrender; the peace of feeling "Tis His to command; 'tis mine to obey'; the peace of casting the whole settling of the campaign on the King's shoulders, and of finding our duty restricted to tramping along with cheery heart on the path that He has appointed. That is worth having. Oh! if we could cease from self and lay our wills down before Him, then we should be quiet. The tranquil heart is the heart which has the law of Christ within it, and the true delight of life belongs to those who truly say, 'I delight to do Thy will.' So yielding, so obeying, so submitting, so surrendering one's self, life becomes quiet, and strong, and sweet. And, if I might so turn the story that we have been considering, the faithful soldiers who have been true to the King when His throne was contested, will march with laurelled heads in His triumphant train when He comes back after His final and complete victory, and reign with Him in the true City of Peace, where His will shall be perfectly done by loving hearts, and all His servants shall be kings.

15)2 Samuel 15:21

2 Samuel

ITTAI OF GATH

2Sa. 15:21.

It was the darkest hour in David's life. No more pathetic page is found in the Old Testament than that which tells the story of his flight before Absalom. He is crushed by the consciousness that his punishment is deserved-the bitter fruit of the sin that filled all his later life with darkness. His courage and his buoyancy have left him. He has no spirit to make a stand or strike a blow. If Shimei runs along the hillside abreast of him, shrieking curses as he goes, all he says is: 'Let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him.'

So, heartbroken and spiritless, he leaves Jerusalem. And as soon as he has got clear of the city he calls a halt, in order that he may muster his followers and see on whom he may depend. Foremost among the little band come six hundred men from Gath-Philistines-from Goliath's city. These men, singularly enough, the king had chosen as his bodyguard; perhaps he was not altogether sure of the loyalty of his own subjects, and possibly felt safer with foreign mercenaries, who could have no secret leanings to the deposed house of Saul. Be that as it may, the narrative tells us that these men had ‘come after him from Gath.’ He had been there twice in the old days, in his flight from Saul, and the second visit had extended over something more than a year. Probably during that period his personal attraction, and his reputation as a brilliant leader, had led these rough soldiers to attach themselves to his service, and to be ready to forsake home and kindred in order to fight beside him.

At all events here they are, ‘faithful among the faithless,’ as foreign soldiers surrounding a king often are-notably, for instance, the Swiss guard in the French Revolution. Their strong arms might have been of great use to David, but his generosity cannot think of involving them in his fall, and so he says to them: ‘I am not going to fight; I have no plan. I am going where I can. You go back and “worship the rising sun.” Absalom will take you and be glad of your help. And as for me, I thank you for your past loyalty. Mercy and peace be with you!’

It is a beautiful nature that in the depth of sorrow shrinks from dragging other people down with itself. Generosity breeds generosity, and this Philistine captain breaks out into a burst of passionate devotion, garnished, in soldier fashion, with an unnecessary oath or two, but ringing very sincere and meaning a great deal. As for himself and his men, they have chosen their side. Whoever goes, they stay. Whatever befalls, they stick by David; and if the worst come to the worst they can all die together, and their corpses lie in firm ranks round about their dead king. David’s heart is touched and warmed by their outspoken loyalty; he yields and accepts their service. Ittai and his noble six hundred tramp on, out of our sight, and all their households behind them. Now what is there in all that, to make a sermon out of?

I. First, look at the picture of that Philistine soldier, as teaching us what grand passionate self-sacrifice may be evolved out of the roughest natures.

Analyse his words, and do you not hear, ringing in them, three things, which are the seed of all nobility and splendour in human character? First, a passionate personal attachment; then, that love issuing, as such love always does, in willing sacrifice that recks not for a moment of personal consequences; that is ready to accept anything for itself if it can serve the object of its devotion, and will count life well expended if it is flung away in such a service. And we see, lastly, in these words a supreme restful delight in the presence of him whom the heart loves. For Ittai and his men, the one thing needful was to be beside him in whose eye they had lived, from whose presence they had caught inspiration; their trusted leader, before whom their souls bowed down. So then this vehement speech is the pure language of love.

Now these three things,-a passionate personal attachment, issuing in spontaneous heroism of self-abandonment, and in supreme satisfaction in the beloved presence,-may spring up in the rudest, roughest nature. A Philistine soldier was not a very likely man in whom to find refined and lofty emotion. He was hard by nature, hardened by his rough trade; and unconscious that he was doing anything at all heroic or great. Something had smitten this rock, and out of it there came the pure refreshing stream. And so I say to you, the weakest and the lowest, the roughest and the hardest, the most selfishly absorbed man and woman among us, has lying in him and her dormant capacities for flaming up into such a splendour of devotion and magnificence of heroic self-sacrifice as is represented in these words of my text. A mother will do it for her child, and never think that she has done anything extraordinary; husbands will do such things for wives; wives for husbands; friends and lovers for one another. All who know the sweetness and power of the bond of affection know that there is nothing more gladsome than to fling oneself away for the sake of those whom we love. And the capacity for such love and sacrifice lies in all of us. Prosaic, commonplace people as we are, with no great field on which to work out our heroisms; yet we have it in us to love and give ourselves away thus, if once the heart be stirred.

And lastly, this capacity which lies dormant in all of us, if once it is roused to action, will make a man blessed and dignified as nothing else will. The joy of unselfish love is the purest joy that man can taste; the joy of perfect self-sacrifice is the highest joy that humanity can possess, and they lie open for us all.

And wherever, in some humble measure, these emotions of which I have been speaking are realised, there you see weakness springing up into strength, and the ignoble into loftiness. Astronomers tell us that sometimes a star that has shone inconspicuous, and stood low down in their catalogues as of fifth or sixth magnitude, will all at once flame out, having kindled and caught fire somehow, and will blaze in the heavens, outshining Jupiter and Venus. And so some poor, vulgar, narrow nature, touched by this Promethean fire of pure love that leads to perfect sacrifice, will 'flame in the forehead of the morning sky' an undying splendour, and a light for evermore.

Brethren, my appeal to you is a very plain and simple one, founded on these facts:-You all have that capacity in you, and you all are responsible for the use of it. What have you done with it? Is there any person or thing in this world that has ever been able to lift you up out of your miserable selves? Is there any magnet that has proved strong enough to raise you from the low levels along which your life creeps? Have you ever known the thrill of resolving to become the bondservant and the slave of some great cause not your own? Or are you, as so many of you are, like spiders living in the midst of your web, mainly intent upon what you can catch by it? You have these capacities slumbering in you. Have you ever set a light to that inert mass of enthusiasm that lies within you? Have you ever woke up the sleeper? Look at this rough soldier of my text, and learn from him the lesson that there is nothing that so ennobles and dignifies a commonplace nature as enthusiasm for a great cause, or self-sacrificing love for a worthy heart.

II. The second remark which I make is this:-These possibilities of love and sacrifice point plainly to God in Christ as their true object.

'Whose image and superscription hath it?' said Christ, looking at the Roman *denarius* that they brought and laid on His palm. If the Emperor's head is on it, why, then, he has a right to it as tribute. And then He went on to say, 'Render, therefore, unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's.' So there are things that have God's image and superscription stamped on them, and such are our hearts, our whole constitution and nature. As plainly as the penny had the head of

Tiberius on it, and therefore proclaimed that he was Emperor where it was current, so plainly does every soul carry in the image of God the witness that He is its owner and that it should be rendered in tribute to Him.

And amongst all these marks of a divine possession and a divine destination printed upon human nature, it seems to me that none is plainer than this fact, that we can all of us thus give ourselves away in the abandonment of a profound and all-surrendering love. That capacity unmistakably proclaims that it is destined to be directed towards God and to find its rest in Him. As distinctly as some silver cup, with its owner's initials and arms engraved upon it, declares itself to be 'meet for the master's use,' so distinctly does your soul, by reason of this capacity, proclaim that it is meant to be turned to Him in whom alone all love can find its perfect satisfaction; for whom alone it is supremely blessed and great to lose life itself; and who only has authority over human spirits.

We are made with hearts that need to rest upon an absolute love; we are made with understandings that need to grasp a pure, a perfect, and, as I believe, paradoxical though it may sound, a personal Truth. We are made with wills that crave for an absolute authoritative command, and we are made with a moral nature that needs a perfect holiness. And we need all that love, truth, authority, purity, to be gathered into one, for our misery is that, when we set out to look for treasures, we have to go into many lands and to many merchants, to buy many goodly pearls. But we need One of great price, in which all our wealth may be invested. We need that One to be an undying and perpetual possession. There is One to whom our love can ever cleave, and fear none of the sorrows or imperfections that make earthward-turned love a rose with many a thorn, One for whom it is pure gain to lose ourselves, One who is plainly the only worthy recipient of the whole love and self-surrender of the heart.

That One is God, revealed and brought near to us in Jesus Christ. In that great Saviour we have a love at once divine and human, we have the great transcendent instance of love leading to sacrifice. On that love and sacrifice for us Christ builds His claim on us for our hearts, and our all. Life alone can communicate life; it is only light that can diffuse light. It is only love that can kindle love; it is only sacrifice that can inspire sacrifice. And so He comes to us, and asks that we should just love Him back again as He has loved us. He first gives Himself utterly for and to us, and then asks us to give ourselves wholly to Him. He first yields up His own life, and then He says: ‘He that loseth his life for My sake shall find it.’ The object, the true object, for all this depth of love which lies slumbering in our hearts, is God in Christ, the Christ that died for us.

III. And now, lastly, observe that the terrible misdirection of these capacities is the sin and the misery of the world.

I will not say that such emotions, even when expended on creatures, are ever wasted. For however unworthy may be the objects on which they are lavished, the man himself is the better and the higher for having cherished them. The mother, when she forgets self in her child, though her love and self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice may, in some respects, be called but an animal instinct, is elevated and ennobled by the exercise of them. The patriot and the thinker, the philanthropist, ay! even-although I take him to be the lowest in the scale-the soldier who, in some cause which he thinks to be a good one, and not merely in the tigerish madness of the battlefield, throws away his life-are lifted in the scale of being by their self-abnegation.

And so I am not going to say that when men love each other passionately and deeply, and sacrifice themselves for one another, or for some cause or purpose affecting only temporal matters, the precious elixir of love is wasted. God forbid! But I do say that all these objects, sweet and gracious as some of them are, ennobling and elevating as some of them are, if they are taken apart from God, are insufficient to fill your hearts: and that if they are slipped in between you and God, as they often are, then they bring sin and sorrow.

There is nothing more tragic in this world than the misdirection of man’s capacity for love and sacrifice. It is like the old story in the Book of Daniel, which tells how the heathen monarch made a great feast, and when the wine began to inflame the guests, sent for the sacred vessels taken from the Temple of Jerusalem, that had been used for Jehovah’s worship; and [as the narrative says, with a kind of shudder at the profanation], ‘They brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the House of God, which was at Jerusalem, and the king and his princes, his wives and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine and praised the gods.' So this heart of mine, which, as I said, has the Master's initials and His arms engraven upon it, in token that it is His cup, I too often fill with the poisonous and intoxicating draught of earthly pleasure and earthly affections; and as I drink it, the madness goes through my veins, and I praise gods of my own making instead of Him whom alone I ought to love.

Ah, brethren! we should be our own rebukers in this matter, and the heroism of the world should put to shame the cowardice and the selfishness of the Church. Contrast the depth of your affection for your household with the tepidity of your love for your Saviour. Contrast the willingness with which you sacrifice yourself for some dear one with the grudgingness with which you yield yourselves to Him. Contrast the rest and the sense of satisfaction in the presence of those whom you love, and your desolation when they are absent, with the indifference whether you have Christ beside you or not. And remember that the measure of your power of loving is the measure of your obligation to love your Lord; and that if you are all frost to Him and all fervour to them, then in a very solemn sense 'a man's foes shall be they of his own household.' 'He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.'

And so let me gather all that I have been saying into the one earnest beseeching of you that you would bring that power of uncalculating love and self-sacrificing affection which is in you, and would fasten it where it ought to fix-on Christ who died on the cross for you. Such a love will bring blessedness to you. Such a love will ennoble and dignify your whole nature, and make you a far greater and fairer man or woman than you ever otherwise could be. Like some little bit of black carbon put into an electric current, my poor nature will flame into beauty and radiance when that spark touches it. So love Him and be at peace; give yourselves to Him and He will give you back yourselves, ennobled and transfigured by the surrender. Lay yourselves on His altar, and that altar will sanctify both the giver and the gift. If you can take this rough Philistine soldier's words in their spirit, and in a higher sense say, 'Whether I live I live unto the Lord, or whether I die I die unto the Lord; living or dying, I am the Lord's,' He will let you enlist in His army; and give you for your marching orders this command

and this hope, ‘If any man serve Me let him follow Me; and where I am there shall also My servant be.’

16)2 Samuel 18:18-33

2 Samuel

THE WAIL OF A BROKEN HEART

2Sa. 18:18 - 2Sa. 18:33.

The first verse of this passage and the one preceding it give a striking contrast between the actual and the designed burial-place of Absalom. The great pit among the sombre trees, where his bloody corpse was hastily flung, with three darts through his heart, and the rude cairn piled over it, were a very different grave from the ostentatious tomb ‘in the king’s dale,’ which he had built to keep his memory green. This was what all his restless intrigues and unbridled passions and dazzling hopes had come to. He wanted to be remembered, and he got his wish; but what a remembrance! That gloomy pit preaches anew the vanity of ‘vaulting ambition which o’erleaps itself,’ and tells us once more that

‘Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet, and blossom in the dust.’

I. The first picture here shows a glimpse of the battlefield, and brings before us three men, each in different ways exhibiting how small a thing Absalom’s death was to all but the heartbroken father, and each going his own road, heedless of what lay below the heap of stones. The world goes on all the same, though death is busy, and some heart-strings be cracked. The minute details which fill the most part of the story, lead up to, and throw into prominence, David’s burst of agony at the close. The three men, Ahimaaz, Joab, and the Cushite [Ethiopian], are types of different kinds of self-engrossment, which is little touched by others’ sorrows. The first, Ahimaaz, the young priest who had already done good service to David as a spy, is full of the joyous excitement of victory, and eager to run with what he thinks such good tidings. The word in 2Sa. 18:19, ‘bear tidings,’ always implies good news; and the youthful warrior-priest cannot conceive that the death of the head of the revolt can darken to the king the joy of victory, He is truly loyal, but, in his youthful impetuosity and excitement, cannot sympathise with the desolate father, who sits expectant at Mahanaim. Right feeling and real affection often fail in sympathy, for want of putting oneself in another's place; and, with the best intentions, wound where they mean to cheer. A little imagination; guided by affection, would have taught Ahimaaz that the messenger who told David of Absalom's death would thrust a sharper spear into his heart than Joab had driven into Absalom's.

Joab is a very different type of indifference. He is too much accustomed to battle to be much flushed with victory, and has killed too many men to care much about killing another. He is cool enough to measure the full effect of the news on David; and though he clearly discerns the sorrow, has not one grain of participation in it. He has some liking for Ahimaaz, and so does not wish him to run, but dissuades him on the ground [2Sa. 18:22, Revised Version] that he will win no reward. That is the true spirit of the mercenary, who cannot conceive of a man taking trouble unless he gets paid for it somehow, and will fight and kill, all in the way of business, without the least spark of enthusiasm for a cause. Hard stolidity and brutal carelessness shielded him from any 'womanish' tenderness. Absalom was dead, and he had killed him. It was a good thing, for it had put out the fire of revolt. No doubt David would be sorry, but that mattered little. Only it was better for the message to go by some one whose fate was of no consequence. So he picks out 'the Cushite,' probably an Ethiopian slave; and if David in his anguish should harm him, nobody will be hurt but a friendless stranger.

The Cushite gets his orders; and he too is, in another fashion, careless of their contents and effect. Without a word, he bows himself to Joab, and runs, as unconcerned as the paper of a letter that may break a heart. Ahimaaz still pleads to go, and, gaining leave, takes the road across the Jordan valley, which was probably easier, though longer; while the other messenger went by the hills, which was a shorter and rougher road.

II. The scene shifts to Mahanaim, where David had found refuge. He can scarcely have failed to take an omen from the name, which commemorated how another anxious heart had camped there, and been comforted, when it saw the vision of the encamping angels above its own feeble, undefended tents, and Jacob ‘called the name of that place Mahanaim’ [that is, ‘Two Camps’]. How the change of scene in the narrative helps its vividness, and makes us share in the strain of expectancy and the tension of watching the approaching messengers! The king, restless for news, has come out to the space between the outer and inner gates, and planted a lookout on the gate-house roof. The sharp eyes see a solitary figure making for the city, across the plain. David recognises that, since he is alone, he must be a messenger; and now the question is, What has he to tell? We see him coming nearer, and share the suspense. Then the second man appears; and clearly something more had happened, to require two. What was it? They run fast; but the moments are long till they arrive. The watchman recognises Ahimaaz by his style of running; and David wistfully tries to forecast his tidings from his character. It is a pathetic effort, and reveals how anxiously his heart was beating.

As soon as Ahimaaz is within earshot, though panting with running, no doubt, he shouts, with what breath is left, the one word, ‘Peace!’ and then, at David’s feet, tells the victory, ‘Blessed be the Lord thy God’; the triumph was Jehovah’s gift, and in it He had shown Himself David’s God, and vindicated His servant’s trust. But Ahimaaz is more devout and thankful than David. The king has neither praise and thankfulness to God nor to man. He has no pleasure in the victory; no interest in the details of the fight; no thankfulness for a restored kingdom; no word of eulogium for his soldiers; nothing but devouring anxiety for his unworthy son. How chilling to Ahimaaz, all flushed with eagerness, and proud of victory, and panting with running, and hungry for some word of praise, it must have been, to get for sole answer the question about Absalom! He shrinks from telling the whole truth, which, indeed, the Cushite was officially despatched to tell; but his enigmatic story of a great tumult as he left the field, of which he did not know the meaning, was meant to prepare for the bitter news. So he is bid to stand aside, and no words more vouchsafed to him. A cool reception, unworthy of David! As Ahimaaz stood there, neglected, he would think that the politic Joab was right after all.

The Cushite must have been close behind him, for he comes up as soon as the brief conversation is over. A deeper anxiety must have waited his tidings; for he must have something more to tell than victory. His first words add nothing to Ahimaaz’s information. What, then, had he come for? David forebodes evil, and, with the monotony of a man absorbed in one anxiety, repeats verbatim his former question. Poor king! He more than half knew the answer, before it was given. The Cushite with some tenderness veils the fate of Absalom in the wish that all the king’s enemies may be ‘as that young man is.’ But the veil was thin, and the attempt to console by reminding of the fact that the dead man was an enemy as well as a son, was swept away like a straw before the father’s torrent of grief.

III. The sobs of a broken heart cannot be analysed; and this wail of almost inarticulate agony, with its infinitely pathetic reiteration, is too sacred for many words. Grief, even if passionate, is not forbidden by religion; and David’s sensitive poet-nature felt all emotions keenly. We are meant to weep; else wherefore is there calamity? But there were elements in David’s mourning which were not good. It blinded him to blessings and to duties. His son was dead; but his rebellion was dead with him, and that should have been more present to his mind. His soldiers had fought well, and his first task should have been to honour and to thank them. He had no right to sink the king in the father, and Joab’s unfeeling remonstrance, which followed, was wise and true in substance, though rough almost to brutality in tone. Sorrow which sees none of the blue because of one cloud, however heavy and thunderous, is sinful. Sorrow which sits with folded hands, like the sisters of Lazarus, and lets duties drift, that it may indulge in the luxury of unrestrained tears, is sinful. There is no tone of ‘It is the Lord! let Him do what seemeth Him good,’ in this passionate plaint; and so there is no soothing for the grief. The one consolation lies in submission. Submissive tears wash the heart clean; rebellious ones blister it.

David’s grief was the bitter fruit of his own sin. He had weakly indulged Absalom, and had probably spared the rod, in the boy’s youth, as he certainly spared the sword when Absalom had murdered his brother. His own immorality had loosened the bonds of family purity, and made him ashamed to punish his children. He had let Absalom flaunt and swagger and live in luxury, and put no curb on him; and here was the end of his foolish softness. How many fathers and mothers are the destroyers of their children to-day in the very same fashion! That grave in the wood might teach parents how their fatal fondness may end. Children, too, may learn from David’s grief what an unworthy son can do to stuff his father’s pillow with thorns, and to break his heart at last.

But there is another side to this grief. It witnesses to the depth and self-sacrificing energy of a father’s love. The dead son’s faults are all forgotten and obliterated by death’s ‘effacing fingers.’ The headstrong, thankless rebel is, in David’s mind, a child again, and the happy old days of his innocence and love are all that remain in memory. The prodigal is still a son. The father’s love is immortal, and cannot be turned away by any faults. The father is willing to die for the disobedient child. Such purity and depth of affection lives in human hearts. So self-forgetting and incapable of being provoked is an earthly father’s love. May we not see in this disclosure of David’s paternal love, stripping it of its faults and excesses, some dim shadow of the greater love of God for His prodigals,-a love which cannot be dammed back or turned away by any sin, and which has found a way to fulfil David’s impossible wish, in that it has given Jesus Christ to die for His rebellious children, and so made them sharers of His own kingdom?

17)2 Samuel 19:34-37

2 Samuel

BARZILLAI

2Sa. 19:34 - 2Sa. 19:37.

To the Young.

People often fancy that religion is only good to die by, and many exhortations are addressed to the young, founded on the possibility that an early death may be their lot. That, no doubt, is a very solemn consideration, but it is by no means the sole ground on which such an appeal may or should be rested. To some of you an early death is destined. To the larger number of you will be granted a life protracted to middle age, and to some of you silver hair will come, and you may see your children’s children. I wish to win you seriously to look forward to the life on earth that is before you, and to the end to which it is likely to come, if you be spared in the world long enough.

The little picture in these verses is a very beautiful one. David had been fleeing from his rebellious Absalom, and his adversity had winnowed his friends. He had crossed the Jordan to the hill-country beyond, and there, while he was lurking with his crown in peril, and a price on his head, and old friends dropping from him in their eagerness to worship the rising sun, this Barzillai with others brought him seasonable help [2Sa. 17:23], When David returned victorious, Barzillai met him again. David offered to take him to Jerusalem and to set him in honour there, The old man answered in the words of our text.

Now I take them for the sake of the picture of old age which they give us. Look at them: the intellectual powers are dimmed, all taste for the pleasures and delights of sense is gone, ambition is dead, capacity for change is departed. What is left? This old man lives in the past and in the future; the early child-love of the father and mother who, eighty years ago, rejoiced over his cradle, remains fresh; he cannot ‘any more hear the voice of the singing men and women,’ but he can hear the tones, clear over all these years, of the dear ones whom he first learned to love. The furthest past is fresh and vivid, and his heart and memory are true to it. Also he looks forward familiarly and calmly to the very near end, and lives with the thought of death. He keeps house with it now. It is nearer to him than the world of living men. In memory is half of his being, and in hope is the other half. All his hopes are now simplified and reduced to *one,* a hope to die and be united again with the dear ones whom he had so long remembered. And so he goes back to his city, and passes out of the record-an example of a green and good old age.

Now, young people, is not that picture one to touch your hearts? You think in your youthful flush of power and interest, that life will go on for ever as it has begun, and it is all but impossible to get you to look forward to what life must come to. I want you to learn from that picture of a calm, bright old age, a lesson or two of what life will certainly do to you, that I may found on these certainties the old, old appeal, ‘Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth’.

I. Life will gradually rob you of your interest in all earthly things.

Your time of life is full of ebullient feeling, and sees freshness, glory, and beauty everywhere. Even the least enthusiastic men are enthusiastic in their early days. You have physical strength, the keenness of unpalled senses, the delights of new powers, the blessedness of mere living. All this springs partly from physical causes, partly from the novelty of your position. Thank God! all young creatures are happy, and you among the rest.

Now, I do not ask you to restrain and mortify these things. But I do ask you to remember the end. It is as certain that joys will pall, it is as certain that subjects of interest will be exhausted, it is as certain that powers will decay, as that they now are what they are. All these grave, middle-aged, careful people round you were like you once. You, if you live, will be like them. The spring tints are natural, but they are transient; the blossoms are not always on the fruit-trees.

Think, then, of the End: to make you thankful; to stimulate you; but also to lead you to take for your object what will never pall. All created things go. Only the gospel provides you with a theme which never becomes stale, with objects which are inexhaustible.

Here is a lesson for-

> [a] Thinkers: ‘Knowledge, it shall vanish away.’
>
> [b] Sensualists: ‘Man delights me not, nor woman either.’ How old was he who said that?
>
> [c] Ambitious, self-advancing men.

Is it worth your while to devote yourself to transient aims?

Is it congruous with your dignity as immortal souls?

Is it innocent or guilty?

Is the gospel not a thing to live by as well as to die by?

II. Life will certainly rob you of the power to change.

Barzillai knew that David’s court was no place for him; he had been bred on the mountains of Gilead, and his habits suited only a simple country life. The court might be better, but he could not fit into it. But there was his boy Chimham; take him, he was young enough to bend and mould.

Now this is true in a far loftier way. I need not dwell on the universality of this law, how it applies to all manner of men, but I use it now in reference only to the gospel and your relation to it. You will never again be so likely to become a Christian, if you let these early days pass.

You say, ‘I will have my fling, sow my wild oats, will wait a little longer, and then’-and then what? You will find that it is infinitely harder to close with Christ than it would have been before.

While you delay, you are stiffening into the habit of rejection. Custom is one of our mightiest friends or foes.

While you delay, you are doing violence to conscience, and so weakening that to which the gospel appeals.

While you delay, you are becoming more familiar with the unreceived message and so weakening the power of the gospel.

While you delay, you are adding to the long list of your sins.

While you delay, youth is slipping from you.

Make a mark with a straw on the clay and it abides; hammer on the brick with iron and it only breaks. Youth is a brief season. It is the season for forming habit, for receiving impression, for building up character. ‘The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold, therefore shall he beg in harvest and have nothing.’ Your present time is seed time. God forbid that I should say that it is impossible, but I do say that it is hard, for ‘a man to be born again when he is old.’

If you do become Christ’s servant later in life, your whole condition will be different from what it would have been if you had begun when young to trust and love Him. Think of the difficulty of rooting out habits and memories. Think of the horrid familiarity with evil. Think of the painful contrition for wasted years, which must be theirs who are hired at the eleventh hour, after standing all the day idle.

Contrast the experience of him who can say, ‘I Thy servant fear God from my youth,’ who has been led by God’s mercy from childhood in the narrow way, who by early faith in Christ has been kept in the slippery ways of youth.

Of the one we can but say, ‘Is not this a brand plucked from the burning?’ The other is ‘innocent of much transgression.’

I have small hope of changing middle-aged and old men. To you I turn, you young men and women, you children, and to each of you I say, ‘Wilt thou not from this time say, My Father, Thou art the guide of my youth?’

III. Life will certainly deepen your early impressions.

The old Barzillai dying looks back to his early days.

So I point the lesson: ‘Keep thy heart with all diligence,’ and let your early thoughts be bright and pure ones.

Remember that you will never find any love like a father’s and mother’s. Don’t do what will load your memories in after days with sharp reproaches.

IV. Life will bring you nearer and nearer to the grave.

Hope after hope dies out, and there is nothing left but the hope to die. How beautiful the facing of it so as to become calmly familiar with it, making it an object of hope, with bright visions of reunion!

How can such an old age so bright and beautiful be secured? Surely the one answer is,-by faith in Jesus Christ.

Think of an old Christian resting, full of years, full of memories, full of hopes, to whom the stir of the present is nothing, who has come so near the place where the river falls into the great sea that the sounds on the banks are unheard. It is calm above the cataract, and though there be a shock when the stream plunges over the precipice, yet a rainbow spans the fall, and the river peacefully mingles with the shoreless, boundless ocean.

Dear young friends, 'what shall the end be'? It is for yourselves to settle. Oh, take Christ for your Lord! Then, though so far as regards the bodily life the 'youths shall faint and be weary,' as regards the true self the life may be one of growing maturity, and at last you may 'come to the grave as a shock of corn that is fully ripe.'

Trust, love, and serve Jesus, that thus calm, thus beautiful, may be your days here below, that if you die young you may die ripe enough for heaven, and that if God spares you to 'reverence and the silver hairs,' you may crown a holy life by a peaceful departure, and, sitting in the antechamber of death, may not grieve for the departure of youth and strength and buoyancy and activity, knowing that 'they also serve who only stand and wait,' and then may shake off the clog and hindrance of old age when you pass into the presence of God, and there, as being the latest-born of heaven, may more than renew your youth, and may enter on a life which weariness and decay never afflict, but with which immortal youth, with its prerogatives of endless hope, of keenest delight, of unwearying novelty, of boundless joy, abides for evermore.

18)2 Samuel 22:40-51

2 Samuel

DAVID'S HYMN OF VICTORY

2Sa. 22:40 f11 - 2Sa. 22:51.

The Davidic authorship of this great hymn has been admitted even by critics who are in general too slow to recognise it. One of these says that 'there is no Israelite king to whom the expressions in the psalm apply so closely as to David.' The favourite alternative theory that the speaker is the personified nation is hard to accept. The voice of individual trust and of personal experience sounds clear in the glowing words. Two editions of the hymn are preserved for us,-in Psa. 18:1 - Psa. 18:50 and 2Sa. 22:1 - 2Sa. 22:51. Slight variations exist in the two copies, which may probably be merely accidental. Nothing important depends on them. The text begins with the closing words of a description of God's arming the singer for his victories, and goes on to paint the tumult of battle and the rout of the foe [2Sa. 22:40 f11 - 2Sa. 22:43]; then follows triumphant expectation of future wider victories [2Sa. 22:44 - 2Sa. 22:46]; and that leads up to the closing burst of grateful praise [2Sa. 22:47 - 2Sa. 22:51].

I. We are not to forget that what is described in 2Sa. 22:40 f11 - 2Sa. 22:43 is a literal fight, with real swords against very real enemies. We may draw lessons of encouragement from it for our conflict with spiritual wickednesses, but we must not lose sight of the bloody combat with flesh and blood which the singer had waged. He felt that God had braced his armour on him, had given him the impenetrable 'shield' which he wore on his arm, and had strengthened his arms to bend the 'bow of steel.' We see him in swift pursuit, pressing hard on the flying foe, crushing them with his fierce charge, trampling them under foot. 'I did beat them small as the dust of the earth.' His blows fell like those of a great pestle, pulverising some substance in a mortar. 'I did stamp them as the mire of the streets,'-a vivid picture of trampling down the prostrate wretches, for which Psa. 18:1 - Psa. 18:50 gives the less picturesque variant, 'did cast them out.' In their despair the fugitives shriek aloud for God's help, and the Psalmist has a stern joy in knowing their cries to be unheard.

Now, such delight in an enemy's despair and destruction, such gratification at the vanity of his prayers, are far away from being Christian sentiments, and the gulf is not wholly bridged by the consideration that David felt himself to be God's Anointed, and enmity to him to be, consequently, treason against God. His feelings were most natural and entirely consistent with the stage of revelation in which he lived. They were capable of being purified into that triumph in the victory of good and the ruin of evil without which there is no vigorous sympathy with Christ's conflict. They kindle, by their splendid energy and condensed rapidity, an answering glow even in readers so far away from the scene as we are. But still they do belong to a lower level of feeling, and result from a less full revelation than belongs to Christianity. The light of battle which blazes in them is not the fire which Jesus longed to kindle on earth.

But we may well take a pattern from the stern soldier’s recognition that all his victory was due to God alone. The strength that he put forth was God’s gift. It was God who subdued the insurgents, not David. The panic which made the foe take to flight was infused into them by God. No name but Jehovah’s was to be carved on the trophy reared on the battlefield. The human victor was but the instrument of the divine Conqueror. Such lowly reference of all our power and success to Him will save us from overweening self-adulation, and is the surest way to retain the power which He gives, and which is lost most surely when we take the credit of it to ourselves.

II. The enemies thus far have been from among his own subjects, but in 2Sa. 22:44 - 2Sa. 22:46 a transition is made to victory over ‘strangers’; that is, foreign nations. The triumph over ‘the strivings of my people’ heartens the singer to expect that he will be’ head of the nations.’ The other version of the hymn [Psa. 18:1 - Psa. 18:50] reads simply ‘*the* people.’

The picture of hasty surrender ‘as soon as they hear of me’ is graphic. His very name conquers. ‘The strangers shall submit themselves unto me’ is literally ‘shall lie,’ or yield feigned obedience. They ‘fade away’ as if withered by the hot wind of the desert. ‘They shall come limping’ [as the word here used signifies], as if wounded in the fight, for which Psa. 18:1 - Psa. 18:50 reads ‘trembling.’

Now this vision of extended conquests, based as it is on past smaller victories, carries valuable lessons. David here lays hold of the great promises to his house of a wide dominion, and expects the beginnings of their fulfilment to himself. And he *did* extend his conquests beyond the territory of Israel. But we may take the hope as an instance in a particular direction of what should be the issue of all experience of God’s mercies. ‘To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.’ Smaller victories will be followed by greater. Our reception of God’s favouring help should widen our anticipations. Our gratitude to Him should be ‘a lively sense of favours to come.’ Progressive victory should be the experience of every believer.

We may see, too, dimly apparent through the large hope of the Psalmist-King, the prophecy of the worldwide victories of his Son, in whom the great promises of a dominion ‘from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth,’ are fulfilled.

III. 2Sa. 22:46 - 2Sa. 22:51 make a noble close to a noble hymn, in which the singer’s strong wing never flags, nor the rush of thought and feeling ever slackens. In it, even more absolutely than in the rest of the psalm, his victory is all ascribed to Jehovah. He alone acts, David simply receives. To have learned by experience that’ He lives,’ and is ‘my Rock,’ and to gather all the feelings excited by the retrospect of a long life into ‘Blessed be my Rock,’ is to have reaped and garnered the richest harvest which earth can yield. So at last sings the man whose early years had been full of struggles and privations. A morning of tempest has cleared into sunny evening calm, as it will with us all if the tempest blows us into our true shelter.

This psalm begins with a rapturous heaping together of the precious names of God, as the singer has had them revealed to him by experience. Foremost among these stands that one, ‘my Rock,’ which is caught up again in this closing burst of thanksgiving. That great Rock towers unchangeable above fleeting things. The river runs past its base, the woods nestling at its feet bud, and shed their pride of foliage, but it stands the same. David had many a time hid in ‘the clefts of the rocks’ in his years of wandering, and the figure is eloquent on his lips.

These closing strains gather together once more the main points of the previous verses, his deliverance from domestic foes, and his conquests over external enemies. These are wholly God’s work. True thankfulness delights to repeat its acknowledgments. God does not weary of giving, we should not weary of praising the Giver and His gifts. We renew our enjoyment of our long-past mercies by reiterating our thankfulness for them. They do not die as long as gratitude keeps their remembrance green.

But the Psalmist’s experience impels him to a vow [2Sa. 22:50]. He will give thanks to God among the nations. God’s mercies bind, and, if rightly felt, will joyfully impel, the receiver to spread His name as far as his voice can reach. Love is sometimes silent, but gratitude must speak. The most unmusical voice is tuned to melody by God's great blessings received and appreciated, and they need never want a theme who can tell what the Lord has done for their souls. 'Then shall. . . the tongue of the dumb sing.' A dumb Christian is a monstrosity. We are 'the secretaries of His praise,' and have been saved ourselves that we may declare His goodness.

2Sa. 22:51 has been supposed by some to be a liturgical addition, on the ground that, if David were the author, he would not be likely to name himself thus. But there does not seem to be anything unnatural in his mentioning himself by name in such a connection, and the reference to his dynasty, based as it is on Nathan's promise, is most fitting. The last thought about his mercies which the humble gratitude of the Psalmist utters is that they were not given to him for any good in himself, nor to be selfishly enjoyed, but that they were bestowed on him because of the place that he filled in the divine purposes, and belonged to 'his seed' as truly as to himself. So lowly had his prosperity made him. So truly had he sunk himself in his office, and in the great things that God meant to do through him and his house. We know better than David did what these were, and how the promise on which he rested his hopes of the duration of his house is fulfilled in his Son, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and who bears God's name to all the nations.

19)2 Samuel 23:1-2

2 Samuel

THE DYING KING'S LAST VISION AND PSALM

2Sa. 23:1 - 2Sa. 23:7.

It was fitting that 'the last words of David' should be a prophecy of the true King, whom his own failures and sins, no less than his consecration and victories, had taught him to expect. His dying eyes see on the horizon of the far-off future the form of Him who is to be a just and perfect Ruler, before the brightness of whose presence and the refreshing of whose influence, verdure and beauty shall clothe the world. As the shades gather round the dying monarch, the radiant glory to come brightens. He departs in peace, having seen the salvation from afar, and stretched out longing hands of greeting toward it. Then his harp is silent, as if the rapture which thrilled the trembling strings had snapped them.

I. We have first a prelude extending to the middle of 2Sa. 23:3. In it there is first a fourfold designation of the personality of the Psalmist-prophet, and then a fourfold designation of the divine oracle spoken through him. The word rendered in 2Sa. 23:1 'saith' is really a noun, and usually employed with 'the Lord' following, as in the familiar phrase 'saith the Lord.' It is used, as here, with the genitive of the human recipient, in Balaam's prophecy, on which this is evidently modelled. It distinctly claims a divine source for the oracle following, and declares, at the outset, that these last words of David were really the faithful sayings of Jehovah. The human and divine elements are smelted together. Note the description of the human personality. First, the natural 'David the son of Jesse,' like 'Balaam the son of Beor' in the earlier oracle. The aged king looks back with adoring thankfulness to his early days and humble birth, as if he were saying, 'Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should proclaim the coming King.' Then follow three clauses descriptive of what 'the son of Jesse' had been made by the grace of God, in that he had been raised on high from his low condition of a shepherd boy, and anointed as ruler, not only by Samuel and the people, but by the God of their great ancestor, whose career had presented so many points of resemblance to his own, the God who still wrought among the nation which bore the patriarch's name, as He had wrought of old; and that, besides his royalty, he had been taught to sing the sweet songs which already were the heritage of the nation. This last designation shows what David counted God's chief gift to him,-not his crown, but his harp. It further shows that he regarded his psalms as divinely inspired, and it proves that already they had become the property of the nation. This first verse heightens the importance of the subsequent oracle by dwelling on the claims of the recipient of the revelation to be heard and heeded.

Similarly, the fourfold designation of the divine source has the same purpose, and corresponds with the four clauses of 2Sa. 23:1, 'The Spirit of the Lord spake in [or “into”] me.’ That gives the Psalmist’s consciousness that in his prophecy he was but the recipient of a message. It wonderfully describes the penetrating power of that inward voice which clearly came to him from without, and as clearly spoke to him within. Words could not more plainly declare the prophetic consciousness of the distinction between himself and the Voice which he heard in the depths of his spirit. It spoke in him before he spoke his lyric prophecy. ‘His word was upon my tongue.’ There we have the utterance succeeding the inward voice, and the guarantee that the Psalmist’s word was a true transcript of the inward voice. ‘The God of Israel said,’ and therefore Israel is concerned in the divine word, which is not of private reference, but meant for all. ‘The Rock of Israel spake,’ and therefore Israel may trust the Word, which rests on His immutable faithfulness and eternal being.

II. The divine oracle thus solemnly introduced and guaranteed must be worthy of such a prelude. Abruptly, and in clauses without verbs, the picture of the righteous Ruler is divinely flashed before the seer’s inward eye. The broken construction may perhaps indicate that he is describing what he beholds in vision. There is no need for any supplement such as ‘There shall be,’ which, however true in meaning, mars the vividness of the presentation of the Ruler to the prophet’s sight. David sees him painted on the else blank wall of the future. When and where the realisation may be he knows not. What are the majestic outlines? A universal sovereign over collective humanity, righteous and God-fearing. In the same manner as he described the vision of the King, David goes on, as a man on some height telling what he saw to the people below, and paints the blessed issues of the King’s coming.

It had been night before He came,-the night of ignorance, sorrow, and sin,-but His coming is like one of these glorious Eastern sunrises without a cloud, when everything laughs in the early beams, and, with tropical swiftness, the tender herbage bursts from the ground, as born from the dazzling brightness and the fertilising rain. So all things shall rejoice in the reign of the King, and humanity be productive, under His glad and quickening influences, of growths of beauty and fruitfulness impossible to it without these.

The abrupt form of the prophecy has led some interpreters to construe it as, ‘When a king over men is righteous. . . then it is as a morning,’ etc. But surely such a platitude is not worthy of being David’s last word, nor did it need divine inspiration to disclose to him that a just king is a great blessing. The only worthy meaning is that which sees here, in words so solemnly marked as a special revelation closing the life of David, ‘the vision of the future and all the wonder that should be,’ when a real Person should thus reign over men. The explanation that we have here simply the ideal of the collective Davidic monarchy is a lame attempt to escape from the recognition of prophecy properly so called. It is the work of poetry to paint ideals, of prophecy to foretell, with God’s authority, their realisation. The picture here is too radiant to be realised in any mere human king, and, as a matter of fact, never was so in any of David’s successors, or in the whole of them put together. It either swings *in vacuo,* a dream unrealised, or it is a distinct prophecy from God of the reign of the coming Messiah, of whom David and all his sons, as anointed kings, were living prophecies. ‘The Messianic idea entered on a new stage of development with the monarchy, and that not as if the history stimulated men’s imaginations, but that God used the history as a means of further revelation by His prophetic Spirit.

III. The difficult 2Sa. 23:5, whether its first and last clauses be taken interrogatively or negatively, in its central part bases the assurance of the coming of the king on God’s covenant [2Sa. 7:1 - 2Sa. 7:29], which is glorified as being everlasting, provided with all requisites for its realisation, and therefore ‘sure,’ or perhaps ‘preserved,’ as if guarded by God’s inviolable sanctity and faithfulness. The fulfilment of the dying saint’s hopes depends on God’s truth. Whatever sense might say, or doubt whisper, he silences them by gazing on that great Word. So we all have to do. If we found our hopes and forecasts on it, we can go down to the grave calmly, though they be not fulfilled, sure that ‘no good thing can fail us of all that He hath spoken.’ Living or dying, faith and hope must stay themselves on God’s word. Happy they whose closing eyes see the form of the King, and whose last thoughts are of God’s faithful promise! Happy they whose forecasts of the future, nearer or more remote, are shaped by His word! Happy they who, in the triumphant energy of such a faith, can with dying lips proclaim that His promises overlap, and contain, all their salvation and all their desire!

If we read the first and last clauses negatively, with Revised Version and others, they, as it were, surround the kernel of clear-eyed faith, in the middle of the verse, with a husk, not of doubt, but of consciousness how far the present is from fulfilling the great promise. The poor dying king looks back on the scandals of his later reign, on his own sin, on his children's lust, rebellion, and tragic deaths, and feels how far from the ideal he and they have been. He sees little token of growth toward realisation of that promise; but yet in spite of a stained past and a wintry present, he holds fast his confidence. That is the true temper of faith, which calls things that are not as though they were, and is hindered by no sense of unworthiness nor by any discouragements born of sense, from grasping with full assurance the promise of God. But the consensus of the most careful expositors inclines to take both clauses as questions, and then the meaning would be, 'Does not my house stand in such a relation to God that the righteous king will spring from it? It is, in this view, a triumphant question, expressing the strongest assurance, and the next clause would then lay bare the foundation of that relation of David's house as not its goodness, but God's covenant ['*for* He hath made']. Similarly the last clause would be a triumphant question of certainty, asserting in the strongest manner that God would cause that future salvation for the world, which was wrapped up in the coming of the king, and in which the dying man was sure that he should somehow have a share, dead though he were, to blossom and grow, though he had to die as in the winter, before the buds began to swell. The assurance of immortality, and of a share in all the blessings to come, bursts from the lips that are so soon to be silent.

IV. But the oracle cannot end with painting only blessings as flowing from the king's reign. If he is to rule in righteousness and the fear of the Lord, then he must fight against evil. If his coming causes the tender grass to spring, it will quicken ugly growths too. The former representation is only half the truth; and the threatening of destruction for the evil is as much a part of the divine oracle as the other. Strictly, it is 'wickedness'-the abstract quality rather than the concrete persons who embody it-which is spoken of. May we recall the old distinction that God loves the sinner while He hates the sin? The picture is vivid. The wicked-and all the enemies of this King are wicked, in the prophet's view-are like some of these thorn-brakes, that cannot be laid hold of, even to root them out, but need to be attacked with sharp pruning-hooks on long shafts, or burned where they grow. There is a destructive side to the coming of the King, shadowed in every prophecy of him, and brought emphatically to prominence in his own descriptions of his reign and its final issues. It is a poor kindness to suppress that side of the truth. Thorns as well as tender grass spring up in the quickening beams; and the best commentary on the solemn words which close David's closing song is the saying of the King himself: 'In the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them.'

20)2 Samuel 23:3-4

2 Samuel

THE DYING KING'S LAST VISION AND PSALM

THE ROYAL JUBILEE 1

2Sa. 23:3 - 2Sa. 23:4.

One of the Psalms ascribed to David sounds like the resolves of a new monarch on his accession. In it the Psalmist draws the ideal of a king, and says such things as, 'I will behave myself wisely, in a perfect way. I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes. I hate the work of them that turn aside. Mine eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me.' That psalm we may regard as the first words of the king when, after long, weary years, the promise of Samuel's anointing was fulfilled, and he sat on the throne.

My text comes from what purports to be the last words of the same king.

He looks back, and again the ideal of a monarch rises before him. The psalm, for it is a psalm, though it is not in the Psalter, is compressed to the verge of obscurity; and there may be many questions raised about its translation and its bearing. These do not need to occupy us now, but the words which I have selected for my text may, perhaps, best be represented to an English reader in some such sentence as this-'If [or when] one rules over men justly, ruling in the fear of God, then it shall be as the light of the morning when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds.' With such a monarch all the interests of his people will prosper. His reign will be like the radiant dawn of a cloudless day, and his land like the spring pastures when the fresh, green grass is wooed out of the baked earth by the combined influence of rain and sunshine. David's little kingdom was surrounded by giant empires, in which brute force, wielded by despotic will, ground men down, or squandered their lives recklessly. But the King of Israel had learned, partly by the experience of his own reign, and partly by divine inspiration, that such rulers are not true types of a monarch after God's own heart. This ideal king is neither a warrior nor a despot. Two qualities mark him, Justice and Godliness. Pharaoh and his like, oppressors, were as the lightning which blasts and scorches. The true king was to be as the sunshine that vitalises and gladdens. ‘He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass, and as showers that water the earth.’

We do not need to ask the question here, though it might be very relevant on another occasion, whether this portraiture is a mere ideal, floating *in vacuo,* or whether it is a direct prophecy of that expected Messianic king who was to realise the divine ideal of sovereignty. At all events we know that, in its highest and deepest significance, the picture of my text has lived and breathed human breath, in Jesus Christ, who both in His character and in His influence on the world, fulfilled the ideal that floated before the eyes of the aged king.

I do not need to follow the course of thought in this psalm any farther. You will have anticipated my motive for selecting this text now. It seems to me to gather up, in vivid and picturesque form, the thoughts and feelings which to-day are thrilling through an Empire, to which the most extended dominion of these warrior kings of old was but a speck. On such an occasion as this I need not make any apology, I am sure, for diverging from the ordinary topics of pulpit address, and associating ourselves with the many millions who to-day are giving thanks for Queen Victoria.

My text suggests two lines along which the course of our thoughts may run. The one is the personal character of this ideal monarch; the other is its effects on his subjects.

I. Now, with regard to the former, the pulpit is, in my judgment, not the place either for the discussion of current events or the pronouncing of personal eulogiums. But I shall not be wandering beyond my legitimate province, if I venture to try to gather into a few words the reasons, in the character and public life of our Queen, for the thankfulness of this day. Our text brings out, as I have said, two great qualities as those on which a throne is to be established, Justice and Godliness. Now, the ancient type of monarch was the fountain of justice, in a very direct sense; inasmuch as it was his office, not only to pronounce sentence on criminals, but to give decisions on disputed questions of right. These functions have long ceased to be exercised by our monarchs, but there is still room for both of those qualities-the Justice which holds an even balance between parties and strifes, the Righteousness which has supreme regard to the primary duties that press alike upon prince and pauper, and the Godliness which, as I believe, is the root from which all righteousness, as between man and man, and as between prince and subject, must ever flow. Morality is the garb of religion; religion is the root of morality. He, and only he, will hold an even balance and discharge his obligations to man, whose life is rooted in, and his acts under the continual influence of, the fear of God which has in it no torment, but is the parent of all things good.

We shall not be flatterers if we thankfully recognise in our Sovereign Lady the presence of both these qualities. I have spoken of the first inaugural words of the King of Israel, and the resolutions that he made. It is recorded that when, to the child of eleven years of age, the announcement was made that she stood near in the line of succession to the throne, the tremulous young lips answered, 'It is a great responsibility; but I will be good.' And all round the world to-day her subjects attest that the aged monarch has kept the little maiden's vow. Contrast that life with the lives of the other women who have sat on the throne of England. Think of the brilliant Queen, whose glories our greatest poets were not ashamed to sing, with the Tudor masterfulness in her, and not a little of the Tudor grossness and passion, and remember the blots that stained her glories. Think of her sister, the morbidly melancholy tool of priests, who goes down the ages branded with an epithet only too sadly earned. Think of another woman that ruled over England in name, the weak instrument of base intrigues. And then turn to this life which we are looking upon to-day. Think of the nameless scandals, the hideous immorality of the reigns that preceded hers, and you will not wonder that every decent man and every modest woman was thankful that, with the young girl, there came a breath of purer air into the foul atmosphere. I am old enough to remember hearing, as a boy, the talk of my elders as to the probabilities of insurrection if, instead of our Queen, there had come to the throne the brother of her two predecessors. The hopes of those early days have been more than fulfilled.

It is not for us to determine the religious character of others, and that is too sacred a region for us to enter; but this we may say, that in all these sixty years of diversified trial, there has been no act known to us outsiders inconsistent with the highest motive, the fear of the Lord; and some of us who have worshipped in the humble Highland church where she has bowed have felt that on the throne of Britain sat a Christian.

Nor need we forget how, from that root of fear of God, there has come that wondrous patience and faithfulness to duty, the form of ‘Justice’ which is possible for a constitutional monarch. We have little notion of how pressing and numerous and continual the royal duties must necessarily be. They have been discharged, even when the blow that struck all sunshine out of life left an irrepressible shrinking from pageantry and pomp. Joys come; joys go. Duties abide, and they have been done.

Nor can we forget, either, how the very difficult position of a constitutional monarch, with the semblance of power and the reality of narrow restrictions, has been filled. Our Sovereign has never set herself against the will of the people, expressed by its legitimate representatives, even when that will may have imposed upon her the sanction of changes which she did not approve. And that is much to say. We have seen young despots whose self-will has threatened to wreck a nation’s prosperity.

Nor can we forget how all the immense influence of position and personality has been thrown on the side of purity and righteousness. Even we outsiders know how, more than once or twice, she has steadfastly set her face against the admission to her presence of men and women of evil repute, and has in effect repeated David’s proclamation against vice and immorality at his accession: ‘He that worketh wickedness shall not dwell within my house.’

Nor must we forget, either, the simplicity, the beauty, the tenderness of her wedded and family life, her love of rural quiet, and of wholesome communion with Nature, and her eagerness to take her people into her confidence, as set forth in the book which, whatever its literary merits, speaks of her earnest appreciation of Nature and her wish for the sympathy of her subjects.

Then came the bolt from the blue, that sudden crash that wrecked the happiness of a life. Many of us, I have no doubt, remember that dreary December Sunday morning when, while the nation was standing in expectation of another calamity from across the Atlantic, there flashed through the land the news of the Prince's death; thrilling all hearts, and bringing all nearer to her, the lonely widow, than they had ever been in her days of radiant happiness. How pathetically, silently, nobly, devoutly, that sorrow has been borne, it is not for us to speak. She has become one of the great company of sad and lonely hearts, and in her sadness has shown an eager desire to send messages of sympathy to all whom she could reach, who were in like darkness and sorrow.

Brethren, I have ventured to diverge so far from the ordinary run of pulpit ministrations because I feel that to-day all of us, whatever may be our political or ecclesiastical relationships and proclivities, are one in thanking God for the monarch whose life has been without a stain, and her reign without a blot.

II. Now let me say a word as to the other line of thought which my text suggests, the effect of such a reign on the condition of the subject.

Now, of course, in the narrowly limited domain of that strange creation, a constitutional monarchy, there is far less opportunity for the Sovereign's direct influence on the Subject than there was in the ancient kingdoms of which David was thinking in his psalm. The marvellous progress of Britain during these sixty years is due, not to our Sovereign, but to a multitude of strenuous workers and earnest thinkers in a hundred different departments, as well as to the evolution of the gifts that come down to us from our ancient inheritance of freedom. But we shall much mistake if, for that reason, we set aside the monarch's character and influence as of no account in the progress

A supposition, which is a violent one, may be made which will set this matter in clearer light. Suppose that during these sixty years we had had a king on the throne of England like some of the kings we have had. The sentiment of loyalty is not now of such a character as that it will survive a vicious sovereign. If we had had such a monarch as I have hinted at, the loyalty of the good would for all these years have been suffering a severe strain, and the forces that make for evil would have been disastrously strengthened. Dangers escaped are unnoticed, but one twelvemonth of the reign of a profligate would shake the foundations of the monarchy, and would open the floodgates of vice; and we should then know how much the nation owed to the Queen whose life was pure, and who cast all her influence on the side of 'things that are lovely and of good report.'

Take another supposition. Suppose that during these years of wonderful transition, when the whole aspect of English politics and society has been transformed, we had had a king like George III., who set his opinion against the nation's will constitutionally expressed. Then no man knows with what storm and tumult, with what strife and injury, the inevitable transition would have been effected. Be sure of this, that the wise self-effacement of our Sovereign during these critical years of change is largely the reason why they have been years of peace, in which the new has mingled itself with the old without revolution or disturbance. It is due to her in a very large degree that

'Freedom broadens slowly down
From precedent to precedent.'

I need not dilate on the changed Britain that she looks out upon and rules to-day. I need not speak-there will be many voices to do that, in not altogether agreeable notes, for there will be a dash of too much self-complacency in them-about progress in material wealth, colonial expansion, the increase of education, the gentler manners, the new life that has been breathed over art and literature, the achievements in science and philosophy, the drawing together of classes, the bridging over of the great gulf between rich and poor by some incipient and tentative attempts at sympathy and brotherhood.

Nor need I dwell upon the ecclesiastical signs of the times, in which, mingled as they are, there is at least this one great good, that never since the early days have so large a proportion of Christian men been 'seeking after the things that make for peace,' and realising the oneness of all believers who hold the Headship of Christ.

All this review falls more properly into other hands than mine. Only I would put in a caution-do not let us mingle self-conceit with our congratulations; and, above all, do not let us 'rest and be thankful.' There is much to be done yet. Listening ears can catch on every side vague sounds that tell of unrest and of the stirrings into wakefulness of

'The spirit of the years to come,
Yearning to mix itself with life.'

I seem to hear all around me the rushing in the dark of a mighty current that is bearing down upon us. Great social questions are rapidly coming to the front-the questions of distribution of wealth, abolition of privilege, the relations of labour and capital, and many others are clamant to be dealt with at least, if not solved. There Is much to be done before Jesus Christ is throned as King of England. War has to be frowned down; the brotherhood of man has to be realised, temperance has to be much more largely practised than it is.

I need not go over the catalogue of *desiderata,* of *agenda*-things that have to be done-in the near future. Only this I would say-Christian men and women are the last people who should be ready to 'rest and be thankful,' for the principles of the Gospel that we profess, which have never been applied to the life of nations as they ought to be, will solve the questions which make the despair of so many in this generation. We shall best express our thankfulness for these past sixty years by each of us taking our part in the great movement which, in the inevitable drift of things to democracy, is going to 'cast the kingdom old into another mould,' and which will, I pray, make our people more of what John Milton long ago called them, 'God's Englishmen.' We have taught the nations many things. Our Parliament is called the Mother of Parliaments. Ours is

'The land where, girt with friends or foes,
A man may say the thing he will.'

It has taught the nations a tempered freedom, and that a monarchy may be a true republic. May we rise to the height of our privileges and responsibilities, and teach our subject peoples, not only mechanics, science, law, free trade, but a loftier morality, and the name of Him by whom kings reign and princes decree justice!

We, members of the free Churches of England, come seldom under the notice of royalty, and have little acquaintance with courts, but we yield to none in our recognition of the virtues and in our sympathy with the sorrows of the Sovereign Lady, the good woman, who rules these lands, and we all heartily thank God for her to-day, and pray that for long years still to come the familiar letters V.R. may stand, as they have stood to two generations, as the symbol of womanly purity and of the faithful discharge of queenly duty.

1 Preached on the occasion of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee.

21)2 Samuel 23:5-7

2 Samuel

THE DYING KING’S LAST VISION AND PSALM

2Sa. 23:1 - 2Sa. 23:7.

It was fitting that ‘the last words of David’ should be a prophecy of the true King, whom his own failures and sins, no less than his consecration and victories, had taught him to expect. His dying eyes see on the horizon of the far-off future the form of Him who is to be a just and perfect Ruler, before the brightness of whose presence and the refreshing of whose influence, verdure and beauty shall clothe the world. As the shades gather round the dying monarch, the radiant glory to come brightens. He departs in peace, having seen the salvation from afar, and stretched out longing hands of greeting toward it. Then his harp is silent, as if the rapture which thrilled the trembling strings had snapped them.

I. We have first a prelude extending to the middle of 2Sa. 23:3. In it there is first a fourfold designation of the personality of the Psalmist-prophet, and then a fourfold designation of the divine oracle spoken through him. The word rendered in 2Sa. 23:1 ‘saith’ is really a noun, and usually employed with ‘the Lord’ following, as in the familiar phrase ‘saith the Lord.’ It is used, as here, with the genitive of the human recipient, in Balaam’s prophecy, on which this is evidently modelled. It distinctly claims a divine source for the oracle following, and declares, at the outset, that these last words of David were really the faithful sayings of Jehovah. The human and divine elements are smelted together. Note the description of the human personality. First, the natural ‘David the son of Jesse,’ like ‘Balaam the son of Beor’ in the earlier oracle. The aged king looks back with adoring thankfulness to his early days and humble birth, as if he were saying, ‘Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should proclaim the coming King.’ Then follow three clauses descriptive of what ‘the son of Jesse’ had been made by the grace of God, in that he had been raised on high from his low condition of a shepherd boy, and anointed as ruler, not only by Samuel and the people, but by the God of their great ancestor, whose career had presented so many points of resemblance to his own, the God who still wrought among the nation which bore the patriarch’s name, as He had wrought of old; and that, besides his royalty, he had been taught to sing the sweet songs which already were the heritage of the nation. This last designation shows what David counted God’s chief gift to him,-not his crown, but his harp. It further shows that he regarded his psalms as divinely inspired, and it proves that already they had become the property of the nation. This first verse heightens the importance of the subsequent oracle by dwelling on the claims of the recipient of the revelation to be heard and heeded.

Similarly, the fourfold designation of the divine source has the same purpose, and corresponds with the four clauses of 2Sa. 23:1, ‘The Spirit of the Lord spake in [or “into”] me.’ That gives the Psalmist’s consciousness that in his prophecy he was but the recipient of a message. It wonderfully describes the penetrating power of that inward voice which clearly came to him from without, and as clearly spoke to him within. Words could not more plainly declare the prophetic consciousness of the distinction between himself and the Voice which he heard in the depths of his spirit. It spoke in him before he spoke his lyric prophecy. ‘His word was upon my tongue.’ There we have the utterance succeeding the inward voice, and the guarantee that the Psalmist’s word was a true transcript of the inward voice. ‘The God of Israel said,’ and therefore Israel is concerned in the divine word, which is not of private reference, but meant for all. ‘The Rock of Israel spake,’ and therefore Israel may trust the Word, which rests on His immutable faithfulness and eternal being.

II. The divine oracle thus solemnly introduced and guaranteed must be worthy of such a prelude. Abruptly, and in clauses without verbs, the picture of the righteous Ruler is divinely flashed before the seer's inward eye. The broken construction may perhaps indicate that he is describing what he beholds in vision. There is no need for any supplement such as 'There shall be,' which, however true in meaning, mars the vividness of the presentation of the Ruler to the prophet's sight. David sees him painted on the else blank wall of the future. When and where the realisation may be he knows not. What are the majestic outlines? A universal sovereign over collective humanity, righteous and God-fearing. In the same manner as he described the vision of the King, David goes on, as a man on some height telling what he saw to the people below, and paints the blessed issues of the King's coming.

It had been night before He came,-the night of ignorance, sorrow, and sin,-but His coming is like one of these glorious Eastern sunrises without a cloud, when everything laughs in the early beams, and, with tropical swiftness, the tender herbage bursts from the ground, as born from the dazzling brightness and the fertilising rain. So all things shall rejoice in the reign of the King, and humanity be productive, under His glad and quickening influences, of growths of beauty and fruitfulness impossible to it without these.

The abrupt form of the prophecy has led some interpreters to construe it as, 'When a king over men is righteous. . . then it is as a morning,' etc. But surely such a platitude is not worthy of being David's last word, nor did it need divine inspiration to disclose to him that a just king is a great blessing. The only worthy meaning is that which sees here, in words so solemnly marked as a special revelation closing the life of David, 'the vision of the future and all the wonder that should be,' when a real Person should thus reign over men. The explanation that we have here simply the ideal of the collective Davidic monarchy is a lame attempt to escape from the recognition of prophecy properly so called. It is the work of poetry to paint ideals, of prophecy to foretell, with God's authority, their realisation. The picture here is too radiant to be realised in any mere human king, and, as a matter of fact, never was so in any of David's successors, or in the whole of them put together. It either swings *in vacuo,* a dream unrealised, or it is a distinct prophecy from God of the reign of the coming Messiah, of whom David and all his sons, as anointed kings, were living prophecies. 'The Messianic idea entered on a new stage of development with the monarchy, and that not as if the history stimulated men's imaginations, but that God used the history as a means of further revelation by His prophetic Spirit.

III. The difficult 2Sa. 23:5, whether its first and last clauses be taken interrogatively or negatively, in its central part bases the assurance of the coming of the king on God's covenant [2Sa. 7:1 - 2Sa. 7:29], which is glorified as being everlasting, provided with all requisites for its realisation, and therefore 'sure,' or perhaps 'preserved,' as if guarded by God's inviolable sanctity and faithfulness. The fulfilment of the dying saint's hopes depends on God's truth. Whatever sense might say, or doubt whisper, he silences them by gazing on that great Word. So we all have to do. If we found our hopes and forecasts on it, we can go down to the grave calmly, though they be not fulfilled, sure that 'no good thing can fail us of all that He hath spoken.' Living or dying, faith and hope must stay themselves on God's word. Happy they whose closing eyes see the form of the King, and whose last thoughts are of God's faithful promise! Happy they whose forecasts of the future, nearer or more remote, are shaped by His word! Happy they who, in the triumphant energy of such a faith, can with dying lips proclaim that His promises overlap, and contain, all their salvation and all their desire!

If we read the first and last clauses negatively, with Revised Version and others, they, as it were, surround the kernel of clear-eyed faith, in the middle of the verse, with a husk, not of doubt, but of consciousness how far the present is from fulfilling the great promise. The poor dying king looks back on the scandals of his later reign, on his own sin, on his children's lust, rebellion, and tragic deaths, and feels how far from the ideal he and they have been. He sees little token of growth toward realisation of that promise; but yet in spite of a stained past and a wintry present, he holds fast his confidence. That is the true temper of faith, which calls things that are not as though they were, and is hindered by no sense of unworthiness nor by any discouragements born of sense, from grasping with full assurance the promise of God. But the consensus of the most careful expositors inclines to take both clauses as questions, and then the meaning would be, 'Does not my house stand in such a relation to God that the righteous king will spring from it? It is, in this view, a triumphant question, expressing the strongest assurance, and the next clause would then lay bare the foundation of that relation of David's house as not its goodness, but God's covenant ['*for* He hath made']. Similarly the last clause would be a triumphant question of certainty, asserting in the strongest manner that God would cause that future salvation for the world, which was wrapped up in the coming of the king, and in which the dying man was sure that he should somehow have a share, dead though he were, to blossom and grow, though he had to die as in the winter, before the buds began to swell. The assurance of immortality, and of a share in all the blessings to come, bursts from the lips that are so soon to be silent.

IV. But the oracle cannot end with painting only blessings as flowing from the king's reign. If he is to rule in righteousness and the fear of the Lord, then he must fight against evil. If his coming causes the tender grass to spring, it will quicken ugly growths too. The former representation is only half the truth; and the threatening of destruction for the evil is as much a part of the divine oracle as the other. Strictly, it is 'wickedness'-the abstract quality rather than the concrete persons who embody it-which is spoken of. May we recall the old distinction that God loves the sinner while He hates the sin? The picture is vivid. The wicked-and all the enemies of this King are wicked, in the prophet's view-are like some of these thorn-brakes, that cannot be laid hold of, even to root them out, but need to be attacked with sharp pruning-hooks on long shafts, or burned where they grow. There is a destructive side to the coming of the King, shadowed in every prophecy of him, and brought emphatically to prominence in his own descriptions of his reign and its final issues. It is a poor kindness to suppress that side of the truth. Thorns as well as tender grass spring up in the quickening beams; and the best commentary on the solemn words which close David's closing song is the saying of the King himself: 'In the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them.'

22)2 Samuel 23:15-17

A LIBATION TO JEHOVAH

2Sa. 23:15 - 2Sa. 23:17.

David's fortunes were at a low ebb. He was in hiding in his cave of Adullam, and a Philistine garrison held Bethlehem, his native place. He was little different from an outlaw at the head of a band of 'broken men,' but there were depths of chivalry and poetry in his heart. Sweltering in his cave in the fierce heat of harvest, he thought of his native Bethlehem; he remembered the old days when he had watered his flock at the well by its gate, or mingled with the people of the little town, in their evening assemblies round it. The memories of boyhood rose up radiant before him, and as he was immersed in the past, the grim present, the perils that threatened his life, the savage, gaunt rocks without a trace of greenness that girded him, the privations to which he was exposed, were all forgotten, and he longed for one more draught of the water that tasted so cool and sweet to memory. Three of his 'mighty men,' bound to him by loyal devotion and unselfish love, were ready to die to win for their chief a momentary gratification. So they slipped away from Adullam, 'brake through the host of the Philistines,' and brought back the longed-for draught. David's reception of the dearly-bought, sparkling gift was due to a noble impulse. The water seemed to him to be dyed with blood, and to be not water so much as 'lives of men.' It had become too precious to be used to satisfy his longing. It would be base self-indulgence to drink what had been won by such self-forgetting devotion. God only had the right to receive what men had risked their lives to obtain, and therefore he 'poured it out unto the Lord.'

The story gleams out of the fierce narratives in which it is embedded, like a flower blooming on some grim cliff. May we not learn lessons from it?

I. David's longing.

David, a fugitive in the cave, haunted by the 'nostalgia' that made Bethlehem seem so fair and dear, may stand for us as an example of the longings and thirsts that sometimes force themselves into consciousness in every soul. Below the bustle and strife of daily life, occupied as it must be with material and often ignoble things, below the hardness into which the world has compressed men's surface nature, there lies a yearning for the cool water that rises hard by the gate of our native home. True, it is with many of us overlaid for the most part by coarser desires, and may be as unlike our usual dominant longings and aims, as David's tender outbreak of sentiment was to the prevailing tenor of his life, in those days when he was an outlaw and a freebooter. But the longing, though often stifled, is not wholly quenched. It is misinterpreted by the man who is conscious of it, and far too often he tries to slake the thirst by fiery and drugged liquors which but make it more intense. Happy are they who know what it is that their parched palates crave, and have learned, while yet the knowledge avails, to say, 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God'! 'Blessed are they who thirst after' the water of the well of Bethlehem, 'for they shall be filled!'

II. The three heroes' devotion.

These three rough soldiers, lawless and fierce as they were, had been so mastered by their chief that they were ready to dare anything to pleasure him. Who would have looked for such delicacy of feeling and such enthusiastic self-surrender in such men?

They stand as grand instances of the height of devotion of which the rudest nature is capable, when once its love and loyalty to the Beloved are evoked.

How such deeds ennoble the lowest types of character, and make us think better of men, and more sadly of the contrast between their habitual characteristics and the possibilities that lie slumbering in their ignoble lives! There are sparks in the hard cold flint, if only they could be struck out. There is water in the rock, if only the right hand, armed with the wonder-working rod, smites it.

Let us not judge men too harshly by what they do and are, but let us try to bring their sleeping possibilities into conscious exercise.

Let us remember that love and self-sacrifice, which is the very outcome and natural voice of love, ennoble the most degraded.

But these heroic three may suggest to us a sadder thought. They were ready to die for David; would they have been as ready to die for God? These noble emotions of love, leading to glad flinging away of life to pleasure the beloved, are freely given to men, but too often withheld from God, We lavish on our beloveds or on our chosen leaders, a devotion that ought to shame us, when contrasted with the scantiness of our grudging devotion and self-surrender to Him. If we loved God a tenth part as ardently as we love our wives or husbands or parents or children, and were willing to do and bear as much for Him as we are willing to bear for them, how different our lives would be! We can love utterly, enthusiastically, self-forget-tingly, absorbed in the beloved, and counting all surrender of self to, and the sacrifice of life itself for, him or her a delight. Many of us do love men so. Do we love God so?

But these heroic three may suggest another thought. Their self-sacrificing love was illustrious; but there is a nobler, more wonderful, more soul-subduing instance of such love. They broke through the ranks of the Philistines to bring David a draught from the well of Bethlehem. Jesus has broken through the ranks of our enemies to bring us the water of which 'if a man drink, he shall live for ever.' If we would see the highest example of self-sacrificing love, we must turn to look, not on the instances of it that shine through the ages on the page of history, and make men thrill as they gaze, and think better of the human nature that can do such things, but on the Christ hanging on the Cross because He loved those who did not love Him, and giving His life a ransom for sinners.

III. David's reception of the water.

The chivalrous devotion of the three touched an answering chord in their chivalrous chief. His heart filled at the thought of what they had risked, and revolted from employing what had been thus won for no higher use than to gratify a piece of sentiment in himself. The sparkling water was too sacred to be taken for any baser use than as a libation to Jehovah. And who can doubt that the three were more fully repaid for their devotion, as David poured it out unto the Lord, than if he had drunk it eagerly up? His feeling and his act indicate beautiful delicacy of instinct, and swiftness of perception of how to requite the devotion of the three.

We may separate into its two parts the generous impulse which sprang as one whole in David's breast. There was the shrinking from using the water to slake his thirst merely, and there was the resolve to pour it out as a libation to God. Both parts of that whole may yield us profitable thoughts.

To risk their lives for the water was noble in the three; to have quaffed it as if it had been drawn like any other water from a well, would have been ignoble in David. There are things that it may be noble to give and ignoble to accept. There are sacrifices which we are not entitled to allow others to make for our sakes. Gratifications which can only be procured at the hazard of men's lives are too dearly bought.

Would not a civilisation, that draws much of its comforts and appliances from 'sweated industries,' and is languidly amused by seeing men and women performers peril their lives nightly, and lose them too, for its gratification, be the better for copying David's recoil from drinking 'the blood of men that went in jeopardy of their lives'? Is there not 'blood' on many a woman's ball-dress, on many an article of luxury, on many an amusement?

There are sacrifices which we have no right to accept from others. The three had no right to risk life for such a purpose, and David would have been selfish if he had drunk the water. Do not such thoughts lead us by contrast to Him who has done what none other can do? 'None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give his life a ransom for him'; but Jesus can and Jesus does, and what it would be impossible, and wrong if it were possible, for one man to do for another, He has done for us all, and what it would be base for a man to accept from another if that other could give it, it is blessed and the beginning of all nobleness of character for us to accept from Him. David would not drink because the cup seemed to him to be red with blood. Jesus offers to us a cup, not of cold water only but of 'water and blood,' and bids us drink of it and remember Him.

The generous devotion of the three kindled answering emotions in David's breast. It would be a churlish soul that was not warmed into some faint replica of such self-sacrifice, and most of us would be ashamed of ourselves if we were unmoved by such love. But does the supreme example of it affect us as much as the lesser examples of it do? How many of us stand before it like the peaks of the Alps that front full south, and lift an unmelted breastplate of snow to the midday sun! How many of us have lived all our lives in presence of Jesus' infinite love and self-surrender for us each, and never have felt one transient touch of answering love!

The other part of David's impulse was to offer to God what was too precious for his own use. That is the fitting destination of our most precious and prized possessions. And whatever is thus offered becomes more precious by being offered. The altar sanctifies and enhances the worth of the gift. What we give to God is more our own than if we had kept it to ourselves, and develops richer capacities of ministering to our delight. It is so with our greatest surrender, the surrender of ourselves. When we give ourselves to Jesus, He renders us back to ourselves, far better worth having than before. We are never so much our own as when we are wholly Christ's. And the same thing is true as to all our riches of mind, heart, or worldly wealth. If we wish to taste their most delicate and refined sweetness, let us give them to Jesus, and the touch of His hand, as He accepts them and gives them back to us, will leave a lingering fragrance that nothing else can impart. Was not the water from the well of Bethlehem sweeter to David as he poured it out unto the Lord than if he had greedily gulped it down?

1 Kings

1) 1 KINGS 1:28-39
2) 1 KINGS 3:5-15
3) 1 KINGS 4:25-34
4) 1 KINGS 5:1-12
5) 1 KINGS 6:7
6) 1 KINGS 8:54-58
7) 1 KINGS 8:59
8) 1 KINGS 8:60-63
9) 1 KINGS 9:1-9
10) 1 KINGS 10:1-13
11) 1 KINGS 11:4-13
12) 1 KINGS 11:26-43
13) 1 KINGS 12:1-17
14) 1 KINGS 12:25-33
15) 1 KINGS 16:23-33
16) 1 KINGS 17:1
17) 1 KINGS 17:2-16

18) 1 KINGS 18:12
19) 1 KINGS 18:25-39
20) 1 KINGS 19:1-8
21) 1 KINGS 19:9
22) 1 KINGS 19:9-18
23) 1 KINGS 20:11
24) 1 KINGS 21:1-16
25) 1 KINGS 21:20
26) 1 KINGS 22:3
27) 1 KINGS 22:7-8

1) 1 Kings 1:28-39

1 Kings

DAVID APPOINTING SOLOMON

1Ki. 1:28 - 1Ki. 1:39.

The earlier part of this chapter must be taken into account in order to get the right view of this incident. David’s eldest surviving son, Adonijah, had claimed the succession, and gathered his partisans to a feast. Nathan, alarmed at the prospect of such a successor, had arranged with Bathsheba that she should go to David and ask his public confirmation of his promise to her that Solomon should succeed him, and that then Nathan should seek an audience while she was with the king, and, as independently, should prefer the same request.

The plan was carried out, and here we see its results. The old king was roused to a flash of his ancient vigour, confirmed his oath to Bathsheba, and promptly cut the ground from under Adonijah’s feet by sending for the three who had remained true to him-Nathan, Benaiah, and Zadok-and despatching them without a moment’s delay to proclaim Solomon king, and then to bring him up to the palace and enthrone him. The swift execution of these decisive orders, and the burst of popular acclamation which welcomed Solomon’s accession, shattered the nascent conspiracy, and its supporters scattered in haste, to preserve their lives. The story may be best dealt with, for our purpose, by taking this brief summary and trying to draw lessons from it.

I. It points anew the truth that ‘whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.’ As Absalom, so Adonijah, had been spoiled by David’s over-indulgence [1Ki. 1:6], and having never had his wishes checked, was now letting his unbridled wishes hurry him into rebellion. Nor was that fault of David’s the only one which brought about the miserable squabbles round his deathbed, as to who should wear the crown which had not yet fallen from his head. Eastern monarchies are familiar with struggles for the crown between the sons of different mothers when their father dies. David had indulged in a multitude of wives, and his last days were darkened by the resulting intrigues of his sons. No doubt, too, Solomon was disliked by his brethren as the child of Bathsheba, and the shame of David’s crime was an obstacle in his younger son’s way. Thus, as ever, his evil deeds came home to roost, and the poisonous seed which he had sown grew up and waved, a bitter harvest, which he had to reap. Repentance and forgiveness did not neutralise the natural consequences of his sin. Nor will they do so for us. God often leaves them to be experienced, that the experience may make us hate the sins the more.

II. The sad defection to Adonijah of such tried friends as Joab and Abiathar has its lesson. The reason for Joab’s treachery is plain. He had been steadily drifting away from David for years. His fierce temper could not brook the king’s displeasure on account of his murders of Abner and Amasa, and his slaying of Absalom had made the breach irreparable. No doubt, David had made him feel that he loved and trusted him no longer; and his old comrade in many a fight, Benaiah, had stepped into the place which he had once filled. Professional rivalry had darkened into bitter bate. Joab commanded the native-born Israelites; Benaiah, the ‘Cherethites and Pelethites,’ who are now generally regarded as foreign mercenaries. They were David’s bodyguard, and were probably as heartily hated by Joab and the other Israelite soldiers as they were trusted by David. So there were reasons enough for Joab’s abetting an insurrection which would again make him the foremost soldier. He wanted to be indispensable, and would prop the throne as long as its occupant looked only to him as its defender. Besides, he probably felt that he would have little chance of winning distinction in a kingdom which was to be a peaceful one.

Abiathar’s motives are unexplained, but if we notice that he had been obliged to acquiesce in the irregular arrangement of putting the high-priest’s office into commission, we can understand that he bore no goodwill to Zadok, his colleague, or to David for making the latter so. Self was at the bottom of these two renegades’ action. The fair fellowship, which had been made the closer because of dangers and privations faced together, crumbled away before the disintegrating influences of petty personal jealousies. When once self-regard gets in, it is like the trickle of water in the cracks of a rock, which freezes in winter and splits the hardest stone. No common action for a great cause is possible without the suppression of sidelong looks towards private advantage. Joab and Abiathar tarnished a life’s devotion and broke sacred bonds, because they thought of themselves rather than of God’s will. Surely they must have had some pangs as they sat at Adonijah’s feast, when they thought of the decrepit old king lying in his chamber up on Zion, and remembered what he and they had come through together.

III. We may note the pathetic picture of decaying old age which is seen in David. He was not very old in years, being about seventy, but he was a worn-out man. His early hardships had told on him, and now he lay in the inner chamber, the shadow of himself. His love for Bathsheba had died down, as would appear both from her demeanour before him, and from her ignorance of his intentions as to his successor. She was little or nothing to him now. He seems to have been torpidly unaware of what was going on. The noise of Adonijah’s revels had not disturbed his quiet. He had not even taken the trouble to designate his successor, though ‘the eyes of all Israel were upon him that he should tell who was to sit on his throne after him’ [1Ki. 1:20]. Such neglect was criminal in the circumstances, and brings out forcibly the weary indifference which had crept over him. Contrast that picture with the early days of swift energy and eager interest in all things. Is this half-comatose old man the David who flashed like a meteor and struck swift as a thunderbolt but a few years before? Yes, and a like collapse of power befalls us all, if life is prolonged. Those who most need the lesson will be least touched by it; but let not the young glory in their strength, for it soon fades away; and let them give the vigour of their early days to God, that, when the years come in which they shall say, ‘I have no pleasure in them,’ they may be able, like David, to look back over a long life and say, with him, that the Lord ‘hath redeemed my soul out of all adversity.’

IV. We note the flash of fire which blazed up in the dying embers of David’s life. The old lion could be roused yet, and could strike when roused. It took much to shake him out of his torpor. Nathan’s plan of bringing the double influence of Bathsheba and himself to bear was successful beyond what he had hoped. All that they desired was a formal declaration of Solomon as successor. They knew that the king’s name was still dear enough to all Israel to ensure that his wish would settle the succession; and they would have been content to have left the actual entrance of Solomon on office till after David’s death, so sure were they that his word was still a spell. But the old king, shaking off his languor, as a lion does the drops from his mane, goes beyond their wishes, and strikes one decisive blow as with a great paw, and no second is needed. Without a moment’s delay, he sends for the trusty three, and bids them act on the instant. So down to Gihon goes the procession, with the youthful prince seated on his father’s mule, in token of his accession, the trusty bodyguard round him with Benaiah at their head, and the great prophet Nathan, side by side with the high-priest Zadok, representing the divine sanction of the solemn act.

It would take stronger men than the spoiled Adonijah and his revellers to upset anything which that determined company resolved to do. The lad is anointed with the holy oil which Zadok as high-priest had the right to bring forth from the temporary sanctuary. That signified and effected the communication from above of qualifications for the kingly office, and indicated divine appointment. Then out blared the trumpets, and the glad people shouted ‘God save the king!’ What thoughts filled the young heart of Solomon as he stood silent there his vision in Gibeon may partly tell. But the distant roar of acclaim reached Adonijah and his gang as they sat at their too hasty banquet.

They had begun at the wrong end. The feast should have closed, not inaugurated, the dash for the crown. They who feast when they should fight are likely to end their mirth with sorrow. David’s one stroke was enough. They were as sure as Nathan and Bathsheba had been that the declaration of his wish would carry all Israel with it, and so they saw that the game was up, and there was a rush for dear life. The empty banqueting-hall proclaimed the collapse of a rebellion which had no brains to guide it, and no reason to justify it. Let us learn that, though ‘the race is not always to the swift,’ promptitude of action, when we are sure of God’s will, is usually a condition of success. Life is too short, and the work to be done too pressing and great, to allow of dawdling. ‘I made haste, and delayed not, but made haste to keep Thy commandments.’ Let us learn, too, from Adonijah’s fiasco, to see the end of a thing before we commit ourselves to it, and to have the work done first before we think of the feast.

Nathan and Bathsheba and David all believed that God had willed Solomon’s succeeding to the throne. No doubt, the reason for their belief was the divine word to David through Nathan [2Sa. 7:12], which designated a son not yet born as his successor, and therefore excluded Adonijah as well as Absalom. But, while they believed this, they did not therefore let Adonijah work his will, and leave God to carry out His purposes. Their belief animated their action. They knew what God willed, and therefore they worked strenuously to effect that will. We may bewilder our brains with speculations about the relation between God’s sovereignty and man’s freedom, but, when it comes to practical work, we have to put out the best and most that is in us to prevent God’s will from being thwarted by rebellious men, and to ensure its being carried into effect through our efforts, ‘for we are God’s fellow-workers.’

2) 1 Kings 3:5-15

1 Kings

A YOUNG MAN’S WISE CHOICE OF WISDOM

1Ki. 3:5 - 1Ki. 3:15.

The new king was apparently some nineteen or twenty years old on his accession. He stepped at once out of seclusion and idleness to bear the whole weight of the kingdom. The glories of David’s reign, his brother Adonijah’s pretensions to the crown, the smouldering hostility of Saul’s old partisans, made his position difficult and his throne unsteady. No doubt, ‘the weight of too much dignity’ pressed on the youth, and this dream found a point of origin in his waking thoughts. God does not thus reveal Himself to men who seek Him not; and the offer in the vision is but the repetition of what Solomon felt in many a waking moment of meditation that God was saying to him, and the choice he makes in it is the choice that he had already made. He who seeks wisdom first is already wise.

I. Note the wide possibilities opened by the divine offer. Our narrative brings that gracious offer into connection with Solomon’s lavish sacrifice before the Tabernacle at Gibeon. ‘God loveth a cheerful giver’ and because these thousand burnt offerings meant devotion and thankfulness, therefore He who lets no man be the poorer for what he gives to Him, and is honoured most, not by our givings to, but by our takings from Him, comes in the quiet night, and puts the key of all His treasures into the young king’s hands. In a very real sense this divine voice is but the putting into words of the fact as to every young life. The all but boundless possibilities before every young man and woman give solemnity to their position, which they too often do not recognise till youth is past. The future lies blank before them, ready to receive what they choose to write on its page. Once written, it is indelible. They are still free from the limitations of habit and associations. They have still the capacity and the opportunity of choice. There are limits, of course, but still it is scarcely exaggeration to say that a man may become almost anything he likes, if he strongly wills it when young, and sticks to his resolve. When the liquid iron flows from the blast furnace, it may be run into any mould; but it soon cools and hardens, and obstinately keeps its shape, in spite of hammers.

If young men and women could but see the possibilities of their youth, and the issues that hang on early choice, as clearly as they will see them some day, there would be fewer wasted mornings of life and fewer gloomy sunsets. But the misery is that so many do not choose at all, but just let things slide, and allow themselves to be moulded by whatever influence happens to be strongest. For one man who goes wrong by deliberate choice, with open eyes, there are twenty who simply drift. Unfortunately, there is more evil than good in the world; and if a lad takes his colour from his surroundings, the chances are terribly against his coming to anything high, noble, or pure. This world is no place for a man who cannot say 'No.' If we are like the weeds in a stream, and let it decide which way we shall point, we shall be sure to point downwards. It would do much to secure the choice of the Good, if there were a clear recognition by all young persons of the fact that they have the choice to make, and are really making it unconsciously. If they could be brought, like Solomon, to put their ruling wish into plain words, many who are not ashamed to yield to unworthy desires would be ashamed to speak them out baldly. Let each ask himself, 'Suppose that I had to say out what I want most, dare I avow before my own conscience, to say nothing of God, what it is?

Looked at from a somewhat different point of view, God's offer to Solomon presupposes God's knowledge and approval of his wishes. He does not give blank cheques to those whom He cannot trust to fill them up rightly. When James and John tried to commit Jesus to a blind promise 'that Thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall ask of Thee,' their answer was a question as to what they wished. 'Delight thyself also in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.' God loves us too well to let us have *carte blanche* unless our wills run parallel with His. He is a foolish and cruel father who promises compliance with all his child's unknown wishes. Not such is our Father's loving discipline. It is to those who 'abide in Christ,' and have Him abiding in them, moulding their longings and prayers, that the great promise is sealed: 'Ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.'

II. Note next the wise choice of wisdom. 'Had not Solomon been wise before, he had not known the worth of wisdom. The dunghill cocks of this world cannot know the price of this pearl; those that have it know that all other excellencies are but trash and rubbish unto it.' Solomon's prayer shows the temper with which he entered on his reign. There is no exultation; his serious and clear-eyed spirit sees in rule a heavy task. He contrasts his inexperienced rawness with the 'truth and righteousness' and veteran maturity of his great predecessor, and trembles to think that he, a mere lad, sits on David's throne. But he pleads with God that He has made him king, and implies that therefore God is bound to fit him for his office. That is the boldness permitted to faith,-to remind God of His own past acts, which pledge Him to give what He has put us into circumstances to need.

With beautiful humility, Solomon dwells on his youth and inexperience, and on the vastness of the charge laid on him. All these considerations are the motives for his choice of a gift, and also pleas with God to grant his request.

He asks for the practical wisdom needed for ruling in these old days, when the king was judge as well as ruler and captain. Was this the highest gift that he could have asked or received? Surely the deep longings of his father for communion with God were yet better. No doubt the ‘wisdom’ of the Book of Proverbs is religion and morality as well as true thinking, but the ‘understanding heart to judge Thy people’ which Solomon asked and received is narrower and more secular in its meaning. There is no sign in his biography that he ever had the deep inward devotion of his father. After the poet-psalmist came the prosaic and keen-sighted shrewd man of affairs. The one breathed his ardent soul into psalms, which feed devotion to-day; the other crystallised his discernment in ‘three thousand proverbs,’ and, though his ‘songs were one thousand and five’ they touched a lower range, both of poetry and religious feeling, than his father’s, as may be expressed by calling them ‘songs,’ not ‘psalms.’

But though the request is not the highest, it may well be taken as a pattern by the young. Note the view of his position from which it rises. To Solomon dignity meant duty; and his crown was not a toy, but a task. The responsibilities, not the enjoyments, of his station were uppermost in his mind. That is the only right view to take. Youth is meant to be enthusiastic, and to feed its aspirations on noble ideals, and if, instead of that, it does as too many do, especially in countries where wealth abounds, namely, regards life as a garden of delights, or sometimes as a sty where young men may wallow in ‘pleasures,’ then farewell to all hopes of high achievements or of an honourable career. Youthful ideals will fade fast enough; but alas for the life which had none to begin with! Note the sense of insufficiency for his task. Youth is prone to be over-confident, and to think that it can do better than its fathers, who were as confident in their time. There is a false humility which flattens the spirit and keeps from plain duty; and there is a true lowliness which feels that the task must be attempted, though the heart may shrink, and which impels to prayer for fitness not its own. He who tells God his consciousness of impotence, and asks Him to supply His strength to its weakness and His wisdom to its inexperience, will never shirk work because it is too great, nor ever fail to find power according to his need.

III. Note God's answer. Solomon gets his wish, and much which he had not asked besides. The divine answer is in two parts. First, the reasons for the large gift; and second, the details of the gift. His not wishing material good was the very reason why he obtained it. That is not always so; for often enough a man whose whole nature is sharpened to one point, in the intensity of his desire to make money, will succeed. But what then? He will be none the better, but the poorer, for his wealth. But this is always true,- that the people who do not make worldly good their first object are the people who can be most safely trusted with it, and who get most enjoyment out of it. Whether in the precise form of the gift to Solomon or not, outward good does attend a life which sets duty before pleasure, and desires most to be able to do it. All earthly good is exalted by being put second, and degraded as well as corrupted by being put first. The water lapped up in the palm, as the soldier marches, is sweeter than the abundant draughts swilled down by self-indulgence. 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God, . . . and all these things shall be added unto you.'

Note the largeness of the gift. When God is pleased with a man's prayers, He gives more than was asked, and so teaches us to be ashamed of the smallness of our expectations, and widens our desires by His overlapping bestowments. First, He gives the wisdom asked. Dependence on God, rising from the sense of our own ignorance, has a wonderful power of bringing illumination, even as to small matters of practical duty. Solomon asked it, to guide him in his judicial decisions; and the first case to which it was applied, when received, was a miserable quarrel between two disreputable women. A devout heart, purged from self-conceit, is often gifted with a piercing wisdom before which the crafty shrewdness of the world is abashed. We cannot be 'wise as serpents' unless we are 'harmless as doves.' The world may think such 'wisdom' folly, but she will be 'justified of her children.' Is the saying of James's Epistle a reminiscence of Solomon's dream, 'If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, . . . and it shall be given him'?

Then follows the grant of the unasked goods,-riches, honour, and length of days. Surely we hear an echo of these promises in that magnificent description of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs: 'Length of days is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour' These and similar gifts may or may not follow our choice of divine wisdom as our truest good If we have really chosen it, we shall regard them as make-weights, to be thankfully received and rightly used, but not as indispensable. If we pursue wisdom for the sake of getting these, we shall lose both it and them. If we have set our desires most earnestly on the most worthy things, which are God's love and a character hallowed by His grace, we shall be rich indeed, whether what the world calls wealth be ours or no; and our days will be long enough if in them we have been prepared for the fuller wisdom and undying life of heaven.

Solomon realised his youthful aspirations. The only way to be sure of getting what we wish, is to wish what God desires to give,-even Himself,-and to ask it of Him. Solomon, like many a young man, outgrew his early 'dream.' Was he happier or wiser when he was a worn-out voluptuary, smiling with cynical scorn at his young self, or when, with generous enthusiasm, he felt the solemnity of life and the awfulness of duty, and asked God to help his insufficiency? Was not the dream truer and more real than the waking hours of profligacy and unreal 'enjoyment'?

3) 1 Kings 4:25-34

1 Kings

THE GREAT GAIN OF GODLINESS

1Ki. 4:25 - 1Ki. 4:34.

The glories of Solomon's reign kindle the writer of this Book of Kings to patriotic enthusiasm, all the more touching if, as is probable, he wrote during Israel's exile. The fair vision of the past would make the sad present still sadder. But it is not patriotism only which guides his pen; he recognises that Solomon's glory was the result of Solomon's religion, and by portraying it he would teach the eternal truth that godliness hath 'promise of the life that now is' as well as 'of that which is to come.' The passage brings out three characteristics of Solomon's reign and character: the peace enjoyed by Israel during his time, his wealth, and his wisdom.

I. That beautiful phrase for a time of secure enjoyment of modest, material good in a simple state of agricultural society, 'dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree' occurs frequently in the Old Testament, and breathes the very essence of a calm life of rural felicity and restful enjoyment of wholesome joys. How different from the feverish ideal predominant in our great cities to-day! Which is the nobler and the more likely to yield abiding content and to be the ally of high and serious thought-this antique picture of leisurely, unambitious lives, or the scramble for wealth which destroys repose, and is so busy getting that it has no time either rightly to enjoy, or nobly to expend, its wealth? Those who have their country's truest prosperity at heart may well sigh for the return of the vanished ideal of Solomon's days; and those who would make the most of themselves must in some measure seek to conform their own lives to it.

But another view may be taken of this picture of national prosperity. Remember the time at which it was painted,-a time when the prosperity of a nation was thought to consist in conquest, and when the arts of peace were despised. How far beyond his era was the king who set his highest glory in securing for his people tranquil lives on their fertile homesteads, and condemned the vulgar glory of the conqueror! How far beyond his era was the writer who felt that the fairest page in his book was not that which told of battles and triumphs, but that which portrayed a peaceful reign, when swords were turned into ploughshares! The world has not yet learned that the highest function of government is to promote individual prosperity. The vulgar, wicked notion of 'glory' bewitches the nations still. A Europe, armed to the teeth and staggering under the weight of its weapons, has need to go to school to this old Hebrew ideal. 'They didn't know everything down in Judee,' but they knew that peace has nobler victories than war has. The people who see nothing in the world's history but natural evolution have a hard nut to crack in accounting for the singular fact that the Jew somehow or other had got hold of a truth to which the most advanced nations to-day have scarcely grown up.

II. The wealth of Solomon is illustrated by his large equipment of chariots and horsemen. The older habits of the nation had not favoured the use of either, and their employment by Solomon was a sign of growing luxury, which had the seeds of evil in it. But the novelty was characteristic of the change coming over Israel in his day, and of its closer intercourse with other nations. The number of forty thousand for the stalls of the horses is an evident clerical error, which is corrected in the parallel passage in 2Ch. 9:25 to the more probable number of four thousand. A well-organised staff looked after provisioning the cavalry and chariot horses wherever they were quartered. This one instance of Solomon's resources should be connected with the other details of these. The intention of all is, not only to magnify his wealth, but to bring out the fulfilment of the promise made to him as part of the reward of his prayer for wisdom, that he should have the inferior good which he had not asked, 'both riches and honour.'

The principle which the writer of this book would confirm and exemplify is, that to the man who seeks first the kingdom of God and His righteousness all these things shall be added. Now the whole order of supernatural providences in the Old Testament was directed to making material prosperity depend on obedience to God. And we cannot assert that the New Testament order has the same purpose in view. 'Prosperity was the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New.' But even in Old Testament times outward prosperity did not always follow godliness, and the problem which has tortured all generations had already been raised, as the Book of Job and Psalm lxxiii show.

Undoubtedly, religion does contribute to prosperity. The natural tendency of the course of life which Christianity enjoins is to lead to moderate, modest success in a worldly point of view. Not many millionaires owe their millions to the practice of Christian virtues, but many a man owes his elevation from poverty to modest competence to the character and habits which his religion has stamped on him. People who get converted in the slums soon get out of the slums.

But, whether Christianity helps a man to worldly success or not, it helps him to get all the good out of the world that the world can give. It may, or may not, give dainties, but it will make brown bread sweet. It may, or may not, give wealth, but it will make the ‘little that a righteous man hath better than the riches of many wicked.’ They who know no higher good than earth can yield know not the highest good of earth; they who put worldly prosperity and treasure second find them far more precious and sweet than when they ranked them as first.

III. But the crown of Solomon’s gifts was his wisdom. And his elevation of intellectual and moral endowments above material good is as remarkable as his similar elevation of peace above warlike fame, and suggests the same questions as to the source of ideas so far ahead of what was then the world’s point of view. Observe that Solomon’s ‘wisdom’ in all its departments is traced to God its giver. Observe, too, that expression ‘largeness of heart,’ by which is meant, not width of quick sympathy or generosity, but what we should call comprehensive intellect. The ‘heart’ is the centre of the personal being, from which thoughts as well as affections flow, and the phrase here points to thoughts rather than to affections.

Solomon, then, was a many-sided student, and his ‘genius’ showed itself in very various forms. He lived before the days of specialists. The region of knowledge was so limited that a man could be master in many departments. Nowadays the mass has become so unmanageable that, to know one subject thoroughly, we have to be ignorant of many, like the scholar who had given his life to the study of the Greek noun, and, dying, lamented that he had not confined himself to the dative case! Practical wisdom, which had its field In doing justice between his subjects; shrewd observation of life, with wit to discern resemblances and to put wisdom into homely, short sayings; poetic sensibility and the gift of melodious speech; and, added to these manifold endowments, interest in, and rudimentary knowledge of, natural history and botany, make the points specified as Solomon’s wisdom.

‘A man so various that he seemed to be
Not one, but all mankind’s epitome,’-

the first and greatest of the few students or philosophers who have sat on thrones.

But the main thing to notice is that in Solomon we see exemplified the normal relation between religion and intellectual power and learning. Judge, artist, scientist, and all other thinkers and students, draw their power from God, and should use it for Him. And, on the other hand, Solomon's example is a rebuke to those narrow-minded Christians who look askance at men of learning, letters, or science, as well as to those still more narrow-minded men of intellectual ability who think that science and religion must be sworn foes. If our religion is what it should be, it will widen our understanding all round.

'Let knowledge grow from more to more, But more of reverence in us dwell.'

4) 1 Kings 5:1-12

1 Kings

GREAT PREPARATIONS FOR A GREAT WORK

1Ki. 5:1 - 1Ki. 5:12.

The building of the Temple was begun in the fourth year of Solomon's reign [1Ki. 6:1]. The preparations for so great a work must have taken much time, so that the arrangement with Hiram recorded in this passage was probably made very early in the reign. That probability is strengthened if we suppose, as we must do, that the embassy from Hiram mentioned in 1Ki. 5:1 was sent to congratulate Solomon on his accession. If so, the latter's proposal to get timber and stones from the Lebanon would be made at the very commencement of the reign. Three years would not be more than enough to get the material ready and transported. Great designs need long preparation. Raw haste wastes time; deliberation is as needful before beginning as rapid action is when we have begun.

I. 1Ki. 5:3 - 1Ki. 5:5 set forth very forcibly the motives which impelled the young king to the work, and may suggest to us the motives which should urge us to diligence in building a better temple than he reared. He begins by reference to his father's foiled wish, and to the reason why David could not build the house. Not only was it inappropriate that a warlike king should build it, but it was impossible that, whilst his thoughts were occupied and his resources taxed by war, he should devote himself to such a work. In Assyria and Egypt the great warrior kings are the great temple-builders, but a divine decorum forbade it to be so in Israel.

Solomon next thankfully describes his own happier circumstances. Observe his designation of Jehovah in1 Kings 5:4 as ‘my God,’ and compare with 1Ki. 5:3, where He is called David’s God. The son had inherited the divine protection and the father’s sense of personal relation to Jehovah. That is a better legacy than a throne. Well had it been for Solomon if he had held by the faith of his first days of royalty! Such a sense of a personal bond of love protecting on the one hand, and love trusting and obeying on the other, is the spring of all true service of God, whether it is busied in temple-building or in anything else.

We note also the grateful recognition of benefits received, and the tracing of peace and outward prosperity to God’s care. There was not a cloud in the sky. The horizon was clear all round, and it was ‘the Lord my God,’ who had made this ease for Solomon. We are often more ready to recognise God’s hand in sorrows than in joys. When He smites, we try to say ‘It is the Lord!’ Do we try to say it when all things are smooth and bright?

The effect of blessings should be thankfulness, and the proof of thankfulness is service. So Solomon did not take prosperity as an inducement to selfish luxurious repose, but heard in it God’s call to a great task. If all the rich men and all the leisurely women who call themselves Christians would do likewise, there would be plenty of workers and of resources for Christ’s service, which now sorely lacks both. How many of such ‘lay up treasure for themselves, and are not rich toward God’! How many fritter away their leisure in vanities, having time for any amusement or folly, but none for Christian service!

The man whom Jesus called ‘Thou fool!’ not the wise king, is the pattern for a sad number of professing Christians. ‘Thou hast much goods laid up for many years.’ What then? ‘I purpose to build an house for the name of the Lord’? By no means. ‘I will build greater barns, and that will give me something to do, and then I will take mine ease.’

We note, too, that Solomon was impelled to his great work by the knowledge that God had appointed him to do it. The divine word concerning himself, spoken to his father, sounded in his ears, and gave him no rest till he had set about obeying it [1Ki. 5:5]. The motives of the great temple-builders of old, as they themselves expound them in hieroglyphics and cuneiform, were largely ostentation and the wish to outdo predecessors; but Solomon was moved by thankfulness and by obedience to his father's will, and still more, to God's destination of him. If we would look at our positions and blessings as he looked at his in the fair dawning of his reign, we should find abundant indications of God's will regarding our work.

Solomon uses a remarkable expression as to the purpose of the Temple. It is to be 'an house for the *name* of the Lord.' That is not the same as 'for the Lord.' Pagan temples might be intended by their builders for the actual residence of the god, but Solomon knew that the heaven of heavens could not contain Him, much less this house which he was about to build. We are fairly entitled, then, to lay stress on that phrase, 'the Name.' It means the whole self-revelation of God, or, rather, the character of God as made known by that self-revelation.

The Temple was, then, to be the place in which the God who fills earth and heaven was to manifest Himself, and where His servants were to behold and reverence Him as manifested. The Shechinah was the symbol, and in one aspect was a part, of that self-revelation. However, in common speech the Temple was spoken of as the house of Jehovah. The same thought which is expressed in Solomon's fuller phrase underlay the expression,-*He* dwelt 'not in temples made with hands' but His *name* was set there, and the structure was reared, not so much for Him as that worshippers might there meet Him.

II. The rest of the passage deals with Solomon's request to Hiram, and the preparation of the material for the Temple. Solomon's first care was to secure timber and stone. His own dominions can never have been well wooded, and there are many indications that the great central knot of mountainous land, which included the greater part of his kingdom, was comparatively treeless. He therefore proposed to Hiram to supply timber from the great woods on Lebanon, which have now nearly died out, and offered liberal payment.

The parallel account in 2 Chronicles makes Solomon offer specified quantities of provisions for Hiram's workmen, and makes Hiram accept the terms. 1Ki. 5:11 of this chapter says that the provisions named there were for the Tyrian king's 'household.' This may possibly mean the workmen, who would be regarded as Hiram's slaves, but, more probably, 'household' means 'court,' and Solomon had not only to feed the army of workmen, but to supply as much again for the great establishment which Hiram kept up. The little slip of seacoast, with the mountain rising sharply behind, which made Hiram's kingdom, could not grow enough for his people's wants. His country was 'nourished' by Palestine, long centuries after this time [Act. 12:20], and the same was the case in Solomon's period. In 1Ki. 5:11, the quantity of oil is impossibly small as compared with that of wheat. 2 Chronicles reads 'twenty thousand' instead of 'twenty,' and the Septuagint inserts 'thousand' in 1Ki. 5:11, which is probably correct.

With all his Oriental politeness and probably real wish to oblige a powerful neighbour, Hiram was too true a Phoenician not to drive a good bargain. He was king of 'a nation of shopkeepers,' and was quite worthy of the position. 'Nothing for nothing' seems to have been his motto, even with friends. He would love Solomon, and send him flowery congratulations, and talk as if all he had was his ally's, but when it came to settling terms he knew what his cedars were worth, and meant to have their value.

There are a good many people who get mixed up with religious work, and talk as if it were very near their hearts, who have as sharp an eye to their own advantage as he had. The man who serves God because he gets paid for it, does not serve Him. The Temple may be built of the timber and stones that he has supplied, but he sold them, and did not give them, therefore he has no part in the building.

How different the uncalculating lavishness of Solomon! He knows no better use for treasures than to expend them on God's service, and 'all for love, and nothing for reward.' That Is the true temper for Christian work. He to whom Christ has given Himself should give himself to Christ; and he who has given himself should and will keep back nothing, nor seek for cheap ways of serving the Lord, He who gives all, be it two mites, or a fishing-boat and some torn nets, or great wealth like that which Solomon found in his father's treasuries and devoted to building the Temple, gives much; and he who gives less than he can gives little.

Solomon's work was, after all, outward work, and fitter for that early age than the imitation of it would be now. The days for building temples and cathedrals are past. The universal religion hallows not Gerizim nor Jerusalem, but every place where souls seek God The spiritual religion asks for no shrines reared by men's hands; for Jesus Christ is the true Temple, where God's name is set, and where men may behold the manifested Jehovah, and meet with Him. But we have work to do for Christ, and a temple to build in our own souls, and a stone or two to lay in the great Temple which is being built up through the ages. Well for us if we use our resources and our leisure, for such ends with the same promptitude, thankful surrender, and sense of fulfilling God's purpose, as animated the young king of Israel!

5) 1 Kings 6:7

1 Kings

BUILDING IN SILENCE

1Ki. 6:7.

The Temple was built in silence. It 'rose like an exhalation.'

'No hammer fell, no ponderous axes rung, Like some tall palm the mystic fabric sprung.'

Perhaps it was merely for convenience of transport and to save time that the stones were dressed in the quarries, but more probably the silence was due to an instinct of reverence. We may fairly use it as suggesting two thoughts.

I. How God's house is mostly built in silence. 'The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation.'

[1] In reference to its advance in the world. Destructive work is noisy, constructive work is silent. God was in 'the still small voice,' not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire. Christ's own career, how silent it was! Drums are loud and empty. The spread of the kingdom was unnoticed by the world's great ones-Caesars, philosophers, patricians, and it silently grew underground. Hence may flow-

[a] An encouragement to those whose work is inconspicuous.

[b] A lesson not to mistake noise and notoriety for spiritual progress.

[c] Guidance as to our expectations of the advance of Christ's kingdom. It will transform society by slow, often unnoticed, degrees, by radical change of individuals' habits. The elevation of humanity will be slow, like the imperceptible rise of the Norwegian coast. Sudden changes are short-lived changes. 'Lightly come, lightly go.' What matures slowly will last long.

[2] In reference to its growth in our souls.

Silence is needed for that. There must be much still communion and quiet reflection. The advance in the Christian life is variously likened to a battle, since there are antagonists and struggle is needed to overcome; and to vegetable or corporeal growth, which the mysterious indwelling life works without effort and almost without consciousness, but it is also likened to the erection of a building, in which there is continuity, and each successive course of masonry is the foundation for that above it. That work of building is work that must be done in silence. If we are to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, we must silently drink in the sunshine and dew, and so prosperously pass from blade to ear, and thence to full corn in the ear.

Surely nothing is more needed in these days of noisy advertisement, and measurement of the importance of things by the noise that they can make, than this lesson of the place of silence in Christian progress, both for individuals and for the Christian Church as a whole.

II. How God's house is built of prepared stones.

That is true, in one view of the matter, in regard to the Church on earth, for there must be the individual act of repentance and faith before a soul is fit to be built into the fabric of the Church.

There is providential training of men for their tasks before these are given to them.

But the highest application of the symbol which we venture to find in our text is to the relation between the earthly and the heavenly life.

This world is the quarry where the stones are dressed for the Temple in the heavens.

> [*a*] Life is the chipping and hewing. The unnecessary pieces are struck off with heavy mallet and sharp chisel. Pain and sorrow are thus explained, if not wholly, yet sufficiently to bring about submission and trust.
>
> [*b*] The Builder has His plan clearly before Him, and works accurately to realise it. He perfectly knows what He means to build, and every stroke of the dressing-tool is accurately directed. There are no mistakes made in His quarrying.
>
> [*c*] We may be sure that the prepared stones will be brought to the Temple site and built into it. There lie gigantic half-hewn pillars in abandoned quarries in Syria and Egypt. But no one will ever say of the divine Temple-Builder: He began to build and was not able to finish. It remains a problem how the old builders managed to transport these huge stones from the quarries to the site, but we may be sure that the Architect of the ‘house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens,’ knows how to bring every stone that has been prepared here, to the place prepared for it, and for which it has been prepared. We may repose on the Apostle’s assurance that ‘He that has begun a good work in you will perform it,’ or rather on the more sure word of Jesus Himself, ‘He that overcometh, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God.’

6) 1 Kings 8:54-58

THE KING ‘BLESSING’ HIS PEOPLE

1Ki. 8:54 - 1Ki. 8:63.

The great ceremonial of dedicating the Temple was threefold. The first stage was setting the ark in its place, which was the essence of the whole thing. God’s presence was the true dedication, and that was manifested by the bright cloud that filled the sanctuary as soon as the ark was placed there. The second stage was the lofty and spiritual prayer, saturated with the language and tone of Deuteronomy, and breathing the purest conceptions of the character and nature of God, and all aglow with trust in Him. Then followed, thirdly, this ‘Blessing of the Congregation.’ The prayer had been uttered by the kneeling king. Now he stands up, and, with ringing tones that reach to the outskirts of the crowd, he gathers the spirit of his prayer into two petitions, preceded by praise for national blessings, and followed by exhortation to national obedience. A huge sacrifice of unexampled magnitude closes the whole.

I. Note the thankful retrospect of the nation’s past [1Ki. 8:56].

Solomon ‘blessed the congregation’ when, in their name, he lifted up his voice to bless the Lord, prayed that God would incline their hearts to keep His law, and would maintain their cause, and exhorted them to keep their hearts perfect with Him. We bless each other when we ask God to bless, and when we draw each other nearer Him. Standing there in the new Temple, with a united nation gathered before him, the cloud filling the house, and peace resting on all his land to its farthest border, the king looks back on the long road from Sinai and the desert, and sums up the whole history in one sentence. The end has vindicated the methods. There had been many a dark time when enemies had oppressed, and many a hard-fought field had been stained with Israel’s blood; but all had tended to this calm hour, when Israel’s multitudes were gathered in worship, and their unguarded homes were safe. There had been many heroes in the long line.

‘Time would fail’ him ‘to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah; of David and Samuel . . . who . . . turned to flight armies of aliens.’ One name alone is worthy to be named,-the name of the true Deliverer and Monarch. It is the Lord who ‘hath given rest unto His people.’ We look on the past most wisely when we see in it all the working of one mighty Hand, and pass beyond the great names of history or the dear names which have made the light of our homes, to the ever-living God, who works through changing instruments; and ‘the help that is done on earth, He doeth it Himself.’ We read the past most truly when we see in all its vicissitudes God’s unchanging faithfulness, and recognise that the foes and sorrows which often pressed sore upon us were no breach of His faithful promises, but either His loving chastisement for our faithlessness, or His loving discipline meant to perfect our characters. We read the past best from the vantage-ground of the Temple. From its height we understand the lie of the land. Communion with God explains much which is else inexplicable. Solomon’s judgment of Israel’s checkered history will be our judgment of our own when we stand in the higher courts of the heavenly home, and look from that height upon all the way by which the Lord our God hath led us. In the meantime, it is often a trial for faith to repeat these words; but the blessing that comes from believing them true is worth the effort to stifle our tears in order to say them.

II. Note the prayer for obedient hearts [1Ki. 8:57 - 1Ki. 8:58]. The proper subject-matter of this petition is ‘that He may incline our hearts to walk in His ways,’ and God’s presence is invoked as a means thereto. The deepest desire of a truly religious soul is for the felt nearness of God. That goes before all other blessings, and contains them all. Nothing is so needful or so sweet as that The presence of God is the absence of evil, the evil both of pain and of sin, as surely as the rising sun is the routing of night’s black hosts. ‘The best of all is, God is with us.’ The prayer again looks back to the past, and asks that the ancient experiences may be renewed. The generations of those who trust in God are knit together, and the wonders of old time are capable of repetition to-day. Faith can say with deeper meaning than the Preacher, ‘That which hath been is that which shall be.’ However varying may be the forms, the fact of a divine presence and help according to need is invariable, and they that have gone before have not exhausted the fountain, which will fill the vessel of the latest comer as it did that of the first. How beautifully the abiding God and the fleeting series of ‘our fathers’ is contrasted! A moment of triumph, when some work, like that of building the Temple, which has for ages been looked forward to, and into which the sacrifices and aspirations of a long line of dead toilers are built, brings strongly before all thoughtful men the continuity of a nation or a Church, and the transiency of its individual members. It should suggest the abiding God yet more strongly than it does the passing fathers. The mercy remains the same, while the receivers change. The sunshine and the tree are the same, though the leaves which glisten and grow in the light have but one summer to live.

But Solomon desires that God may be with him and his people for one specific purpose. Is it to bring outward prosperity, or to extend their territory, or to give them victory? As in his choice in his dream, so now, he asks, not for these things, but for an inward influence on heart and will. What he wants most for himself and them is moral conformity to God's will. All must be right if that be right. The prayer implies that, without God's help, the heart will wander from the paths of duty. The weakness of human nature, and the consequent necessity for God's grace in order to obedience, were as deeply felt by the devout men of the Old Testament as by Apostles. They are felt by every man who has honestly tried to measure the sweep and inwardness of God's law, and to realise it in life. We need go but a very short way on the road to discover that temptations to diverge lie so thick on either side, and that our feet grow weary so soon, that we shall make but little progress without help from above.

The synonyms for the law are worthy of notice. Why are there so many of these in the Old Testament? For the same reason that there are so many for 'money' in English,-because those who made the language thought so much about the thing, and delighted in it so much. As 'commandments,' it was solemnly imposed by rightful authority, and obedience was obligatory. The word rendered 'statutes' means something engraved, or written, and recalls the tables inscribed by God's finger. 'Judgments' are the divine decisions or sentences as to what is right, and therefore the infallible clue to the else bewildering labyrinth. To obey these commandments, to read that solemn writing, and to accept these decisions as our guides, is man's perfection and blessedness; and for that God's felt presence is indispensable.

III. Note the prayer for God’s defence [1Ki. 8:59 - 1Ki. 8:60]. The proper subject-matter of this petition is that God would maintain the cause of king and nation; and it is preceded by a petition that, to that end, the preceding prayer may be answered, and is followed by the desire that thereby the knowledge of God may fill the earth. The prayer for outward blessings comes after the prayer for inward heart-obedience. Is not that the right order? Our prayers need to be prayed for, and a true desire is not contented with one utterance. To ask that what we have asked may be given is no vain repetition, nor a sign of weak faith, or undue anxiety. How bold the figure in asking that the prayer may lie before God day and night, like some suppliant at the foot of His throne!

Note the grand aim of God’s help of Israel,-the universal diffusion of His name among all the peoples of the earth. Solomon understood the divine vocation of Israel, and had risen above desiring blessings only for his own or his subjects’ sake. Later ages fell from that elevation of feeling, and hugged their special privileges without a thought of the obligations which they involved. God’s choice of Israel was not meant for the exclusion of the Gentiles, but as the means of transmitting the knowledge of God to them. The one nation was chosen that God’s grace might fructify through it to all. The fire was gathered into a hearth, that the whole house might be warmed. But selfishness marred the divine plan, and Israel became a nonconductor, and the privileges selfishly kept became corrupt; as the miser’s corn stored in his barns in famine breeds weevils. Christians need no more solemn lesson of what comes from selfishly hoarding spiritual blessings than the fate of Israel. God hath shined into our hearts, that we may give to others who sit in the dark the light which we possess; and if we fail to do so, the light will darken within us.

IV. The blessing ends with one brief, all-comprehensive charge to the people, which seems based, by its ‘therefore,’ on the preceding thought of Jehovah as the only God. The only attitude corresponding to His sole and supreme Majesty is the entire devotion of heart, which leads to thoroughgoing obedience to His commandments. The word rendered ‘perfect’ literally means ‘entire’ or ‘sound,’ and here expresses the complete devotion of the whole nature. Solomon meant that it should be complete, in contradistinction to any sidelong glances to idolatry. The principle underlying that ‘therefore’ is that, God being what He is, our only God and refuge, the only adequate hope and object of our nature, we should give our whole selves to Him. We, too, are tempted to bring Him divided hearts, and to carry some of our love and trust as offerings at other shrines. But if there be ‘one God, and none other but He,’ then to serve Him with all our heart and strength and mind is the dictate of common sense, and the only service which He can accept, or which can bring to our else distracted natures peace and satisfaction. His voice to us is, ‘My son, give Me thy whole heart.’ Our answer to Him should ever be that prayer, ‘Lord, . . . unite my heart to fear Thy name.’ A divided heart is misery. Partial trust is distrust. ‘Love me all in all, or not at all,’ is the requirement of all deep, human love; and shall God ask less than men and women ask from and give to one another?

7) 1 Kings 8:59

1 Kings

THE KING ‘BLESSING’ HIS PEOPLE

‘THE MATTER OF A DAY IN ITS DAY’

1Ki. 8:59.

I have ventured to diverge from my usual custom, and take this fragment of a text because, in the forcible language of the original, it carries some very important lessons. The margin of our Bible gives the literal reading of the Hebrew; the sense, but not the vigorous idiom, of which is conveyed in the paraphrase in our version. ‘At all times, as the matter shall require,’ is, literally, ‘the thing of a day in its day’; and that is the only limitation which this prayer of Solomon places upon the petition that God would maintain the cause of His servants and of His people Israel. The kingly suppliant got a glimpse of very great, though very familiar, truths, and at that hour of spiritual illumination, the very high-water mark of his relations to God-for I suppose he was never half as good a man afterwards-he gave utterance to the great thought that God’s mercies come to us day by day, according to the exigencies of the moment.

Now, I think that in the words ‘the matter of a day in its day’ we may see both a principle in reference to God’s gifts and a precept in reference to our actions. Let us look at these two things.

I. A principle in reference to God’s gifts.

Of course, obviously-and I need not say more than a word about that- we find it so in regard to the outward blessings that are poured into our lives. We are taught, if the translation of the New Testament is correct, to ask, ‘Give us this day our daily bread,’ and to let to-morrow alone. Life comes to us pulsation by pulsation, breath by breath, by reason of the continual operation, in the material world, of the present God’s present giving. He does not start us, at the beginning of our days, with a fund of physical vitality upon which we thereafter draw, but moment by moment He opens His hand, and lets life and breath and all things flow out to us moment by moment, for no creature would live for an instant except for the present working of a present God. If we only realised how the slow pulsation of the minutes is due to the touch of His finger on the pendulum, and how everything that we have, and the existence of us who have it, are results of the continuous welling out from the fountain of life, of ripple after ripple of the waters, everything would be more sacred, and more solemn, and fuller of God than, alas! it is.

But the true region in which we may best find illustrations of this principle in reference to God’s gifts is the region of the spiritual and moral bestowments which He in His love pours upon us. He does not flood us with them: He filters them drop by drop, for great and good reasons. I only mention three various forms of this one great thought.

God gives us gifts adapted to the moment. ‘The matter of a day,’ the thing fitted for the instant, comes. In deepest reality, all is one gift, for in truth what God gives to us is Himself; or, if you like to put it so, His grace. That little word ‘grace’ is like a small window that opens out on to a great landscape, for it gathers up into one encyclopaediacal expression the whole infinite variety of beneficences and bestowments which come showering down upon us. That one gift is, as the Apostle puts it in one of his eloquent epithets, ‘the *manifold* grace of God,’ which word in the original is even more rich and picturesque, because it means the ‘many-variegated’ grace-like some rich piece of embroidery glowing with all manner of dyes and gold. So the one gift comes to us manifold, rich in its adaptation to, and its exquisite fitness for, the needs of the moment. The Rabbis had a tradition that the manna in the wilderness tasted to every man just what each man needed or wished most. It Is as though in some imperial city on a day of rejoicing, one found a fountain in the market-place pouring out, according to the wish of the people, various costly wines and refreshing drinks, God's gift comes to us with like variety-the 'matter of a day in its day.'

God never gives us the wrong medicine. In whatever variety of circumstances we stand, that one infinitely simple and yet infinitely complex gift contains what we specially want at the moment. Am I struggling? He extends a hand to steady me. Am I fighting? He is my 'sword and shield, my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.' Am I anxious? He comes into my heart, and brings with Him a great peace, and all waves cease to toss and smooth themselves into a level plain. Am I glad? He comes to heighten the gladness by some touch of holier joy. Am I perplexed in mind? If I look to Him, 'His coming shall be as the morning,' and illumination will be granted. Am I treading a lonely path? There is One by my side who will neither change, nor fail, nor die. Whatever any man needs, at the moment that he needs it, that one great Gift will supply 'the matter of a day in its day.'

God gives punctually. Many of us may have sometimes sent Christmas presents to India or Australia some weeks before. Some will arrive in time and some will be too late. God's gifts never reach us before the day, and they never come after the day. 'The Lord shall help her, and that right early,' said the grand psalm. What the Psalmist was thinking about was, I suppose, that miraculous intervention when the army of Sennacherib was smitten in a night. Timid and faithless souls in Jerusalem, as they looked over the walls and saw the encircling lines of the fierce foes drawing closer and closer round the doomed city, must have said, 'Our Lord delayeth His coming,' and could not stand the test of their faith and patience, involved in God's apparent indifference to the need of His people. To-morrow the assault is to be delivered. To-night

'The Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,

And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed';

and the would-be assailants, when that to-morrow dawned, were lying stiff and stark in their tents. God's help comes, not too soon, lest we should not know the blessedness of trusting in the dark; and not too late, lest we should know the misery of trusting in vain.

Peter is lying in prison. Herod intends, after the Passover, to bring him out to the people. The scaffolding is ready. The first watch of the night passes, and the second. If once it is fairly light, escape is impossible. But in the grey dawn the angel touches the sleeper. He wakes while his guards sleep. There is no need for hurry. He who has God for his Deliverer has no occasion to 'go out with haste.' So, with strange and majestic leisureliness, the escaping prisoner is bid to put on his shoes and gird himself. No doubt, he cast many a scrutinising glance at the four sleeping legionaries whom a heedless movement might have wakened. When all is ready, he is led forth through all the wards, each being a separate peril, and all made safe to him. The first gate opens, and the second gate opens, and the iron gate that leads into the city opens, and quietly he and the angel go down the street. It is light enough for him to see his way to the house where the brethren are assembled. He gets safe behind Mary's door before it is light enough for the gaolers to discover his absence, and for the pursuers to be started in their search. The Lord did help him, and that right early-' the matter of a day in its day.'

We shall find, if we leave our times in His hand, that the old simple faith has still a talismanic power to quiet us. His time is best, so be patient, and be trustful in your patience.

Again, God gives gifts enough, and not more than enough. He serves out our rations for spirit as for body, as they do on shipboard, where the sailors have to take their pots and plates to the galley every day and for each meal, and get enough to help them over the moment's hunger. The manna fell morning by morning. 'He that gathered much had nothing over, he that gathered little had no lack.' So all the variety of our changeful conditions, besides its purpose of disciplining ourselves and of making character, has also the purpose of affording a theatre for the display, if I may use such cold language-or rather let me say affording an opportunity for the bestowment-of the infinitely varied, exquisitely adapted, punctual, and sufficient grace of God.

II. But now, secondly, a word about the text as containing a precept for our action.

Let me put what I have to say in three plain sentences.

First, take short views of the future. Of course, we have to look ahead, and in reference to many things to take prudent forecasts, but how many of us there are who weaken ourselves and spoil to-day by being 'over-exquisite to cast the fashion of uncertain evils'! It is a great piece of practical philosophy, and I am sure that it has much to do with our getting the best out of the present moment, that we should either take very short or very long views of the future. Either

'Let the unknown to-morrow
Bring with it what it may,'

or look beyond the last of the days into the unseen light of an unsetting sun. If I must anticipate, let me anticipate the ultimate, the changeless, the certain; and let me not condemn my faculty of picturing that which is to come, to look along the low ranges of earthly life, and torture myself by imagining all the possibilities of evil of which my condition admits, as being turned into certainties to-morrow. Take 'the matter of a day *in* its day.' 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' Let us make the minute what it ought to be, then God will make the whole what it ought to be.

Again I say, let us fill each day with discharged duties. If you and I do not do the matter of the day in its day, the chances are that no to-morrow will afford an opportunity of doing it. So there will come upon us all, if we are unfaithful to this portioning out of tasks to times, that burden of an irrevocable past, and of the omitted duties that will stand reproving and condemning before us, whensoever we turn our eyes to them. 'It might have been, and it is not'; does a sadder speech than that fall from human lips? Brethren, the day, though it is short, is elastic; and no one knows how much of discharged service and accomplished work and fulfilled responsibilities can be crammed into its hours, until he has earnestly tried to fill each moment with the task which belongs to the moment. ‘The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest and have nothing.’ If our day is not filled full of work, some to-morrow will be filled full, in retrospect, of thorns and stings. Life is short; ‘the night cometh when no man can work.’ ‘I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day.’

Lastly, I would say, keep open a continual communion with God, that day by day you may get what day by day you need. There are hosts of people who call themselves, and, in some kind of surface way, are, Christian people, who seem to think that they get all that they need of the grace of God in a lump, at the beginning of their Christian career, and who are living upon past communications and the memory of these, and are forgetting that they can no more live and be nourished upon past gifts of God’s grace than upon the dinner that they ate this day last year. We must hang continually upon Him, if we are continually to receive from His hand. No past blessing will avail for present use.

Dear friends, the purpose of this principle, which I have been trying to illustrate in God’s way of dealing with us, is that we shall be content to be continually dependent, and consciously as well as continually dependent, upon Him. In the measure in which we keep our hearts open for the perpetual influx of His grace, in that measure shall we be ready for each day as it comes; for its trials and its joys, for its possibilities and its duties.

This, too, must be remembered-that the days bolted together make months; and the months, years; and the years, life; and that life as a whole is ‘a day’; and that there is a ‘matter’ of that day which can only be done in its day. Oh that none of us may be the subjects of that sad wail from a Saviour’s heart and a Saviour’s lips, which lamented, ‘If thou hadst known, at least, in this thy day, the things that belong to thy peace; but now’-the night has come, and the darkness of the night, and-’they are hid from thine eyes!’

8) 1 Kings 8:60-63

1 Kings

THE KING 'BLESSING' HIS PEOPLE

1Ki. 8:54 - 1Ki. 8:63.

The great ceremonial of dedicating the Temple was threefold. The first stage was setting the ark in its place, which was the essence of the whole thing. God's presence was the true dedication, and that was manifested by the bright cloud that filled the sanctuary as soon as the ark was placed there. The second stage was the lofty and spiritual prayer, saturated with the language and tone of Deuteronomy, and breathing the purest conceptions of the character and nature of God, and all aglow with trust in Him. Then followed, thirdly, this 'Blessing of the Congregation.' The prayer had been uttered by the kneeling king. Now he stands up, and, with ringing tones that reach to the outskirts of the crowd, he gathers the spirit of his prayer into two petitions, preceded by praise for national blessings, and followed by exhortation to national obedience. A huge sacrifice of unexampled magnitude closes the whole.

I. Note the thankful retrospect of the nation's past [1Ki. 8:56].

Solomon 'blessed the congregation' when, in their name, he lifted up his voice to bless the Lord, prayed that God would incline their hearts to keep His law, and would maintain their cause, and exhorted them to keep their hearts perfect with Him. We bless each other when we ask God to bless, and when we draw each other nearer Him. Standing there in the new Temple, with a united nation gathered before him, the cloud filling the house, and peace resting on all his land to its farthest border, the king looks back on the long road from Sinai and the desert, and sums up the whole history in one sentence. The end has vindicated the methods. There had been many a dark time when enemies had oppressed, and many a hard-fought field had been stained with Israel's blood; but all had tended to this calm hour, when Israel's multitudes were gathered in worship, and their unguarded homes were safe. There had been many heroes in the long line.

'Time would fail' him 'to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah; of David and Samuel . . . who . . . turned to flight armies of aliens.' One name alone is worthy to be named,-the name of the true Deliverer and Monarch. It is the Lord who 'hath given rest unto His people.' We look on the past most wisely when we see in it all the working of one mighty Hand, and pass beyond the great names of history or the dear names which have made the light of our homes, to the ever-living God, who works through changing instruments; and ‘the help that is done on earth, He doeth it Himself.’ We read the past most truly when we see in all its vicissitudes God’s unchanging faithfulness, and recognise that the foes and sorrows which often pressed sore upon us were no breach of His faithful promises, but either His loving chastisement for our faithlessness, or His loving discipline meant to perfect our characters. We read the past best from the vantage-ground of the Temple. From its height we understand the lie of the land. Communion with God explains much which is else inexplicable. Solomon’s judgment of Israel’s checkered history will be our judgment of our own when we stand in the higher courts of the heavenly home, and look from that height upon all the way by which the Lord our God hath led us. In the meantime, it is often a trial for faith to repeat these words; but the blessing that comes from believing them true is worth the effort to stifle our tears in order to say them.

II. Note the prayer for obedient hearts [1Ki. 8:57 - 1Ki. 8:58]. The proper subject-matter of this petition is ‘that He may incline our hearts to walk in His ways,’ and God’s presence is invoked as a means thereto. The deepest desire of a truly religious soul is for the felt nearness of God. That goes before all other blessings, and contains them all. Nothing is so needful or so sweet as that The presence of God is the absence of evil, the evil both of pain and of sin, as surely as the rising sun is the routing of night’s black hosts. ‘The best of all is, God is with us.’ The prayer again looks back to the past, and asks that the ancient experiences may be renewed. The generations of those who trust in God are knit together, and the wonders of old time are capable of repetition to-day. Faith can say with deeper meaning than the Preacher, ‘That which hath been is that which shall be.’ However varying may be the forms, the fact of a divine presence and help according to need is invariable, and they that have gone before have not exhausted the fountain, which will fill the vessel of the latest comer as it did that of the first. How beautifully the abiding God and the fleeting series of ‘our fathers’ is contrasted! A moment of triumph, when some work, like that of building the Temple, which has for ages been looked forward to, and into which the sacrifices and aspirations of a long line of dead toilers are built, brings strongly before all thoughtful men the continuity of a nation or a Church, and the transiency of its individual members. It should suggest the abiding God yet more strongly than it does the passing fathers. The mercy remains the same, while the receivers change. The sunshine and the tree are the same, though the leaves which glisten and grow in the light have but one summer to live.

But Solomon desires that God may be with him and his people for one specific purpose. Is it to bring outward prosperity, or to extend their territory, or to give them victory? As in his choice in his dream, so now, he asks, not for these things, but for an inward influence on heart and will. What he wants most for himself and them is moral conformity to God's will. All must be right if that be right. The prayer implies that, without God's help, the heart will wander from the paths of duty. The weakness of human nature, and the consequent necessity for God's grace in order to obedience, were as deeply felt by the devout men of the Old Testament as by Apostles. They are felt by every man who has honestly tried to measure the sweep and inwardness of God's law, and to realise it in life. We need go but a very short way on the road to discover that temptations to diverge lie so thick on either side, and that our feet grow weary so soon, that we shall make but little progress without help from above.

The synonyms for the law are worthy of notice. Why are there so many of these in the Old Testament? For the same reason that there are so many for 'money' in English,-because those who made the language thought so much about the thing, and delighted in it so much. As 'commandments,' it was solemnly imposed by rightful authority, and obedience was obligatory. The word rendered 'statutes' means something engraved, or written, and recalls the tables inscribed by God's finger. 'Judgments' are the divine decisions or sentences as to what is right, and therefore the infallible clue to the else bewildering labyrinth. To obey these commandments, to read that solemn writing, and to accept these decisions as our guides, is man's perfection and blessedness; and for that God's felt presence is indispensable.

III. Note the prayer for God's defence [1Ki. 8:59 - 1Ki. 8:60]. The proper subject-matter of this petition is that God would maintain the cause of king and nation; and it is preceded by a petition that, to that end, the preceding prayer may be answered, and is followed by the desire that thereby the knowledge of God may fill the earth. The prayer for outward blessings comes after the prayer for inward heart-obedience. Is not that the right order? Our prayers need to be prayed for, and a true desire is not contented with one utterance. To ask that what we have asked may be given is no vain repetition, nor a sign of weak faith, or undue anxiety. How bold the figure in asking that the prayer may lie before God day and night, like some suppliant at the foot of His throne!

Note the grand aim of God’s help of Israel,-the universal diffusion of His name among all the peoples of the earth. Solomon understood the divine vocation of Israel, and had risen above desiring blessings only for his own or his subjects’ sake. Later ages fell from that elevation of feeling, and hugged their special privileges without a thought of the obligations which they involved. God’s choice of Israel was not meant for the exclusion of the Gentiles, but as the means of transmitting the knowledge of God to them. The one nation was chosen that God’s grace might fructify through it to all. The fire was gathered into a hearth, that the whole house might be warmed. But selfishness marred the divine plan, and Israel became a nonconductor, and the privileges selfishly kept became corrupt; as the miser’s corn stored in his barns in famine breeds weevils. Christians need no more solemn lesson of what comes from selfishly hoarding spiritual blessings than the fate of Israel. God hath shined into our hearts, that we may give to others who sit in the dark the light which we possess; and if we fail to do so, the light will darken within us.

IV. The blessing ends with one brief, all-comprehensive charge to the people, which seems based, by its ‘therefore,’ on the preceding thought of Jehovah as the only God. The only attitude corresponding to His sole and supreme Majesty is the entire devotion of heart, which leads to thoroughgoing obedience to His commandments. The word rendered ‘perfect’ literally means ‘entire’ or ‘sound,’ and here expresses the complete devotion of the whole nature. Solomon meant that it should be complete, in contradistinction to any sidelong glances to idolatry. The principle underlying that ‘therefore’ is that, God being what He is, our only God and refuge, the only adequate hope and object of our nature, we should give our whole selves to Him. We, too, are tempted to bring Him divided hearts, and to carry some of our love and trust as offerings at other shrines. But if there be ‘one God, and none other but He,’ then to serve Him with all our heart and strength and mind is the dictate of common sense, and the only service which He can accept, or which can bring to our else distracted natures peace and satisfaction. His voice to us is, ‘My son, give Me thy whole heart.’ Our answer to Him should ever be that prayer, ‘Lord, . . . unite my heart to fear Thy name.’ A divided heart is misery. Partial trust is distrust. ‘Love me all in all, or not at all,’ is the requirement of all deep, human love; and shall God ask less than men and women ask from and give to one another?

9) 1 Kings 9:1-9

1 Kings

PROMISES AND THREATENINGS

1Ki. 9:1 - 1Ki. 9:9.

The successful end of a great work is often the beginning of a great reaction. When the tension is slackened, the whole nature of the worker is relaxed, and the temptation to slothful self-indulgence is strong. God knows our frame, and mercifully times His manifestations to the moments of special need. So, when Solomon had finished his great task, ‘the Lord appeared the second time, as He had appeared at Gibeon.’ There had been no manifest token of approval during all the years of building the Temple, for none was needed; but now there was danger that the finished work might be followed by languor and indifference, and therefore once more God spoke words of stimulus, both promises and warnings.

A solemn alternative is set before the king, both parts of which are fitted to rouse his energy and inspire him to faithful obedience. The same alternatives are presented to each of us. In 1Ki. 9:3 - 1Ki. 9:5 God promises blessed results from clinging to Him and keeping His statutes; in 1Ki. 9:6 - 1Ki. 9:9 He mercifully threatens the tragic issues of departure. In applying these to ourselves we must remember that outward prosperity was attached to a devout life more closely in Israel than it is now. But, though the form of the blessings dependent on doing God’s will alters, the reality remains unaltered.

I. The promises to Solomon are preceded by the assurance that his prayer had been heard. The answer corresponds very beautifully to the petitions. God has ‘put His name’ in the Temple, as the descent of the Glory to rest between the cherubim visibly showed, and thus has fulfilled Solomon’s petition; but the answer surpasses the prayer in that the presence of ‘the Name’ is promised ‘for ever.’ Similarly, in Psa. 132:1 - Psa. 132:18, the answer to the petition ‘Arise into Thy rest’ transcends the petition which it answers, and adds the same promise of perpetuity, ‘This is My rest for *ever*.’ Again, Solomon had prayed, ‘that Thine eyes may be open towards this house,’ and God answers with the expanded promise that not His eyes only, but His heart shall be there perpetually. He is ‘able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think,’ and He delights to surprise us with over-answers to our prayers. We cannot widen our desires so far but that His gifts will stretch beyond them on every side.

But the promise of perpetual dwelling in the Temple is conditional, as appears in the latter part of God’s answer, though no condition is stated at first. The promises to Solomon individually are all contingent. The all-important ‘if’ at the beginning of 1Ki. 9:4 governs the whole. The divine eulogium on David, which introduces these promises, suggests how mercifully God regards the imperfect lives of His servants. That merciful interpretation of conduct is removed by a whole universe from palliation of sin. It affords no ground for our thinking little of our inconsistencies. David’s crime was sternly rebuked and sorely punished, but still his life, in its main drift and outline, could be presented as a pattern, as being marked by integrity of heart and uprightness. The moon shines like a disc of silver, though its surface is pitted with extinct volcanoes.

We may note, too, the pregnant description in outline of the elements of a devout life, as here enjoined on Solomon. The first requisite is to walk before God; that is, to nourish a continual consciousness of His presence, and to regulate all actions and thoughts under the thrilling and purifying sense of being ‘ever in the great Taskmaster’s eye.’ Only we are not to think of Him as only a Taskmaster, but as a loving Friend and Helper. A child is happy in its little work or play when it knows that its father is looking on with sympathy. The sense of God's eye being on us should 'make a sunshine in a shady place,' should lighten labour and sweeten care. It is at the root of practical obedience, as its place in this sequence shows; for there follow it, in 1Ki. 9:4, 'integrity of heart and uprightness,' on which again follow obedience to all God's commandments.

First must come the clear recognition of God's relation to us. That recognition will influence our relation to Him, bending hearts to love and wills to submit, and the whole inward being to cleave to Him. Thence, and only thence, will issue in the life the streams of practical obedience. It is vain to seek to produce righteous deeds unless our hearts are right, and it is as vain to labour at making our hearts right unless thoughts of what God is to us have purified them. Morality is rooted in religion. On the other hand, no knowledge of the truth about God is worth anything unless it touches the hidden man of the heart, and then passes outward to mould conduct. 'Faith without works is dead.' Correct theology and glowing emotions lack their consummation if they do not impel to holy and God-pleasing living.

The reward promised in 1Ki. 9:5 is for Solomon alone. His throne is to be 'established for ever.' The duration intended by that expression is therefore not absolutely unlimited, but equivalent to 'during thy lifetime.' Solomon could only affect himself by his obedience. The continuance of the kingdom after him depended on his successors. His possession of the throne during his life was the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise to David referred to in 1Ki. 9:5, but it was only the beginning, and, like all God's promises, it was contingent on obedience. We receive no outward kingdom if we are servants of God; but, in deepest truth, the righteous man is a king, 'lord of himself, though not of lands.' All creatures serve the soul that serves God, and all Christ's brethren share in His royalty.

II. The second part of this divine utterance is addressed to the whole nation, as is marked by the 'ye' there compared with the 'thou' in 1Ki. 9:4, and it lays down for succeeding generations the conditions on which the new Temple, that stood glittering in the bright Eastern sunshine, should retain its pristine beauty. While the address to Solomon incited to obedience by painting its blessed consequences, that to the nation reaches the same end by the opposite path of darkly portraying the ruin that would be caused by departure from God. God draws by holding out a hand full of good things, and He no less lovingly drives by stretching out a hand armed with lightnings.

A plain declaration of the evils that dog disobedience is as loving as a bright vision of the good that attends on submission. The sternest threatenings of Scripture are spoken that they may never need to be executed. There is no more foolish misconception of Christianity than that which calls it harsh because it reveals that 'the wages of sin is death.' Note that the threatenings come second, not first. God's heart is averse to smite. To lavish blessing is His delight, and judgment is 'His work, His strange work,' forced on Him by sin.

The special sin against which Israel was warned was that to which it was specially prone and tempted by its circumstances. When all the nations 'worshipped stocks and stones,' it was hard to 'keep thy faith so pure' as to have no share in the universal bewitchment. So the whole history of the people is one of lapses into idolatry and of chastisements leading to temporary amendment, until the long, sharp lesson of the Captivity eradicated the disposition to be as the nations around. No doubt, idolatry in its crudest forms is outgrown now in Western lands, but sense still craves material embodiment of the unseen, and still feels the pressure of the material and palpable. Hence the earthward direction of so many lives. Asthmatical patients often breathe more easily in the slums of a city than in pure mountain air, and sense-bound men find difficulty in respiration on the heights of a religion which minimises the appeal to sense.

The penalty attached to departure from God was the loss of the land. Israel kept it on a tenure like that of some of our English nobility, who hold their estates on condition of doing some service to the sovereign. Of course, that connection between serving God and national prosperity involved continual supernatural intervention, and cannot be applied entirely to national prosperity now; but it still remains true that moral and religious corruption saps the foundations of a people's well-being, and, when carried far enough, destroys a people's existence. The solemn threat of becoming 'a proverb and a byword' among all peoples is quoted, apparently from Deu. 28:37, and has been only too terribly fulfilled for weary centuries.

The promise in 1Ki. 9:3, that God's eyes and heart should be perpetually on the Temple, has now the condition attached that Israel should cleave to the Lord. Otherwise it will be cast out of His sight, and be a mark for scorn and wonder. The vivid representation of a dialogue between passers-by is quoted from Deu. 29:24 - Deu. 29:26, where it is spoken in reference to the nation. It carries the solemn thought that God's name is made known among the heathen by the punishment of His unfaithful people, not less really, and sometimes more strikingly, than by the blessings bestowed on the obedient. If we will not magnify Him by joyous service, by rewarding which, with good He can magnify Himself, He will magnify Himself on us by retribution, the more severe as our blessings have been the greater. The lightning-scathed tree, standing white in the forest, witnesses to the power of the flash, as its leafy sisters in their green beauty proclaim the energy of the sunshine. Israel has, perhaps, been a more convincing witness for God, in its homeless centuries, than ever it was when at rest in the good land. 'If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee.'

10)1 Kings 10:1-13

1 Kings

A ROYAL SEEKER AFTER WISDOM

1Ki. 10:1 - 1Ki. 10:13.

We feel the breath of a new era in the accounts of Solomon's reign. One most striking peculiarity is the friendly intercourse with the nations around. The horizon has widened, and, instead of wars with Philistines and Ammon, we have alliances with Egypt, Tyre, and, in the present passage, with Sheba, a district of Southern Arabia. The expansion was fruitful of both good and evil. It brought new ideas and much wealth; but it brought, too, luxury and idolatry. Still Israel was meant to be 'a light to lighten the Gentiles,' and in this picturesque story of the wisdom-seeking queen, we have the true relation of Israel to the nations in its purest form. The details of the narrative. Interesting as they are, need not occupy us long.

The queen had heard the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, by which seems to be meant his reputation of being gifted with deep knowledge of the divine character as revealed to him. The questions which occupy earnest souls in all lands and ages were stirring in the heart of this woman-chief. The only way, in these old days, to learn the wisdom of the wise, was to go to them. So the streets of Jerusalem saw the strange sight of the long train which had come toiling up from Arabia, laden with its characteristic produce, gold and spices and precious stones, in the enumeration of which is reflected the wonder of the beholders at the unaccustomed procession. But better than all her wealth was the eager woman’s thirst for truth. Surely it is a very unworthy and unlikely explanation of her ‘hard questions’ and purpose to suppose that she came only for a duel of wit,-to pose Solomon with half-playful riddles. The journey was too toilsome, the gifts too large, the accent of conviction in her subsequent words too grave, for that. She was a seeker after truth, and probably after God, and had known the torture of the eternal questions which rise in the mind, and, once having risen, leave no rest till they are answered.

So she came, though half incredulous, hoping to find some solution to what ‘was in her heart,’ and as thirsty for the answer as her country’s sands for water. Only they who have known the pain of carrying such questions, like a fire in their bones, can know the joy which she felt when she found one to whom she could speak them. It is something of a drop to pass from Solomon’s wisdom to the list of the splendours of his household, and the effect which these produced on the queen; but the whole account of Solomon’s reign is marked by the same naive blending of wisdom and material wealth. In those days, outward prosperity was the sign of divine favour. But even in those days they knew that wisdom was ‘better than rubies.’ The two elements were both at their height in Solomon’s reign, and the lower of them finally got uppermost, and wrecked him. Plain living and high thinking are better than ‘wisdom,’ which lets itself down to make much of ‘the meat of the table,’ and a retinue of servants in fine clothes. How many of us would listen much more respectfully to wisdom, if it lived in a palace, than in ‘dens and caves of the earth’? The queen’s words in 1Ki. 10:6 - 1Ki. 10:9 are graceful with a woman’s tact, and full of feeling. She confesses that she had come half-doubting, even though she risked the journey, and fervently avows how far fame had been unlike itself in this instance, and had diminished, and not magnified. Then she envies the servants who wait on him, because they are so near the fountain, and finally breaks into praise of Solomon’s God, whose love to Israel was shown in giving it such a king. One does not know whether praise of God or compliments to Solomon were most in her mind. The words scarcely sound as if she had become a worshipper of God. He is to her but ‘thy God.’ But we may believe that she carried away some seed which grew up. Then, with munificent interchange of gifts, she and her train glide out of the story, and we lose them in the dark. The account of the wealth brought by Hiram’s ships comes singularly in, breaking the narrative of the queen. Its insertion seems to indicate some connection between the fleet and her, and to suggest that Sheba and Ophir were near each other [which would put Ethiopia, where some have located it, out of court], and that she heard of Solomon through it.

The whole incident may be regarded as an illustration of the spirit that should mark all seekers after truth, whether earthly or heavenly. This queen had to win a victory over national prejudices, over the disabilities of her sex, over the temptations of her station, to travel far, and face dangers, and to incur great cost. It was surely no mere playful errand on which she was bent. She was smitten with the sacred impulse to ‘follow knowledge like a sinking star.’ Seldom, indeed, have rulers made progresses from their dominions for such an end, and seldom have two of them met to confer on such subjects. We shall not rightly measure the relative importance of things unless we resolutely set ourselves to look at them with eyes purged from the illusions of sense, and cleared to see how much better than wealth and all outward good is the possession of truth. All sacrifices made to win it are richly repaid, and wise investments. Even in regard to lower kinds of truth, to win them is worth the effort of a life; and, in regard to the highest kind, which is the personal Truth, he is the wise man who counts all earthly good but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of it. This queen points the path by which all pilgrims of the truth must travel. It is not to be won without effort, without conquest of prejudices, repression of weakness, sacrifices of delights, and long effort. There must be humility, which will gladly learn, if there is ever to be its possession.

'Nor can the man that moulds in idle cell
Unto her happy mansion attain.'

But in our days, the easier the attainment, the less the appreciation. The queen of Sheba had no books, and she travelled far to get wisdom. We are flooded with all appliances, and many of us would not cross the road to get Solomon's wisdom, but would do much to be invited to feast at his table, or to secure some of the queen's camels' load.

This story brings out the true ideal of Israel's relation to the nations. Solomon is the embodiment of his people. His reign is marked by largely increased and amicable relations with his neighbours. These were not all wholesome, and ultimately led to much mischief. But, while the purely commercial connection with Tyre was defective, in that there was no attempt to bring Hiram and the men who worked for the Temple to any knowledge of the God of the Temple, and the relation with Egypt was more unsatisfactory still, in that it meant only the importation of corrupting luxuries and the marriage with an Egyptian princess, an idolatress, this relation with the queen of Sheba was the true one. Solomon did in it what Israel was meant to do for the world. He attracted a seeker from afar, and imparted to her the wisdom that God had given him. He answered the torturing questions and won the confidence of this woman who was groping in the dark, till he led her by the hand to the light. A bond of friendship knit them together, and mutual gifts cemented their amity.

All this is but the putting into concrete form of God's purpose in choosing Israel for His own. It was not meant to retain or to enclose, but to diffuse, the light. The world can only get blessing by one man or people getting it first. As well charge the builder of the lighthouse with partiality because he puts the bright lamps in that narrow room, as find fault with the divine method of making the earth know His name. The lighthouse is reared that the beams may stream out over the tossing, nightly sea. So God appointed to His people of old their task. So He has appointed the same task to His Church to-day. We ought to attract seekers from afar, to win their frank speech when they come, to be able to answer their anxious questions, and to bind them to ourselves in grateful bonds. In these days there are multitudes harassed by the modern forms of the same old, ever-pressing riddles which burdened this ancient queen’s heart; and that Church but ill discharges its office which repels rather than draws the seekers, or has no word of illumination for them if they come.

But the highest use to be made of the story is that which Christ made of it. It stands as a perpetual witness against those who are too blind to see the beauty, or too careless to be drawn to listen to the wisdom, of a present Christ. The sacrifices which men can make for lower objects are the most powerful rebukes of their unwillingness to make sacrifices for the highest, just as their capacity of love and trust is of their not loving and trusting Him. The same energy and effort which this queen put forth to reach Solomon, and which men eagerly put forth for some temporal good, would suffice to bring them to the feet of the great Teacher. Her longing for wisdom, her discernment of the person who could give it, and her toilsome journey, rebuke men’s indifference to Christ’s gifts, their failure to recognise His sweetness and power to make blessed, and their laziness and self-indulgence, which will not take a hundredth part of the pains to secure heaven which they cheerfully expend, and that often in vain, to secure earth. Will the ‘Queen of the south’ stand alone as witness in that day, or will there not be many out of other lands, who, like her, stretched out their hands to the dimly descried but yearned-for light, and came nearer to it, though they seemed far off, than many who lived in its full blaze and never cared for it? Will it be only Christ’s contemporaries who will be condemned by heathen seekers after God, or will there be many of ourselves, convicted of stolid indifference to the Christ who has been beside us all our lives, and has prayed us ‘with much entreaty’ and in vain, to ‘receive the gift’?

They who find their way to Him, and tell Him all that is in their hearts, will have all their questions solved. We have not far to go; for ‘a greater than Solomon is here.’ If we betake ourselves to Him, and learn of Him, we too shall find that ‘the half was not told us’; for Christ possessed is sweeter than all expectation, however high-pitched it may be, and to win Him is the only gain in which there is no disappointment, either at first or at last. We may all have the blessedness of His servants, ‘which stand continually before’ Him, and not only ‘hear’ but receive into their spirits His ‘wisdom.’

11)1 Kings 11:4-13

1 Kings

THE FALL OF SOLOMON

1Ki. 11:4 - 1Ki. 11:13.

Scripture never blinks the defects of its heroes. Its portraits do not smooth out wrinkles, but, with absolute fidelity, give all faults. That pitiless truthfulness is no small proof of its inspiration. If these historical books were simply fragments of national records, owning no higher source than patriotism, they would never have blurted out the errors and sins of David and Solomon as they do. Where else are there national histories of which the very central idea is the laying bare of national sins and chastisements? or where else are there legends of the people’s heroes which tell their sins without apology or reticence? The difference in tone augurs a different origin. The Old Testament histories are not written to tell Israel’s glories, or even, we may say, to recount its history, but to tell God’s dealings with Israel,-a very different theme, and one which finds its material equally in the glories and in the miseries, which respectively follow its obedience and disobedience. So Solomon’s fall is told in the same frank way as his wisdom and wealth; for what is of importance is not Solomon so much as God’s dealings with Solomon, when his heart was turned away. We are told that the narrative of Solomon’s reign is an ideal picture. Strange idealising which leaves the ideal king wallowing in a sty of sensuality and an apostate from Jehovah!

Here we are simply told of the two things,-his sin, and the divine judgment which it drew after it.

I. 1Ki. 11:4 - 1Ki. 11:8 tell the black story of Solomon’s apostasy. What was its extent? Did he himself take part in idolatrous worship, or simply, with the foolish fondness of an old sensualist, let these foreign women have their shrines? The darker supposition seems correct. The expression that he ‘went after other gods’ is commonly used to mean actual idolatry; and his wives could scarcely have been said to have ‘turned away his heart,’ if all that he did was to wink at, or even to facilitate, their worship. But, on the other hand, he does not seem to have abandoned Jehovah’s worship. The charge against him is that ‘his heart was not perfect,’ or wholly devoted to the Lord, or, as 1Ki. 11:6 puts it, that he ‘went not fully’ after the Lord. His was a case of halting between two opinions, or rather, of trying to hold both at once. He wanted to be a worshipper of Jehovah and of these idols also.

Was his apostasy final? Yes, so far as we can gather from the narrative. Not only is there no statement of his repentance, but the silence with which he receives the divine announcement of retribution is suspicious; and the prophecy of Ahijah to Jeroboam, which obviously comes later in time than the threatenings of the text, treats the idolatry as still existing [1Ki. 11:33]. Further, we learn from 2Ki. 23:13 that the shrines which he built stood till Josiah’s time. If Solomon had ever abandoned his idolatry, he would not have left them standing. So we seem to have in him a case of a fall which knew no recovery, an eclipse which did not pass. The Book of Ecclesiastes, if of his composition, would somewhat lighten the darkness of such an end; but his authorship of it is now all but universally given up.

So there, on Olivet’s southern ridge, right opposite the Temple, stood the three altars, and there the king worshipped; and, if he did, he would have a crowd of imitators. The lessons of such a fall are many. First, it teaches the destructive effect of yielding to sensual indulgence. Solomon’s unbridled and monstrous polygamy sapped his manhood and his principle, darkened his clear spirit, blinded his keen eye, and turned a youth of noble aspiration and a manhood of noble accomplishment into an old age without dignity, reverence, or calm. All his wisdom was worth little if it could not keep him master of himself. A young man who lets his passions run away with him is less to be condemned than an old sensualist. God means that reason should govern impulses and desires, and that conscience should govern all and be governed by His will. The vessel is sure to be wrecked when the officers are sent below and the mutineers get hold of the helm.

Second, it warns us that till the very end of life a fall is possible. This ship went down when the voyage was nearly over. In sight of port it struck, and that not for want of beacons. What pathetic warning lies in that phrase, ‘when Solomon was old’! After so many years of high aims, so many temptations overcome, with such habits of wisdom and kingly nobility, after such prayers and visions, he fell; and, if *he* fell, who can be sure of standing? No length of life spent in holy thoughts and service secures us against the possibility of disastrous fall. Only one thing does,-’Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe!’ John Bunyan saw a door opening down to hell hard by the gates of the Celestial City. When a man that has been had in reputation for wisdom and honour shames the record of his life by a great splash of mud on the white page, near its end, he seldom returns. An old apostate is usually finally an apostate.

Third, may we not venture to see a warning here against marriages in which there is not unity in the deepest things, and a common faith? ‘When you run in double harness, take a good look at the other horse.’ If a young Christian man or woman enters on such a union with one who is not a Christian, it is a great deal more probable that, in the end, there will be two unbelievers than that there will be two Christians.

We have nothing to do with pronouncing on Solomon’s final condition, But he stands on the page of this history, a sad, enigmatical figure, a warning to all young people to take heed that the attrition of the world does not rub off the bloom of early religion, or make them cynically ashamed of the unselfishness of their early desires. There is no sadder sight than an old man whose youthful enthusiasm for goodness and belief in the super-excellency of wisdom have withered, leaving him a hard worldling or a gross sensualist. Better the early days, when he was obscure and poor, and believed in wisdom and in the God of wisdom, than the late ones, when worldly success has spoiled him!

II. **1Ki. 11:9 - 1Ki. 11:13** give the divine retribution announced. The immediate connection of sin and punishment is the teaching intended by this close juxtaposition of these two halves of our narrative. However long the chastisement may be in bursting, the divine resolve to send it is instantaneously consequent on the crime. The chain that binds departure from God with loss of blessing may be of many or few links, but it is riveted on when the evil is done. How gravely, as with the voice of an indictment drawn in heaven, the aggravations of Solomon’s crime are set out, in that he had sinned against ‘the Lord’ who had appeared to him twice [once in his youthful vision, and once after the completion of the Temple], ‘and had commanded him concerning’ the very sin that he had done. Sin is made more heinous by the abundance of God’s favours and the plainness of His commands. If we would remember God’s appearances to us and for us, and meditate on His revealed will, we should be more impregnable to the assaults of temptation.

We do not learn *how* the Lord said this to Solomon. Possibly it was by the same prophet who afterwards announced to Jeroboam his destiny; but, however announced, it seems to have been received in sullen silence, and to have wrought no softening nor change. Like all God’s threatenings, it was spoken that it might not be inflicted. Solomon was threatened before the prophet spoke to Jeroboam; and if Solomon had repented, Jeroboam would never have been spoken to. But he is too far gone to be stopped, though he has God’s own word for it that he is ruining his kingdom by his sin. We have as clear declarations of worse results from ours; but they do not stop some of us. How strange it is that men will put out their hands to grasp their sins, even though they have to stretch across the smoke of the pit for them!

Note how forbearance delays and diminishes retribution. The separation of the kingdom is deferred, and one tribe is left to the Davidic house; probably Judah is meant, and Benjamin is omitted as being small. Observe, too, how we have a double instance of the law of God’s providence which visits the father’s deeds on the children. The consequences of David’s goodness fall on Solomon, and the consequences of Solomon’s evil fall on Rehoboam. Stated in the language of the secular historian, that is to say that the consequences of great national virtues or crimes are seldom reaped by the generation that sowed the seed and did the deed, but take time to mature and work themselves out. Stated in the language of Scripture, it is, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ The separation of the kingdom was not brought about by miracle, but came in the natural course of things. A people ground down by heavy taxation and forced labour, to keep up the luxury of a court containing all that disgusting crowd of wives and concubines, was ripe for revolt, and when the sceptre fell into the hands of a headstrong fool, and there was a capable leader on the other side, discontent soon became rebellion, and rebellion soon became triumphant. It all flowed as naturally as possible from the same fountain as the idolatry of which it was the punishment; and so it teaches once more the great truth that ‘the world’s history is the world’s judgment,’ and that the so-called ‘natural consequences’ of our deeds are, even here and now, God’s retribution for our deeds.

What a lesson as to God’s great patience is here! What a solemn glimpse into man’s power to counterwork God’s purpose! So soon after its establishment did the house of David prove unworthy, and the experiment fail. Yet that long-suffering purpose is not turned aside, but persistently and patiently goes on its way, altering its methods, but keeping its end unaltered, bending even sin to minister to its design, pitying and warning the sinner ere it strikes the blow that the sinner has made needful.

Behind the figure of Solomon we see another. The wisest of men fell shamefully, captured by coarse lust, and apparently steeled against all remonstrances from Heaven. ‘A greater than Solomon is here.’ The faults of the human kings of Israel prophesy of the true King, who is to be the substance of which they were but faint shadows, and whose manhood was stained by no flaw, nor His kingdom ever rent from His pure hands. Solomon was wise, but Christ is ‘Wisdom.’ Solomon built a Temple, but also altars to false gods overtopping it across the valley; and his Temple was burned with fire. But Christ is the true Temple as well as Priest and Sacrifice. Solomon was by name ‘the peaceful,’ and his land had outward rest, darkened at the last by war and rebellion. But Christ is the Prince of Peace, and of His dominion there shall be no end. Solomon is the great example of the sad truth that the loftiest and wisest share in the universal sinfulness. Christ is the one flawless Man, who makes those who take Him for their King wise and peaceful, prosperous, and in due time sinless, like Himself.

12)1 Kings 11:26-43

1 Kings

THE NEW GARMENT RENT

1Ki. 11:26 - 1Ki. 11:43.

Solomon falls into the background in the last part of the story of his reign, and his enemies are more prominent than himself. So long as he walked with God, he was of importance for the historian; but as soon as he forsook God, and was consequently forsaken of His wisdom, he becomes as insignificant as an empty vessel which has once held sweet perfume, or a piece of carbon through which the electric current has ceased to flow. The sunbeam has left that peak, and shines on other summits. Never was there a sadder eclipse.

We are here told first how the instrument for shattering Solomon's kingdom was shaped by himself. It is the old story of a young man of mark, attracting the eyes of the king, being promoted to offices of trust, which at once stir ambition, and give prominence and influence which seem to afford a possibility of gratifying it. The passion for building, so common in Eastern kings, and the cause of so much misery to their subjects, had grown on Solomon; and as his later days were harassed by war, and he had lost the safe defence of God's arm, Jerusalem had to be enclosed by a wall. His father had been able to leave a 'breach' because the Lord was a wall round him and his city; and if Solomon had kept in his paths, he would have had no need to add to the fortifications. The preservation of ancestral piety is for nations and individuals a surer protection than the improvement of ancestral outward defences. Jeroboam made himself conspicuous by his energy [for that rather than 'valour' must be the meaning of the word], and so got promotion. It was natural, but at the same time dangerous, to put him in command of the forced labour of his own tribe, as the narrative shows us was done; for 'the house of Joseph' is the tribe of Ephraim, to which, according to the correct translation of 1Ki. 11:26, he belonged. In such an office he would be thrown among his kinsmen, and would at once gain influence and learn to sympathise with their discontent, or, at any rate, to know where the sore places were, if he ever wanted to inflame them. One can easily fancy the grumblings of the Ephraimites dragged up to Jerusalem to the hated labour, which Samuel had predicted [1Sa. 8:16], and how facile it would be for the officer in charge to fan discontent or to win friends by judicious indulgence. How long this went on we do not know, but the fire had smouldered for some time under the unconscious king’s very eyes, when it was fanned into a flame by Ahijah’s breath.

That is the second stage in the story,-the spark on the tinder. We have heard nothing of prophets during Solomon’s reign; but now this man from Shiloh, the ancient seat of the Tabernacle, meets the ambitious young officer in some solitary spot, with the message which answered to his secret thoughts and made his heart beat fast. The symbolic action preceding the spoken word, as usual, supplied the text, of which the word was the explanation and expansion. How pathetic is the newness of the garment! Unworn, strong, and fresh, it yet is rent in pieces. So the kingdom is so recent, with such possibilities of duration, and yet it must be shattered! Thus quickly has the experiment broken down! It is little more than a century since Saul’s anointing, little more than seventy years since the choice of David, and already the fabric, which had such fair promise of perpetuity, is ready to vanish away. If we may say so, that ‘new garment’ represents the divine disappointment and sorrow over the swift corruption of the kingdom. It was probably merely some loose square of cloth which Ahijah tore, with violence proportioned to its newness, into twelve pieces, ten of which he thrust into the astonished Jeroboam’s hands. The commentary followed.

Ahijah’s prophecy is substantially the same as the previous threatenings to Solomon, which had done no good. Their incipient fulfilment in the wars with Edom and Syria had been equally futile; and therefore God, who never strikes without warning, and never warns without striking if men do not heed, now drops the message into ears that were only too ready to hear. The seed fell on prepared soil, and Jeroboam’s half-formed plans would be consolidated and fixed. The scene is like that in which the witches foretell to Macbeth his dignity. Slumbering ambitions are stirred, and a half-inclined will is finally determined by the glimpse into the future. How easily men are persuaded that God speaks, and how willing they are to obey, when their inclinations jump with Heaven’s commandments! The prophet’s message makes the separation of the kingdoms a direct divine act, and yet it was the breaking up of a divine institution. God’s dealings have to be shaped according to facts, and He changes His methods, and lets the feebleness of His creatures and their sins mould His august procedure. The divine Potter, like mere human artisans, has His spoiled pieces of work, and, with infinite resource and patience as infinite, re-shapes the clay into other forms. The separation of the kingdoms was a divine act, and yet it is treated often in the later books as a crime and rebellion. God works out His purposes through men's deeds, and their motives determine whether their acts are sins or obedience. A man may be a rebel while he is doing the will of God, if what he does be done at the bidding of his own selfishness. The separation of the kingdoms was God's doing, but it was brought about by the free action of men obeying most secular impulses of political discontent, and led by a cunning, self-seeking schemer.

Note that the prophecy is in three parts. First, 1Ki. 11:31 - 1Ki. 11:33 announce the punishment, with the reservation of a dwindled dominion to the Davidic house, for the sake of their great ancestor and of God's choice of Jerusalem, and solemnly charge on the people the idolatry which the king had introduced. The second part [1Ki. 11:34 - 1Ki. 11:36] postpones the execution of the sentence till after Solomon's death, and assigns the same two reasons for this further forbearance. The third part [1Ki. 11:37 - 1Ki. 11:39] promises Jeroboam the kingdom, and lays down the conditions on which the favours promised to David and his house may be his. The whole closes with the assurance that the affliction of the seed of David is not to be for ever.

The punishment was heavy; for the disruption of the kingdom meant the wreck of all the prosperity of Solomon's earlier days, the hopeless weakness of the divided tribes as against the formidable powers that pressed in on them from north and south, frequent intestine wars, bitter hatred instead of amity. Yet there was another side to it; for the very failure of the human kings made the Messianic hope the more bright, like a light glowing in the deepening darkness, and tumult and oppression might teach those whom prosperity and peace had only corrupted. The great lesson for us is the ruin which follows on departure from God. We do not see national sins followed with equal plainness or swiftness by national judgments; but the history of Israel is meant to show on a large scale what is always true, in the long run, both for nations and for individuals, that 'it is an evil thing and a bitter' to depart from the living God.

Mark, too, that the judgment is wrought out by perfectly natural causes. The separation follows old lines of cleavage. The strength of David's kingdom lay in the south; and Ephraim was too powerful a tribe and too proud of its ancient glories, to acquiesce cheerfully in the pre-eminence of Judah. The oppression of forced labour and heavy taxation was put forward as the reason for the revolt, and, no doubt, was the reason for the readiness with which the ten tribes rallied to Jeroboam's flag. There are two ways of writing history. You can either leave God out, or trace all to Him. The former way calls itself 'scientific' and 'positive.' The latter is the Bible way. Perhaps, if modern history were written on the same principles as the Books of Kings, the divine hand would be as plainly visible,-only it requires an inspired historian to do it. The way of bringing about the judgment for departing from God has changed, but the judgment remains the same to-day as when Ahijah rent his garment.

Between 1Ki. 11:39 - 1Ki. 11:40 we must suppose an attempt at armed rebellion by Jeroboam. That is implied by the expression that he 'lifted his hand against the king' [1Ki. 11:26 - 1Ki. 11:27]. That attempt must have been put down by Solomon. And that it should have been made shows how little Jeroboam was influenced by religious motives. The prophet's words had set him all afire with ambitious hopes, and he paid no heed to the distinct assurance that Solomon was to be 'prince all the days of his life.' He stretched out a rash, self-willed hand to snatch the promised crown, and broke God's commandment even while he pretended to be keeping it. How different David's conduct in like circumstances! He took no steps to bring about the fulfilment of Samuel's promise at his anointing, but patiently waited for God to do as He had said, in His own time, and meantime continued his lowly work. God's time is the best time; and he who greedily grasps at a premature fulfilment of promised good will have to pay for it by defeat and exile from the modest good that he had.

Jeroboam's flight to Egypt brings that ill-omened name on the page for the first time since the Exodus. It has given occasion to an extraordinary addition to the Septuagint, professing to tell his adventures there,-how he was high in Shishak's favour, and married a princess. That is apparently pure legend; but his residence there was important, as the beginning of

Egypt's interference in Israel's affairs. It is an old trick of aggressive nations to side with a pretender to the throne of a country which they covet, and benevolently to strengthen him that he may weaken it. No doubt it was as Jeroboam's ally that Shishak invaded Judah in the fifth year of Rehoboam, and plundered the Temple and the palace. It was a bad beginning for a king of Israel to be a pensioner of Egypt.

The narrative closes with the sad, reticent formula which ends each reign, and in Solomon's case hides so much that is tragic and dark. This was all that could be said about the end of a career that had begun so nobly. If more had been said, the record would have been sadder; and so the pitying narrative casts the veil of the stereotyped summary over the miserable story. There are many instances in history of lives of genius and enthusiasm, of high promise and partial accomplishment, marred and flung away, but none which present the great tragedy of wasted gifts, and blossoms never fruited, in a sharper, more striking form than the life of the wise king of Israel, who 'in his latter days' was 'a fool.' The goodliest vessel may be shipwrecked in sight of port. Solomon was not an old man, as we count age, when he died; for he reigned forty years, and was somewhere about twenty when he became king. But it was 'when he was old' that he fell, and that through passion which should have been well under control long before. The sun went down in a thick bank of clouds, which rose from undrained marshes in his soul, and stretched high up in the western horizon. His career, in its glory and its shame, preaches the great lesson which the Book of Ecclesiastes puts into his mouth as 'the conclusion of the whole matter': 'Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.'

13)1 Kings 12:1-17

1 Kings

HOW TO SPLIT A KINGDOM

1Ki. 12:1 - 1Ki. 12:17.

The separation of the kingdom of Solomon into two weak and hostile states is, in one aspect, a wretched story of folly and selfishness wrecking a nation, and, in another, a solemn instance of divine retribution working its designs by men's sins. The greater part of this account deals with it in the former aspect, and shows the despicable motives of the men in whose hands was the nation's fate; but one sentence [1Ki. 12:15] draws back the curtain for a moment, and shows us the true cause. There is something very striking in that one flash, which reveals the enthroned God, working through the ignoble strife which makes up the rest of the story. This double aspect of the disruption of the kingdom is the main truth about it which the narrative impresses on us.

As to the mere details of the incident, as a political revolution, they are in four stages. First come the terms of allegiance offered to the new king. Rehoboam goes to Shechem, because 'Israel was gone' there. The choice of the place is suspicious; for it was in the tribe of Ephraim, and had been for a time the centre of national life; and its selection at once indicated discontent with the preponderance of Jerusalem, and a wish to assert the importance of the central tribes. No doubt, the choice of the latter city for the capital had caused heart-burning, even during David's time.

Adopting the reading of the Revised Version, we see another suspicious sign in the recall of Jeroboam, and his selection as spokesman; for he had been in rebellion against Solomon [1Ki. 11:26], and therefore an exile. Probably he had now been the instigator of the discontent of which he became the mouthpiece; and, in any case, his appearance as the leader was all but a declaration of war. His former occupation as superintendent of the forced labour exacted from his own tribe taught him where the shoe pinched, and the weight of the yoke would not be lessened in his representations.

No doubt, the luxury and splendour of Solomon's brilliant reign had an under side of oppression, even though forced labour was not exacted from Israelites [1Ki. 9:22]; but probably the severity was exaggerated in these complaints, which were plainly the pretext for a revolt of which tribal jealousy was the main cause, and Jeroboam's ambition the spark that set light to the train. Certainly there was ignoring of the benefits of the peaceful reign, which had brought security and commerce. But there was enough truth in the complaint to make it plausible and effective for catching the people. Had they a right to suspend their allegiance on compliance with their terms?

Israel was neither a despotism, nor simply a constitutional monarchy. God appointed the kings, and had ordained the Davidic house to the throne; and therefore this making terms was, in effect, asserting independence of God's will. Jeroboam was scheming for a crown. The people were shaking off their submission to God. It is very doubtful if concession would have conciliated them. There is nothing elevated, not to say religious, in their motives or acts.

Then comes Rehoboam on the scene. The one sensible thing that he did was to take three days to think. Whether or no his little finger was thicker than his father's loins, his head was not half so wise. Ecclesiastes, speaking in Solomon's name, reckons it a great evil that he must leave his labour to his successor; 'and who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?' Certainly Rehoboam had little 'wisdom' either of the higher or lower kind. It was the lower kind which the old counsellors of his father gave him,-that wisdom which is mere cunning directed to selfish ends, and careless of honour or truth. 'Flatter them to-day, speak them fair, promise what you do not mean to keep, and then, when you are firm in the saddle, let them feel bit and spur.' That was all these grey-headed men had learned. If that was what passed for 'wisdom' in Solomon's later days, we need not wonder at revolt.

To act on such motives is bad enough, but to put them into plain words, and offer them as the rule of a king's conduct, is a depth of cynical contempt for truth and kingly honour that indicates only too clearly how rotten the state of Israel was. Have we never seen candidates for Parliament and the like on one side of the water, and for Congress, Senate, or Presidency on the other, who have gone to school to the old men at Shechem? The prizes of politicians are often still won by this stale device. The young counsellors differ only in the means of gaining the object. Neither set has the least glimmer of the responsibility of the office, nor ever thinks that God has any say in choosing the king. Naked, undisguised selfishness animates both; only, as becomes their several ages, the one set recommends crawling and the other bluster. Think of Saul hiding among the staff, David going back to his sheep after he was anointed, Solomon praying for wisdom to guide this people, and measure the depth of descent to this ignoble scramble for the sweets of royalty!

According to 1Ki. 14:21, Rehoboam was forty-one at this time, so his contemporaries could not have been very young. But possibly the number in the present text is an error for twenty-one, which would agree better with the tone of the reference to age here, and with the rash counsel. Note the recurrence, both in Rehoboam's question in 1Ki. 12:9 and in the young advisers' answer in 1Ki. 12:10, of the obnoxious speech of the people. That may be accidental, but it sounds as if both he and they were keeping their anger warm by repeating the offensive complaint.

The Revised Version reads, 'My little finger is thicker,' etc., and so makes the sentence not a threat, but the foundation of the following threat in an arrogant and empty assertion of greater power. The fool always thinks himself wiser than the wise dead; the 'living dog' fancies that his yelp is louder than the roar of 'the dead lion.' What can be done with a Rehoboam who brags that he is better than Solomon?

The threat which follows is inconceivably foolish; and all the more so because it probably did not represent any definite intention, and certainly was backed by no force adequate to carry it out. Passion and offended dignity are the worst guides for conduct. Threats are always mistakes. A sieve of oats, not a whip, attracts a horse to the halter. If Rehoboam had wished to split the kingdom, he could have found no better wedge than this blustering promise of tyranny.

Next in this miserable story of imbecility and arrogance comes the answer to the assembly. Shechem had seen many an eventful hour, but never one heavier with important issues than that on which the united Israel met for the last time, and there, in the rich valley with Ebal and Gerizim towering above them, heard the fateful answer of this braggart. A dozen rash words brought about four hundred years of strife, weakness, and final destruction. And neither the foolish speaker nor any man in that crowd dreamed of the unnumbered evils to flow from that hour. Since issues are so far beyond our sight, how careful it becomes us to be of motives! Angry counsels are always blunders. No nation can prosper when moderate complaints are met by threats, and ‘spirited conduct,’ asserting dignity, is a sign of weakness, not of strength. For nations and individuals that is true.

Here the historian draws back the curtain. On earth stand the insolent king and the now mutinous people, each driving at their ends, and neither free of sin in their selfishness. A stormy scene of passion, without thought of God, rages below, and above sits the Lord, working His great purpose by men’s sin. That divine control does not in the least affect the freedom or the guilt of the actors. Rehoboam’s disregard of the people’s terms was ‘a thing brought about of the Lord,’ but it was Rehoboam’s sin none the less. That which, looked at from the mere human side, is the sinful result of the free play of wrong motives, is, when regarded from the divine side, the determinate counsel of God. The greatest crime in the world’s history was at the same time the accomplishment of God’s most merciful purpose. Calvary is the highest example of the truth, which embraces all lesser instances of the wrath of man, which He makes to praise Him and effect His deep designs.

Again, the rending of the kingdom was the punishment of sin, especially Solomon’s sin of idolatry, which was closely connected with the extravagant expenditure that occasioned the separation. So the so-called natural consequences of transgression constitute its temporal punishment in part, and behind all these our eyes should be clear-sighted enough to behold the operative will of God. This one piercing beam of light, cast on that scene of insolence and rebellion, lights up all history, and gives the principle on which it must be interpreted, if it is not to be misread.

Again, the punishment of sin, whether that of a community or of a single person, is sin. The separation was sin, on both sides; it led to much more. It was the consequence of previous departure. So ever the worst result of any sin is that it opens the door, like a thief who has crept in through a window, to a band of brethren.

Lastly, we have the fierce rejoinder to the empty boast of Rehoboam, and the definitive disruption of the nation. Jeroboam must have fanned the flame skilfully, or it would not have burst out so quickly. There is no hesitation, nor any regret. The ominous cry, which had been heard before, in Sheba’s abortive revolt, answers Rehoboam with instantaneous and full-throated defiance. Rancorous tribal hatred is audible in it. Long pent up jealousy and dislike of the dynasty of David has got breath at last: ‘To your tents, O Israel! now see to thine own house, David!’

That roar from a thousand voices meant a good deal more than the cowed king’s vain threats did. The angry men who raised it, and were the tools of a crafty conspirator, the frightened courtiers and king who heard it, were alike in their entire oblivion of their true Lord and Monarch. ‘God was not in all their thoughts.’ An enterprise begun in disregard of Him is fated to failure. The only sure foundations of a nation are the fear of the Lord and obedience to His will. If politics have not a religious basis, the Lord will blow upon them, and they will be as stubble.

14)1 Kings 12:25-33

1 Kings

POLITICAL RELIGION

1Ki. 12:25 - 1Ki. 12:33.

The details of this section need no long elucidation; for the one fact which it records, namely, the establishment of the calf worship in Israel, is the main point to consider. As for details, we need touch them lightly. The ‘building’ of Shechem and Penuel is probably to be understood as ‘fortifying’; for, in regard to the former town, we know from the preceding section that it *was* a town before the disruption, and the same is probably true of the latter. Two fortresses, one in the heart of his kingdom, one on the eastern border, where attack might be expected, were Jeroboam’s first care.

In estimating his conduct, the fact must be remembered that Ahijah had promised him God’s protection and the establishment of his kingdom in his family, on the sole condition of obedience. If he had believed the prophet, something else than building strongholds would have been his prime aim. But he evidently thought that promises were all very well, but thick walls were better. The two things recorded of him are quite of a piece; and the writer seems, by putting them thus side by side, to wish us to note their identity of motive and similarity in character.

The establishment of the calf worship was entirely due, according to this historian, to dread that religious unity would heal the schism of political duality, and that Jeroboam's kingdom and life would be sacrificed to the magnetism which would draw the revolted northern tribes back to render allegiance, where they went up to worship. The calculation was reasonable: but why, in estimating chances, did Jeroboam leave out God's promise? That should have kept him at ease. The calves and the castles were signs of fear and of slight regard to the prophet's word. No doubt, when it suited him, he could vindicate rebellion on the plea of obeying God. The plea would have sounded more genuine if he had shown that he trusted God.

The calves were probably suggested by his Egyptian experiences, where he had seen sacred bulls worshipped living, and mummied dead. But the remembrance of Aaron and the golden calf was evidently present to him, as the almost verbal quotation of Aaron's words shows. If so, the whole transaction is still more accentuated as a revolt against the ritual of the central sanctuary. 'The much-calumniated Aaron is our example. He was mastered by his brother, but he was right, and we go back to the old original worship of our fathers.'

Jeroboam was among the first to employ the expedient, so often resorted to since, of white-washing old-world criminals, in order to provide an ancestry for modern heresies. The calves seem to have been doubled simply as a matter of convenience. When once the principle of saving trouble comes in, in religion, it generally plays a great part. If it were too much to go to Jerusalem, it would soon be too much to go to Bethel, and so Dan must be provided for the north. The calves were symbols of Jehovah, not of other gods, as must be carefully noted. The making of them implied all that followed; for a god must have shrine and priesthood and sacrifice and festivals. The Levites refusing to serve, and probably losing their inheritance, fled to Judah, and a new priesthood was made 'from among all the people' [Rev. Ver.], The Feast of Tabernacles was retained but its date shifted forward a month, perhaps because the harvest, which it closed, was later in the north, but evidently with the design of, as it were, underscoring the religious separation.

The latter part of this passage should perhaps be attached more closely to the next chapter, and understood as describing the one instance of Jeroboam’s sacrificing which was so grimly interrupted by the denunciation by the anonymous prophet from Judah. Such are the outlines of the facts. What are the lessons taught by them?

I. There is that one already mentioned,-the folly and sin of seeking to help God to fulfil His promises by our poor efforts at making their fulfilment sure to sense. No doubt many of His promises are contingent on our activity in material things; and no man has a right to expect that’ his bread shall be given him,’ for instance, unless he contributes the ‘sweat of his brow’ towards it. But Jeroboam had had the conditions of safety and stability clearly laid down. They were, obedience after the pattern of David [1Ki. 11:38]. So there was no need for building Shechem and Penuel, nor for casting calves and serving them. The heavens will stand without our rearing brickwork pillars to hold them up. But it takes much faith to trust God’s bare word, and we are all apt to feel safer if we have something for sense to grasp. On the open plain, God guards those who trust Him more securely than if they lay in cities ‘fenced up to heaven. ‘Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls. . . . For I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about.’

II. Another lesson taught here is the sin of degrading religion to be a mere instrument for securing personal ends. Jeroboam has had many followers among politicians, The average ‘statesman’ looks on all religions as equally true or untrue, and is ready to be polite to any of them, if he can carry his measures thereby. The long history of the relations of Church and State in the Old World has been little else than the State’s hiring and muzzling the Church for its own advantage, and the protests of a faithful few against the degradation of State patronage and consequent control.

In England, Jeroboam and his calves used to be the favourite shocking example of the sin of schism, with which High Church orators were fond of pelting Nonconformists. The true lesson from him and them is precisely the opposite one; namely, the weakening of religion, when it is favoured and endowed by the civil power. The priests of Bethel, who were the creatures of Jeroboam, were not likely to be his or his successors rebukers. When

Amos the prophet spoke bold words against a king, it was Amaziah the priest who gave the shameful counsel, ‘O thou seer, flee into the land of Judah, and prophesy there; but prophesy no more at Bethel: for it is the king’s sanctuary.’ Is there no such thing known as a flaming profession of religion, because it is respectable, or opens the way to some good position? Does nobody pose in public, especially about election times, as a liberal supporter of Churches and a devout Church-member, with an eye mainly to votes? Do political parties think it a good thing to get the religious people to go for their ticket? Or, to take less base instances, is there not a whole school who estimate Christianity mainly as valuable as a social force, and, without any deep personal recognition of its loftier aspects, think it well that it should be generally accepted, especially by other people, as it makes them easier to govern, and cements the social fabric?

Christianity is something more than social cement. Jeroboam’s policy was a great success, as policy. It both united his kingdom and definitively separated it from Judah. But it was a success purchased at the price of degrading religion into the lackey of a court. Samson went to sleep on Delilah’s lap, and she cut off the clustering locks in which his strength lay.

III. The true nature of idolatry is brought out in the incident. Jeroboam did not draw Israel away to worship other gods. No charge of that sort is ever made against the calf worship. The images were meant, just as Aaron’s, of which they were a reproduction, was meant, to be symbols of Jehovah. The true object of worship was worshipped in a false way. No matter though the image represented Him, its worship was idol worship. There is no ground in the narrative for the surmise of Stanley,-who in this, as usual, simply says ditto to Ewald,-that Jeroboam’s motive was the desire to prevent Israel’s adopting false gods, and that the calves were a compromise by which he hoped to stem the tide of apostasy to Baal worship. The single motive stated in the text is policy inspired by fear. Jeroboam did not care enough about the worship of Jehovah to mould his statecraft with the view of conserving it. If he had so cared, he could not have set up the calves. His doing so is uniformly regarded in Scripture as idolatry pure and simple; and though it is clearly distinguished from the worship of false gods, it is none the less branded as rebellion against Jehovah.

A visible representation of Jehovah was as much an idol as a similar one of Baal would have been. It necessarily degraded the conception of Him. It brought sense into dangerous prominence as an aid to worship. The symbol might at first, and to the more devout, be a mere symbol, and transparent; but it would soon become opaque, and from symbol turn embodiment, and thence pass to being the very deity represented. It is a feat of abstraction impossible for the ordinary man, to worship before an idol, and not to worship the idol. The strange, awful fascination which idolatry exercised is perhaps gone now from the civilised world. But the lesson remains ever in season, that it is dangerous work to bring in sense as an ally of devotion, because outward things, which at first may be only symbols and helps, are almost certain to become something more.

IV. Jeroboam may stand, finally, as a type of the men who suppose themselves to be worshipping God when they are only following their own wills. All his ceremonial had this damning characteristic, that it was ‘devised of his own heart’; and so it was himself that was enshrined in his new house of the high places, and himself to whom the sacrifices were offered. Absolute obedience to God’s will, whatever perils may seem to attend it, is true worship. Wherever apparent devotion to Him is mingled with burning incense to our own net, the mixture ruins the devotion. ‘Obedience is better than sacrifice.’ Temptations to take our own way will often appear as the dictates of sound policy, and to neglect them as culpable carelessness. But such paltering with plain commandments is as ruinous as sinful, and is not to be atoned for by outward worship.

What did Jeroboam win by his intrusion of self-will into the region which ought to be sacred to perfect obedience? A troubled reign and the destruction of his house after one generation. One more thing he won; namely, that terrible epithet, which becomes almost a part of his name, ‘Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin.’ What a title to be branded on a man’s forehead for ever! It is always a mistake to disobey God. Every sin is a blunder as well as a crime. This only is the safe motto for churches and individuals, in all the details of worship and of life: ‘Lo, I come to do Thy will, O Lord, and Thy law is within my heart.’

15) 1 Kings 16:23-33

THE RECORD OF TWO KINGS

1Ki. 16:23 - 1Ki. 16:33.

Jeroboam's son and successor was killed by Baasha, Baasha's son and successor was killed by Zimri, who reigned for a week, and then burned the palace and died in the flames. A struggle for the throne followed between Omri, the commander-in-chief, and Tibni, 'Tibni died, and Omri reigned.' So, in fifty years, the kingdom that was to relieve Israel from oppression staggered through seas of blood, and four kings, or would-be kings, died by violence.

Omri's dynasty lasted about as long, namely, through the reigns of four kings, and was then swept away like the others, in blood and fire. The text gives a meagre outline of the reigns of himself and his son Ahab, of which perhaps the meagreness is the most significant feature. The only fact told of the father is that he built Samaria, and his whole reign is summed up in the damning sentence that he 'walked in the way of Jeroboam.' We learn from the Moabite stone that he waged successful war against that country, and that it was tributary to Israel for forty years. In Mic. 6:16, mention is made of the statutes of Omri, as if he had given edicts for idolatry. The reign of Ahab is similarly summarised. His marriage with Jezebel, and the flood of Baal worship which that let loose over the land, are told with horror, in preparation for Elijah's appearance like a dark background that throws up a brilliant figure.

The lessons to be drawn from these severely condensed records, cut down to the bone, as it were, are plain. The first of them is, that when a life is over, the one thing which lasts, or is worth thinking about, is the man's relation to God and His will. Here are twelve years' reign in the one case, and twenty-two in the other, all boiled down, so to speak, into half a dozen sentences, and estimated according to one standard only. What has become of all the eager strife, the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears, that burned so fiercely for awhile? All died down into a handful of grey ashes. And what lies in them like a lump of solid metal that has been melted out of the huge heap of days and deeds that fed the fire? The man's relation to God.

That abides; that is recorded; that determines everything else about him. Waving forests that once had sunshine pouring down on their green fronds are represented in a thin seam of coal. Our lives will all come down to this at last. How did he stand towards God and His will is the final question that will be asked about each of us, and the answer to it is the only thing that concerns the dead-or the living either. Men write voluminous biographies of each other. How little their judgments matter to the dead men! Praise or blame are equally indifferent to them. But what matters is, whether God will have to record of us what is recorded of these two wretched kings, or whether He will recognise that the main drift of our poor lives was to serve Him and do His will. He was a great scholar; he made a huge fortune; he rose to be a peer; she was a noted beauty, a leader of fashion, a queen of society-what will all such epitaphs be worth, if God's finger carves silently below them, 'He did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord'?

Another lesson from these two reigns is the certain widening of the smallest departure from God. Jeroboam professed to retain the worship of Jehovah, and to introduce only a small alteration in setting up a symbol of Him. He would vehemently have asserted that he was no idolater, and would have shuddered at the very notion of bowing down to the gods of the nations, but in less than fifty years a temple to the Sidonian Baal rose in Samaria, and his worship, with its foul sensuality, was corrupting all Israel. However acute the angle of departure, the line has only to be prolonged, and the distance between it and that from which it diverged will be the distance between heaven and hell, Let no one say: 'Thus far and no farther will I go.' There is no stopping at will on that course, any more than a man sliding down a steeply sloping sheet of smooth ice can pull himself up before he plunges over the edge into the abyss below. That is true as to all departures from God and His law, but it is eminently true as to every tampering with the spirituality of worship. Jeroboam's symbolism led straight to Ahab's unblushing pagan worship of the hideous Sidonian Baal. The craving for symbolical and sensuous accessories of worship, which is strong in most Churches in this aesthetic generation, is perilous. Material aids to worship there must be, so long as we are in the flesh, but the fewer and simpler they are the better, for they are aids which very swiftly become hindrances.

Another lesson from Ahab’s reign is the need of detachment from entangling alliances, if we would keep ourselves right with God. It was Israel’s calling to be separate from the nations. It was Israel’s temptation either to mix with them, or to keep aloof from them in contempt and hatred. Ahab’s marriage with Jezebel was, no doubt, thought by his father a clever stroke of policy, assuring them of an ally. But it flooded the nation with the cruel and lustful cult of Baal, and that finally ruined Ahab and his house. God’s servants can never mingle themselves with His enemies without harm, unless they mingle with them for the purpose of turning them into His servants. If we prefer the company of those who do not love Jesus, our love to Him must be faint, and will soon be fainter. If Ahab takes Jezebel for his wife, Ahab will soon take Jezebel’s foul god for his god.

16)1 Kings 17:1

1 Kings

A PROPHET’S STRANGE PROVIDERS

ELIJAH STANDING BEFORE THE LORD

1Ki. 17:1.

This solemn and remarkable adjuration seems to have been habitual upon Elijah’s lips in the great crises of his life. We never find it used by any but himself, and his scholar and successor, Elisha. Both of them employ it under similar circumstances, as if unveiling the very secret of their lives, the reason for their strength, and for their undaunted bearing and bold fronting of all antagonism. We find four instances in their two lives of the use of the phrase. Elijah bursts abruptly on the stage and opens his mouth for the first time to Ahab, to proclaim the coming of that terrible and protracted drought; and he bases his prophecy on that great oath, ‘As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand.’ And again, when he is sent to confront Ahab once more at the close of the period, the same mighty word comes, ‘As the Lord of Hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself unto him this day.’ And then again, Elisha, when he is brought before the three confederate kings, who taunt, and threaten, and flatter, to try to draw smooth things from his lips, and get his sanction to their mad warfare, turns upon the poor creature that called himself the King of Israel with a superb contempt that stayed itself on that same great name and tells him, 'As the Lord liveth before whom I stand, were it not that I had regard for the King of Judah, I would not look toward you or see you,' And lastly, when the grateful Naaman seeks to change the whole character of Elisha's miracle, and to turn it into the coarseness of a thing done for reward, once again the temptation is brushed aside with that solemn word, 'As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none.'

So at every crisis where these prophets were brought full front with hostile power; where a tremendous message was laid upon their hearts and lips to utter; where natural strength would fail; where they were likely to be daunted or dazzled by temptations, by either the sweetness or the terrors of material things, these two great heroes of the Old Covenant, out of sight the strongest men in the old Jewish history, steady themselves by one thought,-God lives, and I am His servant.

For that phrase, 'before whom I stand,' obviously means chiefly 'whom I serve.' It is found, for instance, in Deuteronomy, where the priest's office is thus defined: 'The sons of Levi shall stand before the Lord to minister unto Him.' And in the same way, it is used in the Queen of Sheba's wondering exclamation to Solomon, 'Blessed are thy servants, and blessed are the men that stand before thy face continually.'

So that the consciousness that they were servants of the living God was the very secret of the power of these men. This expression, which thus started to their lips in moments of strain and trial, lets us see into the very inmost heart of their strength. These two great lives, which fill so large a apace in the records of the past, and will be remembered for ever, were braced and ennobled thus. The same grand thought is available to brace and ennoble our little lives, that will soon be forgotten but by a loving heart or two, and yet may be as full of God and of God's service as those of any of the great of old. We too may use this secret of power, 'The Lord liveth, before whom I stand.'

What thoughts then, which may tend to lift and invigorate our days, are included in these words? The first is surely this-Life a constant vision of

God’s presence.

How distinct and abiding must the vision of God have been, which burned before the inward eye of the man that struck out that phrase! ‘Wherever I am, whatever I do, I am before Him. To my purged eye, there is the Apocalypse of heaven, and I behold the great throne, and the solemn ranks of ministering spirits, my fellow-servants, hearkening to the voice of His word.’ No excitement of work, no strain of effort, no distraction of circumstances, no glitter of gold, no dazzle of earthly brightness, dimmed that vision for these prophets. In some measure, it was with them as it shall be perfectly with all one day, ‘His servants serve Him, and see His face,’- action not interrupting vision, nor vision weakening action. To preserve thus fresh and unimpaired, amidst strenuous work and many temptations, the clear consciousness of being ‘ever in the great Taskmaster’s eye,’ needs resolute effort and much self-restraint. It is hard to set the Lord always before us; but it is possible, and in the measure in which we do it, we shall not be moved.

How nobly the steadfastness and superiority to all temptations which such a vision gives, are illustrated by the occasions, in these prophets’ lives, in which this expression came to their lips! The servant of the Heavenly King speaks from his present intuition. As he speaks, he sees the throne in the heavens, and the Sovereign Ruler there, and the sight bears him up from quailing before the earthly monarchs whom he had to beard, and in connection with whom three out of the four instances of the use of the phrase occur. How small Ahab and his court must have looked to eyes that were full of the undazzling brightness of the true King of Israel, and the ordered ranks of *His* attendants! How little the greatness! How tawdry the pomp! How impotent the power, and how toothless the threats! The poor show of the earthly king paled before that awful vision, as a dim candle will show black against the sun. ‘I stand before the living God, and thou, O Ahab! art but a shadow and a noise.’ Just as we may have looked upon some mountain scene, where all the highest summits were wrapt in mist, and the lower hills looked mighty and majestic, until some puff of wind came and rolled up the curtain that had shrined and hidden the icy pinnacles and peaks that were higher up. And as that solemn white apocalypse rose and towered to the heavens, we forgot all about the green hills below, because our eyes beheld the mighty summits that live amongst the stars, and sparkle white through eternity.

My brethren, here is our defence against being led away by the gauds and shows of earth’s vulgar attractions, or being terrified by the poor terrors of its enmity. Go with that talisman in your hand, ‘The Lord liveth, before whom I stand,’ and everything else dwindles down into nothingness, and you are a free man, master and lord of all things, because you are God’s servants, seeing all things aright, because you see them all in God, and God in them all.

Still further, we may say that this phrase is the utterance and expression of a consciousness that life was echoing with the voice of the divine command. Elijah stands before the Lord, not only feeling in his thrilling spirit that God is ever near him, but also that His word is ever coming forth to him, with imperative authority. That is the prophet’s conception of life. Wherever he is, he hears a voice saying, ‘This is the way, walk ye in it.’ Every place where he stands is as the very holy place of the oracles of the Most High, the spot in the innermost shrine where the voice of God is audible, All circumstances are the voice of God, commanding or restraining. He is evermore pursued, nay, rather upheld and guided, by an all-embracing law. That law is no mere utterance of cold impersonal duty,-a thought which may make men slaves, but never makes them good. But it is the voice of the living God, loving and beloved, whose tender care for His children modulates His tone, while He commands them for their good. He speaks because He loves; His law is life. The heart that hears Him speak is filled with music.

Ahab and Jehoram, and all the kings of the earth, may thunder and lighten, may threaten and flatter, may command and forbid, as they list. They and their words are nought to him whose trembling ears have heard, and whose obedient heart has received, a higher command, and to whom, ‘across the storm,’ comes the deeper voice of the one true Commander, whom alone it is a glory absolutely to obey, even ‘the Lord, before whom I stand.’ People talk about the consciousness of ‘a mission.’ The important point, on the settling of which depends the whole character of our lives, is-Who do you suppose gave you your ‘mission’? Was it any *person* at all? or have you any consciousness that any will but your own has anything to say about your life? These prophets had found One whom it was worth while to obey, whatever came of it, and whoever stood in the way. May it be so with you and me, my friend! Let us try always to feel that in the commonest things we may hear the command of God; that the trifles of each day-trifles though they be-vibrate and sound with the reverberation of His great voice; that in all the outward circumstances of our lives, as in all the deep recesses of our hearts, we may trace the indications and rudiments of His will concerning us, which He has perfectly given us in that Gospel which is 'the law of liberty,' and in Him who is the Gospel and the perfect Law. Then quietly, without bluster or mock-heroics, or making a fuss about our independence, we can put all other commands and commanders in their right place, with the old words, 'With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you, or of man's judgment; He that judgeth me,' and He that commandeth me, 'is the Lord,' In answer to all the noise about us we can face round like Elijah, and say, 'As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand.' He is my 'Imperator,' the Autocrat and Commander of my life; and Him, and Him only, must I serve. What calmness, what dignity that would put into our lives! The never-ceasing boom of the great ocean, as it breaks on the beach, drowns all smaller sounds. Those lives are noble and great in which that deep voice is ever dominant, sounding on through all lesser voices, and day and night filling the soul with command and awe.

Then, still further, we may take another view of these words. They are the utterance of a man to whom his life was not only bright with the radiance of a divine presence, and musical with the voice of a divine command, but was also, on his part, full of conscious obedience. No man could say such a thing of himself who did not feel that he was rendering a real, earnest, though imperfect obedience to God. So, though in one view the words express a very lowly sense of absolute submission before God, in another view they make a lofty claim for the utterer. He professes that he stands before the Lord, girt for His service, watching to be guided by His eye, and ready to run when He bids. It is the same lofty sense of communion and consecration, issuing in authority over others, which Elijah's true brother in later days, Paul the Apostle, put forth when he made known to his companions in shipwreck the will of 'the God, whose I am, and whom I serve.' We may well shrink from making that claim for ourselves, when we think of the poor, perfunctory service and partial consecration which our lives show. But let us rejoice that even we may venture to say, ‘Truly I am Thy servant’; if only we, like the Psalmist, rest the confession on the perfectness of what He has done for us, rather than on the imperfection of what we have done for Him; and lay, as its foundation, ‘Thou hast loosed my bonds.’ Then, though we must ever feel how poor our service, and how unprofitable ourselves, how little we deserve the honour, and how impossible that we should ever earn the least mite of wages; yet we may, in all lowliness, think of ourselves as set free that we may serve, and lift our eyes, as the eyes of a servant turn towards his master, to ‘the living Lord, before whom we stand.

Such a life is necessarily a happy life. The one misery of man is self-will, the one secret of blessedness is the conquest over our own wills. To yield them up to God is rest and peace. If we ‘stand before God,’ then that means that our wills are brought into harmony with His. And that means that the one poison drop is squeezed out of our lives, and that sweetness and joy are infused into them. For what disturbs us in this world is not ‘trouble’ but our opposition to trouble. The true source of all that frets and irritates, and wears away our lives, is not in external things, but in the resistance of our wills to the will of God expressed by external things. I suppose that we shall never here bring these wills of ours into perfect correspondence with His, any more than we shall ever, with our shaking hands and blunt pencils, draw a perfectly straight line. But if will and heart are brought even to a rude approach to parallelism with His, if we accept His voice when He takes away, and obey it when He commands, we shall be quiet and peaceful. We shall be strong and unwearied, freed from corroding cares and exhausting rebellions, which take far more out of a man than any work does. ‘Thy word was found, and I did eat it.’ When we thus take God’s command into our spirits, and feed upon it with will and understanding, it becomes, as the Psalmist found it, the ‘joy and rejoicing of our hearts.’ Elijah-like, we shall ‘go in the strength of that meat many days.’ The secret of power and of calm is-yield your will to the loving Lord, and stand ever before Him with, ‘Here am I, send me!’

We may add one more remark to these various views of the significance of this expression, to which the last instance of its use may help us. Here it is:

‘And Naaman said, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant. But he said, As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none.’

The thought, which made all Elisha’s life bright with the light of God’s presence, which filled his ear with the unremitting voice of a Divine Law, which swayed and bowed his will to joyful obedience, chilled and deadened his desires for all earthly rewards. ‘I am not thy servant. I am God’s servant. It is not your business to pay my wages. I cannot dishonour my Master by taking payment from thee for doing His work. I look for everything from Him, for nothing from thee.’

And is there not a broad general truth involved there, namely, that such a life as we have been describing will find its sole reward where it finds its inspiration and its law? The Master’s approval is the servant’s best wages. If we truly feel that ‘the Lord *liveth*, before whom we stand, ‘we shall want nothing else for our work but His smile, and we shall feel that the light of His face is all that we need. That thought should deaden our love for outward things. How little we need to care about any payment that the world can give for anything we do! If we feel, as we ought, that we are God’s servants, that will lift us clear above the low aims and desires which meet us. How little we shall care for money, for men’s praise, for getting on in the world! How the things that we fever our souls by pursuing, and fret our hearts when we lose, will cease to attract! How small and vulgar the ‘prizes’ of life, as people call them, will appear! ‘The Lord liveth, before whom I stand,’ should be enough for us, and instead of all these motives to action drawn from the rewards of this world, we ought to ‘labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him.’

Not the fading leaves of the victor’s wreath, laurel though they be, nor the corruptible things as silver and gold, whereof earth’s diadems and rewards are fashioned, but the incorruptible crown that fadeth not away, which His hand will give, should fire our hope, and shine before our faith. Not Naaman’s gifts but God’s approval is Elisha’s reward. Not the praise from lips that will perish, or the ‘hollow wraith of dying fame,’ but Christ’s ‘Well done! good and faithful servant,’ should be a Christian’s aim.

May we, brethren, possess the ‘spirit and the power of Elias’;-the spirit, in that we know ourselves to be the servants of the living God; and then we shall have some measure of his dauntless power and heroic unworldliness!

Still better, may we have the Spirit of Him who was '*the* Servant of the Lord,' diviner in His gentle meekness than the fiery prophet in his lonely strength! Make yours the mind that was in Christ, that you too may say, 'Lo, I come! in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do Thy will, yea, Thy law is within my heart.'

17)1 Kings 17:2-16

1 Kings

A PROPHET'S STRANGE PROVIDERS

1Ki. 17:1 - 1Ki. 17:16.

The worst times need the best men. The reign of Ahab brought a great outburst of Baal worship, imported by his Phoenician wife, which threatened to sweep away every trace of the worship of Jehovah. The feeble king was absolutely ruled by the strongwilled Jezebel, and everything seemed rushing down to ruin. One man arrests the downward movement, and with no weapon but his word, and no support but his own dauntless courage, which was the child of his faith, works a revolution in Israel. 'Among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than' Elijah the Tishbite. Bugged, stern, solitary, he has no commission to reveal new truth. He is not a 'prophet,' like later ones whose words were revelation.

Little is preserved of his sayings. His task was to reform and restore, not to advance; and his endowments of 'spirit and power' corresponded to his work. The striking peculiarities of this heroic figure will appear as we go on with his history. For the present, we have to consider the three points of this narrative.

I. The Prophet and the King.-The startling suddenness of Elijah's leap into the arena, where he appears without preface or explanation, helps the impression of extraordinary force which his whole career makes. He crashes into the midst of Ahab's court like a thunderbolt. What did Jezebel think of this wild man from the other side of Jordan, with his long hair and his loose mantle, who thus fronted Ahab and her? Nothing is told us of his descent; it is even questionable whether the reading which calls him ‘the Tishbite’ is correct. We only know that he was of Gilead, and therefore used to a ruder, freer, simpler life than that in kings’ palaces.

The natural conclusion from the narrative is that the prophet and the king had never met before; and, if so, the stern brevity of the threat is even more remarkable. In any case, the absence of explanation of reasons for the drought, or of credentials of Elijah, or of offers of mercy on condition of repentance, give a peculiarly grim aspect to the message, and make it a dangerous one to carry to such a hearer as Ahab, stirred up by Jezebel. When God commands us to speak, no thought of peril must make us dumb. If the ‘word of the Lord’ is to sound from our lips with power, it must first have absolute sway over ourselves. One man with God at his back, who fears nothing, can work marvels.

God’s servant is men’s master. The vision of God’s Presence paled the splendour, and blunted the perils, of the court of Samaria. Ahab was but a poor puppet in the sight of eyes that ‘saw the Lord sitting on His throne, high and lifted up.’ So the very first words of Elijah lay bare the secret spring of his fiery energy and courage. ‘Before whom I stand,’-that is the thought to put nerve, daring, and disregard of earth into a man.

James’s comment on this incident assumes that the declaration to Ahab followed earnest prayer that it might not rain, and that the ‘word’ which should end the drought was also prayer. The truest lover of his country or of any men may sometimes have to wish for losses and sorrows. Elijah did not open and shut the heavens, but his prayer had power to move the Hand that ‘openeth and no man shutteth.’

II. The Prophet and the Ravens.-One would like to know how Elijah made his escape from Ahab; but the whole story is marked by sudden appearances and disappearances. He flashes into sight and flames for a moment, and then is swallowed up in the dark again. The exact position of the brook Cherith is doubtful. It would seem most natural to look for it across Jordan, as safer and more familiar ground to Elijah than any of the tributaries on the western side. At all events, somewhere among the savage rocks in some wady with a trickle of water down it, and rank vegetation that would help to hide him, he lurked for an indefinite period, alone with God.

Why did he flee? Not only for safety, but that the period of the drought might be prolonged till it had done its work, and that the prophet might learn more lessons for his calling. Good Obadiah would have made a place for the chief of the prophets in his caves; but the man who is to do work like Elijah's must live in solitude. Cherith was part of the training for Carmel. The flight thither was as much an act of obedient faith as was the appearance before the king. However the necessity of flight was impressed on the prophet, it *was* impressed on him as manifestly not his own plan, but God's command; and though the journey was a weary one, and the appointed place of refuge inhospitable, the command was unhesitatingly obeyed. He was not left to wonder how he was to be fed when he got there, but God gave him, what He seldom gives-a previous assurance of miraculous provision, which obviously met some unspoken thought. We do not usually know how we are to be fed in the solitude till we get there; but if our doubting hearts object, 'But, Lord, there is nothing at Cherith but a brook and some ravens,' He sometimes gives us assurance that these will be enough. Whether or no, the duty is the same,-to follow God's voice, whether it take us face to face with Ahab and Jezebel or into the wild gorge.

Note that the same words are employed about the ravens and the widow: 'I have commanded the. . . to feed thee.' God has ways of reaching the mysterious animal instinct and the mysterious human will, and each, in its own way, obeys. It is needless to try to pare down the miracle by saying that, of course, ravens would haunt the water-courses in drought, and that the food which they brought might be for their young, and so on. The daily regularity of the supply takes it out of the natural category, to say nothing of the remarkable breed which the ravens must have been of, if they brought their young ones' food within reach and let the prophet take it.

People take offence at the abundance of miracles in the lives of Elijah and Elisha, and assert that some of them, this among the rest, are for unworthily trivial occasions. But the grave crisis in Israel is to be taken into account, which involved the necessity for unusual manifestations of divine power, and very evident credentials for the prophets; and the preparation of Elijah for his tremendous struggle was, even to our eyes, surely an adequate end for miracle. How could he doubt that God had sent him and would care for him, with such memories as those of his winged purveyors? How could he doubt future words which should come to him, when he recalled how marvellously this one had been fulfilled? The silence of the ravine, the long days and nights of solitude, the punctual arrival of his food, would all tend to weld his faith into yet more close-knit strength. If we may so say, it was worth God's while to work miracles, to make Elijah. The highest end of creation is the production of God-fearing men. All things serve the soul that serves God.

III. The Prophet and the Widow.-The little stream that came down the wady dried up 'after a while'; and Elijah, no doubt, would wonder what was to be done next, as he saw it daily sending a thinner thread to Jordan. But he was not told till the channel was dry, and the pebbles in its bed bleaching in the sun. God makes us sometimes wait on beside a diminishing rivulet, and keeps us ignorant of the next step, till it is dry. Patience is an element in strength. It was a far cry from Cherith to Zarephath, right across the kingdom of Ahab; and to run for refuge to a dependency of Zidon, Jezebel's country, looked like putting his head in the lion's mouth. But the same 'command' which the ravens had obeyed had smoothed his way.

So he girded up his loins, and left, no doubt reluctantly, the brook for a city. How his heart would bow in adoring thankfulness, when the first person he saw outside the little 'city' was 'the widow'! He knew her; did she know him? The natural interpretation of 1Ki. 17:9 is that, at the time when God spoke to Elijah, he had already 'commanded' the woman. But the despondent tone of her answer seems against that idea; and perhaps we are to suppose that, just as the ravens were commanded and knew not by whom, so this woman received the command, when she saw the travel-stained and gaunt stranger, through her womanly impulses of compassion, not knowing who moved them nor what she did when she sheltered the man whose life was, at that moment, the most important in the world. The motions of pity and charity are of God, and He commands us to help when He sets before us those who need help.

The whole incident was a lesson to the prophet. He might well have thought that God had sent him to a strange helper in this poor widow with her empty cupboard; and it must have taken some faith on his part to reassure her with his cheery ‘Fear not!’ The prediction of the undiminishing stores demanded as much faith from its speaker as from its hearer.

It was a lesson in faith for the woman too. Her use of the phrase ‘the Lord thy God’ may imply some inclination to the worship of Jehovah, and so there may have been a little glimmer of faith in her; but she was full of sorrow and despair, and yet willing to help the stranger with the ‘little water in a vessel,’ though the ‘morsel of bread in thine hand’ was beyond her power. Elijah’s apparently selfish demand that his wants should be looked after first was a test of her faith. Sometimes self-denying duty is made clearly imperative on us, before we hear the promise which, believed, will make it easy. They who have ears to hear the command, and hearts to obey, even if it seem to strip them of all, will soon hear the assurance that secures abundance. The barrel would have been empty by nightfall, if the meal in it had been used for the woman and her son. The continuance of supply depended on her obedience, which, in its turn, depended on faith in the prophet as a messenger of God. ‘There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth.’ The use of earthly goods for God’s service may not be rewarded with the increase of them; but, if the barrel is not kept full of meal, the heart will be kept full of peace, which is better. No sacrifice for God is ever thrown away. He remains in no man’s debt.

The incident has a further bearing, as an instance of a divine benediction resting on heathendom. The synagogue at Nazareth pointed that lesson for us. Elijah and the widow both learned that the God of Israel is the God of all the earth, and that His prophets have a mission to every race. The woman rebuked, by her pity and self-denying benevolence, the prejudices of Israel; the prophet foreshadowed, by his familiar abode with one won from idolatry to the worship of God, the universal aspect of the Jewish religion, and its destiny to overleap the narrow bounds of the nation. Charity and pity have no geographical limits. Much less can the love of God and the light of His revelation be bounded by any narrower circle than the circumference of the world.

18)1 Kings 18:12

1 Kings

OBADIAH

To the Young

1Ki. 18:12.

This Obadiah is one of the obscurer figures in the Old Testament. We never hear of him again, for there is no reason to accept the Jewish tradition which alleges that he was Obadiah the prophet. And yet how distinctly he stands out from the canvas, though he is only sketched with a few bold outlines! He is the ‘governor over Ahab’s house,’ a kind of mayor of the palace, and probably the second man in the kingdom. But though thus high in that idolatrous and self-willed court, he has bravely kept true to the ancient faith. Neither Jezebel’s flatteries nor her frowns have moved him. But there, amid apostasy and idolatry he stands, probably all alone in the court, a worshipper of Jehovah. His name is his character, for it means ‘servant of Jehovah.’ It was not a light thing to be a worshipper of the God of Israel in Ahab’s court. The feminine rage of the fierce Sidonian woman, whom Ahab obeyed in most things, burned hot against the enemies of her father’s gods, and hotter, perhaps, against any one who thwarted her imperious will. Obadiah did both, in that audacious piece of benevolence when he sheltered the Lord’s prophets-one hundred of them-and saved them from her cruel search. The writer of the book very rightly marks this brave antagonism to the outburst of the queen’s wrath as a signal proof of a more than ordinary devotion to the worship and fear of Jehovah. His firmness and his religion did not prevent his retaining his place of honour and dignity. That says something for Ahab, and more perhaps for Obadiah.

Most of you believe that you ought to ‘fear the Lord’: but you are apt to put off, and so I wish to urge on you that you should give your hearts to Jesus Christ at once.

I. The blessedness of youthful religion.

[a] It guards from many temptations, and keeps a character innocent of much transgression.

Think of the dangers that lie thick in the streets of every great city, and of a lad coming up from a country home of godliness, where he was surrounded by a mother's love and an atmosphere of purity, and launched into some lonely lodging, or some factory or warehouse with many tempters. Nothing will be such a help to resistance and victory as to be able to say, 'So did not I because of the fear of the Lord.'

[*b*] It will save from remorse. Even if a man 'sobers down' after 'sowing his wild oats,' which is a very problematical 'if,' what bitter memories of wasted days, what polluting memories of filthy ones, will haunt him! And if he does not sober down, what then?

It is folly to begin life on a wrong tack, in regard to which the best that you can say is that you do not mean to continue it. If you do not, then the wise thing is to get at once on to the road on which you do mean to continue, and to save the weary work of retracing steps and the painful consciousness of having made a false start. Are you so sure that you will wish, or that it will be possible, to face right about and get on to a new line? Fishermen catch lobsters and the like by means of baskets with one opening, the withes of which are so set that the entrance is easy, but that a ring of sharp points oppose all attempts at turning back and getting out. The world lays 'pots' of that sort, and many a young man and woman glides smoothly in, and finds it impossible to get out.

[*c*] It usually leads to a deeper and more peaceful and harmonious religion than is attained by those who have given the world the better part of their days, and have only the last fragment of them to give to God. Obadiah had feared God from his youth, and that had a good deal to do with his brave stand against Jezebel. It is a grand thing to enlist habit on the side of godliness.

II. The foes of youthful religion.

There are foes within . . .. the strong self-reliance and bounding life proper to youth, without which at the opening of the flower, the bloom would be poor and the fruit little, . . . the power of appeals to the unjaded and physically strong senses, . . . the difficulty at such a stage of life of looking forward and soberly regarding the end.

There are foes without . . ..the crowds of tempters of both sexes, men and women who take a devilish pleasure in polluting innocent minds, . . . the companions whose jeers are worse to face than a battery, . . . the inconsistencies of so-called Christians, the anti-Christian literature which is peculiarly fascinating to the young, with its brave show of breaking with mouldy tradition and enthroning reason and emancipating from rusty fetters.

III. The too probable alternative to youthful religion.

It is but too likely that, if a man does not ‘fear the Lord’ from ‘his youth,’ he will never fear Him. Thank God, there is no time nor condition of life in which the wicked man cannot ‘forsake his way,’ or ‘the unrighteous man his thoughts,’ and ‘turn to the Lord’ with the assurance that ‘He will abundantly pardon.’ But it is sadly too plain to observation, and to the experience of some of us, that obstacles grow with years, that habits and associations grip with increasing power, that in all things our natures become less flexible, the supple sapling becoming gnarled and tough, that a middle-aged or old man is more inextricably ‘tied and bound by the cords of his sins,’ than a young one is.

Sin lies to us by first saying, ‘It is too soon to be religious,’ and then it lies to us by saying, ‘It is too late.’

The inclination diminishes.

The Gospel long heard and long put aside, loses power.

Contrast the beauty of a course of life, begun on the same lines as those on which it ends, and being like ‘the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the meridian of the day,’ with one which gave the greater part of its years to ‘the world, the flesh, and the devil,’ or at least to one’s godless self, and the dregs of it only to God.

19)1 Kings 18:25-39

1 Kings

THE TRIAL BY FIRE

1Ki. 18:25 - 1Ki. 18:39.

The place, the purpose, and the actors in this scene, make it among the grandest in history. A nation, with its king, has come together, at the bidding of one man, to settle no less a question than whom they shall worship. There, on the slope of Carmel, with the brassy heaven gleaming hard and dry above them, and the yellow, burnt-up plain of Jezreel at their feet, the expectant people stand. The assembly was a singular proof of Elijah's ascendency; for Ahab's bluster had sunk, cowed in his presence, and he had meekly done the prophet's bidding in summoning 'all Israel' and the eight hundred and fifty Baal and Asherah prophets, for an unexplained purpose. The false priests would come unwillingly; but they came.

Then Elijah takes the command, and, though utterly alone, towers above the crowd in the courage of his undaunted confidence in his message. His words have the ring of authority as he rebukes indecision, and calls for a clear adhesion to Baal or Jehovah. If the people had answered, the trial by fire would have been needless. But their silence shows that they waver, and therefore he makes his proposal to them.

Note that the priests are not consulted, nor is Ahab. The former would have had some excuse for shirking the sharp issue; but the people's assent forced them to accept the ordeal,-reluctantly enough, no doubt.

I. The vain cries to a deaf God. It is strange that one of the parties to the test has power to determine its conditions, especially as Elijah's prophetic authority was one of the things in dispute; but it is a sign of the magnetic power which one bold man with absolute confidence in his own convictions exercises over men. The Baal prophets are given every advantage in priority of action. Error is best unmasked by being allowed free opportunity to do its best; for the more favourable the circumstances of trial, the more signal the defeat. God's servants must never be suspected of unfair tricks in their controversy with error. They can afford to let it try first. Notice the substitution of ‘your god,’ in the Revised Version, for ‘your gods’ in the Authorised Version. That is obviously right; for the only question was about one god,-namely, Baal.

So, in the early morning, with all the people gazing at them, the Baal priests or prophets begin their attempt. It was easy to prepare the sacrifice, and lay it on the altar,-though, no doubt, it was done sullenly, with foreboding of the coming exposure. The whole account of the wild invocations of the priests may suggest some of the characteristics of idolatry, and touch our hearts with pity, as well as with the sense of its absurdity, which animated Elijah’s mockery.

Note, then, the vivid picture, in 1Ki. 18:27, of the long hours of vain crying. On the one hand, we hear the wild chorus echoing among the rocks; on the other, we feel the dead silence in the heavens.

The monotonous and almost mechanical repetition of the invocation, prolonged till the syllables have no meaning to the yelling crowd, is characteristic of the frenzied excitement so common in idolatry. To call such howlings prayer, degrades the name. They are the very opposite of that sacred communion of a believing soul with the God whom it knows, trusts, and beseeches with submission. Neither knowledge nor trust is in these shrieks, which seek to propitiate the stern god by repeating his name as a kind of charm. Heathenism has no true prayer. Wild cries and passionate desires, flung upwards to an unloved god, are not prayer; and that solace and anchor of the troubled soul is wanting in all the dreary lands given up to idolatry.

The melancholy persistence of the unanswered cries may stand as a symbol of the tragic obstinacy with which their devotees cling to their vain gods,-a rebuke to us with a more enlightened faith. The silence, which was the only answer, is put in strong contrast with the continuous roar of the four hundred and fifty,-so long and loud the hoarse cries here, so unmoved the stillness in the careless heaven. That, too, is typical of heathenism, which is sad with unavailing cries and ignorant of answers to any. As the day wore on, and the voices grew hoarse, and hope declined, more violent bodily exercise was resorted to, and the shouting crowd danced [or, perhaps, as the margin says, ‘limped,’-a picturesque and contemptuous word for the grotesque contortions around the altar], as if that might bring the answer. That again is a feature common to all heathenism. No wonder that Elijah’s scorn broke forth vehemently at such a sight. Noon was the hour of the sun’s greatest power, and, since Baal was probably a solar deity, it was the hour when, if ever, he would spare one of his abundant fiery beams to light the pyre. So Elijah’s taunts came just when they were most biting, and none can say that they were undeserved. His fiery zeal and his naturally stern character broke out in the bitter irony with which he imagines a variety of undignified positions for Baal.

Sarcasm is not the highest weapon, and the ‘spirit of Elijah’ is not the spirit of Jesus; but the exposure of the absurdity of idolatry is legitimate, and even ridicule may have its place in pricking wind-distended bladders. A man throttling a serpent may be excused using anything that comes handy for the purpose. But, at the same time, the right attitude for us as Christians in the presence of that awful fact of idolatry, is neither contempt nor scientific curiosity, but pity deep as Christ’s, and earnest resolve to help our darkened brethren. The taunts stirred to fiercer excitement and more extravagant acts, as ridicule is wont to do, and therein proves itself an unreliable instrument of controversy. Laughing at a man generally makes him more obstinate. The priests answered Elijah by savagely gashing their half-naked bodies with knives and lances,-a ready way to make blood come, but not to bring fire. The frenzy became wilder as the day declined, and at last, covered with blood, hoarse with shouting, panting with their gymnastics, they ‘prophesied,’ having wrought themselves into that state of excitement in which incoherent rhapsodies burst from their lips. What a scene to call worship! That is what millions of men are ready to practise to-day. And all the while there is no voice, no answer, no care for them, in the pitiless sky. The very genius of idolatry is set before us in that tumultuous crowd on Carmel.

II. The sacrifice of faith and the answer by fire. We pass from a scene of wild commotion into an atmosphere of sacred calm in 1Ki. 18:30. The contrast is striking. The fiery fervours of the day are past, and the sun is sinking behind the top of Carmel, and there is much to do before it sets. Elijah with his own hands, as would appear, repairs a ruined altar among the woods. Probably it had been erected for secret worship of Jehovah by some faithful amid the national apostasy, when access to Jerusalem was forbidden them, and had been destroyed by Ahab in his crusade against Jehovah worshippers. The selection of the twelve stones was symbolical of the unbroken unity of the nation, and was Elijah's protest against the very existence of the Northern kingdom, and its assumption of the name of 'Israel' The writer explains what was meant, when he reminds us that Israel was the name given to Jacob, and therefore, as he would have us infer, was the common property of all his descendants. Judah was a part of Israel, and Israel should be an undivided whole, uniting in all its tribes in bringing offerings to Jehovah.

It was a daring thing to do before Ahab's face; but the weak king was, for the time, subjugated by the imperious will and courage of Elijah. The building of the altar, with its mute witness to God's purpose, would touch some hearts in the gazing, silent crowd. The next step was, of course, meant to make the miracle more conspicuous by drenching everything with water, probably brought, even in that drought, from the perennial fountain near at hand. Perhaps, too, the number of barrels was intended, again, as symbolical of the twelve tribes.

One can fancy the wonder and eagerness of the people, and the dark frowns of the baffled and exhausted Baal priests, as they gradually came out of their frenzy, and knew that they had lost their opportunity. The tranquil though earnest prayer of the prophet is in sharpest contrast with the meaningless bellowings to Baal. Note in it the solemn invocation. The great Name, which all listening to him had deposed from rule over them, is set in the front; and the ancestral worship, as well as the divine gifts and dealings with the patriarchs, is pleaded with God as the reason for His answer now. The name of 'Israel' instead of the more common 'Jacob,' has the same force as in 1Ki. 18:31.

Note the substance of the petitions. The deepest desire of a truly devout soul is that God would make His name known. Zeal for God's honour and love for men who have gone astray from Him, conspire to make that the head and front of His true servant's prayers. It is God, not his own credit, about which Elijah thinks first. For himself, all that he desires is to be known as an obedient servant, and as not having done anything at the bidding of his own will or judgment, but in accordance with the all-commanding Voice.

Clearly we must suppose that in all the ordering of this sublime trial by fire, Elijah had been acting ‘at Thy word,’ even though we have no other record of the fact. He had no right to expect an answer unless he had been bidden to propose the test. God will honour the drafts which He bids us draw on Him; but to suspend our own or other people’s faith in Him, on the issue of some experiment whether He will answer prayers, is not faith, but rash presumption, unless it is in obedience to a distinct command. Elijah had such a command, and therefore he could ask God to vindicate his action, and to prove that he was God’s servant. His last petition is beautiful, both in its consciousness of power with God and recognition of his place as a prophet, and in its lowly subordination of all personal aims to the restoration of Israel to the true worship. He asks, with reiteration which is earnestness and faith, and therefore the sharpest contrast to the mechanical repetition by Baal’s priests, that God would hear him; but his sole object in that prayer is, not that his name may be exalted as a prophet, or that any good may come to him, but that the blinded eyes may be opened, and the hearts, that have been so sadly led astray, be brought back to the worship of their fathers’ God.

The whole brief prayer, in its calm confidence; its adoring recognition of the name and past dealings of Jehovah as the ground of trust; its throbbing of earnest desire for the manifestation of His character before men; its consciousness of personal relation to God, which humbles rather than puffs up; its beseeching for an answer, and its closing petition, which comes round again to its first, that men may know God, and fasten their hearts on Him,-may well stand as a pattern of prayer for us.

The short prayer of faith does in a moment what all the long day of crying could not do. The language in which the answer is described emulates the rapidity of the swift tongues of fire which licked up sacrifice, altar, and water. They were the tokens of acceptance, reminding of the consuming of the first sacrifices in the Tabernacle, and, like them, inaugurating a new beginning of the worship of God. The burning of the altar, as well as of the sacrifice, expressed the acceptance of the people whom it, by its twelve stones, symbolised. And the people, on their part, were-for the time, at all events-swept away by the miracle, and by the force of the prophet’s example and authority. Short-lived their faith may have been, as certainly it was superficial; but the fire had for the time melted their hearts, and set them flowing in the ancient channels of devotion. The faith that is founded on miracle may be deepened into something better; but unless it is, it speedily dies away. The faith that is due to the influence of some strong personality may lead on to an independent faith, based on personal experience; but, unless it does, it too will perish.

We may find a modern reproduction of the test of Carmel in the impotence of all other schemes and methods of social and spiritual reformation and the power of the Gospel. In it and its effects God answers by fire. Let the opposers, who are so glib in demonstrating the failure of Christianity, do the same with their enchantments, if they can.

20)1 Kings 19:1-8

1 Kings

ELIJAH’S WEAKNESS, AND ITS CUBE

1Ki. 19:1 - 1Ki. 19:18.

The miracle on Carmel cowed, if it did not convince, Ahab, so that he did not oppose the slaughter of the Baal prophets; but Jezebel was made of sterner stuff, and her passionate idolatry was proof against even a sign from heaven. Obstinacy in error is often a rebuke to tremulous faith in God. She fiercely puts her back to the wall, and defies Elijah and his God. Her threat to the prophet has a certain audacity of frankness almost approaching generosity. She will give her victim fair play. This woman is ‘magnificent in sin.’ The Septuagint prefixes to her oath, ‘As surely as thou art Elijah and I Jezebel,’ which adds force to it. It also reads, by a very slight change in the Hebrew, in 1Ki. 19:3, ‘he was afraid,’ for ‘he saw,’-which is possibly right, as giving his motive for escape more distinctly.

I. We may note, first, the prophet’s flight [1Ki. 19:3 - 1Ki. 19:8]. Beersheba, on the southern border of the kingdom of Judah, was eloquent of memories of the patriarchs, but though it was nearly a hundred miles from Jezreel, Jezebel’s arm was long enough to reach the fugitive there, and therefore he plunged deeper into the dreary southern desert. He left behind him his servant, his ‘young man,’ as the original has it, whom Rabbinical tradition identified with the miraculously resuscitated son of the widow of Zarephath, and supposed to become afterwards the prophet Jonah. Thus alone but for the company of his own gloomy thoughts, and wearied with toilsome travel in the sun-smitten waste, he took shelter under the shadow of a solitary shrub [the Hebrew emphatically calls it ‘*one* juniper,’ or rather ‘broom-plant’], and there the waves of depression went over him.

His complaint is not to be wondered at, though it was wrong. The very overstrain of the scene on Carmel brought reaction. The height of the crest of one wave measures the depth of the trough of the next, and no mortal spirit can keep itself at the sublime elevation reached by Elijah when alone he fronted and converted a nation. The supposed necessity for flight, coming so immediately after apparent victory, showed him how hollow the change in the people was. What had become of all the fervency of their shout, ‘The Lord, He is the God!’ if they could leave Jezebel the power to carry out her threat? Solitude and the awful desert increased his gloom. The strong man had become weak, and it was ebb-tide with him. His prayer was petulant, impatient, presumptuous. What right had he to settle what was ‘enough’? If he really wished to die, he could have found death at Jezreel, and had no need to travel a hundred miles to seek a grave. He was weary of his work, and profoundly disappointed by what he hastily concluded was its failure, and in a fit of faithless despondency he forgot reverence, submission, and obedience.

If Elijah can become weak, and his courage die out, and his zeal become torpid apathy and cowardly wish to shuffle off responsibility and shirk work, who shall stand? The lessons of self-distrust, of the nearness to one another of the most opposite emotions in our weak natures, of the depth of gloom into which the boldest and brightest servant of God may fall as soon as he loses hold of God’s hand, never had a more striking instance to point them than that mighty prophet, sitting huddled together in utter despondency below the solitary retem bush, praying his foolish prayer for death.

The meal to which an angel twice waked him was God’s answer to his prayer, telling him both that his life was still needful and that God cared for him. Perhaps one of Elijah’s reasons for taking to the desert was the thought that he might starve there, and so find death. At all events, God for the third time miraculously provides his food. The ravens, the widow of Zarephath, an angel, were his caterers; and, instead of taking away his life, God Himself sends the bread and water to preserve it. The revelation of a watchful, tender Providence often rebukes gloomy unbelief and shames us back to faith. We are not told whether the journey to Horeb was commanded, or, like the flight from Jezreel, was Elijah’s own doing; but, in any case, he must have wandered in the desert, to have taken forty days to reach it.

II. The second stage is the vision at Horeb [1Ki. 19:9 - 1Ki. 19:14]. The history of Israel has never touched Horeb since Moses left it, and it is not without significance that we are once more on that sacred ground. The parallel between Moses and Elijah is very real. These two names stand out above all others in the history of the theocracy, the one as its founder, the other as its restorer; both distinguished by special revelations, both endowed with exceptional force of character and power of the Spirit; the one the lawgiver, the other the head of the prophetic order; both having something peculiar in their departure, and both standing together, in witness of their supremacy in the past, and of their inferiority in the future, by Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. The associations of the place are marked by the use of the definite article, which is missed in the Authorised Version,-’the cave,’ that same cleft in the rock where Moses had stood. Note, too, that the word rendered ‘lodged’ is literally ‘passed the night,’ and that therefore we may suppose that the vision came to Elijah in the darkness.

That question, ‘What doest thou here?’ can scarcely be freed from a tone of rebuke; but, like Christ’s to the travellers to Emmaus, and many another interrogation from God, it is also put in order to allow of the loaded heart’s relieving itself by pouring out all its griefs. God’s questions are the assurance of His listening ear and sympathising heart. This one is like a little key which opens a great sluice. Out gushes a full stream. His forty days’ solitude have done little for him. A true answer would have been, ‘I was afraid of Jezebel.’ He takes credit for zeal, and seems to insinuate that he had been more zealous for God than God had been for Himself. He forgets the national acknowledgment of Jehovah at Carmel, and the hundred prophets protected by good Obadiah. Despondency has the knack of picking its facts. It is colour-blind, and can only see dark tints. He accuses his countrymen, as if he would stir up God to take vengeance.

How different this weak and sinful wail over his solitude from the heroic mention of it on Carmel, when it only nerved his courage I [verse 22]. The divine manifestation which followed is evidently meant to recall that granted to Moses on the same spot. ‘The Lord passed by’ is all but verbally quoted from Exo. 34:6, and the truth that had been proclaimed in words to Moses was enforced by symbol to Elijah. If the vision was in the night, as 1Ki. 19:9 suggests, it becomes still more impressive. The fierce wind that roared among the savage peaks, the shock that made the mountains reel, and the flashing flames that lighted up the wild landscape, were all phenomena of one kind, and at once expressed God’s lordship over all destructive agencies of nature, and symbolised the more vehement and disturbing forms of energy, used by Him for the furtherance of His purposes in the field of history or of revelation. Elijah’s ministry was of such a sort, and he had now to learn the limitations of his work, and the superiority of another type, represented by the ‘sound of gentle stillness.’

It is the same lesson which Moses learned there, when he heard that the Lord is ‘a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth.’ It was exemplified in the gentle Elisha, the successor of Elijah. It reached far beyond the time then present, and was indeed a Messianic prophecy, declaring the inmost character of Him in whom ‘the Lord is,’ in an altogether special sense. Elijah as a prophet brought no new knowledge, and uttered no far-reaching predictions; but he received one of the deepest and clearest prophecies of the gentleness of God’s highest Messenger, and on Horeb saw afar off what he saw fulfilled on the Mountain of Transfiguration. Nor is his vision exhausted by its Messianic reference. It contains an eternal truth for all God’s servants. Storm, earthquake, and fire may be God’s precursors, and needed sometimes to prepare His way; but gentleness is ‘the habitation of His throne,’ and they serve Him best, and are nearest Him whom they serve, who are meek in heart and gentle among enemies, ‘as a nurse cherisheth her children.’ Love is the victor, and the sharpest weapons of the Christian are love and lowliness.

The lesson was not at first grasped by Elijah, as his repetition of his complaint, word for word, with almost dogged obstinacy, shows. The best of us are slow to learn God’s lessons, and a habit of faithless gloom is not soon overcome. It is much easier to get down into the pit than to struggle out of it.

III. The commission for further service, which closes the scene, is a further rebuke to the prophet. He is bidden to retrace his way and to take refuge in the desert lying to the south and east of Damascus, where he would be safe from Jezebel, and still not far from the scene of his activity. The instructions given to anoint a king of Syria and one of Israel were not fulfilled by Elijah, but by his successor; and we have to suppose that further commands were given to him on that subject. The third injunction, to anoint his successor, was obeyed at once on his journey, though Ahelmeholah, on Gilboa, was dangerously near Jezreel. The designation of these future instruments of God’s purpose was at once a sign to Elijah that his own task was drawing to a close [having reached its climax on Carmel], and that God had great designs beyond him and his service. The true conception of our work is that we sire only links in a chain, and that we can be done without. ‘God removes the workers and carries on the work.’ To anoint our successor is often a bitter pill; but self-importance needs to be taken down, and it is blessed to lose ourselves in gazing into the future of God’s work, when we are gone from the field.

Further, the commissions met Elijah’s despondency in another way; for they assured him of the divine judgments on the house of Ahab, and of the use of the Syrian king as a rod to chastise Israel. He had thought God too slow in avenging His dishonoured name, and had been taught the might of gentleness; but now he also learns the certainty of punishment, while the enigmatical promise that Elisha should ‘slay’ those who escaped the swords of Hazael and Jehu dimly points to the merciful energy of that prophet’s word, his only sword, which shall slay but to revive, and wound to heal. ‘I have hewed them by the . . . words of my mouth.’

Finally, the revelation of the seven thousand-a round number, which expresses the sacredness as well as the numerousness of the elect, hidden ones-rebukes the hasty assumption of his being left alone, ‘faithful among the faithless.’ God has more servants than we know of. Let us beware of feeding either our self-righteousness or our narrowness or our faint-heartedness with the fancy that we have a monopoly of faithfulness, or are left alone to witness for God.

21)1 Kings 19:9

1 Samuel **- 1 Kings**

ELIJAH’S WEAKNESS, AND ITS CUBE
WHAT DOEST THOU HERE?

1Sa. 29:3. - 1Ki. 19:9.

I have put these two verses together, not only because of their identity in form, though that is striking, but because they bear upon one and the same subject, as will appear, if, in a word or two, I set each of them in its setting. David was almost at the lowest point of his fortunes when he fled into foreign territory, and for awhile took service under one of the kings of the Philistines. He served him faithfully, and so, when the last great fight, in which Saul lost his life, was about to be waged between Philistia and Israel, David and his men came as a contingent to the army of the former. The Philistine commanders, very naturally, were suspicious of these allies, just as Englishmen would have been if, on the night before Waterloo, a brigade of Frenchmen had deserted and offered their help to fight Napoleon. So the question ‘What do these Hebrews here?’-amongst our ranks-was an extremely natural one, and it was answered in the only possible way, by the subsequent departure of David and his men from the unnatural and ill-omened alliance.

Now, that suggests to us that Christian people are out of their places, even in the eyes of worldly people, when they are fighting shoulder to shoulder with them in certain causes; and it suggests the propriety of keeping apart. ‘Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord’ ‘What do these Hebrews here?' is a question that Philistia often asks. But now turn to the other question. Elijah had fallen into the mood of depression which so often follows great nervous tension. He had just offered the sacrifice on Carmel, and brought all Israel back to the Lord, and Jezebel had flamed out and threatened his life. The usually undaunted prophet, in the reaction after his great effort, was fearful for his life and deserted his work, flung himself into solitude and shook the dust off his feet against Israel. Was that not just doing what I have been saying that Christian people ought to do-separating himself from the world? In a sense, yes, but the voice came, 'What dost thou here, Elijah?' 'Go back to your work; to Ahab, to Jezebel. Go back to death if need be. Do not shirk your duty on the pretence of separating yourself from the world.'

So we put the two questions together. They limit one another, and they suggest the *via media,* the course between, and lead me to say one or two plain things about that duty of Christian separation from an evil world.

I. The first thing that I would suggest to you is the inevitable intermingling, which is the law of God, and therefore can never be broken with impunity.

Christ's parable about the Kingdom of Heaven in the world being like a man that sowed good seed in his field, which sprung up intermingled with tares, contains the lesson, not so much of the purity or nonpurity of the Church as of the inseparable intertwining in the world of Christian people with others. The roots are matted together, and you cannot pull up a tare without danger of pulling up a wheat-stalk that has got interlaced with it. That is but to say that Society at present, and the earthly form of the Kingdom of God, are not organised on the basis of religious affinity, but upon a great many other things, such as family, kindred, business, a thousand ties of all sorts which mat men together, and make it undesirable, impossible, contrary to God's intention, that the good people should club themselves together, and leave the bad ones to rot and stink. The two are meant to be in close contact. 'Let both grow together till the harvest.' If any Christian man were to do as the monks of old did, fly into solitude to look after his own soul, then the question which came to Elijah would be suitable to him, 'What doest thou here?' Is there not work enough for you out there, in that wicked world? Is that not the place for you? Where is the place for the ‘salt’? Where the meat is in danger of putrefaction. Rub it in! That is what it was meant for. ‘Ye are the light of the world.’ That suggests the picture of a lamp upon a pedestal that it may send out its rays, but itself remains apart. But the companion metaphor suggests the closest possible contact, and such contact is duty for us Christian people. Elijah ran away from his work. There are types of Christian life to-day unwholesomely self-engrossed, and too much occupied with their own spiritual condition, to realise and discharge the duty of witnessing in the world. Wherever you find a Christian man -whether he is a monk with bare foot, and a rope round his brown robe, and shaven head, or whether he is in the garb of modern Protestantism- that tries more to keep himself apart, in the enjoyment and cultivation of his own religious life, than to fling himself into the midst of the world’s worst evil, in order to fight and to cure it, you get a man who is sharing in Elijah’s transgression, and needs Elijah’s rebuke. The intermingling is inevitable in the present state of things; and family, kindred, business, social and political movements, all require that Christian people should work side by side with men who are not possessors of ‘like precious faith.’ If ever there have been individuals or communities that have tried to traverse that law, they have developed narrowness and bitterness and stunted growth, and a hundred evils that we all know.

II. And now let me say a word about the second thing, and that is-the imperative separation.

‘What do these Israelites here?’ is the question. Much of all our lives lies outside these necessary connections with the world, of which I have been speaking. And the question for each of us is, What do we do when we are left to do as we like? Where do we go? When the iron weight fastened by the bit of string is taken off the sapling, it starts back to its original uprightness. Is that what your Christianity does for you? When you are left to yourself, when you have done all the work that is required, and you are free, where do you turn naturally? It is of no use to lay down special regulations. There has been far too much regulation and red-tape in our Christianity all along. Do not let us put so much stress upon individual acts. Let us look at the spirit. Whither do I turn? What do I like to do? Who are my chosen companions? What are my recreations? Is my life of such a sort as that the world will point to me, and say, ‘What! you here I a professing Christian; what are you doing here?’

I remember that in the autobiography of Mr. Spurgeon, there is a story told about what he did when a child, and living with his grandfather, the pastor of a little country church. There was a very prominent member of that church who was in the habit of going into the public-house occasionally; and the small boy stepped into the sanded parlour where this inconsistent man was sitting, walked up to him, and said, ‘What doest thou here, Elijah?’ It was the turning-point of the man’s life. That is the question that I desire us all to ask ourselves-where do we go, and what sort of lives do we live in the moments when our own voluntary choice determines our action?

‘A man is known by the company he keeps,’ says an old Latin proverb, and I am bound to say that I do not think that it is a good sign of the depth of a Christian professor’s religion if he feels himself more at home in the company of people who do not share his religion than in the company of those that do. I do not wish to be strait-laced and narrow, but I do not wish, either, to be so broad as to obliterate altogether the distinction between Christian people and others. The fact of the case is this, dear friends; if we are Christ’s servants we have more in common with the most uncongenial Christians than we have with the most congenial man who is not a Christian. And if we were nearer our Master we should feel that it was so. ‘Being let go they went to their own company.’ Where do you go when you can make your choice?

I am not going to speak in detail about occupations or recreations. I can quite believe that the theatre might be made an instrument of morality. I can quite believe that a race-course might be a perfectly innocent place. I can quite believe that there may be no harm in a dance. All that I say is that there are two questions which every Christian professor ought to ask himself about such subjects. One is, Can I ask God to bless this thing, and my doing it? And the other is, Does this help or hinder my religion? If we will take these two questions with us as tests of conduct and companionship, I do not think that we shall go far wrong, either in the choice of our companions, or in the choice of our surroundings of any kind, or in the choice of our recreations and our occupations. But if we do not, then I am quite sure that we shall go wrong in them all. ‘What communion hath light with darkness?’ ‘What agreement hath the temple of God with idols? Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord.’

The main question is, do I grasp the aim of life with clearness and decision as being to make myself by God’s help such a character as God has pleasure in? If I do I shall regulate all these things thereby.

III. Now there is one last suggestion that I wish to make, and that is the double questioning that we shall have to stand.

The lords of the Philistines said, ‘What do these Hebrews here?’ They saw the inconsistency, if David and his men did not. They were sharp to detect it, and David and his band did not rise in their opinion, but decidedly went down, when they saw them marching there, in such an unnatural place as ‘behind Achish,’ and ready to flesh their swords in the blood of their brethren. So let me tell you, you will neither recommend your religion nor yourselves to men of the world, by inconsistently trying to identify yourselves with them. There are a great many professing Christians nowadays whose mouths are full of the word ‘liberality,’ and who seem to try to show how absolutely identical with a godless man’s a God-fearing one’s life may be made. Do you think that the world respects that type of Christian, or regards his religion as the kind of thing to be admired? No; the question that they fling at such people is the question which David was humiliated by having pitched at his head-’What do these Hebrews here?’ ‘Let them go back to their mountains. This is no place for *them*.’ The world respects an out-and-out Christian; but neither God nor the world respects an inconsistent one.

But there is another question, and another Questioner-’What doest thou here, Elijah?’ God did not ask Elijah the question because he did not know the answer; but because he wished to make Elijah put his mood into words, since then Elijah would understand it a little better, and, when he found the tremendous difficulty of making a decent excuse, would begin to suspect that the conduct that wanted so much glozing was not exactly the conduct fit for a prophet. And so let us think that God is looking down upon us, in all our occupation of our free time, and that He is wishing us to put into words what we are about, and why we are where we are.

What do you think you would say if, in some of these moments of unnecessary intermingling with questionable things and doubtful people, you were brought suddenly to this, that you had to formulate into some kind of plausibility your reason for being there? I am afraid it would be a very lame and ragged set of reasons that many of us would have to give. Well! better that we should now have to answer the question ‘What doest thou here?’ than that we should have to fail in answering the future question, after we have done with the world: ‘What didst thou there?’

Dear brethren, let us cleave to Christ, and that will separate us from the world. If we cleave to the world, that will separate us from Christ. I do not insist on details of conduct, but I do beseech you, professing Christians, to recognise that you are set in the world in order to grow like your Master, and that their tendency to help you to that likeness is the one test of all occupations, recreations, and companionships, by which we may know whether we are in or out of the place that pleases Him. And if we are in it, that blessed hope which is held forth in the parable to which I have already referred, will come full of sweetness and of strength to us, that, yonder, men will be grouped according to their moral and religious character; that the tares will be taken away from the wheat, and, that as Christ says, ‘Then shall the righteous flame as the sun in their heavenly Father’s Kingdom.’

22)1 Kings 19:9-18

1 Kings

ELIJAH’S WEAKNESS, AND ITS CUBE

1Ki. 19:1 - 1Ki. 19:18.

The miracle on Carmel cowed, if it did not convince, Ahab, so that he did not oppose the slaughter of the Baal prophets; but Jezebel was made of sterner stuff, and her passionate idolatry was proof against even a sign from heaven. Obstinacy in error is often a rebuke to tremulous faith in God. She fiercely puts her back to the wall, and defies Elijah and his God. Her threat to the prophet has a certain audacity of frankness almost approaching generosity. She will give her victim fair play. This woman is ‘magnificent in sin.' The Septuagint prefixes to her oath, 'As surely as thou art Elijah and I Jezebel,' which adds force to it. It also reads, by a very slight change in the Hebrew, in 1Ki. 19:3, 'he was afraid,' for 'he saw,'-which is possibly right, as giving his motive for escape more distinctly.

I. We may note, first, the prophet's flight [1Ki. 19:3 - 1Ki. 19:8]. Beersheba, on the southern border of the kingdom of Judah, was eloquent of memories of the patriarchs, but though it was nearly a hundred miles from Jezreel, Jezebel's arm was long enough to reach the fugitive there, and therefore he plunged deeper into the dreary southern desert. He left behind him his servant, his 'young man,' as the original has it, whom Rabbinical tradition identified with the miraculously resuscitated son of the widow of Zarephath, and supposed to become afterwards the prophet Jonah. Thus alone but for the company of his own gloomy thoughts, and wearied with toilsome travel in the sun-smitten waste, he took shelter under the shadow of a solitary shrub [the Hebrew emphatically calls it '*one* juniper,' or rather 'broom-plant'], and there the waves of depression went over him.

His complaint is not to be wondered at, though it was wrong. The very overstrain of the scene on Carmel brought reaction. The height of the crest of one wave measures the depth of the trough of the next, and no mortal spirit can keep itself at the sublime elevation reached by Elijah when alone he fronted and converted a nation. The supposed necessity for flight, coming so immediately after apparent victory, showed him how hollow the change in the people was. What had become of all the fervency of their shout, 'The Lord, He is the God!' if they could leave Jezebel the power to carry out her threat? Solitude and the awful desert increased his gloom. The strong man had become weak, and it was ebb-tide with him. His prayer was petulant, impatient, presumptuous. What right had he to settle what was 'enough'? If he really wished to die, he could have found death at Jezreel, and had no need to travel a hundred miles to seek a grave. He was weary of his work, and profoundly disappointed by what he hastily concluded was its failure, and in a fit of faithless despondency he forgot reverence, submission, and obedience.

If Elijah can become weak, and his courage die out, and his zeal become torpid apathy and cowardly wish to shuffle off responsibility and shirk work, who shall stand? The lessons of self-distrust, of the nearness to one another of the most opposite emotions in our weak natures, of the depth of gloom into which the boldest and brightest servant of God may fall as soon as he loses hold of God's hand, never had a more striking instance to point them than that mighty prophet, sitting huddled together in utter despondency below the solitary retem bush, praying his foolish prayer for death.

The meal to which an angel twice waked him was God's answer to his prayer, telling him both that his life was still needful and that God cared for him. Perhaps one of Elijah's reasons for taking to the desert was the thought that he might starve there, and so find death. At all events, God for the third time miraculously provides his food. The ravens, the widow of Zarephath, an angel, were his caterers; and, instead of taking away his life, God Himself sends the bread and water to preserve it. The revelation of a watchful, tender Providence often rebukes gloomy unbelief and shames us back to faith. We are not told whether the journey to Horeb was commanded, or, like the flight from Jezreel, was Elijah's own doing; but, in any case, he must have wandered in the desert, to have taken forty days to reach it.

II. The second stage is the vision at Horeb [1Ki. 19:9 - 1Ki. 19:14]. The history of Israel has never touched Horeb since Moses left it, and it is not without significance that we are once more on that sacred ground. The parallel between Moses and Elijah is very real. These two names stand out above all others in the history of the theocracy, the one as its founder, the other as its restorer; both distinguished by special revelations, both endowed with exceptional force of character and power of the Spirit; the one the lawgiver, the other the head of the prophetic order; both having something peculiar in their departure, and both standing together, in witness of their supremacy in the past, and of their inferiority in the future, by Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. The associations of the place are marked by the use of the definite article, which is missed in the Authorised Version,-'the cave,' that same cleft in the rock where Moses had stood. Note, too, that the word rendered 'lodged' is literally 'passed the night,' and that therefore we may suppose that the vision came to Elijah in the darkness.

That question, ‘What doest thou here?’ can scarcely be freed from a tone of rebuke; but, like Christ’s to the travellers to Emmaus, and many another interrogation from God, it is also put in order to allow of the loaded heart’s relieving itself by pouring out all its griefs. God’s questions are the assurance of His listening ear and sympathising heart. This one is like a little key which opens a great sluice. Out gushes a full stream. His forty days’ solitude have done little for him. A true answer would have been, ‘I was afraid of Jezebel.’ He takes credit for zeal, and seems to insinuate that he had been more zealous for God than God had been for Himself. He forgets the national acknowledgment of Jehovah at Carmel, and the hundred prophets protected by good Obadiah. Despondency has the knack of picking its facts. It is colour-blind, and can only see dark tints. He accuses his countrymen, as if he would stir up God to take vengeance.

How different this weak and sinful wail over his solitude from the heroic mention of it on Carmel, when it only nerved his courage I [verse 22]. The divine manifestation which followed is evidently meant to recall that granted to Moses on the same spot. ‘The Lord passed by’ is all but verbally quoted from Exo. 34:6, and the truth that had been proclaimed in words to Moses was enforced by symbol to Elijah. If the vision was in the night, as 1Ki. 19:9 suggests, it becomes still more impressive. The fierce wind that roared among the savage peaks, the shock that made the mountains reel, and the flashing flames that lighted up the wild landscape, were all phenomena of one kind, and at once expressed God’s lordship over all destructive agencies of nature, and symbolised the more vehement and disturbing forms of energy, used by Him for the furtherance of His purposes in the field of history or of revelation. Elijah’s ministry was of such a sort, and he had now to learn the limitations of his work, and the superiority of another type, represented by the ‘sound of gentle stillness.’

It is the same lesson which Moses learned there, when he heard that the Lord is ‘a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth.’ It was exemplified in the gentle Elisha, the successor of Elijah. It reached far beyond the time then present, and was indeed a Messianic prophecy, declaring the inmost character of Him in whom ‘the Lord is,’ in an altogether special sense. Elijah as a prophet brought no new knowledge, and uttered no far-reaching predictions; but he received one of the deepest and clearest prophecies of the gentleness of God's highest Messenger, and on Horeb saw afar off what he saw fulfilled on the Mountain of Transfiguration. Nor is his vision exhausted by its Messianic reference. It contains an eternal truth for all God's servants. Storm, earthquake, and fire may be God's precursors, and needed sometimes to prepare His way; but gentleness is 'the habitation of His throne,' and they serve Him best, and are nearest Him whom they serve, who are meek in heart and gentle among enemies, 'as a nurse cherisheth her children.' Love is the victor, and the sharpest weapons of the Christian are love and lowliness.

The lesson was not at first grasped by Elijah, as his repetition of his complaint, word for word, with almost dogged obstinacy, shows. The best of us are slow to learn God's lessons, and a habit of faithless gloom is not soon overcome. It is much easier to get down into the pit than to struggle out of it.

III. The commission for further service, which closes the scene, is a further rebuke to the prophet. He is bidden to retrace his way and to take refuge in the desert lying to the south and east of Damascus, where he would be safe from Jezebel, and still not far from the scene of his activity. The instructions given to anoint a king of Syria and one of Israel were not fulfilled by Elijah, but by his successor; and we have to suppose that further commands were given to him on that subject. The third injunction, to anoint his successor, was obeyed at once on his journey, though Ahelmeholah, on Gilboa, was dangerously near Jezreel. The designation of these future instruments of God's purpose was at once a sign to Elijah that his own task was drawing to a close [having reached its climax on Carmel], and that God had great designs beyond him and his service. The true conception of our work is that we sire only links in a chain, and that we can be done without. 'God removes the workers and carries on the work.' To anoint our successor is often a bitter pill; but self-importance needs to be taken down, and it is blessed to lose ourselves in gazing into the future of God's work, when we are gone from the field.

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23)1 Kings 20:11

1 Kings

PUTTING ON THE ARMOUR

1Ki. 20:11.

For the Young.

Ahab, King of Israel, was but a poor creature, and, like most weak characters, he turned out a wicked one, because he found that there were more temptations to do wrong than inducements to do right. Like other weak people, too, he was torn asunder by the influence of stronger wills. On the one side he had a termagant of a wife, stirring him up to idolatry and all evil, and on the other side Elijah thundering and lightning at him; so the poor man was often reduced to perplexity. Once in his lifetime he did behave like a king, with some flash of dignity. My text comes from that incident. His next neighbour, and, consequently, his continual enemy, was the king of Damascus. He had made a raid across the border and was dictating terms so severe as to invite even Ahab to courageous opposition. His back was at the wall, and he mustered up courage to say ‘No!’ That provoked a bit of blustering bravado from the enemy, who sent back a message, ‘The gods do also unto me and more also, if the dust of Samaria shall suffice for handfuls for all the people that follow me.’ And then Ahab replied in the words of our text. They have a dash of contempt and sarcasm, all the more galling because of their unanswerable common-sense. ‘The time to crow and clap your wings is *after* you have fought. Samaria is not a heap of dust just yet. Threatened men live long.’ The battle began, and the bully was beaten; and for once Ahab tasted the sweets of success.

Now, I have nothing more to do with Ahab and the immediate application of his message, but I wish to apply it to my young friends, whom I have taken it upon me to ask now to listen to two or three homely words to them in this sermon.

You are beginning the fight; some of us old people are getting very near the end of it. And I would fain, if I could, see successors coming to take the places which we shall soon have to vacate. So my message to you, dear friends, young men and young women, is this, ‘Let not him that putteth on the harness boast himself as he that putteth it off.’

I. Now, look for a moment at the general view of life that is implied in this saying thus understood.

There is nothing that the bulk of people are more unwilling to do than steadily to think about what life as a whole, and in its deepest aspects, is. And that disinclination is strong, as I suppose, in the average young man or young woman. That comes, plainly enough, from the very blessings of your stage of life. Unworn health, a blessed inexperience of failures and limitations, the sense of undeveloped power within you, the natural buoyancy of early days, all tend to make you rather live by impulse than by reflection. And I should be the last man in the world to try to damp the noble, buoyant, beautiful enthusiasms with which Nature has provided that we should all begin our course. The world will do that soon enough; and there is no sadder sight than that of a bitter old man, who has outlived, and smiles sardonically at, his youthful dreams. But I do wish to press upon you all this question, Have you ever tried to think to yourself, ‘Now what, after all, is this life that is budding within me and dawning before me-what is it, in its deepest reality, and what am I to do with it?’

There are some of us to whom, so far as we have thought at all, life presents itself mainly as a shop, a place where we are to ‘buy and sell, and get gain,’ and use our evenings, after the day’s work is over, for such recreation as suits us. And there are young men among my hearers who, with the flush of their physical manhood upon them, and perhaps away from the restraints of home, and living in gloomy town lodgings, with no one to look after them, are beginning to think that life after all is a kind of pigs’ trough, with plenty of foul wash in it for whoso chooses to suck it up-a garden of not altogether pure delights, a place where a man may gratify the ‘lusts of the flesh.’

But, dear brethren, whilst there are many other noble metaphors under which we can set forth the essential character of this mysterious, tremendous life of ours, I do not know that there is one that ought to appeal more to the slumbering heroism which lies in every human soul, and to the enthusiasms which, unless you in your youth cherish, you will in your manhood be beggared indeed, than that which this picture of my text suggests. After all, life is meant to be one long conflict. We are like the fellahin that one sometimes sees in Eastern lands, who cannot go out to plough in their fields, or reap their harvests, without a gun slung on their backs; for the condition under which we work in this world is that everything worth doing has to be done at the cost of opposition and antagonism, and that no noble service or building is possible without brave, continuous conflict. Even upon the lower levels of life that is so. No man learns a science or a trade without having to fight for it. But high above these lower levels, there is the one on which we all are called to walk, the high level of duty, and no man does what his conscience tells him, or refrains from that which his conscience sternly forbids, without having to fight for it. We are in the lists and compelled to draw the sword. And if we do not realise this, that all nobility all greatness, all wisdom, all success, even of the lowest and most vulpine kind, are won by conflict, we shall never do anything in the world worth doing. You are a soldier, whether you will or no, and life is a fight, whether you recognise the fact or not.

So, standing at the beginning, do not fancy that there is opening before you a scene of enjoyment, or that you are stepping into a world in which you can take your ease, and come out successfully at the other end. It is not so; and you will find that out before long. Better that you should settle it in your minds at first. When you were born you were enrolled on the roll-call of the regiment; and now you have to do a man’s part in the battle.

II. Note the boastful temper which is sure to be beaten.

No doubt there is something inspiring in the spectacle of the young warrior standing there, chafing at the lists, eagerly pulling on his gauntlets, fitting on his helmet, and longing to be in the thick of the fight. No doubt, as I have already said, there is something in your early days which makes such buoyant hopes and anticipations of success natural, and which gives you, as a great gift, that expectation of victory. I do not wish to shatter any of your enthusiasms or ideals, but I do wish to suggest a consideration or two that may calm and sober them.

So I ask, have you ever estimated, are you now estimating rightly, what it is that you have to fight for? To make yourselves pure, wise, strong, self-governing, Christlike men, such as God would have you to be. That is not a small thing for a man to set himself to do. You may go into the struggle for lower purposes, for bread and cheese, or wealth or fame, or love, or the like, with a comparatively light heart; but if there once has dawned upon a young soul the whole majestic sweep of possibilities in its opening life, then the battle assumes an aspect of solemnity and greatness that silences all boasting. Have you considered what it is that you have to fight for?

Have you considered the forces that are arrayed against you? ‘What act is all its thought had been?’ Hand and brain are never paired. There is always a gap between the conception and its realisation. The painter stands before his canvas, and, while others may see beauty in it, he only sees what a small fragment of the radiant vision that floated before his eye his hand has been able to preserve. The author looks on his book and thinks what a poor, wretched transcript of the thoughts that inspired his pen it is. There is ever this same disproportion between the conception and accomplishment. Therefore, all we old people feel, more or less, that our lives have been failures. We set out as you do, thinking that we were going to build a tower whose top should reach to heaven, and we are contented if, at the last, we have scrambled together some little wooden shanty in which we can live. We thought as you do; you will come to think as we do. So you had better begin now, and not go into the fight boasting, or you will come out of it conscious of being beaten.

Have you realised how different it is to dream things and to do them? In our dreams we are, as it were, working *in vacuo*. When we come to acts, the atmosphere offers resistance. It is easy to imagine ourselves victorious in circumstances where things are all going rightly and are bending according to our own desires, but when we come to the grim world, where there are things that resist and people are not plastic, it is a very different matter. You do not yet understand, as you will some day, the fatal limitations of power that hem us all round and the obstinate way that circumstances have of not falling in with our wishes. And you have not yet learned how completely and constantly failure accompanies success, like its shadow. The old Egyptians had no need to put a skeleton at their tables, nor the Romans to set a mocker behind the hero as he rode in triumph up to the Capitol. The world provides the skeleton at the banquet, and circumstances supply the mocker to add a dash of failure to all our triumphs.

Have you ever realised how certainly, into the brightest and most buoyant and successful lives, there will come crushing sorrows, blows as from an unseen hand in the dark, that fell a man? O friend! when one thinks of the miseries and the misfortunes, the sorrows and the losses, the broken and bleeding hearts that began life buoyant, elastic, hopeful, perhaps boasting, like you, there ought to be a sobering tint cast over our brightest visions.

I suppose that our colleges are full of students who are going, to far outstrip their professors, that every life-school has a dozen lads who have just begun to handle brush and easel, and are going to put Raffaelle in the shade. I suppose that every lawyer’s office has a budding Lord Chancellor or two in it. And I suppose that that sharp criticism of us fumblers in the field, and half-expressed thought, ‘How much better I could do it!’ belong to youth by virtue of its youth. It is a crude form of undeveloped power, but it wants a great deal of sobering down, and I am trying now to let out a little of the blood, and to bring you to a clear conception of the very limited success which is likely to attend you. All we old people, whose deficiencies and limitations you see so clearly, had the same dreams, impossible as it may appear to you, fifty years ago. We were going to be the men, and wisdom was going to die with us, and you see what we have made of it. You will not do much better.

Have you ever taken stock honestly of your own resources? ‘What king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether with his ten thousand he can meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?’ Boast if you like, but calculate first, and boast after that, if you can.

Your worst enemy is yourself. When you are counting your resources and saying, ‘I have this, that, and the other thing,’ do not forget to say, ‘I have a part of me, that takes all the rest of me all its time to keep it down and prevent it from becoming master.’ You have traitors in the fortress who are in communication with the enemy outside, and may go over to him openly in the very crisis of the fight. You have to take that fact into account, and it ought to suppress boasting whilst you are putting on the harness.

You are not old enough to remember, as some of us do, the delirious enthusiasm with which, in the last Franco-German war, the Emperor and the troops left Paris, and how, as the train steamed out of the station, shouts were raised, ‘A. Berlin!’ Ay! and they never got farther than Sedan, and there an Emperor and an army were captured. Go into the fight bragging, and you will come out of it beaten.

III. Note the confidence which is not boasting.

I can fancy some of you saying, ‘These gloomy views of yours will lead to nothing but absolute despair. You have been telling us that success is impossible; that we are bound to fight, and are sure to be beaten. What are we to do? Throw up the sponge, and say, “Very well! then I may as well have my fling, and give up all attempts to be any better than my passions and my senses would lead me to be.”‘ And if there is nothing more to be said about the fight than has been already said, that *is* the conclusion. ‘Let us eat and drink,’ not only ‘for to-morrow we die,’ but ‘for to-day we are sure to be beaten.’ But I have only been speaking about this self-distrust as preliminary to what is the main thing that I desire to urge upon you now, and it is this: You do not need to be beaten. There is no room for boasting, but there is room for absolute confidence. You, young men and women, standing at the entrance of the amphitheatre where the gladiators fight, may dash into the arena with the most perfect confidence that you will come out with your shield preserved and your sword unbroken.

There is one way of doing it. ‘Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world.’ That was not the boast of a man putting on the harness, but the calm utterance of the conquering Christ when He was putting it off. He has conquered that you may conquer. Remember how the Apostle, who has preserved for us that note of triumph at the end of Christ’s life, has, like some musician with a favourite phrase, modulated and varied it in his letter written long after, when he says, ‘This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.’ My dear young friends, distrust yourselves utterly, and trust Jesus Christ absolutely, and give yourselves to Him, to be His servants and soldiers till your lives’ end. Then you will not be beaten, for it is written of those who move in the light, wearing the victor’s palm: ‘These are they who overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of His testimony.’ That blood secures our victory in a threefold fashion. By that great death of Jesus Christ all our past sins may be forgiven, and they no longer have power to tyrannise over us. In His sacrifice for us there are motives given to us for noble, grateful, Godlike living, stronger than all the temptations that can arise from our own hearts, or from the evils around us. And if we put our humble trust in Him, then that faith opens the door for the entrance into our hearts, in simple reality, of a share in His conquering life which will make us victorious over the world, the flesh, and the devil.

‘This is the victory that overcometh the world,’ and the youngest, feeblest Christian who lays his or her hand in Christ’s strong hand, may look out upon all the embattled antagonisms that front them, and say, ‘He will cover my head in the day of battle, and teach my hands to war and my fingers to fight.’

Dear young friends, people sometimes preach to you that you should be Christians, because life is uncertain and death is drawing near, and after death the judgment. I preach that too; but the gospel that I seek to press upon you now is not merely a thing to die by, but it is *the* thing to live by; and it is the only power by which we shall be sure of overcoming the armies of the aliens. This confidence in Christ will take away from you no shred of your natural, youthful, buoyant elasticity, but it will save you from much transgression and from bitter regrets.

One last word. There is possible a triumph which is not boasting, for him who puts *off* the harness. The war-worn soldier has little heart for boasting, but he may be able to say, 'I have not been beaten.' The best of us, when we come to the end, will have to recognise in retrospect failures, deficiencies, palterings with evil, yieldings to temptation, sins of many sorts, that will put all boasting out of our thoughts. But, whilst that is so, there is sometimes granted to the man, who has been faithful in his adherence to Jesus Christ, a gleam of sunshine at eventime, which foretells Heaven's welcome and 'Well done!', before it is uttered. He was no self-righteous braggart, but a very rigid judge of himself, who, close by the headsman's block that ended his life, said: 'I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith.' 'Put on the whole armour of God,' and when the time comes to put it off, you will have a peaceful assurance as far removed from despair as it is from boasting. Distrust yourselves; do not underestimate your enemies; understand that life is warfare; trust utterly to Jesus Christ, and He will see to it that you are not conquered, will give you the calm confidence of which we have been speaking here, and a share hereafter in the throne which He promises to him that overcometh. If you will trust yourselves to Him, and take service in His army, you cannot be too certain of victory. If you fling yourself into the battle in your own strength, with however high a hope, and fight without the Captain for your ally, you cannot escape defeat.

24)1 Kings 21:1-16

1 Kings

ROYAL MURDERERS

1Ki. 21:1 - 1Ki. 21:16.

There are three types of character in this story, all bad, but in different ways. Ahab is wicked and weak; Jezebel, wicked and strong; the elders of Jezreel, wicked and subservient. Amongst them they commit a great crime, which was the last drop in the full cup of the king’s sins, and brought down God’s judgment on him and his house.

I. We have to look at the weakly wicked Ahab. His wish for Naboth’s vineyard was a mere selfish whim. He was willing to give more for it than it was worth. It suited his convenience for a kitchen-garden. In the true spirit of an Eastern despot, he expected everything to yield to his caprice, and did not think that a subject had any rights. What business has a poor man with sentiment? Naboth is to go, and a handful of silver will set all right. Samuel’s warning of what a king would be and do was fulfilled. This highhanded interference with private rights was what Israel’s revolt had led to. The sturdy Naboth was influenced not only by love for the bit of land which his fathers had cultivated for more years than Ahab had reigned days, but by obedience to the law of God; and he was not afraid to show himself a Jehovah worshipper, by his solemn appeal to ‘the Lord,’ as well as by the fact of his refusal. The brusque, flat refusal shows that some independence was left in the nation.

The weak rage and childish sulking of Ahab are very characteristic of a feeble and selfish nature, accustomed to be humoured and not thwarted. These fits of temper seem to have been common with him; for he was in one at the end of the preceding chapter, as he is now. The ‘bed’ on which he flung himself is probably the couch for reclining on at table, and, if so, the picture of his passion is still more vivid. Instead of partaking of the meal, he turns his face to the wall, and refuses food. ‘No meat will down with him for want of a salad, because wanting Naboth’s vineyard for a garden of herbs.’ As he lies there, like a spoiled child, all because he could not get his own way, he may serve for an example of the misery of unbridled selfishness and unregulated desires. An acre or two of land was a small matter to get into such a state about, and there are few things that are worth a wise or a strong man’s being so troubled. Hezekiah might ‘turn his face to the wall’ in the extremity of sickness and earnestness of prayer; but Ahab in doing it is only a poor, feeble creature who has weakly set his heart on what is not his, and weakly whimpers because he cannot have it.

To be thus at the mercy of our own ravenous desires, and so utterly miserable when they are thwarted, is unworthy of manhood, and is sure to bring many a bitter moment; for there are more disappointments than gratifications in store for such a one. We may learn from Ahab, too, the certainty that weakness will darken into wickedness. Such a mood as his always brings some Jezebel or other to suggest evil ways of succeeding. In this wicked world there are more temptations to sin than helps to virtue, and the weak man will soon fall into some of the abundant traps laid for him. Unless we have learned to say ‘No’ with much emphasis, because we are ‘strong in the Lord,’ we shall fall. ‘This did not I because of the fear of the Lord.’ To be weak is to be miserable, and any sin may come from it.

II. Jezebel is a type of a different sort of wickedness. She is wicked and strong. Notice how she takes the upper hand at once, in her abrupt question, not without a spice of scorn; and note how Ahab answers, bemoaning himself, putting in the forefront his fair proposal, and making Naboth’s refusal ruder than it really had been, by suppressing its reason. Then out flashes the imperious will of this masterful princess, who had come from a land where royalty was all-powerful, and who had no restraints of conscience. She darts a half-contemptuous question at Ahab, to stir him to action; for nothing moves a weak man so much as the fear of being thought weak. ‘Dost thou govern?’ implies, ‘If thou dost, thou mayest trample on a subject.’ It should mean, ‘If thou dost, thou must jealously guard the subject’s rights.’ What a proud consciousness of her power speaks in that ‘I will give thee the vineyard’! It is like Lady Macbeth’s ‘Give me the dagger!’ No more is said. She can keep her own counsel, and Ahab suspects that some violence is to be used, which he had better not know. So, again, his weakness leads him astray. He does not wish to hear what he is willing should be done, if only he has not to do it. So feeble men hoodwink conscience by conniving at evils which they dare not perpetrate, and then enjoying their fruits, and saying, ‘Thou canst not say I did it.’

Jezebel had Ahab’s signet, the badge of authority, which she probably got from him for her unspoken purpose. Her letter to the elders of Jezreel speaks out, with cynical disregard of decency, the whole ugly conspiracy. It is direct, horribly plain, and imperative. There is a perfect nest of sins hissing and coiled together in it. Hypocrisy calling religion in to attest a lie, subornation of evidence, contempt for the poor tools who are to perjure themselves, consciousness that such work will only be done by worthless men, cool lying, ferocity, and murder,-these are a pretty company to crowd into half a dozen lines. Most detestable of all is the plain speaking which shows her hardened audacity and conscious defiance of all right. To name sin by its true name, and then to do it without a quiver, is a depth of evil reached by few men, and perhaps fewer women.

The plot gives a colour of legality, which is probably often unobserved by readers. Naboth was to be accused of treason: ‘renouncing God and the king’; and that was, according to the law of Moses, a charge which, if proved, merited capital punishment. But it is Satan accusing sin for Jezebel, the Baal worshipper, who had done her best to root out the name of Jehovah, to accuse Naboth of departing from God. Much highhanded oppression must have gone before such outspoken contempt of justice; and, if Ahab represents the fatal connection of weakness and wickedness, Jezebel is an instance of the fatal audacity with which a strong character may come, by long indulgence in self-willed gratification of its own desires, to trample down all obstacles and go crashing through all laws, human and divine. The climax of sin is to see a deed to be sinful, and to do it all the same. Such a pre-eminence in evil is not reached at a bound, but it can be reached; and every indulgence in passion, and every gratifying of desire against which conscience protests, is a step toward it. Therefore, if we shrink from such a goal, let us turn away from the paths that lead to it. ‘No mortal man is supremely foul all at once.’ Therefore resist the beginnings of evil. Elijah was strong by natural temperament, and so was Jezebel. But the strength of the prophet was hallowed by obedience, and, like some great river, poured blessings where it flowed. Jezebel’s strength was lawless, and foamed itself away in fury, like some devastating torrent that spreads ruin whithersoever it bursts out. ‘Be strong’ is good advice, but it needs the supplement, ‘Let all your deeds be done in charity,’ and the foundation,’ Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.’

III. The last set of actors in this pitiful tragedy are the subserviently wicked elders. The narrative sets their slavish compliance in a strong light. It puts emphasis on the tie between them and Naboth, in that they ‘dwelt in his city,’ and so should have had neighbourly feeling. It lays stress on their cowardly motive and their complete execution of orders, both by reiterating that they acted ‘as Jezebel had sent’ and ‘as it was written,’ and by taking the letter clause by clause, in the narrative of the shameful parody of justice which they acted. It suggests both their eagerness to do her pleasure, and her impatient waiting, in her palace, by the message sent in hot haste as soon as the brave peasant proprietor was dead. ‘It is ill sitting at Rome and striving with the Pope,’ as the proverb has it. No doubt these cowards were afraid for their own necks, and were too near the royal tigress to venture disobedience. But their swift, unremonstrating, and complete obedience indicates the depth of degradation and corruption to which they and the nation had sunk, and the terror exercised by their upstart king and his Sidonian wife.

Cowardice is always contemptible, and wickedness is always odious; but when the two come together, and a man has no other reason for his sin than ‘I was afraid,’ each makes the other blacker. Israel had cast off the fear of the Lord, which would have preserved it from the ignoble terror of men, and the consequence was that it trembled before an angry, unscrupulous woman. It had revolted from Rehoboam and his foolish bluster about whips and scorpions, and the consequence was a worse slavery. If we fear God, we need have no other fear. The sun puts out a fire. If we rebel against Him, we do not become free, but fall under a heavy yoke. It is never prudent to do wrong. The worst consequences of resistance to powerful evil are easier to bear than those of compliance, though it may seem the safer. Better be lying dead beneath a heap of stones, like the sturdy Naboth, who could say ‘No’ to a king, than be one of his stoners, who killed their innocent neighbour to pleasure Jezebel!

Her indecent triumph at the success of the plot, and her utter callousness, are expressed in her words to Ahab, in which the main point is the taking possession of the vineyard. The death of its owner is told with exultation, as being nothing but the sweeping aside of an obstacle. Ahab asks no questions as to how this opportune clearing away of hindrance came about. He knew, no doubt, well enough that there had been foul play; but that does not matter to him, and such a trifle as murder does not slacken his glad haste to get his new toy. There was other red on the vines than their clustering grapes, as he soon found out, when Elijah’s grim figure, like an embodied conscience, met him there. Whoever reaches out to grasp a fancied good by breaking God’s law, may get his good, but he will get more than he expected along with it,-even an accusing voice that prophesies evil. Elijah strides among the leafy vines in the field bought by crime. Ahab meant to make it a garden of pot-herbs. 'Surely the bitter wormwood of divine revenge grew abundantly therein.'

25)1 Kings 21:20

1 Kings

AHAB AND ELIJAH

1Ki. 21:20.

The keynote of Elijah's character is force-the force of righteousness. The New Testament, you remember, speaks of the 'power of Elias.' The outward appearance of the man corresponds to his function and his character. Gaunt and sinewy, dwelling in the desert, feeding on locusts and wild honey, with a girdle of camel's skin about his loins, he bursts into the history, amongst all that corrupt state of society, with the force of a hammer that God's hand wields. The whole of his career is marked by this one thing,-the strength of a righteous man. And then, on the other hand, this Ahab;-the keynote of *his* character is the weakness of wickedness, and the wickedness of weakness. Think of him. Weakly longing-as idle and weak minds in lofty places always do-after something that belongs to somebody else; with all his gardens, coveting the one little herb-plot of the poor Naboth; weak and worse than womanly, turning his face to the wall and weeping when he cannot get it; weakly desiring to have it, and yet not knowing how to set about accomplishing his wish; and then-as is always the case, for there are always tempters everywhere for weak people-that beautiful fiend by his side, like the other queen in our great drama, ready to screw the feeble man that she is wedded to, to the sticking-place, and to dare anything to grasp that on which the heart was set. And so the deed is done: Naboth safe stoned out of the way; and Ahab goes down to take possession! The lesson of that is, my friend,-Weak dallying with forbidden desires is sure to end in wicked clutching at them. Young men, take care! You stand upon the beetling edge of a great precipice, when you look over, from your fancied security, at a wrong thing; and to strain too far, and to look too fixedly, leads to a perilous danger of toppling over and being lost! If you know that a thing cannot be won without transgression, do not tamper with hankerings for it. Keep away from the edge, and '*shut* your eyes from beholding vanity.'

But my business now is rather with the consequences of this apparently successful sin, than with what went before it. The king gets the crime done, shuffles it off himself on to the shoulders of his ready tools in the little village, goes down to get his toy, and gets it-but he gets Elijah along with it, which was more than he reckoned on. When, all full of impatience and hot haste to solace himself with his new possession, he rushes down to seize the vineyard, he finds there, standing at the gate, waiting for him-black-browed, motionless, grim, an incarnate conscience-the prophet whom he had not seen for years, the prophet that he had last seen on Carmel, bearding alone the servants of Baal, and executing on them the solemn judgment of death; and there leaps at once to his lip, 'Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?'

I. I find here, in the first place, this broad principle: Pleasure won by sin is peace lost.

It does not need that there should be a rebuking prophet standing by to work out that law. God commits the execution of it to the natural operations of our own consciences and our own spirits. Here is the fact in men's natures on which it partly depends: when sin is yet tempting us, it is loved; when sin in done, it is loathed. Action and reaction, as the mechanicians tell us, are equal and contrary. The more violent the blow with which we strike upon the forbidden pleasure, the further back the rebound after the stroke. When sin tempts-when there hangs glittering before a man the golden fruit which he knows that he ought not to touch-then, amidst the noise of passion or the sophistry of desire, conscience is silenced for a little while. No man sins without knowing that it is wrong, without knowing that in the long run it is a mistake; but at the instant, in the delirium of yielding, as in moments of high physical excitement, he is blind and deaf, deaf to the voice of reason, blind to the sight of consequences. Conscience and consequence are alike lost sight of. Like a mad bull, the man that is tempted lowers his head and shuts his eyes, and rushes right on. The moment that the sin is done, that moment the passion or desire which tempted to it is satiated, and ceases to exist for the time. It is gone as a motive. Like some savage beast, being fed full, it lies down to sleep. There is a vacuum left in the heart, the noise is stilled, and then- and then-conscience begins to speak. Or, to take another image, the passion, the desires, the impulses that lead us to do wrong things- they are like a crew that mutiny, and take for a moment the wheel from the steersman and the command from the captain, but then, having driven the ship on the rocks, the mutineers get intoxicated, and lie down and sleep. Passion fulfils itself, and expires. The desire is satisfied, and it turns into a loathing. The tempter draws us to him, and then unveils the horrid face that lies beneath the mask. When the deed is done and cannot be undone, then comes satiety; then comes the reaction of the fierce excitement, the hot blood begins to flow more slowly; then rises up in the heart conscience; then rises up in majesty in the soul reason; then flashes and flares before the eye the vivid picture of the consequences. His ‘enemy’ has found the sinner. He has got the vineyard-ay, but Elijah is there, and his dark and stern presence sucks all the brightness and the sunniness out of the landscape; and Naboth’s blood stains the leaves of Naboth’s garden! There is no sin which is not the purchase of pleasure at the price of peace.

Now, you will say that all that is true in regard to the grosser forms of transgression, but that it is not true in regard to the less vulgar and sensual kinds of crime. Of course it is most markedly observable with regard to the coarsest kind of sins; but it is as true, though perhaps not in the same degree-not in the same prominent, manifest way at any rate-in regard to every sin that a man does. There is never an evil thing which-knowing it to be evil-we commit, which does not rise up to testify against us. As surely as [in the words of our great philosopher poet] ‘lust dwells hard by hate,’ and as surely as to-night’s debauch is followed by to-morrow’s headache, so surely-each after its kind, and each in its own region-every sin lodges in the human heart the seed of a quick-springing punishment, yea, is its own punishment. When we come to grasp the sweet thing that we have been tempted to seize, there is a serpent that starts up amongst all the flowers. When the evil act is done-opposite of the prophet’s roll-it is sweet in the lips, but oh! it is bitter afterwards. ‘At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder!’

Then, you may say again, ‘All that is very much exaggerated. That is not the sort of feeling which men that go on persistently doing wrong things, cherish. They live quietly and contentedly enough. “There are no bands in their death, and their strength is firm.”‘ All that would be true if men’s consciences kept sensitive in the midst of men’s sins, but they do not; and so it cannot be that every transgression has thus its quick result in loss of peace. I grant you at once that it is quite possible for men to sin away the delicacy and susceptibility of their consciences. I dare say there are people here now who, after they have done a wrong thing, go on very quietly, with no knowledge of those agonies that I have been speaking about, with scarcely ever a prick of conscience for their sin. But what then? I did not say that all sin purchased pleasure by inflictions of agony; but I do say, that all sin purchases pleasure by loss of peace. The silence of a seared conscience is not peace. For peace you want something more than that a conscience shall be dumb. For peace you want something more than that you shall be able to live without the daily sense and sting of sin. You want not only the negative absence of pain, but the positive presence of a tranquillising guest in your heart-that conscience of yours testifying with you, blessing you in its witness, and shedding abroad rest and comfort. It is easy to kill a conscience-after a fashion at least. It is easy to stifle it. It is easy to come to that depth of wrongdoing that one gets used to it, and does it without caring. But oh! that cold vacuum, that dead absence in such a spirit of all healthy self-communing, that painful suspicion, ‘If I look into myself, and be quiet for a little while, and take stock of my own character, and see what I am, the balance will be on the wrong side,’-that is *not* peace. As the old historian says about the Roman armies that marched through a country, burning and destroying every living thing, ‘They make a solitude, and they call it peace.’ And so men do with their consciences. They stifle them, sear them, forcibly silence them, somehow or other; and then, when there is a dead stillness in the heart, broken by no voice of either approbation or blame, but doleful like the unnatural quiet of a deserted city, then they call that peace, and the man’s uncontrolled passions and unbridled desires dwell solitary in the fortress of his own spirit! You *may* almost attain to that. Do you think it is a goal to be set before you as an ideal of human nature? The loss of peace is certain-the presence of agony is most likely-from every act of sin.

And so, it is not only a *crime* that men commit when they do wrong, but it is a *blunder*. Sin is not only guilt, but it is a mistake. ‘The game is not worth the candle,’ according to the French proverb. The thing that you buy is not worth the price you pay for it. Sin is like a great forest-tree that we may sometimes see standing up green in its leafy beauty, and spreading a broad shadow over half a field; but when we get round on the other side, there is a great dark hollow in the very heart of it, and corruption is at work there. It is like the poison-tree in travellers’ stories, tempting weary men to rest beneath its thick foliage, and insinuating death into the limbs that relax in the fatal coolness of its shade. It is like the apples of Sodom, fair to look upon, but turning to acrid ashes on the unwary lips. It is like the magician’s rod that we read about in old books. There it lies; and if, tempted by its glitter, or fascinated by the power that it proffers you, you take it in your hand, the thing starts into a serpent with erected crest and sparkling eye, and plunges its quick barb into the hand that holds it, and sends poison through all the veins. Do not touch it, my brother! Every sin buys pleasure at the price of peace. Elijah is always waiting at the gate of the ill-gotten possession.

II. In the second place, Sin is blind to its true friends and its real foes.

‘Hast thou found me, *O mine enemy?*’ Elijah was the best friend that Ahab had in his kingdom. And that Jezebel there, the wife of his bosom, whom he loved and thanked for this new toy, she was the worst foe that hell could have sent him. Ay, and so it is always. The faithful rebuker, the merciful inflicter of pain, is the truest friend of the wrongdoer. The worst enemy of the sinful heart is the voice that either tempts it into sin, or lulls it into self-complacency. And this is one of the most certain workings of evil desires in our spirits, that they pervert for us all the relations of things, that they make us blind to all the moral truths of God’s universe. Sin is blind as to itself, blind as to its own consequences, blind as to who are its friends and who are its foes, blind as to earth, blind as to another world, blind as to God. The man who walks in the ‘vain show’ of transgression, whose heart is set upon evil,-he fancies that ashes are bread, and stones gold [as in the old fairy story]; and, on the other hand, he thinks that the true sweet is the bitter, and turns away from God’s angels and God’s prophets, with, ‘Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?’ That is the reason, my friend, of not a little of the infidelity that haunts this world-that sin, perverted and blinded, stumbles about in its darkness, and mistakes the face of the friend for the face of the foe. God sends you in mercy a conscience to prick and sting you that you may be kept right; and you think that *it* is your enemy. God sends in His mercy the discipline of life, pains and sorrows, to draw us away from the wrong, to make us believe that the right in this world and the next is life, and that holiness is happiness for evermore. And then, when, having done wrong, God's merciful messenger of a sharp sorrow finds us out, we say, 'Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?' and begin to wonder about the mysteries of Providence, and how it comes that there is evil in the creation of a good God. Why, physical evil is the best friend of the man that is subject to moral evil. Sorrow is the truest blessing to a sinner. The best thing that can befall any of us is that God shall not let us alone in any wrong course, without making us feel His rod, without hedging up our way with thorns, and sending us by His grace into a better one. There is no mystery in sorrow. There is a mystery in sin; but sorrow following on the back of sin is the true friend, and not the enemy, of the wrong-doing spirit.

And then, again, God sends us a gospel full of dark words about evil. It deals with that fact of sin, as no other system ever did. There is no book like the Bible for these two things,-for the lofty notion that it has about what man may be and ought to be; and for the low notion that it has of what man is. It does not degrade human nature, because it tells us the truth about human nature as it is. Its darkest and bitterest sayings about transgression, they are veiled promises, my brother. It does not make the consequences of sin which it writes down. You and I make them for ourselves, and it tells us of them. Did the lighthouse make the rock that it stands on? Is it to be blamed for the shipwreck? If a man *will* go full tilt against the thing that he knows will ruin him, what is the right name for him who hedges it up with a prickly fence of thorns, and puts a great light above it, and writes below, 'If thou comest here thou diest'? Is that the work of an enemy? And yet that is why people talk about the gloomy views of the gospel, about the narrow spirit of Christianity, about the harsh things that are here! The Bible did not make hell. The Bible did not make sin the parent of sorrow. The Bible did not make it certain that 'every transgression and disobedience' should reap its 'just recompense of reward.' We are the causes of their coming upon ourselves; and the Bible but proclaims the end to which the paths of sin must lead, and beseechingly calls to us all, ‘Turn ye, turn ye! why will ye die?’ And yet when it comes to you, how many of you turn away from it, and say, ‘It is mine enemy’! How many shrink from its merciful knife, that cuts into all the wounds of the festering spirit! How many of you feel as if ‘the truth that is in Jesus’ was a hard and bitter truth; when all the while its very heart’s blood is love, and the very secret of its message is the tenderest compassion, the most yearning sympathy, for every soul amongst us!

Ay, and more than that:-sin makes us fancy that God Himself is our enemy; and sin makes that thought of God that ought to be most blessed and most sweet to us, the terror of our souls. You have the power, my friend, by your own wrongdoing, of perverting the whole universe, and, worst of all, of distorting the image of the merciful Father, of the loving God. God loves. God is the Father. God watches over us. God will not let us alone when we transgress, God in His love has appointed that sin shall breed sorrow. But *we*-we do wrong; and then, for God’s Providence, and God’s Gospel, and God’s Son, and God Himself, there rises up in our hearts a hostile feeling, and we think that He is turned to be our enemy, and fights against us! But oh! He only fights against us that we may submit to, and love, Him. Will you, then, have it that God’s highest mercy should be your greatest sorrow, that your truest friend should be your worst foe? You can make the choice. To you God and His truth are like that ark of His covenant which to Dagon and the Philistines was a curse, but to the house of Obededom was a blessing. He and His gospel are to you like that pillar that was darkness and trouble to the hosts of the Egyptians, but light by night to His children. To you, my brother, the gospel may be either ‘the savour of life unto life, or the savour of death unto death!’ If He comes to you with rebuke, and meets you when you are at the very door of your sin, and busy with your transgression,-usher Him in, and thank Him, and bless Him for words of threatening, for merciful severity, for conviction of sin;-because conviction of sin is the work of the Comforter; and all the threatenings and all the pains that follow and track, like swift hounds, the committer of evil, are sent by Him who loves too wisely not to punish transgression, and loves too well to punish without warning, and desires only when He punishes that we should turn from our evil way, and escape the condemnation. An enemy, or a friend,-which is God in His truth to you?

III. Lastly, the sin which mistakes the friendly appeal for an enemy, lays up for itself a terrible retribution. Elijah comes to Jezreel and prophesies the fall of Ahab. The next peal, the next flash, fulfil the prediction. There, where he did the wrong, he suffered. In Jezreel, Ahab died. In Jezreel, Jezebel died. That plain was the battlefield for the subsequent discomfiture of Israel. Over and over again there encamped upon it the hosts of the spoilers. Over and over again its soil ran red with the blood of the children of Israel; and at last, in the destruction of the kingdom, Naboth was avenged and God's word fulfilled. The threatened evil was foretold that it might lead the king to repentance, and that thus it might never need to be more than a threat. But, though Ahab was partially penitent, and partially listened to the prophet's voice, yet for all that, he went on in his evil way. Therefore the merciful threatening becomes a stern prophecy, and is fulfilled to the very letter.

So, when God's message comes to us, friends, if we listen not to it, and turn not to its gentle rebuke, Oh! then we gather up for ourselves an awful futurity of judgment, when threatening will darken into punishment, and the voice that rebuked will swell into the voice of final condemnation. When a man fancies that God's prophet is his enemy, and dreams that his finding him out is a calamity and a loss, that man may be certain that something worse will find him out some day. His sins will find him out, and that is worse than the prophet's coming. My friend, picture to yourself this-a human spirit shut up, with the companionship of its forgotten and dead transgressions. There is a resurrection of acts as well as of bodies. Think what it will be for a man to sit surrounded by that ghastly company, the ghosts of his own sins!-and as each forgotten fault and buried badness comes, silent and sheeted, into that awful society, and sits itself down there, think of him greeting each with the question, 'Thou too? What! are ye all here? Hast *thou* found me, O mine enemy?' and from each bloodless spectral lip there tolls out the answer, the knell of his life, 'I *have* found thee, because thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord.' Ah, my friend! if that were all we had to say, it might well stiffen us into stony despair. Thank God-thank God! such an issue is not inevitable. Christ speaks to you. Christ is your *Friend*. He loves you, and He speaks to you now-speaks to you of your danger, but in order that you may never rush into it and be engulfed by it; speaks to you of your sin, but in order that you may say to Him, ‘Take Thou it away, O merciful Lord’; speaks to you of justice, but in order that you may never sink beneath the weight of His stroke; speaks to you of love, in order that you may know, and fully know, the depth of His graciousness. When He says to you, ‘I love thee; love thou Me: I have died for thee; trust Me, live *by* Me, and live *for* Me, ‘will you not say to Him, ‘My Friend, my Brother, my Lord, and my God’?

26)1 Kings 22:3

1 Kings

UNPOSSESSED POSSESSIONS

1Ki. 22:3.

This city of Ramoth in Gilead was an important fortified place on the eastern side of the Jordan, and had, many years before the date of our text, been captured by its northern neighbours in the kingdom of Syria. A treaty had subsequently been concluded and broken a war followed thereafter, in which Ben-hadad, King of Syria, had bound himself to restore all his conquests. He had not observed that article of peace, and the people of Israel had not been strong enough to enforce it until the date of our text; but then, backed up by a powerful alliance with Jehoshaphat of Judah, they determined to make a dash to get back what was theirs, but whilst theirs was also not theirs.

Now, I have nothing more to do with Ahab and Jehoshaphat, but I wish to turn the words of my test, and the thoughts that may come from them, into a direction profitable to ourselves. ‘Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours?’ and yet it had to be got out of the hands of the King of Syria.

I. What is ours and not ours.

Every Christian man has large tracts of unannexed territory, unattained possibilities, unenjoyed blessings, things that are his and yet not his. How much more of God you and I have a right to than we have the possession of! The ocean is ours, but only the little pailful that we carry away home to our own houses is of use to us. The whole of God is mine if I am Christ’s, and a dribble of God is all that comes into the lives of most of us.

How much inward peace is ours? It is meant that there should never pass across a Christian’s soul more than a ripple of agitation, which may indeed ruffle and curl the surface; but deep down there should be the tranquillity of the fathomless ocean, unbroken by any tempests, and yet not stagnant, because there is a vital current running through it, and every drop is being drawn upward to the surface and the sunlight. There may be a peace in our hearts deep as life; a tranquillity which may be superficially disturbed, but is never thoroughly, and down in its depths, broken. And yet, let some little petty annoyance come into our daily life, and what a pucker we are in! Then we forget all about the still depths in which we ought to be living; and fears and hopes and loves and ambitions disturb our souls, just as they do the spirits of the men that do not profess to have any holdfast in God. The peace of God is ours; but, ah! in how sad a sense it is true that the peace of God is *not* ours!

What ‘heights’-for Ramoth means ‘high places’-what heights of consecration there are which are ours according to the divine purpose and according to the fulness of God’s gift! It is meant, and it is possible, and well within the reach of every Christian soul, that he or she should live, day by day, in the continual and utter surrender of himself or herself to the will of God, and should say, ‘I do the little I can do, and leave the rest with Thee’; and should say again, ‘All is right that seems most wrong, If it be His sweet will.’ But instead of this absolute submission and completeness and joyfulness of surrender of ourselves to Him, what do we find? Reluctance to obey, regret at providences, Self dominant or struggling hard against the partial domination of the will of God in our hearts. The mind which was in Jesus Christ, who was able to say, ‘It is written of Me, lo! I come to do Thy will, O Lord!’ is ours by virtue of our being Christians; but, alas! in practical realisation how sadly it is not ours!

What noble possibilities of service, what power in the world, are bestowed on Christ’s people!’ All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth,’ says He. ‘And He breathed on them, and said, As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.’ The divine gift to the Christian community, and to the individuals that compose it-for there are no gifts given to the community, but to the individuals that make it up- is of fulness of power for all their work. And yet look how, all through the ages, the Church has been beaten by the corruption of the world; and how to-day many of us are standing, either utterly careless and callous about the diseases that we have the medicine to cure, or in desperation looking about for other healing for the social and moral condition of the community than that which is granted to us in Jesus Christ. ‘Know ye that Ramoth in Gilead is ours, and we be still, and take it not out of the hands of the King of Syria?’

There is ever so much in the world which belongs to our Master, and therefore belongs to us, and which the Church is bound to lay its hand upon and claim for its own and for its Lord’s. For remember, brethren, that all the gifts at which I have been glancing-and I might have largely increased the catalogue-all these spiritual endowments of peace, and safety, and purity, and joy, of religious elevation, and consecration, and power for service, and the like-are ours by a threefold title and charter. God’s purpose, which is nothing less for every one of us than that we should be ‘filled with all the fulness of God,’ and that He should ‘supply all our need, according to His riches in glory,’-that is the first of the parchments on which our title depends. And the second title-deed is Christ’s purchase; for the efficacy of His death and the power of His triumphant life have secured for all who trust Him the whole fulness of this divine gift. And the third of our claims and titles is the influence of that Holy Spirit whom Jesus Christ gives to every one of His children to dwell in him. There is in you, working in you, if you have any faith in that Lord, a power that is capable of making you perfectly pure, perfectly blessed, strong with an immortal strength, and glad with a ‘joy that is unspeakable and full of glory.’

Oh! then, let us think of the awful contrast between what is ours and what we have. It is ours by the divine intention, by the divine gift in its fulness and all-sufficiency, and yet think of the poor, partial realisation of it that has passed into our experience. Be sure that you have what you have, and that you make your own what God has made yours.

II. Then, let me suggest, again, how our text hints for us, not only the difference between possession and realisation, but also our strange contentment in imperfect possession.

Ahab's remonstrances with his servants, which make the starting-point of my remarks, seem to suggest that there were two reasons for their acquiescence in the domination of a foreign power on a bit of their soil. They had not realised that Ramoth was theirs, and they were too lazy and cowardly to go and take it. Ignorance of the fulness of the gift, and slothful timidity in daring everything in the effort to make it ours, explain a great deal of the present condition of Christian people.

Is not that condition of passive acquiescence in their small present attainments, and of careless indifference to the great stretch of the unattained, the characteristic of the mass of professing Christians? They have got a foothold on a new continent, and their possession of it is like the world's drawing of the map of Africa when we were children, which had a settlement dotted here and there along the coast, and all the broad regions of the interior were blank. The settlers huddle together upon the fringe of barren sand by the salt water, and never dream of pressing forward into the heart of the land. And so, too, many of us are content with what we have got, a little bit of God, when we might have Him all; a settlement on the fringe and edge of the land, when we might traverse the whole length of it; and behold! it is all ours.

That unfamiliarity with the thought of unattained possibilities in the Christian life is a damning curse of thousands of people who call themselves Christians. They do not think, they never realise-and some of us are guilty in this respect-they never realise that it is possible for them to be all unlike what they are now, and that, instead of the miserable partial hallowing of their nature, and the poor, weak -I was going to say strength, but it is not worth calling strength, that they possess, they might be as the angels of God: 'the weakest as David,' and David as a very angel of heaven itself. Why is it, why is it, that there is this unfamiliarity?

And then, another reason for the woful disproportion between what we have and what we utilise is the love of ease, such as kept these Israelites from going up to Ramoth-Gilead. It was a long way off; there was a river to be forded; there were heights to be climbed; there were weary marches to be taken; there were hard knocks going in front of the walls of Ramoth before they got inside it; and on the whole it was more comfortable to sit at home, or look after their farms and their merchandise, than to embark on the quixotic attempt to win back a city that had not been theirs for ever so long, and that they had got on very well without.

And so it is with hosts of Christian people; we do not realise how much we have that we never get any good out of. And, in the second place, we had rather just stay where we are, and make the best of the world as it is, and the desires of our hearts go in another direction than for our increase in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour. Ah, brethren! if we had a claim to some great property, or any other wealth that we really cared about, should we be so very indifferent as to asserting our rights? Should we not fight to the death, some of us, for the last inch of soil, for the last ounce of treasure, that belonged to us? When you really value a thing, you secure the greatest possible amount of it; and there is very little margin between what you own and what you use.

And if there is such a tremendous difference between the breadth of the one and the narrowness of the other in our Christian life, there can be no reason for it except this, that we do not care enough about spiritual blessings and forces to make the effort that is needed to win and keep, and get the good of, all that is ours.

And is not that something like despising the birthright? Is it not a criminal thing for Christian people thus to neglect, and to put aside, and never to seek to obtain, all these great gifts of God? There they lie at our doors, and they are ours for the taking. Suppose a carrier brought you a whole waggon full of precious goods, and put them down at your door, and you were not at the trouble to open your doors, or to carry the goods into your cellars. That would not look as if you cared much either for the goods or for the giver. And I wonder how many of us are chargeable with that criminal despising of God’s gifts, which is clearly the explanation of our letting them lie rotting, as it were, at our gates? We are starving paupers in the midst of plenty.

‘My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory, by Christ Jesus,’ says Paul. You have the right to them all. Draw cheques against the capital that is lodged in your name in that great bank.

III. And so, lastly, my text suggests the effort that is needed to make our own ours.

‘We be still, and take it not out of the hands of the King of Syria.’ Then these things that are ours, by God’s gift, by Christ’s purchase, by the Spirit’s influence, will need our effort to secure them. And that is no contradiction, nor any paradox. God does exactly in the same way with regard to a great many of His natural gifts as He does with regard to His spiritual ones. He gives them to us, but we hold them on this tenure, that we put forth our best efforts to get and to keep them. His giving them does not set aside our taking. However much we tried we could not take them out of His hand if it were clenched. Open as His hand is, and stretched out to us as it is, the gifts that sparkle in it are not transferred to our hands unless we ourselves put forth an effort.

So let me say that one large part of the discipline by which men make their own their own is by familiarising themselves with the thought of the larger possibilities of unattained possessions which God has given them. That is true in everything. To recognise our present imperfection, and to see stretching before us glorious and immense possibilities, opening out into a vista where our eyesight fails us to travel to its end, is the very salt of life in every region. Artist, student, all of us ‘are saved by hope,’ in a very much wider sense than the Apostle meant by that great saying. And whosoever has once lost, or felt becoming dim, the vision before him of a possible better than his present best, in any region, is in that region condemned to grow no more. If we desire to have any kind of advancement, it is only possible for us, when there gleams ever before us the untravelled road, and we see at the end of it unattained brightnesses and blessings.

And we Christian people have an endless prospect of that sort stretching before us. Oh, if we looked at it oftener, ‘having respect unto the recompense of the reward,’ we should find it easier to dash at any Ramoth-Gilead, and get it out of the hands of the strongest of the enemies that may bar our way to it. Let us familiarise ourselves with the thought of our present imperfection, and of our future completeness, and of the possibilities which may become actualities, even here and now; and let us not fitfully use what power we have, but make the best of what graces are ours, and enjoy and expatiate in the spiritual blessings of peace and rest which Christ has already given to us. ‘To him that hath shall be given,’ and the surest way to lose what we have is to neglect to increase it.

And, above all, let us keep nearer to our Master, and live more in fellowship with our Lord, and that will help us to deny ourselves to ungodliness and worldly lusts. It is the prevalence of these, and the absence of self-denial, that ruins most of the Christian lives that are ruined in this world. If a man wants to be what he is not, he must cease to be what he is.

Self-sacrifice, and the emptying of our hearts of trash and trifles, is the only way to get our hearts filled with God and with His blessing. Let us keep near Jesus Christ. If we have Him for ours we have peace, we have power, we have purity. ‘He of God is made unto us’ all in all, and every gift that may adorn humanity, and make our lives joyous and ourselves noble, is given to us in Jesus Christ. Let us put away from ourselves, then, this slothful indifference to our unattained possessions. ‘Know ye that Ramoth is ours?’ ‘Let us be still’ no longer. ‘All things are yours, whether the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come: all are yours if ye are Christ’s.’

27)1 Kings 22:7-8

1 Kings

AHAB AND MICAIAH

1Ki. 22:7 - 1Ki. 22:8.

An ill-omened alliance had been struck up between Ahab of Israel and Jehoshaphat of Judah. The latter, who would have been much better in Jerusalem, had come down to Samaria to join in an assault on the kingdom of Damascus; but, like a great many other people, Jehoshaphat first made up his mind without asking God, and then thought that it might be well to get some kind of varnish of a religious sanction for his decision. So he proposes to Ahab to inquire of the Lord about this matter. One would have thought that that should have been done before, and not after, the determination was made. Ahab does not at all see the necessity for such a thing, but, to please his scrupulous ally, he sends for his priests. They came, four hundred of them, and of course they all played the tune that Ahab called for. It is not difficult to get prophets to pat a king on the back, and tell him, ‘Do what you like.’

But Jehoshaphat was not satisfied yet. Perhaps he thought that Ahab’s clergy were not exactly God’s prophets, but at all events he wanted an independent opinion; and so he asks if there is not in all Samaria a man that can be trusted to speak out. He gets for answer the name of this ‘Micaiah the son of Imlah.’ Ahab had had experience of him, and knew his man; and the very name leads him to an explosion of passion, which, like other explosions, lays bare some very ugly depths. ‘I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil.’

That is a curious mood, is it not? that a man should know another to be a messenger of God, and therefore know that his words are true, and that if he asked his counsel he would be forbidden to do the thing that he is dead set on doing, and would be warned that to do it was destruction; and that still he should not ask the counsel, nor ever dream of dropping the purpose, but should burst out in a passion of puerile rage against the counsellor, and will have none of his reproofs. Very curious! But there are a great many of us that have something of the same mood in us, though we do not speak it out as plainly as Ahab did. It lurks more or less in us all, and it largely determines the attitude that some of us take to Christianity and to Christ. So I wish to say a word or two about it.

I. My text suggests the inevitable opposition between a message from God, and man’s evil.

No doubt, God is love; and just because He is, it is absolutely necessary that what comes from Him, and is the reflex and cast, so to speak, of His character, should be in stern and continual antagonism to that evil which is the worst foe of men, and is sure to lead to their death. It is because God is love, that ‘to the froward He shows Himself froward.’ and opposes that which, unopposed and yielded to, will ruin the man that does it. So this is one of the characteristic marks of all true messages from God, that men who will not part with their evil call them ‘stern,’ ‘rigid,’ ‘gloomy,’ ‘narrow’ Yes, of course; because God must look upon godless lives with disapprobation, and must desire by all means to draw men away from that which is drawing them away *from* Him and to their death.

Now, I suppose I need not spend time in enumerating or describing the points in the attitude of Christianity towards the solemn fact of human sin, which correspond to Ahab's complaint that the prophet spake always 'not good concerning him, but evil.' The 'gospel' of Jesus Christ proves its name to be true, and that it *is* 'good news,' not only by its graciousness, its promises, its offers, and the rich blessings of eternal life with which its hands are full, but by its severity, as men call it. One characteristic of the gospel is the altogether unique place which the fact of sin fills in it. There is no other religion on the face of the earth that has so grasped and made prominent this thought: 'All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' There is none that has painted human nature as it is in such dark colours, because there is none that knows itself to be able to change human nature into such radiance of glory and purity. The gospel has, if I might so say, on its palette a far greater range of pigments than any other system. Its blacks are blacker; its whites are whiter; its golds are more lustrous than those of other painters of human nature as it is and as it may become. It is a mark of its divine origin that it unfalteringly looks facts in the face, and will not say smooth things about men as they are.

Side by side with that characteristic of the dark picture which it draws of us, as we are in ourselves, is its unhesitating restraint or condemnation of deep-seated desires and tendencies. It does not come to men with the smooth words on its lips, 'Do as thou wilt.' It does not seek for favour by relaxing bonds, but it rigidly builds up a wall on either side of a narrow path, and says, 'Walk within these limits and thou art safe. Go beyond them a hair's-breadth, and thou perishest.' It may suit Ahab's prophets to fling the reins on the neck of human nature; God's prophet says, 'Thou shalt not,' That is another of the tests of divine origin, that there shall be no base compliance with inclinations, but rigid condemnation of many of our deep desires.

Side by side with these two, there is a third characteristic that the Word, which is the outcome and expression of the divine love, is distinguished by its plain and stern declarations of the bitter consequences of evil-doing. I need not dwell upon these, brethren. They seem to me to be far too solemn to be spoken of by a man to men in other words than Scripture's. But I beseech you to remember that this, too, is the characteristic of Christ's message. So a man should feel, when he thinks of the dark and solemn things that the Old Testament partially, and the New Testament more clearly, utter as to the death which is the outcome of sin, that these are indeed the very voice of infinite love pleading with us all. Brother I do not so misapprehend facts as to think that the restraints and threatenings and dark pictures which Christ and His servants have drawn are anything but the utterance of the purest affection.

II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to look for a moment at the strange dislike which this attitude of Christianity kindles.

I have said that Ahab's mental condition was a very odd one. Strange as it is, it is, as I have already remarked, in some degree a very frequent one. There are in us all, as we see in many regions of life, the beginnings of the same kind of feeling. Here, for example, is a course that I am quite sure, if I pursue it, will land me in evil. Does the drunkard take a glass the less, because he knows that if he goes on he will have a drunkard's liver and die a miserable death? Does the gambler ever take away his hand from the pack of cards or the dice-box, because he knows that play means, in the long run, poverty and disgrace? When a man sets his will upon a certain course, he is like a bull that has started in its rage. Down goes the head, and, with eyes shut, he will charge a stone wall or an iron door, though he knows it will smash his skull. Men are very foolish animals; and there is no greater mark of their folly than the conspicuous and oft-repeated fact that the clearest vision of the consequences of a course of conduct is powerless to turn a man from it, when once his passions, or his will, or, worse still, his weakness, or, worst of all, his habits, have bound him to it.

Take another illustration. Do we not all know that honest friends have sometimes fallen out of favour, perhaps with ourselves, because they have persistently kept telling us what our consciences and common-sense knew to be true, that if we go on by that road we shall be suffocated in a bog? A man makes up his mind to a course of conduct. He has a shrewd suspicion that an honest friend will condemn him, and that the condemnation will be right. What does he do, therefore? He never consults his friend, but if by chance that friend should say what was expected of him, he gets angry with his adviser and doggedly goes his own road. I suppose we all know what it is to treat our consciences in the style in which Ahab treated Micaiah. We do not listen to them because we know what they will say before they have said it; and we call ourselves sensible people! Martin Luther once said, ‘It is neither safe nor *wise* to do anything against conscience.’ But Ahab put Micaiah in prison; and we shut up our consciences in a dungeon, and put a gag in their mouths, and a muffler over the gag, that we may hear them say no word, because we know that what we are doing, and we are doggedly determined to do, is wrong.

But the saddest illustration of this infatuation is to be found in the attitude that many men take in regard to Christianity. There is a great craving to-day, more perhaps than there has been in some other periods of the world’s history, for a religion which shall adorn, but shall not restrain; for a religion which shall be toothless, and have no bite in it; for a religion that shall sanction anything that it pleases our sovereign mightiness to want to do. We should all like to have God’s sanction for our actions. But there are a great many of us who will not take the only way to secure that-viz. to do the actions which He commands, and to abstain from those which He forbids. Popular Christianity is a very easy-fitting garment; it is like an old shoe that you can slip off and on without any difficulty. But a religion which does not put up a strong barrier between you and many of your inclinations in not worth anything. The mark of a message from God is that it restrains and coerces and forbids and commands. And some of you do not like it because it does.

There is a great tendency in this day to cut out of the Old and New Testaments all the pages that say things like this, ‘The soul that sinneth it shall die’; or things like this, ‘This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light’; or things like this, ‘Then shall the wicked go away into outer darkness.’ Brethren, men being what they are, and God being what He is, there can be no divine message without a side of what the world calls threatening, or what Ahab called’ prophesying evil.’ I beseech you, do not be carried away by the modern talk about Christianity being gloomy and dark, or fancy that we put a blot and an excrescence upon the pure religion of the Man of Nazareth, when we speak of the death that follows sin, and of the darkness into which unbelief carries a man.

III. Once more, let me say a word about the intense folly of such an attitude.

Ahab hated Micaiah. Why? Because Micaiah told him what would come to him as the fruit of his own actions. That was foolish. It is no less foolish for people to take up a position of dislike, and to turn away from the gospel of Jesus Christ because it speaks in like manner. I said that men are very foolish animals; there is surely nothing in all the annals of human stupidity more stupid than to be angry with the word that tells you the truth about what you are bringing down upon your heads. It is absurd, because Micaiah did not make the evil, but Ahab made it; and Micaiah's business was only to tell him what he was doing. It is absurd, because the only question to be asked is. Are the warnings true? are the threatenings representations of what really will come? are the prohibitions reasonable? And it is absurd, because, if these things are so-if it is true that the soul that sinneth dies, and will die; if it is true that you, who have heard of the name and the salvation of Jesus Christ over and over again, and have turned away from it, will, if you continue in that negligence and unbelief, reap bitter fruits here and hereafter therefrom-if these things are true, surely the man that tells you so, and the gospel that tells you so, deserve better treatment than Ahab's petulant hatred or your stolid indifference and neglect.

Would you think it wise for a sea-captain to try to take the clapper out of the bell that floats and tolls above a shoal on which his ship will be wrecked if it strikes? Would it be wise to put out the lighthouse lamps, and then think that you had abolished the reef? Does the signalman with his red flag make the danger of which he warns, and is it not like a baby to hate and to neglect the message that comes to you and says, 'Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die'?

IV. So, lastly, I notice the end of this foolish attitude.

Ahab was told in plain words by Micaiah, before the interview closed, that he would never come back again in peace. He ordered the bold prophet into prison, and rode away gaily, no doubt, to his campaign. Weak men are very often obstinate, because they are not strong enough to rise to the height of changing a purpose when reason condemns it. This weak man was always obstinate in the wrong place, as so many of us are. So away he went, down from Samaria, across the plain, down to the fords of the Jordan. But when he had crossed to the other side, and was coming near his objective point, the memories of Micaiah in prison at Samaria began to sit heavy on his soul.

So he tried to deceive divine judgment, and got up an ingenious scheme by which his ally was to go into the field in royal pomp, and he to slip into it disguised. A great many of us try to hoodwink God, and it does not answer. The man who 'drew the bow at a venture' had his hand guided by a higher Hand. Ahab was plated all over with iron and brass, but there is always a crevice through which God's arrow can find its way; and, where God's arrow finds its way, it kills. When the night fell, he was lying dead on his chariot floor, and the host was scattered, and Micaiah, the prisoner, was avenged; and his word had taken hold on the despiser of it.

So it always will be. So it will be with us, dear brethren, if we do not give heed to our ways and listen to the word which may be bitter in the mouth, but, eaten, turns sweet as honey. Nailing the index of the barometer to 'set fair' will not keep off the thunderstorm, and no negligence or dislike of divine threatenings will arrest the slow, solemn march, inevitable as destiny, of the consequences of our doings. Things will be as they will be. Believed or unbelieved, the avalanche will come.

Dear brethren, there is one way to get Micaiah on your side. Listen to him, and then he will speak good to you, and not what you foolishly call evil. Let God's word convince you of sin. Let it bring you to the Cross for pardon. Jesus Christ addresses each of us in the Apostle's words: 'Am I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?' The sternest threatenings in the Bible come from the lips of that infinite Love. If you will listen to Him, if you will yield yourselves to Him, if you will take Him for your Saviour and your Lord, if you will cast your confidence and anchor your love upon Him, if you will let Him restrain you, if you will consult Him about what He would have you do, if you will accept His prohibitions as well as His permissions, then His word and His act to you, here and hereafter, will be only good and not evil, all the days of your life.

Remember Ahab lying dead on the floor of his chariot in a pool of his own blood, and bethink yourselves of what despising the threatenings, and turning away from the rebukes and prohibitions of the divine word, come to. These threatenings are spoken that they may never need to be put in effect. If you give heed to them they will never be put in effect in regard to you, if you neglect them and ‘will none of’ God’s ‘reproof,’ they will come down on you like a mighty rock loosed from the mountain, and will grind you to powder.

2 Kings

1) 2 KINGS 2:1-10

2) 2 KINGS 2:11
3) 2 KINGS 2:12
4) 2 KINGS 2:13-22
5) 2 KINGS 4:6
6) 2 KINGS 4:25-37
7) 2 KINGS 5:10-11
8) 2 KINGS 5:15-27
9) 2 KINGS 6:8-18
10) 2 KINGS 7:1-8
11) 2 KINGS 7:9
12) 2 KINGS 7:10-16
13) 2 KINGS 8:9-15
14) 2 KINGS 10:18-31
15) 2 KINGS 11:1-16
16) 2 KINGS 12:4-15
17) 2 KINGS 13:14
18) 2 KINGS 13:16
19) 2 KINGS 17:6-18
20) 2 KINGS 17:33
21) 2 KINGS 18:5-6
22) 2 KINGS 19:20-22
23) 2 KINGS 19:28-37
24) 2 KINGS 22:8-20
25) 2 KINGS 25:1-12

1) 2 Kings 2:1-10

2 Kings

THE CHARIOT OF FIRE

2Ki. 2:1 - 2Ki. 2:11.

Elijah’s end is in keeping with his career. From his first abrupt appearance it had been fitly symbolised by the stormy wind and flaming fire which he heard and saw at Horeb, and now these were to be the vehicles which should sweep him into the heavens. He came like a whirlwind, he burned like a fire, and in fire and whirlwind he disappeared. The story is wonderful in pathos and simplicity. Surely never was such a miracle told so quietly. The actual ascension is narrated in a sentence. Its preliminaries take up the rest of this narrative.

I. This journey from Gilgal to the eastern side of Jordan is minutely described in its stages. Apparently this Gilgal is not the well-known place so called, which was down in the Jordan valley close to Jericho, else the road from it to Bethel could not have been called a going down [2Ki. 2:2]. It probably lay to the north of Bethel, which would then be between it and Jericho, where the Jordan was to be passed. Elijah was not sent on an aimless round of farewell visits, but by the direct road to his destination. Note that he and Elisha and the 'sons of the prophets' all know that he is near his end. How this came about we are not told, and need not speculate; but though all knew, none seems to have known that the others knew. Elijah does not explain to Elisha why he wished him to stay behind, nor Elisha to Elijah why he was so resolved to keep by him. The knowledge and the silence would give peculiar solemnity and sweet bitterness to these last hours. How often a similar combination weighs on the hearts of a household, who all know that a dear one is soon to be taken away, and yet can only be silent about what is uppermost in their thoughts!

Why did Elijah wish Elisha to stay behind? Apparently to spare him the pain of seeing his master depart. With loving concealment, he tried to make Elisha suppose that his errand to Bethel and then to Jericho was but a common one, to be soon despatched. It was a little touch of tenderness in the strong, rough man. Note, too, the gradual disclosure to Elijah of the places to which he was to go. He is only bid to go to Bethel, and not till he gets there is he further sent on to Jericho, and, presumably, only when there is directed to cross Jordan. God does not show all the road at once, even if it lead to glory, but step by step, and a second stage only when we have obediently traversed the first. We get light as we go. Elisha's clinging to his master till the very last is but too intelligible to many of us who have gone through the same sorrow, and counted each moment of companionship with some dear one about to leave earth as priceless gain, to be treasured in the sacredest recesses of memory for evermore.

It has been thought that the object of the visits to Bethel and Jericho was to give parting directions to the schools of the prophets at each place; but that is read into the narrative, which gives no hint that Elijah had any communication with these. Rather the contrary is implied, both in the fact that the ‘sons of the prophets’ came to the travellers, not the travellers to them, and in their addressing Elisha, as if some awe of the master kept them from speaking to him. An Elijah marching to his chariot of fire was not a man for raw youths to approach lightly. Their question is met by Elisha with curtness and scant courtesy, which indicates that it was asked in no sympathetic spirit, but from mere love of telling bad news, and of vulgar excitement. Even the gentle Elisha is stirred to rebuke the gossiping chatterers, who intrude their curiosity into that sacred hour. There are abundance of such busy-bodies always ready to buzz about any bleeding heart, and sorrow has often to be stern in order to be unmolested.

II. The second stage is the passage of Jordan. The verbal repetition of the same dialogue at Jericho as at Bethel increases the impression of prolonged loving struggle between the two prophets. At last, they stand on the western bank of Jordan, at their feet the spot where the hurrying river had been stayed by the ark till the tribes had passed over, before them the mountains bordering Elijah’s homeland of Gilead on the left, and away on the right the lone peak where Moses had died ‘by the mouth of the Lord.’ The soil was redolent of the miracles of the Mosaic age, and the dividing of the waters by Elijah is meant to bring the present into vital connection with that past, and to designate him as parallel with the former leader. Note the vigour with which he twists his characteristic mantle into a kind of rod, and strikes the waters strongly. The repetition of the former miracle is a sign that the unexhausted Power which wrought it is with Elijah. The God of yesterday is the God of to-day, and nothing that was done in the past but will be repeated in essence, though not in form, in the present. ‘As we have heard so have we seen.’ The former miracle had been done for a nation; this is performed for two men. It teaches the preciousness of His individual servants in God’s eyes. The former had been done through the ark; this, by the prophet’s mantle. Power is lodged in the faithful messenger. God’s strength dwells in those who love Him. The former miracle had been the close of the desert wanderings and the gateway to Canaan. Though Elijah’s face is turned in the opposite direction, does not its repetition suggest that for him, too, the impending translation was to be the end of wilderness weariness and toil, and the entrance on rest?

III. Elisha's request is the next stage in the story. How far they two 'went on' is not told. The Bible does not foster the craving to know the exact situation where sacred things happened, the gratification of which might feed superstition, but could not increase reverence. Possibly they had drawn near the eastern hills, and were out of sight of the fifty curious gazers on the other hank. Elijah at last spoke the truth which both knew. How true to nature is that reticence kept up till the last moment, and then broken so tenderly!-'Ask what I shall do for thee, before.' Probably he did not mean any supernatural gift, but simply some parting token of love; for he is startled at the response of Elisha. A true disciple can desire nothing more than a portion of his master's spirit. 'It is enough for the disciple that he be as his Master.' They covet wisely and with a noble covetousness who most desire spiritual gifts to fit them for their vocation. It was an unworldly soul which asked but for such a legacy.

The 'double portion' does not mean twice as much as Elijah's portion had been, but twice as much as other 'sons of the prophets' would receive. Elisha reckoned himself Elijah's first-born spiritual son, and asked for the elder brother's share, because he had been designated as successor, and would require more than others for his work. The new sense of responsibility is coming on him, and teaching him his need. Well for us if higher positions make us lowlier, in the consciousness of our own unfitness without divine help! Elijah knows that his spirit was not his to give, and can only refer his successor to the Fountain from which he had drawn; for the sign which he gives is obviously not within his power to determine. If the Lord shows the ascending master to him who is left, He will give the servant his desire.

A portion of their 'spirit' is the very thing which teachers and prophets cannot give. They may give their systems or their methods, their favourite ideas or cut-and-dry maxims and principles, and so leave a race of pygmies who give themselves airs as being their disciples, but their spirit they cannot impart. Contrast with this limitation of power confessed by Elijah, His consciousness who breathed on eleven poor men, and said, 'Receive ye the

Holy Ghost.' No man could say that without absurdity or blasphemy. The gift impossible to man is the very characteristic gift of Jesus, who 'has power over the Spirit of holiness.' Must He not thereby be 'declared to be the Son of God'?

IV. The climax of this lesson is that stupendous scene of the translation. Note how the 'Behold' suggests the suddenness of the appearance of the fiery chariot, which came flaming between the two men eagerly talking, and drove them apart. The description of the departure, in its brevity and incompleteness, sounds like the report of the only eye-witness, who had the fiery chariot between him and Elijah, and was too bewildered to see precisely what happened. All he knew was the sudden appearance of the fiery equipage, and then that, suddenly, and apparently swiftly, a rushing mighty wind swept away chariot and prophet into the heavens. He saw it, as the next verse after this passage tells us, only long enough to break into one rapturous and yet lamenting cry, and then all vanished, and he stood alone with an apparently empty heaven above him, the whirlwind sunk to calm, and Elijah's mantle at his feet.

The teaching of the event is plain. As for the pre-Mosaic ages the translation of Enoch, and for the earlier Mosaic epoch the mysterious death of Moses, so for the prophetic period the carrying to heaven of Elijah, witnessed of a life beyond death, and of death as the wages of sin, which God could remit, if He willed, in the case of faithful service. Enoch and Elijah were led round the head of the valley on the heights, and reached the other side without having to go down into the cold waters flowing in the bottom; and though we cannot tread their path, the joy of their experience has not ceased to be a joy to us, if we walk with God. Death is still the coming of the chariot and horses of fire to bear the believer home. The same exclamation which fell from Elisha's lips, as he saw the chariot sweep up the sky, was spoken over him as he lay sick 'of the sickness whereof he should die.'

But the most instructive view of Elijah's translation is its parallel and contrast with Christ's Ascension. The one was by outward means; the other by inward energy. Storm and fire bore Elijah up into a region strange to him. Christ 'ascended up where He was before,' returning by the propriety of His nature to His eternal dwelling-place. The one is accomplished with significant disturbance, of whirlwind and flame; the other is gentle, like the life which it closed, and the last sight of Him was with extended hands of blessing. Each life closed in a manner corresponding to its character. The one was swift and sudden. The other was a slow, solemn motion, vividly described as being 'borne upwards' and as 'going into heaven.' The one bore a mortal into 'heaven.' In the other, the Son of God, our great High Priest, 'hath passed through the heavens,' and now, far above them all, He is 'Head over all things.'

2) 2 Kings 2:11

2 Kings

THE CHARIOT OF FIRE

THE TRANSLATION OF ELIJAH AND THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST

2Ki. 2:11. - Luk. 24:51.

These two events, the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of our Lord, have sometimes been put side by side in order to show that the latter narrative is nothing but a 'variant' of the former. See, it is said, the source of your New Testament story is only the old legend shaped anew by the wistful regrets of the early disciples. But to me it seems that the simple comparison of the two narratives is sufficient to bring out such fundamental difference in the ideas which they respectively embody as amount to opposition, and make any such theory of the origin of the latter absurdly improbable, I could wish no better foil for the history of the Ascension than the history of Elijah's rapture. The comparison brings out contrasts at every step, and there is no readier way of throwing into strong relief the meaning and purpose of the former, than holding up beside it the story of the latter. The real parallel makes the divergences the more remarkable, for likeness sharpens our perception of unlikeness, and no contrast is so forcible as the contrast of things that correspond. I am much mistaken if we shall not find almost every truth of importance connected with our Lord’s Ascension emphasised for us by the comparison to which we now proceed.

I. The first point which may be mentioned is the contrast between the manner of Elijah’s translation, and that of our Lord’s Ascension.

It is perhaps not without significance that the place of the one event was on the uplands or in some of the rocky gorges beyond Jordan, and that of the other, the slopes of Olivet above Bethany. The lonely prophet, who had burst like a meteor on Israel from the solitudes of Gilead, whose fervour had ever and again been rekindled by return to the wilderness, whose whole career had isolated him from men, found the fitting place for that last wonder amidst the stern silence where he had so often sought asylum and inspiration. He was close to the scenes of mighty events in the past. There, on that overhanging peak, the lawgiver whose work he was continuing, and with whom he was to be so strangely associated on the Mount of Transfiguration, had made himself ready for his lonely grave. Here at his feet, the river had parted for the victorious march of Israel. Away down on his horizon the sunshine gleamed on the waters of the Dead Sea; and thus, on his native soil, surrounded by memorials of the Law which he laboured to restore, and of the victories which he would fain have brought back, and of the judgments which he saw again impending over Israel, the stern, solitary ascetic, the prophet of righteousness, whose single arm stayed the downward course of a nation, passed from his toil and his warfare.

What a different set of associations cluster round the place of Christ’s Ascension-’Bethany,’ or, as it is more particularly specified in the Acts, ‘Olivet’! In the very heart of the land, close by and yet out of sight of the great city, in no wild solitude, but perhaps in some dimple of the hill, neither shunning nor courting spectators, with the quiet home where He had rested so often in the little village at their feet there, and Gethsemane a few furlongs off, in such scenes did the Christ ‘whose delights were with the sons of men,’ and His life lived in closest companionship with His brethren, choose the place whence He should ‘ascend to their Father and His Father.’ Nor perhaps was it without a meaning that the Mount which received the last print of His ascending footstep was that which a mysterious prophecy designated as destined to receive the first print of the footstep of the Lord coming at a future day to end the long warfare with evil.

But more important than the localities is the contrasted manner of the two ascents. The prophet's end was like the man. It was fitting that he should be swept up the skies in tempest and fire. The impetuosity of his nature, and the stormy energy of his career, had already been symbolised in the mighty and strong wind which rent the rocks, and in the fire that followed the earthquake; and similarly nothing could be more appropriate than that sudden rapture in storm and whirlwind, escorted by the flaming chivalry of heaven.

Nor is it only as appropriate to the character of the prophet and his work that this tempestuous translation is noteworthy. It also suggests very plainly that Elijah was lifted to the skies by power acting on him from without. He did not ascend; he was carried up; the earthly frame and the human nature had no power to rise. 'No man hath ascended into heaven.' The two men of whom the Old Testament speaks were alike in this, that 'God *took* them.' The tempest and the fiery chariot tell us how great was the exercise of divine power which bore the gross mortality thither, and how unfamiliar was the sphere into which it passed.

How full of the very spirit of Christ's whole life is the contrasted manner of His Ascension! The silent gentleness, which did not strive nor cry nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets, marks Him even in that hour of lofty and transcendent triumph. There is no outward sign to accompany His slow upward movement through the quiet air. No blaze of fiery chariots, nor agitation of tempest is needed to bear Him heavenwards. The outstretched hands drop the dew of His benediction on the little company, and so He floats upward, His own will and indwelling power the royal chariot which bears Him, and calmly 'leaves the world and goes unto the Father.' The slow, continuous movement of ascent is emphatically made prominent in the brief narratives, both by the phrase in Luke, 'He was carried up,' which expresses continuous leisurely motion, and by the picture in the Acts, of the disciples gazing into heaven 'as He went up,' in which latter word is brought out, not only the slowness of the movement, but its origin in His own will and its execution by His own power.

Nor is this absence of any vehicle or external agency destroyed by the fact that ‘a cloud’ received Him out of their sight, for its purpose was not to raise Him heavenward, but to hide Him from the gazers’ eyes, that He might not seem to them to dwindle into distance, but that their last look and memory might be of His clearly discerned and loving face. Possibly, too, it may be intended to remind us of the cloud which guided Israel, the glory which dwelt between the cherubim, the cloud which overshadowed the Mount of Transfiguration, and to set forth a symbol of the Divine Presence welcoming to itself, His battle fought, the Son of His love.

Be that as it may, the manner of our Lord’s Ascension by His own inherent power is brought into boldest relief when contrasted with Elijah’s rapture, and is evidently the fitting expression, as it is the consequence, of His sole and singular divine nature. It accords with His own mode of reference to the Ascension, while He was on earth, which ever represents Him not as *being taken*, but as *going*: ‘I leave the world and go to the Father.’ ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father.’ The highest hope of the devoutest souls before Him had been, ‘Thou wilt afterwards take me to glory.’ The highest hope of devout souls since Him has been, ‘We shall be caught up to meet the Lord.’ But this Man ever speaks of Himself as able when He will, by His own power, to rise where no man hath ascended. His divine nature and pre-existence shine clearly forth, and as we stand gazing at Him blessing the world as He rises into the heavens, we know that we are looking on no mere mysterious elevation of a mortal to the skies, but are beholding the return of the Incarnate Lord, who willed to tarry among our earthly tabernacles for a time, to the glory where He was before, ‘His own calm home, His habitation from eternity.’

II. Another striking point of contrast embraces the relation which these two events respectively bear to the life’s work which had preceded them.

The falling mantle of Elijah has become a symbol known to all the world, for the transference of unfinished tasks and the appointment of successors to departed greatness. Elisha asked that he might have a double portion of his master’s spirit, not meaning twice as much as his master had had, but the eldest son’s share of the father’s possessions, the double of the other children’s portion. And, though his master had no power to bestow the gift, and had to reply as one who has nothing that he has not received, and cannot dispose of the grace that dwells in him, the prayer was answered, and the feebler nature of Elisha was fitted for the continuance of the work which Elijah left undone.

The mantle that passed from one to the other was the symbol of office and authority transferred; the functions were the same, whilst the holders had changed. The sons of the prophets bow before the new master; ‘the spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha.’

So the world goes on. Man after man serves his generation by the will of God, and is gathered to his fathers; and a new arm grasps the mantle to smite Jordan, and a new voice speaks from his empty place, and men recognise the successor, and forget the predecessor.

We turn to Christ’s Ascension, and there we meet with nothing analogous to this transference of office. No mantle falling from His shoulders lights on any of that group, none are hailed as His successors. What He has done bears and needs no repetition whilst time shall roll, whilst eternity shall last. His work is unique: ‘the help that is done on earth, He doeth it all Himself.’ His Ascension completed the witness of heaven, begun at His resurrection, that ‘He has offered one sacrifice for sins, for ever.’ He has left no unfinished work which another may perfect. He has done no work which another may do again for new generations. He has spoken all truth, and none may add to His words. He has fulfilled all righteousness, and none may better His pattern. He has borne all the world’s sin, and no time can waste the power of that sacrifice, nor any man add to its absolute sufficiency. This King of men wears a crown to which there is no heir. This Priest has a priesthood which passes to no other. This ‘Prophet’ does ‘live for ever,’ The world sees all other guides and helpers pass away, and every man’s work is caught up by other hands and carried on after he drops it, and the short memories and shorter gratitudes of men turn to the rising sun; but one Name remains undimmed by distance, and one work remains unapproached and unapproachable, and one Man remains whose office none other can hold, whose bow none but He can bend, whose mantle none can wear. Christ has ascended up on high and left a finished work for all men to trust, for no man to continue.

III. Whilst our Lord’s Ascension is thus marked as the seal of a work in which He has no successor, it is also emphatically set forth, by contrast with Elijah’s translation, as the transition to a continuous energy for and in the world.

Clearly the other narrative derives all its pathos from the thought that Elijah’s work is done. His task is over, and nothing more is to be hoped for from him. But that same absence from the history of Christ’s Ascension, of any hint of a successor, to which we have referred in the previous remarks, has an obvious bearing on His present relation to the world as well as on the completeness of His unique past work.

When Christ ascended up on high, He relinquished nothing of His activity for us, but only cast it into a new form, which in some sense is yet higher than that which it took on earth. His work for the world is in one aspect completed on the Cross, but in another it will never be completed until all the blessings which that Cross has lodged in the midst of humanity, have reached their widest possible diffusion and their highest possible development. Long ages ago He cried, ‘It is finished,’ but we may be far yet from the time when He shall say, ‘It is done’; and for all the slow years between His own word gives us the law of His activity, ‘My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.’

Christ’s Ascension is no withdrawal of the Captain of our salvation from the field where we are left to fight, nor has He gone up to the mountain, leaving us alone to tug at the oar, and shiver in the cold night air. True, there may seem a strange contrast between the present condition of the Lord who ‘was received up into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God,’ and that of the servants wandering through the world on *His* business; but the contrast is harmonised by the next words, ‘the Lord also working with them.’ Yes, He has gone up to sit at the right hand of God. That session at God’s right hand to which the Ascension is chiefly of importance as the transition, means the repose of a perfected redemption, the communion of the Son with the Father, the exercise of all the omnipotence of God, the administration of the world’s history. He has ascended that He might fill all things, that He might pour out His Spirit upon us, that the path to God may be trodden by our lame feet, that the whole resources of the divine nature may be wielded by the hands that were nailed to the Cross, that the mighty purpose of salvation may be fulfilled.

Elijah knew not whether his spirit could descend upon his follower. But Christ, though, as we have said, He left no legacy of falling mantle to any, left His Spirit to His people. What Elisha gained, Elijah lost. What Elisha desired, Elijah could not give nor guarantee. How firm and assured beside Elijah's dubious 'Thou hast asked a hard thing,' and his 'If thou see me, it shall be so,' is Christ's 'It is expedient for you that I go away. For if I go not away the Comforter will not come, but if I depart, I will send Him unto you.'

Manifold are the forms of that new and continuous activity of Christ into which He passed when He left the earth: and as we contrast these with the utter helplessness any longer to counsel, rebuke or save, to which death reduces those who love us best, and to which even his glorious rapture into the heavens brought the strong prophet of fire, we can take up, with a new depth of meaning, the ancient words that tell of Christ's exclusive prerogative of succouring and inspiring from within the veil: 'Thou hast ascended on high; Thou hast led captivity captive; Thou hast received gifts for men.'

IV. The Ascension of Christ is still further set forth, in its very circumstances, by contrast with Elijah's translation, as bearing on the hopes of humanity for the future.

The prophet is caught up to the glory and repose for himself alone, and the sole share which the gazing follower or the sons of the prophets straining their eyes there at Jericho, had in his triumph, was a deepened conviction of his prophetic mission, and perhaps some clearer faith in a future life. Their wonder and sorrow, Elisha's immediate exercise of his new power, the prophets' immediate transference of their allegiance to their new head, show that on both sides it was felt that they had no part in the event beyond that of awe-struck beholders. No light streamed from it on their own future. The path they had to tread was still the common road into the great darkness, as solitary and unknown as before. The chariot of fire parted their master from the common experience of humanity as from their fellowship, making him an exception to the sad rule of death, which frowned the grimmer and more inexorable by contrast with his radiant translation.

The very reverse is true of Christ's Ascension. In Him our nature is taken up to the throne of God. His Resurrection assures us that 'them which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him,' His passage to the heavens assures us that 'they who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them,' and that all of both companies shall with Him live and reign, sharing His dominion, and moulded to His image.

If we would know of what our manhood is capable, if we would rise to the height of the hopes which God means that we should cherish, if we would gain a living grasp of the power that fulfils them, we have to stand there, gazing on the piled cloud that sails slowly upwards, the pure floor for our Brother's feet. As we watch it rising with a motion which is rest, we have the right to think, 'Thither the Forerunner is for us entered.' We see there what man is meant for, what men who love Him attain. True, the world is still full of death and sorrow, man's dominion seems a futile dream and a hope that mocks, but 'we see Jesus,' ascended up on high, and in Him we too are 'made to sit together in heavenly places.' The Breaker is gone up before them. Their King shall pass before them, and the Lord at the head of them.'

There is yet another aspect in which our Lord's Ascension bears on our hopes for the future, namely, as connected with His coming again. In that respect, too, the contrast of Elijah's translation may serve to emphasise the truth. Prophecy, indeed, in its latest voice, spoke of sending Elijah the prophet before the coming of the day of the Lord, and Rabbinical legends delighted to tell how he had been carried to the Garden of Eden, whence he would come again, in Israel's sorest need. But the prophecy had no thought of a personal reappearance, and the dreams are only dreams such as we find in the legendary history of many nations. As Elisha recrossed the Jordan, he bore with him only a mantle and a memory, not a hope.

'Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.' How grand is the use in these mighty words of the name Jesus, the name that speaks of His true humanity, with all its weakness, limitations, and sorrow, with all its tenderness and brotherhood! The man who died and rose again, has gone up on high. He will so come as He has gone. ‘So’-that is to say, personally, corporeally, visibly, on clouds, perhaps to that very spot, ‘and His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives.’ Thus Scripture teaches us ever to associate together the departure and the coming of the Lord, and always when we meditate on His Ascension to prepare a place for us, to think of His real presence with us through the ages, and of His coming again to receive us to Himself.

That parting on Olivet cannot be the end. Such a leave-taking is the prophecy of happy greetings and an inseparable reunion. The King has gone to receive a kingdom, and to return. Memory and hope coalesce, as we think of Him who is passed into the heavens, and the heart of the Church has to cherish at once the glad thought that its Head and helper has entered within the veil, and the still more joyous one, which lightens the days of separation and widowhood, that the Lord will come again.

So let us take our share in the ‘great joy’ with which the disciples returned to Jerusalem, left like sheep in the midst of wolves as they were, and ‘let us set our affection on things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.’

3) 2 Kings 2:12

2 Kings

ELIJAH’S TRANSLATION AND ELISHA’S DEATHBED

2Ki. 2:12. - 2Ki. 13:14.

The scenes and the speakers are strangely different in these two incidents. The one scene is that mysterious translation on the further bank of the Jordan, when a mortal was swept up to heaven in a fiery whirlwind, and the other is an ordinary sick chamber, where an old man was lying, with the life slowly ebbing out of him. The one speaker is the successor of the great prophet, on whom his spirit in a large measure fell; the other, an idolatrous king, young, headstrong, who had despised the latter prophet’s teaching while he lived, but was now for the moment awed into something like seriousness and reverence by his death.

Now the remarkable thing is that this unworthy monarch should have come to the dying prophet, and should have strengthened and cheered him by the quotation of his own words, spoken so long ago, as if he would say to him, ‘All that thou didst mean when thou didst stand there in rapturous adoration, watching the ascending Elijah, is as true about thee, lying dying here, of a common and lingering sickness. My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof.’ Seen or unseen, these were present. The reality was the same, though the appearances were so different.

I We have in the first case the chariot and horsemen seen.

To feel the force of the exclamation on the lips of Joash, we must try to make clear to ourselves what its original meaning was. What did Elisha intend when he stood beyond Jordan, and in wonder and awe exclaimed, ‘The chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof’?

It does not seem to me that the interpretation of the words now in favour is at all satisfactory. It tells us that the expression is to he taken as in apposition with the exclamation ‘My father, my father’; and that both the one phrase and the other mean-Elijah! Yet what a preposterous and strange metaphor it would be to call a man a chariot and pair, or a chariot and cavalry! It seems to me that the very statement of this explanation, in plain English, condemns it as untenable. It is surely less probable that Elisha in that exclamation was describing Elijah than that he was speaking of that wondrous chariot of fire and horses of fire that had come between him and his master, and that his exclamation was one of surprised adoration as he gazed with wide-opened eyes on the burning angel-hosts, and saw his master mysteriously able to bear that fire, ringed round by these flaming squadrons, possibly standing unscathed on the floor of the chariot, and swept with it and all the celestial pomp, by the whirlwind, into heaven.

But why should he say ‘the chariot of *Israel*’? I think we take for granted too readily that ‘Israel’ here means the nation. You will remember that that name was not originally that of the nation, but of its progenitor and founder, given to Jacob as the consequence and record of that mysterious wrestling by the brook. And I think we get a nobler signification for the words before us if, instead of applying the name to the nation, we apply it here to the individual. When Elijah and Elisha crossed Jordan they were not far from the spot where that name was given to Jacob, 'the supplanter,' whom discipline and communion with God had elevated into Israel. And they were near another of the sites consecrated by his history, the place where, just before the change of his name, the angels of God met him and 'he called the name of the place Mahanaim.' That means '*the two camps*,' the one, Jacob's defenceless company of women and children, the other, their celestial guards.

It seems reasonable to suppose that, in all probability, a reminiscence of that old story of the manifestation of the armed angels of God as the defenders and servants of His children broke from Elisha's lips. As he looks upon that strange appearance of the chariot and horses of fire that parted him and his friend, he sees once more 'the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof,' the reappearance of the shining armies whose presence had of old declared that 'the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.' And now the same hosts in their immortal youth, unweakened by the ages which have brought earthly warriors to dust and their swords to rust, are flaming and flashing there in the midday sun. What was their errand, and why did they appear? They came, as God's messengers, to bear His servant to His presence. They attested the commission and devotion of the prophet. Their agency was needful to lift a mortal to skies not native to him. Strange that a body of flesh should he able to endure that fiery splendour! Somewhere in the course of that upward movement must this man, who was caught up to meet the Lord in the air, have been 'changed.' His guards of honour were not only for tokens of his prophetic work, but for witnesses of the unseen world and in some sort pledges, suited to that stage of revelation, of life and immortality.

How striking is the contrast between the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of Christ! He who ascended up where He was before needed no whirlwind, nor chariot of fire, nor extraneous power to elevate Him to His home. Calmly, slowly, as borne upwards by indwelling affinity with heaven, He floated thither with outstretched hands of blessing. The servant angels did not need to surround Him, but, clad no longer in fiery armour, but 'in white apparel,’ the emblem of purity and peace, they stood by the disciples and comforted them with hope. Elijah was carried to heaven. Christ went. The angels disappeared with the prophet and left Elisha to grieve alone. They lingered here after Christ had gone, and turned tears into rainbows flashing with the hues of hope.

II. We have in our second text the chariot and horsemen present though unseen.

We are now in a position to appreciate the meaning of Joash’s repetition to Elisha of his own words, spoken under such different circumstances.

Elisha was by no means so great a prophet as Elijah. His work had not been so conspicuous, his character was not so strong, though perhaps more gentle. No such lofty and large influence had been granted to him as had been given to the fiery Tishbite to wield, nor did he leave his mark so deep upon the history of the times or upon the memory of succeeding generations. But such as it had been given him to be he had been. He was a continuer, not an originator. There had been a long period during which he appears to have lived in absolute retirement, exercising no prophetic functions. We never hear of him during the interval between the anointing of Jehu to the Israelitish monarchy and the time of his own death, and that period must have extended over nearly fifty years. After all these years of eclipse and seclusion he was lying dying somewhere in a corner, and the king, young but impressible, although, on the whole, not reliable nor good, came down to the prophet’s home, and there, standing by the pallet of the dying man, repeated the words, so strangely reminiscent of a very different event-’ My father, my father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!’

And what does that exclamation mean? Two things. One is this, that the angels of the Divine Presence are with us as truly, in life, when unseen as if seen. So far as we know, it was only to Elisha that the vision had been granted of that chariot of fire and horses of fire. We read that at Elijah’s translation on the other side of Jordan, and consequently at no great distance off, there stood a company of the sons of the prophets from Jericho to see what would happen, but we do not read that they did see. On the contrary, they were inclined to believe that Elijah had been caught up and flung away somewhere on the mountains, and that it was worth while to organise search-parties to go after him. It was only Elisha that saw, and Elijah did not know whether he would see or not, for he said to him, 'If thou shalt see me when I am taken from thee, then' thy desire shall be granted.

The angels of God are visible to the eyes that are fit to see them; and those eyes can always see them. It does not matter whether in a miracle or in a common event-it does not matter whether on the stones by the banks of Jordan or in a close sick chamber, they are visible for those who, by pure hearts and holy desires, have had their vision purged from the intrusive vulgarities and dazzling brightnesses of this poor, petty present, and can therefore see beneath all the apparent the real that blazes behind it.

The scenes at Jordan and in the death-chamber are not the only times in Elisha's life when we read of these chariots and horses of fire. There was another incident in his career in which the same phrase occurs. Once his servant was terrified at the sight of a host compassing the little city where Elisha and he were, with horses and chariots, and came to his master with alarm and despair, crying, 'Alas! my master, how shall we do?' The prophet answered with superb calmness, 'Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them . . .. Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.' They had always been there, though no one saw them. They were there when no one but Elisha saw them. They were no more there when the young man saw them than they had been before. They did not cease to be there when the film came over his eyes again, and the common round took him back to the trivialities of daily life.

And so from the mouth of this not very devout king the prophet was reminded of his own ancient experiences, and invited to feel that, unseen or seen, the solemn forms stood 'bright-harnessed,' and strong, 'in order serviceable,' ranged about him for his defence and blessing.

And are they not round about us? If a man can but look into the realities of things, will he see only the work of men and of the forces of nature? Will there not be-far more visible as they are far more real than any of these-the forces of the Eternal Presence and ever operative Will of our Father in Heaven? We need not discuss the personality of angels. An angel is the embodiment of the will and energy of God, and we have that will and energy working for us, whether there are any angel persons about us or not. Scripture declares that there are, and that they serve us. We may be sure that if only we will honestly try to purge our eyes from the illusions and temptations of 'things seen and temporal,' the mountain or the sick chamber will be to us equally full of the angel forms of our defenders and companions.

Do we see them for ourselves; and, not less important, do we, like Elisha, lying there on his deathbed, help else blind men to see them, and make every one that comes beside us, even if he be as little impressible and as little devout as this king Joash was, recognise that in our chambers there sit, and round our lives there flutter and sing, sweet and strong angel wings and voices? Will anybody, looking at you, be constrained to feel that with and around you are the angels of God?

Still further, another cognate application of these great words is that one which is more directly suggested by their quotation by Joash. It does not matter in what way the end of life comes. The reality is the same to all devout men; though one be swept to heaven in a whirlwind, and another lady slowly away in old age, or 'fall sick of the sickness wherewith he should die.' Each is taken to God in a chariot of fire. The means are of little moment, the fact remains the same, however diverse may he the methods of its accomplishment. The road is the same, the companions the same, the impelling-I was going to say the locomotive-power, is the same, and the goal is the same.

Of Enoch we read, 'He was not, for God took him.' Of Elijah we read, 'He went up in a whirlwind to heaven.' Of Elisha we read, 'He died and they buried him.' And of all three-the two who were translated that they should not see death, and the one who died like the rest of us-it is equally true that 'God took' them, and that they were taken to Him. So for ourselves and for our dear ones we may look forward or backward, to deathbeds of weariness, of lingering sickness, of long pain and suffering, or of swift dissolution, and piercing beneath the surface may see the blessed central reality and thankfully feel that Death, too, is God’s angel, who’ does His commandments, hearkening to the voice of God’s word’ when in his dark hearse he carries us hence.

4) 2 Kings 2:13-22

2 Kings

GENTLENESS SUCCEEDING STRENGTH

2Ki. 2:13 - 2Ki. 2:22.

The independent activity of Elisha begins with 2Ki. 2:13. How short the gap between the two prophets, and how easily filled it is! Not the greatest are indispensable. God lays aside one tool, but only to take up another. He has inexhaustible stores. The work goes on, though the workers change, and there is little time for mere mourning, and none for idle sorrow. Elisha’s first miracle is almost an experiment. The mantle which lay at his feet had been thrown over him by Elijah when he was called to his service, and it was now a token that office and power had devolved on him. His first steps tread closely in Elijah’s track; as those of wise and humble men, called to higher work, will mostly do. The repetition of the miracle by the same means, and the invocation of the Lord as the ‘God of Elijah,’-a new name, to be set by the side of ‘the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob’-express the humility which seeks to shelter itself behind the example of its mighty predecessor. The form of the invocation as a question indicates that Elisha had not yet attained certainty as to his power, as not yet having proved it. ‘Where is the Lord God of Elijah?’ is not the question of unbelief, but neither is it the voice of full confidence, which asks no such question, because it knows Him to be with it. It is the cry, ‘Oh that Thou mayest be here, even with unworthy me! and art Thou not here?’ The faith was real, though young, and clouded with some film of doubt. But, being real, it was answered; and it was because of Elisha’s trust, not Elijah’s mantle, that the waters parted. God will listen to a man pleading that ancient deeds may be repeated to-day, and, by answering the cry addressed to Him as the God of saints and martyrs of old, will embolden us to cry to Him as our very own God. We may learn from that first half-tentative miracle the spirit in which men should take up the work of those that are gone, the lowliness fitting for beginners, the wisdom of seeking to graft new work on the old stock, the encouragement from remembering the divine wonders through His servants in the past, and the true way to assure ourselves of our God-given power; namely, by attempting great things for Him, in dependence on His promise.

The miracle was wrought partly for Elisha, and partly for others who were to acknowledge his authority. These sons of the prophets, who stood on the eastern bank of Jordan, had probably not been witnesses of the translation, even if their position commanded a view of the spot. Purer eyes and more kindred spirits than theirs were needed for that.

But they saw Elisha returning alone, and the waters parting before him, and, no doubt, as he came nearer, would recognise what he bore in his hand-Elijah's well-known mantle. They hasten to recognise him as the head of the prophets, and their acknowledgment accurately expresses his place and work. Elijah's spirit rests on him, even though the two men and their careers are very different, and in some respects opposite. Elisha is distinctly secondary to Elijah. He is in no sense an originator, either of fresh revelations or of new impulses to obedience. He but carries on what Elijah had begun, inherits a work, and is Elijah's 'Timothy' and 'son in the faith.' The same Spirit was on him, though the form of his character and gifts was in strong contrast to the stormier genius of his mightier predecessor. Elisha had no such work as Elijah-no foot-to-foot and hand-to-hand duels with murderous kings or queens; no single-handed efforts to stop a nation from rushing down a steep place into the sea; no fiery energy; no bursts of despair. He moved among kings and courts as an honoured guest and trusted counsellor. He did not dwell apart, like Elijah, the strong son of the desert; but, born in the fertile valley of the Jordan, he lived a life 'kindly with his kind,' and his delights were with the sons of men. His miracles are mostly works of mercy and gentleness, relieving wants and sicknesses, drying tears and giving back dear ones to mourners. He is as complete a contrast to his stern, solitary, forceful predecessor, as the 'still small voice' was to the roar of the wind or the crackling hiss of the flames.

But, nevertheless, 'there are diversities of operations, but the same God.' It is well to remember that one type of excellence does not exhaust the possibilities of goodness, nor the resources of the inspiring Spirit. The comparative merits of strength and gentleness will always be variously estimated; but God’s work needs them both, and both may join hands as serving the same Lord in diverse ways, which are all needed. We should seek to widen our discernment to the extent of the rich variety of forms of good and of service which God gives. Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Timothy, Luther and Melanchthon, are all His servants. Well is it when the strong can recognise the power of the gentle, and the gentle can discern the tenderness of the strong, and when each is forward to say of the other, ‘He worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do.’

The search after Elijah, insisted on by the sons of the prophets, is of importance only as showing their low thoughts and Elisha’s gentle spirit. He is their head, but he holds the reins loosely. Fancy anybody ‘urging’ Elijah ‘till he was ashamed’! The shame would very soon have mantled the cheek of the urger. But though, no doubt, Elisha would tell what had happened, these ‘prophets’ only think that Elijah has been miraculously borne somewhither, as he had been before, and seem to have no notion of what has really happened. How hard it is to heave heavy men up to any height of spiritual vision! How vulgar minds always take refuge in the most commonplace explanations that they can find of high truths! ‘Gone up to heaven! Not he! He is lying, living or dead, in some gorge or on some hillside. Let us go and look for him!’ There is nothing on which some people pride themselves more than upon being practical-which generally means prosaic, and often means blind to God’s greatest deeds. To go scouring wady and mountain for a man who had been taken up into heaven was practical common sense indeed! But Elisha’s gentleness is to be noted. He let them have their own way. Often that is the only plan for convincing people of their errors. And, when the fifty scouts come back empty-handed, all he says is a quiet ‘Did I no say unto you, Go not?’ ‘The servant of the Lord must not strive,’ but ‘in meekness’ instruct ‘those that oppose themselves’; and the effectual instruction is often to let them take their own course.

The miracle of healing the waters is of the beneficent kind usual with Elisha, inaugurates his course with blessing, and typifies the healing power which God through him would exert on men. Jericho had been recently rebuilt in spite of the curse against its builders. The bitterness of the spring seems to have been part of the malediction; for men would not be so foolish as to rebuild a city which had only impure water to depend on. However that may be, the main lesson of the miracle, beyond its revelation of the spirit of gentle compassion in Elisha, is the symbolical one. The new cruse and the salt are emblems of the divine gift which cleanses the human heart. Salt is an emblem of purification, and its emblematic meaning prevails here over its natural properties; for the last thing to cure a brackish spring was to put salt into it. The very inadequacy, as well as inappropriateness, of the remedy, points the miraculous and symbolical character of the whole. A jar full of salt could do little to a gushing fountain. But it figured the cleansing power which God will bring to bear on us, if we will; and it taught the great truth that sin must be cleansed at the fountain-head in the heart, not half a mile down the stream, in the deeds. Put the salt in the spring, and the outflow will be sweet.

5) 2 Kings 4:6

2 Kings

WHEN THE OIL FLOWS

2Ki. 4:6.

The series of miracles ascribed to Elisha are very unlike most of the wonderful works of even the Old Testament, and still more unlike those of the New. For about a great many of them there seems to have been no special purpose, either doctrinal or otherwise, but simply the relief of trivial and transient distresses. This story, from which my text is taken, is one of that sort. One of the sons of the prophets had died in Shunem. He left a widow and two little children. The creditor, according to the Mosaic law, had the right, which he was about to put in practice, of taking the children to be bondmen. And so the penniless, helpless woman comes to Elisha, as a kind of deliverer-general from all sorts of distresses, and tells him her pitiful tale. He asks her what she wants him to do, and she has no counsel to give. Then the thing to do strikes *him.* He asks what she has in the house. It was a poor, bare hovel of a place. There was not anything in it save a pot of oil, which was all her property. He sends her to borrow vessels, of all sorts and sizes. He takes the pot of oil, and shuts the door. Then she sets the two boys fetching and carrying; and herself taking up the one possession that she has, in faith she pours; and dish after dish is filled, and still she pours; and they were all filled, and she kept on pouring. Then she said, ‘Bring some more’; and the boys answered, ‘There are not any more,’ so then the oil stopped.

There was no very special reason for all this. It is not at all like most Biblical miracles. I do not suppose it had any symbolical intention; but I venture to do a little gentle violence to the incident, and to see in the staying of the oil when no more vessels were brought to be filled, a lesson addressed to us all, and it is this: God keeps giving Himself as long as we bring that into which He can pour Himself. And when we stop bringing, He stops giving.

Now, if I may venture to be fanciful for once, let me tell you of three vessels that we have to bring if we would have the oil of the Divine Spirit poured into us.

I. The vessel of desire.

God can give us a great many things that we do not wish, but He cannot give us His best gift, and that is Himself, unless we desire it. He never forces His company on any man, and if we do not wish for Him He cannot give us Himself, His Spirit, or the gifts of His Spirit. For instance, He cannot make a man wise if he does not wish to be instructed. He cannot make a man holy if he has no aspiration after holiness. He cannot save a man from his sins if the man holds on to his sin with both hands, like some shellfish with its claws when you try to drag it out of its cleft in the rock. He cannot give the oil unless we bring the vessels of our hearts opened by our desires.

If God could He would. ‘Ye have not because ye ask not.’ But we are never to forget that God is not led to begin His giving because we petition Him, but that the infinitude of His stores, and the endless, changeless, unmotived, perfect love of His heart, make self-communication-I was going to use a very strong word, and I do not know that it is too strong-necessary to the blessedness of the blessed God, and, long before we ever thought of Him, or sought anything from Him, there was pouring out from Him all the fulness of His love: just as we may conceive of the sunshine raying out before the orbs that were to circle round it had been completely shaped, but were still diffused and nebulous.

But, while God is always giving, our capacity to receive determines the degree of our individual possession of Him. Or, to put it in the plainest words-we have as much of God as we can take in; and the principal factor in settling how much we can take is-how much we wish. Measure the reality and intensity of desire, and you measure capacity. As the atmosphere rushes into every vacuum, or as the sea runs up into and fills every sinuosity of the shore, so wherever a heart opens, and the unbroken coast-line is indented, as it were, by desire, in rushes the tide of the divine gifts. You have God in the measure in which you desire Him.

Only remember that that desire which brings God must be more than a feeble, fleeting wish. Wishing is one thing; *willing* is quite another. Lazily wishing and strenuously desiring are two entirely different postures of mind; the former gets nothing and the latter gets everything, gets God, and with God all that God can bring.

But the wish must not only rise to intensity and earnestness, but it must be steadfast. Suppose these two little boys of the widow had held their vessels below the spout of the oil-pot with tremulous hands, while they looked away at something else, sometimes keeping the vessels right under, and sometimes shifting them on one side, it would have been slow work filling the unsteadily held vessels. So it is in regard to receiving God's best gift. Our desires must be unwavering. A cup held by a shaking hand will spill its contents, or will never receive them. 'Let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord.' The steadfast wish is the wish that is answered.

Is it not a strange indifference to our true good that we who have learned, as most of us have learned only too well, that in this world to wish is not to have, should turn away from the possibility that lies before us each, of passing from this disappointing world of vain longings into a region where we cannot wish anything that we do not get? There is only one thing about which it is true that, if you want, and as much as you want, you will have; and that thing is found when we turn away our wishes from the false, fleeting, and surface satisfactions of earth, and fasten them upon God, ‘Who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we . . . think.’ Wish for Him, and you have what you have wished. Wish for anything else, and you may have it or you may not, but depend upon it the fish is never half as big when it is out of the water as it felt to be when it was tugging at the hook.

II. Another vessel that we have to bring is the vessel of our expectancy.

Desire is one thing; confident anticipation that the desire will be fulfilled is quite another. And the two do not certainly go together anywhere except in this one region, and there they do go, linked arm in arm. For whatsoever, in the highest of all regions, we wish, we have the right without presumption to believe that we shall receive. Expectation, like desire, opens the heart.

There are some expectations, even in lower regions, that fulfil themselves. Doctors will tell you that a very large part of the curative power of their medicine depends upon the patient’s anticipation of recovery. If a man expects to die when he takes to his bed, the chances are that he will die; and if a man expects to get better, Death will have a fight before it conquers him. There are hundreds of cases, in all departments of life, where he who sets himself to a task with assured persuasion that he is going to do such and such a thing will do it. ‘Screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we’ll not fail,’ said the heroine in the tragedy; and there is a great truth in her fierce encouragement.

All these illustrations fall far beneath the Christian aspect of the thought that what we expect from God we receive. That is only another way of putting ‘According to thy faith be it unto thee.’ It is exactly what Jesus Christ said when He promised, ‘Whatsoever things ye ask when ye stand praying believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.’

I am afraid that a great many of us often have expectations fainter than desires; and that we should be very much surprised if the thing that we ask for, in the prayers that we so often repeat by rote, were granted to us. You will hear men praying for holiness, for clean hearts, for progress in the Christian life, for a hundred other such blessings. They do not expect that anything is going to come in consequence, and they would be mightily at a loss what to do with the gift if it did come. The absence of expectancy in our public petitions is to me one of the saddest features in the Christian life of this day. If you expect little, you will get little; and we do expect far less than we ought. We cannot raise our confident expectations too high; for ‘He is able to do for us exceeding abundantly above all that we ask’ as well as ‘think.’ The Apostle has set the limit of our expectations, in the same context, and here it is: ‘That we may be filled with all the fulness of God.’ There are two limits: one is the boundless illimitableness of God’s perfection, and the possibilities of our possession of Him are not exhausted until we have reached that infinite completeness. But then, there is a practical, working limit for each of us; and that is-what do you desire? and what do you expect? God can give more than we can ask or think, but He cannot at the moment give more than we expect or desire.

True, the vessels that we bring to be filled with the oil are not like the vessels that the fatherless boys brought. These were of a definite capacity; and the little cup when it was filled was filled, and there was an end of it. But the vessels that we bring are elastic, and widen out. The more that is put into them the more they can hold, so that there is no bound to the capacity of a heart for the reception and inrush of God; and there will not be a bound through all the ages of a growing possession of Him in eternity. But for to-day, desire and expectancy determine the measure of the gift.

III. Lastly, one more vessel that we have to bring is obedience.

‘If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine.’ *There* is one case of the general principle that wishes and anticipations are all right and well, but unless they are backed up and verified by conduct, even wishes and anticipations will not bring God’s gift. For it is possible for a man who, in his better moments of devotion, has some desires after a loftier range of goodness and a completer conformity to God than he ordinarily has, to rise from his knees and rush into the world, and there live in some lust, or uncleanness, or vice, or indulgence, or absorption in the cares of this life, in such a way as that desires and anticipations shall vanish. If we fill our vessels full, before we take them to the source of supply, with all manner of baser liquids, there will be no room for the oil. We may contradict and stifle our desires by our conduct, and by it make our expectations perfectly impossible to be fulfilled. Are our daily doings of such a nature as that the Spirit of God, which is symbolised by the oil, can come into our hearts; or are we quenching and grieving Him so that He

'Can but listen at the gate
And hear the household jar within'?

Desire, Expectancy, and Obedience-these three must never be separated if we are to receive the gift of Himself, which God delights and waits to give. All spiritual possessions and powers grow by use, even as exercised muscles are strengthened, and unused ones tend to be atrophied. It is possible, by neglect of God and of the gift given to us, to incur the stern sentence passed on the slothful servant-'Take it from him.' By disobedience and negligence we choke the channel through which God's gifts can flow to us. So, brethren, bring these three vessels, and you will not go away with them empty. 'Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.'

6) 2 Kings 4:25-37

2 Kings

A MIRACLE NEEDING EFFORT

2Ki. 4:25 - 2Ki. 4:37.

The story of Elisha is almost entirely a record of his miracles, and the story of his miracles is almost entirely a record of deeds of beneficence. Exception has been taken to it on the ground of the strange accumulation of supernatural works, which have been said to make it like some mediaeval saint's legend. But why should it not be true that, after Elijah had proclaimed the truth, his successor's function was to enforce it chiefly by his acts, and to seek to draw Israel back to God by 'the cords of love' and the gentle compulsion of mercies? The careful consideration of the work of the two prophets makes the peculiarities of Elisha's perfectly intelligible. This story of the great lady at Shunem, her joy over her only child and his piteous death 'on her knees,' is one of the tenderest and sweetest pages in the history. Late won and early lost, the poor boy lies pale and dead on Elisha’s bed at Shunem, while the mother hurries across the plain of Jezreel to Carmel,-a distance of some fifteen or sixteen miles,-where Elisha was then living, probably near the place of Elijah’s sacrifice. This passage begins with her approach.

I. Note first the meeting [2Ki. 4:25 - 2Ki. 4:28]. Somewhere on the slopes of Carmel, commanding a view of the plain stretching away in the blue distance eastward, sat the prophet. His eye was keen, though probably he was now old, and he recognised the lady at a distance, as she rode swiftly towards the mountain. He appears to have suspected that this unusual visit meant some calamity, and his gentle heart went out towards his hostess and friend. Gehazi could not get back sooner than she could come, but sympathy could not sit passive and watch her approach. So the instinctively despatched message beautifully witnesses the prophet’s keen affection, and, as it were, the eager leap of his sympathy. So swift and ready to flash into act is the fellow-feeling of the Highest with the sorrows of us all; so should be the compassion of each with another. The higher in gifts or office in the kingdom a man is, the more is he bound to carry his sympathy in an outstretched hand. It is worth very little when it comes slowly. It is priceless when it runs to meet the mourner before she speaks.

The detailed question put into Gehazi’s mouth describes the circle within which this woman’s heart moved,-her husband, her child, herself. If these were well, nothing could be very ill; if ill, nothing could be well. But the message, which came so warm from Elisha’s lips, had been cooled on the road, and sounded formal from Gehazi. It is hard for selfish indifference to carry tender words without freezing them. The bearer of sympathy must be sympathetic. As Gehazi spoiled Elisha’s message, so we Christians too often do our Master’s, and cool it down to our own temperature. The fact that Gehazi had done so is suggested by the curt answer, ‘Peace!’ It is often quoted as the language of resignation, but it seems much rather to be evasion of the question, and that because her sorrow shrank from unveiling itself to the questioner. Nothing makes grief dumb so surely as prying and yet indifferent intrusion. A tenderer hand than Gehazi’s is needed to unlock the sad secret of that burdened breast.

It was perhaps partly pique at her silencing him, and partly mere unfeeling attention to ‘propriety,’ which made the servant wish to check the convulsive grasp of the feet, which the master allowed. Underlings are more careful of what they suppose to be their superior’s dignity than he is. Much is permitted to love and sorrow, by a prophet, which would be repressed by smaller men. ‘Her soul is bitter within her’ pardons much, and only unfeeling critics will be punctilious in dealing with even the extravagances of grief. But Elisha had another reason than pity. He wished to know her pain, and therefore he let her cling to his feet; for only there would she find her tongue. Does there not shine through the figure of the gentle prophet the image of the gentler Christ, who will not have the poorest and foulest spurned from His feet, though it be ‘a woman who was a sinner,’ and lets us come as close to Him as we will, even to hide our faces on His breast, that we may pour out all our sorrows and sins to Him?

The limitations of the prophet’s knowledge he frankly owns. How much better would it have been for the Church if its teachers had been more willing to copy his modesty, and said about a great many things, ‘The Lord hath hid it from me’!

The mother’s answer is indeed the cry of a ‘bitter’ heart. Its abrupt questions and its reticence as to the child’s death are pathetically true to nature, and sound yet across all these centuries as if the bitter cry were for a grief of to-day. ‘Did I desire a son?’ She upbraids Elisha and Elisha’s God for having forced on her an unasked blessing. ‘Did I not say, Do not deceive me?’ She did [2Ki. 4:16]; and she upbraids Elisha again for a worse deceit than she had meant then, by mocking her with a gift which was wrenched from her hands so suddenly and soon. How many a sad heart is to-day tempted to raise this cry of anguish! And how patient is Elisha with wild words, and how he discerns, beneath the apparent rough reproach, the misery which it implies and the petition which it veils! Elisha’s Lord is no less tender in His judgment of our hasty, whirlwind words, when our hearts are sore; and if only we speak them to Him and cling to His feet, He translates them into the petitions which they mean, and is swift to answer the meaning and pass by the sound of our bitter cry.

II. We note the ineffectual experiment of the staff [2Ki. 4:29 - 2Ki. 4:31]. The supposition that Gehazi was sent in such haste with the hope that the touch of the staff might bring back life, is dismissed as ‘impossible’ by most commentators, who have therefore some difficulty in saying what he was sent for. Some of the Rabbis answered, ‘To prevent putrefaction,’ which would set in soon on that harvest day. Others say that the intention was to ‘prevent more life escaping from him.’ But ‘dead’ is not usually supposed to be an adjective admitting of comparison. Others find the reason in the wish to deliver Israel from the superstitious veneration of such things as the staff, by showing that it was powerless. But 2Ki. 4:31 plainly implies that the result of Gehazi’s attempt was not what had been expected. Why need there be any hesitation in taking the natural meaning, and supposing that Elisha sent his servant quickly, ‘if peradventure’ the touch of his staff might suffice, and followed in person, because he did not know whether it would. There is nothing unworthy of a prophet who had just confessed his ignorance in the supposition. His unobtrusive spirit delighted to hide its power behind material vehicles, as is seen in most of his miracles; and, if he remembered how he himself, in his early days, had parted the waters with his master’s cloak, he might think it possible that his servant should work a miracle with his staff.

The Shunemite quotes his own words on that far-off day; and perhaps she was reminded of them by perceiving the analogy of the two incidents. But her clinging to Elisha shows her doubt of the success of the attempt; and she was right. Why did the staff fail? Perhaps because of its bearer. Gehazi always appears unfavourably, and Elisha’s staff loses its power in such hands. The mightiest instruments are weak when selfishness and coldness wield them. An unworthy minister can make the Gospel itself impotent. It is an awful thing to carry ‘the rod of Thy strength’ and to hinder its exerting its energy. But possibly the non-success of the attempt was meant to teach Elisha and us that miracles of life-giving are not to be wrought so easily, but need the effort of the prophet himself. We cannot delegate the work of God, and no sending of others will do instead of going ourselves. Such things are not achieved without much personal toil, pains, and self-sacrifice.

III. So we come to the last step, the communication of life [2Ki. 4:32 - 2Ki. 4:37]. It was noon when the child died. The mother’s journey would take three or four hours, and the return at least as much. It would then be dark when the two reached her desolate home. She had laid the boy on Elisha's bed, as if even that brought her some comfort. It is difficult to say whether 'them twain' [2Ki. 4:33] means him and the mother, or him and the child; but the expression of the next verse, 'went up,' suggests that the prayer with shut door was in the lower part of the house, and that the mother's cry was joined to the prophet's petitions. Such prayer is the true preparation for such a miracle. Beautiful consideration, born of sympathy, led him to shut out curious onlookers, and then to go up alone to the little chamber where that pale, tiny corpse lay. No eye but a mother's could have seen what followed without profanation; and a mother's heart would have been torn by hopes and fears if she had seen.

The actual miracle is remarkable for two peculiarities-the effort required and the slowness of the process. Of course, there is a profound and beautiful use to be made of the prophet's action in laying himself upon the dead child, mouth to mouth, and hand to hand, if we regard it as symbolic of that closeness of approach to our nature, dead in sins, which the Lord of life makes in His incarnation and in His continual drawing near. It is His own life which Jesus imparts, and it is imparted because He comes near and touches us. It is the warmth of His own heart which passes into those who live by derivation of life from Him. And Elisha may well stand as symbol of Jesus in this miracle. But besides that use of the narrative, which is no mere fanciful playing with it, we should also note the difference between the prophet and Christ in their miracles. Jesus raises the dead by His bare word. His expressed will is all-sufficient. Elisha prays, and then puts forth somewhat prolonged efforts, from which at first there is no effect, and which drain him of force, so that he is obliged to pause and leave the chamber, and gather himself together for a renewal of them. The ease of the one sets the difficulty of the other in a strong light. And the life which came back with a rush, in full stream, at Christ's bidding, comes only by degrees at Elisha's prayer and work. The one worker is the Lord of life, who speaks and it is done; the other is but the channel of power, and the appearance of effort and gradualness in result is owing to the narrowness of the channel, not to the inadequacy of the power.

In all Elisha’s gentleness and lowliness there is yet a certain dignity as God’s prophet; and it was not fitting that he should come from the scene of such a miracle with the glow of it upon him, to seek for the mother. So he summons her by Gehazi, and then, with beautiful delicacy, leaves her to go alone into the chamber. None are to see the transports of her joy, not even the author of it. How beautiful, too, are the quiet words, ‘Take up thy son’! She has no words; but, for all answer, comes close to him [there is no ‘in’ in 2Ki. 4:37], and once again, but with what different feelings, clasps his feet. Not even Gehazi, or any other stickler for propriety, has the heart to thrust her back this time. The story draws a curtain over that meeting in the prophet’s chamber. Sad hearts who have vainly longed for such a moment, can fancy the rapture. But the day will come, not here, but in the upper chamber, when parted ones shall clasp each other again; and many a mourner shall hear Jesus say from the throne what He once said from the Cross, ‘Woman, behold thy son; son, behold thy mother.’

7) 2 Kings 5:10-11

2 Kings

NAAMAN’S WRATH

2Ki. 5:10 - 2Ki. 5:11.

These two figures are significant of much beyond themselves. Elisha the prophet is the bearer of a divine cure. Naaman, the great Syrian noble, is stricken with the disease that throughout the Old Testament is treated as a parable of sin and death. He was the commander-in-chief of the army of Damascus, high in favour at Ben-hadad’s court; his reputation and renown were on every tongue, *but* he was a leper. There is a ‘but’ in every fortune, as there is a ‘but’ in every character.

So he comes to the prophet’s humble home in Samaria, and we find him waiting, a suppliant at the gate, with his cavalcade of attendants, and a present worth many thousands of pounds in our English money.

How does the prophet receive his distinguished visitor? In all the rest of his actions we find Elisha gentle, accessible, forgetful of his dignity. Here his conduct would be discourteous if there were not a reason for it. He is reserved, unsympathetic, keeps the great man at the staff-end, will not even come out to receive him as common courtesy might have suggested; sends him a curt message of direction, with not a word more than was necessary.

And then, naturally enough, the hot soldier begins to explode. His pride is touched; he has not been received with due deference. If the prophet would have come out and chanted incantations over him, and made mystical motions of his hands above the shining patches of his leprous skin, he could have believed in the cure. But there was nothing in the injunction given for his superstition to lay hold of. His patriotic susceptibilities are roused. If he is to be cleansed by bathing, are not the crystal streams of his own city, the glory of Damascus, better than the turbid and muddy Jordan that belongs to Israel? So he flounced away, and would have sacrificed his hope of cure to his passion if his servants had not brought him to common-sense by their cool remonstrance. He would have done any great thing which he had been set to do; he had already done a great thing in taking the long journey, and being ready to expend all that vast amount of treasure, and so surely there need be no difficulty in his complying, were it only as an experiment, with the very simple and easy terms which the prophet had enjoined.

Now, all these points may be so put as to suggest for us characteristics of that gospel which is God’s cure for our leprosy. And the whole story shows us as in a glass what human nature would like the gospel to be, and how we sick men quarrel with our physic, and stumble at those very characteristics of the gospel which are its main glory and the secret of its power. My only purpose in this sermon is to bring out two or three of these as lying on the surface of the story before us.

I. First, then, God’s cure puts us all on one level.

Naaman wished to be treated like a great man that happened to be a leper; Elisha treated him like a leper that happened to be a great man. ‘I thought, he will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God.’ The whole question about his treatment turns on this, Whether is the important thing his disease or his dignity? He thought it was his dignity, the prophet thought it was his disease. And so he served him as he would have served any one else that in similar circumstances, and for a like necessity, had come to him.

And now, if you will generalise that, it just comes to this-that Christianity brushes aside all the surface differences of men, and goes in its treatment of them straight to the central likenesses, the things which, in all mankind, are identical. There are the same wants, the same sorrows, the same necessity for the same cleansing beneath the queen’s robes and the peer’s ermine, the workman’s jacket and the beggar’s rags.

Whatever differences of culture, of station, of idiosyncrasy there may be, these are but surface and accidental. We are all alike in this, that we ‘have sinned, and come short of the glory of God’; and our Great Physician, in His great remedy, insists upon treating us all as patients, and not as this, that, or the other, kind of patients. The cholera, when it lays hold of ladies and gentlemen, deals with them in precisely the same fashion that it does when it lays hold of waifs on the dunghill; and a wise doctor will treat the Prince of Wales just as he will treat the Prince of Wales’s stable-boy. Christianity has nothing to say, in the first place, to the accidents that separate us one from the other, but insists on looking at us all as standing on the one level and partaking of the one characteristic. We may be wise or foolish, we may be learned or ignorant, we may be rich or poor, we may be high or low, we may be barbarian or civilised, but we are all sinners. The leprosy runs through us all, according to the diagnosis of Christianity, and our Elisha deals with Naaman as he deals with the poorest footboy in Naaman’s cavalcade who is afflicted with the same disease.

Now that rubs against our self-importance; a great many of us would be quite willing to go to heaven, but we do not like to go in a common caravan. We want to have a compartment to ourselves, and to travel in a manner becoming our position. We are quite willing to be healed, but we would like to be healed with due deference. You are an educated man, a student; you do not like to take the same place as the most unlettered, and to feel that the common fact of sin puts you, in a very solemn respect, upon the level of these narrow foreheads and unlettered people. And so some of you turn away because Christianity, with such impartiality and persistency, insists upon the identity of the fact of sin in us all, and passes by the little diversities on which we plume ourselves, and which part us the one from the other. Dear brethren, I am sure that some of my audience have been kept away from the gospel by this humbling characteristic of it, that at the very beginning it insists on bringing us all into the one category; and I venture to ask you to ponder with yourselves this question, Is it not wise, is it not necessary that the physician should look only at the disease and think nothing of all the other facts of the patient's character or life? Surely, surely, it is a fact that we are transgressors, and surely it is a fact that if we be transgressors that is the most important thing about us-far more important than all these diversities of which I have been speaking. They are skin-deep, this is the central truth, that we have souls which ought to stand in a living relation of glad obedience to our Father in heaven; and which, alas! do stand in an attitude often of sulky alienation, often of indifference, and not seldom of rebellion. If so, then it is both wise and kind to deal with that solemn fact first. In wisdom and in mercy Christianity deals with all men as sinners, needing chiefly to be healed of that disease. 'The Scripture hath concluded all under sin'-shut up the whole race as in a great chamber, that so cleansing and forgiveness might reach them all. They are gathered together as patients in a hospital are gathered, that their sickness may be medicined and their wounds dressed.

For this impartiality of the gospel, putting us all on one level, and its determination to deal with us all as sinners, is but the other side of, and the preparation for, that blessed universality of a sacrifice for all, and a gospel for the whole world. Do not quarrel with your physic because the Physician insists upon dealing with you as sick men.

II. Then take another of the thoughts that come out of the incident before us. God's cure puts the messengers of the cure well away in the background.

Naaman, heathen-like, wanted something sensuous for his confidence in the prophet's cure to lay hold upon. If the prophet would only have come out, and done like the sorcerers and magic-workers of whom he had had experience; if he would have come weaving mystical incantations, and calling upon the God whom he worshipped, but whom Naaman did not, and making passes with his hands over the leprous places-then there would have been something for his sense to build upon, and he would have been ready to believe in the prophet’s power to cure. But that was the very thing which the prophet did not want him to believe in. Elisha desired to conceal himself, and to make God’s power prominent. He wished to cure Naaman’s soul of the leprosy of idolatry as well as to cure his body; and we see, in the sequel of the story, that the very simplicity of the means enjoined and the absence of any human agency, which at first staggered the sensuous nature and offended the pride of Naaman, at last led him to see and confess that there was no God in all the earth but in Israel. Therefore the prophet keeps in the background. His part is not to cure, but to bring God’s cure. He is only a voice. He brings the sick man and God’s prescription face to face, and there leaves him. Naaman would have liked to force him into the place of a magician, in whom miracle-working power resided. Elisha will only take the place of a herald who proclaims how God’s power may be brought to heal. So men have always sought to turn the messengers of God’s cure into miracle-workers. Making the ministers of God’s word into priests who by external acts convey grace and forgiveness, is a superstition that has its roots deep in human nature. It is not that the priests have made themselves so much as that the people have made the priests. Here is an instance in a rude form of the tendency which has been at work in all generations, and has been the corruption of Christianity from the beginning, and is doing mischief every day-the tendency to place one’s confidence in a man who is supposed to be, in some mysterious manner, the bearer of a grace that will cure and cleanse. And the prophet’s position in our story brings out very clearly the position which all Christian ministers hold. They are nothing but heralds, their personality disappears, they are merely a voice. All that they have to do is to bring men into contact with God’s own word of command and promise, and then to vanish.

Christianity has no ‘priests,’ Christianity has no ‘sacraments.’ Christianity has no external rites which bring grace or help except in so far as by their aid the soul is brought into contact with the truth, and by meditation and faith is thus made capable of receiving more of Christ’s Spirit. Our only commission is to bring to you God’s message of how you may be healed. When we have said, ‘Wash, and be clean,’ as plainly, earnestly, and lovingly as we can, we have done all our appointed office. We are heralds, and nothing more. Our business is to preach, not to do rites, or minister sacraments. Our business is to preach, not to argue. We are neither priests nor professors, but preachers. We have to deliver the message given to us faithfully. We have to ring out the proclamation loudly. The virtue of a town crier is that he make people hear and understand. The virtue of a messenger is that he repeats precisely what he was told. And a Christian minister has to lift up his voice and not be afraid, to see to it that his speech be plain, and that it do not overlay the message with fripperies of ornament, or affectations, or personalities, and to plead earnestly and lovingly with men to come to the divine Healer. John Baptist's description of himself is true of them. With rare self-abnegation, he would only reply to the question, 'Who art thou?' with 'I am a voice.' His personality was nothing. His message was all. A musical string cannot be seen as it vibrates. So the man should be lost in his proclamation. We are heralds and nothing more, and the more we keep in the background and the less our hearers depend on us, the better. If you want priests who will 'call on the name of their God, and wave their hands over the place,' and convey grace and healing to you by anything that they do for or to you, you will have to go beyond the limits of New Testament Christianity to find them. So men quarrel with their medicine because their cure is purely a spiritual process, depending on spiritual forces, and sense cries out for sacred rites and persons to be the channels of God's healing.

III. And now, lastly, God's cure wants nothing from you but to take it.

Naaman's servants were quite right: 'My father! If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it?' Yes! Of course he would, and the greater the better. Men will stand, as Indian fakirs do, with their arms above their heads until they stiffen there. They will perch themselves upon pillars, like Simeon Stylites, for years, till the birds build their nests in their hair: they will measure all the distance from Cape Comorin to Juggernaut's temple with their bodies along the dusty road. They will give the fruit of their body for the sin of their soul. They will wear hair shirts and scourge themselves. They will fast and deny themselves. They will build cathedrals and endow churches. They will do as many of you do, labour by fits and starts all through your lives at the endless task of making yourselves ready for heaven, and winning it by obedience and by righteousness. They will do all these things and do them gladly, rather than listen to the humbling message that says, ‘You do not need to do anything-wash!’ Is it your washing, or the water, that will clean you? Wash and be clean! Ah, my brother! Naaman’s cleansing was only a test of his obedience, and a token that it was God who cleansed him. There was no power in Jordan’s waters to take away the taint of leprosy. Our cleansing is in that blood of Jesus Christ that has the power to take away all sin, and to make the foulest amongst us pure and clean.

But the two commandments-that of the symbol in my text, that of the reality in the Christian gospel-are alike in this respect, that both the one and the other are a confession that the man himself has no part in his own cleansing. And so Naamans, in all generations, who were eager to do some great thing, have stumbled, and turned away from that gospel which says, ‘It is finished!’ ‘Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us.’ Dear brother, you can do nothing. You do not need to do anything. It is a hard pill for my pride to swallow, to be indebted to absolute mercy, which I have done nothing to bring, for all my hope, but it is a position that we have to take. Hard to take for all of us, very hard for you who have never looked in the face the solemn fact of your own sinfulness, and pondered upon the consequences of that; but most blessed if only you will open your eyes to see that the stern refusal to accept anything from us as working out our salvation is but the other side of the great truth that Christ’s death is all-sufficient, and that in Him the foulest may be clean.

‘Nothing in my hand I bring.’

If you bring anything you cannot grasp the Cross. Do not try to eke out Christ’s work with yours; do not build upon penitence, or feelings, or faith, or anything, but build only upon this: ‘When I had nothing to pay He frankly forgave me all.’ And build upon this: ‘Christ alone has died for me’; and Christ alone is all-sufficient. ‘Wash and be clean’; accept and possess; believe and live!

8) 2 Kings 5:15-27

2 Kings

NAAMAN’S IMPERFECT FAITH

2Ki. 5:15 - 2Ki. 5:27.

Like the Samaritan leper healed by Jesus, Naaman came back to give glory to God. Samaria was quite out of his road to Damascus, but benefit melted his heart, and the pride, which had been indignant that the prophet did not come out to him, faded before thankfulness, which impelled him to go to the prophet. God’s gifts should humble, and gratitude is not afraid to stoop. Elisha would not see Naaman before, for he needed to be taught; but he gladly welcomes him into his presence now, for he has learned his lesson. Sometimes the best way to attract is to repel, and the true servant of God consults not his own dignity, but others’ good, whichever he does.

I. The first point is the offer and refusal of the gift. The benefited is liberal and the benefactor disinterested. Naaman was a convert to pure monotheism. His avowal is clear and full. But what a miserable conclusion he draws with that ‘therefore’! He should have said, ‘Therefore I come to trust under the shadow of His wings.’ But he is not ready to give himself, and, like some of the rest of us, thinks to compound by giving money. When the outward giving of goods is token of inward surrender of self, it is accepted. When it is a substitute for that, it is rejected. No doubt, too, Naaman thought that Elisha was, like the sorcerers of heathenism, very accessible to gifts; and if he had come to believe in Elisha’s God, he had yet to learn the loving-kindness of the God in whom he had come to believe. He had to learn next that ‘the gift of God’ was not ‘purchased with money’ and the prophet’s acceptance of his present would have dimmed Elisha’s own character, and that of his God, in the newly opened eyes of Naaman.

Elisha’s answer begins with the solemn adjuration which we first hear from Elijah. In its use here, it not only declares the unalterable determination of Elisha, but reveals its grounds. To a man who feels ever the burning consciousness that he is in the presence of God, all earthly good dwindles into nothing. How should talents of silver and gold, and changes of raiment, have worth in eyes before which that awful, blessed vision flames? A candle shows black against the sun. If we walk all the day in the light of God’s countenance, we shall not see much brightness to dazzle us in the pale and borrowed lights of earth. The vivid realisation of God in our daily lives is the true shield against the enticements of the world. Further, the consciousness of being God’s servant, which is implied in the expression ‘before whom I stand,’ makes a man shrink from receiving wages from men. ‘To his own Master he standeth or falleth,’ and will be scrupulously careful that no taint of apparent self-seeking shall spoil his service, in the eyes of men or in the judgment of the ‘great Taskmaster.’ Elisha felt that the honour of his order, and, in some sense, of his God, in the eyes of this half-convert, depended on his own perfect and transparent disinterestedness. Therefore, although he made no scruple of taking the Shunemite’s gifts, and probably lived on similar offerings, he steadfastly refused the enormous sum proffered by Naaman. ‘The labourer is worthy of his hire,’ but if accepting it is likely to make people think that he did his work for the sake of it, he must refuse it. A hireling is not a man who is paid for his work, but one who works for the sake of the pay. If once a professed servant of God falls under reasonable suspicion of doing that, his power for good is ended, as it should be.

II. The next point to notice is the alloy in the gold, or the imperfection of Naaman’s new convictions. He had been cured of his leprosy at once, but the cure of his soul had to be more gradual. It is unreasonable to expect clear sight, with the power of rightly estimating magnitudes, from a man seeing for the first time. But though Naaman’s shortcomings are very natural and excusable, they are plainly shortcomings. Note the two forms which they take,-superstition and selfish compromise. What good would a couple of loads of soil be, and could he not have taken that from the roadside without leave? The connection between the two halves of 2Ki. 5:17 makes his object plain. He wished the earth ‘for’ he would not sacrifice but to Jehovah. That is, he meant to use it as the foundation of an altar, as if only some of the very ground on which Jehovah had manifested Himself was sacred enough for such a purpose. He did not, indeed, think of ‘the Lord’ as a local deity of Israel, as his ample confession of faith in 2Ki. 5:15 proves; but neither had he reached the point of feeling that the Being worshipped makes the altar sacred. No wonder that he did not unlearn in an hour his whole way of thinking of religion! The reliance on externals is too natural to us all, even with all our training in a better faith, to allow of our wondering at or severely blaming him. A sackful of earth from Palestine has been supposed to make a whole graveyard a ‘Campo Santo’; and, no doubt, there are many good people in England who have carried home bottles of Jordan water for christenings. Does not the very name of ‘the Holy Land’ witness to the survival of Naaman’s sentimental error?

The other tarnish on the clear mirror was of a graver kind. Notice that he does not ask Elisha’s sanction to his intended compromise, but simply announces his intention, and hopes for forgiveness. It looks ill when a man, in the first fervour of adopting a new faith, is casting about for ways to reconcile it with the public profession of his old abandoned one. We should have thought better of Naaman’s monotheism, if he had not coupled his avowal of it, where it was safe to be honest, with the announcement that he did not intend to stand by his avowal when it was risky. It would have required huge courage to have gone back to Damascus and denied Rimmon; and our censure must be lenient, but decided.

Naaman was the first preacher of a doctrine of compromise, which has found eminent defenders and practisers, in our own and other times. To separate the official from the man, and to allow the one to profess in public a creed which the other disavows in private, is rank immorality, whoever does or advocates it. The motive in this case was, perhaps, not so much cowardice as selfish unwillingness to forfeit position and favour at court. He wants to keep all the good things he has got; and he tries to blind his conscience by representing the small compliance of bowing as almost forced on him by the grasp of the bowing king, who leaned on his hand. But was it necessary that he should be the king’s favourite? A deeper faith would have said, ‘Perish court favour and everything that hinders me from making known whose I am.’ But Naaman is an early example of the family of ‘Facing-both-ways,’ and of trying to ‘make the best of both worlds.’ But his sophistication of conscience will not do, and his own dissatisfaction with his excuse peeps out plainly in his petition that he may be forgiven. If his act needed forgiveness, it should not have been done, nor thus calmly announced. It is vain to ask forgiveness beforehand for known sin about to be committed.

Elisha is not asked for his sanction, and he neither gives nor refuses it. He dismissed Naaman with cold dignity, in the ordinary conventional form of leave-taking. His silence indicated at least the absence of hearty approval, and probably he was silent to Naaman because, as he said about the Shunemite’s trouble, the Lord had been silent to him, and he had no authoritative decision to give. Let us hope that Naaman’s faith grew and stiffened before the time of trial came, and that he did not lie to God in the house of Rimmon. Let us take the warning that we are to publish on the housetops what we hear in the ear, and that, if in anything we should be punctiliously sincere, it is in the profession of our faith.

III. The last point is Gehazi’s avarice, and what he got by it. How differently the same sight affected the man who lived near God and the one who lived by sense! Elisha had no desires stirred by the wealth in Naaman’s train. Gehazi’s mouth watered after it. Regulate desires and you rule conduct. The true regulation of desires is found in communion with God. Gehazi had a sordid soul, like Judas; and, like the traitor Apostle, he was untouched by contact with goodness and unworldliness. Perhaps the parallel might be carried farther, and both were moved with coarse contempt for their master’s silly indifference to earthly good. That feeling speaks in Gehazi’s soliloquy. He evidently thought the prophet a fool for having let ‘this Syrian’ off so easily. He was fair game, and he had brought the wealth on purpose to leave it. Profanity speaks in uttering a solemn oath on such an occasion. The putting side by side of ‘the Lord liveth’ and ‘I will run after him’ would be ludicrous if it were not horrible. How much profanity may live close beside a prophet, and learn nothing from him but a holy name to sully in an oath!

The after part of the story suggests that Naaman was out of sight of the city before he saw Gehazi coming after him. The cunning liar timed his arrival well. The courtesy of Naaman in lighting down from his chariot to receive the prophet’s servant shows how real a change had been wrought upon him, even though there were imperfections in him. Gehazi’s story is well hung together, and has plenty of ‘local colour’ to make it probable. Such glib ingenuity in lying augurs long practice in the art. If he had been content with a small fee, he needed only to have told the truth; but his story was required to put a fair face on the amount of his request. And in what an amiable light it sets Elisha! He would not take for himself, but he has nothing to give to the two imaginary scholars, who have come from some of the schools of the prophets in the hill-country of Ephraim, thirsting for instruction. How sweet the picture, and what a hard heart that could refuse the request! Truly said Paul, ‘The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.’ Any sin may come from it, and be done to gratify it. ‘Honestly if you can, but get it,’ was Gehazi’s principle, as it is that of many a man in the Christian Churches of this day. Greed of gain is a sin that seldom keeps house alone. Naaman no doubt was glad to give, both because he was grateful, and because, like most people in high positions, he was galled by the sense of obligation to a man beneath him in rank. So back went Gehazi, with the two Syrian slaves carrying his baggage for him, and he chuckling at his lucky stroke, and pleasantly imagining how to spend his wealth.

‘The tower’ in 2Ki. 5:24 is more correctly ‘the hill,’ and it was probably there where the little group would come in sight of Elisha’s house. So Gehazi gets rid of the porters before they could be seen or speak to any one, and manages his load for a little way himself, carefully hides it in the house, and, seeing the men safely off, appears obsequious and innocent before Elisha. The prophet’s gift of supernatural knowledge was intermittent, as witness his ignorance of the Shunemite’s sorrow; but Gehazi must have known its occasional action, and we can fancy that his heart sank at the ominous question, so curt in the original, and conveying so clearly the prophet’s knowledge that he had been away from the house: ‘Whence, Gehazi?’ One lie needs another to cover it, and every sin is likely to beget a successor. So, with some tremor, but without hesitation, he tries to hide his tracks. Did not Elisha’s eye pierce the wretched hypocrite as with a dart? and did not his voice ring like a judgment trumpet, as he confounded the silent sinner with the conviction that the prophet himself had been at the spot, though his body had remained in the house? So, at last, will men be reduced to stony dumbness, when they discover that an Eye which can see deeper than Elisha’s has been gazing on all their secret sins. The question, ‘Is this a time to receive?’ etc., suggests the special reasons, in Naaman’s new faith, for conspicuous disregard of wealth, in order that he might thereby learn the free love of Elisha’s God and of Jehovah’s servant, both of which had been tarnished by Gehazi’s ill-omened greed. The long enumeration following on ‘garments’ includes, no doubt, the things that Gehazi had solaced his return with the thought of buying, and so adds another proof that his heart was turned inside out before the prophet.

His punishment is severe; but his sin was great. The leprosy was a fitting punishment, both because it had been Naaman’s, from which obedient reliance on God had set him free, and because of its symbolical meaning, as the type of sin. Gehazi got his coveted money, but he got something else along with it, which he did not bargain for, and which took all the sweetness out of it. That is always the case. ‘Ill-gotten gear never prospers’; and, if a man has set his heart on worldly good, he may succeed in amassing a fortune, but the leprosy will cleave to him, and his soul will be all crusted and foul with that living death. How many successful men, perhaps high in reputation in the Church as in the world, would stand ‘lepers as white as snow,’ if we had God’s eyes to see them with!

9) 2 Kings 6:8-18

2 Kings

SIGHT AND BLINDNESS

2Ki. 6:8 - 2Ki. 6:18.

The revelation of the angel guard around Elisha is the important part of this incident, but the preliminaries to it may yield some instruction. The first point to be noted is the friendly relations between the king and the prophet. The king was probably Joram, who had given up Baal worship, though still retaining the calves at Bethel and Dan [2Ki. 3:2]. The whole tone of things is changed from the stormy days of Elijah. The prophet is frequently an inhabitant of the capital, and a trusted counsellor. No doubt much of this improvement was owing to Elijah’s undaunted denunciation, but much, too, was due to Elisha’s gentle persuasion. We are often tempted to do injustice to the sterner predecessors when we see how the gentler ways of their followers seem to accomplish more than theirs did. Unless winter storms had come first, spring sunshine would draw forth few flowers. All honour to the heroes who begin the fight, and do not see the victory.

The Syrian king’s way of warfare was not by a regular continued invasion, but by dashes across the border on undefended places; and time after time he found himself out in his calculations, and troops enough to beat him off massed where he meant to strike. No wonder that he suspected treachery. The prompt answer of his servants implies that Elisha’s intervention was well known by them, and measures the reputation in which he stood. Let no one suppose that thwarting Syria was an unworthy use of a supernatural gift. The preservation of Israel and the revelation of God were worthy ends, and all that is accessory to a worthy end is worthy. It is foolish to call anything a trifle which serves a great purpose.

Joram had learned to obey the prophet, and his people and their enemies had learned that Elisha was a prophet. That was much. He had no great revelations of the deep things of God to give to his generation or to posterity, but he gave directions as to practical life which bore on the wellbeing of the state; and that office was not less divinely conferred. It is a good thing when God’s servants are not afraid to make their voices heard in politics, and a safeguard for a nation when their counsels are taken. The quiet prophet was more to Israel than an army.

The ‘great host’ sent to capture Elisha shows the terror which he had inspired, and the importance attached to getting possession of him. It is, too, an odd instance of the inconsistency of godless men, in that it never occurs to the Syrian king that Elisha, who knew all his schemes, might know this one too, or that horses and chariots were of little use against a man who had Heaven to back him. Dothan lay on an isolated hill in a wide plain, and could easily be surrounded. A night-march offered the chance of a surprise, which seems to have been prevented by the unusually early rising of Elisha’s servant, the young successor of Gehazi. Apparently he had gone out of the little city before he discovered the besiegers, and then rushed back in terror. Note the strongly contrasted pictures of the lad and his master,-the one representing the despair of sense, the other the confidence of faith. The lad’s passionate exclamation was most natural, and fear darkening to bewildered helplessness is reasonable to men who only see the material and visible dangers and enemies that beset every life. The wonder is, not that we should sometimes be afraid, but that we should ever be free from fear, if we look only at visible facts. Worse foes ring us round than those whose armour glittered in the morning sunshine at Dothan, and we are as helpless to cope with them as that frightened youth was. Any man who calmly reflects on the possibilities and certainties of his life will find abundant reason for a sinking heart. So much that is dreadful and sad may come, and so much must come, that the boldest may well shrink, and the most resourceful cry ‘Alas! how shall we do?’ It is not courage, but blindness, which enables godless men to front life so unconcernedly.

How nobly the calmness of Elisha shows beside the lad’s alarm! Probably both were now outside the city, as the immediately following verse speaks of the mountain as the scene. If so, Elisha had gone forth to meet the enemy, and that must have brought fresh terror to his servant. The quiet ‘Fear not!’ was of little use without the assurance of the next clause; for there is no more idle expenditure of breath than in telling a man not to be afraid, and doing nothing to remove the grounds of his fear. That is all that the world can do to comfort or hearten. ‘Fear not?’ the youth might well have said. ‘It is all very easy to say that; but look there! How can I help being afraid?’ There is only one way to help it, and that is to believe that ‘they that be with us are more than they that be with them.’ The true and only conqueror of reasonable fear is still more reasonable trust. The two parts played by the servant and the prophet are united in the man who cleaves to Jesus Christ as his defence. He would not cling so close to Him but for the fear that tightens his grip. He would tremble far more but for that grip. He who says in his heart, ‘What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee,’ will presently get to saying, ‘I will trust, and not be afraid.’

Note, further, the sight seen by opened eyes. Elisha did not pray that the heavenly guards might come; for they were there already. Nor does it appear that he saw them; for he did not need that heightened condition of spiritual perception which appears to be meant by the opening of the eyes. And what a sight the trembling young man saw! Where he had seen only barren rock or sparse vegetation, he saw that same fiery host that had attended Elijah in his translation, now enclosing the unarmed prophet and himself within a flaming ring. The manifestation, not the presence, of the angel guards was the miracle. It was a momentary unveiling of what always was, and would be after the curtain was drawn again. I suppose that no reverent reader of Scripture can doubt the existence of angelic beings, or their office to ‘minister to the heirs of salvation.’ To us, indeed, who know Him who is the ‘Head of all principalities and powers,’ the doctrine of angelic ministration is of less importance than that of Christ’s divine help;

but the latter truth does not supersede the former, though its brightness throws the other, about which we know so much less, into comparative shadow. But we may still learn from this transient disclosure of ‘the things that are,’ the permanent truth of the ever-active presence of divinely sent helps and guards, with all who trust in Him.

This manifestation has several features of resemblance to that given to Jacob, in his most defenceless hour, when he saw beside his unprotected camp of women and children ‘God’s host,’ and, in a rapture of thankful wonder, named the place ‘Mahanaim,’-’Two Camps.’ The sight teaches us that God’s messengers are ever near, and then most near when needed most. It tells us, too, that they come in the form needed. They are warriors when we are ringed about by foes, counsellors when we are perplexed, comforters when we mourn. Their shapes are as varied as our needs, and ever correspond to ‘the present distress.’ They come in power sufficient to conquer. There was force enough circling the prophet to have annihilated all the Syrians. True, they did not draw their celestial swords, but they were there, and their presence was enough for the triumphant faith of the guarded men. What living thing could come through that wall of fire?

Our eyes are blinded and we need to have them cleared, if not in the same manner as this lad’s, yet in an analogous way. We look so constantly at the things seen that we have no sight for the unseen. Worldliness, sin, unbelief, sense and its trifles, time and its transitoriness, blind the eyes of our mind; and we need those of sense to be closed, that these may open. The truest vision is the vision of faith. It is certain, direct, and conclusive. The world says, ‘Seeing is believing’; the gospel says, ‘Believing is seeing.’ If we would but live near to Jesus Christ, pray to Him to touch our blind eyeballs, and turn away from the dazzling unrealities which sense brings, we should find Him ‘the master-light of all our seeing,’ and be sure of the eternal, invisible things, with an assurance superior to that given by the keenest sight in the brightest sunshine. When we are blind to earth, we see earth glorified by angel presences, and fear and despair and helplessness and sorrow flee away from our tranquil hearts. If, on the other hand, we fix our gaze on earth and its trifles, there will generally be more to alarm than to encourage, and we shall do well to be afraid, if we do not see, as in such a case we shall certainly not see, the fiery wall around us, behind which God keeps His people safe.

Note, finally, the blindness. Elisha’s dealing with the advancing host of Syria can only be rightly estimated by looking beyond the limits of the text. His object was to carry the whole army into Samaria, that they might there be won by giving them bread to eat and water to drink, and so heaping coals of fire on their head. The prophet, who was in so many points a foreshadowing of the gospel type of excellence, was the first to show the right way to conquer. Nineteen centuries of so-called Christianity have not brought ‘Christendom’ to practise Elisha’s recipe for finishing a war. It succeeded in his hands; for, after that feast and liberation of a captured army, ‘the bands of Syria came no more into the land of Israel.’ How could they, as long as the remembrance of that kindness lasted? Pity that the same sort of treatment were not tried to-day!

The blindness which fell on the Syrians does not seem to have been total loss of sight,-for, if so, they could not have followed Elisha to Samaria, nearly fifteen miles off,-but rather an ocular affection which prevented them from recognising what they saw. It was a supernatural impediment in any case, however far it extended. God did ‘according to the word of Elisha,’ a wonderful inversion of the ordinary formula. But that was because Elisha was doing according to the word of the Lord. The prayers which are ‘according to His will’ are the answered prayers.

They who see not the angels, see nothing clearly. There is a mist over every eye that beholds only the things of time, which prevents it from seeing these as they are, and from recognising a prophet when he is before them. If we would rightly estimate the objects of sense, we must discern, shining through them, the far loftier and greater things of eternity. That flaming background is needed to supply a scale by which to measure the others. The flat plain of Lombardy is most beautiful when its flatness is seen girdled by the giant Alps, where lies the purity of the snow which feeds the rivers that fertilise the levels below.

10)2 Kings 7:1-8

‘IMPOSSIBLE,-ONLY I SAW IT’

2Ki. 7:1 - 2Ki. 7:16.

The keynote of this incident lies in the promise in the first verse. The whole story illustrates man’s too frequent rejection of God’s promise, and God’s wonderful way of fulfilling it.

I. We note first the promise which common-sense finds incredible. It came from Elisha when all seemed desperate. The wonderfully vivid narrative in the previous chapter tells a pitiful tale of women boiling their children, of unclean food worth more than its weight in silver, of a king worked up to a pitch of frenzy and murderous designs, and renouncing his allegiance to Jehovah. Such faith as he had was strained to the breaking point, and his messenger was sent to tell the prophet that the king would not ‘wait for the Lord any longer.’ That was the moment chosen to speak the promise. It came, as God’s helps, both of promise and act, so often come, at the very nick of time, when faith is ready to fail and human aid is vain. Before we had learned our hopeless state, they would come too soon for our good; after faith had wholly parted from its moorings, they would come too late.

Note the precision and confidence of the promise. The hour of the fulfilment, and the price of flour and the cheaper barley are stated. Man’s promises are vague; God’s are specific. Mark, too, the entire silence of the promise as to the mode of its fulfilment. Probably Elisha knew as little as any one, how it was going to be accomplished. The particularity and vagueness combined are remarkable. A hint as to how the thing was to be done would have made the belief in the fact so much easier. Yes, and just because it would have smoothed the road for worthless belief, it was not given, but the apparently impossible promise was left in nakedness, for any one who needed sense to animate his faith, to scoff at. Is not that emphatic assertion of the fact, and emphatic silence as to the ‘how,’ a frequent characteristic of God’s promises? If ever we are kept in the dark as to the latter, it is for our good, and for the encouragement of our growth in utter dependence and perfect trust. It is not well for the trusting soul to ask too curiously about methods intervening between the promise in the present and its accomplishment in the future. It is better for peace and the simplicity of our trust, that we should be content to cling to the faithful word, and to ‘believe. . . that it shall be even as it was told’ us, without troubling ourselves about His way of effecting His purposes. Passengers are not admitted to the engine-room, nor allowed on the bridge. Let them leave all the working of the ship to the captain.

II. The noble who blurted out his incredulity had a great deal to say for himself from the common-sense and worldly point of view. But he need not have sneered, in the same breath, at old miracles and new. His sarcasm about ‘windows in heaven’ refers to the story of the flood; and perhaps there is a hint of allusion to the manna. He neither believed these ancient deeds, nor the promise for to-morrow. Why not? Simply because he-wise as he thought himself-could not see any way of bringing it about. There are many of us yet who have the same modest opinion of our own acuteness, and go on the supposition that what we do not see is invisible, and what we cannot do, or imagine done, is impossible. Why should not the Lord ‘make windows in heaven’ if He please? Or, how does the pert objector know that that is the only way of fulfilling the promise? He will be taught that he has not quite exhausted all the possibilities open to Omnipotence, and that something much simpler than windows in heaven can do what is wanted. Unbelief which rejects God’s plain promises because it does not see how they can be fulfilled is common enough still, and is as unreasonable as it is impertinent. Elisha was as ignorant as this nobleman was, of the means, but his faith fixed its eyes on the faithful word, and trusted, while sense, self-conceit, and worldliness, a mole pretending to have an eagle’s eye, declared that to be impossible which it could not see the way to bring about, and thereby exposed only its own blind arrogance.

III. Elisha’s answer [2Ki. 7:2] sounds like Elijah. The utmost gentleness is stirred to pronounce condemnation on self-confident unbelief, and a gentler gentleness than Elisha’s, even Christ’s, shrinks not from executing the sentence. Is not the sentence on this scoffing lord the very sentence pronounced ever on unbelief? In his case, it was fulfilled by the crowd that pressed, in their ravenous hunger, through the gate, and trod him down; but in ordinary cases, in our days, the natural operation of unbelief is to shut men out from the fruition, of which faith is the necessary and only condition. It is no avenging and arbitrarily imposed exclusion, but the necessary result of self-made disqualification, which brings on the unbeliever the doom, ‘Thou shalt not eat thereof.’ The blessings of the religious life on earth, and the glories of its perfection in heaven, are only enjoyable through faith. These are not so plainly visible to the unbelieving heart as the scene at the gate was to the nobleman; but, in some measure, even those who do not possess them do, in some lucid moments, see their worth. It is one sad part of the sad lives of godless men that they have their seasons of calm weather, when, in the clearer atmosphere, they catch glimpses of their true good, but that they yet do not behold it long and close enough to be smitten with the desire to possess it; and so the sight remains inoperative, or adds to their condemnation. Not to taste is the sadder fate, because there has been sight. To have eyes opened at last to our own folly, and to see the rich provision of God’s table, when it is too late, will be a chief pang of future retribution,-as it sometimes is of present god-lessness.

IV. Passing over for the present the account of the discovery by the four lepers, we may next note God’s way of fulfilling His promise. A panic would spread fast in an undisciplined army, and history supplies examples of the swift change into a mob under the influence of groundless terror. There is nothing wonderful in the helter-skelter rush for the Jordan, or in the road being littered with abandoned baggage. The divine intervention produced the impression which naturally brought the flight about, and the coincidence of the prophecy and the panic which fulfilled it stamp both as divinely originated. But if we looked on events as devoutly, and saw into their true character as deeply as the author of the Books of Kings does, we should see that many a similar coincidence, which we trace no farther than to men or circumstances, was due to the same divine cause which made the Syrians to hear ‘the noise of a great host.’ Track the river of life to its source, and you come to God.

‘The wicked fleeth when no man pursueth.’ Imaginary terrors are apt to beset those who have no trust in God. If we fear Him, we need have no other fear; but if we have not Him for our anchorage, we shall be driven by gusts of passion and terror. The unseen possibilities of attack and defeat may well terrify a man who has not the unseen God to keep him calm.

Windows in heaven, then, were not needed, and the arrogance which said 'Impossible!' had not measured all the resources of God. A very wise scientist here in England proved that the Atlantic could not be crossed by a steamer, and the first steamer that did cross took out copies of his book. How foolish men's demonstrations of impossibility look beside God's deliverances! We have not gone through all the chambers of His storehouse, and 'His ways are far above, out of our sight.' Let us hold fast by the faith that His arm is strong to do whatever His lips are gracious to engage, nor let our inability to see where the river gets through the mountains ever make us doubt that it will reach the sunlit ocean.

V. We may throw together the remaining parts of the incident, as showing how the fulfilled promise was received. These four lepers had heard nothing of it, when despair made them venturesome. How reckless they were, and how they harp on the one gloomy word 'die'! The thought was familiar to them, and yet, lepers though they were, life was sweet, and a chance of prolonging it, even as slaves, was worth trying. They chose twilight, that they might be unobserved. We can see them creeping cautiously, with beating hearts, towards the camp, expecting every moment to be challenged, and possibly slain. How their caution would diminish and their wonder grow, as they passed from end to end, and found no one! There stood the horses and asses, left behind lest their footfalls should betray the flight, and every tent empty of men and full of spoil. The lepers seem to have gone right through the camp before they ventured to begin plundering; for the 'uttermost part' in 2Ki. 7:5 and that in 2Ki. 7:8 are naturally understood of its opposite extremities. Then, secure against surprise, they eat and drink as ravenously as men who had been starving so long would do. Twilight had deepened into darkness before hunger and greed were satisfied. Not till then did they awake to their duty; and even when they bethink themselves, it is fear of punishment, not care for a city full of hungry men, that moves them. But their tardy awaking to duty is couched in words which carry a great truth, especially to all who have tasted the Bread of Life. It is 'not well' to 'hold our peace' in 'a day of good tidings.' If we have good news, especially *the* good news, its possession obliges us to impart it. If we have tasted the graciousness of the Lord, we are bound to tell of the stores we have found. 'He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him.’ ‘Of how much sorer punishment. . .shall he be thought worthy,’ who keeps to himself the food of the world?

Lepers were strange messengers of good, but the message graces the bringer, and they who tell good tidings are sure of a welcome. God does not choose great men for the heralds of His mercy, but the qualification is personal experience. These four could only say, ‘We have seen and tasted,’ but that was enough. The king’s caution was very natural, and would have been quite blameless, if God’s promise had not been spoken the day before. But that made the slowness to believe a sin. Feeling one’s way over untried ice is prudent; but if we have previously been told that it will bear, it proves our distrust of him who told us. The despatch of the chariots to make a reconnaissance was needless trouble. But men are always apt to think that faith is but a shaky ground of certitude unless it be backed up by sense. When God gives us His word to trust to, we are wisest if we trust to it alone, and we may save ourselves the trouble of sending out scouts to see if it is really beginning to be fulfilled. Elisha had no need to wait the report of the charioteers before he believed in the fulfilment of the promise, which others had found incredible when spoken, and too good to be true even when fulfilled. Let us trust God, whether sense can attest the incipient accomplishment of His words or no.

11)2 Kings 7:9

2 Kings

‘IMPOSSIBLE,-ONLY I SAW IT’

SILENT CHRISTIANS

2Ki. 7:9.

The city of Samaria was closely besieged, and suffering all the horrors of famine. Women were boiling and eating their children, and the most revolting garbage was worth its weight in silver. Four starving lepers, sitting by the gate, plucked up courage from the extremity of their distress, and looking in each other’s bloodshot eyes, whispered one to another, with their hoarse voices: ‘If we say we will enter into the city, then the famine is in the city, and we shall die there; and if we sit still here we die also. Now therefore come, and let us fall unto the host of the Syrians; if they save us alive we shall live; and if they kill us we shall but die.' So in the twilight they stole away. As they come near the camp there is a strange silence; no guards, no stir. They creep to the first tent and find it empty; and then another, and another, and another, till at last it admits of no doubt that certainly the enemy has gone, leaving all his baggage behind him, So for awhile they feast and plunder-small blame to them! And then conscience wakes, and the same thought occurs to each of them: 'This is not patriotic; this is scarcely human; it is a shame for us to be sitting here gorging ourselves whilst a city is starving within a stone's-throw.' So they say one to another in the words of my text.

Now these men's consciousness of the obligation imposed upon them by the knowledge of glad news, their self-reproach for their silence, their conviction that retribution would fall on them if it continued, and their resolve therefore to clear themselves, may all be transferred to higher regions, and may fairly illustrate Christian responsibilities and duties.

I wish to say one or two very homely, plain things about Christian men's obligation to speech, and the sin of their silence. My remarks will have no special reference to any particular forms of Christian activity, but if I succeed in impressing on any a deeper sense of duty in reference to declaring the Gospel than they possess, then all forms of it will be prosecuted with greater vigour and consecration.

I. I wish first to dwell for a moment on that-I was going to use a plain word and say-*hideous*; I will substitute a milder term, and say-*remarkable*, fact of Christian silence.

I take this congregation as a fair average representative of the ordinary habitudes of professing Christians of this generation. How many men and women there are sitting in these pews, who, if I asked them the question, would say that they were Christians? and what proportion of these, if I asked them the further question, 'Did you ever tell anybody anything about Jesus Christ?' would say, 'No, never!' I know this, that in regard to all the recognised and associated forms of Christian work which cluster round a Christian congregation, it is the same handful of people that do them all. It is just like the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope, there are not many of them though you can shake them up into a great number of patterns, but they are always the very same bits. So I could go through pew after pew, if it would not be very personal, and find men and women, one after another-rows of them -that, so far as any of the united work of a church goes, are absolutely idle. They are worthy kind of people, too, with some real religion in them; but yet, partly from shyness, partly from indolence, partly because [as they think] they have so much else to do, and for a number of other reasons that I do not need to dwell upon, they fall into the great army of idlers, and are just so much dead weight and surplusage, as far as the work of the Church is concerned.

Now I do not mean to say that, because professing Christian people do not work in any recognised forms of Christian service which are attached to a congregation, therefore they are not doing anything. God forbid! There are many of you, for instance, mothers of families, whose best service is to speak about Jesus Christ to your children, and to live according as you speak, and that is work enough for you. There are many more of us, who, for various legitimate reasons, are precluded from taking part in organised forms of Christian service. Do not so fatally misunderstand me as to suppose that I am merely beating a drum to get recruits for societies. What I want to impress upon every Christian person listening to me now is simply this, the anomaly of the fact, if it be a fact, that you are a *dumb* Christian. You can all speak, if you will; you all have people with whom your speech is weighty and powerful. There are doors open before each of you. Ask yourselves, have you gone in at the open doors? or is it true about you that you have never felt the obligation to make your Master known to others, or, at all events, have never felt it so strongly that it compelled you to obey? The strange fact of Christian silence is one that I emphasise to begin with.

II. Let me say a word next about the sin of this silence.

These four poor lepers had not had much kindness dealt out to them in their lives, and they might have been pardoned if in their moment of joy they had remained in the isolation to which they had been condemned by reason of their disease. But they think to themselves of the hollow eyes in Samaria there, and the hideous meals, that might stay hunger but brought no nourishment, and of the king with sackcloth beneath his royal robes, and, forgetting everything but their abundance and these people's empty stomachs, they say, '*Not thus* must we do,' as the Hebrew might be translated, 'this is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace; and that is a sin. And if we continue dumb, then before morning some kind of punishment will come down upon us.'

Now, let me put what I have to say on this matter into two sentences.

First of all, I say that such silence is inhuman. You would all recognise that in the case of an actual, literal, instead of a metaphorical, famine. What would you say about a man who contented himself with sitting in his own back room, where nobody could see his abundance, and feasting to the full, whilst his fellow-citizens were dying of starvation? Why! you would say he was a brute. And if Christian people believed as thoroughly that men and women without 'the Bread of God which comes down from Heaven' were starving and dying of hunger, as they believe that men without literal bread must die, there would not be so many dumb ones amongst them; and they would feel more distinctly than any of us feel now, the responsibility that is laid upon them, and the inhumanity of the sin.

Dear brethren! God has made this strange brotherhood of humanity in which we live, all intertwined and intertangled together, mainly in order that there may be scope for brotherly impartation to the needy, of the gifts that each possesses. And He has given to each of us something or other which, by the very terms of the gift and the purpose of the bestowment, we are bound to impart to others. The meaning of our being born into the brotherhood of humanity is that God's grace, in some shape or other, may fructify through us to all; and I say that the man who possesses any kind of gift, and, especially, God's highest gifts of wisdom and of knowledge, and most of all, the highest gift of spiritual knowledge and moral and religious truth, and keeps them to himself, in his idleness is sinfully active, and in his selfishness is inhuman and cruel. The very constitution of humanity says to us that 'we do not well,' if in the 'day of good tidings' of any sort 'we hold our peace.' The possession of mere physical or abstract truth does not turn its possessors into its apostles, but the possession of moral and spiritual truth does. We are, every one of us, responsible for all the eyes which we could have opened and which are still dark, and for every soul that gropes in ignorance, if we possess something that would enlighten its darkness.

But then, further, let me say that this sin of silence is in sheer contradiction of every principle of Christianity. Why has God given you His grace, do you suppose? For what purpose comes it that you are Christians? Were you converted that you might go by yourselves into a solitary heaven, do you think? Are you important enough to be an ultimate end of God's mercy? Or are you indeed an end, but only that in your turn you might be a means of transmitting? Does the electric influence terminate when it reaches you, or is it turned on to you that from you it may be passed to others? The very purpose of the existence of a Christian Church is counterworked and thwarted by dumb Christians. We Nonconformists can talk abundantly when ecclesiastical assumptions have to be fought against, about the priesthood of all believers. Very well, if that principle is a true one-and it *is* a true one-it has other applications than simply controversial, and is meant for other uses than simply that you should brandish it in the face of sacerdotal claims and priest-ridden churches. 'Ye are all priests,' that is to say, the meaning of the existence of a Christian Church is to raise up a cloud of witnesses, and make every lip vocal with the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. And you, dear brethren, you, the idlers of a church and congregation, are doing all that you can to thwart the divine purpose, and to destroy the very meaning of the existence of the church to which you belong.

And let me remind you, too, that such silence is clearly contrary to all Christian principle, inasmuch as one main purpose of the Gospel being given us is to shift our centre from ourselves, first to Christ, and then, if I may so say, to others. The very thing from which Christianity is meant to deliver us is the very thing that these idle, silent believers are indulging in, namely, the possession of God's gifts for their own profit and enjoyment. What is the use of your saying that you are Christian people if, in your very religion, you are practising the very vice that Jesus Christ has come to destroy? Selfishness is the opposite, the formal contradiction, of Christianity, and in the measure in which your religion is self-regarding, it is no religion at all. You are doing your best to counterwork the very main purpose of the Gospel upon yourselves, when in silence you possess, or fancy that you possess, the gift of His love.

And then, still further, let me remind you that this absolutely un-Christian character of silence is manifested, if you consider that the end of the Gospel for each of us is to bring us into full and happy sympathy with Christ, and likeness to Him. And how is that purpose being effected in His professed 'followers,' if they know nothing of the experience of looking on the world with Christ's eyes, or of the thrill of pity caught from Him, and have no sympathy with, in the sense of any reflected experience of, the sense of obligation to help the helpless which nailed Him to the Cross? We say that we are followers of One who 'so loved the world' that He died for it; we say that we long to be transformed into His likeness, and yet we put away from ourselves the spirit that regards our brethren as He regarded us all; and never dream of copying, howsoever feebly in our lives and efforts, the pattern that was set before us in His death.

O dear brethren! 'if a man see his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion against him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?' And if a Christian looks upon a world without Christ, and has only a tepid sympathy and a faint realisation of the misery, and never does anything to lighten it by a grain, how can he pretend that he takes Jesus Christ for his Pattern and Example? Silence is manifestly a sin by reason of its inhumanity, and its contrariety to every principle of the Gospel.

III. Now, still further, let me point you to the retribution on silence.

These four men, no doubt, had some superstitious idea that mischief might come to them in the darkness. But they expressed a truth when they said, 'If we be silent, some evil'-or, as the word might be translated, 'some *punishment* will find us.' I desire to lay this on your hearts, dear brethren, that like all other selfish things, the silence of the Christian does him harm instead of good.

For instance, if you want to learn anything, set yourself to teach it. In trying to spread the name of Jesus Christ by your own personal effort, you will get a firmer hold of the truths that you attempt to impress upon others. I do not know any better cure for a great deal of unwholesome and superfluous speculation than to go into the slums and see what it is that tells there. That is a test of what is central and what is surface, in Christianity. I do not know any better discipline for a man whose religion is suffering from too much leisure and curiosity than to take a course of evangelistic work. He will find out then where the power is, and a great many cobwebs will be blown away. Be sure of this, that convictions unspoken, like plants grown in a cellar, will get very white in the stems, and will bear no fruit. Be sure of this, that a religion which is dumb will very soon tend to lose its possession of the truth, and that if you carry that great gift hid away in your heart it will be like locking up some singing-bird in a box. When you come to open it, the bird will be dead. There are, I have no doubt, many whom I am now addressing whose religion has all but, if not entirely, ebbed away from them, mainly because they have all their days been dumb Christians. That is one part of the punishment.

And another part is that silence is avenged by the dying out of the sympathies which inspire speech. It is the punishment of the selfish man that he becomes more selfish. It is the punishment of the heart, which never expands in sympathy, that its walls shrivel and contract, until there is scarcely blood enough between them to be impelled through the veins. Feelings which it is joy and nobleness to possess are nurtured and strengthened by expression; and the silent Christian is punished by becoming at last utterly indifferent to the woes of the world and to the spread of the Gospel. I think I could lay my finger, if I dared, on some of my audience who have got perilously near to that point.

And then again let me remind you that there is another form of the punishment, and that is the loss of all the blessed experience of the reaper’s joy; and let me point you in a sentence to the final time of retribution. There shall stand in that last day, as Scripture teaches us, humble workers before the Throne who will say, ‘Behold! I, and the children whom Thou hast given me.’ And there will stand some before the Throne, solitary; and I wonder if they will not feel lonely when they go into heaven, and find not a soul there to look them in the eyes and say, ‘Thou didst lead me to the Christ, and I am here to welcome thee.’ ‘He that soweth and he that reapeth shall rejoice together.’ Do you not think that then there will steal a shadow of shame across the spirit of the servant who stood idle in the market-place all the day with the wretched excuse, ‘No man hath hired me,’ when the Master had hired him beforehand, and given him such wages in advance?

O dear brethren! the cure for silence is to keep near that Master, and to drink in His Spirit; and then, as I beseech you to do, think, think, think of your obligations in the light of the Cross until you can say, ‘Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints is this *grace given*,’ not this burden imposed, ‘that I, even I, should preach’ the Name that is above every name. ‘Open Thou my lips, and my mouth *shall* shew forth Thy praise.’

12)2 Kings 7:10-16

2 Kings

‘IMPOSSIBLE,-ONLY I SAW IT’

2Ki. 7:1 - 2Ki. 7:16.

The keynote of this incident lies in the promise in the first verse. The whole story illustrates man’s too frequent rejection of God’s promise, and God’s wonderful way of fulfilling it.

I. We note first the promise which common-sense finds incredible. It came from Elisha when all seemed desperate. The wonderfully vivid narrative in the previous chapter tells a pitiful tale of women boiling their children, of unclean food worth more than its weight in silver, of a king worked up to a pitch of frenzy and murderous designs, and renouncing his allegiance to Jehovah. Such faith as he had was strained to the breaking point, and his messenger was sent to tell the prophet that the king would not ‘wait for the Lord any longer.’ That was the moment chosen to speak the promise. It came, as God’s helps, both of promise and act, so often come, at the very nick of time, when faith is ready to fail and human aid is vain. Before we had learned our hopeless state, they would come too soon for our good; after faith had wholly parted from its moorings, they would come too late.

Note the precision and confidence of the promise. The hour of the fulfilment, and the price of flour and the cheaper barley are stated. Man’s promises are vague; God’s are specific. Mark, too, the entire silence of the promise as to the mode of its fulfilment. Probably Elisha knew as little as any one, how it was going to be accomplished. The particularity and vagueness combined are remarkable. A hint as to how the thing was to be done would have made the belief in the fact so much easier. Yes, and just because it would have smoothed the road for worthless belief, it was not given, but the apparently impossible promise was left in nakedness, for any one who needed sense to animate his faith, to scoff at. Is not that emphatic assertion of the fact, and emphatic silence as to the ‘how,’ a frequent characteristic of God’s promises? If ever we are kept in the dark as to the latter, it is for our good, and for the encouragement of our growth in utter dependence and perfect trust. It is not well for the trusting soul to ask too curiously about methods intervening between the promise in the present and its accomplishment in the future. It is better for peace and the simplicity of our trust, that we should be content to cling to the faithful word, and to ‘believe. . . that it shall be even as it was told’ us, without troubling ourselves about His way of effecting His purposes. Passengers are not admitted to the engine-room, nor allowed on the bridge. Let them leave all the working of the ship to the captain.

II. The noble who blurted out his incredulity had a great deal to say for himself from the common-sense and worldly point of view. But he need not have sneered, in the same breath, at old miracles and new. His sarcasm about ‘windows in heaven’ refers to the story of the flood; and perhaps there is a hint of allusion to the manna. He neither believed these ancient deeds, nor the promise for to-morrow. Why not? Simply because he-wise as he thought himself-could not see any way of bringing it about. There are many of us yet who have the same modest opinion of our own acuteness, and go on the supposition that what we do not see is invisible, and what we cannot do, or imagine done, is impossible. Why should not the Lord ‘make windows in heaven’ if He please? Or, how does the pert objector know that that is the only way of fulfilling the promise? He will be taught that he has not quite exhausted all the possibilities open to Omnipotence, and that something much simpler than windows in heaven can do what is wanted. Unbelief which rejects God’s plain promises because it does not see how they can be fulfilled is common enough still, and is as unreasonable as it is impertinent. Elisha was as ignorant as this nobleman was, of the means, but his faith fixed its eyes on the faithful word, and trusted, while sense, self-conceit, and worldliness, a mole pretending to have an eagle's eye, declared that to be impossible which it could not see the way to bring about, and thereby exposed only its own blind arrogance.

III. Elisha's answer [2Ki. 7:2] sounds like Elijah. The utmost gentleness is stirred to pronounce condemnation on self-confident unbelief, and a gentler gentleness than Elisha's, even Christ's, shrinks not from executing the sentence. Is not the sentence on this scoffing lord the very sentence pronounced ever on unbelief? In his case, it was fulfilled by the crowd that pressed, in their ravenous hunger, through the gate, and trod him down; but in ordinary cases, in our days, the natural operation of unbelief is to shut men out from the fruition, of which faith is the necessary and only condition. It is no avenging and arbitrarily imposed exclusion, but the necessary result of self-made disqualification, which brings on the unbeliever the doom, 'Thou shalt not eat thereof.' The blessings of the religious life on earth, and the glories of its perfection in heaven, are only enjoyable through faith. These are not so plainly visible to the unbelieving heart as the scene at the gate was to the nobleman; but, in some measure, even those who do not possess them do, in some lucid moments, see their worth. It is one sad part of the sad lives of godless men that they have their seasons of calm weather, when, in the clearer atmosphere, they catch glimpses of their true good, but that they yet do not behold it long and close enough to be smitten with the desire to possess it; and so the sight remains inoperative, or adds to their condemnation. Not to taste is the sadder fate, because there has been sight. To have eyes opened at last to our own folly, and to see the rich provision of God's table, when it is too late, will be a chief pang of future retribution,-as it sometimes is of present god-lessness.

IV. Passing over for the present the account of the discovery by the four lepers, we may next note God's way of fulfilling His promise. A panic would spread fast in an undisciplined army, and history supplies examples of the swift change into a mob under the influence of groundless terror. There is nothing wonderful in the helter-skelter rush for the Jordan, or in the road being littered with abandoned baggage. The divine intervention produced the impression which naturally brought the flight about, and the coincidence of the prophecy and the panic which fulfilled it stamp both as divinely originated. But if we looked on events as devoutly, and saw into their true character as deeply as the author of the Books of Kings does, we should see that many a similar coincidence, which we trace no farther than to men or circumstances, was due to the same divine cause which made the Syrians to hear ‘the noise of a great host.’ Track the river of life to its source, and you come to God.

‘The wicked fleeth when no man pursueth.’ Imaginary terrors are apt to beset those who have no trust in God. If we fear Him, we need have no other fear; but if we have not Him for our anchorage, we shall be driven by gusts of passion and terror. The unseen possibilities of attack and defeat may well terrify a man who has not the unseen God to keep him calm.

Windows in heaven, then, were not needed, and the arrogance which said ‘Impossible!’ had not measured all the resources of God. A very wise scientist here in England proved that the Atlantic could not be crossed by a steamer, and the first steamer that did cross took out copies of his book. How foolish men’s demonstrations of impossibility look beside God’s deliverances! We have not gone through all the chambers of His storehouse, and ‘His ways are far above, out of our sight.’ Let us hold fast by the faith that His arm is strong to do whatever His lips are gracious to engage, nor let our inability to see where the river gets through the mountains ever make us doubt that it will reach the sunlit ocean.

V. We may throw together the remaining parts of the incident, as showing how the fulfilled promise was received. These four lepers had heard nothing of it, when despair made them venturesome. How reckless they were, and how they harp on the one gloomy word ‘die’! The thought was familiar to them, and yet, lepers though they were, life was sweet, and a chance of prolonging it, even as slaves, was worth trying. They chose twilight, that they might be unobserved. We can see them creeping cautiously, with beating hearts, towards the camp, expecting every moment to be challenged, and possibly slain. How their caution would diminish and their wonder grow, as they passed from end to end, and found no one! There stood the horses and asses, left behind lest their footfalls should betray the flight, and every tent empty of men and full of spoil. The lepers seem to have gone right through the camp before they ventured to begin plundering;

for the ‘uttermost part’ in 2Ki. 7:5 and that in 2Ki. 7:8 are naturally understood of its opposite extremities. Then, secure against surprise, they eat and drink as ravenously as men who had been starving so long would do. Twilight had deepened into darkness before hunger and greed were satisfied. Not till then did they awake to their duty; and even when they bethink themselves, it is fear of punishment, not care for a city full of hungry men, that moves them. But their tardy awaking to duty is couched in words which carry a great truth, especially to all who have tasted the Bread of Life. It is ‘not well’ to ‘hold our peace’ in ‘a day of good tidings.’ If we have good news, especially *the* good news, its possession obliges us to impart it. If we have tasted the graciousness of the Lord, we are bound to tell of the stores we have found. ‘He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him.’ ‘Of how much sorer punishment. . .shall he be thought worthy,’ who keeps to himself the food of the world?

Lepers were strange messengers of good, but the message graces the bringer, and they who tell good tidings are sure of a welcome. God does not choose great men for the heralds of His mercy, but the qualification is personal experience. These four could only say, ‘We have seen and tasted,’ but that was enough. The king’s caution was very natural, and would have been quite blameless, if God’s promise had not been spoken the day before. But that made the slowness to believe a sin. Feeling one’s way over untried ice is prudent; but if we have previously been told that it will bear, it proves our distrust of him who told us. The despatch of the chariots to make a reconnaissance was needless trouble. But men are always apt to think that faith is but a shaky ground of certitude unless it be backed up by sense. When God gives us His word to trust to, we are wisest if we trust to it alone, and we may save ourselves the trouble of sending out scouts to see if it is really beginning to be fulfilled. Elisha had no need to wait the report of the charioteers before he believed in the fulfilment of the promise, which others had found incredible when spoken, and too good to be true even when fulfilled. Let us trust God, whether sense can attest the incipient accomplishment of His words or no.

13)2 Kings 8:9-15

THE STORY OF HAZAEL

2Ki. 8:9 - 2Ki. 8:15.

This is a strange, wild story. That Damascene monarchy burst into sudden power, warlike and commercial-for the two things went together in those days. As is usually the case, Hazael the successful soldier becomes ambitious. His sword seems to be the real sceptre, and he will have the dominion. Many years before this Elijah had anointed him to be king over Syria. That had wrought upon him and stirred ambition in him. Elijah’s other appointments, coeval with his own, had already taken effect, Jehu was king of Israel, Elisha was prophet, and he only had not attained the dignity to which he had been designated.

He comes now with his message from the king of Damascus to Elisha. No doubt he had been often contrasting his own vigour with the decrepit, nominal king, and many a time had thought of the anointing, and had nursed ambitious hopes, which gradually turned to dark resolves.

He hoped, no doubt, that Ben-hadad was mortally sick, and it must have been a cruel, crushing disappointment when he heard that there was nothing deadly in the illness. Another hope was gone from him. The throne seemed further off than ever. I suppose that, at that instant, there sprang in his heart the resolve that he would kill Ben-hadad. The recoil of disappointment spurred Hazael to the resolution which he then and there took. It had been gathering form, no doubt, through some years, but now it became definite and settled. While his face glowed with the new determination, and his lips clenched themselves in the firmness of his purpose, the even voice of the prophet went on, ‘howbeit he shall certainly die,’ and the eye of the man of God searched him till he turned away ashamed because aware that his inmost heart was read.

Then there followed the prophet’s weeping, and the solemn announcement of what Hazael would do when he had climbed to the throne. He shrank in real horror from the thought of such enormity of sin. ‘Is thy servant a dog that he should do such a thing?’ Elisha sternly answers: ‘The Lord hath shewed me that thou shalt be king over Syria.’ The certainty is that in his character occasion will develop evil. The certainty is that a course begun by such crime will be of a piece, and consistent with itself.

This conversation with Elisha seems to have accelerated Hazael’s purpose, as if the prediction were to his mind a justification of his means of fulfilling it.

How like Macbeth he is!-the successful soldier, stirred by supernatural monitions of a greatness which he should achieve, and at last a murderer.

This narrative opens to us some of the solemn, dark places of human life, of men’s hearts, of God’s ways. Let us look at some of the lessons which lie here.

I. Man’s responsibility for the sin which God foresees.

It seems as if the prophet’s words had much to do in exciting the ambitious desires which led to the crime. Hazael’s purpose of executing the deed is clearly known to the prophet. His ascending the throne is part of the divine purpose. He could find excuses for his guilt, and fling the responsibility for firing his ambition on the divine messenger. It may be asked-What sort of God is this who works on the mind of a man by exciting promises, and having done so, and having it fixed in His purposes that the man is to do the crime, yet treats it when done as guilt?

But now, whatever you may say, or whatever excuses Hazael might have found for himself, here is just in its most naked form that which is true about all sin. God foresees it all. God puts men into circumstances where they will fall, God presents to them things which they will make temptations. God takes the consequences of their wrongdoing and works them into His great scheme. That is undeniable on one side, and on the other it is as undeniable that God’s foreseeing leaves men free. God’s putting men into circumstances where they fall is not His tempting them. God’s non-prevention of sin is not permission to sin. God’s overruling the consequences of sin is not His condoning of sin as part of the scheme of His providence.

Man is free. Man is responsible. God hates sin. God foresees and permits sin.

It is all a terrible mystery, but the facts are as undeniable as the mystery of their co-existence is inscrutable.

II. The slumbering possibilities of sin.

Hazael indignantly protests against the thought that he should do such a thing. There is conscience left in him yet. His example suggests how little any of us know what it is in us to be or to do. We are all of us a mystery to ourselves. Slumbering powers lie in us. We are like quiescent volcanoes.

So much in us lies dormant, needing occasion for its development, like seeds that may sleep for centuries. That is true in regard to both the good and the bad in us. Life reveals us to ourselves. We learn to know ourselves by our actions, better than by mental self-inspection.

All sin is one in essence, and may pass into diverse forms according to circumstances. Of course characters differ, but the root of sin is in us all. We are largely good because not tempted, as a house may well stand firm when there are no floods. By the nature of the case, thorough self-knowledge is impossible.

Sin has the power of blinding us to its presence. It comes in a cloud as the old gods were fabled to do. The lungs get accustomed to a vitiated atmosphere, and scarcely are conscious of oppression till they cease to play.

All this should teach us-

Lessons of wary walking and humility. We are good because we have not been tried.

Lessons of charity and brotherly kindness. Every thief in the hulks, every prostitute on the streets, is our brother and sister, and they prove their fraternity by their sin. ‘Whatever man has done man may do.’ ‘*Nihil humanum alienum a me puto.*’ ‘Let him that is without sin cast the first stone.’

III. The fatal necessity by which sin repeats itself in aggravated forms.

See how Hazael is drifted into his worst crimes. His first one leads on by fell necessity to others. A man who has done no sin is conceivable, but a man who has done only one is impossible. Did you ever see a dam bursting or breaking down? Through a little crack comes one drop: will it stop there-the gap or the trickle? No! The drop has widened the crack, it has softened the earth around, it has cleared away some impediments. So another and another follow ever more rapidly, until the water pours out in a flood and the retaining embankment is swept away.

No sin ‘is dead, being alone.’ The demon brings seven other devils worse than himself. The reason for that aggravation is plain.

There is, first, habit.

There is, second, growing inclination.

There is, third, weakened restraint.

There is, fourth, a craving for excitement to still conscience.

There is, fifth, the necessity of the man’s position.

There is, sixth, the strange love of consistency which tones all life down or up to one tint, as near as may be. There comes at last despair.

But not merely does every sin tend to repeat itself and to draw others after it. It tends to repeat itself in aggravated forms. There is growth, the law of increase as well as of perpetuity. The seed produces ‘some sixty and some an hundredfold.’

And so the slaughtered soldiers and desolated homesteads of Israel were the sequel of the cloth on Ben-hadad’s face. The secret of much enormous crime is the kind of relief from conscience which is found in committing a yet greater sin. The Furies drive with whips of scorpions, and the poor wretch goes plunging and kicking deeper and deeper in the mire, further and farther from the path. So you can never say: ‘I will only do this one wrong thing.’

We see here how powerless against sin are all restraints. The prophecy did not prevent Hazael from his sins. The clear sense that they were sins did not prevent him. The horror-struck shudder of conscience did not prevent him. It was soon gagged.

Hear, then, the conclusion of the whole matter. Christ reveals us to ourselves. Christ breaks the chain of sin, makes a new beginning, cuts off the entail, reverses the irreversible, erases the indelible, cancels the irrevocable, forgives all the faultful past, and by the power of His love in the soul, works a mightier miracle than changing the Ethiopian’s skin; teaches them that are accustomed to evil to do well, and though sins be as scarlet, makes them white as snow. He gives us a cleansed past and a bright future, and out of all our sins and wasted years makes pardoned sinners and glorified, perfected saints.

14)2 Kings 10:18-31

2 Kings

IMPURE ZEAL

2Ki. 10:18 - 2Ki. 10:31.

The details of this story of bloodshed need little elucidation. Jehu had ‘driven furiously’ to some purpose. Secrecy and swiftness joined to unhesitating severity had crushed the dynasty of Ahab, which fell unlamented and unsupported, as if lightning-struck. The nobler elements had gathered to Jehu, as represented by the Rechabite, Jehonadab, evidently a Jehovah worshipper, and closely associated with the fierce soldier in this chapter. Jehu first secured his position, and then smote the Baal worship as heavily and conclusively as he had done the royal family. He struck once, and struck no more; for the single blow pulverised.

The audacious pretext of an intention to outdo the fallen dynasty in Baal worship must have sounded strange to those who knew how his massacre of

Ahab’s house had been represented by him as fulfilling Jehovah’s purpose, but it was not too gross to be believed. So we can fancy the joyous revival of hope with which from every corner of the land the Baal priests, prophets, and worshippers, recovered from their fright, came flocking to the great temple in Samaria, till it was like a cup filled with wine from brim to brim. The worship cannot have numbered many adherents if one temple could hold the bulk of them. Probably it had never been more than a court fashion, and, now that Jezebel was dead, had lost ground. A token of royal favour was given to each of the crowd, in the gift of a vestment from the royal wardrobe. Then Jehu himself, accompanied by the ascetic Jehonadab, entered the court of the temple, a strangely assorted pair, and a couple of very ‘distinguished’ converts. The Baal priests would thrill with gratified pride when these two came to worship. The usual precautions against the intrusion of non-worshippers were taken at Jehu’s command, but with a sinister meaning, undreamed of by the eager searchers. That was a sifting for destruction, not for preservation. So they all passed into the inner court to offer sacrifice.

The story gives a double picture in 2Ki. 10:24. Within are the jubilant worshippers; without, the grim company of their executioners, waiting the signal to draw their swords and burst in on the unarmed mob. Jehu carried his deception so far that he himself offered the burnt offering, with Jehonadab standing by, and then withdrew, followed, no doubt, by grateful acclamations. A step or two brought him to the ‘eighty men without.’ Two stern words, ‘Go, smite them,’ are enough. They storm in, and ‘the songs of the temple’ are turned to ‘howlings in that day.’ The defenceless, surprised crowd, huddled together in the dimly lighted shrine, were massacred to a man. The innermost sanctuary was then wrecked, corpses and statues thrown pell-mell into the outer courts or beyond the precincts, fires lit to burn the abominations, and busy hands, always more ready for pillage and destruction than for good work, pulled down the temple, the ruins of which were turned to base uses. The writer, picturing the wild scene, sums up with a touch of exultation: ‘Thus Jehu destroyed Baal out of Israel’-where note the emphatic prominence of the three names of the king, the god, and the nation. That is the vindication of the terrible deed.

Now the main interest of this passage lies in its disclosure of the strangely mingled character of Jehu, and in the fact that his bloody severity was approved by God, and rewarded by the continuance of his dynasty for a longer time than any other on the throne of Israel.

Jehu was influenced by ‘zeal for the Lord,’ however much smoke mingled with the flame. He acted under the conviction that he was God’s instrument, and at each new deed of blood asserted his fulfilment of prophecy. His profession to Jehonadab [2Ki. 10:16] was not hypocrisy nor ostentation. The Rechabite sheikh was evidently a man of mark, and apparently one of the leaders of those who had not ‘bowed the knee to Baal’; and Jehu’s disclosure of his animating motive was meant to secure the alliance of that party through one of its chiefs. No doubt many elements of selfishness and many stains mingled with Jehu’s zeal. It was much on the same level as the fanaticism of the immediate successors of Mohammed; but, low as it was, look at its power. Jehu swept like a whirlwind, or like leaping fire among stubble, from Ramoth to Jezreel, from Jezreel to Samaria, and nothing stood before his fierce onset. Promptitude, decision, secrecy,-the qualities which carry enterprises to success-marked his character; partly, no doubt, from natural temperament, for God chooses right instruments, but from temperament heightened and invigorated by the conviction of being the instrument whom God had chosen. We may learn how even a very imperfect form of this conviction gives irresistible force to a man, annihilates fear, draws the teeth of danger, and gathers up all one’s faculties to a point which can pierce any opposition. We may all recognise that God has sent us on His errands; and if we cherish that conviction, we shall put away from us slothfulness and fear, and out of weakness shall be made strong.

But Jehu sets forth the possible imperfections of ‘zeal for the Lord.’ We may defer for a moment the consideration of the morality of his slaughter of the royal house and the Baal worshippers, and point to the taint of selfishness and to the leaven of deceit in his enthusiasm. We have not to analyse it. That is God’s work. But clearly the object which he had in view was not merely fulfilment of prophecy, but securing the throne; and there was more passion, as well as selfish policy, in his massacres, than befitted a minister of the divine justice, who should let no anger disturb the solemnity of his terrible task. Such dangers ever attend the path of the great men who feel themselves to be sent by God. In our humbler lives they dog our steps, and religious fervour needs ever to keep careful watch on itself, lest it should degenerate unconsciously into self-will, and should allow the muddy stream of earth-born passion to darken its crystal waters.

Many a great name in the annals of the Church has fallen before that temptation. We all need to remember that ‘the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God,’ and to take heed lest we should be guided by our own stormy impatience of contradiction, and by a determination to have our own way, while we think ourselves the humble instruments of a divine purpose. There was a ‘Zelotes’ in the Apostolate; but the coarse, sanguinary ‘zeal’ of his party must have needed much purifying before it learned what manner of spirit the zeal of a true disciple was of.

Another point of interest is the divine emphatic approval of Jehu's bloody acts [2Ki. 10:30]. The massacre of the Baal worshippers is not included in the acts which God declares to have been 'according to all that was in Mine heart,' and it may be argued that it was not part of Jehu's commission. Certainly the accompanying deceit was not 'right in God's eyes,' but the slaughter in Baal's temple was the natural sequel of the civil revolution, and is most probably included in the deeds approved.

Perhaps Elisha brought Jehu the message in 2Ki. 10:30. If so, what a contrast between the two instruments of God's purposes! At all events, Jehovah's approval was distinctly given. What then? There need be no hesitation in recognising the progressive character of Scripture morality, as well as the growth of the revelation of the divine character, of which the morality of each epoch is the reflection. The full revelation of the God of love had to be preceded by the clear revelation of the God of righteousness; and whilst the Old Testament does make known the love of God in many a gracious act and word, it especially teaches His righteous condemnation of sin, without which His love were mere facile indulgence and impunity. The slaughter of that wicked house of Ahab and of the Baal priests was the act of divine justice, and the question is simply whether that justice was entitled to slay them. To that question believers in a divine providence can give but one answer. The destruction of Baal worship and the annihilation of its stronghold in Ahab's family were sufficient reasons, as even we can see, for such a deed. To bring in Jehu into the problem is unnecessary. He was the sword, but God's was the hand that struck. It is not for men to arraign the Lord of life and death for His methods and times of sending death to evil-doers. Granted that the 'long-suffering' which is 'not willing that any should perish' speaks more powerfully to our hearts than the justice which smites with death, the later and more blessed revelation is possible and precious only on the foundation of the former. Nor will a loose-braced generation like ours, which affects to be horrified at the thought of the 'wrath of God,' and recoils from the contemplation of His judgments, ever reach the innermost secrets of the tenderness of His love.

From the merely human point of view, we may say that revolutions are not made with rose-water, and that, at all crises in a nation's history, when some ancient evil is to be thrown off, and some powerful system is to be crushed, there will be violence, at which easy-going people, who have never passed through like times, will hold up their hands in horror and with cheap censure. No doubt we have a higher law than Jehu knew, and Christ has put His own gentle commandment of love in the place of what was ‘said to them of old time.’ But let us, while we obey it for ourselves, and abjure violence and blood, judge the men of old ‘according to that which they had, and not according to that which they had not.’ Jehu’s bloody deeds are not held up for admiration. His obedience is what is praised and rewarded. Well for us if we obey our better law as faithfully!

The last point in the story is the imperfection of the obedience of Jehu. He contented himself with rooting out Baal, but left the calves. That shows the impurity of his ‘zeal,’ which flamed only against what it was for his advantage to destroy, and left the more popular and older idolatry undisturbed. Obedience has to be ‘all in all, or not at all.’ We may not ‘compound for sins we are inclined to, by’ zeal against those ‘we have no mind to.’ Our consciences are apt to have insensitive spots in them, like witch-marks. We often think it enough to remove the grosser evils, and leave the less, but white ants will eat up a carcass faster than a lion. Putting away Baal is of little use if we keep the calves at Dan and Beth-el. Nothing but walking in the law of the Lord ‘with all the heart’ will secure our walking safely. ‘Unite my heart to fear Thy name’ needs to be our daily prayer. ‘One foot on sea and one on shore’ is not the attitude in which steadfastness or progress is possible.

15)2 Kings 11:1-16

2 Kings

JEHOIADA AND JOASH

2Ki. 11:1 - 2Ki. 11:16.

The king of Judah has been killed, his alliance with the king of Israel having involved him in the latter’s fate. Jehu had also murdered ‘the brethren of Ahaziah,’ forty-two in number. Next, Athaliah, the mother of

Ahaziah and a daughter of Ahab, killed all the males of the royal family, and planted herself on the throne. She had Jezebel’s force of character, unscrupulousness and disregard of human life. She was a tigress of a woman, and, no doubt, her six year’s usurpation was stained with blood and with the nameless abominations of Baal worship. Never had the kingdom of Judah been at a lower ebb. One infant was all that was left of David’s descendants. The whole promises of God seemed to depend for fulfilment on one little, feeble life. The tree had been cut down, and there was but this one sucker pushing forth a tiny shoot from ‘the root of Jesse.’

We have in the passage, first, the six years of hiding in the temple. It is a pathetic picture, that of the infant rescued by his brave aunt from the blood-bath, and stowed away in the storeroom where the mats and cushions which served for beds were kept when not in use, watched over by two loving and courageous women, and taught infantile lessons by the husband of his aunt, Jehoiada the high priest. Many must have been aware of his existence, and there must have been loyal guarding of the secret, or Athaliah’s sword would have been reddened with the baby’s blood. Like the child Samuel, he had the Temple for his home, and his first impressions would be of daily sacrifices and white-robed priests. It was a better school for him than if he had been in the palace close by. The opening flower would have been soon besmirched there, but in the holy calm of the Temple courts it unfolded unstained. A Christian home should breathe the same atmosphere as surrounded Joash, and it, too, should be a temple, where holy peace rules, and where the first impressions printed on plastic little minds are of God and His service.

We have next the disclosure and coronation of the boy king. The narrative here has to be supplemented from that in 2Ch. 23:1 - 2Ch. 23:21, which does not contradict that in this passage, as is often said, but completes it. It informs us that before the final scene in the Temple, Jehoiada had in Jerusalem assembled a large force of Levites and of the ‘heads of the fathers’ houses’ from all the kingdom. That statement implies that the revolution was mainly religious in its motive, and was national in its extent. Obviously Jehoiada would have been courting destruction for Joash and himself unless he had made sure of a strong backing before he hoisted the standard of the house of David. There must, therefore, have been long preparation and much stir; and all the while the foreign woman was sitting in the palace, close by the Temple, and not a whisper reached her. Evidently she had no party in Judah, and held her own only by her indomitable will and by the help of foreign troops. Anybody who remembers how the Austrians in Italy were shunned, will understand how Athaliah heard nothing of the plot that was rapidly developing a stone's throw from her isolated throne. Strange delusion, to covet such a seat, yet no stranger than many another mistaking of serpents for fish, into which we fall!

Jehoiada's caution was as great as his daring. He does not appear to have given the Levites and elders any inkling of his purpose till he had them safe in the Temple, and then he opened his mind, swore them to stand by him, and 'showed them the king's son.' What a scene that would be-the seven-year-old child there among all these strange men, the joyful surprise flashing in their eyes, the exultation of the faithful women that had watched him so lovingly, the stern facing of the dangers ahead. Most of the assembly must have thought that none of David's house remained, and that thought would have had much to do with their submitting to Athaliah's usurpation. Now that they saw the true heir, they could not hesitate to risk their lives to set him on his throne. Show a man his true king, and many a tyranny submitted to before becomes at once intolerable. The boy Joash makes Athaliah look very ugly.

Jehoiada's plans are somewhat difficult to understand, owing to our ignorance of the details as to the usual arrangements of the guards of the palace, but the general drift of them is plain enough. The main thing was to secure the person of the king, and, for that purpose, the two companies of priests who were relieved on the Sabbath were for once kept on duty, and their numbers augmented by the company that would, in the ordinary course, have relieved them. This augmented force was so disposed as, first, to secure the Temple from attack; and, second, to 'compass the king'-in his chamber, that is. We learn from 2 Chronicles that it consisted of priests and Levites, and some would see in that statement a tampering with the account in this passage, in the interests of a later conception of the sanctity of the Temple and of the priestly order. Our narrative is said to make the foreign mercenaries of the palace guard the persons referred to; but surely that cannot be maintained in the face of the plain statement of 2Ki. 11:7, that they kept the watch of the Temple, for that was the office of the priests. Besides, how should foreign soldiers have needed to be armed from the Temple armoury? And is it probable on the face of it that the palace guard, who were Athaliah's men, and therefore antagonistic to Joash, and Baal worshippers, should have been gained over to his side, or should have been the guards of the house of Jehovah? If, however, we understand that these guards were Levites, all is plain, and the arming of them with 'the spears and shields that had been king David's ' becomes intelligible, and would rouse them to enthusiasm and daring.

Not till all these dispositions for the boy king's safety, and for preventing an assault on the Temple, had been carried out, did the prudent Jehoiada venture to bring Joash out from his place of concealment. Note that in 2Ki. 11:12 he is not called 'the king,' as in the previous verses, but, as in 2Ki. 11:4, 'the king's son.' He was king by right, but not technically, till he had been presented to, and accepted by, the representatives of the people, had had 'the testimony' placed in his hands, and been anointed by the high-priest. So 'they *made* him king.' The three parts of the ceremony were all significant. The delivering of 'the testimony' [the Book of the Law- Deu. 17:18 - Deu. 17:19] taught him that he was no despot to rule by his own pleasure and for his own glory, but the viceroy of the true King of Judah, and himself subject to law. The people's making him king taught him and them that a true royalty rules over willing subjects, and both guarded the rights of the nation and set limits to the power of the ruler. The priest's anointing witnessed to the divine appointment of the monarch and the divine endowment with fitness for his office. Would that these truths were more recognised and felt by all rulers! What a different thing the page of history would be!

The vigilance of the tigress had been eluded, and Athaliah had a rude awakening. But she had her mother's courage, and as soon as she heard in the palace the shouts, she dashed to the Temple, alone as she was, and fronted the crowd. The sight might have made the boldest quail. Who was that child standing in the royal place? Where had he come from? How had he been hidden all these years? What was all this frenzy of rejoicing, this blare of trumpets, these ranks of grim men with weapons in their hands? The stunning truth fell on her; but, though she felt that all was lost, not a whit did she blench, but fronted them all as proudly as ever. One cannot but admire the dauntless woman, ‘magnificent in sin.’ But her cry of ‘Treason! treason!’ brought none to her side. As she stood solitary there, she must have felt that her day was over, and that nothing remained but to die like a queen. Proudly as ever, she passed down the ranks and not a face looked pity on her, nor a voice blessed her. She was reaping what she had sown, and she who had killed without compunction the innocents who stood between her and her ambitions, was pitilessly slain, and all the land rejoiced at her death.

So ended the all but bloodless revolution which crushed Baal worship in Judah. It had been begun by Elijah and Elisha, but it was completed by a high priest. It was religious even more than political. It was a national movement, though Jehoiada’s courage and wisdom engineered it to its triumph. It teaches us how God watches over His purposes and their instruments when they seem nearest to failure, for one poor infant was all that was left of the seed of David; and how, therefore, we are never to despair, even in the darkest hour, of the fulfilment of His promises. It teaches us how much one brave, good man and woman can do to change the whole face of things, and how often there needs but one man to direct and voice the thoughts and acts of the silent multitude, and to light a fire that consumes evil.

16)2 Kings 12:4-15

2 Kings

METHODICAL LIBERALITY

2Ki. 12:4 - 2Ki. 12:15.

‘The sons of Athaliah, that wicked woman, had broken up the house of God,’ says Chronicles. The dilapidation had not been complete, but had been extensive, as may be gathered from the large expenditure recorded in this passage for repairs, and the enumeration of the artisans employed. No doubt Joash was guided by Jehoiada in setting about the restoration, but the fact that he gives the orders, while the high priest is not mentioned, throws light on the relative position of the two authorities, and on the king's office as guardian of the Temple and official 'head of the church.' The story comes in refreshingly and strangely among the bloody pages in which it is embedded, and it suggests some lessons as to the virtue of plain common sense and business principles applied to religious affairs. If 'the outward business of the house of God' were always guided with as much practical reasonableness as Joash brought to bear on it, there would be fewer failures or sarcastic critics.

We note, first, the true source of money for religious purposes. There was a fixed amount for which 'each man is rated,' and that made the minimum, but there was also that which 'cometh into any man's heart to bring,' and that was infinitely more precious than the exacted tax. The former was appropriate to the Old Testament, of which the animating principle was law and the voice: 'Thou shalt' or 'Thou shalt not.' The latter alone fits the New Testament, of which the animating principle is love and the voice: 'Though I have all boldness in Christ to enjoin thee . . . yet for love's sake I rather beseech.' What disasters and what stifling of the spirit of Christian liberality have marred the Church for many centuries, and in many lands, because the great anachronism has prevailed of binding its growing limbs in Jewish swaddling bands, and degrading Christian giving into an assessment! And how shrunken the stream that is squeezed out by such a process, compared with the abundant gush of the fountain of love opened in a grateful, trusting heart!

Next, we have the negligent, if not dishonest, officials. We do not know how long Joash tried the experiment of letting the priests receive the money and superintend the repairs; but probably the restoration project was begun early in his reign, and if so, he gave the experiment of trusting all to the officials, a fair, patient trial, till the twenty-third year of his reign. Years gone and nothing done, or at least nothing completed! We do not need to accuse them of intentional embezzlement, but certainly they were guilty of carelessly letting the money slip through their fingers, and a good deal of it stick to their hands. It is always the temptation of the clergy to think of their own support as a first charge on the church, nor is it quite unheard of that the ministry should be less enthusiastic in religious objects than the 'laity,' and should work the enthusiasm of the latter for their own advantage.

Human nature is the same in Jerusalem in Joash’s time, and to-day in Manchester, or New York, or Philadelphia, and all men who live by the gifts of Christian people have need to watch themselves, lest they, like Ezekiel’s false shepherds, feed themselves and not the flock, and seek the wool and the fat and not the good of the sheep.

Next we have the application of businesslike methods to religious work. It was clearly time to take the whole matter out of the priest’s hands, and Joash is not afraid to assume a high tone with the culprits, and even with Jehoiada as their official head. He was in some sense responsible for his subordinates, and probably, though his own hands were clean, he may have been too lax in looking after the disposal of the funds. Note that while Joash rebuked the priests, and determined the new arrangements, it was Jehoiada who carried them out and provided the chest for receiving the contributions. The king wills, the high priest executes, the rank and file of the priests, however against the grain, consent. The arrangement for collecting the contributions ‘saved the faces’ of the priests to some extent, for the gifts were handed to them, and by them put into the chest. But, of course, that was done at once, in the donor’s presence. If changes involving loss of position are to work smoothly, it is wise to let the deposed officials down as easily as may be.

Similar common sense is shown in the second step, the arrangement for ascertaining the amounts given. The king’s secretary and the high-priest [or a representative] jointly opened the chest, counted and bagged up the money. They checked each other, and prevented suspicion on either side. No man who regards his own reputation will consent to handle public money without some one to stand over him and see what he does with it. One would be wise always to suspect people who appeal for help ‘for the Lord’s work’ and are too ‘spiritual’ to have such worldly things as committees or auditors of their books. Accurate accounts are as essential to Christian work as spirituality or enthusiasm. The next stage was to hand over the money to the ‘contractors,’ as we should call them; and there similar precautions were taken against possible peculation on the part of the two officials who had received the money, for it was apparently ‘weighed out into the hands’ of the overseers, who would thus be able to check what they received by what the secretary and the high-priest had taken from the chest, and would be responsible for the expenditure of the amount which the two officials knew that they had received.

But all this system of checks seems to break down at the very point where it should have worked most searchingly, for ‘they reckoned not with the men, into whose hand they delivered the money’ to pay the workmen, ‘for they dealt faithfully.’ That last clause looks like a hit at the priests who had not dealt so, and contrasts the methods of plain business men of no pretensions, with those of men whose very calling should have guaranteed their trustworthiness. The contrast has been repeated in times and places nearer home. But another suggestion may also be made about this singular lapse into what looks like unwise confidence. These overseers had proved their faithfulness and earned the right to be trusted entirely, and the way to get the best out of a man, if he has any reliableness in him, is to trust him utterly, and to show him that you do. ‘It is a shame to tell Arnold a lie; he always believes us,’ said the Rugby boys about their great head-master. There is a time for using all precautions, and a time for using none. Businesslike methods do not consist in spying at the heels of one’s agents, but in picking the right men, and, having proved them, giving them a free hand. And is not that what the great Lord and Employer does with His servants, and is it not part of the reason why Jesus gets more out of us than any one else can do, that He trusts us more?

One more point may be noticed; namely, the order of precedence in which the necessary works were done. Not a coin went to provide the utensils for sacrifice till the Temple was completely repaired. After they had ‘set up the house of God in its state,’ as Chronicles tells us, they took the balance of the funds to the king and Jehoiada, and spent that on ‘vessels for the house.’ A clear insight to discern what most needs to be done, and a firm resolve to ‘do the duty that lies nearest thee,’ and to let everything else, however necessary, wait till it is done, is a great part of Christian prudence, and goes far to make works or lives truly prosperous. ‘First things first’!-it is a maxim that carries us far and as right as far.

17)2 Kings 13:14

ELIJAH’S TRANSLATION AND ELISHA’S DEATHBED

2Ki. 2:12. - 2Ki. 13:14.

The scenes and the speakers are strangely different in these two incidents. The one scene is that mysterious translation on the further bank of the Jordan, when a mortal was swept up to heaven in a fiery whirlwind, and the other is an ordinary sick chamber, where an old man was lying, with the life slowly ebbing out of him. The one speaker is the successor of the great prophet, on whom his spirit in a large measure fell; the other, an idolatrous king, young, headstrong, who had despised the latter prophet’s teaching while he lived, but was now for the moment awed into something like seriousness and reverence by his death.

Now the remarkable thing is that this unworthy monarch should have come to the dying prophet, and should have strengthened and cheered him by the quotation of his own words, spoken so long ago, as if he would say to him, ‘All that thou didst mean when thou didst stand there in rapturous adoration, watching the ascending Elijah, is as true about thee, lying dying here, of a common and lingering sickness. My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof.’ Seen or unseen, these were present. The reality was the same, though the appearances were so different.

I We have in the first case the chariot and horsemen seen.

To feel the force of the exclamation on the lips of Joash, we must try to make clear to ourselves what its original meaning was. What did Elisha intend when he stood beyond Jordan, and in wonder and awe exclaimed, ‘The chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof’?

It does not seem to me that the interpretation of the words now in favour is at all satisfactory. It tells us that the expression is to he taken as in apposition with the exclamation ‘My father, my father’; and that both the one phrase and the other mean-Elijah! Yet what a preposterous and strange metaphor it would be to call a man a chariot and pair, or a chariot and cavalry! It seems to me that the very statement of this explanation, in plain English, condemns it as untenable. It is surely less probable that Elisha in that exclamation was describing Elijah than that he was speaking of that wondrous chariot of fire and horses of fire that had come between him and his master, and that his exclamation was one of surprised adoration as he gazed with wide-opened eyes on the burning angel-hosts, and saw his master mysteriously able to bear that fire, ringed round by these flaming squadrons, possibly standing unscathed on the floor of the chariot, and swept with it and all the celestial pomp, by the whirlwind, into heaven.

But why should he say ‘the chariot of *Israel*’? I think we take for granted too readily that ‘Israel’ here means the nation. You will remember that that name was not originally that of the nation, but of its progenitor and founder, given to Jacob as the consequence and record of that mysterious wrestling by the brook. And I think we get a nobler signification for the words before us if, instead of applying the name to the nation, we apply it here to the individual. When Elijah and Elisha crossed Jordan they were not far from the spot where that name was given to Jacob, ‘the supplanter,’ whom discipline and communion with God had elevated into Israel. And they were near another of the sites consecrated by his history, the place where, just before the change of his name, the angels of God met him and ‘he called the name of the place Mahanaim.’ That means ‘*the two camps*,’ the one, Jacob’s defenceless company of women and children, the other, their celestial guards.

It seems reasonable to suppose that, in all probability, a reminiscence of that old story of the manifestation of the armed angels of God as the defenders and servants of His children broke from Elisha’s lips. As he looks upon that strange appearance of the chariot and horses of fire that parted him and his friend, he sees once more ‘the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof,’ the reappearance of the shining armies whose presence had of old declared that ‘the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.’ And now the same hosts in their immortal youth, unweakened by the ages which have brought earthly warriors to dust and their swords to rust, are flaming and flashing there in the midday sun. What was their errand, and why did they appear? They came, as God’s messengers, to bear His servant to His presence. They attested the commission and devotion of the prophet. Their agency was needful to lift a mortal to skies not native to him. Strange that a body of flesh should he able to endure that fiery splendour! Somewhere in the course of that upward movement must this man, who was caught up to meet the Lord in the air, have been ‘changed.’ His guards of honour were not only for tokens of his prophetic work, but for witnesses of the unseen world and in some sort pledges, suited to that stage of revelation, of life and immortality.

How striking is the contrast between the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of Christ! He who ascended up where He was before needed no whirlwind, nor chariot of fire, nor extraneous power to elevate Him to His home. Calmly, slowly, as borne upwards by indwelling affinity with heaven, He floated thither with outstretched hands of blessing. The servant angels did not need to surround Him, but, clad no longer in fiery armour, but ‘in white apparel,’ the emblem of purity and peace, they stood by the disciples and comforted them with hope. Elijah was carried to heaven. Christ went. The angels disappeared with the prophet and left Elisha to grieve alone. They lingered here after Christ had gone, and turned tears into rainbows flashing with the hues of hope.

II. We have in our second text the chariot and horsemen present though unseen.

We are now in a position to appreciate the meaning of Joash’s repetition to Elisha of his own words, spoken under such different circumstances.

Elisha was by no means so great a prophet as Elijah. His work had not been so conspicuous, his character was not so strong, though perhaps more gentle. No such lofty and large influence had been granted to him as had been given to the fiery Tishbite to wield, nor did he leave his mark so deep upon the history of the times or upon the memory of succeeding generations. But such as it had been given him to be he had been. He was a continuer, not an originator. There had been a long period during which he appears to have lived in absolute retirement, exercising no prophetic functions. We never hear of him during the interval between the anointing of Jehu to the Israelitish monarchy and the time of his own death, and that period must have extended over nearly fifty years. After all these years of eclipse and seclusion he was lying dying somewhere in a corner, and the king, young but impressible, although, on the whole, not reliable nor good, came down to the prophet’s home, and there, standing by the pallet of the dying man, repeated the words, so strangely reminiscent of a very different event-' My father, my father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!'

And what does that exclamation mean? Two things. One is this, that the angels of the Divine Presence are with us as truly, in life, when unseen as if seen. So far as we know, it was only to Elisha that the vision had been granted of that chariot of fire and horses of fire. We read that at Elijah's translation on the other side of Jordan, and consequently at no great distance off, there stood a company of the sons of the prophets from Jericho to see what would happen, but we do not read that they did see. On the contrary, they were inclined to believe that Elijah had been caught up and flung away somewhere on the mountains, and that it was worth while to organise search-parties to go after him. It was only Elisha that saw, and Elijah did not know whether he would see or not, for he said to him, 'If thou shalt see me when I am taken from thee, then' thy desire shall be granted.

The angels of God are visible to the eyes that are fit to see them; and those eyes can always see them. It does not matter whether in a miracle or in a common event-it does not matter whether on the stones by the banks of Jordan or in a close sick chamber, they are visible for those who, by pure hearts and holy desires, have had their vision purged from the intrusive vulgarities and dazzling brightnesses of this poor, petty present, and can therefore see beneath all the apparent the real that blazes behind it.

The scenes at Jordan and in the death-chamber are not the only times in Elisha's life when we read of these chariots and horses of fire. There was another incident in his career in which the same phrase occurs. Once his servant was terrified at the sight of a host compassing the little city where Elisha and he were, with horses and chariots, and came to his master with alarm and despair, crying, 'Alas! my master, how shall we do?' The prophet answered with superb calmness, 'Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them . . .. Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.' They had always been there, though no one saw them. They were there when no one but Elisha saw them. They were no more there when the young man saw them than they had been before. They did not cease to be there when the film came over his eyes again, and the common round took him back to the trivialities of daily life.

And so from the mouth of this not very devout king the prophet was reminded of his own ancient experiences, and invited to feel that, unseen or seen, the solemn forms stood ‘bright-harnessed,’ and strong, ‘in order serviceable,’ ranged about him for his defence and blessing.

And are they not round about us? If a man can but look into the realities of things, will he see only the work of men and of the forces of nature? Will there not be-far more visible as they are far more real than any of these-the forces of the Eternal Presence and ever operative Will of our Father in Heaven? We need not discuss the personality of angels. An angel is the embodiment of the will and energy of God, and we have that will and energy working for us, whether there are any angel persons about us or not. Scripture declares that there are, and that they serve us. We may be sure that if only we will honestly try to purge our eyes from the illusions and temptations of ‘things seen and temporal,’ the mountain or the sick chamber will be to us equally full of the angel forms of our defenders and companions.

Do we see them for ourselves; and, not less important, do we, like Elisha, lying there on his deathbed, help else blind men to see them, and make every one that comes beside us, even if he be as little impressible and as little devout as this king Joash was, recognise that in our chambers there sit, and round our lives there flutter and sing, sweet and strong angel wings and voices? Will anybody, looking at you, be constrained to feel that with and around you are the angels of God?

Still further, another cognate application of these great words is that one which is more directly suggested by their quotation by Joash. It does not matter in what way the end of life comes. The reality is the same to all devout men; though one be swept to heaven in a whirlwind, and another lady slowly away in old age, or ‘fall sick of the sickness wherewith he should die.’ Each is taken to God in a chariot of fire. The means are of little moment, the fact remains the same, however diverse may he the methods of its accomplishment. The road is the same, the companions the same, the impelling-I was going to say the locomotive-power, is the same, and the goal is the same.

Of Enoch we read, ‘He was not, for God took him.’ Of Elijah we read, ‘He went up in a whirlwind to heaven.’ Of Elisha we read, ‘He died and they buried him.’ And of all three-the two who were translated that they should not see death, and the one who died like the rest of us-it is equally true that ‘God took’ them, and that they were taken to Him. So for ourselves and for our dear ones we may look forward or backward, to deathbeds of weariness, of lingering sickness, of long pain and suffering, or of swift dissolution, and piercing beneath the surface may see the blessed central reality and thankfully feel that Death, too, is God’s angel, who’ does His commandments, hearkening to the voice of God’s word’ when in his dark hearse he carries us hence.

18)2 Kings 13:16

2 Kings

THE SPIRIT OF POWER

2Ki. 13:16.

This is part of one of the strangest narratives in the Old Testament. Elisha is on his deathbed, ‘sick of the sickness’ wherewith he ‘should die.’ A very different scene, that close sick-chamber, from the open plain beyond Jordan from which Elijah had gone up; a very different way of passing from life by wasting sickness than by fiery chariot! But God is as near His servant in the one place as in the other, and the slow wasting away is as much His messenger as the sudden apocalypse of the horsemen of fire. The king of Israel comes to the old prophet, and very significantly repeats over him his own exclamation over Elijah, ‘My father! My father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof.’ Elisha takes no notice of the grief and reverence expressed by the exclamation, but goes straight to his work, and what follows is remarkable indeed.

Here is a prophet dying; and his last words are not edifying moral and religious reflections, nor does he seem to be much concerned to leave with the king his final protest against Israel’s sin, but his thoughts are all of warfare, and his last effort is to stir up the sluggish young monarch to some of his own enthusiasm in the conflict with the enemy. It does not sound like an edifying deathbed. People might have said, ‘Ah! secular and political affairs should be all out of a man’s mind when he comes to his last moments.’ But Elisha thought that to stick to his life’s work till the last breath was out of him, and to devote the last breath to stimulating successors who might catch up the torch that dropped from his failing hands, was no unworthy end of a prophet’s life.

So there followed what perhaps is not very familiar to some of us, that strange scene in which the dying man is far fuller of energy and vigour than the young king, and takes the upper hand of him, giving him a series of curt, authoritative commands, each of which he punctiliously obeys. ‘Take bow and arrow,’ and he took them. Then the prophet lays his wasted hand for a moment on the strong, young hand, and having thus either in symbol or reality-never mind which-communicated power, he says to him, ‘Fling open the casement towards the quarter where the enemy’s territory lies,’ and he flings it open. ‘Now, shoot,’ and he shoots. Then the old man gathers himself up on his bed, and with a triumphant shout exclaims, ‘The Lord’s arrow of victory! . . . Thou shalt smite the Syrians till they be consumed.’

That is not all. There is a second stage. The promise is given; the possibility is opened before the king, and now all depends on the question whether he will rise to the height of the occasion. So the prophet says to him, ‘Take the sheaf of arrows in your hand’; and he takes them. And then he says, ‘Now smite upon the ground.’ It is a test. If he had been roused and stirred by what had gone before; if he had any earnestness of belief in the power that was communicated, and any eagerness of desire to realise the promises that had been given of complete victory, what would he have done? What would Elisha have done if he had had the quiver in his hand? This king smites three perfunctory taps on the floor, and having done what will satisfy the old man’s whim, and what in decency he had to do, he stops, as if weary of the whole performance. So the prophet bursts out in indignation on his dying bed-’Thou shouldst have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou conquered utterly. Now thou shalt conquer but thrice.’ A strange story; very far away from our atmosphere and latitude! Yet are there not obviously in it great principles which may be disentangled from their singular setting, and fully applied to us? I think so. Let us try and draw them from it.

I. Here we have the power communicated.

Now the story seems to indicate that it was only for a moment that the prophet's hands were laid on the king's hands, because, after they had been so laid, he is bidden to go to the window and fling it open, and the bedridden man could not go there with him; then he is bidden to draw the bow, and another hand upon his would have been a hindrance rather than a help. So it was but a momentary touch, a communication of power in reality or in symbol that the muscular young hand needed, and the wasted old one could give. And is that not a parable for us? We, too, if we are Christian men and women, have a gospel of which the very kernel is that there is to us a communication of power, and the very name of that divine Spirit whom it is Christ's greatest work to send flashing and flaming through the world, is the 'Spirit of Power.' And so the old promise that ye shall be clothed with strength from on high is the standing prerogative of the Christian Church. There is not merely some partial communication, as when hand touched hand, but every organ is vitalised and quickened; as in the case of the other miracle of this prophet, when he stretched himself on the dead child eye to eye, and mouth to mouth, and hand to hand; and each part received the vitalising influence. We have, if we are Christian people, a Spirit given to us, and are 'strengthened with might by the Spirit in the inner man.'

That gift, that strength comes to us by contact, not with Elisha, but with Elisha's Lord and Master. Christ's touch, when He was on earth, brought sight to the blind, healing to the sick, vigour to the limbs of the lame, life to the dead. And you and I can have that touch, far more truly, and far more mightily operative upon us than they had, who only felt the contact of His finger, and only derived corporeal blessing. For we can draw near to Him, and in union with Him by faith and love and obedience, can have His Spirit in close contact with our spirits, and strengthening us for all service, and for every task. Brethren! that touch which gives strength is a real thing. It is no mere piece of mystical exaggeration when we speak of our spirits being in actual contact with Christ's Spirit. Many of us have no clear conception, and still less a firm realisation, of that closer than corporeal contact, more real than bodily presence, and more intimate than any possible physical union, which is the great gift of God in Jesus Christ, and brings to us, if we will, life and strength according to our need. I would that the popular Christianity of this day had a far larger infusion of the sound, mystical element that lies in the New Testament Christianity, and did not talk so exclusively about a Christ that is for us as to have all but lost sight of the second stage of our relation to Christ, and lost a faith in a Christ that is in us Brethren! He can lay His hand upon your spirit's hand. He can flash light into your spirit's eye from His eye. He can put breath and eloquence into your spirit's lips from His lips, and His heart beating against yours can transfuse-if I may so say-into you His own life-blood, which cleanses from all sin, and fits for all conflict.

Then, further, let me remind you that this power, which is bestowed on condition of contact, is given before duties are commanded. This king, in our acted parable, first had the touch of Elisha's fingers, and then received the command from Elisha's lips, 'Shoot!' So Jesus Christ gives before He commands, and commands nothing which He has not fitted us to perform. He is not 'an austere man, reaping where He did not sow, and gathering where He did not straw'; but He comes first to us saying, 'I give thee Myself,' and then He looks us in the eyes and says, 'Wilt thou not give Me thyself?' He bestows the strength first, and He commands the consequent duty afterwards.

Further, this strength communicated is realised in the effort to obey Christ's great commands. Joash felt nothing when the prophet's hand was laid upon his but, perhaps, some tingling. But when he got the bow in his hand and drew the arrow to its head, the infused power stiffened his muscles and strengthened him to pull; and though he could not distinguish between his own natural corporeal ability and that which had been thus imparted to him, the two co-operated in the one act, and it was when he drew his bow that he felt his strength. 'Stretch forth thine hand,' said Christ to the lame man. But the very infirmity to be dealt with was his inability to stretch it forth. At the command he tried, and, to his wonder, the stiffened sinews relaxed, and the joint that had been immovable had free play, and he stretched out his hand, and it was restored whole as the other. So He gives what He commands, and in obeying the command we realise and are conscious of the power. Elisha and Joash but act an illustration of the great word of Paul: ‘Work out your own salvation . . . for it is God that worketh in you.’

II. And now, secondly, look at the perfected victory that is possible.

When the arrows, by God’s strength operating through Joash’s arm, had been shot, the prophet says, ‘The arrow of the Lord’s victory! . . . thou shalt smite . . . till thou have consumed.’ Yes, of course; if the arrow is the Lord’s arrow, and the strength is His strength, then the only issue corresponding to the power is perfect victory. I would that Christian people realised more than they do practically in their lives that while men’s ideals and aims may be all unaccomplished, or but partially approximated to, since God is God, His nature is perfection, and nothing that He does can fall beneath His ideal and purpose in doing it. All that comes from Him must correspond to Him from whom it comes. He never leaves off till He has completed, nor can any one say about any of His work, ‘He began to build, and was not able to finish.’ So, Christian people! I would that we should rise to the height of our prerogatives, and realise the fact that perfect victory is possible, regard being had to the power which ‘teaches our hands to war and our fingers to fight.’ A great deal of not altogether profitable jangling goes on at present in reference to the question of whether absolute sinlessness is possible for a Christian man on earth. Whatever view we take upon that question, it ought not to hide from us the fact which should loom very much more largely in our daily operative belief than it does with most of us, that in so far as the power which is given to us is concerned, perfect victory is within our grasp, and is the only worthy and correspondent result to the perfect power which worketh in us. So there is no reason, as from any defect of the divine gift to the weakest of us, why our Christian lives should have ups and downs, why there should be interruptions in our devotion, fallings short in our consecration, contradictions in our conduct, slidings backward in our progress. There is no reason why, in our Christian year, there should be summer and winter; but according to the symbolical saying of one of the old prophets, ‘The ploughman may overtake the reaper, and he that treadeth out the grapes him that soweth the seed.’ In so far as our Christian life is concerned, the perfection of the power that is granted to us involves the possibility of perfection in the recipient.

And the same thing is true in reference to a Christian man’s work in the world. God’s Church has ample resources to overcome the evil of the world. The fire is tremendous, but the Christian Church has possession of the floods that can extinguish the fire. If we utilised all that we have, we might ‘smite till we had consumed,’ and turned the world into the Church of God. That is the ideal, the possibility, when we look at the Christian man as possessor of the communicated power of God. And then we turn to the reality, to our own consciences, to the state of our religious communities everywhere, and we see what seems to be blank contradiction of the possibility. Where is the explanation?

III. That brings me to my last point, the partial victory that is actually won.

‘Thou shouldst have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou smitten the Syrians till they were consumed. But now thou shalt conquer but thrice.’ All God’s promises and prophecies are conditional. There is no such thing as an unconditional promise of victory or of defeat; there is always an ‘if.’ There is always man’s freedom as a factor. It is strange. I suppose no thinking, metaphysical or theological, ever has solved or ever will, that great paradox of the power of a finite will to lift itself up in the face of, and antagonism to, an Infinite Will backed by infinite power, and to thwart its purposes. ‘How often *would I* have gathered . . . and ye *would not.*’ Here is all the power for a perfect victory, and yet the man that has it has to be contented with a very partial one.

It is a solemn thought that the Church’s unbelief can limit and hinder Christ’s work in the world, and we have here another illustration of that truth. You will find now and then in the newspapers, stories-they may be true or false-about caterpillars stopping a train. There is an old legend of that fabulous creature the remora, a tiny thing that fastened itself to the keel of a ship, and arrested it in mid-ocean. That is what we do with God and His purposes, and with His power granted to us.

A low expectation limits the power. This king did not believe, did not expect, that he would conquer utterly, and so he did not. You believe that you can do a thing, and in nine cases out of ten that goes nine-tenths of the way towards doing it. If we cast ourselves into our fight expecting victory, the expectation will realise itself in nine cases out of ten. And the man who in faith refuses to say ‘that beast of a word-impossible!’ will find that ‘all things are possible to him that believeth.’ ‘Expect great things of God,’ and you will feel His power tingling to your very fingertips, and will be able to draw the arrow to its head, and send it whizzing home to its mark.

Small desires block the power. Where there is an iron-bound coast running in one straight line, the whole ocean may dash itself on the cliffs at the base, but it enters not into the land; but where the shore opens itself out into some deep gulf far inland, and broad across at the entrance, then the glad water rushes in and fills it all. Make room for God in your lives by your desires and you will get Him in the fullness of His power.

The use of our power increases our power. Joash had an unused quiver full of arrows, and he only smote thrice. ‘To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken.’ The reason why many of us professing Christians have so little of the strength of God in our lives is because we have made so little use of the strength that we have. Stow away your seed-corn in a granary and do not let the air into it, and weevils and rats will consume it. Sow it broadcast on the fields with liberal hand, and it will spring up, ‘some thirty, some sixty, some an hundredfold.’ Use increases strength in all regions, and unused organs atrophy and wither.

So, dear friends! if we will keep ourselves in contact with Christ, and tremulously sensitive to His touch, if we will expect power according to our tasks and our needs, if we will desire more of His grace, and if we will honestly and manfully use the strength that we have, then He will ‘teach our hands to war and our fingers to fight,’ and will give us strength, ‘so that a bow of brass is bent by’ our arms, and we shall be ‘more than conquerors through Him that loved us.’

19)2 Kings 17:6-18

2 Kings

A KINGDOM’S EPITAPH

2Ki. 17:6 - 2Ki. 17:18.

The brevity of the account of the fall of Samaria in 2Ki. 17:6 contrasts with the long enumeration of the sins which caused it, in the rest of this passage. Modern critics assume that 2Ki. 17:7 - 2Ki. 17:23 are ‘an interpolation by the Deuteronomic writer,’ apparently for no reason but because they trace Israel’s fall to its cause in idolatry. But surely the bare notice in 2Ki. 17:6, immediately followed by 2Ki. 17:24, cannot have been all that the original historian had to say about so tragic an end of so large a part of the people of God. The whole purpose of the Old Testament history is not to chronicle events, but to declare God’s dealings, and the fall of a kingdom was of little moment, except as revealing the righteousness of God.

The main part of this passage, then, is the exposition of the causes of the national ruin. It is a *post mortem* inquiry into the diseases that killed a kingdom. At first sight, these verses seem a mere heaping together, not without some repetition, of one or two charges; but, more closely looked at, they disclose a very striking progress of thought. In the centre stands 2Ki. 17:13, telling of the mission of the prophets. Before it, 2Ki. 17:7 - 2Ki. 17:12, narrate Israel’s sin, which culminates in provoking the Lord to anger [2Ki. 17:11]. After it, the sins are reiterated with noticeable increase of emphasis, and again culminate in provoking the Lord to anger [2Ki. 17:17]. So we have two degrees of guilt-one before and one after the prophets’ messages; and two kindlings of God’s anger-one which led to the sending of the prophets, and one which led to the destruction of Israel. The lessons that flow from this obvious progress of thought are plain.

I. The less culpable apostasy before the prophets’ warnings. The first words of 2Ki. 17:7, rendered as in the Revised Version, give the purpose of all that follows; namely, to declare the causes of the calamity just told. Note that the first characteristic of Israel’s sin was ungrateful departure from God. There is a world of pathos and meaning in that ‘their God,’ which is enhanced by the allusion to the Egyptian deliverance. All sins are attempts to break the chain which binds us to God-a chain woven of a thousand linked benefits. All practically deny His possession of us, and ours of Him, and display the short memory which ingratitude has. All have that other feature hinted at here-the contrast, so absurd if it were not so sad, between the worth and power of the God who is left and the other gods who are preferred. The essential meanness and folly of Israel are repeated by every heart departing from the living God.

The double origin of the idolatry is next set forth. It was in part imported and in part home-made. We have little conception of the strength of faith and courage which were needed to keep the Jews from becoming idolaters, surrounded as they were by such. But the same are needed to-day to keep us from learning the ways of the world and getting a snare to our souls. Now, as ever, walking with God means walking in the opposite direction from the crowd, and that requires some firm nerve. The home-made idolatry is gibbeted as being according to ‘the statutes of the kings.’ What right had they to prescribe their subjects’ religion? The influence of influential people, especially if exerted against the service of God, is hard to resist; but it is no excuse for sin that it is fashionable.

The blindness of Israel to the consequences of their sin is hinted in the reference to the fate of the nations whom they imitated. They had been cast out; would not their copyists learn the lesson? We, too, have examples enough of what godless lives come to, if we had the sense to profit by them. The God who cast out the vile Canaanites and all the rest of the wicked crew before the sons of the desert has not changed, and will treat Israel as He did them, if Israel come down to their level. Outward privileges make idolatry or any sin more sinful, and its punishment more severe.

Another characteristic of Israel’s sin is its being done ‘secretly.’ Of the various meanings proposed for that word [2Ki. 17:9] the best seems to be that it refers to the attempt to combine the worship of God and of idols, of which the calf worship is an instance. Elijah had long ago taunted the people with trying ‘to hobble on both knees,’ or on ‘two opinions’ at once; and here the charge is of covering idolatry with a cloak of Jehovah worship. A varnish of religion is convenient and cheap, and often effectual in deceiving ourselves as well as others; but ‘as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he,’ whatever his cloak may be; and the thing which we count most precious and long most for is our god, whatever our professions of orthodox religion.

The idolatry is then described, in rapid touches, as universal. Wherever there was a solitary watchman’s tower among the pastures there was a high place, and they were reared in every city. Images and Asherim deformed every hill-top and stood under every spreading tree. Everywhere incense loaded the heavy air with its foul fragrance. The old scenes of unnamable abomination, which had been so terribly avenged, seemed to have come back, and to cry aloud for another purging by fire and sword.

The terrible upshot of all was ‘to provoke the Lord to anger.’ The New Testament is as emphatic as the Old in asserting that there is the capacity of anger in the God whose name is love, and that sin calls it forth. The special characteristic of sin, by which it thus attracts that lightning, is that it is disobedience. As in the first sin, so in all others, God has said, ‘Ye shall not do this thing’; and we say, ‘Do it we will.’ What can the end of that be but the anger of the Lord? ‘Because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience.’

II. 2Ki. 17:13 gives the pleading of Jehovah. The mission of the prophets was God’s reply to Israel’s rebellion, and was equally the sign of His anger and of His love. The more sin abounds, the more does God multiply means to draw back to Himself. The deafer the ears, the louder the beseeching voice of His grieved and yet pitying love. His anger clothes itself in more stringent appeals and clearer revelations of Himself before it takes its slaughtering weapons in hand. The darker the background of sin, the brighter the beams of His light show against it. Man’s sin is made the occasion for a more glorious display of God’s character and heart. It is on the storm-cloud that the sun paints the rainbow. Each successive stage in man’s departure from God evoked a corresponding increase in the divine effort to attract him back, till ‘last of all He sent unto them His Son.’ In nature, attraction diminishes as distance increases; in the realms of grace, it grows with distance. The one desire of God’s heart is that sinners would return from their evil ways, and He presses on them the solemn thought of the abundant intimations of His will which have been given from of old, and are pealed again into all ears by living voices. His law for us is not merely an old story spoken centuries ago, but is vocal in our consciences to-day, and fresh as when Sinai flamed and thundered above the camp, and the trumpet thrilled each heart.

III. The heavier sin that followed the divine pleading. That divine voice leaves no man as it finds him. If it does not sway him to obedience, it deepens his guilt, and makes him more obstinate. Like some perverse ox in the yoke, he stiffens his neck, and stands the very picture of brute obduracy. There is an awful alternative involved in our hearing of God's message, which never returns to Him void, but ever does something to the hearer, either softening or hardening, either scaling the eyes or adding another film on them, either being the 'savour of life unto life or of death unto death.' The mission of the prophets changed forgetfulness of God's 'statutes' into 'rejection' of them, and made idolatry self-conscious rebellion. Alas, that men should make what is meant to be a bond to unite them to God into a wedge to part them farther from Him! But how constantly that is the effect of the gospel, and for the same reason as in Israel-that they 'did not believe in the Lord their God'!

The miserable result on the sinners' own natures is described with pregnant brevity in 2Ki. 17:15. 'They followed vanity, and became vain.' The worshipper became like the thing worshipped, as is always the case. The idol is vanity, utter emptiness and nonentity; and whoever worships nothingness will become in his own inmost life as empty and vain as it is. That is the retribution attendant on all trust in, and longing after, the trifles of earth, that we come down to the level of what we set our hearts upon. We see the effects of that principle in the moral degradation of idolaters. Gods lustful, cruel, capricious, make men like themselves. We see it working upwards in Christianity, in which God becomes man that men may become like God, and of which the whole law is put into one precept, which is sure to be kept, in the measure of the reality of a man's religion. 'Be ye therefore imitators of God, as beloved children.'

In 2Ki. 17:16 - 2Ki. 17:17 the details of the idolatry follow the general statement, as in 2Ki. 17:9 - 2Ki. 17:12, but with additions and with increased severity of tone. We hear now of calves and star worship, and Baal, and burning children to Moloch, and divination and enchantment. The catalogue is enlarged, and there is added to it the terrible declaration that Israel had 'sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord.' The same thing was said by Elijah to Ahab-a noble instance of courage. The sinner who steels himself against the divine remonstrance, does not merely go on in his old sins, but adds new ones. Begin with the calves, and fancy that you are worshipping Jehovah, and you will end with Baal and Moloch. Refuse to hear God’s pleadings, and you will sell your freedom, and become the lowest and only real kind of slave-the bondsman of evil. When that point of entire abandonment to sin, which Paul calls being ‘sold under sin,’ is reached, as it may be reached, at all events by a nation, and corruption has struck too deep to be cast out, once again the anger of the Lord is provoked; but this time it comes in a different guise. The armies of the Assyrians, not the prophets, are its messengers now. Israel had made itself like the nations whom God had used it to destroy, and now it shall be destroyed as they were.

To be swept out of His sight is the fate of obstinate rejection of His commandments and pleadings. Israel made itself the slave of evil, and was made the captive of Assyria. Self-willed freedom, which does as it likes, and heeds not God, ends in bondage, and is itself bondage. God’s anger against sin speaks pleadingly to us all, saying, ‘Do not this abominable thing that I hate.’ Well for us if we hearken to His voice when ‘His anger is kindled but a little.’ If we do not yield to Him, and cast away our idols, we shall become vain as they. Our evil will be more fatal, and our obstinacy more criminal, because He called, and we refused. ‘Who may abide the day of His coming? and who shall stand when He appeareth?’ These captives, dragging their weary limbs, with despair in their hearts, across the desert to a land of bondage, were but shadows, in the visible region of things, of the far more doleful and dreary fate that sooner or later must fall on those who would none of God’s counsel, and despised all His reproof, but cling to their idol till they and it are destroyed together.

20)2 Kings 17:33

2 Kings

DIVIDED WORSHIP

2Ki. 17:33.

The kingdom of Israel had come to its fated end. Its king and people had been carried away captives in accordance with the cruel policy of the great Eastern despotisms, which had so much to do with weakening them by their very conquests. The land had lain desolate and uncultivated for many years, savage beasts had increased in the untilled solitudes, even as weeds and nettles grew in the gardens and vineyards of Samaria. At last the king of Assyria resolved to people the country; and for this purpose he sent a mixed multitude from the different nationalities of his empire to the land of Israel. They were men of five nationalities, most of them recently conquered. Israel had been deported to different parts of the Assyrian empire; men from different parts of the empire were deported to the land of Israel. Such cruel uprootings seemed to be wisdom, but were really a policy that kept alive disaffection. It was the same mistake [and bore the same fruits] as Austria pursued in sending Hungarian regiments to keep down Venice, and Venetian-born soldiers to overawe Hungary.

These new settlers brought with them their national peculiarities, and among the rest, their gods. They knew nothing about the Jehovah whom they supposed to be the local deity of Israel; and when they were troubled by the wild beasts which had, of course, rapidly increased in the land, they attributed it to their neglect of His worship, and sent an embassy to the king of Assyria telling that as they ‘know not the manners of the God of the land,’ He has sent lions among them.

This is an instructive example of the heathen way of thinking. They have their local deities. Each land, each valley, each mountain top, has its own. They are ready to worship them all, for they have no real worship for any. Their reason for worship is to escape from harm, to pay the tribute to which the god has a right on his own territory, lest he should make it the worse for them if they neglect it. ‘The mild tolerance of heathendom’ simply means the utter absence of religion and an altogether inadequate notion of deity.

So the settlers have sent to them one of these schismatic priests who had belonged to the extinct sanctuary at Beth-el, and he, apparently, not having any truer notions of God or of worship than they had, nothing loth, teaches them the rites of the Israelite worship, which was not like that of Judah, as is distinctly stated in the context. This worship of Jehovah was, however, blended by them with their own national idolatry. How contemptuously the historian enumerates the hard names of their gods and the rabble rout of them which each nation made! ‘The men of Babylon *made* Succoth-benoth’ [probably a deity, though the name may mean booths for purposes of prostitution] and the others ‘*made* Nergal and Ashima and Nibhaz and Tartak.’ What names, and what a pantheon! ‘They feared the Lord and served their own gods.’

This was the beginning of the Samaritan people, whom we find through the rest of Scripture even down to the Acts of the Apostles, retaining some trace of their heathen origin. Simon Magus bewitched them in his sorceries. They began as heathen, though in lapse of years they came to be pure monotheists, even more rigid than the Jews themselves, and today, if you went to Nablus, you would find the small remnant of their descendants adhering to Moses and the law, guarding their sacred copy of the Pentateuch with unintelligent awe, and eating the Paschal Lamb with wild rites. They have changed the object of their worship, but one fears that it is little more real and deep than in old days, 2500 years ago, when their forefathers ‘feared the Lord and served their own gods.’

Now I venture to take this verse as indicative of a tendency which belongs to a great many more people than the confused mass of settlers that were shot down on the hills of Israel by the king of Assyria. It is really a description of a great deal of what goes by the name of religion amongst us.

I. The Religion of Fear.

These people would never have thought about God if it had not been for the lions. When they did think of Him it was only to tremble before Him. The reason for their trembling was that they did not know the etiquette of His worship; that they thought of Him as having rights over them because they had come into His territory, which He would exact, or punish them for omitting. In a word, their notion of God was that of a jealous, capricious tyrant, whose ways were inscrutable to them, in whose territory they found themselves without their will, and who needed to be propitiated if they would live in peace.

And this is the thought which is most operative in many minds, though it is veiled in more seemly phrases, and which darkens and injures all those on whom it lays hold. Need I spend time in showing you how, point by point, this picture is a picture of many among us? How many of you think of God when you are ill, and forget Him when you are well? How many of you pour out a prayer when you are in trouble, and forget all about Him and it when you are prosperous? How many of you see God in your calamities and not in your joys? Why do people call sudden deaths and the like the 'visitation of God'? How many of us are like Italian sailors who burn candles and shriek out to the Madonna when the storm catches them, and get drunk in the first wine-shop which they come to when they land! Is not many a man's thought of God, 'I knew Thee that Thou wert an austere Man, and I was afraid'?

The popular religion is largely a religion of fear.

There is a fear which is right and noble. That is reverend, humble adoration at the sight or thought of God's great perfections. Angels veil their faces with their wings. Such awe has no thought of personal consequences-is inseparable from all true knowledge of God; for all greatness of character is perfected by love. Of such fear we are not now speaking.

Terror of God is deep in men's hearts.

Fear is the apprehension of personal evil from some person or thing. Now I believe that terror has its place in the human economy, and in religion, as the sense of pain has. There is something in man's relations to God to cause it.

The Bible sets forth 'the terror of the Lord,' that men may tremble before Him. Moses said, 'I exceedingly fear and quake.' But that terror is only right when it proceeds from a sense of God's holiness and a consciousness of my own sinfulness. It is not right when it is a mere dread of a hard tyrant. That terror is only right when it leads to a joyful acceptance of God's revelation of His love in Christ.

Fear was never meant to be permanent, it is only the alarum-bell which rings to wake up the soul that sleeps on when in mortal peril. And it should pass into penitence, faith, joy in Jesus. ‘We have access with confidence by the faith of Him.’ The brightness is great and awful, but go nearer, as you can in Jesus, and lo! there is love in the brightness. You see it all tender and sweet. A heart and a hand are there, and from the midst of it the Father’s voice speaks, and says, ‘My son, give Me thine heart.’

The religion of fear is worthless. It produces no holiness, it does nothing for a man, it does not bind him to God. He is none the stronger for it. It paralyses so far as it does anything.

It is spasmodic and intermittent. It is impossible to keep it up, so it comes in fits and starts. When the morning comes men laugh at their terrors. It leads to wild endeavours to forget God-atheism-to insensibility. He who begins by fearing when there was no need, ends by not fearing when he ought.

II. The Religion of Form.

The Samaritans’ whole worship was outward worship. They did the things which the Beth-el priest taught them to do, and that was all.

And this again is a type, very common in our day. Religion must have forms. The forms often help to bring us the spirit. But we are always in danger of trusting to them too much.

How many of us have our Christianity only in outward seeming? The only thing that unites men to God is love.

So your external connection with God’s worship is of no use at all unless you have that.

Church and chapel-goers are alike exposed to the danger of erecting the forms of worship to a place in which they cannot be put without marring the spirit of worship. Whether our worship be more or less symbolic, whether we have a more or less elaborate ritual, whether we think more or less of sacraments, whether we put hearing a sermon as more or less prominent, or even if we follow the formless forms of the Friends, we are all tempted to substitute our forms for the spirit which alone is worship.

III. The Religion of Compromise or Worldliness.

They had God and they had gods. They liked the latter best. They gave God formal worship, but they gave the others more active service.

Such a kind of religion is a type of much that we see around us; the attempt to be Christians and worldlings, the indecision under which many men labour all their lives, being drawn one way by their consciences, another by their inclinations.

You cannot unite the two. God requires all. He fills the heart, and claims supreme control over all the nature. There cannot be two supreme in the soul. It cannot be God and self. It must be God or self. You may look now one way and now another, but the way the heart goes is the thing. Mr. Facing-both-ways does not really face both ways. He only turns quickly round from one to the other.

Such divided religion is impossible in the nature of God-of the soul-of religion.

To attempt it, then, is really to decide against God.

It is weak and unmanly to be thus vague and decided by circumstances. You would have been a Mohammedan if you had been born in Turkey.

You ought to decide for God.

He claims, He deserves, He will reward and bless, your whole soul.

'Choose you this day whom ye will serve. If the Lord be God, follow Him' If Baal or Succoth-benoth, then follow him. 'You cannot serve God and Mammon.' 'He that is not for us is against us.' Be one thing or the other.

21)2 Kings 18:5-6

2 Kings

HEZEKIAH, A PATTERN OF DEVOUT LIFE

2Ki. 18:5 - 2Ki. 18:6.

Devout people in all ages and stations are very much like each other. The elements of godliness are always the same. This king of Israel, something like two thousand six hundred years ago, and the humblest Christian to-day have the family likeness on their faces. These words, which are an outline sketch of the king's character, are really a sketch of the religious life at all times and in all places. He realised it; why may not we? He achieved it amid much ignorance; why should not we amid our blaze of knowledge? He accomplished it amid the temptations of a monarchy; why should not we in our humbler spheres?

There are four things set forth here as constituting a religious life. We begin at the bottom with the foundation of everything. 'He trusted in the Lord God of Israel.' The Old Testament is just as emphatic in declaring that there is no religion without trust, and that trust is the very nerve and life-blood of religion, as is the New. Only that in the one half of the book our translators have chosen to use the word 'trust,' and in the other half of the book they have chosen to use, for the very same act, the word 'faith.' They have thus somewhat obscured the absolute identity which exists in the teaching of the Old and of the New Testament as regards the bond which unites men to God. That union always was, and always will be, begun in the simple attitude and exercise of trust, and everything else will come out of that, and without that nothing else will come.

So this king had a certain measure of knowledge about the character of God, and that measure of knowledge led him to lean all his weight upon the Lord. You and I know a great deal more about God and His ways and purposes than Hezekiah did, but we can make no better use of it than he did-translate our knowledge into faith, and rely with simple, absolute confidence on Him whose name we know in Christ more fully and blessedly than was possible to Hezekiah.

And need I remind you of how, in this life of which the outline is here given and the inmost secret is here disclosed, there were significant and magnificent instances of the power of humble trust to bring to an else helpless man all the blessings that he needs, and to put a crystal wall round about him that will preserve him from every evil, howsoever threatening it may seem?

‘It has come addressed to me, but it is meant for Thee. Vindicate Thine own cause by delivering Thine own servant.’ And so, ‘when the morning dawned, they were all dead men,’ and faith rejoiced in a perfect deliverance. And you and I may get the same answer, in the midst of all our trials, difficulties, toils, and conflicts, if only we will go the same way to get it, and let our faith work, as Hezekiah’s worked, and take everything that troubles us to our Father in the heavens, and be quite sure that He is the God ‘who daily bears our burdens.’ Let us begin with the simple act of confidence in Him. That is the foundation, and on that we may build everything besides.

Let us see what this man further built upon it. The second story, if I may so say, of the temple-fortress of his life, upon the foundation of faith, was, ‘He clave to the Lord.’

That is to say, the act of confidence must be followed and perfected by tenacious adherence with all the tendrils of a man’s nature to the God in whom he says that he trusts. The metaphor is a very forcible one, so familiar in Scripture as that we are apt to overlook its emphasis. Let me recall one or two of the instances in which it is employed about other matters which throw light on its force here.

First of all, remember that sweet picture of the widow woman from Moab and the two daughters-in-law, one sent back, not reluctantly, to her home; and the other persisting in keeping by Naomi’s side, in spite of difficulties and remonstrances. With kisses of real love Orpah went back, but she did go back, to her people and her gods, but ‘Ruth clave unto her.’ So should we cling to God, as Ruth flung her arms round Naomi, and twined her else lonely and desolate heart about her dear and only friend, for whose sweet sake she became a willing exile from kindred and country. Is that how we cleave to the Lord?

More sacred still are the lessons that are suggested by the fact that this is the word employed to describe the blessed and holy union of man and woman in pure wedded life, and I suppose some allusion to that use of the expression underlies its constant application to the relation of the believing soul to Jehovah. For by trust the soul is wedded to Him, and so ‘joined to the Lord’ as to be ‘one spirit.’

Or if we do not care to go so deep as that, let us take the metaphor that lies in the word itself, without reference to its Scriptural applications. As the limpet holds on to its rock, as the ivy clings to the wall, as a shipwrecked sailor grasps the spar which keeps his head above water, so a Christian man ought to hold on to God, with all his energy, and with all parts of his nature. The metaphor implies tenacity; closeness of adhesion, in heart and will, in thought, in desire, and in all the parts of our receptive humanity, all of which can touch God and be touched by Him, and all of which are blessed only in the measure in which, yielding to Him, they are filled and steadied and glorified.

And there is implied, too, not only tenacity of adherence, but tenacity in the face of obstacles. There must be resistance to all the forces which would detach, if there is to be union with God in the midst of life in the world. Or, to recur for a moment to the figure that I employed a moment ago, as the sailor clings to a spar, though the waves dash round him, and his fingers get stiffened with cold and cramped with keeping the one position, and can scarcely hold on, but he knows that it is life to cling and death to loosen, and so tightens his grasp; thus have we to lay hold of God, and in spite of all obstacles, to keep hold of Him. Our grasp tends to slacken, and is feeble at the best, even if there were nothing outside of us to make it difficult for us to get a good grip. But there are howling winds and battering waves blowing and beating on us, and making it hard to keep our hold.

Do not let us yield to these, but in spite of them all let our hearts tighten round Him, for it is only in His sweet, eternal, perfect love that they can be at rest. And let our thoughts keep close to Him in spite of all distractions, for it is only in the measure in which His light fills our minds and His truth occupies our thoughts that our thinking spirits will be at rest. And let our desires, as the tentacles of some shell-fish fasten upon the rock, and feel out towards the ocean that is coming to it, let our desires go all out towards Him until they touch that after which they feel, and curl round it in repose and in blessedness.

The whole secret of a joyful, strong, noble Christian life lies here-that on the foundation of faith we should rear tenacious adherence to Him in spite of all obstacles. So it was a most encyclopaedic, though laconic, exhortation that that ‘good man’ sent down from Jerusalem to encourage the first heathen converts gave, when instead of all other instruction or advice, or inculcation of less important, and yet real, Christian duties, Barnabas exhorted them all ‘that with purpose of heart’-the full devotion of their inmost natures-’they should cleave to the Lord.’

Then the third stage, or the third story, in this building is that, cleaving to the Lord, ‘he departed not from following Him.’ The metaphor of cleaving implies proximity and union; the metaphor of following implies distance which is being diminished. These two are incongruous, and the very incongruity helps to give point to the representation. The same two ideas of union and yet of pursuit are brought still more closely together in other parts of Scripture. For instance, there is a remarkable saying in one of the Psalms, translated in our Bible-’My soul followeth hard after Thee. Thy right hand upholdeth me,’ where the expression ‘followeth hard after’ is a lame attempt at translating the perhaps impossible-to-be-translated fullness of the original, which reads ‘My soul cleaveth after Thee.’ It is an incongruous combination of ideas, by its very incongruity and paradoxical form suggesting a profound truth-viz. that in all the conscious union and tenacious adherence to God which makes the Christian life, there is ever, also, a sense of distance which kindles aspiration and leads to the effort after continual progress. However close we may be to God, it is always possible to press closer. However full may be the union, it may always be made fuller; and the cleaving spirit will always be longing for a closer contact and a more blessed sense of being in touch with God.

So, as we climb, new heights reveal themselves, and the further we advance in the Christian life the more are we conscious of the infinite depths that yet remain to be traversed. Hence arises one great element of the blessedness of being a Christian-namely, that we need not fear ever coming to the end of the growth in holiness and the increase of joy and power that are possible to us. So that weariness, and the sense of having reached the limits that are possible on a given path, which sooner or later fall upon men that live for anything but God, can never be ours if we live for Him. But the oldest and most experienced will have the same forward-looking glances of hope and forward-directed steps of strenuous effort as the youngest beginner on the path; and a Paul will be able to say when he is ‘Paul the aged,’ and ‘the time of his departure is at hand,’ that he ‘forgets the things that are behind, and reaches forth unto the things that are before, while he presses towards the mark.’ Let us be thankful for the endless progress which is possible to the Christian, and let us see to it that we are never paralysed into supposing that ‘to-morrow must be *as* this day,’ but trust the infinite resources of our God, and be sure that we growingly make our own the growing gifts which He bestows.

And so, lastly, the fourth element in this analysis of a devout life is ‘He kept the commandments of the Lord.’ That is the outcome of them all. Faith, adhesion, aspiration, and progress, all vindicate their value and reality in the simple, homely way of practical obedience.

Let us learn two things. One as to the worthlessness of all these others, if they do not issue in this. Not that these inward emotions are ever to be despised, but that, if they are genuine in our hearts, they cannot but manifest themselves in our lives. And so, dear Christian friends! do you not build upon your faith, on your adherence to God, on your aspirations after Him, unless you can bring into court, as witnesses for these, daily and hourly, your efforts after the conformity of your will to His, in the great things and in the small. Then, and only then, may we be sure that our confidence is not a delusion, and that it is to Him that we cleave when our feet tread in the paths of goodness.

And on the other hand, let us learn that all attempts to be obedient to a divine will which do not begin with trust and cleaving to Him are vain. There is no other way to get that conformity of will except by that union of spirit. All other attempts are beginning at the wrong end. You do not begin building your houses with the chimney-pots, but many a man who seeks to obey without trusting does precisely commit that fault. Let us be sure that the foundations are in, and then let us be sure that we do not stop half-way up, lest all that pass by should mock and say, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’

How many professing Christians' lives are half-finished and unroofed houses, because they have not 'added to their faith'-that is, to their 'cleaving to the Lord'-endless aspiration and continual progress, and to their aspiration and their progress the peaceable fruit of practical righteousness! If these things be in us and abound, they mark us as devout men after God's pattern. And if we want to be devout men after God's pattern, we must follow God's sequence, which begins with trust and ends with obedience.

22)2 Kings 19:20-22

2 Kings

'HE UTTERED HIS VOICE, THE EARTH MELTED'

2Ki. 19:20 - 2Ki. 19:22; 2Ki. 19:28 - 2Ki. 19:37.

At an earlier stage of the Assyrian invasion Hezekiah had sent to Isaiah, asking him to pray to his God for deliverance, and had received an explicit assurance that the invasion would be foiled. When the second stage was reached, and Hezekiah was personally summoned to surrender, by a letter which scoffed at Isaiah's promise, he himself prayed before the Lord. Isaiah does not seem to have been present, and may not have known of the prayer. At all events, the answer was given to him to give to the king; and it is noteworthy that, as in the former case, he does not himself come, but sends to Hezekiah. He did come when he had to bring a message of death, and again when he had to rebuke [2Ki. 20:1 - 2Ki. 20:21], but now he only sends. As the chosen speaker of Jehovah's will, he was mightier than kings, and must not imperil the dignity of the message by the behaviour of the messenger. In a sentence, Hezekiah's prayer is answered, and then the prophet, in Jehovah's name, bursts into a wonderful song of triumph over the defeated invader. 'I have heard.' That is enough. Hezekiah's prayer has, as it were, fired the fuse or pulled the trigger, and the explosion follows, and the shot is sped. 'Whereas thou hast prayed, . . . I have heard,' is ever true, and God's hearing is God's acting in answer. The methods of His response vary, the fact that He responds to the cry of despair driven to faith by extremity of need does not vary.

But it is noteworthy that, with that brief, sufficient assurance, Hezekiah, as it were, is put aside, and instead of three fighters in the field, the king, with God to back him, and on the other side Sennacherib, two only, appear. It is a duel between Jehovah and the arrogant heathen who had despised Him. Jerusalem appears for a moment, in a magnificent piece of poetical scorn, as despising and making gestures of contempt at the baffled would-be conqueror, as Miriam and her maidens did by the Red Sea. The city is 'virgin,' as many a fortress in other lands has been named, because uncaptured. But she, too, passes out of sight, and Jehovah and Sennacherib stand opposed on the field. God speaks now not 'concerning,' but to, him, and indicts him for insane pride, which was really a denial of dependence on God, and passionate antagonism to Him, as manifested not only in his war against Jehovah's people, but also in the tone of his insolent defiances of Hezekiah, in which he scoffed at the vain trust which the latter was placing in his God, and paralleled Jehovah with the gods of the nations whom he had already conquered [Isa. 19:12].

The designation of God, characteristic of Isaiah, as 'the Holy One of Israel,' expresses at once His elevation above, and separation from, all mundane, creatural limitations, and His special relation to His people, and both thoughts intensify Sennacherib's sin. The Highest, before whose transcendent height all human elevations sink to a uniform level, has so joined Israel to Himself that to touch it is to strike at Him, and to vaunt one's self against it is to be arrogant towards God. That mighty name has received wider extension now, but the wider sweep does not bring diminished depth, and lowly souls who take that name for their strong tower can still run into it and be safe from 'the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,' and the strongest foes.

There is tremendous scorn in the threat with which the divine address to Sennacherib ends. The dreaded world-conqueror is no more in God's eyes than a wild beast, which He can ring and lead as He will, and not even as formidable as that, but like a horse or a mule, that can easily be bridled and directed. What majestic assertion lies in these figures and in '*My* hook' and '*My* bridle!' How many conquerors and mighty men since then have been so mastered, and their schemes balked! Sennacherib had to return by 'the way that he came,' and to tramp back, foiled and disappointed, over all the weary miles which he had trodden before with such insolent confidence of victory. A modern parallel is Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow. But the same experience really befalls all who order life regardless of God. Their schemes may seem to succeed, but in deepest truth they fail, and the schemers never reach their goal.

In 2Ki. 19:29 the prophet turns away abruptly and almost contemptuously from Sennacherib to speak comfortably to Jerusalem, addressing Hezekiah first, but turning immediately to the people. The substance of his words to them is, first, the assurance that the Assyrian invasion had limits of time set to it by God; and, second, that beyond it lay prosperous times, when the prophetic visions of a flourishing Israel should be realised in fact. For two seed-times only field work was to be impossible on account of the Assyrian occupation, but it was to foam itself away, like a winter torrent, before a third season for sowing came round.

But how could this sequence of events, which required time for its unfolding, be ‘a sign’? We must somewhat modify our notions of a sign to understand the prophet. The Scripture usage does not only designate by that name a present event or thing which guarantees the truth of a prophecy, but it sometimes means an event, or sequence of events, in the future, which, when they have come to pass in accordance with the divine prediction of them, will shed back light on other divine words or acts, and demonstrate that they were of God. Thus Moses was given as a sign of his mission the worshipping in Mount Sinai, which was to take place only after the Exodus. So with Isaiah’s sign here. When the harvest of the third year was gathered in, then Israel would know that the prophet had spoken from God when he had sung Sennacherib’s defeat. For the present, Hezekiah and Judah had to live by faith; but when the deliverance was complete, and they were enjoying the fruits of their labours and of God’s salvation, then they could look back on the weary years, and recognise more clearly than while these were slowly passing how God had been in all the trouble, and had been carrying on His purposes of mercy through it all. And there will be a ‘sign’ for us in like manner when we look back from eternity on the transitory conflicts of earthly life, and are satisfied with the harvest which He has caused to spring from our poor sowings to the Spirit.

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23)2 Kings 19:28-37

2 Kings

'HE UTTERED HIS VOICE, THE EARTH MELTED'

2Ki. 19:20 - 2Ki. 19:22; 2Ki. 19:28 - 2Ki. 19:37.

At an earlier stage of the Assyrian invasion Hezekiah had sent to Isaiah, asking him to pray to his God for deliverance, and had received an explicit assurance that the invasion would be foiled. When the second stage was reached, and Hezekiah was personally summoned to surrender, by a letter which scoffed at Isaiah's promise, he himself prayed before the Lord. Isaiah does not seem to have been present, and may not have known of the prayer.

At all events, the answer was given to him to give to the king; and it is noteworthy that, as in the former case, he does not himself come, but sends to Hezekiah. He did come when he had to bring a message of death, and again when he had to rebuke [2Ki. 20:1 - 2Ki. 20:21], but now he only sends. As the chosen speaker of Jehovah's will, he was mightier than kings, and must not imperil the dignity of the message by the behaviour of the messenger. In a sentence, Hezekiah's prayer is answered, and then the prophet, in Jehovah's name, bursts into a wonderful song of triumph over the defeated invader. 'I have heard.' That is enough. Hezekiah's prayer has, as it were, fired the fuse or pulled the trigger, and the explosion follows, and the shot is sped. 'Whereas thou hast prayed, . . . I have heard,' is ever true, and God's hearing is God's acting in answer. The methods of His response vary, the fact that He responds to the cry of despair driven to faith by extremity of need does not vary.

But it is noteworthy that, with that brief, sufficient assurance, Hezekiah, as it were, is put aside, and instead of three fighters in the field, the king, with God to back him, and on the other side Sennacherib, two only, appear. It is a duel between Jehovah and the arrogant heathen who had despised Him. Jerusalem appears for a moment, in a magnificent piece of poetical scorn, as despising and making gestures of contempt at the baffled would-be conqueror, as Miriam and her maidens did by the Red Sea. The city is 'virgin,' as many a fortress in other lands has been named, because uncaptured. But she, too, passes out of sight, and Jehovah and Sennacherib stand opposed on the field. God speaks now not 'concerning,' but to, him, and indicts him for insane pride, which was really a denial of dependence on God, and passionate antagonism to Him, as manifested not only in his war against Jehovah's people, but also in the tone of his insolent defiances of Hezekiah, in which he scoffed at the vain trust which the latter was placing in his God, and paralleled Jehovah with the gods of the nations whom he had already conquered [Isa. 19:12].

The designation of God, characteristic of Isaiah, as 'the Holy One of Israel,' expresses at once His elevation above, and separation from, all mundane, creatural limitations, and His special relation to His people, and both thoughts intensify Sennacherib's sin. The Highest, before whose transcendent height all human elevations sink to a uniform level, has so joined Israel to Himself that to touch it is to strike at Him, and to vaunt one's self against it is to be arrogant towards God. That mighty name has received wider extension now, but the wider sweep does not bring diminished depth, and lowly souls who take that name for their strong tower can still run into it and be safe from 'the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,' and the strongest foes.

There is tremendous scorn in the threat with which the divine address to Sennacherib ends. The dreaded world-conqueror is no more in God's eyes than a wild beast, which He can ring and lead as He will, and not even as formidable as that, but like a horse or a mule, that can easily be bridled and directed. What majestic assertion lies in these figures and in '*My* hook' and '*My* bridle!' How many conquerors and mighty men since then have been so mastered, and their schemes balked! Sennacherib had to return by 'the way that he came,' and to tramp back, foiled and disappointed, over all the weary miles which he had trodden before with such insolent confidence of victory. A modern parallel is Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. But the same experience really befalls all who order life regardless of God. Their schemes may seem to succeed, but in deepest truth they fail, and the schemers never reach their goal.

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24)2 Kings 22:8-20

2 Kings

THE REDISCOVERED LAW AND ITS EFFECTS

2Ki. 22:8 - 2Ki. 22:20.

We get but a glimpse into a wild time of revolution and counter-revolution in the brief notice that the 'servants of Amon,' Josiah's father, conspired and murdered him in his palace, but were themselves killed by a popular rising, in which the 'people of the land made Josiah his son king in his stead,' and so no doubt balked the conspirators' plans. Poor boy! he was only eight years old when he made his first acquaintance with rebellion and bloodshed. There must have been some wise heads and strong arms and loyal hearts round him, but their names have perished. The name of David was still a spell in Judah, and guarded his childish descendant's royal rights. In the eighteenth year of his reign, the twenty-sixth of his age, he felt himself firm enough in the saddle to begin a work of religious reformation, and the first reward of his zeal was the finding of the book of the law. Josiah, like the rest of us, gained fuller knowledge of God's will in the act of trying to do it so far as he knew it. 'Light is sown for the upright.'

I. We have, first, the discovery of the law. The important and complicated critical questions raised by the narrative cannot be discussed here, nor do they affect the broad lines of teaching in the incident. Nothing is more truthful-like than the statement that, in course of the repairs of the Temple, the book should be found,-probably in the holiest place, to which the high priest would have exclusive access. How it came to have been lost is a more puzzling question; but if we recall that seventy-five years had passed since Hezekiah, and that these were almost entirely years of apostasy and of tumult, we shall not wonder that it was so. Unvalued things easily slip out of sight, and if the preservation of Scripture depended on the estimation which some of us have of it, it would have been lost long ago. But the fact of the loss suggests the wonder of the preservation. It would appear that this copy was the only one existing,-at all events, the only one known. It alone transmitted the law to later days, like some slender thread of water that finds its way through the sand and brings the river down to broad plains beyond. Think of the millions of copies now, and the one dusty, forgotten roll tossing unregarded in the dilapidated Temple, and be thankful for the Providence that has watched over the transmission. Let us take care, too, that the whole Scripture is not as much lost to us, though we have half a dozen Bibles each, as the roll was to Josiah and his men.

Hilkiah's announcement to Shaphan has a ring of wonder and of awe in it. It sounds as if he had not known that such a book was anywhere in the Temple. And it is noteworthy that not he, but Shaphan, is said to have read it. Perhaps he could not,-though, if he did not, how did he know what the book was? At all events, he and Shaphan seem to have felt the importance of the find, and to have consulted what was to be done. Observe how the latter goes cautiously to work, and at first only says that he has received 'a book.' He gives it no name, but leaves it to tell its own story,-which it was then, and is still, well able to do. Scripture is its own best credentials and witnesses whence it comes. Again Shaphan is the reader, as it was natural that a 'scribe' should be, and again the possibility is that Josiah could not read.

II. One can easily picture the scene while the reader's voice went steadily through the commandments, threatenings, and promises,-the deepening eagerness of the king, the gradual shaping out before his conscience of God's ideal for him and his people, and the gradual waking of the sense of sin in him, like a dormant serpent beginning to stir in the first spring sunshine.

The effect of God's law on the sinful heart is vividly pictured in Josiah's emotion. 'By the law is the knowledge of sin.' To many of us that law, in spite of our outward knowledge of it, is as completely absent from our consciousness as it had been from the most ignorant of Josiah's subjects; and if for once its searchlight were thrown into the hidden corners of our hearts and lives, it would show up in dreadful clearness the skulking foes that are stealing to assail us, and the foul things that have made good their lodgment in our hearts and lives. It always makes an epoch in a life when it is really brought to the standard of God’s law; and it is well for us if, like Josiah, we rend our clothes, or rather ‘our heart, and not our garments,’ and take home the conviction, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’

The dread of punishment sprang up in the young king’s heart, and though that emotion is not the highest motive for seeking the Lord, it is not an unworthy one, and is meant to lead on to nobler ones than itself. There is too much unwillingness, in many modern conceptions of Christ’s gospel, to recognise the place which the apprehension of personal evil consequences from sin has in the initial stages of the process by which we are ‘translated from the kingdom of darkness into that of God’s dear Son.’

III. The message to Huldah is remarkable. The persons sent with it show its importance. The high priest, the royal secretary, and one of the king’s personal attendants, who was, no doubt, in his confidence, and two other influential men, one of whom, Ahikam, is known as Jeremiah’s staunch friend, would make some stir in ‘the second quarter,’ on their way to the modest house of the keeper of the wardrobe. The weight and number of the deputation did honour to the prophetess, as well as showed the king’s anxiety as to the matter in hand. Jeremiah and Zephaniah were both living at this time, and we do not know why Huldah was preferred. Perhaps she was more accessible. But conjecture is idle. Enough that she was recognised as having, and declared herself to have, direct authoritative communications from God.

For what did Josiah need to inquire of the Lord ‘concerning the words of this book’? They were plain enough. Did he hope to have their sternness somewhat mollified by the words of a prophetess who might be more amenable to entreaties or personal considerations than the unalterable page was? Evidently he recognised Huldah as speaking with divine authority, and he might have known that two depositories of God’s voice could not contradict each other. But possibly his embassy simply reflected his extreme perturbation and alarm, and like many another man when God’s law startles him into consciousness of sin, he betook himself to one who was supposed to be in God’s counsels, half hoping for a mitigated sentence, and half uncertain of what he really wished. He confusedly groped for some support or guide. But, confused as he was, his message to the prophetess implied repentance, eager desire to know what to do, and humble docility. If dread of evil consequences leads us to such a temper, we shall hear, as Josiah did, answers of peace as authoritative and divine as were the threatenings that brought us to our senses and our knees.

IV. The answer which Josiah received falls into two parts, the former of which confirms the threatenings of evil to Jerusalem, while the latter casts a gleam athwart the thundercloud, and promises Josiah escape from the national calamities. Observe the difference in the designation given him in the two parts. When the threatenings are confirmed, his individuality is, as it were, sunk; for that part of the message applies to any and every member of the nation, and therefore he is simply called 'the man that sent you.' Any other man would have received the same answer. But when his own fate is to be disclosed, then he is 'the king of Judah, who sent you,' and is described by the official position which set him apart from his subjects.

Huldah has but to confirm the dread predictions of evil which the roll had contained. What else can a faithful messenger of God do than reiterate its threatenings? Vainly do men seek to induce the living prophet to soften down God's own warnings. Foolishly do they think that the messenger or the messenger's Sender has any 'pleasure in the death of the wicked'; and as foolishly do they take the message to be unkind, for surely to warn that destruction waits the evildoer is gracious. The signal-man who waves the red flag to stop the train rushing to ruin is a friend. Huldah was serving Judah best by plain reiteration of the 'words of the book.'

But the second half of her message told that in wrath God remembered mercy. And that is for ever true. His thunderbolts do not strike indiscriminately, even when they smite a nation. Judah's corruption had gone too far for recovery, and the carcase called for the gathering together of the vultures, but Josiah's penitence was not in vain. 'I have heard thee' is always said to the true penitent, and even if he is involved in widespread retribution, its strokes become different to him. Josiah was assured that the evil should not come in his days. But Huldah's promise seems contradicted by the circumstances of his death. It was a strange kind of being gathered to his grave in peace when he fell on the fatal field of Megiddo, and 'his servants carried him in a chariot dead, . . . and buried him in his own sepulchre' [2Ki. 23:30]. But the promise is fulfilled in its real meaning by the fact that the threatenings which he was inquiring about did not fall on Judah in his time, and so far as these were concerned, he *did* come to his grave in peace.

25)2 Kings 25:1-12

2 Kings

THE END

2Ki. 25:1 - 2Ki. 25:12.

Eighteen months of long-drawn-out misery and daily increasing famine preceded the fall of the doomed city. The siege was a blockade. No assaults by the enemy, nor sorties by the inhabitants, are narrated, but the former grimly and watchfully drew their net closer, and the latter sat still in their despair. The passionless tone of the narrative here is very remarkable. Not a word escapes the writer to show his feelings, though he is telling his country's fall. We must turn to Lamentations for sighs and groans. There we have the emotions of devout hearts; here we have the calm record of God's judgment. It is all one long sentence, for in the Hebrew each verse begins with 'and,' clause heaped on clause, as if each were a footstep of the destroying angel in his slow, irresistible march.

The narrative falls into two principal parts-the fate of the king and that of the city. It is unnecessary to dwell on the details. The confusion of counsels, the party strife, the fierce hatred of God's prophet, the agony of famine, are all suppressed here, but painted with terrible vividness in the Book of Jeremiah. At last the fatal day came. On the north side a breach was made in the wall, and through it the fierce besiegers poured-the 'princes of the king of Babylon,' with their idolatrous and barbarous names, 'came in, and sat in the middle gate.' It was night. The sudden appearance of the conquerors in the heart of the city shot panic into the feeble king and his 'men of war' who had never struck one blow for deliverance; and they hurried under cover of darkness, and hidden between two walls, down the ravine to the king’s garden, once the scene of pleasure, but waste now, and thence, as best they could, round or over Olivet to the road to Jericho. The king’s flight by night had been foretold by Ezekiel far away in captivity [Eze. 12:12]; and the same prophet received on that very day a divine message announcing the fall of the city, and bidding him ‘write thee the name of the day, even of this selfsame day,’ as that on which the king of Babylon ‘drew close unto Jerusalem’ [Eze. 24:1 et seq.].

Down the rocky road went the flying host, with ‘their shaftless, broken bows’ closely followed by the avenging foe with ‘red pursuing spear.’ Where Israel had first set foot on its inheritance, the last king of David’s line was captured and his monarchy shattered. The scene of the first victory, when Jericho fell before unarmed men trusting in God, was the scene of the last defeat. The spot where the covenant was renewed, and the reproach of Israel rolled away, was the spot where the broken covenant was finally avenged and abrogated. The end came back to the beginning, and the cradle was the coffin.

Away up to Riblah, in the far north, under the shadow of Lebanon, the captive was dragged to meet the conqueror. The name of each is a profession of belief. The one means ‘Jehovah is righteousness’; the other, ‘Nebo, protect the crown.’ The idol seemed to have overcome, but the defeat of the unbelieving confessor of the true God at the hands of the idolater is really the victory of the righteousness which the name celebrated and the bearer of the name insulted. His murdered sons were the last sight which he saw before he was blinded, according to the ferocious practice of the East. It was ingenuity of cruelty to let him see for so long, and then to give him that as the last thing seen, and therefore often remembered. Note how the enigma of Ezekiel’s prophecy [Eze. 12:13] and its apparent contradiction of Jeremiah’s [Jer. 32:4; Jer. 34:3] are reconciled, and learn how easily the fact, when it comes, clears the riddles of prophecy, and how easily, probably, the whole facts, if we knew them, would clear the difficulties of Scripture history. The blinded king was harmless, but according to Jewish tradition, was set to work in a mill [though that is probably only an application of Samson’s story], and according to Jeremiah [Jer. 52:11], was kept in prison till his death. So ended the monarchy of Judah.

The fate of the city was not settled for a month, during which, no doubt, there was much consultation at Riblah whether to garrison or destroy it. The king of Babylon did not go in person, but despatched a force commanded by a high officer, to burn palace, Temple, the more important houses [the poorer people would probably be lodged in huts not worth burning], and to raze the fortifications. In accordance with the practice of the great Eastern despotisms, deportation followed victory-a clever though cruel device for securing conquests. But some were left behind; for the land, if deserted, would have fallen out of cultivation, and been profitless to Babylon. The bulk of the people of Jerusalem, the fugitives who had joined the invaders during the siege, and the mass of the general population, were carried off, in such a long string of misery as we may still see on the monuments, and a handful left behind, too poor to plot, and stirred to diligence by necessity. So ended the possession by Israel of its promised inheritance.

Now this fall of Jerusalem is like an object-lesson to teach everlasting truth as to the retributive providence of God. What does it say?

It declares plainly what brings down God's judgments. The terms on which Israel prospered and held its land were obedience to God's law. We cannot directly apply the principles of God's government of it to modern nations. The present analogue of Israel is the Church, not the nation. But when all deductions have been made, it is still true that a nation's religious attitude is a most potent factor in its prosperous development. It is not accidental that, on the whole, stagnant Europe and America are Roman Catholic, and the progressive parts Protestant. Nor was it causes independent of religion that scattered a decaying Christianity in the lands of the Eastern Church before the onslaught of wild Arabs, who, at all events, did believe in Allah. So there are abundant lessons for politics and sociology in the story of Jerusalem's fall.

But these lessons have direct application to the individual and to the Christian Church. All departure from God is ruin. We slay ourselves by forsaking Him, and every sinner is a suicide. We live under a moral government, and in a system of things so knit together as that even here every transgression receives its just recompense-if not visibly and palpably in outward circumstances, yet really and punctually in effects on mind and heart, which are more solemn and awful. ‘Behold the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner.’ Sin and sorrow are root and fruit.

Especially does that crash of Jerusalem’s fall thunder the lesson to all churches that their life and prosperity are inseparably connected with faithful obedience and turning away from all worldliness, which is idolatry. They stand in the place that was made empty by Israel’s later fall. Our very privileges call us to beware. ‘Because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith.’ That great seven-branched candlestick was removed out of its place, and all that is left of it is its sculptured image among the spoils on the triumphal arch to its captor. Other lesser candlesticks have been removed from their places, and Turkish oppression brings night where Sardis and Laodicea once gave a feeble light. The warning is needed to-day; for worldliness is rampant in the Church. ‘If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee.’ The fall of Jerusalem is not merely a tragic story from the past. It is a revelation, for the present, of the everlasting truth, that the professing people of God deserve and receive the sorest chastisement, if they turn again to folly.

Further, we learn the method of present retribution. Nebuchadnezzar knew nothing of the purposes which he fulfilled. ‘He meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so.’ He was but the ‘axe’ with which God hewed. Therefore, though he was God’s tool, he was also responsible, and would be punished even for performing God’s ‘whole work upon Jerusalem,’ because of ‘the glory of his high looks.’ The retribution of disobedience, so far as that retribution is outward, needs no ‘miracle.’ The ordinary operations of Providence amply suffice to bring it. If God wills to sting, He will ‘hiss for the fly,’ and it will come. The ferocity and ambition of a grim and bloody despot, impelled by vainglory and lust of cruel conquest, do God’s work, and yet the doing is sin. The world is full of God’s instruments, and He sends punishments by the ordinary play of motives and circumstances, which we best understand when we see behind all His mighty hand and sovereign will. The short-sighted view of history says ‘Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem B.C. so and so,’ and then discourses about the tendencies of which Babylonia was exponent and creature. The deeper view says, God smote the disobedient city, as He had said, and Nebuchadnezzar was ‘the rod of His anger.’

Again, we learn the Divine reluctance to smite. More than four hundred years had passed since Solomon began idolatry, and steadily, through all that time, a stream of prophecy of varying force and width had flowed, while smaller disasters had confirmed the prophets’ voices. ‘Rising up early and sending’ his servants, God had been in earnest in seeking to save Israel from itself. Men said then, ‘Where is the promise of His coming?’ and mocked His warnings and would none of His reproof; but at last the hour struck and the crash came. ‘As a dream when one awaketh; so, O Lord! when Thou awakest, Thou shalt despise their image.’ His judgment seems to slumber, but its eyes are open, and it remains inactive, that His long-suffering may have free scope. As long as His gaze can discern the possibility of repentance, He will not strike; and when that is hopeless, He will not delay. The explanation of the marvellous tolerance of evil which sometimes tries faith and always evokes wonder, lies in the great words, which might well be written over the chair of every teacher of history: ‘The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us-ward.’ Alas, that that divine patience should ever be twisted into the ground of indurated disobedience! ‘Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.’

God’s reluctance to punish is no reason for doubting that He will. Judgment is His ‘strange work,’ less congenial, if we may so paraphrase that strong word of the prophet’ s, than pure mercy, but it will be done nevertheless. The tears over Jerusalem that witnessed Christ’s sorrow did not blind the eyes like a flame of fire, nor stay the outstretched hand of the Judge, when the time of her final fall came. The longer the delay, the worse the ruin. The more protracted the respite and the fuller it has been of entreaties to return, the more terrible the punishment. ‘Behold, therefore, the goodness and severity of God: towards them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in His goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.’

1 Chronicles

1) 1 CHRONICLES 4:23
2) 1 CHRONICLES 6:32
3) 1 CHRONICLES 12:33
4) 1 CHRONICLES 22:6-16
5) 1 CHRONICLES 28:1-10
6) 1 CHRONICLES 29:30

1) 1 Chronicles 4:23

1 Chronicles

THE KING'S POTTERS

1Ch. 4:23.

In these dry lists of names which abound in Chronicles, we now and then come across points of interest, oases in the desert, which need but to be pondered sympathetically to yield interesting suggestions. Here for example, buried in a dreary genealogical table, is a little touch which repays meditating on. Among the members of the tribe of Judah were a hereditary caste of potters who lived in 'Netaim and Gederah,' if we adhere to the Revised Version's text, or 'among plantations and hedges' if we prefer the margin. But they are also described as dwelling 'with the king.' That can only mean on the royal estates, for the king himself resided in Jerusalem. He, however, held large domains in the territory of Judah, on some of which these ceramic artists were settled down and followed their calling. They were kept on the royal estates and kept in comfort, not needing to till, but fed and cared for, that they might be free to mould, out of common clay, forms of beauty and 'vessels meet for the master's use.' Surely we may read into the brief statement of the text a meaning of which the writer of it never dreamt, and see in the description of these forgotten artisans, a symbol of our Christian relations to our Lord and of our life's work.

I. We, too, dwell with the King.

The Davidic king was in Jerusalem, and the potters were 'among plantations and hedges,' yet in a real sense they 'dwelt with the king,' though some of them might never have seen his face or trod the streets of the sacred city. Perhaps now and then he came to visit them on his outlying domains, but they were always parts of his household. And have we, Christ’s servants, not His gracious parting word: ‘I am with you always’? True, we are not beside Him in the great city, but He is beside us in His outlying domains, and we may be with Him in His glory, if while we still outwardly live among the ‘plantations and hedges’ of this life, we dwell in spirit, by faith and aspiration, with our risen and ascended Lord. If we so ‘dwell with the King,’ He will dwell with us, and fill our humble abode with the radiance of His presence, ‘making that place of His feet glorious.’ That He should be with us is supreme condescension, that we should be with Him is the perfection of exaltation. How low He stoops, how high we can rise! The vigour of our Christian life largely depends on our keeping vivid the consciousness of our communion with Jesus and the sense of His real presence with us. How life’s burdens would be lightened if we faced them all in the strength of the felt nearness of our Lord! How impossible it would be that we should ever feel the dreary sense of solitude, if we felt that unseen, but most real, Presence wrapping us round! It is only when our faith in it has fallen asleep that any earthly good allures, or any earthly evil frightens us. To be sure, in our thrilling consciousness, that we dwell with Jesus is an impenetrable cuirass that blunts the points of all arrows and keeps the breast that wears it unwounded in the fray. The world has no voices which can make themselves heard above that low sovereign whisper: ‘I am with you always, even to the end of the world’-and after the end has come, then we shall be with Him.

But we find in this notice a hint that leads us in yet another direction. They ‘dwelt with the king’ in the sense that they were housed and cared for on his lands. And in like manner, the true conception of the Christian life is that each of us is ‘a sojourner with Thee,’ set down on Christ’s domains, and looked after by Him in regard to provision for outward wants. We have nothing in property, but all is His and held by His gift and to be used for Him. The slave owns nothing. The patch of ground which he cultivates for his food and what grows on it, are his master’ s. These workmen were not slaves, but they were not owners either. And we hold nothing as our own, if we are true to the terms on which it is given us to hold.

So if we rightly appreciate our position as dwelling on the King's lands, our delusion of possession will vanish, and we shall feel more keenly the pressure of responsibility while we feel less keenly the grip of anxiety. We are for the time being entrusted with a tiny piece of the royal estates. Let us not strut about as if we were owners, nor be for ever afraid that we shall not have enough for our needs. One sometimes comes on a model village close to the gates of some ducal palace, and notes how the lordly owner's honour prompts its being kept up to a high standard of comfort and beauty. We may be sure that the potters were well lodged and looked after, and that care for their personal wants was shifted from their shoulders to the king' s. So should ours be. He will not leave His servants to starve. They should not dishonour Him and disturb themselves by worries and cares that would be reasonable only if they had no Provider. He has said, 'All things are given to Me of My Father,' and He gives us all that God has given Him.

II. We dwell with the King for His work.

The king's potters had not to till the land nor do any work but to mould clay into vessels for use and beauty. For that purpose they had their huts and bits of ground assigned them. So with us, Christ has a purpose in His provision for us. We are set down on His domains, and we enjoy His presence and providing in order that, set free from carking cares and low ends, we may, with free and joyous hearts, yield ourselves to His joyful service. The law of our life should be that we please not ourselves, nor consult our own will in choosing our tasks, nor seek our own profit or gratification in doing them, but ever ask of Him: 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' and when the answer comes, as come it will to all who ask with real desire to learn and with real inclination to do His will, that we 'make haste and delay not, but make haste to keep His commandments.' The spirit which should animate our active lives is plainly enough taught us in that little word, they 'dwelt with the king for his work.'

Nor are we to forget that, in a very profound sense, dwelling with the King must go before doing His work. Unless we are living continually under the operation of the stimulus of communion with Jesus, we shall have neither quickness of ear to know what He wishes us to do, nor any resolute concentration of ourselves on our Christ-appointed tasks. The spring of all noble living is communion with noble ideals, and fellowship with Jesus sets men agoing, as nothing else will, in practical lives of obedience to Jesus. Time given to silent, retired meditation on that sweet, sacred bond that knits the believing soul to the redeeming Lord is not lost with reference to active work for Jesus. The meditative and the practical life are not antagonistic, but complementary, Mary and Martha are sisters, though sometimes they differ, and foolish people try to set them against each other.

But we must beware of a common misconception of what the King's work is. The royal potters did not make only things of beauty, but very common vessels designed for common and ignoble uses. There were vessels of dishonour dried in their kilns as well as vessels 'meet for the master's use.' There is a usual and lamentable narrowing of the term 'Christian work,' to certain conventional forms of service, which has done and is doing an immense amount of harm. The King's work is far wider in scope than teaching in Sunday-schools, or visiting the sick, or any similar acts that are usually labelled with the name. It covers all the common duties of life. A shallow religion tickets some selected items with the name; a robuster, truer conception extends the designation to everything. It is not only when we are definitely trying to bring others into touch with Jesus that we are doing Him service, but we may be equally serving Him in everything. The difference between the king's work and the poor potters' own lay not so much in the nature as in the motive of it, and whatever we do for Christ's sake and with a view to His will is work that He owns, while a regard to self in our motive or in our end decisively strikes any service tainted by it out of the category.

We are to hallow all our deeds by drawing the motive for them from the King and by laying the fruits of them at His feet. Thus, and only thus, will the most 'secular' actions be sanctified and the narrowest life be widened to contain a present Christ.

There are subsidiary motives which may legitimately blend with the supreme one. The potters would be stimulated to work hard and with their utmost skill when they thought of how well they were paid in house and store for their work. We have ample reasons for dedicating our whole selves to Jesus when we think of His gift of Himself to us, of His wages beforehand, of His joyful presence with His eye ever on us, marking our purity of motive and our diligence.

There is a final thought that may well stimulate us to put all our skill and effort into our work. The potters' work went to Jerusalem. It was for the king. What can be too good for him? He will see it, therefore let us put our best into it. And we shall see it too, when we too enter 'the city of the great King.' Jars that perhaps were wrought by these very workmen of whom we have been speaking turn up to-day in the excavations in Palestine. So much has perished and they remain, speaking symbols of the solemn truth that nothing human ever dies. Our 'works do follow us.' Let us so live that these may be 'found unto praise and honour and glory' at the appearing of 'the King.'

2) 1 Chronicles 6:32

1 Chronicles

DAVID'S CHORISTERS

1Ch. 6:32.

This brief note is buried in the catalogue of the singers appointed by David for 'the service of song in the house of the Lord.' The waves of their choral praise have long ages since ceased to eddy round the 'tabernacle of the tent of meeting,' and all that is left of their melodious companies is a dry list of names, in spite of which the dead owners of them are nameless. But the chronicler's description of them may carry some lessons for us, for is not the Church of Christ a choir, chosen to 'shew forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvellous light'? We take a permissible liberty with this fragment, when we use it to point lessons that may help that great band of choristers who are charged with the office of making the name of Jesus ring through the world. Now, in making such a use of the text, we may linger on each important word in it and find each fruitful in suggestions which we shall be the better for expanding in our own meditations.

We pause on the first word, which is rendered in the Authorised and Revised Versions ‘waited,’ and in the margin of the latter ‘stood.’ The former rendering brings into prominence the mental attitude with which the singers held themselves ready to take their turns in the service, the latter points rather to their bodily attitude as they fulfilled their office. We get a picture of the ranked files gathered round their three leaders, Heman, Asaph, and Ethan. These three names are familiar to us from the Psalter, but how all the ranks behind them have fallen dim to us, and how their song has floated into inaudible distance! They ‘stood,’ a melodious multitude, girt and attent on their song, or waiting their turn to fill the else silent air with the high praises of Jehovah, and glad when it came to their turn to open their lips in full-throated melody.

Now may we not catch the spirit of that long vanished chorus, and find in the two possible renderings of this word a twofold example, the faithful following of which would put new vigour into our service? We are called to a loftier office, and have heavenly harmonies entrusted to us to be made vocal by our lips, compared with which theirs were poor. ‘They waited on’ their office, and shall not we, in a higher fashion, wait on our ministry, and suffer no inferior claims to block our way or hamper our preparedness to discharge it? To let ourselves be entangled with ‘the affairs of this life,’ or to ‘drowse in idle cell,’ sleepily letting summonses that should wake us to work sound unheeded and almost unheard, is flagrant despite done to our high vocation as Christians. ‘They also serve who only stand and wait,’ but not if in their waiting their eyes are straying everywhere but to their Master’s pointing hand or directing eye. The world is full of voices calling Christ’s folk to help; but what a host of so-called Christians fail to hear these piteous and despairing cries, because the noise of their own whims, fancies, and self-centred desires keeps buzzing in their ears. A constant accompaniment of deafness is constant noises in the head; and the Christians who are hardest of hearing when Christ calls are generally afflicted with noises which are probably the cause, and not merely an accompaniment, of their deafness. For indeed it demands no little detachment of spirit from self and sense, from the world and its clamant suitors, if a Christian soul is to be ready to mark the first signal of the great Conductor’s baton, and to answer the lightest whisper, intrusting it with a task for Him, with its self-consecrating ‘Here am I. Send me.’

It used to be said that they who watched for providences never wanted providences to watch for; it is equally true that they who are on the watch for opportunities for service never fail to find them, and that ears pricked to ‘hear what God the Lord shall speak,’ summoning to work for Him, will not listen in vain. Paul saw in a vision ‘a *man* of Macedonia’ begging for his help, and ‘straightway’ he concluded that ‘*God* had called’ him to preach in Europe. Happy are these Christian workers who hear God’s voice speaking through men’s needs, and recognise a divine imperative in human cries!

May we not see in the attitude of David’s choristers as they sang, hints for our own discharge of the tasks of our Christian service? There was a curse of old on him who did the work of the Lord ‘negligently,’ and its weight falls still on workers and work. For who can measure the harm done to the Christian life of the negligent worker, and who can expect any blessing to come either to him or to others from such half-hearted seeming service? The devil’s kingdom is not to be cast down nor Christ’s to be builded up by workers who put less than their whole selves, the entire weight of their bodies, into their toil. A pavior on the street brings down his rammer at every stroke with an accompanying exclamation expressing effort, and there is no place in Christ’s service for dainty people who will not sweat at their task, and are in mortal fear of over-work. Strenuousness, the gathering together of all our powers, are implied in the attitude of Heman and his band as they ‘stood’ in their office. Idle revellers might loll on their rose-strewn couches as they ‘sing idle songs to the sound of the viol and devise for themselves instruments of music, like David,’ but the austerer choir of the Temple despised ease, and stood ready for service and in the best bodily posture for song.

The second important word of the text brings other thoughts no less valuable and rich in practical counsel. The singers in the Temple stood in their ‘office,’ which was song. Their special work was praise. And that is the highest task of the Church. As a matter of fact, every period of quickened earnestness in the Church’s life has been a period marked by a great outburst of Christian song. All intense emotion seeks expression in poetry, and music is the natural speech of a vivid faith. Luther chanted the Marseillaise of the Reformation, ‘A safe stronghold our God is still,’ and many another sweet strain blended strangely with the fiery and sometimes savage words from his lips. The Scottish Reformation, grim in some of its features as it was, had yet its ‘Gude and Godly Ballads.’ At the birth of Methodism, as round the cradle at Bethlehem, hovered as it were angel voices singing, ‘Glory to God in the highest.’ A flock of singing birds let loose attends every revival of Christian life.

The Church’s praise is the noblest expression of the Church’s life. Its hymns go deeper than its creeds, touch hearts more to the quick, minister to the faith which they enshrine, and often draw others to see the preciousness of the Christ whom they celebrate. How little we should have known of Old Testament religion, notwithstanding law and prophets, if the Psalter had perished!

And it is true, in a very deep sense, that we shall do more for Christ and men by voicing our own deep thankfulness for His great gifts and speaking simply our valuation of, and our thankfulness for, what we draw from Him than by any other form of so-called Christian work. We can offend none by saying: ‘We have found the Messias,’ and are adoringly glad that we have. The most effectual way of moving other souls to participate in our joy is to let our joy speak. ‘If you wish me to weep,’ your own tears must not be held back, and if you wish others to know the preciousness of Christ, you must ring out His name with fervour of emotion and the triumphant confidence. We are the ‘secretaries of God’s praise,’ as George Herbert has it, for we have possession of His greatest gift, and have learned to know Him in loftier fashion than Heman’s choristers dreamed of, having seen ‘the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,’ and tasted the sweetness of redeeming love. The Apocalyptic seer sets forth a great truth when he tells us that he first heard a new song from the lips of the representatives of the Church, who could sing, ‘Thou wast slain and didst redeem us to God with Thy blood,’ and then heard their adoration echoed from ‘many angels round about the throne,’ and finally heard the song reverberated from every created thing in heaven and earth, in the sea and all deep places. A praising Church has experiences of its own which angels cannot share, and it sets in motion the great sea of praise whose surges break in music and roll from every side of the universe in melodious thunder to the great white throne. Without our song even angel voices would lack somewhat.

‘God said, “A praise is in Mine ear;
There is no doubt in it, no fear:
Clearer loves sound other ways:
I miss My little human praise.”‘

The song of the redeemed has in it a minor strain that gives a sweetness far more poignant than belongs to those who cannot say: ‘Out of the depths I cried unto Thee.’ ‘The sweetest songs are those which tell of saddest thought,’ and recount experiences of conquered sin and life springing from death.

But it is also true that no kind of Christian service will be effectual, if it lacks the element of grateful praise as its motive and mainspring. Perhaps there would be fewer complaints of toiling all night and wearily hauling in empty nets, if the nets were oftener let down not only ‘at Thy word’ but with glad remembrance of the fishermen’s debt to Jesus, and in the spirit of praise. When all our work is a sacrifice of praise, it is pleasing to God and profitable to ourselves and to others. If we would oftener bethink ourselves, and herald every deed with a silent dedication of it and of ourselves to Him who died for us, we should less often have to complain that we have sowed much and brought back little. A pinch of incense cast into the common domestic fire makes its flame sacrificial and fragrant.

The last important word of the text is also fertile in hints for us. The singers stood in their office ‘according to their order.’ That last expression may either refer to rotation of service or to distribution of parts in the chorus. They did not sing in unison, grand as the effect of such a song from a multitude sometimes is, but they had their several parts. The harmonious complexity of a great chorus is the ideal for the Church. Paul puts the same thought in a sterner metaphor when he tells the Colossian Christians that he joys ‘beholding your order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ,’ where he is evidently thinking of the Roman legion with its rigid discipline and its solid, irresistible, ranked weight. Division of function and consequent concordant action of different parts is the lesson taught by both metaphors, and by the many modern examples of the immense results gained in machinery that almost simulates vital action, and by organisations for great purposes in which men combine. The Church should be the highest example of such combination, for it is the shrine of the noblest life, even the life of its indwelling Lord. Every member of it should have and know his place. Every Christian should know his part in the great chorus, for he has a part, even if it is only that of tinkling the triangle in the orchestra or beating a drum. That division of function and concordance of action apply to all forms of the Church's action, and are enforced most chiefly by the great Apostolic metaphor of the body and its members. Paul did not delight in 'uniformity.' Inferiors calling themselves his successors have often aimed at enforcing it, but nature has been too strong for them, and the hedge will grow its own way in spite of pedants' shears. 'If the whole body were an eye, where the hearing?' The monotony of a church in which uniformity was the ideal would be intolerable. The chorus has its parts, and the soprano cannot say to the bass, 'I have no need of you,' nor the bass to the tenor, 'I have no need of thee.'

So let us see that we find our own place, and see that we fill it, singing our own part lustily, and not being either confused or made dumb because another has other notes to sing than are written on our score. Let us recognise unity made more melodious by diversity, the importance of the humblest, and 'having gifts differing according to the grace given unto us let us wait on our ministry,' and stand in our office according to our order.

3) 1 Chronicles 12:33

1 Chronicles

DRILL AND ENTHUSIASM

1Ch. 12:33.

These words come from the muster-roll of the hastily raised army that brought David up to Hebron and made him King. The catalogue abounds in brief characterisations of the qualities of each tribe's contingent. For example, Issachar had 'understanding of the times.' Our text is spoken of the warriors of Zebulon, who had left their hills and their flocks in the far north, and poured down from their seats by the blue waters of Tiberias to gather round their king. They were not only like their brethren expert in war and fully equipped, but they had some measure of discipline too, a rare thing in the days when there were no standing armies. They ‘could keep rank,’ could march together, had been drilled to some unanimity of step and action, could work and fight together, were an army, not a crowd, and not only so, but also ‘they were not of double heart.’ Each man, and the whole body, had a brave single resolve; they had one spirit animating the whole, and that was to make David king, an enthusiastic loyalty which made them brave, and a discipline which kept the courage from running to waste.

I take, then, this text as bringing before us two very important characteristics which ought to be found in every Christian church, and without which no real prosperity and growth is possible. These two may be put very briefly: organisation and enthusiastic devotion. These are both important, but in very different degrees. Organisation without valour is in a worse plight than valour without organisation. The one is fundamental, the other secondary. The one is the true cause, so far as men are concerned, of victory, the other is but the instrument by which the cause works. There have been many victories won by undisciplined valour, but disciplined cowardice and apathy come to no good.

These two have been separated and made antagonistic, and churches are to be found which glory in the one, and others in the other. Some have gone in for order, and are like butterflies in a cabinet all ticketed and displayed in place, but a pin is run through their bodies and they are dead; and others have prided themselves on unfettered freedom, and been not an army, but a mob. The true relation, of course, is that life should shape and inform organisation, and organisation should preserve, manifest and obey life. There must be body to hold spirit, there must be spirit to keep body from rotting.

I. Organisation.

This is not the strong point of Nonconformist churches. We pride ourselves on our individualism, and that is all very well. We believe in direct access of each soul to Christ, that men must come to Him one by one, that religion is purely a personal matter, and the firmness with which we hold this tends to make us weak in combined action. It cannot be truthfully denied that both in the relations of our churches to one another, and in the internal organisation of these, we are and have been too loosely compacted, and have forgotten that two is more than one *plus* one, so that we are only helping to redress the balance a little when we insist upon the importance of organisation in our churches.

And first of all-remember the principles in subordination to which our organisation must be framed.

What are we united by? Common love and faith to Christ, or rather Christ Himself. ‘One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren.’ So there must be nothing in our organisation which is inconsistent with Christ’s supreme place among us, and with our individual obedience to Him. There are to be no ‘lords over God’s heritage’ in the Church of Christ. There are churches in which the temptation to be such affects the official chiefly, and there are others, with a different polity, in which it is chiefly a Diotrephes, who loves to have pre-eminence. Character, zeal, social station, even wealth will always confer a certain influence, and their possessors will be tempted to set up their own will or opinions as dominant in the Church. Such men are sinning against the very bond of Christian union. Organisation which is bought by investing one man with authority, is too dearly purchased at the cost of individual development on the individual’s own lines. A row of clipped yew-trees is not an inspiring sight.

And yet again what are we organised for? Not merely for our own growth or spiritual advantage, but also, and more especially, for spreading faith in Christ and advancing His glory. All our organisation, then, is but an arrangement for doing our work, and if it hinders that, it is cumbrous and must be cut away or modified, at all hazards. Ecclesiastical martinets are still to be found, to whom drill is all-important, and who see no use in irregular valour, but they are a diminishing number, and they may be recommended to ponder the old wise saying: ‘Where no oxen are, the crib is clean, but much increase is by the strength of the ox.’ If the one aim is a ‘clean crib’ the best way to secure that is to keep it empty; but if a harvest is the aim, there must be cultivation, and one must accept the consequences of having a strong team to plough. The end of drill is fighting. The parade-ground and its exercising is in order that a corps may be hurled against the enemy, or may stand unmoved, like a solid breakwater against a charge which it flings off in idle spray, and the end of the Church’s organisation is that it may move *en masse*, without waste, against the enemy.

But a further guiding principle to shape Christian organisation is that of the Church as the body of Christ. That requires that there shall be work for every member. Christ has endowed His members with varying gifts, powers, opportunities, and has set them in diverse circumstances, that each may give his own contribution to the general stock of work. Our theory is that each man has his own proper gift from God, ‘one after this manner, and another after that.’ But what is our practice? Take any congregation of Christian people in any of our churches, and especially in the Free Churches of which I know most, and is there anything like this wide diversity of forms of service, to which each contributes? A handful of people do all the work, and the remainder are idlers. The same small section are in evidence always, and the rest are nowhere. There are but a few bits of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope, they take different patterns when the tube is turned, but they are always the same bits of glass.

There needs to be a far greater variety of forms of work for our people and more workers in the field. There are too few wheels for the quantity of water in the river, and, partly for that reason, the amount of water that runs waste over the sluice is deplorable. There is a danger in having too many spindles for the power available, but the danger in modern church organisation is exactly the other way.

Every one should have his own work. In all living creatures, differentiation of organs increases as the creature rises in the scale of being, from the simple sac which does everything up to the human body with a distinct function for every finger. It should not be possible for a lazy Christian to plead truly as his vindication that ‘no man had hired’ him. It should be the Church’s business to find work for the unemployed.

The example in our text should enforce the necessity of united work. David’s levies could keep rank. They did not let each man go at his own rate and by his own road, but kept together, shoulder to shoulder, with equal stride. They were content to co-operate and be each a part of a greater whole. That keeping rank is a difficult problem in all societies, where individual judgments, weaknesses, wills, and crotchets are at work, but it is apt to be especially difficult in Christian communities, where one may expect to find individual characteristics intensified, a luxuriant growth of personal peculiarities, an intense grip of partial aspects of the great truths and a corresponding dislike of other aspects of these, and of those whose favourite truths they are. One would do nothing to clip that growth, but still Christians who have not learned to subordinate themselves in and for united work are of little use to God or man. What does such united work require? Mainly the bridling of self, the curbing of one's own will, not insisting on forcing one's opinions on one's brother, not being careful of having one's place secured and one's honour asserted. Without such virtues no association of man could survive for a year. If the world managed its societies as the Church manages its unity, they would collapse quickly. Indeed it is a strong presumption in favour of Christianity that the Churches have not killed it long ago. Vanity, pride, self-importance, masterfulness, pettishness get full play among us. Diotrephes has many descendants today. A cotton mill, even if it were a co-operative one, could not work long without going into bankruptcy, if there were no more power of working together than some Christian congregations have. A watch would be a poor timekeeper, where every wheel tried to set the pace and be a mainspring, or sulked because the hands moved on the face in sight of all men, while it had to move round and fit into its brother wheel in the dark.

Subordination is required as well as co-operation. For if there be harmonious co-operation in varying offices, there must be degrees and ranks. The differences of power and gift make degrees, and in every society there will be leaders. Of course there is no commanding authority in the Churches. Its leaders are brethren, whose most imperative highest word is, 'We beseech you.'

Of course, too, these varieties and degrees do not mean real superiority or inferiority in the eye of God. From the highest point of view nothing is great or small, there is no higher or lower. The only measure is quality, the only gauge is motive. 'Small service is true service while it lasts.' He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet, shall receive a prophet's reward. But yet there are, so far as our work here is concerned, degrees and orders, and we need a hearty and ungrudging recognition of superiority wherever we find it. If the 'brother of high degree' needs to be exhorted to beware of arrogance and imposing his own will on his fellows, the ‘brother of low degree’ needs not less to be exhorted to beware of letting envy and self-will hiss and snarl in his heart at those who are in higher positions than himself. If the chief of all needs to be reminded that in Christ’s household preeminence means service, the lower no less needs to be reminded that in Christ’s household service means pre-eminence.

So much, then, for organisation. It is perfectly reconcilable with democracy that is not mob-ocracy. In fact, democracy needs it most. If I may venture to speak to the members of the Free Churches, with which I am best acquainted, I would take upon myself to say that there is nothing which they need more than that they should show their polity to be capable of reconciling the freest development of the individual with the most efficient organisation of the community. The object is work for Christ, the bond of their fellowship is brotherly union with Christ. Many eyes are on them to-day, and the task is in their hands of showing that they can keep rank. The most perfect discipline in war in old times was found, not amongst the subjects of Eastern despots who were not free enough to learn to submit, but amongst the republics of Greece, where men were all on a level in the city, and fell into their places in the camp, because they loved liberty enough to know the worth of discipline, and so the slaves of Xerxes were scattered before the resistless onset of the phalanx of the free. The terrible legion which moved ‘altogether when it moved at all,’ and could be launched at the foe like one javelin of steel, had for its units free men and equals. There needs freedom for organisation. There needs organisation for freedom. Let us learn the lesson. ‘God is not the author of confusion, but of order, in all churches of saints.’

II. Enthusiastic devotion.

These men came to bring David up to Hebron with one single purpose in their hearts. They had no sidelong glances to their own self-interest, they had no wavering loyalty, they had no trembling fears, so we may take their spirit as expressing generally the deepest requirements for prosperity in a church.

The foundation of all prosperity is a passion of personal attachment to Christ our King.

Christ is Christianity objective. Love to Christ is Christianity subjective. The whole stress of Christian character is laid on this. It is the mother of all grace and goodness, and in regard to the work of the Church, it is the ardour of a soul full of love to Jesus that conquers. The one thing in which all who have done much for Him have been alike in that single-hearted devotion.

But such love is the child of faith. It rests upon belief of truth, and is the response of man to God. Dwelling in the truth is the means of it. How our modern Christianity fails in this strong personal bond of familiar love!

Consider its effect on the individual.

It will give tenacity of purpose, will brace to strenuous effort, will subdue self, self-regard, self-importance, will subdue fear. It is the true anaesthetic. The soldier is unconscious of his wounds, while the glow of devotion is in his heart and the shout of the battle in his ears. It will give fertility of resource and patience.

Consider its effect on the community.

It will remove all difficulties in the way of discipline arising from vanity and self which can be subdued by no other means. That flame fuses all into one glowing mass like a stream that pours from the blast furnace. What a power a church would be which had this! It is itself victory. The men that go into battle with that one firm resolve, and care for nothing else, are sure to win. Think what one man can do who has resolved to sell his life dear!

Consider the worthlessness of discipline without this.

It is a poor mechanical accuracy. How easy to have too much machinery! How the French Revolution men swept the Austrian martinets before them! David was half-smothered in Saul’s armour. On the other hand, this fervid flame needs control to make it last and work. Spirit and law are not incompatible. Valour may be disciplined, and the combination is irresistible.

And so here, till we exchange the close array of the battlefield for the open ranks of the festal procession on the Coronation day, and lay aside the helmet for the crown, the sword for the palm, the breastplate for the robe of peace, and stand for ever before the throne, in the peaceful ranks of ‘the solemn troops and sweet societies’ of the unwavering armies of the heavens who serve Him with a perfect heart, and burn unconsumed with the ardours of an immortal and ever brightening love, let us see to it that we too are ‘men that can keep rank and are not of double heart.’

4) 1 Chronicles 22:6-16

1 Chronicles

DAVID’S PROHIBITED DESIRE AND PERMITTED SERVICE

1Ch. 22:6 - 1Ch. 22:16.

This passage falls into three parts. In 1Ch. 22:6 - 1Ch. 22:10 the old king tells of the divine prohibition which checked his longing to build the Temple; in 1Ch. 22:11 - 1Ch. 22:13 he encourages his more fortunate successor, and points him to the only source of strength for his happy task; in 1Ch. 22:14 - 1Ch. 22:16 he enumerates the preparations which he had made, the possession of which laid stringent obligations on Solomon.

I. There is a tone of wistfulness in David’s voice as he tells how his heart’s desire had been prohibited. The account is substantially the same as we have in 2Sa. 7:4 - 2Sa. 7:16, but it adds as the reason for the prohibition David’s warlike career. We may note the earnestness and the motive of the king’s desire to build the Temple. ‘It was in my heart’; that implies earnest longing and fixed purpose. He had brooded over the wish till it filled his mind, and was consolidated into a settled resolve. Many a musing, solitary moment had fed the fire before it burned its way out in the words addressed to Nathan. So should our whole souls be occupied with our parts in God’s service, and so should our desires be strongly set towards carrying out what in solitary meditation we have felt borne in on us as our duty.

The moving spring of David’s design is beautifully suggested in the simple words ‘unto the name of the Lord my God.’ David’s religion was eminently a personal bond between him and God. We may almost say that he was the first to give utterance to that cry of the devout heart, ‘My God,’ and to translate the generalities of the name ‘the God of Israel’ into the individual appropriation expressed by the former designation. It occurs in many of the psalms attributed to him, and may fairly be regarded as a characteristic of his ardent and individualising devotion. The sense of a close, personal relation to God naturally prompted the impulse to build His house. We must claim our own portion in the universal blessings shrined in His name before we are moved to deeds of loving sacrifice. We must feel that Christ ‘loved me, and gave Himself for me,’ before we are melted into answering surrender.

The reason for the frustrating of David’s desire, as here given, is his career as a warrior king. Not only was it incongruous that hands which had been reddened with blood should rear the Temple, but the fact that his reign had been largely occupied with fighting for the existence of the kingdom showed that the time for engaging in such a work, which would task the national resources, had not yet come. We may draw two valuable lessons from the prohibition. One is that it indicates the true character of the kingdom of God as a kingdom of peace, which is to be furthered, not by force, but in peace and gentleness. The other is that various epochs and men have different kinds of duties in relation to Christ’s cause, some being called on to fight, and others to build, and that the one set of tasks may be as sacred and as necessary for the rearing of the Temple as the other. Militant epochs are not usually times for building. The men who have to do destructive work are not usually blessed with the opportunity or the power to carry out constructive work. Controversy has its sphere, but it is mostly preliminary to true ‘edification.’ In the broadest view all the activity of the Church on earth is militant, and we have to wait for the coming of the true ‘Prince of peace’ to build up the true Temple in the land of peace, whence all foes have been cast out for ever. To serve God in God’s way, and to give up our cherished plans, is not easy; but David sets us an example of simple-hearted, cheerful acquiescence in a Providence that thwarted darling designs. There is often much self-will in what looks like enthusiastic perseverance in some form of service.

II. The charge to Solomon breathes no envy of his privilege, but earnest desire that he may be worthy of the honour which falls to him. Petitions and exhortations are closely blended in it, and, though the work which Solomon is called to do is of an external sort, the qualifications laid down for it are spiritual and moral. However ‘secular’ our work in connection with God’s service may be, it will not be rightly done unless the highest motives are brought to bear on it, and it is performed as worship. The basis of all successful work is God’s presence with us, so David prays for that to be granted to Solomon as the beginning of all his fitness for his task.

Next, David recalls to his son God’s promise concerning him, that it may hearten him to undertake and to carry on the great work. A conviction that our service is appointed for us by God is essential for vigorous and successful Christian work. We must have, in some way or other, heard Him ‘speak concerning us,’ if we are to fling ourselves with energy into it.

The petitions in 1Ch. 22:12 seem to stretch beyond the necessities of the case, in so far as building the Temple is concerned. Wisdom and understanding, and a clear consciousness of the duty enjoined on him by God in reference to Israel, were surely more than that work required. But the qualifications for God’s service, however the manner of service may be concerned with ‘the outward business of the house of God,’ are always these which David asked for Solomon. The highest result of true ‘wisdom and understanding’ given by God is keeping God’s law; and keeping it is the one condition on which we shall obtain and retain that presence of God with us which David prayed for Solomon, and without which they labour in vain that build. A life conformed to God’s will is the absolutely indispensable condition of all prosperity in direct Christian effort. The noblest exercise of our wisdom and understanding is to obey every word that we hear proceeding out of the mouth of God.

III. There is something very pathetic in the old king’s enumeration of the treasures which, by the economies of a lifetime, he had amassed. The amount stated is enormous, and probably there is some clerical error in the numbers specified. Be that as it may, the sum was very large. It represented many an act of self-denial, many a resolute shearing off of superfluities and what might seem necessaries. It was the visible token of long years of fixed attention to one object. And that devotion was all the more noble because the result of it was never to be seen by the man who exercised it.

Therein David is but a very conspicuous example of a law which runs through all our work for God. None of us are privileged to perform completed tasks. ‘One soweth and another reapeth.’ We have to be content to do partial work, and to leave its completion to our successors. There is but one Builder of whom it can be said that His hands ‘have laid the foundation of this house; His hands shall also finish it.’ He who is the ‘Alpha and Omega,’ and He alone, begins and completes the work in which He has neither sharers nor predecessors nor successors. The rest of us do our little bit of the great work which lasts on through the ages, and, having inherited unfinished tasks, transmit them to those who come after us. It is privilege enough for any Christian to lay foundations on which coming days may build. We are like the workers on some great cathedral, which was begun long before the present generation of masons were born, and will not be finished until long after they have dropped trowel and mallet from their dead hands. Enough for us if we can lay one course of stones in that great structure. The greater our aims, the less share has each man in their attainment. But the division of labour is the multiplication of joy, and all who have shared in the toil will be united in the final triumph. It would be poor work that was capable of being begun and perfected in a lifetime. The labourer that dug and levelled the track and the engineer that drives the locomotive over it are partners. Solomon could not have built the Temple unless, through long, apparently idle, years, David had been patiently gathering together the wealth which he bequeathed. So, if our work is but preparatory for that of those who come after, let us not think it of slight importance, and let us be sure that all who have had any portion in the toil shall share in the victory, that ‘he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.’

5) 1 Chronicles 28:1-10

1 Chronicles

DAVID’S CHARGE TO SOLOMON

1Ch. 28:1 - 1Ch. 28:10.

David had established an elaborate organisation of royal officials, details of which occupy the preceding chapters and interrupt the course of the narrative. The passage picks up again the thread dropped at 1Ch. 23:1. The list of the members of the assembly called in 1Ch. 28:1 is interesting as showing how he tried to amalgamate the old with the new. The princes of Israel, the princes of the tribes, represented the primitive tribal organisation, and they receive precedence in virtue of the antiquity of their office. Then come successively David’s immediate attendants, the military officials, the stewards of the royal estates, the ‘officers’ or eunuchs attached to the palace, and the faithful ‘mighty men’ who had fought by the king’s side in the old days. It was an assembly of officials and soldiers whose adherence to Solomon it was all-important to secure, especially in regard to the project for building the Temple, which could not be carried through without their active support. The passage comprises only the beginning of the proceedings of this assembly of notables. The end is told in the next chapter; namely, that the Temple-building scheme was unanimously and enthusiastically adopted, and large donations given for it, and that Solomon’s succession was accepted, and loyal submission offered by the assembly to him.

David’s address to this gathering is directed to secure these two points. He begins by recalling his own intention to build the Temple and God’s prohibition of it. The reason for that prohibition differs from that alleged by Nathan, but there is no contradiction between the two narratives, and the chronicler has already reported Nathan’s words [1Ch. 17:3, etc.], so that the motive which is ascribed to many of the variations in this book, a priestly desire to exalt Temple and ritual, cannot have been at work here. Why should there not have been a divine communication to David as well as Nathan’s message? That hands reddened with blood, even though it had been shed in justifiable war, were not fitted to build the Temple, was a thought so far in advance of David’s time, and flowing from so spiritual a conception of God, that it may well have been breathed into David’s spirit by a divine voice. Sword in one hand and trowel in the other are incongruous, notwithstanding Nehemiah’s example. The Temple of the God of peace cannot be built except by men of peace. That is true in the widest and highest application. Jesus builds the true Temple. Controversy and strife do not. And, on a lower level, the prohibition is for ever valid. Men do not atone for a doubtful past by building churches, founding colleges, endowing religious or charitable institutions.

The speech next declares emphatically that the throne belongs to David and his descendants by real ‘divine right,’ and that God’s choice is Solomon, who is to inherit both the promises and obligations of the office, and, among the latter, that of building the Temple. The unspoken inference is that loyalty to Solomon would be obedience to Jehovah. The connection between the true heavenly King and His earthly representative is strongly expressed in the remarkable phrase: ‘He hath chosen Solomon . . . to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of Jehovah,’ which both consecrates and limits the rule of Solomon, making him but the viceroy of the true king of Israel. When Israel’s kings remembered that, they flourished; when they forgot it, they destroyed their kingdom and themselves. The principle is as true to-day, and it applies to all forms of influence, authority, and gifts. They are God’ s, and we are but stewards.

The address to the assembly ends with the exhortation to these leaders to ‘observe,’ and not merely to observe, but also to ‘seek out’ God’s commandments, and so to secure to the nation, whom they could guide, peaceful and prosperous days. It is not enough to do God’s will as far as we know it; we must ever be endeavouring after clearer, deeper insight into it. Would that these words were written over the doors of all Senate and Parliament houses! What a different England we should see!

But Solomon was present as well as the notables, and it was well that, in their hearing, he should be reminded of his duties. David had previously in private taught him these, but this public ‘charge’ before the chief men of the kingdom bound them more solemnly upon him, and summoned a cloud of witnesses against him if he fell below the high ideal. It is pitched on a lofty key of spiritual religion, for it lays ‘Know thou the God of thy fathers’ as the foundation of everything. That knowledge is no mere intellectual apprehension, but, as always in Scripture, personal acquaintanceship with a Person, which involves communion with Him and love towards Him. For us, too, it is the seed of all strenuous discharge of our life’s tasks, whether we are rulers or nobodies, and it means a much deeper experience than understanding or giving assent to a set of truths about God. We know one another when we summer and winter with each other, and not unless we love one another, and we know God on no other terms.

After such knowledge comes an outward life of service. Active obedience is the expression of inward communion, love, and trust. The spring that moves the hands on the dial is love, and, if the hands do not move, there is something wrong with the spring. Morality is the garment of religion; religion is the animating principle of morality. Faith without works is dead, and works without faith are dead too.

But even when we ‘know God’ we have to make efforts to have our service correspond with our knowledge, for we have wayward hearts and obstinate wills, which need to be stimulated, sometimes to be coerced and forcibly diverted from unworthy objects. Therefore the exhortation to serve God ‘with a perfect heart and with a willing mind’ is always needful and often hard. Entire surrender and glad obedience are the Christian ideal, and continual effort to approximate to it will be ours in the degree in which we ‘know God.’ There is no worse slavery than that of the half-hearted Christian whose yoke is not padded with love. Reluctant obedience is disobedience in God’s sight.

David solemnly reminds Solomon of those ‘pure eyes and perfect judgment,’ not to frighten, but to enforce the thought of the need for whole-hearted and glad service, and of the worthlessness of external acts of apparent worship which have not such behind them. What a deal of seeming wheat would turn out to be chaff if that winnowing fan which is in Christ’s hand were applied to it! How small our biggest heaps would become!

The solemn conditions of the continuance of God’s favour and of the fulfilment of His promises are next plainly stated. God responds to our state of heart and mind. We determine His bearing to us. The seeker finds. If we move away from Him, He moves away from us. That is not, thank God! all the truth, or what would become of any of us? But it is true, and in a very solemn sense God is to us what we make Him. ‘With the pure Thou wilt show Thyself pure; and with the perverse Thou wilt show Thyself froward.’

The charge ends with recalling the high honour and office to which Jehovah had designated Solomon, and with exhortations to 'take heed' and to 'be strong, and do it.' It is well for a young man to begin life with a high ideal of what he is called to be and do. But many of us have that, and miserably fail to realise it, for want of these two characteristics, which the sight of such an ideal ought to stamp on us. If we are to fulfil God's purposes with us, and to be such tools as He can use for building His true Temple, we must exercise self-control and 'take heed to our ways,' and we must brace ourselves against opposition and crush down our own timidity. It seems to be commanding an impossibility to say to a weak creature like any one of us, 'Be strong,' but the impossible becomes a possibility when the exhortation takes the full Christian form: 'Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.'

6) 1 Chronicles 29:30

1 Chronicles

THE WAVES OF TIME

1Ch. 29:30.

This is a fragment from the chronicler's close of his life of King David. He is referring in it to other written authorities in which there are fuller particulars concerning his hero; and he says, 'the acts of David the King, first and last, behold they are written in the book of Samuel the seer . . . with all his reign and his might, and the times that went over him, and over all Israel, and over all the kingdoms of the countries.'

Now I have ventured to isolate these words, because they seem to me to suggest some very solemn and stimulating thoughts about the true nature of life. They refer, originally, to the strange vicissitudes and extremes of fortune and condition which characterised, so dramatically and remarkably, the life of King David. Shepherd-boy, soldier, court favourite, outlaw, freebooter and all but brigand; rebel, king, fugitive, saint, sinner, psalmist, penitent-he lived a life full of strongly marked alternations, and 'the times that went over him' were singularly separate and different from each other.

There are very few of us who have such chequered lives as his. But the principle which dictated the selection by the chronicler of this somewhat strange phrase is true about the life of every man.

I. Note, first, ‘the times’ which make up each life.

Now, by the phrase here the writer does not merely mean the succession of moments, but he wishes to emphasise the view that these are epochs, sections of ‘time,’ each with its definite characteristics and its special opportunities, unlike the rest that lie on either side of it. The great broad field of time is portioned out, like the strips of peasant allotments, which show a little bit here, with one kind of crop upon it, bordered by another little morsel of ground bearing another kind of crop. So the whole is patchy, and yet all harmonises in effect if we look at it from high enough up. Thus each life is made up of a series, not merely of successive moments, but of well-marked epochs, each of which has its own character, its own responsibilities, its own opportunities, in each of which there is some special work to be done, some grace to be cultivated, some lesson to be learned, some sacrifice to be made; and if it is let slip it never comes back any more. ‘It might have been once, and we missed it, and lost it for ever.’ The times pass over us, and every single portion has its own errand to us. Unless we are wide awake we let it slip, and are the poorer to all eternity for not having had in our heads the eyes of the wise man which ‘discern both time and judgment.’ It is the same thought which is suggested by the well-known words of the cynical book of Ecclesiastes-’To every thing there is a season and a time’-an opportunity, and a definite period-’for every purpose that is under the sun.’ It is the same thought which is suggested by Paul’s words, ‘As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good to all men. In due season we shall reap if we faint not.’ There is ‘a time for weeping and a time for laughing, a time for building up and a time for casting down.’ It is the same thought of life, and its successive epochs of opportunity never returning, which finds expression in the threadbare lines about ‘a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,’ and neglected, condemns the rest of a career to be hemmed in among creeks and shallows.

Through all the variety of human occupations, each moment comes to us with its own special mission, and yet, alas! to far too many of us the alternations do not suggest the question, what is it that I am hereby called upon to be or to do? what is the lesson that present circumstances are meant to teach, and the grace that my present condition is meant to force me to cultivate or exhibit? There is one point, as it were, upon the road where we may catch a view far away into the distance, and, if we are not on the lookout when we come there, we shall never get that glimpse at any other point along the path. The old alchemists used to believe that there was what they called the 'moment of projection,' when, into the heaving molten mass in their crucible, if they dropped the magic powder, the whole would turn into gold; an instant later and there would be explosion and death; an instant earlier and there would be no effect. And so God's moments come to us; every one of them-if we had eyes to see and hands to grasp-a crisis, affording opportunity for something for which all eternity will not afford a second opportunity, if the moment be let pass. 'The times went over him,' and your life and mine is parcelled out into seasons which have their special vocation for and message to us.

How solemn that makes our life! How it destroys the monotony that we sometimes complain of! How it heightens the low things and magnifies the apparently small ones! And how it calls upon us for a sharpened attention, that we miss not any of the blessings and gifts which God is meaning to bestow upon us through the ministry of each moment! How it calls upon us for not only sharpened attention, but for a desire to know the meaning of each of the hours and of every one of His providences! And how it bids us, as the only condition of understanding the times, so as to know what we ought to do, to keep our hearts in close union with Him, and ourselves ever standing, as becomes servants, girded and ready for work; and with the question on our lips and in our hearts, 'Lord, what wouldst Thou have me to do? and what wouldst Thou have me to do *now*?' The lesson of the day has to be learned in a day, and at the moment when it is put in practice.

II. Another thought suggested by this text is, the Power that moves the times.

As far as my text represents-and it is not intended to go to the bottom of everything-these times flow on over a man, as a river might. But is there any power that moves the stream? Unthinking and sense-bound men-and we are all such, in the measure in which we are unspiritual-are contented simply to accept the mechanical flow of the stream of time. We are all tempted not to look behind the moving screen to see the force that turns the wheel on which the painted scene Is stretched. But, Oh! how dreary a thing it is if all that we have to say about life is, ‘The times pass over us,’ like the blind rush of a stream, or the movement of the sea around our coasts, eating away here and depositing its spoils there, sometimes taking and sometimes giving, but all the work of mere eyeless and purposeless chance or of natural causes.

Oh, brethren! there is nothing more dismal or paralysing than the contemplation of the flow of the times over our heads, unless we see in their flow something far more than that.

It is very beautiful to notice that this same phrase, or at least the essential part of it, is employed in one of the Psalms ascribed to David, with a very significant addition. He says, ‘My times are *in Thy hand*.’ So, then, the passage of our epochs over us is not merely the aimless flow of a stream, but the movement of a current which God directs. Therefore, if at any time it goes over our heads and seems to overwhelm us, we can look up through the transparent water and say, ‘*Thy* waves and *Thy* billows have gone over me,’ and so I die not of suffocation beneath them. God orders the times, and therefore, though, as the bitter ingenuity of Ecclesiastes, on the lookout for proofs of the vanity of life, complained, in a one-sided view, as an aggravation of man’s lot, that there is a time for everything, yet that aspect of change is not its deepest or truest. True it is that sometimes birth and sometimes death, sometimes joy and sometimes sorrow, sometimes building up and sometimes casting down, follow each other with monotonous uniformity of variety, and seem to reduce life to a perpetual heaping up of what is as painfully to be cast down the next moment, like the pitiless sport of the wind amongst the sandhills of the desert. But the futility is only apparent, and the changes are not meant to occasion ‘man’s misery’ to be ‘great upon him,’ as Ecclesiastes says they do. The diversity of the ‘times’ comes from a unity of purpose; and all the various methods of the divine Providence exercised upon us have one unchanging intention. The meaning of all the ‘times’ is that they should bring us nearer to God, and fill us more full of His power and grace. The web is one, however various may be the pattern wrought upon the tapestry. The resulting motion of the great machine is one, though there may be a wheel turning from left to right here, and another one that fits into it, turning from right to left there. The end of all the opposite motions is straight progress. So the varying times do all tend to the one great issue. Therefore let us seek to pursue, in all varying circumstances, the one purpose which God has in them all, which the Apostle states to be 'even your sanctification,' and let us understand how summer and winter, springtime and harvest, tempest and fair weather, do all together make up the year, and ensure the springing of the seed and the fruitfulness of the stalk.

III. Lastly, let me remind you, too, how eloquently the words of my text suggest the transiency of all the 'times.'

They 'passed over him' as the wind through an archway, that whistles and comes not again. The old, old thought, so threadbare and yet always so solemnising and pathetic, which we know so well that we forget it, and are so sure of that it has little effect on life, the old, old thought, 'this too will pass away,' underlies the phrase of my text, How blessed it is, brethren! to cherish that wholesome sense of the transiency of things here below, only those who live under its habitual power can fairly estimate. It is thought to be melancholy. We are told that it spoils joys and kills interest, and I know not what beside. It spoils no joys that ought to be joys. It kills no interests that are not on other grounds unworthy to be cherished. Contrariwise, the more fully we are penetrated with the persistent conviction of the transiency of the things seen and temporal, the greater they become, by a strange paradox. For then only are they seen in their true magnitude and nobility, in their true solemnity and importance as having a bearing on the things that are eternal. Time is the 'ceaseless lackey of eternity,' and the things that pass over us may become, like the waves of the sea, the means of bearing us to the unmoving shore. Oh! if only in the midst of joys and sorrows, of heavy tasks and corroding cares, of weary work and wounded spirits, we could feel, 'but for a moment,' all would be different, and joy would come, and strength would come, and patience would come, and every grace would come, in the train of the wholesome conviction that 'here we have no continuing city.'

Cherish the thought. It will spoil nothing the spoiling of which will be a loss. It will heighten everything the possession of which is a gain. It will teach us to trust in the darkness, and to believe in the light. And when the times are dreariest, and frost binds the ground, we shall say, ‘If winter comes, can spring be far behind?’ The times roll over us, like the seas that break upon some isolated rock, and when the tide has fallen and the vain flood has subsided, the rock is there. If the world helps us to God, we need not mind though it passes, and the fashion thereof.

But do not let us forget that this text in its connection may teach us another thought. The transitory ‘times that went over’ Israel’s king are all recorded imperishably on the pages here, and so, though condensed into narrow space, the record of the fleeting moments lives for ever, and ‘the books shall be opened, and men shall be judged according to their works.’ We are writing an imperishable record by our fleeting deeds. Half a dozen pages carry all the story of that stormy life of Israel’s king. It takes a thousand rose-trees to make a vial full of essence of roses. The record and issues of life will be condensed into small compass, but the essence of it is eternal. We shall find it again, and have to drink as we have brewed when we get yonder. ‘Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.’ ‘There is a time to sow,’ and that is the present life; ‘and there is a time to gather the fruits’ of our sowing, and that is the time when times have ended and eternity is here.

2 Chronicles

1) 2 CHRONICLES 8:12-13
2) 2 CHRONICLES 12:8
3) 2 CHRONICLES 13:18
4) 2 CHRONICLES 14:2-8
5) 2 CHRONICLES 14:11
6) 2 CHRONICLES 15:15
7) 2 CHRONICLES 17:1-10
8) 2 CHRONICLES 17:16
9) 2 CHRONICLES 19:1-11
10) 2 CHRONICLES 20:12
11) 2 CHRONICLES 20:20
12) 2 CHRONICLES 24:2

13) 2 CHRONICLES 24:4-14
14) 2 CHRONICLES 24:17
15) 2 CHRONICLES 25:9
16) 2 CHRONICLES 27:6
17) 2 CHRONICLES 28:23
18) 2 CHRONICLES 29:1-11
19) 2 CHRONICLES 29:18-31
20) 2 CHRONICLES 30:1-13
21) 2 CHRONICLES 32:1
22) 2 CHRONICLES 33:9-16
23) 2 CHRONICLES 34:1-13
24) 2 CHRONICLES 34:14-28
25) 2 CHRONICLES 36:11-21

1) 2 Chronicles 8:12-13

2 Chronicles

THE DUTY OF EVERY DAY

2Ch. 8:12 - 2Ch. 8:13.

This is a description of the elaborate provision, in accordance with the commandment of Moses, which Solomon made for the worship in his new Temple. The writer is enlarging on the precise accordance of the ritual with the regulations laid down in the law. He expresses, by the phrase which we have taken as our text, not only the accordance of the worship with the commandment, but its unbroken continuity, and also the variety in it, according to the regulations for different days. For the verse runs on, ‘on the Sabbaths, and on the new moons, and on the solemn feasts, three times in the year, even in the Feast of unleavened bread, and in the Feast of weeks, and in the Feast of Tabernacles.’ There were, then, these characteristics in the ritual of Solomon’s Temple, precise compliance with the Divine commandment, unbroken continuity, and beautiful flexibility and variety of method.

But passing altogether from the original application of the words, I venture to do now what I very seldom do, and that is, to take this verse as a kind of motto. ‘Even according as the duty of every day required’; the phrase may suggest three thoughts: that each day has its own work, its own worship, and its own supplies, ‘even as the duty of every day required.’

Each day has its own work.

Of course there is a great uniformity in our lives, and many of us who are set down to one continuous occupation can tell twelve months before what, in all probability, we shall be doing at each hour of each day in the week. But for all that, there is a certain individual physiognomy about each new day as it comes to us; and the oldest, most habitual, and therefore in some degree easiest and least stimulating, work has its own special characteristics as it comes again to us day by day for the hundredth time.

So there are three pieces of practical wisdom that I would suggest, and one is-be content to take your work in little bits as it comes. There is a great deal of practical wisdom in taking short views of things, for although we have often to look ahead, yet it is better on the whole that a man should, as far as he can, confine his anticipations to the day that is passing, and leave the day that is coming to look after itself. Take short views and be content to let each day prescribe its tasks, and you have gone a long way to make all your days quiet and peaceful. For it is far more the anticipation of difficulties than the realisation of them that wears and wearies us. If a man says to himself, ‘This sorrow that I am carrying, or this work that I have to do, is going to last for many days to come,’ his heart will fail. If he said to himself, ‘It will be no worse to-morrow than it is at this moment, and I can live through it, for am I not living through it at this moment, and getting power to endure or do at this moment? and to-morrow will probably be like today,’ things would not be so difficult.

You remember the homely old parable of the clock on the stair that gave up ticking altogether because it began to calculate how many thousands of seconds there are in the year, and that twice that number of times it would have to wag backwards and forwards. The lesson that it learned was-tick one tick and never mind the next. You will be able to do it when the time to do it comes. Let us act ‘as the duty of every day requireth.’ ‘Sufficient for the day is the work thereof.’

Then there is another piece of advice from this thought of each day having its own work, and that is-keep your ears open, and your eyes too, to learn the lesson of what the day’s work is. There is generally abundance of direction for us if only we are content with the one-step-at-a-time direction, which we get, and if another condition is fulfilled, if we try to suppress our own wishes and the noisy babble of our own yelping inclinations, and take the whip to them until they cease their barking, that we may hear what God says. It is not because He does not speak, but because we are too anxious to have our own way to listen quietly to His voice, that we make most of our blunders as to what the duty of every day requires. If we will be still and listen, and stand in the attitude of the boy-prophet before the glimmering lamp in the sacred place, saying, ‘Speak, Lord! for Thy servant heareth,’ we shall get sufficient instruction for our next step.

Another piece of practical wisdom that I would suggest is that if every day has its own work, we should buckle ourselves to do the day’s work before night falls and not leave any over for to-morrow, which will be quite full enough. ‘Do the duty that lies nearest thee,’ was the preaching of one of our sages, and it is wholesome advice. For when we do that duty, the doing of it has a wonderful power of opening up further steps, and showing us more clearly what is the next duty. Only let us be sure of this, that no moment comes from God which has not in it boundless possibilities; and that no moment comes from God which has not in it stringent obligations. We neither avail ourselves of the one, nor discharge the other, unless we come, morning by morning, to the new day that is dawning upon us, with some fresh consciousness of the large issues that may be wrapped in its unseen hours, and the great things for Him that we may do ere its evening falls.

Each day has its tasks, and if we do not do the tasks of each day in its day, we shall fling away life. If a man had L. 100,000 for a fortune, and turned it all into halfpence, and tossed them out of the window, he could soon get rid of his whole fortune. And if you fling away your moments or live without the consciousness of their solemn possibilities and mystic awfulness, you will find at the last that you have made ‘ducks and drakes’ of your years, and have flung them away in moments without knowing what you were doing, and without possibility of recovery. ‘Take care of the pence, the pounds will take care of themselves.’ Take care of the days, and the years will show a fair record.

Secondly, we have here the suggestion that every day has its own worship.

As I remarked at the beginning of my observations, the chronicler dwells, with a certain kind of satisfaction, in accordance with the tone of his whole writings, upon the external ritual of the Temple; and points out its entire conformity with the divine precept, and the unbroken continuity of worship day after day, year in year out, and the variation of the characteristics of that worship according as the day was more or less ritually important. From his words we may deduce a very needful though obvious and commonplace lesson. What we want is every-day religion, and that every-day religion is the only thing that will enable us to do what the duty of every day requires. But that every-day religion which will be our best ally, and power for the discharge of the obligations that each moment brings with it, must have its points of support, as it were, in special moments and methods of worship.

So, then, take that first thought: What we want is a religion that will go all through our lives. A great many of you keep your religion where you keep your best clothes: putting it on on Sunday and locking it away on the Sunday night in a wardrobe because it is not the dress that you go to work in. And some of you keep your religion in your pew, and lock it up in the little box where you put your hymn-books and your Bibles, which you read only once a week, devoting yourselves to ledgers or novels and newspapers for the rest of your time. We want a religion that will go all through our life; and if there is anything in our life that will not stand its presence, the sooner we get rid of that element the better. A mountain road has generally a living brooklet leaping and flashing by the side of it. So our lives will be dusty and dead and cold and poor and prosaic unless that river runs along by the roadside and makes music for us as it flows. Take your religion wherever you go. If you cannot take it in to any scenes or company, stop you outside.

There is nothing that will help a man to do his day’s work so much as the realisation of Christ’s Presence. And that realisation, along with its certain results, devotion of heart to Him and submission of will to His commandment, and desire to shape our lives to be like His, will make us masters of all circumstances and strong enough for the hardest work that God can lay upon us.

There is nothing so sure to make life beautiful, and noble, and pure, and peaceful, and strong as this-the application to its monotonous trifles of religious principles. If you do not do little things as Christian men and women, and under the influence of Christian principle, pray *what* are you going to do under the influence of Christian principle? If you are keeping your religion to influence the crises of your lives, and are content to let the trifles be ruled by the devil or the world and yourselves, you will find out, when you come to the end, that there were perhaps three or four crises in your experience, and that all the rest of life was made of trifles, and that when the crises came you could not lay your hand on the religious principle that would have enabled you to deal with them. The sword had got so rusty in its scabbard because it had never been drawn for long years, that it could not be readily drawn in the moment of sudden peril; and if you could have drawn it, you would have found its edge blunted. Use your religion on the trifles, or you will not be able to make much of it in the crises. 'He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.' The worship of every day is the preparation for the work of that day.

Further, that worship, that religion, wearing its common, modest suit of workaday clothes, must also, if there is to be any power in it, have a certain variety in its methods. 'Solomon offered burnt offerings . . . on the Sabbaths, on the new moons,' which had a little more ceremonial than the Sabbaths, 'and on the solemn feasts three times in a year,' which had still more ceremonial than the new moons, 'even in the Feast of unleavened bread, and in the Feast of weeks, and in the Feast of tabernacles.' These were spring-tides when the sea of worship rose beyond its usual level, and they kept it from stagnating. We, too, if we wish to have this every-day religion running with any strength of scour and current through our lives, will need to have moments when it touches high-water mark, else it will not flush the foulness out of our hearts and our lives.

Lastly, take the other suggestion, that every day has its own supplies.

That does not lie in the text properly, but for the sake of completeness I add it. Every day has its own supplies. The manna fell every day, and was gathered and consumed on the day on which it fell. God gives us strength measured accurately by the needs of the day. You will get as much as you require, and if ever you do not get as much as you require, which is very often the case with Christian people, that is not because God did not send enough manna, but because their *omer* was not ready to catch it as it fell. The day’s supply is measured by the day’s need. Suppose an Israelite had sat in his tent and said, ‘I am not going out to gather,’ would he have had any in his empty vessel? Certainly not. The manna lay all around the tent, but each man had to go out and gather it. God makes no mistakes in His weights and measures. He gives us each sufficient strength to do His will and to walk in His ways; and if we do not do His will or walk in His ways, or if we find our burden too heavy, our sorrows too sharp, our loneliness too dreary, our difficulties too great, it is not because ‘the Lord’s hand is shortened that it cannot’ supply, but because our hands are so slack that they will not take the sufficiency which He gives. In the midst of abundance we are starving. We let the water run idly through the open sluice instead of driving the wheels of life.

My friend! God’s measure of supply is correct. If we were more faithful and humble, and if we understood better and felt more how deep is our need and how little is our strength, we should more continually be able to rejoice that He has given, and we have received, ‘even as the duty of every day required.’

2) 2 Chronicles 12:8

2 Chronicles

CONTRASTED SERVICES

2Ch. 12:8.

Rehoboam was a self-willed, godless king who, like some other kings, learned nothing by experience. His kingdom was nearly wrecked at the very beginning of his reign, and was saved much more by the folly of his rival than by his own wisdom. Jeroboam’s religious revolution drove all the worshippers of God among the northern kingdom into flight. They might have endured the separate monarchy, but they could not endure the separate Temple. So all priests and Levites in Israel, and all the adherents of the ancestral worship in the Temple at Jerusalem, withdrew to the southern kingdom and added much to its strength.

Rehoboam’s narrow escape taught him neither moderation nor devotion, his new strength turned his head. He forsook the law of the Lord. The dreary series, so often illustrated in the history of Israel, came into operation. Prosperity produced irreligion; irreligion brought chastisement; chastisement brought repentance; repentance brought the removal of the invader-and then, like a spring released, back went king and nation to their old sin.

So here-Rehoboam’s sins take visible form in Sheshak’s army. He has sown the dragon’s teeth and they spring up armed men. Shemaiah the prophet, the first of the long series of noble men who curbed the violence of Jewish monarchs, points the lesson of invasion in plain, blunt words: ‘Ye have forsaken Me.’ Then follow penitence and confession-and the promise that Jerusalem shall not be destroyed, but at the same time they are to be left as vassals and tributaries of Egypt-an anomalous position for them-and the reason is given in these words of our text.

I. The contrasted Masters.

Judah was too small to be independent of the powerful warlike states to its north and south, unless miraculously guarded and preserved. So it must either keep near God, and therefore free and safe from invasion, or else, departing from God and following its own ways, fall under alien dominion. Its experience was a type of that of universal humanity. Man is not independent. His mass is not enough for him to do without a central orb round which he may revolve. He has a choice of the form of service and the master that he will choose, but one or other must dominate his life and sway his motions. ‘Ye cannot serve God and Mammon’; ye must serve God *or* Mammon. The solemn choice is presented to every man, but the misery of many lives is that they drift along, making their election unawares, and infallibly choosing the worse by the very act of lazily or weakly allowing accident to determine their lives. Not consciously and strongly to will the right, not resolutely and with coercion of the vagrant self to will to take God for our aim, is to choose the low, the wrong. Perhaps none, or very few of us, would deliberately say ‘I choose Mammon, having carefully compared the claims of the opposite systems of life that solicit me, and with open-eyed scrutiny measured their courses, their goods and their ends.’ But how many of us there are who have in effect made that choice, and never have given one moment’s clear, patient examination of the grounds of our choice! The policy of drift is unworthy of a man and is sure to end in ruin.

It is not for me to attempt here to draw out the contrast between man’s chief end and all other rival claimants of our lives. Each man must do that for himself, and I venture to assert that the more thoroughly the process of comparison is carried out, and the more complete the analysis not only of the rival claims and gifts, but of our capacities and needs, the more sun-clear will be the truth of the old, well-worn answer: ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever.’ The old woman by her solitary fireside who has learned that and practises it, has chosen the better part which will last when many shining careers have sunk into darkness, and many will-o’-the-wisps, which have been pursued with immense acclamations, have danced away into the bog, and many a man who has been envied and admired has had to sum up his successful career in the sad words, ‘I have played the fool and erred exceedingly.’ I cannot pretend to conduct the investigation for you, but I can press on every one who does not wish to let accidents mould him, at least to recognise that there is a choice to be made, and to make it deliberately and with eyes open to the facts of the case. It is a shabby way of ruining yourself to do it for want of thought. The rabble of competitors of God catch more souls by accident than of set purpose. Most men are godless because they have never fairly faced the question: what does my soul require in order to reach its highest blessedness and its noblest energy?

II. The contrasted experience of the servants.

Judah learned that the yoke of obedience to God’s law was a world lighter than the grinding oppression of the Egyptian invader.

God’s service is freedom; the world’s is slavery.

Liberty is unrestrained power to do what we ought. Man must be subject to law. The solemn imperative of duty is omnipresent and sovereign. To do as we like is not freedom, but bondage to self, and that usually our worst self, which means crushing or coercing the better self. The choice is to chain the beast in us or to clip the wings of the angel in us, and he is a fool who conceits himself free because he lets his inferior self have its full swing, and hustles his better self into bondage to clear the course for the other. There is but one deliverance from the sway of self, and it is realised in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. To make self our master inevitably leads to setting beggars on horseback and princes walking. Passion, the 'flesh' is terribly apt to usurp the throne within when once God is dethroned. Then indulgence feeds passion, and deeper draughts become necessary in order to produce the same effects, and cravings, once allowed free play, grow in ravenousness, while their pabulum steadily loses its power to satisfy. The experience of the undevout sensualist is but too faithful a type of that of all undevout livers, in the failure of delights to delight and of acquisitions to enrich, and in the bondage, often to nothing more worthy to be obeyed than mere habit, and in the hopeless incapacity to shake off the adamantine chains which they have themselves rivetted on their limbs. There are endless varieties in the forms which the service of self assumes, ranging from gross animalism, naked and unashamed, up to refined and cultured godlessness, but they are one in their inmost character, one in their disabling the spirit from a free choice of its course, one in the limitations which they impose on its aspirations and possibilities, one in the heavy yoke which they lay on their vassals. The true liberty is realised only when for love's dear sake we joyously serve God, and from the highest motive enrol ourselves in the household of the highest Person, and by the act become 'no more servants but sons.' Well may we all pray-

'Lord! bind me up, and let me lie

A prisoner to my liberty,

If such a state at all can be

As an imprisonment, serving Thee.'

God's service brings solid good, the world's is vain and empty.

God’s service brings an approving conscience, a calm heart, strength and gladness. It is in full accord with our best selves. Tranquil joys attend on it. ‘In keeping Thy commandments there is great reward,’ and that not merely bestowed after keeping, but realised and inherent in the very act. On the other side, think of the stings of conscience, the illusions on which those feed who will not eat of the heavenly food, the husks of the swine-trough, the ashes for bread, that self and the world, in all their forms set before men. A pathetic character in modern fiction says, ‘If you make believe very much it is nice.’ It takes a tremendous amount of make-believe to keep up an appetite for the world’s dainties or to find its meats palatable, after a little while. No sin ever yields the fruit it was expected to produce, or if it does it brings something which was not expected, and the bitter tang of the addition spoils the whole. It may be wisely adapted to secure a given end, but that end is only a means to secure the real end, our substantial blessedness, and that is never attained but by one course of life, the life of service of God. We may indeed win a goodly garment, but the plague is in the stuff and, worn, it will burn into the bones like fire. I read somewhere lately of thieves who had stolen a cask of wine, and had their debauch, but they sickened and died. The cask was examined and a huge snake was found dead in it. Its poison had passed into the wine and killed the drinkers. That is how the world serves those who swill its cup. ‘What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are *now* ashamed?’ The threatening pronounced against Israel’s disobedience enshrines an eternal truth: ‘Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, by reason of the abundance of all things; therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies . . . in hunger and in thirst, and in nakedness and in want of all things.’

God’s service has final issues and the world’s service has final issues.

Only fools try to blink the fact that all our doings have consequences. And it augurs no less levity and insensibility to blink the other fact that these consequences show no indications of being broken short off at the end of our earthly life. Men die into another life, as they have ever, dimly and with many foolish accompaniments, believed; and dead, they are the men that they have made themselves while living. Character is eternal, memory is eternal, death puts the stamp of perpetuity on what life has evolved.

Nothing human ever dies. The thought is too solemn to be vulgarised by pulpit rhetoric. Enough to say here that these two tremendous alternatives, Life and Death, express some little part of the eternal issues of our fleeting days. Looking fixedly into these two great symbols of the ultimate issues of these contrasted services, we can dimly see, as in the one, a wonder of resplendent glories moving in a sphere 'as calm as it is bright,' so, in the other, whirling clouds and jets of vapour as in the crater of a volcano. One shuddering glance over the rim of it should suffice to warn from lingering near, lest the unsteady soil should crumble beneath our feet.

But the true Lord of our lives loves us too well to let us experience all the bitter issues of our foolish rebellion against His authority, and yet He loves us too well not to let us taste something of them that we may 'know and see that it is an evil thing *and a bitter*, that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God.' The experiences of the consequences of godless living are in some measure allowed to fall on us by God's love, lest we should persist in the evil and so bring down on ourselves still more fatal issues. It is mercy that here chastises the evildoer with whips, in hope of not having to chastise him with scorpions. God desires to teach us, by the pains and heartaches of an undevout life, by disappointments, foiled plans, wrecked hopes, inner poverty, the difference between His service and that of 'the kingdoms of the countries,' if haply He may not be forced to let the full flood of fatal results overwhelm us. It is best to be drawn to serve Him by the cords of love, but it is possible to have the beginnings of the desire so to serve roused by the far lower motives of weariness and disgust at the world's wages, and by dread of what these may prove when they are paid in full. Self-interest may sicken a man of serving Mammon, and may be transformed into the self-surrender which makes God's service possible and blessed. The flight into the city of refuge may be quickened by the fear of the pursuer, whose horse's hoofs are heard thundering on the road behind the fugitive, and whose spear is all but felt a yard from his back, but once within the shelter of the city wall, gratitude for deliverance will fill his heart and 'perfect love will cast out fear.'

The king concerning whom our text was spoken had to suffer humiliation by the Egyptian invasion. His sufferings were meant to be educational, and when they in some measure effected their purpose, God curbed the invader and granted some measure of deliverance. So is it with us, if, moved by whatever impulse, we betake ourselves to Jesus to save us from the bitter fruits of our evil lives. The extreme severity of the results of our sins does not fall on penitent, believing spirits, but some do fall. As the Psalmist says: 'Thou wast a God that forgavest them though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.' A profligate course of life may be forgiven, but health or fortune is ruined all the same. In brief, the so-called 'natural' consequences are not removed, though the sin which caused them is pardoned. Polluted memories, indulged habits, defiled imaginations, are not got rid of, though the sins that inflicted them are forgiven.

Is it not, then, the part of wise men to lay to heart the lessons of experience, and to let what we have learned of the bitter fruit of godless living turn us away from such service, and draw us by merciful chastisement to yield ourselves to God, whom to serve accords with our deepest needs and brings first fruits and pre-libations of blessedness and peace here, and fullness of joy with pleasures for evermore hereafter?

3) 2 Chronicles 13:18

2 Chronicles

THE SECRET OF VICTORY

2Ch. 13:18.

These words are the summing-up of the story of a strange old-world battle between Jeroboam, the adventurer who rent the kingdom, and Abijah, the son of the foolish Rehoboam, whose unseasonable blustering had played into the usurper's hands. The son was a wiser and better man than his father. It is characteristic of the ancient world, that before battle was joined Abijah made a long speech to the enemy, recounting the ritual deficiencies of the Northern kingdom, and proudly contrasting the punctilious correctness of the Temple service with the irregular cult set up by Jeroboam. He confidently pointed to the priests 'with their trumpets' in his army as the visible sign that 'God is with us at our head,' and while charging Israel with having 'forsaken the Lord our God,' to whom he and his people had kept true, besought them not to carry their rebellion to the extreme of fighting against their fathers' God, and assured them that no success could attend their weapons in such a strife. The passionate appeal had no effect, but while Abijah was orating, Jeroboam was carrying out a ruse, and planting part of his troops behind Judah, so as to put them between two fires and draw a net round the outnumbered and outmanoeuvred enemy.

Abijah and his men suddenly detected their desperate position, and did the only wise thing. When, with a shock of surprise, they saw that 'behold! the battle was before and behind them,' they 'cried unto the Lord, and the priests sounded with the trumpets.' The sharp, short cry from thousands of agitated men ringed round by foes, and the blare of the trumpets were both prayers, and heartened the suppliants for their whirlwind charge, before which the men of Israel, double in number as they were, broke and fled. The defeat was thorough, and, for a while, Rehoboam and his kingdom were 'brought under,' and a comparatively long peace followed. Our text gathers up the lesson taught, not to Judah or Israel alone, by victory and defeat, when it declares that to rely upon the Lord is to prevail. It opens for us the secret of victory, in that old far-off struggle and in to-day's conflicts.

I. We note the faith of the fighters.

'They relied,' says the chronicler, 'upon the Lord.' Now the word rendered 'relied' is one of several picturesque words by which the Old Testament, which we are sometimes told, with a great flourish of learning, has no mention of 'faith,' expresses 'trust,' by metaphors drawn from bodily actions which symbolise the spiritual act. The word here literally signifies to lean on, as a feeble hand might on a staff, or a tremulous arm on a strong one. And does not that picture carry with it much insight into what the essence of Old Testament 'trust' or New Testament 'faith' is? If we think of faith as leaning, we shall not fall into that starved misconception of it which takes it to be nothing more than intellectual assent. We shall see there is a far fuller pulse of feeling than that beating in it. A man who leans on some support, does so because he knows that his own strength is insufficient for his need. The consciousness of weakness is the beginning of faith. He who has never despaired of himself has scarcely trusted in God. Abijah's enemies were two to one of his own men. No wonder that they cried unto the Lord, and felt a stound of despair shake their courage. And who of us can face life with its heavy duties, its thick-clustering dangers and temptations, its certain struggles, its possible failures, and not feel the cold touch of dread gripping our hearts, though strong and brave? Surely he has had little experience, or has learned little wisdom from the experience he has had, who has yet to discover his own weakness. But the consciousness of weakness is by itself debilitating, and but increases the weakness of which it is painfully aware. There is no surer way to sap what strength we have than to tell ourselves what poor creatures we are. The purpose and end of self-contemplation which becomes aware of our own feebleness is to lead us to the contemplation of God, our immortal strength. Abijah's assurance that 'God is with us at our head' rang out triumphantly. Faith has an upper and an under side: the under side is self-distrust; the upper, trust in God. He will never lean all his weight on a prop, who fancies that he can stand alone, or has other stays to hold him up.

But Abijah's example teaches us another lesson-that for a vigorous faith, there must be obedience to all God's known will. True, thank God! faith often springs in its power in a soul that is conscious but of sin, but a continuance in disobedience will inevitably kill faith. It was because Abijah and his people had kept 'the charge of the Lord our God,' that they were sure that God was with them. We can only be sure of God to lean on when we are doing His will, and we shall do His will only as we are sure that we lean on Him. Our trust in Him will be strong and operative in the measure in which our lives are conformed to His commandments. Much elaborate dissertation has been devoted to expounding what faith is, and the strong, vivid Scriptural conception of it has been woefully darkened and overlaid with cobwebs of theology, but surely this eloquent metaphor of our text tells us more than do many learned volumes. It bids us lean on God, rest the whole weight of our needs, our weaknesses, and our sins on Him. Like any human friend or helper, He is better pleased when we lean hard on Him than when we gingerly put a finger on His arm, and lay no pressure on it, as we do when in ceremonial fashion we seem to accept another's support, and hold ourselves back from putting a weight on the offered arm. We cannot rely too utterly on Him. We honour Him most when we repose our whole selves on His strong arm.

II. The increase of faith by sudden fear.

‘When Judah looked back, behold, the battle was before and behind them.’ The shock of seeing the flashing spears in the rear would make the bravest hold their breath for one overwhelming moment, but the next moment their faith in God surged back with tenfold force, increased by the sudden new peril. The sharp collision of flint and steel struck out a spark of faith. ‘What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee,’ said an expert in the genesis and growth of trust. Peril kills a feeble trust, but vivifies it, if strong. The recognition of danger is meant to drive us to God. If each fresh difficulty or danger makes us tighten our clasp of Him, and lean the harder on Him, it has done its highest service to us, and we have conquered it, and are the stronger because of it. The storm that makes the traveller, fighting with the wind and the rain in his face, clasp his cloak tighter round him, does him no harm. The purpose of our trials is to drive us to God, and a fair-weather faith which had all but fallen asleep is often roused to energy that works wonders, by the sudden dash of danger flung into and disturbing a life. It is wise seamanship to make a run to get snugly behind the breakwater when a sudden gale springs up.

III. The expression of faith in appeal to God.

When the ambush was unmasked, the surrounded men of Judah ‘cried unto the Lord, and the priests sounded with the trumpets,’ before they flung themselves on the enemy. We may be sure that their cry was short and sharp, and poignant with appeal to God. There would be no waste words, nor perfunctory petitions without wings of desire, in that cry. Should we not look for the essential elements of prayer rather to such cries, pressed from burdened hearts by a keen sense of absolute helplessness, and very careless of proprieties so long as they were shrill enough to pierce God’s ear and touch His heart, than to the formal petitions of well-ordered worship? A single ejaculation flung heavenward in a moment of despair or agony is more precious in God’s sight than a whole litany of half-hearted devotions.

The text puts in a striking form another lesson well worth learning, that, in the greatest crises, no time is better spent than time used for prayer. A rush on the enemy would not have served Abijah’s purpose nearly so well as that moment’s pause for crying to the Lord, before his charge. Hands lifted to heaven are nerved to clutch the sword and strike manfully. It is not only that Christ's soldiers are to fight and pray, but that they fight by praying. That is true in the small conflicts and antagonisms of the lives of each of us, and it is true in regard to the agelong battle against ignorance and sin. Christian's sword was named 'All-prayer.'

The priests, too, blew a prayer through their trumpets, for the ordinance had appointed that 'when ye go to war . . . then shall ye sound an alarm with the trumpets; and ye shall be remembered before the Lord your God, and ye shall be saved from your enemies.' The clear, strident blare was not intended to hearten warriors, or to sing defiance, but to remind God of His promises, and to bring Him on to the battlefield, as He had said that He would be. The truest prayer is that which but picks up the arrows of promise shot from heaven to earth, and casts them back from earth to heaven. He prays best who fills his mouth with God's words, turning every 'I will' of His into 'Do Thou!'

IV. The strength that comes through faith.

'As the men of Judah shouted, it came to pass that God smote Jeroboam and all Israel before Abijah and Judah.' There is no such quickener of all a man's natural force as even the lowest forms of faith. He who throws himself into any enterprise sure of success will often succeed just because he was sure he would. The world's history is full of instances where men, with every odds against them, have plucked the flower safety out of the nettle danger, just because they trusted in their star, or their luck, or their destiny. We all know how a very crude faith turned a horde of wild Arabs into a conquering army, that in a century dominated the world from Damascus to Seville. The truth that is in 'Christian Science' is that many forms of disease yield to the patient's firm persuasion of recovery. And from these and many other facts the natural power of faith is beginning to dawn on the most matter-of-fact and unspiritual people. They are beginning to think that perhaps Christ was right after all in saying 'All things are possible to him that believeth,' and that it is not such a blunder after all to make faith the first step to all holiness and purity, and the secret of victory in life's tussle. Leaving out of view for the moment the supernatural effects of faith, which Christianity alleges are its constant consequences, it is clear that its natural effects are all in the direction of increasing the force of the trusting man. It calms, it heartens for all work, effort, and struggle. It imparts patience, it brightens hope, it forbids discouragement, it rebukes and cures despondency. And besides all this, there is the supernatural communication of a strength not our own, which is the constant result of Christian faith. Christian faith knits the soul and the Saviour in so close a union, that all that is Christ's becomes the Christian' s, and every believer may hear His Lover's voice whispering to him what one of His servants once heard in an hour of despondency, 'My grace is sufficient for thee, for My power is made perfect in weakness.' Faith joins us to the Lord, and 'he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit'; and that Lord has said to all His disciples, 'I give thee Myself, and in Myself all that is Mine.' We do not go to warfare at our own charges, but there will pass into and abide in our hearts the warlike might of the true King and Captain of the Lord's host, and we shall hear the ring of His encouraging voice saying, 'Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world.'

4) 2 Chronicles 14:2-8

2 Chronicles

ASA'S REFORMATION, AND CONSEQUENT PEACE AND VICTORY

2Ch. 14:2 - 2Ch. 14:8.

Asa was Rehoboam's grandson, and came to the throne when a young man. The two preceding reigns had favoured idolatry, but the young king had a will of his own, and inaugurated a religious revolution, with which and its happy results this passage deals.

I. It first recounts the thorough clearance of idolatrous emblems and images which Asa made. 'Strange altars,'-that is, those dedicated to other gods; 'high places,'-that is, where illegal sacrifice to Jehovah was offered; 'pillars,'-that is, stone columns; and 'Asherim,'-that is, trees or wooden poles, survivals of ancient stone- or tree-worship; 'sun-images,'-that is, probably, pillars consecrated to Baal as sun-god, were all swept away. The enumeration vividly suggests the incongruous rabble of gods which had taken the place of the one Lord. How vainly we try to make up for His absence from our hearts by a multitude of finite delights and helpers! Their multiplicity proves the insufficiency of each and of all.

1Ki. 15:13 adds a detail which brings out still more clearly Asa's reforming zeal; for it tells us that he had to fight against the influence of his mother, who had been prominent in supporting disgusting and immoral forms of worship, and who retained some authority, of which her son was strong enough to take the extreme step of depriving her. Remembering the Eastern reverence for a mother, we can estimate the effort which that required, and the resolution which it implied. But 1 Kings differs from our narrative in stating that the 'high places' were not taken away-the explanation of the variation probably being that the one account tells what Asa attempted and commanded, and the other records the imperfect way in which his orders were carried out. They would be obeyed in Jerusalem and its neighbourhood, but in many a secluded corner the old rites would be observed.

It is vain to force religious revolutions. Laws which are not supported by the national conscience will only be obeyed where disobedience will involve penalties. If men's hearts cleave to Baal, they will not be turned into Jehovah-worshippers by a king's commands. Asa could command Judah to 'seek the Lord God of their fathers, and to do the law,' but he could not make them do it.

II. The chronicler brings out strongly the truth which runs through his whole book,-namely, the connection between honouring Jehovah and national prosperity. He did not import that thought into his narrative, but he insisted on it as moulding the history of Judah. Modern critics charge him with writing with a bias, but he learned the 'bias' from God's own declarations, and had it confirmed by observation, reflection, and experience. The whole history of Israel and Judah was one long illustration of the truth which he is constantly repeating. No doubt, the divine dealings with Israel brought obedience and well-being into closer connection than exists now; but in deepest truth the sure defence of our national prosperity is the same as theirs, and it is still the case that 'righteousness exalteth a nation.' 'The kingdom was quiet,' says the chronicler, 'and he had no war in those years; because the Lord had given him rest.' 1 Kings makes more of the standing enmity with the northern kingdom, and records scarcely anything of Asa's reign except the war which, as it says, was between him and Baasha of Israel 'all their days.' But, according to 2Ch. 16:1, Baasha did not proceed to war till Asa's thirty-sixth year, and the halcyon time of peace evidently followed immediately on the religious reformation at its very beginning.

Asa's experience embodies a truth which is substantially fulfilled in nations and in individuals; for obedience brings rest, often outward tranquillity, always inward calm. Note the heightened earnestness expressed in the repetition of the expression 'We have sought the Lord' in 2Ch. 14:7, and the grand assurance of His favour as the source of well-being in the clause which follows, 'and He hath given us rest on every side.' That is always so, and will be so with us. If we seek Him with our whole hearts, keeping Him ever before us amid the distractions of life, taking Him as our aim and desire, and ever stretching out the tendrils of our hearts to feel after Him and clasp Him, all around and within will be tranquil, and even in warfare we shall preserve unbroken peace.

Asa teaches us, too, the right use of tranquillity. He clearly and gratefully recognised God's hand in it, and traced it not to his own warlike skill or his people's prowess, but to Him. And he used the time of repose to strengthen his defences, and exercise his soldiers against possible assaults. We do not yet dwell in the land of peace, where it is safe to be without bolts and bars, but have ever to be on the watch for sudden attacks. Rest from war should give leisure for building not only fortresses, but temples, as was the case with Solomon. The time comes when, as in many an ancient fortified city of Europe, the ramparts may be levelled, and flowers bloom where sentries walked; but to-day we have to be on perpetual guard, and look to our fortifications, if we would not be overcome.

5) 2 Chronicles 14:11

2 Chronicles

ASA'S PRAYER

2Ch. 14:11.

This King Asa, Rehoboam's grandson, had had a long reign of peace, which the writer of the Book of Chronicles traces to the fact that he had rooted out idolatry from Judah, 'The land had rest, and he no war . . . because the Lord had given him rest.'

But there came a time when the war-cloud began to roll threateningly over the land, and a great army-the numbers of which, from their immense magnitude, seem to be erroneously given-came up against him. Like a wise man he made his military dispositions first, and prayed next. He set his troops in order, and then he fell down on his knees, and spoke to God.

Now, it seems to me that this prayer contains the very essence of what ought to be the Christian attitude in reference to all the conditions and threatening dangers and conflicts of life; and so I wish to run over it, and bring out the salient points of it, as typical of what ought to be our disposition.

I. The wholesome consciousness of our own impotence.

It did not take much to convince Asa that he had 'no power.' His army, according to the numbers given of the two hosts, was outnumbered two to one; and so it did not require much reflection to say, 'We have no might.' But although perhaps not so sufficiently obvious to us, as truly as in the case in our text, if we look fairly in the face our duties, our tasks, our dangers, the possibilities of life and its certainties, the more humbly we think of our own capacity, the more wisely we shall think about God, and the more truly we shall estimate ourselves. The world says, 'Self-reliance is the conquering virtue'; Jesus says to us, 'Self-distrust is the condition of all victory.' And that does not mean any mere shuffling off of responsibility from our own shoulders, but it means looking the facts of our lives, and of our own characters, in the face. And if we will do that, however apparently easy may be our course, and however richly endowed in mind, body, or estate we may be, if we all do that honestly, we shall find that we each are like 'the man with ten thousand' that has to meet 'the King that comes against him with twenty thousand'; and we shall not 'desire conditions of peace' with our enemy, for that is not what in this case we have to do, but we shall look about us, and not keep our eyes on the horizon, and on the levels of earth, but look up to see if there is not there an Ally that we can bring into the field to redress the balance, and to make our ten as strong as the opposing twenty. Zerah the Ethiopian, who was coming down on Asa, is said to have had a million fighting-men at his back, but that is probably an erroneous figure, because Old Testament numbers are necessarily often unreliable. Asa had only half the number; so he said, 'What can I do?' And what *could* he do? He did the only thing possible, he 'grasped at God's skirts, and prayed,' and that made all the difference.

Now all that is true about the disproportion between the foes we have to face and fight and our own strength. It is eminently true about us Christian people, if we are doing any work for our Master. You hear people say, 'Look at the small number of professing Christians in this country, as compared with the numbers on the other side. What is the use of their trying to convert the world?' Well, think of the assembled Christian people, for instance, of Manchester, on the most charitable supposition, and the shallowest interpretation of that word 'Christian.' What are they among so many? A mere handful. If the Christian Church had to undertake the task of Christianising the world by its own strength, we might well despair of success and stop altogether. 'We have no might.' The disproportion both numerically and in all things that the world estimates as strength [which are many of them good things], is so great that we are in a worse case than Asa was. It is not two to one; it is twenty to one, or an even greater disproportion. But we are not only numerically weak. A multitude of non-effectives, mere camp followers, loosely attached, nominal Christians, have to be deducted from the muster-roll, and the few who are left are so feeble as well as few that they have more than enough to do in holding their own, to say nothing of dreaming of charging the wide-stretching lines of the enemy. So a profound self-distrust is our wisdom. But that should not paralyse us, but lead to something better, as it led Asa.

II. Summoning God into the field should follow wholesome self-distrust.

Asa uses a remarkable expression, which is, perhaps, scarcely reproduced adequately in our Authorised Version: 'It is nothing with Thee to help, whether with many or with them that have no power.' It is a strange phrase, but it seems most probable that the suggested rendering in the Revised Version is nearer the writer's meaning, which says, 'Lord! there is none beside Thee to help between the mighty and them that have no power,' which to our ears is a somewhat cumbrous way of saying that God, and God only, can adjust the difference between the mighty and the weak; can redress the balance, and by the laying of His hand upon the feeble hand can make it strong as the mailed fist to which it is opposed. If we know ourselves to be hopelessly outnumbered, and send to God for reinforcements, He will clash His sword into the scale, and make it go down. Asa turns to God and says, 'Thou only canst trim the scales and make the lighter of the two the heavier one by casting Thy might into it. So help us, O Lord our God!'

One man with God at his back is always in the majority; and, however many there may be on the other side, 'there are more that be with us than they that be with them.' *There* is encouragement for people who have to fight unpopular causes in the world, who have been accustomed to be in minorities all their days, in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation. Never mind about the numbers; bring God into the field, and the little band, which is compared in another place in these historical Books to 'two flocks of kids' fronting the enemy, that had flowed all over the land, is in the majority. 'God with us'; then we are strong.

The consciousness of weakness may unnerve a man; and that is why people in the world are always patting each other on the back and saying 'Be of good cheer, and rely upon yourself.' But the self-distrust that turns to God becomes the parent of a far more reliable self-reliance than that which trusts to men. My consciousness of need is my opening the door for God to come in. Just as you always find the lakes in the hollows, so you will always find the grace of God coming into men's hearts to strengthen them and make them victorious, when there has been the preparation of the lowered estimate of one's self. Hollow out your heart by self-distrust, and God will fill it with the flashing waters of His strength bestowed. The more I feel myself weak, the more I am meant not to fold my hands and say, 'I never can do that thing; it is of no use my trying to attempt it, I may as well give it up'; but to say, 'Lord I there is none beside Thee that can set the balance right between the mighty and him that hath no strength.' 'Help me, O Lord my God!' Just as those little hermit-crabs that you see upon the seashore, with soft bodies unprotected, make for the first empty shell they can find, and house in that and make it their fortress, our exposed natures, our unarmoured characters, our sense of weakness, ought to drive us to Him. As the unarmed population of a land invaded by the enemy pack their goods and hurry to the nearest fortified place, so when I say to myself I have no strength, let me say, 'Thou art my Rock, my Strength, my Fortress, and my Deliverer. My God, in whom I trust, my Buckler, and the Horn of my Salvation, and my high Tower.'

Now, there is one more word about this matter, and that is, the way by which we summon God into the field. Asa prays, 'Help us, O Lord our God! for we rest on Thee'; and the word that he employs for 'rest' is not a very frequent one. It carries with it a very striking picture. Let me illustrate it by a reference to another case where it is employed. It is used in that tragical story of the death of Saul, when the man that saw the last of him came to David and drew in a sentence the pathetic picture of the wearied, wounded, broken-hearted, discrowned, desperate monarch, *leaning on* his spear. You can understand how hard he leaned, with what a grip he held it, and how heavily his whole languid, powerless weight pressed upon it. And that is the word that is used here. 'We lean on Thee' as the wounded Saul leaned upon his spear. Is that a picture of your faith, my friend? Do you lean upon God like that, laying your hand upon Him till every vein on your hand stands out with the force and tension of the grasp? Or do you lean lightly, as a man that does not feel much the need of a support? Lean hard if you wish God to come quickly. 'We rest on Thee; help us, O Lord!'

III. Courageous advance should follow self-distrust and summoning God by faith.

It is well when self-distrust leads to confidence, when, as Charles Wesley has it in his great hymn:

'. . . I am weak,

But confident in self-despair.'

But that is not enough. It is better when self-distrust and confidence in God lead to courage, and as Asa goes on, 'Help us, for we rely on Thee, and in Thy name we go against this multitude.' Never mind though it is two to one. What does that matter? Prudence and calculation are well enough, but there is a great deal of very rank cowardice and want of faith in Christian people, both in regard to their own lives and in regard to Christian work in the world, which goes masquerading under much too respectable a name, and calls itself 'judicious caution' and 'prudence.' There is little ever done by that, especially in the Christian course; and the old motto of one of the French republicans holds good; 'Dare! dare! always dare!' You have more on your side than you have against you, and creeping prudence of calculation is not the temper in which the battle is won. 'Dash' is not always precipitate and presumptuous. If we have God with us, let us be bold in fronting the dangers and difficulties that beset us, and be sure that He will help us.

IV. And now the last point that I would notice is this-the all-powerful plea which God will answer.

'Thou art my God, let not man prevail against Thee.' That prayer covers two things. You may be quite sure that if God is your God you will not be beaten; and you may be quite sure that if you have made God's cause yours He will make your cause His, and again you will not be beaten.

'Thou art our God.' 'It takes two to make a bargain,' and God and we have both to act before He is truly ours. He gives Himself to us, but there is an act of ours required too, and you must take the God that is given to you, and make Him yours because you make yourselves His. And when I have taken Him for mine, and not unless I have, He is mine, to all intents of strength-giving and blessedness. When I can say, 'Thou art my God, and it is impossible that Thou wilt deny Thyself,' then nothing can snap that bond; and 'neither life nor death, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any *other* creature' can do it. But there is a creature that can, and that is I. For I can separate *myself* from the love and the guardianship of God, and He can say to a man, 'I am thy God,' and the man *not* answer, 'Thou art my God.'

And then there is another plea here. ‘Let not man prevail against Thee.’ What business had Asa to identify his little kingdom and his victory with God’s cause and God’s conquest? Only this, that he had flung himself into God’s arms, and because he had, and was trying to do what God would have him do, he was quite sure that it was not Asa but Jehovah that the million of Ethiopians were fighting against. People warn us against the fanaticism of taking for granted that our cause is God’s cause. Well, we need the warning sometimes, but we may be quite sure of this, that if we have made God’s cause ours, He will make our cause His, down to the minutest point in our daily lives.

And then, if thus we say in the depths of our hearts, and live accordingly, ‘There is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O God!’ it will be with us as it was with Asa in the story before us, ‘the enemy fled, and could not recover themselves, for they were destroyed before the Lord and before His hosts.’

6) 2 Chronicles 15:15

2 Chronicles

THE SEARCH THAT ALWAYS FINDS

2Ch. 15:15.

These words occur in one of the least familiar passages of the Old Testament. They describe an incident in the reign of Asa, who was the grandson of Solomon’s foolish son Rehoboam, and was consequently the third king of Judah after the secession of the North. He had just won a great victory, and was returning with his triumphant army to Jerusalem, when there met him a prophet, unknown otherwise, who poured out fiery words, exhorting Asa and his people to cleave to God and to cast away their idols. Asa, encouraged by the prophetic words of this bold speaker for God, screwed himself up, and was able to induce also his people, to effect a great religious reformation. He made a clean sweep of the idols, and gathered the sadly-dwindled nation together in Jerusalem, where they renewed the covenant with the Lord God of their fathers. The text sums up their work and its result. 'They sought Him with their whole heart, and He was found of them; and the Lord gave them rest round about.' The words express in simplest form what should be the chief desire of our hearts and occupation of our lives, and what will then be our peaceful experience. We shall best bring out these points if we take the words just as they lie, and consider the seeking, the finding which certainly crowns that seeking, and the rest which ensues on finding God.

I. The seeking.

Now, of course, there is no doubt that what the chronicler meant to describe by the phrase, 'seeking the Lord,' was largely the mere external acts of ritual worship, the superficial turning from idols to a purely external recognition of God as the God of Israel. But while there may have been nothing deeper than a change in the nominal object of nominal worship, so far as many were concerned, no doubt a very real turning of heart to God underlay the external change in many other cases, of which the destruction of idols and the renewed observance of the form of Jehovah's worship were the consequence and sign. That turning of mind, will, and affection towards God must be ours if we are to be among those wise and happy seekers who are sure to find that which-or rather Him whom-they seek and to rest in Him whom they find. That search is not after a lost treasure, nor does it imply ignorance of where its object is to be found. We seek that which we know, and which we may be assured of finding. Therefore there need be no tremors of uncertainty in our quest, and the blessedness of the search is as real as, though different from, the blessedness of the possession which ends it. The famous saying which prefers the search after, to the possession of truth, is more proud than wise; but the comparison which it institutes is so far true that there is a joy in the aspiration after and the efforts towards truth only less joyous than that which attends its attainment. But truth divorced from God is finite and may pall, become familiar and lose its radiance, like a gathered flower; and hence the preference for the search is intelligible though one-sided. But God does not pall, and the more we find Him the more we delight in Him; the highest bliss is to find Him, the next highest is to seek Him; and, since seeking and finding Him are never wholly separate, these kindred joys blend their lights in the experience of all His children.

But our text lays emphasis on the whole-heartedness of the people's seeking of God. The search must be earnest and engaged in with the whole energy of our whole being, if any blessing is to come from it. Why! one reason why the great mass of professing Christians make so little of their religion is because they are only half-hearted in it. If you divide a river into two streams the force of each is less than half the power of the original current; and the chances are that you will make a stagnant marsh where there used to be a flowing stream. 'All in all, or not at all,' is the rule for life, in all departments. It is the rule in daily business. A man that puts only half himself in his profession or trade, while the other half of his wits is gone woolgathering and dreaming, is predestined from all eternity to fail. The same is true about our religion. If you and I attend to it as a kind of by-occupation; if we give the balance of our time and the superfluity of our energy, after we have done a hard day's work-say, an hour upon a Sunday-to seeking God, and devote all the rest of the week to seeking worldly prosperity, it is no wonder if our religion languishes, and is mainly a matter of forms, as it is with such hosts of people that call themselves Christians.

Oh! dear brethren, I do believe there is more unconscious unreality in the average Christian man's endeavour to be a better Christian than there is in almost anything else in the world:-

'One foot on sea, and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.'

That is why so many of us know nothing of a progressive strengthening of our faith, and an increasing conquest of ourselves, and a firmer grasp of God, and a fuller realisation of the blessedness of walking in His ways.

'They sought Him with all their heart.' That does not mean, remember, that there are to be no other desires, for it is a great mistake to pit religion against other things which are meant to be its instruments and its helps. We are not required to seek nothing else in order to seek God wholly. He demands no impossible and fantastic detachment of ourselves from the ordinary and legitimate occupations, affections, and duties of human life, but He does ask that the dominant desire after Him should be powerful enough to express itself through all our actions, and that we should seek for God in them, and for them in God.

Whilst thus we are to give the right interpretation to that whole-heartedness in our seeking God, on which the text lays stress, do not let us forget that the one token of it which the text specifies is, casting out our idols. There must be detachment if there is to be attachment. If some climbing plant, for instance, has twisted itself round the unprofitable thorns in the hedge, the gardener, before he can get it to go up the support that it is meant to encircle, has carefully to detach it from the stays to which it has wantonly clung, taking care that in the process he does not break its tendrils and destroy its power of growth. So, to train our souls to cleave to God, and to grow up round the great Stay that is provided for us, there is needed, as an essential part of the process, the voluntary, conscious, conscientious, and constant guarding of ourselves from the vagrancies of our desires, which send out their shoots away from Him; and when the objects of these become idols, then there is nothing for it but that, like Asa and his people, we should hew them to pieces and make a bonfire of them; and then renew our covenant before God. I desire to press that upon you and upon myself. The heart must be emptied of baser liquors, if the new wine of the Kingdom is to be poured into it.

True it is, of course-and thank God for it!-that the most powerful agent in effecting that detachment of ourselves from lower things is our fruition of higher. It is when God comes into the temple that Dagon falls on the threshold. It is when a new affection begins to spring in the heart that old loves are thrust out of it. But whilst that is true, it is also true that the two processes run on simultaneously; and that whilst, on the one hand, if we are ever to overcome our love of the world it must be through the love of God, on the other hand, if we are ever to be confirmed in a whole-hearted love of God, it must be through our conquest of our love of the world. ‘Unite my heart to fear Thy name’ was the profound prayer of the old Psalmist; and the ‘heart,’ according to Old Testament usage, is the central fountain from which flow all the streams of conscious life. To seek Him with the whole heart is to engage the whole self in the quest, and that is the only kind of seeking which has the certainty of success.

II. The finding which crowns such seeking.

‘He was found of them.’ Yes; anything is possible rather than that a whole-hearted search after God should be a vain search. For there are, in that case, two seekers-God is seeking for us more truly than we are seeking for Him. And if the mother is seeking her child, and the child its mother, it will be a very wide desert where they will not meet. ‘The Father seeketh such to worship Him,’ that is-the divine activity is going about the world, searching for the heart that turns to Him, and it cannot but be that they that seek Him shall find Him, or ‘shall be found of Him.’ Open the windows, and you cannot keep out the sunshine; open your lungs and you cannot keep out the air. ‘In Him we live and move and have our being,’ and if our desires turn, however blindly, to Him, and are accompanied with the appropriate action, heaven and earth are more likely to rush to ruin than such a searching to be frustrated of its aim.

Brethren! is there anything else in the world of which you can say, ‘Seek, and ye shall find’? You, with white hairs on your heads, have you found anything else in which the chase was sure to result in the capture; in which capture was sure to yield all that the hunter had wished? There is only one direction for a man’s desires and aims, in which disappointment is an impossibility. In all other regions the most that can be promised is ‘Seek, and *perhaps* you will find’; and, when you have found, perhaps you will feel that the prize was not worth the finding. Or it is, ‘Seek, and *possibly* you will find; and after you have found and kept for a little while, you will lose.’ Though it may be

‘Better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all,’

a treasure that slips out of our fingers is not the best treasure that we can search for. But here the assurance is, ‘Seek, and ye *shall* find; and shall never lose. Find, and you shall always possess.’

What would you think of a company of gold-seekers, hunting about in some exhausted claim, for hypothetical grains, ragged, starving-and all the while in the next gully were lying lumps of gold for the picking up? And that figure fairly represents what people do and suffer who seek for good and do not seek for God.

III. The rest which ensues on finding God.

‘The Lord gave them rest round about.’ We believe that the Jewish nation was under special supernatural guidance, so that national adherence to the Law was always followed by external prosperity. That is not, of course, the case with us. But which is the better thing, ‘rest round about’ or rest within? We have no immunity from toil or conflict. Seeking God does not cover our heads from the storm of external calamities, nor arm our hearts against the darts and daggers of many a pain, anxiety, and care, but disturbance around is a very small matter if there be a better thing, rest within.

Do you remember who it was that said, ‘In the world ye shall have tribulation . . . but in Me ye shall have peace’? Then we have, as it were, two abodes-one, as far as regards the life of sense, in the world of sense-another, as far as regards the inmost self, which may, if we will, be in Christ. A vessel with an outer casing and a layer of air between it and the inner will keep its contents hot. So we may have round us the very opposite of repose, and, if God so wills, let us not kick against His will; we may have conflict and stir and strife, and yet a better rest than that of my text may be ours. ‘Rest round about’ is sometimes good and sometimes bad. It is often bad, for it is the people that ‘have no changes’ who most usually ‘do not fear God.’ But rest within, that is sure to come when a man has sought with all his desire for God, whom he has found in all His fullness, is only good and best of all.

We all know, thank God! in worldly matters and in inferior degree, how blessed and restful it is when some strong affection is gratified, some cherished desire fulfilled. Though these satisfactions are not perpetual, nor perfect, they may teach us what a depth of blessed and calm repose, incapable of being broken by any storms or by any tasks, will come to and abide with the man whose deepest love is satisfied in God, and whose most ardent desires have found more than they sought for in Him. Be sure of this, dear friends! that if we do thus seek, and thus find, it is not in the power of anything ‘that is at enmity with joy’ utterly to ‘abolish or destroy’ the quietness of our hearts. ‘Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.’ They who thus repose will have peace in their hearts, even whilst tasks and temptations, changes and sorrows, disturb their outward lives. ‘In the world ye shall have tribulation.’ Be it so; it may be borne with submission and thankfulness if in Christ we have peace.

Thus we may have the peace of God, rest in and from Him, entering into us, and in due time, by His gracious guidance and help, we shall enter into eternal rest. Whilst to seek is to find Him, in a very deep and blessed sense, even in this life; in another aspect all our earthly life may be regarded as seeking after Him, and the future as the true finding of Him. That future will bring to those whose hearts have turned from the shows and vanities of time to God a possession of Him so much fuller than was experienced here that the lesser discoveries and enjoyments of Him which are experienced here, scarcely deserve in comparison to be called by the same name. So my text may be taken, as in its first part, a description of the blessed life here-’They sought Him with all their heart’-and in its second, as a shadowy vision of the yet more blessed life hereafter, ‘He was found of them, and the Lord gave them rest round about,’ as well as within, in the land of peace, where sorrow and sighing, and toil and care, shall pass from memory; and they that warred against us shall be far away.

7) 2 Chronicles 17:1-10

2 Chronicles

JEHOSHAPHAT’S REFORM

2Ch. 17:1 - 2Ch. 17:10.

The first point to be noted in this passage is that Jehoshaphat followed in the steps of Asa his father. Stress is laid on his adherence to the ancestral faith, ‘the first ways of his father David,’-before his great fall,-and the paternal example, ‘he sought to the God of his father.’ Such carrying on of a predecessor’s work is rare in the line of kings of Judah, where father and son were seldom of the same mind in religion. The principle of hereditary monarchy secures peaceful succession, but not continuity of policy. Many a king of Judah had to say in his heart what Ecclesiastes puts into Solomon’s mouth, 'I hated all my labour, . . . seeing that I must leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool?' But it is not only in kings' houses that that experience is realised. Many a home is saddened to-day because the children do not seek the God of their fathers. 'Instead of the fathers' should 'come up thy children'; but, alas! grandmother Lois and mother Eunice do not always see the boy who has known the Scriptures from a child grow up into a Timothy, in whom their unfeigned faith lives again. The neglect of religious instruction in professedly Christian families, the inconsistent lives of parents or their too rigid restraints, or, sometimes, their too lax discipline, are to be blamed for many such cases. But there are many instances in which not the parents, but the children, are to be blamed. An earnest Sunday-school teacher may do much to lead the children of godly parents to their father's God. Blessed is the home where the golden chain of common faith binds hearts together, and family love is elevated and hallowed by common love of God!

Jehoshaphat's religion was, further, resolutely held in the face of prevailing opposition. 'The Baalim' were popular; it was fashionable to worship them. They were numerous, and all varieties of taste could find a Baal to please them. But this young king turned from the tempting ways that opened flower-strewn before him, and chose the narrow road that led upwards. 'So did not I, because of the fear of God,' might have been his motto. A similar determined setting of our faces God-ward, in spite of the crowd of tempting false deities around us, must mark us, if we are to have any religion worth calling by the name. This king recoiled from the example of the neighbouring monarchy, and walked 'not after the doings of Israel.' His seeking to God was very practical, for it was not shown simply by professed beliefs or by sentiment, but by ordering his life in obedience to God's will. The test of real religion is, after all, a life unlike the lives of the men who do not share our faith, and moulded in accordance with God's known will. It is vain to allege that we are seeking the Lord unless we are walking in His commandments.

Prosperity followed godliness, in accordance with the divinely appointed connection between them which characterised the Old Dispensation. 'Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament; adversity is the blessing of the New,' says Bacon. But the epigram is too neat to be entirely true, for the

Book of Job and many a psalm show that the eternal problem of suffering innocence was raised by facts even in the old days, and in our days there are forms of well-being which are the natural fruits of well-doing. Still, the connection was closer in Judah than with us, and, in the case before us, the establishment of Jehoshaphat in the kingdom, his subject's love, which showed itself in voluntary gifts over and above the taxes imposed, and his wealth and honour, were the direct results of his true religion.

A really devout man must be a propagandist. True faith cannot be hid nor be dumb. As certainly as light must radiate must faith strive to communicate itself. So the account of Jehoshaphat's efforts to spread the worship of Jehovah follows the account of his personal godliness. 'His heart was lifted up in the ways of the Lord.' There are two kinds of lifted-up hearts; one when pride, self-sufficiency, and forgetfulness of God, raise a man to a giddy height, from which God's judgments are sure to cast him down and break him in the fall; one when a lowly heart is raised to high courage and devotion, and 'set on high,' because it fears God's name. Such elevation is consistent with humility. It fears no fall; it is an elevation above earthly desires and terrors, neither of which can reach it, so as to hinder the man from walking in 'the ways of the Lord.' This king was lifted to it by his happy experience of the blessed effects of obedience. These encouraged him to vigorous efforts to spread the religion which had thus gladdened and brightened his own life. Is that the use we make of the ease which God gives us?

Jehoshaphat had to destroy first, in order to build up. The 'high places and Asherim' had to be taken out of Judah before the true worship could be established there. So it is still. The Christian has to carry a sword in the one hand, and a trowel in the other. Many a rotten old building, the stones of which have been cemented in blood, has to be swept away before the fair temple can be reared. The Devil is in possession of much of the world, and the lawful owner has to dispossess the 'squatter.' No one can suppose that society is organised on Christian principles even in so-called 'Christian countries'; and there is much overturning work to be done before He whose right it is to reign is really king over the whole earth. We, too, have our 'high places and Asherim' to root out.

But that destructive work is not to be done by force. Institutions can only be swept away when public opinion has grown to see their evils. Forcible reformations of manners, and, still more, of religion, never last, but are sure to be followed by violent rebounds to the old order. So, side by side with the removal of idolatry, this king took care to diffuse the knowledge of the true worship, by sending out a body of influential commissioners to teach in Judah. That was a new departure of great importance. It presents several interesting features. The composition of the staff of instructors is remarkable. The principal men in it are five court officers, next to whom, and subordinate, as is shown not only by the order of enumeration, but by the phrase 'with them,' were nine Levites, and, last and lowest of all, two priests. We might have expected that priests should be the most numerous and important members of such a body, and we are led to suspect that the priesthood was so corrupted as to be careless about religious reformation. A clerical order is not always the most ardent in religious revival. The commissioners were probably chosen, without regard to their being priests, Levites, or 'laymen,' because of their zeal in the worship of Jehovah; and the five 'princes' head the list in order to show the royal authority of the commission.

Another point is the emphasis with which their function of teaching is thrice mentioned in three verses. Apparently the bulk of the nation knew little or nothing of 'the law of the Lord,' either on its spiritual and moral or its ceremonial side; and Jehoshaphat's object was to effect an enlightened, not a forcible and superficial, change. God's way of influencing actions is to reveal Himself to the understanding and the heart, that these may move the will, and that may shape the deeds. Wise men will imitate God's way. Jehoshaphat did not issue royal commands, but sent out teachers. In 2Ch. 19:5 we find him despatching 'judges' in similar fashion throughout Judah. They had the power to punish, but these teachers had only authority to explain and to exhort.

The present writer accepts the chronicler's statement that the teachers had 'the Book of the Law' with them, though he recognises it as possible that that 'Book' was not identical with the complete collection of documents which now bears the name. But, be that as it may, the incident of our text is remarkable as being the only recorded systematic and complete attempt to diffuse the remedy against idolatry throughout the kingdom, as putting religious reformation on its only sure ground, and as hinting at deep and widespread ignorance among the masses.

‘When a man’s ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.’ So Judah found. ‘A terror of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms’ around. No doubt, the news filtered to them of how Jehovah was exerting His might on the nation, and a certain indefinable awe of this so potent god, who was defeating the Baalim, made them think that peace was the best policy. Each nation was supposed to have its own god, and the national god was supposed to fight for his worshippers; so that war was a struggle of deities as well as of men, and the stronger god won. Here was a god who had reconquered his territory, and had cast out usurpers. Prudence dictated keeping on good terms with him. But it never occurred to any of these peoples that their own gods were any less real than Judah’ s, or that Judah’s God could ever become theirs.

8) 2 Chronicles 17:16

2 Chronicles

AMASIAH

2Ch. 17:16.

This is a scrap from the catalogue of Jehoshaphat’s ‘mighty men of valour’; and is Amasiah’s sole record. We see him for a moment and hear his eulogium and then oblivion swallows him up. We do not know what it was that he did to earn it. But what a fate, to live to all generations by that one sentence!

I. Cheerful self-surrender the secret of all religion.

The words of our text contain a metaphor naturally drawn from the sacrificial system. It comes so easily to us that we scarcely recognise the metaphorical element, but the clear recognition of it gives great additional energy to the words. Amasiah was both sacrificer and sacrifice. His offering was self-immolation. As in all love, so in that noblest kind of it which clasps God, its perfect expression is, ‘I give Thee my living, loving self.’ Nor is it only sacrifice and sacrificer that are seen in deepest truth in the experience of the Christian life, but the reality of the Temple is also there, for ‘Ye also . . . are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices.’ Only when God dwells in us, shall we have the nerve and the firmness of hand to take the knife and ‘slay before the Lord,’ the awful Guest in the sanctuary within, the most precious of the children of our spirits.

The essence of the sacrifice of self is the sacrifice of will. In the Christian experience ‘willingly offered’ is almost tautology, for unwilling offerings are a contradiction and in fact there are no such things. The quality of unwillingness destroys the character of the offering and robs it of all sacredness. Reluctant Christianity is not Christianity. That noun and that adjective can never be buckled together.

The submission of will and the consequent surrender of myself and my powers, opportunities, and possessions, so that I do all, enjoy all, use all, and when need is, endure all with glad thankful reference to God is only possible to me in the measure in which my will is made flexible by love, and such will-subduing love comes only when we ‘know and believe the love that God hath to us.’ There is the point at which not a few moral and religious teachers go wrong and bewilder themselves and their disciples. There, too, is the point at which Christ and the Gospel of salvation through faith in Him stand forth as emancipating humanity from the dreary round of efforts and vain attempts to work up the condition needful for achieving the height of self-surrender, which is seen to be indispensable to all true nobleness of living, but is felt to be beyond the reach of the ordinary man. There, too, is the point at which many good people mar their lives as Christians. They waste their strength in trying to bring the jibbing horse up to the leap. They try to blow up a fire of devotion and to make themselves priests to offer themselves, but all the while the mutinous self recoils from the leap, and the fire burns smokily, and their sacrifice is laid on the altar with little joy, because they have not been careful and wise enough to begin at the beginning and to follow God’s way of melting their wills, by love, the reflection of the Infinite love of God to them. God’s priests offer themselves because they offer their wills; they offer their wills because they love God;

they love God because they know that God loves them. That is the divine order. It is vain to try to accomplish the end by any other.

II. This willing offering hallows all life.

No syllable is left to tell us what Amasiah did to win this praise. Probably the words enshrine some now forgotten memory of his cheerful courage, some heroic feat on an unrecorded battlefield. Particulars are not given nor needed. Specific actions are unimportant; the spirit of a life can be told with very incomplete details, and it, not the details, is the important thing. Sometimes, as in many modern biographies, one 'cannot see the wood for the trees,' and misses the main drift and aim of a life in the chaos of a bewildering mass of nothings. How much more happy the lot of this man of whom we have only the generalised expression of the text, unweighted and undisturbed by petty incidents! It takes tons of rose leaves to make a tiny phial of otto of roses, but the fragrance is far more pungent in a drop of the distillation than in armfuls of leaves. Every life shrinks into very small compass, and the centuries do not tolerate long biographies. Shall we not seek to order our life so that Amasiah's epitaph may serve for us? It will be blessed if this-and nothing else-is known about us, that we 'willingly offered ourselves to the Lord.' My friend: will that be a true epitome of your life?

III. This willing offering is accepted by God.

We may hear a mightier voice behind the chronicler' s, and the judgment of the Judge of all pronounced by His lips. It matters little what men say of one another, but it matters everything what God says of us. We are but too apt to forget that He is now saying something as to each of us, and that we have not to wait for death to put a final period to our activities, before our lives become fit subjects for God's judgment, Moment by moment we are writing our own sentences. But while it is good for us to remember the continuous judgment of God on each deed, it is not good to let dark thoughts of the principles of that judgment paralyse our activity or chill our confidence in His forgiving and accepting mercy. There is often a dark suspicion, like that of the one-talented servant, which blackens God's fair fame as being 'an austere Man,' making demands rather than imparting power, and the effect of such an ugly conception of Him is to cut the nerve of service and bury the talent, carefully folded up, it may be, but none the less earning nothing. 'If we call on Him as Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work,' let us be sure that it will be a Fatherly judgment that He will pass upon us and our offerings. There is a wonderful collection on His altar of what many people would think rubbish, just as many a mother has laid away among her treasures some worthless article which her child had once given her-a weed plucked by the roadside in a long past summer day, some trifle of rare preciousness in the child's eyes, and of none in any others than her own. She opens her drawer and brings out the poor little thing, and her eyes fill and her heart fills as she looks. And does not God keep His children's gifts as lovingly, and set them in places of honour in the day when He 'makes up His jewels'? There are cups of cold water and widows' mites and much else that a supercilious world would call 'trash' stored there. Thank God! He accepts imperfect service, faltering faith, partial consecration, a little love. Even our poor offering may be an 'odour of a sweet smell,' ministering fragrance that is a delight to Him, if it is offered with the much incense of the great Sacrifice and through the mediation of the great High Priest.

The world forgot Amasiah, or never knew him, an obscure soldier in an obscure kingdom, but God did not forget, and here is his epitaph, and this is his memorial to all generations. Men's chronicles have no room for all the names that their wearers are eager to have inscribed on their crumbling and crowded pages, 'but the Lamb's Book of Life' has ample space on its radiant pages for all who desire to set their names there, and if ours are there, we need not envy the proudest whose titles and deeds fill the most conspicuous pages in the world's records. 'Then shall every man have praise of Christ,' and he who wins that guerdon needs nothing more, and can have nothing more to swell his blessedness.

9) 2 Chronicles 19:1-11

2 Chronicles

'A MIRROR FOR MAGISTRATES'

2Ch. 19:1 - 2Ch. 19:11.

Jehoshaphat is distinguished by two measures for his people's good: one, his sending out travelling preachers through the land [2Ch. 17:7 - 2Ch. 17:9]; another, this provision of local judges and a central court in Jerusalem. The former was begun as early as the third year of his reign, but was probably interrupted, like other good things, by his ill-omened alliance with Ahab. The prophet Jehu's plain speaking seems to have brought the king back to his better self, and its fruit was his going 'among the people,' from south to north, as a missionary, 'to bring them back to Jehovah.' The religious reformation was accompanied by his setting judges throughout the land. Our modern way of distinguishing between religious and civil concerns is foreign to Eastern thought, and was especially out of the question in a theocracy. Jehovah was the King of Judah; therefore the things that are Caesar's and the things that are God's coalesced, and these two objects of Jehoshaphat's journeyings were pursued simultaneously. We have travelled far from his simple institutions, and our course has not been all progress. His supreme concern was to deal out even-handed justice between man and man; is not ours rather to give ample doses of law? To him the judicial function was a copy of God' s, and its exercise a true act of worship, done in His fear, and modelled after His pattern. The first impression made in one of our courts is scarcely that judge and counsel are engaged in worship.

There had been local judges before Jehoshaphat-elders in the villages, the 'heads of the fathers' houses' in the tribes. We do not know whether the great secession had flung the simple old machinery somewhat out of gear, or whether Jehoshaphat's action was simply to systematise and make universal the existing arrangements. But what concerns us most is to note that all the charge which he gives to these peasant magistrates bears on the religious aspect of their duties. They are to think themselves as acting for Jehovah and with Jehovah. If they recognise the former, they may be confident of the latter. They are to 'let the fear of Jehovah be upon you,' for that awe resting on a spirit will, like a burden or water-jar on a woman's shoulder, make the carriage upright and the steps firm. They are not only to act for and with Jehovah, but to do like Him, avoiding injustice, favouritism, and corruption, the plague-spots of Eastern law-courts. In such a state of society, the cases to be adjudicated were mostly such as mother-wit, honesty and the fear of God could solve; other times call for other qualifications. But still, let us learn from this charge that even in our necessarily complicated legal systems and political life, there is room and sore need for the application of the same principles. What a different world it would be if our judges and representatives carried some tincture of Jehoshaphat's simple and devout wisdom into their duties! Civic and political life ought to be as holy as that of cloister and cell. To judge righteously, to vote honestly, is as much worship as to pray. A politician may be 'a priest of the Most High God.'

And for us all the spirit of Jehoshaphat's charge is binding, and every trivial and secular task is to be discharged for God, with God, in the fear of God. 'On the bells of the horses shall be Holiness unto Jehovah.' If our religion does not drive the wheels of daily life, so much the worse for our life and our religion. But, above all, this charge reminds us that the secret of right living is to imitate God. These peasants were to find direction, as well as inspiration, in gazing on Jehovah's character, and trying to copy it. And we are to be 'imitators of God, as beloved children,' though our best efforts may only produce poor results. A masterpiece may be copied in some wretched little newspaper blotch, but the great artist will own it for a copy, and correct it into complete likeness.

The second step was to establish a 'supreme court' in Jerusalem, which had two divisions, ecclesiastical and civil, as we should say, the former presided over by the chief priest, and the latter by 'the ruler of the house of Judah.' Murder cases and the graver questions involving interpretation of the law were sent up thither, while the village judges had probably to decide only points that shrewdness and integrity could settle. But these superior judges, too, received charges as to moral, rather than intellectual or learned qualifications. Religiously, uprightly, 'with a perfect heart,' courageously, they were to act, 'and Jehovah be with the good!' That may be a prayer, like the old invocation with which heralds sent knights to tilt at each other, and with which, in some legal proceedings, the pleas are begun, 'God defend the right!' But more probably it is an assurance that God will guide the judges to favour the good cause, if they on their parts will bring the aforesaid qualities to their decisions. And are not these qualities just such as will, for the most part, give similar results to us, if in our various activities we exercise them? And may we not see a sequence worth our practically putting to the proof in these characteristics enjoined on Jehoshaphat's supreme court? Begin with 'the fear of the Lord'; that will help us to 'faithfulness and a perfect heart'; and these again by taking away occasions of ignoble fear, and knitting together the else tremulous and distracted nature, will make the fearful brave and the weak strong.

But another thought is suggested by Jehoshaphat's language. Note how this court does not seem to have inflicted punishments, but to have had only counsels and warnings to wield. It was a board of conciliation rather than a penal tribunal. Two things it had to do-to press upon the parties the weighty consideration that crimes against men were sins against God, and that the criminal drew down wrath on the community. This remarkable provision brings out strongly thoughts that modern society will be the better for incorporating. The best way to deal with men is to get at their hearts and consciences. The deeper aspect of civil crimes or wrongs to men should be pressed on the doer; namely, that they are sins against God. Again, all such acts are sins against the mystical sacred bond of brotherhood. Again, the solidarity of a nation makes it inevitable that 'one sinner destroyeth much good,' and pulls down with him, when God smites him, a multitude of innocents. So finely woven is the web of the national life that, if a thread run in any part of it, a great rent gapes. If one member sins, all the members suffer with it. And lastly, the cruellest thing that we can do is to be dumb when we see sin being committed. It is not public men, judges and the like, alone, who are called on thus to warn evil-doers, but all of us in our degree. If we do not, we are guilty along with a guilty nation; and it is only when, to the utmost of our power, we have warned our brethren as to national sins, that we can wash our hands in innocency, 'This do, and ye shall not be guilty.'

10)2 Chronicles 20:12

2 Chronicles

A STRANGE BATTLE

2Ch. 20:12.

A formidable combination of neighbouring nations, of which Moab and Ammon, the ancestral enemies of Judah, were the chief, was threatening Judah. Jehoshaphat, the king, was panic-stricken when he heard of the heavy war-cloud that was rolling on, ready to burst in thunder on his little kingdom. His first act was to muster the nation, not as a military levy but as suppliants, ‘to seek help of the Lord.’ The enemy was camping down by the banks of the Dead Sea, almost within striking distance of Jerusalem. It seemed a time for fighting, not for praying, but even at that critical moment, the king and the men, whom it might have appeared that plain duty called to arms, were gathered in the Temple, and, hampered by their wives and children, were praying. Would they not have done better if they had been sturdily marching through the wilderness of Judah to front their foes? Our text is the close and the climax of Jehoshaphat’s prayer, and, as the event proved, it was the most powerful weapon that could have been employed, for the rest of the chapter tells the strangest story of a campaign that was ever written. No sword was drawn. The army was marshalled, but Levites with their instruments of music, not fighters with their spears, led the van, and as ‘they began to sing and to praise,’ sudden panic laid hold on the invading force, who turned their arms against each other. So when Judah came to some rising ground, on which stood a watch-tower commanding a view over the savage grimness of ‘the wilderness,’ it saw a field of corpses, stark and stiff and silent. Three days were spent in securing the booty, and on the fourth, Jehoshaphat and his men ‘assembled themselves in the Valley of Blessing,’ and thence returned a joyous multitude praising God for the victory which had been won for them without their having struck a blow. The whole story may yield large lessons, seasonable at all times. We deal with it, rather than with the fragment of the narrative which we have taken as our text.

I. We see here the confidence of despair.

Jehoshaphat’s prayer had stayed itself on God’s self-revelation in history, and on His gift of the land to their fathers. It had pleaded that the enemy’s hostility was a poor ‘reward’ for Israel’s ancient forbearance, and now, with a burst of agony, it casts down before God, as it were, Judah’s desperate plight as outnumbered by the swarm of invaders and brought to their last shifts-’we have no might against this great company . . . neither know we what to do.' But the very depth of despair sets them to climb to the height of trust. That is a mighty 'But,' which buckles into one sentence two such antitheses as confront us here. 'We know not what to do, but our eyes are upon Thee'-blessed is the desperation which catches at God's hand; firm is the trust which leaps from despair!

The helplessness is always a fact, though most of us manage to get along for the most part without discovering it. We are all outnumbered and overborne by the claims, duties, hindrances, sorrows, and entanglements of life. He is not the wisest of men who, facing all that life may bring and take away, all that it must bring and take away, knows no quiver of nameless fear, but jauntily professes himself ready for all that life can inflict. But there come moments in every life when the false security in which shallow souls wrap themselves ignobly is broken up, and then often a paroxysm of terror or misery grips a man, for which he has no anodyne, and his despair is as unreasonable as his security. The meaning of all circumstances that force our helplessness on us is to open to us Jehoshaphat's refuge in his-'our eyes are upon Thee.' We need to be driven by the crowds of foes and dangers around to look upwards. Our props are struck away that we may cling to God. The tree has its lateral branches hewed off that it may shoot up heavenward. When the valley is filled with mist and swathed in evening gloom, it is the time to lift our gaze to the peaks that glow in perpetual sunshine. Wise and happy shall we be if the sense of helplessness begets in us the energy of a desperate faith. For these two, distrust of self and glad confidence in God, are not opposites, as naked distrust and trust are, but are complementary. He does not turn his eyes to God who has not turned them on himself, and seen there nothing to which to cling, nothing on which to lean. Astronomers tell us that there are double stars revolving round one axis and forming a unity, of which the one is black and the other brilliant. Self-distrust and trust in God are thus knit together and are really one.

II. We see here the peaceful assurance of victory that attends on faith.

A flash of inspiration came to one of the Levitical singers who had, no doubt, been deeply moved and had unconsciously fitted himself for receiving it. Divinely breathed confidence illuminated his waiting spirit, and a great message of encouragement poured from his lips. His words heartened the host more than a hundred trumpets braying in their ears. How much one man who has drunk in God's assurance of victory can do to send a thrill of his own courage through more timorous hearts! Courage is no less contagious than panic. This Levite becomes the commander of the army, and Jehoshaphat and his captains 'bow their heads' and accept his plan for to-morrow, hearing in his ringing accents a message from Jehovah. The instructions given and at once accepted are as unlike those of ordinary warfare as is the whole incident; for there is to be no sword drawn nor blow struck, but they are to 'stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.' They are told where to find the enemy and are bid to go forth in order of battle against them, and they are assured 'that the battle is not theirs, but God' s.' No wonder that the message was hailed as from heaven, and put new heart into the host, or that, when the messenger's voice ceased, his brother Levites broke into shrill praise as for a victory already won. With what calm, triumphant hearts the camp would sleep that night!

May we not take that inspired Levite's message as one to ourselves in the midst of our many conflicts both in the outward life and in the inward? If we have truly grasped God's hands, and are fighting for what is accordant with His will, we have a right to feel that 'the battle is not ours but God' s,' and to be sure that therefore we shall conquer. Of course we are not to say to ourselves, 'God will fight for us, and we need not strike a blow,' Jehoshaphat's example does not fit our case in that respect, and we may thank God that it does not. We have a better lot than to 'stand still and see the salvation of God,' for we are honoured by being allowed to share the stress of conflict and the glow of battle as well as in the shout of victory. But even in the struggles of outward life, and much more in those of our spiritual nature, every man who watches his own career will many a time have to recognise God's hand, unaided by any act of his own, striking for him and giving him victory; and in the spiritual life every Christian man knows that his best moments have come from the initiation of the Spirit who 'bloweth where He listeth.' How often we have been surprised by God's help; how often we have been quickened by God's inbreathed Spirit, and have been taught that the passivity of faith draws to us greater blessings than the activity of effort! 'They also serve who only stand and wait,' and they also conquer who in quietness and confidence keep themselves still and let God work for them and in them. The first great blessing of trust in God is that we may be at peace on the eve of battle, and the second is that in every battle it is, in truth, not we that fight, but God who fights for and in us.

III. We learn here the best preparation for the conflict.

When the morning dawned, the array was set in order and the march begun, and a strange array it was. In the van marched the Temple singers singing words that are music to us still: ‘Give thanks unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever,’ and behind them came the ranks of Judah, no doubt swelling the volume of melody, that startled the wild creatures of the wilderness, and perhaps travelled through the still morning as far as the camp of the enemy. The singers had no armour nor weapons. They were clad in ‘the beauty of holiness,’ the priestly dress, and for sword and spear they carried harps and timbrels. Our best weapons are like their equipment.

We are most likely to conquer if we lift up the voice of thanks for victory in advance, and go into the battle expecting to triumph, because we trust in God. The world’s expectation of success is too often a dream, a will-o’-the-wisp that tempts to bogs where the beguiled victim is choked, though even in the world it is often true; ‘screw your courage to the sticking point, and we’ll not fail.’ But faith, that is the expectation of success based on God’s help and inspiring to struggles for things dear to His heart, is wont to fulfil itself, and by bringing God into the fray, to secure the victory. A thankful heart not seldom brings into existence that for which it is thankful.

IV. We see here the victory and the praise for it.

The panic that laid hold on the enemy, and turned their swords against each other, was more natural in an undisciplined horde such as these irregular levies of ancient times, than it would be in a modern army. Once started, the infection would spread, so we need not wonder that by the time that Judah arrived on the field all was over. How often a like experience attends us! We quiver with apprehension of troubles that never attack us. We dread some impending battlefield, and when we reach it, Jehoshaphat’s surprise is repeated, ‘and, behold they were dead bodies, fallen to the earth.’ Delivered from foes and fears, Judah’s first impulse was to secure the booty, for they were keen after wealth, and their ‘faith’ was not very pure or elevating. But their last act was worthier, and fitly ended the strange campaign. They gathered in some wady among the grim cliffs of the wilderness of Judah, which broke the dreariness of that savage stretch of country with perhaps verdure and a brook, and there they ‘blessed the Lord.’ The chronicler gives a piece of popular etymology, in deriving the name, ‘the valley of blessing,’ from that morning’s worship. Perhaps the name was older than that, and was given from a feeling of the contrast between the waste wilderness, which in its gaunt sterility seemed an accursed land, and the glen which with its trees and stream was indeed a ‘valley of blessing.’ If so, the name would be doubly appropriate after that day’s experience. Be that as it may, here we have in vivid form the truth that all our struggles and fightings may end in a valley of blessing, which will ring with the praise of the God who fights for us. If we begin our warfare with an appeal to God, and with prayerful acknowledgment of our own impotence, we shall end it with thankful acknowledgment that we are ‘more than conquerors through Him that loved us’ and fought for us, and our choral song of praise will echo through the true Valley of Blessing, where no sound of enemies shall ever break the settled stillness, and the host of the redeemed, like that army of Judah, shall bear ‘psalteries and harps and trumpets,’ and shall need spear and sword no more at all for ever.

11)2 Chronicles 20:20

2 Chronicles

HOLDING FAST AND HELD FAST

2Ch. 20:20.

Certainly no stronger army ever went forth to victory than these Jews, who poured out of Jerusalem that morning with no weapon in all their ranks, and having for their van, not their picked men, but singers who ‘praised the beauty of holiness,’ and chanted the old hymn, ‘Give thanks unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever.’ That was all that men had to do in the battle, for as the shrill song rose in the morning air ‘the Lord set liers in wait for the foe,’ and they turned their swords against one another, so that when Jehoshaphat and his troops came in sight of the enemy the battle was over and the field strewn with corpses-so great and swift is the power of devout recognition of God’s goodness and trust in His enduring mercy, even in the hour of extremest peril.

The exhortation in our text which is Jehoshaphat’s final word to his army, has, in the original, a beauty and emphasis that are incapable of being preserved in translation. There is a play of words which cannot be reproduced in another language, though the sentiment of it may be explained. The two expressions for ‘believing’ and ‘being established’ are two varying forms of the same root-word; and although we can only imitate the original clumsily in our language, we might translate in some such way as this: ‘Hold fast by the Lord your God, and you will be held fast,’ or ‘stay yourselves on Him and you will be stable.’ These attempts at reproducing the similarity of sound between the two verbs in the two clauses of our text, rude as they are, preserve what is lost, so far as regards form, in the English translation, though that is correct as to the meaning of the command and promise. If we note this connection of the two clauses we just come to the general principle which lies here, that the true source of steadfastness in character and conduct, of victory over temptation, and of standing fast in slippery places, is simple reliance, or, to use the New Testament word, ‘faith,’ ‘Believe and ye shall be established.’ Put out your hand and clasp Him, and He puts out His hand and steadies you. But all the steadfastness and strength come from the mighty Hand that is outstretched, not from the tremulous one that grasps it.

So, then, keeping to the words of my text, let me suggest to you the large lessons that this saying teaches us, in regard to three things, which I may put as being the object, the nature, and the issues of faith; or, in other words, to whom we are to cling, how we are to cling, and what the consequence of the clinging is.

I. To whom we must cling.

‘Stay yourselves on the Lord your God,’ Well, then, faith is not believing a number of theological articles, nor is it even accepting the truth of the Gospel as it lies in Jesus Christ, but it is accepting the Christ whom the truth of the Gospel reveals to us. And, although we have to come to Him through the word that declares what He is, and what He has done for us, the act of believing on Him is something that lies beyond the mere understanding of, or giving credence to, the message that tells us who He is and what He has done. A man may have not the ghost of a doubt or hesitation about one tittle of revealed truth, and if you were to cross-question him, could answer satisfactorily all the questions of an orthodox inquisitor, and yet there may not be one faintest flicker of faith in that man's whole being, for all the correctness of his creed, and the comprehensiveness of it, too. Trust is more than assent. If it is a Person on whom our faith leans, then from that there follows clearly enough that the bond which binds us to Him must be something far warmer, far deeper, and far more under the control of our own will than the mere consent or assent of our brains to a set of revealed truths. 'The Lord your God,' and not even the Bible that tells you about Him; 'the Lord your God,' and not even the revealed truths that manifest Him, but Him as revealed by the truths-it is He that is the Object to which our faith clings.

Jehoshaphat, in the same breath in which he exhorted his people to 'believe in the Lord, that they might be established,' also said, 'Believe His prophets, so shall ye prosper.' The immediate reference, of course, was to the man who the day before had assured them of victory. But the wider truth suggested is, that the only way to get to God is through the word that speaks of Him, and which has come from the lips either of prophets or of the Son who has spoken more, and more sweetly and clearly, than all the prophets put together. If we are to believe God, we must believe the prophets that tell us of Him.

And then there is another suggestion that may be made. The Object of faith proposed to Judah is not only 'the Lord,' but 'the Lord *your* God.' I do not say that there can be no faith without the 'appropriating' action which takes the whole Godhead for mine, but I doubt very much whether there is any. And it seems to me that to a very large extent the difference between mere nominal, formal Christians and men who really are living by the power of faith in God as revealed in Jesus Christ, lies in that one little word, 'the Lord your God.' That a man shall put out a grasping hand, and say, 'I take for my own-for my very own-the universal blessing, I claim as my possession that God of the spirits of all flesh, I believe that He does stand in a real individualising relation to me, and I to Him,' is surely of the very essence of faith. There is no presumption, but the truest wisdom and lowliness in enclosing, if I may so say, a part of this great common for ours, and putting a hedge about it, as it were, and saying, 'That is mine.' We shall not have understood the sweetness and the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ until we have pointed and condensed the general declaration, 'He so loved the world,' into the individualising and appropriating one, 'He loved me, and gave Himself for me.' Oh! if we could only apply that process thoroughly to all the broad glorious words and promises of Scripture, and feel that the whole incidence of them was meant to fall upon us, one by one, and that just as the sun, up in the heavens there, sends all his beams into the tiniest daisy on the grass, as if there was nothing else in the whole world, but only its little petals to be smoothed out and opened, I think our Christianity would be more real, and we should have more blessings in our hands. God in Christ and I, the only two beings in the universe, and all His fullness mine, and all my weakness supported and supplemented by Him-that is the view that we should sometimes take. We should set ourselves apart from all mankind, and claim Him as our very own, and so be filled with the fullness of God.

This, then, is the Object of faith, a Person who is all mine and all yours too. The beam of light that falls on my eye falls on yours, and no man makes a sunbeam the smaller because he sees by it; and in like manner we may each possess the whole of God for our very own property.

II. How we cling.

The metaphor, I suppose, is more eloquent than all explanations of it. 'Believe in the Lord'; hold fast by Him with a tight grip, continually renewed when it tends to slacken, as it surely will, and then you will be established.

We might run out into any number of figurative illustrations. Look at that little child beginning to learn to walk, how it fastens its little dimpled hands into its mother's apron, and so the tiny tottering feet get a kind of steadfastness into them. Look at that man lying at the door of the Temple, who never had walked since his mother's womb, and had lain there for forty years, with his poor weak ankles all atrophied by reason of their disuse. 'He *held* Peter and John.' Would not his grasp be tight? Would he not clasp their hands as his only stay? He had not become accustomed to the astounding miracle of walking, nor learned to balance himself and accomplish the still more astounding feat of standing steady. So he clutched at the two Apostles and was 'established.' Look at that man walking by a slippery path which he does not know, holding by the hand the guide who is able to direct and keep him up. See this other in some wild storm, with an arm round a steadfast tree-stem, to keep him from being blown over the precipice, how he clings like a limpet to a rock. And that is how we are to hold on to God, with what would be despair if it were not the perfection of confidence, with the clear sense that the only thing between us and ruin is the strong Hand that we clasp.

And what do we mean by clasping God? I mean making daily efforts to rivet our love on Him, and not to let the world, with all its delusive and cloying sweets, draw us away from Him. I mean continual and strenuous efforts to fix our *thoughts* upon Him, and not to allow the trivialities of life, or the claims of culture, or the necessities of our daily position so to absorb our minds as that thoughts of God are comparative strangers there, except, perhaps, sometimes on a Sunday, and now and then at the sleepy end, or the half-awake beginning, of a day. I mean continually repeated and strenuous efforts to cleave to Him by the submission of our *will*, letting Him 'do what seemeth Him good,' and not lifting ourselves up against Him, or perking our own inclinations, desires, and fancies in His face, as if we would induce Him to take them for His guides! And I mean that we should try to commit our *way* unto the Lord, 'to rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.' The submissive will which cleaves to God's commandments, the waiting heart that clings to His love, the regulated thoughts that embrace His truth, and the childlike confidence that commits its path to Him-these are the elements of that steadfast adherence to the Lord which shall not be in vain.

III. The blessed effects of this clinging to God.

'So shall ye be established.' That follows, as a matter of course. The only way to make light things stable is to fasten them to something that is stable. And the only way to put any kind of calmness and fixedness, and yet progress-stability in the midst of progress, and progress in the midst of stability-into our lives, is by keeping firm hold of God. If we grasp His hand, then a calm serenity will be ours. In the midst of changes, sorrows, losses, disappointments, we shall not be blown about here and there by furious winds of fortune, nor will the heavy currents of the river of life sweep us away. We shall have a holdfast and a mooring. And although, like some light-ship anchored in the Channel, we may heave up and down with the waves, we shall keep in the same place, and be steadfast in the midst of mobility, and wholesomely mobile although anchored in the one spot where there is safety. As the issue of faith, of this throwing the responsibility for ourselves upon God, there will be quietness of heart, and continuance and persistence in righteousness, and steadfastness of purpose and continuity of advancement in the divine life. 'The law of the Lord is in his heart,' says one of the Psalms, 'none of his steps shall slide.' The man who walks holding God's hand can put down a firm foot, even when he is walking in slippery places. There will be decision, and strength, and persistence of continuous advance, in a life that derives its impulse and its motive power from communion with God in Jesus Christ.

There will be victory, not indeed after the fashion of that in this story before us. In it, of course, men had to do nothing but 'stand still and see the salvation of God.' That is the law for us, in regard to the initial blessings of acceptance, and forgiveness, and the communication of the divine life from above. We have to be simple recipients, and we have no co-operating share in that part of the work of our own salvation. But for the rest we have to help God. 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you.' But none the less, 'This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith,' and if we give heed to Jehoshaphat's commandment, and go out to battle as his people did, with the love and trust of God in our hearts, then we shall come back as they did, laden with spoil, and shall name the place which was the field of conflict 'the valley of blessing,' and return to Jerusalem 'with psalteries, and harps, and trumpets,' and 'God will give us rest from all our enemies round about us.'

12)2 Chronicles 24:2

2 Chronicles

JOASH

2Ch. 24:2, 2Ch. 24:7.

Here we have the tragedy of a soul. Joash begins life well and for the greater part of it remains faithful to his conscience and to his duty, and then, when outward circumstances change, he casts all behind him, forgets the past and commits moral suicide. It is the sad old story, a bright commencement, an early promise all scattered to the winds. It is a strange story, too. This seven-year-old king had been saved when his father had been killed, and that true daughter of Jezebel, as well by nature as by blood, Athaliah, had murdered all his brothers and sisters, and made herself queen. He had been saved by the courage of a woman who might worthily stand by the side of Deborah and other Jewish heroines. By this woman, who was his aunt, he was hidden and brought up in the Temple until, whilst yet a mere boy, he came to the throne, the High Priest Jehoiada, the husband of his aunt, being his guardian during his nonage. He reigns well till the lad of seven becomes a mature man of thirty or thereabouts, and then Jehoiada dies, full of years and honours, and they fitly lay him among the kings of Judah, a worthy resting-place for one who had 'done good in Israel.' And now the weakling on the throne is left alone without the strong arm to guide him and keep him right, and we read that 'the princes of Judah came and made obeisance to him.' They take him on his weak side, and I dare say Jehoiada had been too true and too noble to do that, and though we are not told what means they took to flatter and coax him, we see very plainly what they were conspiring to do, for we read that 'they left the house of the Lord their God, the God of their fathers, and served groves and idols,' the groves here mentioned being symbols of Ashtaroth the goddess of the Sidonians. And so all the past is wiped out and Joash takes his place amongst the apostates. The story has solemn lessons.

I. Note the change from loyal adhesion to apostasy.

The strong man on whom Joash used to lean was away, and the poor, weak king went just where the wicked princes led him. It was probably out of sheer imbecility that he passed from the worship of God to the acknowledgment and service of idols.

The first point that I would insist upon is a well-worn and familiar one, as I am well aware, but I urge it upon you, and especially upon the younger portion of my audience. It is this, that there is no telling the amount of mischief that pure weakness of character may lead into. The worst men we come across in the Bible are not those who begin with a deliberate intention of doing evil. They are weak creatures, ‘reeds shaken by the wind,’ who have no power of resisting the force of circumstances. It is a truth which every one’s experience confirms, that the mother of all possible badness is weakness, and that, not only as Milton’s Satan puts it, ‘To be weak is to be miserable,’ but that weakness is wickedness sooner or later. The man who does not bar the doors and windows of his senses and his soul against temptation, is sure to make shipwreck of his life and in the end to become ‘a fool.’ There is so much wickedness lying round us in this world that any man who lets himself be shaped and coloured by that with which he comes in contact, is sure to go to the bad in the long run. Where a man lays himself open to the accidents of time and circumstances, the majority of these influences will be contrary to what is right and good. Therefore, he must gather himself together and learn to say ‘No!’ There is no foretelling the profound abysses into which a ‘good, easy’ nature, with plenty of high and pure impulses, perhaps, but which are written in water, may fall. ‘Thou, therefore, young man! be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.’ Learn to say No! or else you will be sure to say Yes! in the wrong place, and then down you will go, like this Joash whose goodness depended on Jehoiada, and when he died, all the virtue that had characterised this life hitherto was laid with him in the dust.

Let us learn from this story in the next place, how little power of continuance there is in a merely traditional religion. Many of you call yourselves Christian people mainly because other people do the same. It is customary to respect and regard Christianity. You have been brought up in the midst of it. Our country is always considered a Christian land, and so, naturally, you tacitly accept the truth of a religion which is so influential. The lowest phase of this attitude is that which seeks some advantage from a church connection, like the foolish man in the Old Testament who thought he would do well because he had a Levite for his priest. Religion is the most personal thing about a man. To become a Christian is the most personal act one can perform. It is a thing that a man has to do for himself, and however friends and guides may help us in other matters, in trials and perplexities and difficulties, by their sympathy and experience, they are useless here. A man has here to act as if there were no other beings in the universe but a solitary God and himself, and unless we have ourselves done that act in the depths of our own personality, we have not done it at all. If you young people are good, just because you have pious parents who make you go to church or chapel on a Sunday, and keep you out of mischief during the week, your goodness is a sham. One great result of personal Christianity is to make a minister, a teacher, a guide, superfluous, and when such an one becomes so, his work has been successful and not till then. Unless you put forth for yourself the hand of faith and for yourself yield up the devotion and love of your own heart, your religion is nought.

However much active effort about the outside of religion there may be, it is of itself useless. It is without bottom and without reality. Here we have Joash busy with the externals of worship and actually deceiving himself thereby. It was a great deal easier to make that chest for contributions to a Temple Repairing Fund, and to get it well filled, and to patch up the house of the Lord, than for him to get down on his knees and pray, and he may have thought that to be busy about the house of God was to be devout. So it may be with many Sunday-school teachers and Church workers. Their religion may be as merely superficial and as little personal as this man’s was. It is not for me to say so about A, B, or C. It is for you to ask of yourselves if it is so as to you. But I do say that there is nothing that masks his own soul from a man more than setting him to do something for Christianity and God’s Church, while in his inmost self he has not yet yielded himself to God.

I look around and I see the devil slaying his thousands by setting them to work in Christian associations and leaving them no time to think about their own Christianity. My brother! if the cap fits, go home and put it on.

We see in Joash’s life for how long a time a man may go on in this self-delusion of external and barren service and never know it. Joash came to the throne at the age of seven. Up till that age he had lived in the Temple in concealment. Until he was one and thirty he went on in a steady, upright course, never knowing that there was anything hollow in his life.

Apparently, Jehoiada’s long life of one hundred and thirty years extended over the greater part of Joash’s reign, during most of which he had Jehoiada to direct him and keep him right, and all this tragedy comes at the tag end of it.

So he went on apparently all right, like a tree that has become quite hollow, till during some storm it is blown down and falls with a crash, and it is seen that for years it has been only the skin of a tree, bark outside, and inside-emptiness.

II. We come now to the second stage in the later life of Joash: His resistance to the divine pleading.

‘And they left the house of the Lord God of their fathers, and served groves and idols, and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for their trespass, yet He sent prophets to them to bring them again unto the Lord.’ He sent with endless pity, with long-suffering patience. He would not be put away, and as they increased the distance between Him and them, He increased His energies to bring them back. But they lifted themselves up, Joash and his princes, and with that strange, awful power of resisting the attraction of the divine pleading, and hardening their hearts against the divine patience-’they would not.’ And then comes the affecting episode of the death of the high priest Zechariah, who had succeeded to his father’s place and likewise to his heroism, and who, with the Spirit of God upon him, stands up and pointing out his wickedness, rebukes the fallen monarch for his apostasy. Joash, doubtless stung to the quick by Zechariah’s just reproaches, allowed the truculent princes to slay him in the court of the Temple, even between the very shrine and the altar.

What a picture we have here of the divine love which follows every wanderer with its pleadings and beseechings! It came to this man through the lips of a prophet. It comes to us all in daily blessings, sometimes in messages, like these poor words of mine. God will not let us ruin ourselves without pleading with us and wooing us to love Him and cling to Him. ‘He rises up early’ and daily sends us His messages, sometimes rebukes and voices in our conscience, sometimes sunset glows and starry heavens lifting our thoughts above this low earth, sometimes sorrows that are meant to ‘drive us to His breast,’ and above all, the ‘Gospel of our salvation’ in Christ, ever, in such a land as ours, sounding in our ears.

Still further, we see in Joash what a strange, awful strength of obstinate resistance, a character weak as regards its resistance to man, can put forth against God. He never attempted to say ‘No!’ to the princes of Judah, but he could say it again and again to his Father in heaven. He could not but yield to the temptations which were level with his eyes, and this poor creature, easily swayed by human allurements and influences, could gather himself together, standing, as it were, on his little pin point, and say to God, ‘Thou dost call and I refuse.’ What a paradox, and yet repetitions of it are sitting in these pews, only half aware that it is about them that I am speaking!

The ever-deepening evil which began with forsaking the house of the Lord and serving Ashtaroth, ends with Joash steeping his hands in blood. The murder of Zechariah was beyond the common count of crimes, for it was a foul desecration of the Temple, an act of the blackest ingratitude to the man who had saved his infant life, and put him on the throne, an outrage on the claims of family connections, for Joash and Zechariah were probably blood relations. My brother! once get your foot upon that steep incline of evil, once forsake the path of what is good and right and true, and you are very much like a climber who misses his footing up among the mountain peaks, and down he slides till he reaches the edge of the precipice and then in an instant is dashed to pieces at the bottom. Once put your foot on that slippery slope and you know not where you may fall to.

III. Last comes the final scene: The retribution.

We have that picture of Zechariah, solemnly lifting up his eyes to heaven and committing his cause to God. ‘The Lord look upon it and require it,’ says the martyr priest in the spirit of the old Law. The dying appeal was soon answered in the invasion of the Syrian army, a comparatively small company, into whose hands the Lord delivered a very great host of the Israelites. The defeat was complete, and possibly Joash’s ‘great diseases,’ of which the narrative speaks, refer to wounds received in the fight. The end soon comes, for two of his servants, neither of them Hebrews, one being the son of an Ammonitess and the other the son of a Moabitess, who were truer to his religion than he had been, and resolved to revenge Zechariah’s death, entered the room, of the wounded king in the fortress whither he had retired to hide himself after the fight, and 'slew him on his bed.' Imagine the grim scene-the two men stealing in, the sick man there on the bed helpless, the short ghastly struggle and the swift end. What an end for a life with such a beginning!

Now I am not going to dwell on this retribution, inflicted on Joash, or on that which comes to us if we are like him, through a loud-voiced conscience, and a memory which, though it may be dulled and hushed to sleep at present, is sure to wake some day here or yonder. But I beseech you to ask yourselves what your outlook is. 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.' Is that all? Zechariah said, 'The Lord look upon it and require it.' The great doctrine of retribution is true for ever. Yes; but our Zechariah lifts up his eyes to heaven and he says, 'Father! forgive them, for they know not what they do.' And so, dear brother! you and I, trusting to that dear Lord, may have all our apostasy forgiven, and be brought near by the blood of Christ. Let us say with the Apostle Peter, 'Lord, to whom shall we go but to Thee? Thou hast the words of eternal life.'

13)2 Chronicles 24:4-14

2 Chronicles

GLAD GIVERS AND FAITHFUL WORKERS

2Ch. 24:4 - 2Ch. 24:14.

Joash owed his life and his throne to the high-priest Jehoiada, who was his uncle by marriage with the sister of Ahaziah, his father. Rescued by his aunt when an infant, he 'was with them, hid in the house of God six years,' and, when seven years old, was made king by Jehoiada's daring revolt against 'that wicked woman,' Athaliah. Jehoiada's influence was naturally paramount, and was as wholesome as strong. It is remarkable, however, that this impulse to repair the Temple seems to have originated with the king, not with the high-priest, though no doubt the spirit which conceived the impulse was largely moulded by the latter. The king, whose childhood had found a safe asylum in the Temple, might well desire its restoration, even apart from considerations of religion.

I. The story first brings into strong contrast the eager king, full of his purpose, and the sluggards to whom he had to entrust its execution. We can only guess the point in his reign at which Joash summoned the priests to his help. It was after his marriage [2Ch. 24:3], and considerably before the twenty-third year of his reign, at which time his patience was exhausted [2Ki. 12:6]. Some years were apparently wasted by the dawdling sluggishness of the priests, who, for some reason or other, did not go into the proposed restoration heartily. Joash seems to have suspected that they would push the work languidly; for there is a distinct tinge of suspicion and 'whipping up' in his injunction to 'hasten the matter.'

The first intention was to raise the funds by sending out the priests and Levites to collect locally the statutory half-shekel, as well as other contributions mentioned in 2Ki. 12:1 - 2Ki. 12:21 There we learn that each collector was to go to 'his acquaintance.' The subscription was to be spread over some years, and for a while Joash waited quietly; but in the twenty-third year of his reign [see 2 Kings], he could stand delay no longer. Whether the priests had been diligent in collecting or not, they had done nothing towards repairing. Perhaps they found it difficult to determine the proportion of the money which was needed for the ordinary expenses of worship, and for the restoration fund; and, as the former included their own dues and support, they would not be likely to set it down too low. Perhaps they did not much care to carry out a scheme which had not begun with themselves; for priests are not usually eager to promote ecclesiastical renovations suggested by laymen. Perhaps they did not care as much about the renovation as the king did, and smiled at his earnestness as a pious imagining. Possibly there was even deliberate embezzlement. But, at any rate, there was half-heartedness, and that always means languid work, and that always means failure. The earnest people are fretted continually by the indifferent. Every good scheme is held back, like a ship with a foul bottom, by the barnacles that stick to its keel and bring down its speed. Professional ecclesiastics in all ages have succumbed to the temptation of thinking that 'church property' was first of all to be used for their advantage, and, secondarily, for behoof of God's house. Eager zeal has in all ages to be yoked to torpid indifference, and to drag its unwilling companion along, like two dogs in a leash. Direct opposition is easier to bear than apparent assistance which tries to slow down to half speed.

Joash's command is imperative on all workers for God. 'See that ye hasten the matter,' for time is short, the fruit great, the evening shadows lengthening, the interests at stake all-important, and the Lord of the harvest will soon come to count our sheaves. Whatever work may be done without haste, God's cannot be, and a heavy curse falls on him who 'does the work of the Lord negligently.' The runner who keeps well on this side of fatigue, panting, and sweat, has little chance of the crown.

II. The next step is the withdrawal of the work from the sluggards. They are relieved both of the collection and expenditure of the money. Apparently [2Ki. 12:9] the contributors handed their donations to the doorkeepers, who put them into the chest with 'a hole in the lid of it,' in the sight of the donors. The arrangement was not flattering to the hierarchy, but as appearances were saved by Jehoiada's making the chest [see 2 Kings] they had to submit with the best grace they could. In our own times, we have seen the same thing often enough. When clergy have maladministered church property, Parliament has appointed ecclesiastical commissioners. Common sense prescribes taking slovenly work out of lazy hands. The more rigidly that principle is carried out in the church and the nation, at whatever cost of individual humiliation, the better for both. 'The tools to the hands that can use them' is the ideal for both. God's dealings follow the same law, both in withdrawing opportunities of service and in giving more of such. The reward for work is more work, and the punishment for sloth is compulsory idleness.

III. We are next shown the glad givers. Probably suspicion had been excited in others than the king, and had checked liberality. People will not give freely if the expenses of the collectors' support swallow up the funds. It is hard to get help for a vague scheme, which unites two objects, and only gives the balance, after the first is provided for, to the second and more important. So the whole nation, both high and low, was glad when the new arrangement brought a clear issue, and secured the right appropriation of the money.

No doubt, too, Joash's earnestness kindled others. Chronicles speaks only of the 'tax,'-that is, the half-shekel,-but Kings mentions two other sources, one of which is purely spontaneous gifts, and these are implied by the tone of 2Ch. 24:10, which lays stress on the gladness of the offerers. That is the incense which adds fragrance to our gifts. Grudging service is no service, and money given for ever so religious a purpose, without gladness because of the opportunity of giving, is not, in the deepest sense, given at all. Love is a longing to give to the beloved, and whoever truly loves God will know no keener delight than surrender for His dear sake. Pecuniary contributions for religious purposes afford a rough but real test of the depth of a man's religion; but it is one available only for himself, since the motive, and not the amount, is the determining element. We all need to bring our hearts more under the Influence of God's love to us, that our love to Him may be increased, and then to administer possessions, under the impulse to glad giving which enkindled love will always excite. Super-heated steam has most expansive power and driving force. These glad givers may remind us not only of the one condition of acceptable giving, but also of the need for clear and worthy objects, and of obvious disinterestedness in those who seek for money to help good causes. The smallest opening for suspicion that some of it sticks to the collector's fingers is fatal, as it should be.

IV. Joash was evidently a business-like king. We next hear of the precautions he took to secure the public confidence. There was a rough but sufficient audit. When the chest grew heavy, and sounded full, two officials received it at the 'king's office.' The Levites carried it there, but were not allowed to handle the contents. The two tellers represented the king and the chief priest, and thus both the civil and religious authorities were satisfied, and each officer was a check on the other. Public money should never be handled by a man alone; and an honest one will always wish, like Paul, to have a brother associated with him, that no man may blame him in his administration of it. If we take 'day by day' literally, we have a measure of the liberality which filled the chest daily; but, more probably, the expression simply means 'from time to time,' when occasion required.

V. The application of the money is next narrated. In this Jehoiada is associated with Joash, the king probably desiring to smooth over any slight that might seem to have been put on the priests, as well as being still under the influence of the high-priest's strong character and early kindness. Together they passed over the results of the contribution to the contractors, who in turn paid it in wages to the workmen who repaired the fabric, such as masons and carpenters, and to other artisans who restored other details, such as brass and iron work. The Second Book of Kings tells us that Joash's cautious provision against misappropriation seems to have deserted him at this stage; for no account was required of the workmen, 'for they dealt faithfully.' That is an indication of their goodwill. The humble craftsmen were more reliable than the priests. They had, no doubt, given their half-shekel like others, and now they gladly gave their work, and were not hirelings, though they were hired. We, too, have to give our money and our labour; and if our hearts are right, we shall give both with the same conscientious cheerfulness, and, if we are paid in coin for our work, will still do it for higher reasons and looking for other wages. These Temple workmen may stand as patterns of what religion should do for those of us whose lot is to work with our hands,-and not less for others who have to toil with their brains, and the sweat of whose brow is inside their heads. A Christian workman should be a 'faithful' workman, and will be so if he is full of faith.

Joash knew when to trust and when to keep a sharp eye on men. His experience with the priests had not soured him into suspecting everybody. Cynical disbelief in honesty is more foolish and hurtful to ourselves than even excessive trust. These workmen wrought all the more faithfully because they knew that they were trusted, and in nine cases out of ten men will try to live up to our valuation of them. The Rugby boys used to say, 'It's a shame to tell Arnold a lie, he always believes us.' Better to be cheated once than to treat the nine as rogues,-better for them and better for ourselves.

'Faithful' work is prosperous work. As 2Ch. 24:13 picturesquely says, 'Healing went up upon the work'; and the Temple was restored to its old fair proportions, and stood strong as before. Where there is conscientious effort, God's blessing is not withheld. Labour 'in the Lord' can never be empty labour, though even a prophet may often be tempted, in a moment of weary despondency, to complain, 'I have laboured in vain.' We may not see the results, nor have the workmen's joy of beholding the building rise, course by course, under our hands, but we shall see it one day, though now we have to work in the dark.

There seems a discrepancy between the statements in Chronicles and Kings as to the source from which the cost of the sacrificial vessels was defrayed, since, according to the former, it was from the restoration fund, which is expressly denied by the latter. The explanation seems reasonable, that, as Chronicles says, it was from the balance remaining after all restoration charges were liquidated, that this other expenditure was met. First, the whole amount was sacredly devoted to the purpose for which it had been asked, and then, when the honest overseers repaid the uncounted surplus, which they might have kept, it was found sufficient to meet the extra cost of furnishing. God blesses the faithful steward of his gifts with more than enough for the immediate service, and the best use of the surplus is to do more with it for Him. ‘God is able to make all grace abound unto you; that ye, having always all sufficiency in every thing, may abound unto every good work, . . . being enriched in every thing unto all liberality.’

14)2 Chronicles 24:17

2 Chronicles

JOASH

2Ch. 24:2, 2Ch. 24:7.

Here we have the tragedy of a soul. Joash begins life well and for the greater part of it remains faithful to his conscience and to his duty, and then, when outward circumstances change, he casts all behind him, forgets the past and commits moral suicide. It is the sad old story, a bright commencement, an early promise all scattered to the winds. It is a strange story, too. This seven-year-old king had been saved when his father had been killed, and that true daughter of Jezebel, as well by nature as by blood, Athaliah, had murdered all his brothers and sisters, and made herself queen. He had been saved by the courage of a woman who might worthily stand by the side of Deborah and other Jewish heroines. By this woman, who was his aunt, he was hidden and brought up in the Temple until, whilst yet a mere boy, he came to the throne, the High Priest Jehoiada, the husband of his aunt, being his guardian during his nonage. He reigns well till the lad of seven becomes a mature man of thirty or thereabouts, and then Jehoiada dies, full of years and honours, and they fitly lay him among the kings of Judah, a worthy resting-place for one who had ‘done good in Israel.’ And now the weakling on the throne is left alone without the strong arm to guide him and keep him right, and we read that ‘the princes of Judah came and made obeisance to him.’ They take him on his weak side, and I dare say Jehoiada had been too true and too noble to do that, and though we are not told what means they took to flatter and coax him, we see very plainly what they were conspiring to do, for we read that ‘they left the house of the Lord their God, the God of their fathers, and served groves and idols,’ the groves here mentioned being symbols of Ashtaroth the goddess of the Sidonians. And so all the past is wiped out and Joash takes his place amongst the apostates. The story has solemn lessons.

I. Note the change from loyal adhesion to apostasy.

The strong man on whom Joash used to lean was away, and the poor, weak king went just where the wicked princes led him. It was probably out of sheer imbecility that he passed from the worship of God to the acknowledgment and service of idols.

The first point that I would insist upon is a well-worn and familiar one, as I am well aware, but I urge it upon you, and especially upon the younger portion of my audience. It is this, that there is no telling the amount of mischief that pure weakness of character may lead into. The worst men we come across in the Bible are not those who begin with a deliberate intention of doing evil. They are weak creatures, ‘reeds shaken by the wind,’ who have no power of resisting the force of circumstances. It is a truth which every one’s experience confirms, that the mother of all possible badness is weakness, and that, not only as Milton’s Satan puts it, ‘To be weak is to be miserable,’ but that weakness is wickedness sooner or later. The man who does not bar the doors and windows of his senses and his soul against temptation, is sure to make shipwreck of his life and in the end to become ‘a fool.’ There is so much wickedness lying round us in this world that any man who lets himself be shaped and coloured by that with which he comes in contact, is sure to go to the bad in the long run. Where a man lays himself open to the accidents of time and circumstances, the majority of these influences will be contrary to what is right and good. Therefore, he must gather himself together and learn to say ‘No!’ There is no foretelling the profound abysses into which a ‘good, easy’ nature, with plenty of high and pure impulses, perhaps, but which are written in water, may fall. ‘Thou, therefore, young man! be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.’ Learn to say No! or else you will be sure to say Yes! in the wrong place, and then down you will go, like this Joash whose goodness depended on Jehoiada, and when he died, all the virtue that had characterised this life hitherto was laid with him in the dust.

Let us learn from this story in the next place, how little power of continuance there is in a merely traditional religion. Many of you call yourselves Christian people mainly because other people do the same. It is customary to respect and regard Christianity. You have been brought up in the midst of it. Our country is always considered a Christian land, and so, naturally, you tacitly accept the truth of a religion which is so influential. The lowest phase of this attitude is that which seeks some advantage from a church connection, like the foolish man in the Old Testament who thought he would do well because he had a Levite for his priest. Religion is the most personal thing about a man. To become a Christian is the most personal act one can perform. It is a thing that a man has to do for himself, and however friends and guides may help us in other matters, in trials and perplexities and difficulties, by their sympathy and experience, they are useless here. A man has here to act as if there were no other beings in the universe but a solitary God and himself, and unless we have ourselves done that act in the depths of our own personality, we have not done it at all. If you young people are good, just because you have pious parents who make you go to church or chapel on a Sunday, and keep you out of mischief during the week, your goodness is a sham. One great result of personal Christianity is to make a minister, a teacher, a guide, superfluous, and when such an one becomes so, his work has been successful and not till then. Unless you put forth for yourself the hand of faith and for yourself yield up the devotion and love of your own heart, your religion is nought.

However much active effort about the outside of religion there may be, it is of itself useless. It is without bottom and without reality. Here we have Joash busy with the externals of worship and actually deceiving himself thereby. It was a great deal easier to make that chest for contributions to a Temple Repairing Fund, and to get it well filled, and to patch up the house of the Lord, than for him to get down on his knees and pray, and he may have thought that to be busy about the house of God was to be devout. So it may be with many Sunday-school teachers and Church workers. Their religion may be as merely superficial and as little personal as this man's was. It is not for me to say so about A, B, or C. It is for you to ask of yourselves if it is so as to you. But I do say that there is nothing that masks his own soul from a man more than setting him to do something for Christianity and God's Church, while in his inmost self he has not yet yielded himself to God.

I look around and I see the devil slaying his thousands by setting them to work in Christian associations and leaving them no time to think about their own Christianity. My brother! if the cap fits, go home and put it on.

We see in Joash's life for how long a time a man may go on in this self-delusion of external and barren service and never know it. Joash came to the throne at the age of seven. Up till that age he had lived in the Temple in concealment. Until he was one and thirty he went on in a steady, upright course, never knowing that there was anything hollow in his life. Apparently, Jehoiada's long life of one hundred and thirty years extended over the greater part of Joash's reign, during most of which he had Jehoiada to direct him and keep him right, and all this tragedy comes at the tag end of it.

So he went on apparently all right, like a tree that has become quite hollow, till during some storm it is blown down and falls with a crash, and it is seen that for years it has been only the skin of a tree, bark outside, and inside-emptiness.

II. We come now to the second stage in the later life of Joash: His resistance to the divine pleading.

‘And they left the house of the Lord God of their fathers, and served groves and idols, and wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for their trespass, yet He sent prophets to them to bring them again unto the Lord.’ He sent with endless pity, with long-suffering patience. He would not be put away, and as they increased the distance between Him and them, He increased His energies to bring them back. But they lifted themselves up, Joash and his princes, and with that strange, awful power of resisting the attraction of the divine pleading, and hardening their hearts against the divine patience-’they would not.’ And then comes the affecting episode of the death of the high priest Zechariah, who had succeeded to his father’s place and likewise to his heroism, and who, with the Spirit of God upon him, stands up and pointing out his wickedness, rebukes the fallen monarch for his apostasy. Joash, doubtless stung to the quick by Zechariah’s just reproaches, allowed the truculent princes to slay him in the court of the Temple, even between the very shrine and the altar.

What a picture we have here of the divine love which follows every wanderer with its pleadings and beseechings! It came to this man through the lips of a prophet. It comes to us all in daily blessings, sometimes in messages, like these poor words of mine. God will not let us ruin ourselves without pleading with us and wooing us to love Him and cling to Him. ‘He rises up early’ and daily sends us His messages, sometimes rebukes and voices in our conscience, sometimes sunset glows and starry heavens lifting our thoughts above this low earth, sometimes sorrows that are meant to ‘drive us to His breast,’ and above all, the ‘Gospel of our salvation’ in Christ, ever, in such a land as ours, sounding in our ears.

Still further, we see in Joash what a strange, awful strength of obstinate resistance, a character weak as regards its resistance to man, can put forth against God. He never attempted to say ‘No!’ to the princes of Judah, but he could say it again and again to his Father in heaven. He could not but yield to the temptations which were level with his eyes, and this poor creature, easily swayed by human allurements and influences, could gather himself together, standing, as it were, on his little pin point, and say to God, ‘Thou dost call and I refuse.’ What a paradox, and yet repetitions of it are sitting in these pews, only half aware that it is about them that I am speaking!

The ever-deepening evil which began with forsaking the house of the Lord and serving Ashtaroth, ends with Joash steeping his hands in blood. The murder of Zechariah was beyond the common count of crimes, for it was a foul desecration of the Temple, an act of the blackest ingratitude to the man who had saved his infant life, and put him on the throne, an outrage on the claims of family connections, for Joash and Zechariah were probably blood relations. My brother! once get your foot upon that steep incline of evil, once forsake the path of what is good and right and true, and you are very much like a climber who misses his footing up among the mountain peaks, and down he slides till he reaches the edge of the precipice and then in an instant is dashed to pieces at the bottom. Once put your foot on that slippery slope and you know not where you may fall to.

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Now I am not going to dwell on this retribution, inflicted on Joash, or on that which comes to us if we are like him, through a loud-voiced conscience, and a memory which, though it may be dulled and hushed to sleep at present, is sure to wake some day here or yonder. But I beseech you to ask yourselves what your outlook is. ‘Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.’ Is that all? Zechariah said, ‘The Lord look upon it and require it.’ The great doctrine of retribution is true for ever. Yes; but our Zechariah lifts up his eyes to heaven and he says, ‘Father! forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ And so, dear brother! you and I, trusting to that dear Lord, may have all our apostasy forgiven, and be brought near by the blood of Christ. Let us say with the Apostle Peter, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go but to Thee? Thou hast the words of eternal life.’

15)2 Chronicles 25:9

2 Chronicles

PRUDENCE AND FAITH

2Ch. 25:9.

The character of this Amaziah, one of the Kings of Judah, is summed up by the chronicler in a damning epigram: ‘He did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, but not with a perfect heart.’ He was one of your half-and-half people, or, as Hosea says, ‘a cake not turned,’ burnt black on one side, and raw dough on the other. So when he came to the throne, in the buoyancy and insolence of youth, he immediately began to aim at conquests in the neighbouring little states; and in order to strengthen himself he hired ‘a hundred thousand mighty men of valour’ out of Israel for a hundred talents of silver. To seek help from Israel was, in a prophet’s eyes, equivalent to flinging off help from God. So a man of God comes to him, and warns him that the Lord is not with Israel, and that the alliance is not permissible for him. But, instead of yielding to the prophet’s advice, he parries it with this misplaced question, ‘But what shall we do for the hundred talents that I have given to the army of Israel?’ He does not care to ask whether the counsel that he is receiving is right or wrong, or whether what he is intending to do is in conformity with, or in opposition to, the will of God, but, passing by all such questions, at once he fastens on the lower consideration of expediency-’What is to become of me if I do as this prophet would have me do? What a heavy loss one hundred talents will be! It is too much to sacrifice to a scruple of that sort. It cannot be done.’

A great many of us may take a lesson from this man. There are two things in my text-a misplaced question and a triumphant answer: ‘What shall we do for the hundred talents?’ ‘The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.’ Now, remarkably enough, both question and answer may be either very right or very wrong, according as they are taken, and I purpose to look at those two aspects of each.

I. A misplaced question.

I call it misplaced because Amaziah’s fault, and the fault of a great many of us, was, not that he took consequences into account, but that he took them into account at the wrong time. The question should have come second, not first. Amaziah’s first business should have been to see clearly what was duty; and then, and not till then, the next business should have been to consider consequences.

Consider the right place and way of putting this question. Many of us make shipwreck of our lives because, with our eyes shut, we determine upon some grand design, and fall under the condemnation of the man that ‘began to build, and was not able to finish.’ He drew a great plan of a stately mansion; and then found that he had neither money in the bank, nor stones in his quarry, to finish it, and so it stood-a ruin. All through our Lord’s life He was engaged rather in repressing volunteers than in soliciting recruits, and He from time to time poured a douche of cold water upon swiftly effervescing desires to go after Him. When the multitudes followed Him, He turned and said to them, ‘If you are counting on being My disciples, understand what it means: take up the cross and follow Me.’ When an enthusiastic man, who had not looked consequences in the face, came rushing to Him and said: ‘Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest,' His answer to him was another pull at the string of the shower bath: 'The Son of Man hath not where to lay His head.' When the two disciples came to him and said: 'Grant that we may sit, the one on Thy right hand and the other on Thy left, when Thou comest into Thy kingdom,' He said: 'Are ye able to drink of the cup that I drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized withal?' Look the facts in the face before you make your election. Jesus Christ will enlist no man under false pretences. Recruiting-sergeants tell country bumpkins or city louts wonderful stories of what they will get if they take the shilling and put on the king's uniform; but Jesus Christ does not recruit His soldiers in that fashion. If a man does not open his eyes to a clear vision of the consequences of his actions, his life will go to water in all directions. And there is no region in which such clear insight into what is going to follow upon my determinations and the part that I take is more necessary than in the Christian life. It is just because in certain types of character, 'the word is received with joy,' and springs up immediately, that when 'the sun is risen with a burning heat'-that is, as Christ explains, when the pinch of difficulty comes-'immediately they fall away,' and all their grand resolutions go to nothing. 'Lightly come, lightly go.' Let us face the facts of what is involved, in the way of sacrifice, surrender, loss, if we determine to be on Christ's side; and then, when the anticipated difficulties come, we shall neither be perplexed nor swept away, but be able quietly to say, 'I discounted it all beforehand; I knew it was coming.' The storm catches the ship that is carrying full sail and expecting nothing but light and favourable breezes; while the captain that looked into the weather quarter and saw the black cloud beginning to rise above the horizon, and took in his sails and made his vessel snug and tight, rides out the gale. It is wisdom that becomes a man, to ask this question, if first of all he has asked, 'What ought I to do?' But we have here an instance of a right thing in a wrong place. It was right to ask the question, but wrong to ask it at that point. Amaziah thought nothing about duty. There sprang up in his mind at once the cowardly and ignoble thought: 'I cannot afford to do what is right, because it will cost me a hundred talents,' and that was his sin. Consequences may be, must be, faced in anticipation, or a man is a fool. He that allows the clearest perception of disagreeable consequences, such as pain, loss of ease, loss of reputation, loss of money, or any other harmful results that may follow, to frighten him out of the road that he knows he ought to take, is a worse fool still, for he is a coward and recreant to his own conscience.

We have to look into our own hearts for the most solemn and pressing illustrations of this sin, and I daresay we all of us can remember clear duties that we have neglected, because we did not like to face what would come from them. A man in business will say, ‘I cannot afford to have such a high standard of morality; I shall be hopelessly run over in the race with my competitors if I do not do as they do,’ or he will say, ‘I durst not take a stand as an out-and-out Christian; I shall lose connections, I shall lose position. People will laugh at me. What am I to do for the hundred talents?’ But we can find the same thing in Churches. I do not mean to enter upon controversial questions, but as an instance, I may remind you that one great argument that our friends who believe in an Established Church are always bringing forward, is just a modern form of Amaziah’s question, ‘What shall we do for the hundred talents? How could the Church be maintained, how could its ministrations be continued, if its State-provided revenues were withdrawn or given up?’ But it is not only Anglicans who put the consideration of the consequences of obedience in the wrong place. All the Churches are but too apt to let their eyes wander from reading the plain precepts of the New Testament to looking for the damaging results to be expected from keeping them. Do we not sometimes hear, as answer to would-be reformers, ‘We cannot afford to give up this, that, or the other practice? We should not be able to hold our ground, unless we did so-and-so and so-and-so.’

But not only individuals or Churches are guilty in this matter. The nation takes a leaf out of Amaziah’s book, and puts aside many plain duties, for no better reason than that it would cost too much to do them. ‘What is the use of talking about suppressing the liquor traffic or housing the poor? Think of the cost.’ The ‘hundred talents’ block the way and bribe the national conscience. For instance, the opium traffic; how is it defended? Some attempt is made to prove either that we did not force it upon China, or that the talk about the evils of opium is missionary fanaticism, but the sheet-anchor is: ‘How are we ever to raise the Indian revenue if we give up the traffic?’ That is exactly Amaziah over again, come from the dead, and resurrected in a very ugly shape.

So national policy and Church action, and-what is of far more importance to you and me than either the one or the other,-our own personal relation to Jesus Christ and discipleship to Him, have been hampered, and are being hampered, just by that persistent and unworthy attitude of looking at the consequences of doing plain duties, and permitting ourselves to be frightened from the duties because the consequences are unwelcome to us.

Prudence is all right, but when prudence takes command and presumes to guide conscience, then it is all wrong. In some courts of law and in certain cases, the judge has an assessor sitting beside him, an expert about some of the questions that are involved. Conscience is the judge, prudence the assessor. But if the assessor ventures up on the judgment-seat, and begins to give the decisions which it is not his business to give-for *his* only business is to give advice-then the only thing to do with the assessor is to tell him to hold his tongue and let the judge speak. It is no answer to the prophet's prohibition to say, 'But what shall I do for the hundred talents?' A yet better answer than the prophet gave Amaziah would have been, 'Never mind about the hundred talents; do what is right, and leave the rest to God.' However, that was not the answer.

II. The triumphant answer.

'The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.' Now, this answer, like the question, may be right or wrong, according as it is taken. In what aspect is it wrong? In what sense is it not true? I suppose this prophet did not mean more than the undeniable truth that God was able to give Amaziah more than a hundred talents. He was not thinking of the loftier meanings which we necessarily, as Christian people, at a later stage of Revelation, and with a clearer vision of many things, attach to the words. He simply meant, 'You will very likely get more than the hundred talents that you have lost, if you do what pleases God.' He was speaking from the point of view of the Old Testament; though even in the Old Testament we have instances enough that prosperity did not always attend righteousness. In the Old Testament we find the Book of Job, and the Book of Ecclesiastes, and many a psalm, all of which were written in order to grapple with the question, 'How is it that God does not give the good man more than the hundred talents that he has lost for the sake of being good?' It is not true, and it is a dangerous mistake to suggest that it is true, that a man in this world never loses by being a good, honest, consistent Christian. He often does lose a great deal, as far as this world is concerned; and he has to make up his mind to lose it, and it would be a very poor thing to say to him, ‘Now, live like a Christian man, and if you are flinging away money or anything else because of your Christianity, you will get it back.’ No; you will not, in a good many cases. Sometimes you will, and sometimes you will not. It does not matter whether you do or do not.

But the sense in which the triumphant answer of the prophet is true is a far higher one. ‘The Lord is able to give thee much more than this,’-what is ‘more’? a thousand talents? No; the ‘much more’ that Christianity has educated us to understand is meant in the depths of such a promise as this is, first of all, character. Every man that sacrifices anything to convictions of duty gains more than he loses thereby, because he gains an inward nobleness and strength, to say nothing of the genial warmth of an approving conscience. And whilst that is true in all regions of life, it is most especially true in regard to sacrifices made from Christian principle. No matter how disastrous may be the results externally, the inward results of faithfulness are so much greater and sweeter and nobler than all the external evil consequences that may follow, that it is ‘good policy’ for a man to beggar himself for Christ’s sake, for the sake of the durable riches-which our Lord Himself explains to be synonymous with righteousness-which will come thereby. He that wins strength and Christ-likeness of character by sacrificing for Christ has won far more than he can ever lose.

He wins not only character, but a fuller capacity for a fuller possession of Jesus Christ Himself, and that is infinitely more than anything that any man has ever sacrificed for the sake of that dear Lord. Do you remember when it was that there was granted to the Apostle John the vision of the throned Christ, and that he felt laid upon him the touch of the vivifying Hand from Heaven? It was ‘when I was in Patmos for the Word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus.’ He lost Ephesus; he gained an open heaven and a visible Christ. Do you remember who it was that said, ‘I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ’? It was a good bargain, Paul! The balance-sheet showed a heavy balance to your credit. Debit, ‘all things’; credit, ‘Christ.’ ‘The Lord is able to give thee much more than this.’

Remember the old prophecy: ‘For brass I will bring gold; and for iron, silver.’ The brass and the iron may be worth something, but if we barter them away and get instead gold and silver, we are gainers by the transaction. Fling out the ballast if you wish the balloon to rise. Let the hundred talents go if you wish to get ‘the more than this.’ And listen to the New Testament variation of this man of God’s promise, ‘If thou wilt have treasure in heaven, go and sell all that thou hast, and follow Me.’

16)2 Chronicles 27:6

2 Chronicles

JOTHAM

2Ch. 27:6.

This King Jotham is one of the obscurer of the Jewish monarchs, and we know next to nothing about him. The most memorable event in his reign is that ‘in the year when King Uzziah,’ his father, ‘died,’ and consequently in Jotham’s first year, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting in the Temple on the empty throne, and had the lips which were to utter so many immortal words touched with fire from the altar. Whether it were the effect of the prophet’s words, or from other causes, the little that is told of him is good, and he is eulogised as having imitated his father’s God-pleasing acts, and not having stained himself by repeating his father’s sin. The rest that we hear of him in Chronicles is a mere sketch of campaigns, buildings, and victories, and then he and his reign are summed up in the words of our text, which is the analysis of the man and the disclosure of the secret of his prosperity: ‘He became mighty, because he prepared his ways’-and, more than that, ‘he prepared them before the Lord his God.’

So then, if we begin, as it were, at the bottom, as we ought to do, in studying a character, taking the deepest thing first, and laying hold upon the seminal and germinal principle of the whole, this text reminds us that-The secret of true strength lies in the continual recognition that life is lived 'Before the Lord our God.'

Now to say, 'Walk thou *before* Me,' the command given to Abraham, suggests a somewhat different modification of the idea from the apparently parallel phrase, 'to walk *with* God' which is declared to have been the life's habit of Enoch. The one expression suggests simple companionship and communion; the other suggests rather the vivid and continual realisation of the thought that we are 'ever in the great Taskmaster's eye.' To walk before God is to feel thrillingly and continually, and yet without being abased or crushed or discomposed, but rather being encouraged and quickened and calmed and ennobled and gladdened thereby: 'Thou God seest me.' It seems to me that one of the plainest pieces of Christian duty, and, alas! one of the most neglected of them, is the cultivation, definitely and consciously, by effort and by self-discipline, of that consciousness as a present factor in all our lives, and an influencing motive in everything that we do. If once we could bring before the eye of our minds that great, blazing, white throne, and Him that sits upon it, we should want nothing else to burn up the commonplaces of life, and to flash its insignificance into splendour and awfulness. We should want nothing else to lift us to a 'solemn scorn of ills,' and to deliver us from the false sweetnesses and fading delights that grow on the low levels of a sense-bound life! Brethren! our whole life would be transformed and glorified, and we should be different men and women if we ordered our ways as '*before the Lord our God*.' What meanness could live when we knew that it was seen by those pure Eyes? How we should be ashamed of ourselves, of our complaints, of our murmurings, of our reluctance to do our duty, of our puerile regrets for vanished blessings, and of all the low cares and desires that beset and spoil our lives, if once this thought, 'before God,' were habitual with us, and we walked in it as in an atmosphere!

Why is it not? and might it not be? and if it might not, ought it not to be? And what are we to say to Him whom we profess to love as our Supreme Good, if all the day long the thought of Him seldom comes into our minds, and if any triviality, held near the eye, is large enough and bright enough to shut Him out from our sight? With deep ethical significance and accuracy was the command given to Abraham as the sole, all-sufficient direction for both inward and outward life: 'Walk before Me and [so] be thou perfect.' For indeed the full realisation-adequate and constant and solid enough to be a motive-of 'Thou God seest me,' would be found to contain practical directions in regard to all moral difficulties, and would unfailingly detect the evil, howsoever wrapped up, and would carry in itself not only motive but impulse, not only law but power to fulfil it. The Master's eye makes diligent servants. How schoolboys bend themselves over their slates and quicken their effort when the teacher is walking behind the benches! And how a gang of idle labourers will buckle to the spade and tax their muscles in an altogether different fashion when the overseer appears upon the field! If we realised, as we should do, the presence in all our little daily life of that great, sovereign Lord, there would be less skulking, less superficially performed tasks, less jerry work put into our building; more of our strength cast into all our work, and less of ourselves in any of it.

Remember, too, how connected with this is another piece of effort needful in the religious life, and suggested by the last words of this text, 'Before the Lord *his* God.' Cultivate the habit of narrowing down the general truths of religion to their relation to yourselves. Do not be content with 'the Lord *our* God,' or 'the Lord the God of the whole earth,' but put a 'my' in, and realise not only the presence of a divine Inspector, but the closeness of the personal bond that unites to Him; and the individual responsibility, in all its width and depth and unshiftableness-if I may use such a word-which results therefrom. You cannot shake off or step out of the tasks that 'the Lord *your* God' lays upon you. You and He are as if alone in the world. Make Him your God by choice, by your own personal acceptance of His authority and dependence upon His power, and try to translate into daily life the great truth, 'Thou God seest *me*,' and bring it to bear upon the veriest trifles and smallest details.

Now the text follows the order of observation, so to speak, and mentions the outward facts of Jotham's success before it goes deeper and accounts for them. We have reversed the process and dealt first with the cause. The spring of all lay in his conscious recognition of his relation to God and God's to him. From that, of course, followed that he 'prepared,' according to the Authorised Version, or 'ordered,' according to the Revised Version, 'his ways.' There is an alternative rendering of the word rendered ‘prepared’ or ‘ordered’ given in the margin of the Authorised Version, which reads, ‘established his ways.’ Both the ideas of ordering and establishing are contained in the word.

Now that fact, that the same word means both these, conveys a piece of practical wisdom, which it will do us all good to note clearly and take to heart. For it teaches us that whatever is ‘ordered’ is firm, and whatever is disorderly, haphazard, done without the exercise of one’s mind on the act, being chaotic, is necessarily short-lived.

The ordered life is the established life. The life of impulse, chance, passion, the life that is lived without choice and plan, without reflection and consideration of consequences, the following of nature, which some people tell us is the highest law, and which is woefully likely to degenerate into following the *lower* nature, which ought not to be followed, but covered and kept under hatches-such a life is sure to be a topsy-turvy life, which, being based upon the narrowest point, must, by the laws of equilibrium, topple over sooner or later. If you would have your lives established, they must be ordered. You must bring your brains to bear upon them, and you must bring more than brain, you must bring to bear on every part of them the spiritual instincts that are quickened by contact with the thought of the All-seeing God, and let these have the ordering of them. Such lives, and only such, will endure ‘when all that seems shall suffer shock.’ ‘He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’

But the lesson that is pressed upon us by this word, understood in the other meanings of ‘prepared’ or ‘ordered,’ is that all our ‘ways,’ that is, our practical life, our acts, direction of mind, habits, should be regulated by continual consciousness of, and reference to, the All-discerning Eye that looks down upon us, and ‘the God in whose hands our breath is, and whose are’-whether we make them so or not-’all our ways.’ To translate that into less picturesque, and less forcible, but more modern words, it is just this: You Christian people ought to make it a point of duty to cultivate the habit of referring everything that you do to the will and judgment of God. Take Him into account in everything great or small, and in nothing say, ‘Thus I will, thus I command. My will shall stand instead of all other reasons’; but say, ‘Lord! by Thee and for Thee I try to do this’; and having done it, say, 'Lord! the seed is sown in Thy name; bless Thou the springing thereof.' Works thus begun, continued and ended, will never be put to confusion, and 'ways' thus ordered will be established. A path of righteousness like that can no more fail to be a way of peace than can God's throne ever totter or fall. An ordered life in which He is consulted, and which is all shaped at His bidding, and by His strength, and for His dear name, will 'stand four-square to all the winds that blow,' and, being founded upon a rock, will never fall.

But we may also note that in the strength of that thought, that we are before the Lord our God, we shall best establish our ways in the sense that we shall keep on steadily and doggedly on the path. Well begun may be half ended, but there is often a long dreary grind before it is wholly ended, and the last half of the march is the wearisome half. The Bible has a great deal to say about the need of obstinate persistence on the right road. 'Ye did run well, what did hinder you?' 'Cast not away your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward.' 'We are made partakers of Christ if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end.' 'He that overcometh and keepeth My words unto the end, to him will I give authority.' Lives which derive their impulse from communion with God will not come to a dead stop half-way on their road, like a motor the fuel of which fails; and it will be impossible for any man to 'endure unto the end' and so to be heir of the promise-'the same shall be saved,' unless he draws his persistency from Him who 'fainteth not, neither is weary' and who 'reneweth strength to them that have no might' so that in all the monotonous levels they shall 'walk and not faint,' and in all the crises, demanding brief spurts of energy, 'they shall run and not be weary,' and at last 'shall mount up with wings as eagles.' A path ordered and a path persisted in ought to be the path of every Christian man.

The text finally tells of the prosperity and growing power which attends such a course. 'Jotham became mighty.' That was simple outward blessing. His kingdom prospered, and, according to the theocratic constitution of Judah, faithfulness to God and material well-being went together. You cannot apply these words, of course, to the outward lives of Christians. It is no doubt true that 'Godliness *is* profitable for all things,' but there are a great many other things besides the godliness of the man that does them which determine whether a man's undertakings shall prosper in the world's sense or not. It would be a pitiable thing if the full revelation of God in Christ did not teach us Christians more about the meaning and the worth of outward success and inward prosperity than the Old Testament could teach. I hope we have learned that lesson; at least, it is not the fault of our lesson book if we have not. Although it is true that religion does make the best of both worlds, it does not do so by taking the world's estimate of what its best for to-day is, and giving a religious man *that*. Sometimes it does, and sometimes it does not, and whether it does or no depends on other considerations than the reality of the man's devotion. Good men are often made better by being made sad and unsuccessful. And if they are not bettered by adversity, it is not the fault of the discipline but of the people who undergo it.

But though the husk of my text falls away-and we should thank God that it has fallen away-the kernel of it is ever true. Whosoever will thus root his life in the living thought of a loving, divine Eye being perpetually upon him, and make that thought a motive for holiness and loving obedience and effort after service, will find that the true success, the only success and the only strength that are worth a man's ambition to desire or his effort to secure, will assuredly be his. He may be voted a failure as regards the world's prizes. But a man that 'orders his ways,' and perseveres in ways thus ordered, 'before the Lord' will for reward get more power to order his ways, and a purer and more thrilling, less interrupted and more childlike vision of the Face that looks upon him. God's 'eyes behold the upright,' and the upright behold His eyes, and in the interchange of glances there is power; and in that power is the highest reward for ordered lives. We shall get power to do, power to bear, power to think aright, power to love, power to will, power to behold, power to deny ourselves, 'power to become sons of God.' This is the success of life, when out of all its changes, and by reason of all its efforts, we realise more fully our filial possession of our Father, and our Father's changeless love to us. We shall become mighty with the might that is born of obedience and faith if we order our ways before the Lord our God. 'The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more until the noontide of the day.'

17)2 Chronicles 28:23

COSTLY AND FATAL HELP

2Ch. 28:23.

Ahaz came to the throne when a youth of twenty. From the beginning he reversed the policy of his father, and threw himself into the arms of the heathen party. In a comparatively short reign of sixteen years he stamped out the worship of God, and nearly ruined the kingdom.

He did not plunge into idolatry for want of good advice. The greatest of the prophets stood beside him. Isaiah addressed to him remonstrances which might have made the most reckless pause, and promises which might have kindled hope and courage in the bosom of despair. Hosea in the northern kingdom, Micah in Judah, and other less brilliant names were amongst the stars which shone even in that dark night. But their light was all in vain. The foolish lad had got the bit between his teeth, and, like many another young man, thought to show his ‘breadth’ and his ‘spirit’ by neglecting his father’s counsellors, and abandoning his father’s faith. He was ready to worship anything that called itself a god, always excepting Jehovah. He welcomed Baal, Moloch, Rimmon, and many more with an indiscriminate eagerness that would have been ludicrous if it had not been tragical. The more he multiplied his gods the more he multiplied his sorrows, and the more he multiplied his sorrows the more he multiplied his gods.

From all sides the invaders came. From north, northeast, east, south-east, south, they swarmed in upon him. They tore away the fringes of his kingdom; and hostile armies flaunted their banners beneath the very walls of Jerusalem.

And then, in his despair, like a scorpion in a circle of fire, he inflicted a deadly wound on himself by calling in the fatal help of Assyria. Nothing loth, that warlike power responded, scattered his less formidable foes, and then swallowed the prey which it had dragged from between the teeth of the Israelites and Syrians. The result of Ahaz’s frantic appeals to false gods and faithless men may still be read on the cuneiform inscriptions, where, amidst a long list of unknown tributary kings, stands, with a Philistine on one side of him and an Ammonite on the other, the shameful record, ‘Ahaz of Judah.’

That was what came of forsaking the God of his fathers. It is a type of what always has come, and always must come, of a godless life. That is the point of view from which I wish to look at the story, and at these words of my text which gather the whole spirit of it into one sentence.

I. First, then, let me ask you to notice how this narrative illustrates for us the crowd of vain helpers to which a man has to take when he turns his back upon God.

If we compare the narrative in our chapter with the parallel in the Second Book of Kings, we get a very vivid picture of the strange medley of idolatries which they introduced. Amongst Ahaz’s new gods are, for instance, the golden calves of Israel and the ferocious Moloch of Ammon, to whom he sacrificed, passing through the fire at least one of his own children. The ancient sacred places of the Canaanites, on every high hill and beneath every conspicuous tree, again smoked with incense to half-forgotten local deities. In every open space in Jerusalem he planted a brand-new altar with a brand-new worship attendant upon it. In the Temple, he brushed aside the altar that Solomon had made and put up a new one, copied from one which he had seen at Damascus. The importation of the Damascene altar, I suppose, meant, as our text tells us, the importation of the Damascene gods along with it.

Side by side with that multiplication of false deities went the almost entire neglect of the worship of Jehovah, until at last, as his reign advanced and he floundered deeper into his troubles, the Temple was spoiled, everything in it that could be laid hands upon was sent to the melting-pot, to pay the Assyrian tribute; and then the doors were shut, the lamps extinguished, the fire quenched on the cold altars, and the silent Temple left to the bats and-*the Shekinah*; for God still abode in the deserted house.

Further, side by side with this appealing all round the horizon to whatsoever obscene and foul shape seemed to promise some help, there went the foolish appeal to the northern invaders to come and aid him, which they did, to his destruction. His whole career is that of a godless and desperate man who will grasp at anything that offers deliverance, and will worship any god or devil who will extricate him from his troubles.

Is the breed extinct, think you? Is there any one among us who, if he cannot get what he wants by fair ways, will try to get it by foul? Do none of you ever bow down to Satan for a slice of the kingdoms of this world? Ahaz has still plenty of brothers and sisters in all our churches and chapels.

This story illustrates for us what, alas! is only too true, both on the broad scale, as to the generation in which we live, and on the narrower field of our own individual lives. Look at the so-called cultured classes of Europe to-day; turning away, as so many of them are, from the Lord God of their fathers; what sort of gods are they worshipping instead? Scraps from Buddhism, the Vedas, any sacred books but the Bible; quackeries, and charlatanism, arid dreams, and fragmentary philosophies all pieced together, to try and make up a whole, instead of the old-fashioned whole that they have left behind them. There are men and women in many congregations who, in modern fashion, are doing precisely the thing that Ahaz did-having abandoned Christianity, they are trying to make up for it by hastily stitching together shreds and patches that they have found in other systems. 'The garment is narrower than that a man can wrap himself in it,' and a creed patched together so will never make a seamless whole which can be trusted not to rend.

But look, further, how the same thing is true as to the individual lives of godless men.

Many of us are trying to make up for not having the One by seeking to stay our hearts on the many. But no accumulation of insufficiencies will ever make a sufficiency. You may fill the heaven all over with stars, bright and thickly set as those in the whitest spot in the galaxy, and it will be night still. Day needs the sun, and the sun is one, and when it comes the twinkling lights are forgotten. You cannot make up for God by any extended series of creatures, any more than a row of figures that stretched from here to *Sirius* and back again would approximate to infinitude.

The very fact of the multitude of helpers is a sign that none of them is sufficient. There is no end of 'cures' for toothache, that is to say there is none. There is no end of helps for men that have abandoned God, that is to say, every one in turn when it is tried, and the stress of the soul rests upon it, gives, and is found to be a broken staff that pierces the hand that leans upon it.

Consult your own experience. What is the meaning of the unrest and distraction that mark the lives of most of the men in this generation? Why is it that you hurry from business to pleasure, from pleasure to business, until it is scarcely possible to get a quiet breathing time for thought at all? Why is it but because one after another of your gods have proved insufficient, and so fresh altars must be built for fresh idolatries, and new experiments made, of which we can safely prophesy the result will be the old one. We have not got beyond St. Augustine's saying:-'Oh, God! my heart was made for Thee, and in Thee only doth it find repose.' The many idols, though you multiply them beyond count, all put together will never make the One God. You are seeking what you will never find. The many pearls that you seek will never be enough for you. The true wealth is One, 'One pearl of great price.'

II. So notice again how this story teaches the heavy cost of these helpers' help.

Ahaz had, as he thought, two strings to his bow. He had the gods of Damascus and of other lands on one hand, he had the king of Assyria on another. They both of them exacted onerous terms before they would stir a foot to his aid. As for the northern conqueror, all the wealth of the king and of the princes and of the Temple was sent to Assyria as the price of his hurtful help. As for the gods, his helpers, one of his sons at least went into the furnace to secure their favour; and what other sacrifices he may have made besides the sacrifice of his conscience and his soul, history does not tell us. These were considerable subsidies to have to be paid down before any aid was granted.

Do *you* buy this world's help any cheaper, my brother? You get nothing for nothing in that market. It is a big price that you have to pay before these mercenaries will come to fight on your side. Here is a man that 'succeeds in life,' as we call it. What does it cost him? Well! it has cost him the suppression, the atrophy by disuse, of many capacities in his soul which were far higher and nobler than those that have been exercised in his success. It has cost him all his days; it has possibly cost him the dying out of generous sympathies and the stimulating of unwholesome selfishness. Ah! he has bought his prosperity very dear. Political economists have much to say about the 'appreciation of gold.' I think if people would estimate what they pay for it, in an immense majority of cases, in treasure that cannot be weighed and stamped, they would find it to be about the dearest thing in God's universe; and that there are few men who make worse bargains than the men who give *themselves* for worldly success, even when they receive what they give themselves for.

There are some of you who know how much what you call enjoyment has cost you. Some of us have bought pleasure at the price of innocence, of moral dignity, of stained memories, of polluted imaginations, of an incapacity to rise above the flesh: and some of us have bought it at the price of health. The world has a way of getting more out of you than it gives to you.

At the best, if you are not Christian men and women, whether you are men of business, votaries of pleasure, seekers after culture and refinement or anything else, you have given Heaven to get earth. Is that a good bargain? Is it much wiser than that of a horde of naked savages that sell a great tract of fair country, with gold-bearing reefs in it, for a bottle of rum, and a yard or two of calico? What is the difference? You have been fooled out of the inheritance which God meant for you; and you have got for it transient satisfaction, and partial as it is transient. If you are not Christian people, you have to buy this world's wealth and goods at the price of God and of your own souls. And I ask you if that is an investment which recommends itself to your common sense. Oh! my brother; 'what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose himself?' Answer the question.

III. Lastly, we may gather from this story an illustration of the fatal falsehood of the world's help.

Ahaz pauperised himself to buy the hireling swords of Assyria, and he got them; but, as it says in the narrative, 'the king came unto him, and distressed him, but strengthened him not.' He helped Ahaz at first. He scattered the armies of which the king of Judah was afraid like chaff, with his fierce and disciplined onset. And then, having driven them off the bleeding prey, he put his own paw upon it, and growled ‘Mine!’ And where he struck his claws there was little more hope of life for the prostrate creature below him.

Ay! and that is what this world always does. In the case before us there was providential guidance of the politics of the Eastern nations in order to bring about these results; and we do not look for anything of that sort. No! But there are natural laws at work today which are God’s laws, and which ensure the worthlessness of the help bought so dear.

A godless life has at the best only partial satisfaction, and that partial satisfaction soon diminishes. ‘Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness.’

That is the experience of all men, and I need not dwell upon the threadbare commonplaces which have survived from generation to generation, because each generation in turn has found them so piteously true, about the incompleteness and the fleetingness of all the joys and treasures of this life. The awful power of habit, if there were no other reason, takes the edge off all gratification except in so far as God is in it. Nothing fully retains its power to satisfy. Nothing has that power absolutely at any moment; but even what measure of it any of our possessions or pursuits may have for a time, soon, or at all events by degrees, passes away. The greater part of life is but like drinking out of empty cups, and the cups drop from our hands. What one of our purest and peacefullest poets said in his haste about all his kind is true in spirit of all godless lives:-

‘We poets, in our youth, begin in gladness,

But thereof cometh, in the end, despondency and madness.’

‘Vanity of vanities! saith’-not the Preacher only, but the inmost heart of every godless man and woman-’vanity of vanities! all is vanity!’

And do not forget that, partial and transient as these satisfactions of which I have been speaking are, they derive what power of helping and satisfying is in them only from the silence of our consciences, and our success in being able to shut out realities. One word, they say, spoken too loud, brings down the avalanche, and beneath its white, cold death, the active form is motionless and the beating heart lies still. One word from conscience, one touch of an awakened reflectiveness, one glance at the end-the coffin and the shroud and what comes after these-slay your worldly satisfactions as surely as that falling snow would crush some light-winged, gauzy butterfly that had been dancing at the cliff's foot. Your jewellery is all imitation. It is well enough for candle-light. Would you like to try the testing acid upon it? Here is a drop of it. 'Know thou that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.' Does it smoke? or does it stand the test? Here is another drop. 'This night thy soul shall be required of thee.' Does it stand that test? My brother! do not be afraid to take in all the facts of your earthly life, and do not pretend to satisfy yourselves with satisfactions which dare not face realities, and shrivel up at their presence.

These fatal helpers come as friends and allies, and they remain as masters. Ahaz and a hundred other weak princes have tried the policy of sending for a strong foreign power to scatter their enemies, and it has always turned out one way. The foreigner has come and he has stopped. The auxiliary has become the lord, and he that called him to his aid becomes his tributary. Ay! and so it is with all the things of this world. Here is some pleasant indulgence that I call to my help lightly and thoughtlessly. It is very agreeable and does what I wanted with it, and I try it again. Still it answers to my call. And then after a while I say, 'I am going to give that up,' and I cannot, I have brought in a master when I thought I was only bringing in an ally that I could dismiss when I liked. The sides of the pit are very slippery; it is gay travelling down them, but when the animal is trapped at the bottom there is no possibility of getting up again. So some of you, dear friends! have got masters in your delights, masters in your pursuits, masters in your habits. These are your gods, these are your tyrants, and you will find out that they are so, if ever, in your own strength, you try to break away from them.

So let me plead with you. With some of you, perhaps, my voice, as a familiar voice, that in some measure, however undeservedly, you trust, may have influence. Let me plead with you-do not run after these will-o'-the-wisps that will only lure you into destruction, but follow the light of life which is Jesus Christ Himself. Do not take these tyrants for your helpers, who will master you under pretence of aiding you; and work their will of you instead of lightening your burden. The same unwise and hopeless mode of life, which we have been describing this evening by one symbolic illustration, as calling vain helpers to our aid, was presented by Ahaz's great contemporary Isaiah, in words which Ahaz himself may have heard, as 'striking a covenant with death, and making lies our refuge.' Some of us, alas! have been doing that all our lives. Let such hearken to the solemn words which may have rung in the ears of this unworthy king. 'Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet, and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies.' I come to you, dear friends! to press on your acceptance the true Guide and Helper-even Jesus Christ your Brother, in whose single Self you will find all that you have vainly sought dispersed 'at sundry times and in divers manners'-among creatures. Take Him for your Saviour by trusting your whole selves to Him. He is the Sacrifice by whose blood all our sins are washed away, and the Indweller, by whose Spirit all our spirits are ennobled and gladdened. I ask you to take Him for your Helper, who will never deceive you; to call whom to our aid is to be secure and victorious for ever. 'Behold! I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste.'

18)2 Chronicles 29:1-11

2 Chronicles

A GODLY REFORMATION

2Ch. 29:1 - 2Ch. 29:11.

Hezekiah, the best of the later kings, had the worst for his father, and another almost as bad for his son. His own piety was probably deepened by the mad extravagance of his father's boundless idolatry, which brought the kingdom to the verge of ruin. Action and reaction are equal and contrary. Saints grown amidst fashionable and deep corruption are generally strong, and reformers usually arise from the midst of the systems which they overthrow. Hezekiah came to a tottering throne and an all but beggared nation, ringed around by triumphant enemies. His brave young heart did not quail. He sought 'first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness,' and of the two pressing needs for Judah, political peace and religious purity, he began with the last. The Book of Kings tells at most length the civil history; the Book of Chronicles, as usual, lays most stress on the ecclesiastical. The two complete each other. The present passage gives a beautiful picture of the vigorous, devout young king setting about the work of reformation.

We may note, first, his prompt action. Joash had to whip up the reluctant priests with his ‘See that ye hasten the matter!’ Hezekiah lets no grass grow under his feet, but begins his reforms with his reign. ‘The first month’ [2Ch. 29:3] possibly, indeed, means the first month of the calendar, not of Hezekiah, who may have come to the throne in the later part of the Jewish year; but, in any case, no time was lost. The statement in 2Ch. 29:3 may be taken as a general *resume* of what follows in detail, but this vigorous speech to the priests was clearly among the new king’s first acts. No doubt his purpose had slowly grown while his father was affronting Heaven with his mania for idols. Such decisive, swift action does not come without protracted, previous brooding. The hidden fires gather slowly in the silent crater, however rapidly they burst out at last.

We can never begin good things too early, and when we come into new positions, it is always prudence as well as bravery to show our colours unmistakably from the first. Many a young man, launched among fresh associations, has been ruined because of beginning with temporising timidity. It is easier to take the right standing at first than to shift to it afterwards. Hezekiah might have been excused if he had thought that the wretched state of political affairs left by Ahaz needed his first attention. Edomites on the east, Philistines on the west and south, Syrians and Assyrians on the north, ‘compassed him about like bees,’ and worldly prudence would have said, ‘Look after these enemies today, and the Temple tomorrow.’ He was wiser than that, knowing that these were effects of the religious corruption, and so he went at that first. It is useless trying to mend a nation’s fortunes unless you mend its morals and religion.

And there are some things which are best done quickly, both in individual and national life. Leaving off bad habits by degrees is not hopeful. The only thing to be done is to break with them utterly and at once. One strong, swift blow, right through the heart, kills the wild beast. Slighter cuts may make him bleed to death, but he may kill you first. The existing state was undeniably sinful. There was no need for deliberation as to that. Therefore there was no reason for delay. Let us learn the lesson that, where conscience has no doubts, we should have no dawdling. ‘I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandment.’

Note, too, in Hezekiah’s speech, the true order of religious reformation. The priests and Levites were not foremost in it, as indeed is only too often the case with ecclesiastics in all ages. Probably many of them had been content to serve Ahaz as priests of his multiform idolatry. At all events, they needed ‘sanctifying,’ though no doubt the word is here used in reference to merely ceremonial uncleanness. Still the requirement that they should cleanse themselves before they cleansed the Temple has more than ceremonial significance. Impure hands are not fit for the work of religious reformation, though they have often been employed in it. What was the weakness of the Reformation but that the passions of princes and nobles were so soon and generally enlisted for it, and marred it? He that enters into the holy place, especially if his errand be to cleanse it, must have ‘clean hands, and a pure heart.’ The hands that wielded the whip of small cords, and drove out the money-changers, were stainless, and therefore strong. Some of us are very fond of trying to set churches to rights. Let us begin with ourselves, lest, like careless servants, we leave dirty finger-marks where we have been ‘cleaning.’

The next point in the speech is the profound and painful sense of existing corruption. Note the long-drawn-out enumeration of evils in 2Ch. 29:6 - 2Ch. 29:7, starting with the general recognition of the father’s trespass, advancing to the more specific sin of forsaking Him and His house, and dwelling, finally, as with fascinated horror, on all the details of closed shrine and quenched lamps and cold altars. The historical truth of the picture is confirmed by the close of the previous chapter, and its vividness shows how deeply Hezekiah had felt the shame and sin of Ahaz. It is not easy to keep clear of the influence of prevailing corruptions of religion. Familiarity weakens abhorrence, and the stained embodiments of the ideal hide its purity from most eyes. But no man will be God’s instrument to make society, the church, or the home, better, unless he feels keenly the existing evils. We do not need to cherish a censorious spirit, but we do need to guard against an unthinking acquiescence in the present state of things, and a self-complacent reluctance to admit their departure from the divine purpose for the church. There is need to-day for a like profound consciousness of evil, and like efforts after new purity. If we individually lived nearer God, we should be less acclimatised to the Church's imperfections. No doubt Hezekiah's clear sight of the sinfulness of the idolatry so universal round him was largely owing to Isaiah's influence. Eyes which have caught sight of the true King of Israel, and of the pure light of His kingdom, will be purged to discern the sore need for purifying the Lord's house.

The clear insight into the national sin gives as clear understanding of the national suffering. Hezekiah speaks, in 2Ch. 29:8 - 2Ch. 29:9, as the Law and the Prophets had been speaking for centuries, and as God's providence had been uttering in act all through the national history. But so slow are men to learn familiar truths that Ahaz had grasped at idol after idol to rescue him; 'but they were the ruin of him, and of all Israel.' How difficult it is to hammer plain truths, even with the mallet of troubles, into men's heads! How blind we all are to the causal connection between sin and sorrow! Hezekiah saw the iron link uniting them, and his whole policy was based upon that 'wherefore.' Of course, if we accept the Biblical statements as to the divine dealing with Israel and Judah, obedience and disobedience were there followed by reward and suffering more certainly and directly than is now the case in either national or individual life. But it still remains true that it is a 'bitter' as well as an 'evil' thing to depart from the living God. If we would find the cause of our own or of a nation's sorrows, we had better begin our search among our or its sins.

That phrase 'an astonishment, and an hissing' [2Ch. 29:8] is new. It appears for the first time in Micah [Micah vi. l6], and he, we know, exercised influence on Hezekiah [Jer. 26:18 - Jer. 26:19]. Perhaps the king is here quoting the prophet.

The exposition of the sin and its fruit is followed by the king's resolve for himself, and, so far as may be, for his people. The phrase 'it is in my heart' expresses fixed determination, not mere wish. It is used by David and of him, in reference to his resolve to build the Temple. 'To make a covenant' probably means to renew the covenant, made long ago at Sinai, but broken by sin. The king has made up his mind, and announces his determination. He does not consult priests or people, but expects their acquiescence. So, in the early days of Christianity, the ‘conversion’ of a king meant that of his people. Of course, the power of the kings of Israel and Judah to change the national religion at their pleasure shows how slightly any religion had penetrated, and how much, at the best, it was a matter of mere ceremonial worship with the masses. People who worshipped Ahaz’s rabble of gods and godlings to-day because he bade them, and Hezekiah’s God to-morrow, had little worship for either, and were much the same through all changes.

Hezekiah was in earnest, and his resolve was none the less right because it was moved by a desire to turn away the fierce anger of the Lord. Dread of sin’s consequences and a desire to escape these is no unworthy motive, however some superfine moralists nowadays may call it so. It is becoming unfashionable to preach ‘the terror of the Lord.’ The more is the pity, and the less is the likelihood of persuading men. But, however kindled, the firm determination [which does not wait for others to concur] that ‘As for me, I will serve the Lord,’ is the grand thing for us all to imitate. That strong young heart showed itself kingly in its resolve, as it had shown itself sensitive to evil and tender in contemplating the widespread sorrow. If we would brace our feeble wills, and screw them to the sticking-point of immovable determination to make a covenant with God, let us meditate on our departures from Him, the Lover and Benefactor of our souls, and on the dreadfulness of His anger and the misery of those who forsake Him.

Once more the king turns to the priests. He began and he finishes with them, as if he were not sure of their reliableness. His tone is kindly, ‘My sons,’ but yet monitory. They would not have been warned against ‘negligence’ unless they had obviously needed it, nor would they have been stimulated to their duties by reminding them of their prerogatives, unless they had been apt to slight these. Officials, whose business is concerned with the things of God, are often apt to drop into an easy-going pace. Negligent work may suit unimportant offices, but is hideously inconsistent with the tasks and aims of God’s servants. If there is any work which has to be done ‘with both hands, earnestly,’ it is theirs. Unless we put all our strength into it, we shall get no good for ourselves or others out of it. The utmost tension of all powers, the utmost husbanding of every moment, is absolutely demanded by the greatness of the task; and the voice of the great Master says to all His servants, ‘My sons, be not now negligent.’ Ungirt loins and unlit lamps are fatal.

We should meditate, too, on the prerogatives and lofty offices to which Christ calls those who love Him; not to minister to self-complacency, as if we were so much better than other men, but to deepen our sense of responsibility, and stir us to strenuous efforts to be what we are called to be. If Christian people thought more earnestly on what Jesus Christ means them to be to the world, they would not so often counterwork His purpose and shirk their own duties. Crowns are heavy to wear. Gifts are calls to service. If we are chosen to be His ministers, we have solemn responsibilities. If we are to burn incense before Him, our censers need to be bright and free from strange fire. If we are the lights of the world, our business is to shine.

19)2 Chronicles 29:18-31

2 Chronicles

SACRIFICE RENEWED

2Ch. 29:18 - 2Ch. 29:31.

Ahaz, Hezekiah’s father, had wallowed in idolatry, worshipping any and every god but Jehovah. He had shut up the Temple, defiled the sacred vessels, and ‘made him altars in every corner of Jerusalem.’ And the result was that he brought the kingdom very near ruin, was not allowed to be buried in the tombs of the kings, and left his son a heavy task to patch up the mischief he had wrought. Hezekiah began at the right end of his task. ‘In the first year of his reign, in the first month,’ he set about restoring the worship of Jehovah. The relations with Syria and Damascus would come right if the relations with Judah’s God were right. ‘First things first’ was his motto, and perhaps he discerned the true sequence more accurately than some great political pundits do nowadays. So neglected had the Temple been that a strong force of priests and Levites took a fortnight to ‘carry forth the filthiness out of the holy place to the brook Kidron,’ and to cleanse and ceremonially sanctify the sacred vessels. Then followed at once the re-establishment of the Temple worship, which is narrated in the passage.

The first thing to be noted is that the whole movement back to Jehovah was a one-man movement. It was Hezekiah's doing and his only. No priest is named as prominent in it, and the slowness of the whole order is especially branded in 2Ch. 29:34. No prophet is named; was there any one prompting the king? Perhaps Isaiah did, though his Isa. 1:1 with its scathing repudiation of 'the burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts,' suggests that he did not think the restoration of sacrifice so important as that the nation should 'cease to do evil and learn to do well.' The people acquiesced in the king's worship of Jehovah, as they had acquiesced in other kings' worship of Baal or Moloch or Hadad. When kings take to being religious reformers, they make swift converts, but their work is as slight as it is speedy, and as short-lived as it is rapid. Manasseh was Hezekiah's successor, and swept away all his work after twenty-nine years, and apparently the mass of his people followed him just as they had followed Hezekiah. Religion must be a matter of personal conviction and individual choice. Imposed from without, or adopted because other people adopt it, it is worthless.

Another point to notice is that Hezekiah's reformation was mainly directed to ritual, and does not seem to have included either theology or ethics. Was be quite right in his estimate of what was the first thing? Isaiah, in the passage already referred to, does not seem to think so. To him, as to all the prophets, foul hands could not bring acceptable sacrifices, and worship was an abomination unless preceded by obedience to the command: 'Put away the evil of your doings from before Mine eyes.' The filth in the hearts of the men of Judah was more 'rank, and smelt to heaven' more offensively, than that in the Temple, which took sixteen days to shovel into Kidron. No doubt ceremonial bulked more largely in the days of the Old Covenant than it does in those of the New, and both the then stage of revelation and the then spiritual stature of the recipients of revelation required that it should do so. But the true religious reformers, the prophets, were never weary of insisting that, even in those days, moral and spiritual reformation should come first, and that unless it did, ritual worship, though it were nominally offered to Jehovah, was as abhorrent to Him as if it had been avowedly offered to

Baal. Not a little so-called Christian worship today, judged by the same test, is as truly heathen superstition as if it had been paid to Mumbo-Jumbo.

But when all deductions have been made, the scene depicted in the passage is not only an affecting, but an instructive one. Strangely unlike our notions of worship, and to us almost repulsive, must have been the slaying of three hundred and seventy animals and the offering of them as burnt offerings. Try to picture the rivers of blood, the contortions of the dumb brutes, the priests bedaubed with gore, the smell of the burnt flesh, the blare of the trumpets, the shouts of the worshippers, the clashing cymbals, and realise what a world parts it from 'They went up into the upper chamber where they were abiding . . . these all with one accord continued steadfastly in prayer, with the women, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren'! Sacrifice has been the essential feature in all religions before Christ. It has dropped out of worship wherever Christ has been accepted. Why? Because it spoke of a deep, permanent, universal need, and because Christ was recognised as having met the need. People who deny the need, and people who deny that Jesus on the Cross has satisfied it, may be invited to explain these two facts, written large on the history of humanity.

That brings us to the most important aspect of Hezekiah's great sacrifice. It sets forth the stages by which men can approach to God. It is symbolic of spiritual facts, and prophetic of Christ's work and of our way of coming to God through Him. The first requisite for Judah's return to Jehovah, whom they had forsaken, was the presentation of a 'sin offering.' The king and the congregation laid their hands on the heads of the goats, thereby, as it were, transferring their own sinful personality to them. Thus laden with the nation's sins, they were slain, and in their death the nation, as it were, bore the penalty of its sin. Representation and substitution were dramatised in the sacrifice. The blood sprinkled on the altar [which had previously been 'sanctified' by sprinkling of blood, and so made capable of presenting what touched it to Jehovah], made 'atonement for all Israel.' We note in passing the emphasis of 'Israel' here, extending the benefit of the sacrifice to the separated tribes of the Northern Kingdom, in a gush of yearning love and desire that they, too, might be reconciled to Jehovah. And is not this the first step towards any man's reconciliation with God? Is not

'My faith would lay her hand
On that dear head of Thine,'

the true expression of the first requisite for us all? Jesus is the sin-offering for the world. In His death He bears the world's sin. His blood is presented to God, and if we have associated ourselves with Him by faith, that blood sprinkled on the altar covers all our sins.

Then followed in this parabolic ceremonial the burnt offering. And that is the second stage of our return to God, for it expresses the consecration of our forgiven selves, as being consumed by the holy and blessed fire of a self-devotion, kindled by the 'unspeakable gift,' which fire, burning away all foulness, will make us tenfold ourselves. That fire will burn up only our bonds, and we shall walk at liberty in it. And that burnt-offering will always be accompanied with 'the song of Jehovah,' and the joyful sound of the trumpets and 'the instruments of David.' The treasures of Christian poetry have always been inspired by the Cross, and the consequent rapture of self-surrender. Calvary is the true fountain of song.

The last stage in Hezekiah's great sacrifice was 'thank-offerings,' brought by 'as many as were of a willing heart.' And will not the self-devotion, kindled by the fire of love, speak in daily life by practical service, and the whole activities of the redeemed man be a long thank-offering for the Lamb who 'bears away the sins of the world'? And if we do not thus offer our whole lives to God, how shall we profess to have taken the priceless benefit of Christ's death? Hezekiah followed the order laid down in the Law, and it is the only order that leads to the goal. First, the atoning sacrifice of the slain Lamb; next, our identification with Him and it by faith; then the burnt-offering of a surrendered self, with the song of praise sounding ever through it; and last, the life of service, offering all our works to God, and so reaching the perfection of life on earth and antedating the felicities of heaven.

20)2 Chronicles 30:1-13

2 Chronicles

A LOVING CALL TO REUNION

2Ch. 30:1 - 2Ch. 30:13.

The date of Hezekiah's passover is uncertain, for, while the immediate connection of this narrative with the preceding account of his cleansing the Temple and restoring the sacrificial worship suggests that the passover followed directly on those events, which took place at the beginning of the reign, the language employed in the message to the northern tribes [2Ch. 30:6 - 2Ch. 30:7, 2Ch. 30:9] seems to imply the previous fall of the kingdom of Israel, If so, this passover did not occur till after 721 B.C., the date of the capture of Samaria, six years after Hezekiah's accession.

The sending of messengers from Jerusalem on such an errand would scarcely have been possible if the northern kingdom had still been independent. Perhaps its fall was thought by Hezekiah to open the door to drawing 'the remnant that were escaped' back to the ancient unity of worship, at all events, if not of polity. No doubt a large number had been left in the northern territory, and Hezekiah may have hoped that calamity had softened their enmity to his kingdom, and perhaps touched them with longings for the old worship. At all events, like a good man, he will stretch out a hand to the alienated brethren, now that evil days have fallen on them. The hour of an enemy's calamity should be our opportunity for seeking to help and proffering reconciliation. We may find that trouble inclines wanderers to come back to God.

The alteration of the time of keeping the passover from the thirteenth day of the first month to the same day of the second was in accordance with the liberty granted in Num. 9:10 - Num. 9:11, to persons unclean by contact with a dead body or 'in a journey afar off.' The decision to have the passover was not taken in time to allow of the necessary removal of uncleanness from the priests nor of the assembling of the people, and therefore the permission to defer it for a month was taken advantage of, in order to allow full time for the despatch of the messengers and the journeys of the farthest northern tribes. It is to be observed that Hezekiah took his subjects into counsel, since the step intended was much too great for him to venture on of his own mere motion. So the overtures went out clothed with the authority of the whole kingdom of Judah. It was the voice of a nation that sought to woo back the secessionists.

The messengers were instructed to supplement the official letters of invitation with earnest entreaties as from the king, of which the gist is given in 2Ch. 30:6 - 2Ch. 30:9. With the skill born of intense desire to draw the long-parted kingdoms together, the message touches on ancestral memories, recent bitter experiences, yearnings for the captive kinsfolk, the instinct of self-preservation, and rises at last into the clear light of full faith in, and insight into, God's infinite heart of pardoning pity.

Note the very first words, 'Ye children of Israel,' and consider the effect of this frank recognition of the northern kingdom as part of the undivided Israel. Such recognition might have been misunderstood or spurned when Samaria was gay and prosperous; but when its palaces were desolate, the effect of the old name, recalling happier days, must have been as if the elder brother had come out from the father's house and entreated the prodigal to come back to his place at the fireside. The battle would be more than half won if the appeal that was couched in the very name of Israel was heeded.

Note further how firmly and yet lovingly the sin of the northern kingdom is touched on. The name of Jehovah as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, recalls the ancient days when the undivided people worshipped Him, and the still more ancient, and, to hearers and speakers alike, more sacred, days when the patriarchs received wondrous tokens that He was their God, and they were His people; while the recurrence of 'Israel' as the name of Jacob adds force to its previous use as the name of all His descendants. The possible rejection of the invitation, on the ground which the men of the north, like the Samaritan woman, might have taken, that they were true to their fathers' worship, is cut away by the reminder that that worship was an innovation, since the fathers of the present generation had been apostate from the God of *their* fathers. The appeal to antiquity often lands men in a bog because it is not carried far enough back. 'The fathers' may lead astray, but if the antiquity to which we appeal is that of which the New Testament is the record, the more conservative we are, the nearer the truth shall we be.

Again, the message touched on a chord that might easily have given a jarring note; namely, the misfortunes of the kingdom. But it was done with so delicate a hand, and so entirely without a trace of rejoicing in a neighbour's calamities, that no susceptibilities could be ruffled, while yet the solemn lesson is unfalteringly pointed. 'He gave them up to desolation, as ye see.' Behind Assyria was Jehovah, and Israel's fall was not wholly explained by the disparity between its strength and the conquerors'. Under and through the play of criminal ambition, cruelty, and earthly politics, the unseen Hand wrought; and the teaching of all the Old Testament history is condensed into that one sad sentence, which points to facts as plain as tragical. In deepest truth it applies to each of us; for, if we trespass against God, we draw down evil on our heads with both hands, and shall find that sin brings the worst desolation-that which sheds gloom over a godless soul.

We note further the deep true insight into God's character and ways expressed in this message. There is a very striking variation in the three designations of Jehovah as 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel' [2Ch. 30:6], 'the god of their [that is, the preceding generation] fathers' [ver. 7], and 'your God' [2Ch. 30:8]. The relation which had subsisted from of old had not been broken by man's apostasy, Jehovah still was, in a true sense, their God, even if His relation to them only bound Him not to leave them unpunished. So their very sufferings proved them His, for 'What son is he whom the father chasteneth not?' But strong, sunny confidence in God shines from the whole message, and reaches its climax in the closing assurance that He is merciful and gracious. The evil results of rebellion are not omitted, but they are not dwelt on. The true magnet to draw wanderers back to God is the loving proclamation of His love. Unless we are sure that He has a heart tender with all pity, and 'open as day to melting charity,' we shall not turn to Him with our hearts.

The message puts the response which it sought in a variety of ways; namely, turning to Jehovah, not being stiff-necked, yielding selves to Jehovah, entering into His sanctuary. More than outward participation in the passover ceremonial is involved. Submission of will, abandonment of former courses of action, docility of spirit ready to be directed anywhere, the habit of abiding with God by communion-all these, the standing characteristics of the religious life, are at least suggested by the invitations here. We are all summoned thus to yield ourselves to God, and especially to do so by surrendering our wills to Him, and to 'enter into His sanctuary,' by keeping up such communion with Him as that, however and wherever occupied, we shall still 'dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives.'

And the summons to return unto God is addressed to us all even more urgently than to Israel. God Himself invites us by the voice of His providences, by His voice within, and by the voice of Jesus Himself, who is ever saying to each of us, by His death and passion, by His resurrection and ascension, 'Turn ye! turn ye! why will ye die?' and who has more than endorsed Hezekiah's messengers' assurance that 'Jehovah will not turn away His face from' us by His own gracious promise, 'Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.'

The king's message met a mingled reception. Some mocked, some were moved and accepted. So, alas! is it with the better message, which is either 'a savour of life unto life or of death unto death.' The same fire melts wax and hardens clay. May it be with all of us as it was in Judah-that we 'have one heart, to do the commandment' and to accept the merciful summons to the great passover!

21)2 Chronicles 32:1

2 Chronicles

A STRANGE REWARD FOR FAITHFULNESS

2Ch. 32:1.

The Revised Version gives a much more accurate and significant rendering of a part of these words. It reads: 'After these things and *this faithfulness*, Sennacherib, king of Assyria, came.' What are 'these things' and 'this faithfulness'? The former are the whole of the events connected with the religious reformation in Judah, which King Hezekiah inaugurated and carried through so brilliantly and successfully. This 'faithfulness' directly refers to a word in a couple of verses before the text: 'Thus did Hezekiah throughout all Judah; and he wrought that which was good and right and *faithfulness* before the Lord his God.' And, after these things, the re-establishment of religion and this 'faithfulness,' though Hezekiah was perfect before God in all ritual observances and in practical righteousness, and though he was seeking the Lord his God with all his heart, here is what came of it:-'After this faithfulness came' not blessings or prosperity, but 'Sennacherib, king of Assyria'! The chronicler not only tells this as singular, but one can feel that he is staggered by it. There is a tone of perplexity and wonder in his voice as he records that *this* was what followed the faithful righteousness and heart-devotion of the best king that ever sat on the throne of Judah. I think that this royal martyr's experience is really a mirror of the experience of devout men in all ages and a revelation of the great law and constant processes of the Divine Providence. And from that point of view I wish to speak now, not only on the words I have read, but on what follows them.

I. We have here the statement of the mystery.

It is the standing puzzle of the Old Testament, how good men come to be troubled, and how bad men come to be prosperous. And although we Christian men and women are a great deal too apt to suppose that we have outlived that rudimentary puzzle of the religious mind, yet I do not think by any means that we have. For we hear men, when the rod falls upon themselves, saying, 'What have I done that I should be smitten thus?' or when their friends suffer, saying, 'What a marvellous thing it is that such a good man as A, B, or C should have so much trouble!' or, when widespread calamities strike a community, standing aghast at the broad and dark shadows that fall upon a nation or a continent, and wondering what the meaning of all this heaped misery is, and why the world is thus allowed to run along its course surrounded by an atmosphere made up of the breath of sighs, and swathed in clouds which are moist with tears.

My text gives us an illustration in the sharpest form of the mystery. 'After these things and this faithfulness, Sennacherib came'-and he always comes in one shape or another. For, to begin with, a good man's goodness does not lift him out of the ordinary associations and contingencies and laws of life. If he has inherited a diseased constitution, his devotion will not make him a healthy man. If he has little common sense, his godliness will not make him prosper in worldly affairs. If he is tied to unfortunate connections, he will have to suffer. If he happens to be in a decaying branch of business, his prayers will not make him prosperous. If he falls in the way of poisonous gas from a sewer, his godliness will not exempt him from an attack of fever. So all round the horizon we see this: that the godly man is involved like any other man in the ordinary contingencies and possible evils of life. Then, have we to say that God has nothing to do with these?

Again, Hezekiah’s story teaches us how second causes are God’s instruments, and He is at the back of everything. There are two sources of our knowledge of the history of Judah in the time with which we are concerned. One is the Bible, the other is the Assyrian monuments; and it is a most curious contrast to read the two narratives of the same events, agreeing about the facts, but disagreeing utterly in the spirit. Why? Because the one tells the story from the world’s point of view, and the other tells it from God’s point of view. So when you take the one narrative, it is simply this: ‘There was a conspiracy down in the south against the political supremacy of Assyria, and a lot of little confederate kinglets gathered themselves; and Hezekiah, of Judah, was one, along with So-and-So of such-and-such a petty land, and they leaned upon Egypt; and I, Sennacherib, came down among them, and they tumbled to pieces, and that is all.’ Then the Bible comes in, and it says that God ordered all those political complications, and that they were all the working out of His purposes, and that ‘the axe in His hand’ as Isaiah has it so picturesquely, was this proud king of Assyria, with his boastful mouth and vainglorious words.

Now, that is the principle by which we have to estimate all the events that befall us. There are two ways of looking at them. You may look at them from the under side or from the top side. You may see them as they appear to men who cannot look beyond their noses and only have concern with the visible cranks and shafting, or you may look at them from the engine-room and take account of the invisible power that drives them all. In the one case you will regard it as a mystery that good men should have to suffer so; in the other case, you will say, ‘It is the Lord, let Him do’-even when He does it through Sennacherib and his like, ‘let Him do what seemeth Him good.’

Then there is another thing to be taken into account-that is, that the better a man is, the more faithful he is and the more closely he cleaves to God, and seeks, like this king, to do, with all his heart, all his work in the service of the House of God and to seek his God, the more sure is he to bring down upon himself certain forms of trouble and trial. The rebellion which, from the Assyrian side of the river, seemed to be a mere political revolt, from the Jordan side of the river seemed to be closely connected with the religious reformation. And it was just because Hezekiah and his people came back to God that they rebelled against the King of Assyria and served him not. If you provoke Sennacherib, Sennacherib will be down upon you very quickly. That is to say, being translated, if you will live like Christian men and women and fling down the gage of battle to the world and to the evil that lies in every one of us, and say, ‘No, I have nothing to do with you. My law is not your law, and, God helping me, my practice shall not be your practice,’ then you will find out that the power that you have defied has a very long arm and a very tight grasp, and you will have to make up your minds that, in some shape or other, the old law will be fulfilled about you. Through much tribulation we must enter the Kingdom.

II. Now, secondly, my text and its context solve the mystery which it raises.

The chronicler, as I said, wishes us to notice the sequence, strange as it is, and to wonder at it for a moment, in order that we may be prepared the better to take in the grand explanation that follows. And the explanation lies in the facts that ensue.

Did Sennacherib come to destroy? By no means! Here were the results: first, a stirring to wholesome energy and activity. If annoyances and troubles and sorrows, great or small, do nothing else for us, they would be clear and simple gain if they woke us up, for the half of men pass half of their lives half-asleep. And anybody that has ever come through a great sorrow and can remember what deep fountains were opened in his heart that he knew nothing about before, and how powers that were all unsuspected by himself suddenly came to him, and how life, instead of being a trivial succession of nothings, all at once became significant and solemn-any man who can remember that, will feel that if there were nothing else that his troubles did for him than to shake him out of torpor and rouse him to a tension of wholesome activity, so that he cried out:

‘Call forth thy powers, my soul! and dare
The conflict of unequal war,’

he would have occasion to bless God for the roughest handling. The tropics are very pleasant for lazy people, but they sap the constitution and make work impossible; and after a man has lived for a while in their perpetual summer, he begins to long for damp and mist and frost and east winds which bring bracing to the system and make him fit to work. God takes us often into very ungenial climates, and the vindication of it is that we may be set to active service. That was the first good thing that Sennacherib’s coming did.

The next was that his invasion increased dependence upon God. You will remember the story of the insolent taunts and vulgar vaunting by him and his servants, and the one answer that was given: ‘Hezekiah, the king, and Isaiah the son of Amoz the prophet, prayed and cried to God.’ Ah! dear brethren, any thing that drives us to His breast is blessing. We may call it evil when we speak from the point of view of the foolish senses and the quivering heart, but if it blows us into His arms, any wind, the roughest and the fiercest, is to be welcomed more than lazy calms or gentle zephyrs. If, realising our own weakness and impotence, we are made to hang more completely upon Him, then let us be thankful for whatever has been the means of such a blessed issue. That was the second good thing that Sennacherib did.

The third good thing that he-not exactly did-but that was done through him, was that experience of God’s delivering power was enriched. You remember the miracle of the destruction of the army. I need not dilate upon it. A man who can look back and say, ‘Thou hast been with me in six troubles,’ need never be afraid of the seventh; and he who has hung upon that strong rope when he has been swinging away down in the darkness and asphyxiating atmosphere of the pit, and has been drawn up into the sunshine again, will trust it for all coming time. If there were no other explanation, the enlarged and deepened experience of the realities of God’s Gospel and of God’s grace, which are bought only by sorrow, would be a sufficient explanation of any sorrow that any of us have ever had to carry.

‘Well roars the storm to him who hears
A deeper voice across the storm.’

There are large tracts of Scripture which have no meaning, no blessedness to us until they have been interpreted to us by losses and sorrows. We never know the worth of the lighthouse until the November darkness and the howling winds come down upon us, and then we appreciate its preciousness.

So, dear friends! the upshot of the whole is just that old teaching, that if we realised what life is for, we should wonder less at the sorrows that are in it. For life is meant to make us partakers of His holiness, not to make us happy. Our happiness is a secondary purpose, not out of view of the Divine love, but it is not the primary one. And the direct intention and mission of sorrow, like the direct intention and mission of joy, are to further that great purpose, that we ‘should be partakers of His holiness.’ ‘Every branch in Me that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.’

III. Lastly, my text suggests a warning against letting prosperity undo adversity’s work.

Hezekiah came bravely through his trials. They did exactly what God wanted them to do; they drove him to God, they forced him down upon his knees. When Sennacherib’s letter came, he took it to the Temple and spread it before God, and said, ‘O Lord! it is Thy business. It is addressed to me, but it is meant for Thee; do Thou answer it.’ And so he received the help that he wanted. But he broke down after that. He was ‘exalted’; and the allies, his neighbours, that had not lifted a finger to help him when he needed their help, sent him presents which would have been a great deal more seasonable when he was struggling for his life with Sennacherib. What ‘came after [God’s] faithfulness’? This-’his heart was lifted up, and he rendered not according to the benefit rendered to him.’ Therefore the blow had to come down again. A great many people take refuge in archways when it rains, and run out as soon as it holds up, and a great many people take religion as an umbrella, to put down when the sunshine comes. We cross the bridge and forget it, and when the leprosy is out of us we do not care to go back and give thanks. Sometimes too, we begin to think, ‘After all, it was we that killed Sennacherib’s army, and not the angel.’ And so, like dull scholars, we need the lesson repeated once, twice, thrice, ‘here a little and there a little, precept upon precept, line upon line.’ There is none of us that has so laid to heart our past difficulties and trials that it is safe for God to burn the rod as long as we are in this life.

Dear friends! do not let it be said of us, ‘In vain have I smitten thy children. They have received no correction’; but rather let us keep close to Him, and seek to learn the sweet and loving meaning of His sharpest strokes. Then the little book, ‘written within and without with lamentation and woe,’ which we all in our turn have to absorb and make our own, may be ‘bitter in the mouth,’ but will be ‘sweet as honey’ thereafter.

22)2 Chronicles 33:9-16

2 Chronicles

MANASSEH’S SIN AND REPENTANCE

2Ch. 33:9 - 2Ch. 33:16.

The story of Manasseh’s sin and repentance may stand as a typical example. Its historical authenticity is denied on the ground that it appears only in this Book of Chronicles. I must leave others to discuss that matter; my purpose is to bring out the teaching contained in the story.

The first point in it is the stern indictment against Manasseh and his people. The experience which has saddened many a humbler home was repeated in the royal house, where a Hezekiah was followed by a Manasseh, who scorned all that his father had worshipped, and worshipped all that his father had loathed. Happily the father’s eyes were closed long before the idolatrous bias of his son could have disclosed itself. Succeeding to the throne at twelve years of age, he could not have begun his evil ways at once, and probably would have been preserved from them if his father had lived long enough to mould his character. A child of twelve, flung on to a throne, was likely to catch the infection of any sin that was in the atmosphere. The narrative specifies two points in which, as he matured in years, and was confirmed in his course of conduct, he went wrong: first, in his idolatry; and second, in his contempt of remonstrances and warnings. As to the former, the preceding context gives a terrible picture. He was smitten with a very delirium of idolatry, and wallowed in any and every sort of false worship. No matter what strange god was presented, there were hospitality, an altar, and an offering for him. Baal, Moloch, 'the host of heaven,' wizards, enchanters, anybody who pretended to have any sort of black art, all were welcome, and the more the better. No doubt, this eager acceptance of a miscellaneous multitude of deities was partly reaction from the monotheism of the former reign, but also it was the natural result of being surrounded by the worshippers of these various gods; and it was an unconscious confession of the insufficiency of each and all of them to fill the void in the heart, and satisfy the needs of the spirit. There are 'gods many, and lords many,' because they are insufficient; 'the Lord our God is one Lord,' because He, in His single Self, is more than all these, and is enough for any and every man.

We may note, too, that at the beginning of the chapter Manasseh is said to have done '*like* unto the abominations of the heathen,' while in 2Ch. 33:9 he is said to have done 'evil *more* than did the nations.' When a worshipper of Jehovah does *like* the heathen, he does *worse* than they. An apostate Christian is more guilty than one who has never 'tasted the good word of God,' and is likely to push his sins to a more flagrant wickedness. 'The corruption of the best is the worst.' We cannot do what the world does without being more deeply guilty than they.

The narrative lays stress on the fact that the king's inclination to idolatry was agreeable to the people. The kings, who fought against it, had to resist the popular current, but at the least encouragement from those in high places the nation was ready to slide back. Rulers who wish to lower the standard of morality or religion have an easy task; but the people who follow their lead are not free from guilt, though they can plead that they only followed. The second count in the indictment is the refusal of king and people to listen to God's remonstrances. 2Ki. 21:1 - 2Ki. 21:26, gives the prophets' warnings at greater length. 'They would not hearken'-can anything madder and sadder be said of any of us than that? Is it not the very sin of sins, and the climax of suicidal folly, that God should call and men stop their ears? And yet how many of us pay no more regard to His voice, in

His providences, in our own consciences, in history, in Scripture, and, most penetrating and beseeching of all, in Christ, than to idle wind whistling through an archway! Our own evil deeds stop our ears, and the stopped ears make further evil deeds more easy.

The second step in this typical story is merciful chastisement, meant to secure a hearing for God’s voice. 2 Kings tells the threat, but not the fulfilment; Chronicles tells the fulfilment, but not the threat. We note how emphatically God’s hand is recognised behind the political complications which brought the Assyrians to Jerusalem, and how particularly it is stated that the invasion was not headed by Esarhaddon, but by his generals. The place of Manasseh’s captivity also is specified, not as Nineveh, as might have been expected, but as Babylon. These details, especially the last, look like genuine history. It is history which carries a lesson. Here is one conspicuous instance of the divine method, which is working to-day as it did then. God’s hand is behind the secondary causes of events. Our sorrows and ‘misfortunes’ are sent to us by Him, not hurled at us by human hands only, or occurring by the working of impersonal laws. They are meant to make us bethink ourselves, and drop evil things from our hands and hearts. It is best to be guided by His eye, and not need ‘bit and bridle’; but if we make ourselves stubborn as ‘the mule, which has no understanding,’ it is second best that we should taste the whip, that it may bring us to run in harness on the road which He wills. If we habitually looked at calamities as His loving chastisement, intended to draw us to Himself, we should not have to stand perplexed so often at what we call the mysteries of His providence.

The next step in the story is the yielding of the sinful heart when smitten. The worst affliction is an affliction wasted, which does us no good. And God has often to lament, ‘In vain have I smitten your children; they received no correction.’ Sorrow has in itself no power to effect the purpose for which it is sent; but all depends on how we take it. It sometimes makes us hard, bitter, obstinate in clinging to evil. A heart that has been disciplined by it, and still is undisciplined, is like iron hammered on an anvil, and made the more close-grained thereby. But this king took his chastisement wisely. An accepted sorrow is an angel in disguise, and nothing which drives us to God is a calamity. Manasseh praying was freer in his chains than ever he had been in his prosperity. Manasseh humbling himself greatly before God was higher than when, in the pride of his heart, he shut God out from it.

Affliction should clear our sight, that we may see ourselves as we are; and, if we do, there will be an end of high looks, and we shall ‘take the lowest room.’ Thus humbled, we shall pray as the self-confident and outwardly prosperous cannot do. Sorrow has done its best on us when, like some strong hand on our shoulders, it has brought us to our knees. No affliction has yielded its full blessing to us unless it has thus set us by Manasseh’s side.

The next step in the story is the loving answer to the humbled heart, and the restoration to the kingdom. ‘He was entreated of him.’ No doubt, political circumstances brought about Manasseh’s reinstatement, as they had brought about his captivity, but it was God that ‘brought him again to his kingdom.’ We may not receive again lost good things, but we may be quite sure that God never fails to hear the cry of the humble, and that, if there is one voice that more surely reaches His ear and moves His heart than another, it is the voice of His chastened children, who cry to Him out of the depths, and there have learned their own sin and sore need. He will be entreated of them, and, whether He gives back lost good or not, He will give Himself, in whom all good is comprehended. Manasseh’s experience may be repeated in us.

And the best part of it was, not that he received back his kingdom, but that ‘then Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God.’ The name had been but a name to him, but now it had become a reality. Our traditional, second-hand belief in God is superficial and largely unreal till it is deepened and vivified by experience. If we have cried to Him, and been lightened, then we have a ground of conviction that cannot be shaken. Formerly we could at most say, ‘I believe in God,’ or, ‘I think there is a God,’ but now we can say, ‘I know,’ and no criticism nor contradiction can shake that. Such knowledge is not the knowledge won by the understanding alone, but it is acquaintance with a living Person, like the knowledge which loving souls have of each other; and he who has that knowledge as the issue of his own experience may smile at doubts and questionings, and say with the Apostle of Love, ‘We know that we are of God, . . . and we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true.' Then, if we have that knowledge, we shall listen to the same Apostle's commandment, 'Keep yourselves from idols,' even as the issue of Manasseh's knowledge of God was that 'he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the house of the Lord.'

23)2 Chronicles 34:1-13

2 Chronicles

JOSIAH

2Ch. 34:1 - 2Ch. 34:13.

Another boy king, even younger than his grandfather Manasseh had been at his accession, and another reversal of the father's religion! These vibrations from idolatry to Jehovah-worship, at the pleasure of the king, sadly tell how little the people cared whom they worshipped, and how purely a matter of ceremonies and names both their idolatry and their Jehovah-worship were. The religion of the court was the religion of the nation, only idolatry was more congenial than the service of God. How far the child monarch Josiah had a deeper sense of what that service meant we cannot decide, but the little outline sketch of him in 2Ch. 34:2 - 2Ch. 34:3 is at least suggestive of his having it, and may well stand as a fair portrait of early godliness.

A child eight years old, who had been lifted on to the throne of a murdered father, must have had a strong will and a love of goodness to have resisted the corrupting influences of royalty in a land full of idols. Here again we see that, great as may be the power of circumstances, they do not determine character; for it is always open to us either to determine whether we yield to them or resist them. The prevailing idolatry influenced the boy, but it influenced him to hate it with all his heart. So out of the nettle danger we may pluck the flower safety. The men who have smitten down some evil institution have generally been brought up so as to feel its full force.

'He did that which was right in the eyes of Jehovah'-that may mean simply that he worshipped Jehovah by outward ceremonies, but it probably means more; namely, that his life was pure and God-pleasing, or, as we should say, clean and moral, free from the foul vices which solicit a young prince. ‘He walked in the ways of David his father’-not being one of the ‘emancipated’ youths who think it manly to throw off the restraints of their fathers’ faith and morals. He ‘turned not aside to the right hand or to the left’-but marched right onwards on the road that conscience traced out for him, though tempting voices called to him from many a side-alley that seemed to lead to pleasant places. ‘While he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father’-at the critical age of sixteen, when Easterns are older than we, in the flush of early manhood, he awoke to deeper experiences and felt the need for a closer touch of God. A career thus begun will generally prelude a life pure, strenuous, and blessed with a clearer and clearer vision of the God who is always found of them that seek Him. Such a childhood, blossoming into such a boyhood, and flowering in such a manhood, is possible to every child among us. It will ‘still bring forth fruit in old age.’

The two incidents which the passage narrates, the purging of the land and the repair of the Temple, are told in inverted order in 2 Kings, but the order here is probably the more accurate, as dates are given, whereas in 2 Kings, though the purging is related after the Temple restoration, it is not said to have occurred after. But the order is of small consequence. What is important is the fiery energy of Josiah in the work of destruction of the idols. Here, there, everywhere, he flames and consumes. He darts a flash even into the desolate ruins of the Israelitish kingdom, where the idols had survived their devotees and still bewitched the scanty fragments of Israel that remained. The altars of stone were thrown down, the wooden sun-pillars were cut to pieces, the metal images were broken and ground to powder. A clean sweep was made.

A dash of ferocity mingled with contempt appears in Josiah’s scattering the ‘dust’ of the images on the graves of their worshippers, as if he said: ‘There you lie together, pounded idols and dead worshippers, neither able to help the other!’ The same feelings prompted digging up the skeletons of priests and burning the bones on the very altars that they had served, thus defiling the altars and executing judgment on the priests. No doubt there were much violence and a strong strain of the ‘wrath of man’ in all this. Iconoclasts are wont to be ‘violent’; and men without convictions, or who are partisans of what the iconoclasts are rooting out, are horrified at their want of ‘moderation.’ But though violence is always unchristian, indifference to rampant evils is not conspicuously more Christian, and, on the whole, you cannot throttle snakes in a graceful attitude or without using some force to compress the sinuous neck.

The restoration of the Temple comes after the cleansing of the land, in Chronicles, and naturally in the order of events, for the casting out of idols must always precede the building or repairing of the Temple of God. Destructive work is very poor unless it is for the purpose of clearing a space to build the Temple on. Happy the man or the age which is able to do both! Josiah and Joash worked at restoring the Temple in much the same fashion, but Josiah had a priesthood more interested than Joash had.

But we may note one or two points in his restoration. He had put his personal effort into the preparatory extirpation of idols, but he did not need to do so now. He could work this time by deputy. And it is noteworthy that he chose ‘laymen’ to carry out the restoration. Perhaps he knew how Joash had been balked by the knavery of the priests who were diligent in collecting money, but slow in spending it on the Temple. At all events, he delegated the work to three highly-placed officials, the secretary of state, the governor of Jerusalem, and the official historian.

It appears that for some time a collection had been going on for Temple repairs; probably it had been begun six years before, when the ‘purging’ of the land began. It had been carried on by the Levites, and had been contributed to even by ‘the remnant of Israel’ in the northern kingdom, who, in their forlorn weakness, had begun to feel the drawings of ancient brotherhood and the tie of a common worship. This fund was in the keeping of the high priest, and the three commissioners were instructed to require it from him. Here 2 Kings is clearer than our passage, and shows that what the three officials had mainly to do was to get the money from Hilkiah, and to hand it over to the superintendents of the works.

There are two remarkable points in the narrative; one is the observation that ‘the men did the work faithfully,’ which comes in rather enigmatically here, but in 2 Kings is given as the reason why no accounts were kept. Not an example to be imitated, and the sure way to lead subordinates sooner or later to deal unfaithfully; but a pleasant indication of the spirit animating all concerned.

Surely these men worked ‘as ever in the great Taskmaster’s eye.’ That is what makes us work faithfully, whether we have any earthly overseer or audit or no. Another noteworthy matter is that not only were the superintendents of the work-the ‘contractors,’ as we might say-Levites, but so were also the inferior superintendents, or, as we might say, ‘foremen.’

And not only so, but they were those that ‘were skilful with instruments of music.’ What were musicians doing there? Did the building rise

‘with the sound
Of dulcet symphonies and voices sweet?’

May we not gather from this singular notice the great thought that for all rearing of the true Temple, harps of praise are no less necessary than swords or trowels, and that we shall do no right work for God or man unless we do it as with melody in our hearts? Our lives must be full of music if we are to lay even one stone in the Temple.

24)2 Chronicles 34:14-28

2 Chronicles

JOSIAH AND THE NEWLY FOUND LAW

2Ch. 34:14 - 2Ch. 34:18.

About one hundred years separated Hezekiah’s restoration from Josiah’ s. Neither was more than a momentary arrest of the strong tide running in the opposite direction; and Josiah’s was too near the edge of the cataract to last, or to avert the plunge. There is nothing more tragical than the working of the law which often sets the children’s teeth on edge by reason of the fathers’ eating of sour grapes.

I. The first point in this passage is the discovery of the book of the Law.

The book had been lost before it was found. For how long we do not know, but the fact that it had been so carelessly kept is eloquent of the indifference of priests and kings, its appointed guardians. Lawbreakers have a direct interest in getting rid of lawbooks, just as shopkeepers who use short yardsticks and light weights are not anxious the standards should be easily accessible. If we do not make God’s law our guide, we shall wish to put it out of sight, that it may not be our accuser. What more sad or certain sign of evil can there be than that we had rather not ‘hear what God the Lord will speak’?

The straightforward story of our passage gives a most natural explanation of the find. Hilkiah was likely to have had dark corners cleared out in preparation for repairs and in storing the subscriptions, and many a mislaid thing would turn up. If it be possible that the book of the Law should have been neglected [and the religious corruption of the last hundred years makes that only too certain], its discovery in some dusty recess is very intelligible, and would not have been doubted but for the exigencies of a theory. ‘Reading between the lines’ is fascinating, but risky; for the reader is very likely unconsciously to do what Hilkiah is said to have done-namely, to invent what he thinks he finds.

Accepting the narrative as it stands, we may see in it a striking instance of the indestructibleness of God’s Word. His law is imperishable, and its written embodiment seems as if it, too, had a charmed life. When we consider the perils attending the transmission of ancient manuscripts, the necessary scarcity of copies before the invention of printing, the scattering of the Jewish people, it does appear as if a divine hand had guarded the venerable book. How came this strange people, who never kept their Law, to swim through all their troubles, like Caesar with his commentaries between his teeth, bearing aloft and dry, the Word which they obeyed so badly? ‘Write it . . . in a book, that it may be for the time to come for ever and ever.’ The permanence of the written Word, the providence that has watched over it, the romantic history of its preservation through ages of neglect, and the imperishable gift to the world of an objective standard of duty, remaining the same from age to age, are all suggested by this reappearance of the forgotten Law.

It may suggest, too, that honest efforts after reformation are usually rewarded by clearer knowledge of God’s will. If Hilkiah had not been busy in setting wrong things right, he would not have found the book in its dark hiding-place. We are told that the coincidence of the discovery at the nick of time is suspicious. So it is, if you do not believe in Providence. If you do, the coincidence is but one instance of His sending gifts of the right sort at the right moment. It is not the first time nor the last that the attempt to keep God’s law has led to larger knowledge of the law. It is not the first time nor the last that God has sent to His faithful servants an opportune gift. What the world calls accidental coincidence deeper wisdom discerns to be the touch of God’s hand.

Again, the discovery reminds us that the true basis of all religious reform is the Word of God. Josiah had begun to restore the Temple, but he did not know till he heard the Law read how great the task was which he had taken in hand. That recovered book gave impulse and direction to his efforts. The nearest parallel is the rediscovery of the Bible in the sixteenth century, or, if we may take one incident as a symbol of the whole, Luther’s finding the dusty Latin Bible among the neglected convent books. The only reformation for an effete or secularised church is in its return to the Bible. Faded flowers will lift up their heads when plunged in water. The old Bible, discovered and applied anew, must underlie all real renovation of dead or moribund Christianity.

II. The next point here is the effect of the rediscovered Law. Shaphan was closely connected with Josiah, as his office made him a confidant. It is ordinarily taken for granted that he and the other persons named in this lesson formed a little knot of earnest Jehovah worshippers, fully sympathising with the Reformation, and that among them lay the authorship of the book. But we know nothing about them except what is told here and in the parallel in Kings. One of them, Ahikam, was a friend and protector of Jeremiah, and Shaphan the scribe was the father of another of Jeremiah’s friends. They may all have been in accord with the king, or they may not.

At all events, Shaphan took the book to Josiah. We can picture the scene-the deepening awe of both men as the whole extent of the nation’s departure from God became clearer and clearer, the tremulous tones of the reader, and the silent, fixed attention of the listener as the solemn threatenings came from Shaphan's reluctant, pallid lips. There was enough in them to touch a harder heart than Josiah' s. We cannot suppose that, knowing the history of the past, and being sufficiently enlightened to 'seek after the God of David his father,' he did not know in a general way that sin meant sorrow, and national disobedience national death. But we all have the faculty of blunting the cutting edge of truth, especially if it has been familiar, so that some novelty in the manner of its presentation, or even its repetition without novelty sometimes, may turn commonplace and impotent truth into a mighty instrument to shake and melt.

So it seems to have been with Josiah. Whether new or old, the Word found him as it had never done before. The venerable copy from which Shaphan read, the coincidence of its discovery just then, the dishonour done to it for so long, may all have helped the impression. However it arose, it was made. If a man will give God's Word a fair hearing, and be honest with himself, it will bring him to his knees. No man rightly uses God's law who is not convinced by it of his sin, and impelled to that self-abased sorrow of which the rent royal robes were the passionate expression. Josiah was wise when he did not turn his thoughts to other people's sins, but began with his own, even whilst he included others. The first function of the law is to arouse the knowledge of sin, as Paul profoundly teaches. Without that penitent knowledge religion is superficial, and reformation merely external. Unless we 'abhor ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes,' Scripture has not done its work on us, and all our reading of it is in vain. Nor is there any good reason why familiarity with it should weaken its power. But, alas! it too often does. How many of us would stand in awe of God's judgments if we heard them for the first time, but listen to them unmoved, as to thunder without lightning, merely because wo know them so well! That is a reason for attending to them, not for neglecting.

Josiah's sense of sin led him to long for a further word from God; and so he called these attendants named in 2Ch. 34:20, and sent them to 'enquire of the Lord . . . concerning the words of the book.' What more did he wish to know? The words were plain enough, and their application to Israel and him indubitable. Clearly, he could only wish to know whether there was any possibility of averting the judgments, and, if so, what was the means. The awakened conscience instinctively feels that threatenings cannot be God's last words to it, but must have been given that they might not need to be fulfilled. We do not rightly sorrow for sin unless it quickens in us a desire for a word from God to tell us how to escape. The Law prepares for the Gospel, and is incomplete without it. 'The soul that sinneth, it shall die,' cannot be all which a God of pity and love has to say. A faint promise of life lies in the very fact of threatening death, faint indeed, but sufficient to awaken earnest desire for yet another word from the Lord. We rightly use the solemn revelations of God's law when we are driven by them to cry, 'What must I do to be saved?' III. So we come to the last point, the double-edged message of the prophetess. Josiah does not seem to have told his messengers where to go; but they knew, and went straight to a very unlikely person, the wife of an obscure man, only known as his father's son. Where was Jeremiah of Anathoth? Perhaps not in the city at the time. There had been prophetesses in Israel before. Miriam, Deborah, the wife of Isaiah, are instances of 'your daughters' prophesying; and this embassy to Huldah is in full accord with the high position which women held in that state, of which the framework was shaped by God Himself. In Christ Jesus 'there is neither male nor female,' and Judaism approximated much more closely to that ideal than other lands did.

Huldah's message has two parts: one the confirmation of the threatenings of the Law; one the assurance to Josiah of acceptance of his repentance and gracious promise of escape from the coming storm. These two are precisely equivalent to the double aspect of the Gospel, which completes the Law, endorsing its sentence and pointing the way of escape.

Note that the former part addresses Josiah as 'the man that sent you,' but the latter names him. The embassy had probably not disclosed his name, and Huldah at first keeps up the veil, since the personality of the sender had nothing to do with her answer; but when she comes to speak of pardon and God's favour, there must be no vagueness in the destination of the message, and the penitent heart must be tenderly bound up by a word from God straight to itself. The threatenings are general, but each single soul that is sorry for sin may take as its very own the promise of forgiveness. God's great 'Whosoever' is for me as certainly as if my name stood on the page.

The terrible message of the inevitableness of the destruction hanging over Jerusalem is precisely parallel with the burden of all Jeremiah's teaching. It was too late to avert the fall. The external judgments must come now, for the emphasis of the prophecy is in its last words, it 'shall not be quenched.' But that did not mean that repentance was too late to alter the whole character of the punishment, which would be fatherly chastisement if meekly accepted. So, too, Jeremiah taught, when he exhorted submission to the 'Chaldees.' It is never too late to seek mercy, though it may be too late to hope for averting the outward consequences of sin.

As for Josiah, his penitence was accepted, and he was assured that he would be gathered to his fathers. That expression, as is clear from the places where it occurs, is not a synonym for either death or burial, from both of which it is distinguished, but is a dim promise of being united, beyond the grave, with the fathers, who, in some one condition, which we may call a place, are gathered into a restful company, and wander no more as pilgrims and sojourners in this lonely and changeful life.

Josiah died in battle. Was that going to his grave in peace? Surely yes! if, dying, he felt God's presence, and in the darkness saw a great light. He who thus dies, though it be in the thick of battle, and with his heart's blood pouring from an arrow-wound down on the floor of the chariot, dies in peace, and into peace.

25)2 Chronicles 36:11-21

2 Chronicles

THE FALL OF JUDAH

2Ch. 36:11 - 2Ch. 36:21.

Bigness is not greatness, nor littleness smallness. Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Judah was, in his eyes, one of the least important of his many victories, but it is the only one of them which survives in the world's memory and keeps his name as a household word. The Jews were a mere handful, and their country a narrow strip of land between the desert and the sea; but little Judaea, like little Greece, has taught the world. The tragedy of its fall has importance quite disproportioned to its apparent magnitude. Our passage brings together Judah's sin and Judah's punishment, and we shall best gather the lessons of its fall by following the order of the text.

Consider the sin. There is nothing more remarkable than the tone in which the chronicler, like all the Old Testament writers, deals with the national sin. Patriotic historians make it a point of pride and duty to gloss over their country's faults, but these singular narrators paint them as strongly as they can. Their love of their country impels them to 'make known to Israel its transgression and to Judah its sin.' There are tears in their eyes, as who can doubt? But there is no faltering in their voices as they speak. A higher feeling than misguided 'patriotism' moves them. Loyalty to Israel's God forces them to deal honestly with Israel's sin. That is the highest kind of love of country, and might well be commended to loudmouthed 'patriot's in modern lands.

Look at the piled-up clauses of the long indictment of Judah in 2Ch. 36:12 - 2Ch. 36:16. Slow, passionless, unsparing, the catalogue enumerates the whole black list. It is like the long-drawn blast of the angel of judgment's trumpet. Any trace of heated emotion would have weakened the impression. The nation's sin was so crimson as to need no heightening of colour. With like judicial calmness, with like completeness, omitting nothing, does 'the book,' which will one day be opened, set down every man's deeds, and he will be 'judged according to the things that are written in this book.' Some of us will find our page sad reading.

But the points brought out in this indictment are instructive. Judah's idolatry and 'trespass after all the abominations of the heathen' is, of course, prominent, but the spirit which led to their idolatry, rather than the idolatry itself, is dwelt on. Zedekiah's doing 'evil in the sight of the Lord' is regarded as aggravated by his not humbling himself before Jeremiah, and the head and front of his offending is that 'he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart from turning unto the Lord.' Similarly, the people's sin reaches its climax in their 'mocking' and 'scoffing' at the prophets and 'despising' God's words by them. So then, an evil life has its roots in an alienated heart, and the source of all sin is an obstinate self-will. That is the sulphur-spring from which nothing but unwholesome streams can flow, and the greatest of all sins is refusing to hear God’s voice when He speaks to us.

Further, this indictment brings out the patient love of God seeking, in spite of all their deafness, to find a way to the sinners’ ears and hearts. In a bold transference to Him of men’s ways, He is said to have ‘risen early’ to send the prophets. Surely that means earnest effort. The depths of God’s heart are disclosed when we are bidden to think of His compassion as the motive for the prophet’s messages and threatenings. What a wonderful and heart-melting revelation of God’s placableness, wistful hoping against hope, and reluctance to abandon the most indurated sinner, is given in that centuries-long conflict of the patient God with treacherous Israel! That divine charity suffered long and was kind, endured all things and hoped all things.

Consider the punishment. The tragic details of the punishment are enumerated with the same completeness and suppression of emotion as those of the sin. The fact that all these were divine judgments brings the chronicler to the Psalmist’s attitude. ‘I was dumb, I opened not my mouth because Thou didst it.’ Sorrow and pity have their place, but the awed recognition of God’s hand outstretched in righteous retribution must come first. Modern sentimentalists, who are so tenderhearted as to be shocked at the Christian teachings of judgment, might learn a lesson here.

The first point to note is that a time arrives when even God can hope for no amendment and is driven to change His methods. His patience is not exhausted, but man’s obstinacy makes another treatment inevitable. God lavished benefits and pleadings for long years in vain, till He saw that there was ‘no remedy.’ Only then did He, as if reluctantly forced, do ‘His work, His strange work.’ Behold, therefore, the ‘goodness and severity’ of God, goodness in His long delay, severity in the final blow, and learn that His purpose is the same though His methods are opposite.

To the chronicler God is the true Actor in human affairs. Nebuchadnezzar thought of his conquest as won by his own arm. Secular historians treat the fall of Zedekiah as simply the result of the political conditions of the time, and sometimes seem to think that it could not be a divine judgment because it was brought about by natural causes. But this old chronicler sees deeper, and to him, as to us, if we are wise, ‘the history of the world is the judgment of the world.’ The Nebuchadnezzars are God’s axes with which He hews down fruitless trees. They are responsible for their acts, but they are His instruments, and it is His hand that wields them.

The iron band that binds sin and suffering is disclosed in Judah’s fall. We cannot allege that the same close connection between godlessness and national disaster is exemplified now as it was in Israel. Nor can we contend that for individuals suffering is always the fruit of sin. But it is still true that ‘righteousness exalteth a nation,’ and that ‘by the soul only are the nations great,’ in the true sense of the word. To depart from God is always ‘a bitter and an evil thing’ for communities and individuals, however sweet draughts of outward prosperity may for a time mask the bitterness. Not armies nor fleets, not ships, colonies and commerce, not millionaires and trusts, not politicians and diplomatists, but the fear of the Lord and the keeping of His commandments, are the true life of a nation. If Christian men lived up to the ideal set them by Jesus, ‘Ye are the salt of the land,’ and sought more earnestly and wisely to leaven their nation, they would be doing more than any others to guarantee its perpetual prosperity.

The closing words of this chapter, not included in the passage, are significant. They are the first words of the Book of Ezra. Whoever put them here perhaps wished to show a far-off dawn following the stormy sunset. He opens a ‘door of hope’ in ‘the valley of trouble.’ It is an Old Testament version of ‘God hath not cast away His people whom He foreknew.’ It throws a beam of light on the black last page of the chronicle, and reveals that God’s chastisement was in love, that it was meant for discipline, not for destruction, that it was educational, and that the rod was burned when the lesson had been learned. It was learned, for the Captivity cured the nation of hankering after idolatry, and whatever defects it brought back from Babylon, it brought back a passionate abhorrence of all the gods of the nations.

Ezra

1) EZRA 1:1-11
2) EZRA 3:1-13
3) EZRA 4:1-5
4) EZRA 6:14-21

5) EZRA 6:22
6) EZRA 8:22-23
7) EZRA 8:29
8) EZRA 8:31-32

1) Ezra 1:1-11

Ezra

THE EVE OF THE RESTORATION

Ezr. 1:1 - Ezr. 1:11.

Cyrus captured Babylon 538 B.C., and the ‘first year’ here is the first after that event. The predicted seventy years’ captivity had nearly run out, having in part done their work on the exiles. Colours burned in on china are permanent; and the furnace of bondage had, at least, effected this, that it fixed monotheism for ever in the inmost substance of the Jewish people. But the bulk of them seem to have had little of either religious or patriotic enthusiasm, and preferred Babylonia to Judea. We are here told of the beginning of the return of a portion of the exiles-forty-two thousand, in round numbers.

‘The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus.’ That unveils the deepest cause of what fell into place, to the superficial observers, as one among many political events of similar complexion. We find among the inscriptions a cylinder written by order of Cyrus, which shows that he reversed the Babylonian policy of deporting conquered nations. ‘All their peoples,’ says he, in reference to a number of nations of whom he found members in exile in Babylonia, ‘I assembled and restored to their lands and the gods . . . whom Nabonidos . . . had brought into Babylon, I settled in peace in their sanctuaries’ [Sayce, *Fresh Light from the Ancient Monuments*, p. 148]. It was, then, part of a wider movement, which sent back Zerubbabel and his people to Jerusalem, and began the rebuilding of the Temple. No doubt, Cyrus had seen that the old plan simply brought an element of possible rebellion into the midst of the country, and acted on grounds of political prudence.

But our passage digs deeper to find the true cause. Cyrus was God's instrument, and the statesman's insight was the result of God's illumination. The divine causality moves men, when they move themselves. It was not only in the history of the chosen people that God's purpose is wrought out by more or less conscious and willing instruments. The principle laid down by the writer of this book is of universal application, and the true 'philosophy of history' must recognise as underlying all other so-called causes and forces the one uncaused Cause, of whose purposes kings and politicians are the executants, even while they freely act according to their own judgments, and, it may be, in utter unconsciousness of Him. It concerns our tranquillity and hopefulness, in the contemplation of the bewildering maze and often heart-breaking tragedy of mundane affairs, to hold fast by the conviction that God's unseen Hand moves the pieces on the board, and presides over all the complications. The difference between 'sacred' and 'profane' history is not that one is under His direct control, and the other is not. What was true of Cyrus and his policy is as true of England. Would that politicians and all men recognised the fact as clearly as this historian did!

I. Cyrus's proclamation sounds as if he were a Jehovah-worshipper, but it is to be feared that his religion was of a very accommodating kind. It used to be said that, as a Persian, he was a monotheist, and would consequently be in sympathy with the Jews; but the same cylinder already quoted shatters that idea, and shows him to have been a polytheist, ready to worship the gods of Babylon. He there ascribes his conquest to 'Merodach, the great lord,' and distinctly calls himself that god's 'worshipper.' Like other polytheists, he had room in his pantheon for the gods of other nations, and admitted into it the deities of the conquered peoples.

The use of the name 'Jehovah' would, no doubt, be most simply accounted for by the supposition that Cyrus recognised the sole divinity of the God of Israel; but that solution conflicts with all that is known of him, and with his characterisation in Isa. 45:4 as 'not knowing' Jehovah. More probably, his confession of Jehovah as the God of heaven was consistent in his mind with a similar confession as to Bel-Merodach or the supreme god of any other of the conquered nations. There is, however no improbability in the supposition that the prophecies concerning him in Isaiah xlv, may have been brought to his knowledge, and be referred to in the proclamation as the ‘charge’ given to him to build Jehovah’s Temple. But we must not exaggerate the depth or exclusiveness of his belief in the God of the Jews.

Cyrus’s profession of faith, then, is an example of official and skin-deep religion, of which public and individual life afford plentiful instances in all ages and faiths. If we are to take their own word for it, most great conquerors have been very religious men, and have asked a blessing over many a bloody feast. All religions are equally true to cynical politicians, who are ready to join in worshipping ‘Jehovah, Jove, or Lord,’ as may suit their policy. Nor is it only in high places that such loosely worn professions are found. Perhaps there is no region of life in which insincerity, which is often quite unconscious, is so rife as in regard to religious belief. But unless my religion is everything, it is nothing. ‘All in all, or not at all,’ is the requirement of the great Lover of souls. What a winnowing of chaff from wheat there would be, if that test could visibly separate the mass which is gathered on His threshing-floor, the Church!

Cyrus’s belief in Jehovah illustrates the attitude which was natural to a polytheist, and is so difficult for us to enter into. A vague belief in One Supreme, above all other gods, and variously named by different nations, is buried beneath mountains of myths about lesser gods, but sometimes comes to light in many pagan minds. This blind creed, if creed it can be called, is joined with the recognition of deities belonging to each nation, whose worship is to be co-extensive with the race of which they are patrons, and who may be absorbed into the pantheon of a conqueror, just as a vanquished king may be allowed an honourable captivity at the victor’s capital. Thus Cyrus could in a sense worship Jehovah, the God of Israel, without thereby being rebellious to Merodach.

There are people, even among so-called Christians, who try the same immoral and impossible division of what must in its very nature be wholly given to One Supreme. To ‘serve God and mammon’ is demonstrably an absurd attempt. The love and trust and obedience which are worthy of Him must be wholehearted, whole-souled, whole-willed. It is as impossible to love God with part of one’s self as it is for a husband to love his wife with half his heart, and another woman with the rest. To divide love is to slay it.

Cyrus had some kind of belief in Jehovah; but his own words, so wonderfully recovered in the inscription already referred to, proved that he had not listened to the command, 'Him only shalt thou serve.' That command grips us as closely as it did the Jews, and is as truly broken by thousands calling themselves Christians as by any idolaters.

The substance of the proclamation is a permission to return to any one who wished to do so, a sanction of the rebuilding of the Temple, and an order to the native inhabitants to render help in money, goods, and beasts. A further contribution towards the building was suggested as 'a free-will offering.' The return, then, was not to be at the expense of the king, nor was any tax laid on for it; but neighbourly goodwill, born of seventy years of association, was invoked, and, as we find, not in vain. God had given the people favour in the eyes of those who had carried them captive.

II. The long years of residence in Babylonia had weakened the homesickness which the first generation of captives had, no doubt, painfully experienced, and but a small part of them cared to avail themselves of the opportunity of return. One reason is frankly given by Josephus: 'Many remained in Babylon, not wishing to leave their possessions behind them.' 'The heads of the fathers' houses [who may have exercised some sort of government among the captives], the priests and Levites,' made the bulk of the emigrants; but in each class it was only those 'whose spirit God had stirred up' [as he had done Cyrus'] that were devout or patriotic enough to face the wrench of removal and the difficulties of repeopling a wasted land. There was nothing to tempt any others, and the brave little band had need of all their fortitude. But no heart in which the flame of devotion burned, or in which were felt the drawings of that passionate love of the city and soil where God dwelt [which in the best days of the nation was inseparable from devotion], could remain behind. The departing contingent, then, were the best part of the whole; and the lingerers were held back by love of ease, faint-heartedness, love of wealth, and the like ignoble motives.

How many of us have had great opportunities offered for service, which we have let slip in like manner! To have doors opened which we are too lazy, too cowardly, too much afraid of self-denial, to enter, is the tragedy and the crime of many a life. It is easier to live among the low levels of the plain of

Babylon, than to take to the dangers and privations of the weary tramp across the desert. The ruins of Jerusalem are a much less comfortable abode than the well-furnished houses which have to be left. Prudence says, ‘Be content where you are, and let other people take the trouble of such mad schemes as rebuilding the Temple.’ A thousand excuses sing in our ears, and we let the moment in which alone some noble resolve is possible slide past us, and the rest of life is empty of another such. Neglected opportunities, unobeyed calls to high deeds, we all have in our lives. The saddest of all words is, ‘It might have been.’ How much wiser, happier, nobler, were the daring souls that rose to the occasion, and flung ease and wealth and companionship behind them, because they heard the divine command couched in the royal permission, and humbly answered, ‘Here am I; send me’!

III. The third point in the passage is singular-the inventory of the Temple vessels returned by Cyrus. As to its particulars, we need only note that Sheshbazzar is the same as Zerubbabel; that the exact translation of some of the names of the vessels is doubtful; and that the numbers given under each head do not correspond with the sum total, the discrepancy indicating error somewhere in the numbers.

But is not this dry enumeration a strange item to come in the forefront of the narrative of such an event? We might have expected some kind of production of the enthusiasm of the returning exiles, some account of how they were sent on their journey, something which we should have felt worthier of the occasion than a list of bowls and nine-and-twenty knives. But it is of a piece with the whole of the first part of this Book of Ezra, which is mostly taken up with a similar catalogue of the members of the expedition. The list here indicates the pride and joy with which the long hidden and often desecrated vessels were received. We can see the priests and Levites gazing at them as they were brought forth, their hearts, and perhaps their eyes, filling with sacred memories. The Lord had ‘turned again the captivity of Zion,’ and these sacred vessels lay there, glittering before them, to assure them that they were not as ‘them that dream.’ Small things become great when they are the witnesses of a great thing.

We must remember, too, how strong a hold the externals of worship had on the devout Jew. His faith was much more tied to form than ours ought to be, and the restoration of the sacrificial implements as a pledge of the re-establishment of the Temple worship would seem the beginning of a new epoch of closer relation to Jehovah. It is almost within the lifetime of living men that all Scotland was thrilled with emotion by the discovery, in a neglected chamber, of a chest in which lay, forgotten, the crown and sceptre of the Stuarts. A like wave of feeling passed over the exiles as they had given back to their custody these Temple vessels. Sacreder ones are given into our hands, to carry across a more dangerous desert. Let us hear the charge, ‘Be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord,’ and see that we carry them, untarnished and unlost, to ‘the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.’

2) Ezra 3:1-13

Ezra

ALTAR AND TEMPLE

Ezr. 3:1 - Ezr. 3:13.

What an opportunity of ‘picturesque’ writing the author of this book has missed by his silence about the incidents of the march across the dreary levels from Babylon to the verge of Syria! But the very silence is eloquent. It reveals the purpose of the book, which is to tell of the re-establishment of the Temple and its worship. No doubt the tone of the whole is somewhat prosaic, and indicative of an age in which the externals of worship bulked largely; but still the central point of the narrative was really the centre-point of the events. The austere simplicity of biblical history shows the real points of importance better than more artistic elaboration would do.

This passage has two main incidents-the renewal of the sacrifices, and the beginning of rebuilding the Temple.

The date given in Ezr. 2:1 is significant. The first day of the seventh month was the commencement of the great festival of tabernacles, the most joyous feast of the year, crowded with reminiscences from the remote antiquity of the Exodus, and from the dedication of Solomon’s Temple. How long had passed since Cyrus’ decree had been issued we do not know, nor whether his ‘first year’ was reckoned by the same chronology as the Jewish year, of which we here arrive at the seventh month. But the journey across the desert must have taken some months, and the previous preparations could not have been suddenly got through, so that there can have been but a short time between the arrival in Judea and the gathering together ‘as one man to Jerusalem.’

There was barely interval enough for the returning exiles to take possession of their ancestral fields before they were called to leave them unguarded and hasten to the desolate city. Surely their glad and unanimous obedience to the summons, or, as it may even have been, their spontaneous assemblage unsummoned, is no small token of their ardour of devotion, even if they were somewhat slavishly tied to externals. It would take a good deal to draw a band of new settlers in our days to leave their lots and set to putting up a church before they had built themselves houses.

The leaders of the band of returned exiles demand a brief notice. They are Jeshua, or Joshua, and Zerubbabel. In Ezr. 3:2 the ecclesiastical dignitary comes first, but in Ezr. 3:8 the civil. Similarly in Ezr. 2:2, Zerubbabel precedes Jeshua. In Haggai, the priest is pre-eminent; in Zechariah the prince. The truth seems to be that each was supreme in his own department, and that they understood each other cordially, or, Zechariah says, ‘the counsel of peace’ was ‘between them both.’ It is sometimes bad for the people when priests and rulers lay their heads together; but it is even worse when they pull different ways, and subjects are torn in two by conflicting obligations.

Jeshua was the grandson of Seraiah, the unfortunate high-priest whose eyes Nebuchadnezzar put out after the fall of Jerusalem. His son Jozadak succeeded to the dignity, though there could be no sacrifices in Babylon, and after him his son Jeshua. He cannot have been a young man at the date of the return; but age had not dimmed his enthusiasm, and the high-priest was where he ought to have been, in the forefront of the returning exiles. His name recalls the other Joshua, likewise a leader from captivity and the desert; and, if we appreciate the significance attached to names in Scripture, we shall scarcely suppose it accidental that these two, who had similar work to do, bore the same name as the solitary third, of whom they were pale shadows, the greater Joshua, who brings His people from bondage into His own land of peace, and builds the Temple.

Zerubbabel [‘Sown in Babylon’] belonged to a collateral branch of the royal family. The direct Davidic line through Solomon died with the wretched Zedekiah and Jeconiah, but the descendants of another son of David’ s, Nathan, still survived. Their representative was one Salathiel, who, on the failure of the direct line, was regarded as the ‘son of Jeconiah’ [1Ch. 3:17]. He seems to have had no son, and Zerubbabel, who was really his nephew [1Ch. 3:19], was legally adopted as his son. In this makeshift fashion, some shadow of the ancient royalty still presided over the restored people. We see Zerubbabel better in Haggai and Zechariah than in Ezra, and can discern the outline of a strong, bold, prompt nature. He had a hard task, and he did it like a man. Patient, yet vigorous, glowing with enthusiasm, yet clear-eyed, self-forgetful, and brave, he has had scant justice done him, and ought to be a very much more familiar and honoured figure than he is. ‘Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain.’ Great mountains only become plains before men of strong wills and fixed faith.

There is something very pathetic in the picture of the assembled people groping amid the ruins on the Temple hill, to find ‘the bases,’ the half-obliterated outlines, of the foundations of the old altar of burnt offerings. What memories of Araunah’s threshing-floor, and of the hovering angel of destruction, and of the glories of Solomon’s dedication, and of the long centuries during which the column of smoke had gone up continually from that spot, and of the tragical day when the fire was quenched, and of the fifty years of extinction, must have filled their hearts! What a conflict of gladness and sorrow must have troubled their spirits as the flame again shot upwards from the hearth of God, cold for so long!

But the reason for their so quickly rearing the altar is noteworthy. It was because ‘fear was upon them because of the people of the countries.’ The state of the Holy Land at the return must be clearly comprehended. Samaria and the central district were in the hands of bitter enemies. Across Jordan in the east, down on the Philistine plain in the west, and in the south where

Edom bore sway, eager enemies sulkily watched the small beginnings of a movement which they were interested in thwarting. There was only the territory of Judah and Benjamin left free for the exiles, and they had reason for their fears; for their neighbours knew that if restitution was to be the order of the day, they would have to disgorge a good deal. What was the defence against such foes which these frightened men thought most impregnable? That altar!

No doubt, much superstition mingled with their religion. Haggai leaves us under no illusions as to their moral and spiritual condition. They were no patterns of devoutness or of morality. But still, what they did carries an eternal truth; and they were reverting to the original terms of Israel’s tenure of their land when they acted on the conviction that their worship of Jehovah according to His commandment was their surest way of finding shelter from all their enemies. There are differences plain enough between their condition and ours; but it is as true for us as ever it was for them, that our safety is in God, and that, if we want to find shelter from impending dangers, we shall be wiser to betake ourselves to the altar and sit suppliant there than to make defences for ourselves. The ruined Jerusalem was better guarded by that altar than if its fallen walls had been rebuilt.

The whole ritual was restored, as the narrative tells with obvious satisfaction in the enumeration. To us this punctilious attention to the minutiae of sacrificial worship sounds trivial. But we equally err if we try to bring such externalities into the worship of the Christian Church, and if we are blind to their worth at an earlier stage.

There cannot be a temple without an altar, but there may be an altar without a temple. God meets men at the place of sacrifice, even though there be no house for His name. The order of events here teaches us what is essential for communion with God. It is the altar. Sacrifice laid there is accepted, whether it stand on a bare hill-top, or have round it the courts of the Lord’s house.

The second part of the passage narrates the laying of the foundations of the Temple. There had been contracts entered into with masons and carpenters, and arrangements made with the Phoenicians for timber, as soon as the exiles had returned; but of course some time elapsed before the stone and timber were sufficient to make a beginning with. Note in Ezr. 3:7 the reference to Cyrus' grant as enabling the people to get these stores together. Whether the whole preparations, or only the transport of cedar wood, is intended to be traced to the influence of that decree, there seems to be a tacit contrast, in the writer's mind, with the glorious days when no heathen king had to be consulted, and Hiram and Solomon worked together like brothers. Now, so fallen are we, that Tyre and Sidon will not look at us unless we bring Cyru's rescript in our hands!

If the 'years' in Ezr. 3:1 and Ezr. 3:8 are calculated from the same beginning, some seven months were spent in preparation, and then the foundation was laid. Two things are noted-the humble attempt at making some kind of a display on the occasion, and the conflict of feeling in the onlookers. They had managed to get some copies of the prescribed vestments; and the narrator emphasises the fact that the priests were 'in their apparel,' and that the Levites had cymbals, so that some approach to the pomp of Solomon's dedication was possible. They did their best to adhere to the ancient prescriptions, and it was no mere narrow love of ritual that influenced them. However we may breathe a freer air of worship, we cannot but sympathise with that earnest attempt to do everything 'according to the order of David king of Israel.' Not only punctiliousness as to ritual, but the magnetism of glorious memories, prescribed the reproduction of that past. Rites long proscribed become very sacred, and the downtrodden successors of mighty men will cling with firm grasp to what the greater fathers did.

The ancient strain which still rings from Christian lips, and bids fair to be as eternal as the mercies which it hymns, rose with strange pathos from the lips of the crowd on the desolate Temple mountain, ringed about by the waste solitudes of the city: 'For He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever toward Israel.' It needed some faith to sing that song then, even with the glow of return upon them. What of all the weary years? What of the empty homesteads, and the surrounding enemies, and the brethren still in Babylon? No doubt some at least of the rejoicing multitude had learned what the captivity was meant to teach, and had come to bless God, both for the long years of exile, which had burned away much dross, and for the incomplete work of restoration, surrounded though they were with foes, and little as was their strength to fight. The trustful heart finds occasion for unmingled praise in the most mingled cup of joy and sorrow.

There can have been very few in that crowd who had seen the former Temple, and their memories of its splendour must have been very dim. But partly remembrance and partly hearsay made the contrast of the past glories and the present poverty painful. Hence that pathetic and profoundly significant incident of the blended shouts of the young and tears of the old. One can fancy that each sound jarred on the ears of those who uttered the other. But each was wholly natural to the years of the two classes. Sad memories gather, like evening mists, round aged lives, and the temptation of the old is unduly to exalt the past, and unduly to depreciate the present. Welcoming shouts for the new befit young lips, and they care little about the ruins that have to be carted off the ground for the foundations of the temple which they are to have a hand in building. However imperfect, it is better to them than the old house where the fathers worshipped.

But each class should try to understand the other’s feelings. The friends of the old should not give a churlish welcome to the new, nor those of the new forget the old. It is hard to blend the two, either in individual life or in a wider sphere of thought or act. The seniors think the juniors revolutionary and irreverent; the juniors think the seniors fossils. It is possible to unite the shout of joy and the weeping. Unless a spirit of reverent regard for the past presides over the progressive movements of this or any day, they will not lay a solid foundation for the temple of the future. We want the old and the young to work side by side, if the work is to last and the sanctuary is to be ample enough to embrace all shades of character and tendencies of thought. If either the grey beards of Solomon’s court or the hot heads of Rehoboam’s get the reins in their hands, they will upset the chariot. That mingled sound of weeping and joy from the Temple hill tells a more excellent way.

3) Ezra 4:1-5

Ezra

BUILDING IN TROUBLOUS TIMES

Ezr. 4:1 - Ezr. 4:5.

Opposition began as soon as the foundations were laid, as is usually the case with all great attempts to build God's house. It came from the Samaritans, the mingled people who were partly descendants of the ancient remnant of the northern kingdom, left behind after the removal by deportation of the bulk of its population, and partly the descendants of successive layers of immigrants, planted in the empty territory by successive Assyrian and Babylonian kings. Esar-haddon was the first who had sent colonists, about one hundred and thirty years before the return. The writer calls the Samaritans 'the adversaries,' though they began by offers of friendship and alliance. The name implies that these offers were perfidious, and a move in the struggle.

One can easily understand that the Samaritans looked with suspicion on the new arrivals, the ancient possessors of the land, coming under the auspices of the new dynasty, and likely to interfere with their position if not reduced to inferiority or neutralised somehow. The proposal to unite in building the Temple was a political move; for, in old-world ideas, co-operation in Temple-building was incorporation in national unity. The calculation, no doubt, was that if the returning exiles could be united with the much more numerous Samaritans, they would soon be absorbed in them. The only chance for the smaller body was to keep itself apart, and to run the risk of its isolation.

The insincere request was based on an untruth, for the Samaritans did not worship Jehovah as the Jews, but along with their own gods [2Ki. 17:25 - 2Ki. 17:41]. To divide His dominion with others was to dethrone Him altogether. It therefore became an act of faithfulness to Jehovah to reject the entangling alliance. To have accepted it would have been tantamount to frustrating the very purpose of the return, and consenting to be muzzled about the sin of idolatry. But the chief lesson which exile had burned in on the Jewish mind was a loathing of idolatry, which is in remarkable contrast to the inclination to it that had marked their previous history. So one answer only was possible, and it was given with unwelcome plainness of speech, which might have been more courteous, and not less firm. It flatly denied any common ground; it claimed exclusive relation to 'our God,' which meant, ‘not yours’; it underscored the claim by reiterating that Jehovah was the ‘God of Israel’; it put forward the decree of Cyrus, as leaving no option but to confine the builders to the people whom it had empowered to build.

Now, it is easy to represent this as a piece of impolitic narrowness, and to say that its surly bigotry was rightly punished by the evils that it brought down on the returning exiles. The temper of much flaccid Christianity at present delights to expand in a lazy and foolish ‘liberality,’ which will welcome anybody to come and take a hand at the building, and accepts any profession of unity in worship. But there is no surer way of taking the earnestness out of Christian work and workers than drafting into it a mass of non-Christians, whatever their motives may be. Cold water poured into a boiling pot will soon stop its bubbling, and bring down its temperature. The churches are clogged and impeded, and their whole tone lowered and chilled, by a mass of worldly men and women. Nothing is gained, and much is in danger of being lost, by obliterating the lines between the church and the world. The Jew who thought little of the difference between the Samaritan worship with its polytheism, and his own monotheism, was in peril of dropping to the Samaritan level. The Samaritan who was accepted as a true worshipper of Jehovah, though he had a bevy of other gods in addition, would have been confirmed in his belief that the differences were unimportant. So both would have been harmed by what called itself ‘liberality,’ and was in reality indifference.

No doubt, Zerubbabel had counted the cost of faithfulness, and he soon had to pay it. The would-be friends threw off the mask, and, as they could not hinder by pretending to help, took a plainer way to stop progress. All the weapons that Eastern subtlety and intrigue could use were persistently employed to ‘weaken the hands’ of the builders, and the most potent of all methods, bribery to Persian officials, was freely used. The opponents triumphed, and the little community began to taste the bitterness of high hopes disappointed and noble enterprises frustrated. How differently things had turned out from the expectations with which the company had set forth from Babylon! The rough awakening to realities disillusions us all when we come to turn dreams into facts. The beginning of laying the Temple foundations is put in 536 B.C.; the first year of Darius was 522. How soon after the commencement of the work the Samaritan tricks succeeded we do not know, but it must have been some time before the death of Cyrus in 529. For weary years then the sanguine band had to wait idly, and no doubt enthusiasm died out: they had enough to do in keeping themselves alive, and in holding their own amidst enemies. They needed, as we all do, patience, and a willingness to wait for God's own time to fulfil His own promise.

4) Ezra 6:14-21

Ezra

THE NEW TEMPLE AND ITS WORSHIP

Ezr. 6:14 - Ezr. 6:22.

There are three events recorded in this passage,-the completion of the Temple, its dedication, and the keeping of the passover some weeks thereafter. Four years intervene between the resumption of building and its successful finish, much of which time had been occupied by the interference of the Persian governor, which compelled a reference to Darius, and resulted in his confirmation of Cyrus' charter. The king's stringent orders silenced opposition, and seem to have been loyally, however unwillingly, obeyed. About twenty-three years passed between the return of the exiles and the completion of the Temple.

I. The prosperous close of the long task [Ezr. 6:14 - Ezr. 6:15]. The narrative enumerates three points in reference to the completion of the Temple which are very significant, and, taken together, set forth the stimulus and law and helps of work for God.

It is expressive of deep truth that first in order is named, as the cause of success, 'the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah.' 'Practical men,' no doubt, then as always, set little store by the two prophets' fiery words, and thought that a couple of masons would have done more for the building than they did. The contempt for 'ideas' is the mark of shallow and vulgar minds. Nothing is more practical than principles and motives which underlie and inform work, and these two prophets did more for building the Temple by their words than an army of labourers with their hands. 'There are diversities of operations,’ and it is not given to every man to handle a trowel; but no good work will be prosperously accomplished unless there be engaged in it prophets who rouse and rebuke and hearten, and toilers who by their words are encouraged and saved from forgetting the sacred motives and great ends of their work in the monotony and multiplicity of details.

Still more important is the next point mentioned. The work was done ‘according to the commandment of the God of Israel.’ There is peculiar beauty and pathos in that name, which is common in Ezra. It speaks of the sense of unity in the nation, though but a fragment of it had come back. There was still an Israel, after all the dreary years, and in spite of present separation. God was still its God, though He had hidden His face for so long. An inextinguishable faith, wistful but assured, in His unalterable promise, throbs in that name, so little warranted by a superficial view of circumstances, but so amply vindicated by a deeper insight. His ‘commandment’ is at once the warrant and the standard for the work of building. In His service we are to be sure that He bids, and then to carry out His will whoever opposes.

We are to make certain that our building is ‘according to the pattern showed in the mount,’ and, if so, to stick to it in every point. There is no room for more than one architect in rearing the temple. The working drawings must come from Him. We are only His workmen. And though we may know no more of the general plan of the structure than the day-labourer who carries a hod does, we must be sure that we have His orders for our little bit of work, and then we may be at rest even while we toil. They who build according to His commandment build for eternity, and their work shall stand the trial by fire. That motive turns what without it were but ‘wood, hay, stubble,’ into ‘gold and silver and precious stones.’

The last point is that the work was done according to the commandment of the heathen kings. We need not discuss the chronological difficulty arising from the mention of Artaxerxes here. The only king of that name who can be meant reigned fifty years after the events here narrated. The mention of him here has been explained by ‘the consideration that he contributed to the maintenance, though not to the building, of the Temple.’ Whatever is the solution, the intention of the mention of the names of the friendly monarchs is plain. ‘The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord as the watercourses; He turneth it whithersoever He will.’ The wonderful providence, surpassing all hopes, which gave the people ‘favour in the eyes of them that carried them captive,’ animates the writer’s thankfulness, while he recounts that miracle that the commandment of God was re-echoed by such lips. The repetition of the word in both clauses underscores, as it were, the remarkable concurrence.

II. The dedication of the Temple [Ezr. 6:16 - Ezr. 6:18]. How long the dedication was after the completion is not specified. The month Adar was the last of the Jewish year, and corresponded nearly with our March. Probably the ceremonial of dedication followed immediately on the completion of the building. Probably few, if any, of the aged men, who had wept at the founding, survived to see the completion of the Temple. A new generation had no such sad contrasts of present lowliness and former glory to shade their gladness. So many dangers surmounted, so many long years of toil interrupted and hope deferred, gave keener edge to joy in the fair result of them all.

We may cherish the expectation that our long tasks, and often disappointments, will have like ending if they have been met and done in like spirit, having been stimulated by prophets and commanded by God. It is not wholesome nor grateful to depreciate present blessings by contrasting them with vanished good. Let us take what God gives to-day, and not embitter it by remembering yesterday with vain regret. There is a remembrance of the former more splendid Temple in the name of the new one, which is thrice repeated in the passage,-’this house.’ But that phrase expresses gratitude quite as much as, or more than, regret. The former house is gone, but there is still ‘this house,’ and it is as truly God’s as the other was. Let us grasp the blessings we have, and be sure that in them is continued the substance of those we have lost.

The offerings were poor, if compared with Solomon’s ‘two and twenty thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep’ [1Ki. 8:63], and no doubt the despisers of the ‘day of small things,’ whom Zechariah had rebuked, would be at their depreciating work again. But ‘if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.' The thankfulness of the offerers, not the number of their bullocks and rams, made the sacrifice well pleasing. But it would not have been so if the exiles' resources had been equal to the great King' s. How many cattle had they in their stalls at home, not how many they brought to the Temple, was the important question. The man who says, 'Oh! God accepts small offerings,' and gives a mite while he keeps talents, might as well keep his mite too; for certainly God will not have it.

A significant part of the offerings was the 'twelve he-goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.' These spoke of the same confidence as we have already noticed as being expressed by the designation of 'the God of Israel.' Possibly scattered members of all the tribes had come back, and so there was a kind of skeleton framework of the nation present at the dedication; but, whether that be so or not, that handful of people was not Israel. Thousands of their brethren still lingered in exile, and the hope of their return must have been faint. Yet God's promise remained, and Israel was immortal. The tribes were still twelve, and the sacrifices were still theirs. A thrill of emotion must have touched many hearts as the twelve goats were led up to the altar. So an Englishman feels as he looks at the crosses on the Union Jack.

But there was more than patriotism in that sacrifice. It witnessed to unshaken faith. And there was still more expressed in it than the offerers dreamed; for it prophesied of that transformation of the national into the spiritual Israel, in virtue of which the promises remain true, and are inherited by the Church of Christ in all lands.

The re-establishment of the Temple worship with the appointment of priests and Levites, according to the ancient ordinance, naturally followed on the dedication.

III. The celebration of the Passover [Ezr. 6:19 - Ezr. 6:22]. It took place on the fourteenth day of the first month, and probably, therefore, very soon after the dedication. They 'kept the feast, . . . for the priests and Levites were purified together.' The zeal of the sacerdotal class in attending to the prescriptions for ceremonial purity made it possible that the feast should be observed. How much of real devotion, and how much of mere eagerness to secure their official position, mingled with this zeal, cannot be determined.

Probably there was a touch of both. Scrupulous observance of ritual is easy religion, especially if one's position is improved by it. But the connection pointed out by the writer is capable of wide applications. The true purity and earnestness of preachers and teachers of all degrees has much to do with their hearers' and scholars' participation in the blessings of the Gospel. If priests are not pure, they cannot kill the passover. Earnest teachers make earnest scholars. Foul hands cannot dispense the bread of life.

There is a slight deviation from the law in the ritual as here stated, since it was prescribed that each householder should kill the passover lamb for his house. But from the time of Hezekiah the Levites seem to have done it for the congregation [2Ch. 30:17], and afterwards for the priests also [2Ch. 35:11, 2Ch. 35:14].

Ezr. 6:21 tells that not only the returned exiles, but also 'all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel,' ate the passover. It may be questioned whether these latter were Israelites, the descendants of the residue who had not been deported, but who had fallen into idolatry during the exile, or heathens of the mixed populations who had been settled in the vacant country. The emphasis put on their turning to Israel and Israel's God seems to favour the latter supposition. But in any case, the fact presents us with an illustration of the proper effect of the presence anywhere of a company of God's true worshippers. If we purify ourselves, and keep the feast of the true passover with joy as well as purity, we shall not want for outsiders who will separate themselves from the more subtle and not less dangerous idolatries of modern life, to seek the Lord God of Israel. If His Israel is what it ought to be, it will attract. A bit of scrap-iron in contact with a magnet is a magnet. They who live in touch with Him who said, 'I will draw all men unto Me' will share His attractive power in the measure of their union with Him.

The week after the passover feast was, according to the ritual, observed as the feast of unleavened bread. The narrative touches lightly on the ceremonial, and dwells in conclusion on the joy of the worshippers and its cause. They do well to be glad whom God makes glad. All other joy bears in it the seeds of death. It is, in one aspect, the end of God's dealings, that we should be glad in Him. Wise men will not regard that as a less noble end than making us pure; in fact, the two are united. The ‘blessed God’ is glad in our gladness when it is His gladness.

Notice the exulting wonder with which God’s miracle of mercy is reported in its source and its glorious result. The heart of the king was turned to them, and no power but God’s could have done that. The issue of that divine intervention was the completed Temple, in which once more the God of that Israel which He had so marvellously restored dwelt in the midst of His people.

5) Ezra 6:22

Ezra

THE NEW TEMPLE AND ITS WORSHIP

GOD THE JOY-BRINGER

Ezr. 6:22.

Twenty years of hard work and many disappointments and dangers had at last, for the Israelites returning from the captivity, been crowned by the completion of the Temple. It was a poor affair as compared with the magnificent house that had stood upon Zion; and so some of them ‘despised the day of small things.’ They were ringed about by enemies; they were feeble in themselves; there was a great deal to darken their prospects and to sadden their hearts; and yet, when memories of the ancient days came back, and once more they saw the sacrificial smoke rising from the long cold and ruined altar, they rejoiced in God, and they kept the passover amid the ruins, as my text tells us, for the ‘seven days’ of the statutory period ‘with joy,’ because, in spite of all, ‘the Lord had made them joyful.’

I think if we take this simple saying we get two or three thoughts, not altogether irrelevant to universal experience, about the true and the counterfeit gladnesses possible to us all.

I. Look at that great and wonderful thought-God the joy-maker.

We do not often realise how glad God is when we are glad, and how worthy an object of much that He does is simply the prosperity and the blessedness of human hearts. The poorest creature that lives has a right to ask from God the satisfaction of its instincts, and every man has a claim on God-because he is God’s creature-to make him glad. God honours all cheques legitimately drawn on Him, and answers all claims, and regards Himself as occupied in a manner entirely congruous with His magnificence and His infinitude, when He stoops to put some kind of vibrating gladness into the wings of a gnat that dances for an hour in the sunshine, and into the heart of a man that lives his time for only a very little longer.

God is the Joy-maker. There are far more magnificent and sublime thoughts about Him than that; but I do not know that there is any that ought to come nearer to our hearts, and to silence more of our grumblings and of our distrust, than the belief that the gladness of His children is an end contemplated by Him in all that He does. Whether we think it of small importance or no, He does not think it so, that all mankind should rejoice in Himself. And this is a marvellous revelation to break out of the very heart of that comparatively hard system of ancient Judaism. ‘The Lord hath made them joyful.’

Turning away from the immediate connection of these words, let me remind you of the great outlines of the divine provision for gladdening men’s hearts. I was going to say that God had only one way of making us glad; and perhaps that is in the deepest sense true. That way is by putting Himself into us. He gives us Himself to make us glad; for nothing else will do it-or, at least, though there may be many subordinate sources of joy, if there be in the innermost shrine of our spirits an empty place, where the Shekinah ought to shine, no other joys will suffice to settle and to rejoice the soul. The secret of all true human well-being is close communion with God; and when He looks at the poorest of us, desiring to make us blessed, He can but say, ‘I will give Myself to that poor man; to that ignorant creature; to that wayward and prodigal child; to that harlot in her corruption; to that worldling in his narrow godlessness; I will give Myself, if they will have Me.’ And thus, and only thus, does He make us truly, perfectly, and for ever glad.

Besides that, or rather as a sequel and consequence of that, there come such other God-given blessings as these to which my text refers. What were the outward reasons for the restored exiles’ gladness? ‘The Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king . . . unto them to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.’

So, then, He pours into men’s lives by His providences the secondary and lower gifts which men, according to changing circumstances, need; and He also satisfies the permanent physical necessities of all orders of beings to whom He has given life. He gives Himself for the spirit; He gives whatever is contributory to any kind of gladness; and if we are wise we shall trace all to Him. He is the Joy-giver; and that man has not yet understood either the sanctity of life or the full sweetness of its sweetest things unless he sees, written over every one of them, the name of God, their giver. Your common mercies are His love tokens, and they all come to us, just as the gifts of parents to their children do, with this on the fly-leaf, ‘With a father’s love.’ Whatever comes to God’s child with that inscription, surely it ought to kindle a thrill of gladness. That ‘the king of Assyria’s heart is turned’; shall we thank the king of Assyria? Yes and No! For it was God who ‘turned’ it. Oh! to carry the quiet confidence of that thought into all our daily life, and see His name written upon everything that contributes to make us blessed. God is the true Source and Maker of every joy.

And by the side of that we must put this other thought-there are sources of joy with which He has nothing to do. There are people who are joyful-and there are some of them listening now-not because God made them joyful, but because ‘the world, the devil, and the flesh’ have given them ghastly caricatures of the true gladness. And these rival sources of blessedness, the existence of which my text suggests, are the enemies of all that is good and noble in us and in our joys. God made these men joyful, and so their gladness was wholesome.

II. Note the consequent obligation and wisdom of taking our God-given joys.

‘They kept the feast with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful.’ Then it is our obligation to accept and use what it is His blessedness to give. Be sure you take Him. When He is waiting to pour all His love into your heart, and all His sweetness into your sensitive spirit, to calm your anxieties, to deepen your blessedness, to strengthen everything that is good in you, to be to you a stay in the midst of crumbling prosperity, and a Light in the midst of gathering darkness, be sure that you take the joy that waits your acceptance. Do not let it be said that, when the Lord Christ has come down from heaven, and lived upon earth, and gone back to heaven, and sent His Spirit to dwell in you, you lock the door against the entrance of the joy-bringing Messenger, and are sad and restless and discontented because you have shut out the God who desires to abide in your hearts.

‘They kept the feast with joy, because the Lord had made them joyful.’ Oh! how many Christian men and women there are, who in the midst of the abundant and wonderful provision for continual cheerfulness and buoyancy of spirit given to them in the promises of the Gospel, in the gifts of Christ, in the indwelling of the Divine Spirit, do yet go through life creeping and sad, burdened and anxious, perplexed and at their wits’ end, just because they will not have the God who yearns to come to them, or at least will not have Him in anything like the fullness and the completeness in which He desires to bestow Himself. If God gives, surely we are bound to receive. It is an obligation upon Christian men and women, which they do not sufficiently realise, to be glad, and it is a commandment needing to be reiterated. ‘Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, rejoice.’ Would that Christian experience in this generation was more alive to the obligation and the blessedness of perpetual joy arising from perpetual communion with Him.

Further, another obligation is to recognise Him in all common mercies, because He is at the back of them all. Let them always proclaim Him to us. Oh! if we did not go through the world blinded to the real Power that underlies all its motions, we should feel that everything was vocal to us of the loving-kindness of our Father in heaven. Link Him, dear friend! with everything that makes your heart glad; with everything pleasant that comes to you. There is nothing good or sweet but it flows from Him. There is no common delight of flesh or sense, of sight or taste or smell, no little enjoyment that makes the moment pass more brightly, no drop of oil that eases the friction of the wheels of life, but it may be elevated into greatness and nobleness, and will then first be understood in its true significance, if it is connected with Him. God does not desire to be put away high up on a pedestal above our lives, as if He regulated the great things and the trifles regulated themselves; but He seeks to come, as air into the lungs, into every particle of the mass of life, and to fill it all with His own purifying presence.

Recognise Him in common joys. If, when we sit down to partake of them, we would say to ourselves, ‘The Lord has made us joyful,’ all our home delights, all our social pleasures, all our intellectual and all our sensuous ones-rest and food and drink and all other goods for the body-they would all be felt to be great, as they indeed are. Enjoyed in Him, the smallest is great;

without Him, the greatest is small. ‘The Lord made them joyful’; and what is large enough for Him to give ought not to be too small for us to receive with recognition of His hand.

Another piece of wholesome counsel in this matter is-Be sure that you use the joys which God does give. Many good people seem to think that it is somehow devout and becoming to pitch most of their songs in a minor key, and to be habitually talking about trials and disappointments, and ‘a desert land,’ and ‘Brief life is here our portion,’ and so on, and so on. There are two ways in which you can look at the world and at everything that befalls you. There is enough in everybody’s life to make him sad if he sulkily selects these things to dwell upon. There is enough in everybody’s life to make him continually glad if he wisely picks out these to think about. It depends altogether on the angle at which you look at your life what you see in it. For instance, you know how children do when they get a bit of a willow wand into their possession. They cut off rings of bark, and get the switch alternately white and black, white and black, and so on right away to the tip. Whether will you look at the white rings or the black ones? They are both there. But if you rightly look at the black you will find out that there is white below it, and it only needs a very little stripping off of a film to make it into white too. Or, to put it into simpler words, no Christian man has the right to regard anything that God’s Providence brings to him as such unmingled evil that it ought to make him sad. We are bound to ‘rejoice in the Lord always.’

I know how hard it is, but sure am I that it is possible for a man, if he keeps near Jesus Christ, to reproduce Paul’s paradox of being ‘sorrowful yet always rejoicing,’ and even in the midst of darkness and losses and sorrows and blighted hopes and disappointed aims to rejoice in the Lord, and to ‘keep the feast with gladness, because the Lord has made him joyful.’ Nor do we discharge our duty, unless side by side with the sorrow which is legitimate, which is blessed, strengthening, purifying, calming, moderating, there is also ‘joy unspeakable and full of glory.’

Again, be sure that you limit your delights to God-made joys. Too many of us have what parts of our nature recognise as satisfaction, and are glad to have, apart from Him. There is nothing sadder than the joys that come into a life, and do not come from God. Oh! let us see to it that we do not fill our cisterns with poisonous sewage when God is waiting to fill them with the pure ‘river of the water of life.’ Do not let us draw our blessedness from the world and its evils. Does my joy help me to come near to God? Does it interfere with my communion with Him? Does it aid me in the consecration of myself? Does my conscience go with it when my conscience is most awake? Do I recognise Him as the Giver of the thing that is so blessed? If we can say Yes! to these questions, we can venture to believe that our blessedness comes from God, and leads to God, however homely, however sensuous and material may be its immediate occasion. But if not, then the less we have to do with such sham gladness the better. ‘Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness.’ The alternative presented for the choice of each of us is whether we will have surface joy and a centre of dark discontent, or surface sorrow and a centre of calm blessedness. The film of stagnant water on a pond full of rottenness simulates the glories of the rainbow, in which pure sunshine falls upon the pure drops, but it is only painted corruption after all, a sign of rotting; and if a man puts his lips to it it will kill him. Such is the joy which is apart from God. It is the ‘crackling of thorns under a pot’-the more fiercely they burn the sooner they are ashes. And, on the other hand, ‘these things have I spoken unto you that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.’

It is not ‘for seven days’ that we ‘keep the feast’ if God has ‘made us joyful,’ but for all the rest of the days of time, and for the endless years of the calm gladnesses of the heavens.

6) Ezra 8:22-23

Ezra

HEROIC FAITH

Ezr. 8:22 - Ezr. 8:23, Ezr. 8:31 - Ezr. 8:32.

The memory of Ezra the scribe has scarcely had fairplay among Bible-reading people. True, neither his character nor the incidents of his life reach the height of interest or of grandeur belonging to the earlier men and their times. He is no hero, or prophet; only a scribe; and there is a certain narrowness as well as a prosaic turn about his mind, and altogether one feels that he is a smaller man than the Elijahs and Davids of the older days. But the homely garb of the scribe covered a very brave devout heart, and the story of his life deserves to be more familiar to us than it is.

This scrap from the account of his preparations for the march from Babylon to Jerusalem gives us a glimpse of a high-toned faith, and a noble strain of feeling. He and his company had a long weary journey of four months before them. They had had little experience of arms and warfare, or of hardships and desert marches, in their Babylonian homes. Their caravan was made unwieldy and feeble by the presence of a large proportion of women and children. They had much valuable property with them. The stony desert, which stretches unbroken from the Euphrates to the uplands on the east of Jordan, was infested then as now by wild bands of marauders, who might easily swoop down on the encumbered march of Ezra and his men, and make a clean sweep of all which they had. And he knew that he had but to ask and have an escort from the king that would ensure their safety till they saw Jerusalem. Artaxerxes' surname, 'the long-handed,' may have described a physical peculiarity, but it also expressed the reach of his power; his arm could reach these wandering plunderers, and if Ezra and his troop were visibly under his protection, they could march secure. So it was not a small exercise of trust in a higher Hand that is told us here so simply. It took some strength of principle to abstain from asking what it would have been so natural to ask, so easy to get, so comfortable to have. But, as he says, he remembered how confidently he has spoken of God's defence, and he feels that he must be true to his professed creed, even if it deprives him of the king's guards. He halts his followers for three days at the last station before the desert, and there, with fasting and prayer, they put themselves in God's hand; and then the band, with their wives and little ones, and their substance,-a heavily-loaded and feeble caravan,-fling themselves into the dangers of the long, dreary, robber-haunted march. Did not the scribe's robe cover as brave a heart as ever beat beneath a breastplate?

That symbolic phrase, 'the hand of our God,' as expressive of the divine protection, occurs with remarkable frequency in the books of Ezra and

Nehemiah, and though not peculiar to them, is yet strikingly characteristic of them. It has a certain beauty and force of its own. The hand is of course the seat of active power. It is on or over a man like some great shield held aloft above him, below which there is safe hiding. So that great Hand bends itself over us, and we are secure beneath its hollow. As a child sometimes carries a tender-winged butterfly in the globe of its two hands that the bloom on the wings may not be ruffled by fluttering, so He carries our feeble, unarmoured souls enclosed in the covert of His Almighty hand. ‘Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of His hand?’ ‘Who hath gathered the wind in His fists?’ In that curved palm where all the seas lie as a very little thing, we are held; the grasp that keeps back the tempests from their wild rush, keeps us, too, from being smitten by their blast. As a father may lay his own large muscular hand on his child’s tiny fingers to help him, or as ‘Elisha put his hands on the king’s hands,’ that the contact might strengthen him to shoot the ‘arrow of the Lord’s deliverance,’ so the hand of our God is upon us to impart power as well as protection; and our ‘bow abides in strength,’ when ‘the arms of our hands are made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.’ That was Ezra’s faith, and that should be ours.

Note Ezra’s sensitive shrinking from anything like inconsistency between his creed and his practice. It was easy to talk about God’s protection when he was safe behind the walls of Babylon; but now the pinch had come. There was a real danger before him and his unwarlike followers. No doubt, too, there were plenty of people who would have been delighted to catch him tripping; and he felt that his cheeks would have tingled with shame if they had been able to say, ‘Ah! that is what all his fine professions come to, is it? He wants a convoy, does he? We thought as much. It is always so with these people who talk in that style. They are just like the rest of us when the pinch comes.’ So, with a high and keen sense of what was required by his avowed principles, he will have no guards for the road. *There* was a man whose religion was at any rate not a fair-weather religion. It did not go off in fine speeches about trusting to the protection of God, spoken from behind the skirts of the king, or from the middle of a phalanx of his soldiers. He clearly meant what he said, and believed every word of it as a prose fact, which was solid enough to build conduct on.

I am afraid a great many of us would rather have tried to reconcile our asking for a band of horsemen with our professed trust in God’s hand; and there would have been plenty of excuses very ready about using means as well as exercising faith, and not being called upon to abandon advantages, and not pushing a good principle to Quixotic lengths, and so on, and so on. But whatever truth there is in such considerations, at any rate we may well learn the lesson of this story-to be true to our professed principles; to beware of making our religion a matter of words; to live, when the time for putting them into practice comes, by the maxims which we have been forward to proclaim when there was no risk in applying them; and to try sometimes to look at our lives with the eyes of people who do not share our faith, that we may bring our actions up to the mark of what they expect of us. If ‘the Church’ would oftener think of what ‘the world’ looks for from it, it would seldomer have cause to be ashamed of the terrible gap between its words and its deeds.

Especially in regard to this matter of trust in an unseen Hand, and reliance on visible helps, we all need to be very rigid in our self-inspection. Faith in the good hand of God upon us for good should often lead to the abandonment, and always to the subordination, of material aids. It is a question of detail, which each man must settle for himself as each occasion arises, whether in any given case abandonment or subordination is our duty. This is not the place to enter on so large and difficult a question. But, at all events, let us remember, and try to work into our own lives, that principle which the easy-going Christianity of this day has honeycombed with so many exceptions, that it scarcely has any whole surface left at all; that the absolute surrender and forsaking of external helps and goods is sometimes essential to the preservation and due expression of reliance on God.

There is very little fear of any of us pushing that principle to Quixotic lengths. The danger is all the other way. So it is worth while to notice that we have here an instance of a man’s being carried by a certain lofty enthusiasm further than the mere law of duty would take him. There would have been no harm in Ezra’s asking an escort, seeing that his whole enterprise was made possible by the king’s support. He would not have been ‘leaning on an arm of flesh’ by availing himself of the royal troops, any more than when he used the royal firman. But a true man often feels that he cannot do the things which he might without sin do. ‘All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient,’ said Paul. The same Apostle eagerly contended that he had a perfect right to money support from the Gentile Churches; and then, in the next breath, flamed up into, ‘I have used none of these things, for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void.’ A sensitive spirit, or one profoundly stirred by religious emotion, will, like the apostle whose feet were moved by love, far outrun the slower soul, whose steps are only impelled by the thought of duty. Better that the cup should run over than that it should not be full. Where we delight to do His will, there will often be more than a scrupulously regulated enough; and where there is not sometimes that ‘more,’ there will never be enough.

‘Give all thou canst; high Heaven rejects the lore
Of nicely calculated less or more.’

What shall we say of people who profess that God is their portion, and are as eager in the scramble for money as anybody? What kind of a commentary will sharp-sighted, sharp-tongued observers have a right to make on us, whose creed is so unlike theirs, while our lives are identical? Do you believe, friends! that ‘the hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him’? Then, do you not think that racing after the prizes of this world, with flushed cheeks and labouring breath, or longing, with a gnawing hunger of heart, for any earthly good, or lamenting over the removal of creatural defences and joys, as if heaven were empty because some one’s place here is, or as if God were dead because dear ones die, may well be a shame to us, and a taunt on the lips of our enemies? Let us learn again the lesson from this old story,-that if our faith in God is not the veriest sham, it demands and will produce, the abandonment sometimes and the subordination always, of external helps and material good.

Notice, too, Ezra’s preparation for receiving the divine help. There, by the river Ahava, he halts his company like a prudent leader, to repair omissions, and put the last touches to their organisation before facing the wilderness. But he has another purpose also. ‘I proclaimed a fast there, to seek of God a right way for us.’ There was no foolhardiness in his courage; he was well aware of all the possible dangers on the road; and whilst he is confident of the divine protection, he knows that, in his own quiet, matter-of-fact words, it is given 'to all them that *seek* Him.' So his faith not only impels him to the renunciation of the Babylonian guard, but to earnest supplication for the defence in which he is so confident. He is sure it will be given-so sure, that he will have no other shield; and yet he fasts and prays that he and his company may receive it. He prays because he is sure that he will receive it, and does receive it because he prays and is sure.

So for us, the condition and preparation on and by which we are sheltered by that great Hand, is the faith that asks, and the asking of faith. We must forsake the earthly props, but we must also believingly desire to be upheld by the heavenly arms. We make God responsible for our safety when we abandon other defence, and commit ourselves to Him. With eyes open to our dangers, and full consciousness of our own unarmed and unwarlike weakness, let us solemnly commend ourselves to Him, rolling all our burden on His strong arms, knowing that He is able to keep that which we have committed to Him. He will accept the trust, and set His guards about us. As the song of the returning exiles, which may have been sung by the river Ahava, has it: 'My help cometh from the Lord. The Lord is thy keeper. The Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.'

So our story ends with the triumphant vindication of this Quixotic faith. A flash of joyful feeling breaks through the simple narrative, as it tells how the words spoken before the king came true in the experience of the weaponless pilgrims: 'The hand of our God *was* upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way; and we came to Jerusalem.' It was no rash venture that we made. He was all that we hoped and asked. Through all the weary march He led us. From the wild, desert-born robbers, that watched us from afar, ready to come down on us, from ambushes and hidden perils, He kept us, because we had none other help, and all our hope was in Him. The ventures of faith are ever rewarded. We cannot set our expectations from God too high. What we dare scarcely hope now we shall one day remember. When we come to tell the completed story of our lives, we shall have to record the fulfilment of all God's promises, and the accomplishment of all our prayers that were built on these. Here let us cry, 'Be Thy hand upon us.' Here let us trust, Thy hand will be upon us. Then we shall have to say, 'The hand of our God was upon us,' and as we look from the watch-towers of the city, on the desert that stretches to its very walls, and remember all the way by which He led us, we shall rejoice over His vindication of our poor faith, and praise Him that 'not one thing hath failed of all the things which the Lord our God spake concerning us.'

7) **Ezra 8:29**

Ezra

THE CHARGE OF THE PILGRIM PRIESTS

Ezr. 8:29.

The little band of Jews, seventeen hundred in number, returning from Babylon, had just started on that long pilgrimage, and made a brief halt in order to get everything in order for their transit across the desert; when their leader Ezra, taking count of his men, discovers that amongst them there are none of the priests or Levites. He then takes measures to reinforce his little army with a contingent of these, and entrusts to their special care a very valuable treasure in gold, and silver, and sacred vessels, which had been given to them for use in the house of the Lord. The words which I have taken as text are a portion of the charge which he gave to those twelve priestly guardians of the precious things, that were to be used in worship when they got back to the Temple. 'Watch and keep them, until ye weigh them in the chambers of the house of the Lord.'

So I think I may venture, without being unduly fanciful, to take these words as a type of the injunctions which are given to us Christian people; and to see in them a striking and picturesque representation of the duties that devolve upon us in the course of our journey across the desert to the Temple-Home above.

And to begin with, let me remind you, for a moment or two, what the precious treasure is which is thus entrusted to our keeping and care. We can scarcely, in such a connection and with such a metaphor, forget the words of our Lord about a certain king that went to receive his kingdom, and to return; who called together his servants, and gave to each of them according to their several ability, with the injunction to trade upon that until he came. The same metaphor which our Master employed lies in this story before us-in the one case, sacrificial vessels and sacred treasures; in the other case, the talents out of the rich possessions of the departing king.

Nor can we forget either the other phase of the same figure which the Apostle employs when he says to his ‘own son’ and substitute, Timothy: ‘That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us,’ nor that other word to the same Timothy, which says: ‘O Timothy! keep that which was committed to thy trust, and avoid profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science, falsely so called.’ In these quotations, the treasure, and the rich deposit, is the faith once delivered to the saints; the solemn message of love and peace in Jesus Christ, which was entrusted, first of all to those preachers, but as truly to every one of Christ’s disciples.

So, then, the metaphor is capable of two applications. The first is to the rich treasure and solemn trust of our own nature, of our own souls; the faculties and capacities, precious beyond all count, rich beyond all else that a man has ever received. Nothing that you have is half so much as that which you are. The possession of a soul that knows and loves, and can obey; that trusts and desires; that can yearn and reach out to Jesus Christ, and to God in Christ; of a conscience that can yield to His command; and faculties of comprehending and understanding what comes to them from Jesus Christ-that is more than any other possession, treasure, or trust. That which you and I carry with us-the infinite possibilities of these awful spirits of ours-the tremendous faculties which are given to every human soul, and which, like a candle plunged into oxygen, are meant to burn far more brightly under the stimulus of Christian faith and the possession of God’s truth, are the rich deposit committed to our charge. You priests of the living God, you men and women, you say that you are Christ’ s, and therefore are consecrated to a nobler priesthood than any other-to you is given this solemn charge: ‘That good thing which is committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost that dwelleth in you.’ The precious treasure of your own natures, your own hearts, your own understandings, wills, consciences, desires-keep these, until they are weighed in the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

And in like manner, taking the other aspect of the metaphor-we have given to us, in order that we may do something with it, that great deposit and treasure of truth, which is all embodied and incarnated in Jesus Christ our Lord. It is bestowed upon us that we may use it for ourselves, and in order that we may carry it triumphantly all through the world. Possession involves responsibility always. The word of salvation is given to us. If we go tampering with it, by erroneous apprehension, by unfair usage, by failing to apply it to our own daily life; then it will fade and disappear from our grasp. It is given to us in order that we may keep it safe, and carry it high up across the desert, as becomes the priests of the most high God.

The treasure is first-our own selves-with all that we are and may be, under the stimulating and quickening influence of His grace and Spirit. The treasure is next-His great word of salvation, once delivered unto the saints, and to be handed on, without diminution or alteration in its fair perspective and manifold harmonies, to the generations that are to come. So, think of yourselves as the priests of God, journeying through the wilderness, with the treasures of the Temple and the vessels of the sacrifice for your special deposit and charge.

Further, I touch on the command, the guardianship that is here set forth. ‘Watch ye, and keep them.’ That is to say, I suppose, according to the ordinary idiom of the Old Testament, ‘Watch, in order that you may keep.’ Or to translate it into other words: The treasure which is given into our hands requires, for its safe preservation, unceasing vigilance. Take the picture of my text: These Jews were four months, according to the narrative, in travelling from their first station upon their journey to Jerusalem across the desert. There were enemies lying in wait for them by the way. With noble self-restraint and grand chivalry, the leader of the little band says: ‘I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen, to help us against the enemy in the way; because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him; but His power and His wrath is against all that forsake Him.’ And so they would not go to him, cap in hand, and ask him to give them a guard to take care of them; but ‘We fasted and besought our God for this; and He was intreated of us.’

Thus the little company, without arms, without protection, with nothing but a prayer and a trust to make them strong, flung themselves into the pathless desert with all those precious things in their possession; and all the precaution which Ezra took was to lay hold of the priests in the little party, and to say: ‘Here! all through the march do you stick by these precious things. Whoever sleeps, do you watch. Whoever is careless, be you vigilant. Take these for your charge, and remember I weigh them here before we start, and they will be all weighed again when we get there. So be alert.’

And is not that exactly what Christ says to us? ‘Watch; keep them; be vigilant, that ye may keep; and keep them, because they will be weighed and registered when you arrive there.’

I cannot do more than touch upon two or three of the ways in which this charge may be worked out, in its application for ourselves, beginning with that first one which is implied in the words of the text-*unslumbering vigilance*; then *trust*, like the trust which is glorified in the context, depending only on ‘the good hand of our God upon us’; then *purity*, because, as Ezra said, ‘Ye are holy unto the Lord. The vessels are holy also’; and therefore ye are the fit persons to guard them. And besides these, there is, in our keeping our trust, a method which does not apply to the incident before us; namely, *use*, in order to their preservation.

That is to say, first of all, no slumber; not a moment’s relaxation; or some of those who lie in wait for us on the way will be down upon us, and some of the precious things will go. While all the rest of the wearied camp slept, the guardians of the treasure had to outwatch the stars. While others might straggle on the march, lingering here or there, or resting on some patch of green, they had to close up round their precious charge; others might let their eyes wander from the path, they had ever to look to their charge. For them the journey had a double burden, and unslumbering vigilance was their constant duty.

We likewise have unslumberingly and ceaselessly to watch over that which is committed to our charge. For, depend upon it, if for an instant we turn away our heads, the thievish birds that flutter over us will be down upon the precious seed that is in our basket, or that we have sown in the furrows, and it will be gone. Watch, that ye may keep.

And then, still further, see how in this story before us there are brought out very picturesquely, and very simply, deeper lessons still. It is not enough that a man shall be for ever keeping his eye upon his own character and his own faculties, and seeking sedulously to cultivate and improve them, as he that must give an account. There must be another look than that. Ezra said, in effect, ‘Not all the cohorts of Babylon can help us; and we do not want them. We have one strong hand that will keep us safe’; and so he, and his men, with all this mass of wealth, so tempting to the wild robbers that haunted the road, flung themselves into the desert, knowing that all along it there were, as he says, ‘such as lay in wait for them.’ His confidence was: ‘God will bring us all safe out to the end there; and we shall carry every glittering piece of the precious things that we brought out of Babylon right into the Temple of Jerusalem.’ Yet he says, ‘Watch ye and keep them.’

What does that come to in reference to our religious experience? Why this: ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of His own good pleasure.’ You do not need these external helps. Fling yourself wholly upon His keeping hand, and also watch and keep yourselves. ‘I know in whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day,’ is the complement of the other words, ‘That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost.’

So guardianship is, first, unceasing vigilance; and then it is lowly trust. And besides that, it is *punctilious purity*. ‘I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the Lord; the vessels are holy unto the Lord. Watch ye, and keep them.’

It was fitting that priests should carry the things that belonged to the Temple. No other hands but consecrated hands had a right to touch them. To none other guardianship but the guardianship of the possessors of a symbolic and ceremonial purity, could the vessels of a symbolic and ceremonial worship be entrusted; and to none others but the possessors of real and spiritual holiness can the treasures of the true Temple, of an inward and spiritual worship, be entrusted. ‘Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord,’ said Isaiah using a kindred metaphor. The only way to keep our treasure undiminished and untarnished, is to keep ourselves pure and clean.

And, lastly, we have to exercise a guardianship which not only means unslumbering vigilance, lowly trust, punctilious purity, but also requires the constant use of the treasure.

‘Watch ye, and keep them.’ Although the vessels which those priests bore through the desert were used for no service during all the weary march, they weighed just the same when they got to the end as at the beginning; though, no doubt, even their fine gold had become dim and tarnished through disuse. But if we do not use the vessels that are entrusted to our care, *they* will *not* weigh the same. The man that wrapped up his talent in the napkin, and said, ‘Lo, there thou hast that is thine,’ was too sanguine. There was never an unused talent rolled up in a handkerchief yet, but when it was taken out and put into the scales it was lighter than when it was committed to the keeping of the earth. Gifts that are used fructify. Capacities that are strained to the uttermost increase. Service strengthens the power for service; and just as the reward for work is more work, the way for making ourselves fit for bigger things is to do the things that are lying by us. The blacksmith’s arm, the sailor’s eye, the organs of any piece of handicraft, as we all know, are strengthened by exercise; and so it is in this higher region.

And so, dear brethren, take these four words-vigilance, trust, purity, exercise. ‘Watch ye, and keep them, until they are weighed in the chambers of the House of the Lord.’

And, lastly, think of that weighing in the House of the Lord. Cannot you see the picture of the little band when they finally reach the goal of their pilgrimage; and three days after they arrived, as the narrative tells us, went up into the Temple, and there, by number and by weight, rendered up their charge, and were clear of their responsibility? ‘And the first came and said, Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds. And he said, Well, thou good servant, because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities.’

Oh! how that thought of the day when they would empty out the rich treasure upon the marble pavement, and clash the golden vessels into the scales, must have filled their hearts with vigilance during all the weary watches, when desert stars looked down upon the slumbering encampment, and they paced wakeful all the night. And how the thought, too, must have filled their hearts with joy, when they tried to picture to themselves the sigh of satisfaction, and the sense of relief with which, after all the perils, their ‘feet would stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem,’ and they would be able to say, ‘That which thou hast given us, we have kept, and nothing of it is lost.’

A lifetime would be a small expenditure to secure that; and though it cannot be that you and I will meet the trial and the weighing of that great day without many failures and much loss, yet we may say: ‘I know in whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep my deposit-whether it be in the sense of that which I have committed unto Him, or in the sense of that which He has committed unto me-against that day.’ We may hope that, by His gracious help and His pitying acceptance, even such careless stewards and negligent watchers as we are, may lay ourselves down in peace at the last, saying, ‘I have kept the faith,’ and may be awakened by the word, ‘Well done! good and faithful servant.’

8) Ezra 8:31-32

Ezra

HEROIC FAITH

Ezr. 8:22 - Ezr. 8:23, Ezr. 8:31 - Ezr. 8:32.

The memory of Ezra the scribe has scarcely had fairplay among Bible-reading people. True, neither his character nor the incidents of his life reach the height of interest or of grandeur belonging to the earlier men and their times. He is no hero, or prophet; only a scribe; and there is a certain narrowness as well as a prosaic turn about his mind, and altogether one feels that he is a smaller man than the Elijahs and Davids of the older days. But the homely garb of the scribe covered a very brave devout heart, and the story of his life deserves to be more familiar to us than it is.

This scrap from the account of his preparations for the march from Babylon to Jerusalem gives us a glimpse of a high-toned faith, and a noble strain of feeling. He and his company had a long weary journey of four months before them. They had had little experience of arms and warfare, or of hardships and desert marches, in their Babylonian homes. Their caravan was made unwieldy and feeble by the presence of a large proportion of women and children. They had much valuable property with them. The stony desert, which stretches unbroken from the Euphrates to the uplands on the east of Jordan, was infested then as now by wild bands of marauders, who might easily swoop down on the encumbered march of Ezra and his men, and make a clean sweep of all which they had. And he knew that he had but to ask and have an escort from the king that would ensure their safety till they saw Jerusalem. Artaxerxes' surname, 'the long-handed,' may have described a physical peculiarity, but it also expressed the reach of his power; his arm could reach these wandering plunderers, and if Ezra and his troop were visibly under his protection, they could march secure. So it was not a small exercise of trust in a higher Hand that is told us here so simply. It took some strength of principle to abstain from asking what it would have been so natural to ask, so easy to get, so comfortable to have. But, as he says, he remembered how confidently he has spoken of God's defence, and he feels that he must be true to his professed creed, even if it deprives him of the king's guards. He halts his followers for three days at the last station before the desert, and there, with fasting and prayer, they put themselves in God's hand; and then the band, with their wives and little ones, and their substance,-a heavily-loaded and feeble caravan,-fling themselves into the dangers of the long, dreary, robber-haunted march. Did not the scribe's robe cover as brave a heart as ever beat beneath a breastplate?

That symbolic phrase, 'the hand of our God,' as expressive of the divine protection, occurs with remarkable frequency in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and though not peculiar to them, is yet strikingly characteristic of them. It has a certain beauty and force of its own. The hand is of course the seat of active power. It is on or over a man like some great shield held aloft above him, below which there is safe hiding. So that great Hand bends itself over us, and we are secure beneath its hollow. As a child sometimes carries a tender-winged butterfly in the globe of its two hands that the bloom on the wings may not be ruffled by fluttering, so He carries our feeble, unarmoured souls enclosed in the covert of His Almighty hand. 'Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of His hand?' 'Who hath gathered the wind in His fists?' In that curved palm where all the seas lie as a very little thing, we are held; the grasp that keeps back the tempests from their wild rush, keeps us, too, from being smitten by their blast. As a father may lay his own large muscular hand on his child’s tiny fingers to help him, or as ‘Elisha put his hands on the king’s hands,’ that the contact might strengthen him to shoot the ‘arrow of the Lord’s deliverance,’ so the hand of our God is upon us to impart power as well as protection; and our ‘bow abides in strength,’ when ‘the arms of our hands are made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob.’ That was Ezra’s faith, and that should be ours.

Note Ezra’s sensitive shrinking from anything like inconsistency between his creed and his practice. It was easy to talk about God’s protection when he was safe behind the walls of Babylon; but now the pinch had come. There was a real danger before him and his unwarlike followers. No doubt, too, there were plenty of people who would have been delighted to catch him tripping; and he felt that his cheeks would have tingled with shame if they had been able to say, ‘Ah! that is what all his fine professions come to, is it? He wants a convoy, does he? We thought as much. It is always so with these people who talk in that style. They are just like the rest of us when the pinch comes.’ So, with a high and keen sense of what was required by his avowed principles, he will have no guards for the road. *There* was a man whose religion was at any rate not a fair-weather religion. It did not go off in fine speeches about trusting to the protection of God, spoken from behind the skirts of the king, or from the middle of a phalanx of his soldiers. He clearly meant what he said, and believed every word of it as a prose fact, which was solid enough to build conduct on.

I am afraid a great many of us would rather have tried to reconcile our asking for a band of horsemen with our professed trust in God’s hand; and there would have been plenty of excuses very ready about using means as well as exercising faith, and not being called upon to abandon advantages, and not pushing a good principle to Quixotic lengths, and so on, and so on. But whatever truth there is in such considerations, at any rate we may well learn the lesson of this story-to be true to our professed principles; to beware of making our religion a matter of words; to live, when the time for putting them into practice comes, by the maxims which we have been forward to proclaim when there was no risk in applying them; and to try sometimes to look at our lives with the eyes of people who do not share our faith, that we may bring our actions up to the mark of what they expect of us. If ‘the Church’ would oftener think of what ‘the world’ looks for from it, it would seldomer have cause to be ashamed of the terrible gap between its words and its deeds.

Especially in regard to this matter of trust in an unseen Hand, and reliance on visible helps, we all need to be very rigid in our self-inspection. Faith in the good hand of God upon us for good should often lead to the abandonment, and always to the subordination, of material aids. It is a question of detail, which each man must settle for himself as each occasion arises, whether in any given case abandonment or subordination is our duty. This is not the place to enter on so large and difficult a question. But, at all events, let us remember, and try to work into our own lives, that principle which the easy-going Christianity of this day has honeycombed with so many exceptions, that it scarcely has any whole surface left at all; that the absolute surrender and forsaking of external helps and goods is sometimes essential to the preservation and due expression of reliance on God.

There is very little fear of any of us pushing that principle to Quixotic lengths. The danger is all the other way. So it is worth while to notice that we have here an instance of a man’s being carried by a certain lofty enthusiasm further than the mere law of duty would take him. There would have been no harm in Ezra’s asking an escort, seeing that his whole enterprise was made possible by the king’s support. He would not have been ‘leaning on an arm of flesh’ by availing himself of the royal troops, any more than when he used the royal firman. But a true man often feels that he cannot do the things which he might without sin do. ‘All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient,’ said Paul. The same Apostle eagerly contended that he had a perfect right to money support from the Gentile Churches; and then, in the next breath, flamed up into, ‘I have used none of these things, for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void.’ A sensitive spirit, or one profoundly stirred by religious emotion, will, like the apostle whose feet were moved by love, far outrun the slower soul, whose steps are only impelled by the thought of duty. Better that the cup should run over than that it should not be full. Where we delight to do His will, there will often be more than a scrupulously regulated enough; and where there is not sometimes that ‘more,’ there will never be enough.

‘Give all thou canst; high Heaven rejects the lore
Of nicely calculated less or more.’

What shall we say of people who profess that God is their portion, and are as eager in the scramble for money as anybody? What kind of a commentary will sharp-sighted, sharp-tongued observers have a right to make on us, whose creed is so unlike theirs, while our lives are identical? Do you believe, friends! that ‘the hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him’? Then, do you not think that racing after the prizes of this world, with flushed cheeks and labouring breath, or longing, with a gnawing hunger of heart, for any earthly good, or lamenting over the removal of creatural defences and joys, as if heaven were empty because some one’s place here is, or as if God were dead because dear ones die, may well be a shame to us, and a taunt on the lips of our enemies? Let us learn again the lesson from this old story,-that if our faith in God is not the veriest sham, it demands and will produce, the abandonment sometimes and the subordination always, of external helps and material good.

Notice, too, Ezra’s preparation for receiving the divine help. There, by the river Ahava, he halts his company like a prudent leader, to repair omissions, and put the last touches to their organisation before facing the wilderness. But he has another purpose also. ‘I proclaimed a fast there, to seek of God a right way for us.’ There was no foolhardiness in his courage; he was well aware of all the possible dangers on the road; and whilst he is confident of the divine protection, he knows that, in his own quiet, matter-of-fact words, it is given ‘to all them that *seek* Him.’ So his faith not only impels him to the renunciation of the Babylonian guard, but to earnest supplication for the defence in which he is so confident. He is sure it will be given-so sure, that he will have no other shield; and yet he fasts and prays that he and his company may receive it. He prays because he is sure that he will receive it, and does receive it because he prays and is sure.

So for us, the condition and preparation on and by which we are sheltered by that great Hand, is the faith that asks, and the asking of faith. We must forsake the earthly props, but we must also believingly desire to be upheld by the heavenly arms. We make God responsible for our safety when we abandon other defence, and commit ourselves to Him. With eyes open to our dangers, and full consciousness of our own unarmed and unwarlike weakness, let us solemnly commend ourselves to Him, rolling all our burden on His strong arms, knowing that He is able to keep that which we have committed to Him. He will accept the trust, and set His guards about us. As the song of the returning exiles, which may have been sung by the river Ahava, has it: ‘My help cometh from the Lord. The Lord is thy keeper. The Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.’

So our story ends with the triumphant vindication of this Quixotic faith. A flash of joyful feeling breaks through the simple narrative, as it tells how the words spoken before the king came true in the experience of the weaponless pilgrims: ‘The hand of our God *was* upon us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way; and we came to Jerusalem.’ It was no rash venture that we made. He was all that we hoped and asked. Through all the weary march He led us. From the wild, desert-born robbers, that watched us from afar, ready to come down on us, from ambushes and hidden perils, He kept us, because we had none other help, and all our hope was in Him. The ventures of faith are ever rewarded. We cannot set our expectations from God too high. What we dare scarcely hope now we shall one day remember. When we come to tell the completed story of our lives, we shall have to record the fulfilment of all God’s promises, and the accomplishment of all our prayers that were built on these. Here let us cry, ‘Be Thy hand upon us.’ Here let us trust, Thy hand will be upon us. Then we shall have to say, ‘The hand of our God was upon us,’ and as we look from the watch-towers of the city, on the desert that stretches to its very walls, and remember all the way by which He led us, we shall rejoice over His vindication of our poor faith, and praise Him that ‘not one thing hath failed of all the things which the Lord our God spake concerning us.’

Nehemiah

1) NEHEMIAH 1:1-3
2) NEHEMIAH 1:4
3) NEHEMIAH 1:5-11
4) NEHEMIAH 3:28
5) NEHEMIAH 4:9-21
6) NEHEMIAH 5:15

7) NEHEMIAH 8:1-9
8) NEHEMIAH 8:10
9) NEHEMIAH 8:11-12
10) NEHEMIAH 13:15-22

1) Nehemiah 1:1-3

Nehemiah

A REFORMER'S SCHOOLING

Neh. 1:1 - Neh. 1:11.

The date of the completion of the Temple is 516 B.C.; that of Nehemiah's arrival 445 B.C. The colony of returned exiles seems to have made little progress during that long period. Its members settled down, and much of their enthusiasm cooled, as we see from the reforms which Ezra had to inaugurate fourteen years before Nehemiah. The majority of men, even if touched by spiritual fervour, find it hard to keep on the high levels for long. Breathing is easier lower down. As is often the case, a brighter flame of zeal burned in the bosoms of sympathisers at a distance than in those of the actual workers, whose contact with hard realities and petty details disenchanted them. Thus the impulse to nobler action came, not from one of the colony, but from a Jew in the court of the Persian king.

This passage tells us how God prepared a man for a great work, and how the man prepared himself.

I. Sad tidings and their effect on a devout servant of God [Neh. 1:1 - Neh. 1:4]. The time and place are precisely given. 'The month Chislev' corresponds to the end of November and beginning of December. 'The twentieth year' is that of Artaxerxes [Neh. 2:1]. 'Shushan,' or Susa, was the royal winter residence, and 'the palace' was 'a distinct quarter of the city, occupying an artificial eminence.' Note the absence of the name of the king. Nehemiah is so familiar with his greatness that he takes for granted that every reader can fill the gaps. But, though the omission shows how large a space the court occupied in his thoughts, a true Jewish heart beat below the courtier’s robe. That flexibility which enabled them to stand as trusted servants of the kings of many lands, and yet that inflexible adherence to, and undying love of, Israel, has always been a national characteristic. We can think of this youthful cup-bearer as yearning for one glimpse of the ‘mountains round about Jerusalem’ while he filled his post in Shushan.

His longings were kindled into resolve by intercourse with a little party of Jews from Judaea, among whom was his own brother. They had been to see how things went there, and the fact that one of them was a member of Nehemiah’s family seems to imply that the same sentiments belonged to the whole household. Eager questions brought out sorrowful answers. The condition of the ‘remnant’ was one of ‘great affliction and reproach,’ and the ground of the reproach was probably [Neh. 2:17; Neh. 4:2 - Neh. 4:4] the still ruined fortifications.

It has been supposed that the breaking down of the walls and burning of the gates, mentioned in Neh. 1:3, were recent, and subsequent to the events recorded in Ezra; but it is more probable that the project for rebuilding the defences, which had been stopped by superior orders [Ezr. 4:12 - Ezr. 4:16], had not been resumed, and that the melancholy ruins were those which had met the eyes of Zerubbabel nearly a hundred years before. Communication between Shushan and Jerusalem cannot have been so infrequent that the facts now borne in on Nehemiah might not have been known before. But the impression made by facts depends largely on their narrator, and not a little on the mood of the hearer. It was one thing to hear general statements, and another to sit with one’s brother, and see through his eyes the dismal failure of the ‘remnant’ to carry out the purpose of their return. So the story, whether fresh or repeated with fresh force, made a deep dint in the young cupbearer’s heart, and changed his life’s outlook. God prepares His servants for their work by laying on their souls a sorrowful realisation of the miseries which other men regard, and they themselves have often regarded, very lightly. The men who have been raised up to do great work for God and men, have always to begin by greatly and sadly feeling the weight of the sins and sorrows which they are destined to remove. No man will do worthy work at rebuilding the walls who has not wept over the ruins.

So Nehemiah prepared himself for his work by brooding over the tidings with tears, by fasting and by prayer. There is no other way of preparation. Without the sad sense of men's sorrows, there will be no earnestness in alleviating them, nor self-sacrificing devotion; and without much prayer there will be little consciousness of weakness or dependence on divine help.

Note the grand and apparently immediate resolution to throw up brilliant prospects and face a life of danger and suffering and toil. Nehemiah was evidently a favourite with the king, and had the ball at his foot. But the ruins on Zion were more attractive to him than the splendours of Shushan, and he willingly flung away his chances of a great career to take his share of 'affliction and reproach.' He has never had justice done him in popular estimation. He is not one of the well-known biblical examples of heroic self-abandonment; but he did just what Moses did, and the eulogium of the Epistle to the Hebrews fits him as well as the lawgiver; for he too chose 'rather to suffer with the people of God than to enjoy pleasures for a season.' So must we all, in our several ways, do, if we would have a share in building the walls of the city of God.

II. The prayer [Neh. 1:5 - Neh. 1:11]. The course of thought in this prayer is very instructive. It begins with solemnly laying before God His own great name, as the mightiest plea with Him, and the strongest encouragement to the suppliant. That commencement is no mere proper invocation, conventionally regarded as the right way of beginning, but it expresses the petitioner's effort to lay hold on God's character as the ground of his hope of answer. The terms employed remarkably blend what Nehemiah had learned from Persian religion and what from a better source. He calls upon Jehovah, the great name which was the special possession of Israel. He also uses the characteristic Persian designation of 'the God of heaven,' and identifies the bearer of that name, not with the god to whom it was originally applied, but with Israel's Jehovah. He takes the crown from the head of the false deity, and lays it at the feet of the God of his fathers. Whatsoever names for the Supreme Excellence any tongues have coined, they all belong to our God, in so far as they are true and noble. The modern 'science of comparative religion' yields many treasures which should be laid up in Jehovah's Temple.

But the rest of the designations are taken from the Old Testament, as was fitting. The prayer throughout is full of allusions and quotations, and shows how this cupbearer of Artaxerxes had fed his young soul on God's word, and drawn thence the true nourishment of high and holy thoughts and strenuous resolutions and self-sacrificing deeds. Prayers which are cast in the mould of God's own revelation of Himself will not fail of answer. True prayer catches up the promises that flutter down to us, and flings them up again like arrows.

The prayer here is all built, then, on that name of Jehovah, and on what the name involves, chiefly on the thought of God as keeping covenant and mercy. He has bound Himself in solemn, irrefragable compact, to a certain line of action. Men 'know where to have Him,' if we may venture on the familiar expression. He has given us a chart of His course, and He will adhere to it. Therefore we can go to Him with our prayers, so long as we keep these within the ample space of His covenant, and ourselves within its terms, by loving obedience.

The petition that God's ears might be sharpened and His eyes open to the prayer is cast in a familiar mould. It boldly transfers to Him not only the semblance of man's form, but also the likeness of His processes of action. Hearing the cry for help precedes active intervention in the case of men's help, and the strong imagery of the prayer conceives of similar sequence in God. But the figure is transparent, and the 'anthropomorphism' so plain that no mistakes can arise in its interpretation.

Note, too, the light touch with which the suppliant's relation to God ['Thy servant'] and his long-continued cry ['day and night'] are but just brought in for a moment as pleas for a gracious hearing. The prayer is 'for Thy servants the children of Israel,' in which designation, as the next clauses show, the relation established by God, and not the conduct of men, is pleaded as a reason for an answer.

The mention of that relation brings at once to Nehemiah's mind the terrible unfaithfulness to it which had marked, and still continued to mark, the whole nation. So lowly confession follows [Neh. 1:6 - Neh. 1:7]. Unprofitable servants they had indeed been. The more loftily we think of our privileges, the more clearly should we discern our sins. Nothing leads a true heart to such self-ashamed penitence as reflection on God's mercy. If a man thinks that God has taken him for a servant, the thought should bow him with conscious unworthiness, not lift him in self-satisfaction. Nehemiah's confession not only sprung from the thought of Israel's vocation, so poorly fulfilled, but it also laid the groundwork for further petitions. It is useless to ask God to help us to repair the wastes if we do not cast out the sins which have made them. The beginning of all true healing of sorrow is confession of sins. Many promising schemes for the alleviation of national and other distresses have come to nothing because, unlike Nehemiah' s, they did not begin with prayer, or prayed for help without acknowledging sin.

And the man who is to do work for God and to get God to bless his work must not be content with acknowledging other people's sins, but must always say, 'We have sinned,' and not seldom say, 'I have sinned.' That penitent consciousness of evil is indispensible to all who would make their fellows happier. God works with bruised reeds. The sense of individual transgression gives wonderful tenderness, patience amid gainsaying, submission in failure, dependence on God in difficulty, and lowliness in success. Without it we shall do little for ourselves or for anybody else.

The prayer next reminds God of His own words [Neh. 1:8 - Neh. 1:9], freely quoted and combined from several passages [Lev. 26:33 - Lev. 26:45; Deu. 4:25 - Deu. 4:31, etc.]. The application of these passages to the then condition of things is at first sight somewhat loose, since part of the people were already restored; and the purport of the prayer is not the restoration of the remainder, but the deliverance of those already in the land from their distresses. Still, the promise gives encouragement to the prayer and is powerful with God, inasmuch as it could not be said to have been fulfilled by so incomplete a restoration as that as that at present realised. What God does must be perfectly done; and His great word is not exhausted so long as any fuller accomplishment of it can be imagined.

The reminder of the promise is clinched [v. 10] by the same appeal as formerly to the relation to Himself into which God had been pleased to bring the nation, with an added reference to former deeds, such as the Exodus, in which His strong hand had delivered them. We are always sure of an answer if we ask God not to contradict Himself. Since He has begun He will make an end. It will never be said of Him that He ‘began to build and was not able to finish.’ His past is a mirror in which we can read His future. The return from Babylon is implied in the Exodus.

A reiteration of earlier words follows, with the addition that Nehemiah now binds, as it were, his single prayer in a bundle with those of the like-minded in Israel. He gathers single ears into a sheaf, which he brings as a ‘wave-offering.’ And then, in one humble little sentence at the end, he puts his only personal request. The modesty of the man is lovely. His prayer has been all for the people. Remarkably enough, there is no definite petition in it. He never once says right out what he so earnestly desires, and the absence of specific requests might be laid hold of by sceptical critics as an argument against the genuineness of the prayer. But it is rather a subtle trait, on which no forger would have been likely to hit. Sometimes silence is the very result of entire occupation of mind with a thought. He says nothing about the particular nature of his request, just because he is so full of it. But he does ask for favour in the eyes of ‘this man,’ and that he may be prospered ‘this day.’

So this was his morning prayer on that eventful day, which was to settle his life’s work. The certain days of solitary meditation on his nation’s griefs had led to a resolution. He says nothing about his long brooding, his slow decision, his conflicts with lower projects of personal ambition. He ‘burns his own smoke,’ as we all should learn to do. But he asks that the capricious and potent will of the king may be inclined to grant his request. If our morning supplication is ‘Prosper Thy servant this day,’ and our purposes are for God’s glory, we need not fear facing anybody. However powerful Artaxerxes was, he was but ‘this man,’ not God. The phrase does not indicate contempt or undervaluing of the solid reality of his absolute power over Nehemiah, but simply expresses the conviction that the king, too, was a subject of God’ s, and that his heart was in the hand of Jehovah, to mould as He would. The consciousness of dependence on God and the habit of communion with Him give a man a clear sight of the limitations of earthly dignities, and a modest boldness which is equally remote from rudeness and servility.

Thus prepared for whatever might be the issue of that eventful day, the young cupbearer rose from his knees, drew a long breath, and went to his work. Well for us if we go to ours, whether it be a day of crisis or of commonplace, in like fashion! Then we shall have like defence and like calmness of heart.

2) Nehemiah 1:4

Nehemiah

A REFORMER’S SCHOOLING

THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL EVILS

Neh. 1:4.

Ninety years had passed since the returning exiles had arrived at Jerusalem. They had encountered many difficulties which had marred their progress and cooled their enthusiasm. The Temple, indeed, was rebuilt, but Jerusalem lay in ruins, and its walls remained as they had been left, by Nebuchadnezzar’s siege, some century and a half before. A little party of pious pilgrims had gone from Persia to the city, and had come back to Shushan with a sad story of weakness and despondency, affliction and hostility. One of the travellers had a brother, a youth named Nehemiah, who was a cup-bearer in the court of the Persian king. Living in a palace, and surrounded with luxury, his heart was with his brethren; and the ruins of Jerusalem were dearer to him than the pomp of Shushan.

My text tells how the young cupbearer was affected by the tidings, and how he wept and prayed before God. The accurate dates given in this book show that this period of brooding contemplation of the miseries of his brethren lasted for four months. Then he took a great resolution, flung up brilliant prospects, identified himself with the afflicted colony, and asked for leave to go and share, and, if it might be, to redress, the sorrows which had made so deep a dint upon his heart.

Now, I think that this vivid description, drawn by himself, of the emotions excited in Nehemiah by his countrymen’s sorrows, which influenced his whole future, contains some very plain lessons for Christian people, the observance of which is every day becoming more imperative by reason of the drift of public opinion, and the new prominence which is being given to so-called ‘social questions.’ I wish to gather up one or two of these lessons for you now.

I. First, then, note the plain Christian duty of sympathetic contemplation of surrounding sorrows. Nehemiah might have made a great many very good excuses for treating lightly the tidings that his brother had brought him. He might have said: ‘Jerusalem is a long way off. I have my own work to do; it is no part of my business to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. I am the King’s cupbearer. They went with their eyes open, and experience has shown that the people who knew when they were well off, and stayed where they were, were a great deal wiser.’ These were not his excuses. He let the tidings fill his heart, and burn there.

Now, the first condition of sympathy is knowledge; and the second is attending to what we do know. Nehemiah had probably known, in a kind of vague way, for many a day how things were going in Palestine. Communications between it and Persia were not so difficult but that there would come plenty of Government despatches; and a man at headquarters who had the ear of the monarch, was not likely to be ignorant of what was going on in that part of his dominions. But there is all the difference between hearing vague general reports, and sitting and hearing your own brother tell you what he had seen with his own eyes. So the impression which had existed before was all inoperative until it was kindled by attention to the facts which all the time had been, in some degree, known.

Now, how many of us are there that know-and don’t know-what is going on round about us in the slums and back courts of this city? How many of us are there who are habitually ignorant of what we actually know, because we never, as we say, ‘give heed’ to it. ‘I did not think of that,’ is a very poor excuse about matters concerning which there is knowledge, whether there is thought or not. And so I want to press upon all you Christian people the plain duty of knowing what you do know, and of giving an ample place in your thoughts to the stark staring facts around us.

Why! loads of people at present seem to think that the miseries, and hideous vices, and sodden immorality, and utter heathenism, which are found down amongst the foundations of every civic community are as indispensable to progress as the noise of the wheels of a train is to its advancement, or as the bilge-water in a wooden ship is to keep its seams tight. So we prate about 'civilisation,' which means turning men into cities. If agglomerating people into these great communities, which makes so awful a feature of modern life, be necessarily attended by such abominations as we live amongst and never think about, then, better that there had never been civilisation in such a sense at all. Every consideration of communion with and conformity to Jesus Christ, of loyalty to His words, of a true sense of brotherhood and of lower things-such as self-interest-every consideration demands that Christian people shall take to their hearts, in a fashion that the churches have never done yet, 'the condition of England question,' and shall ask, 'Lord! what wouldst Thou have me to do?' I do not care to enter upon controversy raised by recent utterances, the motive of which may be worthy of admiration, though the expression cannot be acquitted of the charge of exaggeration, to the effect that the Christian churches as a whole have been careless of the condition of the people. It is not true in its absolute sense. I suppose that, taking the country over, the majority of the members of, at all events the Nonconformist churches and congregations, are in receipt of weekly wages or belong to the upper ranks of the working-classes, and that the lever which has lifted them to these upper ranks has been God's Gospel. I suppose it will be admitted that the past indifference with which we are charged belonged to the whole community, and that the new sense of responsibility which has marked, and blessedly marked, recent years, is largely owing to political and other causes which have lately come into operation. I suppose it will not be denied that, to a very large extent, any efforts which have been made in the past for the social, intellectual, and moral, and religious elevation of the people have had their impulse, and to a large extent their support, both pecuniary and active, from Christian churches and individuals. All that is perfectly true and, I believe, undeniable. But it is also true that there remains an enormous, shameful, dead mass of inertness in our churches, and that, unless we can break up that, the omens are bad, bad for society, worse for the church. If cholera is raging in the slums, the suburbs will not escape. If the hovels are infected, the mansions will have to pay their tribute to the disease. If we do not recognise the brotherhood of the suffering and the sinful, in any other fashion-'Then,' as a great teacher told us a generation ago now, and nobody paid any attention to him, 'then they will begin and show you that they are your brethren by killing some of you.' And so self-preservation conjoins with loftier motives to make this sympathetic observation of the surrounding sorrows the plainest of Christian duties.

II. Secondly, such a realisation of the dark facts is indispensable to all true work for alleviating them.

There is no way of helping men out by bearing what they bear. No man will ever lighten a sorrow of which he has not himself felt the pressure. Jesus Christ's Cross, to which we are ever appealing as the ground of our redemption and the anchor of our hope, is these, thank God! But it is more than these. It is the pattern for our lives, and it lays down, with stringent accuracy and completeness, the enduring conditions of helping the sinful and the sorrowful. The 'saviours of society' have still, in lower fashion, to be crucified. Jesus Christ would never have been 'the Lamb of God that bore away the sins of the world' unless He Himself had 'taken our infirmities and borne our sicknesses.' No work of any real use will be done except by those whose hearts have bled with the feeling of the miseries which they set themselves to cure.

Oh! we all want a far fuller realisation of that sympathetic spirit of the pitying Christ, if we are ever to be of any use in the world, or to help the miseries of any of our brethren. Such a sorrowful and participating contemplation of men's sorrows springing from men's sins will give tenderness to our words, will give patience, will soften our whole bearing. Help that is flung to people, as you might fling a bone to a dog, hurts those whom it tries to help, and patronising help is help that does little good, and lecturing help does little more. You must take blind beggars by the hand if you are going to make them see; and you must not be afraid to lay your white, clean fingers upon the feculent masses of corruption in the leper's glistening whiteness if you are going to make him whole. Go down in order to lift, and remember that without sympathy there is no sufficient help, and without communion with Christ there is no sufficient sympathy.

III. Thirdly, such realisation of surrounding sorrows should drive to communion with God.

Nehemiah wept and mourned, and that was well. But between his weeping and mourning and his practical work there had to be still another link of connection. ‘He wept and mourned,’ and because he was sad he turned to God, ‘and I fasted and prayed certain days.’ There he got at once comfort for his sorrows, his sympathies, and deepening of his sympathies, and thence he drew inspiration that made him a hero and a martyr. So all true service for the world must begin with close communion with God.

There was a book published several years since which made a great noise in its little day, and called itself *The Service of Man*, which service it proposed to substitute for the effete conception of worship as the service of God. The service of man is, then, best done when it is the service of God. I suppose nowadays it is ‘old-fashioned’ and ‘narrow,’ which is the sin of sins at present, but I for my part have very little faith in the persistence and wide operation of any philanthropic motives except the highest-namely, compassion caught from Jesus Christ. I do not believe that you will get men, year in and year out, to devote themselves in any considerable numbers to the service of man unless you appeal to this highest of motives. You may enlist a little corps-and God forbid that I should deny such a plain fact-of selecter spirits to do purely secular alleviative work, with an entire ignoring of Christian motives, but you will never get the army of workers that is needed to grapple with the facts of our present condition, unless you touch the very deepest springs of conduct, and these are to be found in communion with God. All the rest is surface drainage. Get down to the love of God, and the love of men therefrom, and you have got an Artesian well which will bubble up unfailingly.

And I have not much faith in remedies which ignore religion, and are brought, without communion with God, as sufficient for the disease. I do not want to say one word that might seem to depreciate what are good and valid and noble efforts in their several spheres. There is no need for antagonism-rather, Christian men are bound by every consideration to help to the utmost of their power, even in the incomplete attempts that are made to grapple with social problems. There is room enough for us all. But sure I am that until grapes and waterbeds cure smallpox, and a spoonful of cold water puts out Vesuvius, you will not cure the evils of the body politic by any lesser means than the application of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We hear a great deal to-day about a ‘social gospel,’ and I am glad of the conception, and of the favour which it receives. Only let us remember that the Gospel is social *second*, and individual *first*. And that if you get the love of God and obedience to Jesus Christ into a man’s heart it will be like putting gas into a balloon, it will go up, and the man will get out of the slums fast enough; and he will not be a slave to the vices of the world much longer, and you will have done more for him and for the wide circle that he may influence than by any other means. I do not want to depreciate any helpers, but I say it is the work of the Christian church to carry to the world the only thing that will make men deeply and abidingly happy, because it will make them good.

IV. And so, lastly, such sympathy should be the parent of a noble, self-sacrificing life.

Look at the man in our text. He had the ball at his feet. He had the *entree* of a court, and the ear of a king. Brilliant prospects were opening before him, but his brethren’s sufferings drew him, and with a noble resolution of self-sacrifice, he shut himself out from the former and went into the wilderness. He is one of the Scripture characters that never have had due honour-a hero, a saint, a martyr, a reformer. He did, though in a smaller sphere, the very same thing that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews magnified with his splendid eloquence, in reference to the great Lawgiver, ‘And chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God,’ and to turn his back upon the dazzlements of a court, than to ‘enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season,’ whilst his brethren were suffering.

Now, dear friends! the letter of the example may be put aside; the spirit of it must be observed. If Christians are to do the work that they can do, and that Christ has put them into this world that they may do, there must be self-sacrifice with it. There is no shirking that obligation, and there is no discharging our duty without it. You and I, in our several ways, are as much under the sway of that absolute law, that ‘if a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it brings forth fruit,’ as ever was Jesus Christ or His

Apostles. I have nothing to say about the manner of the sacrifice. It is no part of my business to prescribe to you details of duty. It is my business to insist on the principles which must regulate these, and of these principles in application to Christian service there is none more stringent than-'I will not offer unto my God burnt-offering of that which doth cost me nothing.'

I am sure that, under God, the great remedy for social evils lies mainly here, that the bulk of professing Christians shall recognise and discharge their responsibilities. It is not ministers, city missionaries, Bible-women, or any other paid people that can do the work. It is by Christian men and by Christian women, and, if I might use a very vulgar distinction which has a meaning in the present connection, very specially by Christian ladies, taking their part in the work amongst the degraded and the outcasts, that our sorest difficulties and problems will be solved. If a church does not face these, well, all I can say is, its light will go out; and the sooner the better. 'If thou forbear to deliver them that are appointed to death, and say, Behold! I knew it not, shall not He that weigheth the hearts consider it, and shall He not render to every man according to his work?' And, on the other hand, there are no blessings more rich, select, sweet, and abiding, than are to be found in sharing the sorrow of the Man of Sorrows, and carrying the message of His pity and His redemption to an outcast world. 'If thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul, the Lord shall satisfy thy soul; and thou shalt be as a watered garden, and as a spring of water whose waters fail not.'

3) Nehemiah 1:5-11

Nehemiah

A REFORMER'S SCHOOLING

Neh. 1:1 - Neh. 1:11.

The date of the completion of the Temple is 516 B.C.; that of Nehemiah's arrival 445 B.C. The colony of returned exiles seems to have made little progress during that long period. Its members settled down, and much of their enthusiasm cooled, as we see from the reforms which Ezra had to inaugurate fourteen years before Nehemiah. The majority of men, even if touched by spiritual fervour, find it hard to keep on the high levels for long. Breathing is easier lower down. As is often the case, a brighter flame of zeal burned in the bosoms of sympathisers at a distance than in those of the actual workers, whose contact with hard realities and petty details disenchanted them. Thus the impulse to nobler action came, not from one of the colony, but from a Jew in the court of the Persian king.

This passage tells us how God prepared a man for a great work, and how the man prepared himself.

I. Sad tidings and their effect on a devout servant of God [Neh. 1:1 - Neh. 1:4]. The time and place are precisely given. ‘The month Chislev’ corresponds to the end of November and beginning of December. ‘The twentieth year’ is that of Artaxerxes [Neh. 2:1]. ‘Shushan,’ or Susa, was the royal winter residence, and ‘the palace’ was ‘a distinct quarter of the city, occupying an artificial eminence.’ Note the absence of the name of the king. Nehemiah is so familiar with his greatness that he takes for granted that every reader can fill the gaps. But, though the omission shows how large a space the court occupied in his thoughts, a true Jewish heart beat below the courtier’s robe. That flexibility which enabled them to stand as trusted servants of the kings of many lands, and yet that inflexible adherence to, and undying love of, Israel, has always been a national characteristic. We can think of this youthful cup-bearer as yearning for one glimpse of the ‘mountains round about Jerusalem’ while he filled his post in Shushan.

His longings were kindled into resolve by intercourse with a little party of Jews from Judaea, among whom was his own brother. They had been to see how things went there, and the fact that one of them was a member of Nehemiah’s family seems to imply that the same sentiments belonged to the whole household. Eager questions brought out sorrowful answers. The condition of the ‘remnant’ was one of ‘great affliction and reproach,’ and the ground of the reproach was probably [Neh. 2:17; Neh. 4:2 - Neh. 4:4] the still ruined fortifications.

It has been supposed that the breaking down of the walls and burning of the gates, mentioned in Neh. 1:3, were recent, and subsequent to the events recorded in Ezra; but it is more probable that the project for rebuilding the defences, which had been stopped by superior orders [Ezr. 4:12 - Ezr. 4:16], had not been resumed, and that the melancholy ruins were those which had met the eyes of Zerubbabel nearly a hundred years before. Communication between Shushan and Jerusalem cannot have been so infrequent that the facts now borne in on Nehemiah might not have been known before. But the impression made by facts depends largely on their narrator, and not a little on the mood of the hearer. It was one thing to hear general statements, and another to sit with one's brother, and see through his eyes the dismal failure of the 'remnant' to carry out the purpose of their return. So the story, whether fresh or repeated with fresh force, made a deep dint in the young cupbearer's heart, and changed his life's outlook. God prepares His servants for their work by laying on their souls a sorrowful realisation of the miseries which other men regard, and they themselves have often regarded, very lightly. The men who have been raised up to do great work for God and men, have always to begin by greatly and sadly feeling the weight of the sins and sorrows which they are destined to remove. No man will do worthy work at rebuilding the walls who has not wept over the ruins.

So Nehemiah prepared himself for his work by brooding over the tidings with tears, by fasting and by prayer. There is no other way of preparation. Without the sad sense of men's sorrows, there will be no earnestness in alleviating them, nor self-sacrificing devotion; and without much prayer there will be little consciousness of weakness or dependence on divine help.

Note the grand and apparently immediate resolution to throw up brilliant prospects and face a life of danger and suffering and toil. Nehemiah was evidently a favourite with the king, and had the ball at his foot. But the ruins on Zion were more attractive to him than the splendours of Shushan, and he willingly flung away his chances of a great career to take his share of 'affliction and reproach.' He has never had justice done him in popular estimation. He is not one of the well-known biblical examples of heroic self-abandonment; but he did just what Moses did, and the eulogium of the Epistle to the Hebrews fits him as well as the lawgiver; for he too chose 'rather to suffer with the people of God than to enjoy pleasures for a season.' So must we all, in our several ways, do, if we would have a share in building the walls of the city of God.

II. The prayer [Neh. 1:5 - Neh. 1:11]. The course of thought in this prayer is very instructive. It begins with solemnly laying before God His own great name, as the mightiest plea with Him, and the strongest encouragement to the suppliant. That commencement is no mere proper invocation, conventionally regarded as the right way of beginning, but it expresses the petitioner's effort to lay hold on God's character as the ground of his hope of answer. The terms employed remarkably blend what Nehemiah had learned from Persian religion and what from a better source. He calls upon Jehovah, the great name which was the special possession of Israel. He also uses the characteristic Persian designation of 'the God of heaven,' and identifies the bearer of that name, not with the god to whom it was originally applied, but with Israel's Jehovah. He takes the crown from the head of the false deity, and lays it at the feet of the God of his fathers. Whatsoever names for the Supreme Excellence any tongues have coined, they all belong to our God, in so far as they are true and noble. The modern 'science of comparative religion' yields many treasures which should be laid up in Jehovah's Temple.

But the rest of the designations are taken from the Old Testament, as was fitting. The prayer throughout is full of allusions and quotations, and shows how this cupbearer of Artaxerxes had fed his young soul on God's word, and drawn thence the true nourishment of high and holy thoughts and strenuous resolutions and self-sacrificing deeds. Prayers which are cast in the mould of God's own revelation of Himself will not fail of answer. True prayer catches up the promises that flutter down to us, and flings them up again like arrows.

The prayer here is all built, then, on that name of Jehovah, and on what the name involves, chiefly on the thought of God as keeping covenant and mercy. He has bound Himself in solemn, irrefragable compact, to a certain line of action. Men 'know where to have Him,' if we may venture on the familiar expression. He has given us a chart of His course, and He will adhere to it. Therefore we can go to Him with our prayers, so long as we keep these within the ample space of His covenant, and ourselves within its terms, by loving obedience.

The petition that God’s ears might be sharpened and His eyes open to the prayer is cast in a familiar mould. It boldly transfers to Him not only the semblance of man’s form, but also the likeness of His processes of action. Hearing the cry for help precedes active intervention in the case of men’s help, and the strong imagery of the prayer conceives of similar sequence in God. But the figure is transparent, and the ‘anthropomorphism’ so plain that no mistakes can arise in its interpretation.

Note, too, the light touch with which the suppliant’s relation to God [‘Thy servant’] and his long-continued cry [‘day and night’] are but just brought in for a moment as pleas for a gracious hearing. The prayer is ‘for Thy servants the children of Israel,’ in which designation, as the next clauses show, the relation established by God, and not the conduct of men, is pleaded as a reason for an answer.

The mention of that relation brings at once to Nehemiah’s mind the terrible unfaithfulness to it which had marked, and still continued to mark, the whole nation. So lowly confession follows [Neh. 1:6 - Neh. 1:7]. Unprofitable servants they had indeed been. The more loftily we think of our privileges, the more clearly should we discern our sins. Nothing leads a true heart to such self-ashamed penitence as reflection on God’s mercy. If a man thinks that God has taken him for a servant, the thought should bow him with conscious unworthiness, not lift him in self-satisfaction. Nehemiah’s confession not only sprung from the thought of Israel’s vocation, so poorly fulfilled, but it also laid the groundwork for further petitions. It is useless to ask God to help us to repair the wastes if we do not cast out the sins which have made them. The beginning of all true healing of sorrow is confession of sins. Many promising schemes for the alleviation of national and other distresses have come to nothing because, unlike Nehemiah’ s, they did not begin with prayer, or prayed for help without acknowledging sin.

And the man who is to do work for God and to get God to bless his work must not be content with acknowledging other people’s sins, but must always say, ‘We have sinned,’ and not seldom say, ‘I have sinned.’ That penitent consciousness of evil is indispensible to all who would make their fellows happier. God works with bruised reeds. The sense of individual transgression gives wonderful tenderness, patience amid gainsaying, submission in failure, dependence on God in difficulty, and lowliness in success. Without it we shall do little for ourselves or for anybody else.

The prayer next reminds God of His own words [Neh. 1:8 - Neh. 1:9], freely quoted and combined from several passages [Lev. 26:33 - Lev. 26:45; Deu. 4:25 - Deu. 4:31, etc.]. The application of these passages to the then condition of things is at first sight somewhat loose, since part of the people were already restored; and the purport of the prayer is not the restoration of the remainder, but the deliverance of those already in the land from their distresses. Still, the promise gives encouragement to the prayer and is powerful with God, inasmuch as it could not be said to have been fulfilled by so incomplete a restoration as that as that at present realised. What God does must be perfectly done; and His great word is not exhausted so long as any fuller accomplishment of it can be imagined.

The reminder of the promise is clinched [v. 10] by the same appeal as formerly to the relation to Himself into which God had been pleased to bring the nation, with an added reference to former deeds, such as the Exodus, in which His strong hand had delivered them. We are always sure of an answer if we ask God not to contradict Himself. Since He has begun He will make an end. It will never be said of Him that He ‘began to build and was not able to finish.’ His past is a mirror in which we can read His future. The return from Babylon is implied in the Exodus.

A reiteration of earlier words follows, with the addition that Nehemiah now binds, as it were, his single prayer in a bundle with those of the like-minded in Israel. He gathers single ears into a sheaf, which he brings as a ‘wave-offering.’ And then, in one humble little sentence at the end, he puts his only personal request. The modesty of the man is lovely. His prayer has been all for the people. Remarkably enough, there is no definite petition in it. He never once says right out what he so earnestly desires, and the absence of specific requests might be laid hold of by sceptical critics as an argument against the genuineness of the prayer. But it is rather a subtle trait, on which no forger would have been likely to hit. Sometimes silence is the very result of entire occupation of mind with a thought. He says nothing about the particular nature of his request, just because he is so full of it. But he does ask for favour in the eyes of ‘this man,’ and that he may be prospered ‘this day.’

So this was his morning prayer on that eventful day, which was to settle his life’s work. The certain days of solitary meditation on his nation’s griefs had led to a resolution. He says nothing about his long brooding, his slow decision, his conflicts with lower projects of personal ambition. He ‘burns his own smoke,’ as we all should learn to do. But he asks that the capricious and potent will of the king may be inclined to grant his request. If our morning supplication is ‘Prosper Thy servant this day,’ and our purposes are for God’s glory, we need not fear facing anybody. However powerful Artaxerxes was, he was but ‘this man,’ not God. The phrase does not indicate contempt or undervaluing of the solid reality of his absolute power over Nehemiah, but simply expresses the conviction that the king, too, was a subject of God’ s, and that his heart was in the hand of Jehovah, to mould as He would. The consciousness of dependence on God and the habit of communion with Him give a man a clear sight of the limitations of earthly dignities, and a modest boldness which is equally remote from rudeness and servility.

Thus prepared for whatever might be the issue of that eventful day, the young cupbearer rose from his knees, drew a long breath, and went to his work. Well for us if we go to ours, whether it be a day of crisis or of commonplace, in like fashion! Then we shall have like defence and like calmness of heart.

4) Nehemiah 3:28

Nehemiah

‘OVER AGAINST HIS HOUSE’

Neh. 3:28.

The condition of our great cities has lately been forced upon public attention, and all kinds of men have been offering their panaceas. I am not about to enter upon that discussion, but I am glad to seize the opportunity of saying one or two things which I think very much need to be said to individual Christian people about their duty in the matter. ‘Every man over against his house’ is the principle I desire to commend to you as going a long way to solve the problem of how to sweeten the foul life of our modern cities.

The story from which my text is taken does not need to detain us long. Nehemiah and his little band of exiles have come back to a ruined Jerusalem. Their first care is to provide for their safety, and the first step is to know the exact extent of their defencelessness. So we have the account of Nehemiah’s midnight ride amongst the ruins of the broken walls. And then we read of the co-operation of all classes in the work of reconstruction. ‘Many hands made light work.’ Men and women, priests and nobles, goldsmiths, apothecaries, merchants, all seized trowel or spade, and wheeled and piled. One man puts up a long length of wall, another can only manage a little bit; another undertakes the locks, bolts, and bars for the gates. Roughly and hastily the work is done. The result, of course, is very unlike the stately structures of Solomon’s or of Herod’s time, but it is enough for shelter. We can imagine the sigh of relief with which the workers looked upon the completed circle of their rude fortifications.

The principle of division of labour in our text is repeated several times in this list of the builders. It was a natural one; a man would work all the better when he saw his own roof mutely appealing to be defended, and thought of the dear ones that were there. But I take these words mainly as suggesting some thoughts applicable to the duties of Christian people in view of the spiritual wants of our great cities.

I. I need not do more than say a word or two about the ruins which need repair. If I dwell rather upon the dark side than on the bright side of city life I shall not be understood, as forgetting that the very causes which intensify the evil of a great city quicken the good-the friction of multitudes and the impetus thereby given to all kinds of mental activity. Here amongst us there is much that is admirable and noble-much public spirit, much wise and benevolent expenditure of thought and toil for the general good, much conjoint action by men of different parties, earnest antagonism and earnest co-operation, and a free, bracing intellectual atmosphere, which stimulates activity. All that is true, though, on the other hand, it is not good to live always within hearing of the clatter of machinery and the strife of tongues; and the wisdom that is born of solitary meditation and quiet thought is less frequently met with in cities than is the cleverness that is born of intercourse with men, and newspaper reading.

But there is a tragic other side to all that, which mostly we make up our minds to say little about and to forget. The indifference which has made that ignorance possible, and has in its turn been fed by the ignorance, is in some respects a more shocking phenomenon than the vicious life which it has allowed to rot and to reek unheeded.

Most of us have got so familiarised with the evils that stare us in the face every time we go out upon the pavements, that we have come to think of them as being inseparable from our modern life, like the noise of a carriage wheel from its rotation. And is it so then? Is it indeed inevitable that within a stone’s throw of our churches and chapels there should be thousands of men and women that have never been inside a place of worship since they were christened; and have no more religion than a horse? Must it be that the shining structure of our modern society, like an old Mexican temple, must be built upon a layer of living men, flung in for a foundation? Can it not be helped that there should be streets in our cities into which it is unfit for a decent woman to go by day alone, and unsafe for a brave man to venture after nightfall? Must men and women huddle together in dens where decency is as impossible as it is for swine in a sty? Is it an indispensable part of our material progress and wonderful civilisation that vice and crime and utter irreligion and hopeless squalor should go with it? Can all that bilge water really not be pumped out of the ship? If it be so, then I venture to say that, to a very large extent, progress is a delusion, and that the simple life of agricultural communities is better than this unwholesome aggregation of men.

The beginning of Nehemiah’s work of repair was that sad midnight ride round the ruined walls. So there is a solemn obligation laid on Christian people to acquaint themselves with the awful facts, and then to meditate on them, till sacred, Christ-like compassion, pressing against the flood-gates of the heart, flings them open, and lets out a stream of helpful pity and saving deeds.

II. So much for my first point. My second is-the ruin is to be repaired mainly by the old Gospel of Jesus Christ. Far be it from me to pit remedies against each other. The causes are complicated, and the cure must be as manifold as the causes. For my own part I believe that, in regard to the condition of the lowest of our outcast population, drink and lust have done it almost all, and that for all but an infinitesimal portion of it, intemperance is directly or indirectly the cause. That has to be fought by the distinct preaching of abstinence, and by the invoking of legislative restrictions upon the traffic. Wretched homes have to be dealt with by sanitary reform, which may require municipal and parliamentary action. Domestic discomfort has to be dealt with by teaching wives the principles of domestic economy. The gracious influence of art and music, pictures and window-gardening, and the like, will lend their aid to soften and refine. Coffee taverns, baths and wash-houses, workmen's clubs, and many other agencies are doing real and good work. I for one say, 'God speed to them all,' and willingly help them so far as I can.

But, as a Christian man, I believe that I know a thing that if lodged in a man's heart will do pretty nearly all which they aspire to do; and whilst I rejoice in the multiplied agencies for social elevation, I believe that I shall best serve my generation, and I believe that ninety-nine out of a hundred of you will do so too, by trying to get men to love and fear Jesus Christ the Saviour. If you can get His love into a man's heart, that will produce new tastes and new inclinations, which will reform, and sweeten, and purify faster than anything else does.

They tell us that Nonconformist ministers are never seen in the slums; well, that is a libel! But I should like to ask why it is that the Roman Catholic priest is seen there more than the Nonconformist minister? Because the one man's congregation is there, and the other man's is not-which, being translated into other words, is this: the religion of Jesus Christ mostly keeps people out of the slums, and certainly it will take a man out of them if once it gets into his heart, more certainly and quickly than anything else will.

So, dear friends! if we have in our hearts and in our hands this great message of God's love, we have in our possession the germ out of which all things that are lovely and of good report will grow. It will purify, elevate, and sweeten society, because it will make individuals pure and strong, and homes holy and happy. We do not need to draw comparisons between this and other means of reparation, and still less to feel any antagonism to them or the benevolent men who work them; but we should fix it in our minds that the principles of Christ's Gospel adhered to by individuals, and therefore by communities, would have rendered such a condition of things impossible, and that the true repair of the ruin wrought by evil and ignorance, in the single soul, in the family, the city, the nation, the world, is to be found in building anew on the One Foundation which God has laid, even Jesus Christ, the Living Stone, whose pure life passes into all that are grounded and founded on Him.

III. Lastly, this remedy is to be applied by the individual action of Christian men and women on the people nearest them.

'The priests repaired every one over against his house.' We are always tempted, in the face of large disasters, to look for heroic and large remedies, and to invoke corporate action of some sort, which is a great deal easier for most of us than the personal effort that is required. When a great scandal and danger like this of the condition of the lower layers of our civic population is presented before men, for one man that says, 'What can *I* do?' there are twenty who say, 'Somebody should do something. Government should do something. The Corporation should do something. This, that, or the other aggregate of men should do something.' And the individual calmly and comfortably slips his neck out of the collar and leaves it on the shoulders of these abstractions.

As I have said, there are plenty of things that need to be done by these somebodies. But what they do [they will be a long time in doing it], when they do get to work will only touch the fringe of the question, and the substance and the centre of it you can set to work upon this very day if you like, and not wait for anybody either to set you the example or to show you the way.

If you want to do people good you can; but you must pay the price for it. That price is personal sacrifice and effort. The example of Jesus Christ is the all-instructive one in the case. People talk about Him being their Pattern, but they often forget that whatever more there was in Christ's Cross and Passion there was this in it:-the exemplification for all time of the one law by which any reformation can be wrought on men-that a sympathising man shall give himself to do it, and that by personal influence alone men will be drawn and won from out of the darkness and filth. A loving heart and a sympathetic word, the exhibition of a Christian life and conduct, the fact of going down into the midst of evil and trying to lift men out of it, are the old-fashioned and only magnets by which men are drawn to purer and higher life. That is God’s way of saving the world-by the action of single souls on single souls. Masses of men can neither save nor be saved. Not in groups, but one by one, particle by particle, soul by soul, Christ draws men to Himself, and He does His work in the world through single souls on fire with His love, and tender with pity learned of Him.

So, dear friends! do not think that any organisation, any corporate activity, any substitution of vicarious service, will solve the problem. It will not. There is only one way of doing it, the old way that we must tread if we are going to do anything for God and our fellows: ‘The priests repaired every one over against his house.’

Let me briefly point out some very plain and obvious things which bear upon this matter of individual action. Let me remind you that if you are a Christian man you have in your possession the thing which will cure the world’s woe, and possession involves responsibility. What would you think of a man that had a specific for some pestilence that was raging in a city, and was contented to keep it for his own use, or at most for his family’s use, when his brethren were dying by the thousand, and their corpses polluting the air? And what shall we say of men and women who call themselves Christians, who have some faith in that great Lord and His mighty sacrifice; who know that the men they meet with every day of their lives are dying for want of it, and who yet themselves do absolutely nothing to spread His name, and to heal men’s hurts? What shall we say? God forbid that we should say they are not Christians! but God forbid that anybody should flatter them with the notion that they are anything but most inconsistent Christians!

Still further, need I remind you that if we have found anything in Jesus Christ which has been peace and rest for ourselves, Christ has thereby called us to this work? He has found and saved us, not only for our own personal good. That, of course, is the prime purpose of our salvation, but not its exclusive purpose. He has saved us, too, in order that the Word may be spread through us to those beyond. ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until the whole was leavened,’ and every little bit of the dough, as it received into itself the leaven, and was transformed, became a medium for transmitting the transformation to the next particle beyond it and so the whole was at last permeated by the power. We get the grace for ourselves that we may pass it on; and as the Apostle says: ‘God hath shined into our hearts that we might give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’

And you can do it, you Christian men and women, every one of you, and preach Him to somebody. The possession of His love gives the commission; ay! and it gives the power. There is nothing so mighty as the confession of personal experience. Do not you think that when that first of Christian converts, and first of Christian preachers went to his brother, all full of what he had discovered, his simple saying, ‘We have found the Messias,’ was a better sermon than a far more elaborate proclamation would have been? My brother! if you have found Him, you can say so; and if you can say so, and your character and your life confirm the words of your lips, you will have done more to spread His name than much eloquence and many an orator. All can preach who can say, ‘We have found the Christ.’

The last word I have to say is this: there is no other body that can do it but you. They say:-’What an awful thing it is that there are no churches or chapels in these outcast districts!’ If there were they would be what the churches and chapels are now-half empty. Bricks and mortar built up into ecclesiastical forms are not the way to evangelise this or any other country. It is a very easy thing to build churches and chapels. It is not such an easy thing-I believe it is an impossible thing [and that the sooner the Christian church gives up the attempt the better]-to get the godless classes into any church or chapel. Conducted on the principles upon which churches and chapels must needs at present be conducted, they are for another class altogether; and we had better recognise it, because then we shall feel that no multiplication of buildings like this in which we now are, for instance, is any direct contribution to the evangelisation of the waste spots of the country, except in so far as from a centre like this there ought to go out much influence which will originate direct missionary action in places and fashions adapted to the outlying community.

Professional work is not what we want. Any man, be he minister, clergyman, Bible-reader, city missionary, who goes among our godless population with the suspicion of pay about him is the weaker for that. What is needed besides is that ladies and gentlemen that are a little higher up in the social scale than these poor creatures, should go to them themselves; and excavate and work. Preach, if you like, in the technical sense; have meetings, I suppose, necessarily; but the personal contact is the thing, the familiar talk, the simple exhibition of a loving Christian heart, and the unconventional proclamation in free conversation of the broad message of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Why, if all the people in this chapel who can do that would do it, and keep on doing it, who can tell what an influence would come from some hundreds of new workers for Christ? And why should the existence of a church in which the workers are as numerous as the Christians be an Utopian dream? It is simply the dream that perhaps a church might be conceived to exist, all the members of which had found out their plainest, most imperative duty, and were really trying to do it.

No carelessness, no indolence, no plea of timidity or business shift the obligation from your shoulders if you are a Christian. It is your business, and no paid agents can represent you. You cannot buy yourselves substitutes in Christ’s army, as they used to do in the militia, by a guinea subscription. We are thankful for the money, because there are kinds of work to be done that unpaid effort will not do. But men ask for your money; Jesus Christ asks for yourself, for your work, and will not let you off as having done your duty because you have paid your subscription. No doubt there are some of you who, from various circumstances, cannot yourselves do work amongst the masses of the outcast population. Well, but you have got people by your side whom you can help. The question which I wish to ask of my Christian brethren and sisters now is this: Is there a man, woman, or child living to whom you ever spoke a word about Jesus Christ? Is there? If not, do not you think it is time that you began?

There are people in your houses, people that sit by you in your counting-house, on your college benches, who work by your side in mill or factory or warehouse, who cross your path in a hundred ways, and God has given them to you that you may bring them to Him. Do you set yourself, dear brother, to work and try to bring them. Oh! if you lived nearer Jesus Christ you would catch the sacred fire from Him; and like a bit of cold iron lying beside a magnet, touching Him, you would yourselves become magnetic and draw men out of their evil and up to God.

Let me commend to you the old pattern: ‘The priests repaired every one over against his house’; and beseech you to take the trowel and spade, or anything that comes handiest, and build, in the bit nearest you, some living stones on the true Foundation.

5) Nehemiah 4:9-21

Nehemiah

DISCOURAGEMENTS AND COURAGE

Neh. 4:9 - Neh. 4:21.

Common hatred has a wonderful power of uniting former foes. Samaritans, wild Arabs of the desert, Ammonites, and inhabitants of Ashdod in the Philistine plain would have been brought together for no noble work, but mischief and malice fused them for a time into one. God’s work is attacked from all sides. Herod and Pilate can shake hands over their joint antagonism.

This passage paints vividly the discouragements which are apt to dog all good work, and the courage which refuses to be discouraged, and conquers by bold persistence. The first verse [Neh. 4:9] may stand as a summary of the whole, though it refers to the preceding, not to the following, verses. The true way to meet opposition is twofold-prayer and prudent watchfulness. ‘Pray to God, and keep your powder dry,’ is not a bad compendium of the duty of a Christian soldier. The union of appeal to God with the full use of common sense, watchfulness, and prudence, would dissipate many hindrances to successful service.

I. In Neh. 4:10 - Neh. 4:12 Nehemiah tells, in his simple way, of the difficulties from three several quarters which threatened to stop his work. He had trouble from the workmen, from the enemies, and from the mass of Jews not resident in Jerusalem. The enthusiasm of the builders had cooled, and the magnitude of their task began to frighten them. Neh. 4:6 tells us that the wall was completed 'unto the half of it'; that is, to one-half the height, and half-way through is just the critical time in all protracted work. The fervour of beginning has passed; the animation from seeing the end at hand has not sprung up. There is a dreary stretch in the centre, where it takes much faith and self-command to plod on unfainting. Half-way to Australia from England is the region of sickening calms. It is easier to work in the fresh morning or in the cool evening than at midday. So in every great movement there are short-winded people who sit down and pant very soon, and their prudence croaks out undeniable facts. No doubt strength does become exhausted; no doubt there is 'much rubbish' [literally 'dust']. What then? The conclusion drawn is not so unquestionable as the premises. 'We cannot build the wall' Why not? Have you not built half of it? And was not the first half more embarrassed by rubbish than the second will be?

It is a great piece of Christian duty to recognise difficulties, and not be cowed by them. The true inference from the facts would have been, 'so that we must put all our strength into the work, and trust in our God to help us.' We may not be responsible for discouragements suggesting themselves, but we are responsible for letting them become dissuasives. Our one question should be, Has God appointed the work? If so, it has to be done, however little our strength, and however mountainous the accumulations of rubbish.

The second part in the trio was taken by the enemies-Sanballat and Tobiah and the rest. They laid their plans for a sudden swoop down on Jerusalem, and calculated that, if they could surprise the builders at their work, they would have no weapons to show fight with, and so would be easily despatched. Killing the builders was but a means; the desired end is significantly put last [Neh. 4:11], as being the stopping of the abhorred work. But killing the workmen does not cause the work to cease when it is God's work, as the history of the Church in all ages shows. Conspirators should hold their tongues. It was not a hopeful way of beginning an attack, of which the essence was secrecy and suddenness, to talk about it. ‘A bird of the air carries the matter.’

The third voice is that of the Jews in other parts of the land, and especially those living on the borders of Samaria, next door to Sanballat. Neh. 4:12 is probably best taken as in the Revised Version, which makes ‘Ye must return to us’ the imperative and often-repeated summons from these to the contingents from their respective places of abode, who had gone up to Jerusalem to help in building. Alarms of invasion made the scattered villagers wish to have all their men capable of bearing arms back again to defend their own homes. It was a most natural demand, but in this case, as so often, audacity is truest prudence; and in all high causes there come times when men have to trust their homes and dear ones to God’s protection. The necessity is heartrending, and we may well pray that we may not be exposed to it; but if it clearly arises, a devout man can have no doubt of his duty. How many American citizens had to face it in the great Civil War! And how character is ennobled by even so severe a sacrifice!

II. The calm heroism of Nehemiah and his wise action in the emergency are told in Neh. 4:13 - Neh. 4:15. He made a demonstration in force, which at once showed that the scheme of a surprise was blown to pieces. It is difficult to make out the exact localities in which he planted his men. ‘The lower places behind the wall’ probably means the points at which the new fortifications were lowest, which would be the most exposed to assault; and the ‘higher places’ [Auth. Ver.], or ‘open places’ [Rev. Ver.], describes the same places from another point of view. They afforded room for posting troops because they were without buildings. At any rate, the walls were manned, and the enemy would have to deal, not with unarmed labourers, but with prepared soldiers. The work was stopped, and trowel and spade exchanged for sword and spear. ‘And I looked,’ says Nehemiah. His careful eye travelled over the lines, and, seeing all in order, he cheered the little army with ringing words. He had prayed [Neh. 1:5] to ‘the great and terrible God,’ and now he bids his men remember Him, and thence draw strength and courage. The only real antagonist of fear is faith. If we can grasp God, we shall not dread Sanballat and his crew. Unless we do, the world is full of dangers which it is not folly to fear.

Note, too, that the people are animated for the fight by reminding them of the dear ones whose lives and honour hung on the issue. Nothing is said about fighting for God and His Temple and city, but the motives adduced are not less sacred. Family love is God's best of earthly gifts, and, though it is sometimes duty to 'forget thine own people, and thy father's house,' as we have just seen, nothing short of these highest obligations can supersede the sweet one of straining every nerve for the well-being of dear ones in the hallowed circle of home.

So the plan of a sudden rush came to nothing. It does not appear that the enemy was in sight; but the news of the demonstration soon reached them, and was effectual. Prompt preparation against possible dangers is often the means of turning them aside. Watchfulness is indispensable to vigour of Christian character and efficiency of work. Suspicion is hateful and weakening; but a man who tries to serve God in such a world as this had need to be like the living creatures in the Revelation, having 'eyes all over.' 'Blessed is the man that [in that sense] feareth always.'

The upshot of the alarm is very beautifully told: 'We returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work.' No time was wasted in jubilation. The work was the main thing, and the moment the interruption was ended, back to it they all went. It is a fine illustration of persistent discharge of duty, and of that most valuable quality, the ability and inclination to keep up the main purpose of a life continuous through interruptions, like a stream of sweet water running through a bog.

III. The remainder of the passage tells us of the standing arrangements made in consequence of the alarm [Neh. 4:16 - Neh. 4:21]. First we hear what Nehemiah did with his own special 'servants,' whether these were slaves who had accompanied him from Shushan [as Stanley supposes], or his body-guard as a Persian official. He divided them into two parts-one to work, one to watch. But he did not carry out this plan with the mass of the people, probably because it would have too largely diminished the number of builders. So he armed them all. The labourers who carried stones, mortar, and the like, could do their work after a fashion with one hand, and so they had a weapon in the other. If they worked in pairs, that would be all the easier. The actual builders needed both hands, and so they had swords stuck in their girdles. No doubt such arrangements hindered progress, but they were necessary. The lesson often drawn from them is no doubt true, that God’s workers must be prepared for warfare as well as building. There have been epochs in which that necessity was realised in a very sad manner; and the Church on earth will always have to be the Church militant. But it is well to remember that building is the end, and fighting is but the means. The trowel, not the sword, is the natural instrument. Controversy is second best-a necessity, no doubt, but an unwelcome one, and only permissible as a subsidiary help to doing the true work, rearing the walls of the city of God.

‘He that soundeth the trumpet was by me.’ The gallant leader was everywhere, animating by his presence. He meant to be in the thick of the fight, if it should come. And so he kept the trumpeter by his side, and gave orders that when he sounded all should hurry to the place; for there the enemy would be, and Nehemiah would be where they were. ‘The work is great and large, and we are separated . . . one far from another.’ How naturally the words lend themselves to the old lesson so often drawn from them! God’s servants are widely parted, by distance, by time, and, alas! by less justifiable causes. Unless they draw together they will be overwhelmed, taken in detail, and crushed. They must rally to help each other against the common foe.

Thank God! the longing for manifest Christian unity is deeper to-day than ever it was. But much remains to be done before it is adequately fulfilled in the recognition of the common bond of brotherhood, which binds us all in one family, if we have one Father. English and American Christians are bound to seek the tightening of the bonds between them and to set themselves against politicians who may seek to keep apart those who both in the flesh and in the spirit are brothers. All Christians have one great Captain; and He will be in the forefront of every battle. His clear trumpet-call should gather all His servants to His side.

The closing verse tells again how Nehemiah’s immediate dependants divided work and watching, and adds to the picture the continuousness of their toil from the first grey of morning till darkness showed the stars and ended another day of toil. Happy they who thus ‘from morn till noon, from noon till dewy eve,’ labour in the work of the Lord! For them, every new morning will dawn with new strength, and every evening be calm with the consciousness of ‘something attempted, something done.’

6) Nehemiah 5:15

Nehemiah

AN ANCIENT NONCONFORMIST

Neh. 5:15.

I do not suppose that the ordinary Bible-reader knows very much about Nehemiah. He is one of the neglected great men of Scripture. He was no prophet, he had no glowing words, he had no lofty visions, he had no special commission, he did not live in the heroic age. There was a certain harshness and dryness; a tendency towards what, when it was more fully developed, became Pharisaism, in the man, which somewhat covers the essential nobleness of his character. But he was brave, cautious, circumspect, disinterested; and he had Jerusalem in his heart.

The words that I have read are a little fragment of his autobiography which deal with a prosaic enough matter, but carry in them large principles. When he was appointed governor of the little colony of returned exiles in Palestine, he found that his predecessors, like Turkish pashas and Chinese mandarins to-day, had been in the habit of ‘squeezing’ the people of their Government, and that they had requisitioned sufficient supplies of provisions to keep the governor’s table well spread. It was the custom. Nobody would have wondered if Nehemiah had conformed to it; but he felt that he must have his hands clean. Why did he not do what everybody else had done in like circumstances? His answer is beautifully simple: ‘Because of the fear of God.’ His religion went down into the little duties of common life, and imposed upon him a standard far above the maxims that were prevalent round about him. And so, if you will take these words, and disengage them from the small matter concerning which they were originally spoken, I think you will find in them thoughts as to the attitude which we should take to prevalent practices, the motive which should impel us to a sturdy non-compliance, and the power which will enable us to walk on a solitary road. ‘So did not I, because of the fear of God.’ Now, then, these are my three points:-

I. The attitude to prevalent practices.

Nehemiah would not conform. And unless you can say ‘No!’ and do it very often, your life will be shattered from the beginning. That non-compliance with customary maxims and practices is the beginning, or, at least, one of the foundation-stones, of all nobleness and strength, of all blessedness and power. Of course it is utterly impossible for a man to denude himself of the influences that are brought to bear upon him by the circumstances in which he lives, and the trend of opinion, and the maxims and practices of the world, in the corner, and at the time, in which his lot is cast. But, on the other hand, be sure of this, that unless you are in a very deep and not at all a technical sense of the word, ‘Nonconformists,’ you will come to no good. None! It is so easy to do as others do, partly because of laziness, partly because of cowardice, partly because of the instinctive imitation which is in us all. Men are gregarious. One great teacher has drawn an illustration from a flock of sheep, and says that if we hold up a stick, and the first of the flock jumps over it, and then if we take away the stick, all the rest of the flock will jump when they come to the point where the first did so. A great many of us adopt our creeds and opinions, and shape our lives for no better reason than because people round us are thinking in a certain direction, and living in a certain way. It saves a great deal of trouble, and it gratifies a certain strange instinct that is in us all, and it avoids dangers and conflicts that we should, when we are at Rome, do as the Romans do. ‘So did not I, because of the fear of God.’

Now, brethren! I ask you to take this plain principle of the necessity of non-compliance [which I suppose I do not need to do much to establish, because, theoretically, we most of us admit it], and apply it all round the circumference of your lives. Apply it to your opinions. There is no tyranny like the tyranny of a majority in a democratic country like ours. It is quite as harsh as the tyranny of the old-fashioned despots. Unless you resolve steadfastly to see with your own eyes, to use your own brains, to stand on your own feet, to be a voice and not an echo, you will be helplessly enslaved by the fashion of the hour, and the opinions that prevail.

‘What everybody says’-perhaps-’is true.’ What most people say, at any given time, is very likely to be false. Truth has always lived with minorities, so do not let the current of widespread opinion sweep you away, but try to have a mind of your own, and not to be brow-beaten or overborne because the majority of the people round about you are giving utterance, and it may be unmeasured utterance, to any opinions.

Now, there is one direction in which I wish to urge that especially-and now I speak mainly to the young men in my congregation-and that is, in regard to the attitude that so many amongst us are taking to Christian truth. If you have honestly thought out the subject to the best of your ability, and have come to conclusions diverse from those which men like me hold dearer than their lives, that is another matter. But I know that very widely there is spread to-day the fashion of unbelief. So many influential men, leaders of opinion, teachers and preachers, are giving up the old-fashioned Evangelical faith, that it takes a strong man to say that he sticks by it. It is a poor reason to give for your attitude, that unbelief is in the air, and nobody believes those old doctrines now. That may be. There are currents of opinion that are transitory, and that is one of them, depend upon it. But at all events do not be fooled out of your faith, as some of you are tending to be, for no better reason than because other people have given it up. An iceberg lowers the temperature all round it, and the iceberg of unbelief is amongst us to-day, and it has chilled a great many people who could not tell why they have lost the fervour of their faith.

On the other hand, let me remind you that a mere traditional religion, which is only orthodox because other people are so, and has not verified its beliefs by personal experience, is quite as deleterious as an imitative unbelief. Doubtless, I speak to some who plume themselves on ‘never having been affected by these currents of popular opinion,’ but whose unblemished and unquestioned orthodoxy has no more vitality in it than the other people’s heterodoxy. The one man has said, ‘What is everywhere always, and by all believed, I believe’; and the other man has said, ‘What the select spirits of this day disbelieve, I disbelieve,’ and the belief of one and the unbelief of the other are equally worthless, and really identical.

But it is not only, nor mainly, in reference to opinion that I would urge upon you this nonconformity with prevalent practices as the measure of most that is noble in us. I dare not talk to you as if I knew much about the details of Manchester commercial life, but I can say this much, that it is no excuse for shady practices in your trade to say, 'It is the custom of the trade, and everybody does it.' Nehemiah might have said: 'There never was a governor yet but took his forty shekels a day's worth'-about L. 1,800 of our money-'of provisions from these poor people, and I am not going to give it up because of a scruple. It is the custom, and because it is the custom I can do it.' I am not going into details. It is commonly understood that preachers know nothing about business; that may be true, or it may not. But this, I am sure, is a word in season for some of my friends this evening-do not hide behind the trade. Come out into the open, and deal with the questions of morality involved in your commercial life, as you will have to deal with them hereafter, by yourself. Never mind about other people. 'Oh,' but you say, 'that involves loss.' Very likely! Nehemiah was a poorer man because he fed all these one hundred and fifty Jews at his table, but he did not mind that. It may involve loss, but you will keep God, and that is gain.

Turn this searchlight in another direction. I see a number of young people in my congregation at this moment, young men who are perhaps just beginning their career in this city, and who possibly have been startled when they heard the kind of talk that was going on at the next desk, or from the man that sits beside them on the benches at College. Do not be tempted to follow that multitude to do evil. Unless you are prepared to say 'No!' to a great deal that will be pushed into your face in this great city, as sure as you are living you will make shipwreck of your lives. Do you think that in the forty years and more that I have stood here I have not seen successive generations of young men come into Manchester? I could people many of these pews with the faces of such, who came here buoyant, full of hope, full of high resolves, and with a mother's benediction hanging over their heads, and who got into a bad set, and had not the strength to say 'No,' and they went down and down and down, and then presently somebody asked, 'Where is so-and-so?' 'Oh! his health broke down, and he has gone home to die.' 'His bones are full of the iniquity of his youth'-and he made shipwreck of prospects and of life, because he did not pull himself together when the temptation came, and say, 'So did not I, because of the fear of God.'

II. Now let me ask you to turn with me to the second thought that my text suggests to me; that is, **The motive that impels to this sturdy non-compliance.**

Nehemiah puts it in Old Testament phraseology, ‘the fear of God’; the New Testament equivalent is ‘the love of Christ.’ And if you want to take the power and the life out of both phrases, in order to find a modern conventional equivalent, you will say ‘religion.’ I prefer the old-fashioned language. ‘The love of Christ’ impels to this non-compliance. Now, my point is this, that Jesus Christ requires from each of us that we shall abstain, restrict ourselves, refuse to do a great many things that are being done round us.

I need not remind you of how continually He spoke about taking up the cross. I need not do more than just remind you of His parable of the two ways, but ask you, whilst you think of it, to note that all the characteristics of each of the ways which He sets forth are given by Him as reasons for refusing the one and walking in the other. For example, ‘Enter ye in at the strait gate, for strait is the gate’-that is a reason for going in; ‘and narrow is the way’-that is a reason for going in; ‘and few there be that find it’-that is a reason for going in. ‘Wide is the gate’-that is a reason for stopping out; ‘and broad is the way’-that is a reason for stopping out; ‘and many there be that go in thereat’-that is a reason for stopping out. Is not that what I said, that the minority is generally right and the majority wrong? Just because there are so many people on the path, suspect it, and expect that the path with fewer travellers is probably the better and the higher.

But to pass from that, what did Jesus Christ mean by His continual contrast between His disciples and the world? What did He mean by ‘the world’? This fair universe, with all its possibilities of help and blessing, and all its educational influences? By no means. He meant by ‘the world’ the aggregate of things and men considered as separate from God. And when He applied the term to men only, He meant by it very much what we mean when we talk about society. Society is not organised on Christian principles; we all know that, and until it is, if a man is going to be a Christian he must not conform to the world. ‘Know ye not that whosoever is a friend of the world is an enemy of God.’

I would press upon you, dear friends! that our Christianity is nothing unless it leads us to a standard, and a course of conduct in conformity with that standard, which will be in diametrical opposition to a great deal of what is patted on the back, and petted and praised by society. Now, there is an easy-going kind of Christianity which does not recognise that, and which is in great favour with many people to-day, and is called 'liberality' and 'breadth,' and 'conciliating and commending Christianity to outsiders,' and I know not what besides. Well, Christ's words seem to me to come down like a hammer upon that sort of thing. Depend upon it, 'the world'-I mean by that the aggregate of godless men organised as they are in society-does not think much of these trimmers. It may dislike an out-and-out Christian, but it knows him when it sees him, and it has a kind of hostile respect for him which the other people will never get. You remember the story of the man that was seeking for a coachman, and whose question to each applicant was, 'How near can you drive to the edge of a precipice?' He took the man who said: 'I would keep away from it as far as I could.' And the so-called Christian people that seem to be bent on showing how much their lives can be made to assimilate to the lives of men that have no sympathy with their creeds, are like the rash Jehus that tried to go as near the edge as they could. But the consistent Christian will keep as far away from it as he can. There are some of us who seem as if we were most anxious to show that we, whose creed is absolutely inconsistent with the world's practices, can live lives which are all but identical with these practices. Jesus Christ says, through the lips of His Apostle, what He often said in other language by His own lips when He was here on earth: 'Be ye not conformed to the world.'

Surely such a command as that, just because it involves difficulty, self-restraint, self-denial, and sometimes self-crucifixion, ought to appeal, and does appeal, to all that is noble in humanity, in a fashion that that smooth, easy-going gospel of living on the level of the people round us never can do. For remember that Christ's commandment not to be conformed to the world is the consequence of His commandment to be conformed to Himself. 'Thus did not I' comes second; 'This one thing I do' comes first. You will misunderstand the whole genius of the Gospel if you suppose that, as a law of life, it is perpetually pulling men short up, and saying: Don't, don't, don't! There is a Christianity of that sort which is mainly prohibition and restriction, but it is not Christ's Christianity. He begins by enjoining:

‘This do in remembrance of Me,’ and the man that has accepted that commandment must necessarily say, as he looks out on the world, and its practices: ‘So did not I, because of the fear of God.’

III. And now one last word-my text not only suggests the motive which impels to this non-compliance, but also the power which enables us to exercise it.

‘The fear of God,’ or, taking the New Testament equivalent, ‘the love of Christ,’ makes it possible for a man, with all his weakness and dependence on surroundings, with all his instinctive desire to be like the folk that are near him, to take that brave attitude, and to refuse to be one of the crowd that runs after evil and lies. I have no time to dwell upon this aspect of my subject, as I should be glad to have done. Let me sum up in a sentence or two what I would have said. Christ will enable you to take this necessary attitude because, in Himself He gives you the Example which it is always safe to follow. The instinct of imitation is planted in us for a good end, and because it is in us, examples of nobility appeal to us. And because it is in us Jesus Christ has lived the life that it is possible for, and therefore incumbent on, us to live. It is safe to imitate Him, and it is easy not to do as men do, if once our main idea is to do as Christ did.

He makes it possible for us, because He gives the strongest possible motive for the life that He prescribes. As the Apostle puts it, ‘Ye are bought with a price, be not the servants of men.’ There is nothing that will so deliver us from the tyranny of majorities, and of what we call general opinion and ordinary custom, as to feel that we belong to Him because He died for us. Men become very insignificant when Christ speaks, and the charter of our freedom from them lies in our redemption by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ being our Redeemer is our Judge, and moment by moment He is estimating our conduct, and judging our actions as they are done. ‘With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you or of man’s judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord.’ Never mind what the people round you say; you do not take your orders from them, and you do not answer to them. Like some official abroad, appointed by the Crown, you do not report to the local authorities; you report to headquarters, and what He thinks about you is the only important thing. So ‘the fear of man which bringeth a snare’ dwindles down into very minute dimensions when we think of the Pattern, the Redeemer and the Judge to whom we give account.

And so, dear friends! if we will only open our hearts, by quiet humble faith, for the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives, then we shall be able to resist, to refuse compliance, to stand firm, though alone. The servant of Christ is the master of all men. ‘All things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas-all are yours, and ye are Christ’ s.’

7) Nehemiah 8:1-9

Nehemiah

READING THE LAW WITH TEARS AND JOY

Neh. 8:1 - Neh. 8:12.

The wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, which was the sixth month. The events recorded in this passage took place on the first day of the seventh month. The year is not given, but the natural inference is that it was the same as that of the finishing of the wall; namely, the twentieth of Artaxerxes. If so, the completion of the fortifications to which Nehemiah had set himself, was immediately followed by this reading of the law, in which Ezra takes the lead. The two men stand in a similar relative position to that of Zerubbabel and Joshua, the one representing the civil and the other the religious authority.

According to Ezr. 7:9, Ezra had gone to Jerusalem about thirteen years before Nehemiah, and had had a weary time of fighting against the corruptions which had crept in among the returned captives. The arrival of Nehemiah would be hailed as bringing fresh, young enthusiasm, none the less welcome and powerful because it had the king’s authority entrusted to it. Evidently the two men thoroughly understood one another, and pulled together heartily. We heard nothing about Ezra while the wall was being built. But now he is the principal figure, and Nehemiah is barely mentioned. The reasons for Ezra’s taking the prominent part in the reading of the law are given in the two titles by which he is designated in two successive verses [Neh. 8:1 - Neh. 8:2]. He was ‘the scribe’ and also ‘the priest,’ and in both capacities was the natural person for such a work.

The seventh month was the festival month of the year, its first day being that of the Feast of trumpets, and the great Feast of tabernacles as well as the solemn day of atonement occurring in it. Possibly, the prospect of the coming of the times for these celebrations may have led to the people’s wish to hear the law, that they might duly observe the appointed ceremonial. At all events, the first thing to note is that it was in consequence of the people’s wish that the law was read in their hearing. Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah originated the gathering together. They obeyed a popular impulse which they had not created. We must not, indeed, give the multitude credit for much more than the wish to have their ceremonial right. But there was at least that wish, and possibly something deeper and more spiritual. The walls were completed; but the true defence of Israel was in God, and the condition of His defending was Israel’s obedience to His law. The people were, in some measure, beginning to realise that condition with new clearness, in consequence of the new fervour which Nehemiah had brought.

It is singular that, during his thirteen years of residence, Ezra is not recorded to have promulgated the law, though it lay at the basis of the drastic reforms which he was able to carry through. Probably he had not been silent, but the solemn public recitation of the law was felt to be appropriate on occasion of completing the wall. Whether the people had heard it before, or, as seems implied, it was strange to them, their desire to hear it may stand as a pattern for us of that earnest wish to know God’s will which is never cherished in vain. He who does not intend to obey does not wish to know the law. If we have no longing to know what the will of the Lord is, we may be very sure that we prefer our own to His. If we desire to know it, we shall desire to understand the Book which contains so much of it. Any true religion in the heart will make us eager to perceive, and willing to be guided by, the will of God, revealed mainly in Scripture, in the Person, works, and words of Jesus, and also in waiting hearts by the Spirit, and in those things which the world calls ‘circumstances’ and faith names ‘providences.’

II. Neh. 8:2 - Neh. 8:8 appear to tell the same incidents twice over-first, more generally in Neh. 8:2 andNehemiah 8:8, and then more minutely. Such expanded repetition is characteristic of the Old Testament historical style. It is somewhat difficult to make sure of the real circumstances. Clearly enough there was a solemn assembly of men, women, and children in a great open space outside one of the gates, and there, from dawn till noon, the law was read and explained. But whether Ezra read it all, while the Levites named in Neh. 8:7 explained or paraphrased or translated it, or whether they all read in turns, or whether there were a number of groups, each of which had a teacher who both read and expounded, is hard to determine. At all events, Ezra was the principal figure, and began the reading.

It was a picturesque scene. The sun, rising over the slopes of Olivet, would fall on the gathered crowd, if the water-gate was, as is probable, on the east or south-east side of the city. Beneath the fresh fortifications probably, which would act as a sounding-board for the reader, was set up a scaffold high above the crowd, large enough to hold Ezra and thirteen supporters-principal men, no doubt-seven on one side of him and six on the other. Probably a name has dropped out, and the numbers were equal. There, in the morning light, with the new walls for a background, stood Ezra on his rostrum, and amid reverent silence, lifted high the sacred roll. A common impulse swayed the crowd, and brought them all to their feet-token at once of respect and obedient attention. Probably many of them had never seen a sacred roll. To them all it was comparatively unfamiliar. No wonder that, as Ezra’s voice rose in prayer, the whole assembly fell on their faces in adoration, and every lip responded ‘Amen! amen!’

Much superstition may have mingled with the reverence. No doubt, there was then what we are often solemnly warned against now, bibliolatry. But in this time of critical investigation it is not the divine element in Scripture which is likely to be exaggerated; and few are likely to go wrong in the direction of paying too much reverence to the Book in which, as is still believed, God has revealed His will and Himself. While welcoming all investigations which throw light on its origin or its meaning, and perfectly recognising the human element in it, we should learn the lesson taught by that waiting crowd prone on their faces, and blessing God for His word. Such attitude must ever precede reading it, if we are to read aright.

Hour after hour the recitation went on. We must let the question of the precise form of the events remain undetermined. It is somewhat singular that thirteen names are enumerated as of the men who stood by Ezra, and thirteen as those of the readers or expounders. It may be the case that the former number is complete, though uneven, and that there was some reason unknown for dividing the audience into just so many sections. The second set of thirteen was not composed of the same men as the first. They seem to have been Levites, whose office of assisting at the menial parts of the sacrifices was now elevated into that of setting forth the law. Probably the portions read were such as bore especially on ritual, though the tears of the listeners are sufficient proof that they had heard some things that went deeper than that.

The word rendered 'distinctly' in the Revised Version [margin, *with* an *interpretation*] is ambiguous, and may either mean that the Levites explained or that they translated the words. The former is the more probable, as there is no reason to suppose that the audience, most of whom had been born in the land, were ignorant of Hebrew. But if the ritual had been irregularly observed, and the circle of ideas in the law become unfamiliar, many explanations would be necessary. It strikes one as touching and strange that such an assembly should be needed after so many centuries of national existence. It sums up in one vivid picture the sin and suffering of the nation. To observe that law had been the condition of their prosperity. To bind it on their hearts should have been their delight and would have been their life; and here, after all these generations, the best of the nation are assembled, so ignorant of it that they cannot even understand it when they hear it. Absorption with worldly things has an awful power of dulling spiritual apprehension. Neglect of God's law weakens the power of understanding it.

This scene was in the truest sense a 'revival.' We may learn the true way of bringing men back to God; namely, the faithful exposition and enforcement of God's will and word. We may learn, too, what should be the aim of public teachers of religion; namely, first and foremost, the clear setting forth of God’s truth. Their first business is to ‘give the sense, so that they understand the reading’; and that, not for merely intellectual purposes, but that, like the crowd outside the water-gate on that hot noonday, men may be moved to penitence, and then lifted to the joy of the Lord.

The first day of the seventh month was the Feast of trumpets; and when the reading was over, and its effects of tears and sorrow for disobedience were seen, the preachers changed their tone, to bring consolation and exhort to gladness. Nehemiah had taken no part in reading the law, as Ezra the priest and his Levites were more appropriately set to that. But he joins them in exhorting the people to dry their tears, and go joyfully to the feast. These exhortations contain many thoughts universally applicable. They teach that even those who are most conscious of sin and breaches of God’s law should weep indeed, but should swiftly pass from tears to joy. They do not teach how that passage is to be effected; and in so far they are imperfect, and need to be supplemented by the New Testament teaching of forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But in their clear discernment that sorrow is not meant to be a permanent characteristic of religion, and that gladness is a more acceptable offering than tears, they teach a valuable lesson, needed always by men who fancy that they must atone for their sins by their own sadness, and that religion is gloomy, harsh, and crabbed.

Further, these exhortations to festal gladness breathe the characteristic Old Testament tone of wholesome enjoyment of material good as a part of religion. The way of looking at eating and drinking and the like, as capable of being made acts of worship, has been too often forgotten by two kinds of men-saints who have sought sanctity in asceticism; and sensualists who have taken deep draughts of such pleasures without calling on the name of the Lord, and so have failed to find His gifts a cup of salvation. It is possible to ‘eat and drink and see God’ as the elders of Israel did on Sinai.

Further, the plain duty of remembering the needy while we enjoy God’s gifts is beautifully enjoined here. The principle underlying the commandment to ‘send portions to them for whom nothing is provided’-that is, for whom no feast has been dressed-is that all gifts are held in trust, that nothing is bestowed on us for our own good only, but that we are in all things stewards. The law extends to the smallest and to the greatest possessions. We have no right to feast on anything unless we share it, whether it be festal dainties or the bread that came down from heaven. To divide our portion with others is the way to make our portion greater as well as sweeter.

Further, ‘the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ By *strength* here seems to be meant a *stronghold*. If we fix our desires on God, and have trained our hearts to find sweeter delights in communion with Him than in any earthly good, our religion will have lifted us above mists and clouds into clear air above, where sorrows and changes will have little power to affect us. If we are to rejoice in the Lord, it will be possible for us to ‘rejoice always,’ and that joy will be as a refuge from all the ills that flesh is heir to. Dwelling in God, we shall dwell safely, and be far from the fear of evil.

8) Nehemiah 8:10

Nehemiah

READING THE LAW WITH TEARS AND JOY

THE JOY OF THE LORD

Neh. 8:10.

Judaism, in its formal and ceremonial aspect, was a religion of gladness. The feast was the great act of worship. It is not to be wondered at, that Christianity, the perfecting of that ancient system, has been less markedly felt to be a religion of joy; for it brings with it far deeper and more solemn views about man in his nature, condition, responsibilities, destinies, than ever prevailed before, under any system of worship. And yet all deep religion ought to be joyful, and all strong religion assuredly will be so.

Here, in the incident before us, there has come a time in Nehemiah’s great enterprise, when the law, long forgotten, long broken by the captives, is now to be established again as the rule of the newly-founded commonwealth. Naturally enough there comes a remembrance of many sins in the past history of the people; and tears not unnaturally mingle with the thankfulness that again they are a nation, having a divine worship and a divine law in their midst. The leader of them, knowing for one thing that if the spirits of his people once began to flag, they could not face nor conquer the difficulties of their position, said to them, ‘This day is holy unto the Lord: this feast that we are keeping is a day of devout worship; therefore mourn not, nor weep: go your way; eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared; neither be ye sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ You will make nothing of it by indulgence in lamentation and in mourning. You will have no more power for obedience, you will not be fit for your work, if you fall into a desponding state. Be thankful and glad; and remember that the purest worship is the worship of God-fixed joy, ‘the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ And that is as true, brethren! with regard to us, as it ever was in these old times; and we, I think, need the lesson contained in this saying of Nehemiah’ s, because of some prevalent tendencies amongst us, no less than these Jews did. Take some simple thoughts suggested by this text which are both important in themselves and needful to be made emphatic because so often forgotten in the ordinary type of Christian character. They are these. Religious Joy is the natural result of faith. It is a Christian duty. It is an important element in Christian strength.

I. Joy in the Lord is the natural result of Christian Faith.

There is a natural adaptation or provision in the Gospel, both by what it brings to us and by what it takes away from us, to make a calm, and settled, and deep gladness, the prevalent temper of the Christian spirit. In what it gives us, I say, and in what it takes away from us. It gives us what we call well a sense of acceptance with God, it gives us God for the rest of our spirits, it gives us the communion with Him which in proportion as it is real, will be still, and in proportion as it is still, will be all bright and joyful. It takes away from us the fear that lies before us, the strifes that lie within us, the desperate conflict that is waged between a man’s conscience and his inclinations, between his will and his passions, which tears the heart asunder, and always makes sorrow and tumult wherever it comes. It takes away the sense of sin. It gives us, instead of the torpid conscience, or the angrily-stinging conscience-a conscience all calm from its accusations, with all the sting drawn out of it:-for quiet peace lies in the heart of the man that is trusting in the Lord. The Gospel works joy, because the soul is at rest in

God; joy, because every function of the spiritual nature has found now its haven and its object; joy, because health has come, and the healthy working of the body or of the spirit is itself a gladness; joy, because the dim future is painted [where it is painted at all] with shapes of light and beauty, and because the very vagueness of these is an element in the greatness of its revelation. The joy that is in Christ is deep and abiding. Faith in Him naturally works gladness.

I do not forget that, on the other side, it is equally true that the Christian faith has as marked and almost as strong an adaptation to produce a solemn *sorrow*-solemn, manly, noble, and strong. 'As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,' is the rule of the Christian life. If we think of what our faith does; of the light that it casts upon our condition, upon our nature, upon our responsibilities, upon our sins, and upon our destinies, we can easily see how, if gladness be one part of its operation, no less really and truly is sadness another. Brethren! all great thoughts have a solemn quiet in them, which not unfrequently merges into a still sorrow. There is nothing more contemptible in itself, and there is no more sure mark of a trivial nature and a trivial round of occupations, than unshaded gladness, that rests on no deep foundations of quiet, patient grief; grief, because I know what I am and what I ought to be; grief, because I have learnt the 'exceeding sinfulness of sin'; grief, because, looking out upon the world, I see, as other men do not see, hell-fire burning at the back of the mirth and the laughter, and know what it is that men are hurrying to! Do you remember who it was that stood by the side of the one poor dumb man, whose tongue He was going to loose, and looking up to heaven, *sighed* before He could say, 'Be opened'? Do you remember that of Him it is said, 'God hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows'; and also, 'a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief'? And do you not think that both these characteristics are to be repeated in the operations of His Gospel upon every heart that receives it? And if, by the hopes it breathes into us, by the fears that it takes away from us, by the union with God that it accomplishes for us, by the fellowship that it implants in us, it indeed anoints us all 'with the oil of gladness'; yet, on the other hand, by the sense of mine own sin that it teaches me; by the conflict with weakness which it makes to be the law of my life; by the clear vision which it gives me of 'the law of my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into subjection'; by the intensity which it breathes into all my nature, and by the thoughts that it presents of what sin leads to, and what the world at present is, the Gospel, wheresoever it comes, will infuse a wise, valiant sadness as the very foundation of character. Yes, joy, but sorrow too! the joy of the Lord, but sorrow as we look on our own sin and the world's woe! the head anointed with the oil of gladness, but also crowned with thorns!

These two are not contradictory. These two states of mind, both of them the natural operations of any deep faith, may co-exist and blend into one another, so as that the gladness is sobered, and chastened, and made manly and noble; and that the sorrow is like some thundercloud, all streaked with bars of sunshine, that pierce into its deepest depths. The joy lives in the midst of the sorrow; the sorrow springs from the same root as the gladness. The two do not clash against each other, or reduce the emotion to a neutral indifference, but they blend into one another; just as, in the Arctic regions, deep down beneath the cold snow, with its white desolation and its barren death, you will find the budding of the early spring flowers and the fresh green grass; just as some kinds of fire burn below the water; just as, in the midst of the barren and undrinkable sea, there may be welling up some little fountain of fresh water that comes from a deeper depth than the great ocean around it, and pours its sweet streams along the surface of the salt waste. Gladness, because I love, for love *is* gladness; gladness, because I trust, for trust *is* gladness; gladness, because I obey, for obedience is a meat that others know not of, and light comes when we do His will! But sorrow, because still I am wrestling with sin; sorrow, because still I have not perfect fellowship; sorrow, because mine eye, purified by my living with God, sees earth, and sin, and life, and death, and the generations of men, and the darkness beyond, in some measure as God sees them! And yet, the sorrow is surface, and the joy is central; the sorrow springs from circumstance, and the gladness from the essence of the thing;-and therefore the sorrow is transitory, and the gladness is perennial. For the Christian life is all like one of those sweet spring showers in early April, when the rain-drops weave for us a mist that hides the sunshine; and yet the hidden sun is in every sparkling drop, and they are all saturated and steeped in its light. 'The joy of the Lord' is the natural result and offspring of all Christian faith.

II. And now, secondly, the ‘joy of the Lord’ or rejoicing in God, is a matter of Christian duty.

It is a commandment here, and it is a command in the New Testament as well. ‘Neither be ye sorry, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’ I need not quote to you the frequent repetitions of the same injunction which the Apostle Paul gives us, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice’; ‘Rejoice evermore,’ and the like. The fact that this joy is enjoined us suggests to us a thought or two, worth looking at.

You may say with truth, ‘My emotions of joy and sorrow are not under my own control: I cannot help being glad and sad as circumstances dictate.’ But yet here it lies, a commandment. It is a duty, a thing that the Apostle enjoins; in which, of course, is implied, that somehow or other it is to a large extent within one’s own power, and that even the indulgence in this emotion, and the degree to which a Christian life shall be a cheerful life, is dependent in a large measure on our own volitions, and stands on the same footing as our obedience to God’s other commandments.

We *can* to a very great extent control even our own emotions; but then, besides, we can do more than that. It may be quite true, that you cannot help feeling sorrowful in the presence of sorrowful thoughts, and glad in the presence of thoughts that naturally kindle gladness. But I will tell you what you can do or refrain from doing-you can either go and stand in the light, or you can go and stand in the shadow. You can either fix your attention upon, and make the predominant subject of your religious contemplations, a truth which shall make you glad and strong, or a half-truth, which shall make you sorrowful, and therefore weak. Your meditations may either centre mainly upon your own selves, your faults and failings, and the like; or they may centre mainly upon God and His love, Christ and His grace, the Holy Spirit and His communion. You may either fill your soul with joyful thoughts, or though a true Christian, a real, devout, God-accepted believer, you may be so misapprehending the nature of the Gospel, and your relation to it, its promises and precepts, its duties and predictions, as that the prevalent tinge and cast of your religion shall be solemn and almost gloomy, and not lighted up and irradiated with the felt sense of God’s presence-with the strong, healthy consciousness that you are a forgiven and justified man, and that you are going to be a glorified one.

And thus far [and it is a long way] by the selection or the rejection of the appropriate and proper subjects which shall make the main portion of our religious contemplation, and shall be the food of our devout thoughts, we can determine the complexion of our religious life. Just as you inject colouring matter into the fibres of some anatomical preparation; so a Christian may, as it were, inject into all the veins of his religious character and life, either the bright tints of gladness or the dark ones of self-despondency; and the result will be according to the thing that he has put into them. If your thoughts are chiefly occupied with God, and what He has done and is for you, then you will have peaceful joy. If, on the other hand, they are bent ever on yourself and your own unbelief, then you will always be sad. You can make your choice.

Christian men, the joy of the Lord is a duty. It is so because, as we have seen, it is the natural effect of faith, because we can do much to regulate our emotions directly, and much more to determine them by determining what set of thoughts shall engage us. A wise and strong faith is our duty. To keep our emotional nature well under control of reason and will is our duty. To lose thoughts of ourselves in God’s truth about Himself is our duty. If we do these things, we cannot fail to have Christ’s joy remaining in us, and making ours full. If we have not that blessed possession abiding with us, which He lived and died to give us, there is something wrong in us somewhere.

It seems to me that this is a truth which we have great need, my friends, to lay to heart. It is of no great consequence that we should practically confute the impotent old sneer about religion as being a gloomy thing. One does not need to mind much what some people say on that matter. The world would call ‘the joy of the Lord’ gloom, just as much as it calls ‘godly sorrow’ gloom. But we are losing for ourselves a power and an energy of which we have no conception, unless we feel that joy is a duty, and unless we believe that not to be joyful in the Lord is, therefore, more than a misfortune, it is a fault.

I do not forget that the comparative absence of this happy, peaceful sense of acceptance, harmony, oneness with God, springs sometimes from temperament, and depends on our natural disposition. Of course the natural character determines to a large extent the perspective of our conceptions of Christian truth, and the colouring of our inner religious life. I do not mean to say, for a moment, that there is one uniform type to which all must be conformed, or they sin. There is indeed one type, the perfect manhood of Jesus, but it is all comprehensive, and each variety of our fragmentary manhood finds its own perfecting, and not its transmutation to another fashion of man, in being conformed to Him. Some of us are naturally fainthearted, timid, sceptical of any success, grave, melancholy, or hard to stir to any emotion. To such there will be an added difficulty in making quiet confident joy any very familiar guest in their home or in their place of prayer. But even such should remember that the 'powers of the world to come,' the energies of the Gospel, are given to us for the very express purpose of overcoming, as well as of hallowing, natural dispositions. If it be our duty to rejoice in the Lord, it is no sufficient excuse to urge for not responding to the reiterated call, 'I myself am disposed to sadness.'

Whilst making all allowances for the diversities of character, which will always operate to diversify the cast of the inner life in each individual, we think that, in the great majority of instances, there are two things, both faults, which have a great deal more to do with the absence of joy from much Christian experience, than any unfortunate natural tendency to the dark side of things. The one is, an actual deficiency in the depth and reality of our faith; and the other is, a misapprehension of the position which we have a right to take and are bound to take.

There is an actual deficiency in our faith. Oh, brethren! it is not to be wondered at that Christians do not find that the Lord with them is the Lord their strength and joy, as well as the Lord 'their righteousness'; when the amount of their fellowship with Him is so small, and the depth of it so shallow, as we usually find it. The first true vision that a sinful soul has of God, the imperfect beginnings of religion, usually are accompanied with intense self-abhorrence, and sorrowing tears of penitence. A further closer vision of the love of God in Jesus Christ brings with it 'joy and peace in believing.' But the prolongation of these throughout life requires the steadfast continuousness of gaze towards Him. It is only where there is much faith and consequent love that there is much joy. Let us search our own hearts. If there is but little heat around the bulb of the thermometer, no wonder that the mercury marks a low degree. If there is but small faith, there will not be much gladness. The road into Giant Despair's castle is through doubt, which doubt comes from an absence, a sinful absence, in our own experience, of the felt presence of God, and the felt force of the verities of His Gospel.

But then, besides that, there is another fault: not a fault in the sense of crime or sin, but a fault [and a great one] in the sense of error and misapprehension. We as Christians do not take the position which we have a right to take and that we are bound to take. Men venture themselves upon God's word as they do on doubtful ice, timidly putting a light foot out, to feel if it will bear them, and always having the tacit fear, 'Now, it is going to crack!' You must cast yourselves on God's Gospel with all your weight, without any hanging back, without any doubt, without even the shadow of a suspicion that it will *give*-that the firm, pure floor will give, and let you through into the water! A Christian shrink from saying what the Apostle said, 'I *know* in whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him until that day'! A Christian fancy that salvation is a future thing, and forget that it is a present thing! A Christian tremble to profess 'assurance of hope,' forgetting that there is no hope strong enough to bear the stress of a life's sorrows, which is not a conviction certain as one's own existence! Brethren! understand that the Gospel is a Gospel which brings a present salvation; and try to feel that it is not presumption, but simply acting out the very fundamental principle of it, when you are not afraid to say, 'I *know* that my Redeemer is yonder, and I *know* that He loves me!' Try to feel, I say, that by faith you have a right to take that position, 'Now, we *know* that we are the sons of God'; that you have a right to claim for yourselves, and that you are falling beneath the loftiness of the gift that is given to you unless you do claim for yourselves, the place of sons, accepted, loved, sure to be glorified at God's right hand. Am I teaching presumption? am I teaching carelessness, or a dispensing with self-examination? No, but I am saying this: If a man have once felt, and feel, in however small and feeble a degree, and depressed by whatsoever sense of daily transgressions, if he feel, faint like the first movement of an imprisoned bird in its egg, the feeble pulse of an almost imperceptible and fluttering faith beat-then that man has a right to say, ‘God is mine!’

As one of our great teachers, little remembered now said, ‘Let me take my personal salvation for granted’-and what? and ‘be idle?’ No; ‘and *work* from it.’ Ay, brethren! a Christian is not to be for ever asking himself, ‘Am I a Christian?’ He is not to be for ever looking into himself for marks and signs that he is. He *is* to look into himself to discover sins, that he may by God’s help cast them out, to discover sins that shall teach him to say with greater thankfulness, ‘What a redemption this is which I possess!’ but he is to base his convictions that he is God’s child upon something other than his own characteristics and the feebleness of his own strength. He is to have ‘joy in the Lord’ whatever may be his sorrow from outward things. And I believe that if Christian people would lay that thought to heart, they would understand better how the natural operation of the Gospel is to make them glad, and how rejoicing in the Lord is a Christian duty.

III. And now with regard to the other thought that still remains to be considered, namely, that rejoicing in the Lord is a source of strength,-I have already anticipated, fragmentarily, nearly all that I could have said here in a more systematic form. All gladness has something to do with our efficiency; for it is the prerogative of man that his force comes from his mind, and not from his body. That old song about a sad heart tiring in a mile, is as true in regard to the Gospel, and the works of Christian people, as in any other case. If we have hearts full of light, and souls at rest in Christ, and the wealth and blessedness of a tranquil gladness lying there, and filling our being; work will be easy, endurance will be easy, sorrow will be bearable, trials will not be so very hard, and above all temptations we shall be lifted, and set upon a rock. If the soul is full, and full of joy, what side of it will be exposed to the assault of any temptation? If the appeal be to fear, the gladness that is there is an answer. If the appeal be to passion, desire, wish for pleasure of any sort, there is no need for any more-the heart is *full*. And so the gladness which rests in Christ will be a gladness which will fit us for all service and for all endurance, which will be unbroken by any sorrow, and, like the magic shield of the old legends, invisible, impenetrable, in its crystalline purity will stand before the tempted heart, and will repel all the ‘fiery darts of the wicked.’

‘The joy of the Lord is your strength,’ my brother! Nothing else is. No vehement resolutions, no sense of his own sinfulness, nor even contrite remembrance of past failures, ever yet made a man strong. It made him weak that he might become strong, and when it had done that it had done its work. For strength there must be hope, for strength there must be joy. If the arm is to smite with vigour, it must smite at the bidding of a calm and light heart. Christian work is of such a sort as that the most dangerous opponent to it is simple despondency and simple sorrow. ‘The joy of the Lord is your strength.’

Well, then! there are two questions: How comes it that so much of the world’s joy is weakness? and how comes it that so much of the world’s notion of religion is gloom and sadness? Answer them for yourselves, and remember: you are weak unless you are glad; you are not glad and strong unless your faith and hope are fixed in Christ, and unless you are working from and not towards the sense of pardon, from and not towards the conviction of acceptance with God!

9) Nehemiah 8:11-12

Nehemiah

READING THE LAW WITH TEARS AND JOY

Neh. 8:1 - Neh. 8:12.

The wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, which was the sixth month. The events recorded in this passage took place on the first day of the seventh month. The year is not given, but the natural inference is that it was the same as that of the finishing of the wall; namely, the twentieth of Artaxerxes. If so, the completion of the fortifications to which Nehemiah had set himself, was immediately followed by this reading of the law, in which Ezra takes the lead. The two men stand in a similar relative position to that of Zerubbabel and Joshua, the one representing the civil and the other the religious authority.

According to Ezr. 7:9, Ezra had gone to Jerusalem about thirteen years before Nehemiah, and had had a weary time of fighting against the corruptions which had crept in among the returned captives. The arrival of Nehemiah would be hailed as bringing fresh, young enthusiasm, none the less welcome and powerful because it had the king’s authority entrusted to it. Evidently the two men thoroughly understood one another, and pulled together heartily. We heard nothing about Ezra while the wall was being built. But now he is the principal figure, and Nehemiah is barely mentioned. The reasons for Ezra’s taking the prominent part in the reading of the law are given in the two titles by which he is designated in two successive verses [Neh. 8:1 - Neh. 8:2]. He was ‘the scribe’ and also ‘the priest,’ and in both capacities was the natural person for such a work.

The seventh month was the festival month of the year, its first day being that of the Feast of trumpets, and the great Feast of tabernacles as well as the solemn day of atonement occurring in it. Possibly, the prospect of the coming of the times for these celebrations may have led to the people’s wish to hear the law, that they might duly observe the appointed ceremonial. At all events, the first thing to note is that it was in consequence of the people’s wish that the law was read in their hearing. Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah originated the gathering together. They obeyed a popular impulse which they had not created. We must not, indeed, give the multitude credit for much more than the wish to have their ceremonial right. But there was at least that wish, and possibly something deeper and more spiritual. The walls were completed; but the true defence of Israel was in God, and the condition of His defending was Israel’s obedience to His law. The people were, in some measure, beginning to realise that condition with new clearness, in consequence of the new fervour which Nehemiah had brought.

It is singular that, during his thirteen years of residence, Ezra is not recorded to have promulgated the law, though it lay at the basis of the drastic reforms which he was able to carry through. Probably he had not been silent, but the solemn public recitation of the law was felt to be appropriate on occasion of completing the wall. Whether the people had heard it before, or, as seems implied, it was strange to them, their desire to hear it may stand as a pattern for us of that earnest wish to know God’s will which is never cherished in vain. He who does not intend to obey does not wish to know the law. If we have no longing to know what the will of the Lord is, we may be very sure that we prefer our own to His. If we desire to know it, we shall desire to understand the Book which contains so much of it. Any true religion in the heart will make us eager to perceive, and willing to be guided by, the will of God, revealed mainly in Scripture, in the Person, works, and words of Jesus, and also in waiting hearts by the Spirit, and in those things which the world calls ‘circumstances’ and faith names ‘providences.’

II. Neh. 8:2 - Neh. 8:8 appear to tell the same incidents twice over-first, more generally in Neh. 8:2 andNehemiah 8:8, and then more minutely. Such expanded repetition is characteristic of the Old Testament historical style. It is somewhat difficult to make sure of the real circumstances. Clearly enough there was a solemn assembly of men, women, and children in a great open space outside one of the gates, and there, from dawn till noon, the law was read and explained. But whether Ezra read it all, while the Levites named in Neh. 8:7 explained or paraphrased or translated it, or whether they all read in turns, or whether there were a number of groups, each of which had a teacher who both read and expounded, is hard to determine. At all events, Ezra was the principal figure, and began the reading.

It was a picturesque scene. The sun, rising over the slopes of Olivet, would fall on the gathered crowd, if the water-gate was, as is probable, on the east or south-east side of the city. Beneath the fresh fortifications probably, which would act as a sounding-board for the reader, was set up a scaffold high above the crowd, large enough to hold Ezra and thirteen supporters-principal men, no doubt-seven on one side of him and six on the other. Probably a name has dropped out, and the numbers were equal. There, in the morning light, with the new walls for a background, stood Ezra on his rostrum, and amid reverent silence, lifted high the sacred roll. A common impulse swayed the crowd, and brought them all to their feet-token at once of respect and obedient attention. Probably many of them had never seen a sacred roll. To them all it was comparatively unfamiliar. No wonder that, as Ezra’s voice rose in prayer, the whole assembly fell on their faces in adoration, and every lip responded ‘Amen! amen!’

Much superstition may have mingled with the reverence. No doubt, there was then what we are often solemnly warned against now, bibliolatry. But in this time of critical investigation it is not the divine element in Scripture which is likely to be exaggerated; and few are likely to go wrong in the direction of paying too much reverence to the Book in which, as is still believed, God has revealed His will and Himself. While welcoming all investigations which throw light on its origin or its meaning, and perfectly recognising the human element in it, we should learn the lesson taught by that waiting crowd prone on their faces, and blessing God for His word. Such attitude must ever precede reading it, if we are to read aright.

Hour after hour the recitation went on. We must let the question of the precise form of the events remain undetermined. It is somewhat singular that thirteen names are enumerated as of the men who stood by Ezra, and thirteen as those of the readers or expounders. It may be the case that the former number is complete, though uneven, and that there was some reason unknown for dividing the audience into just so many sections. The second set of thirteen was not composed of the same men as the first. They seem to have been Levites, whose office of assisting at the menial parts of the sacrifices was now elevated into that of setting forth the law. Probably the portions read were such as bore especially on ritual, though the tears of the listeners are sufficient proof that they had heard some things that went deeper than that.

The word rendered ‘distinctly’ in the Revised Version [margin, *with* an *interpretation*] is ambiguous, and may either mean that the Levites explained or that they translated the words. The former is the more probable, as there is no reason to suppose that the audience, most of whom had been born in the land, were ignorant of Hebrew. But if the ritual had been irregularly observed, and the circle of ideas in the law become unfamiliar, many explanations would be necessary. It strikes one as touching and strange that such an assembly should be needed after so many centuries of national existence. It sums up in one vivid picture the sin and suffering of the nation. To observe that law had been the condition of their prosperity. To bind it on their hearts should have been their delight and would have been their life; and here, after all these generations, the best of the nation are assembled, so ignorant of it that they cannot even understand it when they hear it. Absorption with worldly things has an awful power of dulling spiritual apprehension. Neglect of God’s law weakens the power of understanding it.

This scene was in the truest sense a ‘revival.’ We may learn the true way of bringing men back to God; namely, the faithful exposition and enforcement of God’s will and word. We may learn, too, what should be the aim of public teachers of religion; namely, first and foremost, the clear setting forth of God’s truth. Their first business is to ‘give the sense, so that they understand the reading’; and that, not for merely intellectual purposes, but that, like the crowd outside the water-gate on that hot noonday, men may be moved to penitence, and then lifted to the joy of the Lord.

The first day of the seventh month was the Feast of trumpets; and when the reading was over, and its effects of tears and sorrow for disobedience were seen, the preachers changed their tone, to bring consolation and exhort to gladness. Nehemiah had taken no part in reading the law, as Ezra the priest and his Levites were more appropriately set to that. But he joins them in exhorting the people to dry their tears, and go joyfully to the feast. These exhortations contain many thoughts universally applicable. They teach that even those who are most conscious of sin and breaches of God’s law should weep indeed, but should swiftly pass from tears to joy. They do not teach how that passage is to be effected; and in so far they are imperfect, and need to be supplemented by the New Testament teaching of forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But in their clear discernment that sorrow is not meant to be a permanent characteristic of religion, and that gladness is a more acceptable offering than tears, they teach a valuable lesson, needed always by men who fancy that they must atone for their sins by their own sadness, and that religion is gloomy, harsh, and crabbed.

Further, these exhortations to festal gladness breathe the characteristic Old Testament tone of wholesome enjoyment of material good as a part of religion. The way of looking at eating and drinking and the like, as capable of being made acts of worship, has been too often forgotten by two kinds of men-saints who have sought sanctity in asceticism; and sensualists who have taken deep draughts of such pleasures without calling on the name of the Lord, and so have failed to find His gifts a cup of salvation. It is possible to 'eat and drink and see God' as the elders of Israel did on Sinai.

Further, the plain duty of remembering the needy while we enjoy God's gifts is beautifully enjoined here. The principle underlying the commandment to 'send portions to them for whom nothing is provided'- that is, for whom no feast has been dressed-is that all gifts are held in trust, that nothing is bestowed on us for our own good only, but that we are in all things stewards. The law extends to the smallest and to the greatest possessions. We have no right to feast on anything unless we share it, whether it be festal dainties or the bread that came down from heaven. To divide our portion with others is the way to make our portion greater as well as sweeter.

Further, 'the joy of the Lord is your strength.' By *strength* here seems to be meant a *stronghold*. If we fix our desires on God, and have trained our hearts to find sweeter delights in communion with Him than in any earthly good, our religion will have lifted us above mists and clouds into clear air above, where sorrows and changes will have little power to affect us. If we are to rejoice in the Lord, it will be possible for us to 'rejoice always,' and that joy will be as a refuge from all the ills that flesh is heir to. Dwelling in God, we shall dwell safely, and be far from the fear of evil.

10)Nehemiah 13:15-22

Nehemiah

SABBATH OBSERVANCE

Neh. 13:15 - Neh. 13:22.

Many religious and moral reformations depend for their vitality on one man, and droop if his influence be withdrawn. It was so with Nehemiah's work. He toiled for twelve years in Jerusalem, and then returned for 'certain days' to the king at Babylon. The length of his absence is not given; but it was long enough to let much of his work be undone, and to give him much trouble to restore it to the condition in which he had left it. This last chapter of his book is but a sad close for a record which began with such high hope, and tells of such strenuous, self-sacrificing effort. The last page of many a reformer's history has been, like Nehemiah' s, a sad account of efforts to stem the ebbing tide of enthusiasm and the flowing tide of worldliness. The heavy stone is rolled a little way up hill, and, as soon as one strong hand is withdrawn, down it tumbles again to its old place. The evanescence of great men's work makes much of the tragedy of history.

Our passage is particularly concerned with Nehemiah's efforts to enforce Sabbath observance. The rest of the chapter is occupied with similar efforts to set right other irregularities of a ceremonial character, such as the exclusion of Gentiles from the Temple, the exaction of the 'portions of the Levites,' and the like. The passage falls into three parts-the abuse [Neh. 13:15 - Neh. 13:16], the vigorous remedies [Neh. 13:17 - Neh. 13:22], and the prayer [Neh. 13:22].

I. The abuse consisted in Sabbath work and trading. Nehemiah found, on his return, that the people 'in Judaea'-that is, in the country districts-carried on their farm labour and also brought their produce to market to Jerusalem on the Sabbath. So he 'testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals'; that is, probably meaning that he warned them either in person or by messengers before taking further steps. Not only did Jews break the sacred day, but they let heathen do so too. The narrative tells, with a kind of horror, the many aggravations of this piece of wickedness. 'They'-Gentiles with whom contact defiled-'sold on the Sabbath'-the day of rest-'to the children of Judah'-God's people-'in Jerusalem'-the Holy City. It was a many-barrelled crime. Tyre was far from Jerusalem, and one does not see how fish could have been brought in good condition. Perhaps their perishableness was the excuse for allowing their sale on the Sabbath, as is sometimes the case in fishing-villages even in Sabbath-keeping Scotland. Such was the abuse with which Nehemiah struggled.

It is easy to pooh-pooh his crusade against Sabbath labour as mere scrupulousness about externals. But it is a blunder and an injustice to a noble character if we forget that the stage of revelation at which he stood necessarily made him more dependent on externals than Christians are or should be. But his vindication does not need such considerations. He had a truer insight into what active men needed for vigorous working days, and what devout men needed for healthy religion, than many moderns who smile at his eagerness about ‘mere externalisms.’

It is easy to ridicule the Jewish Sabbath and ‘the Puritan Sunday.’ No doubt there have been and are well-meant but mistaken efforts to insist on too rigid observance. No doubt it has been often forgotten by good people that the Christian Lord’s Day is not the Jewish Sabbath. Of course the religious observance of the day is not a fit subject for legislation. But the need for a seventh day of rest is impressed on our physical and intellectual nature; and devout hearts will joyfully find their best rest in Christian worship and service. The vigour of religious life demands special seasons set apart for worship. Unless there be such reservoirs along the road, there will be but a thin trickle of a brook by the way. It is all very well to talk about religion diffused through the life, but it will not be so diffused unless it is concentrated at certain times.

They are no benefactors to the community who seek to break down and relax the stringency of the prohibition of labour. If once the idea that Sunday is a day of amusement take root, the amusement of some will require the hard work of others, and the custom of work will tend to extend, till rest becomes the exception, and work the rule. There never was a time when men lived so furiously fast as now. The pace of modern life demands Sunday rest more than ever. If a railway car is run continually it will wear out sooner than if it were laid aside for a day or two occasionally; and if it is run at express speed it will need the rest more. We are all going at top speed; and there would be more breakdowns if it were not for that blessed institution which some people think they are promoting the public good by destroying-a seventh day of rest.

Our great trading centres in England have the same foreign element to complicate matters as Nehemiah had to deal with. The Tyrian fishmongers knew and cared nothing for Israel’s Jehovah or Sabbath, and their presence would increase the tendency to disregard the day. So with us, foreigners of many nationalities, but alike in their disregard of our religious observances, leaven the society, and help to mould the opinions and practices, of our great cities. That is a very real source of danger in regard to Sabbath observance and many other things; and Christian people should be on their guard against it.

II. The vigorous remedies applied by Nehemiah were administered first to the rulers. He sent for the nobles, and laid the blame at their doors. ‘Ye profane the day,’ said he. Men in authority are responsible for crimes which they could check, but prefer to wink at. Nehemiah seems to trace all the national calamities to the breach of the Sabbath; but of course he is simply laying stress on the sin about which he is speaking, as any man who sets himself earnestly to work to fight any form of evil is apt to do. Then the men who are not in earnest cry out about ‘exaggeration.’ Many other sins besides Sabbath-breaking had a share in sending Israel into captivity; and if Nehemiah had been fighting with idolatrous tendencies he would have isolated idolatry as the cause of its calamities, just as, when fighting against Sabbath-breaking, he emphasises that sin.

Nehemiah was governor for the Persian king, and so had a right to rate these nobles. In this day the people have the same right, and there are many social sins for which they should arraign civic and other authorities. Christian principles unflinchingly insisted on by Christian people, and brought to bear, by ballot-boxes and other persuasive ways, on what stands for conscience in some high places, would make a wonderful difference on many of the abominations of our cities. Go to the ‘nobles’ first, and lay the burden on the backs that ought to carry it.

Then Nehemiah took practical measures by shutting the city gates on the eve of the Sabbath, and putting some of his own servants as a watch. The thing seems to have been done without any notice; so when the country folk came in, as usual, on the Sabbath, they could not get into the city, and camped outside, making a visible temptation to the citizens, to slip out and do a little business, if they could manage to elude the guards. Once or twice this happened; and then Nehemiah himself seems to have taken them in hand, with a very plain and sufficiently emphatic warning: ‘If ye do so again, I will lay hands on you.’

Of course, ‘from that time they came no more on the Sabbath,’ as was natural after such a volley. A man with a good strong will is apt to get his own way, even when he is not clothed with the authority of a governor. Then Nehemiah strengthened the guard, or perhaps withdrew his own servants and substituted for them Levites, whose official position would put them in full sympathy with his efforts. That priestly guard would be inflexible, and with its appointment the abuse appears to have been crushed.

The example of Nehemiah’s enforcing Sabbath observance is not to be taken as a pattern for Christian communities, without many limitations. But it appears to the present writer that it is perfectly legitimate for the civil power to insist upon, and if necessary to enforce, the observance of Sunday as a day of rest; and that, since legitimate, it is for the well-being of the community that it should do so. Tyrians might believe anything they chose, and use the day of rest as they thought proper, so long as they did not sell fish on it. We do not interfere with religious convictions when we enjoin Sunday observance. Nehemiah’s argument has sometimes to be used, even about such a matter: ‘If ye do so again, I will lay hands on you.’

The methods adopted may yield suggestions for all who would aim at reforming abuses or public immoralities. One most necessary step is to cut off, as far as possible, opportunities for the sin. There will be no trade if you shut the gates the night before. There will be little drunkenness if there are no liquor shops. It is quite true that people cannot be made virtuous by legislation, but it is also true that they may be saved from temptations to become vicious by it.

Another hint comes from Nehemiah’s vigorous word to the country folk outside the wall. There is need for very strong determination and much sanctified obstinacy in fighting popular abuses. They die hard. It is permissible to invoke the aid of the lawful authority. But a man with strong convictions and earnest purpose will be able to impress his convictions on a mass, even if he have no guards at his back. The one thing needful for

Christian reformers is, not the power to appeal to force, but the force which they can carry within them. And it is better when the traders love the Sabbath too well to wish to drive bargains on it, than when they are hindered from doing as they wish by Nehemiah’s strong will or formidable threats.

Once more, the guard of Levites may suggest that the execution of measures for the reformation of manners or morals is best entrusted to those who are in sympathy with them. Levites made faithful watchmen. Many a promising measure for reformation has come to nothing because committed to the hands of functionaries who did not care for its success. The instruments are almost as important as the measures which they carry out.

III. Nehemiah’s prayer occurs thrice in this chapter, at the close of each section recounting his reforming acts. In the first instance [Neh. 13:14] it is most full, and puts very plainly the merit of good deeds as a plea with God. The same thing is implied in its form in Neh. 13:22. But while, no doubt, the tone of the prayer is startling to us, and is not such as should be offered now by Christians, it but echoes the principle of retribution which underlies the law. ‘This do, and thou shalt live,’ was the very foundation of Nehemiah’s form of God’s revelation. We do not plead our own merits, because we are not under the law, but under grace, and the principle underlying the gospel is life by impartation of unmerited mercy and divine life. But the law of retribution still remains valid for Christians in so far as that God will never forget any of their works, and will give them full recompense for their work of faith and labour of love. Eternal life here and hereafter is wholly the gift of God; but that fact does not exclude the notion of ‘the recompense of reward’ from the Christian conception of the future. It becomes not us to present our good deeds before the Judge, since they are stained and imperfect, and the goodness in them is His gift. But it becomes Him to crown them with His gracious approbation, and to proportion the cities ruled in that future world to the talents faithfully used here. We need not be afraid of obscuring the truth that we are saved ‘not of works, lest any man should boast,’ though we insist that a Christian man is rewarded according to his works.

Nehemiah had no false notion of his own goodness; for, while he asked for recompense for these good deeds of his, he could not but add, ‘Spare me according to the greatness of Thy mercy.’ He who asks to be ‘spared’ must know himself in peril of destruction; and he who invokes ‘mercy’ must think that, if he were dealt with according to justice, he would be in evil case. So the consciousness of weakness and sin is an integral part of this prayer, and that takes all the apparent self-righteousness out of the previous petition. However worthy of and sure of reward a Christian man’s acts of love and efforts for the spread of God’s honour may be, the doer of them must still be ‘looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.’

Esther

1) ESTHER 3:1-11
2) ESTHER 4:10-13
3) ESTHER 4:14
4) ESTHER 4:15-17
5) ESTHER 5:1-3
6) ESTHER 8:3-8
7) ESTHER 8:15-17

1) Esther 3:1-11

Esther

THE NET SPREAD

Est. 3:1 - Est. 3:11.

The stage of this passage is filled by three strongly marked and strongly contrasted figures: Mordecai, Haman, and Ahasuerus; a sturdy nonconformist, an arrogant and vindictive minister of state, and a despotic and careless king. These three are the visible persons, but behind them is an unseen and unnamed Presence, the God of Israel, who still protects His exiled people.

We note, first, the sturdy nonconformist. ‘The reverence’ which the king had commanded his servants to show to Haman was not simply a sign of respect, but an act of worship. Eastern adulation regarded a monarch as in some sense a god, and we know that divine honours were in later times paid to Roman emperors, and many Christians martyred for refusing to render them. The command indicates that Ahasuerus desired Haman to be regarded as his representative, and possessing at least some reflection of godhead from him. European ambassadors to Eastern courts have often refused to prostrate themselves before the monarch on the ground of its being degradation to their dignity; but Mordecai stood erect while the crowd of servants lay flat on their faces, as the great man passed through the gate, because he would have no share in an act of worship to any but Jehovah. He might have compromised with conscience, and found some plausible excuses if he had wished. He could have put his own private interpretation on the prostration, and said to himself, ‘I have nothing to do with the meaning that others attach to bowing before Haman. I mean by it only due honour to the second man in the kingdom.’ But the monotheism of his race was too deeply ingrained in him, and so he kept ‘a stiff backbone’ and ‘bowed not down.’

That his refusal was based on religious scruples is the natural inference from his having told his fellow-porters that he was a Jew. That fact would explain his attitude, but would also isolate him still more. His obstinacy piqued them, and they reported his contumacy to the great man, thus at once gratifying personal dislike, racial hatred, and religious antagonism, and recommending themselves to Haman as solicitous for his dignity. We too are sometimes placed in circumstances where we are tempted to take part in what may be called constructive idolatry. There arise, in our necessary co-operation with those who do not share in our faith, occasions when we are expected to unite in acts which we are thought very straitlaced for refusing to do, but which, conscience tells us, cannot be done without practical disloyalty to Jesus Christ. Whenever that inner voice says ‘Don’t,’ we must disregard the persistent solicitations of others, and be ready to be singular, and run any risk rather than comply. ‘So did not I, because of the fear of God,’ has to be our motto, whatever fellow-servants may say. The gate of Ahasuerus’s palace was not a favourable soil for the growth of a devout soul, but flowers can bloom on dunghills, and there have been ‘saints’ in ‘Caesar’s household.’

Haman is a sharp contrast to Mordecai. He is the type of the unworthy characters that climb or crawl to power in a despotic monarchy, vindictive, arrogant, cunning, totally oblivious of the good of the subjects, using his position for his own advantage, and ferociously cruel. He had naturally not noticed the one erect figure among the crowd of abject ones, but the insignificant Jew became important when pointed out. If he had bowed, he would have been one more nobody, but his not bowing made him somebody who had to be crushed. The childish burst of passion is very characteristic, and not less true to life is the extension of the anger and thirst for vengeance to ‘all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.’ They were ‘the people of Mordecai,’ and that was enough. ‘He thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone.’ What a perverted notion of personal dignity which thought the sacrifice of the one offender beneath it, and could only be satisfied by a blood-bath into which a nation should be plunged! Such an extreme of frantic lust for murder is only possible in such a state as Ahasuerus’s Persia, but the prostitution of public position to personal ends, and the adoption of political measures at the bidding of wounded vanity, and to gratify blind hatred of a race, is possible still, and it becomes all Christian men to use their influence that the public acts of their nation shall be clear of that taint.

Haman was as superstitious as cruel, and so he sought for auguries from heaven for his hellish purpose, and cast the lot to find the favourable day for bringing it about. He is not the only one who has sought divine approval for wicked public acts. Religion has been used to varnish many a crime, and *Te Deums* sung for many a victory which was little better than Haman’s plot.

The crafty denunciation of the Jews to the king is a good specimen of the way in which a despot is hoodwinked by his favourites, and made their tool. It was no doubt true that the Jews’ laws were ‘diverse from those of every people,’ but it was not true that they did not ‘keep the king’s laws,’ except in so far as these required worship of other gods. In all their long dispersion they have been remarkable for two things,-their tenacious adherence to the Law, so far as possible in exile, and their obedience to the law of the country of their sojourn. No doubt, the exiles in Persian territory presented the same characteristics. But Haman has had many followers in resenting the distinctiveness of the Jew, and charging on them crimes of which they were innocent. From Mordecai onwards it has been so, and Europe is to-day disgraced by a crusade against them less excusable than Haman' s. Hatred still masks itself under the disguise of political expediency, and says, 'It is not for the king's profit to suffer them.'

But the true half of the charge was a eulogium, for it implied that the scattered exiles were faithful to God's laws, and were marked off by their lives. That ought to be true of professing Christians. They should obviously be living by other principles than the world adopts. The enemy's charge 'shall turn unto you for a testimony.' Happy shall we be if observers are prompted to say of us that 'our laws are diverse' from those of ungodly men around us!

The great bribe which Haman offered to the king is variously estimated as equal to from three to four millions sterling. He, no doubt, reckoned on making more than that out of the confiscation of Jewish property. That such an offer should have been made by the chief minister to the king, and that for such a purpose, reveals a depth of corruption which would be incredible if similar horrors were not recorded of other Eastern despots. But with Turkey still astonishing the world, no one can call Haman's offer too atrocious to be true.

Ahasuerus is the vain-glorious king known to us as Xerxes. His conduct in the affair corresponds well enough with his known character. The lives of thousands of law-abiding subjects are tossed to the favourite without inquiry or hesitation. He does not even ask the name of the 'certain people,' much less require proof of the charge against them. The insanity of weakening his empire by killing so many of its inhabitants does not strike him, nor does he ever seem to think that he has duties to those under his rule. Careless of the sanctity of human life, too indolent to take trouble to see things with his own eyes, apparently without the rudiments of the idea of justice, he wallowed in a sty of self-indulgence, and, while greedy of adulation and the semblance of power, let the reality slip from his hands into those of the favourite, who played on his vices as on an instrument, and pulled the strings that moved the puppet. We do not produce kings of that sort nowadays, but King Demos has his own vices, and is as easily blinded and swayed as Ahasuerus. In every form of government, monarchy or republic, there will be would-be leaders, who seek to gain influence and carry their objects by tickling vanity, operating on vices, calumniating innocent men, and the other arts of the demagogue. Where the power is in the hands of the people, the people is very apt to take its responsibilities as lightly as Ahasuerus did his, and to let itself be led blindfold by men with personal ends to serve, and hiding them under the veil of eager desire for the public good. Christians should 'play the citizen as it becomes the gospel of Christ,' and take care that they are not beguiled into national enmities and public injustice by the specious talk of modern Hamans.

2) Esther 4:10-13

Esther

ESTHER'S VENTURE

Est. 4:10 - Est. 4:17; Est. 5:1 - Est. 5:3.

Patriotism is more evident than religion in the Book of Esther. To turn to it after the fervours of prophets and the continual recognition of God in history which marks the other historical books, is like coming down from heaven to earth, as Ewald says. But that difference in tone probably accurately represents the difference between the saints and heroes of an earlier age and the Jews in Persia, in whom national feeling was stronger than devotion. The picture of their characteristics deducible from this Book shows many of the traits which have marked them ever since,-accommodating flexibility, strangely united with unbending tenacity; a capacity for securing the favour of influential people, and willingness to stretch conscience in securing it; reticence and diplomacy; and, beneath all, unquenchable devotion to Israel, which burns alike in the politic Mordecai and the lovely Esther.

There is not much audible religion in either, but in this lesson Mordecai impressively enforces his assurance that Israel cannot perish, and his belief in Providence setting people in their places for great unselfish ends; and Esther is ready to die, if need be, in trying to save her people, and thinks that fasting and prayer will help her in her daring attempt. These two cousins, unlike in so much, were alike in their devotion to Israel; and though they said little about their religion, they acted it, which is better.

It is very like Jews that the relationship between Mordecai and Esther should have been kept dark. Nobody but one or two trusted servants knew that the porter was the queen's cousin, and probably her Jewish birth was also unknown. Secrecy is, no doubt, the armour of oppressed nations; but it is peculiarly agreeable to the descendants of Jacob, who was a master of the art. There must have been wonderful self-command on both sides to keep such a secret, and true affection, to preserve intercourse through apparent indifference.

Our passage begins in the middle of Esther's conversation with the confidential go-between, who told her of the insane decree for the destruction of the Jews, and of Mordecai's request that she should appeal to the king. She reminds him of what he knew well enough, the law that unsummoned intruders into the presence are liable to death; and adds what, of course, he did not know, that she had not been summoned for a month. We need not dwell on this ridiculously arrogant law, but may remark that the substantial accuracy of the statement is confirmed by classical and other authors, and may pause for a moment to note the glimpse given here of the delirium of self-importance in which these Persian kings lived, and to see in it no small cause of their vices and disasters. What chance of knowing facts or of living a wholesome life had a man shut off thus from all but lickspittles and slaves? No wonder that the victims of such dignity beat the sea with rods, when it was rude enough to wreck their ships! No wonder that they wallowed in sensuality, and lost pith and manhood! No wonder that Greece crushed their unwieldy armies and fleets!

And what a glimpse into their heart-emptiness and degradation of sacred ties is given in the fact that Esther the queen had not seen Ahasuerus for a month, though living in the same palace, and his favourite wife! No doubt, the experiences of exile had something to do in later ages with the decided preference of the Jew for monogamy.

But, passing from this, we need only observe how clearly Esther sees and how calmly she tells Mordecai the tremendous risk which following his counsel would bring. Note that she does not refuse. She simply puts the case plainly, as if she invited further communication. ‘This is how things stand. Do you still wish me to run the risk?’ That is poor courage which has to shut its eyes in order to keep itself up to the mark. Unfortunately, the temperament which clearly sees dangers and that which dares them are not often found together in due proportion, and so men are over-rash and over-cautious. This young queen with her clear eyes saw, and with her brave heart was ready to face, peril to her life. Unless we fully realise difficulties and dangers beforehand, our enthusiasm for great causes will ooze out at our fingers’ ends at the first rude assault of these. So let us count the cost before we take up arms, and let us take up arms after we have counted the cost. Cautious courage, courageous caution, are good guides. Either alone is a bad one.

Mordecai’s grand message is a condensed statement of the great reasons which always exist for self-sacrificing efforts for others’ good. His words are none the less saturated with devout thought because they do not name God. This porter at the palace gate had not the tongue of a psalmist or of a prophet. He was a plain man, not uninfluenced by his pagan surroundings, and perhaps he was careful to adapt his message to the lips of the Gentile messenger, and therefore did not more definitely use the sacred name.

It is very striking that Mordecai makes no attempt to minimise Esther’s peril in doing as he wished. He knew that she would take her life in her hand, and he expects her to be willing to do it, as he would have been willing. It is grand when love exhorts loved ones to a course which may bring death to them, and lifelong loneliness and quenched hopes to it. Think of Mordecai’s years of care over and pride in his fair young cousin, and how many joys and soaring visions would perish with her, and then estimate the heroic self-sacrifice he exercised in urging her to her course.

His first appeal is on the lowest ground. Pure selfishness should send her to the king; for, if she did not go, she would not escape the common ruin. So, on the one hand, she had to face certain destruction; and, on the other, there were possible success and escape. It may seem unlikely that the general massacre should include the favourite queen, and especially as her nationality was apparently a secret. But when a mob has once tasted blood, its appetite is great and its scent keen, and there are always informers at hand to point to hidden victims. The argument holds in reference to many forms of conflict with national and social evils. If Christian people allow vice and godlessness to riot unchecked, they will not escape the contagion, in some form or other. How many good men's sons have been swept away by the immoralities of great cities! How few families there are in which there is not 'one dead,' the victim of drink and dissipation! How the godliness of the Church is cooled down by the low temperature around! At the very lowest, self-preservation should enlist all good men in a sacred war against the sins which are slaying their countrymen. If smallpox breaks out in the slums, it will come uptown into the grand houses, and the outcasts will prove that they are the rich man's brethren by infecting him, and perhaps killing him.

Mordecai goes back to the same argument in the later part of his answer, when he foretells the destruction of Esther and her father's house. There he puts it, however, in a rather different light. The destruction is not now, as before, her participation in the common tragedy, but her exceptional ruin while Israel is preserved. The unfaithful one, who could have intervened to save, and did not, will have a special infliction of punishment. That is true in many applications. Certainly, neglect to do what we can do for others does always bring some penalty on the slothful coward; and there is no more short-sighted policy than that which shirks plain duties of beneficence from regard to self.

But higher considerations than selfish ones are appealed to. Mordecai is sure that deliverance will come. He does not know whence, but come it will. How did he arrive at that serene confidence? Certainly because he trusted God's ancient promises, and believed in the indestructibility of the nation which a divine hand protected. How does such a confidence agree with fear of 'destruction'? The two parts of Mordecai's message sound contradictory; but he might well dread the threatened catastrophe, and yet be sure that through any disaster Israel as a nation would pass, cast down, no doubt, but not destroyed.

How did it agree with his earnestness in trying to secure Esther’s help? If he was certain of the issue, why should he have troubled her or himself? Just for the same reason that the discernment of God’s purposes and absolute reliance on these stimulate, and do not paralyse, devout activity in helping to carry them out. If we are sure that a given course, however full of peril and inconvenience, is in the line of God’s purposes, that is a reason for strenuous effort to carry it out. Since some men are to be honoured to be His instruments, shall not we be willing to offer ourselves? There is a holy and noble ambition which covets the dignity of being used by Him. They who believe that their work helps forward what is dear to God’s heart may well do with their might what they find to do, and not be too careful to keep on the safe side in doing it. The honour is more than the danger. ‘Here am I; take me,’ should be the Christian feeling about all such work.

The last argument in this noble summary of motives for self-sacrifice for others’ good is the thought of God’s purpose in giving Esther her position. It carries large truth applicable to us all. The source of all endowments of position, possessions, or capacities, is God. His purpose in them all goes far beyond the happiness of the receiver. Dignities and gifts of every sort are ours for use in carrying out His great designs of good to our fellows. Esther was made queen, not that she might live in luxury and be the plaything of a king, but that she might serve Israel. Power is duty. Responsibility is measured by capacity. Obligation attends advantages. Gifts are burdens. All men are stewards, and God gives His servants their ‘talents,’ not for selfish squandering or hoarding, but to trade with, and to pay the profits to Him. This penetrating insight into the source and intention of all which we have, carries a solemn lesson for us all.

The fair young heroine’s soul rose to the occasion, and responded with a swift determination to her older cousin’s lofty words. Her pathetic request for the prayers of the people for whose sake she was facing death was surely more than superstition. Little as she says about her faith in God, it obviously underlay her courage. A soul that dares death in obedience to His will and in dependence on His aid, demonstrates its godliness more forcibly in silence than by many professions.

‘If I perish, I perish!’ Think of the fair, soft lips set to utter that grand surrender, and of all the flowery and silken cords which bound the young heart to life, so bright and desirable as was assured to her. Note the resolute calmness, the Spartan brevity, the clear sight of the possible fatal issue, the absolute submission. No higher strain has ever come from human lips. This womanly soul was of the same stock as a Miriam, a Deborah, Jephthah’s daughter; and the same fire burned in her,-utter devotion to Israel because entire consecration to Israel’s God. Religion and patriotism were to her inseparable. What was her individual life compared with her people’s weal and her God’s will? She was ready without a murmur to lay her young radiant life down. Such ecstasy of willing self-sacrifice raises its subject above all fears and dissolves all hindrances. It may be wrought out in uneventful details of our small lives, and may illuminate these as truly as it sheds imperishable lustre over the lovely figure standing in the palace court, and waiting for life or death at the will of a sensual tyrant.

The scene there need not detain us. We can fancy Esther’s beating heart putting fire in her cheek, and her subdued excitement making her beauty more splendid as she stood. What a contrast between her and the arrogant king on his throne! He was a voluptuary, ruined morally by unchecked licence,-a monster, as he could hardly help being, of lust, self will, and caprice. She was at that moment an incarnation of self-sacrifice and pure enthusiasm. The blind world thought that he was the greater; but how ludicrous his condescension, how vulgar his pomp, how coarse his kindness, how gross his prodigal promises by the side of the heroine of faith, whose life he held in his capricious hand!

How amazed the king would have been if he had been told that one of his chief titles to be remembered would be that moment’s interview! Ahasuerus is the type of swollen self-indulgence, which always degrades and coarsens; Esther is the type of self-sacrifice which as uniformly refines, elevates, and arrays with new beauty and power. If we would reach the highest nobleness possible to us, we must stand with Esther at the gate, and not envy or imitate Ahasuerus on his gaudy throne. ‘He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for My sake and the gospel’ s, the same shall find it.’

3) Esther 4:14

Esther

ESTHER’S VENTURE

MORDECAI AND ESTHER

Est. 4:14.

All Christians are agreed in holding the principles which underlie our missionary operations. They all believe that the world is a fallen world, that without Christ the fallen world is a lost world, that the preaching of the Gospel is the way to bring Christ to those who need Him, that to the Church is committed the ministry of reconciliation.

These are the grand truths from which the grand missionary enterprise has sprung. It is not my intention to enlarge on them now. But in this and in all cases, there are secondary motives besides, and inferior to those which are derived from the real fundamental principles. We are stimulated to action not only because we hold certain great principles, but because they are reinforced by certain subordinate considerations.

It is the duty of all Christians to promote the missionary cause on the lofty grounds already referred to. Besides that, it may be in a special way our duty for some additional reasons drawn from peculiarities in our condition. Circumstances do not make duties, but they may bring a special weight of obligation on us to do them. Times again do not make duties, but they too make a thing a special duty now. The consideration of consequences may not decide us in matters of conscience, but it may allowably come in to deter us from what is on higher grounds a sin to be avoided, or a good deed to be done. Success or failure is an alternative that must not be thought of when we are asking ourselves, ‘Ought I to do this?’ but when we have answered that question, we may go to work with a lighter heart and a firmer hand if we are sure that we are not going to fail.

All these are inferior considerations which do not avail to determine duty and do not go deep enough to constitute the real foundation of our obligation. They are considerations which can scarcely be shut out, and should be taken in determining the weight of our obligation, in shaping the selection of our duties, in stimulating the zeal and sedulousness with which we do what we know to be right.

To a consideration of some of these secondary reasons for energy in the work of missions I ask your attention. The verse which I have selected for my text is spoken by Mordecai to Esther, when urging her to her perilous patriotism. It singularly blends the statesman and the believer. He sees that if she selfishly refuses to identify herself with her people, in their calamity, the wave that sweeps them away will not be stayed outside her royal dwelling; he knows too much of courts to think that she can stand against that burst of popular fury should it break out. But he looks on as a devout man believing God's promises, and seeing past all instruments; he warns her that 'deliverance and enlargement shall arise.' He is no fatalist; he believes in man's work, therefore he urges her to let herself be the instrument by which God's work shall be done. He is no atheist; he believes in God's sovereign power and unchangeable faithfulness, therefore he looks without dismay to the possibility of her failure. He knows that if she is idle, all the evil will come on her head, who has been unfaithful, and that in spite of that God's faithfulness shall not be made of none effect. He believes that she has been raised to her position for God's sake, for her brethren's sake, not her own.

'Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' There speaks the devout statesman, the court-experienced believer. He has seen favourites tended and tossed aside, viziers powerful and beheaded, kings half deified and deserted in their utmost need. Sitting at the gate there, he has seen generations of Hamans go out and in; he has seen the craft, the cruelty, the lusts which have been the apparent causes of the puppets' rise and fall, and he has looked beyond it all and believed in a Hand that pulled the wires, in a King of Kings who raiseth up one and setteth down another. So he believes that his Esther has come to the kingdom by God's appointment, to do God's work at God's time. And these convictions keep him calm and stir her.

We may find here a series of considerations having a special bearing on this missionary work. To them I ask your attention.

I. God gives us our position that we may use it for His cause, for the spread of the Gospel.

In most general terms.

> [a] No man has anything for his own sake-no man liveth to himself. We come to the kingdom for others. Here we touch the foundation of all authority; we learn the awful burden of all talents, the dreadful weight of every gift.
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> [b] No man receives the Gospel for his own sake. We are not non-conductors, but stand all linked hand in hand. We are members of the body that the blood may flow freely through us. For no loftier reason did God light the candle than that it might give light. We are beacons kindled to transmit, till every sister light flashes back the ray.
>
> [c] We especially have received a position in the world for the conversion of the world. Our national character and position unite that of the Jew in his two stages-we are set to be the 'light of the world,' and we are 'tribes of the wandering foot.' Our history, all, has tended to this function, our local position, our laws, our commerce. We are citizens of a nation which 'as a nest has found the riches' of the peoples. In every land our people dwell.

Think of our colonies. Think that we are brought into contact with heathen, whether we will or not. We cannot help influencing them. 'Through you the name of God is blasphemed amongst the Gentiles.' Think of our sailors. Why this position? What is plainer than that all this is in order that the Gospel might be spread? God has ever let the Gospel follow in the tracks made for it by commercial law.

This object does not exclude others. Our language, our literature, our other rich spiritual treasures, we hold them all that we may impart. But remember that all these other good things that England has will spread themselves with little effort, people will be glad to get them. But the Gospel will not be spread so. It must be taken to those who do not want it. It must be held forth with outstretched hands to ‘a disobedient and gainsaying people.’ It is found of them that seek it not.

Like the Lord we must go to the wanderers, we must find them as they lie panting and thirsty in the wild wilderness. Therefore Christian men must make special earnest efforts or the work will not be done. They must be as the ‘dew that tarrieth not for man, nor waiteth for the sons of men.’

And again, such action does not involve approval of the means by which such a position has become ours. Mordecai knew what vile passions had been at work to put Esther there, and did not forget poor Vashti, and we have no need to hide conviction that England’s place has often been won by wrong, been kept by violence and fraud, that, as she has strode to empire, her foot has trodden on many a venerable throne unjustly thrown down, and her skirts have been dabbled with ‘the blood of poor innocents,’ splashed there with her armed hoof. Be it so!-Still! ‘Thou makest the wrath of man to praise Thee.’ Still-’we are debtors both to the Greek and barbarian,’ and all the more debtors because of ills inflicted. God has laid on us a solemn responsibility. Over all the dust of base intrigues, and the smoke of bloody battles, and the hubbub of busy commerce, His hand has been working, and though we have been sinful, He has given us a place and a power, mighty and awful. We have received these not for our own glory, not that we should boast of our dominion, not that we should gather tribute of gain and glory from subject peoples, not even that we should carry to them the great though lesser blessings of language, united order, peaceful commerce, sway over brute nature, but that we should give them what will make them men-Christ.

We have a work to do, an awful work. To us all as Christians, to us especially as citizens of this land and members of this race, to us and to our brethren across the Atlantic the message comes, by our history, our manners, etc., as plainly as if it were written in every wave that beats around our coast. ‘Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord.’

II. God lays upon us special missionary work by the special characteristics of the times.

‘Such a time as this!’ Was there ever such a time?

Look at the condition of heathenism. It is everywhere tottering. ‘The idols are on the beasts, Bel boweth down.’ The grim gods sit half famished already. There is a crack in every temple wall. Mahommedanism, Buddhism, Brahminism-they are none of them progressive. They are none of them vital. Think how only the Gospel outleaps space and time. How all these systems are of time and devoured by it, as Saturn eats his own children. They are of the things that can be shaken, and their being shaken makes more certain the remaining of the things that cannot be shaken.

Look at the fields open. India, China, Japan, Africa, in a word, ‘The field is the world’ in a degree in which it never was before. ‘Such a time’-a time of seething, and we can determine the cosmos; a plastic time, and we can mould it; it is a deluge, push the ark boldly out and ransom some.

III. If we neglect the voice of God’s providence, harm comes on us.

The gifts unimproved are apt to be lost. One knows not all the conditions on which England holds her sway, nor do we fathom the strange way in which spiritual characteristics are inwrought with material interests. But we believe in a providential government of the world, and of this we may be very sure, that all advantages not used for God are held by a very precarious tenure.

The fact is that selfishness is the ruin of any people. When you have a ‘Christian’ nation not using their position for God’s glory, they are using it for their own sakes; and that indicates a state of mind which will lead to numberless other evils in their relation to men, many of which have a direct tendency to rob them of their advantages. For instance, a selfish nation will never hold conquests with a firm grasp. If we do not bind subject peoples to us by benefits, we shall repel them by hatreds. Think of India and its lessons, or of South Africa and its. We have seen the tide of material prosperity ebb away from many a nation and land, and I for my part believe in the Hand of God in history, and believe that the tide follows the motions of the heavens.

The history of the Jewish people is not an exception to the laws of God's government of the world, but a specimen of it. They who were made a hearth in which the embers of divine truth were kept in a dark world, when they began to think that they had the truth in order that they might be different from other people, and forgot that they were different from others in order that they might first preserve and then impart the truth to all, lost the light and heat of it, stiffened into formal hypocrisy and malice and all uncharitableness, and then the Roman sword smote their national life in twain.

Whatever is not used for God becomes a snare first, then injures the possessors, and tends to destroy the possessors. The march of Providence goes on. Its purposes will be effected. Whatever stands in the way will be mowed remorselessly down, if need be. Helps that have become hindrances will go. The kingdoms of this world will have to fall; and if we are not helping and hasting the coming of the Lord we shall be destroyed by the brightness of His coming. The chariot rolls on. For men and for nations there is only the choice of yoking themselves to the car, and finding themselves borne along rather than bearing it, and partaking the triumph, or of being crushed beneath its awful wheels as they bound along their certain road, bearing Him who rides 'forth prosperously because of truth and meekness and righteousness.'

IV. Though we be unfaithful, God's purpose of mercy to the world shall be accomplished.

'Deliverance and enlargement shall arise from another place.' So it is certain that God from eternity has willed that all flesh should see His salvation. He loves the heathen better than we do. Christ has died not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world. God hath made of one blood all nations of men. The race is one in its need. The race is one in its goal. The Gospel is fit for all men. The Gospel is preached to all men. The Gospel shall yet be received by a world, and from every corner of a believing earth will rise one roll of praise to one Father, and the race shall be one in its hopes, one in its Lord, one in faith, one in baptism, one in one God and Father of us all. That grand unity shall certainly come. That true unity and fraternity shall be realised. The blissful wave of the knowledge of the Lord shall cover and hide and flow rejoicingly over all national distinctions. 'In that day Israel shall be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth.'

This is as certain as the efficacy of a Saviour's blood can make it, as certain as the universal adaptation and design of a preached Gospel can make it, as certain as the oneness of human nature can make it, as certain as the power of a Comforter who shall convince the world of sin, of righteousness, and judgment can make it, as certain as the misery of man can make it, as certain as the promises of God who cannot lie can make it, as certain as His faithfulness who hangs the rainbow in the heavens and enters into an everlasting covenant with all the earth can make it.

And this accumulation of certainties does not depend on the faithfulness of men. In the width of that mighty result the failure of some single agent may be eliminated. Nay, more, though all men failed, God hath instruments, and will use them Himself, if need were.

Only we may share the triumph and partake of the blessed result. Decide for yourself, what share you will have in that marvellous day. Let your work be such as that it shall abide. Stonehenge, cathedrals, temples stand when all else has passed away. Work for God abides and outlasts everything beside, and the smallest service for Him is only made to flash forth light by the glorifying and revealing fires of that awful day which will burn up the wood, the hay, and the stubble, and flow with beautifying brightness and be flashed back with double splendour from 'the gold, the silver, and the precious stones,' the abiding workmanship of devout hearts in that everlasting tabernacle which shall not be taken down, the ransomed souls builded together, ransomed by our preaching, and 'builded up together for a temple of God by the Spirit.'

4) Esther 4:15-17

Esther

ESTHER'S VENTURE

Est. 4:10 - Est. 4:17; Est. 5:1 - Est. 5:3.

Patriotism is more evident than religion in the Book of Esther. To turn to it after the fervours of prophets and the continual recognition of God in history which marks the other historical books, is like coming down from heaven to earth, as Ewald says. But that difference in tone probably accurately represents the difference between the saints and heroes of an earlier age and the Jews in Persia, in whom national feeling was stronger than devotion. The picture of their characteristics deducible from this Book shows many of the traits which have marked them ever since,-accommodating flexibility, strangely united with unbending tenacity; a capacity for securing the favour of influential people, and willingness to stretch conscience in securing it; reticence and diplomacy; and, beneath all, unquenchable devotion to Israel, which burns alike in the politic Mordecai and the lovely Esther.

There is not much audible religion in either, but in this lesson Mordecai impressively enforces his assurance that Israel cannot perish, and his belief in Providence setting people in their places for great unselfish ends; and Esther is ready to die, if need be, in trying to save her people, and thinks that fasting and prayer will help her in her daring attempt. These two cousins, unlike in so much, were alike in their devotion to Israel; and though they said little about their religion, they acted it, which is better.

It is very like Jews that the relationship between Mordecai and Esther should have been kept dark. Nobody but one or two trusted servants knew that the porter was the queen’s cousin, and probably her Jewish birth was also unknown. Secrecy is, no doubt, the armour of oppressed nations; but it is peculiarly agreeable to the descendants of Jacob, who was a master of the art. There must have been wonderful self-command on both sides to keep such a secret, and true affection, to preserve intercourse through apparent indifference.

Our passage begins in the middle of Esther’s conversation with the confidential go-between, who told her of the insane decree for the destruction of the Jews, and of Mordecai’s request that she should appeal to the king. She reminds him of what he knew well enough, the law that unsummoned intruders into the presence are liable to death; and adds what, of course, he did not know, that she had not been summoned for a month.

We need not dwell on this ridiculously arrogant law, but may remark that the substantial accuracy of the statement is confirmed by classical and other authors, and may pause for a moment to note the glimpse given here of the delirium of self-importance in which these Persian kings lived, and to see in it no small cause of their vices and disasters. What chance of knowing facts or of living a wholesome life had a man shut off thus from all but lickspittles and slaves? No wonder that the victims of such dignity beat the sea with rods, when it was rude enough to wreck their ships! No wonder that they wallowed in sensuality, and lost pith and manhood! No wonder that Greece crushed their unwieldy armies and fleets!

And what a glimpse into their heart-emptiness and degradation of sacred ties is given in the fact that Esther the queen had not seen Ahasuerus for a month, though living in the same palace, and his favourite wife! No doubt, the experiences of exile had something to do in later ages with the decided preference of the Jew for monogamy.

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Mordecai’s grand message is a condensed statement of the great reasons which always exist for self-sacrificing efforts for others’ good. His words are none the less saturated with devout thought because they do not name God. This porter at the palace gate had not the tongue of a psalmist or of a prophet. He was a plain man, not uninfluenced by his pagan surroundings, and perhaps he was careful to adapt his message to the lips of the Gentile messenger, and therefore did not more definitely use the sacred name.

It is very striking that Mordecai makes no attempt to minimise Esther’s peril in doing as he wished. He knew that she would take her life in her hand, and he expects her to be willing to do it, as he would have been willing. It is grand when love exhorts loved ones to a course which may bring death to them, and lifelong loneliness and quenched hopes to it. Think of Mordecai’s years of care over and pride in his fair young cousin, and how many joys and soaring visions would perish with her, and then estimate the heroic self-sacrifice he exercised in urging her to her course.

His first appeal is on the lowest ground. Pure selfishness should send her to the king; for, if she did not go, she would not escape the common ruin. So, on the one hand, she had to face certain destruction; and, on the other, there were possible success and escape. It may seem unlikely that the general massacre should include the favourite queen, and especially as her nationality was apparently a secret. But when a mob has once tasted blood, its appetite is great and its scent keen, and there are always informers at hand to point to hidden victims. The argument holds in reference to many forms of conflict with national and social evils. If Christian people allow vice and godlessness to riot unchecked, they will not escape the contagion, in some form or other. How many good men’s sons have been swept away by the immoralities of great cities! How few families there are in which there is not ‘one dead,’ the victim of drink and dissipation! How the godliness of the Church is cooled down by the low temperature around! At the very lowest, self-preservation should enlist all good men in a sacred war against the sins which are slaying their countrymen. If smallpox breaks out in the slums, it will come uptown into the grand houses, and the outcasts will prove that they are the rich man’s brethren by infecting him, and perhaps killing him.

Mordecai goes back to the same argument in the later part of his answer, when he foretells the destruction of Esther and her father’s house. There he puts it, however, in a rather different light. The destruction is not now, as before, her participation in the common tragedy, but her exceptional ruin while Israel is preserved. The unfaithful one, who could have intervened to save, and did not, will have a special infliction of punishment. That is true in many applications. Certainly, neglect to do what we can do for others does always bring some penalty on the slothful coward; and there is no more short-sighted policy than that which shirks plain duties of beneficence from regard to self.

But higher considerations than selfish ones are appealed to. Mordecai is sure that deliverance will come. He does not know whence, but come it will. How did he arrive at that serene confidence? Certainly because he trusted God's ancient promises, and believed in the indestructibility of the nation which a divine hand protected. How does such a confidence agree with fear of 'destruction'? The two parts of Mordecai's message sound contradictory; but he might well dread the threatened catastrophe, and yet be sure that through any disaster Israel as a nation would pass, cast down, no doubt, but not destroyed.

How did it agree with his earnestness in trying to secure Esther's help? If he was certain of the issue, why should he have troubled her or himself? Just for the same reason that the discernment of God's purposes and absolute reliance on these stimulate, and do not paralyse, devout activity in helping to carry them out. If we are sure that a given course, however full of peril and inconvenience, is in the line of God's purposes, that is a reason for strenuous effort to carry it out. Since some men are to be honoured to be His instruments, shall not we be willing to offer ourselves? There is a holy and noble ambition which covets the dignity of being used by Him. They who believe that their work helps forward what is dear to God's heart may well do with their might what they find to do, and not be too careful to keep on the safe side in doing it. The honour is more than the danger. 'Here am I; take me,' should be the Christian feeling about all such work.

The last argument in this noble summary of motives for self-sacrifice for others' good is the thought of God's purpose in giving Esther her position. It carries large truth applicable to us all. The source of all endowments of position, possessions, or capacities, is God. His purpose in them all goes far beyond the happiness of the receiver. Dignities and gifts of every sort are ours for use in carrying out His great designs of good to our fellows. Esther was made queen, not that she might live in luxury and be the plaything of a king, but that she might serve Israel. Power is duty. Responsibility is measured by capacity. Obligation attends advantages. Gifts are burdens. All men are stewards, and God gives His servants their ‘talents,’ not for selfish squandering or hoarding, but to trade with, and to pay the profits to Him. This penetrating insight into the source and intention of all which we have, carries a solemn lesson for us all.

The fair young heroine’s soul rose to the occasion, and responded with a swift determination to her older cousin’s lofty words. Her pathetic request for the prayers of the people for whose sake she was facing death was surely more than superstition. Little as she says about her faith in God, it obviously underlay her courage. A soul that dares death in obedience to His will and in dependence on His aid, demonstrates its godliness more forcibly in silence than by many professions.

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5) Esther 5:1-3

Esther

ESTHER'S VENTURE

Est. 4:10 - Est. 4:17; Est. 5:1 - Est. 5:3.

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6) Esther 8:3-8

Esther

THE NET BROKEN

Est. 8:3 - Est. 8:8,Est. 8:15 - Est. 8:17.

The spirit of this passage may perhaps be best caught by taking the three persons appearing in it, and the One who does not appear, but acts unseen through them all.

I. The heroine of the whole book and of this chapter is Esther, one of the sweetest and noblest of the women of Scripture. The orphan girl who had grown up into beauty under the care of her uncle Mordecai, and was lifted suddenly from sheltered obscurity into the 'fierce light that beats upon a throne,' like some flower culled in a shady nook and set in a king's bosom, was true to her childhood's protector and to her people, and kept her sweet, brave gentleness unspoiled by the rapid elevation which ruins so many characters. Her Jewish name of Hadassah ['myrtle'] well befits her, for she is clothed with unostentatious beauty, pure and fragrant as the blossoms that brides twine in their hair. But, withal, she has a true woman's courage which is always ready to endure any evil and dare any danger at the bidding of her heart. She took her life in her hand when she sought an audience of Ahasuerus uninvited, and she knew that she did. Nothing in literature is nobler than her quiet words, which measure her danger without shrinking, and front it without heroics: 'If I perish, I perish!'

The danger was not past, though she was queen and beloved; for a despot's love is a shifting sand-bank, which may yield anchorage to-day, and to-morrow may be washed away. So she counted not her life dear unto herself when, for the second time, as in our passage, she ventured, uninvited, into the king's presence. The womanly courage that risks life for love's sake is nobler than the soldier's that feels the lust of battle maddening him.

Esther’s words to the king are full of tact. She begins with what seems to have been the form of address prescribed by custom, for it is used by her in her former requests [Est. 5:8; Est. 7:3]. But she adds a variation of the formula, tinged with more personal reference to the king’s feeling towards her, as well as breathing entire submission to his estimate of what was fitting. ‘If the thing seem right before the king,’ appeals to the sense of justice that lay dormant beneath the monarch’s arbitrary will; ‘and I be pleasing in his eyes,’ drew him by the charm of her beauty. She avoided making the king responsible for the plot, and laid it at the door of the dead and discredited Haman. It was his device, and since he had fallen, his policy could be reversed without hurting the king’s dignity. And then with fine tact, as well as with a burst of genuine feeling, she flings all her personal influence into the scale, and seeks to move the king, not by appeals to his justice or royal duty, but to his love for her, which surely could not bear to see her suffer. One may say that it was a low motive to appeal to, to ask the despot to save a people in order to keep one woman from sorrow; and so it was. It was Ahasuerus’s fault that such a reason had more weight with him than nobler ones. It was not Esther’s that she used her power over him to carry her point. She used the weapons that she had, and that she knew would be efficacious. The purpose for which she used them is her justification.

Esther may well teach her sisters to-day to be brave and gentle, to use their influence over men for high purposes of public good, to be the inspirers of their husbands, lovers, brothers, for all noble thinking and doing; to make the cause of the oppressed their own, to be the apostles of mercy and the hinderers of wrong, to keep true to their early associations if prosperity comes to them, and to cherish sympathy with their nation so deep that they cannot ‘endure to see the evil that shall come unto them’ without using all their womanly influence to avert it.

II. Ahasuerus plays a sorry part beside Esther. He knows no law but his own will, and that is moved, not by conscience or reason, but by ignoble passions and sensual desires. He tosses his subjects’ lives as trivial gifts to any who ask for them. Haman’s wife knew that he had only to ‘speak to the king,’ and Mordecai would be hanged; Haman had no difficulty in securing the royal mandate for the murder of all the Jews. Sated with the indulgence of low desires, he let all power slip from his idle hands, and his manhood was rotted away by wallowing in the pigsty of voluptuousness. But he was tenacious of the semblance of authority, and demanded the appearance of abject submission from the ‘servants’ who were his masters. He yielded to Esther’s prayer as lightly as to Haman’s plot. Whether the Jews were wiped out or not mattered nothing to him, so long as he had no trouble in the affair.

To shift all responsibility off his own shoulders on to somebody else’s was his one aim. He was as untrue to his duty when he gave his signet to Mordecai, and bade him and Esther do as they liked, as when he had given it to Haman. And with all this slothful indifference to his duty, he was sensitive to etiquette, and its cobwebs held him whom the cords of his royal obligations could not hold. It mattered not to him that the edict which he allowed Mordecai to promulgate practically lit the flames of civil war. He had washed his hands of the whole business.

It is a hideous picture of an Eastern despot, and has been said to be unhistorical and unbelievable. But the world has seen many examples of rulers whom the possession of unlimited and irresponsible power has corrupted in like fashion. And others than rulers may take the warning that to live to self is the mother of all sins and crimes; that no man can safely make his own will and his own passions his guides; that there is no slavery so abject as that of the man who is tyrannised by his lower nature; that there is a temptation besetting us all to take the advantages and neglect the duties of our position, and that to yield to it is sure to end in moral ruin. We are all kings, even if our kingdom be only our own selves, and we shall rule wisely only if we rule as God’s viceroys, and think more of duty than of delight.

III. Mordecai is a kind of duplicate of Joseph, and embodies valuable lessons. Contented acceptance of obscurity and neglect of his services, faithfulness to his people and his God in the foul atmosphere of such a court, wise reticence, patient discharge of small duties, undoubting hope when things looked blackest fed by stedfast faith in God, unchangedness of character and purpose when lifted to supreme dignity, the use of influence and place, not for himself, but for his people,-all these are traits which may be imitated in any life. We should be the same men, whether we sit unnoticed among the lackeys at the gate, or are bearing the brunt of the hatred of powerful foes, or are clothed ‘in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold.’ These gauds were nothing to Mordecai, and earthly honours should never turn our heads. He valued power because it enabled him to save his brethren, and we should cultivate the same spirit. The political world, with its fierce struggles for personal ends, its often disregard of the public good, and its use of place and power for ‘making a pile’ or helping relations up, would be much the better for some infusion of the spirit of Mordecai.

IV. But we must not look only at the visible persons and forces. This book of Esther does not say much about God, but His presence broods over it all, and is the real spring that moves the movers that are seen. It is all a lesson of how God works out His purposes through men that seem to themselves to be working out theirs. The king’s criminal abandonment to lust and luxury, Haman’s meanly personal pique, Esther’s beauty, the fall of the favourite, the long past services of Mordecai, even the king’s sleepless night, are all threads in the web, and God is the weaver. The story raises the whole question of the standing miracle of the co-existence and co-operation of the divine and the human. Man is free and responsible, God is sovereign and all-pervading. He ‘makes the wrath of man to praise Him, and with the remainder thereof He girdeth Himself.’ To-day, as then, He is working out His deep designs through men whom He has raised up, though they have not known Him. Amid the clash of contending interests and worldly passions His solemn purpose steadily advances to its end, like the irresistible ocean current, which persists through all storms that agitate the surface, and draws them into the drift of its silent trend. Ahasuerus, Haman, Esther, Mordecai, are His instruments, and yet each of them is the doer of his or her deed, and has to answer to Him for it.

7) Esther 8:15-17

Esther

THE NET BROKEN

Est. 8:3 - Est. 8:8,Est. 8:15 - Est. 8:17.

The spirit of this passage may perhaps be best caught by taking the three persons appearing in it, and the One who does not appear, but acts unseen through them all.

I. The heroine of the whole book and of this chapter is Esther, one of the sweetest and noblest of the women of Scripture. The orphan girl who had grown up into beauty under the care of her uncle Mordecai, and was lifted suddenly from sheltered obscurity into the 'fierce light that beats upon a throne,' like some flower culled in a shady nook and set in a king's bosom, was true to her childhood's protector and to her people, and kept her sweet, brave gentleness unspoiled by the rapid elevation which ruins so many characters. Her Jewish name of Hadassah ['myrtle'] well befits her, for she is clothed with unostentatious beauty, pure and fragrant as the blossoms that brides twine in their hair. But, withal, she has a true woman's courage which is always ready to endure any evil and dare any danger at the bidding of her heart. She took her life in her hand when she sought an audience of Ahasuerus uninvited, and she knew that she did. Nothing in literature is nobler than her quiet words, which measure her danger without shrinking, and front it without heroics: 'If I perish, I perish!'

The danger was not past, though she was queen and beloved; for a despot's love is a shifting sand-bank, which may yield anchorage to-day, and to-morrow may be washed away. So she counted not her life dear unto herself when, for the second time, as in our passage, she ventured, uninvited, into the king's presence. The womanly courage that risks life for love's sake is nobler than the soldier's that feels the lust of battle maddening him.

Esther's words to the king are full of tact. She begins with what seems to have been the form of address prescribed by custom, for it is used by her in her former requests [Est. 5:8; Est. 7:3]. But she adds a variation of the formula, tinged with more personal reference to the king's feeling towards her, as well as breathing entire submission to his estimate of what was fitting. 'If the thing seem right before the king,' appeals to the sense of justice that lay dormant beneath the monarch's arbitrary will; 'and I be pleasing in his eyes,' drew him by the charm of her beauty. She avoided making the king responsible for the plot, and laid it at the door of the dead and discredited Haman. It was his device, and since he had fallen, his policy could be reversed without hurting the king's dignity. And then with fine tact, as well as with a burst of genuine feeling, she flings all her personal influence into the scale, and seeks to move the king, not by appeals to his justice or royal duty, but to his love for her, which surely could not bear to see her suffer. One may say that it was a low motive to appeal to, to ask the despot to save a people in order to keep one woman from sorrow; and so it was. It was Ahasuerus's fault that such a reason had more weight with him than nobler ones. It was not Esther's that she used her power over him to carry her point. She used the weapons that she had, and that she knew would be efficacious. The purpose for which she used them is her justification.

Esther may well teach her sisters to-day to be brave and gentle, to use their influence over men for high purposes of public good, to be the inspirers of their husbands, lovers, brothers, for all noble thinking and doing; to make the cause of the oppressed their own, to be the apostles of mercy and the hinderers of wrong, to keep true to their early associations if prosperity comes to them, and to cherish sympathy with their nation so deep that they cannot 'endure to see the evil that shall come unto them' without using all their womanly influence to avert it.

II. Ahasuerus plays a sorry part beside Esther. He knows no law but his own will, and that is moved, not by conscience or reason, but by ignoble passions and sensual desires. He tosses his subjects' lives as trivial gifts to any who ask for them. Haman's wife knew that he had only to 'speak to the king,' and Mordecai would be hanged; Haman had no difficulty in securing the royal mandate for the murder of all the Jews. Sated with the indulgence of low desires, he let all power slip from his idle hands, and his manhood was rotted away by wallowing in the pigsty of voluptuousness. But he was tenacious of the semblance of authority, and demanded the appearance of abject submission from the 'servants' who were his masters. He yielded to Esther's prayer as lightly as to Haman's plot. Whether the Jews were wiped out or not mattered nothing to him, so long as he had no trouble in the affair.

To shift all responsibility off his own shoulders on to somebody else's was his one aim. He was as untrue to his duty when he gave his signet to

Mordecai, and bade him and Esther do as they liked, as when he had given it to Haman. And with all this slothful indifference to his duty, he was sensitive to etiquette, and its cobwebs held him whom the cords of his royal obligations could not hold. It mattered not to him that the edict which he allowed Mordecai to promulgate practically lit the flames of civil war. He had washed his hands of the whole business.

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Job

1) JOB 1:21
2) JOB 5:17-22
3) JOB 5:23
4) JOB 5:24-27
5) JOB 8:14
6) JOB 14:14
7) JOB 22:21
8) JOB 22:26-29
9) JOB 42:1-10

1) Job 1:21

Job

SORROW THAT WORSHIPS

Job. 1:21.

This book of Job wrestles with the problem of the meaning of the mystery of sorrow. Whether history or a parable, its worth is the same, as tortured hearts have felt for countless centuries, and will feel to the end. Perhaps no picture that was ever painted is grander and more touching than that of the man of Uz, in the antique wealth and happiness of his brighter days, rich, joyful, with his children round him, living in men’s honour, and walking upright before God. Then come the dramatic completeness and suddenness of his great trials. One day strips him of all, and stripped of all he rises to a loftier dignity, for there is a majesty as well as an isolation in his sorrow.

How many spirits tossed by afflictions have found peace in these words! How many quivering lips have tried to utter their grave, calm accents! To how many of us are they hallowed by memories of times when they stood between us and despair!

They seem to me to say everything that can be said about our trials and losses, to set forth the whole truth of the facts, and to present the whole series of feelings with which good men may and should be exercised.

I. The vindication of sorrow.

He ‘rent his clothes’-the signs and tokens of inward desolation and loss.

It is worth our while to stay for one moment with the thought that we are meant to feel grief. God sends sorrows in order that they may pain. Sorrow has its manifold uses in our lives and on our hearts. It is natural. That is enough. God set the fountain of tears in our souls. We are bidden not to ‘despise the chastening of the Lord.’ It is they who are ‘exercised’ thereby to whom the chastisement is blessed.

It is sanctioned by Christ. He wept. He bade the women of Jerusalem weep for themselves and for their children.

Religion does not destroy the natural emotions-sorrow as little as any other. It guides, controls, curbs, comforts, and brings blessings out of it. So do not aim at an impossible stoicism, but permit nature to have its way, and look at the picture of this manly sorrow of Job's-calm, silent, unless when stung by the undeserved reproaches of these three 'orthodox liars for God,' and going to God and worshipping.

II. The recognition of loss and sorrow as the law of life.

'Naked came I out of my mother's womb.'

We need not dwell on the figure 'mother,' suggesting the grave as the kindly mother's bosom that gathers us all in, and the thought that perhaps gleams forth that death, too, is a kind of birth.

But the truth picturesquely set forth is just the old and simple one-that all possessions are transient.

The naked self gets clothed and lapped round with possessions, but they are all outside of it, apart from its individuality. It has been without them. It will be without them. Death at the end will rob us of them all.

The inevitable law of loss is fixed and certain. We are losing something every moment-not only possessions, but all our dearest ties are knit but for a time, and sure to be snapped. They go, and then after a while we go.

The independence of each soul of all its possessions and relations is as certain as the loss of them. They may go and we are made naked, but still we exist all the same. We have to learn the hard lesson which sounds so unfeeling, that we can live on in spite of all losses. Nothing, no one, is necessary to us.

All this is very cold and miserable; it is the standing point of law and necessity. An atheist could say it. It is the beginning of the Christian contemplation of life, but only the beginning.

III. The recognition of God in the law.

'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.' That is a step far beyond the former. To bring in the thought of *the Lord* makes a world of difference.

The tendency is to look only at the second cause. In Job’s case there were two classes of agencies, men, Chaldeans and Sabeans, and natural causes, fire and wind, but he did not stop with these.

The grand corrective of that tendency lies in the full theistic idea, that God is the sole cause of all. The immanence of Deity in all things and events is our refuge from the soul-crushing tyranny of the reign of law.

That devout recognition of God in law is eminently to be made in regard to death, as Job does in the text: ‘The number of his months is with Thee.’ Death is not any more nor any less under His control than all other human incidents are. It has no special sanctity, nor abnormally close connection with His will, but it no more is exempt from such connection than all the other events of life. The connection is real. He opens the gate of the grave and no man shuts. He shuts, and no man opens.

Job did not forget the Lord’s gifts even while he was writhing under the stroke of His withdrawings. Alas! that it should so often need sorrow to bear into our hearts that we owe all to Him, but even then, if not before, it is well to remember how much good we have received of the Lord, and the remembrance should not be ‘a sorrow’s crown of sorrow,’ but a thankful one.

IV. The thankful resignation to God’s loving administration of the law.

The preceding words might be said with mere submission to an irresistible power, but this last sentence climbs to the highest of the true Christian idea. It recognises in loss and sorrow a reason for praise.

Why?

Because we may be sure that all loss is for our good.

Because we may be sure that all loss is from a loving God. In loss of dear ones, *our* gain is in drawing nearer to God, in being taught more to long for heaven. In our relation to them, a loftier love, a hallowing of all the past. *Their* gain is in their entrance to heaven, and all the glory that they have reached.

This blessing of God for loss is not inconsistent with sorrow, but anticipates the future when we shall know all and bless Him for all.

2) **Job 5:17-22**

Job

THE PEACEABLE FRUITS OF SORROWS RIGHTLY BORNE

Job. 5:17 - Job. 5:27.

The close of the Book of Job shows that his friends' speeches were defective, and in part erroneous. They all proceeded on the assumption that suffering was the fruit of sin-a principle which, though true in general, is not to be unconditionally applied to specific cases. They all forgot that good men might be exposed to it, not as punishment, nor even as correction, but as trial, to 'know what was in their hearts.'

Eliphaz is the best of the three friends, and his speeches embody much permanent truth, and rise, as in this passage, to a high level of literary and artistic beauty. There are few lovelier passages in Scripture than this glowing description of the prosperity of the man who accepts God's chastisements; and, on the whole, the picture is true. But the underlying belief in the uniform coincidence of inward goodness and outward good needs to be modified by the deeper teaching of the New Testament before it can be regarded as covering all the facts of life.

Eliphaz is gathering up, in our passage, the threads of his speech. He bases upon all that he has been saying the exhortation to Job to be thankful for his sorrows. With a grand paradox, he declares the man who is afflicted to be happy. And therein he strikes an eternally true note. It is good to be made to drink a cup of sorrow. Flesh calls pain evil, but spirit knows it to be good. The list of our blessings is not only written in bright inks, but many are inscribed in black. And the reason why the sad heart should be a happy heart is because, as Eliphaz believed, sadness is God's fatherly correction, intended to better the subject of it. 'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth,' says the Epistle to the Hebrews, in full accord with Eliphaz.

But his well-meant and true words flew wide of their mark, for two reasons. They were chillingly didactic, and it is vinegar upon nitre to stand over an agonised soul and preach platitudes in an unsympathetic voice. And they assumed unusual sin in Job as the explanation of his unparalleled pains, while the prologue tells us that his sufferings were not fruits of his sin, but trials of his righteousness. He was horrified at Job's words, which seemed to him full of rebellion and irreverence; and he made no allowance for the wild cries of an agonised heart when he solemnly warned the sufferer against 'despising' God's chastening. A more sympathetic ear would have detected the accent of faith in the groans.

The collocation, in Job. 5:18, of making sore and binding up, does not merely express sequence, but also purpose. The wounding is in order to healing. The wounds are merciful surgery; and their intention is health, like the cuts that lay open an ulcer, or the scratches for vaccination. The view of suffering in these two verses is not complete, but it goes far toward completeness in tracing it to God, in asserting its disciplinary intention, in pointing to the divine healing which is meant to follow, and in exhorting to submission. We may recall the beautiful expansion of that exhortation in Hebrews, where 'faint not' is added to 'despise not,' so including the two opposite and yet closely connected forms of misuse of sorrow, according as we stiffen our wills against it, and try to make light of it, or yield so utterly to it as to collapse. Either extreme equally misses the corrective purpose of the grief.

On this general statement follows a charming picture of the blessedness which attends the man who has taken his chastisement rightly. After the thunderstorm come sunshine and blue, and the song of birds. But, lovely as it is, and capable of application in many points to the life of every man who trustfully yields to God's will, it must not be taken as a literally and absolutely true statement of God's dealings with His children. If so regarded, it would hopelessly be shattered against facts; for the world is full of instances of saintly men and women who have not experienced in their outward lives such sunny calm and prosperity stretching to old age as are here promised. Eliphaz is not meant to be the interpreter of the mysteries of Providence, and his solution is decisively rejected at the close. But still there is much in this picture which finds fulfilment in all devout lives in a higher sense than his intended meaning.

The first point is that the devout soul is exempt from calamities which assail those around it. These are such as are ordinarily in Scripture recognised as God’s judgments upon a people. Famine and war devastate, but the devout soul abides in peace, and is satisfied. Now it is not true that faith and submission make a wall round a man, so that he escapes from such calamities. In the supernatural system of the Old Testament such exemptions were more usual than with us, though this very Book of Job and many a psalm show that devout hearts had even then to wrestle with the problem of the prosperity of the wicked and the indiscriminate fall of widespread calamities on the good and bad.

But in its deepest sense [which, however, is not Eliphaz’s sense] the faithful man is saved from the evils which he, in common with his faithless neighbour, experiences. Two men are smitten down by the same disease, or lie dying on a battlefield, shattered by the same shell, and the one receives the fulfilment of the promise, ‘there shall no evil touch thee,’ and the other does not. For the evil in the evil is all sucked out of it, and the poison is wiped off the arrow which strikes him who is united to God by faith and submission. Two women are grinding at the same millstone, and the same blow kills them both; but the one is delivered, and the other is not. They who pass through an evil, and are not drawn away from God by it, but brought nearer to Him, are hid from its power. To die may be our deliverance from death.

Eliphaz’s promises rise still higher in Job. 5:22 - Job. 5:23, in which is set forth a truth that in its deepest meaning is of universal application. The wild beasts of the earth and the stones of the field will be in league with the man who submits to God’s will. Of course the beasts come into view as destructive, and the stones as injuring the fertility of the fields. There is, probably, allusion to the story of Paradise and the Fall. Man’s relation to nature was disturbed by sin; it will be rectified by his return to God. Such a doctrine of the effects of sin in perverting man’s relation to creatures runs all through Scripture, and is not to be put aside as mere symbolism.

But the large truth underlying the words here is that, if we are servants of God, we are masters of everything. ‘All things work together for good to them that love God.’ All things serve the soul that serves God; as, on the other hand, all are against him that does not, and ‘the stars in their courses fight against’ those who fight against Him. All things are ours, if we are Christ’ s. The many mediaeval legends of saints attended by animals, from St. Jerome and his lion downwards to St. Francis preaching to the birds, echo the thoughts here. A gentle, pure soul, living in amity with dumb creatures, has wonderful power to attract them. They who are at peace with God can scarcely be at war with any of God’s creatures. Gentleness is stronger than iron bands. ‘Cords of love’ draw most surely.

Peace and prosperity in home and possessions are the next blessings promised [Job. 5:24]. ‘Thou shalt visit [look over] thy household, and shalt miss nothing.’ No cattle have strayed or been devoured by evil beasts, or stolen, as all Job’s had been. Alas! Eliphaz knew nothing about commercial crises, and the great system of credit by which one scoundrel’s fall may bring down hundreds of good men and patient widows, who look over their possessions and find nothing but worthless shares. Yet even for those who find all at once that the herd is cut off from the stall, their tabernacle may still be in peace, and though the fold be empty they may miss nothing, if in the empty place they find God. That is what Christians may make out of the words; but it is not what was originally meant by them.

In like manner the next blessing, that of a numerous posterity, does not depend on moral or religious condition, as Eliphaz would make out, and in modern days is not always regarded as a blessing. But note the singular heartlessness betrayed in telling Job, all whose flocks and herds had been carried off, and his children laid dead in their festival chamber, that abundant possessions and offspring were the token of God’s favour. The speaker seems serenely unconscious that he was saying anything that could drive a knife into the tortured man. He is so carried along on the waves of his own eloquence, and so absorbed in stringing together the elements of an artistic whole, that he forgets the very sorrows which he came to comfort. There are not a few pious exhorters of bleeding hearts who are chargeable with the same sin. The only hand that will bind up without hurting is a hand that is sympathetic to the finger-tips. No eloquence or poetic beauty or presentation of undeniable truths will do as substitutes for that.

The last blessing promised is that which the Old Testament places so high in the list of good things-long life. The lovely metaphor in which that promise is couched has become familiar to us all. The ripe corn gathered into a sheaf at harvest-time suggests festival rather than sadness. It speaks of growth accomplished, of fruit matured, of the ministries of sun and rain received and used, and of a joyful gathering into the great storehouse. There is no reference in the speech to the uses of the sheaf after it is harvested, but we can scarcely avoid following its history a little farther than the 'grave' which to Eliphaz seems the garner. Are all these matured powers to have no field for action? Were all these miracles of vegetation set in motion only in order to grow a crop which should be reaped, and there an end? What is to be done with the precious fruit which has taken so long time and so much cultivation to grow? Surely it is not the intention of the Lord of the harvest to let it rot when it has been gathered. Surely we are grown here and ripened and carried hence for something.

But that is not in our passage. This, however, may be drawn from it-that maturity does not depend on length of days; and, however Eliphaz meant to promise long life, the reality is that the devout soul may reckon on complete life, whether it be long or short. God will not call His children home till their schooling is done; and, however green and young the corn may seem to our eyes, He knows which heads in the great harvest-field are ready for removal, and gathers only these. The child whose little coffin may be carried under a boy's arm may be ripe for harvesting. Not length of days, but likeness to God, makes maturity; and if we die according to the will of God, it cannot but be that we shall come to our grave in a full age, whatever be the number of years carved on our tombstones.

The speech ends with a somewhat self-complacent exhortation to the poor, tortured man: 'We have searched it, so it is.' We wise men pledge our wisdom and our reputation that this is true. Great is authority. An ounce of sympathy would have done more to commend the doctrine than a ton of dogmatic self-confidence. 'Hear it, and know thou it for thyself.' Take it into thy mind. Take it into thy mind and heart, and take it for thy good. It was a frosty ending, exasperating in its air of patronage, of superior wisdom, and in its lack of any note of feeling. So, of course, it set Job's impatience alight, and his next speech is more desperate than his former. When will well-meaning comforters learn not to rub salt into wounds while they seem to be dressing them?

3) Job 5:23

Job

THE PEACEABLE FRUITS OF SORROWS RIGHTLY BORNE

'ALL THINGS ARE YOURS'

Jdg. 5:20. - Job. 5:23.

These two poetical fragments present the same truth on opposite sides. The first of them comes from Deborah's triumphant chant. The singer identifies God with the cause of Israel, and declares that heaven itself fought against those who fought against God's people. There may be an allusion to the tempest which Jewish tradition tells us burst over the ranks of the enemy, or there may be some trace of ancient astrological notions, or the words may simply be an elevated way of saying that Heaven fought for Israel. The silent stars, as they swept on their paths through the sky, advanced like an avenging host embattled against the foes of Israel and of God. All things fight against the man who fights against God.

The other text gives the other side of the same truth. One of Job's friends is rubbing salt into his wounds by insisting on the commonplace, which needs a great many explanations and limitations before it can be accepted as true, that sin is the cause of sorrow, and that righteousness brings happiness; and in the course of trying to establish this heartless thesis to a heavy heart he breaks into a strain of the loftiest poetry in describing the blessedness of the righteous. All things, animate and inanimate, are upon his side. The ground, which Genesis tells us is 'cursed for his sake,' becomes his ally, and the very creatures whom man's sin set at enmity against him are at peace with him. All things are the friends and servants of him who is the friend and servant of God.

I. So, putting these two texts together, we have first the great conviction to which religion clings, that God being on our side all things are for us, and not against us.

Now, that is the standing faith of the Old Testament, which no doubt was more easily held in those days, because, if we accept its teaching, we shall recognise that Israel lived under a system in so far supernatural as that moral goodness and material prosperity were a great deal more closely and indissolubly connected than they are to-day. So, many a psalmist and many a prophet breaks out into apostrophes, warranted by the whole history of Israel, and declaring how blessed are the men who, apart from all other defences and sources of prosperity, have God for their help and Him for their hope.

But we are not to dismiss this conviction as belonging only to a system where the supernatural comes in, as it does in the Old Testament history, and as antiquated under a dispensation such as that in which we live. For the New Testament is not a whit behind the Old in insisting upon this truth. ‘All things work together for good to them that love God.’ ‘All things are yours, and ye are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.’ ‘Who is he that will harm you if ye be followers of that which is good?’ The New Testament is committed to the same conviction as that to which the faith of Old Testament saints clung as the sheet anchor of their lives.

That conviction cannot be struck out of the creed of any man, who believes in the God to whom the Old and the New Testament alike bear witness. For it rests upon this plain principle, that all this great universe is not a chaos, but a cosmos, that all these forces and creatures are not a rabble, but an ordered host.

What is the meaning of that great Name by which, from of old, God in His relations to the whole universe has been described-the ‘Lord of Hosts’? Who are the ‘hosts’ of which He is ‘the Lord,’ and to whom, as the centurion said, He says to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goeth; and to another, ‘Come!’ and he cometh; and to another, ‘Do this!’ and he doeth it? Who are ‘the hosts’? Not only these beings who are dimly revealed to us as rational and intelligent, who ‘excel in strength,’ because they ‘hearken to the voice of His word’, but in the ranks of that great army are also embattled all the forces of the universe, and all things living or dead. ‘All are Thy servants; they continue this day’-angels, stars, creatures of earth-’ according to Thine ordinances.’

And if it be true that the All is an ordered whole, which is obedient to the touch and to the will of that divine Commander, then all His servants must be on the same side, and cannot turn their arms against each other. As an old hymn says with another reference-

‘All the servants of our King
In heaven and earth are one,’

and none of them can injure, wound, or slay a fellow-servant. If all are travelling in the same direction there can be no collision. If all are enlisted under the same standard they can never turn their weapons against each other. If God sways all things, then all things which God sways must be on the side of the men that are on the side of God. ‘Thou shalt make a league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.’

II. Note the difficulties arising from experience, in the way of holding fast by this conviction of faith.

The grim facts of the world, seen from their lowest level, seem to shatter it to atoms. Talk about ‘the stars in their courses fighting’ for or against anybody! In one aspect it is superstition, in another aspect it is a dream and an illusion. The prose truth is that they shine down silent, pitiless, cold, indifferent, on battlefields or on peaceful homes; and the moonlight is as pure when it falls upon broken hearts as when it falls upon glad ones. Nature is utterly indifferent to the moral or the religious character of its victims. It goes on its way unswerving and pitiless; and whether the man who stands in its path is good or bad matters not. If he gets into a typhoon he will be wrecked; if he tumbles over Niagara he will be drowned. And what becomes of all the talk about an embattled universe on the side of goodness, in the face of the plain facts of life-of nature’s indifference, nature’s cruelty which has led some men to believe in two sovereign powers, one beneficent and one malicious, and has led others to say, ‘God is a superfluous hypothesis, and to believe in Him brings more enigmas than it solves,' and has led still others to say, 'Why, if there *is* a God, does it look as if either He was not all-powerful, or was not all-merciful?' Nature has but ambiguous evidence to give in support of this conviction.

Then, if we turn to what we call Providence and its mysteries, the very book of Job, from which my second text is taken, is one of the earliest attempts to grapple with the difficulty and to untie the knot; and I suppose everybody will admit that, whatever may be the solution which is suggested by that enigmatical book, the solution is by no means a complete one, though it is as complete as the state of religious knowledge at the time at which the book was written made possible to be attained. The seventy-third psalm shows that even in that old time when, as I have said, supernatural sanctions were introduced into the ordinary dealings of life, the difficulties that cropped up were great enough to bring a devout heart to a stand, and to make the Psalmist say, 'My feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped.' Providence, with all its depths and mysteries, often to our aching hearts seems in our own lives to contradict the conviction, and when we look out over the sadness of humanity, still more does it seem impossible for us to hold fast by the faith 'that all which we behold is full of blessings.'

I doubt not that there are many of ourselves whose lives, shadowed, darkened, hemmed in, perplexed, or made solitary for ever, seem to them to be hard to reconcile with this cheerful faith upon which I am trying to insist. Brethren, cling to it even in the darkness. Be sure of this, that amongst all our mercies there are none more truly merciful than those which come to us shrouded in dark garments, and in questionable shapes. Let nothing rob us of the confidence that 'all things work together for good.'

III. I come, lastly, to consider the higher form in which this conviction is true for ever.

I have said that the facts of life seem often to us, and are felt often by some of us, to shatter it to atoms; to riddle it through and through with shot. But, if we bring the Pattern-life to bear upon the illumination of all life, and if we learn the lessons of the Cradle and the Cross, and rise to the view of human life which emerges from the example of Jesus Christ, then we get back the old conviction, transfigured indeed, but firmer than ever. We have to alter the point of view. Everything always depends on the point of view. We have to alter one or two definitions. Definitions come first in geometry and in everything else. Get *them* right, and you will get your theorems and problems right.

So, looking at life in the light of Christ, we have to give new contents to the two words ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ and a new meaning to the two words ‘for’ and ‘against.’ And when we do that, then the difficulties straighten themselves out, and there are not any more knots, but all is plain; and the old faith of the Old Testament, which reposed very largely upon abnormal and extraordinary conditions of life, comes back in a still nobler form, as possible to be held by us amidst the commonplace of our daily existence.

For everything is my friend, is for me and not against me, that helps me nearer to God. To live for Him, to live with Him, to be conscious ever of communion with Himself, to feel the touch of His hand on my hand, and the pressure of His breast against mine, at all moments of my life, is my true and the highest good. And if it is true that the ‘river of the water of life’ which ‘flows from the Throne of God’ is the only draught that can ever satisfy the immortal thirst of a soul, then whatever drives me away from the cisterns and to the fountain, is on my side. Better to dwell in a ‘dry and thirsty land, where no water is,’ if it makes me long for the water that rises at the gate of the true Bethlehem-the house of bread-than to dwell in a land flowing with milk and honey, and well watered in every part! If the cup that I would fain lift to my lips has poison in it, or if its sweetness is making me lose my relish for the pure and tasteless river that flows from the Throne of God, there can be no truer friend than that calamity, as men call it, which strikes the cup from my hands, and shivers the glass before I have raised it to my lips. Everything is my friend that helps me towards God.

Everything is my friend that leads me to submission and obedience. The joy of life, and the perfection of human nature, is an absolutely submitted will, identified with the divine, both in regard to doing and to enduring. And whatever tends to make my will flexible, so that it corresponds to all the sinuosities, so to speak, of the divine will, and fits into all its bends and turns, is a blessing to me. Raw hides, stiff with dirt and blood, are put into a bath of bitter infusion of oak-bark. What for? For the same end as, when they are taken out, they are scraped with sharp steels,-that they may become flexible. When that is done the useless hide is worth something.

‘Our wills are ours, we know not how;
Our wills are ours, to make them Thine.’

And whatever helps me to that is my friend.

Everything is a friend to the man that loves God, in a far sweeter and deeper sense than it can ever be to any other. Like a sudden burst of sunshine upon a gloomy landscape, the light of union with God and friendship with Him flooding my daily life flashes it all up into brightness. The dark ribbon of the river that went creeping through the black copses, when the sun glints upon it, gleams up into links of silver, and the trees by its bank blaze out into green and gold. Brethren! ‘Who follows pleasure follows pain’; who follows God finds pleasure following him. There can be no surer way to set the world against me than to try to make it for me, and to make it my all They tell us that if you want to count those stars that ‘like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver braid’ make up the Pleiades, the surest way to see the greatest number of them is to look a little on one side of them. Look away from the joys and friendships of creatural things right up to God, and you will see these sparkling and dancing in the skies, as you never see them when you gaze at them only. Make them second and they are good and on your side. Make them first, and they will turn to be your enemies and fight against you.

This conviction will be established still more irrefragably and wonderfully in that future. Nothing lasts but goodness. ‘He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’ To oppose it is like stretching a piece of pack-thread across the rails before the express comes; or putting up some thin wooden partition on the beach on one of the Western Hebrides, exposed to the whole roll of the Atlantic, which will be battered into ruin by the first winter’s storm. Such is the end of all those who set themselves against God.

But there comes a future in which, as dim hints tell us, these texts of ours shall receive a fulfilment beyond that realised in the present condition of things. ‘Then comes the statelier Eden back to man,’ and in a renewed and redeemed earth ‘they shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain’; and the ancient story will be repeated in higher form. The servants shall be like the Lord who, when He had conquered temptation, ‘was with the wild beasts’ that forgot their enmity, and ‘angels ministered unto Him.’ That scene in the desert may serve as a prophecy of the future when, under conditions of which we know nothing, all God’s servants shall, even more markedly and manifestly than here, help each other; and every man that loves God will find a friend in every creature.

If we take Him for our Commander, and enlist ourselves in that embattled host, then all weathers will be good; ‘stormy winds, fulfilling His word,’ will blow us to our port; ‘the wilderness will rejoice and blossom as the rose’; and the whole universe will be radiant with the light of His presence, and ringing with the music of His voice. But if we elect to join the other army-for there is another army, and men have wills that enable them to lift themselves up against God, the Ruler of all things-then the old story, from which my first text is taken, will fulfil itself again in regard to us-’the stars in their courses will fight against’ us; and Sisera, lying stiff and stark, with Jael’s tent-peg through his temples, and the swollen corpses being swirled down to the stormy sea by ‘that ancient river, the river Kishon,’ will be a grim parable of the end of the men that set themselves against God, and so have the universe against them. ‘Choose ye this day whom ye will serve.’

4) Job 5:24-27

Job

THE PEACEABLE FRUITS OF SORROWS RIGHTLY BORNE

Job. 5:17 - Job. 5:27.

The close of the Book of Job shows that his friends’ speeches were defective, and in part erroneous. They all proceeded on the assumption that suffering was the fruit of sin-a principle which, though true in general, is not to be unconditionally applied to specific cases. They all forgot that good men might be exposed to it, not as punishment, nor even as correction, but as trial, to ‘know what was in their hearts.’

Eliphaz is the best of the three friends, and his speeches embody much permanent truth, and rise, as in this passage, to a high level of literary and artistic beauty. There are few lovelier passages in Scripture than this glowing description of the prosperity of the man who accepts God's chastisements; and, on the whole, the picture is true. But the underlying belief in the uniform coincidence of inward goodness and outward good needs to be modified by the deeper teaching of the New Testament before it can be regarded as covering all the facts of life.

Eliphaz is gathering up, in our passage, the threads of his speech. He bases upon all that he has been saying the exhortation to Job to be thankful for his sorrows. With a grand paradox, he declares the man who is afflicted to be happy. And therein he strikes an eternally true note. It is good to be made to drink a cup of sorrow. Flesh calls pain evil, but spirit knows it to be good. The list of our blessings is not only written in bright inks, but many are inscribed in black. And the reason why the sad heart should be a happy heart is because, as Eliphaz believed, sadness is God's fatherly correction, intended to better the subject of it. 'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth,' says the Epistle to the Hebrews, in full accord with Eliphaz.

But his well-meant and true words flew wide of their mark, for two reasons. They were chillingly didactic, and it is vinegar upon nitre to stand over an agonised soul and preach platitudes in an unsympathetic voice. And they assumed unusual sin in Job as the explanation of his unparalleled pains, while the prologue tells us that his sufferings were not fruits of his sin, but trials of his righteousness. He was horrified at Job's words, which seemed to him full of rebellion and irreverence; and he made no allowance for the wild cries of an agonised heart when he solemnly warned the sufferer against 'despising' God's chastening. A more sympathetic ear would have detected the accent of faith in the groans.

The collocation, in Job. 5:18, of making sore and binding up, does not merely express sequence, but also purpose. The wounding is in order to healing. The wounds are merciful surgery; and their intention is health, like the cuts that lay open an ulcer, or the scratches for vaccination. The view of suffering in these two verses is not complete, but it goes far toward completeness in tracing it to God, in asserting its disciplinary intention, in pointing to the divine healing which is meant to follow, and in exhorting to submission. We may recall the beautiful expansion of that exhortation in Hebrews, where ‘faint not’ is added to ‘despise not,’ so including the two opposite and yet closely connected forms of misuse of sorrow, according as we stiffen our wills against it, and try to make light of it, or yield so utterly to it as to collapse. Either extreme equally misses the corrective purpose of the grief.

On this general statement follows a charming picture of the blessedness which attends the man who has taken his chastisement rightly. After the thunderstorm come sunshine and blue, and the song of birds. But, lovely as it is, and capable of application in many points to the life of every man who trustfully yields to God’s will, it must not be taken as a literally and absolutely true statement of God’s dealings with His children. If so regarded, it would hopelessly be shattered against facts; for the world is full of instances of saintly men and women who have not experienced in their outward lives such sunny calm and prosperity stretching to old age as are here promised. Eliphaz is not meant to be the interpreter of the mysteries of Providence, and his solution is decisively rejected at the close. But still there is much in this picture which finds fulfilment in all devout lives in a higher sense than his intended meaning.

The first point is that the devout soul is exempt from calamities which assail those around it. These are such as are ordinarily in Scripture recognised as God’s judgments upon a people. Famine and war devastate, but the devout soul abides in peace, and is satisfied. Now it is not true that faith and submission make a wall round a man, so that he escapes from such calamities. In the supernatural system of the Old Testament such exemptions were more usual than with us, though this very Book of Job and many a psalm show that devout hearts had even then to wrestle with the problem of the prosperity of the wicked and the indiscriminate fall of widespread calamities on the good and bad.

But in its deepest sense [which, however, is not Eliphaz’s sense] the faithful man is saved from the evils which he, in common with his faithless neighbour, experiences. Two men are smitten down by the same disease, or lie dying on a battlefield, shattered by the same shell, and the one receives the fulfilment of the promise, ‘there shall no evil touch thee,’ and the other does not. For the evil in the evil is all sucked out of it, and the poison is wiped off the arrow which strikes him who is united to God by faith and submission. Two women are grinding at the same millstone, and the same blow kills them both; but the one is delivered, and the other is not. They who pass through an evil, and are not drawn away from God by it, but brought nearer to Him, are hid from its power. To die may be our deliverance from death.

Eliphaz’s promises rise still higher in Job. 5:22 - Job. 5:23, in which is set forth a truth that in its deepest meaning is of universal application. The wild beasts of the earth and the stones of the field will be in league with the man who submits to God’s will. Of course the beasts come into view as destructive, and the stones as injuring the fertility of the fields. There is, probably, allusion to the story of Paradise and the Fall. Man’s relation to nature was disturbed by sin; it will be rectified by his return to God. Such a doctrine of the effects of sin in perverting man’s relation to creatures runs all through Scripture, and is not to be put aside as mere symbolism.

But the large truth underlying the words here is that, if we are servants of God, we are masters of everything. ‘All things work together for good to them that love God.’ All things serve the soul that serves God; as, on the other hand, all are against him that does not, and ‘the stars in their courses fight against’ those who fight against Him. All things are ours, if we are Christ’ s. The many mediaeval legends of saints attended by animals, from St. Jerome and his lion downwards to St. Francis preaching to the birds, echo the thoughts here. A gentle, pure soul, living in amity with dumb creatures, has wonderful power to attract them. They who are at peace with God can scarcely be at war with any of God’s creatures. Gentleness is stronger than iron bands. ‘Cords of love’ draw most surely.

Peace and prosperity in home and possessions are the next blessings promised [Job. 5:24]. ‘Thou shalt visit [look over] thy household, and shalt miss nothing.’ No cattle have strayed or been devoured by evil beasts, or stolen, as all Job’s had been. Alas! Eliphaz knew nothing about commercial crises, and the great system of credit by which one scoundrel’s fall may bring down hundreds of good men and patient widows, who look over their possessions and find nothing but worthless shares. Yet even for those who find all at once that the herd is cut off from the stall, their tabernacle may still be in peace, and though the fold be empty they may miss nothing, if in the empty place they find God. That is what Christians may make out of the words; but it is not what was originally meant by them.

In like manner the next blessing, that of a numerous posterity, does not depend on moral or religious condition, as Eliphaz would make out, and in modern days is not always regarded as a blessing. But note the singular heartlessness betrayed in telling Job, all whose flocks and herds had been carried off, and his children laid dead in their festival chamber, that abundant possessions and offspring were the token of God's favour. The speaker seems serenely unconscious that he was saying anything that could drive a knife into the tortured man. He is so carried along on the waves of his own eloquence, and so absorbed in stringing together the elements of an artistic whole, that he forgets the very sorrows which he came to comfort. There are not a few pious exhorters of bleeding hearts who are chargeable with the same sin. The only hand that will bind up without hurting is a hand that is sympathetic to the finger-tips. No eloquence or poetic beauty or presentation of undeniable truths will do as substitutes for that.

The last blessing promised is that which the Old Testament places so high in the list of good things-long life. The lovely metaphor in which that promise is couched has become familiar to us all. The ripe corn gathered into a sheaf at harvest-time suggests festival rather than sadness. It speaks of growth accomplished, of fruit matured, of the ministries of sun and rain received and used, and of a joyful gathering into the great storehouse. There is no reference in the speech to the uses of the sheaf after it is harvested, but we can scarcely avoid following its history a little farther than the 'grave' which to Eliphaz seems the garner. Are all these matured powers to have no field for action? Were all these miracles of vegetation set in motion only in order to grow a crop which should be reaped, and there an end? What is to be done with the precious fruit which has taken so long time and so much cultivation to grow? Surely it is not the intention of the Lord of the harvest to let it rot when it has been gathered. Surely we are grown here and ripened and carried hence for something.

But that is not in our passage. This, however, may be drawn from it-that maturity does not depend on length of days; and, however Eliphaz meant to promise long life, the reality is that the devout soul may reckon on complete life, whether it be long or short. God will not call His children home till their schooling is done; and, however green and young the corn may seem to our eyes, He knows which heads in the great harvest-field are ready for removal, and gathers only these. The child whose little coffin may be carried under a boy’s arm may be ripe for harvesting. Not length of days, but likeness to God, makes maturity; and if we die according to the will of God, it cannot but be that we shall come to our grave in a full age, whatever be the number of years carved on our tombstones.

The speech ends with a somewhat self-complacent exhortation to the poor, tortured man: ‘We have searched it, so it is.’ We wise men pledge our wisdom and our reputation that this is true. Great is authority. An ounce of sympathy would have done more to commend the doctrine than a ton of dogmatic self-confidence. ‘Hear it, and know thou it for thyself.’ Take it into thy mind. Take it into thy mind and heart, and take it for thy good. It was a frosty ending, exasperating in its air of patronage, of superior wisdom, and in its lack of any note of feeling. So, of course, it set Job’s impatience alight, and his next speech is more desperate than his former. When will well-meaning comforters learn not to rub salt into wounds while they seem to be dressing them?

5) Job 8:14

Job

TWO KINDS OF HOPE

Job. 8:14. - Rom. 5:5.

These two texts take opposite sides. Bildad was not the wisest of Job’s friends, and he gives utterance to solemn commonplaces with partial truth in them. In the rough it is true that the hope of the ungodly perishes, and the limits of the truth are concealed by the splendour of the imagery and the perfection of artistic form in which the well-worn platitude is draped. The spider’s web stretched glittering in the dewy morning on the plants, shaking its threaded tears in the wind, the flag in the dry bed of a nullah withering while yet green, the wall on which leaning a man will fall, are vivid illustrations of hopes that collapse and fail. But my other text has to do with hopes that do not fail. Paul thinks that he knows of hope that maketh not ashamed, that is, which never disappoints. Bildad was right if he was thinking, as he was, of hopes fixed on earth; the Apostle was right, for he was thinking of hopes set on God. It is a commonplace that ‘hope springs immortal in the human breast’; it is equally a commonplace that hopes are disappointed. What is the conclusion from these two universal experiences? Is it the cynical one that it is all illusion, or is it that somewhere there must be an object on which hope may twine its tendrils without fear? God has given the faculty, and we may be sure that it is not given to be for ever balked. We must hope. Our hope may be our worst enemy; it may and should be our purest joy.

Let us then simply consider these two sorts of hope, the earthly and the heavenly, in their working in the three great realms of life, death, and eternity.

I. In life.

The faculty is inseparable from man’s consciousness of immortality and of an indefinitely expansible nature which ever makes him discontented with the present. It has great purposes to perform in strengthening him for work, in helping him over sorrows, in making him buoyant and elastic, in painting for him the walls of the dungeon, and hiding for him the weight of the fetters.

But for what did he receive this great gift? Mainly that he might pass beyond the temporal and hold converse with the skies. Its true sphere is the unseen future which is at God’s right hand.

We may run a series of antitheses, *e.g.*-

Earthly hope is so uncertain that its larger part is often fear.

Heavenly hope is fixed and sure. It is as certain as history.

Earthly hope realised is always less blessed than we expected. How universal the experience that there is little to choose between a gratified and a frustrated hope! The wonders inside the caravan are never so wonderful as the canvas pictures outside.

Heavenly hopes ever surpass the most rapturous anticipation. ‘The half hath not been told.’

Earthly hopes are necessarily short-winged. They are settled one way or another, and sink hull down below our horizon.

Heavenly hope sets its object far off, and because a lifetime only attains it in part, it blesses a lifetime and outlasts it.

II. Hope in death.

That last hour ends for us all alike our earthly joys and relations. The slow years slip away, and each bears with it hopes that have been outlived, whether fulfilled or disappointed. One by one the lights that we kindle in our hall flicker out, and death quenches the last of them. But there is one light that burns on clear through the article of death, like the lamp in the magician’s tomb. ‘The righteous hath hope in his death.’ We can each settle for ourselves whether we shall carry that radiant angel with her white wings into the great darkness, or shall sadly part with her before we part with life. To the earthly soul that last earthly hour is a black wall beyond which it cannot look. To the God-trusting soul the darkness is peopled with bright-faced hopes.

III. Hope in eternity.

It is not for our tongues to speak of what must, in the natural working out of consequences, be the ultimate condition of a soul which has not set its hopes on the God who alone is the right Object of the blessed but yet awful capacity of hoping, when all the fleeting objects which it sought as solace and mask of its own true poverty are clean gone from its grasp. Dante’s tremendous words are more than enough to move wholesome horror in any thinking soul: ‘Leave hope behind, all ye who enter here.’ They are said to be unfeeling, grim, and mediaeval, incredible in this enlightened age; but is there any way out of them, if we take into account what our nature is moulded to need and cling to, and what 'godless' men have done with it?

But let us turn to the brighter of these texts. 'Hope maketh not ashamed.' There will be an internal increase of blessedness, power, purity in that future, a fuller possession of God, a reaching out after completer likeness to Him. So if we can think of days in that calm state where time will be no more, 'to-morrow shall be as this day and much more abundant,' and the angel Hope, who kept us company through all the weary marches of earth, will attend on us still, only having laid aside the uncertainty that sometime veiled her smiles, but retaining all the buoyant eagerness for the ever unfolding wonders which gave us courage and cheer in the days of our flesh.

6) Job 14:14

Job

JOB'S QUESTION, JESUS' ANSWER

Job. 14:14. - Joh. 11:25 - Joh. 11:26.

Job's question waited long for an answer. Weary centuries rolled away; but at last the doubting, almost despairing, cry put into the mouth of the man of sorrows of the Old Testament is answered by the Man of Sorrows of the New. The answer in words is this second text which may almost be supposed to allude to the ancient question. The answer, in fact, is the resurrection of Christ. Apart from this answer there is none.

So we may take these two texts to help us to grasp more clearly and feel more profoundly what the world owes to that great fact which we are naturally led to think of to-day.

I. The ancient and ever returning question.

The Book of Job is probably a late part of the Old Testament. It deals with problems which indicate some advance in religious thought. Solemn and magnificent, and for the most part sad; it is like a Titan struggling with large problems, and seldom attaining to positive conclusions in which the heart or the head can rest in peace. Here all Job’s mind is clouded with a doubt. He has just given utterance to an intense longing for a life beyond the grave. His abode in Sheol is thought of as in some sense a breach in the continuity of his consciousness, but even that would be tolerable, if only he could be sure that, after many days, God would remember him. Then that longing gives way before the torturing question of the text, which dashes aside the tremulous hope with its insistent interrogation. It is not denial, but it is a doubt which palsies hope. But though he has no certainty, he cannot part with the possibility, and so goes on to imagine how blessed it would be if his longing were fulfilled. He thinks that such a renewed life would be like the ‘release’ of a sentry who had long stood on guard; he thinks of it as his swift, joyous ‘answer’ to God’s summons, which would draw him out from the sad crowd of pale shadows and bring him back to warmth and reality. His hope takes a more daring flight still, and he thinks of God as yearning for His creature, as His creature yearns for Him, and having ‘a desire to the work of His hands,’ as if His heaven would be incomplete without His servant. But the rapture and the vision pass, and the rest of the chapter is all clouded over, and the devout hope loses its light. Once again it gathers brightness in the twenty-first chapter, where the possibility flashes out starlike, that ‘after my skin hath been thus destroyed, yet from my flesh shall I see God.’

These fluctuations of hope and doubt reveal to us the attitude of devout souls in Israel at a late era of the national life. And if they show us their high-water mark, we need not suppose that similar souls outside the Old Testament circle had solid certainty where these had but a variable hope. We know how large a development the doctrine of a future life had in Assyria and in Egypt, and I suppose we are entitled to say that men have always had the idea of a future. They have always had the thought, sometimes as a fear, sometimes as a hope, but never as a certainty. It has lacked not only certainty but distinctness. It has lacked solidity also, the power to hold its own and sustain itself against the weighty pressure of intrusive things seen and temporal.

But we need not go to the ends of the earth or to past generations for examples of a doubting, superficial hold of the truth that man lives through death and after it. We have only to look around us, and, alas! we have only to look within us. This age is asking the question again, and answering it in many tones, sometimes of indifferent disregard, sometimes flaunting a stark negative without reasoned foundation, sometimes with affirmatives with as little reason as these negatives. The modern world is caught in the rush and whirl of life, has its own sorrows to front, its own battles to fight, and large sections of it have never come as near an answer to Job's question as Job did.

II. Christ's all-sufficing answer.

He gave it there, by the grave of Lazarus, to that weeping sister, but He spoke these great words of calm assurance to all the world. One cannot but note the difference between His attitude in the presence of the great Mystery and that of all other teachers. How calmly, certainly, and confidently He speaks!

Mark that Jesus, even at that hour of agony, turns Martha's thoughts to Himself. What He is is the all-important thing for her to know. If she understands Him, life and death will have no insoluble problems nor any hopelessness for her. 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.' She had risen in her grief to a lofty height in believing that 'even now'-at this moment when help is vain and hope is dead-'whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee,' but Jesus offers to her a loftier conception of Him when He lays a sovereign hand on resurrection and life, and discloses that both inhere in Him, and from Him flow to all who shall possess them. He claims to have in Himself the fountain of life, in all possible senses of the word, as well as in the special sense relevant at that sad hour. Further, He tells Martha that by faith in Him any and all may possess that life. And then He majestically goes on to declare that the life which He gives is immune from, and untouched by, death. The believer shall live though he dies, the living believer shall never die. It is clear that, in these two great statements, to die is used in two different meanings, referring in the former case to the physical fact, and in the latter carrying a heavier weight of significance, namely the pregnant sense which it usually has in this Gospel, of separation from God and consequently from the true life of the soul. Physical death is not the termination of human life. The grim fact touches only the surface life, and has nothing to do with the essential, personal being. He that believes on Jesus, and he only, truly lives, and his union with Jesus secures his possession of that eternal life, which victoriously persists through the apparent, superficial change which men call death. Nothing dies but the death which surrounds the faithful soul. For it to die is to live more fully, more triumphantly, more blessedly. So though the act of physical death remains, its whole character is changed. Hence the New Testament euphemisms for death are much more than euphemisms. Men christen it by names which drape its ugliness, because they fear it so much, but Faith can play with Leviathan, because it fears it not at all. Hence such names as 'sleep,' 'exodus,' are tokens of the victory won for all believers by Jesus. He will show Martha the hope for all His followers which begins to dawn even in the calling of her brother back from the grip of death. And He shows us the great truth that His being the 'Life' necessarily involved His being also the 'Resurrection,' for His life-communicating work could not be accomplished till His all-quickening vitality had flowed over into, and flooded with its own conquering tides, not only the spirit which believes but its humble companion, the soul, and its yet humbler, the body. A bodily life is essential to perfect manhood, and Jesus will not stay His hand till every believer is full-summed in all his powers, and is perfect in body, soul, and spirit, after the image of Him who redeemed Him.

III. The pledge for the truth of the answer.

The words of Jesus are only words. These precious words, spoken to that one weeping sister in a little Jewish village, and which have brought hope to millions ever since, are as baseless as all the other dreams and longings of the heart, unless Jesus confirms them by fact. If He did not rise from the dead, they are but another of the noble, exalted, but futile delusions of which the world has many others. If Christ be not risen, His words of consolation are swelling words of emptiness; His whole claims are ended, and the age-old question which Job asked is unanswered still, and will always remain unanswered. If Christ be not risen, the hopeless colloquy between Jehovah and the prophet sums up all that can be said of the future life: ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ And I answered, ‘O Lord God, Thou knowest!’

But Christ’s resurrection is a fact which, taken in connection with His words while on earth, endorses these and establishes His claims to be the Declarer of the name of God, the Saviour of the world. It gives us demonstration of the continuity of life through and after death. Taken along with His ascension, which is but, so to speak, the prolongation of the point into a line, it declares that a glorified body and an abode in a heavenly home are waiting for all who by faith become here partakers in Jesus and are quickened by sharing in His life.

So in despite of sense and doubt and fear, notwithstanding teachers who, like the supercilious philosophers on Mars Hill, mock when they hear of a resurrection from the dead, we should rejoice in the great light which has shined into the region of the shadow of death, we should clasp His divine and most faithful answer to that old, despairing question, as the anchor of our souls, and lift up our hearts in thanksgiving in the triumphant challenge, ‘O death! where is thy sting? O grave! where is thy victory?’

7) Job 22:21

Job

KNOWLEDGE AND PEACE

Job. 22:21.

In the sense in which the speaker meant them, these words are not true. They mean little more than ‘It pays to be religious.’ What kind of notion of acquaintance with God Eliphaz may have had, one scarcely knows, but at any rate, the whole meaning of the text on his lips is poor and selfish.

The peace promised is evidently only outward tranquillity and freedom from trouble, and the good that is to come to Job is plainly mere worldly prosperity. This strain of thought is expressed even more clearly in that extraordinary bit of bathos, which with solemn irony the great dramatist who wrote this book makes this Eliphaz utter immediately after the text, ‘The Almighty shall be thy defence and-thou shalt have plenty of silver!’ It has not been left for commercial Englishmen to recommend religion on the ground that it produces successful merchants and makes the best of both worlds.

These friends of Job’s all err in believing that suffering is always and only the measure of sin, and that you can tell a man’s great guilt by observing his great sorrows. And so they have two main subjects on which they preach at their poor friend, pouring vitriol into his wounds: first, how wicked he must be to be so haunted by sorrows; second, how surely he will be delivered if he will only be religious after their pattern, that is, speak platitudes of conventional devotion and say, I submit.

This is the meaning of our text as it stands. But we may surely find a higher sense in which it is true and take that to heart.

I. What is acquainting oneself with God?

The first thing to note is that this acquaintance depends on us. So then there must have been a previous objective manifestation on His part. Of course there must be a God to know, and there must be a way of knowing Him. For us Jesus Christ is the Revealer. What men know of God apart from Him is dim, shadowy, indistinct; it lacks certainty, and so is not knowledge. I venture to say that there is nothing between cultivated men and the loss of certain knowledge of God and conviction of His Being, but the historical revelation of Jesus Christ. The Christ reveals the inmost character of God, and that not in words but in deeds. Without Him no man knows God; ‘No man knoweth the Father save the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal Him.'

So then the objective revelation having been made, we must on our part embrace that revelation as ours. The act of so accepting begins with the familiar act of faith, which includes both an exercise of the understanding, as it embraces the facts of Christ's revelation of the Father, and of the will as it casts itself upon and submits to Him. But that exercise of faith is but the point which has to be drawn out into a golden line, woven into the whole length of a life. And it is in the continuity of that line that the average Christian so sadly fails, and because of that failure his acquaintance with God is so distant. How little time or thought we give to the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ! We must be on intimate terms with Him. To know God, as to know a man, we must 'live with' Him, must summer and winter with Him, must bring Him into the pettinesses of daily life, must let our love set to Him, must be in sympathy with Him, our wills being tuned to make harmony with His, our whole nature being in accord with His. That is work more than enough for a lifetime, enough to task it, enough to bless it.

II. The peace of acquaintance with God.

Eliphaz meant nothing more than mere earthly tranquillity and exemption from trouble, but his words are true in a far loftier region.

Knowledge of God as He really is brings peace, because His heart is full of love. We do but need to know the actual state of the heart of God towards us to be lapped and folded in peace that nothing outside of God and ourselves can destroy. If we lived under the constant benediction of the deepest truth in the universe, 'God is love,' our peace would be full. That is enough, if we believe it to bring peace. The thought of God which alarms and terrifies cannot be a true thought. But, alas! in proportion as we know ourselves, it becomes difficult to believe that God is love. The stings of conscience hiss prophecies to us of that in God which cannot but be antagonistic to that in us which conscience condemns. Only when our thought of God is drawn from the revelation of Him in Jesus Christ, does it become possible for any man to grasp in one act of his consciousness the conviction, I am a sinner, and the conquering conviction, God is Love, and only Love to me. So the old exhortation, ‘Acquaint thyself with God and be at peace,’ comes to be in Christian language: ‘Behold God in Jesus, and thou shalt possess the peace of God to keep thy heart and mind.’

Knowledge of God gives peace, because in it we find the satisfaction of our whole nature. Thereby we are freed from the unrest of tumultuous passions and storms of self-will. The internecine war between the better and the worse selves within ceases to rage, and when we have become God’s friends, that in us which is meant to rule rules, and that in us which is meant to serve serves, and the inner kingdom is no longer torn asunder but is harmonised with itself.

Knowledge of God brings peace amid all changes, for he who has God for his continual Companion draws little of his supplies from without, and can be tranquil when the seas roar and are troubled and the mountains are cast into the midst of the sea. He bears all his treasures with him, and need fear no loss of any real good. And at last the angel of peace will lead us through the momentary darkness and guide us, after a passing shadow on our path, into ‘the land of peace wherein we trusted,’ while yet in the land of warfare. Jesus still whispers the ancient salutation with which He greeted the company in the upper room on the evening of the day of resurrection, as He comes to His servants here, and it will be His welcome to them when He receives them above.

III. The true good from acquaintance with God.

As we have already said, Eliphaz was only thinking, on Old Testament lines, that prosperity in material things was the theocratic reward of allegiance to Jehovah. He was rubbing vitriol into Job’s sores, and avowedly regarding him as a fear-inspiring instance of the converse principle. But we have a better meaning breathed into his words, since Jesus has taught us what is the true good for a man all the days of his life. Acquaintance with God is, not merely procures, good. To know Him, to clasp Him to our hearts as our Friend, our Infinite Lover, our Source of all peace and joy, to mould our wills to His and let Him dominate our whole selves, to seek our wellbeing in Him alone-what else or more can a soul need to be filled with all good? Acquaintance with God brings Him in all His sufficiency to inhabit else empty hearts. It changes the worst, according to the judgment of sense, into the best, transforming sorrow into loving discipline, interpreting its meaning, fitting us to ‘bear it, and securing to us its blessings. To him that is a friend of God,

‘All is right that seems most wrong
If it be His sweet will.’

To be acquainted with God is the quintessence of good. ‘This is life eternal, to know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.’

8) Job 22:26-29

Job

WHAT LIFE MAY BE MADE

Job. 22:26 - Job. 22:29.

These words are a fragment of one of the speeches of Job’s friends, in which the speaker has been harping on the old theme that affliction is the consequence and evidence of sin. He has much ado to square his theory with facts, and especially with the fact which brought him to Job’s dunghill. But he gets over the difficulty by the simple method of assuming that, since his theory must be true, there must be unknown facts which vindicate it in Job’s case; and since affliction is a sign of sin, Job’s afflictions are proof that he has been a sinner. So he charges him with grossest crimes, without a shadow of other reason; and after having poured this oil of vitriol into his wounds by way of consolation, he advises him to be good, on the decidedly low and selfish ground that it will pay.

His often-quoted exhortation, ‘Acquaint thyself with God, and be at peace: thereby good shall come unto thee,’ is, in his meaning of it, an undisguised appeal to purely selfish considerations, and its promise is not in accordance with facts. Whether that saying is noble and true or ignoble and false, depends on the meanings attached to ‘peace’ and ‘good.’ A similar flaw mars the words of our text, as understood by the speaker. But they can be raised to a higher level than that on which he placed them, and regarded as describing the sweet and wonderful prerogatives of the devout life. So understood, they may rebuke and stimulate and encourage us to make our lives conformed to the ideal here.

I. I note, first, that life may be full of delight and confidence in God.

'Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Almighty, and shalt lift up thy face unto God.' Now when we 'delight' in a thing or a person, we recognise that that thing, or person, fits into a cleft in our hearts, and corresponds to some need in our natures. We not only recognise its good, sweetness, and adaptation to ourselves, but we actually possess in real fruition the sweetness that we recognise, and the good which we apprehend in it. And so these things, the recognition of the supreme sweetness and all-perfect adaptation and sufficiency of God to all that I need; the suppression of tastes and desires which may conflict with that sweetness, and the actual enjoyment and fruition of the sweetness and preciousness which I apprehend-these things are the very heart of a man's religion. Without delight in God, there is no real religion.

The bulk of men are so sunken and embruted in animal tastes and sensuous desires and fleeting delights, that they have no care for the pure and calm joys which come to those who live near God. But above these stand the men, of whom there are a good many amongst us, whose religion is a matter of fear or of duty or of effort. And above them there stand the men who serve because they trust God, but whose religion is seeking rather than finding, and either from deficient consecration or from false conceptions of Him and of their relation to Him, is overshadowed by an unnatural and unwholesome gloom. And all these kinds of religion, the religion of fear, of duty, of effort, of seeking, and of doubt fighting with faith, are at the best wofully imperfect, and are, some of them, radically erroneous types of the religious life. He is the truly devout man who not only knows God to be great and holy, but feels Him to be sweet and sufficient; who not only fears, but loves; who not only seeks and longs, but possesses; or, in one word, true religion is delighting in God.

So herein is supplied a very sharp test for us. Do our tastes and inclinations set towards Him, and is He better to us than anything beside? Is God to me my dearest faith, the very home of my heart, to which I instinctively turn?

Is the brightness of my day the light of His face? Is He the gladness of my joy? Is my Christianity a mill-horse round of service that I am not glad to render? Do I worship because I think it is duty, and are my prayers compulsory and mechanical; or do I worship because my heart goes out to Him? And is my life calm and sweet because I 'delight in the Lord'?

The next words of my text will help us to answer. 'Thou shalt lift up thy face unto God.' That is a clear enough metaphor to express frank confidence of approach to Him. The head hangs down in the consciousness of demerit and sin. 'Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me,' wailed the Psalmist, 'so that I am not able to look up.' But it is possible for men to go into God's presence with a sense of peace, and to hold up their heads before their Judge and look Him in the eyes and not be afraid. And unless we have that confidence in Him, not because of our merits, but because of His certain love, there will be no 'delight in the Lord.' And there will be no such confidence in Him unless we have 'access with confidence by faith' in that Christ who has taken away our sins, and prepared the way for us into the Father's presence, and by whose death and sacrifice, and by it alone, we sinful men, with open face and uplifted foreheads, can stand to receive upon our visage the full beams of His light, and expatiate and be glad therein. There is no religion worth naming, of which the inmost characteristic is not delight in God. There is no 'delighting in God' possible for sinful men unless they can come to Him with frank confidence, and there is no such confidence possible for us unless we apprehend by faith, and thereby make our own, the great work of Jesus Christ our Lord.

II. So, secondly, note, such a life of delighting in God will be blessed by the frankest intercourse with Him.

'Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He shall hear thee, and thou shalt pay thy vows.' These are three stages of this blessed communion that is possible for men. And note, prayer is not regarded in this aspect as duty, nor is it even dwelt upon as privilege, but as being the natural outcome and issue of that delighting in God and confident access to Him which have preceded. That is to say, if a man really has set his heart on God, and knows that in Him is all that he needs, then, of course, he will tell Him everything. As surely as the sunshine draws out the odours from the opening petals of the flowers, will the warmth of the felt divine light and love draw from our hearts the sweet confidence, which it is impossible not to give to Him in whom we delight.

If you have to be driven to prayer by a sense of duty, and if there be no impulse in your heart whispering ever to you, ‘Tell your Love about it!’ you have much need to examine into the reality, and certainly into the depth of your religion. For as surely as instinctive impulse, which needs no spurring from conscience or will, leads us to breathe our confidences to those that we love best, and makes us restless whilst we have a secret hid from them, so surely will a true love to God make it the most natural thing in the world to put all our circumstances, wants, and feeling into the shape of prayers. They may be in briefest words. They may scarcely be vocalised at all, but there will be, if there be a true love to Him, an instinctive turning to Him in every circumstance; and the single-worded cry, if it be no more, for help is sufficient. The arrow may be shot towards Heaven, though it be but slender and short, and it will reach its goal.

For my text goes on to the second stage, ‘He shall hear thee.’ That was not true as Eliphaz meant it. But it is true if we remember the preceding conditions. The fundamental passage, which I suppose underlies part, at least, of our text, is that great word in the psalm, ‘Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.’ Does that mean that if a man loves God he may get everything he wants? Yes! and No! If it is supposed to mean that our religion is a kind of key to God’s storehouse, enabling us to go in there and rifle it at our pleasure, then it is not true; if it means that a man who delights himself in God will have his supreme desire set upon God, and so will be sure to get it, then it is true. Fulfil the conditions and you are sure of the promise. If our prayer in its deepest essence be ‘Not my will, but Thine,’ it will be answered. When the desires of our heart are for God, and for conformity to His will, as they will be when we ‘delight ourselves in Him,’ then we get our heart’s desires. There is no promise of our being able to impose our wills upon God, which would be a calamity, and not a blessing, but a promise that they who make Him their joy and their desire will never be defrauded of their desire nor robbed of their joy.

And so the third stage of this frank intercourse comes. ‘Thou shalt pay thy vows.’ All life may become a thank-offering to God for the benefits that have flowed unceasing from His hands. First a prayer, then the answer, then the rendered thank-offering. Thus, in swift alternation and reciprocity, is carried on the commerce between Heaven and earth, between man and God. The desires rise to Heaven, but Heaven comes down to earth first; and prayer is not the initial stage, but the second, in the process. God first gives His promise, and the best prayer is the catching up of God’s promise and tossing it back again whence it came. Then comes the second downward motion, which is the answer to prayer, in blessing, and on it follows, finally, the reflection upwards, in thankful surrender and service, of the love that has descended on us, in answer to our desires. So like sunbeams from a mirror, or heat from polished metal, backwards and forwards, in continual alternation and reciprocation of influence and of love, flash and travel bright gleams between the soul and God. ‘Truth springs out of the earth, and righteousness looks down from Heaven. Our God shall give that which is good, and the earth shall yield her increase.’ Is there any other life of which such alternation is the privilege and the joy?

III. Then thirdly, such a life will neither know failure nor darkness.

‘Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee, and the light shall shine upon thy ways.’ Then is my will to be omnipotent, and am I to be delivered from the experiences of disappointments and failures and frustrated plans that are common to all humanity, and an essential part of its discipline, because I am a Christian man? Eliphaz may have meant that, but we know something far nobler. Again, I say, remember the conditions precedent. First of all, there must be the delight in God, and the desire towards Him, the submission of the will to Him, and the waiting before Him for guidance. I decree a thing-if I am a true Christian, and in the measure in which I am-only when I am quite sure that God has decreed it. And it is only His decrees, registered in the chancery of my will, of which I may be certain that they shall be established. There will be no failures to the man whose life’s purpose is to serve God, and to grow like Him; but if our purpose is anything less than that, or if we go arbitrarily and self-willedly resolving and saying, ‘Thus I will; thus I command; let my will stand instead of all reason,’ we shall have our contemptuous ‘decrees’ disestablished many a time. If we run our heads against stone walls in that fashion, the walls will stand, and our heads will be broken. To serve Him and to fall into the line of His purpose, and to determine nothing, nor obstinately want anything until we are sure that it is His will-that is the secret of never failing in what we undertake.

We must understand a little more deeply than we are apt to do what is meant by ‘success,’ before we predict unfailing success for any man. But if we have obeyed the commandment from the psalm already quoted, which may be again alluded to in the words of my text-’Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him’-we shall inherit the ancient promise, ‘and He shall bring it to pass.’ ‘All things work together for good to them that love God,’ and in the measure of our love to Him are our discernment and realisation of what is truly good. Religion gives no screen to keep the weather off us, but it gives us an insight into the truth that storms and rain are good for the only crop that is worth growing here. If we understand what we are here for, we shall be very slow to call sorrow evil, and to crown joy with the exclusive title of blessing and good; and we shall have a deeper canon of interpretation for the words of my text than he who is represented as speaking them ever dreamed of.

So with the promise of light to shine upon our paths. It is ‘the light which never was on sea or land,’ and not the material light which sense-bound eyes can see. That may all go. But if we have God in our hearts, there will be a light upon our way ‘which knows no variableness, neither shadow of turning.’ The Arctic winter, sunless though it be, has a bright heaven radiant with myriad stars, and flashing with strange lights born of no material or visible orb. And so you and I, if we delight ourselves ‘in the Lord,’ will have an unsetting sun to light our paths; ‘and at eventide,’ and in the mirkest midnight, ‘there will be light’ in the darkness.

IV. Lastly, such a life will be always hopeful, and finally crowned with deliverance.

‘When they’-that is, the ways that he has been speaking about-’when they are cast down, thou shalt say, Lifting up.’ That is an exclamation or a prayer, and we might simply render, ‘thou shalt say, Up!’ Even in so blessed a life as has been described, times will come when the path plunges downwards into some ‘valley of the shadow of death.’ But even then the traveller will bate no jot of hope. He will in his heart say ‘Up!’ even while sense says ‘Down!’ either as expressing indomitable confidence and good cheer in the face of depressing circumstances, or as pouring out a prayer to Him who ‘has showed him great and sore troubles’ that He would ‘bring him up again from the depths of the earth.’ The devout life is largely independent of circumstances, and is upheld and calmed by a quiet certainty that the general trend of its path is upward, which enables it to trudge hopefully down an occasional dip in the road.

Such an obstinate hopefulness and cheery confidence are the natural result of the experiences already described in the text. If we delight in God, hold communion with Him and have known Him as answering prayer, prospering our purposes and illuminating our paths, how shall we not hope? Nothing need depress nor perturb those whose joys and treasures are safe above the region of change and loss. If our riches are there where neither moth, rust, nor thieves can reach, our hearts will be there also, and an inward voice will keep singing, ‘Lift up your heart.’ It is the prerogative of experience to light up the future. It is the privilege of Christian experience to make hope certainty. If we live the life outlined in these verses we shall be able to bring June into December, and feel the future warmth whilst our bones are chilled with the present cold. ‘When the paths are made low, thou shalt say, Up!’

And the end will vindicate such confidence. For the issue of all will be, ‘He will save the humble person’; namely, the man who is of the character described, and who is ‘lowly of eyes’ in conscious unworthiness, even while he lifts up his face to God in confidence in his Father’s love. The ‘saving’ meant here is, of course, temporary and temporal deliverance from passing outward peril. But we may permissibly give it wider and deeper meaning. Continuous partial deliverances lead on to and bring about final full salvation.

We read that into the words, of course. But nothing less than a complete and conclusive deliverance can be the legitimate end of the experience of the Christian life here. Absurdity can no further go than to suppose that a soul which has delighted itself in God, and looked in His face with frank confidence, and poured out his desires to Him, and been the recipient of numberless answers, and the seat of numberless thank-offerings, has travelled along life's common way in cheerful godliness, has had the light of heaven shining on the path, and has found an immortal hope springing as the natural result of present experience, shall at the last be frustrated of all, and lie down in unconscious sleep, which is nothingness. If that were the end of a Christian life, then 'the pillared firmament were rottenness, and earth's base built on stubble.' No, no! A heaven of endless blessedness and close communion with God is the only possible ending to the facts of the devout life on earth.

We have such a life offered to us all and made possible through faith in Jesus Christ, in whom we may delight ourselves in the Lord, by whom we have 'access with confidence,' who is Himself the light of our hope, the answer of our prayers, the joy of our hearts, and who will 'deliver us from every evil work' as we travel along the road; 'and save us' at last 'into His heavenly kingdom,' where we shall be joined to the Delight of our souls, and drink for evermore of the fountain of life.

9) Job 42:1-10

Job

'THE END OF THE LORD'

Job. 42:1 - Job. 42:10.

The close of the Book of Job must be taken in connection with its prologue, in order to get the full view of its solution of the mystery of pain and suffering. Indeed the prologue is more completely the solution than the ending is; for it shows the purpose of Job's trials as being, not his punishment, but his testing. The whole theory that individual sorrows were the result of individual sins, in the support of which Job's friends poured out so many eloquent and heartless commonplaces, is discredited from the beginning. The magnificent prologue shows the source and purpose of sorrow. The epilogue in this last chapter shows the effect of it in a good man's character, and afterwards in his life.

So we have the grim thing lighted up, as it were, at the two ends. Suffering comes with the mission of trying what stuff a man is made of, and it leads to closer knowledge of God, which is blessed; to lowlier self-estimation, which is also blessed; and to renewed outward blessings, which hide the old scars and gladden the tortured heart.

Job’s final word to God is in beautiful contrast with much of his former unmeasured utterances. It breathes lowliness, submission, and contented acquiescence in a providence partially understood. It does not put into Job’s mouth a solution of the problem, but shows how its pressure is lightened by getting closer to God. Each verse presents a distinct element of thought and feeling.

First comes, remarkably enough, not what might have been expected, namely, a recognition of God’s righteousness, which had been the attribute impugned by Job’s hasty words, but of His omnipotence. God ‘can do everything,’ and none of His ‘thoughts’ or purposes can be ‘restrained’ [Rev. Ver.]. There had been frequent recognitions of that attribute in the earlier speeches, but these had lacked the element of submission, and been complaint rather than adoration. Now, the same conviction has different companions in Job’s mind, and so has different effects, and is really different in itself. The Titan on his rock, with the vulture tearing at his liver, sullenly recognised Jove’s power, but was a rebel still. Such had been Job’s earlier attitude, but now that thought comes to him along with submission, and so is blessed. Its recurrence here, as in a very real sense a new conviction, teaches us how old beliefs may flash out into new significance when seen from a fresh point of view, and how the very same thought of God may be an argument for arraigning and for vindicating His providence.

The prominence given, both in the magnificent chapters in which God answers Job out of the whirlwind and in this final confession, to power instead of goodness, rests upon the unspoken principle that ‘the divine nature is not a segment, but a circle. Any one divine attribute implies all others. Omnipotence cannot exist apart from righteousnes’s [Davidson’s *Job*, Cambridge Bible for Schools]. A mere naked omnipotence is not God. If we rightly understand His power, we can rest upon it as a Hand sustaining, not crushing, us. ‘He doeth all things well’ is a conviction as closely connected with ‘I know that Thou canst do all things’ as light is with heat.

The second step in Job’s confession is the acknowledgment of the incompleteness of his and all men’s materials and capacities for judging God’s providence. Job. 42:3 begins with quoting God’s rebuke [Job. 38:2]. It had cut deep, and now Job makes it his own confession. We should thus appropriate as our own God’s merciful indictments, and when He asks, ‘Who is it?’ should answer with lowliness, ‘Lord, it is I.’ Job had been a critic; he is a worshipper. He had tried to fathom the bottomless, and been angry because his short measuring-line had not reached the depths. But now he acknowledges that he had been talking about what passed his comprehension, and also that his words had been foolish in their rashness.

Is then the solution of the whole only that old commonplace of the unsearchableness of the divine judgments? Not altogether; for the prologue gives, if not a complete, yet a real, key to them. But still, after all partial solutions, there remains the inscrutable element in them. The mystery of pain and suffering is still a mystery; and while general principles, taught us even more clearly in the New Testament than in this book, do lighten the ‘weight of all this unintelligible world,’ we have still to take Job’s language as the last word on the matter, and say, ‘How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!’

For individuals, and on the wider field of the world, God’s way is in the sea; but that does not bewilder those who also know that it is also in the sanctuary. Job’s confession as to his rash speeches is the best estimate of many elaborate attempts to ‘vindicate the ways of God to man.’ It is better to trust than to criticise, better to wait than to seek prematurely to understand.

Job. 42:4, like Job. 42:3, quotes the words of God [Job. 38:3; Job. 40:7]. They yield a good meaning, if regarded as a repetition of God’s challenge, for the purpose of disclaiming any such presumptuous contest. But they are perhaps better understood as expressing Job’s longing, in his new condition of humility, for fuller light, and his new recognition of the way to pierce to a deeper understanding of the mystery, by illumination from God granted in answer to his prayer. He had tried to solve his problem by much, and sometimes barely reverent, thinking. He had racked brain and heart in the effort, but he has learned a more excellent way, as the Psalmist had, who said, ‘When I thought, in order to know this, it was too painful for me, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I.’ Prayer will do more for clearing mysteries than speculation, however acute, and it will change the aspect of the mysteries which it does not clear from being awful to being solemn-veils covering depths of love, not clouds obscuring the sun.

The centre of all Job’s confession is in Job. 42:5, which contrasts his former and present knowledge of God, as being mere hearsay before, and eyesight now. A clearer understanding, but still more, a sense of His nearness, and an acquaintance at first hand, are implied in the bold words, which must not be interpreted of any outward revelation to sense, but of the direct, full, thrilling consciousness of God which makes all men’s words about Him seem poor. That change was the master transformation in Job’s case, as it is for us all. Get closer to God, realise His presence, live beneath His eye and with your eyes fixed on Him, and ancient puzzles will puzzle no longer, and wounds will cease to smart, and instead of angry expostulation or bewildered attempts at construing His dealings, there will come submission, and with submission, peace.

The cure for questionings of His providence is experience of His nearness, and blessedness therein. Things that loomed large dwindle, and dangers melt away. The landscape is the same in shadow and sunshine; but when the sun comes out, even snow and ice sparkle, and tender beauty starts into visibility in grim things. So, if we see God, the black places of life are lighted; and we cease to feel the pressure of many difficulties of speculation and practice, both as regards His general providence and His revelation in law and gospel.

The end of the whole matter is Job’s retractation of his words and his repentance. ‘I abhor’ has no object expressed, and is better taken as referring to the previous speeches than to ‘myself.’ He means thereby to withdraw them all. The next clause, ‘I repent in dust and ashes,’ carries the confession a step farther. He recognises guilt in his rash speeches, and bows before his God confessing his sin. Where are his assertions of innocence gone? One sight of God has scattered them, as it ever does. A man who has learned his own sinfulness will find few difficulties and no occasions for complaint in God's dealings with him. If we would see aright the meaning of our sorrows, we must look at them on our knees. Get near to God in heart-knowledge of Him, and that will teach our sinfulness, and the two knowledges will combine to explain much of the meaning of sorrow, and to make the unexplained residue not hard to endure.

The epilogue in prose which follows Job's confession, tells of the divine estimate of the three friends, of Job's sacrifice for them, and of his renewed outward prosperity. The men who had tried to vindicate God's righteousness are charged with not having spoken that which is right; the man who has passionately impugned it is declared to have thus spoken. No doubt, Eliphaz and his colleagues had said a great many most excellent, pious things, and Job as many wild and untrue ones. But their foundation principle was not a true representation of God's providence, since it was the uniform connection of sin with sorrow, and the accurate proportion which these bore to each other.

Job, on the other hand, had spoken truth in his denials of these principles, and in his longings to have the righteousness of God set in clear relation to his own afflictions. We must remember, too, that the friends were talking commonplaces learned by rote, while Job's words came scalding hot from his heart. Most excellent truth may be so spoken as to be wrong; and it is so, if spoken heartlessly, regardless of sympathy, and flung at sufferers like a stone, rather than laid on their hearts as a balm. God lets a true heart dare much in speech; for He knows that the sputter and foam prove that 'the heart's deeps boil in earnest.'

Job is put in the place of intercessor for the three-a profound humiliation for them and an honour for him. They obeyed at once, showing that they have learned their lesson, as well as Job his. An incidental lesson from that final picture of the sufferer become the priest requiting accusations with intercession, is the duty of cherishing kind feelings and doing kind acts to those who say hard things of us. It would be harder for some of us to offer sacrifices for our Eliphazes than to argue with them. And yet another is that sorrow has for one of its purposes to make the heart more tender, both for the sorrows and the faults of others.

Note, too, that it was ‘when Job prayed for his friends’ that the Lord turned his captivity. That is a proverbial expression, bearing witness, probably, to the deep traces left by the Exodus, for reversing calamity. The turning-point was not merely the confession, but the act, of beneficence. So, in ministering to others, one’s own griefs may be soothed.

The restoration of outward good in double measure is not meant as the statement of a universal law of Providence, and still less as a solution of the problem of the book. But it is putting the truth that sorrows, rightly borne, yield peaceable fruit at the last, in the form appropriate to the stage of revelation which the whole book represents; that is, one in which the doctrine of immortality, though it sometimes rises before Job’s mind as an aspiration of faith, is not set in full light.

To us, living in the blaze of light which Jesus Christ has let into the darkness of the future, the ‘end of the Lord’ is that heaven should crown the sorrows of His children on earth. We can speak of light, transitory affliction working out an eternal weight of glory. The book of Job is expressing substantially the same expectation, when it paints the calm after the storm and the restoration in double portion of vanished blessings. Many desolate yet trusting sufferers know how little such an issue is possible for their grief, but if they have more of God in clearer sight of Him, they will find empty places in their hearts and homes filled.

Psalms

1) PSALMS 1:1-2
2) PSALMS 5:11-12
3) PSALMS 10:6
4) PSALMS 16:5-6
5) PSALMS 16:8
6) PSALMS 16:11
7) PSALMS 17:15
8) PSALMS 19:12
9) PSALMS 19:13
10) PSALMS 22:26
11) PSALMS 23:1-6
12) PSALMS 24:3

13) PSALMS 24:7-10
14) PSALMS 25:8-9
15) PSALMS 25:11
16) PSALMS 27:4
17) PSALMS 27:8-9
18) PSALMS 30:5
19) PSALMS 30:6
20) PSALMS 31:2-3
21) PSALMS 31:5
22) PSALMS 31:19
23) PSALMS 31:20
24) PSALMS 32:1-2
25) PSALMS 34:7
26) PSALMS 34:10
27) PSALMS 34:22
28) PSALMS 36:5-7
29) PSALMS 36:8-9
30) PSALMS 37:4-5
31) PSALMS 37:7
32) PSALMS 39:6
33) PSALMS 39:12
34) PSALMS 42:2
35) PSALMS 43:5
36) PSALMS 45:2-7
37) PSALMS 45:10-15
38) PSALMS 46:4-7
39) PSALMS 46:11
40) PSALMS 48:1-14
41) PSALMS 49:14
42) PSALMS 51:1-2
43) PSALMS 51:10-12
44) PSALMS 56:3-4
45) PSALMS 56:13
46) PSALMS 57:7
47) PSALMS 59:9
48) PSALMS 59:17
49) PSALMS 62:1

50) PSALMS 62:5
51) PSALMS 63:1
52) PSALMS 63:5
53) PSALMS 63:8
54) PSALMS 65:3
55) PSALMS 68:19
56) PSALMS 73:20
57) PSALMS 73:25-26
58) PSALMS 73:28
59) PSALMS 78:7
60) PSALMS 84:3
61) PSALMS 84:5-7
62) PSALMS 84:12
63) PSALMS 85:10-13
64) PSALMS 86:1-5
65) PSALMS 89:15
66) PSALMS 90:17
67) PSALMS 91:4
68) PSALMS 91:9-10
69) PSALMS 91:14
70) PSALMS 91:15-16
71) PSALMS 99:8
72) PSALMS 105:14-15
73) PSALMS 105:19
74) PSALMS 110:3
75) PSALMS 111:3
76) PSALMS 112:3
77) PSALMS 116:8-9
78) PSALMS 116:12-13
79) PSALMS 119:9
80) PSALMS 119:11
81) PSALMS 119:19
82) PSALMS 119:64
83) PSALMS 119:126-128
84) PSALMS 119:165
85) PSALMS 121:1-2
86) PSALMS 125:1-2

87) PSALMS 134:1-3
88) PSALMS 139:23-24
89) PSALMS 141:2
90) PSALMS 143:10
91) PSALMS 145:16
92) PSALMS 145:19
93) PSALMS 150:6

1) Psalms 1:1-2

Psalms

BLESSEDNESS AND PRAISE

Psa. 1:1 - Psa. 1:2. - Psa. 150:6.

The Psalter is the echo in devout hearts of the other portions of divine revelation. There are in it, indeed, further disclosures of God's mind and purposes, but its especial characteristic is-the reflection of the light of God from brightened faces and believing hearts. As we hold it to be inspired, we cannot simply say that it is man's response to God's voice. But if the rest of Scripture may be called the speech of the Spirit of God *to* men, this book is the answer of the Spirit of God *in* men.

These two verses which I venture to lay side by side present in a very remarkable way this characteristic. It is not by accident that they stand where they do, the first and last verses of the whole collection, enclosing all, as it were, within a golden ring, and bending round to meet each other. They are the summing up of the whole purpose and issue of God's revelation to men.

The first and second psalms echo the two main portions of the old revelation-the Law and the Prophets. The first of them is taken up with the celebration of the blessedness and fruitful, stable being of the man who loves the Law of the Lord, as contrasted with the rootless and barren life of the ungodly, who is like the chaff. The second is occupied with the contemplation of the divine 'decree' by which the coming King is set in

God's 'holy hill of Zion,' and of the blessedness of 'all they who put their trust in Him,' as contrasted with the swift destruction that shall fall on the vain imaginations of the rebellious heathen and banded kings of earth.

The words of our first text, then, may well stand at the beginning of the Psalter. They express the great purpose for which God has given His Law. They are the witness of human experience to the substantial, though partial, accomplishment of that purpose. They rise in buoyant triumph over that which is painful and apparently opposed to it; and in spite of sorrow and sin, proclaim the blessedness of the life which is rooted in the Law of the Lord.

The last words of the book are as significant as its first. The closing psalms are one long call to praise-they probably date from the time of the restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah, when, as we know, 'the service of song' was carefully re-established, and the harps which had hung silent upon the willows by the rivers of Babylon woke again their ancient melodies. These psalms climb higher and higher in their rapturous call to all creatures, animate and inanimate, on earth and in heaven, to praise Him. The golden waves of music and song pour out ever faster and fuller. At last we hear this invocation to every instrument of music to praise Him, responded to, as we may suppose, by each, in turn as summoned, adding its tributary notes to the broadening river of harmony-until all, with gathered might of glad sound blended with the crash of many voices, unite in the final words, 'Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord.'

I. We have here a twofold declaration of God's great purpose in all His self-revelation, and especially in the Gospel of His Son.

Our first text may be translated as a joyful exclamation, 'Oh! the blessedness of the man-whose delight is in the law of the Lord.' Our second is an invocation or a command. The one then expresses the purpose which God secures by His gift of the Law; the other the purpose which He summons us to fulfil by the tribute of our hearts and songs-man's happiness and God's glory.

His purpose is Man's blessedness.

That is but another way of saying, God is love. For love, as we know it, is eminently the desire for the happiness of the person on whom it is fixed. And unless the love of God be like ours, however it may transcend it, there is no revelation of Him to our hearts at all. If He be love, then He ‘delights in the prosperity’ of His children.

And that purpose runs through all His acts. For perfect love is all-pervasive, and even with us men, it rules the whole being; nor does he love at all who seeks the welfare of the heart he clings to by fits and starts, by some of his acts and not by others. When God comes forth from the unvisioned light, which is thick darkness, of His own eternal, self-adequate Being, and flashes into energy in Creation, Providence, or Grace, the Law of His Working and His Purpose are one, in all regions. The unity of the divine acts depends on this-that all flow from one deep source, and all move to one mighty end. Standing on the height to which His own declarations of His own nature lift our feebleness, we can see how the ‘river of God that waters the garden’ and ‘parts’ into many ‘heads,’ gushes from one fountain. One of the psalms puts what people call the ‘philosophy’ of creation and of providence very clearly, in accordance with this thought-that the love of God is the source, and the blessedness of man the end, of all His work: ‘To Him that made great lights; for His mercy endureth for ever. To Him that slew mighty kings; for His mercy endureth for ever.’

Creation, then, is the effluence of the loving heart of God. Though the sacred characters be but partially legible to us now, what He wrote, on stars and flowers, on the infinitely great and the infinitely small, on the infinitely near and the infinitely far off, with His creating hand, was the one inscription-God is love. And as in nature, so in providence. The origination, and the support, and the direction of all things, are the works and the heralds of the same love. It is printed in starry letters on the sky. It is graven on the rocks, and breathed by the flowers. It is spoken as a dark saying even by sorrow and pain. The mysteries of destructive and crushing providences have come from the same source. And he who can see with the Psalmist the ever-during mercy of the Lord, as the reason of creation and of judgments, has in his hands the golden key which opens all the locks in the palace chambers of the great King. He only hath penetrated to the secret of things material, and stands in the light at the centre, who understands that all comes from the one source-God’s endless desire for the blessedness of His creatures.

But while all God’s works do thus praise Him by testifying that He seeks to bless His creatures, the loftiest example of that desire is, of course, found in His revelation of Himself to men’s hearts and consciences, to men’s spirits and wills. That mightiest act of love, beginning in the long-past generations, has culminated in Him in whom ‘dwelleth the whole fulness of the Godhead bodily,’ and in whose work is all the love-the perfect, inconceivable, patient, omnipotent love of our redeeming God.

And then, remember that this is not inconsistent with or contradicted by the sterner aspects of that revelation, which cannot be denied, and ought not to be minimised or softened. *Here*, on the right hand, are the flowery slopes of the Mount of Blessing; *there*, on the left, the barren, stern, thunder-riven, lightning-splintered pinnacles of the Mount of Cursing. Every clear note of benediction hath its low minor of imprecation from the other side. Between the two, overhung by the hopes of the one, and frowned upon and dominated by the threatenings of the other, is pitched the little camp of our human life, and the path of our pilgrimage runs in the trough of the valley between. And yet-might we not go a step farther, and say that above the parted summits stretches the one overarching blue, uniting them both, and their roots deep down below the surface interlace and twine together? That is to say, the threatenings and rebukes, the acts of retributive judgment, which are contained in the revelation of God, are no limitation nor disturbance of the clear and happy faith that all which we behold is full of blessing, and that all comes from the Father’s hand. They are the garb in which His Love needs to array itself when it comes in contact with man’s sin and man’s evil. The love of God appears no less when it teaches us in grave sad tones that ‘the wages of sin is death,’ than when it proclaims that ‘the gift of God is eternal life.’

Love threatens that it may never have to execute its threats. Love warns that we may be wise in time. Love prophesies that its sad forebodings may not be fulfilled. And love smites with lighter strokes of premonitory chastisements, that we may never need to feel the whips of scorpions.

Remember, too, that these sterner aspects both of Law and of Gospel point this lesson-that we shall very much misunderstand God's purpose if we suppose it to be blessedness for us men *anyhow*, irrespective altogether of character. Some people seem to think that God loves us so much, as they would say-so little, so ignobly, as I would say-as that He only desires us to be happy. They seem to think that the divine love is tarnished unless it provides for men's felicity, whether they are God-loving and God-like or no. Thus the solemn and majestic love of the Father in heaven is to be brought down to a weak good nature, which only desires that the child shall cease crying and be happy, and does not mind by what means that end is reached. God's purpose *is* blessedness; but, as this very text tells us, not blessedness anyhow, but one which will not and cannot be given by God to those who walk in the way of sinners. His love desires that we should be holy, and 'followers of God as dear children'-and the blessedness which it bestows comes from pardon and growing fellowship with Him. It can no more fall on rebellious hearts than the pure crystals of the snow can lie and sparkle on the hot, black cone of a volcano.

The other text that I have read sets forth another view of God's purpose. God seeks our praise. The glory of God is the end of all the divine actions. Now, that is a statement which no doubt is irrefragable, and a plain deduction from the very conception of an infinite Being. But it may be held in such connections, and spoken with such erroneous application, and so divorced from other truths, that instead of being what it is in the Bible, good news, it shall become a curse and a lie. It may be so understood as to describe not our Father in heaven, but an almighty devil! But, when the thought that God's purpose in all His acts is His own glory, is firmly united with that other, that His purpose in all His acts is our blessing, then we begin to understand how full of joy it may be for us. His glory is sought by Him in the manifestation of His loving heart, mirrored in our illuminated and gladdened hearts. Such a glory is not unworthy of infinite love. It has nothing in common with the ambitious and hungry greed of men for reputation or self-display. That desire is altogether ignoble and selfish when it is found in human hearts; and it would be none the less ignoble and selfish if it were magnified into infinitude, and transferred to the divine. But to say that God's glory is His great end, is surely but another way of saying that He is love. The love that seeks to bless us desires, as all love does, that it should be known for what it is, that it should be recognised in our glad hearts, and smiled back again from our brightened faces. God desires that we should know Him, and so have Eternal Life; He desires that knowing Him, we should love Him, and loving should praise, and so should glorify Him. He desires that there should be an interchange of love bestowing and love receiving, of gifts showered down and of praise ascending, of fire falling from the heavens and sweet incense, from grateful hearts, going up in fragrant clouds acceptable unto God. It is a sign of a Fatherly heart that He '*seeketh* such to worship Him'. He desires to be glorified by our praise, because He loves us so much. He commences with an offer, He advances to a command. He gives first, and then [not till then] He comes seeking fruit from the 'trees' which are 'the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified.' His plea is not 'the vineyard belongs to Me, and I have a right to its fruits,' but 'what could have been done more to My vineyard, that I have not done in it?-judge between Me and My vineyard.' First, He showers down blessings; then, He looks for the revenue of praise!

II. We may also take these passages as giving us a twofold expression of the actual effects of God's revelation, especially in the Gospel, even here upon earth.

The one text is the joyful exclamation built upon experience and observation. The other is a call which is answered in some measure even by voices that are often dumb in unthankfulness, often broken by sobs, often murmuring in penitence.

God does actually, though not completely, make men blessed here. Our text sums up the experience of all the devout hearts and lives whose emotions are expressed in the Psalms. He who wrote this psalm would preface the whole book by words into which the spirit of the book is distilled. It will have much to say of sorrow and pain. It will touch many a low note of wailing and of grief. There will be complaints and penitence, and sighs almost of despair before it closes. But this which he puts first is the note of the whole. So it is in our histories. They will run through many a dark and desert place. We shall have bitterness and trials in abundance, there will be many an hour of sadness caused by my own evil, and many a hard struggle with it. But high above all these mists and clouds will rise the hope that seeks the skies, and deep beneath all the surface agitations of storms and currents there will be the unmoved stillness of the central ocean of peace in our hearts. In the ‘valley of weeping’ we may still be ‘blessed’ if ‘the ways’ are in our hearts, and if we make of the very tears ‘a well,’ drawing refreshment from the very trials. With all its sorrows and pains, its fightings and fears, its tribulations in the world, and its chastenings from a Father’s hand, the life of a Christian is a happy life, and ‘the joy of the Lord’ remains with His servants.

More than twenty centuries have passed since that psalm was written. As many stretched dim behind the Psalmist as he sang. He was gathering up in one sentence the spirit of the past, and confirming it by his own life’s history. And has any one that has lived since then stood up and said-’Behold! I have found it otherwise. I have waited on God, and He has not heard my cry. I have served Him, and that for nought. I have trusted in Him, and been disappointed. I have sought His face-in vain. And I say, from my own experience, that the man who trusts in Him is *not* blessed’? Not one, thank God! The history of the past, so far as this matter is concerned, may be put in one sentence ‘They looked unto Him and were lightened, and their faces were not ashamed,’ and as for the present, are there not some of us who can say, ‘This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles’?

Brethren! make the experiment for yourselves. Test this experience by your own simple affiance and living trust in Jesus Christ. We have the experience of all generations to encourage us. What has blessed them is enough for you and me. Like the meal and the oil, which were the Prophet’s resource in famine, yesterday’s supply does not diminish to-morrow’s store. We, too, may have all that gladdened the hearts and stayed the spirits of the saints of old. ‘Oh! taste and see that God is good.’ ‘Blessed is the man that trusteth in Him.’

So, too, God’s gift produces man’s praise.

What is it that He desires from us? Nothing but our thankful recognition and reception of His benefits. We honour God by taking the full cup of salvation which He commends to our lips, and by calling, while we drink, upon the name of the Lord. Our true response to His Word, which is essentially a proffer of blessing to us, is to open our hearts to receive, and, receiving, to render grateful acknowledgment. The echo of love which gives and forgives, is love which accepts and thanks. We have but to lift up our empty and impure hands, opened wide to receive the gift which He lays in them-and though they be empty and impure, yet ‘the lifting up of our hands’ is ‘as the evening sacrifice’; our sense of need stands in the place of all offerings. The stained thankfulness of our poor hearts is accepted by Him who inhabits the praises of eternity, and yet delights in the praises of Israel. He bends from heaven to give, and all He asks is that we should take. He only seeks our thankfulness-but He does seek it. And wherever His grace is discerned, and His love is welcomed, there praise breaks forth, as surely as streams pour from the cave of the glacier when the sun of summer melts it, or earth answers the touch of spring with flowers.

And that effect is produced, notwithstanding all the complaints and sighs and tears which sometimes choke our praise. It *is* produced even while these last; the psalms of thanksgiving are not all reserved for the end of the book. But even in those which read like the very sobs of a broken heart, there is ever present some tone of grateful acknowledgment of God’s mercy. He sends us sorrow, and He wills that we should weep-but they should be tears like David’s, who, at the lowest point of his fortunes, when he plaintively besought God, ‘Put Thou my tears into Thy bottle’-could say in the same breath, ‘Thy vows are upon me, O God: I will render praises unto Thee.’ God works on our souls that we may have the consciousness of sin, and He wills that we should come with broken and contrite hearts, and like the king of Israel wail out our confessions and supplications-’Have mercy upon me, O God! according to Thy loving-kindness.’ But, like him, we should even in our lowliest abasement, when our hearts are bruised, be able to say along with our contrition, ‘Open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise.’ Our sorrows are never so great that they hide our mercies. The sky is never so covered with clouds that neither sun nor stars appear for many days. And in every Christian heart the low tones of lamentation and confession are blended with grateful praise. So it is even in the darkest moments, whilst the blast of misfortune and misery is as a storm against the wall.

But a brighter hope even for our life here rises from these words, if we think of the place which they hold in the whole book. They are the last words. Whatever other notes have been sounded in its course, all ends in this. The winter's day has had its melancholy grey sky, with many a bitter dash of snow and rain-but it has stormed itself out, and at eventide, a rent in the clouds reveals the sun, and it closes in peaceful clearness of light.

The note of gladness heard at the beginning, 'Oh! the blessedness of the man that delights in the law of the Lord,' holds on persistently, like a subdued and almost bewildered undercurrent of sweet sound amid all the movements of some colossal symphony, through tears and sobs, confession and complaint, and it springs up at the close triumphant, like the ruddy spires of a flame long smothered, and swells and broadens, and draws all the intricate harmonies into its own rushing tide. Some of you remember the great musical work which has these very words for its theme. It begins with the call, 'All that hath life and breath, praise ye the Lord,' and although the gladness saddens into the plaintive cry of a soul sick with hope deferred, 'Will the night soon pass?' yet, ere the close, all discords are reconciled, and at last, with assurance firmer for the experience of passing sorrows, loud as the voice of many waters and sweet as harpers harping with their harps, the joyful invocation peals forth again, and all ends, as it does in a Christian man's life, and as it does in this book, with 'Praise ye the Lord.'

III. We have here also a twofold prophecy of the perfection of Heaven.

Whilst it is true that both of these purposes are accomplished here and now, it is also true that their accomplishment is but partial, and that therefore for their fulfilment we have to lift our eyes beyond this world of imperfect faith, of incomplete blessedness, of interrupted praise. Whether the Psalmist looked forward thus we do not know. But for us, the very shortcomings of our joys and of our songs are prophetic of the perfect and perpetual rapture of the one, and the perfect and perpetual music of the other. We know that He who has given us so much will not stay His hand until He has perfected that which concerns us. We know that He who has taught our dumb hearts to magnify His name will not cease till 'out of the lips of babes and sucklings, He has perfected praise.' We know that the pilgrims in whose hearts are the ways are blessed, and we are sure that a fuller blessedness must belong to those who have reached the journey's end.

And so these words give us a twofold aspect of that future on which our longing hopes may well fix.

It is the perfection of man's blessedness. Then the joyous exclamation of our first text, which we have often had to strive hard not to disbelieve, will be no more a truth of faith but a truth of experience. Here we have had to trust that it was so, even when we could scarce cleave to the confidence. There, memory will look back on our wanderings through this great wilderness, and, enlightened by the issue of them all, will speak only of Mercy and Goodness as our angel guides all our lives. The end will crown the work. Pure unmingled consciousness of bliss will fill all hearts, and break into the old exclamation, which we had sometimes to stifle sobs ere we could speak on earth. When He says, 'Come in! ye blessed of My Father,' all our tears and fears, and pains and sins, will be forgotten, and we shall but have to say, in wonder and joy, 'Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house; they will be still praising Thee.'

It is the perfection of God's praise. We may possibly venture to see in these wonderful words of our text a dim and far-off hint of a possibility that seems to be pointed at in many parts of Scripture-that the blessings of Christ's mighty work shall, in some measure and manner, pass through man to his dwelling-place and its creatures. Dark shadows of evil-the mystery of pain and sorrow-lie over earth and all its tribes. 'We look for new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.' And the statements of Scripture which represent creation as suffering by man's sin, and participant in its degree in man's redemption, seem too emphatic and precise, as well as too frequent, and in too didactic connections, to be lightly brushed aside as poetic imagery. May it not be that man's transgression

'Broke the fair music that all creatures made
To their great Lord, whose love their motion swayed,'

and that man's restoration may, indeed, bring back all that hath life and breath to a harmonious blessedness-according to the deep and enigmatical words, which declare that ‘the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God’? Be that as it may, at all events our second text opens to us the gates of the heavenly temple, and shows us there the saintly ranks and angel companies gathered in the city whose walls are salvation and its gates praise. They harmonise with that other later vision of heaven which the Seer in Patmos beheld, not only in setting before us worship as the glad work of all who are there, but in teaching the connection between the praises of men, and the answering hymns of angels. The harps of heaven are hushed to hear *their* praise who can sing, ‘Thou hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood,’ and, in answer to that hymn of thanksgiving for unexampled deliverance and resorting grace, the angels around the throne break forth into new songs to the Lamb that was slain-while still wider spread the broadening circles of harmonious praise, till at last ‘every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them,’ join in the mighty hymn of ‘Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and to the Lamb for ever and ever.’ Then the rapturous exclamation from human souls redeemed,-’Oh! the blessedness of the men whom Thou hast loved and saved,’ shall be answered by choral praise from everything that hath breath.

And are you dumb, my friend, in these universal bursts of praise? Is that because you have not chosen to take the universal blessing which God gives? You have nothing to do but to receive the things that are freely given to you of God-the forgiveness, the cleansing, the life, that come from Christ by faith. Take them, and call upon the name of the Lord, And can you refuse His gifts and withhold your praise? You can be eloquent in thanks to those who do you kindnesses, and in praise of those whom you admire and love, but your best Friend receives none of your gratitude and none of your praise. Ignoble silence and dull unthankfulness-with these you requite your Saviour! ‘I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out!’

2) **Psalms 5:11-12**

Psalms

A STAIRCASE OF THREE STEPS

Psa. 5:11 - Psa. 5:12.

I have ventured to isolate these three clauses from their context, because, if taken in their sequence, they are very significant of the true path by which men draw nigh to God and become righteous. They are all three designations of the same people, but regarded under different aspects and at different stages. There is a distinct order in them, and whether the Psalmist was fully conscious of it or not, he was anticipating and stating, with wonderful distinctness, the Christian sequence-faith, love, righteousness.

These three are the three flights of stairs, as it were, which lead men up to God and to perfection, or if you like to take another metaphor, meaning the same thing, they are respectively the root, the stalk, and the fruit of religion. 'They that put their trust in Thee . . . them also that love Thy Name . . . the righteous.'

I. So, then, the first thought here is that the foundation of all is trust.

Now, the word that is employed here is very significant. In its literal force it really means to 'flee to a refuge.' And that the literal signification has not altogether been lost in the spiritual and metaphorical use of it, as a term expressive of religious experience, is quite plain from many of the cases in which it occurs. Let me just repeat one of them to you. 'Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful to me, for my soul trusteth in Thee; yea, in the shadow of Thy wings will I make my refuge.' There the picture that is in the words is distinctly before the Psalmist's mind, and he is thinking not only of the act of mind and heart by which he casts himself in confidence upon God, but upon that which represents it in symbol, the act by which a man flees into some hiding-place. The psalm is said in the superscription to have been written when David hid in a cave from his persecutor. Though no weight be given to that statement, it suggests the impression made by the psalm. In imagination we can see the rough sides of the cavern that sheltered him arching over the fugitive, like the wings of some great bird, and just as he has fled thither with eager feet and is safely hidden from his pursuers there, so he has betaken himself to the everlasting Rock, in the cleft of which he is at rest and secure. To trust in God is neither more nor less than to flee to Him for refuge, and there to be at peace. The same presence of the original metaphor, colouring the same religious thought, is found in the beautiful words with which Boaz welcomes Ruth, when he prays for her that the God of Israel may reward her, ‘under the shadow of whose wings thou hast come to trust.’

So, as a man in peril runs into a hiding-place or fortress, as the chickens beneath the outspread wing of the mother bird nestle close in the warm feathers and are safe and well, the soul that trusts takes its flight straight to God, and in Him reposes and is secure.

Now, it seems to me that such a figure as that is worth tons of theological lectures about the true nature of faith, and that it tells us, by means of a picture that says a great deal more than many a treatise, that faith is something very different from a cold-blooded act of believing in the truth of certain propositions; that it is the flight of the soul-knowing itself to be in peril, and naked, and unarmed-into the strong Fortress.

What is it that keeps a man safe when he thus has around him the walls of some citadel? Is it himself, is it the act by which he took refuge, or is it the battlements behind which he crouches? So in faith-which is more than a process of a man’s understanding, and is not merely the saying, ‘Yes, I believe all that is in the Bible is true; at any rate, it is not for me to contradict it,’ but is the running of the man, when he knows himself to be in danger, into the very arms of God-it is not the running that makes him safe, but it is the arms to which he runs.

If we would only lay to heart that the very essence of religion lies in this ‘flight of the lonely soul to the only God,’ we should understand better than we do what He asks from us in order that He may defend us, and how blessed and certain His defence is. So let us clear our minds from the thought that anything is worth calling trust which is not thus taking refuge in God Himself.

Now, I need not remind you, I suppose, that all this is just as true about us as it was about David, and that the emotion or the act of his will and heart which he expresses in these words of my text is neither more nor less than the Christian act of faith. There is no difference except a difference of development; there is no difference between the road to God marked out in the Psalms, and the road to God laid down in the Gospels. The Psalmist who said, ‘Trust ye in the Lord for ever,’ and the Apostle who said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,’ were preaching identically the same doctrine. One of them could speak more fully than the other could of the Person on whom trust was to be rested, but the trust itself was the same, and the Person on whom it rested was the same, though His Name of old was Jehovah, and His Name to-day is ‘Immanuel, God with us.’

Nor need I do more than point out how the context of the words that I have ventured to detach from their surroundings is instructive: ‘Let all those that put their trust in Thee rejoice because Thou defendest them.’ The word for defending there continues the metaphor that lies in the word for ‘trust,’ for it means literally to cover over and so to protect. Thus, when a man runs to God for His refuge, God

‘Covers his defenceless head With the shadow of His wings.’

And the joy of trust is, first, that it brings round me the whole omnipotence of God for my defence, and the whole tenderness of God for my consolation, and next, that in the very exercise of trust in such defence, so fortified and vindicated by experience, there is great reward. All who thus flee into the refuge shall find refuge whither they flee, and shall be glad.

II. Then the next thought of my texts, which I do not force into them, but which results, as it seems to me, distinctly from the order in which they occur in the context, is that love follows trust.

‘All those that put their trust in Thee-they also that love Thee.’ If I am to love God, I must be quite sure that God loves me. My love can never be anything else than an answer to His. It can only be secondary and derived, or I would rather say reflected and flashed back from His. And so, very significantly, the Psalmist says, ‘Those that love Thy Name,’ meaning by ‘Name,’ as is always meant by it, the revealed character of God. If I am to love God, He must not hide in the darkness behind His infinity, but must come out and give me something about Him that I know. The three letters G O D mean nothing, and there is no power in them to stir a man’s heart. It must be the knowledge of the acts of God that brings men to love Him. And there is no way of getting that knowledge but through the faith which, as I said, must precede love. For faith realises the fact that God loves. ‘We have known and believed the love that God hath to us.’ The first step is to grasp the great truth of the loving God, and through that truth to grasp the God that loves. And then, and not till then, does there spring up in a man’s heart love towards Him. But it is only the faith that is set on Him who hath declared the Father unto us that gives us for our very own the grasp of the facts, which facts are the only possible fuel that can kindle love in a human heart. ‘We love Him because He first loved us,’ and we shall never know that He loves us unless we come to the knowledge through the road of faith. So John himself tells us when he says, in the words that I have already quoted, ‘We have known and believed.’ He puts the foundation last, ‘We have known,’ because ‘we have believed’ ‘the love that God hath to us.’

And so faith is the only possible means by which any of us can ever experience, as well as realise, the love that kindles ours. It is the possession of the fact of redemption for my very own and of the blessings which accompany it, and that alone, that binds a man to God in the bonds of love that cannot be broken, and that subdues and unites all vagrant emotions, affections, and desires in the mighty tide of a love that ever sets towards Him. As surely as the silvery moon in the sky draws after it the heaped waters of the ocean all round the world, so God’s love draws ours. They that believe contemplate, and they that believe experience the effects of that divine love, which must be experienced ere our answering love can be flashed back to heaven.

Students of acoustics tell us that if you have two stringed instruments in adjacent apartments, tuned to the same pitch, a note sounded on one of them will be feebly vibrated upon the other as soon as the waves of sound have reached the sensitive string. In like manner a man’s heart gives off a faint, but musical, little tinkle of answering love to God when the deep note of God’s love to him, struck on the chords of heaven up yonder, reaches his poor heart.

Love follows trust. So, brethren, if we desire to be warmed, let us get into the sunshine and abide there. If we desire to have our hearts filled with love to God, do not let us waste our time in trying to pump up artificial emotions or to persuade ourselves that we love Him better than we do, but let us fix our thoughts and fasten our refuge-seeking trust on Him, and then that shall kindle ours.

III. Lastly, righteousness follows trust and love.

The last description here of the man who begins as a believer and then advances to being a lover is *righteous*. That is the evangelical order. That is the great blessing and beauty of Christianity, that it goes an altogether different way to work to make men good from that which any other system has ever dreamed of. It says, first of all, trust, and that will create love and that will ensure obedience. Faith leads to righteousness because, in the very act of trusting God, I come out of myself, and going out of myself and ceasing from all self-admiration and self-dependence and self-centred life is the beginning of all good and has in it the germ of all righteousness, even as to live for self is the mother tincture out of which we can make all sins.

And faith leads to righteousness in another way. Open the heart and Christ comes in. Trust Him and He fills our poor nature with ‘the law of the Spirit of life that was in Christ Jesus,’ and that ‘makes me free from the law of sin and death.’ Righteousness, meaning thereby just what irreligious men mean by it-viz. good living, plain obedience to the ordinary recognised dictates of morality, going straight-that is most surely attained when we cease from our own works and say to Jesus Christ, ‘Lord, I cannot walk in the narrow path. Do Thou Thyself come to me and fill my heart and keep my feet.’ They that trust and love are ‘found in Him, not having their own righteousness, but that which is of God by faith.’

And love leads to righteousness because it brings the one motive into play in our hearts which turns duty into delight, toil into joy, and makes us love better to do what will please our beloved Lover than anything besides. Why did Jesus Christ say, ‘My yoke is easy and My burden is light’? Was it because He diminished the weight of duties or laid down an easier slipshod morality than had been enjoined before? No! He intensified it all, and His Commandment is far harder to flesh and blood than any commandments that were ever given. But for all that, the yoke that He lays upon our necks is, if I may so say, padded with velvet; and the burden that we have to draw behind us is laid upon wheels that will turn so easily that the load is diminished, inasmuch as for Duty He substitutes Himself and says to us, ‘If ye love Me, keep My Commandments.’

So, dear brethren! here is a very easily applied, and a very far-reaching test for us who call ourselves Christians: Does our love and does our trust culminate in practical righteousness? We are all tempted to make too much of the emotions of the religious life, and too little of its persistent, dogged obedience. We are all too apt to think that a Christian is a man that believes in Jesus Christ. ‘Justification by faith alone without the works of the law’ used to be the watchword of the Evangelical Church. It might be so held as to be either a blessed truth or a great error, and many of us make it an error instead of a blessing.

On the other hand, there is only one way by which righteousness can be attained, and that is: first by faith and then by love. Here are three steps: ‘we have known and believed the love that God hath to us’; that is the broad, bottom step. And above it ‘we love Him because He first loved us,’ that is the central one. And on the top of all, ‘herein is our love made perfect that we keep His Commandments.’ They that trust are they also who love Thy Name, and they who trust through love are, and only they are, the righteous.

3) Psalms 10:6

Psalms

ONE SAYING FROM THREE MEN

Psa. 10:6. - Psa. 16:8. - Psa. 30:6.

How differently the same things sound when said by different men! Here are three people giving utterance to almost the same sentiment of confidence. A wicked man says it, and it is insane presumption and defiance. A good man says it, having been lulled into false security by easy times, and it is a mistake that needs chastisement. A humble believing soul says it, and it is the expression of a certain and blessed truth. ‘The wicked saith in his heart, I shall not be moved.’ A good man, led astray by his prosperity, said, ‘I shall not be moved,’ and the last of the three put a little clause in which makes all the difference, ‘*because He is at my right hand*, I shall never be moved.’ So, then, we have the mad arrogance of godless confidence, the mistake of a good man that needs correction, and the warranted confidence of a believing soul.

I. The mad arrogance of godless confidence.

The ‘wicked’ man, in the psalm from which our first text comes, said a good many wrong things ‘in his heart.’ The tacit assumptions on which a life is based, though they may never come to consciousness, and still less to utterance, are the really important things. I dare say this ‘wicked man’ was a good Jew with his lips, and said his prayers all properly, but in his heart he had two working beliefs. One is thus expressed: ‘As for all his enemies, he puffeth at them. He hath said in his heart, I shall not be moved.’ The other is put into words thus: ‘He hath said in his heart, God hath forgotten, He hideth His face. He will never see it.’

That is to say, the only explanation of a godless life, unless the man is an idiot, is that there lie beneath it, as formative principles and unspoken assumptions, guiding and shaping it, one or both of these two thoughts: either ‘There is no God,’ or ‘He does not care what I do, and I am safe to go on for evermore in the present fashion.’ It might seem as if a man with the facts of human life before him, could not, even in the insanest arrogance, say, ‘I shall not be moved, for I shall never be in adversity.’ But we have an awful power-and the fact that we exercise, and choose to exercise, it is one of the strange riddles of our enigmatical existence and characters-of ignoring unwelcome facts, and going cheerily on as though we had annihilated them, because we do not reflect upon them. So this man, in the midst of a world in which there is no stay, and whilst he saw all round him the most startling and tragical instances of sudden change and complete collapse, stands quietly and says, ‘Ah! *I* shall never be moved’; ‘God doth not require it.’

That absurdity is the basis of every life that is not a life of consecration and devotion-so far as it has a basis of conviction at all. The ‘wicked’ man’s true faith is this, absurd as it may sound when you drag it out into clear, distinct utterance, whatever may be his professions. I wonder if there are any of us whose life can only be acquitted of being utterly unreasonable and ridiculous by the assumption, ‘I shall never be moved’?

Have you a lease of your goods? Do you think you are tenants at will or owners? Which? Is there any reason why any of us should escape, as some of us live as if we believed we should escape, the certain fate of all others? If there is not, what about the sanity of the man whose whole life is built upon a blunder? He is convicted of the grossest folly, unless he be assured that either there is no God, or that He does not care one rush about what we do, and that consequently we are certain of a continuance in our present state.

Do you say in your heart, ‘I shall never be moved’? Then you must be strong enough to resist every tempest that beats against you. Is that so? ‘I shall never be moved’-then nothing that contributes to your well-being will ever slip from your grasp, but you will be able to hold it tight. Is that so? ‘I shall never be moved’-then there is no grave waiting for you. Is that so? Unless these three assumptions be warranted, every godless man is making a hideous blunder, and his character is the sentence pronounced by the loving lips of Incarnate Truth on the rich man who thought that he had ‘much goods laid up for many years,’ and had only to be merry-’Thou fool! Thou fool!’ If an engineer builds a bridge across a river without due calculation of the force of the winds that blow down the gorge, the bridge will be at the bottom of the stream some stormy night, and the train piled on the fragments of it in hideous ruin. And with equal certainty the end of the first utterer of this speech can be calculated, and is foretold in the psalm, ‘The Lord is King for ever and ever. . . . The godless are perished out of the land.’

II. We have in our second text the mistake of a good man who has been lulled into false confidence.

The Psalmist admits his error by the acknowledgment that he spoke ‘in my prosperity’; or, as the word might be rendered, ‘in my *security*.’ This suggests to us the mistake into which even good men, lulled by the quiet continuance of peaceful days, are certain to fall, unless there be continual watchfulness exercised by them.

It is a very significant fact that the word which is translated in our Authorised Version 'prosperity' is often rendered 'security,' meaning thereby, not safety, but a belief that I am safe. A man who is prosperous, or at ease, is sure to drop into the notion that 'to-morrow will be as this day, and much more abundant,' unless he keeps up unslumbering watchfulness against the insidious illusion of permanence. If he yields to the temptation, in his foolish security, forgetting how fragile are its foundations, and what a host of enemies surround him threatening it, then there is nothing for it but that the merciful discipline, which this Psalmist goes on to tell us he had to pass through by reason of his fall, shall be brought to bear upon him. The writer gives us a page of his own autobiography. 'In my security I said, I shall never be moved.' 'Lord! by Thy favour Thou hast made my mountain to stand strong. Thou didst hide Thy face.' What about the security then? What about 'I shall never be moved' then? 'I was troubled. I cried to Thee, O Lord!'-and then it was all right, his prayer was heard, and he was in 'security'-that is, safety-far more really when he was 'troubled' and sore beset than when he had been, as he fancied, sure of not being moved.

Long peace rusts the cannon, and is apt to make it unfit for war. Our lack of imagination, and our present sense of comfort and well-being, tend to make us fancy that we shall go on for ever in the quiet jog-trot of settled life without any very great calamities or changes. But there was once a village at the bottom of the crater of Vesuvius, and great trees, that had grown undisturbed there for a hundred years, and green pastures, and happy homes and flocks. And then, one day, a rumble and a rush, and what became of the village? It went up in smoke-clouds. The quiescence of the volcano is no sign of its extinction. And as surely as we live, so sure is it that there will come a 'to-morrow' to us all which shall *not* be as this day. No man has any right to calculate upon anything beyond the present moment, and there is no basis whatever, either for the philosophical assertion that the order of nature is fixed, and that therefore there are no miracles, or for the practical translation of the assertion into our daily lives, that we may reasonably expect to go on as we are without changes or calamities. There is no reason capable of being put into logical shape for believing that, because the sun has risen ever since the beginning of things, it will rise to-morrow, for there will come a to-morrow when it will *not* rise. In like manner, the longest possession of our mercies is no reason for forgetting the precarious tenure on which we hold them all.

So, Christian men and women! let us try to keep vivid that consciousness which is so apt to get dull, that nothing continueth in one stay, and that we *shall* be moved, as far as the outward life and its circumstances are concerned. If we forget it, we shall need, and we shall get, the loving Fatherly discipline, which my second text tells us followed the false security of this good man. The sea is kept from putrefying by storms. Wine poured from vessel to vessel is purified thereby. It is an old truth and a wholesome one, to be always remembered, 'because they have no changes therefore they fear not God .'

III. Lastly, we have the same thing said by another man in another key.

'Because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.' The prelude to the assertion makes all the difference. Here is the warranted confidence of a simple faith.

The man who clasps God's hand, and has Him standing by his side, as his Ally, his Companion, his Guide, his Defence-that man does not need to fear change. For all the things which convict the arrogant or mistaken confidences of the other men as being insanity or a lapse from faith prove the confidence of the trustful soul to be the very perfection of reason and common sense.

We may be confident of our power to resist anything that can come against us, if He be at our side. The man that stands with his back against an oak-tree is held firm, not because of his own strength, but because of that on which he leans. There is a beautiful story of some heathen convert who said to a missionary's wife, who had felt faint and asked that she might lean for a space on her stronger arm, 'If you love me, lean hard.' That is what God says to us, 'If you love Me, lean hard.' And if you do, because He is at your right hand, you will not be moved. It is not insanity; it is not arrogance; it is simple faith, to look our enemies in the eyes, and to feel sure that they cannot touch us, 'Trust in Jehovah; so shall ye be established.' Rest on the Lord, and ye shall rest indeed.

In like manner the man who has God at his right hand may be sure of the unalterable continuance of all his proper good. Outward things may come or go, as it pleases Him, but that which makes the life of our life will never depart from us as long as He stands there. And whilst He is there, if only our hearts are knit to Him, we can say, ‘My heart and my flesh faileth, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever. I shall not be moved. Though all that can go goes, He abides; and in Him I have all riches.’ Trust not in the uncertainty of outward good, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy.

The wicked man was defiantly arrogant, and the forgetful good man was criminally self-confident, when they each said, ‘I shall not be moved.’ We are only taking up the privileges that belong to us if, exercising faith in Him, we venture to say, ‘Take what Thou wilt; leave me Thyself; I have enough.’ And the man who says, ‘Because God is at my right hand, I shall not be moved,’ has the right to anticipate an unbroken continuance of personal being, and an unchanged continuance of the very life of his life. That which breaks off all other lives abruptly is no breach in the continuity, either of the consciousness or of the avocations of a devout man. For, on the other side of the flood, he does what he does on this side, only more perfectly and more continually. ‘He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever,’ and it makes comparatively little difference to him whether his place be on this or on the other side of Jordan. We ‘shall not be moved,’ even when we change our station from earth to heaven, and the sublime fulfilment of the warranted confidence of the trustful soul comes when the ‘to-morrow’ of the skies is as the ‘to-day’ of earth, only ‘much more abundant.’

4) Psalms 16:5-6

Psalms

MAN’S TRUE TREASURE IN GOD

Psa. 16:5 - Psa. 16:6.

We read, in the law which created the priesthood in Israel, that ‘the Lord spake unto Aaron, Thou shalt have no inheritance in their land, neither shalt thou have any part among them. I am thy part and thine inheritance among the children of Israel’ [Num. 18:20]. Now there is an evident allusion to that remarkable provision in this text. The Psalmist feels that in the deepest sense he has no possession amongst the men who have only possessions upon earth, but that God is the treasure which he grasps in a rapture of devotion and self-abandonment. The priest’s duty is his choice. He will ‘walk by faith and not by sight.’

Are not all Christians priests? and is not the very essence and innermost secret of the religious life this-that the heart turns away from earthly things and deliberately accepts God as its supreme good, and its only portion? These first words of my text contain the essence of all true religion.

The connection between the first clause and the others is closer than many readers perceive. The ‘lot’ which ‘Thou maintainest,’ the ‘pleasant places,’ the ‘goodly heritage,’ all carry on the metaphor, and all refer to God as Himself the portion of the heart that chooses and trusts Him. ‘Thou maintainest my lot’-He who is our inheritance also guards our inheritance, and whosoever has taken God for his possession has a possession as sure as God can make it. ‘The lines are fallen to me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage’-the heritage that is goodly is God Himself. When a man chooses God for his portion, then, and then only, is he satisfied-’satisfied with favour, and full of the goodness of the Lord.’ Let me try to expand and enforce these thoughts, with the hope that we may catch something of their fervour and their glow.

I. The first thought, then, that comes out of the words before us is this: all true religion has its very heart in deliberately choosing God as my supreme good.

‘The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup.’ The two words which are translated in our version ‘portion’ and ‘inheritance’ are substantially synonymous. The latter of them is used continually in reference to the share of each individual, or family, or tribe in the partition of the land of Canaan. There is a distinct allusion, therefore, to that partition in the language of our text; and the two expressions, part or ‘portion,’ and ‘inheritance,’ are substantially identical, and really mean just the same as if the single expression had stood-’The Lord is my Portion.’

I may just notice in passing that these words are evidently alluded to in the New Testament, in the Epistle to the Colossians, where Paul speaks of God ‘having made us meet for our portion of the inheritance of the saints in light.’

And then the ‘portion of my cup’ is a somewhat strange expression. It is found in one of the other Psalms, with the meaning ‘fortune,’ or ‘destiny,’ or ‘sum of circumstances which make up a man’s life.’ There may be, of course, an allusion to the metaphor of a feast here, and God may be set forth as ‘the portion of my cup,’ in the sense of being the refreshment and sustenance of a man’s soul. But I should rather be disposed to consider that there is merely a prolongation of the earlier metaphor, and that the same thought as is contained in the figure of the ‘inheritance’ is expressed here [as in common conversation it is often expressed] by the word ‘cup,’ namely, ‘that which makes up a man’s portion in this life.’ It is used with such a meaning in the well-known words, ‘My cup runneth over,’ and in another shape in ‘The cup which My Father hath given Me, shall I not drink it?’ It is the sum of circumstances which make up a man’s ‘fortune.’ So the double metaphor presents the one thought of God as the true possession of the devout soul.

Now, how do we possess God? We possess things in one fashion and persons in another. The lowest and most imperfect form of possession is that by which a man simply keeps other people off material good, and asserts the right of disposal of it as he thinks proper. A blind man may have the finest picture that ever was painted; he may call it his, that is to say, nobody else can sell it, but what good is it to him? A lunatic may own a library as big as the Bodleian, but what use is it to him? Does the man who collects the rents of a mountain-side, or the poet or painter to whom its cliffs and heather speak far-reaching thoughts, most truly possess it? The highest form of possession, even of things, is when they minister to our thought, to our emotion, to our moral and intellectual growth. We possess even them really, according as we know them and hold communion with them. But when we get up into the region of persons, we possess them in the measure in which we understand them, and sympathise with them, and love them. Knowledge, intercourse, sympathy, affection-these are the ways by which men can possess men, and spirits, spirits. A disciple who gets the thoughts of a great teacher into his mind, and has his whole being saturated by them, may be said to have made the teacher his own. A friend or a lover owns the heart that he or she loves, and which loves back again; and not otherwise do we possess God.

Such ownership must be, from its very nature, reciprocal. There must be the two sides to it. And so we read in the Bible, with equal frequency: the Lord is the inheritance of His people, and His people are the inheritance of the Lord. He possesses me, and I possess Him-with reverence be it spoken-by the very same tenure; for whoso loves God has Him, and whom He loves He owns. There is deep and blessed mystery involved in this wonderful prerogative, that the loving, believing heart has God for its possession and indwelling Guest; and people are apt to brush such thoughts aside as mystical. But, like all true Christian mysticism, it is intensely practical.

We have God for ours, first, in the measure in which our minds are actively occupied with thoughts of Him. We have no merely mystical or emotional possession of God to preach. There is a real, adequate knowledge of Him in Jesus Christ. We know God, His character, His heart, His relations to us, His thoughts of good concerning us, sufficiently for all intellectual and for all practical purposes.

I wish to ask you a plain question: Do you ever think about Him? There is only one way of getting God for yours, and that is by bringing Him into your life by frequent meditation upon His sweetness, and upon the truths that you know about Him. There is no other way by which a spirit can possess a spirit, that is not cognisable by sense, except only by the way of thinking about him, to begin with. All else follows that. That is how you hold your dear ones when they go to the other side of the world. That is how you hold God, who dwells on the other side of the stars. There is no way to ‘have’ Him, but through the understanding accepting Him, and keeping firm hold of Him. Men and women that from Monday morning to Saturday night never think of His name-how do they possess God? And professing Christians that never remember Him all the day long-what absurd hypocrisy it is for them to say that God is theirs!

Yours, and never in your mind! When your husband, or your wife, or your child, goes away from home for a week, do you forget them as utterly as you forget God? Do you have them in any sense if they never dwell in the 'study of your imagination,' and never fill your thoughts with sweetness and with light?

And so again when the heart turns to Him, and when all the faculties of our being, will, hope, and imagination, and all our affections and all our practical powers, when they all touch Him, each in its proper fashion, then and then only can we in any reasonable and true sense be said to possess God.

Thought, communion, sympathy, affection, moral likeness, practical obedience, these are the way-and not by mystical raptures only-by which, in simple prose fact, it is possible for the finite to grasp the infinite, and for a man to be the *owner* of God.

Now there is another consideration very necessary to be remembered, and that is that this possession of God involves, and is possible only by, a deliberate act of renunciation. The Levite's example, that is glanced at in my text, is always our law. You must have no part or inheritance amongst the sons of earth if God is to be your inheritance. Or, to put it into plain words, there must be a giving up of the material and the created if there is to be a possession of the divine and the heavenly. There cannot be *two* supreme, any more than there can be two pole-stars, one in the north and the other in the south, to both of which a man can be steering. You cannot stand with

'One foot on land, and one on sea,

To one thing constant never.'

If you are to have God as your supreme good, you must empty your heart of earth and worldly things, or your possession of Him will be all words, and imagination, and hypocrisy. Brethren! I wish to bring that message to your consciences to-day.

And what is this renunciation? There must be, first of all, a fixed, deliberate, intelligent conviction lying at the foundation of my life that God is best, and that He and He only is my true delight and desire. Then there must be built upon that intelligent conviction that God is best, the deliberate turning away of the heart from these material treasures. Then there must be the willingness to abandon the outward possession of them, if they come in between us and Him. Just as travellers in old days, that went out looking for treasures in the western hemisphere, were glad to empty their ships of their less precious cargo in order to load them with gold, you must get rid of the trifles, and fling these away if ever they so take up your heart that God has no room there. Or rather, perhaps, if the love of God in any real measure, howsoever imperfectly, once gets into a man's soul, it will work there to expel and edge out the love and regard for earthly things. Just as when the chemist collects oxygen in a vessel filled with water, as it passes into the jar it drives out the water before it; the love of God, if it come into a man's heart in any real sense, in the measure in which it comes, will deliver him from the love of the world. But between the two there is warfare so internecine and endless that they cannot co-exist: and here, to-day, it is as true as ever it was that if you want to have God for your portion and your inheritance you must be content to have no inheritance amongst your brethren, nor part amongst the sons of earth.

Men and women! are you ready for that renunciation? Are you prepared to say, 'I know that the sweetness of Thy presence is the truest sweetness that I can taste; and lo! I give up all besides and my own self'?

'O God of good, the unfathomed Sea!
Who would not yield himself to Thee?'

And remember, that nothing less than these is Christianity-the conviction that the world is second and not first; that God is best, love is best, truth is best, knowledge of Him is best, likeness to Him is best, the willingness to surrender all if it come in contest with His supreme sweetness. He that turns his back upon earth by reason of the drawing power of the glory that excelleth, is a Christian. The Christianity that only trusts to Christ for deliverance from the punishment of sin, and so makes religion a kind of fire insurance, is a very poor affair. We need the lesson pealed into our ears as much as any generation has ever done, ‘Ye cannot serve God and mammon.’ A man’s real working religion consists in his loving God most and counting His love the sweetest of all things.

II. Now let me turn to the next point that is here, viz. that this possession is as sure as God can make it. ‘Thou maintainest my lot.’ Thou art Thyself both my heritage and the guardian of my heritage. He that possesses God, says the text, by implication, is lifted above all fear and chance of change.

The land, the partition of which amongst the tribes lies at the bottom of the allusive metaphor of my text, was given to them under the sanction of a supernatural defence; and the law of their continuance in it was that they should trust and serve the unseen King. It was He, according to the theocratic theory of the Old Testament, and not chariots and horses, their own arm and their own sword, that kept them safe, though the enemies on the north and the enemies on the south were big enough to swallow up the little kingdom at a mouthful.

And so, says the Psalmist allusively, in a similar manner, the Divine Power surrounds the man who chooses God for his heritage, and nothing shall take that heritage from him.

The lower forms of possession, by which men are called the owners of material goods, are imperfect, because they are all precarious and temporary. Nothing really belongs to a man if it can be taken from him. What we may lose we can scarcely be said to have. They *are* mine, they *were* yours, they *will be* somebody else’s to-morrow. Whilst we have them we do not have them in any deep sense; we cannot retain them, they are not really ours at all. The only thing that is worth calling mine is something that so passes into and saturates the very substance of my soul that, like a piece of cloth dyed in the grain, as long as two threads hold together the tint will be there. That is how God gives us Himself, and nothing can take Him out of a man’s soul. He, in the sweetness of His grace, bestows Himself upon man, and guards His own gift in the heart, which is Himself. He who dwells in God and God in him lives as in the inmost keep and citadel. The noise of battle may roar around the walls, but deep silence and peace are within. The storm may rage upon the coasts, but he who has God for his portion dwells in a quiet inland valley where tempests never come. No outer changes can touch our possession of God. They belong to another region altogether. Other goods may go, but this is held by a different tenure. The life of a Christian is lived in two regions: in the one his life has its roots, and its branches extend to the other. In the one there may be whirling storms and branches may toss and snap, whilst in the other, to which the roots go down, may be peace. Root yourselves in God, making Him your truest treasure, and nothing can rob you of your wealth.

We here in this commercial community see many examples of great fortunes and great businesses melting away like yesterday's snow. And surely the certain alternations of 'booms' and bad times might preach to some of you this lesson: Set not your hearts on that which can pass, but make your treasure that which no man can take from you.

Then, too, there is the other thought. God will help us so that no temptations shall have power to make us rob *ourselves* of our treasure. None can take it from us but ourselves, but we are so weak and surrounded by temptations so strong that we need Him to aid us if we are not to be beguiled by our own treacherous hearts into parting with our highest good. A handful of feeble Jews were nothing against the gigantic might of Assyria, or against the compacted strength of civilised Egypt; but there they stood, on their rocky mountains, defended, not by their own strength, but by the might of a present God. And so, unfit to cope with the temptations round us as we are, if we cast ourselves upon His power and make Him our supreme delight, nothing shall be able to rob us of that possession and that sweetness.

And there is just one last point that I would refer to here on this matter of our stable possession of God. It is very beautiful to observe that this psalm, which, in the language of my text, rises to the very height of spiritual and, in a good sense, mystical devotion, recognising God as the One Good for souls, is also one of the psalms which has the clearest utterance of the faith in immortality. Just after the words of my text we read these others, in which the Old Testament confidence in a life beyond the grave reaches its very climax: ‘Thou wilt not leave my soul in Sheol, neither wilt Thou suffer Thine holy one to see corruption. Thou wilt show me the path of life; in Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.’

That connection teaches us that the measure in which a man feels his true possession of God here and now, is the measure in which his faith rises triumphant over the darkness of the grave, and grasps, with unfaltering confidence, the conviction of an immortal life. The more we know that God is our portion and our treasure, the more sure, and calmly sure, we shall be that a thing like death cannot touch a thing like that, that the mere physical fact is far too small and insignificant a fact to have any power in such a region as that; that death can no more affect a man’s relation to God, whom he has learned to love and trust, than you can cut thought or feeling with a knife. The two belong to two different regions. Thus we have here the Old Testament faith in immortality shaping itself out of the Old Testament enjoyment of communion with God, with a present God. And you will find the very same process of thought in that seventy-third psalm, which stands in some respects side by side with this one as attaining the height of mystical devotion, joined with a very clear utterance of the faith in immortality: ‘Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee! Thou wilt guide me with Thy counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory.’

So Death himself cannot touch the heritage of the man whose heritage is the Lord. And his ministry is not to rob us of our treasures as he robs men of all treasures besides [for ‘their glory shall not descend after them’], but to give us instead of the ‘earnest of the inheritance’-the bit of turf by which we take possession of the estate-the broad land in all the amplitude of its sweep, into our perpetual possession. ‘Thou maintainest my lot.’ Neither death nor life ‘shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

III. And then the last thought here is that he who thus elects to find his treasure and delight in God is satisfied with his choice. ‘The lines’-the measuring-cord by which the estate was parted off and determined-’are fallen in pleasant places; yea!’-not as our Bible has it, merely ‘I have a *goodly* heritage,’ putting emphasis on the fact of possession, but-’the heritage is goodly to *me*,’ putting emphasis on the fact of subjective satisfaction with it.

I have no time to dwell upon the thoughts that spring from these words. Take them in the barest outline. No man that makes the worse choice of earth instead of God, ever, in the retrospect, said: ‘I have a goodly heritage.’ One of the later Roman Emperors, who was among the best of them, said, when he was dying: ‘I have been everything, and it profits me nothing.’ No creature can satisfy your whole nature. Portions of it may be fed with their appropriate satisfaction, but as long as we feed on the things of earth there will always be part of our being like an unfed tiger in a menagerie, growling for its prey, whilst its fellows are satisfied for the moment. You can no more give your heart rest and blessedness by pitching worldly things into it, than they could fill up Chat Moss, when they made the first Liverpool and Manchester Railway, by throwing in cartloads of earth. The bog swallowed them and was none the nearer being filled.

No man who takes the world for his portion ever said, ‘The lines are fallen to me in pleasant places.’ For the make of your soul as plainly cries out ‘God!’ as a fish’s fins declare that the sea is its element, or a bird’s wings mark it out as meant to soar. Man and God fit each other like the two halves of a tally. You will never get rest nor satisfaction, and you will never be able to look at the past with thankfulness, nor at the present with repose, nor into the future with hope, unless you can say, ‘God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.’ But oh! if you do, then you have a goodly heritage, a heritage of still satisfaction, a heritage which suits, and gratifies, and expands all the powers of a man’s nature, and makes him ever capable of larger and larger possession of a God who ever gives more than we can receive, that the overplus may draw us to further desire, and the further desire may more fully be satisfied.

The one true, pure, abiding joy is to hold fellowship with God and to live in His love. The secret of all our unrest is the going out of our desires after earthly things. They fly forth from our hearts like Noah’s raven, and nowhere amid all the weltering flood can find a resting-place. The secret of satisfied repose is to set our affections thoroughly on God. Then our wearied hearts, like Noah’s dove returning to its rest, will fold their wings and nestle fast by the throne of God. ‘All the happiness of this life,’ said William Law, ‘is but trying to quench thirst out of golden *empty* cups.’ But if we will take the Lord for ‘the portion of our cup,’ we shall never thirst.

Let me beseech you to choose God in Christ for your supreme good and highest portion; and having chosen, to cleave to your choice. So shall you enter on possession of good that truly shall be yours, even ‘that good part, which shall not be taken away from’ you.

And, lastly, remember that if you would have God, you must take Christ. He is the true Joshua, who puts us in possession of the inheritance. He brings God to you-to your knowledge, to your love, to your will. He brings you to God, making it possible for your poor sinful souls to enter His presence by His blood; and for your spirits to possess that divine Guest. ‘He that hath the Son, hath the Father’; and if you trust your souls to Him who died for you, and cling to Him as your delight and your joy, you will find that both the Father and the Son come to you and make their home in you.

Through Christ the Son you will receive power to become sons of God, and 'if children, then heirs, heirs of God,' because 'joint heirs with Christ.'

5) Psalms 16:8

Psalms

ONE SAYING FROM THREE MEN

GOD WITH US, AND WE WITH GOD

Psa. 16:8, Psa. 16:11.

There are, unquestionably, large tracts of the Old Testament in which the anticipation of immortality does not appear, and there are others in which its presence may be doubtful. But here there can be no hesitation, I think, as to the meaning of these words. If we regard them carefully, we shall not only see clearly the Psalmist's hope of immortal life, but shall discern the process by which he came to it, and almost his very act of grasping at it; for the first verse of our text is manifestly the foundation of the second; and the facts of the one are the basis of the hopes of the other. That is made plain by the 'therefore' which, in one of the intervening verses, links the concluding rapturous anticipations with the previous expressions.

If, then, we observe that here, in these two verses which I have read, there is a very remarkable parallelism, we shall get still more strikingly the connection between the devout life here and the perfecting of the same hereafter. Note how, even in our translation, the latter verse is largely an echo of the former, and how much more distinctly that is the case if we make a little variation in the rendering, which brings it closer to the original. 'I have set the Lord always *before me*,' says the one,-that is the present. 'In Thy *presence* is fulness of joy,' says the other,-that is the consequent future. And the two words, which are rendered in the one case 'before me' and in the other case 'in Thy presence,' are, though not identical, so precisely synonymous that we may take them as meaning the same thing. So we might render 'I have set the Lord always before *my* face': 'Before *Thy* face is fulness of joy.' The other clause is, to an English reader, more obviously parallel: 'Because He is at *my right hand* I shall not be moved'-shall be steadied here. 'At *Thy right* hand are pleasures for evermore'-the steadfastness here merges into eternal delights hereafter.

So then, we have two conditions set before us, and the link between them made very plain. And I gather all that I have to say about these words into two statements. First, life here may be God's presence with us, to make us steadfast. And secondly, if so, life hereafter will be our presence with God to make us glad. That is the Psalmist's teaching, and I will try to enforce it.

I. First, then, life here may be God's presence with us, to make us steadfast.

Mark the Psalmist's language. 'I have set the Lord always *in front of* me-before my face.' Emphasis is placed on 'set' and 'always.' God is ever by our sides, but we may be very far away from Him, 'though He be not far off from every one of us,' and if we are to have Him blazing, clear and unobscured above and beyond all the mists and hubbub of earth, we shall need continual effort in order to keep Him in our sight. 'I have set the Lord'-He permits me to put out my hand, as it were, and station Him where I want Him, that I may always have Him in my sight, and be able to look at Him and be calm and blessed.

You cannot do that, if you let the world, and wealth, and business, and anxieties, and ambitions, and cares, and sorrows, and duties, and family responsibilities, jostle and hustle Him out of your minds and hearts. You cannot do it if, like John Bunyan's man with the muckrake, you keep your eyes always down on the straw at your feet, and never lift them to the crown above. How many men in Manchester walk its streets from year's end to year's end, and never look up to the sky except to see whether they must take their umbrellas with them or not? And so all the magnificence and beauty of the daily heavens, and the nightly gemming of the empty places with perpetually burning stars, are lost to them! So, God is blazing there in front of us, but unless we set ourselves to it, we shall never see Him. You have to look, by a conscious effort, over and away from the things that are 'seen and temporal' if you want to see the things that are 'unseen and eternal.'

But if you disturb the whole tenor of your being by agitations and distractions and petty cares, or if you defile it by sensual and fleshly lusts, and animal propensities gratified, and poor, miserable, worldly ambitions and longings filling up your souls, then God can no more be visible before your face than the blessed sun can mirror himself in a storm-tossed sea or in a muddy puddle. The heart must be pure, and the heart must be still, and the mind must be detached from earth, and glued to Heaven, and the glasses of the telescope must be sedulously cleansed from dust, if we are to be blessed with the vision of God continuously before our face.

Then note, still further, that if thus we have made God present with us, by realising the fact of His presence, when He comes, He comes with His hands full. 'I have set the Lord always before me,' says the Psalmist. And then he goes on to say, 'Because He is at my right hand.' Not only in front of you, then, David, to be looked at, but at your side! What for? What do we summon some one to come and stand beside us for? In order that from his presence there may come help and succour and courage and confidence. And so God comes to the right hand of the man who honestly endeavours through all the confusions and bustles of life to realise His sweet and calming presence. Where He comes He comes to help; not to be a spectator, but an ally in the warfare; and whoever sets the Lord before him will have the Lord at his right hand.

And then, note, still further, the steadfastness which God brings. I have spoken of the effort which brings God. I speak now of the steadfastness which He brings by His coming. The Psalmist's anticipation is a singularly modest one. 'Because He is at my right hand I shall'-What? Be triumphant? No! Escape sorrows? No! Have my life filled with serenity? No! 'I shall not be moved.' That is the best I can hope for. To be able to stand on the spot, with steadfast convictions, with steadfast purposes, with steadfast actions-continuously in one direction; 'having overcome all, to stand'-that is as much as the best of us can desire or expect, in this poor struggling life of ours.

What a profound consciousness of inward weakness and of outward antagonism there breathes in that humble and modest hope, as being the loftiest result of the presence of Omnipotence for our aid: 'I shall not be moved'! When we think of our inner weakness, when we remember the fluctuations of our feelings and emotions, when we compare the ups and downs of our daily life, or when we think of the larger changes covering years, which affect all our outlooks, our thoughts, our plans; and how

'We all are changed by still degrees,
All but the basis of the soul,'

it is much to say, 'I shall not be moved.' And when we think of the obstacles that surround us, of the storms that dash against us, how we are swept by surges of emotion that wash away everything before their imperious onrush, or swayed by blasts of temptation that break down the strongest defences, or smitten by the shocks of change and sorrow that crush the firmest hearts, it is much to say, in the face of a world pressing upon us with the force of the wind in a cyclone, that our poor, feeble reed shall stand upright and 'not be moved' in the fiercest blast. 'What went ye out for to see?' 'A reed shaken with the wind'-that is humanity. 'Behold! I have made thee an iron pillar and brazen walls, and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail'-that is weak man, stiffened into uprightness, and rooted in steadfastness by the touch of the hand of a present God.

And, brother! there is nothing else that will stay a man's soul. The holdfast cannot be a part of the chain. It must be fastened to a fixed point. The anchor that is to keep the ship of your life from dragging and finding itself, when the morning breaks, a ghastly wreck upon the reef, must be outside of yourself, and the cable of it must be wrapped round the throne of God. The anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, which will neither break nor drag, can only be firm when it 'enters into that within the veil.' God, and God only, can thus make us strong! So, dear friends, let us see to it that we fasten our aims and purposes, our faith and love, our submission and obedience, upon that mighty Helper who will be with us and make us strong, that we may 'stand fast in the Lord and in the power of His might.'

II. Now, secondly, notice how, if so, life hereafter will be our presence with God, to make us glad.

I have already pointed out briefly the connection between these two portions of my text, and I need only remark here that the link which holds them together is very obvious. If a man loves God, and trusts Him, and 'walks with Him,' after the fashion described in our former verse, then there will spring up, irrepressible and unconquerable, a conviction in that man's soul that this sweet and strong communion, which makes so much of the blessedness of life, must last after death. Anything is conceivable rather than that a man who walks with God shall cease to be! Rather, when he 'is not' any more 'found' among men, it is only because 'God took him.' Thus the emotions and experiences of a truly devout soul are [apart from the great revelation in Jesus Christ which hath brought 'life and immortality to light'] the best evidence and confirmation of the anticipation of immortal life. It cannot be, unless our whole intellectual faculties are to be put into utter confusion, that such an experience as that of the man who loves God, and tries to trust Him, and walk before Him, is destined to be brought to nothingness with the mere dissolution of this earthly frame. The greatness and the smallness, the achievements and the failures, of the religious life as we see it here, all bear upon their front the mark of imperfection, and in their imperfection prophesy and proclaim a future completion. Because it is so great in itself, and because, being so great, its developments and influence are so strangely and sadly checked, the faith that knits a man to Christ demands eternity for its duration, and infinitude for its perfection. Thus, he that says 'I have set the Lord always before me,' goes on to say, with an undeniable accuracy of inference, 'Therefore Thou wilt not leave my soul in the under world.' God is not going to forget the soul that clave to Him, and anything is believable sooner than that.

Our texts not only assert this connection and base the confidence of immortality on the present experiences of the spirit that trusts in God, but also give the outline, at least, of the correspondences between the imperfections of the present and the perfectnesses of the future. And I cast this into two or three words before I close.

This is the first of them. If you will turn your faces to God, amidst all the flaunting splendours and vain shows and fleeting possessions of this present, His face will dawn on you yonder. We can say but little of what is meant by such a hope as that. But only this we can say, that there will be, as yet unimaginable, new wealths of revelation of the Father, and to match them, as yet unimaginable new inlets of apprehension and perception upon our parts, so that the sweetest, clearest, closest, most satisfying vision of God that has ever dawned on sad souls here, shall be but ‘as in a glass darkly’ compared with that face to face sight. We live away out on the far-off outskirts of the system where those great planets plough along their slow orbits, and turn their languid rotations at distances that imagination faints in contemplating, and the light and the heat and the life that reach them are infinitesimally small. We shall be shifted into the orb that is nearest the sun; and oh! what a rapture of light and life and heat will come to our amazed spirits: ‘I have set the Lord always before me.’ Twilight though the light has been, I have tried to keep it. I shall be of the sons of light close to the Throne and shall see Thy face. I shall be satisfied when I wake out of this sleep of life into Thy likeness.

Then, again, if you will keep God at your right hand here, He will set you on His hereafter. Keep Him here for your Companion, for your Ally, for your Advocate, to breathe strength into you by the touch of His hand, as some feeble man, leaning upon a stronger arm, may be upheld. If you will do that, then the place where the favoured servants stand will be yours; the place where trusted counsellors stand will be yours; the place where the sheep stand will be yours; the place where the Shepherd sits will be yours; for He to whom it is said, ‘Sit Thou at My right hand till I make Thine enemies Thy footstool,’ says to us, ‘Where I am there shall also My servant be.’ Keep God by your sides, and you will be lifted to Christ’s place at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Lastly, if we let ourselves be stayed by God amidst the struggle and difficulty, we shall be gladdened by Him with perpetual joys. The emphasis of the last words of my text is rather on the adjectives than on the nouns-*full* joy, *eternal* pleasure. And how both characteristics contradict the experiences of earth, even the gladdest, which we fain would make permanent! For I suppose that no earthly joy is either central, reaching the deepest self, or circumferential, embracing the whole being of a man, but that only God can so go into the depths of my soul as that from His throne there He can flood the whole of my nature with felicity and peace. In all other gladnesses there is always in the landscape one bit of sullen shadow somewhere or other, unparticipant of the light, while all around is blazing. And we need that He should come to make us blessed.

Joys here are no more lasting than they are complete. As one who only too sadly proved the truth of his own words, burning out his life before he was six-and-thirty, has said-

‘Pleasures are like poppies spread,
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed!
Or like the snowflake in the river.
A moment white-then gone for ever.’

Oh! my friend, ‘why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread?’ The life of faith on earth is the beginning, and only the beginning, of that life of calm and complete felicity in the heavenly places.

I have shown you the ladder’s foot, ‘I have set the Lord always before me.’ The top round reaches the throne of God, and whoever begins at the bottom, and holds fast the beginning of his confidence firm unto the end, for him the great promise of the Master will come true, and Christ’s ‘joy will remain in him and his joy shall be full.’

6) Psalms 16:11

Psalms

GOD WITH US, AND WE WITH GOD

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Mark the Psalmist's language. 'I have set the Lord always *in front of* me-before my face.' Emphasis is placed on 'set' and 'always.' God is ever by our sides, but we may be very far away from Him, 'though He be not far off from every one of us,' and if we are to have Him blazing, clear and unobscured above and beyond all the mists and hubbub of earth, we shall need continual effort in order to keep Him in our sight. 'I have set the Lord'-He permits me to put out my hand, as it were, and station Him where

I want Him, that I may always have Him in my sight, and be able to look at Him and be calm and blessed.

You cannot do that, if you let the world, and wealth, and business, and anxieties, and ambitions, and cares, and sorrows, and duties, and family responsibilities, jostle and hustle Him out of your minds and hearts. You cannot do it if, like John Bunyan's man with the muckrake, you keep your eyes always down on the straw at your feet, and never lift them to the crown above. How many men in Manchester walk its streets from year's end to year's end, and never look up to the sky except to see whether they must take their umbrellas with them or not? And so all the magnificence and beauty of the daily heavens, and the nightly gemming of the empty places with perpetually burning stars, are lost to them! So, God is blazing there in front of us, but unless we set ourselves to it, we shall never see Him. You have to look, by a conscious effort, over and away from the things that are 'seen and temporal' if you want to see the things that are 'unseen and eternal.'

But if you disturb the whole tenor of your being by agitations and distractions and petty cares, or if you defile it by sensual and fleshly lusts, and animal propensities gratified, and poor, miserable, worldly ambitions and longings filling up your souls, then God can no more be visible before your face than the blessed sun can mirror himself in a storm-tossed sea or in a muddy puddle. The heart must be pure, and the heart must be still, and the mind must be detached from earth, and glued to Heaven, and the glasses of the telescope must be sedulously cleansed from dust, if we are to be blessed with the vision of God continuously before our face.

Then note, still further, that if thus we have made God present with us, by realising the fact of His presence, when He comes, He comes with His hands full. 'I have set the Lord always before me,' says the Psalmist. And then he goes on to say, 'Because He is at my right hand.' Not only in front of you, then, David, to be looked at, but at your side! What for? What do we summon some one to come and stand beside us for? In order that from his presence there may come help and succour and courage and confidence. And so God comes to the right hand of the man who honestly endeavours through all the confusions and bustles of life to realise His sweet and calming presence. Where He comes He comes to help; not to be a spectator, but an ally in the warfare; and whoever sets the Lord before him will have the Lord at his right hand.

And then, note, still further, the steadfastness which God brings. I have spoken of the effort which brings God. I speak now of the steadfastness which He brings by His coming. The Psalmist's anticipation is a singularly modest one. 'Because He is at my right hand I shall'-What? Be triumphant? No! Escape sorrows? No! Have my life filled with serenity? No! 'I shall not be moved.' That is the best I can hope for. To be able to stand on the spot, with steadfast convictions, with steadfast purposes, with steadfast actions-continuously in one direction; 'having overcome all, to stand'-that is as much as the best of us can desire or expect, in this poor struggling life of ours.

What a profound consciousness of inward weakness and of outward antagonism there breathes in that humble and modest hope, as being the loftiest result of the presence of Omnipotence for our aid: 'I shall not be moved'! When we think of our inner weakness, when we remember the fluctuations of our feelings and emotions, when we compare the ups and downs of our daily life, or when we think of the larger changes covering years, which affect all our outlooks, our thoughts, our plans; and how

'We all are changed by still degrees,
All but the basis of the soul,'

it is much to say, 'I shall not be moved.' And when we think of the obstacles that surround us, of the storms that dash against us, how we are swept by surges of emotion that wash away everything before their imperious onrush, or swayed by blasts of temptation that break down the strongest defences, or smitten by the shocks of change and sorrow that crush the firmest hearts, it is much to say, in the face of a world pressing upon us with the force of the wind in a cyclone, that our poor, feeble reed shall stand upright and 'not be moved' in the fiercest blast. 'What went ye out for to see?' 'A reed shaken with the wind'-that is humanity. 'Behold! I have made thee an iron pillar and brazen walls, and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail'-that is weak man, stiffened into uprightness, and rooted in steadfastness by the touch of the hand of a present God.

And, brother! there is nothing else that will stay a man's soul. The holdfast cannot be a part of the chain. It must be fastened to a fixed point. The anchor that is to keep the ship of your life from dragging and finding itself, when the morning breaks, a ghastly wreck upon the reef, must be outside of yourself, and the cable of it must be wrapped round the throne of God. The anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, which will neither break nor drag, can only be firm when it 'enters into that within the veil.' God, and God only, can thus make us strong! So, dear friends, let us see to it that we fasten our aims and purposes, our faith and love, our submission and obedience, upon that mighty Helper who will be with us and make us strong, that we may 'stand fast in the Lord and in the power of His might.'

II. Now, secondly, notice how, if so, life hereafter will be our presence with God, to make us glad.

I have already pointed out briefly the connection between these two portions of my text, and I need only remark here that the link which holds them together is very obvious. If a man loves God, and trusts Him, and 'walks with Him,' after the fashion described in our former verse, then there will spring up, irrepressible and unconquerable, a conviction in that man's soul that this sweet and strong communion, which makes so much of the blessedness of life, must last after death. Anything is conceivable rather than that a man who walks with God shall cease to be! Rather, when he 'is not' any more 'found' among men, it is only because 'God took him.' Thus the emotions and experiences of a truly devout soul are [apart from the great revelation in Jesus Christ which hath brought 'life and immortality to light'] the best evidence and confirmation of the anticipation of immortal life. It cannot be, unless our whole intellectual faculties are to be put into utter confusion, that such an experience as that of the man who loves God, and tries to trust Him, and walk before Him, is destined to be brought to nothingness with the mere dissolution of this earthly frame. The greatness and the smallness, the achievements and the failures, of the religious life as we see it here, all bear upon their front the mark of imperfection, and in their imperfection prophesy and proclaim a future completion. Because it is so great in itself, and because, being so great, its developments and influence are so strangely and sadly checked, the faith that knits a man to Christ demands eternity for its duration, and infinitude for its perfection. Thus, he that says ‘I have set the Lord always before me,’ goes on to say, with an undeniable accuracy of inference, ‘Therefore Thou wilt not leave my soul in the under world.’ God is not going to forget the soul that clave to Him, and anything is believable sooner than that.

Our texts not only assert this connection and base the confidence of immortality on the present experiences of the spirit that trusts in God, but also give the outline, at least, of the correspondences between the imperfections of the present and the perfectnesses of the future. And I cast this into two or three words before I close.

This is the first of them. If you will turn your faces to God, amidst all the flaunting splendours and vain shows and fleeting possessions of this present, His face will dawn on you yonder. We can say but little of what is meant by such a hope as that. But only this we can say, that there will be, as yet unimaginable, new wealths of revelation of the Father, and to match them, as yet unimaginable new inlets of apprehension and perception upon our parts, so that the sweetest, clearest, closest, most satisfying vision of God that has ever dawned on sad souls here, shall be but ‘as in a glass darkly’ compared with that face to face sight. We live away out on the far-off outskirts of the system where those great planets plough along their slow orbits, and turn their languid rotations at distances that imagination faints in contemplating, and the light and the heat and the life that reach them are infinitesimally small. We shall be shifted into the orb that is nearest the sun; and oh! what a rapture of light and life and heat will come to our amazed spirits: ‘I have set the Lord always before me.’ Twilight though the light has been, I have tried to keep it. I shall be of the sons of light close to the Throne and shall see Thy face. I shall be satisfied when I wake out of this sleep of life into Thy likeness.

Then, again, if you will keep God at your right hand here, He will set you on His hereafter. Keep Him here for your Companion, for your Ally, for your Advocate, to breathe strength into you by the touch of His hand, as some feeble man, leaning upon a stronger arm, may be upheld. If you will do that, then the place where the favoured servants stand will be yours; the place where trusted counsellors stand will be yours; the place where the sheep stand will be yours; the place where the Shepherd sits will be yours; for He to whom it is said, ‘Sit Thou at My right hand till I make Thine enemies Thy footstool,’ says to us, ‘Where I am there shall also My servant be.’ Keep God by your sides, and you will be lifted to Christ’s place at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Lastly, if we let ourselves be stayed by God amidst the struggle and difficulty, we shall be gladdened by Him with perpetual joys. The emphasis of the last words of my text is rather on the adjectives than on the nouns-*full* joy, *eternal* pleasure. And how both characteristics contradict the experiences of earth, even the gladdest, which we fain would make permanent! For I suppose that no earthly joy is either central, reaching the deepest self, or circumferential, embracing the whole being of a man, but that only God can so go into the depths of my soul as that from His throne there He can flood the whole of my nature with felicity and peace. In all other gladnesses there is always in the landscape one bit of sullen shadow somewhere or other, unparticipant of the light, while all around is blazing. And we need that He should come to make us blessed.

Joys here are no more lasting than they are complete. As one who only too sadly proved the truth of his own words, burning out his life before he was six-and-thirty, has said-

‘Pleasures are like poppies spread,

You seize the flower, its bloom is shed!

Or like the snowflake in the river.

A moment white-then gone for ever.’

Oh! my friend, ‘why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread?’ The life of faith on earth is the beginning, and only the beginning, of that life of calm and complete felicity in the heavenly places.

I have shown you the ladder’s foot, ‘I have set the Lord always before me.’ The top round reaches the throne of God, and whoever begins at the bottom, and holds fast the beginning of his confidence firm unto the end, for him the great promise of the Master will come true, and Christ’s ‘joy will remain in him and his joy shall be full.’

7) Psalms 17:15

Psalms

THE TWO AWAKINGS

Psa. 17:15. - Psa. 73:20.

Both of these Psalms are occupied with that standing puzzle to Old Testament worthies-the good fortune of bad men, and the bad fortune of good ones. The former recounts the personal calamities of David, its author. The latter gives us the picture of the perplexity of Asaph its writer, when he ‘saw the prosperity of the wicked.’

And as the problem in both is substantially the same, the solution also is the same. David and Asaph both point onwards to a period when this confusing distribution of earthly good shall have ceased, though the one regards that period chiefly in its bearing upon himself as the time when he shall see God and be at rest, while the other thinks of it rather with reference to the godless rich as the time of their destruction.

In the details of this common expectation, also, there is a remarkable parallelism. Both describe the future to which they look as an awaking, and both connect with it, though in different ways and using different words, the metaphor of an image or likeness. In the one case, the future is conceived as the Psalmist’s awaking, and losing all the vain show of this dreamland of life, while he is at rest in beholding the appearance, and perhaps in receiving the likeness, of the one enduring Substance, God. In the other, it is thought of as God’s awaking, and putting to shame the fleeting shadow of well-being with which godless men befool themselves.

What this period of twofold awaking may be is a question on which good men and thoughtful students of Scripture differ. Without entering on the wide subject of the Jewish knowledge of a future state, it may be enough for the present purpose to say that the language of both these Psalms seems much too emphatic and high-pitched, to be fully satisfied by a reference to anything in this life. It certainly looks as if the great awaking which David puts in immediate contrast with the death of ‘men of this world,’ and which solaced his heart with the confident expectation of beholding God, of full satisfaction of all his being, and possibly even of wearing the divine likeness, pointed onwards, however dimly, to that ‘within the veil.’ And as for the other psalm, though the awaking of God is, no doubt, a Scriptural phrase for His ending of any period of probation and indulgence by an act of judgment, yet the strong words in which the context describes this awaking, as the ‘destruction’ and the ‘end’ of the godless, make it most natural to take it as here referring to the final close of the probation of life. That conclusion appears to be strengthened by the contrast which in subsequent verses is drawn between this ‘end’ of the worldling, and the poet’s hopes for himself of divine guidance in life, and afterwards of being taken [the same word as is used in the account of Enoch’s translation] by God into His presence and glory-hopes whose exuberance it is hard to confine within the limits of any changes possible for earth.

The doctrine of a future state never assumed the same prominence, nor possessed the same clearness in Israel as with us. There are great tracts of the Old Testament where it does not appear at all. This very difficulty, about the strange disproportion between character and circumstances, shows that the belief had not the same place with them as with us. But it gradually emerged into comparative distinctness. Revelation is progressive, and the appropriation of revelation is progressive too. There is a history of God’s self-manifestation, and there is a history of man’s reception of the manifestation. It seems to me that in these two psalms, as in other places of Old Testament Scripture, we see inspired men in the very course of being taught by God, on occasion of their earthly sorrows, the clearer hopes which alone could sustain them. They stood not where we stand, to whom Christ has ‘brought life and immortality to light’; but to their devout and perplexed souls, the dim regions beyond were partially opened, and though they beheld there a great darkness, they also ‘saw a great light.’ They saw all this solid world fade and melt, and behind its vanishing splendours they saw the glory of the God whom they loved, in the midst of which they felt that there *must* be a place for them, where eternal realities should fill their vision, and a stable inheritance satisfy their hearts.

The period, then, to which both David and Asaph look, in these two verses, is the end of life. The words of both, taken in combination, open out a series of aspects of that period which carry weighty lessons, and to which we turn now.

I. The first of these is that to all men the end of Life is an awaking.

The representation of death most widely diffused among all nations is that it is a sleep. The reasons for that emblem are easily found. We always try to veil the terror and deformity of the ugly thing by the thin robe of language. As with reverential awe, so with fear and disgust, the tendency is to wrap their objects in the folds of metaphor. Men prefer not to name plainly their god or their dread, but find roundabout phrases for the one, and coaxing, flattering titles for the other. The furies and the fates of heathenism, the supernatural beings of modern superstition, must not be spoken of by their own appellations. The recoil of men's hearts from the thing is testified by the aversion of their languages to the bald name-death. And the employment of this special euphemism of sleep is a wonderful witness to our weariness of life, and to its endless toil and trouble. Everywhere that has seemed to be a comforting and almost an attractive name, which has promised full rest from all the agitations of this changeful scene. The prosperous and the wretched alike have owned the fatigue of living, and been conscious of a soothing expectance which became almost a hope, as they thought of lying still at last with folded hands and shut eyes. The wearied workers have bent over their dead, and felt that they are blest in this at all events, that they rest from their labours; and as they saw them absolved from all their tasks, have sought to propitiate the power that had made this ease for them, as well as to express their sense of its merciful aspect, by calling it not death, but sleep.

But that emblem, true and sweet as it is, is but half the truth. Taken as the whole, as indeed men are ever tempted to take it, it is a cheerless lie. It is truth for the senses-'the foolish senses,' who 'crown' Death, as 'Omega,' the last, 'the Lord,' because '*they* find no *motion* in the dead.' Rest, cessation of consciousness of the outer world, and of action upon it, are set forth by the figure. But even the figure might teach us that the consciousness of life, and the vivid exercise of thought and feeling, are not denied by it. Death is sleep. Be it so. But does not that suggest the doubt-'in that sleep, what dreams may come?' Do we not all know that, when the chains of slumber bind sense, and the disturbance of the outer world is hushed, there are faculties of our souls which work more strongly than in our waking hours? We are all poets, 'makers' in our sleep. Memory and imagination open their eyes when flesh closes it. We can live through years in the dreams of a night; so swiftly can spirit move when even partially freed from 'this muddy vesture of decay.' That very phrase, then, which at first sight seems the opposite of the representation of our text, in reality is preparatory to and confirmatory of it. That very representation which has lent itself to cheerless and heathenish thoughts of death as the cessation not only of toil but of activity, is the basis of the deeper and truer representation, the truth for the spirit, that death is an awaking. If, on the one hand, we have to say, as we anticipate the approaching end of life, 'The night cometh, when no man can work'; on the other the converse is true, 'The night is far spent; the day is at hand.'

We shall sleep. Yes; but we shall wake too. We shall wake just because we sleep. For flesh and all its weakness, and all its disturbing strength, and craving importunities-for the outer world, and all its dissipating garish shows, and all its sullen resistance to our hand-for weariness, and fevered activity and toil against the grain of our tastes, too great for our strength, disappointing in its results, the end is blessed, calm sleep. And precisely because it is so, therefore for our true selves, for heart and mind, for powers that lie dormant in the lowest, and are not stirred into full action in the highest, souls; for all that universe of realities which encompass us undisclosed, and known only by faint murmurs which pierce through the opiate sleep of life, the end shall be an awaking.

The truth which corresponds to this metaphor, and which David felt when he said, 'I shall be satisfied when I awake,' is that the spirit, because emancipated from the body, shall spring into greater intensity of action, shall put forth powers that have been held down here and shall come into contact with an order of things which here it has but indirectly known. To our true selves and to God we shall wake. Here we are like men asleep in some chamber that looks towards the eastern sky. Morning by morning comes the sunrise, with the tender glory of its rosy light and blushing heavens, and the heavy eyes are closed to it all. Here and there some lighter sleeper, with thinner eyelids or face turned to the sun, is half conscious of a vague brightness, and feels the light, though he sees not the colours of the sky nor the forms of the filmy clouds. Such souls are our saints and prophets, but most of us sleep on unconscious. To us all the moment comes when we shall wake and see for ourselves the bright and terrible world which we have so often forgotten, and so often been tempted to think was itself a dream. Brethren, see to it that that awaking be for you the beholding of what you have loved, the finding, in the sober certainty of waking bliss, of all the objects which have been your visions of delight in the sleep of earth.

This life of ours hides more than it reveals. The day shows the sky as solitary but for wandering clouds that cover its blue emptiness. But the night peoples its waste places with stars, and fills all its abysses with blazing glories. 'If light so much conceals, wherefore not life?' Let us hold fast by a deeper wisdom than is born of sense; and though men, nowadays, seem to be willing to go back to the 'eternal sleep' of the most unspiritual heathenism, and to cast away all that Christ has brought us concerning that world where He has been and whence He has returned, because positive science and the anatomist's scalpel preach no gospel of a future, let us try to feel as well as to believe that it is life, with all its stunted capacities and idle occupation with baseless fabrics, which is the sleep, and that for us all the end of it is-to awake.

II. The second principle contained in our text is that death is to some men the awaking of God.

'When Thou awakest, Thou shalt despise their image.' Closely rendered, the former clause would read simply 'in awaking,' without any specifying of the person, which is left to be gathered from the succeeding words. But there is no doubt that the English version fills the blank correctly by referring the awaking to God.

The metaphor is not infrequent in the Old Testament, and, like many others applying to the divine nature, is saved from any possibility of misapprehension by the very boldness of its materialism. It has a well-marked and uniform meaning. God 'awakes' when He ends an epoch of probation and long-suffering mercy by an act or period of judgment. So far, then, as the mere expression is concerned, there may be nothing more meant here than the termination by a judicial act in this life, of the transient ‘prosperity of the wicked.’ Any divinely-sent catastrophe which casts the worldly rich man down from his slippery eminence would satisfy the words. But the emphatic context seems, as already pointed out, to require that they should be referred to that final crash which irrevocably separates him who has ‘his portion in this life,’ from all which he calls his ‘goods.’

If so, then the whole period of earthly existence is regarded as the time of God’s gracious forbearance and mercy; and the time of death is set forth as the instant when sterner elements of the divine dealings start into greater prominence. Life here is predominantly, though not exclusively, the field for the manifestation of patient love, not willing that any should perish. To the godless soul, immersed in material things, and blind to the light of God’s wooing love, the transition to that other form of existence is likewise the transition to the field for the manifestation of the retributive energy of God’s righteousness. Here and now His judgment on the whole slumbers. The consequences of our deeds are inherited, indeed, in many a merciful sorrow, in many a paternal chastisement, in many a partial exemplification of the wages of sin as death. But the harvest is not fully grown nor ripened yet; it is not reaped in all its extent; the bitter bread is not baked and eaten as it will have to be. Nor are men’s consciences so awakened that they connect the retribution, which does befall them, with its causes in their own actions, as closely as they will do when they are removed from the excitement of life and the deceit of its dreams. ‘Sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily.’ For the long years of our stay here, God’s seeking love lingers round every one of us, yearning over us, besetting us behind and before, courting us with kindnesses, lavishing on us its treasures, seeking to win our poor love. It is sometimes said that this is a state of probation. But that phrase suggests far too cold an idea. God does not set us here as on a knife edge, with abysses on either side ready to swallow us if we stumble, while He stands apart watching for our halting, and unhelpful to our tottering feebleness. He compasses us with His love and its gifts, He draws us to Himself, and desires that we should stand. He offers all the help of His angels to hold us up. ‘He will not suffer thy foot to be moved; He that keepeth thee will not slumber.’ The judgment sleeps; the loving forbearance, the gracious aid wake. Shall we not yield to His perpetual pleadings, and, moved by the mercies of God, let His conquering love thaw our cold hearts into streams of thankfulness and self-devotion?

But remember, that that predominantly merciful and long-suffering character of God's present dealing affords no guarantee that there will not come a time when His slumbering judgment will stir to waking. The same chapter which tells us that 'He is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance,' goes on immediately to repel the inference that therefore a period of which retribution shall be the characteristic is impossible, by the solemn declaration, '*But* the day of the Lord shall come as a thief in the night.' His character remains ever the same, the principles of His government are unalterable, but there may be variations in the prominence given in His acts, to the several principles of the one, and the various though harmonious phases of the other. The method may be changed, the purpose may remain unchanged. And the Bible, which is our only source of knowledge on the subject, tells us that the method *is* changed, in so far as to intensify the vigour of the operation of retributive justice after death, so that men who have been compassed with 'the loving-kindness of the Lord,' and who die leaving worldly things, and keeping worldly hearts, will have to confront 'the terror of the Lord.'

The alternation of epochs of tolerance and destruction is in accordance with the workings of God's providence here and now. For though the characteristic of that providence as we see it is merciful forbearance, yet we are not left without many a premonition of the mighty final 'day of the Lord.' For long years or centuries a nation or an institution goes on slowly departing from truth, forgetting the principles on which it rests, or the purposes for which it exists. Patiently God pleads with the evil-doers, lavishes gifts and warnings upon them. He holds back the inevitable avenging as long as restoration is yet possible-and *His* eye and heart see it to be possible long after men conclude that the corruption is hopeless. But at last comes a period when He says, 'I have long still holden My peace, and refrained Myself, now will I destroy'; and with a crash one more hoary iniquity disappears from the earth which it has burdened so long. For sixty times sixty slow, throbbing seconds, the silent hand creeps unnoticed round the dial and then, with whirr and clang, the bell rings out, and another hour of the world’s secular day is gone. The billows of the thunder-cloud slowly gather into vague form, and slowly deepen in lurid tints, and slowly roll across the fainting blue; they touch-and then the fierce flash, like the swift hand on the palace-wall of Babylon, writes its message of destruction over all the heaven at once. We know enough from the history of men and nations since Sodom till to-day, to recognise it as God’s plan to alternate long patience and ‘sudden destruction’:-

‘The mills of God grind slowly,
But they grind exceeding small’;

and every such instance confirms the expectation of the coming of that great and terrible day of the Lord, whereof all epochs of convulsion and ruin, all falls of Jerusalem, and Roman empires, Reformations, and French Revolutions, and American wars, all private and personal calamities which come from private wrong-doing, are but feeble precursors. ‘When Thou awakest, Thou wilt despise their image.’

Brethren, do we use aright this goodness of God which is the characteristic of the present? Are we ready for that judgment which is the mark of the future?

III. Death is the annihilation of the vain show of worldly life.

The word rendered *image* is properly shadow, and hence copy or likeness, and hence image. Here, however, the simpler meaning is the better. ‘Thou shalt despise their shadow.’ The men are shadows, and all their goods are not what they are called, their ‘substance,’ but their *shadow*, a mere appearance, not a reality. That show of good which seems but is not, is withered up by the light of the awaking God. What He despises cannot live.

So there are the two old commonplaces of moralists set forth in these grand words-the unsatisfying character of all merely external delights and possessions, and also their transitory character. They are non-substantial and non-permanent.

Nothing that is without a man can make him rich or restful. The treasures which are kept in coffers are not real, but only those which are kept in the soul. Nothing which cannot enter into the substance of the life and character can satisfy us. That which we are makes us rich or poor, that which we own is a trifle.

There is no congruity between any outward thing and man's soul, of such a kind as that satisfaction can come from its possession. 'Cisterns that can hold no water,' 'that which is not bread,' 'husks that the swine did eat'-these are not exaggerated phrases for the good gifts which God gives for our delight, and which become profitless and delusive by our exclusive attachment to them. There is no need for exaggeration. These worldly possessions have a good in them, they contribute to ease and grace in life, they save from carking cares and mean anxieties, they add many a comfort and many a source of culture. But, after all, a true, lofty life may be lived with a very small modicum. There is no proportion between wealth and happiness, nor between wealth and nobleness. The fairest life that ever lived on earth was that of a poor Man, and with all its beauty it moved within the limits of narrow resources. The loveliest blossoms do not grow on plants that plunge their greedy roots into the fattest soil. A little light earth in the crack of a hard rock will do. We need enough for the physical being to root itself in; we need no more.

Young men! especially you who are plunged into the busy life of our great commercial centres, and are tempted by everything you see, and by most that you hear, to believe that a prosperous trade and hard cash are the realities, and all else mist and dreams, fix this in your mind to begin life with-God is the reality, all else is shadow. Do not make it your ambition to get *on*, but to get *up*. 'Having food and raiment, let us be content.' Seek for your life's delight and treasure in thought, in truth, in pure affections, in moderate desires, in a spirit set on God. These are the realities of our possessions. As for all the rest, it is sham and show.

And while thus all without is unreal, it is also fleeting as the shadows of the flying clouds; and when God awakes, it disappears as they before the noonlight that clears the heavens. All things that are, are on condition of perpetual flux and change. The cloud-rack has the likeness of bastions and towers, but they are mist, not granite, and the wind is every moment sweeping away their outlines, till the phantom fortress topples into red ruin while we gaze. The tiniest stream eats out its little valley and rounds the pebble in its widening bed, rain washes down the soil, and frost cracks the cliffs above. So silently and yet mightily does the law of change work that to a meditative eye the solid earth seems almost molten and fluid, and the everlasting mountains tremble to decay.

‘Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not?’ Are we going to be such fools as to fix our hopes and efforts upon this fleeting order of things, which can give no delight more lasting than itself? Even whilst we are in it, it continueth not in one stay, and we are in it for such a little while! Then comes what our text calls God’s awaking, and where is it all then? Gone like a ghost at cockcrow. Why! a drop of blood on your brain or a crumb of bread in your windpipe, and as far as you are concerned the outward heavens and earth ‘pass away with a great’ silence, as the impalpable shadows that sweep over some lone hillside.

‘The glories of our birth and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armour against fate,
Death lays his icy hand on kings.’

What an awaking to a worldly man that awaking of God will be! ‘As when a hungry man dreameth, and behold he eateth, but he awaketh and his soul is empty.’ He has thought he fed full, and was rich and safe, but in one moment he is dragged from it all, and finds himself a starving pauper, in an order of things for which he has made no provision. ‘When he dieth, he shall carry nothing away.’ Let us see to it that not in utter nakedness do we go hence, but clothed with that immortal robe, and rich in those possessions that cannot be taken away from us, which they have who have lived on earth as heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. Let us pierce, for the foundation of our life’s house, beneath the shifting sands of time down to the Rock of Ages, and build there.

IV. Finally, death is for some men the annihilation of the vain shows in order to reveal the great reality.

‘I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness.’

‘Likeness’ is properly ‘form,’ and is the same word which is employed in reference to Moses, who saw ‘the similitude of the Lord.’ If there be, as is most probable, an allusion to that ancient vision in these words, then the ‘likeness’ is not that conformity to the divine character which it is the goal of our hopes to possess, but the beholding of His self-manifestation. The parallelism of the verse also points to such an interpretation.

If so, then, we have here the blessed confidence that when all the baseless fabric of the dream of life has faded from our opening eyes, we shall see the face of our ever-loving God. Here the distracting whirl of earthly things obscures Him from even the devoutest souls, and His own mighty works which reveal do also conceal. In them is the hiding as well as the showing of His power. But there the veil which draped the perfect likeness, and gave but dim hints through its heavy swathings of the outline of immortal beauty that lay beneath, shall fall away. No longer befooled by shadows, we shall possess the true substance; no longer bedazzled by shows, we shall behold the reality.

And seeing God we shall be satisfied. With all lesser joys the eye is not satisfied with seeing, but to look on Him will be enough. Enough for mind and heart, wearied and perplexed with partial knowledge and imperfect love; enough for eager desires, which thirst, after all draughts from other streams; enough for will, chafing against lower lords and yet longing for authoritative control; enough for all my being-to see God. Here we can rest after all wanderings, and say, ‘I travel no further; here will I dwell for ever-*I shall be satisfied*.’

And may these dim hopes not suggest to us too some presentiment of the full Christian truth of assimilation dependent on vision, and of vision reciprocally dependent on likeness? ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is,’-words which reach a height that David but partially discerned through the mist. This much he knew, that he should in some transcendent sense behold the manifested God; and this much more, that it must be ‘in righteousness’ that he should gaze upon that face. The condition of beholding the Holy One was holiness. We know that the condition of holiness is trust in Christ. And as we reckon up the rich treasure of our immortal hopes, our faith grows bold, and pauses not even at the lofty certainty of God without us, known directly and adequately, but climbs to the higher assurance of God within us, flooding our darkness with His great light, and changing us into the perfect copies of His express Image, His only-begotten Son. ‘I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness,’ cries the prophet Psalmist. ‘It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master,’ responds the Christian hope.

Brethren! take heed that the process of dissipating the vain shows of earth be begun betimes in your souls. It must either be done by Faith, whose rod disenchants them into their native nothingness, and then it is blessed; or it must be done by death, whose mace smites them to dust, and then it is pure, irrevocable loss and woe. Look away from, or rather look through, things that are seen to the King eternal, invisible. Let your hearts seek Christ, and your souls cleave to Him. Then death will take away nothing from you that you would care to keep, but will bring you your true joy. It will but trample to fragments the ‘dome of many-coloured glass’ that ‘stains the white radiance of eternity.’ Looking forward calmly to that supreme hour, you will be able to say, ‘I will both lay me down in peace and sleep, for Thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety.’ Looking back upon it from beyond, and wondering to find how brief it was, and how close to Him whom you love it has brought you, your now immortal lips touched by the rising Sun of the heavenly morning will thankfully exclaim, ‘When I awake, I am still with Thee.’

8) Psalms 19:12

Psalms

SECRET FAULTS

Psa. 19:12.

The contemplation of the ‘perfect law, enlightening the eyes,’ sends the Psalmist to his knees. He is appalled by his own shortcomings, and feels that, beside all those of which he is aware, there is a region, as yet unilluminated by that law, where evil things nestle and breed.

The Jewish ritual drew a broad distinction between inadvertent-whether involuntary or ignorant-and deliberate sins; providing atonement for the former, not for the latter. The word in my text rendered ‘errors’ is closely connected with that which in the Levitical system designates the former class of transgressions; and the connection between the two clauses of the text, as well as that with the subsequent verse, distinctly shows that the ‘secret faults’ of the one clause are substantially synonymous with the ‘errors’ of the other.

They are, then, not sins hidden from men, whether because they have been done quietly in a corner, and remain undetected, or because they have only been in thought, never passing into act. Both of these pages are dark in every man’s memory. Who is there that could reveal himself to men? who is there that could bear the sight of a naked soul? But the Psalmist is thinking of a still more solemn fact, that, beyond the range of conscience and consciousness, there are evils in us all. It may do us good to ponder his discovery that he had undiscovered sins, and to take for ours his prayer, ‘Cleanse Thou me from secret faults.’

I. So I ask you to look with me, briefly, first, at the solemn fact here, that there are in every man sins of which the doer is unaware.

It is with our characters as with our faces. Few of us are familiar with our own appearance, and most of us, if we have looked at our portraits, have felt a little shock of surprise, and been ready to say to ourselves, ‘Well! I did not know that I looked like that!’ And the bulk even of good men are almost as much strangers to their inward physiognomy as to their outward. They see themselves in their looking-glasses every morning, although they ‘go away and forget what manner of men’ they were. But they do not see their true selves in the same fashion in any other mirror. It is the very characteristic of all evil that it has a strange power of deceiving a man as to its real character; like the cuttle-fish, that squirts out a cloud of ink and so escapes in the darkness and the dirt. The more a man goes wrong the less he knows it. Conscience is loudest when it is least needed, and most silent when most required.

Then, besides that, there is a great part of every one’s life which is mechanical, instinctive, and all but involuntary. Habits and emotions and passing impulses very seldom come into men’s consciousness, and an enormously large proportion of everybody’s life is done with the minimum of attention, and is as little remembered as it is observed.

Then, besides that, conscience wants educating. You see that on a large scale, for instance, in the history of the slow progress which Christian principle has made in leavening the world’s thinkings. It took eighteen centuries to teach the Church that slavery was unchristian. The Church has not yet learned that war is unchristian, and it is only beginning to surmise that possibly Christian principle may have something to say in social questions, and in the determination, for example, of the relations of capital and labour, and of wealth and poverty. The very same slowness of apprehension and gradual growth in the education of conscience, and in the perception of the application of Christian principles to duty, applies to the individual as to the Church.

Then, besides that, we are all biassed in our own favour, and what, when another man says it, is ‘flat blasphemy,’ we think, when we say it, is only ‘a choleric word.’ We have fine names for our own vices, and ugly ones for the very same vices in other people. David will flare up into generous and sincere indignation about the man that stole the poor man’s ewe lamb, but he has not the ghost of a notion that he has been doing the very same thing himself. And so we bribe our consciences as well as neglect them, and they need to be educated.

Thus, down below every life there lies a great dim region of habits and impulses and fleeting emotions, into which it is the rarest thing for a man to go with a candle in his hand to see what it is like.

But I can imagine a man saying, ‘Well, if I do not know that I am doing wrong, how can it be a sin?’ In answer to that, I would say that, thank God! ignorance diminishes criminality, but ignorance does not alter the nature of the deed. Take a simple illustration. Here is a man who, all unconsciously to himself, is allowing worldly prosperity to sap his Christian character. He does not know that the great current of his life has been turned aside, as it were, by that sluice, and is taken to drive the wheels of his mill, and that there is only a miserable little trickle coming down the river bed. Is he any less guilty because he does not know? Is he not the more so, because he might and would have known if he had thought and felt right? Or, here is another man who has the habit of letting his temper get the better of him. He calls it ‘stern adherence to principle,’ or ‘righteous indignation’; and he thinks himself very badly used when other people ‘drive him’ so often into a temper. Other people know, and *he* might know, if he would be honest with himself, that, for all his fine names, it is nothing else than passion. Is he any the less guilty because of his ignorance? It is plain enough that, whilst ignorance, if it is absolute and inevitable, does diminish criminality to the vanishing point, the ignorance of our own faults which most of us display is neither absolute nor inevitable; and therefore, though it may, thank God! diminish, it does not destroy our guilt. ‘She wipeth her mouth and saith, I have done no harm’: was she, therefore, chaste and pure? In all our hearts there are many vermin lurking beneath the stones, and they are none the less poisonous because they live and multiply in the dark. ‘I know nothing against myself, yet am I not hereby justified. But he that judgeth me is the Lord.’

II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to look at the special perilousness of these hidden faults.

As with a blight upon a rose-tree, the little green creatures lurk on the underside of the leaves, and in all the folds of the buds, and because unseen, they increase with alarming rapidity. The very fact that we have faults in our characters, which everybody sees but ourselves, makes it certain that they will grow unchecked, and so will prove terribly perilous. The small things of life are the great things of life. For a man’s character is made up of them, and of their results, striking inwards upon himself. A wine-glassful of water with one drop of mud in it may not be much obscured, but if you come to multiply it into a lakeful, you will have muddy waves that reflect no heavens, and show no gleaming stars.

These secret faults are like a fungus that has grown in a wine-cask, whose presence nobody suspected. It sucks up all the generous liquor to feed its own filthiness, and when the staves are broken, there is no wine left, nothing but the foul growth. Many a Christian man and woman has the whole Christian life arrested, and all but annihilated, by the unsuspected influence of a secret sin. I do not believe it would be exaggeration to say that, for one man who has made shipwreck of his faith and lost his peace by reason of some gross transgression, there are twenty who have fallen into the same condition by reason of the multitude of small ones. ‘He that despiseth little things shall fall by little and little’; and whilst the deeds which the Ten Commandments rebuke are damning to a Christian character, still more perilous, because unseen, and permitted to grow without check or restraint, are these unconscious sins. ‘Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.’

III. Notice the discipline, or practical issues, to which such considerations should lead.

To begin with, they ought to take down our self-complacency, if we have any, and to make us feel that, after all, our characters are very poor things. If men praise us, let us try to remember what it will be good for us to remember, too, when we are tempted to praise ourselves-the underworld of darkness which each of us carries about within us.

Further, let me press upon you two practical points. This whole set of contemplations should make us practise a very rigid and close self-inspection. There will always be much that will escape our observation-we shall gradually grow to know more and more of it-but there can be no excuse for that which I fear is a terribly common characteristic of the professing Christianity of this day-the all but entire absence of close inspection of one’s own character and conduct. I know very well that it is not a wholesome thing for a man to be always poking in his own feelings and emotions. I know also that, in a former generation, there was far too much introspection, instead of looking to Jesus Christ and forgetting self. I do not believe that self-examination, directed to the discovery of reasons for trusting the sincerity of my own faith, is a good thing. But I do believe that, without the practice of careful weighing of ourselves, there will be very little growth in anything that is noble and good.

The old Greeks used to preach, ‘Know thyself.’ It was a high behest, and very often a very vain-glorious one. A man’s best means of knowing what he is, is to take stock of what he does. If you will put your conduct through the sieve, you will come to a pretty good understanding of your character. ‘He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls,' into which all enemies can leap unhindered, and out from which all things that will may pass. Do you set guards at the gates and watch yourselves with all carefulness.

Then, again, I would say we must try to diminish as much as possible the mere instinctive and habitual and mechanical part of our lives, and to bring, as far as we can, every action under the conscious dominion of principle. The less we live by impulse, and the more we live by intelligent reflection, the better it will be for us. The more we can get habit on the side of goodness, the better; but the more we break up our habits, and make each individual action the result of a special volition of the spirit guided by reason and conscience, the better for us all.

Then, again, I would say, set yourselves to educate your consciences. They need that. One of the surest ways of making conscience more sensitive is always to consult it and always to obey it. If you neglect it, and let it prophesy to the wind, it will stop speaking before long. Herod could not get a word out of Christ when he 'asked Him many questions' because for years he had not cared to hear His voice. And conscience, like the Lord of conscience, will hold its peace after men have neglected its speech. You can pull the clapper out of the bell upon the rock, and then, though the waves may dash, there will not be a sound, and the vessel will drive straight on to the black teeth that are waiting for it. Educate your conscience by obeying it, and by getting into the habit of bringing everything to its bar.

And, still further, compare yourselves constantly with your model. Do as the art students do in a gallery, take your poor daub right into the presence of the masterpiece, and go over it line by line and tint by tint. Get near Jesus Christ that you may learn your duty from Him, and you will find out many of the secret sins.

And, lastly, let us ask God to cleanse us.

My text, as translated in the Revised Version, says, '*Clear* Thou me from secret faults.' And there is present in that word, if not exclusively, at least predominantly, the idea of a judicial acquittal, so that the thought of the first clause of this verse seems rather to be that of pronouncing guiltless, or forgiving, than that of delivering from the power of. But both, no doubt, are included in the idea, as both, in fact, come from the same source and in response to the same cry.

And so we may be sure that, though our eye does not go down into the dark depths, God’s eye goes, and that where He looks He looks to pardon, if we come to Him through Jesus Christ our Lord.

He will deliver us from the power of these secret faults, giving to us that divine Spirit which is ‘the candle of the Lord,’ to search us, and to convince of our sins, and to drag our evil into the light; and giving us the help without which we can never overcome. The only way for us to be delivered from the dominion of our unconscious faults is to increase the depth and closeness and constancy of our communion with Jesus Christ; and then they will drop away from us. Mosquitoes and malaria, the one unseen in their minuteness, and the other, ‘the pestilence that walketh in darkness,’ haunt the swamps. Go up on the hilltop, and neither of them are found. So if we live more and more on the high levels, in communion with our Master, there will be fewer and fewer of these unconscious sins buzzing and stinging and poisoning our lives, and more and more will His grace conquer and cleanse.

They will all be manifested some day. The time comes when He shall bring to light the hidden things and darkness and the counsels of men’s hearts. There will be surprises on both hands of the Judge. Some on the right, astonished, will say, ‘Lord, when saw we Thee?’ and some on the left, smitten to confusion and surprise, will say, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name?’ Let us go to Him with the prayer, ‘Search me, O God! and try me; and see if there be any wicked way in me; and lead me in the way everlasting.’

9) Psalms 19:13

Psalms

OPEN SINS

Psa. 19:13.

Another psalmist promises to the man who dwells 'in the secret place of the Most High' that' he shall not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the arrow that flieth by day, nor for the pestilence that walketh at noonday,' but shall 'tread upon the lion and adder.' These promises divide the dangers that beset us into the same two classes as our Psalmist does-the one secret; the other palpable and open. The former, which, as I explained in my last sermon, are sins hidden, not from others, but from the doer, may fairly be likened to the pestilence that stalks slaying in the dark, or to the stealthy, gliding serpent, which strikes and poisons before the naked foot is aware. The other resembles the 'destruction that wasteth at noonday,' or the lion with its roar and its spring, as, disclosed from its covert, it leaps upon the prey.

Our present text deals with the latter of these two classes. 'Presumptuous sins' does not, perhaps, convey to an ordinary reader the whole significance of the phrase, for it may be taken to define a single class of sins-namely, those of pride or insolence. What is really meant is just the opposite of 'secret sins'-all sorts of evil which, whatever may be their motives and other qualities, have this in common, that the doer, when he does them, knows them to be wrong.

The Psalmist gets this further glimpse into the terrible possibilities which attach even to a servant of God, and we have in our text these three things-a danger discerned, a help sought, and a daring hope cherished.

I. Note, then, the first of these, the dreaded and discerned danger-'presumptuous sins,' which may 'have dominion over' us, and lead us at last to a 'great transgression.'

Now the word which is translated 'presumptuous' literally means *that which boils or bubbles*; and it sets very picturesquely before us the movement of hot desires-the agitation of excited impulses or inclinations which hurry men into sin in spite of their consciences. It is also to be noticed that the prayer of my text, with singular pathos and lowly self-consciousness, is the prayer of 'Thy servant,' who knows himself to be a servant, and who therefore knows that these glaring transgressions, done in the teeth of conscience and consciousness, are all inconsistent with his standing and his profession, but yet are perfectly possible for him.

An old mediaeval mystic once said, ‘There is nothing weaker than the devil stripped naked.’ Would it were true! For there is one thing that is weaker than a discovered devil, and that is my own heart. For we all know that sometimes, with our eyes open, and the most unmistakable consciousness that what we are doing was wrong, we have set our teeth and done it, Christian men though we may profess to be, and may really be. All such conduct is inconsistent with Christianity; but we are not to say, therefore, that it is incompatible with Christianity. Thank God! that is a very different matter. But as long as you and I have two things-viz. strong and hot desires, and weak and flabby wills-so long shall we, in this world full of combustibles, not be beyond the possibility of a dreadful conflagration being kindled by some devil-blown sparks. There are plenty of dry sticks lying about to put under the caldron of our hearts, to make them boil and bubble over! And we have, alas! but weak wills, which do not always keep the reins in their hands as they ought to do, nor coerce these lower parts of our nature into their proper subordination. Fire is a good servant, but a bad master; and we are all of us too apt to let it become master, and then the whole ‘course of nature’ is ‘set on fire of hell.’ The servant of God may yet, with open eyes and obstinate disregard of his better self and of all its remonstrances, go straight into ‘presumptuous sin.’

Another step is here taken by the Psalmist. He looks shrinkingly and shudderingly into a possible depth, and he sees, going down into the abyss, a ladder with three rungs on it. The topmost one is wilful, self-conscious transgression. But that is not the lowest stage; there is another step. Presumptuous sin tends to become despotic sin. ‘Let them not *have dominion* over me.’ A man may do a very bad thing once, and get so wholesomely frightened, and so keenly conscious of the disastrous issues, that he will never go near it again. The prodigal would not be in a hurry, you may depend upon it, to try the swine trough and the far country, and the rags, and the fever, and the famine any more. David got a lesson that he never forgot in that matter of Bathsheba. The bitter fruit of his sin kept growing up all his life, and he had to eat it, and that kept him right. They tell us that broken bones are stronger at the point of fracture than they were before. And it is possible for a man’s sin-if I might use a paradox which you will not misunderstand-to become the instrument of his salvation.

But there is another possibility quite as probable, and very often recurring, and that is that the disease, like some other morbid states of the human frame, shall leave a tendency to recurrence. A pin-point hole in a dyke will be widened into a gap as big as a church-door in ten minutes, by the pressure of the flood behind it. And so every act which we do in contradiction of our standing as professing Christians, and in the face of the protests, all unavailing, of that conscience which is only a voice, and has no power to enforce its behests, will tend to recurrence once and again. The single acts become habits, with awful rapidity. Just as the separate gas jets from a multitude of minute apertures coalesce into a continuous ring of light, so deeds become habits, and get dominion over us. 'He sold himself to do evil.' He made himself a bond-slave of iniquity. It is an awful and a miserable thing to think that professing Christians do often come into that position of being, by their inflamed passions and enfeebled wills, servants of the evil that they do. Alas! how many of us, if we were honest with ourselves, would have to say. 'I am carnal, sold unto sin.'

That is not the lowest rung of the slippery ladder. Despotic sin ends in utter departure.

The word translated here, quite correctly, 'transgression,' and intensified by that strong adjective attached, 'a *great* transgression,' literally means *rebellion*, *revolt*, or some such idea; and expresses, as the ultimate issue of conscious transgression prolonged and perpetuated into habit, an entire casting off of allegiance to God. 'No man can serve two masters.' 'His servants ye are whom ye obey,' whomsoever ye may call your master. The Psalmist feels that the end of indulged evil is going over altogether to the other camp. I suppose all of us have known instances of that sort. Men in my position, with a long life of ministry behind them, can naturally remember many such instances. And this is the outline history of the suicide of a Christian. First secret sin, unsuspected, because the conscience is torpid; then open sin, known to be such, but done nevertheless; then dominant sin, with an enfeebled will and power of resistance; then the abandonment of all pretence or profession of religion. The ladder goes down into the pit, but not to the bottom of the pit. And the man that is going down it has a descending impulse after he has reached the bottom step and he falls-Where? The first step down is tampering with conscience. It is neither safe nor wise to do anything, howsoever small, against that voice. All the rest will come afterward, unless God restrains-'first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear,' and then the bitter harvest of the poisonous grain.

II. So, secondly, note the help sought.

The Psalmist is like a man standing on the edge of some precipice, and peeping over the brink to the profound beneath, and feeling his head beginning to swim. He clutches at the strong, steady hand of his guide, knowing that unless he is restrained, over he will go. 'Keep Thou back Thy servant from presumptuous sins.'

So, then, the first lesson we have to take is, to cherish a lowly consciousness of our own tendency to light-headedness and giddiness. 'Blessed is the man that feareth always.' That fear has nothing cowardly about it. It will not abate in the least the buoyancy and bravery of our work. It will not tend to make us shirk duty because there is temptation in it, but it will make us go into all circumstances realising that without that divine help we cannot stand, and that with it we cannot fall. 'Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.' The same Peter that said, 'Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I,' was wiser and braver when he said, in later days, being taught by former presumption, 'Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.'

Let me remind you, too, that the temper which we ought to cherish is that of a confident belief in the reality of a divine support. The prayer of my text has no meaning at all, unless the actual supernatural communication by God's own Holy Spirit breathed into men's hearts be a simple truth. 'Hold Thou me up,' 'Keep Thou me back,' means, if it means anything, 'Give me in my heart a mightier strength than mine own, which shall curb all this evil nature of mine, and bring it into conformity with Thy holy will.'

How is that restraining influence to be exercised? There are many ways by which God, in His providence, can fulfil the prayer. But the way above all others is by the actual operation upon heart and will and desires of a divine Spirit, who uses for His weapon the Word of God, revealed by Jesus Christ, and in the Scriptures. 'The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God,' and

God’s answer to the prayer of my text is the gift to every man who seeks it of that indwelling Power to sustain and to restrain.

That will keep our passions down. The bubbling water is lowered in its temperature, and ceases to bubble, when cold is added to it. When God’s Spirit comes into a man’s heart, that will deaden his desires after earth and forbidden ways. He will bring blessed higher objects for all his affections. He who has been fed on ‘the hidden manna’ will not be likely to hanker after the leeks and onions, however strong their smell and pungent their taste, that grew in the Nile mud in Egypt. He who has tasted the higher sweetnesses of God will have his heart’s desires after lower delights strangely deadened and cooled. Get near God, and open your hearts for the entrance of that divine Spirit, and then it will not seem foolish to empty your hands of the trash that they carry in order to grasp the precious things that He gives. A bit of scrap-iron magnetised turns to the pole. My heart, touched by the Spirit of God dwelling in me, will turn to Him, and I shall find little sweetness in the else tempting delicacies that earth can supply. ‘Keep Thy servant back from,’ by depriving him of the taste for, ‘presumptuous sins.’

That Spirit will strengthen our wills. For when God comes into a heart, He restores the due subordination which has been broken into discord and anarchy by sin. He dismounts the servant riding on horseback, and carrying the horse to the devil, according to the proverb, and gives the reins into the right hands. Now, if the gift of God’s Spirit, working through the Word of God, and the principles and the motives therein unfolded, and therefrom deducible, be the great means by which we are to be kept from open and conscious transgression, it follows very plainly that our task is twofold. One part of it is to see that we cultivate that spirit of lowly dependence, of self-conscious weakness, of triumphant confidence, which will issue in the perpetual prayer for God’s restraint. When we enter upon tasks which may be dangerous, and into regions of temptation which cannot but be so, though they be duty, we should ever have the desire in our hearts and upon our lips that God would keep us from, and in, the evil.

The other part of our duty is to make it a matter of conscience and careful cultivation, to use honestly and faithfully the power which, in response to our desires, has been granted to us. All of you, Christian men and women, have access to an absolute security against every transgression; and the cause lies wholly at your own doors in each case of failure, deficiency, or transgression, for at every moment it was open to you to clasp the Hand that holds you up, and at every moment, if you failed, it was because your careless fingers had relaxed their grasp.

III. Lastly, observe the daring hope here cherished.

‘Then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression.’ That is the upshot of the divine answer to both the petitions which have been occupying us in these two successive sermons. It is connected with the former of them by the recurrence of the same word, which in the first petition was rendered ‘cleanse’-or, more accurately, ‘clear’-and in this final clause is to be rendered accurately, ‘I shall be *clear* from the great transgression.’ And it obviously connects in sense with both these petitions, because, in order to be upright and clear, there must, first of all, be divine cleansing, and then divine restraint.

So, then, nothing short of absolute deliverance from the power of sin in all its forms should content the servant of God. Nothing short of it contents the Master for the servant. Nothing short of it corresponds to the power which Christ puts in operation in every heart that believes in Him. And nothing else should be our aim in our daily conflict with evil and growth in grace. Ah! I fear me that, for an immense number of professing Christians in this generation, the hope of-and, still more, the aim towards-anything approximating to entire deliverance from sin, have faded from their consciences and their lives. Aim at the stars, brother! and if you do not hit them, your arrow will go higher than if it were shot along the lower levels.

Note that an indefinite approximation to this condition is possible. I am not going to discuss, at this stage of my discourse, controversial questions which may be involved here. It will be time enough to discuss with you whether you can be absolutely free from sin in this world when you are a great deal freer from it than you are at present. At all events, you can get far nearer to the ideal, and the ideal must always be perfect. And I lay it on your hearts, dear friends! that you have in your possession, if you are Christian people, possibilities in the way of conformity to the Master’s will, and entire emancipation from all corruption, that you have not yet dreamed of, not to say applied to your lives. ‘I pray God that He would sanctify you wholly, and that your whole body, soul, and spirit be preserved blameless unto the coming.’

That daring hope will be fulfilled one day; for nothing short of it will exhaust the possibilities of Christ’s work or satisfy the desires of Christ’s heart.

The Gospel knows nothing of irreclaimable outcasts. To it there is but one unpardonable sin, and that is the sin of refusing the cleansing of Christ’s blood and the sanctifying of Christ’s Spirit. Whoever you are, whatever you are, go to God with this prayer of our text, and realise that it is answered in Jesus Christ, and you will not ask in vain. If you will put yourself into His hands, and let Him cleanse and restrain, He will give you new powers to detect the serpents in the flowers, and new resolution to shake off the vipers into the fire. For there is nothing that God wants half so much as that we, His wandering children, should come back to Him, and He will cleanse us from the filth of the swine trough and the rags of our exile, and clothe us in ‘fine linen clean and white.’ We may each be sinless and guiltless. We can be so in one way only. If we look to Jesus Christ, and live near Him, He ‘will be made of God unto us wisdom,’ by which we shall detect our secret sins; ‘righteousness,’ whereby we shall be cleansed from guilt; ‘sanctification,’ which shall restrain us from open transgression; ‘and redemption,’ by which we shall be wholly delivered from evil and ‘presented faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.’

10)Psalms 22:26

Psalms

FEASTING ON THE SACRIFICE

Psa. 22:26.

‘The flesh of the sacrifice of his peace-offering for thanksgiving shall be offered in the day of his oblation.’ Such was the law for Israel. And the custom of sacrificial feasts, which it embodies, was common to many lands.

To such a custom my text alludes; for the Psalmist has just been speaking of ‘paying his vows’ [that is, sacrifices which he had vowed in the time of his trouble], and to partake of these he invites the meek. The sacrificial dress is only a covering for high and spiritual thoughts. In some way or other the singer of this psalm anticipates that his experiences shall be the nourishment and gladness of a wide circle; and if we observe that in the context that circle is supposed to include the whole world, and that one of the results of partaking of this sacrificial feast is ‘your heart shall live for ever,’ we may well say with the Ethiopian eunuch, ‘Of whom speaketh the Psalmist thus?’ The early part of the psalm answers the question. Jesus Christ laid His hand on this wonderful psalm of desolation, despair, and deliverance when on the Cross He took its first words as expressing His emotion then: ‘My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ Whatever may be our views as to its authorship, and as to the connection between the Psalmist’s utterances and his own personal experiences, none to whom that voice that rang through the darkness on Calvary is the voice of the Son of God, can hesitate as to who it is whose very griefs and sorrows are thus the spiritual food that gives life to the whole world.

From this, the true point of view, then, from which to look at the whole of this wonderful psalm, I desire to deal with the words of my text now.

I. We have, first, then, the world’s sacrificial feast.

The Jewish ritual, and that of many other nations, as I have remarked, provided for a festal meal following on, and consisting of the material of, the sacrifice. A generation which studies comparative mythology, and spares no pains to get at the meaning underlying the barbarous worship of the rudest nations, ought to be interested in the question of the ideas that formed and were expressed by that elaborate Jewish ritual. In the present case, the signification is plain enough. That which, in one aspect, is a peace-offering reconciling to God, in another aspect is the nourishment and the joy of the hearts that accept it. And so the work of Jesus Christ has two distinct phases of application, according as we think of it as being offered to God or appropriated by men. In the one case it is our peace; in the other it is our food and our life. If we glance for a moment at the marvellous picture of suffering and desolation in the previous portion of this psalm, which sounds the very depths of both, we shall understand more touchingly what it is on which Christian hearts are to feed. The desolation that spoke in ‘Why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ the consciousness of rejection and reproach, of mockery and contempt, which wailed, ‘All that see Me laugh Me to scorn; they shoot out the lip; they shake the head, saying, “He trusted on the Lord that He would deliver Him; let Him deliver Him, seeing He delighteth in Him”‘; the physical sufferings which are the very picture of crucifixion, so as that the whole reads liker history than prophecy, in ‘All My bones are out of joint; My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and My tongue cleaveth to My jaws’; the actual passing into the darkness of the grave, which is expressed in ‘Thou hast brought Me into the dust of death’; and even the minute correspondence, so inexplicable upon any hypothesis except that it is direct prophecy, which is found in ‘They part My garments among them, and cast lots upon My vesture’-these be the viands, not without bitter herbs, that are laid on the table which Christ spreads for us. They are parts of the sacrifice that reconciles to God. Offered to Him they make our peace. They are parts and elements of the food of our spirits. Appropriated and partaken of by us they make our strength and our life.

Brethren! there is little food, there is little impulse, little strength for obedience, little gladness or peace of heart to be got from a Christ who is *not* a Sacrifice. If we would know how much He may be to us, as the nourishment of our best life, and as the source of our purest and permanent gladness, we must, first of all, look upon Him as the Offering for the world’s sin, and then as the very Life and Bread of our souls. The Christ that feeds the world is the Christ that died for the world.

Hence our Lord Himself, most eminently in one great and profound discourse, has set forth, not only that He is the Bread of God which ‘came down from heaven,’ but that His flesh and His blood are such, and the separation between the two in the discourse, as in the memorial rite, indicates that there has come the violent separation of death, and that thereby He becomes the life of humanity.

So my text, and the whole series of Old Testament representations in which the blessings of the Kingdom are set forth as a feast, and the parables of the New Testament in which a similar representation is contained, do all converge upon, and receive their deepest meaning from, that one central thought that the peace-offering for the world is the food of the world.

We see, hence, the connection between these great spiritual ideas and the central act of Christian worship. The Lord’s Supper simply says by act what my text says in words. I know no difference between the rite and the parable, except that the one is addressed to the eye and the other to the ear. The rite is an acted parable; the parable is a spoken rite. And when Jesus Christ, in the great discourse to which I have referred, dilates at length upon the ‘eating of His flesh and the drinking of His blood’ as being the condition of spiritual life, He is not referring to the Lord’s Supper, but the discourse and the rite refer both to the same spiritual truth. One is a symbol; the other is a saying; and symbol and saying mean just the same thing. The saying does not refer to the symbol, but to that to which the symbol refers. It seems to me that one of the greatest dangers which now threaten Evangelical Christianity is the strange and almost inexplicable recrudescence of Sacramentarianism in this generation to which those Christian communities are contributing, however reluctantly and unconsciously, who say there is something more than commemorative symbols in the bread and wine of the Lord’s table. If once you admit that, it seems, in my humble judgment, that you open the door to the whole flood of evils which the history of the Church declares have come with the Sacramentarian hypothesis. And we must take our stand, as I believe, upon the plain, intelligible thoughts-Baptism is a declaratory symbol, and nothing more; the Lord’s Supper is a commemorative symbol, and nothing more; except that both are acts of obedience to the enjoining Lord. When we stand there we can face all priestly superstitions, and say, ‘Jesus I know; and Paul I know; but who are ye?’ ‘The meek shall eat and be satisfied,’ and the food of the world is the suffering Messiah.

But what have we to say about the act expressed in the text? ‘The meek shall eat.’ I do not desire to dwell at any length upon the thought of the process by which this food of the world becomes ours, in this sermon. But there are two points which perhaps may be regarded as various aspects of one, on which I would like to say just a sentence or two. Of course, the translation of the ‘eating’ of my text into spiritual reality is simply that we partake of the food of our spirits by the act of faith in Jesus Christ. But whilst that is so, let me put emphasis, in a sentence, upon the thought that personal appropriation, and making the world's food mine, by my own individual act, is the condition on which alone I get any good from it. It is possible to die of starvation at the door of a granary. It is possible to have a table spread with all that is needful, and yet to set one's teeth, and lock one's lips, and receive no strength and no gladness from the rich provision. 'Eat' means, at any rate, incorporate with myself, take into my very own lips, masticate with my very own teeth, swallow down by my very own act, and so make part of my physical frame. And that is what we have to do with Jesus Christ, or He is nothing to us. 'Eat'; claim your part in the universal blessing; see that it becomes yours by your own taking of it into the very depths of your heart. And then, and then only, will it become your food.

And how are we to do that if, day in and day out, and week in and week out, and year in and year out, with some of us, there be scarce a thought turned to Him; scarce a desire winging its way to Him; scarce one moment of quiet contemplation of these great truths. We have to ruminate, we have to meditate; we have to make conscious and frequent efforts to bring before the mind, in the first place, and then before the heart and all the sensitive, emotional, and voluntary nature, the great truths on which our salvation rests. In so far as we do that we get good out of them; in so far as we fail to do it, we may call ourselves Christians, and attend to religious observances, and be members of churches, and diligent in good works, and all the rest of it, but nothing passes from Him to us, and we starve even whilst we call ourselves guests at His table.

Oh! the average Christian life of this day is a strange thing; very, very little of it has the depth that comes from quiet communion with Jesus Christ; and very little of it has the joyful consciousness of strength that comes from habitual reception into the heart of the grace that He brings. What is the good of all your profession unless it brings you to that? If a coroner's jury were to sit upon many of us-and we are dead enough to deserve it-the verdict would be, 'Died of starvation.' 'The meek shall eat,' but what about the professing Christians that feed their souls upon anything, everything rather than upon the Christ whom they say they trust and serve?

II. And now let me say a word, in the second place, about the rich fruition of this feast.

‘The meek shall be satisfied.’ ‘Satisfied!’ Who in the world is? And if we are not, why are we not? Jesus Christ, in the facts of His death and resurrection-for His resurrection as well as His death are included in the psalm-brings to us all that our circumstances, relationships, and inward condition can require.

Think of what that death, as the sacrifice for the world’s sin, does. It sets all right in regard to our relation to God. It reveals to us a God of infinite love. It provides a motive, an impulse, and a Pattern for all life. It abolishes death, and it gives ample scope for the loftiest and most exuberant hopes that a man can cherish. And surely these are enough to satisfy the seeking spirit.

But go to the other end, and think, not of what Christ’s work does for us, but of what we need to have done for us. What do you and I want to be satisfied? It would take a long time to go over the catalogue; let me briefly run through some of the salient points of it. We want, for the intellect, which is the regal part of man, though it be not the highest, truth which is certain, comprehensive, and inexhaustible; the first, to provide anchorage; the second, to meet and regulate and unify all thought and life; and the last, to allow room for endless research and ceaseless progress. And in that fact that the Eternal Son of the Eternal Father took upon Himself human nature, lived, died, rose, and reigns at God’s right hand, I believe there lie the seeds of all truth, except the purely physical and material, which men need. Everything is there; every truth about God, about man, about duty, about a future, about society; everything that the world needs is laid up in germ in that great gospel of our salvation. If a man will take it for the foundation of his beliefs and the guide of his thinkings, he will find his understanding is satisfied, because it grasps the personal Truth who liveth, and is with us for ever.

Our hearts crave, however imperfect their love may be, a perfect love; and a perfect love means one untinged by any dash of selfishness, incapable of any variation or eclipse, all-knowing, all-pitying, all-powerful. We have made experience of precious loves that die. We know of loves that change, that grow cold, that misconstrue, that may have tears but have no hands. We know of ‘loves’ that are only a fine name for animal passions, and are twice cursed, cursing them that give and them that take. The happiest will admit, and the lonely will achingly feel, how we all want for satisfaction a love that cannot fail, that can help, that beareth all things, and that can do all things. We have it in Jesus Christ, and the Cross is the pledge thereof.

Conscience wants pacifying, cleansing, enlightening, directing, and we get all these in the good news of One that has died for us, and that lives to be our Lord. The will needs authority which is not force. And where is there an authority so constraining in its sweetness and so sweet in its constraint as in those silken bonds which are stronger than iron fetters? Hope, imagination, and all other of our powers or weaknesses, our gifts or needs, are satisfied when they feed on Christ. If we feed upon anything else it turns to ashes that break our teeth and make our palates gritty, and have no nourishment in them. We shall be ‘for ever roaming with a hungry heart’ unless we take our places at the feast on the one sacrifice for the world’s peace.

III. I can say but a word as to the guests.

It is ‘the meek’ who eat. The word translated ‘meek’ has a wider and deeper meaning than that. ‘Meek’ refers, in our common language, mainly to men’s demeanour to one another; but the expression here goes deeper. It means both ‘afflicted’ and ‘lowly’-the right use of affliction being to bow men, and they that bow themselves are those who are fit to come to Christ’s feast. There is a very remarkable contrast between the words of my text and those that follow a verse or two afterwards. ‘The meek shall eat and be satisfied,’ says the text. And then close upon its heels comes, ‘All those that be fat upon earth shall eat.’ That is to say, the lofty and proud have to come down to the level of the lowly, and take indiscriminate places at the table with the poor and the starving, which, being turned into plain English is just this-the one thing that hinders a man from partaking of the fulness of Christ’s feeding grace is self-sufficiency, and the absence of a sense of need. They that ‘hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled’; and they that come, knowing themselves to be poor and needy, and humbly consenting to accept a gratuitous feast of charity-they, and only they, do get the rich provisions.

You are shut out because you shut yourselves out. They that do not know themselves to be hungry have no ears for the dinner-bell. They that feel the pangs of starvation and know that their own cupboards are empty, they are those who will turn to the table that is spread in the wilderness, and there find a ‘feast of fat things.’

And so, dear friends! when He calls, do not let us make excuses, but rather listen to that voice that says to us, ‘Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not. . . . Incline your ear unto Me; hear, and your soul shall live.’

11)Psalms 23:1-6

Psalms

THE SHEPHERD KING OF ISRAEL

Psa. 23:1 - Psa. 23:6.

The king who had been the shepherd-boy, and had been taken from the quiet sheep-cotes to rule over Israel, sings this little psalm of Him who is the true Shepherd and King of men. We do not know at what period of David’s life it was written, but it sounds as if it were the work of his later years. There is a fulness of experience about it, and a tone of subdued, quiet confidence which speaks of a heart mellowed by years, and of a faith made sober by many a trial. A young man would not write so calmly, and a life which was just opening would not afford material for such a record of God’s guardianship in all changing circumstances.

If, then, we think of the psalm as the work of David’s later years, is it not very beautiful to see the old king looking back with such vivid and loving remembrance to his childhood’s occupation, and bringing up again to memory in his palace the green valleys, the gentle streams, the dark glens where he had led his flocks in the old days; very beautiful to see him traversing all the stormy years of warfare and rebellion, of crime and sorrow, which lay between, and finding in all God’s guardian presence and gracious guidance? The faith which looks back and says, ‘It is all very good,' is not less than that which looks forward and says, 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.'

There is nothing difficult of understanding in the psalm. The train of thought is clear and obvious. The experiences which it details are common, the emotions it expresses simple and familiar. The tears that have been dried, the fears that have been dissipated, by this old song; the love and thankfulness which have found in them their best expression, prove the worth of its simple words. It lives in most of our memories. Let us try to vivify it in our hearts, by pondering it for a little while together now.

The psalm falls into two halves, in both of which the same general thought of God's guardian care is presented, though under different illustrations, and with some variety of detail. The first half sets Him forth as a shepherd, and us as the sheep of His pasture. The second gives Him as the Host, and us as the guests at His table, and the dwellers in His house.

First, then, consider that picture of the divine Shepherd and His leading of His flock.

It occupies the first four verses of the psalm. There is a double progress of thought in it. It rises, from memories of the past, and experiences of the present care of God, to hope for the future. 'The Lord is my Shepherd'-'I will fear no evil.' Then besides this progress from what was and is, to what will be, there is another string, so to speak, on which the gems are threaded. The various methods of God's leading of His flock, or rather, we should say, the various regions into which He leads them, are described in order. These are Rest, Work, Sorrow-and this series is so combined with the order of time already adverted to, as that the past and the present are considered as the regions of rest and of work, while the future is anticipated as having in it the valley of the shadow of death.

First, God leads His sheep into rest. 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside the still waters.' It is the hot noontide, and the desert lies baking in the awful glare, and every stone on the hills of Judaea burns the foot that touches it. But in that panting, breathless hour, here is a little green glen, with a quiet brooklet, and moist lush herb-age all along its course, and great stones that fling a black shadow over the dewy grass at their base; and there would the shepherd lead his flock, while the sunbeams, like swords,' are piercing everything beyond that hidden covert. Sweet silence broods there, The sheep feed and drink, and couch in cool lairs till he calls them forth again. So God leads His children.

The psalm puts the rest and refreshment *first*, as being the most marked characteristic of God's dealings. After all, it is so. The years are years of unbroken continuity of outward blessings. The reign of afflictions is ordinarily measured by days. 'Weeping endures for a night.' It is a rainy climate where half the days have rain in them; and that is an unusually troubled life of which it can with any truth be affirmed that there has been as much darkness as sunshine in it.

But it is not mainly of outward blessings that the Psalmist is thinking. They are precious chiefly as emblems of the better spiritual gifts; and it is not an accommodation of his words, but is the appreciation of their truest spirit, when we look upon them, as the instinct of devout hearts has ever done, as expressing both God's gift of temporal mercies, and His gift of spiritual good, of which higher gift all the lower are meant to be significant and symbolic. Thus regarded, the image describes the sweet rest of the soul in communion with God, in whom alone the hungry heart finds food that satisfies, and from whom alone the thirsty soul drinks draughts deep and limpid enough.

This rest and refreshment has for its consequence the restoration of the soul, which includes in it both the invigoration of the natural life by the outward sort of these blessings, and the quickening and restoration of the spiritual life by the inward feeding upon God and repose in Him.

The soul thus restored is then led on another stage; 'He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake,'-that is to say, God guides us into work.

The quiet mercies of the preceding verse are not in themselves the end of our Shepherd's guidance; they are means to an end, and that is-work. Life is not a fold for the sheep to lie down in, but a road for them to walk on. All our blessings of every sort are indeed given us for our delight. They will never fit us for the duties for which they are intended to prepare us, unless they first be thoroughly enjoyed. The highest good they yield is only reached through the lower one. But, then, when joy fills the heart, and life is bounding in the veins, we have to learn that these are granted, not for pleasure only, but for pleasure in order to power. We get them, not to let them pass away like waste steam puffed into empty air, but that we may use them to drive the wheels of life. The waters of happiness are not for a luxurious bath where a man may lie, till, like flax steeped too long, the very fibre be rotted out of him; a quick plunge will brace him, and he will come out refreshed for work. Rest is to fit for work, work is to sweeten rest.

All this is emphatically true of the spiritual life. Its seasons of communion, its hours on the mount, are to prepare for the sore sad work in the plain; and he is not the wisest disciple who tries to make the Mount of Transfiguration the abiding place for himself and his Lord.

It is not well that our chief object should be to enjoy the consolations of religion; it is better to seek first to do the duties enjoined by religion. Our first question should be, not, How may I enjoy God? but, How may I glorify Him? 'A single eye to His glory' means that even our comfort and joy in religious exercises shall be subordinated, and [if need were] postponed, to the doing of His will. While, on the one hand, there is no more certain means of enjoying Him than that of humbly seeking to walk in the ways of His commandments, on the other hand, there is nothing more evanescent in its nature than a mere emotion, even though it be that of joy in God, unless it be turned into a spring of action for God. Such emotions, like photographs, vanish from the heart unless they be fixed. Work for God is the way to fix them. Joy in God is the strength of work for God, but work for God is the perpetuation of joy in God.

Here is the figurative expression of the great evangelical principle, that works of righteousness must follow, not precede, the restoration of the soul. We are justified not by works, but for works, or, as the Apostle puts it in a passage which sounds like an echo of this psalm, we are 'created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained *that we should walk in them*.' The basis of obedience is the sense of salvation. We work not *for* the assurance of acceptance and forgiveness, but *from* it. First the restored soul, then the paths of righteousness for *His* name's sake who has restored me, and restored me that I may be like Him.

But there is yet another region through which the varied experience of the Christian carries him, besides those of rest and of work. God leads His people through sorrow. 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.'

The 'valley of the shadow of death' does not only mean the dark approach to the dark dissolution of soul and body, but any and every gloomy valley of weeping through which we have to pass. Such sunless gorges we have all to traverse at some time or other. It is striking that the Psalmist puts the sorrow, which is as certainly characteristic of our lot as the rest or the work, into the future. Looking back he sees none. Memory has softened down all the past into one uniform tone, as the mellowing distance wraps in one solemn purple the mountains which, when close to them, have many a barren rock and gloomy rift, All behind is good. And, building on this hope, he looks forward with calmness, and feels that no evil shall befall.

But it is never given to human heart to meditate of the future without some foreboding. And when 'Hope enchanted smiles,' with the light of the future in her blue eyes, there is ever something awful in their depths, as if they saw some dark visions behind the beauty. Some evils may come; some will probably come; one at least is sure to come. However bright may be the path, somewhere on it, perhaps just round that turning, sits the 'shadow feared of man.' So there is never hope only in any heart that wisely considers the future. But to the Christian heart there may be this-the conviction that sorrow, when it comes, will not harm, because God will be with us; and the conviction that the Hand which guides us into the dark valley, will guide us through it and up out of it. Yes, strange as it may sound, the presence of Him who sends the sorrow is the best help to bear it. The assurance that the Hand which strikes is the Hand which binds up, makes the stroke a blessing, sucks the poison out of the wound of sorrow, and turns the rod which smites into the staff to lean on.

The second portion of this psalm gives us substantially the same thoughts under a different image. It considers God as the host, and us as the guests at His table and the dwellers in His house.

In this illustration, which includes the remaining verses, we have, as before, the food and rest, the journey and the suffering. We have also, as before, memory and present experience issuing in hope. But it is all intensified. The necessity and the mercy are alike presented in brighter colours; the want is greater, the supply greater, the hope for the future on earth brighter; and, above all, while the former set of images stopped at the side of the grave, and simply refused to fear, here the vision goes on beyond the earthly end; and as the hope comes brightly out, that all the weary wanderings will end in the peace of the Father's house, the absence of fear is changed into the presence of triumphant confidence, and the resignation which, at the most, simply bore to look unfaltering into the depth of the narrow house, becomes the faith which plainly sees the open gate of the everlasting home.

God supplies our wants in the very midst of strife. 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over.' Before, it was food and rest first, work afterwards. Now it Is more than work-it is conflict. And the mercy is more strikingly portrayed, as being granted not only *before toil*, but *in warfare*. Life is a sore fight; but to the Christian man, in spite of all the tumult, life is a festal banquet. There stand the enemies, ringing him round with cruel eyes, waiting to be let slip upon him like eager dogs round the poor beast of the chase. But for all that, here is spread a table in the wilderness, made ready by invisible hands; and the grim-eyed foe is held back in the leash till the servant of God has fed and been strengthened. This is our condition-always the foe, always the table.

What sort of a meal should that be? The soldiers who eat and drink, and are drunken in the presence of the enemy, like the Saxons before Hastings, what will become of them? Drink the cup of gladness, as men do when their foe is at their side, looking askance over the rim, and with one hand on the sword, 'ready, aye ready,' against treachery and surprise. But the presence of the danger should make the feast more enjoyable too, by the moderation it enforces, and by the contrast it affords-as to sailors on shore, or soldiers in a truce. Joy may grow on the very face of danger, as a slender rose-bush flings its bright sprays and fragrant blossoms over the lip of a cataract; and that not the wild mirth of men in a pestilence, with their 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die,' but the simple-hearted gladness of those who have preserved the invaluable childhood gift of living in the present moment, because they know that to-morrow will bring God, whatever it brings, and not take away His care and love, whatever it takes away.

This, then, is the form under which the experience of the past is presented in the second portion,-joy in conflict, rest and food even in the strife. Upon that there is built a hope which transcends that in the previous portion of the psalm. As to this life, ‘Goodness and mercy shall follow us.’ This is more than ‘I will fear no evil.’ That said, sorrow is not evil if God be with us. This says, sorrow is mercy. The one is hope looking mainly at outward circumstances, the other is hope learning the spirit and meaning of them all. These two angels of God-Goodness and Mercy-shall follow and encamp around the pilgrim. The enemies whom God held back while he feasted, may pursue, but will not overtake him. They will be distanced sooner or later; but the white wings of these messengers of the covenant will never be far away from the journeying child, and the air will often be filled with the music of their comings, and their celestial weapons will glance around him in all the fight, and their soft arms will bear him up over all the rough ways, and up higher at last to the throne.

So much for the earthly future. But higher than all that rises the confidence of the closing words, ‘I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.’ This should be at once the crown of all our hopes for the future, and the one great lesson taught us by all the vicissitudes of life. The sorrows and the joys, the journeying and the rest, the temporary repose and the frequent struggles, all these should make us *sure* that there is an end which will interpret them all, to which they all point, for which they may all prepare. We get the table in the wilderness here. It is as when the son of some great king comes back from foreign soil to his father’s dominions, and is welcomed at every stage in his journey to the capital with pomp of festival, and messengers from the throne, until he enters at last his palace home, where the travel-stained robe is laid aside, and he sits down with his father at his table. God provides for us here in the presence of our enemies; it is wilderness food we get, manna from heaven, and water from the rock. We eat in haste, staff in hand, and standing round the meal. But yonder we sit down with the Shepherd, the Master of the house, at His table in His kingdom. We put off the pilgrim-dress, and put on the royal robe; we lay aside the sword, and clasp the palm. Far off, and lost to sight, are all the enemies. We fear no change. We 'go no more out.'

The sheep are led by many a way, sometimes through sweet meadows, sometimes limping along sharp-flinted, dusty highways, sometimes high up over rough, rocky mountain-passes, sometimes down through deep gorges, with no sunshine in their gloom; but they are ever being led to one place, and when the hot day is over they are gathered into one fold, and the sinking sun sees them safe, where no wolf can come, nor any robber climb up any more, but all shall rest for ever under the Shepherd's eye.

Brethren! can you take this psalm for yours? Have you returned unto Christ, the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls? Oh! let Him, the Shepherd of Israel, and the Lamb of God, one of the fold and yet the Guide and Defender of it, human and divine, bear you away from the dreary wilderness whither He has come seeking you. He will carry you rejoicing to the fold, if only you will trust yourselves to His gentle arm. He will restore your soul. He will lead you and keep you from all dangers, guard you from every sin, strengthen you when you come to die, and bring you to the fair plains beyond that narrow gorge of frowning rock. Then this sweet psalm shall receive its highest fulfilment, for then 'they shall hunger no more, neither shall they thirst any more, neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat, for the Lamb which is in the midst of the Throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters, and God shall wipe all tears from their eyes.'

12)Psalms 24:3

Psalms

A GREAT QUESTION AND ITS ANSWER

Psa. 24:3.

The psalm from which these words are taken flashes up into new beauty, if we suppose it to have been composed in connection with the bringing of the Ark into the Temple, or for some similar occasion. Whether it is David's or not is a matter of very small consequence. But if we look at the psalm as a whole, we can scarcely fail to see that some such occasion underlies it. So just exercise your imaginations for a moment, and think of the long procession of white-robed priests bearing the Ark, and followed by the joyous multitude chanting as they ascended, ‘Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His holy place?’ They are bethinking themselves of the qualifications needed for that which they are now doing. They reach the gates, which we must suppose to have been closed that they might be opened, and from the half-chorus outside there peals out the summons, ‘Lift up your heads, O ye gates! and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.’ Then from within another band of singers answers with the question, ‘Who is this King of Glory’ who thus demands entrance? And triumphantly the reply rings out, ‘The Lord, strong and mighty; the Lord, mighty in battle.’ Still reluctant, the question is put again, ‘Who is this King of Glory?’ and the answer is given once more, ‘The Lord of hosts, He is the King of Glory.’ There is no reference in the second answer to ‘battle.’ The conflicts are over, and the dominion is established, and at the reiterated summons the ancient gates roll back on their hinges, burst as by a strong blow, and Jehovah enters into His rest, He and the Ark of His strength. If that is the general connection of the psalm-and I think you will admit that it adds to its beauty and dramatic force if we suppose it so-then this introductory question, sung as the procession climbed the steep, had realised what was needed for those who should get the entrance that they sought, and comes to be a very significant and important one. I deal now with the question and its answer.

I. The question of questions.

That question lies deep in all men’s hearts, and underlies sacrifices and priesthoods and asceticisms and tortures of all sorts, and is the inner meaning of Hindoos swinging with hooks in their backs, and others of them measuring the road to the temple by prostrating themselves every yard or two as they advance. These self-torturers are all asking the same question: ‘Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?’ It sometimes rises in the thoughts of the most degraded, and it is present always with some of the better and nobler of men.

Now, there are three places in the Old Testament where substantially the same question is asked. There is this psalm of ours; there is another psalm which is all but a duplicate, which begins with ‘Lord, who shall abide in Thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in Thy holy hill?’ And there is another shape into which the question is cast by the fervent and somewhat gloomy imagination of one of the prophets, who puts it thus: ‘Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who shall dwell with the everlasting burnings?’ There never was a more disastrous misapplication of Scripture than the popular idea that these two last questions suggest the possibility of a creature being exposed to the torments of future punishment. They have nothing to do with that. ‘Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire?’ If you want a commentary, remember the words, ‘Our God is a consuming fire.’ That puts us on the right track, if we needed any putting on it, for answering this question, not in the gruesome and ghastly sense in which some people take it, but in all the grandeur of Isaiah’s thought. He sees God as ‘the everlasting burnings.’ Fire is the emblem of life as well as of death; fire is the means of quickening as well as of destroying; and when we speak of Him as ‘the everlasting burnings’ we are reminded of the bush in the desert, where His own signature was set, ‘burning and not consumed.’

So the question in all the three places referred to is substantially the same-and what does it indicate? It indicates the deep consciousness that men have that they need to be in that home, that for life and peace and blessedness, they must get somehow to the side of God, and be quiet there, as children in their Father’s house. We all know that this is true, whether our life is regulated by it or not. Very deep in every man’s conscience, if he will attend to its voice, there is that which says, ‘You are a pilgrim and a sojourner, and homeless and desolate until you nestle beneath the outspread wings in the Holy Place, and are a denizen of God’s house.’

The question further suggests another. The universal consciousness-which is, I believe, universal-though it is overlain and stifled by many of us, and neglected and set at nought by others-is that this fellowship with God, which is indispensable to a man’s peace, is impossible to a man’s impurity. So the question raises the thought of the consciousness of sin which comes creeping over a man when he is sometimes feeling after God, and seems to batter him in the face, and fling him back into the outer darkness, ‘How can I enter in there?’ and conscience has no answer, and the world has none, and as I shall have to say presently, the answer which the Old Testament, as Law, gives is almost as hopeless as the answer which conscience gives. But at all events that this question should rise and insist upon being answered as it does proves these three things-man’s need of God, man’s sense of God’s purity, man’s consciousness of his own sin.

And what does that ascent to the hill of the Lord include? All the present life, for, unless we are ‘dwelling in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives beholding His beauty and inquiring in His Temple,’ then we have little in life that is worth the having. The old Arab right of claiming hospitality of the Sheikh into whose tent the fugitive ran is used in Scripture over and over again to express the relation in which alone it is blessed for a man to live-namely, as a guest of God’s. That is peace. That is all that we require, to sit at His fireside, if I may so say, to claim the rites of hospitality, which the Arab chief would not refuse to the veriest tatterdemalion, or the greatest enemy that he knew, if he came into his tent and sought it. God sits in the door of His tent, and is ready to welcome us.

The ascent to the hill of the Lord means more than that. It includes also the future. I suppose that when men think about another world-which I am afraid none of us think about as often as we ought to do, in order to make the best of this one-the question, in some shape or other, which this band of singers lifted up, rises to their lips, ‘Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His Holy Place’ beyond the stars? Well, brethren! that is the question which concerns us all, more than anything else in the world, to have clearly and rightly answered.

II. Note the answer to this great question.

The psalm answers it in an instructive fashion, which we take as it stands. ‘He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.’ Let me measure myself by the side of that requirement. ‘Clean hands?’-are mine clean? ‘And a pure heart?’-what about mine? ‘Who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity’-and where have my desires and thoughts so often gone? ‘Nor sworn deceitfully.’ These are the qualifications that our psalm dashes down in front of us when we ask the question.

The other two occasions to which I have referred, where the same question is put, give substantially the same answer. It might be interesting, if one had time, or this was the place, to look at the differences in the replies, as suggesting the slight differences in the ideal of a good man as presented by the various writers, but that must be left untouched now. Taking these four conditions that are laid down here, we come to this, that psalmist and prophet with one voice say that same solemn thing: 'Holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.' There is no faltering in the answer, and it is an answer to which the depths of conscience say 'Yes.' We all admit, when we are wise, that for communion with God on earth, and for treading the golden pavements of that city into which nothing that is unclean shall enter, absolute holiness is necessary. Let no man deceive himself-that stands the irreversible, necessary condition.

Well, then, is anybody to go in? Let us read on in our psalm. An impossible requirement is laid down, broad and stern and unmistakable. But is that all? 'He shall receive a blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation.' So, then, the impossible requirement is made possible as a gift to be received. And although I do not know that this psalmist, in the twilight of revelation, saw all that was involved in what he sang, he had caught a glimpse of this great thought, that what God required, God would give, and that our way to get the necessary, impossible condition realised in ourselves is to 'receive' it. 'He shall receive . . . righteousness from the God of his salvation.' Now, do you not see how, like some great star, trembling into the field of the telescope, and sending arrowy beams before it to announce its approach, the great central Christian truth is here dawning, germinant, prophesying its full rising? And the truth is this, 'that I might be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, but that which is of God through Christ.' Ah, brethren! impossibilities become possible when God comes and says, 'I give thee that which thou canst not have.' The old prophet asked the question, 'What doth God require of thee?' and his answer was, 'That thou shouldst do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.' If he had gone on to ask a better question, 'What does God give thee?' he would have said what all the New Testament says, 'He gives what He commands, and He bestows before He requires.' And so in Jesus Christ there is the forgiveness that blots out the past, and there is the new life bestowed that will develop the righteousness far beyond our reach. And thus the question which evoked first the answer that might drive us to despair, evokes next a response that commands us to hope.

But that is not all, for the psalm goes on: ‘This is the generation of them that seek Him, that seek Thy face.’ Yes; couched in germ there lies in that last word the great truth which is expanded in the New Testament, like a beech-leaf folded up in its little brown sheath through all the winter, and ready to break and give out its green plumelets as soon as the warm rains and sunshine of spring come. ‘They that seek Him’-’if thou seek Him He will be found of thee.’ The requirement of righteousness, as I have said, is not abolished by the Gospel, as some people seem to think that it substitutes faith for righteousness; but it is made possible by the Gospel which through faith gives righteousness. And what the Psalmist meant by ‘seeking’ we Christian people mean by ‘faith.’ Earnest desire and confident application to Him are sure to obtain righteousness. To these there will never be returned a refusing answer. ‘I have never said to any of the seed of Jacob, seek ye Me in vain.’ So, brethren! if we seek we shall receive; if we receive we shall be holy, if we are holy we shall dwell with God, in sweet and blessed communion, and be denizens of His house, and sit together in heavenly places with Him all the days of our lives, and then shall pass, when ‘goodness and mercy have followed us all the days of our lives,’ and ‘dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.’

13)Psalms 24:7-10

Psalms

THE GOD WHO DWELLS WITH MEN

Psa. 24:7 - Psa. 24:10.

This whole psalm was probably composed at the time of the bringing of the ark into the city of Zion. The former half was chanted as the procession wound its way up the hillside. It mainly consists of the answer to the question ‘Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?’ and describes the kind of men that dwell with God, and the way by which they obtain their purity.

This second half of our psalm is probably to be thought of as being chanted when the procession had reached the summit of the hill and stood before the barred gates of the ancient Jebusite city. It is mainly in answer to the question, ‘Who is this King of Glory?’ and is the description of the God that dwells with men, and the meaning of His dwelling with them.

We are to conceive of a couple of half choirs, the one within, the other without the mountain hold. The advancing choir summons the gates to open in the grand words: ‘Lift up your heads, O ye gates! even lift them up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.’ Their lofty lintels are too low for His head to pass beneath; so they have to be lifted that He may find entrance. They are ‘everlasting doors,’ grey with antiquity, hoary with age. They have looked down, perhaps, upon Melchizedek, King of Salem, as he went forth in the morning twilight of history to greet the patriarch. But in all the centuries they have never seen such a King as this King of Glory, the true King of Israel who now desires entrance.

The answer to the summons comes from the choir within. ‘Who is this King of Glory?’ the question represents ignorance and possible hesitation, as if the pagan inhabitants of the recently conquered city knew nothing of the God of Israel, and recognised no authority in His name. Of course, the dramatic form of question and answer is intended to give additional force to the proclamation as by God Himself of the Covenant name, the proper name of Israel’s God, as Baal was the name of the Canaanite’s God, ‘the Lord strong and mighty; the Lord mighty in battle,’ by whose warrior power David had conquered the city, which now was summoned to receive its conqueror. Therefore the summons is again rung out, ‘Lift up your heads, O ye gates! and the King of Glory shall come in.’ And once more, to express the lingering reluctance, ignorance not yet dispelled, suspicion and unwilling surrender, the dramatic question is repeated, ‘Who is this King of Glory?’ The answer is sharp and authoritative in its brevity, and we may fancy it shouted with a full-throated burst-’The Lord of Hosts,’ who, as Captain, commands all the embattled energies of earth and heaven conceived as a disciplined army. That great name, like a charge of dynamite, bursts the gates of brass asunder, and with triumphant music the procession sweeps into the conquered city.

Now these great words, throbbing with the enthusiasm at once of poetry and of devotion, may, I think, teach us a great deal if we ponder them.

I. Notice, first, their application, their historical and original application, to the King who dwelt with Israel.

We must never forget that in the Old Testament we have to do with an incomplete and a progressive revelation, and that if we would understand its significance, we must ever endeavour to ascertain to what point in that progress the words before us belong. We are not to read into these words New Testament depth and fulness of meaning; we are to take them and try to find out what they meant to David and to his people; and so we shall get a firm basis for any deeper significance which we may hereafter see in them. The thought of God, then, in these words is mainly that of a God of strong and victorious energy, a warrior-God, a conquering King, one whose word is power, who rules amidst the armies of heaven, and amidst the inhabitants of earth.

A brief consideration of each expression is all which can be attempted here. 'Who is this King of Glory?' The first idea, then, is that of sovereign rule; the idea which had become more and more plain and clear to the national consciousness of the Hebrew with the installation of monarchy amongst them. And it is very beautiful to see how David lays hold of that thought of God being Himself the King of Israel; and dwells so often in his psalms on the idea that he, poor, pale, earthly shadow, is but a representative and a viceroy of the true King who sits in the heavens. He takes off his crown and lays it before His throne and says: 'Thou art the King of Israel, the King of Glory.'

The Old Testament meaning of that word 'glory' is a great deal more definite than the ordinary religious use of it amongst us. The 'glory of God' in the Old Testament is, first and foremost, the supernatural light that dwelt between the cherubim and was the manifestation and symbol of the divine Presence. And next it is the sum total of all the impression made upon the world by God's manifestation of Himself, the Light, of which the material and supernatural light between the cherubs was but the emblem; all by which God flames and flashes Himself upon the trembling and thankful heart; that glory which is substantially the same as the Name of the Lord.

And in this brightness, lustrous and dark with excess of light, this King dwells. The splendour of His regalia is the brightness that emanates from Himself. He is the King of Glory.

Next, we have the great Name, ‘the Lord,’ Jehovah, which speaks of timeless, independent, unchanging, self-sufficing being. It declares that He is His own cause, His own law, His own impulse, the staple from which all the links of the chain of being depend, and not Himself a link, the fontal Source of all which is.

We say: ‘I am that which I have become; I am that which I have been made; I am that which I have inherited; I am that which circumstances and example and training have shaped me to be.’ God says: ‘I AM THAT I AM.’ This name is also significant, not only because it proclaims absolute, independent, underived, timeless being, but because it is the Covenant name, and speaks of the God who has come into fellowship with men, and has bound Himself to a certain course of action for their blessing, and is thus the Lord of Israel, and the God, in a special manner, of His people.

‘The Lord mighty in battle.’ A true warrior-God, who went out in no metaphorical sense, but in prose reality, fought for His people and subdued the nations under them, in order that His name might be spread and His glory be known in the earth.

And then, still further, ‘the Lord of Hosts,’ the Captain of all the armies of heaven and earth. In that name is the thought to which the modern world is coming so slowly by scientific paths, that all being is one ordered whole, subject to the authority of one Lord. And in addition to that, the grander thought, that the unity of nature is the will of God; and that as the Commander issues His orders over all the field, so He speaks and it is done. The hosts are the angels of whom it is said: ‘Bless the Lord all ye His hosts; ye ministers of His that do His pleasure.’ The hosts are the stars that fill the nightly heavens, of whom it is said, ‘He bringeth out their host by number.’ The hosts are all creatures that live and are; and all are the soldiers and servants of this conquering King. Such is the name of the Lord that dwelt with Israel, the great conception that rises before this Psalmist.

II. Now turn to the second application of these great words, that speak to us not only of the God that dwelt in Zion in outward and symbolical form, by means of a material Presence which was an emblem of the true nearness of Israel’s God, but yet more distinctly, as I take it, of the Christ that dwells with men.

The devout hearts in Israel felt that there was something more needed than this dwelling of Jehovah within an earthly Temple, and the process of revelation familiarised them with the thought that there was to be in the future a ‘coming of the Lord’ in some special manner unknown to them. So that the whole anticipation and forward look of the Old Testament system is gathered into and expressed by almost its last words, which prophesy that ‘the Lord shall suddenly come to His Temple,’ and that once again this King of Glory shall stand before the everlasting gates and summon them to open.

And when was that fulfilled? Fulfilled in a fashion that at first sight seems the greatest contrast to all this vision of grandeur, of warlike strength, of imperial power and rule with which we have been dealing; but which yet was not the contrast to these ideas so much as the highest embodiment of them. For, although at first sight it seems as if there could be no greater contrast than between the lion might of the Jehovah of the Old Testament, and the lamb gentleness of the Jesus of the New, if we look more closely we shall see that it is not a relation of contrast that exists between the two. Christ is all, and more than all, that this psalm proclaimed the Jehovah of the Old Covenant to be. Let us look again from that point of view at the particulars already referred to.

He is the highest manifestation of the divine rule and authority. There is no dominion like the dominion of the loving Christ, a kingdom based upon suffering and wielded in gentleness, a kingdom of which the crown is a wreath of thorns, and the sceptre a rod of reed; a dominion which is all exercised for the blessing of its subjects, and which, therefore, is an everlasting dominion. There is no rule like that; no height of divine authority towers so high as the authority of Him who rules us so absolutely because He gave Himself for us utterly. This is the King, the Prince of the kings of the earth, because this is the Incarnate God who died for us.

Christ is the highest raying out of the divine Light, or, as the Epistle to the Hebrews calls it, ‘the effulgence of His glory.’ The true glory of God lies in His love, and of that love Christ is the noblest and most wondrous example. So all other beams of the divine character, bright as their light is, are but dim as compared with the sevenfold lustre of the light that shines from the gentle loving-kindness of the heart of Christ. He has glorified God because He shows us that the divinest thing in God is love.

For the same reason, He is the mightiest exhibition of the divine power-’the Lord strong and mighty.’ There is no work of God’s hand, no work of God’s will so great as that by which we are turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. The Cross is God’s noblest revelation of power; and in Him, His weakness, His surrender, His death, with all the wonderful energies that flow from that death for man’s salvation, we see the divine strength made perfect in the human weakness of Jesus. The Gospel of Christ ‘is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.’ *There* is divine power in its noblest form, in the paradoxical shape of a dying man; in its noblest effect, salvation; in its widest sweep to all who believe.

“Twas great to speak a world from nought,
‘Tis greater to redeem.’

This ‘strong Son of God’ is the arm of the Lord in whom live and act the energies of omnipotence.

Christ is ‘the Lord mighty in battle.’ True, He is the Prince of peace, but He is also the better Joshua, the victorious Captain, in whom dwells the conquering divine might. Through all the gentleness of His life there winds a martial strain, and it is not in vain that the Evangelist who was most deeply penetrated by the sweetness of His love, is the one who most often speaks of Him as overcoming, and who has preserved as His last words to His timid followers, that triumphant command, ‘Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world.’ He has conquered for us, binding the strong man, and so He will spoil his house. Sin, hell, death, the devil, law, fear, our own foolish hearts, all temptations that hover around us-they are all vanquished foes of a ‘Lord’ that is ‘mighty in battle.’ And as He overcame, so shall we if we will trust Him.

Christ is the Commander and Wielder of all the forces of the universe. As one said to Him in the days of His flesh, ‘I am a man under authority, and I say to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it. So do Thou speak and Thy word shall be sovereign.’ And so it was. He spake to diseases and they vanished. He spake to the winds and the seas and there was a great calm. He spake to demons, and murmuring, but yet obedient, they came out of their victims. He flung His word into the recesses of the grave, and Lazarus came forth, fumbling with the knots on his grave-clothes, and stumbling into the light. ‘He spake and it was done.’ Who is He, the utterance of whose will is sovereign amongst all the regions of being? ‘Who is the King of Glory?’ ‘Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ!’ ‘Thou art the Everlasting Son of the Father.’

III. And now, lastly, let me ask you to look, and that for a moment, at the application of these words to the Christ who will dwell in our hearts.

His historical manifestation here upon earth and His Incarnation, which is the true dwelling of Deity amongst men, are not enough. They have left something more than a memory to the world. He is as ready to abide as really within our spirits as He was to tabernacle upon earth amongst men. And the very central message of that Gospel which Is proclaimed to us all is this, that if we will open the gates of our hearts He will come in, in all the plenitude of His victorious power, and dwell in our hearts, their Conqueror and their King.

What a strange contrast, and yet what a close analogy there is between the victorious tones and martial air of this summons of my text. ‘Lift up your heads, O ye gates! that the King of Glory may come in,’ and the gentle words of the Apocalypse: ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear My voice and open the door, I will come in to him.’ But He that in the Old Covenant arrayed in warrior arms, summoned the rebels to surrender, is the same as He who, in the New, with the night-dews in His hair, and patience on His face, and gentleness in the touch of His hand upon the door, waits to enter in. Brethren! open your hearts, ‘and the King of Glory shall come in.’

And He will come in as a king that might seek to enter some city far away on the outposts of his kingdom, besieged by his enemies. If the King comes in, the city will be impregnable. If you open your hearts for Him He will come and keep you from all your foes and give you the victory over them all. So, to every hard-pressed heart, waging an unequal contest with toils and temptations, and sorrows and sins, this great hope is given, that Christ the Victor will come in His power to garrison heart and mind. As of old the encouragement was given to Hezekiah in his hour of peril, when the might of Sennacherib insolently threatened Jerusalem, so the same stirring assurances are given to each who admits Christ’s succours to his heart-’He shall not come into this city, for I will defend this city to save it for Mine own sake’ Open your hearts and the conquering King will come in.

And do not forget that there is another possible application of these words lying in the future, to the conquering Christ who shall come again. The whole history of the past points onwards to yet a last time when ‘the Lord shall suddenly come to His temple,’ and predicts that Christ shall so come in like manner as He went up to heaven. Again will the summons ring out. Again will He come arrayed in flashing brightness, and the visible robes of His imperial majesty. Again will He appear, mighty in battle, when ‘in righteousness He shall judge and make war.’ For a Christian, one great memory fills the past-Christ has come; and one great hope brightens the else waste future-Christ will come. That hope has been far too much left to be cherished only by those who hold a particular opinion as to the chronology of unfulfilled prophecy. But it should be to every Christian heart ‘the blessed hope,’ even the appearing of the glory of Him who has come in the past. He is with and in us, in the present. He will come in the future ‘in His glory, and shall sit upon the throne of His glory.’ All our pardon and hope of God’s love depend upon that great fact in the past, that ‘the Lord was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.’ Our purity which will fit us to dwell with God, our present blessedness, all our power for daily strife, and our companionship in daily loneliness, depend on the present fact that He dwells in our hearts by faith, the seed of all good, and the conquering Antagonist of every evil. And the one light which fills the future with hope, peaceful because assured, streams from that most sure promise that He will come again, sweeping from the highest heavens, on His head the many crowns of universal monarchy, in His hand the weapons of all-conquering power, and none shall need to ask, ‘Who is this King of Glory?’ for every eye shall know Him, the Judge upon His throne, to be the Christ of the Cross. Open the doors of your hearts to Him, as He sues for entrance now in the meekness of His patient love, that on you may fall in that day of the coming of the King, the blessing of the servants who wait for their returning Lord, that ‘when He cometh and knocketh, they may open unto Him immediately.’

14)Psalms 25:8-9

Psalms

GUIDANCE IN JUDGMENT

Psa. 25:8 - Psa. 25:9.

The Psalmist prays in this psalm for three things: deliverance, guidance, and forgiveness. Of these three petitions the central one is that for guidance. ‘Show me Thy ways, O Lord,’ he asks in a previous verse; where he means by ‘Thy ways,’ not God’s dealings with men, but men’s conduct as prescribed by God. In my text he exchanges petition for contemplation; and gazes on the character of God, in order thereby to be helped to confidence in an answer to his prayer. Such alternations of petition and contemplation are the very heartbeats of devotion, now expanding in desire, now closing on its treasure in fruition. Either attitude is incomplete without the other. Do *our* prayers pass into such still contemplation of the face of God? Do *our* thoughts of His character break into such confident petition? My text contains a striking view of the divine character, a grand confidence built thereupon, and a condition appended on which the fulfilment of that confidence depends. Let us look at these in turn.

I. First, then, we have here the Psalmist’s thought of God. ‘Good and upright is the Lord.’

Now it is clear that the former of these two epithets is here employed, not in its widest sense of moral perfectness, or else ‘upright,’ which follows, would be mere tautology, but in the narrower sense, which is familiar too, to us, in our common speech, in which *good* is tantamount to *kind*, *beneficent*, or to say all in a word, *loving*. *Upright* needs no explanation; but the point to notice is the decisiveness with which the Psalmist binds together, in one thought, the two aspects of the divine nature which so many people find it hard to reconcile, and the separation of which has been the parent of unnumbered misconceptions and errors as to Him and to His dealings. ‘Good *and* upright, loving *and* righteous is the Lord,’ says the Psalmist. He puts in no qualifying word such as, loving *though* righteous, righteous and *yet* loving. Such phrases express the general notions of the relation of these two attributes. But the Psalmist employs no such expressions. He binds the two qualities together, in the feeling of their profoundest harmony.

Now let me remind you that neither of these two resplendent aspects of the divine nature reaches its highest beauty and supremest power, except it be associated with the other. In the spectrum analysis of that great light there are the two lines; the one purest white of righteousness, and the other tinged with a ruddier glow, the line of love. The one adorns and sets off the other. Love without righteousness is flaccid, a mere gush of good-natured sentiment, impotent to confer blessing, powerless to evoke reverence. Righteousness without love is as white as snow, and as cold as ice; repellent, howsoever it may excite the sentiment of awe-struck distance. But we need that the righteousness shall be loving, and that the love shall be righteous, in order that the one may be apprehended in its tenderest tenderness and the other may be adored in its loftiest loftiness.

And yet we are always tempted to wrench the two apart, and to think that the operation of the one must sometimes, at all events on the outermost circumference of the spheres, impinge upon, and collide with, the operations of the other. Hence you get types of religion-yes! and two types of Christianity-in which the one or the other of these two harmonious attributes is emphasised to such a degree as almost to blot out the other. You get forms of religion in which the righteousness has swallowed up the love, and others in which the love has destroyed the righteousness. The effect is disastrous. In old days our fathers fell into the extreme on the one hand; and the pendulum has swung with a vengeance as far from the vertical line, to the other extreme, in these days as it ever did in the past. The religion which found its centre-point and its loftiest conception of the divine nature in the thought of His absolute righteousness made strong, if it made somewhat stern, men. And now we see renderings of the truth that God is love which degrade the lofty, noble, sovereign conception of the righteous God that loveth, into mere Indulgence on the throne of the universe. And what is the consequence? All the stern teachings of Scripture men recoil from, and try to explain away. The ill desert of sin, and the necessary iron nexus between sin and suffering-and as a consequence the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, and the supreme glory of His mission in that He is the Redeemer of mankind-are all become unfashionable to preach and unfashionable to believe. God is Love. We cannot make too much of His love, unless by reason of it we make too little of His righteousness.

The Psalmist, in his childlike faith, saw deeper and more truly than many would-be theologians and thinkers of this day, when he proclaimed in one breath ‘Good *and* upright is the Lord.’ Let us not forget that the Apostle, whose great message to the world was, as the last utterance completing the process of revelation, ‘God is Love,’ had it also in charge to ‘declare unto us that God is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all.’

II. And so, secondly, mark the calm confidence builded on this conception of the divine character.

What a wonderful ‘therefore’ that is!-the logic of faith and not of sense. ‘Good and upright is the Lord; *therefore* will He teach sinners in the way.’ The coexistence of these two aspects in the perfect divine character is for us a guarantee that He cannot leave men, however guilty they may be, to grope in the dark, or keep His lips locked in silence. The Psalmist does not mean guidance as to practical advantages and worldly prosperity. That may also be looked for, in a modified degree. But what he means is guidance as to the one important thing, the sovereign conception of duty, the eternal law of right and wrong. God will not leave a man without adequate teaching as to that, just because He is loving and righteous.

For what *is* love, in its loftiest, purest, and therefore in its divine aspect? What is it except an infinite desire to impart, and that the object on which it falls shall be blessed. So because 'the Lord is good, and His tender mercies are over all His works,' certainly He must desire, if one may so say, as His deepest desire, the blessedness of His creatures. He is a God whose nature and property it is to love, and His love is the infinite and ceaseless welling out of Himself, in all forms of beauty and blessedness, according to the capacity and contents of His recipient creatures. He is 'the giving God,' as James in his epistle eloquently and wonderfully calls Him, whose very nature it is to give. And that is only to say, in other words, 'good *is the Lord*.'

But then 'good *and* upright'-that combination determines the form which His blessings shall assume, the channel in which by preference they will flow. If we had only to say, 'good is the Lord,' then our happiness, as we call it, the satisfaction of our physical needs and of lower cravings, might be the adequate expression of His love. But if God be righteous, then because Himself is so, it must be His deepest desire for us that we should be like Him. Not our happiness but our rectitude is God's end in all that He does with us. It is worth His while to make us, in the lower sense of the word, 'happy,' but the purpose of joy as of sorrow is to make us pure and righteous. We shall never come to understand the meaning of our own lives, and will always be blindly puzzling over the mysteries of the providences that beset us, until we learn that not enjoyment and not sorrow is His ultimate end concerning us, but that we may be partakers of His holiness. Since He is righteous, the dearest desire of His loving heart, and that to which all His dealings with us are directed; and that, therefore, to which all our desires and efforts should be directed likewise, is to make us righteous also.

'Therefore will He teach sinners in the way.' If the righteousness existed without the love it must 'come with a rod,' and the sinners who are out of the way must incontinently be crushed where they have wandered. But since righteousness is blended with love, therefore He comes, and must desire to bring all wanderers back into the paths which are His own.

I need not do more than in a word remind you how strong a presumption there lies in this combination of aspects of the divine nature, in favour of an actual revelation. It seems to me that, notwithstanding all the objections that are made to a supernatural and objective revelation, there is nothing half so monstrous as it would be to believe, with the pure deist or theist, that God, being what He is, righteous and loving, had never rent His heavens to say one word to man to lead him in the paths of righteousness. I can understand Atheism, and I can understand a revealing God, but not a God that dwells in the thick darkness, and is yet Love and Righteousness, and looks down upon this world and never puts out a finger to point the path of duty. A silent God seems to me no God but an Almighty Devil. Revelation is the plain conclusion from the premisses that 'good and upright is the Lord!' I speak not, for there is no time to do so, of the various manners in which this divine desire to bring sinners into the way fulfils itself. There are our consciences; there are His providences; there is the objective revelation of His word; there are the whispers of His Spirit in men's hearts. I do not know what you believe, but I believe that God can find His way to my heart and infuse there illumination, and move affections, and make my eye clear to discern what is right. 'He that formed the eye, shall He not see?' He that formed the eye, shall He not send light to it? Are we to shut out God, in obedience to the dictates of an arbitrary psychology, from access to His own creature; and to say, 'Thou hast made me, and Thou canst not speak to me. My soul is Thine by creation, but its doors are close barred against Thee; and Thou canst not lay Thy hand upon it?' 'Good and upright is the Lord, therefore will He teach sinners in the way.'

III. Now notice, again, the condition on which the fulfilment of this confidence depends.

'The meek will He guide in judgment, and the meek will He teach His way.' The fact of our being sinful only makes it the more imperative that God should speak to us. But the condition of our hearing and profiting by the guidance is meekness. By meekness the Psalmist means, I suppose, little else than what we might call docility, of which the prime element is the submission of my own will to God's. The reason why we go wrong about our duties is mainly that we do not supremely want to go right, but rather to gratify inclinations, tastes, or passions. God is speaking to us, but if we make such a riot with the yelpings of our own kennelled desires and lusts, and listen to the rattle and noise of the street and the babble of tongues, He

'Can but listen at the gate,
And hear the household jar within.'

'The meek will He guide in judgment; the meek will He teach His way.' Some of us put our heads down like bulls charging a gate. Some of us drive on full speed, and will not shut off steam though the signals are against us, and the end of that can only be one thing. Some of us do not wish to know what God wishes us to do. Some of us cannot bear suspense of judgment, or of decision, and are always in a hurry to be in action, and think the time lost that is spent in waiting to know what God the Lord will speak. If you do not clearly see what to do, then clearly you may see that you are to do *nothing*.

The ark was to go half a mile in front of the camp before the foremost files lifted a foot to follow, in order that there should be no mistake as to the road. Wait till God points the path, and wish Him to point it, and hush the noises that prevent your hearing His voice, and keep your wills in absolute submission; and above all, be sure that you act out your convictions, and that you have no knowledge of duty which is not expressed in your practice, and you will get all the light which you need; sometimes being taught by errors no doubt, often being left to make mistakes as to what is expedient in regard to worldly prosperity, but being infallibly guided as to the path of duty, and the path of peace and righteousness.

And now, before I close, let me just remind you of the great fact which transcends the Psalmist's confidence whilst it warrants it.

Because God is Love, and God is Righteousness, He cannot but speak. But this Psalmist did not know how wonderfully God was going to speak by that Word who has called Himself the Light of men; and who has said, 'He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.' He 'teaches sinners in the way,' by Jesus Christ; for we have Him for our Pattern and Example. We have His love for our impelling motive. We have His Spirit to speak in our hearts, and to 'guide us into all truth.' And this Shepherd, ‘when He putteth forth His own sheep, goeth before them; and the sheep follow Him and know His voice.’ The Psalmist’s confidence, bright as it is, is but the glow of the morning twilight. The full sunshine of the transcendent fact to which God’s righteous love impelled and bound Him is Christ, who makes us know the will of the Father. But we want more than knowledge. For we all know our duty a great deal better than any of us do it. What is the use of a guide to a lame man? But our Guide says to us, ‘Arise and walk,’ and if we clasp His hand we receive strength, and ‘the lame man leaps as a hart.’

So, dear brethren! let us all cleave to Him, the Guide, the Way, and the Life which enables us to walk in the way. If we thus cleave, then be sure that He will lead us in the paths of righteousness, which are paths of peace. He is the Way; He is the Leader of the march; He gives power to walk in the light, and His one command, ‘Follow Me,’ unfolds into all duty and includes all direction, companionship, perfection, and blessedness.

15)Psalms 25:11

Psalms

A PRAYER FOR PARDON AND ITS PLEA

Psa. 25:11.

The context shows us that this is the prayer of a man who had long loved and served God. He says that ‘on God’ he ‘waits all the day,’ that his ‘eyes are ever toward the Lord,’ that he has ‘integrity and uprightness’ which will ‘preserve him, for he waits upon God,’ and yet side by side with this consciousness of devotion and service there lie the profound sense of sin and of the need of pardon. The better a man is, the more clearly he sees, and the more deeply he feels, his own badness. If a shoe is all covered with mud, a splash or two more or less will make no difference, but if it be polished and clean, one speck shows. A black feather on a swan’s breast is conspicuous. And so the less sin a man has the more obvious it is, and the more he has the less he generally knows it. But whilst this consciousness of transgression and cry for pardon are inseparable and permanent accompaniments of a devout life all along its course, they are the roots and beginning of all true godliness. And as a rule, the first step which a man takes to knit himself consciously to God is through the gate of recognised and repeated and confessed sin and imploring the divine mercy.

I. Notice, first, here the cry for pardon.

'I believe in the forgiveness of sins' hundreds of thousands of Englishmen have said twice to-day. Most of us, when we pray at all, push in somewhere or other the petition, 'Forgive us our sins.' And how many of us understand what we mean when we ask for that? And how many of us feel that we need the thing which we seem to be requesting? Let me dwell for a moment or two upon the Scriptural idea of forgiveness. Of course we may say that when we ask forgiveness from God we are transferring ideas and images drawn from human relations to the divine. Be it so. That does not show that there is not a basis of reality and of truth in the ideas thus transferred. But there are two elements in forgiveness as we know it, both of which it seems to me to be very important that we should carry in our minds in interpreting the Scriptural doctrine. There is the forgiveness known to law and practised by the lawgiver. There is the forgiveness known to love and practised by the friend, or parent, or lover. The one consists in the remission of external penalties. A criminal is forgiven, or, as we say [with an unconscious restriction of the word *forgiven* to the deeper thing], *pardoned*, when, the remainder of his sentence being remitted, he is let out of gaol, and allowed to go about his business without any legal penalties. But there is a forgiveness deeper than that legal pardon. A parent and a child both of them know that parental pardon does not consist in the waiving of punishment. The averted look, the cold voice, the absence of signs of love are far harder to bear than so-called punishment. And the forgiveness, which belongs to love only, comes when the film between the two is swept away, and both the offended and the offender feel that there is no barrier to the free, unchecked flow of love from the heart of the aggrieved to the heart of the aggressor.

We must carry both of these ideas into our thoughts of God's pardon in order to see the whole fulness of it. And perhaps we may have to add yet another illustration, drawn from another region, and which is enshrined in one of the versions of the Lord’s Prayer, where we read, ‘Forgive us our *debts*.’ When a debt is forgiven it is cancelled, and the payment of it no longer required. But the two elements that I have pointed out, the remission of the penalty and the uninterrupted flow of God’s love, are inseparably united in the full Scriptural notion of forgiveness.

Scripture recognises as equally real and valid, in our relations to God, the judicial and the fatherly side of the relationship. And it declares as plainly that the wages of sin is death as it declares that God’s love cannot come in its fulness and its sweetness, upon a heart that indulges in unconfessed and unrepented sin. They are poor friends of men who, for the sake of smoothing away the terrible side of the Gospel, minimise or hide the reality of the awful penalties which attach to every transgression and disobedience, because they thereby maim the notion of the divine forgiveness, and lull into a fatal slumber the consciences of many men.

Dear brethren! I have to stand here saying, ‘Knowing, therefore, the terrors of the Lord, we persuade men.’ This is sure and certain, that over and above the forcing back upon itself of the love of God by my sin, that sin by necessary consequence will work out awful results for the doer in the present and in the future. I do not wish to dwell upon that thought, only remember that God is a Judge and God is the Father, and that the divine forgiveness includes both of these elements, the sweeping away of the penal consequences of men’s sin, wholly in the future, and to some extent in the present; and the unchecked flow of the love of God to a man’s heart.

There are awful words in Scripture-which are not to be ruled out of it by any easy-going, optimistic, rose-water system of a mutilated Christianity-there are awful words in Scripture, concerning what you and I must come to if we live and die in our sins, and there would be no message of forgiveness worth the proclaiming to men, if it had nothing to say about the removal of that which a man’s own unsophisticated conscience tells him is certain, the fatal and the damnable effects of his departure from God.

But let us not forget that these two aspects do to a large extent coincide, when we come to remember that the worst of all the penal consequences of sin is that it separates from God, and exposes to ‘the wrath of God,’ a terrible expression by which the Bible means the necessary disapprobation and aversion of the divine nature, being such as it is, from man’s sin.

Experimentalists will sometimes cut off one or other of the triple rays of which sunlight is composed by passing the beam through some medium which intercepts the red, or the violet, or the yellow, as may chance. And my sin makes an atmosphere which cuts off the gentler rays of that divine nature, and lets the fiery ones of retribution come through. It is not that a sinful man, howsoever drenched overhead in the foul pool of his own unrepented iniquity, is shut out from the love of God, which lingers about him and woos him, and lavishes upon him all the gifts of which he is capable, but that he has made himself incapable of receiving the sweetest of these influences, and that so long as he continues thus, his life and his character cannot but be odious and hateful in the pure eyes of perfect love.

But whilst thus there are external consequences which are swept away by forgiveness, and whilst the real hell of hells and death of deaths is the separation from God, and the misery that must necessarily ensue thereupon, there are consequences of man’s sin which forgiveness is not intended to remove, and will not remove, just because God loves us. He loves us too well to take away the issues in the natural sphere, in the social sphere, the issues perhaps in bodily health, reputation, position, and the like, which flow from our transgression. ‘Thou wast a God that forgavest them, and Thou didst inflict retribution for their inventions.’ He does leave much of these outward issues unswept away by His forgiveness, and the great law stands, ‘Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.’ And yet the pardon that you and I need, and which we can all have for the asking, flows to us unchecked and full-the great stream of the love of God, to whom we are reconciled, when we turn to Him in penitent dependence on the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

This consciousness of sin and cry for pardon lie at the foundation of vigorous practical religion. It seems to me that the differences between different types of Christianity, insipid elegance and fiery earnestness, between coldness and fervour, the difference between a sapless and a living ministry and between a formal and a real Christianity, are very largely due to the differences in realising the fact and the gravity of the fact of transgression. The prominence which we give to that in our thoughts will largely determine our notions of ourselves, and of Christ’s work, and to a great extent settle what we think Christianity is for, and what in itself it is. If a man has no deep consciousness of sin he will be satisfied with a very superficial kind of religion. ‘Every man his own redeemer’ will be his motto. And not knowing the necessity for a Saviour, he will not recognise that Christianity is fundamentally and before anything else, a system of redemption. A moral agent? Yes! A large revelation of great truth? Yes! A power to make men’s lives, individually and in the community, nobler and loftier? By all means. But before all these, and all these consequentially on its being a system by which sinful men, else hopeless and condemned, are delivered and set free. So, dear brethren! let me press upon you this,-unless my Christianity gives large prominence to the fact of my own transgression, and is full of a penitent cry for pardon, it lacks the one thing needful, I was going to say-it lacks, at all events, that which will make it a living power blessedly ruling my heart and life.

II. Note in the next place the plea for pardon.

‘For Thy name’s sake.’ The Psalmist does not come with any carefully elaborated plea, grounded upon anything in himself, either on the excuses and palliations of his evil, his corrupt nature, his many temptations, and the like, or on the depth and reality of his repentance. He does not say, ‘Forgive me, for I weep for my evil and loathe myself.’ Nor does he say, ‘Forgive me, for I could not help doing it, or because I was tempted; or because the thing that I have done is a very little thing after all.’ He comes empty-handed, and says, ‘For Thy name’s sake, O Lord!’ That means, first, the great thought that God’s mercy flows from the infinite depths of His own character. He is His own motive. The fountain of His forgiving love wells up of itself, drawn forth by nothing that we do, but propelled from within by the inmost nature of God. As surely as it is the property of light to radiate and of fire to spread, so surely is it His nature and property to have mercy. He forgives, says our text, because He is God, and cannot but do so. Therefore our mightiest plea is to lay hold of His own strength, and to grasp the fact of the unmotived, uncompelled, unpurchased, and therefore unalterable and eternal pardoning love of God.

Scientists tell us that the sun is fed and kept in splendour by the constant impact of bodies from without falling in upon it, and that if that supply were to cease, the furnace of the heavens would go out. But God, who is light in Himself, needs no accession of supplies from without to maintain His light, and no force of motives from without to sway His will. We do not need to seek to bend Him to mercy, for He is mercy in Himself. We do not need to stir His purpose into action, for it has been working from of old and ‘its goings forth are from everlasting.’ He is His own motive, He forgives because of what He is. So let us dig down to that deepest of all rock foundations on which to build our confidence, and be sure that, if I may use such an expression, the necessity of the divine nature compels Him to pardon iniquity, transgression, and sin.

Then there is another thought here, that the past of God is a plea with God for present forgiveness. ‘Thy name’ in Scripture means the whole revelation of the divine character, and thus the Psalmist looks back into the past, and sees there how God has, all through the ages, been plenteous in mercy and ready to forgive all that called upon Him; and he pleads that past as a reason for the present and for the future. Thousands of years have passed since David, if he was the Psalmist, offered this prayer; and you and I can look back to the blessed old story of *his* forgiveness, so swift, so absolute and free, which followed upon confession so lowly, and can remember that infinitely pathetic and wonderful word which puts the whole history of the resurrection and restoration of a soul into two clauses. ‘David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord: and Nathan said unto David’-finishing the sentence-’And the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity of thy sin.’ What He was He is; what He is He will be. ‘For Thy name’s sake, pardon mine iniquity.’

There is yet another thought that may be suggested. The divine forgiveness is in order that men may know Him better. That is represented in Scripture as being the great motive of the divine actions-’for the glory of Thine own name.’ That may be so put as to be positively atrocious, or so as to be perfectly divine and lovely. It has often been put, by hard and narrow dogmatists, in such a way as to make God simply an Almighty selfishness, but it ought to be put as the Bible puts it, so as to show Him as an Almighty love. For why does He desire that His name should be known by us but for our sakes, that the light of that great Name may come to us, ‘sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death,’ and that, knowing Him for what He is, we may have peace, and rest, and joy, and love, and purity? It is pure benevolence that makes Him act, ‘for the glory of His great name’; sweeping away the clouds that a darkened earth may expand and rejoice, and all the leaves unfold themselves, and every bird sing, in the restored sunshine.

And there is nothing that reveals the inmost hived sweetness and honey of the name of God like the assurance of His pardon. ‘There is forgiveness with Thee that Thou mayest be feared.’ Oh, dear brethren! unless you know God as the God that has forgiven you, your knowledge of Him is but shallow and incomplete, and you know not the deepest blessings that flow to them who find that this is life eternal to know the only true God as the all-forgiving Father.

Note the connection between the Psalmist’s plea and the New Testament plea. David said, ‘For Thy name’s sake, pardon,’ we say, ‘For Christ’s sake, forgive.’ Are the two diverse? Is the fruit diverse from the bud? Is the complete noonday diverse from the blessed morning twilight? Christ *is* the Name of God, the Revealer of the divine heart and mind. When Christian men pray ‘For the sake of Christ,’ they are not bringing a motive, which is to move the divine love which else lies passive and inert, because God’s love was the cause of Christ’s work not Christ’s work the cause of God’s love, but they are expressing their own dependence on the Great Mediator and His work, and solemnly offering, as the ground of all their hope, that perfect sacrifice which is the medium by which forgiveness reaches men, and without which it is impossible that the government of the righteous God could exist with pardon. Christ has died; Christ, in dying, has borne the sins of the world; that is, yours and mine. And therefore the pardon of God comes to us through that channel, without, in the slightest degree, trenching on the awfulness of the divine holiness or weakening the sanctities of God’s righteous retributive law. ‘For Christ’s sake hath forgiven us’ is the daylight which the Psalmist saw as morning dawn when he cried, ‘For Thy name’s sake, pardon mine iniquity.’

III. Lastly, note the reason for the earnest cry, ‘For it is great.’

That may be a reason for the pardon; more probably it is a reason for the prayer. The fact is true in regard to us all. There is no need to suppose any special heinous sin in the Psalmist’s mind. I would fain press upon all consciences that listen to me now that these lowly words of confession are true about every one of us, whether we know it or not. For if you consider how much of self-will, how much of indifference, of alienation from, if not of antagonism against, the law of God, go to every trifling transgression, you will think twice before you call it small. And if it be small, a microscopic viper, the length of a cutting from your finger nail, has got the viper’s nature in it, and its poison, and its sting, and it will grow. A very little quantity of mud held in solution in a continuously flowing river will make a tremendous delta at the mouth of it in the course of years. And however small may have been the amount of evil and deflection from God’s law in that flowing river of my past life, what a filthy, foul bank of slime must be piled up down yonder at the mouth!

If the fact be so, then is not that a reason for our all going to the only One who can dredge it away, and get rid of it? ‘Pardon me; for it is great.’ That is to say, ‘There is no one else who can deal with it but Thyself, O Lord! It is too large for me to cart away; it is too great for any inferior hand to deal with. I am so bad that I can come only to Thyself to be made better.’ It is blessed and wise when the consciousness of our deep transgression drives us to the only Hand that can heal, to the only Heart that can forgive.

So, dear friends! in a blessed desperation of otherwise being unable to get rid of this burden which has grown on our backs ounce by ounce for long years, let us go to Him. He and He alone can deal with it. ‘Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned,’ and to Thee, Thee only, will I come.

Only remember that, before you ask, God has given. He is ‘like the dew upon the grass, that waiteth not for man.’ Instead of praying for pardon which is already bestowed, do you see to it that you take the pardon which God is praying you to receive. Swallow the bitter pill of acknowledging your own transgression; and then one look at the crucified Christ and one motion of believing desire towards Him; ‘and the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity of thy sin.’

16)Psalms 27:4

Psalms

GOD’S GUESTS

Psa. 27:4.

We shall do great injustice to this mystical aspiration of the Psalmist, if we degrade it to be the mere expression of a desire for unbroken residence in a material Temple. He was no sickly, sentimental seeker after cloistered seclusion. He knew the necessities and duties of life far better than in a cowardly way to wish to shirk them, in order that he might loiter in the temple, idle under the pretence of worship. Nor would the saying fit into the facts of the case if we gave it that low meaning, for no person had his residence in the temple. And what follows in the next verse would, on that hypothesis, be entirely inappropriate. ‘In the secret of His tabernacle shall He hide me.’ No one went into the secret place of the Most High, in the visible, material structure, except the high priest once a year. But this singer expects that his abode will be there always; and that, in the time of trouble, he can find refuge there.

Apart altogether from any wider considerations as to the relation between form and spirit under the Old Covenant, I think that such observations compel us to see in these words a desire a great deal nobler and deeper than any such wish.

I. Let us, then, note the true meaning of this aspiration of the Psalmist.

Its fulfilment depends not on where we are, but on what we think and feel; for every place is God’s house, and what the Psalmist desires is that he should be able to keep up unbroken consciousness of being in God’s presence and should be always in touch with Him.

That seems hard, and people say, ‘Impossible! how can I get above my daily work, and be perpetually thinking of God and His will, and consciously realising communion with Him?’ But there is such a thing as having an undercurrent of consciousness running all through a man’s life and mind; such a thing as having a melody sounding in our ears perpetually, ‘so sweet we know not we are listening to it’ until it stops, and then, by the poverty of the naked and silent atmosphere, we know how musical were the sounds that we scarcely knew that we heard, and yet did hear so well high above all the din of earth’s noises.

Every man that has ever cherished such an aspiration as this knows the difficulties all too well. And yet, without entering upon thorny and unprofitable questions as to whether the absolute, unbroken continuity of consciousness of being in God’s presence is possible for men here below, let us look at the question, which has a great deal more bearing upon our present condition-viz. whether a greater continuity of that consciousness is not possible than we attain to to-day. It does seem to me to be a foolish and miserable waste of time and temper and energy for good people to be quarrelling about whether they can come to the absolute realisation of this desire in this world, when there is not one of them who is not leagues below the possible realisation of it, and knows that he is. At all events, whether or not the line can be drawn without a break at all, the breaks might be a great deal shorter and a great deal less frequent than they are. An unbroken line of conscious communion with God is the ideal; and that is what this singer desired and worked for. How many of my feelings and thoughts to-day, or of the things that I have said or done since I woke this morning, would have been done and said and felt exactly the same, if there were not a God at all, or if it did not matter in the least whether I ever came into touch with Him or not? Oh, dear friends! it is no vain effort to bring our lives a little nearer that unbroken continuity of communion with Him of which this text speaks. And God knows, and we each for ourselves know, how much and how sore our need is of such a union. ‘One thing have I desired, that will I seek after; that I, in my study; I, in my shop; I, in my parlour, kitchen, or nursery; I, in my studio; I, in my lecture-hall-’may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.’ In our ‘Father’s house are many mansions.’ The room that we spend most of our lives in, each of us, at our tasks or our work-tables may be in our Father’s house, too; and it is only we that can secure that it shall be.

The inmost meaning of this Psalmist’s desire is that the consciousness of God shall be diffused throughout the whole of a man’s days, instead of being coagulated here and there at points. The Australian rivers in a drought present a picture of the Christian life of far too many of us-a stagnant, stinking pool here, a stretch of blinding gravel there; another little drop of water a mile away, then a long line of foul-smelling mud, and then another shallow pond. Why! it ought to run in a clear stream that has a scour in it and that will take all filth off the surface.

The Psalmist longed to break down the distinction between sacred and secular; to consecrate work, of whatsoever sort it was. He had learned what so many of us need to learn far more thoroughly, that if our religion does not drive the wheels of our daily business, it is of little use; and that if the field in which our religion has power to control and impel is not that of the trivialities and secularities of our ordinary life, there is no field for it at all.

'All the days of my life.' Not only on Wednesday nights, while Tuesday and Thursday are given to the world and self; not only on Sundays; not for five minutes in the morning, when I am eager to get to my daily work, and less than five minutes at night, when I am half asleep, but through the long day, doing this, that, and the other thing for God and by God and with God, and making Him the motive and the power of my course, and my Companion to heaven. And if we have, in our lives, things over which we cannot make the sign of the cross, the sooner we get rid of them the better; and if there is anything in our daily work, or in our characters, about which we are doubtful, here is a good test: does it seem to check our continual communion with God, as a ligature round the wrist might do the continual flow of the blood, or does it help us to realise His presence? If the former, let us have no more to do with it; if the latter, let us seek to increase it.

II. And now let me say a word about the Psalmist's reason for this aspiration.

The word which he employs carries with it a picture which is even more vividly given us by a synonymous word employed in the same connection in some of the other psalms. 'That I may dwell in the house of the Lord'-now, that is an allusion, not only, as I think, to the Temple, but also to the Oriental habit of giving a man who took refuge in the tent of the sheikh, guest-rites of protection and provision and friendship. The habit exists to this day, and travellers among the Bedouins tell us lovely stories of how even an enemy with the blood of the closest relative of the owner of the tent on his hands, if he can once get in there and partake of the salt of the host, is safe, and the first obligation of the owner of the tent is to watch over the life of the fugitive as over his own. So the Psalmist says, ‘I desire to have guest-rites in Thy tent; to lift up its fold, and shelter there from the heat of the desert. And although I be dark and stained with many evils and transgressions against Thee, yet I come to claim the hospitality and provision and protection and friendship which the laws of the house do bestow upon a guest.’ Carrying out substantially the same idea, Paul tells the Ephesians, as if it were the very highest privilege that the Gospel brought to the Gentiles: ‘Ye are no more strangers, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and *of the household of God*’; incorporated into His family, and dwelling safely in His pavilion as their home.

That is to say, the blessedness of keeping up such a continual consciousness of touch with God is, first and foremost, the certainty of infallible protection. Oh! how it minimises all trouble and brightens all joys, and calms amidst all distractions, and steadies and sobers in all circumstances, to feel ever the hand of God upon us! He who goes through life, finding that, when he has trouble to meet, it throws him back on God, and that when bright mornings of joy drive away nights of weeping, these wake morning songs of praise, and are brightest because they shine with the light of a Father’s love, will never be unduly moved by any vicissitudes of fortune. Like some inland and sheltered valley, with great mountains shutting it in, that ‘heareth not the loud winds when they call’ beyond the barriers that enclose it, our lives may be tranquilly free from distraction, and may be full of peace, of nobleness, and of strength, on condition of our keeping in God’s house all the days of our lives.

There is another blessing that will come to the dweller in God’s house, and that not a small one. It is that, by the power of this one satisfied longing, driven like an iron rod through all the tortuosities of my life, there will come into it a unity which otherwise few lives are ever able to attain, and the want of which is no small cause of the misery that is great upon men. Most of us seem, to our own consciousness, to live amidst endless distractions all our days, and our lives to be a heap of links parted from each other rather than a chain. But if we have that one constant thought with us, and if we are, through all the variety of occupations, true to the one purpose of serving and keeping near God, then we have a charm against the frittering away of our lives in distractions, and the misery of multiplicity; and we enter into the blessedness of unity and singleness of purpose; and our lives become, like the starry heavens in all the variety of their motions, obedient to one impulse. For unity in a life does not depend upon the monotony of its tasks, but upon the simplicity of the motive which impels to all varieties of work. So it is possible for a man harassed by multitudinous avocations, and drawn hither and thither by sometimes apparently conflicting and always bewildering, rapidly-following duties, to say, 'This one thing I do,' if all his doings are equally acts of obedience to God.

III. So, lastly, note the method by which this desire is realised.

'One thing have I desired, . . . that will I seek after' There are two points to be kept in view to that end. A great many people say, 'One thing have I desired,' and fail in persistent continuousness of the desire. No man gets rights of residence in God's house for a longer time than he continues to seek for them. The most advanced of us, and those that have longest been like Anna, who 'departed not from the Temple,' day nor night, will certainly eject ourselves unless, like the Psalmist, we use the verbs in both tenses, and say, 'One thing *have* I desired . . . that *will* I seek after.' John Bunyan saw that there was a back door to the lower regions close by the gates of the Celestial City. There may be men who have long lived beneath the shadow of the sanctuary, and at the last will be found outside the gates.

But the words of the text not only suggest, by the two tenses of the verbs, the continuity of the desire which is destined to be granted, but also by the two verbs themselves-desire and seek after-the necessity of uniting prayer and work. Many desires are unsatisfied because conduct does not correspond to desires. Many a prayer remains unanswered because its prayers never do anything to fulfil their prayers. I do not say they are hypocrites; certainly they are not consciously so, but I do say that there is a large measure of conventionality that means nothing, in the prayers of average Christian people for more holiness and likeness to Jesus Christ.

Dear friends! if we truly wish this desire of dwelling in the house of the Lord to be fulfilled, the day’s work must run in the same direction as the morning’s petition, and we must, like the Psalmist, say, ‘I *have desired* it of the Lord, so I, for my part, *will seek after it*.’ Then, whether or not we reach absolutely to the standard, which is none the less to be aimed at, though it seems beyond reach, we shall arrive nearer and nearer to it; and, God helping our weakness and increasing our strength, quickening us to ‘desire,’ and upholding us to ‘seek after,’ we may hope that, when the days of our life are past, we shall but remove into an upper chamber, more open to the sunrise and flooded with light; and shall go no more out, but ‘dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.’

17)Psalms 27:8-9

Psalms

‘SEEK YE’-’I WILL SEEK’

Psa. 27:8 - Psa. 27:9.

We have here a report of a brief dialogue between God and a devout soul. The Psalmist tells us of God’s invitation and of his acceptance, and on both he builds the prayer that the face which he had been bidden to seek, and had sought, may not be hid from him. The correspondence between what God said to him and what he said to God is even more emphatically expressed in the original than in our version. In the Hebrew the sentence is dislocated, at the risk of being obscure, for the sake of bringing together the two voices. It runs thus, ‘My heart said to Thee,’ and then, instead of going on with his answer, the Psalmist interjects God’s invitation ‘Seek ye My face,’ and then, side by side with that, he lays his response, ‘Thy face, Lord, will I seek.’ The completeness and swiftness of his answer could not be more vividly expressed. To hear was to obey: as soon as God’s merciful call sounded, the Psalmist’s heart responded, like a harp-string thrilled into music by the vibration of another tuned to the same note. Without hesitation, and in entire correspondence with the call, was his response. So swiftly, completely, resolutely should we respond to God’s voice, and our ready ‘I will’ should answer His commandment, as the man at the wheel repeats the captain’s orders whilst he carries them out. Upon such acceptance of such an invitation we, too, may build the prayer, ‘Hide not Thy face far from me.’

Now, there are three things here that I desire to look at-God’s merciful call to us all; the response of the devout soul to that call; and the prayer which is built upon both.

I. We have God’s merciful call to us all.

‘Thou saidst, Seek ye My face.’ Now, that expression, ‘the face of God,’ though highly metaphorical, is perfectly clear and defined in its meaning. It corresponds substantially to what the Apostle Paul calls, in speaking of the knowledge of God beyond the limits of revelation, ‘that which may be known of God’; or, in more modern language, the side of the divine nature which is turned to man; or, in plainer words still, God, in so far as He is revealed. It means substantially the same thing as the other Scriptural expression, ‘the name of the Lord.’ Both phrases draw a broad distinction between what God is, in the infinite fulness of His incomprehensible being, and what He is as revealed to man; and both imply that what is revealed is knowledge, real and valid, though it may be imperfect.

This, then, being the meaning of the phrase, what is the meaning of the invitation: ‘Seek ye My face’? Have we to search for that, as if it were something hidden, far off, lost, and only to be recovered by our effort? No: a thousand times no! For the seeking, to which God mercifully invites us, is but the turning of the direction of our desires to Him, the recognition of the fact that His face is more than all else to men, the recognition that whilst there are many that say, ‘Who will show us any good?’ and put the question impatiently, despairingly, vainly, they that turn the seeking into a prayer, and ask, ‘Lord! lift Thou the light of Thy countenance upon us,’ will never ask in vain. To seek is to desire, to turn the direction of thought and will and affection to Him and to take heed that the ordering of our daily lives is such as that no mist rising from them shall come between us and that brightness of light, or hide from us the vision splendid. They who seek God by desire, by the direction of thought and will and love, and by the regulation of their daily lives in accordance with that desire, are they who obey this commandment.

Next we come to that great thought that God is ever sounding out to all mankind this invitation to seek His face. By the revelation of Himself He bids us all sun ourselves in the brightness of His countenance. One of the New Testament writers, in a passage which is mistranslated in our Authorised Version, says that God ‘calls us by His own glory and virtue.’ That is to say, the very manifestation of the divine Being is such that there lies in it a summons to behold Him, and an attraction to Himself. So fair is He, that He but needs to withdraw the veil, and men’s hearts rejoice in that countenance, which is as the sun shining in his strength; ‘nor know we anything more fair than is the smile upon His face.’ If we see Him as He really is, we cannot choose but love. By all His works He calls us to seek Him, not only because the intellect demands that there shall be a personal Will behind all these phenomena, but because they in themselves proclaim His name, and the proclamation of His name is the summons to behold.

By the very make of our own spirits He calls us to Himself. Our restlessness, our yearnings, our movings about as aliens in the midst of things seen and visible, all these bid us turn to Him in whom alone our capacities can be satisfied, and the hunger of our souls appeased. You remember the old story of the Saracen woman who came to England seeking her lover, and passed through these foreign cities, with no word upon her tongue that could be understood of those that heard her except his name whom she sought. Ah! that is how men wander through the earth, strangers in the midst of it. They cannot translate the cry of their own hearts, but it means, ‘God-my soul thirsteth for Thee’; and the thirst bids us seek His face.

He summons us by all the providences and events of our changeful lives. Our sorrows by their poignancy, our joys by their incompleteness and their transiency, alike call us to Him in whom alone the sorrows can be soothed and the joys made full and remain. Our duties, by their heaviness, call us to turn ourselves to Him, in whom alone we can find the strength to fill the *role* that is laid upon us, and to discharge our daily tasks.

But, most of all, He summons us to Himself by Him who is the Angel of His Face, ‘the effulgence of His glory, and the express image of His person.’ In the face of Jesus Christ, ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God' beams out upon us, as it never shone on this Psalmist of old. He saw but a portion of that countenance, through a thick veil which thinned as faith gazed, but was never wholly withdrawn. The voice that he heard calling him was less penetrating and less laden with love than the voice that calls us. He caught some tones of invitation sounding in providences and prophecies, in ceremonies and in law; we hear them more full and clear from the lips of a Brother. They sound to us from the cradle and the cross, and they are wafted down to us from the throne. God's merciful invitation to us poor men never has taken, nor will, nor can, take a sweeter and more attractive form than in Christ's version of it: 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' Friend! that summons comes to us; may we deal with it as the Psalmist did!

II. That brings me to note, secondly, the devout soul's response to the loving call from God.

I have already pointed out how beautifully and vividly the contrast between the two is expressed in our text: 'Seek ye My face'-'Thy face will I seek.' The Psalmist takes the general invitation and converts it into an individual one, to which he responds. God's 'ye' is met by his 'I.' The Psalmist makes no hesitation or delay-'When Thou *saidst* . . . my heart said to Thee.' The Psalmist gathers himself together in a concentrated resolve of a fixed determination-'Thy face *will* I seek.' That is how we ought to respond.

Make the general invitation thy very own. God summons all, because He summons each. He does not cast His invitations out at random over the heads of a crowd, as some rich man might fling coins to a mob, but He addresses every one of us singly and separately, as if there were not another soul in the universe to hear His voice but our very own selves. It is for us not to lose ourselves in the crowd, since He has not lost us in it; but to appropriate, to individualise, to make our very own, the universality of His call to the world. It matters nothing to you what other men may do; it matters not to you how many others may be invited, and whether they may accept or may refuse. When that 'Seek ye' comes to my heart, life or death depends on my answering, 'Whatsoever others may do, as for me I will seek Thy face.' We preachers that have to stand and address a multitude sound out the invitation, and it loses in power, the more there are to listen to us. If I could get you one by one, the poorest words would have more weight with you than the strongest have when spoken to a crowd. Brother! God individualises us, and God speaks to Thee, ‘Wilt thou behold My face?’ Answer, ‘As for me, I will.’

Again, the Psalmist ‘made haste, and delayed not, but made haste’ to respond to the merciful summons. Ah! how many of us, in how many different ways, fall into the snare ‘by-and-by’! ‘not now’; and all these days, that slip away whilst we hesitate, gather themselves together to be our accusers hereafter. Friend! why should you limit the blessedness that may come into your life to the fag end of it when you have got tired and satiated, or tired and disappointed with the world and its good? ‘Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near.’ It is poor courtesy to show to a merciful invitation from a bountiful host if I say; ‘After I have looked to the oxen I have bought, and tested them, and measured the field that I have acquired; after I have drunk the sweetness of wedded life with the wife that I have married, then I will come. But, for the present, I pray thee, have me excused.’ And that is what many are doing, more or less.

The Psalmist gathered himself together in a fixed resolve, and said, ‘I *will*.’ That is what we have to do. A languid seeker will not find; an earnest one will not fail to find. But if half-heartedly, now and then, when we are at leisure in the intervals of more important and pressing daily business, we spasmodically bethink ourselves, and for a little while seek for the light of God’s felt presence to shine upon us, we shall not get it. But if we lay a masterful hand, as we ought to do, on these divergent desires that draw us asunder, and bind ourselves, as it were, together, by the strong cord of a resolved purpose carried out throughout our lives, then we shall certainly not seek in vain.

Alas! how strange and how sad is the reception which this merciful invitation receives from so many of us! Some of you never hear it at all. Standing in the very focus where the sounds converge, you are deaf, as if a man behind the veil of the falling water of Niagara, on that rocky shelf there, should hear nothing. From every corner of the universe that voice comes; from all the providences and events of our lives that voice comes;

from the life and death of Jesus Christ that voice comes; and not a sound reaches your ears. ‘Having ears, they hear not,’ and some of us might take the Psalmist’s answer, with one sad word added, as ours-’When Thou saidst, Seek ye My face, my heart said unto Thee, Thy face, Lord, will I *not* seek.’

Brethren! it is heaven on earth to say, ‘Thou dost call, and I answer. Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.’ Yet you shut yourselves up to, and with, misery and vanity, if you so deal with God’s merciful summons as some of us are dealing with it, so that He has to say, ‘I called, and ye refused; I stretched out My hand, and no man regarded.’

III. Lastly, we have here a prayer built upon both the invitation and the acceptance.

‘Hide not Thy face far from me.’ That prayer implies that God will not contradict Himself. His promises are commandments. If He bids us seek He binds Himself to show. His veracity, His unchangeableness, are pledged to this, that no man who yields to His invitation will be balked of his desire. He does not hold out the gift in His hand, and then twitch it away when we put out encouraged and stimulated hands to grasp it. You have seen children flashing bright reflections from a mirror on to a wall, and delighting to direct them away to another spot, when a hand has been put out to touch them. That is not how God does. The light that He reveals is steady, and whosoever turns his face to it will be irradiated by its brightness.

The prayer builds itself on the assurance that, because God will not contradict Himself, therefore every heart seeking is sure to issue in a heart finding. There is only one region where that is true, brethren! there is only one tract of human experience in which the promise is always and absolutely fulfilled:-’Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find.’ We hunt after all other good, and at the best we get it in part or for a time, and when possessed, it is not as bright as when it shone in the delusive colours of hope and desire. If you follow other good, and are drawn after the elusive lights that dance before you, and only show how great is the darkness, you will not reach them, but will be mired in the bog. If you follow after God’s face, it will make a sunshine in the shadiest places of life here. You will be blessed because you walk all the day long in the light of His countenance, and when you pass hence it will irradiate the darkness of death, and thereafter, ‘His servants shall serve Him, and shall see His face,’ and, seeing, shall be made like Him, for ‘His name shall be in their foreheads.’

Brethren! we have to make our choice whether we shall see His face here on earth, and so meet it hereafter as that of a long-separated and long-desired friend; or whether we shall see it first when He is on His throne, and we at His bar, and so shall have to ‘call on the rocks and the hills to fall on us, and cover us from the face of Him who is our Judge.’

18)Psalms 30:5

Psalms

THE TWO GUESTS

Psa. 30:5.

A word or two of exposition is necessary in order to bring out the force of this verse. There is an obvious antithesis in the first part of it, between ‘His anger’ and ‘His favour.’ Probably there is a similar antithesis between a ‘moment’ and ‘life.’ For, although the word rendered ‘life’ does not unusually mean a *lifetime* it *may* have that signification, and the evident intention of contrast seems to require it here. So, then, the meaning of the first part of my text is, ‘the anger lasts for a moment; the favour lasts for a lifetime.’ The perpetuity of the one, and the brevity of the other, are the Psalmist’s thought.

Then, if we pass to the second part of the text, you will observe that there is there also a double antithesis. ‘Weeping’ is set over against ‘joy’; the ‘night’ against the ‘morning.’ And the first of these two contrasts is the more striking if we observe that the word ‘joy’ means, literally, ‘a joyful shout,’ so that the voice which was lifted in weeping is conceived of as now being heard in exultant praise. Then, still further, the expression ‘may endure’ literally means ‘may come to lodge.’ So that Weeping and Joy are personified. Two guests come; one, dark-robed and approaching at the fitting season for such, ‘the night.’ The other bright, coming with all things fresh and sunny, in the dewy morn. The guest of the night is Weeping; the guest that takes its place in the morning is Gladness.

The two clauses, then, of my text suggest substantially the same thought, and that is the persistence of joy and the transitoriness of sorrow. The one speaks of the succession of emotions in the man; the other, of the successive aspects of the divine dealings which occasion these. The whole is a leaf out of the Psalmist's own experience. The psalm commemorates his deliverance from some affliction, probably a sickness. That is long gone past; and the tears that it caused have long since dried up. But this shout of joy of his has lasted all these centuries, and is like to be immortal. Well for us if we can read our life's story with the same cheery confidence as he did his, and have learned like him to discern what is the temporary and what the permanent element in our experience!

I. Note, first, the proportion of joy and sorrow in an ordinary life.

The Psalmist expresses, as I have said, the same idea in both clauses. In the former the 'anger' is contemplated not so much as an element in the divine mind, as in its manifestations in the divine dealings. I shall have a word or two, presently, to say about the Scriptural conception of the 'anger' of God and its relation to the 'favour' of God; but for the present I take the two clauses as being substantially equivalent.

Now is it true-is it not true?-that if a man rightly regards the proportionate duration of these two diverse elements in his life, he must come to the conclusion that the one is continuous and the other is but transitory? A thunderstorm is very short when measured against the long summer day in which it crashes; and very few days have them. It must be a bad climate where half the days are rainy. If we were to take the chart and prick out upon it the line of our sailing, we should find that the spaces in which the weather was tempestuous were brief and few indeed as compared with those in which it was sunny and calm.

But then, man looks before and after, and has the terrible gift that by anticipation and by memory he can prolong the sadness. The proportion of solid matter needed to colour the Irwell is very little in comparison with the whole of the stream. But the current carries it, and half an ounce will stain miles of the turbid stream. Memory and anticipation beat the metal thin, and make it cover an enormous space. And the misery is that, somehow, we have better memories for sad hours than for joyful ones, and it is easier to get accustomed to 'blessings,' as we call them, and to lose the poignancy of their sweetness because they become familiar, than it is to apply the same process to our sorrows, and thus to take the edge off them. The rose's prickles are felt in the flesh longer than its fragrance lives in the nostrils, or its hue in the eye. Men have long memories for their pains as compared with their remembrance of their sorrows.

So it comes to be a piece of very homely, well-worn, and yet always needful, practical counsel to try not to magnify and prolong grief, nor to minimise and abbreviate gladness. We can make our lives, to our own thinking, very much what we will. We cannot directly regulate our emotions, but we can regulate them, because it is in our own power to determine which aspect of our life we shall by preference contemplate.

Here is a room, for instance, papered with a paper with a dark background and a light pattern on it. Well, you can manoeuvre your eye about so as either to look at the black background-and then it is all black, with only a little accidental white or gilt to relieve it here and there; or you can focus your eye on the white and gold, and then that is the main thing, and the other is background. We can choose, to a large extent, what we shall conceive our lives to be; and so we can very largely modify their real character.

'There's nothing either good or bad
But thinking makes it so.'

They who will can surround themselves with persistent gladness, and they who will can gather about them the thick folds of an everbrooding and enveloping sorrow. Courage, cheerfulness, thankfulness, buoyancy, resolution, are all closely connected with a sane estimate of the relative proportions of the bright and the dark in a human life.

II. And now consider, secondly, the inclusion of the 'moment' in the 'life.'

I do not know that the Psalmist thought of that when he gave utterance to my text, but whether he did it or not, it is true that the ‘moment’ spent in ‘anger’ is a part of the ‘life’ that is spent in the ‘favour.’ Just as within the circle of a life lies each of its moments, the same principle of inclusion may be applied to the other contrast presented here. For as the ‘moment’ is a part of the ‘life,’ the ‘danger’ is a part of the love. The ‘favour’ holds the ‘anger’ within itself, for the true Scriptural idea of that terrible expression and terrible fact, the ‘wrath of God,’ is that it is the necessary aversion of a perfectly pure and holy love from that which does not correspond to itself. So, though sometimes the two may be set against each other, yet at bottom, and in reality, they are one, and the ‘anger’ is but a mode in which the ‘favour’ manifests itself. God’s love is plastic, and if thrown back upon itself, grieved and wounded and rejected, becomes the ‘anger’ which ignorant men sometimes seem to think it contradicts. There is no more antagonism between these two ideas when they are applied to God than when they are applied to you parents in your relations to a disobedient child. You know, and it knows, that if there were no love there would be little ‘anger.’ Neither of you suppose that an irate parent is an unloving parent. ‘If ye, being evil, know how,’ in dealing with your children, to blend wrath and love, ‘how much more shall your Father which is in heaven’ be one and the same Father when His love manifests itself in chastisement and when it expands itself in blessings!

Thus we come to the truth which breathes uniformity and simplicity through all the various methods of the divine hand, that howsoever He changes and reverses His dealings with us, they are one and the same. You may get two diametrically opposite motions out of the same machine. The same power will send one wheel revolving from right to left, and another from left to right, but they are co-operant to grind out at the far end the one product. It is the same revolution of the earth that brings blessed lengthening days and growing summer, and that cuts short the sun’s course and brings declining days and increasing cold. It is the same motion which hurls a comet close to the burning sun, and sends it wandering away out into fields of astronomical space, beyond the ken of telescope, and almost beyond the reach of thought. And so one uniform divine purpose, the ‘favour’ which uses the ‘anger,’ fills the life, and there are no interruptions, howsoever brief, to the steady continuous flow of His outpoured blessings.

All is love and favour. Anger is masked love, and sorrow has the same source and mission as joy. It takes all sorts of weathers to make a year, and all tend to the same issue, of ripened harvests and full barns. O brethren! if we understand that God means something better for us than happiness, even likeness to Himself, we should understand better how our deepest sorrows and bitterest tears, and the wounds that penetrate deepest into our bleeding hearts, all come from the same motive, and are directed to the same end as their most joyful contraries. One thing the Lord desires, that we may be partakers of His holiness, and so we may venture to give an even deeper meaning to the Psalmist's words than he intended, and recognise that the 'moment' is an integral part of the 'life,' and the 'anger' a mode of the manifestation of the 'favour.'

III. Lastly, notice the conversion of the sorrow into joy.

I have already explained the picturesque image of the last part of my text, which demands a little further consideration. There are two figures presented before us, one dark robed and one bright garmented. The one is the guest of the night, the other is the guest of the morning. The verb which occurs in the first clause of the second half of my text is not repeated in the second, and so the words may be taken in two ways. They may either express how Joy, the morning guest, comes, and turns out the evening visitant, or they may suggest how we took Sorrow in when the night fell, to sit by the fireside, but when morning dawned-who is this, sitting in her place, smiling as we look at her? It is Sorrow transfigured, and her name is changed into Joy. Either the substitution or the transformation may be supposed to be in the Psalmist's mind.

Both are true. No human heart, however wounded, continues always to bleed. Some gracious vegetation creeps over the wildest ruin. The roughest edges are smoothed by time. Vitality asserts itself; other interests have a right to be entertained and are entertained. The recuperative powers come into play, and the pang departs and poignancy is softened. The cutting edge gets blunt on even poisoned spears by the gracious influences of time. The nightly guest, Sorrow, slips away, and ere we know, another sits in her place. Some of us try to fight against that merciful process and seem to think that it is a merit to continue, by half artificial means, the first moment of pain, and that it is treason to some dear remembrances to let life have its way, and to-day have its rights. That is to set ourselves against the dealings of God, and to refuse to forgive Him for what His love has done for us.

But the other thought seems to me to be even more beautiful, and probably to be what was in the Psalmist's mind-viz. the transformation of the evil, Sorrow itself, into the radiant form of Joy. A prince in rags comes to a poor man's hovel, is hospitably received in the darkness, and being received and welcomed, in the morning slips off his rags and appears as he is. Sorrow is Joy disguised.

If it be accepted, if the will submit, if the heart let itself be untwined, that its tendrils may be coiled closer round the heart of God, then the transformation is sure to come, and joy will dawn on those who have done rightly-that is, submissively and thankfully-by their sorrows. It will not be a joy like what the world calls joy-loud-voiced, boisterous, ringing with idiot laughter; but it will be pure, and deep, and sacred, and permanent. A white lily is fairer than a flaunting peony, and the joy into which sorrow accepted turns is pure and refining and good.

So, brethren! remember that the richest vintages are grown on the rough slopes of the volcano, and lovely flowers blow at the glacier's edge; and all our troubles, big and little, may be converted into gladnesses if we accept them as God meant them. Only they must be so accepted if they are to be thus changed.

But there may be some hearts recoiling from much that I have said in this sermon, and thinking to themselves, 'Ah! there are two kinds of sorrows. There are those that *can* be cured, and there are those that *cannot*. What have you got to say to me who have to bleed from an immedicable wound till the end of my life?' Well, I have to say this-look beyond earth's dim dawns to that morning when 'the Sun of Righteousness shall arise, to them that love His name, with healing in His wings.' If we have to carry a load on an aching back till the end, be sure that when the night, which is far spent, is over, and the day which is at hand hath broken, every raindrop will be turned into a flashing rainbow when it is smitten by the level light, and every sorrow rightly borne be represented by a special and particular joy.

Only, brother! if a life is to be spent in His favour, it must be spent in His fear. And if our cares and troubles and sorrows and losses are to be transfigured hereafter, then we must keep very near Jesus Christ, who has promised to us that His joy will remain with us, and that our sorrows shall be turned into joys. If we trust to Him, the voices that have been raised in weeping will be heard in gladness, and earth's minor will be transposed by the great Master of the music into the key of Heaven's jubilant praise. If only 'we look not at the things seen, but at the things which are not seen,' then 'our light affliction, which is but for a moment, will work out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory'; and the weight will be no burden, but will bear up those who are privileged to bear it.

19)Psalms 30:6

Psalms

ONE SAYING FROM THREE MEN

Psa. 10:6. - Psa. 16:8. - Psa. 30:6.

How differently the same things sound when said by different men! Here are three people giving utterance to almost the same sentiment of confidence. A wicked man says it, and it is insane presumption and defiance. A good man says it, having been lulled into false security by easy times, and it is a mistake that needs chastisement. A humble believing soul says it, and it is the expression of a certain and blessed truth. 'The wicked saith in his heart, I shall not be moved.' A good man, led astray by his prosperity, said, 'I shall not be moved,' and the last of the three put a little clause in which makes all the difference, '*because He is at my right hand*, I shall never be moved.' So, then, we have the mad arrogance of godless confidence, the mistake of a good man that needs correction, and the warranted confidence of a believing soul.

I. The mad arrogance of godless confidence.

The 'wicked' man, in the psalm from which our first text comes, said a good many wrong things 'in his heart.' The tacit assumptions on which a life is based, though they may never come to consciousness, and still less to utterance, are the really important things. I dare say this ‘wicked man’ was a good Jew with his lips, and said his prayers all properly, but in his heart he had two working beliefs. One is thus expressed: ‘As for all his enemies, he puffeth at them. He hath said in his heart, I shall not be moved.’ The other is put into words thus: ‘He hath said in his heart, God hath forgotten, He hideth His face. He will never see it.’

That is to say, the only explanation of a godless life, unless the man is an idiot, is that there lie beneath it, as formative principles and unspoken assumptions, guiding and shaping it, one or both of these two thoughts: either ‘There is no God,’ or ‘He does not care what I do, and I am safe to go on for evermore in the present fashion.’ It might seem as if a man with the facts of human life before him, could not, even in the insanest arrogance, say, ‘I shall not be moved, for I shall never be in adversity.’ But we have an awful power-and the fact that we exercise, and choose to exercise, it is one of the strange riddles of our enigmatical existence and characters-of ignoring unwelcome facts, and going cheerily on as though we had annihilated them, because we do not reflect upon them. So this man, in the midst of a world in which there is no stay, and whilst he saw all round him the most startling and tragical instances of sudden change and complete collapse, stands quietly and says, ‘Ah! *I* shall never be moved’; ‘God doth not require it.’

That absurdity is the basis of every life that is not a life of consecration and devotion-so far as it has a basis of conviction at all. The ‘wicked’ man’s true faith is this, absurd as it may sound when you drag it out into clear, distinct utterance, whatever may be his professions. I wonder if there are any of us whose life can only be acquitted of being utterly unreasonable and ridiculous by the assumption, ‘I shall never be moved’?

Have you a lease of your goods? Do you think you are tenants at will or owners? Which? Is there any reason why any of us should escape, as some of us live as if we believed we should escape, the certain fate of all others? If there is not, what about the sanity of the man whose whole life is built upon a blunder? He is convicted of the grossest folly, unless he be assured that either there is no God, or that He does not care one rush about what we do, and that consequently we are certain of a continuance in our present state.

Do you say in your heart, ‘I shall never be moved’? Then you must be strong enough to resist every tempest that beats against you. Is that so? ‘I shall never be moved’-then nothing that contributes to your well-being will ever slip from your grasp, but you will be able to hold it tight. Is that so? ‘I shall never be moved’-then there is no grave waiting for you. Is that so? Unless these three assumptions be warranted, every godless man is making a hideous blunder, and his character is the sentence pronounced by the loving lips of Incarnate Truth on the rich man who thought that he had ‘much goods laid up for many years,’ and had only to be merry-’Thou fool! Thou fool!’ If an engineer builds a bridge across a river without due calculation of the force of the winds that blow down the gorge, the bridge will be at the bottom of the stream some stormy night, and the train piled on the fragments of it in hideous ruin. And with equal certainty the end of the first utterer of this speech can be calculated, and is foretold in the psalm, ‘The Lord is King for ever and ever. . . . The godless are perished out of the land.’

II. We have in our second text the mistake of a good man who has been lulled into false confidence.

The Psalmist admits his error by the acknowledgment that he spoke ‘in my prosperity’; or, as the word might be rendered, ‘in my *security*.’ This suggests to us the mistake into which even good men, lulled by the quiet continuance of peaceful days, are certain to fall, unless there be continual watchfulness exercised by them.

It is a very significant fact that the word which is translated in our Authorised Version ‘prosperity’ is often rendered ‘security,’ meaning thereby, not safety, but a belief that I am safe. A man who is prosperous, or at ease, is sure to drop into the notion that ‘to-morrow will be as this day, and much more abundant,’ unless he keeps up unslumbering watchfulness against the insidious illusion of permanence. If he yields to the temptation, in his foolish security, forgetting how fragile are its foundations, and what a host of enemies surround him threatening it, then there is nothing for it but that the merciful discipline, which this Psalmist goes on to tell us he had to pass through by reason of his fall, shall be brought to bear upon him. The writer gives us a page of his own autobiography. ‘In my security I said, I shall never be moved.’ ‘Lord! by Thy favour Thou hast made my mountain to stand strong. Thou didst hide Thy face.’ What about the security then? What about ‘I shall never be moved’ then? ‘I was troubled. I cried to Thee, O Lord!’-and then it was all right, his prayer was heard, and he was in ‘security’-that is, safety-far more really when he was ‘troubled’ and sore beset than when he had been, as he fancied, sure of not being moved.

Long peace rusts the cannon, and is apt to make it unfit for war. Our lack of imagination, and our present sense of comfort and well-being, tend to make us fancy that we shall go on for ever in the quiet jog-trot of settled life without any very great calamities or changes. But there was once a village at the bottom of the crater of Vesuvius, and great trees, that had grown undisturbed there for a hundred years, and green pastures, and happy homes and flocks. And then, one day, a rumble and a rush, and what became of the village? It went up in smoke-clouds. The quiescence of the volcano is no sign of its extinction. And as surely as we live, so sure is it that there will come a ‘to-morrow’ to us all which shall *not* be as this day. No man has any right to calculate upon anything beyond the present moment, and there is no basis whatever, either for the philosophical assertion that the order of nature is fixed, and that therefore there are no miracles, or for the practical translation of the assertion into our daily lives, that we may reasonably expect to go on as we are without changes or calamities. There is no reason capable of being put into logical shape for believing that, because the sun has risen ever since the beginning of things, it will rise to-morrow, for there will come a to-morrow when it will *not* rise. In like manner, the longest possession of our mercies is no reason for forgetting the precarious tenure on which we hold them all.

So, Christian men and women! let us try to keep vivid that consciousness which is so apt to get dull, that nothing continueth in one stay, and that we *shall* be moved, as far as the outward life and its circumstances are concerned. If we forget it, we shall need, and we shall get, the loving Fatherly discipline, which my second text tells us followed the false security of this good man. The sea is kept from putrefying by storms. Wine poured from vessel to vessel is purified thereby. It is an old truth and a wholesome one, to be always remembered, ‘because they have no changes therefore they fear not God .’

III. Lastly, we have the same thing said by another man in another key.

‘Because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.’ The prelude to the assertion makes all the difference. Here is the warranted confidence of a simple faith.

The man who clasps God’s hand, and has Him standing by his side, as his Ally, his Companion, his Guide, his Defence-that man does not need to fear change. For all the things which convict the arrogant or mistaken confidences of the other men as being insanity or a lapse from faith prove the confidence of the trustful soul to be the very perfection of reason and common sense.

We may be confident of our power to resist anything that can come against us, if He be at our side. The man that stands with his back against an oak-tree is held firm, not because of his own strength, but because of that on which he leans. There is a beautiful story of some heathen convert who said to a missionary’s wife, who had felt faint and asked that she might lean for a space on her stronger arm, ‘If you love me, lean hard.’ That is what God says to us, ‘If you love Me, lean hard.’ And if you do, because He is at your right hand, you will not be moved. It is not insanity; it is not arrogance; it is simple faith, to look our enemies in the eyes, and to feel sure that they cannot touch us, ‘Trust in Jehovah; so shall ye be established.’ Rest on the Lord, and ye shall rest indeed.

In like manner the man who has God at his right hand may be sure of the unalterable continuance of all his proper good. Outward things may come or go, as it pleases Him, but that which makes the life of our life will never depart from us as long as He stands there. And whilst He is there, if only our hearts are knit to Him, we can say, ‘My heart and my flesh faileth, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever. I shall not be moved. Though all that can go goes, He abides; and in Him I have all riches.’ Trust not in the uncertainty of outward good, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy.

The wicked man was defiantly arrogant, and the forgetful good man was criminally self-confident, when they each said, ‘I shall not be moved.’ We are only taking up the privileges that belong to us if, exercising faith in Him, we venture to say, ‘Take what Thou wilt; leave me Thyself; I have enough.’ And the man who says, ‘Because God is at my right hand, I shall not be moved,’ has the right to anticipate an unbroken continuance of personal being, and an unchanged continuance of the very life of his life. That which breaks off all other lives abruptly is no breach in the continuity, either of the consciousness or of the avocations of a devout man. For, on the other side of the flood, he does what he does on this side, only more perfectly and more continually. ‘He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever,’ and it makes comparatively little difference to him whether his place be on this or on the other side of Jordan. We ‘shall not be moved,’ even when we change our station from earth to heaven, and the sublime fulfilment of the warranted confidence of the trustful soul comes when the ‘to-morrow’ of the skies is as the ‘to-day’ of earth, only ‘much more abundant.’

20)Psalms 31:2-3

Psalms

‘BE . . . FOR THOU ART’

Psa. 31:2 - Psa. 31:3.

It sounds strange logic, ‘Be . . . for Thou art,’ and yet it *is* the logic of prayer, and goes very deep, pointing out both its limits and its encouragements. The parallelism between these two clauses is even stronger in the original than in our Version, for whilst the two words which designate the ‘Rock’ are not identical, their meaning is identical, and the difference between them is insignificant; one being a rock of any shape or size, the other being a perpendicular cliff or elevated promontory. And in the other clause, ‘for a house of defence to save me,’ the word rendered ‘defence’ is the same as that which is translated in the next clause ‘fortress.’ So that if we were to read thus: ‘Be Thou a strong Rock to me, for a house, a fortress, for Thou art my Rock and my Fortress,’ we should get the whole force of the parallelism. Of course the main idea in that of the ‘Rock,’ and ‘Fortress’ is only an exposition of one phase of the meaning of that metaphor.

I. So let us look first at what God is.

‘A rock, a fortress-house.’ Now, what is the force of that metaphor? Stable being, as it seems to me, is the first thought in it, for there is nothing that is more absolutely the type of unchangeableness and steadfast continuance. The great cliffs rise up, and the river glides at their base-it is a type of mutability, and of the fleeting generations of men, who are as the drops and ripples in its course-it eddies round the foot of the rocks to which the old man looks up, and sees the same dints and streaks and fissures in it that he saw when he was a child. The river runs onwards, the trees that root themselves in the clefts of the rock bear their spring foliage, and drop their leaves like the generations of men, and the Rock is ‘the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.’ And God the Unchangeable rises, if I may so say, like some majestic cliff, round the foot of which rolls for ever the tide of human life, and round which are littered the successive layers of the leaves of many summers.

Then besides this stable being, and the consequences of it, is the other thought which is attached to the emblem in a hundred places in Scripture, and that is defence. ‘His place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks.’ When the floods are out, and all the plain is being dissolved into mud, the dwellers on it fly to the cliffs. When the enemy’s banners appear on the horizon, and the open country is being harried and burned, the peasants hurry to the defence of the hills, and, sheltered there, are safe. And so for us this Name assures us that in Him, whatever floods may sweep across the low levels, and whatever foes may storm over the open land and the unwalled villages, there is always the fortress up in the hills, and thither no flood can rise, and there no enemy can come. A defence and a sure abode is his who dwells in God, and thus folds over himself the warm wings that stretch on either side, and shelter him from all assault. ‘Lead me to the Rock that is higher than I.’

But the Rock is a defence in another way. If a hard-pressed fugitive is brought to a stand and can set his back against a rock, he can front his assailants, secure that no unseen foe shall creep up behind and deal a stealthy stab and that he will not be surrounded unawares. ‘The God of Israel shall be your rearward,’ and he who has ‘made the Most High his habitation’ is sheltered from ‘the pestilence that walketh in darkness,’ as well as from ‘the destruction that wasteth at noon-day,’ and will be cleansed from ‘secret faults’ if he keeps up unbroken his union with God, for the ‘faults’ which are not recognised as faults by his partially illuminated conscience are known to God. But the Rock is a defence in yet another way, for it is a sure foundation for our lives. Whoso builds on God need fear no change. When the floods rise, and the winds blow, and the rain storms down, the house that is on the Rock will stand.

And, then, in the Rock there is a spring, and round the spring there is ‘the light of laughing flowers,’ amidst the stern majesty of the cliff. Just as the Law-giver of old smote the rock, and there gushed out the stream that satisfied the thirst of the whole travelling nation, so Paul would have us Christians repeat the miracle by our faith. Of us, too, it may be said, they drank ‘of that Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.’ Stable being, secure defence, a fountain of refreshment and satisfaction: all these blessings lie in that great metaphor.

II. Now, note our plea with God, from what He is.

‘Be Thou to me a Rock . . . for Thou art a Rock.’ Is that not illogical? No, for notice that little word, ‘to me’-be Thou *to me* what Thou art in Thyself, and hast been to all generations.’ That makes all the difference. It is not merely ‘Be what Thou art,’ although that would be much, but it is ‘be it to me,’ and let *me* have all which is meant in that great Name.

But then, beyond that, let me point out to you how this prayer suggests to us that all true prayer will keep itself within God’s revelation of what He is. We take His promises, and all the elements which make up His name or manifestation of His character to the world, whether by His acts or by the utterances of this Book, or by the inferences to be drawn from the life of Jesus Christ, the great Revealer, or by what we ourselves have experienced of Him. The ways by which God has revealed Himself to the world define the legitimate subjects, and lay down the firm foundation, of our petitions. In all His acts God reveals Himself, and if I may so say, when we truly pray, we catch these up, and send them back again to heaven, like arrows from a bow. It is only when our desires and prayers foot themselves upon God's revelation of Himself, and in essence are, in various fashions, the repetition of this prayer of my text: 'Be . . . for Thou art,' that we can expect to have them answered. Much else may call itself prayer, but it is often but petulant and self-willed endeavour to force our wishes upon Him, and no answer will come to that. We are to pray about everything; but we are to pray about nothing, except within the lines which are marked out for us by what God has told us, in His words and acts, that He Himself is. Catch these up and fling them back to Him, and for every utterance that He has made of Himself, 'I am' so-and-so, let us go to Him and say 'Be Thou that to me,' and then we may be sure of an answer.

So then two things follow. If we pray after the pattern of this prayer, 'Be Thou to me what Thou art,' then a great many foolish and presumptuous wishes will be stifled in the birth, and, on the other hand, a great many feeble desires will be strengthened and made confident, and we shall be encouraged to expect great things of God. Have you widened your prayers, dear friend!-and I do not mean by that only your outward ones, but the habitual aspiration and expectation of your minds-have you widened these to be as wide as what God has shown us that He is? Have you taken all God's revelation of Himself, and translated it into petition? And do you expect Him to be to you all that He has ever been to any soul of man upon earth? Oh! how such a prayer as this, if we rightly understand it and feel it, puts to shame the narrowness and the poverty of our prayers, the falterings of our faith, and the absence of expectation in ourselves that we shall receive the fulness of God.

God owns that plea: 'Be . . . what Thou art.' He cannot resist that. That is what the Apostle meant when he said, 'He abideth faithful, He cannot deny Himself.' He must be true to His character. He can never be other than He always has been. And that is what the Psalmist meant when he goes on, after the words that I have taken for my text, and says, 'For Thy Name's sake lead me and guide me,' What is God's Name? The collocation of letters by which we designate Him? Certainly not. The Name of God is the sum total of what God has revealed Himself as being. And 'for the sake of the Name,' that He may be true to that which He has shown Himself to be, He will always endorse this bill that you draw upon Him when you present Him with His own character, and say ‘Be to me what Thou art.’

III. Lastly, we have here the plea with God drawn from what we have taken Him to be to us.

That is somewhat different from what I have already been dwelling upon. Mark the words: ‘Be Thou to me a strong Rock, for Thou art *my* Rock and *my* Fortress.’ What does that mean? It means that the suppliant has, by his own act of faith, taken God for his; that he has appropriated the great divine revelation, and made it his own. Now it seems to me that that appropriation is, if not *the* point, at least one of the points, in which real faith is distinguished from the sham thing which goes by that name amongst so many people. A man by faith encloses a bit of the common for his very own. When God says that He ‘so loved the world that He gave His . . . Son,’ I should say, ‘He loved *me*, and gave Himself for *me*.’ When the great revelation is made that He is the Rock of Ages, my faith says: ‘*My* Rock and *my* Fortress.’ Having said that, and claimed Him for mine, I can then turn round to Him and say, ‘Be to me what I have taken Thee to be.’

And that faith is expressed very beautifully and strikingly in one of the Old Testament metaphors, which frequently goes along with this one of the Rock. For instance, in a great chapter in Isaiah we find the original of that phrase ‘the Rock of Ages.’ It runs thus, ‘Trust ye in the Lord for ever, for in the Lord JEHOVAH is the *Rock of Ages*.’ Now the word for trust there literally means, to flee into a refuge, and so the true idea of faith is ‘to fly for refuge,’ as the Epistle to the Hebrews has it, ‘to the Hope set before us,’-that is [keeping to the metaphor], to the cleft in the Rock.

That act of trust or flight will make it certain that God will be to us for a house of defence, a fortress to save us. Other rock-shelters may crumble. They may be carried by assault; they may be riven by earthquakes. ‘The mountains shall depart, and the hills shall be removed,’ but this Rock is impregnable, and all who take refuge in it are safe for ever.

And so the upshot of the whole matter is that God will be to us what we have faith to believe that He is, and our faith will be the measure of our possession of the fulness of God. If we can only say in the fulness of our hearts-and keep to the saying: ‘Be Thou to me a Rock, for Thou art my Rock,’ then nothing shall ever hurt us; and ‘dwelling in the secret place of the Most High’ we shall be kept in safety; our ‘abode shall be the munitions of rocks, our bread shall be given us, and our water shall be made sure.’

21)Psalms 31:5

Psalms

‘INTO THY HANDS’

Psa. 31:5.

The first part of this verse is consecrated for ever by our Lord’s use of it on the Cross. Is it not wonderful that, at that supreme hour, He deigned to take an unknown singer’s words as His words? What an honour to that old saint that Jesus Christ, dying, should find nothing that more fully corresponded to His inmost heart at that moment than the utterance of the Psalmist long ago! How His mind must have been saturated with the Old Testament and with these songs of Israel! And do you not think it would be better for us if ours were completely steeped in those heart-utterances of ancient devotion?

But, of course, the Psalmist was not thinking about his death. It was an act for his life that he expressed in these words:-’Into Thine hands I commit my spirit.’ If you will glance over the psalm at your leisure, you will see that it is the heart-cry of a man in great trouble, surrounded by all sorts of difficulties, with his very life threatened. He was down in the very depths of darkness, and ringed about by all sorts of enemies at that moment, not sitting comfortably, as you and I are here, but in the midst of the hurly-burly and the strife, when by a dead lift of faith he flung himself clean out of his disasters, and, if I might so say, pitched himself into the arms of God. ‘Into Thine hands I commit my spirit,’ as a man standing in the midst of enemies, and bearing some precious treasure in his hand might, with one strong cast of his arm, fling it into the open hand of some mighty helper, and so baulk the enemies of their prey. That is the figure.

I. Now, let me say a word as to where to lodge a soul for safe keeping.

‘Into Thine hands’-a banker has a strong room, and a wise man sends his securities and his valuables to the bank and takes an acknowledgment, and goes to bed at night, quite sure that no harm will come to them, and that he will get them when he wants them. And that is exactly what the Psalmist does here. He deposits his most precious treasure in the safe custody of One who will take care of it. The great Hand is stretched out, and the little soul is put into it. It closes, and ‘no man is able to pluck them out of My Father’s hand.’

Now that is only a picturesque way of putting the most threadbare, bald, commonplace of religious teaching. The word faith, when it has any meaning at all in people’s minds when they hear it from the pulpit, is extremely apt, I fear, to create a kind of, if not disgust, at least a revulsion of feeling, as if people said, ‘Ah, there he is at the old story again!’ But will you freshen up your notions of what faith it means by taking that picture of my text as I have tried to expand and illuminate it a little by my metaphor? That is what is meant by ‘Into Thy hands I commit my spirit.’ There are two or three ways in which that is to be done, and one or two ways in which it is not to be done.

We do it when we trust Him for the salvation of our souls. There are a great many good Christian people who go mourning all their days, or, at least, sometimes mourning and sometimes indifferent. The most that they venture to say is, ‘But I cannot be sure.’ Our grandfathers used to sing:-

“Tis a point I long to know,
Oft it causes anxious thought.’

Why should it cause anxious thought? Take your own personal salvation for granted, and work from that. Do not work *towards* it. If you have gone to Christ and said, ‘Lord, I cannot save myself; save me. I am willing to be saved,’ be sure that you have the salvation that you ask, and that if you have put your soul in that fashion into God’s hands, any incredible thing is credible, and any impossible thing is possible, rather than that you should fail of the salvation which, in the bottom of your hearts, you desire. Take the burden off your backs and put it on His. Do not be for ever questioning yourselves, ‘Am I a saved man?’ You will get sick of that soon, and you will be very apt to give up all thought about the matter at all. But take your stand on the fact, and with emancipated and buoyant hearts, and grateful ones, work from it, and because of it. And when sin rises up in your soul, and you say to yourselves, ‘If I were a Christian I could not have done that,’ or, ‘If I were a Christian I could not be so-and-so’; remember that all sin is inconsistent with being a Christian, but no sin is incompatible with it; and that after all the consciousness of shortcomings and failure, we have just to come back to the old point, and throw ourselves on God’s love. His arms are open to clasp us round. ‘Into Thy hands I commit my spirit.’

Further, the Psalmist meant, by committing himself to God, trusting Him in reference to daily life, and all its difficulties and duties. Our act of trust is to run through everything that we undertake and everything that we have to fight with. Self-will wrenches our souls out of God’s hands. A man who sends his securities to the banker can get them back when he likes. And if we undertake to manage our own affairs, or fling ourselves into our work without recognition of our dependence upon Him, or if we choose our work without seeking to know what His will is, that is recalling our deposit. Then you *will* get it back again, because God does not keep anybody’s securities against his will-you will get it back again, and much good it will do you when you have got it! Self-will, self-reliance, self-determination-these are the opposites of committing the keeping of our souls to God. And, as I say, if you withdraw the deposit, you take all the burden and trouble of it on your own shoulders again. Do not fancy that you are ‘living lives of faith in the Son of God,’ if you are not looking to Him to settle what you are to do. You cannot expect that He will watch over you, if you do not ask Him where you are to go.

But now there is another thing that I would suggest, this committing of ourselves to God which begins with the initial act of trust in Him for the salvation of our souls, and is continued throughout life by the continual surrender of ourselves to Him, is to be accompanied with corresponding work. The Apostle Peter’s memory is evidently hovering round this verse, whether he is consciously quoting it or not, when he says, ‘Let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to Him *in welldoing*,’ which has to go along with the act of trust and dependence. There must come the continual ordering of the life in accordance with His will; for ‘well-doing’ does not mean merely some works of beneficence and ‘charity,’ of the sort that have monopolised to themselves the name in latter days, but it means the whole of righteous conduct in accordance with the will of God.

So Peter tells us that it is vain for us to talk about committing the keeping of our soul to God unless we back up the committing with consistent, Christlike lives. Of course it is vain. How can a man expect God to take care of him when he plunges himself into something that is contrary to God’s laws? There are many people who say, ‘God will take care of me; He will save me from the consequences.’ Not a bit of it-He loves us a great deal too well for that. If you take the bit between your teeth, you will be allowed to go over the precipice and be smashed to pieces. If you wish to be taken care of, keep within the prescribed limits, and consult Him before you act, and do not act till you are sure of His approval. God has never promised to rescue man when he has got into trouble by his own sin. Suppose a servant had embezzled his master’s money through gambling, and then expected God to help him to get the money to pay back into the till. Do you think that would be likely to work? And how dare you anticipate that God will keep your feet, if you are walking in ways of your own choosing? All sin takes a man out from the shelter of the divine protection, and the shape the protection has to take then is chastisement. And all sin makes it impossible for a man to exercise that trust which is the committing of his soul to God. So it has to be ‘in welldoing,’ and the two things are to go together. ‘What God hath joined let not man put asunder.’ You do not become a Christian by the simple exercise of trust unless it is trust that worketh by love.

But let me remind you, further, that this committing of our souls into God’s hands does not mean that we are absolved from taking care of them ourselves. There is a very false kind of religious faith, which seems to think that it shuffles off all responsibility upon God. Not at all; you lighten the responsibility, but you do not get rid of it. And no man has a right to say ‘He will keep me, and so I may neglect diligent custody of myself.’ He keeps us very largely by helping us to keep our hearts with all diligence, and to keep our feet in the way of truth.

So let me now just say a word in regard to the blessedness of thus living in an atmosphere of continual dependence on, and reference to, God, about great things and little things. Whenever a man is living by trust, even when the trust is mistaken, or when it is resting upon some mere human, fallible creature like himself, the measure of his confidence is the measure of his tranquillity. You know that when a child says, 'I do not need to mind, father will look after that,' he may be right or wrong in his estimate of his father's ability and inclination; but as long as he says it, he has no kind of trouble or anxiety, and the little face is scarred by no deep lines of care or thought. So when we turn to Him and say, 'Why should I the burden bear?' then there comes-I was going to say 'surging,' but 'trickling' is a better word-into my heart a settled peacefulness which nothing else can give. Look at this psalm. It begins, and for the first half continues, in a very minor key. The singer was not a poet posing as in affliction, but his words were wrung out of him by anguish. 'Mine eyes are consumed with grief; my life is spent with grief'; 'I am . . . as a dead man out of mind'; 'I am in trouble.' And then with a quick wheel about, 'But I trusted in Thee, O Lord! I said, Thou art my God.' And what comes of that? This-'O how great is Thy goodness which Thou hast laid up for them that fear Thee!' 'Blessed be the Lord, for He hath showed me His marvellous kindness in a strong city.' And then, at the end of all, his peacefulness is so triumphant that he calls upon 'all His saints' to help him to praise. And the last words are 'Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart.' That is what you will get if you commit your soul to God. There was no change in the Psalmist's circumstances. The same enemy was round about him. The same 'net was privily laid for him.' All that had seemed to him half an hour before as wellnigh desperate, continued utterly unaltered. But what *had* altered? God had come into the place, and that altered the whole aspect of matters. Instead of looking with shrinking and tremulous heart along the level of earth, where miseries were, he was looking up into the heavens, where God was; and so everything was beautiful. That will be our experience if we will commit the keeping of our souls to Him in well doing. You can bring June flowers and autumn fruits into snowy January days by the exercise of this trust in God. It does not need that our circumstances should alter, but only that our attitude should alter. Look up, and cast your souls into God's hands, and all that is round you, of disasters and difficulties and perplexities, will suffer transformation; and for sorrow there will come joy because there has come trust.

I need not say a word about the other application of this verse, which, as I have said, is consecrated to us by our Lord’s own use of it at the last. But is it not beautiful to think that the very same act of mind and heart by which a man commits his spirit to God in life may be his when he comes to die, and that death may become a voluntary act, and the spirit may not be dragged out of us, reluctant, and as far as we can, resisting, but that we may offer it up as a libation, to use one metaphor of St. Paul’s, or may surrender it willingly as an act of faith? It is wonderful to think that life and death, so unlike each other, may be made absolutely identical in the spirit in which they are met. You remember how the first martyr caught up the words from the Cross, and kneeling down outside the wall of Jerusalem, with the blood running from the wounds that the stones had made, said, ‘Lord Jesus! receive my spirit.’ That is the way to die, and that is the way to live.

One word is all that time permits about the ground upon which this great venture of faith may be made. ‘Thou hast redeemed me, Lord God of Truth.’ The Psalmist, I think, uses that word ‘redeemed’ here, not in its wider spiritual New Testament sense, but in its frequent Old Testament sense, of deliverance from temporal difficulties and calamities. And what he says is, in effect, this: ‘I have had experience in the past which makes me believe that Thou wilt extricate me from this trouble too, because Thou art the God of Truth.’ He thinks of what God has done, and of what God is. And Peter, whom we have already found echoing this text, echoes that part of it too, for he says, ‘Let them commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well doing, as *unto a faithful Creator*,’ which is all but parallel to ‘Lord God of Truth.’ So God will continue as He has begun, and finish what He has begun.

‘A faithful Creator-’ He made us to need what we do need, and He is not going to forget the wants that He Himself has incorporated with our human nature. He is bound to help us because He made us. He is the God of Truth, and He will help us. But if we take ‘redeemed’ in its highest sense, the Psalmist, arguing from God’s past mercy and eternal faithfulness, is saying substantially what the Apostle said in the triumphant words, ‘Whom He did foreknow, them He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son . . . and whom He did predestinate them He also . . . justified, and whom He justified them He also glorified.’ ‘Thou hast redeemed me.’

‘Thou art the God of Truth; Thou wilt not lift Thy hand away from Thy work until Thou hast made me all that Thou didst bind Thyself to make me in that initial act of redeeming me.’

So we can say, ‘He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?’ You have experiences, I have no doubt, in your past, on which you may well build confidence for the future. Let each of us consult our own hearts, and our own memories. Cannot *we* say, ‘Thou hast been my Help,’ and ought we not therefore to be sure that He will not ‘leave us nor forsake us’ until He manifests Himself as the God of our salvation?

It is a blessed thing to lay ourselves in the hands of God, but the New Testament tells us, ‘It is a fearful thing to *fall into* the hands of the living God.’ The alternative is one that we all have to face,-either ‘into Thy hands I commit my spirit,’ or into those hands to fall. Settle which of the two is to be your fate.

22)Psalms 31:19

Psalms

GOODNESS WROUGHT AND GOODNESS LAID UP

Psa. 31:19.

The Psalmist has been describing, with the eloquence of misery, his own desperate condition, in all manner of metaphors which he heaps together-’sickness,’ ‘captivity,’ ‘like a broken vessel,’ ‘as a dead man out of mind.’ But in the depth of desolation he grasps at God’s hand, and that lifts him up out of the pit. ‘I trusted in Thee, O Lord! Thou art my God.’ So he struggles up on to the green earth again, and he feels the sunshine; and then he breaks out-’Oh! how great is Thy goodness which Thou hast laid up for them that fear Thee.’ So the psalm that began with such grief, ends with the ringing call, ‘Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord.’

Now these great words which I have read for my text, and which derive even additional lustre from their setting, do not convey to the hasty English reader the precise force of the antithesis which lies in them. The contrast in the two clauses is between goodness laid up and goodness wrought; and that would come out a little more clearly if we transposed the last words of the text, and instead of reading, as our Authorised Version does, 'which Thou hast wrought for them that trusted in Thee before the sons of men,' read 'which Thou hast wrought before the sons of men for them that trusted in Thee.'

So I think there are, as it were, two great masses of what the Psalmist calls 'goodness'; one of them which has been plainly manifested 'before the sons of men,' the other which is 'laid up' in store. There are a great many notes in circulation, but there is far more bullion in the strong-room. Much 'goodness' has been exhibited; far more lies concealed.

If we take that antithesis, then, I think we may turn it in two or three directions, like a light in a man's hand; and look at it as suggesting-

I. First, the goodness already disposed-'wrought before the sons of men'; and that 'laid up,' yet to be manifested.

Now, that distinction just points to the old familiar but yet never-to-be-exhausted thought of the inexhaustibleness of the divine nature. That inexhaustibleness comes out most wondrously and beautifully in the fundamental manifestation of God on which the Old Testament revelation is built-I mean the vision given to Moses prior to his call, and as the basis of his message, of the bush that burned and was not consumed. That lowly shrub flaming and not burning out was not, as has often been supposed, the symbol of Israel which in the furnace of affliction was not destroyed. It meant the same as the divine name, then proclaimed; 'I AM THAT I AM,' which is but a way of saying that God's Being is absolute, dependent upon none, determined by Himself, infinite, and eternal, burns and is not burned up, lives and has no proclivity towards death, works and is unwearied, 'operates unspent,' is revealed and yet hidden, gives and is none the poorer.

And as we look upon our daily lives, and travel back in thought, some of us over the many years which have all been crowded with instances and illustrations of divine faithfulness and favouring care, we have to grasp both these exclamations of our text, ‘Oh! how great is Thy goodness which Thou hast wrought,’ how much greater ‘is Thy goodness which is laid up!’ The table has been spread in the wilderness, and the verities of Christian experience more than surpass the legends of hungry knights finding banquets prepared by unseen hands in desert places. It is as when Jesus made the multitude sit down on the green grass and feast to the full, and yet abundance remained undiminished after satisfying all the hungry applicants. The bread that was broken yielded more basketfuls for to-morrow than the original quantity in the lad’s hands. The fountain rises, and the whole camp, ‘themselves and their children and their cattle,’ slake their thirst at it, and yet it is full as ever. The goodness wrought is but the fringe and first beginnings of the mass that is laid up. All the gold that has been coined and put into circulation is as nothing compared with the wedges and ingots of massive bullion that lie in the strong room. God’s riches are not like the world’s wealth. You very soon get to the bottom of its purse. Its ‘goodness,’ is very soon run dry; and nothing will yield an unintermittent stream of satisfaction and blessing to a poor soul except the ‘river of the water of life that proceedeth out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb.’

So, dear brethren! that contrast may suggest to us how quietly and peacefully we may look forward to all the unknown future; and hold up to it so as to enable us to scan its general outlines, the light of the known and experienced past. Let our trustful prayer be; ‘Thou hast been my help: leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation!’ and the answer will certainly be: ‘I will not leave thee, till I have done unto thee that which I have spoken to thee of.’ Our Memory ought to be the mother of our Hope; and we should paint the future in the hues of the past. Thou hast goodness ‘laid up,’ more than enough to match ‘the goodness Thou hast wrought.’ God’s past is the prophecy of God’s future; and my past, if I understand it aright, ought to rebuke every fear and calm every anxiety. We, and only we, have the right to say, ‘To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.’ That is delusion if said by any but by those that fear and trust in the Inexhaustible God.

II. Now let us turn our light in a somewhat different direction. The contrast here suggests the goodness that is publicly given and that

which is experienced in secret.

If you will notice, in the immediate neighbourhood of my text there come other words which evidently link themselves with the thought of the goodness laid up: ‘Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy presence.’ That is where also the ‘goodness’ is. ‘Thou shalt keep them secretly in a pavilion . . . blessed be the Lord! for He hath shewed me His marvellous kindness in a strong city.’ So, then, the goodness which is wrought, and which can be seen by the sons of men, dwindles in comparison with the goodness which lies in that secret place, and can only be enjoyed and possessed by those who dwell there, and whose feet are familiar with the way that leads to it. That is to say, if you wish the Psalmist’s thought in plain prose, all these visible blessings of ours are but pale shadows and suggestions of the real wealth that we can have only if we live in continual communion with God. The spiritual blessings of quiet minds and strength for work, the joys of communion with God, the sweetness of the hopes that are full of immortality, and all these delights and manifestations of God’s inmost love and sweetness which are granted only to waiting hearts that shut themselves off from the tumultuous delights of earth as the bases of their trust or the sources of their gladness-these are fuller, better than the selectest and richest of the joys that God’s world can give. God does not put His best gifts, so to speak, in the shop-windows; He keeps these in the inner chambers. He does not arrange His gifts as dishonest traders do their wares, putting the finest outside or on the top, and the less good beneath. ‘Thou hast kept the good wine until now.’ It is they who inhabit ‘the secret place of the Most High,’ and whose lives are filled with communion with Him, realising His presence, seeking to know His will, reaching out the tendrils of their hearts to twine round Him, and diligently, for His dear sake, doing the tasks of life; who taste the selected dainties from God’s gracious hands.

How foolish, then, to order life on the principle upon which we are all tempted to do it, and to yield to the temptation to which some of us have yielded far too much, of fancying that the best good is the good that we can touch and taste and handle and that men can see! No! no! Deep down in our hearts a joy that strangers never intermeddle with nor know, a peace that passes understanding, a present Christ and a Heaven all but present, because Christ is present-these are the good things for men, and these are the things which God does not, because He cannot, fling broadcast into the world, but which He keeps, because He must, for those that desire them, and are fit for them. ‘He causeth His sun to shine, and His rain to fall on the unthankful and on the disobedient,’ but the goodness laid up is better than the sunshine, and more refreshing and fertilising and cleansing than the rain, and it comes, and comes only, to them that trust Him, and live near Him.

III. And so, lastly, we may turn our light in yet another direction, and take this contrast as suggesting the goodness wrought on earth, and the goodness laid up in heaven.

Here we see, sometimes, the messengers coming with the one cluster of grapes on the pole. There we shall live in the vineyard. Here we drink from the river as it flows; there we shall be at the fountain-head. Here we are in the vestibule of the King’s house, there we shall be in the throne room, and each chamber as we pass through it is richer and fairer than the one preceding. Heaven’s least goodness is more than earth’s greatest blessedness. All that life to come, all its conditions and everything about it, are so strange to us, so incapable of being bodied forth or conceived by us, and the thought of Eternity is, it seems to me, so overwhelmingly awful that I do not wonder at even good people finding little stimulus, or much that cheers, in the thought of passing thither. But if we do not know anything more-and we know very little more-let us be sure of this, that when God begins to compare His adjectives He does not stop till He gets to the superlative degree and that *good* begets *better*, and the better of earth ensures the *best* of Heaven. And so out of our poor little experience here, we may gather grounds of confidence that will carry our thoughts peacefully even into the great darkness, and may say, ‘What Thou didst work is much, what Thou hast laid up is more.’ And the contrast will continue for ever and ever; for all through that strange Eternity that which is wrought will be less than that which is laid up, and we shall never get to the end of God, nor to the end of His goodness.

Only let us take heed to the conditions-’them that fear Him, them that trust in Him.’ If we will do these things through each moment of the experiences of a growing Christian life, and at the moment of the experience of a Christian death, and through the eternities of the experience of a Christian heaven, Jesus Christ will whisper to us, 'Thou shalt see greater things than these.'

23)Psalms 31:20

Psalms

HID IN LIGHT

Psa. 31:20.

The word rendered 'presence' is literally 'face,' and the force of this very remarkable expression of confidence is considerably marred unless that rendering be retained. There are other analogous expressions in Scripture, setting forth, under various metaphors, God's protection of them that love Him. But I know not that there is any so noble and striking as this. For instance, we read of His hiding His children 'in the secret of His tabernacle,' or tent; as an Arab chief might do a fugitive who had eaten of his salt, secreting him in the recesses of his tent whilst the pursuers scoured the desert in vain for their prey. Again, we read of His hiding them 'beneath the shadow of His wing'; where the divine love is softened into the likeness of the maternal instinct which leads a hen to gather her chickens beneath the shelter of her own warm and outspread feathers. But the metaphor of my text is more vivid and beautiful still. 'Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy face.' The light that streams from that countenance is the hiding-place for a poor man. These other metaphors may refer, perhaps, the one to the temple, and the other to the outstretched wings of the cherubim that shadowed the Mercy-seat. And, if so, this metaphor carries us still more near to the central blaze of the Shekinah, the glory that hovered above the Mercy-seat, and glowed in the dark sanctuary, unseen but once a year by one trembling high priest, who had to bear with him blood of sacrifice, lest the sight should slay. The Psalmist says, into that fierce light a man may go, and stand in it, bathed, hid, secure. 'Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy face.'

I. Now, then, let us notice, first, this hiding-place.

The ‘face’ of God is so strongly figurative an expression that its metaphorical character cannot but be obvious to the most cursory reader. The very frankness, and, we may say, the grossness of the image, saves it from all misconception, and as with other similar expressions in the Old Testament, at once suggests its meaning. We read, for example, of the ‘arm,’ the ‘hand,’ the ‘finger’ of God, and everybody feels that these mean His power. We read of the ‘eye’ of God, and everybody knows that that means His omniscience. We read of the ‘ear’ of God, and we all understand that that holds forth the blessed thought that He hears and answers the cry of such as be sorrowful. And, in like manner, the ‘face’ of God is the apprehensible part of the divine nature which turns to men, and by which He makes Himself known. It is roughly equivalent to the other Old and New Testament expression, the ‘name of the Lord,’ the manifested and revealed side of the divine nature. And that is the hiding-place into which men may go.

We have the other expression also in Scripture, ‘the light of Thy countenance,’ and that helps us to apprehend the Psalmist’s meaning. ‘The light of Thy face’ is ‘secret.’ What a paradox! Can light conceal? Look at the daily heavens-filled with blazing stars, all invisible till the night falls. The effulgence of the face is such that they that stand in it are lost and hid, like the lark in the blue sky. ‘A glorious privacy of light is Thine.’ There is a wonderful metaphor in the New Testament of a woman ‘clothed with the sun,’ and caught up into it from her enemies to be safe there. And that is just an expansion of the Psalmist’s grand paradox, ‘Thou shalt hide them in the secret of Thy face.’ Light conceals when the light is so bright as to dazzle. They who are surrounded by God are lost in the glory, and safe in that seclusion, ‘the secret of Thy face.’

A thought may be suggested, although it is somewhat of a digression from the main purpose of my text, but it springs naturally out of this paradox, and may just deserve a word. Revelation is real, but revelation has its limits. That which is revealed is ‘the face of God,’ but we read, ‘no man can see My face.’ After all revelation He remains hidden. After all pouring forth of His beams He remains ‘the God that dwelleth in the thick darkness,’ and the light which is inaccessible is also a darkness that can be felt. Apprehension is possible; comprehension is impossible. What we know of God is valid and true, but we never shall know all the depths that lie in that which we do know of Him. His face is ‘the secret’; and though men may malign Him when they say, ‘Verily, Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel!’ and He answers them, ‘I have not spoken in secret’ in a dark ‘place of the earth,’ it still remains true that revelation has its mysteries born of the greatness of its effulgence, and that all which we know of God is ‘dark with excess of light.’

But that is aside from our main purpose. Let me rather remind you of how the thought of the secret of God’s face being the secure hiding-place of them that love Him points to this truth-that that brightness of light has a repellent power which keeps far away from all intermingling with it everything that is evil. The old Greek mythologies tell us that the radiant arrows of Apollo shot forth from his far-reaching bow, wounded to death the monsters of the slime and unclean creatures that crawled and revelled in darkness. And the myth has a great truth in it. The light of God’s face slays evil, of whatsoever kind it is; and just as the unlovely, loathsome creatures that live in the dark and find themselves at ease there writhe and wriggle in torment, and die when their shelter is taken away and they are exposed to the light beating on their soft bodies, so the light of God’s face turned upon evil things smites them into nothingness. Thus ‘the secret of His countenance’ is the shelter of all that is good.

Nor need I remind you how, in another aspect of the phrase, the ‘light of His face,’ is the expression for His favour and loving regard, and how true it is that in that favour and loving regard is the impregnable fortress into which, entering, any man is safe. I said that the expression the ‘face of the Lord’ roughly corresponded to the other one, ‘the name of the Lord,’ inasmuch as both meant the revealed aspect of the divine nature. You may remember how we read, ‘The name of the Lord is a strong tower into which the righteous runneth and is safe.’ The ‘light’ of the face of the Lord is His favour and loving regard falling upon men. And who can be harmed with that lambent light-like sunshine upon water, or upon a glittering shield-playing around Him?

Only let us remember that for us ‘the face of God’ is Jesus Christ. He is the ‘arm’ of the Lord; He is the ‘name’ of the Lord; He is the ‘face.’ All that we know of God we know through and in Him; all that we see of God we see by the shining upon us of Him who is ‘the eradiation of His glory and the express image of His person.’ So the open secret of the ‘face’ of God is Jesus, the hiding-place of our souls.

II. Secondly, notice God’s hidden ones.

My text carries us back, by that word ‘them,’ to the previous verse, where we have a double description of those who are thus hidden in the inaccessible light of His countenance. They are ‘such as fear Thee,’ and ‘such as trust in Thee.’ Now, that latter expression is congruous with the metaphor of my text, in so far as the words on which we are now engaged speak about a ‘hiding-place,’ and the word which is translated ‘trust’ literally means ‘to flee to a refuge.’ So they that flee to God for refuge are those whom God hides in the ‘secret of His face.’ Let us think of that for a moment.

I said, in the beginning of these remarks, that there was here an allusion, possibly, to the Temple. All temples in ancient times were asylums. Whosoever could flee to grasp the horns of the altar, or to sit, veiled and suppliant, before the image of the god, was secure from his foes, who could not pass within the limits of the Temple grounds, in which strife and murder were not permissible. We too often flee to other gods and other temples for our refuges. Ay! and when we get there we find that the deity whom we have invoked is only a marble image that sits deaf, dumb, motionless, whilst we cling to its unconscious skirts. As one of the saddest of our modern cynics once said, looking up at that lovely impersonation of Greek beauty, the Venus de Milo, ‘Ah! she is fair; but she has no arms,’ so we may say of all false refuges to which men betake themselves. The goddess is powerless to help, however beautiful the presentment of her may have seemed to our eyes. The evils from which we have fled to these false deities and shelterless sanctuaries will pursue us across the threshold; and as Elijah did with the priests of Baal upon Carmel, will slay us at the very foot of the altar to which we have clung, and vexed with our vain prayers. There is only one shrine where there is a sanctuary, and that is the shrine above which shines ‘the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’; into the brightness of which poor men may pass and therein may hide themselves.

God hides us, and His hiding is effectual, in the secret of the light and splendour of His face.

I said, too, that there was an allusion, as there is in all the psalms that deal with men as God's guests, to the ancient customs of hospitality, by which a man who has once entered the tent of the chief, and partaken of food there, is safe, not only from his pursuers, but from his host himself, even though that host should be the kinsman-avenger. The red-handed murderer, who has eaten the salt of the man whose duty it otherwise would have been to slay him where he stood, is safe from his vengeance. And thus they who cast themselves upon God have nothing to fear. No other hand can pluck them from the sanctuary of His tent. He Himself, having admitted them to share His hospitality, cannot and will not lift a hand against them. We are safe *from* God only when we are safe *in* God.

But remember the condition on which this security comes. 'Thou shalt hide *them* in the secret of Thy face.' Whom? Those that flee for refuge to Thee. The act of simple faith is set forth there, by which a poor man, with all his imperfections on his head, may yet venture to put his foot across the boundary line that separates the outer darkness from the beam of light that comes from God's face. 'Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?' That question does not mean, as it is often taken to mean-What mortal can endure the punishments of a future life? but, Who can venture to be God's guests? and it is equivalent to the other interrogation, 'Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His holy place?' The answer is, If you go to Him for refuge, knowing your danger, feeling your impurity, *you* may walk amidst all that light softened into lambent beauty, as those Hebrew children did in the furnace of fire, being at ease there, and feeling it well with themselves, and having nothing about them consumed except the bonds that bound them.

Remember that Jesus Christ is the Hiding-place, and that to flee to Him for refuge is the condition of security, and all they who thus, from the snares of life, from its miseries, disappointments, and burdens, from the agitation of their own hearts, from the ebullition of their own passions, from the stings of their own conscience, or from other of the ills that flesh is heir to, make their hiding-place-by the simple act of faith in Jesus Christ-in the light of God's face, are thereby safe for evermore.

But the initial act of fleeing to the refuge must be continued by abiding in the refuge. It is of no use to take shelter in the light unless we abide in the light. It is of no use to go to the Temple for sanctuary unless we continue in it for sacrifice and worship. We must 'walk in the light as God is in the light.' That is to say, the condition of being hid in God is, first of all, to take refuge in Jesus Christ, and then to abide in Him by continual communion. 'Your life is hid with Christ in God.' Unless we have a hidden life, deep beneath, and high above, and far beyond the life of sense, we have no right to think that the shelter of the Face will be security for us. The very essence of Christianity is the habitual communion of heart, mind, and will with God in Christ. Do you live in the light, or have you only gone there to escape what you are afraid of? Do you live in the light by the continual direction of thought and heart to Him, cultivating the habit of daily and hourly communion with Him amidst the distractions of necessary duty, care, and changing circumstances?

But not only by communion, but also by conduct, must we keep in the light. The fugitive found outside the city of refuge was fair game for the avenger, and if he strayed beyond its bounds there was a sword in his back before he knew where he was. Every Christian, by each sin, whether it be acted or only thought, casts himself out of the light into the darkness that rings it round, and out there he is a victim to the beasts of prey that hunt in darkness. An eclipse of the sun is not caused by any change in the sun, but by an opaque body, the offspring and satellite of the earth, coming between the earth and sun. And so, when Christian men lose the light of God's face, it is not because there is any 'variableness or shadow of turning' in Him, but because between Him and them has come the blackness-their own offspring-of their own sin. You are not safe if you are outside the light of His countenance. These are the conditions of security.

III. Lastly, note what the hidden ones find in the light.

This burst of confidence in my text comes from the Psalmist immediately after plaintively pouring out his soul under the pressure of afflictions. His experience may teach us the interpretation of his glad assurance.

God will keep all real evil from us if we keep near Him; but He will not keep the externals that men call evil from us. I do not know whether there is such a thing as filtering any poisons or malaria by means of light, but I am sure that the light of God filters our atmosphere for us. Though it may leave the external form of evil it takes all the poison out of it and turns it into a harmless minister for our good. The arrows that are launched at us may be tipped with venom when they leave the bow, but if they pass through the radiant envelope of divine protection that surrounds us-and they must have passed through that if they reach us-it cleanses all the venom from the points though it leaves the sharpness there. The evil is not an evil if it has got our length; and its having touched us shows that He who lets it pass into the light where His children safely dwell, knows that it cannot harm them.

But, again, we shall find if we live in continual communion with the revealed Face of God, that we are elevated high above all the strife of tongues and the noise of earth. We shall ‘outsoar the shadow of the night,’ and be lifted to an elevation from which all the clamours of earth will sound faint and poor, like the noises of the city to the dwellers on the mountain peak. Nor do we find only security there, for the word in the second clause of my text, ‘Thou shalt *keep* them *secretly*,’ is the same as is employed in the previous verse in reference to the treasures which God *lays up* for them that fear Him. The poor men that trust in God, and the wealth which He has to lavish upon them, are both hid, and they are hid in the same place. The ‘goodness wrought before the sons of men’ has not emptied the reservoir. After all expenditure the massy ingots of gold in God’s storehouse are undiminished. The mercy still to come is greater than that already received. ‘To-morrow shall be as this day and much more abundant.’ This river broadens as we mount towards its source.

Brethren! the Face of God must be either our dearest joy or our greatest dread. There comes a time when you and I must front it, and look into His eyes. It is for us to settle whether at that day we shall ‘call upon the rocks and the hills to hide us’ from it, or whether we shall say with rapture, ‘Thou hast made us most blessed with Thy countenance’! Which is it to be? It must be one or other. When He says, ‘Seek ye My Face,’ may our hearts answer, ‘Thy Face, Lord, will I seek,’ that when we see it hereafter, shining as the sun in his strength, its light may not be darkness to our impure and horror-struck eyes.

24)Psalms 32:1-2

Psalms

A THREEFOLD THOUGHT OF SIN AND FORGIVENESS

Psa. 32:1 - Psa. 32:2.

This psalm, which has given healing to many a wounded conscience, comes from the depths of a conscience which itself has been wounded and healed. One must be very dull of hearing not to feel how it throbs with emotion, and is, in fact, a gush of rapture from a heart experiencing in its freshness the new joy of forgiveness. It matters very little who wrote it. If we accept the superscription, which many of those who usually reject these ancient Jewish notes do in the present case, the psalm is David’s, and it fits into some of the specific details of his great sin and penitence. But that is of very small moment. Whoever wrote it, he sings because he must.

The psalm begins with an exclamation, for the clause would be better translated, ‘Oh! the blessedness of the man.’ Then note the remarkable accumulation of clauses, all expressing substantially the same thing, but expressing it with a difference. The Psalmist’s heart is too full to be emptied by one utterance. He turns his jewel, as it were, round and round, and at each turn it reflects the light from a different angle. There are three clauses in my text, each substantially having the same meaning, but which yet present that substantially identical meaning with different shades. And that is true both in regard to the three words which are employed to describe the fact of transgression, and to the three which are employed to describe the fact of forgiveness. It is mainly to these, and the large lessons which lie in observing the shades of significance in them, that I wish to turn now.

I. Note the solemn picture which is here drawn of various phases of sin.

There are three words employed-’transgression,’ ‘sin,’ ‘iniquity.’ They all mean the same thing, but they mean it with a different association of ideas and suggestions of its foulness. Let me take them in order. The word translated 'transgression' seems literally to signify separation, or rending apart, or departure, and hence comes to express the notion of apostasy and rebellion.

So, then, here is this thought; all sin is a going away. From what? Rather the question should be-from *whom*? All sin is a departure from God. And that is its deepest and darkest characteristic. And it is the one that needs to be most urged, for it is the one that we are most apt to forget. We are all ready enough to acknowledge faults; none of us have any hesitation in saying that we have done wrong, and have gone wrong. We are ready to recognise that we have transgressed the law; but what about the Lawgiver? The personal element in every sin, great or small, is that it is a voluntary rending of a union which exists, a departure from God who is with us in the deepest recesses of our being, unless we drag ourselves away from the support of His enclosing arm, and from the illumination of His indwelling grace.

So, dear brethren! this was the first and the gravest aspect under which the penitent and the forgiven man in my text thought of his past, that in it, when he was wildly and eagerly rushing after the low and sensuous gratification of his worst desires, he was rebelling against, and wandering far away from, the ever-present Friend, the all-encircling support and joy, the Lord, his life. You do not understand the gravity of the most trivial wrong act when you think of it as a sin against the order of Nature, or against the law written on your heart, or as the breach of the constitution of your own nature, or as a crime against your fellows. You have not got to the bottom of the blackness until you see that it is flat rebellion against God Himself. This is the true devilish element in all our transgression, and this element is in it all. Oh! if once we do get the habit formed and continued until it becomes almost instinctive and spontaneous, of looking at each action of our lives in immediate and direct relation to God, there would come such an apocalypse as would startle some of us into salutary dread, and make us all feel that 'it is an evil and a bitter thing' [and the two characteristics must always go together], 'to depart from the living God.' The great type of all wrongdoers is in that figure of the Prodigal Son, and the essence of his fault was, first, that he selfishly demanded for his own his father's goods; and, second, that he went away into a far country. Your sins have separated between you and

God. And when you do those little acts of selfish indulgence which you do twenty times a day, without a prick of conscience, each of them, trivial as it is, like some newly-hatched poisonous serpent, a finger-length long, has in it the serpent nature, it is rebellion and separation from God.

Then another aspect of the same foul thing rises before the Psalmist's mind. This evil which he has done, which I suppose was the sin in the matter of Bathsheba, was not only rebellion against God, but it was, according to this text, in the second clause, 'a sin,' by which is meant literally *missing an aim*. So this word, in its pregnant meaning, corresponds with the signification of the ordinary New Testament word for sin, which also implies error, or missing that which ought to be the goal of our lives. That is to say, whilst the former word regarded the evil deed mainly in its relation to God, this word regards it mainly in its relation to ourselves, and that which before Him is rebellion, the assertion of my own individuality and my own will, and therefore in separation from His will, is, considered in reference to myself, my fatally missing the mark to which my whole energy and effort ought to be directed. All sin, big or little, is a blunder. It never hits what it aims at, and if it did, it is aiming at the wrong thing. So doubly, all transgression is folly, and the true name for the doer is 'Thou fool!' For every evil misses the mark which, regard being had to the man's obvious destiny, he ought to aim at. 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever'; and whosoever in all his successes fails to realise that end is a failure through and through, in whatever smaller matters he may seem to himself and to others to succeed. He only strikes the target in the bull's eye who lets his arrows be deflected by no gusts of passion, nor aimed wrong by any obliquity of vision; but with firm hand and clear eye seeks and secures the absolute conformity of his will to the Father's will, and makes God his aim and end in all things. 'Thou hast created us for Thyself, and only in Thee can we find rest.' O brother! whatever be your aims and ends in life, take this for the surest verity, that you have fatally misunderstood the purpose of your being, and the object to which you should strain, if there is anything except God, who is the supreme desire of your heart and the goal of your life. All sin is missing the mark which God has set up for man.

Therefore let us press to the mark where hangs the prize which whoso possesses succeeds, whatsoever other trophies may have escaped his grasp.

But there is another aspect of this same thought, and that is that every piece of evil misses its own shabby mark. ‘A rogue is a round-about fool.’ No man ever gets, in doing wrong, the thing he did the wrong for, or if he gets it, he gets something else along with it that takes all the sweet taste out of it. The thief secures the booty, but he gets penal servitude besides. Sin tempts us with glowing tales of the delight to be found in drinking stolen waters and eating her bread in secret; but sin lies by suppression of the truth, if not by suggestions of the false, because she says never a word about the sickness and the headache that come after the debauch, nor about the poison that we drink down along with her sugared draughts. The paltering fiend keeps the word of promise to the ear, and breaks it to the hope. All sin, great or little, is a blunder, and missing of the mark.

And lastly, yet another aspect of the ugly thing rises before the Psalmist’s eye. In reference to God, evil is separation and rebellion; in reference to myself, it is an error and missing of my true goal; and in reference to the straight standard and law of duty, it is, according to the last of the three words for sin in the text, ‘iniquity,’ or, literally, *something twisted* or distorted. It is thus brought into contrast with the right line of the plain, straight path in which we ought to walk. We have the same metaphor in our own language. We talk about things being right and wrong, by which we mean, in the one case, parallel with the rigid law of duty, and in the other case, ‘wrung,’ or wavering, crooked and divergent from it. There is a standard as well as a Judge, and we have not only to think of evil as being rebellion against God and separation from Him, and as, for ourselves, issuing in fatal missing of the mark, but also as being divergent from the one manifest law to which we ought to be conformed. The path to God is a right line; the shortest road from earth to Heaven is absolutely straight. The Czar of Russia, when railways were introduced into that country, was asked to determine the line between St. Petersburg and Moscow. He took a ruler and drew a straight line across the map, and said, ‘There!’ Our Autocrat has drawn a line as straight as the road from earth to Heaven, and by the side of it are ‘the crooked, wandering ways in which we live.’

Take these three thoughts then-as for law, divergence; as for the aim of my life, a fatal miss; as for God, my Friend and my Life, rebellion and separation-and you have, if not the complete physiognomy of evil, at least grave thoughts concerning it, which become all the graver when we think that they are true about us and about our deeds.

II. And so let me ask you to look secondly at the blessed picture drawn here of the removal of the sin.

There are three words here for forgiveness, each of which adds its quota to the general thought. It is ‘forgiven,’ ‘covered,’ ‘not imputed.’ The accumulation of synonyms not only sets forth various aspects of pardon, but triumphantly celebrates the completeness and certainty of the gift.

As to the first, it means literally to lift and bear away a load or burden. As to the second, it means, plainly enough, to cover over, as one might do some foul thing, that it may no longer offend the eye or smell rank to Heaven. Bees in their hives, when there is anything corrupt and too large for them to remove, fling a covering of wax over it, and hermetically seal it, and no foul odour comes from it. And so a man’s sin is covered over and ceases to be *in evidence*, as it were before the divine Eye that sees all things. He Himself casts a merciful veil over it and hides it from Himself. A similar idea, though with a modification in metaphor, is included in that last word, the sin is not reckoned. God does not write it down in His Great Book on the debit side of the man’s account. And these three things, the lifting up and carrying away of the load, the covering over of the obscene and ugly thing, the non-reckoning in the account of the evil deed; these three things taken together do set forth before us the great and blessed truth that a man’s transgressions may become, in so far as the divine heart and the divine dealings with him are concerned, as if nonexistent.

Men tell us that that is not possible and that it is immoral to preach a doctrine of forgiveness. O dear brethren! there is no gospel to preach that will touch a man’s heart except the gospel that begins with this-God bears away, covers over, does not reckon to a man, his rebellions, his errors, his departures from the law of right. Sin *is* capable of forgiveness, and, blessed be God! every sin He is ready to forgive. I should be ashamed of myself to stand here, and not preach a gospel of pardon. I know not anything else that will touch consciences and draw hearts except this gospel, which I am trying in my poor way to lay upon your hearts.

Notice how my text includes also a glance at the condition on our part on which this absolute and utter annihilation of our wicked past is possible. That last clause of my text, ‘In whose spirit there is no guile,’ seems to me to refer to the frank sincerity of a confession, which does not try to tell lies to God, and, attempting to deceive Him, really deceives only the self-righteous sinner. Whosoever opens his heart to God, makes a clean breast of it, and without equivocation or self-deception or the palliations which self-love teaches, says, ‘I have played the fool and erred exceedingly,’ to that man the Psalmist thinks pardon is sure to come.

Now remember that the very heart and centre of that Jewish system was an altar, and that on that altar was sacrificed the expiatory victim. I am not going to insist upon any theory of an atonement, but I do want to urge this, that Christianity is nothing, if it have not explained and taken up into itself that which was symbolised in that old ritual. The very first words from human lips which proclaimed Christ’s advent to man were, ‘Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,’ and amongst the last words which Christ spoke upon earth, in the way of teaching His disciples, were these, ‘This is My blood, shed for many for the remission of sins.’ The Cross of Christ explains my psalm, the Cross of Christ answers the confidence of the Psalmist, which was fed upon the shadow of the good things to come. He has died, the Just for the unjust, that the sins which were laid upon Him might be taken away, covered, and not reckoned to us.

Brethren! unless my sins are taken away by the Lamb of God they remain. Unless they are laid upon Christ, they crush me. Unless they are covered by His expiation, they lie there before the Throne of God, and cry for punishment. Unless His blood has wiped out the record that is against us, the black page stands for ever. And to you and me there will be said one day, in a voice which we dare not dispute, ‘Pay Me that thou owest!’ The blacker the sin the brighter the Christ. I would that I could lay upon all your hearts this belief, ‘the blood of Jesus Christ,’ and nothing else, ‘cleanses from all sin!’

III. I will touch in a word only upon the last thought suggested by the text, and that is the blessedness of this removal of sin.

As I said, my text is really an exclamation, a gush of rapture from a heart that is tasting the fresh-drawn blessedness of pardon. And the rest of the psalm is little more than an explanation of the various aspects and phases of that blessedness. Let me just run over them in the briefest possible manner.

If we receive this forgiveness through Jesus Christ and our faith in Him, then we have manifold blessedness in one. There is the blessedness of deliverance from sullen remorse and of the dreadful pangs of an accusing conscience. How vividly, and evidently as a transcript from a page in his own autobiography, the Psalmist describes that condition, 'When I kept silence my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long'! When a man's heart is locked against confession he hears a tumult of accusing voices within himself, and remorse and dread creep over his heart. The pains of sullen remorse were never described more truly and more dreadfully than in this context. 'Day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me, my moisture is turned into the drought of summer.' Some of us may know something of that. But there is a worse state than that, and one or other of the two states belongs to us. If we have not found our way into the liberty of confession and forgiveness, we have but a choice between the pains of an awakened conscience and the desolation of a dead one. It is worse to have no voice within than to have an accusing one. It is worse to feel no pressure of a divine Hand than to feel it. And they whose consciences are seared as with a hot iron have sounded the lowest depths. They are perfectly comfortable, quite happy; they say all these feelings that I am trying to suggest to you seem to them to be folly. 'They make a solitude and call it peace.' It is an awful thing when a man has come to this point, that he has got past the accusations of conscience, and can swallow down the fiercest draughts without feeling them burn. Dear brethren! there is only one deliverance from an accusing conscience which does not murder the conscience, and that is that we should find our way into the peace of God which is through Christ Jesus and His atoning death.

Then, again, my psalm goes on to speak about the blessedness of a close clinging to God in peaceful trust, which will ensure security in the midst of all trials, and a hiding-place against every storm. The Psalmist uses a magnificent figure. God is to him as some rocky island, steadfast and dry, in the midst of a widespread inundation; and taking refuge there in the clefts of the rock, he looks down upon the tossing, shoreless sea of troubles and sorrows that breaks upon the rocky barriers of his Patmos, and stands safe and dry. Only through forgiveness do we come into that close communion with God which ensures safety in all disasters.

And then there follows the blessedness of a gentle guidance and of a loving obedience. ‘Thou shalt guide me with Thine eye.’ No need for force, no need for bit and bridle, no need for anything but the glance of the Father, which the child delights to obey. Docility, glad obedience unprompted by fear, based upon love, are the fruits of pardon through the blood of Christ.

And, lastly, there is the blessedness of exuberant gladness; the joy that comes from the sorrow according to God is a joy that will last. All other delights, in their nature, are perishable; all other raptures, by the very necessity of their being and of ours, die down, sometimes into vanity, always into commonplace or indifference. But the joy that springs in the pardoned heart, and is fed by closeness of communion with God, and by continual obedience to His blessed guidance, has in it nothing that can fade, nothing that can burn out, nothing that can be disturbed. The deeper the penitence the surer the rebound into gladness. The more a man goes down into the depths of his own heart and learns his own evil, the more will he, trusting in Christ, rise into the serene heights of thankfulness, and live, if not in rapture, at least in the calm joy of conscious communion and unending fellowship. Every tear may be crystallised into a diamond that shall flash in the light. And they, and only they, who begin in the valley of weeping, confessing their sins and imploring forgiveness through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Lord, will rise to heights of a joy that remains, and remaining, is full.

25)Psalms 34:7

Psalms

THE ENCAMPING ANGEL

Psa. 34:7.

If we accept the statement in the superscription of this psalm, it dates from one of the darkest hours in David's life. His fortunes were never lower than when he fled from Gath, the city of Goliath, to Adullam. He never appears in a less noble light than when he feigned madness to avert the dangers which he might well dread there. How unlike the terror and self-degradation of the man who 'scrabbled on the doors,' and let 'the spittle run down his beard,' is the heroic and saintly constancy of this noble psalm! And yet the contrast is not so violent as to make the superscription improbable, and the tone of the whole well corresponds to what we should expect from a man delivered from some great peril, but still surrounded with dangers. There, in the safety of his retreat among the rocks, with the bit of level ground where he had fought Goliath just at his feet in the valley, and Gath, from which he had escaped, away down at the mouth of the glen [if Conder's identification of Adullam be correct], he sings his song of trust and praise; he hears the lions roar among the rocks where Samson had found them in his day; he teaches his 'children,' the band of broken men who there began to gather around him, the fear of the Lord; and calls upon them to help him in his praise. What a picture of the outlaw and his wild followers tamed into something like order, and lifted into something like worship, rises before us, if we follow the guidance of that old commentary contained in the superscription!

The words of our text gain especial force and vividness by thus localising the psalm. Not only 'the clefts of the rock' but the presence of God's Angel is his defence; and round him is flung, not only the strength of the hills, but the garrison and guard of heaven.

It is generally supposed that the 'Angel of the Lord' here is to be taken collectively, and that the meaning is-the 'bright-harnessed' hosts of these divine messengers are as an army of protectors round them who fear God. But I see no reason for departing from the simpler and certainly grander meaning which results from taking the word in its proper force of a singular. True, Scripture does speak of the legions of ministering spirits, who in their chariots of fire were once seen by suddenly opened eyes 'round about' a prophet in peril, and are ever ministering to the heirs of salvation. But Scripture also speaks of One, who is in an eminent sense 'the Angel of the Lord'; in whom, as in none other, God sets His 'Name'; whose form, dimly seen, towers above even the ranks of the angels that ‘excel in strength’; whose offices and attributes blend in mysterious fashion with those of God Himself. There may be some little incongruity in thinking of the single Person as ‘encamping round about’ us; but that does not seem a sufficient reason for obliterating the reference to that remarkable Old Testament doctrine, the retention of which seems to me to add immensely to the power of the words.

Remember some of the places in which the ‘Angel of the Lord’ appears, in order to appreciate more fully the grandeur of this promised protection. At that supreme moment when Abraham ‘took the knife to slay his son,’ the voice that ‘called to him out of heaven’ was ‘the voice of the Angel of the Lord.’ He assumes the power of reversing a divine command. He says, ‘Thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from *Me*,’ and then pronounces a blessing, in the utterance of which one cannot distinguish His voice from the voice of Jehovah. In like manner it is the Angel of the Lord that speaks to Jacob, and says, ‘I am the God of Bethel.’ The dying patriarch invokes in the same breath ‘the God which fed me all my life long,’ ‘the Angel which redeemed me from all evil,’ to bless the boys that stand before him, with their wondering eyes gazing in awe on his blind face. It was that Angel’s glory that appeared to the outcast, flaming in the bush that burned unconsumed. It was He who stood before the warrior leader of Israel, sword in hand, and proclaimed Himself to be the Captain of the Lord’s host, the Leader of the armies of heaven, and the true Leader of the armies of Israel; and His commands to Joshua, His lieutenant, are the commands of ‘the Lord.’ And, to pass over other instances, Isaiah correctly sums up the spirit of the whole earlier history in words which go far to lift the conception of this Angel of the Lord out of the region of created beings-’In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His face saved them,’ It is this lofty and mysterious Messenger, and not the hosts whom He commands, that our Psalmist sees standing ready to help, as He once stood, sword-bearing by the side of Joshua. To the warrior leader, to the warrior Psalmist, He appears, as their needs required, armoured and militant. The last of the prophets saw that dim, mysterious Figure, and proclaimed, ‘The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His temple; even the Angel of the Covenant, whom ye delight in’; and to his gaze it was wrapped in obscure majesty and terror of purifying flame. But for us the true Messenger of the Lord is His Son, whom He has sent, in whom He has put His name; who is the Angel of His face, in that we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; who is the Angel of the Covenant, in that He has sealed the new and everlasting covenant with His blood; and whose own parting promise, ‘Lo! I am with you always,’ is the highest fulfilment to us Christians of that ancient confidence: ‘The Angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him.’

Whatever view we adopt of the significance of the first part of the text, the force and beauty of the metaphor in the second remain the same. If this psalm were indeed the work of the fugitive in his rocky hold at Adullam, how appropriate the thought becomes that his little encampment has such a guard. It reminds one of the incident in Jacob’s life, when his timid and pacific nature was trembling at the prospect of meeting Esau, and when, as he travelled along, encumbered with his pastoral wealth, and scantily provided with means of defence, ‘the angels of God met him, and he named the place Mahanaim,’ that is, two camps-his own feeble company, mostly made up of women and children, and that heavenly host that hovered above them. David’s faith sees the same defence encircling his weakness, and though sense saw no protection for him and his men but their own strong arms and their mountain fastness, his opened eyes beheld the mountain full of the chariots of fire, and the flashing of armour and light in the darkness of his cave.

The vision of the divine presence ever takes the form which our circumstances most require. David’s then need was safety and protection. Therefore he saw the Encamping Angel; even as to Joshua the leader He appeared as the Captain of the Lord’s host; and as to Isaiah, in the year that the throne of Judah was emptied by the death of the earthly king, was given the vision of the Lord sitting on a throne, the King Eternal and Immortal. So to us all His grace shapes its expression according to our wants, and the same gift is Protean in its power of transformation; being to one man wisdom, to another strength, to the solitary companionship, to the sorrowful consolation, to the glad sobering, to the thinker truth, to the worker practical force-to each his heart’s desire, if the heart’s delight be God. So manifold are the aspects of God’s infinite sufficiency, that every soul, in every possible variety of circumstance, will find there just what will suit it. That armour fits every man who puts it on. That deep fountain is like some of those fabled springs which give forth whatsoever precious draught any thirsty lip asked. He takes the shape that our circumstances most need. Let us see that we, on our parts, use our circumstances to help us in anticipating the shapes in which God will draw near for our help.

Learn, too, from this image, in which the Psalmist appropriates to himself the experience of a past generation, how we ought to feed our confidence and enlarge our hopes by all God’s past dealings with men. David looks back to Jacob, and believes that the old fact is repeated in his own day. So every old story is true for us; though outward form may alter, inward substance remains the same. Mahanaim is still the name of every place where a man who loves God pitches his tent. We may be wandering, solitary, defenceless, but we are not alone. Our feeble encampment may lie open to assault, and we be all unfit to guard it, but the other camp is there too, and our enemies must force their way through it before they get at us. We are in its centre-as they put the cattle and the sick in the midst of the encampment on the prairies when they fear an assault from the Indians-because we are so weak. Jacob’s experience may be ours: ‘The Lord of Hosts is with us: the God of Jacob is our refuge.’

Only remember that the eye of faith alone can see that guard, and that therefore we must labour to keep our consciousness of its reality fresh and vivid. Many a man in David’s little band saw nothing but cold gray stone where David saw the flashing armour of the heavenly Warrior. To the one all the mountain blazed with fiery chariots, to the other it was a lone hillside, with the wind moaning among the rocks. We shall lose the joy and the strength of that divine protection unless we honestly and constantly try to keep our sense of it bright. Eyes that have been gazing on earthly joys, or perhaps gloating on evil sights, cannot see the Angel presence. A Christian man, on a road which he cannot travel with a clear conscience, will see no angel, not even the Angel with the drawn sword in His hand, that barred Balaam’s path among the vineyards. A man coming out of some room blazing with light cannot all at once see into the violet depths of the mighty heavens, that lie above him with all their shimmering stars. So this truth of our text is a truth of faith, and the believing eye alone beholds the Angel of the Lord.

Notice, too, that final word of deliverance. This psalm is continually recurring to that idea. The word occurs four times in it, and the thought still oftener. Whether the date is rightly given, as we have assumed it to be, or not, at all events that harping upon this one phrase indicates that some season of great trial was its birth-time, when all the writer's thoughts were engrossed and his prayers summed up in the one thing-deliverance. He is quite sure that such deliverance must follow if the Angel presence be there. But he knows too that the encampment of the Angel of the Lord will not keep away sorrows, and trial, and sharp need. So his highest hope is not of immunity from these, but of rescue out of them. And his ground of hope is that his heavenly Ally cannot let him be overcome. That He will let him be troubled and put in peril he has found; that He will not let him be crushed he believes. Shadowed and modest hopes are the brightest we can venture to cherish. The protection which we have is protection in, and not protection from, strife and danger. It is a filter which lets the icy cold water of sorrow drop numbing upon us, but keeps back the poison that was in it. We have to fight, but He will fight with us; to sorrow, but not alone nor without hope; to pass through many a peril, but we shall get through them. Deliverance, which implies danger, need, and woe, is the best we can hope for.

It is the least we are entitled to expect if we love Him. It is the certain issue of His encamping round about us. Always with us, He will strike for us at the best moment. The Lord God is in the midst of her always; 'the Lord will help her, and that right early.' So like the hunted fugitive in Adullam we may lift up our confident voices even when the stress of strife and sorrow is upon us; and though Gath be in sight and Saul just over the hills, and we have no better refuge than a cave in a hillside; yet in prophecy built upon our consciousness that the Angel of the Covenant is with us now, we may antedate the deliverance that shall be, and think of it as even now accomplished. So the Apostle, when within sight of the block and the headsman's axe, broke into the rapture of his last words: 'The Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me to His heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.' Was he wrong?

26)Psalms 34:10

STRUGGLING AND SEEKING

Psa. 34:10.

If we may trust the superscription of this psalm, it was written by David at one of the very darkest days of his wanderings, probably in the Cave of Adullam, where he had gathered around him a band of outlaws, and was living, to all appearance, a life uncommonly like that of a brigand chief, in the hills. One might have pardoned him if, at such a moment, some cloud of doubt or despondency had crept over his soul. But instead of that his words are running over with gladness, and the psalm begins 'I will bless the Lord at all times, and His praise shall continually be in my mouth.' Similarly here he avers, even at a moment when he wanted a great deal of what the world calls 'good,' that 'they that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing.' There were lions in Palestine in David's time. He had had a fight with one of them, as you may remember, and his lurking place was probably not far off the scene of Samson's exploits. Very likely they were prowling about the rocky mouth of the cave, and he weaves their howls into his psalm: 'The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger: but they that seek the Lord shall not want any good.'

So, then, here are the two thoughts-the struggle that always fails and the seeking that always finds.

I. The struggle that always fails.

'The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger.' They are taken as the type of violent effort and struggle, as well as of supreme strength, but for all their teeth and claws, and lithe spring, 'they lack, and suffer hunger.' The suggestion is, that the men whose lives are one long fight to appropriate to themselves more and more of outward good, are living a kind of life that is fitter for beasts than for men. A fierce struggle for material good is the true description of the sort of life that hosts of us live. What is the meaning of all this cry that we hear about the murderous competition going on round us? What is the true character of the lives of, I am afraid, the majority of people in a city like Manchester, but a fight and a struggle, a desire to have, and a failure to obtain? Let us remember that that sort of existence is for the brutes, and that there is a better way of getting what is good; the only fit way for man. Beasts of prey, naturalists tell us, are always lean. It is the graminivorous order that meekly and peacefully crop the pastures that are well fed and in good condition-'which things are an allegory.'

'The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger'-and that, being interpreted, just states the fact to which every man's experience, and the observation of every man that has an eye in his head, distinctly say, 'Amen, it is so.' For there is no satisfaction or success ever to be won by this way of fighting and struggling and scheming and springing at the prey. For if we do not utterly fail, which is the lot of so many of us, still partial success has little power of bringing perfect satisfaction to a human spirit. One loss counterbalances any number of gains. No matter how soft is the mattress, if there is one tiny thorn sticking up through it all the softness goes for nothing. There is always a Mordecai sitting at the gate when Haman goes prancing through it on his white horse; and the presence of the unsympathetic and stiff-backed Jew, sitting stolid at the gate, takes the gilt off the gingerbread, and embitters the enjoyment. So men count up their disappointments, and forget all their fulfilled hopes, count up their losses and forget their gains. They think less of the thousands that they have gained than of the half-crown that they were cheated of.

In every way it is true that the little annoyances, like a grain of dust in the sensitive eye, take all the sweetness out of mere material good, and I suppose that there are no more bitterly disappointed men in this world than the perfectly 'successful men,' as the world counts them. They have been disillusionised in the process of acquisition. When they were young and lusted after earthly good things, these seemed to be all that they needed. When they are old, and have them, they find that they are feeding on ashes, and the grit breaks their teeth, and irritates their tongues. The 'young lions do lack' even when their roar and their spring 'have secured the prey,' and 'they suffer hunger' even when they have fed full. Ay! for if the utmost possible measure of success were granted us, in any department in which the way of getting the thing is this fighting and effort, we should be as far away from being at rest as ever we were.

You remember the old story of the *Arabian Nights*, about the wonderful palace that was built by magic, and all whose windows were set in precious stones, but there was one window that remained unadorned, and that spoiled all for the owner. His palace was full of treasures, but an enemy looked on all the wealth and suggested a previously unnoticed defect by saying, ‘You have not a roc’s egg.’ He had never thought about getting a roc’s egg, and did not know what it was. But the consciousness of something lacking had been roused, and it marred his enjoyment of what he had and drove him to set out on his travels to secure the missing thing. There is always something lacking, for our desires grow far faster than their satisfactions, and the more we have, the wider our longing reaches out, so that as the wise old Book has it, ‘He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase.’ You cannot fill a soul with the whole universe, if you do not put God in it. One of the greatest works of fiction of modern times ends, or all but ends, with a sentence something like this, ‘Ah! who of us has what he wanted, or having it, is satisfied?’ ‘The young lions do lack, and suffer hunger’-and the struggle always fails-’but they that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing.’

II. The seeking which always finds.

Now, how do we ‘seek the Lord’? It is a metaphorical expression, of course, which needs to be carefully interpreted in order not to lead us into a great mistake. We do not seek Him as if He had not sought us, or was hiding from us. But our search of Him is search after one who is near every one of us, and who delights in nothing so much as in pouring Himself into every heart and mind, and will and life, if only heart, mind, will, life, are willing to accept Him. It is a short search that the child by her mother’s skirts, or her father’s side, has to make for mother or father. It is a shorter search that we have to make for God.

We seek Him by desire. Do you want Him? A great many of us do not. We seek Him by communion, by turning our thoughts to Him, amidst all the rush of daily life, and such a turning of thought to Him, which is quite possible, will prevent our most earnest working upon things material from descending to the likeness of the lions’ fighting for it. We seek Him by desire, by communion, by obedience. And they who thus seek Him find Him in the act of seeking Him, just as certainly as if I open my eye I see the sun, or as if I dilate my lungs the atmosphere rushes into them. For He is always seeking us. That is a beautiful word of our Lord's to which we do not always attach all its value, 'The Father *seeketh* such to worship Him.' Why put the emphasis upon the 'such,' as if it was a definition of the only kind of acceptable worship? It is that. But we might put more emphasis upon the 'seeketh' without spoiling the logic of the sentence; and thereby we should come nearer the truth of what God's heart to us is, so that if we do seek Him, we shall surely find. In this region, and in this region only, there is no search that is vain, there is no effort that is foiled, there is no desire unaccomplished, there is no failure possible. We each of us have, accurately and precisely, as much of God as we desire to have. If there is only a very little of the Water of Life in our vessels, it is because we did not care to possess any more. 'Seek, and ye shall find.'

We shall be sure to find everything in God. Look at the grand confidence, and the utterance of a life's experience in these great words: 'Shall not want any good.' For God is everything to us, and everything else is nothing; and it is the presence of God in anything that makes it truly able to satisfy our desires. Human love, sweet and precious, dearest and best of all earthly possessions as it is, fails to fill a heart unless the love grasps God as well as the beloved dying creature. And so with regard to all other things. They are good when God is in them, and when they are ours in God. They are nought when wrenched away from Him. We are sure to find everything in Him, for this is the very property of that infinite divine nature that is waiting to impart itself to us, that, like water poured into a vessel, it will take the shape of the vessel into which it is poured. Whatever is my need, the one God will supply it all.

You remember the old Rabbinical tradition which speaks a deep truth, dressed in a fanciful shape. It says that the manna in the wilderness tasted to every man just what he desired, whatever dainty or nutriment he most wished; that the manna became like the magic cup in the old fairy legends, out of which could be poured any precious liquor at the pleasure of the man who was to drink it. The one God is everything to us all, anything that we desire, and the thing that we need; Protean in His manifestations, one in His sufficiency. With Him, as well as in Him, we are sure to have all that we require. 'Seek ye first the Kingdom . . . and all these things shall be added unto you.'

Let us begin, dear brethren! with seeking, and then our struggling will not be violent, nor self-willed, nor will it fail. If we begin with seeking, and have God, be sure that all we need we shall get, and that what we do not get we do not need. It is hard to believe it when our vehement wishes go out to something that His serene wisdom does not send. It is hard to believe it when our bleeding hearts are being wrenched away from something around which they have clung. But it is true for all that. And he that can say, ‘Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee,’ will find that the things which he enjoys in subordination to his one supreme good are a thousand times more precious when they are regarded as second than they ever could be when our folly tried to make them first. ‘Seek first the Kingdom,’ and be contented that the ‘other things’ shall be appendices, additions, over and above the one thing that is needful.

Now, all that is very old-fashioned, threadbare truth. Dear brethren! if we believed it, and lived by it, ‘the peace of God which passes understanding’ would ‘keep our hearts and minds.’ And, instead of fighting and losing, and desiring to have and howling out because we cannot obtain, we should patiently wait before Him, submissively ask, earnestly seek, immediately find, and always possess and be satisfied with, the one good for body, soul, and spirit, which is God Himself.

‘There be many that cry, Oh! that one would show as any good.’ The wise do not cry to men, but pray to God. ‘Lord! lift Thou the light of Thy countenance upon us.’

27)Psalms 34:22

Psalms

NO CONDEMNATION

Psa. 34:22.

These words are very inadequately represented in the translation of the Authorised Version. The Psalmist’s closing declaration is something very much deeper than that they who trust in God ‘shall not be desolate.’ If you look at the previous clause, you will see that we must expect something more than such a particular blessing as that:-'The Lord redeemeth the soul of His servants.' It is a great drop from that thought, instead of being a climax, to follow it with nothing more than, 'None of them that trust in Him shall be desolate.' But the Revised Version accurately renders the words: 'None of them that trust in Him shall be *condemned*.' There we have something that is worthy to follow 'The Lord redeemeth the soul of His servants,' and we have a most striking anticipation of the clearest and most Evangelical teaching of the New Testament.

The entirely New Testament tone of these words of the psalm comes out still more clearly, if we recognise that, not only in the latter, but in the former, part of the clause, we have one of the very keynotes of New Testament teaching. When we read in the New Testament that 'we are justified by faith,' the meaning is precisely the same as that of our text. Thus, however it came about, here is this Psalmist, David or another, standing away back amidst the shadows and symbols and ritualisms of that Old Covenant, and rising at once above all the mists, right up into the sunshine, and seeing, as clearly as we see it nineteen centuries after Jesus Christ, that the way to escape condemnation is simple faith. Let us look at both of the parts of these great words. We consider-

I. The people that are spoken of here.

'None of them that trust in Him'-I need not, I suppose, further dwell upon the absolute identity shown by this phrase between the Old and the New Testament conceptions; but I should like to make a remark, which I dare say I have often made before-it cannot be made too often-that, whatever be the differences between the Old and the New, this is not the difference, that they present two different ways of approaching God. There are a great many differences; the conception of the divine nature is no doubt infinitely deepened, made more tender and more lofty, by the thought of the Fatherhood of God. The contents of the revelation which our faith is to grasp are brought out far more definitely and articulately and fully in the New Testament. But in the Old, the road to God was the same as it is to-day; and from the beginning there has only been, and through all Eternity there will only be, one path by which men can have access to the Father, and that is by faith. 'Trust' is the Old Testament word, 'faith' is the New.

They are absolutely identical, and there would have been a flood of light-sorely needed by a great many good people-cast upon the relations between those two complementary and harmonious halves of a consistent whole, if our translators had not been influenced by their unfortunate love for varying translations of the same word, but had contented themselves with choosing one of these two words 'trust' or 'faith,' and had used that one consistently and uniformly throughout the Old and New books. Then we should have understood, what anybody who will open his eyes can see now, that what the New Testament magnifies as 'faith' is identical with what the Old Testament sets forth as 'trust.' 'None of them that trust in Him shall be condemned.'

But there is one more remark to make on this matter, and that is that a great flood of light, and of more than light, of encouragement and of stimulus, is cast upon that saving exercise of trust by noticing the literal meaning of the word that is rightly so rendered here. All those words, especially in the Old Testament, that express emotions or acts of the mind, originally applied to corporeal acts or material things. I suppose that is so in all language. It is very conspicuously so in the Hebrew. And the word that is here translated, rightly, 'trust,' means literally to fly to a refuge, or to betake oneself to some defence in order to get shelter there.

There is a trace of both meanings, the literal and the metaphorical, in another psalm, where we read, amidst the Psalmist's rapturous heaping together of great names for God: 'My Rock, in whom I will trust.' Now keep to the literal meaning there, and you see how it flashes up the whole into beauty: 'My Rock, to whom I will flee for refuge,' and put my back against it, and stand as impregnable as it; or get myself well into the clefts of it, and then nothing can touch me.

'Rock of Ages! cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.'

Then we find the same words, with the picture of flight and the reality of faith, used with another set of associations in another psalm, which says: 'He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust.' That grates, one gets away from the metaphor too quickly; but if we preserve the literal meaning, and read, ‘under His wings shalt thou flee for refuge,’ we have the picture of the chicken flying to the mother-bird when kites are in the sky, and huddling close to the warm breast and the soft downy feathers, and so with the spread of the great wing being sheltered from all possibility of harm. This psalm is ascribed to David when he was in hiding. The superscription says that it is ‘a psalm of David, when he changed his behaviour before Abimelech; who drove him away, and he departed.’ And where did he go? To the cave in the rock. And as he sat in the mouth of it, with the rude arch stretching above him, like the wings of some great bird, feeling himself absolutely safe, he said, ‘None of them that take refuge in Thee shall be condemned.’

Does not that metaphor teach us a great deal more of what faith is, and encourage us far more to exercise it, than much theological hair-splitting? What lies in the metaphor? Two things, the earnest eagerness of the act of flight, and the absolute security which comes when we have reached the shadow of the great Rock in a weary land.

But there is one thing more that I would notice, and that is that this designation of the persons as ‘them that trust in Him’ follows last of all in a somewhat lengthened series of designations for good people. They are these: ‘the righteous’-’them that are of a broken heart’-’such as be of a contrite spirit’-’His servants,’ and then, lastly, comes, as basis of all, as, so to speak, the keynote of all, ‘none of them that *trust* in Him.’ That is to say-righteousness, true and blessed pulverising of the obstinate insensibility of self alienated from God, true and blessed consciousness of sin, joyful surrender of self to loving and grateful submission to God’s will, are all connected with or flow from that act of trust in Him. And if you are trusting in Him, in anything more than the mere formal, dead way in which multitudes of nominal Christians in all our congregations are doing so, your trust will produce all these various fruits of righteousness, and lowliness, and joyful service. ‘Faith’ or ‘trust’ is the mother of all graces and virtues, and it produces them all because it directly kindles the creative flame of an answering love to Him in whom we trust. So much, then, for the first part of my remarks. Consider, next-

II. The blessing here promised.

‘None of them that trust in Him shall be condemned.’ The word which is inadequately rendered ‘desolate,’ and more accurately ‘condemned,’ includes the following varying shades of meaning, which, although they are various, are all closely connected, as you will see-to incur guilt, to feel guilty, to be condemned, to be punished. All these four are inextricably blended together. And the fact that the one word in the Old Testament covers all that ground suggests some very solemn thoughts.

First of all, it suggests this, that guilt, or sin, and condemnation and punishment, are, if not absolutely identical, inseparable. To be guilty is to be condemned. That is to say, since we live, as we do, under the continual grip of an infinitely wise and all-knowing law, and in the presence of a Judge who not only sees us as we are, but treats us as He sees us-sin and guilt go together, as every man knows that has a conscience. And sin and guilt and condemnation and punishment go together, as every man may see in the world, and experience in himself. To be separated from God, which is the immediate effect of sin, is to pass into hell here. ‘Every transgression and disobedience,’ not only ‘shall receive its just recompense,’ away out yonder, in some misty, far-off, hypothetical future, but down here to-day. All sin works automatically, and to do wrong is to be punished for doing it.

Then my text suggests another solemn thought, and that is that this judgment, this condemnation, is not only present, according to our Lord’s own great words, which perhaps are an allusion to these: ‘He that believeth not is condemned already’; but it also suggests the universality of that condemnation. Our Psalmist says that only through trusting Him can a man be taken and lifted away, as it were, from the descent of the thundercloud, and its bolt that lies above his head. ‘They that trust Him are not condemned,’ every one else is; not ‘shall be,’ but is, to-day, here and now. If there is a man or woman in my audience now who is not exercising trust in God through Jesus Christ, on that man or woman, young or old, cultivated or uncultivated, professing Christian or not, there is bound the burden of their sin, which is the crushing weight of their condemnation.

So my text suggests, that the sole deliverance from this universal pressure of the condemnatory influence of universal sin lies in that fleeing for refuge to God. And then comes in the Christian addition, ‘to God, as manifested in

Jesus Christ.’ The Psalmist did not know that. All the more wonderful is it that without the knowledge he should have risen to the great thought of our text-all the more inexplicable unless you believe that ‘holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.’

Wonderful it is still, but not unintelligible, if you believe that. But you and I know more than this singer did; for we can listen to the Master, who says, ‘He that believeth on Him is not condemned’; and to the servant who echoes-and perhaps both of them are alluding to our psalm-’There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.’ My faith, if it knits me to Jesus Christ, unties the bonds by which my sin is bound upon me, for it makes me to share in His Spirit, in His righteousness, in His glory.

And so, dear brethren! the Psalmist, though he did not know it, may point us away to the truth hidden from him, but sunlight clear for us, that by simple trust we may receive the Saviour through whom all our condemnation will pass away, and may be found in Him having the ‘righteousness which is of God by faith.’

‘Not condemned’-Is that all? Are the blessings of the Gospel all to be reduced to this mere negative expression? Certainly not. The Psalmist could have said a great deal more, and in the previous context he does say a great deal more. But to that restrained and moderate statement of the case, which is far less than the facts of the case, ‘he that trusteth is not condemned,’ let us add Paul’s expansion, ‘whom He called them He also justified, and whom He justified them He also glorified.’

28)Psalms 36:5-7

Psalms

SKY, EARTH, AND SEA: A PARABLE OF GOD

Psa. 36:5 - Psa. 36:7.

This wonderful description of the manifold brightness of the divine nature is introduced in this psalm with singular abruptness. It is set side by side with a vivid picture of an evildoer, a man who mutters in his own heart his godlessness, and with obstinate determination plans and plots in forgetfulness of God. Without a word to break the violence of the transition, side by side with that picture, the Psalmist sets before us these thoughts of the character of God. He seems to feel that that character was the only relief in the contemplation of the miserable sights of which the earth is only too full. We should go mad when we think of man’s wickedness unless we could look up and see, with one quick turn of the eye, the heaven opened and the throned Love that sits up there gazing on all the chaos, and working to soothe sorrow, and to purify evil.

Perhaps there is another reason for this dramatic and striking swiftness of contrast between the godless man and the revealed God. The true test of a life is its power to bear the light of God being suddenly let in upon it. How would yours look, my friend! if all at once a window in heaven was opened, and God glared in upon you? Set your lives side by side with Him. They always are side by side with Him whether you know it or not; but you had better bring your ‘deeds to the light that they may be made manifest’ now, than to have to do it as suddenly, and a great deal more sorrowfully, when you are dragged out of the shows and illusions of time, and He meets you on the threshold of another world. Would a beam of light from God, coming in upon your life, be like a light falling upon a gang of conspirators, that would make them huddle all their implements under their cloaks, and scuttle out of the way as fast as possible? Or would it be like a gleam of sunshine upon the flowers, opening out their petals and wooing from them fragrance? Which?

But I turn from such considerations as these to the more immediate subject of my contemplations in this discourse. I have ventured to take so great words for my text, though each clause would be more than enough for many a sermon, because my aim now is a very modest one. I desire simply to give, in the briefest way, the connection and mutual relation of these wonderful words; not to attempt any adequate treatment of the great thoughts which they contain, but only to set forth the meaning and interdependence of these manifold names for the beams of the divine light, which are presented here. The chief part of our text sets before us God in the variety and boundlessness of His loving nature, and the close of it shows us man sheltering beneath God’s wings. These are the two main themes for our present consideration.

I. We have, first, God in the boundlessness of His loving nature.

The one pure light of the divine nature is broken up, in the prism of the psalm, into various rays, which theologians call, in their hard, abstract way, divine attributes. These are ‘mercy, faithfulness, righteousness.’ Then we have two sets of divine acts-’judgments,’ and the ‘preservation’ of man and beast; and finally we have again ‘lovingkindness,’ as our version has unfortunately been misled, by its love for varying its translation, to render the same word which begins the series and is there called ‘mercy.’

Now that ‘mercy’ or ‘lovingkindness’ of which my text thus speaks, is very nearly equivalent to the New Testament ‘love’; or, perhaps, still more nearly equivalent to the New Testament ‘grace.’ Both the one and the other mean substantially this-active love communicating itself to creatures that are inferior and that might have expected something else to befall them. Mercy is a modification of love, inasmuch as it is love to an inferior. The hand is laid gently upon the man, because if it were laid with all its weight it would crush him. It is the stooping goodness of a king to a beggar. And mercy is likewise love in its exercise to persons that might expect something else, being guilty. As a general coming to a body of mutineers with pardon and favour upon his lips, instead of with condemnation and death; so God comes to us forgiving and blessing. All His goodness is forbearance, and His love is mercy, because of the weakness, the lowliness, and the ill desert of us on whom the love falls.

Now notice that this same ‘quality of mercy’ stands here at the beginning and at the end. All the attributes of the divine nature, all the operations of the divine hand lie within the circle of His mercy-like diamonds set in a golden ring. Mercy, or love flowing out in blessings to inferior and guilty creatures, is the root and ground of all God’s character; it is the foundation and impulse of all His acts. Modern science reduces all modes of physical energy to one, for which it has no name but-energy. We are taught by God’s own revelation of Himself-and most especially by His final and perfect revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ-to trace all forms of divine energy back to one which David calls ‘mercy,’ which John calls ‘love.’

It is last as well as first, the final upshot of all revelation. The last voice that speaks from Scripture has for its special message ‘God is Love.’ The last voice that sounds from the completed history of the world will have the same message, and the ultimate word of all revelation, the end of the whole of the majestic unfolding of God’s purposes will be the proclamation to the four corners of the universe, as from the trump of the Archangel, of the name of God as Love. The northern and the southern poles of the great sphere are one and the same, a straight axle through the very heart of it, from which the bounding lines swell out to the equator, and towards which they converge again on the opposite side of the world. So mercy is the strong axletree, the northern pole and the southern, on which the whole world of the divine perfections revolves and moves. The first and last, the Alpha and Omega of God, beginning and crowning and summing up all His being and His work, is His mercy, His lovingkindness.

But next to mercy comes faithfulness. ‘Thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds.’ God’s faithfulness is in its narrowest sense His adherence to His promises. It implies, in that sense, a verbal revelation, and definite words from Him pledging Him to a certain line of action. ‘He hath said, and shall He not do it?’ ‘He will not alter the thing that is gone out of His lips.’ It is only a God who has actually spoken to men who can be a ‘faithful God.’ He will not palter with a double sense, ‘keeping His word of promise to the ear, and breaking it to the hope.’

But not only His articulate promises, but also His own past actions, bind Him. He is always true to these; and not only continues to do as He has done, but discharges every obligation which His past imposes on Him. The ostrich was said to leave its eggs to be hatched in the sand. Men bring men into positions of dependence, and then lightly shake responsibility from careless shoulders. But God accepts the cares laid upon Him by His own acts, and discharges them to the last jot. He is a ‘faithful Creator.’ Creation brings obligations with it; obligations for the creature; obligations for the Creator. If God makes a being, God is bound to take care of the being that He has made. If He makes a being in a given fashion, He is bound to provide for the necessities that He has created. According to the old proverb, if He makes mouths it is His business to feed them. And He recognises the obligation. His past binds Him to certain conduct in His future. We can lay hold on the former manifestation, and we can plead it with Him. ‘Thou hast been, and therefore Thou must be.’ ‘Thou hast taught me to trust in Thee; vindicate and warrant my trust by Thy unchangeableness.’ So His word, His acts, and His own nature, bind God to bless and help. His faithfulness is the expression of His unchangeableness. ‘Because He could swear by no greater, He sware by Himself.’

Take, then, these two thoughts of God’s lovingkindness and of God’s faithfulness and weave them together, and see what a strong cord they are to which a man may cling, and in all His weakness be sure that it will never give nor break. Mercy might be transient and arbitrary, but when you braid in ‘faithfulness’ along with it, it becomes fixed as the pillars of heaven, and immutable as the throne of God. Only when we are sure of God’s faithfulness can we lift up thankful voices to Him, ‘because His mercy endureth for ever.’ A despotic monarch may be all full of tenderness at this moment, and all full of wrath and sternness the next. He may have a whim of favour to-day, and a whim of severity to-morrow, and no man can say, ‘What doest thou?’ But God is not a despot. He has, so to speak, ‘decreed a constitution.’ He has limited Himself. He has marked out His path across the great wide region of possibilities of the divine action; He has buoyed out His channel on that ocean, and declared to us His purposes. So we can reckon on God, as astronomers can foretell the motions of the stars. We can plead His faithfulness along with His love, and feel that the one makes sure that the other shall be from everlasting to everlasting.

The next beam of the divine brightness is righteousness. ‘Thy righteousness is like the great mountains.’ Righteousness is not to be taken here in its narrow sense of stern retribution which gives to the evildoer the punishment that he deserves. There is no thought here, whatever there may be in other places in Scripture, of any opposition between mercy and righteousness, but the notion of righteousness here is a broader and greater one. It is just this, to put it into other words, that God has a law for His being to which He conforms; and that whatsoever things are fair and lovely, and good, and pure down here, those things are fair, and lovely, and good, and pure up there; that He is the Archetype of all excellence, the Ideal of all moral completeness: that we can know enough of Him to be sure of this that what we call right He loves, and what we call right He practises.

Brethren! unless we have that for the very foundation of our thoughts of God, we have no foundation to rest on. Unless we feel and know that ‘the Judge of all the earth doeth right,’ and is right, and law and righteousness have their home and seat in His bosom, and are the expression of His inmost being, then I know not where our confidence can be built. Unless ‘Thy righteousness, like the great mountains,’ surrounds and guards the low plain of our lives, they will lie open to all foes.

Then, next, we pass from the divine character to the divine acts. Mercy, faithfulness, and righteousness all converge and flow into the great river of the divine ‘judgments.’

By judgments are not meant merely the acts of God’s punitive righteousness, the retributions that destroy evildoers, but all God’s decisions and acts in regard to man. Or, to put it into other and briefer words, God’s judgments are the whole of the ‘ways,’ the methods of the divine government. So Paul, alluding to this very passage when he says ‘How unsearchable are Thy judgments!’ adds, as a parallel clause, meaning the same thing, ‘and Thy ways past finding out.’ That includes all which men call, in a narrower sense, judgments, but it includes, too, all acts of kindness and loving gifts. God’s judgments are the expressions of His thoughts, and these thoughts are thoughts of good and not of evil.

But notice, in the next place, the boundlessness of all these characteristics of the divine nature.

‘Thy mercy is in the heavens,’ towering up above the stars, and dwelling there, like some divine ether filling all space. The heavens are the home of light, the source of every blessing, arching over every head, rimming every horizon, holding all the stars, opening into abysses as we gaze, with us by night and by day, undimmed by the mist and smoke of earth, unchanged by the lapse of centuries; ever seen, never reached, bending over us always, always far above us. So the mercy of God towers above us, and stoops down towards us, rims us all about and arches over us all, sheds down its dewy benedictions by night and by day; is filled with a million stars and light-points of duty and of splendour; is near us ever to bless and succour and help, and holds us all in its blue round.

‘Thy faithfulness reacheth to the clouds.’ Strange that God’s fixed faithfulness should be compared to the very emblems of mutation. The clouds are unstable, they whirl and melt and change. Strange to think of the unalterable faithfulness as reaching to them! May it not be that the very mutability of the mutable may be the means of manifesting the unalterable sameness of God’s faithful purpose, of His unchangeable love, and of His ever consistent dealings? May not the apparent incongruity be a part of the felicity of the bold words? Is it not true that earthly things, as they change their forms and melt away, leaving no track behind, phantomlike as they are, do still obey the behests of that divine faithfulness, and gather and dissolve and break in brief showers of blessing, or short, sharp crashes of storm, at the bidding of that steadfast purpose which works out one unalterable design by a thousand instruments, and changeth all things, being in itself unchanged? The thing that is eternal, even the faithfulness of God, dwells amid, and shows itself through, the things that are temporal, the flying clouds of change.

Again, ‘Thy righteousness is like the great mountains.’ Like these, its roots are fast and stable; like these, it stands firm for ever; like these, its summits touch the fleeting clouds of human circumstance; like these, it is a shelter and a refuge, inaccessible in its steepest peaks, but affording many a cleft in its rocks, where a man may hide and be safe. But, unlike these, it knew no beginning, and shall know no end. Emblems of permanence as they are, though Olivet looks down on Jerusalem as it did when Melchizedek was its king, and Tabor and Hermon stand as they did before human lips had named them, they are wearing away by winter storms and summer heats. But, as Isaiah has taught us, when the earth is old, God’s might and mercy are young; for ‘the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from thee.’ ‘The earth shall wax old like a garment, but My righteousness shall not be abolished.’ It is more stable than the mountains, and firmer than the firmest things upon earth.

Then, with wonderful poetical beauty and vividness of contrast, there follows upon the emblem of the great mountains of God’s righteousness the emblem of the ‘mighty deep’ of His judgments. Here towers Vesuvius; there at its feet lie the waters of the bay. So the righteousness springs up like some great cliff, rising sheer from the water’s edge, while its feet are laved by the sea of the divine judgments, unfathomable and shoreless. The mountains and the sea are the two grandest things in nature, and in their combination sublime; the one the home of calm and silence, the other in perpetual motion. But the mountain’s roots are deeper than the depths of the sea, and though the judgments are a mighty deep, the righteousness is deeper, and is the bed of the ocean.

The metaphor, of course, implies obscurity, but what sort of obscurity? The obscurity of the sea. And what sort of obscurity is that? Not that which comes from mud, or anything added, but that which comes from depth. As far as a man can see down into its blue-green depths they are clear and translucent; but where the light fails and the eye fails, there comes what we call obscurity. The sea is clear, but our sight is limited.

And so there is no arbitrary obscurity in God’s dealings, and we know as much about them as it is possible for us to know; but we cannot see to the bottom. A man on the cliff can look much deeper into the ocean than a man on the level beach. The higher you climb the further you will see down into the ‘sea of glass mingled with fire’ that lies placid before God’s throne. Let us remember that it is a hazardous thing to judge of a picture before it is finished; of a building before the scaffolding is pulled down, and it is as hazardous for us to say about any deed or any revealed truth that it is inconsistent with the divine character. Wait a bit; wait a bit! ‘Thy judgments are a great deep.’ The deep will be drained off one day, and you will see the bottom of it. ‘Judge nothing before the time.’

But as an aid to patience and faith hearken how the Psalmist finishes up his contemplations: ‘O Lord! Thou preservest man and beast.’ Very well then, all this mercy, faithfulness, righteousness, judgment, high as the heavens, deep as the ocean, firm as the hills, it is all working for this-to keep the millions of living creatures round about us, and ourselves, in life and well-being. The mountain is high, the deep is profound. Between the mountain and the sea there is a strip of level land. God’s righteousness towers above us; God’s judgments go down beneath us; we can scarcely measure adequately the one or the other. But upon the level where we live there are the green fields where the cattle browse, and the birds sing, and men live and till and reap and are fed. That is to say, we all have enough in the plain, patent facts of creation and preservation of man and animal life in this world to make us quite sure of what is the principle that prevails up to the very top of the inaccessible mountains, and down to the very bottom of the unfathomable deep. What we know of Him, in the blessings of His love and providence, ought to interpret for us all that is perplexing. What we understand is good and loving. Let us be sure that what we do not yet understand is good and loving too. The web is of one texture throughout. The least educated ear can catch the music of the simpler melodies which run through the Great Composer’s work. We shall one day be able to appreciate the yet fuller music of the more recondite parts, which to us at present seem only jangling and discord. It is not His melody but our ears that are at fault. But we may well accept the obscurity of the mighty deep of God’s judgment, when we can see plainly that, after all, the earth is full of His mercy, and that ‘the eyes of all things wait on God, and He giveth them their meat in due season.’

II. So much, then, for the great picture here of these boundless characteristics of the divine nature. Now let us look for a moment at the picture of man sheltering beneath God's wings.

'How excellent is Thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings.' God's lovingkindness, or mercy, as I explained the word might be rendered, is *precious*, for that is the true meaning of the word translated 'excellent.' We are rich when we have that for ours; we are poor without it. Our true wealth is to possess God's love, and to know in thought and realise in feeling and reciprocate in affection His grace and goodness, the beauty and perfectness of His wondrous character. That man is wealthy who has God on his side; that man is a pauper who has not God for his.

'How precious is Thy lovingkindness, *therefore* the children of men put their trust.' There is only one thing that will ever win a man's heart to love God, and that is that God should love him first, and let him see it. 'We love Him because He first loved us,' is the New Testament teaching. Is it not all adumbrated and foretold in these words: 'How precious is Thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust'?

We may be driven to worship after a sort by power; we may be smitten into some cold admiration, into some kind of reluctant subjection and trembling reverence, by the manifestation of divine perfections. But there is only one thing that wins a man's heart, and that is the sight of God's heart; and it is only when we know how precious His lovingkindness is that we shall be drawn towards Him.

And then this last verse tells us how we can make God our own: 'They put their trust under the shadow of Thy wings.' The word here rendered, and accurately rendered, 'put their trust,' has a very beautiful literal meaning. It means to flee for refuge, as the manslayer might flee into the strong city, or as Lot did out of Sodom to the little city on the hill, or as David did into the cave from his enemies. So, with such haste, with such intensity, staying for nothing, and with the effort of your whole will and nature, flee to God. That is trust. Go to Him for refuge from all evil, from all harm, from your own souls, from all sin, from hell, and death, and the devil.

Put your trust under 'the shadow of His wings.' That is a beautiful image, drawn, probably, from the grand words of Deuteronomy, where God is likened to the 'eagle stirring up her nest, fluttering over her young,' with tenderness in her fierce eye, and protecting strength in the sweep of her mighty pinion. So God spreads the covert of His wing, strong and tender, beneath which we may all gather ourselves and nestle.

And how can we do that? By the simple process of fleeing unto Him, as made known to us in Christ our Saviour; to hide ourselves there. For let us not forget how even the tenderness of this metaphor was increased by its shape on the tender lips of the Lord: 'How often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings!' The Old Testament took the emblem of the eagle, sovereign, and strong, and fierce; the New Testament took the emblem of the domestic fowl, peaceable, and gentle, and affectionate. Let us flee to that Christ, by humble faith with the plea on our lips-

'Cover my defenceless head
With the shadow of Thy wing';

and then all the Godhead in its mercy, its faithfulness, its righteousness, and its judgments will be on our side; and we shall know how precious is the lovingkindness of the Lord, and find in Him the home and hiding-place of our hearts for ever.

29)Psalms 36:8-9

Psalms

WHAT MEN FIND BENEATH THE WINGS OF GOD

Psa. 36:8 - Psa. 36:9.

In the preceding verses we saw a wonderful picture of the boundless perfections of God; His lovingkindness, faithfulness, righteousness, and of His twofold act, the depths of His judgments and the plainness of His merciful preservation of man and beast. In these verses we have an equally wonderful picture of the blessedness of the godly, the elements of which consist in four things: satisfaction, represented under the emblem of a feast; joy, represented under the imagery of full draughts from a flowing river of delight; life, pouring from God as a fountain; light, streaming from Him as source.

And this picture is connected with the previous one by a very simple link. Who are they who ‘shall be abundantly satisfied’? The men ‘who put their trust beneath the shadow of Thy wings.’ That is to say, the simple exercise of confidence in God is the channel through which all the fulness of divinity passes into and fills our emptiness.

Observe, too, that the whole of the blessings here promised are to be regarded as present and not future. ‘They shall be abundantly satisfied’ would be far more truly rendered in consonance with the Hebrew: ‘They *are* satisfied’; and so also we should read ‘Thou *dost* make them drink of the river of Thy pleasures; in Thy light *do* we see light.’ The Psalmist is not speaking of any future blessedness, to be realised in some far-off, indefinite day to come, but of what is possible even in this cloudy and sorrowful life. My text was true on the hills of Palestine, on the day when it was spoken; it may be true amongst the alleys of Manchester to-day. My purpose at this time is simply to deal with the four elements in which this blessedness consists-satisfaction, joy, life, light.

I. Satisfaction: ‘They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of Thy house.’

Now, I suppose, there is a double metaphor in that. There is an allusion, no doubt, to the festal meal of priests and worshippers in the Temple, on occasion of the peace-offering, and there is also the simpler metaphor of God as the Host at His table, at which we are guests. ‘Thy house’ may either be, in the narrower sense, the Temple; and then all life is represented as being a glad sacrificial meal in His presence, of which ‘the meek shall eat and be satisfied,’ or Thy ‘house’ may be taken in a more general sense; and then all life is represented as the gathering of children round the abundant board which their Father’s providence spreads for them, and as glad feasting in the ‘mansions’ of the Father’s house.

In either case the plain teaching of the text is, that by the might of a calm trust in God the whole mass of a man’s desires are filled and satisfied. What do we want to satisfy us? It is something almost awful to think of the multiplicity, and the variety, and the imperativeness of the raging desires which every human soul carries about within it. The heart is like a nest of callow fledglings, every one of them a great, wide open, gaping beak, that ever needs to have food put into it. Heart, mind, will, appetites, tastes, inclinations, weaknesses, bodily wants-the whole crowd of these are crying for their meat. The Book of Proverbs says there are three things that are never satisfied: the grave, the earth that is not filled with water, and the fire that never says, ‘It is enough.’ And we may add a fourth, the human heart, insatiable as the grave; thirsty as the sands, on which you may pour Niagara, and it will drink it all up and be ready for more; fierce as the fire that licks up everything within reach and still hungers.

So, though we be poor and weak creatures, we want much to make us restful. We want no less than that every appetite, desire, need, inclination shall be filled to the full; that all shall be filled to the full at once, and that by one thing; that all shall be filled to the full at once, by one thing that shall last for ever. Else we shall be like men whose store of provision gives out before they are half-way across the desert. And we need that all our desires shall be filled at once by one thing that is so much greater than ourselves that we shall grow up towards it, and towards it, and towards it, and yet never be able to exhaust or surpass it.

Where are you going to get that? There is only one answer, dear brethren! to the question, and that is-God, and God alone is the food of the heart; God, and God alone, will satisfy your need. Let us bring the full Christian truth to bear upon the illustration of these words. Who was it that said, ‘I am the Bread of Life. He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger’? Christ will feed my mind with truth if I will accept His revelation of Himself, of God, and of all things. Christ will feed my heart with love if I will open my heart for the entrance of His love. Christ will feed my will with blessed commands if I will submit myself to His sweet and gentle, and yet imperative, authority. Christ will satisfy all my longings and desires with His own great fulness. Other food palls upon man’s appetite, and we wish for change; and physiologists tell us that a less wholesome and nutritious diet, if varied, is better for a man’s health than a more nutritious one if uniform and monotonous. But in Christ there are all constituents that are needed for the building up of the human spirit, and so we never weary of Him if we only know His sweetness. After a world of hungry men have fed upon Him, He remains inexhaustible as at the beginning; like the bread in His own miracles, of which the pieces that were broken and ready to be given to the eaters were more than the original stock, as it appeared when the meal began, or like the fabled feast in the Norse Walhalla, to which the gods sit down to-day, and to-morrow it is all there on the board, as abundant and full as ever. So if we have Christ to live upon, we shall know no hunger; and ‘in the days of famine we shall be satisfied.’

O brethren! have you ever known what it is to feel that your hungry heart is at rest? Did you ever know what it is to say, ‘It is enough’? Have you anything that satisfies your appetite and makes you blessed? Surely, men’s eager haste to get more of the world’s dainties shows that there is no satisfaction at its table. Why will you ‘spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not,’ as Indians in famine eat clay which fills their stomachs, but neither stays hunger, nor ministers strength? Eat and your soul shall live.

II. Now, turn to the next of the elements of blessedness here-Joy. ‘Thou makest them drink of the river of Thy pleasures.’

There may be a possible reference here, couched in the word ‘pleasures,’ to the Garden of Eden, with the river that watered it parting into four heads; for ‘Eden’ is the singular of the word which is here translated ‘pleasures’ or ‘delight.’ If we take that reference, which is very questionable, there would be suggested the thought that amidst all the pain and weariness of this desert life of ours, though the gates of Paradise are shut against us, they who dwell beneath the shadow of the divine wing really have a paradise blooming around them; and have flowing ever by their side, with tinkling music, the paradisaical river of delights, in which they may bathe and swim, and of which they may drink. Certainly the joys of communion with God surpass any which unfallen Eden could have boasted.

But, at all events, the plain teaching of the text is that the simple act of trusting beneath the shadow of God’s wings brings to us an ever fresh and flowing river of gladness, of which we may drink. The whole conception of religion in the Bible is gladsome. There is no puritanical gloom about it. True, a Christian man has sources of sadness which other men have not. There is the consciousness of his own sin, and the contest that he has daily to wage; and all things take a soberer colouring to the eye that has been accustomed to look, however dimly, upon God. Many of the sources of earthly felicity are dammed up and shut off from us if we are living beneath the shadow of God's wings. Life will seem to be sterner, and graver, and sadder than the lives 'that ring with idiot laughter solely,' and have no music because they have no melancholy in them. That cannot be helped. But what does it matter though two or three surface streams, which are little better than drains for sewage, be stopped up, if the 'pure river of the water of life' is turned into your hearts? Surely it will be a gain if the sadness which has joy for its very foundation is yours, instead of the laughter which is only a mocking mask for a death's head, and of which it is true that even 'in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness.' Better to be 'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,' than to be glad on the surface, with a perpetual sorrow and unrest gnawing at the root of your life.

And if it be true that the whole Biblical conception of religion is of a glad thing, then, my brother! it is your duty, if you are a Christian man, to be glad, whatever temptations there may be in your way to be sorrowful. It is a hard lesson, and one which is not always insisted upon. We hear a great deal about other Christian duties. We do not hear so much as we ought about the Christian duty of gladness. It takes a very robust faith to say, 'Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vine, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation,' but unless we can say it, there is an attainment of Christian life yet unreached, to which we have to aspire.

But be that as it may, my point is simply this-that all real and profound possession of, and communion with, God in Christ will make us glad; glad with a gladness altogether unlike that of the world round about us, far deeper, far quieter, far nobler, the sister and the ally of all great things, of all pure life, of all generous and lofty thought. And where is it to be found? Only in fellowship with Him. 'The river of Thy pleasures' may mean something yet more solemn and wonderful than pleasures of which He is the Author. It may mean pleasures *which He shares*, the very delights of the divine nature itself. The more we come into fellowship with Him, the more shall we share in the very joy of God Himself. And what is His joy? He delights in mercy; He delights in self-communication: He is the blessed, the happy God, because He is the giving God. He delights in His love. He ‘rejoices over’ His penitent child ‘with singing,’ In that blessedness we may share; or if that be too high and mystical a thought, may we not remember who it was that said: ‘These things speak I unto you that My joy may remain in you’; and who it is that will one day say to the faithful servant: ‘Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord’? Christ makes us drink of the river of His pleasures. The Shepherd and the sheep drink from the same stream, and the gladness which filled the heart of the Man of Sorrows, and lay deeper than all His sorrows, He imparts to all them that put their trust in Him.

So, dear brethren! what a blessing it is for us to have, as we may have, a source of joy, frozen by no winter, dried up by no summer, muddied and corrupted by no iridescent scum of putrefaction which ever mantles over the stagnant ponds of earthly joys! Like some citadel that has an unfailing well in its courtyard, we may have a fountain of gladness within ourselves which nothing that touches the outside can cut off. We have but to lap a hasty mouthful of earthly joys as we run, but we cannot drink too full draughts of this pure river of water which makes glad the city of God.

III. We have the third element of the blessedness of the godly represented under the metaphor of Life, pouring from the fountain, which is God. ‘With Thee is the fountain of life.’

The words are true in regard to the lowest meaning of ‘life’-physical existence-and they give a wonderful idea of the connection between God and all living creatures. The fountain rises, the spray on the summit catches the sunlight for a moment, and then falls into the basin, jet after jet springing up into the light, and in its turn recoiling into the darkness. The water in the fountain, the water in the spray, the water in the basin, are all one. Wherever there is life there is God. The creature is bound to the Creator by a mystic bond and tie of kinship, by the fact of life. The mystery of life knits all living things with God. It is a spark, wherever it burns, from the central flame. It is a drop, wherever it is found, from the great fountain.

It is in man the breath of God’s nostrils. It is not a gift given by a Creator who dwells apart, having made living things, as a watchmaker might a watch, and then ‘seeing them go.’ But there is a deep mystic union between the God who has life in Himself and all the living creatures who draw their life from Him, which we cannot express better than by that image of our text, ‘With Thee is the fountain of life.’

But my text speaks about a blessing belonging to the men who put their trust under the shadow of God’s wing, and therefore it does not refer merely to physical existence, but to something higher than that, namely, to that life of the spirit in communion with God, which is the true and the proper sense of ‘life’; the one, namely, in which the word is almost always used in the Bible.

There is such a thing as death in life; living men may be ‘dead in trespasses and sins,’ ‘dead in pleasure,’ dead in selfishness. The awful vision of Coleridge in the *Ancient Mariner*, of dead men standing up and pulling at the ropes, is only a picture of the realities of life; where, as on some Witches’ Sabbath, corpses move about and take part in the activities of this dead world. There are people full of energy in regard of worldly things, who yet are all dead to that higher region, the realities of which they have never seen, the actions of which they have never done, the emotions of which they have never felt. Am I speaking to such living corpses now? There are some of my audience alive to the world, alive to animalism, alive to lust, alive to passion, alive to earth, alive perhaps to thought, alive to duty, alive to conduct of a high and noble kind, but yet dead to God, and, therefore, dead to the highest and noblest of all realities. Answer for yourselves the question-do you belong to this class?

There is life for you in Jesus Christ, who ‘*is* the Life.’ Like the great aqueducts that stretch from the hills across the Roman Campagna, His Incarnation brings the waters of the fountain from the mountains of God into the lower levels of our nature, and the fetid alleys of our sins. The cool, sparkling treasure is carried near to every lip. If we drink, we live. If we will not, we die in our sins, and are dead whilst we live. Stop the fountain, and what becomes of the stream? It fades there between its banks, and is no more. You cannot even live the animal life except that life were joined to

Him. If it could be broken away from God it would disappear as the clouds melt in the sky, and there would be nobody, and you would be nowhere. You cannot break yourself away from God *physically* so completely as to annihilate yourself. You can do so *spiritually*, and some of you do it, and the consequence is that you are dead, *dead*, DEAD! You can be made 'alive from the dead,' if you will lay hold on Jesus Christ, and get His life-giving Spirit into your hearts.

IV. Light. 'In Thy light shall we see light.'

God is 'the Father of lights.' The sun and all the stars are only lights kindled by Him. It is the very crown of revelation that 'God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.' Light seems to the unscientific eye, which knows nothing about undulations of a luminiferous ether, to be the least material of material things. All joyous things come with it. It brings warmth and fruit, fulness and life. Purity, and gladness, and knowledge have been symbolised by it in all tongues. The Scripture uses light, and the sun, which is its source, as an emblem for God in His holiness, and blessedness, and omniscience. This great word here seems to point chiefly to light as knowledge.

This saying is true, as the former clause was, in relation to all the light which men have. 'The inspiration of the Almighty giveth him understanding.' The faculties by which men know, and all the exercise of those faculties, are His gift. It is in the measure in which God's light comes to the eye that the eye beholds. 'Light' may mean not only the faculty, but the medium of vision. It is in the measure in which God's light comes, and because His light comes, that all light of reason in human nature sees the truth which is its light. God is the Author of all true thoughts in all mankind. The spirit of man is a candle kindled by the Lord.

But as I said about life, so I say about light. The material or intellectual aspects of the word are not the main ones here. The reference is to the spiritual gift which belongs to the men 'who put their trust beneath the shadow of Thy wings.' In communion with Him who is the Light as well as the Life of men, we see a whole universe of glories, realities, and brightnesses. Where other eyes see only darkness, we behold 'the King in His beauty, and the land that is very far off.' Where other men see only cloudland and mists, our vision will pierce into the unseen, and there behold ‘the things which are,’ the only real things, of which all that the eye of sense sees are only the fleeting shadows, seen as in a dream, while these are the true, and the sight of them is sight indeed. They who see by the light of God, and see light therein, have a vision which is more than imagination, more than opinion, more than belief. It is certitude. Communication with God does not bring with it superior intellectual perspicuity, but it does bring a perception of spiritual realities and relations, which, in respect of clearness and certainty, may be called sight. Many of us walk in darkness, who, if we were but in communion with God, would see the lone hillside blazing with chariots and horses of fire. Many of us grope in perplexity, who, if we were but hiding under the shadow of God’s wings, would see the truth and walk at liberty in the light, which is knowledge and purity and joy.

In communication with God, we see light upon all the paths of duty. It is wonderful how, when a man lives near God, he gets to know what he ought to do. That great Light, which is Christ, is like the star that hung over the Magi, blazing in the heavens, and yet stooping to the lowly task of guiding three wayfaring men along a muddy road upon earth. So the highest Light of God comes down to be ‘a lantern for our paths and a light for our feet.’

And in the same communion with God, we get light in all seasons of darkness and of sorrow. ‘To the upright there ariseth light in the darkness’; and the darkest hours of earthly fortune will be like a Greenland summer night, when the sun scarcely dips below the horizon, and even when it is absent, all the heaven is aglow with a calm twilight.

All these great blessings belong to-day to those who take refuge under the shadow of His wings. But blessed as the present experience is, we have to look for the perfecting of it when we pass from the forecourt to the inner sanctuary, and in that higher house sit with Christ at His table and feast at ‘the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ Here we drink from the river, but there we shall be carried up to the source. The life of God in the soul is here often feeble in its flow, ‘a fountain sealed’ and all but shut up in our hearts, but there it will pour through all our being, a fountain springing up into everlasting life. The darkness is scattered even here by beams of the true light, but here we are only in the morning twilight, and many clouds still fill the sky, and many a deep gorge lies in sunless shadow, but there the light shall be a broad universal blaze, and there shall be ‘nothing hid from the heat thereof.’

Now, dear brethren! the sum of the whole matter is, that all this fourfold blessing of satisfaction, joy, life, light, is given to you, if you will take Christ. He will feed you with the bread of God; He will give you His own joy to drink; He will be in you the life of your lives, and ‘the master-light of all your seeing.’ And if you will not have Him, you will starve, and your lips will be cracked with thirst; and you will live a life which is death, and you will sink at last into outer darkness.

Is that the fate which you are going to choose? Choose Christ, and He will give you satisfaction, and joy, and life, and light.

30)Psalms 37:4-5

Psalms

THE SECRET OF TRANQUILLITY

Psa. 37:4 - Psa. 37:5, Psa. 37:7.

‘I have been young, and now am old,’ says the writer of this psalm. Its whole tone speaks the ripened wisdom and autumnal calm of age. The dim eyes have seen and survived so much, that it seems scarcely worth while to be agitated by what ceases so soon. He has known so many bad men blasted in all their leafy verdure, and so many languishing good men revived, that-

‘Old experience doth attain
To something of prophetic strain’;

and is sure that ‘to trust in the Lord and do good’ ever brings peace and happiness. Life with its changes has not soured but quieted him. It does not seem to him an endless maze, nor has he learned to despise it. He has learned to see God in it all, and that has cleared its confusion, as the movements of the planets, irregular and apparently opposite, when viewed from the earth, are turned into an ordered whole, when the sun is taken for the centre. What a contrast between the bitter cynicism put into the lips of the son, and the calm cheerful godliness taught, according to our psalm, by the father! To Solomon, old age is represented as bringing the melancholy creed, 'All is vanity'; David believes, 'Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.' Which style of old age is the nobler? what kind of life will lead to each?

These clauses, which I have ventured to isolate from their context, contain the elements which secure peace even in storms and troubles. I think that, if we consider them carefully, we shall see that there is a well-marked progress in them. They do not cover the same ground by any means; but each of the later flows from the former. Nobody can 'commit his way unto the Lord' who has not begun by 'delighting in the Lord'; and nobody can 'rest in the Lord' who has not 'committed his way to the Lord.' These three precepts, then, the condensed result of the old man's lifelong experience, open up for our consideration the secret of tranquillity. Let us think of them in order.

I. Here is the secret of tranquillity in freedom from eager, earthly desires-'Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.'

The great reason why life is troubled and restless lies not without, but within. It is not our changing circumstances, but our unregulated desires, that rob us of peace. We are feverish, not because of the external temperature, but because of the state of our own blood. The very emotion of desire disturbs us; wishes make us unquiet; and when a whole heart, full of varying, sometimes contradictory longings, is boiling within a man, how can he but tremble and quiver? One desire unfulfilled is enough to banish tranquillity; but how can it survive a dozen dragging different ways? A deep lesson lies in that word *distraction*, which has come to be so closely attached to *desires*; the lesson that all eager longing tears the heart asunder. Unbridled and varying wishes, then, are the worst enemies of our repose.

And, still further, they destroy tranquillity by putting us at the mercy of externals. Whatsoever we make necessary for our contentment, we make lord of our happiness. By our eager desires we give perishable things supreme power over us, and so intertwine our being with theirs, that the blow which destroys them lets out our life-blood. And, therefore, we are ever disturbed by apprehensions and shaken by fears. We tie ourselves to these outward possessions, as Alpine travellers to their guides, and so, when they slip on the icy slopes, their fall is our death. If we were not eager to stand on the giddy top of fortune's rolling wheel, we should not heed its idle whirl; but we let our foolish hearts set our feet there, and thenceforward every lurch of the glittering instability threatens to lame or kill us. He who desires fleeting joys is sure to be restless always, and to be disappointed at the last. For, even at the best, the heart which depends for peace on the continuance of things subjected to a thousand accidents, can only know quietness by forcibly closing its eyes against the inevitable; and, even at the best, such a course must end on the whole in failure. Disappointment is the law for all earthly desires; for appetite increases with indulgence, and as it increases, satisfaction decreases. The food remains the same, but its power to appease hunger diminishes. Possession bring indifference. The dose that lulls into delicious dreams to-day must be doubled to-morrow, if it is to do anything; and there is soon an end of that. Each of your earthly joys fills but a part of your being, and all the other ravenous longings either come shrieking at the gate of the soul's palace, like a mob yelling for bread, or are starved into silence; but either way there is disquiet. And then, if a man has fixed his happiness on anything lower than the stars, less stable than the heavens, less sufficient than God, there does come, sooner or later, a time when it passes from him, or he from it. Do not venture the rich freightage of your happiness in crazy vessels. If you do, be sure that, somewhere or other, before your life is ended, the poor frail craft will strike on some black rock rising sheer from the depths, and will grind itself to chips there. If your life twines round any prop but God your strength, be sure that, some time or other, the stay to which its tendrils cling will be plucked up, and the poor vine will be lacerated, its clusters crushed, and its sap will bleed out of it.

If, then, our desires are, in their very exercise, a disturbance, and in their very fruition prophesy disappointment, and if that certain disappointment is irrevocable and crushing when it comes, what shall we do for rest? Dear brethren! there is but one answer-'Delight thyself in the Lord.' These eager desires, transfer to Him; on Him let the affections fix and fasten; make Him the end of your longings, the food of your spirits. This is the purest, highest form of religious emotion-when we can say, ‘Whom have I but Thee? possessing Thee I desire none beside.’ And this glad longing for God is the cure for all the feverish unrest of desires unfulfilled, as well as for the ague fear of loss and sorrow. Quietness fills the soul which delights in the Lord, and its hunger is as blessed and as peaceful as its satisfaction.

Think how surely rest comes with delighting in God. For that soul must needs be calm which is freed from the distraction of various desires by the one master-attraction. Such a soul is still as the great river above the falls, when all the side currents and dimpling eddies and backwaters are effaced by the attraction that draws every drop in the one direction; or like the same stream as it nears its end, and, forgetting how it brawled among rocks and flowers in the mountain glens, flows with a calm and equable motion to its rest in the central sea. Let the current of your being set towards God, then your life will be filled and calmed by one master-passion which unites and stills the soul.

And for another reason there will be peace: because in such a case desire and fruition go together. ‘He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.’ Only do not vulgarise that great promise by making it out to mean that, if we will be good, He will give us the earthly blessings which we wish. Sometimes we shall get them, and sometimes not; but our text goes far deeper than that. God Himself is the heart’s desire of those who delight in Him; and the blessedness of longing fixed on Him is that it ever fulfils itself. They who want God have Him. Your truest joy is in His fellowship and His grace. If, set free from creatural delights, our wills reach out towards God, as a plant growing in darkness to the light-then we shall wish for nothing contrary to Him, and the wishes which run parallel to His purposes, and embrace Himself as their only good, cannot be vain. The sunshine flows into the opened eye, the breath of life into the expanding lung-so surely, so immediately the fulness of God fills the waiting, wishing soul. To delight in God is to possess our delight. Heart! lift up thy gates: open and raise the narrow, low portals, and the King of Glory will stoop to enter.

Once more: desire after God will bring peace by putting all other wishes in their right place. The counsel in our text does not enjoin the extinction, but the subordination, of other needs and appetites-’Seek ye *first* the kingdom of God.' Let that be the dominant desire which controls and underlies all the rest. Seek for God in everything, and for everything in God. Only thus will you be able to bridle those cravings which else tear the heart. The presence of the king awes the crowd into silence. When the full moon is in the nightly sky, it sweeps the heavens bare of flying cloud-rack, and all the twinkling stars are lost in the peaceful, solitary splendour. So let delight in God rise in our souls, and lesser lights pale before it-do not cease to be, but add their feebleness, unnoticed, to its radiance. The more we have our affections set on God, the more shall we enjoy, because we subordinate, His gifts. The less, too, shall we dread their loss, the less be at the mercy of their fluctuations. The capitalist does not think so much of the year's gains as does the needy adventurer, to whom they make the difference between bankruptcy and competence. If you have God for your 'enduring substance,' you can face all varieties of condition, and be calm, saying-

'Give what Thou canst, without Thee I am poor,
And with Thee rich, take what Thou wilt away.'

The amulet that charms away disquiet lies here. Still thine eager desires, arm thyself against feverish hopes, and shivering fears, and certain disappointment, and cynical contempt of all things; make sure of fulfilled wishes and abiding joys. 'Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.'

II. But this is not all. The secret of tranquillity is found, secondly, in freedom from the perplexity of choosing our path.

'Commit thy way unto the Lord'-or, as the margin says, 'roll' it upon God; leave to Him the guidance of thy life, and thou shalt be at peace on the road.

This is a word for all life, not only for its great occasions. Twice, or thrice, perhaps in a lifetime, a man's road leads him up to a high dividing point, a watershed as it were, whence the rain runs from the one side of the ridge to the Pacific, and from the other to the Atlantic. His whole future may depend on his bearing the least bit to the right hand or to the left, and all the slopes below, on either side, are wreathed in mist. Powerless as he is to see before him, he has yet to choose, and his choice determines the rest of his days.

Certainly he needs some guidance then. But he needs it not less in the small decisions of every hour. Our histories are made up of a series of trifles, in each of which a separate act of will and choice is involved. Looking to the way in which character is made, as coral reefs are built up, by a multitude of tiny creatures whose united labours are strong enough to breast the ocean; looking to the mysterious way in which the greatest events in our lives have the knack of growing out of the smallest; looking to the power of habit to make any action of the mind almost instinctive: it is of far more importance that we should become accustomed to apply this precept of seeking guidance from God to the million trifles than to the two or three decisions which, at the time of making them, we know to be weighty. Depend upon it that, if we have not learned the habit of committing the daily-recurring monotonous steps to Him, we shall find it very, very hard to seek His help, when we come to a fork in the road. So this is a command for all life, not only for its turning-points.

What does it prescribe? First, the subordination-not the extinction-of our own *inclinations*. We must begin by ceasing from self. Not that we are to cast out of consideration our own wishes. These are an element in every decision, and often are our best helps to the knowledge of our powers and of our duties. But we have to take special care that they never in themselves settle the question. They are second, not first. ‘Thus I will, and therefore thus I decide; my wish is enough for a reason,’ is the language of a tyrant over others, but of a slave to himself. Our first question is to be, not ‘What should I like?’ but ‘What does God will, if I can by any means discover it?’ Wishes are to be held in subordination to Him. Our will is to be master of our passions, and desires, and whims, and habits, but to be servant of God. It should silence all their cries, and itself be silent, that God may speak. Like the lawgiver-captain in the wilderness, it should stand still at the head of the ordered rank, ready for the march, but motionless, till the Pillar lifts from above the sanctuary. Yes! ‘Commit thy way’-unto whom? Conscience? No: unto Duty? No: but ‘unto God’-which includes all these lower laws, and a whole universe besides. Hold the will in equilibrium, that His finger may incline the balance.

Then the counsel of our text prescribes the submission of our *judgment* to God, in the confidence that His wisdom will guide us. Committing our way unto the Lord does not mean shifting the trouble of patient thought about our duty off our own shoulders. It is no cowardly abnegation of the responsibility of choice which is here enjoined; nor is there any sanction of lazily taking the first vagrant impulse, wafted we know not whence, that rises in the mind, for the voice of God. But, just because we are to commit our way to Him, we are bound to the careful exercise of the best power of our own brains, that we may discover what the will of God is. He does not reveal that will to people who do not care to know it. I suppose the precursor of all visions of Him, which have calmed His servants' souls with the peace of a clearly recognised duty, has been their cry, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' God counsels men who use their own wits to find out His counsel. He speaks to us through our judgments when they take all the ordinary means of ascertaining our course. The law is: Do your best to find out your duty; suppress inclination, and desire to do God's will, and He will certainly tell you what it is. I, for my part, believe that the Psalmist spoke a truth when he said, 'In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy steps.' Only let the eye be fixed on Him, and He will guide us in the way. If we chiefly desire, and with patient impartiality try, to be directed by Him, we shall never want for direction.

But all this is possible only if we 'delight in the Lord.' Nothing else will still our desires-the voice within, and the invitations without, which hinder us from hearing the directions of our Guide. Nothing else will so fasten up and muzzle the wild passions and lusts that a little child may lead them. To delight in Him is the condition of all wise judgment. For the most part, it is not hard to discover God's will concerning us, if we supremely desire to know and do it; and such supreme desire is but the expression of this supreme delight in Him. Such a disposition wonderfully clears away mists and perplexities; and though there will still remain ample scope for the exercise of our best judgment, and for reliance on Him to lead us, yet he whose single object is to walk in the way that God points, will seldom have to stand still in uncertainty as to what that way is. 'If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.'

Thus, dear brethren! these two keys-joy in God, and trust in His guidance-open for us the double doors of 'the secret place of the Most High'; where all the roar of the busy world dies upon the ear, and the still small voice of the present God deepens the silence, and hushes the heart. Be quiet, and you will hear Him speak-delight in Him, that you may be quiet. Let the affections feed on Him, the will wait mute before Him, till His command inclines it to decision, and quickens it into action; let the desires fix upon His all-sufficiency; and then the wilderness will be no more trackless, but the ruddy blaze of the guiding pillar will brighten on the sand a path which men's hands have never made, nor human feet trodden into a road. He will 'guide us with His eye,' if our eyes be fixed on Him, and be swift to discern and eager to obey the lightest glance that love can interpret. Shall we be 'like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding,' and need to be pulled with bridles and beaten with whips before they know how to go; or shall we be like some trained creature that is guided by the unseen cord of docile submission, and has learned to read the duty, which is its joy, in the glance of its master's eye, or the wave of his hand? 'Delight thyself in the Lord: commit thy way unto Him.'

III. Our text takes one more step. The secret of tranquillity is found, thirdly, in freedom from the anxiety of an unknown future. 'Best in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.'

Such an addition to these previous counsels is needful, if all the sources of our disquiet are to be dealt with. The future is dim, after all our straining to see into its depths. The future is threatening, after all our efforts to prepare for its coming storms. A rolling vapour veils it all; here and there a mountain peak seems to stand out; but in a moment another swirl of the fog hides it from us. We know so little, and what we do know is so sad, that the ignorance of what may be, and the certainty of what must be, equally disturb us with hopes which melt into fears, and forebodings which consolidate into certainties. We are sure that in that future are losses, and sorrows, and death; thank God! we are sure too, that He is in it. That certainty alone, and what comes of it, makes it possible for a thoughtful man to face to-morrow without fear or tumult. The only rest from apprehensions which are but too reasonable is 'rest in the Lord.' If we are sure that He will be there, and if we delight in Him, then we can afford to say, 'As for all the rest, let it be as He wills, it will be well.' That thought alone, dear friends! will give calmness. What else is there, brethren! for a man fronting that vague future, from whose weltering sea such black, sharp-toothed rocks protrude? Shall we bow before some stern Fate, as its lord, and try to be as stern as It? Shall we think of some frivolous Chance, as tossing its unguided waves, and try to be as frivolous as It? Shall we try to be content with an animal limitation to the present, and heighten the bright colour of the little to-day by the black background that surrounds it, saying, ‘Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die’? Is it not better, happier, nobler, every way truer, to look into that perilous uncertain future, or rather to look past it to the loving Father who is its Lord and ours, and to wait patiently for Him? Confidence that the future will but evolve God’s purposes, and that all these are enlisted on our side, will give peace and power. Without it all is chaos, and we flying atoms in the anarchic mass; or else all is coldblooded impersonal law, and we crushed beneath its chariot-wheels. Here, and here alone, is the secret of tranquillity.

But remember, brethren! that the peaceful confidence of this final counsel is legitimate only when we have obeyed the other two. I have no business, for instance, to expect God to save me from the natural consequences of my own worldliness or folly. If I have taken up a course from eager desires for earthly good, or from obedience to any inclination of my own without due regard to His will, I have no right, when things begin to go awry, to turn round to God and say, ‘Lord! I wait upon Thee to save me.’ And though repentance, and forsaking of our evil ways at any point in a man’s course, do ensure, through Jesus Christ, God’s loving forgiveness, yet the evil consequences of past folly are often mercifully suffered to remain with us all our days. He who has delighted in the Lord, and committed his way unto Him, can venture to front whatever may be coming; and though not without much consciousness of sin and weakness, can yet cast upon God the burden of taking care of him, and claim from his faithful Father the protection and the peace which He has bound Himself to give.

And O dear friends! what a calm will enter our souls then, solid, substantial, ‘the peace of God,’ gift and effluence from the ‘God of peace’! How blessed then to leave all the possible to-morrow with a very quiet heart in His hands! How easy then to bear the ignorance, how possible then to face the certainties, of that solemn future! Change and death can only thin away and finally remove the film that separates us from our delight. Whatever comes here or yonder can but bring us blessing; for we must be glad if we have God, and if our wills are parallel with His, whose Will all things serve. Our way is traced by Him, and runs alongside of His. It leads to Himself. Then rest in the Lord, and 'judge nothing before the time.' We cannot criticise the Great Artist when we stand before His unfinished masterpiece, and see dim outlines here, a patch of crude colour there. But wait patiently for Him, and so, in calm expectation of a blessed future and a finished work, which will explain the past, in honest submission of our way to God, in supreme delight in Him who is the gladness of our joy, the secret of tranquillity will be ours.

31)Psalms 37:7

Psalms

THE SECRET OF TRANQUILLITY

Psa. 37:4 - Psa. 37:5, Psa. 37:7.

'I have been young, and now am old,' says the writer of this psalm. Its whole tone speaks the ripened wisdom and autumnal calm of age. The dim eyes have seen and survived so much, that it seems scarcely worth while to be agitated by what ceases so soon. He has known so many bad men blasted in all their leafy verdure, and so many languishing good men revived, that-

'Old experience doth attain
To something of prophetic strain';

and is sure that 'to trust in the Lord and do good' ever brings peace and happiness. Life with its changes has not soured but quieted him. It does not seem to him an endless maze, nor has he learned to despise it. He has learned to see God in it all, and that has cleared its confusion, as the movements of the planets, irregular and apparently opposite, when viewed from the earth, are turned into an ordered whole, when the sun is taken for the centre. What a contrast between the bitter cynicism put into the lips of the son, and the calm cheerful godliness taught, according to our psalm, by the father! To Solomon, old age is represented as bringing the melancholy creed, 'All is vanity'; David believes, 'Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.' Which style of old age is the nobler? what kind of life will lead to each?

These clauses, which I have ventured to isolate from their context, contain the elements which secure peace even in storms and troubles. I think that, if we consider them carefully, we shall see that there is a well-marked progress in them. They do not cover the same ground by any means; but each of the later flows from the former. Nobody can 'commit his way unto the Lord' who has not begun by 'delighting in the Lord'; and nobody can 'rest in the Lord' who has not 'committed his way to the Lord.' These three precepts, then, the condensed result of the old man's lifelong experience, open up for our consideration the secret of tranquillity. Let us think of them in order.

I. Here is the secret of tranquillity in freedom from eager, earthly desires-'Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.'

The great reason why life is troubled and restless lies not without, but within. It is not our changing circumstances, but our unregulated desires, that rob us of peace. We are feverish, not because of the external temperature, but because of the state of our own blood. The very emotion of desire disturbs us; wishes make us unquiet; and when a whole heart, full of varying, sometimes contradictory longings, is boiling within a man, how can he but tremble and quiver? One desire unfulfilled is enough to banish tranquillity; but how can it survive a dozen dragging different ways? A deep lesson lies in that word *distraction*, which has come to be so closely attached to *desires*; the lesson that all eager longing tears the heart asunder. Unbridled and varying wishes, then, are the worst enemies of our repose.

And, still further, they destroy tranquillity by putting us at the mercy of externals. Whatsoever we make necessary for our contentment, we make lord of our happiness. By our eager desires we give perishable things supreme power over us, and so intertwine our being with theirs, that the blow which destroys them lets out our life-blood. And, therefore, we are ever disturbed by apprehensions and shaken by fears. We tie ourselves to these outward possessions, as Alpine travellers to their guides, and so, when they slip on the icy slopes, their fall is our death. If we were not eager to stand on the giddy top of fortune’s rolling wheel, we should not heed its idle whirl; but we let our foolish hearts set our feet there, and thenceforward every lurch of the glittering instability threatens to lame or kill us. He who desires fleeting joys is sure to be restless always, and to be disappointed at the last. For, even at the best, the heart which depends for peace on the continuance of things subjected to a thousand accidents, can only know quietness by forcibly closing its eyes against the inevitable; and, even at the best, such a course must end on the whole in failure. Disappointment is the law for all earthly desires; for appetite increases with indulgence, and as it increases, satisfaction decreases. The food remains the same, but its power to appease hunger diminishes. Possession bring indifference. The dose that lulls into delicious dreams to-day must be doubled to-morrow, if it is to do anything; and there is soon an end of that. Each of your earthly joys fills but a part of your being, and all the other ravenous longings either come shrieking at the gate of the soul’s palace, like a mob yelling for bread, or are starved into silence; but either way there is disquiet. And then, if a man has fixed his happiness on anything lower than the stars, less stable than the heavens, less sufficient than God, there does come, sooner or later, a time when it passes from him, or he from it. Do not venture the rich freightage of your happiness in crazy vessels. If you do, be sure that, somewhere or other, before your life is ended, the poor frail craft will strike on some black rock rising sheer from the depths, and will grind itself to chips there. If your life twines round any prop but God your strength, be sure that, some time or other, the stay to which its tendrils cling will be plucked up, and the poor vine will be lacerated, its clusters crushed, and its sap will bleed out of it.

If, then, our desires are, in their very exercise, a disturbance, and in their very fruition prophesy disappointment, and if that certain disappointment is irrevocable and crushing when it comes, what shall we do for rest? Dear brethren! there is but one answer-’Delight thyself in the Lord.’ These eager desires, transfer to Him; on Him let the affections fix and fasten; make Him the end of your longings, the food of your spirits. This is the purest, highest form of religious emotion-when we can say, ‘Whom have I but Thee? possessing Thee I desire none beside.’ And this glad longing for God is the cure for all the feverish unrest of desires unfulfilled, as well as for the ague fear of loss and sorrow. Quietness fills the soul which delights in the Lord, and its hunger is as blessed and as peaceful as its satisfaction.

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II. But this is not all. The secret of tranquillity is found, secondly, in freedom from the perplexity of choosing our path.

'Commit thy way unto the Lord'-or, as the margin says, 'roll' it upon God; leave to Him the guidance of thy life, and thou shalt be at peace on the road.

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What does it prescribe? First, the subordination-not the extinction-of our own *inclinations*. We must begin by ceasing from self. Not that we are to cast out of consideration our own wishes. These are an element in every decision, and often are our best helps to the knowledge of our powers and of our duties. But we have to take special care that they never in themselves settle the question. They are second, not first. ‘Thus I will, and therefore thus I decide; my wish is enough for a reason,’ is the language of a tyrant over others, but of a slave to himself. Our first question is to be, not ‘What should I like?’ but ‘What does God will, if I can by any means discover it?’ Wishes are to be held in subordination to Him. Our will is to be master of our passions, and desires, and whims, and habits, but to be servant of God. It should silence all their cries, and itself be silent, that God may speak. Like the lawgiver-captain in the wilderness, it should stand still at the head of the ordered rank, ready for the march, but motionless, till the Pillar lifts from above the sanctuary. Yes! ‘Commit thy way’-unto whom? Conscience? No: unto Duty? No: but ‘unto God’-which includes all these lower laws, and a whole universe besides. Hold the will in equilibrium, that His finger may incline the balance.

Then the counsel of our text prescribes the submission of our *judgment* to God, in the confidence that His wisdom will guide us. Committing our way unto the Lord does not mean shifting the trouble of patient thought about our duty off our own shoulders. It is no cowardly abnegation of the responsibility of choice which is here enjoined; nor is there any sanction of lazily taking the first vagrant impulse, wafted we know not whence, that rises in the mind, for the voice of God. But, just because we are to commit our way to Him, we are bound to the careful exercise of the best power of our own brains, that we may discover what the will of God is. He does not reveal that will to people who do not care to know it. I suppose the precursor of all visions of Him, which have calmed His servants' souls with the peace of a clearly recognised duty, has been their cry, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' God counsels men who use their own wits to find out His counsel. He speaks to us through our judgments when they take all the ordinary means of ascertaining our course. The law is: Do your best to find out your duty; suppress inclination, and desire to do God's will, and He will certainly tell you what it is. I, for my part, believe that the Psalmist spoke a truth when he said, 'In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy steps.' Only let the eye be fixed on Him, and He will guide us in the way. If we chiefly desire, and with patient impartiality try, to be directed by Him, we shall never want for direction.

But all this is possible only if we 'delight in the Lord.' Nothing else will still our desires-the voice within, and the invitations without, which hinder us from hearing the directions of our Guide. Nothing else will so fasten up and muzzle the wild passions and lusts that a little child may lead them. To delight in Him is the condition of all wise judgment. For the most part, it is not hard to discover God's will concerning us, if we supremely desire to know and do it; and such supreme desire is but the expression of this supreme delight in Him. Such a disposition wonderfully clears away mists and perplexities; and though there will still remain ample scope for the exercise of our best judgment, and for reliance on Him to lead us, yet he whose single object is to walk in the way that God points, will seldom have to stand still in uncertainty as to what that way is. 'If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.'

Thus, dear brethren! these two keys-joy in God, and trust in His guidance-open for us the double doors of 'the secret place of the Most High'; where all the roar of the busy world dies upon the ear, and the still small voice of the present God deepens the silence, and hushes the heart. Be quiet, and you will hear Him speak-delight in Him, that you may be quiet. Let the affections feed on Him, the will wait mute before Him, till His command inclines it to decision, and quickens it into action; let the desires fix upon His all-sufficiency; and then the wilderness will be no more trackless, but the ruddy blaze of the guiding pillar will brighten on the sand a path which men's hands have never made, nor human feet trodden into a road. He will 'guide us with His eye,' if our eyes be fixed on Him, and be swift to discern and eager to obey the lightest glance that love can interpret. Shall we be 'like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding,' and need to be pulled with bridles and beaten with whips before they know how to go; or shall we be like some trained creature that is guided by the unseen cord of docile submission, and has learned to read the duty, which is its joy, in the glance of its master's eye, or the wave of his hand? 'Delight thyself in the Lord: commit thy way unto Him.'

III. Our text takes one more step. The secret of tranquillity is found, thirdly, in freedom from the anxiety of an unknown future. 'Best in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him.'

Such an addition to these previous counsels is needful, if all the sources of our disquiet are to be dealt with. The future is dim, after all our straining to see into its depths. The future is threatening, after all our efforts to prepare for its coming storms. A rolling vapour veils it all; here and there a mountain peak seems to stand out; but in a moment another swirl of the fog hides it from us. We know so little, and what we do know is so sad, that the ignorance of what may be, and the certainty of what must be, equally disturb us with hopes which melt into fears, and forebodings which consolidate into certainties. We are sure that in that future are losses, and sorrows, and death; thank God! we are sure too, that He is in it. That certainty alone, and what comes of it, makes it possible for a thoughtful man to face to-morrow without fear or tumult. The only rest from apprehensions which are but too reasonable is 'rest in the Lord.' If we are sure that He will be there, and if we delight in Him, then we can afford to say, 'As for all the rest, let it be as He wills, it will be well.' That thought alone, dear friends! will give calmness. What else is there, brethren! for a man fronting that vague future, from whose weltering sea such black, sharp-toothed rocks protrude? Shall we bow before some stern Fate, as its lord, and try to be as stern as It? Shall we think of some frivolous Chance, as tossing its unguided waves, and try to be as frivolous as It? Shall we try to be content with an animal limitation to the present, and heighten the bright colour of the little to-day by the black background that surrounds it, saying, 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die'? Is it not better, happier, nobler, every way truer, to look into that perilous uncertain future, or rather to look past it to the loving Father who is its Lord and ours, and to wait patiently for Him? Confidence that the future will but evolve God's purposes, and that all these are enlisted on our side, will give peace and power. Without it all is chaos, and we flying atoms in the anarchic mass; or else all is coldblooded impersonal law, and we crushed beneath its chariot-wheels. Here, and here alone, is the secret of tranquillity.

But remember, brethren! that the peaceful confidence of this final counsel is legitimate only when we have obeyed the other two. I have no business, for instance, to expect God to save me from the natural consequences of my own worldliness or folly. If I have taken up a course from eager desires for earthly good, or from obedience to any inclination of my own without due regard to His will, I have no right, when things begin to go awry, to turn round to God and say, 'Lord! I wait upon Thee to save me.' And though repentance, and forsaking of our evil ways at any point in a man's course, do ensure, through Jesus Christ, God's loving forgiveness, yet the evil consequences of past folly are often mercifully suffered to remain with us all our days. He who has delighted in the Lord, and committed his way unto Him, can venture to front whatever may be coming; and though not without much consciousness of sin and weakness, can yet cast upon God the burden of taking care of him, and claim from his faithful Father the protection and the peace which He has bound Himself to give.

And O dear friends! what a calm will enter our souls then, solid, substantial, 'the peace of God,' gift and effluence from the 'God of peace'! How blessed then to leave all the possible to-morrow with a very quiet heart in His hands! How easy then to bear the ignorance, how possible then to face the certainties, of that solemn future! Change and death can only thin away and finally remove the film that separates us from our delight. Whatever comes here or yonder can but bring us blessing; for we must be glad if we have God, and if our wills are parallel with His, whose Will all things serve. Our way is traced by Him, and runs alongside of His. It leads to Himself. Then rest in the Lord, and 'judge nothing before the time.' We cannot criticise the Great Artist when we stand before His unfinished masterpiece, and see dim outlines here, a patch of crude colour there. But wait patiently for Him, and so, in calm expectation of a blessed future and a finished work, which will explain the past, in honest submission of our way to God, in supreme delight in Him who is the gladness of our joy, the secret of tranquillity will be ours.

32)Psalms 39:6

Psalms

THE BITTERNESS AND BLESSEDNESS OF THE BREVITY OF LIFE

Psa. 39:6, Psa. 39:12.

These two sayings are two different ways of putting the same thing. There is a common thought underlying both, but the associations with which that common thought is connected in these two verses are distinctly different. The one is bitter and sad-a gloomy half truth. The other, out of the very same fact, draws blessedness and hope. The one may come from no higher point of view than the level of worldly experience; the other is a truth of faith. The former is at best partial, and without the other may be harmful; the latter completes, explains, and hallows it.

And that this progress and variety in the thought is the key to the whole psalm is, I think, obvious to any one who will examine it with care. I cannot here enter on that task but in the hastiest fashion, by way of vindicating the connection which I trace between the two verses of our text. The Psalmist begins, then, with telling how at some time recently passed-in consequence of personal calamity not very clearly defined, but apparently some bodily sickness aggravated by mental sorrow and anxiety-he was struck dumb with silence, so that he ‘held his peace even from good.’ In that state there rose within him many sad and miserable thoughts, which at last forced their way through his locked lips. They shape themselves into a prayer, which is more complaint than petition-and which is absorbed in the contemplation of the manifest melancholy facts of human life-’Thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before Thee.’ And then, as that thought dilates and sinks deeper into his soul, he looks out upon the whole race of man-and in tones of bitterness and hopelessness, affirms that all are vanity, shadows, disquieted in vain. The blank hopelessness of such a view brings him to a standstill. It is true-but taken alone is too dreadful to think of. ‘That way madness lies,’-so he breaks short off his almost despairing thoughts, and with a swift turning away of his mind from the downward gaze into blackness that was beginning to make him reel, he fixes his eyes on the throne above-’And now, Lord! what wait I for? my hope is in Thee.’ These words form the turning-point of the psalm. After them, the former thoughts are repeated, but with what a difference-made by looking at all the blackness and sorrow, both personal and universal, in the bright light of that hope which streams upon the most lurid masses of opaque cloud, till their gloom begins to glow with an inward lustre, and softens into solemn purples and reds. He had said, ‘I was dumb with silence-even from good.’ But when his hope is in God, the silence changes its character and becomes resignation and submission. ‘I opened not my mouth; because Thou didst it.’ The variety of human life and its transiency is not less plainly seen than before; but in the light of that hope it is regarded in relation to God’s paternal correction, and is seen to be the consequence, not of a defect in His creative wisdom or love, but of man’s sin. ‘Thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity.’ That, to him who waits on the Lord, is the reason and the alleviation of the reiterated conviction, ‘Every man is vanity.’ Not any more does he say every man ‘at his best state,’ or, as it might be more accurately expressed, ‘even when most firmly established,’-for the man who is established in the Lord is not vanity, but only the man who founds his being on the fleeting present. Then, things being so, life being thus in itself and apart from God so fleeting and so sad, and yet with a hope that brightens it like sunshine through an April shower-the Psalmist rises to prayer, in which that formerly expressed conviction of the brevity of life is reiterated, with the addition of two words which changes its whole aspect, ‘I am a stranger *with Thee*.’ He is God’s guest in his transient life. It is short, like the stay of a foreigner in a strange land; but he is under the care of the King of the Land-therefore he need not fear nor sorrow. Past generations, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob-whose names God ‘is not ashamed’ to appeal to in His own solemn designation of Himself-have held the same relation, and their experience has sealed His faithful care of those who dwell with Him. Therefore, the sadness is soothed, and the vain and fleeting life of earth assumes a new appearance, and the most blessed and wisest issue of our consciousness of frailty and insufficiency is the fixing of our desires and hopes on Him in whose house we may dwell even while we wander to and fro, and in whom our life being rooted and established shall not be vain, howsoever it may be brief.

If, then, we follow the course of contemplation thus traced in the psalm, we have these three points brought before us-first, the thought of life common to both clauses; second, the gloomy, aimless hollowness which that thought breathes into life apart from God; third, the blessedness which springs from the same thought when we look at it in connection with our Father in heaven.

I. Observe the very forcible expression which is given here to the thought of life common to both verses.

‘Every man walketh in a vain show.’ The original is even more striking and strong. And although one does not like altering words so familiar as those of our translation, which have sacredness from association and a melancholy music in their rhythm-still it is worth while to note that the force of the expression which the Psalmist employs is correctly given in the margin, ‘in an image’-or ‘in a shadow.’ The phrase sounds singular to us, but is an instance of a common enough Hebrew idiom, and is equivalent to saying-he walks in the character or likeness of a shadow, or, as we should say, he walks as a shadow. That is to say, the whole outward life and activity of every man is represented as fleeting and unsubstantial, like the reflection of a cloud which darkens leagues of the mountains’ side in a moment, and ere a man can say, ‘Behold!’ is gone again for ever.

Then, look at the other image employed in the other clause of our text to express the same idea, ‘I am a stranger and a sojourner, as all my fathers.’ The phrase has a history. In that most pathetic narrative of an old-world sorrow long since calmed and consoled, when ‘Abraham stood up from before his dead,’ and craved a burying-place for his Sarah from the sons of Heth, his first plea was, ‘I am a stranger and a sojourner with you.’ In his lips it was no metaphor. He was a stranger, a visitor for a brief time to an alien land; he was a sojourner, having no rights of inheritance, but settled among them for a while, and though dwelling among them, not adopted into their community. He was a foreigner, not naturalised. And such is our relation to all this visible frame of things in which we dwell. It is alien to us; though we be in it, our true affinities are elsewhere; though we be in it, our stay is brief, as that of ‘a wayfaring man that turns aside to tarry for a night.’

And there is given in the context still another metaphor setting forth the same fact in that dreary generalisation which precedes my text, ‘Every man at his best state’-or as the word means, ‘established,’- with his roots most firmly struck in the material and visible-’is only a breath.’ It appears for a moment, curling from lip and nostril into the cold morning air, and vanishes away, so thus vaporous, filmy, is the seeming solid fact of the most stable life.

These have been the commonplaces of poets and rhetoricians and moralists in all time. But threadbare as the thought is, I may venture to dwell on it for a moment. I know I am only repeating what we all believe-and all forget. It is never too late to preach commonplaces, until everybody acts on them as well as admits them-and this old familiar truth has not yet got so wrought into the structure of our lives that we can afford to say no more about it.

‘Surely every man walketh in a shadow.’ Did you ever stand upon the shore on some day of that ‘uncertain weather, when gloom and glory meet together,’ and notice how swiftly there went, racing over miles of billows, a darkening that quenched all the play of colour in the waves, as if all suddenly the angel of the waters had spread his broad wings between sun and sea, and then how in another moment as swiftly it flits away, and with a burst the light blazes out again, and leagues of ocean flash into green and violet and blue. So fleeting, so utterly perishable are our lives for all their seeming solid permanency. ‘Shadows in a career, as George Herbert has it-breath going out of the nostrils. We think of ourselves as ever to continue in our present posture. We are deceived by illusions. Mental indolence, a secret dislike of the thought, and the impostures of sense, all conspire to make us blind to, or at least oblivious of, the plain fact which every beat of our pulses might preach, and the slow creeping hands of every parish clock confirm. How awful that silent, unceasing footfall of receding days is when once we begin to watch it! Inexorable, passionless-though hope and fear may pray, ‘Sun! stand thou still on Gibeon; and thou moon! in the valley of Ajalon,’-the tramp of the hours goes on. The poets paint them as a linked chorus of rosy forms, garlanded, and clasping hands as they dance onwards. So they may be to some of us at some moments. So they may seem as they approach; but those who come hold the hands of those who go, and that troop has no rosy light upon their limbs, their garlands are faded, the sunshine falls not upon the grey and shrouded shapes, as they steal ghostlike through the gloom-and ever and ever the bright and laughing sisters pass on into that funereal band which grows and moves away from us unceasing. Alas! for many of us it bears away with it our lost treasures, our shattered hopes, our joys from which all the bright petals have dropped! Alas! for many of us there is nothing but sorrow in watching how all things become 'part and parcel of the dreadful past.'

And how strangely sometimes even a material association may give new emphasis to that old threadbare truth. Some more permanent *thing* may help us to feel more profoundly the shadowy fleetness of *man*. The trifles are so much more lasting than their owners. Or, as 'the Preacher' puts it, with such wailing pathos, 'One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth for ever.' This material is perishable-but yet how much more enduring than we are! The pavements we walk upon, the coals in our grates-how many millenniums old are they? The pebble you kick aside with your foot-how many generations will it outlast? Go into a museum and you will see hanging there, little the worse for centuries, battered shields, notched swords, and gaping helmets-aye, but what has become of the bright eyes that once flashed the light of battle through the bars, what has become of the strong hands that once gripped the hilts? 'The knights are dust,' and 'their good swords are' *not* 'rust.' The material lasts after its owner. Seed corn is found in a mummy case. The poor form beneath the painted lid is brown and hard, and more than half of it gone to pungent powder, and the man that once lived has faded utterly: but the handful of seed has its mysterious life in it, and when it is sown, in due time the green blade pushes above English soil, as it would have done under the shadow of the pyramids four thousand years ago-and its produce waves in a hundred harvest fields to-day. The money in your purses now, will some of it bear the head of a king that died half a century ago. It is bright and useful-where are all the people that in turn said they 'owned' it? Other men will live in our houses, will preach from this pulpit, and sit in these pews, when you and I are far away. And other June days will come, and the old rose-trees will flower round houses where unborn men will then be living, when the present possessor is gone to nourish the roots of the roses in the graveyard!

'Our days are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.' So said David on other occasions. We know, dear brethren! how true it is, whether we consider the ceaseless flux and change of things, the mystic march of the silent-footed hours, or the greater permanence which attaches to the 'things which perish,' than to our abode among them. We know it, and yet how hard it is not to yield to the inducement to act and feel as if all this painted scenery were solid rock and mountain. By our own inconsiderateness and sensuousness, we live in a lie, in a false dream of permanence, and so in a sadder sense we walk in 'a vain show,'-deluding ourselves with the conceit of durability, and refusing to see that the apparent is the shadowy, and the one enduring reality God. It is hard to get even the general conviction vivified in men's minds, hardest of all to get any man to reflect upon it as applying to himself. Do not think that you have said enough to vindicate neglect of my words now, when you call them commonplace. So they are. But did you ever take that well-worn old story, and press it on your own consciousness-as a man might press a common little plant, whose juice is healing, against his dim eye-ball-by saying to yourself, 'It is true of *me*. *I* walk as a shadow. *I* am gliding onwards to my doom. Through *my* slack hands the golden sands are flowing, and soon *my* hour-glass will run out, and *I* shall have to stop and go away.' Let me beseech you for one half-hour's meditation on that fact before this day closes. You will forget my words then, when with your own eyes you have looked upon that truth, and felt that it is not merely a toothless commonplace, but belongs to and works in *thy* life, as it ebbs away silently and incessantly from *thee*.

II. Let me point, in the second place, to the gloomy, aimless hollowness which that thought, apart from God, infuses into life.

There is, no doubt, a double idea in the metaphor which the Psalmist employs. He desires to set forth, by his image of a shadow, not only the transiency, but the unsubstantialness of life. Shadow is opposed to substance, to that which is real, as well as to that which is enduring. And we may further say that the one of these characteristics is in great part the occasion of the other. Because life is fleeting, therefore, in part, it is so hollow and unsatisfying. The fact that men are dragged away from their pursuits so inexorably makes these pursuits seem, to any one who cannot see beyond that fact, trivial and not worth the following. Why should we fret and toil and break our hearts, ‘and scorn delights, and live laborious days’ for purposes which will last so short a time, and things which we shall so soon have to leave? What is all our bustle and business, when the sad light of that thought falls on it, but ‘labouring for the wind’? ‘Were it not better to lie still?’ Such thoughts have at least a partial truth in them, and are difficult to meet as long as we think only of the facts and results of man’s life that we can see with our eyes, and our psalm gives emphatic utterance to them. The word rendered ‘walketh’ in our text is not merely a synonym for passing through life, but has a very striking meaning. It is an intensive frequentative form of the word-that is, it represents the action as being repeated over and over again. For instance, it might be used to describe the restless motion of a wild beast in a cage, raging from side to side, never still, and never getting any farther for all the racing backward and forward. So here it signifies ‘walketh to and fro,’ and implies hurry and bustle, continuous effort, habitual unrest. It thus comes to be parallel with the stronger words which follow,- ‘Surely they are *disquieted* in vain’; and one reason why all this effort and agitation are purposeless and sad, is because the man who is straining his nerves and wearying his legs is but a shadow in regard to duration-’He heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them.’

Yes! if we have said all, when we have said that men pass as a fleeting shadow-if my life has no roots in the Eternal, nor any consciousness of a life that does not pass, and a light that never perishes, if it is derived from, directed to, ‘cribbed, cabined, and confined’ within this visible diurnal sphere, then it is all flat and unprofitable, an illusion while it seems to last, and all its pursuits are folly, its hopes dreams, its substances vapours, its years a lie. For, if life be thus short, I who live it am conscious of, and possess whether I be conscious of them or no, capacities and requirements which, though they were to be annihilated to-morrow, could be satisfied while they lasted by nothing short of the absolute ideal, the all-perfect, the infinite-or, to put away abstractions, ‘My soul thirsteth for God, the living God!’ ‘He hath put eternity in their heart,’ as the book of Ecclesiastes says.

Longings and aspirations, weaknesses and woes, the limits of creature helps and loves, the disproportion between us and the objects around us-all these facts of familiar experience do witness, alike by blank misgivings and by bright hopes, by many disappointments and by indestructible expectations surviving them all, that nothing which has a date, a beginning, or an end, can fill our souls or give us rest. Can you fill up the swamps of the Mississippi with any cartloads of faggots you can fling in? Can you fill your souls with anything which belongs to this fleeting life? Has a flying shadow an appreciable thickness, or will a million of them pressed together occupy a space in your empty, hungry heart?

And so, dear brethren! I come to you with a message which may sound gloomy, and beseech you to give heed to it. No matter how you may get on in the world-though you may fulfil every dream with which you began in your youth-you will certainly find that without Christ for your Brother and Saviour, God for your Friend, and heaven for your hope, life, with all its fulness, is empty. It lasts long, too long as it sometimes seems for work, too long for hope, too long for endurance; long enough to let love die, and joys wither and fade, and companions drop away, but without God and Christ, you will find it but 'as a watch in the night.' At no moment through the long weary years will it satisfy your whole being; and when the weary years are all past, they will seem to have been but as one troubled moment breaking the eternal silence. At every point *so* profitless, and all the points making so thin and short a line! The crested waves seem heaped together as they recede from the eye till they reach the horizon, where miles of storm are seen but as a line of spray. So when a man looks back upon his life, if it have been a godless one, be sure of this, that he will have a dark and cheerless retrospect over a tossing waste, with a white rim of wandering barren foam vexed by tempest, and then, if not before, he will sadly learn how he has been living amidst shadows, and, with a nature that needs God, has wasted himself upon the world. 'O life! as futile then as frail'; 'surely,' in such a case, 'every man walketh in a vain show.'

III. But note, finally, how our other text in its significant words gives us the blessedness which springs from this same thought of life, when it is looked at in connection with God.

The mere conviction of the brevity and hollowness of life is not in itself a religious or a helpful thought. Its power depends upon the other ideas which are associated with it. It is susceptible of the most opposite applications, and may tend to impel conduct in exactly opposite directions. It may be the language of despair or of bright hope. It may be the bitter creed of a worn-out debauchee, who has wasted his life in hunting shadows, and is left with a cynical spirit and a barbed tongue. It may be the passionless belief of a retired student, or the fanatical faith of a religious ascetic. It may be an argument for sensuous excess, ‘Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die’; or it may be the stimulus for noble and holy living, ‘I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day. The night cometh.’ The other accompanying beliefs determine whether it shall be a blight or a blessing to a man.

And the one addition which is needed to incline the whole weight of that conviction to the better side, and to light up all its blackness, is that little phrase in this text, ‘I am a stranger *with Thee*, and a sojourner.’ There seems to be an allusion here to remarkable words connected with the singular Jewish institution of the Jubilee. You remember that by the Mosaic law, there was no absolute sale of land in Israel, but that every half century the whole returned to the descendants of the original occupiers. Important economical and social purposes were contemplated in this arrangement, as well as the preservation of the relative position of the tribes as settled at the Conquest. But the law itself assigns a purely religious purpose-the preservation of the distinct consciousness of the tenure on which the people held their territory, namely, obedience to and dependence on God. ‘The land shall not be sold for ever, for the land is Mine, for ye are *strangers and sojourners with Me*.’ Of course, there was a special sense in which that was true with regard to Israel, but David thought that the words were as true in regard to his whole relation to God, as in regard to Israel’s possession of its national inheritance.

If we grasp these words as completing all that we have already said, how different this transient and unsubstantial life looks! You must have the light from both sides to stereoscope and make solid the flat surface picture. Transient! yes-but it is passed in the presence of God. Whether we know it or no, our brief days hang upon Him, and we walk, all of us, in the light of

His countenance. That makes the transient eternal, the shadowy substantial, the trivial heavy with solemn meaning and awful yet vast possibilities. ‘In our embers is something that doth live.’ If we had said all, when we say ‘We are as a shadow,’ it would matter very little, though even then it *would* matter something, how we spent our shadowy days; but if these poor brief hours are spent ‘in the great Taskmaster’s eye,’-if the shadow cast on earth proclaims a light in the heavens-if from this point there hangs an unending chain of conscious being-Oh! then, with what awful solemnity is the brevity, with what tremendous magnitude is the minuteness, of our earthly days invested! ‘With Thee’-then I am constantly in the presence of a sovereign Law and its Giver; ‘with Thee’-then all my actions are registered and weighed yonder; ‘with Thee’-then ‘Thou, God, seest me.’ Brethren! it is the prismatic halo and ring of eternity round this poor glass of time that gives it all its dignity, all its meaning. The lives that are lived before God cannot be trifles.

And if this relation to time be recognised and accepted and held fast by our hearts and minds, then what calm blessedness will flow into our souls!

‘A stranger with Thee,’-then we are the guests of the King. The Lord of the land charges Himself with our protection and provision; we journey under His safe conduct. It is for His honour and faithfulness that no harm shall come to us travelling in His territory, and relying on His word. Like Abraham with the sons of Heth, we may claim the protection and help which a stranger needs. He recognises the bond and will fulfil it. We have eaten of His salt, and He will answer for our safety.-’He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of Mine eye.’

‘A stranger with Thee,’-then we have a constant Companion and an abiding Presence. We may be solitary and necessarily remote from the polity of the land. We may feel amid all the visible things of earth as if foreigners. We may not have a foot of soil, not even a grave for our dead. Companionships may dissolve and warm hands grow cold and their close clasp relax-what then? He is with us still. He will join us as we journey, even when our hearts are sore with loss. He will walk with us by the way, and make our chill hearts glow. He will sit with us at the table-however humble the meal, and He will not leave us when we discern Him. Strangers we are indeed here-but not solitary, for we are ‘strangers with Thee.’ As in some ancestral home in which a family has lived for centuries-son after father has rested in its great chambers, and been safe behind its strong walls-so, age after age, they who love Him abide in God.-’Thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations.’

‘Strangers with Thee,’-then we may carry our thoughts forward to the time when we shall go to our true home, nor wander any longer in a land that is not ours. If even here we come into such blessed relationships with God, that fact is in itself a prophecy of a more perfect communion and a heavenly house. They who are strangers with Him will one day be ‘at home with the Lord,’ and in the light of that blessed hope the transiency of this life changes its whole aspect, loses the last trace of sadness, and becomes a solemn joy. Why should we be pensive and wistful when we think how near our end is? Is the sentry sad as the hour for relieving guard comes nigh? Is the wanderer in far-off lands sad when he turns his face homewards? And why should not we rejoice at the thought that we, strangers and foreigners here, shall soon depart to the true metropolis, the mother-country of our souls? I do not know why a man should be either regretful or afraid, as he watches the hungry sea eating away this ‘bank and shoal of time’ upon which he stands-even though the tide has all but reached his feet-if he knows that God’s strong hand will be stretched forth to him at the moment when the sand dissolves from under him, and will draw him out of many waters, and place him high above the floods in that stable land where there is ‘no more sea.’

Lives rooted in God through faith in Jesus Christ are not vanity. Let us lay hold of Him with a loving grasp-and ‘we shall live also’ *because* He lives, *as* He lives, *so long* as He lives. The brief days of earth will be blessed while they last, and fruitful of what shall never pass. We shall have Him with us while we journey, and all our journeyings will lead to rest in Him. True, men walk in a vain show; true, ‘the world passeth away and the lust thereof,’ but, blessed be God! true, also, ‘He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’

33)Psalms 39:12

THE BITTERNESS AND BLESSEDNESS OF THE BREVITY OF LIFE

Psa. 39:6, Psa. 39:12.

These two sayings are two different ways of putting the same thing. There is a common thought underlying both, but the associations with which that common thought is connected in these two verses are distinctly different. The one is bitter and sad-a gloomy half truth. The other, out of the very same fact, draws blessedness and hope. The one may come from no higher point of view than the level of worldly experience; the other is a truth of faith. The former is at best partial, and without the other may be harmful; the latter completes, explains, and hallows it.

And that this progress and variety in the thought is the key to the whole psalm is, I think, obvious to any one who will examine it with care. I cannot here enter on that task but in the hastiest fashion, by way of vindicating the connection which I trace between the two verses of our text. The Psalmist begins, then, with telling how at some time recently passed-in consequence of personal calamity not very clearly defined, but apparently some bodily sickness aggravated by mental sorrow and anxiety-he was struck dumb with silence, so that he ‘held his peace even from good.’ In that state there rose within him many sad and miserable thoughts, which at last forced their way through his locked lips. They shape themselves into a prayer, which is more complaint than petition-and which is absorbed in the contemplation of the manifest melancholy facts of human life-’Thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before Thee.’ And then, as that thought dilates and sinks deeper into his soul, he looks out upon the whole race of man-and in tones of bitterness and hopelessness, affirms that all are vanity, shadows, disquieted in vain. The blank hopelessness of such a view brings him to a standstill. It is true-but taken alone is too dreadful to think of. ‘That way madness lies,’-so he breaks short off his almost despairing thoughts, and with a swift turning away of his mind from the downward gaze into blackness that was beginning to make him reel, he fixes his eyes on the throne above-’And now, Lord! what wait I for? my hope is in Thee.’ These words form the turning-point of the psalm. After them, the former thoughts are repeated, but with what a difference-made by looking at all the blackness and sorrow, both personal and universal, in the bright light of that hope which streams upon the most lurid masses of opaque cloud, till their gloom begins to glow with an inward lustre, and softens into solemn purples and reds. He had said, ‘I was dumb with silence-even from good.’ But when his hope is in God, the silence changes its character and becomes resignation and submission. ‘I opened not my mouth; because Thou didst it.’ The variety of human life and its transiency is not less plainly seen than before; but in the light of that hope it is regarded in relation to God’s paternal correction, and is seen to be the consequence, not of a defect in His creative wisdom or love, but of man’s sin. ‘Thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity.’ That, to him who waits on the Lord, is the reason and the alleviation of the reiterated conviction, ‘Every man is vanity.’ Not any more does he say every man ‘at his best state,’ or, as it might be more accurately expressed, ‘even when most firmly established,’-for the man who is established in the Lord is not vanity, but only the man who founds his being on the fleeting present. Then, things being so, life being thus in itself and apart from God so fleeting and so sad, and yet with a hope that brightens it like sunshine through an April shower-the Psalmist rises to prayer, in which that formerly expressed conviction of the brevity of life is reiterated, with the addition of two words which changes its whole aspect, ‘I am a stranger *with Thee*.’ He is God’s guest in his transient life. It is short, like the stay of a foreigner in a strange land; but he is under the care of the King of the Land-therefore he need not fear nor sorrow. Past generations, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob-whose names God ‘is not ashamed’ to appeal to in His own solemn designation of Himself-have held the same relation, and their experience has sealed His faithful care of those who dwell with Him. Therefore, the sadness is soothed, and the vain and fleeting life of earth assumes a new appearance, and the most blessed and wisest issue of our consciousness of frailty and insufficiency is the fixing of our desires and hopes on Him in whose house we may dwell even while we wander to and fro, and in whom our life being rooted and established shall not be vain, howsoever it may be brief.

If, then, we follow the course of contemplation thus traced in the psalm, we have these three points brought before us-first, the thought of life common to both clauses; second, the gloomy, aimless hollowness which that thought breathes into life apart from God; third, the blessedness which springs from the same thought when we look at it in connection with our Father in heaven.

I. Observe the very forcible expression which is given here to the thought of life common to both verses.

‘Every man walketh in a vain show.’ The original is even more striking and strong. And although one does not like altering words so familiar as those of our translation, which have sacredness from association and a melancholy music in their rhythm-still it is worth while to note that the force of the expression which the Psalmist employs is correctly given in the margin, ‘in an image’-or ‘in a shadow.’ The phrase sounds singular to us, but is an instance of a common enough Hebrew idiom, and is equivalent to saying-he walks in the character or likeness of a shadow, or, as we should say, he walks as a shadow. That is to say, the whole outward life and activity of every man is represented as fleeting and unsubstantial, like the reflection of a cloud which darkens leagues of the mountains’ side in a moment, and ere a man can say, ‘Behold!’ is gone again for ever.

Then, look at the other image employed in the other clause of our text to express the same idea, ‘I am a stranger and a sojourner, as all my fathers.’ The phrase has a history. In that most pathetic narrative of an old-world sorrow long since calmed and consoled, when ‘Abraham stood up from before his dead,’ and craved a burying-place for his Sarah from the sons of Heth, his first plea was, ‘I am a stranger and a sojourner with you.’ In his lips it was no metaphor. He was a stranger, a visitor for a brief time to an alien land; he was a sojourner, having no rights of inheritance, but settled among them for a while, and though dwelling among them, not adopted into their community. He was a foreigner, not naturalised. And such is our relation to all this visible frame of things in which we dwell. It is alien to us; though we be in it, our true affinities are elsewhere; though we be in it, our stay is brief, as that of ‘a wayfaring man that turns aside to tarry for a night.’

And there is given in the context still another metaphor setting forth the same fact in that dreary generalisation which precedes my text, ‘Every man at his best state’-or as the word means, ‘established,’- with his roots most firmly struck in the material and visible-'is only a breath.' It appears for a moment, curling from lip and nostril into the cold morning air, and vanishes away, so thus vaporous, filmy, is the seeming solid fact of the most stable life.

These have been the commonplaces of poets and rhetoricians and moralists in all time. But threadbare as the thought is, I may venture to dwell on it for a moment. I know I am only repeating what we all believe-and all forget. It is never too late to preach commonplaces, until everybody acts on them as well as admits them-and this old familiar truth has not yet got so wrought into the structure of our lives that we can afford to say no more about it.

'Surely every man walketh in a shadow.' Did you ever stand upon the shore on some day of that 'uncertain weather, when gloom and glory meet together,' and notice how swiftly there went, racing over miles of billows, a darkening that quenched all the play of colour in the waves, as if all suddenly the angel of the waters had spread his broad wings between sun and sea, and then how in another moment as swiftly it flits away, and with a burst the light blazes out again, and leagues of ocean flash into green and violet and blue. So fleeting, so utterly perishable are our lives for all their seeming solid permanency. 'Shadows in a career, as George Herbert has it-breath going out of the nostrils. We think of ourselves as ever to continue in our present posture. We are deceived by illusions. Mental indolence, a secret dislike of the thought, and the impostures of sense, all conspire to make us blind to, or at least oblivious of, the plain fact which every beat of our pulses might preach, and the slow creeping hands of every parish clock confirm. How awful that silent, unceasing footfall of receding days is when once we begin to watch it! Inexorable, passionless-though hope and fear may pray, 'Sun! stand thou still on Gibeon; and thou moon! in the valley of Ajalon,'-the tramp of the hours goes on. The poets paint them as a linked chorus of rosy forms, garlanded, and clasping hands as they dance onwards. So they may be to some of us at some moments. So they may seem as they approach; but those who come hold the hands of those who go, and that troop has no rosy light upon their limbs, their garlands are faded, the sunshine falls not upon the grey and shrouded shapes, as they steal ghostlike through the gloom-and ever and ever the bright and laughing sisters pass on into that funereal band which grows and moves away from us unceasing. Alas! for many of us it bears away with it our lost treasures, our shattered hopes, our joys from which all the bright petals have dropped! Alas! for many of us there is nothing but sorrow in watching how all things become 'part and parcel of the dreadful past.'

And how strangely sometimes even a material association may give new emphasis to that old threadbare truth. Some more permanent *thing* may help us to feel more profoundly the shadowy fleetness of *man*. The trifles are so much more lasting than their owners. Or, as 'the Preacher' puts it, with such wailing pathos, 'One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth for ever.' This material is perishable-but yet how much more enduring than we are! The pavements we walk upon, the coals in our grates-how many millenniums old are they? The pebble you kick aside with your foot-how many generations will it outlast? Go into a museum and you will see hanging there, little the worse for centuries, battered shields, notched swords, and gaping helmets-aye, but what has become of the bright eyes that once flashed the light of battle through the bars, what has become of the strong hands that once gripped the hilts? 'The knights are dust,' and 'their good swords are' *not* 'rust.' The material lasts after its owner. Seed corn is found in a mummy case. The poor form beneath the painted lid is brown and hard, and more than half of it gone to pungent powder, and the man that once lived has faded utterly: but the handful of seed has its mysterious life in it, and when it is sown, in due time the green blade pushes above English soil, as it would have done under the shadow of the pyramids four thousand years ago-and its produce waves in a hundred harvest fields to-day. The money in your purses now, will some of it bear the head of a king that died half a century ago. It is bright and useful-where are all the people that in turn said they 'owned' it? Other men will live in our houses, will preach from this pulpit, and sit in these pews, when you and I are far away. And other June days will come, and the old rose-trees will flower round houses where unborn men will then be living, when the present possessor is gone to nourish the roots of the roses in the graveyard!

'Our days are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.' So said David on other occasions. We know, dear brethren! how true it is, whether we consider the ceaseless flux and change of things, the mystic march of the silent-footed hours, or the greater permanence which attaches to the ‘things which perish,’ than to our abode among them. We know it, and yet how hard it is not to yield to the inducement to act and feel as if all this painted scenery were solid rock and mountain. By our own inconsiderateness and sensuousness, we live in a lie, in a false dream of permanence, and so in a sadder sense we walk in ‘a vain show,’-deluding ourselves with the conceit of durability, and refusing to see that the apparent is the shadowy, and the one enduring reality God. It is hard to get even the general conviction vivified in men’s minds, hardest of all to get any man to reflect upon it as applying to himself. Do not think that you have said enough to vindicate neglect of my words now, when you call them commonplace. So they are. But did you ever take that well-worn old story, and press it on your own consciousness-as a man might press a common little plant, whose juice is healing, against his dim eye-ball-by saying to yourself, ‘It is true of *me*. *I* walk as a shadow. *I* am gliding onwards to my doom. Through *my* slack hands the golden sands are flowing, and soon *my* hour-glass will run out, and *I* shall have to stop and go away.’ Let me beseech you for one half-hour’s meditation on that fact before this day closes. You will forget my words then, when with your own eyes you have looked upon that truth, and felt that it is not merely a toothless commonplace, but belongs to and works in *thy* life, as it ebbs away silently and incessantly from *thee*.

II. Let me point, in the second place, to the gloomy, aimless hollowness which that thought, apart from God, infuses into life.

There is, no doubt, a double idea in the metaphor which the Psalmist employs. He desires to set forth, by his image of a shadow, not only the transiency, but the unsubstantialness of life. Shadow is opposed to substance, to that which is real, as well as to that which is enduring. And we may further say that the one of these characteristics is in great part the occasion of the other. Because life is fleeting, therefore, in part, it is so hollow and unsatisfying. The fact that men are dragged away from their pursuits so inexorably makes these pursuits seem, to any one who cannot see beyond that fact, trivial and not worth the following. Why should we fret and toil and break our hearts, ‘and scorn delights, and live laborious days’ for purposes which will last so short a time, and things which we shall so soon have to leave? What is all our bustle and business, when the sad light of that thought falls on it, but ‘labouring for the wind’? ‘Were it not better to lie still?’ Such thoughts have at least a partial truth in them, and are difficult to meet as long as we think only of the facts and results of man’s life that we can see with our eyes, and our psalm gives emphatic utterance to them. The word rendered ‘walketh’ in our text is not merely a synonym for passing through life, but has a very striking meaning. It is an intensive frequentative form of the word-that is, it represents the action as being repeated over and over again. For instance, it might be used to describe the restless motion of a wild beast in a cage, raging from side to side, never still, and never getting any farther for all the racing backward and forward. So here it signifies ‘walketh to and fro,’ and implies hurry and bustle, continuous effort, habitual unrest. It thus comes to be parallel with the stronger words which follow,- ‘Surely they are *disquieted* in vain’; and one reason why all this effort and agitation are purposeless and sad, is because the man who is straining his nerves and wearying his legs is but a shadow in regard to duration-’He heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them.’

Yes! if we have said all, when we have said that men pass as a fleeting shadow-if my life has no roots in the Eternal, nor any consciousness of a life that does not pass, and a light that never perishes, if it is derived from, directed to, ‘cribbed, cabined, and confined’ within this visible diurnal sphere, then it is all flat and unprofitable, an illusion while it seems to last, and all its pursuits are folly, its hopes dreams, its substances vapours, its years a lie. For, if life be thus short, I who live it am conscious of, and possess whether I be conscious of them or no, capacities and requirements which, though they were to be annihilated to-morrow, could be satisfied while they lasted by nothing short of the absolute ideal, the all-perfect, the infinite-or, to put away abstractions, ‘My soul thirsteth for God, the living God!’ ‘He hath put eternity in their heart,’ as the book of Ecclesiastes says. Longings and aspirations, weaknesses and woes, the limits of creature helps and loves, the disproportion between us and the objects around us-all these facts of familiar experience do witness, alike by blank misgivings and by bright hopes, by many disappointments and by indestructible expectations surviving them all, that nothing which has a date, a beginning, or an end, can fill our souls or give us rest. Can you fill up the swamps of the Mississippi with any cartloads of faggots you can fling in? Can you fill your souls with anything which belongs to this fleeting life? Has a flying shadow an appreciable thickness, or will a million of them pressed together occupy a space in your empty, hungry heart?

And so, dear brethren! I come to you with a message which may sound gloomy, and beseech you to give heed to it. No matter how you may get on in the world-though you may fulfil every dream with which you began in your youth-you will certainly find that without Christ for your Brother and Saviour, God for your Friend, and heaven for your hope, life, with all its fulness, is empty. It lasts long, too long as it sometimes seems for work, too long for hope, too long for endurance; long enough to let love die, and joys wither and fade, and companions drop away, but without God and Christ, you will find it but ‘as a watch in the night.’ At no moment through the long weary years will it satisfy your whole being; and when the weary years are all past, they will seem to have been but as one troubled moment breaking the eternal silence. At every point *so* profitless, and all the points making so thin and short a line! The crested waves seem heaped together as they recede from the eye till they reach the horizon, where miles of storm are seen but as a line of spray. So when a man looks back upon his life, if it have been a godless one, be sure of this, that he will have a dark and cheerless retrospect over a tossing waste, with a white rim of wandering barren foam vexed by tempest, and then, if not before, he will sadly learn how he has been living amidst shadows, and, with a nature that needs God, has wasted himself upon the world. ‘O life! as futile then as frail’; ‘surely,’ in such a case, ‘every man walketh in a vain show.’

III. But note, finally, how our other text in its significant words gives us the blessedness which springs from this same thought of life, when it is looked at in connection with God.

The mere conviction of the brevity and hollowness of life is not in itself a religious or a helpful thought. Its power depends upon the other ideas which are associated with it. It is susceptible of the most opposite applications, and may tend to impel conduct in exactly opposite directions. It may be the language of despair or of bright hope. It may be the bitter creed of a worn-out debauchee, who has wasted his life in hunting shadows, and is left with a cynical spirit and a barbed tongue. It may be the passionless belief of a retired student, or the fanatical faith of a religious ascetic. It may be an argument for sensuous excess, ‘Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die’; or it may be the stimulus for noble and holy living, ‘I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day. The night cometh.’ The other accompanying beliefs determine whether it shall be a blight or a blessing to a man.

And the one addition which is needed to incline the whole weight of that conviction to the better side, and to light up all its blackness, is that little phrase in this text, ‘I am a stranger *with Thee*, and a sojourner.’ There seems to be an allusion here to remarkable words connected with the singular Jewish institution of the Jubilee. You remember that by the Mosaic law, there was no absolute sale of land in Israel, but that every half century the whole returned to the descendants of the original occupiers. Important economical and social purposes were contemplated in this arrangement, as well as the preservation of the relative position of the tribes as settled at the Conquest. But the law itself assigns a purely religious purpose-the preservation of the distinct consciousness of the tenure on which the people held their territory, namely, obedience to and dependence on God. ‘The land shall not be sold for ever, for the land is Mine, for ye are *strangers and sojourners with Me*.’ Of course, there was a special sense in which that was true with regard to Israel, but David thought that the words were as true in regard to his whole relation to God, as in regard to Israel’s possession of its national inheritance.

If we grasp these words as completing all that we have already said, how different this transient and unsubstantial life looks! You must have the light from both sides to stereoscope and make solid the flat surface picture. Transient! yes-but it is passed in the presence of God. Whether we know it or no, our brief days hang upon Him, and we walk, all of us, in the light of His countenance. That makes the transient eternal, the shadowy substantial, the trivial heavy with solemn meaning and awful yet vast possibilities. ‘In our embers is something that doth live.’ If we had said all, when we say ‘We are as a shadow,’ it would matter very little, though even then it *would* matter something, how we spent our shadowy days; but if these poor brief hours are spent ‘in the great Taskmaster’s eye,’-if the shadow cast on earth proclaims a light in the heavens-if from this point there hangs an unending chain of conscious being-Oh! then, with what awful solemnity is the brevity, with what tremendous magnitude is the minuteness, of our earthly days invested! ‘With Thee’-then I am constantly in the presence of a sovereign Law and its Giver; ‘with Thee’-then all my actions are registered and weighed yonder; ‘with Thee’-then ‘Thou, God, seest me.’ Brethren! it is the prismatic halo and ring of eternity round this poor glass of time that gives it all its dignity, all its meaning. The lives that are lived before God cannot be trifles.

And if this relation to time be recognised and accepted and held fast by our hearts and minds, then what calm blessedness will flow into our souls!

‘A stranger with Thee,’-then we are the guests of the King. The Lord of the land charges Himself with our protection and provision; we journey under His safe conduct. It is for His honour and faithfulness that no harm shall come to us travelling in His territory, and relying on His word. Like Abraham with the sons of Heth, we may claim the protection and help which a stranger needs. He recognises the bond and will fulfil it. We have eaten of His salt, and He will answer for our safety.-’He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of Mine eye.’

‘A stranger with Thee,’-then we have a constant Companion and an abiding Presence. We may be solitary and necessarily remote from the polity of the land. We may feel amid all the visible things of earth as if foreigners. We may not have a foot of soil, not even a grave for our dead. Companionships may dissolve and warm hands grow cold and their close clasp relax-what then? He is with us still. He will join us as we journey, even when our hearts are sore with loss. He will walk with us by the way, and make our chill hearts glow. He will sit with us at the table-however humble the meal, and He will not leave us when we discern Him. Strangers we are indeed here-but not solitary, for we are ‘strangers with Thee.’ As in some ancestral home in which a family has lived for centuries-son after father has rested in its great chambers, and been safe behind its strong walls-so, age after age, they who love Him abide in God.-’Thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations.’

‘Strangers with Thee,’-then we may carry our thoughts forward to the time when we shall go to our true home, nor wander any longer in a land that is not ours. If even here we come into such blessed relationships with God, that fact is in itself a prophecy of a more perfect communion and a heavenly house. They who are strangers with Him will one day be ‘at home with the Lord,’ and in the light of that blessed hope the transiency of this life changes its whole aspect, loses the last trace of sadness, and becomes a solemn joy. Why should we be pensive and wistful when we think how near our end is? Is the sentry sad as the hour for relieving guard comes nigh? Is the wanderer in far-off lands sad when he turns his face homewards? And why should not we rejoice at the thought that we, strangers and foreigners here, shall soon depart to the true metropolis, the mother-country of our souls? I do not know why a man should be either regretful or afraid, as he watches the hungry sea eating away this ‘bank and shoal of time’ upon which he stands-even though the tide has all but reached his feet-if he knows that God’s strong hand will be stretched forth to him at the moment when the sand dissolves from under him, and will draw him out of many waters, and place him high above the floods in that stable land where there is ‘no more sea.’

Lives rooted in God through faith in Jesus Christ are not vanity. Let us lay hold of Him with a loving grasp-and ‘we shall live also’ *because* He lives, *as* He lives, *so long* as He lives. The brief days of earth will be blessed while they last, and fruitful of what shall never pass. We shall have Him with us while we journey, and all our journeyings will lead to rest in Him. True, men walk in a vain show; true, ‘the world passeth away and the lust thereof,’ but, blessed be God! true, also, ‘He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’

34)Psalms 42:2

Psalms

THIRSTING FOR GOD

Psa. 42:2.

This whole psalm reads like the sob of a wounded heart. The writer of it is shut out from the Temple of his God, from the holy soil of his native land.

One can see him sitting solitary yonder in the lonely wilderness [for the geographical details that occur in one part of the psalm point to his situation as being on the other side of the Jordan, in the mountains of Moab]-can see him sitting there with long wistful gaze yearning across the narrow valley and the rushing stream that lay between him and the land of God's chosen people, and his eye resting perhaps on the mountaintop that looked down upon Jerusalem. He felt shut out from the presence of God. We need not suppose that he believed all the rest of the world to be profane and God-forsaken, except only the Temple. Nor need we wonder, on the other hand, that his faith did cling to form, and that he thought the sparrows beneath the eaves of the Temple blessed birds! He was depressed, because he was shut out from the tokens of God's presence; and because he *was* depressed, he shut himself out from the reality of the presence. And so he cried with a cry which never is in vain, 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God!' Taken, then, in its original sense, the words of our text apply only to that strange phenomenon which we call religious depression. But I have ventured to take them in a wider sense than that. It is not only Christian men who are cast down, whose souls 'thirst for God.' It is not only men upon earth whose souls thirst for God. All men, everywhere, may take this text for theirs. Every human heart may breathe it out, if it understands itself. The longing for 'the living God' belongs to all men. Thwarted, stifled, it still survives. Unconscious, it is our deepest misery. Recognised, yielded to, accepted, it is the foundation of our highest blessings. Filled to the full, it still survives unsatiated and expectant. For all men upon earth, Christian or not Christian, for Christians here below, whether in times of depression or in times of gladness, and for the blessed and calm spirits that in ecstasy of longing, full of fruition, stand around God's throne-it is equally true that their souls 'thirst for God, for the living God.' Only with this difference, that to some the desire is misery and death, and to some the desire is life and perfect blessedness. So that the first thought I would suggest to you now is, that there is an unconscious and unsatisfied longing after God, which is what we call the state of nature; secondly, that there is an imperfect longing after God, fully satisfied, which is what we call the state of grace; and lastly, that there is a perfect longing, perfectly satisfied, which is what we call the state of glory. Nature; religion upon earth; blessedness in heaven-my text is the expression, in divers senses, of them all.

I. In the first place, then, there is in every man an unconscious and unsatisfied longing after God, and that is the state of nature.

Experience is the test of that assertion. And the most superficial examination of the facts of daily life, as well as the questioning of our own souls, will tell us that *this* is the leading feature of them-a state of unrest. What is it that one of those deistic poets of our own land says, about ‘Man never *is*, but always *to be* blest’? What is the meaning of the fact that all round about us, and we partaking of it, there is ceaseless, gigantic activity going on? The very fact that men work, the very fact of activity in the mind and life, noble as it is, and root of all that is good, and beautiful as it is, is still the testimony of nature to this fact that I by myself am full of passionate longings, of earnest desires, of unsupplied wants. ‘I thirst,’ is the voice of the whole world.

No man is made to be satisfied from himself. For the stilling of our own hearts, for the satisfying of our own nature, for the strengthening and joy of our being, we need to go beyond ourselves, and to fix upon something external to ourselves. We are not independent. None of us can stand by himself. No man carries within him the fountain from which he can draw. If a heart is to be blessed, it must go out of the narrow circle of its own individuality; and if a man’s life is to be strong and happy, he must get the foundation of his strength somewhere else than in his own soul. And, my friends! especially you young men, all that modern doctrine of self-reliance, though it has a true side to it, has also a frightfully false side. Though it may he quite true that a man ought to be, in one sense, sufficient for himself, and that there is no real blessedness of which the root does not lie within the nature and heart of the man; though all that be quite true, yet, if the doctrine means [as on the lips of many a modern eloquent and powerful teacher of it, it does mean] that we can do without God, that we may be self-reliant and self-sufficient, and proudly neglectful of all the divine forces that come down into life to brighten and gladden it, it is a lie, false and fatal; and of all the falsehoods that are going about this world at present, I know not one that is varnished over with more apparent truth, that is smeared over with more of the honey that catches young, ardent, ingenuous hearts, than that half-truth, and therefore most deceptive error, which preaches independence, and self-reliance, and which *means*-a man’s soul does not ‘thirst for the living God.’ Take care of it! We are made *not* to be independent.

We are made, next, to need, not *things*, but *living beings*. ‘My soul thirsteth’-for what? An abstraction, a possession, riches, a thing? No! ‘my soul thirsteth for God, for *the living God*.’ Yes, hearts want hearts. The converse of Christ’s saying is equally true; He said, ‘God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit’; man has a spirit, and man must have Spirit to worship, to lean upon, to live by, or all will be inefficient and unsatisfactory. Oh, lay this to heart, my brother!-no *things* can satisfy a living soul. No accumulation of dead matter can become the life of an immortal being. The two classes are separated by the whole diameter of the universe-matter and spirit, thing and person; and *you* cannot feed yourself upon the dead husks that lie there round about you-wealth, position, honour. Books, thoughts, though they are nobler than these other, are still inefficient. Principles, ‘causes,’ emotions springing from truth, these are not enough. I want more than that, I want something to love, something to lay a hand upon, that shall return the grasp of the hand. A living man must have a living God, or his soul will perish in the midst of earthly plenty, and will thirst and die whilst the water of earthly delights is running all around him. We are made to need *persons*, not *things*.

Then again, we need *one* Being who shall be all-sufficient. There is no greater misery than that which may ensue from the attempt to satisfy our souls by the accumulation of objects, each of them imperfect and finite, which yet we fancy, woven together, will make an adequate whole. When a heart is diverted from its one central purpose, when a life is split up in a hundred different directions and into a hundred different emotions, it is like a beam of light passed through some broken surface where it is all refracted and shivered into fragments; there is no clear vision, there is no perfect light. If a man is to be blessed, he must have one source to which he can go. The merchantman that seeks for many goodly pearls, may find the many; but until he has bartered them all for the one, there is something lacking. Not only does the understanding require to pass through the manifold, up and up in ever higher generalisations, till it reaches the One from whom all things come; but the heart requires to soar, if it would be at rest, through all the diverse regions where its love may legitimately tarry for a while, until it reaches the sole and central throne of the universe, and there it may cease its flight, and fold its weary wings, and sleep like a bird within its nest. We want *a Being*, and we want *one Being* in whom shall be sphered all perfection, in whom shall abide all power and blessedness; beyond whom thought cannot pass, out of whose infinite circumference love does not need to wander; besides whose boundless treasures no other riches can be required; who is light for the understanding, power for the will, authority for the practical life, purpose for the efforts, motive for the doings, end and object for the feelings, home of the affections, light of our seeing, life of our life, the love of our heart, the one living God, infinite in wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth; who is all in all, and without whom everything else is misery. 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.'

Brother! let me ask you the question, before I pass on-the question for the sake of which I am preaching this sermon: Do *you* know that Father? I know this much, that every heart here now answers an 'Amen' [if it will be honest] to what I have been saying. Unrest; panting, desperate thirst, deceiving itself as to where it should go; slaking itself 'at the gilded puddles that the beasts would cough at,' instead of coming to the water of life!-that is the state of man without God. That is nature. That is irreligion. The condition in which every man is that is not trusting in Jesus Christ, is this-thirsting for God, and not knowing *whom* he is thirsting for, and so not getting the supply that he wants.

II. There is a conscious longing, imperfect, but answered; and that is the state of grace-the beginning of religion in a man's soul.

If it be true that there are, as part of the universal human experience, however overlaid and stifled, these necessities of which I have been speaking, the very existence of the necessities affords a presumption, before all evidence, that, somehow and somewhere, they shall be supplied. There can be no deeper truth-none, I think, that ought to have more power in shaping some parts of our Christian creed, than this, that God is a faithful Creator; and where He makes men with longings, it is a prophecy that those longings are going to be supplied. The same ground which avails to defend doctrines that cannot be so well defended by any other argument-the same ground on which we say that there is an immortality, because men long for it and believe in it; that there is a God because men cannot get rid of the instinctive conviction that there is; that there is a retribution, because men's consciences do ask for it, and cry out for it-the very same process which may be applied to the buttressing and defending of all the grandest truths of the Gospel, applies also in this practical matter. If I, made by God who knew what He was doing when He made me, am formed with these deep necessities, with these passionate longings-then it cannot but be that it is intended that they should be to me a means of leading me to Him, and that there they should be satisfied. For He is 'the faithful Creator,' and He remembers the conditions under which His making of us has placed us. 'He knoweth our frame,' and He remembereth what He has implanted within us. And the presumption is, of course, turned into an actual certainty when we let in the light of the Gospel upon the thing. Then we can say to every man that thus is yearning after a goodness dimly perceived, and does not know what it is that he wants, and we say to you now, Brother! betake yourself to the cross of Christ go with those wants of yours to 'the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world': He will interpret them to you. He will explain to you, as you do not now know, what they mean; and, better than that, He will supply them all. Your souls are thirsting; and you look about, here and there, and everywhere, for springs of water. *There* is the fountain-go to Christ. Your souls are thirsting for God. The unfathomed ocean of the Godhead lies far beyond my lip; but here is the channel through which there flows that river of water of life. Here is the manifested God, here is the granted God, here is the Godhead coming into connection and union with man, his wants and his sins-the 'living God' and His living Son, His everlasting Word. 'He that believeth upon Him shall never hunger, and he that cometh unto Him shall never thirst.' God is the divine and unfathomable ocean; Christ the Son is the stream that brings salvation to every man's lips. All wants are supplied there. Take it as a piece of the simplest prose, with no rhetorical exaggeration about it, that Christ is *everything*, everything that a man can want. We are made to require, and to be restless until we possess, perfect truth-there it is! We are made to want, and to be restless until we get, perfect, infinite unchangeable love-there it is! We must have, or the burden of our own self-will will be a misery to us, a hand laid upon the springs of our conduct, authoritative and purifying, and have the blessedness of some voice to say to us, 'I bid thee, and that is enough'-there it is! We must have rest, purity, hope, gladness, life in our souls-there they all are! Whatever form of human nature and character be yours, my brother!-whatever exigencies of life you may be lying under the pressure of-man or woman, adult or child, father or son, man of business or man of thought, struggling with difficulties or bright with joy-Oh! believe us, the perfecting of your character may be got in the Lamb of God, and without Him it never can be possessed. Christ is everything, and ‘out of His fulness all we receive grace for grace.’

Not only in Christ is there the perfect supply of all these necessities, but also that fulness *becomes* ours on the simple condition of desiring it. The thirst for the living God in a man who has faith in Christ Jesus, is not a thirst which amounts to pain, or arises from a sense of non-possession. But in this divine region the principle of the giving is this-to desire is to have; to long for is to possess. There is no wide interval between the sense of thirst and the trickling of the stream over the parched lip; but ever it is flowing, flowing past us, and the desire is but the opening of the lips to receive the limpid and life-giving waters. No one ever desired the grace of God, really and truly desired it; but just in proportion as he desired it, he got it-just in proportion as he thirsted, he was satisfied. Therefore we have to preach that grand gospel that faith, simple, conscious longing, turned to Christ, avails to bring down the full and perfect supply.

But some Christian people here may reply, ‘Ah! I wish it were so: what was that you were saying at the beginning of your sermon, about men having religious depression, about Christians longing and not possessing?’ Well, I have only this to say about that matter. Wherever in a heart that really believes on God in Christ, there is a thirst that amounts to pain, and that has with it a sense of non-possession, that is not because Christ’s fulness has become shrunken; that is not because there is a change in God’s law, that the measure of the desire is the measure of the reception; but it is only because, for some reason or other that belongs to the man alone, the desire is not deep, genuine, simple, but is troubled and darkened. What we ask, we get. If I am a Christian, however feeble I may be, the feebleness of my faith and the feebleness of my desire may make my supplies of grace feeble; but if I am a Christian, there is no such thing as an earnest longing unsatisfied, no such thing as a thirst accompanied with a pain and sense of want, except in consequence of my own transgression.

And thus there *is* a longing imperfect in this life, but fully supplied according to the measure of its intensity, a longing after ‘the living God’; and that is the state of a Christian man. And O my friend! that is a widely different desire from the other that I have been speaking about. It is blessed thus to say, ‘My soul thirsteth for God.’ It is blessed to feel the passionate wish for more light, more grace, more peace, more wisdom, more of God. That *is* joy, that *is* peace! Is that *your* experience in this present life?

III. Lastly, there is a perfect longing perfectly satisfied; and that is heaven.

We shall not there be independent, of course, of constant supplies from the great central Fulness, any more than we are here. One may see in one aspect, that just as the Christian life here on earth is in a very true sense a state of never thirsting any more, because we have Christ, and yet in another sense is a state of continual longing and desire-so the Christian and glorified life in heaven, in one view of it, is the removal of all that thirst which marked the condition of man upon earth, and in another is the perfecting of all those aspirations and desires. Thirst, as longing, is eternal; thirst, as aspiration after God, is the glory of heaven; thirst, as desire for more of Him, is the very condition of the celestial world, and the element of all its blessedness.

That future life gives us two elements, an infinite God, and an indefinitely expansible human spirit: an infinite God to fill, and a soul to be filled, the measure and the capacity of which has no limit set to it that we can see. What will be the consequence of the contact of these two? Why this, for the first thing, that always, at every moment of that blessed life, there shall be a perpetual fruition, a perpetual satisfaction, a deep and full fountain filling the whole soul with the refreshment of its waves and the music of its flow. And yet, and yet-though at every moment in heaven we shall be satisfied, filled full of God, full to overflowing in all our powers-yet the very fact that the God who dwells in us, and fills our whole natures with unsullied and perfect blessedness, is an infinite God; and that we in whom the infinite Father dwells, are men with souls that can grow, and can grow for ever-will result in this, that at every moment our capacities will expand; that at every moment, therefore, the desire will grow and spring afresh; that at every moment God will be seen unveiling undreamed-of beauties, and revealing hitherto unknown heights of blessedness before us; and that the sight of that transcendent, unapproached, unapproachable, and yet attracting and transforming glory, will draw us onward as by an impulse from above, and the possession of some portion of it will bear us upward as by a power from within; and so, nearer, nearer, ever nearer to the throne of light, the centre of blessedness, the growing, and glorifying, and greatening souls of the perfectly and increasingly blessed shall 'mount up with wings as eagles.' Heaven *is* endless longing, accompanied with an endless fruition-a longing which is blessedness, a longing which is life!

My brother! let me put two sayings of Scripture side by side, 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God,'-'Father Abraham! send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue.' There be two thirsts, one, the longing for God, which, satisfied, is heaven; one, the longing for quenching of self-lit fires, and for one drop of the lost delights of earth to cool the thirsty throat, which, unsatisfied, is hell. Then hearken to the final vision on the page of Scripture, 'He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.' To us it is showed, and to us the whole revelation of God converges to that last mighty call, 'Let him that is athirst come, and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely!'

35)Psalms 43:5

Psalms

THE PSALMIST'S REMONSTRANCE WITH HIS SOUL

Psa. 43:5.

This verse, which closes this psalm, occurs twice in the previous one. It is a kind of refrain. Obviously this little psalm, of which my text is a part, was originally united with the preceding one. That the two made one is clear to anybody that will read them, by reason of structure, and tone, and similarity of the singer's situation, and the recurrence of many phrases, and especially of these significant words of my text.

The Psalmist is in circumstances of trouble and sorrow. We need not enter upon them particularly, but the thing that I desire to point out is that three times does the Psalmist take himself to task and question himself as to the reasonableness of the emotions that are surging in his soul, and checks these by higher considerations. Thrice he does it; twice in vain, for the trouble and anxiety come rolling back upon him in spite of the moment's respite, but the third time he triumphs.

I. We note, then, first, that moods and emotions should be examined and governed by a higher self.

In the Psalmist's case, his gloom and despondency, which could plead good reasons for their existence, had everything their own way at first, and swept over his soul like the first rush of waters which have burst their bounds. But, presently, the ruling part of his nature wakes, and brings the feebler lower soul to its tribunal, and says, in effect, 'Now! now that I am here, what hast thou to say about these sorrows that thou hast been complaining about? *Why* art thou cast down, O my soul? Why art thou disquieted? . . . Hope in God!'

I shall have a word or two to say presently about the details of this remonstrance, but the main point that I make, to begin with, is just this, that however strong and reasonably occasioned by circumstances a man's emotions and feelings, either of the bright or the dark kind, may be, they are not to be indulged, unless they have passed muster and examination by that higher and better self. It is necessary to keep a very tight hand upon *all* our feelings, whether they be the natural desires of the sensuous part of our nature, or whether they be the sentiments of sadness, or doubt, or anxiety, or perplexity, which are the natural results of outward circumstances of trial; or whether, on the contrary, they be the bright and buoyant ones which come, like angels, along with prosperous hours. But that necessity, commonplace as it is of all morals and all religion, is yet a thing which, day by day, we so forget that we need to be ever and anon reminded of it.

There are hosts of people who, making profession of being Christians, do not habitually put the brake on their moods and tempers, and who seem to think that it is a sufficient vindication of gloom and sadness to say that things are going badly with them in the outer world, and who act as if they supposed that no joy can be too exuberant and no elation too lofty if, on the other hand, things are going rightly. It is a miserable travesty of the Christian faith to suppose that its prime purpose is anything else than to put into our hands the power of ruling ourselves because we let Christ rule us.

And so, dear brethren! though it be the A B C of Christian teaching, suffer this word of exhortation. It is only ‘milk for babes,’ but it is milk that the babes are very unwilling to take. Learn from this verse before us the solemn duty of rigid control, by the higher self, of the tremulous, emotional lower self which responds so completely to every change of temperature or circumstances in the world without. And remember that there should be a central heat which keeps the temperature substantially the same, whatever be the weather outside. As the wheel-house, and the steering gear, and the rudder of the ship proclaim their purpose of guidance and direction, so eloquently and unmistakably does the make of our inward selves tell us that emotions and moods and tempers are meant to be governed, often to be crushed, always to be moderated, by sovereign will and reason. In the Psalmist’s language, ‘My soul’ has to give account of its tremors and flutterings to ‘Me,’ the ruling Self, who should be Lord of temperament, and control the fluctuations of feeling.

II. Note that there are two ways of looking at causes of dejection and disquiet.

The whole preceding parts of both the psalms, before this refrain, are an answer to the question which my text puts. ‘Why art thou cast down, O my soul?’ ‘My soul’ has been talking two whole psalms, to explain why it is cast down. And after all the eloquent torrent of words to vindicate and explain its reasons for sadness-separation from the sanctuary, bitter remembrances of bright days, which the poet tells us are ‘a sorrow’s crown of sorrow,’ taunts of enemies and the like-after all these have been said over and over again, the Psalmist says to himself: ‘Come now, let us hear it all once more. *Why* art thou cast down? Why art thou disquieted within me? Thou hast been telling the reasons abundantly. Speak them once again, and let us have a look at them.’

There is a court of appeal in each man, which tests and tries his reasons for his moods; and these, which look very sufficient to the flesh, turn out to be very insufficient when investigated and tested by the higher spirit or self. We should ‘appeal from Philip drunk to Philip sober.’ And if a man will be honest with himself, and tell himself why he is in such a pucker of terror, or why he is in such a rapture of joy, nine times out of ten the attempt to tell the reasons will be the condemnation of the mood which they are supposed to justify. If men would only bring the causes or occasions of the tempers and feelings which they allow to direct them, to the bar of common sense, to say nothing of religious faith, half the furious boilings in their hearts would stop their ebullition. It would be like pouring cold water into a kettle on the fire. It would end its bubbling. Everything has two handles. The aspect of any event depends largely on the beholder’s point of view. ‘There’s nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.’ ‘Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me?’ The answer is often very hard to give; the question is always very salutary to ask.

III. Note that no reasons for being cast down are so strong as those for elation and calm hope.

‘Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance and my God.’ I need not deal here with the fact that the first of the three occurrences of this refrain is, in our Bible, a little different from the other two. That is probably a mistake in the text. In all three cases the words ought to stand the same.

Try to realise what God is to yourselves-’My God’ and ‘the health of my countenance.’ That will stimulate sluggish feeling; that will calm disturbed emotion. He that can say ‘My God!’ and in that possession can repose, will not be easily moved, by the trivialities and transitorinesses of this life, to excessive disquiet, whether of the exuberant or of the woful sort. There is a wonderful calming power in realising our possession of God as our portion-not stagnating, but quieting. I am quite sure that the troubles of our lives, and the gladnesses of our lives, which often distract, would be far less operative in disturbing, if we felt more that God was ours and that we were God’s.

Brethren! ‘there is no joy but calm.’ To be at rest is better than rapture. And there is no way of getting and keeping a fixed temper of still tranquillity unless we go into that deep and hidden chamber, in the secret place of the Most High, where we cannot ‘hear the loud winds when they call,’ but dwell in security, whatever storms harass the land. ‘Why art thou cast down,’ or lifted ‘up,’ and, in either case, ‘disquieted’? ‘Hope in God,’ and be at rest.

IV. Note that the effort to lay hold on the truth which calms is to be repeated in spite of failures.

The words of our text are thrice repeated in these two psalms. In the two former instances they are followed by a fresh burst of pained feeling. A moment of tranquillity interrupts the agitation of the Psalmist’s soul, but is soon followed by the recurrence of ‘the horrible storm’ that ‘begins afresh.’ A tiny island of blue appears in his sky, and then the pale, ugly, grey rack drives across it once more. But the guiding self keeps the hand firm on the tiller, notwithstanding the wash of the water and the rolling of the ship, and the dominant will conquers at last, and at the third time the yielding soul obeys and is quiet, because the Psalmist’s will resolved that it should be quiet, and it hopes in God because He, by a dead lift of effort, lifts it up to hope.

No effort at tranquillising our hearts is wholly lost; and no attempt to lay hold upon God is wholly in vain. Men build a dam to keep out the sea, and the winter storms make a breach in it, but it is not washed away altogether, and next season they will not need to begin to build from quite so low down; but there will be a bit of the former left, to put the new structure upon, and so by degrees it will rise above the tide, and at last will keep it out.

Did you ever see a child upon a swing, or a gymnast upon a trapeze? Each oscillation goes a little higher; each starts from the same lowest point, but the elevation on either side increases with each renewed effort, until at last the destined height is reached and the daring athlete leaps on to a solid platform. So we may, if I might say so, by degrees, by reiterated efforts, swing ourselves up to that steadfast floor on which we may stand high above all that breeds agitation and gloom. It is possible, in the midst of change and circumstances that excite sad emotions, anxieties, and fears-it is possible to have this calmness of hope in God. The rainbow that spans the cataract rises steadfast above the white, tortured water beneath, and persists whilst all is hurrying change below, and there are flowers on the grim black rocks by the side of the fall, whose verdure is made greener and whose brightness is made brighter, by the freshening of the spray of the waterfall. So we may be ‘as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,’ and may bid dejected and disquieted souls to hope in God and be still.

36)Psalms 45:2-7

Psalms

THE KING IN HIS BEAUTY

Psa. 45:2 - Psa. 45:7.

There is no doubt that this psalm was originally the marriage hymn of some Jewish king. All attempts to settle who that was have failed, for the very obvious reason that neither the history nor the character of any of them correspond to the psalm. Its language is a world too wide for the diminutive stature and stained virtues of the greatest and best of them, and it is almost ludicrous to attempt to fit its glowing sentences even to a Solomon. They all look like little David in Saul’s armour. So, then, we must admit one of two things. Either we have here a piece of poetical exaggeration far beyond the limits of poetic license, or ‘a greater than Solomon is here.’ Every Jewish king, by virtue of his descent and of his office, was a living prophecy of the greatest of the sons of David, the future King of Israel. And the Psalmist sees the ideal Person who, as he knew, was one day to be real, shining through the shadowy form of the earthly king, whose very limitations and defects, no less than his excellences and his glories, forced the devout Israelite to think of the coming King in whom ‘the sure mercies’ promised to David should be facts at last. In plainer words, the psalm celebrates Christ, not only although, but because, it had its origin and partial application in a forgotten festival at the marriage of some unknown king. It sees Him in the light of the Messianic hope, and so it prophesies of Christ. My object is to study the features of this portrait of the King, partly in order that we may better understand the psalm, and partly in order that we may with the more reverence crown Him as Lord of all.

I. The Person of the King.

The old-world ideal of a monarch put special emphasis upon two things-personal beauty and courtesy of address and speech. The psalm ascribes both of these to the King of Israel, and from both of them draws the conclusion that one so richly endowed with the most eminent of royal graces is the object of the special favour of God. ‘Thou art fairer than the children of men, grace is poured into Thy lips: therefore God hath blessed Thee for ever.’

Here, at the very outset, we have the keynote struck of superhuman excellence; and though the reference is, on the surface, only to physical perfection, yet beneath that there lies the deeper reference to a character which spoke through the eloquent frame, and in which all possible beauties and sovereign graces were united in fullest development, in most harmonious co-operation and unstained purity.

‘Thou art fairer than the children of men.’ Put side by side with that, words which possibly refer to, and seem to contradict it. A later prophet, speaking of the same Person, said: ‘His visage was so marred, more than any man, and His form than the sons of men. . . . There is no form nor comeliness, and when we shall see Him there is no beauty that we should desire Him.’ We have to think, not of the outward form, howsoever lovely with the loveliness of meekness and transfigured with the refining patience of suffering it may have been, but of the beauty of a soul that was all radiant with a lustre of loveliness that shames the fragmentary and marred virtues of the best of us, and stands before the world for ever as the supreme type and high-water mark of the grace that is possible to a human spirit. God has lodged in men’s nature the apprehension of Himself, and of all that flows from Him, as true, as good, as beautiful; and to these three there correspond wisdom, morality, and art. The latter, divorced from the other two, becomes earthly and devilish. This generation needs the lesson that beauty wrenched from truth and goodness, and pursued for its own sake, by artist or by poet or by *dilettante*, leads by a straight descent to ugliness and to evil, and that the only true satisfying of the deep longing for ‘whatsoever things are lovely’ is to be found when we turn to Christ and find in Him, not only wisdom that enlightens the understanding, and righteousness that fills the conscience, but beauty that satisfies the heart. He is ‘altogether lovely.’ Nor let us forget that once on earth ‘the fashion of His countenance was altered, and His raiment did shine as the light,’ as indicative of the possibilities that lay slumbering in His lowly Manhood, and as prophetic of that to which we believe that the ascended Christ hath now attained-viz. the body of His glory, wherein He reigns, filled with light and undecaying loveliness on the Throne of the Heaven. Thus He is fairer in external reality now, as He is, by the confession of an admiring, though not always believing, world, fairer in inward character than the children of men.

Another personal characteristic is ‘Grace is poured into Thy lips.’ Kingly courtesy, and kingly graciousness of word, must be the characteristic of the Sovereign of men. The abundance of that bestowment is expressed by that word, ‘poured.’ We need only remember, ‘All wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth,’ or how even the rough instruments of authority were touched and diverted from their appointed purpose, and came back and said, ‘Never man spake like this Man.’ To the music of Christ’s words all other eloquence is harsh, poor, shallow-like the piping of a shepherd boy upon some wretched oaten straw as compared with the full thunder of the organ. Words of unmingled graciousness came from His lips. That fountain never sent forth ‘sweet waters and bitter.’ He satisfies the canon of St. James: ‘If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man.’ Words of wisdom, of love, of pity, of gentleness, of pardon, of bestowment, and only such, came from Him. ‘Daughter! be of good cheer.’ ‘Son! thy sins be forgiven thee.’ ‘Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy-laden.’

‘Grace is poured into Thy lips’; and, withal, it is the grace of a King. For His language is authoritative even when it is most tender, and regal when it is most gentle. His lips, sweet as honey and the honeycomb, are the lips of an Autocrat. ‘He speaks, and it is done: He commands, and it stands fast.’ He says to the tempest, ‘Be still!’ and it is quiet; and to the demons, ‘Come out of him!’ and they disappear; and to the dead, ‘Come forth!’ and he stumbles from the tomb.

Another personal characteristic is-’God hath blessed Thee for ever.’ By which we are to understand, not that the two preceding graces are the reasons for the divine benediction, but that the divine benediction is the cause of them; and therefore they are the signs of it. It is not that because He is lovely and gracious therefore God hath blessed Him; but it is that we may know that God has blessed Him, since He is lovely and gracious. These endowments are the results, not the causes; the signs or the proofs, not the reasons of the divine benediction. That is to say, the humanity so fair and unique shows by its beauty that it is the result of the continual and unique operation and benediction of a present God. We understand Him when we say, 'On Him rests the Spirit of God without measure or interruption.' The explanation of the perfect humanity is the abiding Divinity.

II. We pass from the person of the King, in the next place, to His warfare.

The Psalmist breaks out in a burst of invocation, calling upon the King to array Himself in His weapons of warfare, and then in broken clauses vividly pictures the conflict. The Invocation runs thus: 'Gird on thy sword upon thy thigh, O mighty hero! gird on thy glory and thy majesty, and ride on prosperously on behalf [or, in the cause] of truth and meekness and righteousness.' The King, then, is the perfection of warrior strength as well as of beauty and gentleness-a combination of qualities that speaks of old days when kings *were* kings, and reminds us of many a figure in ancient song, as well as of a Saul and a David in Jewish history.

The singer calls upon Him to bind on His side His glittering sword, and to put on, as His armour, 'glory and majesty.' These two words, in the usage of the psalms, belong to Divinity, and they are applied to the monarch here as being the earthly representative of the divine supremacy, on whom there falls some reflection of the glory and the majesty of which He is the vice-regent and representative. Thus arrayed, with His weapon by His side and glittering armour on His limbs, He is called upon to mount His chariot or His warhorse and ride forth.

But for what? 'On behalf of truth, meekness, righteousness.' If He be a warrior, these are the purposes for which the true King of men must draw His sword, and these only. No vulgar ambition or cruel lust of conquest, earth-hunger, or 'glory' actuates Him. Nothing but the spread through the world of the gracious beauties which are His own can be the end of the King’s warfare. He fights for truth; He fights-strange paradox-for meekness; He fights for righteousness. And He not only fights *for* them, but *with* them, for they are His own, and by *reason* of them He ‘rides prosperously,’ as well as ‘rides prosperously’ in order to establish them.

In two or three swift touches the Psalmist next paints the tumult and hurry of the fight. ‘Thy right hand shall teach Thee terrible things.’ There are no armies or allies, none to stand beside Him. The one mighty figure of the Kingly Warrior stands forth, as in the Assyrian sculptures of conquerors, erect and solitary in His chariot, crashing through the ranks of the enemy, and owing victory to His own strong arm alone.

Then follow three short, abrupt clauses, which, in their hurry and fragmentary character, reflect the confusion and swiftness of battle. ‘Thine arrows are sharp. . . . The people fall under Thee.’ . . . ‘In the heart of the King’s enemies.’ The Psalmist sees the bright arrow on the string; it flies; he looks-the plain is strewed with prostrate forms, the King’s arrow in the heart of each.

Put side by side with that this picture:-A rocky road; a great city shining in the morning sunlight across a narrow valley; a crowd of shouting peasants waving palm branches in their rustic hands; in the centre the meek carpenter’s Son, sitting upon the poor robes which alone draped the ass’s colt, the tears upon His cheeks, and His lamenting heard above the Hosannahs, as He looked across the glen and said, ‘If thou hadst known the things that belong to thy peace!’ That is the fulfilment, or part of the fulfilment, of this prophecy. The slow-pacing, peaceful beast and the meek, weeping Christ are the reality of the vision which, in such strangely contrasted and yet true form, floated before the prophetic eye of this ancient singer, for Christ’s humiliation is His majesty, and His sharpest weapon is His all-penetrating love, and His cross is His chariot of victory and throne of dominion.

But not only in His earthly life of meek suffering does Christ fight as a King, but all through the ages the world-wide conflict for truth and meekness and righteousness is His conflict; and wherever that is being waged, the power which wages it is His, and the help which is done upon earth He doeth it all Himself. True, He has His army, willing in the day of His power, and clad in priestly purity and armour of light, but all their strength, courage, and victory are from Him; and when they fight and conquer, it is not they, but He in them who struggles and overcomes. We have a better hope than that built on ‘a stream of tendency that makes for righteousness.’ We know a Christ crucified and crowned, who fights for it, and what He fights for will hold the field.

This prophecy of our psalm is not exhausted yet. I have set side by side with it one picture-the Christ on the ass’s colt. Put side by side with it this other. ‘I beheld the heaven opened; and lo! a white horse. And He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He doth judge and make war.’ The psalm waits for its completion still, and shall be fulfilled on that day of the true marriage supper of the Lamb, when the festivities of the marriage chamber shall be preceded by the last battle and crowning victory of the King of kings, the Conqueror of the world.

III. Lastly, we have the royalty of the King.

‘Thy throne, O God! is for ever and ever.’ This is not the place nor time to enter on the discussion of the difficulties of these words. I must run the risk of appearing to state confident opinions without assigning reasons, when I venture to say that the translation in the Authorised Version is the natural one. I do not say that others have been adopted by reason of doctrinal prepossessions; I know nothing about that; but I do say that they are not by any means so natural a translation as that which stands before us. What it may mean is another matter; but the plain rendering of the words, I venture to assert, is what our English Bible makes it-’Thy throne, O God! is for ever and ever.’

Then it is to be remembered that, throughout the Old Testament, we have occasional instances of the use of that great and solemn designation in reference to persons in such place and authority as that they are representatives of God. So kings and judges and lawyers and the like are spoken of more than once. Therefore there is not, in the language, translated as in our English Bible, necessarily the implication of the unique divinity of the persons so addressed. But I take it that this is an instance in which the prophet was ‘wiser than he knew,’ and in which you and I understand him better than he understood himself, and know what God, who spoke through him, meant, whatsoever the prophet, through whom He spoke, did mean. That is to say, I take the words before us as directly referring to Jesus Christ, and as directly declaring the divinity of His person, and therefore the eternity of His kingdom.

We live in days when that perpetual sovereignty is being questioned. In a revolutionary time like this it is well for Christian people, seeing so many venerable things going, to tighten their grasp upon the conviction that, whatever goes, Christ's kingdom will not go; and that, whatever may be shaken by any storms, the foundation of His Throne stands fast. For our personal lives, and for the great hopes of the future beyond the grave, it is all-important that we should grasp, as an elementary conviction of our faith, the belief in the perpetual rule of that Saviour whose rule is life and peace. In the great mosque of Damascus, which was a Christian church once, there may still be read, deeply cut in the stone, high above the pavement where now Mohammedans bow, these words, 'Thy kingdom, O Christ! is an everlasting kingdom.' It is true, and it shall yet be known that He is for ever and ever the Monarch of the world.

Then, again, this royalty is a royalty of righteousness. 'The sceptre of Thy kingdom is a right sceptre. Thou lovest righteousness and hatest wickedness.' His rule is no arbitrary sway, His rod is no rod of iron and tyrannical oppression, His own personal character is righteousness. Righteousness is the very life-blood and animating principle of His rule. He loves righteousness, and, therefore, puts His broad shield of protection over all who love it and seek after it. He hates wickedness, and therefore He wars against it wherever it is, and seeks to draw men out of it. And thus His kingdom is the hope of the world.

And, lastly, this dominion of perennial righteousness is the dominion of unparalleled gladness. 'Therefore God, even Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of joy above Thy fellows.' Set side by side with that the other words, 'A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.' And remember how, near the very darkest hour of the Lord's earthly experiences, He said:-'These things have I spoken unto you that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.' Christ's gladness flowed from Christ's righteousness. Because His pure humanity was ever in touch with God, and in conscious obedience to Him, therefore, though darkness was around, there was light within. He was 'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,' and the saddest of men was likewise the gladdest, and possessed 'the oil of joy above His fellows.'

Brother! that kingdom is offered to us; participation in that joy of our Lord may belong to each of us. He rules that He may make us like Himself, lovers of righteousness, and so, like Himself, possessors of unfading joy. Make Him your King, let His arrow reach your heart, bow in submission to His power, take for your very life His words of graciousness, lovingly gaze upon His beauty till some reflection of it shall shine from you, fight by His side with strength drawn from Him alone, own and adore Him as the enthroned God-man, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Crown Him with the many crowns of supreme trust, heart-whole love, and glad obedience. So shall you be honoured to share in His warfare and triumph. So shall you have a throne close to His and eternal as it. So shall His sceptre be graciously stretched out to you to give you access with boldness to the presence-chamber of the King. So shall He give you too, 'the oil of joy for mourning,' even in the 'valley of weeping,' and the fulness of His gladness for evermore, when He sets you at His right hand.

37)Psalms 45:10-15

Psalms

THE PORTRAIT OF THE BRIDE

Psa. 45:10 - Psa. 45:15.

The relation between God and Israel is constantly represented in the Old Testament under the emblem of a marriage. The tenderest promises of protection and the sharpest rebukes of unfaithfulness are based upon this foundation. 'Thy Maker is thy Husband'; or, 'I am married unto thee, saith the Lord.' The emblem is transferred in the New Testament to Christ and His Church. Beginning with John the Baptist's designation of Him as the Bridegroom, it reappears in many of our Lord's sayings and parables, is frequent in the writings of the Apostle Paul, and reaches its height of poetic splendour and terror in that magnificent description in Revelation of ‘the Bride, the Lamb’s wife,’ and ‘the marriage supper of the Lamb.’

Seeing, then, the continual occurrence of this metaphor, it is unnatural and almost impossible to deny its presence in this psalm. In a former sermon I have directed attention to the earlier portion of it, which presents us, in its portraiture of the King, a shadowy and prophetic outline of Jesus Christ. I desire, in a similar fashion, to deal now with the latter portion, which, in its portrait of the bride, presents us with truths having their real fulfilment in the Church collectively and in the individual soul.

Of course, inasmuch as the consort of a Jewish monarch was not an incarnate prophecy as her husband was, the transference of the historical features of this wedding-song to a spiritual purpose is not so satisfactory, or easy, in the latter part as in the former. There is a thicker rind of prose fact, as it were, to cut through, and certain of the features cannot be applied to the relation between Christ and His Church without undue violence. But, whilst we admit that, it is also clear that the main, broad outlines of this picture do require as well as permit its higher application. Therefore I turn to them to try to bring out what they teach us so eloquently and vividly of Christ’s gifts to, and requirements from, the souls that are wedded to Him.

I. Now the first point is this-the all-surrendering Love that must mark the Bride.

The language of the tenth verse is the voice of prophecy or inspiration; speaking words of fatherly counsel to the princess-’Forget also thine own people and thy father’s house.’ Historically I suppose it points to the foreign birth of the queen, who is called upon to abandon all old ties, and to give herself with wholehearted consecration to her new duties and relations.

In all real wedded life, as those who have tasted it know, there comes, by sweet necessity, the subordination, in the presence of a purer and more absorbing love, brought close by a will itself ablaze with the sacred glow.

Therefore, while giving all due honour to other forms of Christian opposition to the prevailing unbelief, I urge the cultivation of a quickened spiritual life as by far the most potent. Does not history bear me out in that view? What, for instance, was it that finished the infidelity of the eighteenth century? Whether had Butler's *Analogy* or Charles Wesley's hymns, Paley's *Evidences* or Whitefield's sermons, most to do with it? A languid Church breeds unbelief as surely as a decaying oak does fungus. In a condition of depressed vitality, the seeds of disease, which a full vigour would shake off, are fatal. Raise the temperature, and you kill the insect germs. A warmer tone of spiritual life would change the atmosphere which unbelief needs for its growth. It belongs to the fauna of the glacial epoch, and when the rigours of that wintry time begin to melt, and warmer days to set in, the creatures of the ice have to retreat to arctic wildernesses, and leave a land no longer suited for their life. A diffused unbelief, such as we see around us to-day, does not really arise from the logical basis on which it seems to repose. It comes from something much deeper,-a certain habit and set of mind which gives these arguments their force. For want of a better name, we call it the spirit of the age. It is the result of very subtle and complicated forces, which I do not pretend to analyse. It spreads through society, and forms the congenial soil in which these seeds of evil, as we believe them to be, take root. Does anybody suppose that the growth of popular unbelief is owing to the logical force of certain arguments? It is in the air; a wave of it is passing over us. We are in a condition in which it becomes shall drop the toys of earth as easily and naturally as a child will some trinket or plaything, when it stretches out its little hand to get a better gift from its loving mother. Love will sweep the heart clean of its antagonists; and there is no real union between Jesus Christ and us except in the measure in which we joyfully, and not as a reluctant giving up of things that we would much rather keep if we durst, 'count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Have the terms of wedded life changed since my psalm was written? Is there less need now than there used to be that, if we are to possess a heart, we should give a whole heart? And have the terms of Christian living altered since the old days, when He said, 'Whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be My disciple'? Ah! I fear me that it is no uncharitable judgment to say that the bulk of so-called Christians are playing at being Christians, and have never penetrated into the depths either of the sweet all-sufficiency of the love which they say that they possess, or the constraining necessity that is in it for the surrender of all besides. Many happy husbands and wives, if they would only treat Jesus Christ as they treat one another, would find out a power and a blessedness in the Christian life that they know nothing about at present. ‘Daughter! forget thine own people and thy father’s house!’

II. Again, the second point here is that which directly follows-the King’s love and the Bride’s reverence. ‘So shall the King greatly desire thy beauty: for He is thy Lord; and worship thou Him.’

The King is drawn, in the outgoings of His affection, by the sweet trust and perfect love which has surrendered everything for him and happily followed him from the far-off land. And then, in accordance with Oriental ideas, and with His royal rank, the bride is exhorted, in the midst of the utter trust and equality born of love, to remember, ‘He is thy Lord, and reverence thou Him.’ So, then, here are two thoughts that go, as I take it, very deep into the realities of the Christian life. The first is that, in simple literal fact, Jesus Christ is affected, in His relation to us, by the completeness of our dependence upon Him, and surrender of all else for Him. We do not believe that half vividly enough. We have surrounded Jesus Christ with a halo of mystery and of remoteness which neither lets us think of Him as being really man or really God. And I press on you this as a plain fact, no piece of pulpit rhetoric, that His relation to us as Christians hinges upon our surrender to Him. Of course, there is a love with which He pours Himself out over the unworthy and the sinful-blessed be His name!-and the more sinful and the more unworthy, the deeper the tenderness and the more yearning the pity and pathos of invitation which He lavishes upon us. But that is a different thing from this other, which is that He is pleased or displeased, actually drawn to or repelled from us, in the measure of the completeness and gladness of our surrender of ourselves to Him. That is what Paul means when he says that he labours that ‘whether present or absent he may be pleasing to Christ.’ And this is the highest and strongest motive that I know for all holy and noble living, that we shall bring a smile into our Master’s face and draw Him nearer to ourselves thereby. ‘So *shall* the King greatly desire thy beauty.’

Again, in the measure in which we live out our Christianity, in whole-hearted and thorough surrender, in that measure shall we be *conscious* of His nearness and feel His love.

There are many Christian people that have only religion enough to make them uncomfortable, only enough to make religion to them a system of regulations, negative and positive, the reasonableness and sweetness of which they but partially apprehend. They must not do *this* because it is forbidden; they ought to do *that* because it is commanded. They would much rather do the forbidden thing, and they have no wish to do the commanded thing, and so they live in twilight, and when they come beside a man who really has been walking in the light of Christ's face, the language of his experience, though it be but a transcript of facts, sounds to them all unreal and fanatical. They miss the blessing that is waiting for them, just because they have not really given up themselves. If by resolute and continual opening of our hearts to Christ's real love and presence, and by consequent casting off of our false and foolish self-dependence, we were to blow away the clouds that come between us and Him, we should feel the sunshine. But as it is, a miserable multitude of professing Christians 'walk in the darkness, and have no light,' or, at the most, but some wintry sunshine that struggles through the thick mist, and does little more than reveal the barrenness that lies around. Brethren! if you want to be happy Christians, be out-and-out ones; and if you would have your hands and your hearts filled with Christ, empty them of the trash that they grip so closely now.

Then, on the other side, there is the reminder and exhortation: 'He is thy Lord, worship thou Him.' The beggar-maid that, in the old ballad, married the king, in all her love was filled with reverence; and the ragged, filthy souls, whom Jesus Christ stoops to love, and wash, and make His own, are never to forget, in the highest rapture of their joy, their lowly adoration, nor in the glad familiarity of their loving approach to Him, cease to remember that the test of love is, 'Keep My commandments.'

There are types of emotional and sentimental religion that have a great deal more to say about love than about obedience; that are full of half wholesome apostrophes to a 'dear Lord,' and almost forget the '*Lord*' in the emphasis which they put on the '*dear*.' And I want you to remember this, as by no means an unnecessary caution, and of especial value in some quarters to-day, that the test of the reality of Christian love is its lowliness, and that all that which indulges in heated emotion, and forgets practical service, is rotten and spurious. Though the King desire her beauty, still, when He stretches out the golden sceptre, Esther must come to Him with lowly guise and a reverent heart. 'He is thy Lord, worship thou Him.'

III. The next point in this portraiture is the reflected honour and influence of the bride.

There are difficulties about the translation of the 12th verse of our psalm with which I do not need to trouble you. We may take it for our purpose as it stands before us. 'The daughter of Tyre' [representing the wealthy, outside nations] 'shall be there with a gift; even the rich among the people shall entreat thy favour.'

The bride being thus beloved by the King, thus standing by His side, those around recognise her dignity and honour, and draw near to secure her intercession. Translate that out of the emblem into plain words, and it comes to this-if Christian people, and communities of such, are to have influence in the world, they must be thorough-going Christians. If they are, they will get hatred sometimes; but men know honest people and religious people when they see them, and such Christians will win respect and be a power in the world. If Christian men and Christian communities are despised by outsiders, they very generally earn the contempt and deserve it, both from men and from heaven. The true evangelist is Christian character. They that manifestly live with the sunshine of the Lord's love on their faces, and whose hands are plainly clear from worldly and selfish graspings, will have the world recognising the fact and honouring them accordingly. 'The sons of them that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee, and all they that despised thee shall bow themselves down to the soles of thy feet.' When the Church has cast the world out of its heart, it will conquer the world-and not till then.

IV. The next point in this picture is the fair adornment of the bride. The language is in part ambiguous; and if this were the place for commenting would require a good deal of comment. But we take it as it stands in our

Bible, ‘The King’s daughter is all glorious within’-not within her nature, but within the innermost recesses of the palace-’her clothing is of wrought gold. She shall be brought unto the King in raiment of needlework.’

It is an easy and well-worn metaphor to talk about people’s character as their dress. We speak about the ‘habits’ of a man, and we use that word to express both his customary manners and his costume. Custom and costume, again, are the same word. So here, without any departure from the well-trodden path of Scriptural emblem, we cannot but see in the glorious apparel the figure of the pure character with which the bride is clothed. The Book of the Revelation dresses her in the fine linen clean and white, which symbolises the lustrous radiance and snowy purity of righteousness. The psalm describes her dress as partly consisting in garments gleaming with gold, which suggests splendour and glory, and partly in robes of careful and many-coloured embroidery, which suggests the patience with which the slow needle has been worked through the stuff, and the variegated and manifold graces and beauties with which she is adorned.

So, putting all the metaphors together, the true Christian character, which will be ours if we really are the subjects of that divine love, will be lustrous and snowy as the snows on Hermon, or as was the garment whose whiteness outshone the neighbouring snows when He was ‘transfigured before them.’ Our characters will be splendid with a splendour far above the tawdry beauties and vulgar conspicuousness of the ‘heroic’ and worldly ideals, and will be endowed with a purity and harmony of colouring in richly various graces, such as no earthly looms can ever weave.

We are not told here how the garment is attained. It is no part of the purpose of the psalm to tell us that, but it is part of its purpose to insist that there is no marriage between Christ and the soul except that soul be pure, none except it be robed in the beauty of righteousness and the splendour of consecration, and the various gifts of an all-giving Spirit. The man that came into the wedding-feast, with his dirty, every-day clothes on, was turned out as a rude insulter. But what of the queen that should come foully dressed? There would be no place for her amidst its solemnities. You will never stand at the right hand of Christ, unless jour souls here are clothed in the fine linen clean and white, and over it the flashing wealth and the harmonised splendour of the gold and embroidery of Christlike graces. We know how to get the garment. Faith strips the rags and puts the best robe on us; and effort based upon faith enables us day by day to put off the old man with his deeds and to put on the new man. The bride 'made *herself* ready,' and 'to her was *granted* that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white.'

V. Lastly, we have the picture of the homecoming of the bride. 'She shall be brought unto the King. . . . with gladness and rejoicing shall they be brought; they shall enter into the King's palace.'

The presence of virgin companions waiting on the bride is no more difficult to understand here than it is in Christ's parable of the Ten Virgins. It is a characteristic of all parabolical representation to be elastic, and sometimes to duplicate its emblems for the same thing; and that is the case here. But the main point to be insisted upon is this, that, according to the perspective of Scripture, the life of the Christian Church here on earth is, if I may so say, a betrothal in righteousness and loving-kindness; and that the betrothal waits for its consummation in that great future when the bride shall pass into the presence of the King. The whole collective body of sinful souls redeemed by His blood, and who know the sweetness of His partially received love, shall be drawn within the curtains of that upper house, and enter into a union with Christ Jesus ineffable, incomprehensible till experienced; and of which the closest union of loving souls on earth is but a dim shadow. 'He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit'; and the reality of our union with Him rises above the emblem of a marriage, as high as spirit rises above flesh.

The psalm stops at the palace-gate. 'Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.' But there is a solemn prelude to that completed union and its deep rapture. Before it there comes the last campaign of the conquering King on the white horse, who wars in righteousness. Dear friends! you must choose now whether you will be of the company of the Bride or of the company of the enemy. 'They that were ready went in with Him unto the marriage, and the door was shut.'

Which side of the door do *you* mean to be on?

38)Psalms 46:4-7

Psalms

THE CITY AND RIVER OF GOD

Psa. 46:4 - Psa. 46:7.

There are two remarkable events in the history of Israel, one or other of which most probably supplied the historical basis upon which this psalm rests. One is that wonderful deliverance of the armies of Jehoshaphat from the attacking forces of the bordering nations, which is recorded in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Chronicles. There you will find that, by a singular arrangement, the sons of Korah, members of the priestly order, were not only in the van of the battle, but celebrated the victory by hymns of gladness. It is possible that this may be one of those hymns; but I think rather that the more ordinary reference is the correct one, which sees in this psalm and in the two succeeding ones, echoes of that supernatural deliverance of Israel in the time of Hezekiah, when

> 'The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,'

and Sennacherib and all his army were, by the blast of the breath of His nostrils, swept into swift destruction.

The reasons for that historical reference may be briefly stated. We find, for instance, a number of remarkable correspondences between these three psalms and portions of the Book of the prophet Isaiah, who, as we know, lived in the period of that deliverance. The comparison, for example, which is here drawn with such lofty, poetic force between the quiet river which 'makes glad the city of God,' and the tumultuous billows of the troubled sea, which shakes the mountain and moves the earth, is drawn by Isaiah in regard to the Assyrian invasion, when he speaks of Israel refusing 'the waters of Shiloah, which go softly,' and, therefore, having brought upon them the waters of the river-the power of Assyria-'which shall fill the breadth of Thy land, O Immanuel!' Notice, too, that the very same consolation which was given to Isaiah, by the revelation of that significant appellation, 'Immanuel, God with us,' appears in this psalm as a kind of refrain, and is the foundation of all its confident gladness, ‘The Lord of Hosts is with us.’ Besides these obvious parallelisms, there are others to which I need not refer, which, taken together, seem to render it at least probable that we have in this psalm the devotional echo of the great deliverance of Israel from Assyria in the time of Hezekiah.

Now, these verses are the cardinal central portion of the song. We may call them The Hymn of the Defence and Deliverance of the City of God. We cannot expect to find in poetry the same kind of logical accuracy in the process of thought which we require in treatises; but the lofty emotion of devout song obeys laws of its own: and it is well to surrender ourselves to the flow, and to try to see with the Psalmist’s eyes for a moment his sources of consolation and strength.

I take the four points which seem to be the main turning-points of these verses-first, the gladdening river; second, the indwelling Helper; third, the conquering voice; and fourth, the alliance of ourselves by faith with the safe dwellers in the city of God.

I. First, we have the gladdening river-an emblem of many great and joyous truths.

The figure is occasioned by, or at all events derives much of its significance from, a geographical peculiarity of Jerusalem. Alone among the great cities and historical centres of the world, it stood upon no broad river. One little perennial stream, or rather rill of living water, was all which it had; but Siloam was mightier and more blessed for the dwellers in the rocky fortress of the Jebusites than the Euphrates, Nile, or Tiber for the historical cities which stood upon their banks. One can see the Psalmist looking over the plain eastward, and beholding in vision the mighty forces which came against them, symbolised and expressed by the breadth and depth and swiftness of the great river upon which Nineveh sat as a queen, and then thinking upon the little tiny thread of living water that flowed past the base of the rock upon which the temple was perched. It seems small and unconspicuous-nothing compared to the dash of the waves and the rise of the floods of those mighty secular empires, still, ‘There is a river the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God.’ Its waters shall never fail, and thirst shall flee whithersoever this river comes.

It is also to be remembered that the psalm is running in the track of a certain constant symbolism that pervades all Scripture. From the first book of Genesis down to the last chapter of Revelation, you can hear the dashing of the waters of the river. ‘It went out from the garden and parted into four heads.’ ‘Thou makest them drink of the river of Thy pleasures.’ ‘Behold, waters issued out from under the threshold of the house eastward,’ and ‘everything shall live whithersoever the river cometh.’ ‘He that believeth on me, out of His belly shall flow rivers of living water.’ ‘And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.’ Isaiah, who has already afforded some remarkable parallels to the words of our psalm, gives another very striking one to the image now under consideration, when he says, ‘The glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams, wherein shall go no galley with oars.’ The picture in that metaphor is of a stream lying round Jerusalem, like the moated rivers which girdle some of the cities in the plains of Italy, and are the defence of those who dwell enclosed in their flashing links.

Guided, then, by the physical peculiarity of situation which I have referred to, and by the constant meaning of Scriptural symbolism, I think we must conclude that this river, ‘the streams whereof make glad the city of God,’ is God Himself in the outflow and self-communication of His own grace to the soul. The stream is the fountain in flow. The gift of God, which is living water, is God Himself, considered as the ever-imparting Source of all refreshment, of all strength, of all blessedness. ‘This spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe should receive.’

We must dwell for a moment or two still further upon these words, and mark how this metaphor, in a most simple and natural way, sets forth very grand and blessed spiritual truths with regard to this communication of God’s grace to them that love Him and trust Him. First, I think we may see here a very beautiful suggestion of the manner, and then of the variety, and then of the effects of that communication of the divine love and grace.

We have only to read the previous verses to see what I mean. ‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.' There you can hear the wild waves dashing round the base of the firm hills, sapping their strength, and toppling their crests down in the bubbling, yeasty foam. Remember how, not only in Scripture but in all poetry, the sea has been the emblem of endless unrest. Its waters, those barren, wandering fields of foam, going moaning round the world with unprofitable labour, how they have been the emblem of unbridled power, of tumult and strife, and anarchy and rebellion! Then mark how our text brings into sharpest contrast with all that hurly-burly of the tempest, and the dash and roar of the troubled waters, the gentle, quiet flow of the river, 'the streams whereof make glad the city of God'; the translucent little ripples purling along beds of golden pebbles, and the enamelled meadows drinking the pure stream as it steals by them. Thus, says our psalm, not with noise, not with tumult, not with conspicuous and destructive energy, but in silent, secret underground communication, God's grace, God's love, His peace, His power, His almighty and gentle Self flow into men's souls. Quietness and confidence on our sides correspond to the quietness and serenity with which He glides into the heart. Instead of all the noise of the sea you have within the quiet impartations of the voice that is still and small, wherein God dwells. The extremest power is silent. The mightiest force in all the universe is the force which has neither speech nor language. The parent of all physical force, as astronomers seem to be more and more teaching us, is the great central sun which moveth all things, which operates all physical changes, whose beams are all but omnipotent, and yet fall so quietly that they do not disturb the motes that dance in their path. Thunder and lightning are child's play compared with the energy that goes to make the falling dews and quiet rains. The power of the sunshine is the root power of all force which works in material things. And so we turn, with the symbol in our hands, to the throne of God, and when He says, 'Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit,' we are aware of an energy, the signature of whose might is its quietness, which is omnipotent because it is gentle and silent. The seas may roar and be troubled, the tiny thread of the river is mightier than them all.

And then, still further, in this first part of our text there is also set forth very distinctly the number and the variety of the gifts of God. 'The streams whereof,' literally, 'the divisions whereof,'-that is to say, going back to Eastern ideas, the broad river is broken up into canals that are led off into every man’s little bit of garden ground; coming down to modern ideas, the water is carried by pipes into every man’s household and chamber. The stream has its divisions; listen to words that are a commentary upon the meaning of this verse, ‘All these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing unto every man severally as He will’-an infinite variety, an endless diversity, according to all the petty wants of each that is supplied thereby. As you can divide water all but infinitely, and it will take the shape of every containing vessel, so into every soul according to its capacities, according to its shape, according to its needs, this great gift, this blessed presence of the God of our strength, will come. The varieties of His gifts are as much the mark of His omnipotence as the gentleness and stillness of them.

And then I need only touch upon the last thought, the effects of this communicated God. ‘The streams make glad’-with the gladness which comes from refreshment, with the gladness which comes from the satisfying of all thirsty desires, with the gladness which comes from the contact of the spirit with absolute completeness; of the will, with perfect authority; of the heart, with changeless love; of the understanding, with pure incarnate truth; of the conscience, with infinite peace; of the child, with the Father; of my emptiness, with His fulness; of my changeableness, with His immutability; of my incompleteness, with His perfectness. They to whom this stream passes shall know no thirst; they who possess it from them it shall come. Out of him ‘shall flow rivers of living water.’ That all-sufficient Spirit not only becomes to its possessor the source of individual refreshment, and slakes his own thirst, but flows out from him for the gladdening of others.

‘The least flower with a brimming cup may stand,
And share its dew-drop with another near.’

The city thus supplied may laugh at besieging hosts. With the deep reservoir in its central fortress, the foe may do as they list to all surface streams, its water shall be sure, and no raging thirst shall ever drive it to surrender. The river breaks from the threshold of the Temple, within its walls, and when all beyond that safe enclosure is cracked and parched in the fierce heat, and no green thing can be seen in the dry and thirsty land, that stream shall ‘make glad the city of our God,’ and ‘everything shall live whithersoever the river cometh.’ ‘Thou shalt be as a well-watered garden, and as a river whose streams fail not.’

II. Then notice, secondly, substantially the same general thought, but modified and put in plain words-the indwelling Helper.

‘God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early,’ or, as the latter clause had better be translated, as it is given in the margin of some of our Bibles, ‘God shall help her at the appearance of the morning.’ There are two promises here: first of all, the constant presence; and second, help at the right time. Whether there be actual help or no, there is always with us the potential help of God, and it flashes into energy at the moment that He knows to be the right one. The ‘appearing of the morning’ He determines; not you or I. Therefore, we may be confident that we have God ever by our sides. Not that that Presence is meant to avert outward or inward trouble and trial, and painfulness and weariness; but in the midst of these, and while they last, here is the assurance, ‘She shall not be moved’; and that it will not always last, here is the ground of the confidence, ‘God shall help her when the morning dawns.’

I need not point out to you the contrast here between the tranquillity of the city which has for its central Inhabitant and Governor the omnipotent God, and the tumult of all that turbulent earth. The waves of the troubled waters break everywhere,-they run over the flat plains and sweep over the mountains of secular strength and outward might, and worldly kingdoms, and human polities and earthly institutions, acting on them all either by slow corrosive action at the base, or by the tossing floods swirling against them, until they shall be lost in the ocean of time. For ‘the history of the world is the judgment of the world.’ When He wills the plains are covered and mountains disappear, but one rock stands fast-’The mountain of the Lord’s house is exalted above the top of the mountains’; and when everything is rocking and swaying in the tempests, here is fixity and tranquillity. ‘She shall not be moved.’ Why? Because of her citizens? No. Because of her guards and gates? No! Because of her polity? No! Because of her orthodoxy? No! But because God is in her, and she is safe, and where He dwells no evil can come. ‘Thou carriest Caesar and his fortunes.’ The ship of Christ carries the Lord and His fortunes; and, therefore, whatsoever becomes of the other little ships in the wild dash of the tempest, this with the Lord on board arrives at its desired haven-'God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved.'

Then, still further, that Presence which is always the pledge of stability, and unmoved calm, even while causes of agitation are storming around, will, as I said, flash into energy, and be a Helper and a Deliverer at the right moment. And when will that right moment be? At the appearing of the morning. 'And when they arose early in the morning, they were all dead corpses'; in the hour of greatest extremity, but ere the foe has executed his purposes; not too soon for fear and faith, not too late for hope and help; when the morning dawns, when the appointed hour of deliverance, which He alone determines, has struck. 'It is not for you to know the times and seasons'; but this we may know, that He who is the Lord of time will ever save at the best possible moment. He will not come so quickly as to prevent us from feeling our need; He will not tarry so long as to make us sick with hope deferred, or so long as to let the enemy fulfil his purposes of destruction. 'Lord, behold! he whom Thou lovest is sick. Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. When He had heard therefore that he was sick, He abode two days still in the same place where He was. . . . Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. . . . And he that was dead came forth.'

The Lord may seem to sleep on His hard wooden pillow in the stern of the little fishing boat, and even while the frail craft begins to fill may show no sign of help. But ere the waves have rolled over her, the cry of fear that yet trusts, and of trust that yet fears, wakes Him who knew the need, even while He seemed to slumber, and one mighty word, as of a master to some petulant slave, 'Peace! be still,' hushes the confusion, and rebukes the fear, and rewards the faith.

'The Lord is in the midst of her'-that is the perennial fact. 'The Lord shall help her, *and that* right early'-that is the 'grace for seasonable help.'

III. The psalm having set forth these broad grounds of confidence, goes on to tell the story of actual deliverance which confirms them, and of which they are indeed but the generalised expression.

The condensed narrative moves to its end by a series of short crashing sentences like the ring of the destructive axe at the roots of trees. We see the whole sequence of events as by lightning flashes, which give brief glimpses and are quenched. The grand graphic words seem to pant with haste, as they record Israel's deliverance. That deliverance comes from the Conquering Voice. 'The heathen raged' [the same word, we may note, as is found a verse or two back, 'Though the waters thereof *roar*'], 'the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted.' With what vigour these hurried sentences describe, first, the wild wrath and formidable movements of the foe, and then the One Sovereign Word which quells them all, as well as the instantaneous weakness that dissolves the seeming solid substance when the breath of His lips smites it!

And where will you find a grander or loftier thought than this, that the simple word-the utterance of the pure will of God conquers all opposition, and tells at once in the sphere of material things? He speaks, and it is done. At the sound of that thunder-voice, hushed stillness and a pause of dread fall upon all the wide earth, deeper and more awe-struck than the silence of the woods with their huddling leaves, when the feebler peals roll through the sky. 'The depths are congealed in the heart of the sea'-as if you were to lay hold of Niagara in its wildest plunge, and were with a word to freeze all its descending waters and stiffen them into immovableness in fetters of eternal ice. So He utters His voice, and all meaner noises are hushed. 'The lion hath roared, who shall not fear?' He speaks-no weapon, no material vehicle is needed. The point of contact between the pure divine will and the material creatures which obey its behests is ever wrapped in darkness, whether these be the settled ordinances which men call nature, or the less common which the Bible calls miracle. In all alike there is, to every believer in a God at all, an incomprehensible action of the spiritual upon the material, which allows of no explanations to bridge over the gulf recognised in the broken utterances of our psalm, 'He uttered His voice: the earth melted.'

How grandly, too, these last words give the impression of immediate and utter dissolution of all opposition! All the Titanic brute forces are, at His voice, disintegrated, and lose their organisation and solidity. 'The hills melted like wax'; 'The mountains flowed down at Thy presence.' The hardness and obstinacy is all liquefied and enfeebled, and parts with its consistency and is lost in a fluid mass. As two carbon points when the electric stream is poured upon them are gnawed to nothingness by the fierce heat, and you can see them wasting before your eyes, so the concentrated ardour of His breath falls upon the hostile evil, and lo! it is not.

The Psalmist is generalising the historical fact of the sudden and utter destruction of Sennacherib's host into a universal law. And it *is* a universal law-true for us as for Hezekiah and the sons of Korah, true for all generations. Martin Luther might well make this psalm the battle cry of the Reformation, and we may well make our own the rugged music and dauntless hope of his rendering of these words:-

'And let the Prince of Ill
Look grim as e'er he will,
He harms us not a whit.
For why? His doom is writ.
A word shall quickly slay him.'

IV. Then note, finally, how the psalm shows us the act by which we enter the City of God.

'The Lord of Hosts is with *us*; the God of Jacob is *our* refuge.' It is not enough to lay down general truths, however true and however blessed, about the safe and sacred city of God-not enough to be theoretically convinced of the truth of the supreme governance and ever-present aid of God. We must take a further step that will lead us far beyond the regions of barren intellectual apprehension of the great truths of God's love and care. These truths are nothing to us, brethren! unless, like the Psalmist here, we make them our own, and losing the burden of self in the very act of grasping them by faith, unite ourselves with the great multitude who are joined together in Him, and say, 'He is *my* God: He is *our* refuge.' That living act of 'appropriating faith' presupposes, indeed, the presence of these truths in our understandings, but in the very act they are changed into powers in our lives. They pass into the affections and the will. They are no more empty generalities. Bread nourishes, not when it is looked at, but when it is eaten. 'He that eateth Me, even he shall live by Me.' We feed on

Christ when we make Him ours by faith, and each of us is sustained and blessed by Him when we can say, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Mark, too, how there is here set forth the twofold ground for our calmest confidence in these two mighty names of God.

‘The Lord of Hosts is with us.’ That majestic name includes all the deepest and most blessed thoughts of God which the earlier revelation imparted. That name of ‘Jehovah’ proclaims at once His Eternal Being and His covenant relation-manifesting Him by its mysterious meaning as He who dwells above time, the tideless sea of absolute unchanging existence, from whom all the stream of creatural life flows forth many-coloured and transient, to whom it all returns, who, Himself unchanging, changeth all things, and declaring Him, by the historical associations connected with it, as having unveiled His purposes in firm words, to which men may trust, and as having entered into that solemn league with Israel which underlay their whole national life. He is *the Lord* the Eternal,-the covenant name.

He is the Lord of Hosts, the ‘Imperator,’ absolute Master and Commander, Captain and King of all the combined forces of the universe, whether they be personal or impersonal, spiritual or material, who, in serried ranks, wait on Him, and move harmonious, obedient to His will. And this Eternal Master of the legions of the universe is with us, weak and poor, and troubled and sinful as we are. Therefore, we will not fear: what can man do unto us?

Again, when we say, ‘The God of Jacob is our refuge,’ we reach back into the past, and lay hold of the mercies promised to, and received by, the long vanished generations who trusted in Him and were lightened. As, by the one name, we appeal to His own Being and uttered pledge, so, by the other, we appeal to His ancient deeds-past as we call them, but present with Him, who lives and loves in the undivided eternity above the low fences of time. All that He has been, He is; all that He has done, He is doing. We on whom the ends of the earth are come have the same Helper, the same Friend that ‘the world’s grey fathers’ had. They that go before do not prevent them that come after. The river is full still. The van of the pilgrim host did, indeed, long, long ago drink and were satisfied, but the bright waters are still as pellucid, still as near, still as refreshing, still as abundant as they ever were.

Nay, rather, they are fuller and more accessible to us than to patriarch and Psalmist, ‘God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.’

For we, brethren! have a fuller revelation of that mighty name, and a more wondrous and closer divine presence by our sides. The psalm rejoices in that ‘The Lord of Hosts is with us’; and the choral answer of the Gospel swells into loftier music, as it tells of the fulfilment of psalmists’ hopes and prophets’ visions in Him who is called ‘Immanuel,’ which is, being interpreted, ‘God with us.’ The psalm is confident in that God dwelt in Zion, and our confidence has the more wondrous fact to lay hold of, that even now the Word who dwelt among us makes His abode in every believing heart, and gathers them all together at last in that great city, round whose flashing foundations no tumult of ocean beats, whose gates of pearl need not be closed against any foes, with whose happy citizens ‘God will dwell, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God.’

39)Psalms 46:11

Psalms

THE LORD OF HOSTS, THE GOD OF JACOB

Psa. 46:11.

Some great deliverance, the details of which we do not know, had been wrought for Israel, and this psalmist comes forth, like Miriam with her choir of maidens, to hymn the victory. The psalm throbs with exultation, but no human victor’s name degrades the singer’s lips. There is only one Conqueror whom he celebrates. The deliverance has been ‘the work of the Lord’; the ‘desolations’ that have been made on the ‘earth’ ‘He has made.’ This great refrain of the song, which I have chosen for my text, takes the experience of deliverance as a proof in act of an astounding truth, and as a hope for the future. ‘The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our Refuge.’

There is in these words a significant duplication of idea, both in regard to the names which are given to God, and to that which He is conceived as being to us; and I desire now simply to try to bring out the force of the consolation and strength which lie in these two epithets of His, and in the double wonder of His relation to us men.

I. First, then, I ask you to look at the twin thoughts of God that are here. 'The Lord of hosts . . . The God of Jacob.'

Now, with regard to the former of these grand names, it may be observed that it does not occur in the earliest stages of Revelation as recorded in the Old Testament. The first instance in which we find it is in the song of Hannah in the beginning of the first Book of Samuel; and it re-appears in the Davidic psalms and in psalms and prophecies of later date.

What 'hosts' are they of which God is the Lord? Is that great title a mere synonym for the half-heathenish idea of the 'God of battles'? By no means. True! He is the Lord of the armies of Israel, but the hosts which the Psalmist sees ranged in embattled array, and obedient to the command of the great Captain, are far other and grander than any earthly armies. If we would understand the whole depth and magnificent sweep of the idea enshrined in this name, we cannot do better than recall one or two other Scripture phrases. For instance, the account of the Creation in the Book of Genesis is ended by, 'Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.' Then, remember that, throughout the Old Testament, we meet constantly with the idea of the celestial bodies as being 'the hosts of heaven.' And, still further, remember how, in one of the psalms, we hear the invocation to 'all ye His hosts, ye ministers of His that do His pleasure,' 'the angels that excel in strength,' to praise and bless Him. If we take account of all these and a number of similar passages, I think we shall come to this conclusion, that by that title, 'the Lord of hosts,' the prophets and psalmists meant to express the universal dominion of God over the whole universe in all its battalions and sections, which they conceived of as one ranked army, obedient to the voice of the great General and Ruler of them all.

So the idea contained in the name is precisely parallel with that to which the heathen centurion in the Gospels had come, by reflecting upon the teaching of the legion in which he himself commanded, when he said, ‘I am a man under authority, having servants under me; and I say to this one, Go, and he goeth; to another, Come, and he cometh; to another, Do this, and he doeth it-speak Thou the word!’ To him Jesus Christ was Captain of the Lord’s hosts, and Ruler of all the ordered forces of the universe. The Old Testament name enshrines the same idea. The universe is an ordered whole. Science tells us that. Modern thought emphasises it. But how cruel, relentless, crushing, that conception may be unless we grasp the further thought which is presented in this great Name, and see, behind all the play of phenomena, the one Will which is the only power in the universe, and sways and orders all besides! The armies of heaven and every creature in the great *Cosmos* are the servants of this Lord. Then we can stand before the dreadful mysteries and the all but infinite complications of this mighty Whole, and say, ‘These are His soldiers, and He is their Captain, the Lord of hosts.’

Next we turn, by one quick bound, from the wide sweep of that mighty Name to the other, ‘The God of Jacob.’ The one carries us out among the glories of the universe, and shows us, behind them all, the personal Will of which they are the servants, and the Character of which they are the expressions. The other brings us down to the tent of the solitary wanderer, and shows us that that mighty Commander and Emperor enters into close, living, tender, personal relations with one poor soul, and binds Himself by that great covenant, which is rooted in His love alone, to be the God who cares for and keeps and blesses the man in all his wanderings. Neither does the command of the mighty Whole hinder the closest relation to the individual, nor does the care of the individual interfere with the direction of the Whole. The single soul stands out clear and isolated, as if there were none in the universe but God and himself; and the whole fulness of the divine power, and all the tenderness of the God-heart, are lavished upon the individual, even though the armies of the skies wait upon His nod.

So, if we put the two names together, we get the completion of the great idea; and whilst the one speaks to us of infinite power, of absolute supremacy, of universal rule, and so delivers us from the fear of nature, and from the blindness which sees only the material operations and not the working Hand that underlies them, the other speaks to us of gentle and loving and specific care, and holds out the hope that, between man and God, there may be a bond of friendship and of mutual possession so sweet and sacred that nothing else can compare with it. The God of Jacob is the Lord of hosts. More wondrous still, the Lord of hosts is the God of Jacob.

II. Note, secondly, the double wonder of our relation to this great God.

There is almost a tone of glad surprise, as well as of triumphant confidence, in this refrain of our psalm, which comes twice in it, and possibly ought to have come three times-at the end of each of its sections. The emphasis is to be laid on the 'us' and the 'our,' as if that was the miracle, and the fact which startled the Psalmist into the highest rapture of astonished thankfulness.

'The Lord of hosts is with *us*.' What does that say? It proclaims that wondrous truth that no gulf between the mighty Ruler of all and us, the insignificant little creatures that creep upon the face of this tiny planet, has any power of separating us from Him. It is always hard to believe that. It is harder to-day than it was when our Psalmist's heart beat high at the thought. It is hard by reason of our sense-bound blindness, by reason of our superficial way of looking at things, which only shows us the nearest, and veils with their insignificances the magnitude of the furthest. Jupiter is blazing in our skies every night now; he is not one-thousandth part as great or bright as any one of the little needle-points of light, the fixed stars, that are so much further away; but he is nearer, and the intrusive brightness of the planet hides the modest glories of the distant and shrouded suns. Just so it is hard for us ever to realise, and to walk in the light of the realisation of, the fact that the Lord of hosts, the Emperor of all things, is of a truth with each of us.

It is harder to-day than ever it was; for we have learned to think rightly-or at least more rightly and approximately rightly-of the position and age of man upon this earth. The Psalmist's ancient question of devout thankfulness is too often travestied to-day into a question of scoffing or of melancholy unbelief: 'When I consider the heavens, the work of Thy hands; what is man? Art Thou mindful of him?' This psalm comes to answer that. 'The Lord of hosts is with us.' True, we are but of yesterday, and know nothing. True, earth is but a pin-point amidst the universe's glories. True, we are crushed down by sorrow and by care; and in some moods it seems supremely incredible that we should be of such worth in the scale of Creation as that the Lord of all things should, in a deeper sense than the Psalmist knew, have dwelt with us and be with us still. But bigness is not greatness, and there is nothing incredible in the belief that men, lower than the angels, and needing God more because of their sin, do receive His visitations in an altogether special sense, and that, passing by the lofty and the great that may inhabit His universe, His chariot wheels stoop to us, and that, because we are sinners, God is with us.

Let me remind you, dear brethren! of how this great thought of my text is heightened and transcended by the New Testament teaching. We believe in One whose name is 'Immanuel, God with *us*.' Jesus Christ has come to be with men, not only during the brief years of His earthly ministry, in corporeal reality, but to be with all who love Him and trust Him, in a far closer, more real, more deep, more precious, more operative Presence than when He dwelt here. Through all the ages Christ Himself is with every soul that loves Him; and He will dwell beside *us* and bless *us* and keep *us*. God's presence means God's sympathy, God's knowledge, God's actual help, and these are ours if we will. Instead of staggering at the apparent improbability that so transcendent and mighty a Being should stoop from His throne, where He lords it over the universe, and enter into the narrow room of our hearts, let us rather try to rise to the rapture of the astonished Psalmist when, looking upon the deliverance that had been wrought, this was the leading conviction that was written in flame upon his heart, 'The Lord of hosts is with *us*.'

And then the second of the wonders that are here set forth in regard to our relations to Him is, 'the God of Jacob is *our* Refuge.'

That carries for us the great truth that, just as the distance between us and God makes no separation, and the gulf is one that is bridged over by His love, so distance in time leads to no exhaustion of the divine faithfulness and care, nor any diminution of the resources of His grace. 'The God of Jacob is our Refuge.' The story of the past is the prophecy of the future. What God has been to any man He will be to every man, if the man will let Him. There is nothing in any of these grand narratives of ancient days which is not capable of being reproduced in our lives. God drew near to Jacob when he was lying on the stony ground, and showed him the ladder set upon earth, with its top in the heavens, and the bright-winged soldiers and messengers of His will ascending and descending upon it, and His own face at the top. God shows you and me that vision to-day. It was no vanishing splendour, no transient illumination, no hallucination of the man's own thoughts seeking after a helper, and the wish being father to the vision. But it was the unveiling for a moment, in supernatural fashion, of the abiding reality. 'The God of Jacob is *our* Refuge'; and whatever He was to His servant of old He is to-day to you and me.

We say that miracle has ceased. Yes. But that which the miracle effected has not ceased; and that from which the miracle came has not ceased. The realities of a divine protection, of a divine supply, of a divine guidance, of a divine deliverance, of a divine discipline, and of a divine reward at the last, are as real to-day as when they were mediated by signs and wonders, by an open heaven and by an outstretched hand. They who went before have not emptied the treasures of the Father's house, nor eaten all the bread that He spreads upon the table. God has no stepchildren, and no favourite and spoiled ones. All that the elder brethren have had, we, on whom the ends of the dispensation are come, may have just as really; and whatever God has been to the patriarch He is to us to-day.

Remember the experience of the man of whom our text speaks. The God of Jacob manifested Himself to him as being a God who would draw near to, and care for, and help, a very unworthy and poor creature. Jacob was no saint at the beginning. Selfishness and cunning and many a vice clung very close to his character; but for all that, God drew near to him and cared for him and guided him, and promised that He would not leave him till He had done that which He had spoken to him of. And He will do the same for us-blessed be His name!-with all our faults and weaknesses and craftiness and worldliness and sins. If He cared for that huckstering Jew, as He did, even in his earlier days, He will not put us away because He finds faults in us. 'The God of Jacob,' the supplanter, the trickster, 'is our Refuge.'

But remember how the divine Presence with that man had to be, because of his faults, a Presence that wrought him sorrows and forced him to undergo discipline. So it will be with us. He will not suffer sin upon us; He will pass us through the fire and the water; and do anything with us short of destroying us, in order to destroy the sin that is in us. He does not spare His rod for His child's crying, but smites with judgment, and sends us sorrows 'for our profit, that we should be partakers of His holiness.' We may write this as the explanation over most of our griefs-'the God of Jacob is our Refuge,' and He is disciplining us as He did him.

And remember what the end of the man was. 'Thy name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel; for as a prince thou hast power with God, and hast prevailed.' So if we have God, who out of such a sow's ear made a silk purse, out of such a stone raised up a servant for Himself, we may be sure that His purpose in all discipline will be effected on us submissive, and we shall end where His ancient servant ended, and shall be in our turn princes with God.

Let me recall to you also the meaning which Jesus Christ found in this name. He quoted 'the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob' as being the great guarantee and proof to us of immortality. 'The God of Jacob is our Refuge.' If so, what can the grim and ghastly phantom of death do to us? He may smite upon the gate, but he cannot enter the fortress. The man who has knit himself to God by saying to God, 'Lo! I am Thine, and Thou art mine,' in that communion has a proof and a pledge that nothing shall ever break it, and that death is powerless. The fact of religion-true, heartfelt religion, with its communion, its prayer, its consciousness of possessing and of being possessed, makes the idea that death ends a man's conscious existence an absurdity and an impossibility.

'The God of Jacob is *our* Refuge,' and so we may say to the storms of life, and after them to the last howling tornado of death-Blow winds and crack your cheeks, and do your worst, you cannot touch me in the fortress where I dwell. The wind will hurtle around the stronghold, but within there shall be calm.

Dear brethren! make sure that you are in the refuge. Make sure that you have fled for 'Refuge to the hope set before you in the Gospel.' The Lord of hosts is with us,' but you may be parted from Him. He is our Refuge, but you may be standing outside the sanctuary, and so be exposed to all the storms. Flee thither, cast yourselves on Him, trust in that great Saviour who has given Himself for us, and who says to us, 'Lo! I am with you always.' Take Christ for your hiding-place by simple faith in Him and loving obedience born of faith, and then the experience of our Psalmist will be yours. Your life will not want for deliverances which will thrill your heart with thankfulness, and turn the truth of faith into a truth of experience. So you may set to your seals the great saying of our psalm, which is fresh to-day, though centuries have passed since it came glowing fiery from the lips of the ancient seer, and may take up as yours the great words in which Luther has translated it for our times, the 'Marseillaise' of the Reformation-

'A safe stronghold our God is still;

A trusty shield and weapon;

He'll help us clear from all the ill

That hath us now o'ertaken.'

40)Psalms 48:1-14

Psalms

A SONG OF DELIVERANCE

Psa. 48:1 - Psa. 48:14.

The enthusiastic triumph which throbs in this psalm, and the specific details of a great act of deliverance from a great peril which it contains, sufficiently indicate that it must have had some historical event as its basis. Can we identify the fact which is here embalmed?

The psalm gives these points-a formidable muster before Jerusalem of hostile people under confederate kings, with the purpose of laying siege to the city; some mysterious check which arrests them before a sword is drawn, as if some panic fear had shot from its towers and shaken their hearts; and a flight in wild confusion from the impregnable dwelling-place of the Lord of hosts. The occasion of the terror is vaguely hinted at, as if some solemn mystery brooded over it. All that is clear about it is that it was purely the work of the divine hand-'Thou breakest the ships of Tarshish with an east wind'; and that in this deliverance, in their own time, the Levite minstrels recognised the working of the same protecting grace which, from of old, had 'commanded deliverances for Jacob.'

Now there is one event, and only one, in Jewish history, which corresponds, point for point, to these details-the crushing destruction of the Assyrian army under Sennacherib. There, there was the same mustering of various nations, compelled by the conqueror to march in his train, and headed by their tributary kings. There, there was the same arrest before an arrow had been shot, or a mound raised against the city. There, there was the same purely divine agency coming in to destroy the invading army.

I think, then, that from the correspondence of the history with the requirements of the psalm, as well as from several similarities of expression and allusion between the latter and the prophecies of Isaiah, who has recorded that destruction of the invader, we may, with considerable probability, regard this psalm as the hymn of triumph over the baffled Assyrian, and the marvellous deliverance of Israel by the arm of God.

Whatever may be thought, however, of that allocation of it to a place in the history, the great truths that it contains depend upon no such identification. They are truths for all time; gladness and consolation for all generations. Let us read it over together now, if, perchance, some echo of the confidence and praise that is found in it may be called forth from our hearts! If you will look at your Bibles you will find that it falls into three portions. There is the glory of Zion, the deliverance of Zion, and the consequent grateful praise and glad trust of Zion.

I. There is the glory of Zion.

Hearken with what triumph the Psalmist breaks out: 'Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of His holiness. Beautiful for situation [or rather elevation], the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King.' Now these words are something more than mere patriotic feeling. The Jew's glory in Jerusalem was a different thing altogether from the Roman's pride in Rome. To the devout men amongst them, of whom the writer of this psalm was one, there was one thing, and one only, that made Zion glorious. It was beautiful indeed in its elevation, lifted high upon its rocky mountain. It was safe indeed, isolated from the invader by the precipitous ravines which enclosed and guarded the angle of the mountain plateau on which it stood; but *the one* thing that gave it glory was that in *it* God abode. The name even of that earthly Zion was 'Jehovah-Shammah, the Lord is there.' And the emphasis of these words is entirely pointed in that direction. What they celebrate concerning *Him* is not merely the general thought that the Lord is great, but that the Lord is *great in Zion*. What they celebrate concerning *it* is that it is His city, the mountain of His holiness, where He dwells, where He manifests Himself. Because there is His self-manifestation, therefore He is there greatly to be praised. And because the clear voice of His praise rings out from Zion, therefore is she 'the joy of the whole earth.' The glory of Zion, then, is that it is the dwelling-place of God.

Now, remember, that when the Old Testament Scripture speaks about God abiding in Jerusalem, it means no heathenish or material localising of the Deity, nor does it imply any depriving of the rest of the earth of the sanctity of His presence. The very psalm which most distinctly embodies the thought of God's abode protests against that narrowness, for it begins, 'The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof: the world and they that dwell therein.' The very ark which was the symbol of His presence, protests by its name against all such localising, for the name of it was 'the ark of the covenant of the God of the whole earth.' When the Bible speaks of Zion as the dwelling-place of God, it is but the expression of the fact that there, between the cherubim, was the visible sign of His presence-that there, in the Temple, as from the centre of the whole land, He ruled, and 'out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shone.'

We are, then, not 'spiritualising,' or forcing a New Testament meaning into these words, when we see in them an Eternal Truth. We are but following in the steps of history and prophecy, and of Christ and His Apostles, and of that last vision of the Apocalypse. We are but distinguishing between an idea and the fact which more or less perfectly embodies it. An idea may have many garments, may transmigrate into many different material forms. The idea of the dwelling of God with men had its less perfect embodiment, has its more perfect embodiment, will have its absolutely perfect embodiment. It had its less perfect in that ancient time. It has its real but partial embodiment in this present time, when, in the midst of the whole community of believing and loving souls, which stretches wider than any society that calls itself a Church, the living God abides and energises by His Spirit and by His Son in the souls of them that believe upon Him. ‘Ye are come unto Mount Zion and unto the city of the living God.’ And we wait for the time when, filling all the air with its light, there shall come down from God a perfect and permanent form of that dwelling; and that great city, the New Jerusalem, ‘having the glory of God,’ shall appear, and He will dwell with men and be their God.

But in all these stages of the embodiment of that great truth the glory of Zion rests in this, that in it God abides, that from it He flames in the greatness of His manifestations, which are ‘His praise in all the earth.’ It is that presence which makes her fair, as it is that presence which keeps her safe. It is that light shining within her palaces-not their own opaque darkness, which streams out far into the waste night with ruddy glow of hospitable invitation. It is God in her, not anything of her own, that constitutes her ‘the joy of the whole earth.’ ‘Thy beauty was perfect, through My comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord.’ Zion is where hearts love and trust and follow Christ. The ‘city of the great King’ is a permanent reality in a partial form upon earth-and that partial form is itself a prophecy of the perfection of the heavens.

II. Still further, there is a second portion of this psalm which, passing beyond these introductory thoughts of the glory of Zion, recounts with wonderful power and vigour the process of the deliverance of Zion.

It extends from the fourth to the eighth verses. Mark the dramatic vigour of the description of the deliverance. There is, first, the mustering of the armies-’The kings were assembled.’ Some light is thrown upon that phrase by the proud boast which the prophet Isaiah puts into the lips of the Assyrian invader, ‘Are not my princes altogether kings?’ The subject-monarchs of the subdued nationalities that were gathered round the tyrant’s standard were used, with the wicked craft of conquerors in all ages, to bring still other lands under the same iron dominion. ‘The kings were assembled’-we see them gathering their far-reaching and motley army, mustered from all corners of that gigantic empire. They advance together against the rocky fortress that towers above its girdling valleys. ‘They saw it, they marvelled’-in wonder, perhaps, at its beauty, as they first catch sight of its glittering whiteness from some hill crest on their march; or, perhaps, stricken by some strange amazement, as if, basilisk-like, its beauty were deadly, and a beam from the Shechinah had shot a nameless awe into their souls-’they were troubled, they hasted away.’

I need not dilate on the power of this description, nor do more than notice how the abruptness of the language, huddled together, as it were, without connecting particles, conveys the impression of hurry and confusion, culminating in the rush of fugitives fleeing under the influence of panic-terror. They are like the well-known words, ‘I came, I saw, I conquered,’ only that here we have to do with swift defeat-they came, they saw, they were conquered. They are, in regard to vivid picturesqueness, arising from the broken construction, singularly like other words which refer to the same event in the forty-sixth psalm, ‘The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved; He uttered His voice, the earth melted.’ In their scornful emphasis of triumph they remind us of Isaiah’s description of the end of the same invasion-’So Sennacherib, king of Assyria, departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh.’

Mark, still further, the eloquent silence as to the cause of the panic and the flight. There is no appearance of armed resistance. This is no ‘battle of the warrior with garments rolled in blood,’ and the shock of contending hosts. But an unseen Hand smites once-’and when the morning dawned they were all dead corpses.’ The impression of terror produced by such a blow is increased by the veiled allusion to it here. The silence magnifies the deliverance. If we might apply the grand words of Milton to that night of fear-

‘The trumpet spake not to the armed throng,

But kings sat still, with awful eye,

As if they surely knew their sovereign Lord was by.’

The process of the deliverance is not told here, as there was no need it should be in a hymn which is not history, but the lyrical echo of what is told in history; one image explains it all-’Thou breakest the ships of Tarshish with an east wind.’ The metaphor-one that does not need expansion here-is that of a ship like a great unwieldy galleon, caught in a tempest. However strong for fight, it is not fit for sailing. It is like some of those turret ships of ours, if they venture out from the coast and get into a storm, their very strength is their destruction, their armour wherein they trusted ensures that they shall sink. And so, this huge assailant of Israel, this great ‘galley with oars,’ washing about there in the trough of the sea, as it were-God broke it in two with the tempest, which is His breath. You remember how on the medal that commemorated the destruction of the Spanish Armada-our English deliverance-there were written the words of Scripture: ‘God blew upon them and they were scattered.’ What was there true, literally, is here true in figure. The Psalmist is not thinking of any actual scattering of hostile fleets-from which Jerusalem was never in danger; but is using the shipwreck of ‘the ship of Tarshish’ as a picture of the utter, swift, God-inflicted destruction which ground that invading army to pieces, as the savage rocks and wild seas will do the strongest craft that is mangled between them.

And then, mark how from this dramatic description there rises a loftier thought still. The deliverance thus described links the present with the past. ‘As we have heard so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God.’ Yes, brethren! God’s merciful manifestation for ourselves, as for those Israelitish people of old, has this blessed effect, that it changes hearsay and tradition into living experience;-this blessed effect, that it teaches us, or ought to teach us, the inexhaustibleness of the divine power, the constant repetition in every age of the same works of love. Taught by it, we learn that all these old narratives of His grace and help are ever new, not past and gone, but ready to be reproduced in their essential characteristics in our lives too. ‘We have heard with our ears, O Lord, our fathers have told us what work Thou didst in their days.’ But is the record only a melancholy contrast with our own experience? Nay, truly. ‘As we have heard so have we seen.’ We are ever tempted to think of the present as commonplace. The sky right above our heads is always farthest from earth. It is at the horizon behind and the horizon in front, where earth and heaven seem to blend. We think of miracles in the past, we think of a manifest presence of God in the future, but the present ever seems to our sense-bound understandings as beggared and empty of Him, devoid of His light. But this verse suggests to us how, if we mark the daily dealings of that loving Hand with us, we have every occasion to say, Thy loving-kindness of old lives still. Still, as of old, the hosts of the Lord encamp round about them that fear Him to deliver them. Still, as of old, the voice of guidance comes from between the cherubim. Still, as of old, the pillar of cloud and fire moves before us. Still, as of old, angels walk with men. Still, as of old, His hand is stretched forth, to bless, to feed, to guard. Nothing in the past of God's dealings with men has passed away. The eternal present embraces what we call the past, present, and future. They that went before do not prevent us on whom the ends of the ages are come. The table that was spread for them is as fully furnished for the latest guests. The light, which was so magical and lustrous in the morning beauty, for us has not faded away into the light of common day. The river which flowed in these past ages has not been drunk up by the thirsty sands. The fire that once blazed so clear has not died down into grey ashes. 'The God of *Jacob* is *our* refuge.' 'As we have heard so have we seen.'

And then, still further, the deliverance here is suggested as not only linking most blessedly the present with the past, but also linking it for our confidence with all the *future*. 'God will establish it for ever.'

'Old experience doth attain
To something of prophetic strain.'

In the strength of what that moment had taught of God and His power, the singer looks onward, and whatever may be the future he knows that the divine arm will be outstretched. God will establish Zion; or, as the word might be translated, God will hold it erect, as if with a strong hand grasping some pole or banner-staff that else would totter and fall-He will keep it up, standing there firm and steadfast.

It would lead us too far to discuss the bearing of such a prophecy upon the future history and restoration of Israel, but the bearing of it upon the security and perpetuity of the Church is unquestionable. The city is immortal because God dwells in it. For the individual and for the community, for the great society and for each of the single souls that make it up, the history of the past may seal the pledge which He gives for the future. If it had been possible to destroy the Church of the living God, it had been gone long, long ago. Its own weakness and sin, the ever-new corruptions of its belief and paring of its creed, the imperfections of its life and the worldliness of its heart, the abounding evils that lie around it and the actual hostility of many that look upon it and say, Raze it, even to the ground, would have smitten it to the dust long since. It lives, it has lived in spite of all, and therefore it shall live. 'God will establish it for ever.'

In almost every land there is some fortress or other, which the pride of the inhabitants calls 'the maiden fortress,' and whereof the legend is, that it has never been taken, and is inexpugnable by any foe. It is true about the tower of the flock, the stronghold of the daughter of Zion. The grand words of Isaiah about this very Assyrian invader are our answer to all fears within and foes without: 'Say unto him, the virgin, the daughter of Zion, hath despised thee, and laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee. . . . I will defend this city to save it for My own sake, and for My servant David's sake.' 'God will establish it for ever,' and the pledges of that eternal stability are the deliverances of the past and of the present.

III. Then, finally, there is still another section of this psalm to be looked at for a moment, which deals with the consequent grateful praise and glad trust of Zion.

I must condense what few things I have to say about these closing verses. The deliverance, first of all, deepens the glad meditation on God's favour and defence. 'We have thought,' say the ransomed people, as with a sigh of rejoicing, 'we have thought of Thy loving-kindness in the midst of Thy temple.' The scene of the manifestation of His power is the scene of their thankfulness, and the first issue of His mercy is His servants' praise.

Then, the deliverance spreads His fame throughout the world. 'According to Thy name, O God! so is Thy praise unto the ends of the earth. Thy right hand is full of righteousness.' The name of God is God's own making known of His character, and the thought of these words is double. They most beautifully express the profoundest trust in that blessed name that it only needs to be known in order to be loved. There is nothing wanted but His manifestation of Himself for His praise and glory to spread. Why is the

Psalmist so sure that according to the revelation of His character will be the revenue of His praise? Because the Psalmist is so sure that that character is purely, perfectly, simply good-nothing else but good and blessing-and that He cannot act but in such a way as to magnify Himself. That great sea will cast up nothing on the shores of the world but pearls and precious things. He is all 'light, and in Him is no darkness at all.' There needs but the shining forth in order that the light of His character shall bring gladness and joy, and the song of birds, and opening flowers wheresoever it falls.

Still further, there is the other truth in the words, that we misapprehend the purpose of our own deliverances, and the purpose of God's mercy to Zion, if we confine these to any personal objects or lose sight of the loftier end of them all-that men may learn to know and love Him. Brethren! we neither rightly thank Him for His gifts to us nor rightly apprehend the meaning of His dealings, unless the sweetest thought to us, even in the midst of our own personal joy for deliverance, is not 'we are saved,' but 'God is exalted.'

And then, beyond that, the deliverance produces in Zion, the mother city and her daughter villages, a triumph of rapture and gladness. 'Let mount Zion rejoice, let the daughters of Judah be glad because of Thy judgments.' Yes, even though an hundred and four score and five thousand dead men lay there, they were to be glad. Solemn and awful as is the baring of His righteous sword, it is an occasion for praise. It is right to be glad when men and systems that hinder and fight against God are swept away as with the besom of destruction. 'When the wicked perish there is shouting,' and the fitting epitaph for the oppressors to whom the surges of the Red Sea are shroud and gravestone is, 'Sing ye to the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously.'

The last verses set forth, more fully than even the preceding ones, the height and perfectness of the confidence which the manifold mercies of God ought to produce in men's hearts. The citizens who have been cooped up during the invasion, and who, in the temple, as we have seen, have been rendering the tribute of their meditation and thankful gratitude to God for His loving-kindness, are now called upon to come forth from the enclosure of the besieged city, and free from all fear of the invading army, to 'walk about

Zion, and go round about her and tell the towers,’ and ‘mark her bulwarks and palaces.’

They look first at the defences, on which no trace of assault appears, and then at the palaces guarded by them, that stand shining and unharmed. The deliverance has been so complete that there is not a sign of the peril or the danger left. It is not like a city besieged, and the siege raised when the thing over which contending hosts have been quarrelling has become a ruin, but not one stone has been smitten from the walls, nor one agate chipped in the windows of the palaces. It is unharmed as well as uncaptured.

Thus, we may say, no matter what tempests assail us, the wind will but sweep the rotten branches out of the tree. Though war should arise, nothing will be touched that belongs to Thee. We have a city which cannot be moved; and the removal of the things which can be shaken but makes more manifest its impregnable security, its inexpugnable peace. As in war they will clear away the houses and the flower gardens that have been allowed to come and cluster about the walls and fill up the moat, yet the walls will stand; so in all the conflicts that befall God’s church and God’s truth, the calming thought ought to be ours that if anything perishes it is a sign that it is not His, but man’s excrescence on His building. Whatever is His will stand for ever.

And then, with wonderful tenderness and beauty, the psalm in its last words drops, as one might say, in one aspect, and in another, *rises* from its contemplations of the immortal city and the community to the thought of the individuals that make it up: ‘For this God is our God for ever and ever; He will be our guide *even* unto death.’ Prosaic commentators have often said that these last two words are an interpolation, that they do not fit into the strain of the psalm, and have troubled themselves to find out what meaning to attach to them, because it seemed to them so unlikely that, in a hymn that had only to do with the community, we should find this expression of individual confidence in anticipation of that most purely personal of all evils. That seems to me the very reason for holding fast by the words as being a genuine part of the psalm, because they express a truth, without which the confident hope of the psalm, grand as it is, is but poor consolation for each heart. It is not enough for passing, perishing men to say, ‘Never mind your own individual fate: the society, the community, will stand fast and firm.’

I want something more than to know that God will establish Zion for ever. What about *me*, my own individual self? And these last words answer that question. Not merely the city abides, but ‘He will be our guide even unto death.’ And surely, if so-if His loving hand will lead the citizens of His eternal kingdom even to the edge of that great darkness-He will not lose them even in its gloom. Surely there is here the veiled hope that if the city be eternal and the gates of the grave cannot prevail against *it*, the community cannot be eternal unless the individuals be immortal.

Such a hope is vindicated by the blessed words of a newer revelation: ‘God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He hath prepared for them a city.’

Dear brethren! remember the last words, or all but the last words of Scripture which, in their true text and reading, tell us how, instead of aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, we may become fellow-citizens with the saints. ‘Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may have a right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gate into the city!’

41)Psalms 49:14

Psalms

TWO SHEPHERDS AND TWO FLOCKS

Psa. 49:14. - Rev. 7:17.

These two verses have a much closer parallelism in expression than appears in our Authorised Version. If you turn to the Revised Version you will find that it rightly renders the former of my texts, ‘Death shall be their shepherd,’ and the latter, ‘The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their Shepherd.’ The Old Testament Psalmist and the New Testament Seer have fallen upon the same image to describe death and the future, but with how different a use! The one paints a grim picture, all sunless and full of shadow; the other dips his pencil in brilliant colours, and suffuses his canvas with a glow as of molten sunlight. The difference between the two is partly due to the progress of revelation and the light cast on life and immortality by Christ through the Gospel. But it is much more due to the fact that the two writers have different classes in view. The one is speaking of men whose portion is in this life, the other of men who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. And it is the characters of the persons concerned, much more than the degree of enlightenment possessed by the writers, that makes the difference between these two pictures. Life and death and the future are what each man makes of them for himself. We shall best deal with these two pictures if we take them separately, and let the gloom of the one enhance the glory of the other. They hang side by side, like a Rembrandt beside a Claude or a Turner, each intensifying by contrast the characteristics of the other. So let us look at the two-first, the grim picture drawn by the Psalmist; second, the sunny one drawn by the Seer. Now, with regard to the former,

I. The grim picture drawn by the Psalmist.

We too often forget that a psalmist is a poet, and misunderstand his spirit by treating his words as matter-of-fact prose. His imagination is at work, and our sympathetic imagination must be at work too, if we would enter into his meaning. Death a shepherd-what a grim and bold inversion of a familiar metaphor! If this psalm is, as is probable, of a comparatively late date, then its author was familiar with many sweet and tender strains of early singers, in which the blessed relation between a loving God and an obedient people was set forth under that metaphor. ‘The Lord is *my* Shepherd’ may have been ringing in his ears when he said, ‘Death is *their* shepherd.’ He lays hold of the familiar metaphor, and if I may so speak, turns it upside down, stripping it of all that is beautiful, tender, and gracious, and draping it in all that is harsh and terrible. And the very contrast between the sweet relation which it was originally used to express, and the opposite kind of one which he uses it to set forth, gives its tremendous force to the daring metaphor.

‘Death is their shepherd.’ Yes, but what manner of shepherd? Not one that gently leads his flock, but one that stalks behind the huddled sheep, and drives them fiercely, club in hand, on a path on which they would not willingly go. The unwelcome necessity, by which men that have their portion in this world are hounded and herded out of all their sunny pastures and abundant feeding, is the thought that underlies the image. It is accentuated, if we notice that in the former clause, ‘like sheep they are laid in the grave,’ the word rendered in the Authorised Version ‘laid,’ and in the Revised Version ‘appointed,’ is perhaps more properly read by many, ‘like sheep they are *thrust down*.’ There you have the picture-the shepherd stalking behind the helpless creatures, and coercing them on an unwelcome path.

Now that is the first thought that I suggest, that to one type of man, Death is an unwelcome necessity. It is, indeed, a necessity to us all, but necessities accepted cease to be painful; and necessities resisted-what do they become? Here is a man being swept down a river, the sound of the falls is in his ears, and he grasps at anything on the bank to hold by, but in vain. That is how some of us feel when we face the thought, and will feel more when we front the reality, of that awful ‘must.’ ‘Death shall be their shepherd,’ and coerce them into darkness. Ask yourself the question, Is the course of my life such as that the end of it cannot but be a grim necessity which I would do anything to avoid?

This first text suggests not only a shepherd but a fold: ‘Like sheep they are thrust down to the grave.’ Now I am not going to enter upon what would be quite out of place here: a critical discussion of the Old Testament conception of a future life. That conception varies, and is not the same in all parts of the book. But I may, just in a word, say that ‘the grave’ is by no means the adequate rendering of the thought of the Psalmist, and that ‘Hell’ is a still more inadequate rendering of it. He does not mean either the place where the body is deposited, or a place where there is punitive retribution for the wicked, but he means a dim region, or, if I might so say, a localised condition, in which all that have passed through this life are gathered, where personality and consciousness continue, but where life is faint, stripped of all that characterises it here, shadowy, unsubstantial, and where there is inactivity, absolute cessation of all the occupations to which men were accustomed. But there may be restlessness along with inactivity; may there not? And there is no such restlessness as the restlessness of compulsory idleness. That is the main idea that is in the Psalmist’s mind. He knows little about retribution, he knows still less about transmutation into a glorious likeness to that which is most glorious and divine. But he conceives a great, dim, lonely land, wherein are prisoned and penned all the lives that have been foamed away vainly on earth, and are now settled into a dreary monotony and a restless idleness. As one of the other books of the Old Testament puts it, it is a ‘land of the shadow of death, without order, and in which the light is as darkness.’

I know, of course, that all that is but the imperfect presentation of partially apprehended, and partially revealed, and partially revealable truth. But what I desire to fix upon is that one dreary thought of this fold, into which the grim shepherd has driven his flock, and where they lie cribbed and huddled together in utter inactivity. Carry that with you as a true, though incomplete thought.

Let me remind you, in the next place, with regard to this part of my subject, of the kind of men whom the grim shepherd drives into that grim fold. The psalm tells us that plainly enough. It is speaking of men who have their portion in this life, who ‘trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches . . . whose inward thought is that their house shall continue for ever . . . who call their lands after their own names.’ Of every such man it says: ‘when he dieth he shall carry nothing away’-none of the possessions, none of the forms of activity which were familiar to him here on earth. He will go into a state where he finds nothing which interests him, and nothing for him to do.

Must it not be so? If we let ourselves be absorbed and entangled by the affairs of this life, and permit our whole spirits to be bent in the direction of these transient things, what is to become of us when the things that must pass have passed, and when we come into a region where there are none of them to occupy us any more? What would some Manchester men do if they were in a condition of life where they could not go on ‘Change on Tuesdays and Fridays? What would some of us do if the professions and forms of mental activity in which we have been occupied as students and scholars were swept away? ‘Whether there be knowledge it shall cease; whether there be tongues they shall vanish away,’ and what are you going to do then, you men that have only lived for intellectual pursuits connected with this transient state? We are going to a world where there are no books, no pens nor ink, no trade, no dress, no fashion, no amusements; where there is nothing but things in which some of us have no interest, and a God who ‘is not in all our thoughts.’ Surely we shall be ‘fish out of water’ there. Surely we shall feel that we have been banned and banished from everything that we care about. Surely men that boasted themselves in their riches, and in the multitude of their wealth, will be necessarily condemned to inactivity. Life is continuous, and all on one plane. Surely if a man knows that he must some day, and may any day, be summoned to the other side of the world, he would be a wise man if he got his outfit ready, and made some effort to acquire the customs and the arts of the land to which he was going. Surely life here is mainly given to us that we may develop powers which will find their field of exercise yonder, and acquire characters which shall be in conformity with the conditions of that future life. Surely there can be no more tragic folly than the folly of letting myself be so absorbed and entangled by this present world, as that when the transient has passed, I shall feel homeless and desolate, and have nothing that I can do or care about amidst the activities of Eternity. Dear friend, should *you* feel homeless if you were taken, as you will be taken, into that world?

Turn now to

II. The sunny landscape drawn by the Seer.

Note the contrast presented by the shepherds. ‘Death shall be their shepherd.’ ‘The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their Shepherd.’ I need not occupy your time in trying to show, what has sometimes been doubted, that the radiant picture of the Apocalyptic Seer is dealing with nothing in the present, but with the future condition of certain men. I would just remind you that the words in which it is couched are to a large extent a quotation from ancient prophecy, a description of the divine watchfulness over the pilgrim’s return from captivity to the Land of Promise. But the quotation is wonderfully elevated and spiritualised in the New Testament vision; for instead of reading, as the Original does: ‘He that hath mercy on them shall lead them,’ we have here, ‘the Lamb which is in the midst of the Throne shall be their Shepherd,’ and instead of their being led merely to ‘the springs of water,’ here we read that He ‘leads them to the fountains of the water of life.’

We have to think, first, of that most striking, most significant and profound modification of the Old Testament words, which presents the Lamb as ‘the Shepherd.’ All Christ’s shepherding on earth and in heaven depends, as do all our hopes for heaven and earth, upon the fact of His sacrificial death. It is only because He is the ‘Lamb that was slain’ that He is either the ‘Lamb in the midst of the Throne,’ or the Shepherd of the flock. And we must make acquaintance with Him first in the character of ‘the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world,’ before we can either follow in His footsteps as our Guide, or be compassed by His protection as our Shepherd.

He is the Lamb, and He is the Shepherd-that suggests not only that the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ is the basis of all His work for us on earth and in heaven, but the very incongruity of making One, who bears the same nature as the flock to be the Shepherd of the flock, is part of the beauty of the metaphor. It is His humanity that is our guide. It is His continual manhood, all through eternity and its glories, that makes Him the Shepherd of perfected souls. They follow Him because He is one of themselves, and He could not be the Shepherd unless he were the Lamb.

But then this Shepherd is not only gracious, sympathetic, kin to us by participation in a common nature, and fit to be our Guide because He has been our Sacrifice and the propitiation of our sins, but He is the Lamb ‘in the midst of the throne,’ wielding therefore all divine power, and standing-not as the rendering in our Bible leads an English reader to suppose, on the throne, but-in the middle point between it and the ring of worshippers, and so the Communicator to the outer circumference of all the blessings that dwell in the divine centre. He shall be their Shepherd, not coercing, not driving by violence, but leading to the fountains of the waters of life, gently and graciously. It is not compulsory energy which He exercises upon us, either on earth or in heaven, but it is the drawing of a divine attraction, sweet to put forth and sweet to yield to.

There is still another contrast. Death huddled and herded his reluctant sheep into a fold where they lay inactive but struggling and restless. Christ leads His flock into a pasture. He shall guide them ‘to the fountains of waters of life.’ I need not dwell at any length on the blessed particulars of that future, set forth here and in the context. But let me suggest them briefly. There is joyous activity. There is constant progression. He goeth before; they follow. The perfection of heaven begins at entrance into it, but it is a perfection which can be perfected, and is being perfected, through the ages of Eternity, and the picture of the Shepherd in front and the flock behind, is the true conception of all the progress of that future life. ‘They shall follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth’-a sweet guidance, a glad following, a progressive conformity! ‘In the long years liker must they grow.’

Further, there is the communication of life more and more abundantly. Therefore there is the satisfaction of all desire, so that ‘they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more.’ The pain of desire ceases because desire is no sooner felt than it is satisfied, the joy of desire continues, because its satisfaction enables us to desire more, and so, appetite and eating, desire and fruition, alternate in ceaseless reciprocity. To us, being every moment capable of more, more will be given; and ‘to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.’

There is one point more in regard to that pasture into which the Lamb leads the happy flock, and that is, the cessation of all pains and sorrows. Not only shall they ‘hunger no more, neither thirst any more’; but ‘the sun shall not smite them, nor any heat, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.’ Here the Shepherd carried rod and staff, and sometimes had to strike the wandering sheep hard: there these are needed no more. Here He had sometimes to move them out of green pastures, and away from still waters, into valleys of the shadow of death; but ‘there,’ as one of the prophets has it: ‘they shall lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed.’

But now, we must note, finally, the other kind of men whom this other Shepherd leads into His pastures, ‘They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’ Aye! that is it. That is why He can lead them where He does lead them. Strange alchemy which out of two crimsons, the crimson of our sins and the crimson of His blood, makes one white! But it is so, and the only way by which we can ever be cleansed, either with the initial cleansing of forgiveness, or with the daily cleansing of continual purifying and approximation to the divine holiness, is by our bringing the foul garment of our stained personality and character into contact with the blood which, ‘shed for many,’ takes away their sins, and infused into their veins, cleanses them from all sin.

You have yourselves to bring about that contact. ‘*They* have washed their robes.’ And how did they do it? By faith in the Sacrifice first, by following the Example next. For it is not merely a forgiveness for the past, but a perfecting, progressive and gradual, for the future, that lies in that thought of washing their robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Dear brethren, life here and life hereafter are continuous. They are homogeneous, on one plane though an ascending one. The differences there are great-I was going to say, and it would be true, that the resemblances are greater. As we have been, we shall be. If we take Christ for our Shepherd here, and follow Him, though from afar and with faltering steps, amidst all the struggles and windings and rough ways of life, then and only then, will He be our Shepherd, to go with us through the darkness of death, to make it no reluctant expulsion from a place in which we would fain continue to be, but a tranquil and willing following of Him by the road which He has consecrated for ever, and deprived for ever of its solitude, because Himself has trod it.

Those two possibilities are before each of us. Either of them may be yours. One of them must be. Look on this picture and on this; and choose-God help you to choose aright-which of the two will describe your experience. Will you have Christ for your Shepherd, or will you have Death for your shepherd? The answer to that question lies in the answer to the other-have you washed your robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb; and are you following Him? You can settle the question which lot is to be yours, and only you can settle it. See that you settle it aright, and that you settle it soon.

END OF VOL. I.

42)Psalms 51:1-2

Psalms

DAVID’S CRY FOR PARDON

Psa. 51:1 - Psa. 51:2.

A whole year had elapsed between David's crime and David's penitence. It had been a year of guilty satisfaction not worth the having; of sullen hardening of heart against God and all His appeals. The thirty-second Psalm tells us how *happy* David had been during that twelvemonth, of which he says, 'My bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy on me.' Then came Nathan with his apologue, and with that dark threatening that 'the sword should never depart from his house,' the fulfilment of which became a well-head of sorrow to the king for the rest of his days, and gave a yet deeper poignancy of anguish to the crime of his spoiled favourite Absalom. The stern words had their effect. The frost that had bound his soul melted all away, and he confessed his sin, and was forgiven then and there. 'I have sinned against the Lord' is the confession as recorded in the historical books; and, says Nathan, 'The Lord hath made to pass from thee the iniquity of thy sin.' Immediately, as would appear from the narrative, that very same day, the child of Bathsheba and David was smitten with fatal disease, and died in a week. And it is *after* all these events-the threatening, the penitence, the pardon, the punishment-that he comes to God, who had so freely forgiven, and likewise so sorely smitten him, and wails out these prayers: 'Blot out my transgressions, wash me from mine iniquity, cleanse me from my sin.'

One almost shrinks from taking as the text of a sermon words like these, in which a broken and contrite spirit groans for deliverance, and which are, besides, hallowed by the thought of the thousands who have since found them the best expression of their sacredest emotions. But I would fain try not to lose the feeling that breathes through the words, while seeking for the thoughts which are in them, and hope that the light which they throw upon the solemn subjects of guilt and forgiveness may not be for any of us a mere cold light.

I. Looking then at this triad of petitions, they teach us first how David thought of his sin.

You will observe the reiteration of the same earnest cry in all these clauses, and if you glance over the remainder of this psalm, you will find that he asks for the gifts of God's Spirit, with a similar threefold repetition. Now this characteristic of the whole psalm is worth notice in the outset. It is not a mere piece of Hebrew parallelism. The requirements of poetical form but partially explain it. It is much more the earnestness of a soul that cannot be content with once asking for the blessings and then passing on, but dwells upon them with repeated supplication, not because it thinks that it shall be heard for its 'much speaking,' but because it longs for them so eagerly.

And besides that, though the three clauses do express the same general idea, they express it under various modifications, and must be all taken together before we get the whole of the Psalmist's thought of sin.

Notice again that he speaks of his evil as 'transgressions' and as 'sin,' first using the plural and then the singular. He regards it first as being broken up into a multitude of isolated acts, and then as being all gathered together into one knot, as it were, so that it is one thing. In one aspect it is 'my transgressions'-'that thing that I did about Uriah, that thing that I did about Bathsheba, those other things that these dragged after them.' One by one the acts of wrongdoing pass before him. But he does not stop there. They are not merely a number of deeds, but they have, deep down below, a common root from which they all came-a centre in which they all inhere. And so he says, not only 'Blot out my *transgressions*,' but 'Wash me from mine *iniquity*.' He does not merely generalise, but he sees and he feels what you and I have to feel, if we judge rightly of our evil actions, that we cannot take them only in their plurality as so many separate deeds, but that we must recognise them as coming from a common source, and we must lament before God not only our 'sins' but our 'sin'-not only the outward acts of transgression, but that alienation of heart from which they all come; not only sin in its manifold manifestations as it comes out in the life, but in its inward roots as it coils round our hearts. You are not to confess acts alone, but let your contrition embrace the principle from which they come.

Further, in all the petitions we see that the idea of his own single responsibility for the whole thing is uppermost in David's mind. It is *my* transgression, it is *mine* iniquity, and *my* sin. He has not learned to say with Adam of old, and with some so-called wise thinkers to-day: 'I was tempted, and I could not help it.' He does not talk about 'circumstances,' and say that they share the blame with him. He takes it all to himself. 'It was *I* did it.

True, I was tempted, but it was my soul that made the occasion a temptation. True, the circumstances led me astray, but they would not have led me astray if I had been right, and *where* as well as *what* I ought to be.' It is a solemn moment when that thought first rises in its revealing power to throw light into the dark places of our souls. But it is likewise a blessed moment, and without it we are scarcely aware of ourselves. Conscience quickens consciousness. The sense of transgression is the first thing that gives to many a man the full sense of his own individuality. There is nothing that makes us feel how awful and incommunicable is that mysterious personality by which every one of us lives alone after all companionship, so much as the contemplation of our relations to God's law. 'Every man shall bear his own burden.' 'Circumstances,' yes; 'bodily organisation,' yes; 'temperament,' yes; 'the maxims of society,' 'the conventionalities of the time,' yes,-all these things have something to do with shaping our single deeds and with influencing our character; but after we have made all allowances for these influences which affect *me*, let us ask the philosophers who bring them forward as diminishing or perhaps annihilating responsibility, 'And what about that *me* which these things influence?' After all, let me remember that the deed is *mine*, and that every one of us shall, as Paul puts it, give account of *himself* unto God.

Passing from that, let me point for one moment to another set of ideas that are involved in these petitions. The three words which the Psalmist employs for sin give prominence to different aspects of it. 'Transgression' is not the same as 'iniquity,' and 'iniquity' is not the same as 'sin.' They are not aimless, useless synonyms, but they have each a separate thought in them. The word rendered 'transgression' literally means rebellion, a breaking away from and setting oneself against lawful authority. That translated 'iniquity' literally means that which is twisted, bent. The word in the original for 'sin' literally means missing a mark, an aim. And this threefold view of sin is no discovery of David's, but is the lesson which the whole Old Testament system had laboured to print deep on the national consciousness. That lesson, taught by law and ceremonial, by denunciation and remonstrance, by chastisement and deliverance, the penitent king has learned. To all men's wrongdoings these descriptions apply, but most of all to his. Sin is ever, and his sin especially is, rebellion, the deflection of the life from the straight line which God’s law draws so clearly and firmly, and hence a missing the aim.

Think how profound and living is the consciousness of sin which lies in calling it *rebellion*. It is not merely, then, that we go against some abstract propriety, or break some impersonal law of nature when we do wrong, but that we rebel against a rightful Sovereign. In a special sense this was true of the Jew, whose nation stood under the government of a divine king, so that sin was treason, and breaches of the law acts of rebellion against God. But it is as true of us all. Our theory of morals will be miserably defective, and our practice will be still more defective, unless we have learned that morality is but the garment of religion, that the definition of virtue is obedience to God, and that the true sin in sin is not the yielding to impulses that belong to our nature, but the assertion in the act of yielding, of our independence of God and of our opposition to His will. And all this has application to David’s sin. He was God’s viceroy and representative, and he sets to his people the example of revolt, and lifts the standard of rebellion. It is as if the ruler of a province declared war against the central authority of which he was the creature, and used against it the very magazines and weapons with which it had intrusted him. He had rebelled, and in an eminent degree, as Nathan said to him, given to the enemies of God occasion to blaspheme.

Not less profound and suggestive is that other name for sin, that which is twisted, or bent, mine ‘iniquity.’ It is the same metaphor which lies in our own word ‘wrong,’ that which is wrung or warped from the straight line of right. To that line, drawn by God’s law, our lives should run parallel, bending neither to the right hand nor to the left. But instead of the firm directness of such a line, our lives show wavering deformity, and are like the tremulous strokes in a child’s copy-book. David had the pattern before him, and by its side his unsteady purpose, his passionate lust, had traced this wretched scrawl. The path on which he should have trodden was a straight course to God, unbending like one of these conquering Roman roads, that will turn aside for neither mountain nor ravine, nor stream nor bog. If it had been thus straight, it would have reached its goal. Journeying on that way of holiness, he would have found, and we shall find, that on it no ravenous beast shall meet us, but with songs and everlasting joy upon their lips the happy pilgrims draw ever nearer to God, obtaining joy and gladness in all the march, until at last ‘sorrow and sighing shall flee away.’ But instead of this he had made for himself a crooked path, and had lost his road and his peace in the mazes of wandering ways. ‘The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to come to the city.’

Another very solemn and terrible thought of what sin is, lies in that final word for it, which means ‘missing an aim.’ How strikingly that puts a truth which siren voices are constantly trying to sing us out of believing! Every sin is a blunder as well as a crime. And that for two reasons, because, first, God has made us for Himself, and to take anything besides for our life’s end or our heart’s portion is to divert ourselves from our true destiny; and because, second, that being so, every attempt to win satisfaction or delight by such a course is and must be a failure. Sin misses the aim if we think of our proper destination. Sin misses its own aim of happiness. A man never gets what he hoped for by doing wrong, or, if he seem to do so, he gets something more that spoils it all. He pursues after the fleeing form that seems so fair, and when he reaches her side, and lifts her veil, eager to embrace the tempter, a hideous skeleton grins and gibbers at him. The siren voices sing to you from the smiling island, and their white arms and golden harps and the flowery grass draw you from the wet boat and the weary oar; but when a man lands he sees the fair form end in a slimy fish, and she slays him and gnaws his bones. ‘He knows not that the dead are there, and that her guests are in the depths of hell.’ Yes! every sin is a mistake, and the epitaph for the sinner is ‘Thou fool!’

II. These petitions also show us, in the second place, How David thinks of forgiveness.

As the words for sin expressed a threefold view of the burden from which the Psalmist seeks deliverance, so the triple prayer, in like manner, sets forth that blessing under three aspects. It is not merely pardon for which he asks. He is making no sharp dogmatic distinction between forgiveness and cleansing.

The two things run into each other in his prayer, as they do, thank God! in our own experience, the one being inseparable, in fact, from the other. It is absolute deliverance from the power of sin, in all forms of that power, whether as guilt or as habit, for which he cries so piteously; and his accumulative petitions are so exhaustive, not because he is coldly examining his sin, but because he is intensely feeling the manifold burden of his great evil.

That first petition conceives of the divine dealing with sin as being the erasure of a writing, perhaps of an indictment. There is a special significance in the use of the word here, because it is also employed in the description of the Levitical ceremonial of the ordeal, where a curse was written on a scroll and blotted out by the priest. But apart from that the metaphor is a natural and suggestive one. Our sin stands written against us. The long gloomy indictment has been penned by our own hands. Our past is a blurred manuscript, full of false things and bad things. We have to spread the writing before God, and ask Him to remove the stained characters from its surface, that once was fair and unsoiled.

Ah, brethren! some people tell us that the past is irrevocable, that the thing once done can never be undone, that the life's diary written by our own hands can never be cancelled. The melancholy theory of some thinkers and teachers is summed up in the words, infinitely sad and despairing when so used, 'What I have written I have written.' Thank God! we know better than that. We know who blots out the handwriting 'that is against us, nailing it to His Cross.' We know that of God's great mercy our future may 'copy fair our past,' and the past may be all obliterated and removed. And as sometimes you will find in an old monkish library the fair vellum that once bore lascivious stories of ancient heathens and pagan deities turned into the manuscript in which a saint has penned his Contemplations, an Augustine his Confessions, or a Jerome his Translations, so our souls may become palimpsests. The old wicked heathen characters that we have traced there may be blotted out, and covered over by the writing of that divine Spirit who has said, 'I will put My laws into their minds, and write them in their hearts.' As you run your pen through the finished pages of your last year's diaries, as you seal them up and pack them away, and begin a new page in a clean book on the first of January, so it is possible for every one of us to do with our lives. Notwithstanding all the influence of habit, notwithstanding all the obstinacy of long-indulged modes of thought and action, notwithstanding all the depressing effect of frequent attempts and frequent failures, we may break ourselves off from all that is sinful in our past lives, and begin afresh, saying, ‘God helping me! I will write another sort of biography for myself for the days that are to come.’

We cannot erase these sad records from our past. The ink is indelible; and besides all that we have visibly written in these terrible autobiographies of ours, there is much that has sunk into the page, there is many a ‘secret fault,’ the record of which will need the fire of that last day to make it legible, Alas for those who learn the black story of their own lives for the first time then! Learn it now, my brother! and learn likewise that Christ can wipe it all clean off the page, clean out of your nature, clean out of God’s book. Cry to Him, with the Psalmist, ‘Blot out my transgressions!’ and He will calm and bless you with the ancient answer, ‘I have blotted out as a thick cloud thy transgressions, and as a cloud thy sins.’

Then there is another idea in the second of these prayers for forgiveness: ‘Wash me throughly from mine iniquity.’ That phrase does not need any explanation, except that the word expresses the antique way of cleansing garments by treading and beating. David, then, here uses the familiar symbol of a robe, to express the ‘habit’ of the soul, or, as we say, the character. That robe is all splashed and stained. He cries to God to make it a robe of righteousness and a garment of purity.

And mark that he thinks the method by which this will be accomplished is a protracted and probably a painful one. He is not praying for a mere declaration of pardon, he is not asking only for the one complete, instantaneous act of forgiveness, but he is asking for a process of purifying which will be long and hard. ‘I am ready,’ says he, in effect, ‘to submit to any sort of discipline, if only I may be clean. Wash me, beat me, tread me down, hammer me with mallets, dash me against stones, rub me with smarting soap and caustic nitre-do anything, anything with me, if only those foul spots melt away from the texture of my soul!’ A solemn prayer, my brethren! if we pray it aright, which will be answered by many a sharp application of God’s Spirit, by many a sorrow, by much very painful work, both within our own souls and in our outward lives, but which will be fulfilled at last in our being clothed like our Lord, in garments which shine as the light.

We know, dear brethren! who has said, ‘I counsel thee to buy of Me white raiment, that the shame of thy nakedness may not appear.’ And we know well who were the great company before the throne of God, that had ‘washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’ ‘Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.’ ‘*Wash me throughly* from mine iniquity.’

The deliverance from sin is still further expressed by that third supplication, ‘Cleanse me from my sin.’ That is the technical word for the priestly act of declaring ceremonial cleanness-the cessation of ceremonial pollution, and for the other priestly act of making, as well as declaring, clean from the stains of leprosy. And with allusion to both of these uses, the Psalmist employs it here. That is to say, he thinks of his guilt not only as a blotted past record which he has written, not only as a garment spotted by the flesh which his spirit wears, but he thinks of it too as inhering in himself, as a leprosy and disease of his own personal nature. He thinks of it as being, like that, incurable, fatal, twin sister to and precursor of death; and he thinks of it as capable of being cleansed only by a sacerdotal act, only by the great High Priest and by His finger being laid upon it. And we know who it was that-when the leper, whom no man in Israel was allowed to touch on pain of uncleanness, came to His feet-put out His hand in triumphant consciousness of power, and touched him, and said, ‘I *will*! be thou clean.’ Let this be thy prayer, ‘Cleanse me from my sin’; and Christ will answer, ‘Thy leprosy hath departed from thee.’

III. These petitions likewise show us whence the Psalmist draws his confidence for such a prayer.

‘According to the multitude of Thy tender mercies, blot out my transgressions.’ His whole hope rests upon God’s own character, as revealed in the endless continuance of His acts of love. He knows the number and the greatness of his sins, and the very depth of his consciousness of sin helps him to a corresponding greatness in his apprehension of God’s mercy. As he says in another of his psalms, ‘Innumerable evils have compassed me about; they are more than the hairs of my head. . . . Many, O Lord my God! are Thy wonderful works. . . . They are more than can be numbered.' This is the blessedness of all true penitence, that the more profoundly it feels its own sore need and great sinfulness, in that very proportion does it recognise the yet greater mercy and all-sufficient grace of our loving God, and from the lowest depths beholds the stars in the sky, which they who dwell amid the surface-brightness of the noonday cannot discern.

God's own revealed character, His faithfulness and persistency, notwithstanding all our sins, in that mode of dealing with men which has blessed all generations with His tender mercies-these were David's pleas. And for us who have the perfect love of God perfectly expressed in His Son, that same plea is incalculably strengthened, for we can say, 'According to Thy tender mercy in Thy dear Son, for the sake of Christ, blot out my transgressions.' Is the depth of our desire, and is the firmness of our confidence, proportioned to the increased clearness of our knowledge of the love of our God? Does the Cross of Christ lead us to as trustful a penitence as David had, to whom meditation on God's providences and the shadows of the ancient covenant were chiefest teachers of the multitude of His tender mercies?

Remember further that a comparison of the narrative in the historical books seems to show, as I said, that this psalm followed Nathan's declaration of the divine forgiveness, and that therefore these petitions of our text are the echo and response to that declaration.

Thus we see that the revelation of God's love precedes, and is the cause of, the truest penitence; that our prayer for forgiveness is properly the appropriating, or the effort to appropriate, the divine promise of forgiveness; and that the assurance of pardon, so far from making a man think lightly of his sin, is the thing that drives it home to his conscience, and first of all teaches him what it really is. As long as you are tortured with thoughts of a possible hell because of guilt, as long as you are troubled by the contemplation of consequences affecting your happiness as ensuing upon your wrongdoing, so long there is a foreign and disturbing element in even your deepest and truest penitence. But when you know that God has forgiven-when you come to see the 'multitude of Thy tender mercies,' when the fear of punishment has passed out of your apprehension, then you are left with a heart at leisure from dread, to look the fact and not the consequences in the face, and to think of the moral nature, and not of the personal results, of your sin. And so one of the old prophets, with profound truth, says, ‘Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy sin, when I am pacified towards thee for all thou hast done.’

Dear friends! the wheels of God’s great mill may grind us small, without our coming to know or to hate our sin. About His chastisements, about the revelation of His wrath, that old saying is true to a great extent: ‘If you bray a fool in a mortar, his folly will not depart from him.’ You may smite a man down, crush him, make his bones to creep with the preaching of vengeance and of hell, and the result of it will often be, if it be anything at all, what it was in the case of that poor wretched Judas, who, because he only saw wrath, *flung* himself into despair, and was lost, not because he had betrayed Christ, but because he believed that there was no forgiveness for the man that had betrayed.

But Love comes, and ‘Love is Lord of all.’ God’s assurance, ‘I have forgiven,’ the assurance that we do not need to plead with Him, to bribe Him, to buy pardon by tears and amendment, but that it is already provided for us-the blessed vision of an all-mighty love treasured in a dying Saviour, the proclamation ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them’-Oh! these are the powers that break, or rather that melt, our hearts; these are the keen weapons that wound to heal our hearts; these are the teachers that teach a ‘godly sorrow that needeth not to be repented of.’ Think of all the patient, pitying mercy of our Father, with which He has lingered about our lives, and softly knocked at the door of our hearts! Think of that unspeakable gift in which are wrapped up all His tender mercies-the gift of Christ who died for us all! Let it smite upon your heart with a rebuke mightier than all the thunders of law or terrors of judgment. Let it unveil for you not only the depths of the love of God, but the darkness of your own selfish rebellion from Him. Measure your crooked lives by the perfect rightness of Christ’s. Learn how you have missed the aim which He reached, who could say, ‘I delight to do Thy will, O my God!’ And let that same infinite love that teaches sin announce frank forgiveness and prophesy perfect purity. Then, with heart fixed upon Christ's Cross, let your cry for pardon be the echo of the most sure promise of pardon which sounds from His dying lips; and as you gaze on Him who died that we might be freed from all iniquity, ask Him to blot out your transgressions, to wash you throughly from your iniquity, and to cleanse you from your sins. Ask, for you cannot ask in vain; ask earnestly, for you need it sorely; ask confidently, for He has promised before you ask; but ask, for unless you do, you will not receive. Ask, and the answer is sent already-'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.'

43)Psalms 51:10-12

Psalms

DAVID'S CRY FOR PURITY

Psa. 51:10 - Psa. 51:12.

We ought to be very thankful that the Bible never conceals the faults of its noblest men. David stands high among the highest of these. His words have been for ages the chosen expression for the devotions of the holiest souls; and whoever has wished to speak longings after purity, lowly trust in God, the aspirations of love, or the raptures of devotion, has found no words of his own more natural than those of the poet-king of Israel. And this man sins, black, grievous sin. Self-indulgent, he stays at home while his army is in the field. His moral nature, relaxed by this shrinking from duty, is tempted, and easily conquered. The sensitive poet nature, to which all delights of eye and sense appeal so strongly, is for a time too strong for the devout soul. One sin drags on another. As self-indulgence opened the door for lust, so lust, which dwells hard by hate, draws after it murder. The king is a traitor to his subjects, the soldier untrue to the chivalry of arms, the friend the betrayer of the friend. Nothing can be blacker than the whole story, and the Bible tells the shameful history in all its naked ugliness.

Many a precious lesson is contained in it. For instance, It is not innocence which makes men good. 'This is your man after God's own heart, is it?' runs the common, shallow sneer. Yes; not that God thought little of his foul sin, nor that ‘saints’ make up for adultery and murder by making or singing psalms; not that ‘righteousness’ as a standard of conduct is lower than ‘morality’; but that, having fallen, he learned to abhor his sin, and with deepened trust in God’s mercy, and many tears, struggled out of the mire, and with unconquered resolve and strength drawn from a divine source, sought still to press towards the mark. It is not the attainment of purity, not the absence of sin, but the presence and operation, though it be partial, of an energy which is at war with all impurity, that makes a man righteous. That is a lesson worth learning.

Again, David was not a hypocrite because of this fall of his. All sin is inconsistent with a religious character. But it is not for us to say what sin is incompatible with a religious character.

Again, the worst sin is not some outburst of gross transgression, forming an exception to the ordinary tenor of a life, bad and dismal as such a sin is; but the worst and most fatal are the small continuous vices, which root underground and honeycomb the soul. Many a man who thinks himself a Christian, is in more danger from the daily commission, for example, of small pieces of sharp practice in his business, than ever was David at his worst. White ants pick a carcase clean sooner than a lion will.

Most precious of all is the lesson as to the possibility of all sin being effaced, and of the high hopes which even a man sunk in transgression has a right to cherish, as to the purity and beauty of character to which he may come. What a prayer these clauses contain to be offered by one who has so sinned! What a marvellous faith in God’s pardoning love, and what a boldness of hope in his own future, they disclose! They set forth a profound ideal of a noble character; they make of that ideal a prayer; they are the prayer of a great transgressor, who is also a true penitent. In all these aspects they are very remarkable, and lead to valuable lessons. Let us look at them from these points of view successively.

I. Observe that here is a remarkable outline of a holy character.

It is to be observed that of these three gifts-a right spirit, Thy Holy Spirit, a free spirit-the central one alone is in the original spoken of as God’s; the ‘Thy’ of the last clause of the English Bible being an unnecessary supplement. And I suppose that this central petition stands in the middle, because the gift which it asks is the essential and fundamental one, from which there flow, and as it were, diverge on the right hand and on the left, the other two. God's Holy Spirit given to a man makes the human spirit holy, and then makes it 'right' and 'free.' Look then at the petitions, not in the order in which they stand in the text, but in the order which the text indicates as the natural one.

Now as to that fundamental petition, 'Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me,' one thing to notice is that David regards himself as possessing that Spirit. We are not to read into this psalm the fully developed New Testament teaching of a personal Paraclete, the Spirit whom Christ reveals and sends. To do that would be a gross anachronism. But we are to remember that it is an anointed king who speaks, on whose head there has been poured the oil that designated him to his office, and in its gentle flow and sweet fragrance, symbolised from of old the inspiration of a divine influence that accompanied every divine call. We are to remember, too, how it had fared with David's predecessor. Saul had been chosen by God; had been for a while guided and upheld by God. But he fell into sin, and-not because he fell into it, but because he continued in it; not because he did wrong, but because he did not repent-the solemn words are recorded concerning him, that 'the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him.' The divine influence which came on the towering head of the son of Kish, through the anointing oil that Samuel poured upon his raven hair, left him, and he stood God-forsaken because he stood God-forsaking. And so David looks back from the 'horrible pit and miry clay' into which he had fallen, where, stained with blood and lust, he lies, to that sad gigantic figure, remembered so well and loved by him so truly-the great king who sinned away his soul, and bled out his life on the heights of Gilboa. He sees in that blasted pine-tree, towering above the forest but dead at the top, and barked and scathed all down the sides by the lightning scars of passion, the picture of what he himself will come to, if the blessing that was laid upon his ruddy locks and his young head by the aged Samuel's anointing should pass from him too as it had done from his predecessor. God had departed from Saul, because Saul had refused His counsel and departed from Him; and Saul's successor, trembling as he remembers the fate of the founder of the monarchy, and of his vanished dynasty, prays with peculiar emphasis of meaning, ‘Take not Thy Holy Spirit from *me*!’

That Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, had descended upon him when he was anointed king, but it was no mere official consecration which he had thereby received. He had been fitted for regal functions by personal cleansing and spiritual gifts. And it is the man as well as the king, the sinful man much rather than the faulty king, that here wrestles with God, and stays the heavenly Visitant whom his sin has made to seem as if He would depart. What he desires most earnestly, next to that pardon which he has already sought and found, is that his spirit should be made holy by God’s Spirit. That is, as I have said, the central petition of his threefold prayer, from which the others come as natural consequences.

And what is this ‘holiness’ which David so earnestly desires? Without attempting any lengthened analysis of the various shades of meaning in the word, our purpose will be served if I point out that in all probability the primary idea in it is that of separation. God is holy-that is, separated by all the glory of His perfect nature from His creatures. Things are holy-that is, separated from common uses, and appropriated to God’s service. Whatever He laid His hand on and claimed in any especial manner for His, became thereby holy, whether it were a ceremony, or a place, or a tool. Men are holy when they are set apart for God’s service, whether they be officially consecrated for certain offices, or have yielded themselves by an inward devotion based on love to be His.

The ethical signification which is predominant in our use of the word and has made it little more than a synonym for moral purity is certainly not the original meaning, as is sufficiently clear from the fact that the word is applied to material things which could have no moral qualities, and sometimes to persons who were not pure, but who were in some sense or other set apart for God’s service. But gradually that meaning becomes more and more completely attached to the word, and ‘holiness’ is not only separation for God, but separation from sin. That is what David longs for in this prayer; and the connection of these two meanings of the word is worth pointing out in a sermon, for the sake of the great truth which it suggests, that the basis of all rightness and righteousness in a human spirit is its conscious and glad devotion to God’s service and uses. A reference to God must underlie all that is good in men, and on the other hand, that consecration to God is a delusion or a deception which does not issue in separation from evil.

‘Holiness’ is a loftier and a truer word than ‘morality,’ ‘virtue,’ or the like; it differs from these in that it proclaims that surrender to God is the very essence of all good, while they seek to construct a standard for human conduct, and to lay a foundation for human goodness, without regard to Him. Hence, irreligious moralists dislike the very word, and fall back upon pale, colourless phrases rather than employ it. But these are inadequate for the purpose. Man’s duties can never be summed up in any expression which omits man’s relation to God. How do I stand to Him? Do I belong to Him by joyous yielding of myself to be His instrument? That, my friends! is the question, the answer to which determines everything about me. Rightly answered, there will come all fruits of grace and beauty in the character as a natural consequence; ‘whatsoever things are lovely and of good report,’ every virtue and every praise grow from the root of consecration to God. Wrongly answered, there will come only fruits of selfishness and evil, which may simulate virtue, but the blossom shall go up in dust, and the root in stubble. Do you seek purity, nobleness, strength, and beauty of soul? Learn that all these inhere in and flow from the one act of giving up yourself to God, and in their truest perfection are found only in the spirit that is His. Holiness considered as moral excellence is the result of holiness considered as devotion to God. And learn too that holiness in both aspects comes from the operation and indwelling in our spirits of a divine Spirit, who draws away our love from self to fix it on Him, which changes our blindness into sight, and makes us by degrees like Himself, ‘holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners.’ The Spirit of the Lord is the energy which produces all righteousness and purity in human spirits.

Therefore, all our desires after what is good and true should shape themselves into the desire for that Spirit. Our prayer should be, ‘Make me separate from evil, and that I may be so, claim and keep me for Thine own. As Thou hast done with the Sabbath amongst the days, with the bare summit of the hill of the Lord’s house among the mountains, with Israel amidst the nations, so do with me; lay Thine hand upon me for Thine own.

Let my spirit, O God! know its destination for Thee, its union with Thee. Then being Thine, it will be clean. Dwell in me, that I may know myself Thine. Seal me with that gracious influence which is the proof that Thou possessest me, and the pledge that I possess Thee. “Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.”‘ So much for the chief of these petitions, which gives the ideal character in its deepest relations. There follow two other elements in the character, which on either side flow from the central source. The *holy* spirit in a man will be a *right* spirit and a *free* spirit. Consider these further thoughts in turn.

‘A right spirit.’ You will observe that our translators have given an alternative rendering in the margin, and as is not seldom the case, it is a better one than that adopted in the text. ‘A constant or firm spirit’ is the Psalmist’s meaning. He sees that a spirit which is conscious of its relation to God, and set free from the perturbations of sin, will be a spirit firm and settled, established and immovable in its obedience and its faith. For Him, the root of all steadfastness is in consecration to God.

And so this collocation of ideas opens the way for us to important considerations bearing upon the practical ordering of our natures and of our lives. For instance, there is no stability and settled persistency of righteous purpose possible for us, unless we are made strong because we lay hold on God’s strength, and stand firm because we are rooted in Him. Without that hold-fast, we shall be swept away by storms of calamity or by gusts of passion. Without that to steady us, our own boiling lusts and desires will make every fibre of our being quiver and tremble. Without that armour, there will not be solidity enough in our character to bear without breaking the steady pressure of the world’s weight, still less the fierce hammering of special temptation. To stand erect, and in that sense to have a right spirit-one that is upright and unbent-we must have sure footing in God, and have His energy infused into our shrinking limbs. If we are to be stable amidst earthquakes and storms, we must be built on the rock, and build rock-like upon it. Build thy strength upon God. Let His Holy Spirit be the foundation of thy life, and then thy tremulous and vagrant soul will be braced and fixed. The building will become like the foundation, and will grow into ‘a tower of strength that stands four-square to every wind.’ Rooted in God, thou shalt be unmoved by ‘the loud winds when they call’; or if still the tremulous leaves are huddled together before the blast, and the swaying branches creak and groan, the bole will stand firm and the gnarled roots will not part from their anchorage, though the storm-giant drag at them with a hundred hands. The spirit of holiness will be a firm spirit.

But there is another phase of connection between these two points of the ideal character-if my spirit is to be holy and to preserve its holiness, it must be firm. That is to say, you can only get and keep purity by resistance. A man who has not learned to say 'No!'-who is not resolved that he *will* take God's way in spite of every dog that can bay or bark at him, in spite of every silvery voice that woos him aside-will be a weak and a wretched man till he dies. In such a world as this, with such hearts as ours, weakness *is* wickedness in the long run. Whoever lets himself be shaped and guided by anything lower than an inflexible will, fixed in obedience to God, will in the end be shaped into a deformity and guided to wreck and ruin. Dreams however rapturous, contemplations however devout, emotions however deep and sacred, make no man pure and good without hard effort, and that to a large extent in the direction of resistance. Righteousness is not a mere negative idea, and Scripture morality is something much deeper than prohibitions. But there is no law for us without prohibitions, and no righteousness without casting out evil that is strong in us, and fighting against evil that is attractive around us. Therefore we need firmness to guard holiness, to be the hard shell in which the rich fruit matures. We need a wholesome obstinacy in the right that will neither be bribed nor coaxed nor bullied, nor anyhow persuaded out of the road in which we know that we should walk. 'Add to your faith manly vigour.' Learn that an indispensable requisite of holiness is prescribed in that command, 'Whom resist, steadfast in the faith.' And remember that the ground of all successful resistance and the need for it are alike taught in that series of petitions, which makes a holy spirit the foundation of a constant spirit, and a constant spirit the guard of a holy spirit.

Then consider, for a moment, the third element in the character which David longs to possess-a *free* spirit. He who is holy because full of God's Spirit, and constant in his holiness, will likewise be 'free.' That is the same word which is in other places translated 'willing'-and the scope of the Psalmist's desire is, 'Let my spirit be emancipated from sin by *willing* obedience.' This goes very deep into the heart of all true godliness. The only obedience which God accepts is that which gladly, and almost as by an instinctive inward impulse, harmonises the human will with the divine. 'Lo! I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do Thy will, and Thy law is within my heart.' That is a blessed thought, that we may come to do Him service not because we must, but because we like; not as serfs, but as sons; not thinking of His law as a slave-driver that cracks his whip over our heads, but as a friend that lets us know how we may please Him whom it is our delight to obey. And so the Psalmist prays, 'Let my obedience be so willing that I had rather do what Thou wilt than anything besides.'

'*Then*,' he thinks, 'I shall be free.' Of course-for the correlative of freedom is lawful authority, and the definition of freedom is willing submission. If for us duty is joy, and all our soul's desires flow with an equable motion parallel to the will of God, then there is no sense of restraint in keeping within the limits beyond which we do not seek to go. The willing spirit sets us free, free from the 'ancient solitary reign' of the despot Self, free from the mob rule of passions and appetites, free from the incubus of evil habits, free from the authority of men's voices and examples. Obedience is freedom to them that have learned to love the lips that command. We are set free that we may serve: 'O Lord! truly I am Thy servant; Thou hast loosed my bonds.' We are set free in serving: 'I will walk at liberty, for I keep Thy precepts.' Let a willing, free spirit uphold me.

II. Observe, too, that desires for holiness should become prayers.

David does not merely long for certain spiritual excellences; he goes to God for them. And his reasons for doing so are plain. If you will look at the former verses of this psalm, you will see that he had found out two things about his sin, both of which make him sure that he can only be what he should be by God's help. He had learned what his crimes were in relation to God, and he had further learned what they indicated about himself. The teaching of his bitter experience as to the former of these two matters lies in that saying which some people have thought strange. 'Against *Thee only* have I sinned.' What! Had he not committed a crime against human law? had he not harmed Uriah and Bathsheba? were not his deeds an offence to his whole kingdom? Yes, he knew all that; but he felt that over and above all that was black in his deed, considered in its bearing upon men, it was still blacker when it was referred to God; and a sadder word than ‘crime’ or ‘fault’ had to be used about it. I have done wrong as against my fellows, but worse than that, I have *sinned* against God. The notion of *sin* implies the notion of God. Sin is wilful transgression of the law of *God*. An atheist can have no conception of sin. But bring God into human affairs, and men’s faults immediately assume the darker tint, and become men’s sins. Therefore the need of prayer if these evils are to be blotted out. If I had done crime against man only, I should not need to ask God for pardon or cleansing; but I have sinned against Him, and done this evil in His sight, therefore my desires for deliverance address themselves to Him, and my longings for purity must needs break into the cry of entreaty to that God with whom are forgiveness and redemption from all iniquity.

And still further, looking at the one deed, he sees in it something more than an isolated act. It leads him down to its motive; that motive carries him to the state of mind in which it could have power; that state of mind, in which the motive could have power, carries him still deeper to the bias of his nature as he had received it from his parents. And thinking of how he had fallen, how upon his terraced palace roof there the eye had inflamed the heart, and the heart had yielded so quickly to the temptations of the eye, he finds no profounder explanation of the disastrous eclipse of goodness than this: ‘Behold! I was shapen in iniquity.’

Is that a confession or a palliation, do you think? Is he trying to shuffle off guilt from his own shoulders? By no means, for these words are the motive for the prayer, ‘Purge me, and I shall be clean.’ That is to say, he has learned that isolated acts of sin inhere in a common root, and that root a disposition inherited from generation to generation to which evil is familiar and easy, to which good, alas! is but too alien and unwelcome. None the less is the evil done *his* deed. None the less has he to wail in full consciousness of his individual responsibility: ‘Against Thee have *I* sinned.’ But the effect of this second discovery, that sin has become so intertwisted with his being that he cannot shake off the venomous beast into the fire and feel no harm, is the same as that of the former-to drive him to God, who alone can heal the nature and separate the poison from his blood.

Dear friends! there are some of you who are wasting your lives in paroxysms of fierce struggle with the evil that you have partially discovered in yourselves, alternating with long languor, fits of collapse and apathy, and who make no solid advance, just because you will not lay to heart these two convictions-your sin has to do with God, and your sins come from a sinful nature. Because of the one fact, you must go to God for pardon; because of the other, you must go to God for cleansing. There, in your heart, like some black well-head in a dismal bog, is the source of all the swampy corruption that fills your life. You cannot stanch it, you cannot drain it, you cannot sweeten it. Ask Him, who is above your nature and without it, to change it by His own new life infused into your spirit. He will heal the bitter waters. He alone can. Sin is against God; sin comes from an evil heart; therefore, if your longings for that ideal perfectness are ever to be fulfilled, you must make prayers of them, and cry to Him who hears, ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God! take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.’

III. Finally, observe that prayers for perfect cleansing are permitted to the lips of the greatest sinners.

Such longings as these might seem audacious, when the atrocity of the crime is remembered, and by man’s standard they are so. Let the criminal be thankful for escape, and go hide himself, say men’s pardons. But here is a man, with the evil savour of his debauchery still tainting him, daring to ask for no mere impunity, but for God’s choicest gifts. Think of his crime, think of its aggravations from God’s mercies to him, from his official position, from his past devotion. Remember that this cruel voluptuary is the sweet singer of Israel, who had taught men songs of purer piety and subtler emotion than the ruder harps of older singers had ever flung from their wires. And this man, so placed, so gifted, set up on high to be the guiding light of the nation, has plunged into the filth of these sins, and quenched all his light there. When he comes back penitent, what will he dare to ask? Everything that God can give to bless and gladden a soul. He asks for God’s Spirit, for His presence, for the joy of His salvation; to be made once again, as he had been, the instrument that shall show forth His praise, and teach transgressors God’s ways. Ought he to have had more humble desires? Does this great boldness show that he is leaping very lightly over his sin? Is he presumptuous in such prayers? God be thanked-no! But, knowing all his guilt, and broken and contrite in heart [crushed and ground to powder, as the words mean], utterly loathing himself, aware of all the darkness of his deserts, he yet cherishes unconquerable confidence in the pitying love of God, and believes that in spite of all his sin, he may yet be pure as the angels of heaven-ay, even holy as God is holy.

Thank God we have such an example for our heartening! Lay it to heart, brethren! You cannot believe too much in God's mercy. You cannot expect too much at His hands. He is 'able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.' No sin is so great but that, coming straight from it, a repentant sinner may hope and believe that all God's love will be lavished upon him, and the richest of God's gifts be granted to his desires. Even if our transgression is aggravated by a previous life of godliness, and have given the enemies great occasion to blaspheme, as David's did, yet David's penitence may in our souls lead on to David's hope, and the answer will not fail us. Let no sin, however dark, however repeated, drive us to despair of ourselves, because it hides from us our loving Saviour. Though beaten back again and again by the surge of our passions and sins, like some poor shipwrecked sailor sucked back with every retreating wave and tossed about in the angry surf, yet keep your face towards the beach, where there is safety, and you will struggle through it all, and though it were but on some floating boards and broken pieces of the ship, will come safe to land. He will uphold you with His Spirit, and take away the weight of sin that would sink you, by His forgiving mercy, and bring you out of all the weltering waste of waters to the solid shore.

So whatever thy evil behaviour, come with it all, and cast thyself before Him, with whom is plenteous redemption. Embrace in one act the two truths, of thine own sin and of God's infinite mercy in Jesus Christ. Let not the one blind you to the other; let not the one lead you to a morbid despondency, which is blind to Christ, nor the other to a superficial estimate of the deadliness of sin, which is blind to thine own self. Let the Cross teach thee what sin is, and let the dark background of thy sin bring into clear prominence the Cross that bringeth salvation. Know that thou art utterly black and sinful. Believe that God is eternally, utterly, inconceivably, merciful. Learn both, in Him who is the Standard by which we can estimate our sin, and the Proof and Medium of God's mercy. Trust thyself and all thy foulness to Jesus Christ; and, so doing, look up from whatsoever horrible pit and miry clay thou mayest have fallen into, with this prayer, 'Create in me a clean heart, O God! and renew a right spirit within me, take not Thy Holy Spirit from me, and uphold me with Thy free Spirit.' Then the answer shall come to you from Him who ever puts the best robe upon His returning prodigals, and gives His highest gifts to sinners who repent. 'From all your filthiness will I cleanse you, a new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you, and I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes.'

44)Psalms 56:3-4

Psalms

FEAR AND FAITH

Psa. 56:3 - Psa. 56:4.

It is not given to many men to add new words to the vocabulary of religious emotion. But so far as an examination of the Old Testament avails, I find that David was the first that ever employed the word that is here translated, *I will trust*, with a religious meaning. It is found occasionally in earlier books of the Bible in different connections, never in regard to man's relations to God, until the Poet-Psalmist laid his hand upon it, and consecrated it for all generations to express one of the deepest relations of man to his Father in heaven. And it is a favourite word of his. I find it occurs constantly in his psalms; twice as often, or nearly so, in the psalms attributed to David as in all the rest of the Psalter put together; and as I shall have occasion to show you in a moment, it is in itself a most significant and poetic word.

But, first of all, I ask you to notice how beautifully there comes out here the *occasion* of trust. 'What time I am afraid, I will put my trust in Thee.'

This psalm is one of those belonging to the Sauline persecution. If we adopt the allocation in the superscription, it was written at one of the very lowest points of David's fortunes. And there seem to be one or two of its phrases which acquire new force, if we regard the psalm as drawn forth by the perils of his wandering, hunted life. For instance-'Thou tellest my wanderings,' is no mere expression of the feelings with which he regarded the changes of this early pilgrimage, but is the confidence of the fugitive that in the doublings and windings of his flight God's eye marked him. 'Put thou my tears into Thy *bottle*'-one of the few indispensable articles which he had to carry with him, the water-skin which hung beside him, perhaps, as he meditated. So read in the light of his probable circumstances, how pathetic and eloquent does that saying become-'What time I am *afraid*, I will trust in Thee.' That goes deep down into the realities of life. It is when we are 'afraid' that we trust in God; not in easy times, when things are going smoothly with us. Not when the sun shines, but when the tempest blows and the wind howls about his ears, a man gathers his cloak round him, and cleaves fast to his supporter. The midnight sea lies all black; but when it is cut into by the oar, or divided and churned by the paddle, it flashes up into phosphorescence, and so it is from the tumults and agitation of man's spirit that there is struck out the light of man's faith. There is the bit of flint and the steel that comes hammering against it; and it is the contact of these two that brings out the spark. The man never knew confidence who does not know how the occasion that evoked and preceded it was terror and need. 'What time I am *afraid*, I will trust.' That is no trust which is only fair weather trust. This principle-first fear, and only then, faith-applies all round the circle of our necessities, weaknesses, sorrows, and sins.

There must, first of all, be the deep sense of need, of exposedness to danger, of weakness, of sorrow, and only then will there come the calmness of confidence. A victorious faith will

'rise large and slow
From out the fluctuations of our souls,
As from the dim and tumbling sea
Starts the completed moon.'

And then, if so, notice how there is involved in that the other consideration, that a man's confidence is not the product of outward circumstances, but of his own fixed resolves. 'I *will* put my trust in Thee.' Nature says, 'Be afraid!' and the recoil from that natural fear, which comes from a discernment of threatening evil, is only possible by a strong effort of the will. Foolish confidence opposes to natural fear a groundless resolve not to be afraid, as if heedlessness were security, or facts could be altered by resolving not to think about them. True faith, by a mighty effort of the will, fixes its gaze on the divine Helper, and there finds it possible and wise to lose its fears. It is madness to say, 'I will not to be afraid!' it is wisdom and peace to say, 'I will trust, and not be afraid.' But it is no easy matter to fix the eye on God when threatening enemies within arm's-length compel our gaze; and there must be a fixed resolve, not indeed to coerce our emotions or to ignore our perils, but to set the Lord before us, that we may not be moved. When war desolates a land, the peasants fly from their undefended huts to the shelter of the castle on the hilltop, but they cannot reach the safety of the strong walls without climbing the steep road. So when calamity darkens round us, or our sense of sin and sorrow shakes our hearts, we need effort to resolve and to carry into practice the resolution, 'I flee unto Thee to hide me.' Fear, then, is the occasion of faith, and faith is fear transformed by the act of our own will, calling to mind the strength of God, and betaking ourselves thereto. Therefore, do not wonder if the two things lie in your hearts together, and do not say, 'I have no faith because I have some fear,' but rather feel that if there be the least spark of the former it will turn all the rest into its own bright substance. Here is the stifling smoke, coming up from some newly-lighted fire of green wood, black and choking, and solid in its coils; but as the fire burns up, all the smoke-wreaths will be turned into one flaming spire, full of light and warmth. Do you turn your smoke into fire, your fear into faith. Do not be down-hearted if it takes a while to convert the whole of the lower and baser into the nobler and higher. Faith and fear do blend, thank God! They are as oil and water in a man's soul, and the oil will float above, and quiet the waves. 'What time I am afraid'-there speak nature and the heart; 'I will trust in Thee'-there speaks the better man within, lifting himself above nature and circumstances, and casting himself into the extended arms of God, who catches him and keeps him safe.

Then, still further, these words, or rather one portion of them, give us a bright light and a beautiful thought as to the *essence* and inmost centre of this faith or trust. Scholars tell us that the word here translated 'trust' has a graphic, pictorial meaning for its root idea. It signifies literally to cling to or hold fast anything, expressing thus both the notion of a good tight grip and of intimate union. Now, is not that metaphor vivid and full of teaching as well as of impulse? ‘I will trust in Thee.’ ‘And he exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they should *cleave* unto the Lord.’ We may follow out the metaphor of the word in many illustrations. For instance, here is a strong prop, and here is the trailing, lithe feebleness of the vine. Gather up the leaves that are creeping all along the ground, and coil them around that support, and up they go straight towards the heavens. Here is a limpet in some pond or other, left by the tide, and it has relaxed its grasp a little. Touch it with your finger and it grips fast to the rock, and you will want a hammer before you can dislodge it. There is a traveller groping along some narrow broken path, where the chamois would tread cautiously, his guide in front of him. His head reels, and his limbs tremble, and he is all but over, but he grasps the strong hand of the man in front of him, or lashes himself to him by the rope, and he can walk steadily. Or, take that story in the Acts of the Apostles, about the lame man healed by Peter and John. All his life long he had been lame, and when at last healing comes, one can fancy with what a tight grasp ‘the lame man held Peter and John.’ The timidity and helplessness of a lifetime made him hold fast, even while, walking and leaping, he tried how the unaccustomed ‘feet and ankle bones’ could do their work. How he would clutch the arms of his two supporters, and feel himself firm and safe only as long as he grasped them! That is faith, cleaving to Christ, twining round Him with all the tendrils of our heart, as the vine does round its pole; holding to Him by His hand, as a tottering man does by the strong hand that upholds.

And there is one more application of the metaphor, which perhaps may be best brought out by referring to a passage of Scripture. We find this same expression used in that wonderfully dramatic scene in the Book of Kings, where the supercilious messengers from the king of Assyria came up and taunted the king and his people on the wall. ‘What confidence is this wherein thou trustest? Now, on whom dost thou trust, that thou rebellest against me? Now, behold, thou trustest upon the staff of this bruised reed, even upon Egypt, on which, if a man lean, it will go into his hand and pierce it: so is Pharaoh, king of Egypt, unto all that trust on him,’ The word of our text is employed there, and as the phrase shows, with a distinct trace of its primary sense. Hezekiah was leaning upon that poor paper reed on the Nile banks, that has no substance, or strength, or pith in it. A man leans upon it, and it runs into the palm of his hand, and makes an ugly festering wound. Such rotten stays are all our earthly confidences. The act of trust, and the miserable issues of placing it on man, are excellently described there. The act is the same when directed to God, but how different the issues. Lean all your weight on God as on some strong staff, and depend upon it that your support will never yield nor crack and no splinters will run into your palms from it.

If I am to cling with my hand I must first empty my hand. Fancy a man saying, 'I cannot stand unless you hold me up; but I have to hold my bank book, and this thing, and that thing, and the other thing; I cannot put them down, so I have not a hand free to lay hold with, you must do the holding.' That is what some of us are saying in effect. Now the prayer, 'Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe,' is a right one; but not from a man who will not put his possessions out of his hands that he may lay hold of the God who lays hold of him.

'Nothing in my hand I bring.'

Then, of course, and only then, when we are empty-handed, shall we be free to grip and lay hold; and only then shall we be able to go on with the grand words-

'Simply to Thy Cross I cling,'

as some half-drowned, shipwrecked sailor, flung up on the beach, clasps a point of rock, and is safe from the power of the waves that beat around him.

And then one word more. These two clauses that I have put together give us not only the occasion of faith in fear, and the essence of faith in this clinging, but they also give us very beautifully the *victory* of faith. You see with what poetic art-if we may use such words about the breathings of such a soul-he repeats the two main words of the former verse in the latter, only in inverted order-'What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee.' He is possessed by the lower emotion, and resolves to escape from its sway into the light and liberty of faith. And then the next words still keep up the contrast of faith and fear, only that now he is possessed by the more blessed mood, and determines that he will not fall back into the bondage and darkness of the baser. ‘In God I have put my trust; I will not fear.’ He has confidence, and in the strength of that he resolves that he will not yield to fear. If we put that thought into a more abstract form it comes to this: that the one true antagonist and triumphant rival of all fear is faith, and faith alone. There is no reason why any man should be emancipated from his fears either about this world or about the next, except in proportion as he has faith. Nay, rather it is far away more rational to be afraid than not to be afraid, unless I have this faith in Christ. There are plenty of reasons for dread in the dark possibilities and not less dark certainties of life. Disasters, losses, partings, disappointments, sicknesses, death, may any of them come at any moment, and some of them will certainly come sooner or later. Temptations lurk around us like serpents in the grass, they beset us in open ferocity like lions in our path. Is it not wise to fear unless our faith has hold of that great promise, ‘Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder; there shall no evil befall thee’? But if we have a firm hold of God, then it is wise not to be afraid, and terror is folly and sin. For trust brings not only tranquillity, but security, and so takes away fear by taking away danger.

That double operation of faith in quieting and in defending is very strikingly set forth by an Old Testament word, formed from the verb here employed, which means properly *confidence*, and then in one form comes to signify both *in security* and *in safety*, secure as being free from anxiety, safe as being sheltered from peril. So, for instance, the people of that secluded little town of Laish, whose peaceful existence amidst warlike neighbours is described with such singular beauty in the Book of Judges, are said to ‘dwell *careless*, quiet, and *secure*.’ The former phrase is literally ‘in trust,’ and the latter is ‘trusting.’ The idea sought to be conveyed by both seems to be that double one of quiet freedom from fear and from danger. So again, in Moses’ blessing, ‘The beloved of the Lord shall dwell *in safety* by Him,’ we have the same phrase to express the same twofold benediction of shelter, by dwelling in God, from all alarm and from all attack:

‘As far from danger as from fear,
While love, Almighty love is near.’

This thought of the victory of faith over fear is very forcibly set forth in a verse from the Book of Proverbs, which in our version runs ‘The righteous is bold as a lion.' The word rendered 'is bold' is that of our text, and would literally be 'trusts,' but obviously the metaphor requires such a translation as that of the English Bible. The word that properly describes the act of faith has come to mean the courage which is the consequence of the act, just as our own word *confidence* properly signifies trust, but has come to mean the boldness which is born of trust. So, then, the true way to become brave is to lean on God. That, and that alone, delivers from otherwise reasonable fear, and Faith bears in her one hand the gift of outward safety, and in her other that of inward peace.

Peter is sinking in the water; the tempest runs high. He looks upon the waves, and is ready to fancy that he is going to be swallowed up immediately. His fear is reasonable if he has only the tempest and himself to draw his conclusions from. His helplessness and the scowling storm together strike out a little spark of faith, which the wind cannot blow out, nor the floods quench. Like our Psalmist here, when Peter is afraid, he trusts. 'Save, Lord! or I perish.' Immediately the outstretched hand of his Lord grasps his, and brings him safety, while the gentle rebuke, 'O thou of little faith! wherefore didst thou doubt?' infuses courage into his beating heart. The storm runs as high as ever, and the waves beat about his limbs, and the spray blinds his eyes. If he leaves his hold for one moment down he will go. But, as long as he clasps Christ's hand, he is as safe on that heaving floor as if his feet were on a rock; and as long as he looks in Christ's face and leans upon His upholding arm, he does *not* 'see the waves boisterous,' nor tremble at all as they break around him. His fear and his danger are both gone, because he holds Christ and is upheld by Him. In this sense, too, as in many others, 'this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.'

45)Psalms 56:13

Psalms

A SONG OF DELIVERANCE

Psa. 56:13.

According to the ancient Jewish tradition preserved in the superscription of this psalm, it was written at the lowest ebb of David's fortunes, 'when the Philistines took him in Gath,' and as you may remember, he saved himself by adding the fox's hide to the lion's skin, and by pretending to be an idiot, degraded as well as delivered himself. Yet immediately after, if we accept the date given by the superscription, the triumphant confidence and devout hope of this psalm animated his mind. How unlike the true man was to what he appeared to be to Achish and his Philistines! It is strange that the inside and the outside should correspond so badly; but yet, thank God! it is possible. We note,

I. The deliverance realised by faith before it is accomplished in fact.

You will observe that I have made a slight alteration in the translation of the words. In our Authorised Version they stand thus: 'Thou hast delivered my soul from death; *wilt* Thou not deliver my feet from falling?' as if some prior deliverance was the basis upon which the Psalmist rested his expectation of that which was still to come. But there is no authority in the original for that variation of tenses, and both clauses obviously refer to the same period and the same deliverance. Therefore we must read: 'Thou hast delivered my soul from death: *hast* Thou not delivered,' etc.; the question being equivalent to a strong affirmation, 'Yea, Thou hast delivered my feet from falling.' This reference of both clauses to the same period and the same delivering act, is confirmed by the quotation of these words in a very much later psalm, the Psa. 116:8, where we read, with an addition, 'Thou hast delivered my soul from death, *mine eyes from tears*, and my feet from falling.'

So, then, the Psalmist is so sure of the deliverance that is coming that he sings of it as past. He is still in the very thick of the trouble and the fight, and yet he says, 'It is as good as over. Thou *hast* delivered.'

How does he come to that confidence? Simply because his future is God; and whoever has God for his future can turn else uncertain hopes into certain confidences, and make sure of this, that however Achish and his giant Philistines of Gath, wielding Goliath's arms, spears like a weaver's beam, and brazen armour, may compass him about, in the name of the Lord he will destroy them. They are all as good as dead, though they are alive and hostile at this moment. In the midst of trouble we can fling ourselves into the future, or rather draw the future into the present, and say, ‘Thou hast delivered my soul from death.’ It is safe to reckon on to-morrow when we reckon on God. We to-day have the same reasons for the same confidence; and if we will go the right way about it, we, too, may bring June’s sun into November’s fogs, and bask in the warmth of certain deliverance even when the chill mists of trouble enfold us.

But then note, too, here, the substance of this future intervention which, to the Psalmist’s quiet faith, is present:-’My soul from death,’ and after that he says, ‘My feet from falling,’ which looks very like an anticlimax and bathos. But yet, just because to deliver the feet from falling is so much smaller a thing than delivering a life from death, it comes here to be a climax and something greater. The storm passes over the man. What then? After the storm has passed, he is not only alive, but he is standing upright. It has not killed him. No, it has not even shaken him. His feet are as firm as ever they were, and just because that is a smaller thing, it is a greater thing for the deliverance to have accomplished than the other. God does not deliver by halves; He does not leave the delivered man maimed, or thrown down, though living.

Remember, too, the expansion of the text in the psalm to which I have already referred, one of a much later date, which by quoting these words really comments upon them. The later Psalmist adds a clause. ‘Mine eyes from tears,’ and we may follow on in the same direction, and note the three spheres in which the later poet hymns the delivering hand of God as spiritualising for us all our deeper Christian experience. ‘Thou *hast* delivered my soul from death,’ in that great redemption by which the Son has died that we may never know either the intensest bitterness of physical death, or the true death of which it is the shadow and the emblem. ‘Thou hast delivered mine eyes from tears’; God wipes away tears here, even before we come to the time when He wipes away all tears from off all faces, and no eyes are delivered from tears, except eyes that have looked through tears to God. ‘And my feet from falling’-redeeming grace which saves the soul; comforting grace which lightens sorrow; upholding grace which keeps us from sins-these are the elements of what God has done for us all, if our poor feeble trust has rested on Him.

How did David get to this confidence? Why, he prayed himself into it. If you will read the psalm, you will see very clearly the process by which a man comes to that serene, triumphant trust that the battle is won even whilst it is raging around him. The previous portion of the psalm falls into two parts, on which I need only make this one remark, that in both we have first of all an obvious disquieting fact, and then a flash of victorious confidence. Let me just read a word or two to you. The Psalmist begins in a very minor key. ‘Be merciful unto me, O God! for man would swallow me up’-that is Achish and his Philistines. ‘He fighting daily oppresseth me; mine enemies daily would swallow me up.’ He reiterates the same thought with the dreary monotony of sorrow, ‘for there be many that fight against me, O Thou most High!’ But swiftly his note changes into ‘What time I am afraid I will trust in Thee. In God I will praise His word’; that is to say, His promise of deliverance, ‘in God I have put my trust.’ He has climbed to the height, but only for a moment, for down he drops again, and begins anew the old miserable complaint. The sorrow is too clinging to be cast off at one struggle. It has been dammed out for the moment, but the flood rushes too heavily, and away goes the dam, and back pours the black water. ‘Every day they wrest my words; all their thoughts are against me for evil.’ And he goes on longer on his depressing key this second time than he did the first, but he rises above it once more in the same fashion, and the refrain with which he had closed the first part of the psalm closes the second. ‘In God will I praise His word; in the Lord will I praise His word.’ Now he has won the height and keeps it, and breaks into a paean of victory in words of the text.

That is to say, pray yourselves into confidence, and if it does not come at first, pray again. If the consolation seems to glide away, even whilst you are laying hold of it, grasp it once more, and close your fingers more tightly on it. Do not be afraid of going down into the depths a second time, but be sure that you try to rise out of them at the same point as before, by grasping the assurance that in God, in His strength, and by His grace, you will be able to set your seal to the truth of His great promise. Thus will you rise to this confidence which calleth things that are not as though they were, and brings the to-morrow that is sure to dawn with all its brightness and serenity into the turbulent, tempestuous, and clouded atmosphere of to-day. We shall one day escape from all that burdens, and tries, and tasks us; and until then this blessed assurance, the fruit of prayer, is like the food that the ravens brought to the prophet in the ravine, or the bread and water that the angel awoke him to partake of when he was faint in the wilderness. The true answer to David’s prayer was the immediate access of confidence unshaken, though the outward answer was a long time in coming, and years lay between him and the cessation of his persecutions and troubles. So we may have brooks by the way, in quiet confidence of deliverance ere yet the deliverance comes. Then note,

II. The impulse to service which deliverance brings.

‘That I may walk before God in the light of the living’; that is God’s purpose in all His deliverances, that we may thereby be impelled to trustful and grateful service. And David makes that purpose into a vow, for the words might almost as well be translated, ‘I *will* walk before Him.’ Let us see to it that God’s purpose is our resolve, and that we do not lose the good of any of the troubles or discipline through which He passes us; for the worst of all sorrows is a wasted sorrow.

‘Thou hast delivered my feet that I may walk.’ What are feet for? Walking. Further, notice the precise force of that phrase, ‘that I may walk *before God*.’ It is not altogether the same as the cognate one which is used about Enoch, that ‘he walked *with* God.’ That expresses communion as with a friend; this, the ordering of one’s life before His eye, and in the consciousness of His presence as Judge and as Taskmaster. So you find the expression used in almost the only other occasion where it occurs in the Old Testament, where God says to Abraham, ‘Walk before Me, and’-because thou dost order thy life in the consciousness that I am looking at thee-’be thou perfect.’ So, to walk before God is to live even in all the distracting activities of daily life, with the clear realisation, and the continued thought burning in our minds that we are doing them all in His presence. Think of what a regiment of soldiers on parade does as each file passes in front of the saluting point where the commanding officer is standing. How each man dresses up, and they pull themselves together, keeping step, sloping their rifles rightly. We are not on parade, but about business a great deal more serious than that. We are doing our fighting with the Captain looking at us, and that should be a stimulus, a joy and not a terror. Realise God’s eye watching you, and sin, and meanness, and negligence, and selfishness, and sensuality, and lust, and passion, and all the other devils that are in you will vanish like ghosts at cockcrow. ‘Walk before Me,’ and if you feel that I am beside you, you cannot sin. ‘Walk before Me, and be thou perfect.’ Notice,

III. The region in which that observance of the divine eye is to be carried on.

‘In the light of the living,’ says the Psalmist. That seems to correspond to the first clause of his hope; just as the previous word that I have been commenting upon, ‘walking before Him,’ corresponds to the second, where he speaks about his feet. ‘Thou hast delivered my soul from death. . . . I will walk before Thee in the light of the living’-where Thou dost still permit my delivered soul to be. And the phrase seems to mean the sunshine of human life contrasted with the darkness of *Sheol*.

The expression is varied in the 116th Psalm, which reads ‘the land of the living.’ The really living are they who live in Jesus, and the real light of the living is the sunshine that streams on those who thus live, because they live in Him who not only pours His light upon their hearts, but, by pouring it, turns themselves into ‘light in the Lord.’ We, too, may have the brightness of His face irradiating our faces and illuminating our paths, as with the beneficence of a better sunshine. The Psalmist points us the way thus to walk in light. He vows that, because his heart is full of the great mercies of his delivering God, he will order all his active life as under the consciousness of God’s eye upon him, and then it will all be lightened as by a burst of sunshine. Our brightest light is the radiance from the face of God whom we try to love and serve, and the Psalmist’s confidence is that a life of observance of His commandments in which gratitude for deliverance is the impelling motive to continual realisation of His presence, and an accordant life, will be a bright and sunny career. You will live in the sunshine if you live before His face, and however wintry the world may be, it will be like a clear frosty day. There is no frost in the sky, it does not go above the atmosphere, and high above, in serene and wondrous blue, is the blaze of the sunshine. Such a life will be a guided life. There will still remain many occasions for doubt in the region of belief, and for perplexity as to duty. There will often be need for patient and earnest thought as to both, and there will be no lack of calls for strenuous effort of our best faculties in order to apprehend what our Guide means us to do, and where He would have us go, but through it all there will be the guiding hand. As the Master, with perhaps a glance backwards to these words, said, ‘He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.’ If He is in the light let us walk in the light, and to us it will be purity and knowledge and joy.

46)Psalms 57:7

Psalms

THE FIXED HEART

Psa. 57:7.

It is easy to say such things when life goes smoothly with us. But this Psalmist, whether David or another, says this, and means it, when all things are dark and frowning around him. The superscription attributes the words to David himself, fleeing from Saul, and hiding in the cave. Whether that be so or no, the circumstances under which the Psalmist sings are obviously those of very great difficulty and oppression. But he sings himself into confidence and good cheer. In the dark he believes in the light. There are some flowers that give their perfumes after sunset and are sweetest when the night dews are falling. The true religious life is like these. A heart really based upon God, and at rest in Him, never breathes forth such fragrant and strong perfume as in the darkness of sorrow. The repetition of ‘My heart is fixed’ adds emphasis to the expression of unalterable determination. The fixed heart is resolved to ‘sing and give praise’ in spite of everything that might make sobs and tears choke the song.

I. Note the fixed heart.

The Hebrew uses the metaphor of the ‘heart’ to cover a great deal more of the inward self than we are accustomed to do. We mainly mean thereby that in us which loves. But the Old Testament speaks of the ‘thoughts and intents’ as well as the ‘affections’ of the heart. And so to this Psalmist his ‘heart’ was not only that in him which loved, but that which purposed and which thought. When he says ‘My heart is fixed’ he does not merely mean that he is conscious of a steadfast love, but also and rather of a fixed and settled determination, and of an abiding communion of thought between himself and God. And he not only makes this declaration as the expression of his experience for the moment, but he mortgages the future, and in so far as any man dare, he ventures to say that this temper of entire consecration, of complete communion, of fixed resolve to cleave to God, which is his present mood, will be his future whatever may wait his outward life then. The lesson from that resolve is that our religion, if it is worth anything, must be a continuous and uniformly acting force throughout our whole lives, and not merely sporadic and spasmodic, by fits and starts. The lines that a child’s unsteady and untrained hand draws in its copy-book are too good a picture of the ‘crooked, wandering ways in which we live,’ in so far as our religion is concerned. The line should be firm and straight, uniform in breadth, unvarying in direction, like a sunbeam, homogeneous and equally tenacious like an iron rod. Unless it be thus strong and uniform, it will scarcely sustain the weights that it must bear, or resist the blows that it must encounter.

For a fixed heart I must have a fixed determination, and not a mere fluctuating and soon broken intention. I must have a steadfast affection, and not merely a fluttering love, that, like some butterfly, lights now on this, now on that, sweet flower, but which has a flight straight as a carrier pigeon to its cot, which shall bear me direct to God. And I must have a continuous realisation of my dependence upon God, and of God’s sweet sufficiency, going with me all through the dusty day. A firm determination, a steadfast love, a constant thought, these at least are inculcated in the words of my text. ‘My heart is fixed, O God! my heart is fixed.’

Ah, brethren! how unlike the broken, interrupted, divergent lines that we draw! Our religious moments are not knit together, and touching one upon the other, but they are like the pools in the bed of a half dried up Australian stream-a pond here, and a stretch of white, blistering pebbles there, and then a little drop of water, and then another reach of dryness. They should all be knit together by one continuous flow of a fixed love, desire, and thought. Is our average Christianity fairly represented by such words as these of my text? Do they not rather make us burn with shame when we think that a man who lived in the twilight of God’s revelation, and was weighed upon by distresses such as wrung this psalm out of him, should have poured out this resolve, which we who live in the sunlight and are flooded with blessings find it hard to echo with sincerity and truth? Fixed hearts are rare amongst the Christians of this day.

II. Notice the manifold hindrances to such a uniformity of our religious life.

They are formidable enough, God knows, we all know it, and I do not need to dwell upon them. There is, for example, the tendency to fluctuation which besets all our feelings, and especially our religious emotions. What would happen to a steam-engine if the stoker now piled on coals and then fell asleep by the furnace door? One moment the boiler would be ready to burst; at another moment there would be no steam to drive anything. That is the sort of alternation that goes on amongst hosts of Christians to-day. Their springtime and summer are followed certainly by an autumn and a bitter winter. Every moment of elevation has a corresponding moment of depression. They never catch a glimpse of God and of His love brighter and more sweet than ordinary without its being followed by long weariness and depression and darkness. That is the kind of life that many of you are contented to live as Christian people.

But is there any necessity for such alternations? Some degree of fluctuation there will always be. The very exercise of emotion tends to its extinction. Varying conditions of health and other externals will affect the buoyancy and clear-sightedness and vivacity of the spiritual life. Only a barometer that is out of order will always stand at set fair. The vane which never points but to south is rusty and means nothing.

But while there cannot be absolute uniformity, there might and should be a far nearer approach to an equable temperature of a much higher range than the readings of most professing Christians give. There is, indeed, a dismally uniform arctic temperature in many of them. Their hearts are fixed, truly, but fixed on earth. Their frost is broken by no thaw, their tepid formalism interrupted by no disturbing enthusiasm. We do not now speak of these, but of those who have moments of illumination, of communion, of submission of will, which fade all too soon. To such we would earnestly say that these moments may be prolonged and made more continuous. We need not be at the mercy of our own unregulated feelings. We can control our hearts, and keep them fixed, even if they should wish to wander. If we would possess the blessing of an approximately uniform religious life, we must assert the control of ourselves and use both bridle and spur. A great many religious people seem to think that 'good times' come and go, and that they can do nothing to bring or keep or banish them. But that is not so. If the fire is burning low, there is such a thing on the hearth as a poker, and coals are at hand. If we feel our faith falling asleep, are we powerless to rouse it? Cannot we say 'I *will* trust'? Let us learn that the variations in our religious emotions are largely subject to our own control, and may, if we will govern ourselves, be brought far nearer to uniformity than they ordinarily are.

Besides the fluctuations due to our own changes of mood, there are also the distracting influences of even the duties which God lays upon us. It is hard for a man with the material task of the moment that takes all his powers, to keep a little corner of his heart clear, and to feel that God is there. It is difficult in the clatter of the mill or in the crowds on 'Change, to do our work as for and in remembrance of Christ. It *is* difficult; but it is possible. Distractions are made distractions by our own folly and weakness. There is nothing that it is our duty to do which an honest attempt to do from the right motive could not convert into a positive help to getting nearer God. It is for us to determine whether the tasks of life, and this intrusive external and material world, shall veil Him from us, or shall reveal Him to us. It is for us to determine whether we shall make our secular avocation and its trials, little and great, a means to get nearer to God, or a means to shut Him out from us, and us from Him. There is nothing but sin incompatible with the fixed heart, the resolved will, the continual communion, nothing incompatible though there may be much that makes it difficult to realise and preserve these.

And then, of course, the trials and sorrows which strike us all make this fixed heart hard to keep. It is easy, as I said, to vow, 'I will sing and give praise,' when flesh is comfortable and prosperity is spreading its bright sky over our heads. It is harder to say it when disappointment and bitterness are in the heart, and an empty place there that aches and will never be filled. It is harder for a man to say it when, like this Psalmist, his soul is 'amongst lions' and he 'lies amongst them that are set on fire.' But still, rightly taken, sorrow is the best ladder to God; and there is no such praise as comes from the lips that, if they did not praise, must sob, and that praise because they are beginning to learn that evil, as the world calls it, is the stepping-stone to the highest good. 'My heart is fixed. I will sing and give praise' may be the voice of the mourner as well as of the prosperous and happy.

III. Lastly, let me say just a word as to the means by which such a uniform character may be impressed upon our religious experience.

There is another psalm where this same phrase is employed with a very important and illuminating addition, in which we read, 'His heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord.' That is the secret of a fixed heart-continuous faith rooted and grounded in Him. This fluttering, changeful, unreliable, emotional nature of mine will be made calm and steadfast by faith, and duties done in the faith of God will bind me to Him; and sorrows borne and joys accepted in the faith of God will be links in the chain that knits Him to me.

But then the question comes, how to get this continuous faith? Brethren! I know no answer except the simple one, by continually making efforts after it, and adopting the means which Christ enjoins to secure it. A man climbing a hill, though he has to look to his feet when in the slippery places, and all his energies are expended in hoisting himself upwards by every projection and crag, will do all the better if he lifts his eye often to the summit that gleams above him. So we, in our upward course, shall make the best progress when we consciously and honestly try to look beyond the things seen and temporal, even whilst we are working in the midst of them, and to keep clear before us the summit to which our faith tends. If we lived in the endeavour to realise that great white throne, and Him that sits upon it, we should find it easier to say, 'My heart is fixed, O God! my heart is fixed.'

But be sure of this, there will be no such uniformity of religious experience throughout our lives unless there be frequent times in them in which we go into our chambers and shut our doors about us, and hold communion with our Father in secret. Everything noble and great in the Christian life is fed by solitude, and everything poor and mean and hypocritical and low-toned is nourished by continual absence from the secret place of the Most High. There must be moments of solitary communion, if there are to be hours of strenuous service and a life of continual consecration.

We need not ask ourselves the question whether the realisation of the ideal of this fixedness in its perfect completeness is possible for us here on earth or not. You and I are a long way on this side of that realisation yet, and we need not trouble ourselves about the final stages until we have got on a stage or two more.

What would you think of a boy if, when he had just been taught to draw with a pencil, he said to his master, 'Do you think I shall ever be able to draw as well as Raphael?' His teacher would say to him, 'Whether you will or not, you will be able to draw a good deal better than now, if you try.' We need not trouble ourselves with the questions that disturb some people until we are very much nearer to perfection than any of us yet are. At any rate, we can approach indefinitely to that ideal, and whether it is possible for us in this life ever to have hearts so continuously fixed as that no attraction shall draw the needle aside one point from the pole or not, it is possible for us all to have them a great deal steadier than in that wavering, fluctuating vacillation which now rules them.

So let us pray the prayer, 'Unite my heart to fear Thy name,' make the resolve, 'My heart is fixed,' and listen obediently to the command, 'He exhorted them all that with purpose of heart they should cleave unto the Lord.'

47)Psalms 59:9

Psalms

WAITING AND SINGING

Psa. 59:9, Psa. 59:17.

There is an obvious correspondence between these two verses even as they stand in our translation, and still more obviously in the Hebrew. You observe that in the former verse the words 'because of' are a supplement inserted by our translators, because they did not exactly know what to make of the bare words as they stood. 'His strength, I will wait upon Thee,' is, of course, nonsense; but a very slight alteration of a single letter, which has the sanction of several good authorities, both in manuscripts and translations, gives an appropriate and beautiful meaning, and brings the two verses into complete verbal correspondence. Suppose we read, 'My strength,' instead of 'His strength.' The change is only making the limb of one letter a little shorter, and as you will perceive, we thereby get the same expressions in both verses.

We may then read our two texts thus: 'Upon Thee, O my Strength! I will wait. . . . Unto Thee, O my Strength, I will sing!' They are, word for word, parallel, with the significant difference that the waiting in the one passes into song, in the other, the silent expectation breaks into music of praise. And these two words-*wait* and *sing*-are in the Hebrew the same in every letter but one, thus strengthening the impression of likeness as well as emphasising, with poetic art, that of difference. The parallel, too, obviously extends to the second half of each verse, where the reason for both the waiting and the praise is the same-'For God is my defence'-with the further eloquent variation that the song is built not only on the thought that 'God is my defence,' but also on this, that He is 'the God of my mercy.'

These two parallel verses, then, are a kind of refrain, coming in at the close of each division of the psalm; and if you examine its structure and general course of thought, you will see that the first stands at the end of a picture of the Psalmist's trouble and danger, and makes the transition to the second part, which is mainly a prayer for deliverance, and finishes with the refrain altered and enlarged, as I have pointed out.

The heading of the psalm tells us that its date is the very beginning of Saul's persecution, when 'they watched the house to kill' David, and he fled by night from the city. There is a certain correspondence between the circumstances and some part of the picture of his foes here which makes the date probable. If so, this is one of David's oldest psalms, and is interesting as showing his faith and courage, even in the first burst of danger. But whether that be so or not, we have here, at any rate, the voice of a devout soul in sore sorrow, and we may well learn the lesson of its twofold utterance. The man, overwhelmed by calamity, betakes himself to God. ‘Upon Thee, O my Strength! will I wait, for God is my defence.’ Then, by dint of *waiting*, although the outward circumstances keep just the same, his temper and feelings change. He began with, ‘Deliver me from my enemies, O Lord! for they lie in wait for my soul.’ He passes through ‘My Strength! I will wait upon Thee,’ and so ends with ‘My Strength! I will sing unto Thee.’ We may then throw our remarks into two groups, and deal for a few moments with these two points-the waiting on God, and the change of waiting into praise.

Now, with regard to the first of these-the waiting on God-I must notice that the expression here, ‘I will *wait*,’ is a somewhat remarkable one. It means accurately, ‘I will watch Thee,’ and it is the word that is generally employed, not about our looking up to Him, but about His looking down to us. It would describe the action of a shepherd guarding his flock; of a sentry keeping a city; of the watchers that watch for the morning, and the like. By using it, the Psalmist seems as if he would say-There are two kinds of watching. There is God’s watching over me, and there is my watching for God. I look up to Him that He may bless; He looks down upon me that He may take care of me. As He guards me, so I stand expectant before Him, as one in a besieged town, upon the ramparts there, looks eagerly out across the plain to see the coming of the long-expected succours. God ‘waits to be gracious’-wonderful words, painting for us His watchfulness of fitting times and ways to bless us, and His patient attendance on our unwilling, careless spirits. We may well take a lesson from His attitude in bestowing, and on our parts, wait on Him to be helped. For these two things-vigilance and patience-are the main elements in the scriptural idea of waiting on God. Let me enforce each of them in a word or two.

There is no waiting on God for help, and there is no help from God, without watchful expectation on our parts. If ever we fail to receive strength and defence from Him, it is because we are not on the outlook for it. Many a proffered succour from heaven goes past us, because we are not standing on our watch-tower to catch the far-off indications of its approach, and to fling open the gates of our heart for its entrance. He who expects no help will get none; he whose expectation does not lead him to be on the alert for its coming will get but little. How the beleaguered garrison, that knows a relieving force is on the march, strain their eyes to catch the first glint of the sunshine on their spears as they top the pass! But how unlike such tension of watchfulness is the languid anticipation and fitful look, with more of distrust than hope in it, which we turn to heaven in our need! No wonder we have so little living experience that God is our ‘strength’ and our ‘defence,’ when we so partially believe that He is, and so little expect that He will be either. The homely old proverb says, ‘They that watch for providences will never want a providence to watch for,’ and you may turn it the other way and say, ‘They that do *not* watch for providence will never *have* a providence to watch for.’ Unless you put out your water-jars when it rains you will catch no water; if you do not watch for God coming to help you, God’s watching to be gracious will be of no good at all to you. His waiting is not a substitute for ours, but because He watches therefore we should watch. We say, we expect Him to comfort and help us-well, are we standing, as it were, on tiptoe, with empty hands upraised to bring them a little nearer the gifts we look for? Are our ‘eyes ever towards the Lord’? Do we pore over His gifts, scrutinising them as eagerly as a gold-seeker does the quartz in his pan, to detect every shining speck of the precious metal? Do we go to our work and our daily battle with the confident expectation that He will surely come when our need is the sorest and scatter our enemies? Is there any clear outlook kept by us for the help which we know must come, lest it should pass us unobserved, and like the dove from the ark, finding no footing in our hearts drowned in a flood of troubles, be fain to return to the calm refuge from which it came on its vain errand? Alas, how many gentle messengers of God flutter homeless about our hearts, unrecognised and unwelcomed, because we have not been watching for them! Of what avail is it that a strong hand from the beach should fling the safety-line with true aim to the wreck, if no eye on the deck is watching for it? It hangs there, useless and unseen, and then it drops into the sea, and every soul on board is drowned. It is our own fault-and very largely the fault of our want of watchfulness for the coming of God’s help-if we are ever overwhelmed by the tasks, or difficulties, or sorrows of life. We wonder that we are left to fight out the battle ourselves. But are we? Is it not rather, that while God’s succours are hastening to our side we will not open our eyes to see, nor our hearts to receive them? If we go through the world with our hands hanging listlessly down instead of lifted to heaven, or full of the trifles and toys of this present, as so many of us do, what wonder is it if heavenly gifts of strength do not come into our grasp?

That attitude of watchful expectation is vividly described for us in the graphic words of another psalm, ‘My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning.’ What a picture that is! Think of a wakeful, sick man, tossing restless all the night on his tumbled bed, racked with pain made harder to bear by the darkness. How often his heavy eye is lifted to the window-pane, to see if the dawn has not yet begun to tint it with a grey glimmer! How he groans, ‘Would God it were morning!’ Or think of some unarmed and solitary man, benighted in the forest, and hearing the wild beasts growl and scream and bark all round, while his fire dies down, and he knows that his life depends on the morning breaking soon. With yet more eager expectation are we to look for God, whose coming is a better morning for our sick and defenceless spirits. If we are not so looking for His help, we need never be surprised that we do not get it. There is no promise and no probability that it will come to men in their sleep, who neither desire it nor wait for it. And such vigilant expectation will be accompanied with patience. There is no impatience in it, but the very opposite. ‘If we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.’ If we know that He will surely come, then if He tarry we can wait for Him. The measure of our confidence is ever the measure of our patience. Being sure that He is always ‘in the midst of’ Zion, we may be sure that at the right time He will flame out into delivering might, helping her, and that right early. So waiting means watchfulness and patience, both of which have their roots in trust.

Further, we have here set forth not only the nature, but also the object of this waiting. ‘Upon Thee, O *my Strength*! will I wait, for God is *my Defence*.’

The object to which faith is directed, and the ground on which it is based, are both set forth in these two names here applied to God. The name of the Lord is Strength, therefore I wait on Him in the confident expectation of receiving of His power. The Lord is ‘my Defence,’ therefore I wait on Him in the confident expectation of safety. The one name has respect to our condition of feebleness and inadequacy for our tasks, and points to God as infusing strength into us. The other points to our exposedness to danger and to enemies, and points to God as casting His shelter around us. The word translated ‘defence’ is literally ‘a high fortress,’ and is the same as closes the rapturous accumulation of the names of his delivering God, which the Psalmist gives us when he vows to love Jehovah, who has been his Rock, and Fortress, and Deliverer; his God in whom he will trust, his Buckler, and the Horn of his salvation, and his *High Tower*. The first name speaks of God dwelling in us, and His strength made perfect in our weakness; the second speaks of our dwelling in God, and our defencelessness sheltered in Him. ‘The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.’ As some outnumbered army, unable to make head against its enemies in the open, flees to the shelter of some hill fortress, perched upon a crag, and taking up the drawbridge, cannot be reached by anything that has not wings, so this man, hard pressed by his foes, flees into God to hide him, and feels secure behind these strong walls.

That is the God on whom we wait. The recognition of His character as thus mighty and ready to help is the only thing that will evoke our expectant confidence, and His character thus discerned is the only object which our confidence can grasp aright. Trust Him as what He is, and trust Him because of what He is, and see to it that your faith lays hold on the living God Himself, and on nothing beside.

But waiting on God is not only the recognition of His character as revealed, but it involves, too, the act of laying hold on all the power and blessing of that character for myself. ‘*My* strength, *my* defence,’ says the Psalmist. Think of what He is, and believe that He is that for *you*, else there is no true waiting on Him. Make God thy very own by claiming thine own portion in His might, by betaking thyself to that strong habitation. We cannot wait on God in crowds, but one by one, must say, ‘*My* strength and *my* defence.’

And now turn to the second verse of our two texts: ‘Unto Thee, O my Strength! will I sing, for God is my defence and the God of my mercy.’

Here we catch, as it were, waiting expectation and watchfulness in the very act of passing over into possession and praise. For remember the aspect of things has not changed a bit between the first verse of our text and the last. The enemies are all round about David just as they were, ‘making a noise like a dog,' as he says, and 'going round about the city.' The evil that was threatening him and making him sad remains entirely unlightened. What has altered? He has altered. And how has he altered? Because his waiting on God has begun to work an inward change, and he has climbed, as it were, out of the depths of his sorrow up into the sunlight. And so it ever is, my friends! There is deliverance in spirit before there is deliverance in outward fact. If our patient waiting bring, as it certainly will bring, at the right time, an answer in the removal of danger, and the lightening of sorrow, it will bring first the better answer, 'the peace of God, which passeth all understanding,' to keep your hearts and minds. That is the highest blessing we have to seek for in our waiting on God, and that is the blessing which we get as soon as we wait on Him. The outward deliverance may tarry, but ever there come before it, as heralds of its approach, the sense of a lightened burden and the calmness of a strengthened heart. It may be long before the morning breaks, but even while the darkness lasts, a faint air begins to stir among the sleeping leaves, the promise of the dawn, and the first notes of half-awakened birds prelude the full chorus that will hail the sunrise.

It is beautiful, I think, to see how in the compass of this one little psalm the singer has, as it were, wrought himself clear, and sung himself out of his fears. The stream of his thought, like some mountain torrent, turbid at first, has run itself bright and sparkling. How all the tremor and agitation have gone away, just because he has kept his mind for a few minutes in the presence of the calm thought of God and His love. The first courses of his psalm, like those of some great building, are laid deep down in the darkness, but the shining summit is away up there in the sunlight, and God's glittering glory is sparklingly reflected from the highest point. Whoever begins with, 'Deliver me-I will wait upon Thee,' will pass very quickly, even before the outward deliverance comes, into-'O my Strength! unto Thee will I sing!' Every song of true trust, though it may begin with a minor, will end in a burst of jubilant gladness. No prayer ought ever to deal with complaints, as we know, without starting with thanksgiving, and, blessed be God, no prayer need to deal with complaints without ending with thanksgiving. So, all our cries of sorrow, and all our acknowledgments of weakness and need, and all our plaintive beseechings, should be inlaid, as it were, between two layers of brighter and gladder thought, like dull rock between two veins of gold. The prayer that begins with thankfulness, and passes on into waiting, even while in sorrow and sore need, will always end in thankfulness, and triumph, and praise.

If we regard this second verse of our text as the expression of the Psalmist's emotion at the moment of its utterance, then we see in it a beautiful illustration of the effect of faithful waiting to turn complaining into praise. If we regard it rather as an expression of his confidence, that 'I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance,' we see in it an illustration of the power of patient waiting to brighten the sure hope of deliverance, and to bring summer into the heart of winter. As resolve, or as prophecy, it is equally a witness of the large reward of quiet waiting for the salvation of the Lord.

In either application of the words their almost precise correspondence with those of the previous verse is far more than a mere poetic ornament, or part of the artistic form of the psalm. It teaches us this happy lesson-that the song of accomplished deliverance, whether on earth, or in the final joy of heaven, will be but a sweeter, fuller repetition of the cry that went up in trouble from our waiting hearts. The object to which we shall turn with our thankfulness is He to whom we betook ourselves with our prayers. There will be the same turning of the soul to Him; only instead of wistful waiting in the longing look, joy will light her lamps in our eyes, and thankfulness beam in our faces as we turn to His light. We shall look to Him as of old, and name Him what we used to name Him when we were in weakness and warfare,-our 'Strength' and our 'Defence.' But how different the feelings with which the delivered soul calls Him so, from those with which the sorrowful heart tried to grasp the comfort of the names. Then their reality was a matter of faith, often hard to hold fast. Now it is a matter of memory and experience. 'I called Thee my strength when I was full of weakness; I tried to believe Thou wast my defence when I was full of fear; I thought of Thee as my fortress when I was ringed about with foes; I know Thee now for that which I then trusted that Thou wast. As I waited upon Thee that Thou mightest be gracious, I praise Thee now that Thou hast been more gracious than my hopes.' Blessed are they whose loftiest expectations were less than their grateful memories and their rich experience, and who can take up in their song of praise the names by which they called on God, and feel that they knew not half their depth, their sweetness, or their power!

But the praise is not merely the waiting transformed. Experience has not only deepened the conception of the meaning of God's name; it has added a new name. The cry of the suppliant was to God, his strength and defence; the song of the saved is to the God who is also the God of his mercy. The experiences of life have brought out more fully the love and tender pity of God. While the troubles lasted it was hard to believe that God was strong enough to brace us against them, and to keep us safe in them; it was harder still to think of them as coming from Him at all; it was hardest to feel that they came from His love. But when they are past, and their meaning is plainer, and we possess their results in the weight of glory which they have wrought out for us, we shall be able to look back on them all as the mercies of the God of our mercy, even as when a man looks down from the mountain-top upon the mists and the clouds through which he passed, and sees them all smitten by the sunshine that gleams upon them from above. That which was thick and damp as he was struggling through it, is irradiated into rosy beauty; the retrospective and downward glance confirms and surpasses all that faith dimly discerned, and found it hard to believe. Whilst we are fighting here, brethren! let us say, 'I will wait for Thee,' and then yonder we shall, with deeper knowledge of the love that was in all our sorrows, sing unto Him who was our strength in earth's weakness, our defence in earth's dangers, and is for ever more the 'God of our mercy,' amidst the large and undeserved favours of heaven.

48)Psalms 59:17

Psalms

WAITING AND SINGING

Psa. 59:9, Psa. 59:17.

There is an obvious correspondence between these two verses even as they stand in our translation, and still more obviously in the Hebrew. You observe that in the former verse the words 'because of' are a supplement inserted by our translators, because they did not exactly know what to make of the bare words as they stood. ‘His strength, I will wait upon Thee,’ is, of course, nonsense; but a very slight alteration of a single letter, which has the sanction of several good authorities, both in manuscripts and translations, gives an appropriate and beautiful meaning, and brings the two verses into complete verbal correspondence. Suppose we read, ‘My strength,’ instead of ‘His strength.’ The change is only making the limb of one letter a little shorter, and as you will perceive, we thereby get the same expressions in both verses.

We may then read our two texts thus: ‘Upon Thee, O my Strength! I will wait. . . . Unto Thee, O my Strength, I will sing!’ They are, word for word, parallel, with the significant difference that the waiting in the one passes into song, in the other, the silent expectation breaks into music of praise. And these two words-*wait* and *sing*-are in the Hebrew the same in every letter but one, thus strengthening the impression of likeness as well as emphasising, with poetic art, that of difference. The parallel, too, obviously extends to the second half of each verse, where the reason for both the waiting and the praise is the same-’For God is my defence’-with the further eloquent variation that the song is built not only on the thought that ‘God is my defence,’ but also on this, that He is ‘the God of my mercy.’

These two parallel verses, then, are a kind of refrain, coming in at the close of each division of the psalm; and if you examine its structure and general course of thought, you will see that the first stands at the end of a picture of the Psalmist’s trouble and danger, and makes the transition to the second part, which is mainly a prayer for deliverance, and finishes with the refrain altered and enlarged, as I have pointed out.

The heading of the psalm tells us that its date is the very beginning of Saul’s persecution, when ‘they watched the house to kill’ David, and he fled by night from the city. There is a certain correspondence between the circumstances and some part of the picture of his foes here which makes the date probable. If so, this is one of David’s oldest psalms, and is interesting as showing his faith and courage, even in the first burst of danger. But whether that be so or not, we have here, at any rate, the voice of a devout soul in sore sorrow, and we may well learn the lesson of its twofold utterance. The man, overwhelmed by calamity, betakes himself to God. ‘Upon Thee, O my Strength! will I wait, for God is my defence.’ Then, by dint of *waiting*, although the outward circumstances keep just the same, his temper and feelings change. He began with, ‘Deliver me from my enemies, O Lord! for they lie in wait for my soul.’ He passes through ‘My Strength! I will wait upon Thee,’ and so ends with ‘My Strength! I will sing unto Thee.’ We may then throw our remarks into two groups, and deal for a few moments with these two points-the waiting on God, and the change of waiting into praise.

Now, with regard to the first of these-the waiting on God-I must notice that the expression here, ‘I will *wait*,’ is a somewhat remarkable one. It means accurately, ‘I will watch Thee,’ and it is the word that is generally employed, not about our looking up to Him, but about His looking down to us. It would describe the action of a shepherd guarding his flock; of a sentry keeping a city; of the watchers that watch for the morning, and the like. By using it, the Psalmist seems as if he would say-There are two kinds of watching. There is God’s watching over me, and there is my watching for God. I look up to Him that He may bless; He looks down upon me that He may take care of me. As He guards me, so I stand expectant before Him, as one in a besieged town, upon the ramparts there, looks eagerly out across the plain to see the coming of the long-expected succours. God ‘waits to be gracious’-wonderful words, painting for us His watchfulness of fitting times and ways to bless us, and His patient attendance on our unwilling, careless spirits. We may well take a lesson from His attitude in bestowing, and on our parts, wait on Him to be helped. For these two things-vigilance and patience-are the main elements in the scriptural idea of waiting on God. Let me enforce each of them in a word or two.

There is no waiting on God for help, and there is no help from God, without watchful expectation on our parts. If ever we fail to receive strength and defence from Him, it is because we are not on the outlook for it. Many a proffered succour from heaven goes past us, because we are not standing on our watch-tower to catch the far-off indications of its approach, and to fling open the gates of our heart for its entrance. He who expects no help will get none; he whose expectation does not lead him to be on the alert for its coming will get but little. How the beleaguered garrison, that knows a relieving force is on the march, strain their eyes to catch the first glint of the sunshine on their spears as they top the pass! But how unlike such tension of watchfulness is the languid anticipation and fitful look, with more of distrust than hope in it, which we turn to heaven in our need! No wonder we have so little living experience that God is our ‘strength’ and our ‘defence,’ when we so partially believe that He is, and so little expect that He will be either. The homely old proverb says, ‘They that watch for providences will never want a providence to watch for,’ and you may turn it the other way and say, ‘They that do *not* watch for providence will never *have* a providence to watch for.’ Unless you put out your water-jars when it rains you will catch no water; if you do not watch for God coming to help you, God’s watching to be gracious will be of no good at all to you. His waiting is not a substitute for ours, but because He watches therefore we should watch. We say, we expect Him to comfort and help us-well, are we standing, as it were, on tiptoe, with empty hands upraised to bring them a little nearer the gifts we look for? Are our ‘eyes ever towards the Lord’? Do we pore over His gifts, scrutinising them as eagerly as a gold-seeker does the quartz in his pan, to detect every shining speck of the precious metal? Do we go to our work and our daily battle with the confident expectation that He will surely come when our need is the sorest and scatter our enemies? Is there any clear outlook kept by us for the help which we know must come, lest it should pass us unobserved, and like the dove from the ark, finding no footing in our hearts drowned in a flood of troubles, be fain to return to the calm refuge from which it came on its vain errand? Alas, how many gentle messengers of God flutter homeless about our hearts, unrecognised and unwelcomed, because we have not been watching for them! Of what avail is it that a strong hand from the beach should fling the safety-line with true aim to the wreck, if no eye on the deck is watching for it? It hangs there, useless and unseen, and then it drops into the sea, and every soul on board is drowned. It is our own fault-and very largely the fault of our want of watchfulness for the coming of God’s help-if we are ever overwhelmed by the tasks, or difficulties, or sorrows of life. We wonder that we are left to fight out the battle ourselves. But are we? Is it not rather, that while God’s succours are hastening to our side we will not open our eyes to see, nor our hearts to receive them? If we go through the world with our hands hanging listlessly down instead of lifted to heaven, or full of the trifles and toys of this present, as so many of us do, what wonder is it if heavenly gifts of strength do not come into our grasp?

That attitude of watchful expectation is vividly described for us in the graphic words of another psalm, ‘My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning.’ What a picture that is! Think of a wakeful, sick man, tossing restless all the night on his tumbled bed, racked with pain made harder to bear by the darkness. How often his heavy eye is lifted to the window-pane, to see if the dawn has not yet begun to tint it with a grey glimmer! How he groans, ‘Would God it were morning!’ Or think of some unarmed and solitary man, benighted in the forest, and hearing the wild beasts growl and scream and bark all round, while his fire dies down, and he knows that his life depends on the morning breaking soon. With yet more eager expectation are we to look for God, whose coming is a better morning for our sick and defenceless spirits. If we are not so looking for His help, we need never be surprised that we do not get it. There is no promise and no probability that it will come to men in their sleep, who neither desire it nor wait for it. And such vigilant expectation will be accompanied with patience. There is no impatience in it, but the very opposite. ‘If we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.’ If we know that He will surely come, then if He tarry we can wait for Him. The measure of our confidence is ever the measure of our patience. Being sure that He is always ‘in the midst of’ Zion, we may be sure that at the right time He will flame out into delivering might, helping her, and that right early. So waiting means watchfulness and patience, both of which have their roots in trust.

Further, we have here set forth not only the nature, but also the object of this waiting. ‘Upon Thee, O *my Strength*! will I wait, for God is *my Defence*.’

The object to which faith is directed, and the ground on which it is based, are both set forth in these two names here applied to God. The name of the Lord is Strength, therefore I wait on Him in the confident expectation of receiving of His power. The Lord is ‘my Defence,’ therefore I wait on Him in the confident expectation of safety. The one name has respect to our condition of feebleness and inadequacy for our tasks, and points to God as infusing strength into us. The other points to our exposedness to danger and to enemies, and points to God as casting His shelter around us. The word translated ‘defence’ is literally ‘a high fortress,’ and is the same as closes the rapturous accumulation of the names of his delivering God, which the Psalmist gives us when he vows to love Jehovah, who has been his Rock, and Fortress, and Deliverer; his God in whom he will trust, his Buckler, and the Horn of his salvation, and his *High Tower*. The first name speaks of God dwelling in us, and His strength made perfect in our weakness; the second speaks of our dwelling in God, and our defencelessness sheltered in Him. ‘The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.’ As some outnumbered army, unable to make head against its enemies in the open, flees to the shelter of some hill fortress, perched upon a crag, and taking up the drawbridge, cannot be reached by anything that has not wings, so this man, hard pressed by his foes, flees into God to hide him, and feels secure behind these strong walls.

That is the God on whom we wait. The recognition of His character as thus mighty and ready to help is the only thing that will evoke our expectant confidence, and His character thus discerned is the only object which our confidence can grasp aright. Trust Him as what He is, and trust Him because of what He is, and see to it that your faith lays hold on the living God Himself, and on nothing beside.

But waiting on God is not only the recognition of His character as revealed, but it involves, too, the act of laying hold on all the power and blessing of that character for myself. ‘*My* strength, *my* defence,’ says the Psalmist. Think of what He is, and believe that He is that for *you*, else there is no true waiting on Him. Make God thy very own by claiming thine own portion in His might, by betaking thyself to that strong habitation. We cannot wait on God in crowds, but one by one, must say, ‘*My* strength and *my* defence.’

And now turn to the second verse of our two texts: ‘Unto Thee, O my Strength! will I sing, for God is my defence and the God of my mercy.’

Here we catch, as it were, waiting expectation and watchfulness in the very act of passing over into possession and praise. For remember the aspect of things has not changed a bit between the first verse of our text and the last. The enemies are all round about David just as they were, ‘making a noise like a dog,' as he says, and 'going round about the city.' The evil that was threatening him and making him sad remains entirely unlightened. What has altered? He has altered. And how has he altered? Because his waiting on God has begun to work an inward change, and he has climbed, as it were, out of the depths of his sorrow up into the sunlight. And so it ever is, my friends! There is deliverance in spirit before there is deliverance in outward fact. If our patient waiting bring, as it certainly will bring, at the right time, an answer in the removal of danger, and the lightening of sorrow, it will bring first the better answer, 'the peace of God, which passeth all understanding,' to keep your hearts and minds. That is the highest blessing we have to seek for in our waiting on God, and that is the blessing which we get as soon as we wait on Him. The outward deliverance may tarry, but ever there come before it, as heralds of its approach, the sense of a lightened burden and the calmness of a strengthened heart. It may be long before the morning breaks, but even while the darkness lasts, a faint air begins to stir among the sleeping leaves, the promise of the dawn, and the first notes of half-awakened birds prelude the full chorus that will hail the sunrise.

It is beautiful, I think, to see how in the compass of this one little psalm the singer has, as it were, wrought himself clear, and sung himself out of his fears. The stream of his thought, like some mountain torrent, turbid at first, has run itself bright and sparkling. How all the tremor and agitation have gone away, just because he has kept his mind for a few minutes in the presence of the calm thought of God and His love. The first courses of his psalm, like those of some great building, are laid deep down in the darkness, but the shining summit is away up there in the sunlight, and God's glittering glory is sparklingly reflected from the highest point. Whoever begins with, 'Deliver me-I will wait upon Thee,' will pass very quickly, even before the outward deliverance comes, into-'O my Strength! unto Thee will I sing!' Every song of true trust, though it may begin with a minor, will end in a burst of jubilant gladness. No prayer ought ever to deal with complaints, as we know, without starting with thanksgiving, and, blessed be God, no prayer need to deal with complaints without ending with thanksgiving. So, all our cries of sorrow, and all our acknowledgments of weakness and need, and all our plaintive beseechings, should be inlaid, as it were, between two layers of brighter and gladder thought, like dull rock between two veins of gold. The prayer that begins with thankfulness, and passes on into waiting, even while in sorrow and sore need, will always end in thankfulness, and triumph, and praise.

If we regard this second verse of our text as the expression of the Psalmist's emotion at the moment of its utterance, then we see in it a beautiful illustration of the effect of faithful waiting to turn complaining into praise. If we regard it rather as an expression of his confidence, that 'I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance,' we see in it an illustration of the power of patient waiting to brighten the sure hope of deliverance, and to bring summer into the heart of winter. As resolve, or as prophecy, it is equally a witness of the large reward of quiet waiting for the salvation of the Lord.

In either application of the words their almost precise correspondence with those of the previous verse is far more than a mere poetic ornament, or part of the artistic form of the psalm. It teaches us this happy lesson-that the song of accomplished deliverance, whether on earth, or in the final joy of heaven, will be but a sweeter, fuller repetition of the cry that went up in trouble from our waiting hearts. The object to which we shall turn with our thankfulness is He to whom we betook ourselves with our prayers. There will be the same turning of the soul to Him; only instead of wistful waiting in the longing look, joy will light her lamps in our eyes, and thankfulness beam in our faces as we turn to His light. We shall look to Him as of old, and name Him what we used to name Him when we were in weakness and warfare,-our 'Strength' and our 'Defence.' But how different the feelings with which the delivered soul calls Him so, from those with which the sorrowful heart tried to grasp the comfort of the names. Then their reality was a matter of faith, often hard to hold fast. Now it is a matter of memory and experience. 'I called Thee my strength when I was full of weakness; I tried to believe Thou wast my defence when I was full of fear; I thought of Thee as my fortress when I was ringed about with foes; I know Thee now for that which I then trusted that Thou wast. As I waited upon Thee that Thou mightest be gracious, I praise Thee now that Thou hast been more gracious than my hopes.' Blessed are they whose loftiest expectations were less than their grateful memories and their rich experience, and who can take up in their song of praise the names by which they called on God, and feel that they knew not half their depth, their sweetness, or their power!

But the praise is not merely the waiting transformed. Experience has not only deepened the conception of the meaning of God's name; it has added a new name. The cry of the suppliant was to God, his strength and defence; the song of the saved is to the God who is also the God of his mercy. The experiences of life have brought out more fully the love and tender pity of God. While the troubles lasted it was hard to believe that God was strong enough to brace us against them, and to keep us safe in them; it was harder still to think of them as coming from Him at all; it was hardest to feel that they came from His love. But when they are past, and their meaning is plainer, and we possess their results in the weight of glory which they have wrought out for us, we shall be able to look back on them all as the mercies of the God of our mercy, even as when a man looks down from the mountain-top upon the mists and the clouds through which he passed, and sees them all smitten by the sunshine that gleams upon them from above. That which was thick and damp as he was struggling through it, is irradiated into rosy beauty; the retrospective and downward glance confirms and surpasses all that faith dimly discerned, and found it hard to believe. Whilst we are fighting here, brethren! let us say, 'I will wait for Thee,' and then yonder we shall, with deeper knowledge of the love that was in all our sorrows, sing unto Him who was our strength in earth's weakness, our defence in earth's dangers, and is for ever more the 'God of our mercy,' amidst the large and undeserved favours of heaven.

49)Psalms 62:1

Psalms

SILENCE TO GOD

Psa. 62:1, Psa. 62:5.

We have here two corresponding clauses, each beginning a section of the psalm. They resemble each other even more closely than appears from the English version, for the 'truly' of the first, and the 'only' of the second clause, are the same word; and in each case it stands in the same place, namely, at the beginning. So, word for word, the two answer to each other. The difference is, that the one expresses the Psalmist's patient stillness of submission, and the other is his self-encouragement to that very attitude and disposition which he has just professed to be his. In the one he speaks of, in the other to, his soul. He stirs himself up to renew and continue the faith and resignation which he has, and so he sets before us both the temper which we should have, and the effort which we should make to prolong and deepen it, if it be ours. Let us look at these two points then-the expression of waiting, and the self-exhortation to waiting.

‘Truly my soul waiteth upon God.’ It is difficult to say whether the opening word is better rendered ‘truly,’ as here, or ‘only,’ as in the other clause. Either meaning is allowable and appropriate. If, with our version, we adopt the former, we may compare with this text the opening of another psalm [Psa. 73:1.], ‘Truly God is good to Israel,’ and there, as here, we may see in that vehement affirmation a trace of the struggle through which it had been won. The Psalmist bursts into song with a word, which tells us plainly enough how much had to be quieted in him before he came to that quiet waiting, just as in the other psalm he pours out first the glad, firm certainty which he had reached, and then recounts the weary seas of doubt and bewilderment through which he had waded to reach it. That one word is the record of conflict and the trophy of victory, the sign of the blessed effect of effort and struggle in a truth more firmly held, and in a submission more perfectly practised. It is as if he had said, ‘Yes! in spite of all its waywardness and fears, and self-willed struggles, my soul waits upon God. I have overcome these, and now there is peace within.’

It is to be further observed that literally the words run, ‘My soul is silence unto God.’ That forcible form of expression describes the completeness of the Psalmist’s unmurmuring submission and quiet faith. His whole being is one great stillness, broken by no clamorous passions, by no loud-voiced desires, by no remonstrating reluctance. There is a similar phrase in another psalm [Psa. 109:4], which may help to illustrate this: ‘For my love they are my adversaries, but I am prayer’-his soul is all one supplication. The enemies’ wrath awakens no flush of passion on his cheek, or ripple of vengeance in his heart. He meets it all with prayer. Wrapped in devotion and heedless of their rage, he is like Stephen, when he kneeled down among his yelling murderers, and cried with a loud voice, ‘Lord! lay not this sin to their charge.’ So here we have the strongest expression of the perfect consent of the whole inward nature in submission and quietness of confidence before God.

That silence is first a silence of the will. The plain meaning of this phrase is resignation; and resignation is just a silent will. Before the throne of the Great King, His servants are to stand like those long rows of attendants we see on the walls of Eastern temples, silent, with folded arms, straining their ears to hear, and bracing their muscles to execute his whispered commands, or even his gesture and his glance. A man's will should be an echo, not a voice; the echo of God, not the voice of self. It should be silent, as some sweet instrument is silent till the owner's hand touches the keys. Like the boy-prophet in the hush of the sanctuary, below the quivering light of the dying lamps, we should wait till the awful voice calls, and then answer, 'Speak, Lord! for Thy servant heareth.' Do not let the loud utterances of your own wills anticipate, nor drown, the still, small voice in which God speaks. Bridle impatience till He does. If you cannot hear His whisper, wait till you do. Take care of running before you are sent. Keep your wills in equipoise till God's hand gives the impulse and direction.

Such a silent will is a strong will. It is no feeble passiveness, no dead indifference, no impossible abnegation that God requires, when He requires us to put our wills in accord with His. They are not slain, but vivified, by such surrender; and the true secret of strength lies in submission. The secret of blessedness is there, too, for our sorrows come because there is discord between our circumstances and our wills, and the measure in which these are in harmony with God is the measure in which we shall feel that all things are blessings to be received with thanksgiving. But if we will take our own way, and let our own wills speak before God speaks, or otherwise than God speaks, nothing can come of that but what always has come of it-blunders, sins, misery, and manifold ruin.

We must keep our *hearts* silent too. The sweet voices of pleading affections, the loud cry of desires and instincts that roar for their food like beasts of prey, the querulous complaints of disappointed hopes, the groans and sobs of black-robed sorrows, the loud hubbub and Babel, like the noise of a great city, that every man carries within, must be stifled and coerced into silence. We have to take the animal in us by the throat, and sternly say, 'Lie down there and be quiet.' We have to silence tastes and inclinations. We have to stop our ears to the noises around, however sweet the songs, and to close many an avenue through which the world's music might steal in. He cannot say, 'My soul is silent unto God,' whose whole being is buzzing with vanities and noisy with the din of the market-place. Unless we have something, at least, of that great stillness, our hearts will have no peace, and our religion no reality.

There must be the silence of the *mind*, as well as of the heart and will. We must not have our thoughts ever occupied with other things, but must cultivate the habit of detaching them from earth, and keeping our minds still before God, that He may pour His light into them. Surely if ever any generation needed the preaching-'Be still and let God speak'-we need it. Even religious men are so busy with spreading or defending Christianity, that they have little time, and many of them less inclination, for quiet meditation and still communion with God. Newspapers, and books, and practical philanthropy, and Christian effort, and business, and amusement, so crowd into our lives now, that it needs some resolution and some planning to get a clear space where we can be quiet, and look at God.

But the old law for a noble and devout life is not altered by reason of any new circumstances. It still remains true that a mind silently waiting before God is the condition without which such a life is impossible. As the flowers follow the sun, and silently hold up their petals to be tinted and enlarged by his shining, so must we, if we would know the joy of God, hold our souls, wills, hearts, and minds still before Him, whose voice commands, whose love warms, whose truth makes fair, our whole being. God speaks for the most part in such silence only. If the soul be full of tumult and jangling noises, His voice is little likely to be heard. As in some kinds of deafness, a perpetual noise in the head prevents hearing any other sounds, the rush of our own fevered blood, and the throbbing of our own nerves, hinder our catching His tones. It is the calm lake which mirrors the sun, the least catspaw wrinkling the surface wipes out all the reflected glories of the heavens. If we would mirror God our souls must be calm. If we would hear God our souls must be silence.

Alas, how far from this is our daily life! Who among us dare to take these words as the expression of our own experience? Is not the troubled sea which cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt, a truer emblem of our restless, labouring souls than the calm lake? Put your own selves by the side of this Psalmist, and honestly measure the contrast. It is like the difference between some crowded market-place all full of noisy traffickers, ringing with shouts, blazing in sunshine, and the interior of the quiet cathedral that looks down on it all, where are coolness and subdued light, and silence and solitude. 'Come, My people! enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee.' 'Commune with your own heart and be still.' 'In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.'

This man's profession of utter resignation is perhaps too high for us; but we can make his *self-exhortation* our own. 'My soul! wait thou only upon God.' Perfect as he ventures to declare his silence towards God, he yet feels that he has to stir himself up to the effort which is needed to preserve it in its purity. Just because he can say, 'My soul waits,' therefore he bids his soul wait.

I need not dwell upon that self-stimulating as involving the great mystery of our personality, whereby a man exalts himself above himself, and controls, and guides, and speaks to his soul. But a few words may be given to that thought illustrated here, of the necessity for conscious effort and self-encouragement, in order to the preservation of the highest religious emotion.

We are sometimes apt to forget that no holy thoughts or feelings are in their own nature permanent, and the illusion that they are so, often tends to accelerate their fading. It is no wonder if we in our selectest hours of 'high communion with the living God' should feel as if that lofty experience would last by virtue of its own sweetness, and need no effort of ours to retain it. But it is not so. All emotion tends to exhaustion, as surely as a pendulum to rest, or as an Eastern torrent to dry up. All our flames burn to their extinction. There is but one fire that blazes and is not consumed. Action is the destruction of tissue. Life reaches its term in death. Joy and sorrow, and hope and fear, cannot be continuous. They must needs wear themselves out and fade into a grey uniformity like mountain summits when the sun has left them.

Our religious experience too will have its tides, and even those high and pure emotions and dispositions that bind us to God can only be preserved by continual effort. Their existence is no guarantee of their permanence, rather is it a guarantee of their transitoriness, unless we earnestly stir up ourselves to their renewal. Like the emotions kindled by lower objects, they perish while they glow, and there must be a continual recurrence to the one Source of light and heat if the brilliancy is to be preserved.

Nor is it only from within that their continuance is menaced. Outward forces are sure to tell upon them The constant wash of the sea of life undermines the cliffs and wastes the coasts. The tear and wear of external occupations is ever acting upon our religious life. Travellers tell us that the constant friction of the sand on Egyptian hieroglyphs removes every trace of colour, and even effaces the deep-cut characters from basalt rocks. So the unceasing attrition of multitudinous trifles will take all the bloom off your religion, and efface the name of the King cut on the tables of your hearts, if you do not counteract them by constant earnest effort. Our devotion, our faith, our love are only preserved by being constantly renewed.

That vigorous effort is expressed here by the very form of the phrase. The same word which began the first clause begins the second also. As in the former it represented for us, with an emphatic ‘Truly,’ the struggle through which the Psalmist had reached the height of his blessed experience, so here it represents in like manner the earnestness of the self-exhortation which he addresses to himself. He calls forth all his powers to the conflict, which is needed even by the man who has attained to that height of communion, if he would remain where he has climbed. And for us, brethren! who shrink from taking these former words upon our lips, how much greater the need to use our most strenuous efforts to quiet our souls. If the summit reached can only be held by earnest endeavour, how much more is needed to struggle up to it from the valleys below!

The silence of the soul before God is no mere passiveness. It requires the intensest energy of all our being to keep all our being still and waiting upon Him. So put all your strength into the task, and be sure that your soul is never so intensely alive as when in deepest abnegation it waits hushed before God.

Trust no past emotions. Do not wonder if they should fade even when they are brightest. Do not let their evanescence tempt you to doubt their reality. But always when our hearts are fullest of His love, and our spirits stilled with the sweetest sense of His solemn presence, stir yourselves up to keep firm hold of the else passing gleam, and in your consciousness let these two words live in perpetual alternation: ‘Truly my soul waiteth upon God. My soul! wait thou only upon God.’

50)Psalms 62:5

Psalms

SILENCE TO GOD

Psa. 62:1, Psa. 62:5.

We have here two corresponding clauses, each beginning a section of the psalm. They resemble each other even more closely than appears from the English version, for the ‘truly’ of the first, and the ‘only’ of the second clause, are the same word; and in each case it stands in the same place, namely, at the beginning. So, word for word, the two answer to each other. The difference is, that the one expresses the Psalmist’s patient stillness of submission, and the other is his self-encouragement to that very attitude and disposition which he has just professed to be his. In the one he speaks of, in the other to, his soul. He stirs himself up to renew and continue the faith and resignation which he has, and so he sets before us both the temper which we should have, and the effort which we should make to prolong and deepen it, if it be ours. Let us look at these two points then-the expression of waiting, and the self-exhortation to waiting.

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We are sometimes apt to forget that no holy thoughts or feelings are in their own nature permanent, and the illusion that they are so, often tends to accelerate their fading. It is no wonder if we in our selectest hours of ‘high communion with the living God’ should feel as if that lofty experience would last by virtue of its own sweetness, and need no effort of ours to retain it. But it is not so. All emotion tends to exhaustion, as surely as a pendulum to rest, or as an Eastern torrent to dry up. All our flames burn to their extinction. There is but one fire that blazes and is not consumed. Action is the destruction of tissue. Life reaches its term in death. Joy and sorrow, and hope and fear, cannot be continuous. They must needs wear themselves out and fade into a grey uniformity like mountain summits when the sun has left them.

Our religious experience too will have its tides, and even those high and pure emotions and dispositions that bind us to God can only be preserved by continual effort. Their existence is no guarantee of their permanence, rather is it a guarantee of their transitoriness, unless we earnestly stir up ourselves to their renewal. Like the emotions kindled by lower objects, they perish while they glow, and there must be a continual recurrence to the one Source of light and heat if the brilliancy is to be preserved.

Nor is it only from within that their continuance is menaced. Outward forces are sure to tell upon them The constant wash of the sea of life undermines the cliffs and wastes the coasts. The tear and wear of external occupations is ever acting upon our religious life. Travellers tell us that the constant friction of the sand on Egyptian hieroglyphs removes every trace of colour, and even effaces the deep-cut characters from basalt rocks. So the unceasing attrition of multitudinous trifles will take all the bloom off your religion, and efface the name of the King cut on the tables of your hearts, if you do not counteract them by constant earnest effort. Our devotion, our faith, our love are only preserved by being constantly renewed.

That vigorous effort is expressed here by the very form of the phrase. The same word which began the first clause begins the second also. As in the former it represented for us, with an emphatic 'Truly,' the struggle through which the Psalmist had reached the height of his blessed experience, so here it represents in like manner the earnestness of the self-exhortation which he addresses to himself. He calls forth all his powers to the conflict, which is needed even by the man who has attained to that height of communion, if he would remain where he has climbed. And for us, brethren! who shrink from taking these former words upon our lips, how much greater the need to use our most strenuous efforts to quiet our souls. If the summit reached can only be held by earnest endeavour, how much more is needed to struggle up to it from the valleys below!

The silence of the soul before God is no mere passiveness. It requires the intensest energy of all our being to keep all our being still and waiting upon Him. So put all your strength into the task, and be sure that your soul is never so intensely alive as when in deepest abnegation it waits hushed before God.

Trust no past emotions. Do not wonder if they should fade even when they are brightest. Do not let their evanescence tempt you to doubt their reality. But always when our hearts are fullest of His love, and our spirits stilled with the sweetest sense of His solemn presence, stir yourselves up to keep firm hold of the else passing gleam, and in your consciousness let these two words live in perpetual alternation: 'Truly my soul waiteth upon God. My soul! wait thou only upon God.'

51)Psalms 63:1

THIRST AND SATISFACTION

Psa. 63:1, Psa. 63:5, Psa. 63:8.

It is a wise advice which bids us regard rather what is said than who says it, and there are few regions in which the counsel is more salutary than at present in the study of the Old Testament, and especially the Psalms. This authorship has become a burning question which is only too apt to shut out far more important things. Whoever poured out this sweet meditation in the psalm before us, his tender longings for, and his jubilant possession of, God remain the same. It is either the work of a king in exile, or is written by some one who tries to cast himself into the mental attitude of such a person, and to reproduce his longing and his trust. It may be a question of literary interest, but it is of no sort of spiritual or religious importance whether the author is David or a singer of later date endeavouring to reproduce his emotions under certain circumstances.

The three clauses which I have read, and which are so strikingly identical in form, constitute the three pivots on which the psalm revolves, the three bends in the stream of its thought and emotion. ‘My soul thirsts; my soul is satisfied; my soul follows hard after Thee.’ The three phases of emotion follow one another so swiftly that they are all wrapped up in the brief compass of this little song. Unless they in some degree express our experiences and emotions, there is little likelihood that our lives will be blessed or noble, and we have little right to call ourselves Christians. Let us follow the windings of the stream, and ask ourselves if we can see our own faces in its shining surface.

I. The soul that knows its own needs will thirst after God.

The Psalmist draws the picture of himself as a thirsty man in a waterless land. That may be a literally true reproduction of his condition, if indeed the old idea is correct, that this is a work of David’s; for there is no more appalling desert than that in which he wandered as an exile. It is a land of arid mountains without a blade of verdure, blazing in their ghastly whiteness under the fierce sunshine, and with gaunt ravines in which there are no pools or streams, and therefore no sweet sound of running waters, no shadow, no songs of birds, but all is hot, dusty, glaring, pitiless; and men and beasts faint, and loll out their tongues, and die for want of water. And, says the Psalmist, such is life, if due regard be had to the deepest wants of a soul, notwithstanding all the abundant supplies which are spread in such rich and loving luxuriance around us-we are thirsty men in a waterless land. I need not remind you how true it is that a man is but a bundle of appetites, desires, often tyrannous, often painful, always active. But the misery of it is-the reason why man's misery is great upon him is-mainly, I suppose, that he does not know what it is that he wants; that he thirsts, but does not understand what the thirst means, nor what it is that will slake it. His animal appetites make no mistakes; he and the beasts know that when they are thirsty they have to drink, and when they are hungry they have to eat, and when they are drowsy they have to sleep. But the poor instinct of the animal that teaches it what to choose and what to avoid fails us in the higher reaches; and we are conscious of a craving, and do not find that the craving reveals to us the source from whence its satisfaction can be derived. Therefore 'broken cisterns that can hold no water' are at a premium, and 'the fountain of living waters' is turned away from, though it could slake so many thirsts. Like ignorant explorers in an enemy's country, we see a stream, and we do not stop to ask whether there is poison in it or not before we glue our thirsty lips to it. There is a great old promise in one of the prophets which puts this notion of the misinterpretation of our thirsts, and the mistakes as to the sources from which they can be slaked, into one beautiful metaphor which is obscured in our English version. The prophet Isaiah says, according to our reading, 'the parched land shall become a pool.' The word which he uses is that almost technical one which describes the phenomenon known only in Eastern lands, or at least known in them only in its superlative degree; the mirage, where the dancing currents of ascending air simulate the likeness of a cool lake, with palm-trees around it. And, says he, 'the mirage shall become a pool,' the romance shall turn into a reality, the mistakes shall be rectified, and men shall know what it is that they want, and shall get it when they know. Brethren! unless we have listened to the teaching from above, unless we have consulted far more wisely and far more profoundly than many of us have ever done the meaning of our own hearts when they cry out, we too shall only be able to take for ours the plaintive cry of the half of this first utterance of the Psalmist, and say despairingly, 'My soul thirsteth.' Blessed are they who know where the fountain is, who know the meaning of the highest unrests in their own souls, and can go on to say with clear and true self-revelation, ‘My soul thirsteth for God!’ That is religion. There is a great deal more in Christianity than longing, but there is no Christianity worth the name without it. There is moral stimulus to activity, a pattern for conduct, and so on, in our religion, and if our religion is only this longing-well then, it is worth very little; and I fancy it is worth a good deal less if there is none of this felt need for God, and for more of God, in us.

And so I come to two classes of my hearers; and to the first of them I say, Dear friends! do not mistake what it is that you ‘need,’ and see to it that you turn the current of your longings from earth to God; and to the second of them I say, Dear friends! if you have found out that God is your supreme good, see to it that you live in the good, see to it that you live in the constant attitude of longing for more of that good which alone will slake your appetite.

‘The thirst that from the soul doth rise Doth ask a drink divine,’ and unless we know what it is to be drawn outwards and upwards, in strong aspirations after something-’afar from the sphere of our sorrow,’ I know not why we should call ourselves Christians at all.

But, dear friends! let us not forget that these higher aspirations after the uncreated and personal good which is God have to be cultivated very sedulously and with great persistence, throughout all our changing lives, or they will soon die out, and leave us. There has to be the clear recognition, habitual to us, of what is our good. There has to be a continual meditation, if I may so say, upon the all-sufficiency of that divine Lord and Lover of our souls, and there has to be a vigilant and a continual suppression, and often excision and ejection, of other desires after transient and partial satisfactions. A man who lets all his longings go unchecked and untamed after earthly good has none left towards heaven. If you break up a river into a multitude of channels, and lead off much of it to irrigate many little gardens, there will be no force in its current, its bed will become dry, and it will never reach the great ocean where it loses its individuality and becomes part of a mightier whole. So, if we fritter away and divide up our desires among all the clamant and partial blessings of earth, then we shall but feebly long, and feebly longing, shall but faintly enjoy, the cool, clear, exhaustless gush from the fountain of life-'My soul thirsteth for God!'-in the measure in which that is true of us, and not one hairsbreadth beyond it, in spite of orthodoxy, and professions, and activities, are we Christian people.

II. The soul that thirsts after God is satisfied.

The Psalmist, by the magic might of his desire, changes, as in a sudden transformation scene in a theatre, all the dreariness about him. One moment it is a 'dry and barren land where no water is'; the next moment a flash of verdure has come over the yellow sand, and the ghastly silence is broken by the song of merry birds. The one moment he is hungering there in the desert; the next, he sees spread before him a table in the wilderness, and his soul is 'satisfied as with marrow and with fatness,' and his mouth praises God, whom he possesses, who has come unto him swift, immediate, in full response to his cry. Now, all that is but a picturesque way of putting a very plain truth, which we should all be the happier and better if we believed and lived by, that we can have as much of God as we desire, and that what we have of Him will be enough.

We can have as much of God as we desire. There is a quest which finds its object with absolute certainty, and which finds its object simultaneously with the quest. And these two things, the certainty and the immediateness with which the thirst of the soul after God passes into a satisfied fruition of the soul in God, are what are taught us here in our text; and what you and I, if we comply with the conditions, may have as our own blessed experience. There is one search about which it is true that it never fails to find. The certainty that the soul thirsting after God shall be satisfied with God results at once from His nearness to us, and His infinite willingness to give Himself, which He is only prevented from carrying into act by our obstinate refusal to open our hearts by desire. It takes all a man's indifference to keep God out of his heart, 'for in Him we live, and move, and have our being,' and that divine love, which Christianity teaches us to see on the throne of the universe, is but infinite longing for self-communication. That is the definition of true love always, and they fearfully mistake its essence, and take the lower and spurious forms of it for the higher and nobler, who think of love as being what, alas! it often is, in our imperfect lives, a fierce desire to have for our very own the thing or person beloved. But that is a second-rate kind of love. God's love is an infinite desire to give Himself. If only we open our hearts-and nothing opens them so wide as longing-He will pour in, as surely as the atmosphere streams in through every chink and cranny, as surely as if some great black rock that stands on the margin of the sea is blasted away, the waters will flood over the sands behind it. So unless we keep God out, by not wishing Him in, in He will come.

The certitude that we possess Him when we desire Him is as absolute. As swift as Marconi's wireless message across the Atlantic and its answer; so immediate is the response from Heaven to the desire from earth. What a contrast that is to all our experiences! Is there anything else about which we can say 'I am quite sure that if I want it I shall have it. I am quite sure that when I want it I have it'? Nothing! There may be wells to which a man has to go, as the Bedouin in the desert has to go, with empty water-skins, many a day's journey, and it comes to be a fight between the physical endurance of the man and the weary distance between him and the spring. Many a man's bones, and many a camel's, lie on the track to the wells, who lay down gasping and black-lipped, and died before they reached them. We all know what it is to have longing desires which have cost us many an effort, and efforts and desires have both been in vain. Is it not blessed to be sure that there is One whom to long for is immediately to possess?

Then there is the other thought here, too, that when we have God we have enough. That is not true about anything else. God forbid that one should depreciate the wise adaptation of earthly goods to human needs which runs all through every life! but all that recognised, still we come back to this, that there is nothing here, nothing except God Himself, that will fill all the corners of a human heart. There is always something lacking in all other satisfactions. They address themselves to sides, and angles, and facets of our complex nature; they leave all the others unsatisfied. The table that is spread in the world, at which, if I might use so violent a figure, our various longings and capacities seat themselves as guests, always fails to provide for some of them, and whilst some, and those especially of the lower type, are feasting full, there sits by their side another guest, who finds nothing on the table to satisfy his hunger. But if my soul thirsts for God, my soul will be satisfied when I get Him. The prophet Isaiah modifies this figure in the great word of invitation which pealed out from him, where he says, ‘Ho! everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters.’ But that figure is not enough for him, that metaphor, blessed as it is, does not exhaust the facts; and so he goes on, ‘yea, come, buy wine’-and that is not enough for him, that does not exhaust the facts, therefore he adds, ‘and milk.’ Water, wine, and milk; all forms of the draughts that slake the thirsts of humanity, are found in God Himself, and he who has Him needs seek nowhere besides.

Lastly-

III. The soul that is satisfied with God immediately renews its quest.

‘My soul followeth hard after Thee.’ The two things come together, longing and fruition, as I have said. Fruition begets longing, and there is swift and blessed alternation, or rather co-existence of the two. Joyful consciousness of possession and eager anticipation of larger bestowments are blended still more closely, if we adhere to the original meaning of the words of this last clause, than they are in our translation, for the psalm really reads, ‘My soul cleaveth after Thee.’ In the one word ‘cleaveth,’ is expressed adhesion, like that of the limpet to the rock, conscious union, blessed possession; and in the other word ‘after Thee’ is expressed the pressing onwards for more and yet more. But now contrast that with the issue of all other methods of satisfying human appetites, be they lower or be they higher. They result either in satiety or in a tyrannical, diseased appetite which increases faster than the power of satisfying it increases. The man who follows after other good than God, has at the end to say, ‘I am sick, tired of it, and it has lost all power to draw me,’ or he has to say, ‘I ravenously long for more of it, and I cannot get any more.’ ‘He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase.’ You have to increase the dose of the narcotic, and as you increase the dose, it loses its power, and the less you can do without it the less it does for you. But to drink into the one God slakes all thirsts, and because He is infinite, and our capacity for receiving Him may be indefinitely expanded; therefore, ‘Age cannot wither, nor custom stale His infinite variety’; but the more we have of God, the more we long for Him, and the more we long for Him the more we possess Him.

Brethren! these are the possibilities of the Christian life; being its possibilities they are our obligations. The Psalmist’s words may well be turned by us into self-examining interrogations and we may-God grant that we do!-all ask ourselves; ‘Do I thus thirst after God?’ ‘Have I learned that, notwithstanding all supplies, this world without Him is a waterless desert? Have I experienced that whilst I call He answers, and that the water flows in as soon as I open my heart? And do I know the happy birth of fresh longings out of every fruition, and how to go further and further into the blessed land, and into my elastic heart receive more and more of the ever blessed God?’ These texts of mine not only set forth the ideal for the Christian life here, but they carry in themselves the foreshadowing of the life hereafter. For surely such a merely physical accident as death cannot be supposed to break this golden sequence which runs through life. Surely this partial and progressive possession of an infinite good, by a nature capable of indefinitely increasing appropriation of, and approximation to it is the prophecy of its own eternal continuance. So long as the fountain springs, the thirsty lips will drink. God’s servants will live till God dies. The Christian life will go on, here and hereafter, till it has reached the limits of its own capacity of expansion, and has exhausted God. ‘The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water, springing up into everlasting life.’

52)Psalms 63:5

Psalms

THIRST AND SATISFACTION

Psa. 63:1, Psa. 63:5, Psa. 63:8.

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The Psalmist, by the magic might of his desire, changes, as in a sudden transformation scene in a theatre, all the dreariness about him. One moment it is a ‘dry and barren land where no water is’; the next moment a flash of verdure has come over the yellow sand, and the ghastly silence is broken by the song of merry birds. The one moment he is hungering there in the desert; the next, he sees spread before him a table in the wilderness, and his soul is ‘satisfied as with marrow and with fatness,’ and his mouth praises God, whom he possesses, who has come unto him swift, immediate, in full response to his cry. Now, all that is but a picturesque way of putting a very plain truth, which we should all be the happier and better if we believed and lived by, that we can have as much of God as we desire, and that what we have of Him will be enough.

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III. The soul that is satisfied with God immediately renews its quest.

'My soul followeth hard after Thee.' The two things come together, longing and fruition, as I have said. Fruition begets longing, and there is swift and blessed alternation, or rather co-existence of the two. Joyful consciousness of possession and eager anticipation of larger bestowments are blended still more closely, if we adhere to the original meaning of the words of this last clause, than they are in our translation, for the psalm really reads, ‘My soul cleaveth after Thee.’ In the one word ‘cleaveth,’ is expressed adhesion, like that of the limpet to the rock, conscious union, blessed possession; and in the other word ‘after Thee’ is expressed the pressing onwards for more and yet more. But now contrast that with the issue of all other methods of satisfying human appetites, be they lower or be they higher. They result either in satiety or in a tyrannical, diseased appetite which increases faster than the power of satisfying it increases. The man who follows after other good than God, has at the end to say, ‘I am sick, tired of it, and it has lost all power to draw me,’ or he has to say, ‘I ravenously long for more of it, and I cannot get any more.’ ‘He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase.’ You have to increase the dose of the narcotic, and as you increase the dose, it loses its power, and the less you can do without it the less it does for you. But to drink into the one God slakes all thirsts, and because He is infinite, and our capacity for receiving Him may be indefinitely expanded; therefore, ‘Age cannot wither, nor custom stale His infinite variety’; but the more we have of God, the more we long for Him, and the more we long for Him the more we possess Him.

Brethren! these are the possibilities of the Christian life; being its possibilities they are our obligations. The Psalmist’s words may well be turned by us into self-examining interrogations and we may-God grant that we do!-all ask ourselves; ‘Do I thus thirst after God?’ ‘Have I learned that, notwithstanding all supplies, this world without Him is a waterless desert? Have I experienced that whilst I call He answers, and that the water flows in as soon as I open my heart? And do I know the happy birth of fresh longings out of every fruition, and how to go further and further into the blessed land, and into my elastic heart receive more and more of the ever blessed God?’ These texts of mine not only set forth the ideal for the Christian life here, but they carry in themselves the foreshadowing of the life hereafter. For surely such a merely physical accident as death cannot be supposed to break this golden sequence which runs through life. Surely this partial and progressive possession of an infinite good, by a nature capable of indefinitely increasing appropriation of, and approximation to it is the prophecy of its own eternal continuance. So long as the fountain springs, the thirsty lips will drink. God's servants will live till God dies. The Christian life will go on, here and hereafter, till it has reached the limits of its own capacity of expansion, and has exhausted God. 'The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water, springing up into everlasting life.'

53)Psalms 63:8

Psalms

THIRST AND SATISFACTION

Psa. 63:1, Psa. 63:5, Psa. 63:8.

It is a wise advice which bids us regard rather what is said than who says it, and there are few regions in which the counsel is more salutary than at present in the study of the Old Testament, and especially the Psalms. This authorship has become a burning question which is only too apt to shut out far more important things. Whoever poured out this sweet meditation in the psalm before us, his tender longings for, and his jubilant possession of, God remain the same. It is either the work of a king in exile, or is written by some one who tries to cast himself into the mental attitude of such a person, and to reproduce his longing and his trust. It may be a question of literary interest, but it is of no sort of spiritual or religious importance whether the author is David or a singer of later date endeavouring to reproduce his emotions under certain circumstances.

The three clauses which I have read, and which are so strikingly identical in form, constitute the three pivots on which the psalm revolves, the three bends in the stream of its thought and emotion. 'My soul thirsts; my soul is satisfied; my soul follows hard after Thee.' The three phases of emotion follow one another so swiftly that they are all wrapped up in the brief compass of this little song. Unless they in some degree express our experiences and emotions, there is little likelihood that our lives will be blessed or noble, and we have little right to call ourselves Christians. Let us follow the windings of the stream, and ask ourselves if we can see our own faces in its shining surface.

I. The soul that knows its own needs will thirst after God.

The Psalmist draws the picture of himself as a thirsty man in a waterless land. That may be a literally true reproduction of his condition, if indeed the old idea is correct, that this is a work of David’s; for there is no more appalling desert than that in which he wandered as an exile. It is a land of arid mountains without a blade of verdure, blazing in their ghastly whiteness under the fierce sunshine, and with gaunt ravines in which there are no pools or streams, and therefore no sweet sound of running waters, no shadow, no songs of birds, but all is hot, dusty, glaring, pitiless; and men and beasts faint, and loll out their tongues, and die for want of water. And, says the Psalmist, such is life, if due regard be had to the deepest wants of a soul, notwithstanding all the abundant supplies which are spread in such rich and loving luxuriance around us-we are thirsty men in a waterless land. I need not remind you how true it is that a man is but a bundle of appetites, desires, often tyrannous, often painful, always active. But the misery of it is-the reason why man’s misery is great upon him is-mainly, I suppose, that he does not know what it is that he wants; that he thirsts, but does not understand what the thirst means, nor what it is that will slake it. His animal appetites make no mistakes; he and the beasts know that when they are thirsty they have to drink, and when they are hungry they have to eat, and when they are drowsy they have to sleep. But the poor instinct of the animal that teaches it what to choose and what to avoid fails us in the higher reaches; and we are conscious of a craving, and do not find that the craving reveals to us the source from whence its satisfaction can be derived. Therefore ‘broken cisterns that can hold no water’ are at a premium, and ‘the fountain of living waters’ is turned away from, though it could slake so many thirsts. Like ignorant explorers in an enemy’s country, we see a stream, and we do not stop to ask whether there is poison in it or not before we glue our thirsty lips to it. There is a great old promise in one of the prophets which puts this notion of the misinterpretation of our thirsts, and the mistakes as to the sources from which they can be slaked, into one beautiful metaphor which is obscured in our English version. The prophet Isaiah says, according to our reading, ‘the parched land shall become a pool.' The word which he uses is that almost technical one which describes the phenomenon known only in Eastern lands, or at least known in them only in its superlative degree; the mirage, where the dancing currents of ascending air simulate the likeness of a cool lake, with palm-trees around it. And, says he, 'the mirage shall become a pool,' the romance shall turn into a reality, the mistakes shall be rectified, and men shall know what it is that they want, and shall get it when they know. Brethren! unless we have listened to the teaching from above, unless we have consulted far more wisely and far more profoundly than many of us have ever done the meaning of our own hearts when they cry out, we too shall only be able to take for ours the plaintive cry of the half of this first utterance of the Psalmist, and say despairingly, 'My soul thirsteth.' Blessed are they who know where the fountain is, who know the meaning of the highest unrests in their own souls, and can go on to say with clear and true self-revelation, 'My soul thirsteth for God!' That is religion. There is a great deal more in Christianity than longing, but there is no Christianity worth the name without it. There is moral stimulus to activity, a pattern for conduct, and so on, in our religion, and if our religion is only this longing-well then, it is worth very little; and I fancy it is worth a good deal less if there is none of this felt need for God, and for more of God, in us.

And so I come to two classes of my hearers; and to the first of them I say, Dear friends! do not mistake what it is that you 'need,' and see to it that you turn the current of your longings from earth to God; and to the second of them I say, Dear friends! if you have found out that God is your supreme good, see to it that you live in the good, see to it that you live in the constant attitude of longing for more of that good which alone will slake your appetite.

'The thirst that from the soul doth rise Doth ask a drink divine,' and unless we know what it is to be drawn outwards and upwards, in strong aspirations after something-'afar from the sphere of our sorrow,' I know not why we should call ourselves Christians at all.

But, dear friends! let us not forget that these higher aspirations after the uncreated and personal good which is God have to be cultivated very sedulously and with great persistence, throughout all our changing lives, or they will soon die out, and leave us. There has to be the clear recognition, habitual to us, of what is our good. There has to be a continual meditation, if I may so say, upon the all-sufficiency of that divine Lord and Lover of our souls, and there has to be a vigilant and a continual suppression, and often excision and ejection, of other desires after transient and partial satisfactions. A man who lets all his longings go unchecked and untamed after earthly good has none left towards heaven. If you break up a river into a multitude of channels, and lead off much of it to irrigate many little gardens, there will be no force in its current, its bed will become dry, and it will never reach the great ocean where it loses its individuality and becomes part of a mightier whole. So, if we fritter away and divide up our desires among all the clamant and partial blessings of earth, then we shall but feebly long, and feebly longing, shall but faintly enjoy, the cool, clear, exhaustless gush from the fountain of life-'My soul thirsteth for God!'-in the measure in which that is true of us, and not one hairsbreadth beyond it, in spite of orthodoxy, and professions, and activities, are we Christian people.

II. The soul that thirsts after God is satisfied.

The Psalmist, by the magic might of his desire, changes, as in a sudden transformation scene in a theatre, all the dreariness about him. One moment it is a 'dry and barren land where no water is'; the next moment a flash of verdure has come over the yellow sand, and the ghastly silence is broken by the song of merry birds. The one moment he is hungering there in the desert; the next, he sees spread before him a table in the wilderness, and his soul is 'satisfied as with marrow and with fatness,' and his mouth praises God, whom he possesses, who has come unto him swift, immediate, in full response to his cry. Now, all that is but a picturesque way of putting a very plain truth, which we should all be the happier and better if we believed and lived by, that we can have as much of God as we desire, and that what we have of Him will be enough.

We can have as much of God as we desire. There is a quest which finds its object with absolute certainty, and which finds its object simultaneously with the quest. And these two things, the certainty and the immediateness with which the thirst of the soul after God passes into a satisfied fruition of the soul in God, are what are taught us here in our text; and what you and I, if we comply with the conditions, may have as our own blessed experience. There is one search about which it is true that it never fails to find. The certainty that the soul thirsting after God shall be satisfied with God results at once from His nearness to us, and His infinite willingness to give Himself, which He is only prevented from carrying into act by our obstinate refusal to open our hearts by desire. It takes all a man's indifference to keep God out of his heart, 'for in Him we live, and move, and have our being,' and that divine love, which Christianity teaches us to see on the throne of the universe, is but infinite longing for self-communication. That is the definition of true love always, and they fearfully mistake its essence, and take the lower and spurious forms of it for the higher and nobler, who think of love as being what, alas! it often is, in our imperfect lives, a fierce desire to have for our very own the thing or person beloved. But that is a second-rate kind of love. God's love is an infinite desire to give Himself. If only we open our hearts-and nothing opens them so wide as longing-He will pour in, as surely as the atmosphere streams in through every chink and cranny, as surely as if some great black rock that stands on the margin of the sea is blasted away, the waters will flood over the sands behind it. So unless we keep God out, by not wishing Him in, in He will come.

The certitude that we possess Him when we desire Him is as absolute. As swift as Marconi's wireless message across the Atlantic and its answer; so immediate is the response from Heaven to the desire from earth. What a contrast that is to all our experiences! Is there anything else about which we can say 'I am quite sure that if I want it I shall have it. I am quite sure that when I want it I have it'? Nothing! There may be wells to which a man has to go, as the Bedouin in the desert has to go, with empty water-skins, many a day's journey, and it comes to be a fight between the physical endurance of the man and the weary distance between him and the spring. Many a man's bones, and many a camel's, lie on the track to the wells, who lay down gasping and black-lipped, and died before they reached them. We all know what it is to have longing desires which have cost us many an effort, and efforts and desires have both been in vain. Is it not blessed to be sure that there is One whom to long for is immediately to possess?

Then there is the other thought here, too, that when we have God we have enough. That is not true about anything else. God forbid that one should depreciate the wise adaptation of earthly goods to human needs which runs all through every life! but all that recognised, still we come back to this, that there is nothing here, nothing except God Himself, that will fill all the corners of a human heart. There is always something lacking in all other satisfactions. They address themselves to sides, and angles, and facets of our complex nature; they leave all the others unsatisfied. The table that is spread in the world, at which, if I might use so violent a figure, our various longings and capacities seat themselves as guests, always fails to provide for some of them, and whilst some, and those especially of the lower type, are feasting full, there sits by their side another guest, who finds nothing on the table to satisfy his hunger. But if my soul thirsts for God, my soul will be satisfied when I get Him. The prophet Isaiah modifies this figure in the great word of invitation which pealed out from him, where he says, ‘Ho! everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters.’ But that figure is not enough for him, that metaphor, blessed as it is, does not exhaust the facts; and so he goes on, ‘yea, come, buy wine’-and that is not enough for him, that does not exhaust the facts, therefore he adds, ‘and milk.’ Water, wine, and milk; all forms of the draughts that slake the thirsts of humanity, are found in God Himself, and he who has Him needs seek nowhere besides.

Lastly-

III. The soul that is satisfied with God immediately renews its quest.

‘My soul followeth hard after Thee.’ The two things come together, longing and fruition, as I have said. Fruition begets longing, and there is swift and blessed alternation, or rather co-existence of the two. Joyful consciousness of possession and eager anticipation of larger bestowments are blended still more closely, if we adhere to the original meaning of the words of this last clause, than they are in our translation, for the psalm really reads, ‘My soul cleaveth after Thee.’ In the one word ‘cleaveth,’ is expressed adhesion, like that of the limpet to the rock, conscious union, blessed possession; and in the other word ‘after Thee’ is expressed the pressing onwards for more and yet more. But now contrast that with the issue of all other methods of satisfying human appetites, be they lower or be they higher. They result either in satiety or in a tyrannical, diseased appetite which increases faster than the power of satisfying it increases. The man who follows after other good than God, has at the end to say, ‘I am sick, tired of it, and it has lost all power to draw me,’ or he has to say, ‘I ravenously long for more of it, and I cannot get any more.’ ‘He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase.’ You have to increase the dose of the narcotic, and as you increase the dose, it loses its power, and the less you can do without it the less it does for you. But to drink into the one God slakes all thirsts, and because He is infinite, and our capacity for receiving Him may be indefinitely expanded; therefore, ‘Age cannot wither, nor custom stale His infinite variety’; but the more we have of God, the more we long for Him, and the more we long for Him the more we possess Him.

Brethren! these are the possibilities of the Christian life; being its possibilities they are our obligations. The Psalmist’s words may well be turned by us into self-examining interrogations and we may-God grant that we do!-all ask ourselves; ‘Do I thus thirst after God?’ ‘Have I learned that, notwithstanding all supplies, this world without Him is a waterless desert? Have I experienced that whilst I call He answers, and that the water flows in as soon as I open my heart? And do I know the happy birth of fresh longings out of every fruition, and how to go further and further into the blessed land, and into my elastic heart receive more and more of the ever blessed God?’ These texts of mine not only set forth the ideal for the Christian life here, but they carry in themselves the foreshadowing of the life hereafter. For surely such a merely physical accident as death cannot be supposed to break this golden sequence which runs through life. Surely this partial and progressive possession of an infinite good, by a nature capable of indefinitely increasing appropriation of, and approximation to it is the prophecy of its own eternal continuance. So long as the fountain springs, the thirsty lips will drink. God’s servants will live till God dies. The Christian life will go on, here and hereafter, till it has reached the limits of its own capacity of expansion, and has exhausted God. ‘The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water, springing up into everlasting life.’

54)Psalms 65:3

SIN OVERCOMING AND OVERCOME

Psa. 65:3.

There is an intended contrast in these two clauses more pointed and emphatic in the original than in our Bible, between man's impotence and God's power in the face of the fact of sin. The words of the first clause might be translated, with perhaps a little increase of vividness, 'iniquities are too strong for me'; and the 'Thou' of the next clause is emphatically expressed in the original, 'as for our transgressions' [which we cannot touch], '*Thou* shalt purge them away.' Despair of self is the mother of confidence in God; and no man has learned the blessedness and the sweetness of God's power to cleanse, who has not learned the impotence of his own feeble attempts to overcome his transgression. The very heart of Christianity is redemption. There are a great many ways of looking at Christ's mission and Christ's work, but I venture to say that they are all inadequate unless they start with this as the fundamental thought, and that only he who has learned by serious reflection and bitter personal experience the gravity and the hopelessness of the fact of the bondage of sin, rightly understands the meaning and the brightness of the Gospel of Christ. The angel voice that told us His name, and based His name upon His characteristic work, went deeper into the 'philosophy' of Christianity than many a modern thinker, when it said, 'Thou shalt call His name Jesus, because He shall save His people from their sins.' So here we have the hopelessness and misery of man's vain struggles, and side by side with these the joyful confidence in the divine victory. We have the problem and the solution, the barrier and the overleaping of it; man's impotence and the omnipotence of God's mercy. My iniquities are too strong for me, but Thou art too strong for them. As for our transgressions, of which I cannot purge the stain, with all my tears and with all my work, 'Thou shalt purge them away.' Note, then, these two-first, the cry of despair; second, the ringing note of confidence.

I. The cry of despair.

‘Too strong for me,’ and yet they *are* me. Me, and *not* me; mine, and yet, somehow or other, my enemies, although my children-too strong for me, yet I give them their strength by my own cowardly and feeble compliance with their temptations; too strong for me and overmastering me, though I pride myself often on my freedom and spirit when I am yielding to them. Mine iniquities are mine, and yet they are not mine; me and yet, blessed be God! they can be separated from me.

The picture suggested by the words is that of some usurping power that has mastered a man, and laid its grip upon him so that all efforts to get away from the grasp are hopeless. Now, I dare say, that some of you are half consciously thinking that this is a piece of ordinary pulpit exaggeration, and has no kind of application to the respectable and decent lives that most of you live, and that you are ready to say, with as much promptitude and as much falsehood as the old Jews did, even whilst the Roman eagles, lifted above the walls of the castle, were giving them the lie: ‘We were never in bondage to any man.’ You do not know or feel that anything has got hold of you which is stronger than you. Well, let us see.

Consider for a moment. You are powerless to master your evil, considered as habits. You do not know the tyranny of the usurper until a rebellion is got up against him. As long as you are gliding with the stream you have no notion of its force. Turn your boat and try to pull against it, and when the sweat-drops come on your brow, and you are sliding backwards, in spite of all your effort, you will begin to find out what a tremendous down-sucking energy there is in that quiet, silent flow. So the ready compliance of the worst part of my nature masks for me the tremendous force with which my evil tyrannises over me, and it is only when I face round and try to go the other way, that I find out what a power there is in its invisible grasp.

Did you ever try to cure some trivial bad habit, some trick of your fingers, for instance? You know what infinite pains and patience and time it took you to do that, and do you think that you would find it easier if you once set yourself to cure that lust, say, or that petulance, pride, passion, dishonesty, or whatsoever form of selfish living in forgetfulness of God may be your besetting sin? If you will try to pull the poison fang up, you will find how deep its roots are. It is like the yellow charlock in a field, which seems only to spread in consequence of attempts to get rid of it-as the rough rhyme says; ‘One year’s seeding, seven years’ weeding’-and more at the end of the time than at the beginning. Any honest attempt at mending character drives a man to this-’My iniquities are too strong for me.’

I do not for a moment deny that there may be, and occasionally is, a magnificent force of will and persistency of purpose in efforts at self-improvement on the part of perfectly irreligious men. But, if by the occasional success of such effort, a man conquers one form of evil, that does not deliver him from evil. You have the usurping dominion deep in your nature, and what does it matter in essence which part of your being is most conspicuously under its control? It may be some animal passion, and you may conquer that. A man, for instance, when he is young, lives in the sphere of sensuous excitement; and when he gets old he turns a miser, and laughs at the pleasures that he used to get from the flesh, and thinks himself ever so much wiser. Is he any better? He has changed, so to speak, the kind of sin. That is all. The devil has put a new viceroy in authority, but it is the old government, though with fresh officials. The house which is cleared of the seven devils without getting into it the all-filling and sanctifying grace of God and love of Jesus Christ will stand empty. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so does Satan, and the empty house invites the seven ill-tenants, and back they come in their diabolical completeness.

So, dear friends! though you may do a great deal-thank God!-in subduing evil habits and inclinations, you cannot touch, so as to master, the central fact of sin unless you get God to help you to do it, and you have to go down on your knees before you can do that work. ‘Iniquities are too strong for me.’

Then, again, consider our utter impotence in dealing with our own evil regarded as guilt. When we do wrong, the judge within, which we call conscience, says to us two things, or perhaps three. It says first, ‘That is wrong’; it says secondly, ‘You have got to answer for it’; and I think it says thirdly, ‘And you will be punished for it.’ That is to say, there is a sense of demerit that goes side by side with our evil, as certainly as the shadow travels with the substance. And though, sometimes, when the sun goes behind a cloud, there is no shadow, and sometimes, when the light within us is darkened, conscience does not cast the black shade of demerit across the mind; yet conscience is there, though silent. When it does speak it says, ‘You have done wrong, and you are answerable.’ Answerable to whom? To it? No! To society? No! To law? No! You can only be answerable to a person, and that is God. Against Him we have sinned. We do wrong; and if wrong were all that we had to charge ourselves with, it would be because there was nothing but law that we were answerable to. We do unkind things, and if unkindness and inhumanity were all that we had to charge ourselves with, it would be because we were only answerable to one another. We do suicidal things, and if self-inflicted injury were all our definition of evil, it would be because we were only answerable to our conscience and ourselves. But we *sin*, and that means that every wrong thing, big or little, which we do, whether we think about God in the doing of it or no, is, in its deepest essence, an offence against Him.

The judgment of conscience carries with it the solemn looking for of future judgment. It says, ‘I am only a herald: *He* is coming.’ No man feels the burden of guilt without an anticipation of judgment. What are you going to do with these two feelings? Do you think that *you* can deal with them? It is no use saying, ‘I am not responsible for what I did; I inherited such-and-such tendencies; circumstances are so-and-so. I could not help it; environment, and evolution, and all the rest of it diminish, if they do not destroy, responsibility.’ Be it so! And yet, after all, this is left-the certainty in my own convictions that I had the power to do or not to do. That is a fundamental part of a man’s consciousness. If it is a delusion, what is to be trusted, and how can we be sure of anything? So that we are responsible for our action, and can no more elude the guilt that follows sin than we can jump off our own shadow. And I want you to consider what you are going to do about your guilt.

One thing you cannot do-you cannot remove it. Men have tried to do so by sacrifices, and false religions. They have swung in the air by means of hooks fastened into their bodies, and I do not know what besides, and they have not managed it. You can no more get rid of your guilt by being sorry for your sin than you could bring a dead man to life again by being sorry for his murder. What is done is done. ‘What I have written I have written!’ Nothing will ever ‘wash that little lily hand white again,’ as the magnificent murderess in Shakespeare's great creation found out. You can forget your guilt; you can ignore it. You can adopt some of the easily-learned-by-rote and fashionable theories that will enable you to minimise it, and to laugh at us old-fashioned believers in guilt and punishment. You do not take away the rock because you blow out the lamps of the lighthouse, and you do not alter an ugly fact by ignoring it. I beseech you, as reasonable men and women, to open your eyes to these plain facts about yourselves, that you have an element of demerit and of liability to consequent evil and suffering which you are perfectly powerless to touch or to lighten in the slightest degree.

Consider, again, our utter impotence in regard to our evil, looked upon as a barrier between us and God. That is the force of the context here. The Psalmist has just been saying, 'O Thou that hearest prayer! unto Thee shall all flesh come.' And then he bethinks himself how flesh compassed with infirmities can come. And he staggers back bewildered. There can be no question but that the plain dictate of common sense is, 'We know that God heareth not sinners.' My evil not only lies like a great black weight of guilt and of habit on my consciousness and on my activity, but it actually stands like a frowning cliff, barring my path and making a barrier between me and God. 'Your hands are full of blood; I hate your vain oblations,' says the solemn Voice through the prophet. And this stands for ever true-'The prayer of the wicked is an abomination.' There frowns the barrier. Thank God! mercies come through it, howsoever close-knit and impenetrable it may seem. Thank God! no sin can shut Him out from us, but it can shut us out from Him. And though we cannot separate God from ourselves, and He is nearer us than our consciousness and the very basis of our being, yet by a mysterious power we can separate ourselves from Him. We may build up, of the black blocks of our sins flung up from the inner fires, and cemented with the bituminous mortar of our lusts and passions, a black wall between us and our Father. You and I have done it. We can build it-we cannot throw it down; we can rear it-we cannot tunnel it. Our iniquities are too strong for us.

Now notice that this great cry of despair in my text is the cry of a single soul. This is the only place in the psalm in which the singular person is used. 'Iniquities are too strong for us,' is not sufficient. Each man must take guilt to himself. The recognition and confession of evil must be an intensely personal and individual act. My question to you, dear friend! is, Did you ever know it by experience? Going apart by yourself, away from everybody else, with no companions or confederates to lighten the load of your felt evil, forgetting tempters and associates and all other people, did you ever stand, you and God, face to face, with nobody to listen to the conference? And did you ever feel in that awful presence that whether the world was full of men, or deserted and you the only survivor, would make no difference to the personal responsibility and weight and guilt of your individual sin? Have you ever felt, 'Against Thee, Thee only, have I'-solitary- 'sinned,' and confessed that iniquities are 'too strong for me'?

II. Now, let me say a word or two about the second clause of this great verse, the ringing cry of confident hope.

The confidence is, as I said, the child of despair. You will never go into that large place of assured trust in God's effacing finger passed over all your evil until you have come through the narrow pass, where the black rocks all but bar the traveller's foot, of conscious impotence to deal with your sin. You must, first of all, dear friends! go down into the depths, and learn to have no trust in yourselves before you can rise to the heights, and rejoice in the hope of the glory and of the mercy of God. Begin with 'too strong for me,' and the impotent 'me' leads on to the almighty 'Thou.'

Then, do not forget that what was confidence on the Psalmist's part is knowledge on ours. 'As for our transgressions, Thou wilt purge them away.' You and I know why, and know how. Jesus Christ in His great work for us has vindicated the Psalmist's confidence, and has laid bare for the world's faith the grounds upon which that divine power proceeds in its cleansing mercy. 'Thou wilt purge them away,' said he. 'Christ hath borne our sins in His own body on the tree,' says the New Testament. I have spoken about our impotence in regard to our own evil, considered under three aspects. I meant to have said more about Christ's work upon our sins, considered under the same three aspects. But let me just, very briefly, touch upon them.

Jesus Christ, when trusted, will do for sin, as habit, what cannot be done without Him. He will give the motive to resist, which is lacking in the majority of cases. He will give the power to resist, which is lacking in all cases. He will put a new life and spirit into our nature which will strengthen and transform our feeble wills, will elevate and glorify our earthward trailing affections, will make us love that which He loves, and aspire to that which He is, until we become, in the change from glory to glory, reflections of the image of the Lord. As habit and as dominant power within us, nothing will cast out the evil that we have entertained in our hearts except the power of the life of Christ Jesus, in His Spirit dwelling within us and making us clean. When ‘a strong man keeps his house, his goods are in peace, but when a stronger than he cometh he taketh from him all his implements in which he trusteth, and divideth his spoil.’ And so Christ has bound the strong man, in that one great sacrifice on the Cross. And now He comes to each of us, if we will trust Him, and gives motives, power, pattern, hopes, which enable us to cast out the tyrant that has held dominion over us. ‘If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.’

And I tell all of you, especially you young men and women, who presumably have noble aspirations and desires, that the only way to conquer the world, the flesh, and the devil, is to let Christ clothe you with His armour; and let Him lay His hand on your feeble hands whilst you aim the arrows and draw the bow, as the prophet did in the old story, and then you will shoot, and not miss. Christ, and Christ alone, within us will make us powerful to cast out the evil.

In like manner, He, and He only, deals with sin, considered as guilt. Here is the living secret and centre of all Christ’s preciousness and power-that He died on the Cross; and in His spirit, which knew the drear desolation of being forsaken by God, and in His flesh, which bore the outward consequences of sin, in death as a sinful world knows it, ‘bare our sins and carried our sorrows,’ so that ‘by His stripes we are healed.’

If you will trust yourselves to the mighty Sacrifice, and with no reservation, as if you could do anything, will cast your whole weight and burden upon Him, then the guilt will pass away, and the power of sin will be broken. Transgressions will be buried-’covered,’ as the original of my text has it-as with a great mound piled upon them, so that they shall never offend or smell rank to heaven any more, but be lost to sight for ever.

Christ can take away the barrier reared by sin between God and the human spirit. Solid and black as it stands, His blood dropped upon it melts away. Then it disappears like the black bastions of the aerial structures in the clouds before the sunshine. He hath opened for us a new and living way, that we might 'have access and confidence,' and, sinners as we are, that we might dwell for ever more at the side of our Lord.

So, dear brother! whilst humanity cries-and I pray that all of us may cry like the Apostle, 'Oh, wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?'-Faith lifts up, swift and clear, her ringing note of triumph, which I pray God or rather, which I beseech you that you will make your own, 'I thank God! I through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

55)Psalms 68:19

Psalms

THE BURDEN-BEARING GOD

Psa. 68:19.

The difference between these two renderings seems to be remarkable, and a person ignorant of any language but our own might find it hard to understand how any one sentence was susceptible of both. But the explanation is extremely simple. The important words in the Authorised Version, 'with benefits,' are a supplement, having nothing to represent them in the original. The word translated '*loadeth*' in the one rendering and '*beareth*' in the other admits of both these meanings with equal ease, and is, in fact, employed in both of them in other places in Scripture. It is clear, I think, that, in this case, at all events, the Revision is an improvement. For the great objection to the rendering which has become familiar to us all, 'Who daily loadeth us *with benefits*,' is that these essential words are not in the original, and need to be supplied in order to make out the sense. Whereas, on the other hand, if we adopt the suggested emendation, 'Who daily beareth our burdens,' we get a still more beautiful meaning, which requires no forced addition in order to bring it out. So, then, I accept that varied form of our text as the one on which I desire to say a few words now.

I. The first thing that strikes me in looking at it is the remarkable and eloquent blending of majesty and condescension.

It is not without significance that the Psalmist employs that name for God in this clause, which most strongly expresses the idea of supremacy and dominion. Rule and dignity are the predominant ideas in the word 'Lord,' as, indeed, the English reader feels in hearing it; and then, side by side with that, there lies this thought, that the Highest, the Ruler of all, whose absolute authority stretches over all mankind, stoops to this low and servile office, and becomes the burden-bearer for all the pilgrims who will put their trust in Him. This blending together of the two ideas of dignity and condescension to lowly offices of help and furtherance is made even more emphatic if we glance back at the context of the psalm. For there is no place in Scripture in which there is flashed before the mind of the singer a grander picture of the magnificence and the glory of God, than that which glitters and flames in the previous verses. We read in them of God 'riding through the heavens by His name Jehovah'; of Him as marching at the head of the people, through the wilderness, and of the earth quivering at His tread, and the heavens dropping at His presence. We read of Zion itself being moved at the presence of the Lord. We read of His word going forth so mightily as to scatter armies and their kings. We read of the chariots of God as 'twenty thousand, even thousands of angels.' All is gathered together in the great verse, 'Thou hast ascended on high, Thou hast led captivity captive.' And then, before he has taken breath almost, the Psalmist turns, with most striking and dramatic abruptness, from the contemplation, awe-struck and yet jubilant, of all that tremendous, magnificent, and earth-shaking power to this wonderful thought, 'Blessed be the Lord! who daily beareth our burdens.' Not only does He march at the head of the congregation through the wilderness, but He comes, if I might so say, behind the caravan, amongst the carriers and the porters, and will bear anything that any of the weary pilgrims intrusts to His care.

Oh, dear brethren! if familiarity did not dull the glory of it, what a thought that is-a God that carries men's loads! People talk much rubbish about the 'stern Old Testament Deity'; is there anything sweeter, greater, more heart-compelling and heart-softening, than such a thought as this? How all the majesty bows itself, and declares itself to be enlisted on our side, when we think that ‘He that sitteth on the circle of the heavens, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers’ is the God that ‘daily beareth our burdens’!

And that is the tone of the Old Testament throughout, for you will always find braided together in the closest vital unity the representation of these two aspects of the divine nature; and if ever we hear set forth a more than ordinarily magnificent conception of His power and majesty be sure that, if you look, you will find side by side with it a more than ordinarily tender representation of His gentleness and His grace. And if we look deeper, this is not a case of contrast, it is not that there are sharply opposed to each other these two things, the gentleness and the greatness, the condescension and the magnificence, but that the former is the direct result of the latter; and it is just because He is Lord, and has dominion over all, that, therefore, He bears the burdens of all. For the responsibilities of the Creator are in proportion to His greatness, and He that has made man has thereby made it necessary that He should, if they will let Him, be their Burden-bearer and their Servant. The highest must be the lowest, and just because God is high over all, blessed for ever, therefore is He the Supporter and Sustainer of all. So we may learn the true meaning of elevation of all sorts, and from the example of loftiest, may draw the lesson for our more insignificant varieties of height, that the higher we are, the more we are bound to stoop, and that men are then likest God, when their elevation suggests to them responsibility, and when he that is chiefest becomes the servant.

II. So, then, notice next the deep insight into the heart and ways of God here.

‘He daily beareth our burdens.’ If there is any meaning in this word at all, it means that He so knits Himself with us as that all which touches us touches Him, that He takes a share in all our pressing duties, and feels the reflection from all our sorrows and pains. We have no impassive God in the heavens, careless of mankind, nor is His settled and changeless and unshaded blessedness of such a sort as that there cannot pass across it-if I may not say a shadow, I may at least say-a ripple from men’s pangs and troubles and cares. Love is the identification of oneself with the beloved object. We call it sympathy, when we are speaking about the fellow feeling between man and man that is kindled of love. But there is something deeper than sympathy in that great Heart, which gathers into itself all hearts, and in that great Being, whose being underlies all our beings, and is the root from which we all live and grow. God, in all our afflictions, is afflicted; and in simple though profound verity, has that which is most truly represented to men, by calling it a fellow feeling with our infirmities and our sorrows.

'Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,
And thy Maker is not nigh;
Think not thou canst weep a tear,
And thy Maker is not near.'

For want of a better word, we speak of the sympathy of God: but we need something far more intimate and unwearied than we understand by that word, to express the community of feeling between all who trust Him and His own infinite heart. If this bearing of our burden means anything, it gives us a deep insight, too, into His workings, as well as into His heart. For it covers over this great truth that He Himself comes to us, and by the communication of His own power to us, makes us able to bear the burdens which we roll upon Him. The meaning of His 'lifting our load,' in so far as that expression refers to the divine act rather than the divine heart, is that He breathes into us the strength by which we can carry the heavy task of duties, and can endure the crushing pressure of our sorrows. All the endurance of the saints is God in them bearing their burdens.

Notice, too, '*daily* beareth,' or, as the Hebrew has it yet more emphatically because more simply, 'day by day beareth.' He travels with us, in the greatness of His might and the long-suffering of His unwearied patience, through all our tribulation, and as He has 'borne and carried' His people 'all the days of old,' so, at each new recurrence of new weights, He is with us still. Like some river that runs by the wayside and ever cheers the traveller on the dusty path with its music, and offers its waters to cool his thirsty lips, so, day by day, in the slow iteration of our lingering sorrows, and in the monotonous recurrence of our habitual duties, there is with us the ever-present help of the Ancient of Days, who measures out daily strength for the daily load, and never sends the one without proffering the other.

III. So, again, notice here the remarkable anticipation of the very heart of the Gospel.

‘The God who daily beareth our burdens,’ says the Psalmist. He spoke deeper things than he knew, and was wiser than he understood. For the hope that gleams in these words comes to fulfilment, in Him of whom it was written in prophetic anticipation, so clear and definite that it reads like historical narrative-’He bare our grief and carried our sorrows. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him. The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.’

Ah! it were of small avail to know a God that bore the burden of our sorrows and the load of our duties, if we did not know a God who bore the weight of our sins. For that is the real crushing weight that breaks men’s hearts and bows them to the earth. So the New Testament, with its message of a Christ on whom is laid the whole pressure of the world’s sin, is the deepest fulfilment of the great words of my text.

IV. Note, lastly, what we should therefore do with our burdens.

First, we should cast them on God, and *let* Him carry them. He cannot unless we do. One sometimes sees a petulant and self-confident little child staggering along with some heavy burden by the parent’s side, but pushing away the hand that is put out to help it to carry its load. And that is what too many of us do when God says to us, ‘Here, My child! let Me help you, I will take the heavy end of it, and do you take the light one.’ ‘Cast thy burden upon the Lord’-and do it by faith, by simple trust in Him, by making real to yourselves the fact of His divine sympathy, and His sure presence, to aid and to sustain.

Having thus let Him carry the weight, do not you try to carry it too. As our good old hymn has it- ‘Why should I the burden bear?’ It is a great deal more God’s affair than yours. We have, indeed, in a sense, to carry it. ‘Every man shall bear his own burden.’ The weight of duty is not to be indolently shoved off our shoulders on to His, saying, ‘Let Him do the work.’ We have indeed to carry the weight of sorrow. There is no use in trying to deny its bitterness and its burden, and it would not be well for us that it should be less bitter and less heavy. In many lands the habit prevails, especially amongst the women, of carrying heavy loads on their heads; and all travellers tell us that the practice gives a dignity and a grace to the carriage, and a freedom and a swing to the gait, which nothing else will do. Depend upon it, that so much of our burdens of work and weariness as is left to us, after we have cast them upon Him, is intended to strengthen and ennoble us. But do not let there be the gnawings of anxiety. Do not let there be the self-torment of aimless prognostications of evil. Do not let there be the chewing of the bitter morsel of irrevocable sorrows; but fling all upon God. And remember what the Master has said, and His servant has repeated: ‘Take no anxious care . . . for your heavenly Father knoweth’; ‘Cast your anxiety upon Him, for He careth for you.’

And the last advice that comes from my text is, to see that your tongues are not silent in that great hymn of praise which ought to go up to ‘the Lord that daily beareth our burdens.’ He wants only our trust and our thanks, and is best paid by the praise of our love, and of our heaping still more upon His ever strong and ready arm. Bless the Lord! who beareth our burdens, and see that you give Him yours to bear. Listen to Him who hath said, ‘Come unto Me all ye that . . . are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’

56)Psalms 73:20

Psalms

THE TWO AWAKINGS

Psa. 17:15. - Psa. 73:20.

Both of these Psalms are occupied with that standing puzzle to Old Testament worthies-the good fortune of bad men, and the bad fortune of good ones. The former recounts the personal calamities of David, its author. The latter gives us the picture of the perplexity of Asaph its writer, when he ‘saw the prosperity of the wicked.’

And as the problem in both is substantially the same, the solution also is the same. David and Asaph both point onwards to a period when this confusing distribution of earthly good shall have ceased, though the one regards that period chiefly in its bearing upon himself as the time when he shall see God and be at rest, while the other thinks of it rather with reference to the godless rich as the time of their destruction.

In the details of this common expectation, also, there is a remarkable parallelism. Both describe the future to which they look as an awaking, and both connect with it, though in different ways and using different words, the metaphor of an image or likeness. In the one case, the future is conceived as the Psalmist's awaking, and losing all the vain show of this dreamland of life, while he is at rest in beholding the appearance, and perhaps in receiving the likeness, of the one enduring Substance, God. In the other, it is thought of as God's awaking, and putting to shame the fleeting shadow of well-being with which godless men befool themselves.

What this period of twofold awaking may be is a question on which good men and thoughtful students of Scripture differ. Without entering on the wide subject of the Jewish knowledge of a future state, it may be enough for the present purpose to say that the language of both these Psalms seems much too emphatic and high-pitched, to be fully satisfied by a reference to anything in this life. It certainly looks as if the great awaking which David puts in immediate contrast with the death of 'men of this world,' and which solaced his heart with the confident expectation of beholding God, of full satisfaction of all his being, and possibly even of wearing the divine likeness, pointed onwards, however dimly, to that 'within the veil.' And as for the other psalm, though the awaking of God is, no doubt, a Scriptural phrase for His ending of any period of probation and indulgence by an act of judgment, yet the strong words in which the context describes this awaking, as the 'destruction' and the 'end' of the godless, make it most natural to take it as here referring to the final close of the probation of life. That conclusion appears to be strengthened by the contrast which in subsequent verses is drawn between this 'end' of the worldling, and the poet's hopes for himself of divine guidance in life, and afterwards of being taken [the same word as is used in the account of Enoch's translation] by God into His presence and glory-hopes whose exuberance it is hard to confine within the limits of any changes possible for earth.

The doctrine of a future state never assumed the same prominence, nor possessed the same clearness in Israel as with us. There are great tracts of the Old Testament where it does not appear at all. This very difficulty, about the strange disproportion between character and circumstances, shows that the belief had not the same place with them as with us. But it gradually emerged into comparative distinctness. Revelation is progressive, and the appropriation of revelation is progressive too. There is a history of God's self-manifestation, and there is a history of man's reception of the manifestation. It seems to me that in these two psalms, as in other places of Old Testament Scripture, we see inspired men in the very course of being taught by God, on occasion of their earthly sorrows, the clearer hopes which alone could sustain them. They stood not where we stand, to whom Christ has 'brought life and immortality to light'; but to their devout and perplexed souls, the dim regions beyond were partially opened, and though they beheld there a great darkness, they also 'saw a great light.' They saw all this solid world fade and melt, and behind its vanishing splendours they saw the glory of the God whom they loved, in the midst of which they felt that there *must* be a place for them, where eternal realities should fill their vision, and a stable inheritance satisfy their hearts.

The period, then, to which both David and Asaph look, in these two verses, is the end of life. The words of both, taken in combination, open out a series of aspects of that period which carry weighty lessons, and to which we turn now.

I. The first of these is that to all men the end of Life is an awaking.

The representation of death most widely diffused among all nations is that it is a sleep. The reasons for that emblem are easily found. We always try to veil the terror and deformity of the ugly thing by the thin robe of language. As with reverential awe, so with fear and disgust, the tendency is to wrap their objects in the folds of metaphor. Men prefer not to name plainly their god or their dread, but find roundabout phrases for the one, and coaxing, flattering titles for the other. The furies and the fates of heathenism, the supernatural beings of modern superstition, must not be spoken of by their own appellations. The recoil of men's hearts from the thing is testified by the aversion of their languages to the bald name-death. And the employment of this special euphemism of sleep is a wonderful witness to our weariness of life, and to its endless toil and trouble. Everywhere that has seemed to be a comforting and almost an attractive name, which has promised full rest from all the agitations of this changeful scene. The prosperous and the wretched alike have owned the fatigue of living, and been conscious of a soothing expectance which became almost a hope, as they thought of lying still at last with folded hands and shut eyes. The wearied workers have bent over their dead, and felt that they are blest in this at all events, that they rest from their labours; and as they saw them absolved from all their tasks, have sought to propitiate the power that had made this ease for them, as well as to express their sense of its merciful aspect, by calling it not death, but sleep.

But that emblem, true and sweet as it is, is but half the truth. Taken as the whole, as indeed men are ever tempted to take it, it is a cheerless lie. It is truth for the senses-'the foolish senses,' who 'crown' Death, as 'Omega,' the last, 'the Lord,' because '*they* find no *motion* in the dead.' Rest, cessation of consciousness of the outer world, and of action upon it, are set forth by the figure. But even the figure might teach us that the consciousness of life, and the vivid exercise of thought and feeling, are not denied by it. Death is sleep. Be it so. But does not that suggest the doubt-'in that sleep, what dreams may come?' Do we not all know that, when the chains of slumber bind sense, and the disturbance of the outer world is hushed, there are faculties of our souls which work more strongly than in our waking hours? We are all poets, 'makers' in our sleep. Memory and imagination open their eyes when flesh closes it. We can live through years in the dreams of a night; so swiftly can spirit move when even partially freed from 'this muddy vesture of decay.' That very phrase, then, which at first sight seems the opposite of the representation of our text, in reality is preparatory to and confirmatory of it. That very representation which has lent itself to cheerless and heathenish thoughts of death as the cessation not only of toil but of activity, is the basis of the deeper and truer representation, the truth for the spirit, that death is an awaking. If, on the one hand, we have to say, as we anticipate the approaching end of life, 'The night cometh, when no man can work'; on the other the converse is true, 'The night is far spent; the day is at hand.'

We shall sleep. Yes; but we shall wake too. We shall wake just because we sleep. For flesh and all its weakness, and all its disturbing strength, and craving importunities-for the outer world, and all its dissipating garish shows, and all its sullen resistance to our hand-for weariness, and fevered activity and toil against the grain of our tastes, too great for our strength, disappointing in its results, the end is blessed, calm sleep. And precisely because it is so, therefore for our true selves, for heart and mind, for powers that lie dormant in the lowest, and are not stirred into full action in the highest, souls; for all that universe of realities which encompass us undisclosed, and known only by faint murmurs which pierce through the opiate sleep of life, the end shall be an awaking.

The truth which corresponds to this metaphor, and which David felt when he said, ‘I shall be satisfied when I awake,’ is that the spirit, because emancipated from the body, shall spring into greater intensity of action, shall put forth powers that have been held down here and shall come into contact with an order of things which here it has but indirectly known. To our true selves and to God we shall wake. Here we are like men asleep in some chamber that looks towards the eastern sky. Morning by morning comes the sunrise, with the tender glory of its rosy light and blushing heavens, and the heavy eyes are closed to it all. Here and there some lighter sleeper, with thinner eyelids or face turned to the sun, is half conscious of a vague brightness, and feels the light, though he sees not the colours of the sky nor the forms of the filmy clouds. Such souls are our saints and prophets, but most of us sleep on unconscious. To us all the moment comes when we shall wake and see for ourselves the bright and terrible world which we have so often forgotten, and so often been tempted to think was itself a dream. Brethren, see to it that that awaking be for you the beholding of what you have loved, the finding, in the sober certainty of waking bliss, of all the objects which have been your visions of delight in the sleep of earth.

This life of ours hides more than it reveals. The day shows the sky as solitary but for wandering clouds that cover its blue emptiness. But the night peoples its waste places with stars, and fills all its abysses with blazing glories. ‘If light so much conceals, wherefore not life?’ Let us hold fast by a deeper wisdom than is born of sense; and though men, nowadays, seem to be willing to go back to the ‘eternal sleep’ of the most unspiritual heathenism, and to cast away all that Christ has brought us concerning that world where He has been and whence He has returned, because positive science and the anatomist's scalpel preach no gospel of a future, let us try to feel as well as to believe that it is life, with all its stunted capacities and idle occupation with baseless fabrics, which is the sleep, and that for us all the end of it is-to awake.

II. The second principle contained in our text is that death is to some men the awaking of God.

'When Thou awakest, Thou shalt despise their image.' Closely rendered, the former clause would read simply 'in awaking,' without any specifying of the person, which is left to be gathered from the succeeding words. But there is no doubt that the English version fills the blank correctly by referring the awaking to God.

The metaphor is not infrequent in the Old Testament, and, like many others applying to the divine nature, is saved from any possibility of misapprehension by the very boldness of its materialism. It has a well-marked and uniform meaning. God 'awakes' when He ends an epoch of probation and long-suffering mercy by an act or period of judgment. So far, then, as the mere expression is concerned, there may be nothing more meant here than the termination by a judicial act in this life, of the transient 'prosperity of the wicked.' Any divinely-sent catastrophe which casts the worldly rich man down from his slippery eminence would satisfy the words. But the emphatic context seems, as already pointed out, to require that they should be referred to that final crash which irrevocably separates him who has 'his portion in this life,' from all which he calls his 'goods.'

If so, then the whole period of earthly existence is regarded as the time of God's gracious forbearance and mercy; and the time of death is set forth as the instant when sterner elements of the divine dealings start into greater prominence. Life here is predominantly, though not exclusively, the field for the manifestation of patient love, not willing that any should perish. To the godless soul, immersed in material things, and blind to the light of God's wooing love, the transition to that other form of existence is likewise the transition to the field for the manifestation of the retributive energy of God's righteousness. Here and now His judgment on the whole slumbers. The consequences of our deeds are inherited, indeed, in many a merciful sorrow, in many a paternal chastisement, in many a partial exemplification of the wages of sin as death. But the harvest is not fully grown nor ripened yet; it is not reaped in all its extent; the bitter bread is not baked and eaten as it will have to be. Nor are men's consciences so awakened that they connect the retribution, which does befall them, with its causes in their own actions, as closely as they will do when they are removed from the excitement of life and the deceit of its dreams. 'Sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily.' For the long years of our stay here, God's seeking love lingers round every one of us, yearning over us, besetting us behind and before, courting us with kindnesses, lavishing on us its treasures, seeking to win our poor love. It is sometimes said that this is a state of probation. But that phrase suggests far too cold an idea. God does not set us here as on a knife edge, with abysses on either side ready to swallow us if we stumble, while He stands apart watching for our halting, and unhelpful to our tottering feebleness. He compasses us with His love and its gifts, He draws us to Himself, and desires that we should stand. He offers all the help of His angels to hold us up. 'He will not suffer thy foot to be moved; He that keepeth thee will not slumber.' The judgment sleeps; the loving forbearance, the gracious aid wake. Shall we not yield to His perpetual pleadings, and, moved by the mercies of God, let His conquering love thaw our cold hearts into streams of thankfulness and self-devotion?

But remember, that that predominantly merciful and long-suffering character of God's present dealing affords no guarantee that there will not come a time when His slumbering judgment will stir to waking. The same chapter which tells us that 'He is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance,' goes on immediately to repel the inference that therefore a period of which retribution shall be the characteristic is impossible, by the solemn declaration, '*But* the day of the Lord shall come as a thief in the night.' His character remains ever the same, the principles of His government are unalterable, but there may be variations in the prominence given in His acts, to the several principles of the one, and the various though harmonious phases of the other. The method may be changed, the purpose may remain unchanged. And the Bible, which is our only source of knowledge on the subject, tells us that the method *is* changed, in so far as to intensify the vigour of the operation of retributive justice after death, so that men who have been compassed with ‘the loving-kindness of the Lord,’ and who die leaving worldly things, and keeping worldly hearts, will have to confront ‘the terror of the Lord.’

The alternation of epochs of tolerance and destruction is in accordance with the workings of God’s providence here and now. For though the characteristic of that providence as we see it is merciful forbearance, yet we are not left without many a premonition of the mighty final ‘day of the Lord.’ For long years or centuries a nation or an institution goes on slowly departing from truth, forgetting the principles on which it rests, or the purposes for which it exists. Patiently God pleads with the evil-doers, lavishes gifts and warnings upon them. He holds back the inevitable avenging as long as restoration is yet possible-and *His* eye and heart see it to be possible long after men conclude that the corruption is hopeless. But at last comes a period when He says, ‘I have long still holden My peace, and refrained Myself, now will I destroy’; and with a crash one more hoary iniquity disappears from the earth which it has burdened so long. For sixty times sixty slow, throbbing seconds, the silent hand creeps unnoticed round the dial and then, with whirr and clang, the bell rings out, and another hour of the world’s secular day is gone. The billows of the thunder-cloud slowly gather into vague form, and slowly deepen in lurid tints, and slowly roll across the fainting blue; they touch-and then the fierce flash, like the swift hand on the palace-wall of Babylon, writes its message of destruction over all the heaven at once. We know enough from the history of men and nations since Sodom till to-day, to recognise it as God’s plan to alternate long patience and ‘sudden destruction’:-

‘The mills of God grind slowly,
But they grind exceeding small’;

and every such instance confirms the expectation of the coming of that great and terrible day of the Lord, whereof all epochs of convulsion and ruin, all falls of Jerusalem, and Roman empires, Reformations, and French Revolutions, and American wars, all private and personal calamities which come from private wrong-doing, are but feeble precursors. ‘When Thou awakest, Thou wilt despise their image.’

Brethren, do we use aright this goodness of God which is the characteristic of the present? Are we ready for that judgment which is the mark of the future?

III. Death is the annihilation of the vain show of worldly life.

The word rendered *image* is properly shadow, and hence copy or likeness, and hence image. Here, however, the simpler meaning is the better. 'Thou shalt despise their shadow.' The men are shadows, and all their goods are not what they are called, their 'substance,' but their *shadow*, a mere appearance, not a reality. That show of good which seems but is not, is withered up by the light of the awaking God. What He despises cannot live.

So there are the two old commonplaces of moralists set forth in these grand words-the unsatisfying character of all merely external delights and possessions, and also their transitory character. They are non-substantial and non-permanent.

Nothing that is without a man can make him rich or restful. The treasures which are kept in coffers are not real, but only those which are kept in the soul. Nothing which cannot enter into the substance of the life and character can satisfy us. That which we are makes us rich or poor, that which we own is a trifle.

There is no congruity between any outward thing and man's soul, of such a kind as that satisfaction can come from its possession. 'Cisterns that can hold no water,' 'that which is not bread,' 'husks that the swine did eat'-these are not exaggerated phrases for the good gifts which God gives for our delight, and which become profitless and delusive by our exclusive attachment to them. There is no need for exaggeration. These worldly possessions have a good in them, they contribute to ease and grace in life, they save from carking cares and mean anxieties, they add many a comfort and many a source of culture. But, after all, a true, lofty life may be lived with a very small modicum. There is no proportion between wealth and happiness, nor between wealth and nobleness. The fairest life that ever lived on earth was that of a poor Man, and with all its beauty it moved within the limits of narrow resources. The loveliest blossoms do not grow on plants that plunge their greedy roots into the fattest soil. A little light earth in the crack of a hard rock will do. We need enough for the physical being to root itself in; we need no more.

Young men! especially you who are plunged into the busy life of our great commercial centres, and are tempted by everything you see, and by most that you hear, to believe that a prosperous trade and hard cash are the realities, and all else mist and dreams, fix this in your mind to begin life with-God is the reality, all else is shadow. Do not make it your ambition to get *on*, but to get *up*. ‘Having food and raiment, let us be content.’ Seek for your life’s delight and treasure in thought, in truth, in pure affections, in moderate desires, in a spirit set on God. These are the realities of our possessions. As for all the rest, it is sham and show.

And while thus all without is unreal, it is also fleeting as the shadows of the flying clouds; and when God awakes, it disappears as they before the noonlight that clears the heavens. All things that are, are on condition of perpetual flux and change. The cloud-rack has the likeness of bastions and towers, but they are mist, not granite, and the wind is every moment sweeping away their outlines, till the phantom fortress topples into red ruin while we gaze. The tiniest stream eats out its little valley and rounds the pebble in its widening bed, rain washes down the soil, and frost cracks the cliffs above. So silently and yet mightily does the law of change work that to a meditative eye the solid earth seems almost molten and fluid, and the everlasting mountains tremble to decay.

‘Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not?’ Are we going to be such fools as to fix our hopes and efforts upon this fleeting order of things, which can give no delight more lasting than itself? Even whilst we are in it, it continueth not in one stay, and we are in it for such a little while! Then comes what our text calls God’s awaking, and where is it all then? Gone like a ghost at cockcrow. Why! a drop of blood on your brain or a crumb of bread in your windpipe, and as far as you are concerned the outward heavens and earth ‘pass away with a great’ silence, as the impalpable shadows that sweep over some lone hillside.

‘The glories of our birth and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;

There is no armour against fate,
Death lays his icy hand on kings.'

What an awaking to a worldly man that awaking of God will be! 'As when a hungry man dreameth, and behold he eateth, but he awaketh and his soul is empty.' He has thought he fed full, and was rich and safe, but in one moment he is dragged from it all, and finds himself a starving pauper, in an order of things for which he has made no provision. 'When he dieth, he shall carry nothing away.' Let us see to it that not in utter nakedness do we go hence, but clothed with that immortal robe, and rich in those possessions that cannot be taken away from us, which they have who have lived on earth as heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. Let us pierce, for the foundation of our life's house, beneath the shifting sands of time down to the Rock of Ages, and build there.

IV. Finally, death is for some men the annihilation of the vain shows in order to reveal the great reality.

'I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness.'

'Likeness' is properly 'form,' and is the same word which is employed in reference to Moses, who saw 'the similitude of the Lord.' If there be, as is most probable, an allusion to that ancient vision in these words, then the 'likeness' is not that conformity to the divine character which it is the goal of our hopes to possess, but the beholding of His self-manifestation. The parallelism of the verse also points to such an interpretation.

If so, then, we have here the blessed confidence that when all the baseless fabric of the dream of life has faded from our opening eyes, we shall see the face of our ever-loving God. Here the distracting whirl of earthly things obscures Him from even the devoutest souls, and His own mighty works which reveal do also conceal. In them is the hiding as well as the showing of His power. But there the veil which draped the perfect likeness, and gave but dim hints through its heavy swathings of the outline of immortal beauty that lay beneath, shall fall away. No longer befooled by shadows, we shall possess the true substance; no longer bedazzled by shows, we shall behold the reality.

And seeing God we shall be satisfied. With all lesser joys the eye is not satisfied with seeing, but to look on Him will be enough. Enough for mind and heart, wearied and perplexed with partial knowledge and imperfect love; enough for eager desires, which thirst, after all draughts from other streams; enough for will, chafing against lower lords and yet longing for authoritative control; enough for all my being-to see God. Here we can rest after all wanderings, and say, ‘I travel no further; here will I dwell for ever-*I shall be satisfied*.’

And may these dim hopes not suggest to us too some presentiment of the full Christian truth of assimilation dependent on vision, and of vision reciprocally dependent on likeness? ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is,’-words which reach a height that David but partially discerned through the mist. This much he knew, that he should in some transcendent sense behold the manifested God; and this much more, that it must be ‘in righteousness’ that he should gaze upon that face. The condition of beholding the Holy One was holiness. We know that the condition of holiness is trust in Christ. And as we reckon up the rich treasure of our immortal hopes, our faith grows bold, and pauses not even at the lofty certainty of God without us, known directly and adequately, but climbs to the higher assurance of God within us, flooding our darkness with His great light, and changing us into the perfect copies of His express Image, His only-begotten Son. ‘I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness,’ cries the prophet Psalmist. ‘It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master,’ responds the Christian hope.

Brethren! take heed that the process of dissipating the vain shows of earth be begun betimes in your souls. It must either be done by Faith, whose rod disenchants them into their native nothingness, and then it is blessed; or it must be done by death, whose mace smites them to dust, and then it is pure, irrevocable loss and woe. Look away from, or rather look through, things that are seen to the King eternal, invisible. Let your hearts seek Christ, and your souls cleave to Him. Then death will take away nothing from you that you would care to keep, but will bring you your true joy. It will but trample to fragments the ‘dome of many-coloured glass’ that ‘stains the white radiance of eternity.’ Looking forward calmly to that supreme hour, you will be able to say, ‘I will both lay me down in peace and sleep, for Thou, Lord, only makest me dwell in safety.' Looking back upon it from beyond, and wondering to find how brief it was, and how close to Him whom you love it has brought you, your now immortal lips touched by the rising Sun of the heavenly morning will thankfully exclaim, 'When I awake, I am still with Thee.'

57)Psalms 73:25-26

Psalms

REASONABLE RAPTURE

Psa. 73:25 - Psa. 73:26.

We have in this psalm the record of the Psalmist's struggle with the great standing difficulty of how to reconcile the unequal distribution of worldly prosperity with the wisdom and providence of God. That difficulty pressed more acutely upon men of the Old Dispensation than even upon us, because the very promise of that stage of revelation was that Godliness brought with it outward well-being. Our Psalmist reaches a solution, not exactly by the same path by which the writers of the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes find an answer to the problem. This man gives up the endeavour to solve the question by reflection and thought, and as he says, 'goes into the sanctuary of God,' gets into communion with his Father in heaven, and by reason of that communion reaches a conclusion which is, at all events, an approximate solution of his difficulty, viz. the belief of a future life, 'Then understood I their end.' The solemn vision of a life beyond the present, which should be the outcome and retribution of this, rises before him from out of his agitated thoughts, like the moon, pale and phantom-like, from a stormy sea. That truth, if revealed at all to the Psalmist's contemporaries, certainly did not occupy the same position of clearness or of prominence as it does in our religious beliefs. But here we see a soul led up by its wrestlings to apprehend it, and as was said of a statesman, 'calling a new world into existence to redress the balance of the old.' So we get here a soul taught by God, and filled with Him by communion, therefore lifted to the height of a faith in a future life, and so made able to look out upon all the perplexities and staggering mysteries of earth's mingled ill and good, if not with distinct understanding, at least with patient faith.

The words of my text indicate for us the very high-water mark of religious experience, the very apex and climax of what some people would call mystical religion to which this man has climbed, because he fought with his doubts, and by God's grace was able to lay them. To him the world's uncertain ill or good becomes infinitely insignificant, because for the future he has a clear vision of a continued life with God, and because for the present he knows that to have God in his heart is all that he really needs.

I. We have here, first, a necessity which, misdirected, is the source of man's misery.

'Whom have I in heaven but Thee? there is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee.' If men would interpret the deepest voices of their own souls that is what they would all say, because, from the very make of our human nature there is not one of us, howsoever weak and sinful and small, but is great enough to be too great to be filled with anything smaller than God. Our thoughts, even the thoughts of the least enlightened amongst us, go wandering through eternity; and as the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes says:-'He hath set eternity in men's hearts.' We all of us need, though, alas! so few of us know that we need, a living possession of a living perfect Person, for mind, for heart, for will. Nothing short of the 'fulness of God' is enough for the smallest amongst us. So, because we do not believe this, because hundreds of you do not know what it is for which your souls are crying out, 'the misery of man is great upon him.' You try to fill that deep and aching void in your hearts, which is a sign of your possible nobleness, and a pledge of your possible blessedness, with all manner of minute rubbish, which can never fill up the gap that is there. Cartload after cartload may be tilted into the bottomless bog, and there is no more solid ground on the surface than there was at the beginning. Oh, my brother! consult thine own deepest need; listen to that voice, often stifled, often neglected, and by some of you always misunderstood, which speaks in your wills, minds, consciences, hopes, desires, hearts; and is it not this: 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God'?

There is none in the heaven, with all its stars and angels, enough for thee but Him. There is none upon earth, with all its flowers, and treasures, and loves, that will calm and still thy soul but only God. The words of my text spring from a necessity felt by every man, misdirected by a tragical majority of men, and therefore the source of restlessness and misery.

II. Secondly, we see here the longing which, rightly directed and cherished, is the very spirit of religion.

He, and only he, is the religious man, who can take these words of my text for the inmost words of his conscious effort and life. Only in the measure in which you and I recognise that God is our sole and all-sufficient good, in that measure have we any business to call ourselves devout or Christian people. That is a sharp test, is it not? Is it not a valid and an accurate one? Is that not what really makes a religious man, namely, the supreme admiration of, and aspiration after, and possession of God, and God alone? What a contrast that forms to our ordinary notions of what religion is! High above all creeds which are valuable as leading up to this enthusiasm of longing and rapture of possession, high above all preliminaries and preparations in the way of outward services and ceremonial or united acts of worship, which are only helps to this inward possession, rises such a thought of religion as this. You are not a Christian because you believe a creed. The very death of Jesus Christ is a means to this end. In order that we might come into personal, rapturous, and hallowing possession of God, His very Self in our hearts and spirits, Jesus Christ died and rose again. Do not mistake the staircase for the presence-chamber. Do not fancy that you are Christian people because you hold certain opinions or beliefs in regard of certain doctrines. Do not fancy that religion consists in either the mere outward practice of, or abstinence from, certain forms of conduct. Such things are the means to, or the outcome of, this inward devotion, but the true essence of our religion is that we recognise God as our only good, and that in Him we find absolute rest and perfect sufficiency.

Is that your religion, my brother? What a contrast these words of my text present not only to our notions of what constitutes religion, but to our practice! What is the thing that you and I crave most to have? What is the thing that we lament most of all when we lose? Where do our desires go when we take the guiding hand off them, and let them run as they will? For some of us there are dearer hearts on earth than His, Perhaps for some of us there are more dearly loved faces in heaven than His. Taking the two extreme possible cases, and supposing at the one end of the scale a man that had everything but God, and at the other end a man that had nothing but God, do we live as if we believed that the man that had everything *minus* God is a pauper; and the other who has God *minus* everything is 'rich to all the intents of bliss'? Let us shape our desires, aspirations, efforts, according to that certain truth.

I do not need to remind you that this lofty height of conscious longing, not unblest with contemporaneous fruition, is above the height to which we habitually rise. But what I would now insist upon is only this, that whilst there will be variations, whilst there will be ups and downs, the periods in our lives when we do not consciously recognise Him as our supreme and single good are the periods that drop below duty and blessedness. Acknowledge the imperfections, but Oh, my friends! you Christian men and women, who know that these hours of high communion with a loving God are not diffused through your whole life, do not sit down contented, and say that it must be so; but confess them as being imperfections which are your own fault, and remember that just as much, and not one hairsbreadth more than, we can take these words of my text for ours, so much and no more, have we a right to call ourselves religious men and women.

III. Again, we have here the blessed possession, which deadens earthly desires.

That clause, 'There is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee,' might, I think, be rendered more accurately 'With Thee'-that is to say, 'possessing Thee,'-I desire none 'upon earth.' If we thus have been longing after God, and fuller possession of Him, and if in some measure, in answer to the desire, as is always the case, we have received into mind and heart and will more of His preciousness and sweetness, then that will kill the desires that otherwise would conflict with it. Our great poet, speaking about a supreme earthly love, says-

'That rich golden shaft

Hath killed the flock of all affections else,
That lived in her.'

And the same thing is true about this higher life. This new affection will deaden, and in some sense destroy, the desires that turn to lower and to earthly things. The sun when it rises quenches the brightest stars that can but fade in his light and die. And so when, in answer to our longing, God lifts the light of His countenance-a better sunrise-upon us, that new affection dims and quenches the brightness of these little, though they be lustrous points, that shed a fragmentary and manifold twinkling over the darkness of our former night. 'Walk in the light,' and your heaven will be naked of all competing brightness.

Only remember that this supreme, and in some sense exclusive, love and longing does not destroy the sweetness of lower possessions and blessings. A new deep love in a man or a woman's heart does not make their former affections less, but more, sweet and noble and strong. And so when we get to love God best, and to love all other persons and things in Him, and Him in them, then they become sources of dignity and nobleness, of sweetness and strength, in our lives, which they otherwise never would be. If you want to make all your family affections, for instance, more permanent, more lofty, and more blessed, let them be all in God:

'I trust he lives in God, and there
I find him worthier to be loved,'

says the poet about one that had been carried into the other life. It is true about us in our relations to one another, even whilst we remain here. Let God be first, and the second rises higher in the scale than when we thought it first. The more our hearts are knit to Him and all other desires are subordinated to Him, the more do they become precious, and powers for good in our lives.

IV. And so, lastly, we have here the possession which is the pledge of perpetuity.

The Psalmist, in the last verse of my text, supposes an extreme, and in some sense, an impossible case. 'My flesh'-my bodily frame-'and my heart'-some portion of my immaterial being-'faileth.' The clause should probably be taken as hypothetical. 'Even supposing that it has come to this,' says he, 'that I had been separated from my body, and that along with the body there had also been "consumed" [as is the meaning of the original word] some portion of my spiritual being, even then, though there were only a thin thread of personality left, enough to call "me" and no more, so to speak, I should cling with that to God, and I know that then I should have enough, for "God is the Rock of my heart, and my Portion for ever." ' These two last words are obviously here to be taken in their widest extension. The whole context requires us to suppose that the Psalmist's eye is looking across the black gorge of death to the shining table-land beyond. So here we are admitted to see faith in the future life in the very act of growth. The singer soars to that sunlit height of confidence in the endless blessedness of union with God, just because he feels so deeply the sacredness and the blessedness of his present communion with God.

Next to the resurrection of Jesus Christ the best proof of immortality lies in the present experience of communion with God. Anything is more reasonable than to believe that a soul which can grasp God for its good, which can turn itself to, and be united with, an infinite Being; and itself is capable of indefinite approximation towards that Being, should have its course and career cut short by such a surface thing as death. If there be a God at all, anything is more reasonable than to believe that the union, formed between Him and me by faith here, can ever come to an end until I have exhausted Him, and drawn all His fulness into myself. This communion, by its 'very sweetness yieldeth proof that it was born for immortality.' And the Psalmist here, just because to-day God is the Rock of his heart, is sure that that relation must last on, through life, through death, ay! and for ever, 'when all that seems shall suffer shock.'

So, my brethren! here is the choice and alternative presented before us. And I ask you which is the wise man, he who clutches at external possessions which cannot abide, or he who hungers for that indwelling God, who sinks into the very substance of his soul, and is more inseparable from him than his very body? Which is the wise man, he of whom it shall one day be said, ‘This night thy soul shall be required of thee,’ and ‘His glory shall not descend after him,’ or the man who knows for what his heart hungers, and knowing it turns to God in Christ, by simple faith and lowly aspiration, as his enduring Treasure; and then, and therefore, can look out with a calm smile of security over all the tumbling sea of change, and beyond the dark horizon there where sight fails; and can say, ‘I am persuaded that neither things present, nor things to come, nor life, nor death, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate me from the God who is my Treasure, and the Life of my very self’?

58)Psalms 73:28

Psalms

NEARNESS TO GOD THE KEY TO LIFE’S PUZZLE

Psa. 73:28.

The old perplexity as to how it comes, if God is good and wise and strong, that bad men should prosper and good men should suffer, has been making the Psalmist’s faith reel. He does not answer the question exactly as the New Testament would have done, but he does find a solution sufficient for himself in two thoughts, the transiency of that outward prosperity, and the eternal sufficiency of God. ‘It was too painful for me until I went into the Sanctuary, then understood I their end’; and on the other hand: ‘Thou art the Strength of my life, and my Portion for ever.’ So he climbs at last to the calm height where he learns that, whatever be a man’s outward prosperity, if he is separated from God he ceases to be. As the context says: ‘They that are far from Thee shall perish.’ ‘Thou hast destroyed’-already, before they die-’all them that go a-whoring from Thee.’ And on the other hand, whatever be the outward condition, God is enough. ‘It is good for me,’ rich or poor harassed or at rest, afflicted or prosperous, in health or sickness, solitary or compassed about with loving friends, ‘it is good for me to draw near to God’; and nothing else is good. Thus the river that has had to fight its way through rocks, and has been chafed in the conflict, and has twisted its path through many a deep, dark, sunless gorge, comes out at last into the open, and flows with a broad sunlit breast, peaceable and full, into the great ocean-'It is good for me to draw near to God.'

But that is not all. The Psalmist goes on to tell how we are to draw near to God: 'I have put my trust in Him.' And that is not all, for he further goes on to tell how, drawing near to God through faith, all these puzzles and mysteries about men's condition cease to perplex, and a beam of light falls upon the whole of them. 'I have put my trust in God, that I may declare all Thy works.' There are no knots in the thread now.

I. So here we have, first the truth of experience that nearness to God is the one good.

Of course, it is so in the Psalmist's view, since he believes, as we profess to believe, that, to quote the words of another Psalmist, 'With Thee is the fountain of life'; and therefore that to 'draw near to Thee' is to carry our little empty pitchers to that great spring that is always flowing with waters ever sweet and clear. Union with God is life, in all senses of the word, according as the creature is capable of union with Him. Why! there is no life in a plant except God's power is vitalising it. 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow' because God makes them grow. There is no bodily life in a man, unless He continually breathes into the nostrils the breath of life. If you stop the flow of the fountain, then all the pools are dry. There is no life intellectual in a man, except by the 'inspiration of the Almighty,' from whom 'all just thoughts do proceed.' Above all these forms of life the real life of a spirit is the life derived from the union with God Himself, whereby He pours Himself into it, and in the deepest sense of the words it is true: 'Because I live ye shall live also.' 'It is good for me to draw near to God,' because, unless I do, and if I am separated from Him, my true self is dead, even whilst I seem to live. All that are parted from Him perish; all that are joined to Him, and only they, do live what is worth calling life. Cut off the sunbeam from the sun, and what becomes of it? It vanishes. Separate a soul from God, and it is dead. What is all the good of the world to you if your true self is dead? And what an absurdity it is to deck a corpse with riches and pomp of various kinds! That is what the men of the world are doing, who have chained themselves to earth, and cut themselves off from God. 'For me it is good to draw near to God.' Do you draw near? Because if you do not, no matter what prosperity you have, you do not know anything about the true life and real good for heart and spirit.

I suppose I need scarcely go on pointing out other aspects of this supreme-or more truly, this solitary-good. For instance, nothing is really good to me unless I have it within me, so as that it can never be wrenched away from me. The blessings that we cannot incorporate with the very substance of our being are only partial blessings after all; and all these things round us that do minister to our necessities, tastes, affections, and sometimes to our weaknesses, these good things fail just in this, that they stand outside us, and there is no real union between us and them. So, changes come, and we have to unclasp hands, and the footsteps that used to be planted by the side of ours cease, and our track across the sands is lonely; and losses come, and death comes, and all the glory and the good that were only externally possessed by us we leave behind us. As this psalm says: 'I considered their end . . . how they are brought into desolation, as in a moment!' What is the good of a good that is not incorporated into any being? What is the good of a good about which I cannot say, with a smile of confidence, 'I know that where-ever I may go, and whatever may befall me, that can never pass from me'? There is but one good of that sort. 'I am persuaded that . . . neither life nor death . . . nor any other creature, shall separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' 'It is good for me,' amidst the morasses and quicksands and bogs of life's uncertain and shifting ill and good, to set my feet upon the rock, and to say: 'Here I stand, and my footing will never give way.' Do you, brother! possess a changeless, imperishable, inwrought good like that? You may if you like.

But remember, too, that in regard to this Christian good, it is not only the possession of it, but the aspiration after it, that is blessed. The Psalmist does not only say, 'It is good for me to be near to God,' but he says, 'It is good for me to draw near.' There is one kind of life in which the seeking is all but as blessed as the finding. There is one kind of life in which to desire is all but as full of peace, and power, and joy as to possess. Therefore, another psalm, which begins by celebrating the blessedness of the men that dwell in God's house, and are 'still praising Thee,' goes on to speak of the blessedness, not less blessed, of the men 'in whose heart are the ways.' They who have reached the Temple are at rest, and blessed in their repose.

They who are journeying towards it are in action, and blessed in their activity. ‘It is good to draw near’; and the seeking after God is as far above the possession of all other good as heaven is above earth.

But then, notice further, how our Psalmist comes down to very plain, practical teaching. He seems to feel that he must explain what he means by drawing near to God. And here is his explanation. ‘I have put my trust in the Lord.’

II. The way to nearness to God is twofold.

On the one hand the true path is Jesus Christ, on the other hand the means by which we walk upon that path is our faith. The Apostle puts it all in a nutshell when he says that his prayer for the Ephesian Church is that ‘Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith,’ and then, by a linked chain which we have not now to consider, leads up to the final issues of that faith in that indwelling Christ-’that ye may be filled with all the fulness of God.’ So to draw near and to possess that good, that only good which is God, all that is needed is-and it is needed-that we should turn with the surrender of our hearts, with the submission of our wills, with the outgoing of our affections, and with the conformity of our practical life, to Jesus. Seeing Him, we see the Father, and having Him near us, we feel the touch of the divine hand, and being joined to the Lord, we are separated from the vanities of life, and united to the Supreme Good.

Dear brethren! this Psalmist shows us how hard it is for us to keep up that continual attitude of faith, how many difficulties there are in daily life, in the way of our continually being true to our deepest convictions, and seeking after Him amidst all the distracting whirl and perplexities of our daily lives. But he shows us, too, how possible it is, even for men constituted as we are, moment by moment, day by day, task by task, to keep vivid the consciousness of our dependence upon Him, and the blessed consciousness of our being beside Him, and how, if we do, strength will come to us for everything. The secret of a joyous walk lies in this, ‘I have set the Lord always before me. Because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved.’ We draw near to God when we clutch Christ in faith. Our faith manifests itself, not merely by a lazy reliance upon what He once did, long ago, on the Cross for us; but by daily, effortful revivifying of our consciousness of His presence, of our consciousness of our dependence upon Him, and by the continual reference of thoughts, desires, plans, and actions to Himself.

Keep God beside you so, and then there will follow what this Psalmist reached at last, a peaceful insight into what else are full of perplexity and difficulty, the ways of God in the world.

To myself, to my dear ones, to the nation, to the Church, to the world, there come many perplexing riddles as to God’s dealings, that cannot be solved except by getting close to Him. Just as a little child nestling on its mother’s bosom, with its mother’s arm around it, looks out with peaceful eye and a bright smile, upon everything beyond the safe nest, so they who are near to God can bear to look at difficulties and perplexities, and the mysteries of their own sorrows and of the world’s miseries, and say, ‘All things work together for good’; ‘I have put my trust in the Lord, that I may declare *all* Thy works.’ Stand in the sun, and all the planets move around it manifestly in order. Take your place anywhere else, and there is confusion. Get beside God, and look out on the world, and you will see it as He saw it when, ‘Behold! it was very good.’

Now, dear friends! my text in its first part may become the description of our death. One man holds on to the world as it is slipping away from him. I remember a story about a coast-guardsman that was flung over the cliffs once, and when they picked up his dead body, all under the nails was full of chalk that he had scraped off the cliffs in his desperate attempts to clutch at something to hold by. That is like one kind of death. But another kind may be: ‘It is good for me to draw near to God.’ And when we reach His side, and see all the past from the centre, and in the light of the Eternal Present, to which it has led, we shall be able to declare all His works, and to give thanks ‘for all the way by which the Lord our God hath led us’ and the world ‘these many years in the wilderness.’

59)Psalms 78:7

MEMORY, HOPE, AND EFFORT

Psa. 78:7.

In its original application this verse is simply a statement of God's purpose in giving to Israel the Law, and such a history of deliverance. The intention was that all future generations might remember what He had done, and be encouraged by the remembrance to hope in Him for the future; and by both memory and hope, be impelled to the discharge of present duty.

So, then, the words may permissibly bear the application which I purpose to make of them in this sermon, re-echoing only [and aspiring to nothing more] the thoughts which the season has already, I suppose, more or less, suggested to most of us. Smooth motion is imperceptible; it is the jolts that tell us that we are advancing. Though every day be a New Year's Day, still the alteration in our dates and our calendars should set us all thinking of that continual lapse of the mysterious thing-the creature of our own minds-which we call time, and which is bearing us all so steadily and silently onwards.

My text tells us how past, present, and future-memory, hope, and effort may be ennobled and blessed. In brief, it is by associating them all with God. It is as the field of His working that our past is best remembered. It is on Him that our hopes may most wisely be set. It is keeping His commandments which is the consecration of the present. Let us, then, take the three thoughts of our text and cast them into New Year's recommendations.

I. First, then, let us associate God with memory by thankful remembrance.

Now I suppose that there are very few of the faculties of our nature which we more seldom try to regulate by Christian principles than that great power which we have of looking backwards. Did you ever reflect that you are responsible for what you remember, and for how you remember it, and that you are bound to train and educate your memory, not merely in the sense of cultivating it as a means of carrying intellectual treasures, but for a religious purpose? The one thing that all parts of our nature need is God, and that is as true about our power of remembrance as it is about any other part of our being. The past is then hallowed, noble, and yields its highest results and most blessed fruits for us when we link it closely with Him, and see in it not only, nor so much, the play of our own faculties, whether we blame or approve ourselves, as rather see in it the great field in which God has brought Himself near to our experience, and has been regulating and shaping all that has befallen us. The one thing which will consecrate memory, deliver it from its errors and abuses, raise it to its highest and noblest power, is that it should be in touch with God, and that the past should be regarded by each of us as it is, in deed and in truth, one long record of what God has done for us.

We can see His presence more clearly when we look back over a long-connected stretch of days, and when the excitement of feeling the agony or rapture have passed, than we could whilst they were hot, and life was all hurry and bustle. The men on the deck of a ship see the beauty of the city that they have left behind, better than when they were pressing through its narrow streets. And though the view of the receding houses from the far-off waters may be an illusion, our view of the past, if we see God brooding over it all, and working in it all, is no illusion. The meannesses are hidden, the narrow places are invisible, all the pain and suffering is quieted, and we are able to behold more truly than when we were in the midst of them, the bearing, the purpose, and the blessedness alike of our sorrows and of our joys.

Not a few of us are old enough to have had a great many mysteries of our early days cleared up. We have seen at least the beginnings of the harvest which the ploughshare of sorrow and the winter winds were preparing for us, and for the rest we can trust. Brethren! remember your mercies; remember your losses; and ‘for all the way by which the Lord our God has led us these many years in the wilderness,’ let us try to be thankful, including in our praises the darkness and the storm as well as the light and the calm. Some of us are like people who, when they get better of their sicknesses, grudge the doctor’s bill. We forget the mercies as soon as they are past, because we only enjoyed the sensuous sweetness of them whilst it tickled our palate, and did not think, in the enjoyment of them, whose love it was that they spoke of to us. Sorrows and joys, bring them all in your thanksgivings, and ‘forget not the works of God.’

Such a habit of cultivating the remembrance of God's hand as moving in all our past, will not, in the slightest degree, interfere with lower and yet precious exercises of that same faculty. We shall still be able to look back, and learn our limitations, mark our weaknesses, gather counsels of prudence from our failures, tame our ambitions by remembering where we broke down. And such an exercise of grateful God-recognising remembrance will deliver us from the abuses of that great power, by which so many of us turn our memories into a cause of weakness, if not of sin. There are people, and we are all tempted to be of the number, who look back upon the past and see nothing there but themselves, their own cleverness, their own success; 'burning incense to their own net, and sacrificing to their own drag.' Another mood leads us to look back into the past dolefully and disappointedly, to say, 'I have broken down so often; my resolutions have all gone to water so quickly; I have tried and failed over and over again. I may as well give it all up, and accept the inevitable, and grope on as well as I can without hope of self-advancement or of victory.' Never! If only we will look back to God we shall be able to look forward to a perfect self. To-morrow need never be determined by the failures that have been. We may still conquer where we have often been defeated. There is no worse use of the power of remembrance than when we use it to bind upon ourselves, as the permanent limitations of our progress, the failures and faults of the past. 'Forget the things that are behind.' Your old fragmentary goodness, your old foiled aspirations, your old frequent failures-cast them all behind you!

And there are others to whom remembrance is mainly a gloating over old sins, and a doing again of these-ruminating upon them; bringing up the chewed food once more to be masticated. Some of us gather only poisonous weeds, and carry them about in the *hortus siccus* of our memories. Alas! for the man whose memory is but the paler portraiture of past sins. Some of us, I am sure, have our former evils holding us so tight in their cords that when we look back memory is defiled by the things which defiled the unforgettable past. Brethren! you may find a refuge from that curse of remembrance in remembering God.

And some of us, unwisely and ungratefully, live in the light of departed blessings, so as to have no hearts either for present mercies or for present duties. There is no more weakening and foolish misdirection of that great gift of remembrance than when we employ it to tear down the tender greenery with which healing time has draped the ruins; or to turn again in the wound which is beginning to heal the sharp and poisoned point of the sorrow which once pierced it. For all these abuses-the memory that gloats upon sin; the memory that is proud of success; the memory that is despondent because of failures; the memory that is tearful and broken-hearted over losses-for all these the remedy is that we should not forget the works of God, but see Him everywhere filling the past.

II. Again, let us live in the future by hope in Him.

Our remembrances and our hopes are closely connected; one might almost even say that the power by which we look backwards and that by which we look forwards are one and the same. At all events, Hope owes to Memory the pigments with which it paints, the canvas on which it paints, and the objects which it portrays there. But in all our earthly hopes there is a feeling of uncertainty which brings alarm as well as expectation, and he whose forward vision runs only along the low levels of earth, and is fed only by experience and remembrance, will never be able to say, ‘I hope with certitude, and I know that my hope shall be fulfilled.’ For him ‘hopes, and fears that kindle hopes,’ will be ‘an indistinguishable throng’; and there will be as much of pain as of pleasure in his forward glance.

But if, according to my text, we set our hopes on God, then we shall have a certainty absolute. What a blessing it is to be able to look forward to a future as fixed and sure, as solid and as real, as much our possession, as the irrevocable past! The Christian man’s hope, if it be set on God, is not a ‘may be,’ but a ‘will be’; and he can be as sure of to-morrow as he is of yesterday.

They whose hopes are set on God have a certain hope, a sufficient one, and one that fills all the future. All other expectations are fulfilled, or disappointed, as the case may be, but are left behind and outgrown. This one only never palls, and is never accomplished, and yet is never disappointed. So if we set our hopes on Him, we can face very quietly the darkness that lies ahead of us. Earthly hopes are only the mirrors in which the past reflects itself, as in some king’s palace you will find a lighted chamber, with a great sheet of glass at each end, which perpetuates in shining rows the lights behind the spectator. A curtain veils the future, and earthly hope can only put a mirror in front of it that reflects what has been. But the hope that is set on God draws back the curtain, and lets us see enough of a fixed, eternal future to make our lives bright and our hearts calm. The darkness remains; what of that, if

‘I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care’?

Set your hopes on God, and they will not be ashamed.

III. Lastly, let us live in the present by strenuous obedience.

After all, memory and hope are meant to fit us for work in the flying moment. Both should impel us to this keeping of the commandments of God; for both yield motives which should incline us thereto. A past full of blessing demands the sacrifice of loving hearts and of earnest hands. A future so fair, so far, so certain, so sovereign, and a hope that grasps it, and brings some of its sweet fragrance into the else scentless air of the poor present, ought to impel to service, vigorous and continual. Both should yield motives which make such service a delight.

If my memory weakens me for present work, either because it depresses my hope of success, or because it saddens me with the remembrance of departed blessings, then it is a curse and not a good. And if I dream myself away in any future, and forget the exigencies of the imperative and swiftly-passing moment, then the faculty of hope, too, is a curse and a weakening. But both are delivered from their possible abuses, if both are made into means of helping us to fill the present with loving obedience. These two faculties are like the two wings that may lift us to God, like the two paddles, one on either side of the ship, that may drive us steadily forward, through all the surges and the tempest. They find their highest field in fitting us for the grinding tasks and the heavy burdens that the moment lays upon us.

So, dear friends! we are very different in our circumstances and positions. For some of us Hope’s basket is nearly empty, and Memory’s sack is very full. For us older men the past is long, the earthly future is short. For you younger people the converse is the case. It is Hope whose hands are laden with treasures for you, Memory carries but a little store. Your past is brief; your future is probably long. The grains of sand in some of our hour-glasses are very heaped and high in the lower half, and running very low in the upper. But whichever category we stand in, one thing remains the same for us all, and that is duty, keeping God’s commandments. That is permanent, and that is the one thing worth living for. ‘Whether we live we live unto the Lord; or whether we die we die unto the Lord.’

So let us front this New Year, with all its hidden possibilities, with quiet, brave hearts, resolved on present duty, as those ought who have such a past to remember and such a future to hope for. It will probably be the last on earth for some of us. It will probably contain great sorrows for some of us, and great joys for others. It will probably be comparatively uneventful for others. It may make great outward changes for us, or it may leave us much as it found us. But, at all events, God will be in it, and work for Him should be in it. Well for us if, when its hours have slidden away into the grey past, they continue to witness to us of His love, even as, while they were wrapped in the mists of the future, they called on us to hope in Him! Well for us if we fill the passing moment with deeds of loving obedience! Then a present of keeping His commandments will glide into a past to be thankfully remembered, and will bring us nearer to a future in which hope shall not be put to shame. To him who sees God in all the divisions and particles of his days, and makes Him the object of memory, hope, and effort, past, present, and future are but successive calm ripples of that mighty river of Time which bears him on the great ocean of Eternity, from which the drops that make its waters rose, and to which its ceaseless flow returns.

60)Psalms 84:3

Psalms

SPARROWS AND ALTARS

Psa. 84:3.

The well-known saying of the saintly Rutherford, when he was silenced and exiled from his parish, echoes and expounds these words. ‘When I think,’ said he, ‘upon the sparrows and swallows that build their nests in the kirk of Anwoth, and of my dumb Sabbaths, my sorrowful, bleared eyes look asquint upon Christ, and present Him as angry.’ So sighed the Presbyterian minister in his compelled idleness in a prosaic seventeenth-century Scotch town, answering his heart’s-brother away back in the far-off time, and in such different circumstances. The Psalmist was probably a member of the Levitical family of the Sons of Korah, who were ‘doorkeepers in the house of the Lord.’ He knew what he was saying when he preferred his humble office to all honours among the godless. He was shut out by some unknown circumstances from external participation in the Temple rites, and longs to be even as one of the swallows or sparrows that twitter and flit round the sacred courts. No doubt to him faith was much more inseparably attached to form than it should be for us. No doubt place and ritual were more to him than they can permissibly be to those who have heard and understood the great charter of spiritual worship spoken first to an outcast Samaritan of questionable character: ‘Neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem shall men worship the Father.’ But equally it is true that what he wanted was what the outward worship brought him, rather than the worship itself. And the psalm, which begins with ‘longing’ and ‘fainting’ for the courts of the Lord, and pronouncing benedictions on ‘those that dwell in Thy house,’ works itself clear, if I might so say, and ends with ‘O Lord of Hosts! Blessed is the man that trusteth in Thee’-for he shall ‘dwell in Thy house,’ wherever he is. So this flight of imagination in the words of my text may suggest to us two or three lessons.

I. I take it first as pointing a bitter and significant contrast.

‘The sparrow hath found a house, and the swallow a nest for herself,’ while I! We do not know what the Psalmist’s circumstances were, but if we accept the conjecture that he may have accompanied David in his flight during Absalom’s rebellion, we may fancy him as wandering on the uplands across Jordan, and sharing the agitations, fears, and sorrows of those dark hours, and in the midst of all, as the little company hurried hither and thither for safety, thinking, with a touch of bitter envy, of the calm restfulness and serene services of the peaceful Temple.

But, pathetic as is the complaint, when regarded as the sigh of a minister of the sanctuary exiled from the shrine which was as his home, and from the worship which was his occupation and delight, it sounds a deeper note and one which awakens echoes in our hearts, when we hear in it, as we may, the complaint of humanity contrasting its unrest with the happier lot of lower creatures. Do you remember who it was that said-and on what occasion He said it-'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have roosting-places, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head'? That saying, like our text, has a narrower and a wider application. In the former it pathetically paints the homeless Christ, a wanderer in a land peculiarly 'His own,' and warns His enthusiastic would-be follower of the lot which he was so light-heartedly undertaking to share. But when Jesus calls Himself 'Son of Man,' He claims to be the realised ideal of humanity, and when, as in that saying, He contrasts the condition of 'the Son of Man' with that of the animal creation, we can scarcely avoid giving to the words their wider application to the same contrast between man's homelessness and the creatures' repose which we have found in the Psalmist's sigh.

Yes! There is only one being in this world that does not fit the world that he is in, and that is man, chief and foremost of all. Other beings perfectly correspond to what we now call their 'environment.' Just as the soft mollusc fits every convolution of its shell, and the hard shell fits every curve of the soft mollusc, so every living thing corresponds to its place and its place to it, and with them all things go smoothly. But man, the crown of creation, is an exception to this else universal complete adaptation. 'The earth, O Lord! is full of Thy mercy,' but the only creature who sees and says that is the only one who has further to say, 'I am a stranger on the earth.' He and he alone is stung with restlessness and conscious of longings and needs which find no satisfaction here. That sense of homelessness may be an agony or a joy, a curse or a blessing, according to our interpretation of its meaning, and our way of stilling it. It is not a sign of inferiority, but of a higher destiny, that we alone should bear in our spirits the 'blank misgivings' of those who, amid unsatisfying surroundings, have blind feelings after 'worlds not realised,' which elude our grasp. It is no advantage over us that every fly dancing in the treacherous gleams of an April sun, and every other creature on the earth except ourselves, on whom the crown is set, is perfectly proportioned to its place, and has desire and possessions absolutely conterminous.

‘The son of man hath not where to lay his head.’ Why must he alone wander homeless on the bleak moorland, whilst the sparrows and the swallows have their nests and their houses? Why? Because they *are* sparrows and swallows, and he is man, and ‘better than many sparrows.’ So let us lay to heart the sure promises, the blessed hopes, the stimulating exhortations, which come from that which, at first sight, seems to be a mystery and half an arraignment of the divine wisdom, in the contrast between the restlessness of humanity and the reposeful contentment of those whom we call the lower creatures. Be true to the unrest, brother! and do not mistake its meaning, nor seek to still it, until it drives you to God.

II. These words bring to us a plea which we may use, and a pledge on which we may rest.

‘Thine altars, O Lord of hosts! my King and my God.’ The Psalmist pleads with God, and lays hold for his own confidence upon the fact that creatures which do not understand what the altar means, may build beside it, and those which have no notion of who the God is to whom the house is sacred, are yet cared for by Him. And he thinks to himself, ‘If I can say “*My* King and *my* God,” surely He that takes care of them will not leave me uncared for.’ The unrest of the soul that is capable of appropriating God is an unrest which has in it, if we understand it aright, the assurance that it shall be stilled and satisfied. He that is capable of entering into the close personal relationship with God which is expressed by that eloquent little pronoun and its reduplication with the two words, ‘King’ and ‘God’-such a creature cannot cry for rest in vain, nor in vain grope, as a homeless wanderer, for the door of the Father’s house.

‘Doth God care for oxen; or saith He it altogether for our sakes?’ ‘Consider the fowls of the air; your heavenly Father feedeth them.’ And the same argument which the Apostle used in the one of these sayings, and our Lord in the other, is valid and full of encouragement when applied to this matter. He that ‘satisfies the desires of every living thing,’ and fills full the maw of the lowest creature; and puts the worms into the gaping beak of the young ravens when they cry, is not the King to turn a deaf ear, or the back of His hand, to the man who can appeal to Him with this word on his lips, ‘My King and my God!’ We grasp God when we say that; and all that we see of provident recognition and supply of wants in dealings with these lower creatures should encourage us to cherish calm unshakable confidence that every true desire of our souls after Him is as certain to be satisfied.

And so the glancing swallows around the eaves of the Temple and the twittering sparrows on its pinnacles may proclaim to us, not only a contrast which is bitter, but a confidence which is sweet. We may be sure that we shall not be left uncared for amongst the many pensioners at His table, and that the deeper our wants the surer we are of their supply. Our bodies may hunger in vain-bodily hunger has no tendency to bring meat; but our spirits cannot hunger in vain if they hunger after God; for that hunger is the sure precursor and infallible prophet of the coming satisfaction.

These words not only may hearten us with confidence that our desires will be satisfied if they are set upon Him, but they point us to the one way by which they are so. Say ‘My King and my God!’ in the deepest recesses of a spirit conscious of His presence, of a will submitting to His authority, of emptiness expectant of His fulness; say that, and you are in the house of the Lord. For it is not a question of place, it is a question of disposition and desire. This Psalmist, though, when he began his song, he was far away from the Temple, and though he finished it sitting on the same hillside on which he began it, when he had ended it was within the curtains of the sanctuary and wrapt about with the presence of his God. He had regained as he sang what for a moment he had lost the consciousness of when he began-viz. the presence of God with him on the lone, dreary expanse of alien soil as truly as amidst the sanctities of what was called His House.

So, brethren! if we want rest, let us clasp God as ours; if we desire a home warm, safe, sheltered from every wind that blows, and inaccessible to enemies, let us, like the swallows, nestle under the eaves of the Temple. Let us take God for our Hope. They that hold communion with Him-and we can all do that wherever we are and whatever we may be doing-these, and only these, ‘dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of their lives.’ Therefore, with deepest simplicity of expression, our psalm goes on to describe, as equally recipients of blessedness, ‘those that dwell in the house of the

Lord,' and those in 'whose heart are the ways' that lead to it, and to explain at last, as I have already pointed out, that both the dwellers in, and the pilgrims towards, that intimacy of abiding with God are included in the benediction showered on those who cling to Him, 'Blessed is the man that trusteth in Thee!'

III. Lastly, we may take this picture of the Psalmist's as a warning.

Sparrows and swallows have very small brains. They build their nests, and they do not know whose altars they are flitting around. They pursue the insects on the wing, and they twitter their little songs; and they do not understand how all their busy, glancing, brief, trivial life is being lived beneath the shadow of the cherubim, and all but in the presence of the veiled God of the Shekinah.

There are too many people who live like that. We are all tempted to build our nests where we may lay our young, or dispose of ourselves or our treasures in the very sanctuary of God, with blind, crass indifference to the Presence in which we move. The Father's house has many mansions, and wherever we go we are in God's Temple. Alas! some of us have no more sense of the sanctities around us, and no more consciousness of the divine Eye that looks down upon us, than if we were so many feathered sparrows flitting about the altar.

Let us take care, brethren! that we give our hearts to be influenced, and awed, and ennobled, and tranquillised by the sense of ever more being in the house of the Lord. Let us see to it that we keep in that house by continual aspiration, cherishing in our hearts the ways that lead to it; and so making all life worship, and every place what the pilgrim found the stone of Bethel to be, a house of God and a gate of heaven. For everywhere, to the eye that sees the things that are, and not only the things that seem-and to the heart that feels the unseen presence of the One Reality, God Himself-all places are temples, and all work may be beholding His beauty and inquiring in His sanctuary; and everywhere, though our heads rest upon a stone, and there be night and solitude around us, and doubt and darkness in front of us, and danger and terror behind us, and weakness within us, as was the case with Jacob, there will be the ladder with its foot at our side and its top in the heavens; and above the top of it His face, which when we see it look down upon us, makes all places and circumstances good and sweet.

61)Psalms 84:5-7

Psalms

HAPPY PILGRIMS

Psa. 84:5 - Psa. 84:7.

Rightly rendered, the first words of these verses are not a calm, prosaic statement, but an emotional exclamation. The Psalmist's tone would be more truly represented if we read, 'How blessed is the man,' or 'Oh, the blessednesses!' for that is the literal rendering of the Hebrew words, 'of the man whose strength is Thee.'

There are three such exclamations in this psalm, the consideration of which leads us far into the understanding of its deepest meaning. The first of them is this, 'How blessed are they that dwell in Thy house!' Of course the direct allusion is to actual presence in the actual Temple at Jerusalem. But these old psalmists, though they attached more importance to external forms than we do, were not so bound by them, even at their stage of development of the religious life, as that they conceived that no communion with God was possible apart from the form, or that the form itself was communion with God. We can see gleaming through all their words, though only gleaming through them, the same truth which Jesus Christ couched in the immortal phrase-the charter of the Church's emancipation from all externalisms-'neither in this mountain, nor yet in Jerusalem, shall men worship the Father.' To 'dwell in the house of the Lord' is not only to be present in bodily form in the Temple-the Psalmist did not think that it was *only* that-but to possess communion with Him, of which the external presence is but the symbol, the shadow, and the means.

But there is another blessing. To be there is blessing, to wish to be there is no less so.-'Blessed are the men in whose heart are the ways.' The joyous company that went up from every corner of the land to the feasts in Jerusalem made the paths ring with their songs as they travelled, and as the prophet says about another matter, ‘they went up to Zion with songs and joy upon their heads,’ and so the search after is only a shade less blessed-if it be even that-than the possession of communion with God.

But there is a third blessedness in our psalm. ‘Oh! the blessedness of the man that trusteth in Thee.’ That includes and explains both the others. It confirms what I have said, that we do great injustice to the beauty and the spirituality of the Old Testament religion, if we conceive of it as slavishly tied to external forms. And it suggests the thought that in trust there lie both the previous elements, for he that trusts possesses, and he that trustingly possesses is thereby impelled as trustingly to seek for, larger gifts.

So, then, I turn to this outline sketch of the happy pilgrims on the road, and desire to gather from it, as simply as may be, the stimulating thoughts which it suggests to us.

I. Let me ask you, then, following the words which I have read to you, to look with me, first at the blessedness of the pilgrims' spirit.

'Blessed are the men in whose heart are the ways.' A singular expression, and yet a very eloquent and significant one! 'The ways' are, of course, the various roads which, from every corner of the land, lead to the Temple, and the thought suggested is that the men whom the Psalmist pronounces blessed, and in whose blessednesses his longing heart desires to share, are the men who are restless till they are on the path, whose eyes are ever travelling to the goal, who have a 'divine discontent' with distance from God, and who know the impulse and the sting that sends them ever travelling on the path that leads to Him.

On any lower level it is perfectly true that the very salt of life is aspiration after an unattained ideal; that there is nothing that so keeps a man young, strong, buoyant, and fits him for nobilities of action, as that there shall be gleaming for ever before him in the beckoning distance a horizon that moves ever as he moves. When we cease to be the slaves of unattained ideals in any department, it is time for us to die; indeed, we are dead already. There are men in every civilised country, with the gipsy strain in their blood, who never can be at rest until they are in motion, to whom a settled abode is irksome, and to whom the notion of blessedness is that they shall be out in the free plains. '*Amplius*,' the dying Xavier's word, '*further afield*,' is the motto of all noble life-scientist, scholar, artist, man of letters, man of affairs; all come under the same law, that unless there is something before them which has dominated their hearts, and draws their whole being towards it, their lives want salt, want nobility, want freshness, and a green scum comes over the pool. We all know that. To live is to aspire; to cease to aspire is to die.

Well then, looking all round our horizon there stands out one path for aspiration which is clearly blessed to tread-one path, and one path alone. For, oh brethren! there are needs in all our hearts, deep longings, terrible wounds, dreary solitudes, which can only be appeased and healed and companioned when we are pressing nearer and nearer God, that infinite and divine Source of all blessedness, of all peace and good. To possess God is life; to feel after God is life, too. For that aim is sure, as we shall see, to be satisfied. That aim gives, and it is the only one which does give, adequate occupation for every power of a man’s soul; that aim brings, simultaneously with its being entertained, its being satisfied; for, as I have already said, in the one act of faith there lie both these elements of blessedness-the possession of, and the seeking after, God. The religious life is distinguished from all others in two respects; one is the contemporaneousness and co-existence of desire and fruition, and the other is the impossibility that fruition shall ever be so complete and perfect as that desire shall die. And because thus all my nature may reach out its yearnings to Him, and in reaching out may find that after which it feels, and yet, finding it, must feel after it all the more; therefore, high above all other delights of search, high above all other blessednesses of pilgrimage, high above all the buoyancy and concentration of aim and contempt of hindrances which pour into a soul, before which the unattained ideal burns beckoning and inviting, there stands the blessedness of the man ‘in whose heart are the ways’ which lead to God in Zion.

II. And now notice the blessedness of the pilgrims’ experience.

If you use the Revised Version you will see the changes upon the Authorised which it makes, following the stream of modern critics and commentators, and which may thus be reproduced: ‘Passing through the Valley of Weeping, they make it a *place of springs*, the rain also *covereth it with blessings*.’ No doubt the poet is referring here to the actual facts of the pilgrimage to Zion, No doubt, on some one of the roads, there lay a gloomy gorge, the name of which was the Valley of Weeping; either because it dimly commemorated some half-forgotten tragedy long ago, or, more probably, because it was arid and frowning and full of difficulty for the travellers on the march. The Psalmist uses that name with a lofty imaginative freedom, which itself confirms the view that I have taken, that there is something deeper in the psalm than the mere external circumstances of the pilgrimages to the Holy City. For, he says, ‘passing through the Valley of Weeping, they make it a place of springs.’ They, as it were, pour their tears into the wells, and they become sources of refreshment and fertility.

But there are other kinds of moisture than tears and fountains. And so he goes on: ‘the rain also’ from above ‘covereth it with blessings’; the blessings being, I suppose, the waving crops which the poet’s imagination conceives of as springing up all over the else arid ground. Irrigated thus by the pilgrims’ labour, and rained upon thus by God’s gift from heaven, ‘the wilderness rejoices and blossoms as the rose.’

Now, translate that-it scarcely needs translation, I suppose, to anybody who will read the psalm with the least touch of a poetic imagination-translate that, and it just comes to this. If we have in our hearts, as our chief aim, the desire to get closer to God, then our sorrows and our tears will become sources of refreshment and fertility. Ah! how different all our troubles, large and little, look when we take as our great aim in life what is God’s great purpose in giving us life-viz. that we should be moulded into His likeness and enriched by the possession of Himself. That takes the sting out of sorrow, and although it leaves us in no morbid condition of insensibility, it yet makes it possible for us to gather our tears into reservoirs which shall be to us the sources of many a blessing, and many a thankfulness. *He* puts them into His bottle; we have to put them into our wells. And be sure of this, that if we understood better the meaning of life, that it was all intended to be our road to God, and if we judged of things more from that point of view, we should less frequently be brought to stand by what we call the mysteries of Providence and more able to wring out of them all the rich honey which is stored in them all for us. Not the least of the blessednesses of the pilgrim heart is its power of transmitting the pilgrim’s tears into the pilgrim’s wells. Brothers! do you bring such thoughts to bear on the disappointments, anxieties, sorrows, losses that befall you, be they great or small? If you do, you will have learned, better than I can say it, how strangely grief changes its aspect when it is looked upon as the helper and servant to our progress towards God.

But that is not all. If, with the pilgrims’ hearts, we rightly use our sorrows, we shall not be left to find refreshment and fertilising power only in ourselves, but the benediction of the rain from heaven will come down, and the great Spirit of God will fall upon our hearts, not in a flood that drowns, but broken up into a beneficent mist that falls quietly upon us, and brings with itself the assurance of fertility. And so the secret of turning the desert into abundance, and tears into blessings, lies in having the pilgrim's heart.

III. Notice the blessedness of the pilgrims' advance.

'They go from strength to strength.' I do not know whether the Psalmist means to use that word 'strength' in the significance which it also has in old English, of a fortified place, so that the metaphor would be that from one camp of security, one fortress to another, they journey safe always, because of their protection; or whether he means to use it rather in its plain and simple sense, according to which the significance would be that these happy pilgrims do not get worn out on the journey, as is the wont of men that set out, for instance, from some far corner of India to Mecca, and come in battered and travel-stained, and half dead with their privations, but that the further they go the stronger they become; and on the road gain more vigour than they could ever have gained by ease and indulgence in their homes. But, whichever of these two meanings we may be disposed to adopt, the great thought that comes out of both of them is identical-viz. that this is one of the distinguishing joys of a Christian career of pressing forward to closer communion and conformity with our Lord and Master, in whom God is manifested-viz. that we grow day by day in strength, and that effort does not weaken, but invigorates.

And now I have to put a very plain question. Is that growing strength anything like the general characteristic of us professing Christians? I wonder how many people there are listening to me now that have been members of Christian churches for half a century almost, but are not a bit better than they were away back in the years that they have almost forgotten? I wonder in how many of our cases there has been an arrested development, like that which you will sometimes see in deformed people, the lower limbs all but atrophied? I wonder how many of us are babes of forty years old, and from how many of our minds the very conception of continual growth, as an essential of Christian life, has altogether vanished? Brother! are you any further than you were ten years ago?

I remember once, long ago, when I was on board a sailing ship, that we had baffling winds as we tried to run up the coast; and morning after morning for a week we used to come up on deck, and *there* were the same windmill, and the same church-tower that we had seen last night, and the night before and the night before that. That is the sort of voyage that a great many of you Christian people are making. There may be motion; there is no progress. Round and round and round you go. That is not the way to get to Zion. 'They go from strength to strength,' and unless you are doing that, you know little about the blessedness of the pilgrim heart.

IV. Lastly, note the blessedness of the pilgrims' arrival.

'Every one of them in Zion appeareth before God.' Then there is one road on which whosoever travels is sure to reach his goal. On all others caravans get lost, overwhelmed in a sandstorm, or slain by robbers; and the bleached bones of men and camels lie there on the sand for centuries. This caravan always arrives. For no man ever wanted God who did not possess Him, and the measure of our desire is the prophecy of our possession. Surely it is worth while, even from the point of view of self-interest, to forsake all these lower aims in which success is absolutely problematical, or, while pursuing them as far as duty and necessity require, in and through them, as well as above and beyond them, to press towards the one aim in which failure is impossible. You cannot say about say other course-'Blessed is the man that enters on it, for he is sure to reach what he desires.' Other goals are elusive; the golden circlet may never drop upon your locks. But there is one path on which all that you seek you shall have, and you are on it if 'in your hearts are the *ways*.'

I need not say a word about the ultimate fulfilment of this great promise of our text; how that there is not only in our psalm, gleaming through it, a reference to the communion of earth rather than to the external Presence in the sanctuary, but there is also hinted, though less consciously, to the Psalmist himself, yet necessarily from the nature of the case the perfecting of that earthly communion in the higher house of the Lord in the heavenly Zion. Are all these desires, these longings, these efforts after God which make the nobleness and the blessedness of a life on earth, and which are always satisfied, and yet never satiated, to be crushed into nothingness by the accident of bodily dissolution? Then, then, the darkest of all clouds is drawn over the face of God, and we are brought into a state of absolute intellectual bewilderment as to what life, futile and frail, has been for at all. No, brother! God never gives mouths but He sends meat to fill them; and He has not suffered His children to long after Him, to press after Him, only in order that the partial fulfilment of their desires and yearnings which is possible upon earth should be all their experience.

'He thinks he was not made to die,

And Thou hast made him; Thou art just.'

Be sure that 'every one of them in Zion appeareth before God.'

So, brethren! let us take the pilgrim scrip and staff; and be sure of this, that the old blessed word will be fulfilled, that we shall not be lost in the wilderness, where there is no way, nor grope and search after elusive and fleeting good; but that 'the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.'

62)Psalms 84:12

Psalms

BLESSED TRUST

Psa. 84:12.

In my last sermon from the central portion of this psalm I pointed out that the Psalmist thrice celebrates the blessedness of certain types of character, and that these threefold benedictions constitute, as it were, the keynotes of the portions of the psalm in which they respectively occur. They are these: 'Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house'; 'Blessed is the man in whose heart are the ways'; and this final one, 'Blessed is the man that trusteth in Thee.'

Now, this last benediction includes, as I then remarked, both of the others; both the blessedness belonging to dwelling in, and that realised by journeying towards, the House of the Lord. For trust is both fruition and longing; both aspiration and possession. But it not only includes the other two: it explains and surpasses them. For they bear, deeply stamped upon them, the impression of the imperfect stage of revelation to which the psalm belongs, and are tied to form in a manner which we ought not to be. But here the Psalmist gets behind all the externals of ceremonial worship, and goes straight to the heart of spiritual religion when, for dwelling in, and journeying towards, any house of the Lord, he substitutes that plain expression, ‘the man that trusteth in Thee.’

Now, the other two benedictions of which I have spoken do respectively form the centre of the first and second portions of this psalm; in each case the remainder of the section being an explanation of that central utterance. And here the case is the same; for the verses which precede this final exclamation are various phases of the experience of a man who trusts in God, and are the ground upon which his faith is pronounced ‘blessed.’

So I desire now to view these three preceding verses together, as being illustrations of the various blessednesses of the life of trust in God. They are not exhaustive. There are other tints and flashes of glory sleeping in the jewel which need the rays of light to impinge upon it at other angles, in order to wake them into scintillation and lustre. But there is enough in the context to warrant the Psalmist’s outburst into this final rapturous exclamation, and ought to be enough to make us seek to possess that life as our own.

I. First, then, note here how the heart of religion always has been, and is, trust in God.

This Psalmist, nourished amidst the externalisms of an elaborate ceremonial, and compelled, by the stage of revelation at which he stood, to localise worship in an external Temple, in a fashion that we need not do, had yet attained to the conviction that, in the desert or in the Temple, God was near; that no weary pilgrimage was needed to reach His house, but that with one movement of a trusting heart the man clasped God wherever he was. And that is the living centre of all religion. I do not mean merely that our way to be sure of God is not through the understanding only, but through the outgoing of confidence in Him-but I mean that the kernel of a devout life is trust in God. The bond that underlies all the blessedness of human society, the thing that makes the sweetness of the sweetest ties that can knit men together, the secret of all the happy loves of husband and wife, friend and friend, parent and child, is simple confidence. And the more utter the confidence the more tranquilly blessed is the union and the life that flow from it. Transfer this, then-which is the bond of perfectness between man and man-to our relation to God, and you get to the very heart of the mystery. Not by externalisms of any kind, not by the clear dry light of the understanding, but by the outgoing of the heart's confidence to God, do we come within the clasp of His arms and become recipients of His grace. Trust knits to the unseen, and trust alone.

That has always been the way. This Psalmist is no exception to the devout souls of his time. For though, as I have said, externalisms and ritualisms filled a place then, that it is an anachronism and a retrogression that they should be supposed to fill now, still beneath all these there lay this one ancient, permanent relation, the relation of trust. From the day in which the 'father of the faithful' as he is significantly called Abraham, 'believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness,' down all through the ages of that ancient Church, every man who laid a real hold upon God clasped Him by the outstretched hand of faith. So the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews was fully warranted in claiming all these ancient heroes, sages, and saints, as having lived by faith, and as being the foremost files in the same army in which the Christians of his day marched. The prophets who cried, 'Trust ye in the Lord for ever, for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength,' were saying the very same thing as the Apostles who preached 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.' The contents of the faith were expanded; the faith itself was identical. Like some of those old Roman roads, where to-day the wains of commerce and the chariots of ease and the toiling pedestrians pass over the lava blocks that have been worn by the tramp of legions and rutted by the wheels of their chariots, the way to God that we travel is the way on which all the saints from the beginning of time have passed in their pilgrimage. Trust is, always has been, always will be, the bond that knits men with God.

And trust is blessed, because the very attitude of confident dependence takes the strain off a man. To feel that I am leaning hard upon a firm prop, to devolve responsibility, to put the reins into another's hand, to give the helm into another steersman's grasp, whilst I may lie down and rest, that is blessedness, though there be a storm. In the story of frontier warfare we read how, day by day, the battalion that had been in the post of danger, and therefore of honour, was withdrawn into the centre; and another one was placed in the position that it had occupied. So, when we trust we put Him in the front, and we march more quietly, more blessedly, when we are in the centre, and He has to bear the brunt of the assailing foe.

Christian people! have you got as far past the outsides of religion as this Psalmist had? Do you recognise as clearly as he did that all this outward worship, and a great deal of our theology, is but the scaffolding; and that the real building lies inside of that; and that it is of value only as being a means to an end? Church membership is all very well; coming to church and chapel is all right; the outsides of worship will be necessary as long as our souls have outsides-their bodies. But you do not get into the house of the Lord unless you go in through 'the door of faith,' which is opened to us all. The heart of the religious life, which makes it blessed, is trust in God.

II. And now, secondly, a life of faith is a blessed life, because it talks with God.

I have already said that my text is expanded in the preceding verses. And I now turn to them to catch the various flashes of the diversely coloured blessedness of this life. The first of them is that which I have just mentioned. The Psalmist has described for us the happy pilgrims passing from strength to strength, and in imagination has landed them in the Temple. And then he goes on to tell us what they did and found there.

The first thing that they did was to speak to Him who was in the Temple. 'Behold! O God our Shield! and look upon the face of Thine anointed.' They had, as he has just said, 'Every one of them appeared before God in Zion.' As they looked up to Him they asked Him to look down upon them. 'Behold! O God our Shield!' 'Shield' here is the designation of God Himself, and is an exclamation addressed to Him-'Thou who art our God and Shield, look down upon us!' And then comes a singular clause, about which much might be said if time permitted: 'Look upon the face of Thine anointed.' The use of that word 'anointed' seems to suggest that the psalm is either the outpouring of a king, or that it is spoken by some one in the train of a king, who feels that the favour bestowed upon the king will be participated in by his followers. But whilst that, if it be the explanation, might carry with it a hint as to the great truth of the mediation of Jesus Christ, our true King, I pass that by altogether, and fix upon the thought that here one element of the blessedness of the life of faith lies in the desire that God should look upon us. For that look means love, and that look secures protection and wise distribution of gifts. And it is life to have His eye fixed upon me, and to be conscious that He is looking at me. Dear brethren! if we want a lustre to be diffused through all our days, depend upon it, the surest and the only way to secure it is that that Face shall be felt to be turned toward us, 'as the sun shineth in his strength'; and then all the landscape will rejoice, and the birds will sing and the waters will flash. 'Look upon me, and let me sun myself beneath Thine eye'-to have that desire is blessed; and to feel that the desire is accomplished is more blessed still.

Dear friends! it seems to me that the ordinary Christian life of this day is terribly wanting in this experience of frank, free talk with God, and that that is one reason why so many of us professing Christians know so little of the blessedness of the man that trusts in God. You have religion enough to keep you from doing certain gross acts of sin; you have religion enough to make you uncomfortable in neglected duty. You have religion enough to impel you to certain acts that you suppose to be obligatory upon you. But do you know anything about the elasticity and spring of spirit in getting near God, and pouring out all your hearts to Him? The life of faith is not blessed unless it is a life of frank speaking with God.

III. The life of faith is blessed, because it has fixed its desires on the true good.

The Psalmist goes on-'A day in Thy courts is better than a thousand; I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.' 'A day in Thy courts is better than a thousand.' We all know how strangely elastic time is, and have sometimes been amazed when we remembered what an infinity of joy or sorrow we had lived through in one tick of the pendulum. When men are dreaming, they pass through a long series of events in a moment's space. When we are truly awake, we live long in a short time, for life is measured, not by the length of its moments, but by the depth of its experiences. And when some new truth is flashed upon us, or some new emotion has shaken us as with an earthquake, or when some new blessing has burst into our lives, then we know how ‘one day’ with men may be as it is with God, in a deeper sense, ‘as a thousand years,’ so great is the change that it works upon us. There is nothing that will so fill life to the utmost bounds of its elastic capacity as strong trust in Him. There is nothing that will make our lives so blessed. This Psalmist, speaking with the voice of all them that trust in the Lord, here declares his clear consciousness that the true good for the human soul is fellowship with God.

But the clearest knowledge of that fact is not enough to bring the blessedness. There must be the next step-’I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness’-the definite resolve that I, for my part, will act according to my conviction, and believing that the best thing in life is to have God in life, and that that will make life, as it were, an eternity of blessedness even while it is made up of fleeting days, will put my foot down and make my choice, and having made it, will stick to it. It is all very well to say that ‘A day in Thy courts is better than a thousand’: have I *chosen* to dwell in the courts; and do I, not only in estimate but in feeling and practice, set communion with God high above everything besides?

This psalm, according to the superscription attached to it, is one ‘for the sons of Korah.’ These sons of Korah were a branch of the Levitical priesthood, to whose charge was committed the keeping of the gates of the Temple, and hence this phrase is especially appropriate on their lips. But passing that, let me just ask you to lay to heart, dear friends! this one plain thought, that the effect of a real life of faith will be to make us perfectly sure that the true good is in God, and fixedly determined to pursue that. And you have no right to claim the name of a believing Christian, unless your faith has purged your eyes, so that you can see the hollowness of all besides, and has stiffened your will so that you can determine that, for your part, ‘the Lord is the Strength of your heart, and your Portion for ever.’ The secret of blessedness lies here. ‘Seek ye the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you.’

IV. Lastly, a life of faith is a life of blessedness, because it draws from God all necessary good.

I must not dwell, as I had hoped to do, upon the last words preceding my text, ‘The Lord God is a Sun and Shield’-brightness and defence-’the Lord will give grace and glory’: ‘grace,’ the loving gifts which will make a man gracious and graceful; ‘glory,’ not any future lustre of the transfigured soul and glorified body, but the glory which belongs to the life of faith here on earth. Link that thought with the preceding one. ‘The Lord is a Sun . . . the Lord will give glory’; like a little bit of broken glass lying in the furrows of a ploughed field, when the sun smites down upon it, it flashes, outshining many a diamond. If a man is walking upon a road with the sun behind him, his face is dark. He wheels himself round, and it is suffused with light, as Moses’ face shone. ‘We all, with unveiled faces beholding, are changed from glory to glory.’ If we walk in the sunshine we shall shine too. If we ‘walk in the light’ we shall be ‘light in the Lord.’

‘No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly.’ Trust is inward, and the outside of trust is an upright walk; and if a man has these two, which, inasmuch as one is the root and the other is the fruit, are but one in reality, nothing that is good will be withheld from Him. For how can the sun but pour its rays upon everything that lives? ‘Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights.’ So the life is blessed that talks with God; that has fixed its desires on Him as its Supreme Good; that is irradiated by His light, glorified by the reflection of His brightness, and ministered to with all necessary appliances by His loving self-communication.

We come back to the old word, dear friends! ‘Trust in the Lord, and do good, and verily thou shalt be fed.’ We come back to the old message that nothing knits a man to God but faith with its child, righteousness. If trusting we love, and loving we obey, then in converse with Him, in fixed desires after Him, in daily and hourly reception from Him of Himself and His gifts, the life of earth will be full of a blessedness more real, more deep, more satisfying, more permanent, than can be found anywhere besides.

Who was it that said, ‘I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh to the Father but by Me’? Tread that path, and you will come into the house of the Lord, and will dwell there all the days of your life. 'Believe in God, believe also in Me.'

63)Psalms 85:10-13

Psalms

'THE BRIDAL OF THE EARTH AND SKY'

Psa. 85:10 - Psa. 85:13.

This is a lovely and highly imaginative picture of the reconciliation and reunion of God and man, 'the bridal of the earth and sky.'

The Poet-Psalmist, who seems to have belonged to the times immediately after the return from the Exile, in strong faith sees before him a vision of a perfectly harmonious co-operation and relation between God and man. He is not prophesying directly of Messianic times. The vision hangs before him, with no definite note of time upon it. He hopes it may be fulfilled in his own day; he is sure it will, if only, as he says, his countrymen 'turn not again to folly.' At all events, it will be fulfilled in that far-off time to which the heart of every prophet turned with longing. But, more than that, there is no reason why it should not be fulfilled with every man, at any moment. It is the ideal, to use modern language, of the relations between heaven and earth. Only that the Psalmist believed that, as sure as there was a God in heaven, who is likewise a God working in the midst of the earth, the ideal might become, and would become, a reality.

So, then, I take it, these four verses all set forth substantially the same thought, but with slightly different modifications and applications. They are a four-fold picture of how heaven and earth ought to blend and harmonise. This four-fold representation of the one thought is what I purpose to consider now.

I. To begin with, then, take the first verse:-'Mercy and Truth are met together, Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other.' We have here *the heavenly twin-sisters, and the earthly pair that correspond*.

‘Mercy and Truth are met together’-that is one personification; ‘Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other’ is another. It is difficult to say whether these four great qualities are here regarded as all belonging to God, or as all belonging to man, or as all common both to God and man. The first explanation is the most familiar one, but I confess that, looking at the context, where we find throughout an interpenetration and play of reciprocal action as between earth and heaven, I am disposed to think of the first pair as sisters from the heavens, and the second pair as the earthly sisters that correspond to them. Mercy and Truth-two radiant angels, like virgins in some solemn choric dance, linked hand in hand, issue from the sanctuary and move amongst the dim haunts of men making ‘a sunshine in a shady place,’ and to them there come forth, linked in a sweet embrace, another pair, Righteousness and Peace, whose lives depend on the lives of their elder and heavenly sisters. And so these four, the pair of heavenly origin, and the answering pair that have sprung into being at their coming upon earth;-these four, banded in perfect accord, move together, blessing and light-giving, amongst the sons of men. Mercy and Truth are the divine-Righteousness and Peace the earthly.

Let me dwell upon these two couples briefly. ‘Mercy and Truth are met together’ means this, that these two qualities are found braided and linked inseparably in all that God does with mankind; that these two springs are the double fountains from which the great stream of the ‘river of the water of life,’ the forthcoming and the manifestation of God, takes its rise.

‘Mercy and Truth.’ What are the meanings of the two words? Mercy is love that stoops, love that departs from the strict lines of desert and retribution. Mercy is Love that is kind when Justice might make it otherwise. Mercy is Love that condescends to that which is far beneath. Thus the ‘Mercy’ of the Old Testament covers almost the same ground as the ‘Grace’ of the New Testament. And Truth blends with Mercy; that is to say-Truth in a somewhat narrower than its widest sense, meaning mainly God’s fidelity to every obligation under which He has come, God’s faithfulness to promise, God’s fidelity to His past, God’s fidelity, in His actions, to His own character, which is meant by that great word, ‘He sware by *Himself*!’

Thus the sentiment of mercy, the tender grace and gentleness of that condescending love, has impressed upon it the seal of permanence when we say: ‘Grace and Truth, Mercy and Faithfulness, are met together.’ No longer is love mere sentiment, which may be capricious and may be transient. We can reckon on it, we know the law of its being. The love is lifted up above the suspicion of being arbitrary, or of ever changing or fluctuating. We do not know all the limits of the orbit, but we know enough to calculate it for all practical purposes. God has committed Himself to us, He has limited Himself by the obligations of His own past. We have a right to turn to Him, and say; ‘Be what Thou art, and continue to be to us what Thou hast been unto past ages,’ and He responds to the appeal. For Mercy and Truth, tender, gracious, stooping, forgiving love, and inviolable faithfulness that can never be otherwise, these blend in all His works, ‘that by two immutable things, wherein it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation.’

Again, dear brethren! let me remind you that these two are the ideal two, which as far as God’s will and wish are concerned, are the only two that would mark any of His dealings with men. When He is, if I may so say, left free to do as He would, and is not forced to His ‘strange act’ of punishment by my sin and yours, these, and these only, are the characteristics of His dealings. Nor let us forget-’We beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father, *full of grace and truth*.’ The Psalmist’s vision was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, in whom these sweet twin characteristics, that are linked inseparably in all the works of God, are welded together into one in the living personality of Him who is all the Father’s grace embodied; and is ‘the Way and the Truth and the Life.’

Turn now to the other side of the first aspect of the union of God and man, ‘Mercy and Truth are met together’; these are the heavenly twins. ‘Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other’-these are the earthly sisters who sprang into being to meet them.

Of course I know that these words are very often applied, by way of illustration, to the great work of Jesus Christ upon the Cross, which is supposed to have reconciled, if not contradictory, at least divergently working sides of the divine character and government. And we all know how beautifully the phrase has often been employed by eloquent preachers, and how beautifully it has been often illustrated by devout painters.

But beautiful as the adaptation is, I think it is an adaptation, and not the real meaning of the words, for this reason, if for no other, that Righteousness and Peace are not in the Old Testament regarded as opposites, but as harmonious and inseparable. And so I take it that here we have distinctly the picture of what happens upon earth when Mercy and Truth that come down from Heaven are accepted and recognised-then Righteousness and Peace kiss each other.

Or, to put away the metaphor, here are two thoughts, first that in men's experience and life Righteousness and Peace cannot be rent apart. The only secret of tranquillity is to be good. He who is, first of all, 'King of Righteousness' is 'after that also King of Salem, which is King of Peace.' 'The effect of righteousness shall be peace,' as Isaiah, the brother in spirit of this Psalmist, says; and on the other hand, as the same prophet says, 'The wicked is like a troubled sea that cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt; there is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked,' but where affections are pure, and the life is worthy, where goodness is loved in the heart, and followed even imperfectly in the daily practice, there the ocean is quiet, and 'birds of peace sit brooding on the charmed wave.' The one secret of tranquillity is first to trust in the Lord and then to do good. Righteousness and Peace kiss each other.

The other thought here is that Righteousness and her twin sister, Peace, only come in the measure in which the mercy and the truth of God are received into thankful hearts. My brother! have you taken that Mercy and that Truth into your soul, and are you trying to reach peace in the only way by which any human being can ever reach it-through the path of righteousness, self-suppression, and consecration to Him?

II. Now, take the next phase of this union and cooperation of earth and heaven, which is given here in the 11th verse-'Truth shall spring out of the earth, and Righteousness shall look down from heaven.' That is, to put it into other words-God responding to man's truth.

Notice that in this verse one member from each of the two pairs that have been spoken about in the previous verse is detached from its companion, and they are joined so as to form for a moment a new pair. Truth is taken from the first couple; Righteousness from the second, and a third couple is thus formed.

And notice, further, that each takes the place that had belonged to the other. The heavenly Truth becomes a child of earth; and the earthly Righteousness ascends 'to look down from heaven.' The process of the previous verse in effect is reversed. 'Truth shall spring out of the earth, Righteousness shall look down from heaven'; that is to say-man's Truth shall begin to grow and blossom in answer, as it were, to God's Truth that came down upon it. Which being translated into other words is this: where a man's heart has welcomed the Mercy and the Truth of God there will spring up in that heart, not only the Righteousness and Peace, of which the previous verse is speaking, but specifically a faithfulness not all unlike the faithfulness which it grasps. If we have a God immutable and unchangeable to build upon, let us build upon Him immutability and unchangeableness. If we have a Rock on which to build our confidence, let us see that the confidence which we build upon it is rocklike too. If we have a God that cannot lie, let us grasp His faithful word with an affiance that cannot falter. If we have a Truth in the heavens, absolute and immutable, on which to anchor our hopes, let us see to it that our hopes, anchored thereon, are sure and steadfast. What a shame it would be that we should bring the vacillations and fluctuations of our own insincerities and changeableness to the solemn, fixed unalterableness of that divine Word! We ought to be faithful, for we build upon a faithful God.

And then the other side of this second picture is 'Righteousness shall look down from heaven,' not in its judicial aspect merely, but as the perfect moral purity that belongs to the divine Nature, which shall bend down a loving eye upon the men beneath, and mark the springings of any imperfect good and thankfulness in our hearts; joyous as the husbandman beholds the springing of his crops in the fields that he has sown.

God delights when He sees the first faint flush of green which marks the springing of the good seed in the else barren hearts of men. No good, no beauty of character, no meek rapture of faith, no aspiration Godwards is ever wasted and lost, for His eye rests upon it. As heaven, with its myriad stars, bends over the lowly earth, and in the midnight when no human eye beholds, sees all, so God sees the hidden confidence, the unseen 'Truth' that springs to meet His faithful Word. The flowers that grow in the pastures of the wilderness, or away upon the wild prairies, or that hide in the clefts of the inaccessible mountains, do not 'waste their sweetness on the desert air,' for God sees them.

It may be an encouragement and quickening to us to remember that wherever the tiniest little bit of Truth springs upon the earth, the loving eye-not the eye of a great Taskmaster-but the eye of the Brother, Christ, which is the eye of God, looks down. 'Wherefore we labour, that whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing unto Him.'

III. And then the third aspect of this ideal relation between earth and heaven, the converse of the one we have just now been speaking of, is set forth in the next verse: 'Yea, the Lord shall give that which is good and our land shall yield her increase.' That is to say, Man is here responding to God's gift.

You see that the order of things is reversed in this verse, and that it recurs to the order with which we originally started. 'The Lord shall give that which is good.' In the figure that refers to all the skyey influence of dew, rain, sunshine, passing breezes, and still ripening autumn days; in the reality it refers to all the motives, powers, impulses, helps, furtherances by which He makes it possible for us to serve Him and love Him, and bring forth fruits of righteousness.

And so the thought which has already been hinted at is here more fully developed and dwelt upon, this great truth that earthly fruitfulness is possible only by the reception of heavenly gifts. As sure as every leaf that grows is mainly water that the plant has got from the clouds, and carbon that it has got out of the atmosphere, so surely will all our good be mainly drawn from heaven and heaven's gifts. As certainly as every lump of coal that you put upon your fire contains in itself sunbeams that have been locked up for all these millenniums that have passed since it waved green in the forest, so certainly does every good deed embody in itself gifts from above. No man is pure except by impartation; and every good gift and every perfect gift cometh from the Father of Lights.

So let us learn the lesson of absolute dependence for all purity, virtue, and righteousness on His bestowment, and come to Him and ask Him ever more to fill our emptiness with His own gracious fulness and to lead us to be what He commands and would have us to be.

And then there is the other lesson out of this phase of the ideal relation between earth and heaven, the lesson of what we ought to do with our gifts. ‘The earth yields her increase,’ by laying hold of the good which the Lord gives, and by means of that received good quickening all the germs. Ah, dear brethren! wasted opportunities, neglected moments, uncultivated talents, gifts that are not stirred up, rain and dew and sunshine, all poured upon us and no increase-is not that the story of much of all our lives, and of the whole of some lives? Are we like Eastern lands where the trees have been felled, and the great irrigation works and tanks have been allowed to fall into disrepair, and so when the bountiful treasure of the rains comes, all that it does is to swell for half a day the discoloured stream that carries away some more of the arable land; and when the sunshine comes, with its swift, warm powers, all that it does is to bleach the stones and scorch the barren sand? ‘The earth which *drinketh in the rain* that cometh oft upon it, and yieldeth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth the blessing of God.’ Is it true about you that the earth yieldeth her increase, as it is certainly true that ‘the Lord giveth that which is good’?

IV. And now the last thing which is here, the last phase of the fourfold representation of the ideal relation between earth and heaven is, ‘Righteousness shall go before Him and shall set us in the way of His steps.’ That is to say, God teaches man to walk in His footsteps.

There is some difficulty about the meaning of the last clause of this verse, but I think that having regard to the whole context and to that idea of the interpenetration of the heavenly with the human which we have seen running through it, the reading in our English Bible gives substantially, though somewhat freely, the meaning. The clause might literally be rendered ‘make His footsteps for a way,’ which comes to substantially the same thing as is expressed in our English Bible. Righteousness, God’s moral perfectness, is set forth here in a twofold phase. First it is a herald going before Him and preparing His path. The Psalmist in these words draws tighter than ever the bond between God and man. It is not only that God sends His messengers to the world, nor only that His loving eye looks down upon it, nor only ‘that He gives that which is good’; but it is that the whole heaven, as it were, lowers itself to touch earth, that God comes down to dwell and walk among men. The Psalmist’s mind is filled with the thought of a present God who moves amongst mankind, and has His ‘footsteps’ on earth. This herald Righteousness prepares God’s path, which is just to say that all His dealings with mankind-which, as we have seen, have Mercy and Faithfulness for their signature and stamp-are rooted and based in perfect Rectitude.

The second phase of the operation of Righteousness is that that majestic herald, the divine purity which moves before Him, and ‘prepares in the desert a highway for the Lord,’-that that very same Righteousness comes and takes my feeble hand, and will lead my tottering footsteps into God’s path, and teach me to walk, planting my little foot where He planted His. The highest of all thoughts of the ideal relation between earth and heaven, that of likeness between God and man, is trembling on the Psalmist’s lips. Men may walk in God’s ways-not only in ways that please Him, but in ways that are like His. ‘Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.’

And the likeness can only be a likeness in moral qualities-a likeness in goodness, a likeness in purity, a likeness in aversion from evil, for His other attributes and characteristics are His peculiar property; and no human brow can wear the crown that He wears. But though His mercy can but, from afar off, be copied by us, the righteousness that moves before Him, and engineers God’s path through the wilderness of the world, will come behind Him and nurselike lay hold of our feeble arms and teach us to go in the way God would have us to walk.

Ah, brethren! that is the crown and climax of the harmony between God and man, that His mercy and His truth, His gifts and His grace have all led us up to this: that we take His righteousness as our pattern, and try in our poor lives to reproduce its wondrous beauty. Do not forget that a great deal more than the Psalmist dreamed of, you Christian men and women possess, in the Christ ‘who of God is made unto us Righteousness,’ in whom heaven and earth are joined for ever, in whom man and God are knit in strictest bonds of indissoluble friendship; and who, having prepared a path for God in His mighty mission and by His sacrifice on the Cross, comes to us, and as the Incarnate Righteousness, will lead us in the paths of God, leaving us an Example, that ‘we should follow in His steps.’

64)Psalms 86:1-5

Psalms

A SHEAF OF PRAYER ARROWS

Psa. 86:1 - Psa. 86:5.

We have here a sheaf of arrows out of a good man’s quiver, shot into heaven. This series of supplications is remarkable in more than one respect. They all mean substantially the same thing, but the Psalmist turns the one blessing round in all sorts of ways, so great does it seem to him, and so earnest is his desire to possess it. They are almost all quotations from earlier psalms, just as our prayers are often words of Scripture, hallowed by many associations, and uniting us with the men of old who cried unto God and were answered.

The structure of the petitions is remarkably uniform. In each there are a prayer and a plea, and in most of them a direct invocation of God. So I have thought that, if we put them all together now, we may get some lessons as to the invocations, the petitions, and the pleas of true prayer; or, in other words, we may be taught how to lay hold of God, what to ask from Him, and how to be sure of an answer.

I. First, the lesson as to how to lay hold upon God.

The divine names in this psalm are very frequent and significant, and the order in which they are used is evidently intentional. We have the great covenant name of Jehovah set in the very first verse, and in the last verse; as if to bind the whole together with a golden circlet. And then, in addition, it appears once in each of the other two sections of the psalm, with which we have nothing to do at present. Then we have, further, the name of *God* employed in each of the sections; and further, the name of *Lord*, which is not the same as *Jehovah*, but implies the simple idea of superiority and authority. In each portion of the psalm, then, we see the writer laying his hand, as it were, upon these three names-'Jehovah,' 'my God,' 'Lord'-and in all of them finding grounds for his confidence and reasons for his cry.

Nothing in our prayers is often more hollow and unreal than the formal repetitions of the syllables of that divine name, often but to fill a pause in our thoughts. But to 'call upon the Name of the Lord' means, first and foremost, to bring before our minds the aspects of His great and infinite character, which are gathered together into the Name by which we address Him. So when we say 'Jehovah!' 'Lord!' what we ought to mean is this, that we are gazing upon that majestic, glorious thought of Being, self-derived, self-motived, self-ruled, the being of Him whose Name can only be, 'I am that I am.' Of all other creatures the name is, 'I am that I have been made,' or 'I am that I became,' but of Him the Name is, 'I am that I am.' Nowhere outside of Himself is the reason for His being, nor the law that shapes it, nor the aim to which it tends. And this infinite, changeless Rock is laid for our confidence, Jehovah the Eternal, the Self-subsisting, Self-sufficing One.

There is more than that thought in this wondrous Name, for it not only expresses the timeless, unlimited, and changeless being of God, but also the truth that He has entered into what He deigns to call a Covenant with us men. The name Jehovah is the seal of that ancient Covenant, of which, though the form has vanished, the essence abides for ever, and God has thereby bound Himself to us by promises that cannot be abrogated. So that when we say, 'O Lord!' we summon up before ourselves, and grasp as the grounds of our confidence, and we humbly present before Him as the motives, if we may so call them, for His action, His own infinite being and His covenanted grace.

Then, further, our psalm invokes '*my* God.' That names implies in itself, simply, the notion of power to be reverenced. But when we add to it that little word '*my*,' we rise to the wonderful thought that the creature can claim an individual relation to Him, and in some profound sense a possession there. The tiny mica flake claims kindred with the Alpine peak from which it fell. The poor, puny hand, that can grasp so little of the material and temporal, can grasp all of God that it needs.

Then, there is the other name, ‘Lord,’ which simply expresses illimitable sovereignty, power over all circumstances, creatures, orders of being, worlds, and cycles of ages. Wherever He is He rules, and therefore my prayer can be answered by Him. When a child cries ‘Mother!’ it is more than all other petitions. A dear name may be a caress when it comes from loving lips. If we are the kind of Christians that we ought to be, there will be nothing sweeter to us than to whisper to ourselves, and to say to Him, ‘Abba! Father!’ See to it that your calling on the Name of the Lord is not formal, but the true apprehension, by a believing mind and a loving heart, of the ineffable and manifold sweetnesses which are hived in His manifold names.

II. Now, secondly, we have here a lesson as to what we should ask.

The petitions of our text, of course, only cover a part of the whole field of prayer. The Psalmist is praying in the midst of some unknown trouble, and his petitions are manifold in form, though in substance, as I have said, they may all be reduced to one. Let me run over them very briefly. ‘Bow down Thine ear and hear me.’ That is not simply the invocation of the omniscience of a God, but an appeal for loving, attentive regard to the desires of His poor servant. The hearing is not merely the perception in the divine mind of what the creature desires, but it is the answer in fact, or the granting of the petition. The best illustration of what the Psalmist desires here may be found in another psalm, where another Psalmist tells us his experience and says, ‘My cry came unto His ears, and the earth shook and trembled.’ You put a spoonful of water into a hydraulic press at the one end, and you get a force that squeezes tons together at the other. Here there is a poor, thin stream of the voice of a sorrowful man at the one end, and there is an earthquake at the other. That is what ‘hearing’ and ‘bowing down the ear’ means.

Then the prayers go on to three petitions, which may be all regarded as diverse acts of deliverance or of help. ‘Preserve my soul.’ The word expresses the guardianship with which a garrison keeps a fortress. It is the

Hebrew equivalent of the word employed by Paul-'The peace of God shall *keep* your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' The thought is that of a defenceless man or thing round which some strong protection is cast. And the desire expressed by it is that in the midst of sorrow, whatever it is, the soul may be guarded from evil. Then, the next petition-'Save Thy servant'-goes a step further, and not only asks to be kept safe in the midst of sorrows, but to be delivered out of them. And then the next petition-'Be merciful unto me, O Lord!'-craves that the favour which comes down to inferiors, and is bestowed upon those who might deserve something far otherwise, may manifest itself, in such acts of strengthening, or help, or deliverance, as divine wisdom may see fit. And then the last petition is-'Rejoice the soul of Thy servant.' The series begins with 'hearing,' passes through 'preserving,' 'saving,' showing 'mercy,' and comes at last to 'rejoice the soul' that has been so harassed and troubled. Gladness is God's purpose for us all; joy we all have a right to claim from Him. It is the intended issue of every sorrow, and it can only be had when we cleave to Him, and pass through the troubles of life with continual dependence on and aspiration towards Himself.

So these are the petitions massed together, and out of them let me take two or three lessons. First, then, let us learn to make all wishes and annoyances material of prayer. This man was harassed by some trouble, the nature of which we do not know; and although the latter portion of his psalm rises into loftier regions of spiritual desire, here, in the first part of it, he is wrestling with his afflicting circumstances, whatever they were, and he has no hesitation in spreading them all out before God and asking for His delivering help. Wishes that are not turned into prayers irritate, disturb, unsettle. Wishes that are turned into prayers are calmed and made blessed. Stanley and his men lived for weeks upon a poisonous root, which, if eaten crude, brought all manner of diseases, but, steeped in running water, had all the acrid juices washed out of it, and became wholesome food. If you steep your wishes in the stream of prayer the poison will pass out of them. Some of them will be suppressed, all of them will be hallowed, and all of them will be calmed. Troubles, great or small, should be turned into prayers. Breath spent in sighs is wasted; turned into prayers it will swell our sails. If a man does not pray 'without ceasing,' there is room for doubt whether he ever prays at all. What would you think of a traveller who had a valuable cordial of which he only tasted a drop in the morning and another in the evening; or who had a sure staff on which to lean which he only employed at distant intervals on the weary march, and that only for a short time? Let us turn all that we want into petitions, and all that annoys us let us spread before God.

Learn, further, that earnest reiteration is not vain repetition. ‘Use not vain repetitions as the heathen do, for they think they shall be heard for their much speaking,’ said the Master. But the same Master ‘went away from them and prayed the third time, using the same words.’ As long as we have not consciously received the blessing, it is no vain reiteration if we renew our prayers that it may come upon our heads. The man who asks for a thing once, and then gets up from his knees and goes away, and does not notice whether he gets the answer or not, does not pray. The man who truly desires anything from God cannot be satisfied with one languid request for it. But as the heart contracts with a sense of need, and expands with a faith in God’s sufficiency, it will drive the same blood of prayer over and over again through the same veins; and life will be wholesome and strong.

Then learn, further, to limit wishes and petitions within the bounds of God’s promises. The most of these supplications of our text may be found in other parts of Scripture, as promises from God. Only so far as an articulate divine word carries my faith has my faith the right to go. In the crooked alleys of Venice there is a thin thread of red stone, inlaid in the pavement or wall, which guides through all the devious turnings to the Piazza, in the centre, where the great church stands. As long as we have the red line of promise on our path, faith may follow it and will come to the Temple. Where the line stops it is presumption, and not faith, that takes up the running. God’s promises are sunbeams flung down upon us. True prayer catches them on its mirror, and signals them back to God. We are emboldened to say, ‘Bow down Thine ear!’ because He has said, ‘I will hear.’ We are encouraged to cry, ‘Be merciful!’ because we have our foot upon the promise that He will be; and all that we can ask of Him is, ‘Do for us what Thou hast said; be to us what Thou art.’

The final lesson is, Leave God to settle how He answers your prayer. The Psalmist prayed for preservation, for safety, for joy; but he did not venture to prescribe to God *how* these blessings were to be ministered to him. He does not ask that the trouble may be taken away. That is as it may be; it may be better that it shall be left. But he asks that in it he shall not be allowed to sink, and that, however the waves may run high, they shall not be allowed to swamp his poor little cockle-shell of a boat. This is the true inmost essence of prayer-not that we should prescribe to Him how to answer our desires, but that we should leave all that in His hands. The Apostle Paul said, in his last letter, with triumphant confidence, that he knew that God would ‘deliver him and save him into His everlasting kingdom.’ And he knew, at the same time, that his course was ended, and that there was nothing for him now but the crown. How was he ‘saved into the kingdom’ and ‘delivered from the mouth of the lion’? The sword that struck off the wearied head that had thought so long for God’s Church was the instrument of the deliverance and the means of the salvation. For us it may be that a sharper sorrow may be the answer to the prayer, ‘Preserve Thy servant.’ It may be that God’s ‘bowing down His ear’ and answering us when we cry shall be to pass us through a mill that has finer rollers, to crush still more the bruised corn. But the end and the meaning of it all will be to ‘rejoice the soul of the servant’ with a deeper joy at last.

III. Finally, mark the lesson which we have here as to the pleas that are to be urged, or the conditions on which prayer is answered.

‘I am poor and needy,’ or, as perhaps the words more accurately mean, ‘afflicted and poor.’ The first condition is the sense of need. God’s highest blessings cannot be given except to the men who know they want them. The self-righteous man cannot receive the righteousness of Christ. The man who has little or no consciousness of sin is not capable of receiving pardon. God cannot put His fulness into our emptiness if we conceit ourselves to be filled and in need of nothing. We must know ourselves to be ‘poor and naked and blind and miserable’ ere He can make us rich, and clothe us, and enlighten our eyes, and flood our souls with His own gladness. Our needs are dumb appeals to Him; and in regard to all outward and lower things, they bind Him to supply us, because they themselves have been created by Him. He that hears the raven’s croak satisfies the necessities that He has ordained in man and beast. But, for all the best blessings of His providence and of His love, the first steps towards receiving them are the knowledge that we need them and the desire that we should possess them.

Then the Psalmist goes on to put another class of pleas derived from his relation to God. These are mainly two-'I am holy,' and 'Thy servant that trusteth in Thee.' Now, with regard to that first word 'holy,' according to our modern understanding of the expression it by no means sets forth the Psalmist's idea. It has an unpleasant smack of self-righteousness, too, which is by no means to be found in the original. But the word employed is a very remarkable and pregnant one. It really carries with it, in germ, the great teaching of the Apostle John. 'We love Him because He first loved us.' It means one who, being loved and favoured by God, answers the divine love with his own love. And the Psalmist is not pleading any righteousness of his own, but declaring that he, touched by the divine love, answers that love, and looks up; not as if thereby he deserved the response that he seeks, but as knowing that it is impossible but that the waiting heart should thus be blessed. They who love God are sure that the answer to their desires will come fluttering down upon their heads, and fold its white wings and nestle in their hearts. Christian people are a great deal too much afraid of saying, 'I love God.' They rob themselves of much peace and power thereby. We should be less chary of so saying if we thought more about God's love to us, and poked less into our own conduct.

Again, the Psalmist brings this plea-'Thy servant that trusteth in Thee.' He does not say, 'I deserve to be answered because I trust,' but 'because I trust I am sure that I shall be answered'; for it is absurd to suppose that God will look down from heaven on a soul that is depending upon Him, and will let that soul's confidence be put to shame. Dear friend! if your heart is resting upon God, be sure of this, that anything is possible rather than that you should not get from Him the blessings that you need.

The Psalmist gathers together all his pleas which refer to himself into two final clauses-'I cry unto Thee daily,' 'I lift up my soul unto Thee'-which, taken together, express the constant effort of a devout heart after communion with God. To withdraw my heart from the low levels of earth, and to bear it up into communion with God, is the sure way to get what I desire, because then God Himself will be my chief desire, and ‘they who seek the Lord shall not want any good.’

But the true and prevailing plea is not in our needs, desires, or dispositions, but in God’s own character, as revealed by His words and acts, and grasped by our faith. Therefore the Psalmist ends by passing from thoughts of self to thoughts of God, and builds at last on the sure foundation which underlies all his other ‘fors’ and gives them all their force-’For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon Thee.’

Brethren! turn all your wishes and all your annoyances into prayers. If a wish is not fit to be prayed about, it is not fit to be cherished. If a care is too small to be made a prayer, it is too small to be made a burden. Be frank with God as God is frank with you, and go to His throne, keeping back nothing of your desires or of your troubles. To carry them there will take the poison and the pain out of wasps’ stings, and out of else fatal wounds. We have a Name to trust to, tenderer and deeper than those which evoked the Psalmist’s triumphant confidence. Let us see to it that, as the basis of our faith is firmer, our faith be stronger than his. We have a plea to urge, more persuasive and mighty than those which he pressed on God and gathered to his own heart. ‘For Christ’s sake’ includes all that he pled, and stretches beyond it. If we come to God through Him who declares His name to us, we shall not draw near to the Throne with self-willed desires, nor leave it with empty hands. ‘If ye ask anything in My Name, I will do it.’

65)Psalms 89:15

Psalms

CONTINUAL SUNSHINE

Psa. 89:15.

The Psalmist has just been setting forth, in sublime language, the glories of the divine character-God’s strength, His universal sway, the justice and judgment which are the foundation of His Throne, the mercy and truth which go as heralds before His face. A heathen singing of any of his gods would have gone on to describe the form and features of the god or goddess who came behind the heralds, but the Psalmist remembers 'Thou shalt not make unto thyself any . . . likeness of God.' A sacred reverence checks his song. He veils his face in his mantle while He whom no man can see and live passes by. Then he breaks into rapturous exclamations which are very prosaically and poorly represented by our version. For the text is not a mere statement, as it is made to be by reading 'Blessed is the people,' but it is a burst of adoring wonder, and should be read, 'Oh! the blessedness of the people that know the joyful sound.'

Now, the force of this exclamation is increased if we observe that the word that is rendered 'joyful sound' is the technical word for the trumpet blast at Jewish feasts. The purpose of these blasts, like those of the heralds at the coronation of a king, was to proclaim the presence of God, the King of Israel, in the festival, as well as to express the gladness of the worshippers. Thus the Psalmist, when he says, 'Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound,' has no reference, as we ordinarily take him to have, to the preaching of the Gospel, but to the trumpet-blasts that proclaimed the present God and throbbed with the gladness of the waiting worshippers. So that this exclamation is equivalent to 'Oh! how blessed are the people who are sure that they have God with them!' and who, being sure, bow before Him in loving worship. It is to be further noticed that the subsequent words of the text state the first element which it indicates of that blessedness of a devout life, 'They shall walk, O Lord! in the light of Thy countenance.'

I. We deal first with the meaning of this phrase.

Of course, 'the light of Thy countenance' is a very obvious and natural symbol for favour, complacency, goodwill on the part of Him that is conceived of as looking on any one. We read, for instance, in reference to a much lower subject in the Book of Proverbs, 'In the light of the king's countenance is life, and his favour is as a cloud of the latter rain.' Again we have, in the Levitical benediction, the phrase accompanied in the parallel clauses by what is really an explanation of it, 'The Lord cause His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee.' So that the simple and obvious meaning of the words, 'the light of Thy countenance,' is the favour and lovingkindness of God manifested in that gracious Face which He turns to

His servants. As for the other chief word in the clause, ‘to walk’ is the equivalent throughout Scripture for the conduct of the active life and daily conversation of a man, and to walk in the light is simply to have the consciousness of the divine Presence and the experience of the divine lovingkindness and friendship as a road on which we travel our life’s journey, or an atmosphere round us in which all our activities are done and in which we ever remain, as a diver in his bell, to keep evil and sin from us.

There is only one more remark in the nature of explanation which I make, and that is that the expression here for walking is cast in the original into a form which grammarians call intensive, strengthening the simple idea expressed by the word. We may express its force if we read, ‘They walk continually in the light of Thy countenance.’

Is not that just a definition of the Christian life as an unbroken realisation of the divine Presence, and an unbroken experience of the lovingkindness and favour of God? Is not that religion in its truest, simplest essence, in its purest expression? The people who are sure that they have their King in their midst, and who feel that He is looking down upon them with tender pity, with loving care, with nothing but friendship and sweetness in His heart, these people, says the Psalmist, are blessed. So much, then, for the meaning of the word.

II. Consider the possibility of such a condition being ours.

Can such a thing be? Is it possible for a man to go through life carrying this atmosphere constantly with him? Can the continuity which, as I remarked, is expressed by the original accurately rendered, be kept up through an ordinary life that has all manner of work to do, or are we only to ‘hear the joyful sound,’ now and then, at rare intervals, on set occasions, answering to these ancient feasts? Which of the two is it to be, dear brethren? There is no need whatever why any amount of hard work, or outward occupations of the most secular character, or any amount of distractions, should break for us the continuity of that consciousness and of that experience. We may carry God with us wherever we go, if only we remember that where we cannot carry Him with us we ought not to go. We may carry Him with us into all the dusty roads of life; we may always walk on the sunny side of the street if we like. We may always bear our own sunshine with us. And although we are bound to be diligent in business, and some of us have had to take a heavy lift of a great deal of hard work, and much of it apparently standing in no sort of relation to our religious life, yet for all that it is possible to bend all to this one direction, and to make everything a means of bringing us nearer to God and fuller of the conscious enjoyment of His presence. And if we have not learned to do that with our daily work, then our daily work is a curse to us. If we have allowed it to become so absorbing or distracting as that it dims and darkens our sense of the divine Presence, then it is time for us to see what is wrong in the method or in the amount of work which is thus darkening our consciences. I know it is hard, I know that an absolute attainment of such an ideal is perhaps beyond us, but I know that we can approach-I was going to say infinitely, but a better word is indefinitely-nearer it than any of us have ever yet done. As the psalm goes on to say in the next clause, it is possible for us to 'rejoice in His Name all the day.' Ay, even at your tasks, and at your counters, and in your kitchens, and in my study, it is possible for us; and if our hearts are what and where they ought to be, the possibility will be realised. Earthly duty has no necessary effect of veiling the consciousness of God.

Nor is there any reason why our troubles, sorrows, losses, solitude should darken that sunshine. I know that that is hard, too, perhaps harder than the other. It is more difficult to have a sense of the sunshine of the divine Presence shining through the clouds of disaster and sorrow than even it is to have it shining through the dust that is raised by traffic and secular occupation. But it *is* possible. There is nothing in all the sky so grand as clouds smitten by sunshine, and the light is never so glorious as when it is flashed back from them and dyes their piled bosoms with all celestial colours. There is no experience of God's Presence so blessed as that of a man who, in the midst of sorrow, has yet with him the assurance of the Father's friendship and favour and love, and so can say 'as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.' This sunshine shines in the foulest corners, and the most thunder-laden clouds only flash back its glories in new forms.

There is only one thing that breaks the continuity of that blessedness, and that is our own sin. We carry our own weather with us, whether we will or no, and we can bring winter into the middle of summer by flinging God away from us, and summer into the midst of winter by grappling Him to our hearts. There is only one thing that necessarily breaks our sense of His Presence, and that is that our hearts should turn away from His face. A man can work hard and yet feel that God is with him. A man can be weighed upon by many distresses and yet feel that God is with him and loves him; but a man cannot commit the least tiny sin and love it, and feel at the same time that God is with him. The heart is like a sensitive photographic plate, it registers the variations in the sunshine; and the one hindrance that makes it impossible for God's light to fall upon my soul with the assurance of friendship and the sense of sweetness, is that I should be hugging some evil to my heart. It is not the dusty highway of life nor the dark vales of weeping and of the shadow of death through which we sometimes have to pass that make it impossible for this sunlight to pour down upon us, but it is our gathering round ourselves of the poisonous mists of sin through which that light cannot pierce; or if it pierce, pierces transformed and robbed of all its beauty.

III. Let me note next the blessedness which draws out the Psalmist's rapturous exclamation.

The same phrase is employed in one of the other psalms, which, I think, bears in its contents the confirmation of the attribution of it to David. When he was fleeing before his rebellious son, at the very lowest ebb of his fortunes, away on the uplands of Moab, a discrowned king, a fugitive in danger of death at every moment, he sang a psalm in which these words occur: 'There be many that say, Who will show us any good?' 'Lord, lift up the light of Thy countenance upon us'; and then follows, 'Thou hast put gladness into my heart more than when their corn and wine abound.' The speech of the many, 'Who will show us any good?' is contrasted with the prayer of the one, 'Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us.' That is blessedness. It is the only thing that makes the heart to be at rest. It is the only thing that makes life truly worth living, the only thing that brings sweetness which has no after taint of bitterness and breeds no fear of its passing away. To have that unsetting sunshine streaming down upon my open heart, and to carry about with me whithersoever I go, like some melody from hidden singers sounding in my ears, the Name and the Love of my Father God-that and that only, brother, is true rest and abiding blessedness. There are many other joys far more turbulent, more poignant, but they all pass. Many of them leave a nauseous taste in the mouth when they are swallowed; all of them leave us the poorer for having had them and having them no more. For one who is not a Christian I do not know that it *is*

'Better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.'

But for those to whom God's Face is as a Sun, life in all its possibilities is blessed; and there is no blessedness besides. So let us keep near Him, 'walking in the light,' in our changeful days, 'as He is in the light' in His essential and unalterable being; and that light will be to us all which it is taken in Scripture to symbolise-knowledge and joy and purity; and in us, too, there will be 'no darkness at all.'

But there is one last word that I must say, and that is that a possible terror is intertwined with this blessedness. The next psalm to this says, with a kind of tremulous awe in the Psalmist's voice: 'Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance.' In that sense all of us, good and bad, lovers of God and those that are careless about Him, walk all the day long in the light of His face, and He sees and marks all our else hidden evil. It needs something more than any of us can do to make the thought that we do stand in the full glaring of that great searchlight, not turned occasionally but focussed steadily on us individually, a joy and a blessing to us. And what we need is offered us when we read, 'His countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength, and I fell at His feet as dead. And He laid His hand upon me and said, Fear not! I am He that liveth and was dead; and behold! I am alive for ever more.' If we put our poor trust in the Eternal Light that was manifest in Christ, then we shall walk in the sunshine of His face on earth, and that lamp will burn for us in the darkness of the grave and lead us at last into the ever-blazing centre of the Sun itself.

66)Psalms 90:17

Psalms

THE CRY OF THE MORTAL TO THE UNDYING

Psa. 90:17.

If any reliance is to be placed upon the superscription of this psalm, it is one of the oldest, as it certainly is of the grandest, pieces of religious poetry in the world. It is said to be ‘A prayer of Moses, the man of God,’ and whether that be historically true or no, the tone of the psalm naturally suggests the great lawgiver, whose special task it was to write deep upon the conscience of the Jewish people the thought of the wages of sin as being death.

Hence the sombre magnificence and sad music of the psalm, which contemplates a thousand generations in succession as sliding away into the dreadful past, and sinking as beneath a flood. This thought of the fleeting years, dashed and troubled by many a sin, and by the righteous retribution of God, sent the Psalmist to his knees, and he found the only refuge from it in these prayers. These two petitions of our text, the closing words of the psalm, are the cry forced from a heart that has dared to look Death in the eyes, and has discovered that the world after all is a place of graves.

‘Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish Thou the work of our hands upon us.’ There are two thoughts there-the cry of the mortal for the beauty of the Eternal; and the cry of the worker in a perishable world for the perpetuity of his work. Look at these two thoughts briefly.

I. We have here, first, the yearning and longing cry of the mortal for the beauty of the Eternal.

The word translated ‘beauty’ in my text is, like the Greek equivalent in the New Testament, and like the English word ‘grace,’ which corresponds to them both susceptible of a double meaning. ‘Grace’ means both *kindness* and *loveliness*, or, as we might distinguish both graciousness and gracefulness. And that double idea is inherent in the word, as it is inherent in the attribute of God to which it refers. For that twofold meaning of the one word suggests the truth that God’s lovingkindness and communicating mercy *is* His beauty, and that the fairest thing about Him, notwithstanding the splendours that surround His character, and the flashing lights that come from His many-sided glory, is that He loves and pities and gives Himself. God is all fair, but the central and substantial beauty of the divine nature is that it is a stooping nature, which bows to weak and unworthy souls, and on them pours out the full abundance of its manifold gifts. So the ‘beauty of the Lord’ means, by no quibble or quirk, but by reason of the essential loveliness of His lovingkindness, both God’s loveliness and God’s goodness; God’s graciousness and God’s gracefulness [if I may use such a word].

The prayer of the Psalmist that this beauty may be *upon* us conceives of it as given to us from above and as coming floating down from heaven, like that white Dove that fell upon Christ’s head, fair and meek, gentle and lovely, and resting on our anointed heads, like a diadem and an aureole of glory.

Now that communicating graciousness, with its large gifts and its resulting beauty, is the one thing that we need in view of mortality and sorrow and change and trouble. The psalm speaks about ‘all our years’ being ‘passed away in Thy wrath,’ about the very inmost recesses of our secret unworthiness being turned inside out, and made to look blacker than ever when the bright sunshine of His face falls upon them. From that thought of God’s wrath and omniscience the poet turns, as we must turn, to the other thought of His gentle longsuffering, of His forbearing love, of His infinite pity, of His communicating mercy. As a support in view both of our dreary and yet short years, and our certain mortality, and in the contemplation of the evils within and suffering from without, that harass us all, there is but one thing for us to do-namely, to fling ourselves into the arms of God, and in the spirit of this great petition, to ask that upon us there may fall the dewy benediction of His gentle beauty.

That longing is meant to be kindled in our hearts by all the discipline of life. Life is not worth living unless it does that for us; and there is no value nor meaning either in our joys or in our sorrows, unless both the one and the other send us to Him. Our gladness and our disappointments, our hopes fulfilled and our hopes dissipated and unanswered are but, as it were, the two wings by which, on either side, our spirits are to be lifted to God. The solemn pathos of the earlier portion of this psalm-the funeral march of generations-leads up to the prayerful confidence of these closing petitions, in which the sadness of the minor key in which it began has passed into a brighter strain. The thought of the fleeting years swept away as with a flood, and of the generations that blossom for a day and are mown down and wither when their swift night falls, is saddening and paralysing unless it suggests by contrast the thought of Him who, Himself unmoved, moves the rolling years, and is the dwelling-place of each succeeding generation. Such contemplations are wholesome and religious only when they drive us to the eternal God, that in Him we may find the stable foundation which imparts its own perpetuity to every life built upon it. We have experienced so many things in vain, and we are of the ‘fools’ that, being ‘brayed in a mortar,’ are only brayed fools after all, unless life, with its sorrows and its changes, has blown us, as with a hurricane, right into the centre of rest, and unless its sorrows and changes have taught us this as the one aspiration of our souls: ‘Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us,’ and then, let what may come, come, let what can pass, pass, we shall have all that we need for life and peace.

And then, note further, that this gracious gentleness and long-suffering, giving mercy of God, when it comes down upon a man, makes him, too, beautiful with a reflected beauty. If the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us, it will cover over our foulness and deformity. For whosoever possesses in any real fashion God’s great mercy will have his spirit moulded into the likeness of that mercy. We cannot have it without reflecting it, we cannot possess it without being assimilated to it. Therefore, to have the grace of God makes us both gracious and graceful. And the true refining influence for a character is that into it there shall come the gift of that endless pity and patient love, which will transfigure us into some faint likeness of itself, so that we shall walk among men, able, in some poor measure, after the manner of our Master, to say, ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.’ He said it in a sense and in a measure which we cannot reach, but the assimilation to and reflection of the divine character is our aim, or ought to be, if we are Christians. ‘Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us,’ and ‘change us into the same image from glory to glory.’

II. We have here the cry of the worker in a fleeting world for the perpetuity of his work.

‘Establish,’ or make firm, ‘the work of our hands upon us, yea the work of our hands establish Thou it.’ The thought that everything is passing away so swiftly and inevitably, as the earlier part of the psalm suggests, might lead a man to say, ‘What is the use of my doing anything? I may just as well sit down here, and let things slide, if they are all going to be swallowed up in the black bottomless gulf of forgetfulness.’ The contemplation has actually produced two opposite effects, ‘Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die,’ is quite as fair an inference from the fact as is ‘Awake to righteousness and sin not,’ if the fact itself only be taken into account. There is nothing religious in the clearest conviction of mortality, if it stands alone. It may be the ally of profligate and cynical sensuality quite as easily as it may be the preacher of asceticism. It may make men inactive, from their sense of the insignificant and fleeting nature of all human works, or it may stimulate to intensest effort, from the thought, ‘I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day. The night cometh.’ All depends on whether we link the conviction of mortality with that of eternity, and think of our perishable selves as in relationship with the unchanging God.

This prayer expresses a deep longing, natural to all men, and which yet seems incompatible with the stern facts of mortality and decay. We should all like to have our work exempted from the common lot. What pathetically futile attempts to secure this are pyramids, and rock-inscriptions, and storied tombs, and posthumous memoirs, and rich men’s wills! Why should any of us expect that the laws of nature should be suspended for our benefit, and our work made lasting while everything beside changes like the shadows of the clouds? Is there any way by which such exceptional permanence can be secured for our poor deeds? Yes, certainly. Let us commit them to God, praying this prayer, ‘Establish Thou the work of our hands upon us.’

Our work will be established if it is His work. This prayer in our text follows another prayer [Psa. 90:16]-namely, ‘Let *Thy* work appear unto Thy servants.’ That is to say, My work will be perpetual when the work of my hands is God’s work done through me. When you bring your wills into harmony with God’s will, and so all your effort, even about the little things of daily life, is in consonance with His will, and in the line of His purpose, then your work will stand. If otherwise, it will be like some slow-moving and frail carriage going in the one direction and meeting an express train thundering in the other. When the crash comes, the opposing motion of the weaker will be stopped, reversed, and the frail thing will be smashed to atoms. So, all work which is man's and not God's will sooner or later be reduced to impotence and either annihilated or reversed, and made to run in the opposite direction. But if our work runs parallel with God's, then the rushing impetus of His work will catch up our little deeds into the swiftness of its own motion, and will carry them along with itself, as a railway train will lift straws and bits of paper that are lying by the rails, and give them motion for a while. If my will runs in the line of His, and if the work of my hands is 'Thy work,' it is not in vain that we shall cry 'Establish it upon us,' for it will last as long as He does.

In like manner, all work will be perpetual that is done with 'the beauty of the Lord our God' upon the doers of it. Whosoever has that grace in his heart, whosoever is in contact with the communicating mercy of God, and has had his character in some measure refined and ennobled and beautified by possession thereof, will do work that has in it the element of perpetuity.

And our work will stand if we quietly leave it in His hands. Quietly do it to Him, never mind about results, but look after motives. You cannot influence results, let God look after them; you can influence motives. Be sure that they are right, and if they are, the work will be eternal.

'Eternal? What do you mean by eternal? how can a man's work be that?' Part of the answer is that it may be made permanent in its issues by being taken up into the great whole of God's working through His servants, which results at last in the establishment of His eternal kingdom. Just as a drop of water that falls upon the moor finds its way into the brook, and goes down the glen and on into the river, and then into the sea, and is there, though undistinguishable, so in the great summing up of everything at the end, the tiniest deed that was done for God, though it was done far away up amongst the mountain solitudes where no eye saw, shall live and be represented, in its effects on others and in its glad issues to the doer.

In the highest fashion the Psalmist's cry for the perpetuity of the fleeting deeds of dying generations will be answered in that region in which his dimmer eye saw little but the sullen flood that swept away youth and strength and wisdom, but in which we can see the solid land beyond the river, and the happy company who rejoice with the joy of harvest, and bear with them the sheaves, whereof the seed was sown on this bank, in tears and fears. ‘Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord. Their works do follow them.’ ‘The world passeth away, and the fashion thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’

67)Psalms 91:4

Psalms

THE SHELTERING WING

Psa. 91:4.

We remember the magnificent image in Moses’ song, of God’s protection and guidance as that of the eagle who stirred up his nest, and hovered over the young with his wings, and bore them on his pinions. That passage may possibly have touched the imagination of this psalmist, when he here employs the same general metaphor, but with a distinct and significant difference in its application. In the former image the main idea is that of training and sustaining. Here the main idea is that of protection and fostering. *On* the wing and *under* the wing suggest entirely different notions, and both need to be taken into account in order to get the many-sided beauties and promises of these great sayings. Now there seems to me here to be a very distinct triad of thoughts. There is the covering wing; there is the flight to its protection; and there is the warrant for that flight. ‘He shall cover thee with His pinions’; that is the divine act. ‘Under His wings shalt thou trust’; that is the human condition. ‘His truth shall be thy shield and buckler’; that is the divine manifestation which makes the human condition possible.

I. A word then, first, about the covering wing.

Now, the main idea in this image is, as I have suggested, that of the expanded pinion, beneath the shelter of which the callow young lie, and are guarded. Whatever kites may be in the sky, whatever stoats and weasels may be in the hedges, the brood are safe there. The image suggests not only the thought of protection but those of fostering, downy warmth, peaceful proximity to a heart that throbs with parental love, and a multitude of other happy privileges realised by those who nestle beneath that wing. But while these subsidiary ideas are not to be lost sight of, the promise of protection is to be kept prominent, as that chiefly intended by the Psalmist.

This psalm rings throughout with the truth that a man who dwells 'in the secret place of the Most High' has absolute immunity from all sorts of evil; and there are two regions in which that immunity, secured by being under the shadow of the Almighty, is exemplified here. The one is that of outward dangers, the other is that of temptation to sin and of what we may call spiritual foes. Now, these two regions and departments in which the Christian man does realise, in the measure of his faith, the divine protection, exhibit that protection as secured in two entirely different ways.

The triumphant assurances of this psalm, 'There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling,'-'the pestilence shall smite thousands and ten thousands beside thee, but not come nigh thee,'-seem to be entirely contradicted by experience which testifies that 'there is one event to the evil and the good,' and that, in epidemics or other widespread disasters, we all, the good and the bad, God-fearers and God-blasphemers, do fare alike, and that the conditions of exemption from physical evil are physical and not spiritual. It is of no use trying to persuade ourselves that that is not so. We shall understand God's dealings with us, and get to the very throbbing heart of such promises as these in this psalm far better, if we start from the certainty that whatever it means it does *not* mean that, with regard to external calamities and disasters, we are going to be God's petted children, or to be saved from the things that fall upon other people. No! no! we have to go a great deal deeper than that. If we have felt a difficulty, as I suppose we all have sometimes, and are ready to say with the half-despondent Psalmist, 'My feet were almost gone, and my steps had well-nigh slipped,' when we see what we think the complicated mysteries of divine providence in this world, we have to come to the belief that the evil that is in the evil will never come near a man sheltered beneath God's wing. The physical external event may be entirely the same to him as to another who is not covered with His feathers. Here are two partners in a business, the one a Christian man, and the other is not. A common disaster overwhelms them. They become bankrupts. Is insolvency the same to the one as it is to the other? Here are two men on board a ship, the one putting his trust in God, the other thinking it all nonsense to trust anything but himself. They are both drowned. Is drowning the same to the two? As their corpses lie side by side among the ooze, with the weeds over them, and the shell-fish at them, you may say of the one, but only of the one, ‘There shall no evil befall thee, neither any plague come nigh thy dwelling.’

For the protection that is granted to faith is only to be understood by faith. It is deliverance from the evil in the evil which vindicates as no exaggeration, nor as merely an experience and a promise peculiar to the old theocracy of Israel, but not now realised, the grand sayings of this text. The poison is all wiped off the arrow by that divine protection. It may still wound but it does not putrefy the flesh. The sewage water comes down, but it passes into the filtering bed, and is disinfected and cleansed before it is permitted to flow over our fields.

And so, brethren! if any of you are finding that the psalm is not outwardly true, and that through the covering wing the storm of hail has come and beaten you down, do not suppose that that in the slightest degree impinges upon the reality and truthfulness of this great promise, ‘He shall cover thee with His feathers.’ Anything that has come through *them* is manifestly not an ‘evil.’ ‘Who is he that will harm you if ye be followers of that which is good?’ ‘If God be for us who can be against us?’ Not what the world calls, and our wrung hearts feel that it rightly calls, ‘sorrows’ and ‘afflictions,’- these all work for our good, and protection consists, not in averting the blows, but in changing their character.

Then, there is another region far higher, in which this promise of my text is absolutely true-that is, in the region of spiritual defence. For no man who lies under the shadow of God, and has his heart filled with the continual consciousness of that Presence, is likely to fall before the assaults of evil that tempt him away from God; and the defence which He gives in that region is yet more magnificently impregnable than the defence which He gives against external evils. For, as the New Testament teaches us, we are kept from sin, not by any outward breastplate or armour, nor even by the divine wing lying above us to cover us, but by the indwelling Christ in our hearts. His Spirit within us makes us ‘free from the law of sin and death,’ and conquerors over all temptations.

I say not a word about all the other beautiful and pathetic associations which are connected with this emblem of the covering wing, sweet and inexhaustible as it is, but I simply leave with you the two thoughts that I have dwelt upon, of the twofold manner of that divine protection.

II. And now a word, in the second place, about the flight of the shelterless to the shelter.

The word which is rendered in our Authorised Version, ‘shalt thou trust,’ is, like all Hebrew words for mental and spiritual emotions and actions, strongly metaphorical. It might have been better to retain its literal meaning here instead of substituting the abstract word ‘trust.’ That is to say, it would have been an improvement if we had read with the Revised Version, not, ‘under His wings shalt thou trust,’ but ‘under His wings shalt thou take refuge.’ For that is the idea which is really conveyed; and in many of the psalms, if you will remember, the same metaphor is employed. ‘Hide me beneath the shadow of Thy wings’; ‘Beneath Thy wings will I take refuge until calamities are overpast’; and the like. Many such passages will, no doubt, occur to your memories.

But what I wish to signalise is just this, that in this emblem of flying into a refuge from impending perils we get a far more vivid conception, and a far more useful one, as it seems to me, of what Christian faith really is than we derive from many learned volumes and much theological hair-splitting. ‘Under His wings shalt thou flee for refuge.’ Is not that a vivid, intense, picturesque, but most illuminative way of telling us what is the very essence, and what is the urgency, and what is the worth, of what we call faith? The Old Testament is full of the teaching-which is masked to ordinary readers, but is the same teaching as the New Testament is confessedly full of-of the necessity of faith as the one bond that binds men to God. If only our translators had wisely determined upon a uniform rendering in Old and New Testament of words that are synonymous, the reader would have seen what is often now reserved for the student, that all these sayings in the Old Testament about ‘trusting in God’ run on all fours with ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.’

But just mark what comes out of that metaphor; that ‘trust,’ the faith which unites with God, and brings a man beneath the shadow of His wings, is nothing more or less than the flying into the refuge that is provided for us. Does that not speak to us of the urgency of the case? Does that not speak to us eloquently of the perils which environ us? Does it not speak to us of the necessity of swift flight, with all the powers of our will? Is the faith which is a flying into a refuge fairly described as an intellectual act of believing in a testimony? Surely it is something a great deal more than that. A man out in the plain, with the avenger of blood, hot-breathed and bloody-minded, behind him might believe, as much as he liked, that there would be safety within the walls of the City of Refuge, but unless he took to his heels without loss of time, the spear would be in his back before he knew where he was. There are many men who know all about the security of the refuge, and believe it utterly, but never run for it; and so never get into it. Faith is the gathering up of the whole powers of my nature to fling myself into the asylum, to cast myself into God’s arms, to take shelter beneath the shadow of His wings. And unless a man does that, and swiftly, he is exposed to every bird of prey in the sky, and to every beast of prey lurking in wait for him.

The metaphor tells us, too, what are the limits and the worth of faith. A man is not saved because he believes that he is saved, but because by believing he lays hold of the salvation. It is not the flight that is impregnable, and makes those behind its strong bulwarks secure. Not my outstretched hand, but the Hand that my hand grasps, is what holds me up. The power of faith is but that it brings me into contact with God, and sets me behind the seven-fold bastions of the Almighty protection.

So, brethren! another consideration comes out of this clause: ‘Under His wings shalt thou trust.’ If you do not flee for refuge to that wing, it is of no use to you, however expanded it is, however soft and downy its underside, however sure its protection. You remember the passage where our Lord uses the same venerable figure with modifications, and says: ‘How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and *ye would not*.’ So our ‘would not’ thwarts Christ’s ‘would.’ Flight to the refuge is the condition of being saved. How can a man get shelter by any other way than by running to the shelter? The wing is expanded; it is for us to say whether we will ‘flee for refuge to the hope set before us.’

III. Now, lastly, the warrant for this flight.

‘His truth shall be thy shield.’ Now, ‘truth’ here does not mean the body of revealed words, which are often called God’s truth, but it describes a certain characteristic of the divine nature. And if, instead of ‘truth,’ we read the good old English word ‘troth,’ we should be a great deal nearer understanding what the Psalmist meant. Or if ‘troth’ is archaic, and conveys little meaning to us; suppose we substitute a somewhat longer word, of the same meaning, and say, ‘His faithfulness shall be thy shield.’ You cannot trust a God that has not given you an inkling of His character or disposition, but if He has spoken, then you ‘know where to have him.’ That is just what the Psalmist means. How can a man be encouraged to fly into a refuge, unless he is absolutely sure that there is an entrance for him into it, and that, entering, he is safe? And that security is provided in the great thought of God’s troth. ‘Thy faithfulness is like the great mountains.’ ‘Who is like unto Thee, O Lord! or to Thy faithfulness round about Thee?’ That faithfulness shall be our ‘shield,’ not a tiny targe that a man could bear upon his left arm; but the word means the large shield, planted in the ground in front of the soldier, covering him, however hot the fight, and circling him around, like a wall of iron.

God is ‘faithful’ to all the obligations under which He has come by making us. That is what one of the New Testament writers tells us, when he speaks of Him as ‘a faithful Creator.’ Then, if He has put desires into our hearts, be sure that somewhere there is their satisfaction; and if He has given us needs, be sure that in Him there is the supply; and if He has lodged in us aspirations which make us restless, be sure that if we will turn them to Him, they will be satisfied and we shall be at rest. ‘God never sends mouths but He sends meat to fill them.’ ‘He remembers our frame,’ and measures His dealings accordingly. When He made me, He bound Himself to make it possible that I should be blessed for ever; and He has done it.

God is faithful to His word, according to that great saying in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the writer tells us that by ‘God’s counsel,’ and ‘God’s oath,’ ‘two immutable things,’ we might have ‘strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.’ God is faithful to His own past. The more He has done the more He will do. ‘Thou hast been my Help; leave me not, neither forsake me.’ Therein we present a plea which God Himself will honour. And He is faithful to His own past in a yet wider sense. For all the revelations of His love and of His grace in times that are gone, though they might be miraculous in their form, are permanent in their essence. So one of the Psalmists, hundreds of years after the time that Israel was led through the wilderness, sang: ‘There did *we*’-of this present generation-’rejoice in Him.’ What has been, is, and will be, for Thou art ‘the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.’ We have not a God that lurks in darkness, but one that has come into the light. We have to run, not into a Refuge that is built upon a ‘perhaps,’ but upon ‘Verily, verily! I say unto thee.’ Let us build rock upon Rock, and let our faith correspond to the faithfulness of Him that has promised.

68)Psalms 91:9-10

Psalms

THE HABITATION OF THE SOUL

Psa. 91:9 - Psa. 91:10.

It requires a good deal of piecing to make out from the Hebrew the translation of our Authorised Version here. The simple, literal rendering of the first words of these verses is, ‘Surely, Thou, O Lord! art my Refuge’; and I do not suppose that any of the expedients which have been adopted to modify that translation would have been adopted, but that these words seem to cut in two the long series of rich promises and blessings which occupy the rest of the psalm. But it is precisely this interruption of the flow of the promises which puts us on the right track for understanding the words in question, because it leads us to take them as the voice of the devout man, to whom the promises are addressed, responding to them by the expression of his own faith.

The Revised Version is much better here than our Authorised Version, for it has recognised this breach of continuity of sequence in the promises, and translated as I have suggested; making the first words of my text, ‘Thou, O Lord! art my Refuge,’ the voice of one singer, and ‘Because thou hast made the Most High thy habitation, there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any evil come nigh thy dwelling,’ the voice of another.

Whether or no it be that in the Liturgical service of the Temple this psalm was sung by two choirs which answered one another, does not matter for our purpose. Whether or no we regard the first clause as the voice of the Psalmist speaking to God, and the other as the same man speaking to himself, does not matter. The point is that, first, there is an exclamation of personal faith, and that then that is followed and answered, as it were, by the further promise of continual blessings. One voice says, ‘Thou, Lord! art my Refuge,’ and then another voice-not God’s, because that speaks in majesty at the end of the psalm-replies to that burst of confidence, ‘Thou hast made the Lord thy habitation’ [as thou hast done by this confession of faith], ‘there shall no evil come nigh thy dwelling.’

I. We have here the cry of the devout soul.

I observed that it seems to cut in two the stream of promised blessings, and that fact is significant. The psalm begins with the deep truth that ‘He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.’ Then a single voice speaks, ‘I will say of the Lord, He is my Refuge and my Fortress, my God, in Him will I trust.’ Then that voice, which thus responds to the general statement of the first verse, is answered by a stream of promises. The first part of our text comes in as the second speech of the same voice, repeating substantially the same thing as it said at first.

Now, notice that this cry of the soul, recognising God as its Asylum and Home, comes in response to a revelation of God’s blessing, and to large words of promise. There is no true refuge nor any peace and rest for a man unless in grasping the articulate word of God, and building his assurance upon that. Anything else is not confidence, but folly; anything else is building upon sand, and not upon the Rock. If I trust my own or my brother’s conception of the divine nature, if I build upon any thoughts of my own, I am building upon what will yield and give. For all peaceful casting of my soul into the arms of God there must be, first, a plain stretching out of the hands of God to catch me when I drop. So the words of my text, ‘Thou art my Refuge,’ are the best answer of the devout soul to the plain words of divine promise. How abundant these are we all know, how full of manifold insight and adaptation to our circumstances and our nature we may all experience, if we care to prove them.

But let us be sure that we *are* hearkening to the voice with which He speaks through our daily circumstances as well as by the unmistakable revelation of His will and heart in Jesus Christ. And then let us be sure that no word of His, that comes fluttering down from the heavens, meaning a benediction and enclosing a promise, falls at our feet ungathered and unregarded, or is trodden into the dust by our careless heels. The manna lies all about us; let us see that we gather it. ‘When Thou saidst, Seek ye My Face, my heart said unto Thee, Thy Face, Lord, will I seek.’ When Thou saidst, ‘I will be thy Strength and thy Righteousness,’ have I said, ‘Surely, O Jehovah! Thou art my Refuge’? Turn His promises into your creed, and whatever He has declared in the sweet thunder of His voice, loud as the voice of many waters, and melodious as ‘harpers harping with their harps,’ do you take for your profession of faith in the faithful promises of your God.

Still further, this cry of the devout soul suggests to me that our response ought to be the establishment of a close personal relation between us and God. ‘Thou, O Lord! art my Refuge.’ The Psalmist did not content himself with saying ‘Lord! Thou hast been *our* Dwelling-place in all generations,’ or as one of the other psalmists has it, ‘God is *our* Refuge and *our* Strength.’ That thought was blessed, but it was not enough for the Psalmist’s present need, and it is never enough for the deepest necessities of any soul. We must isolate ourselves and stand, God and we, alone together-at heart-grips-we grasping His hand, and He giving Himself to us-if the promises which are sent down into the world for all who will make them theirs can become ours. They are made payable to your order; you must put your name on the back before you get the proceeds. There must be what our good old Puritan forefathers used to call, in somewhat hard language, ‘the appropriating act of faith,’ in order that God’s richest blessings may be of any use to us. Put out your hand to grasp them, and say, ‘Mine,’ not ‘Ours.’ The thought of others as sharing in them will come afterwards, for he who has once realised the absolute isolation of the soul and has been alone with

God, and in solitude has taken God’s gifts as his very own, is he who will feel fellowship and brotherhood with all who are partakers of like precious faith and blessings. The ‘ours’ will come; but you must begin with the ‘mine’-’*my* Lord and *my* God.’ ‘He loved *me*, and gave Himself for *me*.’

Just as when the Israelites gathered on the banks of the Red Sea, and Miriam and the maidens came out with songs and timbrels, though their hearts throbbed with joy, and music rang from their lips for national deliverance, their hymn made the whole deliverance the property of each, and each of the chorus sang, ‘The Lord is my Strength and my Song, He also is become my Salvation,’ so we must individualise the common blessing. Every poor soul has a right to the whole of God, and unless a man claims all the divine nature as his, he has little chance of possessing the promised blessings. The response of the individual to the worldwide promises and revelations of the Father is, ‘Thou, O Lord! art my Refuge.’

Further, note how this cry of the devout soul recognises God as He to whom we must go because we need a refuge. The word ‘refuge’ here gives the picture of some stronghold, or fortified place, in which men may find security from all sorts of dangers, invasions by surrounding foes, storm and tempest, rising flood, or anything else that threatens. Only he who knows himself to be in danger bethinks himself of a refuge. It is only when we know our danger and defencelessness that God, as the Refuge of our souls, becomes precious to us. So, underlying, and an essential part of, all our confidence in God, is the clear recognition of our own necessity. The sense of our own emptiness must precede our grasp of His fulness. The conviction of our own insufficiency and sinfulness must precede our casting ourselves on His mercy and righteousness. In all regions the consciousness of human want must go before the recognition of the divine supply.

II. Now, note the still more abundant answer which that cry evokes.

I said that the words on which I have been commenting thus far, seem to break in two the continuity of the stream of blessings and promises. But there may be observed a certain distinction of tone between those promises which precede and those which follow the cry. Those that follow have a certain elevation and depth, completeness and fulness, beyond those that precede. This enhancing of the promises, following on the faithful grasp of previous promises, suggests the thought that, when God is giving, and His servant thankfully accepts and garners up His gifts, He opens His hand wider and gives more. When He pours His rain upon the unthankful and the evil, and they let the precious, fertilising drops run to waste, there comes after a while a diminution of the blessing; but they who store in patient and thankful hearts the faithful promises of God, have taken a sure way to make His gifts still larger and His promises still sweeter, and their fulfilment more faithful and precious.

But now notice the remarkable language in which this answer is couched. ‘Thou hast made the Most High thy Habitation, there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.’

Did you ever notice that there are two dwelling-places spoken of in this verse? ‘Thou hast made the Most High thy Habitation’; ‘There shall no plague come nigh thy dwelling.’ The reference of the latter word to the former one is even more striking if you observe that, literally translated, as in the Revised Version, it means a particular kind of abode-namely, a tent. ‘Thou hast made the Most High thy habitation.’ The same word is employed in the 90th Psalm: ‘Lord, Thou hast been our Dwelling-place in all generations.’ Beside that venerable and ancient abode, that has stood fresh, strong, incorruptible, and unaffected by the lapse of millenniums, there stands the little transitory canvas tent in which our earthly lives are spent. We have two dwelling-places. By the body we are brought into connection with this frail, evanescent, illusory outer world, and we try to make our homes out of shifting cloud-wrack, and dream that we can compel mutability to become immutable, that we may dwell secure. But fate is too strong for us, and although we say that we will make our nest in the rocks, and shall never be moved, the home that is visible and linked with the material passes and melts as a cloud. We need a better dwelling-place than earth and that which holds to earth. We have God Himself for our true Home. Never mind what becomes of the tent, as long as the mansion stands firm. Do not let us be saddened, though we know that it is canvas, and that the walls will soon rot and must some day be folded up and borne away, if we have the Rock of Ages for our dwelling-place.

Let us abide in the Eternal God by the devotion of our hearts, by the affiance of our faith, by the submission of our wills, by the aspiration of our yearnings, by the conformity of our conduct to His will. Let us abide in the Eternal God, that 'when the earthly house of this tabernacle is dissolved,' we may enter into two buildings 'eternal in the heavens'-the one the spiritual body which knows no corruption, and the other the bosom of the Eternal God Himself. 'Because thou hast made Him thy Habitation,' that Dwelling shall suffer no evil to come near it or its tenant.

Still further, notice the scope of this great promise. I suppose there is some reference in the form of it to the old story of Israel's exemption from the Egyptian plagues, and a hint that that might be taken as a parable and prophetic picture of what will be true about every man who puts his trust in God. But the wide scope and the paradoxical completeness of the promise itself, instead of being a difficulty, point the way to its true interpretation. 'There shall no plague come nigh thy dwelling'-and yet we are smitten down by all the woes that afflict humanity. 'No evil shall befall thee'-and yet 'all the ills that flesh is heir to' are dealt out sometimes with a more liberal hand to them who abide in God than to them who dwell only in the tent upon earth. What then? Is God true, or is He not? Did this psalmist mean to promise the very questionable blessing of escape from all the good of the discipline of sorrow? Is it true, in the unconditional sense in which it is often asserted, that 'prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament, and adversity of the New'? I think not, and I am sure that this psalmist, when he said, 'there shall no evil befall thee, nor any plague come nigh thy dwelling,' was thinking exactly the same thing which Paul had in his mind when he said, 'All things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to His purpose.' If I make God my Refuge, I shall get something a great deal better than escape from outward sorrow-namely, an amulet which will turn the outward sorrow into joy. The bitter water will still be given me to drink, but it will be filtered water, out of which God will strain all the poison, though He leaves plenty of the bitterness in it; for bitterness is a tonic. The evil that is in the evil will be taken out of it, in the measure in which we make God our Refuge, and 'all will be right that seems most wrong' when we recognise it to be 'His sweet will.'

Dear brother! the secret of exemption from every evil lies in no peculiar Providence, ordering in some special manner our outward circumstances, but in the submission of our wills to that which the good hand of the Lord our God sends us for our good; and in cleaving close to Him as our Refuge. Nothing can be 'evil' which knits me more closely to God; and whatever tempest drives me to His breast, though all the four winds of the heavens strive on the surface of the sea, it will be better for me than calm weather that entices me to stray farther away from Him.

We shall know that some day. Let us be sure of it now, and explain by it our earthly experience, even as we shall know it when we get up yonder and 'see all the way by which the Lord our God has led us.'

69)Psalms 91:14

Psalms

THE ANSWER TO TRUST

Psa. 91:14.

There are two voices speaking in the earlier part of this psalm: one that of a saint who professes his reliance upon the Lord, his Fortress; and another which answers the former speaker, and declares that he shall be preserved by God. In this verse, which is the first of the final portion of the psalm, we have a third voice-the voice of God Himself, which comes in to seal and confirm, to heighten and transcend, all the promises that have been made in His name. The first voice said of himself, '*I* will trust'; the second voice addresses that speaker, and says, '*Thou* shalt not be afraid'; the third voice speaks of him, and not to him, and says, 'Because *he* hath set his love upon Me, therefore will I deliver him.'

Why does this divine voice speak thus indirectly of this blessing of His servant? I think partly because it heightens the majesty of the utterance, as if God spake to the whole universe about what He meant to do for His friend who trusts Him; and partly because, in that general form of speech, there is really couched an 'whosoever'; and it applies to us all. If God had said, 'Because thou hast set thy love upon Me, I will deliver thee,' it had not been so easy for us to put ourselves in the place of the man concerning whom this great divine voice spoke; but when He says, ‘Because *he* hath set *his* love upon Me,’ in the ‘he’ there lies ‘everybody’; and the promise spoken before the universe as to His servants is spoken universally to His servants.

So, then, these words seem to me to carry two thoughts: the first, what God delights to find in a man; and the second, what God delights to give to the man in whom He finds it.

I. Note, first, what God delights to find in man.

There is, if we may reverently say so, a tone of satisfaction in the words, ‘Because he hath set his love upon Me,’ and ‘because he hath known My name.’ Thus, then, there are two things that the great Father’s heart seeks, and wheresoever it finds them, in however imperfect a degree, He is glad, and lavishes upon such a one the most precious things in His possession.

What are these two things? Let us look at each of them. Now the word rendered ‘set his love’ includes more than is suggested by that rendering, beautiful as it is. It implies the binding or knitting oneself to anything. Now, though love be the true cement by which men are bound to God, as it is the only real bond which binds men to one another, yet the word itself covers a somewhat wider area than is covered by the notion of love. It is not my love only that I am to fasten upon God, but my whole self that I am to bind to Him. God delights in us when we cling to Him. There is a threefold kind of clinging, which I would urge upon you and upon myself.

Let us cling to Him in our thoughts, hour by hour, moment by moment, amidst all the distractions of daily life. Whilst there are other things that must legitimately occupy our minds, let us see to it that, ever and anon, we turn ourselves away from these, and betake ourselves, with a conscious gathering in of our souls, to Him, and calm and occupy our hearts and minds with the bright and peaceful thoughts of a present God ever near us, and ever gracious to us. Life is but a dreary stretch of wilderness, unless all through it there be dotted, like a chain of ponds in a desert, these moments in which the mind fixes itself upon God, and loses sorrows and sins and weakness and all other sadnesses in the calm and blessed contemplation of

His sweetness and sufficiency. The very heavens are bare and lacking in highest beauty, unless there stretch across them the long lines of rosy-tinted clouds. And so across our skies let us cast a continuous chain of thoughts of God, and as we go about our daily work, let us try to have our minds ever recurring to Him, like the linked pools that mirror heaven in the midst of the barren desert, and bring a reflection of life into the midst of its death. Cleave and cling to God, brother! by frequent thoughts of Him, diffused throughout the whole continuity of the busy day.

Then again, we might say, let us cleave to Him by our love, which is the one bond of union, as I said, between man and God, as it is the one bond of union between man and man. ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength,’ was from the beginning the Alpha, and until the end will be the Omega, of all true religion; and within the sphere of that commandment lie all duty, all Christianity, all blessedness, and all life. The heart that is divided is wretched; the heart that is consecrated is at rest. The love that is partial is nought; the love that is worth calling so is total and continuous. Let us cling to Him with our thoughts; let us cling to Him with the tendrils of our hearts.

Let us cleave to Him, still further, by the obedient contact of our wills with His, taking no commandments from men, and no overpowering impressions from circumstances, and no orders from our own fancies and inclinations and tastes and lusts, but receiving all our instructions from our Father in heaven. There is no real contact between us and God, no real cleaving to Him, howsoever the thought of God may be in our minds, and some kind of imperfect love to Him may be supposed to be in our hearts, unless there be the absolute submission of our wills to His authority; and only in the measure in which we are able to say, What He commands I do, and what He sends I accept, and my will is in His hands to be moulded, do we really get close and keep close to our Father in the heavens. He that hath brought himself into loving touch with God, and clings to Him in that threefold fashion, by thought, love, and submission, he, and only he, is so joined to the Lord as to be one Spirit.

Now that is not a state to be won and kept without much vigorous, conscious effort. The nuts in a machine work loose; the knots in a rope ‘come untied,’ as the children say. The hand that clasps anything, by slow and imperceptible degrees, loses muscular contraction, and the grip of the fingers becomes slacker. Our minds and affections and wills have that same tendency to slacken their hold of what they grasp. Unless we tighten up the machine it will work loose; and unless we make conscious efforts to keep ourselves in touch with God, His hand will slip out of ours before we know that it is gone, and we shall fancy that we feel the impression of the fingers long after they have been taken away from our negligent palms.

Besides our own vagrancies, and the waywardness and wanderings of our poor, unreliable natures, there come in, of course, as hindrances, all the interruptions and distractions of outside things, which work in the same direction of loosening our hold on God. If the shipwrecked sailor is not to be washed off the raft he must tie himself on to it, and must see that the lashings are reliable and the knots tight; and if we do not mean to be drifted away from God without knowing it, we must make very sure work of anchor and cable, and of our own hold on both. Effort is needed, continuous and conscious, lest at any time we should slide away from Him. And this is what God delights to find: a mind and will that bind themselves to Him.

There is another thing in the text which, as I take it, is a consequence of that close union between man in his whole nature and God: ‘I will set him on high because he hath known My name.’ Notice that the knowledge of the name comes after, and not before, the setting of the love or the fixing of the nature upon God. God’s ‘name’ is the same thing as His self-revelation or His manifested character. Then, does not every one to whom that revelation is made know His name? Certainly not. The word ‘know’ is here used in the same deep sense in which it is employed all but uniformly in the New Testament-the same sense in which it is used in the writings of the Apostle John. It describes a knowledge which is a great deal more than a mere intellectual acquaintance with the facts of divine revelation. Or, to put the thought into other words, this is a knowledge which comes after we have set our love upon God, a knowledge which is the child of love. We forget sometimes that it is a Person, and not a system of truth, whom the Bible tells us we are to know. And how do you know people? Only by familiar acquaintance with them. You might read a description of a man, perfectly accurate, sufficiently full, but you would not therefore say you knew him.

You might know about him, or fancy you did, but if you knew him, it would be because you had summered and wintered with him, and lived beside him, and were on terms of familiar acquaintance with him. As long as it is God and not theology, the knowledge of whom makes religion, so long it will not be the head, but the heart or spirit, that is the medium or organ by which we know Him. You have to become acquainted with Him and be very familiar with Him-that is to say, to fix your whole self upon Him-before you 'know' Him; and it is only the knowledge which is born of love and familiarity that is worth calling knowledge at all. Just as with our earthly relationships and acquaintances, only they who love a man or a woman know such a one right down to the very depth of their being, so the one way to know God's name is to bind myself to Him with mind and heart and will, as friends cleave to one another. Then I shall know Him and be known of Him.

Still further, this knowledge which God delights to find in us men, is a knowledge which is experience. There is all the difference between reading about a foreign country and going to see it with your own eyes. The man that has been there knows it; the man that has not knows about it. And only he knows God to whom the commonplaces of religion have turned into facts which he verifies by his own experiences.

It is a knowledge, too, which influences life. Obviously the words of my text look back to what the saint was represented as saying in an earlier portion of the psalm. Why does God declare that the man has set his love upon Him, and knows His name? Because the saint professed this, 'I will say of the Lord, He is my Refuge and my Fortress.' These are His name. The man knows it; he has it not only upon his lips, but in his heart, and feels that it is true, and acts accordingly. 'He is my Refuge and my Fortress; my God, in Him will I trust.' The knowledge which God regards as knowledge of Him is one based upon experience and upon familiar acquaintance, and issuing in joyful recognition of my possession of Him as mine, and the outgoing of my confidence to Him. These are the things that God desires and delights to find in men.

II. Note, secondly, what God gives to the man in whom He finds such things.

‘I will deliver him’; ‘I will set him on high.’ These two clauses are substantially parallel, and yet there is a difference between them, as is the nature of the parallelism of Hebrew poetry, where the same ideas are repeated with a shade of modification, and the second of them somewhat surpassing the first. ‘I will deliver him,’ says the promise. That confirms the view that the promise in the previous verse, ‘There shall no plague come nigh thy dwelling,’ does not mean exemption from sorrow and trial because, if so, there would be no relevancy or blessedness in the promise of deliverance. He who needs ‘deliverance’ is the man who is surrounded by evils, and God’s promise is not that no evil shall come to the man who trusts Him, but that he shall be delivered out of the evil that does come, and that it will not be truly evil.

And why is he to be delivered? ‘Because he has bound himself to Me,’ says God, ‘therefore will I deliver him.’ Of course, if I am fastened to God, nothing that does not hurt Him can hurt me. If I am knit to Him as closely as this psalm contemplates, it is impossible but that out of His fulness my emptiness shall be filled, and with His rejoicing strength my weakness will be made strong. It is just the same idea as is given to us in the picture of Peter upon the water, when the cold waves are up to his knees, and the coward heart says, ‘I am ready to sink,’ but yet, with the faith that comes with the fear, he puts out his hand and grasps Christ’s hand, and as soon as he does, and the two are united, he is buoyant, and rises again, and the water is beneath the soles of his feet. ‘He sent from above, He took me; He drew me out of many waters.’ Whoever is joined to God is lifted above all evil, and the evil that continues to eddy about him will change its character, and bear him onwards to his haven. For he who is thus knit to God in the living, pulsating bond of thought and affection and submission, will be delivered from sin.

When a boy first learns to skate, he needs some one to go behind him and hold him up whilst he uses his unaccustomed limbs; and so, when we are upon the smooth, treacherous ice of this wicked world, it is by leaning on God that we are kept upright. ‘He hath set himself close to Me, I will deliver him,’ says God. ‘Yea! he shall not fall, for the Lord is able to make him stand.’

Still further, we have another great promise, which is the explanation and extension of the former, ‘I will set him on high, because he hath known My name.’ That is more than lifting a man up above the reach of the storms of life by means of any external deliverance. There is a better thing than that-namely, that our whole inward life be lived loftily. If it is true of us that we know His name, then our lives are ‘hid with Christ in God,’ and far below our feet will be all the riot of earth and its noise and tumult and change. We shall live serene and uplifted lives on the mount, if we know His name and have bound ourselves to Him, and the troubles and cares and changes and duties and joys of this present will be away down below us, like the lowly cottages in some poor village, seen from the mountain top, the squalor out of sight, the magnitude diminished, the noise and tumult dimmed to a mere murmur that interrupts not the sacred silence of the lofty peak where we dwell with God. ‘I will set him on high because he knows My name.’

Then, perhaps, there is a hint in the words, as there is in subsequent words of the verse, of an elevation even higher than that, when, life ended and earth done, He shall receive into His glory those whom He hath guided by His counsel. ‘I will set him on high, because he hath known My name,’ says the Jehovah of the Old Covenant. ‘To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me on My throne,’ says the Jesus of the New, who is the Jehovah of the Old.

70)Psalms 91:15-16

Psalms

WHAT GOD WILL DO FOR US

Psa. 91:15 - Psa. 91:16.

When considering the previous verses of this psalm, I pointed out that at its close we have God’s own voice coming in to confirm and expand the promises which, in the earlier portion of it, have been made in His name to the devout heart. The words which we have now to consider cover the whole range of human life and need, and may be regarded as being a picture of the sure and blessed consequences of keeping our hearts fixed upon our Father, God. He Himself speaks them, and His word is true.

The verses of the text fall into three portions. There are promises for the suppliant, promises for the troubled, promises for mortals. ‘He shall call upon Me and I will answer him’; that is for the suppliant. ‘I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honour him’; that is for the distressed. ‘With long life will I satisfy him, and show him My salvation’; that is for the mortal. Now let us look at these three.

I. The promise to the suppliant.

‘He will call upon Me and I will answer.’ We may almost regard the first of these two clauses as part of the promise. It is not merely a Hebrew way of putting a supposition, ‘If he calls upon Me, then I will answer him,’ nor merely a virtual commandment, ‘Call, if you expect an answer,’ but itself is a part of the blessing and privilege of the devout and faithful heart. ‘He shall call upon Me’; the King opens the door of His chamber and beckons us within.

In these great words we may see set forth both the instinct, as I may call it, of prayer, and the privilege of access to God. If a man’s heart is set upon God, his very life-breath will be a cry to His Father. He will experience a need which is not degraded by being likened to an instinct, for it acts as certainly as do the instincts of the lower creatures, which guide them by the straightest possible road to the surest supply of their need. Any man who has learned in any measure to love God and trust Him will, in the measure in which he has so learned, live in the exercise and habit of prayer; and it will be as much his instinct to cry to God in all changing circumstances as it is for the swallows to seek the sunny south when the winter comes, or the cold north when the sunny south becomes torrid and barren. So, then, ‘He shall call upon Me’ is the characteristic of the truly God-knowing and God-loving heart, which was described in the previous verse. ‘Because he has clung to Me in love, therefore will I deliver him; because he has known My name, therefore will I set him on high,’ and because he has clung and known therefore it is certain that He will ‘call upon Me.’

My friend! do you know anything of that instinctive appeal to God? Does it come to your heart and to your lips without your setting yourself to pray, just as the thought of dear ones on earth comes stealing into our minds a hundred times a day, when we do not intend it nor know exactly how it has come? Does God suggest Himself to you in that fashion, and is the instinct of your hearts to call upon Him?

Again, we see here not only the unveiling of the very deepest and most characteristic attribute of the devout soul, but also the assurance of the privilege of access. God lets us speak to Him. And there is, further, a wonderful glimpse into the very essence of true prayer. 'He shall call upon Me.' What for? No particular object is specified as sought. It is God whom we want, and not merely any things that even He can give. If asking for these only or mainly is our conception of what prayer is, we know little about it. True prayer is the cry of the soul for the living God, in whom is all that it needs, and out of whom is nothing that will do it good. 'He shall call upon Me,' that is prayer.

'I will answer him.' Yes! Of course the instinct is not all on one side. If the devout heart yearns for God, God longs for the devout heart. If I might use such a metaphor, just as the ewe on one side of the hedge hears and answers the bleating of its lamb on the other, so, if my heart cries out for the living God, anything is more credible than that such a cry should not be answered. You may not get this, that, or the other blessing which you ask, for perhaps they are not blessings. You may not get what you fancy you need. We are not always good at translating our needs into words, and it is a mercy that there is Some One that understands what we do want a great deal better than we do ourselves. But if below the specific petition there lies the cry of a heart that calls for the living God, then whether the specific petition be answered or dispersed into empty air will matter comparatively little. 'He shall call upon Me,' and that part of his prayer 'I will answer' and come to him and be in him. Is that our experience of what it is to pray, and our notion of what it is to be answered?

II. Further, here we have a promise for suppliants.

I take the next three clauses of the text as being all closely connected. 'I will be with him in trouble. I will deliver him and honour him'-in trouble, His presence; from trouble, His deliverance; after trouble, glorifying and refining. There are the whole theory and process of the discipline of the devout man's life.

'I will be with him in trouble.' The promise is not only that, when trials of any kind, larger or smaller, more grave or more slight, fall upon us, we shall become more conscious, if we take them rightly, of God's presence, but that all which is meant by God's presence shall really be more fully ours, and that He is, if I may say so, actually nearer us. Though, of course, all words about being near or far have only a very imperfect application to our relation to Him, still the gifts that are meant by His presence-that is to say, His sympathy, His help, His love-are more fully given to a man who in the darkness is groping for his Father's hand, and yet not so much groping for as grasping it. He *is* nearer us as well as *felt* to be nearer us, if we take our sorrows rightly. The effect of sorrow devoutly borne, in bringing God closer to us, belongs to it, whether it be great or small; whether it be, according to the metaphor of an earlier portion of this psalm, 'a lion or an adder'; or whether it be a buzzing wasp or a mosquito. As long as anything troubles me, I may make it a means of bringing God closer to myself.

Therefore, there is no need for any sorrowful heart ever to say, 'I am solitary as well as sad.' He will always come and sit down by us, and if it be that, like poor Job upon his dunghill, we are not able to bear the word of consolation, yet He will wait there till we are ready to take it. He is there all the same, though silent, and will be near all of us, if only we do not drive Him away. 'He will call upon Me and I will answer him'; and the beginning of the answer is the real presence of God with every troubled heart.

Then there follows the next stage, deliverance from trouble; 'I will *deliver* him.' That is not the same word as is employed in the previous verse, though it is translated in the same way in our Bibles. The word here means lifting up out of a pit, or dragging up out of the midst of anything that surrounds a man, and so setting him in some place of safety. Is this promise always true, about people who in sorrow of any kind cast themselves upon God? Do they always get deliverance from Him? There are some sorrows from the pressure of which we shall never escape. Some of us have to carry such. Has this promise no application to the people for whom outward life can never bring an end of the sorrows and burdens that they carry? Not so. He will deliver us not only by taking the burden off our backs, but by making us strong to carry it, and the sorrow, which has changed from wild and passionate weeping into calm submission, is sorrow from which we have been delivered. The serpent may still wound our heel, but if God be with us He will give us strength to press the wounded heel on the malignant head, and we can squeeze all the poison out of it. The bitterness remains; be it so, but let us be quite sure of this, that though sorrow be lifelong, that does not in the least contradict the great and faithful promise, ‘I will be with him in trouble and deliver him,’ for where He is *there* is deliverance.

Lastly, there is the third of these promises for the troubled. ‘I will honour him.’ The word translated ‘honour’ is more correctly rendered ‘glorify.’ Is not that the end of a trouble which has been borne in company with Him; and from which, because it has been so borne, a devout heart is delivered even whilst it lasts? Does not all such sorrow hallow, ennoble, refine, purify the sufferer, and make him liker his God? ‘He for our profit, that we should be partakers of His holiness.’ Is not that God’s way of glorifying us before heaven’s glory? When a blunt knife is ground upon a wheel, the sparks fly fast from the edge held down upon the swiftly-revolving emery disc, but that is the only way to sharpen the dull blade. Friction, often very severe friction, and heat are indispensable to polish the shaft and turn the steel into a mirror that will flash back the sunshine. So when God holds us to His grindstone, it is to get a polish on the surface. ‘I will deliver him and I will glorify him.’

III. Last of all, we have the promise for mortals.

‘With long life will I satisfy him, and show him My salvation.’ I do not know whether by that first clause the Psalmist meant, as people who sometimes like to make the Psalmist mean as little as possible tell us that he did mean, simply ‘length of days.’ For my own part I do not believe that he did. He meant that, no doubt, for longevity was part of the Old Testament promises for this life. But ‘length of days’ does not ‘satisfy’ all old people who attain to it, and that ‘satisfaction’ necessarily implies something more than the prolongation of the physical life to old age. The idea contained in this promise may be illustrated by the expression which is used in reference to a select few of the Old Testament saints, of whom it is recorded that they died ‘full of days.’ That does not merely mean that they had many days, but that, whatever the number, they had as many as they wished, and departed unreluctantly, having had enough of life. They looked back, and saw that all the past had been very good, and that goodness and mercy had determined and accompanied all their days, and so they did not wish to linger longer here, but closed their eyes in peace, with no hungry, vain cravings for prolonged life. They had got all out of the world which it could give, and were contented to have done with it all.

So this promise assures us that, if we are of those who, in the midst of fleeting days, lay hold on the ‘Ancient of Days’ and live by Him, we shall find a table spread in the wilderness, and like travellers in an inn, having eaten enough, shall willingly obey the call to leave the meal provided on the road, and pass into the Father’s house, and sit at the bountiful feast there.

The heart that lives near God, whether its years be few or many, will find in life all that life is capable of giving, and when the end comes will not be unwilling that it should come, nor hold on desperately to the last fag-end and fragment of life that it can keep within its clutches, but will be satisfied to have lived and be contented to die.

Nor is this all, for says the Psalmist, ‘I will show him My salvation.’ That sight comes after he is satisfied with length of days here. And so I think the fair interpretation of the words, in their place in this psalm, is, that however dimly, yet certainly, here the Psalmist saw something beyond. It was not a black curtain which dropped at death. He believed that, yonder, the man who here had been living near God, calling to Him, realising His presence, and satisfied with the fatness of His house upon earth, would see something that would satisfy him more. ‘I shall be satisfied when I awake in Thy likeness.’ That is satisfaction indeed, and the vision, which is possession, of that perfected salvation is the vision that makes the blessedness of heaven.

So, dear friends! we, if we will, may have access to God’s chamber at every moment, and may have His presence, which will make it impossible that we should ever be alone. We may have Him to deliver us from all the evil that is in evil, and to turn it into good. We may have Him to purge, and cleanse, and uplift, and change us into His likeness, even by the ministry of our trials. We may get out of life the last drop of the sweetness that He has put in it; and when it comes to a close, may say, ‘It is enough! Let Thy servant depart in peace; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation,’ and then we may go to see it better in that world where we shall all, if we attain thither, be ‘satisfied’ when we ‘awake in His likeness.’

71)Psalms 99:8

Psalms

FORGIVENESS AND RETRIBUTION

Psa. 99:8.

When the prophet Isaiah saw the great vision which called him to service, he heard from the lips of the seraphim around the Throne the threefold ascription of praise: ‘Holy! holy! holy! Lord God of hosts.’ This psalm seems to be an echo of that heavenly chorus, for it is divided into three sections, each of which closes with the refrain, ‘He is holy,’ and each of which sets forth some one aspect or outcome of that divine holiness. In the first part the holiness of His universal dominion is celebrated; in the second, the holiness of His revelations and providences to Israel, His inheritance; in the third, the holiness of His dealings with them that call upon His name, both when He forgives their sins and when He scourges for the sins that He has forgiven.

Two remarks of an expository character will prepare the way for what I have further to say. The first is that the word ‘though’ in my text, which holds together the two statements that it contains, is commentary rather than translation. For the original has the simple ‘and,’ and the difference between the two renderings is this, that ‘though’ implies some real or apparent contrariety between forgiveness and taking vengeance, which makes their co-existence remarkable, whereas ‘and’ lays the two things down side by side. The Psalmist simply declares that they are both there, and puts in no such fine distinction as is represented by the words ‘though,’ or ‘but,’ or ‘yet.’ To me it seems a great deal more eloquent in its simplicity and reticence that he should say, ‘Thou forgavest them and tookest vengeance,’ than that he should say ‘Thou forgavest them though Thou tookest vengeance.’

Then there is another point to be noted, viz. we must not import into that word ‘vengeance,’ when it is applied to divine actions, the notions which cluster round it when it is applied to ours. For in its ordinary use it means retaliation, inflicted at the bidding of personal enmity or passion. But there are no turbid elements of that sort in God. His retribution is a great deal more analogous to the unimpassioned, impersonal action of public law than it is to the ‘wild justice of revenge.’ When we speak of His ‘vengeance’ we simply mean-unless we have dropped into a degrading superstition-the just recompense of reward which divinely dogs all sin. There is one saying in Scripture which puts the whole matter in its true light, ‘Vengeance is Mine; I will repay,’ saith the Lord; the last clause of which interprets the first. So, then, with these elucidations, we may perhaps see a little more clearly the sequence of the Psalmist’s thought here-God’s forgiveness, and co-existing with that, God’s scourging of the sin which He forgives; and both His forgiveness and the scourging, the efflux and the manifestation of the divine holiness. Now just let us look at these thoughts. Here we have-

I. The adoring contemplation of the divine forgiveness.

I suppose that is almost exclusively a thought due to the historical revelation, through the ages, to Israel, crowned, as well as deepened, by the culmination and perfecting of the eternal revelation of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. I suppose the conception of a forgiving God is the product of the Old and of the New Testament. But familiar as the word is to us, and although the thing that it means is embodied in the creed of Christendom, ‘I believe . . . in the forgiveness of sins,’ I think that a great many of us would be somewhat put to it, if we were called upon to tell definitely and clearly what we mean when we speak of the forgiveness of sins. Many of us, prior to thinking about the matter, would answer ‘the non-infliction or remission of penalty.’ And I am far from denying that that is an element in forgiveness, although it is the lowest and the most external, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament conception of it. But we must rise a great deal higher than that. We are entitled, by our Lord’s teaching, to parallel God’s forgiveness and man’s forgiveness; and so perhaps the best way to understand the perfect type of forgiveness is to look at the imperfect types which we see round us. What, then, do we mean by human forgiveness? It is seen in multitudes of cases where there is no question at all of penalty. Two men get alienated from one another. One of them does something which the other thinks is a sin against friendship or loyalty, and he who is sinned against says, ‘I forgive you.’ That does not mean that he does not inflict a penalty, because there is no penalty in question. Forgiveness is not a matter of conduct, then, primarily, but it is a matter of disposition, of attitude, or, to put it into a shorter word, it is a matter of the heart; and even on the lower level of the human type, we see that remission of penalty may be a part, sometimes is and sometimes is not, but is always the smallest part of it, and a derivative and secondary result of something that went before. An unconscious recognition of this attitude of mind and heart, as being the essential thing in forgiveness, brings about an instance of the process by which two words that originally mean substantially the same thing come to acquire each its special shade of meaning. What I refer to is this-when a judicial sentence on a criminal is remitted, we never hear any one speak about the criminal being ‘forgiven.’ We keep the word ‘pardon,’ in our daily conventional intercourse, for slight offences or for the judicial remission of a sentence. The king pardons a criminal; you never hear about the king ‘forgiving’ a criminal. And that, as I take it, is just because people have been groping after the thought that I am trying to bring out, viz. that the remission of penalty is one thing, and purging the heart of all alienation and hatred is another; and that the latter is forgiveness, whilst the former has to be content with being pardon.

The highest type of forgiveness is the paternal. Every one of us who remembers our childhood, and every one of us who has had children of his own, knows what paternal forgiveness is. It is not when you put away the rod that the little face brightens again and the tears cease to flow, but it is when *your* face clears, and the child knows that there is no cloud between it and the father, or still more the mother, that forgiveness is realised. The immediate effect of our transgressions is that we, as it were, thereby drop a great, black rock into the stream of the divine love, and the channel is barred by our action; and God’s forgiveness is when, as was the case in another fashion in the Deluge, the floods rise above the tops of the highest hills; and as the good old hymn that has gone out of fashion nowadays, says, over sins:

‘Like the mountains for their size,
The seas of sovereign grace arise.’

When the love of God flows over the black rock, as the incoming tide does over some jagged reef, then, and not merely when the rod is put on the shelf, is forgiveness bestowed and received.

But, as I have said, the remission of penalty *is* an element in forgiveness. Some people say: ‘It is a very dangerous thing, in the interests of Christian truth, to treat that relation of a loving Father as if it expressed all that God is to men.’ Quite so; God is King as well as Father. There are analogies, both in paternal and regal government, which help us to understand the divine dealings with us; though, of course, in regard to both we must always remember that the analogies are remote and not to be pressed too far. But even in recognising the fact that an integral part of forgiveness is remission of penalty, we come back, by another path, to the same point, that the essence of forgiveness is the uninterrupted flow of love. Remission of penalty;-yes, by all means. But then the question comes, what *is* the penalty of sin? And I suppose that the deepest answer to that is, separation from God. But if the true New Testament conception of the penalty of sin is the eternal death which is the result of the rending of a man away from the Source of life, then the remission of the penalty is precisely identical with the uninterrupted flow of the divine love. The mists of autumnal mornings drape the sky in gloom, and turn the blessed sun itself into a lurid ball of fire. Sweep away the mists, and its rays again pour out beneficence. The man who sins, piles up, as it were, a cloud-bank between himself and God, and forgiveness, which is the remission of the penalty, is the sweeping away of the cloud-bank, and the pouring out of sunshine upon a darkened heart. So, brethren! the essence of forgiveness is that God shall love me all the same, though I sin against Him.

But now turn, in the next place, to

II. God’s scourging of the sin which He forgives.

Look at the instances in our psalm, ‘Moses and Aaron among His priests. . . . They called upon the Lord and He answered them. Thou wast a God that forgavest them, and Thou tookest vengeance of their doings.’ Moses dies on Pisgah, Aaron is stripped of his priestly robes by his brother’s hand and left alone amongst the clouds and the eagles, on the solitary summit of the mountain, and yet Moses and Aaron knew themselves forgiven the sins for which they died those lonely deaths. And these are but instances of what is universally true, that the sin which is pardoned is also ‘avenged’ in the sense of having retribution dealt out to it.

I need not dwell upon this at any length, but let me just remind you how there are two provinces of human experience in which this is abundantly true: one, that of outward consequences, and another that of inward consequences. Take, for instance, two men, boon companions, who together have wasted their substance in riotous living. One of them is converted, as we call it, becomes a Christian, knows himself forgiven. The other one is not. Is the one less certain to have a corrugated liver than the other? Will the disease, the pauperism, the ruined position in life, the loss of reputation be any different in the cases of him who is pardoned and of him who is not? No; the two will suffer in a similar fashion, and the different attitude that the one has to the divine love from that which the other has, will not make a hair of difference as to the results that follow. The consequences are none the less divine retribution because they are the result of natural laws, and none the less penal because they are automatically inflicted.

There is another department in which we see the same law working, and that is the inward consequences. A man does change his attitude to his former sins, when he knows that he is pardoned; but the results of these sins will follow all the same, whether he is forgiven or not. Memory will be tarnished, habits will be formed and chain a man, capacities will be forfeited, weaknesses will ensue. The wounds may be healed, but the scars will remain, and when we consider how certainly, and as I said, divinely, such issues dog all manner of transgression, we can understand what the Psalmist meant when, not thinking about a future retribution, but about the present life’s experiences, he said, ‘Thou wast a God that forgavest them, and Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.’ ‘The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold, therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing,' and that will be his case whether he is forgiven, or not forgiven, by the divine love.

So, dear friends! do not let us confound the two things which are so widely separated, the flow of the divine love to us irrespective of our sins, which is the true forgiveness, and the remission of the penalty, the infliction of which may itself be a part of forgiveness. 'Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap,' and he will reap it whether he has sown darnel and tares and poisonous seeds, of which he is now ashamed, and for which he has received forgiveness, or whether he has not asked nor received it.

Only remember that if we humbly realise the great fact that God has forgiven us, we can, as they say, 'take our punishment' in an altogether different spirit and temper, and it comes to be, not judicial penalty, but paternal chastisement, the token of love, and of which we can say that 'We are judged of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world.'

Lastly, my text leads us to think of-

III. Forgiveness and scourging as both issues of holy love.

Some people, in their narrow and altogether superficial view of Christianity, would divide between the two, and say forgiveness comes from God's love, and scourging comes from His holiness. But this psalm puts the two together, just as we must put together as inseparable from each other the two conceptions of holiness and of love. Now our modern notions of what is meant by the love of God are a great deal too sentimental and gushing and limp. Love is degraded unless there be holiness in it. It becomes immoral good nature, much more than anything that deserves the name of love. A God who is all love, so much so that it makes no difference to Him whether a man is a saint or a sinner, is not a God to be worshipped, and scarcely a God to be admired. He is lower than we, not higher. But His holy love is like a sea of glass mingled with fire; the love being shot all through, as it were, with streams of flame.

This holy love underlies the forgiveness of sins. To forgive may sometimes be profoundly right; it may sometimes be profoundly immoral. A general gaol delivery simply sets the scoundrels free; a universal amnesty is a failure of justice, and a very doubtful benefit. But the forgiveness, which is the issue of holy love, is a means to an end, and the end which it has in view is that, drawn by answering love to a pardoning God, we may be drawn from the sins which alienate us from Him. There is no such sure way of making a man forsake his sins as to give him the assurance that God has forgiven them. ‘Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more, because of thy sins, when’-I smite? no-’I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done.’ ‘Thou wast a God that forgavest them,’ and in the very act of forgiving, didst draw them from their sins.

That holy love, in like manner, underlies retribution. I have been speaking of retribution mainly as it is seen in the working of natural law. It is none the less God’s act, because it is the operation of the laws which He impressed upon His creation at the beginning. You have weaving machines in your mills that whenever a thread breaks, stop dead. Is it the machine or the maker that is to get the credit of that? God has set us in an order of things wherein, and has given us a nature whereby, automatically, every sin, as it were, stops the loom, and ‘every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of reward.’ But men sometimes say ‘that is Nature; that is not God.’ God lies at the back of Nature, and works through Nature. Although Nature is not God, God is Nature. Therefore it is ‘Thou’ that ‘takest vengeance of their inventions.’ Let us, then, remember that retribution is a token of love, meant to drive us from our sins, just as forgiveness is meant to draw us from them. Our Psalmist had come the length of putting these two things together, forgiveness and retribution. We have reached further, and here is the New Testament enlargement and deepening and explanation of the Old Testament thought: ‘If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins,’ and in the very act, ‘to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’ ‘If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous.’

72)Psalms 105:14-15

Psalms

INVIOLABLE MESSIAHS AND PROPHETS

Psa. 105:14 - Psa. 105:15.

The original reference of these words is to the fathers of the Jewish people-the three wandering shepherds, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Psalmist transfers to them the great titles which properly belong to a later period of Jewish history. None of the three were ever in the literal sense of the word 'anointed,' but all the three had what anointing symbolised. None of them were in the literal or narrow sense of the word 'prophets'-that is to say, predicters of future events-but one of them was called a 'prophet' even in his lifetime. And they all possessed that intimacy of communion with God which imparted the power of *forth-speaking for* Him. Insignificant as they were, they were bigger than the Pharaohs and Abimelechs and the other kinglets that strutted their little day beside them. Astonished as the monarch of Egypt would have been, or the king of the Philistines either, if he had been told that the wandering shepherd was of far more importance for the world than he was, it was true. 'He suffered no man to do them wrong: yea, He reproved kings for their sakes, saying, Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm.'

Further, as Judaism, with its anointings and prophecies was a narrower system following upon a wider one, so a wider one has succeeded it; and we step into the position occupied by these patriarchs-on whose heads no anointing oil had been poured, and into whose lips no supernatural gifts of prediction had been infused. It is no arrogance, but the simplest recognition of the essential facts of the case, if we take these words of the Psalmist's and transfer them bodily to the whole mass of Christian people, and to each individual atom that makes up the mass. All are anointed; all are prophets; of all it is true that God suffers no man nor thing to do them wrong. And kings and dynasties and the politics of the world are all in the hands of One whose supreme purpose is that through men there may be made known to all mankind the significant tidings of His love. Therefore, His Church is founded upon a rock, and earth is the servant of the servants of God.

I. Every Christian is a 'messiah.'

You know that the word 'anointed' is a translation of the Hebrew word 'Messiah,' or of the Greek word 'Christ.' The meaning of the symbolic 'anointing' was simply consecration to office by the divine will, and endowment with the capacity for that office by the divine gift. In the ancient system it was mainly employed-though not, perhaps, exclusively-as a means of designating, and when received in humble dependence on God, of fitting, a man for the two great offices of king and priest.

Oil was an appropriate symbol. Its gentle flow, its soothing, suppling effect, and in another aspect, its value as a means of invigoration and sustenance, and in yet another, as a source of light, peculiarly adapted it to be an emblem of the bestowment on a patient and trustful and submissive heart that was saying, ‘Lord, take me, and use me as Thou wilt,’ of that divine Spirit by whose silent, sweet, soft-flowing, strong influences men were prepared for God’s service.

Jesus was the Christ, the Messias, because that Divine Spirit dwelt in Him without measure. If we are Christians in the real sense of the word, then, however imperfectly, yet really, and by God’s grace increasingly, there is such a union between us and our Saviour as that into us there does flow the anointing of His Spirit. There being a community of life derived from the Source of Life, it is no presumption to say that every Christian man is a Christ.

The word has been used of late with unwise significations, but the truth that has been inadequately expressed by such uses is the great truth of Scripture; ‘He that is joined to the Lord is one Spirit,’ and there does flow the anointing oil from the head of the High Priest to the skirts of the garments. Every man and woman who has any hold of Jesus Christ at all, in the measure of his or her hold, is drawing from Him this ‘unction of the Holy One.’ So, brethren, rise to the solemnity, the awfulness, the joyfulness of your true position, and understand that you, too, are anointed, though not for the same purposes [and in humbler and derived fashion], for which the Spirit dwelt without measure upon ‘the First-born among many brethren.’

Kings were anointed; and when that divine gift comes into a man’s heart, it, and as I believe, only it, makes him lord of himself, of circumstances, of time, and of the world. ‘All things are yours, and ye are Christ’s.’ There is one real royalty-the royalty of the man who rules because he submits. Every Christian soul may be described as Gideon’s brethren were described, ‘As thou art, so were they: each one resembled the children of a king,’ for if

Christ’s Spirit is in the Christian’s spirit, the disciple will grow like his Master, and it will be growingly true of us, that ‘as He is, so are we in this world.’

Priests were anointed. And we, if we are Christian people, have the prerogative of direct access to the Divine Presence, and need neither Church nor sacraments to intervene or mediate between us and Him. The true democracy of Christianity lies in that word ‘Mine anointed.’

II. Further, every Christian man is a prophet.

I have already said that there is no historical warrant for supposing that the gift of prophecy, in its narrower sense, was ever bestowed upon any of these patriarchs. But prediction is only one corner of the prophetic office. The word is connected with a root which means ‘to boil, or bubble like a fountain,’ and it expresses, not so much the theme of the utterance as its nature. The welling up, from a full heart, of God’s thoughts and God’s truth, that is prophecy. The patriarchs were prophets, not in the sense that they had the gift of beholding and foretelling visions of the future, and all the wonder that should be, but in the higher sense-for it is the higher as well as broader-of being bearers of a divine word, breathed into them by that anointing Spirit, that it might be uttered forth by them. That sort of prophetic inspiration belongs to all Christians. It is the result of the relationship between Christ and Christians of which we have been speaking. Every one who has been anointed will be thus gifted.

God’s ‘messiahs’ will be God’s prophets. If we are in touch with God, and have our hearts and whole spiritual natures drawn and kept so near Him as that we are ever receiving from Him of His transcendent and mysterious life, then silence will be impossible. The lips will not be able to contain themselves, but will speak forth that of which the heart is full. And thus every Christian man, in the measure of his true Christianity, will be a prophet of the most High.

I do not need to point the lesson. A silent Christian is an anomaly, a contradiction in terms, as much as black light, or dark stars. If Christ is in you He will come out of you. If your hearts are full the crystal treasure will flow over the brim. It is easy to be dumb when you have nothing to say, and that is the condition of hundreds of people who fancy themselves to be, and are called by others, ‘Christians.’ ‘Mine anointed’ cannot help being ‘My prophets.’ If you are not prophets, if there never is any bubbling up of the fountain demanding utterance, ask yourselves whether there is any fountain there at all.

III. And so, lastly, every Christian man, in his double capacity of anointed and prophet, is watched over by God.

One is tempted to diverge into wider considerations, and speak of the relative importance of things secular and sacred [to adopt a doubtful distinction] in the history of the world, and how the former are for the sake of the latter. But I do not yield to the temptation. Let me rather take the thought here as it applies to our own little lives.

Abraham more than once in his lifetime, though sometimes by his own fault, was brought into very perilous places. There are one or two incidents which are familiar to most of us, I dare say, in his life which are evidently referred to in the phrase ‘He reproved kings for their sakes.’ The principle remains in full force to-day, and God says to every thing and person, Death included, ‘Do My prophets no harm.’ They may slay; they cannot harm. If I might use a very homely metaphor, sportsmen train retriever dogs to bring their game without ruffling a feather. God trains evils and sorrows to lay hold of us, and bring us to, and lay us down at, His feet untouched.

There is no real harm in so-called evil. That is the interpretation that Christianity gives to such words as this of my text, not because it is forced to weaken them by the obstinate facts of life, but because it has learned to strengthen them by the understanding of what is harm and what is good; what is gain and what is loss. Peter shall be delivered out of prison by the skin of his teeth when they are hammering at the scaffold on the other side of the wall, and the dawn is just beginning to show itself in the sky; whilst James shall have his head cut off. Was that because God loved Peter better than James? Was one harmed and the other not? Ah! Peter’s turn came all in good time. Peter and his brother Paul had both to bow their necks to the headsman’s sword one day, although one of them said, ‘Who shall harm you if ye be followers of that which is good?’ and the other said, when within sight of his death, ‘He shall deliver me from every evil work.’ Were they disappointed? Let us hear how Paul ends the same verse: ‘and shall save me into His heavenly kingdom.’ Ay! and he *was* ‘saved into the heavenly kingdom’ when outside the walls of Rome; where a gaudy church stands now, he died for his Master. No harm came to him. God said to Death, ‘Do My prophet no harm!’ and Death docilely did him good, and brought him to his Lord.

Only, dear friends! let us remember that the inviolableness of the ambassador depends on his function, and not on his person; and that if we want to be kept from all evil, we must do the work for which we have been sent here. So let us understand the meaning of our difficulties and sorrows. Let us set ourselves to our tasks, live up to the level of the high names which we have a right to claim, and be sure that there is no harm in the harm that befalls us; and that all evil things ‘work together for good to them that love God.’

73)Psalms 105:19

Psalms

GOD’S PROMISES TESTS

Psa. 105:19.

I do not think I shall be mistaken if I affirm that these words do not convey any very clear idea to most readers. They were spoken with reference to Joseph, during the period of his imprisonment. For the understanding of them I think we must observe that there is a contrast drawn between two ‘words,’ ‘his’ [*i.e.* Joseph’s] and God’s. If we lay firm hold of that clue, I think it will lead us into clear daylight, and it will be obvious that Joseph’s word, which delayed its coming, or fulfilment, was either his boyish narrative of the dreams that foreshadowed his exaltation, or less probably, his words to his fellow-prisoners in the interpretation of their dreams. In either case, the *terminus ad quem*, the point to which our attention is directed, is the period when that word came to be fulfilled, and what my text says is that during that long season of unfulfilled hope, the ‘word of God,’ which was revealed in Joseph’s dream, and was the ground on which his own ‘word’ rested-did what? Encouraged, heartened, strengthened him? No, that unfulfilled promise might encourage or discourage him; but the Psalmist fixes our thoughts on another effect which, whether it encouraged or discouraged, it certainly had, namely, that it tested him, and found out what stuff he was made of, and whether there was staying power enough in him to hold on, in unconquerable faith, to a promise made long since, communicated by no more reliable method than a dream, and of the fulfilment of which not the faintest sign had, for all these weary years, appeared. His circumstances, judged by appearances, shattered his early visions, and bade him believe them to be no more than the boyish aspirations which grown men dismiss or find melt away of themselves when life’s realities wake the dreamer. We might either say that the non-fulfilment of the promise tested Joseph, or that the promise, by its non-fulfilment, tested him. The Psalmist chooses the latter more forcible and half paradoxical mode of speech. It proved the depth and vitality of his faith, and his ability to see things that are not as though they were. Will this man be able continually through years of poverty and imprisonment to keep his eye on the light beyond, to see his star through clouds? Will he despise the ‘light affliction,’ in the potent and immovable belief that it is ‘but for a moment?’ Thus, for all these years the great blessed word, or the hope that was built upon it, tested Joseph in the very depths of his soul. And is not that just what our anticipations, built upon God’s assurances, whether they are in regard to earthly matters that seem long in coming, or whether they, as they ought to do, travel beyond the bounds of the material, to grasp *the* hope which is *the* promise, ‘the hope of eternal life,’ ought to do for us, test us and find out what sort of people we are? And they do!

Let us go back to the man in our text. According to some commentators, he was imprisoned for something like ten years. We do not know how long his Egyptian bondage had lasted, nor how long before that his endurance of the active ill-will of his surly brothers had gone on. But at all events his chrysalis stage was very long, and one would not have wondered if he had said to himself, down in that desert pit or in that Egyptian dungeon, ‘Ah, yes! they *were* dreams, and *only* dreams,’ or if he had, as so many of us do, turned his back on his youthful visions, and gained the sad power of being able to smile at his old hopes and ambitions. Brethren! especially you young men and women, cherish your youthful dreams. They are often the prophecies of capacities and possibilities, signs of what God means you to make yourselves. But that is apart from my subject. Suppose we had clear before us, with unwavering confidence in its reality, the great promise which God has given us, do you not think that its presence would purify our souls, and give power and dignity to our lives?

The promise was a test, says my text. The word which it employs to designate the manner of testing or trying, is one drawn from the smelting operations of the goldsmith, by which, heat being applied, the mass is made fluid and the dross is run off, and as the result of the trial, there flows out gold refined by fire.

‘Having these promises, dearly beloved! let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit.’ ‘Every man who hath this hope in Him purifieth himself, even as He is pure.’ The result of the great promise of eternal life and of the hope that it kindles is meant to be that it shall purge our spirits from meanness, from sense, from undue dependence upon the miserable trivialities of to-day, that it shall emancipate us from slavery to the moment, and lead us into the liberty of the eternities, ‘while we look not at the things that are seen, but at the things which are not seen.’ Oh! if we would only see clearly and habitually before us-for we could if we would-what God’s heart inclines Him to do for us, and what He certainly will do for us, in the far-off future, if we will only let Him, do you not think that these trifles that put us off our equanimity this morning would have been borne with a little more composure? Do you not think that the things that looked so huge when we were down abreast of them would, by the laws of perspective, diminish in their proportions as we rose steadily above them, until all the hubbub in the valley was unheard on the mountain peak, and the great trees that waved their giant branches below and shut out the sky from our eyes while we were among them would dwindle to a green smear on the plain, and all the foes ‘show scarce so gross as beetles,’ from the height from which we look down upon them? Get up beside God’s promise, if you would take the true dimensions of cares and tasks, and burdens and sorrows. Then, brother! you will learn the truth of the paradox, ‘light . . . but for a moment’; though often they all but crush the burden-bearing shoulder and seem to last through slow years.

‘The word of the Lord tried him,’ and because it tried him, it purified him. If we give credence, as we ought to, to that word, it will purify *us*, and it will test of what contexture our faith is. The further away the object of any hope is, the more noble the cherishing of it makes a life. The trivial, short-lived anticipations which do not look beyond the end of next week are far less operative in making strong and noble characters than are those, of whatever kind they may be otherwise, which look far ahead and need years for their realisation. It is a blessing to have the mark far, far away, because that means that the arm that pulls the bow must draw more strongly, and the eye that sees the goal must gaze more intently. Be thankful for the promise that cannot be fulfilled in this world because it lifts us above the low levels, and already makes us feel as if we were endowed with immortality.

The word will test our patience, and it will test our willingness, though we be heirs of the kingdom, to do humble tasks. Christian men in this world are sons of a King, and look forward to a royal inheritance, but in the meantime they have, as it were, to keep a little huckster’s shop in a back alley. But if we adequately realised the promise of our inheritance, the meanness of our surroundings and the triviality of our occupations would not make us mean or trivial, but our souls would be ‘like stars’ and ‘dwell apart’ while we travelled ‘on life’s common way in cheerful godliness,’ and did small duties in such a manner as to make them great.

Because Joseph was sure that God’s long-lingering word would be fulfilled, he did not mind though he had to be the lackey of his brothers, the Midianites’ chattel, Potiphar’s slave, Pharaoh’s prisoner, and a servant of servants in his dungeon. So with us, the measure of our willing acceptance of our present tasks, burdens, humiliations, and limitations is the measure of our firm faith in the promise that tarries.

‘If we hope for what we see not, then do we with patience wait for it,’ says the Apostle, though most of us would have said exactly the opposite. We generally suppose that the more ardent the hope, the more is it impatient of delay. Paul had learned better. The more certain the assurance, the better we can tolerate the procrastination of its fulfilment.

So, brethren! God’s greatest gift to us, like all His other gifts, has in it the quality of testing us; and we can come to a pretty fair approximation to an estimate of what sort of Christian people we are, by observing how we deal with God’s promises of help according to our need here and of heaven hereafter. How do we deal with them? Why, a sadly large number of us never think about them at all; and a large proportion of the others would a great deal rather stay working in the huckster’s shop in the back alley, than go home to the King. I am quite sure that if the inmost sentiments of the bulk of professing Christians about a future life were dragged into light, these would be a revelation of a faith all honeycombed with insincerity. God tests us, and it is a sharp test if we submit ourselves to it; He tests us by His promises. ‘Child, wilt thou believe?’ is the first testing question put to us by these. ‘Wilt thou keep them hid in thy heart?’ is the next. ‘Wilt thou go out towards them in desire?’ is the next. ‘Wilt thou live worthy of them?’ is the last. ‘The word of the Lord tried him.’

So let us be thankful for the delays of love, for the wide gap between promise and realisation. It was for Joseph’s sake that the slow years were multiplied between the first gleam of his future and the full sunshine of his exaltation. And it is for our sakes that God in like manner protracts the period of anticipation and non-fulfilment. ‘If the vision tarry, wait for it.’ ‘Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus their brother’ very dearly. ‘When He heard, therefore, that he was sick, He abode still two days’-to give time for Lazarus to die-’in the same place where He was.’ Ay, and when each sister came to Him with her most natural and yet most faithless 'Lord! if Thou hadst been here my brother had not died,' He only said, 'If thou wouldst believe thou shouldst see the glory of God.' Was not Lazarus dearer, restored from the grave, than he would have been, raised from his sickbed? Is not the delaying of the blessing a means of increase of the blessing? And shall not we be sure that however long 'He that shall come' may seem to tarry ere He comes, when He *has* come they who have waited for His coming more than they that watch for the morning and have sometimes been ready to cry out: 'Hath the Lord forgotten? Doth His promise fail for ever more?' will be ashamed of their impatient moments and will humbly and thankfully exclaim: 'He came at the very right time and did *not* tarry.' 'Until the time that his word came, the word of the Lord tried him,' and the coming of that word was all the more blessed for every heavy-laden hour of hope deferred, which, by God's grace, did not make the heart sick, but prepared it for fuller possession of the blessings enhanced by the delays of love.

74)Psalms 110:3

Psalms

SOLDIER PRIESTS

Psa. 110:3.

It is no part of my present purpose to establish the reference of this psalm to our Lord. We have Christ's own authority for that.

It does not seem to be typical-that is to say, it does not appear to have had a lower application to a king of Israel who was a shadow of the true monarch, but rather to refer only to the coming Sovereign, whom David was helped to discern, indeed, by his own regal office, but whose office and character, as here set forth, far surpass anything belonging to him or to his dynasty. The attributes of the King, the union in His case of the royal and priestly dignities, His seat at the right hand of God, His acknowledged supremacy over the greatest Jewish ruler, who here calls him 'my Lord,' His eternal dominion, His conquest of many nations, and His lifting up of His head in triumphant rule that knows no end-all these characteristics seem to forbid the possibility of a double reference, and to demand the acknowledgment of a distinct and exclusive prophecy of Christ.

Taking that for granted without more words, it strikes one as remarkable that this description of the subjects of the Priest-King should be thus imbedded in the very heart of the grand portraiture of the monarch Himself. It is the anticipation of the profound New Testament thought of the unity of Christ and His Church. By simple faith a union is brought about so close and intimate that all His is theirs, and the picture of His glory is incomplete without the vision of ‘the Church, which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.’ Therefore, between the word of God which elevates Him to His right hand, and the oath of God which consecrates Him a priest for ever, is this description of the army of the King.

The full force of the words will, I hope, appear as we advance. For the present it will be enough to say that there are really in our text three co-ordinate clauses, all descriptive of the subjects of the monarch, regarded as a band of warriors-and that the main ideas are these:-the subjects are willing soldiers; the soldiers are priests; the priest-soldiers are as dew upon the earth. Or, in other words, we have here the very heart of the Christian character set forth as being willing consecration; then we have the work which Christian men have to do, and the spirit in which they are to do it, expressed in that metaphor of their priestly attire; and then we have their refreshing and quickening influence upon the world.

I. The subjects of the Priest-King are willing soldiers.

In accordance with the warlike tone of the whole psalm, our text describes the subjects as an army. That military metaphor comes out more clearly when we attach the true meaning to the words, ‘in the day of Thy power.’ The word rendered, and rightly rendered, ‘power,’ has the same ambiguity which that word has in the English of the date of our translation, and for a century later, as you may find in Shakespeare and Milton, who both used it in the sense of ‘army.’ Singularly enough we do not employ ‘powers’ in that meaning, but we do another word which means the same thing-and talk of ‘forces,’ meaning thereby ‘troops.’ By the way, what a melancholy sign it is of the predominance of that infernal military spirit, that it should have so leavened language, that the ‘forces’ of a nation means its soldiers, its embattled energies turned to the work of destruction. But the phrase is so used here. ‘The day of Thy power’ is not a mere synonym for ‘the time of Thy might,’ but means specifically ‘the day of Thine army,’ that is, ‘the day when Thou dost muster Thy forces and set them in array for the war.’

The King is going forth to conquest. But He goes not alone. Behind Him come His faithful followers, all pressing on with willing hearts and high courage. Then, to begin with, the warfare which He wages is one not confined to Him. Alone He offers the sacrifice by which He atones; but, as we shall see, we too are priests. He rules, and His servants rule with Him. But ere that time comes, they are to be joined with Him in the great warfare by which He wins the earth for Himself. ‘As Captain of the Lord’s host am I now come.’ He wins no conquests for Himself; and now that He is exalted at God’s right hand, He wins none by Himself. We have to do His work, we have to fight His battles as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. By power derived from Him, but wielded by ourselves; with courage inspired by Him, but filling our hearts; not as though He needed us, but inasmuch as He is pleased to use us, we have to wage warfare for and to please Him who hath chosen us to be soldiers. The Captain of our salvation sits at the right hand of God, expecting till His enemies be made His footstool. He has bidden us to keep the field and fight the fight. From His height He watches the conflict-nay, He is with us while we wage it. So long as we strike for Him, so long is it His power that teaches our hands to war. Our King’s flag is committed to our care; but we are not left to defend it alone. In indissoluble unity, the King and the subjects, the Chief and His vassals, the Captain and His soldiers, are knit together-and wheresoever His people are, in all the danger and hardships of the long struggle, there is He, to keep their heads in the day of battle, and make them more than conquerors.

Then, again, that warfare is shared in by all the subjects. It is a levy *en masse*-an armed nation. The whole of the people are embodied for the battle. It is not the work of a select few, but of every one who calls Christ ‘Lord,’ to be His faithful servant and soldier. Whatever varieties of occupation may be set us by Him, one purpose is to be kept in view and one end to be effected by them all. Every Christian man is bound to strive for the reduction of all human hearts under Christ’s dominion. The tasks may be different, but the result should be one. Some of us have to toil in the trenches, some of us to guard the camp, some to lead the assault, some to stay by the stuff and keep the communications open. Be it so. We are all soldiers, and He alone has to determine our work. We are responsible for the spirit of it, He for its success.

Again, there are no *mercenaries* in these ranks, no pressed men. The soldiers are all volunteers. ‘Thy people shall be willing.’ Pause for a moment upon that thought.

Dear brethren! there are two kinds of submission and service. There is submission because you cannot help it, and there is submission because you like it. There is a sullen bowing down beneath the weight of a hand which you are too feeble to resist, and there is a glad surrender to a love which it would be a pain not to obey. Some of us feel that we are shut in by immense and sovereign power which we cannot oppose. And yet, like some raging rebel in a dungeon, or some fluttering bird in a cage, we beat ourselves, all bruised and bloody, against the bars in vain attempts at liberty, alternating with fits of cowed apathy as we slink into a corner of our cell. Some of us, thank God! feel that we are enclosed on every side by that mighty Hand which none can resist, and from which we would not stray if we could, and we joyfully hide beneath its shelter, and gladly obey when it points. Constrained obedience is no obedience. Unless there be the glad surrender of the will and heart, there is no surrender at all. God does not want compulsory submission. He does not care to rule over people who are only crushed down by greater power. He does not count that those serve who sullenly acquiesce because they dare not oppose. Christ seeks for no pressed men in His ranks. Whosoever does not enlist joyfully is not reckoned as His. And the question comes to us, brethren!-What is my relation to that loving Lord, to that Redeemer King? Do I submit because His love has won my heart, and it would be a pang not to serve Him; or do I submit because I know Him strong, and am afraid to refuse? If the former, all is well; He calls us ‘not servants but friends.’ If the latter, all is wrong; we are not subjects, but enemies.

There is another idea involved in this description. The soldiers are not only marked by glad obedience, but that obedience rests upon the sacrifice of themselves. The word here rendered ‘willing’ is employed throughout the Levitical law for ‘freewill offerings.’ And if we may venture to bring that reference in here, it carries us a step farther in this characterisation of the army. This glad submission comes from self-consecration and surrender. It is in that host as it was in the army whose heroic self-devotion was chaunted by Deborah under her palm-tree, ‘The people willingly offered themselves.’ Hence came courage, devotion, victory. With their lives in their hands they flung themselves on the foe, and nothing could stand against the onset of men who recked not of themselves. There is one grand thing even about the devilry of war-the transcendent self-abnegation with which, however poor and unworthy may be the cause, a man casts himself away, ‘what time the foeman’s line is broke.’ The poorest, vulgarest, most animal natures rise for a moment into something like nobility, as the surge of the strong emotion lifts them to that height of heroism. Life is then most glorious when it is given away for a great cause. That sacrifice is the one noble and chivalrous element which gives interest to war-the one thing that can be disentangled from its hideous associations, and can be transferred to higher regions of life. That spirit of lofty consecration and utter self-forgetfulness must be ours, if we would be Christ’s soldiers. Our obedience will then be glad when we feel the force of, and yield to, that gentle, persuasive entreaty, ‘I beseech you, brethren! by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice.’ There is ‘one Sacrifice for sin for ever’-which never can be repeated, nor exhausted, nor copied. And the loving, faithful acceptance of that sacrifice of propitiation leads our hearts to the response of thank-offering, the sacrifice and surrender of ourselves to Him who has given Himself not only to, but for us. It cannot be recompensed, but it may be acknowledged. Let us give ourselves to Christ, for He has died for us. Let us give ourselves to Christ, for only in such surrender do we truly find ourselves. Let us give ourselves to Christ, for such a sacrifice makes all life fair and noble, and that altar sanctifies the gift. Let us give ourselves to Christ, for without such sacrifice we have no place in the host whom He leads to victory. ‘Thy people shall be willing offerings in the day of Thy power.’

Still further, another remarkable idea may be connected with this word. By a natural transition, of which illustrations may be found in other languages, it comes to mean ‘*free,*’ and also ‘*noble.*’ As, for instance, it is used in the fifty-first Psalm, ‘Uphold me with Thy *free* Spirit’-and in the forty-seventh, ‘The *princes* of the people are gathered together.’ And does not this shading of significations-willing sacrifices, free, princely-remind us of another distinctly evangelical principle, that the willing service which rests upon glad consecration raises him who renders it to true freedom and dominion? Every man enlisted in His body-guard is noble. The Prince’s servants are every other person’s master. The King’s livery exempts from all other submission. As in the old Saxon monarchies, the monarch’s domestics were nobles, the men of Christ’s household are ennobled by their service. They who obey Him are free from every yoke of bondage-’free indeed.’ All things serve the soul that serves Christ. ‘He hath made us kings unto God.’

II. The soldiers are priests.

That expression, ‘in the beauties of holiness,’ is usually read as if it belonged either to the words immediately preceding, or to those immediately following. But in either case the connection is somewhat difficult and obscure. It seems better regarded as a distinct and separate clause, adding a fresh trait to the description of the army, and what that is we need not find any difficulty in ascertaining. ‘The beauties of holiness’ is a frequent phrase for the sacerdotal garments, the holy festal attire of the priests of the Lord. So considered, how beautifully it comes in here! The conquering King whom the psalm hymns is a Priest for ever; and He is followed by an army of priests. The soldiers are gathered in the day of the muster, with high courage and willing devotion, ready to fling away their lives; but they are clad not in mail, but in priestly robes-like those who wait before the altar rather than like those who plunge into the fight-like those who compassed Jericho with the ark for their standard, and the trumpets for all their weapons. We can scarcely fail to remember the words which echo these and interpret them: ‘The armies which were in heaven followed Him on white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean’-a strange armour against sword-cut and spear-thrust.

The main purpose, then, of this part of our text seems to be to bring out the priestly character of the Christian soldier-a thought which carries with it many important considerations, on which I can barely touch.

Mark, then, how the warfare which we have to wage is the same as the priestly service which we have to render. The conflict is with our own sin and evil; the sacrifice we have to offer is ourselves. As soldiers, we have to fight against our selfish desires and manifold imperfections; as priests, we have to lay our whole selves on His altar. The task is the same under either emblem. We have a conflict to wage in the world, and in the world we have a priestly work to do, and these are the same. We have to be God's representatives in the world, bringing Him nearer to men's apprehensions and hearts by word and work. We have to bring men to God by entreaty, and by showing the path which leads to Him. That priestly service for men is in effect identical with the merciful warfare which we have to wage in the world. The Church militant is an army of priests. Its warfare is its sacerdotal function. It fights for Christ when it opposes the message of His grace and the power of His blood to its own and the world's sins-and when it intercedes in the secret place for the coming of His kingdom.

Does not this metaphor teach us also, what is to be our defence and our weapon in this warfare? Not with garments rolled in blood, nor with brazen armour do they go forth, who follow Him that conquered by dying. Their uniform is the beauties of holiness, 'the fine linen clean and white, which is the righteousness of saints.' Many great thoughts lie in such words, which I must pass over. But this one thing is obvious-that the great power which we Christian men are to wield in our loving warfare is-*character*. Purity of heart and life, transparent simple goodness, manifest in men's sight-these will arm us against dangers, and these will bring our brethren glad captives to our Lord. We serve Him best, and advance His kingdom most, when the habit of our souls is that righteousness with which He invests our nakedness. Be like your Lord, and as His soldiers you will conquer, and as His priests you will win some to His love and fear. Nothing else will avail without that. Without that dress no man finds a place in the ranks.

The image suggests, too, the spirit in which our priestly warfare is to be waged. The one metaphor brings with it thoughts of strenuous effort, of discipline, of sworn consecration to a cause. The other brings with it thoughts of gentleness and sympathy and tenderness, of still waiting at the shrine, of communion with Him who dwells between the Cherubim. Whilst our work demands all the courage and tension of every power which the one image presents, it is to be sedulously guarded from any tinge of wrath or heat of passion, such as mingles with conflict, and is to be prosecuted with all the pity and patience, the brotherly meekness of a true priest. ‘The wrath of men worketh not the righteousness of God.’ If we forget the one character in the other, we shall bring weakness into our warfare, and pollution into our sacrifice. ‘The servant of the Lord must not strive.’ We must not be animated by mere pugnacious desire to advance our principles, nor let the heat of human eagerness give a false fervour to our words and work. We cannot scold nor dragoon men to love Jesus Christ. We cannot drive them into the fold with dogs and sticks. We are to be gentle, long-suffering, not doing our work with passion and self-will, but remembering that gentleness is mightiest, and that we shall best ‘adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour’ when we go among men with the light caught in the inner sanctuary still irradiating our faces, and our hands full of blessings to bestow on our brethren. We are to be soldier-priests, strong and gentle, like the ideal of those knights of old who were both, and bore the cross on shield and helmet and sword-hilt.

He, our Lord, is our pattern for both; and from Him we derive the strength for each. He is the Captain of our salvation, and we fight beneath His banner, and by His strength. He is a merciful and faithful High Priest, and He consecrates His brethren to the service of the sanctuary. To Him look for your example of heroism, of fortitude, of self-forgetfulness. To Him look for your example of gentle patience and dewy pity. Learn in Christ how possible it is to be strong and mild, to blend in fullest harmony the perfection of all that is noble, lofty, generous in the soldier’s ardour of heroic devotion; and of all that is calm, still, compassionate, tender in the priest’s waiting before God and mediation among men. And remember, that by faith only do we gain the power of copying that blessed example, to be like which is to be perfect-not to be like which is to fail wholly, and to prove that we have no part in His sacrifice, nor any share in His victory.

III. The final point in this description must now engage us for a few moments. The soldier-priests are as dew upon the earth.

‘From the womb of the morning thou hast the dew of thy youth.’ These words are often misunderstood, and taken to be a description of the fresh, youthful energy attributed by the psalm to the Priest-King of this nation of soldier-priests. The misunderstanding, I suppose, has led to the common phrase, ‘The dew of one’s youth.’ But the reference of the expression is to the army, not to its leader. ‘Youth’ here is a collective noun, equivalent to ‘young men.’ The host of His soldier-subjects is described as a band of young warriors whom He leads, in their fresh strength and countless numbers and gleaming beauty, like the dew of the morning.

There are two points in this last clause which may occupy us for a few moments-that picture of the army as a band of youthful warriors; and that lovely emblem of the dew as applied to Christ’s servants.

As to the former-there are many other words of Scripture which carry the same thought, that he who has fellowship with God, and lives in the constant reception of the supernatural life and grace which come from Jesus Christ, possesses the secret of perpetual youth. The world ages us, time and physical changes tell on us all, and the strength which belongs to the life of nature ebbs away, but the life eternal is subject to no laws of decay and owes nothing to the external world. So we may be ever young in heart and spirit. It is possible for a man to carry the freshness, the buoyancy, the elastic cheerfulness, the joyful hope of his earliest days, right on through the monotony of middle-aged maturity, and even into old age, unshadowed by the lonely reflection of the tombs which the setting sun casts over the path. It is possible for us to get younger as we get older, because we drink more full draughts of the fountain of life: and so to have to say at the last, ‘Thou hast kept the good wine until now.’ ‘Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.’ If we live near Christ, and draw our life from Him, then we may blend the hopes of youth with the experience and memory of age; be at once calm and joyous, wise and strong, preserving the blessedness of each stage of life into that which follows, and thus at last possessing the sweetness and the good of all at once. We may not only bear fruit in old age, but have blossoms, fruit, and flowers-the varying product and adornment of every stage of life, united in our characters.

Then, with regard to the other point in this final clause-that emblem of the dew leads to many considerations upon which I can but inadequately touch.

It comes into view here, I suppose, mainly for the sake of its effect upon the earth. It is as a symbol of the refreshing which a weary world will receive from the conquests and presence of the King and His host, that the latter are likened to the glittering morning dew. Another prophetic Scripture gives us the same emblem when it speaks of Israel being ‘in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord.’ Such ought to be the effect of our presence. We are meant to gladden, to adorn, to refresh, this parched, prosaic world, with a freshness brought from the chambers of the sunrise.

It is worth while to notice how we may discern a sequence of thought in these successive features of description in our text. It began with that inmost spirit and motive of the Christian life, the submission of will and consecration of self to Christ. It advanced to the function and character of His servants in the world. And now it deals finally with the influence which they are to exert by this their soldier-like obedience and priestly ministration.

There is progress of thought, too, in another way. We began with a symbol that had in it something almost harsh and stern. We advanced to one in which there was a predominance of gentle and gracious thoughts and images. And now all that was severe, and all that reminded either of opposition or of effort, has melted away into this sweet emblem. Instead of the ‘confused noise’ of the battle of the warrior, we have the silence of the dawn, and the noiseless falling of the dew amid the solitudes of the wildernesses, or the recesses of the mountains. So the highest thought of our Christian influence, is that it comes with silent footfall and refreshes men’s souls, like His, who will come down as ‘rain upon the mown grass,’ who will not strive nor cry, but in gentle omnipotence and meek persistence of love, ‘will not fail nor be discouraged till He have set judgment in the earth.’

Remember other symbols by which the same general thought of Christian influence upon the world is set forth with very remarkable variation. ‘Ye are the light of the world.’-’Ye are the salt of the earth.’ The light guides and gladdens; the salt preserves and purifies; the dew freshens and fertilises; the light, conspicuous; the salt, working concealed; and the dew, visible like the former, but yet unobtrusive and operating silently like the latter. Some of us had rather be light than salt; prefer to be conspicuous rather than to diffuse a wholesome silent influence around us. But these three types must all be blended, both in regard to the manner of working, and in regard to the effects produced. We shall refresh and beautify the world only in proportion as we save it from its rottenness and corruption, and we shall do either only in proportion as we bear abroad the name of Christ, in whom is ‘life; and the life is the light of men.’

Nor need we omit allusions to other associations connected with this figure. The dew, formed in the silence of the darkness while men sleep, falling as willingly on a bit of dead wood as anywhere, hanging its pearls on every poor spike of grass, and dressing everything on which it lies with strange beauty, each separate globule tiny and evanescent, but each flashing back the light, and each a perfect sphere, feeble one by one, but united, mighty to make the pastures of the wilderness rejoice-so, created in silence by an unseen influence, weak when taken singly, but strong in their myriads, glad to occupy the lowliest place, and each ‘bright with something of celestial light,’ Christian men and women are to be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord.

Brethren! that characteristic, like all else which is good, belongs to us in proportion as we keep near to Christ Jesus, and are filled with His fulness. All these emblems which have been occupying us now, originally belonged to Him, and we receive from Him the grace that makes us as He is in the world. He Himself is the Warrior King, the Captain of the Lord’s host, the true Joshua, whose last word ere His Cross was a shout of victory, ‘I have overcome the world’-whose promises from the throne seven times crown the conqueror who overcomes as He overcame. He makes us His soldiers and strengthens us for the war, if we live by faith in Him. He Himself is the Priest-the only Eternal Priest of the world-who wears on His head the mitre and the diadem, and bears in His hand the sceptre and the censer; and He makes us priests, if faith in His only sacrifice and all-prevalent intercession be in our souls. He is the dew unto Israel-and only by intercourse with Him shall we be made gentle and refreshing, silent blessings to all the weary and the parched souls in the wilderness of the world.

Everything worth being or doing comes from Jesus Christ. Heroic courage; then hold His hand, and He will strengthen your heart. Glad surrender; then think of His sacrifice for us until ours to Him be our answering gift. Priestly power; then let Him bring us nigh by His blood, that we too may be able to have compassion on the ignorant and to draw them to God. Dewy purity and freshness; then open your hearts for the reception of His grace, for all the invigoration that we can impart to the world is but the communication of that refreshing wherewith we ourselves are refreshed of Christ. In every aspect of our relations to the world, we draw all our fitness for all our offices from that Lord, who is and gives everything that we can be or do. Then let us seek by humble faith and habitual contact with Him and His truth, to have our emptiness filled by His fulness, and our unfitness made ready for all service by His all-sufficiency.

And let me close by reiterating what I have said already. There is a twofold manner of subjection-the spurious and the real. The involuntary is nought; the glad and cheerful surrender alone is counted submission. This psalm shows us Christ surrounded by His friends who are glad to obey. But it also shows us Christ ruling in the midst of His enemies. They cannot help obeying; His dominion is established over them, but they do not wish to have Him to reign over them, and therefore they are enemies-even though they be subjects. Which is it with you, my brother? Do you serve because you love-and love because He died for you? or do you serve because you must? Then, remember, constrained service is no service; and subjects without loyalty are rebel traitors. Our psalm shows us Christ gathering His army in array. He is calling each of us to a place there, in this day of His power, and day of His grace. Take heed lest the day of His power should for you darken into that other day of which this psalm speaks-the day of His wrath, when He strikes through kings, and bruises the head over many countries. Put your trust in that Saviour, my friend! cleave to that Sacrifice, then you will not be amongst those whom He treads down in His march to victory, but one of that happy band of priestly warriors who follow Him as He goes forth ‘conquering and to conquer.’

75)Psalms 111:3

GOD AND THE GODLY

Psa. 111:3; Psa. 112:3.

These two psalms are obviously intended as a pair. They are identical in number of verses and in structure, both being acrostic, that is to say, the first clause of each commences with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the second clause with the second, and so on. The general idea that runs through them is the likeness of the godly man to God. That resemblance comes very markedly to the surface at several points in the psalms, and pervades them traceably even where it is less conspicuous. The two corresponding clauses which I have read as my text are the first salient instances of it. But I propose to deal not only with them, but with a couple of others which occur in the course of the psalms, and will appear as I proceed.

The general underlying thought is a noteworthy one. The worshipper is to be like his God. So it is in idolatry; so it should be with us. Worship is, or should be, adoration of and yearning after the highest conceivable good. Such an attitude must necessarily lead to imitation, and be crowned by resemblance. Love makes like, and they who worship God are bound to, and certainly will, in proportion to the ardour and sincerity of their devotion, grow like Him whom they adore. So I desire to look with you at the instances of this resemblance or parallelism which the Psalmist emphasises.

I. The first of them is that in the clauses which I have read as our starting-point, viz. God and the godly are alike in enduring righteousness.

That seems a bold thing to say, especially when we remember how lofty and transcendent were the Old Testament conceptions of the righteousness of God. But, lofty as these were, this Psalmist lifts an unpresumptuous eye to the heavens, and having said of Him who dwells there, ‘His righteousness endureth for ever,’ is not afraid to turn to the humble worshipper on this low earth, and declare the same thing of him. Our finite, frail, feeble lives may be really conformed to the image of the heavenly. The dewdrop with its little rainbow has a miniature of the great arch that spans the earth and rises into the high heavens. And so, though there are differences, deep and impassable, between anything that can be called creatural righteousness, and that which bears the same name in the heavens, the fact that it does bear the same name is a guarantee to us that there is an essential resemblance between the righteousness of God in its lustrous perfectness, and the righteousness of His child in its imperfect effort.

But how can we venture to run any kind of parallelism between the eternity of the one and that of the other? God's righteousness we can understand as enduring for ever, because it is inseparable from His very being; because it is manifested unbrokenly in all the works that for ever pour out from that central Source, and because it and its doings stand fast and unshaken amidst the passage of ages, and the 'wreck of matter and the crash of worlds.' But may there not be, if not an eternity, yet a perpetuity, in our reflection of the divine righteousness which shall serve to vindicate the application of the same mighty word to both? Is it not possible that, unbroken amidst the stress of temptation, and running on without interruptions, there may be in our hearts and in our lives conformity to the divine will? And is it not possible that the transiencies of our earthly doings may be sublimed into perpetuity if there is in them the preserving salt of righteousness?

'The actions of the just
Smell sweet, and blossom in the dust.'

And may it not be, too, that though this Psalmist may have had no clear articulate doctrine of eternal life beyond, he may have felt, and rightly felt, that there were things that were too fair to die, and that it was inconceivable that a soul which had been, in some measure, tinged with the righteousness of God could ever be altogether a prey to the law of transiency and decay which seizes upon things material and corporeal? That which is righteous is eternal, be it manifested in the acts of the unchanging God or in the acts of a dying man, and when all else has passed away, and the elements have melted with fervent heat, 'he that doeth the will of God,' and the deeds which did it, 'shall abide for ever.' 'His righteousness endureth for ever.'

Now, brethren! there are two ways in which we may look at this parallelism of our text: the one is as containing a stringent requirement; the other as holding forth a mighty hope. It contains a stringent requirement. Our religion does not consist in assenting to any creed. Our religion is not wholly to consist of devout emotions and loving and joyous acts of communion and friendship with God. There must be more than these; these things there must be. For if a man is to be guided mainly by reason, there must, first of all, be creed; then there must be corresponding emotions. But creed and emotions are both meant to be forces which shall drive the wheels of life, and conduct is, after all, the crown of religion and the test of godliness. They that hold communion with God are bound to mould their lives into the likeness of His. 'Little children, let no man deceive you,' and let not your own hearts deceive you. You are not a Christian because you believe the truths of the Gospel. You are not such a Christian as you ought to be, if your religion is more manifest in loving trust than in practical obedience which comes from trust. 'He that doeth righteousness is righteous,' and he is to be righteous 'even as He is righteous.' If you are God's, you will be like God. Apply the touchstone to your lives, and test your Christianity by this simple and most stringent test.

But again, we may look at the thought as holding forth a great hope. I do not wish to force upon Old Testament writers New Testament truth. It would be an anachronism and an absurdity to make this Psalmist responsible for anything like a clear evangelistic statement of the way by which a man may be made righteous. That waited for coming days, and eminently for Jesus Christ. But it would be quite as great a mistake to eviscerate the words of their plain implications. And when they put side by side the light and the reflection, God and the godly, it seems to me to be doing violence to their meaning for the sake of trying to make them mean less than they do, if we refuse to recognise that they have at any rate an inkling of the thought that the Original and Pattern of human righteousness was likewise the Source of it. This at least is plain, that the Psalmist thought that 'the fear of the Lord' was not only, as he calls it at the close of the former of the two psalms, 'the beginning of wisdom,' but also the basis of goodness, for he begins his description of the godly with it.

I believe that he felt, what is assuredly true, that no man, by his own unaided effort, can ever work out for himself a righteousness which will satisfy his own conscience, and that he must, first of all, be in touch with

God, in order to receive from Him that which he cannot create. Ah, brethren! the ‘fine linen, clean and white, which is the righteousness of saints,’ is woven in no earthly looms; and the lustrous light with which it glistens is such as ‘no fuller on earth can white’ men’s characters into. Another Psalmist has sung of the man who can stand in the holy place, ‘He shall *receive* the blessing from the Lord, even righteousness from the God of his salvation,’ and our psalms hint, if they do not articulately declare, how that reception is possible for us, when they set forth waiting upon God as the condition of being made like Him. We translate the Psalmist’s feeling after the higher truth which we know, when we desire ‘that we may be found in Him, not having our own righteousness which is of the law, but that which is of God by faith.’ So much, then, for the first point of correspondence in these two psalms.

II. God and the godly are alike in gracious compassion.

If you will turn to the two psalms for a moment, and look at the last clauses of the two fourth verses, you will see how that thought is brought out. In the former psalm we read, ‘The Lord is gracious and full of compassion’: in the latter we find, ‘he’ [the upright man] ‘is gracious and full of compassion, and righteous.’

I need not trouble you with any remarks about certain difficulties that lie in the rendering of that latter verse. Suffice it to say that they are such as to make more emphatic the intentional resemblance between the godly as there described, and God as described in the previous one. Of both it is said ‘gracious and full of compassion.’

Now that great truth of which I have been speaking, the divine righteousness, is like white Alpine snow, sublime, but cold, awful and repellent, when taken by itself. Our hearts need something more than a righteous God if we are ever to worship and draw near. Just as the white snow on the high peak needs to be flushed with the roseate hue of the morning before it can become tender, and create longings, so the righteousness of the great white Throne has to be tinged with the ruddy heart-hue of gracious compassion if men are to be moved to adore and to love. Each enhances the other. ‘What God hath joined together,’ in Himself, ‘let not man put asunder’; nor talk about the stern Deity of the Old

Testament, and pit Him against the compassionate Father of the New. He is righteous, but the proclaimers of His righteousness in old days never forgot to blend with the righteousness the mercy; and the combination heightens the lustre of both attributes.

The same combination is absolutely needful in the copy, as is emphatically set forth in our text by the addition of ‘and righteous,’ in the case of the man. For whilst with God the tyro attributes do lie, side by side, in perfect harmony, in us men there is always danger that the one shall trench upon the territory of the other, and that he who has cultivated the habit of looking upon sorrows and sins with compassion and tenderness shall somewhat lose the power of looking at them with righteousness. So our text, in regard to man, proclaims more emphatically than it needs to do in regard to the perfect God, that ever his highest beauty of compassion must be wedded to righteousness, and ever his truest strength of righteousness must be softened with compassion.

But beyond that, note how, wherever there is the loving and childlike contemplation of God, there will be an analogy in our compassion, to His perfectness. We are transformed by beholding. The sun strikes a poor little pane of glass in a cottage miles away, and it flashes with some likeness of the sun and casts a light across the plain. The man whose face is turned Godwards will have beauty pass into his face, and all that look upon him will see ‘as it had been the countenance of an angel.’

If we have, in any real and deep measure, received mercy we shall reflect mercy. Remember the parable of the unmerciful debtor. The servant that cast himself at his lord’s feet, and got the acquittal of his debt, and went out and gripped his fellow-servant by the throat, leaving the marks of his fingernails on his windpipe, with his ‘Pay me that thou owest!’ had all the pardon cancelled, and all the debt laid upon his shoulders again. If we owe all our hope and peace to a forgiving God, how can we make anything else the law of our lives than that, having received mercy, we should show mercy? The test of your being a forgiven man is your forgivingness. There is no getting away from that plain principle, which modifies the declaration of the freedom of God’s full pardon.

But I would have you notice, further, as a very remarkable illustration of this correspondence between the gracious and compassionate Lord and His servant, that in the verses which follow respectively the two about which I am now speaking, the same idea is wrought out in another shape. In the psalm dealing with the divine character and works we read, immediately after the declaration that He is ‘gracious and full of compassion,’ this-’He hath given meat to them that fear Him’; and the corresponding clause in the second of our psalms is followed by this-to translate accurately-’It is well with the man who showeth favour and lendeth.’ So man’s open-handedness in regard to money is put down side by side with God’s open-handedness in regard to giving meat unto them that fear Him. And again, in the ninth verse of each psalm, we have the same thought set forth in another fashion. ‘He sent redemption unto His people,’ says the one; ‘He hath dispersed, He hath given to the poor,’ says the other. That is to say, our paltry giving may be paralleled with the unspeakable gifts which God has bestowed, if they come from a love which is like His. It does not matter though they are so small and His are so great; there is a resemblance. The tiniest crystal may be like the hugest. God gives to us the possession of things in order that we may enjoy the luxury, which is one of the elements in the blessedness of the blessed God, who is blessed because He is the giving God, the luxury of giving. Poor though our bestowments must be, they are not unlike His. The little burn amongst the heather carves its tiny bed, and impels its baby ripples by the same laws which roll the waters of the Amazon, and every fall that it makes over a shelf of rock a foot high is a miniature Niagara.

III. So, lastly, we have still another point, not so much of resemblance as of correspondence, in the firmness of God’s utterances and of the godly heart.

In the first of our two psalms we read, in the seventh verse, ‘All His commandments are *sure*.’ In the second we read, in the corresponding verse, ‘his heart is *fixed*, trusting in the Lord.’ The former psalm goes on, ‘His commandments *stand fast* for ever and ever; and the next psalm, in the corresponding verse, says ‘his heart is *established*,’ the original employing the same word in both cases, which in our version is rendered, in the one place, ‘stand fast,’ and in the other ‘established.’ So that the Psalmist is thinking of a correspondence between the stability of God's utterances and the stability of the heart that clasps them in faith.

His commandments are not only precepts which enjoin duty. All which God says is law, whether it be directly in the nature of guiding precept, or whether it be in the nature of revealing truth, or whether it be in the nature of promise. It is sure, reliable, utterly trustworthy. We may be certain that it will direct us aright, that it will reveal to us absolute truth, that it will hold forth no flattering and false promises. And it is 'established.' The one fixed point amidst the whirl of things is the uttered will of God.

Therefore, the heart that builds there builds safely. And there should be a correspondence, whether there is or no, between the faithfulness of the Speaker and the faith of the hearer. A man who is doubtful about the solidity of the parapet which keeps him from toppling over into the abyss will lean gingerly upon it, until he has found out that it is firm. The man that knows how strong is the stay on which he rests ought to lean hard upon it. Lean hard upon God, put all your weight upon Him. You cannot put too much, you cannot lean too hard. The harder the better; the better He is pleased, and the more He breathes support and strength into us. And, brethren! if thus we build an established faith on that sure foundation, and match the unchangeableness of God in Christ with the constancy of our faith in Him, then, 'He that believeth shall never make haste,' and as my psalm says, 'He shall not be afraid of evil tidings; his heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord.'

The upshot of the whole matter is-we cannot work out for ourselves a righteousness that will satisfy our own consciences, nor secure for ourselves a strength that will give peace to our hearts, and stability to our lives, by any other means than by cleaving fast to God revealed in Jesus Christ.

We have borne the image of the earthly long enough; let us open our hearts to God in Christ. Let us yield ourselves to Him; let us gaze upon Him with fixed eyes of love, and labour to make our own what He bestows upon us. Thus living near Him, we shall be bathed in His light, and show forth something of His beauty. Godliness is God-likeness. It is of no use to say that we are God's children if we have none of the family likeness. 'If ye were Abraham's sons ye would do the works of Abraham,' said Christ to the Jews. If we are God's sons we shall do the works of God. 'Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect;' be ye merciful as your Father is merciful. And if thus we here, dwelling with Christ, are being conformed to the image of His Son, we shall one day 'be satisfied' when we 'awake in His likeness.'

76)Psalms 112:3

Psalms

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If you will turn to the two psalms for a moment, and look at the last clauses of the two fourth verses, you will see how that thought is brought out. In the former psalm we read, ‘The Lord is gracious and full of compassion’: in the latter we find, ‘he’ [the upright man] ‘is gracious and full of compassion, and righteous.’

I need not trouble you with any remarks about certain difficulties that lie in the rendering of that latter verse. Suffice it to say that they are such as to make more emphatic the intentional resemblance between the godly as there described, and God as described in the previous one. Of both it is said ‘gracious and full of compassion.’

Now that great truth of which I have been speaking, the divine righteousness, is like white Alpine snow, sublime, but cold, awful and repellent, when taken by itself. Our hearts need something more than a righteous God if we are ever to worship and draw near. Just as the white snow on the high peak needs to be flushed with the roseate hue of the morning before it can become tender, and create longings, so the righteousness of the great white Throne has to be tinged with the ruddy heart-hue of gracious compassion if men are to be moved to adore and to love. Each enhances the other. ‘What God hath joined together,’ in Himself, ‘let not man put asunder’; nor talk about the stern Deity of the Old Testament, and pit Him against the compassionate Father of the New. He is righteous, but the proclaimers of His righteousness in old days never forgot to blend with the righteousness the mercy; and the combination heightens the lustre of both attributes.

The same combination is absolutely needful in the copy, as is emphatically set forth in our text by the addition of ‘and righteous,’ in the case of the man. For whilst with God the tyro attributes do lie, side by side, in perfect harmony, in us men there is always danger that the one shall trench upon the territory of the other, and that he who has cultivated the habit of looking upon sorrows and sins with compassion and tenderness shall somewhat lose the power of looking at them with righteousness. So our text, in regard to man, proclaims more emphatically than it needs to do in regard to the perfect God, that ever his highest beauty of compassion must be wedded to righteousness, and ever his truest strength of righteousness must be softened with compassion.

But beyond that, note how, wherever there is the loving and childlike contemplation of God, there will be an analogy in our compassion, to His perfectness. We are transformed by beholding. The sun strikes a poor little pane of glass in a cottage miles away, and it flashes with some likeness of the sun and casts a light across the plain. The man whose face is turned Godwards will have beauty pass into his face, and all that look upon him will see ‘as it had been the countenance of an angel.’

If we have, in any real and deep measure, received mercy we shall reflect mercy. Remember the parable of the unmerciful debtor. The servant that cast himself at his lord’s feet, and got the acquittal of his debt, and went out and gripped his fellow-servant by the throat, leaving the marks of his fingernails on his windpipe, with his ‘Pay me that thou owest!’ had all the pardon cancelled, and all the debt laid upon his shoulders again. If we owe all our hope and peace to a forgiving God, how can we make anything else the law of our lives than that, having received mercy, we should show mercy? The test of your being a forgiven man is your forgivingness. There is no getting away from that plain principle, which modifies the declaration of the freedom of God’s full pardon.

But I would have you notice, further, as a very remarkable illustration of this correspondence between the gracious and compassionate Lord and His servant, that in the verses which follow respectively the two about which I am now speaking, the same idea is wrought out in another shape. In the psalm dealing with the divine character and works we read, immediately after the declaration that He is ‘gracious and full of compassion,’ this-’He hath given meat to them that fear Him’; and the corresponding clause in the second of our psalms is followed by this-to translate accurately-’It is well with the man who showeth favour and lendeth.’ So man’s open-handedness in regard to money is put down side by side with God’s open-handedness in regard to giving meat unto them that fear Him. And again, in the ninth verse of each psalm, we have the same thought set forth in another fashion. ‘He sent redemption unto His people,’ says the one; ‘He hath dispersed, He hath given to the poor,’ says the other. That is to say, our paltry giving may be paralleled with the unspeakable gifts which God has bestowed, if they come from a love which is like His. It does not matter though they are so small and His are so great; there is a resemblance. The tiniest crystal may be like the hugest. God gives to us the possession of things in order that we may enjoy the luxury, which is one of the elements in the blessedness of the blessed God, who is blessed because He is the giving God, the luxury of giving. Poor though our bestowments must be, they are not unlike His. The little burn amongst the heather carves its tiny bed, and impels its baby ripples by the same laws which roll the waters of the Amazon, and every fall that it makes over a shelf of rock a foot high is a miniature Niagara.

III. So, lastly, we have still another point, not so much of resemblance as of correspondence, in the firmness of God’s utterances and of the godly heart.

In the first of our two psalms we read, in the seventh verse, ‘All His commandments are *sure*.’ In the second we read, in the corresponding verse, ‘his heart is *fixed*, trusting in the Lord.’ The former psalm goes on, ‘His commandments *stand fast* for ever and ever; and the next psalm, in the corresponding verse, says ‘his heart is *established*,’ the original employing the same word in both cases, which in our version is rendered, in the one place, ‘stand fast,’ and in the other ‘established.’ So that the Psalmist is thinking of a correspondence between the stability of God’s utterances and the stability of the heart that clasps them in faith.

His commandments are not only precepts which enjoin duty. All which God says is law, whether it be directly in the nature of guiding precept, or whether it be in the nature of revealing truth, or whether it be in the nature of promise. It is sure, reliable, utterly trustworthy. We may be certain that it will direct us aright, that it will reveal to us absolute truth, that it will hold forth no flattering and false promises. And it is ‘established.’ The one fixed point amidst the whirl of things is the uttered will of God.

Therefore, the heart that builds there builds safely. And there should be a correspondence, whether there is or no, between the faithfulness of the Speaker and the faith of the hearer. A man who is doubtful about the solidity of the parapet which keeps him from toppling over into the abyss will lean gingerly upon it, until he has found out that it is firm. The man that knows how strong is the stay on which he rests ought to lean hard upon it. Lean hard upon God, put all your weight upon Him. You cannot put too much, you cannot lean too hard. The harder the better; the better He is pleased, and the more He breathes support and strength into us. And, brethren! if thus we build an established faith on that sure foundation, and match the unchangeableness of God in Christ with the constancy of our faith in Him, then, ‘He that believeth shall never make haste,’ and as my psalm says, ‘He shall not be afraid of evil tidings; his heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord.’

The upshot of the whole matter is-we cannot work out for ourselves a righteousness that will satisfy our own consciences, nor secure for ourselves a strength that will give peace to our hearts, and stability to our lives, by any other means than by cleaving fast to God revealed in Jesus Christ.

We have borne the image of the earthly long enough; let us open our hearts to God in Christ. Let us yield ourselves to Him; let us gaze upon Him with fixed eyes of love, and labour to make our own what He bestows upon us. Thus living near Him, we shall be bathed in His light, and show forth something of His beauty. Godliness is God-likeness. It is of no use to say that we are God's children if we have none of the family likeness. 'If ye were Abraham's sons ye would do the works of Abraham,' said Christ to the Jews. If we are God's sons we shall do the works of God. 'Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect;' be ye merciful as your Father is merciful. And if thus we here, dwelling with Christ, are being conformed to the image of His Son, we shall one day 'be satisfied' when we 'awake in His likeness.'

77)Psalms 116:8-9

Psalms

EXPERIENCE, RESOLVE, AND HOPE

Psa. 116:8 - Psa. 116:9.

This is a quotation from an earlier psalm, with variations which are interesting, whether we suppose that the Psalmist was quoting from memory and made them unconsciously, or whether, as is more probable, he did so, deliberately and for a purpose. The variations are these. The words in the original psalm [Psa. 56:1] according to the Revised Version, read, 'Thou hast delivered my soul from death; hast Thou not delivered my feet from falling?' The writer of this psalm felt that that did not say all, so he put in another clause: 'Thou hast delivered my soul from death, *mine eyes from tears*, and my feet from falling.' It is not enough to keep a man alive and upright. God will wipe away his tears; and will often keep him from shedding them.

Then the original psalm goes on: 'Thou hast delivered . . . my feet from falling, that I may walk before God,' but the later Psalmist goes a step further than his original. The first singer had seen what it is always a blessing to see-what God meant by all the varieties of His providences, viz.

that the recipient might walk as in His presence; but the later poet not only discerns, but accords with, God's purpose, yields himself to the divine intention, and instead of simply saying 'That was what God meant,' he says, 'That is what I am going to do-I will walk before the Lord.' There is still another variation which, however, does not alter the sense. The original psalm says, 'in the light of the living'; the other uses another word, a little more intelligible, perhaps, to an ordinary reader, and says, 'in the land of the living.'

Now, noting these significant variations, I would draw attention to this expression of the Psalmist's acceptance of the divine purpose, and the vision that it gave him of his future. It is hard to say whether he means 'I will walk' or 'I shall walk'; whether he is expressing a hope or giving utterance to a fixed resolve. I think there is an element of both in the words. At all events, I find in them three things: a sure anticipation, a firm resolve, and a far-reaching hope.

I. A sure anticipation.

'Thou hast'-'I will.' The past is for this Psalmist a mirror in which he sees reflected the approaching form of the veiled future. God's past is the guarantee of God's future. Godless people, who get wearied of the monotony of life, begin to say before they have gone far in it, 'Oh! there is nothing new. That which is to be hath already been. It is just one continual repetition of the same sort of thing.' But that is only partially true. There is only one man in the world who can truly and certainly say, 'To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant'; and that is the man who says; 'He delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling.' For the continuance of things here is not guaranteed to us by the fact that they have lasted for so long. Why, nobody knows whether the sun will rise to-morrow or not-whether there will be a to-morrow or not. There will come one day when the sun sets for the last time. What people call the 'uniformity of nature' affords no ground on which to build certainty as to the future. We all do it, but we have no right to do it. But when we bring God into the future, that makes all the difference. His past is the guarantee and the revelation of His future, and every person that grasps Him in faith has the right to pray with assurance, 'Thou hast been my

Helper; leave me not, neither forsake me,' and to declare triumphantly, 'The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me.'

So, brethren! all the past, as it is recorded for us in Scripture, lives and throbs with faithful promises for us to-day. Though the methods of the manifestation may alter, the essence of it remains the same. As one of the Apostles says, 'Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our advantage, that we, through the encouragement ministered by the Scriptures, might have hope'; and looking forward into all the future, might discern its wastes unknown, all lighted up by the one glad certainty that He that is 'the same yesterday and to-day and for ever' will be there, and we shall be beside Him. What God has done, He will keep on doing. 'The Lord hath delivered mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling,' and therefore 'I shall walk before the Lord in the land of the living.'

Our experience yields fuel for our faith. We have been near death many a time; we have never fallen into it. Our eyes have been wet many a time; God has dried them. Our feet have been ready to fall many a time, and if at the moment when we were tottering on the edge of the precipice, we have cried to Him and said, 'My feet have well-nigh slipped,' a strong Hand has been held out to us. 'The Lord upholdeth them that are in the act of falling,' as the old psalm, rightly rendered, has it, and if we have pushed aside His hand, and gone down, then the next clause of the same verse applies, for He 'raiseth up those that have fallen,' and are lying prostrate.

As it has been, so it will be. 'Thou hast been with me in six troubles,' therefore 'in the seventh Thou wilt not forsake me.' We can wear out men; and we cannot argue that because a man has had long patience with some unworthy recipient of his goodness, his patience will never give out. But it is safe to argue thus about God. 'I say not unto thee, until seven times, but until seventy times seven'-the two perfect numbers multiplied into each other, and the product again multiplied by one of them, to give the measureless measure of the exhaustless divine love, and the sure guarantee that to His servant 'to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.'

Then, again, if we put a little different meaning into the Psalmist's words [and as I said, I think both meanings lie in them], they suggest that he did not look forward into the future only with expectation, but that along with expectation there was resolve. So we have here

II. A firm resolve.

‘I will walk before the Lord.’ What does ‘walking before the Lord’ mean? There are two or three expressions very like each other, yet entirely different from each other, in the Old and in the New Testament, about this matter. We read of ‘walking with God,’ and of ‘walking before God,’ and of ‘walking after God.’ And whilst there is much that is common to all the expressions, they look at the same idea from different angles. ‘Walking with God,’ communion, fellowship, and companionship are implied there. ‘Walking after God,’ guidance, direction, and example, and our poor imitation and obedience, are most conspicuous there. And ‘walking before God’ means, I suppose, mainly, feeling always that we are in His presence, and have the light of His face, and the glance of His all-seeing eye, falling upon us. ‘If I take the wings of the morning, and fly into the uttermost parts of the sea, Thou art there.’ ‘Thou art acquainted with all my ways, search me, O God!’ That is walking before God. To put it into colder words, it means the habitual-I do not say unbroken, but habitual-effort to feel in our conscious hearts that we are in His sight; not only that we are with Him, but that we are ‘naked and open to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.’ And that is to be the result, says our psalm, as it is the intention, of all that God has been doing with us in His merciful providence, in His quickening, sustaining, and comforting influences in the past. He sent all these varying conditions, kept the psalmist alive, kept him from weeping, or dried his tears, kept him from falling, with the intention that he should be continually blessed in the continuous sunshine of God’s presence, and should open out his heart in it and for it, like a flower when the sunbeams strike it. Oh! how different life would look if we habitually took hold of all its incidents by that handle, and thought about them, not as we are accustomed to do, according to whether they tended to make us glad or sorry, to disappoint or fulfil our hopes and purposes, but looked upon them all as stages in our education, and as intended, if I might so say, to force us, when the tempests blow, close up against God; and when the sunshine came, to woo us to His side. Would not all life change its aspect if we carried that thought right into it, and did not only keep it for Sundays, or for the crises of our lives, but looked at all the trifles as so many magnets brought into action by Him to attract us to Himself? Dear brother, it is not enough to recognise God's purpose, we must fall in with it, accept the intention, and co-operate with God in fulfilling it. It is a matter of purity and of piety, to say, 'Thou hast delivered my soul from death, that I may walk before Thee.'

But there has to be something more. There have to be a firm resolve, and effort without which the firmest resolve will all come to nothing, and be one more paving-stone for the road that is 'paved with good intentions.' That firm resolve finds utterance in the not vain vow, 'I will'-in spite of all opposition and difficulties-'I will walk before the Lord,' and keep ever bright in my mind the thought, 'Thou God seest me.'

Ay! and just in the measure in which we do so shall we have joy. In some of those inhuman prisons where they go in for solitary confinement, there is a little hole somewhere in the wall-the prisoner does not know where-at which at any moment in the four-and-twenty hours the eye of the gaoler may be, and they say that the thought of that unseen eye, glaring in upon the felons, drives some of them half mad. The thought that poor Hagar found to be her only comfort in the wilderness-and so christened the well after it-'Thou God seest me,' must be the source of our purest joy; or it must be a ghastly dread. When He comes at last, some men will lift up their faces to the sunshine and have their faces irradiated by the light; and some will call on the rocks and the hills to cover them from His face, and prefer rather to be crushed than to be blasted by the brightness of His countenance. If we are right with God, then the gladdest of thoughts is, 'Thou knowest me altogether, and Thou hast beset me behind and before.' If we are right with God, 'Thou hast laid Thine hand upon me' will mean for us support and blessing. If we are wrong, it will mean a weight that crushes to the earth.

And if we are right with Him, that same thought brings with it security and companionship. Ah! we do not need ever to say 'I am alone' if we are walking before God. It brings with it, of course, an armour against temptation. What mean, lustful, worldly seduction has any power when a man falls back on the thought, 'God sees me, and God is with me'? Do you remember the very first instance in Scripture of the use of this phrase? The Lord said unto Abraham, 'Walk before Me, and be thou perfect.' That was not only a commandment, but it was a promise, and we might as truly, for the sense of the passage, read, ‘Walk before Me, and thou shalt be perfect.’ That thought of the present God draws the teeth of all raging lions, and takes the stings out of all serpents, and paralyses and reduces to absolute nothingness every temptation. Clasp God’s hand, and you will not fall.

III. There is lastly here, a far-reaching hope.

I do not know whether the Psalmist had any notion of any land of the living except the land of Earth, where men pass their natural lives. I almost think that both he and his brother, whose words he was imitating, had some glimpse of a future life of closer union, when eyes should no more weep nor feet fall. At any rate, you and I cannot help reading that hope into his words. When we read, ‘I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living,’ we cannot but think of the true and perfect deliverance, when it shall be said, with a depth and a fulness of meaning with which it is never said here, ‘Thou hast delivered my soul from death,’ and the black dread that towered so high, and closed the vista of all human expectation of the future, is now away back in the past, hull-down on the horizon as they say about ships scarcely visible, and no more to be feared. We cannot but think of the perfect deliverance of ‘mine eyes from tears,’ when ‘God shall wipe away the tears from off all faces, and the rebuke of His people from off all the earth.’ We cannot but think of the perfect deliverance of ‘my feet from falling’ when the redeemed of the Lord shall stand firm, and walk at liberty on the golden pavements, and no more dread the stumbling-blocks of earth. We cannot but think of the perfect presence of God, the perfect consciousness that we are near Him, when He shall ‘present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.’ We cannot but think of the perfect activity of that future state when we ‘shall walk with Him in white,’ and ‘follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.’ And one guarantee for all that far-reaching hope is in the tiny experiences of the present; for He who hath delivered our souls from death, our eyes from tears, and our feet from falling, is not going to expose Himself to the scoff, ‘This “God” began to build, and was not able to finish.’ But He will complete that which He has begun, and will not stay His hand until all His children are perfectly redeemed and perfectly conscious of His perfect Presence.

78)Psalms 116:12-13

Psalms

REQUITING GOD

Psa. 116:12 - Psa. 116:13.

There may possibly be a reference here to a part of the Passover ritual. It seems to have become the custom in later times to lift high the wine cup at that feast and drink it with solemn invocation and glad thanksgiving. So we find our Lord taking the cup-the 'cup of blessing' as Paul calls it-and giving thanks. But as there is no record of the introduction of that addition to the original Paschal celebration, we do not know but that it was later than the date of this psalm. Nor is there any need to suppose such an allusion in order either to explain or to give picturesque force to the words. It is a most natural thing, as all languages show, to talk of a man's lot, either of sorrow or joy, as the cup which he has to drink; and there are numerous instances of the metaphor in the Psalms, such as 'Thou art the Portion of mine inheritance and of my cup, Thou maintainest my lot.' 'My cup runneth over.' That familiar emblem is all that is wanted here.

Then one other point in reference to the mere words of the text may be noticed. 'Salvation' can scarcely be taken in its highest meaning here, both because the whole tone of the psalm fixes its reference to lower blessings, and because it is in the plural in the Hebrew. 'The cup of salvation' expresses, by that plural form, the fulness and variety of the manifold and multiform deliverances which God had wrought and was working for the Psalmist. His whole lot in life appears to him as a cup full of tender goodness, loving faithfulness, delivering grace. It runs over with divine acts of help and sustenance. As his grateful heart thinks of all God's benefits to him, he feels at once the impulse to requite and the impossibility of doing so. With a kind of glad despair he asks the question that ever springs to thankful lips, and having nothing to give, recognises the only possible return to God to be the acceptance of the brimming chalice which His goodness commends to his thirst.

The great thought, then, which lies here is that we best requite God by thankfully taking what He gives.

Now I note to begin with-how deep that thought goes into the heart of God.

Why is it that we honour God most by taking, not by giving? The first answer that occurs to you, no doubt, is-because of His all-sufficiency and our emptiness. Man receives all. God needs nothing. We have all to say, after all our service, ‘Of Thine own have we given Thee.’ No doubt that is quite true; and rightly understood that is a strengthening and a glad truth. But is that all which can be said in explanation of this principle? Surely not. ‘If I were hungry I would not tell thee; for the world is mine and the fulness thereof,’ is a grand word, but it does not give all the truth. When Paul stood on Mars Hill, and, within sight of the fair images of the Parthenon, shattered the intellectual basis of idolatry, by proclaiming a God ‘not worshipped with men’s hands as though He needed anything, seeing He giveth to all men all things,’ that truth, mighty as it is, is not all. We requite God by taking rather than by giving, not merely because He needs nothing, and we have nothing which is not His. If that were all, it might be as true of an almighty tyrant, and might be so used as to forbid all worship before the gloomy presence, to give reverence and love to whom were as impertinent as the grossest offerings of savage idolaters. But the motive of His giving to us is the deepest reason why our best recompense to Him is our thankful reception of His mercies. The principle of our text reposes at last on ‘God is love and wishes our hearts,’ and not merely on ‘God has all and does not need our gifts.’

Take the illustration from our own love and gifts. Do we not feel that all the beauty and bloom of a gift is gone if the giver hopes to receive as much again? Do we not feel that it is all gone if the receiver thinks of repaying it in any coin but that of the heart? Love gives because it delights in giving. It gives that it may express itself and may bless the recipient. If there be any thought of return it is only the return of love. And that is how God gives. As James puts it, He is ‘the giving God,-who gives,’ not as our version inadequately renders, ‘liberally,’ but ‘simply’-that is, I suppose, with a single eye, without any ulterior view to personal advantage, from the impulse of love alone, and having no end but our good. Therefore it is, because of that pure, perfect love, that He delights in no recompense, but only in the payment of a heart won to His love and melted by His mercies. Therefore it is that His hand is outstretched, ‘hoping for nothing again.’ His Almighty all-sufficiency needs nought from us, and to all heathen notions of worship and tribute puts the question: ‘Do ye requite the Lord, O foolish people and unwise?’ But His deep heart of love desires and delights in the echo of its own tones that is evoked among the rocky hardnesses of our hearts, and is glad when we take the full cup of His blessings and, as we raise it to our lips, call on the name of the Lord. Is not that a great and a gracious thought of our God and of His great purpose in His mercies?

But now let us look for a moment at the elements which make up this requital of God in which He delights. And, first I put a very simple and obvious one, let us be sure that we recognise the real contents of our cup. It *is* a cup of salvations, however hard it is sometimes to believe it. Of how much blessing and happiness we all rob ourselves by our slowness to feel that! Some of us by reason of natural temperament; some of us by reason of the pressure of anxieties, and the aching of sorrows, and the bleeding of wounds; some of us by reason of mere blindness to the true character of our present, have little joyous sense of the real brightness of our days. It seems as if joys must have passed and be seen in the transfiguring light of memory, before we can discern their fairness; and then, when their place is empty, we know that we were entertaining angels unawares. Many men and women live in the gloom of a lifelong regret for the loss of some gift which, when they had it, seemed nothing very extraordinary, and could not keep them from annoyance with trifles. Common sense and reasonable regard for our own happiness and religious duty unite, as they always do, in bidding us take care that we know our blessings. Do not let custom blind you to them. Do not let tears so fill your eyes that you cannot see the goodness of the Lord. Do not let thunderclouds, however heavy their lurid piles, shut out from you the blue that is in your sky. Do not let the empty cup be your first teacher of the blessings you had when it was full. Do not let a hard place here and there in the bed destroy your rest. Seek, as a plain duty, to cultivate a buoyant, joyous sense of the crowded kindnesses of God in your daily life. Take full account of all the pains, all the bitter ingredients, remembering that for us weak and sinful men the bitter is needful. If still the cup seem charged with distasteful draught, remember whose lip has touched its rim, leaving its sacred kiss there, and whose hand holds it out to you while He says, ‘Do this in remembrance of Me.’ The cup which my Saviour giveth me, can it be anything but a cup of salvations?

Then, again, another of the elements of this requital of God is-be sure that you take what God gives.

There can be no greater slight and dishonour to a giver than to have his gifts neglected. You give something that has, perhaps, cost you much, or which at any rate has your heart in it, to your child, or other dear one; would it not wound you if a day or two after you found it tossing about among a heap of unregarded trifles? Suppose that some of those Rajahs who received presents on a royal visit to India had gone out from the durbar and flung them into the kennel, that would have been insult and disaffection, would it not? But these illustrations are trivial by the side of our treatment of the ‘giving God.’ Surely of all the follies and crimes of our foolish and criminal race, there is none to match this-that we will not take and make our own the things that are freely given to us of God. This is the height of all madness; this is the lowest depth of all sin. He spares not His own Son, the Son spares not Himself, the Father gives up His Son for us all because He loves, the Son loves us, and gives Himself to us and for us, and we stand with our hands folded on our breasts, will not condescend so much as to stretch them out, or hold our blessings with so slack a grasp that at any time we may let them slip through our careless fingers. He prays us with much entreaty to receive the gift, and neglect and stolid indifference are His requital. Is there anything worse than that? Surely Scripture is right when it makes the sin of sins that unbelief, which is at bottom nothing else than a refusal to take the cup of salvation. Surely no sharper grief can be inflicted on the Spirit of God than when we leave His gifts neglected and unappropriated.

In the highest region of all, how many of these there are which we treat so! A Saviour and His pardoning blood; a Spirit and His quickening energies; that eternal life which might spring in our souls a fountain of living waters-all these are ours. Are we as strong as we might be if we used the strength which we have? How comes it that with the fulness of God at our sides we are empty; that with the word of God in our hands we know so little; that with the Spirit of God in our hearts we are so fleshly; that with the joy of our God for our portion we are so troubled; that with the heart of God for our hiding-place we are so defenceless? ‘We have all and abound,’ and yet we are poor and needy, like some infatuated beggar, in rags and wretchedness, to whom wealth had been given which he would not use.

In the lower region of daily life and common mercies the same strange slowness to take what we have is found. There are very few men who really make the best of their circumstances. Most of us are far less happy than we might be, if we had learned the divine art of wringing the last drop of good out of everything. After our rude attempts at smelting there is a great deal of valuable metal left in the dross, which a wiser system would extract. One wonders when one gets a glimpse of how much of the raw material of happiness goes to waste in the manufacture in all our lives. There is so little to spare, and yet so much is flung away. It needs a great deal of practical wisdom, and a great deal of strong, manly Christian principle, to make the most of what God gives us. Watchfulness, self-restraint, the power of suppressing anxieties and taking no thought for the morrow, and most of all, the habitual temper of fellowship with God, which is the most potent agent in the chemistry that extracts its healing virtue from everything-all these are wanted. The lesson is worth learning, lest we should wound that most tender Love, and lest we should impoverish and hurt ourselves. Do not complain of your thirsty lips till you are sure that you have emptied the cup of salvation which God gives.

One more element of this requital of God has still to be named, the thankful recognition of Him in all our feasting-’call on the name of the Lord.’ Without this the preceding precept would be a piece of pure selfish Epicureanism-and without this it would be impossible. Only he who enjoys life in God enjoys it worthily. Only he who enjoys life in God enjoys it at all. This is the true infusion which gives sweetness to whatever of bitter, and more of sweetness to whatever of sweet, the cup may contain, when the name of the Lord is pronounced above it. The Jewish father at the Passover feast solemnly lifted the wine cup above his head, and drank with thanksgiving. The meal became a sacrament. So here the word rendered ‘take’ might be translated ‘raise,’ and we may be intended to have the picture as emblematical of our consecration to all our blessings by a like offering of them before God and a like invoking of the Giver.

Christ gave us not only the ritual of an ordinance, but the pattern for our lives, when He ‘took the cup and gave thanks.’ So common joys become sacraments, enjoyment becomes worship, and the cup which holds the bitter or the sweet skilfully mingled for our lives becomes the cup of blessing and salvation drank in remembrance of Him. If we carried that spirit with us into all our small duties, sorrows, and gladnesses, how different they would all seem! We should then drink for strength, not for drunkenness. We should not then find that God’s gifts hid Him from us. We should neither leave any of them unused nor so greedily grasp them that we let His hand go. Nothing would be too great for us to attempt, nothing too small for us to put our strength into. There would be no discord between earthly gladness and heavenly desires, nor any repugnance at what He held to our lips. We should drink of the cup of His benefits, and all would be sweet-until we drew nearer and slaked our thirst at the river of His pleasures and the Fountain-head itself.

One more word. There is an old legend of an enchanted cup filled with poison, and put treacherously into a king’s hand. He signed the sign of the Cross and named the name of God over it, and it shivered in his grasp. Do you take that name of the Lord as a test. Name Him over many a cup of which you are eager to drink, and the glittering fragments will lie at your feet, and the poison be spilled on the ground. What you cannot lift before His pure eyes and think of Him while you enjoy is not for you. Friendships, schemes, plans, ambitions, amusements, speculations, studies, loves, businesses-can you call on the name of the Lord while you put these cups to your lips? If not, fling them behind you-for they are full of poison which, for all its sugared sweetness, at the last will ‘bite like a serpent and sting like an adder.’

79)Psalms 119:9

Psalms

A CLEANSED WAY

Psa. 119:9.

There are many questions about the future with which it is natural for you young people to occupy yourselves; but I am afraid that the most of you ask more anxiously ‘How shall I *make* my way?’ than ‘How shall I *cleanse* it?’ It is needful carefully to ponder the questions: ‘How shall I get on in the world-be happy, fortunate?’ and the like, and I suppose that that is the consideration which presses with special force upon a great many of you. Now I want you to think of another question: ‘How shall I *cleanse* my way?’ For purity is the best thing; and to be good is a wiser as well as a nobler object of ambition than any other. So my object is just to try and urge upon my dear young friends before me the serious consideration for a while of this grave question of my text, and the answers which are given to it.

If I can get you once to be smitten with a passion for purity, all but everything is gained. But I shall not be content if even that is the issue of my pleading with you now, for I want to have you all Christians. And that is why I have asked you to listen to what I have to say to you on this occasion.

I. So, first, we have here the great practical problem for life: ‘Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?’ Or, in other words, ‘How may I live a pure and a noble life?’ It is a question, of course, for everybody: it is *the* question for everybody, but it is more especially one for you young people. And I wish to urge it upon you for two or three reasons, which I very briefly specify.

First, I desire to press upon you this question, because, as I have said, you are under special temptations not to ask it. There are so many other points in your future unresolved, that you are only too apt to put aside the consideration of this one in favour of those which seem to be of more pressing and immediate importance. And you have the other temptation, common to us all, but especially attending you as young people, of living without any plan of life at all. The sin and the misery of half the world are that they live from hand to mouth, knowing why they do each single action at the moment, but never looking a dozen inches beyond their noses to see where all the actions taken together tend; and so being just like weathercocks, whirled round by every wind of temptation that comes to them. If they are good or pure they are so by accident, by impulse, or because they have never been tempted. They have no definite plan or theory of life which they could put into words if anybody asked them on what principles, and for what end, and towards what objects they were living. And as everybody is tempted into such an unreflecting way of life, so you especially are tempted to it, because at your age judgment and experience are not so strong as inclination and passion; and everything has got the fresh gloss of novelty upon it, and it seems to be sometimes sufficient delight to live and get hold of the new joys that are flooding in upon you. And therefore I want you to stop and for a moment think whether you have any plan of life that bears being put into words, whether you can tell God and your own consciences what you are living for.

And I urge this question upon you for another reason-because it is worth while for *you* to ask it. For you have still the prerogative that some of us have lost, of determining the shape that your life's course is to take. The path that you are going to tread lies all unmarked out across the plain of life. You may be pretty nearly what you like. Life is before you, with great blessed possibilities; it is behind some of us. All the long years which you may probably have are all plastic in your hands yet; they are moulded into a rigid shape for men like me. We have made our beds, and we must lie on them. You have your life in your own hands; therefore, I beseech you, while you have not to ask this question with the bitter meaning with which old men that have made their paths, and made them filthy, have to ask it-'How shall an *old* man cleanse his way, and get rid of the filth?'-consider how you may secure that your way in the untrodden future shall be clean, and do not rest till you get an answer.

And I press it upon you for another reason, because you have special temptations to make your ways unclean. It is a fearful ordeal that every young man and woman has to face, as he or she steps across the dividing boundary between childhood and youth, when parental authority is weakened, and the leading-strings are loosened, and the young swimmer is as it were cut away from the buoys, and has to battle with the waves alone. There are hundreds of young men in Manchester, there are many of them here now, who have come up into this great city from quiet country homes where they were shielded by the safeguards of a father's and a mother's love and care, and have been flung into this place, with its every street swarming with temptation, and companions on the benches of the university, at the desks, in the warehouses, and the workshops, leading them away into evil and teaching them the devil's alphabet-young men with their evenings vacant and with no home. Am I speaking to any such standing in slippery places? Oh, my young friend! there is nothing in all these temptations, the fascinations of which you are beginning to find out, there is nothing in them all worth soiling your fingers for; there is nothing in them all that will pay you for the loss of your innocence. There is nothing in them all except a fair outside with poison at the core. You see the 'primrose path'; you do not see, to use Shakespeare's solemn words, 'the everlasting burnings' to which it leads. And so I plead with you all, young men and women, to lay this question to heart; and I beseech you to credit me when I say to you that you have not yet touched the gravest and the most pressing problem of life unless you have asked yourselves in a serious mood of deep reflection, 'Wherewithal shall I cleanse my way?'

II. So much for the first point to which I ask your attention. Now, secondly, look at this answer, which tells us that we can only make our way clean on condition of constant watchfulness. 'By taking heed thereto.'

That seems a very plain, simple, common-sense answer. The best made road wants looking after if it is to be kept in repair. What would become of a railway that had no surfacemen and platelayers going along the line and noticing whether anything was amiss? I remember once seeing a bit of an old Roman road; the lava blocks were there, but for want of care, here a young sapling had grown up between two of them and had driven them apart; there they were split by the frost, here was a great ugly gap full of mud; and the whole thing ended in a jungle. How shall a man keep his road in repair? 'By taking heed thereto.' Things that are left to go anyhow in this world have a strange knack of going one how. You do not need anything else than negligence to ensure that things will come to grief.

And so, at first sight, my text simply seems to preach the plain truth: if you want to keep your road right, look after it. But if you look at your Bibles, you will see that the word 'thereto' is a supplement, and that all that the Psalmist really says is 'by taking heed.' And perhaps it is to himself rather than to his 'way' that a man is exhorted to 'take heed.' 'Take heed to thyself' is the only condition of a pure and noble life.

That such a condition is necessary, will appear very plain from two considerations. First, it is clear that there must be constant watchfulness, if we consider what sort of a world this is that we have got into And it is also plain, if we consider what sort of creatures we are that have got into it.

First, it is plain if we consider what sort of a world this is that we have got into. It is a world a great deal fuller of inducements to do wrong than of inducements to do right; a world in which there are a great many bad things that have a deceptive appearance of pleasure; a great many circumstances in which it seems far easier to follow the worse than to follow the better course. And so, unless a man has learned the great art of saying 'No!' 'So did not I because of the fear of the Lord'; he will come to rack and ruin without a doubt. There are more things round about you that will tempt you downwards than will draw you upwards, and your only security is constant watchfulness. As George Herbert says:-

'Who keeps no guard upon himself is slack,
And rots to nothing at the next great thaw.'

And that is what will happen to you, as sure as you are living, in spite of all your good resolutions, unless you back up those resolutions with perpetual jealous watchfulness over yourselves. 'Keep thy heart with all diligence.'

And the same lesson is pealed out to us if we consider what sort of creatures we are that have got into this world all full of wickedness. We are creatures evidently made for self-government. Our whole nature is like a monarchy. There are things in each of us that are never meant to rule, but to be kept well down under control, such as strong passions, desires rooted in the flesh which are not meant to get the mastery of a man, and there are parts of our nature which are as obviously intended to be supreme and sovereign: the reason, the conscience, the will.

There is a deal of pestilent talk which one sometimes hears, amongst young men especially, about 'following nature.' Yes! I say, 'Follow nature!' and nature says, 'Let the man govern the animal!' and 'Do not set beggars on horseback,' nor allow your passions to guide you, but keep a tight hand on them, suppress them, scourge them, rule them by your reason, by your conscience, and by your will.

Suppose a man were to say about a steamship, ‘The structure of this vessel shows that it is meant that we should get a roaring fire up in the furnaces, and set the engines going at full speed, and let her go as she will.’ Would he not have left out of account that there was a steering apparatus, which was as plainly meant to guide as are the engines to drive? What are the rudder and the wheel for?-do they not imply a pilot? and is not the make of our souls as plainly suggestive of subordination and control? Doth not nature itself teach you that you do not follow, but outrage, nature, when you let your passions rule, and that you only then follow nature when you bow the whole man under the dominion of the conscience, and when conscience stands waiting for the voice of God?

‘Unless above himself he can erect
Himself, how mean a thing is man!’

You are called upon by the very world that you have come into, and by the very sort of person that you yourself are, to exercise that perpetual watchfulness which is the only condition of cleansing your way. There must be a strong guard on the frontier, which shall examine all the thoughts and purposes and desires that would pass out, and all the temptations and seductions that would pass in; and take care that none shall pass which cannot bring the King’s warrant, ‘Keep thy heart with diligence.’ ‘Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto.’

III. This constant watchfulness, to be of any use, must be regulated by God’s Word. ‘Taking heed thereto, according to Thy word.’

The guard on the frontier who is to keep the path must have instructions from headquarters, and not choose and decide according to their own phantasy, but according to the King’s orders. Or to use another metaphor, it is no use having a guard unless the guard has a lantern, and the lantern and light is the Word of God.

That brings me to say, and only in a word or two, how inadequate for the task of regulating our own lives our own watchfulness is. Conscience is the captain of the guard, and there is only one judgment in which conscience is always and infallibly right, and that is when it says, ‘It is right to do right; and it is wrong to do wrong.’ But when you begin to ask conscience, ‘And, pray, what *is* right and what *is* wrong?’ it is by no means invariably to be trusted; for you can educate conscience up or down to almost anything; and you can warp conscience, and you can bribe conscience, and you can stifle conscience. And so it is not enough that we should exercise the most watchful care over our course, and decide upon the right and the wrong of it by our own judgments; we may be fearfully wrong notwithstanding it all. It is not enough for a man to have a good watch in his pocket unless now and then he can get Greenwich time by which he can set it, and unless that has been secured by taking an observation of the sun. And so you cannot trust to anything in yourselves for the guidance of your own way or for the determination of your duty, but you must look to that higher Wisdom that has condescended to speak to us, and give us in this Book the revelation of its will. Men rebel against the moral law of the Bible, and speak of it as if it were a restraint and a sharp taskmaster. Ah, no! It is one of the greatest tokens of God’s infinite love to us that He has not left us to grope our way amidst the illusions of our own judgments, and the questionable shapes of human conceptions of right and wrong, but that He has declared to us His own character for the standard of all perfection, and given us in the human life of the Son of His love the all-sufficient pattern for every life.

So I need not dwell at any length upon the thought that in that word of God, in its whole sweep, and eminently and especially in Christ, who is the Incarnate Word, we have an all-sufficient Guide. A guide of conduct must be plain-and whatever doubts and difficulties there may be about the doctrines of Christianity there is none about its morality. A guide of conduct must be decisive-and there is no faltering in the utterance of the Book as to right and wrong. A guide of conduct must be capable of application to the wide diversities of character, age, circumstance-and the morality of the New Testament especially, and of the Old in a measure, secures that, because it does not trouble itself about minute details, but deals with large principles. The morality of the Gospel, if I may so say, is a morality of centres, not of circumferences; of germinal principles, not of special prescriptions. A guide for morals must be far in advance of the followers, and it has taken generations and centuries to work into men’s consciences, and to work out in men's practice, *a portion* of the morality of that Book. People tell us that Christianity is worn out. Ah! it will not be worn out until all its moral teaching has become part of the practice of the world, and that will not be for a year or two! The men that care least about Christian doctrines are foremost to admit that the Sermon on the Mount is the noblest code of morality that has ever been promulgated. If the world kept the commandments of the New Testament, the world would be in the Millennium; and all the sin and crime, and ninety-nine-hundredths of all the sorrow, of earth would have vanished like an ugly dream. Here is the guide for you, and if you take it you will not err.

My dear young friend! did you ever try to measure one day's actions by the standard of this Book? Let me press upon you this: Cultivate the habit-the habit of bringing all that you do side by side with this light; as a scholar in some school of art will take his feeble copy, and hold it by the side of the masterpiece, and compare line for line, and tint for tint. Take your life, and put it by the side of the Great Life, and you will begin to find out how 'according to Thy word' is the only standard by which to set your lives.

IV. And now I have one last thing to say. All this can only be done effectually if you are a Christian. My psalm does not go to the bottom; it goes as far as the measure of revelation granted to its author admitted; but if a person had no more to say than that, it would be a weary business. It is no use to tell a man, 'Guard yourself, guard yourself,' nor even to tell him, 'Guard yourself according to God's word,' if God's word is only a *law*.

The fatal defect of all attempts at keeping my heart by my own watchfulness is that keeper and kept are one and the same, and so there may be mutiny in the garrison, and the very forces that ought to subdue the rebellion may have gone over to the rebels. You want a power outside of you to steady you. The only way to haul a boat up the rapids is to have some fixed point on the shore to which a man may fasten a rope and pull at that. You get that eternal guard and fixed point by which to hold in Jesus Christ, the dear Son of God's love, who has died for you.

You want another motive to be brought to bear upon your conduct, and upon your convictions and your will mightier than any that now influence them; and you get that if you will yield yourself to the love that has come down from heaven to save you, and says to you, ‘If you love Me, keep My commandments.’ You want for keeping yourself and cleansing your way reinforcements to your own inward vigour, and you will get these if you will trust to Jesus Christ, who will breathe into you the Spirit of His own life, which will make you ‘free from the law of sin and death.’

You want, if your path is to be cleansed-the youngest of you, the most tenderly nurtured, the purest, the most innocent wants-forgiveness for a past path, which is in some measure stained and foul, as well as strength for the future, to deliver you from the dreadful influence of the habit of evil. And you get all these, dear friends! in the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses from all sin.

So, standing as you do in the place where two ways meet, and with your choice yet in your power, I beseech you, turn away from the broad, easy road that slopes pleasantly downwards, and choose the narrow, steep path that climbs. Better rocks than mud, better the painful life of self-restraint and self-denial than the life of pleasing self.

Oh! choose the better portion, choose Christ for your Leader, your Law, your Lord! Trust yourselves to that great sacrifice which He made on the Cross, that all the past for you may be cleansed, and the future may be swept clear; and, so trusting, be sure He will be with you, to keep you and to guide you into the path which His own hand has raised above the filth of the world; the path of holiness, along which you may walk with feet and garments unstained till you come to Zion, ‘with songs and everlasting joy upon your heads,’ and bless Him there for all the way by which He led you home.

80)Psalms 119:11

Psalms

LIFE HID AND NOT HID

Psa. 119:11. - Psa. 40:10.

Then there are two kinds of hiding-one right and one wrong: one essential to the life of the Christian, one inconsistent with it. He is a shallow Christian who has no secret depths in his religion. He is a cowardly or a lazy one, at all events an unworthy one, who does not exhibit, to the utmost of his power, his religion. It is bad to have all the goods in the shop window; it is just as bad to have them all in the cellar. There are two aspects of the Christian life-one between God and myself, with which no stranger intermeddles; one patent to all the world. My two texts touch these two.

I. 'I have hid Thy word within my heart.' There we have the word hidden, or the secret religion of the heart.

Now, I have often had occasion to remind you that the Old Testament use of the word 'heart' is much wider than our modern one, which limits it to being the seat and organ of love, affection, or emotion; whereas in the Old Testament the 'heart' is the very vital centre of the personal self. As the Book of Proverbs has it, 'out of it are the issues of life,' all the outgoings of activity of every kind, both that which we ascribe to the head, and that which we ascribe to the heart. These come, according to the Old Testament idea, from this central self. And so, when the Psalmist says, 'I have hid Thy word within my heart,' he means 'I have buried it deep in the very midst of my being, and put it down at the very roots of myself, and there incorporated it with the very substance of my soul.'

Now, I venture to take that expression, 'Thy word,' in a somewhat wider sense than the Psalmist employed it. There are three ideas conveyed by that expression in Scripture; and two of them are distinctly found in this psalm.

First, there is the plain, obvious one, which means by 'the word,' written revelation. The Bible of the Psalmist was a very small volume compared with ours. The Pentateuch, and perhaps some of the historical books, possibly also one or two of the prophets-and these were about all. Yet this fragmentary word he 'hid in his heart.' Now, dear brethren! I wish to say a very practical thing or two, and I begin with this. If you want to be strong Christian people, hide the Bible in your heart. When I was a boy the practice of good Christian folk was to read a daily chapter. I wonder if that is kept up. I gravely suspect it is not. There are, no doubt, a great many causes contributing to the comparative decay amongst professing

Christians, of Bible reading and Bible study. There is modern ‘higher criticism,’ which has a great deal to say about how and when the books were made, especially the books that composed this Psalmist’s Bible. But I want to insist that no theories, were they ever so well established-as I take leave to say they are not-no theories about these secondary questions touch the value of Scripture as a factor in the development of the Christian life. Whatever a man may think about these, he will be none the less alive, if he is wise, to the importance of the daily devotional study of Scripture.

Then there is another set of reasons for the neglect of Scripture, in the multiplication of other forms of literature. People have so many other books to read now, that they have not much time for reading their Bibles, or if they have, they think they have not. No literature will ever take the place of the old Book. Why, even looked at as a mere literary product there is nothing in the world like it! And no religious literature, sermons, treatises, still less magazines and periodicals, will do for Christian men what the Bible will do for them. You make a tremendous mistake, for your own souls’ sake, if your religious reading consists in what people have said and thought about Scripture, more than in the Scripture itself. Why should you dip your pitchers into the reservoir, when you can take them up to where the spring comes gushing out of the hillside, pure and limpid and living?

Then there is the drive of our modern life which crowds out the word. Get up a quarter of an hour earlier and you will have time to read your Bible. It will be well worth the sacrifice, if it is a sacrifice. I do not mean by reading the Bible what, I am afraid, is far too common, reading a scrap of Scripture as if it were a kind of charm. But I would most earnestly press upon you that muscle and fibre will distinctly atrophy and become enfeebled, if Christian people neglect the first plain way of hiding the word in their heart, which is to make the utterances of Scripture as if incorporated with their very being, and part of their very selves.

But there is another use of the expression, ‘Thy word,’ which is not without example in this great psalm of praise of the word. In one place in it we read, ‘For ever, O Lord! Thy word is settled in heaven’; that is not the Bible. ‘Thy faithfulness is unto all generations. They continue this day according to Thy ordinances’; these are not the Bible-’for all are Thy servants.’

‘Unless Thy law had been my delight, I should have perished in my afflictions’; I think that is not the Bible either, but it is the utterance of God’s will, as expressed in the Psalmist’s affliction. God’s word comes to us in His providences and in many other ways. It is the declaration of His character and purposes, however they are declared, and the expression of His will and command, however expressed. In that wider sense of the phrase, I would say, ‘Hide that manifested will of God in your hearts.’ Let us cultivate the habit of bringing all ‘the issues of life’-the streams that bubble up from that fountain in the centre of our being-into close relation to what we know to be God’s will concerning us. Let the thought of the will of God sit sovereign arbiter, enthroned in the very centre of our personality, ruling our will, bending it and making it yielding and conformed to His, governing our affections, regulating our passions, restraining our desires, stimulating our slothfulness, quickening our aspirations, lifting heavenwards our hopes, and bringing the whole of the activities that well up from our hearts into touch with the will of God. Cast the healing branch into the very eye of the fountain, and then all the streams will partake of the cleansing. Let that known will of God be as the leaven hid in three measures of meal till the whole was leavened. A fanciful interpretation of that emblem makes the three measures to mean the triple constituents of humanity, body, soul, and spirit. We may smile at the fantastic exposition, but let us take heed to obey the exhortation. When God’s will is deeply planted within, it will work quickening change on the heavy dough of our sluggish natures. It is when we bring the springs of our actions-namely, our motives, which are our true selves-into touch with His uttered will, that our deeds become conformed to it. Look after the motives, and the deeds will look after themselves. ‘I have hid Thy word within my heart.’

And now I venture upon a further application of this phrase, of which the Psalmist had no notion, but which, in God’s great mercy, in the progress of revelation, we can make. There is a better word of God than the Bible; there is a better word of God than any will uttered in His providences and the like. There is the Incarnate Word of God, who ‘was from the beginning with God, and was God,’ and is manifested in these last times unto us. I am keeping well within the analogy of Scripture teaching when I see the perfecting of revelation by the spoken Word as reached in the revelation by the personal word; and when, in addition to the exhortation, to hide the

Scripture in your hearts, and to hide the uttered will of God, however uttered, in your hearts, I add, let us hide Christ in our hearts. For He will 'dwell in our hearts by faith,' and if He is shrined within the curtains of the secret place within us, which is 'the secret place of the Most High,' then, in the courts of the sanctuary, there will be a pure sacrifice and a priest clad 'in the beauties of holiness.'

II. The word not hidden, or the religion of the outward life.

Our second text brings into view the outer side of the devout life, that which is turned to the world. The word is to be hidden in the heart, for this very end of being then revealed in the life. For what other purpose is it to be set in the centre of our being and applied to the springs of action, than to mould action, and so to be displayed in conduct? It is not to be hid like some forgotten and unused treasure in a castle vault, but to be buried deep in a living person, that it may affect all that person's character and acts. 'There is nothing hidden, but that it should come abroad.' The deepest, sacredest, most secret Christian experiences are to be operative on the outward life. A man may be caught up into the third heavens and there hear words which mortal speech cannot utter, but the incommunicable vision should tell on his patience and fortitude, and influence his Christian work. Nor is our manifestation of the springs of our action to be confined to conduct. However eloquent it is, it will be all the more intelligible for the commentary supplied by confession with the mouth. Speech for Christ is a Christian obligation. 'What ye hear in the ear, that proclaim ye on the housetops.' True, there is a legitimate reticence as to the depths of personal religion, which needs very strong reasons to warrant its being broken through. Peter told Mark nothing of the interview which he had with Christ on the Resurrection morning, but he must have told the fact. We shall do well to be silent as to what passes between Jesus and us in secret; but we shall not do well if, coming from our private communion with Him, we do not 'find' some to whom we can say, 'We have found the Messiah,' and so bring them to Jesus.

The word, if hid in the heart, will certainly be manifest in the life. For not only is it impossible for a man who deeply and continually realises God's will, and lives in touch with Jesus Christ, to prevent these experiences from visibly affecting His life and conduct, but also in the measure in which we have that conscious inward possession of the divine word and the divine Christ we shall be impelled to manifest them to our fellows by every means in our power. What, then, is the inference to be drawn from the fact that there are thousands of professing Christian people in Manchester, who never felt the slightest touch of a necessity to make known the Master whom they say they serve? They must be very shallow Christians, having no depth of experience, or that experience would insist on coming out. True Christian emotion is like a fire smouldering within some substance, that never rests till it burns its way to the outside. As one of the prophets puts it, 'I said I will speak no more in Thy name'; he goes on to tell how his resolve of silence gave way under the pressure of the unuttered speech-'Thy word shut up in my bones was like a fire, and I was weary of forbearing and I could not stay.' So it will always be. Every genuine conviction demands utterance. A full heart needs the relief of speech. If you feel no need to show your allegiance and love to Christ by speech as well as by life, I shrewdly suspect you have little love or allegiance to hide.

Further, the more we show it, the more need there is for us to cultivate the hidden element in our religion. If I were talking to ministers I should have a great deal to say about that. There are preachers who preach away their own religion. The two attitudes of mind in imparting and in receiving are wholly different; and if one is allowed to encroach upon the other, nothing but harm can come. 'As thy servant was busy here and there, he was gone,'-that is the short account of the decay of personal religion in many a life outwardly diligent in Christian work. If there is a proportionate cultivation of the hidden self, then the act of manifesting will tend to strengthen it. It is meant that our Christian convictions and affections should grow in strength and in transforming power upon ourselves, by reason of utterance; just as when you let air in, the fire burns brighter. But it is quite possible that we may dissipate and scatter our feeble religion by talking about it; and some of us may be in danger of that. The loftier you mean to build your tower, the deeper must be the foundation that you dig. The more any of us are trying to do for Jesus Christ, the more need there is that we increase our secret communion with Jesus Christ.

We may wrongly hide our religion so that it evaporates. Too many professing Christians put away their religion as careless housewives might do some precious perfume, and when they go to take it out, they find nothing but a rotten cork, a faint odour, and an empty flask. Take care of burying your religion so deep, as dogs do bones, that you cannot find it again, or if you do discover, when you open the coffin, that it holds only a handful of dry dust. The heart has two actions. In one it opens its portals and expands to receive the inflowing blood which is the life. In the other it contracts to drive the life through the veins. For health there must be both motions; the receptiveness, in the secret ‘hiding of the word in the heart’; the expulsive energy in the ‘not hiding Thy righteousness in my heart.’

81)Psalms 119:19

Psalms

A STRANGER IN THE EARTH

Psa. 119:19, Psa. 119:64.

There is something very remarkable in the variety-in-monotony of this, the longest of the psalms. Though it be the longest it is in one sense the simplest, inasmuch as there is but one thought in it, beaten out into all manner of forms and based upon all various considerations. It reminds one of the great violinist who out of one string managed to bring such music and melody.

The one thought is the infinite preciousness of God’s law, by which, of course, is not meant the written record of that law which lies in Scripture, but the utterances of God’s law in any form, by which men may receive it. You will find that that wider signification of the word ‘law,’ ‘commandment,’ ‘statute,’ is essential to the understanding of every portion of this psalm.

And now these two petitions which I have put together base the prayer, which they both offer, in slightly varied form [‘Teach me Thy statutes,’ or ‘Hide not Thy commandments from me,’] upon two diverse considerations, which, taken in conjunction, are extremely interesting.

The two facts on which the one petition rests, are like two great piers on two opposite sides of a river, each of which holds one end of the arch. ‘The earth is full of Thy mercy’; ay! but ‘I am a stranger upon the earth.’ These two things are both true, and from each of them, and still more from both of them taken together, rises up this petition. Let us look then at the facts, and then at the prayer that is built upon them.

Take first that thought of the rejoicing earth, full of God’s mercy as some cup is full of rich wine, or as the flowers in the morning are filled with dew. The Bible does not look at the external world, the material universe, from a scientific point of view, nor does it look at it from a poetical point of view, but from a simply religious one. Nothing that modern science has taught us to say about the world in the least affects this principle which the Psalmist lays down, that it is all full of God’s mercy. The thought is intended to exclude man and man’s ways and all connected with him, as we shall see presently, but the Psalmist looks out upon the earth and all the rest of its inhabitants, and he is sure of two things: one, that God’s direct act is at work in it all, so as that every creature that lives, and everything that is, lives and is because God is there, and working there; and next, that everything about us is the object of loving thoughts of God’s; and has, as it were, some reflection of God’s smile cast across it like the light of flowers upon the grass. Spring days with life ‘re-orient out of dust,’ and the annual miracle beginning again all round, with the birds in the trees, that even dwellers in towns can hear singing as if their hearts would burst for very mirth and hopefulness, the blossoms beginning to push above the frosty ground, and the life breaking out of the branches that were stiff and dry all through the winter, proclaim the same truth as the Psalmist was contemplating when he spoke thus. He looks all round, and everywhere sees the signature of a loving divine Hand.

The earth is full to brimming of Thy mercy. It takes faith to see that; it takes a deeper and a firmer hold of the thought of a present God than most men have, to feel that. For the most of us, the world has got to be very empty of God now. We hear rather the creaking of the wheels of a great machine, or see the workings of a blind, impersonal force. But I believe that all that is precious and good in the growth of knowledge since the old days when this Psalmist wrote may be joyfully accepted by us, and deep down below all we may see the deeper, larger truth of the living purpose and will of God Himself. And I know no reason why twentieth-century men, full to the fingertips of modern scientific thought, may not say as heartily as the old Psalmist said, ‘The earth, O Lord! is full of Thy mercy.’

But then there is another side to all this. Amidst all this sunny play of gladness, and apocalypse of blessing, there stands one exception. Hearken to the other word of my texts, ‘I am a stranger upon the earth.’ Man is out of joint with the great whole, out of harmony with the music, the only hungry one at the feast. All other creatures are admirably adapted for the place they fill, and the place they fill is sufficient for them. But I stand here, knowing that I do not belong to this goodly fellowship, feeling that I am an exception to the rule. As Colonel Gardiner said, ‘I looked at the dog, and I wished that *I* was a dog.’ Ah! many another man has felt, Why is it that whilst every creature, the motes that dance in the sunbeam, and the minutest living things, however insignificant, are all filled to the very brim of their capacity-why is it that I, the roof and crown of things, stand here, a sad and solitary stranger, having made acquaintance with grief; having learned what they know not, the burden of toil and care, cursed with forecast and anticipation, saddened by memory, torn by desires? ‘We look before and after, and pine for what is not.’ All other beings fit their place, and their place fits them like a glove upon a fair hand, but I stand here ‘a stranger upon the earth.’ And the more I feel, or at least the more I am convinced that it is full of God’s mercy, the more I feel that there is something else which I need to make me, in my fashion, as really and as completely blessed as the lowest of His creatures.

The Psalmist tells us what that something more is: ‘I am a stranger upon the earth; hide not Thy commandments from me.’ That is my food, that is what I need; that is the one thing that will make our souls feel at rest, that we shall have not merely a Bible in our hands, but the will of God, the knowledge and the love of the will of God, in our hearts. When we can say ‘I delight to do Thy will, and my whole being seeks to lay itself beneath the mould of Thine impressing purpose, and to be shaped accordingly’; Oh! then, then the care and the toil and the sorrow and the restlessness and the sense of transiency, all change. Some of them pass away altogether; those of them that survive are transfigured from darkness to glory. Just as some gloomy cliff, impending over the plain, when the rising sun smites upon it, is changed into a rosy and golden glory, so the frowning peaks that look down upon us, are all transmuted and glorified, when once the light of God's recognised will falls upon them.

'All is right that seems most wrong,
If it be His sweet will.'

And when He has not hidden His commandments from us, but we have them in our hearts, for the joy and the strength of our lives, then, then it does not matter, though we have to say, 'foxes have holes, and birds of the air have their roosting-places,' and I only, in creation, have 'not where to lay my head.' If we have His will in our hearts, and are humbly and yet lovingly trying to do it, then toil becomes easy, and work becomes blessedness. If we have His will in our hearts, and are seeking to cleave to it, then and only then, do we cease to feel that it is sad that we should be strangers upon the earth, because then and then only can we say 'we seek for a better country, that is, a heavenly.'

Oh, dear friends! we shall be cursed with restlessness and 'weighed upon with sore distress'; and a fleeting world will, by its very fleetingness, be a misery to us, until we have learned to yield our wills to God, and to drink in His law as the joy and the rejoicing of our hearts. A stranger upon the earth needs the statutes of the Lord, he needs no more, and then they will be as the Psalmist says in another place, 'his song in the house of his pilgrimage.'

But the first of our two texts suggests further to us the certainty that this petition shall not be in vain. If the thought, 'I am a stranger in the earth,' teaches us our need of God's commandments, the thought, 'the earth is full of Thy mercies,' assures us that we shall get what we need.

Surely it is not going to be the case that we only are to be left hungry when all other creatures sit at His table and feast there. Surely He who knows what each living thing requires, and opens His hand, and satisfies their desires, is not going to leave the nobler famishing of an immortal soul uncared for.

Surely if all through the universe besides, we see that the measure of a creature’s capacity is the measure of God’s gift to it, there is not going to be, there need not be, any disproportion between what we require and what we possess. Surely if His ear can hear and translate, and His loving hand can open to satisfy, the croaking of the young raven when it cries, He will neither mistake nor neglect the voice of a man’s heart, when it is asking what is so in accordance with His will as that He should let him know and love His statutes.

It is not meant to be the case that we lie in the middle of His creation, the one exception to the universal law, like Gideon’s fleece, dry and dusty, while every poor bit of bush and grass round about is soaked with His dew. If ‘the earth is full of Thy mercy,’ Thou thereby hast pledged Thyself that my heart shall be full of Thy law and Thy grace, if I desire it.

And so, dear brethren! whilst the one of these twin considerations should send us to our knees, the other should hearten and wing our prayers. And if, on the one hand, we feel that to bring us up to the level of the poorest of His creatures, we need a firm grasp and a hearty love of His law deep in our spirits, on the other hand, the fact that the feeblest and the poorest of His creatures is saturated and soaked with as much of God’s goodness as it can suck in, may make us quite sure that our souls will not vainly pant after Him in a ‘dry and thirsty land where no water is.’ ‘The earth, O Lord! is full of Thy mercy.’ Am I to be empty of the highest mercy, the knowledge of Thy will? Never! never!

And so, ‘Say not, Who shall ascend up into the heavens? say not, Who shall pass over the sea to bring Thy law near, that we may hear and do it? Behold! the word is very nigh thee.’ The law, the will of God, and the power to perform it are braided together, in inextricable union, in Jesus Christ Himself; and the prayer of my psalm most deeply understood, turns itself all into this:-Give me Christ, more of the knowledge of Him who is my law and Thine uttered will; more of the love of Him whom to love is to be at home everywhere, and to be filled with Thy mercy; more of the likeness to Him whom to imitate is holiness; whom to resemble is perfection. ‘The earth is full of Thy mercy.’ ‘The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us; and we beheld His glory, full of grace and truth.’ And of that fulness can all we receive. Then will we be strangers here no longer; and our hearts will be replenished with a better mercy than all the universe beside is capable of containing.

82)Psalms 119:64

Psalms

A STRANGER IN THE EARTH

Psa. 119:19, Psa. 119:64.

There is something very remarkable in the variety-in-monotony of this, the longest of the psalms. Though it be the longest it is in one sense the simplest, inasmuch as there is but one thought in it, beaten out into all manner of forms and based upon all various considerations. It reminds one of the great violinist who out of one string managed to bring such music and melody.

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83)Psalms 119:126-128

Psalms

'TIME FOR THEE TO WORK'

Psa. 119:126 - Psa. 119:128.

If much that we hear be true, a society to circulate Bibles is a most irrational and wasteful expenditure of energy and money. We cannot ignore the extent and severity of the opposition to the very idea of revelation, even if we would; we should not if we could. We are told with some exaggeration-the wish being father to the thought-that the educated mind of the country has broken with Christianity, a statement which is equally remarkable for its accuracy and for its modesty. But it has a basis of truth in the widespread disbelief diffused through the literary and so-called cultivated classes. There is no need to spend time in referring at length to facts which are only too familiar to most of us. Every sphere of knowledge, every form of literature, is enlisted in the crusade. Periodicals that lie on all our tables, works of imagination that your daughters read, newspapers that go everywhere, are full of it. Poetry, forgetting her lineage and her sweetness, strains *her* voice in rhapsodies of hostility. Science, leaping the hedge beyond which *she* at all events is a trespasser,-or in finer language, ‘prolonging its gaze backwards beyond the boundary of experimental evidence,’ or in still plainer terms, *guessing*, affirms that she discerns in matter the promise and potency of every form of life; or presently, in a devouter mood, looking on the budding glories of the spring, declines to *profess* the creed of Atheism. Learned criticism demonstrates the impossibility of supernatural religion. The leader of an influential school leaves behind him a voice hollow and sad, as from the great darkness, in which we seem to hear the echoes of a life baffled in the attempt to harmonise the logical and the spiritual elements of a large soul: ‘There may be a God. The evidence is insufficient for proof. It only amounts to one of the lower degrees of probability. He may have given a revelation of His will. There are grounds sufficient to remove all antecedent improbability. The question is wholly one of evidence; but the evidence required has not been, and cannot be, forthcoming. There is room to hope for a future life, but there is no assurance whatever. Therefore cultivate in the region of the imagination merely those hopes which can never become certainties, for they are infinitely precious to mankind.’

Ah, brethren! do we not hear in these dreary words the cry of the immortal hunger of the soul for God, for the living God? The concessions they make to Christian apologists are noteworthy, but that unconscious confession of need is the most noteworthy. Surely, as the eye prophesies light, so the longing of the soul and the capacity for forming such ideals are the token that He is for whom heart and flesh do thus yearn. And how blessed is it to set over against these dreary ghosts that call themselves hopes, and that pathetic vain attempt to find refuge in the green fields of the imagination from the choking dust of the logical arena, the old faithful words: 'This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and that this life is in His Son'!

But my object in referring to these forms of opinion was merely to prepare the way for my subsequent observations; I have no intention of dealing with any of them by way of criticism or refutation. This is not the place nor the audience, nor am I the person, for that task. But I have thought that it might not be inappropriate to this occasion if I were to ask you to consider with me, from these words, the attitude of mind and heart to God's word which becomes the Christian in times of opposition.

The Psalmist was surrounded, as would appear, by widespread defection from God's law. But instead of trembling as if the sun were about to expire, he turns himself to God, and in fellowship with Him sees in all the antagonism but the premonition that He is about to act for the vindication of His own work. That confidence finds expression in the sublime invocation of our text. Then with another movement of thought, the contemplation of the departures makes him tighten his own hold on the law of the Lord, and the contempt of the gainsayers quickens his love: '*Therefore* I love,' etc. And as must needs be the case, that love is the measure of his abhorrence of the opposite; and because God's commandments are so dear to him, therefore he recoils with healthy hatred from false ways. So, I think, we have a fourfold representation here of our true attitude in the face of existing antagonism-calm confidence in God's work for His law; earnest prayer, which secures the forthputting of the divine energy; an increased intensity of cleaving to the word; and a decisive opposition to the ways which make it void.

I ask your attention to some remarks on each of these in their order. So, then, we have-

I. Calm confidence that times of antagonism evoke God's work for His word.

Now I dare say that some of you feel that is not the first thought that should be excited by the opposition around us. 'We have no sort of doubt,' you may say, 'that God will take care of His own word, if there be such a thing; but the question that presses is, Have we it in this book? Answer that for us, and we will thank you; but platitudes about God watching over His truth are naught. The first thing to do is to meet these arguments and establish the origin of Scripture. Then it will follow of itself that it will not perish.'

But I take leave to think we, as Christians, arc not bound to revise the foundation belief of our lives at the call of every new antagonist. Life is too short for that. There is too much work waiting, to suspend our activity till we have answered each denier. We do not hold our faith in the word of God, as the winners at a match do their cups and belts, on condition of wrestling for them with any challenger. It is a perfectly legitimate position to say, We hold a ground of certitude, from which none of this strife of tongues is able to dislodge us. 'We have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is the Christ.' The Scriptures which we have received, not without knowledge of the grounds on which controversialists defend them, have proved themselves to us by their own witness. The light is its own proof. We have the experience of Christ and His law. He has saved our souls, He has changed our lives. We know in whom we have believed, and we are neither irrational nor obstinate when we avow that we will not pretend to suspend these convictions on the issue of any debate. We decline to dig up the piles of the bridge that carries us over the abyss because voices tell us that it is rotten. It is shorter and perfectly reasonable to answer, 'Rotten, did you say? Well, we have tried it, and it bears'; which, being translated into less simple language, is just the assertion of certitude built on facts and experience which leaves no place for doubt. All the opposition will be broken into spray against that rock bulwark: 'Thy words were found, and I did eat them, and they are the joy and rejoicing of my heart.'

So I venture to think that, speaking to Christian men and women, I have a right to speak on the basis of our common belief, and to encourage them to cherish it notwithstanding gainsayers. I am not counselling stolid indifference to the course of modern thought, nor desertion of the duty of defence. We are not to say, ‘God will interfere; I need do nothing.’ But the task of controversy is not for all Christians, nor the duty of following the flow of opinion. There is plenty of more profitable work than that for most of us. The temper which our text enjoins *is* for us all; and this calm confidence, that at the right time God will work for His word, is its first element.

This confidence rests upon our belief in a divine providence that governs the world, and on the observed laws of its working. It is ever His method to send His succour *after* the evil has been developed, and *before* it has triumphed. Had it come sooner, the priceless benefits of struggle, the new perceptions won in controversy of the many-sided meaning and value of His truth, the vigour from conflict, the wholesome sense of our weakness, had all been lost. Had it come later, it had come too late. So He times His help, in order that we may derive the greatest possible benefit from both the trial and the aid. We have all been dealt with so in our personal histories, whereof the very motto might be, ‘When I said my foot slippeth, Thy mercy, O Lord! held me up.’ The same law works on the wider platform. The enemy shall be allowed to pass through the breadth of the land, to spread dread and sorrow through village and hamlet, to draw his ranks round Jerusalem, as a man closes his hand on some insect he would crush. *To-morrow*, and the assault will be made; but *to-night* ‘the angel of the Lord went forth and smote the camp; and when they arose in the morning,’ expecting to hear the wild war-cry of the conquerors as they stormed across the undefended walls, ‘they were all dead corpses.’ Then, as it would appear, a psalmist, moved by that mighty victory, cast it into words, which remain for all generations the law of the divine aid, and imply all that I am urging now: ‘The Lord is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; the Lord shall help her at the dawning of the morning.’ True, we are no judges of the time. Our impatience is ever outrunning His calm deliberation. An illusion besets us all that *our* conflicts with unbelief are the severest the world has ever seen; and there is a great deal of exaggeration on both sides at present as to the real extent and importance of existing antagonism to God’s revelation. A widespread literature provides so many-I would not say empty-spaces for any voice to reverberate in, that both the shouters and the listeners are apt to fancy the assailants are an army, when they are only a handful, armed mainly with trumpets and pitchers. There have been darker days of antagonism than these. ‘He that believeth shall not make haste.’ This confidence in the punctual wisdom of His working involves the other belief, that if He does not ‘work,’ it is because the time is not yet ripe; the negations and contradictions have still an office to fulfil, and no hurt that cannot be repaired has been done to the faith of the Church or the power of the word.

Nor can we forecast the manner of His working. He can call forth from the solitary sheepfolds the defenders of His word, as has ever been His wont, raising the man when the hour had come, even as He sent His son in the fulness of time. He can lead science on to deeper truth; He can quicken His Church into new life; He can guide the spirit of the age. We believe that the history of the world is the unfolding of His will, and the course of opinion guided in its channel by the Voice which the depths have obeyed from of old. Therefore we wait for His working, expecting no miracle, prescribing no time, hurried by no impatience, avoiding no task of defence or confession; but knowing that, unhasting and unresting He will arise when the storm is loudest, and somehow will say, ‘Peace! be still.’ Then they who had not cast away their confidence for any fashion of unbelief that passeth away will rejoice as they sing, ‘Lo! this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us.’

This confidence is confirmed by the history of all the past assaults on Scripture.

The whole history of the origin, collection, preservation, transmission, diffusion, and present influence of the Bible involves so much that is surprising and unique, as to amount to at least a strong presumption of a divine care. Among all the remarkable things about the Book, nothing is more remarkable than that there it is, after all that has happened. When we think of the gaps and losses in ancient literature, and the long stormy centuries that lie between us and its earlier pages, we can faintly estimate the chances against their preservation. It is strange that the Jewish race should have so jealously preserved books which certainly did not flatter national pride, which put a mortifying explanation on national disasters, which painted them and their fathers in dark colours, which proclaimed truths they never loved, and breathed a spirit they never caught. It is stranger still, that in the long years of dispersion the very vices and limitations of the people subserved the same end, and that stiff pedantry and laborious trifling-the poorest form of intellectual activity-should have guarded the letter of the word, as the coral insects painfully build up their walls round some fair island of the Southern Sea. When one thinks of the great gulf of language between the Old and New Testaments, of the variety of authors, periods, subjects, literary form, the animosities of Christian and Jew, it *is* strange that we have the Book here *one*, and that all these parts should blend into unity, unless the source and theme were one, and one Hand had shaped each, and cared for the gathering together of all.

It has been demonstrated over and over again to have no pretensions to be a divine revelation; and yet here it is, believed by millions, and rooted so firmly in European language and thought, that no revolution short of a return to barbarism can abolish it. It has been proved to be a careless, unauthenticated collection of works of different periods, styles, and schools of thought, having no unity but what is given by the bookbinder: and lo! here it is still, not disintegrated, much less dissolved. Each age brings its own destructive criticism to play on it, confessing thereby that its predecessors have effected nothing; for as the Bible says about sacrifices, so we may say about assaults on Scripture, 'If they had done their work, would they not have ceased to be offered?' And the effect of the heaviest artillery that can be brought into position is as transient as the boom of their report and the puff of their smoke. Why, who knows anything about the world's wonders of books that a hundred years ago made good men's hearts tremble for the ark of God? You may find them in dusty rows on the top shelves of great libraries. But if their names had not occurred in the pages of Christian apologists, flies in amber, nobody in this generation would ever have heard of them. And still more conspicuously is it so with earlier examples of the same kind. Their work is as hopelessly dead as they. And the Book seems none the worse for all the shot-like the rock that a ship fired at all night, taking it for an enemy, and could not provoke to answer nor succeed in sinking. Surely some dim suspicion of the hopelessness of the attempt might creep into the hearts of men who know what *has* been. Surely the signal failure and swift fading away of all former efforts to dethrone the Bible might lead to the question, 'Does it not lay its deep foundations in the heart of man and the purpose of God, too deep to be reached by the short tools of mere criticism, too massive to be overthrown by all the weight of materialistic science?' It is with the Bible as it was with the Apostle, on whose hand, as he crouched over the newly-lit flame, the viper fastened, 'and he shook off the beast into the fire, and felt no harm.' The barbarous people, who changed their minds after they had looked a great while and saw no harm come to him, were not altogether wrong, and might teach a lesson to some modern wise men, that, among the other facts which they deal with, they should try to estimate this fact of the continued existence and influence of Scripture, and the failure thus far of all attempts to shake its throne or break the sweet influences of its bands.

Brethren! we, at all events, should learn the lesson of historical experience. The Gospel and the Book which is its record, have met with eager, eloquent, learned antagonists before to-day, and they have passed. Little more than a generation has sufficed to sweep them to oblivion. So it will be again. The forms of opinion, the tendencies of thought, which now seem to some of its enemies so certain to conquer, will follow these forgotten precursors into the dim land. May we not see them-these ancient discrowned kings that ruled over men and rebelled against Christ, these beliefs that no man now believes-rising from their shadowy thrones in the underworld to meet the now living and ruling unbelief, when it, too, shall have gone down to them; 'All they shall speak and say unto thee, Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us?' Yes, each in its turn 'becomes but a noise' when he 'passes the time appointed'-the time when God arises to do His act and vindicate His word.

II. We have here, secondly, earnest prayer which brings that divine energy.

The confidence that God *will* work underlies and gives energy to the prayer that God *would* work. The belief that a given thing is in the line of the divine purpose is not a reason for saying, 'We need not pray; God means to do it,' but is a reason for saying on the contrary, 'God means to do it; let us pray for it.' And this prayer, based upon the confidence that it is His will, is the best service that any of us can render to the Gospel in troublous times.

I shall have a word to say presently on the *sort* of outflow of the divine energy which we should principally expect and desire; but let me first remind you, very briefly, how the prayers of Christian men do condition-I had almost said regulate-that outflow.

I need not put this matter on its abstract and metaphysical side. Two facts are enough for my present purpose-one, a truth of faith, that the actual power wherewith God works for His word remains ever the same; one, a truth of observation and experience, that there are variations in the intensity of its operations and effects in the world. Wherefore? Surely because of the variations in the human recipients and organs of the power. Here at one end is the great fountain, ever brimming. Draw from it ever so much, it sinks not one hair's-breadth in its pure basin. Here, on the other side, is an intermittent flow, sometimes in scanty driblets, sometimes in painful drops, sometimes more full and free on the pastures of the wilderness. Wherefore these jerks and spasms? It must be something stopping the pipe. Yes, of course. God's might is ever the same, but our capacity of receiving and transmitting that might varies, and with it varies the energy with which that unchanging power is exerted in the world. Our faith, our earnestness of desire, our ardour and confidence of prayer, our faithfulness of stewardship and strenuousness of use, measure the amount of the unmeasured grace which we can receive. So long as our vessels are brought, the golden oil does not cease to flow. When they are full, it stays. The principle of the variation in actual manifestation of the unvarying might of God is found in the Lord's words: 'According to your faith be it unto you.' So, then, we may expect periods of quickened energy in the forth-putting of the divine power. And these will correspond to, and be consequent on, the faithful prayers of Christian men. See to it, brethren! that you keep the channels clear, that the flow may continue full and increase. Let no mud and ooze of the world, no big blocks of sin nor subtler accumulations of small negligences, choke them again. Above all, by simple, earnest prayer keep your hearts, as it were, wide open to the Sun, and His light will shine on you, and His grace fructify through you, and His Spirit will work in you mightily.

The tenor of these remarks presupposes a point on which I wish to make one or two observations now, viz. that the manner of the divine working which we should most earnestly desire in a time of diffused unbelief is the elevation of Christian souls to a higher spiritual life.

I do not wish to exclude other things, but I believe that the true antidote to a widespread scepticism is a quickened Church. We may indeed desire that in other ways the enemy should be met. We ought to pray that God would work by sending forth defenders of the truth, by establishing His Church in the firm faith of disputed verities, and by all the multitude of ways in which He can sway the thoughts and tendencies of men. But I honestly confess that I, for my part, attach but secondary importance to controversial defences of the faith. No doubt they have their office; they may confirm a waverer, they may establish a believer, they may show onlookers that the Christian position is tenable; they may, in some rare cases of transcendent power, prevent a heresy from spreading and from descending to another generation. But oftenest they are barren of result, and where they do their work, it is not to be forgotten that there may remain as true a making void of God’s law by an evil heart of unbelief as by an understanding cased in the mail of denial. You may hammer ice on an anvil, or bray it in a mortar. What then? It is pounded ice still, except for the little portion melted by heat of percussion, and it will soon all congeal again. Melt it in the sun, and it flows down in sweet water, which mirrors that light which loosed its bonds of cold. So hammer away at unbelief with your logical sledge-hammers, and you will change its shape, perhaps; but it is none the less unbelief because you have ground it to powder. It is a mightier agent that must melt it-the fire of God’s affection, of all lower, howsoever tender, loves that once filled the whole heart. Such surrender is not pain but gladness, inasmuch as the deeper well that has been sunk dries the surface springs, and gathers all their waters into itself. The new treasure that has filled the heart compels, by glad compulsion, the surrender or, at least, the subordination, of all former affections to the constraint of all-mastering love.

The same thing is true in regard to the union of the soul with Christ. The description of the bride’s abandonment of former duties and ties may be transferred, without the change of a word, to our relations to Him. If love to Him has really come into our hearts, it will master all our yearnings and tendencies and affections, and we shall feel that we cannot but yield up everything besides, by reason of the sovereign power of this new affection. Christ demands from us [if I may use the word ‘demand’ for the beseeching of love], for His sake, and for our sakes, the entire surrender of ourselves to Him. And that new affection will deal with the old loves, just as the new buds upon the beech-trees in the spring deal with the old leaves that still hang withered on some of the branches. It will push them from their hold, and they will drop. If a river should be turned into some dark cave where unclean beasts have herded and littered for years, the bright waters would sweep out on their bosom all the filth and rottenness. So, when the love of Christ comes surging and flashing into a heart, it will bear out on its broad surface all conflicting and subordinate inclinations, with the passions and lusts that used to rule and befoul the spirit. Christ demands complete surrender, and, if we are Christians, that absolute abandonment will not be a pain nor unwelcome. We epidemic. That is a doctrine which one influential school of modern disbelievers, at all events, cannot but admit.

What then? Why this-that to change the opinions you must change the atmosphere; or, in other words, the true antagonist of a diffused scepticism is a quickened Christian life. Brethren! if we had been what we ought, would such an environment have ever been possible as that which produces this modern unbelief? Even now, depend upon it, we shall do more for Christ by catching and exhibiting more of His Spirit than by many arguments-more by words of prayer to God than by words of reasoning to men. A higher tone of spiritual life would prove that the Gospel was mighty to mould and ennoble character. If our own souls were gleaming with the glory of God, men would believe that we had met more than the shadow of our own personality in the secret place. If the fire of faith were bright in us, it would communicate itself to others, for nothing is so contagious as earnestness. If we believed, and therefore spoke, the accent of conviction in our tones would carry them deep into some hearts. If we would trust Christ’s Cross to stand firm without our stays, and arguing less about it, would seldomer try to *prop* it, and oftener to *point* to it, it would draw men to itself. When the power and reality of Scripture as the revelation of God are questioned, the best answer in the long-run will be a Church which can adduce itself as the witness, and can say to the gainsayers, ‘Why, herein is a marvellous thing, that ye know not from whence He is, and yet He hath opened mine eyes!’ Brethren! do you see to it that your life be thus a witness that you have heard His voice; and make it your contribution to the warfare of this day, if you do not bear a weapon, that you lift your hands and heart to God. Moses on the mount helped the struggling ranks below in their hand-to-hand combat with Amalek. Hezekiah's prayer, when he spread the letter of the invader before the Lord, was more to the purpose than all his munitions of war. Let your voice rise to heaven like a fountain, and blessings will fall on earth. 'Arise, O Lord! plead Thine own cause. The tumult of those that rise up against Thee increaseth continually.'

III. We have here, thirdly, as the fitting attitude in times of widespread unbelief, a love to God's word made more fervid by antagonism.

There may be a question what reason for the Psalmist's love is pointed at in this 'therefore.' We shall hardly be satisfied with the slovenly and not very reverent explanation, that the word is introduced, without any particular meaning, because it begins with the initial letter proper to this section; nor does it seem enough to suppose a mere general reference to the excellences of the law of the Lord, which are the theme of the whole psalm. Such an interpretation blunts the sharp edge of the thought, and has nothing in its favour but the general want of connection between the separate verses. There are, however, one or two other instances where a thought is pursued through more than one verse, and the usual mere juxtaposition gives place to an interlocking, so that the construction is not unexampled. It is most natural to take the plain meaning of the words, and to suppose that when the Psalmist said, 'They have made void Thy law, therefore I love Thy commandments,' he meant, 'The prevailing opposition is the reason why I, for my part, grasp Thy law more strongly.' The hostility of others evokes my warmer love. The thought, so understood, is definite, true, and important, and so I venture to construe it, and enforce it as containing a lesson for the day.

And here I would first observe that I desire not to be understood as urging the substitution of feeling for reason, nor as trying to enlist passion in a crusade against the opponent's logic. Still less do I desire to counsel the exaggeration of opinions because they are denied-that besetting danger of all controversy.

But surely the emotions have a place and an office, if not indeed in the search for, and the submission to, the truth of God, yet in the defence and adherence to that truth when found. The heart may not be the organ for the investigation and apprehension of truth, though it has a part to play even there; but the tenacity with which I cleave to truth, when apprehended, is far more an affair of the will than of the understanding-it is the heart's love steadying the mind, and holding it fixed to the rock. And love has also a place in the defence of the truth. It gives weight to blows, and wings to the arrows. It makes arguments to be wrought in fire rather than in frost. It lights the enthusiasm which cannot despair, the diligence that will not weary, the fervour that often goes farther to sway other minds than the sharpest dialectics of a passionless understanding. There *are* causes in which an unimpassioned advocacy is worse than silence; and this is one of them. The word of the living God which has saved our souls and brought to us all that makes our natures rich and strong, and all that peoples the great darkness with fair hopes solid as certainties, demands and deserves fervour in its soldiers, and loyal love in its subjects.

And while it is weakness to over-emphasise our beliefs *merely* because they are denied, and one of the saddest issues of controversy, that both sides are apt to be hurried into exaggerated statements which calmer thoughts would repudiate; on the other hand, there *is* a legitimate prominence which ought to be given to a truth *precisely* because it is denied. The time to underline and accentuate strongly our convictions is, when society is slipping away from them, provided it be done without petulance, passion, or the falsehood of extremes.

If ever there was a period when such general considerations as these had a practical application, this is the time. Would that all such as my voice now reaches would take these grand words for theirs: 'They make void Thy law, therefore I love Thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold!' Such increase of affection because of gainsayers is the natural instinct of loyal and chivalrous love. If your mother's name were defiled, would not your heart bound to her defence? When a prince is a dethroned exile, his throne is fixed deeper in the hearts of his adherents 'though his back be at the wall' and common souls become heroes because their devotion has been heightened to sublimity of self-sacrifice by a nation's rebellion. And when so many voices are proclaiming that God has never spoken to men, that our thoughts of His Book are dreams, and its long empire over men's spirits a waning tyranny, does cool indifference become us? Will not fervour be sobriety, and the glowing emotion of our whole nature our reasonable service?

Such increase of affection because of gainsayers is the fitting end and main blessing of the controversy which is being waged. We never fully hold our treasures till we have grasped them hard, lest they should be plucked from us. No truth is established till it has been denied and has survived. Antagonism to the word of God should have, and will have, to those who use it rightly, a blessing in its train, in bringing out yet more of the preciousness and manifoldness, the all-sufficiency and the universality of the Book. 'The more 'tis shook, the more it shines.' The fiercer the blast, the firmer our confidence in the inexpugnable solidity of that tower of strength that stands four square to every wind that blows. 'The word of the Lord is tried, therefore Thy servant loveth it.'

Such increase of attachment to the word of God because of gainsayers, is the instinct of self-preservation. The sight of so many making void the law makes a man bethink himself of what his own standing is. We, as they, are the children of the age. The tendencies to which they have yielded operate on us too, and our only strength is, 'Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe!' The present condition of opinion remands us all to our foundations, and should teach us that nothing but firm adherence to God revealed in His word, and to the word which reveals God, will prevent us, too, from drifting away to shoreless, solitary seas of doubt, barren as the foam, and changeful as the crumbling, restless wave.

Such strength of affection in the presence of diffused doubt is not to be won without an effort. All our churches afford us but too many examples of men and women who have lost the warmth of their first love, if not their love itself, for no better reason than because so many others have lost it. The effect of popular unbelief stretches far beyond those who are directly affected by its arguments, or avowedly adopt its conclusions. It is hard to hold by a creed which so many influential voices tell you it is a sign of folly and of being behind the age to believe. The consciousness that Christian truth is denied, makes some of you falter in its profession, and fancy that it is less certain simply because it is gainsaid. The mist wraps you in its folds, and it is difficult to keep warm in it, or to believe that love and sunshine are above it all the same. ‘Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.’

Therefore, brethren! do you consciously endeavour that the tempest shall make you tighten your hold on Christ and His word. He appeals to us, too, with that most pathetic question, in which yearning for our love and sorrow over the departed disciples blend so wondrously, as if He cast Himself on our loyalty: ‘Will ye also go away?’ Let us answer, not with the self-confidence that was so signally put to shame, ‘Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I’; but with the resolve that draws its firmness from His fulness and from our knowledge of the power of His truth, ‘Lord! to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.’

IV. And lastly, we have here, as the final trait in the temper which becomes such times, healthy opposition to the ways which make void the word of the Lord.

That is the Psalmist’s last movement of feeling, and you see that it comes second, not first, in the order of his emotions. It is the consequence of his love, the recoil of his heart from the practices and theories which contradicted God’s law.

Now, far be it from me to say a word which should fan the embers of the *odium theologicum* into a blaze against either men or opinions. But there is a truth involved which seems to be in danger of being forgotten at present, and that to the detriment of large interests as well as of the forgetters. The correlative of a hearty love for any principle or belief is-we may as well use the obnoxious word-a healthy hatred for its denial and contradiction. They are but two aspects of one thing, like that pillar of old which, in its single substance, was a cloud and darkness to the foes, and gave light by night to the friends of Him who dwelt in it. Nay, they are but two names for the very same thing viewed in the very same motion, which is love as it yearns towards and cleaves to its treasure; and hatred, as by the identical same act it recoils and withdraws from the opposite: ‘He will hold to the one, and therefore and therein despise the other.’

Much popular teaching as to Christian truth seems to me to ignore this plain principle, and to be working harm, especially among our younger cultivated men and women, whom it charms by an appearance of liberality, which in their view, contrasts very favourably with the narrowness of us sectarians. I am free to admit that in our zeal about small matters [and in a certain 'provincialism,' so to speak, which characterised the type of English Christianity till within a recent period] we needed, and still need, the lesson, and I will thankfully accept the rebuke that reminds me of what I ever tend to forget, that the golden rod, wherewith the divine Builder measures from jewel to jewel in the walls of the New Jerusalem, takes in wider spaces than we have meted with our lines. But that is a very different matter from the tone which vitiates and weakens so much modern adherence to Christ's Gospel and Christ's Church. The old principle, 'in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty,' made no attempt to determine what belonged to these two classes, and in practice their bounds may often have been wrongly set, so as to include many of the latter among the former; but it at all events recognised the distinction as the basis of its next clause, 'in all things, charity.' But nowadays, to listen to some liberal teachers, one would think that nothing was necessary, except the great sacred principle, that nothing is necessary; and that charity could not exist, unless that distinction were effaced.

I pray you, and if I may venture so far, I would especially pray my younger hearers, to take note, that however fair this way of looking at varying forms of Christian opinion may be, it really reposes on a basis which they will surely think twice before accepting, the denial that there is such a thing as intellectual certitude in religion which can be cast into definite propositions. If there be any truth at all, to confess *it* is to deny its opposite, to cleave to *this* is to reject that, to love the one is to hate the other. I fear-I know-that there are many minds among us who began with simply catching this tone of tolerance, and who have been insensibly borne along to an enfeebled belief that there is such a thing as religious truth at all, and that the truth lies in the word of God. Dear friends! let me beseech you to take heed lest, while you are only conscious of your hearts expanding with the genial glow of liberality, by little and little you lose your power of discerning between things that differ, your sense of the worth of the Scripture as the depository of divine truth, and from your slack hand the hem of the vesture in which its healing should fall away.

As broad a liberality as you please within the limits that are laid down by the very nature of the case. ‘These things are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, ye might have life through His name.’ Wheresoever that record is accepted, that divine Name confessed, that faith exercised, and that life possessed, there, with all diversities, own a brother. Wheresover these things are not, loyalty to your Lord demands that the strength of your love for His word should be manifested in the strength of your recoil from that which makes it void. ‘I love Thy commandments, and I hate every false way.’

I am much mistaken if times are not rapidly coming on us when a decisive election of his side will be forced on every man. The old antagonists will be face to face once more. Compromises and hesitations will not serve. The country between the opposing forces will be stripped of every spot that might serve as cover for neutrals. On the one side a mighty host, its right the Pharisees of ecclesiasticism and ritual, with their banner of authority, making void the law of God by their tradition; its left, and never far away from their opposites on the right with whom they are strangely leagued, working into each other’s hands, the Sadducees denying angel and spirit, with their war-cry of unfettered freedom and scientific evidence; and in the centre, far rolling, innumerable, the dusky hosts of mere animalism, and worldliness, and self, making void the law by their sheer godlessness. And on the other side, ‘He was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood, and His name is called the Word of God, and they that were with Him were called, and chosen, and faithful.’ The issue is certain from of old. Do you see to it that you are of those who were valiant for the truth upon the earth.

Let not the contradiction of many move you from your faith; let it lift your eyes to the hills from whence cometh our help. Let it open your desires in prayer to Him who keeps His own word, that it may keep His Church and bless the world. Let it kindle into fervent enthusiasm, which is calm sobriety, your love for that word. Let it make decisive your rejection of all that opposes. Driftwood may float with the stream; the ship that holds to her anchor swings the other way. Send that word far and wide. It is its own best evidence. It will correct all the misrepresentation of its foes, and supplement the inadequate defences of its friends. Amid all the changes of attacks that have their day and cease to be, amid all the changes of our representations of its endless fulness, it will live. Schools of thought that assail and defend it pass, but it abides. Of both enemy and friend it is true, 'The grass withereth, and the flower thereof passeth away.' How antique and ineffectual the pages of the past generations of either are, compared with the ever-fresh youth of the Bible, which, like the angels, is the youngest and is the oldest of books. The world can never lose it; and notwithstanding all assaults, we may rest upon *His* assurance, whose command is prophecy, when He says, 'Write it before them in a table, and note it in a book, that it may be for the time to come for ever and ever.'

84)Psalms 119:165

Psalms

SUBMISSION AND PEACE

Psa. 119:165.

The marginal note says 'they shall have no stumbling block.'

We do great injustice to this psalm-so exuberant in its praises of 'the law of the Lord'-if we suppose that that expression means nothing more than the Mosaic or Jewish revelation. It does mean that, of course, but the psalm itself shows that the writer uses the expression and its various synonyms as including a great deal more than any one method by which God's will is made known to man. For he speaks, for instance, in one part of the psalm of God's 'word,' as being settled for ever in the heavens, and of the heavens and earth as continuing to this day, 'according to Thine ordinances.'

So we are warranted in giving to the thought of our text the wider extension of taking the divine 'law' to include not only that directory of conduct contained in Scripture, but the expressed will of God, involving duties for us, in whatever way it is made known. The love of that uttered will, the Psalmist declares, will always bring peace. Such an understanding of the text does not exclude the narrower reference, which is often taken to be the only thought in the Psalmist’s mind, nor does it obliterate the distinction between the written law of God and the disclosures of His will which we collect by the exercise of our faculties on events around and facts within us. But it widens the horizon of our contemplations, and bases the promised peace on its true foundation, the submission of the human to the divine will.

Let us then consider how true love to the will of God, however it is made known to us, either in the Book or in our consciousness, or in daily providences, or by other people’s hints, is the talisman that brings to us, in all circumstances, and in every part of our nature, a tranquillity which nothing can disturb.

Of course, by ‘love’ here is meant, not only delight in the expression of, but the submission of the whole being to, God’s will; and we love the law only when, and because, we love the Lawgiver.

I. Thus loving the law of God, not only with delight in the vehicle of its expression, but with inward submission to its behests, we shall have, first of all, the peacefulness of a restful heart.

Such a heart has found an adequate and worthy object for the outgoings of its affections. Base things loved always disturb. Noble things loved always tranquillise. And he to whom his judgment declares that the best of all things is God’s manifested will, and whose affections and emotions and actions follow the dictate of his judgment, has a love which grasps whatsoever things are noble and fair and of good report, and is lifted to a level corresponding with the loftiness of its objects. For our hearts are like the creatures in some river, of which they tell us that they change their colour according to the hue of the bed of the stream in which they float and of the food of which they partake. The heart that lives on the will of God will be calm and steadfast, and ennobled into reposeful tranquillity like that which it grasps and grapples.

Little boats which are made fast to the sides of a ship rise and fall with the tide, as does that to which they are attached. And our hearts, if they be roped to the fleeting, the visible, the creatural, the finite, partake of the fluctuations, and finally are involved in the destruction, of that which they have made their supreme good. And contrariwise, they who love that which is eternal shine with a light thrown by reflection from the object of their love, and ‘he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever,’ like the will which he doeth. ‘Great peace’-the peace of a restful heart-’have they that love Thy law.’

II. Then again, such love brings the calm of a submitted will.

Brethren! it is not sorrow that troubles us so much as resistance to sorrow. It is not pain that lacerates; it cuts, and cuts clean when we keep ourselves still and let it do its merciful ministry upon us. But it is the plunging and struggling under the knife that makes the wounds jagged and hard to heal. The man who bows his will to the Supreme, in quiet acceptance of that which He sends, is never disturbed. Resistance distracts and agitates; acquiescence brings a great calm. Submission is peace. And when we have learned to bend our wills, and let God break them, if that be His will, in order to bend them, then ‘nothing shall by any means hurt us’; and nothing shall by any means trouble us.

If you were ever on board a sailing-ship you know the difference between its motion when it is beating up against the wind and when it is running before it. In the one case all is agitation and uneasiness, in the other all is smooth and frictionless and delicious. So, when we go with the great stream, in not ignoble surrender, then we go quietly. It is God’s great intention, in all that befalls us in this life, to bring our wills into conformity with His. Blessed is the ministry of sorrow and of pain and of loss, if it does that for us, and disastrous and accursed is the ministry of joy and success if it does not. There is no joy but calm, and there is no calm but in-not the annihilation, but-the intensest activity of will, in the act of submitting to that higher will, which is discerned to be ‘good,’ and is gratefully taken as ‘acceptable,’ and will one day be seen to have been ‘perfect.’ The joy and peace of a submitted will are the secret of all true tranquillity.

III. Then again, there comes by such a love the peace of an obedient life.

When once we have taken it [and faithfully adhere to the choice] as our supreme desire to do God’s will, we are delivered from almost all the things that distract and disturb us. Away go all the storms of passion, and we are no more at the mercy of vagrant inclinations. We are no longer agitated by having to consult our own desires, and seeking to find in them compass and guide for our lives-a hopeless attempt! All these sources of agitation are dried up, and the man who has only this desire, to do his duty because God has made it such, has an ever powerful charm, which makes him tranquil whatever befalls.

And as thus we may be delivered from all the agitations and cross-currents of conflicting wishes, inclinations, aims, which otherwise would make a jumble and a chaos of our lives, so, on the other hand, if for us the supreme desire is to obey God, then we are delivered from the other great enemy to tranquillity-namely, anxious forecasting of possible consequences of our actions, which robs so many of us of so many quiet days. ‘I do the little I can do,’ said Faber, ‘and leave the rest with Thee,’ and that will bring peace. Instead of wondering what is to come of this step and that, whether our plans will turn out as we hope, and so being at the mercy of contingencies impossible to be forecasted, we cast all upon Him and say, ‘I have nothing to do with the far end of my actions. Thou givest them a body as it has pleased Thee. I have to do with this end of my actions-their motive; and I will make that right, and then it is Thy business to make the rest right.’ And so, ‘great peace have they which love Thy law.’

An obedient life not only delivers us from the distractions of miscellaneous desires, and from the anxiety of unforeseen results, but it contributes to tranquillity in another way. The thing that makes us most uneasy is either sin done or duty neglected. Either of these, however small it may appear, is like a horse-hair upon the sheets of a bed, or a little wrinkle in that on which a man lies, disturbing all his repose. No man is really at rest unless his conscience is clear. ‘The wicked is like the troubled sea, which cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt.’ But if the uttered will of the Lord is our supreme object, then in this direction, too, tranquillity is ours.

IV. Lastly, such a love gives the peace of freedom from temptations.

‘Nothing shall offend them.’ ‘There shall be no stumbling-block to them.’ The higher love casts out the lower. It is well, when, by reinforcing conscience by considerations of duty, or even sometimes by the lower thoughts of consequences, a man is able to pass by a temptation which appeals to him, and conquers the inclination to go wrong. But it is far better-and it is possible-to be lifted up into such a region as that the temptation does not appeal to him any more.

To take a very homely illustration, whether is it better for a man to steel himself, and walk past the door of a public-house, though the fumes appeal to his sense, and stir his inclinations; or to go past, and never know any attraction to enter? Which is best, to overcome our temptations, or to live away up in the high regions to which the malaria of the swamps never climbs, and where no disease-germs can ever reach?

That elevation is possible for us, if only we keep in close touch with God, and love the law because our hearts are knit to the Law-giver. ‘There shall be no occasion of stumbling in him,’ as the Apostle John varies the expression of my text. Within, there will be no traitors to surrender the camp to the enemy without. So Paul in the letter to the Philippians attributes to ‘the peace of God which passeth understanding’ a military function, and says that it will ‘garrison the heart and mind,’ and keep them ‘in Christ Jesus,’ which is but the Christian way of saying, ‘Great peace have they which love Thy law; and there is no occasion of stumbling in them.’

85)Psalms 121:1-2

Psalms

LOOKING TO THE HILLS

Psa. 121:1 - Psa. 121:2.

The so-called ‘Songs of Degrees,’ of which this psalm is one, are usually, and with great probability, attributed to the times of the Exile. If that be so, we get an appropriate background and setting for the expressions and emotions of this psalm. We see the exile, wearied with the monotony of the long-stretching, flat plains of Babylonia, summoning up before his mind the distant hills where his home was. We see him wondering how he will be able ever to reach that place where his desires are set; and we see him settling down, in hopeful assurance that his effort is not in vain, since his help comes from the Lord. ‘I will lift up my eyes unto the hills’; away out yonder westwards, across the sands, lie the lofty summits of my fatherland that draws me to itself. Then comes a turn of thought, most natural to a mind passionately yearning after a great hope, the very greatness of which makes it hard to keep constant. For the second clause of my text cannot possibly be, as it is translated in our Authorised Version, an affirmation, but must be taken as the Revised Version correctly gives it, a question: ‘I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills. From whence cometh my help?’ How am I to get there? And then comes the final turn of thought: ‘My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.’

So then, there are three things here-the look of longing, the question of weakness, the assurance of faith.

I. The look of longing.

‘I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills’-a resolution, and a resolution born of intense longing. Now the hills that the Psalmist is thinking about were visible from no part of that long-extended plain where he dwelt; and he might have looked till he wore his eyes out, ere he could have seen them on the horizon of sense. But although they were unseen, they were visible to the heart that longed for them. He directs his desires further than the vision of his eyeballs can go. Just as his possible contemporary, Daniel, when he prayed, opened his window towards the Jerusalem that was so far away; and just as Mohammedans still, in every part of the world, when they pray, turn their faces to the *Kaabah* at Mecca, the sacred place to which their prayers are directed; and just as many Jews still, north, east, south or west though they be, face Jerusalem when they offer their supplications-so this psalmist in Babylon, wearied and sick of the low levels that stretched endlessly and monotonously round about him, says, ‘I will look at the things that I cannot see, and lift up my eyes above these lownesses about me, to the loftinesses that sense cannot behold, but which I know to be lying serene and solid beyond the narrowing horizon before me.'

There was the look of longing, and the longing which made non-vision into a look; and there was the effort to divert his attention from the things around him to the things afar off; and there was the realisation, by reason of the effort, of these distant but most certain realities.

Now this Psalmist's home-sickness, if I may so call it, had nothing at all religious about it. It was simply that he wanted to get to his own country-his own, though he had been born in exile; and there was nothing more devout or spiritual or refining about his longing than there is about the wish to return to his native country that any foreigner in a distant land feels. But when we take these words, as we all ought to do, as the motto of our lives, we must necessarily attach the loftiest religious meaning to them. And here start up the plain, simple, but tight-gripping and stimulating questions, 'Do I see the Unseen? Does that far-off, dim land assume substance and reality to me? Do I walk in the light of it raying out to me through earth's darkness? Do I dwell contented with never a glimpse of it?' It comes to be a very sharp question with us professing Christians, whether the horizon of our inward being is limited by, and coterminous with, the horizon of our senses, or whether, far beyond the narrow limits to which these can reach, our spirits' desire stretches boundless. Are, to us, the things unseen the solid things, and the things visible the shadows and the phantoms? The Apocalyptic seer, in his rocky Patmos, was told that he was to be shown 'the things which *are*'; and what was it that he saw? A set of what people call unreal and symbolic visions. 'The things which are,' the world would have said, 'are the rocks that you are standing on, and the sea that is dashing upon them, and all the solid-seeming Roman world, and the power that has got you in its grip. These are the realities, and these things that you think you see, these are the dreams.' But it is exactly the other way. The world and all that is about us, Manchester and its hubbub, warehouses crammed with cloth, and mills full of jennies and throstles-these are the shadows; and the things that only the believing eye beholds, that are wrapped in the invisibility of their own greatness, these, and these only, are the realities. We see with the bodily eyes the shadows on the wall, as it were, but we have to turn round and see with the eyes of our minds the light that flings the shadows. ‘I will lift up my eyes’ from the mud-flats where I live to the hills that I cannot see, and, seeing them, I shall be blessed.

Further, do we know anything of that longing that the Psalmist had? He was perfectly comfortable in Babylon. There was abundance of everything that he wanted for his life. The Jews there were materially quite as well off, and many of them a great deal better off, than ever they had been in their narrow little strip of mountain land, shut in between the desert and the sea. But for all that, fat, wealthy Babylon was not Palestine. So amidst the lush vegetation, the wealth of water and the fertile plains, the Psalmist longed for the mountains, though the mountains are often bare of green things. It was that longing that led to his looking to the hills. Do we know anything of that longing which makes us ‘that are in this tabernacle to groan, being burdened’? ‘Absent from the Lord,’ and ‘present in the body,’ we should not be at ease, nor at home. Unless our Christianity throws us out of harmony and contentment with the present, it is worth very little. And unless we know something of that immortal longing to be nearer to God, and fuller of Christ, and emancipated from sense, and from the burdens and trivialities of life, we have yet to learn what the meaning of ‘walking not after the flesh but after the Spirit’ really is.

Further, do we make any effort like that of this Psalmist, who encourages and stimulates himself by that strong ‘I *will* lift up my eyes’? You will not do it unless you make a dead lift of effort. It is a great deal easier for a man to look at what is at his feet than to crane his neck gazing at the stars.

And so, unless we take up and persevere in maintaining a habitual attitude of stirring up and lifting up ourselves, gravitation will be too much for us, and down will go the head, and down the eyes; and down will go the desires, and we shall be like men that live in some mountainous country, who never lift their gaze to the solemn white summits that travellers come across half Europe to see. Christian men and women too often walk beneath the very peaks of the mountains of God, and rarely lift their vision there. They perhaps do so for an hour and a half on a Sunday morning, or an hour on a Wednesday evening, when there is no other engagement, or for a minute or two in the morning before they hurry down to breakfast, or a minute or two at night when they are dead beat and unfit for anything. For the rest of the time, *there* are the mountains and *here* is the saint, and he seldom or never turns his head to look at them! Is that the sort of Christianity that is likely to be a power in the world, or a blessing to its possessor?

II Further, notice the question of weakness.

‘From whence cometh my help?’ The loftier our ideal, the more painful ought to be our conviction of incapacity to reach it. The Christian man’s one security is in feeling his peril, and the condition of his strength is his acknowledgment and vivid consciousness always of his weakness. The exile in Babylon had a dreary desert, peopled by wild Arab tribes hostile to him, stretching between his present home and that where he desired to be, and it would be difficult for him to get away from the dominion that held him captive, unless by consent of the power of whom he was the vassal. So the more the thought of the mountains of Israel drew the Psalmist, the more there came into his mind the thought, ‘How am I to be made able to reach that blessed soil?’ And surely, if *we* saw, with anything like a worthy apprehension and vision, the greatness of that blessedness that lies yonder for Christian souls, we should feel far more deeply than we do the impossibility, as far as we are concerned, of our ever reaching it. The sense of our own weakness and the consciousness of the perils upon the path ought ever to be present with us all.

Brethren! if, on the one hand, we have to cultivate, for a healthy, vital Christianity, a vision of the mountains of God, on the other hand we have to try to deepen in ourselves the wholesome sense of our own impotence, and the conviction that the dangers on the road are far too great for us to deal with. ‘Blessed is the man that feareth always.’ ‘Pride goeth before destruction.’ Remember the Franco-German war, and how the French Prime Minister said that they were going into it ‘with a light heart,’ and how some of the troops went out of Paris in railway carriages labelled ‘for Berlin’; and when they reached the frontier they were doubled up and crushed in a month. Unless we, when we set ourselves to this warfare, feel the formidableness of the enemy and recognise the weakness of our own arms, there is nothing but defeat for us.

III. Finally, notice the assurance of faith.

The Psalmist asks himself, ‘From whence cometh my help?’ and then the better self answers the questioning, timid self: ‘My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.’ There will be no reception of the divine help unless there is a sense of the need of the divine help. God cannot help me before I am brought to despair of any other help. It is only when a man says, ‘There is none other that fighteth for us, but only Thou, O God!’ that God comes to help.

There is a story in the Book of Chronicles, about one battle in which Judah engaged, of a very singular kind. The first step in the campaign was that the king of Judah gathered all his people together, and prayed to God, and said, ‘We know not what we shall do. We have no strength against this great multitude that cometh against us, but our eyes are unto Thee.’ Then a prophet came and assured him of victory, and next day they arrayed the battle. It was set in this strange fashion: in the forefront were put the priests and Levites, with their instruments of music, and not soldiers with spears and bows, and they marched out to battle with this song, ‘The Lord is gracious and merciful. His mercy endureth for ever.’ Then, without the stroke of sword or thrust of spear, God fought for them and scattered their foes.

‘Which things are an allegory.’ If we recognise our helplessness, God is our help. If we conceit ourselves to be strong, we are weak; if we know ourselves to be impotent, Omnipotence pours itself into us. We read once that Jesus Christ healed ‘them that had need of healing.’ Why does the Evangelist not say, without that periphrasis, ‘healed the sick’? Because he would emphasise, I suppose, amongst other things, the thought that only the sense of need fits for the reception of healing and help.

If, then, we desire that God should be ‘the Strength of our hearts, and our Portion for ever,’ the coming of His help must be wooed and won by our sense of our own impotence, and only they who say, ‘We have no might against this great multitude that cometh against us,’ will ever hear from Him the blessed assurance, ‘The Lord will fight for you.’ ‘Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord!’ So, brethren! the assurance of faith follows the consciousness of weakness, and both together will lead, and nothing else will lead, to the realisation of the vision of faith, and bring us at last, weak as we are, to the hills where the weary and foot-sore flock ‘shall lie down in a good fold, and on fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel.’

86)Psalms 125:1-2

Psalms

MOUNTAINS ROUND MOUNT ZION

Psa. 125:1 - Psa. 125:2.

The so-called ‘Songs of Degrees,’ of which this psalm is one, are probably a pilgrim’s song-book, and possibly date from the period of the restoration of Israel from the Babylonish captivity. In any case, this little psalm looks very much like a record of the impression that was made on the pilgrim, as he first topped the crest of the hill from which he looked on Jerusalem. Two peculiarities of its topographical position are both taken here as symbols of spiritual realities, for the singularity of the situation of the city is that it stands on a mountain and is girdled by mountains. There is a tongue of land or peninsula cut off from the surrounding country by deep ravines, on which are perched the buildings of the city, while across the valley on the eastern side is Olivet, and, on the south, another hill, the so-called ‘Hill of Evil Counsel’; but upon the west and north sides there are no conspicuous summits, though the ground rises. Thus, really, though not apparently, there lie all round the city encircling defences of mountains. Similarly, says the Psalmist, set and steadfast as on a mountain, and compassed about by a protection, like the bastions of the everlasting hills, are they whose trust is in the Lord. Faith, then, gives inward stability, and faith secures an encircling defence.

But, more than that, notice that the mountains encompass a mountain. Faith, in some measure, makes the protected like the Protector. And then, beyond that, notice the two ‘for evers.’ Zion cannot be moved, it ‘abideth for ever,’ and ‘the Lord is about His people from henceforth and for ever.’ To trust in God gives the transitory creature a kind of share in the uncreated eternity of that in which he trusts. Now these are four thoughts worth carrying away with us.

I. The simple act of trust in God brings inward stability.

The word here that is rightly translated ‘trust,’ like most expressions in the Old Testament for religious emotion, has a distinctly metaphorical colouring about it. It literally means to ‘hang upon’ something, and so, beautifully, it tells us what faith is-just hanging upon God. Whoever has laid his tremulous hand on a fixed something, partakes, in the measure in which he does grasp it, of the fixity of that on which he lays hold; so ‘they that trust in the Lord shall be as Mount Zion,’ that stands there summer and winter, day and night, year out and year in, with its strong buttresses and its immovable mass, the very emblem of solidity and stability.

Ay! and this is true about these tremulous hearts of ours. There is one way to make them stable, and only one; and that is that they shall be fastened, as it were, to that which is stable, and so be steadfast because they hold by what is steadfast. There is no other means by which any heart can be made immovable, except in so far as it may be moved by holy impulses and sweet drawings of love and loftinesses of aspiration towards God; there is no other means by which a heart, with all its inward perturbations and all its outward sources of agitation, can be made calm and still, except by living, deep, continual fellowship with Him who is the Eternal Calm, and from whose stable Being we mutable men can derive serenity which is a faint likeness of His immutability. ‘We which have believed do enter into rest.’

How can I still these hot desires of mine, this self-asserting will, all these various passions and emotions which sweep through my soul, and which must not be made mute and dead-or else there will come corruption and stagnation-but must be made so to move as that in their very motion shall be rest? How can I do that? By one way, and one only. Live in fellowship with God, and that will quiet perturbations within and tumults without. The foot of the Master on the midnight stormy sea will smooth the waves which the moonbeams have not power to still, but only to reveal their heavings. ‘They that trust in the Lord shall be like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved,’ and yet is not torpid in its immobility, but full of fertility and of beauty wedded to its steadfastness.

In like manner, the only way by which not only the inward storms can be quieted, but the outward assaults of perturbing circumstances, disasters, changes, difficult duties, and the like, can ever be received with tranquillity is, that they should be received in quiet faith. And, in like manner, the only way by which men can be made steadfast and immovable in brave, pertinacious adherence to the simple law of right, whatsoever temptations may try to draw them aside, and whatsoever frowns may gather upon the face of affairs so as to frighten them from the path of rectitude-the only way by which they can conquer evil, so as not to be hurried into forbidden paths, is this same making sure of their hold upon God, and carrying with them day by day, and moment by moment, into all the little difficulties and small temptations that would lead to trivial faults, the one solemn thought that bids all these back into their lairs-God is near me and I am with Him.

Oh, brethren! if we could live in touch with Him and, as this great word for ‘trust’ suggests, be fastened to Him, as a man, swinging from a cliff over the crawling sea, fathoms below him, clutches the rope that is his safety-then we should live in tranquillity, and be steadfast, immovable.

They say that in the great church of St. Peter there is only one temperature in summer and winter; that the fiercest heat may be pouring down in the colonnades, or the sharpest frost may have silenced the tinkling fall of the fountains in the Piazza; but within the great portal the thermometer stands the same. Thus, if we live in the Temple, and keep inside its doors, the thermometer in our hearts will be fixed; and the anemometer-the measurer of the wind-will point to calm all the year round. ‘They that trust in the Lord shall be as Mount Zion, which cannot be moved.’

II. Again, this same attitude of realising the divine Presence, Will, and Help, will bring around us encircling defences.

I have already said that one peculiarity of the topography of the sacred city is that, at first sight, the metaphor of my text seems to break down, for nobody, looking at the situation of the city with uninstructed eye, would say that it was compassed all around with mountains. On two sides it manifestly is; on two sides it apparently is not, though the land rises on the north and west till it is higher than the tops of the houses. We may not be fanciful in taking that as a parable. ‘As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about His people'-a very real defence, but a defence that it takes an instructed eye to see; no obvious protection, palpable to the vulgar touch, and manifest to the sensuous eye, but something a great deal better than that-a real protection, through which we may be sure that nothing which is evil can ever pass.

Whatsoever does get over the encircling mountains, and reaches us, we may be sure, is not an evil but a very real good. Only we have to interpret the protection on the principles of faith, and not on those of sense. When, then, there come down upon us-as there do upon us all, thank God!-dark days, and sad days, and solitary days, and losses and bitternesses of a thousand kinds, do not let us falter in the belief that if we have our hearts set on God, nothing has come to us but what He has let through. Our sorrows are His angels, though their faces are dark, and though they bear a sword that flames and turns every way. It is hard to believe; it is certainly true, and if we could carry the confidence of it as a continual possession into our ordinary lives, they would be very different from what they are to-day.

III. And then, remember the other thing that I said. My text suggests that- Simple trust in God, in some measure, assimilates the protected to the Protector.

The mountains girdle a mountain, and so my trust opens my heart to the entrance into my heart of something akin to God. As the Apostle Peter, in his brave way, is not afraid to say, it makes us 'partakers of the divine nature.' The immovableness of the trustful man is not all unlike the calmness of the trusted God; and the steadfastness of the one is a reflex of the unchangeableness of the other. We have not understood the meaning of faith, nor have we risen to the experience of its best effects upon ourselves, unless we understand that its great blessing and fruit, and the purpose for which we are commanded to cherish it, is that thereby we may become like Him in whom we trust. 'They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them.' That is the key to the degradations that inhere in idolatrous worship, and that principle is true about all worship-as the god so is every one that trusteth in it. 'As the mountains are round about Mount Zion,' God is round about the people that are becoming Godlike.

IV. Mark further the significant repetition of the same expression in reference to the stability of the man protected and the continuance of the protection.

Both are ‘for ever’. That is to say, if it is true that God is round about me, and that, in some humble measure, my heart has been opening to be calmed and steadied by the influx of His own life, then His ‘for ever’ is my ‘for ever,’ and it cannot be that He should live and I should die. The guarantee of the eternal being of the trustful soul is the experience to-day of the reality of the divine protection. And thus we may face everything-life, death, whatsoever may come, assured that nothing touches the continuity and the perpetuity of the union between the trusting soul and the trusted God. ‘The mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from thee; nor shall the covenant of My peace be removed, saith the Lord.’ The earthquake comes. It shatters a continent and changes the face of nature; makes valleys where there were mountains, and mountains where there were vales, and open seas where there were fertile plains and covers everything with ruin and with rubbish. But there emerge from the cloudy and chaotic confusion the city perched on the hill and its encompassing heights. ‘The world passeth away, and the fashion thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’

87)Psalms 134:1-3

Psalms

THE CHARGE OF THE WATCHERS IN THE TEMPLE

Psa. 134:1 - Psa. 134:3.

This psalm, the shortest but one in the whole Psalter, will be more intelligible if we observe that in the first part of it more than one person is addressed, and in the last verse a single person. It begins with ‘Bless *ye* the Lord’; and the latter words are, ‘The Lord bless *thee*.’ No doubt, when used in the Temple service, the first part was chanted by one half of the choir, and the other part by the other. Who are the persons addressed in the first portion? The answer stands plain in the psalm itself. They are, ‘All ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the House of the Lord.' That is to say, the priests or Levites whose charge it was to patrol the Temple through the hours of night and darkness, to see that all was safe and right there, and to do such other priestly and ministerial work as was needful; they are called upon to 'lift up their hands in'-or rather *towards*-'the Sanctuary, and to bless the Lord.'

The charge is given to these watching priests, these nightly warders, by some single person-we know not whom. Perhaps by the High Priest, perhaps by the captain of their band. They listen to the exhortation to praise, and answer, in the last words of this little psalm, by invoking a blessing on the head of the unnamed speaker who gave the charge. So we have in this antiphonal choral psalm a little snatch of musical ritual falling into two parts-the charge to the watchers and the answering invocation. We may find a good deal of practical teaching in it. Let us look, then, at this choral charge and the response to it.

The charge to the watchers.

We do not know what the office of these watchers was, but in the second Temple, to the period of which this psalm may possibly belong, their duties were carefully defined, and Rabbinical literature has preserved a minute account of the work of the nightly patrol.

According to the authorities, two hundred and forty priests and Levites were the nightly guard, distributed over twenty-one stations. The captain of the guard visited these stations throughout the night with flaming torches before him, and saluted each with 'Peace be unto thee.' If he found the sentinel asleep he beat him with his staff, and had authority to burn his cloak [which the drowsy guard had rolled up for a pillow]. We all remember who warned His disciples to watch, lest coming suddenly He should find them asleep. We may remember, too, the blessing pronounced in the Apocalypse on 'Him who watcheth and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked.' Shortly before daybreak the captain of the guard came, as the Talmud says: 'All times were not equal. Sometimes he came at cockcrow, or near it, before or after it. He went to one of the posts where the priests were stationed, and opened a wicket which led into the court. Here the priests, who marched behind him torch in hand, divided into two companies which went one to the east, and one to the west, carefully ascertaining that all was well. When they met each company reported “It is peace.” Then the duties of the watch were ended, and the priests who were to prepare for the daily sacrifice entered on their tasks.’

Our psalm may be the chant and answering chant with which the nightly charge was given over to the watchers, or it may be, as some commentators suppose, ‘the call and counter-call with which the watchers greeted each other when they met.’

Figure then, to yourselves, the band of white-robed priests gathered in the court of the Temple, their flashing torches touching pillar and angle with strange light, the city sunk in silence and sleep, and ere they part to their posts the chant rung in their ears:-’Bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord which by night stand in the House of the Lord! Lift up your hands to the Sanctuary, and bless the Lord!’ Notice, then, that the priests’ duty is to praise. It is because they are the servants of the Lord that, therefore, it is their business to bless the Lord. It is because they stand in the House of the Lord that it is theirs to bless the Lord. They who are gathered into His House, they who hold communion with Him, they who can feel that the gate of the Father’s dwelling, like the gate of the Father’s heart, is always open to them, they who have been called in from their wanderings in a homeless wilderness, and given a place and a name in His House better than of sons and daughters, have been so blessed in order that, filled with thanksgiving for such an entrance into God’s dwelling and of such an adoption into His family, their silent lips may be filled with thanksgiving and their redeemed hands be uplifted in praise.

So for us Christians. We are servants of the Lord-His priests. That we ‘stand in the House of the Lord’ expresses not only the fact of our great privilege of confiding approach to Him and communion with Him, whereby we may ever abide in the very Holy of Holies and be in the secret place of the Most High, even while we are busy in the world, but it also points to our duty of ministering; for the word ‘stand’ is employed to designate the attendance of the priests in their office, and is almost equivalent to ‘serve.’ ‘To bless the Lord,’ then, is the work to which we are especially called. If we are made a ‘royal priesthood,’ it is that we ‘should show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness into His marvellous light.' The purpose of that full horn of plenty, charged with blessings which God has emptied upon our heads, is that our dumb lips may be touched into thankfulness, because our selfish hearts have been wooed and charmed into love and life.

The Rabbis had a saying that there were two sorts of angels: the angels that served, and the angels that praised; of which, according to their teaching, the latter were the higher in degree. It was only a half-truth, for true service is praise.

But whatever the form in which praise may come, whether it be in the form of vocal thanksgiving, or whether it be the glad surrender of the heart, manifested in the conscious discharge of the most trivial duties, whether we 'lift up our hands in the Sanctuary, and bless the Lord' with them, or whether we turn our hands to the tools of our daily occupation and handle them for His sake, alike we maybe praising Him. And the thing for us to remember is that the place where we, if we are Christians, stand, and the character which we, if we are Christians, sustain, bind us to live blessing and praising Him whilst we live. 'Behold!'-as if He would point to all the crowded list of God's great mercies-'Bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord that . . . stand in the house of the Lord.'

And then there is another point that comes out of this charge to the watchers, viz. the necessity of strenuously trying to unite together service of God and communion with God. These priests might have said-'When we go our rounds through the empty and echoing corridors of the dark Temple, we perform the charge which God gave us; and it needs not that we pray. We are working for Him and doing the work which He appointed us; and that is better than all external ritual.' But this unknown speaker who charges them knew better than that. The priests' service under the Old Covenant was very unspiritual service. Their work was sometimes very repulsive and always purely external work, which might be done without one trace of religion or devotion in it. And so the speaker here warns them, as it were, against the temptation which besets all men that are concerned in the outward service of the house of God, to confound the mere outward service with inward devotion. The charge bids us remember that the more sedulously our hands and thoughts are employed about the externals of religious duties, the more must we see to it that our inmost spirits are baptized into fellowship with God.

It is not enough to patrol the Temple courts unless we 'lift up our hands to the sanctuary,' and with our hearts 'bless the Lord.' And all we who in any degree and any department are officially or semi-officially connected with the work of the Christian Church have very earnestly and especially to lay this to heart. We ministers, deacons, Sunday-school teachers, tract distributors, have much need to take care that we do not confound watching in the courts of the Temple with lifting up our own hands and hearts to our Father that is in heaven; and remember that the more outward work we do, the more inward life we ought to have. The higher the stem of the tree grows and the broader its branches spread the deeper must strike and the wider must extend its underground roots, if it is not to be blown over and become a withered ruin.

And so all you Christian men and women! will you take the plain lesson that is here? All ye that stand ready for service, and doing service, all 'ye that stand in the house of the Lord, behold' your peril and your duty-and 'bless ye the Lord,' and remember that the more work the more prayer to keep it from rotting; the more effort the more communion; and that at the end we shall discover with alarm, and with shame confess 'I kept others' vineyards and my own vineyard have I not kept'; unless, like our Master, we prepare for a day of work and toil in the Temple by a night of quiet communion with our Father on the mountainside.

And then there is another lesson here which I only touch, and that is that all times are times for blessing God. 'Ye who *by night* stand in the house of the Lord, bless the Lord': so though no sacrifice was smoking on the altar, and no choral songs went up from the company of praising priests in the ritual service; and although the nightfall had silenced the worship and scattered the worshippers, yet some low murmur of praise would be echoing through the empty halls all the night long, and the voice of thanksgiving and of blessing would blend with the clank of the priests' feet on the marble pavements as they went their patrolling rounds; and their torches would send up a smoke not less acceptable than the wreathing columns of the incense that had filled the day. And so as in some convents you will find a monk kneeling on the steps of the altar at each hour of the four-and-twenty, adoring the Sacrament exposed upon it, so [but in inmost reality and not in a mere vulgar outside form that means nothing] in the Christian heart there should be a perpetual adoration and a continual praise-a prayer without ceasing. What is it that comes first of all into your minds when you wake in the middle of the night? Yesterday's business, to-morrow's vanities, or God's present love and your dependence upon Him?

In the night of sorrow, too, do our songs go up, and do we hear and obey the charge which commands not only perpetual adoration, but bids us fill the night with music and with praise? Well for us if it be, anticipating the time when 'they rest not day nor night saying, Holy! Holy! Holy!' Now, that is the priests' charge. Look for a moment at the answering blessing: 'The Lord that made heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion.'

'Thee?' Whom? Him who gave the solemn charge. Their obedience to it is implied in the blessing which the priests invoke on the head of the unnamed speaker. So they express their joyful consent to his charge, and their desires for his welfare whose clear voice has summoned them to their high duty and privilege. They obey, and their first prayer is a prayer for him.

May we venture to draw from this interchange of counsel and benediction a simple lesson as to the best form in which mutual goodwill and friendship may express itself? It is by the interchange of stimulus to God's service and praise, and of grateful prayer. He is my best friend who stirs me up to make my whole life a strong sweet song of thanksgiving to God for all His numberless mercies to me. Even if the exhortation becomes rebuke, faithful are such wounds. It is but a shallow affection which can be eloquent on other subjects of common interests, but is dumb on this, the deepest of all; which can counsel wisely and rebuke gently in regard to other matters, but has never a word to say to its dearest concerning duty to the God of all mercies.

And the true response to any loving exhortation to bless God, or any religious impulse which we receive from one another, is to invoke God's blessing on faithful lips that have given us counsel.

This is the best recompense to Christian teachers. If any poor words of ours have come to any of your hearts with power for conviction, or instruction, or encouragement, let your response be, I beseech you, ‘The Lord that hath made heaven and earth bless *thee*.’ We need your prayers. We are weak, often sad, often discouraged. We are tempted ever to handle God’s truth professionally, instead of living on it for ourselves. We are tempted to think that our work is in vain, and to lose heart because we do not see the spiritual results which we would fain reap. And in many an hour of languor and despondency, when the wheels of life turn heavily and the sky seems very far away, and our message seems to have lost its grandeur and certainty to ourselves, and our handling of it looks as if it had been one long failure, then we need and may be helped by the voice of cheer coming through the night from those whom we have tried to counsel: ‘The Lord that made heaven and earth bless thee.’

But observe, further, the two kinds of blessing which answer to one another-God’s blessing of man, and man’s blessing of God. The one is communicative, the other receptive and responsive. The one is the great stream which pours itself over the precipice; the other is the basin into which it falls and the showers of spray which rise from its surface, rainbowed in the sunshine, as the cataract of divine mercies comes down upon it. God blesses us when He gives. We bless God when we thankfully take, and praise the Giver. God’s blessing then, must ever come first. ‘We love Him because He first loved us.’ Ours is but the echo of His, but the acknowledgment of the divine act, which must precede our recognition of it as the dawn must come in order that the birds may wake to sing.

Our highest service is to take the gifts of God, and with glad hearts to praise the Giver.

Our blessings are but words. God’s blessings are realities. We wish good to one another when we bless each other. But He does good to men when He blesses them. Our wishes may be deep and warm, but, alas! how ineffectual. They flutter round the heads of those whom we would bless, but how seldom do they actually rest upon their brows. But God’s blessings are powers. They never miss their mark. Whom He blesses are blessed indeed.

That experience of the ineffectual emptiness of blessings from the most loving hearts gives point to the emphatic designation here of ‘the Lord which made heaven and earth,’ a formula which is common in this connection. It brings before the eye of faith the mighty Name, and the mighty work of Him in whose blessing we shall be rich. He is the Lord, the Eternal and the Covenant King. He has made heaven and earth. If He who lives above all limitations of time, the Source of life, who has the fulness of life in Himself, He who has revealed Himself to Israel and bound Himself to fulfil His covenant with all who plead it, He whose sovereign effortless power willed and spake into being the azure deeps of heaven with all its stars, and the solid earth with its tribes-if He, with such infinite resources to bestow on us as we need, if He blesses us, it will be with no vain wishes nor with the invoking of the goodwill of a higher power, but with the veritable communication of good, and we shall be blessed indeed.

Observe, too, the channel through which God’s blessings come-’out of Zion.’ For the Jew, the fulness of divine glory dwelt between the Cherubim, and the richest of the divine blessings were bestowed on the waiting worshippers there, and no doubt it is still true that God dwells in Zion, and blesses men from thence. The New Testament analogue to the Old Testament Temple is no outward building. That would be absurd confusing of the very nature of type and antitype. A material type must have a spiritual fulfilment. A rite cannot correspond to a rite, nor a building to a building. But the correspondence in Christianity to the Temple where God dwelt, and from which He scattered His blessings is twofold-one proper and original, the other secondary and derived. In the true sense, Jesus Christ is the Temple. In Him God dwelt; in Him, man meets God; in Him was the place of revelation; in Him the place of sacrifice. ‘In this place is one greater than the Temple,’ and the abiding of Jehovah above the mercy-seat was but a material symbol, shadowing and foretelling the true indwelling of all the fulness of the Godhead bodily in that true Tabernacle which the Lord hath pitched and not man. So the great fountain of all possible good and benediction which was opened for the believing Jew in ‘Zion,’ is opened for us in Jesus Christ who stood in the very court of the Temple, and called in tones of clear, loud invitation: ‘If any man thirst let him come unto Me and drink.’ We may each pass through the rent veil into the holiest of all, and there, laying our hand on Jesus, touch God, and opening our empty palm extended to Him, can receive from Him all the blessing that we need.

There is another application of the Temple symbol in the New Testament-a derivative and secondary one-to the Church, that is, to the aggregate of believers. In it God dwells through Christ. Receiving His Spirit, instinct with His life, it is His Body, and as in His earthly life 'He spake of the Temple of His "literal" body,' so now that Church becomes the Temple of God, being builded through the ages. In that Zion all God's best blessings are possessed and stored, that the Church may, by faithful service, impart them to the world. Whosoever desires to possess these blessings must enter thither-not by any ceremonial act, or outward profession, but by becoming one of those who put their whole heart's confidence in Jesus Christ. Within that sacred enclosure we receive whatever divine love and power can give. If we are knit to Christ by our faith, we share in proportion to our faith in all the wealth of blessing with which God has blessed Him. We possess Christ and in Him all. The ancient benediction, which came from the lips of the priestly watchers, and rang through the empty corridors of the darkened Temple, asked for much: 'The Lord who made heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion.' But the Apostolic assurance sounds a yet deeper and more wonderful note of confidence when it proclaims that already, however to ourselves we may seem sad and needy, and however little we may have counted our treasures or made them our own, 'God hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.'

88)Psalms 139:23-24

Psalms

GOD'S SCRUTINY LONGED FOR

Psa. 139:23 - Psa. 139:24.

This psalm begins with perhaps the grandest contemplation of the divine Omniscience that was ever put into words. It is easy to pour out platitudes upon such a subject, but the Psalmist does not content himself with generalities. He gathers all the rays, as it were, into one burning point, and focusses them upon himself: ‘Oh, Lord! Thou hast searched *me*, and known *me*.’ All the more remarkable, then, is it that the psalm should end with asking God to do what it began with declaring that He does. He knows us each, altogether; whether we like it or not, whether we try to hinder it or not, whether we remember it or not. Singular, therefore, is it to find this prayer as the very climax of all the Psalmist’s contemplation. It is more than the ‘searching’ which was spoken of at the beginning, which is desired at the end. It is a process which has for its issue the cleansing of all the evil that is beheld. The prayer of the text is in fact the yearning of the devout soul for purity. I simply wish to consider the series of petitions here, in the hope that we may catch something of their spirit, and that some faint echo of them may sound in our desires. My purpose, then, will be best accomplished if I follow the words of the text, and look at these petitions in the order in which they stand.

I. Note then, first, the longing for the searching of God’s eye.

Now, the word which is here rendered ‘search’ is a very emphatic and picturesque one. It means to dig deep. God is prayed, as it were, to make a cutting into the man, and lay bare his inmost nature, as men do in a railway cutting, layer after layer, going ever deeper down till the bed-rock is reached. ‘Search me’-dig into me, bring the deep-lying parts to light-’and know my heart’; the centre of my personality, my inmost self. That is the prayer, not of fancied fitness to stand investigation, but of lowly acknowledgment. In other words, it is really a form of confession. ‘Search me. I know Thou wilt find evil, but still-search me!’ It seems to me that there are two main ideas in this petition, on each of which I touch briefly.

One is, that it is a glad recognition of a fact which is very terrible to many hearts. The conception of God as ‘knowing me altogether,’ down to the very roots of my being, is either the most blessed or the most unwelcome thought, according to my conception of what His heart to me is. If I think of Him, as so many of us do, as simply the ‘austere man’ who ‘gathers where he did not straw,’ and ‘reaps where he did not sow’; if my thought of God is mainly that of an Investigator and a Judge, with pure eyes and rigid judgment, then I shall be more ignorant of myself, and more confident in myself, than the most of men are when they bethink themselves, if I do not feel that I shrink up like a sensitive plant's leaf when a finger touches it, and would fain curl myself together, and hide from His eye something that I know lurks and poisons at the centre of my being.

The gaoler's eye at the slit in the wall of the solitary prisoner's cell is a constant terror to the man who knows that it may be upon him at every moment, and does not know where the eyehole is, or when the merciless eye may be at it, but if we love one another we do not shrink from opening out our inward baseness to each other. We can venture to tell those that are dear to us as our own hearts the things that lie in our own hearts and make them black and ugly in all eyes but love's; or if we cannot venture to do it wholly, at all events we do it more fully, and more willingly, and with more of something that is almost pleasure in the very act of confession, in proportion as we are bound by the sacred ties of love to the recipient of the confession. There is a joy, and a blessedness deeper than joy, in discovering ourselves, even our unworthy selves, when we know that the eye that looks is a loving eye.

If, then, we have rightly conceived of our relation to Him, that infinite Lover of all our hearts, who looks, 'with other eyes than ours, and makes allowance for us all,' there will be a certain blessedness, almost like joy, in turning ourselves inside out before Him; and in feeling that every corner of our hearts lies naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. 'Search me, O God!' is the voice of confident love, which is sure of the love that contemplates the sinner.

And for us Christian people, to whom all these attributes of Deity are gathered together and brought very near our hearts and our experiences in the person of our Brother Christ, the thought of such knowledge of us becomes still more blessed. Just as the Apostle who was conscious of many sins, could say to his Master, not in petulance, but in deeply-moved confidence, 'Thou knowest all things! Why dost Thou ask me questions? Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest, notwithstanding my denials, that I love Thee,' so may we turn to Jesus Christ, who knows what is in men, and who knows each man, and may be sure that the eye which looks upon our unworthiness pities our sinfulness, and is ready to bear it all away. There is a deeper gladness in pouring out our hearts to our loving Lord than in locking them in sullen silence, with the vain conceit that we thereby hide ourselves from Him. Make a clean breast of your evil, and you will find that the act has in it a blessedness all unique and poignant. ‘Pour out your hearts before Him, O ye people! God is a refuge for us.’

This prayer is also an expression of absolute willingness to submit to the searching process. God is represented in my text as searching the secrets of a man’s heart, not that God may know, but that the man may know. By His Spirit He will come into the innermost corners of our nature, if this prayer is a real expression of our desire, and there the illumination of His presence will flash light into all the dark places of our experience and of our natures. We cannot afford to be in ignorance of these. Pestilence breathes in the unventilated, unlighted, uncleansed recesses of a neglected nature. It is only on condition of the light of God’s convincing Spirit being cast into every part of our being that we shall be able to overcome and annihilate the creeping swarms of microscopic sins that are there, minute but mighty in their myriads to destroy a man’s soul. ‘Search me’ is the expression of a penitence that knows itself to be full of evil, that does not know all the evil of which it is full, that needs enlightenment, that desires deliverance, that is sure of the love that looks, and that so spreads itself, as a bleacher spreads some piece of stained cloth in the gracious sunshine and sprinkles it with the pure water of heaven that all the stains may melt away.

It is useless to ask God to search us if we lock our hearts against His searching. The mere natural exercise, if I may so say, of the divine attribute of Omniscience we cannot hinder. He knows us thereby altogether, whether we like it or not; but the ‘searching’ of my text is one which He cannot put in force without our consent. We have to confess our sins unto the Lord ere this kind of divine scrutiny can be brought to bear. By His natural Omniscience, He knows them altogether, but the seeing which is preparatory to destroying them depends on our willingness to submit ourselves to the often painful process by which He drags our sins to light. Do you want Him to come and search your hearts, and tell you in your spirits what He has found there? Do you desire to know your hidden evil? Then keep close to Him, and tell Him what the sin is which you know to be sin; and ask Him to show you what the sins are which, as yet, you have not grown up to the height of understanding and acknowledging.

II. Next, there follows the longing for the divine testing of our thoughts.

Now you will have observed, I suppose, that in the second clause of my text, ‘try me, and know my thoughts’ the result of the investigation is somewhat different from that of the previous clause. The ‘searching’ issued in a divine knowledge of the heart; the ‘trying,’ or testing, issues in a divine knowledge of the thoughts. The distinction between these two, in the Biblical use of the expressions, is not precisely the same as in our modern popular speech. We are accustomed to talk of the heart as being the seat of emotions, affections, feelings, whereas we relegate thoughts to the head. But Scripture does not quite take that metaphorical view. In it the heart is the centre of personal being, and out of it there come, not only emotions and loves, but ‘thoughts and intents.’ The difference, then, between these two, ‘heart’ and ‘thoughts’ is this, the one is the workshop and the other is the product. The heart is the place where the thoughts are elaborated. So you see the process of the Psalmist’s prayer is from the centre a little outwards, first the inmost self, and then the ‘thoughts,’ meaning thereby the whole web of activities, both intellectual and emotional, of which the heart, in his sense of the word, is the seat and source. In like manner as the field of investigation is somewhat shifted in the second petition, so the manner of investigation is correspondingly different. ‘Search’ is the divine scrutiny of the inner man by the eye; ‘test’ is the trial as metals are tried and proved by the fiery furnace.

So, then, the innermost man is searched by the divine knowledge, and the thoughts which the innermost man produces are tested by the divine providence. And our second petition is for a trial by facts, by external agencies, of the true nature and character of the purposes, desires, designs, intentions, as well as of the affections and loves and joys. That is to say, this second prayer submits absolutely to any discipline, fiery and fierce and bitter, by which the true character of a man’s activities may be made clear to himself. Oh! it is a prayer easily offered; hard to stand by. It is a prayer often answered in ways that drive us almost to despair. It means, ‘Do anything with me, put me into any seven-fold heated furnace of sorrow, do anything that will melt my hardness, and run off my dross, which Thy great ladle will then skim away, that the surface may be clear, and the substance without alloy.’

Do you pray that prayer, brother! knowing all that it means, and being willing to take the answer, in forms that may rack your heart, and sadden your whole lives? If you are wise, you will. Better to go crippled into life than, 'having two hands or two feet, to be cast into hell fire'! Better to be saved though maimed, than to be entire and lost.

'Try me.' It is an awful prayer. Let us not offer it lightly, or unadvisedly; but if we are wise let it be our inmost desire. And when the answer comes, and sorrows fall, do not let us murmur, do not let us kick, do not let us wonder, but let us say, 'Thou art a God that hearest prayer,' and 'I will glorify God in the fires.' Then 'the trial of your faith being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, shall be found unto praise and honour and glory.'

III. The next petition of my text is a longing for the casting out of evil.

'See if there be any wicked way in me.' Now, that *if* is not the 'if' of doubt whether any such 'ways' are in the man, but it is the 'if' of consciousness that there are such, though what they are he may not clearly discern. And so, it is the 'if' of humility-knowing that he is not justified because he knows nothing against himself-and not the 'if' of presumption.

I have only time to observe here, in a word or two, what would well deserve more expanded treatment, and that is, the very striking and significant expression here employed for this evil way that the Psalmist desires to be detected, that it may be cast out. The word rendered 'wicked'-or more properly, wickedness-is literally 'forced labour,' which was, in old times, and still is in some countries, laid upon the inhabitants at the command of authority; and then, because forced labour is grievous labour, it comes to mean sorrow. So the 'way of wickedness' that the Psalmist feels is in him is the way of compulsory service, and the way that leads to sorrow. That is to say, all sin is slavery, and all sin leads to a bitter and a bad end, and its fruit is death. And so, because the man feels that his better self is in bondage, and shudderingly apprehends that the courses which he pursues can only end in bitterness and misery, he turns to God and asks Him that He would enlighten him as to what these fatal courses are. 'See if there be any way of wickedness in me,' because he is quite sure that the evil which God sees, God will help him to overcome.

Ah, friends! we all have such ways deeply lodged within us, and we do not always know that we have; but if we will turn ourselves to Him, He will prevent our ‘condemning ourselves in things that we allow’ and increasing the sensitiveness of our consciences, He will teach us that many things that we did not know to be wrong are harmful.

As soon as we learn that they are, He will help us to cast them out. God has nothing to do with our evil but to fight against it. Be sure of this, that whatsoever evil in us He thus searches and shows us. He does so in order to fling it from us. He goes down into the cellars of our hearts, with the candle of His Spirit in His hand, in order that He may lay hold of all the explosives there, and having drenched them so that they shall not catch fire, may cast them clean out so that they may not blow us to destruction.

IV. The last petition of my text is for guidance in ‘the everlasting way.’

The ‘ways of wickedness’ are in us; the ‘way everlasting’ we need to be led into. That is to say, naturally we incline to evil; it must be the divine hand and the divine Spirit that lead our feet in the paths of righteousness. When we ask Him to ‘guide us in the way everlasting,’ we ask that we may know what is duty, and that we may incline to do it. And He answers it by the gift of His divine Spirit, by the quickening of our consciences, by bringing nearer to our hearts the great Example who has left us His footsteps as a legacy that we may tread in them.

Whosoever walks in Christ’s footsteps is walking in ‘the way everlasting,’ for that path is rightly so named which leads to eternal blessedness. It is everlasting, too, inasmuch as nothing of human effort or work abides except that which is in conformity with the will of God, and inasmuch as it, and it alone, is not broken short off by death, but runs, borne upon one mighty arch that spans the gorge, clean across the black abyss, and continues straight on in the same course, only with a swifter upward gradient, through all the ages of eternity. The man who here has lived for God will live yonder as he has lived here, only more completely and more joyously for ever. ‘A highway shall be there, and a way, and the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs, and everlasting joy upon their heads.’

89)Psalms 141:2

Psalms

THE INCENSE OF PRAYER

Psa. 141:2.

The place which this psalm occupies in the Psalter, very near its end, makes it probable that it is considerably later in date than the prior portions of the collection. But the Psalmist, who here penetrates to the inmost meaning of the symbolic sacrificial worship of the Old Testament, was not helped to his clear-sightedness by his date, but by his devotion. For throughout the Old Testament you find side by side these two trends of thought-a scrupulous carefulness for the observance of all the requirements of ritual worship, and a clear-eyed recognition that it was all external and symbolical and prophetic. Who was it that said ‘Obedience is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams’? Samuel, away back in the times when many scholars tell us that the loftier conceptions of worship had not yet emerged. Similar utterances are scattered throughout the Old Testament, and the prominence given to the more spiritual side depends not on the speaker’s date but on his disposition and devotion. So here this Psalmist, because his soul was filled with true longings after God, passes clear through the externals and says, ‘Here am I with no incense, but I have brought my prayer. I am empty-handed, but because my hands are empty, I lift them up to Thee; and Thou dost accept them, as if they were-yea, rather than if they were-filled with the most elaborate and costly sacrifices.’

So here are two thoughts suggested, which sound mere commonplace, but if we realised them, in our religious life, that life would be revolutionised; first, the incense of prayer; second, the sacrifice of the empty-handed. Let us look at these two points.

I. The Incense of Prayer. ‘Let my prayer come before Thee as incense.’

Now, that symbol of incense is thus used in many places in Scripture. I need only remind you of one or two instances. You remember how, when the father of John the Baptist went into the Holy Place, as was his priestly duty at the time of the offering of the evening oblation, the whole multitude were in the Outer Court praying; he in the Inner Court, presenting the symbolical worship, and they, without, offering the real. Then, if we turn to the grand imagery of the Book of the Revelation, where we find the heavenly temple opened up to our reverent gaze, we read that the elders, the representatives of redeemed humanity, have ‘golden bowls full of odours, which are the prayers of the saints.’ So there is no fancifulness in interpreting the incense of the ancient ritual as meaning simply the prayers of devout hearts. Of course there has been a great deal of nonsense talked about the symbolical signification of these Old Testament rites, and there is need for sober sense to put the rein upon a vivid imagination in interpreting these; still clear utterances of Scripture as well as this verse itself remove all need for hesitation to accept this meaning of the symbol.

Now, let me remind you of the place which the Altar of Incense occupied. The Temple was divided into three courts, the Outer Court, the Holy Place, and the Holiest of All. The Altar of Incense stood in the second of these, the Holy Place; the Altar of Burnt Offering stood in the court without. It was not until that Altar, with its expiatory sacrifice, had been passed, that one could enter into the Holy Place, where the Altar of Incense stood. There were three pieces of furniture in that Place, the Altar of Incense, the Golden Candlestick, and the Table of the Shewbread. Of these three, the Altar of Incense stood in the centre. Twice a day the incense was kindled upon it by a priest, by means of live coals brought from the Altar of Burnt Offering in the Outer Court, and, thus kindled, the wreaths of fragrant smoke ascended on high. All day long the incense smouldered upon the altar; twice a day it was kindled into a bright flame.

Now, if we take these things with us, we can understand a little more of the depth and beauty of this prayer, and see how much it tells us of what we, as the priests of the most High God-which we are, if we are Christian people at all-ought to have in our censers.

I need not dwell upon the careful and sedulous preparation from pure spices which went to the making of the incense. So we have to prepare ourselves by sedulous purity if there is to be any life or power in our devotions. But I pass from that, and ask you to think of the lovely picture of true devoutness given in that inflamed incense, wreathing in coils of fragrance up to the heavens. Prayer is more than petition. It is the going up of the whole soul towards God. Brother! do you know anything of that instinctive and spontaneous rising up of desire and aspiration and faith and love, up and up and up, until they reach Him? Do you realise that just in the measure in which we set our minds as well as our affections, and our affections as well as our minds, on the things which are above, just to that extent, and not one hairsbreadth further, have we the right to call ourselves Christians at all? I fear me that for the great mass of Christian professors the great bulk of their lives creeps along the low levels like the mists in winter, that hug the marshes instead of rising, swirling up like an incense cloud, impelled by nothing but the fire in the censer up and up towards God. Let us each ask the question for himself, Is my prayer '*directed*'-as is the true meaning of the Hebrew word-'before Thee as incense'?

Remember, too, that the incense lay dead, unfragrant, and with no capacity of soaring, till it was kindled; that is to say, unless there is a flame in my heart there will be no rising of my aspirations to God. Cold prayers do not go up more than a foot or two above the ground; they have no power to soar. There must be the inflaming before there can be the mounting of the aspiration. You cannot get a balloon to go up unless the gas within it is warmer than the atmosphere round it. It is because we are habitually such tepid Christians that we are so tongue-tied in prayer.

Where was the incense kindled from? From coals brought from the Altar of Burnt Offering in the outer court; that is to say, light the fire in your heart with a coal brought from Christ's sacrifice, and then it will flame; and only then will love well upwards and desires be set on the things above. The beginning of Christian fervour lies in the habitual realising as a fact of the great love which 'loved me and gave itself for me.' There is no patent way of getting a vivid Christian experience except the old way of clinging close to Jesus Christ the Saviour; and in order to do that, we have to think about Him, as well as to feel about Him, a great deal more than I fear the most of us do.

Further, does not this lovely symbol of my text suggest to us a glorious thought, the acceptableness even of our poor prayers, if they come from hearts inflamed with love because of Christ's great redeeming love? The Psalmist, thinking humbly of himself and of the worth of anything that he can bring, says, 'Let my prayer come before Thee as incense,' an 'odour of a sweet smell, acceptable to God'; yes, even our prayers will be sweet to Him if they are prayers of true aspiration and mounting faith, leaping from a kindled heart, kindled at the great flame of Christ's love.

Were you ever in a Roman Catholic cathedral? Did you ever see there the little boys that carry the censers, swinging them backwards and forwards every now and then, and by means of the silver chains lifting the covers? What is that for? Because the incense would go out unless the air was let into it. So a constant effort is needed in order to keep the incense of our prayers alight. We have to swing the censer to get rid of the things that make our hearts cold; we have to stir the fire, and only so shall we keep up our devotion. Remember the incense burned all day long on the altar; though perhaps but smouldering, like the banked-up fires in the furnaces of a steamer that lies at anchor, still the glow was there; and twice a day there came the priest with his pan full of fresh glowing coals from the altar in the Outer Court, and kindled it up into a flame once more. Which things are thus far an allegory that our devotion is to be diffused throughout our lives in a lambent glow, and if it is, it will have to be fed by special acts of worship day by day.

You hear people talk of not caring about times and seasons of prayer, and of the beauty of making all life a prayer. Amen! I say so too. But depend upon it that there will never be devotion diffused through life unless there is devotion concentrated at points in the life. There must be reservoirs as well as pipes in order to supply the water through the whole city. So the incense is perpetually to be heaped on the Altar of Incense, but also it is to be stirred to a fragrant blaze and fed, morning and evening, by fresh coals from the altar.

II. Now let me say a word about the other thought here-the sacrifice of the empty-handed.

'The lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.' In accordance with the genius of Hebrew poetry the same general idea is repeated in the second member of the parallelism, but with modifications. What is implied in likening the uplifted empty hands to the evening sacrifice? First, it is a confession of impotent emptiness, a lifting up of expectant hands to be filled with the gift from God. And, says this Psalmist, ‘Because I bring nothing in my hand, Thou dost accept me, as if I came laden with offerings.’ That is just a picturesque way of putting a familiar, threadbare truth, which, threadbare as it is, needs to be laid to heart a great deal more by us, that our true worship and truest honour of God lies not in giving but in taking. ‘He is not worshipped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, seeing that He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.’ That one truth, Paul felt on Mars Hill, was sure enough to make all the temples and statues by which he was surrounded crumble into nothingness. But it does not merely destroy idolatry. It cuts up by the root much of what we call Christian worship. How many people worship because they think they ought? How many people talk about Christian worship as being a duty-’Our duty we have now performed’? How many have never had a glimpse of this thought, that God wills us to draw near to Him, not because it pleases Him but because it blesses us, and that we are to worship, not in order that we may bring anything, either the sacrifices of bulls and goats, or the more refined ones that we bring nowadays, but in order that, bringing our emptiness into touch with His infinite fulness, as much of that fulness as we need to make us full, and as much of that blessedness as we need to make us blessed, may pass into our lives. Oh! if we understand ‘the giving God,’ as James calls Him in his letter; and if we had learned the old lesson of that fiftieth Psalm, ‘If I were hungry I would not tell thee. . . . Will I eat the flesh of bulls and drink the blood of goats? He that offereth praise glorifieth Me, and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I show the salvation of God’-if we had learned that, and laid it to heart, and applied it to our own worship and our lives, mountains of misconception would be lifted away from many hearts. In our service we do not need to bring any merit of our own. This great principle destroys not only the gross externalities of heathen sacrifice, and the notion that worship is a duty, but it destroys the other notion of our having to bring anything to deserve God’s gifts. And so it is an encouragement to us when we feel ourselves to be what we are, and what we should always feel ourselves to be, empty-handed, coming to Him not only with hearts that aspire like incense, but with petitions that confess our need, and cast ourselves upon His grace. See that you desire what God wishes to give; see that you go to Him for what He does give. See that you give to Him the only thing that He does wish, or that it lies in your power to give, and that is yourself.

Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy Cross I cling.

‘Let the lifting of my hands be as the evening sacrifice’; as the Psalmist has it in another place, ‘What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits?’-it is not a question of rendering, but ‘I will the cup of salvation.’ Taking is our truest worship, and the lifting up of empty, expectant hands is, in God’s sight, as the evening sacrifice.

90)Psalms 143:10

Psalms

THE PRAYER OF PRAYERS

Psa. 143:10.

These two clauses mean substantially the same thing. The Psalmist’s longings are expressed in the first of them in plain words, and in the second in a figure. ‘To do God’s will’ is to be in ‘the land of uprightness.’ That phrase, in its literal application, means a stretch of level country, and hence is naturally employed as an emblem of a moral or religious condition. A life of obedience to the will of God is likened to some far stretching plain, easy to traverse, broken by no barren mountains or frowning cliffs, but basking, peaceful and fruitful, beneath the smile of God. Into such a garden of the Lord the Psalmist prays to be led.

In each case his prayer is based upon a motive or plea. ‘Thou art my God’; his faith apprehends a personal bond between him and God, and feels that that bond obliges God to teach him His will. If we adopt the reading in our Bibles of our second clause a still deeper and more wonderful plea is presented there. ‘Thy Spirit is good,’ and therefore the trusting spirit has a right to ask to be made good likewise. The relation of the believing spirit to God not only obliges God to teach it His will, but to make it partaker of His own image and conformed to His own purity. So high on wings of faith and desire soared this man, who, at the beginning of his psalm, was crushed to the dust by enemies and by dangers. So high we may rise by like means.

I. Notice, then, first, the supreme desire of the devout soul.

We do not know who wrote this psalm. The superscription says that it was David’s, and although its place in the Psalter seems to suggest another author, the peculiar fervour and closeness of intimacy with God which breathes through it are like the Davidic psalms, and seem to confirm the superscription. If so, it will naturally fall into its place with the others which were pressed from his heart by the rebellion of Absalom. But be that as it may, whosoever wrote the psalm, was a man in extremest misery and peril, and as he says of himself, ‘persecuted,’ ‘overwhelmed,’ ‘desolate.’ The tempest blows him to the Throne of God, and when he is there, what does he ask? Deliverance? Scarcely. In one clause, and again at the end, as if by a kind of after-thought, he asks for the removal of the calamities. But the main burden of his prayer is for a closer knowledge of God, the sound of His lovingkindness in his inward ear, light to show him the way wherein he should walk, and the sweet sunshine of God’s face upon his heart. There is a better thing to ask than exemption from sorrows, even grace to bear them rightly. The supreme desire of the devout soul is practical conformity to the will of God. For the prayer of our text is not ‘Teach me to *know* Thy will.’ The Psalmist, indeed, has asked *that* in a previous clause-’Cause me to know the way wherein I should walk.’ But knowledge is not all that we need, and the gulf between knowledge and practice is so deep that after we have prayed that we may be caused to know the way, and have received the answer, there still remains the need for God’s help that knowledge may become life, and that all which we understand we may do. To such practical conformity to the will of God all other aspects of religion are meant to be subservient.

Christianity is a revelation of truth, but to accept it as such is not enough. Christianity brings to me exemption from punishment, escape from hell, deliverance from condemnation and guilt, and by some of us, that is apt to be regarded as the whole Gospel; but pardon is only a means to an end. Christianity brings to us the possibility of indulgence in sweet and blessed emotions, and a fervour of feeling which to experience is the ante-past of heaven, and for some of us, all our religion goes off in vaporous emotion; but feeling alone is not Christianity. Our religion brings to us sweet and gracious consolations, but it is a poor affair if we only use it as an anodyne and a comfort. Our Christianity brings to us glorious hopes that flash lustre into the darkness, and make the solitude of the grave companionship, and the end of earth the beginning of life, but it is a poor affair if the mightiest operation of our religion be relegated to a future, and flung on to the close. All these things, the truth which the Gospel brings, the pardon and peace of conscience which it ensures, the joyful emotion which it sets loose from the ice of indifference, the sweet consolations with which it pillows the weary head and bandages the bleeding heart, and the great hopes which flash light into glazing eyes, and make the end glorious with the rays of a beginning, and the western heaven bright with the promise of a new day-all these things are but subservient means to this highest purpose, that we should do the will of God, and be conformed to His image. They whose religion has not reached that apex have yet to understand its highest meaning. The river of the water of life that proceeds from the Throne of God and the Lamb is not sent merely to refresh thirsty lips, and to bring music into the silence of a waterless desert, but it is sent to drive the wheels of life. Action, not thought, is the end of God's revelation, and the perfecting of man.

But, then, let us remember that we shall most imperfectly apprehend the whole sweep and blessedness of this great supreme aim of the devout soul, if we regard this doing of God's will as merely the external act of obedience to an external command. Simple doing is not enough; the deed must be the fruit of love. The aim of the Christian life is not obedience to a law that is recognised as authoritative, but joyful moulding of ourselves after a law that is felt to be sweet and loving. 'I delight to do Thy will, yea! Thy law is within my heart.' Only when thus the will yields itself in loving and glad conformity to the will of God is true obedience possible for us. Brother! is that your Christianity? Do you desire, more than anything besides, that what He wills you should will, and that His law should be stamped upon your hearts, and all your rebellious desires and purposes should be brought into a sweet captivity which is freedom, and an obedience to Christ which is kingship over the universe and yourselves?

II. Note, secondly, the divine teaching and touch which are required for this conformity.

The Psalmist betakes himself to prayer, because he knows that of himself he cannot bring his will into this attitude of harmonious submission. And his prayer for ‘teaching’ is deepened in the second clause of our text into a petition, which is substantially the same in meaning, but yet sets the felt need and the coveted help in a still more striking light, in its cry for the touch of God’s good spirit to guide, as by a hand grasping the Psalmist’s hand, into the paths of obedience.

We may learn from this prayer, then, that practical conformity to God’s will can never be attained by our own efforts. Remember all the hindrances that rise between us and it; these wild passions of ours, this obstinate gravitating of tastes and desires towards earth, these animal necessities, these spiritual perversities, which make up so much of us all-how can we coerce these into submission? Our better selves sit within like some prisoned king, surrounded and ‘fooled by the rebel powers’ of his revolted subjects; and our best recourse is to send an embassy to the Over-lord, the Sovereign King, praying Him to come to our help. We cannot will to will as God wills, but we can turn ourselves to Him, and ask Him to put the power within us which shall subdue the evil, conquer the rebels, and make us masters of our own else anarchic and troubled spirits. For all honest attempts to make the will of God our wills, the one secret of success is confident and continual appeal to Him. A man must have gone a very little way, very superficially and perfunctorily, on the path of seeking to make himself what he ought to be, unless he has found out that he cannot do it, and unless he has found out that there is only one way to do it, and that is to go to God and say, ‘O Lord! I am baffled and beaten. I put the reins into Thy hand; do Thou inspire and direct and sanctify.’

That practical conformity to the will of God requires divine teaching, but yet that teaching must be no outward thing. It is not enough that we should have communicated to us, as from without, the clearest knowledge of what we ought to be. There must be more than that. Our Psalmist’s prayer was a prophecy. He said, ‘Teach me to do Thy will.’ And he thought, no doubt, of an inward teaching which should mould his nature as well as enlighten it; of the communication of impulses as well as of conceptions; of something which should make him love the divine will, as well as of something which should make him know it.

You and I have Jesus Christ for our Teacher, the answer to the psalm. His teaching is inward and deep and real, and answers to all the necessities of the case. We have His example to stand as our perfect law. If we want to know what is God's will, we have only to turn to that life; and however different from ours His may have been in its outward circumstances, and however fragmentary and brief its records in the Gospels may sometimes seem to us, yet in these little booklets, telling of the quiet life of the carpenter's Son, there is guidance for every man and woman in all circumstances, however complicated, and we do not need anything more to teach us what God's will is than the life of Jesus Christ. His teaching goes deeper than example. He comes into our hearts, He moulds our wills. His teaching is by inward impulses and communications of desire and power to do, as well as of light to know. A law has been given which can give life. As the modeller will take a piece of wax into his hand, and by warmth and manipulation make it soft and pliable, so Jesus Christ, if we let Him, will take our hard hearts into His hands, and by gentle, loving, subtle touches, will shape them into the pattern of His own perfect beauty, and will mould all their vagrant inclinations and aberrant distortions into 'one immortal feature of loveliness and perfection.' 'The *grace of God* that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men *teaching* that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly,' controlling ourselves, 'righteously,' fulfilling all our obligations to our fellows, 'and godly,' referring everything to Him, 'in this present world.'

That practical conformity to the divine will requires, still further, the operation of the divine Spirit as our Guide. 'Thy Spirit is good lead me into the land of uprightness.' There is only one power that can draw us out of the far-off land of rebellious disobedience, where the prodigals and the swine's husks and the famine and the rags are, into the 'land of uprightness,' and that is, the communicated Spirit of God, which is given to all them that desire Him, and will lead them in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. It is He that works in us, the willing and the doing, according to His own good pleasure. 'He shall guide you,' said the Master, 'into all truth'-not merely into its knowledge, but into its performance, not merely into truth of conception, but into truth of practice, which is righteousness, and the fulfilling of the Law.

III. Lastly, note the divine guarantee that this practical conformity shall be ours.

The Psalmist pleads with God a double motive-His relation to us and His own perfectness, ‘Thou art my God; therefore teach me.’ ‘Thy Spirit is good; therefore lead me into the land of uprightness.’ I can but glance for a moment at these two pleas of the prayer.

Note, then, first, God’s personal relation to the devout soul, as the guarantee that that soul shall be taught, not merely to know, but also to do His will. If He be ‘my God,’ there can be no deeper desire in His heart, than that His will should be my will. And this He desires, not from any masterfulness or love of dominion, but only from love to us. If He be my God, and therefore longing to have me obedient, He will not withhold what is needed to make me so. God is no hard Taskmaster who sets us to make bricks without straw. Whatsoever He commands He gives, and His commandments are always second and His gifts first. He bestows Himself and then He says, ‘For the love’s sake, do My will.’ Be sure that the sacred bond which knits us to Him is regarded by Him, the faithful Creator, as an obligation which He recognises and respects and will discharge. We have a right to go to Him and to say to Him, ‘Thou art my God; and Thou wilt not be what Thou art, nor do what Thou hast pledged Thyself to do, unless Thou makest me to know and to do Thy will.’

And on the other hand, if we have taken Him for ours, and have the bond knit from our side as well as from His, then the fact of our faith gives us a claim on Him which He is sure to honour. The soul that can say, ‘I have taken Thee for mine,’ has a hold on God which God is only too glad to recognise and to vindicate. And whoever, humbly trusting to that great Father in the heavens, feels that he belongs to God, and that God belongs to him, is warranted in praying, ‘Teach me, and make me, to do Thy will,’ and in being confident of an answer.

And there is the other plea with Him and guarantee for us, drawn from God’s own moral character and perfectness. The last clause of my text may either be read as our Bible has it, ‘Thy Spirit is good; lead me,’ or ‘Let Thy good Spirit lead me.’ In either case the goodness of the divine Spirit is the plea on which the prayer is grounded. The goodness here referred to is, as I take it, not merely beneficence and kindliness, but rather goodness in its broader and loftier sense of perfect moral purity. So that the thought just comes to this-we have the right to expect that we shall be made participant of the divine nature for so sweet, so deep, so tender is the tie that knits a devout soul to God, that nothing short of conformity to the perfect purity of God can satisfy the aspirations of the creature, or discharge the obligations of the Creator.

It is a daring thought. The Psalmist’s desire was a prophecy. The New Testament vindicates and fulfils it when it says ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ Since He now dwells in ‘the land of uprightness,’ who once dwelt among us in this weary world of confusion and of sin, then we one day shall be with Him. Christ’s heart cannot be satisfied, Christ’s Cross cannot be rewarded, the divine nature cannot be at rest, the purpose of redemption cannot be accomplished, until all who have trusted in Christ be partakers of divine purity, and all the wanderers be led by devious and yet by right paths, by crooked and yet by straight ways, by places rough and yet smooth, into ‘the land of uprightness.’ Where and what He is, there and that shall also His servants be.

My brother! if to do the will of God is to dwell in the land of uprightness, disobedience is to dwell in a dry and thirsty land, barren and dreary, horrid with frowning rocks and jagged cliffs, where every stone cuts the feet and every step is a blunder, and all the paths end at last on the edge of an abyss, and crumble into nothingness beneath the despairing foot that treads them. Do you see to it that you walk in ways of righteousness which are paths of peace; and look for all the help you need, with assured faith, to Him who shall ‘guide us by His counsel and afterwards receive us to His glory.’

91)Psalms 145:16

THE SATISFIER OF ALL DESIRES

Psa. 145:16, Psa. 145:19.

You observe the recurrence, in these two verses, of the one emphatic word 'desire.' Its repetition evidently shows that the Psalmist wishes to run a parallel between God's dealings in two regions. The same beneficence works in both. Here is the true extension of natural law to the spiritual world. It is the same teaching to which our Lord has given immortal and inimitable utterance, when He says, 'Your heavenly Father feedeth them.' And so we are entitled to look on all the wonders of creation, and to find in them buttresses which may support the edifice of our faith, and to believe that wherever there is a mouth God sends food to fill it. 'Thou openest Thine hand'-that is all-'and satisfiest the desire of every living thing.' But to fulfil the desires of them who are not only 'living things,' but 'who fear' Him, is it such a simple task? Sometimes more is wanted than an open hand before that can be accomplished. So, looking not only at the words I have read, but at the whole of their setting, which is influenced by the thought of this parallelism, we see here two sets of pensioners, two kinds of wants, two forms of appeal, two processes of satisfaction.

I. Two kinds of pensioners.

'Every living thing-' life makes a claim on God, and whatever desires arise in the living creature by reason of its life, God would be untrue to Himself, a cruel Parent, an unnatural Father, if He did not satisfy them. We do not half enough realise the fact that the condescension of creation lies not only in the act of creating, but in the willing acceptance by the Creator of the bonds under which He thereby lays Himself; obliging Himself to see to the creatures that He has chosen to make. And so, as one of the New Testament writers puts it, in his simple way, with a profound truth, 'He is a faithful Creator'; and wherever there is a creature that He has made to need anything, He has thereby said, 'As I live, that creature shall have what it needs.'

Then, take the other class, 'them that fear Him'; or as they are described in the context-by contrast with 'the wicked who are destroyed'-'the righteous.' That is to say, whilst, because we are living things, like the bee and the worm, we have a claim on God precisely parallel with theirs for what we may need by reason of His gift, which we never asked for, His gift of life, we shall have a similar but higher claim on Him if we are ‘they that fear Him’ with that loving reverence which has no torment in it, and that love Him with that reverential affection which has no presumption in it, and whose love and fear coalesce in making them long to be righteous like the Object of their love, to be holy like the Object of their fear. And just as the fact of physical life binds God to care for it, and to give all that is needed for its health, growth, blessedness, so the fact of man’s having in his heart the faintest tremor of reverential dread, the feeblest aspiration of outgoing affection, the most faltering desire after purity of life and conduct, binds God to answer these according to the man’s need. Of all incredibilities in the world, there is nothing more incredible, because there is nothing more contrary to the very depths of the divine nature, than that desires, longings, expectations, which are the direct result of the love and fear of God, and the hunger and thirst after righteousness, should not be answered.

Now that is a very wide principle, and I do not believe that it is trusted enough by many. It comes to this-wherever you find in people a confidence which grows with their love of God, be sure that there is, somewhere or other in the universe of things, that which answers it.

Take a case. If there was not a word in the New Testament about Jesus Christ’s resurrection, the fact that just in proportion as men grow in devotion, in love of God, in fear of Him, in longing to be good and to appear like Him, in that same proportion does their conviction that there must be a life beyond the grave become firm and certain-that fact would be enough to make any one who believed in God sure that the hope thus rooted in love to Him, and fed by everything that draws us nearer to Him, could not be a delusion, nor be destined to be left unfulfilled.

And we might go round the whole circle of dim religious aspirations and desires, and find in all of them illustrations of the principle so profoundly and so simply put in our psalm, that the same Love which, in the realm of the physical world, binds itself to satisfy the life which it imparts, is at work in the higher regions, and will ‘fulfil the desires of them that fear Him.’

II. Again, there are two sets of needs.

The first of them is very easily disposed of. ‘The eyes of all wait upon Thee, and Thou givest them their meat.’ That is all. Feed the beast, and give it the other things necessary for its physical existence, and there is no more to be done. But there is more wanted for the desires of the men that love and fear God. These are glanced at in the context, ‘He also will hear their cry, and will save them’; ‘the Lord preserveth all them that love Him.’ That is to say, there are deeper needs in our hearts and lives than any that are known amongst the lower creatures. Evils, dangers inward and outward, sorrows, disappointments, losses of all sorts shadow our lives, in a fashion which the happy, careless life of field and forest knows nothing about. Give them their meat, and they curl themselves up and lie down to sleep, satisfied. Man longs for something more and needs something more.

‘He will save them.’ Now, I do not suppose that ‘save’ here is employed in its full New Testament sense, but it approximates to that sense. And, further, there are other aspects of our needs set forth in the context, on which I briefly touch. Do not let us vulgarise such a saying as this of my text, ‘He will fulfil the desire of them that fear Him,’ as if it only meant that if a man fears God he may set his longing upon any outward thing, and be sure to get it. There is nothing so poor, so unworthy as that promised in Scripture. For one thing, it is not true; for another, it would not be good if it were. The way to spoil children is not the way to perfect saints; and to give them what they want because they want it, is the sure way to spoil children of all ages. We may be quite certain that our heavenly Father is not going to do that. The promise here means something far nobler and loftier. The fact of creation binds God to supply all the wants which spring from life. The fact of our loving and fearing Him binds Him to supply all the wants which spring from our love and fear. And it is these desires which the Psalmist is thinking of.

What is the object of desire to a man who loves God? God. What is the object of desire to a man who fears Him? God. What is the object of desire to a righteous man? Righteousness. And these are the desires which God is sure to fulfil to us. Therefore, there is only one region in which it is safe and wise to cherish longings, and it is the region of the spiritual life where God imparts Himself. Everywhere else there will be disappointments-thank Him for them. Nowhere else is it absolutely true that He will ‘fulfil the desires of them that fear Him.’ But in this region it is. Whatever any of us desire to have of God, we are sure to get. We open our mouths and He fills them. In the Christian life desire is the measure of possession, and to long is to have. And there is nowhere else where it is absolutely, unconditionally, and universally true that to wish is to possess, and to ask is to have.

Oh! then, is it not a foolish thing for us to worry and torture and sweat, in order to win for ourselves for a little while the uncertain possession of incomplete bliss? Would it not be wiser, instead of letting the current of our desires dribble itself away through a thousand channels in the sand and get lost, to gather it all into one great stream which is sure to find its way to the broad ocean? ‘Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart,’ for these will then be after Himself, and Himself only.

III. Further, there are here two forms of appeal.

‘The eyes of all wait upon Thee.’ That is beautiful! The dumb look of the unconscious creature, like that of a dog looking up in its master’s face for a crust, makes appeal to God, and He answers that. But a dumb, unconscious look is not for us. ‘He also will hear their cry.’ Put your wish into words if you want it answered; not for His information, but for your strengthening. ‘Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of these things before ye ask Him.’ What then? Why should I ask Him? Because the asking will clear your thoughts about your desires. It will be a very good test of them. There are many things that we all wish, which I am afraid we should not much like to put into our prayers, not because of any foolish notion that they are too small to find a place there, but because of an uncomfortable suspicion that perhaps they are not the kind of things that we ought to wish. And if we cannot make the desire into a cry, the sooner we make it dead as well as dumb the better for ourselves. The cry will serve, too, as a stimulus to the wishes which are put into words. Silent prayer is well, but there is a wonderful power on ourselves-it may be due to our weakness, but still it exists-in the articulate and audible utterance of our petitions to God. I would fain that all of us were more in the habit of putting into distinct words that we ourselves can hear, the wishes that we cherish. I am sure our prayers would be more sincere, less wandering, more earnest and real, if they were spoken, as well as felt, prayers.

Let us remember, dear brethren! that the condition of our getting the higher gifts is not only that we should love and fear, and in the silence of our own hearts should wish for, but that we should definitely ask for, them. Not only desire, but 'their cry,' brings the answer.

IV. And now one last word. Note the two processes of satisfying.

'Thou openest Thine hand.' That is enough. But God cannot satisfy our deepest desires by any such short and easy method. There is a great deal more to be done by Him before the aspirations of love and fear and longing for righteousness can be fulfilled. He has to breathe Himself into us. Lower creatures have enough when they have the meat that drops from His hand. They know and care nothing for the hand that feeds. But God's best gifts cannot be separated from Himself. They are Himself, and in order to 'satisfy the desires of them that fear Him' there is no way possible, even to Him, but the impartation of Himself to the waiting heart.

That is a mystery deep and blessed. Oh, that we may all know, by our own living experience, what it is to have not only the gifts which drop from His hands, but the gifts which cannot be parted from Him, the Giver! He has to discipline us for His highest gifts, in order that we may receive them. And sometimes He has to do that, as I have no doubt He has done it with many of us, by withholding or withdrawing the satisfaction of some of our lower desires, and so emptying our hearts and turning the current of our wishes from earth to heaven. If you are going to pour precious wine into a chalice, you begin by emptying out the less valuable liquid that may be in it. So God often empties us, in order that He may fill us, and takes away the creatures in order that we may long for the Creator.

Not only has He to give us Himself, and to discipline us in order to receive Him, but He has to put all His gifts which meet our deepest desires into a great storehouse. He does not open His hand and give us peace and righteousness, and growing knowledge of Himself, and closer union, and the other blessings of the Christian life, but He gives us Jesus Christ. We are to find all these blessings in Him, and it depends upon us whether we find them or not, and how much of them we find. You will always find as much in Christ as you want, but you may not find nearly as much in Him as you could; and you will never find as much in Him as there is. God sends His

Son, and in that one gift, like a box ‘wherein sweets compacted lie,’ are all the gifts that even His hand can bestow, or our desires require. So be sure that you have what you have, and that you suck out of the Rose of Sharon all the honey that lies deep in its calyx. Expand your desires to the width of Christ’s great mercies; for the measure of our wishes is the limit of our possession. He has laid up the supply of all our need in the storehouse, which is Christ; and He has given us the key. Let us see to it that we enter in. ‘Ye have not because ye ask not.’ ‘To him that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance.’

END OF VOL. II.

92)Psalms 145:19

Psalms

THE SATISFIER OF ALL DESIRES

Psa. 145:16, Psa. 145:19.

You observe the recurrence, in these two verses, of the one emphatic word ‘desire.’ Its repetition evidently shows that the Psalmist wishes to run a parallel between God’s dealings in two regions. The same beneficence works in both. Here is the true extension of natural law to the spiritual world. It is the same teaching to which our Lord has given immortal and inimitable utterance, when He says, ‘Your heavenly Father feedeth them.’ And so we are entitled to look on all the wonders of creation, and to find in them buttresses which may support the edifice of our faith, and to believe that wherever there is a mouth God sends food to fill it. ‘Thou openest Thine hand’-that is all-’and satisfiest the desire of every living thing.’ But to fulfil the desires of them who are not only ‘living things,’ but ‘who fear’ Him, is it such a simple task? Sometimes more is wanted than an open hand before that can be accomplished. So, looking not only at the words I have read, but at the whole of their setting, which is influenced by the thought of this parallelism, we see here two sets of pensioners, two kinds of wants, two forms of appeal, two processes of satisfaction.

I. Two kinds of pensioners.

‘Every living thing-’ life makes a claim on God, and whatever desires arise in the living creature by reason of its life, God would be untrue to Himself, a cruel Parent, an unnatural Father, if He did not satisfy them. We do not half enough realise the fact that the condescension of creation lies not only in the act of creating, but in the willing acceptance by the Creator of the bonds under which He thereby lays Himself; obliging Himself to see to the creatures that He has chosen to make. And so, as one of the New Testament writers puts it, in his simple way, with a profound truth, ‘He is a faithful Creator’; and wherever there is a creature that He has made to need anything, He has thereby said, ‘As I live, that creature shall have what it needs.’

Then, take the other class, ‘them that fear Him’; or as they are described in the context-by contrast with ‘the wicked who are destroyed’-’the righteous.’ That is to say, whilst, because we are living things, like the bee and the worm, we have a claim on God precisely parallel with theirs for what we may need by reason of His gift, which we never asked for, His gift of life, we shall have a similar but higher claim on Him if we are ‘they that fear Him’ with that loving reverence which has no torment in it, and that love Him with that reverential affection which has no presumption in it, and whose love and fear coalesce in making them long to be righteous like the Object of their love, to be holy like the Object of their fear. And just as the fact of physical life binds God to care for it, and to give all that is needed for its health, growth, blessedness, so the fact of man’s having in his heart the faintest tremor of reverential dread, the feeblest aspiration of outgoing affection, the most faltering desire after purity of life and conduct, binds God to answer these according to the man’s need. Of all incredibilities in the world, there is nothing more incredible, because there is nothing more contrary to the very depths of the divine nature, than that desires, longings, expectations, which are the direct result of the love and fear of God, and the hunger and thirst after righteousness, should not be answered.

Now that is a very wide principle, and I do not believe that it is trusted enough by many. It comes to this-wherever you find in people a confidence which grows with their love of God, be sure that there is, somewhere or other in the universe of things, that which answers it.

Take a case. If there was not a word in the New Testament about Jesus Christ's resurrection, the fact that just in proportion as men grow in devotion, in love of God, in fear of Him, in longing to be good and to appear like Him, in that same proportion does their conviction that there must be a life beyond the grave become firm and certain-that fact would be enough to make any one who believed in God sure that the hope thus rooted in love to Him, and fed by everything that draws us nearer to Him, could not be a delusion, nor be destined to be left unfulfilled.

And we might go round the whole circle of dim religious aspirations and desires, and find in all of them illustrations of the principle so profoundly and so simply put in our psalm, that the same Love which, in the realm of the physical world, binds itself to satisfy the life which it imparts, is at work in the higher regions, and will 'fulfil the desires of them that fear Him.'

II. Again, there are two sets of needs.

The first of them is very easily disposed of. 'The eyes of all wait upon Thee, and Thou givest them their meat.' That is all. Feed the beast, and give it the other things necessary for its physical existence, and there is no more to be done. But there is more wanted for the desires of the men that love and fear God. These are glanced at in the context, 'He also will hear their cry, and will save them'; 'the Lord preserveth all them that love Him.' That is to say, there are deeper needs in our hearts and lives than any that are known amongst the lower creatures. Evils, dangers inward and outward, sorrows, disappointments, losses of all sorts shadow our lives, in a fashion which the happy, careless life of field and forest knows nothing about. Give them their meat, and they curl themselves up and lie down to sleep, satisfied. Man longs for something more and needs something more.

'He will save them.' Now, I do not suppose that 'save' here is employed in its full New Testament sense, but it approximates to that sense. And, further, there are other aspects of our needs set forth in the context, on which I briefly touch. Do not let us vulgarise such a saying as this of my text, 'He will fulfil the desire of them that fear Him,' as if it only meant that if a man fears God he may set his longing upon any outward thing, and be sure to get it. There is nothing so poor, so unworthy as that promised in Scripture. For one thing, it is not true; for another, it would not be good if it were. The way to spoil children is not the way to perfect saints; and to give them what they want because they want it, is the sure way to spoil children of all ages. We may be quite certain that our heavenly Father is not going to do that. The promise here means something far nobler and loftier. The fact of creation binds God to supply all the wants which spring from life. The fact of our loving and fearing Him binds Him to supply all the wants which spring from our love and fear. And it is these desires which the Psalmist is thinking of.

What is the object of desire to a man who loves God? God. What is the object of desire to a man who fears Him? God. What is the object of desire to a righteous man? Righteousness. And these are the desires which God is sure to fulfil to us. Therefore, there is only one region in which it is safe and wise to cherish longings, and it is the region of the spiritual life where God imparts Himself. Everywhere else there will be disappointments-thank Him for them. Nowhere else is it absolutely true that He will ‘fulfil the desires of them that fear Him.’ But in this region it is. Whatever any of us desire to have of God, we are sure to get. We open our mouths and He fills them. In the Christian life desire is the measure of possession, and to long is to have. And there is nowhere else where it is absolutely, unconditionally, and universally true that to wish is to possess, and to ask is to have.

Oh! then, is it not a foolish thing for us to worry and torture and sweat, in order to win for ourselves for a little while the uncertain possession of incomplete bliss? Would it not be wiser, instead of letting the current of our desires dribble itself away through a thousand channels in the sand and get lost, to gather it all into one great stream which is sure to find its way to the broad ocean? ‘Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart,’ for these will then be after Himself, and Himself only.

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Not only has He to give us Himself, and to discipline us in order to receive Him, but He has to put all His gifts which meet our deepest desires into a great storehouse. He does not open His hand and give us peace and righteousness, and growing knowledge of Himself, and closer union, and the other blessings of the Christian life, but He gives us Jesus Christ. We are to find all these blessings in Him, and it depends upon us whether we find them or not, and how much of them we find. You will always find as much in Christ as you want, but you may not find nearly as much in Him as you could; and you will never find as much in Him as there is. God sends His Son, and in that one gift, like a box 'wherein sweets compacted lie,' are all the gifts that even His hand can bestow, or our desires require. So be sure that you have what you have, and that you suck out of the Rose of Sharon all the honey that lies deep in its calyx. Expand your desires to the width of Christ's great mercies; for the measure of our wishes is the limit of our possession. He has laid up the supply of all our need in the storehouse, which is Christ; and He has given us the key. Let us see to it that we enter in. 'Ye have not because ye ask not.' 'To him that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance.'

END OF VOL. II.

93)Psalms 150:6

Psalms

BLESSEDNESS AND PRAISE

Psa. 1:1 - Psa. 1:2. - Psa. 150:6.

The Psalter is the echo in devout hearts of the other portions of divine revelation. There are in it, indeed, further disclosures of God's mind and purposes, but its especial characteristic is-the reflection of the light of God from brightened faces and believing hearts. As we hold it to be inspired, we cannot simply say that it is man's response to God's voice. But if the rest of Scripture may be called the speech of the Spirit of God *to* men, this book is the answer of the Spirit of God *in* men.

These two verses which I venture to lay side by side present in a very remarkable way this characteristic. It is not by accident that they stand where they do, the first and last verses of the whole collection, enclosing all, as it were, within a golden ring, and bending round to meet each other. They are the summing up of the whole purpose and issue of God's revelation to men.

The first and second psalms echo the two main portions of the old revelation-the Law and the Prophets. The first of them is taken up with the celebration of the blessedness and fruitful, stable being of the man who loves the Law of the Lord, as contrasted with the rootless and barren life of the ungodly, who is like the chaff. The second is occupied with the contemplation of the divine 'decree' by which the coming King is set in God's 'holy hill of Zion,' and of the blessedness of 'all they who put their trust in Him,' as contrasted with the swift destruction that shall fall on the vain imaginations of the rebellious heathen and banded kings of earth.

The words of our first text, then, may well stand at the beginning of the Psalter. They express the great purpose for which God has given His Law. They are the witness of human experience to the substantial, though partial, accomplishment of that purpose. They rise in buoyant triumph over that which is painful and apparently opposed to it; and in spite of sorrow and sin, proclaim the blessedness of the life which is rooted in the Law of the Lord.

The last words of the book are as significant as its first. The closing psalms are one long call to praise-they probably date from the time of the restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah, when, as we know, 'the service of song' was carefully re-established, and the harps which had hung silent upon the willows by the rivers of Babylon woke again their ancient melodies. These psalms climb higher and higher in their rapturous call to all creatures, animate and inanimate, on earth and in heaven, to praise Him.

The golden waves of music and song pour out ever faster and fuller. At last we hear this invocation to every instrument of music to praise Him, responded to, as we may suppose, by each, in turn as summoned, adding its tributary notes to the broadening river of harmony-until all, with gathered might of glad sound blended with the crash of many voices, unite in the final words, ‘Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord.’

I. We have here a twofold declaration of God’s great purpose in all His self-revelation, and especially in the Gospel of His Son.

Our first text may be translated as a joyful exclamation, ‘Oh! the blessedness of the man-whose delight is in the law of the Lord.’ Our second is an invocation or a command. The one then expresses the purpose which God secures by His gift of the Law; the other the purpose which He summons us to fulfil by the tribute of our hearts and songs-man’s happiness and God’s glory.

His purpose is Man’s blessedness.

That is but another way of saying, God is love. For love, as we know it, is eminently the desire for the happiness of the person on whom it is fixed. And unless the love of God be like ours, however it may transcend it, there is no revelation of Him to our hearts at all. If He be love, then He ‘delights in the prosperity’ of His children.

And that purpose runs through all His acts. For perfect love is all-pervasive, and even with us men, it rules the whole being; nor does he love at all who seeks the welfare of the heart he clings to by fits and starts, by some of his acts and not by others. When God comes forth from the unvisioned light, which is thick darkness, of His own eternal, self-adequate Being, and flashes into energy in Creation, Providence, or Grace, the Law of His Working and His Purpose are one, in all regions. The unity of the divine acts depends on this-that all flow from one deep source, and all move to one mighty end. Standing on the height to which His own declarations of His own nature lift our feebleness, we can see how the ‘river of God that waters the garden’ and ‘parts’ into many ‘heads,’ gushes from one fountain. One of the psalms puts what people call the ‘philosophy’ of creation and of providence very clearly, in accordance with this thought-that the love of God is the source, and the blessedness of man the end, of all His work: ‘To Him that made great lights; for His mercy endureth for ever. To Him that slew mighty kings; for His mercy endureth for ever.’

Creation, then, is the effluence of the loving heart of God. Though the sacred characters be but partially legible to us now, what He wrote, on stars and flowers, on the infinitely great and the infinitely small, on the infinitely near and the infinitely far off, with His creating hand, was the one inscription-God is love. And as in nature, so in providence. The origination, and the support, and the direction of all things, are the works and the heralds of the same love. It is printed in starry letters on the sky. It is graven on the rocks, and breathed by the flowers. It is spoken as a dark saying even by sorrow and pain. The mysteries of destructive and crushing providences have come from the same source. And he who can see with the Psalmist the ever-during mercy of the Lord, as the reason of creation and of judgments, has in his hands the golden key which opens all the locks in the palace chambers of the great King. He only hath penetrated to the secret of things material, and stands in the light at the centre, who understands that all comes from the one source-God’s endless desire for the blessedness of His creatures.

But while all God’s works do thus praise Him by testifying that He seeks to bless His creatures, the loftiest example of that desire is, of course, found in His revelation of Himself to men’s hearts and consciences, to men’s spirits and wills. That mightiest act of love, beginning in the long-past generations, has culminated in Him in whom ‘dwelleth the whole fulness of the Godhead bodily,’ and in whose work is all the love-the perfect, inconceivable, patient, omnipotent love of our redeeming God.

And then, remember that this is not inconsistent with or contradicted by the sterner aspects of that revelation, which cannot be denied, and ought not to be minimised or softened. *Here*, on the right hand, are the flowery slopes of the Mount of Blessing; *there*, on the left, the barren, stern, thunder-riven, lightning-splintered pinnacles of the Mount of Cursing. Every clear note of benediction hath its low minor of imprecation from the other side. Between the two, overhung by the hopes of the one, and frowned upon and dominated by the threatenings of the other, is pitched the little camp of our human life, and the path of our pilgrimage runs in the trough of the valley between. And yet-might we not go a step farther, and say that above the parted summits stretches the one overarching blue, uniting them both, and their roots deep down below the surface interlace and twine together? That is to say, the threatenings and rebukes, the acts of retributive judgment, which are contained in the revelation of God, are no limitation nor disturbance of the clear and happy faith that all which we behold is full of blessing, and that all comes from the Father's hand. They are the garb in which His Love needs to array itself when it comes in contact with man's sin and man's evil. The love of God appears no less when it teaches us in grave sad tones that 'the wages of sin is death,' than when it proclaims that 'the gift of God is eternal life.'

Love threatens that it may never have to execute its threats. Love warns that we may be wise in time. Love prophesies that its sad forebodings may not be fulfilled. And love smites with lighter strokes of premonitory chastisements, that we may never need to feel the whips of scorpions.

Remember, too, that these sterner aspects both of Law and of Gospel point this lesson-that we shall very much misunderstand God's purpose if we suppose it to be blessedness for us men *anyhow*, irrespective altogether of character. Some people seem to think that God loves us so much, as they would say-so little, so ignobly, as I would say-as that He only desires us to be happy. They seem to think that the divine love is tarnished unless it provides for men's felicity, whether they are God-loving and God-like or no. Thus the solemn and majestic love of the Father in heaven is to be brought down to a weak good nature, which only desires that the child shall cease crying and be happy, and does not mind by what means that end is reached. God's purpose *is* blessedness; but, as this very text tells us, not blessedness anyhow, but one which will not and cannot be given by God to those who walk in the way of sinners. His love desires that we should be holy, and 'followers of God as dear children'-and the blessedness which it bestows comes from pardon and growing fellowship with Him. It can no more fall on rebellious hearts than the pure crystals of the snow can lie and sparkle on the hot, black cone of a volcano.

The other text that I have read sets forth another view of God’s purpose. God seeks our praise. The glory of God is the end of all the divine actions. Now, that is a statement which no doubt is irrefragable, and a plain deduction from the very conception of an infinite Being. But it may be held in such connections, and spoken with such erroneous application, and so divorced from other truths, that instead of being what it is in the Bible, good news, it shall become a curse and a lie. It may be so understood as to describe not our Father in heaven, but an almighty devil! But, when the thought that God’s purpose in all His acts is His own glory, is firmly united with that other, that His purpose in all His acts is our blessing, then we begin to understand how full of joy it may be for us. His glory is sought by Him in the manifestation of His loving heart, mirrored in our illuminated and gladdened hearts. Such a glory is not unworthy of infinite love. It has nothing in common with the ambitious and hungry greed of men for reputation or self-display. That desire is altogether ignoble and selfish when it is found in human hearts; and it would be none the less ignoble and selfish if it were magnified into infinitude, and transferred to the divine. But to say that God’s glory is His great end, is surely but another way of saying that He is love. The love that seeks to bless us desires, as all love does, that it should be known for what it is, that it should be recognised in our glad hearts, and smiled back again from our brightened faces. God desires that we should know Him, and so have Eternal Life; He desires that knowing Him, we should love Him, and loving should praise, and so should glorify Him. He desires that there should be an interchange of love bestowing and love receiving, of gifts showered down and of praise ascending, of fire falling from the heavens and sweet incense, from grateful hearts, going up in fragrant clouds acceptable unto God. It is a sign of a Fatherly heart that He ‘*seeketh* such to worship Him’. He desires to be glorified by our praise, because He loves us so much. He commences with an offer, He advances to a command. He gives first, and then [not till then] He comes seeking fruit from the ‘trees’ which are ‘the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified.’ His plea is not ‘the vineyard belongs to Me, and I have a right to its fruits,’ but ‘what could have been done more to My vineyard, that I have not done in it?-judge between Me and My vineyard.’ First, He showers down blessings; then, He looks for the revenue of praise!

II. We may also take these passages as giving us a twofold expression of the actual effects of God’s revelation, especially in the Gospel, even here upon earth.

The one text is the joyful exclamation built upon experience and observation. The other is a call which is answered in some measure even by voices that are often dumb in unthankfulness, often broken by sobs, often murmuring in penitence.

God does actually, though not completely, make men blessed here. Our text sums up the experience of all the devout hearts and lives whose emotions are expressed in the Psalms. He who wrote this psalm would preface the whole book by words into which the spirit of the book is distilled. It will have much to say of sorrow and pain. It will touch many a low note of wailing and of grief. There will be complaints and penitence, and sighs almost of despair before it closes. But this which he puts first is the note of the whole. So it is in our histories. They will run through many a dark and desert place. We shall have bitterness and trials in abundance, there will be many an hour of sadness caused by my own evil, and many a hard struggle with it. But high above all these mists and clouds will rise the hope that seeks the skies, and deep beneath all the surface agitations of storms and currents there will be the unmoved stillness of the central ocean of peace in our hearts. In the ‘valley of weeping’ we may still be ‘blessed’ if ‘the ways’ are in our hearts, and if we make of the very tears ‘a well,’ drawing refreshment from the very trials. With all its sorrows and pains, its fightings and fears, its tribulations in the world, and its chastenings from a Father’s hand, the life of a Christian is a happy life, and ‘the joy of the Lord’ remains with His servants.

More than twenty centuries have passed since that psalm was written. As many stretched dim behind the Psalmist as he sang. He was gathering up in one sentence the spirit of the past, and confirming it by his own life’s history. And has any one that has lived since then stood up and said-’Behold! I have found it otherwise. I have waited on God, and He has not heard my cry. I have served Him, and that for nought. I have trusted in Him, and been disappointed. I have sought His face-in vain. And I say, from my own experience, that the man who trusts in Him is *not* blessed’? Not one, thank God! The history of the past, so far as this matter is concerned, may be put in one sentence 'They looked unto Him and were lightened, and their faces were not ashamed,' and as for the present, are there not some of us who can say, 'This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles'?

Brethren! make the experiment for yourselves. Test this experience by your own simple affiance and living trust in Jesus Christ. We have the experience of all generations to encourage us. What has blessed them is enough for you and me. Like the meal and the oil, which were the Prophet's resource in famine, yesterday's supply does not diminish to-morrow's store. We, too, may have all that gladdened the hearts and stayed the spirits of the saints of old. 'Oh! taste and see that God is good.' 'Blessed is the man that trusteth in Him.'

So, too, God's gift produces man's praise.

What is it that He desires from us? Nothing but our thankful recognition and reception of His benefits. We honour God by taking the full cup of salvation which He commends to our lips, and by calling, while we drink, upon the name of the Lord. Our true response to His Word, which is essentially a proffer of blessing to us, is to open our hearts to receive, and, receiving, to render grateful acknowledgment. The echo of love which gives and forgives, is love which accepts and thanks. We have but to lift up our empty and impure hands, opened wide to receive the gift which He lays in them-and though they be empty and impure, yet 'the lifting up of our hands' is 'as the evening sacrifice'; our sense of need stands in the place of all offerings. The stained thankfulness of our poor hearts is accepted by Him who inhabits the praises of eternity, and yet delights in the praises of Israel. He bends from heaven to give, and all He asks is that we should take. He only seeks our thankfulness-but He does seek it. And wherever His grace is discerned, and His love is welcomed, there praise breaks forth, as surely as streams pour from the cave of the glacier when the sun of summer melts it, or earth answers the touch of spring with flowers.

And that effect is produced, notwithstanding all the complaints and sighs and tears which sometimes choke our praise. It *is* produced even while these last; the psalms of thanksgiving are not all reserved for the end of the book. But even in those which read like the very sobs of a broken heart, there is ever present some tone of grateful acknowledgment of God's mercy. He sends us sorrow, and He wills that we should weep-but they should be tears like David's, who, at the lowest point of his fortunes, when he plaintively besought God, 'Put Thou my tears into Thy bottle'-could say in the same breath, 'Thy vows are upon me, O God: I will render praises unto Thee.' God works on our souls that we may have the consciousness of sin, and He wills that we should come with broken and contrite hearts, and like the king of Israel wail out our confessions and supplications-'Have mercy upon me, O God! according to Thy loving-kindness.' But, like him, we should even in our lowliest abasement, when our hearts are bruised, be able to say along with our contrition, 'Open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise.' Our sorrows are never so great that they hide our mercies. The sky is never so covered with clouds that neither sun nor stars appear for many days. And in every Christian heart the low tones of lamentation and confession are blended with grateful praise. So it is even in the darkest moments, whilst the blast of misfortune and misery is as a storm against the wall.

But a brighter hope even for our life here rises from these words, if we think of the place which they hold in the whole book. They are the last words. Whatever other notes have been sounded in its course, all ends in this. The winter's day has had its melancholy grey sky, with many a bitter dash of snow and rain-but it has stormed itself out, and at eventide, a rent in the clouds reveals the sun, and it closes in peaceful clearness of light.

The note of gladness heard at the beginning, 'Oh! the blessedness of the man that delights in the law of the Lord,' holds on persistently, like a subdued and almost bewildered undercurrent of sweet sound amid all the movements of some colossal symphony, through tears and sobs, confession and complaint, and it springs up at the close triumphant, like the ruddy spires of a flame long smothered, and swells and broadens, and draws all the intricate harmonies into its own rushing tide. Some of you remember the great musical work which has these very words for its theme. It begins with the call, 'All that hath life and breath, praise ye the Lord,' and although the gladness saddens into the plaintive cry of a soul sick with hope deferred, 'Will the night soon pass?' yet, ere the close, all discords are reconciled, and at last, with assurance firmer for the experience of passing sorrows, loud as the voice of many waters and sweet as harpers harping with their harps, the joyful invocation peals forth again, and all ends, as it does in a Christian man's life, and as it does in this book, with 'Praise ye the Lord.'

III. We have here also a twofold prophecy of the perfection of Heaven.

Whilst it is true that both of these purposes are accomplished here and now, it is also true that their accomplishment is but partial, and that therefore for their fulfilment we have to lift our eyes beyond this world of imperfect faith, of incomplete blessedness, of interrupted praise. Whether the Psalmist looked forward thus we do not know. But for us, the very shortcomings of our joys and of our songs are prophetic of the perfect and perpetual rapture of the one, and the perfect and perpetual music of the other. We know that He who has given us so much will not stay His hand until He has perfected that which concerns us. We know that He who has taught our dumb hearts to magnify His name will not cease till 'out of the lips of babes and sucklings, He has perfected praise.' We know that the pilgrims in whose hearts are the ways are blessed, and we are sure that a fuller blessedness must belong to those who have reached the journey's end.

And so these words give us a twofold aspect of that future on which our longing hopes may well fix.

It is the perfection of man's blessedness. Then the joyous exclamation of our first text, which we have often had to strive hard not to disbelieve, will be no more a truth of faith but a truth of experience. Here we have had to trust that it was so, even when we could scarce cleave to the confidence. There, memory will look back on our wanderings through this great wilderness, and, enlightened by the issue of them all, will speak only of Mercy and Goodness as our angel guides all our lives. The end will crown the work. Pure unmingled consciousness of bliss will fill all hearts, and break into the old exclamation, which we had sometimes to stifle sobs ere we could speak on earth. When He says, 'Come in! ye blessed of My Father,' all our tears and fears, and pains and sins, will be forgotten, and we shall but have to say, in wonder and joy, 'Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house; they will be still praising Thee.'

It is the perfection of God’s praise. We may possibly venture to see in these wonderful words of our text a dim and far-off hint of a possibility that seems to be pointed at in many parts of Scripture-that the blessings of Christ’s mighty work shall, in some measure and manner, pass through man to his dwelling-place and its creatures. Dark shadows of evil-the mystery of pain and sorrow-lie over earth and all its tribes. ‘We look for new heavens and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.’ And the statements of Scripture which represent creation as suffering by man’s sin, and participant in its degree in man’s redemption, seem too emphatic and precise, as well as too frequent, and in too didactic connections, to be lightly brushed aside as poetic imagery. May it not be that man’s transgression

‘Broke the fair music that all creatures made
To their great Lord, whose love their motion swayed,’

and that man’s restoration may, indeed, bring back all that hath life and breath to a harmonious blessedness-according to the deep and enigmatical words, which declare that ‘the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God’? Be that as it may, at all events our second text opens to us the gates of the heavenly temple, and shows us there the saintly ranks and angel companies gathered in the city whose walls are salvation and its gates praise. They harmonise with that other later vision of heaven which the Seer in Patmos beheld, not only in setting before us worship as the glad work of all who are there, but in teaching the connection between the praises of men, and the answering hymns of angels. The harps of heaven are hushed to hear *their* praise who can sing, ‘Thou hast redeemed us to God by Thy blood,’ and, in answer to that hymn of thanksgiving for unexampled deliverance and resorting grace, the angels around the throne break forth into new songs to the Lamb that was slain-while still wider spread the broadening circles of harmonious praise, till at last ‘every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them,’ join in the mighty hymn of ‘Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and to the Lamb for ever and ever.’ Then the rapturous exclamation from human souls redeemed,-’Oh! the blessedness of the men whom Thou hast loved and saved,’ shall be answered by choral praise from everything that hath breath.

And are you dumb, my friend, in these universal bursts of praise? Is that because you have not chosen to take the universal blessing which God gives? You have nothing to do but to receive the things that are freely given to you of God-the forgiveness, the cleansing, the life, that come from Christ by faith. Take them, and call upon the name of the Lord, And can you refuse His gifts and withhold your praise? You can be eloquent in thanks to those who do you kindnesses, and in praise of those whom you admire and love, but your best Friend receives none of your gratitude and none of your praise. Ignoble silence and dull unthankfulness-with these you requite your Saviour! ‘I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out!’

Proverbs

1) PROVERBS 1:1-19
2) PROVERBS 1:20-33
3) PROVERBS 3:1-10
4) PROVERBS 3:11-24
5) PROVERBS 4:10-11
6) PROVERBS 4:12
7) PROVERBS 4:13-17
8) PROVERBS 4:18
9) PROVERBS 4:19
10) PROVERBS 4:23
11) PROVERBS 5:22
12) PROVERBS 8:21
13) PROVERBS 8:30-31
14) PROVERBS 10:29
15) PROVERBS 12:1-15
16) PROVERBS 13:7
17) PROVERBS 13:23
18) PROVERBS 14:9
19) PROVERBS 14:13
20) PROVERBS 14:14
21) PROVERBS 16:2
22) PROVERBS 16:22-33
23) PROVERBS 18:10-11

24) PROVERBS 20:1-3
25) PROVERBS 20:4
26) PROVERBS 20:5-7
27) PROVERBS 20:17
28) PROVERBS 23:15-16
29) PROVERBS 23:17-18
30) PROVERBS 23:19-23
31) PROVERBS 23:29-35
32) PROVERBS 24:11-12
33) PROVERBS 24:30-31
34) PROVERBS 25:28
35) PROVERBS 27:3
36) PROVERBS 31:10-31

1) Proverbs 1:1-19

Proverbs

A YOUNG MAN’S BEST COUNSELLOR

Pro. 1:1 - Pro. 1:19.

This passage contains the general introduction to the book of Proverbs. It falls into three parts-a statement of the purpose of the book [Pro. 1:1 - Pro. 1:6]; a summary of its foundation principles, and of the teachings to which men ought to listen [Pro. 1:7 - Pro. 1:9]; and an antithetic statement of the voices to which they should be deaf [Pro. 1:10 - Pro. 1:19].

I. The aim of the book is stated to be twofold-to enable men, especially the young, to ‘know wisdom,’ and to help them to ‘discern the words of understanding’; that is, to familiarise, by the study of the book, with the characteristics of wise teachings, so that there may be no mistaking seducing words of folly for these. These two aims are expanded in the remaining verses, the latter of them being resumed in Pro. 1:6, while the former occupies the other verses.

We note how emphatically the field in which this wisdom is to be exercised is declared to be the moral conduct of life. ‘Righteousness and judgment and equity’ are ‘wise dealing,’ and the end of true wisdom is to practise these. The wider horizon of modern science and speculation includes much in the notion of wisdom which has no bearing on conduct. But the intellectual progress [and conceit] of to-day will be none the worse for the reminder that a man may take in knowledge till he is ignorant, and that, however enriched with science and philosophy, if he does not practise righteousness, he is a fool.

We note also the special destination of the book-for the young. Youth, by reason of hot blood and inexperience, needs such portable medicines as are packed in these proverbs, many of them the condensation into a vivid sentence of world-wide truths. There are few better guides for a young man than this book of homely sagacity, which is wisdom about the world without being tainted by the bad sort of worldly wisdom. But unfortunately those who need it most relish it least, and we have for the most part to rediscover its truths for ourselves by our own, often bitter, experience.

We note, further, the clear statement of the way by which incipient ‘wisdom’ will grow, and of the certainty of its growth if it is real. It is the ‘wise man’ who will ‘increase in learning,’ the ‘man of understanding’ who ‘attains unto sound counsels.’ The treasures are thrown away on him who has no heart for them. You may lavish wisdom on the ‘fool,’ and it will run off him like water off a rock, fertilising nothing, and stopping outside him.

The Bible would not have met all our needs, nor gone with us into all regions of our experience, if it had not had this book of shrewd, practical common-sense. Christianity is the perfection of common sense. ‘Godliness hath promise of the life which now is.’ The wisdom of the serpent, which Jesus enjoins, has none of the serpent’s venom in it. It is no sign of spirituality of mind to be above such mundane considerations as this book urges. If we hold our heads too high to look to our road and our feet, we are sure to fall into a pit.

II. Pro. 1:7 - Pro. 1:9 may be regarded as a summary statement of the principle on which the whole book is based, and of the duty which it enjoins. The principle is that true wisdom is based on religion, and the duty is to listen to parental instruction. ‘My son,’ is the address of a teacher to his disciples, rather than of a father to his child. The characteristic Old Testament designation of religion as ‘the fear of Jehovah’ corresponds to the Old Testament revelation of Him as the Holy One,-that is, as Him who is infinitely separated from creatural being and limitations. Therefore is He ‘to be had in reverence of all’ who would be ‘about Him’; that fear of reverential awe in which no slavish dread mingles, and which is perfectly consistent with aspiration, trust, and love. The Old Testament reveals Him as separate from men; the New Testament reveals Him as united to men in the divine man, Christ Jesus. Therefore its keynote is the designation of religion as ‘the love of God’; but that name is no contradiction of the earlier, but the completion of it.

That fear is the beginning or basis of wisdom, because wisdom is conceived of as God’s gift, and the surest way to get it is to ‘ask of God’ [Jam. 1:5]. Religion is, further, the foundation of wisdom, inasmuch as irreligion is the supreme folly of creatures so dependent on God, and so hungering after Him in the depths of their being, as we are. In whatever directions a godless man may be wise, in the most important matter of all, his relations to God, he is unwise, and the epitaph for all such is ‘Thou fool!’

Further, religion is the fountain of wisdom, in the sense of the word in which this book uses it, since it opens out into principles of action, motives, and communicated powers, which lead to right apprehension and willing discharge of the duties of life. Godless men may be scientists, philosophers, encyclopaedias of knowledge, but for want of religion, they blunder in the direction of their lives, and lack wisdom enough to keep them from wrecking the ship on the rocks.

The Israelitish parent was enjoined to teach his or her children the law of the Lord. Here the children are enjoined to listen to the instruction. Reverence for traditional wisdom was characteristic of that state of society, and since a divine revelation stood at the beginning of the nation’s history, it was not unreasonable to look back for light. Nowadays, a belief’s being our fathers’ is with many a reason for not making it ours. But perhaps that is no more rational than the blind adherence to the old with which this emancipated generation reproaches its predecessors. Possibly there are some ‘old lamps’ better than the new ones now hawked about the streets by so many loud-voiced vendors. The youth of this day have much need of the exhortation to listen to the ‘instruction’ [by which is meant, not only teaching by word, but discipline by act] of their fathers, and to the gentler voice of the mother telling of law in accents of love. These precepts obeyed will be fairer ornaments than jewelled necklaces and wreathed chaplets.

III. On one side of the young man are those who would point him to the fear of Jehovah; on the other are seducing whispers, tempting him to sin. That is the position in which we all stand. It is not enough to listen to the nobler voice. We have resolutely to stop our ears to the baser, which is often the louder. Facile yielding to the cunning inducements which strew every path, and especially that of the young, is fatal. If we cannot say ‘No’ to the base, we shall not say ‘Yes’ to the noble voice. To be weak is generally to be wicked; for in this world the tempters are more numerous, and to sense and flesh, more potent than those who invite to good.

The example selected of such enticers is not of the kind that most of us are in danger from. But the sort of inducements held out are in all cases substantially the same. ‘Precious substance’ of one sort or another is dangled before dazzled eyes; jovial companionship draws young hearts. The right or wrong of the thing is not mentioned, and even murder and robbery are presented as rather pleasant excitement, and worth doing for the sake of what is got thereby. Are the desirable consequences so sure? Is there no chance of being caught red-handed, and stoned then and there, as a murderer? The tempters are discreetly silent about that possibility, as all tempters are. Sin always deceives, and its baits artfully hide the hook; but the cruel barb is there, below the gay silk and coloured dressing, and it-not the false appearance of food which lured the fish-is what sticks in the bleeding mouth.

The teacher goes on, in Pro. 1:15 - Pro. 1:19, to supply the truth which the tempters tried to ignore. He does so in three weighty sentences, which strip the tinsel off the temptation, and show its real ugliness. The flowery way to which they coax is a way of ‘evil’; that should be enough to settle the question. The first thing to ask about any course is not whether it is agreeable or disagreeable, but Is it right or wrong? Pro. 1:17 is ambiguous, but probably the ‘net’ means the tempters’ speech in Pro. 1:11 - Pro. 1:14, and the ‘bird’ is the young man supposed to be addressed. The sense will then be, ‘Surely you are not foolish enough to fly right into the meshes, and to go with your eyes open into so transparent sin!’

Pro. 1:18 points to the grim possibility already referred to, that the would-be murderers will be caught and executed. But its lesson is wider than that one case, and declares the great solemn truth that all sin is suicide. Who ever breaks God’s law slays himself.

What is true about ‘covetousness,’ as Pro. 1:19 tells, is true about all kinds of sin-that it takes away the life of those who yield to it, even though it may also fill their purses, or in other ways may gratify their desires. Surely it is folly to pursue a course which, however it may succeed in its immediate aims, brings real death, by separation from God, along with it. He is not a very wise man who ties his gold round him when the ship founders. He is not parted from his treasure certainly, but it helps to sink him. We may get what we want by sinning, but we get also what we did not want or reckon on-that is, eternal death. ‘This their way is their folly.’ Yet, strange to tell, their posterity ‘approve their sayings,’ and follow their doings.

2) Proverbs 1:20-33

Proverbs

WISDOM’S CALL

Pro. 1:20 - Pro. 1:33.

Our passage begins with a striking picture. A fair and queenly woman stands in the crowded resorts of men, and lifts up a voice of sweet entreaty-authoritative as well as sweet. Her name is Wisdom. The word is in the plural in the Hebrew, as if to teach that in this serene and lovely form all manifold wisdoms are gathered and made one. Who then is she? It is easy to say ‘a poetical personification,’ but that does not add much to our understanding. It is clear that this book means much more by Wisdom than a human quality merely; for august and divine attributes are given to her, and she is the co-eternal associate of God Himself. Dwelling in His bosom, she thence comes forth to inspire all human good deeds, to plead evermore with men, to enrich those who listen to her with choicest gifts. Intellectual clearness, moral goodness, religious devotion, are all combined in the idea of Wisdom as belonging to men.

The divine source of all, and the correspondence between the human and the divine nature, are taught in the residence of this personified Wisdom with God before she dwelt with men. The whole of the manifold revelations, by which God makes known any part of His will to men, are her voice. Especially the call contained in the Old Testament revelation is the summons of Wisdom. But whether the writer of this book had any inkling of deeper truth still, or not, we cannot but connect the incomplete personification of divine Wisdom here with its complete incarnation in a Person who is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God,' and who embodies the lineaments of the grand picture of a Wisdom crying in the streets, even while it is true of Him that 'He does not strive nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets'; for the crying, which is denied to be His, is ostentatious and noisy, and the crying which is asserted to be hers is the plain, clear, universal appeal of divine love as well as wisdom. The light of Christ 'lighteth every man that cometh into the world.'

The call of Wisdom in this passage begins with remonstrance and plain speech, giving their right names to men who neglect her voice. The first step in delivering men from evil-that is, from foolish-courses is to put very clearly before them the true character of their acts, and still more of their inclinations. Gracious offers and rich promises come after; but the initial message of Wisdom to such men as we are must be the accusation of folly. 'When she is come, she will convict the world of sin.'

The three designations of men in Pro. 1:22 are probably arranged so as to make a climax. First come 'the simple,' or, as the word means, 'open.' There is a *sancta simplicitas*, a holy ignorance of evil, which is sister to the highest wisdom. It is well to be ignorant as well as 'innocent of much transgression'; and there is no more mistaken and usually insincere excuse for going into foul places than the plea that it is best to know the evil and so choose the good. That knowledge comes surely and soon enough without our seeking it. But there is a fatal simplicity, open-eared, like Eve, to the

Tempter's whisper, which believes the false promises of sin, and as Bunyan has taught us, is companion of sloth and presumption.

Next come 'scorners,' who mock at good. A man must have gone a long way down hill before he begins to gibe at virtue and godliness. But the descent is steep, though the distance is long; and the 'simple' who begins to do what is wrong will come to sneer at what is right.

Then last comes the 'fool,' the name which, in Proverbs, is shorthand for mental stupidity, moral obstinacy, and dogged godlessness,-a foul compound, but one which is realised oftener than we think. A great many very superior intellects, cultivated ladies and gentlemen, university graduates, and the like, would be unceremoniously set down by divine wisdom as fools; and surely if account is taken of the whole compass and duration of our being, and of all our relations to things and persons seen and unseen, nothing can be more stupid than godlessness, however cultured. The word literally means coarse or thick, and may suggest the idea of stolid insensibility as the last stage in the downward progress.

But note that the charge is directed, not against deeds, but dispositions. Perverted love and perverted hatred underlie acts. The simple love simplicity, preferring to be unwarned against evil; the scorner finds delight in letting his rank tongue blossom into speech; and the false direction given to love gives a fatal twist to its corresponding hate, so that the fool detests 'knowledge' as a thief the policeman's lantern. You cannot love what you should loathe, without loathing what you should love. Inner longings and revulsions settle character and acts.

Pro. 1:23 passes into entreaty; for it is vain to rouse conscience by plain speech, unless something is offered to make better life possible. The divine Wisdom comes with a rod, but also with gifts; but if the rod is kissed, the rewards are possessed. The relation of clauses in Pro. 1:23 is that the first is the condition of the fulfilment of the second and third. If we turn at her reproof, two great gifts will be bestowed. Her spirit within will make us quick to hear and receive her words sounding without. Whatever other good follows on yielding to the call of divine Wisdom [and the remaining early chapters of Proverbs magnificently detail the many rich gifts that do follow], chief of all are spirits swift to hear and docile to obey her voice, and then actual communications to purged ears. Outward revelation without prepared hearts is water spilt upon rock. Prepared hearts without a message to them would be but multiplication of vain longings; and God never stultifies Himself, or gives mouths without sending meat to fill them. To the submissive spirit, there will not lack either disposition to hear or clear utterance of His will.

But now comes a pause. Wisdom has made her offers in the crowded streets, and amid all the noise and bustle her voice has rung out. What is the result? Nothing. Not a head has been turned, nor an eye lifted. The bustle goes on as before. 'They bought, they sold,' as if no voice had spoken. So, after the disappointed waiting of Wisdom, her voice peals out again, but this time with severity in its tones. Note how, in Pro. 1:24 - Pro. 1:25, the sin of sins against the pleading Wisdom of God is represented as being simple indifference. 'Ye refused,' 'no man regarded,' 'set at nought,' 'would none of'-these are the things which bring down the heavy judgments. It does not need violent opposition or black crime to wreck a soul. Simply doing nothing when God speaks is enough to effect destruction. There is no need to lift up angry arms in hostility. If we keep them hanging listless by our sides, it is sufficient. The gift escapes us, if we simply keep our hands shut or held behind our backs. Alas, for ears which have not heard, for seeing eyes which have not seen because they loved evil simplicity and hated knowledge!

Then note the terrible retribution. That is an awful picture of the mocking laughter of Wisdom, accompanying the rush of the whirlwind and the groans of anguish and shrieks of terror. It is even more solemn and dreadful than the parallel representations in Psa. 2:1 - Psa. 2:12, for there the laughter indicates God's knowledge that the schemes of opponents are vain, but here it figures pleasure in calamities. Of course it is to be remembered that the Wisdom thus represented is not to be identified with God; but still the imagery is startling, and needs to be taken along with declarations that God has 'no pleasure in the death of the sinner,' and to be interpreted as indicating, with daring anthropomorphism, the inevitable character of the 'destruction,' and the uselessness of appeals to the Wisdom once despised. But we joyfully remember that the Incarnate Wisdom, fairer than the ancient personification, wept over the city which He knew must perish.

Pro. 1:28 - Pro. 1:31 carry on the picture of too late repentance and inevitable retribution. They who let Wisdom cry, and paid no heed, shall cry to her in their turn, and be unnoticed. They whom she vainly sought shall vainly seek for her. Actions have their consequences, which are not annihilated because the doers do not like them. Thoughts have theirs; for the foolish not only eat of the fruit of their ways or doings, but are filled with their own devices or counsels. 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' That inexorable law works, deaf to all cries, in the field of earthly life, both as regards condition and character; and that field of its operation is all that the writer of this book has in view. He is not denying the possibility of forgiveness, nor the efficacy of repentance, nor is he asserting that a penitent soul ever seeks God in vain; but he is declaring that it is too late to cry out for deliverance from consequences of folly when the consequences have us in their grip, and that wishes for deliverance are vain, though sighs of repentance are not. We cannot reap where we have not sowed. We must reap what we have. If we are such sluggards that we will ‘not plough in winter by reason of the cold,’ we shall ‘beg in harvest and have nothing.’

But though the writer had probably only this life in view, Jesus Christ has extended the teaching to the next, when He has told of those who will seek to enter in and not be able. The experience of the fruits of their godlessness will make godless men wish to escape eating the fruits-and that wish shall be vain. It is not for us to enlarge on such words, but it is for us all to lay them to heart, and to take heed that we listen now to the beseeching call of the heavenly Wisdom in its tenderest and noblest form, as it appeared in Christ, the Incarnate Word.

Pro. 1:32 - Pro. 1:33 generalise the preceding promises and warnings in a great antithesis. ‘The backsliding [or, turning away] of the simple slays them.’ There is allusion to Wisdom’s call in Pro. 1:23. The simple had turned, but in the wrong direction-away from and not towards her. To turn away from heavenly Wisdom is to set one’s face toward destruction. It cannot be too earnestly reiterated that we must make our choice of one of two directions for ourselves-either towards God, to seek whom is life, to find whom is heaven; or away from Him, to turn our backs on whom is to embrace unrest, and to be separate from whom is death. ‘The security of fools,’ by which is meant, not their safety, but their fancy that they are safe, ‘destroys them.’ No man is in such danger as the careless man of the world who thinks that he is all right. A traveller along the edge of a precipice in the night, who goes on as if he walked a broad road and takes no heed to his footing, will soon repent his rashness at the bottom, mangled and bruised. A man who in this changing world fancies that he sits as a king, and sees no sorrow, will have a rude wakening. A moment’s heed saves hours of pain.

The alternative to this suicidal folly is in listening to Wisdom’s call. Whoever does that will ‘dwell safely,’ not in fancied but real security; and in his quiet heart there need be no unrest from feared evils, for he will have hold of a charm which turns evils into good, and with such a guide he cannot go astray, nor with such a defender be wounded to death, nor with such a companion ever be solitary. If Christ be our Light, we shall not walk in darkness. If He be our Wisdom, we shall not err. If He be our Life, we shall never see death. If He is our Good, we shall fear no evil.

3) Proverbs 3:1-10

Proverbs

THE SECRET OF WELL-BEING

Pro. 3:1 - Pro. 3:10.

The first ten verses of this passage form a series of five couplets, which enforce on the young various phases of goodness by their tendency to secure happiness or blessedness of various sorts. The underlying axiom is that, in a world ruled by a good Being, obedience must lead to well-being; but while that is in the general true, exceptions do occur, and good men do encounter evil times. Therefore the glowing promises of these verses are followed by two verses which deal with the explanation of good men's afflictions, as being results and tokens of God's fatherly love.

The first couplet is general in character. It inculcates obedience to the precepts of the teacher, and gives as reason the assurance that thereby long life and peace will be secured. True to the Old Testament conception of revelation as a law, the teacher sets obedience in the forefront. He is sure that his teaching contains the sufficient guide for conduct, and coincides with the divine will. He calls, in the first instance, for inward willing acceptance of His commandments; for it is the heart, not primarily the hands, which he desires should 'keep' them. The mother of all graces of conduct is the bowing of the will to divine authority. The will is the man, and where it ceases to lift itself up in self-sacrificing and self-determining rebellion, and dissolves into running waters of submission, these will flow through the life and make it pure. To obey self is sin, to obey God is righteousness. The issues of such obedience are 'length of days . . . and peace.'

Even if we allow for the difference between the Old and the New Testaments, it remains true that a life conformed to God's will tends to longevity, and that many forms of sin do shorten men's days. Passion and indulged appetites eat away the very flesh, and many a man's 'bones are full of the sin of his youth.’ The profligate has usually ‘a short life,’ whether he succeeds in making it ‘merry’ or not.

‘Peace’ is a wide word, including all well-being. Ease-loving Orientals, especially when living in warlike times, naturally used the phrase as a shorthand expression for all good. Busy Westerns, torn by the distractions and rapid movement of modern life, echo the sigh for repose which breathes in the word. ‘There is no joy but calm,’ and the sure way to deepest peace is to give up self-will and live in obedience.

The second couplet deals with our relations to one another, and puts forward the two virtues of ‘loving-kindness and truth’-that is truth, or faithfulness-as all-inclusive. They are the two which are often jointly ascribed to God, especially in the Psalms. Our attitude to one another should be moulded in God’s to us all. The tiniest crystal has the same facets and angles as the largest. The giant hexagonal pillars of basalt, like our Scottish Staffa, are identical in form with the microscopic crystals of the same substance. God is our Pattern; goodness is likeness to Him.

These graces are to be bound about the neck, perhaps as an ornament, but more probably as a yoke by which the harnessed ox draws its burden. If we have them, they will fit us to bear one another’s burdens, and will lead to all human duties to our fellows.

These graces are also to be written on the ‘table of the heart’; that is, are to be objects of habitual meditation with aspiration. If so, they will come to sight in life. He who practises them will ‘find favour with God and man,’ for God looks with complacency on those who display the right attitude to men; and men for the most part treat us as we treat them. There are surly natures which are not won by kindness, like black tarns among the hills, that are gloomy even in sunshine, and requite evil for good; but the most of men reflect our feelings to them.

‘Good understanding’ is another result. It is ‘found’ when it is attributed to us, so that the expression substantially means that the possessors of these graces will win the reputation of being really wise, not only in the fallible judgment of men, but before the pure eyes of the all-seeing God. Really wise policy coincides with loving-kindness and truth.

The remaining couplets refer to our relations to God. The New Testament is significantly anticipated in the pre-eminence given to trust; that is, faith. Nor less significant and profound is the association of self-distrust with trust in the Lord. The two things are inseparable. They are but the under and upper sides of one thing, or like the two growths that come from a seed-one striking downwards becomes the root; one piercing upwards becomes the stalk. The double attitude of trust and distrust finds expression in acknowledging Him in all our ways; that is, ordering our conduct under a constant consciousness of His presence, in accordance with His will, and in dependence on His help.

Such a relation to God will certainly, and with no exceptions, issue in His ‘directing our paths,’ by which is meant that He will be not only our Guide, but also our Roadmaker, showing us the way and clearing obstacles from it. Calm certitude follows on willingness to accept God’s will, and whoever seeks only to go where God sends him will neither be left doubtful whither he should go, nor find his road blocked.

The fourth couplet is, in its first part, in inverted parallelism with the third; for it begins with self-distrust, and proceeds thence to ‘fear of the Lord,’ which corresponds to, and is, in fact, but one phase of, trust in Him. It is the reverent awe which has no torment, and is then purest when faith is strongest. It necessarily leads to departing from evil. Morality has its roots in religion. There is no such magnet to draw men from sin as the happy fear of God, which is likewise faith. Whoever separates devoutness from purity of life, this teacher does not. He knows nothing of religion which permits association with iniquity. Such conduct will tend to physical well-being, and in a deeper sense will secure soundness of life. Godlessness is the true sickness. He only is healthy who has a healthy, because healed, soul.

The fifth couplet appears at first as being a drop to a lower region. A regulation of the Mosaic law may strike some as out of place here. But it is to be remembered that our modern distinction of ceremonial and moral law was non-existent for Israel, and that the command has a wider application than to Jewish tithes. To ‘honour God with our substance’ is not necessarily to give it away for religious purposes, but to use it devoutly and as He approves.

Christianity has more to say about the distribution, as well as the acquisition, of wealth, than professing Christians, especially in commercial communities, practically recognise. This precept grips us tight, and is much more than a ceremonial regulation. Many causes besides the devout use of property tend to wealth in our highly artificial state of society. The world tries to get it by shrewdness, unscrupulousness, and by many other vices which are elevated to the rank of virtues; but he who honours the Lord in getting and spending will generally have as much as his true needs and regulated desires require.

4) Proverbs 3:11-24

Proverbs

THE GIFTS OF HEAVENLY WISDOM

Pro. 3:11 - Pro. 3:24.

The repetition of the words ‘my son’ at the beginning of this passage marks a new section, which extends to Pro. 3:20, inclusively, another section being similarly marked as commencing in Pro. 3:21. The fatherly counsels of these early chapters are largely reiterations of the same ideas, being line upon line. ‘To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe.’ Many strokes drive the nail home. Exhortations to get Wisdom, based upon the blessings she brings, are the staple of the whole. If we look carefully at the section [Pro. 3:11 - Pro. 3:20], we find in it a central core [Pro. 3:13 - Pro. 3:18], setting forth the blessings which Wisdom gives, preceded by two verses, inculcating the right acceptance of God’s chastisements which are one chief means of attaining Wisdom, and followed by two verses [Pro. 3:19 - Pro. 3:20], which exalt her as being divine as well as human. So the portraiture of her working in humanity is framed by a prologue and epilogue, setting forth two aspects of her relation to God; namely, that she is imparted by Him through the discipline of trouble, and that she dwells in His bosom and is the agent of His creative work.

The prologue, then, points to sorrow and trouble, rightly accepted, as one chief means by which we acquire heavenly Wisdom. Note the profound insight into the meaning of sorrows. They are 'instruction' and 'reproof.' The thought of the Book of Job is here fully incorporated and assimilated. Griefs and pains are not tokens of anger, nor punishments of sin, but love-gifts meant to help to the acquisition of wisdom. They do not come because the sufferers are wicked, but in order to make them good or better. Tempests are meant to blow us into port. The lights are lowered in the theatre that fairer scenes may become visible on the thin screen between us and eternity. Other supports are struck away that we may lean hard on God. The voice of all experience of earthly loss and bitterness is, 'Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get Wisdom.' God himself becomes our Schoolmaster, and through the voice of the human teacher we hear His deeper tones saying, 'My son, despise not the chastening.'

Note, too, the assurance that all discipline is the fruit of Fatherly love. How many sad hearts in all ages these few words have calmed and braced! How sharp a test of our childlike spirit our acceptance of them, when our own hearts are sore, is! How deep the peace which they bring when really believed! How far they go to solve the mystery of pain, and turn darkness into a solemn light!

Note, further, that the words 'despise' and 'be weary' both imply rather rejection with loathing, and thus express unsubmissive impatience which gets no good from discipline. The beautiful rendering of the Septuagint, which has been made familiar by its adoption in Hebrews, makes the two words express two opposite faults. They 'despise' who steel their wills against the rod, and make as if they did not feel the pain; they 'faint' who collapse beneath the blows, which they feel so much that they lose sight of their purpose. Dogged insensibility and utter prostration are equally harmful. He who meets life's teachings, which are a Father's correction, with either, has little prospect of getting Wisdom.

Then follows the main part of this section [Pro. 3:13 - Pro. 3:18],-the praise of Wisdom as in herself most precious, and as bestowing highest good. 'The man that findeth Wisdom' reminds us of the peasant in Christ's parable, who found treasure hidden in a field, and the 'merchandise' in Pro. 3:14, of the trader seeking goodly pearls. But the finding in Pro. 3:13 is not like the rustic's in the parable, who was seeking nothing when a chance stroke of his plough or kick of his heel laid bare the glittering gold. It is the finding which rewards seeking. The figure of acquiring by trading, like that of the pearl-merchant in the companion parable, implies pains, effort, willingness to part with something in order to attain.

The nature of the price is not here in question. We know who has said, 'I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire.' We buy heavenly Wisdom when we surrender ourselves. The price is desire to possess, and willingness to accept as an undeserved, unearned gift. But that does not come into view in our lesson. Only this is strongly put in it-that this heavenly Wisdom outshines all jewels, outweighs all wealth, and is indeed the only true riches. 'Rubies' is probably rather to be taken as 'corals,' which seem to have been very highly prized by the Jews, and, no doubt, found their way to them from the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea. The word rendered 'things thou canst desire' is better taken as meaning 'jewels.'

This noble and conclusive depreciation of material wealth in comparison with Wisdom, which is not merely intellectual, but rests on the fear of the Lord, and is goodness as well as understanding, never needed preaching with more emphasis than in our day, when more and more the commercial spirit invades every region of life, and rich men are the aristocrats and envied types of success. When will England and America believe the religion which they profess, and adjust their estimates of the best things accordingly? How many so-called Christian parents would think their son mad if he said, 'I do not care about getting rich; my goal is to be wise with God's Wisdom'? How few of us order our lives on the footing of this old teacher's lesson, and act out the belief that Wisdom is more than wealth! The man who heaps millions together, and masses it, fails in life, however a vulgar world and a nominal church may admire and glorify him. The man who wins Wisdom succeeds, however bare may be his cupboard, and however people may pity him for having failed in life, because he has not drawn prizes in the Devil's lottery. His blank is a prize, and their prizes are blanks. This decisive subordination of material to spiritual good is too plainly duty and common sense to need being dwelt upon; but, alas! like a great many other most obvious, accepted truths, it is disregarded as universally as believed.

The inseparable accompaniments of Wisdom are next eloquently described. The picture is the poetical clothing of the idea that all material good will come to him who despises it all and clasps Wisdom to his heart. Some things flow from Wisdom possessed as usual consequences; some are inseparable from her. The gift in her right hand is length of days; that in her left, which, by its position, is suggested as inferior to the former, is wealth and honour-two goods which will attend the long life. No doubt such promises are to be taken with limitations; but there need be no doubt that, on the whole, loyal devotion to and real possession of heavenly Wisdom do tend in the direction of lengthening lives, which are by it delivered from vices and anxieties which cut many a career short, and of gathering round silver hairs reverence and troops of friends.

These are the usual consequences, and may be fairly brought into view as secondary encouragements to seek Wisdom. But if she is sought for the sake of getting these attendant blessings, she will not be found. She must be loved for herself, not for her dowry, or she will not be won. At the same time, the overstrained and fantastic morality, which stigmatises regard to the blessed results of a religious life as selfishness, finds no support in Scripture, as it has none in common sense. Would there were more of such selfishness!

Sometimes Wisdom’s hands do not hold these outward gifts. But the connection between her and the next blessings spoken of is inseparable. Her ways are pleasantness and peace. ‘In keeping’-not *for* keeping-’her commandments is great reward.’ Inward delight and deep tranquillity of heart attend every step taken in obedience to Wisdom. The course of conduct so prescribed will often involve painful crucifying of the lower nature, but its pleasure far outweighs its pain. It will often be strewn with sharp flints, or may even have red-hot ploughshares laid on it, as in old ordeal trials; but still it will be pleasant to the true self. Sin is a blunder as well as a crime, and enlightened self-interest would point out the same course as the highest law of Wisdom. In reality, duty and delight are co-extensive. They are two names for one thing-one taken from consideration of its obligation; the other, from observation of its issues. ‘Calm pleasures there abide.’ The only complete peace, which fills and quiets the whole man, comes from obeying Wisdom, or what is the same thing, from following Christ. There is no other way of bringing all our nature into accord with itself, ending the war between conscience and inclination, between flesh and spirit. There is no other way of bringing us into amity with all circumstances, so that fortunate or adverse shall be recognised as good, and nothing be able to agitate us very much. Peace with ourselves, the world, and God, is always the consequence of listening to Wisdom.

The whole fair picture is summed up in Pro. 3:18 : ‘She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her.’ This is a distinct allusion to the narrative of Genesis. The flaming sword of the cherub guard is sheathed, and access to the tree, which gives immortal life to those who eat, is open to us. Mark how that great word ‘life’ is here gathering to itself at least the beginnings of higher conceptions than those of simple existence. It is swelling like a bud, and preparing to open and disclose the perfect flower, the life which stands in the knowledge of God and the Christ whom He has sent. Jesus, the incarnate Wisdom, is Himself ‘the Tree of Life in the midst of the paradise of God.’ The condition of access to it is ‘laying hold’ by the outstretched hand of faith, and keeping hold with holy obstinacy of grip, in spite of all temptations to slack our grasp. That retaining is the condition of true blessedness.

Pro. 3:19 - Pro. 3:20 invest the idea of Wisdom with still loftier sublimity, since they declare that it is an attribute of God Himself by which creation came into being. The meaning of the writer is inadequately grasped if we take it to be only that creation shows God’s Wisdom. This personified Wisdom dwells with God, is the agent of creation, comes with invitations to men, may be possessed by them, and showers blessings on them. The planet Neptune was divined before it was discovered, by reason of perturbations in the movements of the exterior members of the system, unaccountable unless some great globe of light, hitherto unseen, were swaying them in their orbits. Do we not see here like influence streaming from the unrisen light of Christ? Personification prepares for Incarnation. There is One who has been with the Father from the beginning, by whom all things came into being, whose voice sounds to all, who is the Tree of Life, whom we may all possess, and with whose own peace we may be peaceful and blessed for evermore.

Pro. 3:21 - Pro. 3:24 belong to the next section of the great discourse or hymn. They add little to the preceding. But we may observe the earnest exhortation to let wisdom and understanding be ever in sight. Eyes are apt to stray and clouds to hide the sun. Effort is needed to counteract the tendency to slide out of consciousness, which our weakness imposes on the most certain and important truths. A Wisdom which we do not think about is as good or as bad as non-existent for us. One prime condition of healthy spiritual life is the habit of meditation, thereby renewing our gaze upon the facts of God's revelation and the bearing of these on our conduct.

The blessings flowing from Wisdom are again dilated on, from a somewhat different point of view. She is the giver of life. And then she adorns the life she gives. One has seen homely faces so refined and glorified by the fair soul that shone through them as to be, 'as it were, the face of an angel.' Gracefulness should be the outward token of inward grace. Some good people forget that they are bound to 'adorn the doctrine.' But they who have drunk most deeply of the fountain of Wisdom will find that, like the fabled spring, its waters confer strange loveliness. Lives spent in communion with Jesus will be lovely, however homely their surroundings, and however vulgar eyes, taught only to admire staring colours, may find them dull. The world saw 'no beauty that they should desire Him,' in Him whom holy souls and heavenly angels and the divine Father deemed 'fairer than the sons of men'!

Safety and firm footing in active life will be ours if we walk in Wisdom's ways. He who follows Christ's footsteps will tread surely, and not fear foes. Quiet repose in hours of rest will be his. A day filled with happy service will be followed by a night full of calm slumber, 'Whether we sleep or wake, we live' with Him; and, if we do both, sleeping and waking will be blessed, and our lives will move on gently to the time when days and nights shall melt into one, and there will be no need for repose; for there will be no work that wearies and no hands that droop. The last lying down in the grave will be attended with no terrors. The last sleep there shall be sweet; for it will really be awaking to the full possession of the personal Wisdom, who is our Christ, our Life in death, our Heaven in heaven.

5) **Proverbs 4:10-11**

Proverbs

THE TWO PATHS

Pro. 4:10 - Pro. 4:19.

This passage includes much more than temperance or any other single virtue. It is a perfectly general exhortation to that practical wisdom which walks in the path of righteousness. The principles laid down here are true in regard to drunkenness and abstinence, but they are intended to receive a wider application, and to that wider application we must first look. The theme is the old, familiar one of the two paths, and the aim is to recommend the better way by setting forth the contrasted effects of walking in it and in the other.

The general call to listen in Pro. 4:10 is characteristically enforced by the Old Testament assurance that obedience prolongs life. That is a New Testament truth as well; for there is nothing more certain than that a life in conformity with God’s will, which is the same thing as a life in conformity with physical laws, tends to longevity. The experience of any doctor will show that. Here in England we have statistics which prove that total abstainers are a long-lived people, and some insurance offices construct their tables accordingly.

After that general call to listen comes, in Pro. 4:11, the description of the path in which long life is to be found. It is ‘the way of Wisdom’-that is, that which Wisdom prescribes, and in which therefore it is wise to walk. It is always foolish to do wrong. The rough title of an old play is *The Devil is an Ass*, and if that is not true about him, it is absolutely true about those who listen to his lies. Sin is the stupidest thing in the universe, for it ignores the plainest facts, and never gets what it flings away so much to secure.

Another aspect of the path is presented in the designation ‘paths of uprightness,’ which seems to be equivalent to those which belong to, or perhaps which consist of, uprightness. The idea of straightness or evenness is the primary meaning of the word, and is, of course, appropriate to the image of a path. In the moral view, it suggests how much more simple and easy a course of rectitude is than one of sin. The one goes straight and unswerving to its end; the other is crooked, devious, intricate, and wanders from the true goal. A crooked road is a long road, and an up-and-down road is a tiring road. Wisdom’s way is straight, level, and steadily approaches its aim.

In Pro. 4:13 the image of the path is dropped for the moment, and the picture of the way of uprightness and its travellers is translated into the plain exhortation to keep fast hold of ‘instruction,’ which is substantially equivalent to the queenly Wisdom of these early chapters of Proverbs. The earnestness of the repeated exhortations implies the strength of the forces that tend to sweep us, especially those of us who are young, from our grasp of that Wisdom. Hands become slack, and many a good gift drops from nerveless fingers; thieves abound who will filch away ‘instruction,’ if we do not resolutely hold tight by it. Who would walk through the slums of a city holding jewels with a careless grasp, and never looking at them? How many would he have left if he did? We do not need to do anything to lose instruction. If we will only do nothing to keep it, the world and our own hearts will make sure that we lose it. And if we lose it, we lose ourselves; for ‘she is thy life,’ and the mere bodily life, that is lived without her, is not worth calling the life of a man.

Pro. 4:14 - Pro. 4:17 give the picture of the other path, in terrible contrast with the preceding. It is noteworthy that, while in the former the designation was the ‘path of uprightness’ or of ‘wisdom,’ and the description therefore was mainly of the characteristics of the path, here the designation is ‘the path of the *wicked*,’ and the description is mainly of the travellers on it. Righteousness was dealt with, as it were, in the abstract; but wickedness is too awful and dark to be painted thus, and is only set forth in the concrete, as seen in its doers. Now, it is significant that the first exhortation here is of a negative character. In contrast with the reiterated exhortations to keep wisdom, here are reiterated counsels to steer clear of evil. It is all about us, and we have to make a strong effort to keep it at arm's-length. 'Whom resist' is imperative. True, negative virtue is incomplete, but there will be no positive virtue without it. We must be accustomed to say 'No,' or we shall come to little good. An outer belt of firs is sometimes planted round a centre of more tender and valuable wood to shelter the young trees; so we have to make a fence of abstinences round our plantation of positive virtues. The decalogue is mostly prohibitions. 'So did *not* I, because of the fear of God' must be our motto. In this light, entire abstinence from intoxicants is seen to be part of the 'way of Wisdom.' It is one, and, in the present state of England and America, perhaps the most important, of the ways by which we can 'turn from' the path of the wicked and 'pass on.'

The picture of the wicked in Pro. 4:16 - Pro. 4:17 is that of very grossly criminal sinners. They are only content when they have done harm, and delight in making others as bad as themselves. But, diabolical as such a disposition is, one sees it only too often in full operation. How many a drunkard or impure man finds a fiendish pleasure in getting hold of some innocent lad, and 'putting him up to a thing or two,' which means teaching him the vices from which the teacher has ceased to get much pleasure, and which he has to spice with the condiment of seeing an unaccustomed sinner's eagerness! Such people infest our streets, and there is only one way for a young man to be safe from them,-'avoid, pass not by, turn from, and pass on.' The reference to 'bread' and 'wine' in Pro. 4:17 seems simply to mean that the wicked men's living is won by their 'wickedness,' which procures bread, and by their 'violence,' which brings them wine. It is the way by which these are obtained that is culpable. We may contrast this foul source of a degraded living with Pro. 4:13, where 'instruction' is set forth as 'the life' of the upright.

Pro. 4:18 - Pro. 4:19 bring more closely together the two paths, and set them in final, forcible contrast. The phrase 'the perfect day' might be rendered, vividly though clumsily, 'the steady of the day'-that is, noon, when the sun seems to stand still in the meridian. So the image compares the path of the just to the growing brightness of morning dawn, becoming more and more fervid and lustrous, till the climax of an Eastern midday. No more sublime figure of the continuous progress in goodness, brightness, and joy, which is the best reward of walking in the paths of uprightness, can be imagined; and it is as true as it is sublime. Blessed they who in the morning of their days begin to walk in the way of wisdom; for, in most cases, years will strengthen their uprightness, and to that progress there will be no termination, nor will the midday sun have to decline westward to diminishing splendour or dismal setting, but that noontide glory will be enhanced, and made eternal in a new heaven. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. That blaze of growing glory, possible for us all, makes the tragic gloom to which evil men condemn themselves the thicker and more doleful, as some dungeon in an Eastern prison seems pitch dark to one coming in from the blaze outside. ‘How great is that darkness!’ It is the darkness of sin, of ignorance, of sorrow, and what adds deeper gloom to it is that every soul that sits in that shadow of death might have been shining, a sun, in the spacious heaven of God’s love.

6) Proverbs 4:12

Proverbs

THE TWO PATHS

MONOTONY AND CRISES

Pro. 4:12.

The old metaphor likening life to a path has many felicities in it. It suggests constant change, it suggests continuous progress in one direction, and that all our days are linked together, and are not isolated fragments; and it suggests an aim and an end. So we find it perpetually in this Book of Proverbs. Here the ‘way’ has a specific designation, ‘the way of Wisdom’-that is to say, the way which Wisdom teaches, and the way on which Wisdom accompanies us, and the way which leads to Wisdom. Now, these two clauses of my text are not merely an instance of the peculiar feature of Hebrew poetry called parallelism, in which two clauses, substantially the same, occur, but with a little pleasing difference. ‘When thou goest’-that is, the monotonous tramp, tramp, tramp of slow walking along the path of an uneventful daily life, the humdrum ‘one foot up and another foot down’ which makes the most of our days. ‘When thou runnest’-that points to the crises, the sudden spurts, the necessarily brief bursts of more than usual energy and effort and difficulty. And about both of them, the humdrum and the exciting, the monotonous and the startling, the promise comes that if we walk in the path of Wisdom we shall not get disgusted with the one and we shall not be overwhelmed by the other. ‘When thou walkest, thy steps shall not be straitened; when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.’

But before I deal with these two clauses specifically, let me recall to you the condition, and the sole condition, upon which either of them can be fulfilled in our daily lives. The book from which my text is taken is probably one of the very latest in the Old Testament, and you catch in it a very significant and marvellous development of the Old Testament thought. For there rises up, out of these early chapters of the Book of Proverbs, that august and serene figure of the queenly Wisdom, which is more than a personification and is less than a person and a prophecy. It means more than the wise man that spoke it saw; it means for us Christ, ‘the Power of God and the Wisdom of God.’ And so instead of keeping ourselves merely to the word of the Book of Proverbs, we must grasp the thing that shines through the word, and realise that the writer’s visions can only become realities when the serene and august Wisdom that he saw shimmering through the darkness took to itself a human Form, and ‘the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.’

With that heightening of the meaning of the phrase, ‘the path of Wisdom’ assumes a heightened meaning too, for it is the path of the personal Wisdom, the Incarnate Wisdom, Christ Himself. And what does it *then* come to be to obey this command to walk in the way of Wisdom? Put it into three sentences. Let the Christ who is not only wise, but Wisdom, choose your path, and be sure that by the submission of your will all your paths are His, and not only yours. Make His path yours by following in His steps, and do in your place what you think Christ would have done if He had been there. Keep company with Him on the road. If we will do these three things-if we will say to Him, ‘Lord, when Thou sayest go, I go; when Thou biddest me come, I come; I am Thy slave, and I rejoice in the bondage more than in all licentious liberty, and what Thou biddest me do, I do’-if you will further say, ‘As Thou art, so am I in the world’-and if you will further say, ‘Leave me not alone, and let me cling to Thee on the road, as a little child holds on by her mother’s skirt or her father’s hand,’ then, and only then, will you walk in the path of Wisdom.

Now, then, these three things-submission of will, conformity of conduct, closeness of companionship-these three things being understood, let us look for a moment at the blessings that this text promises, and first at the promise for long uneventful stretches of our daily life. That, of course, is mainly the largest proportion of all our lives. Perhaps nine-tenths at least of all our days and years fall under the terms of this first promise, ‘When thou walkest.’ For many miles there comes nothing particular, nothing at all exciting, nothing new, nothing to break the plod, plod, plod along the road. Everything is as it was yesterday, and the day before that, and as it will be to-morrow, and the day after that, in all probability. ‘The trivial round, the common task’ make up by far the largest percentage of our lives. It is as in wine, the immense proportion of it is nothing but water, and only a small proportion of alcohol is diffused through the great mass of the tamer liquid.

Now, then, if Jesus Christ is not to help us in the monotony of our daily lives, what, in the name of common sense, is His help good for? If it is not true that He will be with us, not only in the moments of crisis, but in the long commonplace hours, we may as well have no Christ at all, for all that I can see. Unless the trivial is His field, there is very little field for Him, in your life or mine. And so it should come to all of us who have to take up this daily burden of small, monotonous, constantly recurring, and therefore often wearisome, duties, as even a more blessed promise than the other one, that ‘when thou walkest, thy steps shall not be straitened.’

I remember hearing of a man that got so disgusted with having to dress and undress himself every day that he committed suicide to escape from the necessity. That is a very extreme form of the feeling that comes over us all sometimes, when we wake in a morning and look before us along the stretch of dead level, which is a great deal more wearisome when it lasts long than are the cheerful vicissitudes of up hill and down dale. We all know the deadening influence of a habit. We all know the sense of disgust that comes over us at times, and of utter weariness, just because we have been doing the same things day after day for so long. I know only one infallible way of preventing the common from becoming commonplace, of preventing the small from becoming trivial, of preventing the familiar from becoming contemptible, and it is to link it all to Jesus Christ, and to say, ‘For Thy sake, and unto Thee, I do this’; then, not only will the rough places become plain, and the crooked things straight, and not only will the mountains be brought low, but the valleys of the commonplace will be exalted. ‘Thy steps shall not be straitened.’ ‘I will make his feet as hind’s feet,’ says one of the old prophets. What a picture of light, buoyant, graceful movement that is! And each of us may have that, instead of the grind, grind, grind! tramp, tramp, tramp! along the level and commonplace road of our daily lives, if we will. Walk in the path of Christ, with Christ, towards Christ, and ‘thy steps shall not be straitened.’

Now, there is another aspect of this same promise-viz. if we thus are in the path of Incarnate Wisdom, we shall not feel the restrictions of the road to be restraints. ‘Thy steps shall not be straitened’; although there is a wall on either side, and the road is the narrow way that leads to life, it is broad enough for the sober man, because he goes in a straight line, and does not need half the road to roll about in. The limits which love imposes, and the limits which love accepts, are not narrowing. ‘I will walk at liberty, for-I do as I like.’ No! that is slavery; but, ‘I will walk at liberty, for I keep Thy precepts’; and I do not want to go vagrantising at large, but limit myself thankfully to the way which Thou dost mark out. ‘Thy steps shall not be straitened.’ So much for the first of these promises.

Now what about the other one? ‘When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.’

As I have said, the former promise applies to the hours and the years of life. The latter applies to but a few moments of each man’s life. Cast your thoughts back over your own days, and however changeful, eventful, perhaps adventurous, and as we people call it, romantic, some parts of our lives may have been, yet for all that you can put the turning-points, the crises that have called for great efforts, and the gathering of yourselves up, and the calling forth of all your powers to do and to dare, you can put them all inside of a week, in most cases. ‘When thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble.’ The greater the speed, the greater the risk of stumbling over some obstacle in the way. We all know how many men there are that do very well in the uneventful commonplaces of life, but bring them face to face with some great difficulty or some great trial, and there is a dismal failure. Jesus Christ is ready to make us fit for anything in the way of difficulty, in the way of trial, that can come storming upon us from out of the dark. And He will make us so fit if we follow the injunctions to which I have already been referring. Without His help it is almost certain that when we have to run, our ankles will give, or there will be a stone in the road that we never thought of, and the excitement will sweep us away from principle, and we shall lose our hold on Him; and then it is all up with us.

There is a wonderful saying in one of the prophets, which uses this same metaphor of my text with a difference, where it speaks of the divine guidance of Israel as being like that of a horse in the wilderness. Fancy the poor, nervous, tremulous creature trying to keep its footing upon the smooth granite slabs of Sinai. Travellers dare not take their horses on mountain journeys, because they are highly nervous and are not sure-footed enough. And, so says the old prophet, that gracious Hand will be laid on the bridle, and hold the nervous creature’s head up as it goes sliding over the slippery rocks, and so He will bring it down to rest in the valley. ‘Now unto Him that is able to keep us from stumbling,’ as is the true rendering, ‘and to present us faultless . . . be glory.’ Trust Him, keep near Him, let Him choose your way, and try to be like Him in it; and whatever great occasions may arise in your lives, either of sorrow or of duty, you will be equal to them.

But remember the virtue that comes out victorious in the crisis must have been nourished and cultivated in the humdrum moments. For it is no time to make one’s first acquaintance with Jesus Christ when the eyeballs of some ravenous wild beast are staring into ours, and its mouth is open to swallow us. Unless He has kept our feet from being straitened in the quiet walk, He will not be able to keep us from stumbling in the vehement run.

One word more. This same distinction is drawn by one of the prophets, who adds another clause to it. Isaiah, or the author of the second portion of the book which goes by his name, puts in wonderful connection the two thoughts of my text with analogous thoughts in regard to God, when he says, ‘Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?' and immediately goes on to say, 'They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.' So it is from God, the unfainting and the unwearied, that the strength comes which makes our steps buoyant with energy amidst the commonplace, and steadfast and established at the crises of our lives. But before these two great promises is put another one: 'They shall mount up with wings as eagles,' and therefore both the other become possible. That is to say, fellowship with God in the heavens, which is made possible on earth by communion with Christ, is the condition both of the unwearied running and of unfainting walking. If we will keep in the path of Christ, He will take care of the commonplace dreary tracts and of the brief moments of strain and effort, and will bring us at last where He has gone, if, looking unto Him, we 'run with patience the race,' and walk with cheerfulness the road, 'that is set before us.'

7) Proverbs 4:13-17

Proverbs

THE TWO PATHS

Pro. 4:10 - Pro. 4:19.

This passage includes much more than temperance or any other single virtue. It is a perfectly general exhortation to that practical wisdom which walks in the path of righteousness. The principles laid down here are true in regard to drunkenness and abstinence, but they are intended to receive a wider application, and to that wider application we must first look. The theme is the old, familiar one of the two paths, and the aim is to recommend the better way by setting forth the contrasted effects of walking in it and in the other.

The general call to listen in Pro. 4:10 is characteristically enforced by the Old Testament assurance that obedience prolongs life. That is a New Testament truth as well; for there is nothing more certain than that a life in conformity with God's will, which is the same thing as a life in conformity with physical laws, tends to longevity. The experience of any doctor will show that. Here in England we have statistics which prove that total abstainers are a long-lived people, and some insurance offices construct their tables accordingly.

After that general call to listen comes, in Pro. 4:11, the description of the path in which long life is to be found. It is ‘the way of Wisdom’-that is, that which Wisdom prescribes, and in which therefore it is wise to walk. It is always foolish to do wrong. The rough title of an old play is *The Devil is an Ass*, and if that is not true about him, it is absolutely true about those who listen to his lies. Sin is the stupidest thing in the universe, for it ignores the plainest facts, and never gets what it flings away so much to secure.

Another aspect of the path is presented in the designation ‘paths of uprightness,’ which seems to be equivalent to those which belong to, or perhaps which consist of, uprightness. The idea of straightness or evenness is the primary meaning of the word, and is, of course, appropriate to the image of a path. In the moral view, it suggests how much more simple and easy a course of rectitude is than one of sin. The one goes straight and unswerving to its end; the other is crooked, devious, intricate, and wanders from the true goal. A crooked road is a long road, and an up-and-down road is a tiring road. Wisdom’s way is straight, level, and steadily approaches its aim.

In Pro. 4:13 the image of the path is dropped for the moment, and the picture of the way of uprightness and its travellers is translated into the plain exhortation to keep fast hold of ‘instruction,’ which is substantially equivalent to the queenly Wisdom of these early chapters of Proverbs. The earnestness of the repeated exhortations implies the strength of the forces that tend to sweep us, especially those of us who are young, from our grasp of that Wisdom. Hands become slack, and many a good gift drops from nerveless fingers; thieves abound who will filch away ‘instruction,’ if we do not resolutely hold tight by it. Who would walk through the slums of a city holding jewels with a careless grasp, and never looking at them? How many would he have left if he did? We do not need to do anything to lose instruction. If we will only do nothing to keep it, the world and our own hearts will make sure that we lose it. And if we lose it, we lose ourselves;

for ‘she is thy life,’ and the mere bodily life, that is lived without her, is not worth calling the life of a man.

Pro. 4:14 - Pro. 4:17 give the picture of the other path, in terrible contrast with the preceding. It is noteworthy that, while in the former the designation was the ‘path of uprightness’ or of ‘wisdom,’ and the description therefore was mainly of the characteristics of the path, here the designation is ‘the path of the *wicked*,’ and the description is mainly of the travellers on it. Righteousness was dealt with, as it were, in the abstract; but wickedness is too awful and dark to be painted thus, and is only set forth in the concrete, as seen in its doers. Now, it is significant that the first exhortation here is of a negative character. In contrast with the reiterated exhortations to keep wisdom, here are reiterated counsels to steer clear of evil. It is all about us, and we have to make a strong effort to keep it at arm’s-length. ‘Whom resist’ is imperative. True, negative virtue is incomplete, but there will be no positive virtue without it. We must be accustomed to say ‘No,’ or we shall come to little good. An outer belt of firs is sometimes planted round a centre of more tender and valuable wood to shelter the young trees; so we have to make a fence of abstinences round our plantation of positive virtues. The decalogue is mostly prohibitions. ‘So did *not* I, because of the fear of God’ must be our motto. In this light, entire abstinence from intoxicants is seen to be part of the ‘way of Wisdom.’ It is one, and, in the present state of England and America, perhaps the most important, of the ways by which we can ‘turn from’ the path of the wicked and ‘pass on.’

The picture of the wicked in Pro. 4:16 - Pro. 4:17 is that of very grossly criminal sinners. They are only content when they have done harm, and delight in making others as bad as themselves. But, diabolical as such a disposition is, one sees it only too often in full operation. How many a drunkard or impure man finds a fiendish pleasure in getting hold of some innocent lad, and ‘putting him up to a thing or two,’ which means teaching him the vices from which the teacher has ceased to get much pleasure, and which he has to spice with the condiment of seeing an unaccustomed sinner’s eagerness! Such people infest our streets, and there is only one way for a young man to be safe from them,-’avoid, pass not by, turn from, and pass on.’ The reference to ‘bread’ and ‘wine’ in Pro. 4:17 seems simply to mean that the wicked men’s living is won by their ‘wickedness,’ which procures bread, and by their ‘violence,’ which brings them wine. It is the way by which these are obtained that is culpable. We may contrast this foul source of a degraded living with Pro. 4:13, where ‘instruction’ is set forth as ‘the life’ of the upright.

Pro. 4:18 - Pro. 4:19 bring more closely together the two paths, and set them in final, forcible contrast. The phrase ‘the perfect day’ might be rendered, vividly though clumsily, ‘the steady of the day’-that is, noon, when the sun seems to stand still in the meridian. So the image compares the path of the just to the growing brightness of morning dawn, becoming more and more fervid and lustrous, till the climax of an Eastern midday. No more sublime figure of the continuous progress in goodness, brightness, and joy, which is the best reward of walking in the paths of uprightness, can be imagined; and it is as true as it is sublime. Blessed they who in the morning of their days begin to walk in the way of wisdom; for, in most cases, years will strengthen their uprightness, and to that progress there will be no termination, nor will the midday sun have to decline westward to diminishing splendour or dismal setting, but that noontide glory will be enhanced, and made eternal in a new heaven. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. That blaze of growing glory, possible for us all, makes the tragic gloom to which evil men condemn themselves the thicker and more doleful, as some dungeon in an Eastern prison seems pitch dark to one coming in from the blaze outside. ‘How great is that darkness!’ It is the darkness of sin, of ignorance, of sorrow, and what adds deeper gloom to it is that every soul that sits in that shadow of death might have been shining, a sun, in the spacious heaven of God’s love.

8) Proverbs 4:18

Proverbs

THE TWO PATHS

FROM DAWN TO NOON

Pro. 4:18. - Mat. 13:43.

The metaphor common to both these texts is not infrequent throughout Scripture. In one of the oldest parts of the Old Testament, Deborah's triumphal song, we find, 'Let all them that love Thee be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.' In one of the latest parts of the Old Testament, Daniel's prophecy, we read, 'They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.' Then in the New Testament we have Christ's comparison of His servants to light, and the great promise which I have read as my second text. The upshot of them all is this-the most radiant thing on earth is the character of a good man. The world calls men of genius and intellectual force its lights. The divine estimate, which is the true one, confers the name on righteousness.

But my first text follows out another analogy; not only brightness, but progressive brightness, is the characteristic of the righteous man.

We are to think of the strong Eastern sun, whose blinding light steadily increases till the noontide. 'The perfect day' is a somewhat unfortunate translation. What is meant is the point of time at which the day culminates, and for a moment, the sun seems to stand steady, up in those southern lands, in the very zenith, raying down 'the arrows that fly by noonday.' The text does not go any further, it does not talk about the sad diminution of the afternoon. The parallel does not hold; though, if we consult appearance and sense alone, it seems to hold only too well. For, sadder than the setting of the suns, which rise again to-morrow, is the sinking into darkness of death, from which there seems to be no emerging. But my second text comes in to tell us that death is but as the shadow of eclipse which passes, and with it pass obscuring clouds and envious mists, and 'then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.'

And so the two texts speak to us of the progressive brightness, and the ultimate, which is also the progressive, radiance of the righteous.

I. In looking at them together, then, I would notice, first, what a Christian life is meant to be.

I must not linger on the lovely thoughts that are suggested by that attractive metaphor of life. It must be enough, for our present purpose, to say that the light of the Christian life, like its type in the heavens, may be analysed into three beams-purity, knowledge, blessedness. And these three, blended together, make the pure whiteness of a Christian soul.

But what I wish rather to dwell upon is the other thought, the intention that every Christian life should be a life of increasing lustre, uninterrupted, and the natural result of increasing communion with, and conformity to, the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance.

Remember how emphatically, in all sorts of ways, progress is laid down in Scripture as the mark of a religious life. There is the emblem of my text. There is our Lord's beautiful one of vegetable growth: 'First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.' There is the other metaphor of the stages of human life, 'babes in Christ,' young men in Him, old men and fathers. There is the metaphor of the growth of the body. There is the metaphor of the gradual building up of a structure. We are to 'edify ourselves together,' and to 'build ourselves up on our most holy faith.' There is the other emblem of a race-continual advance as the result of continual exertion, and the use of the powers bestowed upon us.

And so in all these ways, and in many others that I need not now touch upon, Scripture lays it down as a rule that life in the highest region, like life in the lowest, is marked by continual growth. It is so in regard to all other things. Continuity in any kind of practice gives increasing power in the art. The artisan, the blacksmith with his hammer, the skilled artificer at his trade, the student at his subject, the good man in his course of life, and the bad man in his, do equally show that use becomes second nature. And so, in passing, let me say what incalculable importance there is in our getting habit, with all its mystical power to mould life, on the side of righteousness, and of becoming accustomed to do good, and so being unfamiliar with evil.

Let me remind you, too, how this intention of continuous growth is marked by the gifts that are bestowed upon us in Jesus Christ. He gives us-and it is by no means the least of the gifts that He bestows-an absolutely unattainable aim as the object of our efforts. For He bids us not only be 'perfect, as our Father in Heaven is perfect,' but He bids us be entirely conformed to His own Self. The misery of men is that they pursue aims so narrow and so shabby that they can be attained, and are therefore left behind, to sink hull down on the backward horizon. But to have before us an aim which is absolutely unreachable, instead of being, as ignorant people say, an occasion of despair and of idleness, is, on the contrary, the very salt of life. It keeps us young, it makes hope immortal, it emancipates from lower pursuits, it diminishes the weight of sorrows, it administers an anaesthetic to every pain. If you want to keep life fresh, seek for that which you can never fully find.

Christ gives us infinite powers to reach that unattainable aim, for He gives us access to all His own fullness, and there is more in His storehouses than we can ever take, not to say more than we can ever hope to exhaust. And therefore, because of the aim that is set before us, and because of the powers that are bestowed upon us to reach it, there is stamped upon every Christian life unmistakably as God's purpose and ideal concerning it, that it should for ever and for ever be growing nearer and nearer, as some ascending spiral that ever circles closer and closer, and yet never absolutely unites with the great central Perfection which is Himself.

So, brethren, for every one of us, if we are Christian people at all, 'this is the will of God, even your perfection.'

II. Consider the sad contrast of too many Christian lives.

I would not speak in terms that might seem to be reproach and scolding. The matter is far too serious, the disease far too widespread, to need or to warrant any exaggeration. But, dear brethren, there are many so-called and, in a fashion, really Christian people to whom Christ and His work are mainly, if not exclusively, the means of escaping the consequences of sin-a kind of 'fire-escape.' And to very many it comes as a new thought, in so far as their practical lives are concerned, that these ought to be lives of steadily increasing deliverance from the love and the power of sin, and steadily increasing appropriation and manifestation of Christ's granted righteousness. There are, I think, many of us from whom the very notion of progress has faded away. I am sure there are some of us who were a great deal farther on on the path of the Christian life years ago, when we first felt that Christ was anything to us, than we are to-day. 'When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you which be the first principles of the oracles of God.'

There is an old saying of one of the prophets that a child would die a hundred years old, which in a very sad sense is true about very many folk within the pale of the Christian Church who are seventy-year-old babes still, and will die so. Suns 'growing brighter and brighter until the noonday!' Ah! there are many of us who are a great deal more like those strange variable stars that sometimes burst out in the heavens into a great blaze, that brings them up to the brightness of stars of the first magnitude, for a day or two; and then they dwindle until they become little specks of light that the telescope can hardly see.

And there are hosts of us who are instances, if not of arrested, at any rate of unsymmetrical, development. The head, perhaps, is cultivated; the intellectual apprehension of Christianity increases, while the emotional, and the moral, and the practical part of it are all neglected. Or the converse may be the case; and we may be full of gush and of good emotion, and of fervour when we come to worship or to pray, and our lives may not be a hair the better for it all. Or there may be a disproportion because of an exclusive attention to conduct and the practical side of Christianity, while the rational side of it, which should be the basis of all, and the emotional side of it, which should be the driving power of all, are comparatively neglected.

So, dear brethren! what with interruptions, what with growing by fits and starts, and long, dreary winters like the Arctic winters, coming in between the two or three days of rapid, and therefore brief and unwholesome, development, we must all, I think, take to heart the condemnation suggested by this text when we compare the reality of our lives with the divine intention concerning them. Let us ask ourselves, 'Have I more command over myself than I had twenty years ago? Do I live nearer Jesus Christ today than I did yesterday? Have I more of His Spirit in me? Am I growing? Would the people that know me best say that I am growing in the grace and knowledge of my Lord and Saviour?' Astronomers tell us that there are dark suns, that have burnt themselves out, and are wandering unseen through the skies. I wonder if there are any extinguished suns of that sort listening to me at this moment.

III. How the divine purpose concerning us may be realised by us.

Now the *Alpha* and the *Omega* of this, the one means which includes all other, is laid down by Jesus Christ Himself in another metaphor when He said, ‘Abide in Me, and I in you; so shall ye bring forth much fruit.’ Our path will brighten, not because of any radiance in ourselves, but in proportion as we draw nearer and nearer to the Fountain of heavenly radiance.

The planets that move round the sun, further away than we are on earth, get less of its light and heat; and those that circle around it within the limits of our orbit, get proportionately more. The nearer we are to Him, the more we shall shine. The sun shines by its own light, drawn indeed from the shrinkage of its mass, so that it gives away its very life in warming and illuminating its subject-worlds. But we shine only by reflected light, and therefore the nearer we keep to Him the more shall we be radiant.

That keeping in touch with Jesus Christ is mainly to be secured by the direction of thought, and love, and trust to Him. If we follow close upon Him we shall not walk in darkness. It is to be secured and maintained very largely by what I am afraid is much neglected by Christian people of all sorts nowadays, and that is the devotional use of their Bibles. That is the food by which we grow. It is to be secured and maintained still more largely by that which I, again, am afraid is but very imperfectly attained to by Christian people now, and that is, the habit of prayer. It is to be secured and maintained, again, by the honest conforming of our lives, day by day, to the present amount of our knowledge of Him and of His will. Whosoever will make all his life the manifestation of his belief, and turn all his creed into principles of action, will grow both in the comprehensiveness, and in the depths of his Christian character. ‘Ye are the light in the Lord.’ Keep in Him, and you will become brighter and brighter. So shall we ‘go from strength to strength, till we appear before God in Zion.’

IV. Lastly, what brighter rising will follow the earthly setting?

My second text comes in here. Beauty, intellect, power, goodness; all go down into the dark. The sun sets, and there is left a sad and fading glow in the darkening pensive sky, which may recall the vanished light for a little while to a few faithful hearts, but steadily passes into the ashen grey of forgetfulness.

But ‘then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun, in their Heavenly Father’s kingdom.’ The momentary setting is but apparent. And ere it is well accomplished, a new sun swims into the ‘ampler ether, the diviner air’ of that future life, ‘and with new spangled beams, flames in the forehead of the morning sky.’

The reason for that inherent brightness suggested in our second text is that the soul of the righteous man passes from earth into a region out of which we ‘gather all things that offend, and them that do iniquity.’ There are other reasons for it, but that is the one which our Lord dwells on. Or, to put it into modern scientific language, environment corresponds to character. So, when the clouds have rolled away, and no more mists from the undrained swamps of selfishness and sin and animal nature rise up to hide the radiance, there shall be a fuller flood of light poured from the re-created sun.

That brightness thus promised has for its highest and most blessed character that it is conformity to the Lord Himself. For, as you may remember, the last use of this emblem that we find in Scripture refers not to the servant but to the Master, whom His beloved disciple in Apocalyptic vision saw, with His ‘countenance as the sun shining in his strength.’ Thus ‘we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ And therefore that radiance of the sainted dead is progressive, too. For it has an infinite fulness to draw upon, and the soul that is joined to Jesus Christ, and derives its lustre from Him, cannot die until it has outgrown Jesus and emptied God. The sun will one day be a dark, cold ball. We shall outlast it.

But, brethren, remember that it is only those who here on earth have progressively appropriated the brightness that Christ bestows who have a right to reckon on that better rising. It is contrary to all probability to believe that the passage from life can change the ingrained direction and set of a man’s nature. We know nothing that warrants us in affirming that death can revolutionise character. Do not trust your future to such a dim peradventure. Here is a plain truth. They who on earth are as ‘the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day,’ shall, beyond the shadow of eclipse, shine on as the sun does, behind the opaque, intervening body, all unconscious of what looks to mortal eyes on earth an eclipse, and ‘shall blaze out like the sun in their Heavenly Father’s kingdom.’ For all that we know and are taught by experience, religious and moral distinctions are eternal. ‘He that is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still.’

9) Proverbs 4:19

Proverbs

THE TWO PATHS

Pro. 4:10 - Pro. 4:19.

This passage includes much more than temperance or any other single virtue. It is a perfectly general exhortation to that practical wisdom which walks in the path of righteousness. The principles laid down here are true in regard to drunkenness and abstinence, but they are intended to receive a wider application, and to that wider application we must first look. The theme is the old, familiar one of the two paths, and the aim is to recommend the better way by setting forth the contrasted effects of walking in it and in the other.

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In Pro. 4:13 the image of the path is dropped for the moment, and the picture of the way of uprightness and its travellers is translated into the plain exhortation to keep fast hold of 'instruction,' which is substantially equivalent to the queenly Wisdom of these early chapters of Proverbs. The earnestness of the repeated exhortations implies the strength of the forces that tend to sweep us, especially those of us who are young, from our grasp of that Wisdom. Hands become slack, and many a good gift drops from nerveless fingers; thieves abound who will filch away 'instruction,' if we do not resolutely hold tight by it. Who would walk through the slums of a city holding jewels with a careless grasp, and never looking at them? How many would he have left if he did? We do not need to do anything to lose instruction. If we will only do nothing to keep it, the world and our own hearts will make sure that we lose it. And if we lose it, we lose ourselves; for 'she is thy life,' and the mere bodily life, that is lived without her, is not worth calling the life of a man.

Pro. 4:14 - Pro. 4:17 give the picture of the other path, in terrible contrast with the preceding. It is noteworthy that, while in the former the designation was the 'path of uprightness' or of 'wisdom,' and the description therefore was mainly of the characteristics of the path, here the designation is 'the path of the *wicked*,' and the description is mainly of the travellers on it. Righteousness was dealt with, as it were, in the abstract; but wickedness is too awful and dark to be painted thus, and is only set forth in the concrete, as seen in its doers. Now, it is significant that the first exhortation here is of a negative character. In contrast with the reiterated exhortations to keep wisdom, here are reiterated counsels to steer clear of evil. It is all about us, and we have to make a strong effort to keep it at arm's-length. 'Whom resist' is imperative. True, negative virtue is incomplete, but there will be no positive virtue without it. We must be accustomed to say 'No,' or we shall come to little good. An outer belt of firs is sometimes planted round a centre of more tender and valuable wood to shelter the young trees; so we have to make a fence of abstinences round our plantation of positive virtues. The decalogue is mostly prohibitions. 'So did *not* I, because of the fear of God' must be our motto. In this light, entire abstinence from intoxicants is seen to be part of the 'way of Wisdom.' It is one, and, in the present state of England and America, perhaps the most important, of the ways by which we can 'turn from' the path of the wicked and 'pass on.'

The picture of the wicked in Pro. 4:16 - Pro. 4:17 is that of very grossly criminal sinners. They are only content when they have done harm, and delight in making others as bad as themselves. But, diabolical as such a disposition is, one sees it only too often in full operation. How many a drunkard or impure man finds a fiendish pleasure in getting hold of some innocent lad, and 'putting him up to a thing or two,' which means teaching him the vices from which the teacher has ceased to get much pleasure, and which he has to spice with the condiment of seeing an unaccustomed sinner's eagerness! Such people infest our streets, and there is only one way for a young man to be safe from them,-'avoid, pass not by, turn from, and pass on.' The reference to 'bread' and 'wine' in Pro. 4:17 seems simply to mean that the wicked men's living is won by their 'wickedness,' which procures bread, and by their 'violence,' which brings them wine. It is the way by which these are obtained that is culpable. We may contrast this foul source of a degraded living with Pro. 4:13, where 'instruction' is set forth as 'the life' of the upright.

Pro. 4:18 - Pro. 4:19 bring more closely together the two paths, and set them in final, forcible contrast. The phrase 'the perfect day' might be rendered, vividly though clumsily, 'the steady of the day'-that is, noon, when the sun seems to stand still in the meridian. So the image compares the path of the just to the growing brightness of morning dawn, becoming more and more fervid and lustrous, till the climax of an Eastern midday. No more sublime figure of the continuous progress in goodness, brightness, and joy, which is the best reward of walking in the paths of uprightness, can be imagined; and it is as true as it is sublime. Blessed they who in the morning of their days begin to walk in the way of wisdom; for, in most cases, years will strengthen their uprightness, and to that progress there will be no termination, nor will the midday sun have to decline westward to diminishing splendour or dismal setting, but that noontide glory will be enhanced, and made eternal in a new heaven. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. That blaze of growing glory, possible for us all, makes the tragic gloom to which evil men condemn themselves the thicker and more doleful, as some dungeon in an Eastern prison seems pitch dark to one coming in from the blaze outside. 'How great is that darkness!' It is the darkness of sin, of ignorance, of sorrow, and what adds deeper gloom to it is that every soul that sits in that shadow of death might have been shining, a sun, in the spacious heaven of God's love.

10)Proverbs 4:23

Proverbs

KEEPING AND KEPT

Pro. 4:23. - 1Pe. 1:5.

The former of these texts imposes a stringent duty, the latter promises divine help to perform it. The relation between them is that between the Law and the Gospel. The Law commands, the Gospel gives power to obey. The Law pays no attention to man's weakness, and points no finger to the source of strength. Its office is to set clearly forth what we ought to be, not to aid us in becoming so. 'Here is your duty, do it' is, doubtless, a needful message, but it is a chilly one, and it may well be doubted if it ever rouses a soul to right action. Moralists have hammered away at preaching self-restraint and a close watch over the fountain of actions within from the beginning, but their exhortations have little effect unless they can add to their icy injunctions the warmth of the promise of our second text, and point to a divine Keeper who will make duty possible. We must be kept by God, if we are ever to succeed in keeping our wayward hearts.

I. Without our guarding our hearts, no noble life is possible.

The Old Testament psychology differs from our popular allocation of certain faculties to bodily organs. We use head and heart, roughly speaking, as being respectively the seats of thought and of emotion. But the Old Testament locates in the heart the centre of personal being. It is not merely the home of the affections, but the seat of will, moral purpose. As this text says, ‘the issues of life’ flow from it in all the multitudinous variety of their forms. The stream parts into many heads, but it has one fountain. To the Hebrew thinkers the heart was the indivisible, central unity which manifested itself in the whole of the outward life. ‘As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.’ The heart is the man. And that personal centre has a moral character which comes to light in, and gives unity and character to, all his deeds.

That solemn thought that every one of us has a definite moral character, and that our deeds are not an accidental set of outward actions but flow from an inner fountain, needs to be driven home to our consciences, for most of the actions of most men are done so mechanically, and reflected on so little by the doers, that the conviction of their having any moral character at all, or of our incurring any responsibility for them, is almost extinct in us, unless when something startles conscience into protest.

It is this shrouded inner self to which supreme care is to be directed. All noble ethical teaching concurs in this-that a man who seeks to be right must keep, in the sense both of watching and of guarding, his inner self. Conduct is more easily regulated than character-and less worth regulating. It avails little to plant watchers on the stream half way to the sea. Control must be exercised at the source, if it is to be effectual. The counsel of our first text is a commonplace of all wholesome moral teaching since the beginning of the world. The phrase ‘with all diligence’ is literally ‘above all guarding,’ and energetically expresses the supremacy of this keeping. It should be the foremost, all-pervading aim of every wise man who would not let his life run to waste. It may be turned into more modern language, meaning just what this ancient sage meant, if we put it as, ‘Guard thy character with more carefulness than thou dost thy most precious possessions, for it needs continual watchfulness, and, untended, will go to rack and ruin.’ The exhortation finds a response in every heart, and may seem too familiar and trite to bear dwelling on, but we may be allowed to touch lightly on one or two of the plain reasons which enforce it on every man who is not what Proverbs very unpolitely calls ‘a fool.’

That guarding is plainly imposed as necessary, by the very constitution of our manhood. Our nature is evidently not a republic, but a monarchy. It is full of blind impulses, and hungry desires, which take no heed of any law but their own satisfaction. If the reins are thrown on the necks of these untamed horses, they will drag the man to destruction. They are only safe when they are curbed and bitted, and held well in. Then there are tastes and inclinations which need guidance and are plainly meant to be subordinate. The will is to govern all the lower self, and conscience is to govern the will. Unmistakably there are parts of every man’s nature which are meant to serve, and parts which are appointed to rule, and to let the servants usurp the place of the rulers is to bring about as wild a confusion within as the Ecclesiast lamented that he had seen in the anarchic times when he wrote-princes walking and beggars on horseback. As George Herbert has it-

‘Give not thy humours way;
God gave them to thee under lock and key.’

Then, further, that guarding is plainly imperative, because there is an outer world which appeals to our needs and desires, irrespective altogether of right and wrong and of the moral consequences of gratifying these. Put a loaf before a starving man and his impulse will be to clutch and devour it, without regard to whether it is his or no. Show any of our animal propensities its appropriate food, and it asks no questions as to right or wrong, but is stirred to grasp its natural food. And even the higher and nobler parts of our nature are but too apt to seek their gratification without having the license of conscience for doing so, and sometimes in defiance of its plain prohibitions. It is never safe to trust the guidance of life to tastes, inclinations, or to anything but clear reason, set in motion by calm will, and acting under the approbation of ‘the Lord Chief Justice, Conscience.’

But again, seeing that the world has more evil than good in it, the keeping of the heart will always consist rather in repelling solicitations to yielding to evil. In short, the power and the habit of sternly saying ‘No’ to the whole crowd of tempters is always the main secret of a noble life. ‘He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down and without walls.’

II. There is no effectual guarding unless God guards.

The counsel in Proverbs is not mere toothless moral commonplace, but is associated, in the preceding chapter, with fatherly advice to ‘let thine heart keep my commandments’ and to ‘trust in the Lord with all thine heart.’ The heart that so trusts will be safely guarded, and only such a heart will be. The inherent weakness of all attempts at self-keeping is that keeper and kept being one and the same personality, the more we need to be kept the less able we are to effect it. If in the very garrison are traitors, how shall the fortress be defended? If, then, we are to exercise an effectual guard over our characters and control over our natures, we must have an outward standard of right and wrong which shall not be deflected by variations in our temperature. We need a fixed light to steer towards, which is stable on the stable shore, and is not tossing up and down on our decks. We shall cleanse our way only when we ‘take heed thereto, according to Thy word.’ For even God’s viceroy within, the sovereign conscience, can be warped, perverted, silenced, and is not immune from the spreading infection of evil. When it turns to God, as a mirror to the sun, it is irradiated and flashes bright illumination into dark corners, but its power depends on its being thus lit by radiations from the very Light of Life. And if we are ever to have a coercive power over the rebellious powers within, we must have God’s power breathed into us, giving grip and energy to all the good within, quickening every lofty desire, satisfying every aspiration that feels after Him, cowing all our evil and being the very self of ourselves.

We need an outward motive which will stimulate and stir to effort. Our wills are lamed for good, and the world has strong charms that appeal to us. And if we are not to yield to these, there must be somewhere a stronger motive than any that the sorceress world has in its stores, that shall constrainingly draw us to ways that, because they tend upward, and yield no pabulum for the lower self, are difficult for sluggish feet. To the writer of this Book of Proverbs the name of God bore in it such a motive. To us the name of Jesus, which is Love, bears a yet mightier appeal, and the motive which lies in His death for us is strong enough, and it alone is strong enough, to fire our whole selves with enthusiastic, grateful love, which will burn up our sloth, and sweep our evil out of our hearts, and make us swift and glad to do all that may please Him. If there must be fresh reinforcements thrown into the town of Mansoul, as there must be if it is not to be captured, there is one sure way of securing these. Our second text tells us whence the relieving force must come. If we are to keep our hearts with all diligence, we must be 'kept by the power of God,' and that power is not merely to make diversion outside the beleaguered fortress which may force the besiegers to retreat and give up their effort, but is to enter in and possess the soul which it wills to defend. It is when the enemy sees that new succours have, in some mysterious way, been introduced, that he gives up his siege. It is God in us that is our security.

III. There is no keeping by God without faith.

Peter was an expert in such matters, for he had had a bitter experience to teach him how soon and surely self-confidence became self-despair. 'Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I,' was said but a few hours before he denied Jesus. His faith failed, and then the divine guard that was keeping his soul passed thence, and, left alone, he fell.

That divine Power is exerted for our keeping on condition of our trusting ourselves to Him and trusting Him for ourselves. And that condition is no arbitrary one, but is prescribed by the very nature of divine help and of human faith. If God could keep our souls without our trust in Him He would. He does so keep them as far as is possible, but for all the choicer blessings of His giving, and especially for that of keeping us free from the domination of our lower selves, there must be in us faith if there is to be in God help. The hand that lays hold on God in Christ must be stretched out and must grasp His warm, gentle, and strong hand, if the tingling touch of it is to infuse strength. If the relieving force is victoriously to enter our hearts, we must throw open the gates and welcome it. Faith is but the open door for God's entrance. It has no efficacy in itself any more than a door has, but all its blessedness depends on what it admits into the hidden chambers of the heart.

I reiterate what I have tried to show in these poor words. There is no noble life without our guarding our hearts; there is no effectual guarding unless God guards; there is no divine guarding unless through our faith. It is vain to preach self-governing and self-keeping. Unless we can tell the beleaguered heart, ‘The Lord is thy Keeper; He will keep thee from all evil; He will keep thy soul,’ we only add one more impossible command to a man’s burden. And we do not apprehend nor experience the divine keeping in its most blessed and fullest reality, unless we find it in Jesus, who is ‘able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.’

11)Proverbs 5:22

Proverbs

THE CORDS OF SIN

Pro. 5:22.

In Hosea’s tender picture of the divine training of Israel which, alas! failed of its effect, we read, ‘I drew them with cords of a man,’ which is further explained as being ‘with bands of love.’ The metaphor in the prophet’s mind is probably that of a child being ‘taught to go’ and upheld in its first tottering steps by leading-strings. God drew Israel, though Israel did not yield to the drawing. But if these gentle, attractive influences, which ever are raying out from Him, are resisted, another set of cords, not now sustaining and attracting, but hampering and fettering, twine themselves round the rebellious life, and the man is like a wild creature snared in the hunter’s toils, enmeshed in a net, and with its once free limbs restrained. The choice is open to us all, whether we will let God draw us to Himself with the sweet manlike cords of His educative and forbearing love, or, flinging off these, which only foolish self-will construes into limitations, shall condemn ourselves to be prisoned within the narrow room of our own sins. We may choose which condition shall be ours, but one or other of them must be ours. We may either be drawn by the silken cord of God’s love or we may be ‘holden by the cords’ of our sins.

In both clauses of our text evil deeds done are regarded as having a strange, solemn life apart from the doer of them, by which they become influential factors in his subsequent life. Their issues on others may be important, but their issues on him are the most important of all. The recoil of the gun on the shoulder of him who fired it is certain, whether the cartridge that flew from its muzzle wounded anything or not. 'His own iniquities shall take the wicked'-they ring him round, a grim company to whom he has given an independent being, and who have now 'taken' him prisoner and laid violent hands on him. A long since forgotten novel told of the fate of 'a modern Prometheus,' who made and put life into a dreadful creature in man's shape, that became the curse of its creator's life. That tragedy is repeated over and over again. We have not done with our evil deeds when we have done them, but they, in a very terrible sense, begin to be when they are done. We sow the seeds broadcast, and the seed springs up dragon's teeth.

The view of human experience set forth, especially in the second clause of this text, directs our gaze into dark places, into which it is not pleasant to look, and many of you will accuse me of preaching gloomily if I try to turn a reflective eye inwards upon them, but no one will be able to accuse me of not preaching truly. It is impossible to enumerate all the cords that make up the net in which our own evil doings hold us meshed, but let me point out some of these.

I. Our evil deeds become evil habits.

We all know that anything once done becomes easier to do again. That is true about both good and bad actions, but 'ill weeds grow apace,' and it is infinitely easier to form a bad habit than a good one. The young shoot is green and flexible at first, but it soon becomes woody and grows high and strikes deep. We can all verify the statement of our text by recalling the tremors of conscience, the self-disgust, the dread of discovery which accompanied the first commission of some evil deed, and the silence of undisturbed, almost unconscious facility, that accompanied later repetitions of it. Sins of sense and animal passion afford the most conspicuous instances of this, but it is by no means confined to these. We have but to look steadily at our own lives to be aware of the working of this solemn law in them, however clear we may be of the grosser forms of evil deeds. For us all it is true that custom presses on us ‘with a weight, heavy as frost and deep almost as life,’ and that it is as hard for the Ethiopian to change his skin or the leopard his spots as for those who ‘are accustomed to do evil’ to ‘do good.’

But experience teaches not only that evil deeds quickly consolidate into evil habits, but that as the habit grips us faster, the poor pleasure for the sake of which the acts are done diminishes. The zest which partially concealed the bitter taste of the once eagerly swallowed morsel is all but gone, but the morsel is still sought and swallowed. Impulses wax as motives wane, the victim is like an ox tempted on the road to the slaughter-house at first by succulent fodder held before it, and at last driven into it by pricking goads and heavy blows. Many a man is so completely wrapped in the net which his own evil deeds have made for him, that he commits the sin once more, not because he finds any pleasure in it, but for no better reason than that he has already committed it often, and the habit is his master.

There are many forms of evil which compel us to repeat them for other reasons than the force of habit. For instance, a fraudulent book-keeper has to go on making false entries in his employer’s books in order to hide his peculations. Whoever steps on to the steeply sloping road to which self-pleasing invites us, soon finds that he is on an inclined plane well greased, and that compulsion is on him to go on, though he may recoil from the descent, and be shudderingly aware of what the end must be. Let no man say, ‘I will do this doubtful thing once only, and never again.’ Sin is like an octopus, and if the loathly thing gets the tip of one slender filament round a man, it will envelop him altogether and drag him down to the cruel beak.

Let us then remember how swiftly deeds become habits, and how the fetters, which were silken at first, rapidly are exchanged for iron chains, and how the craving increases as fast as the pleasure from gratifying it diminishes. Let us remember that there are many kinds of evil which seem to force their own repetition, in order to escape their consequences and to hide the sin. Let us remember that no man can venture to say, ‘This once only will I do this thing.’ Let us remember that acts become habits with dreadful swiftness, and let us beware that we do not forge chains of darkness for ourselves out of our own godless deeds.

II. Our evil deeds imprison us for good.

The tragedy of human life is that we weave for ourselves manacles that fetter us from following and securing the one good for which we are made. Our evil past holds us in a firm grip. The cords which confine our limbs are of our own spinning. What but ourselves is the reason why so many of us do not yield to God’s merciful drawings of us to Himself? We have riveted the chains and twined the net that holds us captive, by our own acts. It is we ourselves who have paralysed our wills, so that we see the light of God but as a faint gleam far away, and dare not move to follow the gleam. It is we who have smothered or silenced our conscience and perverted our tastes, and done violence to all in us that ‘thirsteth for God, even the living God.’ Alas! how many of us have let some strong evil habit gain such a grip of us that it has overborne our higher impulses, and silenced the voice within us that cries out for the living God! We are kept back from Him by our worse selves, and whoever lets that which is lowest in him keep him from following after God, who is his ‘being’s end and aim,’ is caught and prisoned by the cords woven and knitted out of his sins. Are there none of us who know, when they are honest with themselves, that they would have been true Christians long since, had it not been for one darling evil that they cannot make up their minds to cast off? Wills disabled from strongly willing the good, consciences silenced as when the tongue is taken out of a bell-buoy on a shoal, tastes perverted and set seeking amid the transitory treasures of earth for what God only can give them, these are the ‘cords’ out of which are knotted the nets that hold so many of us captive, and hinder our feet from following after God, even the living God, in following and possessing whom is the only liberty of soul, the one real joy of life.

III. Our evil deeds work their own punishment.

I do not venture to speak of the issues beyond the grave. It is not for a man to press these on his brethren. But even from the standpoint of this Book of Proverbs, it is certain that ‘the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth, much more the wicked and the sinner.’ Probably it was the earthly consequences of wrongdoing that were in the mind of the proverb-maker. And we are not to let our Christian enlightenment as to the future rob us of the certainty, written large on human life here and now, that with whatever apparent exceptions in regard to prosperous sin and tried righteousness, it is yet true that ‘every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of reward.’ Life is full of consequences of evil-doing. Even here and now we reap as we have sown. Every sin is a mistake, even if we confine our view to the consequences sought for in this life by it, and the consequences actually encountered. ‘A rogue is a roundabout fool.’ True, we believe that there is a future reaping so complete that it makes the partial harvests gathered here seem of small account. But the framer of this proverb, who had little knowledge of that future, had seen enough in the meditative survey of this present to make him sure that the consequences of evil-doing were certain, and in a very true sense, penal. And leaving out of sight all that lies in the dark beyond, surely if we sum up the lamed aspirations, the perverted tastes, the ossifying of noble emotions, the destruction of the balance of the nature, the blinding of the eye of the soul, the lowering and narrowing of the whole nature, and many another wound to the best in man that come as the sure issue of evil deeds, we do not need to doubt that every sinful man is miserably ‘holden with the cords of his sin.’ Life is the time for sowing, but it is a time for reaping too, and we do not need to wait for death to experience the truth of the solemn warning that ‘he who soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption.’ Let us, then, do no deeds without asking ourselves, What will the harvest be? and if from any deeds that we have done we have to reap sorrow or inward darkness, let us be thankful that by experience our Father is teaching us how bitter as well as evil a thing it is to forsake Him, and cast off His fear from our wayward spirits.

IV. The cords can be loosened.

Bitter experience teaches that the imprisoning net clings too tightly to be stripped from our limbs by our own efforts. Nay rather, the net and the captive are one, and he who tries to cast off the oppression which hinders him from following that which is good is trying to cast off himself. The desperate problem that fronts every effort at self-emendation has two bristling impossibilities in it: one, how to annihilate the past; one, how to extirpate the evil that is part of my very self, and yet to keep the self entire. The very terms of the problem show it to be insoluble, and the climax of all honest efforts at making a clean thing of an unclean by means within reach of the unclean thing itself, is the despairing cry, ‘O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?’ But to men writhing in the grip of a sinful past, or paralysed beyond writhing, and indifferent, because hopeless, or because they have come to like their captivity, comes one whose name is ‘the Breaker,’ whose mission it is to proclaim liberty to the captives, and whose hand laid on the cords that bind a soul, causes them to drop harmless from the limbs and sets the bondsman free. Many tongues praise Jesus for many great gifts, but His proper work, and that peculiar to Himself alone, is His work on the sin and the sins of the world. He deals with that which no man can deal with for himself or by his own power. He can cancel our past, so that it shall not govern our future. He can give new power to fight the old habits. He can give a new life which owes nothing to the former self, and is free from taint from it. He can break the entail of sin, the ‘law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ can make any of us, even him who is most tied and bound by the chain of his sins, ‘free from the law of sin and death.’ We cannot break the chains that fetter us, and our own struggles, like the plungings of a wild beast caught in the toils, but draw the bonds tighter. But the chains that cannot be broken can be melted, and it may befall each of us as it befell the three Hebrews in the furnace, when the king ‘was astonished’ and asked, ‘Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?’ and wonderingly declared, ‘Lo, I see four men loose walking in the midst of the fire, and the aspect of the fourth is like a son of the gods.’

12)Proverbs 8:21

Proverbs

WISDOM’S GIFT

Pro. 8:21.

The word here rendered ‘substance’ is peculiar. Indeed, it is used in a unique construction in this passage. It means ‘being’ or ‘existence,’ and seems to have been laid hold of by the Hebrew thinkers, from whom the books commonly called ‘the Wisdom Books’ come, as one of their almost technical expressions. ‘Substance’ may be used in our translation in its philosophical meaning as the supposed reality underlying appearances, but if we observe that in the parallel following clause we find ‘treasures,’ it seems more likely that in the text, it is to be taken in its secondary, and much debased meaning of wealth, material possessions. But the prize held out here to the lovers of heavenly wisdom is much more than worldly good. In deepest truth, the being which is theirs is God Himself. They who love and seek the wisdom of this book possess Him, and in possessing Him become possessed of their own true being. They are owners and lords of themselves, and have in their hearts a fountain of life, because they have God dwelling with and in them.

I. The quest which always finds.

‘Those who love wisdom’ might be a Hebrew translation of ‘philosopher,’ and possibly the Jewish teachers of wisdom were influenced by Greece, but their conception of wisdom has a deeper source than the Greek had, and what they meant by loving it was a widely different attitude of mind and heart from that of the Greek philosopher. It could never be said of the disciples of a Plato that their quest was sure to end in finding what they sought. Many a man then, and many a man since, and many a man to-day, has ‘followed knowledge, like a sinking star,’ and has only caught a glimmer of a far-off and dubious light. There is only one search which is certain always to find what it seeks, and that is the search which knows where the object of it is, and seeks not as for something the locality of which is unknown, but as for that which the place of which is certain. The manifold voices of human aims cry, ‘Who will show us any good?’ The seeker who is sure to find is he who prays, ‘Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us.’ The heart that truly and supremely affects God is never condemned to seek in vain. The Wisdom of this book herself is presented as proclaiming, ‘They that seek me earnestly shall find me,’ and humble souls in every age since then have set to their seal that the word is true to their experience. For there are two seekers in every such case, God and man. ‘The Father seeketh such to worship Him,’ and His love goes through the world, yearning and searching for hearts that will turn to Him. The shepherd seeks for the lost sheep, and lays it on his shoulders to bear it back to the fold. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the seeking love of God. And the human seeker finds God, or rather is found by God, for no aspiration after Him is vain, no longing unresponded to, no effort to find Him unresponded to. We have as much of God as we wish, as much as our desires have fitted us to receive. The all-penetrating atmosphere enters every chink open to it, and no seeking soul has ever had to say, ‘I sought Him but found Him not.’

Is there any other quest of which the same can be said? Are not all paths of human effort strewed with the skeletons of men who have fretted and toiled away their lives in vain attempts to grasp aims that have eluded their grip? Do we not all know the sickness of disappointed effort, or the sadder sickness of successful effort, which has secured the apparent good and found it not so good after all? The Christian life is, amid all the failures of human effort, the only life in which the seeking after good is but a little less blessed than the finding of it is, and in which it is always true that ‘he that seeketh findeth.’ Nor does such finding deaden the spirit of seeking, for in every finding there is a fresh discovery of new depths in God, and a consequent quickening of desire to press further into the abyss of His Being, so that aspiration and fruition ever beget each other, and the upward, Godward progress of the soul is eternal.

II. The finding that is always blessed.

We have seen that being is the gift promised to the lovers of wisdom, and that the promise may either be referred to the possession of God, who is the fountain of all being, or to the true possession of ourselves, which is a consequence of our possession of Him. In either aspect, that possession is blessedness. If we have God, we have real life. We truly own ourselves when we have God. We really live when God lives in us, the life of our lives. We are ourselves, when we have ceased to be ourselves, and have taken God to be the Self of ourselves.

Such a life, God-possessing, brings the one good which corresponds to our whole nature. All other good is fragmentary, and being fragmentary is inadequate, as men’s restless search after various forms of good but too sadly proves. Why does the merchantman wander over sea and land seeking for many goodly pearls? Because he has not found one of great price, but tries to make up by their number for the insufficiency of each. But the soul is made, not to find its wealth in the manifold but in the one, and no aggregation of incompletenesses will make up completeness, nor any number of partial satisfactions of this and the other appetite or desire make a man feel that he has enough and more than enough. We must have all good in one Person, if we are ever to know the rest of full satisfaction. It will be fatal to our blessedness if we have to resort to a hundred different sources for different supplies. The true blessedness is simple and yet infinitely complex, for it comes from possessing the one Person in whom dwell for us all forms of good, whether good be understood as intellectual or moral or emotional. That which cannot be everything to the soul that seeks is scarcely worth the seeking, and certainly is not wisely proposed as the object of a life's search, for such a life will be a failure if it fails to find its object, and scarcely less tragically, though perhaps less conspicuously, a failure if it finds it. All other good is but apparent; God is the one real object that meets all man's desires and needs, and makes him blessed with real blessedness, and fills the cup of life with the draught that slakes thirst and satisfies the thirstiest.

III. The blessedness that always lasts.

He who finds God, as every one of us may find Him, in Christ, has found a Good that cannot change, pass, or grow stale. His blessedness will always last, as long as he keeps fast hold of that which he has, and lets no man take his crown.

For the Christian's good is the only one that does not intend to grow old and pall. We can never exhaust God. We need never grow weary of Him. Possession robs other wealth of its glamour, and other pleasures of their poignant sweetness. We grow weary of most good things, and those which we have long had, we generally find get somewhat faded and stale. Habit is a fatal enemy to enjoyment. But it only adds to the joy which springs from the possession of God in Christ. Swedenborg said that the oldest angels look the youngest, and they who have longest experience of the joy of fellowship with God are they who enjoy each instance of it most. We can never drink the chalice of His love to the dregs, and it will be fresh and sparkling as long as we have lips that can absorb it. He keeps the good wine till the last.

The Christian’s good is the only good which cannot be taken away. Loss and change beggars the millionaire sometimes, and the possibility of loss shadows all earthly good with pale foreboding. Everything that is outside the substance of the soul can be withdrawn, but the possession of God in Christ is so intimate and inward, so interwoven with the very deepest roots of the Christian’s personal being, that it cannot be taken out from these by any shocks of time or change. There is but one hand that can end that possession and that is his own. He can withdraw himself from God, by giving himself over to sin and the world. He can empty the shrine and compel the indwelling deity to say, as the legend told was heard in the Temple the night before Roman soldiers desecrated the Holy of Holies: Let us depart. But besides himself, ‘neither things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature’ has power to take away that faithful God to whom a poor soul clings, and in whom whoso thus clings finds its unchangeable good.

The Christian’s good is the only one from which we cannot be taken. A grim psalm paints for us the life and end of men ‘who trust in the multitude of their possessions,’ and whose ‘inward thought is that they have founded families that will last.’ It tells how ‘this their way is folly,’ and yet is approved with acclamations by the crowd. It lets us see the founder of a family, the possessor of broad acres, going down to the grave, carrying nothing away, stripped of his glory and with Death for his shepherd, who has driven his flock from pleasant pastures here into the dreariness of Sheol. But that shepherd has a double office. Some he separates from all their possessions, hopes, and joys. Some he, stern though his aspect and harsh though his guidance, leads up to the green pastures of God, and as the last messenger of the love of God in Christ, unites the souls that found God amid the distractions of earth with the God whom they will know better and possess more fully and blessedly, amid the unending felicities and progressive blessednesses of Heaven.

13)Proverbs 8:30-31

Proverbs

WISDOM AND CHRIST

Pro. 8:30 - Pro. 8:31.

There is a singular difference between the two portions of this Book of Proverbs. The bulk of it, beginning with Pro. 10:1 - Pro. 10:32, contains a collection of isolated maxims which may be described as the product of sanctified common sense. They are shrewd and homely, but not remarkably spiritual or elevated. To these is prefixed this introductory portion, continuous, lofty in style, and in its personification of divine wisdom, rising to great sublimity both of thought and of expression. It seems as if the main body of the book had been fitted with an introduction by another hand than that of the compilers of the various sets of proverbial sayings. It is apparently due to an intellectual movement, perhaps not uninfluenced by Greek thought, and chronologically the latest of the elements composing the Old Testament scriptures. In place of the lyric fervour of prophets, and the devout intuition of psalmists, we have the praise of Wisdom. But that noble portrait is no copy of the Greek conception, but contains features peculiar to itself. She stands opposed to blatant, meretricious Folly, and seeks to draw men to herself by lofty motives and offering pure delights. She is not a person, but she is a personification of an aspect of the divine nature, and seeing that she is held forth as willing to bestow herself on men, that queenly figure shadows the great truth of God’s self-communication as being the end and climax of all His revelation.

We are on the wrong tack when we look for more or less complete resemblances between the ‘Wisdom’ of Proverbs and the ‘Sophia’ of Greek thinkers. It is much rather an anticipation, imperfect but real, of Jesus than a pale reflection of Greek thought. The way for the perfect revelation of God in the incarnation was prepared by prophet and psalmist. Was it not also prepared by this vision of a Wisdom which was always with God, and yet had its delights with the sons of men, and whilst ‘rejoicing always before Him,’ yet rejoiced in the habitable parts of the earth?

Let us then look, however imperfect our gaze may be, at the self-revelation in Proverbs of the personified divine Wisdom, and compare it with the revelation of the incarnate divine Word.

I. The Self-revelation of Wisdom.

The words translated in Authorised Version, ‘As one brought up with him,’ are rendered in Revised Version, ‘as a master workman,’ and seem intended to represent Wisdom-that is, of course, the divine Wisdom-as having been God’s agent in the creative act. In the preceding context, she triumphantly proclaims her existence before His ‘works of old,’ and that she was with God, ‘or ever the earth was.’ Before the everlasting mountains she was, before fountains flashed in the light and refreshed the earth, her waters flowed. But that presence is not all, Wisdom was the divine agent in creation. That thought goes beyond the ancient one: ‘He spake and it was done.’ Genesis regards the divine command as the cause of creatural being. God said, ‘Let there be-and there was’: the forthputting of His will was the impulse to which creatures sprang into existence at response. That is a great thought, but the meditative thinker in our text has pondered over the facts of creation, and notwithstanding all their apparent incompletenesses and errors, has risen to the conclusion that they can all be vindicated as ‘very good.’ To him, this wonderful universe is not only the product of a sovereign will, but of one guided in its operations by all-seeing Wisdom.

Then the relation of this divine Wisdom to God is represented as being a continual delight and a childlike rejoicing in Him, or as the word literally means, a ‘sporting’ in Him. Whatever energy of creative action is suggested by the preceding figure of a ‘master workman,’ that energy had no effort. To the divine Wisdom creation was an easy task. She was not so occupied with it as to interrupt her delight in contemplating God, and her task gave her infinite satisfaction, for she ‘rejoiced always’ before Him, and she rejoiced in His habitable earth. The writer does not shrink from ascribing to the agent of creation something like the glow of satisfaction that we feel over a piece of well-done work, the poet’s or the painter’s rapture as he sees his thoughts bodied forth in melody or glowing on canvas.

But there is a greater thought than these here, for the writer adds, ‘and my delight was with the sons of men.’ It is noteworthy that the same word is used in the preceding verse. The ‘delight of the heavenly Wisdom in God’ is not unlike that directed to man. ‘The sons of men’ are the last, noblest work of Creation, and on them, as the shining apex, her delight settles. The words describe not only what was true when man came into being, as the utmost possible climax of creatural excellence, but are the revelation of what still remains true.

One cannot but feel how in all this most striking disclosure of the depths of God, a deeper mystery is on the verge of revelation. There is here, as we have said, a personification, but there seems to be a Person shining through, or dimly discerned moving behind, the curtain. Wisdom is the agent of creation. She creates with ease, and in creating delights in God as well as in her work, which calls for no effort in doing, and done, is all very good. She delights most of all in the sons of men, and that delight is permanent. Does not this unknown Jewish thinker, too, belong, as well as prophet and psalmist, to those who went before crying, Hosanna to Him that cometh in the name of the Lord? Let us turn to the New Testament and find an answer to the question.

II. The higher revelation of the divine Word.

There can be no doubt that the New Testament is committed to the teaching that the Eternal Word of God, who was incarnate in Jesus, was the agent of creation. John, in his profound prologue to the Gospel, utters the deepest truths in brief sentences of monosyllables, and utters them without a trace of feeling that they needed proof. To him they are axiomatic and self evident. ‘All things were made by Him.’ The words are the words of a child; the thought takes a flight beyond the furthest reach of the mind of men. Paul, too, adds his Amen when he proclaims that ‘All things have been created through Him and unto Him, and He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.’ The writer of Hebrews declares a Son ‘through whom also He made the worlds, and who upholds all things by the word of His power’ and does not scruple at transferring to Jesus the grand poetry of the Psalmist who hymned ‘Thou, Lord, in the beginning, hast laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Thy hands.’ We speak of things too deep for us when we speak of persons in the Godhead, but yet we know that the Eternal Word, which was from the beginning, was made flesh and dwelt among us. The personified Wisdom of Proverbs is the personal Word of John’s prologue. John almost quotes the former when he says ‘the same was in the beginning with God.’ for his word recalls the grand declaration, ‘The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His way . . .

I was set up in the beginning or ever the earth was.’ Then there are two beginnings, one lost in the depths of timeless being, one, the commencement of creative activity, and that Word was with God in the remotest, as in the nearer, beginning.

But the ancient vision of the Jewish thinker anticipated the perfect revelation of the New Testament still further, in its thought of an unbroken communion between the personified Wisdom and God. That dim thought of perfect communion and interchange of delights flashes into wondrous clearness when we think of Him who spake of ‘the glory which I had with Thee before the foundation of the world,’ and calmly declared: ‘Thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.’ Into that depth of mutual love we cannot look, and our eyes are too dim-sighted to bear the blaze of that flashing interchange of glory, but we shall rob the earthly life of Jesus of its pathos and saving power, if we do not recognise that in Him the personification of Proverbs has become a person, and that when He became flesh, He not only took on Him the garment of mortality, but laid aside ‘the visible robes of His imperial majesty,’ and that His being found in fashion as a man was humbling Himself beyond all humiliation that afterwards was His.

But still further, the Gospel reality fills out and completes the personification of Proverbs in that it shows us a divine person who so turned to ‘the sons of men’ that He took on Him their nature and Himself bore their sicknesses. The Jewish writer had great thoughts of the divine condescension, and was sure that God’s love still rested on men, sinful as they were, but not even he could foresee the miracle of long-suffering love in the Incarnate Jesus, and he had no power of insight into the depths of the heart of God, that enabled him to foresee the sufferings and death of Jesus. Till that supreme self-sacrifice was a fact, it was inconceivable. Alas, now that it is a fact, to how many hearts that need it most is it still incredible. But passing all anticipation as it is, it is the root of all joy, the ground of all hope, and to millions of sinful souls it is their only refuge, and their sovereign example and pattern of life.

The Jewish thinker had a glimpse of a divine wisdom which delighted in man, but he did not dream of the divine stooping to share in man’s sorrows, or of its so loving humanity as to take on itself its limitations, not only to pity these as God's images, but to take part of the same and to die. That man should minister to the divine delight is wonderful, but that God should participate in man's grief passes wonder. Thereby a new tenderness is given to the ancient personification, and the august form of the divine Wisdom softens and melts into the yet more august and tender likeness of the divine Love. Nor is there only an adumbration of the redeeming love of Jesus as He dwells among us here, but we have to remember that Jesus delights in the sons of men when they love Him back again. All the sweet mysteries of our loving communion with Him, and of His joy in our faith, love, and obedience, all the secret treasures of His self-impartation to, and abiding in, souls that open themselves to His entrance, are suggested in that thought. We can minister to the joy of Jesus, and when He is welcomed into any heart, and any man's love answers His, He sees of the travail of His soul and is satisfied.

III. The call of the personal Word to each of us.

The Wisdom of Proverbs is portrayed in her queenly dignity, as calling men to herself, and promising them the satisfaction of all their needs. She describes herself that the description may draw men to her. The self-revelation of God is His mightiest means of attracting men to Him. We but need to know Him as He really is, in order to love Him and cling to Him. A fairer form than hers has drawn near to us, and calls us with tenderer invitations and better promises. The divine Wisdom has become Man with 'sweet human hands and lips and eyes.' Such was His delight in the sons of men that He emptied Himself of His glory, and finished a greater work than that over which he presided when the mountains were settled and the hills brought forth. Now He calls us, and His summons is tenderer, and gives promise of loftier blessings than the call of Wisdom was and did. She called to the simple, 'Come eat ye of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled.' He invites us: 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink,' and He furnishes a table for us, and calls us to eat of the bread which is His body broken for us, and to drink of the wine which is His blood shed for many for the remission of sins. She promises 'riches and honour, yea, durable riches and righteousness.' His voice vibrates with sympathy, and calls the weary and heavy laden, of whom she scarcely thinks, and offers to them a gift, which may seem humble enough beside her more dazzling offers of fruit, better than gold and revenues, better than choice silver, but which come closer to universal wants, the gift of rest, which is really what all men long for, and none but they who take His yoke upon them possess. 'See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh,' for if they escaped not when they refused her that spake through the Jewish thinker's lips of old, 'much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from Him that beseecheth us from heaven.' Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God, and it is in Him crucified that our weakness and our folly are made strong and wise, and Wisdom's ancient promise is fulfilled: 'Whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord.'

14)Proverbs 10:29

Proverbs

THE TWO-FOLD ASPECT OF THE DIVINE WORKING

Pro. 10:29.

You observe that the words 'shall be,' in the last clause, are a supplement. They are quite unnecessary, and in fact they rather hinder the sense. They destroy the completeness of the antithesis between the two halves of the verse. If you leave them out, and suppose that the 'way of the Lord' is what is spoken of in both clauses, you get a far deeper and fuller meaning. 'The way of the Lord is strength to the upright; but destruction to the workers of iniquity.' It is the same way which is strength to one man and ruin to another, and the moral nature of the man determines which it shall be to him. That is a penetrating word, which goes deep down. The unknown thinkers, to whose keen insight into the facts of human life we are indebted for this Book of Proverbs, had pondered for many an hour over the perplexed and complicated fates of men, and they crystallised their reflections at last in this thought. They have in it struck upon a principle which explains a great many things, and teaches us a great many solemn lessons. Let us try to get a hold of what is meant, and then to look at some applications and illustrations of the principle.

I. First, then, let me just try to put clearly the meaning and bearing of these words. ‘The way of the Lord’ means, sometimes in the Old Testament and sometimes in the New, religion, considered as the way in which God desires a man to walk. So we read in the New Testament of ‘the way’ as the designation of the profession and practice of Christianity; and ‘the way of the Lord’ is often used in the Psalms for the path which He traces for man by His sovereign will.

But that, of course, is not the meaning here. Here it means, not the road in which God prescribes that we should walk, but that road in which He Himself walks; or, in other words, the sum of the divine action, the solemn footsteps of God through creation, providence, and history. ‘His goings forth are from everlasting.’ ‘His way is in the sea.’ ‘His way is in the sanctuary.’ Modern language has a whole set of phrases which mean the same thing as the Jew meant by ‘the way of the Lord,’ only that God is left out. They talk about the ‘current of events,’ ‘the general tendency of things,’ ‘the laws of human affairs,’ and so on. I, for my part, prefer the old-fashioned ‘Hebraism.’ To many modern thinkers the whole drift and tendency of human affairs affords no sign of a person directing these. They hear the clashing and grinding of opposing forces, the thunder as of falling avalanches, and the moaning as of a homeless wind, but they hear the sounds of no footfalls echoing down the ages. This ancient teacher had keener ears. Well for us if we share his faith, and see in all the else distracting mysteries of life and history, ‘the way of the Lord!’

But not only does the expression point to the operation of a personal divine Will in human affairs, but it conceives of that operation as one, a uniform and consistent whole. However complicated, and sometimes apparently contradictory, the individual events were, there was a unity in them, and they all converged on one result. The writer does not speak of ‘ways,’ but of ‘the way,’ as a grand unity. It is all one continuous, connected, consistent mode of operation from beginning to end.

The author of this proverb believed something more about the way of the Lord. He believed that although it is higher than our way, still, a man can know something about it; and that whatever may be enigmatical, and sometimes almost heart-breaking, in it, one thing is sure-that as we have been taught of late years in another dialect, it 'makes for righteousness.' 'Clouds and darkness are round about Him,' but the Old Testament writers never falter in the conviction, which was the soul of all their heroism and the life blood of their religion, that in the hearts of the clouds and darkness, 'Justice and judgment are the foundations of His throne.' The way of the Lord, says this old thinker, *is* hard to understand, very complicated, full of all manner of perplexities and difficulties, and yet on the whole the clear drift and tendency of the whole thing is discernible, and it is this: it is all on the side of good. Everything that is good, and everything that does good, is an ally of God' s, and may be sure of the divine favour and of the divine blessing resting upon it.

And just because that is so clear, the other side is as true; the same way, the same set of facts, the same continuous stream of tendency, which is all with and for every form of good, is all against every form of evil. Or, as one of the Psalmists puts the same idea, 'The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and His ears are open unto their cry. The face of the Lord is against them that do evil.' The same eye that beams in lambent love on 'the righteous' burns terribly to the evil doer. 'The face of the Lord' means the side of the divine nature which is turned to us, and is manifested by His self-revealing activity, so that the expression comes near in meaning to 'the way of the Lord,' and the thought in both cases is the same, that by the eternal law of His being, God's actions must all be for the good and against the evil.

They do not change, but a man's character determines which aspect of them he sees and has to experience. God's way has a bright side and a dark. You may take which you like. You can lay hold of the thing by whichever handle you choose. On the one side it is convex, on the other concave. You can approach it from either side, as you please. 'The way of the Lord' must touch *your* 'way.' Your cannot alter that necessity. Your path must either run parallel in the same direction with His, and then all His power will be an impulse to bear you onward; or it must run in the opposite direction, and then all His power will be for your ruin, and the collision with it will crush you as a ship is crushed like an egg-shell, when it strikes an iceberg. You can choose which of these shall befall you.

And there is a still more striking beauty about the saying, if we give the full literal meaning to the word ‘strength.’ It is used by our translators, I suppose, in a somewhat archaic and peculiar signification, namely, that of a stronghold. At all events the Hebrew means a fortress, a place where men may live safe and secure; and if we take that meaning, the passage gains greatly in force and beauty. This ‘way of the Lord’ is like a castle for the shelter of the shelterless good man, and behind those strong bulwarks he dwells impregnable and safe. Just as a fortress is a security to the garrison, and a frowning menace to the besiegers or enemies, so the ‘name of the Lord is a strong tower,’ and the ‘way of the Lord’ is a fortress. If you choose to take shelter within it, its massive walls are your security and your joy. If you do not, they frown down grimly upon you, a menace and a terror. How differently, eight hundred years ago, Normans and Saxons looked at the square towers that were built all over England to bridle the inhabitants! To the one they were the sign of the security of their dominion; to the other they were the sign of their slavery and submission. Torture and prison-houses they might become; frowning portents they necessarily were. ‘The way of the Lord’ is a castle fortress to the man that does good, and to the man that does evil it is a threatening prison, which may become a hell of torture. It is ‘ruin to the workers of iniquity.’ I pray you, settle for yourself which of these it is to be to you.

II. And now let me say a word or two by way of application, or illustration, of these principles that are here.

First, let me remind you how the order of the universe is such that righteousness is life and sin is death. This universe and the fortunes of men are complicated and strange. It is hard to trace any laws, except purely physical ones, at work. Still, on the whole, things do work so that goodness is blessedness, and badness is ruin. That is, of course, not always true in regard of outward things, but even about them it is more often and obviously true than we sometimes recognise. Hence all nations have their proverbs, embodying the generalised experience of centuries, and asserting that, on the whole, ‘honesty is the best policy,’ and that it is always a blunder to do wrong. What modern phraseology calls ‘laws of nature,’ the Bible calls ‘the way of the Lord’; and the manner in which these help a man who conforms to them, and hurt or kill him if he does not, is an illustration on a lower level of the principle of our text. This tremendous congeries of powers in the midst of which we live does not care whether we go with it or against it, only if we do the one we shall prosper, and if we do the other we shall very likely be made an end of. Try to stop a train, and it will run over you and murder you; get into it, and it will carry you smoothly along. Our lives are surrounded with powers, which will carry our messages and be our slaves if we know how to command nature by obeying it, or will impassively strike us dead if we do not.

Again, in our physical life, as a rule, virtue makes strength, sin brings punishment. ‘Riotous living’ makes diseased bodies. Sins in the flesh are avenged in the flesh, and there is no need for a miracle to bring it about that he who sows to the flesh shall ‘of the flesh reap corruption.’ God entrusts the punishment of the breach of the laws of temperance and morality in the body to the ‘natural’ operation of such breach. The inevitable connection between sins against the body and disease in the body, is an instance of the way of the Lord-the same set of principles and facts-being strength to one man and destruction to another. Hundreds of young men in Manchester-some of whom are listening to me now, no doubt-are killing themselves, or at least are ruining their health, by flying in the face of the plain laws of purity and self-control. They think that they must ‘have their fling,’ and ‘obey their instincts,’ and so on. Well, if they must, then another ‘must’ will insist upon coming into play-and they must reap as they have sown, and drink as they have brewed, and the grim saying of this book about profligate young men will be fulfilled in many of them. ‘His bones are full of the iniquity of his youth, which shall lie down with him in the grave.’ Be not deceived, God is not mocked, and His way avenges bodily transgressions by bodily sufferings.

And then, in higher regions, on the whole, goodness makes blessedness, and evil brings ruin. All the powers of God’s universe, and all the tenderness of God’s heart are on the side of the man that does right. The stars in their courses fight against the man that fights against Him; and on the other side, in yielding thyself to the will of God and following the dictates of His commandments, ‘Thou shalt make a league with the beasts of the field, and the stones of the field shall be at peace with thee.’ All things serve the soul that serves God, and all war against him who wars against his Maker. The way of the Lord cannot but further and help all who love and serve Him. For them all things must work together for good. By the very laws of God's own being, which necessarily shape all His actions, the whole 'stream of tendency without us makes for righteousness.' In the one course of life we go with the stream of divine activity which pours from the throne of God. In the other we are like men trying to row a boat *up* Niagara. All the rush of the mighty torrent will batter us back. Our work will be doomed to destruction, and ourselves to shame. For ever and ever to be good is to be well. An eternal truth lies in the facts that the same word 'good' means pleasant and right, and that sin and sorrow are both called 'evil.' All sin is self-inflicted sorrow, and every 'rogue is a roundabout fool.' So ask yourselves the question: 'Is my life in harmony with, or opposed to, these omnipotent laws which rule the whole field of life?' Still further, this same fact of the two-fold aspect and operation of the one way of the Lord will be made yet more evident in the future. It becomes us to speak very reverently and reticently about the matter, but I can conceive it possible that the one manifestation of God in a future life may be in substance the same, and yet that it may produce opposite effects upon oppositely disposed souls. According to the old mystical illustration, the same heat that melts wax hardens clay, and the same apocalypse of the divine nature in another world may to one man be life and joy, and to another man may be terror and despair. I do not dwell upon that; it is far too awful a thing for us to speak about to one another, but it is worth your taking to heart when you are indulging in easy anticipations that of course God is merciful and will bless and save everybody after he dies. Perhaps-I do not go any further than a perhaps-perhaps God cannot, and perhaps if a man has got himself into such a condition as it is possible for a man to get into, perhaps, like light upon a diseased eye, the purest beam may be the most exquisite pain, and the natural instinct may be to 'call upon the rocks and the hills to fall upon them' and cover them up in a more genial darkness from that Face, to see which should be life and blessedness.

People speak of future rewards and punishments as if they were given and inflicted by simple and divine volition, and did not stand in any necessary connection with holiness on the one hand or with sin on the other. I do not deny that some portion of both bliss and sorrow may be of such a character. But there is a very important and wide region in which our actions here must automatically bring consequences hereafter of joy or sorrow, without any special retributive action of God' s.

We have only to keep in view one or two things about the future which we know to be true, and we shall see this. Suppose a man with his memory of all his past life perfect, and his conscience stimulated to greater sensitiveness and clearer judgment, and all opportunities ended of gratifying tastes and appetites, whose food is in this world, while yet the soul has become dependent on them for ease and comfort, What more is needed to make a hell? And the supposition is but the statement of a fact. We seem to forget much; but when the waters are drained off all the lost things will be found at the bottom. Conscience gets dulled and sophisticated here. But the icy cold of death will wake it up, and the new position will give new insight into the true character of our actions. You see how often a man at the end of life has his eyes cleared to see his faults. But how much more will that be the case hereafter! When the rush of passion is past, and you are far enough from your life to view it as a whole, holding it at arm's length, you will see better what it looks like. There is nothing improbable in supposing that inclinations and tastes which have been nourished for a lifetime may survive the possibility of indulging them in another life, as they often do in this; and what can be worse than such a thirst for one drop of water, which never can be tasted more? These things are certain, and no more is needed to make sin produce, by necessary consequence, misery, and ruin; while similarly, goodness brings joy, peace, and blessing.

But again, the self-revelation of God has this same double aspect.

'The way of the Lord' may mean His process by which He reveals His character. Every truth concerning Him may be either a joy or a terror to men. All His 'attributes' are builded into 'a strong tower, into which the righteous runneth, and is safe,' or else they are builded into a prison and torture-house. So the thought of God may either be a happy and strengthening one, or an unwelcome one. 'I remembered God, and was troubled' says one Psalmist. What an awful confession-that the thought of God disturbed him! The thought of God to some of us is a very unwelcome one, as unwelcome as the thought of a detective to a company of thieves. Is not that dreadful? Music is a torture to some ears: and there are people who have so alienated their hearts and wills from God that the Name which should be ‘their dearest faith’ is not only their ‘ghastliest doubt,’ but their greatest pain. O brethren, the thought of God and all that wonderful complex of mighty attributes and beauties which make His Name should be our delight, the key to all treasures, the end of all sorrows, our light in darkness, our life in death, our all in all. It is either that to us, or it is something that we would fain forget. Which is it to you?

Especially the Gospel has this double aspect. Our text speaks of the distinction between the righteous and evil doers; but how to pass from the one class to the other, it does not tell us. The Gospel is the answer to that question. It tells us that though we are all ‘workers of iniquity,’ and must, therefore, if such a text as this were the last word to be spoken on the matter, share in the ruin which smites the opponent of the divine will, we may pass from that class; and by simple faith in Him who died on the Cross for all workers of iniquity, may become of those righteous on whose side God works in all His way, who have all His attributes drawn up like an embattled army in their defence, and have His mighty name for their refuge.

As the very crown of the ways of God, the work of Christ and the record of it in the Gospel have most eminently this double aspect. God meant nothing but the salvation of the whole world when He sent us this Gospel. His ‘way’ therein was pure, unmingled, universal love. We can make that great message untroubled blessing by simply accepting it. Nothing more is needed but to take God at His word, and to close with His sincere and earnest invitation. Then Christ’s work becomes the fortress in which we are guarded from sin and guilt, from the arrows of conscience, and the fiery darts of temptation. But if not accepted, then it is not passive, it is not nothing. If rejected, it does more harm to a man than anything else can, just because, if accepted, it would have done him more good. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. The pillar which symbolised the presence of God sent down influences on either side; to the trembling crowd of the Israelites on the one hand, to the pursuing ranks of the Egyptians on the other; and though the pillar was one, opposite effects streamed from it, and it was ‘a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these.’ Everything depends on which side of the pillar you choose to see. The ark of God, which brought dismay and death among false gods and their worshippers, brought blessing into the humble house of Obed Edom, the man of Gath, with whom it rested for three months before it was set in its place in the city of David. That which is meant to be the savour of life unto life must either be that or the savour of death unto death.

Jesus Christ is *something* to each of us. For you who have heard His name ever since you were children, your relation to Him settles your condition and your prospects, and moulds your character. Either He is for you the tried corner-stone, the sure foundation, on which whosoever builds will not be confounded, or He is the stone of stumbling, against which whosoever stumbles will be broken, and which will crush to powder whomsoever it falls upon, 'This Child is set for the rise' or for the fall of all who hear His name. He leaves no man at the level at which He found him, but either lifts him up nearer to God, and purity and joy, or sinks him into an ever-descending pit of darkening separation from all these. Which is He to you? Something He must be-your strength or your ruin. If you commit your souls to Him in humble faith, He will be your peace, your life, your Heaven. If you turn from His offered grace, He will be your pain, your death, your torture. 'What maketh Heaven, that maketh hell.' Which do you choose Him to be?

15)Proverbs 12:1-15

Proverbs

THE MANY-SIDED CONTRAST OF WISDOM AND FOLLY

Pro. 12:1 - Pro. 12:15.

The verses of the present passage are a specimen of the main body of the Book of Proverbs. They are not a building, but a heap. The stones seldom have any mortar between them, and connection or progress is for the most part sought in vain. But one great antithesis runs through the whole-the contrast of wisdom or righteousness with folly or wickedness. The compiler or author is never weary of setting out that opposition in all possible lights. It is, in his view, the one difference worth noting between men, and it determines their whole character and fortunes. The book traverses with keen observation all the realm of life, and everywhere finds confirmation of its great principle that goodness is wisdom and sin folly.

There is something extremely impressive in this continual reiteration of that contrast. As we read, we feel as if, after all, there were nothing in the world but it and its results. That profound sense of the existence and far-reaching scope of the division of men into two classes is not the least of the benefits which a thoughtful study of Proverbs brings to us. In this lesson it is useless to attempt to classify the verses. Slight traces of grouping appear here and there; but, on the whole, we have a set of miscellaneous aphorisms turning on the great contrast, and setting in various lights the characters and fates of the righteous and the wicked.

The first mark of difference is the opposite feeling about discipline. If a man is wise, he will love ‘knowledge’; and if he loves knowledge, he will love the means to it, and therefore will not kick against correction. That is another view of trials from the one which inculcates devout submission to a Father. It regards only the benefits to ourselves. If we want to be taught anything, we shall not flinch from the rod. There must be pains undergone in order to win knowledge of any sort, and the man who rebels against these shows that he had rather be comfortable and ignorant than wise. A pupil who will not stand having his exercises corrected will not learn his faults. On the other hand, hating reproof is ‘brutish’ in the most literal sense; for it is the characteristic of animals that they do not understand the purpose of pain, and never advance because they do not. Men can grow because they can submit to discipline; beasts cannot improve because, except partially and in a few cases, they cannot accept correction.

The first proverb deals with wisdom or goodness in its inner source; namely, a docile disposition. The two next deal with its consequences. It secures God’s favour, while its opposite is condemned; and then, as a consequence of this, the good man is established and the wicked swept away. The manifestations of God’s favour and its opposite are not to be thrown forward to a future life. Continuously the sunshine of divine love falls on the one man, and already the other is condemned. It needs some strength of faith to look through the shows of prosperity often attending plain wickedness, and believe that it is always a blunder to do wrong.

But a moderate experience of life will supply many instances of prosperous villainy in trade and politics which melted away like mist. The shore is strewn with wrecks, dashed to pieces because righteousness did not steer. Every exchange gives examples in plenty. How many seemingly solid structures built on wrong every man has seen in his lifetime crumble like the cloud masses which the wind piles in the sky and then dissipates! The root of the righteous is in God, and therefore he is firm. The contrast is like that of Psa. 1:1 - Psa. 1:6 -between the tree with strong roots and waving greenery, and the chaff, rootless, and therefore whirled out of the threshing-floor.

The universal contrast is next applied to women; and in accordance with the subordinate position they held in old days, the bearing of her goodness is principally regarded as affecting her husband. That does not cover the whole ground, of course. But wherever there is a true marriage, the wife will not think that woman's rights are infringed because one chief issue of her beauty of virtue is the honour and joy it reflects upon him who has her heart. 'A virtuous woman' is not only one who possesses the one virtue to which the phrase has been so miserably confined, but who is 'a woman of strength'-no doll or plaything, but

'A perfect woman, nobly planned
To warn, to comfort, and command.'

The gnawing misery of being fastened like two dogs in a leash to one who 'causes shame' is vividly portrayed by that strong figure, that she is like 'rottenness in his bones,' eating away strength, and inflicting disfigurement and torture.

Then come a pair of verses describing the inward and outward work of the two kinds of men as these affect others. The former verses dealt with their effects on the actors; the present, with their bearing on others. Inwardly, the good man has thoughts which scrupulously keep the balance true and are just to his fellows, while the wicked plans to deceive for his own profit. When thoughts are translated into speech, deceit bears fruit in words which are like ambushes of murderers, laying traps to destroy, while the righteous man's words are like angels of deliverance to the unsuspecting who are ready to fall into the snare. Selfishness, which is the root of wickedness, will be cruelty and injustice when necessary for its ends. The man who is wise because God is his centre and aim will be merciful and helpful. The basis of philanthropy is religion. The solemn importance attached to speech is observable. Words can slay as truly as swords. Now that the press has multiplied the power of speech, and the world is buzzing with the clatter of tongues, we all need to lay to heart the responsibilities and magic power of spoken and printed words, and 'to set a watch on the door of our lips.'

Then follow a couple of verses dealing with the consequences to men themselves of their contrasted characters. The first of these [Pro. 12:7] recurs to the thought of Pro. 12:3 but with a difference. Not only the righteous himself, but his house, shall be established. The solidarity of the family and the entail of goodness are strongly insisted on in the Old Testament, though limitations are fully recognised. If a good man's son continues his father's character, he will prolong his father's blessings; and in normal conditions, a parent's wisdom passes on to his children. Something is wrong when, as is so often the case, it does not; and it is not always the children's fault.

The overthrow of the wicked is set in striking contrast with their plots to overthrow others. Their mischief comes back, like an Australian boomerang, to the hand that flings it; and contrariwise, delivering others is a sure way of establishing one's self. Exceptions there are, for the world-scheme is too complicated to be condensed into a formula; but all proverbs speak of the average usual results of virtue and vice, and those of this book do the same. Pro. 12:8 asserts that, on the whole, honour attends goodness, and contempt wickedness. Of course, companions in dissipation extol each other's vices, and launch the old threadbare sneers at goodness. But if wisdom were not set uppermost in men's secret judgment, there would be no hypocrites, and their existence proves the truth of the proverb.

Pro. 12:9 seems suggested by 'despised' in Pro. 12:8. There are two kinds of contempt-one which brands sin deservedly, one which vulgarly despises everybody who is not rich. A man need not mind, though his modest household is treated with contempt, if quiet righteousness reigns in it. It is better to be contented with little, and humble in a lowly place, than to be proud and hungry, as many were in the writer's time and since. A foolish world set on wealth may despise, but its contempt breaks no bones. Self-conceit is poor diet.

This seems to be the first of a little cluster of proverbs bearing on domestic life. It prefers modest mediocrity of station, such as Agur desired. Its successor shows how the contrasted qualities come out in the two men's relation to their domestic animals. Goodness sweeps a wide circle touching the throne of God and the stall of the cattle. It was not Coleridge who found out that 'He prayeth best who loveth best' but this old proverb-maker; and he could speak the thought without the poet's exaggeration, which robs his expression of it of half its value. The original says 'knoweth the soul' which may indeed mean, 'regardeth the life' but rather seems to suggest sympathetic interest in leading to an understanding of the dumb creature, which must precede all wise care for its well-being. It is a part of religion to try to enter into the mysterious feelings of our humble dependants in farmyard and stable. On the other hand, for want of such sympathetic interest, even when the 'wicked' means to be kind, he does harm; or the word rendered 'tender mercies' may here mean the feelings [literally, 'bowels'] which, in their intense selfishness, are cruel even to animals.

Pro. 12:11 has no connection with the preceding, unless the link is common reference to home life and business. It contrasts the sure results of honest industry with the folly of speculation. The Revised Version margin 'vain things' is better than the text 'vain persons,' which would give no antithesis to the patient tilling of the first clause. That verse would make an admirable motto to be stretched across the Stock Exchange, and like places on both sides of the Atlantic. How many ruined homes and heart-broken wives witness in America and England to its truth! The vulgar English proverb, 'What comes over the Devil's back goes under his belly,' says the same thing. The only way to get honest wealth is to work for it. Gambling in all its forms is rank folly.

So the next proverb [Pro. 12:12] continues the same thought, and puts it in a somewhat difficult phrase. It goes a little deeper than the former, showing that the covetousness which follows after vain things, is really wicked lusting for unrighteous gain. 'The net of evildoer's is better taken as in the margin [Rev. Ver.] ‘prey’ or ‘spoil,’ and the meaning seems to be as just stated. Such hankering for riches, no matter how obtained, or such envying of the booty which admittedly has been won by roguery, is a mark of the wicked. How many professing church members have known that feeling in thinking of the millions of some railway king! Would they like the proverb to be applied to them?

The contrast to this is ‘the root of the righteous yields fruit,’ or ‘shoots forth,’ We have heard [Pro. 12:3] that it shall never be moved, being fixed in God; now we are told that it will produce all that is needful. A life rooted in God will unfold into all necessary good, which will be better than the spoil of the wicked. There are two ways of getting on-to struggle and fight and trample down rivals; one, to keep near God and wait for him. ‘Ye fight and war; ye have not, because ye ask not.’

The next two proverbs have in common a reference to the effect of speech upon the speaker. ‘In the transgression of the lips is an evil snare’; that is, sinful words ensnare their utterer, and whoever else he harms, he himself is harmed most. The reflex influence on character of our utterances is not present to us, as it should be. They leave stains on lips and heart. Thoughts expressed are more definite and permanent thereby. A vicious thought clothed in speech has new power over the speaker. If we would escape from that danger, we must *be* righteous, and *speak* righteousness; and then the same cause will deepen our convictions of ‘whatsoever things are lovely and of good report.’

Pro. 12:14 insists on this opposite side of the truth. Good words will bring forth fruit, which will satisfy the speaker, because, whatever effects his words may have on others, they will leave strengthened goodness and love of it in himself. ‘If the house be worthy, your peace shall rest upon it; if not, it shall return to you again.’ That reaction of words on oneself is but one case of the universal law of consequences coming back on us. We are the architects of our own destinies. Every deed has an immortal life, and returns, either like a raven or a dove, to the man who sent it out on its flight. It comes back either croaking with blood on its beak, or cooing with an olive branch in its mouth. All life is at once sowing and reaping. A harvest comes in which retribution will be even more entire and accurate.

The last proverb of the passage gives a familiar antithesis, and partially returns to the thought of Pro. 12:1. The fool has no standard of conduct but his own notions, and is absurdly complacent as to all his doings. The wise seeks better guidance than his own, and is docile, because he is not so ridiculously sure of his infallibility. No type of weak wickedness is more abominable to the proverbialist than that of pert self-conceit, which knows so little that it thinks it knows everything, and is ‘as untameable as a fly.’ But in the wisest sense, it is true that a mark of folly is self-opinionativeness; that a man who has himself for teacher has a fool for scholar; that the test of wisdom is willingness to be taught; and, especially, that to bring a docile, humble spirit to the Source of all wisdom, and to ask counsel of God, is the beginning of true insight, and that the self-sufficiency which is the essence of sin, is never more fatal than when it is ignorant of guilt, and therefore spurns a Saviour.

16)Proverbs 13:7

Proverbs

THE POOR RICH AND THE RICH POOR

Pro. 13:7.

Two singularly-contrasted characters are set in opposition here. One, that of a man who lives like a millionaire and is a pauper; another, that of a man who lives like a pauper and is rich. The latter character, that of a man who hides and hoards his wealth, was, perhaps, more common in the days when this collection of Proverbs was put together, because in all ill-governed countries, to show wealth is a short way to get rid of it. But they have their modern representatives. We who live in a commercial community have seen many a blown-out bubble soaring and glittering, and then collapsing into a drop of soapsuds, and on the other hand, we are always hearing of notes and bank-books being found stowed away in some wretched hovel where a miser has died.

Now, I do not suppose that the author of this proverb attached any kind of moral to it in his own mind. It is simply a jotting of an observation drawn from a wide experience; and if he meant to teach any lesson by it, I suppose it was nothing more than that in regard to money, as to other things, we should avoid extremes, and should try to show what we are, and to be what we seem. But whilst thus I do not take it that there is any kind of moral or religious lesson in the writer's mind, I may venture, perhaps, to take this saying as being a picturesque illustration, putting in vivid fashion certain great truths which apply in all regions of life, and which find their highest application in regard to Christianity, and our relation to Jesus Christ. There, too, 'there is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing; and there is that maketh himself poor, and yet'-or one might, perhaps, say *therefore*-'hath great riches.' It is from that point of view that I wish to look at the words at this time. I must begin with recalling to your mind, I. Our universal poverty.

Whatever a man may think about himself, however he may estimate himself and conceit himself, there stand out two salient facts, the fact of universal dependence, and the fact of universal sinfulness, which ought to bear into every heart the consciousness of this poverty. A word or two about each of these two facts.

First, the fact of universal dependence. Now, wise men and deep thinkers have found a very hard problem in the question of how it is possible that there should be an infinite God and a finite universe standing, as it were, over against Him. I am not going to trouble you with the all-but-just-succeeding answers to that great problem which the various systems of thinking have given. These lie apart from my present purpose. But what I would point out is that, whatever else may be dark and difficult about the co-existence of these two, the infinite God and the finite universe, this at least is sun-clear, that the creature depends absolutely for everything on that infinite Creator. People talk sometimes, and we are all too apt to think, as if God had made the world and left it. And we are all too apt to think that, however we may owe the origination of our own personal existence to a divine act, the act was done when we began to be, and the life was given as a gift that could be separated from the Bestower. But that is not the state of the case at all. The real fact is that life is only continued because of the continued operation on every living thing, just as being is only continued by reason of the continued operation on every existing thing, of the Divine

Power. ‘In Him we live,’ and the life is the result of the perpetual impartation from Himself ‘in whom all things consist,’ according to the profound word of the Apostle. Their being depends on their union with Him. If it were possible to cut a sunbeam in two, so that the further half of it should be separated from its vital union with the great central fire from which it rushed long, long ago, that further half would pale into darkness. And if you cut the connection between God and the creature, the creature shrivels into nothing. By Him the spring buds around us unfold themselves; by Him all things are. So, at the very foundation of our being there lies absolute dependence.

In like manner, all that we call faculties, capacities, and the like, are, in a far deeper sense than the conventional use of the word ‘gift’ implies, bestowments from Him. The Old Testament goes to the root of the matter when, speaking of the artistic and aesthetic skill of the workers in the fine arts in the Tabernacle, it says, ‘the Spirit of the Lord’ taught Bezaleel; and when, even in regard to the brute strength of Samson-surely the strangest hero of faith that ever existed-it says that when ‘the Spirit of the Lord came upon him,’ into his giant hands there was infused the strength by which he tore the lion’s jaws asunder. In like manner, all the faculties that men possess they have simply because He has given them. ‘What hast thou that thou hast not received? If thou hast received, why dost thou boast thyself?’ So there is a great psalm that gathers everything that makes up human life, and traces it all to God, when it says, ‘They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of Thy house,’ for from God comes all that sustains us; ‘Thou shalt make them drink of the river of Thy pleasures,’ for from God comes all that gladdens us; ‘with Thee is the fountain of life,’ for from Him flow all the tiny streams that make the life of all that live; ‘in Thy light shall we see light,’ for every power of perceiving, and all grace and lustre of purity, owe their source to Him. As well, then, might the pitcher boast itself of the sparkling water that it only holds, as well might the earthen jar plume itself on the treasure that has been deposited in it, as we make ourselves rich because of the riches that we have received. ‘Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his strength. Let not the rich man glory in his riches; but he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.’

Then, turn for a moment to the second of the facts on which this universal poverty depends, and that is the fact of universal sinfulness. Ah! there is one thing that is our own-

'If any power we have, it is to will.'

We have that strange faculty, which nobody has ever thoroughly explained yet, but which we all know to exist, of wrenching ourselves so far away from God, 'in whom we live and move and have our being,' that we can make our thoughts and ways, not merely lower than, but contradictory of, and antagonistic to, His thoughts, and His ways. Conscience tells us, and we all know it, that we are the causes of our own actions, though from Him come the powers by which we do them. The electricity comes from the central powerstation, but it depends on us what sort of wheels we make it drive, and what kind of work we set it to do. Make all allowances you like for circumstances-what they call nowadays 'environment,' by which formidable word some people seem to think that they have explained away a great many difficulties-make all allowances you like for inheritance-what they now call 'heredity,' by which other magic word people seem to think that they may largely obliterate the sense of responsibility and sin-allow as much as you like, in reason, for these, and there remains the indestructible consciousness in every man, 'I did it, and it was my fault that I did it; and the moral guilt remains.'

So, then, there are these two things, universal dependence and universal sinfulness, and on them is built the declaration of universal poverty. Duty is debt. Everybody knows that the two words come from the same root. What we ought is what we owe. We all owe an obedience which none of us has rendered. Ten thousand talents is the debt and-'they had nothing to pay.' We are like bankrupts that begin business with a borrowed capital, by reason of our absolute dependence; and so manage their concerns as to find themselves inextricably entangled in a labyrinth of obligations which they cannot discharge. We are all paupers. And so I come to the second point, and that is-

II. The poor rich man.

‘There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing.’ That describes accurately the type of man of whom there are thousands; of whom there are dozens listening to me at this moment; who ignores dependence and is not conscious of sin, and so struts about in self-complacent satisfaction with himself, and knows nothing of his true condition. There is nothing more tragic-and so it would be seen to be if it were not so common-than that a man, laden, as we each of us are, with a burden of evil that we cannot get rid of, should yet conceit himself to possess merits, virtues, graces, that ought to secure for him the admiration of his fellows, or, at least, to exempt him from their censure, and which he thinks, when he thinks about it at all, may perhaps secure for him the approbation of God. ‘The deceitfulness of sin’ is one of its mightiest powers. There is nothing that so blinds a man to the real moral character of actions as that obstinate self-complacency which approves of a thing because it is mine. You condemn in other people the very things you do yourself. You see all their ugliness in them; you do not recognise it when it is your deed. Many of you have never ventured upon a careful examination and appraisement of your own moral and religious character. You durst not, for you are afraid that it would turn out badly. So, like some insolvent who has not the courage to face the facts, you take refuge in defective bookkeeping, and think that that is as good as being solvent. Then you have far too low a standard, and one of the main reasons why you have so low a standard is just because the sins that you do have dulled your consciences, and like the Styrian peasants that eat arsenic, the poison does not poison you, and you do not feel yourself any the worse for it. Dear brethren! these are very rude things for me to say to you. I am saying them to myself as much as to you, and I would to God that you would listen to them, not because I say them, but because they are true. The great bulk of us know our own moral characters just as little as we know the sound of our own voices. I suppose if you could hear yourself speak you would say, ‘I never knew that my voice sounded like that.’ And I am quite sure that many of you, if the curtain could be drawn aside which is largely woven out of the black yarn of your own evil thoughts, and you could see yourselves as in a mirror, you would say, ‘I had no notion that I looked like that.’ ‘There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing.’

Ay! and more than that. The making of yourself rich is the sure way to prevent yourself from ever being so. We see that in all other regions of life.

If a student says to himself, ‘Oh! I know all that subject,’ the chances are that he will not get it up any more; and the further chance is that he will be ‘ploughed’ when the examination-day comes. If the artist stands before the picture, and says to himself, ‘Well done, that is the realisation of my ideal!’ he will paint no more anything worth looking at. And in any department, when a man says ‘Lo! I have attained,’ then he ceases to advance.

Now, bring all that to bear upon religion, upon Christ and His salvation, upon our own spiritual and religious and moral condition. The sense of imperfection is the salt of approximation to perfection. And the man that says ‘I am rich’ is condemning himself to poverty and pauperism. If you do not know your need, you will not go to look for the supply of it. If you fancy yourselves to be quite well, though a mortal disease has gripped you, you will take no medicine, nor have recourse to any physician. If you think that you have enough good to show for man’s judgment and for God’ s, and have not been convinced of your dependence and your sinfulness, then Jesus Christ will be very little to you, and His great work as the Redeemer and Saviour of His people from their sins will be nothing to you. And so you will condemn yourselves to have nothing unto the very end.

I believe that this generation needs few things more than it needs a deepened consciousness of the reality of sin and of the depth and damnable nature of it. It is because people feel so little of the burden of their transgression that they care so little for that gentle Hand that lifts away their burden. It is because from much of popular religion-and, alas! that I should have to say it, from much of popular preaching-there has vanished the deep wholesome sense of poverty, that, from so much of popular religion, and preaching too, there has faded away the central light of the Gospel, the proclamation of the Cross by which is taken away the sin of the whole world.

So, lastly, my text brings before us-

III. The rich poor man.

‘There is that maketh himself poor and yet’-or, as varied, the expression is, ‘therefore hath great riches.’ Jesus Christ has lifted the thoughts in my text into the very region into which I am trying to bring them, when in the first of all the Beatitudes, as they are called, ‘He opened His mouth and said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.’ Poor, and therefore an owner of a kingdom! Now I need not, at this stage of my sermon, insist upon the fact that that consciousness of poverty is the only fitting attitude for any of us to take up in view of the two facts with which I started, the fact of our dependence and the fact of our sinfulness. What absurdity it seems for a man about whom these two things are true, that, as I said, he began with a borrowed capital, and has only incurred greater debts in his transactions, there should be any foothold left in his own estimation on which he can stand and claim to be anything but the pauper that he is. Oh! brethren, of all the hallucinations that we put upon ourselves in trying to believe that things are as we wish, there is none more subtle, more obstinate, more deeply dangerous than this, that a man full of evil should be so ignorant of his evil as to say, like that Pharisee in our Lord’s parable, ‘I thank Thee that I am not as other men are. I give tithes . . . I pray . . . I am this, that, and the other thing; not like that wretched publican over there.’ Yes, this is the fit attitude for us,-’He would not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven.’

Then let me remind you that this wholesome recognition of facts about ourselves as they are is the sure way to possess the wealth. Of course, it is possible for a man by some mighty influence or other brought to bear upon him, to see himself as God sees him, and then, if there is nothing more than that, he is tortured with ‘the sorrow that worketh death.’ Judas ‘went out and hanged himself’; Peter ‘went out and wept bitterly.’ The one was sent ‘to his own place,’ wherever that was; the other was sent foremost of the Twelve. If you see your poverty, let self-distrust be the nadir, the lowest point, and let faith be the complementary high point, the zenith. The rebound from self-distrust to trust in Christ is that which makes the consciousness of poverty the condition of receiving wealth.

And what wealth it is!-the wealth of a peaceful conscience, of a quiet heart, of lofty aims, of a pure mind, of strength according to our need, of an immortal hope, of a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, ‘where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt; where thieves do not break through nor steal.’ Blessed be God! the more we have the riches of glory in Christ Jesus, the more shall we feel that we have nothing, and that all is His, and none of it ours. And so, as the rivers run in the valleys, and the high mountain-tops are dry and barren, the grace which makes us rich will run in the low ground of our conscious humiliation and nothingness.

Dear brother! do you estimate yourself as you are? Have you taken stock of yourself? Have you got away from the hallucination of possessing wealth? Has your sense of need led you to cease from trust in yourself, and to put all your trust in Jesus Christ? Have you taken the wealth which He freely gives to all who sue *in forma pauperis*? He does not ask you to bring anything but debts and sins, emptiness and weakness, and penitent faith. He will strengthen the weakness, fill the emptiness, forgive the sins, cancel the debts, and make you 'rich toward God.' I beseech you to listen to Him, speaking from heaven, and taking up the strain of this text: 'Because thou sayest I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich.' And then you will be of those blessed poor ones who are 'rich through faith, and heirs of the Kingdom.'

17)Proverbs 13:23

Proverbs

THE TILLAGE OF THE POOR

Pro. 13:23.

Palestine was a land of small peasant proprietors, and the institution of the Jubilee was intended to prevent the acquisition of large estates by any Israelite. The consequence, as intended, was a level of modest prosperity. It was 'the tillage of the poor,' the careful, diligent husbandry of the man who had only a little patch of land to look after, that filled the storehouses of the Holy Land. Hence the proverb of our text arose. It preserves the picture of the economical conditions in which it originated, and it is capable of, and is intended to have, an application to all forms and fields of work. In all it is true that the bulk of the harvested results are due, not to the large labours of the few, but to the minute, unnoticed toils of the many. Small service is true service, and the aggregate of such produces large crops. Spade husbandry gets most out of the ground. The labourer’s allotment of half an acre is generally more prolific than the average of the squire’s estate. Much may be made of slender gifts, small resources, and limited opportunities if carefully cultivated, as they should be, and as their very slenderness should stimulate their being.

One of the psalms accuses ‘the children of Ephraim’ because, ‘being armed and carrying bows, they turned back in the day of battle.’ That saying deduces obligation from equipment, and preaches a stringent code of duty to those who are in any direction largely gifted. Power to its last particle is duty, and not small is the crime of those who, with great capacities, have small desire to use them, and leave the brunt of the battle to half-trained soldiers, badly armed.

But the imagery of the fight is not sufficient to include all aspects of Christian effort. The peaceful toil of the ‘husbandman that labours’ stands, in one of Paul’s letters, side by side with the heroism of the ‘man that warreth.’ Our text gives us the former image, and so supplements that other.

It completes the lesson of the psalm in another respect, as insisting on the importance, not of the well endowed, but of the slenderly furnished, who are immensely in the majority. This text is a message to ordinary, mediocre people, without much ability or influence.

I. It teaches, first, the responsibility of small gifts.

It is no mere accident that in our Lord’s great parable He represents the man with the *one* talent as the hider of his gift. There is a certain pleasure in doing what we can do, or fancy we can do, well. There is a certain pleasure in the exercise of any kind of gift, be it of body or mind; but when we know that we are but very slightly gifted by Him, there is a temptation to say, ‘Oh! it does not matter much whether I contribute my share to this, that, or the other work or no. I am but a poor man. My half-crown will make but a small difference in the total. I am possessed of very little leisure. The few minutes that I can spare for individual cultivation, or for benevolent work, will not matter at all. I am only an insignificant unit; nobody pays any attention to my opinion. It does not in the least signify whether I make my influence felt in regard of social, religious, or political questions, and the like. I can leave all that to the more influential men. My littleness at least has the prerogative of immunity. My little finger would produce such a slight impact on the scale that it is indifferent whether I apply it or not. It is a good deal easier for me to wrap up my talent-which, after all, is only a threepenny bit, and not a talent-and put it away and do nothing.'

Yes, but then you forget, dear friend! that responsibility does not diminish with the size of the gifts, but that there is as great responsibility for the use of the smallest as for the use of the largest, and that although it does not matter very much to anybody but yourself what you do, it matters all the world to you.

But then, besides that, my text tells us that it does matter whether the poor man sets himself to make the most of his little patch of ground or not. 'There is much food in the tillage of the poor.' The slenderly endowed are the immense majority. There is a genius or two here and there, dotted along the line of the world's and the Church's history. The great men and wise men and mighty men and wealthy men may be counted by units, but the men that are not very much of anything are to be counted by millions. And unless we can find some stringent law of responsibility that applies to them, the bulk of the human race will be under no obligation to do anything either for God or for their fellows, or for themselves. If I am absolved from the task of bringing my weight to bear on the side of right because my weight is infinitesimal, and I am only one in a million, suppose all the million were to plead the same excuse; what then? Then there would not be any weight on the side of the right at all. The barns in Palestine were not filled by farming on a great scale like that pursued away out on the western prairies, where one man will own, and his servants will plough a furrow for miles long, but they were filled by the small industries of the owners of tiny patches.

The 'tillage of the poor,' meaning thereby not the mendicant, but the peasant owner of a little plot, yielded the bulk of the 'food.' The wholesome old proverb, 'many littles make a mickle,' is as true about the influence brought to bear in the world to arrest evil and to sweeten corruption as it is about anything besides. Christ has a great deal more need of the cultivation of the small patches that He gives to the most of us than He has even of the cultivation of the large estates that He bestows on a few. Responsibility is not to be measured by amount of gift, but is equally stringent, entire, and absolute whatsoever be the magnitude of the endowments from which it arises.

Let me remind you, too, how the same virtues and excellences can be practised in the administering of the smallest as in that of the greatest gifts. Men say-I dare say some of you have said-'Oh! if I were eloquent like So-and-so; rich like somebody else; a man of weight and importance like some other, how I would consecrate my powers to the Master! But I am slow of speech, or nobody minds me, or I have but very little that I can give.' Yes! 'He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.' If you do not utilise the capacity possessed, to increase the estate would only be to increase the crop of weeds from its uncultivated clods. We never palm off a greater deception on ourselves than when we try to hoodwink conscience by pleading bounded gifts as an excuse for boundless indolence, and to persuade ourselves that if we could do more we should be less inclined to do nothing. The most largely endowed has no more obligation and no fairer field than the most slenderly gifted lies under and possesses.

All service coming from the same motive and tending to the same end is the same with God. Not the magnitude of the act, but the motive thereof, determines the whole character of the life of which it is a part. The same graces of obedience, consecration, quick sympathy, self-denying effort may be cultivated and manifested in the spending of a halfpenny as in the administration of millions. The smallest rainbow in the tiniest drop that hangs from some sooty eave and catches the sunlight has precisely the same lines, in the same order, as the great arch that strides across half the sky. If you go to the Giant's Causeway, or to the other end of it amongst the Scotch Hebrides, you will find the hexagonal basaltic pillars all of identically the same pattern and shape, whether their height be measured by feet or by tenths of an inch. Big or little, they obey exactly the same law. There is 'much food in the tillage of the poor.'

II. But now, note, again, how there must be a diligent cultivation of the small gifts.

The inventor of this proverb had looked carefully and sympathetically at the way in which the little peasant proprietors worked; and he saw in that a pattern for all life. It is not always the case, of course, that a little holding means good husbandry, but it is generally so; and you will find few waste corners and few unweeded patches on the ground of a man whose whole ground is measured by rods instead of by miles. There will usually be little waste time, and few neglected opportunities of working in the case of the peasant whose subsistence, with that of his family, depends on the diligent and wise cropping of the little patch that does belong to him.

And so, dear brethren! if you and I have to take our place in the ranks of the one-talented men, the commonplace run of ordinary people, the more reason for us to enlarge our gifts by a sedulous diligence, by an unwearied perseverance, by a keen look-out for all opportunities of service, and above all by a prayerful dependence upon Him from whom alone comes the power to toil, and who alone gives the increase. The less we are conscious of large gifts the more we should be bowed in dependence on Him from whom cometh ‘every good and perfect gift’; and who gives according to His wisdom; and the more earnestly should we use that slender possession which God may have given us. Industry applied to small natural capacity will do far more than larger power rusted away by sloth. You all know that it is so in regard of daily life, and common business, and the acquisition of mundane sciences and arts. It is just as true in regard to the Christian race, and to the Christian Church’s work of witness.

Who are they who have done the most in this world for God and for men? The largely endowed men? ‘Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble are called.’ The coral insect is microscopic, but it will build up from the profoundest depth of the ocean a reef against which the whole Pacific may dash in vain. It is the small gifts that, after all, are the important ones. So let us cultivate them the more earnestly the more humbly we think of our own capacity. ‘Play well thy part; there all the honour lies.’ God, who has builded up some of the towering Alps out of mica-flakes, builds up His Church out of infinitesimally small particles-slenderly endowed men touched by the consecration of His love.

III. Lastly, let me remind you of the harvest reaped from these slender gifts when sedulously tilled.

Two great results of such conscientious cultivation and use of small resources and opportunities may be suggested as included in that abundant ‘food’ of which the text speaks.

The faithfully used faculty increases. ‘To him that hath shall be given.’ ‘Oh! if I had a wider sphere how I would flame in it, and fill it!’ Then twinkle your best in your little sphere, and that will bring a wider one some time or other. For, as a rule, and in the general, though with exceptions, opportunities come to the man that can use them; and roughly, but yet substantially, men are set in this world where they can shine to the most advantage to God. Fill your place; and if you, like Paul, have borne witness for the Master in little Jerusalem, He will not keep you there, but carry you to bear witness for Him in imperial Rome itself.

The old fable of the man who told his children to dig all over the field and they would find treasure, has its true application in regard to Christian effort and faithful stewardship of the gifts bestowed upon us. The sons found no gold, but they improved the field, and secured its bearing golden harvests, and they strengthened their own muscles, which was better than gold. So if we want larger endowments let us honestly use what we possess, and use will make growth.

The other issue, about which I need not say more than a word, is that the final reward of all faithful service-’Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord’ is said, not to the brilliant, but to the ‘faithful’ servant. In that great parable, which is the very text-book of this whole subject of gifts and responsibilities and recompense, the men who were entrusted with unequal sums used these unequal sums with equal diligence, as is manifest by the fact that they realised an equal rate of increase. He that got two talents made two more out of them, and he that had five did no more; for he, too, but doubled his capital. So, because the poorer servant with his two, and the richer with his ten, had equally cultivated their diversely-measured estates, they were identical in reward; and to each of them the same thing is said: ‘Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.’ It matters little whether we copy some great picture upon a canvas as big as the side of a house, or upon a thumbnail; the main thing is that we copy it. If we truly employ whatsoever gifts God has given to us, then we shall be accepted according to that we have, and not according to that we have not.

18)Proverbs 14:9

Proverbs

SIN THE MOCKER

Pro. 14:9.

The wisdom of this Book of Proverbs is not simply intellectual, but it has its roots in reverence and obedience to God, and for its accompaniment, righteousness. The wise man is the good man, and the good man is the godly man. And as is wisdom, so its opposite, folly, is not only intellectual feebleness-the bad man is a fool, and the godless is a bad man. The greatest amount of brain-power cultivated to the highest degree does not make a man wise, and about many a student and thinker God pronounces the sentence ‘Thou fool!’

That does not mean that all sin is ignorance, as we sometimes hear it said with a great show of tolerant profundity. There is some ignorance in all sin, but the essence of sin is the aversion of the will from a law and from a Person, not the defect of the understanding. So far from all sin being but ignorance, and therefore blameless, there is no sin without knowledge, and the measure of ignorance is the measure of blamelessness; unless the ignorance be itself, as it often is, criminal. Ignorance is one thing, folly is another.

One more remark by way of introduction must be made on the language of our text. The margin of the Revised Version correctly turns it completely round, and for ‘the foolish make a mock at guilt,’ would read, ‘guilt mocketh at the foolish.’ In the original the verb in our text is in the singular, and the only singular noun to go with it is ‘guilt.’ The thought then here is, that sin tempts men into its clutches, and then gibes and taunts them. It is a solemn and painful subject, but perhaps this text rightly pondered may help to save some of us from hearing the mocking laugh which echoes through the empty chambers of many an empty soul.

I. Sin mocks us by its broken promises.

The object immediately sought by any wrong act may be attained. In sins of sense, the appetite is gratified; in other sins, the desire that urged to them attains its end. But what then? The temptation lay in the imagination that, the wrong thing being done, an inward good would result, and it does not; for even if the immediate object be secured, other results, all unforeseen, force themselves on us which spoil the hoped for good. The sickle cuts down tares as well as wheat, and the reaper’s hands are filled with poisonous growths as well as with corn. There is a revulsion of feeling from the thing that before the sin was done attracted. The hideous story of the sin of David’s son, Amnon, puts in ugliest shape the universal experience of men who are tempted to sin and are victims of the revulsion that follows-He ‘hated her exceedingly, so that the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her.’ Conscience, which was overpowered and unheard amid the loud cries of desire, speaks. We find out the narrow limits of satisfaction. The satisfied appetite has no further driving power, but lies down to sleep off its debauch, and ceases to be a factor for the time. Inward discord, the schism between duty and inclination, sets up strife in the very sanctuary of the soul. We are dimly conscious of the evil done as robbing us of power to do right. We cannot pray, and would be glad to forget God. And a self thus racked, impoverished, and weakened, is what a man gains by the sin that promised him so much and hid so much from him.

Or if these consequences are in any measure silenced and stifled, a still more melancholy mockery betrays him, in the continuance of the illusion that he is happy and all is well, when all the while he is driving headlong to destruction. Many a man orders his life so that it is like a ship that sails with huzzas and bedizened with flags while a favouring breeze fills its sails, but comes back to port battered and all but waterlogged, with its canvas ‘lean, rent, and beggared by the strumpet wind.’ It is always a mistake to try to buy happiness by doing wrong. The price is rigorously demanded, but the *quid pro quo* is not given, or if it seems to be so, there is something else given too, which takes all the savour out of the composite whole. The ‘Folly’ of the earlier half of this book woos men by her sweet invitations, and promises the sweetness of stolen waters and the pleasantness of bread eaten in secret, but she hides the fact, which the listener to her seducing voice has to find out for himself after he has drunk of the stolen waters and tasted the maddening pleasantness of her bread eaten in secret, that ‘her guests are in the depths of Sheol.’ The temptations that seek to win us to do wrong and dazzle us by fair visions are but ‘juggling fiends that keep the word of promise to the ear, and break it to the hope.’

II. Sin mocks fools by making them its slaves.

There is not only a revulsion of feeling from the evil thing done that was so tempting before, but there is a dreadful change in the voice of the temptress. Before her victim had done the sin, she whispered hints of how little a thing it was. ‘Don’t make such a mountain of a molehill. It is a very small matter. You can easily give it up when you like.’ But when the deed is done, then her mocking laugh rings out, ‘I have got you now and you cannot get away.’ The prey is seduced into the trap by a carefully prepared bait, and as soon as its hesitating foot steps on to the slippery floor, down falls the door and escape is impossible, We are tempted to sin by the delusion that we are shaking off restraints that fetter our manhood, and that it is spirited to do as we like, and as soon as we have sinned we discover that we were pleasing not ourselves but a taskmaster, and that while the voice said, ‘Show yourself a man, beyond these petty, old-fashioned maxims’; the meaning of it was, ‘Become my slave.’

Sin grows in accordance with an awful necessity, so that it is never in a sinner’s power to promise himself ‘It is only this one time that I will do the wrong thing. Let me have one lapse and I will abjure the evil for ever after.’ We have to reckon with the tremendous power of habit, and to bethink ourselves that a man may never commit a given sin, but that if he has committed it once, it is all but impossible that he will stop there. The incline is too slippery and the ice too smooth to risk a foot on it. Habit dominates, outward circumstances press, there springs up a need for repeating the draught, and for its being more highly spiced. Sin begets sin as fast as the green flies which infest rose-bushes. One has heard of slavers on the African coast speaking negroes fair, and tempting them on board by wonderful promises, but once the poor creatures are in the ship, then on with the hatches and, if need be, the chains.

III. Sin mocks fools by unforeseen consequences.

These are carefully concealed or madly disregarded, while we are in the stage of merely being tempted, but when we have done the evil, they are unmasked, like a battery against a detachment that has been trapped. The previous denial that anything will come of the sin, and the subsequent proclamation that this ugly issue has come of it, are both parts of sin’s mockery, and one knows not which is the more fiendish, the laugh with which she promises impunity or that with which she tells of the certainty of retribution. We may be mocked, but ‘God is not mocked. Whatever a man soweth, that’-and not some other growth-’shall he also reap.’ We dwell in an all-related order of things, in which no act but has its appropriate consequences, and in which it is only fools who say to themselves, ‘I did not think it would matter much.’ Each act of ours is at once sowing and reaping; a sowing, inasmuch as it sets in motion a train the issues of which may not be realised by us till the act has long been forgotten; a reaping, inasmuch as what we are and do to-day is the product of what we were and did in a forgotten past. We are what we are, because we were long ago what we were. As in these composite photographs, which are produced by laying one individual likeness on another, our present selves have our past selves preserved in them. We do not need to bring in a divine Judge into human life in order to be sure that, by the play of the natural laws of cause and effect, ‘every transgression and disobedience receives its just recompense of reward.’ Given the world as it is, and the continuous identity of a man, and you have all that is needed for an Iliad of woes flowing from every life that makes terms with sin. If we gather into one dismal pile the weakening of power for good, the strengthening of impulses to evil, the inward poverty, the unrest, the gnawings of conscience or its silence, the slavery under evil often loathed even while it is being obeyed, the dreary sense of inability to mend oneself, and often the wreck of outward life which dog our sins like sleuth-hounds, surely we shall not need to imagine a future tribunal in order to be sure that sin is a murderess, or to hear her laugh as she mocks her helpless victims.

But as surely as there are in this present world experiences which must be regarded as consequences of sin, so surely do they all assume a more dreadful character and take on the office of prophets of a future. If man lives beyond the grave, there is nothing to suggest that he will there put off character as he puts off the bodily life. He will be there what he has made himself here. Only he will be so more intensely, more completely. The judgments of earth foretell and foreshadow a judgment beyond earth.

There is but one more word that I would say, and it is this. Jesus has come to set the captives of sin free from its mockery, its tyranny, its worst consequences. He breaks the power of past evil to domineer over us. He gives us a new life within, which has no heritage of evil to pervert it, no memories of evil to discourage it, no bias towards evil to lead it astray. As for the sins that we have done, He is ready to forgive, to seal to us God's forgiveness, and to take from our own self-condemnation all its bitterness and much of its hopelessness. For the past, His blood has taken away its guilt and power. For the future it sets us free from the mockery of our sin, and assures us of a future which will not be weakened or pained by remembrances of a sinful past. Sin mocks at fools, but they who have Christ for their Redeemer, their Righteousness, and their Life can smile at her impotent rage, and mock at her and her impotent attempts to terrify them and assert her lost power with vain threats.

19)Proverbs 14:13

Proverbs

HOLLOW LAUGHTER, SOLID JOY

Pro. 14:13. - Joh. 15:11.

A poet, who used to be more fashionable than he is now, pronounces 'happiness' to be our being's end and aim. That is not true, except under great limitations and with many explanations. It may be regarded as God's end, but it is ruinous to make it man's aim. It is by no means the highest conception of the Gospel to say that it makes men happy, however true it may be. The highest is that it makes them good. I put these two texts together, not only because they bring out the contrast between the laughter which is hollow and fleeting and the joy which is perfect and perpetual, but also because they suggest to us the difference in kind and object between earthly and heavenly joys; which difference underlies the other between the boisterous laughter in which is no mirth and no continuance and the joy which is deep and abiding.

In the comparison which I desire to make between these two texts we must begin with that which is deepest, and consider-

I. The respective objects of earthly and heavenly joy.

Our Lord's wonderful words suggest that they who accept His sayings, that they who have His word abiding in them, have in a very deep sense His joy implanted in their hearts, to brighten and elevate their joys as the sunshine flashes into silver the ripples of the lake. What then were the sources of the calm joys of 'the Man of Sorrows'? Surely His was the perfect instance of 'rejoicing in the Lord always'-an unbroken communion with the Father. The consciousness that the divine pleasure ever rested on Him, and that all His thoughts, emotions, purposes, and acts were in perfect harmony with the perfect will of the perfect God, filled His humanity up to the very brim with gladness which the world could not take away, and which remains for us for ever as a type to which all our gladness must be conformed if it is to be worthy of Him and of us. As one of the Psalmists says, God is to be 'the gladness of our joy.' It is in Him, gazed upon by the faith and love of an obedient spirit, sought after by aspiration and possessed inwardly in peaceful communion, confirmed by union with Him in the acts of daily obedience, that the true joy of every human life is to be realised. They who have drunk of this deep fountain of gladness will not express their joy in boisterous laughter, which is the hollower the louder it is, and the less lasting the more noisy, but will manifest itself 'in the depth and not the tumult of the soul.'

Nor must we forget that 'My joy' co-existed with a profound experience of sorrow to which no human sorrow was ever like. Let us not forget that, while His joy filled His soul to the brim, He was 'acquainted with grief'; and let us not wonder if the strange surface contradiction is repeated in ourselves. It is more Christlike to have inexpressibly deep joy with surface sorrow, than to have a shallow laughter masking a hurtful sorrow.

We have to set the sources of earthly gladness side by side with those of Christ's joy to be aware of a contrast. His sprang from within, the world's is drawn from without. His came from union with the Father, the world's largely depends on ignoring God. His needed no supplies from the gratifications ministered by sense, and so independent of the presence or absence of such; the world's need the constant contributions of outward good, and when these are cut off they droop and die. He who depends on outward circumstances for his joy is the slave of externals and the sport of time and chance.

II. The Christian’s joy is full, the world’s partial.

All human joys touch but part of our nature, the divine fills and satisfies all. In the former there is always some portion of us unsatisfied, like the deep pits on the moon’s surface into which no light shines, and which show black on the silver face. No human joys wait to still conscience, which sits at the banquet like the skeleton that Egyptian feasters set at their tables. The old story told of a magician’s palace blazing with lighted windows, but there was always one dark;-what shrouded figure sat behind it? Is there not always a surly ‘elder brother’ who will not come in however the musicians may pipe and the servants dance? Appetite may be satisfied, but what of conscience, and reason, and the higher aspirations of the soul? The laughter that echoes through the soul is the hollower the louder it is, and reverberates most through empty spaces.

But when Christ’s joy remains in us our joy will be full. Its flowing tide will rush into and placidly occupy all the else oozy shallows of our hearts, even into the narrowest crannies its penetrating waters will pass, and everywhere will bring a flashing surface that will reflect in our hearts the calm blue above. We need nothing else if we have Christ and His joy within us. If we have everything else, we need His joy within us, else ours will never be full.

III. The heavenly joys are perpetual, the earthly joys transient.

Many of our earthly joys die in the very act of being enjoyed. Those which depend on the gratification of some appetite expire in fruition, and at each recurrence are less and less complete. The influence of habit works in two ways to rob all such joys of their power to minister to us-it increases the appetite and decreases the power of the object to satisfy. Some are followed by swift revulsion and remorse; all soon become stale; some are followed by quick remorse; some are necessarily left behind as we go on in life. To the old man the pleasures of youth are but like children’s toys long since outgrown and left behind. All are at the mercy of externals. Those which we have not left we have to leave. The saddest lives are those of pleasure-seekers, and the saddest deaths are those of the men who sought for joy where it was not to be found, and sought for their gratification in a world which leaves them, and which they have to leave.

There is a realm where abide ‘fullness of joy and pleasures for ever more.’ Surely they order their lives most wisely who look for their joys to nothing that earth holds, and have taken for their own the ancient vow: ‘Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vine. . .. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.’ If ‘My joy’ abides in us in its calm and changeless depth, our joy will be ‘full’ whatever our circumstances may be; and we shall hear at last the welcome: ‘Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.’

20)Proverbs 14:14

Proverbs

SATISFIED FROM SELF

Pro. 14:14.

At first sight this saying strikes one as somewhat unlike the ordinary Scripture tone, and savouring rather of a Stoical self-complacency; but we recall parallel sayings, such as Christ’s words, ‘The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water’; and the Apostle’ s, ‘Then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone.’ We further note that the text has an antithetic parallel in the preceding clause, where the picture is drawn of ‘a backslider in heart,’ as ‘filled with his own ways’; so that both clauses set forth the familiar but solemn thought that a man’s deeds react upon the doer, and apart from all thoughts of divine judgment, themselves bring certain retribution. To grasp the inwardness of this saying we must note that-

I. Goodness comes from godliness.

There is no more striking proof that most men are bad than the notion which they have of what is good. The word has been degraded to mean in common speech little more than amiability, and is applied with little discrimination to characters of which little more can be said than that they are facile and indulgent of evil. ‘A good fellow’ may be a very bad man. At the highest the epithet connotes merely more or less admirable motives and more or less admirable deeds as their results, whilst often its use is no more than a piece of unmeaning politeness. That was what the young ruler meant by addressing Christ as ‘Good Master’; and Christ’s answer to him set him, and should set us, on asking ourselves why we call very ordinary men and very ordinary actions ‘good.’ The scriptural notion is immensely deeper, and the scriptural employment of the word is immensely more restricted. It is more inward: it means that motives should be right before it calls any action good; it means that our central and all-influencing motive should be love to God and regard to His will. That is the Old Testament point of view as well as the New. Or to put it in other words, the ‘good man’ of the Bible is a man in whom outward righteousness flows from inward devotion and love to God. These two elements make up the character: godliness is an inseparable part of goodness, is the inseparable foundation of goodness, and the sole condition on which it is possible. But from this conception follows, that a man may be truly called good, although not perfect. He may be so and yet have many failures. The direction of his aspirations, not the degree to which these are fulfilled, determines his character, and his right to be reckoned a good man. Why was David called ‘a man after God’s own heart,’ notwithstanding his frightful fall? Was it not because that sin was contrary to the main direction of his life, and because he had struggled to his feet again, and with tears and self-abasement, yet with unconquerable desire and hope, ‘pressed toward the mark for the prize of his high calling’? David in the Old Testament and Peter in the New bid us be of good cheer, and warn us against the too common error of thinking that goodness means perfection. ‘The new moon with a ragged edge’ is even in its imperfections beautiful, and in its thinnest circlet prophesies the perfect round.

Remembering this inseparable connection between godliness and goodness we further note that-

II. Godliness brings satisfaction.

There is a grim contrast between the two halves of this verse. The former shows us the backslider in heart as filled ‘with his own ways.’ He gets weary with satiety; with his doings he ‘will be sick of them’; and the things which at first delighted will finally disgust and be done without zest. There is nothing sadder than the gloomy faces often seen in the world’s festivals. But, on the other hand, the godly man will be satisfied from within. This is no Stoical proclamation of self-sufficingness. Self by itself satisfies no man, but self, become the abiding-place of God, does satisfy. A man alone is like ‘the chaff which the wind driveth away’; but, rooted in God, he is ‘like a tree planted by the rivers of water, whose leaf does not wither.’ He has found all that he needs. God is no longer without him but within; and he who can say, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,’ has within him the secret of peace and the source of satisfaction which can never say ‘I thirst.’ Such an inward self, in which God dwells and through which His sweet presence manifests itself in the renewed nature, sets man free from all dependence for blessedness on externals. We hang on them and are in despair if we lose them, because we have not the life of God within us. He who has such an indwelling, and he only, can truly say, ‘All my possessions I carry with me.’ Take him and strip from him, film after film, possessions, reputation, friends; hack him limb from limb, and as long as there is body enough left to keep life in him, he can say, ‘I have all and abound.’ ‘Ye took joyfully the spoiling of your possessions, knowing that ye have your own selves for a better possession.’

III. Godly goodness brings inward satisfaction.

No man is satisfied with himself until he has subjugated himself. What makes men restless and discontented is their tossing, anarchical desires. To live by impulse, or passion, or by anything but love to God, is to make ourselves our own tormentors. It is always true that he ‘who loveth his life shall lose it,’ and loses it by the very act of loving it. Most men’s lives are like the troubled sea, ‘which cannot rest,’ and whose tossing surges, alas! ‘cast up mire and dirt,’ for their restless lives bring to the surface much that was meant to lie undisturbed in the depths.

But he who has subdued himself is like some still lake which ‘heareth not the loud winds when they call,’ and mirrors the silent heavens on its calm surface. But further, goodness brings satisfaction, because, as the Psalmist says, ‘in keeping Thy commandments there is great reward.’ There is a glow accompanying even partial obedience which diffuses itself with grateful warmth through the whole being of a man. And such goodness tends to the preservation of health of soul as natural, simple living to the health of the body. And that general sense of well-being brings with it a satisfaction compared with which all the feverish bliss of the voluptuary is poor indeed.

But we must not forget that satisfaction from one’s self is not satisfaction *with* one’s self. There will always be the imperfection which will always prevent self-righteousness. The good man after the Bible pattern most deeply knows his faults, and in that very consciousness is there a deep joy. To be ever aspiring onwards, and to know that our aspiration is no vain dream, this is joy. Still to press ‘toward the mark,’ still to have ‘the yet untroubled world which gleams before us as we move,’ and to know that we shall attain if we follow on, this is the highest bliss. Not the accomplishment of our ideal, but the cherishing of it, is the true delight of life.

Such self-satisfying goodness comes only through Christ. He makes it possible for us to love God and to trust Him. Only when we know ‘the love wherewith He has loved us,’ shall we love with a love which will be the motive power of our lives. He makes it possible to live outward lives of obedience, which, imperfect as it is, has ‘great reward.’ He makes it possible for us to attain the yet unattained, and to be sure that we ‘shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ He has said, ‘The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up unto everlasting life.’ Only when we can say, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,’ will it be true of us in its fullest sense, ‘A good man shall be satisfied from himself.’

21)Proverbs 16:2

Proverbs

WHAT I THINK OF MYSELF AND WHAT GOD THINKS OF ME

Pro. 16:2.

‘All the ways of a man’-then there is no such thing as being conscious of having gone wrong, and having got into miry and foul ways? Of course there is; and equally of course a broad statement such as this of my text is not to be pressed into literal accuracy, but is a simple, general assertion of what we all know to be true, that we have a strange power of blinding ourselves as to what is wrong in ourselves and in our actions. Part of the cure for that lies in the thought in the second clause of the text-’But the Lord weigheth the spirits.’ He weighs them in a balance, or as a man might take up something and poise it on his palm, moving his hand up and down till his muscles by their resistance gave him some inkling of its weight. But what is it that God weighs? ‘The spirits.’ We too often content ourselves with looking at our ways; God looks at ourselves. He takes the inner man into account, estimates actions by motives, and so very often differs from our judgment of ourselves and of one another.

Now so far the verse of my text carries me, and as a rule we have to keep ourselves within the limits of each verse in reading this Book of Proverbs, for two adjoining verses have very seldom anything to do with each other. But in the present case they have, for here is what follows: ‘Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts’ [about thyself and everything else] ‘shall be established.’ That is to say, since we make such terrible blunders about the moral character of our own works, and since side by side with these erroneous estimates there is God’s absolutely correct and all-penetrating one, common sense says: ‘Put yourself into His hands, and then it will be all right.’ So we consider now these very well-worn and familiar thoughts as to our strange blunders about ourselves, as to the contemporaneous divine estimate, which is absolutely correct, and as to the practical issues that come from two facts.

I. Our strange power of blinding ourselves.

It is difficult to make so threadbare a commonplace at all impressive. But yet if we would only take this thought, ‘All the ways of a man’-that is me-’are right in his own eyes’-that is, my eyes-and apply it directly to our own personal experience and thoughts of ourselves, we should find that, like every other commonplace of morality and religion, the apparently toothless generality has sharp enough teeth, and that the trite truth flashes up into strange beauty, and has power to purify and guide our lives. Some one says that ‘recognised truths lie bedridden in the dormitory of the soul, side by side with exploded errors.’ And I am afraid that that is true of this thought, that we cannot truly estimate ourselves.

'All the ways of a man are right in his own eyes.' For to begin with, we all know that there is nothing that we so habitually neglect as the bringing of conscience to bear right through all our lives. Sometimes it is because there is a temptation that appeals very strongly, perhaps to sense, perhaps to some strong inclination which has been strengthened by indulgence. And when the craving arises, that is no time to begin asking, 'Is it right, or is it wrong to yield?' That question stands small chance of being wisely considered at a moment when, under the goading of roused desire, a man is like a mad bull when it charges. It drops its head and shuts its eyes, and goes right forward, and no matter whether it smashes its horns against an iron gate, and damages them and itself, or not, on it will go. So when great temptations rise-and we all know such times in our lives-we are in no condition to discuss that question with ourselves. Sometimes the craving is so vehement that if we could not get this thing that we want without putting our hands through the sulphurous smoke of the bottomless pit, we should thrust them out to grasp it. But in regard to the smaller commonplace matters of daily life, too, we all know that there are whole regions of our lives which seem to us to be so small that it is hardly worth while summoning the august thought of 'right or wrong?' to decide them. Yes, and a thousand smugglers that go across a frontier, each with a little package of contraband goods that does not pay any duty, make a large aggregate at the year's end. It is the trifles of life that shape life, and it is to them that we so frequently fail in applying, honestly and rigidly, the test, 'Is this right or wrong?' 'He that is faithful in that which is least,' and conscientious down to the smallest things, 'is faithful also in much.' The legal maxim has it, 'The law does not care about the very smallest matters.' What that precisely means, as a legal maxim, I do not profess to know, but it is rank heresy in regard to conduct and morality. Look after the pennies, and the pounds will look after themselves. Get the habit of bringing conscience to bear on little things, or you will never be able to bring it to bear when great temptations come and the crises emerge in your lives. Thus, by reason of that deficiency in the habitual application of conscience to bur lives, we slide through, and take for granted that all our ways are right in our eyes.

Then there is another thing: we not only neglect the rigid application of conscience to all our lives, but we have a double standard, and the notion of right and wrong which we apply to our neighbours is very different from that which we apply to ourselves. No wonder that the criminal is acquitted, and goes away from the tribunal ‘without a stain on his character,’ when he is his own judge and jury. ‘All the ways of a man are right in his own eyes,’ but the very same ‘way’s that you allow to pass muster and condone in yourselves, you visit with sharp and unfailing censure in others. That strange self-complacency which we have, which is perfectly undisturbed by the most general confessions of sinfulness, and only shies when it is brought up to particular details of faults, we all know is very deep in ourselves.

Then there is another thing to be remembered, and that is-the enormous and the tragical influence of habit in dulling the mirror of our souls, on which our deeds are reflected in their true image. There are places in Europe where the peasantry have become so accustomed to minute and constantly repeated doses of arsenic that it is actually a minister of health to them, and what would poison you is food for them. We all know that we may sit in a hall like this, packed full and steaming, while the condensed breath is running down the windows, and never be aware of the foulness of the odours and the air. But when we go out and feel the sweet, pure breath of the unpolluted atmosphere, then we know how habit has dulled the lungs. And so habit dulls the conscience. According to the old saying, the man that began by carrying a calf can carry an ox at the end, and feel no burden. What we are accustomed to do we scarcely ever recognise to be wrong, and it is these things which pass because they are habitual that do more to wreck lives than occasional outbursts of far worse evils, according to the world’s estimate of them. Habit dulls the eye.

Yes; and more than that, the conscience needs educating just as much as any other faculty. A man says, ‘My conscience acquits me’; then the question is, ‘And what sort of a conscience have you got, if it acquits you?’ All that your conscience says is, ‘It is right to do what is right, it is wrong to do what is wrong.’ But for the explanation of what is wrong and what is right you have to go somewhere else than to your consciences. You have to go to your reason, and your judgment, and your common sense, and a hundred other sources. And then, when you have found out what is right and what is wrong, you will hear the voice saying, ‘Do that, and do not do this.’ Every one of us has faults that we know nothing about, and that we bring up to the tribunal of our consciences, and wipe our mouths and say, ‘We have done no harm.’ ‘I thought within myself that I verily ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.’ ‘They think that they do God service.’ Many things that seem to us virtues are vices.

And as for the individual so for the community. The perception of what is right and what is wrong needs long educating. When I was a boy the whole Christian Church of America, with one voice, declared that ‘slavery was a patriarchal institution appointed by God.’ The Christian Church of to-day has not awakened either to the sin of war or of drink. And I have not the smallest doubt that there are hosts of things which public opinion, and Christian public opinion, regards to-day as perfectly allowable and innocent, and, perhaps, even praiseworthy, and over which it will ask God’s blessing, at which, in a hundred years our descendants will hold up their hands in wonder, and say, ‘How did good people-and good people they no doubt were-tolerate such a condition of things for a moment?’ ‘All a man’s ways are right in his own eyes,’ and he needs a great deal of teaching before he comes to understand what, according to God’s will, really, is right and what is wrong.

Now let me turn for a moment to the contrasted picture, with which I can only deal in a sentence or two.

II. The divine estimate.

I have already pointed out the two emphatic thoughts that lie in that clause, ‘God weigheth,’ and ‘weigheth the spirits.’ I need not repeat what I said, in the introduction to these remarks, upon this subject. Just let us take with us these two thoughts, that the same actions which we sometimes test, in our very defective and loaded balances, have also to go into the infallible scales, and that the actions go with their interpretation in their motive. ‘God weighs the spirits.’ He reads what we do by His knowledge of what we are. We reveal to one another what we are by what we do, and, as is a commonplace, none of us can penetrate, except very superficially and often inaccurately, to the motives that actuate. But the motive is three-fourths of the action. God does not go from without, as it were, inwards; from our actions to estimate our characters; but He starts with the character and the motive-the habitual character and the occasional motive-and by these He reads the deed. He weighs, ponders, penetrates to the heart of the thing, and He weighs the spirits.

So on the one hand, ‘I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief,’ and many a deed which the world would condemn, and in which we onlookers would see evil, God does not wholly condemn, because He, being the Inlooker as well as the Onlooker, sees the albeit mistaken yet pure motives that underlay it. So it is conceivable that the inquisitor, and the heretic that he sent to the stake, may stand side by side in God’s estimate; the one if he were actuated by pure zeal for the truth, the other because he was actuated by self-sacrifice in loyalty to his Lord. And, on the other hand, many a deed that goes flaunting through the world in ‘purple and fine linen’ will be stripped of its gauds, and stand naked and ugly before the eyes of ‘Him with whom we have to do.’ He ‘weighs the spirits.’

Lastly, a word about-

III. The practical issues of these thoughts.

‘Commit thy works unto the Lord’-that is to say, do not be too sure that you are right because you do not think you are wrong. We should be very distrustful of our own judgments of ourselves, especially when that judgment permits us to do certain things. ‘I know nothing against myself,’ said the Apostle, ‘yet am I not hereby justified.’ And again, still more emphatically, he lays down the principle that I would have liked to have enlarged upon if I had had time. ‘Happy is he that condemneth not himself in the things which he alloweth.’ You may have made the glove too easy by stretching. It is possible that you may think that something is permissible and right which a wiser and more rigid and Christlike judgment of yourself would have taught you was wrong. Look under the stones for the reptiles, and remember the prayer, ‘Cleanse thou me from secret faults,’ and distrust a permitting and easy conscience.

Then, again, let us seek the divine strengthening and illumination. We have to seek that in some very plain ways. Seek it by prayer. There is nothing so powerful in stripping off from our besetting sins their disguises and masks as to go to God with the honest petition: ‘Search me . . . and try me . . . and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.’

Brethren! if we will do that, we shall get answers that will startle us, that will humble us, but that will be blessed beyond all other blessedness, and will bring to light the ‘hidden things of darkness.’ Then, after they are brought to light and cast out, ‘then shall every man have praise of God.’

We ought to keep ourselves in very close union with Jesus Christ, because if we cling to Him in simple faith, He will come into our hearts, and we shall be saved from walking in darkness, and have the light of life shining down upon our deeds. Christ is the conscience of the Christian man’s conscience, who, by His voice in the hearts that wait upon Him, says, ‘Do this,’ and they do it. It is when He is in our spirits that our estimate of ourselves is set right, and that we hear the voice saying, ‘This is the way, walk ye in it’; and not merely do we hear the voice, but we get help to our feet in running in the way of His commandments, with enlarged and confirmed hearts. Brethren! for the discovery of our faults, which we ought all to long for, and for the conquest of these discovered faults, which, if we are Christians, we do long for, our confidence is in Him. And if you trust Him, ‘the blood of Christ will cleanse’-because it comes into our life’s blood-’from all sin.’

And the last thing that I would say is this. We must punctiliously obey every dictate that speaks in our own consciences, especially when it urges us to unwelcome duties or restrains us from too welcome sins. ‘To him that hath shall be given’-and the sure way to condemn ourselves to utter blindness as to our true selves is to pay no attention to the glimmers of light that we have, whilst, on the other hand, the sure way to be led into fuller illumination is to follow faithfully whatsoever sparkles of light may shine upon our hearts. ‘Do the duty that lies nearest thee.’ Put thy trust in Jesus Christ. Distrust thine own approbation or condonation of thine actions, and ever turn to Him and say, ‘Show me what to do, and make me willing and fit to do it.’ Then there will be little contrariety between your estimate of your ways and God’s judgments of your spirits.

22)Proverbs 16:22-33

Proverbs

A BUNDLE OF PROVERBS

Pro. 16:22 - Pro. 16:33.

A slight thread of connection may be traced in some of the proverbs in this passage. Pro. 16:22, with its praise of 'Wisdom,' introduces one instance of Wisdom's excellence in Pro. 16:23, and that again, with its reference to speech, leads on to Pro. 16:24 and its commendation of 'pleasant words.' Similarly, Pro. 16:27 - Pro. 16:30 give four pictures of vice, three of them beginning with 'a man.' We may note, too, that, starting with Pro. 16:26, every verse till Pro. 16:30 refers to some work of 'the mouth' or 'lips.'

The passage begins with one phase of the contrast between Wisdom and Folly, which this book is never weary of emphasising and underscoring. We shall miss the force of its most characteristic teaching unless we keep well in mind that the two opposites of Wisdom and Folly do not refer only or chiefly to intellectual distinctions. The very basis of 'Wisdom,' as this book conceives it, is the 'fear of the Lord,' without which the man of biggest, clearest brain, and most richly stored mind, is, in its judgment, 'a fool.' Such 'understanding,' which apprehends and rightly deals with the deepest fact of life, our relation to God and to His law, is a 'well-spring of life.' The figure speaks still more eloquently to Easterns than to us. In those hot lands the cool spring, bursting through the baked rocks or burning sand, makes the difference between barrenness and fertility, the death of all green things and life. So where true Wisdom is deep in a heart, it will come flashing up into sunshine, and will quicken the seeds of all good as it flows through the deeds. 'Everything liveth whithersoever the river cometh.' Productiveness, refreshment, the beauty of the sparkling wavelets, the music of their ripples against the stones, and all the other blessings and delights of a perpetual fountain, have better things corresponding to them in the life of the man who is wise with the true Wisdom which begins with the fear of God. Just as *it* is active in the life, so is Folly. But its activity is not blessing and gladdening, but punitive. For all sin automatically works its own chastisement, and the curse of Folly is that, while it corrects, it prevents the 'fool' from profiting by the correction. Since it punishes itself, one might expect that it would cure itself, but experience shows that, while it wields a rod, its subjects 'receive no correction.' That insensibility is the paradox and the Nemesis of 'Folly.'

The Old Testament ethics are remarkable for their solemn sense of the importance of words, and Proverbs shares in that sense to the full. In some aspects, speech is a more perfect self-revelation than act. So the outflow of the fountain in words comes next. Wise heart makes wise speech. That may be looked at in two ways. It may point to the utterance by word as the most precious, and incumbent on its possessor, of all the ways of manifesting Wisdom; or it may point to the only source of real ‘learning,’-namely, a wise heart. In the former view, it teaches us our solemn obligation not to hide our light under a bushel, but to speak boldly and lovingly all the truth which God has taught us. A dumb Christian is a monstrosity. We are bound to give voice to our ‘Wisdom.’ In the other aspect, it reminds us that there is a better way of getting Wisdom than by many books,-namely, by filling our hearts, through communion with God, with His own will. Then, whether we have worldly ‘learning’ or no, we shall be able to instruct many, and lead them to the light which has shone on us.

There are many kinds of pleasant words, some of which are not like ‘honey,’ but like poison hid in jam. Insincere compliments, flatteries when rebukes would be fitting, and all the brood of civil conventionalities, are not the words meant here. Truly pleasant ones are those which come from true Wisdom, and may often have a surface of bitterness like the prophet’s roll, but have a core of sweetness. It is a great thing to be able to speak necessary and unwelcome truths with lips into which grace is poured. A spoonful of honey catches more flies than a hogshead of vinegar.

Pro. 16:25 has no connection with its context. It teaches two solemn truths, according to the possible double meaning of ‘right.’ If that word means ethically right, then the saying sets forth the terrible possibility of conscience being wrongly instructed, and sanctioning gross sin. If it means only *straight*, or level-that is, successful and easy-the saying enforces the not less solemn truth that sin deceives as to its results, and that the path of wrong-doing, which is flowery and smooth at first, grows rapidly thorny, and goes fast downhill, and ends at last in a *cul-de-sac,* of which death is the only outlet. We are not to trust our own consciences, except as enlightened by God’s Word. We are not to listen to sin’s lies, but to fix it well in our minds that there is only one way which leads to life and peace, the narrow way of faith and obedience.

The Revised Version's rendering of Pro. 16:26 gives the right idea. 'The appetite,' or hunger, 'of the labourer labours for him' [that is, the need of food is the mainspring of work], and it lightens the work to which it impels. So hunger is a blessing. That is true in regard to the body. The manifold material industries of men are, at bottom, prompted by the need to earn something to eat. The craving which drives to such results is a thing to be thankful for. It is better to live where toil is needful to sustain life than in lazy lands where an hour's work will provide food for a week. But the saying reaches to spiritual desires, and anticipates the beatitude on those who 'hunger and thirst after righteousness.' Happy they who feel that craving, and are driven by it to the labour for the bread which comes down from heaven! 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.'

The next three proverbs [Pro. 16:27 - Pro. 16:29] give three pictures of different types of bad men. First, we have 'the worthless man' [Rev. Ver.], literally 'a man of Belial,' which last word probably means worthlessness. His work is 'digging evil'; his words are like scorching fire. To dig evil seems to have a wider sense than has digging a pit for others [Psa. 7:15], which is usually taken as a parallel. The man is not merely malicious toward others, but his whole activity goes to further evil. It is the material in which he delights to work. What mistaken spade husbandry it is to spend labour on such a soil! What can it grow but thistles and poisonous plants? His words are as bad as his deeds. No honey drops from *his* lips, but scorching fire, which burns up not only reputations but tries to consume all that is good. As James says, such a tongue is 'set on fire of hell.' The picture is that of a man bad through and through. But there may be indefinitely close approximations to it, and no man can say, 'Thus far will I go in evil ways, and no further.'

The second picture is of a more specific kind. The 'froward man' here seems to be the same as the slanderer in the next clause. He utters perverse things, and so soweth strife and parts friends. There are people whose mouths are as full of malicious whispers as a sower's basket is of seed, and who have a base delight in flinging them broadcast. Sometimes they do not think of what the harvest will be, but often they chuckle to see it springing in the mistrust and alienation of former friends. A loose tongue often does as much harm as a bitter one, and delight in dwelling on people's faults is not innocent because the tattler did not think of the mischief he was setting agoing.

In Pro. 16:29 another type of evil-doer is outlined-the opposite, in some respects, of the preceding. The slanderer works secretly; this mischief-maker goes the plain way to work. He uses physical force or 'violence.' But how does that fit in with 'enticeth'? It may be that the enticement of his victim into a place suitable for robbing or murder is meant, but more probably there is here the same combination of force and craft as in Pro. 1:10 - Pro. 1:14. Criminals have a wicked delight in tempting innocent people to join their gangs. A lawless desperado is a hotbed of infection.

Pro. 16:30 draws a portrait of a bad man. It is a bit of homely physiognomical observation. A man with a trick of closing his eyes has something working in his head; and, if he is one of these types of men, one may be sure that he is brewing mischief. Compressed lips mean concentrated effort, or fixed resolve, or suppressed feeling, and in any of these cases are as a danger signal, warning that the man is at work on some evil deed.

Two sayings follow, which contrast goodness with the evils just described. The 'if' in Pro. 16:31 weakens the strong assertion of the proverb. 'The hoary head is a crown of glory; it is found in the way of righteousness.' That is but putting into picturesque form the Old Testament promise of long life to the righteous-a promise which is not repeated in the new dispensation, but which is still often realised. 'Whom the gods love, die young,' is a heathen proverb; but there is a natural tendency in the manner of life which Christianity produces to prolong a man's days. A heart at peace, because stayed on God, passions held well in hand, an avoidance of excesses which eat away strength, do tend to length of life, and the opposites of these do tend to shorten it. How many young men go home from our great cities every year, with their 'bones full of the iniquities of their youth,' to die!

If we are to tread the way of righteousness, and so come to 'reverence and the silver hair,' we must govern ourselves. So the next proverb extols the ruler of his own spirit as 'more than conquerors,' whose triumphs are won in such vulgar fields as battles and sieges, Our sorest fights and our noblest victories are within.

‘Unless above himself he can
Erect himself, how poor a thing is man!’

Pro. 16:31 takes the casting of the lot as one instance of the limitation of all human effort, in all which we can but use the appropriate means, while the whole issue must be left in God’s hands. The Jewish law did not enjoin the lot, but its use seems to have been frequent. The proverb presents in the sharpest relief a principle which is true of all our activity. The old proverb-maker knew nothing of chance. To him there were but two real moving forces in the world-man and God. To the one belonged sowing the seed, doing his part, whether casting the lot or toiling at his task. His force was real, but derived and limited. Efforts and attempts are ours; results are God’ s. We sow; He ‘gives it a body as it pleases Him.’ Nothing happens by accident. Man’s little province is bounded on all sides by God’ s, and the two touch. There is no neutral territory between, where godless chance rules.

23)Proverbs 18:10-11

Proverbs

TWO FORTRESSES

Pro. 18:10 - Pro. 18:11.

The mere reading of these two verses shows that, contrary to the usual rule in the Book of Proverbs, they have a bearing on each other. They are intended to suggest a very strong contrast, and that contrast is even more emphatic in the original than in our translation; because, as the margin of your Bibles will tell you, the last word of the former verse might be more correctly rendered, ‘the righteous runneth into it, and is *set on high.*’ It is the same word which is employed in the next verse-’a high wall.’

So we have ‘the strong tower’ and ‘the strong city’; the man lifted up above danger on the battlements of the one, and the man fancying himself to be high above it [and only fancying himself] in the imaginary safety of the other.

I. Consider then, first, the two fortresses.

One need only name them side by side to feel the full force of the intended contrast. On the one hand, the name of the Lord with all its depths and glories, with its blaze of lustrous purity, and infinitudes of inexhaustible power; and on the other, ‘the rich man’s wealth.’ What contempt is expressed in putting the two side by side! It is as if the author had said, ‘Look on this picture and on that!’ Two fortresses! Yes! The one is like Gibraltar, inexpugnable on its rock, and the other is like a painted castle on the stage; flimsy canvas that you could put your foot through-solidity by the side of nothingness. For even the poor appearance of solidity is an illusion, as our text says with bitter emphasis-’a high wall *in his own conceit*.’

‘The name of the Lord,’ of course, is the Biblical expression for the whole character of God, as He has made it known to us, or in other words, for God Himself, as He has been pleased to reveal Himself to mankind. The syllables of that name are all the deeds by which He has taught us what He is; every act of power, of wisdom, of tenderness, of grace that has manifested these qualities and led us to believe that they are all infinite. In the name, in its narrower sense, the name of Jehovah, there is much of ‘the name’ in its wider sense. For that name ‘Jehovah,’ both by its signification and by the circumstances under which it was originally employed, tells us a great deal about God. It tells us, for instance, by virtue of its signification, that He is self-existent, depending upon no other creature. ‘I AM THAT I AM!’ No other being can say that. All the rest of us have to say, ‘I am that which God made me.’ Circumstances and a hundred other things have made me; God finds the law of His being and the fountain of His being within Himself.

‘He sits on no precarious throne,

Nor borrows leave to be.’

His name proclaims Him to be self-existent, and as self-existent, eternal; and as eternal, changeless; and as self-existent, eternal, changeless, infinite in all the qualities by which He makes Himself known. This boundless Being, all full of wisdom, power, and tenderness, with whom we can enter into relations of amity and concord, surely He is ‘a strong tower into which we may run and be safe.’

But far beyond even the sweep of that great name, Jehovah, is the knowledge of God’s deepest heart and character which we learn in Him who said, ‘I have declared Thy name unto My brethren, and will declare it.’ Christ in His life and death, in His meekness, sweetness, gentleness, calm wisdom, infinite patience, attractiveness; yearning over sinful hearts, weeping over rebels, in the graciousness of His life, in the sacredness and the power of His Cross, is the Revealer to our hearts of the heart of God. If I may so say, He has builded ‘the strong tower’ broader, has expanded its area and widened its gate, and lifted its summit yet nearer the heavens, and made the name of God a wider name and a mightier name, and a name of surer defence and blessing than ever it was before.

And so, dear brethren! it all comes to this, the name that is ‘the strong tower’ is the name ‘My Father!’ a Father of infinite tenderness and wisdom and power. Oh! where can the child rest more quietly than on the mother’s breast, where can the child be safer than in the circle of the father’s arms? ‘The name of the Lord is a strong tower.’

Now turn to the other for a moment: ‘The rich man’s wealth is’ [with great emphasis on the next little word] ‘*his* strong city, and as a high wall in his own conceit.’ Of course we have not to deal here only with wealth in the shape of money, but all external and material goods, the whole mass of the ‘things seen and temporal,’ are gathered together here in this phrase.

Men use their imaginations in very strange fashion, and make, or fancy they make, for themselves out of the things of the present life a defence and a strength. Like some poor lunatic, out upon a moor, that fancies himself ensconced in a castle; like some barbarous tribes behind their stockades or crowding at the back of a little turf wall, or in some old tumble-down fort that the first shot will bring rattling down about their ears, fancying themselves perfectly secure and defended-so do men deal with these outward things that are given them for another purpose altogether: they make of them defences and fortresses.

It is difficult for a man to have them and not to trust them. So Jesus said to His disciples once: ‘How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the Kingdom’; and when they were astonished at His words, He repeated them with the significant variation, ‘How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the Kingdom of God.’ So He would teach that the misuse and not the possession of wealth is the barrier, but so, too, He would warn us that, nine times out of ten, the possession of them in more than a very modest measure, tempts a man into confidence in them.

The illusion is one that besets us all. We are all tempted to make a defence of the things that we can see and handle. Is it not strange, and is it not sad, that most of us just turn the truth round about and suppose that the real defence is the imaginary, and that the imaginary one is the real? How many men are there in this chapel who, if they spoke out of their deepest convictions, would say: ‘Oh yes! the promises of God are all very well, but I would rather have the cash down. I suppose that I may trust that He will provide bread and water, and all the things that I need, but I would rather have a good solid balance at the banker’ s.’ How many of you would rather honestly, and at the bottom of your hearts, have that than God’s word for your defence? How many of you think that to trust in a living God is but grasping at a very airy and unsubstantial kind of support; and that the real solid defence is the defence made of the things that you can see?

My brother! it is exactly the opposite way. Turn it clean round, and you get the truth. The unsubstantial shadows are the material things that you can see and handle; illusory as a dream, and as little able to ward off the blows of fate as a soap bubble. The real is the unseen beyond-’the things that *are*,’ and He who alone really is, and in His boundless and absolute Being is our only defence.

In one aspect or another, that false imagination with which my last text deals is the besetting sin of Manchester. Not the rich man only, but the poor man just as much, is in danger of it. The poor man who thinks that everything would be right if only he were rich, and the rich man who thinks that everything is right because he *is* rich, are exactly the same man. The circumstances differ, but the one man is but the other turned inside out. And all round about us we see the fierce fight to get more and more of these things, the tight grip of them when we have got them, the overestimate of the value of them, the contempt for the people who have less of them than ourselves. Our aristocracy is an aristocracy of wealth; in some respects, one by no means to be despised, because there often go a great many good qualities to the making and the stewardship of wealth; but still it is an evil that men should be so largely estimated by their money as they are here. It is not a sound state of opinion which has made 'what is he *worth*?' mean 'how much of *it* has he?' We are taught here to look upon the prizes of life as being mainly wealth. To win that is 'success'-'prosperity'-and it is very hard for us all not to be influenced by the prevailing tone.

I would urge you, young men, especially to lay this to heart-that of all delusions that can beset you in your course, none will work more disastrously than the notion that the *summum bonum*, the shield and stay of a man, is the 'abundance of the things that he possesses.' I fancy I see more listless, discontented, unhappy faces looking out of carriages than I see upon the pavement. And I am sure of this, at any rate, that all which is noble and sweet and good in life can be wrought out and possessed upon as much bread and water as will keep body and soul together, and as much furniture as will enable a man to sit at his meal and lie down at night. And as for the rest, it has many advantages and blessings, but oh! it is all illusory as a defence against the evils that will come, sooner or later, to every life.

II. Consider next how to get into the true Refuge.

'The righteous runneth into it and is safe,' says my text. You may get into the illusory one very easily. Imagination will take you there. There is no difficulty at all about that. And yet the way by which a man makes this world his defence may teach you a lesson as to how you can make God your defence. How *does* a man make this world his defence? By trusting to it. He that says to the fine gold, 'Thou art my confidence,' has made it his fortress-and that is how you will make God your fortress-by trusting to *Him*. The very same emotion, the very same act of mind, heart, and will, may be turned either upwards or downwards, as you can turn the beam from a lantern which way you please. Direct it earthwards, and you 'trust in the uncertainty of riches.’ Flash it heavenwards, and you ‘trust in the living God.’

And that same lesson is taught by the words of our text, ‘The righteous runneth into it.’ I do not dwell upon the word ‘righteous.’ That is the Old Testament point of view, which could not conceive it possible that any man could have deep and close communion with God, except on condition of a pure character. I will not speak of that at present, but point to the picturesque metaphor, which will tell us a great deal more about what faith is than many a philosophical dissertation. Many a man who would be perplexed by a theologian’s talk will understand this: ‘The righteous runneth into the name of the Lord.’

The metaphor brings out the idea of eager haste in betaking oneself to the shelter, as when an invading army comes into a country, and the unarmed peasants take their portable belongings and their cattle, and catch up their children in their arms, and set their wives upon their mules, and make all haste to some fortified place; or as when the manslayer in Israel fled to the city of refuge, or as when Lot hurried for his life out of Sodom. There would be no dawdling then; but with every muscle strained, men would run into the stronghold, counting every minute a year till they were inside its walls, and heard the heavy door close between them and the pursuer. No matter how rough the road, or how overpowering the heat-no time to stop to gather flowers, or even diamonds on the road, when a moment’s delay might mean the enemy’s sword in your heart!

Now that metaphor is frequently used to express the resolved and swift act by which, recognising in Jesus Christ, who declares the name of the Lord, our hiding-place, we shelter ourselves in Him, and rest secure. One of the picturesque words by which the Old Testament expresses ‘trust’ means literally ‘to flee to a refuge.’ The Old Testament *trust* is the New Testament *faith*, even as the Old Testament ‘*Name of the Lord*’ answers to the New Testament ‘*Name of Jesus*.’ And so we run into this sure hiding-place and strong fortress of the name of the Lord, when we betake ourselves to Jesus and put our trust in Him as our defence.

Such a faith-the trust of mind, heart, and will-laying hold of the name of the Lord, makes us ‘righteous,’ and so capable of ‘dwelling with the devouring fire' of God's perfect purity. The Old Testament point of view was righteousness, in order to abiding in God. The New Testament begins, as it were, at an earlier stage in the religious life, and tells us how to get the righteousness, without which, it holds as strongly as the Old Testament, 'no man shall see the Lord.' It shows us that our faith, by which we run into that fortress, fits us to enter the fortress, because it makes us partakers of Christ's purity.

So my earnest question to you all is-Have you 'fled for refuge to lay hold' on that Saviour in whom God has set His name? Like Lot out of Sodom, like the manslayer to the city of refuge, like the unwarlike peasants to the baron's tower, before the border thieves, have you gone thither for shelter from all the sorrows and guilt and dangers that are marching terrible against you? Can you take up as yours the old grand words of exuberant trust in which the Psalmist heaps together the names of the Lord, as if walking about the city of his defence, and telling the towers thereof, 'The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower'? If you have, then 'because you have made the Lord your refuge, there shall no evil befall you.'

III. So we have, lastly, what comes of sheltering in these two refuges.

As to the former of them, I said at the beginning of these remarks that the words 'is safe' were more accurately as well as picturesquely rendered by 'is set aloft.' They remind us of the psalm which has many points of resemblance with this text, and which gives the very same thought when it says, 'I will set him on high, because he hath known My name.' The fugitive is taken within the safe walls of the strong tower, and is set up high on the battlements, looking down upon the baffled pursuers, and far beyond the reach of their arrows. To stand upon that tower lifts a man above the region where temptations fly, above the region where sorrow strikes; lifts him above sin and guilt and condemnation and fear, and calumny and slander, and sickness, and separation and loneliness and death; 'and all the ills that flesh is heir to.'

Or, as one of the old Puritan commentators has it: 'The tower is so deep that no pioneer can undermine it, so thick that no cannon can breach it, so high that no ladder can scale it.' 'The righteous runneth into it,' and is perched up there; and can look down like Lear from his cliff, and all the troubles that afflict the lower levels shall 'show scarce so gross as beetles' from the height where he stands, safe and high, hidden in the name of the Lord.

I say little about the other side. Brethren! the world in any of its forms, the good things of this life in any shape, whether that of money or any other, can do a great deal for us. They can keep a great many inconveniences from us, they can keep a great many cares and pains and sorrows from us. I was going to say, to carry out the metaphor, they can keep the rifle-bullets from us. But, ah! when the big siege-guns get into position and begin to play; when the great trials that every life must have, sooner or later, come to open fire at us, then the defence that anything in this outer world can give comes rattling about our ears very quickly. It is like the pasteboard helmet which looked as good as if it had been steel, and did admirably as long as no sword struck it.

There is only one thing that will keep us peaceful and unharmed, and that is to trust our poor shelterless lives and sinful souls to the Saviour who has died for us. In Him we find the hiding-place, in which secure, as beneath the shadow of a great rock, dreaded evils will pass us by, as impotent to hurt as savages before a castle fortified by modern skill. All the bitterness of outward calamities will be taken from them before they reach us. Their arrows will still wound, but He will have wiped the poison off before He lets them be shot at us. The force of temptation will be weakened, for if we live near Him we shall have other tastes and desires. The bony fingers of the skeleton Death, who drags men from all other homes, will not dislodge us from our fortress-dwelling. Hid in Him we shall neither fear going down to the grave, nor coming up from it, nor judgment, nor eternity. Then, I beseech you, make no delay. Escape! flee for your life! A growing host of evil marches swift against you. Take Christ for your defence and cry to Him,

'Lo! from sin and grief and shame,
Hide me, Jesus! in Thy name.'

24)Proverbs 20:1-3

A STRING OF PEARLS

Pro. 20:1 - Pro. 20:7.

The connection between the verses of this passage is only in their common purpose to set forth some details of a righteous life, and to brand the opposite vices. A slight affinity may be doubtfully traced in one or two adjacent proverbs, but that is all.

First comes temperance, enforced by the picture of a drunkard. Wine and strong drink are, as it were, personified, and their effects on men are painted as their own characters. And an ugly picture it is, which should hang in the gallery of every young man and woman. ‘Wine is a mocker.’ Intemperance delights in scoffing at all pure, lofty, sacred things. It is the ally of wild profanity, which sends up its tipsy and clumsy ridicule against Heaven itself. If a man wants to lose his sense of reverence, his susceptibility for what is noble, let him take to drink, and the thing is done. If he would fain keep these fresh and quick, let him eschew what is sure to deaden them. Of course there are other roads to the same end, but there is no other end to this road. Nobody ever knew a drunkard who did not scoff at things that should be reverenced, and that because he knew that he was acting in defiance of them.

‘A brawler,’ or, as Delitzsch renders it, ‘boisterous’-look into a liquor-store if you want to verify that, or listen to a drunken party coming back from an excursion and making night hideous with their bellowings, or go to any police court on a Monday morning. We in England are familiar with the combination on police charge-sheets, ‘drunk and disorderly.’ So does the old proverb-maker seem to have been. Drink takes off the brake, and every impulse has its own way, and makes as much noise as it can.

The word rendered in Authorised Version ‘is deceived,’ and in Revised Version ‘erreth,’ is literally ‘staggers’ or ‘reels,’ and it is more graphic to keep that meaning. There is a world of quiet irony in the unexpectedly gentle close of the sentence, ‘is not wise.’ How much stronger the assertion might have been! Look at the drunkard as he staggers along, scoffing at everything purer and higher than himself, and ready to fight with his own shadow, and incapable of self-control. He has made himself the ugly spectacle you see. Will anybody call *him* wise?

The next proverb applies directly to a state of things which most nations have outgrown. Kings who can give full scope to their anger, and who inspire mainly terror, are anomalies in civilised countries now. The proverb warns that it is no trifle to rouse the lion from his lair, and that when he begins to growl there is danger. The man who stirs him 'forfeits his own life,' or, at all events, imperils it.

The word rendered 'sins' has for its original meaning 'misses,' and seems to be so used here, as also in Pro. 8:36. 'Against' is a supplement. The maxim inculcates the wisdom of avoiding conduct which might rouse an anger so sure to destroy its object. And that is a good maxim for ordinary times in all lands, monarchies or republics. For there is in constitutional kingdoms and in republics an uncrowned monarch, to the full as irresponsible, as easily provoked, and as relentless in hunting its opponents to destruction, as any old-world tyrant. Its name is Public Opinion. It is not well to provoke it. If a man does, let him well understand that he takes his life, or what is sometimes dearer than life, in his hand. Not only self-preservation, which the proverb and Scripture recognise as a legitimate motive, but higher considerations, dictate compliance with the ruling forces of our times, as far as may be. Conscience only has the right to limit this precept, and to say, 'Let the brute roar, and never mind if you *do* forfeit your life. It is your duty to say "No," though all the world should be saying "Yes."'

A slight thread of connection may be established between the second and third proverbs. The latter, like the former, commends peacefulness and condemns pugnacity. Men talk of 'glory' as the warrior's meed, and the so-called Christian world has not got beyond the semi-barbarous stage which regards 'honour' as mainly secured by fighting. But this ancient proverb-maker had learned a better conception of what 'honour' or 'glory' was, and where it grew.

'Peace hath her victories
No less renowned than war,'

said Milton. But our proverb goes farther than ‘no less,’ and gives *greater* glory to the man who never takes up arms, or who lays them down. The saying is true, not only about warfare, but in all regions of life. Fighting is generally wasted time. Controversialists of all sorts, porcupine-like people, who go through the world all sharp quills sticking out to pierce, are less to be admired than peace-loving souls. Any fool can ‘show his teeth,’ as the word for ‘quarrelling’ means. But it takes a wise man, and a man whose spirit has been made meek by dwelling near God in Christ, to withhold the angry word, the quick retort. It is generally best to let the glove flung down lie where it is. There are better things to do than to squabble.

Pro. 20:4 is a parable as well as a proverb. If a man sits by the fireside because the north wind is blowing, when he ought to be out in the field holding the plough with frost-nipped fingers, he will beg [or, perhaps, *seek for a crop*] in harvest, and will find nothing, when others are rejoicing in the slow result of winter showers and of their toilsome hours. So, in all life, if the fitting moments for preparation are neglected, late repentance avails nothing. The student who dawdles when he should be working, will be sure to fail when the examination comes on. It is useless to begin ploughing when your neighbours are driving their reaping machines into the fields. ‘There is a time to sow, and a time to reap.’ The law is inexorable for this life, and not less certainly so for the life to come. The virgins who cried in vain, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ and were answered, ‘Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now!’ are sisters of the man who was hindered from ploughing because it was cold, and asked in vain for bread when harvest time had come. ‘To-day, if ye will to hear His voice, harden not your hearts.’

The next proverb is a piece of shrewd common sense. It sets before us two men, one reticent, and the other skilful in worming out designs which he wishes to penetrate. The former is like a deep draw-well; the latter is like a man who lets down a bucket into it, and winds it up full. ‘Still waters are deep.’ The faculty of reading men may be abused to bad ends, but is worth cultivating, and may be allied to high aims, and serve to help in accomplishing these. It may aid good men in detecting evil, in knowing how to present God’s truth to hearts that need it, in pouring comfort into closely shut spirits. Not only astute business men or politicians need it, but all who would help their fellows to love God and serve Him-preachers, teachers, and the like. And there would be more happy homes if parents and children tried to understand one another. We seldom dislike a man when we come to know him thoroughly. We cannot help him till we do.

The proverb in Pro. 20:6 is susceptible of different renderings in the first clause. Delitzsch and others would translate, ‘Almost every man meets a man who is gracious to him.’ The contrast will then be between partial ‘grace’ or kindness, and thoroughgoing reliableness or trustworthiness. The rendering of the Authorised and Revised Versions, on the other hand, makes the contrast between talk and reality, professions of goodwill and acts which come up to these. In either case, the saying is the bitter fruit of experience. Even charity, which ‘believeth all things,’ cannot but admit that soft words are more abundant than deeds which verify them. It is no breach of the law of love to open one’s eyes to facts, and so to save oneself from taking paper money for gold, except at a heavy discount. Perhaps the reticence, noted in the previous proverb, led to the thought of a loose-tongued profession of kindliness as a contrast. Neither the one nor the other is admirable. The practical conclusion from the facts in this proverb is double-do not take much heed of men’s eulogiums on their own benevolence; do not trumpet your own praises. Caution and modesty are parts of Christian perfection.

The last saying points to the hereditary goodness which sometimes, for our comfort, we do see, as well as to the halo from a saintly parent which often surrounds his children. Note that there may be more than mere succession in time conveyed by the expression ‘after him.’ It may mean following in his footsteps. Such children are blessed, both in men’s benedictions and in their own peaceful hearts. Weighty responsibilities lie upon the children of parents who have transmitted to them a revered name. A Christian’s children are doubly bound to continue the parental tradition, and are doubly criminal if they depart from it. There is no sadder sight than that of a godly father wailing over an ungodly son, unless it be that of the ungodly son who makes him wail. Absalom hanging by his curls in the oak-tree, and David groaning, ‘My son, my son!’ touch all hearts. Alas that the tragedy should be so often repeated in our homes to-day!

25)Proverbs 20:4

A STRING OF PEARLS

THE SLUGGARD IN HARVEST

Pro. 20:4.

Like all the sayings of this book, this is simply a piece of plain, practical common sense, intended to inculcate the lesson that men should diligently seize the opportunity whilst it is theirs. The sluggard is one of the pet aversions of the Book of Proverbs, which, unlike most other manuals of Eastern wisdom, has a profound reverence for honest work.

He is a great drone, for he prefers the chimney-corner to the field, even although it cannot have been very cold if the weather was open enough to admit of ploughing. And he is a great fool, too, for he buys his comfort at a very dear price, as do all men who live for to-day, and let to-morrow look out for itself.

But like most of the other sayings of this book, my text contains principles which are true in the highest regions of human life, for the laws which rule up there are not different from those which regulate the motions of its lower phases. Religion recognises the same practical common-sense principles that daily business does. I venture to take this as my text now, in addressing young people, because they have special need of, and special facilities for, the wisdom which it enjoins; and because the words only want to be turned with their faces heavenwards in order to enforce the great appeal, the only one which it is worth my while to make, and worth your while to come here to listen to; the appeal to each of you, ‘I beseech you, by the mercies of God, that ye yield yourselves to God’ *now*.

My object, then, will be perhaps best accomplished if I simply ask you to look, first, at the principles involved in this quaint proverb; and, secondly, to apply them in one or two directions.

I. First, then, let us try to bring out the principles which are crystallised in this picturesque saying.

The first thought evidently is: present conduct determines future conditions. Life is a series of epochs, each of which has its destined work, and that being done, all is well; and that being left undone, all is ill.

Now, of course, in regard to many of the accidents of a man's condition, his conduct is only one, and by no means the most powerful, of the factors which settle them. The position which a man fills, the tasks which he has to perform, and the whole host of things which make up the externals of his life, depend upon far other conditions than any that he brings to them. But yet on the whole it is true that what a man does, and is, settles how he fares. And this is the mystical importance and awful solemnity of the most undistinguished moments and most trivial acts of this awful life of ours, that each of them has an influence on all that comes after, and may deflect our whole course into altogether different paths. It is not only the moments that we vulgarly and blindly call great which settle our condition, but it is the accumulation of the tiny ones; the small deeds, the unnoticed acts, which make up so large a portion of every man's life. It is these, after all, that are the most powerful in settling what we shall be. There come to each of us supreme moments in our lives. Yes! and if in all the subordinate and insignificant moments we have not been getting ready for them, but have been nurturing dispositions and acquiring habits, and cultivating ways of acting and thinking which condemn us to fail beneath the requirements of the supreme moment, then it passes us by, and we gain nothing from it. Tiny mica flakes have built up the Matterhorn, and the minute acts of life after all, by their multiplicity, make up life to be what it is. 'Sand is heavy,' says this wise book of Proverbs. The aggregation of the minutest grains, singly so light that they would not affect the most delicate balance, weighs upon us with a weight 'heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.' The mystic significance of the trivialities of life is that in them we largely make destiny, and that in them we wholly make character.

And now, whilst this is true about all life, it is especially true about youth. You have facilities for moulding your being which some of us older men would give a great deal to have again for a moment, with our present knowledge and bitter experience. The lava that has solidified into hard rock with us is yet molten and plastic with you. You can, I was going to say, be anything you make up your minds to; and, within reasonable limits, the bold saying is true. ‘Ask what thou wilt and it shall be given to thee’ is what nature and Providence, almost as really as grace and Christ, say to every young man and woman, because you are the arbiters, not wholly, indeed, of your destiny, and are the architects, altogether, of your character, which is more.

And so I desire to lay upon your hearts this threadbare old truth, because you are living in the ploughing time, and the harvest is months ahead. Whilst it is true that every day is the child of all the yesterdays, and the parent of all the to-morrows, it is also true that life has its predominant colouring, varying at different epochs, and that for you, though you are largely inheriting, even now, the results of your past, brief as it is, still more largely is the future, the plastic future, in your hands, to be shaped into such forms as you will. ‘The child is father of the man,’ and the youth has the blessed prerogative of standing before the mouldable to-morrow, and possessing a nature still capable of being cast into an almost infinite variety of form.

But then, not only do you stand with special advantages for making yourselves what you will, but you specially need to be reminded of the terrible importance and significance of each moment. For this is the very irony of human life, that we seldom awake to the sense of its importance till it is nearly ended, and that the period when reflection would avail the most is precisely the period when it is the least strong and habitual. What is the use of an old man like me thinking about what he could make of life if he had it to do over again, as compared with the advantage of your doing it? Yet I dare say that for once that you think thus, my contemporaries do it fifty times. So, not to abate one jot of your buoyancy, not to cast any shadow over joys and hopes, but to lift you to a sense of the blessed possibilities of your position, I want to lay this principle of my text upon your consciences, and to beseech you to try to keep it operatively in mind-you are making yourselves, and settling your destiny, by every day of your plastic youth.

There is another principle as clear in my text-viz., the easy road is generally the wrong one. The sluggard was warmer at the fireside than he would be in the field with his plough in the north wind, and so he stopped there. There are always obstacles in the way of noble life. It is always easier, as flesh judges, to live ignobly than to live as Jesus Christ would have us live. ‘Endure hardness’ is the commandment to all who would be soldiers of any great cause, and would not fling away their lives in low self-indulgence. If a man is going to be anything worth being, or to do anything worth doing, he must start with, and adhere to this, ‘to scorn delights and live laborious days.’ And only then has he a chance of rising above the fat dull weed that rots in Lethe’s stream, and of living anything like the life that it becomes him to live.

Be sure of this, dear young friends, that self-denial and rigid self-control, in its two forms, of stopping your ears to the attractions of lower pleasures, and of cheerily encountering difficulties, is an indispensable condition of any life which shall at the last yield a harvest worth the gathering, and not destined to be

‘Cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete.’

Never allow yourselves to be turned away from the plain path of duty by any difficulties. Never allow yourselves to be guided in your choice of a road by the consideration that the turf is smooth, and the flowers by the side of it sweet. Remember, the sluggard would have been warmer, with a wholesome warmth, at the ploughtail than cowering in the chimney corner. And the things that seem to be difficulties and hardships only need to be fronted to yield, like the east wind in its season, good results in bracing and hardening. Fix it in your minds that nothing worth doing is done but at the cost of difficulty and toil.

That is a lesson that this generation wants, even more than some that have lived. I suppose it is one of the temptations of older men to look askance upon the amusements of younger ones, but I cannot help lifting up here one word of earnest appeal to the young men and women of this congregation, and beseeching them, as they value the nobleness of their own lives, and their power of doing any real good, to beware of what seems to me the altogether extravagant and excessive love, and following after, of mere amusement which characterises this day to so large an extent. Better toil than such devotion to mere relaxation.

The last principle here is that the season let slip is gone for ever. Whether my text, in its second picture, intends us to think of the sluggard when the harvest came as 'begging' from his neighbours; or whether, as is possibly the construction of the Hebrew, it simply means to describe him as going out into his field, and looking at it, and asking for the harvest and seeing nothing there but weeds, the lesson it conveys is the same-the old, old lesson, so threadbare that I should be almost ashamed of taking up your time with it unless I believed that you did not lay it to heart as you should. Opportunity is bald behind, and must be grasped by the forelock. Life is full of tragic *might-have-beens*. No regret, no remorse, no self-accusation, no clear recognition that I was a fool will avail one jot. The time for ploughing is past; you cannot stick the share into the ground when you should be wielding the sickle. 'Too late' is the saddest of human words. And, my brother, as the stages of our lives roll on, unless each is filled as it passes with the discharge of the duties, and the appropriation of the benefits which it brings, then, to all eternity, that moment will never return, and the sluggard may beg in harvest, that he may have the chance to plough once more, and have none. The student that has spent the term in indolence, perhaps dissipation, has no time to get up his subject when he is in the examination-room, with the paper before him. And life, and nature, and God's law, which is the Christian expression for the heathen one of *nature*, are stern taskmasters, and demand that the duty shall be done in its season or left undone for ever.

II. In the second place, let me, just in a few words, carry the lamp of these principles of my text and flash its rays upon one or two subjects.

Let me say a word, first, about the lowest sphere to which my text applies. I referred at the beginning of this discourse to this proverb as simply an inculcation of the duty of honest work, and of the necessity of being wide awake to opportunities in our daily work. Now, the most of you young men, and many of you young women, are destined for ordinary trades, professions, walks in commerce; and I do not suppose it to be beneath the dignity of the pulpit to say this: Do not trust to any way of getting on by dodges or speculation, or favour, or anything but downright hard work. Don't shirk difficulties, don't try to put the weight of the work upon some colleague or other, that you may have an easier life of it. Set your backs to your tasks, and remember that 'in all labour there is profit'; and whether the profit comes to you in the shape of advancement, position, promotion in your offices, partnerships perhaps, wealth, and the like, or no, the profit lies in the work. Honest toil is the key to pleasure.

Then, let me apply the text in a somewhat higher direction. Carry these principles with you in the cultivation of that important part of yourself-your intellects. What would some of us old students give if we had the flexibility, the power of assimilating new truth, the retentive memories, that you young people have? Some of you, perhaps, are students by profession; I should like all of you to make a conscience of making the best of your brains, as God has given them to you, a trust. 'The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold.' The dawdler will read no books that tax his intellect, therefore shall he beg in harvest and have nothing. Amidst all the flood of feeble, foolish, flaccid literature with which we are afflicted at this day, I wonder how many of you young men and women ever set yourselves to some great book or subject that you cannot understand without effort. Unless you do you are not faithful stewards of the supreme gift of God to you of that great faculty which apprehends and lives upon truth. So remember the sluggard by his fireside; and do you get out with your plough.

Again I say, apply these principles to a higher work still-that of the formation of character. Nothing will come to you noble, great, elevating, in that direction, unless it is sought, and sought with toil.

'In woods, in waves, in wars, she wont to dwell,

And will be found with peril and with pain;

Before her gate high Heaven did sweat ordain,

And wakeful watches ever to abide.'

Wisdom and truth, and all their elevating effects upon human character, require absolutely for their acquirement effort and toil. You have the opportunity still. As I said a moment ago-you may mould yourselves into noble forms. But in the making of character we have to work as a painter in fresco does, with a swift brush on the plaster while it is wet. It sets and hardens in an hour. And men drift into habits which become tyrannies and dominant before they know where they are. Don't let yourselves be shaped by accident, by circumstance. Remember that you can build yourselves up into forms of beauty by the help of the grace of God, and that for such building there must be the diligent labour and the wise clutching at opportunity and understanding of the times which my text suggests.

And, lastly, let these principles applied to religion teach us the wisdom and necessity of beginning the Christian life at the earliest moment. I am by no means prepared to say that the extreme tragedy of my text can ever be wrought out in regard to the religious experience of any man here on earth, for I believe that at any moment in his career, however faultful and stained his past has been, and however long and obstinate has been his continuance in evil, a man may turn himself to Jesus Christ, and beg, and not in vain, nor ever find 'nothing' there.

But whilst all that is quite true, I want you, dear young friends, to lay this to heart, that if you do not yield yourselves to Jesus Christ now, in your early days, and take Him for your Saviour, and rest your souls upon Him, and then take Him for your Captain and Commander, for your Pattern and Example, for your Companion and your Aim, you will lose what you can never make up by any future course. You lose years of blessedness, of peaceful society with Him, of illumination and inspiration. You lose all the sweetness of the days which you spend away from Him. And if at the end you did come to Him, you would have one regret, deep and permanent, that you had not gone to Him before. If you put off, as some of you are putting off, what you know you ought to do-namely, give your hearts to Jesus Christ and become His-think of what you are laying up for yourselves thereby. You get much that it would be gain to lose-bitter memories, defiled imaginations, stings of conscience, habits that it will be very hard to break, and the sense of having wasted the best part of your lives, and having but the fag end to bring to Him. And if you put off, as some of you are disposed to do, think of the risk you run. It is very unlikely that susceptibilities will remain if they are trifled with. You remember that Felix trembled once, and sent for Paul often; but we never hear that he trembled any more. And it is quite possible, and quite likely, more likely than not, that you will never be as near being a Christian again as you are now, if you turn away from the impressions that are made upon you at this moment, and stifle the half-formed resolution.

But there is a more solemn thought still. This life as a whole is to the future life as the ploughing time is to the harvest, and there are awful words in Scripture which seem to point in the same direction in reference to the irrevocable and irreversible issue of neglected opportunities on earth, as this proverb does in regard to the ploughing and harvests of this life.

I dare not conceal what seems to me the New Testament confirmation and deepening of the solemn words of our text, 'He shall beg in harvest and have nothing,' by the Master's words, 'Many shall say to me in that day, Lord! Lord I and I will say, I never knew you.' The five virgins who rubbed their sleepy eyes and asked for oil when the master was at hand got none, and when they besought, 'Lord! Lord! open to us,' all the answer was, 'Too late! too late! ye cannot enter now.' Now, while it is called day, harden not your hearts.

26)Proverbs 20:5-7

Proverbs

A STRING OF PEARLS

Pro. 20:1 - Pro. 20:7.

The connection between the verses of this passage is only in their common purpose to set forth some details of a righteous life, and to brand the opposite vices. A slight affinity may be doubtfully traced in one or two adjacent proverbs, but that is all.

First comes temperance, enforced by the picture of a drunkard. Wine and strong drink are, as it were, personified, and their effects on men are painted as their own characters. And an ugly picture it is, which should hang in the gallery of every young man and woman. 'Wine is a mocker.' Intemperance delights in scoffing at all pure, lofty, sacred things. It is the ally of wild profanity, which sends up its tipsy and clumsy ridicule against Heaven itself. If a man wants to lose his sense of reverence, his susceptibility for what is noble, let him take to drink, and the thing is done. If he would fain keep these fresh and quick, let him eschew what is sure to deaden them. Of course there are other roads to the same end, but there is no other end to this road. Nobody ever knew a drunkard who did not scoff at things that should be reverenced, and that because he knew that he was acting in defiance of them.

‘A brawler,’ or, as Delitzsch renders it, ‘boisterous’-look into a liquor-store if you want to verify that, or listen to a drunken party coming back from an excursion and making night hideous with their bellowings, or go to any police court on a Monday morning. We in England are familiar with the combination on police charge-sheets, ‘drunk and disorderly.’ So does the old proverb-maker seem to have been. Drink takes off the brake, and every impulse has its own way, and makes as much noise as it can.

The word rendered in Authorised Version ‘is deceived,’ and in Revised Version ‘erreth,’ is literally ‘staggers’ or ‘reels,’ and it is more graphic to keep that meaning. There is a world of quiet irony in the unexpectedly gentle close of the sentence, ‘is not wise.’ How much stronger the assertion might have been! Look at the drunkard as he staggers along, scoffing at everything purer and higher than himself, and ready to fight with his own shadow, and incapable of self-control. He has made himself the ugly spectacle you see. Will anybody call *him* wise?

The next proverb applies directly to a state of things which most nations have outgrown. Kings who can give full scope to their anger, and who inspire mainly terror, are anomalies in civilised countries now. The proverb warns that it is no trifle to rouse the lion from his lair, and that when he begins to growl there is danger. The man who stirs him ‘forfeits his own life,’ or, at all events, imperils it.

The word rendered ‘sins’ has for its original meaning ‘misses,’ and seems to be so used here, as also in Pro. 8:36. ‘Against’ is a supplement. The maxim inculcates the wisdom of avoiding conduct which might rouse an anger so sure to destroy its object. And that is a good maxim for ordinary times in all lands, monarchies or republics. For there is in constitutional kingdoms and in republics an uncrowned monarch, to the full as irresponsible, as easily provoked, and as relentless in hunting its opponents to destruction, as any old-world tyrant. Its name is Public Opinion. It is not well to provoke it. If a man does, let him well understand that he takes his life, or what is sometimes dearer than life, in his hand. Not only self-preservation, which the proverb and Scripture recognise as a legitimate motive, but higher considerations, dictate compliance with the ruling forces of our times, as far as may be. Conscience only has the right to limit this precept, and to say, 'Let the brute roar, and never mind if you *do* forfeit your life. It is your duty to say "No," though all the world should be saying "Yes."'

A slight thread of connection may be established between the second and third proverbs. The latter, like the former, commends peacefulness and condemns pugnacity. Men talk of 'glory' as the warrior's meed, and the so-called Christian world has not got beyond the semi-barbarous stage which regards 'honour' as mainly secured by fighting. But this ancient proverb-maker had learned a better conception of what 'honour' or 'glory' was, and where it grew.

'Peace hath her victories
No less renowned than war,'

said Milton. But our proverb goes farther than 'no less,' and gives *greater* glory to the man who never takes up arms, or who lays them down. The saying is true, not only about warfare, but in all regions of life. Fighting is generally wasted time. Controversialists of all sorts, porcupine-like people, who go through the world all sharp quills sticking out to pierce, are less to be admired than peace-loving souls. Any fool can 'show his teeth,' as the word for 'quarrelling' means. But it takes a wise man, and a man whose spirit has been made meek by dwelling near God in Christ, to withhold the angry word, the quick retort. It is generally best to let the glove flung down lie where it is. There are better things to do than to squabble.

Pro. 20:4 is a parable as well as a proverb. If a man sits by the fireside because the north wind is blowing, when he ought to be out in the field holding the plough with frost-nipped fingers, he will beg [or, perhaps, *seek for a crop*] in harvest, and will find nothing, when others are rejoicing in the slow result of winter showers and of their toilsome hours. So, in all life, if the fitting moments for preparation are neglected, late repentance avails nothing. The student who dawdles when he should be working, will be sure to fail when the examination comes on. It is useless to begin ploughing when your neighbours are driving their reaping machines into the fields. ‘There is a time to sow, and a time to reap.’ The law is inexorable for this life, and not less certainly so for the life to come. The virgins who cried in vain, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ and were answered, ‘Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now!’ are sisters of the man who was hindered from ploughing because it was cold, and asked in vain for bread when harvest time had come. ‘To-day, if ye will to hear His voice, harden not your hearts.’

The next proverb is a piece of shrewd common sense. It sets before us two men, one reticent, and the other skilful in worming out designs which he wishes to penetrate. The former is like a deep draw-well; the latter is like a man who lets down a bucket into it, and winds it up full. ‘Still waters are deep.’ The faculty of reading men may be abused to bad ends, but is worth cultivating, and may be allied to high aims, and serve to help in accomplishing these. It may aid good men in detecting evil, in knowing how to present God’s truth to hearts that need it, in pouring comfort into closely shut spirits. Not only astute business men or politicians need it, but all who would help their fellows to love God and serve Him-preachers, teachers, and the like. And there would be more happy homes if parents and children tried to understand one another. We seldom dislike a man when we come to know him thoroughly. We cannot help him till we do.

The proverb in Pro. 20:6 is susceptible of different renderings in the first clause. Delitzsch and others would translate, ‘Almost every man meets a man who is gracious to him.’ The contrast will then be between partial ‘grace’ or kindness, and thoroughgoing reliableness or trustworthiness. The rendering of the Authorised and Revised Versions, on the other hand, makes the contrast between talk and reality, professions of goodwill and acts which come up to these. In either case, the saying is the bitter fruit of experience. Even charity, which ‘believeth all things,’ cannot but admit that soft words are more abundant than deeds which verify them. It is no breach of the law of love to open one’s eyes to facts, and so to save oneself from taking paper money for gold, except at a heavy discount. Perhaps the reticence, noted in the previous proverb, led to the thought of a loose-tongued profession of kindliness as a contrast. Neither the one nor the other is admirable. The practical conclusion from the facts in this proverb is double-do not take much heed of men’s eulogiums on their own benevolence; do not trumpet your own praises. Caution and modesty are parts of Christian perfection.

The last saying points to the hereditary goodness which sometimes, for our comfort, we do see, as well as to the halo from a saintly parent which often surrounds his children. Note that there may be more than mere succession in time conveyed by the expression ‘after him.’ It may mean following in his footsteps. Such children are blessed, both in men’s benedictions and in their own peaceful hearts. Weighty responsibilities lie upon the children of parents who have transmitted to them a revered name. A Christian’s children are doubly bound to continue the parental tradition, and are doubly criminal if they depart from it. There is no sadder sight than that of a godly father wailing over an ungodly son, unless it be that of the ungodly son who makes him wail. Absalom hanging by his curls in the oak-tree, and David groaning, ‘My son, my son!’ touch all hearts. Alas that the tragedy should be so often repeated in our homes to-day!

27)Proverbs 20:17

Proverbs

BREAD AND GRAVEL

Pro. 20:17.

‘Bread of deceit’ is a somewhat ambiguous phrase, which may mean either of two things, and perhaps means both. It may either mean any good obtained by deceit, or good which deceives in its possession. In the former signification it would appear to have reference primarily to unjustly gotten gain, while in the latter it has a wider meaning and applies to all the worthless treasures and lying delights of life. The metaphor is full of homely vigour, and the contrast between the sweet bread and the gravel that fills the mouth and breaks the teeth, carries a solemn lesson which is perpetually insisted upon in this book of Proverbs, and confirmed in every man’s experience.

I. The first lesson here taught is the perpetuity of the most transient actions.

We are tempted to think that a deed done is done with, and to grasp at momentary pleasure, and ignore its abiding consequences. But of all the delusions by which men are blinded to the true solemnity of life none is more fatal than that which ignores the solemn ‘afterward’s that has to be taken into account. For, whatever issues in outward life our actions may have, they have all a very real influence on their doers; each of them tends to modify character, to form habits, to drag after itself a whole trail of consequences. Each strikes inwards and works outwards. The whole of a life may be set forth in the pregnant figure, ‘A sower went forth to sow,’ and ‘Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.’ The seed may lie long dormant, but the green shoots will appear in due time, and pass through all the stages of ‘first the blade, and then the ear, and after that the full corn in the ear.’ The sower has to become the reaper, and the reaper has to eat of the bread made from the product of the long past sowing. Shall *we* have to reap a harvest of poisonous tares, or of wholesome wheat? ‘If ‘twere done when ‘tis done, ‘twere well it were done quickly’; but since it begins to do when ‘tis done, it were often better that it were not done at all. A momentary pause to ask ourselves when tempted to evil, ‘And what then?’ would burst not a few of the painted bubbles after which we often chase.

Is there any reason to suppose that these permanent consequences of our transient actions are confined in their operation to this life? Does not such a present, which is mainly the continuous result of the whole past, seem at least to prophesy and guarantee a similar future? Most of us, I suppose, believe in the life continuous through and after death retributive in a greater degree than life here. Whatever changes may be involved in the laying aside of the ‘earthly house of this tabernacle,’ it seems folly to suppose that in it we lay aside the consequences of our past inwrought into our very selves. Surely wisdom suggests that we try to take into view the whole scope of our actions, and to carry our vision as far as the consequences reach. We should all be wiser and better if we thought more of the ‘afterwards,’ whether in its partial form in the present, or in its solemn completion in the future beyond.

II. The bitterness of what is sweet and wrong.

There is no need to deny that ‘bread of deceit is sweet to a man.’ There is a certain pleasure in a lie, and the taste of the bread purchased by it is not embittered because it has been bought by deceit. If we succeed in getting the good which any strong desire hungers after, the gratification of the desire ministers pleasure. If a man is hungry, it matters not to his hunger how he has procured the bread which he devours. And so with all forms of good which appeal to sense. The sweetness of the thing desired and obtained is more subtle, but not less real, if it nourishes some inclination or taste of a higher nature. But such sweetness in its very essence is momentary, and even, whilst being masticated, ‘bread of deceit’ turns into gravel; and a mouthful of it breaks the teeth, excoriates the gums, interferes with breathing, and ministers no nourishment. The metaphor has but too familiar illustrations in the experience of us all. How often have we flattered ourselves with the thought, ‘If I could but get this or that, how happy I should be’? How often when we got it have we been as happy as we expected? We had forgotten the voice of conscience, which may be overborne for a moment, but begins to speak more threateningly when its prohibitions have been neglected; we had forgotten that there is no satisfying our hungry desires with ‘bread of deceit,’ but that they grow much faster than it can be presented to them; we had forgotten the evil that was strengthened in us when it has been fed; we had forgotten that the remembrance of past delights often becomes a present sorrow and shame; we had forgotten avenging consequences of many sorts which follow surely in the train of sweet satisfactions which are wrong.

So, even in this life nothing keeps its sweetness which is wrong, and nothing which is sweet and wrong avoids a *tang* of intensest bitterness ‘afterwards.’ And all that bitterness will be increased in another world, if there is another, when God gives us to read the book of our lives which we ourselves have written. Many a page that records past sweetness will then be felt to be written, ‘within and without,’ with lamentation and woe.

All bitterness of what is sweet and wrong makes it certain that sin is the stupidest, as well as the wickedest, thing that a man can do.

III. The abiding sweetness of true bread.

In a subordinate sense, the true bread may be taken as meaning our own deeds inspired by love of God and approved by conscience. They may often be painful to do, but the pain merges into calm pleasure, and conscience whispers a foretaste of heaven's 'Well done! good and faithful servant.' The roll may be bitter to the lips, but, eaten, becomes sweet as honey; whereas the world's bread is sweet at first but bitter at last. The highest wisdom and the most exacting conscience absolutely coincide in that which they prescribe, and Scripture has the warrant of universal experience in proclaiming that sin in its subtler and more refined forms, as well as in its grosser, is a gigantic mistake, and the true wisdom and reasonable regard for one's own interest alike point in the same direction,-to a life based on the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, as being the life which yields the happiest results today and perpetual bliss hereafter. But let us not forget that in the highest sense Christ Himself is the 'true bread that cometh down from heaven.' He may be bitter at first, being eaten with tears of penitence and painful efforts at conquering sin, but even in the first bitterness there is sweetness beyond all the earth can give. He 'spreads a table before us in the presence of our enemies,' and the bread which He gives tastes as the manna of old did, like wafers made of honey. Only perverted appetites loathe this light bread and prefer the strong-favoured leeks and garlics of Egypt. They who sit at the table in the wilderness will finally sit at the table prepared in the kingdom of the heavens.

28)Proverbs 23:15-16

Proverbs

A CONDENSED GUIDE FOR LIFE

Pro. 23:15 - Pro. 23:23.

The precepts of this passage may be said to sum up the teaching of the whole Book of Proverbs. The essentials of moral character are substantially the same in all ages, and these ancient advices fit very close to the young lives of this generation. The gospel has, no doubt, raised the standard of morals, and, in many respects, altered the conception and perspective of virtues; but its great distinction lies, not so much in the novelty of its commandments as in the new motives and powers to obey them. Reverence for parents and teachers, the habitual 'fear of the Lord,' temperance, eager efforts to win and retain 'the truth,' have always been recognised as duties; but there is a long weary distance between recognition and practice, and he who draws inspiration from Jesus Christ will have strength to traverse it, and to do and be what he knows that he should.

The passage may be broken up into four parts, which, taken together, are a young life's directory of conduct which is certain to lead to peace.

I. There is, first, an appeal to filial affection, and an unveiling of paternal sympathy [Pro. 23:15 - Pro. 23:16]. The paternal tone characteristic of the Book of Proverbs is most probably regarded as that of a teacher addressing his disciples as his children. But the glimpse of the teacher's heart here given may well apply to parents too, and ought to be true of all who can influence other and especially young hearts. Little power attends advices which are not sweetened by manifest love. Many a son has been kept back from evil by thinking, 'What would my mother say?' and many a sound admonition has been nothing but sound, because the tone of it betrayed that the giver did not much care whether it was taken or not.

A true teacher must have his heart engaged in his lessons, and must impress his scholars with the conviction that their failure drives a knife into it, and their acceptance of them brings him purest joy. On the other hand, the disciple, and still more the child, must have a singularly cold nature who does not respond to loving solicitude and does not care whether he wounds or gladdens the heart which pours out its love and solicitude over him. May we not see shining through this loving appeal a truth in reference to the heart of the great Father and Teacher, who, in the depths of His divine blessedness, has no greater joy than that His children should walk in the truth? God's heart is glad when man's is wise.

Note, also, the wide general expression for goodness-a wise heart, lips speaking right things. The former is source, the latter stream. Only a pure fountain will send forth sweet waters. ‘If thy heart become wise’ is the more correct rendering, implying that there is no inborn wisdom, but that it must be made ours by effort. We *are* foolish; we *become* wise.

What the writer means by wisdom he will tell us presently. Here he lets us see that it is a good to be attained by appropriate means. It is the foundation of ‘right’ speech. Nothing is more remarkable than the solemn importance which Scripture attaches to words, even more, we might almost say than to deeds, therein reversing the usual estimate of their relative value. Putting aside the cases of insincerity, falsehood, and the like, a man’s speech is a truer transcript of himself than his deeds, because less hindered and limited by externals. The most precious wine drips from the grapes by their own weight in the vat, without a turn of the screw. ‘By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.’ ‘God’s great gift of speech abused’ is one of the commonest, least considered, and most deadly sins.

II. We have next the one broad precept with its sure reward, which underlies all goodness [Pro. 23:17 - Pro. 23:18]. The supplement ‘be thou,’ in the second clause of Pro. 23:17, obscures the close connection of clauses. It is better to regard the verb of the first clause as continued in the second. Thus the one precept is set forth negatively and positively: ‘Strive not after [that is, seek not to imitate or be associated with] sinners, but after the fear of the Lord.’ The heart so striving becomes wise. So, then, wisdom is not the result of cultivating the intellect, but of educating the desires and aspirations. It is moral and religious, rather than simply intellectual. The magnificent personification of Wisdom at the beginning of the book influences the subsequent parts, and the key to understanding that great conception is, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.’ The Greek goddess of Wisdom, noble as she is, is of the earth earthy when contrasted with that sovereign figure. Pallas Athene, with her clear eyes and shining armour, is poor beside the Wisdom of the Book of Proverbs, who dwelt with God ‘or ever the earth was,’ and comes to men with loving voice and hands laden with the gifts of ‘durable riches and righteousness.’

He is the wise man who fears God with the fear which has no torment and is compact of love and reverence. He is on the way to become wise whose seeking heart turns away from evil and evil men, and feels after God, as the vine tendrils after a stay, or as the sunflower turns to the light. For such wholehearted desire after the one supreme good there must be resolute averting of desire from ‘sinners.’ In this world full of evil there will be no vigorous longing for good and God, unless there be determined abstention from the opposite. We have but a limited quantity of energy, and if it is frittered away on multifarious creatures, none will be left to consecrate to God. There are lakes which discharge their waters at both ends, sending one stream east to the Atlantic and one west to the Pacific; but the heart cannot direct its issues of life in that fashion. They must be banked up if they are to run deep and strong. ‘All the current of my being’ must ‘set to thee’ if my tiny trickle is to reach the great ocean, to be lost in which is blessedness.

And such energy of desire and direction is not to be occasional, but ‘all the day long.’ It is possible to make life an unbroken seeking after and communion with God, even while plunged in common tasks and small cares. It is possible to approximate indefinitely to that ideal of continually ‘dwelling in the house of the Lord’; and without some such approximation there will be little realising of the Lord, sought by fits and starts, and then forgotten in the hurry of business or pleasure. A photographic plate exposed for hours will receive the picture of far-off stars which would never show on one exposed for a few minutes.

The writer is sure that such desires will be satisfied, and in Pro. 23:18 says so. The ‘reward’ [Rev. Ver.] of which he is sure is the outcome of the life of such seekers after God. It does not necessarily refer to the future after death, though that may be included in it. But what is meant is that no seeking after the fear of the Lord shall be in vain. There is a tacit emphasis on ‘thy,’ contrasting the sure fulfilment of hopes set on God with the as sure ‘cutting of’ of those mistakenly fixed upon creatures and vanities. Psa. 37:38, has the same word here rendered ‘reward’ and declares that ‘the future [or reward] of the wicked shall be cut off.’ The great fulfilment of this assurance is reserved for the life beyond; but even here among all disappointments and hopes of which fulfilment is so often disappointment also, it remains true that the one striving which cannot be fruitless is striving for more of God, and the one hope which is sure to be realised, and is better when realised than expected, is the hope set on Him. Surely, then, the certainty that if we delight ourselves in God He will give us the desires of our hearts, is a good argument, and should be with us an operative motive for directing desire and effort away from earth and towards Him.

III. Special precepts as to the control of the animal nature follow in Pro. 23:19 - Pro. 23:21. First, note that general one of Pro. 23:19, 'Guide thine heart in the way.' In most general terms, the necessity of self-government is laid down. There is a 'way' in which we should be content to travel. It is a definite path, and feet have to be kept from straying aside to wide wastes on either hand. Limitation, the firm suppression of appetites, the coercing of these if they seek to draw aside, are implied in the very conception of 'the way.' And a man must take the upper hand of himself, and, after all other guidance, must be his own guide; for God guides us by enabling us to guide ourselves.

Temperance in the wider sense of the word is prominent among the virtues flowing from fear of the Lord, and is the most elementary instance of 'guiding the heart.' Other forms of self-restraint in regard to animal appetites are spoken of in the context, but here the two of drunkenness and gluttony are bracketed together. They are similarly coupled in Deu. 21:20, in the formula of accusation which parents are to bring against a degenerate son. Allusion to that passage is probable here, especially as the other crime mentioned in it-namely, refusal to 'hear' parental reproof-is warned against in Pro. 23:22. The picture, then, here is that of a prodigal son, and we have echoes of it in the great parable which paints first riotous living, and then poverty and misery.

Drunkenness had obviously not reached the dimensions of a national curse in the date when this lesson was written. We should not put over-eating side by side with it. But its ruinous consequences were plain then, and the bitter experience of England and America repeats on a larger scale the old lesson that the most productive source of poverty, wretchedness, rags, and vice, is drink. Judges and social reformers of all sorts concur in that now, though it has taken fifty years to hammer it into the public conscience. Perhaps in another fifty or so society may have succeeded in drawing the not very obscure inference that total abstinence and prohibition are wise. At any rate, they who seek after the fear of the Lord should draw it, and act on it.

IV. The last part is in Pro. 23:22 - Pro. 23:23. The appeal to filial duty cannot here refer to disciple and teacher, but to child and parents. It does not stand as an isolated precept, but as underscoring the important one which follows. But a word must be spared for it. The habits of ancient days gave a place to the father and mother which modern family life woefully lacks, and suffers in many ways for want of. Many a parent in these days of slack control and precocious independence might say, ‘If I be a father, where is mine honour?’ There was perhaps not enough of confidence between parent and child in former days, and authority on the one hand and submission on the other too much took the place of love; but nowadays the danger is all the other way-and it is a very real danger.

But the main point here is the earnest exhortation of Pro. 23:23, which, like that to the fear of the Lord, sums up all duty in one. The ‘truth’ is, like ‘wisdom,’ moral and religious, and not merely intellectual. ‘Wisdom’ is subjective, the quality or characteristic of the devout soul; ‘truth’ is objective, and may also be defined as the declared will of God. The possession of truth is wisdom. ‘The entrance of Thy words giveth light.’ It makes wise the simple. There is, then, such a thing as ‘the truth’ accessible to us. We can know it, and are not to be for ever groping amid more or less likely guesses, but may rest in the certitude that we have hold of foundation facts. For us, the truth is incarnate in Jesus, as He has solemnly asserted. That truth we shall, if we are wise, ‘buy,’ by shunning no effort, sacrifice, or trouble needed to secure it.

In the lower meanings of the word, our passage should fire us all, and especially the young, to strain every muscle of the soul in order to make truth for the intellect our own. The exhortation is needed in this day of adoration of money and material good. Nobler and wiser far the young man who lays himself out to know than he who is engrossed with the hungry desire to have! But in the highest region of truth, the buying is ‘without money and without price,’ and all that we can give in exchange is ourselves. We buy the truth when we know that we cannot earn it, and forsaking self-trust and self-pleasing, consent to receive it as a free gift. ‘Sell it not,’-let no material good or advantage, no ease, slothfulness, or worldly success, tempt you to cast it away; for its ‘fruit is better than gold,’ and its ‘revenue than choice silver.’ We shall make a bad bargain if we sell it for anything beneath the stars; for ‘wisdom is better than rubies,’ and he has been cheated in the transaction who has given up ‘the truth’ and got instead ‘the whole world.’

29)Proverbs 23:17-18

Proverbs

A CONDENSED GUIDE FOR LIFE

THE AFTERWARDS AND OUR HOPE

Pro. 23:17 - Pro. 23:18.

The Book of Proverbs seldom looks beyond the limits of the temporal, but now and then the mists lift and a wider horizon is disclosed. Our text is one of these exceptional instances, and is remarkable, not only as expressing confidence in the future, but as expressing it in a very striking way. ‘Surely there is an end,’ says our Authorised Version, substituting in the margin, for end, ‘reward.’ The latter word is placed in the text of the Revised Version. But neither ‘end’ nor ‘reward’ conveys the precise idea. The word so translated literally means ‘something that comes after.’ So it is the very opposite of ‘end’, it is really that which lies beyond the end-the ‘sequel,’ or the ‘future’-as the margin of the Revised Version gives alternatively, or, more simply still, the afterwards. Surely there is an afterwards behind the end. And then the proverb goes on to specify one aspect of that afterwards: ‘Thine expectation’-or, better, because more simply, thy hope-shall not be cut off. And then, upon these two convictions that there is, if I might so say, an afterclap, and that it is the time and the sphere in which the fairest hopes that a man can paint to himself shall be surpassed by the reality, it builds the plain partial exhortation: ‘Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.’

So then, we have three things here, the certainty of the afterwards, the immortality of hope consequent thereon, and the bearing of these facts on the present.

I. The certainty of the hereafter.

Now, this Book of Proverbs, as I have said in the great collection of popular sayings which makes the bulk of it, has no enthusiasm, no poetry, no mysticism. It has religion, and it has a very pure and lofty morality, but, for the most part, it deals with maxims of worldly prudence, and sometimes with cynical ones, and represents, on the whole, the wisdom of the market-place, and the 'man in the street.' But now and then, as I have said, we hear strains of a higher mood. My text, of course, might be watered down and narrowed so as to point only to sequels to deeds realised in this life. And then it would be teaching us simply the very much needed lessons that even in this life, 'Whatever a man soweth that shall he also reap.' But it seems to me that we are entitled to see here, as in one or two other places in the Book of Proverbs, a dim anticipation of a future life beyond the grave. I need not trouble you with quoting parallel passages which are sown thinly up and down the book, but I venture to take the words in the wider sense to which I have referred.

Now, the question comes to be, where did the coiners of Proverbs, whose main interest was in the obvious maxims of a prudential morality, get this conviction? They did not get it from any lofty experience of communion with God, like that which in the seventy-third Psalm marks the very high-water mark of Old Testament faith in regard to a future life, where the Psalmist finds himself so completely blessed and well in present fellowship with God, that he must needs postulate its eternal continuance, and just because he has made God the portion of his heart, and is holding fellowship with Him, is sure that nothing can intervene to break that sweet communion. They did not get it from any clear definite revelation, such as we have in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which has made that future life far more than an inference for us, but they got it from thinking over the facts of this present life as they appeared to them, looked at from the standpoint of a belief in God, and in righteousness. And so they represent to us the impression that is made upon a man's mind, if he has the 'eye that hath kept watch o'er man's mortality,' that is made by the facts of this earthly life-viz. that it is so full of onward-looking, prophetic aspect, so manifestly and tragically, and yet wonderfully and hopefully. Incomplete and fragmentary in itself, that there must be something beyond in order to explain, in order to vindicate, the life that now is. And that aspect of fragmentary incompleteness is what I would insist upon for a moment now.

You sometimes see a row of houses, the end one of them has, in its outer gable wall, bricks protruding here and there, and holes for chimney-pieces that are yet to be put in. And just as surely as that external wall says that the row is half built, and there are some more tenements to be added to it, so surely does the life that we now live here, in all its aspects almost, bear upon itself the stamp that it, too, is but initial and preparatory. You sometimes see, in the bookseller's catalogue, a book put down 'volume one; all that is published.' That is our present life-volume one, all that is published. Surely there is going to be a sequel, volume two. Volume two is due, and will come, and it will be the continuation of volume one.

What is the meaning of the fact that of all the creatures on the face of the earth only you and I, and our brethren and sisters, do not find in our environment enough for our powers? What is the meaning of the fact that, whilst 'foxes have holes' where they curl themselves up, and they are at rest, 'and the birds of the air have roosting-places,' where they tuck their heads beneath their wings and sleep, the 'son of man' hath not where to lay his head, but looks round upon the earth and says, 'The earth, O Lord, is full of Thy mercy. I am a stranger on the earth.' What is the meaning of it? Here is the meaning of it: 'Surely there is a hereafter.'

What is the meaning of the fact that lodged in men's natures there lies that strange power of painting to themselves things that are not as though they were? So that minds and hearts go out wandering through Eternity, and having longings and possibilities which nothing beneath the stars can satisfy, or can develop? The meaning of it is this: Surely there is a hereafter. The man that wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, in his sceptical moment ere he had attained to his last conclusion, says, in a verse that is mistranslated in our rendering, 'He hath set Eternity in their hearts, therefore the misery of man is great upon him.' That is true, because the root of all our unrest and dissatisfaction is that we need God, and God in Eternity, in order that we may be at rest. But whilst on the one hand 'therefore the misery of man is great upon him,' on the other hand, because Eternity is in our hearts, therefore there is the answer to the longings, the adequate sphere for the capacities in that great future, and in the God that fills it. You go into the quarries left by reason of some great convulsion or disaster, by forgotten races, and you will find there half excavated and rounded pillars still adhering to the matrix of the rock from which they were being hewn. Such unfinished abortions are all human lives if, when Death drops its curtain, there is an end.

But, brethren, God does not so clumsily disproportion His creatures and their place. God does not so cruelly put into men longings that have no satisfaction, and desires which never can be filled, as that there should not be, beyond the gulf, the fair land of the hereafter. Every human life obviously has in it, up to the very end, the capacity for progress. Every human life, up to the very end, has been educated and trained, and that, surely, for something. There may be masters in workshops who take apprentices, and teach them their trade during the years that are needed, and then turn round and say, ‘I have no work for you, so you must go and look for it somewhere else.’ That is not how God does. When He has trained His apprentices He gives them work to do. Surely there is a hereafter, But that is only part of what is involved in this thought. It is not only a state subsequent to the present, but it is a state consequent on the present, and the outcome of it. The analogy of our earthly life avails here. To-day is the child of all the yesterdays, and the yesterdays and to-day are the parent of tomorrow. The past, our past, has made us what we are in the present, and what we are in the present is making us what we shall be in the future. And when we pass out of this life we pass out, notwithstanding all changes, the same men as we were. There may be much on the surface changed, there will be much taken away, thank God! dropped, necessarily, by the cessation of the corporeal frame, and the connection into which it brings us with things of sense. There will be much added, God only knows how much, but the core of the man will remain untouched. ‘We all are changed by still degrees,’ and suddenly at last ‘All but the basis of the evil.’ And so we carry ourselves with us into that future life, and, ‘what a man soweth, that shall he also reap.’ Oh that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their afterward!

II. Now, secondly, my text suggests the immortality of hope.

‘Thine expectation’-or rather, as I said, ‘thy hope’-’shall not be cut off.’ This is a characteristic of that hereafter. What a wonderful saying that is which also occurs in this Book of Proverbs, ‘The righteous hath hope in his death.’ Ah! we all know how swiftly, as years increase, the things to hope for diminish, and how, as we approach the end, less and less do our imaginations go out into the possibilities of the sorrowing future. And when the end comes, if there is no afterwards, the dying man’s hopes must necessarily die before he does. If when we pass into the darkness we are going into a cave with no outlet at the other end, then there is no hope, and you may write over it Dante’s grim word: ‘All hope abandon, ye who enter here.’ But let in that thought, ‘surely there is an afterwards,’ and the enclosed cave becomes a rock-passage, in which one can see the arch of light at the far end of the tunnel; and as one passes through the gloom, the eye can travel on to the pale radiance beyond, and anticipate the ampler ether, the diviner air, ‘the brighter constellations burning, mellow moons and happy stars,’ that await us there. ‘The righteous hath hope in his death.’ ‘Thine expectation shall not be cut off.’

But, further, that conviction of the afterward opens up for us a condition in which imagination is surpassed by the wondrous reality. Here, I suppose, nobody ever had all the satisfaction out of a fulfilled hope that he expected. The fish is always a great deal larger and heavier when we see it in the water than when it is lifted out and scaled. And I suppose that, on the whole, perhaps as much pain as pleasure comes from the hopes which are illusions far more often than they are realities. They serve their purpose in whirling us along the path of life and in stimulating effort, but they do not do much more.

But there does come a time, if you believe that there is an afterwards, when all we desired and painted to ourselves of possible good for our craving spirits shall be felt to be but a pale reflex of the reality, like the light of some unrisen sun on the snowfields, and we shall have to say ‘the half was not told to us.’

And, further, if that afterwards is of the sort that we, through Jesus Christ and His resurrection and glory, know to be, then all through the timeless eternity hope will be our guide. For after each fresh influx of blessedness and knowledge we shall have to say ‘it doth not yet appear what we shall be.’ ‘Thus now abideth’-and not only now, but then and eternally-’these three-faith, hope, and charity,' and hope will never be cut off through all the stretch of that great afterwards.

III. And now, finally, notice the bearing of all this on the daily present.

'Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long.' The conviction of the hereafter, and the blessed vision of hopes fulfilled, are not the only reasons for that exhortation. A great deal of harm has been done, I am afraid, by well-meaning preachers who have drawn the bulk of their strongest arguments to persuade men to Christian faith from the thought of a future life. Why, if there were no future, it would be just as wise, just as blessed, just as incumbent upon us to 'be in the fear of the Lord all the day long.' But seeing that there is that future, and seeing that only in it will hope rise to fruition, and yet subsist as longing, surely there comes to us a solemn appeal to 'be in the fear of the Lord all the day long,' which being turned into Christian language, is to live by habitual faith, in communion with, and love and obedience to, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Surely, surely the very climax and bad eminence of folly is shutting the eyes to that future that we all have to face; and to live here, as some of you are doing, ignoring it and God, and cribbing, cabining, and confining all our thoughts within the narrow limits of the things present and visible. For to live so, as our text enjoins, is the sure way, and the only way, to make these great hopes realities for ourselves.

Brethren, that afterwards has two sides to it. The prophet Malachi, in almost his last words, has a magnificent apocalypse of what he calls 'the day of the Lord,' which he sets forth as having a double aspect. On the one hand, it is lurid as a furnace, and burns up the wicked root and branch. I saw a forest fire this last autumn, and the great pine-trees stood there for a moment pyramids of flame, and then came down with a crash. So that hereafter will be to godless men. And on the other side, that 'day of the Lord' in the prophet's vision was radiant with the freshness and dew and beauty of morning, and the Sun of Righteousness arose with healing in his wings. Which of the two is it going to be to us? We have all to face it. We cannot alter that fact, but we can settle how we shall face it. It will be to either the fulfilment of blessed hope, the 'appearance of the glory of the great God and our Saviour,' or else, as is said in this same Book of Proverbs: 'The hope of the godless' shall be like one of those water plants, the papyrus or the flag, which, when the water is taken away, 'withereth up before any other herb.' It is for us to determine whether the afterwards that we must enter upon shall be the land in which our hopes shall blossom and fruit, and blossom again immortally, or whether we shall leave behind us, with all the rest that we would fain keep, the possibility of anticipating any good. 'Surely there is an afterwards,' and if thou wilt 'be in the fear of the Lord all the day long,' then for evermore 'thy hope shall not be cut off.'

30)Proverbs 23:19-23

Proverbs

A CONDENSED GUIDE FOR LIFE

Pro. 23:15 - Pro. 23:23.

The precepts of this passage may be said to sum up the teaching of the whole Book of Proverbs. The essentials of moral character are substantially the same in all ages, and these ancient advices fit very close to the young lives of this generation. The gospel has, no doubt, raised the standard of morals, and, in many respects, altered the conception and perspective of virtues; but its great distinction lies, not so much in the novelty of its commandments as in the new motives and powers to obey them. Reverence for parents and teachers, the habitual 'fear of the Lord,' temperance, eager efforts to win and retain 'the truth,' have always been recognised as duties; but there is a long weary distance between recognition and practice, and he who draws inspiration from Jesus Christ will have strength to traverse it, and to do and be what he knows that he should.

The passage may be broken up into four parts, which, taken together, are a young life's directory of conduct which is certain to lead to peace.

I. There is, first, an appeal to filial affection, and an unveiling of paternal sympathy [Pro. 23:15 - Pro. 23:16]. The paternal tone characteristic of the Book of Proverbs is most probably regarded as that of a teacher addressing his disciples as his children. But the glimpse of the teacher's heart here given may well apply to parents too, and ought to be true of all who can influence other and especially young hearts. Little power attends advices which are not sweetened by manifest love. Many a son has been kept back from evil by thinking, ‘What would my mother say?’ and many a sound admonition has been nothing but sound, because the tone of it betrayed that the giver did not much care whether it was taken or not.

A true teacher must have his heart engaged in his lessons, and must impress his scholars with the conviction that their failure drives a knife into it, and their acceptance of them brings him purest joy. On the other hand, the disciple, and still more the child, must have a singularly cold nature who does not respond to loving solicitude and does not care whether he wounds or gladdens the heart which pours out its love and solicitude over him. May we not see shining through this loving appeal a truth in reference to the heart of the great Father and Teacher, who, in the depths of His divine blessedness, has no greater joy than that His children should walk in the truth? God’s heart is glad when man’s is wise.

Note, also, the wide general expression for goodness-a wise heart, lips speaking right things. The former is source, the latter stream. Only a pure fountain will send forth sweet waters. ‘If thy heart become wise’ is the more correct rendering, implying that there is no inborn wisdom, but that it must be made ours by effort. We *are* foolish; we *become* wise.

What the writer means by wisdom he will tell us presently. Here he lets us see that it is a good to be attained by appropriate means. It is the foundation of ‘right’ speech. Nothing is more remarkable than the solemn importance which Scripture attaches to words, even more, we might almost say than to deeds, therein reversing the usual estimate of their relative value. Putting aside the cases of insincerity, falsehood, and the like, a man’s speech is a truer transcript of himself than his deeds, because less hindered and limited by externals. The most precious wine drips from the grapes by their own weight in the vat, without a turn of the screw. ‘By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.’ ‘God’s great gift of speech abused’ is one of the commonest, least considered, and most deadly sins.

II. We have next the one broad precept with its sure reward, which underlies all goodness [Pro. 23:17 - Pro. 23:18]. The supplement ‘be thou,’ in the second clause of Pro. 23:17, obscures the close connection of clauses. It is better to regard the verb of the first clause as continued in the second. Thus the one precept is set forth negatively and positively: ‘Strive not after [that is, seek not to imitate or be associated with] sinners, but after the fear of the Lord.’ The heart so striving becomes wise. So, then, wisdom is not the result of cultivating the intellect, but of educating the desires and aspirations. It is moral and religious, rather than simply intellectual. The magnificent personification of Wisdom at the beginning of the book influences the subsequent parts, and the key to understanding that great conception is, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.’ The Greek goddess of Wisdom, noble as she is, is of the earth earthy when contrasted with that sovereign figure. Pallas Athene, with her clear eyes and shining armour, is poor beside the Wisdom of the Book of Proverbs, who dwelt with God ‘or ever the earth was,’ and comes to men with loving voice and hands laden with the gifts of ‘durable riches and righteousness.’

He is the wise man who fears God with the fear which has no torment and is compact of love and reverence. He is on the way to become wise whose seeking heart turns away from evil and evil men, and feels after God, as the vine tendrils after a stay, or as the sunflower turns to the light. For such wholehearted desire after the one supreme good there must be resolute averting of desire from ‘sinners.’ In this world full of evil there will be no vigorous longing for good and God, unless there be determined abstention from the opposite. We have but a limited quantity of energy, and if it is frittered away on multifarious creatures, none will be left to consecrate to God. There are lakes which discharge their waters at both ends, sending one stream east to the Atlantic and one west to the Pacific; but the heart cannot direct its issues of life in that fashion. They must be banked up if they are to run deep and strong. ‘All the current of my being’ must ‘set to thee’ if my tiny trickle is to reach the great ocean, to be lost in which is blessedness.

And such energy of desire and direction is not to be occasional, but ‘all the day long.’ It is possible to make life an unbroken seeking after and communion with God, even while plunged in common tasks and small cares. It is possible to approximate indefinitely to that ideal of continually ‘dwelling in the house of the Lord’; and without some such approximation there will be little realising of the Lord, sought by fits and starts, and then forgotten in the hurry of business or pleasure. A photographic plate exposed for hours will receive the picture of far-off stars which would never show on one exposed for a few minutes.

The writer is sure that such desires will be satisfied, and in Pro. 23:18 says so. The 'reward' [Rev. Ver.] of which he is sure is the outcome of the life of such seekers after God. It does not necessarily refer to the future after death, though that may be included in it. But what is meant is that no seeking after the fear of the Lord shall be in vain. There is a tacit emphasis on 'thy,' contrasting the sure fulfilment of hopes set on God with the as sure 'cutting of' of those mistakenly fixed upon creatures and vanities. Psa. 37:38, has the same word here rendered 'reward' and declares that 'the future [or reward] of the wicked shall be cut off.' The great fulfilment of this assurance is reserved for the life beyond; but even here among all disappointments and hopes of which fulfilment is so often disappointment also, it remains true that the one striving which cannot be fruitless is striving for more of God, and the one hope which is sure to be realised, and is better when realised than expected, is the hope set on Him. Surely, then, the certainty that if we delight ourselves in God He will give us the desires of our hearts, is a good argument, and should be with us an operative motive for directing desire and effort away from earth and towards Him.

III. Special precepts as to the control of the animal nature follow in Pro. 23:19 - Pro. 23:21. First, note that general one of Pro. 23:19, 'Guide thine heart in the way.' In most general terms, the necessity of self-government is laid down. There is a 'way' in which we should be content to travel. It is a definite path, and feet have to be kept from straying aside to wide wastes on either hand. Limitation, the firm suppression of appetites, the coercing of these if they seek to draw aside, are implied in the very conception of 'the way.' And a man must take the upper hand of himself, and, after all other guidance, must be his own guide; for God guides us by enabling us to guide ourselves.

Temperance in the wider sense of the word is prominent among the virtues flowing from fear of the Lord, and is the most elementary instance of 'guiding the heart.' Other forms of self-restraint in regard to animal appetites are spoken of in the context, but here the two of drunkenness and gluttony are bracketed together. They are similarly coupled in Deu. 21:20, in the formula of accusation which parents are to bring against a degenerate son. Allusion to that passage is probable here, especially as the other crime mentioned in it-namely, refusal to 'hear' parental reproof-is warned against in Pro. 23:22. The picture, then, here is that of a prodigal son, and we have echoes of it in the great parable which paints first riotous living, and then poverty and misery.

Drunkenness had obviously not reached the dimensions of a national curse in the date when this lesson was written. We should not put over-eating side by side with it. But its ruinous consequences were plain then, and the bitter experience of England and America repeats on a larger scale the old lesson that the most productive source of poverty, wretchedness, rags, and vice, is drink. Judges and social reformers of all sorts concur in that now, though it has taken fifty years to hammer it into the public conscience. Perhaps in another fifty or so society may have succeeded in drawing the not very obscure inference that total abstinence and prohibition are wise. At any rate, they who seek after the fear of the Lord should draw it, and act on it.

IV. The last part is in Pro. 23:22 - Pro. 23:23. The appeal to filial duty cannot here refer to disciple and teacher, but to child and parents. It does not stand as an isolated precept, but as underscoring the important one which follows. But a word must be spared for it. The habits of ancient days gave a place to the father and mother which modern family life woefully lacks, and suffers in many ways for want of. Many a parent in these days of slack control and precocious independence might say, 'If I be a father, where is mine honour?' There was perhaps not enough of confidence between parent and child in former days, and authority on the one hand and submission on the other too much took the place of love; but nowadays the danger is all the other way-and it is a very real danger.

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In the lower meanings of the word, our passage should fire us all, and especially the young, to strain every muscle of the soul in order to make truth for the intellect our own. The exhortation is needed in this day of adoration of money and material good. Nobler and wiser far the young man who lays himself out to know than he who is engrossed with the hungry desire to have! But in the highest region of truth, the buying is ‘without money and without price,’ and all that we can give in exchange is ourselves. We buy the truth when we know that we cannot earn it, and forsaking self-trust and self-pleasing, consent to receive it as a free gift. ‘Sell it not,’-let no material good or advantage, no ease, slothfulness, or worldly success, tempt you to cast it away; for its ‘fruit is better than gold,’ and its ‘revenue than choice silver.’ We shall make a bad bargain if we sell it for anything beneath the stars; for ‘wisdom is better than rubies,’ and he has been cheated in the transaction who has given up ‘the truth’ and got instead ‘the whole world.’

31)Proverbs 23:29-35

Proverbs

THE PORTRAIT OF A DRUNKARD

Pro. 23:29 - Pro. 23:35.

This vivid picture of the effects of drunkenness leaves its sinfulness and its wider consequences out of sight, and fixes attention on the sorry spectacle which a man makes of himself in body and mind when he ‘puts an enemy into his mouth to steal away his brains.’ Disgust and ridicule are both expressed. The writer would warn his ‘son’ by impressing the ugliness and ludicrousness of drunkenness. The argument is legitimate, though not the highest.

The vehement questions poured out on each other's heels in Pro. 23:29 are hot with both loathing and grim laughter. The two words rendered 'woe' and 'sorrow' are unmeaning exclamations, very like each other in sound, and imitating the senseless noises of the drunkard. They express discomfort as a dog might express it. They are howls rather than words. That is one of the prerogatives won by drunkenness,-to come down to the beasts' level, and to lose the power of articulate speech. The quarrelsomeness which goes along with certain stages of intoxication, and the unmeaning maudlin misery and whimpering into which it generally passes, are next coupled together.

Then come a pair of effects on the body. The tipsy man cannot take care of himself, and reeling against obstacles, or falling over them, wounds himself, and does not know where the scratches and blood came from. 'Redness of eyes' is, perhaps, rather 'darkness,' meaning thereby dim sight, or possibly 'black eyes,' as we say,-a frequent accompaniment of drunkenness, and corresponding to the wounds in the previous clause. It is a hideous picture, and one that should be burned in on the imagination of every young man and woman. The liquor-sodden, miserable wrecks that are found in thousands in our great cities, of whom this is a picture, were, most of them, in Sunday-schools in their day. The next generation of such poor creatures are, many of them, in Sunday-schools now, and may be reading this passage to-day.

The answer to these questions has a touch of irony in it. The people who win as their possessions these six precious things have to sit up late to earn them. What a noble cause in which to sacrifice sleep, and turn night into day! And they pride themselves on being connoisseurs in the several vintages; they 'know a good glass of wine when they see it.' What a noble field for investigation! What a worthy use of the faculties of comparison and judgment! And how desirable the prizes won by such trained taste and delicate discrimination!

In Pro. 23:31 - Pro. 23:32 weighty warning and dehortation follow, based in part on the preceding picture. The writer thinks that the only way of sure escape from the danger is to turn away even the eyes from the temptation. He is not contented with saying 'taste not,' but he goes the whole length of ‘look not’; and that because the very sparkle and colour may attract. ‘When it is red’ might perhaps better be rendered ‘when it reddens itself,’ suggesting the play of colour, as if put forth by the wine itself. The word rendered in the Authorised Version and Revised Version ‘colour’ is literally ‘eye,’ and probably means the beaded bubbles winking on the surface. ‘Moveth itself aright’ [Authorised Version] is not so near the meaning as ‘goeth down smoothly’ [Revised Version]. The whole paints the attractiveness to sense of the wine-cup in colour, effervescence, and taste.

And then comes in, with startling abruptness, the end of all this fascination,-a serpent’s bite and a basilisk’s sting. The kind of poisonous snake meant in the last clause of Pro. 23:32 is doubtful, but certainly is one much more formidable than an adder. The serpent’s lithe gracefulness and painted skin hide a fatal poison; and so the attractive wine-cup is sure to ruin those who look on it. The evil consequences are pursued in more detail in what follows.

But here we must note two points. The advice given is to keep entirely away from the temptation. ‘Look not’ is safe policy in regard of many of the snares for young lives that abound in our modern society. It is not at all needful to ‘see life,’ or to know the secrets of wickedness, in order to be wise and good. ‘Simple concerning evil’ is a happier state than to have eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Many a young man has been ruined, body and soul, by a prurient curiosity to know what sort of life dissipated men and women led, or what sort of books they were against which he was warned, or what kind of a place a theatre was, and so on. Eyes are greedy, and there is a very quick telephone from them to the desires. ‘The lust of the eye’ soon fans the ‘lust of the flesh’ into a glow. There are plenty of depths of Satan gaping for young feet; and on the whole, it is safer and happier not to know them, and so not to have defiling memories, nor run the risk of falling into fatal sins. Whether the writer of this stern picture of a drunkard was a total abstainer or not, the spirit of his counsel not to ‘look on the wine’ is in full accord with that practice. It is very clear that if a man is a total abstainer, he can never be a drunkard. As much cannot be said of the moderate man.

Note too, how in all regions of life, the ultimate results of any conduct are the important ones. Consequences are hard to calculate, and they do not afford a good guidance for action. But there are many lines of conduct of which the consequences are not hard to calculate, but absolutely certain. It is childish to take a course because of a moment's gratification at the beginning, to be followed by protracted discomfort afterwards. To live for present satisfaction of desires, and to shut one's eyes tight against known and assured results of an opposite sort, cannot be the part of a sensible man, to say nothing of a religious one. So moralists have been preaching ever since there was such a thing as temptation in the world; and men have assented to the common sense of the teaching, and then have gone straight away and done the exact opposite.

'What shall the end be?' ought to be the question at every beginning. If we would cultivate the habit of holding present satisfactions in suspense, and of giving no weight to present advantages until we saw right along the road to the end of the journey, there would be fewer failures, and fewer weary, disenchanted old men and women, to lament that the harvest they had to reap and feed on was so bitter. There are other and higher reasons against any kind of fleshly indulgence than that at the last it bites like a serpent, and with a worse poison than serpent's sting ever darted; but that is a reason, and young hearts, which are by their very youth blessedly unused to look forward, will be all the happier to-day, and all the surer of to-morrow's good, if they will learn to say, 'And afterwards-what?' The passage passes to a renewed description of the effects of intoxication, in which the disgusting and the ludicrous aspects of it are both made prominent. Pro. 23:33 seems to describe the excited imagination of the drunkard, whose senses are no longer under his control, but play him tricks that make him a laughingstock to sober people. One might almost take the verse to be a description of delirium tremens. 'Strange things' are seen, and perverse things [that is, unreal, or ridiculous] are stammered out. The writer has a keen sense of the humiliation to a man of being thus the fool of his own bewildered senses, and as keen a one of the absurd spectacle he presents; and he warns his 'son' against coming down to such a depth of degradation.

It may be questioned whether the boasted quickening and brightening effects of alcohol are not always, in a less degree, that same beguiling of sense and exciting of imagination which, in their extreme form, make a man such a pitiable and ridiculous sight. It is better to be dull and see things as they are, than to be brilliant and see things larger, brighter, or any way other than they are, because we see them through a mist. Imagination set agoing by such stimulus, will not work to as much purpose as if aroused by truth. God's world, seen by sober eyes, is better than rosy dreams of it. If we need to draw our inspiration from alcohol, we had better remain uninspired. If we desire to know the naked truth of things, the less we have to do with strong drink the better. Clear eyesight and self-command are in some degree impaired by it always. The earlier stages are supposed to be exhilaration, increased brilliancy of fancy and imagination, expanded good-fellowship, and so on. The latter stages are these in our passage, when strange things dance before cheated eyes, and strange words speak themselves out of lips which their owner no longer controls. Is that a condition to be sought after? If not, do not get on to the road that leads to it.

Pro. 23:34 adds another disgusting and ridiculous trait. A man who should try to lie down and go to sleep in the heart of the sea or on the masthead of a ship would be a manifest fool, and would not keep life in him for long. One has seen drunken men laying themselves down to sleep in places as exposed and as ridiculous as these; and one knows the look of the heavy lump of insensibility lying helpless on public roads, or on railway tracks, or anywhere where the fancy took him. The point of the verse seems to be the drunken man's utter loss of sense of fitness, and complete incapacity to take care of himself. He cannot estimate dangers. The very instinct of self-preservation has forsaken him. There he lies, though as sure to be drowned as if he were in the depth of the sea, though on as uncomfortable a bed as if he were rocking on a masthead, where he could not balance himself.

The torpor of Pro. 23:34 follows on the unnatural excitement of Pro. 23:33, as, in fact, the bursts of uncontrolled energy in which the man sees and says strange things, are succeeded by a collapse. One moment raging in excitement caused by imaginary sights, the next huddled together in sleep like death,-what a sight the man is! The teacher here would have his 'son' consider that he may come to that, if he looks on the wine-cup. '*Thou* shalt be' so and so. It is very impolite, but very necessary, to press home the individual application of pictures like this, and to bid bright young men and women look at the wretched creatures they may see hanging about liquor shops, and remember that they may come to be such as these.

Pro. 23:35 finishes the picture. The tipsy man’s soliloquy puts the copestone on his degradation. He has been beaten, and never felt it. Apparently he is beginning to stir in his sleep, though not fully awake; and the first thing he discovers when he begins to feel himself over is that he has been beaten and wounded, and remembers nothing about it. A degrading anaesthetic is drink. Better to bear all ills than to drown them by drowning consciousness. There is no blow which a man cannot bear better if he holds fast by God’s hand and keeps himself fully exposed to the stroke, than if he sought a cowardly alleviation of it, softer the drunkard’s fashion.

But the pains of his beating and the discomforts of his waking do not deter the drunkard. ‘When shall I awake?’ He is not fully awake yet, so as to be able to get up and go for another drink. He is in the stage of feeling sorry for himself, and examining his bruises, but he wishes he were able to shake off the remaining drowsiness, that he might ‘seek yet again’ for his curse. The tyranny of desire, which wakes into full activity before the rest of the man does, and the enfeebled will, which, in spite of all bruises and discomforts, yields at once to the overmastering desire, make the tragedy of a drunkard’s life. There comes a point in lives of fleshly indulgence in which the craving seems to escape from the control of the will altogether. Doctors tell us that the necessity for drink becomes a physical disease. Yes; but it is a disease manufactured by the patient, and he is responsible for getting himself into such a state.

This tragic picture proves that there were many originals of it in the days when it was painted. Probably there are far more, in proportion to population, in our times. The warning it peals out was never more needed than now. Would that all preachers, parents, and children laid it to heart and took the advice not even to ‘look upon the wine’!

32)Proverbs 24:11-12

THE CRIME OF NEGLIGENCE

Pro. 24:11 - Pro. 24:12.

What is called the missionary spirit is nothing else than the Christian church working in a particular direction. If a man has a conviction, the health of his own soul, his reverence for the truth he has learnt to love, his necessary connection with other men, make it a duty, a necessity, and a joy to tell what he has heard, and to speak what he believes. On these common grounds rests the whole obligation of Christ's followers to speak the Gospel which they have received; only the obligation presses on them with greater force because of the higher worth of the word and the deeper misery of men without it. The text contains nothing specially bearing on Christian missions, but it deals with the fault which besets us all in our relations and in life: and the wholesome truths which it utters apply to our duties in regard to Christian missions because they apply to our duties in regard to every misery within our reach. They speak of the murderous cruelty and black sin of negligence to save any whom we can help from any sort of misery which threatens them. They appear to me to suggest four thoughts which I would now deal with:-

I. The crime of negligence.

Not to use any power is a sin; to omit to do anything that we can do is a crime: to withhold a help that we can render is to participate in the authorship of all the misery that we have failed to relieve. He who neglects to save a life, kills. There are more murderers than those who lift violent hands with malice aforethought against a hated life. Rulers or communities who leave people uncared for to die, who suffer swarming millions to live where the air is poison and the light is murky, and first the soul and then the body, are dwarfed and die; the incompetent men in high places, and the indolent ones in low, whose selfishness brings, and whose blundering blindness allows to continue, the conditions that are fatal to life-on these the guilt of blood lies. Violence slays its thousands, but supine negligence slays its tens of thousands.

And when we pass from these merely physical conditions to think of the world and of the Church in the world, where shall we find words weighty and burning enough to tell what fatal cruelty lies in the unthinking negligence so characteristic of large portions of Christ's professed followers? There is nothing which the ordinary type of Christian, so called, more needs than to be aroused to a living sense of personal responsibility for all the unalleviated misery of the world. For every one who has laid the sorrows of humanity on his heart, and has felt them in any measure as his own, there are a hundred to whom these make no appeal and give no pang. Within ear-shot of our churches and chapels there are squalid aggregations of stunted and festering manhood, of whom it is only too true that they are 'drawn unto death' and 'ready to be slain,' and yet it would be an exaggeration to say that the bulk of our congregations cast even a languid eye of compassion upon those, to say nothing of stretching out a hand to help. It needs to be dinned, far more than it is at present, into every professing Christian that each of us has an obligation which cannot be ignored or shuffled off, to acquaint ourselves with the glaring facts that force themselves upon all thoughtful men, and that the measure of our power is the measure of our obligation. The question, Has the church done its best to deliver these? needs to be sharpened to the point of 'Have I done my best?' And the vision of multitudes perishing in the slums of a great city needs to be expanded into the vision of dim millions perishing in the wide world.

II. The excuse of negligence.

The shuffling plea, 'Behold we knew it not,' is a cowardly lie. It admits the responsibility to knowledge and pretends an ignorance which it knows to be partly a false excuse, and in so far as it is true, to be our own fault. We are bound to know, and the most ignorant of us does know, and cannot help knowing, enough to condemn our negligence. How many of us have ever tried to find out how the pariahs of civilisation live who live beside us? Our ignorance so far as it is real is the result of a sinful indolence. And there is a sadder form of it in an ignorance which is the result of familiarity. We all know how custom dulls our impressions. It is well that it should be so, for a surgeon would be fit for little if he trembled and was shaken at the sight of the tumour he had to work to remove, as we should be; but his familiarity with misery does not harden him, because he seeks to remove the suffering with which he has become familiar. But that same familiarity does harden and injure the whole nature of the onlooker who does nothing to alleviate it. Then there is an ignorance of other suffering which is the result of selfish absorption in one’s own concerns. The man who is caring for himself only, and whose thoughts and feelings all flow in the direction of his own success, may see spread before him the most poignant sorrows without feeling one throb of brotherly compassion and without even being aware of what his eyes see. So, in so far as the excuse ‘we knew it not’ is true, it is no excuse, but an indictment. It lays bare the true reason of the criminal negligence as being a yet more criminal callousness as to the woe and loss in which such crowds of men whom we ought to recognise as brethren are sunken.

III. The condemnation of negligence.

The great example of God is put forward in the text as the contrast to all this selfish negligence. Note the twofold description of Him given here, ‘He that pondereth the heart,’ and ‘He that keepeth thy soul.’ The former of these presents to us God’s sedulous watching of the hearts of men, in contrast to our indolent and superficial looks; and in this divine attitude we find the awful condemnation of our disregard of our fellows. God ‘takes pain,’ so to speak, to see after His children. Are they not bound to look lovingly on each other? God seeks to know them. Are they not bound to know one another? Lofty disregard of human suffering is not *God’s* way. Is it ours? He ‘looks down from the height of His sanctuary to hear the crying of the prisoner.’ Should not we stoop from our mole-hill to see it? God has not too many concerns on His hands to mark the obscurest sorrow and be ready to help it. And shall we plead that we are too busy with petty personal concerns to take interest in helping the sorrows and fighting against the sins of the world?

No less eloquently does the other name which is here applied to God rebuke our negligence. ‘He preserveth thy soul.’ By His divine care and communication of life, we live; and surely the soul thus preserved is thereby bound to be a minister of preservation to all that are ‘ready to be slain.’ The strongest motive for seeking to save others is that God has saved us. Thus this name for God touches closely upon the great Christian thought, ‘Christ has given Himself for me.’ And in that thought we find the true condemnation of a Christianity which has not caught from Him the enthusiasm for self-surrender, and the passion for saving the outcast and forlorn. If to be a Christian is to imitate Christ, then the name has little application to those who see ‘them that are drawn to death,’ and turn from them unconcerned and unconscious of responsibility.

IV. The judgment of negligence.

‘Doth not He render to every man according to his works?’ There is such a judgment both in the present and in the future for Christian men as for others. And not only what they do, but what they inconsistently fail to do, comes into the category of their works, and influences their position. It does so in the present, for no man can cherish such a maimed Christian life as makes such negligence possible without robbing himself of much that would tend to his own growth in grace and likeness to Jesus Christ. The unfaithful servant is poorer by the pound hidden in the napkin which might all the while have been laid out at interest with the money-changers, which would have increased the income whilst the lord was absent. We rob ourselves of blessed sympathies and of the still more blessed joy of service, and of the yet more blessed joy of successful effort, by our indolence and our negligence. Let us not forget that our works do follow us in this life as in the life to come, and that it is here as well as hereafter, that he that goeth forth with a full basket and scatters the precious seed with weeping, and yet with joy, shall doubtless come again bringing his sheaves with him. And if we stretch our view to take in the life beyond, what gladness can match that of the man who shall enter there with some who will be his joy and crown of rejoicing in that day, and of whom he shall be able to say, ‘Behold I and the children whom Thou hast given me!’

I venture earnestly to appeal to all my hearers for more faithful discharge of this duty. I pray you to open your ears to hear, and your eyes to see, and your hearts to feel, and last of all, your hands to help, the miseries of the world. Solemn duties wait upon great privileges. It is an awful trust to have Christ and His gospel committed to our care. We get it because from One who lived no life of luxurious ease, but felt all the woes of humanity which He redeemed, and forbore not to deliver us from death, though at the cost of His own. We get it for no life of silken indolence or selfish disregard of the sorrows of our brethren. If there is one tear we could have dried and didn’t, or one wound we could have healed and didn’t, that is a sin; if we could have lightened the great heap of sorrow by one grain and didn’t, that is a sin; and if there be one soul that perishes which we might have saved and didn't, the negligence is not merely the omission of a duty, but the doing of a deed which will be 'rendered to us according to our works.'

33)Proverbs 24:30-31

Proverbs

THE SLUGGARD'S GARDEN

Pro. 24:30 - Pro. 24:31.

This picture of the sluggard's garden seems to be intended as a parable. No doubt its direct simple meaning is full of homely wisdom in full accord with the whole tone of the Book of Proverbs; but we shall scarcely do justice to this saying of the wise if we do not see in 'the ground grown over with thorns,' and 'the stone wall thereof broken down,' an apologue of the condition of a soul whose owner has neglected to cultivate and tend it.

I. Note first who the slothful man is.

The first plain meaning of the word is to be kept in view. The whole Book of Proverbs brands laziness as the most prolific source of poverty. Honest toil is to it the law of life. It is never weary of reiterating 'In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat bread'; and it condemns all swift modes of getting riches without labour. No doubt the primitive simplicity of life as set forth in this book seems far behind the many ingenuities by which in our days the law is evaded. How much of Stock Exchange speculation and 'Company promoter's gambling would survive the application of the homely old law?

But it is truer in the inward life than in the outward that 'the hand of the diligent maketh rich.' After all, the differences between men who truly 'succeed' and the human failures, which are so frequent, are more moral than intellectual. It has been said that genius is, after all, 'the capacity for taking infinite pains'; and although that is an exaggerated statement, and an incomplete analysis, there is a great truth in it, and it is the homely virtue of hard work which tells in the long run, and without which the most brilliant talents effect but little. However gifted a man may be, he will be a failure if he has not learned the great secret of dogged persistence in often unwelcomed toil. No character worth building up is built without continuous effort. If a man does not labour to be good, he will surely become bad. It is an old axiom that no man attains superlative wickedness all at once, and most certainly no man leaps to the height of the goodness possible to his nature by one spring. He has laboriously, and step by step, to climb the hill. Progress in moral character is secured by long-continued walking upwards, not by a jump.

We note that in our text ‘the slothful’ is paralleled by ‘the man void of understanding’; and the parallel suggests the stupidity in such a world as this of letting ourselves develop according to whims, or inclinations, or passions; and also teaches that ‘understanding’ is meant to be rigidly and continuously brought to bear on actions as director and restrainer. If the ship is not to be wrecked on the rocks or to founder at sea, Wisdom’s hand must hold the helm. Diligence alone is not enough unless directed by ‘understanding.’

II. What comes of sloth.

The description of the sluggard’s garden brings into view two things, the abundant, because unchecked, growth of profitless weeds, and the broken down stone wall. Both of these results are but too sadly and evidently true in regard to every life where rigid and continuous control has not been exercised. It is a familiar experience known, alas! to too many of us, that evil things, of which the seeds are in us all, grow up unchecked if there be not constant supervision and self-command. If we do not carefully cultivate our little plot of garden ground, it will soon be overgrown by weeds. ‘Ill weeds grow apace’ as the homely wisdom of common experience crystallises into a significant proverb. And Jesus has taught the sadder truth that ‘thorns spring up and choke the word and it becometh unfruitful.’ In the slothful man’s soul evil will drive out good as surely as in the struggle for existence the thorns and nettles will cover the face of the slothful man’s garden. In country places we sometimes come across a ruined house with what was a garden round it, and here and there still springs up a flower seeking for air and light in the midst of a smothering mass of weeds. *They* needed no kindly gardener’s hand to make them grow luxuriantly; can barely put out a pale petal unless cared for and guarded.

But not only is there this unchecked growth, but ‘the stone wall thereof was broken down.’ The soul was unfenced. The solemn imperative of duty ceases to restrain or to impel in proportion as a man yields slothfully to the baser impulses of his nature. Nothing is hindered from going out of, nor for coming into, an unfenced soul, and he that ‘hath no rule over his own spirit,’ but is like a ‘city broken down without walls,’ is certain sooner or later to let much go forth from that spirit that should have bean rigidly shut up, and to let many an enemy come in that will capture the city. It is not yet safe to let any of the fortifications fall into disrepair, and they can only be kept in their massive strength by continuous vigilance.

III. How sloth excuses itself.

Our text is followed at the distance of one verse with what seemed to be the words of the sluggard in answer to the attempt to awake him: ‘Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep.’ They are a quotation from an earlier chapter [Pro. 6:1 - Pro. 6:35] where ‘His Laziness’ is sent to ‘consider the ways of the ant and be wise.’ They are a drowsy petition which does not dispute the wisdom of the call to awake, but simply craves for a little more luxurious laziness from which he has unwillingly been aroused. And is it not true that we admit too late the force of the summons and yet shrink from answering it? Do we not cheat ourselves and try to deceive God with the promise that we will set about amendment soon? This indolent sleeper asks only for a *little*: ‘A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep.’ Do we not all know that mood of mind which confesses our slothfulness and promises to be wide awake tomorrow but would fain bargain to be left undisturbed today? The call ‘Awake thou that sleepest and arise from the dead!’ rings from Christ’s lips in the ears of every man, and he who answers, ‘I will presently, but must sleep a little longer,’ may seem to himself to have complied with the call, but has really refused it. The ‘little more’ generally becomes *much* more; and the answer ‘presently’ alas! too often becomes the answer ‘never.’ When a man is roused so as to be half awake, the only safety for him is *immediately* to rise and clothe himself; the head that drowsily droops back on the pillow after he has heard the morning’s call, is likely to lie there long. Now, not ‘by-and-by’ is the time to shake off the bonds of sloth to cultivate our garden.

IV. How sloth ends.

The sleeper's slumber is dramatically represented as being awakened by armed robbers who bring a grim awakening. 'Poverty' and 'want' break in on his 'folding hands to sleep.' That is true as regards the outward life, where indulgence in literal slothfulness brings want, and the whole drift of things executes on the sluggard the sentence that if 'any man will not work, neither shall he eat.'

But the picture is more sadly and fatally true concerning the man who has made his earthly life 'a little sleep' as concerns heavenly things, and in spite of his beseechings, is roused to life and consciousness of himself and of God by death. That man's 'poverty' in his lack of all that is counted as wealth in the world of realities to which he goes will indeed come as a robber. I would press upon you all the plain question, Is this fatal slothfulness characteristic of me? It may co-exist with, and indeed is often the consequence of vehement energy and continuous work to secure wealth, or wisdom, or material good; and the contrast between a man who is all eagerness in regard to the things that don't matter, and all carelessness in regard to the things that do, is the tragedy of life amongst us. My friend! if *your* garden has been suffered by you to be overgrown with weeds, be sure of this, that one day you will be awakened from the slumber that you would fain continue, and will find yourself in a life where your 'poverty' will come as a robber and your want of all which *there* is counted treasure 'as an armed man.'

One word more. Christ's parable of the sower may be brought into relationship with this parable. He sows the true seed in our hearts, but when sown, it, too, has to be cared for and tended. If it is sown in the sluggard's garden, it will bring forth few ears, and the tares will choke the wheat.

34)Proverbs 25:28

Proverbs

AN UNWALLED CITY

Pro. 25:28.

The text gives us a picture of a state of society when an unwalled city is no place for men to dwell in. In the Europe of today there are still fortified places, but for the most part, battlements are turned into promenades; the gateways are gateless; the sweet flowers blooming where armed feet used to tread; and men live securely without bolts and bars. But their spirits cannot yet afford to raise their defences and fling themselves open to all comers.

We may see here three points: the city defenceless, or human nature as it is; the city defended, human nature as it may be in Christ; the city needing no defence, human nature as it will be in heaven.

I. The city defenceless, or human nature as it is.

Here we are in a state of warfare which calls for constant shutting out of enemies. Temptations are everywhere; our foes compass us like bees; evils of many sorts seduce. We can picture to ourselves some little garrison holding a lonely outpost against lurking savages ready to attack if ever the defenders slacken their vigilance for a moment. And that is the truer picture of human nature as it is than the one by which most men are deluded. Life is not a playground, but an arena of grim, earnest fighting. No man does right in his sleep; no man does right without a struggle.

The need for continual vigilance and self-control comes from the very make of our souls, for our nature is not a democracy, but a kingdom. In us all there are passions, desires, affections, all of which may lead to vice or to virtue: and all of which evidently call out for direction, for cultivation, and often for repression. Then there are peculiarities of individual character which need watching lest they become excessive and sinful. Further, there are qualities which need careful cultivation and stimulus to bring them into due proportion. We each of us receive, as it were, an undeveloped self, and have entrusted to us potential germs which come to nothing, or shoot up with a luxuriance that stifles unless we exercise a controlling power. Besides all this, we all carry in us tendencies which are positively, and only, sinful. There would be no temptation if there were no such.

But the slightest inspection of our own selves clearly points out, not only what in us needs to be controlled, but that in us which is *meant* to control.

The will is regal; conscience is meant to govern the will, and its voice is but the echo of God's law.

But, while all this is true, it is too sadly true that the accomplishment of this ideal is impossible in our own strength. Our own sad experience tells us that we cannot govern ourselves; and our observations of our brethren but too surely indicate that they too are the prey of rebellious, anarchical powers within, and of temptations, against the rush of which they and we are as powerless as a voyager in a bark-canoe, caught in the fatal drift of Niagara. Conscience has a voice, but no hands; it can speak, but if its voice fails, it cannot hold us back. From its chair it can bid the waves breaking at our feet roll back, as the Saxon king did, but their tossing surges are deaf. As helpless as the mud walls of some Indian hill-fort against modern artillery, is the defence, in one's own strength, of one's own self against the world. We would gladly admit that the feeblest may do much to 'keep himself unspotted from the world'; but we must, if we recognise facts, confess that the strongest cannot do all. No man can alone completely control his own nature; no man, unenlightened by God, has a clear, full view of duty, nor a clear view of himself. Always there is some unguarded place:

'Unless above himself he can
Erect himself, how mean a thing is man!'

but no man can so lift himself so as that self will not drag him down. The walls are broken down and the troops of the spoilers sack the city.

II. The defended city, or human nature as it may be in Christ.

If our previous remarks are true, they give us material for judging how far the counsels of some very popular moral teachers should be followed. It is a very old advice, 'know thyself; and it is a very modern one that

'Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control
Lead life to sovereign power.'

But if these counsels are taken absolutely and without reference to Christ and His work, they are 'counsels of despair,' demanding what we cannot give, and promising what they cannot bestow. When we know Christ, we shall know ourselves; when He is the self of ourselves, then, and only then, shall we reverence and can we control the inner man. The city of Mansoul will then be defended when ‘the peace of God keeps our hearts and minds in Jesus.’

He who submits himself to Christ is lord of himself as none else are. He has a light within which teaches him what is sin. He has a love within which puts out the flame of temptation, as the sun does a coal fire. He has a motive to resist; he has power for resistance; he has hope in resisting. Only thus are the walls broken down rebuilded. And as Christ builds our city on firmer foundations, He will appear in His glory, and will ‘lay the windows in agates, and all thy borders in precious stones.’ The sure way to bring our ruined earth, ‘without form and void,’ into a cosmos of light and beauty, is to open our spirit for the Spirit of God to ‘brood upon the face of the waters.’ Otherwise the attempts to rule over our own spirit will surely fail; but if we let Christ rule over our spirit, then it will rule itself.

But let us ever remember that he who thus submits to Christ, and can truly say, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in *me*,’ still needs defence. The strife does not thereby cease; the enemies still swarm; sin is not removed. There will be war to the end, and war for ever; but He will ‘keep our heads in the day of battle’; and though often we may be driven from the walls, and outposts may be lost, and gaping breaches made, yet the citadel shall be safe. If only we see to it that ‘*He* is the glory in the midst of us,’ He will be ‘a wall of fire round about us.’ Our nature as it may be in Christ is a walled city as needing defence, and as possessing the defence which it needs.

III. The city defenceless, and needing no defence; that is, human nature as it will be hereafter.

‘The gates shall not be shut day nor night,’ for ‘every thing that defileth’ is without. We know but little of that future, what we know will, surely, be theirs who here have been ‘guarded by the power of God, through faith, unto salvation.’ That salvation will bring with it the end for the need of guardianship; though it leaves untouched the blessed dependence, we shall stand secure when it is impossible to fall. And that impossibility will be realised, partly, as we know, from change in surroundings, partly from the dropping away of flesh, partly from the entire harmony of our souls with the will of God. Our ignorance of that future is great, but our knowledge of it is greater, and our certainty of it is greatest of all.

This is what we may become. Dear friends! toil no longer at the endless, hopeless task of ruling those turbulent souls of yours; you can never rebuild the walls already fallen. Give up toiling to attain calmness, peace, self-command. Let Christ do all for you, and let Him in to dwell in you and be all to you. Builded on the true Rock, we shall stand stately and safe amid the din of war. He will watch over us and dwell in us, and we shall be as 'a city set on a hill,' impregnable, a virgin city. So may it be with each of us while strife shall last, and hereafter we may quietly hope to be as a city without walls, and needing none; for they that hated us shall be far away, for between us and them is 'a great gulf fixed,' so that they cannot cross it to disturb us any more; and we shall dwell in the city of God, of which the name is Salem, the city of peace, whose King is Himself, its Defender and its Rock, its Fortress and its high Tower.

35)Proverbs 27:3

Proverbs

THE WEIGHT OF SAND

Pro. 27:3.

This Book of Proverbs has a very wholesome horror of the character which it calls 'a fool'; meaning thereby, not so much intellectual feebleness as moral and religious obliquity, which are the stupidest things that a man can be guilty of. My text comes from a very picturesque and vivid description, by way of comparison, of the fatal effects of such a man's passion. The proverb-maker compares two heavy things, stones and sand, and says that they are feathers in comparison with the immense lead-like weight of such a man's wrath.

Now I have nothing more to do with the immediate application of my text. I want to make a parable out of it. What is lighter than a grain of sand? What is heavier than a bagful of it? As the grains fall one by one, how easily they can be blown away! Let them gather, and they bury temples, and crush the solid masonry of pyramids. ‘Sand is weighty.’ The accumulation of light things is overwhelmingly ponderous. Are there any such things in our lives? If there are, what ought we to do? So you get the point of view from which I want to look at the words of our text.

I. The first suggestion that I make is that they remind us of the supreme importance of trifles.

If trivial acts are unimportant, what signifies the life of man? For ninety-nine and a half per cent. of every man’s life is made up of these light nothings; and unless there is potential greatness in them, and they are of importance, then life is all ‘a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’ Small things make life; and if are small, then *it* is so too.

But remember, too, that the supreme importance of so-called trivial actions is seen in this, that there may be every bit as much of the noblest things that belong to humanity condensed in, and brought to bear upon, the veriest trifle that a man can do, as on the greatest things that he can perform. We are very poor judges of what is great and what is little. We have a very vulgar estimate that noise and notoriety and the securing of, not *great* but ‘big,’ results of a material kind make the deeds by which they are secured, great ones. And we think that it is the quiet things, those that do not tell outside at all, that are the small ones.

Well! here is a picture for you. Half-a-dozen shabby, travel-stained Jews, sitting by a river-side upon the grass, talking to a handful of women outside the gates of a great city. Years before that, there had been what the world calls a great event, almost on the same ground-a sanguinary fight, that had settled the emperorship of the then civilised world, for a time. I want to know whether the first preaching of the Gospel in Europe by the Apostle Paul, or the battle of Philippi, was the great event, and which of the two was the little one. I vote for the Jews on the grass, and let all the noise of the fight, though it reverberated through the world for a bit, die away, as ‘a little dust that rises up, and is lightly laid again.’ Not the noisy events are the great ones; and as much true greatness may be manifested in a poor woman stitching in her garret as in some of the things that have rung through the world and excited all manner of vulgar applause. Trifles may be, and often are, the great things in life.

And then remember, too, how the most trivial actions have a strange knack of all at once leading on to large results, beyond what could have been expected. A man shifts his seat in a railway carriage, from some passing whim, and five minutes afterwards there comes a collision, and the bench where he had been sitting is splintered up, and the place where he is sitting is untouched, and the accidental move has saved his life. According to the old story a boy, failing in applying for a situation, stoops down in the courtyard and picks up a pin, and the millionaire sees him through the window, and it makes his fortune. We cannot tell what may come of anything; and since we do not know the far end of our deeds, let us be quite sure that we have got the near end of them right. Whatever may be the issue, let us look after the motive, and then all will be right. Small seeds grow to be great trees, and in this strange and inexplicable network of things which men call circumstances, and Christians call Providence, the only thing certain is that ‘great’ and ‘small’ all but cease to be a tenable, and certainly altogether cease to be an important distinction.

Then another thing which I would have you remember is, that it is these trivial actions which, in their accumulated force, make character. Men are not made by crises. The crises reveal what we have made ourselves by the trifles. The way in which we do the little things forms the character according to which we shall act when the great things come. If the crew of a man-of-war were not exercised at boat and fire drill during many a calm day, when all was safe, what would become of them when tempests were raging, or flames breaking through the bulk-heads? It is no time to learn drill then. And we must make our characters by the way in which, day out and day in, we do little things, and find in them fields for the great virtues which will enable us to front the crises of our fate unblenching, and to master whatsoever difficulties come in our path. Geologists nowadays distrust, for the most part, theories which have to invoke great forces in order to mould the face of a country. They tell us that the valley, with its deep sides and wide opening to the sky, may have been made by the slow operation of a tiny brooklet that trickles now down at its base, and by erosion of the atmosphere. So we shape ourselves-and that is a great thing-by the way we do small things.

Therefore, I say to you, dear friends! think solemnly and reverently of this awful life of ours. Clear your minds of the notion that anything is small which offers to you the alternative of being done in a right way or in a wrong; and recognise this as a fact-'sand is weighty,' trifles are of supreme importance.

II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to take this saying as suggesting the overwhelming weight of small sins.

That is only an application in one direction of the general principle that I have been trying to lay down; but it is one of such great importance that I wish to deal with it separately. And my point is this, that the accumulated pressure upon a man of a multitude of perfectly trivial faults and transgressions makes up a tremendous aggregate that weighs upon him with awful ponderousness.

Let me remind you, to begin with, that, properly speaking, the words 'great' and 'small' should not be applied in reference to things about which 'right' or 'wrong' are the proper words to employ. Or, to put it into plainer language, it is as absurd to talk about the 'size' of a sin, as it is to take the superficial area of a picture as a test of its greatness. The magnitude of a transgression does not depend on the greatness of the act which transgresses-according to human standards-but on the intensity with which the sinful element is working in it. For acts make crimes, but motives make sins. If you take a bit of prussic acid, and bruise it down, every little microscopic fragment will have the poisonous principle in it; and it is very irrelevant to ask whether it is as big as a mountain or small as a grain of dust, it is poison all the same. So to talk about magnitude in regard to sins, is rather to introduce a foreign consideration. But still, recognising that there is a reality in the distinction that people make between great sins and small ones, though it is a superficial distinction, and does not go down to the bottom of things, let us deal with it now.

I say, then, that small sins, by reason of their numerousness, have a terrible accumulative power. They are like the green flies on our rose-bushes, or the microbes that our medical friends talk so much about nowadays. Like them, their power of mischief does not in the least degree depend on their magnitude, and like them, they have a tremendous capacity of reproduction. It would be easier to find a man that had not done any one sin than to find out a man that had only done it once. And it would be easier to find a man that had done no evil than a man who had not been obliged to make the second edition of his sin an enlarged one. For this is the present Nemesis of all evil, that it requires repetition, partly to still conscience, partly to satisfy excited tastes and desires; so that animal indulgence in drink and the like is a type of what goes on in the inner life of every man, in so far as the second dose has to be stronger than the first in order to produce an equivalent effect; and so on *ad infinitum*.

And then remember that all our evil doings, however insignificant they may be, have a strange affinity with one another, so that you will find that to go wrong in one direction almost inevitably leads to a whole series of consequential transgressions of one sort or another. You remember the old story about the soldier that was smuggled into a fortress concealed in a hay cart, and opened the gates of a virgin citadel to his allies outside. Every evil thing, great or small, that we admit into our lives, still more into our hearts, is charged with the same errand as he had:-' Set wide the door when you are inside, and let us all come in after you.' 'He taketh with him seven other spirits worse than himself, and they dwell there.' 'None of them,' says one of the prophets, describing the doleful creatures that haunt the ruins of a deserted city, 'shall by any means want its mate,' and the satyrs of the islands and of the woods join together! and hold high carnival in the city. And so, brethren! our little transgressions open the door for great ones, and every sin makes us more accessible to the assaults of every other.

So let me remind you how here, in these little unnumbered acts of trivial transgression which scarcely produce any effect on conscience or on memory, but make up so large a portion of so many of our lives, lies one of the most powerful instruments for making us what we are. If we indulge in slight acts of transgression be sure of this, that we shall pass from them to far greater ones. For one man that leaps or falls all at once into sin which the world calls gross, there are a thousand that slide into it. The storm only blows down the trees whose hearts have been eaten out and their roots loosened. And when you see a man having a reputation for wisdom and honour all at once coming crash down and disclosing his baseness, be sure that he began with small deflections from the path of right. The evil works underground; and if we yield to little temptations, when great ones come we shall fall their victims.

Let me remind you, too, that there is another sense in which ‘sand is weighty.’ You may as well be crushed under a sandhill as under a mountain of marble. It matters not which. The accumulated weight of the one is as great as that of the other. And I wish to lay upon the consciences of all that are listening to me now this thought, that an overwhelming weight of guilt results from the accumulation of little sins. Dear friends! I do not desire to preach a gospel of fear, but I cannot help feeling that, very largely, in this day, the ministration of the Christian Church is defective in that it does not give sufficient, though sad and sympathetic, prominence to the plain teaching of Christ and of the New Testament as to future retribution for present sin. We shall ‘every one of us give account of himself to God’; and if the account is long enough it will foot up to an enormous sum, though each item may be only halfpence. The weight of a lifetime of little sins will be enough to crush a man down with guilt and responsibility when he stands before that Judge. That is all true, and you know it, and I beseech you, take it to your hearts, ‘Sand is weighty.’ Little sins have to be accounted for, and may crush.

III. And now, lastly, let me ask you to consider one or two of the plain, practical issues of such thoughts as these.

And, first, I would say that these considerations set in a very clear light the absolute necessity for all-round and ever-wakeful watchfulness over ourselves. A man in the tropics does not say, ‘Mosquitoes are so small that it does not matter if two or three of them get inside my bed-curtains.’ He takes care that not one is there before he lays himself down to sleep. There seems to be nothing more sad than the complacent, easy-going way in which men allow themselves to keep their higher moral principles and their more rigid self-examination for the ‘great’ things, as they suppose, and let the little things often take care of themselves. What would you think of the captain of a steamer who in calm weather sailed by rule of thumb, only getting out his sextant when storms began to blow? And what about a man that lets the myriad trivialities that make up a day pass in and out of his heart as they will, and never arrests any of them at the gate with a ‘How camest thou in hither?’ ‘Look after the pence, and the pounds will look after themselves.’ Look after your trivial acts, and, take my word for it, the great ones will be as they ought to be.

Again, may not this thought somehow take down our easy-going and self-complacent estimate of ourselves? I have no doubt that there are a number of people in my audience just now who have been more or less consciously saying to themselves whilst I have been going on, ‘What have *I* to do with all this talk about sin, sin, sin? I am a decent kind of a man. I do all the duties of my daily life, and nobody can say that the white of my eyes is black. I have done no great transgressions. What is it all about? It has nothing to do with me.’

Well, my friend! it has this to do with you-that in your life there are a whole host of things which only a very superficial estimate hinders you from recognising to be what they are-small deeds, but great sins. Is it a small thing to go, as some of you do go on from year to year, with your conduct and your thoughts and your loves and your desires utterly unaffected by the fact that there is a God in heaven, and that Jesus Christ died for you? Is that a small thing? It manifests itself in a great many insignificant actions. That I grant you; and you are a most respectable man, and you keep the commandments as well as you can. But ‘the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified.’ I say that that is not a small sin.

So, dear brethren! I beseech you judge yourselves by this standard. I charge none of you with gross iniquities. I know nothing about that. But I do appeal to you all, as I do to myself, whether we must not recognise the fact that an accumulated multitude of transgressions which are only superficially small, in their aggregate weigh upon us with ‘a weight heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.’

Last of all, this being the case, should we not all turn ourselves with lowly hearts, with recognition of our transgressions, acknowledging that whether it be five hundred or fifty pence that we owe, we have nothing to pay, and betake ourselves to Him who alone can deliver us from the habit and power of these small accumulated faults, and who alone can lift the burden of guilt and responsibility from off our shoulders? If you irrigate the sand it becomes fruitful soil. Christ brings to us the river of the water of life; the inspiring, the quickening, the fructifying power of the new life that He bestows, and the sand may become soil, and the wilderness blossom as the rose. A heavy burden lies on our shoulders. Ah! yes! but 'Behold the Lamb of God that beareth away the sins of the world!' What was it that crushed Him down beneath the olives of Gethsemane? What was it that made Him cry, 'My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?' I know no answer but one, for which the world's gratitude is all too small. 'The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.'

'Sand is weighty,' but Christ has borne the burden, 'Cast thy burden upon the Lord,' and it will drop from your emancipated shoulders, and they will henceforth bear only the light burden of His love.

36)Proverbs 31:10-31

Proverbs

PORTRAIT OF A MATRON

Pro. 31:10 - Pro. 31:31.

This description of a good 'house-mother' attests the honourable position of woman in Israel. It would have been impossible in Eastern countries, where she was regarded only as a plaything and a better sort of slave. The picture is about equally far removed from old-world and from modern ideas of her place. This 'virtuous woman' is neither a doll nor a graduate nor a public character. Her kingdom is the home. Her works 'praise her in the gates'; but it is her husband, and not she, that 'sits' there among the elders. There is no sentiment or light of wedded love in the picture. It is neither the ideal woman nor wife that is painted, but the ideal head of a household, on whose management, as much as on her husband's work, its well-being depends.

There is plenty of room for modern ideals by the side of this old one, but they are very incomplete without it. If we take the 'oracle which his mother taught' King Lemuel to include this picture, the artist is a woman, and her motive may be to sketch the sort of wife her son should choose. In any case, it is significant that the book which began with the magnificent picture of Wisdom as a fair woman, and hung beside it the ugly likeness of Folly, should end with this charming portrait. It is an acrostic, and the fetters of alphabetic sequence are not favourable to progress or continuity of thought.

But I venture to suggest a certain advance in the representation which removes the apparent disjointed character and needless repetition. There are, first, three verses forming a kind of prologue or introduction [Pro. 31:10 - Pro. 31:12]. Then follows the picture proper, which is brought into unity if we suppose that it describes the growing material success of the diligent housekeeper, beginning with her own willing work, and gradually extending till she and her family are well to do and among the magnates of her town [Pro. 31:13 - Pro. 31:29], Then follow two verses of epilogue or conclusion [Pro. 31:30 - Pro. 31:31].

The rendering 'virtuous' is unsatisfactory; for what is meant is not moral excellence, either in the wider sense or in the narrower to which, in reference to woman, that great word has been unfortunately narrowed. Our colloquialism 'a woman of faculty' would fairly convey the idea, which is that of ability and general capacity. We have said that there was no light of wedded love in the picture. That is true of the main body of it; but no deeper, terser expression of the inmost blessedness of happy marriage was ever spoken than in the quiet words, 'The heart of her husband trusteth in her,' with the repose of satisfaction, with the tranquillity of perfect assurance. The bond uniting husband and wife in a true marriage is not unlike that uniting us with God. Happy are they who by their trust in one another and the peaceful joys which it brings are led to united trust in a yet deeper love, mirrored to them in their own! True, the picture here is mainly that of confidence that the wife is no squanderer of her husband's goods, but the sweet thought goes far beyond the immediate application. So with the other general feature in Pro. 31:12. A true wife is a fountain of good, and good only, all the days of her life-ay, and beyond them too, when her remembrance shines like the calm west after a cloudless sunset. This being, as it were, the overture, next follows the main body of the piece.

It starts with a description of diligence in a comparatively humble sphere. Note that in Pro. 31:13 the woman is working alone. She toils ‘willingly,’ or, as the literal rendering is, ‘with the pleasure of her hands.’ There is no profit in unwilling work. Love makes toil delightful, and delighted toil is successful. Throughout its pages the Bible reverences diligence. It is the condition of prosperity in material and spiritual things. Vainly do men and women try to dodge the law which makes the ‘sweat of the brow’ the indispensable requisite for ‘eating bread.’ When commerce becomes speculation, which is the polite name for gambling, which, again, is a synonym for stealing, it may yield much more dainty fare than bread to some for a time, but is sure to bring want sooner or later to individuals and communities. The foundation of this good woman’s fortune was that she worked with a will. There is no other foundation, either for fortune or any other good, or for self-respect, or for progress in knowledge or goodness or religion.

Then her horizon widened, and she saw a way of increasing her store. ‘She is like the merchants’ ships; she bringeth her food from afar.’ She looks afield, and sees opportunities for profitable exchange. Promptly she avails herself of these, and is at work while it is yet dark. She has a household now, and does not neglect their comfort, any more than she does their employment. Their food and their tasks are both set them in the early morning, and their mistress is up as soon as they. Her toil brings in wealth, and so Pro. 31:16 shows another step in advance. ‘She considereth a field, and buyeth it,’ and has made money enough to stock it with vines, and so add a new source of revenue, and acquire a new position as owning land.

But prosperity does not make her relax her efforts so we are told again in Pro. 31:17 - Pro. 31:19 of her abridging the hours of sleep, and toiling with wool and flax, which would be useless tautology if there were not some new circumstances to account for the repetition. Encouraged by success, she ‘girdeth her loins with strength,’ and, since she sees that ‘her merchandise is profitable,’ she is the more induced to labour. She still works with her own hands [Pro. 31:19]. But the hands that are busy with distaff and spindle are also stretched out with alms in the open palm, and are extended in readiness to help the needy. A woman made unfeeling by wealth is a monster. Prosperity often leads men to niggardliness in charitable gifts; but if it does the same for a woman, it is doubly cursed. Pity and charity have their home in women's hearts. If they are so busy holding the distaff or the pen that they become hard and insensible to the cry of misery, they have lost their glory.

Then follow a series of verses describing how increased wealth brings good to her household and herself. The advantages are of a purely material sort, Her children are 'clothed with scarlet,' which was not only the name of the dye, but of the stuff. Evidently thick material only was dyed of that hue, and so was fit for winter clothing, even if the weather was so severe for Palestine that snow fell. Her house was furnished with 'carpets,' or rather 'cushions' or 'pillows,' which are more important pieces of furniture where people recline on divans than where they sit on chairs. Her own costume is that of a rich woman. 'Purple and fine linen' are tokens of wealth, and she is woman enough to like to wear these. There is nothing unbecoming in assuming the style of living appropriate to one's position. Her children and herself thus share in the advantages of her industry; and the husband, who does not appear to have much business of his own, gets his share in that he sits among the wealthy and honoured inhabitants of the town, 'in the gates,' the chief place of meeting for business and gossip.

Pro. 31:24 recurs to the subject of the woman's diligence. She has got into a 'shipping business,' making for the export trade with the 'merchants'- literally, 'Canaanites' or Phoenicians, the great traders of the East, from whom, no doubt, she got the 'purple' of her clothing in exchange for her manufacture. But she had a better dress than any woven in looms or bought with goods. 'Strength and dignity' clothe her. 'She laugheth at the time to come'; that is, she is able to look forward without dread of poverty, because she has realised a competent sum. Such looking forward may be like that of the rich man in the parable, a piece of presumption, but it may also be compatible with devout recognition of God's providence. As in Pro. 31:20, beneficence was coupled with diligence, so in Pro. 31:26 gentler qualities are blended with strength and dignity, and calm anticipation of the future.

A glimpse into 'the very pulse' of the woman's nature is given. A true woman's strength is always gentle, and her dignity attractive and gracious. Prosperity has not turned her head. 'Wisdom,' the heaven-descended virgin, the deep music of whose call we heard sounding in the earlier chapters of Proverbs, dwells with this very practical woman. The collocation points the lesson that heavenly Wisdom has a field for its display in the common duties of a busy life, does not dwell in hermitages, or cloisters, or studies, but may guide and inspire a careful housekeeper in her task of wisely keeping her husband's goods together. The old legend of the descending deity who took service as a goat-herd, is true of the heavenly Wisdom, which will come and live in kitchens and shops.

But the ideal woman has not only wisdom in act and word, but 'the law of kindness is on her tongue.' Prosperity should not rob her of her gracious demeanour. Her words should be glowing with the calm flame of love which stoops to lowly and undeserving objects. If wealth leads to presumptuous reckoning on the future, and because we have 'much goods laid up for many years,' we see no other use of leisure than to eat and drink and be merry, we fatally mistake our happiness and our duty. But if gentle compassion and helpfulness are on our lips and in our hearts and deeds, prosperity will be blessed.

Nor does this ideal woman relax in her diligence, though she has prospered. Pro. 31:27 seems very needless repetition of what has been abundantly said already, unless we suppose, as before, new circumstances to account for the reintroduction of a former characteristic. These are, as it seems to me, the increased wealth of the heroine, which might have led her to relax her watchfulness. Some slacking off might have been expected and excused; but at the end, as at the beginning, she looks after her household and is herself diligent. The picture refers only to outward things. But we may remember that the same law applies to all, and that any good, either of worldly wealth or of intellectual, moral, or religious kind, is only preserved by the continuous exercise of the same energies which won it at first.

Pro. 31:28 - Pro. 31:29 give the eulogium pronounced by children and husband. The former 'rise up' as in reverence; the latter declares her superiority to all women, with the hyperbolical language natural to love. Happy the man who, after long years of wedded life, can repeat the estimate of his early love with the calm certitude born of experience!

The epilogue in Pro. 31:30 - Pro. 31:31 is not the continuation of the husband’s speech. It at once points the lesson from the whole picture for King Lemuel, and unveils the root of the excellences described. Beauty is skin deep. Let young men look deeper than a fair face. Let young women seek for that beauty which does not fade. The fear of the Lord lies at the bottom of all goodness that will last through the tear and wear of wedded life, and of all domestic diligence which is not mere sordid selfishness or slavish toil. The narrow arena of domestic life affords a fit theatre for the exercise of the highest gifts and graces; and the woman who has made a home bright, and has won and kept a husband’s love and children’s reverence, may let who will grasp at the more conspicuous prizes which women are so eager after nowadays. She has chosen the better part, which shall not be taken from her. She shall receive ‘of the fruit of her hands’ both now and hereafter, if the fear of the Lord has been the root from which that fruit has grown; and ‘her works shall praise her in the gate,’ though she sits quietly in her home. It is well when our deeds are the trumpeters of our fame, and when to tell them is to praise us.

The whole passage is the hallowing of domestic life, a directory for wives and mothers, a beautiful ideal of how noble a thing a busy mother’s life may be, an exhibition to young men of what they should seek, and of young women of what they should aim at. It were well for the next generation if the young women of this one were as solicitous to make cages as nets, to cultivate qualities which would keep love in the home as to cultivate attractions which lure him to their feet.

Ecclesiastes

1) ECCLESIASTES 1:4
2) ECCLESIASTES 1:9
3) ECCLESIASTES 1:13
4) ECCLESIASTES 3:2
5) ECCLESIASTES 3:11
6) ECCLESIASTES 5:1-12
7) ECCLESIASTES 5:15
8) ECCLESIASTES 7:8
9) ECCLESIASTES 8:11
10) ECCLESIASTES 10:8

11) ECCLESIASTES 10:15
12) ECCLESIASTES 11:9
13) ECCLESIASTES 12:1-7
14) ECCLESIASTES 12:13-14

1) Ecclesiastes 1:4

Ecclesiastes

WHAT PASSES AND WHAT ABIDES

Ecc. 1:4. - 1Jn. 2:17.

A great river may run through more than one kingdom, and bear more than one name, but its flow is unbroken. The river of time runs continuously, taking no heed of dates and calendars. The importance that we attach to the beginnings or endings of years and centuries is a sentimental illusion, but even an illusion that rouses us to a consciousness of the stealthy gliding of the river may do us good, and we need all the helps we can find to wise retrospect and sober anticipation. So we must let the season colour our thoughts, even whilst we feel that in yielding to that impulse we are imagining what has no reality in the passing from the last day of one century to the first day of another.

I do not mean to discuss in this sermon either the old century or the new in their wider social and other aspects. That has been done abundantly. We shall best do our parts in making the days, and the years, and the century what they should be, if we let the truths that come from these combined texts sink into and influence our individual lives. I have put them together, because they are so strikingly antithetical, both true, and yet looking at the same facts from opposite points of view, But the antithesis is not really so complete as it sounds at first hearing, because what the Preacher means by ‘the earth’ that ‘abideth for ever’ is not quite the same as what the Apostle means by the ‘world’ that ‘passes’ and the ‘generations’ that come and go are not exactly the same as the men that ‘abide for ever.’ But still the antithesis is real and impressive. The bitter melancholy of the Preacher saw but the surface; the joyous faith of the Apostle went a great deal deeper, and putting the two sets of thoughts and ways of looking at man and his dwelling-place together, we get lessons that may well shape our individual lives.

So let me ask you to look, in the first place, at-

I. The sad and superficial teaching of the Preacher.

Now in reading this Book of Ecclesiastes-which I am afraid a great many people do not read at all-we have always to remember that the wild things and the bitter things which the Preacher is saying so abundantly through its course do not represent his ultimate convictions, but thoughts that he took up in his progress from error to truth. His first word is: ‘All is vanity!’ That conviction had been set vibrating in his heart, as it is set vibrating in the heart of every man who does as he did, viz., seeks for solid good away from God. That is his starting-point. It is not true. All is not vanity, except to some *blase* cynic, made cynical by the failure of his voluptuousness, and to whom ‘all things here are out of joint,’ and everything looks yellow because his own biliary system is out of order. That is the beginning of the book, and there are hosts of other things in the course of it as one-sided, as cynically bitter, and therefore superficial. But the end of it is: ‘Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.’ In his journey from the one point to the other my text is the first step, ‘One generation goeth, and another cometh: the earth abideth for ever.’

He looks out upon humanity, and sees that in one aspect the world is full of births, and in another full of deaths. Coffins and cradles seem the main furniture, and he hears the tramp, tramp, tramp of the generations passing over a soil honeycombed with tombs, and therefore ringing hollow to their tread. All depends on the point of view. The strange history of humanity is like a piece of shot silk; hold it at one angle, and you see dark purple, hold at another, and you see bright golden tints. Look from one point of view, and it seems a long history of vanishing generations. Look to the rear of the procession, and it seems a buoyant spectacle of eager, young faces pressing forwards on the march, and of strong feet treading the new road. But yet the total effect of that endless procession is to impress on the observer the transiency of humanity. And that wholesome thought is made more poignant still by the comparison which the writer here draws between the fleeting generations and the abiding earth. Man is the lord of earth, and can mould it to his purpose, but it remains and he passes. He is but a lodger in an old house that has had generations of tenants, each of whom has said for a while, ‘It is mine’; and they all have drifted away, and the house stands. The Alps, over which Hannibal stormed, over which the Goths poured down on the fertile plains of Lombardy, through whose passes mediaeval emperors led their forces, over whose summits Napoleon brought his men, through whose bowels this generation has burrowed its tunnels, stand the same, and smile the same amid their snows, at the transient creatures that have crawled across them. The primrose on the rock blooms in the same place year after year, and nature and it are faithful to their covenant, but the poet’s eyes that fell upon them are sealed with dust. Generations have gone, the transient flower remains. ‘One generation cometh and another goeth,’ and the tragedy is made more tragical because the stage stands unaltered, and ‘the earth abides for ever.’ That is what sense has to say-’the foolish senses’-and that is all that sense has to say. Is it all that can be said? If it is, then the Preacher’s bitter conclusion is true, and ‘all is vanity and chasing after wind.’

He immediately proceeds to draw from this undeniable, but, as I maintain, partial fact, the broad conclusion which cannot be rebutted, if you accept what he has said in my text as being the sufficient and complete account of man and his dwelling-place. If, says he, it is true that one generation comes and another goes, and the earth abides for ever, and if that is all that has to be said, then all things are full of labour. There is immense activity, and there is no progress; it is all rotary motion round and round and round, and the same objects reappear duly and punctually as the wheel revolves, and life is futile. Yes; so it is unless there is something more to be said, and the life that is thus futile is also, as it seems to me, inexplicable if you believe in God at all. If man, being what he is, is wholly subject to that law of mutation and decay, then not only is he made ‘a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death,’ but he is also inferior to that persistent, old mother-earth from whose bosom he has come. If all that you have to say of him is, ‘Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,’ then life is futile, and God is not vindicated for having produced it.

And there is another consequence that follows, if this is all that we have got to say. If the cynical wisdom of Ecclesiastes is the ultimate word, then I do not assert that morality is destroyed, because right and wrong are not dependent either upon the belief in a God, or on the belief in immortality. But I do say that to declare that the fleeting, transient life of earth is all does strike a staggering blow at all noble ethics and paralyses a great deal of the highest forms of human activity, and that, as has historically been the case, so on the large scale, and, speaking generally, it will be the case, that the man whose creed is only 'To-morrow we die' will very speedily draw the conclusion, 'Let us eat and drink,' and sensuous delights and the lower side of his nature will become dominant.

So, then, the Preacher had not got at the bottom of all things, either in his initial conviction that all was vanity, or in that which he laid down as the first step towards establishing that, that man passes and the earth abides. There is more to be said; the sad, superficial teaching of the Preacher needs to be supplemented.

Now turn for a moment to what does supplement it.

II. The joyous and profounder teaching of the Apostle.

The cynic never sees the depths; that is reserved for the mystical eye of the lover. So John says: 'No, no; that is not all. Here is the true state of affairs: "The world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever."' The doctrine of the passing generations and the abiding earth is fronted squarely in my second text by the not contradictory, but complementary doctrine of the passing world and the abiding men. I do not suppose that John had this verse of Ecclesiastes in his mind, for the word 'abide' is one of his favourite expressions, and is always cropping up. But even though he had not, we find in his utterance the necessary correction to the first text. As I have said, and now need not do more than repeat in a sentence, the antithesis is not so complete as it seems. John's 'world' is not the Preacher's 'earth,' but he means thereby, as we all know, the aggregate of created things, including men, considered apart from God, and in so far as it includes voluntary agents set in opposition to God and the will of God. He means the earth rent away from God, and turned to be what it was not meant to be, a minister of evil, and he means men, in so far as they have parted themselves from God and make up an alien, if not a positively antagonistic company.

Perhaps he was referring, in the words of our text, to the break-up of the existing order of things which he discerned as impending and already begun to take effect in consequence of the coming of Jesus Christ, the shining of the true Light. For you may remember that in a previous part of the epistle he uses precisely the same expression, with a significant variation. Here, in our text, he says, ‘The world passeth away’; there he says, ‘The darkness has passed and the true light now shineth.’ He sees a process installed and going on, in which the whole solid-seeming fabric of a godless society is being dissolved and melted away. And says he, in the midst of all this change there is one who stands unchanged, the man that does God’s will.

But just for a moment we may take the lower point of view, and see here a flat contradiction of the Preacher. He said, ‘Men go, and the world abides.’ ‘No,’ says John; ‘your own psalmists might have taught you better: “As a vesture shalt Thou change them, and they shall be changed.”‘ The world, the earth, which seems so solid and permanent, is all the while in perpetual flux, as our later science has taught us, in a sense of which neither Preacher nor Apostle could dream. For just as from the beginning forces were at work which out of the fire-mist shaped sun and planets, so the same forces, continuing in operation, are tending towards the end of the system which they began; and a contracting sun and a diminished light and a lowered temperature and the narrower orbits in which the planets shall revolve, prophesy that ‘the elements shall melt with fervent heat,’ and that all things which have been made must one day cease to be. Nature is the true Penelope’s web, ever being woven and ever being unravelled, and in the most purely physical and scientific sense the world is passing away. But then, because you and I belong, in a segment of our being, to that which thus is passing away, we come under the same laws, and all that has been born must die. So the generations come, and in their very coming bear the prophecy of their going. But, on the other hand, there is an inner nucleus of our being, of which the material is but the transient envelope and periphery, which holds nought of the material, but of the spiritual, and that ‘abides for ever.’

But let us lift the thought rather into the region of the true antithesis which John was contemplating, which is not so much the crumbling away of the material, and the endurance of the spiritual, as the essential transiency of everything that is antagonism to the will of God, and the essential eternity of everything which is in conformity with that will. And so, says he, 'The world is passing, and the lust thereof.' The desires that grasp it perish with it, or perhaps, more truly still, the object of the desire perishes, and with it the possibility of their gratification ceases, but the desire itself remains. But what of the man whose life has been devoted to the things seen and temporal, when he finds himself in a condition of being where none of these have accompanied him? Nothing to slake his lusts, if he be a sensualist. No money-bags, ledgers, or cheque-books if he be a plutocrat or a capitalist or a miser. No books or dictionaries if he be a mere student. Nothing of his vocations if he lived for 'the world.' But yet the appetite is abiding. Will that not be a thirst that cannot be slaked?

'The world is passing and the lust thereof,' and all that is antagonistic to God, or separated from Him, is essentially as 'a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanishes away,' whereas the man who does the will of God abideth for ever, in that he is steadfast in the midst of change.

'His hand the good man fastens on the skies,
And lets earth roll, nor heeds its idle whirl.'

He shall 'abide for ever,' in the sense that his work is perpetual. In one very deep and solemn sense, nothing human ever dies, but in another all that is not running in the same direction as, and borne along by the impulse of, the will of God, is destined to be neutralised and brought to nothing at last. There may be a row of figures as long as to reach from here to the fixed stars, but if there is not in front of them the significant digit, which comes from obedience to the will of God, all is but a string of ciphers, and their net result is nothing. And he 'abideth for ever,' in the most blessed and profound sense, in that through his faith, which has kindled his love, and his love which has set in motion his practical obedience, he becomes participant of the very eternity of the living God. 'This is eternal life,' not merely to know, but 'to do the will' of our Father. Nothing else will last, and nothing else will prosper, any more than a bit of driftwood can stem Niagara. Unite yourself with the will of God, and you abide.

And now let me, as briefly as I can, throw together-

III. The plain, practical lessons that come from both these texts.

May I say, without seeming to be morbid or unpractical, one lesson is that we should cultivate a sense of the transiency of this outward life? One of our old authors says somewhere, that it is wholesome to smell at a piece of turf from a churchyard. I know that much harm has been done by representing Christianity as mainly a scheme which is to secure man a peaceful death, and that many morbid forms of piety have given far too large a place to the contemplation of skulls and cross-bones. But for all that, the remembrance of death present in our lives will often lay a cool hand upon a throbbing brow; and, like a bit of ice used by a skilful physician, will bring down the temperature, and stay the too tumultuous beating of the heart. ‘So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.’ It will minister energy, and lead us to say, like our Lord, ‘We must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh.’

Let me say again-a very plain, practical lesson is to dig deep down for our foundations below the rubbish that has accumulated. If a man wishes to build a house in Rome or in Jerusalem he has to go fifty or sixty feet down, through potsherds and broken tiles and triturated marbles, and the dust of ancient palaces and temples. We have to drive a shaft clear down through all the superficial strata, and to lay the first stones on the Rock of Ages. Do not build on that which quivers and shakes beneath you. Do not try to make your life’s path across the weeds, or as they call it in Egypt, the ‘sudd,’ that floats on the surface of the Nile, compacted for many a mile, and yet only a film on the surface of the river, to be swept away some day. Build on God.

And the last lesson is, let us see to it that our wills are in harmony with His, and the work of our hands His work. We can do that will in all the secularities of our daily life. The difference between the work that shrivels up and disappears and the work that abides is not so much in its external character, or in the materials on which it is expended, as in the motive from which it comes. So that, if I might so say, if two women are sitting at the same millstone face to face, and turning round the same handle, one of them for one half the circumference, and the other for the other, and grinding out the same corn, the one's work may be 'gold, silver, precious stones,' which shall abide the trying fire; and the other's may be 'wood, hay, stubble,' which shall be burnt up. 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'

So let us set ourselves, dear friends! to our several tasks for this coming year. Never mind about the century, it will take care of itself. Do your little work in your little corner, and be sure of this, that amidst changes you will stand unchanged, amidst tumults you may stand calm, in death you will be entering on a fuller life, and that what to others is the end will be to you the beginning. 'If any man's work abide, he shall receive a reward,' and he himself shall abide with the abiding God.

The bitter cynic said half the truth when he said, 'One generation goeth, and another cometh; but the earth abides.' The mystic Apostle saw the truth steadily, and saw it whole when he said, 'Lo! the world passeth away, and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.'

2) Ecclesiastes 1:9

Ecclesiastes

THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

Ecc. 1:9. - 1Pe. 4:2 - 1Pe. 4:3.

If you will look at these two passages carefully you will, I think, see that they imply two different, and in some respects contradictory, thoughts about the future in its relation to the past. The first of them is the somewhat exaggerated utterance of a dreary and depressing philosophy, which tells us that, as in the outer world, so in regard to man's life, there is an enormous activity and no advance, that it is all moving round like the scenes in some circular panorama, that after it has gone the round back it comes again, that it is the same thing over and over again, that life is a treadmill, so to speak, with an immense deal of working of muscles; but it all comes to nothing over again. 'The rivers run into the sea and the sea is not full, and where the rivers come from they go back to; and the wind goes to the south, turns to the north, and whirls about continually. Everything is full of labour, and it has all been done before, and there is nothing fresh; everything is flat, stale, and unprofitable.'

Well that is not true altogether, but though it be not true altogether-though it be an exaggeration, and though the inference that is built upon it is not altogether satisfactory and profound-yet the thought itself is one that has a great deal in it that is true and important, and may be very helpful and profitable to us now; for there is a religious way, as well as an irreligious way, of saying there is nothing new under the sun. It may be the utterance of a material, *blase*, unprofitable, spurious philosophy, or it may be the utterance of the profoundest, and the happiest, and the most peaceful religious trust and confidence.

The other passage implies the opposite notion of man's life, that however much in my future may be just the same as what my past has been, there is a region in which it is quite possible to make to-morrow unlike to-day, and so to resolve and so to work as that 'the time past of our lives' may be different from 'the rest of our time in the flesh'; that a great revolution may come upon a man, and that whilst the outward life is continuous and the same, and the tasks to be done are the same, and the joys the same, there may be such a profound and radical difference in the spirit and motive in which they are done as that the thing that has been is *not* that which shall be, and for us there *may* be a new thing under the sun.

And so just now I think we may take these two passages in their connection-their opposition, and in their parallelism-as suggesting to us two very helpful, mutually completing thoughts about the unknown future that stretches before us-first, the substantial identity of the future with the past; second, the possible total unlikeness of the future and the past.

First then, let us try to get the impress from the first phrase of that conviction, so far as it is true, as to the sameness of the things that are going to be with the things that have been. The immediate connection in which the words are spoken is in regard, mainly, to the outer world, the physical universe, and only secondarily and subordinately in regard to man's life. And I need not remind you how that thought of the absolute sameness and continuous repetition of the past and the future has gained by the advance of physical science in modern times. It seems to be contradicted no doubt by the continual emergence of new things here and there, but they tell us that the novelty is only a matter of arrangement, that the atoms have never had an addition to them since the beginning of things, that all stand just as they were from the very commencement and foundation of all things, and that all that seems new is only a new arrangement, so that the thing which has been is that which shall be. And then there comes up the other thought, upon which I need not dwell for a moment, that the present condition of things round about us is the result of the uniform forces that have been working straight on from the very beginning. And yet, whilst all that is quite true, we come to our own human lives, and we find there the true application of such words as these: to-morrow is to be like yesterday. There is one very important sense in which the opposite of that is true, and no to-morrow can ever be like any yesterday for however much the events may be the same, we are so different that, in regard even to the most well trodden and beaten of our paths of daily life, we may all say, 'We have not passed this way before!' We cannot bring back that which is gone-that which is gone is gone for good or evil, irrevocable as the snow or the perfume of last year's flowers. I dare say there are many here before me who are saying to themselves, 'No! life can never again be what life has been for me, and the only thing that I am quite sure about in regard to to-morrow is that it is utterly impossible that it should ever be as yesterday was!' Notwithstanding, the word of my text is a true word, the thing that hath been is that which shall be. I need not dwell on the grounds upon which the certainty rests, such, for instance, as that the powers which shape to-morrow are the same as the powers which shaped yesterday; that you and I, in our nature, are the same, and that the mighty Hand up there that is moulding it is the same; that every to-morrow is the child of all the yesterdays; that the same general impression will pervade the future as has pervaded the past. Though events may be different the general stamp and characteristics of them will be the same, and when we pass into a new region of human life we shall find that we are not walking in a place where no footprints have been before us, but that all about us the ground is trodden down smooth.

'That which hath been is that which shall be.' Thus, while this is proximately true in regard to the future, let me just for a moment or two give you one or two of the plain, simple pieces of well-worn wisdom which are built upon such a thought. And first of all let me give you this, 'Well, then, let us learn to tone down our expectations of what may be coming to us.' Especially I speak now to the younger portion of my congregation, to whom life is beginning, and to whom it is naturally tinted with roseate hue, and who have a great deal stretching before them which is new to them, new duties, new relationships, new joys. But whilst that is especially true for them it is true for all. It is a strange illusion under which we all live to the very end of our lives, unless by reflection and effort we become masters of it and see things in the plain daylight of common sense, that the future is going somehow or other to be brighter, better, fuller of resources, fuller of blessings, freer from sorrow than the past has been. We turn over each new leaf that marks a new year, and we cannot help thinking: 'Well! perhaps hidden away in its storehouses there may be something brighter and better in store for me.' It is well, perhaps, that we should have that thought, for if we were not so drawn on, even though it be by an illusion, I do not know that we should be able to live on as we do. But don't let us forget in the hours of quiet that there is no reason at all to expect that any of these arbitrary, and conventional, and unreal distinctions of calendars and dates make any difference in that uniform strand of our life which just runs the same, which is reeled off the great drum of the future and on to the great drum of the past, and that is all spun out of one fibre and is one gauge, and one sort of stuff from the beginning to the end. And so let us be contented where we are, and not fancy that when I get that thing that I am looking forward to, when I get into that position I am waiting for, things will be much different from what they are to-day. Life is all one piece, the future and the past, the pattern runs right through from the beginning to the end, and the stuff is the same stuff. So don't you be too enthusiastic, you people who have an eager ambition for social and political advancement. Things will be very much as they are used to be, with perhaps some slow, gradual, infinitesimal approximation to a higher ideal and a nobler standard; but there will be no jump, no breaks, no spasmodic advance. We must be contented to accept the law, that there is no new thing under the sun. As you would lay a piece of healing ice upon the heated forehead, lay that law upon the feverish anticipations some of you have in regard to the future, and let the heart beat more quietly, and with the more contentment for the recognition of that law.

And then I may say, at the same time, though I won't dwell upon it for more than a moment, let us take the same thought to teach us to moderate our fears. Don't be afraid that anything whatever may come that will destroy the substantial likeness between the past and the future; and so leave all those jarring and terrifying thoughts that mingle with all our anticipations of the time to come, leave them very quietly on one side and say, 'Thou hast been my Help leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.'

And then there are one or two other points I mean to touch upon, and let me just name them. Do not let us so exaggerate that thought of the substantial sameness of the future and the past as to flatten life and make it dreary and profitless and insignificant. Let us rather feel, as I shall have to say presently, that whilst the framework remains the same, whilst the general characteristics will not be much different, there is room within that uniformity for all possible play of variety and interest, and earnestness and enthusiasm, and hope. They make the worst possible use of this fixity and steadfastness of things who say, as the dreary man at the beginning of the Book of Ecclesiastes is represented as saying, that because things are the same as they will and have been, all is vanity. It is not true. Don't let the uniformity of life flatten your interest in the great miracle of every fresh day, with its fresh continuation of ancient blessings and the steadfast mercies of our Lord.

And let us hold firmly to the far deeper truth that the future will be the same as the past, because God is the same. God's yesterday is God's to-morrow-the same love, the same resources, the same wisdom, the same power, the same sustaining Hand, the same encompassing Presence. 'A thousand years are as one day, and one day as a thousand years'; and when we say there is no new thing under the sun let us feel that the deepest way of expressing that thought is, 'Thou art the same, and Thy steadfast purposes know no alteration.'

Turn to the other side of the thought suggested by the second passage of the text. It speaks to us, as I have said, of the possible entire unlikeness between the future and the past. To-morrow is the child of yesterday-granted; 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap'-certainly; there is a persistent uniformity of nature, and the same causes working make the future much of the same general structure as all the past has been-be it so; and yet within the limits of that identity there may be breathed into the self-sameness of to-morrow such an entire difference of disposition, temper, motive, direction of life, that my whole life may be revolutionised, my whole being, I was going to say, cleft in twain, my old life buried and forgotten, and a new life may emerge from chaos and from the dead. Of course, the question, Is such an alteration possible? rises up very solemnly to men, to most of them, for I suppose we all of us know what it is to have been beaten time after time in the attempt to shake off the dominion of some habit or evil, and to alter the bearing and the direction of the whole life, and we have to say, 'It is no good trying any longer my life must run on in the channel which I have carved for it; I have made my bed and I must lie on it; I cannot get rid of these things.' And, no doubt, in certain aspects, change is impossible. There are certain limitations of natural disposition which I never can overcome. For instance, if I have no musical ear I cannot turn myself into a musician. If I have no mathematical faculty it is no good poring over Euclid, for, with the best intentions in the world, I shall make nothing of it. We must work within the limits of our natural disposition, and cut our coat according to our cloth. In that respect to-morrow will be as yesterday, and there cannot be any change. And it is quite true that character, which is the great precipitate from the waters of conduct, gets rocky, that habits become persistent, and man's will gets feeble by long indulgence in any course of life. But for all that, admitting to the full all that, I am here now to say to every man and woman in this place, 'Friend, you may make your life from this moment so unlike the blotted, stained, faultful, imperfect, sinful past that no words other than the words of the New Testament will be large enough to express the fact. "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature, old things are passed away."' For we all know how into any life the coming of some large conviction not believed in or perceived before, may alter the whole bias, current, and direction of it; how into any life the coming of a new love not cherished and entertained before, may ennoble and transfigure the whole of its nature; how into any life the coming of new motives, not yielded to and recognised before, may make all things new and different. These three plain principles, the power of conviction, the power of affection, the power of motive, are broad enough to admit of building upon them this great and helpful and hopeful promise to us all-'The time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles,' that ‘henceforth we may live the rest of our time in the flesh according to the will of God.’

To you who have been living in the past with little regard to the supreme powers and principles of Christ’s love and God’s Gospel in Him, I bring the offer of a radical revolution; and I tell you that if you like you may this day begin a life which, though it shall be like yesterday in outward things, in the continuity of some habits, in the continuance of character, shall be all under the influence of an entirely new, and innovating, and renovating power. I ask you whether you don’t think that you have had enough, to use the language of my text, in the part of obeying the will of the flesh; and I beseech you that you will let these great principles, these grand convictions which cluster round and explain the cross of Jesus Christ, influence your mind, character, habits, desires, thoughts, actions; that you will yield yourself to the new power of the Spirit of life in Christ, which is granted to us if only we submit ourselves to it and humbly desire it. And to you who have in some measure lived by this mighty influence I come with the message for you and for myself that the time to come may, if we will, be filled very much fuller than it is; ‘To-morrow may be as this day, and much more abundant.’ I believe in a patient, reflecting, abundant examination of the past. The old proverb says that ‘Every man by the time he is forty is either a fool or a physician’; and any man or woman by the time they get ten years short of that age, ought to know where they are weakest, and ought to be able to guard against the weak places in their character. I do not believe in self-examination for the purpose of finding in a man’s own character reasons for answering the question, ‘Am I a Christian?’ But I do believe that no people will avail themselves fully of the power God has given them for making the future brighter and better than the past who have not a very clear, accurate, comprehensive, and penetrating knowledge of their faults and their failures in the past. I suppose if the Tay Bridge is to be built again, it won’t be built of the same pattern as that which was blown into the water last week; and you and I ought to learn by experience the places in our souls that give in the tempests, where there is most need for strengthening the bulwarks and defending our natures. And so I say, begin with the abundant recognition of the past, and then a brave confidence in the possibilities of the future. Let us put ourselves under that great renovating Power which is conviction and affection and motive all in one.

‘He loved me and gave Himself for me.’ And so while we front the future we can feel that, God being in us, and Christ being in us, we shall make it a far brighter and fairer thing than the blurred and blotted past which to-day is buried, and life may go on with grand blessedness and power until we shall hear the great voice from the Throne say, ‘There shall be no more death, no more sorrow, no more crying, no more pain, for the former things are passed away, ‘Behold! I make all things new.’

3) Ecclesiastes 1:13

Ecclesiastes

TWO VIEWS OF LIFE

Ecc. 1:13. - Heb. 12:10.

These two texts set before us human life as it looks to two observers. The former admits that God shapes it; but to him it seems sore travail, the expenditure of much trouble and efforts; the results of which seem to be nothing beyond profitless exercise. There is an immense activity and nothing to show for it at the end but wearied limbs. The other observer sees, at least, as much of sorrow and trouble as the former, but he believes in the ‘Father of spirits,’ and in a hereafter; and these, of course, bring a meaning and a wider purpose into the ‘sore travail,’ and make it, not futile but, profitable to our highest good.

I. Note first the Preacher’s gloomy half-truth.

The word rendered in our text ‘travail’ is a favourite one with the writer. It means occupation which costs effort and causes trouble. The phrase ‘to be exercised therewith,’ rather means to *fatigue themselves*, so that life as looked upon by the Preacher consists of effort without result but weariness.

If he knew it at all, it was very imperfectly and dimly; and whatever may be thought of teaching on that subject which appears in the formal conclusion of the book, the belief in a future state certainly exercises no influence on its earlier portions. These represent phases through which the writer passes on his way to his conclusion. He does believe in ‘God,’ but, very significantly, he never uses the sacred name ‘Lord.’ He has shaken himself free, or he wishes to represent a character who has shaken himself free from Revelation, and is fighting the problem of life, its meaning and worth, without any help from Law, or Prophet, or Psalm. He does retain belief in what he calls ‘God,’ but his pure Theism, with little, if any, faith in a future life, is a creed which has no power of unravelling the perplexed mysteries of life, and of answering the question, ‘What does it all mean?’ With keen and cynical vision he looks out not only over men, as in this first chapter, but over nature; and what mainly strikes him is the enormous amount of work that is being done, and the tragical poverty of its results. The question with which he begins his book is, ‘What profit hath a man of all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun?’ And for answer he looks at the sun rising and going down, and being in the same place after its journey through the heavens; and he hears the wind continually howling and yet returning again to its circuits; and the waters now running as rivers into the sea and again drawn up in vapours, and once more falling in rain and running as waters. This wearisome monotony of intense activity in nature is paralleled by all that is done by man under heaven, and the net result of all is ‘Vanity and a strife after wind.’

The writer proceeds to confirm his dreary conclusion by a piece of autobiography put into the mouth of Solomon. He is represented as flinging himself into mirth and pleasure, into luxury and debauchery, and as satisfying every hunger for any joy, and as being pulled up short in the midst of his rioting by the conviction, like a funeral bell, tolling in his mind that all was vanity. ‘He gave himself to wisdom, and madness, and folly’; and in all he found but one result-enormous effort and no profit. There seemed to be a time for everything, and a kind of demonic power in men compelling them to toil as with equal energy, now at building up, and now at destroying. But to every purpose he saw that there was ‘time and judgment,’ and therefore, ‘the misery of man was great upon him.’ To his jaundiced eye the effort of life appeared like the play of the wind in the desert, always busy, but sometime busy in heaping the sands in hillocks, and sometimes as busy in levelling them to a plain.

We may regard such a view of humanity as grotesquely pessimistic; but there is no doubt that many of us do make of life little more than what the

Preacher thought it. It is not only the victims of civilisation who are forced to wearisome monotony of toil which barely yields daily bread; but we see all around us men and women wearing out their lives in the race after a false happiness, gaining nothing by the race but weariness. What shall we say of the man who, in the desire to win wealth, or reputation, lives laborious days of cramping effort in one direction, and allows all the better part of his nature to be atrophied, and die, and passes, untasted, brooks by the way, the modest joys and delights that run through the dustiest lives. What is the difference between a squirrel in the cage who only makes his prison go round the faster by his swift race, and the man who lives toilsome days for transitory objects which he may never attain? In the old days every prison was furnished with a tread-mill, on which the prisoner being set was bound to step up on each tread of the revolving wheel, not in order to rise, but in order to prevent him from breaking his legs. How many men around us are on such a mill, and how many of them have fastened themselves on it, and by their own misreading and misuse of life have turned it into a dreary monotony of resultless toil. The Preacher may be more ingenious than sound in his pessimism, but let us not forget that every godless man does make of life 'Vanity and strife after wind.'

II. The higher truth which completes the Preacher' s.

Of course the fragmentary sentence in our second text needs to be completed from the context, and so completed will stand, 'God chastens us for our profit, that we should be partakers of His holiness.' Now let us consider for a moment the thought that the true meaning of life is *discipline*. I say discipline rather than 'chastening,' for chastening simply implies the fact of pain, whereas discipline includes the wholesome *purpose* of pain. The true meaning of life is not to be found by estimating its sorrows or its joys, but by trying to estimate the effects of either upon us. The true value of life, and the meaning of all its tears and of all its joys, is what it makes us. If the enormous effort which struck the Preacher issues in strengthened muscles and braced limbs, it is not 'vanity.' He who carries away with him out of life a character moulded as God would have it, does not go in all points 'naked as he came.' He bears a developed self, and that is the greatest treasure that a man can carry out of multitudinous toils of the busiest life. If we would think less of our hard work and of our heavy sorrows, and more of the loving purpose which appoints them all, we should find life less difficult, less toilsome, less mysterious. That one thought taken to our hearts, and honestly applied to everything that befalls us, would untie many a riddle, would wipe away many a tear, would bring peace and patience into many a heart, and would make still brighter many a gladness. Without it our lives are a chaos; with it they would become an ordered world.

But the recognition of the hand that ministers the discipline is needed to complete the peacefulness of faith. It would be a dreary world if we could only think of some inscrutable or impersonal power that inflicted the discipline; but if in its sharpest pangs we give ‘reverence to the Father of spirits,’ we shall ‘live.’ Of course, a loving father sees to his children’s education, and a loving child cannot but believe that the father’s single purpose in all his discipline is his good. The good that is sought to be attained by the sharpest chastisement is better than the good that is given by weak indulgence. When the father’s hand wields the rod, and a loving child receives the strokes, they may sting, but they do not wound. The ‘fathers of our flesh chasten us after their own pleasure,’ and there may be error and arbitrariness in their action; and the child may sometimes nourish a right sense of injustice, but ‘the Father of spirits’ makes no mistakes, and never strikes too hard. ‘He for our profit’ carries with it the declaration that the deep heart of God doth not willingly afflict, and seeks in afflicting for nothing but His children’s good.

Nor are these all the truths by which the New Testament completes and supersedes the Preacher’s pessimism, for our text closes by unveiling the highest profit which discipline is meant to secure to us as being that we should be ‘partakers of His holiness.’ The Biblical conception of holiness in God is that of separation from and elevation above the creature. Man’s holiness is separation from the world and dedication to God. He is separated from the world by moral perfection yet more than by His other attributes, and men who have yielded themselves to Him will share in that characteristic. This assimilation to His nature is the highest ‘profit’ to which we can attain, and all the purpose of His chastening is to make us more completely like Himself. ‘The fathers of our flesh’ chasten with a view to the brief earthly life, but His chastening looks onwards beyond the days of ‘strife and vanity’ to a calm eternity.

Thus, then, the immortality which glimmered doubtfully in the end of his book before the eyes of the Preacher is the natural inference for the Christian thought of moral discipline as the great purpose of life. No doubt it might be possible for a man to believe in the supreme importance of character, and in all the discipline of life as subsidiary to its development, and yet not believe in another world, where all that was tendency, often thwarted, should be accomplished result, and the schooling ended the rod should be broken. But such a position will be very rare and very absurd. To recognise moral discipline as the greatest purpose of life, gives quite overwhelming probability to a future. Surely God does not take such pains with us in order to make no more of us than He makes of us in this world. Surely human life becomes 'confusion worse confounded' if it is carefully, sedulously, continuously tended, checked, inspired, developed by all the various experiences of sorrow and joy, and then, at death, broken short off, as a man might break a stick across his knee, and the fragments tossed aside and forgotten. If we can say, 'He for our profit that we might be partakers of His holiness,' we have the right to say 'We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.'

4) Ecclesiastes 3:2

Ecclesiastes

'A TIME TO PLANT'

Ecc. 3:2.

The writer enumerates in this context a number of opposite courses of conduct arranged in pairs, each of which is right at the right time. The view thus presented seems to him to be depressing, and to make life difficult to understand, and aimless. We always appear to be building up with one hand and pulling down with the other. The ship never heads for two miles together in the same direction. The history of human affairs appears to be as purposeless as the play of the wind on the desert sands, which it sometimes piles into huge mounds and then scatters.

So he concludes that only God, who appoints the seasons that demand opposite courses of conduct, can understand what it all means. The engine-driver knows why he reverses his engine, and not the wheels that are running in opposite directions in consecutive moments according to his will.

Now that is a one-sided view, of course, for it is to be remembered that the Book of Ecclesiastes is the logbook of a voyager after truth, and tells us all the wanderings and errors of his thinking until he has arrived at the haven of the conclusion that he announces in the final word: ‘Hear the sum of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.’

I have nothing to do just now with the conclusion which he arrives at, but the facts from which he starts are significant and important. There are things in life, God has so arranged it, which can only be done fittingly, and for the most part of all, at certain seasons; and the secret of success is the discernment of present duty, and the prompt performance of it.

And this is especially true about your time of life, my young friends. There are things, very important things, which, unless you do them now, the overwhelming probability is that you will never do at all; and the certainty is that you will not do them half as well. And so I want to ask you to look at these words, which, by a legitimate extension of the writer’s meaning, and taking them in a kind of parabolic way, may sum up for us the whole of the special duties of youth. ‘A time to plant.’

I. Now, my first remark is this: that you are now in the planting time of your lives.

No wise forester will try to shift shrubs or to put them into his gardens or woods, except in late autumn or early spring. And our lives are as really under the dominion of the law of seasons as the green world of the forest and the fields. Speaking generally, and admitting the existence of many exceptions, the years between childhood and, say, two or three-and-twenty, for a young man or woman, for the most part settle the main outline of their character, and thereby determine their history, which, after all, is mainly the outcome of their character.

You have wide possibilities before you, of moulding your characters into beauty, and purity, holiness, and strength.

For one thing, you have got no past, or next to none written all over, which it is hard to erase. You have substantially a clean sheet on which to write what you like. Your stage of life predisposes you in favour of novelty. New things are glad things to you, whereas to us older people a new thought coming into some of our brains is like a new bit of furniture coming into a crowded room. All the other pieces need to be arranged, and it is more of a trouble than anything else. You are flexible and plastic as yet, like the iron running out of the blast furnace in a molten stream, which in half an hour's time will be a rigid bar that no man can bend.

You have all these things in your favour, and so, dear young friends, whether you think of it or not, whether voluntarily or not, I want you to remember that this awful process is going on inevitably and constantly in every one of you. You are planting, whether you recognise the fact or no. What are you planting?

Well, for one thing, you are making *habits*, which are but actions hardened, like the juice that exudes from the pine-tree, liquid, or all but liquid, when it comes out, and when exposed to the air, is solidified and tenacious. The old legend of the man in the tower who got a slim thread up to his window, to which was attached one thicker and then thicker, and so on ever increasing until he hauled in a cable, is a true parable of what goes on in every human life. Some one deed, a thin film like a spider's thread, draws after it a thicker, by that inevitable law that a thing done once tends to be done twice, and that the second time it is easier than the first time. A man makes a track with great difficulty across the snow in a morning, but every time that he travels it, it is a little harder, and the track is a little broader, and it is easier walking. You play with the tiger's whelp of some pleasant, questionable enjoyment, and you think that it will always keep so innocent, with its budding claws not able to draw blood, but it grows-*it grows*. And it grows according to its kind, and what was a plaything one day is a full-grown and ravening wild beast in a while. You are making habits, whatever else you are making, and you are planting in your hearts seeds that will spring and bear fruit according to their kind.

Then remember, you are planting *belief*.-Most of us, I am afraid, get our opinions by haphazard; like the child in the well-known story, whose only account of herself was that ‘she expected she growed.’ That is the way by which most of you come to what you dignify by the name of your opinions. They come in upon you, you do not know how. Youth is receptive of anything new. You can learn a vast deal more easily than many of us older people can. Set down a man who has never learned the alphabet, to learn his letters, and see what a task it is for him. Or if he takes a pen in his hand for the first time, look how difficult the stiff wrist and thick knuckles find it to bend. Yours is the time for forming your opinions, for forming some rational and intelligent account of yourself and the world about you. See to it, that you plant truth in your hearts, under which you may live sheltered for many days.

Then again, you are planting character, which is not only habit, but something more. You are making *yourselves*, whatever else you are making. You begin with almost boundless possibilities, and these narrow and narrow and narrow, according to your actions, until you have laid the rails on which you travel-one narrow line that you cannot get off. A man’s character is, if I may use a chemical term, a ‘precipitate’ from his actions. Why, it takes acres of roses to make a flask of perfume; and all the long life of a man is represented in his ultimate character. Character is formed like those chalk cliffs in the south, built up eight hundred feet, beetling above the stormy sea; and all made up of the relics of microscopic animals. So you build up a great solid structure-yourself-out of all your deeds. You are making your character, your habits, your opinions.-And you are making your reputation too. And you will not be able to get rid of that. This is the time for you to make a good record or a bad one, in other people’s opinions.

And so, young men and women, boys and girls, I want you to remember the permanent effects of your most fleeting acts. Nothing ever dies that a man does. Nothing! You go into a museum, and you will see standing there a slab of red sandstone, and little dints and dimples upon it. What are they? Marks made by a flying shower that lasted for five minutes, nobody knows how many millenniums ago. And there they are, and there they will be until the world is burned up. So our fleeting deeds are all recorded here, in our permanent character. Everything that we have done is laid up there in the testimony of the rocks:-

‘Through our soul the echoes roll,
And grow for ever and for ever.’

You are now living in ‘a time to plant.’

II. Notice, in the next place, that as surely as *now* is the time to plant, *then* will be a time to reap.

I do not know whether the writer of my text meant the harvest, when he put in antithesis to my text the other clause, ‘and a time to pluck up that which is planted.’ Probably, as most of the other pairs are opposites, here, too, we are to see an opposite rather than a result; the destructive action of plucking up, and not the preservative action of gathering a harvest. But, however that may be, let me remind you that there stands, irrefragable, for every human soul and every human deed, this great solemn law of retribution.

Now what lies in that law? Two things-that the results are similar in kind, and more in number. The law of likeness, and the law of increase, both of them belong to the working of the law of retribution. And so, be sure that you will find out that all your past lives on into your present; and that the present, in fact, is very little more than the outcome of the past. What you plant as a youth you will reap as a man. This mysterious life of ours is all sowing and reaping intermingled, right away on to the very end. Each action is in turn the child of all the preceding and the parent of all that follows. But still, though that be true, your time of life is predominantly the time of sowing; and my time of life, for instance, is predominantly the time of reaping. There are a great many things that I could not do now if I wished. There are a great many things in our past that I, and men of my age, would fain alter; but there they stand, and nothing can do away the marks of that which once has been. We have to reap, and so will you some day.

And I will tell you what you will have to reap, as sure as you are sitting in those pews. You will have the enlarged growth of your present characteristics. A man takes a photograph upon a sensitive plate, half the size of the palm of my hand; and then he enlarges it to any size he pleases.

And that is what life does for all of us. The pictures, drawn small on the young man's imagination, on the young woman's dreaming heart, be they of angels or of beasts, are permanent; and they will get bigger and bigger and bigger, as get older. You do not reap only as much as you sowed, but 'some sixty fold, and some an hundred fold.'

And you will reap the increased dominion of your early habits. There is a grim verse in the Book of Proverbs that speaks about a man being tied and bound by the chains of his sins. And that is just saying that the things which you chose to do when you were a boy, many of them you will have to do when you are a man; because you have lost the power, though sometimes not the will, of doing anything else. There be men that sow the wind, and they do not reap the wind, but the law of increase comes in and they reap the whirlwind. There be men who, according to the old Greek legend, sow dragon's teeth and they reap armed soldiers. There are some of you that are sowing to the flesh, and as sure as God lives, you will 'of the flesh reap corruption.' 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that,' even here, 'shall he also reap.'

And let me remind you that that law of inheriting the fruit of our doings is by no means exhausted by the experience of life. Whenever conscience is awakened it at once testifies not only of a broken law, but of a living Law-giver; and not only of retribution here, but of retribution hereafter. And I for my part believe that the modern form of Christianity and the tendencies of the modern pulpit, influenced by some theological discussions, about details in the notion of retribution that have been going on of late years, have operated to make ministers of the Gospel too chary of preaching, and hearers indisposed to accept, the message of 'the terror of the Lord.' My dear friends! retribution cannot stop on this side of the grave, and if you are going yonder you are carrying with you the necessity in yourself for inheriting the results of your life here. I beseech you, do not put away such thoughts as this, with the notion that I am brandishing before you some antiquated doctrine, fit only to frighten old women and children. The writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes was no weak-minded, superstitious fanatic. He was far more disposed to scepticism than to fanaticism. But for all that, with all his sympathy for young men's breadth and liberality, with his tolerance for all sorts and ways of living, with all his doubts and questionings, he came to this, and this was his teaching to the young men whom in idea he had gathered round his chair,-'Rejoice, oh young man, in thy youth. And let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes.' By all means, God has put you into a fair world, and meant you to get all the good out of it. 'But,' and that not as a kill-joy, 'know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment,' and shape your characters accordingly.

III. Still further, let me say, these things being so, you especially need to ponder them.

That is so, because you especially are in danger of forgetting them. It is meant that young people should live by impulse much more than by reflection.

'If nature put not forth her power
About the opening of the flower,
Who is there that could live an hour?'

The days of calculation will come soon enough; and I do not want to hurry them. I do not want to put old heads upon young shoulders. I would rather see the young ones, a great deal. But I want you not to go down to the level of the beast, living only by instinct and by impulse. You have got brains, you are meant to use them. You have the great divine gift of reason, that looks before and after, and though you have not much experience yet, you can, if you will, reflect upon such things as I have just been saying to you, and take them into your hearts, and live accordingly. My dear young friend! enjoy yourself, live buoyantly, yield to your impulses, be glad for the beautiful life that is unfolding around you, and the strong nature that is blossoming within you. And then take this other lesson, 'Ponder the path of thy feet,' and remember that all the while you dance along the flowery path, you are planting what you will have to reap.

Then, still further, it is especially needful for you that you should ponder these things, because unless you do you will certainly go wrong. If you do not plant good, somebody else will plant evil. An untilled field is not a field that nothing grows in, but it is a field full of weeds; and the world and the flesh and the devil, the temptations round about you and the evil tendencies in you, unless they are well kept down and kept off, are sure to fill your souls full of all manner of seeds that will spring up to bitterness, and poison, and death. Oh! think, think! for it is the only chance of keeping your hearts from being full of wickedness-think what you are sowing, and think what will the harvest be. There are some of you, as I said, sowing to the flesh, young men living impure and wicked lives, and 'their bones are full of the sins of their youth.' There are some of you letting every wind bring the thistledown of vanities, and scatter them all across your hearts, that they may spring up prickly, and gifted with a fatal power of self-multiplication. There are some of you, young men, and young women too, whose lives are divided between Manchester business and that ignoble thirst for mere amusement which is eating all the dignity and the earnestness out of the young men of this city. I beseech you, do not slide into habits of frivolity, licentiousness, and sin, for want of looking after yourselves. Remember, if you do not ponder the path of your feet, you are sure to take the turn to the left.

Again, it is needful for you to ponder these things, for if you waste this time, it will never come back to you any more. It is useless to sow corn in August. There are things in this world that a man can only get when he is young, such as sound education, for instance; business habits, habits of industry, of application, of concentration, of self-control, a reputation which may avail in the future. If you do not begin to get these before you are five-and-twenty, you will never get them.

And although the certainty is not so absolute in regard to spiritual and religious things, the dice are frightfully weighted, and the chances are terribly small that a young man who, like some of you, has passed his early years in church or chapel, in weekly contact with earnest preaching, and has not accepted the Saviour, will do it when he grows old. He may; he may. But it is a great deal more likely that he will not.

IV. The conclusion of the whole matter is, Begin on the spot, to trust and to serve Jesus Christ.

These are the best things to plant-simple reliance upon His death for your forgiveness, upon His power to make you pure and clean; simple submission to His commandment. Oh! dear young friend; if you have these in your hearts everything will come right. You will get habit on your side, and that is much; and you will be saved from a great deal of misery which would be yours if you went wrong first, and then came right.

If you will plant a cutting of the tree of life in your heart it will yield everything to you when it grows. The people in the South Seas, if they have a palm-tree, can get out of it bread and drink, food, clothing, shelter, light, materials for books, cordage for their boats, needles to sew with, and everything. If you will take Jesus Christ, and plant Him in your hearts, everything will come out of that. That Tree 'bears twelve manners of fruits, and yields His fruit every month.' With Christ in your heart all other fair things will be planted there; and with Him in your heart, all evil things which you may already have planted there, will be rooted out. Just as when some strong exotic is carried to some distant land and there takes root, it exterminates the feebler vegetation of the place to which it comes; so with Christ in my heart the sins, the evil habits, the passions, the lusts, and all other foul spawn and offspring, will die and disappear. Take Him, then, dear friend! by simple faith, for your Saviour. He will plant the good seed in your spirit, and 'instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle.' Your lives will become fruitful of goodness and of joy, according to that ancient promise: 'The righteous shall flourish like the palm-tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age.'

5) Ecclesiastes 3:11

Ecclesiastes

ETERNITY IN THE HEART

Ecc. 3:11.

There is considerable difficulty in understanding what precise meaning is to be attached to these words, and what precise bearing they have on the general course of the writer's thoughts; but one or two things are, at any rate, quite clear.

The Preacher has been enumerating all the various vicissitudes of prosperity and adversity, of construction and destruction, of society and solitude, of love and hate, for which there is scope and verge enough in one short human life; and his conclusion is, as it always is in the earlier part of this book, that because there is such an endless diversity of possible occupation, and each of them lasts but for a little time, and its opposite has as good a right of existence as itself; therefore, perhaps, it might be as well that a man should do nothing as do all these opposite things which neutralise each other, and the net result of which is nothing. If there be a time to be born and a time to die, nonentity would be the same when all is over. If there be a time to plant and a time to pluck, what is the good of planting? If there be a time for love and a time for hate, why cherish affections which are transient and may be succeeded by their opposites?

And then another current of thought passes through his mind, and he gets another glimpse somewhat different, and says in effect, 'No! that is not all true-God has made all these different changes, and although each of them seems contradictory of the other, in its own place and at its own time each is beautiful and has a right to exist.' The contexture of life, and even the perplexities and darknesses of human society, and the varieties of earthly condition-if they be confined within their own proper limits, and regarded as parts of a whole-they are all co-operant to an end. As from wheels turning different ways in some great complicated machine, and yet fitting by their cogs into one another, there may be a resultant direct motion produced even by these apparently antagonistic forces.

But the second clause of our text adds a thought which is in some sense contrasted with this.

The word rendered 'world' is a very frequent one in the Old Testament, and has never but one meaning, and that meaning is *eternity*. 'He hath set *eternity* in their heart.'

Here, then, are two antagonistic facts. They are transient things, a vicissitude which moves within natural limits, temporary events which are beautiful in their season. But there is also the contrasted fact, that the man who is thus tossed about, as by some great battledore wielded by giant powers in mockery, from one changing thing to another, has relations to something more lasting than the transient. He lives in a world of fleeting change, but he has ‘eternity’ in ‘his heart.’ So between him and his dwelling-place, between him and his occupations, there is a gulf of disproportion. He is subjected to these alternations, and yet bears within him a repressed but immortal consciousness that he belongs to another order of things, which knows no vicissitude and fears no decay. He possesses stifled and misinterpreted longings which, however starved, do yet survive, after unchanging Being and eternal Rest, And thus endowed, and by contrast thus situated, his soul is full of the ‘blank misgiving of a creature moving about in worlds not realised.’ Out of these two facts-says our text-man’s *where* and man’s *what*, his nature and his position, there rises a mist of perplexity and darkness that wraps the whole course of the divine actions-unless, indeed, we have reached that central height of vision above the mists, which this Book of Ecclesiastes puts forth at last as the conclusion of the whole matter-’Fear God, and keep His commandments.’ If transitory things with their multitudinous and successive waves toss us to solid safety on the Rock of Ages, then all is well, and many mysteries will be clear. But if not, if we have not found, or rather followed, the one God-given way of harmonising these two sets of experiences-life in the transient, and longings for the eternal-then their antagonism darkens our thoughts of a wise and loving Providence, and we have lost the key to the confused riddle which the world then presents. ‘He hath made everything beautiful in his time: also He hath set Eternity in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.’

Such, then, being a partial but, perhaps, not entirely inadequate view of the course of thought in the words before us, I may now proceed to expand the considerations thus brought under our notice in them. These may be gathered up in three principal ones: the consciousness of Eternity in every heart; the disproportion thence resulting between this nature of ours and the order of things in which we dwell; and finally, the possible satisfying of that longing in men’s hearts-a possibility not indeed referred to in our text, but unveiled as the final word of this Book of Ecclesiastes, and made clear to us in Jesus Christ.

I. Consider that eternity is set in every human heart.

The expression is, of course, somewhat difficult, even if we accept generally the explanation which I have given. It may be either a declaration of the actual immortality of the soul, or it may mean, as I rather suppose it to do, the consciousness of eternity which is part of human nature.

The former idea is no doubt closely connected with the latter, and would here yield an appropriate sense. We should then have the contrast between man’s undying existence and the transient trifles on which he is tempted to fix his love and hopes. We belong to one set of existences by our bodies, and to another by our souls. Though we are parts of the passing material world, yet in that outward frame is lodged a personality that has nothing in common with decay and death. A spark of eternity dwells in these fleeting frames. The laws of physical growth and accretion and maturity and decay, which rule over all things material, do not apply to my true self. ‘In our embers is something that doth live.’ Whatsoever befalls the hairs that get grey and thin, and the hands that become wrinkled and palsied, and the heart that is worn out by much beating, and the blood that clogs and clots at last, and the filmy eye, and all the corruptible frame; yet, as the heathen said, ‘I shall not *all* die,’ but deep within this transient clay house, that must crack and fall and be resolved into the elements out of which it was built up, there dwells an immortal guest, an undying personal self. In the heart, the inmost spiritual being of every man, eternity, in this sense of the word, does dwell.

‘Commonplaces,’ you say. Yes; commonplaces, which word means two things-truths that affect us all, and also truths which, because they are so universal and so entirely believed, are all but powerless. Surely it is not time to stop preaching such truths as long as they are forgotten by the overwhelming majority of the people who acknowledge them. Thank God! the staple of the work of us preachers is the reiteration of commonplaces, which His goodness has made familiar, and our indolence and sin have made stale and powerless.

My brother! you would be a wiser man if, instead of turning the edge of statements which you know to be true, and which, if true, are infinitely solemn and important, by commonplace sarcasm about pulpit commonplaces, you would honestly try to drive the familiar neglected truth home to your mind and heart. Strip it of its generality and think, ‘It is true about *me. I* live for ever. My outward life will cease, and *my* dust will return to dust-but *I* shall last undying.’ And ask yourselves-What then? ‘Am I making “provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof,” in more or less refined fashion, and forgetting to provide for that which lives for evermore? Eternity is in *my* heart. What a madness it is to go on, as if either I were to continue for ever among the shows of time, or when I leave them all, to die wholly and be done with altogether!’

But, probably, the other interpretation of these words is the truer. The doctrine of immortality does not seem to be stated in this Book of Ecclesiastes, except in one or two very doubtful expressions. And it is more in accordance with its whole tone to suppose the Preacher here to be asserting, not that the heart or spirit is immortal, but that, whether it is or no, in the heart is planted the *thought*, the *consciousness* of eternity-and the longing after it.

Let me put that into other words. We, brethren, are the only beings on this earth who can think the thought and speak the word-Eternity. Other creatures are happy while immersed in time; we have another nature, and are disturbed by a thought which shines high above the roaring sea of circumstance in which we float.

I do not care at present about the metaphysical puzzles that have been gathered round that conception, nor care to ask whether it is positive or negative, adequate or inadequate. Enough that the word has a meaning, that it corresponds to a thought which dwells in men’s minds. It is of no consequence at all for our purpose, whether it is a positive conception, or simply the thinking away of all limitations. ‘I know what God is, when you do not ask me.’ I know what eternity is, though I cannot define the word to satisfy a metaphysician. The little child taught by some grandmother Lois, in a cottage, knows what she means when she tells him ‘you will live for ever,’ though both scholar and teacher would be puzzled to put it into other words. When we say eternity flows round this bank and shoal of time, men know what we mean. Heart answers to heart; and in each heart lies that solemn thought-for ever!

Like all other of the primal thoughts of men’s souls, it may be increased in force and clearness, or it may be neglected and opposed, and all but crushed. The thought of God is natural to man, the thought of right and wrong is natural to man-and yet there may be atheists who have blinded their eyes, and there may be degraded and almost animal natures who have seared their consciences and called sweet bitter and evil good. Thus men may so plunge themselves into the present as to lose the consciousness of the eternal-as a man swept over Niagara, blinded by the spray and deafened by the rush, would see or hear nothing outside the green walls of the death that encompassed him. And yet the blue sky with its peaceful spaces stretches above the hell of waters.

So the thought is in us all-a presentiment and a consciousness; and that universal presentiment itself goes far to establish the reality of the unseen order of things to which it is directed. The great planet that moves on the outmost circle of our system was discovered because that next it wavered in its course in a fashion which was inexplicable, unless some unknown mass was attracting it from across millions of miles of darkling space. And there are ‘perturbations’ in our spirits which cannot be understood, unless from them we may divine that far-off and unseen world, that has power from afar to sway in their orbits the little lives of mortal men. It draws us to itself-but, alas! the attraction may be resisted and thwarted. The dead mass of the planet bends to the drawing, but we can repel the constraint which the eternal world would exercise upon us-and so that consciousness which ought to be our nobleness, as it is our prerogative, may become our shame, our misery, and our sin.

That Eternity which is set in our hearts is not merely the thought of ever-during Being, or of an everlasting order of things to which we are in some way related. But there are connected with it other ideas besides those of mere duration. Men know what perfection means. They understand the meaning of perfect goodness; they have the notion of infinite Wisdom and boundless Love. These thoughts are the material of all poetry, the thread from which the imagination creates all her wondrous tapestries. This ‘capacity for the Infinite,’ as people call it-which is only a fine way of putting the same thought as that in our text-which is the prerogative of human spirits, is likewise the curse of many spirits. By their misuse of it they make it a fatal gift, and turn it into an unsatisfied desire which gnaws their souls, a famished yearning which ‘roars, and suffers hunger.’ Knowing what perfection is, they turn to limited natures and created hearts for their rest. Having the haunting thought of an absolute Goodness, a perfect Wisdom, an endless Love, an eternal Life-they try to find the being that corresponds to their thought here on earth, and so they are plagued with endless disappointment.

My brother! God has put eternity in *your* heart. Not only will you live for ever, but also in your present life you have a consciousness of that eternal and infinite and all-sufficient Being that lives above. You have need of Him, and whether you know it or not, the tendrils of your spirits, like some climbing plant not fostered by a careful hand but growing wild, are feeling out into the vacancy in order to grasp the stay which they need for their fruitage and their strength.

By the make of our spirits, by the possibilities that dawn dim before us, by the thoughts ‘whose very sweetness yieldeth proof that they were born for immortality,’-by all these and a thousand other signs and facts in every human life we say, ‘God has set eternity in their hearts!’

II. And then turn to the second idea that is here. The disproportion between this our nature, and the world in which we dwell.

The writer of this book [whether Solomon or no we need not stay to discuss] looks out upon the world; and in accordance with the prevailing tone of all the earlier parts of his contemplations, finds in this prerogative of man but another reason for saying, ‘All is vanity and vexation of spirit.’

Two facts meet him antagonistic to one another: the place that man occupies, and the nature that man bears. This creature with eternity in his heart, where is he set? what has he got to work upon? what has he to love and hold by, to trust to, and anchor his life on? A crowd of things, each well enough, but each having a *time*-and though they be beautiful in their time, yet fading and vanishing when it has elapsed. No multiplication of *times* will make *eternity*. And so with that thought in his heart, man is driven out among objects perfectly insufficient to meet it.

Christ said, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head’-and while the words have their proper and most pathetic meaning in the history of His own earthly life of travail and toil for our sakes, we may also venture to give them the further application, that all the lower creatures are at rest here, and that the more truly a man is man, the less can he find, among all the shadows of the present, a pillow for his head, a place of repose for his heart. The animal nature is at home in the material world, the human nature is not.

Every other creature presents the most accurate correspondence between nature and circumstances, powers and occupations. Man alone is like some poor land-bird blown out to sea, and floating half-drowned with clinging plumage on an ocean where the dove ‘finds no rest for the sole of her foot,’ or like some creature that loves to glance in the sunlight, but is plunged into the deepest recesses of a dark mine. In the midst of a universe marked by the nicest adaptations of creatures to their habitation, man alone, the head of them all, presents the unheard-of anomaly that he is surrounded by conditions which do *not* fit his whole nature, which are not adequate for all his powers, on which he cannot feed and nurture his whole being. ‘To what purpose is this waste?’ ‘Hast thou made all men in vain?’ Everything is ‘beautiful in its time.’ Yes, and for that very reason, as this Book of Ecclesiastes says in another verse, ‘Because to every purpose there is time and judgment, therefore the misery of man is great upon him.’ It was happy when we loved; but the day of indifference and alienation and separation comes. Our spirits were glad when we were planting; but the time for plucking up that which was planted is sure to draw near. It was blessed to pour out our souls in the effluence of love, or in the fullness of thought, and the time to speak was joyous; but the dark day of silence comes on. When we twined hearts and clasped hands together it was glad, and the time when we embraced was blessed; but the time to refrain from embracing is as sure to draw near. It is good for the eyes to behold the sun, but so certainly as it rolls to its bed in the west, and ‘leaves the world to darkness’ and to us, do all earthly occupations wane and fade, and all possessions shrivel and dwindle, and all associations snap and drop and end, and the whirligig of time works round and takes away everything which it once brought us.

And so man, with eternity in his heart, with the hunger in his spirit after an unchanging whole, an absolute good, an ideal perfectness, an immortal being-is condemned to the treadmill of transitory revolution. Nothing continueth in one stay, 'For all that *is* in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof.' It is limited, it is changeful, it slips from under us as we stand upon it, and therefore, mystery and perplexity stoop down upon the providence of God, and misery and loneliness enter into the heart of man. These changeful things, they do not meet our ideal, they do not satisfy our wants, they do not last even our duration.

'The misery of man is great upon him,' said the text quoted a moment ago. And is it not? Is this present life enough for you? Sometimes you fancy it is. Many of us habitually act on the understanding that it is, and treat all that I have been saying about the disproportion between our nature and our circumstances as not true about them. 'This world not enough for me!' you say-'Yes! it is; only let me get a little more of it, and keep what I get, and I shall be all right.' So then-'a little more' is wanted, is it? And that 'little more' will always be wanted, and besides it, the guarantee of permanence will always be wanted, and failing these, there will be a hunger that nothing can fill which belongs to earth. Do you remember the bitter experience of the poor prodigal, 'he would fain have filled his belly with the husks'? He tried his best to live upon the horny, innutritious pods, but he could not; and after them he still was 'perishing with hunger.' So it is with us all when we try to fill the soul and satisfy the spirit with earth or aught that holds of it. It is as impossible to still the hunger of the heart with that, as to stay the hunger of the body with wise sayings or noble sentiments.

I appeal to your real selves, to your own past experience. Is it not true that, deep below the surface contentment with the world and the things of the world, a dormant but slightly slumbering sense of want and unsatisfied need lies in your souls? Is it not true that it wakes sometimes at a touch; that the tender, dying light of sunset, or the calm abysses of the mighty heavens, or some strain of music, or a line in a book, or a sorrow in your heart, or the solemnity of a great joy, or close contact with sickness and death, or the more direct appeals of Scripture and of Christ, stir a wistful yearning and a painful sense of emptiness in your hearts, and of insufficiency in all the ordinary pursuits of your lives? It cannot but be so; for though it be true that our natures are in some measure subdued to what we work in, and although it is possible to atrophy the deepest parts of our being by long neglect or starvation, yet you will never do that so thoroughly but that the deep-seated longing will break forth at intervals, and the cry of its hunger echo through the soul. Many of us do our best to silence it. But I, for my part, believe that, however you have crushed and hardened your souls by indifference, by ambition, by worldly cares, by frivolous or coarse pleasures, or by any of the thousand other ways in which you can do it-yet there is some response in your truest self to my poor words when I declare that a soul without God is an empty and an aching soul!

These things which, even in their time of beauty, are not enough for a man's soul-have all but a time to be beautiful in, and then they fade and die. A great botanist made what he called 'a floral clock' to mark the hours of the day by the opening and closing of flowers. It was a graceful and yet a pathetic thought. One after another they spread their petals, and their varying colours glow in the light. But one after another they wearily shut their cups, and the night falls, and the latest of them folds itself together, and all are hidden away in the dark. So our joys and treasures, were they sufficient did they last, cannot last. After a summer's day comes a summer's night, and after a brief space of them comes winter, when all are killed and the leafless trees stand silent.

'Bare, ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.'

We cleave to these temporal possessions and joys, and the natural law of change sweeps them away from us one by one. Most of them do not last so long as we do, and they pain us when *they* pass away from us. Some of them last longer than we do, and *they* pain us when we pass away from them. Either way our hold of them is a transient hold, and one knows not whether is the sadder-the bare garden beds where all have done blowing, and nothing remains but a tangle of decay, or the blooming beauty from which a man is summoned away, leaving others to reap what he has sown. Tragic enough are both at the best-and certain to befall us all. We live and they fade; we die and they remain. We live again and they are far away. The facts are *so*. We may make them a joy or a sorrow as we will. Transiency is stamped on all our possessions, occupations, and delights. We have the hunger for eternity in our souls, the thought of eternity in our hearts, the destination for eternity written on our inmost being, and the need to ally ourselves with eternity proclaimed even by the most short-lived trifles of time. Either these things will be the blessing or the curse of our lives. Which do you mean that they shall be for you?

III. These thoughts lead us to consider the possible satisfying of our souls.

This Book of Ecclesiastes is rather meant to enforce the truth of the weariness and emptiness of a godless life, than of the blessedness of a godly one. It is the record of the struggles of a soul-'the confessions of an inquiring spirit'-feeling and fighting its way through many errors, and many partial and unsatisfactory solutions of the great problem of life, till he reaches the one in which he can rest. When he has touched that goal his work is done. And so the devious way is told in the book at full length, while a sentence sets forth the conclusion to which he was working, even when he was most bewildered. 'The conclusion of the whole matter' is 'Fear God and keep His commandments.' That is all that a man needs. It is 'the whole of man.' 'All is' *not* 'vanity and vexation of spirit' *then*-but 'all things work together for good to them that love God.'

The Preacher in his day learned that it was possible to satisfy the hunger for eternity, which had once seemed to him a questionable blessing. He learned that it was a loving Providence which had made man's home so little fit for him, that he might seek the 'city which hath foundations.' He learned that all the pain of passing beauty, and the fading flowers of man's goodliness, were capable of being turned into a solemn joy. Standing at the centre, he saw order instead of chaos, and when he had come back, after all his search, to the old simple faith of peasants and children in Judah, to fear God and keep His commandments, he understood why God had set eternity in man's heart, and then flung him out, as if in mockery, amidst the stormy waves of the changeful ocean of time.

And we, who have a further word from God, may have a fuller and yet more blessed conviction, built upon our own happy experience, if we choose, that it *is* possible for us to have that deep thirst slaked, that longing appeased. We have Christ to trust to and to love. He has given Himself for us that all our many sins against the eternal love and our guilty squandering of our hearts upon transitory treasures may be forgiven. He has come amongst us, the Word in human flesh, that our poor eyes may see the Eternal walking amidst the things of time and sense, and may discern a beauty in Him beyond ‘whatsoever things are lovely.’ He has come that we through Him may lay hold on God, even as in Him God lays hold on us. As in mysterious and transcendent union the divine takes into itself the human in that person of Jesus, and Eternity is blended with Time; we, trusting Him and yielding our hearts to Him, receive into our poor lives an incorruptible seed, and for us the soul-satisfying realities that abide for ever mingle with and are reached through the shadows that pass away.

Brethren, yield yourselves to Him! In conscious unworthiness, in lowly penitence, let us cast ourselves on Jesus Christ, our Sacrifice, for pardon and peace! Trust Him and love Him! Live by Him and for Him! And then, the loftiest thoughts of our hearts, as they seek after absolute perfection and changeless love, shall be more than fulfilled in Him who is more than all that man ever dreamed, because He is the perfection of man, and the Son of God.

Love Christ and live in Him, taking Him for the motive, the spring, and the very atmosphere of your lives, and then no capacities will languish for lack of either stimulus or field, and no weariness will come over you, as if you were a stranger from your home. For if Christ be near us, all things go well with us. If we live for Him, the power of that motive will make all our nature blossom like the vernal woods, and dry branches break into leafage. If we dwell in Him, we shall be at home wherever we are, like the patriarch who pitched his tent in many lands, but always had the same tent wherever he went. So we shall have the one abode, though its place in the desert may vary-and we shall not need to care whether the encampment be beneath the palm-trees and beside the wells of Elim, or amidst the drought of Marah, so long as the same covering protects us, and the same pillar of fire burns above us.

Love Christ, and then the eternity in the heart will not be a great aching void, but will be filled with the everlasting life which Christ gives, and is. The vicissitude will really become the source of freshness and progress which God meant it to be. Everything which, when made our all-sufficient portion, becomes stale and unprofitable, even in its time, will be apparelled in celestial light. It shall all be lovely and pleasant while it lasts, and its beauty will not be saddened by the certainty of its decay, nor its empty place a pain when it has passed away.

Take Christ for Saviour and Friend, your Guide and Support through time, and Himself, your Eternity and Joy, then all discords are reconciled-and ‘all things are yours-whether the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours, and ye are Christ’ s, and Christ is God’s.’

6) Ecclesiastes 5:1-12

Ecclesiastes

LESSONS FOR WORSHIP AND FOR WORK

Ecc. 5:1 - Ecc. 5:12.

This passage is composed of two or perhaps three apparently disconnected sections. The faults in worship referred to in Ecc. 5:1 - Ecc. 5:7 have nothing to do with the legalised robbery of Ecc. 5:8, nor has the demonstration of the folly of covetousness in Ecc. 5:10 - Ecc. 5:12 any connection with either of the preceding subjects. But they are brought into unity, if they are taken as applications in different directions of the bitter truth which the writer sets himself to prove runs through all life. ‘All is vanity.’ That principle may even be exemplified in worship, and the obscure Ecc. 5:7 which closes the section about the faults of worship seems to be equivalent to the more familiar close which rings the knell of so many of men’s pursuits in this book, ‘This also is vanity.’ It stands in the usual form in Ecc. 5:10.

We have in Ecc. 5:1 - Ecc. 5:7 a warning against the faults in worship which make even it to be ‘vanity,’ unreal and empty and fruitless. These are of three sorts, arranged, as it were, chronologically. The worshipper is first regarded as going to the house of God, then as presenting his prayers in it, and then as having left it and returned to his ordinary life. The writer has cautions to give concerning conduct before, during, and after public worship.

Note that, in all three parts of his warnings, his favourite word of condemnation appears as describing the vain worship to which he opposes the right manner. They who fall into the faults condemned are ‘fools.’ If that class includes all who mar their worship by such errors, the church which holds them had need to be of huge dimensions; for the faults held up in these ancient words flourish in full luxuriance to-day, and seem to haunt long-established Christianity quite as mischievously as they did long-established Judaism. If we could banish them from our religious assemblies, there would be fewer complaints of the poor results of so much apparently Christian prayer and preaching.

Fruitful and acceptable worship begins before it begins. So our passage commences with the demeanour of the worshipper on his way to the house of God. He is to keep his foot; that is, to go deliberately, thoughtfully, with realisation of what he is about to do. He is to ‘draw near to hear’ and to bethink himself, while drawing near, of what his purpose should be. Our forefathers Sunday began on Saturday night, and partly for that reason the hallowing influence of it ran over into Monday, at all events. What likelihood is there that much good will come of worship to people who talk politics or scandal right up to the church door? Is reading newspapers in the pews, which they tell us in England is not unknown in America, a good preparation for worshipping God? The heaviest rain runs off parched ground, unless it has been first softened by a gentle fall of moisture. Hearts that have no dew of previous meditation to make them receptive are not likely to drink in much of the showers of blessing which may be falling round them. The formal worshipper who goes to the house of God because it is the hour when he has always gone; the curious worshipper [?] who draws near to hear indeed, but to hear a man, not God; and all the other sorts of mere outward worshippers who make so large a proportion of every Christian congregation-get the lesson they need, to begin with, in this precept.

Note, that right preparation for worship is better than worship itself, if it is that of ‘fools.’ Drawing near with the true purpose is better than being near with the wrong one. Note, too, the reason for the vanity of the ‘sacrifice of fools’ is that ‘they know not’; and why do they not know, but because they did not draw near with the purpose of hearing? Therefore, as the last clause of the verse says, rightly rendered, ‘they do evil.’ All hangs together. No matter how much we frequent the house of God, if we go with unprepared minds and hearts we shall remain ignorant, and because we are so, our sacrifices will be ‘evil.’ If the winnowing fan of this principle were applied to our decorous congregations, who dress their bodies for church much more carefully than they do their souls, what a cloud of chaff would fly off!

Then comes the direction for conduct in the act of worship. The same thoughtfulness which kept the foot in coming to, should keep the heart when in, the house of God. His exaltation and our lowliness should check hasty words, blurting out uppermost wishes, or in any way outrunning the sentiments and emotions of prepared hearts. Not that the lesson would check the fervid flow of real desire. There is a type of calm worship which keeps itself calm because it is cold. Propriety and sobriety are its watchwords-both admirable things, and both dear to tepid Christians. Other people besides the crowds on Pentecost think that men whose lips are fired by the Spirit of God are ‘drunken,’ if not with wine, at all events with unwholesome enthusiasm. But the outpourings of a soul filled, not only with the sense that God is in heaven and we on earth, but also with the assurance that He is near to it, and it to Him, are not rash and hasty, however fervid. What is condemned is words which travel faster than thoughts or feelings, or which proceed from hearts that have not been brought into patient submission, or from such as lack reverent realisation of God’s majesty; and such faults may attach to the most calm worship, and need not infect the most fervent. Those prayers are not hasty which keep step with the suppliant’s desires, when these take the time from God’s promises. That mouth is not rash which waits to speak until the ear has heard.

‘Let thy words be few.’ The heathen ‘think that they shall be heard for much speaking.’ It needs not to tell our wants in many words to One who knows them altogether, any more than a child needs many when speaking to a father or mother. But ‘few’ must be measured by the number of needs and desires. The shortest prayer, which is not animated by a consciousness of need and a throb of desire, is too long; the longest, which is vitalised by these, is short enough. What becomes of the enormous percentage of public and private prayers, which are mere repetitions, said because they are the right thing to say, because everybody always has said them, and not because the man praying really wants the things he asks for, or expects to get them any the more for asking?

Ecc. 5:3 gives a reason for the exhortation, ‘A dream comes through a multitude of business’-when a man is much occupied with any matter, it is apt to haunt his sleeping as well as his waking thoughts. ‘A fool’s voice comes through a multitude of words.’ The dream is the consequence of the pressure of business, but the fool’s voice is the cause, not the consequence, of the gush of words. What, then, is the meaning? Probably that such a gush of words turns, as it were, the voice of the utterer, for the time being, into that of a fool. Voluble prayers, more abundant than devout sentiments or emotions, make the offerer as a ‘fool’ and his prayer unacceptable.

The third direction refers to conduct after worship. It lays down the general principle that vows should be paid, and that swiftly. A keen insight into human nature suggests the importance of prompt fulfilment of the vows; for in carrying out resolutions formed under the impulse of the sanctuary, even more than in other departments, delays are dangerous. Many a young heart touched by the truth has resolved to live a Christian life, and has gone out from the house of God and put off and put off till days have thickened into months and years, and the intention has remained unfulfilled for ever. Nothing hardens hearts, stiffens wills, and sears consciences so much as to be brought to the point of melting, and then to cool down into the old shape. All good resolutions and spiritual convictions may be included under the name of vows; and of all it is true that it is better not to have formed them, than to have formed and not performed them.

Ecc. 5:6 - Ecc. 5:7 are obscure. The former seems to refer to the case of a man who vows and then asks that he may be absolved from his vow by the priest or other ecclesiastical authority. His mouth-that is, his spoken promise-leads him into sin, if he does not fulfil it [comp. Deut. xxiii, 21, 22]. He asks release from his promise on the ground that it is a sin of weakness. The ‘angel’ is best understood as the priest [messenger], as in Mal. 2:7. Such a wriggling out of a vow will bring God’s anger; for the ‘voice’ which promised what the hand will not perform, sins.

Ecc. 5:7 is variously rendered. The Revised Version supplies at the beginning, ‘This comes to pass,’ and goes on ‘through the multitude of dreams and vanities and many words.’ But this scarcely bears upon the context, which requires here a reason against rash speech and vows. The meaning seems better given, either by the rearranged text which Delitzsch suggests, ‘In many dreams and many words there are also many vanities’ [so, substantially, the Auth. Ver.], or as Wright, following Hitzig, etc., has it, ‘In the multitude of dreams are also vanities, and [in] many words [as well].’ The simile of Ecc. 5:3 is recurred to, and the whirling visions of unsubstantial dreams are likened to the rash words of voluble prayers in that both are vanity. Thus the writer reaches his favourite thought, and shows how vanity infects even devotion. The closing injunction to ‘fear God’ sets in sharp contrast with faulty outward worship the inner surrender and devotion, which will protect against such empty hypocrisy. If the heart is right, the lips will not be far wrong.

Ecc. 5:8 - Ecc. 5:9 have no direct connection with the preceding, and their connection with the following [Ecc. 5:10 - Ecc. 5:12] is slight. Their meaning is dubious. According to the prevailing view now, the abuses of government in Ecc. 5:8 are those of the period of the writer; and the last clauses do not, as might appear at first reading, console sufferers by the thought that God is above rapacious dignitaries, but bids the readers not be surprised if small officials plunder, since the same corruption goes upwards through all grades of functionaries. With such rotten condition of things is contrasted, in Ecc. 5:9, the happy state of a people living under a patriarchal government, where the king draws his revenues, not from oppression, but from agriculture. The Revised Version gives in its margin this rendering. The connection of these verses with the following may be that they teach the vanity of riches under such a state of society as they describe. What is the use of scraping wealth together when hungry officials are ‘watching’ to pounce on it? How much better to be contented with the modest prosperity of a quiet country life! If the translation of Ecc. 5:9 in the Authorised

Version and the Revised Version is retained, there is a striking contrast between the rapine of the city, where men live by preying on each other [as they do still to a large extent, for ‘commerce’ is often nothing better], and the wholesome natural life of the country, where the kindly earth yields fruit, and one man’s gain is not another’s loss.

Thus the verses may be connected with the wise depreciation of money which follows. That low estimate is based on three grounds, which great trading nations like England and the United States need to have dinned into their ears. First, no man ever gets enough of worldly wealth. The appetite grows faster than the balance at the banker’ s. That is so because the desire that is turned to outward wealth really needs something else, and has mistaken its object. God, not money or money’s worth, is the satisfying possession. It is so because all appetites, fed on earthly things, increase by gratification, and demand ever larger draughts. The jaded palate needs stronger stimulants. The seasoned opium-eater has to increase his doses to produce the same effects. Second, the race after riches is a race after a phantom, because the more one has of them the more people there spring up to share them. The poor man does with one servant; the rich man has fifty; and his own portion of his wealth is a very small item. His own meal is but a small slice off the immense provisions for which he has the trouble of paying. It is so, thirdly, because in the chase he deranges his physical nature; and when he has got his wealth, it only keeps him awake at night thinking how he shall guard it and keep it safe.

That which costs so much to get, which has so little power to satisfy, which must always be less than the wish of the covetous man, which costs so much to keep, which stuffs pillows with thorns, is surely vanity. Honest work is rewarded by sweet sleep. The old legend told of unslumbering guards who kept the treasure of the golden fruit. The millionaire has to live in a barred house, and to be always on the lookout lest some combination of speculators should pull down his stocks, or some change in the current of population should make his city lots worthless. Black care rides behind the successful man of business. Better to have done a day’s work which has earned a night’s repose than to be the slave of one’s wealth, as all men are who make it their aim and their supreme good. Would that these lessons were printed deep on the hearts of young Englishmen and Americans!

7) **Ecclesiastes 5:15**

Ecclesiastes

NAKED OR CLOTHED?

Ecc. 5:15. - Rev. 14:13.

It is to be observed that these two sharply contrasted texts do not refer to the same persons. The former is spoken of a rich worldling, the latter of ‘the dead who die in the Lord.’ The unrelieved gloom of the one is as a dark background against which the triumphant assurance of the other shines out the more brightly, and deepens the gloom which heightens it. The end of the man who has to go away from earth naked and empty-handed acquires new tragic force when set against the lot of those ‘whose works do follow them.’ Well-worn and commonplace as both sets of thought may be, they may perhaps be flashed up into new vividness by juxtaposition; and if in this sermon we have nothing new to say, old truth is not out of place till it has been wrought into and influenced our daily practice. We shall best gather the lessons of our text if we consider what we must leave, what we must take, and what we may take.

I. What we must leave.

The Preacher in the context presses home a formidable array of the limitations and insufficiencies of wealth. Possessed, it cannot satisfy, for the appetite grows with indulgence. Its increase barely keeps pace with the increase of its consumers. It contributes nothing to the advantage of its so-called owner except ‘the beholding of it with his eyes,’ and the need of watching it keeps them open when he would fain sleep. It is often kept to the owner’s hurt, it often disappears in unfortunate speculation, and the possessor’s heirs are paupers. But, even if all these possibilities are safely weathered, the man has to die and leave it all behind. ‘He shall take nothing of his labour which he can carry away in his hand’; that is to say, death separates from all with whom the life of the body brings us into connection. The things which are no parts of our true selves are ours in a very modified sense even whilst we seem to possess them, and the term of possession has a definite close. ‘Shrouds have no pockets,’ as the stern old proverb says. How many men have lived in the houses which we call ours, sat on our seats, walked over our lands, carried in their purses the money that is in ours! Is ‘the game worth the candle’ when we give our labour for so imperfect and brief a possession as at the fullest and the longest we enjoy of all earthly good? Surely a wise man will set little store by possessions of all which a cold, irresistible hand will come to strip him. Surely the life is wasted which spends its energy in robing itself in garments which will all be stripped from it when the naked self ‘returns to go as he came.’

But there are other things than these earthly possessions from which death separates us. It carries us far away from the sound of human voices and isolates us from living men. Honour and reputation cease to be audible. When a prominent man dies, what a clatter of conflicting judgments contends over his grave! and how utterly he is beyond them all! Praise or blame, blessing or banning are equally powerless to reach the unhearing ear or to agitate the unbeating heart. And when one of our small selves passes out of life, we hear no more the voice of censure or of praise, of love or of hate. Is it worth while to toil for the ‘hollow wraith of dying fame,’ or even for the clasp of loving hands which have to be loosened so surely and so soon?

Then again, there are other things which must be left behind as belonging only to the present order, and connected with bodily life. There will be no scope for material work, and much of all our knowledge will be antiquated when the light beyond shines in. As we shall have occasion to see presently, there is a permanent element in the most material work, and if in handling the transient we have been living for the eternal, such work will abide; but if we think of the spirit in which a sad majority do their daily tasks, whether of a more material or of a more intellectual sort, we must recognise that a very large proportion of all the business of life must come to an end here. There is nothing in it that will stand the voyage across the great deep, or that can survive in the order of things to which we go. What is a man to do in another world, supposing there is another world, where ledgers and mills are out of date? Or what has a scholar or scientist to do in a state of things where there is no place for dictionaries and grammars, for acute criticism, or for a careful scientific research?

Physical science, linguistic knowledge, political wisdom, will be antiquated. The poetry which glorifies afresh and interprets the present will have lost its meaning. Half the problems that torture us here will cease to have existence, and most of the other half will have been solved by simple change of position. ‘Whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away’; and it becomes us all to bethink ourselves whether there is anything in our lives that we can carry away when all that is ‘of the earth earthy’ has sunk into nothingness.

II. What we must take.

We must take *ourselves*. It is the same ‘he’ who goes ‘naked as he came’; it is the same ‘he’ who ‘came from his mother’s womb,’ and is ‘born again’ as it were into a new life, only ‘he’ has by his earthly life been developed and revealed. The plant has flowered and fruited. What was mere potentiality has become fact. There is now fixed character. The transient possessions, relationships, and occupations of the earthly life are gone, but the man that they have made is there. And in the character there are predominant habits which insist upon having their sway, and a memory of which, as we may believe, there is written indelibly all the past. Whatever death may strip from us, there is no reason to suppose that it touches the consciousness and personal identity, or the prevailing set and inclination of our characters. And if we do indeed pass into another life ‘not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness,’ but carrying a perfected memory and clothed in a garment woven of all our past actions, there needs no more to bring about a solemn and continuous act of judgment.

III. What we may take.

‘Their works do follow them.’ These are the words of the Spirit concerning ‘the dead who die in the Lord.’ We need not fear marring the great truth that ‘not by works of righteousness but by His mercy He saved us,’ if we firmly grasp the large assurance which this text blessedly contains. A Christian man’s works are perpetual in the measure in which they harmonise with the divine will, in the measure they have eternal consequences in himself whatever they may have on others. If we live opening our minds and hearts to the influx of the divine power ‘that worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure,’ then we may be humbly sure that these ‘works’ are eternal; and though they will never constitute the ground of our acceptance, they will never fail to secure 'a great recompence of reward.' To many a humble saint there will be a moment of wondering thankfulness when he sees these his 'children whom God hath given him' clustered round him, and has to say, 'Lord, when saw I Thee naked, or in prison, and visited Thee?' There will be many an apocalypse of grateful surprise in the revelations of the heavens. We remember Milton's noble explanation of these great words which may well silence our feeble attempts to enforce them-

'Thy works and alms and all thy good endeavour

Stood not behind, nor in the grave were trod,

But as faith pointed with her golden rod,

Followed them up to joy and bliss for ever.'

So then, life here and yonder will for the Christian soul be one continuous whole, only that there, while 'their works do follow them,' 'they rest from their labours.'

8) Ecclesiastes 7:8

Ecclesiastes

FINIS CORONAT OPUS

Ecc. 7:8.

This Book of Ecclesiastes is the record of a quest after the chief good. The Preacher tries one thing after another, and tells his experiences. Amongst these are many blunders. It is the final lesson which he would have us learn, not the errors through which he reached it. 'The conclusion of the whole matter' is what he would commend to us, and to it he cleaves his way through a number of bitter exaggerations and of partial truths and of unmingled errors. The text is one of a string of paradoxical sayings, some of them very true and beautiful, some of them doubtful, but all of them the kind of things which used-up men are wont to say-the salt which is left in the pool when the tide is gone down. The text is the utterance of a wearied man who has had so many disappointments, and seen so many fair beginnings overclouded, and so many ships going out of port with flying flags and foundering at sea, that he thinks nothing good till it is ended; little worth beginning-rest and freedom from all external cares and duties best; and, best of all, to be dead, and have done with the whole coil. Obviously, ‘the end of a thing’ here is the parallel to ‘the day of death’ in Ecc. 7:1, which is there preferred to ‘the day of one’s birth.’ That is the godless, worn-out worlding’s view of the matter, which is infinitely sad, and absolutely untrue.

But from another point of view there is a truth in these words. The life which is lived for God, which is rooted in Christ, a life of self-denial, of love, of purity, of strenuous ‘pressing towards the mark,’ is better in its ‘end’ than in its ‘beginning.’ To such a life we are all called, and it is possible for each. May my poor words help some of us to make it ours.

I. Then our life has an end.

It is hard for any of us to realise this in the midst of the rush and pressure of daily duty; and it is not altogether wholesome to think much about it; but it is still more harmful to put it out of our sight, as so many of us do, and to go on habitually as if there would never come a time when we shall cease to be where we have been so long, and when there will no more arise the daily calls to transitory occupations. The thought of the certainty and nearness of that end has often become a stimulus to wild, sensuous living, as the history of the relaxation of morality in pestilences, and in times when war stalked through the land, has abundantly shown. ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die,’ is plainly a way of reasoning that appeals to the average man. But the entire forgetfulness that there is an end is no less harmful, and is apt to lead to over-indulgence in sensuous desires as the other extreme. Perhaps the young need more especially to be recalled to the thought of the ‘end’ because they are more especially likely to forget it, and because it is specially worth their while to remember it. They have still the long stretch before the ‘end’ before them, to make of it what they will. Whereas for us who are further on in the course, there is less time and opportunity to shape our path with a view to its close, and to those of us in old age, there is but little need to preach remembrance of what has come so close to us. It is to the young man that the Preacher proffers his final advice, to ‘rejoice in his health, and to walk in the ways of his heart, and in the sight of his eyes,’ but withal to know that ‘for these God will bring him into judgment.’

And in that counsel is involved the thought that ‘the end which is better than the beginning’ is neither old age, with its limitations and compulsory abstinences, nor death, which is, as the dreary creed of the book in its central portions believes it to be, the close of all things, but, beyond these, the state in which men will reap as they have sown, and inherit what they have earned. It is that condition which gives all its importance to death-the porter who opens the door into a future life of recompence.

II. The end will, in many respects, not be better than the beginning.

Put side by side the infant and the old man. Think of the undeveloped strength, the smooth cheek, the ruddy complexion, the rejoicing in physical well-being, of the one, with the failing senses, the tottering limbs, the lowered vitality, the many pains and aches, of the other. In these respects the end is worse than the beginning. Or go a step further onwards in life, and think of youth, with its unworn energy, and the wearied longing for rest which comes at the end; of youth, with its quick, open receptiveness for all impressions, and the horny surface of callousness which has overgrown the mind of the old; of youth, with its undeveloped powers and endless possibilities, which in the old have become rigid and fixed; of youth, with the rich gift before it of a continent of time, which in the old has been washed away by the ocean, till there is but a crumbling bank still to stand on; of youth, with its wealth of hopes, and of the hopes of the old, which are solemn ventures, few and scanty-and then say if the end is not worse than the beginning.

And if we go further, and think of death as the end, is it not in a very real and terrible sense, loss, loss? It is loss to be taken out of the world, to ‘leave the warm precincts and the cheerful day,’ to lose friends and lovers, and to be banned into a dreary land. Yet, further, the thought of the end as being a state of retribution strikes upon all hearts as being solemn and terrible.

III. Yet the end may be better.

The sensuous indulgence which Ecclesiastes preaches in its earlier portions will never lead to such an end. It breeds disgust of life, as the examples of in all ages, and today, abundantly shows. Epicurean selfishness leads to weariness of all effort and work. If we are unwise enough to make either of these our guides in life, the only desirable end will be the utter cessation of being and consciousness.

But there is a better sense in which this paradoxical saying is simple truth, and that sense is one which it is possible for us all to realise. What sort of end would that be, the brightness of which would far outshine the joy when a man-child is born into the world? Would it not be a birth into a better life than that which fills and often disturbs the 'threescore years and ten' here? Would it not be an end to a course in which all our nature would be fully developed and all opportunities of growth and activity had been used to the full? which had secured all that we could possess? which had happy memories and calm hopes? Would it not be an end which brought with it communion with the Highest-joys that could never fade, activities that could never weary? Surely the Christian heaven is better than earth; and that heaven may be ours.

That supreme and perfect end will be reached by us through faith in Christ, and through union by faith with Him. If we are joined to the Lord and are one with Him, our end in glory will be as much better than this our beginning on earth as the full glory of a summer's day transcends the fogs and frosts of dreary winter. 'The path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day.'

If the end is not better than the beginning, it will be infinitely worse. Golden opportunities will be gone; wasted years will be irrevocable. Bright lights will be burnt out; sin will be graven on the memory; remorse will be bitter; evil habits which cannot be gratified will torment; a wearied soul, a darkened understanding, a rebellious heart, will make the end awfully, infinitely, always worse than the beginning. From all these Jesus Christ can save us; and, full as He fills the cup of life as we travel along the road, He keeps the best wine till the last, and makes 'the end of a thing better than the beginning.'

9) Ecclesiastes 8:11

Ecclesiastes

MISUSED RESPITE

Ecc. 8:11.

When the Pharaoh of the Exodus saw there was respite, he hardened his heart. Abject in his fear before Moses, he was ready to promise anything; insolent in his pride, he swallows down his promises as soon as fear is eased, his repentance and his retractation of it combined to add new weights about his neck. He was but a conspicuous example of a universal fault. Every nation, I suppose, has its proverb scoffing at the contrast between the sick man's vow and the recovered man's sins. The bitter moralist of the Old Testament was sure not to let such an instance of man's inconceivable levity pass unnoticed. His settled habit of dragging to light the seamy side of human nature was sure to fall on this illustration of it as congenial food. He has wrapped up here in these curt, bitter words a whole theory of man's condition, of God's providence, of its abuse, and of the end to which it all tends.

I. Note the delay in executing sentence.

Every 'evil work' is already sentenced. 'He that believeth not,' said Christ, 'is condemned already'; and that is one case of a general truth. The text writes the sentence as passed, though the execution is for a time suspended. What is the underlying fact expressed by this metaphor? God's thorough knowledge of, and displeasure at, every evil. When one sees vile things done on earth, and no bolt coming out of the clear sky, it is not easy to believe that all the foulness is known to God; but His eye reaches further than He wills to stretch His arm. He sits a silent Onlooker and beholds; the silence does not argue indifference. The sentence is pronounced, but the execution is delayed. It is not wholly delayed, for there are consequences which immediately dog our evil deeds, and are, as it were, premonitions of a yet more complete penalty. But in the present order of things the connection between a man's evil-doing and suffering is, on the whole, slight, obscure, and partial. Evil triumphs; goodness not seldom suffers. If one thinks for a moment of the manifold evils of the world, which swathe it, as it were, in an atmosphere of woe-the wars, the slavery, the oppressions, the private sorrows-and then thinks that there is a God who lets all these go on from generation to generation, we seem to be in the presence of a mystery of mysteries. The Psalmist of old exclaimed in adoring wonder, ‘Thy judgments are a great deep’; but the absence of His judgments seems to open a profounder abyss into which even the great mountains of His righteousness appear in danger of falling.

II. The reasons for this delay.

It is not only a mystery, but it is a ‘mystery of love.’ We can see but a little way into it, but we can see so far as to be sure that the apparent passivity of God, which looks like leaving evil to work its unhindered will, is the silence of a God who ‘doth not willingly afflict,’ and is ‘slow to anger,’ because He is perfect love.

The ground of necessity for the delay in executing the sentence lies, partly, in the probationary character of this present life. If evil-doing was always followed by swift retribution, obedience would be only the obedience of fear, and God does not desire such obedience. It would be impossible that testing could go on at all if at every instant the whole of the consequences of our actions were being realised. Such a condition of things is unthinkable, and would be as confusing, in the moral sphere, as if harvest weather and spring weather were going on together. Again, the great reason why sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily lies in God’s own heart, and His desire to win us to Himself by benefits. He does not seek enforced obedience; He neither desires our being wedded to evil, nor our being weighed upon by the consequences of our sin, and so He holds back His hand. It is to be remembered that He not merely does thus restrain the forthcoming of His hand of judgment, but, instead of it, puts forth a hand of blessing. He moves around us wooing us to Himself, and, in patience possessing His spirit, marks all our sins, but loves and blesses still. He gives us the vineyard, though we do not give Him the fruit. Still He is not angry, but sends His messengers, and we stone them. Still He waits: we go on heaping year upon year of rebellious forgetfulness, and no lightning flashes from His eye, no exclamation of wearied-out patience, comes from His lips, no rush of the sudden arrow from His long-stretched bow. The endless patience of God has no explanation but only this, that He loves us too well to leave any means untried to bring us to Him, and that He lingers round us to win our hearts. O rare and unspeakable love, the patient love of the patient God!

III. The abuse of this delay.

We have the knack of turning God’s pure gifts into poison, and practise a devilish chemistry by which we distil venom from the flowers of Eden and the roses of the garden of God. I don’t suppose that to many men the respite which marks God’s dealing with them actually tends to doubts of His righteousness, or of His power, or of His being. We have evidence enough of these; and the apparently counter evidence, arising from the impunity of evil-doers, is fairly enough laid aside by our moral instincts and consciousness, and by the consideration that the mighty sweep of God’s providence is too great for us to decide on the whole circle by the small portion of the circumference which we have seen. But what most men do is simply that they permit impunity to deaden their sense of right and wrong, and go on in their course without any serious thought of God’s blessings, to jostle Him out of their mind; they ‘*despise the riches of His long-suffering goodness*,’ and never suffer it to ‘*lead them to repentance.*’ To the unthinking minds of most of us, the long continuance of impunity lulls us into a dream of its perpetuity. Man’s godless ingratitude is as deep a mystery as is God’s loving patience. It is strange that, with such constant failure of His love to win, God should still persevere in it. For more than seventy times seven He persists in forgiving the rebellious child who sins against Him, and for more than seventy times seven the child persists in the abuse of the Father’s love, which still remains-an abuse of sin above all sins.

IV. The end of the delay.

The sentence is passed. It is impossible that it should not be executed. When God has done all, and sees that the point of hopelessness is reached, or when the time has for other reasons come, then He lets the sentence take effect. He kept back the destroying angels from Sodom, but He sent them forth at last. There is a point in the history of nations and of men when iniquity is ‘full,’ and when God sees that it is best, on world-wide grounds or personal ones, to end it. So there come for nations and for individuals crises; and the law for the divine working is, ‘A short work will the Lord make on the earth.’ For long years Noah was building the ark, and exposed to the scoffs of a generation whose sentence had been pronounced and not yet executed; but the day came when he entered into its covert, and ‘the flood came and destroyed them all.’ For generations He would fain have gathered the people of Jerusalem to His bosom ‘as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and they would not’; but the day came when the Roman soldiers cast their torches into the beautiful house where their fathers had praised Him, and sinned against Him, and it was left unto them desolate. Let us not be high-minded nor victims of our levity and inconsiderateness, but fear.

Let us remember too that the intensity of the execution is aggravated by all the sins committed during the delay. By them we ‘treasure wrath against the day of wrath.’ He says to His angels at last ‘Now,’ and the sword falls, and justice is done. ‘The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small.’ The sum of the whole matter is, every evil of ours is sentenced already; the punishment is delayed for our sins, and because Christ has died. God is wooing our hearts, and trying to win us to love Him by the holding back of the sentence which we are daily abusing. Shall we not accept His forbearance and take His gifts as tokens of the patient tenderness of His heart? Or are we to be like ‘the brutes that perish,’ knowing neither the hand that feeds them, nor the hand that kills them. The delay in rendering ‘the just recompence of reward’ only aggravates its weight when it falls. As in some levers, the slower the motion, the greater the force of the lift.

10)Ecclesiastes 10:8

Ecclesiastes

FENCES AND SERPENTS

Ecc. 10:8.

What is meant here is, probably, not such a hedge as we are accustomed to see, but a dry-stone wall, or, perhaps, an earthen embankment, in the crevices of which might lurk a snake to sting the careless hand. The connection and purpose of the text are somewhat obscure. It is one of a string of proverb-like sayings which all seem to be illustrations of the one thought that every kind of work has its own appropriate and peculiar peril. So, says the Preacher, if a man is digging a pit, the sides of it may cave in and he may go down. If he is pulling down a wall he may get stung. If he is working in a quarry there may be a fall of rock. If he is a woodman the tree he is felling may crush him. What then? Is the inference to be, Sit still and do nothing, because you may get hurt whatever you do? By no means. The writer of this book hates idleness very nearly as much as he does what he calls 'folly,' and his inference is stated in the next verse-'Wisdom is profitable to direct.' That is to say, since all work has its own dangers, work warily, and with your brains as well as your muscles, and do not put your hand into the hollow in the wall, until you have looked to see whether there are any snakes in it. Is that very wholesome maxim of prudence all that is meant to be learned? I think not. The previous clause, at all events, embodies a well-known metaphor of the Old Testament. 'He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it,' often occurs as expressing the retribution in kind that comes down on the cunning plotter against other men's prosperity, and the conclusion that wisdom suggests in that application of the sentence is, 'Dig judiciously,' but 'Do not dig at all.' And so in my text the 'wall' may stand for the limitations and boundary-lines of our lives, and the inference that wisdom suggests in that application of the saying is not 'Pull down judiciously,' but 'Keep the fence up, and be sure you keep on the right side of it.' For any attempt to pull it down-which being interpreted is, to transgress the laws of life which God has enjoined-is sure to bring out the hissing snake with its poison.

Now it is in that aspect that I want to look at the words before us.

I. First of all, let us take that thought which underlies my text-that all life is given us rigidly walled up.

The first thing that the child learns is, that it must not do what it likes. The last lesson that the old man has to learn is, you must do what you ought.

And between these two extremes of life we are always making attempts to treat the world as an open common, on which we may wander at our will. And before we have gone many steps, some sort of keeper or other meets us and says to us, ‘Trespassers, back again to the road!’ Life is rigidly hedged in and limited. To live as you like is the prerogative of a brute. To live as you ought, and to recognise and command by obeying the laws and limitations stamped upon our very nature and enjoined by our circumstances, is the freedom and the glory of a man. There are limitations, I say-fences on all sides. Men put up their fences; and they are often like the wretched wooden hoardings that you sometimes see limiting the breadth of a road. But in regard to these conventional limitations and regulations, which own no higher authority or lawgiver than society and custom, you must make up your mind even more certainly than in regard of loftier laws, that if you meddle with them, there will be plenty of serpents coming out to hiss and bite. No man that defies the narrow maxims and petty restrictions of conventional ways, and sets at nought the opinions of the people round about him, but must make up his mind for backbiting and slander and opposition of all sorts. It is the price that we pay for obeying at first hand the laws of God and caring nothing for the conventionalities of men.

But apart from that altogether, let me just remind you, in half a dozen sentences, of the various limitations or fences which hedge up our lives on every side. There are the obligations which we owe, and the relations in which we stand, to the outer world, the laws of physical life, and all that touches the external and the material. There are the relations in which we stand, and the obligations which we owe, to ourselves. And God has so made us as that obviously large tracts of every man’s nature are given to him on purpose to be restrained, curbed, coerced, and sometimes utterly crushed and extirpated. God gives us our impulses under lock and key. All our animal desires, all our natural tendencies, are held on condition that we exercise control over them, and keep them well within the rigidly marked limits which He has laid down, and which we can easily find out. There are, further, the relations in which we stand, and the obligations and limitations, therefore, under which we come, to the people round about us. High above them all, and in some sense including them all, but loftier than these, there is the all-comprehending relation in which we stand to God, who is the fountain of all obligations, the source and aim of all duty, who encompasses us on every side, and whose will makes the boundary walls within which alone it is safe for a man to live.

We sometimes foolishly feel that a life thus hedged up, limited by these high boundaries on either side, must be uninteresting, monotonous, or unfree. It is not so. The walls are blessings, like the parapet on a mountain road, that keeps the travellers from toppling over the face of the cliff. They are training-walls, as our hydro-graphical engineers talk about, which, built in the bed of a river, wholesomely confine its waters and make a good scour which gives life, instead of letting them vaguely wander and stagnate across great fields of mud. Freedom consists in keeping willingly within the limits which God has traced, and anything else is not freedom but licence and rebellion, and at bottom servitude of the most abject type.

II. So, secondly, note that every attempt to break down the limitations brings poison into the life.

We live in a great automatic system which, by its own operation, largely avenges every breach of law. I need not remind you, except in a word, of the way in which the transgression of the plain physical laws stamped upon our constitutions avenges itself; but the certainty with which disease dogs all breaches of the laws of health is but a type in the lower and material universe of the far higher and more solemn certainty with which ‘the soul that sinneth, it shall die.’ Wherever a man sets himself against any of the laws of this material universe, they make short work of him. We command them, as I said, by obeying them; and the difference between the obedience and the breach of them is the difference between the engineer standing on his engine and the wretch that is caught by it as it rushes over the rails. But that is but a parable of the higher thing which I want to speak to you about.

The grosser forms of transgression of the plain laws of temperance, abstinence, purity, bring with them, in like manner, a visible and palpable punishment in the majority of cases. Whoso pulls down the wall of temperance, a serpent will bite him. Trembling hands, broken constitutions, ruined reputations, vanished ambitions, wasted lives, poverty, shame, and enfeebled will, death-these are the serpents that bite, in many cases, the transgressor. I have a man in my eye at this moment that used to sit in one of these pews, who came into Manchester a promising young man, a child of many prayers, with the ball at his foot, in one of your great warehouses, the only hope of his house, professedly a Christian. He began to tamper with the wall. First a tiny little bit of stone taken out that did not show the daylight through; then a little bigger, and a bigger. And the serpent struck its fangs into him, and if you saw him now, he is a shambling wreck, outside of society, and, as we sometimes tremblingly think, beyond hope. Young men! ‘whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him.’

In like manner there are other forms of ‘sins of the flesh avenged in kind,’ which I dare not speak about more plainly here. I see many young men in my congregation, many strangers in this great city, living, I suppose, in lodgings, and therefore without many restraints. If you were to take a pair of compasses and place one leg of them down at the Free Trade Hall, and take a circle of half a mile round there, you would get a cavern of rattlesnakes. You know what I mean. Low theatres, low music-halls, casinos, haunts of yet viler sorts-there the snakes are, hissing and writhing and ready to bite. Do not ‘put your hand on the hole of the asp.’ Take care of books, pictures, songs, companions that would lead you astray. Oh for a voice to stand at some doors that I know in Manchester, and peal this text into the ears of the fools, men and women, that go in there!

I heard only this week of one once in a good position in this city, and in early days, I believe, a member of my own congregation, begging in rags from door to door. And the reason was, simply, the wall had been pulled down and the serpent had struck. It always does; not with such fatal external effects always, but be ye sure of this, ‘God is not mocked; “whatsoever a man,” or a woman either, “soweth, that shall he also reap.”‘ For remember that there are other ways of pulling down walls than these gross and palpable transgressions with the body; and there are other sorts of retributions which come with unerring certainty besides those that can be taken notice of by others. I do not want to dwell upon these at any length, but let me just remind you of one or two of them.

Some serpents’ bites inflame, some paralyse; and one or other of these two things-either an inflamed conscience or a palsied conscience-is the result of all wrongdoing. I do not know which is the worst. There are men and women now in this chapel, sitting listening to me, perhaps half interested, without the smallest suspicion that I am talking about them. The serpent’s bite has led to the torpor of their consciences. Which is the worse-to loathe my sin and yet to find its slimy coils round about me, so that I cannot break it, or to have got to like it and to be perfectly comfortable in it, and to have no remonstrance within when I do it? Be sure of this, that every transgression and disobedience acts immediately upon the conscience of the doer, sometimes to stir that conscience into agonies of gnawing remorse, more often to lull it into a fatal slumber.

I do not speak of the retributions which we heap upon ourselves in loading our memories with errors and faults, in polluting them often with vile imaginations, or in laying up there a lifelong series of actions, none of which have ever had a trace of reference to God in them. I do not speak, except in a sentence, of the retribution which comes from the habit of evil which weighs upon men, and makes it all but impossible for them ever to shake off their sin. I do not speak, except in a sentence, of the perverted relations to God, the incapacity of knowing Him, the disregard, and even sometimes the dislike, of the thought of Him which steal across the heart of the man that lives in evil and sin; but I put all into two words-every sin that I do tells upon myself, inasmuch as its virus passes into my blood as *guilt* and as *habit*. And then I remind you of what you say you believe, that beyond this world there lies the solemn judgment-seat of God, where you and I have to give account of our deeds. O brother, be sure of this, ‘whoso breaketh an hedge’-here and now, and yonder also-’a serpent shall bite him’!

That is as far as my text carries me. It has nothing more to say. Am I to shut the book and have done? There is only one system that has anything more to say, and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

III. And so, passing from my text, I have to say, lastly, All the poison may be got out of your veins if you like.

Our Lord used this very same metaphor under a different aspect, and with a different historical application, when He said, ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.’

There is Christ’s idea of the condition of this world of ours-a camp of men lying bitten by serpents and drawing near to death. What I have been speaking about, in perhaps too abstract terms, is the condition of each one of us. It is hard to get people, when they are gathered by the hundred to listen to a sermon flung out in generalities, to realise it. If I could get you one by one, and ‘buttonhole’ you; and instead of the plural ‘you’ use the singular ‘thou,’ perhaps I could reach you. But let me ask you to try and realise each for himself that this serpent bite, as the issue of pulling down the wall, is true about each soul in this place, and that Christ endorsed the representation. How are we to get this poison out of the blood? Reform your ways? Yes; I say that too; but reforming the life will deliver from the poison in the character, when you cure hydrophobia by washing the patient’s skin, and not till then. It is all very well to repaper your dining-rooms, but it is very little good doing that if the drainage is wrong. It *is* the drainage that is wrong with us all. A man cannot reform himself down to the bottom of his sinful being. If he could, it does not touch the past. That remains the same. If he could, it does not affect his relation to God. Repentance-if it were possible apart from the softening influence of faith in Jesus Christ-repentance alone would not solve the problem. So far as men can see, and so far as all human systems have declared, ‘What I have written I have written.’ There is no erasing it. The irrevocable past stands stereotyped for ever. Then comes in this message of forgiveness and cleansing, which is the very heart of all that we preachers have to say, and has been spoken to most of you so often that it is almost impossible to invest it with any kind of freshness or power. But once more I have to preach to you that Christ has received into His own inmost life and self the whole gathered consequences of a world’s sin; and by the mystery of His sympathy, and the reality of His mysterious union with us men, He, the sinless Son of God, has been made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. The brazen serpent lifted on the pole was in the likeness of the serpent whose poison slew, but there was no poison in it. Christ has come, the sinless Son of God, for you and me. He has died on the Cross, the Sacrifice for every man’s sin, that every man’s wound might be healed, and the poison cast out of his veins. He has bruised the malignant, black head of the snake with His wounded heel; and because He has been wounded, we are healed of our wounds. For sin and death launched their last dart at Him, and, like some venomous insect that can sting once and then must die, they left their sting in His wounded heart, and have none for them that put their trust in Him.

So, dear brother, here is the simple condition-namely, faith. One look of the languid eye of the poisoned man, howsoever bloodshot and dim it might be, and howsoever nearly veiled with the film of death, was enough to make him whole. The look of our consciously sinful souls to that dear Christ that has died for us will take away the guilt, the power, the habit, the love of evil; and, instead of blood saturated with the venom of sin, there will be in our veins the Spirit of life in Christ, which will 'make us free from the law of sin and death.' 'Look unto Him and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth!'

11)Ecclesiastes 10:15

Ecclesiastes

THE WAY TO THE CITY

Ecc. 10:15.

On the surface this seems to be merely a piece of homely, practical sagacity, conjoined with one of the bitter things which Ecclesiastes is fond of saying about those whom he calls 'fools.' It seems to repeat, under another metaphor, the same idea which has been presented in a previous verse, where we read: 'If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength; but wisdom is profitable to direct.' That is to say, skill is better than strength; brain saves muscle; better sharpen your axe than put yourself into a perspiration, hitting fierce blows with a blunt one. The prerogative of wisdom is to guide brute force. And so in my text the same general idea comes under another figure. Immense effort may end in nothing but tired feet if the traveller does not know his road. A man lost in the woods may run till he drops, and find himself at night in the place from which he started in the morning. The path must be known, and the aim clear, if any good is to come of effort.

That phrase, 'how to go to the city,' seems to be a kind of proverbial comparison for anything that is very plain and conspicuous, just as our forefathers used to say about any obvious truth, that it was ‘as plain as the road to London town.’ The road to the capital is sure to be a well-marked one, and he must be a fool indeed who cannot see that. So our text, though on the surface, as I say, is simply a sarcasm and a piece of homely, practical sagacity, yet, like almost all the sayings in this Book of Ecclesiastes, it has a deeper meaning than appears on the surface; and may be applied in higher and more important directions. It carries with it large truths, and enshrines in a vivid metaphor bitter experiences which, I suppose, we can all confirm.

I. We consider, first, the toil that tires.

‘The labour wearies every one of them.’ The word translated ‘labour’ seems to carry with it both the idea of effort and of trouble. Or to recur to a familiar distinction in modern English, the word really covers both the ground of work and of worry. And it is a sad and solemn thought that a word with that double element in it should be the one which is most truly applicable to the efforts of a large majority of men. I suppose there never was a time in the world’s history when life went so fast as it does in these great centres of civilisation and commerce in which you and I live. And it is awful to have to think that the great mass of it all ends in nothing else but tired limbs and exhaustion. That is a truth to be verified by experience, and I am bold to believe that every man and woman in this chapel now can say more or less distinctly ‘Amen!’ to the assertion that every life, except a distinctly and supremely religious one, is worry and work without adequate satisfying result, and with no lasting issue but exhaustion.

Let us begin at the bottom. For instance, take a man who has avowedly flung aside the restraints of right and wrong and conscience, and does things habitually that he knows to be wrong. Every sin is a blunder as well as a crime. No man who aims at an end through the smoke of hell gets the end that he aims at. Or if he does, he gets something that takes all the gilt off the gingerbread, and all the sweetness out of the success. They put a very evil-tasting ingredient into spirits of wine to prevent its being drunk. The cup that sin reaches to a man, though the wine moveth itself aright and is very pleasant to look at before being tasted, cheats with *methylated* spirits. Men and women take more pains and trouble to damn themselves than ever they do to have their souls saved. The end of all work, which begins with tossing conscience on one side, is simply this-'The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them.'

Take a step higher-a respectable, well-to-do Manchester man, successful in business. He has made it his aim to build up a large concern, and has succeeded. He has a fine house, carriages, greenhouses; he has 'J.P.' to his name; he stands high in credit and on Change. His name is one that gives respectability to anything that it is connected with. Has he 'come to the city'? Has he got what he thought he would get when he began his career? He has succeeded in his immediate and smaller purpose; has that immediate and smaller purpose succeeded in bringing him what he thought it would bring him? Or has he fallen a victim to those-

'juggling fiends . . .
That palter with us in a double sense;
That keep the word of promise to the ear,
And break it to the hope?'

They tell us that if you put down in one column the value of the ore that has been extracted from all the Australian gold-mines, and in another the amount that it has cost to get it, the latter sum will exceed the former. There are plenty of people in Manchester who have put more down into the pit from which they dig their wealth than ever they will get out of it. And their labour, too, leaves a very dark and empty aching centre in their lives, 'and wearieth every one of them.' And so I might go the whole round. We students, so long as our pursuit of knowledge has not in it as supreme, directing motive, and ultimate aim and issue, the glory and the service of God, come under the lash of the same condemnation as those grosser and lower forms of life of which I have been speaking. But wherever we look, if there be not in the heart and in the life a supreme regard to God and a communion with Him, then this characteristic is common to all the courses, that, whilst they may each meet some immediate and partial necessity of our natures, none of them is adequate for the whole circumference of a man's being, nor any of them able, during the whole duration of that being, to be his satisfaction and his rest. Therefore, I say, all toil, however successful to the view of a shorter range of vision, and however noble-excluding the noblest of all-all toil that ends only in securing that which perishes with the using, or that which we leave behind us here when we pass hence, is condemned for folly and labour that wearies the men who are fools enough to surrender themselves to it.

I need not remind you of the wonderful variety of metaphor under which that threadbare thought, which yet it is so hard for us to believe and make operative in our lives, is represented to us in Scripture. Just let me recall one or two of them in the briefest way. ‘Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which profiteth not?’ ‘They have hewn for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water.’ ‘Their webs shall not become garments.’ That may want a word of explanation. The metaphor is this. You are all like spiders spinning carefully and diligently your web. There is not substance enough in it to make a coat out of. You will never cover yourselves with the product of your own brains or your own efforts. There is no clothing in the spider’s webs of a godless life.

Ah! brother, all these earthly aims which some of my friends listening to me now have for the *sole* aims of their lives, are as foolish and as inadequate to accomplish that which is sought for by them, as it would be to seek to quench raging thirst by lifting to the lips a golden cup that is empty. Some of us have a whole sideboard full of such, and vary our pursuits according to inclination and task. Some of us have only one such, but they are all empty, and the lip is parched after the cup has been lifted to it as it was before.

II. And so, consider now, secondly, the foolish ignorance that makes the toil tiresome.

The metaphor of my text says that the reason why the ‘fool’ is so wearied after the day’s march is that he does not in the morning settle where he is going, and how he is to get there; and so, having started to go nowhither, he has got where he started for. He ‘does not know how to go to the city’-which, being translated into plain and unmetaphorical English, is just this, that many men wreck their lives for want of a clear sight of their true aim, and of the way to secure it.

There is nothing more tragical than the absence, in the great bulk of men, of anything like deliberate, definite views as to their aim in life, and the course to be taken to secure it. There are two things obviously necessary for success in any enterprise. One is, that there shall be the most definite and clear conception of what is aimed at; and the other, that there shall be a wisely considered plan to get at it. Unless there be these, if you go at random, running a little way for a moment in this direction, and then heading about and going in the other, you cannot expect to get to the goal.

Now, what I want to ask some of my friends here is, Did you ever give ten deliberate minutes to try to face for yourselves, and put into plain words, what you are living for, and how you mean to secure it? Of course I know that you have given thought and planning in plenty to the nearer aims, without which material life cannot be lived at all. I do not suppose that anybody here is chargeable with not having thought enough about how to get on in business, or in their chosen walk of life. It is not that kind of aim which I mean at all; but it is a point beyond it that I want to press upon you. You are like men who would carefully victual a ship and take the best information for their guide as to what course to lie, and had never thought what they were going to do when they got to the port. So you say, ‘I am going to be such-and-such a thing.’ Well, what then? ‘Well, I am going to lay myself out for success.’ Be it commercial, be it intellectual, be it social, be it in the sphere of the affections, or whatever it may be. Well, what then? ‘Well, then I am going to advance in material prosperity, I hope, or in wisdom, or to be surrounded by loving faces of children and those that are dear to me.’ What then? ‘Then I am going to die.’ What then?

It is not till you get to that last question, and have faced it and answered it, that you can be said to have taken the whole sweep of the circumstances into view, and regulated your course according to the dictates of common sense and right reason. And a terribly large number of us live with careful adaptation of means to ends in regard of all the smaller and more immediately to be realised aims of life, but have never faced the larger question which reduces all these smaller aims to insignificance. The simple child’s interrogation which in the well-known ballad ripped the tinsel off the skeleton, and showed war in its hideousness, strips many of your lives of all pretence to be reasonable. ‘What good came of it at the last?’ Can you answer the question that the infant lips asked, and say, ‘This good will come of it at last. That I shall have God for my own, and Jesus Christ in my heart’?

Brother! if I could only get you to this point, that you would take half an hour now to think over what you ought to be, and to ask yourself whether your aims in life correspond to what your aims should be, I should have done more than I am afraid I shall do with some of you. The naturalist can tell when he picks up a skeleton something of the habits and the element of the creature to which it belonged. If it has a hollow *sternum* he knows it is meant to fly. On your nature is impressed unmistakably that your destiny is not to creep, but to soar. Not in vain does the Westminster Catechism lay the foundation of everything in this, the prime question for all men, ‘What is the chief end of man?’ Ask that, and do not rest till you have answered it.

Then there is another idea connected with this ignorance of my text-viz. that it is the result of folly. Now the words ‘folly’ and ‘foolish’ and ‘foolishness,’ and their opposites, ‘wisdom’ and ‘wise,’ in this Book of Ecclesiastes, as in the Book of Proverbs, do not mean merely dull stupidity intellectually, which is a thing for which a man is to be pitied rather than to be blamed, but they always carry besides the idea of intellectual defect, also the idea of moral obliquity. ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’; and, conversely, the absence of that fear is the foundation of that which this writer stigmatises as ‘folly’ He is not merely sneering at men with small brains and little judgments. There may be plenty of us who are so, and yet are wise unto salvation and possessed of a far higher wisdom than that of this world. But he tells us that so strangely intertwined are the intellectual and moral parts of our nature, that wheresoever there is the obscuration of the latter there is sure to be the perversion of the former, and the man knows not ‘how to go to the city’ because he is ‘foolish.’

That is to say, you go wrong in your judgment about your conduct because you have gone wrong morally. And your blunders about life, and your ignorance of its true end and aim, and your mistakes as to how to secure happiness and blessedness, are your own faults, and are owing to the aversion of your nature from that which is highest and noblest, even God and His service. Therefore you are not only to be pitied because you are out of the road, but to be blamed because you have darkened the eyes of your mind by loving the darkness rather than the light. And you ‘do not know how to go to the city,’ because you do not want to go to the city, and would rather huddle here in the wilderness, and live upon its poor supplies, than pass within the golden gates. My brethren! the folly which blinds a man to his true aim and mission in life is a folly which has in it the darker aspect of sin, and is punishable as such.

III. Lastly, note the plain path which the foolish miss.

He ‘does not know how to go to the city.’ What on earth will he be able to see if he cannot see that broad highway, beaten and white, stretching straight before him, over hill and dale, and going right to the gates? A man must be a fool who cannot find the way to London.

The principles of moral conduct are trite and obvious. It is plain that it is better to be good than bad. It is better to be unselfish than selfish. It is better not to live for things that perish, seeing that we are going to last for ever. It is better not to make the flesh our master here, seeing that the spirit will have to live without the flesh some day. It is better to get into training for the world to coma, seeing that we are all drifting thither. All these things are plain and obvious.

Man’s destiny for God is unmistakable. ‘Whose image and superscription hath it?’ said Christ about the coin. ‘Caesar’s!’ ‘Then give it to Caesar.’ Whose image and superscription hath my heart, this restless heart of mine, this spirit that wanders on through space and time, homeless and comfortless, until it can grasp the Eternal? Who are you meant for? God! And every fibre of your nature has a voice to say so to you if you listen to it. So, then, a godless life such as some of you, my hearers, are contentedly living, ignores facts that are most patent to every man’s experience. And while before you, huge ‘as a mountain, open, palpable,’ are the commonplaces and undeniable verities which declare that every man who is not a God-fearing man is a fool, you admit them all, and, bowing your heads in reverence, let them all go over you and produce no effect.

The road is clearer than ever since Jesus Christ came. He has shown us the city, for He has brought life and immortality to light by the Gospel. He has shown us the road, for His life is the pattern of all that men ought to aim at and to be. The motto of the eternal Son of God, if I may venture upon such a metaphor, is like the motto of the heir-apparent of the English throne, 'I serve.' Lo! 'I come to do Thy will'-and that is the only word which will make a human life peaceful and strong and beautiful. In the presence of His radiant and solitary perfection, men no longer need to wonder, What is the ideal to which conduct and character should be conformed? And Jesus Christ has come to make it possible to go to the city, by that cross on which He bore the burden of all sin, and takes away the sin of the world, and by that Spirit of life which He will impart to our weakness, and which makes our sluggish feet run in the way of His commandments, and not be weary, and walk and not faint.

Take that dear Lord for your revelation of duty, for your Pattern of conduct, for the forgiveness of your sins, for the Inspirer with power to do His will, and then you will see stretching before you, high up above the surrounding desert, so that no lion nor ravenous beast shall go up there, the highway on which the ransomed of the Lord shall walk, 'and the wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein.' 'Blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may enter in through the gates into the City.'

12)Ecclesiastes 11:9

Ecclesiastes

A NEW YEARS SERMON TO THE YOUNG

Ecc. 11:9; Ecc. 12:1.

This strange, and in some places perplexing Book of Ecclesiastes, is intended to be the picture of a man fighting his way through perplexities and half-truths to a clear conviction in which he can rest. What he says in his process of coming to that conviction is not always to be taken as true. Much that is spoken in the earlier portion of the Book is spoken in order to be confuted, and its insufficiency, its exaggerations, its onesidedness, and its half-truths, to be manifest in the light of the ultimate conclusion to which he comes. Through all these perplexities he goes on 'sounding his dim and perilous way,' with pitfalls on this side of him and bogs on that, till he comes out at last upon the open way, with firm ground under foot and a clear sky overhead. These phrases which I have taken are the opening sentences and the final conclusion on which he rests. How then are they meant to be understood? Is that saying, 'Rejoice, O young man! in the days of thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart and in the sight of thine eyes,' to be taken as a bit of fierce irony? Is this a man taking the maxims of the foolish world about him and seeming to approve of them in order that he may face round at the end with a quick turn and a cynical face and hand them back their maxims along with that which will shatter them to pieces-as if he said, 'Oh, yes! go on, talk your fill about making the best of this world, and rejoicing and doing as you like, dancing on the edge of a precipice, and fiddling, like Nero, whilst a worse fire than that of Rome is burning'? Well, I do not think that is the meaning of it. Though there is irony to be found in the Bible, I do not think that fierce irony like that which might do for the like of Dean Swift, is the intention of the Preacher. So I take these words to be said in good faith, as a frank recognition of the fact that, after all we have been hearing about vanity and vexation of spirit, life is worth living for, and that God means young people to be glad and to make the best of the fleeting years that will never come back with the same buoyancy and elasticity all their lives long. And then I take it that the words added are not meant to destroy or neutralise the concession of the first sentence, but only to purify and ennoble a gladness which, without them, would be apt to be stained by many a corruption, and to make permanent a joy which, without them, would be sure to die down into the miserable, peevish, and feeble old age of which the grim picture follows, and to be quenched at last in death. So there are three words that I take out of this text of mine, and that I want to bring before my young friends as exhortations which it is wise to follow. These are Rejoice, Reflect, Remember. Rejoice-the fitting gladness of youth; reflect-the solemn thought that will guard the gladness from stain; remember-the religion which will make these things ever last.

First of all 'Rejoice.' Do as you like, for that is the English translation of the words, 'Walk in the ways of thine heart and in the sight of thine eyes.' Buoyantly and cheerfully follow the inclinations and the desires which are stamped upon your nature and belong to your time of life. All young things are joyful, from the lamb in the pastures upwards, and are meant to be so. The mere bounding sense of physical strength which leads so many of you young men astray is a good thing and a blessed thing-a blessing to be thankful for and to cherish. Your smooth cheeks, so unlike those of old age, are only an emblem of the comparative freedom from care which belongs to your happy condition. Your memories are not yet like some-a book written within and without with the records of mourning and disappointment and crosses. There are in all probability long years stretching before you, instead of a narrow strip of barren sand, before you come to the great salt sea that is going to swallow you up, as is the case with some of us. Christianity looks with complacency on your gladness, and does not mean to clip the wing of one white-winged pleasure, or to breathe one glimmer of blackness on your atmosphere. You are meant to be glad, but it is gladness in a far higher sense that I want to secure for you, or rather to make you secure for yourselves. God delights in the prosperity and light-hearted buoyancy of His children, especially of His young children. Ah! but I know there are young lives over which poverty or ill-health or sorrows of one kind or another have cast a gloom as incongruous to your time of life as snow in the garden in the spring, that pinches the crocuses and weighs down young green beech-leaves, would be. And if I am speaking to any young man or young woman at this time who by reason of painful outward circumstances has had but a chilling spring and youth, I would say to them, ‘don’t lose heart’; a cloudy morning often breaks into a perfect day. It is good for a man to have to ‘bear the yoke in his youth,’ and if you miss joy, you may get grace and strength and patience, which will be a blessing to you all your days. For all that, the ordinary course of things is that the young should be glad, and that the young life should be as the rippling brook in the sunshine. I want to leave upon your minds this impression, that it is all right and all in the order of God’s providence, who means every one of you to rejoice in the days of your youth. The text says further, ‘Walk in the ways of thine heart.’ That sounds very like the unwholesome teaching, ‘Follow nature; do as you like; let passions and tastes and inclinations be your guides.’

Well, that needs to be set round with a good many guards to prevent it becoming a doctrine of devils. But for all that, I wish you to notice that that has a great and a religious side to it. You have come into possession of this mystical life of yours, a possession which requires that you must choose what kind of life you will follow. Every one has this awful prerogative of being able to walk in the way of their heart. You have to answer for the kind of way that is, and the kind of heart out of which it has come. But I want to go to more important things, and so with a clear understanding that the joy of youth is all right and legitimate, that you are intended to be glad, and to feel the physical and intellectual spring and buoyancy of early days, let us go on to the next thing. ‘Rejoice,’ says my text, and it adds, ‘Reflect.’ It is one of the blessings of your time of life, my young friends, that you do not do much of that. It is one of your happy immunities that you are not yet in the habit of looking at life as a whole, and considering actions and consequences. Keep that spontaneity as long as you can; it is a good thing to keep. But for all that, do not forget this awful thing, that it may turn to exaggeration and excess, and that it needs, like all other good things, to be guarded and rightly used. And so, ‘Rejoice,’ and ‘walk in the sight of thine eyes’; *but*-’know that for all these things God will bring thee to judgment.’ Well, now, is that thought to come in [I was going to say, like a mourning-coach driven through a wedding procession] to kill the joys we have been seeming to receive from the former words? Are we taking back all that we have been giving, and giving out instead something that will make them all cower and be quiet, like the singing birds that stop their singing and hide in the leaves when they see the kite in the sky? No, there is no need for anything of the sort. ‘For all these things God will bring thee to judgment’: that is not the thought that kills, but that purifies and ennobles. Regard being had to the opinions expressed at various points in the earlier portion of this Book, we may be allowed to think of this testimony as having reference to the perpetual judgment that is going on in this world always over every man’s life. A great German thinker has it, in reference to the history of nations, that the history of the world is the judgment of the world, and although that is not true if it is a denial of a physical day of judgment, it is true in a very profound and solemn sense with regard to the daily life of every man, that whether there be a judgment-seat beyond the grave or not, and whether this Preacher knew anything about that or no, there is going on through the whole of a man’s life, and evolving itself, this solemn conviction, that we are to pass away from this present life. All our days are knit together as one whole. Yesterday is the parent of today, and today is the parent of all the tomorrows. The meaning and the deepest consequence of man’s life is that no feeling, no thought that flits across the mirror of his life and heart dies utterly, leaving nothing behind it. But rather the metaphor of the Apostle is the true one, ‘That which thou sowest, that shalt thou also reap.’ All your life a seed-time, all your life a harvest-time too, for the seed which I sow today is the seed which I have reaped from all my former sowings, and so cause and consequence go rolling on in life in extricable entanglement, issuing out in this, that whatever a man does lives on in him, and that each moment inherits the whole consequence of his former life. And now, you young men and women, you boys and girls, mind! this seed-time is the one that will be most powerful in your lives, and there is a judgment you do not need to die to meet. If you are idle at school, you will never learn Latin when you go to business. If you are frivolous in your youth, if you stain your souls and soil your lives by outward coarse sin here in Manchester in your young days, there will be a taint about you all your lives. You cannot get rid of that brave law that ‘Whatever a man sows, that, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, an hundredfold, that shall he also reap’-the same kind, but infinitely multiplied in quantity. Let me therefore name some of the ways in which your joys or pleasures, as lads, as boys and girls, as growing young men and women, will bring you to judgment. Health, that is one; position, that is two; reputation, that is three; character, that is four. Did you ever see them build one of those houses they make in some parts of the country, with concrete instead of stones? Take a spadeful of the mud, and put it into a frame on the wall. When it is dry, take away the frame and the supports, and it hardens into rock. You take your single deeds-the mud sometimes, young men!-pop them on the wall, and think no more about it. Ay, but they stop there and harden there, and lo! a character-a house for your soul to live in-health, position, memory, capacity, and all that. If you have not done certain things which you ought to have done, you will never be able to do them, and there are the materials for a judgment. That is going on every moment, and especially is it going on in the region of your pleasures. If they are unworthy, you are unworthy; if they are gross, and coarse, and low, and animal, they are dragging you down; if they are frivolous and foolish, they are making you a poor butterfly of a creature that is worth nothing and will be of no good to anybody; if they are pure, and chaste, and lofty, and virginal and white, they will make your souls good and gracious and tender with the tenderness and beauty of God.

But that is not all. I am not going to travel beyond the limits of this present life with any words of mine, but as I read this final conclusion in this Book of Ecclesiastes, I think I can perceive that the doubts and the scepticisms about a future life, and the difference between a man and a beast which are spoken of in the earlier chapters, have all been overcome, and the clear conviction of the writer is expressed in these twofold great sayings: ‘The spirit shall return unto God who gave it, and the words with which He stamps all His message upon our hearts, the final words of His book’; ‘God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing.’ And I come to you and say, ‘I suppose you believe in a state of retribution beyond?’ I suppose that most of the young folk I am speaking to now at all events believe that ‘Thou wilt come to be our judge,’ as the *Te Deum* has it; and that it is this same personal self of mine that is to stand there who is sitting here? God shall bring *thee* into judgment. Never mind what is to come of the body, the quivering, palpitating, personal centre. The very same self that I know myself to be will be carried there. Now, take that with you and lay it to heart, and let it have a bearing on your pleasure. It will kill nothing that deserves to live, it will take no real joy out of a man’s life. It will only strain out the poison that would kill you. You turn that thought upon your heart, my friends. Is it like a policeman’s bull’s-eye turned upon a lot of bad characters hiding under a railway arch in the corner there? If so, the sooner you get rid of the pleasures and inclinations that slink away when that beam of light strikes their ugly faces, the better for yourselves and for your lives. ‘Rejoice in the way of thine heart and, that thy joy may be pure, know that for all this God will bring thee into judgment.’

And now my last word, ‘Remember God,’ says my text. The former two sayings, if taken by themselves, would make a very imperfect guide to life. Self-indulgence regulated by the thought of retribution is a very low kind of life after all. There is something better in this world, and that is work; something higher, and that is duty; something nobler than self-indulgence, and that is self-sacrifice. And so no religion worthy the name contents itself by saying to a man, ‘Be good and you will be glad’; but, ‘Never mind whether you are glad; be good at any rate, and such gladness as is good for you will come to you, and you can want the rest.’ ‘Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth.’ Recall God to your thoughts, and keep Him in your mind all the day long. That is wonderfully unlike your life, is it not?

Remember thy Creator; shift the centre of your life. What I have been saying might be true of a man, the centre of whose life was himself, and such a man is next door to a devil, for, I suppose, the definition of devil is ‘self-engrossed still,’ and whosoever lives for himself is dead. Don’t let the earth be the centre of your system, but the sun. Do not live to yourselves, or your pleasures will all be ignoble and creeping, but live to God. ‘Remember.’ Well, then, you and I know a good deal more about God than the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes did-both about what He is and how to remember Him. I am not going to content myself by taking his point of view, but I must take a far higher and a far better one. If he had been here he would have said ‘Remember God.’ He would have said, ‘Look at God in Jesus Christ, and trust Him and love Him; go to Him as your Saviour, and take all the burden of your past sin and lay it upon His merciful shoulders, and for His dear sake look for forgiveness and cleansing; and then for His dear sake live to serve and bless Him. Never mind about yourself, and do not think much about your gladness. Follow in the footsteps of Him who has shown us that the highest joy is to give oneself utterly away. Love Jesus Christ and trust Him and serve Him, and that will make all your gladness permanent.’ There is one thing I want to teach you. Look at that description, or rather read when you go home the description which follows my text, of that wretched old man who has got no hope in God and no joy, feeble in body, going down to the grave, and dying out at last. That is what rejoicing in the days of thy youth, and walking in the ways of thine own heart, come to when you do not remember God. There is nothing more miserable on the face of this earth than an ill-conditioned old man, who is ill-conditioned because he has lost his early joys and early strength, and has got nothing to make up for them. How many of your joys, my dear young friends, will last when old age comes to you? How many of them will survive when your eye is no longer bright, and your hand no longer strong, and your foot no longer fleet? How many of them, young woman! when the light is out of your eye, and the beauty and freshness out of your face and figure, when you are no longer able for parties, when it is no longer a pastime to read novels, and when the ballroom is not exactly the place for you,-how many of your pleasures will survive? Young man! how many of yours will last when you can no longer go into dissipation, and stomach and system will no longer stand fast living, nor athletics, and the like? Oh! let me beseech thee, go to the ant and consider her ways, who in the summer layeth up for the winter;

and do ye likewise in the days of your youth, store up for yourselves that which knows no change and laughs at the decay of flesh and sense. A thousand motives coincide and press on my memory if I had words and time to speak them. Let me beseech you-especially you young men and women of this congregation, of some of whom I may venture to speak as a father to his children, whom I have seen growing up, as it were, from your mothers' arms, and the rest of you whom I do not know so well-Oh! carry away with you this beseeching entreaty of mine at the end. Love Jesus Christ and trust to Him as your Saviour; serve Him as your Captain and your King in the days of your youth. Do not offer Him the fag end of a life-the last inch of the candle that is burning down into the socket. Do it now, for the moments are flying, and you may never have Him offered to you any more. If there is any softening, any touch of conscience in your heart, yield to the impulse and do not stifle it. Take Christ for your Saviour, take Him now-'Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.'

13)Ecclesiastes 12:1-7

Ecclesiastes

A NEW YEARS SERMON TO THE YOUNG

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

Ecc. 12:1 - Ecc. 12:7, Ecc. 12:13 - Ecc. 12:14.

The Preacher has passed in review 'all the works that are done under the sun,' and has now reached the end of his long investigation. It has been a devious path. He has announced many provisional conclusions, which are not intended for ultimate truths, but rather represent the progress of the soul towards the final, sufficient ground and object of belief and aim of all life, even God Himself. 'Vanity of vanities' is a cheerless creed and a half-truth. Its completion lies in being driven, by recognising vanity as stamped on all creatures, to clasp the one reality. 'All is vanity' apart from God, but He is fullness, and possessed and enjoyed and endured in Him, life is not 'a striving after wind.' Leave out this last section, and this book of so-called 'Wisdom' is one-sided and therefore error, as is modern pessimism, which only says more feebly what the Preacher had said long ago. Take the rest of the book as the autobiography of a seeker after reality, and this last section as his declaration of where he had found it, and all the previous parts fall into their right places.

Our passage omits the first portion of the closing section, which is needed in order to set the counsel to remember the Creator in its right relation. Observe that, properly rendered, the advice in Ecc. 12:1 is 'remember also,' and that takes us back to the end of the preceding chapter. There the young are exhorted to enjoy the bright, brief blossom-time of their youth, withal keeping the consciousness of responsibility for its employment. In earlier parts of the book similar advice had been given, but based on different grounds. Here religion and full enjoyment of youthful buoyancy and delight in fresh, unhackneyed, homely pleasures are proclaimed to be perfectly compatible. The Preacher had no idea that a devout young man or woman was to avoid pleasures natural to their age. Only he wished their joy to be pure, and the stern law that 'whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap' to be kept in mind. Subject to that limitation, or rather that guiding principle, it is not only allowable, but commanded, to 'put away sorrow and evil.' Young people are often liable to despondent moods, which come over them like morning mists, and these have to be fought against. The duty of joy is the more imperative on the young because youth flies so fast, or, as the Preacher says,' is vanity.'

Now these advices sound very like the base incitements to sensual and unworthy delight which poets of the meaner sort, and some, alas! of the nobler in their meaner moments, have presented. But this writer is no teacher of 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,' and wicked trash of that sort. Therefore he brings side by side with these advices the other of our passage. That 'also' saves the former from being misused, just as the thought of judgment did.

That possible combination of hearty, youthful glee and true religion is the all-important lesson of this passage. The word for Creator is in the plural number, according to the Hebrew idiom, which thereby expresses supremacy or excellence. The name of 'Creator' carries us back to Genesis, and suggests one great reason for the injunction. It is folly to forget Him on whom we depend for being; it is ingratitude to forget, in the midst of the enjoyments of our bright, early days, Him to whom we owe them all. The advice is specially needed; for youth has so much, that is delightful in its novelty, to think about, and the world, on both its innocent and its sinful side, appeals to it so strongly, that the Creator is only too apt to be crowded out of view by His works. The temptation of the young is to live in the present. Reflection belongs to older heads; spontaneous action is more characteristic of youth. Therefore, they specially need to make efforts to bring clearly to their thoughts both the unseen future and Him who is invisible. The advice is specially suitable for them; for what is begun early is likely to last and be strong.

It is hard for older men, stiffened into habits, and with less power and love of taking to new courses, to turn to God, if they have forgotten Him in early days. Conversion is possible at any age, but it is less likely as life goes on. The most of men who are Christians have become so in the formative period between boyhood and thirty. After that age, the probabilities of radical change diminish rapidly. So, ‘Remember . . . in the days of thy youth,’ or the likelihood is that you will never remember. To say, ‘I mean to have my fling, and I shall turn over a new leaf when I am older,’ is to run dreadful risk. Perhaps you will never be older. Probably, if you are, you will not want to turn the leaf. If you do, what a shame it is to plan to give God only the dregs of life! You need Him, quite as much, if not more, now in the flush of youth as in old age. Why should you rob yourself of years of blessing, and lay up bitter memories of wasted and polluted moments? If ever you turn to God in your older days, nothing will be so painful as the remembrance that you forgot Him so long.

The advice is further important, because it presents the only means of delivering life from the ‘vanity’ which the Preacher found in it all. Therefore he sets it at the close of his meditations. This is the practical outcome of them all. Forget God, and life is a desert. Remember Him, and ‘the desert will rejoice and blossom as the rose.’

The verses from the middle of Ecc. 12:1 - Ecc. 12:7 enforce the exhortation by the consideration of what will certainly follow youth, and advise remembrance of the Creator before that future comes. So much is clear, but the question of the precise meaning of these verses is much too large for discussion here. The older explanation takes them for an allegory representing the decay of bodily and mental powers in old age, whilst others think that in them the advance of death is presented under the image of an approaching storm. Wright, in his valuable commentary, regards the description of the gradual waning away of life in old age, in the first verses, as being set forth under images drawn from the closing days of the Palestinian winter, which are dreaded as peculiarly unhealthy, while Ecc. 12:4 - Ecc. 12:5 present the advent of spring, and contrast the new life in animals and plants with the feebleness of the man dying in his chamber and unable to eat. Still another explanation is that the whole is part of a dirge, to be taken literally, and describing the mourners in house and garden. I venture, though with some hesitation, to prefer, on the whole, the old allegorical theory, for reasons which it would be impossible to condense here. It is by no means free from difficulty, but is, as I think, less difficult than any of its rivals.

Interpreters who adopt it differ somewhat in the explanation of particular details, but, on the whole, one can see in most of the similes sufficient correspondence for a poet, however foreign to modern taste such a long-drawn and minute allegory may be. ‘The keepers of the house’ are naturally the arms; the ‘strong men,’ the legs; the ‘grinding women,’ the teeth; the ‘women who look out at the windows,’ the eyes; ‘the doors shut towards the street,’ either the lips or, more probably, the ears. ‘The sound of the grinding,’ which is ‘low,’ is by some taken to mean the feeble mastication of toothless gums, in which case the ‘doors’ are the lips, and the figure of the mill is continued. ‘Arising at the voice of the bird’ may describe the light sleep or insomnia of old age; but, according to some, with an alteration of rendering [‘The voice riseth into a sparrow’s’], it is the ‘childish treble’ of Shakespeare. The former is the more probable rendering and reference. The allegory is dropped in Ecc. 12:5, which describes the timid walk of the old, but is resumed in ‘the almond trees shall flourish’; that is, the hair is blanched, as the almond blossom, which is at first delicate pink, but fades into white. The next clause has an appropriate meaning in the common translation, as vividly expressing the loss of strength, but it is doubtful whether the verb here used ever means ‘to be a burden.’ The other explanations of the clause are all strained. The next clause is best taken, as in the Revised Version, as describing the failure of appetite, which the stimulating caper-berry is unable to rouse. All this slow decay is accounted for, ‘because the man is going to his long home,’ and already the poet sees the mourners gathering for the funeral procession.

The connection of the long-drawn-out picture of senile decay with the advice to remember the Creator needs no elucidation. That period of failing powers is no time to begin remembering God. How dreary, too, it will be, if God is not the ‘strength of the heart,’ when ‘heart and flesh fail’! Therefore it is plain common sense, in view of the future, not to put off to old age what will bless youth, and keep the advent of old age from being wretched.

Ecc. 12:6 - Ecc. 12:7 still more stringently enforce the precept by pointing, not to the slow approach, but to the actual arrival of death. If a future of possible weakness and gradual creeping in on us of death is reason for the exhortation, much more is the certainty that the crash of dissolution will come. The allegory is partially resumed in these verses. The ‘golden bowl’ is possibly the head, and, according to some, the ‘silver cord’ is the spinal marrow, while others think rather of the bowl or lamp as meaning the body, and the cord the soul which, as it were, holds it up. The ‘pitcher’ is the heart, and the ‘wheel’ the organs of respiration. Be this as it may, the general thought is that death comes, shivering the precious reservoir of light, and putting an end to drawing of life from the Fountain of bodily life. Surely these are weighty reasons for the Preacher’s advice. Surely it is well for young hearts sometimes to remember the end, and to ask, ‘What will ye do in the end?’ and to do before the end what is so hard to begin doing at the end, and so needful to have done if the end is not to be worse than ‘vanity.’

The collapse of the body is not the end of the man, else the whole force of the argument in the preceding verses would disappear. If death is annihilation, what reason is there for seeking God before it comes? Therefore Ecc. 12:7 is no interpolation to bring a sceptical book into harmony with orthodox Jewish belief, as some commentators affirm. The ‘contradiction’ between it and Ecc. 3:21 is alleged as proof of its having been thus added. But there is no contradiction. The former passage is interrogative, and, like all the earlier part of the book, sets forth, not the

Preacher's ultimate convictions, but a phase through which he passed on his way to these. It is because man is twofold, and at death the spirit returns to its divine Giver, that the exhortation of Ecc. 12:1 is pressed home with such earnestness.

The closing verses are confidently asserted to be, like Ecc. 12:7, additions in the interests of Jewish 'orthodoxy.' But Ecclesiastes is made out to be a 'sceptical book' by expelling these from the text, and then the character thus established is taken to prove that they are not genuine. It is a remarkably easy but not very logical process.

'The end of the matter' when all is heard, is, to 'fear God and keep His commandments.' The inward feeling of reverent awe which does not exclude love, and the outward life of conformity to His will, is 'the whole duty of man,' or 'the duty of every man.' And that plain summary of all that men need to know for practical guidance is enforced by the consideration of future judgment, which, by its universal sweep and all-revealing light, must mean the judgment in another life.

Happy they who, through devious mazes of thought and act, have wandered seeking for the vision of any good, and having found all to be vanity, have been led at last to rest, like the dove in the ark, in the broad simplicity of the truth that all which any man needs for blessedness in the buoyancy of fresh youthful strength and in the feebleness of decaying age, in the stress of life, in the darkness of death, and in the day of judgment, is to 'fear God and keep His commandments'!

14)Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

Ecclesiastes

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

Ecc. 12:1 - Ecc. 12:7, Ecc. 12:13 - Ecc. 12:14.

The Preacher has passed in review 'all the works that are done under the sun,' and has now reached the end of his long investigation. It has been a devious path. He has announced many provisional conclusions, which are not intended for ultimate truths, but rather represent the progress of the soul towards the final, sufficient ground and object of belief and aim of all life, even God Himself. ‘Vanity of vanities’ is a cheerless creed and a half-truth. Its completion lies in being driven, by recognising vanity as stamped on all creatures, to clasp the one reality. ‘All is vanity’ apart from God, but He is fullness, and possessed and enjoyed and endured in Him, life is not ‘a striving after wind.’ Leave out this last section, and this book of so-called ‘Wisdom’ is one-sided and therefore error, as is modern pessimism, which only says more feebly what the Preacher had said long ago. Take the rest of the book as the autobiography of a seeker after reality, and this last section as his declaration of where he had found it, and all the previous parts fall into their right places.

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The collapse of the body is not the end of the man, else the whole force of the argument in the preceding verses would disappear. If death is annihilation, what reason is there for seeking God before it comes? Therefore Ecc. 12:7 is no interpolation to bring a sceptical book into harmony with orthodox Jewish belief, as some commentators affirm. The ‘contradiction’ between it and Ecc. 3:21 is alleged as proof of its having been thus added. But there is no contradiction. The former passage is interrogative, and, like all the earlier part of the book, sets forth, not the Preacher’s ultimate convictions, but a phase through which he passed on his way to these. It is because man is twofold, and at death the spirit returns to its divine Giver, that the exhortation of Ecc. 12:1 is pressed home with such earnestness.

The closing verses are confidently asserted to be, like Ecc. 12:7, additions in the interests of Jewish ‘orthodoxy.’ But Ecclesiastes is made out to be a ‘sceptical book’ by expelling these from the text, and then the character thus established is taken to prove that they are not genuine. It is a remarkably easy but not very logical process.

‘The end of the matter’ when all is heard, is, to ‘fear God and keep His commandments.’ The inward feeling of reverent awe which does not exclude love, and the outward life of conformity to His will, is ‘the whole duty of man,’ or ‘the duty of every man.’ And that plain summary of all that men need to know for practical guidance is enforced by the consideration of future judgment, which, by its universal sweep and all-revealing light, must mean the judgment in another life.

Happy they who, through devious mazes of thought and act, have wandered seeking for the vision of any good, and having found all to be vanity, have been led at last to rest, like the dove in the ark, in the broad simplicity of the truth that all which any man needs for blessedness in the buoyancy of fresh youthful strength and in the feebleness of decaying age, in the stress of life, in the darkness of death, and in the day of judgment, is to ‘fear God and keep His commandments’!

Isaiah

1) ISAIAH 1:1-2

2) ISAIAH 1:3
3) ISAIAH 1:4-9
4) ISAIAH 1:16-20
5) ISAIAH 1:30-31
6) ISAIAH 4:5
7) ISAIAH 5:8-30
8) ISAIAH 6:1
9) ISAIAH 6:2
10) ISAIAH 6:3-4
11) ISAIAH 6:5
12) ISAIAH 6:6-13
13) ISAIAH 8:6-7
14) ISAIAH 9:2-7
15) ISAIAH 10:17
16) ISAIAH 11:1-10
17) ISAIAH 12:3
18) ISAIAH 17:10-11
19) ISAIAH 25:6
20) ISAIAH 25:7
21) ISAIAH 25:8
22) ISAIAH 26:1-2
23) ISAIAH 26:3-4
24) ISAIAH 26:5-10
25) ISAIAH 27:5
26) ISAIAH 28:1-2
27) ISAIAH 28:3-4
28) ISAIAH 28:5
29) ISAIAH 28:6-13
30) ISAIAH 28:16
31) ISAIAH 28:21
32) ISAIAH 28:23-29
33) ISAIAH 30:15
34) ISAIAH 30:18
35) ISAIAH 31:5
36) ISAIAH 31:9
37) ISAIAH 32:2
38) ISAIAH 33:14-15

39) ISAIAH 33:16
40) ISAIAH 33:21
41) ISAIAH 33:22
42) ISAIAH 35:5
43) ISAIAH 35:6-7
44) ISAIAH 35:8-359
45) ISAIAH 35:9-10
46) ISAIAH 37:14
47) ISAIAH 37:15-21
48) ISAIAH 37:33-38
49) ISAIAH 42:3-4
50) ISAIAH 42:16
51) ISAIAH 43:1
52) ISAIAH 43:7
53) ISAIAH 44:1-2
54) ISAIAH 44:20
55) ISAIAH 44:22
56) ISAIAH 45:15
57) ISAIAH 45:19
58) ISAIAH 46:12-13
59) ISAIAH 48:18
60) ISAIAH 49:9
61) ISAIAH 49:11
62) ISAIAH 49:16
63) ISAIAH 50:4
64) ISAIAH 50:5
65) ISAIAH 50:6
66) ISAIAH 50:7
67) ISAIAH 50:8-9
68) ISAIAH 50:10
69) ISAIAH 50:11
70) ISAIAH 51:9
71) ISAIAH 52:1
72) ISAIAH 52:3
73) ISAIAH 52:11
74) ISAIAH 52:12
75) ISAIAH 53:1

76) ISAIAH 53:2-3
77) ISAIAH 53:4-6
78) ISAIAH 53:7-9
79) ISAIAH 53:10
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82) ISAIAH 54:10
83) ISAIAH 55:1
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89) ISAIAH 59:6
90) ISAIAH 60:1-3
91) ISAIAH 60:18
92) ISAIAH 61:3
93) ISAIAH 62:1
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96) ISAIAH 63:1
97) ISAIAH 63:2-3
98) ISAIAH 63:9
99) ISAIAH 64:5
100) ISAIAH 65:16

1) **Isaiah 1:1-2**

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THE GREAT SUIT: JEHOVAH *VERSUS* JUDAH

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But the bitter fountain of all evil lies in distorted relations to God. ‘They have forsaken the Lord’; that is why they ‘do corruptly.’ They have ‘despised the Holy One of Israel’; that is why they are ‘laden with iniquity.’ Alienated hearts separate from Him. To forsake Him is to despise Him. To go from Him is to go ‘away backward.’ Whatever may have been our inheritance of evil, we each go further from Him. And this fatherly lament over Judah is indeed a wail over every child of man. Does it not echo in the ‘pearl of parables,’ and may we not suppose that it suggested that supreme revelation of man’s misery and God’s love?

After the indictment comes the sentence [Isa. 1:5 - Isa. 1:8]. Perhaps ‘sentence’ is not altogether accurate, for these verses do not so much decree a future as describe a present, and the deep tone of pitying wonder sounds through them as they tell of the bitter harvest sown by sin. The penetrating question, ‘Why will ye be still stricken, that ye revolt more and more?’ brings out the solemn truth that all which men gain by rebellion against God is chastisement. The ox that ‘kicks against the pricks’ only makes its own hocks bleed. We aim at some imagined good, and we get-blows. No rational answer to that stern ‘Why?’ is possible. Every sin is an act of unreason, essentially an absurdity. The consequences of Judah’s sin are first darkly drawn under the metaphor of a man desperately wounded in some fight, and far away from physicians or nurses, and then the metaphor is interpreted by the plain facts of hostile invasion, flaming cities, devastated fields. It destroys the coherence of the verses to take the gruesome picture of the wounded man as a description of men’s sins; it is plainly a description of the consequences of their sins. In accordance with the Old Testament point of view, Isaiah deals with national calamities as the punishment of national sins. He does not touch on the far worse results of individual sins on individual character. But while we are not to ignore his doctrine that nations are individual entities, and that ‘righteousness exalteth a nation’ in our days as well as in his, the Christian form of his teaching is that men lay waste their own lives and wound their own souls by every sin. The fugitive son comes down to be a swine-herd, and cannot get enough even of the swine’s food to stay his hunger.

The note of pity sounds very clearly in the pathetic description of the deserted ‘daughter of Zion.’ Jerusalem stands forlorn and defenceless, like a frail booth in a vineyard, hastily run up with boughs, and open to fierce sunshine or howling winds. Once ‘beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, . . . the city of the great King’-and now!

Isa. 1:9 breaks the solemn flow of the divine Voice, but breaks it as it desires to be broken. For in it hearts made soft and penitent by the Voice, breathe out lowly acknowledgment of widespread sin, and see God’s mercy in the continuance of ‘a very small remnant’ of still faithful ones. There is a little island not yet submerged by the sea of iniquity, and it is to Him, not to themselves, that the ‘holy seed’ owe their being kept from following the multitude to do evil. What a smiting comparison for the national pride that is-’as Sodom,’ ‘like unto Gomorrah’!

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But these stern requirements, if taken alone, kindle despair. ‘Wash you, make you clean’-easy to say, plainly necessary, and as plainly hopelessly above my reach. If that is all that a prophet has to say to me, he may as well say nothing. For what is the use of saying ‘Arise and walk’ to the man who has been lame from his mother’s womb? How can a foul body be washed clean by filthy hands? Ancient or modern preachers of a self-wrought-out morality exhort to impossibilities, and unless they follow their preaching of an unattainable ideal as Isaiah followed his, they are doomed to waste their words. He cried, ‘Make you clean,’ but he immediately went on to point to One who could make clean, could turn scarlet into snowy white, crimson into the lustrous purity of the unstained fleeces of sheep in green pastures. The assurance of God’s forgiveness which deals with guilt, and of God’s cleansing which deals with inclination and habit, must be the foundation of our cleansing ourselves from filthiness of flesh and spirit. The call to repentance needs the promise of pardon and divine help to purifying in order to become a gospel. And the call to ‘repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,’ is what we all, who are ‘laden with iniquity,’ and have forsaken the Lord, need, if ever we are to cease to do evil and learn to do well.

As with one thunder-clap the prophecy closes, pealing forth the eternal alternative set before every soul of man. Willing obedience to our Father God secures all good, the full satisfaction of our else hungry and ravenous desires. To refuse and rebel is to condemn ourselves to destruction. And no man can avert that consequence, or break the necessary connection between goodness and blessedness, ‘for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it,’ and what He speaks stands fast for ever and ever.

2) Isaiah 1:3

Isaiah

THE GREAT SUIT: JEHOVAH VERSUS JUDAH

THE STUPIDITY OF GODLESSNESS

Isa. 1:3.

This is primarily an indictment against Israel, but it touches us all. ‘Doth not know’ *i.e.* has no familiar acquaintance with; ‘doth not consider,’ *i.e.* frivolously ignores, never meditates on.

I. This is a common attitude of mind towards God.

Blank indifference towards Him is far more frequent than conscious hostility. Take a hundred men at random as they hurry through the streets, and how many of them would have to acknowledge that no thought of God had crossed their minds for days or months? So far as they are concerned, either in regard to their thoughts or actions, He *is* 'a superfluous hypothesis.' Most men are not conscious of rebellion against Him, and to charge them with it does not rouse conscience, but they cannot but plead guilty to this indictment, 'God is not in all their thoughts.'

II. This attitude is strange and unnatural.

That a man should be able to forget God, and live as if there were no such Being, is strange. It is one instance of that awful power of ignoring the most important subjects, of which every life affords so many and tragic instances. It seems as if we had above us an opium sky which rains down soporifics, go that we are fast asleep to all that it most concerns us to wake to. But still stranger is it that, having that power of attending or not attending to subjects, we should so commonly exercise it on *this* subject. For, as the ox that knows the hand that feeds him, and the ass that makes for his 'master's crib' where he is sure of fodder and straw, might teach us, the stupidest brute has sense enough to recognise who is kind to him, or has authority over him, and where he can find what he needs. The godless man descends below the animals' level. And to ignore Him is intensely stupid. But it is worse than foolish, for III. This attitude is voluntary and criminal.

Though there is not conscious hostility in it, the root of it is a subconscious sense of discordance with God and of antagonism between His will and the man's When we are quite sure that we love another, and that hearts beat in accord and wills go out towards the same things, we do not need to make efforts to think of that other, but our minds turn towards him or her as to a home, whenever released from the holding-back force of necessary occupations. If we love God, and have our will set to do His will, our thoughts will fly to Him, 'as doves to their windows.'

It is fed by preoccupation of thought with other things. We have but a certain limited amount of energy of thought or attention, and if we waste it, as much as most of us do, on 'things seen and temporal,' there is none left for the unseen realities and the God who is 'eternal, invisible.' It is often reinforced by theoretical uncertainty, sometimes real, often largely unreal. But after all, the true basis of it is, what Paul gives as its cause, 'they did not *like* to retain God in their knowledge.'

The criminality of this indifference! It is heartlessly ungrateful. Dogs lick the hand that feeds them; ox and ass in their dull way recognise something almost like obligation arising from benefits and care. No ingratitude is meaner and baser than that of which we are guilty, if we do not requite Him 'in whose hands our breath is, and whose are all our ways,' by even one thankful heart-throb or one word shaped out of the breath that He gives.

IV. This attitude is fatal.

It separates us from God, and separation from Him is the very definition of Death. A God of whom we never think is all the same to us as a God who does not exist. Strike God out of a life, and you strike the sun out of the system, and wrap all in darkness and weltering chaos. 'This is life eternal, to know Thee'; but if 'Israel doth not know,' Israel has slain itself.

3) Isaiah 1:4-9

Isaiah

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4) Isaiah 1:16-20

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The first bars of the great overture to Isaiah’s great oratorio are here sounded. These first chapters give out the themes which run through all the rest of his prophecies. Like most introductions, they were probably written last, when the prophet collected and arranged his life’s labours. The text deals with the three great thoughts, the *leit-motifs* that are sounded over and over again in the prophet’s message.

First comes the great indictment [Isa. 1:2 - Isa. 1:4]. A true prophet’s words are of universal application, even when they are most specially addressed to a particular audience. Just because this indictment was so true of Judah, is it true of all men, for it is not concerned with details peculiar to a long-past period and state of society, but with the broad generalities common to us all. As another great teacher in Old Testament times said, ‘I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices or thy burnt-offerings, to have been continually before me.’ Isaiah has nothing to say about ritual or ceremonial omissions, which to him were but surface matters after all, but he sets in blazing light the foundation facts of Judah’s [and every man’s] distorted relation to God. And how lovingly, as well as sternly, God speaks through him! That divine lament which heralds the searching indictment is not unworthy to be the very words of the Almighty Lover of all men, sorrowing over His prodigal and fugitive sons. Nor is its deep truth less than its tenderness. For is not man’s sin blackest when seen against the bright background of God’s fatherly love? True, the fatherhood that Isaiah knew referred to God’s relation to the nation rather than to the individual, but the great truth which is perfectly revealed by the Perfect Son was in part shown to the prophet. The east was bright with the unrisen sun, and the tinted clouds that hovered above the place of its rising seemed as if yearning to open and let him through. Man’s neglect of God’s benefits puts him below the animals that ‘know’ the hand that feeds and governs them. Some men think it a token of superior ‘culture’ and advanced views to throw off allegiance to God. It is a token that they have less intelligence than their dog.

There is something very beautiful and pathetic in the fact that Judah is not directly addressed, but that Isa. 1:2 - Isa. 1:4 are a divine soliloquy. They might rather be called a father’s lament than an indictment. The forsaken father is, as it were, sadly brooding over his erring child’s sins, which are his father’s sorrows and his own miseries. In Isa. 1:4 the black catalogue of the prodigal’s doings begins on the surface with what we call ‘moral’ delinquencies, and then digs deeper to disclose the root of these in what we call ‘religious’ relations perverted. The two are inseparably united, for no man who is wrong with God can be right with duty or with men. Notice, too, how one word flashes into clearness the sad truth of universal experience-that ‘iniquity,’ however it may delude us into fancying that by it we throw off the burden of conscience and duty, piles heavier weights on our backs. The doer of iniquity is ‘laden with iniquity.’ Notice, too, how the awful entail of evil from parents to children is adduced-shall we say as aggravating, or as lessening, the guilt of each generation? Isaiah’s contemporaries are ‘a seed of evil-doers,’ spring from such, and in their turn are ‘children that are corrupters.’ The fatal bias becomes stronger as it passes down. Heredity is a fact, whether you call it original sin or not.

But the bitter fountain of all evil lies in distorted relations to God. ‘They have forsaken the Lord’; that is why they ‘do corruptly.’ They have ‘despised the Holy One of Israel’; that is why they are ‘laden with iniquity.’ Alienated hearts separate from Him. To forsake Him is to despise Him. To go from Him is to go ‘away backward.’ Whatever may have been our inheritance of evil, we each go further from Him. And this fatherly lament over Judah is indeed a wail over every child of man. Does it not echo in the ‘pearl of parables,’ and may we not suppose that it suggested that supreme revelation of man’s misery and God’s love?

After the indictment comes the sentence [Isa. 1:5 - Isa. 1:8]. Perhaps ‘sentence’ is not altogether accurate, for these verses do not so much decree a future as describe a present, and the deep tone of pitying wonder sounds through them as they tell of the bitter harvest sown by sin. The penetrating question, ‘Why will ye be still stricken, that ye revolt more and more?’ brings out the solemn truth that all which men gain by rebellion against God is chastisement. The ox that ‘kicks against the pricks’ only makes its own hocks bleed. We aim at some imagined good, and we get-blows. No rational answer to that stern ‘Why?’ is possible. Every sin is an act of unreason, essentially an absurdity. The consequences of Judah’s sin are first darkly drawn under the metaphor of a man desperately wounded in some fight, and far away from physicians or nurses, and then the metaphor is interpreted by the plain facts of hostile invasion, flaming cities, devastated fields. It destroys the coherence of the verses to take the gruesome picture of the wounded man as a description of men’s sins; it is plainly a description of the consequences of their sins. In accordance with the Old Testament point of view, Isaiah deals with national calamities as the punishment of national sins. He does not touch on the far worse results of individual sins on individual character. But while we are not to ignore his doctrine that nations are individual entities, and that ‘righteousness exalteth a nation’ in our days as well as in his, the Christian form of his teaching is that men lay waste their own lives and wound their own souls by every sin. The fugitive son comes down to be a swine-herd, and cannot get enough even of the swine’s food to stay his hunger.

The note of pity sounds very clearly in the pathetic description of the deserted ‘daughter of Zion.’ Jerusalem stands forlorn and defenceless, like a frail booth in a vineyard, hastily run up with boughs, and open to fierce sunshine or howling winds. Once ‘beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, . . . the city of the great King’-and now!

Isa. 1:9 breaks the solemn flow of the divine Voice, but breaks it as it desires to be broken. For in it hearts made soft and penitent by the Voice, breathe out lowly acknowledgment of widespread sin, and see God’s mercy in the continuance of ‘a very small remnant’ of still faithful ones. There is a little island not yet submerged by the sea of iniquity, and it is to Him, not to themselves, that the ‘holy seed’ owe their being kept from following the multitude to do evil. What a smiting comparison for the national pride that is-’as Sodom,’ ‘like unto Gomorrah’!

After the sentence comes pardon. Isa. 1:16 - Isa. 1:17 properly belong to the paragraph omitted from the text, and close the stern special word to the ‘rulers’ which, in its severe tone, contrasts so strongly with the wounded love and grieved pity of the preceding verses. Moral amendment is demanded of these high-placed sinners and false guides. It is John the Baptist’s message in an earlier form, and it clears the way for the evangelical message. Repentance and cleansing of life come first.

But these stern requirements, if taken alone, kindle despair. ‘Wash you, make you clean’-easy to say, plainly necessary, and as plainly hopelessly above my reach. If that is all that a prophet has to say to me, he may as well say nothing. For what is the use of saying ‘Arise and walk’ to the man who has been lame from his mother’s womb? How can a foul body be washed clean by filthy hands? Ancient or modern preachers of a self-wrought-out morality exhort to impossibilities, and unless they follow their preaching of an unattainable ideal as Isaiah followed his, they are doomed to waste their words. He cried, ‘Make you clean,’ but he immediately went on to point to One who could make clean, could turn scarlet into snowy white, crimson into the lustrous purity of the unstained fleeces of sheep in green pastures. The assurance of God’s forgiveness which deals with guilt, and of God’s cleansing which deals with inclination and habit, must be the foundation of our cleansing ourselves from filthiness of flesh and spirit. The call to repentance needs the promise of pardon and divine help to purifying in order to become a gospel. And the call to ‘repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,’ is what we all, who are ‘laden with iniquity,’ and have forsaken the Lord, need, if ever we are to cease to do evil and learn to do well.

As with one thunder-clap the prophecy closes, pealing forth the eternal alternative set before every soul of man. Willing obedience to our Father God secures all good, the full satisfaction of our else hungry and ravenous desires. To refuse and rebel is to condemn ourselves to destruction. And no man can avert that consequence, or break the necessary connection between goodness and blessedness, ‘for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it,’ and what He speaks stands fast for ever and ever.

5) Isaiah 1:30-31

Isaiah

WHAT SIN DOES TO MEN

Isa. 1:30 - Isa. 1:31.

The original reference of these words is to the threatened retribution for national idolatry, of which ‘oaks’ and ‘gardens’ were both seats. The nation was, as it were, dried up and made inflammable; the idol was as the ‘spark’ or the occasion for destruction. But a wider application, which comes home to us all, is to the fatal results of sin. These need to be very plainly stated, because of the deceitfulness of sin, which goes on slaying men by thousands in silence.

‘That grim wolf with privy paw
Daily devours apace.’

I. Sin withers.

We see the picture of a blasted tree in the woods, while all around are in full leaf, with tiny leaves half developed and all brown at the edges. The prophet draws another picture, that of a garden not irrigated, and therefore, in the burning East, given over to barrenness.

Sin makes men fruitless and withered.

It involves separation from God, the source of all fruitfulness [Psa. 1:1 - Psa. 1:6].

Think of how many pure desires and innocent susceptibilities die out of a sinful soul. Think of how many capacities for good disappear. Think of how dry and seared the heart becomes. Think of how conscience is stifled.

All sin-any sin-does this.

Not only gross, open transgressions, but any piece of godless living will do it.

Whatever a man does against his conscience-neglect of duty, habitual unveracity, idleness-in a word, his besetting sin withers him up.

And all the while the evil thing that is drawing his life-blood is growing like a poisonous, blotched fungus in a wine-cask.

II. Sin makes men inflammable.

‘As tow’ or tinder.

A subsidiary reference may be intended to the sinful man as easily catching fire at temptation. But the main thought is that sin makes a man ready for destruction, ‘whose end is to be burned.’

The materials for retribution are laid up in a man’s nature by wrong-doing. The conspirators store the dynamite in a dark cellar. Conscience and memory are charged with explosives.

If tendencies, habits, and desires become tyrannous by long indulgence and cannot be indulged, what a fierce fire would rage then!

We have only to suppose a man made to know what is the real moral character of his actions, and to be unable to give them up, to have hell.

All this is confirmed by occasional glimpses which men get of themselves. Our own characters are the true Medusa-head which turns a man into stone when he sees it.

What, then, are we really doing by our sins? Piling together fuel for burning.

III. Sin burns up.

‘Work as a spark.’ The evil deeds brought into contact with the doer work destruction. That is, if, in a future life or at any time, a man is brought face to face with his acts, then retribution begins. We shake off the burden of our actions by want of remembrance. But that power of ignoring the past may be broken down at any time. Suppose it happens that in another world it can no longer be exercised, what then?

Evil deeds are the occasion of the divine retribution. They are ‘a spark.’ It is they who light the pyre, not God. The prophet here protests in God’s name against the notion that He is to be blamed for punishing. Men are their own self-tormentors. The sinful man immolates himself. Like Isaac, he carries the wood and lays the pile for his own burning.

Christ severs the connection between us and our evil. He restores beauty and freshness to the blighted tree, planting it as ‘by the river of water,’ so that it ‘bringeth forth its fruit in its season,’ and its ‘leaf also doth not wither.’

6) Isaiah 4:5

Isaiah

THE PERPETUAL PILLAR OF CLOUD AND FIRE

Isa. 4:5.

The pillar of cloud and fire in the Exodus was one: there are to be as many pillars as there are ‘assemblies’ in the new era. Is it straining the language too much to find significance in that difference? Instead of the formal unity of the Old Covenant, there is a variety which yet is a more vital unity. Is there not a hint here of the same lesson that is taught by the change of the one golden lamp-stand into the seven, which are a better unity because Jesus Christ walks among them?

The heart of this promise, thus cast into the form of ancient experiences, but with significant variations, is that of true communion with God.

That communion makes those who have it glorious.

That communion supplies unfailing guidance.

A man in close fellowship with God will have wonderful flashes of sagacity, even about small practical matters. The gleam of the pillar will illumine conscience, and shine on many difficult, dark places. The ‘simplicity’ of a saintly soul will often see deeper into puzzling contingencies than the vulpine craftiness of the ‘prudent.’ The darker the night, the brighter the guidance.

That communion gives a defence.

The pillar came between Egypt and Israel, and kept the foe off the timid crowd of slaves. Whatever forms our enemies take, fellowship with God will invest us with a defence as protean as our perils. The same cloud is represented in the context as being ‘a pavilion for a shadow in the heat, and for a refuge and for a covert from storm and from rain.’

7) Isaiah 5:8-30

Isaiah

A PROPHET’S WOES

Isa. 5:8 - Isa. 5:30.

Drunkenness is, in this text, one of a ring of plague-spots on the body politic of Judah. The prophet six times proclaims ‘woe’ as the inevitable end of these; such ‘sickness’ is ‘unto death’ unless repentance and another course of conduct bring healing. But drunkenness appears twice in this grim catalogue, and the longest paragraph of denunciation [Isa. 5:11 - Isa. 5:17] is devoted to it. Its connection with the other vices attacked is loose, but it is worth noting that all these have an inner kinship, and tend to appear together. They are ‘all in a string,’ and where a community is cursed with one, the others will not be far away. They are a knot of serpents intertwined. We touch but slightly on the other vices denounced by the prophet’s burning words, but we must premise the general observation that the same uncompromising plainness and boldness in speaking out as to social sins ought to characterise Christian teachers to-day. The prophet’s office is not extinct in the church.

The first plague-spot is the accumulation of wealth in few hands, and the selfish withdrawal of its possessors from the life of the community. In an agricultural society like that of Judah, that clotting of wealth took the shape of ‘land-grabbing,’ and of evicting the small proprietors. We see it in more virulent forms in our great commercial centres, where the big men often become big by crushing out the little ones, and denude themselves of responsibility to the community in proportion as they clothe themselves with wealth. Wherever wealth is thus congested, and its obligations ignored by selfish indulgence, the seeds are sown which will spring up one day in ‘anarchism.’ A man need not be a prophet to have it whispered in his ear, as Isaiah had, that the end of selfish capitalism is a convulsion in which ‘many houses shall be desolate,’ and many fields barren. England needs the warning as much as Isaiah’s Judah did.

Such selfish wealth leads, among other curses, to indolence and drunkenness, as the next woe shows. The people described make drinking the business of their lives, beginning early and sitting late. They have a varnish of art over their swinishness, and must have music as well as wine. So, in many a drink-shop in England, a piano or a band adds to the attractions, and gives a false air of aestheticism to pure animalism. Isaiah feels the incongruity that music should be so prostituted, and expresses it by adding to his list of musical instruments ‘and wine’ as if he would underscore the degradation of the great art to be the cupbearer of sots. Such revellers are blind to the manifest tokens of God’s working, and the ‘operation of His hands’ excites only the tipsy gaze which sees nothing. That is one of the curses which dog the drunkard-that he takes no warning from the plain results of his vice as seen in others. He knows that it means shattered health, ruined prospects, broken hearts, but nothing rouses him from his fancy of impunity. High, serious thoughts of God and His government of the world and of each life are strange to him. His sin compels him to be godless, if he is not to go mad. But sometimes he wakes to a moment’s sight of realities, and then he is miserable till his next bout buys fatal forgetfulness.

The prophet forces the end of a drunken nation on the unwilling attention of the roisterers, in Isa. 5:13 - Isa. 5:17, which throb with vehemence of warning and gloomy eloquence. What can such a people come to but destruction? Knowledge must languish, hunger and thirst must follow. Like some monster’s gaping mouth, the pit yawns for them; and, drawn as by irresistible attraction, the pomp and the wicked, senseless jollity elide down into it. In the universal catastrophe, one thing alone stands upright, and is lifted higher, because all else has sunk so far,-the righteous judgment of the forgotten God. The grim picture is as true for individuals and their deaths as for a nation and its decay. And modern nations cannot afford to have this ulcer of drunkenness draining away their strength any more than Judah could. ‘By the soul only are the nations great and free,’ and a people can be neither where the drink fiend has his way.

Three woes follow which are closely connected. That pronounced on daring evil-doers, who not only let sin draw them to itself, but go more than halfway to meet it, needing no temptation, but drawing it to them eagerly, and scoffing at the merciful warnings of fatal consequences, comes first. Next is a woe on those who play fast and loose with plain morality, sophisticating conscience, and sapping the foundations of law. Such juggling follows sensual indulgence such as drunkenness, when it becomes habitual and audacious, as in the preceding woe. Loose or perverted codes of morality generally spring from bad living, seeking to shelter itself. Vicious principles are an afterthought to screen vicious practices. The last subject of the triple woes is self-conceit and pretence to superior illumination. Such very superior persons are emancipated from the rules which bind the common herd. They are so very clever that they have far outgrown the creeping moralities, which may do for old women and children. Do we not know the sort of people? Have we none of them surviving to-day?

Then Isaiah comes back to his theme of drunkenness, but in a new connection. It poisons the fountain of justice. There is a world of indignant contempt in the prophet's scathing picture of those who are 'mighty' and 'men of strength,'-but how is their strength shown? They can stand any quantity of wine, and can 'mix their drinks,' and yet look sober! What a noble use to put a good constitution to! These valiant topers are in authority as judges, and they sell their judgments to get money for their debauches. We do not see much of such scandals among us, but yet we have heard of leagues between liquor-sellers and municipal authorities, which certainly do *not* 'make for righteousness.' When shall we learn and practise the lesson that Isaiah was reading his countrymen,-that it is fatal to a nation when the private character of public men is regarded as of no account in political and civic life? The prophet had no doubt as to what must be the end of a state of things in which the very courts of law were honeycombed with corruption, and demoralised by the power of drink. His tremendous image of a fierce fire raging across a dry prairie, and burning the grass to its very roots, while the air is stifling with the thick 'dust' of the conflagration, proclaims the sure fate, sooner or later, of every community and individual that 'rejects the law of the Lord of Hosts, and despises the word of the Holy One of Israel.' Change the name, and the tale is told of us; for it is 'righteousness that exalteth a nation,' and no single vice drags after it more infallibly such a multitude of attendant demons as the vice of drunkenness, which is a crying sin of England to-day.

8) Isaiah 6:1

Isaiah

VISION AND SERVICE

THE EMPTY THRONE FILLED

Isa. 6:1.

Uzziah had reigned for fifty-two years, during the greater part of which he and his people had been brilliantly prosperous. Victorious in war, he was also successful in the arts of peaceful industry. The later years of his life were clouded, but on the whole the reign had been a time of great well-being. His son and successor was a young man of five-and-twenty; and when he came to the throne ominous war-clouds were gathering in the North, and threatening to drift to Judah. No wonder that the prophet, like other thoughtful patriots, was asking himself what was to come in these anxious days, when the helm was in new hands, which, perhaps, were not strong enough to hold it. Like a wise man, he took his thoughts into the sanctuary; and there he understood. As he brooded, this great vision was disclosed to his inward eye. ‘In the year that King Uzziah died’ is a great deal more than a date for chronological purposes. It tells us not only the *when*, but the *why*, of the vision. The earthly king was laid in the grave; but the prophet saw that the true King of Israel was neither the dead Uzziah nor the young Jotham, but the Lord of hosts. And, seeing that, fears and forebodings and anxieties and the sense of loss, all vanished; and new strength came to Isaiah. He went into the temple laden with anxious thoughts; he came out of it with a springy step and a lightened heart, and the resolve ‘Here am I; send me.’ There are some lessons that seem to me of great importance for the conduct of our daily life which may be gathered from this remarkable vision, with the remarkable note of time that is appended to it.

Now, before I pass on, let me remind you, in a word, of that apparently audacious commentary upon this great vision, which the Evangelist John gives us: ‘These things said Esaias, when he had beheld *His* glory and spake of *Him*.’ Then the Christ is the manifest Jehovah; is the King of Glory. Then the vision which was but a transitory revelation is the revelation of an eternal reality, and ‘the vision splendid’ does not ‘fade but brightens, into the light of common day’; when instead of being flashed only on the inward eye of a prophet, it is made flesh and walks amongst us, and lives our life, and dies our death. Our eyes have seen the King in as true a reality, and in better fashion, than ever Isaiah did amid the sanctities of the Temple. And the eyes that have seen only the near foreground, the cultivated valleys, and the homes of men, are raised, and lo! the long line of glittering peaks, calm, silent, pure. Who will look at the valleys when the Himalayas stand out, and the veil is drawn aside?

I. Let me say a word or two about the ministration of loss and sorrow in preparing for the vision.

It was when ‘King Uzziah died’ that the prophet ‘saw the Lord sitting upon the throne.’ If the Throne of Israel had not been empty, he would not have seen the throned God in the heavens. And so it is with all our losses, with all our sorrows, with all our disappointments, with all our pains; they have a mission to reveal to us the throned God. The possession of the things that are taken away from us, the joys which our sorrows smite into dust, have the same mission, and the highest purpose of every good, of every blessing, of every possession, of every gladness, of all love-the highest mission is to lead us to Him. But, just as men will frost a window, so that the light may come in but the sight cannot go out, so by our own fault and misuse of the good things which are meant to lead us up to, and to show us, God, we frost and darken the window so that we cannot see what it is meant to show us. And then a mighty and merciful hand shivers the painted glass into fragments, because it has been dimming ‘the white radiance of Eternity.’ And though the casement may look gaunt, and the edges of the broken glass may cut and wound, yet the view is unimpeded. When the gifts that we have misused are withdrawn, we can see the heaven that they too often hide from us. When the leaves drop there is a wider prospect. When the great tree is fallen there is opened a view of the blue above. When the night falls the stars sparkle. When other props are struck away we can lean our whole weight upon God. When Uzziah dies the King becomes visible.

Is that what our sorrows, our pains, losses, disappointments do for us? Well for those to whom loss is gain, because it puts them in possession of the enduring riches! Well for those to whom the passing of all that can pass is a means of revealing Him who ‘is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever’! The message to us of all these our pains and griefs is ‘Come up hither.’ In them all our Father is saying to us, ‘Seek ye My face.’ Well for those who answer, ‘Thy face, Lord, will I seek. Hide not Thy face far from me.’

Let us take care that we do not waste our griefs and sorrows. They absorb us sometimes with vain regrets. They jaundice and embitter us sometimes with rebellious thoughts. They often break the springs of activity and of interest in others, and of sympathy with others. But their true intention is to draw back the thin curtain, and to show us 'the things that are,' the realities of the throned God, the skirts that fill the Temple, the hovering seraphim, and the coal from the altar that purges.

II. Let me suggest how our text shows us the compensation that is given for all losses.

As I have pointed out already, the thought conveyed to the prophet by this vision was not only the general one, of God's sovereign rule, but the special one of His rule over and for, and His protection of, the orphan kingdom which had lost its king. The vision took the special shape that the moment required. It was because the earthly king was dead that the living, heavenly King was revealed.

So there is just suggested by it this general thought, that the consciousness of God's presence and work for us takes in each heart the precise shape that its momentary necessities and circumstances require. That infinite fulness is of such a nature as that it will assume any form for which the weakness and the need of the dependent creature call. Like the one force which scientists now are beginning to think underlies all the various manifestations of energy in nature, whether they be named light, heat, motion, electricity, chemical action, or gravitation, the one same vision of the throned God, manifest in Jesus Christ, is protean. Here it flames as light, there burns as heat, there flashes as electricity; here as gravitation holds the atoms together, there as chemical energy separated and decomposes them; here results in motion, there in rest; but is the one force. And so the one God will become everything and anything that every man, and each man, requires. He shapes himself according to our need. The water of life does not disdain to take the form imposed upon it by the vessel into which it is poured. The Jews used to say that the manna in the wilderness tasted to each man as each man desired. And the God, who comes to us all, comes to us each in the shape that we need; just as He came to Isaiah in the manifestation of His *kingly* power, because the throne of Judah was vacated.

So when our hearts are sore with loss, the New Testament Manifestation of the King, even Jesus Christ, comes to us and says, ‘The same is my mother and sister and brother,’ and His sweet love compensates for the love that can die, and that has died. When losses come to us He draws near, as durable riches and righteousness. In all our pains He is our anodyne, and in all our griefs He brings the comfort; He is all in all, and each withdrawn gift is compensated, or will be compensated, to each in Him.

So, dear friends, let us learn God’s purpose in emptying hearts and chairs and homes. He empties them that He may fill them with Himself. He takes us, if I might so say, into the darkness, as travellers to the south are to-day passing through Alpine tunnels, in order that He may bring us out into the land where ‘God Himself is sun and moon,’ and where there are ampler ether and brighter constellations than in these lands where we dwell. He means that, when Uzziah dies, our hearts shall see the King. And for all mourners, for all tortured hearts, for all from whom stays have been stricken and resources withdrawn, the old word is true: ‘Lord shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us.’

Let me recall to you what I have already insisted on more than once, that the perfecting of this vision is in the historical fact of the Incarnate Son. Jesus Christ shows us God. Jesus Christ is the King of Glory. If we will go to Him, and fix our eyes and hearts on Him, then losses may come, and we shall be none the poorer; death may unclasp our hands from dear hands, but He will close a dearer one round the hand that is groping for a stay; and nothing can betaken away but He will more than fill the gap it leaves by His own sweet presence. If our eyes behold the King, if we are like John the Seer in his rocky Patmos, and see the Christ in His glory and royalty, then He will lay His hands on us and say, ‘Fear not! Weep not; I am the First and the Last,’ and forebodings, and fears, and sense of loss will all be changed into trustfulness and patient submission. ‘Seeing Him, who is invisible,’ we shall be able to endure and to toil, until the time when the vision of earth is perfected by the beholding of heaven. Blessed are they who with purged eyes see, and with yielding hearts obey, the heavenly vision, and turn to the King and offer themselves for any service He may require, saying, ‘Here am I; send me.’

9) Isaiah 6:2

Isaiah

VISION AND SERVICE

A SERAPH'S WINGS

Isa. 6:2.

This is the only mention in Scripture of the seraphim. I do not need to enter upon the much-debated, and in some respects interesting, question as to whether these are to be taken as identical with the cherubim, or as to whether they are altogether imaginary and symbolical beings, nor as to whether they are identical with the angels, or part of their hierarchy. All that may be left on one side. I would only notice, before I deal with the specific words of my text, the significance of the name. It means 'the flaming' or 'burning ones,' and so the attendants of the divine glory in the heavens, whether they be real or imaginary beings, are represented as flashing with splendour, as full of swift energy, like a flame of fire, as glowing with fervid love, as blazing with enthusiasm. That is the type of the highest creatural being, which stands closest to God. There is no ice in His presence, and the nearer we get to Him in truth, the more we shall glow and burn. Cold religion is a contradiction in terms, though, alas, it is a reality in professors.

And so with that explanation, and putting aside all these other questions, let us gather up some, at least, of the lessons as to the essentials of worship, and try to grasp the prophecy of the heavenly state, given us in these words.

I. The Wings of Reverence.

He covered his face, or *they* covered *their* faces, lest they should see. As a man brought suddenly into the sunlight, especially if out of a darkened chamber, by an instinctive action shades his eyes with his hand, so these burning creatures, confronted with the still more fervid and fiery light of the divine nature, fold one pair of their great white pinions over their shining faces, even whilst they cry 'Holy! Holy! Holy! is the Lord God Almighty!'

And does not that teach us the incapacity of the highest creature, with the purest vision, to gaze undazzled into the shining light of God? I, for my part, do not believe that any conceivable extension of creatural faculties, or any conceivable hallowing of creatural natures, can make the creature able to gaze upon God. I know that it is often said that the joy of the future life for men is what the theologians call 'the beatific vision,' in which there shall be direct sight of God, using that word in its highest sense, as applied to the perceptions of the spirit, and not of the sense. But I do not think the Bible teaches us that. It does teach us 'We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' But who is the 'Him'? Jesus Christ. And, in my belief, Jesus Christ will, to all eternity, be the medium of manifesting God, and there will remain, to all eternity, the incapacity which clogs creatures in time-' No man hath seen God at any time, nor *can* see Him.'

But my text, whilst it thus suggests solemn thoughts of a Light that cannot be looked at with undazzled eyes, does also suggest to us by contrast the possibility of far feebler-sighted and more sinful creatures than these symbolical seraphs coming into a Presence in which God shall be manifest to them; and they will need no veil drawn by themselves across their eyes. God has veiled Himself, that 'we, with unveiled faces, beholding His glory, may be changed into the same image.' So the seraph, with his white wings folded before his eyes, may at once stand to us as a parallel and a contrast to what the Christian may expect. We, *we* can see Jesus, with no incapacity except such as may be swept away by His grace and our will. And direct vision of the whole Christ is the heaven of heaven, even as the partial vision of the partially perceived Christ is the sweetest sweetness of a life on earth.

There is no need for us to draw any screen between our happy eyes and the Face in which we 'behold the glory as of the only Begotten of the Father.' All the tempering that the divine lustre needed has been done by Him who veils His glory with the veil of Christ's flesh, and therein does away the need for any veil that we can draw.

But, beyond that, there is another consideration that I should like to suggest, as taught us by the use of this first pair of the six wings, and that is the absolute need for the lowliest reverence in our worship of God. It is strange, but true, I am afraid, that the Christian danger is to weaken the sense of the majesty and splendour and separation of God from His creatures. And all that is good in the Christian revelation may be so abused as that there shall come, what I am sure does in effect sometimes come, a terrible lack of due reverence in our so-called worship. What does that lofty chorus of ‘Holy! Holy! Holy!’ that burst from those immortal lips mean but the declaration that God is high above, and separate from, all limitations and imperfections of creatures? And we Christians, who hear it re-echoed in the very last Book of Scripture by the four-and-twenty elders who represent redeemed humanity, have need to take heed that we do not lose our reverence in our confidence, and that we do not part with godly fear in our filial love. If one looks at a congregation of professing Christians engaged in their worship, does not one feel and see that there is often a carelessness and shallowness, a want of realisation of the majesty and sanctity and tremendousness of that Father to whom we draw near? Brethren, if a seraph hides his face, surely it becomes us to see to it that, since we worship a God who is a consuming fire,’ we serve Him with far deeper ‘reverence and godly fear’ than ordinarily mark our devotions.

II. The Wings of Humility.

‘With twain he covered his feet.’ The less comely and inferior parts of that fiery corporeity were veiled lest they should be seen by the Eyes that see all things. The wings made no screen that hid the seraph’s feet from the eye of God, but it was the instinctive lowly sense of unworthiness that folded them across the feet, even though they, too, burned as a furnace. The nearer we get to God, the more we shall be aware of our limitations and unworthiness, and it is because that vision of the Lord sitting on ‘His throne, high and lifted up,’ with the thrilling sense of His glory filling the holy temple of the universe, does not burn before us that we can conceit ourselves to have anything worth pluming ourselves upon. Once lift the curtain, once let my eye be flooded with the sight of God, and away goes all my self-conceit, and all my fancied superiority above others. One little molehill is pretty nearly the same height as another, if you measure them both against the top of the Himalayas, that lie in the background, with their glittering peaks of snow. ‘Star differeth from star in glory’ in a winter’s night, but when the great sun swims into the sky, they all vanish together. If you and I saw God burning before us, as Isaiah saw Him, we should veil ourselves, and lose all that which so often veils Him from us-the fancy that we are anything when we are nothing. And the nearer we get to God, and the purer we are, the more shall we be keenly conscious of our imperfections and our sins. ‘If I say I am perfect,’ said Job in his wise way, ‘this also should prove me perverse.’ Consciousness of sin is the continual accompaniment of growth in holiness. ‘The heavens are not pure in His sight, and He chargeth His angels with folly.’ Everything looks black beside that sovereign whiteness. Get God into your lives, and you will see that the feet need to be washed, and you will cry, ‘Lord! not my feet only, but my hands and my head!’

III. Lastly-The Wings for Service.

‘With twain he did fly.’ That is the emblem of joyous, buoyant, unhindered motion. It is strongly, sadly contrary to the toilsome limitations of us heavy creatures who have no wings, but can at best run on His service, and often find it hard to ‘walk with patience in the way that is set before us.’ But-service with wings, or service with lame feet, it matters not. Whosoever, beholding God, has found need to hide his face from that Light even whilst he comes into the Light, and to veil his feet from the all-seeing Eye, will also feel impulses to go forth in His service. For the perfection of worship is neither the consciousness of my own insufficiency, nor the humble recognition of His glory, nor the great voice of praise that thrilled from those immortal lips, but it is the doing of His will in daily life. Some people say the service of man is the service of God. Yes, when it is service of man, done for God’s sake, it is so, and only then. The old motto, ‘Work is worship,’ may preach a great truth or a most dangerous error. But there is no possibility of error or danger in maintaining this: that the climax and crown of all worship, whether for us footsore servants upon earth, or for these winged attendants on the throne of the King in the heavens, is activity in obedience. And that is what is set before us here.

Now, dear brethren, we, as Christians, have a far higher motive for service than the seraphs had. We have been redeemed, and the spirit of the old Psalm should animate all our obedience: ‘O Lord, truly I am Thy servant.’ Why? The next clause tells us: ‘Thou hast loosed my bonds.’ The seraphs could not say that, and therefore our obedience, our activity in doing the will of the Father in heaven, should be more buoyant, more joyful, more swift, more unrestricted than even theirs.

The seraphim were winged for service even while they stood above the throne and pealed forth their thunderous praise which shook the Temple. May we not discern in that a hint of the blessed blending of two modes of worship which will be perfectly united in heaven, and which we should aim at harmonising even on earth? ‘His servants serve Him and see His face.’ There is possible, even on earth, some foretaste of the perfection of that heavenly state in which no worship in service shall interfere with the worship in contemplation. Mary, sitting at Christ’s feet, and Martha, busy in providing for His comfort, may be, to a large extent, united in us even here, and will be perfectly so hereafter, when the practical and the contemplative, the worship of noble aspiration, of heart-filling gazing, and that of active service shall be indissolubly blended.

The seraphs sang ‘Holy! Holy! Holy!’ but they, and all the hosts of heaven, learn a new song from the experience of earth, and redeemed men are the chorus-leaders of the perfected and eternal worship of the heavens. For we read that it is the four-and-twenty elders who begin the song and sing to the Lamb that redeemed them by His blood, and that the living creatures and all the hosts of the angels to that song can but say ‘Amen!’

10)Isaiah 6:3-4

Isaiah

VISION AND SERVICE

Isa. 6:1 - Isa. 6:13.

WE may deal with this text as falling into three parts: the vision, its effect on the prophet, and his commission.

I. The Vision.-’In the year that King Uzziah died’ is more than a date for chronological accuracy. It tells not only when, but why, the vision was given. The throne of David was empty.

God never empties places in our homes and hearts, or in the nation or the Church, without being ready to fill them. He sometimes empties them that He may fill them. Sorrow and loss are meant to prepare us for the vision of God, and their effect should be to purge the inward eye, that it may see Him. When the leaves drop from the forest trees we can see the blue sky which their dense abundance hid. Well for us if the passing of all that can pass drives us to Him who cannot pass, if the unchanging God stands out more clear, more near, more dear, because of change.

As to the substance of this vision, we need not discuss whether, if we had been there, we should have seen anything. It was doubtless related to Isaiah's thoughts, for God does not send visions which have no point of contact in the recipient. However communicated, it was a divine communication, and a temporary unveiling of an eternal reality. The form was transient, but Isaiah then saw for a moment 'the things which are' and always are.

The essential point of the vision is the revelation of Jehovah as king of Judah. That relation guaranteed defence and demanded obedience. It was a sure basis of hope, but also a stringent motive to loyalty, and it had its side of terror as well as of joyfulness. 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.' The place of vision is the heavenly sanctuary of which the temple was a prophecy. Eminently significant and characteristic of the whole genius of the Old Testament is the absence of any description of the divine appearance. The prophet saw things 'which it is not lawful for a man to utter,' and his silence is not only reverent, but more eloquent than any attempt to put the Ineffable into words. Even in this act of manifestation God was veiled, and '*there* was the hiding of His power.' The train of His robe can be spoken of, but not the form which it concealed even in revealing it. Nature is the robe of God. It hides while it discloses, and discloses while it hides.

The hovering seraphim were in the attitude of service. They are probably represented as fiery forms, but are spoken of nowhere else in Scripture. The significance of their attitude has been well given by Jewish commentators, who say, 'with two he covered his face that he might not see, and with two he covered his body that he might not be seen' and we may add, 'with two he stood ready for service, by flight whithersoever the King would send.' Such awe-stricken reverence, such humble hiding of self, such alacrity for swift obedience, such flaming ardours of love and devotion, should be ours. Their song celebrated the holiness and the glory of Jehovah of hosts. We must ever remember that the root-meaning of 'holiness' is separation, and that the popular meaning of moral purity is secondary and derivative. What is rapturously sung in the threefold invocation of the seraphs is the infinite exaltation of Jehovah above all creatural conditions, limitations, and, we may add, conceptions. That separation, of course, includes purity, as may be seen from the immediate effect of the vision on the prophet, but the conception is much wider than that. Very beautifully does the second line of the song re-knit the connection between Jehovah and this world, so far beneath Him, which the burst of praise of His holiness seems to sever. The high heaven is a bending arch; its inaccessible heights ray down sunshine and drop down rain, and, as in the physical world, every plant grows by Heaven's gift, so in the world of humanity all wisdom, goodness, and joy are from the Father of lights. God's 'glory' is the flashing lustre of His manifested holiness, which fills the earth as the train of the robe filled the temple. The vibrations of that mighty hymn shook the 'foundations of the threshold' [Rev. Ver.] with its thunderous harmonies. 'The house was filled with smoke' which, since it was an effect of the seraph's praise, is best explained as referring to the fragrant smoke of incense which, as we know, symbolised 'the prayers of saints.'

II. The effect of the vision on the prophet.-The vision kindled as with a flash Isaiah's consciousness of sin. He expressed it in regard to his words rather than his works, partly because in one aspect speech is even more accurately than act a cast, as it were, of character, and partly because he could not but feel the difference between the mighty music that burst from these pure and burning lips and the words that flowed from and soiled his own. Not only the consciousness of sin, but the dread of personal evil consequences from the vision of the holy God, oppressed his heart. We see ourselves when we see God. Once flash on a heart the thought of God's holiness, and, like an electric searchlight, it discloses flaws which pass unnoticed in dimmer light. The easy-going Christianity, which is the apology for religion with so many of us, has no deep sense of sin, because it has no clear vision of God. 'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear;

but now mine eye seeth Thee: wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'

The next stage in Isaiah's experience is that sin recognised and confessed is burned away. Cleansing rather than forgiveness is here emphasised. The latter is, of course, included, but the main point is the removal of impurity. It is mediated by one of the seraphim, who is the messenger of God, which is just a symbolical way of saying that God makes penitents 'partakers of His holiness,' and that nothing less than a divine communication will make cleansing possible. It is effected by a live coal. Fire is purifying, and the New Testament has taught us that the true cleansing fire is that of the Holy Spirit. But that live coal was taken from the altar. The atoning sacrifice has been offered there, and our cleansing depends on the efficacy of that sacrifice being applied to us.

The third stage in the prophet's experience is the readiness for service which springs up in his purged heart. God seeks for volunteers. There are no pressed men in His army. The previous experiences made Isaiah quick to hear God's call, and willing to respond to it by personal consecration. Take the motive-power of redemption from sin out of Christianity, and you break its mainspring, so that the clock will only tick when it is shaken. It is the Christ who died for our sins to whom men say, 'Command what Thou wilt, and I obey.'

III. The prophet's commission.-He was not sent on his work with any illusions as to its success, but, on the contrary, he had a clear premonition that its effect would be to deepen the spiritual deafness and blindness of the nation. We must remember that in Scripture the certain effect of divine acts is uniformly regarded as a divine design. Israel was so sunk in spiritual deadness that the issue of the prophet's work would only be to immerse the mass of 'this people' farther in it. To some more susceptible souls his message would be a true divine voice, rousing them like a trumpet, and that effect was what God desired; but to the greater number it would deepen their torpor and increase their condemnation. If men love darkness rather than light, the coming of the light works only judgment.

Isaiah recoils from the dreary prospect, and feels that this dreadful hardening cannot be God's ultimate purpose for the nation. So he humbly and wistfully asks how long it is to last. The answer is twofold, heavy with a weight of apparently utter ruin in its first part, but disclosing a faint, far-off gleam of hope on its second. Complete destruction, and the casting of Israel out from the land, are to come. But as, though a goodly tree is felled, a stump remains which has vital force [or *substance*] in it, so, even in the utmost apparent desperateness of Israel's state, there will be in it 'the holy seed,' the 'remnant,' the true Israel, from which again the life shall spring, and stem and branches and waving foliage once more grow up.

11)Isaiah 6:5

Isaiah

VISION AND SERVICE

THE MAKING OF A PROPHET

Isa. 6:5.

In previous pages we have seen how Isaiah's vision of Jehovah throned in the Temple, 'high and lifted up,' derived significance from the time of its occurrence. It was 'in the year that' the earthly King 'died' that the heavenly King was revealed. The passing of the transient prepared the way for the revelation of the Eternal, and the revelation of the Eternal more than compensated for the passing of the transient. But strengthening and calming as these thoughts are, they by no means exhaust the purpose of the vision, nor do they describe all its effects on the recipient. These were, first and immediately, the consciousness of unworthiness and sin, expressed in the words that I have taken for my text. Then came the touch of the 'live coal from the altar,' laid on the unclean lips by the seraph; and on that followed willing surrender for a perilous service.

These three stages flowing from the vision of God, recognition of sin, experience of purging, abandonment to obedience and service, must be repeated in us all, if we are to live worthy lives. There may be much that is beautiful and elevating and noble without these; but unless in some measure we pass through the prophet's experience, we shall fail to reach the highest possibilities of beauty and of service that open before us. So I wish to consider, very simply, these three stages in my remarks now.

I. If we see *God* we shall see our *sin*.

There came on the prophet, as in a flash, the two convictions, one which he learned from the song of the seraphs, ringing in music through the Temple, and one which rose up, like an answering note from the voice of conscience within. They sang ‘Holy! holy! holy! Lord God Almighty.’ And what was the response to that, in the prophet’s heart?-’I am unclean.’ Each major note has a corresponding minor, and the triumphant doxology of the seraph wakes in the hearer’s conscience the lowly confession of personal unlikeness to the holiness of God. It was not joy that sprang in Isaiah’s heart when he saw the throned King, and heard the proclamation of His name. It was not reverence merely that bowed his head in the dust, but it was the awakened consciousness, ‘Thou art holy; and now that I understand, in some measure, what Thy holiness means, I look on myself and I say, “unclean! unclean!”‘

The prophet’s confession assumes a form which may strike us as somewhat singular. Why is it that he speaks of ‘unclean lips,’ rather than of an unclean heart? I suppose partly because, in a very deep sense, a man’s words are more accurately a cast, as it were, from a man’s character than even his actions, and partly because the immediate occasion of his confession was the words of the seraphim, and he could not but contrast what came burning from their pure lips with what had trickled from, and soiled, his own.

But, however expressed, the consciousness of personal unlikeness to the holiness of God is the first result, and the instantaneous result, of any real apprehension of that holiness, and of any true vision of Him. Like some search-light flung from a ship over the darkling waters, revealing the dark doings of the enemy away out yonder in the night, the thought of God and His holiness streaming in upon a man’s soul, if it does so in any adequate measure, is sure to disclose the heaving waters and the skulking foes that are busy in the dark.

But it was not only the consciousness of sinfulness and antagonism that woke up instantaneously in response to that vision of the holy God. It was likewise a shrinking apprehension of personal evil from contact of God's light with Isaiah's darkness. 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.' What is to become, then, of the man that has neither the one nor the other? The experience of all the world witnesses that whenever there comes, in reality, or in a man's conceptions or fancy, the contact of the supernatural, as it is called, with the natural, there is a shrinking, a sense of eerieness, an apprehension of vague possibilities of evil. The sleeping snake that is coiled in every soul stirs and begins to heave in its bulk, and wake, when the thought of a holy God comes into the heart. Now, I do not suppose that consciousness of sin is the whole explanation of that universal human feeling, but I am very sure it is an element in it, and I suspect that if there were no sin, there would be no shrinking.

At all events, be that as it may, these are the two thoughts that, involuntarily and spontaneously and immediately, sprang in this man's heart when his purged eyes saw the King on His throne. He did not leap up with gladness at the vision. Its consolatory and its strengthening aspects were not the first that impinged upon his eye, or upon his consciousness, but the first thing was an instinctive recoil, 'Woe is me; I am undone.' Now, brethren, I venture to think that one main difference between shallow religion and real is to be found here, that the dim, far-off vision, if we may venture to call it so, which serves the most of us for a sight of God, leaves us quite complacent, and with very slight and superficial conceptions of our own evil, and that if once we saw, in so far as it is possible for humanity to-day to see, God as He is, and heard in the depths of our hearts that 'Holy! holy! holy!' from the burning seraphim, the easy-going, self-satisfied judgment of ourselves which too many of us cherish would be utterly impossible; and would disappear, shrivelled up utterly in the light of God. 'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear,' said Job, 'but now mine eye seeth Thee; therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.' A hearsay God and a self-complacent beholder-a God really seen, and a man down in the dust before Him! Has that vision ever blazed in on you? And if it has, has not the light shown you the seaminess of much in which a dimmer light detects no flaws or stains? Thank God if, having seen Him, you see yourselves. If you have not felt, 'I am unclean and undone,' depend upon it, your knowledge of God is faint and dim, and He is rather One heard of from the lips of others than realised in your own experience.

II. Again, note the second stage here, in the education of a soul for service-the sin, recognised and repented, is burned away.

‘Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar; and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo! this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.’

Now, I would notice as to this stage of the process, first, that Isaiah singularly passes beyond all the old ritual in which he had been brought up, and recognises another kind of cleansing than that which it embodied. He had got beyond the ritual to what the ritual meant. We have passed beyond the ritual, too, by another process; and, though I would by no means read full, plain, articulate Christian thought into the vision of Isaiah-which would be an anachronism, and unfaithful to the gradual historical development of the idea and means of redemption-yet I cannot help pointing to the fact that, even although this vision is located as seen in the Temple, there is not a single reference [except that passing allusion to the altar] to the ritual of the Temple, but the cleansing comes in another fashion altogether.

But far more important than that thought is the human condition that is required ere this cleansing can be realised. ‘I am a man of unclean lips.’ ‘I am undone!’ It was because that conviction and confession sprang in the prophet’s consciousness that the seraph winged his way with the purifying fire in his hands. Which being translated is just this: faith alone will not bring cleansing. There must go with it what we call, in our Christian phraseology, repentance, which is but the recognition of my own antagonism to the holiness of God, and the resolve to turn my back on my own past self. Now, it seems to me that a great deal of what is called, and in a sense is, Evangelical teaching, fails to represent the full counsel of God, in the matter of man’s redemption, because it puts a one-sided emphasis on faith, and slurs over the accompanying idea of repentance. And I am here to say that a trust in Jesus Christ, which is unaccompanied by a profound penitent consciousness and abhorrence of one’s own sins, and a resolve to turn away from them for the time to come, is not a faith which will bring either pardon or cleansing. We do not need to have less said about trust; we need to have a great deal more said about repentance. You have to learn what it is to say, 'I abhor myself'; you have to learn what it is to say, 'I will turn right round, and leave all that past behind me; and go in the opposite direction'; or the faith which you say you are exercising will neither save nor cleanse your souls nor your lives.

Again, note that we have here set forth most strikingly the other great truth that, side by side, and as closely synchronous as the flash and the peal, as soon as the consciousness of sin and the aversion from it spring in a man's heart, the seraph's wings are set in motion. Remember that beautiful old story in the historical books, of how the erring king, brought to sanity and repentance by Nathan's apologue, put all his acknowledgments in these words, 'I have sinned against the Lord'; and how the confession was not out of his lips, nor had died in its vibration in the atmosphere, before the prophet, with divine authority, replied with equal brevity and completeness, and as if the two sayings were parts of one sentence, '*And* the Lord hath made to pass the iniquity of thy sin.' That is all. Simultaneous are the two things. To confess is to be forgiven, and the moment that the consciousness of sin rises in the heart, that moment does the heavenly messenger come to still and soothe.

Still further, notice how the cleansing comes as a divine gift. It is purifying, much more than pardon, that is set forth in the symbolical incident before us. The seraph is the divine messenger, and he brings a coal from the altar, and lays that upon the prophet's lips, which is but the symbolical way of saying that the man who is conscious of his own evil will find in himself a blessed despair of being his own healer, and that he has to turn to the divine source, the vision of which has kindled the consciousness, to find there that which will take away the evil. The Lord is 'He that healeth us.'

But, further, the cleansing is by fire. By which, as I suppose, in the present context, and at Isaiah's stage of religious knowledge and experience, we are to understand that great thought that God burns away our sins, as you put a piece of foul clay into the fire, and the stain melts from the surface like a dissipating cloud as the heat finds its way into the substance. 'He will baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire'-a fire that quickens. A new impulse will be granted, which will become the life of the sinful man's life, and will emancipate him from the power of his own darkness and evil.

Now, let us remember that *we* have the fulness of all that was shadowed to the prophet in this vision, and that the reality of every one of these emblems is gathered together-if I may so say-not with confusion, but with abundance and opulence in Jesus Christ Himself. Is He not the seraph? Is He not Himself the burning coal? Is He not the altar from which it is taken? All that is needed to make the foulest clean is given in Christ's great work. Brethren, we shall never understand the deepest secret of Christ and of Christianity until we learn and hold fast by the conviction that the central work of Jesus is to deal with man's sin; and that whatever else Christianity is, it is first and foremost God's way of redeeming the world, and making it possible for the unholy to dwell with His holy self.

III. Lastly, and only a word, the third stage here is-the purged spirit is ready for service.

God did not bid the prophet go on His mission till the prophet had voluntarily accepted the mission. He said, 'Who will go for us?' He wants no pressed men in His army. He does not work with reluctant servants. There is, first, the yielding of the will, and then there is the enduement with the privilege of service. The prophet, having passed through the preceding experiences, had thereby received a quick ear to hear God's calling for volunteers. And we shall not hear Him asking 'Who will go?' unless we have, in our measure, passed through similar experiences. It will be a test of having done so, of our having been purged from our evil, if, when other people think that it is only Eli speaking, we know that it is the Lord that has called us, and say, 'Here am I.'

For such experiences as I have been describing do influence the will, and mould the heart, and make it a delight to do God's commandments, and to execute His purpose, and to be the ministers of His great Word. Some of us are willing to say that we have learned God's holiness; that we have seen and confessed our sins; that we have received pardon and cleansing. Have these experiences made you ready for any service? Have they made your will flexible-made you dethrone yourself, and enthrone the King whom the prophet saw? If they have, they are genuine; if they have not, they are not. Submission of will; glorying in being the instrument of the divine purpose; ears sharpened to catch His lowest whisper; eyes that, like those of a dog fixed on his master, watch for the faintest indication from his guiding eye-these are the infallible tests and signs of having had lips and heart touched with the live coal that burns away our uncleanness.

So, friends, would that I could flash upon every conscience that vision! But you can do so for yourselves. Let me beseech you to bring yourselves honestly into that solemn light of the character of God, and to ask yourselves, 'How can two walk together except they be agreed?' Do not put away such thoughts with any shallow, easy-going talk about how God is good and will not be hard upon a poor fellow that has tried to do his best. God is good; God is love. But divine goodness and love cannot find a way by which the unclean shall dwell with the clean. What then? This then-Jesus Christ has come. We may be made clean if we trust in Him, and forsake our sins. He will touch the heart and lips with the fire of His own Spirit, and then it will be possible to dwell with the everlasting burnings of that flaming fire which is a holy God. Blessed are they that have seen the vision; blessed they that have felt it disclosing their own sins; blessed they whose hearts have been purged. Blessed most of all they who, educated and trained through these experiences, have taken this as the motto of their lives, 'Here am I; send me.'

12)Isaiah 6:6-13

Isaiah

VISION AND SERVICE

Isa. 6:1 - Isa. 6:13.

WE may deal with this text as falling into three parts: the vision, its effect on the prophet, and his commission.

I. The Vision.-'In the year that King Uzziah died' is more than a date for chronological accuracy. It tells not only when, but why, the vision was given. The throne of David was empty.

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As to the substance of this vision, we need not discuss whether, if we had been there, we should have seen anything. It was doubtless related to Isaiah's thoughts, for God does not send visions which have no point of contact in the recipient. However communicated, it was a divine communication, and a temporary unveiling of an eternal reality. The form was transient, but Isaiah then saw for a moment 'the things which are' and always are.

The essential point of the vision is the revelation of Jehovah as king of Judah. That relation guaranteed defence and demanded obedience. It was a sure basis of hope, but also a stringent motive to loyalty, and it had its side of terror as well as of joyfulness. 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.' The place of vision is the heavenly sanctuary of which the temple was a prophecy. Eminently significant and characteristic of the whole genius of the Old Testament is the absence of any description of the divine appearance. The prophet saw things 'which it is not lawful for a man to utter,' and his silence is not only reverent, but more eloquent than any attempt to put the Ineffable into words. Even in this act of manifestation God was veiled, and '*there* was the hiding of His power.' The train of His robe can be spoken of, but not the form which it concealed even in revealing it. Nature is the robe of God. It hides while it discloses, and discloses while it hides.

The hovering seraphim were in the attitude of service. They are probably represented as fiery forms, but are spoken of nowhere else in Scripture. The significance of their attitude has been well given by Jewish commentators, who say, 'with two he covered his face that he might not see, and with two he covered his body that he might not be seen' and we may add, 'with two he stood ready for service, by flight whithersoever the King would send.' Such awe-stricken reverence, such humble hiding of self, such alacrity for swift obedience, such flaming ardours of love and devotion, should be ours. Their song celebrated the holiness and the glory of Jehovah of hosts. We must ever remember that the root-meaning of 'holiness' is separation, and that the popular meaning of moral purity is secondary and derivative. What is rapturously sung in the threefold invocation of the seraphs is the infinite exaltation of Jehovah above all creatural conditions, limitations, and, we may add, conceptions. That separation, of course, includes purity, as may be seen from the immediate effect of the vision on the prophet, but the conception is much wider than that. Very beautifully does the second line of the song re-knit the connection between Jehovah and this world, so far beneath Him, which the burst of praise of His holiness seems to sever. The high heaven is a bending arch; its inaccessible heights ray down sunshine and drop down rain, and, as in the physical world, every plant grows by Heaven's gift, so in the world of humanity all wisdom, goodness, and joy are from the Father of lights. God's 'glory' is the flashing lustre of His manifested holiness, which fills the earth as the train of the robe filled the temple. The vibrations of that mighty hymn shook the 'foundations of the threshold' [Rev. Ver.] with its thunderous harmonies. 'The house was filled with smoke' which, since it was an effect of the seraph's praise, is best explained as referring to the fragrant smoke of incense which, as we know, symbolised 'the prayers of saints.'

II. The effect of the vision on the prophet.-The vision kindled as with a flash Isaiah's consciousness of sin. He expressed it in regard to his words rather than his works, partly because in one aspect speech is even more accurately than act a cast, as it were, of character, and partly because he could not but feel the difference between the mighty music that burst from these pure and burning lips and the words that flowed from and soiled his own. Not only the consciousness of sin, but the dread of personal evil consequences from the vision of the holy God, oppressed his heart. We see ourselves when we see God. Once flash on a heart the thought of God's holiness, and, like an electric searchlight, it discloses flaws which pass unnoticed in dimmer light. The easy-going Christianity, which is the apology for religion with so many of us, has no deep sense of sin, because it has no clear vision of God. 'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear;

but now mine eye seeth Thee: wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.’

The next stage in Isaiah’s experience is that sin recognised and confessed is burned away. Cleansing rather than forgiveness is here emphasised. The latter is, of course, included, but the main point is the removal of impurity. It is mediated by one of the seraphim, who is the messenger of God, which is just a symbolical way of saying that God makes penitents ‘partakers of His holiness,’ and that nothing less than a divine communication will make cleansing possible. It is effected by a live coal. Fire is purifying, and the New Testament has taught us that the true cleansing fire is that of the Holy Spirit. But that live coal was taken from the altar. The atoning sacrifice has been offered there, and our cleansing depends on the efficacy of that sacrifice being applied to us.

The third stage in the prophet’s experience is the readiness for service which springs up in his purged heart. God seeks for volunteers. There are no pressed men in His army. The previous experiences made Isaiah quick to hear God’s call, and willing to respond to it by personal consecration. Take the motive-power of redemption from sin out of Christianity, and you break its mainspring, so that the clock will only tick when it is shaken. It is the Christ who died for our sins to whom men say, ‘Command what Thou wilt, and I obey.’

III. The prophet’s commission.-He was not sent on his work with any illusions as to its success, but, on the contrary, he had a clear premonition that its effect would be to deepen the spiritual deafness and blindness of the nation. We must remember that in Scripture the certain effect of divine acts is uniformly regarded as a divine design. Israel was so sunk in spiritual deadness that the issue of the prophet’s work would only be to immerse the mass of ‘this people’ farther in it. To some more susceptible souls his message would be a true divine voice, rousing them like a trumpet, and that effect was what God desired; but to the greater number it would deepen their torpor and increase their condemnation. If men love darkness rather than light, the coming of the light works only judgment.

Isaiah recoils from the dreary prospect, and feels that this dreadful hardening cannot be God’s ultimate purpose for the nation. So he humbly and wistfully asks how long it is to last. The answer is twofold, heavy with a weight of apparently utter ruin in its first part, but disclosing a faint, far-off gleam of hope on its second. Complete destruction, and the casting of Israel out from the land, are to come. But as, though a goodly tree is felled, a stump remains which has vital force [or *substance*] in it, so, even in the utmost apparent desperateness of Israel's state, there will be in it 'the holy seed,' the 'remnant,' the true Israel, from which again the life shall spring, and stem and branches and waving foliage once more grow up.

13)Isaiah 8:6-7

Isaiah

SHILOAH AND EUPHRATES

Isa. 8:6 - Isa. 8:7.

The kingdom of Judah was threatened with a great danger in an alliance between Israel and Damascus. The cowardly King Ahaz, instead of listening to Isaiah's strong assurances and relying on the help of God, made what he thought a master-stroke of policy in invoking the help of the formidable Assyrian power. That ambitious military monarchy was eager to find an excuse for meddling in the politics of Syria, and nothing loath, marched an army down on the backs of the invaders, which very soon compelled them to hasten to Judah in order to defend their own land. But, as is always the case, the help invoked was his ruin. Like all conquering powers, once having got its foot inside the door, Assyria soon followed bodily. First Damascus and Israel were ravaged and subdued, and then Judah. That kingdom only purchased the privilege of being devoured last. Like the Spaniards in Mexico, the Saxons in England, the English in a hundred Indian territories, the allies that came to help remained to conquer, and Judah fell, as we all know.

This is the simple original application of these words. They are a declaration that in seeking for help from others Judah was forsaking God, and that the helper would become ruler, and the ruler an oppressive tyrant.

The waters of Shiloah that go softly stand as an emblem of the Davidic monarchy as God meant it to be, and, since that monarchy was itself a prophecy, they therefore represent the kingdom of God or the Messianic King. The ‘waters strong and many’ are those of the Euphrates, which swells and overflows and carries havoc, and are taken as the emblem of the wasting sweep of the Assyrian king, whose capital stood on its banks.

But while thus there is a plain piece of political history in the words, they are also the statement of general principles which apply to every individual soul and its relations to the kingdom, the gentle kingdom, of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I. The Gentle Kingdom.

That little brooklet slipping quietly along; what a striking image of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ!

It suggests the character of the King, the ‘meek and lowly in heart.’ It suggests the manner of His rule as wielded in gentleness and exercising no compulsion but that of love. It suggests the blessed results of His reign under the image of the fertility, freshness, and beauty which spring up wherever ‘the river cometh.’ That kingdom we are all summoned to enter.

II. The Rejection of the Kingdom.

Strange and awful fact that men do turn away from it and Him.

In what does rejection consist?

In not trusting in His power to help and deliver.

In seeking help from other sources. This rejection is often unconscious on the part of men who are guilty of it.

III. The Allies who are preferred to the gentle King.

The crowd of worldly things.

What is to be noticed is that at first the preference seems to answer and be all right.

IV. The Allies becoming Tyrants.

The swift Euphrates in spate. That is what the rejecters have chosen for themselves. Better to have lived by Shiloah than to have built their houses by the side of such a raging stream. Mark how this is a divine retribution indeed, but a natural process too.

[a] If Christ does not rule us, a mob of tyrants will.

Our own passions. Our own evil habits. The fascinating sins around us.

[b] They soon cease to seem helpers, and become tyrants.

How quickly the pleasure of sin disappears-like some bird that loses its gay plumage as it grows old.

How stern becomes the necessity to obey; how great the difficulty of breaking off evil habits! So a man becomes the slave of his own lusts, of his indulged tastes, which rise above all restraints and carry away all before them, like the Euphrates in flood. Fertility is turned to barrenness; a foul deposit of mud overlays the soil; houses on the sand are washed away; corpses float on the tawny wave. The soul that rejects Christ’s gentle sway is harried and laid waste by a mob of base-born tyrants. We have to make our choice-either Christ or these; either a service which is freedom, or an apparent freedom which is slavery; either a worship which exalts, or a worship which embrutes. ‘If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.’

‘There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God.’ It is peaceful to pitch our tents beside its calm flow, whereon shall go no hostile fleets, and whence we shall but pass to the city above, in the midst of the street whereof the ‘river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeds out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.’

14)Isaiah 9:2-7

THE KINGDOM AND THE KING

Isa. 9:2 - Isa. 9:7.

The darker the cloud, the brighter is the rainbow. This prophecy has for its historical background the calamitous reign of the weak and wicked Ahaz, during which the heart of the nation was bowed, like a forest before the blast, by the dread of foreign invasion and conquest. The prophet predicts a day of gloom and anguish, and then, out of the midst of his threatenings, bursts this glorious vision, sudden as sunrise. With consummate poetic art, the consequences of Messiah's rule are set forth before He Himself is brought into view.

I. Image is heaped on image to tell the blessedness of that reign [Isa. 9:2 - Isa. 9:5]. Each trait of the glowing description is appropriate to the condition of Israel under Ahaz; but each has a meaning far beyond that limited application. Isaiah may, or may not, have been aware of 'what' or 'what time' his words portrayed in their deepest, that is, their true meaning, but if we believe in supernatural prediction which, though it may have found its point of attachment in the circumstances of the present, was none the less the voice of the Spirit of God, we shall not make, as is often done now, the prophet's construction of his words the rule for their interpretation. What the prophecy was discerned to point to by its utterer or his contemporaries, is one thing; quite another is what God meant by it.

First we have the picture of the nation groping in a darkness that might be felt, the emblem of ignorance, sin, and sorrow, and inhabiting a land over which, like a pall, death cast its shadow. On that dismal gloom shines all at once a 'great light,' the emblem of knowledge, purity, and joy. The daily mercy of the dawn has a gospel in it to a heart that believes in God; for it proclaims the divine will that all who sit in darkness shall be enlightened, and that every night but prepares the way for the freshness and stir of a new morning. The great prophecy of these verses in its indefiniteness goes far beyond its immediate occasion in the state of Judah under Ahaz. As surely as the dawn floods all lands, so surely shall all who walk in darkness see the great light; and wherever is a ‘land of the shadow of death,’ there shall the light shine. It is ‘the light of the world.’

Isa. 9:3 gives another phase of blessing. Israel is conceived of as dwindled in number by deportation and war. But the process of depopulation is arrested and reversed, and numerical increase, which is always a prominent feature in Messianic predictions, is predicted. That increase follows the dawning of the light, for men will flock to the ‘brightness of its rising.’ *We* know that the increase comes from the attractive power of the Cross, drawing men of many tongues to it; and we have a right to bring the interpretation, which the world’s history gives, into our understanding of the prophecy. That enlarged nation is to have abounding joy.

Undoubtedly, the rendering ‘To it thou hast increased the joy’ is correct, as that of the Authorized Version [based upon the Hebrew text] is clearly one of several cases in which the partial similarity in spelling and identity in sound of the Hebrew words for ‘not’ and ‘to it,’ have led to a mistaken reading. The joy is described in words which dance and sing, like the gladness of which they tell. The mirth of the harvest-field, when labour is crowned with success, and the sterner joy of the victors as they part the booty, with which mingles the consciousness of foes overcome and dangers averted, are blended in this gladness. We have the joy of reaping a harvest of which we have not sowed the seed. Christ has done that; we have but to enjoy the results of His toil. We have to divide the spoil of a victory which we have not won. He has bound the strong man, and we share the benefits of His overcoming the world.

That last image of conquerors dividing the spoil leads naturally to the picture in Isa. 9:4 of emancipation from bondage, as the result of a victory like Gideon’s with his handful. Who the Gideon of this new triumph is, the prophet will not yet say. The ‘yoke of his burden’ and ‘the rod of his oppressor’ recall Egypt and the taskmasters.

Isa. 9:5 gives the reason for the deliverance of the slaves; namely, the utter destruction of the armour and weapons of their enemy. The Revised Version is right in its rendering, though it may be doubtful whether its margin is not better than its text, since not only are ‘boot’ and ‘booted’ as probable renderings of the doubtful words as ‘armour’ and ‘armed man,’ but the picture of the warrior striding into battle with his heavy boots is more graphic than the more generalised description in the Revised Version's text. In any case, the whole accoutrements of the oppressor are heaped into a pile and set on fire; and, as they blaze up, the freed slaves exult in their liberty. The blood-drenched cloaks have been stripped from the corpses and tossed on the heap, and, saturated as they are, they burn. So complete is the victory that even the weapons of the conquered are destroyed. Our conquering King has been manifested, that He might annihilate the powers by which evil holds us bound. His victory is not by halves. 'He taketh from him all his armour wherein he trusted.'

II. Now we are ready to ask, And who is to do all this? The guarantee for its accomplishment is the person of the conquering Messiah. The hopes of Israel did not, and those of the world do not, rest on tendencies, principles, laws of progress, advance of civilisation, or the like abstractions or impersonalities, but on a living Person, in whom all principles which make for righteousness and blessedness for individuals and communities are incarnated, and whose vital action works perpetually in mankind.

In this prophecy the prophet is plainly speaking greater things than he knew. We do not get to the meaning if we only ask ourselves what did he understand by his words, or what did his hearers gather from them? They and he would gather the certainty of the coming of Messiah with wondrous attributes of power and divine gifts, by whose reign light, gladness, liberty would belong to the oppressed nation. But the depth of the prophecy needed the history of the Incarnation for its disclosure. If this is not a God-given prediction of the entrance into human form of the divine, it is something very like miraculous that, somehow or other, words should have been spoken, without any such reference, which fit so closely to the supernatural fact of Christ's incarnation.

The many attempts to translate Isa. 9:6 so as to get rid of the application of 'Mighty God,' 'Everlasting Father,' to Messiah, cannot here be enumerated or adequately discussed. I must be content with pointing out the significance of the august fourfold name of the victor King. It seems best to take the two first titles as a compound name, and so to recognise four such compounds.

There is a certain connection between the first and second of these which respectively lay stress on wisdom of plan and victorious energy of accomplishment, while the third and fourth are also connected, in that the former gathers into one great and tender name what Messiah is to His people, and the latter points to the character of His dominion throughout the whole earth. ‘A wonder of a counsellor,’ as the words may be rendered, not only suggests His giving wholesome direction to His people, but, still more, the mystery of the wisdom which guides His plans. Truly, Jesus purposes wonders in the depth of His redeeming design. He intends to do great things, and to reach them by a road which none would have imagined. The counsel to save a world, and that by dying for it, is the miracle of miracles. ‘Who hath been His counsellor in that overwhelming wonder?’ He needs no teacher; He is Himself the teacher of all truth. All may have His direction, and they who follow it will not walk in darkness.

‘The mighty God.’ Isa. 10:21 absolutely forbids taking this as anything lower than the divine name. The prophet conceives of Messiah as the earthly representative of divinity, as having God with and in Him as no other man has. We are not to force upon the prophet the full new Testament doctrine of the oneness of the incarnate Word with the Father, which would be an anachronism. But we are not to fall into the opposite error, and refuse to see in these words, so startling from the lips of a rigid monotheist, a real prophecy of a divine Messiah, dimly as the utterer may have perceived the figure which he painted. Note, too, that the word ‘mighty’ implies victorious energy in battle. It is often applied to human heroes, and here carries warlike connotations, kindred with the previous picture of conflict and victory. Thus strength as of God, and, in some profound way, strength which is divine, will be the hand obeying the brain that counsels wonder, and all His plans shall be effected by it.

But these are not all His qualities. He is ‘the Father of Eternity’-a name in which tender care and immortal life are marvellously blended. This King will be in reality what, in old days, monarchs often called themselves and seldom were,-the Father of His people, with all the attributes of that sacred name, such as guidance, love, providing for His children’s wants. Nor can Christians forget that Jesus is the source of life to them, and that the name has thus a deeper meaning. Further, He is possessed of eternity. If He is so closely related to God as the former name implies, that predicate is not wonderful. Dying men need and have an undying Christ. He is ‘the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.’

The whole series of names culminates in ‘the Prince of Peace,’ which He is by virtue of the characteristics expressed in the foregoing names. The name pierces to the heart of Christ’s work. For the individual He brings peace with God, peace in the else discordant inner nature, peace amid storms of calamity-the peace of submission, of fellowship with God, of self-control, of received forgiveness and sanctifying. For nations and civic communities He brings peace which will one day hush the tumult of war, and burn chariots and all warlike implements in the fire. The vision tarries, because Christ’s followers have not been true to their Master’s mission, but it comes, though its march is slow. We can hasten its arrival.

Isa. 9:7 - Isa. 9:8 declare the perpetuity of Messiah’s kingdom, His Davidic descent, and those characteristics of His reign, which guarantee its perpetuity. ‘Judgment’ which He exercises, and ‘righteousness’ which He both exercises and bestows, are the pillars on which His throne stands; and these are eternal, and it never will totter nor sink, as earthly thrones must do. The very life-blood of prophecy, as of religion, is the conviction that righteousness outlasts sin, and will survive ‘the wreck of matter and the crash of worlds.’

The great guarantee for these glowing anticipations is that the ‘zeal of the Lord of hosts’ will accomplish them. *Zeal*, or rather *jealousy*, is love stirred to action by opposition. It tolerates no unfaithfulness in the object of its love, and flames up against all antagonism to the object. ‘He that toucheth you, toucheth the apple of Mine eye.’ So the subjects of that Messiah may be sure that a wall of fire is round about them, which to foes without is terror and destruction, and to dwellers within its circuit glows with lambent light, and rays out beneficent warmth.

15)Isaiah 10:17

LIGHT OR FIRE?

Isa. 10:17.

With grand poetry the prophet pictures the Assyrian power as a forest consumed like thistles and briers by the fire of God. The text suggests solemn truths about the divine Nature and its manifestations.

I. The Essential Character of God.

Light and Holiness are substantially parallel. Light symbolises purity, but also knowledge and joy. Holiness is Separation from Creatures, but chiefly from their Evils.

II. The Different Attitudes which Men assume to that Character.

‘Light of *Israel*’: ‘*His* Holy One.’

God becomes ours, and we have an interest in that radiant Personality if we choose to claim it by faith, love, and obedience. We are free to accept God as ours or to reject Him.

III. The Opposite Aspects which that Character accordingly assumes.

> [a] The self-same divine Character has two effects according to the character of the beholder.

To those who respond to God’s love it is-heaven. To those who are indifferent or alienated it may be pain, and will harm them if they see it and do not yield to it.

God’s holiness is not retributive justice but moral perfectness, which to a good man will be joy, and to a bad man, intolerable.

The light which is gladsome to a healthy eye is agony to a diseased one.

> [b] All the manifestations and operations of that divine Character have a twofold aspect. Christ is either a stone of stumbling or a sure foundation. Men are either the better or the worse for Him. The Gospel

> is the savour of life unto life or of death unto death. The tremendous ‘either-or.’ The Cross rejected harms the moral nature, hardens conscience, deepens condemnation.

All divine operations are necessarily on the side of God’s lovers and against those who love Him not. They are contrary to Him, therefore He is so to them. ‘With the froward Thou wilt show Thyself froward.’

The final Judgment will be either rapture or despair, like the coming of a bridegroom, or the fiery rain that burnt up Sodom.

The very dew of Heavenly Bliss would be corroding poison to a godless spirit.

16)Isaiah 11:1-10

Isaiah

THE SUCKER FROM THE FELLED OAK

Isa. 11:1 - Isa. 11:10.

The hopeless fall of Assyria is magnificently pictured in the close of Isa. 10:1 - Isa. 10:16, as the felling of the cedars of Lebanon by the axe swung by Jehovah’s own hand. A cedar once cut down puts out no new shoots; and so the Assyrian power, when it falls, will fall for ever. The metaphor is carried on with surpassing beauty in the first part of this prophecy, which contrasts the indestructible vitality of the Davidic monarchy with the irremediable destruction fated for its formidable antagonist. The one is a cedar, the stump of which rots slowly, but never recovers. The other is an oak, which, every woodman knows, will put out new growth from the ‘stool.’ But instead of a crowd of little suckers, the prophet sees but one shoot, and that rising to more than the original height and fruitfulness of the tree. The prophecy is distinctly that of One Person, in whom the Davidic monarchy is concentrated, and all its decadence more than recovered.

Isaiah does not bring the rise of the Messiah into chronological connection with the fall of Assyria; for he contemplates a period of decay for the

Israelitish monarchy, and it was the very burden of his message as to Assyria that it should pass away without harming that monarchy. The contrast is not intended to suggest continuity in time. The period of fulfilment is entirely undetermined.

The first point in the prophecy is the descent of the Messiah from the royal stock. That is more than Isaiah's previous Messianic prophecies had told. He is to come at a time when the fortunes of David's house were at their worst. There is to be nothing left but the stump of the tree, and out of it is to come a 'shoot,' slender and insignificant, and in strange contrast with the girth of the truncated bole, stately even in its mutilation. We do not talk of a growth from the stump as being a 'branch'; and 'sprout' would better convey Isaiah's meaning. From the top of the stump, a shoot; from the roots half buried in the ground, an outgrowth,-these two images mean but one person, a descendant of David, coming at a time of humiliation and obscurity. But this lowly shoot will 'bear fruit,' which presupposes its growth.

The King-Messiah thus brought on the scene is then described in regard to His character [Isa. 11:2], the nature of His rule [Isa. 11:3 - Isa. 11:5], the universal harmony and peace which He will diffuse through nature [Isa. 11:6 - Isa. 11:9], and the gathering of all mankind under His dominion. There is much in the prophetic ideal of the Messiah which finds no place in this prophecy. The gentler aspects of His reign are not here, nor the deeper characteristics of His 'spirit,' nor the chiefest blessings in His gift. The suffering Messiah is not yet the theme of the prophet.

The main point as to the character of the Messiah which this prophecy sets forth is that, whatever He was to be, He was to be by reason of the resting on Him of the Spirit of Jehovah. The directness, fulness, and continuousness of His inspiration are emphatically proclaimed in that word 'shall rest,' which can scarcely fail to recall John's witness, 'I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven; and it abode upon Him.' The humanity on which the Divine Spirit uninterruptedly abides, ungrieved and unrestrained, must be free from the stains which so often drive that heavenly visitant from our breasts. The white-breasted Dove of God cannot brood over foulness. There has never been but one manhood capable of receiving and retaining the whole fulness of the Spirit of God.

The gifts of that Spirit, which become qualities of the Messiah in whom He dwells, are arranged [if we may use so cold a word] in three pairs; so that, if we include the introductory designation, we have a sevenfold characterisation of the Spirit, recalling the seven lamps before the throne and the seven eyes of the Lamb in the Apocalypse, and symbolising by the number the completeness and sacredness of that inspiration. The resulting character of the Messiah is a fair picture of one who realises the very ideal of a strong and righteous ruler of men. ‘Wisdom and understanding’ refer mainly to the clearness of intellectual and moral insight; ‘counsel and might,’ to the qualities which give sound practical direction and vigour to follow, and carry through, the decisions of practical wisdom; while ‘the knowledge and fear of the Lord’ define religion by its two parts of acquaintance with God founded on love, and reverential awe which prompts to obedience. The fulfilment, and far more than fulfilment, of this ideal is in Jesus, in whom were ‘hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,’ to whom no circumstances of difficulty ever brought the shadow of perplexity, who always saw clearly before Him the path to tread, and had always ‘might’ to tread it, however rough, who lived all His days in unbroken fellowship with the Father and in lowly obedience.

The prophet saw not all the wonders of perfect human character which that indwelling Spirit would bring to realisation in Him; but what he saw was indispensable to a perfect King, and was, at all events, an arc of the mighty circle of perfection, which has now been revealed in the life of Jesus. The possibilities of humanity under the influence of the Divine Spirit are revealed here no less than the actuality of the Messiah’s character. What Jesus is, He gives it to His subjects to become by the dwelling in them of the spirit of life which was in Him.

The rule of the King is accordant with His character. It is described in Isa. 11:3 - Isa. 11:5. The first characteristic named may be understood in different ways. According to some commentators, who deserve respectful consideration, it means, ‘He shall draw His breath in the fear of Jehovah’; that is, that that fear has become, as it were, His very life-breath. But the meaning of ‘breathing’ is doubtful; and the phrase seems rather to express, as the Revised Version puts it, ‘His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.’ That might mean that those who fear Jehovah shall be His delight, and this would free the expression from any shade of tautology, when compared with the previous clause, and would afford a natural transition to the description of His rule. It might, on the other hand, continue the description of His personal character, and describe the inward cheerfulness of His obedience, like ‘I delight to do Thy will.’ In any case, the ‘fear of the Lord’ is represented as a sweet-smelling fragrance; and, if we adopt the former explanation, then it is almost a divine characteristic which is here attributed to the Messiah; for it is God to whom the fear of Him in men’s hearts is ‘an odour of a sweet smell.’

Then follow the features of His rule. His unerring judgment pierces through the seen and heard. That is the quality of a monarch after the antique pattern, when kings were judges. It does not appear that the prophet rose to the height of perceiving the divine nature of the Messiah; but we cannot but remember how far the reality transcends the prophecy, since He whose ‘eyes are as a flame of fire’ knows what is in man, and the earliest prayers of the Church were addressed to Jesus as ‘Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men.’

The relation of Messiah to two classes is next set forth. The oppressed and the meek shall have Him for their defender and avenger,-a striking contrast to the oppressive monarchs whom Isaiah had seen. We remember who said ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit,’ ‘Blessed are the meek.’ The King Himself has taught us to deepen the meaning of the words of the prophet, and to find in them the expression of the law of His kingdom by which its blessings belong to those who know their need and come with humble hearts. But the same acts which are for the poor are against the oppressors. The emendation which reads ‘tyrant’ [*arits*] for ‘earth’ [*erets*] brings the two clauses descriptive of the punitive acts into parallelism, and is probably to be preferred. The same pillar was light to Israel and darkness to the Egyptians. Christ is the savour of life unto life and of death unto death. But what is His instrument of destruction? ‘The rod of His mouth’ or ‘the breath of His lips.’ And who is He whose bare word thus has power to kill and make alive? Is not this a divine prerogative? and does it not belong in the fullest sense to Him whose voice rebuked fevers, storms, and demons, and pierced the dull, cold ear of death? Further, righteousness, the absolute conformity of character and act to the standard in the will of God, and faithfulness, the inflexible constancy, which makes a character consistent with itself, and so reliable, are represented by a striking figure as being twined together to make the girdle, which holds the vestments in place, and girds up the whole frame for effort. This righteous King 'shall not fail nor be discouraged.' He is to be reckoned on to the uttermost, or, as the New Testament puts it, He is 'the faithful and true witness.' This is the strong Son of God, who gathered all His powers together to run with patience the race set before Him, and to whom all may turn with the confidence that He is faithful 'as a Son over His own house,' and will inviolably keep the promise of His word and of His past acts.

We pass from the picture of the character and rule of the King over men to that fair vision of Paradise regained, which celebrates the universal restoration of peace between man and the animals. The picture is not to be taken as a mere allegory, as if 'lions' and 'wolves' and 'snakes' meant bad men; but it falls into line with other hints in Scripture, which trace the hostility between man and the lower creatures to sin, and shadow a future when 'the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.' The psalm which sings of man's dominion over the creatures is to be one day fulfilled; and the Epistle to the Hebrews teaches that it is already fulfilled in Christ, who will raise His brethren, for whom He tasted death, to partake in His dominion. The present order of things is transient; and if earth is to be, as some shadowy hints seem to suggest, the scene of the future glories of redeemed humanity, it may be the theatre of a fulfilment of such visions as this. But we cannot dogmatise on a subject of which we know so little, nor be sure of the extent to which symbolism enters into this sweet picture. Enough that there surely comes a time when the King of men and Lord of nature shall bring back peace between both, and restore 'the fair music that all creatures made To their great Lord.'

Isa. 11:10 begins an entirely new section, which describes the relations of Messiah's kingdom to the surrounding peoples. The picture preceding closed with the vision of the earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord, and this verse proclaims the universality of Messiah's kingdom. By 'the root of Jesse’ is meant, not the root from which Jesse sprang, but, in accordance with Isa. 11:1, the sprout from the house of Jesse. Just as in that verse the sprout was prophesied of as growing up to be fruitbearing, so here the lowly sucker shoots to a height which makes it conspicuous from afar, and becomes, like some tall mast, a sign for the nations. The contrast between the obscure beginning and the conspicuous destiny of Messiah is the point of the prophecy. ‘I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.’ Strange elevation for a king is a cross! But it is because He has died for men that He has the right to reign over them, and that they ‘shall seek’ to Him. ‘His resting-place shall be glorious.’

The seat of His dominion is also the seat of His repose. The beneficent activity just described is wielded from a calm, central palace, and does not break the King’s tranquillity. That is a paradox, except to those who know that Jesus Christ, sitting in undisturbed rest at the right hand of God, thence works with and for His servants. His repose is full of active energy; His active energy is full of repose. And that place of calm abode is ‘glorious’ or, more emphatically and literally, ‘glory. He shall dwell in the blaze of the uncreated glory of God,-a prediction which is only fulfilled in its true meaning by Christ’s ascension and session at the right hand of God, in the glory which He had with the Father before the world was, and into which He has borne that lowly manhood which He drew from the cut-down stem of Jesse.

17)Isaiah 12:3

Isaiah

THE WELL-SPRING OF SALVATION

Isa. 12:3.

There are two events separated from each other by more than fifteen hundred years which have a bearing upon this prophecy: the one supplied the occasion for its utterance, the other claimed to be its interpretation and its fulfilment. The first of these is that scene familiar to us all, where the Israelites in the wilderness murmured for want of water, and the law-giver, being at his wits' end what to do with his troublesome charges, took his anxieties to God, and got for an answer the command to take with him the elders of Israel and his miracle-working rod, and to go to the rock, 'and the Lord shall stand upon the rock before thee and them, and the water shall flow forth.' It was not the rock, nor the rod, nor Moses and the elders, but the presence of God that brought the refreshing draught. And that that incident was in Isaiah's mind when he wrote our text is very clear to anybody who will observe that it occurs in the middle of a song of praise, which corresponds to the Israelites' song at the Red Sea after the destruction of Pharaoh, and is part of a great prophecy in which he describes God's future blessings and mercies under images constantly drawn from the Egyptian bondage and the Exodus in the desert. Now, that interpretation, or rather that application, of the words of my text, was very familiar to the Jews long, long before the New Testament was thought about. For, as many of you will know, there came in the course of time a number of ceremonies to be added to a feast established by Moses himself-the Feast of Tabernacles. That was a feast in which the whole body of the Israelitish people dwelt for a week in leafy booths, in order to remind them of the time when they were wanderers in the wilderness; and as is usually the case, the ritual of the celebration developed a number of additional symbolical observances which were tacked on to it in the course of centuries. Amongst these there was this very memorable one: that on each of the days of the Feast of Tabernacles, at a given point in the ceremonial, the priests went from the temple, winding down the rocky path on the temple mountain, to the Pool of Siloam in the valley below, and there in their golden vases they drew the cool sparkling water, which they bore up, and amidst the blare of trumpets and the clash of cymbals poured it on the altar, whilst the people chanted the words of my text, 'With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.'

That ceremonial had been going on for eight hundred years from Isaiah's time; and once more the period came round when it was to be performed; and on the seven days of the feast, punctually at the appointed time, the procession wound down the rocky slopes, drew the water in the golden vases, bore it up to the temple, and poured it upon the altar; and on the last great day of the feast, the same ceremonial went on up to a given point; and just as the last rites of the chant of our text were dying on the ears, there was a little stir amidst the crowd, which parted to make way for him, and a youngish man, of mean appearance and rustic dress, stepped forward, and there, before all the gathered multitudes and the priests standing with their empty urns, symbol of the impotence of their system, 'on the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' Brethren, such a commentary, at such a time, from such a commentator, may well absolve me from the necessity of enforcing the evangelistic bearing of the words of my text. And so, then, with that understanding of the deepest meaning of these words that we have to look at, I ask you to take them in the simplest possible way, and to consider three points: the Well of Salvation, the Act of Drawing the Water, the Gladness of those that draw. 'With *joy* shall *ye* draw water out of the fountains of salvation.'

Now, with regard to the first point, let me remind you to begin with, that the idea of the word here is not that which we attach to a well, but that which we attach to a spring. It does not describe the source of salvation as being a mere reservoir, still less as being a created or manufactured thing; but there lies in it the deep idea of a source from which the water wells up by its own inward energy. Then, when we have got that explanation, and the deep, full, pregnant meaning of the word salvation as a thing past, a thing present, a thing future, a thing which negatively delivers a man from all sin and sorrow, and a thing which positively endows a man with beauty, happiness, and holiness-when we have got that, then the question next cries aloud for answer-this well-spring of salvation, is-what? Who? And the first answer and the last answer is GOD-GOD HIMSELF. It is no mere bit of drapery of the prophet's imagery, this well-spring of salvation; it is something much more substantial, much deeper than that. You remember the old psalm, 'With Thee is the fountain of life: in Thy light shall we see light'; and what David and John after him called life, Isaiah and Paul after him calls salvation. And you remember too, no doubt, the indictment of another of the prophets, laying hold of the same metaphor in order to point to the folly and the suicide of all godless living: 'My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and they have hewn out for themselves broken cisterns.' They were manufactured articles, and because they were made they could be cracked, but the fountain, because it rises by its own inherent energy, springing up into everlasting life, is all-sufficient. God Himself is the well-spring of salvation.

If I had time to enlarge upon this idea, I might remind you how nobly and blessedly that principle is confirmed when we think of this great salvation, past, present, and future, negative and positive, all-sufficient and complete, as having its origin in His deep nature, as having its process in His own finished work, and as being in its essence the communication of Himself. That last thing I should like to say a word or two about. If there is a man or a woman that thinks of salvation as if it were merely a shutting up of some material hell, or the dodging round a corner so as to escape some external consequence of transgression, let him and her hear this: the possession of God is salvation, that and nothing else. To have Him within me, that is to be saved; to have His life in His dear Son made the foundation of my life, to have my whole being penetrated and filled with God, that is the essence of the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. And because it comes unmotived, uncaused, self-originated, springing up from the depths of His own heart; because it is all effected by His own mighty work who has trodden the winepress alone, and, single-handed, has wrought the salvation of the race; and because its essence and heart is the communication of God Himself, and the bestowing upon us the participation in a divine nature, therefore the depth of the thought, *God Himself* is the well-fountain of salvation.

But there is still another step to take. If these things which I have only just been able to glance at in the most superficial, and perhaps, therefore, confused manner, in any measure commend themselves to your judgments and your consciences, let me ask you to go with me one step further, and to figure to yourselves the significance and the strangeness of that moment to which I have already referred, when a man stood up in the temple court, and, with distinct allusion to the whole of the multitude of Old Testament sayings, in which God and the communication of God’s own energy were represented as being the fountain of salvation and the salvation from the fountain, and said, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me.’ Why, what a thing-let us put it into plain, vulgar English-what a thing for a man to say-’If any man thirst.’ Who art Thou that dost thus plant Thyself opposite the race, sure that Thou hast no needs like them, but, contrariwise, canst refresh and satiate the thirsty lips of them all? Who art Thou that dost proclaim Thyself as sufficient for the fruition of the mind that yearns for truth and thirsts for certitude, of the parched heart that wearies and cracks for want of love, of the will that longs to be rightly and lovingly commanded? Oh, dear brethren, not only the Titanic presumption of proposing oneself as enough for a single soul, but the inconceivable madness of proposing oneself as enough for all the race in all generations to the end of time, except on one hypothesis, marks this utterance of Him who has also said, 'I am meek and lowly of heart.' Strange lowliness! singular meekness! Who was He? Who is this that steps into the place that only a God can fill, and says, 'I can do it all. If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink'?

Dear brethren, some of us can, thank God, answer that question as I pray that every one of you may be able to answer it, 'Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ; Thou art the everlasting son of the Father. With Thee is the fountain of life; Thou Thyself art the living water.'

But I think there is a still further step to be taken. It is not only that our Lord Jesus Christ, in His nature, in His person, is the communicator of the divine life to man, just as-if you will let me take such a metaphor-just as up in the hills sometimes you will find some little tarn or loch all shut in; but having trickling from it a thread of limpid life, and, wherever it flows, the water of the loch goes; only, the one is lake and the other is river, and the latter is the medium of communication of the former to the thirsty pastures of the wilderness. And not only so, but-if I might venture to build upon a word of the context-there seems to be another consideration there. The words which precede my text are a quotation from a song of the Israelites in their former Exodus: 'The Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; He also is become my salvation.' Now, if our Bible has been correct-and I do not enter upon that question-in emphasising the difference between *is* and *is become*, mark where it takes us. It takes us to this, that there was some single, definite, historical act wherein God *became* in an eminent manner and in reality what He had always been in purpose, intent, and idea. Then that to which my text originally alludes, to which it looks back, is the great deliverance wrought by the banks of the Red Sea. It was because Pharaoh and his hosts were drowned in it that Miriam and her musical sisters, with their timbrel and dance, not only said, 'The Lord is my strength,' but 'He *has become* my strength'-there where the corpses are floating yet. What answers to that in the matter with which we are concerned? Brethren, it is not enough to say that God is the fountain of salvation, it is not enough to say that the Incarnate Christ is the medium of salvation. Will you take the other step with us, and say that the Cross of Christ is the realisation of the divine intention of salvation? Then He, who from everlasting was the strength and song of all the strong and the songful, *is become* the salvation of all the lost, and the fountain is 'opened for sin and for uncleanness.' A definite, historical act, the manifestation of Jesus Christ, is the bringing to man of the salvation of God. So much, then, for that first point to which I desired to ask your attention.

And now let me say a word or two as to the second. I wish to speak about this process of drawing from the fountain. That metaphor, without any further explanation, might very naturally suggest more idea of human effort than in reality belongs to it. Men have said: 'Yes; no doubt God is the fountain of salvation; no doubt Christ is the river of salvation; no doubt His death is the opening of the fountain for sin and for uncleanness; but how am I to bring myself into contact and connection with it?' And there have been all sorts of answers. Every kind of pump has been resorted to. Go up to the Agricultural Hall and you will see no end of contrivances for bringing water to the surface. There are not so many there as men have found out for themselves to bring the water of salvation to their lips, and the effect has always been the same. There has been something wrong with the valves; the pump has not worked properly; there has been something wrong with the crank; the pipe has not gone down to the water; and there has been nothing but a great jingling of empty buckets, and aching and wearied elbows, and what the woman said to Christ has been true all round, 'Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep.' Ay! thank God, it *is* deep; and if we let our Lord be His own interpreter, we have only to put together three sayings of His in order to come to the true meaning of this metaphor. My text says, 'With joy ye shall draw water'; and Christ, sitting at the well of Samaria-what a strange combination of the weakness and the weariness of manhood and the strength and self-consciousness of Divinity was there!-wearied with His journey, said, 'If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give Me to drink, thou wouldest have asked of Him and

He would have given thee living water.’ So, then, drawing is asking. That is step number one.

Take another word of the Master’s that I have already quoted for other purposes, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.’ So, then, drawing, or asking, or coming are all equivalent. That is step number two.

And, then, take another word. ‘He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst.’ So, then, drawing, asking, coming, all melt into the one simple word-believing. Trust in Him, and thou hast come, thou hast asked, thou hast drawn, thou dost possess.

But whilst I would lay the foundation thus broad, thus simple, do not forget, dear brethren, what I was saying about a definite historical act. You will hear people say, ‘Oh, I trust in Christ!’ What do you trust in Christ? You will hear people say, ‘Oh, I look to the goodness of God.’ Be it so. God forbid I should say a word to prevent that; but what I would insist upon is that a mere vague regard to a vague Christ is not the faith that is equivalent to drawing from the fountain of salvation. There must be a further object in a faith that saves. It must lay hold of the definite historical act in which Christ has become the salvation of the world.

Do not take it upon my words, take it upon His own. He once said to His fellow-countrymen in His lifetime, ‘I am the living bread’; and many of our modern teachers would go that length heartily. Was that where Christ stopped? By no means. Was His Gospel a gospel of incarnation only? Certainly not. ‘I am the living bread that came down from heaven.’ Anything more? Yes; this more, ‘and the bread which I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. He that eateth Me he shall live by Me.’ ‘Well,’ say some people, ‘that means following His example, accepting His teaching, being loyal to His Person, absorbing His Spirit.’ Yes, it means all that; but is that all it means? Take His own commentary: ‘He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood, hath eternal life.’ Yes, brethren, a Christ incarnate, blessed be God! A Christ crucified, blessed be God! And not the one but *both* must be the basis of our faith and our hope.

Now, will you let me say one thing about this matter of drawing the water? It is an act of faith in a whole Jesus, and eminently in the mighty act and sacrifice of His Cross. But to go back again to the context: 'He also is become *my* salvation. 'That is what I desire, God helping me, to lay on the hearts of all my hearers-that a definite act of faith in Christ crucified is not enough unless it is a personal act, unless it is what our old Puritan forefathers used to call 'appropriating faith.' Never mind about the somewhat dry and technical phraseology; the thing is what I insist upon-'*my* salvation.' O brother! what does it matter though all Niagara were roaring past your door; you might die of thirst all the same unless you put your own lips to it. Down on your knees like Gideon's men; it is safest there; that is the only attitude in which a man can drink of this fountain. Down on your knees and put your lips to it-your very own lips-and drink for your own soul's salvation. Christ died for the world. Yes; but the world for which Christ died is made up of individuals who were in His heart. It is Paul's words that I would beseech you to make your own: 'The Son of God, who loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*.' Every one of you is entitled to say that, if you will. You remember that verse filled with adoring contemplation that we sometimes sing, one word in which seems to me to be coloured by the too sombre doctrine of the epoch from which it came:-

'My soul looks back to see
The burden Thou didst bear,
When hanging on the accursed tree,
And knows her guilt was there.'

'He also is my strength and my song. He is become my salvation; therefore, in joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.'

Now, I have left myself no time to do more than say one word about that last point, the gladness of the water-drawers. It is a pretty picture in our text, full of the atmosphere and spirit of Eastern life: the cheery talk and the ringing laughter round the village well, where the shepherds with their flocks linger all day long, and the maidens from their tents come-a kind of rude Exchange in the antique world; and, says our prophet, 'As the dwellers in the land at their village springs, so ye, the weary travellers at "the eye of the desert," will draw with gladness.' So we have this joy.

Dear brethren, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is meant for something better than to make us glad, but it is meant to make us glad too, and he is but a very poor Christian who has not found that it is the joy and rejoicing of his heart. We need not put too much emphasis and stress upon that side of the truth; but we need not either suppress it or disregard it in our modern high-flown disinterestedness. There are joys worth calling so which only come from possessing this fountain of salvation. How shall I enumerate them? The best way, I think, will be to quote passages.

There is the gladness of forgiven sin and a quieted conscience: ‘Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice.’ There is the joy of a conscious possession of God: ‘Blessed are the people that know the joyful sound; they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of Thy countenance. In Thy name shall they rejoice all the day.’ There is the joy of fellowship and communion with Jesus Christ and His full presence: ‘I will see you again; and your hearts shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh away from you.’ There is the joy of willing obedience: ‘I delight to do Thy will.’ ‘It is joy to the just to do judgment.’ There is the joy of a bright hope of an inheritance ‘incorruptible,’ ‘wherein ye greatly rejoice,’ and there is a joy which, like that Greek fire they talk about, burns brighter under water, and glows as the darkness deepens-a joy which is independent of circumstances, and can say, ‘Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.’

And all that, brother and friend, may be yours and mine; and then what this same prophet says may also be true: ‘The ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads’-that is for the pilgrimage; ‘They shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away’-that is for the home. There is another prophecy in this same book of Isaiah: ‘Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters’; that was the voice of the Christ in prophecy. There is a saying spoken in the temple courts: ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink’; that was the voice of the Christ upon earth. There is a saying at the end of Scripture-almost the last words that the Seer in Patmos heard: ‘Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely’; that was the voice of the Christ from the throne. And the triple invitation comes to every soul of man in the world, and to thee, and thee, and thee, my brother. Answer,

answer as the Samaritan woman did: ‘Sir, give me this water that I thirst not, neither come hither’ any more to draw of the broken cisterns.

18)Isaiah 17:10-11

Isaiah

THE HARVEST OF A GODLESS LIFE

Isa. 17:10 - Isa. 17:11.

The original application of these words is to Judah’s alliance with Damascus, which Isaiah was dead against. He saw that it would only precipitate the Assyrian invasion, as in fact it did. Judah had forsaken God, and because they had done so, they had gone to seek for themselves delights-alliance with Damascus. The image of planting a garden of pleasures, and ‘vine slips of a stranger’ refers to sensuous idolatry as well as to the entangling alliance. Then follows a contemptuous description of the rapid growth of this alliance and of the care with which Israel cultivated it. ‘In a day thou makest thy plant to grow’ [or fencest it], and next morning it was in blossom, so sedulously had they nursed and fostered it. Then comes the smiting contrast of what it was all for-’A harvest heap in the day of sickness and incurable pain.’

Now we may take this in a more general way as containing large truths which affect the life of every one of us.

I. The Sin of a Godless Life.

> [a] Notice the Sin charged. It is merely negative-*forgettest*. There is no charge of positive hostility or of any overt act. This forgetfulness is most natural and easy to be fallen into. The constant pressure of the world. It indicates alienation of heart from God.

It is most common among us, far more so than active infidelity, far more so than gross sin, far more so than conscious hostility.

[b] The implied Criminality of it. He is the ‘Rock of thy strength’ and the ‘God of thy salvation.’ Rock is the grand Old Testament name of God, expressing in a pregnant metaphor both what He is in Himself and what in relation to those who trust Him. It speaks of stability, elevation, massiveness, and of defence and security. The parallel title sets Him forth as the Giver of salvation; and both names set in clear light the sinful ingratitude of forgetting God, and force home the question: ‘Do ye thus requite the Lord, oh foolish people and unwise?’

[c] The implied Absurdity of it. What a contrast between the safe ‘munitions of rocks’ and the unsheltered security of these Damascene gardens! What fools to leave the heights and come down into the plain! Think of the contrast between the sufficiency of God and the emptiness of the substitutes. Forgetfulness of Him and preference of creatures cannot be put into language which does not convict it of absurdity.

II. The Busy Effort and Apparent Success of a Godless Life.

[a] If a man loses his hold on God and has not Him to stay himself on, he is driven to painful efforts to make up the loss. God is needed by every soul. If the soul is not satisfied in Him, then there are hungry desires. This is the explanation of the feverish activity of much of our life.

[b] Such work is far harder than the work of serving God. It takes a great deal of toil to make that garden grow. The world is a hard taskmaster. God’s service is easy. He sets us in Eden to till and dress it, but when we forget Him, the ground is cursed, and bears thorns and thistles, and sweat drips from our brows.

Men take more pains to damn themselves than to save themselves. There is nothing more wearying than the pursuit of pleasure. ‘Pleasant plants’-that is a hopeless kind of gardening. There is nothing more degrading.

‘Ye lust and desire to have,’-what a contrast is in, Ask and have! We might live even as the lilies or the ravens, or with only this difference, that we laboured, but were as uncaring and as peaceful as they.

God is *given*. The world has to be *bought*. Its terms are 'Nothing for nothing.'

[c] Such work has sometimes quick, present success.

'In the day.' It is hard for men to labour towards far-off unseen good. We like to have what will grow up in a night, like Jonah's gourd. So these present satisfactions in a worldly life appeal to worldly, sensuous natures. And it is hard to set over against these a plant which grows slowly, and only bears fruit in the next world.

III. The End of it all.

'A harvest heap in the day of grief.' This clearly points on to a solemn ending-the day of judgment.

> [a] How poor the fruit will he that a God-forgetting man will take out of life! There is but *one heap* from all the long struggle. He has 'sowed much and brought home little.' What shall we take with us out of our busy years as their net result? A very small sack will be large enough to hold the harvest that many of us have reaped.
>
> [b] All this God-forgetting life of pleasure-seeking and idolatry is bringing on a terrible, inevitable consummation.

'Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.'

No doubt there is often a harvest of grief and desperate sorrow springing, even in this life, from forgetting God. For it is only they who set their hopes on Him that are never disappointed, and only they who have chosen Him for their portion who can always say, 'I have a goodly heritage.' But the real harvest is not reaped till death has separated the time of sowing from that of ingathering. The sower shall reap; *i.e.* every man shall inherit the consequences of his deeds. 'They that have planted it shall eat it.'

> [c] That harvest home will be a day of sadness to some. These are terrible words-'grief and desperate sorrow,' or 'pain and incurable sickness.' We dare not dilate on this. But if we trust in Christ and sow

to the Spirit, we shall then ‘rejoice before God as with the joy of harvest,’ and ‘return with joy, bringing our sheaves with us.’

19)Isaiah 25:6

Isaiah

‘IN THIS MOUNTAIN’

THE FEAST ON THE SACRIFICE

Isa. 25:6.

There is here a reference to Sinai, where a feast followed the vision of God. It was the sign of covenant, harmony, and relationship, and was furnished by a sacrifice.

I. The General Ideas contained in this Image of a Feast.

We meet it all through Scripture; it culminates in Christ’s parables and in the ‘Marriage Supper of the Lamb.’

In the image are suggested:-

Free familiarity of access, fellowship, and communion with Him.

Abundant Supply of all wants and desires.

Festal Joy.

Family Intercommunion.

II. The Feast follows on Sacrifice. We find that usage of a feast following a sacrifice existing in many races and religions. It seems to witness to a widespread consciousness of sin as disturbing our relations with God. These could be set right only by sacrifice, which therefore must precede all joyful communion with Him.

The New Testament accepts that truth and clears it from the admixture of heathenism.

God provides the Sacrifice.

It is not brought by man. There is no need for our efforts-no atonement to be found by us. The sacrifice is not meant to turn aside God's wrath.

Communion is possible through Christ.

In Him God is revealed.

Objective hindrances are taken away.

Subjective ones are removed.

Dark fears-indifference-dislike of fellowship-Sin-these make communion with God impossible.

At Sinai the elders 'saw God, and did eat and drink' Here the end of the preceding chapter shows the 'elders' gazing on the glory of Jehovah's reign in Zion.

III. The Feast consists of a Sacrifice.

Christ is the food of our souls, He and His work are meant to nourish our whole being. He is the object for all our nature.

The Sacrifice must be incorporated with us. It is not enough that it be offered, it must also be partaken of.

Now the Sacrifice is eaten by faith, and by occupation with it of each part of our being, according to its own proper action. Through love, obedience, hope, desire, we may all feed on Jesus.

The Lord's Supper presents the same thoughts, under similar symbols, as Isaiah expressed in his prophecy.

Symbolically we feast on the sacrifice when we eat the Bread which is the Body broken for us. But the true eating of the true sacrifice is by faith. *Crede et manducasti*-Believe, and thou hast eaten.

20)Isaiah 25:7

Isaiah

‘IN THIS MOUNTAIN’

THE VEIL OVER ALL NATIONS

Isa. 25:7.

The previous chapter closes with a prediction of the reign of Jehovah in Mount Zion ‘before His elders’ in Glory. The allusion apparently is to the elders being summoned up to the Mount and seeing the Glory, ‘as the body of heaven in its clearness.’ The veil in this verse is probably a similar allusion to that which covered Moses’ face. It will then be an emblem of that which obscures for ‘all nations the face of God.’ And what is that but sin?

I. Sin veils God from men’s sight.

It is not the necessary inadequacy of the finite mind to conceive of the Infinite that most tragically hides God from us. That inadequacy is compatible with true and sufficient knowledge of Him. Nor is it ‘the veils of flesh and sense,’ as we often hear it said, that hide Him. But it is our sinful moral nature that darkens His face and dulls our eyes. ‘Knowledge’ of God, being knowledge of a Person, is not merely an intellectual process. It is much more truly acquaintance than comprehension; and as such, requires, as all acquaintance does, some foundation of sympathy and appreciation.

Every sin darkens the witness to God in ourselves, In a pure nature, conscience would perfectly reveal God; but we all know too sadly and intimately how it is gradually silenced, and fails to discriminate between what pleases and what displeases God. In a pure nature, the obedient Will would perfectly reveal God and the man’s dependence on Him. We all know how sin weakens that.

Every sin diminishes our power of seeing Him in His external Revelation. Every sin ruffles the surface of the soul, which is a mirror reflecting the light that streams from Creation, from Providence, from History. A mass of black rock flung into a still lake shatters the images of the girdling woods and the overarching sky.

Every sin bribes us to forget God. It becomes our interest, as we fancy, to shut Him out of our thoughts. Adam’s impulse is to carry his guilty secret with him into hiding among the trees of the garden. We cannot shake off His presence, but we can-and when we have sinned, we have but too good reason to exercise the power-we can dismiss the thought of Him. ‘They did not *like* to retain God in their knowledge.’

Individual sins may seem of small moment, but an opaque veil can be woven out of very fine thread.

II. To veil God from our sight is fatal.

We imagine that to forget Him leaves us undisturbed in following aims disapproved by Him, and we spend effort to secure that false peace by fierce absorption in other pursuits, and impatient shaking off of all that might wake our sleeping consciousness of Him.

But what unconscious self-murder that is, which we take such pains to achieve! To know God is life eternal; to lose Him from our sight is to condemn all that is best in our nature, all that is most conducive to blessedness, tranquillity, and strenuousness in our lives, to languish and die. Every creature separated from God is cut off from the fountain of life, and loses the life it drew from the fountain, of whatever kind that life is. And that in man which is most of kin with God languishes most when so cut off. And when we have blocked Him out from our field of vision, all that remains for us to look at suffers degradation, and becomes phantasmal, poor, unworthy to detain, and impotent to satisfy, our hungry vision.

III. The Veil is done away in Christ.

He shows us God, instead of our own false conceptions of Him, which are but distorted refractions of His true likeness. Only within the limits of Christ's revelation is there knowledge of God, as distinguished from guesses, doubtful inferences, partial glimpses. Elsewhere, the greatest certitude as to Him is a 'peradventure'; Jesus alone says 'Verily, verily.'

Jesus makes us able to see God.

Jesus makes us delight in seeing Him.

All dread of the 'steady whole of the Judge's face' is changed to the loving heart's joy in seeing its Beloved.

IV. The Veil is wholly removed hereafter.

The prophecy from which the text is taken is obviously not yet fulfilled. It waits for the perfect condition of redeemed manhood in another life. But even then, the chief reason why the Christian is warranted in cherishing an unpresumptuous hope that he will know even as he is known is not that then he will have dropped the veil of flesh and sense, but that he will have dropped the thicker, more stifling covering of sin, and, being perfectly like God, will be able perfectly to gaze on Him, and, perfectly gazing on Him, will grow ever more perfectly like Him.

The choice for each of us is whether the veil will thicken till it darkens the Face altogether, and that is death; or whether it will thin away till the last filmy remnant is gone, and 'we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.'

21)Isaiah 25:8

Isaiah

'IN THIS MOUNTAIN'

Isa. 25:6 - Isa. 25:8.

A poet’s imagination and a prophet’s clear vision of the goal to which God will lead humanity are both at their highest in this great song of the future, whose winged words make music even in a translation. No doubt it starts from the comparatively small fact of the restoration of the exiled nation to its own land. But it soars far beyond that. It sees all mankind associated with them in sharing their blessings. It is the vision of God’s ideal for humanity. That makes it the more remarkable that the prophet, with this wide outlook, should insist with such emphasis on the fact that it has a local centre. That phrase ‘in this mountain’ is three times repeated in the hymn; two of the instances occurring in the verses of my text have lying side by side with them the expressions ‘all people’ and ‘all nations,’ as if to bring together the local origin, and the universal extent, of the blessings promised.

The sweet waters that are to pour through the world well up from a spring opened ‘in this mountain.’ The beams that are to lighten every land stream out from a light blazing there. The world’s hopes for that golden age which poets have sung, and towards which earnest social reformers have worked, and of the coming of which this prophet was sure, rest on a definite fact, done in a definite place, at a definite time. Isaiah knew the place, but what was to be done, or when it was to be done, he knew not. You and I ought to be wiser. History has taught us that Jesus Christ fulfils the visioned good that inspired the prophet’s brilliant words. We might say, with allowable licence, that ‘this mountain,’ in which the Lord does the great things that this song magnifies, is not so much Zion as Calvary.

Brethren, in these days, when so many voices are proclaiming so many short cuts to the Millennium, this clear declaration of the source of the world’s hope is worth pondering. For us all, individually, this localisation of the origin of the universal good of mankind is an offer of blessings to us if we will go thither, where the provision for the world’s good is stored-’In this mountain’; therefore, to seek it anywhere else is to seek it in vain.

Now, I wish, under the impression of that conviction, to put before you just these three thoughts: where the world’s food comes from; where the unveiling which gives light to the world comes from; and where the life which destroys death for the world comes from-’In this mountain.’

I. Where does the world’s food come from?

Physiologists can tell, by studying the dentition-the system of the teeth-and the digestive apparatus of an animal, what it is meant to live upon, whether vegetables or flesh, or a mingled diet of both. And you can tell, if you will, by studying yourself, what, or whom, you are meant to live upon. The poet said, ‘We live by admiration, hope, and love.’ But he did not say on what these faculties, which truly nourish man’s spirit, are to fix and fasten. He tells of the appetites; he does not tell of their food. My text does: ‘In this mountain shall the Lord make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the less well refined.’ Friends, look at these hearts of yours with their yearnings, with their passionate desires, with their clamant needs. Will any human love-the purest, the sweetest, the most unselfish, the most utter in its surrender-satisfy the heart-hunger of the poorest of us? No! Look at the capacities of grasping thought and truth in our spirits, which are ever seek, seek, seeking for absolutely certain foundations on which we may build the whole structure of our beliefs. You have to go deeper down than the sand of man’s thinkings and teachings before you can reach what will bear without shifting the foundations of a life’s credence and confidence. Look at these tumultuous wills of ours that fancy they crave to be independent, and really crave an absolute master whom it is blessedness to obey. You will find none such beneath the stars. The very elements of our being, our heart, will, mind, desires, passions, longings, all with one voice proclaim that the only food for a man is God.

Jesus Christ brings the food that we need. Remember His own adaptation of this great vision of my text in more than one parable; such as the supper that was provided, and to which all men were invited, and, ‘with one consent,’ declined the invitation. Remember His own utterance,’ I am the Bread of God which came down from heaven to give life to the world.’ Remembering such words, let me plead with you to listen to the voice of warning as well as of invitation, which sounds from Cradle and Cross and Throne. ‘Why will ye spend your money for that which is not bread’-you know it is not-’and your labour for that which satisfieth not?’-you know it does not. Turn to Him, ‘eat, and your souls shall live.’ ‘In this mountain is prepared a feast. . . for all nations.’

Notice that although it does not appear on the surface, and to English readers, this world's festival, in which every want is met, and every appetite satisfied, is a feast on a sacrifice. That touches the deepest need, about which I shall have a word or two to say presently. But in the meantime let me just press this upon you, that the Christ who died on the Cross is to be lived on by us; and that it is His sacrifice that is to be the nourishment of our spirits.

Would that the earnest men, who are trying to cure the world's evils and to still the world's wants, and are leaving Jesus Christ and His religion out of their programme, would take thought and ask themselves whether there is not something more in the hunger of humanity than their ovens can ever bake bread for! They are spinning ropes of sand, if they are trying to lift the world clear of its miseries and of its hunger, and are not presenting Jesus Christ. I hope I am no bigot; I know that I sympathise earnestly with all these other schemes for helping mankind, but this I am bound to say here-all of them put together will not reach the need of the case, unless they start from, and are subsidiary to, and develop out of, the presenting of the primal supply for the universal want, Christ, who alone is able to still the hunger of men's hearts. Education will do much, but university degrees and the highest culture will not satisfy a hungry heart. Fitting environment, as it is fashionable to call it, will do a great deal, but nothing outside of a man will staunch his evils or still the hunger that coils and grips in his heart. Competent wealth is a good-there is no need to say that in Manchester-but millionaires have been known to be miserable. A heart at rest in the love of husband, wife, parent, child, is a blessing earnestly to be sought and thankfully to be treasured by us all; but there is more than that wanted. Put a man in the most favourable circumstances; give him competent worldly means; do all that modern philosophers who leave religion out of the question are trying to do; put in practice your most advanced Socialistic schemes, and you will still have a man with a hungry heart. He may not know what he wants; very often he will entirely mistake what that is, but he will be restless for want of an unknown good. Here is the only thing that will still his heart: 'The bread which I give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.'

Brother and sister, this is not a matter only for social reformers, and to be dealt with as bearing upon wide movements that influence multitudes. It comes home to you and me. Some of you do not in the least degree know what I am talking about when I speak of the hunger of men's hearts; for you have lost your appetites, as children that eat too many sweets have no desire for their wholesome meals. You have lost your appetite by feeding upon garbage, and you say you are quite content. Yes, at present; but deep down there lies in your hearts a need which will awake and speak out some day; and you will find that the husks which the swine did eat are scarcely wholesome nutriment for a man. And there are some of you that turn away with disgust, and I am glad of it, from these low, gross, sensuous delights; and are trying to satisfy yourselves with education, culture, refinement, art, science, domestic love, wealth, gratified ambition, or the like. There are tribes of degraded Indians that in times of famine eat clay. There is a little nourishment in it, and it distends their stomachs, and gives them the feeling of having had a meal. And that is like what some of you do. Dear friends, will you listen to this?-'Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread?' Will you listen to this?-'I am the Bread of Life,' Will you listen to this?-'In this mountain will the Lord make unto all people a feast of fat things.'

II. Where does the unveiling that gives light to the world come from?

My text, as I have already remarked, emphatically repeats 'in this mountain' in its next clause. 'He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations.'

Now, of course, the pathetic picture that is implied here, of a dark pall that lies over the whole world, suggests the idea of mourning, but still more emphatically, I think, that of obscuration and gloom. The veil prevents vision and shuts out light, and that is the picture of humanity as it presents itself before this prophet-a world of men entangled in the folds of a dark pall that lay over their heads, and swathed them round about, and prevented them from seeing; shut them up in darkness and entangled their feet, so that they stumbled in the gloom. It is a pathetic picture, but it does not go beyond the realities of the case. For, with all our light on other matters, with all our freedom of action, with all our frequent forgetfulness of the fact that we are thus encompassed, it remains true that, apart from the emancipation and illumination that are effected by Jesus Christ, this is the picture of mankind as they are. And you are beneath that veil, and swathed, obstructively as regards light and liberty, by its heavy folds, unless Christ has freed you.

But we must go a step further than that, I think; and although one does not wish to force too much meaning on to a poetic metaphor, still I cannot help supposing that that universal pall, as I called it, which is cast over all nations, has a very definite and a very tragic meaning. There is a universal fact of human experience which answers to the figure, and that is sin. That is the black thing whose ebon folds hamper us, and darken us, and shut out the visions of God and blessedness, and all the glorious blue above us. The heavy, dark mist settles down on the plains, though the sky above is undimmed by it, and the sun is blazing in the zenith. Not one beam can penetrate through the wet, chill obstruction, and men stumble about in the fog with lamps and torches, and all the while a hundred feet up it is brightness and day. Or, if at some points the obstruction is thinned and the sun does come through, it is shorn of all its gracious beams and power to warm and cheer, and looks but like a copper-coloured, livid, angry ball. So the ‘veil that is spread over all nations, ‘that awful fact of universal sinfulness, shuts out God-who is our light and our joy-from us, and no other lights or joys are more than twinkling tapers in the mist. Or it makes us see Him as men in a fog see the sun-shorn of His graciousness, threatening, wrathful, unlovely.

Brethren, the fact of universal sinfulness is the outstanding fact of humanity. Jesus Christ deals with it by His death, which is God’s sacrifice and the world’s atonement. That Lamb of God has borne away the world’s sins, and my sins and thy sins are there. By the fact of His death He has rent the veil from the top to the bottom, and the light comes in, unhindered by the terrible solemn fact that all of us have sinned and come short of the glory of God. By His life He communicates to each of us, if we will trust our poor sinful souls to Him, a new power of living which is triumphant over temptation, and gives the victory over sin if we will be true to Him. And so the last shreds of the veil, like the torn clouds of a spent thunderstorm, are parted into filmy rags and float away below the horizon, leaving the untarnished heavens and the flaming sunshine; and 'we with unveiled faces' can lift them up to be irradiated by the light. 'In this mountain will the Lord destroy the covering that is spread over all nations.'

The weak point of all these schemes and methods to which I have already referred for helping humanity out of the slough, and making men happier, is that they underestimate the fact of sin. If a man comes to them and says, 'I have broken God's law. What am I to do? I have a power within me that impels me now to evil. How am I to get rid of it?' they have no adequate answer. There is only one remedy that deals radically with the fact of human transgression; only one power that will deliver each of us, if we will, from the penalty, the guilt, the power of sin; and that is the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, and its result, the inspiration of the spirit of life that was in Jesus Christ, breathed into us from the Throne itself. Thus, and thus only, is the veil done away in Christ.

III. Lastly, where does the life that destroys death come from?

'He will swallow up death in victory,' or, as probably the word more correctly means, 'He will swallow up death *for ever*.' None of the other panaceas for the world's evils that I have been speaking of even attempt to deal with that 'Shadow feared of Man' that sits at the end of all our paths. Jesus Christ has dealt with it. Like the warrior of Judah who went down into a pit and slew a lion, He has gone down into the lair of the dreadful thing, and has come up leaving Death dead on the threshold.

By His death Christ has so altered that grim fact, which awaits us all, that to those who will trust their souls to Him it ceases to be death, even though the physical fact remains unaltered. For what is death? Is it simply the separation of soul from body, the cessation of corporeal existence? Surely not. We have to add to that all the spiritual tremors, all the dreads of passing into the unknown, and leaving this familiar order of things, and all the other reluctances and half-conscious feelings which make the difference between the death of a man and the death of a dog. And all these are swept clean away, if we believe that Jesus died, and died as our Redeemer and our Saviour. So, unconsciously and instinctively, the New Testament writers will seldom condescend to call the physical fact by the ugly old name. It has changed its character; it is ‘a sleep’ now; it is ‘an exodus,’ a ‘going out’ from the land of Egypt into a land of peace. It is a plucking up of the tent-pegs, according to another of the words which the writers employ for death, in preparation for entering, when the ‘tabernacle is dissolved,’ into ‘a house not made with hands,’ a statelier edifice, ‘eternal in the heavens.’ To die in Christ is not to die, but becomes a mere change of condition and of place, to be with Him, which is far ‘better.’ So an Apostle who was coming within measurable distance of his own martyrdom, even whilst the headsman’s block was all but in his sight, said: ‘He hath abolished death,’ the physical fact remaining still.

By His resurrection Jesus Christ has established immortality as a certainty for men. I can understand a man, who has persuaded himself that when he dies he is done with, dressing his limbs to die without dread if without hope. But that is a poor victory over death, which, even in the act of getting rid of the fear of it, invests it with supreme and ultimate power over humanity. Surely, surely, to believe that the grave is a blind alley, with no exit at the other end,-to believe that, however it may minister to a quiet departure, is no victory over the grave. But to die believing, on the other hand, that it is only a short tunnel through which we pass, and come out into fairer lands on the other side of the mountains, is to conquer that last foe even while it seems to conquer us.

Jesus Christ, who died that we might never die, lives that we may always live. For His immortal life will give to each of us, if we join ourselves to Him by simple faith and lowly obedience, an immortal life that shall persist through, and be increased by, the article of bodily death. And when we pass into the higher realm of fulness of joy, then- as Paul quotes the words of my text-’shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.’

Dear brethren, gather all these thoughts together. Do they not plead with you to cast yourselves on Jesus Christ, and to turn to Him alone? He will give you the food of your souls; if you will not sit at His table you will starve. He will strip you of the covering that is cast over you, as over us all; if you will not let Him unwind its folds from your limbs, then like the clothes of a drowning man, they will sink you. He will give you immortal life, which laughs at death, and you will be able to take up the great song, ‘O Death, where is thy sting; O grave, where is thy victory?. . . Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory.’ ‘In this mountain’ and in this mountain only, are the food, the illumination, the life of the world. I beseech you, do not turn away from them, lest you stumble on the dark mountains, where are starvation and gloom and death, but rather join that happy company of pilgrims who sing as they march, ‘Come! let us go up to the mountain of the Lord. He will teach us His ways, and we will walk in His paths.’

22)Isaiah 26:1-2

Isaiah

THE SONG OF TWO CITIES

OUR STRONG CITY

Isa. 26:1 - Isa. 26:2.

What day is ‘that day’? The answer carries us back a couple of chapters, to the great picture drawn by the prophet of a world-wide judgment, which is followed by a burst of song from the ransomed people of Jehovah, like Miriam’s chant by the shores of the Red Sea. The ‘city of confusion,’ the centre of the power hostile to God and man, falls; and its fall is welcomed by a chorus of praises. The words of my text are the beginning of one of these songs. Whether or not there were any historical event which floated before the prophet’s mind is wholly uncertain. If there were a smaller judgment upon some city of the enemy, it passes in his view into a world-wide judgment; and my text is purely ideal, imaginative, and apocalyptic. Its nearest ally is the similar vision of the Book of the Revelation, where, when Babylon sank with a splash like a millstone in the stream, the ransomed people raised their praises.

So, then, whatever may have been the immediate horizon of the prophet, and though, there may have stood on it some historical event, the city which he sees falling is other than any material Babylon, and the strong city in which he rejoices is other than the material Jerusalem, though it may have suggested the metaphor of my text. The song fits our lips quite as closely as it did the lips from which it first sprang, thrilling with triumph: ‘We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks. Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in.’

There are three things, then, here: the city, its defences, its citizens.

I. The City.

Now, no doubt the prophet was thinking of the literal Jerusalem; but the city is ideal, as is shown by the bulwarks which defend, and by the qualifications which permit entrance. And so we must pass beyond the literalities of Palestine, and, as I think, must not apply the symbol to any visible institution or organisation if we are to come to the depth and greatness of the meaning of these words. No church which is organised amongst men can be the New Testament representation of this strong city. And if the explanation is to be looked for in that direction at all, it can only be the invisible aggregate of ransomed souls which is regarded as being the Zion of the prophecy.

But perhaps even that is too definite and hard. And we are rather to think of the unseen but existent order of things or polity to which men here on earth may belong, and which will one day, after shocks and convulsions that shatter all which is merely institutional and human, be manifested still more gloriously.

The central thought that was moving in the prophet’s mind is that of the indestructible vitality of the true Israel, and the order which it represented, of which Jerusalem on its rock was but to him a symbol. And thus for us the lesson is that, apart altogether from the existing and visible order of things in which we dwell, there is a polity to which we may belong, for ‘ye are come unto Mount Zion, the city of the living God,’ and that that order is indestructible. Convulsions come, every Babylon falls, all human institutions change and pass. ‘The kingdoms old’ are ‘cast into another mould.’ But persistent through them all, and at the last, high above them all, will stand the stable polity of Heaven, ‘*the* city which hath *the* foundations.’

There is a lesson for us, brethren, in times of fluctuation, of change of opinion, of shaking of institutions, and of new social, economical, and political questions, threatening day by day to reorganise society. ‘We have a strong city’; and whatever may come-and much destructive will come, and much that is venerable and antique, rooted in men’s prejudices, and having survived through and oppressed the centuries, will have to go; but God’s polity, His form of human society of which the perfect ideal and antitype, so to speak, lies concealed in the heavens, is everlasting. Therefore, whatsoever changes, whatsoever ancient and venerable things come to be regarded as of no account, howsoever the nations, like clay in the hands of the potter, may have to assume new forms, as certainly they will, yet the foundation of God standeth sure. And for Christian men in revolutionary epochs, whether these revolutions affect the forms in which truth is grasped, or whether they affect the moulds into which society is run, the only worthy temper is the calm, triumphant expectation that through all the dust, contradiction, and distraction, the fair city of God will be brought nearer and made more manifest to man. Isaiah, or whoever was the writer of these great words of my text, stayed his own and his people’s hearts in a time of confusion and distress, by the thought that it was only Babylon that could fall, and that Jerusalem was the possessor of a charmed, immortal life.

This strong city, the order of human society which God has appointed, and which exists, though it be hidden in the heavens, will be manifested one day when, like the fair vision of the goddess rising from amidst the ocean’s foam, and shedding peace and beauty over the charmed waves, there will emerge from all the wild confusion and tossing billows of the sea of the peoples the fair form of the ‘Bride, the Lamb’s wife.’ There shall be an apocalypse of the city, and whether the old words which catch up the spirit of my text, and speak of that Holy City as ‘descending from heaven’ upon earth, at the close of the history of the world, are to be taken, as perhaps they are, as expressive of the truth that a renewed earth is to be the dwelling of the ransomed or no, this at least is clear, that the city shall be revealed, and when Babylon is swept away, Zion shall stand.

To this city-existent, immortal, and waiting to be revealed-you and I may belong to-day. ‘We *have* a strong city.’ You may lay hold of life either by the side of it which is transient and trivial and contemptible, or by the side of it which goes down through all the mutable and is rooted in eternity. As in some seaweed, far out in the depths of the ocean, the tiny frond that floats upon the billow goes down and down and down, by filaments that bind it to the basal rock, so the most insignificant act of our fleeting days has a hold upon eternity, and life in all its moments may be knit to the permanent. We may unite our lives with the surface of time or with the centre of eternity. Though we dwell in tabernacles, we may still be ‘come to Mount Zion,’ and all life be awful, noble, solemn, religions, because it is all connected with the unseen city across the seas. It is for us to determine to which of these orders-the perishable, noisy and intrusive and persistent in its appeals, or the calm, silent, most real, eternal order beyond the stars-our petty lives shall attach themselves.

II. Now note, secondly, the defences.

‘Salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks.’ This ‘evangelical prophet,’ as he has been called, is distinguished, not only by the clearness of his anticipations of Jesus Christ and His work, but by the fulness and depth which he attaches to that word ‘salvation.’ He all but anticipates the New Testament completeness and fulness of meaning, and lifts it from all merely material associations of earthly or transitory deliverance, into the sphere in which we are accustomed to regard it as especially moving. By ‘salvation’ he means and we mean, not only negative but positive blessings. Negatively it includes the removal of every conceivable or endurable evil, ‘all the ills that flesh is heir to,’ whether they be evils of sin or evils of sorrow; and, positively, the investiture with every possible good that humanity is capable of, whether it be good of goodness, or good of happiness. This is what the prophet tells us is the wall and bulwark of his ideal-real city.

Mark the eloquent omission of the name of the builder of the wall. ‘God’ is a supplement. Salvation ‘will *He* appoint for walls and bulwarks.’ No need to say who it is that flings such a fortification around the city. There is only one hand that can trace the lines of such walls; only one hand that can pile their stones; only one that can lay them, as the walls of Jericho were laid, in the blood of His first-born Son. ‘Salvation will He appoint for walls and bulwarks.’ That is to say in a highly imaginative and picturesque form, that the defense of the City is God Himself; and it is substantially a parallel with other words which speak about Him as being ‘a wall of fire round about it and the glory in the midst of it.’ The fact of salvation is the wall and the bulwark. And the consciousness of the fact and the sense of possessing it, is for our poor hearts, one of our best defenses against both the evil of sin and the evil of sorrow. For nothing so robs temptation of its power, so lightens the pressure of calamities, and draws the poison from the fangs of sin and sorrow, as the assurance that the loving purpose of God to save grasps and keeps us. They who shelter behind that wall, feel that between them and sin, and them and sorrow, there rises the inexpugnable defense of an Almighty purpose and power to save, lie safe whatever betides. There is no need of other defenses. Zion

'Needs no bulwarks,
No towers along the steep.'

God Himself is the shield and none other is required.

So, brethren, let us walk by the faith that is always confident, though it depends on an unseen hand. It is a grand thing to be able to stand, as it were, in the open, a mark for all 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' and yet to feel that around us there are walls most real, though invisible, which permit no harm to come to us. Our feeble sense-bound souls much prefer a visible wall. We, like a handrail on the stair. Though it does not at all guard the descent, it keeps our heads from getting dizzy. It is hard for us, as some travellers may have to do, to walk with steady foot and unthrobbing heart along a narrow ledge of rock with beetling precipice above us and black depths beneath, and we would like a little bit of a wall of some sort, for imagination if not for reality, between us and the sheer descent. But it is blessed to learn that naked we are clothed, solitary we have a Companion, and unarmed we have our defenceless heads covered with the shadow of the great wing, which, though sense sees it not, faith knows is there. A servant of God is never without a friend, and when most unsheltered

'From marge to blue marge
The whole sky grows his targe,
With sun's self for visible boss,'

beneath which he lies safe.

‘Salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks,’ and if we realise, as we ought to do, His purpose to keep us safe, and His power to keep us safe, and the actual operation of His hand keeping us safe at every moment, we shall not ask that these defences shall be supplemented by the poor feeble earthworks that sense can throw up.

III. Lastly, note the citizens.

Our text is part of a ‘song,’ and is not to be interpreted in the cold-blooded fashion that might suit prose. A voice, coming from whom we know not, breaks in upon the first strain with a command, addressed to whom we know not-’Open ye the gates’-the city thus far being supposed to be empty-’that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in.’ The central idea there is just this, ‘Thy people shall be all righteous.’ The one qualification for entrance into the city is absolute purity.

Now, brethren, that is true in regard to our present imperfect denizenship within the city; and it is true in regard to men’s passing into it in its perfect and final form. As to the former, there is nothing that you Christian people need more to have dinned into you than this, that your continuance in the state of a redeemed man, with all the security and blessing that attach thereto, depends upon your continuing to be righteous. Every sin, every flaw, every dropping beneath our own standard in conscience of what we ought to be, has for its inevitable result that we are robbed for the time being of consciousness of the walls of the city being about us and of our being citizens thereof. ‘Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in His holy place?’ The New Testament, as emphatically as the old psalm, answers,’ He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.’ ‘Let no man deceive you. He that doeth righteousness is righteous.’ There is no way by which Christian men here on earth can pass into and keep within the city of the living God, except they possess personal purity, righteousness of life, and cleanness of heart.

They used to say that Venice glass was so made that any poison poured into it shivered the vessel. Any drop of sin poured into your cup of communion with God, shatters the cup and spills the wine. Whosoever thinks himself a citizen of that great city, if he falls into transgression, and soils the cleanness of his hands, and ruffles the calm of his pure heart by self-willed sinfulness, will wake to find himself not within the battlements, but lying wounded, robbed, solitary, in the pitiless desert. My brother, it is ‘the righteous nation’ that ‘enters in,’ even here on earth.

I do not need to remind you how, admittedly by us all, that is the case in regard to the final form of the city of our God, into which nothing shall enter ‘that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination or maketh a lie.’ Heaven can only be entered into hereafter by, as here and now it can only enter into, those who are pure of heart. All else there would shrivel as foul things born In the darkness do in the light, and be consumed in the fire. None but the pure can enter and see God.

‘The nation which keepeth the truth’-that does not mean adherence to any revelation, or true creed, or the like. The word which is employed means, not truth of thought, but truth of character; and might, perhaps, be better represented by the more familiar word in such a connection, ‘faithfulness.’ A man who is true to God, keeping up a faithful relation to Him who is faithful to us, he, and only he, will pass into, and abide in, the city.

Now, brethren, so far our text carries us, but no further; unless, perhaps, there may be a hint of something yet deeper in the next clause of this song. If any one asks, How does the nation become righteous? the answer may lie in the immediately following exhortation-’Trust ye in the Lord for ever.’ But whether that be so or not, if we want an answer to the questions, How can my stained feet be cleansed so as to be fit to tread the crystal pavements? how can my foul garments be so purged as not to be a blot and an eyesore, beside the white, lustrous robes that sweep along them and gather no defilement there? the only answer that I know of is to be found by turning to the final visions of the New Testament, where the spirit of this whole section of our prophet is reproduced. Again, Babylon falls amidst the songs of saints; and then, down upon all the dust and confusion of the crash of ruin, the seer beholds the Lamb’s wife, the new Jerusalem, descending from above. To his happy eyes its glories are unveiled, its golden streets, its open gates, its walls of precious stones, its flashing river, its peaceful inhabitants, its light streaming from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And when that vision passes, his last message to us is, ‘Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may enter through the gates into the city.’

None but those who wash their garments, and make them white in the blood of the Lamb, can, living, come unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; or, dying, can pass through the iron gate that opens to them of its own accord, and find themselves as day breaks in the street of the Jerusalem which is above.

23)Isaiah 26:3-4

Isaiah

THE SONG OF TWO CITIES

THE INHABITANT OF THE ROCK

Isa. 26:3 - Isa. 26:4.

There is an obvious parallel between these verses and the two preceding ones. The safety which was there set forth as the result of dwelling in the strong city is here presented as the consequence of trust. The emblem of the fortified place passes into that of the Rock of Ages. There is the further resemblance in form, that, just as in the two preceding verses we had the triumphant declaration of security followed by a summons to some unknown persons to 'open the gates,' so here we have the triumphant declaration of perfect peace, followed by a summons to all to 'trust in the Lord for ever.' If we may suppose the invocation of the preceding verses to be addressed to the watchers at the gate of the strong city, it is perhaps not too fanciful to suppose that the invitation in my text is the watcher's answer, pointing the way by which men may pass into the city.

Whether that be so or no, at all events I take it as by no means accidental that, immediately upon the statement of the Old Testament law that righteousness alone admits to the presence of God, there follows so clear and emphatic an anticipation of the great New Testament Gospel that faith is the condition of righteousness, and that immediately after hearing that only 'the righteous nation which keepeth the truth' can enter there, we hear the merciful call, 'Trust ye in the Lord for ever.' So, then, I think we have in the words before us, though not formally yet really, very large teaching as to the nature, the object, the blessed effects, and the universal duty of that trust in the Lord which makes the very nexus between man and God, according to the teaching of the New Testament.

I. First, then, I desire to notice in a sentence the insight into the true nature of trust or faith given by the word employed here.

Now the literal meaning of the expression here rendered ‘to trust’ is to lean upon anything. As we say, trust is reliance. As a weak man might stay his faltering, tottering steps upon some strong staff, or might lean upon the outstretched arm of a friend, so we, conscious of our weakness, aware of our faltering feet, and realising the roughness of the road, and the smallness of our strength, may lay the whole weight of ourselves upon the loving strength of Jehovah.

And that is the trust of the Old Testament, the faith of the New-the simple act of reliance, going out of myself to find the basis of my being, forsaking myself to touch and rest upon the ground of my security, passing from my own weakness and laying my trembling hand into the strong hand of God, like some weak-handed youth on a coach-box who turns to a stronger beside him and says: ‘Take thou the reins, for I am feeble to direct or to restrain.’ Trust is reliance, and reliance is always blessedness.

II. Notice, secondly, the steadfast peacefulness of trust.

Now there are difficulties about the rendering and precise significance of the first verse of my text with which I do not need to trouble you. The Authorised Version, and still more perhaps the Revised Version, give substantially, as I take it, the prophet’s meaning; and the margin of the Revised Version is still more literal and accurate than the text, ‘A steadfast mind Thou keepest in perfect peace, because it trusteth in Thee.’ If this, then, be the true meaning of the words, you observe that it is the steadfast mind, steadfast because it trusts, which God keeps In the deep peace that is expressed by the reduplication of the word.

And if we break up that complex thought into its elements, it just comes to this, first, that trust makes steadfastness. Most men’s lives are blown about by winds of circumstance, directed by gusts of passion, shaped by accidents, and are fragmentary and jerky, like some ship at sea with nobody at the helm, heading here and there, as the force of the wind or the flow of the current may carry them. If my life is to be steadied, there must not only be a strong hand at the tiller, but some outward object which shall be for me the point of aim and the point of rest. No man can steady his life except by clinging to a holdfast without himself. Some of us look for that stay in the fluctuations and fleetingnesses of creatures; and some of us are wiser and saner, and look for it in the steadfastness of the unchanging God. The men who do the former are the sport of circumstances, and the slaves of their own natures, and there is no consistency in noble aim and effort throughout their lives, corresponding to their circumstances, relations, and nature. Only they who stay themselves upon God, and get down through all the superficial shifting strata of drift and gravel, to the base-rock, are steadfast and solid.

My brother, if you desire to govern yourself, you must let God govern you. If you desire to be firm, you must draw your firmness from the unchangingness of that divine nature which you grasp. How can a willow be stiffened into an iron pillar? Only-if I might use such a violent metaphor-when it receives into its substance the iron particles that it draws from the soil in which it is rooted. How can a bit of thistledown be kept motionless amidst the tempest? Only by being glued to something that is fixed. What do men do with light things on deck when the ship is pitching? Lash them to a fixed point. Lash yourselves to God by simple trust, and then you will partake of His serene immutability in such fashion as it is possible for the creature to participate in the attributes of the Creator.

And then, still further, the steadfast mind-steadfast because it trusts-is rewarded in that it is kept by God. It is no mere mistake in the order of his thought which leads this prophet to allege that it is the steadfast mind which God keeps. For, though it is true, on the one hand, that the real fixity and solidity of a human character come more surely and fully through trust in God than by any other means, on the other hand it is true that, in order to receive the full blessed effects of trust into our characters and lives, we must persistently and doggedly keep on in the attitude of confidence. If a man holds out to God a tremulous hand with a shaking cup in it, which Le sometimes presents and sometimes twitches back, it is not to be expected that God will pour the treasure of His grace into such a vessel, with the risk of most of it being spilt upon the ground. There must be a steadfast waiting if there is to be a continual flow.

It is the mind that cleaves to God which God keeps. I suppose that there was floating before Paul’s thoughts some remembrance of this great passage of the evangelical prophet when he uttered his words, which ring so strikingly with so many echoes of them, when he said, ‘The peace of God which passeth understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.’ It is the steadfast mind that is kept in perfect peace. If we ‘keep ourselves,’ by that divine help which is always waiting to be given,’ in the’ faith and ‘love of God,’ He will keep us in the hour of temptation, will keep us from falling, and will garrison our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And then, still further, this faithful, steadfast heart and mind, kept by God, is a mind filled with deepest peace. There is something very beautiful in the prophet’s abandoning the attempt to find any adjective of quality which adequately characterises the peace of which he has been speaking. He falls back upon the expedient which is the confession of the impotence of human speech worthily to portray its subject when he simply says, ‘Thou shalt keep in peace, peace . . . because he trusteth in Thee.’ The reduplication expresses the depth, the completeness of the tranquillity which flows into the heart, Such continuity, wave after wave, or rather ripple after ripple, is possible even for us. For, dear brethren, the possession of this deep, unbroken peace does not depend on the absence of conflict, on distraction, trouble, or sorrow, but on the presence of God. If we are in touch with Him, then our troubled days may be calm, and beneath all the surface tumult there may be a centre of rest. The garrison in some high hill-fortress looks down upon the open where the enemy’s ranks are crawling like insects across the grass, and scarcely hears the noise of the tumult, and no arrow can reach the lofty hold. So, up in God we may dwell at rest whate’er betide. Strange that we should prefer to live down amongst the unwalled villages, which every spoiler can harry and burn, when we might climb, and by the might and the magic of trust in the Lord bring round about ourselves a wall of fire which shall consume the poison out of the evil, even whilst it permits the sorrow to do its beneficent work upon us!

III. Note again the worthiness of the divine Name to evoke, and the power of the divine character to reward, the trust.

We pass to the last words of *my* text:-'In the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength.'

Now I suppose we all know that the words feebly rendered in the Authorised Version 'everlasting strength' are literally 'the Rock of Ages'; and that this verse is the source of that hallowed figure which, by one of the greatest of our English hymns, is made familiar and immortal to all English-speaking people.

But there is another peculiarity about the words on which I dwell for a moment, and that is, that here we have, for one of the only two times in which the expression occurs in Scripture, the great name of Jehovah reduplicated. 'In Jab Jehovah is the Rock of Ages.' In the former verse the prophet had given up in despair the attempt to characterise the peace which God gave, and fallen back upon the expedient of naming it twice over. In this verse, with similar eloquence of reticence, he abandons the attempt to describe or characterise that great Name, and in adoration, contents himself with twice taking it upon his lips, in order to *impress* what he cannot *express*, the majesty and the sufficiency of that name.

What, then, is the force of that name? We do not need, I suppose, to do more than simply remind you that there are two great thoughts communicated by that self-revelation of God which lies in it. *Jehovah*, in its literal grammatical signification, puts emphasis upon the absolute, underived, and therefore unlimited, unconditioned, unchangeable, eternal being of God. 'I AM THAT I AM.' Men and creatures are what they are made, are what they become, and some time or other cease to be what they were. But God is what He is, and is because He is. He is the Source, the Motive, the Law, the Sustenance of His own Being; and changeless and eternal He is for ever. In that name is the Rock of Ages.

That mighty name, by its place in the history of Revelation, conveys to us still further thoughts, for it is the name of the God who entered into covenant with His ancient people, and remains bound by His covenant to bless us. That Is to say, He hath not left us in darkness as to the methods and purpose of His dealings with us, or as to the attitude of His heart towards us. He has bound Himself by solemn words, and by deeds as revealing as words. So we can reckon on God. To use a vulgarism which is stripped of its vulgarity if employed reverently, as I would do it-we know where to have Him. He has given us the elements to calculate His orbit; and we are sure that the calculation will come right. So, because the name flashes upon men the thought of an absolute Being, eternal, and all-sufficient, and self-modified, and changeless, and because it reveals to us the very inmost heart of the mystery, and makes it possible for us to forecast the movements of this great Sun of our heavens, therefore in the name '*Jab Jehovah* is the Bock of Ages.'

The metaphor needs no expansion. We understand that it conveys the idea of unchangeable defence. As the cliffs tower above the river that swirls at their base, and takes centuries to eat the faintest line upon their shining surface, so the changeless God rises above the stream of time, of which the brief breakers are human lives, 'sparkling, bursting, borne away.' They who fasten themselves to that Rock are safe in its unchangeable strength, God the Unchangeable is the amulet against any change, that is not growth, in the lives of those who trust Him. Some of us may recall some great precipice rising above the foliage, which stands to-day as it did when we were boys, unwasted in its silent strength, while generations of leaves have opened and withered at its base, and we have passed from childhood to age. Thus, unaffected by the transiency that changes all beneath, God rises, the Bock of Ages in whom we may trust. 'The conies are a feeble folk, but they make their houses in the rocks.' So our weakness may house itself there and be at rest.

IV. Lastly, note the summons to trust.

We know not whose voice it is that is heard in the last words of my text, but we know to whose ears it is addressed. It is to all. 'Trust ye in the Lord for ever.'

Surely, surely the blessed effects of trust, of which we have been speaking, have a voice of merciful invitation summoning us to exercise it. The promise of peace appeals to the deepest, though often neglected and misunderstood, longings of the human heart. Inly we sigh for that repose.'

O dear brethren, if it is true that into our agitated and struggling lives there may steal, and in them there may abide, this priceless blessing of a great tranquillity, surely nothing else should be needed to woo us to accept the conditions and put forth the trust. It is strange that we should turn away, as we are all tempted to do, from that rest in God, and try to find repose in what was only meant for stimulus, and is altogether incapable of imparting rest. Storms live in the lower regions of the atmosphere; get up higher and there is peace. Waves dash and break on the surface region of the ocean; get down deeper, nearer the heart of things, and again there is peace.

Surely the name of the Bock of Ages is an invitation to us to put our trust in Him. If a man knew God as He is, he could not choose but trust Him. It is because we have blackened His face with our own doubts, and darkened His character with the mists that rise from our own sinful hearts, that we have made that bright Sun in the heavens, which ought to fall upon our hearts with healing in its beams, into a lurid ball of fire that shines threatening through the dim obscurity of our misty hearts. But if we knew Him we should love Him, and if we would only listen to His own self-revelation, we should find that He draws us to Himself by the manifestation of Himself, as the sun binds all the planets to his mass and his flame by the eradiation of his own mystic energies.

The summons is a summons to a faith corresponding to that upon which it is built. 'Trust ye in the Lora for ever, for in the Lord is the strength that endures for ever.' Our continual faith is the only fit response to His unchanging faithfulness. Build rock upon rock.

The summons is a summons addressed to us all. 'Trust ye'-whoever ye are-'in the Lord for ever.' You and I, dear friends, hear the summons in a yet more beseeching and tender voice than was audible to the prophet, for our faith has a nobler object, and may have a mightier operation, seeing that its object is 'the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world'; and its operation, to bring to us peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. When from the Cross there comes to all our hearts the merciful invitation, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,' why should not we each answer,

'Rock of Ages, cleft for me,

Let me hide myself in Thee'?

24)Isaiah 26:5-10

Isaiah

THE SONG OF TWO CITIES

Isa. 26:1 - Isa. 26:10.

'This song' is to be interpreted as a song, not with the cold-blooded accuracy proper to a scientific treatise. The logic of emotion is as sound as that of cool intellect, but it has its own laws and links of connection. First, the song sets in sharp contrast the two cities, describing, in Isa. 26:1 - Isa. 26:4, the city of God, its strength defences, conditions of citizenship, and the peace which reigns within its walls; and in Isa. 26:5 - Isa. 26:6 the fall and utter ruin of the robber city, its antagonist Jerusalem, on its rocky peninsula, supplies the form of Isaiah's thought; but it is only a symbol of the true city of God, the stable, invisible, but most real, polity and order of things to which men, even while wandering lonely and pilgrims, do come, if they will. It is possible even here and now to have our citizenship in the heavens, and to feel that we belong to a great community beyond the sea of time, though our feet have never trodden its golden pavements, nor our eyes seen its happy glories.

In one aspect, it is ideal, but in truth it is more real than the intrusive and false things of this fleeting present, which call themselves realities. 'The things which are' are the things above. The things here are but shows and shadows.

The city's walls are salvation. There is no need to name the architect of these fortifications. One hand only can pile their strength. God appoints salvation in lieu of all visible defences. Whom He purposes to save are saved. Whom He wills to keep safe are kept safe. They who can shelter behind that strong defence need no other. Weak, sense-governed hearts may crave something more palpable, but they do not really need it. A parapet on an Alpine road gives no real security, but only satisfies imagination. The sky needs no pillars to hold it up.

Then an unknown voice breaks in upon the song, calling on unnamed attendants to fling wide the gates. The city is conceived of as empty; its destined inhabitants must have certain qualifications. They must be righteous, and must 'keep faithfulness' being true to the God who is 'faithful and true' in all His relations. None but the righteous can dwell in conscious citizenship with the Unseen while here, and none but the righteous can enter through the gates into the city. That requirement is founded in the very nature of the case, and is as emphatically proclaimed by the gospel as by the prophet. But the gospel tells more articulately than he was enlightened to do, how righteousness is to be won. The last vision of the Apocalypse, which is so like this song in its central idea, tells us of the fall of Babylon, of the descent to earth of the New Jerusalem, and leaves as its last message the great saying, 'Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may . . . enter in through the gate into the city.'

Our song gives some hint of similar thoughts by passing from the description of the qualifications for entrance to the celebration of the security which comes from trust. The safety which is realised within the walls of the strong city is akin to the 'perfect peace' in which he who trusts is kept; and the juxtaposition of the two representations is equivalent to the teaching that trust, which is precisely the same as the New Testament faith, is the condition of entrance. We know that faith makes righteous, because it opens the heart to receive God's gift of righteousness; but that effect of faith is implied rather than stated here, where security and peace are the main ideas. As some fugitives from the storm of war sit in security behind the battlements of a fortress, and scarcely hear the din of conflict in the open field below, the heart, which has taken refuge by trust in God, is kept in peace so deep that it passes description, and the singer is fain to give a notion of its completeness by calling it 'peace, peace.' The mind which trusts is steadied thereby, as light things lashed to a firm stay are kept steadfast, however the ship toss. The only way to get and keep fixedness of temper and spirit amid change and earthquake is to hold on to God, and then we may be stable with stability derived from the foundations of His throne to which we cling.

Therefore the song breaks into triumphant fervour of summons to all who hear it, to 'trust in Jab Jehovah for ever,' Such settled, perpetual trust is the only attitude corresponding to His mighty name, and to the realities found in His character. He is the ‘Bock of Ages’ the grand figure which Moses learned beneath the cliffs of Sinai and wove into his last song, and which tells us of the unchanging strength that makes a sure hiding-place for all generations, and the ample space which will hold all the souls of men, and be for a shadow from the heat, a covert from the tempest, a shelter from the foe, and a home for the homeless, with many a springing fountain in its clefts.

The great act of judgment which the song celebrates is now [Isa. 26:5 - Isa. 26:6] brought into contrast with the blessed picture of the city, and by the introductory ‘for’ is stated as the reason for eternal trust. The language, as it were, leaps and dances in jubilation, heaping together brief emotional and synonymous clauses. So low is the once proud city brought, that the feet of the poor tread it down. These ‘poor’ and ‘needy’ are the true Israel, the suffering saints, who had known how cruel the sway of the fallen robber city was; and now they march across its site; and its broken columns and ruined palaces strew the ground below their feet. ‘The righteous nation’ of the one picture are ‘the poor and needy’ of the other. No doubt the prophecy has had partial accomplishments more than once or twice, when the oppressed church has triumphed, and some hoary iniquity been levelled at a blow, or toppled over by slow decay. But the complete accomplishment is yet future, and not to be realised till that last act, when all antagonism shall be ended, and the net result of the weary history of the world be found to be just these two pictures of Isaiah’s-the strong city of God with its happy inhabitants, and the everlasting desolations of the fallen city of confusion.

The triumphant hurry of the song pauses for a moment to gaze upon the crash, and in Isa. 26:7 gathers its lessons into a kind of proverbial saying, which is perhaps best translated ‘The path of the just is smooth [or “plain"]; Thou levellest smooth the path of the just.’ To render ‘upright’ instead of ‘smooth’ seems to make the statement almost an identical proposition, and is tame. What is meant is, that, in the light of the end, the path which often seemed rough is vindicated. The judgment has showed that the righteous man’s course had no unnecessary difficulties. The goal explains the road. The good man’s path is smooth, not because of its own nature, but because God makes it so. We are to look for the clearing of our road, not to ourselves, nor to circumstances, but to Him; and even when it is engineered through rocks and roughnesses, to believe that He will make the rough places plain, or give us shoes of iron and brass to encounter them. Trust that when the journey is over the road will be explained, and that this reflection, which breaks the current of the swift song of the prophet, will be the abiding, happy conviction of heaven.

Lastly, the song looks back and tells how the poor and needy, in whose name the prophet speaks, had filled the dreary past, while the tyranny of the fallen city lasted, with yearning for the judgment which has now come at last. Isa. 26:8 - Isa. 26:9 breathe the very spirit of patient longing and meek hope. There is a certain tone of triumph in that 'Yea,' as if the singer would point to the great judgment now accomplished, as vindicating the long, weary hours of hope deferred. That for which 'the poor and needy' wait is the coming 'in the path of Thy judgments.' The attitude of expectance is as much the duty and support of Christians as of Israel. We have a greater future clearer before us than they had. The world needs God's coming in judgment more than ever; and it says little for either the love to God or the benevolence towards man of average Christians, that they should know so little of that yearning of soul which breathes through so much of the Old Testament. For the glory of God and the good of men, we should have the desire of our souls turned to His manifestation of Himself in His righteous judgments. It was no personal end which bred the prophet's yearning. True, the 'night' round him was dreary enough, and sorrow lay black on his people and himself; but it was God's 'name' and 'memorial' that was uppermost in his desires. That is to say, the chief object of the devout soul's longings should be the glory of God's revealed character. And the deepest reason for wishing that He would flash forth from His hiding-place in judgments, is because such an apocalypse is the only way by which wilfully blind eyes can be made to see, and wilfully unrighteous hearts can be made to practise righteousness.

Isaiah believed in the wholesome effect of terror. His confidence in the power of judgments to teach the obstinate corresponds to the Old Testament point of view, and contains a truth for all points of view; but it is not the whole truth. We know only too well that sorrows and judgments do not work infallibly, and that men 'being often reproved, harden their necks.' We know, too, more clearly than any prophet of old could know, that the last arrow in God's quiver is not some unheard-of awfulness of judgment, but an unspeakable gift of love, and that if that 'favour shown to the wicked' in the life and death of God's Son does not lead him to 'learn righteousness,' nothing else will.

But while this is true, the prophet's aspirations are founded on the facts of human nature too, and judgments do sometimes startle those whom kindness had failed to touch. It is an awful thought that human nature may so steel itself against the whole armoury of divine weapons as that favour and severity are equally blunted, and the heart remains unpierced by either. It is an awful thought that there may be induced such truculent obstinacy of love of evil that, even when in 'a land of uprightness,' a man shall choose evil, and forcibly shut his eyes, that he may not see the majesty of the Lord, which he does not wish to see because it condemns his choice, and threatens to burn up him and his work together. A blasted tree when all the woods are green, a fleece dry when all around is rejoicing in the dew, a window dark when the whole city is illuminated, one black sheep amid the white flock, or anything else anomalous and alone in its evil, is less tragic than the sight, so common, of a man so sold to sin that the presence of good only makes him angry and restless. It is possible to dwell amidst the full light of Christian truth, and in a society moulded by its precepts, and to be unblessed, unsoftened thereby. If not softened, then hardened; and the wicked who in the land of uprightness deals wrongfully is all the worse for the light which he hated because it showed him the sinfulness of the sin which he obstinately loved and would keep.

25)Isaiah 27:5

Isaiah

THE GRASP THAT BRINGS PEACE

Isa. 27:5.

Lyrical emotion makes the prophet's language obscure by reason of its swift transitions from one mood of feeling to another. But the main drift here is discernible. God is guarding Israel, His vineyard, and before Him its foes are weak as ‘thorns and briers,’ whose end is to be burned. With daring anthropomorphism, the prophet puts into God’s mouth a longing for the enemies to measure their strength against His, a warrior’s eagerness for the fight. But at once this martial tone gives place to the tender invitation of the text, and the infinite divine willingness to be reconciled to the enemy speaks wooingly and offers conditions of peace. All this has universal application to our relations to God.

I. The Hostility.

That our relations with God are ‘strained,’ and that men are ‘enemies of God,’ is often repelled as exaggeration, if not as directly false. And, no doubt, the Scripture representation has often been so handled as to become caricature rather than portraiture. Scripture does not deny the lingering presence in men of goodness, partial and defective, nor does it assert that conscious antagonism to God is active in godless men. But it does assert that ‘God is not in all their thoughts,’ and that their wills are ‘not subject to the law of God.’ And in such a case as man’s relations to God, indifference and forgetfulness cannot but rest upon divergence of will and contrast of character. Why do men ‘not like to retain God in their knowledge, ‘but because they feel that the thought of Him would spoil the feast, like the skeleton in the banqueting chamber? Beneath the apparent indifference lie opposition of will, meeting God’s ‘Thou shalt’ with man’s ‘I will not’; opposition of moral nature, impurity shrinking from perfect purity; opposition of affection, the warmth of human love being diverted to other objects than God.

II. The entreating Love that is not turned aside by hostility.

The antagonism is wholly on man’s part.

True, man’s opposition necessarily turns certain sides of the divine character to present a hostile front to him. Not only God’s physical attributes, if we may so call them, but the moral attributes which guide the energies of these, namely, His holiness and His righteousness, and the acts of His sovereignty which flow from these, must be in opposition to the man who has set himself in opposition to God. ‘The face of the Lord is against them that do evil.’ If it were not, He would not be God.

But still, God’s love enfolds all men in its close and tender clasp. As the context says, in close connection with the threat to burn the briers and thorns, ‘Fury is not in Me.’ Man’s hostility does not rouse God’s. He wars against the sin because He still loves the sinner. His love ‘must come with a rod,’ but, at the same time, it comes ‘with the spirit of meekness.’ It gives its enemy all that it can; but it cannot give all that it would.

He stoops to sue for our amity. It is the creditor who exhausts beseechings on His debtor, so much does He wish to ‘agree with His adversary quickly.’ The tender pleading of the Apostle was but a faint echo of the marvellous condescension of God, when he, ‘in God’s stead, besought: ‘Be ye reconciled to God.’

III. The grasp which ends alienation.

The word for ‘strength’ here means a stronghold or fortified place, which serves as an asylum or refuge. There may be some mingling of an allusion to the fugitive’s taking hold of the horns of the altar, and so being safe from the vengeance of his pursuers. If we may take this double metaphor as implied in the text, it vividly illustrates the essence of the faith which brings us into peace with God. That faith is the flight of the soul to God, and, in another aspect, it is the clinging of the soul to Him. How much more these two metaphors tell of the real nature of faith than many a theological treatise! They speak of the urgency of the peril from which it seeks deliverance. A fugitive with the hot breath of the avenger of blood panting behind him, and almost feeling the spear-point in his back, would not let the grass grow under his feet. They speak of the energetic clutch of faith, as that of the man gripping the horns of the altar. They suggest that faith is something much more vital than intellectual assent or credence, namely, an act of the whole man realising his need and casting himself on God.

And they set in clear light what is the connection between faith and salvation. It is not the hand that grasps the altar that secures safety, but the altar itself. It is not the flight to the fortress, but the massive walls themselves, which keeps those who hunt after the fugitive at bay. It is not my faith, but the God on whom my faith fastens, that brings peace to my conscience.

IV. The peace that this grasp brings.

In Christ God has ‘put away all His wrath, and turned Himself from the fierceness of His anger.’ And He was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. It is a one-sided warfare that men wage with Him, and when we abandon our opposition to Him, the war is ended. We might say that God, clasped by faith and trusted in and loved, is the asylum from God opposed and feared. His moral nature must be against evil, but faith unites us to Jesus, and, by union with Him, we receive the germ of a nature which has no affinity with evil, and which God wholly delights in and loves. To those who live by the life, and growingly bear the image of His Son, the divine Nature turns a face all bright and favouring, and His moral and physical attributes are all enlisted on their side. The fortress looks grim to outsiders gazing up at its strong walls and frowning battlements, but to dwellers within, these give security, and in its inmost centre is a garden, with flowers and a springing fountain, whither the noise of fighting never penetrates. We have but to cease to be against Him, and to grasp the facts of His love as revealed in the Cross of Christ, the sacrifice who taketh away the sin of the world, and we are at peace with God. Being at peace with Him, the discords of our natures warring against themselves are attuned into harmony, and we are at peace within. And when God and we are at one, and we are at one with ourselves, then all things will be on our side, and will work together for good. To such a man the ancient promise will be fulfilled: ‘Thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field, and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.’

26)Isaiah 28:1-2

Isaiah

THE JUDGMENT OF DRUNKARDS AND MOCKERS

Isa. 28:1 - Isa. 28:13.

This prophecy probably falls in the first years of Hezekiah, when Samaria still stood, and the storm of war was gathering black in the north. The portion included in the text predicts the fall of Samaria [Isa. 28:1 - Isa. 28:6] and then turns to Judah, which is guilty of the same sins as the northern capital, and adds to them mockery of the prophet's message. Isaiah speaks with fiery indignation and sharp sarcasm. His words are aflame with loathing of the moral corruption of both kingdoms, and he fastens on the one common vice of drunkenness-not as if it were the only sin, but because it shows in the grossest form the rottenness underlying the apparent beauty.

I. The woe on Samaria [Isa. 28:1 - Isa. 28:6]. Travellers are unanimous in their raptures over the fertility and beauty of the valley in which Samaria stood, perched on its sunny, fruitful hill, amid its vineyards. The situation of the city naturally suggests the figure which regards it as a sparkling coronet or flowery wreath, twined round the brows of the hill; and that poetical metaphor is the more natural, since revellers were wont to twist garlands in their hair, when they reclined at their orgies. The city is 'the crown of pride'-that is, the object of boasting and foolish confidence-and is also 'the fading flower of his sparkling ornament'; that is, the flower which is the ornament of Ephraim, but is destined to fade.

The picture of the city passes into that of the drunken debauch, where the chief men of Samaria sprawl, 'smitten down' by wine, and with the innocent flowers on their hot temples drooping in the fumes of the feast. But bright and sunny as the valley is, glittering in the light as the city sits on her hill, careless and confident as the revellers are, a black cloud lies on the horizon, and one of the terrible sudden storms which such lands know comes driving up the valley. 'The Lord hath a mighty and strong one'-the conqueror from the north, who is God's instrument, though he knows it not.

The swift, sudden, irresistible onslaught of the Assyrian is described, in harmony with the figure of the flowery coronal, as a tempest which beats down the flowers and flings the sodden crown to the ground. The word rendered 'tempest' is graphic, meaning literally a 'downpour.' First comes hail, which batters the flowers to shreds; then the effect of the storm is described as 'destruction,' and then the hurrying words turn back to paint the downpour of rain, 'mighty' from its force in falling, and 'overflowing' from its abundance, which soon sets all the fields swimming with flood water. What chance has a poor twist of flowers in such a storm? Its beauty will be marred, and all the petals beaten off, and nothing remains but that it should be trampled into mud. The rush of the prophet's denunciation is swift and irresistible as the assault it describes, and it flashes from one metaphor to another without pause. The fertility of the valley of Samaria shapes the figures. As the picture of the flowery chaplet, so that which follows of the early fig, is full of local colour. A fig in June is a delicacy, which is sure to be plucked and eaten as soon as seen. Such a dainty, desirable morsel will Samaria be, as sweet and as little satisfying to the all-devouring hunger of the Assyrian.

But storms sweep the air clear, and everything will not go down before this one. The flower fadeth, but there is a chaplet of beauty which men may wreathe round their heads, which shall bloom for ever. All sensuous enjoyment has its limits in time, as well as in nobleness and exquisiteness; but when it is all done with, the beauty and festal ornament which truly crowns humanity shall smell sweet and blossom. The prophecy had regard simply to the issue of the historical disaster to which it pointed, and it meant that, after the storm of Assyrian conquest, there would still be, for the servants of God, the residue of the people, both in Israel and in Judah, a fuller possession of the blessings which descend on the men who make God their portion. But the principle involved is for ever true. The sweeping away of the perishable does draw true hearts nearer to God.

So the two halves of this prophecy give us eternal truths as to the certain destruction awaiting the joys of sense, and the permanence of the beauty and strength which belong to those who take God for their portion.

Drunkenness seems to have been a national sin in Israel; for Micah rebukes it as vehemently as Isaiah, and it is a clear bit of Christian duty in England to-day to 'set the trumpet to thy mouth and show the people' this sin. But the lessons of the prophecy are wider than the specific form of evil denounced. All setting of affection and seeking of satisfaction in that which, in all the pride of its beauty, is 'a fading flower,' is madness and sin. Into every life thus turned to the perishable will come the crash of the destroying storm, the mutterings of which might reach the ears of the feasters, if they were not drunk with the fumes of their deceiving delights. Only one kind of life has its roots in that which abides, and is safe from tempest and change. Amaranthine flowers bloom only in heaven, and must be brought thence, if they are to garland earthly foreheads. If we take God for ours, then whatever tempests may howl, and whatever fragile though fragrant joys may be swept away, we shall find in Him all that the world ‘fails to give to its votaries. He is ‘a crown of glory’ and ‘a diadem of beauty.’ Our humanity is never so fair as when it is made beautiful by the possession of Him. All that sense vainly seeks in earth, faith finds in God. Not only beauty, but ‘a spirit of judgment,’ in its narrower sense and in its widest, is breathed into those to whom God is ‘the master light of all their seeing’; and, yet more, He is strength to all who have to fight. Thus the close union of trustful souls with God, the actual inspiration of these, and the perfecting of their nature from communion with God, are taught us in the great words, which tell how beauty, justice, and strength are all given in the gift of Jehovah Himself to His people.

II. The prophet turns to Judah [Isa. 28:7 - Isa. 28:13], and charges them with the same disgusting debauchery. His language is vehement in its loathing, and describes the filthy orgies of those who should have been the guides of the people with almost painful realism. Note how the words ‘reel’ and ‘stagger’ are repeated, and also the words ‘wine’ and ‘strong drink.’ We see the priests’ and prophets’ unsteady gait, and then they ‘stumble’ or fall. There they lie amid the filth, like hogs in a sty. It is very coarse language, but fine words are the Devil’s veils for coarse sins; and it is needful sometimes to call spades spades, and not to be ashamed to tell men plainly how ugly are the vices which they are not ashamed to commit. No doubt some of the drunken priests and false prophets in Jerusalem thought Isaiah extremely vulgar and indelicate, in talking about staggering teachers and tables swimming in ‘vomit.’ But he had to speak out. So deep was the corruption that the officials were tipsy even when engaged in their official duties, the prophets reeled while they were seeing visions; the judges could not sit upright even when pronouncing judgment.

Isa. 28:9 - Isa. 28:10 are generally taken as a sarcastic quotation of the drunkards’ scoffs at the prophet. They might be put in inverted commas. Their meaning is, ‘Does he take us grave and reverend seigniors, priests and prophets, to be babies just weaned, that he pesters us with these monotonous petty preachings, fit only for the nursery, which he calls his “message"?’ In Isa. 28:10, the original for ‘precept upon precept,’ etc., is a series of short words, which may be taken as reproducing the ‘babbling tones of the drunken mockers.’

The loose livers of all generations talk in the same fashion about the stern morality which rebukes their vice. They call it weak, commonplace, fit for children, and they pretend that they despise it. They are much too enlightened for such antiquated teaching. Old women and children may take it in, but men of the world, who have seen life, and know what is what, are not to be fooled so. ‘What will this babbler say?’ was asked by the wise men of Athens, who were but repeating the scoffs of the prophets and priests of Jerusalem, and the same jeers are bitter in the mouth of many a profligate man to-day. It is the fate of all strict morality to be accounted childish by the people whom it inconveniently condemns.

In Isa. 28:11 and onwards the prophet speaks. He catches up the mockers’ words, and retorts them. They have scoffed at his message as if it were stammering speech. They shall hear another kind of stammerers when the fierce invaders’ harsh and unintelligible language commands them. The reason why these foreign voices would have authority, was the national disregard of God’s voice. ‘Ye would not hear’ Him when, by His prophet, He spoke gracious invitations to rest, and to give the nation rest, in obedience and trust. Therefore they shall hear the battle-cry of the conqueror, and have to obey orders spoken in a barbarous tongue.

Of course, the language meant is the Assyrian, which, though cognate with Hebrew, is so unlike as to be unintelligible to the people. But is not the threat the statement of a great truth always being fulfilled towards the disobedient? If we will not listen to that loving Voice which calls us to rest, we shall be forced to listen to the harsh and strident tones of conquering enemies who command us to slavish toil. If we will not be guided by His eye and voice, we shall be governed by whip and bridle. Our choice is either to hearken to the divine call, which is loving and gentle, and invites to deep repose springing from faith, or to have to hear the voice of the taskmasters. The monotony of despised moral and religious teaching shall give place to a more terrible monotony, even that of continuous judgments.

‘The mills of God grind slowly.’ Bit by bit, with gradual steps, with dismal persistence, like the slow drops on the rock, the judgments of God trickle out on the mocking heart. It takes a long time for a child to learn a pageful when he gets his lesson a sentence at a time. So slowly do His chastisements fall on men who have despised the continuous messages of His love. The word of the Lord, which was laughed at when it clothed itself in a prophet’s speech, will be heard in more formidable shape, when it is wrapped in the long-drawn-out miseries of years of bondage. The warning is as needful for us as for these drunken priests and scornful rulers. The principle embodied is true in this day as it was then, and we too have to choose between serving God in gladness, hearkening to the voice of His word, and so finding rest to our souls, and serving the world, the flesh, and the devil, and so experiencing the perpetual dropping of the fiery rain of His judgments.

27)Isaiah 28:3-4

Isaiah

THE JUDGMENT OF DRUNKARDS AND MOCKERS

A CROWN OF PRIDE OR A CROWN OF GLORY

Isa. 28:3 - Isa. 28:5.

The reference is probably to Samaria as a chief city of Israel. The image is suggested by the situation of Samaria, high on a hill-side, crowning the valley, and by the rich vegetation and bright flowers which makes it even now one of the few lovely scenes in Palestine; and by the luxurious riot and sensual excess that were always characteristic of the northern kingdom.

The destruction of Samaria and of the kingdom, then, is here prophesied-the garland will fade, the hail will batter all its drooping flowerets, and it shall be trodden under foot. Look at that withered wreath that gleamed yesterday on some fair head, to-day flung into the ashpit or kicked about the street.

That is a modern rendering of the prophet’s imagery. But the reference goes further than merely to the city: the whole state of the nation is expressed by the symbol, as doomed to quick decay, fading in itself, and further smitten down by divine judgments.

There is a contrasted picture, that of ‘the residue of the people’ to whom there is an amaranthine crown, a festal diadem glorious and beautiful, which can never fade, even God Himself. To them who love Him He is an ornament, and His presence is the consecration of the true joyful feast. They who are crowned by Him are crowned, not for idle revelry, but for strenuous toil [‘sit in judgment’] and for brave purpose [‘turn the battle to the gate,’] and their coronation day is ever the day when earthly garlands are withered, whether it be the crises and convulsions of nations and institutions, or times of personal trial, or ‘in the hour of death or in the day of judgment.’

Expanding then these thoughts, we have-

I. All godless joys are but fading chaplets.

Of course the first application of such words is to purely sensuous delights.

Men who seek to make life a mere revel and banquet.

Nothing is so short-lived as gratification of appetite. It is not merely that each act lasts but for a moment, but also that past gratifications leave no sort of solace to the appetite behind them; whereas past acquirements or deeds of goodness are a perpetual joy as well as the foundation of the present. There is something essentially isolated in each act of sensuous delight. No man can by so willing recall the taste of eaten food, nor slake his thirst by remembrance of former draughts, or cool himself by thinking of ‘frosty Caucasus.’ But each such gratification is done when it is done, and there is an end of its power to gratify.

Further, the power of enjoyment wanes, though the lust for it waxes. Hence each act has less and less power of satisfying.

One sees *blase* young men of twenty-five. It was a man of under thirty-five who wrote, ‘Man delights not me, no, nor woman neither.’ It was a used-up *roue* that was represented as saying, ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’ It was of sensuous ‘pleasures’ that poor Burns wrote,-

‘Like the snowfall in the river,
A moment white,-then melts for ever.’

When a people is given over to such excess, late or soon the fate of Samaria comes upon them. Think of the French Revolution or of the fall of Rome, and learn that the prophet was announcing a law for all nations, in his fiery denunciation, and one which holds good to-day as ever.

But we may generalise more widely. Every godless life is essentially transitory; of course, all life is so in one view. But suppose two men, working side by side at the same occupation, passing through the same circumstances. So far as physical changes go, these men are the same. Both lose much. Both leave behind much. Both cease to be interested in much that was dear to them. Both die at last, and leave it all. Is there any difference? The transitoriness is the same, and the eternal consequences are eternal alike in both; and yet there is a very solemn sense in which the one man’s life has utterly perished, and the other’s abides. Suppose a man, educated to be a first-rate man of business, dies. Which of his trained faculties will he have scope for in that new order of things? Or a student, or a lawyer, or a statesman?

Oh, it is not our natural mortality that makes these thoughts so awful; but it is the thought that the man who is doing these things is immortal. The head which wears the fading wreath will live for ever. ‘What will ye do in the end?’

II. Godly life brings unfading joys.

Communion with God yields abiding joys. The law of change remains the same. The law of death remains the same. But the motives which direct and impel the godly man are beyond the reach of change.

The habits which he contracts are for heaven as well as for earth. The treasures which he amasses will always be his.

His life in its essence and his work are one in all worlds. What a grand continuity, then, knits into one a godly life whether it is lived on earth or in heaven!

Communion with God gives beauty and ornament to the whole character. It brings the true refining and perfecting of the soul. No doubt many Christian men, as we see them, are but poor specimens of this effect of godliness; still, it is an effect produced in proportion to the depth and continuity of their communion. We might dwell on the effect on Will, Affections, Understanding, produced by dwelling in God. It is simple fact that the highest conceivable type of beauty is only reached through communion with God.

Communion with God gives power as well as gladness. The life of abiding with God is also one of strenuous effort and real warfare. In the context it is promised that God will be for strength to them that turn the battle to the gate.

The luxurious life of self-indulgence ends, as all selfish life must do, in the vanishing of delights. The life of joy in God issues, as all true joy does, in power for work and in power for conflict.

‘God doth anoint thee with His odorous oil, to wrestle, not to reign.’

III. There will be a coronation day.

‘In that day,’ the day when ‘the crown of pride shall be trodden under foot,’ the people of God are crowned with the diadem of beauty which is God Himself. That twofold work of that one day suggests-

The double aspect of trials and sorrows.

The double aspect of death.

The double aspect of final Judgment.

‘Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day.’

To be crowned or discrowned ‘in that day’ is the alternative set before each of us. Which of the two do we choose?

28)Isaiah 28:5

Isaiah

THE JUDGMENT OF DRUNKARDS AND MOCKERS

MAN’S CROWN AND GOD’S

Isa. 28:5. - Isa. 62:3.

Connection of first prophecy-destruction of Samaria. Its situation, crowning the hill with its walls and towers, its fertile ‘fat valley,’ the flagrant immorality and drunkenness of its inhabitants, and its final ruin, are all presented in the highly imaginative picture of its fall as being like the trampling under foot of a garland on a reveller’s head, the roses of which fade and droop amid the fumes of the banqueting hall, and are then flung out on the highway. The contrast presented is very striking and beautiful. When all that gross and tumultuous beauty has faded and died, then God Himself will be a crown of beauty to His people.

The second text comes into remarkable line with this. The verbal resemblance is not quite so strong in the original. The words for *diadem* and *crown* are not the same; the word rendered *glory* in the second text is rendered *beauty* in the first, but the two texts are entirely one in meaning. The same metaphor, then, is used with reference to what God is to the Church and what the Church is to God. He is its crown, it is His.

I. The Possession of God is the Coronation of Man.

> [a] Crowns were worn by guests at feasts. They who possess God sit at a table perpetually spread with all which the soul can wish or want. Contrast the perishable delights of sense and godless life with the calm

and immortal joys of communion with God; ‘a crown that fadeth not away’ beside withered garlands.

[b] Crowns were worn by kings. They who serve God are thereby invested with rule over selves, over circumstances, over all externals. He alone gives completeness to self-control.

[c] Crowns were worn by priests. The highest honour and dignity of man’s nature is thereby reached. To have God is like a beam of sunshine on a garden, which brings out the colours of all the flowers; contrast with the same garden in the grey monotony of a cloudy twilight.

II. The Coronation of Man in God is the Coronation of God in Man.

That includes the following thoughts.

The true glory of God is in the communication of Himself. What a wonderful light that throws on divine character! It is equivalent to ‘God is Love.’

He who is glorified by God glorifies God, as showing the most wonderful working of His power in making such a man out of such material, by an alchemy that can convert base metal into fine gold; as showing the most wonderful condescension of His love in taking to His heart man, into whose flesh the rotting leprosy of sin has eaten.

Such a man will glorify God by becoming a conscious herald of His praise. He who has God in his heart will magnify Him by lip and life. Redeemed men are ‘secretaries of His praise’ to men, and ‘to principalities and powers in heavenly places is made known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God.’

He who thus glorifies God is held in God’s hand.

‘None shall pluck them out of My Father’s hand.’

All this will be perfected in heaven. Redeemed men lead the universal chorus that thunders forth ‘glory to Him that sitteth on the throne.’

‘He shall come to be glorified in His saints.’

‘Glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son also may glorify Thee.’

29)Isaiah 28:6-13

Isaiah

THE JUDGMENT OF DRUNKARDS AND MOCKERS

Isa. 28:1 - Isa. 28:13.

This prophecy probably falls in the first years of Hezekiah, when Samaria still stood, and the storm of war was gathering black in the north. The portion included in the text predicts the fall of Samaria [Isa. 28:1 - Isa. 28:6] and then turns to Judah, which is guilty of the same sins as the northern capital, and adds to them mockery of the prophet’s message. Isaiah speaks with fiery indignation and sharp sarcasm. His words are aflame with loathing of the moral corruption of both kingdoms, and he fastens on the one common vice of drunkenness-not as if it were the only sin, but because it shows in the grossest form the rottenness underlying the apparent beauty.

I. The woe on Samaria [Isa. 28:1 - Isa. 28:6]. Travellers are unanimous in their raptures over the fertility and beauty of the valley in which Samaria stood, perched on its sunny, fruitful hill, amid its vineyards. The situation of the city naturally suggests the figure which regards it as a sparkling coronet or flowery wreath, twined round the brows of the hill; and that poetical metaphor is the more natural, since revellers were wont to twist garlands in their hair, when they reclined at their orgies. The city is ‘the crown of pride’-that is, the object of boasting and foolish confidence-and is also ‘the fading flower of his sparkling ornament’; that is, the flower which is the ornament of Ephraim, but is destined to fade.

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The loose livers of all generations talk in the same fashion about the stern morality which rebukes their vice. They call it weak, commonplace, fit for children, and they pretend that they despise it. They are much too enlightened for such antiquated teaching. Old women and children may take it in, but men of the world, who have seen life, and know what is what, are not to be fooled so. 'What will this babbler say?' was asked by the wise men of Athens, who were but repeating the scoffs of the prophets and priests of Jerusalem, and the same jeers are bitter in the mouth of many a profligate man to-day. It is the fate of all strict morality to be accounted childish by the people whom it inconveniently condemns.

In Isa. 28:11 and onwards the prophet speaks. He catches up the mockers' words, and retorts them. They have scoffed at his message as if it were stammering speech. They shall hear another kind of stammerers when the fierce invaders' harsh and unintelligible language commands them. The reason why these foreign voices would have authority, was the national disregard of God’s voice. ‘Ye would not hear’ Him when, by His prophet, He spoke gracious invitations to rest, and to give the nation rest, in obedience and trust. Therefore they shall hear the battle-cry of the conqueror, and have to obey orders spoken in a barbarous tongue.

Of course, the language meant is the Assyrian, which, though cognate with Hebrew, is so unlike as to be unintelligible to the people. But is not the threat the statement of a great truth always being fulfilled towards the disobedient? If we will not listen to that loving Voice which calls us to rest, we shall be forced to listen to the harsh and strident tones of conquering enemies who command us to slavish toil. If we will not be guided by His eye and voice, we shall be governed by whip and bridle. Our choice is either to hearken to the divine call, which is loving and gentle, and invites to deep repose springing from faith, or to have to hear the voice of the taskmasters. The monotony of despised moral and religious teaching shall give place to a more terrible monotony, even that of continuous judgments.

‘The mills of God grind slowly.’ Bit by bit, with gradual steps, with dismal persistence, like the slow drops on the rock, the judgments of God trickle out on the mocking heart. It takes a long time for a child to learn a pageful when he gets his lesson a sentence at a time. So slowly do His chastisements fall on men who have despised the continuous messages of His love. The word of the Lord, which was laughed at when it clothed itself in a prophet’s speech, will be heard in more formidable shape, when it is wrapped in the long-drawn-out miseries of years of bondage. The warning is as needful for us as for these drunken priests and scornful rulers. The principle embodied is true in this day as it was then, and we too have to choose between serving God in gladness, hearkening to the voice of His word, and so finding rest to our souls, and serving the world, the flesh, and the devil, and so experiencing the perpetual dropping of the fiery rain of His judgments.

30)Isaiah 28:16

Isaiah

THE FOUNDATION OF GOD

Isa. 28:16.

‘Therefore thus saith the Lord.’ Then these great words are God’s answer to something. And that something is the scornful defiance by the rulers of Israel of the prophet’s threatenings. By their deeds, whether by their words or no, they said that they had made friends of their enemies, and that so they were sure that, whatsoever came, they were safe. To this contemptuous and false reliance God answers, not as we might expect, first of all, by a repetition of the threatenings, but by a majestic disclosure of the sure refuge which He has provided, set in contrast to the flimsy and false ones, on which these men built their truculent confidence; ‘I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone.’ And then, after the exhibition of the great mercy which has been evoked by the very blasphemy of the rulers, and not till then, does He reiterate the threatenings of judgment, against which this foundation is laid, that men may escape; God first declares the refuge, and then warns of the tempest.

Without entering at all upon the question, which for all believing and simple souls is settled by the New Testament, of the Messianic application of the words before us, I take it for granted. There may no doubt be an allusion here to the great solid blocks which travellers tell us may still be seen at the base of the encircling walls of the Temple hill. A stone so gigantic and so firm God has laid for man to build upon.

I. Note, then, first, the foundation, which is Christ.

There are many aspects of the great thought on which I cannot touch even for a moment. For instance, let me remind you how, in a very deep sense, Jesus Christ is the foundation of the whole of the divine dealings with us; and how, in another aspect, historically, since the day on which He appeared on earth, He has more and more manifestly and completely been the foundation of the whole history of the world. But passing these aspects, let us rather fix upon those which are more immediately in the prophet’s mind.

Jesus Christ is the foundation laid for all men’s security against every tempest or assault. The context has portrayed the coming of a tremendous storm and inundation, in view of which this foundation is laid. The building reared on it then is, therefore, to be a refuge and an asylum. Have not we all of us, like these scornful men in Jerusalem, built our refuges on vain hopes, on creatural affections, on earthly possessions, on this, that, and the other false thing, all of which are to be swept away when the storm comes? And does there not come upon us all the blast of the ordinary calamities to which flesh is heir, and have we not all more or less consciousness of our own evil and sinfulness; and does there not lie before every one of us at the end of life that solemn last struggle, and beyond that, as we most of us believe, a judgment for all that we have done in the body? ‘I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone.’ Build upon that, and neither the tempest of earthly calamities, changes, disappointments, sorrows, losses, nor the scourge that is wielded because of our sins, nor the last wild tempest that sweeps a man on the wings of its strong blast from out of life into the dark region, nor the solemn final retribution and judgment, shall ever touch us. And when the hail sweeps away the refuge of lies, and the waters overflow the hiding-place, this foundation stands sure-

And lo! from sin and grief and shame
I hide me, Jesus, in Thy name.

Brethren, the one foundation on which building, we can build secure, and safe as well as secure, is that foundation which is laid in the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God. The foundation of all our security is Jesus Christ.

We may look at the same thought under somewhat different aspects. He is the foundation for all our thinking and opinions, for all our belief and our knowledge. ‘In Him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,’ and whatsoever of solid fact men can grasp in their thinkings in regard to all the most important facts and truths with which they come into relation, is to be found in the life and death of Jesus Christ, and in the truths which these reveal. He is the foundation of all our knowledge of God, and of all our true knowledge of ourselves, of all our true knowledge of duty, and all our true knowledge of the relations between the present and the future, between man and God.

And in His life, in the history of His death and resurrection, is the only foundation for any real knowledge of the awful mysteries that lie beyond the grave. He is the Alpha from whom all truth must be deduced, the Omega to which it all leads up. Certitude is in Him. Apart from Him we are but groping amid peradventures. If we *know* anything about God it is due to Jesus Christ. If we *know* anything about ourselves it is due to Him. If we *know* anything about what men ought to do, it is because He has done all human duty. And if, into the mist and darkness that wraps the future, there has ever travelled one clear beam of insight, it is because He has died and risen again. If we have Him, and ponder upon the principles that are involved in, and flow from, the facts of His life and death, then we know; and 'the truth as it is in Jesus' is the truth indeed. To possess Him is to hold the key to all mysteries, and knowledge without Him is but knowledge of the husk, the kernel being all unreached. That Stone is the foundation on which the whole stately fabric of man's knowledge of the highest things must ever be reared.

He is the foundation of all restful love. A Czar of Russia, in the old days, was mad enough to build a great palace upon the ice-blocks of the Neva. And when the spring came, and the foundations melted, the house, full of delights and luxury, sank beneath the river. We build upon frozen water, and when the thaw comes, what we build sinks and is lost to sight. Instead of love that twines round the creature and trails, bleeding and bruised, along the ground when the prop is taken away, let us turn our hearts to the warm, close, pure, perfect changeless love of the undying Christ, and we shall build above the fear of change. The dove's nest in the pine-tree falls in ruin when the axe is laid to the root. Let us build our nests in the clefts of the rock and no hand will ever reach them. Christ is the foundation on which we may build an immortal love.

He is the foundation for all noble and pure living. He is the fixed pattern to which it may be conformed. Otherwise man's notions of what is virtuous and good are much at the mercy of conventional variations of opinion. This class, that community, this generation, that school, all differ in their notions of what is true nobleness and goodness of life. And we are left at the mercy of fluctuating standards unless we take Christ in His recorded life as the one realised ideal of manhood, the pattern of what we ought to be. We cannot find a fixed and available model for conduct anywhere so useful, so complete, so capable of application to all varieties of human life and disposition as we find in Him, who was not this man or that man, in whom the manly and the feminine, the gentle and the strong, the public and the private graces were equally developed. In Christ there is no limitation or taint. In Christ there is nothing narrow or belonging to a school. This water has no taste of any of the rocks through which it flowed. You cannot say of Jesus Christ that He is a Jew or a Gentile, that He is man or woman, that He is of the ancient age or the modern type, that He is cut after this pattern or that. All beauty and all grace are in Him, and every man finds there the example that he needs. So, as the perfect pattern, He is the foundation for all noble character.

As the one sufficient motive for holy and beauteous living, He is the foundation. ‘If ye love Me, keep My commandments.’ That is a new thing in the world’s morality, and that one motive, and that motive alone, has power, as the spring sunshine has, to draw beauty from out the little sheaths of green, and to tempt the radiance of the flowers to unfold their lustre. They that find the reason and the motive for goodness and purity in Christ’s love to them, and their answering love to Christ, will build a far fairer fabric of a life than any others, let them toil at the building as they may. So, dear brethren, on this foundation God has built His mercy to all generations, and on this foundation you and I may build our safety, our love, our thinkings, our obedience, and rest secure.

II. Note next the tried preciousness of the foundation.

The language of the text, ‘a stone of proof,’ as it reads in the original, probably means a stone which has been tested and stood the trial. And because it is thus a tested stone, it therefore is a precious stone. There are two kinds of testing-the testing from the assaults of enemies, and the testing by the building upon it of friends. And both these methods of proof have been applied, and it has stood the test.

Think of all the assaults that have been made from this side and the other against Christ and His gospel, and what has become of them all? Travellers tell us how they often see some wandering tribes of savage Arabs trying to move the great stones, for instance, of Baalbec-those wonders of unfinished architecture. But what can a crowd of such people, with all their crowbars and levers, do to the great stone bedded there, where it has been for centuries? They cannot stir it one hair's-breadth. And so, against Jesus Christ and His gospel there has stormed for eighteen hundred years an assaulting crowd, varying in its individuals and in its methods of attack, but the same in its purpose, and the same in the fruitlessness of its effort. Century after century they have said, as they are saying to-day, '*Now* the final assault is going to be delivered; it can never stand *this*.' And when the smoke has cleared away there may be a little blackening upon the edge, but there is not a chip off its bulk, and it stands in its bed where it did; and of all the grand preparations for a shattering explosion, nothing is left but a sulphurous smell, and a wreath of smoke, and both are floating away down into the distance. Generation after generation has attacked the gospel; generation after generation has been foiled; and I do not need to be a prophet, or the son of a prophet, to be quite sure of this, that all who to-day are trying to destroy men's faith in the Incarnate Son of God, who died for them and rose again, will meet the same fate. I can see the ancient and discredited systems of unbelief, that have gone down into oblivion, rising from their seats, as the prophet in his great vision saw the kings of the earth, to greet the last comer who had fought against God and failed, with 'Art thou also become weak as we? Art thou become like unto us?' The stone will stand, whosoever tries to blow it up with his dynamite, or to pound it with his hammers.

But there is the other kind of testing. One proves the foundation by building upon it. If the stone be soft, if it be slender, if it be imperfectly bedded, it will crumble, it will shift, it will sink. But this stone has borne all the weight that the world has laid upon it, and borne it up. Did any man ever come to Jesus Christ with a sorrow that He could not comfort, with a sin that He could not forgive, with a soul that He could not save? And we may trust Him to the end. He is a 'tried stone.' 'This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles,' has been the experience of nineteen centuries.

So, being tried, it is precious,-precious to God who laid it there at a great and real cost to Himself-having given up 'His only begotten Son'; precious, inasmuch as building upon it is the one safety from the raging tempest and flood that would else engulf and destroy us.

III. Note, next, the process of building.

The metaphor seems to be abandoned in the last words of our text, but it is only apparently so. ‘He that believeth shall not make haste.’ So, then, we build by believing. The act of building is simple faith in Jesus Christ. We *come* to Him, as the Apostle Peter has it in his quotation of this text-come to Him as unto a living stone, and the coming and the building are both of them metaphors for the one simple thing, trust in the Lord. The bond that unites men on earth with Christ in Heaven, is the exercise of simple faith in Him. By it they come into contact with Him, and receive from Him the security and the blessing that He can bestow. Nothing else brings a man into living fellowship with Him. When we trust in the Lord we, as it were, are bedded into Him; and resting upon Him with all our weight, then we are safe. That confidence involves the abandonment of all the ‘refuges of lies.’ There must be utter self-distrust and forsaking and turning away from every dependence upon anything else, if we are to trust ourselves to Jesus Christ. But the figure of a foundation which gives security and stability to the stones laid upon it, does not exhaust all the blessedness of this building upon Christ. For when we really rest upon Him, there comes from the foundation up through all the courses a vital power. Thus Peter puts it: ‘To whom, coming as unto a living stone, ye also as living stones are built up.’ We might illustrate this by the supposition of some fortress perched upon a rock, and in the heart of the rock a clear fountain, which is guided by some pipe or other into the innermost rooms of the citadel. Thus, builded upon Christ, ‘our defence shall be the munitions of rocks, and our waters shall be sure.’ From Him, the foundation, there will rise into all the stones, built upon Him, the power of His own endless life, and they, too, become living stones.

IV. So note, lastly, the quiet confidence of the builders.

‘He that believeth shall not *make haste.*’ The word is somewhat obscure, and the LXX., which is followed by the New Testament, readers it, ‘Shall not be confounded or put to shame.’ But the rendering of our text seems to be accurate enough. ‘He shall not make haste.’ Remember the picture of the context-a suddenly descending storm, a swiftly rising and turbid flood, the lashing of the rain, the howling of the wind. The men in the clay-built hovels on the flat have to take to flight to some higher ground above the reach of the innundation, on some sheltered rock out of the flashing of the rain and the force of the tempest. He who is built upon the true foundation knows that his house is above the water-level, and he does not need to be in a hurry. He can remain quietly there till the flood subsides, knowing that it will not rise high enough to drown or even disturb him. When all the other buildings are gone, his stands. And he that thus dwells on high may look out over the wild flood, washing and weltering to the horizon, and feel that he is safe. So shall he not have to make haste, but may wait calm and quiet, knowing that all is well.

Dear friends, there is only one refuge for any of us-only one from the little annoyances and from the great ones; from to-day's petty troubles, and from the day of judgment; from the slight stings, if I may so say, of little sorrows, cares, burdens, and from the poisoned dart of the great serpent. There is only one refuge for any of us, to build upon Jesus Christ, as we can do by simple faith.

And oh! remember, He must either be the foundation on which we build, or the stone of stumbling against which we stumble, and which one day will fall upon us and grind us to powder. Do you make your choice; and when God says, as He says to each of us: 'Behold! I lay in Zion a foundation,' do you say, 'And, Lord, I build upon the foundation which Thou hast laid.'

31)Isaiah 28:21

Isaiah

GOD'S STRANGE WORK

Isa. 28:21.

How the great events of one generation fall dead to another! There is something very pathetic in the oblivion that swallows up world-resounding deeds. Here the prophet selects two instances which to him are solemn and singular examples of divine judgment, and we have difficulty in finding out to what he refers. To him they seemed the most luminous illustrations he could find of the principle which he is proclaiming, and to us all the light is burned out of them. They are the darkest portion of the verse. Several different events have been suggested. But most probably the historical references here are to David's slaughter of the Philistines [2Sa. 5:1 - 2Sa. 5:25, and 1Ch. 14:1 - 1Ch. 14:17]. This is probable, but by no means certain. If so, the words are made still more threatening by asserting that He will treat the Israelites as if they were Philistines. But the point on which we should concentrate attention is this remarkable expression, according to which judgment is God's strange work. And that is made more emphatic by the use of a word translated 'act,' which means service, and is almost always used for work that is hard and heavy-a toil or a task.

I. The work in which God delights.

It is here implied that the opposite kind of activity is congenial to Him. The text declares judgment to be an anomaly, out of His ordinary course of action and foreign to His nature.

We may pause for a moment on that great thought that God has a usual course of action, which is usual because it is the spontaneous expression and true mirror of His character. What He thus does shows that character to His creatures, who cannot see Him but in the glass of His works, and have to infer His nature, as they best may, from His works. The Bible begins with His nature and thence interprets His work.

The work in which God delights is the utterance of His love in blessing.

The very essence of love is self-manifestation.

The very being of God is love, and all being delights in its own self-manifestation, in its own activity.

How great the thought is that He is glad when we let Him satisfy His nature by making us glad!

The ordinary course of His government in the world is blessing.

II. The Task in which He does not delight, or His Strange Work.

The consequences of sin are God’s work. The miseries consequent on sin are self-inflicted, but they are also God’s judgments on sin. We may say that sin automatically works out its results, but its results follow by the will of God on account of sin.

That work is a necessity arising from the nature of God. It is foreign to His heart but not to His nature. God is both ‘the light of Israel’ for blessing, and ‘a consuming fire.’ The two opposite effects are equally the result of the contact of God and man. Light pains a diseased eye and gladdens a sound one. The sun seen through a mist becomes like a ball of red-hot iron. The whole revelation of God becomes a pain to an unloving soul.

But God’s very love compels Him to punish.

Some modern notions of the love of God seem to strike out righteousness from His nature altogether, and substitute for it a mere good nature which is weakness, not love, and is cruelty, not kindness.

There is nothing in the facts of the world or in the teachings of the gospel which countenances the notion of a God whose fondness prevents Him from scourging.

What do you call it when a father spares the rod and spoils the child?

Even this world is a very serious place for a man who sets himself against its laws. Its punishments come down surely and not always slowly. There is nothing in it to encourage the idea of impunity.

That work is to Him an Unwelcome Necessity. Bold words. ‘I have no pleasure in the death of a sinner.’ ‘He doth not willingly inflict.’ The awful power of sin to divert the current of blessing. Christ’s tears over Jerusalem. How unwelcome that work is to them is shown by the slowness of His judgments, by multiplied warnings. ‘Rising up early,’ He tells men that He will smite, in order that He may never need to smite.

That work is a certainty. However reluctantly He smites, the blow *will* fall.

III. The Strange Work of Redemption.

The mightiest miracle. The revelation of God’s deepest nature. The wonder of the universe.

32)Isaiah 28:23-29

Isaiah

THE HUSBANDMAN AND HIS OPERATIONS

Isa. 28:23 - Isa. 28:29.

The prophet has been foretelling a destruction which he calls God’s *strange* act. The Jews were incredulous, ‘scornful men.’ They did not believe him; and the main reason for their incredulity was that a divine destruction of the nation was so opposite to the divine conservation of it as to amount to an impossibility. God had raised up and watched over the people. He had planted it in the mountain of His inheritance, and now was it going to be thrown down by the same hand which had built it up? Impossible.

The prophet’s answer to that question is this parable of the husbandman, who has to perform a great variety of operations. He ploughs, but that is not all. He lays aside the plough when it has done its work, and takes up the seed-basket, and, in different ways, sows different seeds, scattering some broadcast, and dropping others carefully, grain by grain, into their place-’dibbling’ it in, as we should say. But seedtime too, passes, and then he cuts down what he had so carefully sown, and pulls up what he had so sedulously planted, and, in different ways, breaks and bruises the grain. Is he inconsistent because he ploughs in winter and reaps in harvest? Does his carrying the seed-basket at one time make it impossible that he shall come with flail and threshing-oxen at another? Are not all the various operations co-operant to one end? Does not the end need them all? Is not one purpose going steadily forward through ploughing, sowing, reaping, threshing? Is not that like the work of the great Husbandman, who changes His methods and preserves His plan through them all, who has His ‘time to sow’ and His ‘time to reap,’ and who orders the affairs of men and kingdoms, for the one purpose that He may gather His wheat into His garner, and purge from it its chaff?

This parable sets forth a philosophy of the divine operations very beautiful and true, and none the less impressive for the simple garb in which it is clothed.

I. All things come from one steady, divine purpose.

We may notice in passing how reverentially the prophet believes that agriculture is taught by God. He would have said the same of cotton-spinning or coal-mining. Think how striking a figure that is, of all the world as God’s farm, where He practises His husbandry to grow the crops which He desires.

What a picture the parable gives of sedulous and patient labour for a far-off result!

It insists on the thought of one steady divine purpose ever directing the movements of the divine hand.

That is the negation of the godless theory that the affairs of men are merely the work of men, or are merely the result of impersonal causes. The world is not a jungle where any or every plant springs of itself, but it is cultivated ground which has an Owner who looks after it.

It is the affirmation that God’s action is regulated by a purpose which is intelligent, unchanging, all-embracing to us because revealed.

II. That steady purpose is man’s highest good.

The end of all the farmer’s care is the ripening of the seed. God’s purpose is our moral, intellectual, and spiritual perfecting.

Neither His own ‘glory’ nor man’s ‘happiness,’ which are taken by different schools of thought to be the divine aim in creation and providence, is an object worthy of Him or adequate to explain the facts of every man’s experience, unless both are regarded as needing man’s perfecting, for their attainment. God’s glory is to make men godlike. Man’s happiness cannot be secured without His holiness.

God has larger and nobler designs for us than merely to make us happy.

‘This is the will of God concerning you, even your sanctification.’

Nothing short of that end would be worthy of God, or would explain His methods.

III. That purpose needs great variety of processes.

This is true about nations and about individuals.

Different stages of growth need different treatment.

The parable names three operations:-

Ploughing, which is preparation;

Sowing, or casting in germinating principles;

Threshing, which is effected by tribulation, a word which means driving a ‘tribulum’ or threshing-sedge over ears of grain.

So sorrow is indispensable for our perfecting.

By it earthly affections are winnowed away, and our dependence on God increased. A certain refinement of spirit results, like the pallor on the face of a chronic invalid, which has a delicate beauty unattainted by ruddy health. A capacity for sympathy, too, is often the result of one’s own trials. Rightly borne, they tend to bend or break the will, and they teach how great it is to suffer and be strong.

But sorrow is not enough; joy is indispensable too. The crop is threshed in tribulation, but is grown mostly in sunshine. Calm, uneventful hours, continuous possession of blessings, have a ministry not less than afflictions have. The corn in the furrow, waving in the western wind, and with golden sunlight among its golden stems, is preparing for the loaf no less than when bound in bundles and lying on the threshing-floor, or cut and bruised by sharp teeth of dray or heavy hoofs of oxen, or blows of swinging flails.

So do not suppose that sorrow is the only instrument for perfecting character, and see that you do not miss the sanctifying and ripening effect of your joyous hours.

Again, different types of character require different modes of treatment. In the parable, ‘the fitches’ are sown in one fashion, and ‘the cummin’ in another the ‘wheat’ and ‘barley’ in still another; and similar variety marks the methods of separating the grain from the husk, one kind of crop being threshed another having a wheel turned upon it. Thus each of us gets the kind of joys and pains that will have most effect on us. God knows where is the tenderest spot, and makes no mistakes in His dealing. He sends us ‘afflictions sorted, sorrows of all sizes.’

Let us see that we trust to His loving and wise adaptation of our trials to our temperaments and needs. Let us see that we never let clouds obscure the clearness of our perception, or, failing perception, the serenity of our trust, that all things work together, and all work for our highest good-our being made like our Lord. We should less often complain of the mysteries of Providence if we had learned the meaning of Isaiah’s parable.

IV. All the processes end in garnering the grain.

There is a barn or storehouse for the ripened and threshed crops. The farmer’s toil and careful processes would be absurd and unintelligible if, after them all, the crop, so sedulously ripened and cultivated and cleansed, was left to rot where it fell. And no less certainly does the discipline of this life cry aloud for heaven and a conscious personal future life, if it is not to be all set down as grim irony or utterly absurd. There must be a heaven if we are not to be put to intellectual bewilderment.

What was needed for growth here drops away there, as blossoms fall when their work is done. Sunshine and rain are no more necessary when the fields are cleared and the barn-yard is filled. Much in our nature, in our earthly condition, in God’s varying processes, will drop away. When school-time is done the rod is burned. But nothing will perish that can contribute to our perfecting.

So let us ask Him to purge us with His fan in His hand now, lest we should be found at last fruitless cumberers of the ground or chaff which is rootless, and fit only to be swept out of the threshing-floor.

33)Isaiah 30:15

Isaiah

‘QUIETNESS AND CONFIDENCE’

Isa. 30:15.

ISRAEL always felt the difficulty of sustaining itself on the height of dependence on the unseen, spiritual power of God, and was ever oscillating between alliances with the Northern and Southern powers, linking itself with Assyria against Egypt, or with Egypt against Assyria. The effect was that whichever was victorious it suffered; it was the battleground for both, it was the prize of each in turn. The prophet’s warnings were political wisdom as truly as religious.

Here Judah is exhorted to forsake the entangling dependence on Egypt, and to trust wholly to God. They had gone away from Him in their fears. They must come back by their faith. To them the great lesson was trust in God. Through them to us the same lesson is read. The principle is far wider than this one case. It is the one rule of life for us all.

The two clauses of the text convey substantially the same idea. They are in inverted parallelism. ‘Returning and rest’ correspond to ‘quietness and confidence,’ so as that ‘rest’ answers to ‘quietness’ and ‘returning’ to ‘confidence.’ In the former clause we have the action towards God and then its consequence. In the latter we have the consequence and then the action.

I. The returning.

Men depart from God by speculative thought or by anxious care, or by sin.

To ‘return’ is just to trust.

The parallel helps us here-’returning’ is parallel with ‘confidence.’ This confidence is to be exercised especially in relation to one’s own path in life and the outward trials and difficulties which we meet, but its sphere extends far beyond these. It is a disposition of mind which covers all things. The attitude of trust, the sense of dependence, the assurance of God’s help and love are in all life the secrets of peace and power.

Am I sinful? then trust. Am I bewildered and ignorant? then trust. Am I anxious and harassed? then trust.

Note the thought, that we come back to God by simple confidence, not by preparing ourselves, not by our expiation, but only by trusting in Him.

Of course the temptations to the opposite attitude are many and great.

Note, too, that every want of confidence is a departure from God. We go away from Him not only by open sin, not only by denial of Him, but by forgetfulness, by want of faith.

The *ground* of this confidence is laid in our knowledge of Him, especially in our knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The *exercise* of this confidence is treated as voluntary. Every man is responsible for his faith.

The *elements* of this confidence are, as regards ourselves, our sense of want in all its various aspects; and, as regards Him, our assurance of His love, of His nearness to help.

II. Confiding nearness to God brings quiet rest.

‘Rest’ and ‘being quiet’ are treated here partly as consequences of faith, partly as duties which we are bound to strive to achieve.

1. See how confidence in God stills and quiets the soul.

The very exercise of communion with Him brings peace and rest, inasmuch as all things are then possessed which we can desire. There is a still fruition which nothing can equal and nothing destroy.

Trust in God brings rest from our own evil consciences.

It brings rest from our own plans and purposes.

Trust gives insight into the meaning of all this else unintelligible world.

It brings the calming and subduing of desires, which in their eagerness torture, in their fruition trouble, and in their disappointment madden.

It brings the gathering in of ourselves from all the disturbing diffusion of ourselves through earthly trifles.

2. Notice what this rest is not.

It does not mean the absence of causes of disturbance.

It does not mean the abnegation of forethought.

It does not mean an indolent passiveness.

3. Notice the duty of being thus quiet and resting.

How much we fail in this respect.

We have faith, but there seems some obstruction which stops it from flowing refreshingly through our lives.

We are bound to seek for its increased continuity and power in our hearts and lives.

III. Confidence and rest in God bring safety and strength.

That is true in the lowest sense of ‘saved,’ and not less true in the highest. The condition of all our salvation from temporal as well as spiritual evils lies thus in the same thing-that we trust God.

No harm comes to us when we trust, because then God is with us, and works for us, and cares for us. So all departments of life are bound together by the one law. Trust is the condition of being ‘saved.’

And not only so, but also trust is strength. God works *for* us; yes, but better than that, God works *in* us and fits *us* to work.

What powers we might be in the world! Trust should make us strong. To have confidence in God should bring us power to which all other power is as nothing. He who can feel that his foot is on the rock, how firm he should stand!

Best gives strength. The rest of faith doubles our forces. To be freed from anxious care makes a man much more likely to act vigorously and to judge wisely.

Stillness of soul, born of communion with God, makes us strong.

Stillness of soul, born of deliverance from our fears, makes us strong.

Here then is a golden chain-or shall we rather say a live wire?- whereof one end is bound to the Throne and the other encircles our poor hearts. Trust, so shall we be at rest and safe. Being at rest and safe, we shall be strong. If we link ourselves with God by faith, God will flash into us His mysterious energy, and His strength will be made perfect in our weakness.

34)Isaiah 30:18

Isaiah

GOD’S WAITING AND MAN’S

Isa. 30:18.

God’s waiting and man’s-bold and beautiful, that He and we should be represented as sharing the same attitude.

I. God’s waiting,

1. The first thought is-why should He wait-why does He not act at once? Because something in us hinders. We cannot enter into spiritual blessings till we are made capable of them by faith. It would not be for our good to receive some temporal blessings till sorrow has done its work on us. The great thought here is that God has a right time for help. He is ‘a God of judgment,’ *i.e.*. discerns our moral condition and shapes His dealings thereby. He never gives the wrong medicine.

2. His waiting is full of work to fit us to receive His grace. It is not a mere passive standing by, till the fit conditions are seen in us; but He ‘is exalted’ while He waits, *i.e.*. lifted up in the manifestation of His might, and by His energy in preparing us for the gifts that He has prepared for us. ‘He that hath wrought us for the self-same thing is God.’ He who prepares a place for us is preparing us for the place. He who has grace which He is ready to give us here, is making us ready for His grace. The meaning of all God’s work on us is to form a character fit to possess His highest gifts.

3. His waiting is very patient. The divine husbandman ‘waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it.’ How wonderful that in a very real sense He attends on our pleasure, as it were, and lets us determine His time to work.

4. That waiting is full of divine desire to help. It is not the waiting of indifference, which says: ‘If you will have it-well and good. If not, it does not matter to Me.’ But ‘more than they that watch for the morning,’ God waits ‘that He may be gracious unto you.’

II. Man’s waiting.

Our attitude is to be in some real sense analogous to His.

Its main elements are firm anticipation, patient expectation, steadfast desire, self-discipline to fit us for the influx of God’s grace.

We are not to prescribe ‘times and seasons which the Father hath put in His own power.’ The clock of Eternity ticks more slowly than our short-pendulumed timepieces. ‘If the vision tarry, wait for it.’ We may well wait for God when we know that He waits for us, and that, for the most part, when He sees that we are waiting, He knows that His time is come.

But it is to be noted that the waiting desire to which He responds is directed to something better and greater than any gifts from Him, even to Himself, for it is they who ‘wait for *Him*,’ not only for His benefits apart from Himself, however precious these may be, who are blessed.

The blessedness of such waiting, how it calms the heart, brings into constant touch with God, detaches from the fever and the fret which kill, opens our eyes to mark the meanings of our life’s history, and makes the divine gifts infinitely more precious when they do come.

After all, the time of waiting is at the longest very short. And when the perfect fruition is come, and we enter into the great spaces of Eternity, it will seem as an handbreadth.

‘Take it on trust a little while,

Thou soon shalt read the mystery right

In the full sunshine of His smile.’

35)Isaiah 31:5

Isaiah

THREE PICTURES OF ONE REALITY

Isa. 31:5.

The immediate occasion of this very remarkable promise is, of course, the peril in which Jerusalem was placed by Sennacherib’s invasion; and the fulfilment of the promise was the destruction of his army before its gates. But the promise here, like all God’s promises, is eternal in substance, and applies to a community only because it applies to each member of that community. Jerusalem was saved, and that meant that every house in Jerusalem was saved, and every man in it the separate object of the divine protection So that all the histories of Scripture, and all the histories of men in the world, are but transitory illustrations of perennial principles, and every atom of the consolation and triumph of this verse comes to each of us, as truly as it did to the men that with tremulous heart began to take cheer, as they listened to Isaiah. There is a wonderful saying in one of the other prophets which carries that lesson, where, bringing down the story of Jacob’s struggle with the angel of Peniel to the encouragement of the existing generation, he says,’ He spake to *us*.’ They were hundreds of years after the patriarch, and yet had fallen heirs to all that God had ever said to him So, from that point of view, I am not spiritualising, or forcing the meaning of these words, when I bring them direct into the lives of each one of ourselves.

I. And, first, I would note the very striking and beautiful pictures that are given in these verses.

There are three of them, on each of which I must touch briefly. ‘As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem.’ The form of the words in the original shows that it is the mother-bird that is thought about. And the picture rises at once of her fluttering over the nest, where the callow chickens are, unable to fly and to help themselves. It is a kind of echo of the grand metaphor in the song that is attributed to Moses, which speaks of the eagle fluttering over her nest, and taking care of her young. Jerusalem was as a nest on which, for long centuries, that infinite divine love had brooded. It was but a poor brood that had been hatched out, but yet ‘as birds flying’ He had watched over the city. Can you not almost see the mother-bird, made bold by maternal love, swooping down upon the intruder that sought to rob the nest, and spreading her broad pinion over the callow fledglings that lie below? That is what God does with us. As I said, it is a poor brood that is hatched out. That does not matter; still the Love bends down and helps. Nobody but a prophet could have ventured on such a metaphor as that, and nobody but Jesus Christ would have ventured to mend it and say, ‘As a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings,’ when there are hawks in the sky. So He, in all the past ages, was the One that ‘as birds flying . . . defended’ His people, and would have gathered them under His wings, only they would not.

Now, beautiful as this metaphor is, as it stands, it seems to me, like some brilliant piece of colouring, to derive additional beauty from its connection with the background upon which it stands out. For just a verse before the prophet has given another emblem of what God is and does, and if you will carry with you all those thoughts of tenderness and maternal care and solicitude, and then connect them with that verse, I think the thought of His tenderness will start up into new beauty. For here is what precedes the text: ‘Like as a lion, and the young lion roaring on his prey when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him, he will not be afraid of their voice, nor bow himself for the noise of them. So shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for Mount Zion.’ Look at these two pictures side by side, on the one hand the lion, with his paw on his prey, and the angry growl that answers when the shepherds vainly try to drag it away from him. That is God. Ay! but that is only an aspect of God. ‘As birds flying, so the Lord will defend Jerusalem.’ We have to take that into account too. This generation is very fond of talking about God’s love; does it believe in God’s wrath? It is very fond of speaking about the gentleness of Jesus; has it pondered that tremendous phrase, ‘the wrath of the Lamb’? The lion that growls, and the mother-bird that hovers-God is like them both. That is the first picture that is here.

The second one is not so obvious to English readers, but it is equally striking, though I do not mean to dwell upon it. The word that is translated in our text twice, ‘defend’ and ‘defending’-’So will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem, and defending will deliver’-means, literally, ‘shielding.’ Thus we have the same general idea as that in the previous metaphor of the mother-bird hovering above the nest: God is like a shield held over us, and so flinging off front the broad and burnished surface of the Almighty buckler, all the darts that any foe can launch against as. ‘Our God is a Sun and Shield.’ I need not enlarge on this familiar metaphor.

But the third picture I wish to point to in more detail: 'Passing over, He will deliver.' Now, the word that is there rendered 'passing over,' is almost a technical word in the Old Testament, because it is that employed in reference to the Passover. And so you see the swiftness of genius with which the prophet changes his whole scene. We had the nest and the mother-bird, we had the battlefield and the shield; now we are swept away back to that night when the Destroying Angel stalked through the land, and 'passed over' the doors on which the blood had been sprinkled. And thus this God, who in one aspect may be likened to the mother-bird hovering with her little breast full of tenderness, and made brave by maternal love conquering natural timidity, and in another aspect may be likened to the broad shield behind which a man stands safe, may also be likened to that Destroying Angel that went through Egypt, and smote wherever there were not the tokens of the blood on the lintels, and 'passed over' wherever there were. Of course, the original fulfilment of this third picture is the historical case of the army of Sennacherib; outside the walls, widespread desolation; inside the walls, an untroubled night of peace. That night in Egypt is paralleled, in the old Jewish hymn that is still sung at the Passover, with the other night when Sennacherib's men were slain; and the parallel is based on our text. So, then, here is another illustration of what I started with saying, that the past events of Scripture are transient expressions of perennial principles and tendencies. For the Passover night was not to be to the contemporaries of the prophet an event receding ever further into the dim distance, but it was a present event, and to be reproduced in that catastrophe when 'in the morning when they arose, they were all dead corpses.' And the event is being repeated to-day, and will be for each of us, if we will.

So, then, there are these three pictures-the Nest and the Mother-bird, the Battlefield and the Shield, Egypt and the Destroying Angel.

II. We note the reality meant by these pictures.

They mean the absolute promise from God of protection for His people from *every* evil. We are not to cut it down, not to say that it applies absolutely in regard to the spiritual world, but that it does not apply in regard to temporal things. Yes, it does entirely, only you have to rise to the height of God's conception of what is good and what is evil in regard to outward things, before you understand how completely, and without qualification or deduction, this promise is fulfilled to every man that puts his trust in Him. Of course, I do not need to remind you, for your own lives will do so sufficiently, that this hovering protector, this strong Shield, this Destroying Angel that passes by our houses if the blood is on the threshold, does not guarantee us any exemption from the common ‘ills that flesh is heir to.’ We all know that well enough. But what does it guarantee? That all the poison shall be wiped off the arrow, that all the evil shall be taken out of the evil, that it will change its character, that if we observe the conditions, the sharpest sorrow will come to us with this written on it by the Father’s hand, ‘With My love to My child’; that pain will be discipline, and discipline will be blessed. Ah! dear friends! I am sure there are many of us that can set to our seals that God is true in this matter, and that we have found that His rod does blossom, and that our sorest sorrows have been our greatest mercies, drawing us nearer to Him; ‘Defending He will deliver, and passing over He will preserve.’

III. And now let me remind you of the way by which we can make the reality of these pictures ours.

You know that all the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament are conditional, and that there are many of them that were never fulfilled, and were spoken in order that they might not be fulfilled, if only the people took warning. I wish folk would carry a little more consciously in their minds that principle in interpreting them all, and in asking about their fulfilment. Not only in regard to these ancient events, but in regard to our individual experience, God’s promises and threatenings are conditional.

Take that first metaphor of the hovering mother-bird. Listen to this expansion of it in one of the psalms: ‘He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust.’ The word for *trust* here means to ‘fly into a refuge.’ Can you not see the picture? A little brood round the parent bird, frightened by some beast of prey, or hovering hawk in the sky, and fluttering under its wings, and all safe and huddled together there close against the warm breast, and in amongst the downy feathers. ‘Under His wings shalt thou trust.’ Put thou thy trust in God, and God is to thee the hovering bird, the broad shield, the Angel that ‘passes over.’

Take the other picture of the Passover night. Only by our individual faith in Jesus Christ as our individual Saviour can we put the blood on our door-posts so that the Destroying Angel shall pass by. So, if we would have the sweetness of such words as these fulfilled in our daily lives, however disturbed and troubled and sorrowful and solitary they may be, the first condition is that under His wings shall we flee for refuge, and we do so by trust in Him.

But having thus fled thither, we must continue there, if we would continue under His protection. Such continuance of safety because of continuous faith is possible only by continued communion. Remember our Lord’s expansion of the metaphor in His lament: ‘How often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not.’ We can resist the drawing. We can get away from the shelter of the wing. We can lift up our wills against Him. And what becomes of the chicken that does *not* run to the mother’s pinions when the hawk is hovering? That is what becomes of the man that stops outside the refuge in Christ, or that by failure of his faith departs from that refuge. ‘Ye would not; therefore your house is left unto you desolate.’ That house, in the Jerusalem which God ‘defends,’ is *not* defended.

Another condition of divine protection is obedience. We need not expect that God will take care of us, and preserve us, when we did not ask His leave to get into the dangerous place that we find ourselves in. Many of us do the converse of what the Apostle condemns, we begin ‘in the flesh,’ and think we shall end ‘in the Spirit’; which being translated is, we do not ask God’s leave to do certain things, to enter into certain engagements or arrangements with other people, and the like, and then we expect God to come and help us in or out of them. That is by no means an uncommon form of delusion. You remember what Jesus Christ said when the Devil tried to entice Him to do a thing of that sort, by quoting Scripture to Him-’He shall give His angels charge concerning Thee, to keep Thee in all Thy ways. Cast Thyself down. Trust to the promise as a kind of parachute to keep Thee from falling bruised on the stones of the Temple-court.’ Christ’s answer was: ‘Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.’ You will not get God’s protection in ways of your own choosing.

And so, brethren, ‘all things work together for good to them that love,’ to them that trust, to them that keep close, to them that obey. And for such the old faithful promise will be faithful and new once more, ‘Because He hath set His love upon Me, therefore will I deliver Him’-that will be the summing up of our lives; ‘and I will set Him on high because He hath known My Name,’ that will be the meaning of our deaths.

36)Isaiah 31:9

Isaiah

THE LORD’S FURNACE

Isa. 31:9.

This very remarkable characterisation of God stands here as a kind of seal, set upon the preceding prophecy. It is the reason why that will certainly be fulfilled. And what precedes is mainly a promise of a deliverance for Israel, which was to be a destruction for Israel’s enemies. It is put in very graphic and remarkable metaphors: ‘Like as a lion roareth on his prey when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him, he will not be afraid of their voice, nor abase himself for the noise of them: so shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for Mount Zion.’ The enemies of Israel are picturesquely and poetically represented as a crowd of shepherds vainly trying to scare a lion by their shouts. He stands undaunted, with his strong paw on his prey, and the boldest of them durst not venture to drag it from beneath his claws. So, says Isaiah, with singularly daring imagery, God will put all His strength into keeping fast hold of Israel, and no one can pluck His people from His hands.

Then, with a sudden and striking change of metaphor, the prophet passes from a picture of the extreme of fierceness to one of the extreme of tenderness. ‘As birds flying’-mother birds fluttering over their nests-’so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem,’ hovering over it and going from side to side to defend with His broad pinions, ‘passing over, He will preserve it.’ These figures are next translated into the plain promise of utter discomfiture and destruction, panic and flight as the portion of the enemies of Israel, and the whole has this broad seal set to it, that He who promises is ‘the Lord, whose fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.’

We shall not understand these great words if we regard them as only a revelation of destructive and terrible power. They are that indeed, but they are far more than that. It is the very beauty and completeness of this emblem that has a double aspect, and is no less rich in joy and blessing than pregnant with warning and terror. As Isaiah says in another place, Jerusalem is ‘Ariel,’ which probably means ‘the hearth of God.’ His presence in the city is as a fire for the comfort and defence of the happy inhabitants, and at the same time for the destruction of all evil and enemies. Far more truly than He dwelt in the city of David does God dwell in the Church, and His presence is its security. What, then, of instruction and hope may we gather from this wonderful emblem?

I. In the Church, God is present as a great reservoir of fervid love.

Every language has taken fire as the symbol of love and emotion. We speak so naturally of warm love, fervent feeling, glowing earnestness, ardent enthusiasm and the like, that we are scarcely aware of using figurative language. We do not usually ascribe emotion to God, but surely the deepest and most sacred of the senses in which it is true that fire is His emblem, is that He is love. His fire is in Zion. He dwells in His Church, a storehouse of blazing love, heated seventy times seven hotter than any creatural love, and pouring out its ardours for the quickening and gladdening of all who walk in the light of that fire, and thaw their coldness at its blaze.

Then, if so, how comes it that so many Christian Churches are ice-houses instead of furnaces? How comes it that they who profess to live in the Zion where this fire flames are themselves so cold? If God’s blazing furnace is in Jerusalem, it should send the thermometer up in all the houses of the city. But what a strange contradiction it is for men to be in God’s Church, the very focus and centre of His burning love, and themselves to be almost down below zero in their temperature! The Christian Church ought to be all aflame in all its members, with the fire of love kindled and alight from God Himself. Every community of Christian people ought to radiate warmth and light which it has absorbed from its present God. Our love ought to answer His, and, being caught and kindled from that mighty fire, should throw back to its source some of the heat received, in fervours of reflected love, and should pour the rest beneficently on all around. Love to God and love to man are regarded in Christian morals as beams of the same fire, only travelling in different directions. But what a miserable contrast to such an ideal the reality in so many of our churches is! A fiery furnace with its doors hung with icicles is no greater a contradiction and anomaly than a Christian Church or a single soul, which professes to have been touched by the infinite loving kindness of God, and yet lives as cold and unmoved as we do. The 'Lord's fire is in Zion.' Are there any tokens of that fire amongst us, in our own hearts and in our collective temperature as Christian Churches?

There is no religion worth calling so which has not warmth in it. We hear a great deal from people against whom I do not wish to say a word, about the danger of an 'emotional Christianity.' Agreed, if by that they mean a Christianity which has no foundation for its emotion in principle and intelligence; but not agreed if they mean to recommend a Christianity which professes to accept truths that might kindle a soul beneath the ribs of death and make the dumb sing, and yet is never moved one hair's-breadth from its quiet phlegmaticism. There is no religion without emotion. Of course it must be intelligent emotion, built upon the acceptance of divine truth, and regulated and guided by that, and so consolidated into principle, and it must be emotion which works for its living, and impels to Christian conduct. These two provisoes being attended to, then we can safely say that warmth is the test of life, and the readings of the thermometer, which measure the fervour, measure also the reality of our religion. A cold Christian is a contradiction in terms. If the adjective is certainly applicable, I am afraid the applicability of the noun is extremely doubtful. If there is no fire, what is there? Cold is death.

We want no flimsy, transitory, noisy, ignorant, hysterical agitation. Smoke is not fire. If the temperature were higher, and the fire more wisely fed, there would not be any. But we do want a more obvious and powerful effect of their solemn, glorious, and heart-melting beliefs on the affections and emotions of professing Christians, and that they may be more mightily moved by love, to all heroisms and service and enthusiasms and to consecration which shall in some measure answer to the glowing heart of that fire of God which flames in Zion.

II. God’s revelation of Himself, and presence in His Church, are an instrument of cleansing.

Fire purifies. In our great cities now there are ‘disinfecting ovens,’ where infected articles are taken, and exposed to a high temperature which kills the germs of disease, so that tainted things come out sweet and clean. That is what God’s furnace in Zion is meant to do for us. The true way of purifying is by fire. To purify by water, as John the Baptist saw and said, is but a poor, cold way of getting outward cleanliness. Water cleanses the surface, and becomes dirty in the process. Fire cleanses within and throughout, and is not tainted thereby. You plunge some foul thing into the flame, and, as you look, the specks and spots melt out of it. Raise the temperature, and you kill the poison germs. That is the way that God cleanses His people; not by external application, but by getting up the heat. The fire of His love, the fire of His spirit, is, as St. Bernard says, a blessed fire, which ‘consumes indeed, but does not hurt; which sweetly burns and blessedly lays waste, and so puts forth the force and fire against our vices, as to display the operation of the anointing oil upon our souls.’ The Hebrew captives were flung into the fiery furnace. What did it burn? Only their bonds. They themselves lived and rejoiced in the intense heat. So, if we have any real possession of the divine flame, it will burn off our wrists the bands and chains of our old vices, and we shall stand pure and clean, emancipated by the fire which will consume only our sins, and be for our true selves as our native home, where we walk at liberty and expatiate in the genial warmth. That is the blessed and effectual way of purifying, which slays only the death that we carry about with us in our sin, and makes us the more truly living for its death. Cleansing is only possible if we are immersed in the Holy Ghost and in fire, as some piece of foul clay, plunged into the furnace, has all the stains melted out of it. For all sinful souls seeking after cleansing, and finding that the ‘damned spot’ will not ‘out’ for all their washing, it is surely good news and tidings of great joy that the Lord has His fire in Zion, and that its purifying power will burn out all their sin.

III. Further, there is suggested another thought: that God, in His great revelation of Himself, by which He dwells in His Church, is a power of transformation.

Fire turns all which it seizes into fire. ‘Behold how much wood is kindled by how small a fire’ [R.V.]. The heap of green wood with the sap in it needs but a tiny light pushed into the middle, and soon it is all ablaze, transformed into ruddy brightness, and leaping heavenwards. However heavy, wet, and obstinate may be the fuel, the fire can change it into aspiring and brilliant flame.

And so God, coming to us in His ‘Spirit of burning,’ turns us into His own likeness, and makes us possessors of some spark of Himself. Therefore it is a great promise, ‘He shall baptize you in the Holy Ghost, and in fire.’ He shall plunge you into the life-giving furnace, and so ‘make His ministers like a flame of fire,’ like the Lord whom they serve. The seraphim who stand round the throne are ‘burning’ spirits, and the purity which shines, the love which glows, the swift life which flames in them, are all derived from that unkindled and all-animating Fire who is their and our God. The transformation of all the dwellers in Zion into miniature likenesses of this fire is the very highest hope that springs from the solemn and blessed truth that the Lord has His fire in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.

IV. But, further, this figure teaches that the same divine fire may become destructive.

The emblem of fire suggests a double operation, and the very felicity of it as an emblem is that it has these two sides, and with equal naturalness may stand for a power which quickens, and for one which destroys. The difference in the effects springs not from differences in the cause, but in the objects with which the fire plays. The same God is the fire of life, the fire of love, of purifying and transformation and glad energy to whosoever will put his trust in Him, and a fire of destruction and anger unto whosoever resists Him. The alternative stands before every soul of man, to be quickened by fire or consumed by it. We may make the furnace of God our blessedness and the reservoir of a far more joyful and noble life than ever we could have lived in our coldness; or we may make it terror and destruction. There lie the two possibilities before every one of us. We cannot stand apart from Him; we have relations with Him, whether we will or no; He is something to us. He is, and must be for all, a flaming fire. We can settle whether it shall be a fire which is life-giving unto life, or a fire which is death-giving unto death.

Here are two buildings: the one the life of the man that lives apart from God, and therefore has built only with wood, hay, and stubble; the other the life of the man that lives with God and for Him, and so has built with gold, silver, and precious stones. The day and the fire come; and the fates of these two are opposite effects of the same cause. The licking tongues surround the wretched hut, built of combustibles, and up go wood and hay and stubble, in a smoking flare, and disappear. The flames play round the gold and silver and precious stones, and every leap of their light is answered by some facet of the gems that flash in their brilliancy, and give back the radiance.

You can settle which of these two is to be your fate. ‘The Lord’s fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem.’ To those who, by faith in that dear Lord who came to cast fire on earth,’ have opened their hearts, to the entrance of that searching, cleansing flame, and who therefore burn with kindred and answering fervours, it is joy to know that their ‘God is a consuming fire,’ for therein lies their hope of daily purifying and ultimate assimilation. To those, on the other hand, who have closed their hearts to the warmth of His redeeming love in Christ, and the quickening of His baptism by fire, what can the knowledge be but terror, what can contact with God in judgment be but destruction? ‘The day cometh, it burneth as a furnace; and all the proud, and all that work wickedness, shall be as stubble, and the day that cometh shall burn them up.’ What will that day do for you?

37)Isaiah 32:2

Isaiah

THE HIDING-PLACE

Isa. 32:2.

We may well say, Of whom speaketh the prophet this? Here are distinctly attributed to one of ourselves, if we take the words in their simplicity and fulness, functions and powers which universal experience has taught us not to look for in humanity. And there have been a great many attempts-as it seems to me, altogether futile and baseless ones-to break the force of these words as a distinct prophecy of Jesus Christ. Surely the language is far too wide to have application to any real or ideal Jewish monarch, except one whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom? Surely the experience of a hundred centuries might teach men that there is *one* man, and one alone, who is the refuge from all dangers, the fruition of all desires, the rest and refreshment in all toils.

And I, for my part, have no hesitation in saying that the only reference of these words which gives full value to their wealth of blessing, is to regard them as a prophecy of *the* man-Christ Jesus; hiding in whom we are safe, 'coming' to whom we 'never thirst,' guarded and blest by whom no weariness can befall us, and dwelling in whom this weary world shall be full of refreshment and peace!

I do not need to point out the exquisite beauty of the imagery or the pathos and peace that breathe in the majestic rhythm of the words. There is something more than poetical beauty or rhetorical amplification of a single thought in those three clauses. The 'hiding-place' and 'covert' refer to one class of wants; the 'rivers of water in a dry place' to yet another; and 'the shadow of a great rock in a weary land' to yet a third. And, though they are tinged and dyed in Eastern imagery, the realities of life in Western lands, and in all ages, give them a deeper beauty than that of lovely imagery, and are the true keys to understanding their meaning. We shall, perhaps, best grasp the whole depth of that meaning according to the Messianic reference which we give to the text, if we consider the sad and solemn conception of man's life that underlies it; the enigmatical and obstinate hope which it holds out in the teeth of all experience-'A *man* shall be a refuge'; and the solution of the riddle in the man Christ Jesus.

I. First, there underlies this prophecy a very sad but a very true conception of human life.

The three classes of promises have correlative with them three phases of man's condition, three diverse aspects of his need and misery. The 'covert' and the 'hiding-place' imply tempest, storm, and danger; the 'river of water' implies drought and thirst; 'the shadow of a great rock' implies lassitude and languor, fatigue and weariness. The view of life that arises from the combination of these three bears upon its front the signature of truth in the very fact that it is a sad view.

For, I suppose, notwithstanding all that we may say concerning the beauty and the blessedness scattered broadcast round about us; notwithstanding that we believe, and hold as for our lives the happy 'faith that all which we behold is full of blessing,' it needs but a very short experience of this life, and but a superficial examination of our own histories and our own hearts, in order to come to the conclusion that the world is full of strange and terrible sadness, that every life has dark tracts and long stretches of sombre tint, and that no representation is true to fact which dips its pencil only in light and flings no shadows on the canvas. There is no depth in a Chinese picture, because there is no shade. It is the wrinkles and marks of tear and wear that make the expression in a *man's* portrait. 'Life's sternest painter "is" its best.' The gloomy thoughts which are charged against Scripture are the true thoughts about man and the world as man has made it. Not, indeed, that life needs to be so, but that by reason of our own evil and departure from God there have come in as a disturbing element the retributive consequences of our own godlessness, and these have made danger where else were safety, thirst where else were rivers of water, and weariness and lassitude where else were strength and bounding hope.

So then, look for a moment at these three points that come out of my text, in order to lay the foundation for subsequent considerations.

We live a life defenceless and exposed to many a storm and tempest. I need but remind you of the adverse circumstances-the wild winds that go sweeping across the flat level, the biting blasts that come down from the snow-clad mountains of destiny that lie round the low plain upon which we live. I need but remind you of the dangers that are lodged for our spiritual life in the temptations to evil that are round us. I need but remind you of that creeping and clinging consciousness of being exposed to a divinely commissioned retribution and punishment, which perverts the Name that ought to be the basis of all our blessedness into a Name unwelcome and terrible, because threatening judgment. I need but remind you how men's sins have made it needful that when the mighty God, even the Lord, appears before them, ‘it shall be very tempestuous round about him.’ Men fear and ought to fear ‘the blast of the breath of His nostrils,’ which must burn up all that is evil. And I need but remind you of that last wild wind of Death that whirls the sin-faded leaves into dark corners where they lie and rot.

My brother, you have not lived thus long without learning how defenceless you are against the storm of adverse circumstances. You have not lived thus long without learning that though, blessed be God! there do come in all our lives long periods of halcyon rest, when ‘birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave,’ and the heavens above are clear as sapphire, and the sea around is transparent as opal-yet the little cloud, no bigger than a man’s hand, may rise on the horizon, and may thicken and blacken and grow greater and nearer till all the sky is dark, and burst in lightning and rain and fierceness of wind, till ‘through the torn sail the wild tempest is streaming,’ and the white crests of the waves are like the mane of Death’s pale horse leaping upon the broken ship. We have all learnt in how profound a sense, by reason of outward adverse circumstances and inward temptations, by reason of the fears of a Justice which we know is throned at the centre of the creation, by reason of a death which to us is a terror, and by reason of that universal fear of ‘after death the judgment,’ storm and tempest swoop upon our paths. God made the sunshine, and we have made it a storm. God made life blessed and full of safety and peace, and we have wrenched ourselves from Him and stand defenceless amidst its dangers.

Then, there is another aspect and conception of life which underlies these words of my text. The image of the desert was before the prophet’s rapt vision. He saw the sand whirled into mad dancing columns before the blast which swept across the unsheltered flat, with nothing, for a day’s march, to check its force. But the wilderness is not only shelterless, it is waterless too-a place in which wild and ravening thirst finds no refreshing draughts, and the tongue cleaves to the blackening gums.

‘Rivers of water in a dry place’; and what is the prose fact of that? That you and I live in the midst of a world which has no correspondence with, nor power of satisfying, our truest and deepest selves-that we bear about with us a whole set of longings and needs and weaknesses and strengths and capacities, all of which, like the climbing tendrils of some creeping plant, go feeling and putting out their green fingers to lay hold of some prop and stay-that man is so made that for his rest and blessedness he must have an external object round which his spirit may cling, on which his desires may fasten and rest, by which his heart may be blessed, which shall be authority for his will, peace for his fears, sprinkling and cleansing for his conscience, light for his understanding, shall be in complete correspondence with his inward nature-be water for his thirst, and bread for his hunger.

And as thus, on the very nature which each of us carries, there is stamped the signature of dependence, and the necessity of finding an external object on which to rest; and as, further, men will not be tutored even by their own miseries or by the voice of their own wants, and ever confound their wishes with their wants and their whims with their needs, therefore it comes to pass that the appetite which was only meant to direct us to God, and to be as a wholesome hunger in order to secure our partaking with relish and delight of the divine food that is provided for it, becomes unsatisfied, a torture, and unslaked, a ravening madness; and men's needs become men's misery; and men's hunger becomes men's famine; and men's thirst becomes men's death. We do dwell in a dry land where no water is.

All about us there are these creatures of God, bright and blessed and beautiful, fit for their functions and meant to minister to our gladness. They are meant to be held in subordination. It is not meant that we should find in them the food for our souls. Wealth and honour and wisdom and love and gratified ambition and successful purpose, and whatsoever other good things a man may gather about him and achieve-he may have them all, and yet in spite of them all there will be a great aching, longing vacuity in his soul. His true and inmost being will be groping through the darkness, like a plant growing in a cellar, for the light which alone can tinge its pale petals and swell its shrivelling blossoms to ripeness and fruit.

A dry place, as well as a dangerous place-have not you found it so? I believe that every soul of man has, if he will be honest with himself, and that there is not one among us who would not, if he were to look into the deepest facts and real governing experience of his life, confess-I thirst: 'my soul thirsteth.' And oh, brethren, why not go on with the quotation, and make that which is else a pain, a condition of blessedness? Why not recognise the meaning of all this restless disquiet, and say ‘My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God’?

And then there is the other idea also underlying these words, yet another phase of this sad life of ours-not only danger and drought, but also weariness and languor. The desert stretches before us again, where there is no shelter from the blast and no trickling stream amid the yellowing sand; where the fierce ball above beats down cruelly, and its hot rays are flung up cruelly into our faces, and the glare blinds us, and the stifling heat wearies us, and work is a torture and motion is misery, and we long for nothing so much as to be quiet and to hide our heads in some shade.

I was reading recently one of our last books of travel in the wilderness of the Exodus, in which the writer told how, after toiling for hours under a scorching sun, over the hot, white, marly flat, seeing nothing but a beetle or two on the way, and finding no shelter anywhere from the pitiless beating of the sunshine, the weary travellers came at last to a little Retem bush only a few feet high, and flung themselves down and tried to hide, at least, their heads, from those ‘sunbeams like swords,’ even beneath its ragged shade. And my text tells of a great rock, with blue dimness in its shadow, with haply a fern or two in the moist places of its crevices, where there is rest, and a man can lie down and be cool, while all outside is burning sun, and burning sand, and dancing mirage.

Oh! the weariness felt by us all, of plod, plod, plodding across the sand! That fatal monotony into which every man’s life stiffens, as far as outward circumstances, outward joys and pleasures go! the depressing influence of custom which takes the edge off all gladness and adds a burden to every duty! the weariness of all that tugging up the hill, of all that collar-work which we have to do! Who is there that has not his mood, and that by no means the least worthy and man-like of his moods, wherein he feels not, perhaps, that all is vanity, but-’how infinitely wearisome it all is.’

And so every race of man that ever has lived has managed out of two miseries to make a kind of shadowy gladness; and, knowing the weariness of life and the blackness of death, has somewhat lightened the latter by throwing upon it the thought of the former, and has said, ‘Well, at any rate, if the grave be narrow and dark, and if outside “the warm precincts of the cheerful day" there be that ambiguous night, at least it is the place for sleep; and, if we cannot be sure of anything more, we shall rest then, at any rate.' So the hope of 'long disquiet merged in rest' becomes almost bright, and man's weariness finds most pathetic expression in his thinking of the grave as a bed where he can stretch himself and be still. Life is hard, life is dry, life is dangerous.

II. But another thought suggested by these words is-The Mysterious Hope which shines through them.

One of ourselves shall deliver us from all this evil in life. '*A man* shall be a refuge, rivers of water, the shadow of a great rock.' Such an expectation seems to be right in the teeth of all experience and far too high-pitched ever to be fulfilled. It appears to demand in him who should bring it to pass powers which are more than human, and which must in some inexplicable way be wide as the range of humanity and enduring as the succession of the ages.

It is worth while to realise to ourselves these two points which seem to make such words as these of our text a blank impossibility. Experience contradicts them, and common-sense demands for their fulfilment an apparently impossible human character.

All experience seems to teach-does it not?-that no human arm or heart can be to another soul what these words promise, and what we need. And yet the men who have been disappointed and disenchanted a thousand times do still look among their fellows for what their fellows, too, are looking for, and none have ever found. Have *we* found what we seek among men? Have we ever known amongst the dearest that we have clung to, one arm that was strong enough to keep us in all danger? Has there ever been a human love to which we can run with the security that *there* is a strong tower where no evil can touch us? There have been many delights in all our lives mediated and ministered to us by those that we loved. They have taught us, and helped us, and strengthened us in a thousand ways. We have received from them draughts of wisdom, of love, of joy, of guidance, of impulse, of comfort, which have been, as water in the desert is, more precious than gold. Our fellow-travellers have shared their store with us, 'letting down their pitchers upon their hand,' and giving us drink; but has the draught ever slaked the thirst? They carry but a pitcher, and a pitcher is not a fountain. Have there been any in all the round of those that we have loved and trusted, to whom we have trusted absolutely, without having been disappointed? They, like us, are hemmed in by human limitations. They each bear a burdened and thirsty spirit, itself needing such supplies. And to the truest, happiest, most soul-sufficing companionship, there comes at last that dread hour which ends all sweet commerce of giving and receiving, and makes the rest of life, for some of us, one monotonous ashen-grey wilderness where no water is. These things make it impossible for us to find anywhere amongst men our refuge and our fruition.

And yet how strange, how pathetic, is the fact that after all disappointments, men still obstinately continue to look among their fellows for guidance and for light, for consolation, for defence, and for strength! After a thousand failures they still hope. Does not the search at once confess that hitherto they have not found, else why be seeking still?-and that they yet believe they will yet find, else why not cease the vain quest? And surely He who made us, made us not in vain, nor cursed us with immortal hopes which are only persistent lies. Surely there is some living Person who will vindicate these unquenchable hopes of humanity, and receive and requite our love and trust, and satisfy our longings, and explain the riddle of our lives. If there be not, nor ever has been, nor ever can be a man who shall satisfy us with his love, and defend us with his power, and be our all-sufficient satisfaction and our rest in weariness, then much of man’s noblest nature is a mistake, and many of his purest and profoundest hopes are an illusion, a mockery, and a snare. The obstinate hope that, within the limits of humanity, we shall find what we need is a mystery, except on one hypothesis, that it, too, belongs to ‘the unconscious prophecies’ that God has lodged in all men’s hearts.

Nor need I remind you, I suppose, how such functions as those of which my text speaks not only seem to be contradicted by all experience, but manifestly and obviously to transcend the possibilities of human nature. *A man* to defend me; and he himself-does *he* need no defence? A man to supply my wants; and is his spirit, then, other than mine, that it can become the all-sufficient fulness for my emptiness? He that can do this for one spirit must be greater than the spirit for which he doeth it. He that can do it for the whole race of man, through all ages, in all circumstances, down to the end of time, in every latitude, under every condition of civilisation-who must *he* be who, for the whole world, evermore and always, is their defence, their gladness, their shelter, and their rest?

The function requires a divine power, and the application of the power requires a human hand. It is not enough that I should be pointed to a far-off heaven, where there dwells an infinite loving God-I believe that we need more than that. We need both of the truths: ‘God is my refuge and my strength,’ and ‘A man shall be a hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest.’

III. That brings me to the last point to be noticed, namely:-The solution of the mystery in the person of Jesus Christ.

That which seemed impossible is real. The forebodings of humanity have not fathomed the powers of Divine Love. There *is* a man, our brother, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, who can be to single souls the adequate object of their perfect trust, the abiding home of their deepest love, the unfailing supply for their profoundest wants. There *is* one man to whom it is wise and blessed to look as the exclusive source of all our peace, the absolute ruler of all our lives. There *is* a man in whom we find all that we have vainly sought in men. There *is* a man, who can be to all ages and to the whole race their refuge, their satisfaction, their rest. ‘It behoved Him to be made in all points like unto His brethren,’ that His succour might be ever near, and His sympathy sure. The man Christ Jesus who, being man, is God manifest in the flesh, exercises in one and the same act the offices of divine pity and human compassion, of divine and human guardianship, of divine and human love.

‘And so the Word had breath, and wrought
With human hands the creed of creeds
In loveliness of perfect deeds,
More strong than all poetic thought.’

The dreams of weary hearts that have longed for an impossible perfection are all below the reality. The fact surpasses all expectation. It is more than all prophecies, it is more than all hopes, it is more than all praise. It is God’s unspeakable gift. Well might an angel voice proclaim the mystery of love, ‘Unto you is *born* a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.’ The ancient promise of our text is history now. A man has been and is all these things for us.

A refuge and a hiding-place from every storm-adverse circumstances sweep upon us, and His mighty hand is put down there as a buckler, behind which we may hide and be safe. Temptations to evil storm upon us, but if we are enclosed within Him they never touch us. The fears of our own hearts swirl like a river in flood against the walls of our fortress home, and we can laugh at them, for it is founded upon a rock! The day of judgment rises before us solemn and certain, and we can await it without fear, and approach it with calm joy. I call upon no mountains and hills to cover me.

‘Rock of ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.’

‘Rivers of water in a dry place,’-hungry and thirsty, my soul fainted within me. I longed for light, and behold darkness. I longed for help, and there was none that could come close to my spirit to succour and to give me drink in the desert. My conscience cried in all its wounds for cleansing and stanching, and no comforter nor any balm was there. My heart, weary of limited loves and mortal affections, howsoever sweet and precious, yearned and bled for one to rest upon all-sufficient and eternal. I thirsted with a thirst that was more than desire, that was pain, and was coming to be death, and I heard a voice which said, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.’

‘The shadow of a great rock in a weary land,’-and my heart was weary by reason of the greatness of the way, and duties and tasks seemed toils and burdens, and I was ready to say, ‘Wherefore has Thou made me and all men in vain? Surely all this is vanity and vexation of spirit,’ and I heard One that laid His hand upon me and said, ‘Come unto Me, and I will give thee rest.’ I come to Thee, O Christ, faint and perishing, defenceless and needy, with many a sin and many a fear; to Thee I turn for Thou hast died for me, and for me thou dost live. Be Thou my shelter and strong tower. Give me to drink of living water. Let me rest in Thee while in this weary land, and let Thy sweet love, my Brother and my Lord, be mine all on earth and the heaven of my heaven!

38) Isaiah 33:14-15

Isaiah

HOW TO DWELL IN THE FIRE OF GOD

Isa. 33:14 - Isa. 33:15. - 1Jn. 4:16.

I have put these two verses together because, striking as is at first sight the contrast in their tone, they refer to the same subject, and they substantially preach the same truth. A hasty reader, who is more influenced by sound than by sense, is apt to suppose that the solemn expressions in my first text, ‘the devouring fire’ and’ everlasting burnings,’ mean *hell*. They mean *God*, as is quite obvious from the context. The man who is to ‘dwell in the devouring fire’ is the *good* man. He that is able to abide ‘the everlasting burnings’ is ‘the man that walketh righteously and speaketh uprightly,’ that ‘despiseth the gain of oppression, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.’ The prophet has been calling all men, far and near, to behold a great act of divine judgment in which God has been manifested in flaming glory, consuming evil; now he represents the ‘sinners in Zion,’ the unworthy members of the nation, as seized with sudden terror, and anxiously asking this question, which in effect means: ‘Who among us can abide peacefully, joyfully, fed and brightened, not consumed and annihilated, by that flashing brightness and purity?’ The prophet’s answer is the answer of common-sense-like draws to like. A holy God must have holy companions.

But that is not all. The fire of God is the fire of love as well as the fire of purity; a fire that blesses and quickens, as well as a fire that destroys and consumes. So the Apostle John comes with his answer, not contradicting the other one, but deepening it, expanding it, letting us see the foundations of it, and proclaiming that as a holy God must be surrounded by holy hearts, which will open themselves to the flame as flowers to the sunshine, so a loving God must be clustered about by loving hearts, who alone can enter into deep and true friendship with Him.

The two answers, then, of these texts are one at bottom; and when Isaiah asks, 'Who shall dwell with the everlasting fire?'-the perpetual fire, burning and unconsumed, of that divine righteousness-the deepest answer, which is no stern requirement but a merciful promise, is John's answer, 'He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.'

The simplest way, I think, of bringing out the force of the words before us will be just to take these three points which I have already suggested: the world's question, the partial answer of the prophet, the complete answer of the Apostle.

I. The World's Question.

I need only remind you how frequently in the Old Testament the emblem of fire is employed to express the divine nature. In many places, though by no means in all, the prominent idea in the emblem is that of the purity of the divine nature, which flashes and flames as against all which is evil and sinful. So we read in one grand passage in this book of Isaiah, 'the Light of Israel shall become a fire'; as if the lambent beauty of the highest manifestation of God gathered itself together, intensified itself, was forced back upon itself, and from merciful, illuminating light turned itself into destructive and consuming fire. And we read, you may remember, too, in the description of the symbolical manifestation of the divine nature which accompanied the giving of the Law on Sinai, that 'the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mountain,' and yet into that blaze and brightness the Lawgiver went, and lived and moved in it.

There is, then, in the divine nature a side of antagonism and opposition to evil, which flames against it, and labours to consume it. I would speak with all respect for the motives of many men in this day who dread to entertain the idea of the divine wrath against evil, lest they should in any manner trench upon the purity and perfectness of the divine love. I respect and sympathise with the motive altogether; and I neither respect nor sympathise with the many ferocious pictures of that which is called the wrath of God against sin, which much so-called orthodox teaching has indulged in. But if you will only remove from that word 'anger' the mere human associations which cleave to it, of passion on the one hand, and of a wish to hurt its object on the other, then you cannot, I think, deny to the divine nature the possession of such passionless and unmalignant wrath, without striking a fatal blow at the perfect purity of God. A God that does not hate evil, that does not flame out against it, using all the energies of His being to destroy it, is a God to whose character there cleaves a fatal suspicion of indifference to good, of moral apathy. If I have not a God to trust in that hates evil because He loveth righteousness, then 'the pillared firmament itself were rottenness, and earth's base built on stubble'; nor were there any hope that this damnable thing that is killing and sucking the life-blood out of our spirits should ever be destroyed and cast aside. Oh! it is short-sighted wisdom, and it is cruel kindness, to tamper with the thought of the wrath of God, the 'everlasting burnings' of that eternally pure nature wherewith it wages war against all sin.

But then, let us remember that, on the other side, the fire which is the destructive fire of perfect purity is also the fire that quickens and blesses. God is love, says John, and love is fire, too. We speak of 'the flame of love,' of 'warm affections,' and the like. The symbol of fire does not mean destructive energy only. And these two are one. God's wrath is a form of God's love; God hates because He loves.

And the 'wrath' and the 'love' differ much more in the difference of the eyes that look, than they do in themselves. Here are two bits of glass; one of them sifts out and shows all the fiery-red rays, the other all the yellow. It is the one same pure, white beam that passes through them both, but one is only capable of receiving the fiery-red beams of the wrath, and the other is capable of receiving the golden light of the love. Let us take heed lest, by destroying the wrath, we maim the love; and let us take heed lest, by exaggerating the wrath, we empty the love of its sweetness and its preciousness; and let us accept the teaching that these are one, and that the deepest of all the things that the world can know about God lies in that double saying, which does not contradict its second half by its first, but completes its first by its second-God is Righteousness, God is Love.

Well, then, that being so, the question rises to every mind of ordinary thoughtfulness: 'Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?' A God fighting against evil; can you and I hope to hold familiar fellowship with Him? A God fighting against evil; if He rises up to exercise His judging and His punishing energies, can we meet Him? ‘Can thy heart endure and thy hands be strong, in the day that I shall deal with thee?’ is the question that comes to each of us if we are reasonable people. I do not dwell upon it; but I ask you to take it, and answer it for yourselves.

To ‘dwell with everlasting burnings’ means two things. First, it means to hold familiar intercourse and communion with God. The question which presents itself to thoughtful minds is-What sort of man must I be if I am to dwell near God? The lowliest bush may be lit by the divine fire and not be consumed by it; and the poorest heart may be all aflame with an indwelling God, if only it yield itself to Him, and long for His likeness. Electricity only flames into consuming fire when its swift passage is resisted. The question for us all is-How can I receive this holy fire into my bosom, and not be burned? Is any communion possible, and if it is, on what conditions? These are the questions which the heart of man is really asking, though it knows not the meaning of its own unrest.

‘To dwell with everlasting burnings’ means, secondly, to bear the action of the fire-the judgment of the present and the judgment of the future. The question for each of us is-How can we face that judicial and punitive action of that Divine Providence which works even here, and how can we face the judicial and punitive action in the future?

I suppose you all believe, or at least say that you believe, that there is such a future judgment. Have you ever asked yourselves the question, and rested not until you got a reasonable answer to it, on which, like a man leaning on a pillar, you can lean the whole weight of your expectations-How am I to come into the presence of that devouring fire? Have you any fireproof dress that will enable you to go into the furnace like the Hebrew youths, and walk up and down in the midst of it, well and at liberty? Have you? ‘Who shall dwell amidst the everlasting fires?’

That question has stirred sometimes, I know, in the consciences of every man and woman that is listening to me. Some of you have tampered with it and tried to throttle it, or laughed at it and shuffled it out of your mind by the engrossments of business, and tried to get rid of it in all sorts of ways: and here it has met you again to-day. Let us have it settled, in the name of common-sense [to invoke nothing higher], once for all, upon reasonable principles that will stand; and do you see that you settle it to-day.

II. And now, look next at the prophet's answer.

It is simple. He says that if a man is to hold fellowship with, or to face the judgment of, the pure and righteous God, the plainest dictate of reason and common-sense is that he himself must be pure and righteous to match. The details into which hid answer to the question runs out are all very homely, prosaic, pedestrian kind of virtues, nothing at all out of the way, nothing that people would call splendid or heroic. Here they are:-'He that walks righteously,'-a short injunction, easily spoken, but how hard!-'and speaketh uprightly, he that despiseth the gain of oppression, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, that shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.' Righteous action, righteous speech, inward hatred of possessions gotten at my neighbour's cost, and a vehement resistance to all the seductions of sense, shutting one's hands, stopping one's ears, fastening one's eyes up tight so that he may not handle, nor hear, nor see the evil-there is the outline of a trite, everyday sort of morality which is to mark the man who, as Isaiah says, can 'dwell amongst the everlasting fires.'

Now, if at your leisure you will turn to Psa. 15:1 - Psa. 15:5 and Psa. 24:1 - Psa. 24:10, you will find there two other versions of the same questions and the same answer, both of which were obviously in our prophet's mind when he spoke. In the one you have the question put: 'Who shall abide in Thy tabernacle?' In the other you have the same question put: 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?' And both these two psalms answer the question and sketch the outline [and it is only an outline] of a righteous man, from the Old Testament point of view, substantially in the same fashion that Isaiah does here.

I do not need to remark upon the altogether unscientific and non-exhaustive nature of the description of righteousness that is set forth here. There are a great many virtues, plain and obvious, that are left out of the picture. But I ask you to notice one very special defect, as it might seem. There is not the slightest reference to anything that we call religion. It is all purely pedestrian, worldly morality; do righteous things; do not tell lies; do not cheat your neighbour; stop your ears if people say foul things in your hearing; shut your eyes if evil comes before you. These are the kind of duties enjoined, and these only. The answer of my text moves altogether on the surface, dealing only with conduct, not with character, and dealing with conduct only in reference to this world. There is not a word about the inner nature, not a word about the inner relation of a man to God. It is the minimum of possible qualifications for dwelling with God.

Well, now, do you achieve that minimum? Suppose we waive for the moment all reference to God; suppose we waive for the moment all reference to motive and inward nature; suppose we keep ourselves only on the outside of things, and ask what sort of *conduct* a man must have that is able to walk with God? We have heard the answer.

Now, then, is that *me*? Is this sketch here, admittedly imperfect, a mere black-and-white swift outline, not intended to be shaded or coloured, or brought up to the round; is this mere outline of what a good man ought to be, at all like me? Yes or no? I think we must all say No to the question, and acknowledge our failure to attain to this homely ideal of conduct. The requirement pared down to its lowest possible degree, and kept as superficial as ever you can keep it, is still miles above me, and all I have to say when I listen to such words is, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’

My dear friends, take this one thought away with you:-the requirements of the most moderate conscience are such as no man among us is able to comply with. And what then? Am I to be shut up to despair? am I to say: Then nobody can dwell within that bright flame? Am I to say: Then when God meets man, man must crumble away into nothing and disappear? Am I to say, for myself: Then, alas for me! when I stand at His judgment bar?

III. Let us take the Apostle’s answer.

God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.’ Now, to begin with, let us distinctly understand that the New Testament answer, represented by John’s great words, entirely endorses Isaiah’s; and that the difference between the two is not that the Old Testament, as represented by psalmist and prophet, said, ‘You must be righteous in order to dwell with God,’ and that the New Testament says, ‘You need not be.’ Not at all! John is just as vehement in saying that nothing but purity can bind a man in thoroughly friendly and familiar conjunction with God as David or Isaiah was. He insists as much as anybody can insist upon this great principle, that if we are to dwell with God we must be like God, and that we are like God when we are like Him in righteousness and love.

‘He that saith he hath fellowship with Him, and walketh in darkness, is a liar!’ That is John’s short way of gathering it all up. Righteousness is as essential in the gospel scheme for all communion and fellowship with God as ever it was declared to be by the most rigid of legalists; and if any of you have the notion that Christianity has any other terms to lay down than the old terms-that righteousness is essential to communion-you do not understand Christianity. If any of you are building upon the notion that a man can come into loving and familiar friendship with God as long as he loves and cleaves to any sin, you have got hold of a delusion that will wreck your souls yet,-is, indeed, harming, wrecking them now, and will finally destroy them if you do not got rid of it. Let us always remember that the declaration of my first text lies at the very foundation of the declaration of my second.

What, then, is the difference between them? Why, for one thing it is this-ISAIAH tells us that we must he righteous, John tells us how we may be. The one says, ‘There are the conditions,’ the other says, ‘Here are the means by which you can have the conditions.’ Love is the productive germ of all righteousness; it is the fulfilling of the law. Get that into your hearts, and all these relative and personal duties will come. If the deepest, inmost life is right, all the surface of life will come right. Conduct will follow character, character will follow love.

The efforts of men to make themselves pure, and so to come into the position of holding fellowship with God, are like the wise efforts of children in their gardens. They stick in their little bits of rootless flowers, and they water them; but, being rootless, the flowers are all withered to-morrow and flung over the hedge the day after. But if we have the love of God in our hearts, we have not rootless flowers, but the seed which will spring up and bear fruit of holiness.

But that is not all. Isaiah says ‘Righteousness,’ John says ‘Love,’ which makes righteousness. And then he tells us how we may get love, having first told us how we may get righteousness: ‘We love Him because He first loved us.’ It is just as impossible for a man to work himself into loving God as it is for a man to work himself into righteous actions. There is no difference in the degree of impossibility in the two cases. But what we can do is, we can go and gaze at the thing that kindles the love; we can contemplate the Cross on which the great Lover of our souls died, and thereby we can come to love Him. John’s answer goes down to the depths, for his notion of love is the response of the believing soul to the love of God which was manifested on the Cross of Calvary. To have righteousness we must have love; to have love we must look to the love that God has to us; to look rightly to the love that God has to us we must have faith. Now you have gone down to the very bottom of the matter. Faith is the first step of the ladder, and the second step is love and the third step is righteousness.

And so the New Testament, in its highest and most blessed declarations, rests itself firmly upon these rigid requirements of the old law. You and I, dear brethren, have but one way by which we can walk in the midst of that fire, rejoicing and unconsumed, namely that we shall know and believe the love which God hath to us, love Him back again ‘with pure hearts fervently,’ and in the might of that receptive faith and productive love, become like Him in holiness, and ourselves be ‘baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire.’ Thus, fire-born and fiery, we shall dwell as in our native home, in God Himself.

39)Isaiah 33:16

Isaiah

THE FORTRESS OF THE FAITHFUL

Isa. 33:16.

This glowing promise becomes even more striking if we mark its connection with the solemn question in the previous context. ‘Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire?’ is the prophet’s question; ‘who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?' That question really means, Who is capable 'of communion with God'? The prophet sketches the outline of the character in the subsequent verses, and then recurring to his metaphor of a habitation, and yet with a most lovely and significant modification, he says, 'he'-the man that he has been sketching-'shall dwell,' not 'with the everlasting burnings,' but 'on high; his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks,' like some little hill, fort, or city, perched upon a mountain, and having within it ample provision and an unfailing spring of water. 'His bread shall, be given him, his water shall be sure.' To dwell with 'the devouring fire' is to 'dwell on high,' to be safe and satisfied. So then, whilst the words before us have, of course, direct and immediate reference to the Assyrian invasion, and promise, in a literal sense, security and exemption from its evils to the righteous in Israel, they widen and deepen into a picturesque, but not less real, statement of what comes into the religious life, by communion with God. There are three things: elevation, security, satisfaction.

'He shall dwell on high.'

In the East, and in all unsettled countries, you will find that the sites of the cities are on the hilltops, for a very plain reason, and that is the fact that underlies the prophet's representation. To hold fellowship with God, to live in union with Him, to have His thoughts for my thoughts, and His love wrapping my heart, and His will enshrined in my will; to carry Him about with me into all the pettinesses of daily life, and, amidst the whirlpool of duties and changing circumstances, to sit in the centre, as it were the eye of the whirlpool where there is a dead calm, *that* lifts a man on high. Communion with God secures elevation of spirit, raising us clean above the flat that lies beneath. There are many ways by which men seek for lofty thoughts, and a general elevation above the carking cares and multiplied minutenesses of this poor, mortal, transient life; but while books and great thoughts, and the converse of the wise, and art, and music, and all these other elevating influences have a real place and a blessed efficiency in ennobling life, there is not one of them, nor all of them put together, that will give to the human spirit that strange and beautiful elevation above the world and the flesh and the devil, which simple communion with God will give. I have seen many a poor man who knew nothing about the lofty visions that shape and lift humanity, who had no side of him responsive to aesthetics or art or music, who was no thinker, no student, who never had spoken to anybody above the rank of a poor labouring man, and to whom all the wisdom of the nations was a closed chamber, who yet in his life, ay! and on his face, bore marks of a spirit elevated into a serene region where there was no tumult, and where nothing unclean or vicious could live. A few of the select spirits of the race may painfully climb on high by thought and effort. Get God into your hearts, and it will be like filling the round of a silken balloon with light air; you will soar instead of climbing, and 'dwell on high.' When you are up there, the things below that look largest will dwindle and 'show,' as Shakespeare has it, 'scarce so gross as beetles,' looked at from the height, and the noises will sink to a scarcely audible murmur, and you will be able to see the lie of the country, and, as it says in the context, 'your eyes shall behold the land that is very far off.' Yes! the hilltop is the place for wide views, and for understanding the course of the serpentine river, and it is the place to discover how small are the mightiest things at the foot, and how little a way towards the sun the noises of human praise or censure can ever travel. 'He shall dwell on high,' and he will see a long way off, and understand the relative magnitude of things, and the strife of tongues will have ceased for him.

And more than that is implied in the promise. If we dwell on high, we shall come down with all the more force on what lies below. There is no greater caricature and misconception of Christianity than that which talks as if the spirit that lived in daily communion with God, high above the world, was remote from the world. Why, how do they make electricity nowadays? By the fall of water from a height, and the higher the level from which it descends, the mightier the force which it generates in the descent. So nobody will tell on the world like the man who lives above it. The height from which a weight rushes down measures the force of its dint where it falls, and of the energy with which it comes. 'He shall dwell on high'; and only the man that stands above the world is able to influence it.

Again, here is another blessing of the Christian life, put in a picturesque form: 'His defence shall be munitions of rocks.' That is a promise of security from assailants, which in its essence is true always, though its truth may seem doubtful to the superficial estimate of sense. The experience of the South African war showed how impregnable ‘the munitions of rocks’ were. The Boers lay safe behind them, and our soldiers might fire lyddite at them all day and never touch them. So, the man who lives in communion with God has between him and all evil the Rock of Ages, and he lies at the back of it, quiet and safe, whatever foe may rage on the other side of it.

Now, of course, the prophet meant to tell his countrymen that, in the theocracy of which they were parts, righteousness and nothing else was the national security, and if a man or a nation lived in communion with God, it bore a charmed life. That is a great deal more true, in regard to externals, in the miraculous ‘dispensation,’ as it is called, of the Old Testament than it is now, and we are not to take over these promises in their gross literal form into the Christian era, as if they were unconditional and absolutely to be fulfilled. But at the same time, if you reflect how many of our troubles do come to us mainly because we break our communion with God, I think we shall see that this old word has still an application to our daily lives and outward circumstances. Deduct from any man’s life all the discomfort and trouble and calamity which have come down upon him because he was not in touch with God, and there will not be very much left. Yet there will be some, and the deepest and sorest of all our sorrows are not to be interpreted as occasioned by defects in our dwelling in God. Then has my text no application to them? Yes, because what still remains of earthly cares and sorrows and evils would, in communion with God, change its character. The rind is the same; but all the interior contents have been, as children will do with a fruit, scooped out, and another kind of thing has been put inside, so that though the outward appearance is the same, what is at the heart of it is utterly different. It is no longer some coarse, palate-biting, common vegetable, but a sweet confection, made by God’s own hands, and put into the gourd, which has been hollowed out and emptied of its evil. That is, perhaps, a very violent figure, but take a plain case as illustration. Suppose two men, each of them going to his wife’s funeral. The two hearses pass inside the cemetery gates, one after the other. Outwardly the two afflictions are the same, but the one man says, ‘The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away’; the other man says, ‘They have taken away my gods, and what shall I do more?’ *Are* the two things the same? ‘He shall dwell on high, his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks,’ and if we do hide ourselves in the cleft, then no evil shall befall us, nor any plague come nigh our dwelling.

But there is another truth contained in this great promise, viz., that in regard to all the real evils which beset men, and these are all summed up in the one, the temptation to do wrong, their arrows will be blunted, and their force be broken, if we keep our minds in touch with God through humble communion and lowly obedience. Dear brethren, the way by which we can conquer temptations around, and silence inclinations within which riotously seek to yield to the temptations is, I believe, far more by cultivating a consciousness of communion with God, than by specific efforts directed to the overcoming of a given and particular temptation. Keep inside the fortress, and no bullet will come near you. Array yourselves in the most elaborate precautions and step out from its shadow, and every bullet will strike and wound. Let me keep up my fellowship with God, and I may laugh at temptation. Security depends on continual communion with God by faith, love, aspiration, and obedience.

Now, I need not say more than a word about the last element in these promises, the satisfaction of desires. ‘His bread shall be given him, and his water shall be sure.’ In ancient warfare sieges were usually blockades; and strong fortresses were reduced by famine much more frequently than by assault. Mafeking and Ladysmith and Port Arthur were in most danger from that cause. The promise here assures us that we shall have all supplies in our abode, if God is our abode. Wherever he who dwells in God goes, he carries with him his provisions, and he does not need elaborate arrangements of pipes or reservoirs, because there is a fountain in the courtyard that the enemy cannot get at. They may stop the springs throughout the land, they may cut off all water supplies, so that ‘there shall be no fruit in the vine, and the labour of the olive shall fail,’ but they cannot touch the fountain. ‘His water shall be sure,’ and he can say, ‘In the days of famine I shall be satisfied.’

God is and gives all that we need for sustenance, for growth, for refreshment, for satisfaction of our desires. Keep near Him, and you will find in the heart of the devouring fire a shelter, and you will have all that you want for life here. My text will be true about us, in the measure in which we do thus dwell, and if we thus dwell here, and so dwell on high, with the munitions of rocks for our fortress, and ‘the bread of God that came down from heaven’ for our food, and the water of life for our refreshment, then, when there is no longer any need of places for defence, the other saying will be true, ‘They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more, for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them . . . and shall lead them to living fountains of waters, and God, the Lord, shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.’

40)Isaiah 33:21

Isaiah

THE RIVERS OF GOD

Isa. 33:21.

One great peculiarity of Jerusalem, which distinguishes it from almost all other historical cities, is that it has no river. Babylon was on the Euphrates, Nineveh on the Tigris, Thebes on the Nile, Rome on the Tiber; but Jerusalem had nothing but a fountain or two, and a well or two, and a little trickle and an intermittent stream. The water supply to-day is, and always has been, a great difficulty, and an insuperable barrier to the city’s ever having a great population.

That deficiency throws a great deal of beautiful light on more than one passage in the Old Testament. For instance, this same prophet contrasts the living stream, the waters of Siloam, as an emblem of the gentle sway of the divine King of Israel, with ‘the river, strong and mighty,’ which was the symbol of Assyria; and a psalm that we all know well, sings, ‘There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God,’-a triumphant exclamation which is robbed of half its force, unless we remember that the literal Jerusalem had no river at all. The vision of living waters flowing from the Temple which Ezekiel saw is a variation of the same theme, and suggests that in the Messianic days the deficiency shall be made good, and a mysterious stream shall spring up from behind, and flow out from beneath, the temple doors, and then with rapid increase and depth and width, but with no tributaries coming into it, shall run fertilising and life-giving everywhere, till it pours itself into the noisome waters of the sullen sea of death and heals even them.

The same general representation is contained in the words before us. Isaiah’s great vision is not, as I take it, of a future, but of what the Jerusalem of his day might he to the Israelite if he would live by faith. The mighty Lord, ‘the glorious Lord,’ shall Himself ‘be a place of broad rivers and streams.’

I. First, then, this remarkable promise suggests to me how in God there is the supply of all deficiencies.

The city was perched on its barren, hot rock, with scarcely a drop of water, and its inhabitants must often have been tempted to wish that there had been running down the sun-bleached bed of the Kedron a flashing stream, such as laved the rock-cut temples and tombs of Thebes. Isaiah says, in effect, ‘You cannot see it, but if you will trust yourselves to God, there will be such a river.’

In like manner every defect in our circumstances, everything lacking in our lives-and we all have something which does not correspond with, or which falls beneath, our wishes and apparent needs-everything which seems to hamper us in some aspects, and to sadden us in others, may be compensated and made up if we will hold fast by God; and although to outward sense we dwell ‘in a dry and barren land where no water is,’ the eye of faith will see, flashing and flowing all around, the rejoicing waters of the divine presence, and they will mirror the sky, and the reflections will teach us that there is a heaven above us.

If there is in any life a gap, that is a prophecy that God will fill it. If there is anything in your circumstances in regard to which you often feel sadly, and are sometimes tempted to feel bitterly, how much stronger and more fully equipped you would be, if it were otherwise, be sure that in God there is that which can supply the want, and that the consciousness of the want is a merciful summons to seek its supply from and in Him. If there is a breach in the encircling wall of your defences, God has made it in order that He Himself, and not an enemy, may enter your lives and hearts. ‘In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne,' and it did not matter though that mortal king was dead, for the true King was thereby revealed as living for ever, just as when the summer foliage, fluttering and green, drops from the tree, the sturdy stem and the strong branches are made the more visible. Our felt deficiencies are doors by which God may come in. Do you sometimes feel as if you would be better if you had easier worldly circumstances? Is your health precarious and feeble? Have you to walk a solitary path through this world, and does your heart often ache for companionship? You can have all your heart's desire fulfilled in deepest reality in God, in the same way that that riverless city had Jehovah for 'a place of broad rivers and streams.'

II. Take another side of the same thought. Here is a revelation of God and His sweet presence as our true defence.

The river that lay between some strong city and the advancing enemy was its strongest fortification when the bridge of boats was taken away. One of the ancient cities to which I have referred is described by one of the prophets as being held as within the coils of a serpent, by which he means the various bendings and twistings of the Euphrates, which encompassed Babylon, and made it so hard to be conquered. The primitive city of Paris owed its safety in the wild old times when it was founded, to its being on an island. Venice has lived through many centuries, because it is girded about by its lagoons. England is what it is, largely because of 'the streak of silver sea.' So God's city has a broad moat all round it. The prophet goes on to explain the force of his bold figure in regard to the safety promised by it, when he says: 'Wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby.' Not a keel of the enemy shall dare to cut its waters, nor break their surface with the wet plash of invading oars. And so, if we will only knit ourselves with God by simple trust and continual communion, it is the plainest prose fact that nothing will harm us, and no foe will ever get near enough to us to shoot his arrows against us.

That is a truth for faith, and not for sense. Many a man, truly compassed about by God, has to go through fiery trial and sorrow and affliction. But I venture to appeal to every heart that has known grief most acutely, protractedly, and frequently, and has borne it in the faith of God, and with submission to Him; and I know that they who are the ‘experts,’ and who alone have the right to speak with authority on the subject, will confirm the statement that I make, that sorrows recognised as sent from God are the truest blessings of our lives. No real evil befalls us, because, according to the old superstition that money bewitched was cleansed if it was handed across running water, our sorrows only reach us across the river that defends.

Isaiah is full of symbols of various kinds for the impregnability of Zion. Sometimes, as in my text, he falls back upon the thought of the bright waters of the moat on which no enemy can venture to sail. Sometimes he draws his metaphor from the element opposed to water, and speaks of a wall of fire round about us. But the simple reality that lies below all the poetry is, that trust in God brings His presence around me, and that makes it impossible that any evil should befall me, and certain that whatever does befall me is His messenger, His loving messenger, for my good. If we believed that, and lived on the belief, the whole world would be different.

III. Take, again, another aspect of this same thought, which suggests to us God’s presence as our true refreshment and satisfaction.

The waterless city depended on cisterns, and they were often broken, and were always more or less foul, and sometimes the water fell very low in them. Isaiah says to us: Even when you are living in external circumstances like that:

‘When all created streams are dry,
Thy fulness is the same.’

The fountain of living waters-if we may slightly vary the metaphor of my text-never sinks one hair’s-breadth in its crystal basin, however many thirsty lips may be glued to its edge, and however large may be their draughts from it. This metaphor, turned to the purpose of suggesting how in God every part of our nature finds its appropriate nourishment and refreshment which it does not find anywhere besides, has become one of the commonplaces of the pulpit. Would it were the commonplace of our lives! It is easy to talk about Him as being the fountain of living waters; it is easy to quote and to admire the words which the Master spoke to the Samaritan woman when He said, ‘I would have given thee living water,’ and ‘the water which I give will be a fountain springing up into everlasting life.’ We repeat or learn such sayings, and then what do we do? We go away and try to slake our thirst at broken cisterns, and every draught which we take is like the salt water from which a shipwrecked-boat’s crew in its madness will sometimes not be able to refrain, each drop increasing the raging thirst and hastening the impending death.

If we believed that God was the broad river from which we could draw and draw, and drink and drink, for ever and ever, should we be clinging with such desperate tenacity, as most of us exhibit, to earthly goods? Should we whimper with such childish regrets, as most of us nourish, when these goods are diminished or withdrawn? Should we live as we constantly do, day in and day out, seldom applying ourselves to the one source of strength and peace and refreshment, and trying, like fools, to find what apart from Him the world can never give? The rivers in northern Tartary all lose themselves in the sand. Not one of them has volume or force enough to get to the sea. And the rivers from which we try to drink are sand-choked long before our thirst is slaked. So, if we are wise, we shall take Isaiah’s hint, and go where the water flows abundantly, and flows for ever.

IV. There is a last point that I would also suggest, namely, the manifold variety in the results of God’s presence.

It shapes itself into many forms, according to our different needs. ‘The glorious Lord shall be a place of broad rivers.’ Yes; but notice the next words-’and streams.’ Now, the word which is there translated ‘streams’ means little channels for irrigation and other purposes, by which the water of some great river is led off into the melon patches, and gardens, and plantations, and houses of the inhabitants. So we have not only the picture of the broad river in its unity, but also that of the thousand little rivulets in their multiplicity, and in their direction to each man’s plot of ground. It is the same idea that is in the psalm which I have already quoted: ‘There is a river, *the streams* whereof make glad the city of our God.’ You can divide the river up into very tiny trickles, according to the moment’s small wants.

If you make but a narrow channel, you will get but a shallow streamlet; and if you make your channel broad and deep, you will get much of Him.

It is of no profit that we live on the river’s bank if we let its waters go rolling and flashing past our door, or our gardens, or our lips. Unless you have a sluice, by which you can take them off into your own territory, and keep the shining blessing to be the source of fertility in your own garden, and of coolness and refreshment to your own thirst, your garden will be parched, and your lips will crack. There is a ‘broad river,’ and there are also ‘streams’; which, being brought down to its simplest expression, just comes to this-that we may and must make God our very own property. It is useless to say ‘*our* God,’ ‘the God of Israel,’ ‘the God of the Church,’ ‘the Great Creator,’ ‘the Universal Father,’ and so on, unless we say ‘*my* God and *my* Saviour,’ ‘*my* Refuge and *my* Strength.’ How much of the river have you dipped up in your own vessel? How much of it have you taken with which to water your own vineyard and refresh your own souls?

The time comes when Isaiah’s prophecy shall be perfectly fulfilled, according to the great words in the closing hook of Scripture, about the river of the water of life proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb. But, till that time comes, we do not need to wander thirsty in a desert; but all round us we may hear the mighty waters rolling everywhere, and drink deep draughts of delight and supply for all our needs, from the very presence of God Himself.

41)Isaiah 33:22

Isaiah

JUDGE, LAWGIVER, KING

Isa. 33:22.

There is reference here to the three forms of government in Israel: by Moses, by Judges, by Kings. In all, Israel was a Theocracy. Isaiah looks beyond the human representative to the true divine Reality.

I. A truth for us, in both its more specific and its more general forms.

[a] Specific. Christ is all these three for us-Authority; His will law; Defender.

[b] More general. Everything that human beings are to us, they are by derivation from Him-and He sums in Himself all forms of good and blessing. Every name among men for any kind of helper belongs to Him. All tender, helpful relationships are but 'broken lights of Thee.'

II. A lesson hard to learn and to remember.

One knows not whether it is harder for faith to look beyond the visible helpers or delights to the Unseen Real One, or to look through tears, when these are gone, and to see Him clearly filling an otherwise empty field of vision. When we have a palpable prop to lean on, it is difficult to be clearly aware that, unless the palpable support were held up by the Unseen, it could not be a prop, and to lean on it would be like resting one's weight on a staff stuck in yielding mud. But it is no less difficult to tell our hearts that we have all that we ever had, when what we had leaned on for many happy days and found to hold us up is stricken from beneath us. Present, the seen lawgiver, judge, or king stays the eyes that should travel past him to God Himself; removed, his absence makes a great emptiness, in whose vacuity it is difficult for faith to discern the real presence of Him who is all that the departed seemed to be. The painted glass stays the eye; shattered, it lets in only the sight of a void and far-off sky.

Israel could not breathe freely in the rarefied air on the heights of a theocracy, and demanded a visible king. It had its desire, and as a consequence, 'leanness in its soul.' Christendom has found it as difficult to do without visible embodiments of authority, law, defence, and hence many evils and corruptions in the institutions and practices of organised Christianity.

III. A conviction which makes strong and blessed.

To have dominant in our minds, and operative through our lives, the settled conviction that God in Christ is for us judge, lawgiver, and king, and that the purpose of all these offices or relationships is that 'He will save us' is the secret of tranquillity, the fountain of courage, the talisman which makes life all different and us who live in it different. Fear cannot survive where that conviction rules and fortifies a heart. We shall not be slavish adherents of men if we are accustomed to take our orders from our Lawgiver. Earthly prizes or dignities will not dazzle eyes that have seen the King in His beauty. We shall pay little heed to men's judgments if there flames ever before conscience the thought, 'He that judgeth me is the Lord.' 'He will save us'; who can destroy what His hand is stretched out to preserve? 'If God is for us, who is against us? It is God that justifieth; who is He that condemneth?'

42)Isaiah 35:5

Isaiah

MIRACLES OF HEALING

Isa. 35:5 - Isa. 35:6.

'Then'-when? The previous verse answers, 'Behold, your God will come, He will come and save you.' And what or when is that 'coming'? A glance at the place which this grand hymn occupies in the series of Isaiah's prophecies answers that question. It stands at the close of the first part of these, and is the limit of the prophet's vision. He has been setting forth the Lord's judgments upon all heathen, and His deliverance of Israel from its oppressors; and the 'coming' is His manifestation for that double purpose. Before its flashing brightness, barrenness is changed into verdure, diseases that lame men's powers vanish, the dry and thirsty land gleams with the shining light of sudden streams. Across the wilderness stretches a broad path, raised high above the bewildering monotony of pathless sand, too plain to be missed, too lofty for wild beasts' suppleness to spring upon it: along it troop with song and gladness the returning exiles, with hope in their hearts as they journey to Zion, where they find a joyful home undimmed by sorrow, and in which sighing and sorrow are heard and felt no more.

Now this is poetry, no doubt; the golden light of imagination suffuses it all, but it is poetry with a solid meaning in it. It is not a mere play of fancy exalting the 'coming of the Lord' by heaping together all images that suggest the vanishing of evil and the coming of good. If there is a basis of facts in it, what are they? What is the period of that emphatic ‘then’ at the beginning of our text? The return of the Jews from exile? Yes, certainly; but some greater event shines through the words. Some future restoration of that undying race to their own land? Yes, possibly, again we answer, but that does not exhaust the prophecy. The great coming of God to save in the gift of His Son? Yes, that in an eminent degree. The second coming of Christ? Yes, that too. All the events in which God has come for men’s deliverance are shadowed here; for in them all, the same principles are at work, and in all, similar effects have followed. But mainly the mission and work of Jesus Christ is pointed at here-whether in its first stage of Incarnation and Passion, or in its second stage of Coming in glory, ‘the second time without sin, unto salvation.’

And the bodily diseases here enumerated are symbols, just as Christ’s miracles were symbolical, just as every language has used the body as a parable of the soul, and has felt that there is such a harmony between them that the outward and visible does correspond to and shadow the inward and spiritual.

I think, then, that we may fairly take these four promises as bringing out very distinctly the main characteristics of the blessed effects of Christ’s work in the world. The great subject of these words is the power of Christ in restoring to men the spiritual capacities which are all but destroyed. We have here three classes of bodily infirmities represented as cured at the date of that blessed ‘Then.’ Blindness and deafness are defects in perception, and stand for incapacities affecting the powers of knowledge. Lameness affects powers of motion, and stands for incapacity of activity. Dumbness prevents speech, and stands for incapacity of utterance.

I. Christ as the restorer of the powers of knowing.

Bodily diseases are taken to symbolise spiritual infirmities.

Mark the peculiarities of Scripture anthropology as brought out in this view of humanity:-

Its gloomy views of man’s actual condition.

Its emphatic declaration that that condition is abnormal.

Its confidence of effecting a cure.

Its transcendentally glorious conception of what man may become.

Men are blind and deaf; that is to say, their powers of perception are destroyed by reason of disease. What a picture! The great spiritual realities are all unseen, as Elisha's young servant was blind to the fiery chariots that girdled the prophet. Men are blind to the starry truths that shine as silver in the firmament. They are deaf to the Voice which is gone out to the ends of the earth, and yet they have eyes and ears, conscience, intuitions. They possess organs, but these are powerless.

And while the blindness is primarily in regard to spiritual and religious truths, it is not confined to these, but wherever spiritual blindness has fallen, the whole of a man's knowledge will suffer. There will be blindness to the highest philosophy, to the true basis and motive of morals, to true psychology, to the noblest poetry. All will be of the earth, earthy. You cannot strike religion out of men's thoughts, as you might take a stone out of a wall and leave the wall standing; you take out foundation and mortar, and make a ruinous heap.

I know, of course, that there may be much mental activity without any perception of spiritual realities, but all knowledge which is not purely mathematical or physical suffers by the absence of such perception. All this blindness is caused by sin.

Christ is the giver of spiritual sight. He restores the faculty by taking away the hindrance to its exercise. Further, He gives sight because He gives light.

But turn to facts of experience, and consider the mental apathy of heathenism as contrasted with the energy of mind within the limits of Christendom. Greece, of course, is a brilliant exception, but even there [1] what of the conceptions of God? [2] what of the effect of the wise on the mass of the nation? Think of the languid intellectual life of the East. Think of the energy of thought which has been working within the limits of Christianity. Think of Christian theology compared with the mythologies of idolatry. And the contrast holds not only in the religious field but all over the field of thought.

There is no such sure way of diffusing a culture which will refine and strengthen all the powers of mind as to diffuse the knowledge of Jesus, and to make men love Him. In His light they will see light.

To know Him and to keep company with Him is ‘a liberal education,’ as is seen in many a lowly life, all uninfluenced by what is called learning, but enriched with the finest flowers of ‘culture,’ and having gathered them all in Christ’s garden.

Christ is the true light; in Him do we see. Without Him, what is all other knowledge? He is central to all, like genial heat about the roots of a plant. There is other knowledge than that of sense; and for the highest of all our knowledge we depend on Him who is the Word. In that region we can neither observe nor experiment. In that region facts must be brought by some other means than we can command, and we can but draw more or less accurate deductions from them. Logic without revelation is like a spinning-machine without any cotton, busy drawing out nothing. Here we have to listen. ‘The entrance of Thy words giveth light.’ Your God shall come and save you; then, by that divine coming and saving, ‘the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.’

II. Christ as the Restorer of the Powers of Action.

Again turn to heathenism, see the apathetic indolence, the unprogressive torpor, ‘Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.’ Sin lames for service of God; it leaves the lower nature free to act, and that freedom paralyses all noble activity.

Christianity brings the Energising of the Soul-

> [a] By its reference of everything to God-our powers and our circumstances and our activities.
>
> [b] By its prominence given to Retribution. It speaks not merely of *vita brevis*-but of *vita brevis* and an Eternity which grows out of it.

[c] By its great motive for work-love.

[d] By the freedom It brings from the weight that paralysed.

It takes away sin. Lifting that dreary load from our backs, it makes us joyful, strong, and agile.

The true view of Christianity is not, as some of its friends, and some of its foes, mistakenly concur in supposing, that it weakens interest in, and energy on, the Present, but that it heightens the power of action. A life plunged in that jar of oxygen will glow with redoubled brilliance.

III. Christ as the Restorer of Powers of Utterance.

The silence that broods over the world. It is dumb for all holy, thankful words; with no voice to sing, no utterance of joyful praise.

Think of the effect of Christianity on human speech, giving it new themes, refining words and crowding them with new meanings. Translate the Bible into any language, and that language is elevated and enriched.

Think of the effect on human praise. That great treasure of Christian poetry.

Think of the effect on human gladness. Christ fills the heart with such reasons for praise, and makes life one song of joy.

Thus Christ is the Healer.

To men seeking for knowledge, He offers a higher gift-healing. And as for true knowledge and culture, in Christ, and in Christ alone, will you find it.

Let your culture be rooted in Him. Let your Religion influence all your nature.

The effects of Christianity are its best evidence. What else does the like of that which it does? Let Jannes and Jambres ‘do the same with their enchantments.’ We may answer the question, ‘Art Thou He that should come?’ as Christ did, ‘The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear.’

The perfect Restoration will be in heaven. Then, indeed, when our souls are freed from mortal grossness, and the thin veils of sense are rent and we behold Him as He is, then when they rest not day nor night, but with ever renewed strength run to His commandments, then when He has put into their lips a new song-'then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf be unstopped; then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing.'

43)Isaiah 35:6-7

Isaiah

MIRACLES OF HEALING

MIRAGE OR LAKE

Isa. 35:6 - Isa. 35:7.

What a picture is painted in these verses! The dreary wilderness stretches before us, monotonous, treeless, in some parts bearing a scanty vegetation which flourishes in early spring and dies before fierce summer heats, but for the most part utterly desolate, the sand blinding the eyes, the ground cracked and gaping as if athirst for the rain that will not fall; over it the tantalising mirage dancing in mockery, and amid the hot sand the yelp of the jackals. What does this dead land want? One thing alone-water. Could that be poured upon it, all would be changed; nothing else will do any good. And it comes. Suddenly it bursts from the sand, and streams bring life along the desert. It gathers into placid lakes, with their whispering reeds and nodding rushes, and the thick cool grass round their margins. The foul beasts that wandered through dry places seeking rest are drowned out. So full of blessed change will be the coming of the Lord, of which all this context speaks. Mark that this burst of waters is when 'the Lord shall come,' and that it is the reason for the restoration of lost powers in men, and especially for a chorus of praise from dumb lips. This, then, is the central blessing. It is not merely a joyful transformation, but it is the reason for a yet more joyful transformation [Isa. 44:3]. Recall Christ's words to the Samaritan woman and in the Temple on the great day of the Feast.

Then this is pre-eminently a description of the work of Christ.

I. Christ brings the Supernatural Communication of a New Life.

We may fairly regard this metaphor as setting forth the very deepest characteristic of the gospel. Consider man’s need, as typified in the image of the desert. Mark that the supply for that need must come from without; that coming from without, it must be lodged in the heart of the race; that the supernatural communication of a new life and power is the very essence of the work of Christ; that such a communication is the only thing adequate to produce these wondrous effects.

II. This new life slakes men’s thirst.

The pangs and tortures of the waterless wilderness. The thirst of human souls; they long, whether they know it or not, for-

Truth for Understanding.
Love for Heart.
Basis and Guidance for Will and Effort.
Cleansing for Conscience.
Adequate objects for their powers.

They need that all these should be in One.

The gnawing pain of our thirst is not a myth; it is the secret of man’s restlessness. We are ever on the march, not only because change is the law of the world, nor only because effort and progress are the law for civilised men, but because, like caravans in the desert, we have to search for water.

In Christ it is slaked; all is found there.

III. The Communication of this New Life turns Illusions into Realities.

‘The mirage shall become a pool.’ Life without Christ is but a long illusion. ‘Sin makes a mock of fools.’ How seldom are hopes fulfilled, and how still less frequently are they, when fulfilled, as good as we painted them! The prismatic splendours of the rain bow, which gleam before us and which we toil to catch, are but grey rain-drops when caught. Joys attract and, attained, have incompleteness and a tang of bitterness. The fish is never so heavy when landed on the sward as it felt when struggling on our hook. ‘All is vanity’-yes, if creatures and things temporal are pursued as our good. But nothing is vanity, if we have the life in us which Jesus comes to give. His Gospel gives solid, unmingled joys, sure promises which are greater when fulfilled than when longed for, certain hopes whose most brilliant colours are duller than those of the realities. The half has not been told of the ‘things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.’

Sure Promises.

A certain Hope.

IV. This New Life gives Fruitfulness. It stimulates all our nature. A godless life is in a very tragic sense barren, and a wilderness. There is in it nothing really worth doing, nor anything that will last. Christ gives Power, Motive, Pattern, and makes a life of holy activity possible. The works done by men apart from Him are, if measured by the whole relations and capacities of the doers, unfruitful works, however they may seem laden with ruddy clusters. It is only lives into which that river of God which is full of water flows that bring forth fruit, and whose fruit remains. The desert irrigated becomes a garden of the Lord.

Note, too, how this river drowns out wild beasts. The true way of conquering evil is to turn the river into it. Cultivate, and weeds die. The expulsive power of a new affection is the most potent instrument for perfecting character.

What is the use of water if we do not drink? We may perish with thirst even on the river’s bank. ‘If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink.’

44)Isaiah 35:8-359

Isaiah

THE KING’S HIGHWAY

Isa. 35:8 - Isa. 35:9.

We can fancy what it is to be lost in a forest where a traveller may ride round in a circle, thinking he is advancing, till he dies. But it is as easy to be lost in a wilderness, where there is nothing to see, as in a wood where one can see nothing. And there is something even more ghastly in being lost below the broad heavens in the open face of day than ‘in the close covert of innumerous boughs.’ The monotonous swells of the sand-heaps, the weary expanse stretching right away to the horizon, no land-marks but the bleaching bones of former victims, the gigantic sameness, the useless light streaming down, and in the centre one tiny, black speck toiling vainly, rushing madly hither and thither-a lost man-till he desperately flings himself down and lets death bury him, that is the one picture suggested by the text. The other is of that same wilderness, but across it a mighty king has flung up a broad, lofty embankment, a highway raised above the sands, cutting across them so conspicuously that even an idiot could not help seeing it, so high above the land around that the lion’s spring falls far beneath it, and the supple tiger skulks baffled at its base. It is like one of those roads which the terrible energy of conquering Rome carried straight as an arrow from the milestone in the Forum over mountains, across rivers and deserts, morasses and forests, to flash along them the lightning of her legions, and over whose solid blocks we travel to-day in many a land.

The prophet has seen in his vision the blind and deaf cured, the capacities of human nature destroyed by sin restored. He has told us that this miraculous change has come from the opening of a spring of new life in the midst of man’s thirsty desert, and now he gets before us, in yet another image, another aspect of the glorious change which is to follow that coming of the Lord to save, which filled the farthest horizon of his vision. The desert shall have a plain path on which those diseased men who have been healed journey. Life shall no longer be trackless, but God will, by His coming, prepare paths that we should walk in them; and as He has given the lame man power to walk, so will he also provide the way by which His happy pilgrims will journey to their home.

I. The pathless wandering of godless lives.

The old, old comparison of life to a journey is very natural and very pathetic. It expresses life’s ceaseless change; every day carries us into a new scene, every day the bends of the road shut out some happy valley where we fain would have rested, every day brings new faces, new associations, new difficulties, and even if the same recur, yet it is with such changes that they are substantially new, and of each day’s march it is true, even when life is most monotonous, that ‘ye have not passed this way heretofore.’ It expresses life’s ceaseless effort and constant plodding. To-day’s march does not secure to-morrow’s rest, but, however footsore and weary, we have to move on, like some child dragged along by a careless nurse. It expresses the awful crumbling away of life beneath us. The road has an end, and each step takes us nearer to it. The numbers that face us on the milestones slowly and surely decrease; we pass the last and on we go, tramp, tramp, and we cannot stop till we reach the narrow chamber, cold and dark, where, at any rate, we have got the long march over.

But to many men, the journey of life is one which has no definite direction deliberately chosen, which has no all-inclusive aim, which has no steady progress. There may be much running hither and thither, but it is as aimless as the marchings of a fly upon a window, as busy and yet as uncertain as that of the ants who bustle about on an ant-hill.

Now that is the idea, which our text implies, of all the activity of a godless life, that it is not a steady advance to a chosen goal, but a rushing up and down in a trackless desert, with many immense exertions all thrown away. Then, in contrast, it puts this great thought: that God has come to us and made for us a path for our feet.

II. The highway that God casts up.

Of course that coming we take to be Christ’s coming, and we have just to consider the manner in which His coming fulfils this great promise, and has made in the trackless wilderness a way for us to walk in.

> 1. Christ gives us a Definite Aim for Life. I know, of course, that men may have this apart from Him, definite enough in all conscience. But such aims are unworthy of men’s whole capacities. Not one of them is fit to be made the exclusive, all-embracing purpose of a life, and, taken

> together, they are so multifarious that in their diversity they come to be equal to none. How many we have all had! Most of us are like men who zig-zag about, chasing after butterflies! Nor are any such aims certain to be reached during life, and they all are certain to be lost at death.

Godless men are enticed on like some dumb creature lured to slaughter-house by a bunch of fodder-once inside, down comes the pole-axe.

But Christ gives us a definite aim which is worthy of a man, which includes all others; which binds this life and the next into one.

> 2. Christ gives us distinct knowledge of whither we should go. It is not enough to give general directions; we need to know what our next step is to be. It is of no avail that we see the shining turrets far off on the hill, if all the valleys between are unknown and trackless. Well: we have Him to point us our course. He is the exemplar-the true ideal of human nature. Hour by hour His pattern fits to our lives. True, we shall often be in perplexity, but that perplexity will clear itself by patient thought, by holding our wills in suspense till He speaks, and by an honest wish to go right. There will no longer be doubt as to what is our law, though there may be as to the application of it. We are not to be guided by men’s maxims, nor by the standards and patterns round us, but by Him.

> 3. Christ gives means by which we can reach the aim. He does so by supplying a stimulus to our activity, in the motive of His love; by the removal of the hindrances arising from sin, through His redeeming work; by the gifts of new life from His Spirit.

‘The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.’ But he that follows Jesus treads the right way to the city of habitation.

> 4. Christ goes with us. The obscure words, ‘It shall be for those’ are by some rendered, ‘He shall be with them,’ and we may take them so, as referring to the presence with His happy pilgrims of the Lord Himself. Perhaps Isaiah may have been casting back a thought to the desert

> march, where the pillar led the host. But at all events we have the same companion to 'talk with us by the way,' and make 'our hearts burn within us,' as had the two disconsolate pedestrians on the road to Emmaus. It is Jesus who goes before us, whether He leads us to green pastures and waters of quietness or through valleys of the shadow of death, and we can be smitten by no evil, since He is with us.

III. The travellers upon God's highway.

Two conditions are laid down in the text. One is negative-the unclean can find no footing there. It is 'the way of holiness,' not only because holiness is in some sense the goal to which it leads, but still more, because only holy feet can tread it, holy at least in the travellers' aspiration and inward consecration, though still needing to be washed daily. One is positive-it is 'the simple' who shall not err therein. They who distrust themselves and their own skill to find or force a path through life's jungle, and trust themselves to higher guidance, are they whose feet will be kept in the way.

No lion or ravenous beast can spring or creep up thereon. Simple keeping on Christ's highway elevates us above temptations and evils of all sorts, whether nightly prowlers or daylight foes.

This generation is boasting or complaining that old landmarks are blotted out, ancient paths broken, footmarks obliterated, stars hid, and mist shrouding the desert. But Christ still guides, and His promise still holds good: 'He that followeth Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life.' The alternative for each 'traveller between life and death' is to tread in His footsteps or to 'wander in the wilderness in a solitary way, hungry and thirsty,' with fainting soul. Let us make the ancient prayer ours: 'See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.'

45)Isaiah 35:9-10

Isaiah

THE KING'S HIGHWAY

WHAT LIFE’S JOURNEY MAY BE

Isa. 35:9 - Isa. 35:10.

We have here the closing words of Isaiah’s prophecy. It has been steadily rising, and now it has reached the summit. Men restored to all their powers, a supernatural communication of a new life, a pathway for our journey-these have been the visions of the preceding verses, and now the prophet sees the happy pilgrims flocking along the raised way, and hears some faint strains of their glad music, and he marks them, rank after rank, entering the city of their solemnities, and through the gates can behold them invested with joy and gladness, while sorrow and sighing, like some night-loving birds shrinking from the blaze of that better sun which lights the city, spread their black wings and flee away.

The noble rhythm of our English version rises here to a strain of pathetic music, the very cadence of which stirs thoughts that lie too deep for tears, and one shrinks from taking these lofty words of immortal hope-which life’s sorrows have interpreted, I trust, for many of us-as the text of a sermon. But I would fain try whether some of their gracious sweetness and power may not survive even our rude handling of them.

The prophet here is not only speaking of the literal return of his brethren from captivity. The place which this prophecy holds at the very close of the book, the noble loftiness of the language, the entire absence of any details or specific allusions which compel reference to the Captivity, would be sufficient of themselves to make us suspect that there was very much more here. The structure of prophecy is misunderstood unless it be recognised that all the history of Israel was itself a prediction, a great supernatural system of types and shadows, and that all the interventions of the divine hand are one in principle, and all foretell the great intervention of redeeming love, in the person of Jesus Christ. Nor need that be unlikely in the eyes of any who believe that Christ’s coming is the centre of the world’s history, and that there is in prophecy a supernatural element. We are not reading our own fancies into Scripture; we are not using, in allowable freedom, words which had another meaning altogether, to adorn our own theology, but we are apprehending the innermost meaning of prophecy, when we see in it Christ and His salvation [1Pe. 1:10].

We have then here a picture of what Christ does for us weary journeyers on life's road,

I. Who are the travellers?

'Redeemed,' 'ransomed of the Lord.' Israel had in its past history one great act, under the imagery of which all future deliverances were prophesied. The events of the Exodus were the great storehouse from which prophets drew the clothing of their brightest hopes; and that is a lesson for us of how to use the history of God's past deliverances. They believed that each transitory act was a revelation of an unchanging purpose and an unexhausted power, and that it would be repeated over and over again. Experience supplied the material out of which Hope wove its fairest webs, but Faith drove the shuttle. Here the names which describe the pilgrims come from the old story. They are slaves, purchased or otherwise set free from captivity by a divine act. The epithets are transferred to the New Testament, and become the standing designation for those who have been delivered by Christ.

That designation, 'ransomed of the Lord,' opens out into the great evangelical thoughts which are the very life-blood of vital Christianity.

Emancipation from bondage is the first thing that we all need. 'He that committeth sin is the slave of sin.' An iron yoke presses on every neck.

The needed emancipation can only be obtained by a ransom price. The question of to whom the ransom is paid is not in the horizon of prophet or apostle or of Jesus Himself, in using this metaphor. What is strongly in their minds is that a great surrender must be greatly made by the Emancipator.

Jesus conceived of Himself as giving 'His life a ransom for the many.'

The emancipation must be a divine act. It surpasses any created power.

There can be no happy pilgrims unless they are first set free.

II. The end of the journey.

‘They shall come to Zion.’ It is one great distinctive characteristic and blessedness of the Christian conception of the future that it takes away from it all the chilling sense of strangeness, arising from ignorance and lack of experience, and invests it with the attraction of being the mother-city of us all. So the pilgrims are not travelling a dreary road into the common darkness, but are like colonists who visit England for the first time, and are full of happy anticipations of ‘going home,’ though they have never seen its shores.

That conception of the future perfect state as a ‘city’ includes the ideas of happy social life, of a settled polity, of stability and security. The travellers who were often solitary on the march will all be together there. The nomads, who had to leave their camping-place each morning and let the fire that cheered them in the night die down into a little ring of grey ashes, will ‘go no more out,’ but yet make endless progress within the gates. The defenceless travellers, who were fain to make the best ‘laager’ they could, and keep vigilant watch for human and bestial enemies crouching beyond the ring of light from the camp-fires, are safe at last, and they that swallowed them up shall be far away.

Contrast the future outlook of the noblest minds in heathenism with the calm certainty which the gospel has put within the reach of the simplest! ‘Blessed are your eyes, for they see.’

III. The joy of the road.

The pilgrims do not plod wearily in silence, but, like the tribes going up to the feasts, burst out often, as they journey, into song. They are like Jehoshaphat’s soldiers, who marched to the fight with the singers in the van chanting ‘Give thanks unto the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever.’ The Christian life should be a joyful life, ever echoing with the ‘high praises of God.’ However difficult the march, there is good reason for song, and it helps to overcome the difficulties. ‘A merry heart goes all the day, a sad heart tires in a mile.’ Why should the ransomed pilgrims sing? For present blessings, for deliverance from the burden of self and sin, for communion with God, for light shed on the meaning of life, and for the sure anticipation of future bliss.

‘Everlasting joy on their heads.’ Other joys are transitory. It is not only ‘we poets’ who ‘in our youth begin with gladness,’ whereof ‘cometh in the end despondency and madness’; but, in a measure, these are the outlines of the sequence in all godless lives. The world’s festal wreathes wilt and wither in the hot fumes of the banqueting house, and ‘the crown of pride shall be trodden under foot.’ But joy of Christ’s giving ‘shall remain,’ and even before we sit at the feast, we may have our brows wreathed with a garland ‘that fadeth not away.’

IV. The perfecting of joy at last.

‘They shall obtain joy and gladness’: but had they not had it on their heads as they marched? Yes; but at last they have it in perfect measure and manner. The flame that burned but dimly in the heavy air of earth flashes up into new brightness in the purer atmosphere of the city.

And one part of its perfecting is the removal of all its opposites. Sorrow ends when sin and the discipline that sin needs have ended. ‘The inhabitant shall not say: I am sick; the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity.’ Sighing ends when weariness, loss, physical pain, and all the other ills that flesh is heir to have ceased to vex and weigh upon the spirit. Life purges the dross of imperfection from character. Death purges the alloy of sorrow and sighing from joy, and leaves the perfected spirit possessor of the pure gold of perfect and eternal gladness.

46)Isaiah 37:14

Isaiah

THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH

WHERE TO CARRY TROUBLES

Isa. 37:14.

When Hezekiah heard the threatenings of Sennacherib’s servants, he rent his clothes and went into the house of the Lord, and sent to Isaiah entreating his prayers. When he received the menacing letter, his faith was greater, having been heartened by Isaiah’s assurances. So he then himself appealed to Jehovah, spreading the letter before Him, and himself prayed God to guard His own honour, and answer the challenge flung down by the insolent Assyrian. It is noble when faith increases as dangers increase.

I. We have here an example of what to do with troubles and difficulties.

We are to lay them out before God, as we can do by praying about them. Hezekiah’s trouble was great. His kingdom could be crushed like an eggshell by the grasp of Sennacherib’s hand. But little troubles as well as great ones are best dealt with by being ‘spread before the Lord.’ Whatever is important enough to disturb me is important enough for me to speak to God about it. Whether the poison inflaming our blood be from a gnat’s bite, or a cobra’s sting, the best antidote is-pray about it.

How much more real and fervid our prayers would be, if we habitually turned all our affairs into materials for petition! That is a very empty dispute as to whether we ought to pray for deliverance from outward sorrows. If we are living in touch with God, we cannot but take Him into our confidence, if we may so say, as to everything that affects us. And we should as soon think of hiding any matter from our dearest on earth as from our Friend in heaven. ‘In *everything*, by prayer and supplication’ is the commandment, and will be the instinct of the devout heart.

Note Hezekiah’s assurance that God cares about him.

Note his clear perception that God is his only help.

Note his identification of his own deliverance with God’s honour. We cannot identify our welfare, or deliverance in small matters, with God’s fair fame, in such a fashion. But we ought to be quite sure that He will not let us sink or perish, and will never desert us. And we can be quite sure that, if we identify ourselves and our work with Him, He will identify Himself with us and it. His treatment of His servants will tell the world [and not one world only] what He is, how faithful, how loving, how strong.

II. We have here an example of how God answers His servants' prayers.

It was 'by terrible things in righteousness' that Hezekiah's answer came. His prayer was at one end of the chain, and at the other was a camp full of corpses. One poor man's cry can set in motion tremendous powers, as a low whisper can start an avalanche. That magnificent theophany in Psa. 18:1 - Psa. 18:50, with all its majesty and terror of flashing lightnings and a rocking earth, was brought about by nothing more than 'In my distress I called upon the Lord,' and its purpose was nothing more than to draw the suppliant out of many waters and deliver him from his strong enemy.

That army swept off the earth may teach us how much God will do for a praying child of His. His people's deliverance is cheaply purchased at such a price. 'He reproved kings for their sake.'

One man with God beside him is stronger than all the world. As the psalmist learned in his hour of peril, 'Thou, Lord, makest me to dwell in safety, thou alone!'

47)Isaiah 37:15-21

Isaiah

THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH

Isa. 37:14 - Isa. 37:21, Isa. 37:33 - Isa. 37:38.

Is trust in Jehovah folly or wisdom? That was the question raised by Sennacherib's invasion. A glance at the preceding chapters will show how the high military official, 'the rabshakeh,' or chief of the officers, shaped all his insolent and yet skilful mixture of threats and promises so as to demonstrate the vanity of trust in Egypt or in Jehovah, or in any but 'the great king.' Isaiah had been labouring to lift his countrymen to the height of reliance on Jehovah alone, and now the crucial test of the truth of his contention had come. On the one hand were Sennacherib and his host, flushed with victory, and sure of crushing this puny kinglet Hezekiah and his obstinate little city, perched on its rock. On the other was nothing but a prophet’s word. Where is the stronger force? And does political prudence dictate reliance on the Unseen or on the visible? The moment is the crisis of Isaiah’s work, and this narrative has been placed, with true insight into its importance, at the close of the first half of this book.

To grasp the significance of the text the preceding events have to be remembered. Hezekiah’s kingdom had been overrun, and tribute exacted from him. The rabshakeh had been sent from the main body of the Assyrian army, which was down at Lachish in the Philistine low country on the road to Egypt, in order to try to secure Jerusalem by promises and threats, since it was too important a post to leave in the rear, if Egypt was to be invaded. That attempt having failed, and the Egyptian forces being in motion, this new effort was made to induce Hezekiah to surrender. A letter was sent, whether accompanied by any considerable armed force or no does not appear. At this point the narrative begins. It may be best studied as an illustration of the trial of faith, its refuge, its pleading, and its deliverance.

I. Note the trial of faith. Rabshakeh had derided the obstinate confidence in Jehovah, which kept these starving men on the walls grimly silent in spite of his coaxing. The letter of Sennacherib harps on the same string. It is written in a tone of assumed friendly remonstrance, and lays out with speciousness the apparent grounds for calling trust in Jehovah absurdity. There are no threats in it. It is all an appeal to common sense and political prudence. It marshals undeniable facts. Experience has shown the irresistible power of Assyria. There have been plenty of other little nations which have trusted in their local deities, and what has become of them? Barbarous names are flourished in Hezekiah’s face, and their wasted dominions are pointed to as warnings against his committing a parallel folly. There is nothing in the letter which might not have been said by a friend, and nothing which was not said by the Jews who had lost their faith in their God. It was but the putting into plain words of what ‘common-sense’ and faint faith had often whispered to Hezekiah. The very absence of temper or demand in the letter gives it an aspect of that ‘sweet reasonableness’ so dear to sense-bound souls.

Mutatis mutandis, the letter may stand for a specimen of the arguments which worldly prudence brings to shake faith, in all ages. We, too, are assailed by much that sounds most forcible from the point of view of mere earthly calculation. Sennacherib does not lie in boasting of his victories. He and his shoals of soldiers are very real and potent. It does seem madness for one little kingdom to stand out, and all the more so because its king is cooped up in his city, as the cuneiform inscription proudly tells, ‘like a bird in a cage,’ and all the rest of his land is in the conqueror’s grip. They who look only at the things seen cannot but think the men of faith mad. They who look at the things unseen cannot but know that the men of sense are fools. The latter elaborately prove that the former are impotent, but they have left out one factor in their calculations, and that is God. One man and God at his back are stronger than Sennacherib and all his mercenaries.

II. Note the refuge of tempted faith. What was Hezekiah to do with the crafty missive? It was hoped that he would listen to reason, and come down from his perch. But he neither yielded nor took counsel with his servants, but, like a devout man, went into the house of the Lord, and spread the letter before the Lord. It would have gone hard with him if he had not been to the house of the Lord many a time before. It is not easy to find our way thither for the first time, when our eyes are blinded by tears or our way darkened by calamities. But faith instinctively turns to God when anything goes wrong, because it has been accustomed to turn to Him when all was right, according to the world’s estimate of right and wrong. Whither should the burdened heart betake itself but to Him who daily bears our burdens? The impulse to tell God all troubles is as truly a mark of the faithful soul as the impulse to tell everything to the beloved is the life-breath of love.

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III. Note the pleading of faith. Hezekiah's address to God is no mere formal recapitulation of divine names, but is the effort of faith to grasp firmly the truths which the enemy denies, and on which it builds. So considered, the accumulation of titles in Isa. 37:16 is very instructive, and shows how a trustful soul puts forth the energy of its faith in summoning to mind the great aspects of the divine name as bulwarks against suggested fears, and bases of supplication. Hezekiah appeals to 'the God of Hosts,' the Ruler of all the embattled forces of the universe, as well as of the armies of angels. What is Sennacherib's array compared with these? He appeals to the 'God of Israel,' as pleading the ancient relationship, which binds the unchangeable Guardian of the people to be still what He has been, and casts the responsibility of Israel's preservation upon Him. He appeals to Him 'who sits between the cherubim,' as thence defending and filling the threatened city. He grasps the thought that Jehovah is 'God alone' with a vividness which is partly due no doubt to Isaiah's teaching, but is also the indignant recoil of faith from the assumption of the letter, that Jehovah was but as the beaten deities of Gozan and the rest. Faith clings the more tenaciously to truths denied, as a dog will hold on to the stick that one tries to pull from it.

Thus, having heartened himself and pled with God by all these names, Hezekiah comes to his petition. It is but translating into words the symbol of spreading the letter before God. He asks God to behold and to hear the defiant words. Prayer tells God what it knows that He knows already, for it relieves the burdened heart to tell Him. It asks Him to see and hear what it knows that He does see and hear. But the prayer is not for mere observance followed by no divine act, but for taking knowledge as the precursor of the appropriate help. Of such seeing and hearing by God, believing prayer is the appointed condition. 'Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him'; but that is not a reason for silence, but for supplication.

Hezekiah rightly regarded Sennacherib's words as meant to reproach the living God, for the point of the letter was to dissuade from trust in Him, as no more powerful than the petty deities of already conquered cities. The prayer, therefore, pleads that God would take care of His own honour, and by delivering Jerusalem, show His sole sovereignty. It is a high and wonderful level for faith to reach, when it regards personal deliverance mainly in its aspect as vindicating God and warranting faith. We may too easily conclude that God's honour is involved in our deliverance, and it is well to be on our guard against that.

But it is possible to die to self so fully as to feel that our cause is His, because His is so entirely ours; and then we may come to that heroic faith which seeks even personal good more for God's sake than for our own. It was noble that this man should have no word to say about self but 'Save us, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou art God alone.' Like him, we may each feel that our defence is more God's affair than ours, in proportion as we feel we are His rather than our own. That siege of Jerusalem was indeed as a duel between faith and unbelief on the one hand, and between Jehovah and the gods who were 'no gods' on the other. Sennacherib's letter was a defiant challenge to Jehovah to do His best for this people, and when faith repeated in prayer the insolence of unbelief only one result was possible. It came.

IV. Note the deliverance of faith. Isaiah's grand prophecy tempts us to linger over its many beauties and magnificent roll of triumphant scorn, but it falls outside our purpose. As for the catastrophe, it should be noted that its place and time are not definitely stated, and that probably the notion that the Assyrian army was annihilated before Jerusalem is a mistake. Sennacherib and his troops were at Libnah, on their way to meet the Egyptian forces. If there were any of them before Jerusalem, they would at most be a small detachment, sufficient to invest it. Probably the course of events was that, at some time not specified, soon after the dismissal of the messengers who brought the letter, the awful destruction fell, and that, when the news of the disaster reached the detachment at Jerusalem, as the psalm which throbs with the echoes of the triumph says, 'They were troubled, and hasted away.'

How complete was the crushing blow the lame record of this campaign in the inscriptions shows, in which the failure of the attempt to capture the city is covered up by vapouring about tribute and the like. If it had not failed, however, the success would certainly have been told, as all similar cases are told, with abundant boasting. The other fact is also to be remembered, that Sennacherib tried no more conclusions with Jerusalem and Jehovah, and though he lived for some twenty years afterwards, never again ventured on to the soil where that mighty God fought for His people.

The appended notice of Sennacherib's death has been added by some narrator, since it probably occurred after Isaiah's martyrdom. 'All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.' Such a career as his could not but give taste for violence and bloodshed, and dimmish regard for human life. Retribution comes slowly, for twenty years intervened between the catastrophe to the army and the murder of the king. Its penalties increase as its fall delays; for first came the blotting out of the army, and then, when that had no effect, at last the sword in his own heart. 'He that being often reproved hardeneth his neck shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.'

But the great lesson of that death is the same as that of the other king's deliverance. Hezekiah 'went unto the house of the Lord,' and found Him a very present help in trouble. Sennacherib was slain in the house of his god. The two pictures of the worshippers and their fates are symbolic of the meaning of the whole story. Sennacherib had dared Jehovah to try His strength against him and his deities. The challenge was accepted, and that bloody corpse before the idol that could not help preaches a ghastly sermon on the text, 'They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them. O Israel, trust thou in the Lord: He is their help and their shield.'

48)Isaiah 37:33-38

Isaiah

THE TRIUMPH OF FAITH

Isa. 37:14 - Isa. 37:21, Isa. 37:33 - Isa. 37:38.

Is trust in Jehovah folly or wisdom? That was the question raised by Sennacherib's invasion. A glance at the preceding chapters will show how the high military official, 'the rabshakeh,' or chief of the officers, shaped all his insolent and yet skilful mixture of threats and promises so as to demonstrate the vanity of trust in Egypt or in Jehovah, or in any but ‘the great king.’ Isaiah had been labouring to lift his countrymen to the height of reliance on Jehovah alone, and now the crucial test of the truth of his contention had come. On the one hand were Sennacherib and his host, flushed with victory, and sure of crushing this puny kinglet Hezekiah and his obstinate little city, perched on its rock. On the other was nothing but a prophet’s word. Where is the stronger force? And does political prudence dictate reliance on the Unseen or on the visible? The moment is the crisis of Isaiah’s work, and this narrative has been placed, with true insight into its importance, at the close of the first half of this book.

To grasp the significance of the text the preceding events have to be remembered. Hezekiah’s kingdom had been overrun, and tribute exacted from him. The rabshakeh had been sent from the main body of the Assyrian army, which was down at Lachish in the Philistine low country on the road to Egypt, in order to try to secure Jerusalem by promises and threats, since it was too important a post to leave in the rear, if Egypt was to be invaded. That attempt having failed, and the Egyptian forces being in motion, this new effort was made to induce Hezekiah to surrender. A letter was sent, whether accompanied by any considerable armed force or no does not appear. At this point the narrative begins. It may be best studied as an illustration of the trial of faith, its refuge, its pleading, and its deliverance.

I. Note the trial of faith. Rabshakeh had derided the obstinate confidence in Jehovah, which kept these starving men on the walls grimly silent in spite of his coaxing. The letter of Sennacherib harps on the same string. It is written in a tone of assumed friendly remonstrance, and lays out with speciousness the apparent grounds for calling trust in Jehovah absurdity. There are no threats in it. It is all an appeal to common sense and political prudence. It marshals undeniable facts. Experience has shown the irresistible power of Assyria. There have been plenty of other little nations which have trusted in their local deities, and what has become of them? Barbarous names are flourished in Hezekiah’s face, and their wasted dominions are pointed to as warnings against his committing a parallel folly. There is nothing in the letter which might not have been said by a friend, and nothing which was not said by the Jews who had lost their faith in their God. It was but the putting into plain words of what ‘common-sense’ and faint faith had often whispered to Hezekiah. The very absence of temper or demand in the letter gives it an aspect of that ‘sweet reasonableness’ so dear to sense-bound souls.

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49)Isaiah 42:3-4

Isaiah

CHRIST THE ARRESTER OF INCIPIENT EVIL AND THE NOURISHER OF INCIPIENT GOOD

Isa. 42:3 - Isa. 42:4.

The two metaphors which we have in the former part of these words are not altogether parallel. 'A bruised reed' has suffered an injury which, however, is neither complete nor irreparable. 'Smoking flax,' on the other hand-by which, of course, is meant flax used as a wick in an old-fashioned oil lamp-is partially lit. In the one a process has been begun which, if continued, ends in destruction; in the other, a process has been begun which, if continued, ends in a bright flame. So the one metaphor may refer to the beginnings of evil which may still be averted, and the other the beginnings of incipient and incomplete good. If we keep this distinction in mind, the words of our text gain wonderfully in comprehensiveness.

Then again, it is to be noticed that in the last words of our text, which are separated from the former by a clause which we omit, we have an echo of these metaphors. The word translated 'fail' is the same as that rendered in the previous verse 'smoking,' or 'dimly burning'; and the word 'discouraged' is the same as that rendered in the previous verse 'bruised.' So then, this 'Servant of the Lord,' who is not to break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax, is fitted for His work, because He Himself has no share in the evils which He would heal, and none in the weaknesses which He would strengthen. His perfect manhood knows no flaws nor bruises; His complete goodness is capable of and needs no increase. Neither outward force nor inward weakness can hinder His power to heal and bless; therefore His work can never cease till it has attained its ultimate purpose. 'He shall not fail nor be discouraged'; shall neither be broken by outward violence, nor shall the flame of His fading energy burn faint until He hath 'set judgment in the earth,' and crowned His purposes with complete success.

We have, then, here set before us three significant representations of the servant of the Lord, which may well commend Him to our confidence and our love. I shall not spend any time in answering the question: Of whom speaketh the prophet this? The answer is plain for us. He speaks of the personal Servant of the Lord, and the personal Servant of the Lord is Jesus

Christ our Saviour. I ask you then to come with me while I deal, as simply as may be, with these three ideas that lie before us in this great prophecy.

I. Consider then, first, the representation of the Servant of the Lord as the arrester of incipient ruin.

‘He shall not break the bruised reed.’ Here is the picture-a slender bulrush, growing by the margin of some tarn or pond; its sides crushed and dented in by some outward power, a gust of wind, a sudden blow, the foot of a passing animal. The head is hanging by a thread, but it is not yet snapped or broken off from the stem.

But, blessed be God! there emerges from the metaphor not only the solemn thought of the bruises by sin that all men bear, but the other blessed one, that there is no man so bruised as that he is broken; none so injured as that restoration is impossible, no depravity so total but that it may be healed, none so far off but that he may be brought nigh. On no man has sin fastened its venomous claws so deeply but that these may be wrenched away. In none of us has the virus so gone through our veins but that it is capable of being expelled. The reeds are all bruised, the reeds are none of them broken. And so my text comes with its great triumphant hopefulness, and gathers into one mass as capable of restoration the most abject, the most worthless, the most ignorant, the most sensuous, the most godless, the most Christ-hating of the race. Jesus looks on all the tremendous bulk of a world’s sins with the confidence that He can move that mountain and cast it into the depths of the sea.

There is a man in Paris that says he has found a cure for that horrible disease of hydrophobia, and who therefore regards the poor sufferers of whom others despair as not beyond the reach of hope. Christ looks upon a world of men smitten with madness, and in whose breasts awful poison is working, with the calm confidence that He carries in His hand an elixir, one drop of which inoculated into the veins of the furious patient will save him from death, and make him whole. ‘The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.’ ‘He will not break,’ and that means He will restore, ‘the bruised reed.’ There are no hopeless outcasts. None of you are beyond the reach of a Saviour’s love, a Saviour’s blood, a Saviour’s healing.

But then the words in my text may be taken in a somewhat narrower sense, applying more particularly to a class. In accordance with other metaphors of Scripture, we may think of ‘the bruised reed’ as expressive of the condition of men whose hearts have been crushed by the consciousness of their sins. ‘The broken and the contrite heart,’ bruised and pulverised, as it were, by a sense of evil, may be typified for us by this bruised reed. And then from the words of my text there emerges the great and blessed hope that such a heart, wholesomely removed from its self-complacent fancy of soundness, shall certainly be healed and bound up by His tender hand. Did you ever see a gardener dealing with some plant, a spray of which may have been wounded? How delicately and tenderly the big, clumsy hand busies itself about the tiny spray, and by stays and bandages brings it into an erect position, and then gives it water and loving care. Just so does Jesus Christ deal with the conscious and sensitive heart of a man who has begun to find out how bad he is, and has been driven away from all his foolish confidence. Christ comes to such an one and restores him, and just because he is crushed deals with him gently, pouring in His consolation. Wheresoever there is a touch of penitence, there is present a restoring Christ.

And the words may be looked at from yet another point of view. We may think of them as representing to us the merciful dealing of the Master with the spirits which are beaten and bruised, sore and wounded, by sorrows and calamities; to whom the Christ comes in all the tenderness of His gentleness, and lays a hand upon them-the only hand in all the universe that can touch a bleeding heart without hurting it.

Brother and sister suffering from any sorrow, and bleeding from any wound, there is a balm and a physician. There is one hand that will never be laid with blundering kindness or with harshness upon our sore hearts, but whose touch will be healing, and whose presence will be peace.

The Christ who knows our sins and sorrows will not break the bruised reed. The whole race of man may be represented in that parable that came from His own lips, as fallen among thieves that have robbed him and wounded him and left him bruised, but, blessed be God! only ‘half dead’; sorely wounded, indeed, but not so sorely but that he may be restored. And there comes One with the wine and the oil, and pours them into the wounds. ‘The bruised reed shall He not break.’

II. Now, in the next place, look at the completing thought that is here, in the second clause, which represents Christ as the fosterer of incipient and imperfect good.

‘The dimly-burning wick He shall not quench.’ A process, as I have said, is begun in the smoking flax, which only needs to be carried on to lead to a brilliant flame. That represents for us not the beginnings of a not irreparable evil, but the commencement of very dim and imperfect good. Now, then, who are represented by this ‘smoking flax’? You will not misunderstand me, nor think that I am contradicting what I have already been saying, if I claim for this second metaphor as wide a universality as the former, and say that in all men, just because the process of evil and the wounds from it are not so deep and complete as that restoration is impossible, therefore is there something in their nature which corresponds to this dim flame that needs to be fostered in order to blaze brightly abroad. There is no man out of hell but has in him something that needs but to be brought to sovereign power in his life in order to make him a light in the world. You have consciences at the least; you have convictions, you know you have, which if you followed them out would make Christians of you straight away. You have aspirations after good, desires, some of you, after purity and nobleness of living, which only need to be raised to the height and the dominance in your lives which they ought to possess, in order to revolutionise your whole course. There is a spark in every man which, fanned and cared for, will change him from darkness into light. Fanned and cared for it needs to be, and fanned and cared for it can only be by a divine power coming down upon it from without. This second metaphor of my text, as truly as the other, belongs to every soul of man upon the earth. He from whom all sparks and light have died out is not a man but a devil. And for all of us the exhortation comes: ‘Thou hast a voice within testifying to God and to duty’; listen to it and care for it.

Then again, dear brethren, in a narrower way, the words may be applied to a class. There are some of us who have in us a little spark, as we believe, of a divine life, the faint beginnings of a Christian character. We call ourselves

Christ's disciples. We are; but oh! how dimly the flax burns. They say that where there is smoke there is fire. There is a great deal more smoke than fire in the most of Christian people in this generation, and if it were not for such thoughts as this of my text about that dear Christ who will not lay a hasty hand upon some little tremulous spark, and by one rash movement extinguish it for ever, there would be but small hope for a great many of us.

Whether, then, the dimly-burning wick be taken to symbolise the lingering remains of a better nature which still abides with all sinful men, yet capable of redemption, or whether it be taken to mean the low and imperfect and inconsistent and feeble Christianity of us professing Christians, the words of my text are equally blessed and equally true. Christ will neither despise, nor so bring down His hand upon it as to extinguish, the feeblest spark. Look at His life on earth, think how He bore with those blundering, foolish, selfish disciples of His; how patient the divine Teacher was with their slow learning of His meaning and catching of His character. Remember how, when a man came to Him with a very imperfect goodness, the Evangelist tells us that Jesus, beholding him, loved him. And take out of these blessed stories this great hope, that howsoever small men 'despise the day of small things,' the Greatest does not; and howsoever men may say 'Such a little spark can never be kindled into flame, the fire is out, you may as well let it alone,' He never says that, but by patient teaching and fostering and continual care and wise treatment will nourish and nurture it until it leaps into a blaze.

How do you make 'smoking flax' burn? You give it oil, you give it air, and you take away the charred portions. And Christ will give you, in your feebleness, the oil of His Spirit, that you may burn brightly as one of the candlesticks in His Temple; and He will let air in, and sometimes take away the charred portions by the wise discipline of sorrow and trial, in order that the smoking flax may become a shining light. But by whatsoever means He may work, be sure of this, that He will neither despise nor neglect the feeblest inclination of good after Him, but will nourish it to perfection and to beauty.

The reason why so many Christian men's Christian light is so fuliginous and dim is just that they keep away from Jesus Christ. 'Abide in Me and I in you.’ ‘As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.’ How can the Temple lamps burn bright unless the Priest of the Temple tends them? Keep near Him that His hand may nourish your smoking dimness into a pure flame, leaping heavenward and illuminating your lives.

III. And now, lastly, we have here the representation of the servant of the Lord’s exemption from human evil and weakness, as the foundation of His restoring and fostering work.

‘He shall not burn dimly nor be broken till He hath set judgment in the earth.’ There are no bruises in this reed; that is to say, Christ’s manhood is free from all scars and wounds of evil or of sin. There is no dimness in this light, that is to say, Christ’s character is perfect, His goodness needs no increase. There is no trace of effort in His holiness, no growth manifest in His God-likeness, from the beginning to the end. There is no outward violence that can be brought to bear upon Him that will stay Him in His purpose. There is no inward failure of strength in Him that may lead us to fear that His work shall not be completed. And because of these things, because of His perfect exemption from human infirmity, because in Him was no sin. He is manifested to take away our sins. Because in Him there was goodness incapable of increase, being perfect from the beginning, therefore He is manifested to make us participants of His own unalterable and infinite goodness and purity. Because no outward violence, no inward weakness, can ever stay His course, nor make Him abandon His purpose, therefore His gospel looks upon the world with boundless hopefulness, with calm triumph; will not hear of there being any outcast and irreclaimable classes; declares it to be a blasphemy against God and Christ to say that any men or any nations are incapable of receiving the gospel and of being redeemed by it, and comes with supreme love and a calm consciousness of infinite power to you, my brother, in your deepest darkness, in your moods most removed from God and purity, and insures you that it will heal you, and will raise all that in you is feeble to its own strength. Every man may pray to that strong Christ who fails not nor is discouraged-

‘What in me is dark
Illumine; what is low, raise and support,’

in the confidence that He will hear and answer. If you do that you will not do it in vain, but His gentle hand laid upon you will heal the bruises that sin has made. Out of your weakness, as of ‘a reed shaken with the wind,’ the Restorer will make a pillar of marble in the Temple of His God. And out of your smoking dimness and wavering light, a spark at the best, almost buried in the thick smoke that accompanies it, the fostering Christ will make a brightness which shall flame as the perfect light that ‘shineth more and more unto the noontide of the day.’

50)Isaiah 42:16

Isaiah

THE BLIND MAN’S GUIDE

Isa. 42:16.

The grand stormy verses before these words, with all their dread array of natural convulsions, have one object-the tender guidance promised in the text. So we have the combination of terror and love, the blending in the divine government of terrible judgments and most gentle guidance. The words apply, of course, primarily to the redemption of Israel; but through them shines a picture of the greater redemption of humanity.

> 1. The blind travellers. They are blind, and their road is unknown to them. It is a symbol of our condition and of our paths in life. Our limited foresight cannot discern certainly even the next moment. It is always the unexpected that happens. We cannot tell what lies behind the next bend in the road, and there are so many bends; and behind one of them, we cannot tell whether it may be the next, sits ‘the Shadow feared of man.’ Life is like the course of the Congo, which makes so mighty a bend northward that, till it had been followed from source to mouth, no one could have supposed that it was to enter the ocean far away to the west. Not only God’s mercies, but our paths, are ‘new every morning.’ Experience, like conscience, sheds light mainly on what lies behind, and scarcely ‘doth attain to something of prophetic strain.’

2. The Leader. How tenderly God makes Himself the leader of the blind pilgrims! It does not matter about being blind, if we put our hands in His. Then He will ‘be to us instead of eyes.’ Jesus took the blind man by the hand.

So here is the promise of guidance by Providence, Word, Spirit. And here is the condition of receiving it, namely, our conscious blindness and realisation of the complexities of life, leading to putting ourselves into His hands in docile faith.

3. The gradual light. Darkness is made light. We receive the knowledge of each step, when it needs to be taken; the light shines only on the next; we are like men in a fog, who are able only to see a yard ahead.

4. The clearing away of hindrances. ‘Crooked things straight.’ A careful guide lifts stones out of a blind man’s way. How far is this true? There will be plenty of crooked things left crooked, but still so many straightened as to make our road passable.

5. The perpetual Presence. If God is with me, then all these blessings will surely be mine. He will be with me if I keep myself with Him. It is His felt presence that gives me light on the road, and levels and straightens out the crookedest and roughest path.

51)Isaiah 43:1

Isaiah

THY NAME: MY NAME

Isa. 43:1. - Isa. 43:7.

Great stress is laid on names in Scripture. These two parallel and antithetic clauses bring out striking complementary relations between God and the collective Israel. But they are as applicable to each individual member of the true Israel of God.

I. What does God’s calling a man by his name imply?

1. Intimate knowledge.

Adam naming the creatures.

Christ naming His disciples.

2. Loving friendship.

Moses, ‘I know thee by name, and thou hast found grace in my sight.’

3. Designation and adaptation to work.

Bezaleel- Exo. 31:2; Cyrus- Isa. 45:3; Servant of the Lord- Isa. 49:1.

II. What does God’s calling a man by His name imply?

1. God’s possession of him. That possession by God involves God’s protection and man’s safety. He does not hold His property slackly. ‘None shall pluck them out of My Father’s hand.’

2. Kindred. The man bears the family name. He is adopted into the household. The sonship of the receiver of the new name is dimly shadowed.

3. Likeness.

The Biblical meaning of ‘name’ is ‘character manifested.’

Nomen and omen coincide.

We must bring into connection with the texts the prominence given in the Apocalypse to analogous promises.

‘I will write on him the name of My God.’ That means a fuller disclosing of God’s character, and a clear impress of that character on perfected men ‘His name shall be in their foreheads.’

52)Isaiah 43:7

Isaiah

THY NAME: MY NAME

Isa. 43:1. - Isa. 43:7.

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53)Isaiah 44:1-2

Isaiah

JACOB-ISRAEL-JESHURUN

Isa. 44:1 - Isa. 44:2.

You observe that there are here three different names applied to the Jewish nation. Two of them, namely Jacob and Israel, were borne by their great ancestor, and by him transmitted to his descendants. The third was never borne by him, and is applied to the people only here and in the Book of Deuteronomy.

The occurrence of all three here is very remarkable, and the order in which they stand is not accidental. The prophet begins with the name that belonged to the patriarch by birth; the name of nature, which contained some indications of character. He passes on to the name which commemorated the mysterious conflict where, as a prince, Jacob had power with God and prevailed. He ends with the name Jeshurun, of which the meaning is ‘the righteous one,’ and which was bestowed upon the people as a reminder of what they ought to be.

Now, as I take it, the occurrence of these names here, and their sequence, may teach us some very important lessons; and it is simply to these lessons, and not at all to the context, that I ask your attention.

I. I take, then, these three names in their order as teaching us, first, the path of transformation.

Every 'Jacob' may become a 'righteous one,' if he will tread Jacob's road. We start with that first name of nature which, according to Esau's bitter etymology of it, meant 'a supplanter'-not without some suggestions of craft and treachery in it. It is descriptive of the natural disposition of the patriarch, which was by no means attractive. Cool, calculating, subtle, with a very keen eye to his own interests, and not at all scrupulous as to the means by which he secured them, he had no generous impulses, and few unselfish affections. He told lies to his poor old blind father, he cheated his brother, he met the shiftiness of Laban with equal shiftiness. It was 'diamond cut diamond' all through. He tried to make a bargain with God Himself at Bethel, and to lay down conditions on which he would bring Him the tenth of his substance. And all through his earlier career he does not look like the stuff of which heroes and saints are made.

But in the mid-path of his life there came that hour of deep dejection and helplessness, when, driven out of all dependence on self, and feeling round in his agony for something to lay hold upon, there came into his nightly solitude a vision of God. In conscious weakness, and in the confidence of self-despair, he wrestled with the mysterious Visitant in the only fashion in which He can be wrestled with. 'He wept and made supplication to Him,' as one of the prophets puts it, and so he bore away the threefold gift-blessing from those mighty lips whose blessing is the communication, and not only the invocation, of mercy, a deeper knowledge of that divine and mysterious Name, and for himself a new name.

That new name implied a new direction given to his character.

Hitherto he had wrestled with men whom he would supplant, for his own advantage, by craft and subtlety; henceforward he strove with God for higher blessings, which, in striving, he won. All the rest of his life was on a loftier plane. Old ambitions were dead within him, and though the last of these names in our text was never actually borne by him, he began to deserve it, and grew steadily in nobleness and beauty of character until the end, when he sang his swan-song and lay down to die, with thanksgiving for the past and glowing prophecies for the future, pouring from his trembling lips.

And now, brethren, that is the outline of the only way in which, from out of the evil and the sinfulness of our natural disposition, any of us can be raised to the loftiness and purity of a righteous life. There must be a Peniel between the two halves of the character, if there is to be transformation.

Have you ever been beaten out of all your confidence, and ground down into the dust of self-disgust and self-abandonment? Have you ever felt, ‘there is nothing in me or about me that I can cling to or rely upon’? Have you ever in the thickest of that darkness had, gleaming in upon your solitude, the vision of His face, whose face we see in Jesus Christ? Have you ever grasped Him who is infinitely willing to be held by the weakest hand, and who never ‘makes as though He would go further,’ except in order to induce us to say, with deeper earnestness of desire, ‘Abide with us, for it is dark’? And have you ever, in fellowship with Him thus, found pouring into your enlightened mind a deeper reading of the meaning of His character and a fuller conception of the mystery of His love? And have you ever-certainly you have if these things have preceded it, certainly you have not if they have not -have you ever thereby been borne up on to a higher level of feeling and life, and been aware of new impulses, hopes, joys, new directions and new capacities budding and blossoming in your spirit?

Brethren! there is only one way by which, out of the mire and clay of earth, there can be formed a fair image of holiness, and that is, that Jacob’s experience, in deeper, more inward, more wonderful form, should be repeated in each one of us; and that thus, penitent and yet hopeful, we should behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and draw from Him our righteousness. That is the path of transformation. The road passes through Peniel, and Jacob must become Israel before he is Jeshurun. He must hold communion with God in Christ before he is clothed with righteousness.

How different that path is from the road which men are apt to take in working out their own self-improvement! How many forms of religion, and how many toiling souls put the cart before the horse, and in effect just reverse the process, and say practically-'first make yourselves righteous, and then you will have communion with God'! That is an endless and a hopeless task. I have no doubt that some of you have spent-and I would not say wasted, but it has been almost so-years of life, not without many an honest effort, in the task of self-improvement, and are very much where you were long ago. Why have you failed? Because you have never been to Peniel. You have never seen the face of God in Christ, You have not received from Him the blessing, even righteousness, from the God of your salvation.

Dear friends, give up treading that endless, weary path of vain effort; and learn-oh! learn-that the righteousness which makes a soul pure and beautiful must come as a gift from God, and is given only in Jesus Christ.

This sequence too, I think, may very fairly be used to teach us the lesson that there is no kind of character so debased but that it may partake of the purifying and ennobling influence. All the Jacobs may be turned into righteous ones, however crafty, however subtle, however selfish, however worldly they are. Christianity looks at no man and says, 'That is too bad a case for me to deal with.' It will undertake any and every case, and whoever will take its medicines can be cured 'of whatsoever disease he had.'

To all of us, no matter what our past may have been, this blessed message comes: 'There is hope for thee, if thou wilt use these means.' Only remember, the road from the depths of evil to the heights of purity always lies through Peniel. You must have power with God and draw a blessing from Him, and hold communion with Him, before you can become righteous.

How do they print photographs? By taking sensitive paper, and laying it, in touch with the negative, in the sun. Lay your spirits on Christ, and keep them still, touching Him, in the light of God, and that will turn you into His likeness. That, and nothing else will do it.

II. And now there is a second lesson from the occurrence of these three names, viz., here we may find expressed the law for the Christian life.

There are some religious people that seem to think that it is enough if only they can say; ‘Well! I have been to Jesus Christ and I have got my past sins forgiven; I have been on the mountain and have held communion with God; I do know what it is to have fellowship with Him, in many an hour of devout communion.’ and who are in much danger of treating the further stage of simple, practical righteousness as of secondary importance. Now the order of these names here points the lesson that the apex of the pyramid, the goal of the whole course, is-Righteousness. The object for which the whole majestic structure of Revelation has been builded up, is simply to make good men and women. God does not tell us His Name merely in order that we may know His Name, but in order that, knowing it, we may be smitten with the love of it, and so may come into the likeness of it. There is no religious truth which is given men for the sake of clearing their understandings and enlightening their minds only. We get the truth to enlighten our minds and to clear our understandings in order that thereby, as becomes reasonable men with heads on our shoulders, we may let our principles guide our conduct. Conduct is the end of principle, and all Revelation is given to us in order that we may be pure and good men and women.

For the same end all God’s mercy of forgiveness and deliverance from guilt and punishment in Jesus Christ is given to you, not merely in order that you may escape the penalties of your evil, but in order that, being pardoned, you may in glad thankfulness be lifted up into an enthusiasm of service which will make you eager to serve Him and long to be like Him. He sets you free from guilt, from punishment, and His wrath, in order that by the golden cord of love you may be fastened to Him in thankful obedience. God’s purpose in redemption is that ‘we, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies should serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.’

And in like manner, righteousness, by which, in the present connection, we mean simply the doing of the things, and the being the character, which a conscience enlightened by the law of God dictates to us to be and to do-righteousness is the intention and the aim of all religious emotion and feeling. It is all very well to have the joy of fellowship with God in our inmost soul, but there is a type of Christianity which is a great deal stronger on the side of devout emotion than on the side of transparent godliness; and although it becomes no man to say what Jesus Christ could say to those whose religion is mainly emotional, ‘Hypocrites!’ it is the part of every honest preacher to warn all that listen to him that there does lie a danger, a very real danger, very close to some of us, to substitute devout emotion for plain, practical goodness, and to be a great deal nearer God in the words of our prayers than we are in the current and set of our daily lives. Take, then, these three names of my text as flashing into force and emphasis the exhortation that the crown of all religion is righteousness, and as preaching, in antique guise, the same lesson that the very Apostle of affectionate contemplation uttered with such earnestness:-’Little children! let no man deceive you. He that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as He is righteous.’ An ounce of practical godliness is worth a pound of fine feeling and a ton of correct orthodoxy. Remember what the Master said, and take the lesson in the measure in which you need it: ‘Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name have cast out devils, and in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you, depart from Me.’ And the proof that I never knew you, nor you Me, is: ‘Ye that work iniquity.’

III. Then there is another lesson still which I draw from these words, viz. the merciful judgment which God makes of the character of them that love Him.

Jeshurun means ‘the righteous one.’ How far beneath the ideal of the name these Jewish people fell we all know, and yet the name is applied to them. Although the realisation of the ideal has been so imperfect, the ideal is not destroyed. Although they have done so many sins, yet He calls them by His name of ‘righteous.’ And so we Christian people find that the New Testament calls us ‘saints.’ That name is not applied to some select and lofty specimens of Christianity, but to all Christians, however imperfect their present life and character may be. Then people sneer and say, ‘Ah! a strange kind of saints these Christians are! Do you think that a man can condone practical immorality by saying that he is trusting in Jesus Christ? The Church’s “saint” seems to mean less than the world’s “man of honour.”‘ God forbid that it should be fancied that Christian sainthood is more tolerant of evil than worldly morality, or has any fantastic standard of goodness which makes up for departures from the plain rule of right by prayers and raptures. But surely there may be a principle of action deep down at the bottom of a heart, very feeble in its present exercise and manifestation, which yet is the true man, and is destined to conquer the whole nature which now wars against it. Here, for instance, is a tiny spark, and there is a huge pile of damp, green wood. Yes; and the little spark will turn all the wood into flame, if you give it time and fair play. The leaven may be hid in an immensely greater mass of meal, but it, and not the three measures of flour, is the active principle. And if there is in a man, overlaid by ever so many absurdities, and contradictions, and inconsistencies, a little seed of faith in Jesus Christ, there will be in him proportionately a little particle of a divine life which is omnipotent, which is immortal, which will conquer and transform all the rest into its own likeness; and He who sees not as men see, beholds the inmost tendencies and desires of the nature, as well as the facts of the life, and discerning the inmost and true self of His children, and knowing that it will conquer, calls us ‘righteous ones,’ even while the outward life has not yet been brought into harmony with the new man, created in righteousness after God’s image.

All wrong-doing is inconsistent with Christianity, but, thank God, it is not for us to say that *any* wrong-doing is incompatible with it; and therefore, for ourselves there is hope, and for our estimate of one another there ought to be charity, and for all Christian people there is the lesson-live up to your name. *Noblesse oblige!* Fulfil your ideal. Be what God calls you, and ‘press toward the mark for the prize.’

If one had time to deal with it, there is another lesson naturally suggested by these names, but I only put it in a sentence and leave it; and that is the union between the founder of the nation and the nation. The name of the patriarch passes to his descendants, the nation is called after him that begat it. In some sense it prolongs his life and spirit and character upon the earth. That is the old-world way of looking at the solidarity of a nation. There is a New Testament fact which goes even deeper than that. The names which Christ bears are given to Christ’s followers. Is He a King, is He a Priest? He ‘makes us kings and priests.’ Is He anointed the Messiah? God ‘hath anointed us in Him.’ Is He the Light of the World?

‘Ye are the lights of the world.’ His life passeth into all that love Him in the measure of their trust and love. We are one with Jesus if we rest upon Him; one in life, one in character, approximating by slow degrees, but surely, to His likeness; and blessed be His name! one in destiny. Then, my friend, if you will only keep near that Lord, trust Him, live in the light of His face, go to Him in your weakness, in your despair, in your self-abandonment; wrestle with Him, with the supplication and the tears that He delights to receive, then you will be knit to Him in a union so real and deep that all which is His shall be yours, His life shall be the life of your spirit, His power the strength of your life, His dominion the foundation of your dignity as a prince with God, His all-prevailing priesthood the security that your prayer shall have power, and the spotless robe of His righteousness the fine linen, clean and white, in which arrayed, you shall be found of Him, and in Him at last, in peace, ‘not having your own righteousness, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.’

54)Isaiah 44:20

Isaiah

FEEDING ON ASHES

Isa. 44:20.

The prophet has been pouring fierce scorn on idolaters. They make, he says, the gods they worship. They take a tree and saw it up: one log serves for a fire to cook their food, and with compass and pencil and plane they carve the figure of a man, and then they bow down to it and say, ‘Deliver me, for thou art my god!’ He sums up the whole in this sentence of my text, in which the tone changes from bitter irony to astonished pity. Now, if this were the time and the place, one would like to expand and illustrate the deep thoughts in these words in reference to idolatry; thoughts which go dead in the teeth of a great deal that is now supposed to be scientifically established, but which may be none the more true for all that. He asserts that idolatry is empty, a feeding on ashes. He declares, in opposition to modern ideas, that the low, gross forms of polytheism and idol-worship are a departure from a previous higher stage, whereas to-day we are told by a hundred voices that all religion begins at the bottom, and slowly struggles up to the top. Isaiah says the very opposite. The pure form is the primitive; the secondary form is the gross, which is a corruption. They tell us too, nowadays, that all religion pursues a process of evolution, and gradually clears itself of its more imperfect and carnal elements. Isaiah says, 'he cannot deliver his soul'; and no religion ever worked itself up, unless under the impulse of a revelation from without. That is Isaiah's philosophy of idolatry, and I expect it will be accepted as the true one some day.

But my text has a wider bearing. It not only describes, in pathetic language, the condition of the idolater, but it is true about all lives, which are really idolatrous in so far as they make anything else than God their aim and their joy. Every word of this text applies to such lives-that is to say, to the lives of a good many people listening to me now. And I would fain try to lay the truths here on some hearts. Let me just take them as they lie in the words before me.

I. A life that substantially ignores God is empty of all true satisfaction.

'He feedeth on ashes'! Very little imagination will realise the force of that picture. The gritty cinders will irritate the lips and tongue, will dry up the moisture of the mouth, will interfere with the breathing, and there will be no nourishment in a sackful of them.

Dear brethren, the underlying truth is this-God is the only food of a man's soul. You pick up the skeleton of a bird upon a moor; and if you know anything about osteology-the science of bones-you will see, in the very make of its breast-bone and its wing-bones, the declaration that its destiny was to soar into the blue. You pick up the skeleton of a fish lying on the beach, and you will see in its very form and characteristics that its destiny is to expatiate in the depths of the sea. And, written on you, as distinctly as flight on the bird, or swimming on the fish, is this, that you are meant, by your very make, to soar up into the heights of the glory of God, and to plunge deep into the abysses of His infinite love and wisdom. Man is made for God. 'Whose image and superscription hath it?' said Christ. The coin belongs to the king whose head and titles are displayed upon it; and on your heart, friend, though a usurper has tried to recoin the piece, and put his own foul image on the top of the original one, is stamped deep that you belong to the King of kings, to God Himself.

For what does our heart want? A perfect, changeless, all-powerful love. And what does our mind want? Reliable, guiding, inexhaustible, and yet accessible truth. And what does our will want? Commandments which have an authoritative ring in their very utterance, and which will serve for infallible guides for our lives. And what do our weak, sinful natures want? Something that shall free our consciences, and shall deliver us from the burden of our transgressions, and shall calm our fears, and shall quicken and warrant our lofty hopes. And what do men whose destiny is to live for ever want but something that shall go with them through all changes of condition, and, like a light in the midst of the darkest tunnel, shall burn in the passage between this and the other world, and shall never be taken away from them? We want a Person to be everything to us. No accumulation of things will satisfy a man. And we want all our treasures to be in one Person, and we need that that Person shall live as long as we live, and as long as we need shall be sufficient to supply us. And all this is only the spelling in many letters of the one name-God. That is what we want, that, and nothing less.

Then the next step that I suggest to you is, that where a man will take God for the food of his spirit, and turn love and mind and will and conscience and practical life to Him, seeing Him in everything, and seeing all things in Him; saturating, as it were, the universe with the thought of God, and recreating his own spirit with communion of friendship to Him; to that man lower goods do first disclose their real sweetness, their most poignant delight, and their most solid satisfaction. To say of a world where God has set us, that it is all ‘vanity and vexation of spirit,’ goes in flat contradiction to what He said when, creation finished, He looked upon His world, and proclaimed to the waiting seraphim around that ‘it was very good.’ There is a view of the world which calls itself pious, but is really an insult to God; and the irreligious pessimism that is fashionable nowadays, as if human life were a great mistake, and everything were mean and poor and insufficient, is contrary to the facts and to the consciousness of every man. But if you make things first which were meant to be second, then you make what was meant to be food ‘ashes.’ They are all good in their place. Wealth is good;

wisdom is good; success is good; love is good. And all these things may be enjoyed without God, and will each of them yield their proportional satisfaction to the part of our nature to which they belong. But if you put them first you degrade them; a change passes over them at once. A long row of cyphers means nothing; put a significant digit in front of it, and it means millions. Take away the digit, and it goes back to nothing again. The world, and all its fading sweets, if you put God in the forefront of it, and begin the series with Him, is sweet, though it may be fleeting, and is meant to be felt by us as such. But if you take away Him, it is a row of cyphers signifying nothing, and able to contribute nothing to the real, deepest necessities of the human soul. And so the old question comes-'Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread?' It is bread, if only you will remember first that God is the food of your souls. But if you try to nourish yourselves on it alone, then, as I said, a sackful of such ashes will not stay your appetite. Oh! brethren, God has not so blundered in making the world that He has surrounded us with things that are all lies, but He has so made it that whosoever flies in the face of the gracious commandment which is also an invitation, 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness,' has not only no security that the 'other things' shall 'be added unto him,' but has the certainty that though they were added to him, in degree beyond his dreams and highest hopes, they would avail nothing to satisfy the hunger of his heart. As George Herbert puts it-

'Shadows well mounted, dreams in a career,
Embroidered lies, nothing between two dishes,
These are the pleasures here.'

'He feedeth on ashes,' because he does not take God for the food of his soul.

II. So, secondly, notice that a life which thus ignores God is tragically unaware of its own emptiness.

'A deceived heart hath turned him aside.' That explains how the man comes to fancy that ashes are food. His whole nature is perverted, his vision distorted, his power of judgment marred. He is given over to hallucinations and illusions and dreams.

That explains, too, why men persist in this feeding on ashes after all experience. There is no fact stranger or more tragical in our histories than that we do not learn by a thousand failures that the world will not avail to make us restful and blessed. You will see a dog chasing a sparrow,-it has chased hundreds before and never caught one. Yet, when the bird rises from the ground, away it goes after it once more, with eager yelp and rush, to renew the old experience. Ah! that is like what a great many of you are doing, and you have not the same excuse that the dog has. You have been trying all your lives-and some of you have grey hairs on your heads-to slake your thirst by dipping leaky buckets into empty wells, and you are at it yet. As some one says, 'experience throws a light on the wave behind us,' but it does very little to fling a light on the sea before us. Experience confirms my text, for I venture to put it to the experience of every man-how many moments of complete satisfaction and rest can you summon up in your memory as having been yours in the past? 'He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase.' Appetite always grows faster than supply. And so, though we have tried them in vain so often, we turn again to the old discredited sources, and fancy we shall do better this time. Is it not strange? Is there any explanation of it, other than that of my text? 'A deceived heart hath turned him aside.'

And that deceived heart, stronger than experience, is also stronger than conscience. Do you not know that you ought to be Christians? Do you not know that it is both wrong and foolish of you to ignore God? Do you not know that you will have to answer for it? Have you not had moments of illumination when there has risen up before you the whole vanity of your past lives, and when you have felt 'I have played the fool, and erred exceedingly'? And yet, what has come of it all with some of you? Why, what comes of it with the drunkard in the Book of Proverbs, who, as soon as he has got over the bruises and the sickness of his last debauch, says, 'I will seek it yet again.' 'A deceived heart hath turned him aside.'

And how is it that this hallucination that you have fed full and been satisfied, when all the while your hunger has not been appeased, can continue to act on us? For the very plain reason that every one of us has in himself a higher and a lower self, a set of desires for the grosser, more earthly, and, using the word in its proper sense, worldly sort-that is to say, directed towards material things, and a higher set which look right up to God if they were allowed fair play. And of these two sets-which really are one at bottom, if a man would only see it-the lower gets the upper hand, and suppresses the higher and the nobler. And so in many a man and woman the longing for God is crushed out by the grosser delights of sense.

One sometimes hears of cowardly, unmanly sailors, who in shipwreck push the women and children aside, and struggle to the boats. And there are in all of us groups of sturdy mendicants, so to speak, who elbow their way to the front, and will have their wants satisfied. What becomes of the gentler group that stand behind, unnoticed and silent? It is an awful thing when men and women do, as so many of us do, pervert the tastes that are meant to lead them to God, in order to stifle the consciousness that they need a God at all. There are tribes of low savages who are known as ‘clay-eaters.’ That is what a great many of us are; we feed upon the serpent’s meat, the dust of the earth, and let all the higher heavenly food, which addresses itself first to loftier desires, but also satisfies these lower ones, stand unnoticed, unsought for, unpartaken of. Dear friends, do not be befooled by that treacherous heart of yours, but let the deepest voices in your soul be heard. Understand, I beseech you, that their cry is for no created person or thing, and that only God Himself can satisfy them.

III. And now, lastly, notice that a life thus ignoring God needs a power from without to set it free.

‘He cannot deliver his soul.’ Can you? Do you think you can break the habits of a lifetime? Do you think that, left to yourself, you would ever have any inclination to break them? Certainly, left to yourselves, you will never have the power. These long indulged appetites of ours grow with indulgence; and that which first was light as a cobweb, and soft as a silken bracelet, becomes heavier and solider until it is an iron fetter upon the limb, which no man can break. There is nothing more awful in life than the influence of habit, so unthinkingly acquired, so inexorably certain, so limiting our possibilities and enclosing us in its grip.

Dear brethren, there is something more wanted than yourselves to break this chain. You have tried, I have no doubt, in the course of your lives, more and more resolutely, to cure yourselves of some more or less unworthy habits.

They may be but mere slight tricks of attitude or intonation, or movement. Has your success been such as to encourage you to think that you can revolutionise your lives, and dethrone the despots that have ruled over you in the past? I leave the question to yourselves. To me it seems that the world of men is certain to go on ignoring God, and seeking its delight only in the world of creatures, unless there comes in an outside power into the heart of the world and revolutionises all things.

It is that power that I have to preach, the Christ who is the ‘Bread of God that came down from Heaven,’ who can lift up any soul from the most obstinate and long-continued grovelling amongst the transitory things of this limited world, and the superficial delights of sense and a gratified bodily life; who can bring the forgiveness which is essential, the deliverance from the power of evil which is not less essential, and who can fill our hearts with Himself the food of the world. He comes to each of us; He comes to you, with the old unanswerable question upon His lips, ‘Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not?’ It is unanswerable, for you can give no reason sufficient for such madness. All that you could say, and you durst not say it to Him, is, ‘a deceived heart hath turned me aside.’ He comes with the old gracious word upon His lips, ‘Take! eat! this is My body which is broken for you.’ He offers us Himself. He can stay all the hungers of all mankind. He can feed your heart with love, your mind with truth which is Himself, your will with His sweet commands.

As of old He made the thousands sit down upon the grass, and they did all eat and were filled, so He stands before the world to-day and says, ‘I am the Bread of Life; He that cometh to Me shall never hunger.’ And if you will only come to Him-that is to say, will trust yourselves altogether to the merits of His sacrifice, and the might of His indwelling Spirit-He will take away all the taste for the leeks and onions and garlic, and will give you the appetite for heavenly food. He will spread for you a table in the wilderness, and what would else be ashes will become sweet, wholesome, and nourishing. Nor will He cease there, for in His own good time He will call us to the banqueting house above, where He will make us to sit down to meat, and come forth Himself and serve us. Here, hunger often brings pain, and eating is followed by repletion. But there, appetite and satisfaction will produce each other perpetually, and the blessed ones who then hunger will not hunger so as to feel faintness or emptiness, nor be so filled as to cease to desire larger portions of the Bread of God. I beseech you, cry, 'Lord, ever more give us this bread!'

55)Isaiah 44:22

Isaiah

WRITING BLOTTED OUT AND MIST MELTED

Isa. 44:22.

Isaiah has often and well been called the Evangelical Prophet. Many parts of this second half of his prophecies referring to the Messiah read like history rather than prediction. But it is not only from the clearness with which the great figure of the future king of Israel stands out on his page that he deserves that title. Other thoughts belonging to the very substance of the gospel appear in him with a vividness and a frequency which well warrants its application to him. He speaks much of the characteristically Christian conceptions of sin, forgiveness, and redemption. The whole of the latter parts of this book are laden with that burden. They are gathered up in the extraordinarily pregnant and blessed words of my text, in which metaphors are blended with much disregard to oratorical propriety, in order to bring out the whole fulness of the prophet's meaning. 'I have blotted out'-that suggests a book. 'I have blotted out as a cloud'-that suggests the thinning away of morning mists. The prophet blends the two thoughts together, and on that great revelation of a forgiveness granted before it has been asked, and given, not only to one penitent soul wailing out like the abased king of Israel in his deep contrition, 'according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions,' but promised to a whole people, is rested the great invitation, 'Return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee.'

Let me try and bring out, as simply and earnestly as I can, the great teaching that is condensed into these words.

I. Observe here the penetrating glance into the very essential characteristics of all sin.

There are two words, as you see, employed in my text, ‘transgressions’ and ‘sins.’ They apply to the same kind of actions, but they look at them from different angles and points of view. They are partially synonymous, but they cover very various conceptions, and if we take note of the original significations of the two words, we get two very important and often forgotten thoughts.

For that expression rendered in my text, and rendered correctly enough - transgressions-means at bottom, ‘rebellion,’ the rising up of a disobedient will, not only against a law, but against a lawgiver. There we have a deepening of that solemn fact of a man’s wrongdoing, which brings it into immediate connection with God, and marks its foulness by reason of that connection.

Ah! brethren, it makes all the difference to a man’s notions of right and wrong, whether he stops on the surface or goes down to the depths; whether he says to himself, ‘The thing is a vice; it is wrong; it is contrary to what I ought to be’; or whether he gets down to the darker, deeper, and truer thought, and says, ‘The damnable thing about every little evil that I do is this, that in it *I*-poor puny I-perk myself up against God, and say to Him, “Thou wilt; wilt thou? *I* shall not!”‘ Sin is rebellion.

And so what becomes of the hazy distinction between great sins and little ones? An overt act of rebellion is of the same gravity, whatsoever may be its form. The man that lifts his sword against the sovereign, and the man behind him that holds his horse, are equally criminal. And when once you let in the notion that in all our actions we have to do with a Person, to whom we are bound to be obedient, then the distinction which sophisticates so many people’s consciences, and does such infinite harm in so many lives, between great and small transgressions, disappears altogether. Sin is rebellion.

Then the other word of my text is equally profound and significant. For it, literally taken, means-as the words for ‘sin’ do in other languages besides the Hebrew-missing a mark. Every wrong thing that any man does is beside the mark, at which he, by virtue of his manhood, and his very make and nature, ought to aim. It is beside the mark in another sense than that. As some one says, ‘A rogue is a roundabout fool.’ No man ever secures that, and only that, which he aims at by any departure from the straight path of imperative duty. For if he gets some vulgar and transient titillation of appetite, or satisfaction of desire, he gets along with it something that takes all the gilt off the gingerbread, and all the sweetness out of the satisfaction. So that it is always a blunder to be bad, and every arrow that is drawn by a sinful hand misses the target to which all our arrows should be pointed, and misses even the poor mark that we think we are aiming at. Take these two thoughts with you-I will not dwell on them, but I desire to lay them upon all your hearts-all evil is sin, and every sin is rebellion against God, and a blunder in regard to myself.

II. And now I come to the second point of our text, and ask you to note the permanent record which every sin leaves.

I explained in the earlier part of my remarks that we have a case here of the thing that horrifies rhetoricians, but does not matter a bit to a prophet, the blending or confusing of two metaphors. The first of them-'I have blotted out'-suggests a piece of writing, a book, or manuscript of some sort. And the plain English of what lies behind that metaphor is this solemn thought, which I would might blaze before each of us, in all our lives, that God's calm and all-comprehensive knowledge and remembrance takes and keeps filed, and ready for reference, the whole story of our whole acts. There *is* a book. It is a violent metaphor, no doubt, but there is a solemn truth underlying it which we are too apt to forget. The world is groaning nowadays with two-volume memoirs of men that nobody wants to know anything more about. But every man is ever writing his autobiography with invisible but indelible ink. You have seen those old-fashioned 'manifold writers' in your places of business, and the construction of them is this: a flimsy sheet of tissue paper, a bit of black to be put in below it, and then another sheet on the other side; and the pen that writes on the flimsy top surface makes an impression that is carried through the black to the sheet below, and there is a duplicate which the writer keeps. You and I, upon the flimsinesses of this fleeting-sometimes, we think, futile-life, are penning what is neither flimsy nor futile, which goes through the opaque dark, and is reproduced and docketed yonder. That is what we are doing every day and every minute, writing, writing, writing our own biography. And who is going to read it? Well, God does read it now, and you will have to read it out one day, and how will you like that?

This metaphor will bear a little further expansion. Scripture tells us, and conscience tells us, what manner of manuscript it is that we are each so busy adding line upon line to. It is a ledger; it is an indictment. Our own handwriting puts down in the ledger our own debts, and we cannot deny our own handwriting when we are confronted with it. It is an indictment, and our own hand draws it, and we have to plead 'guilty,' or 'not guilty,' to it. Which, being translated into plain fact, is this-that there goes with all our deeds some sense and reality of responsibility for them, and that all our rebellions against God, and our blunders against self, be they great or small, carry with them a sense of guilt and a reality of guilt whether we have the sense of it or not. God has a judgment at this moment about every man and woman, based upon the facts of the unfinished biography which they are writing.

Mystical and awful, yet blessed and elevating, is the thought that nothing-*nothing,* ever dies; and that what was, is now, and always will be.

Amongst the specimens from the coal measures in a museum you will find slabs upon which the tiniest fronds of ferns that grew nobody knows how many millenniums since are preserved for ever. Our lives, when the blow of the last hammer lays them open, will, in like manner, bear the impress of the minutest filament of every deed that we have ever done.

But my metaphor will bear yet further expansion, for this autobiographical record which we are busy preparing, which is at once ledger and indictment, is to be read out one day. There is a great scene in the last book of Scripture, the whole solemn significance of which, I suppose, we shall not understand till we have learned it by experience, but the truth of which we have sufficient premonitions to assure us of, which declares that at a given time, on the confines of Eternity, the Great White Throne is to be set, and the books are to be opened, and the dead are judged 'out of the books,' which, the seer goes on to explain, is 'according to their works.' The story of Esther tells us how the sleepless monarch in the night-watches sent for the records of the kingdom and had them read to him. The King who never slumbers nor sleeps, in that dawning of heaven's eternal morning, will have the books opened before Him, and my deeds will be read out. He and I will hear them, whether any else may hear or no. That is my second lesson.

III. The third is, that we have here suggested the darkening power of sin.

The prophet, as I said, mixes metaphors. ‘I have blotted out as a cloud thy transgressions.’ He uses two words for ‘cloud’ here; both of them mean substantially the same thing, and both suggest the same idea. When cloud fills the sky it darkens the earth, and shuts out the sunshine and the blue, it closes the petals of the little flowers, it hushes the songs of the birds. Sin makes for the sinning man ‘an under-roof of doleful grey,’ which shuts out all the glories above. Put that metaphor into plain English, and it is just this, ‘Your sins have separated between you and your God, and your iniquities have hid His face from you that He will not hear.’ It is impossible for a man that has his heart all stiffened by the rebellion of his will against God’s, or all seething with unrestrained passions, or perturbed with worldly longings and desires, to enter into calm fellowship with God or to keep the thought of God clear before his mind. For we know Him, not by sense nor by reason, but by sympathy and by feeling. And whatsoever comes in to disturb a man’s purity, comes in to hinder his vision of God. ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they’-and they only-’shall see God.’ Whenever from the undrained swamps of my own passions and sensualities, or from the as malarious though loftier grounds of my own self-regard, be I student or thinker, or moral man, there rise up these light mists, they will fill the sky and hide the sun. On a winter’s night you will see the Pleiades, or other bright constellations, varying in brilliancy from moment to moment as some invisible cloud-wrack floats across the heavens. So, brother, every evil thing that we do rises up and gets diffused through our atmosphere, and blots out from our vision the face of God Himself, the blessed Son.

Not only by reason of dimming and darkening my thoughts of Him is my sin rightly compared to an obscuring cloud; but the comparison also holds good because, just as the blanket of a wet mist swathing the wintry fields prevents the sunshine from falling upon them in blessing, so the accumulated effect of my evil doings and evil designings and thinkings and willings comes between me and all spiritual blessings which God can bestow, so that the very light of light, the highest blessings that He yearns to give, and we faint for want of possessing, are impossible even to His love to communicate until the cloud is swept away. So my sin darkens my soul, and separates me from the light of life.

But the metaphor carries with it, too, a suggestion of the limitations of the power of sin. For when the cloud is thickest and most obscuring it only hugs the earth, and rises but a little way Into the heavens; and far above it the blue is as blue, and the sunshine as bright, as if there were no mist or fog in the lower regions. Therefore, let us remember that, while the cloud must veil us from the light, the light is above it, and ‘every cloud that veileth love’ may some day be thinned away by the love it veils.

IV. That brings me to the last word of my text,-viz. the prophet’s teaching as to the removal of the sin.

We have to carry both the metaphors together with us here. ‘I have blotted out’-that is, as erasing from a book. ‘I have blotted out as a cloud’-that is, the thinning away of the mist. The blurred and stained page can be cancelled. Chemicals will take the ink out. ‘The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin’; and it, passed over all that foul record, makes it pure and clean. ‘What I have written, I have written,’ said Pilate in his obstinacy. ‘What I have written, I have written,’ wails many a man in the sense of the irrevocableness of his past. Brother! be not afraid. Christ can take away all that stained record, and give you back the page ready to receive holier words.

The cloud is thinned away. What thins the cloud? As I have said, the light which the cloud obscures, shining on the upper surface of it, dissipates it layer by layer till it gets down at last to the lowermost, and then rends a gap in it, and sends the shaft of the sunbeam through on to the green earth. And that is only a highly imaginative way of saying that it is the love against which we transgress that thins away the cloud of transgression, and at last, as the placid moon, by simply shining silently on, will sweep the whole sky clear of its clouds, dissipates them all, and leaves the calm blue. God forgives. The ledger account-if I may use so grossly commercial a figure-is settled in full; the indictment is endorsed, ‘acquitted.’ He remembers the sins only to breathe into the child’s heart the assurance of pardon, and no obstacle rises by reason of forgiven transgression between the sinning man and the reconciled God.

Now, all this preaching of Isaiah's is enlarged and confirmed, and to some extent the *rationale* of it is set before us in the great Gospel truth of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ. Unless we know that truth, we may well stand amazed and questioning as to whether a righteous God, administering a rigorous universe, can ever pardon sin. And unless we know that by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, granted to our spirits, our whole nature may be remade and moulded, we might well be tempted to say, Ah! the Ethiopian cannot change his skin nor the leopard his spots. But Jesus Christ can change more than skin, even the heart and spirit, the inmost depths of the nature.

Now, brother, my text speaks of this great blotting out as a past fact. It is so in the divine mind with regard to each of us, because Christ's great work has made reconciliation and atonement for all the sins of all the world. And on the fact that it is past is based the exhortation, 'Return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee.' God does not say, 'Come back and I will forgive'; He does not say, 'Return and I will blot out'; but He says, 'Return, for I *have* blotted out.' Though accomplished, the forgiveness has to be appropriated by individual faith. The sins of the world have been borne, and borne away, by the Lamb of God, but your sins are not borne away unless your hand is laid on this head.

If it is, then you do not need to say, 'What I have written is written, and it cannot be blotted out.' But as in the old days a monk would take some manuscript upon which filthy stories about heathen gods and foolish fables were written, and erase these to write the legends of saints, or perhaps the words of the Gospels themselves; so on our hearts, which have been scribbled all over with obscenities and follies, He will write His new best name of Love, and we may be epistles of Christ, written with the Spirit of the living God.

56)Isaiah 45:15

HIDDEN AND REVEALED

Isa. 45:15, Isa. 45:19.

The former of these verses expresses the thoughts of the prophet in contemplating the close of a great work of God’s power which issues in the heathen’s coming to Israel and acknowledging God. He adores the depth of the divine counsels which, by devious ways and after long ages, have led to this bright result. And as he thinks of all the long-stretching preparations, all the apparently hostile forces which have been truly subsidiary, all the generations during which these Egyptian and Ethiopian tribes have been the enemies and oppressors of that Israel whom they at last acknowledge for the dwelling-place of God, and enemies of that Jehovah before whom they finally bow down, he feels that he has no measuring-line to fathom the divine purposes, and bows his face to the ground in reverent contemplation with that word upon his lips: ‘Verily Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.’ It is a parallel to the apostolic words, ‘O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out.’

But such thoughts are but a half truth, and may very easily become in men’s minds a whole error, and therefore they are followed by a marvellous section in which the Lord Himself speaks, and of which the whole burden is-the clearness and fulness with which God makes Himself known to men. True it is that there are depths inaccessible in the divine nature. True it is that there are mysteries unrevealed in the method of the divine procedure, and especially in that of the relation of heathen tribes to His gospel and His love. True it is that there are mysteries opened in the very word of His grace. But notwithstanding all this-it is also true that He makes Himself known to us all, that He declares righteousness, that He calls us to seek Him, and that He wills to be found and known by us.

The collocation of these two passages may be taken, then, as representing the two phases of the Divine Manifestation, the obscurity which must ever be associated with all our finite knowledge of God, and the clear sunlight in which blazes all that we need to know of Him.

I. After all revelation, God is hidden.

There is revelation of His Name in all His works. His action must be all self-manifestation. But after all it is obscure and hidden.

1. Nature hides while it reveals.

Nature's revelation is unobtrusive.

God is concealed behind second causes.

God is concealed behind regular modes of working [laws].

Nature's revelation is partial, disclosing only a fragment of the name.

Nature's revelation is ambiguous. Dark shadows of death and pain in the sensitive world, of ruin and convulsions, of shivered stars, seem to contradict the faith that all is very good; so that it has been possible for men to drop their plummet in the deep and say, 'I find no God,' and for others to fall into Manichaeism or some form or other of dualism.

2. Providence hides while it reveals.

That is the sphere in which men are most familiar with the idea of mystery.

There is much of which we do not see the issue. The process is not completed, and so the end is not visible.

Even when we believe that 'to Him' and 'for good' are 'all things,' we cannot tell how all will come circling round. We are like men looking only at one small segment of an ellipse which is very eccentric.

There is much of which we do not see the consistency with the divine character.

We are confronted with stumbling-blocks in the allotment of earthly conditions; in the long ages and many tribes which are without knowledge of God; in the sore sorrows, national and individual.

We can array a formidable host. But it is to be remembered that revelation actually increases these. It is just because we know so much of God that we feel them so keenly. I suppose the mysteries of the divine government trouble others outside the sphere of revelation but little. The darkness is made visible by the light.

3. Even in ‘grace’ God is hidden while revealed.

The Infinite and Eternal cannot be grasped by man.

The conception of infinity and eternity is given us by revelation, but it is not comprehended so that its contents are fully known. The words are known, but their full meaning is not, and no revelation can make them, known to finite intelligences.

God dwells in light inaccessible, which is darkness.

Revelation opens abysses down which we cannot look. It raises and leaves unsettled as many questions as it solves.

The telescope resolves many nebulae, but only to bring more unresolvable ones into the field of vision.

Now all this is but one side of the truth. There is a tendency in some minds to underrate what is plain because all is not plain. For some minds the obscure has a fascination, apart altogether from its nature, just because it is obscure. It is a noble emulation to press forward and ‘still to be closing up what we know not with what we know.’ But neither in science nor in religion shall we make progress if we do not take heed of the opposing errors of thinking that all is seen, and of thinking that what we have is valueless because there are gaps in it. The constellations are none the less bright nor immortal fires, though there be waste places in heaven where nothing but opaque blackness is seen. In these days it is especially needful to insist both on the incompleteness of all our religious knowledge, and to say that-

II. Notwithstanding all obscurity, God has amply revealed Himself.

Though God hides Himself, still there comes from heaven the voice-’I have not spoken in secret,’ Now these words contain these thoughts-

> 1. That whatever darkness there may be, there is none due to the manner of the revelation.

God has not spoken in secret, in a corner. There are no arbitrary difficulties made or unnecessary darkness left in His revelation. *We* have no right to say that He has left difficulties to test our faith. *He* Himself has never said so. He deals with us in good faith, doing all that can be done to enlighten, regard being had to still loftier considerations, to the freedom of the human will, to the laws which He has Himself imposed on our nature, and the purposes for which we are here. It is very important to grasp this. We have been told as much as *can* be told. Contrast with such a revelation the cave-muttered oracles of heathenism and their paltering double sense. Be sure that when God speaks, He speaks clearly and to all, and that in Christianity there is no esoteric teaching for a few initiated only, while the multitude are put off with shows.

> 2. That whatever obscurity there may be, there is none which hides the divine invitation or Him from those who obey it.

'I have never said . . . seek ye Me in vain.' Much is obscure if speculative completeness is looked for, but the moral relations of God and man are not obscure.

All which the heart needs is made known. His revelation is clearly His seeking us, and His revelation is His gracious call to us to seek Him. He is ever found by those who seek. They have not to press through obscurities to find Him, but the desire to possess must precede possession in spiritual matters. He is no hidden God, lurking in obscurity and only to be found by painful search. They who 'seek' Him know where to find Him, and seek because they know.

> 3. That whatever may be obscure, the Revelation of righteousness is clear.

We have to face speculative difficulties in plenty, but the great fact remains that in Revelation steady light is focussed on the moral qualities of the divine Nature and especially on His righteousness.

And the revelation of the divine righteousness reaches its greatest brightness, as that of all the divine Nature does, in the Person and work of Jesus. Very significantly the idea of God's righteousness is fully developed in the immediately subsequent context. There we find that attribute linked in close and harmonious conjunction with what shallower thought is apt to regard as being in antagonism to it. He declares Himself to be 'a just [righteous] God and a Saviour.' So then, if we would rightly conceive of His righteousness, we must give it a wider extension than that of retributive justice or cold, inflexible aloofness from sinners. It impels God to be man's saviour. And with similar enlarging of popular conceptions there follows: 'In the Lord is righteousness and strength,' and therefore, 'In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified [declared and made righteous] and shall glory'-then, the divine Righteousness is communicative.

All these thoughts, germinal in the prophet's words, are set in fullest light, and certified by the most heart-moving facts, in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. He 'declares at this time His righteousness, that He might Himself be righteous and the maker righteous of them that have faith in Jesus.' Whatever is dark, this is clear, that 'Jehovah our Righteousness' has come to us in His Son, in whom seeking Him we shall never seek in vain, but 'be found in Him, not having a righteousness of our own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.'

If the great purpose of revelation is to make us know that God loves us, and has given us His Son that in Him we may know Him and possess His Righteousness, difficulties and obscurities in its form or in its substance take a very different aspect. What need we more than that knowledge and possession? Be not robbed of them.

Many things are not written in the book of the divine Revelation, whether it be that of Nature, of human history, or of our own spirits, or even of the Gospel, but these are written that we may believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and believing, may have life in His name.

57)Isaiah 45:19

HIDDEN AND REVEALED

Isa. 45:15, Isa. 45:19.

The former of these verses expresses the thoughts of the prophet in contemplating the close of a great work of God's power which issues in the heathen's coming to Israel and acknowledging God. He adores the depth of the divine counsels which, by devious ways and after long ages, have led to this bright result. And as he thinks of all the long-stretching preparations, all the apparently hostile forces which have been truly subsidiary, all the generations during which these Egyptian and Ethiopian tribes have been the enemies and oppressors of that Israel whom they at last acknowledge for the dwelling-place of God, and enemies of that Jehovah before whom they finally bow down, he feels that he has no measuring-line to fathom the divine purposes, and bows his face to the ground in reverent contemplation with that word upon his lips: 'Verily Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.' It is a parallel to the apostolic words, 'O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out.'

But such thoughts are but a half truth, and may very easily become in men's minds a whole error, and therefore they are followed by a marvellous section in which the Lord Himself speaks, and of which the whole burden is-the clearness and fulness with which God makes Himself known to men. True it is that there are depths inaccessible in the divine nature. True it is that there are mysteries unrevealed in the method of the divine procedure, and especially in that of the relation of heathen tribes to His gospel and His love. True it is that there are mysteries opened in the very word of His grace. But notwithstanding all this-it is also true that He makes Himself known to us all, that He declares righteousness, that He calls us to seek Him, and that He wills to be found and known by us.

The collocation of these two passages may be taken, then, as representing the two phases of the Divine Manifestation, the obscurity which must ever be associated with all our finite knowledge of God, and the clear sunlight in which blazes all that we need to know of Him.

I. After all revelation, God is hidden.

There is revelation of His Name in all His works. His action must be all self-manifestation. But after all it is obscure and hidden.

1. Nature hides while it reveals.

Nature's revelation is unobtrusive.

God is concealed behind second causes.

God is concealed behind regular modes of working [laws].

Nature's revelation is partial, disclosing only a fragment of the name.

Nature's revelation is ambiguous. Dark shadows of death and pain in the sensitive world, of ruin and convulsions, of shivered stars, seem to contradict the faith that all is very good; so that it has been possible for men to drop their plummet in the deep and say, 'I find no God,' and for others to fall into Manichaeism or some form or other of dualism.

2. Providence hides while it reveals.

That is the sphere in which men are most familiar with the idea of mystery.

There is much of which we do not see the issue. The process is not completed, and so the end is not visible.

Even when we believe that 'to Him' and 'for good' are 'all things,' we cannot tell how all will come circling round. We are like men looking only at one small segment of an ellipse which is very eccentric.

There is much of which we do not see the consistency with the divine character.

We are confronted with stumbling-blocks in the allotment of earthly conditions; in the long ages and many tribes which are without knowledge of God; in the sore sorrows, national and individual.

We can array a formidable host. But it is to be remembered that revelation actually increases these. It is just because we know so much of God that we feel them so keenly. I suppose the mysteries of the divine government trouble others outside the sphere of revelation but little. The darkness is made visible by the light.

3. Even in ‘grace’ God is hidden while revealed.

The Infinite and Eternal cannot be grasped by man.

The conception of infinity and eternity is given us by revelation, but it is not comprehended so that its contents are fully known. The words are known, but their full meaning is not, and no revelation can make them, known to finite intelligences.

God dwells in light inaccessible, which is darkness.

Revelation opens abysses down which we cannot look. It raises and leaves unsettled as many questions as it solves.

The telescope resolves many nebulae, but only to bring more unresolvable ones into the field of vision.

Now all this is but one side of the truth. There is a tendency in some minds to underrate what is plain because all is not plain. For some minds the obscure has a fascination, apart altogether from its nature, just because it is obscure. It is a noble emulation to press forward and ‘still to be closing up what we know not with what we know.’ But neither in science nor in religion shall we make progress if we do not take heed of the opposing errors of thinking that all is seen, and of thinking that what we have is valueless because there are gaps in it. The constellations are none the less bright nor immortal fires, though there be waste places in heaven where nothing but opaque blackness is seen. In these days it is especially needful to insist both on the incompleteness of all our religious knowledge, and to say that-

II. Notwithstanding all obscurity, God has amply revealed Himself.

Though God hides Himself, still there comes from heaven the voice-'I have not spoken in secret,' Now these words contain these thoughts-

1. That whatever darkness there may be, there is none due to the manner of the revelation.

God has not spoken in secret, in a corner. There are no arbitrary difficulties made or unnecessary darkness left in His revelation. *We* have no right to say that He has left difficulties to test our faith. *He* Himself has never said so. He deals with us in good faith, doing all that can be done to enlighten, regard being had to still loftier considerations, to the freedom of the human will, to the laws which He has Himself imposed on our nature, and the purposes for which we are here. It is very important to grasp this. We have been told as much as *can* be told. Contrast with such a revelation the cave-muttered oracles of heathenism and their paltering double sense. Be sure that when God speaks, He speaks clearly and to all, and that in Christianity there is no esoteric teaching for a few initiated only, while the multitude are put off with shows.

2. That whatever obscurity there may be, there is none which hides the divine invitation or Him from those who obey it.

'I have never said . . . seek ye Me in vain.' Much is obscure if speculative completeness is looked for, but the moral relations of God and man are not obscure.

All which the heart needs is made known. His revelation is clearly His seeking us, and His revelation is His gracious call to us to seek Him. He is ever found by those who seek. They have not to press through obscurities to find Him, but the desire to possess must precede possession in spiritual matters. He is no hidden God, lurking in obscurity and only to be found by painful search. They who 'seek' Him know where to find Him, and seek because they know.

3. That whatever may be obscure, the Revelation of righteousness is clear.

We have to face speculative difficulties in plenty, but the great fact remains that in Revelation steady light is focussed on the moral qualities of the divine Nature and especially on His righteousness.

And the revelation of the divine righteousness reaches its greatest brightness, as that of all the divine Nature does, in the Person and work of Jesus. Very significantly the idea of God's righteousness is fully developed in the immediately subsequent context. There we find that attribute linked in close and harmonious conjunction with what shallower thought is apt to regard as being in antagonism to it. He declares Himself to be 'a just [righteous] God and a Saviour.' So then, if we would rightly conceive of His righteousness, we must give it a wider extension than that of retributive justice or cold, inflexible aloofness from sinners. It impels God to be man's saviour. And with similar enlarging of popular conceptions there follows: 'In the Lord is righteousness and strength,' and therefore, 'In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified [declared and made righteous] and shall glory'-then, the divine Righteousness is communicative.

All these thoughts, germinal in the prophet's words, are set in fullest light, and certified by the most heart-moving facts, in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. He 'declares at this time His righteousness, that He might Himself be righteous and the maker righteous of them that have faith in Jesus.' Whatever is dark, this is clear, that 'Jehovah our Righteousness' has come to us in His Son, in whom seeking Him we shall never seek in vain, but 'be found in Him, not having a righteousness of our own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.'

If the great purpose of revelation is to make us know that God loves us, and has given us His Son that in Him we may know Him and possess His Righteousness, difficulties and obscurities in its form or in its substance take a very different aspect. What need we more than that knowledge and possession? Be not robbed of them.

Many things are not written in the book of the divine Revelation, whether it be that of Nature, of human history, or of our own spirits, or even of the Gospel, but these are written that we may believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and believing, may have life in His name.

58)Isaiah 46:12-13

Isaiah

A RIGHTEOUSNESS NEAR AND A SWIFT SALVATION

Isa. 46:12 - Isa. 46:13.

God has promised that He will dwell with him that is humble and of a contrite heart. Jesus has shed the oil of His benediction on the poor in spirit. It is the men who form the exact antithesis to these characters who are addressed here. The 'stout-hearted' are those who, being untouched in conscience and ignorant of their sin, are self-reliant and almost defiant before God. That temper is branded here, though, of course, there is a sense in which a stout heart is a priceless possession, but that sort of stoutness of heart is best secured by the contrite of heart. Those who are far from righteousness are those who are not only sinful in act, but do not desire to be otherwise, having no approximation or drawing towards a nobler life, by aspiration or effort.

To such men God speaks, as in the tone of a royal proclamation; and what should we expect to hear pealing from His lips? Words of rebuke, warning, condemnation? No; His voice is gentle and wooing, and does not threaten blows, but proffers blessings: 'I will bring near My righteousness. It shall not be far off,' though the stout-hearted maybe 'far from' it. Here we have a divine proclamation of a divine Love that will not let us away from its presence; of a divine Work for us that is finished without us; of an all-sufficient Gift to us.

I. A divine proclamation of a divine Love that will not let us away from its presence.

There is a great contest between God and man: man seeking to withdraw from God, and God following in patient, persistent love.

1. In general terms God keeps near us, however far away we go from Him.

Think of our forgetfulness of Him and His continual thought of us. Think of our alienated hearts and His unchanging love.

We cannot turn away His care, we cannot exhaust His compassion, we cannot alienate His heart. All men everywhere are objects of these, as in every corner of the world the sky is overhead, and all lands have sunshine.

What a picture of divine patience and placability that truth points for us! It shows the Father coming after His prodigal son, and so surpasses even the pearl of the parables.

2. The special reference to Christ's work.

That work is the exhibition in manhood and to men of a perfect righteousness.

It is the implanting in the corrupt world of a new beginning. It is the clothing us with Christ's righteousness, for which we are forgiven and in which we are sanctified.

So Christ's work is God's coming to bring near His righteousness, and now 'it is nigh thee in thy mouth and in thy heart.'

II. A divine proclamation of a divine Work which is finished without us.

The divine righteousness and its consequence are here represented as being brought near while men are still 'stout-hearted.' We must feel the emphasis laid on '*I* will bring near *My* righteousness,' and the impression of merciful speed given by 'My salvation shall not tarry.' The whole suggests such thoughts as these:-

The divine love is not drawn out by anything in us, but pours out on us, even while we are far off and indifferent to it. His bringing near of righteousness, and setting His salvation to run very swiftly side by side with it, originates in Himself. It is the self-impelled and self-fed flow of a fountain, and we need no pump or machinery to draw it forth.

The divine work is accomplished without man's co-operation.

'It is finished,' was Christ's dying cry. But what is finished?- Bringing the righteousness near. What still remains to be done?-Making it mine. And that is accomplished by faith.

It is mine if by faith I claim it as mine, and knit myself with Him who is righteousness and salvation for every man that they may be accessible to and possessed by any man.

A man may be far from righteousness though it is near him and all around him. Like Gideon's fleece, he may be dry when all is wet, or like some rock in a field, barren and sullen, while all around the corn is waving.

III. The proclamation of an all-sufficient Gift.

Righteousness, salvation, glory, are here brought together in significant sequence. They are but several names for the same divine gift, looked at from different angles. A diamond flashes varying prismatic hues from its different facets.

That encyclopaedical gift, which in regard to man considered as sinful brings pardon and a new nature 'in righteousness and holiness of truth,' brings deliverance from peril and from every form of evil and death, to him considered as exposed to consequences of sin both physical and moral, and a true though limited participation in the divine glory, even now, with the hope of entering into the blaze of it hereafter, to him as considered as made in the divine image and having lost it.

And all this wonderful triple hope, rapturous and impossible as it seems when we think of man as he is, and of each of ourselves as we each feel ourselves to be, is for us a sober certainty and a fact sufficiently accomplished, to give firm ground for our largest expectations if we hold fast by Jesus who brings that all-sufficient gift of God within reach of each of us. The divine patience and love follow us in all our wild wanderings, praying us ‘with much entreaty that we should receive the gift.’ Jesus, who is God’s righteousness and love incarnate, beseeches us to take Him, and in Him righteousness, salvation, and glory.

59)Isaiah 48:18

Isaiah

A RIVER OF PEACE AND WAVES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Isa. 48:18.

I. The Wonderful Thought of God here.

This is an exclamation of disappointment; of thwarted love. The good which He purposed has been missed by man’s fault, and He regards the faulty Israel with sorrow and pity as a would-be benefactor balked of a kind intention might do. O Jerusalem! ‘how often would I have gathered thee.’ ‘If thou hadst known . . . the things that belong unto thy peace!’

II. Man’s opposition to God’s loving purpose for us.

To have hearkened to His commandments would have enabled Him to let His kindness have its way.

It is not only our act contrary to God’s Law, but the source of that act in our antagonistic will, which fatally bars out the possibility of God’s intended good from us. It is ‘not hearkening’ which is the root of not doing.

That possibility of lifting up our puny wills against the all-sovereign, Infinite Will is the mystery of mysteries.

The fact that the mysterious possibility becomes an actuality in us is still more mysterious. If we could solve those two mysteries, we should be far on the way to solve all the mysteries of man's relation to God, and God's to man.

A will absolutely submitted to Him is His great ideal of human nature. And that ideal we all can thwart, and alas, alas! we all do. It is the deepest mystery; it is the blackest sin; it is the intensest folly.

Sin is negative as well as positive. Not to hearken is as bad as to act in dead opposition to.

III. The lost good.

The great purpose of the divine Commandment is to show us, for our own sakes, the path that leads to all blessedness.

Peace and Righteousness, or, in more modern words, all well-being and all goodness, are the sure results of taking God's expressed Will as the guide of life.

These two are inseparable. Indeed they are one and the same fact of human experience, looked at from two points of view.

The force of the metaphor in both clauses is substantially the same. It suggests in both-Abundance-Continuity-Uninterrupted Succession. But regarded separately each has its own fair promise. 'As a river'- flowing softly, not stagnant-that suggests the calm and gentle flow of a placid and untroubled stream refreshing and fertilising. 'As waves of the sea,' these suggest greater force than 'river.' The image speaks of a righteousness massive and having power and a resistless swing in it. It is the more striking because the waves of the sea are the ordinary emblem of rebellious power. But here they stand as emblem of the strength of a submissive, not of a rebellious, will. In that obedience human nature rises to a higher type of strength than it ever attains while in opposition to the Source of all strength.

Contrast-'Whose waters cast up mire and dirt.'

IV. The lost good regained.

God has yet a method to accomplish His loving desire. Even those who have not hearkened may receive through Christ the good which they have sinned away. In Him is peace; in Him is Righteousness, which comes from faith. ‘Hear, and your soul shall live.’

60)Isaiah 49:9

Isaiah

FEEDING IN THE WAYS

Isa. 49:9.

This is part of the prophet’s glowing description of the return of the Captives, under the figure of a flock fed by a strong shepherd. We have often seen, I suppose, a flock of sheep driven along a road, some of them hastily trying to snatch a mouthful from the dusty grass by the wayside. Little can they get there; they have to wait until they reach some green pasture in which they can be folded. This flock shall ‘feed in the ways’; as they go they will find nourishment. That is not all; the top of the mountains is not the place where grass grows. *There* are bare, savage cliffs, from which every particle of soil has been washed by furious torrents, or the scanty vegetation has been burnt up by the fierce ‘sunbeams like swords.’ There the wild deer and the ravens live, the sheep feed down in the valleys. But ‘*their* pasture shall be in all high places.’ The literal rendering is even more emphatic: ‘Their pasture shall be in all *bare heights*,’ where a sudden verdure springs to feed them according to their need. Whilst, then, this prophecy is originally intended simply to suggest the abundant supplies that were to be provided for the band of exiles as they came back from Babylon, there lie in it great and blessed principles which belong to the Christian pilgrimage, and the flock that follows Christ.

They who follow Him, says my text, to begin with, shall find in the dusty paths of common life, and in all the smallnesses and distractions of daily duty, nourishment for their spirits. Do you remember what Jesus said? ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work.’ We, too, may have the same meat to eat which the world knows not of, and He will give that hidden manna to the combatant as well as ‘to him that overcometh.’ In the measure in which ‘we follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,’ in that measure do we find-like the stores of provisions that Arctic explorers come upon, *cached* for them-food in the wilderness, and nourishment for our highest life in our common work. That is a great promise, and it is a great duty.

It is a promise the fulfilment of which is plainly guaranteed by the very nature of the case. Religion is meant to direct conduct, and the smallest affairs of life are to come under its imperial control, and the only way by which a man can get any good out of his Christianity is by living it. It is when he sets to work on the principles of the Gospel that the Gospel proves itself to be a reality in his blessed experience. It is when he does the smallest duties from the great motives that these great motives are strengthened by exercise, as every motive is. If you wish to weaken the influence of any principle upon you, do not work it out, and it will wither and die. If a man would grasp the fulness of spiritual sustenance which lies in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, let him go to work on the basis of the Gospel, and he ‘shall feed in the ways,’ and common duties will minister strength to him instead of taking strength from him. We can make the smallest daily incidents subserve our growth and our spiritual strength, because, if we thus do them, they will bring to us attestations of the reality of the faith by which we act on them. For convincing a man that a lifebuoy is reliable there is nothing like having had experience of its power to hold his head above the waves when he has been cast into them. *Live* your Christianity, and it will attest itself. There will come, besides that, the blessed memory of past times in which we trusted in the Lord and were lightened, we obeyed God and found His promises true, we risked all for God and found that we had all more abundantly. It is only an active Christian life that is a nourished and growing Christian life.

The food which God gives us is not only to be taken by faith, but it has to be made ours more abundantly by work. Saint Augustine said in another connection, ‘Believe, and thou hast eaten.’ Yes, that is blessedly true, but it needs to be supplemented by ‘they shall feed *in the ways*,’ and their work will bring them nourishment.

But this is a great duty as well as a great promise. How many of us Christian people have but little experience of getting nearer to God because of our daily occupations? To by far the larger number of us, in by far the greater space of time in our lives, our daily work is a distraction, and tends to obscure the face of God to us and to shut us out from many of the storehouses of sustenance by which a quiet, contemplative faith is refreshed. Therefore we need times of special prayer and remoteness from daily work; and there will be very little realisation of the nourishing power of common duties unless there is familiar to us also the entrance into the 'secret place of the Most High,' where He feeds His children on the bread of life.

We must not neglect either of these two ways by which our souls are fed, and we must ever remember that the reason why so many Christian people cannot set to their seal that this promise is true, lies mainly in this, that the ways on which they go are either not the ways that the Shepherd has walked in before them, or that they are trodden in forgetfulness of Him and without looking to His guidance. The work that is to minister to the Christian life must be work conformed to the Christian ideal, and if we fling ourselves into our secular business, as it is called-if you go to your counting-houses and shops, and I go to my desk and books, and forget the Shepherd-then there is no grass by the wayside for such sheep. But if we subject our wills to Him, and if in all that we do we are trying to refer to Him and are working in dependence on Him, and for Him, then the poorest work, the meanest, the most entirely secular, will be a source of Christian nourishment and blessing. We have to settle for ourselves whether we shall be distracted, torn asunder by pressure of cares and responsibilities and activities, or whether, far below the agitated surface which is ruffled by the winds, and borne along by the tidal wave, there will be a great central depth, still but not stagnant-whether we shall be fed, or starved in our Christian life, by the pressure of our worldly tasks. The choice is before us. 'They shall feed in the ways,' if the ways are Christ's ways, and He is at every step their Shepherd.

Further, my text suggests that for those who follow the Lamb there shall be greenness and pasture on the bare heights. Strip that part of our text of its metaphor, and it just comes to the blessed old thought, which I hope many of us have known to be a true one, that the times of sorrow are the times when a Christian may have the most of the presence and strength of God. ‘In the days of famine they shall be satisfied,’ and up among the most barren cliffs, where there is not a bite for any four-footed creature, they shall find springing grass and watered pastures. Our prophet puts the same thought, under a kindred though somewhat different metaphor, in another place in this book, where he says, ‘I will open rivers in high places.’ That is clean contrary to nature. The rivers do not run on the mountain-tops, but down in the low ground. But for us, as the darkness thickens, the pillar may glow the brighter; as the gloom increases, the glory may grow; the less of nutriment or refreshment earth affords, the more abundantly does God spread His stores before us, if we are wise enough to take them. It is an experience, I suppose, common to all devout men, that their times of most rapid growth were their times of trouble. In nature winter stops all vegetable life. In grace the growing time is the winter. They tell us that up in the Arctic regions the reindeer will scratch away the snow, and get at the succulent moss that lies beneath it. When that Shepherd, Who Himself has known sorrows, leads us up into those barren regions of perpetual cold and snow, He teaches us, too, how to brush it away, and find what we need buried and kept safe and warm beneath the white shroud. It is the prerogative of the Christian soul not to be without trouble, but to turn the trouble into nourishment, and to feed on the barest heights.

May I turn these latter words of our text a somewhat different way, attaching to them a meaning which does not belong to them, but by way of accommodation? If Christian people want to have the bread of God abundantly, they must climb. It is to those who live on the heights that provision comes according to their need. If you would have your Christian life starved, go down into the fertile valleys. Remember Abraham and Lot, and the choice which each made. The one said: ‘I want cattle and wealth, and I am going down to Sodom. Never mind about the vices of the inhabitants. There is money to be made there.’ Abraham said: ‘I am going to stay up here on the heights, the breezy, barren heights,’ and God stayed beside him. If we go down we starve our souls. If we desire them to be fat and flourishing, nourished with the hidden manna, then we must go up. ‘Their pasture shall be in all high places.’

Before I finish, let me remind you of the application of the words of my text, which we owe to the New Testament. The context runs, as you will remember, ‘they shall not hunger nor thirst, neither shall the heat nor the sun smite them. For He that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall He guide them.’ And you remember the beautiful variation and deepening of this promise in that great saying which the Seer in the Apocalypse gives us, when he speaks of those ‘who follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,’ and are led ‘by living fountains of water,’ where ‘God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.’ So we are entitled to believe that on the loftiest heights, far above this valley of weeping, there shall be immortal food, and that on the high places of the mountains of God there shall be pasture that never withers. The prophet Ezekiel has a similar variation of my text, and transfers it from the captives on their march homewards, to the happy pilgrims who have reached home, when he says: ‘I will bring them unto their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel’-when they have reached them at last after the weary march-’I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the mountains of Israel shall their fold be; there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel.’

61)Isaiah 49:11

Isaiah

THE MOUNTAIN ROAD

Isa. 49:11.

This grand prophecy is far too wide to be exhausted by the return of the exiles. There gleamed through it the wider redemption and the true return of the real captives. The previous promises all find their fulfilment in the experiences of the soul on its journey back to God. Here we have two characteristics of that journey.

I. The Path through the mountains.

‘*My* mountains.’ That is the claim that all the world is His; and also the revelation that He is the Lord of Providence. He makes our difficult and steep places. Submission comes with that thought, and even 'for the strength of the hills we bless Thee.' There are mountains which are not His but ours, artificial difficulties of our own creating.

> 1. Our way does lie over the mountains. There are difficulties. The Christian course is like a Roman road which never turned aside, but went straight up and on. So much the better. A keener air blows, bracing and health-giving, up there. Mosquitoes and malaria keep to the lower levels.
>
> 2. There is always a path over the mountains. Some way opens when we get close up, like a path through heather, which is not seen till reached. We walk by faith. We foolishly forebode and fancy that we cannot live if something happens, but there is no *cul de sac* in our paths if God's mountain-way is our way, nor does the faint track ever die out if our faith is keen-sighted and docile.

II. The Pasture on the mountains-lit. 'bare heights.'

Pastures in the East are down in bottoms, not, like ours, upon the hills. But this flock finds supplies on the barren hill-tops.

Sustenance in Sorrow and Loss.

> 1. Promise that whatever be our trials and losses we shall be taken care of. Not, perhaps, as we should have liked, nor as abundantly fed as down in the valleys, but still not left to starve. No carcases strewed on the bleakest bit of road as one sees dead camels by the side of the tracks in the desert.
>
> 2. Promise of sustenance of a higher kind even in sorrow. The Alpine flora is specially beautiful, though minute. The blessings of affliction; the more intimate knowledge of His love, submission of will. 'Out of the eater came forth meat.'

'Passing through the valley of weeping they make it a well'; the tears shed in times of rightly borne sorrow are gathered into a reservoir from which refreshment, patience, trust and strength may be drawn in later days.

But the perfect fulfilment of the promise lies beyond this life. ‘On the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be,’ and they who have found pasture on the barren heights of earthly sorrow shall ‘summer high in bliss upon the hills of God,’ and shall at once both lie ‘for ever in a good fold,’ and ‘follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,’ and find fountains of living water bursting forth for ever on these fertile heights.

62)Isaiah 49:16

Isaiah

THE WRITING ON GOD’S HANDS

Isa. 49:16.

In the preceding context we have the infinitely tender and beautiful words: ‘Zion hath said, The Lord hath forsaken me. Can a woman forget her sucking child? . . . yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.’ There is more than a mother’s love in the Father’s heart. But wonderful in their revelation of God, and mighty to strengthen, calm, and comfort, as these transcendent words are, those of my text, which follow them, do not fall beneath their loftiness. They are a singularly bold metaphor, drawn from the strange and half-savage custom, which lingers still among sailors and others, of having beloved names or other tokens of affection and remembrance indelibly inscribed on parts of the body. Sometimes worshippers had the marks of the god thus set on their flesh; here God writes on His hands the name of the city of His worshippers. And it is not its name only, but its very likeness that He stamps there, that He may ever look on it, as those who love bear with them a picture of one dear face. The prophecy goes on: ‘Thy walls are continually before Me,’ but in the prophet’s time the walls were in ruins, and yet they are present to the divine mind.

I. Now, the first thought suggested by these great words is that here we have set forth for our strength and peace a divine remembrance, tender as-yea, more tender than-a mother’s.

When Israel came out of Egypt, the Passover was instituted as ‘a memorial unto all generations,’ or, as the same idea is otherwise expressed, ‘it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand.’ Here God represents Himself as doing for Israel what He had bid Israel do for Him. They were, as it were, to write the supreme act of deliverance in the Exodus upon their hands, that it might never be forgotten. He writes Zion on His hands for the same purpose.

Now, of course, the text does not primarily refer to individuals, but to the community, whether Zion is understood, as the prophet understood the name, to be ancient Israel, or as the Christian Church. But the recognition of that fact should not be allowed to rob us of the preciousness of this text in its bearing on the individual. For God remembers the community, not as an abstraction or a generalised expression, but as the aggregate of all the individuals composing it. We lose sight of the particulars when we generalise. We cannot see the trees for the wood. We think of ‘the Church,’ and do not think of the thousands of men and women who make it up. We cannot discern the separate stars in the galaxy. But God’s eye resolves what to us is a nebula, and to Him every single glittering point of light hangs rounded and separate in the heaven. Therefore this assurance of our text is to be taken by every single soul that loves God, and trusts Him through Jesus Christ, as belonging to it, as though there were not another creature on earth but itself.

‘The sun whose beams most glorious are,
Disdaineth no beholder.’

Its light floods the world, yet seems to go straight into the eyeball of every man that looks at it. And such is the divine love and remembrance. There is no jostling nor confusion in the wide space of the heart of God. They that go before shall not hinder them that come after. The hungry crowd sat down in companies on the green grass, and the first fifty, no doubt, were envied by the last of the hundred fifties that made up the five thousand, and wondered whether the five loaves and the two small fishes could go round, but the last fed full as did the first. The great promise of our text belongs to me and thee, and therefore belongs to us all.

That remembrance which each man may take for himself-and we are poor Christians if we do not live in its light-is infinitely tender. The echo of the music of the previous words still haunts the verse, and the remembrance promised in it is touched with more than a mother's love. 'I am poor and needy,' says the Psalmist, 'yet the Lord thinketh upon me.' He might have said, 'I am poor and needy, therefore the Lord thinketh upon me.' That remembrance is in full activity when things are darkest with us. Israel said, 'My Lord hath forgotten me,' because at the point of view taken in the second half of Isaiah, it was captive in a far-off land. You and I sometimes are brought into circumstances in which we are ready to think 'God has, somehow or other, left me, has forgotten me.' Never! never! However mirk the night, however apparently solitary the way, however mysterious and insoluble the difficulties of our position, let us fall back on this, that the captive Israel was remembered by God, and let us be sure that no circumstances of our lives are so dark or mysterious as to warrant the faintest shadow of suspicion creeping over the brightness of our confidence in this great promise. His divine remembrance of each of His servants is certain.

But do not let us forget that it was a very sinful Zion that God thus remembered. It was because the nation had transgressed that they were captives, but their very captivity was a proof that they were not forgotten. The loving divine remembrance had to smite in order to prove that it was active. Let us neither be puzzled by our sorrows nor made less confident when we think of our sins. For there is no sin that is strong enough to chill the divine love, or to erase us from the divine remembrance. 'Captive Israel! captive because sinful, I have graven *thee* on the palms of My hands.'

II. A second thought here is that the divine remembrance guides the divine action.

The palm of the hand is the seat of strength, the instrument of work; and so, if Zion's name is written there, that means not only remembrance, but remembrance which is at the helm, as it were, which is moulding and directing all the work that is done by the hand that bears the name inscribed upon it. The thought is identical with the one which is suggested by part of the High Priest’s official dress, although there the thought has a different application. He bore the names of the twelve tribes graven upon his shoulder, the seat of power, and upon his breastplate that lay above the heart, the home of love. God holds out the mighty Hand which works all things, and says to His children: ‘Look, you are graven there’-at the very fountain-head, as it were, of the divine activity. Which, being turned into plain English, is just this, that for His Church as a whole, He does move amidst the affairs of nations. You remember the grand words of one of the Psalms,-’He reproved kings for their sakes, saying, Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm.’ It is no fanatical reading of the history of earthly politics and kingdoms, if we recognise that one of the most prominent reasons for the divine activities in moulding the kingdoms, setting up and casting down, is the advancement of the kingdom of heaven and the building of the City of God. ‘I have graven thee on the palms of My hands’-and when the hands go to work, it is for the Zion whose likeness they bear.

But the same truth applies to us individually. ‘All things work together’; they would not do so, unless there was one dominant Will which turned the chaos into a cosmos. ‘All things work,’ that is very plain. The tremendous activities round us both in Nature and in history are clear to us all. But if all things and events are co-operant, working into each other, and for one end, like the wheels of a well-constructed engine, then there must be an Engineer, and they work together because He is directing them. Thus, because my name is graven on the palms of the mighty Hand that doeth all things, therefore ‘all things work together for my good.’ If we could but carry that quiet conviction into all the mysteries, as they sometimes seem to be, of our daily lives, and interpret everything in the light of that great thought, how different all our days would be! How far above the petty anxieties and cares and troubles that gnaw away so much of our strength and joy; how serene, peaceful, lofty, submissive, would be our lives, and how in the darkest darkness there would be a great light, not only of hope for a distant future, but of confident assurance for the present. ‘I have graven thee on the palms of My hands ‘-do Thou, then, as Thou wilt with me.

III. A last thought here is that the divine remembrance works all things, to realise a great ideal end, as yet unreached.

‘Thy walls are continually before Me.’ When this prophecy was uttered the Israelites were in captivity, and the city was a wilderness, ‘the holy and beautiful House’-as this very book says-’where the fathers praised Thee was burned with fire,’ the walls were broken down, rubbish and solitude were there. Yet on the palms of God’s hands were inscribed the walls which were nowhere else! They were ‘before Him,’ though Jerusalem was a ruin. What does that mean? It means that that divine remembrance sees ‘things that are not, as though they were.’ In the midst of the imperfect reality of the present condition of the Church as a whole, and of us, its actual components, it sees the ideal, the perfect vision of the perfect future, and ‘all the wonder that shall be.’ Zion may be desolate, but ‘before Him’ stands what will one day stand on the earth before all men, ‘the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven,’ having walls great and high, and its foundations garnished with all manner of precious stones. ‘Thy walls are before Me,’ though the ruins are there before men.

So, brethren, the most radiant optimism is the only fitting attitude for Christian people in looking into the future, either of the Church as a whole, or of themselves as individual members of it. God’s hand is working for Zion and for me. It is guided by love that does not lose the individual in the mass, nor ever forgets any of its children, and it works towards the attainment of unattained perfection. ‘This Man’ does not ‘begin to build and’ prove ‘not able to finish.’

So let us be sure that, if only we keep ourselves in the love, and continue in the grace of God, He will not slack nor stay His hand on which Zion is graven, until it has ‘perfected that which concerneth us,’ and fulfilled to each of us that ‘which He has spoken to us of.’

I said at the beginning of these remarks that God did what He bids us do. God bids us do what He does. His name should be on our hands; that is to say, memory of Him, love of Him, regard to Him, confidence in Him should mould and guide all our activity, and the aim that we shall be builded up for a habitation of God through the Spirit should be the conscious aim of our lives, as it is the aim which He has in view in all His dealings with us. Our names on His hand; His name on our hands; so shall we be blessed.

63)Isaiah 50:4

Isaiah

THE SERVANT'S WORDS TO THE WEARY

Isa. 50:4.

In Isa. 49:1 - Isa. 49:6, the beginning of the continuous section of which these verses are part, a transition is made from Israel as collectively the ideal servant of the Lord, to a personal Servant, whose office it is 'to bring Jacob again to Him.' We see the ideal in the very act of passing to its highest form, and that in which it is finally fulfilled in history, namely, by the person Jesus. That Jesus was 'Thy Holy Servant' was the earliest gospel preached by Peter and John before people and rulers. It is not the most vital conception of our Lord's nature and work. The prophet does not here pierce to the core, as in his fifty-third chapter with its vision of the Suffering Servant, but this is prelude to that, and the office assigned here to the Servant cannot be fully discharged without that ascribed to Him there, as the prophet begins to discern almost immediately. The text gives us a striking view of the purpose of Messiah's mission and of His training and preparation for it.

I. The purpose of Christ's mission.

There is a remarkable contrast between the stately prelude to the section of the prophecy in Isa. 49:1 - Isa. 49:26, and the ideal in this text. There the Servant calls the isles and the distant peoples to listen, and declares that His mouth is 'like a sharp sword'; here all that is keen and smiting in His word has softened into gentle whispers of comfort to sustain the weary.

A mission addressed to 'the weary' is addressed to every man, for who is not 'weighed upon with sore distress,' or loaded with the burden and the weight of tasks beyond his power or distasteful to his inclinations, or monotonous to nausea, or prolonged to exhaustion, or toiled at with little hope and less interest? Who is not weary of himself and of his load? What but universal weariness does the universal secret desire for rest betray? We are all ‘pilgrims weary of time,’ and some of us are weary of even prosperity, and some of us are worn out with work, and some of us buffeted to all but exhaustion by sorrow, and all of us long for rest, though many of us do not know where to look for it.

Jesus may have had this word in mind, when He called to Him all them ‘that labour and are heavy laden.’ At all events, the prophet’s ideal and the evangelists’ story accurately correspond. Christ’s words have other characteristics, but are eminently words that sustain the weary and comfort the down-hearted. Who can ever calculate the new strength poured by them into fainting hearts and languid hands, the all but dead hopes that they have reanimated, the sorrows they have comforted, the wounds they have stanched?

What a lesson here as to the noblest use of high endowments! What a contrast to the use that so many of those to whom God has given ‘the tongue of them that are taught’ make of their great gifts! Literature yields but few examples of great writers who have faithfully employed their powers for that purpose, which seems so humble and is so lofty, the help of the weary, the comfort of the sad. Many pages in famous books would be cancelled if all that had been written without consideration for these classes were obliterated, as it will be one day.

But Christ not only speaks by outward words, but has other ways of lodging sustenance and comfort in souls than by vocables audible to the ear or visible to the eye on the page. ‘The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life.’ He spoke by His deeds on earth, and in one and the same set of facts, He ‘began to do and to teach,’ the doing being named first. He ‘now speaketh from Heaven’ by many an inward whisper, by the communication of His own Spirit, on Whom this very office of ministering sustenance and comfort is laid, and whose very name of the Comforter means One who by his being with a man strengthens him.

II. The training and preparation of the Messiah for His mission.

The Messiah is here represented as having the tongue of ‘them that are taught,’ and as having it, because morning by morning He has been wakened to hear God’s lessons. He is thus God’s scholar-a thought of which an unreflecting orthodoxy has been shy, but which it is necessary to admit unhesitatingly and ungrudgingly, if we would not reduce the manhood of Jesus to a mere phantasm. He Himself has said, ‘As the Father taught Me, I speak these things.’ With emphatic repetition, He was continually making that assertion, as, for instance, ‘I have not spoken of Myself, but the Father which sent Me, He gave Me a commandment what I should say, and what I should speak . . . the things therefore which I speak, even as the Father hath said unto Me, so I speak.’

The Gospels tell us of the prayers of Jesus, and of rare occasions in which a voice from heaven spoke to Him. But while these are palpable instances of His communion with God, and precious tokens of His true brotherhood with us in the indispensable characteristics of the life of faith, they are but the salient points on which the light falls, and behind them, all unknown by us, stretches an unbroken chain of like acts of fellowship. In that subordination as of a scholar to teacher, both His divine and His human nature concurred, the former in filial submission, the latter in continual, truly human derivation and reception. The man Jesus was taught and, like the boy Jesus, ‘increased in wisdom.’

But while He learned as truly as we learn from God, and exercised the same communion with the Father, the same submission to Him, which other men have to exercise, and called ‘us brethren, saying, I will put my trust in Him,’ the difference in degree between His close fellowship with God the Father, and our broken and always partial fellowship, between His completeness of reception of God’s words and our imperfect comprehension, between His perfect reproduction of the words He had heard and our faint, and often mistaken echo of them, is so immense as to amount to a difference in kind. His unity of will and being with the Father ensured that all His words were God’s. ‘Never man spake like this man.’ The man who speaks to us once for all God’s words must be more than man. Other men, the highest, give us fragments of that mighty voice; Jesus speaks its whole message, and nothing but its message. Of that perfect reproduction He is calmly conscious, and claims to give it, in words which are at once lowly and instinct with more than human authority: ‘All things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you.’ Who besides Him dare make such a claim? Who besides Him could make it without being met by incredulous scorn? His utterance of the Father’s words was unmarred by defect on the one hand, and by additions on the other. It was like pure water which tastes of no soil. His soul was like an open vessel plunged in a stream, filled by the flow and giving forth again its whole contents.

That divine communication to Jesus was no mere impartation of abstractions or ‘truths,’ still less of the poor words of man’s speech, but was the flowing into His spirit of the living Father by whom He lived. And it was unbroken. ‘Morning by morning’ it was going on. The line was continuous, whereas for the rest of us, at the best, it is a series of points more or less contiguous, but with dark spaces between. ‘God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him.’

So, then, let us hold fast by Him, the Son in whom God has spoken to us, and to all voices without and within that would woo us to listen, let us answer with the only wise answer: ‘To whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.’

64)Isaiah 50:5

Isaiah

THE SERVANT’S OBEDIENCE

Isa. 50:5.

I. The secret of Christ’s life, filial obedience.

The fact is attested by Scripture. By His own words: ‘My meat is to do the will of My Father’; ‘For thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness’; ‘I came down from heaven not to do My own will.’ By His servant’s words: ‘Obedient unto death’; ‘Made under the law’; ‘He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.’ It is involved in the belief of His righteous manhood. It is essential to true manhood. The highest ideal for humanity is conscious dependence on God, and the very definition of righteousness is conscious conformity to the Will of God. If Christ had done the noblest acts and yet had not always had this sense of being a servant, He would not have been pure and holy.

It is not inconsistent with His true Divinity. We stand afar off, but we can see this much.

The completeness of that obedience. It was continuous and it was entire.

The living heart of it: ‘I delight to do Thy Will.’ The Father’s Will was not a force without, but Christ’s whole being was conformed to it, and it was shrined within His heart and had become His choice and delight.

The expressions of His obedience were His perfect fulfilment of the divine commands, and His perfect endurance of the divine appointments.

Thus God’s Will was the keynote, to which Christ’s will struck the full chord.

II. The yet deeper mysteries which that perfect obedience discloses.

1. A sinless human life must be more than human. The contrast with all which we have known-the impossibility of retaining belief in the perfect obedience of Jesus unless we have underlying it the belief in His divinity. ‘There is none good but one, that is God.’

2. The sinless human life suffers not for itself but for us. The combination of holiness and sorrow leads on to the mystery of atonement. The sinlessness is indispensable to the doctrine of His sacrificial death.

III. The glorious gifts which flow from that perfect obedience.

1. It gives us a living law to obey.

2. It gives us a transforming power to receive.

3. It gives us a perfect righteousness to trust to.

This perfect obedience may be ours. Being ours, our lives will be strong, free, peaceful.

That obedience becomes ours by faith, which leads to love, and love to the glad obedience of sons.

65)Isaiah 50:6

Isaiah

THE SERVANT’S VOLUNTARY SUFFERINGS

Isa. 50:6.

Such words are not to be dealt with coldly. Unless they be grasped by the heart they are not grasped at all. We do not think of analysing in the presence of a great sorrow. There can be no greater dishonour to the name of Christ than an unemotional consideration of His sufferings for us. The hindrances to a due consideration of these are manifold; some arising from intellectual, and some from moral, causes. Most men have difficulty in vivifying any historical event so as to feel its reality. There is no nobler use of the historical imagination than to direct it to that great life and death on which the salvation of the world depends.

The prophet here has advanced from the first general conception of the Servant of the Lord as recipient of divine commission, and submissive to the divine voice, to thoughts of the sufferings which He would meet with on His path, and of how He bore them.

I. The sufferings of the Servant.

The minute particularity is very noteworthy, scourging, plucking the beard, shame, all sorts of taunts and buffets on the face, and the last indignity of spitting. Clearly, then, He is not only to suffer persecution, but is to be treated with insult and to endure that strange blending, so often seen, of grim infernal laughter with grim infernal fury, the hyena’s laugh and its ferocity. Wherever it occurs, it implies not only fell hate and cruelty, but also contempt and a horrible delight in triumphing over an enemy. It is found in all corrupt periods, and especially in religious persecutions. Here it implies the rejection of the Servant.

The prophecy was literally fulfilled, but not in all its traits. This may give a hint as to the general interpretation of prophecy and may teach that external fulfilment only points to a deeper correspondence. The most salient instance is in Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem riding on an ass, which was but a finger-post to guide men's thoughts to His fulfilling the ideal of the Messianic King. And yet, the minute correspondences are worth noticing. What a strange, solemn glimpse they give into that awful divine omniscience, and into the mystery of the play of the vilest passions as being yet under control in their extremest rage!

We must note the remarkable prominence in the narratives of the Passion, of signs of contempt and mockery; Judas' kiss, the purple robe, the crown of thorns, 'wagging their heads,' 'let be, let Elias come,' etc.

Think of the exquisite pain of this to Christ. That He was sinless and full of love made it all the worse to bear. Not the physical pain, but the consciousness that He was encompassed by such an atmosphere of evil, was the sharpest pang. We should think with reverent sympathy of His perfect discernment of the sinful malignant hearts from which the sufferings came, of His pained and rejected love thrown back on itself, of His clear sight of what their heartless infliction of tortures would end in for the inflicters, of His true human feeling which shrank from being the object of contempt and execration.

II. His patient submission.

'I gave,'-purely voluntary. That word originally expressed the patient submission with which He endured at the moment, when the lash scored His back, but it may be widened out to express Christ's perfect voluntariness in all His passion. At any moment He could have abandoned His work if His filial obedience and His love to men had let Him do so. His would-be captors fell to the ground before one momentary flash of His majesty, and they could have laid no hand on Him, if His will had not consented to His capture. Fra Angelico has grasped the thought which the prophet here uttered, and which the evangelists emphasise, that all His suffering was voluntary, and that His love to us restrained His power, and led Him to the slaughter, silent as a sheep before her shearers. For he has pourtrayed the majestic figure seated in passive endurance, with eyes blindfolded but yet wide open behind the bandage, all-seeing, wistful, sad, and patient, while around are fragments of rods, and smiting hands, and a cruel face blowing spittle on the unshrinking cheeks. He seems to be saying: ‘These things hast thou done, and I kept silence.’ ‘Thou couldest have no power at all against Me unless it were given thee.’

III. His submission to suffering in obedience to the Father’s Will.

The context connects His opened ear and His not being rebellious with His giving His back to the smiters. That involves the idea that these indignities and insults were part of the divine counsel in reference to Him. That same combination of ideas is strongly presented in the early addresses of Peter, recorded in the first chapters of Acts, of which this is a specimen: ‘Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye with wicked hands have crucified and slain.’ The full significance of Christ’s passion as that of the atoning sacrifice was not yet clear to the apostle, any more than the Servant’s sufferings were to the prophet, but both prophet and apostle were carried on by fuller experience and reflection on what they already saw clearly, to discern the inwardness and depth of these. The one soon came to see that ‘by His stripes we are healed,’ and the other finally wrote: ‘Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree.’ And whoever deeply ponders the startling fact that ‘it pleased the Lord to bruise Him,’ sinless and ever obedient as He was, will be borne, sooner or later, into the full sunlight of the blessed belief that when Jesus suffered and died, ‘He died for all.’ His sufferings were those of a martyr for truth, who is willing to die rather than cease to witness for it; but they were more. They were the sufferings of a lover of mankind who will face the extremest wrong that can be inflicted, rather than abandon His mission; but they were more. They were not merely the penalty which He had to pay for faithfulness to His work; they were themselves the crown and climax of His work. The Son of Man came, indeed, ‘not to be ministered to but to minister,’ but that, taken alone, is but a maimed view of what He came for, and we must whole-heartedly go on to say as He said, ‘and to give His life a ransom for many,’ if we would know the whole truth as to the sufferings of Jesus.

Again, since Christ suffers according to the will of God, it is clear that all representations of the scope of His atoning death, which represent it as moving the will of the Father to love and pardon, are travesties of the truth and turn cause into effect. God does not love, because Jesus died, but Jesus died because God loved.

Further, it is to be noted that His sufferings are the great means by which He sustains the weary. The word to which His ears were opened, morning by morning, was the word to which He was docile when He gave His back to the smiters. It is His passion, regarded as the sacrifice for a world’s sin, from which flow the most powerful stimulants to service and tonics for weary souls, the tenderest comfortings for sorrow. He sustains and comforts by the example of His life, but far more, and more sweetly, more mightily, by that which flows to us through His death. His sufferings are powerful to sustain, when thought of as our example, but they are a tenfold stronger source of patience and strength, when laid on our hearts as the price of our redemption. The Cross is, in all senses of the expression, the tree of life.

Wonder, reverence, love, gratitude, should well forth from our hearts, when we think of these cruel sufferings, but the deepest fountains in them will not be unsealed, unless we see in the suffering Servant the atoning Son.

66)Isaiah 50:7

Isaiah

THE SERVANT’S INFLEXIBLE RESOLVE

Isa. 50:7.

What a striking contrast between the tone of these words and of the preceding! There all is gentleness, docility, still communion, submission, patient endurance. Here all is energy and determination, resistance and martial vigour. It is like the contrast between a priest and a warrior. And that gentleness is the parent of this boldness. The same Will which is all submission to God is all resistance in the face of hostile men. The utmost lowliness and the most resolved resistance to opposing forces are found in that prophetic image of the Servant of the Lord-even as they are found in the highest degree and most perfectly in Jesus Christ.

The sequence in this context is worth noting. We had first Christ's communion with God and communications from the Father; then the perfect submission of His Will; then that submission expressed in His voluntary sufferings; and now we have His immovable steadfastness of resistance to the temptation, which lay in these sufferings, to depart from His attitude of submission, and to abandon His work.

The former verse led us up to the verge of the great mystery of His sacrificial death. This gives us a glimpse into the depths of His human life, and shows Him to us as our example in all holy heroism.

I. The need which Christ felt to exercise firm resistance.

The words of the text are found almost reproduced in Jer. 1:1 - Jer. 1:19 and Eze. 3:1 - Eze. 3:27 All prophets and servants of God have had thus to resist, and it would be superfluous to show how resistance to opposing influences is the condition of all noble life and of all true service.

But was it so with Him? The more accurate translation of the second clause of our text is to be noticed: 'Therefore I will not suffer Myself to be overcome by the shame.'

Then the shame had in it some tendency to divert Him from His course. Christ's humanity felt natural human shrinking from pain and suffering. It shrank from the contempt and mockery of those around Him, and did so with especial sensitiveness because of His pure and sinless nature, His yearning sympathy, the atmosphere of love in which He dwelt, His clear sight of the sin, and His prevision of the consequent sorrow. If so, His sufferings did appeal to His human nature and constituted a temptation.

At the beginning the Tempter addressed himself to natural desires to procure physical gratification [bread], and to the equally natural desire to avoid suffering and pain, and to secure His kingdom by an easier method [‘All these will I give Thee, if-’].

And the latter temptation attended Him all through His life, and was most insistent at its close. The shadow of the cross stretched along His path from its beginning. But it is to be remembered that he had not the same need of *self*-control which we have, in that His Will was not reluctant, and that no rebellious desires had escaped from its control and needed to be reduced to submission. ‘I was not rebellious.’ ‘The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak’ was true in the fullest extent only of Him. So the context gives us His perfect submission of will, and yet the need to harden His face toward externals from which, instinctively and without breach of filial obedience, His sensitive nature recoiled. The reality of the temptation, the limits of its reach, His consciousness of it, and His immovable obedience and resistance, are all expressed in the deep and wonderful words, ‘If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me, nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt.’

II. The perfect inflexible resolve.

‘Face like a flint’ seems to be quoted in Luk. 9:51; ‘Steadily set His face.’ The whole story of the Gospels gives the one impression of a life steadfast in its great resolve. There are no traces of His ever faltering in His purpose, none of His ever suffering Himself to be diverted from it, no parentheses and no digressions. There are no blunders either. But what a contrast in this respect to all other lives! Mark’s Gospel, which is eminently the gospel of the Servant, is full of energy and of this inflexible resolve, which speak in such sayings as ‘I must be about My Father’s business’; ‘I must work the works of My Father while it is day.’ That last journey, during which He ‘steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem,’ is but a type of the whole. Christ’s life was a continuous or rather a continually repeated effort.

This inflexible resolve is associated in Him with characteristics not usually allied with it. The gentleness of Christ is so obvious in His character that little needs to be said to point it out. To the influence of His character more than to any other cause may be traced the change in the perspective, so to speak, of Virtue, which characterises modern notions of perfection as contrasted with antique ones. Contrast the Greek and Roman type with the mediaeval ascetic, or with the philanthropic type of modern times. Carlyle's ideal is retrograde and an anachronism. Women and patient sufferers find example in Him. But we have in Jesus Christ, too, the highest example of all the stronger and robuster virtues, the more distinctly heroic, masculine; and that not merely passive firmness of endurance such as an American Indian will show in torments, but active firmness which presses on to its goal, and, immovably resolute, will not be diverted by anything. In Him we see a resolved Will and a gentle loving Heart in perfect accord. That is a wonderful combination. We often find that such firmness is developed at the expense of indifference to other people. It is like a war chariot, or artillery train, that goes crashing across the field, though it be over shrieking men and broken bones, and the wheels splash in blood. Resolved firmness is often accompanied with self-absorption which makes it gloomy, and with narrow limitations. Such men gather all their powers together to secure a certain end, and do it by shutting the eyes of their mind to everything but the one object, like the painter, who blocks up his studio window to get a top light, or as a mad bull lowers his head and blindly rushes on.

There is none of all this in Christ's firmness. He was able at every moment to give His whole sympathy to all who needed it, to take in all that lay around Him, and His resolute concentration of Himself on His work made Him none the less perfect in all which goes to make up complete manhood. Not only was Christ's firmness that of a fixed Will and a most loving Heart, like one of these 'rocking stones,' whose solid mass can be set vibrating by a poising bird, but the fixed Will came from the loving Heart. The very compassion and pity of His nature led to that resolved continuance in His path of redeeming love, though suffering and mockery waited for Him at each turn.

And so He is the Joshua, the Warrior-King, as well as the Priest. That Face, ever ready to kindle into pity, to melt into tenderness, to express every shade of tender feeling, was 'set as a flint.' That Eye, ever brimming with tears, was ever fixed on one goal. That Character is the type of all strength and of all gentleness.

III. The basis of Christ's fixed resolve in filial confidence.

‘The Lord God will help Me.’ So Christ lived by faith.

That faith led to this heroic resistance and immovable resolution.

That confidence of divine help was based upon consciousness of obedience.

It is most blessed for us to have Him as our example of faith and of brave opposition to all the antagonistic forces around us. But we need more than an example. He will but rebuke our wavering purposes of obedience, if He is no more than our pattern. Thank God, He is more, even our Fountain of Power, from Whom we can draw life akin to, because derived from, His own. In Him we can feel strength stealing into flaccid limbs, and gain ‘the wrestling thews that throw the world.’ If we are ‘in Christ’ and on the path of duty, we too may be able to set our faces as a flint, and to say truthfully: ‘None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear to myself, that I may finish my course with joy.’ And yet we may withal be gentle, and keep hearts ‘open as day to melting charity,’ and have leisure and sympathy to spare for every sorrow of others, and a hand to help and ‘sustain him that is weary.’

67)Isaiah 50:8-9

Isaiah

THE SERVANT’S TRIUMPH

Isa. 50:8 - Isa. 50:9.

We have reached the final words of this prophecy, and we hear in them a tone of lofty confidence and triumph. While the former ones sounded plaintive like soft flute music, this rings out clear like the note of a trumpet summoning to battle. The Servant of the Lord seems here to be eager for the conflict, not merely patient and enduring, not merely setting His face like a flint, but confidently challenging His adversaries, and daring them to the strife.

As for the form of the words, the image underlying the whole is that of a suit at law. It is noteworthy that since Isa. 41:1 - Isa. 41:29 this metaphor has run through the whole prophecy. The great controversy is God *versus* Idols. God appears at the bar of men, pleads His cause, calls His witnesses [Isa. 43:9]. 'Let them' [*i.e.* idols] 'bring forth their witnesses that they may be justified.'

Possibly the form of the words here is owing to the dominance of that idea in the context, and implies nothing more than the general notion of opposition and victory. But it is at least worth remembering that in the life of Christ we have many instances in which the prophetic images were literally fulfilled even though their meaning was mainly symbolical: as *e.g.* the riding on the ass, the birth in Bethlehem, the silence before accusers, 'a bone of Him shall not be broken,' and in this very contest, 'shame and spitting.' So here there may be included a reference to that time when the hatred of opposition reached its highest point-in the sufferings and death of our Lord. And it is at least a remarkable coincidence that that highest point was reached in formal trials before the ecclesiastical and civil authorities, for the purpose of convicting Him, and that these processes as legal procedures broke down so signally.

Keeping up the metaphor, we mark here-

I. Messiah's lofty challenge to His accusers.

The 'justifying' which He expects may refer either to personal character or to official functional faithfulness. I think it refers to both, and that we have here, expressed in prophetic outline, not only the fact of Christ's sinlessness, but the fact of His consciousness of sinlessness.

The words are the strongest assertion of His absolute freedom from anything that an adversary could lay hold of on which to found a charge, and not merely so, but they also dare to assert that the unerring and all-penetrating eye of the Judge of all will look into His heart, and find nothing there but the mirrored image of His own perfection. I do not need to dwell on the fact of Christ's sinlessness, that He is perfect manhood without stain, without defect. I have had occasion to touch upon that truth in a former sermon on 'I was not rebellious.' Here we have to do not so much with sinlessness as with the consciousness of sinlessness.

Now note that consciousness on Christ's part.

We have to reckon with the fact of it as expressed in His own words: 'I do always the things that please Him. Which of you convinceth Me of sin?' 'The Prince of this world cometh and hath nothing in Me.'

In Him there is the absence of all trace of sense of sin.

No prayer for forgiveness comes from His lips.

No penitence, no acknowledgment of even weakness is heard from Him. Even in His baptism, which for others was an acknowledgment of impurity, He puts His submission to the rite, not on the ground of needing to be washed from sin, but of 'fulfilling all righteousness.'

Now, unless Christ was sinless, what do we say of these assertions? 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us'-are we to apply that canon to Him when He stands before us and asks, 'Which of you convinceth Me of sin?' Surely it augurs small self-knowledge or a low moral standard if, from the lips of a religious teacher, there never comes one word to indicate that he has felt the hold of evil on him. I make bold to say that if Christ were not sinless, the Apostle Paul stood far above Him, with his 'of whom I am chief.' What difference would there be between Him and the Pharisees who called forth His bitterest words by this very absence in them of consciousness of sin: 'If ye were blind ye would have no sin, but now ye say, We see, therefore your sin remaineth.'

Singularly enough the world has accepted Him at His own estimate, and has felt that these lofty assertions of absolute perfection were borne out by His life, and were consistent with the utmost lowliness of heart.

As to the adversary's failure, I need only recall the close of His life, which is representative of the whole impression made on the world by Him. What a wonderful and singular concurrence of testimonies was borne to His pure and blameless life! After months of hatred and watching, even the rulers' lynx-eyed jealousy found nothing, and they had to fall back upon false witnesses. 'Hearest thou not how many things they witness against Thee?' He stood with unmoved silence, and the lies fell down dead at His feet. Had

He answered, they would have been preserved and owed their immortality to the Gospels: He held His peace and they vanished. All attempts failed so signally that at the last they were fain, in well-simulated holy abhorrence, to base His condemnation on what He had said in their presence. ‘How think ye, ye have heard the blasphemy?’ So all that the adversary, raking through a life, could find, was that one word. That was His sin; in all else He was pure. Remember Pilate’s acquittal: ‘I find no fault in Him,’ and his wife’s warning, ‘Have thou nothing to do with that just Person.’ Think of Judas, ‘I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood.’ Listen to the penitent thief’s low voice gasping out in his pangs and almost collapse: ‘This man hath done nothing amiss.’ Listen to the Centurion telling the impression made even on his rough nature: ‘Truly this was a righteous Man.’

These are the answers to the Servant’s challenge, wrung from the lips of His adversaries; and they but represent the universal judgment of humanity.

There is one Man whose life has been without stain or spot, whose soul has never been crossed by a breath of passion, nor dimmed by a speck of sin, whose will has ever been filled with happy obedience, whose conscience has been undulled by evil and untaught to speak in condemnation, whose whole nature has been like some fair marble, pure in hue, perfect in form, and unstained to the very core. There is one Man who can front the most hostile scrutiny with the bold challenge, ‘Which of you convinceth Me of sin?’ and His very haters have to answer, ‘I find no fault in Him,’ while those that love Him rejoice to proclaim Him ‘holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners.’ There is one Man who can front the most rigid Law of Duty and say, ‘I came not to destroy but to fulfil,’ and the stony tables seem to glow with tender light, as of rocky cliffs in morning sunshine, attesting that He has indeed fulfilled all righteousness. There is one Man who can stand before God without repentance or confession, and whose claim ‘I do always the things that please Him,’ the awful voice from the opening heavens endorses, when it proclaims; ‘This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.’ The lowly Servant of God flings out His challenge to the universe: ‘Who will contend with Me?’ and that gage has lain in the lists for nineteen centuries unlifted.

II. The Messiah’s expectation of divine vindication and acquittal.

Like many another man, Christ had to strengthen Himself against calumny and slander by turning to God, and finding comfort in the belief that there was One who would do Him right, and as throughout this context we have had the true humanity of our Lord in great prominence, it is worth while to dwell for a moment on that thought of His real sharing in the pain of misconstruction and groundless charges, and of His too having to say, as we have so often to say, ‘Well, there is one who knows. Men may condemn but God will acquit.’

But there is something more than that here. The divine vindication and acquittal is not a mere hidden thought and judgment in the mind of God. It is a declaring and showing to be innocent, and that not by word but by deed. That expectation seemed to be annihilated and made ludicrous by His death. But the ‘justifying’ of which our text speaks takes place in Christ’s resurrection and ascension.

‘Manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit’ [1Ti. 3:16]. ‘Declared to be the Son of God with power, . . . by the resurrection from the dead’ [Rom. 1:4].

His death seems the entire abandonment of this holy and sinless man. It seems to demonstrate His claims to be madness, His hope to be futile, His promises to be wind. No wonder that the sorrowing apostles wailed, ‘We trusted that it had been He who should have redeemed Israel.’ The death of Christ, if it were but a martyr’s death, and if we had to believe that that frame had crumbled into dust, and that heart ceased for ever to beat, would not only destroy the worth of all that He spoke, but would be the saddest instance in all history of the irreversible sway that death wields over all mankind, and would deepen the darkness and sadden the gloom of the grave. True, there were not wanting even in His dying hours mysterious indications, such as His promise to the penitent thief. But these only make the disappointment the deeper, if there was nothing more after His death.

So Christ’s justification is in His resurrection and ascension.

III. The Messiah’s confidence of ultimate triumph.

In the last words of the text the adversaries are massed together. The confidence that the Lord God will help and justify leads to the conviction that all opposition to Him is futile and leads to destruction.

We see the historical fulfilment in the fate of the nation. 'His blood be upon us and upon our children.'

We have a truth applying universally that antagonism to Him is self-destructive.

Two forms of destruction are here named. There is a slow decay going on in the opponents and their opposition, as a garment waxing old, and there is a being fretted away by the imperceptible working of external causes, as by gnawing moths.

Applied to persons. To opposing systems.

How many antagonists the Gospel has had, and one after another has been antiquated, and their books are only known because fragments of them are preserved in Christian writings. Paganism is gone from Europe, and its idols are in our museums. Each generation has its own phase of opposition, which lasts for a little while. The mists round the sun melt, the clouds piled in the north, surging up to bury it beneath their banks, are dissipated. The sea roars and smashes on the cliffs, but it ebbs and calms. Some of us have seen more than one school of thought which came to the assault of Christianity, with colours flying and drums rattling, defeated utterly and forgotten, and so it will always be. One may be sure that each enemy in turn will descend to the oblivion that has already received so many, and can imagine these beaten foes rising from their seats to welcome the newcomer with the sad greeting: 'Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us?'

We are 'justified' in His 'justification.'

The real connection between us and Christ by faith, makes our justification to be involved in His, so that it is no mere accommodation but a profound perception of the real relation between Christ and us, when Paul, in Rom. 8:34, triumphantly claims the words of our text for Christ's disciples, and rings out their challenge on behalf of all believers: ‘It is God that justifieth, who is he that condemneth?’

Do you trust in Christ? Then you too can dare to say: ‘The Lord God will help me; who is he that shall condemn me?’

68)Isaiah 50:10

Isaiah

A CALL TO FAITH

Isa. 50:10.

The persons addressed in this call to faith are ‘those who fear the Lord,’ and ‘obey the voice of His Servant.’ In that collocation is implied that these two things are necessarily connected, so that obedience to Christ is the test of true religion, and the fear of the Lord does not exist where the word of the Son is neglected or rejected.

But besides that most fruitful and instructive juxtaposition, other important thoughts come into view here. The fact that the call to faith is addressed to those who are regarded as already fearing God suggests the need for renewed and constantly repeated acts of confidence, at every stage of the Christian life, and opens up the whole subject of the growth and progress of individual religion, as secured by the continuous exercise of faith. The call is addressed to all at every stage of advancement. Of course it is addressed also to those who are disobedient and rebellious. But that wider aspect of the merciful invitation does not come into view here.

But there is another clause in the description of the persons addressed, ‘Who walketh in darkness and hath no light.’ This is, no doubt, primarily a reference to the great sorrow that filled, like a gloomy thundercloud, the horizon of Jewish prophets, small and uninteresting as it seems to us, namely, the captivity of Israel and their expulsion from their land. The faithful remnant are not to escape their share in the national calamity. But while it lasts, they are to wait patiently on the Lord, and not to cast away their confidence, though all seems dark and dreary.

The exhortation thus regarded suggests the power and duty of faith even in times of disaster and sorrow. But another meaning has often been attached to these words, they have been lifted into another region, the spiritual, and have been supposed to refer to a state of feeling not unknown to devout hearts, in which the religious life is devoid of joy and peace. That is a phase of Christian experience, which meets any one who knows much of the workings of men’s hearts, and of his own, when faith is exercised with but little of the light of faith, and the fear of the Lord is cherished with but scant joy in the Lord. Now if it be remembered that such an application of the words is not their original purpose, there can be no harm in using them so. Indeed we may say that, as the words are perfectly general, they include a reference to all darkness of life or soul, however produced, whether it come from the night of sorrow falling on us from without, or from mists and gloom rising like heavy vapours from our own hearts. So considered, the text suggests the one remedy for all gloom and weakness in the spiritual life.

Thus, then, we have three different sets of circumstances in which faith is enforced as the source of true strength and our all-embracing duty. In outward sorrow and trial, trust; in inward darkness and sadness, trust; in every stage of Christian progress, trust. Or I. Faith the light in the darkness of the world. II. Faith the light in the darkness of the soul. III. Faith the light in every stage of Christian progress.

I. Faith our light in the darkness of the world.

The mystery and standing problem of the Old Testament is the coexistence of goodness and sorrow, and the mystery still remains, and ever will remain, a fact. It is partially alleviated if we remember that one main purpose of all our sorrows is to lead us to this confidence.

1. The call to faith is the true voice of all our sorrows.

It seems easy to trust when all is bright, but really it is just as hard, only we can more easily deceive ourselves, when physical well-being makes us comfortable. We are less conscious of our own emptiness, we mask our poverty from ourselves, we do not seem to need God so much. But sorrow reveals our need to us. Other props are struck away, and it is either collapse or Him. We learn the vanity, the transiency, of all besides.

Sorrow reveals God, as the pillar of cloud glowed brighter when the evening fell. Sorrow is meant to awaken the powers that are apt to sleep in prosperity.

So the true voice of all our griefs is ‘Come up hither.’ They call us to trust, as nightfall calls us to light up our lamps. The snow keeps the hidden seeds warm; shepherds burn heather on the hillside that young grass may spring.

2. The call to faith echoes from the voice of the Servant.

Jesus in His darkness rested on God, and in all His sorrows was yet anointed with the oil of gladness. In every pang He has been before us. The rack is sanctified because He has been stretched upon it.

3. The substance of the call.

It is to *trust*, not to anything more. No attempts to stifle tears are required. There is no sin in sorrow. The emotions which we feel to God in bright days are not appropriate at such times. There are seasons in every life when all that we can say is, ‘Truly this is a grief, and I will bear it.’

What then *is* required? Assurance of God’s loving will sending sorrow. Assurance of God’s strengthening presence in it, assurance of deliverance from it. These, not more, are required; these are the elements of the faith here called for.

Such faith may co-exist with the keenest sense of loss. The true attitude in sorrow may be gathered from Christ’s at the grave of Lazarus, contrasted with the excessive mourning of the sisters, and the feigned grief of the Jews.

There are times when the most that we can do is to trust even in the great darkness, ‘Though He slay me yet will I trust in Him.’ Submissive silence is sometimes the most eloquent confession of faith. ‘I was dumb, I opened not my mouth, because Thou didst it.’

4. The blessed results of such faith.

It is implied that we may find all that we need, and more, in God. Have we to mourn friends? ‘In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne.’ Have we lost wealth? We have in Him a treasure that moth or rust cannot touch. Are our hopes blasted? ‘Happy is He . . . whose hope is in the Lord his God.’ Is our health broken? ‘I shall yet praise Him, who is the health of my countenance.’ ‘The Lord is able to give thee much more than these.’

How can we face the troubles of life without Him? God calls us when in darkness, and by the darkness, to trust in His name and stay ourselves on Him. Happy are we if we answer ‘Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines . . . yet I will rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of my salvation.’

II. Faith, our light in the darkness of the soul.

No doubt there may be such a thing as true fear of God in the soul along with spiritual darkness, faith without the joy of faith. Now this condition seems contradictory of the very nature of the Christian life. For religion is union with God who is light, and if we walk in Him, we are in the light. How then can such experience be?

We must dismiss the notion of God’s desertion of the trusting soul. He is always the same; He has ‘never said to the seed of Jacob, Seek ye Me in vain.’ But while putting aside that false explanation, we can see how such darkness may be. If our religious life was in more vigorous exercise, more pure, perfect and continuous, there would be no separation of faith and the joy of faith. But we have not such unruffled, perfect, uninterrupted faith, and hence there may be, and often is, faith without much joy of faith. I would not say that such experience is always the fruit of sin. But certainly we are not to blame Him or to think of Him as breaking His promises, or departing from His nature. No principles, be they ever so firmly held, ever so undoubtingly received, ever so passionately embraced, exert their whole power equally at all moments in a life. There come times of languor when they seem to be mere words, dead commonplaces, as unlike their former selves as sapless winter boughs to their summer pride of leafy beauty. The same variation in our realising grasp affects the truths of the Gospel. Sometimes they seem but words, with all the life and power sucked out of them, pale shadows of themselves, or like the dried bed of a wady with blazing, white stones, where flashing water used to leap, and all the flowerets withered, which once bent their meek little heads to drink. No facts are always equally capable of exciting their correspondent emotions. Those which most closely affect our personal life, in which we find our deepest joys, are not always present in our minds, and when they are, do not always touch the springs of our feelings. No possessions are always equally precious to us. The rich man is not always conscious with equal satisfaction of his wealth. If, then, the way from the mind to the emotions is not always equally open, there is a reason why there may be faith without light of joy. If the thoughts are not always equally concentrated on the things which produce joy, *there* is a reason why there may be the habit of fearing God, though there be not the present vigorous exercise of faith, and consequently but little light.

Another reason may lie in the disturbing and saddening influence of earthly cares and sorrows. There are all weathers in a year. And the highest hope and nearest possible approach to joy is sometimes 'Unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness.' Our lives are sometimes like an Arctic winter in which for many days is no sun.

Another reason may be found in the very fact that we are apt to look impatiently for peace and joy, and to be more exercised with these than with that which produces them.

Another may be errors or mistakes about God and His Gospel.

Another may be absorption with our own sin instead of with Him. To all these add temperament, education, habit, example, influence of body on the mind, and of course also positive inconsistencies and a low tone of Christian life.

It is clear then that, if these be the causes of this state, the one cure for it is to exercise our faith more energetically.

Trust, do not look back. We are tempted to cast away our confidence and to say: What profit shall I have if I pray unto Him? But it is on looking onwards, not backwards, that safety lies.

Trust, do not think about your sins.

Trust, do not think so much about your joy.

It is in the occupation of heart and mind with Jesus that joy and peace come. To make them our direct aim is the way not to attain them. Though now there seems a long wintry interval between seed time and harvest, yet ‘in due season we shall reap if we faint not.’

‘In the fourth watch of the night Jesus came unto them.’

III. Faith our guiding light in every stage of Christian progress.

Those who already ‘fear God’ are in the text exhorted to trust.

In the most advanced Christian life there are temptations to abandon our confidence. We never on earth come to such a point as that, without effort, we are sure to continue in the way. True, habit is a wonderful ally of goodness, and it is a great thing to have it on our side, but all our lives long, there will be hindrances without and within which need effort and self-repression. On earth there is no time when it is safe for us to go unarmed. The force of gravitation acts however high we climb. Not till heaven is reached will ‘love’ be ‘its own security,’ and nature coincide with grace. And even in heaven faith ‘abideth,’ but there it will be without effort.

1. The most advanced Christian life needs a perpetual renewal and repetition of past acts of faith.

It cannot live on a past any more than the body can subsist on last year’s food. The past is like the deep portions of coral reefs, a mere platform for the living present which shines on the surface of the sea, and grows. We must gather manna daily.

The life is continued by the same means as that by which it was begun. There is no new duty or method for the most advanced Christian; he has to do just what he has been doing for half a century. We cannot transcend the creatural position, we are ever dependent. ‘To hoar hairs will I carry you.’ The initial point is prolonged into a continuous line.

2. The most advanced and mature faith is capable of increase, in regard to its knowledge of its object, and in intensity, constancy, power. At first it may be a tremulous trust, afterwards it should become an assured confidence. At first it may be but a dim recognition, as in a glass darkly, of the great love which has redeemed us at a great price; afterwards it should become the clear vision of the trusted Friend and lifelong companion of our souls, who is all in all to us. At first it may be an interrupted hold, afterwards it should become such a grasp as the roots of a tree have on the soil. At first it may be a feeble power ruling over our rebel selves, like some king beleaguered in his capital, who has no sway beyond its walls, afterwards it should become a peaceful sovereign who guides and sways all the powers of the soul and outgoings of the life. At first it may be like a premature rose putting forth pale petals on an almost leafless bough, afterwards the whole tree should be blossomed over with fragrant flowers, the homes of light and sweetness. The highest faith may be heightened, and the spirits before the throne pray the prayer, ‘Lord, increase our faith.’

For us all, then, the merciful voice of the servant of the Lord calls to His light. Our faith is our light in darkness, only as a window is the light of a house, or the eye, of the body, because it admits and discerns that true light. He calls us each from the darkness. Do not try to make fires for yourselves, ineffectual and transient, but look to Him, and you shall not walk in darkness, even amid the gloom of earth, but shall have light in your darkness, till the time come when, in a clearer heaven and a lighter air, ‘Thy sun shall no more go down, neither shall thy moon withdraw itself, for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.’

69)Isaiah 50:11

Isaiah

DYING FIRES

Isa. 50:11.

The scene brought before us in these words is that of a company of belated travellers in some desert, lighting a little fire that glimmers ineffectual in the darkness of the eerie waste. They huddle round its dying embers for a little warmth and company, and they hope it will scare wolf and jackal, but their fuel is all burned, and they have to go to sleep without its solace and security. The prophet's imaginative picture is painted from life, and is a sad reality in the cases of all who seek to warm themselves at any fire that they kindle for themselves, apart from God.

I. A sad, true picture of human life.

It does not cover, nor is presented by the prophet as covering, all the facts of experience. Every man has his share of sunshine, but still it is true of all who are not living in dependence on and communion with God, that they are but travellers in the dark.

Scripture uses the image of darkness as symbolic of three sad facts of our experience: ignorance, sin, sorrow. Are not all these the characteristics of godless lives?

As for ignorance-a godless man has no key to the awful problems that front him. He knows not God, who is to him a dread, a name, a mystery. He knows not himself, the depths of his nature, its possibilities for good or evil, whence it cometh nor whither it goeth. He has no solution for the riddle of the universe. It is to him a chaos, and darkness is upon the face of the deep.

As to sin, the darkness of ignorance is largely due to the darkness of sin. In every heart comes sometimes the consciousness that it is thus darkened by sin. The sense of sin is with all men more or less-much perverted, often wrong in its judgments, feeble, easily silenced, but for all that it is there-and it is great part of the cold obstruction that shuts out the light. Sin weaves the pall that shrouds the world.

As for darkness of sorrow-we must beware that we do not exaggerate. God makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and there is gladness in every life, much that arises from fulfilled desires, from accomplished purposes, from gratified affections. But when all this has been freely admitted, still sadness crouches somewhere in all hearts, and over every life the storm sometimes stoops.

We need nothing beyond our own experience and the slightest knowledge of other hearts to know how shallow and one-sided a view of life that is which sees only the joy and forgets the sorrow, which ignores the night and thinks only of the day; which, looking out on nature, is blind to the pain and agony, the horror and the death, which are as real parts of it as brightness and beauty, love and life. Every little valley that lies in lovely loneliness has its scenes of desolation, and tempest has broken over the fairest scenes. Every river has drowned its man. Over every inch of blue sky the thunder cloud has rolled. Every summer has its winter, every day its night, every life its death. All stars set, all moons wane. 'Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang' come after every leafy June.

Sorrow is as deeply embedded in the necessity and constitution of things as joy. 'God hath set one over against another, and hath made all things double.'

II. The vain attempts at light.

There is bitter irony in the prophet's description of the poor flickering spot of light in the black waste and of its swift dying out. The travellers without a watch-fire are defenceless from midnight prowlers. How full of solemn truth about godless lives the vivid outline picture is!

Men try to free themselves from the miseries of ignorance, sin, and sorrow.

Think of the insufficiency of all such attempts, the feeble flicker which glimmers for an hour, and then fuel fails and it goes out. Then the travellers can journey no further, but 'lie down in sorrow,' and without a watchfire they become a prey to all the beasts of the field. It is a little picture taken from the life.

It vividly paints how men *will* try to free themselves from the miseries of their condition, how insufficient all their attempts are, how transient the relief, and how bitter and black the end.

We may apply these thoughts to-

1. Men-made grounds of hope before God.

2. Men-made attempts to read the mysteries.

We do not say this of all human learning, but of that which, apart from God's revelation, deals with the subjects of that revelation.

3. Men-made efforts at self-reformation.

4. Men-made attempts at alleviating sorrow.

Scripture abounds in other metaphors for the same solemn spiritual facts as are set before us in this picture of the dying watchfire and the sad men watching its decline. Godless lives draw from broken cisterns out of which the water runs. They build with untempered mortar. They lean on broken reeds that wound the hand pressed on them. They spend money for that which is not bread. But all these metaphors put together do not tell all the vanity, disappointments, and final failure and ruin of such a life. That last glimpse given in the text of the sorrowful sleeper stretched by the black ashes, with darkness round and hopeless heaviness within, points to an issue too awful to be dwelt on by a preacher, and too awful not to be gravely considered by each of us for himself.

III. The light from God.

What would the dead fire and the ring of ashes on the sand matter when morning dawned? Jesus is our Sun. He rises, and the spectres of the night melt into thin air, and 'joy cometh in the morning.' He floods our ignorance with knowledge of the Father whose name He declares, with knowledge of ourselves, of the world, of our destiny and our duty, our hopes and our home. He takes away the sin of the world. He gives the oil of joy for mourning. For every human necessity He is enough. Follow Him and your life's pilgrimage shall not be a midnight one, but accomplished in sunshine. 'I am the light of the world; he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.'

70)Isaiah 51:9

Isaiah

THE AWAKENING OF ZION

Isa. 51:9. - Isa. 52:1.

Both these verses are, I think, to be regarded as spoken by one voice, that of the Servant of the Lord. His majestic figure, wrapped in a light veil of obscurity, fills the eye in all these later prophecies of Isaiah. It is sometimes clothed with divine power, sometimes girded with the towel of human weakness, sometimes appearing like the collective Israel, sometimes plainly a single person.

We have no difficulty in solving the riddle of the prophecy by the light of history. Our faith knows One who unites these diverse characteristics, being God and man, being the Saviour of the body, which is part of Himself and instinct with His life. If we may suppose that He speaks in both verses of the text, then, in the one, as priest and intercessor, He lifts the prayers of earth to heaven in His own holy hands-and in the other, as messenger and Word of God, He brings the answer and command of heaven to earth on His own authoritative lips-thus setting forth the deep mystery of His person and double office as mediator between man and God. But even if we put aside that thought, the correspondence and relation of the two passages remain the same. In any case they are intentionally parallel in form and connected in substance. The latter is the answer to the former. The cry of Zion is responded to by the call of God. The awaking of the arm of the Lord is followed by the awaking of the Church. He puts on strength in clothing us with His might, which becomes ours.

The mere juxtaposition of these verses suggests the point of view from which I wish to treat them on this occasion. I hope that the thoughts to which they lead may help to further that quickened earnestness and expectancy of blessing, without which Christian work is a toil and a failure.

We have here a common principle underlying both the clauses of our text, to which I must first briefly ask attention, namely-

I. The occurrence in the Church's history of successive periods of energy and of languor.

It is freely admitted that such alternation is not the highest ideal of growth, either in the individual or in the community. Our Lord's own parables set forth a more excellent way-the way of uninterrupted increase, whereof the type is the springing corn, which puts forth 'first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear,' and passes through all the stages from the tender green spikelets that gleam over the fields in the spring-tide to the yellow abundance of autumn, in one unbroken season of genial months. So would our growth be best, healthiest, happiest. So *might* our growth be, if the mysterious life in the seed met no checks. But, as a matter of fact, the Church has not thus grown. Rather at the best, its emblem is to be looked for, not in corn, but in the forest tree-the very rings in whose trunk tell of recurring seasons when the sap has risen at the call of spring, and sunk again before the frowns of winter. I have not to do now with the causes of this. These will fall to be considered presently. Nor am I saying that such a manner of growth is inevitable. I am only pointing out a fact, capable of easy verification and familiar to us all. Our years have had summer and winter. The evening and the morning have completed all the days since the first.

We all know it only too well. In our own hearts we have known such times, when some cold clinging mist wrapped us round and hid all the heaven of God's love and the starry lights of His truth; when the visible was the only real, and He seemed far away and shadowy; when there was neither confidence in our belief, nor heat in our love, nor enthusiasm in our service; when the shackles of conventionalism bound our souls, and the fetters of the frost imprisoned all their springs. And we have seen a like palsy smite whole regions and ages of the Church of God, so that even the sensation of impotence was dead like all the rest, and the very tradition of spiritual power had faded away. I need not point to the signal historical examples of such times in the past. Remember England a hundred years ago-but what need to travel so far? May I venture to draw my example from nearer home, and ask, have we not been living in such an epoch? I beseech you, think whether the power which the Gospel preached by us wields on ourselves, on our churches, on the world, is what Christ meant it and fitted to exercise. Why, if we hold our own in respect to the material growth of our population, it is as much as we do. Where is the joyful buoyancy and expansive power with which the Gospel burst into the world? It looks like some stream that leaps from the hills, and at first hurries from cliff to cliff full of light and music, but flows slower and more sluggish as it advances, and at last almost stagnates in its flat marshes. Here we are with all our machinery, our culture, money, organisations-and the net result of it all at the year's end is but a poor handful of ears. 'Ye sow much and bring home little.' Well may we take up the wail of the old Psalm, 'We see not our signs. There is no more any prophet; neither is there any among us that knoweth how long-arise, O Lord, plead Thine own cause.'

If, then, there are such recurring seasons of languor, they must either go on deepening till sleep becomes death, or they must be broken by a new outburst of vigorous life. It would be better if we did not need the latter. The uninterrupted growth would be best; but if that has not been attained, then the ending of winter by spring, and the suppling of the dry branches, and the resumption of the arrested growth, is the next best, and the only alternative to rotting away.

And it is by such times that the Kingdom of Christ always has grown. Its history has been one of successive impulses gradually exhausted, as by friction and gravity, and mercifully repeated just at the moment when it was ceasing to advance and had begun to slide backwards. And in such a manner of progress, the Church's history has been in full analogy with that of all other forms of human association and activity. It is not in religion alone that there are 'revivals,' to use the word of which some people have such a dread. You see analogous phenomena in the field of literature, arts, social and political life. In them all, there come times of awakened interest in long-neglected principles. Truths which for many years had been left to burn unheeded, save by a faithful few watchers of the beacon, flame up all at once as the guiding pillars of a nation's march, and a whole people strike their tents and follow where they lead. A mysterious quickening thrills through society. A contagion of enthusiasm spreads like fire, fusing all hearts in one. The air is electric with change. Some great advance is secured at a stride; and before and after that supreme effort are years of comparative quiescence; those before being times of preparation, those after being times of fruition and exhaustion-but slow and languid compared with the joyous energy of that moment. One day may be as a thousand years in the history of a people, and a nation may be born in a day.

So also is the history of the Church. And thank God it is so, for if it had not been for the dawning of these times of refreshing, the steady operation of the Church’s worldliness would have killed it long ago.

Surely, dear brethren, we ought to desire such a merciful interruption of the sad continuity of our languor and decay. The surest sign of its coming would be a widespread desire and expectation of its coming, joined with a penitent consciousness of our heavy and sinful slumber. For we believe in a God who never sends mouths but He sends meat to fill them, and in whose merciful providence every desire is a prophecy of its own fruition. This attitude of quickened anticipation, diffusing itself silently through many hearts, is like the light air that springs up before sunrise, or like the solemn hush that holds all nature listening before the voice of the Lord in the thunder.

And another sign of its approach is the extremity of the need. ‘If winter come, can spring be far behind?’ For He who is always with Zion strikes in with His help when the want is at its sorest. His ‘right early’ is often the latest moment before destruction. And though we are all apt to exaggerate the urgency of the hour and the severity of *our* conflict, it certainly does seem that, whether we regard the languor of the Church or the strength of our adversaries, succour delayed a little longer would be succour too late. ‘The tumult of those that rise up against Thee increaseth continually. It is time for Thee to work.’

The juxtaposition of these passages suggests for us-

II. The twofold explanation of these variations.

That bold metaphor of God’s sleeping and waking is often found in Scripture, and generally expresses the contrast between the long years of patient forbearance, during which evil things and evil men go on their rebellious road unchecked but by Love, and the dread moment when some throne of iniquity, some Babylon cemented by blood, is smitten to the dust. Such is the original application of the expression here. But the contrast may fairly be widened beyond that specific form of it, and taken to express any apparent variations in the forth-putting of His power. The prophet carefully avoids seeming to suggest that there are changes in God Himself. It is not He but His arm, that is to say. His active energy, that is invoked to awake. The captive Church prays that the dormant might which could so easily shiver her prison-house would flame forth into action.

We may, then, see here implied the cause of these alternations, of which we have been speaking, on its divine side, and then, in the corresponding verse addressed to the Church, the cause on the human side.

As to the former, it is true that God’s arm sometimes slumbers, and is not clothed with power. There are, as a fact, apparent variations in the energy with which He works in the Church and in the world. And they are real variations, not merely apparent. But we have to distinguish between the power, and what Paul calls ‘the might of the power.’ The one is final, constant, unchangeable. It does not necessarily follow that the other is. The rate of operation, so to speak, and the amount of energy actually brought into play may vary, though the force remains the same.

It is clear from experience that there are these variations; and the only question with which we are concerned is, are they mere arbitrary jets and spurts of a divine power, sometimes gushing out in full flood, sometimes trickling in painful drops, at the unknown will of the unseen hand which controls the flow? Is the ‘law of the Spirit of life’ at all revealed to us; or are the reasons occult, if there be any reasons at all other than a mere will that it shall be so? Surely, whilst we never can know all the depths of His counsels and all the solemn concourse of reasons which, to speak in man’s language, determine the energy of His manifested power, He has left us in no doubt that this is the weightiest part of the law which it follows-the might with which God works on the world through His Church varies according to the Church’s receptiveness and faithfulness.

Our second text tells us that if God’s arm seems to slumber and really does so, it is because Zion sleeps. In itself that immortal energy knows no variableness. ‘He fainteth not, neither is weary.’ ‘The Lord’s arm is not shortened that He cannot save.’ ‘He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.’ But He works through us; and we have the solemn and awful power of checking the might which would flow through us; of restraining and limiting the Holy One of Israel. It avails nothing that the ocean stretches shoreless to the horizon; a jar can hold only a jarful. The receiver’s capacity determines the amount received, and the receiver’s desire determines his capacity. The law has ever been, ‘according to your faith be it unto you.’ God gives as much as we will, as much as we can hold, as much as we use, and far more than we deserve. As long as we will bring our vessels the golden oil will flow, and after the last is filled, there yet remains more that we might have had, if we could have held it, and might have held if we would. ‘Ye are not straitened in Me, ye are straitened in yourselves.’

So, dear brethren, if we have to lament times of torpor and small success, let us be honest with ourselves, and recognise that all the blame lies with us. If God’s arm seems to slumber, it is because we are asleep. His power is invariable, and the Gospel which is committed to our trust has lost none of its ancient power, whatsoever men may say. If there be variations, they cannot be traced to the divine element in the Church, which in itself is constant, but altogether to the human, which shifts and fluctuates, as we only too sadly know. The light in the beacon-tower is steady, and the same; but the beam it throws across the waters sometimes fades to a speck, and sometimes flames out clear and far across the heaving waves, according to the position of the glasses and shades around it. The sun pours out heat as profusely and as long at midwinter as on midsummer-day, and all the difference between the frost and darkness and glowing brightness and flowering life, is simply owing to the earth’s place in its orbit and the angle at which the unalterable rays fall upon it. The changes are in the terrestrial sphere; the heavenly is fixed for ever the same.

May I not venture to point an earnest and solemn appeal with these truths? Has there not been poured over us the spirit of slumber? Does it not seem as if an opium sky had been raining soporifics on our heads? We have had but little experience of the might of God amongst us of late years, and we need not wonder at it. There is no occasion to look far for the reason. We have only to regard the low ebb to which religious life has been reduced amongst us to have it all and more than all accounted for. I fully admit that there has been plenty of activity, perhaps more than the amount of real life warrants, not a little liberality, and many virtues. But how languid and torpid the true Christian life has been! how little enthusiasm! how little depth of communion with God! how little unworldly elevation of soul! how little glow of love! An improvement in social position and circumstances, a freer blending with the national life, a full share of civic and political honours, a higher culture in our pulpits, fine chapels, and applauding congregations-are but poor substitutes for what many of us have lost in racing after them. We have the departed prophets' mantle, the outward resemblance to the fathers who have gone, but their fiery zeal has passed to heaven with them; and softer, weaker men, we stand timidly on the river's brink, invoking the Lord God of Elijah, and too often the flood that obeyed them has no ear for our feebler voice.

I speak to many who are in some sort representatives of the churches throughout the land, and they can tell whether my words are on the whole true or overstrained. We who labour in our great cities, what say we? If one of the number may speak for the rest, we have to acknowledge that commercial prosperity and business cares, the eagerness after pleasure and the exigencies of political strife, diffused doubt and widespread artistic and literary culture, are eating the very life out of thousands in our churches, and lowering their fervour till, like molten iron cooling in the air, what was once all glowing with ruddy heat is crusted over with foul black scoriae ever encroaching on the tiny central warmth. You from rural churches, what say you? Have you not to speak of deepening torpor settling down on quiet corners, of the passing away of grey heads which leave no successors, of growing difficulties and lessened power to meet them, that make you sometimes all but despair?

I am not flinging indiscriminate censures. I know that there are lights as well as shades in the picture. I am not flinging censures at all. But I am giving voice to the confessions of many hearts, that our consciousness of our blame may be deepened, and we may hasten back to that dear Lord whom we have left to serve alone, as His first disciples left Him once to agonise alone under the gnarled olives in Gethsemane, while they lay sleeping in the moonlight. Listen to His gentle rebuke, full of pain and surprised love, 'What, could ye not watch with Me one hour?' Listen to His warning call, loving as the kiss with which a mother wakes her child, 'Arise, let us be going'-and let us shake the spirit of slumber from our limbs, and serve Him as those unsleeping spirits do, who rest not day nor night from vision and work and praise.

III. The beginning of all awaking is the Church's earnest cry to God.

It is with us as with infants, the first sign of whose awaking is a cry. The mother's quick ear hears it through all the household noises, and the poor little troubled life that woke to a scared consciousness of loneliness and darkness, is taken up into tender arms, and comforted and calmed. So, when we dimly perceive how torpid we have been, and start to find that we have lost our Father's hand, the first instinct of that waking, which must needs be partly painful, is to call to Him, whose ear hears our feeble cry amid the sound of praise like the voice of many waters, that billows round His throne, and whose folding arms keep us 'as one whom his mother comforteth.' The beginning of all true awaking must needs be prayer.

For every such stirring of quickened religious life must needs have in it bitter penitence and pain at the discovery flashed upon us of the wretched deadness of our past-and, as we gaze like some wakened sleepwalker into the abyss where another step might have smashed us to atoms, a shuddering terror seizes us that must cry, 'Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.' And every such stirring of quickened life will have in it, too, desire for more of His grace, and confidence in His sure bestowal of it, which cannot but breathe itself in prayer.

Nor is Zion's cry to God only the beginning and sign of all true awaking: it is also the condition and indispensable precursor of all perfecting of recovery from spiritual languor.

I have already pointed out the relation between the waking of God and the waking of His Church, from which that necessarily follows. God’s power flows into our weakness in the measure and on condition of our desires. We are sometimes told that we err in praying for the outpouring of His Holy Spirit, because ever since Pentecost His Church has had the gift. The objection alleges an unquestioned fact, but the conclusion drawn from it rests on an altogether false conception of the manner of that abiding gift. The Spirit of God, and the power which comes from Him, are not given as a purse of money might be put into a man’s hand once and for all, but they are given in a continuous impartation and communication and are received and retained moment by moment, according to the energy of our desires and the faithfulness of our use. As well might we say, Why should I ask for natural life, I received it half a century ago? Yes, and at every moment of that half-century I have continued to live, not because of a past gift, but because at each moment God is breathing into my nostrils the breath of life. So is it with the life which comes from His Spirit. It is maintained by constant efflux from the fountain of Life, by constant impartation of His quickening breath. And as He must continually impart, so must we continually receive, else we perish. Therefore, brethren, the first step towards awaking, and the condition of all true revival in our own souls and in our churches, is this earnest cry, ‘Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord.

Thank God for the outpouring of a long unwonted spirit of prayer in many places. It is like the melting of the snows in the high Alps, at once the sign of spring and the cause of filling the stony river beds with flashing waters, that bring verdure and growth wherever they come. The winter has been long and hard. We have all to confess that we have been restraining prayer before God. Our work has been done with but little sense of our need of His blessing, with but little ardour of desire for His power. We have prayed lazily, scarcely believing that answers would come; we have not watched for the reply, but have been like some heartless marksman who draws his bow and does not care to look whether his arrow strikes the target. These mechanical words, these conventional petitions, these syllables winged by no real desire, inspired by no faith, these expressions of devotion, far too wide for their real contents, which rattle in them like a dried kernel in a nut, are these prayers? Is there any wonder that they have been dispersed in empty air, and that we have been put to shame before our enemies? Brethren in the ministry, do we need to be surprised at our fruitless work, when we think of our prayerless studies and of our faithless prayers? Let *us* remember that solemn word, ‘The pastors have become brutish, and have not sought the Lord, therefore they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered.’ And let us all, brethren, betake ourselves, with penitence and lowly consciousness of our sore need, to prayer, earnest and importunate, believing and persistent, like this heaven-piercing cry which captive Israel sent up from her weary bondage.

Look at the passionate earnestness of it-expressed in the short, sharp cry, thrice repeated, as from one in mortal need; and see to it that our drowsy prayers be like it. Look at the grand confidence with which it founds itself on the past, recounting the mighty deeds of ancient days, and looking back, not for despair but for joyful confidence, to the generations of old; and let our faint-hearted faith be quickened by the example, to expect great things of God. The age of miracles is not gone. The mightiest manifestations of God’s power in the spread of the Gospel in the past remain as patterns for His future. We have not to look back as from low-lying plains to the blue peaks on the horizon, across which the Church’s path once lay, and sigh over the changed conditions of the journey. The highest watermark that the river in flood has ever reached will be reached and overpassed again, though to-day the waters may seem to have hopelessly subsided. Greater triumphs and deliverances shall crown the future than have signalised the past. Let our faithful prayer base itself on the prophecies of history and on the unchangeableness of God.

Think, brethren, of the prayers of Christ. Even He, whose spirit needed not to be purged from stains or calmed from excitement, who was ever in His Father’s house whilst He was about His Father’s business, blending in one, action and contemplation, had need to pray. The moments of His life thus marked are very significant. When He began His ministry, the close of the first day of toil and wonders saw Him, far from gratitude and from want, in a desert place in prayer. When He would send forth His apostles, that great step in advance, in which lay the germ of so much, was preceded by solitary prayer. When the fickle crowd desired to make Him the centre of political revolution, He passed from their hands and beat back that earliest attempt to secularise His work, by prayer. When the seventy brought the first tidings of mighty works done in His name, He showed us how to repel the dangers of success, in that He thanked the Lord of heaven and earth who had revealed these things to babes. When He stood by the grave of Lazarus, the voice that waked the dead was preceded by the voice of prayer, as it ever must be. When He had said all that He could say to His disciples, He crowned all with His wonderful prayer for Himself, for them, and for us all. When the horror of great darkness fell upon His soul, the growing agony is marked by His more fervent prayer, so wondrously compact of shrinking fear and filial submission. When the cross was hid in the darkness of eclipse, the only words from the gloom were words of prayer. When, Godlike, He dismissed His spirit, manlike He commended it to His Father, and sent the prayer from His dying lips before Him to herald His coming into the unseen world. One instance remains, even more to our present purpose than all these-'It came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon Him.' Mighty mystery! In Him, too, the Son's desire is connected with the Father's gift, and the unmeasured possession of the Spirit was an answer to *His* prayer.

Then, brethren, let us lift our voices and our hearts. That which ascends as prayer descends as blessing, like the vapour that is drawn up by the kiss of the sun to fall in freshening rain. 'Call upon Me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and hidden things which thou knowest not.'

IV. The answering call from God to Zion.

Our truest prayers are but the echo of God's promises. God's best answers are the echo of our prayers. As in two mirrors set opposite to each other, the same image is repeated over and over again, the reflection of a reflection, so here, within the prayer, gleams an earlier promise, within the answer is mirrored the prayer.

And in that reverberation, and giving back to us our petition transformed into a command, we are not to see a dismissal of it as if we had misapprehended our true want. It is not tantamount to, Do not ask me to put on my strength, but array yourselves in your own. The very opposite interpretation is the true one. The prayer of Zion is heard and answered.

God awakes, and clothes Himself with might. Then, as some warrior king, himself roused from sleep and girded with flashing steel, bids the clarion sound through the grey twilight to summon the prostrate ranks that lie round his tent, so the sign of God's awaking and the first act of His conquering might is this trumpet call-'The night is far spent, the day is at hand, let us put off the works of darkness,'-the night gear that was fit for slumber-'and put on the armour of light,' the mail of purity that gleams and glitters even in the dim dawn. God's awaking is our awaking. He puts on strength by making us strong; for His arm works through us, clothing itself, as it were, with our arm of flesh, and perfecting itself even in our weakness.

Nor is it to be forgotten that this, like all God's commands, carries in its heart a promise. That earliest word of God's is the type of all His latter behests: 'Let there be light,' and the mighty syllables were creative and self-fulfilling. So ever, with Him, to enjoin and to bestow are one and the same, and His command is His conveyance of power. He rouses us by His summons, He clothes us with power in the very act of bidding us put it on. So He answers the Church's cry by stimulating us to quickened zeal, and making us more conscious of, and confident in, the strength which, in answer to our cry, He pours into our limbs.

But the main point which I would insist on in what remains of this sermon, is the practical discipline which this divine summons requires from us.

And first, let us remember that the chief means of quickened life and strength is deepened communion with Christ.

As we have been saying, our strength is ours by continual derivation from Him. It has no independent existence, any more than a sunbeam could have, severed from the sun. It is ours only in the sense that it flows through us, as a river through the land which it enriches. It is His whilst it is ours, it is ours when we know it to be His. Then, clearly, the first thing to do must be to keep the channels free by which it flows into our souls, and to maintain the connection with the great Fountainhead unimpaired. Put a dam across the stream, and the effect will be like the drying up of Jordan before Israel: 'the waters that were above rose up upon an heap, and the waters that were beneath failed and were cut off,' and the foul oozy bed was disclosed to the light of day. It is only by constant contact with Christ that we have any strength to put on.

That communion with Him is no mere idle or passive attitude, but the active employment of our whole nature with His truth, and with Him whom the truth reveals. The understanding must be brought into contact with the principles of His word, the heart must touch and beat against His heart, the will meekly lay its hand in His, the conscience draw at once its anodyne and its stimulus from His sacrifice, the passions know His finger on the reins, and follow, led in the silken leash of love. Then, if I may so say, Elisha’s miracle will be repeated in nobler form, and from Himself, the Life thus touching all our being, life will flow into our deadness. ‘He put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and he stretched himself upon the child, and the flesh of the child waxed warm.’ So, dear brethren, all our practical duty is summed up in that one word, the measure of our obedience to which is the measure of all our strength-’Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.’

Again, this summons calls us to the faithful use of the power which, on condition of that communion, we have.

There is no doubt a temptation, in all times like the present, to look for some new and extraordinary forms of blessing, and to substitute such expectation for present work with our present strength. There is nothing new to look for. There is no need to wait for anything more than we possess. Remember the homely old proverb, ‘You never know what you can do till you try,’ and though we are conscious of much unfitness, and would sometimes gladly wait till our limbs are stronger, let us brace ourselves for the work, assured that in it strength will be given to us that equals our desire. There is a wonderful power in honest work to develop latent energies and reveal a man to himself. I suppose, in most cases, no one is half so much surprised at a great man’s greatest deeds as he is himself. They say that there is dormant electric energy enough in a few raindrops to make a thunderstorm, and there is dormant spiritual force enough in the weakest of us to flash into beneficent light, and peal notes of awaking into many a deaf ear. The effort to serve your Lord will reveal to you strength that you know not. And it will increase the strength which it brings into play, as the used muscles grow like whipcord, and the practised fingers become deft at their task, and every faculty employed is increased, and every gift wrapped in a napkin melts like ice folded in a cloth, according to that solemn law, ‘To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.’

Then be sure that to its last particle you are using the strength you have, ere you complain of not having enough for your tasks. Take heed of the vagrant expectations that wait for they know not what, and the apparent prayers that are really substitutes for possible service. ‘Why liest thou on thy face? Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward.’

The Church’s resources are sufficient for the Church’s work, if the resources are used. We are tempted to doubt it, by reason of our experience of failure and our consciousness of weakness. We are more than ever tempted to doubt it to-day, when so many wise men are telling us that our Christ is a phantom, our God a stream of tendency, our Gospel a decaying error, our hope for the world a dream, and our work in the world done. We stand before our Master with doubtful hearts, and, as we look along the ranks sitting there on the green grass, and then at the poor provisions which make all our store, we are sometimes tempted almost to think that He errs when He says with that strange calmness of His, ‘They need not depart, give ye them to eat.’ But go out among the crowds and give confidently what you have, and you will find that you have enough and to spare. If ever our stores seem inadequate, it is because they are reckoned up by sense, which takes cognizance of the visible, instead of by faith which beholds the real. Certainly five loaves and two small fishes are not enough, but are not five loaves and two small fishes and a miracle-working hand behind them, enough? It is poor calculation that leaves out Christ from the estimate of our forces. The weakest man and Jesus to back him are more than all antagonism, more than sufficient for all duty. Be not seduced into doubt of your power, or of your success, by others’ sneers, or by your own faint-heartedness. The confidence of ability is ability. ‘Screw your courage to the sticking place,’ and you will *not* fail-and see to it that you use the resources you have, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. ‘Put on *thy* strength, O Zion.’

So, dear brethren, to gather all up in a sentence, let us confidently look for times of blessing, penitently acknowledge that our own faithlessness has hindered the arm of the Lord, earnestly beseech Him to come in His rejoicing strength, and, drawing ever fresh power from constant communion with our dear Lord, use it to its last drop for Him. Then, like the mortal leader of Israel, as he pondered doubtingly with sunken eyes on the hard task before his untrained host, we shall look up and be aware of the presence of the sworded angel, the immortal Captain of the host of the Lord, standing ready to save, ‘putting on righteousness as a breastplate, an helmet of salvation on His head, and clad with zeal as a cloak.’ From His lips, which give what they command, comes the call, ‘Take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.’ Hearkening to His voice, the city of the strong ones shall be made an heap before our wondering ranks, and the land shall lie open to our conquering march.

Wheresoever *we* lift up the cry, ‘Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord,’ there follows, swift as the thunderclap on the lightning flash, the rousing summons, ‘Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem!’ Wheresoever it is obeyed there will follow in due time the joyful chorus, as in this context, ‘Sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem; the Lord hath made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.’

71)Isaiah 52:1

Isaiah

THE AWAKENING OF ZION

Isa. 51:9. - Isa. 52:1.

Both these verses are, I think, to be regarded as spoken by one voice, that of the Servant of the Lord. His majestic figure, wrapped in a light veil of obscurity, fills the eye in all these later prophecies of Isaiah. It is sometimes clothed with divine power, sometimes girded with the towel of human weakness, sometimes appearing like the collective Israel, sometimes plainly a single person.

We have no difficulty in solving the riddle of the prophecy by the light of history. Our faith knows One who unites these diverse characteristics, being God and man, being the Saviour of the body, which is part of Himself and instinct with His life. If we may suppose that He speaks in both verses of the text, then, in the one, as priest and intercessor, He lifts the prayers of earth to heaven in His own holy hands-and in the other, as messenger and Word of God, He brings the answer and command of heaven to earth on His own authoritative lips-thus setting forth the deep mystery of His person and double office as mediator between man and God. But even if we put aside that thought, the correspondence and relation of the two passages remain the same. In any case they are intentionally parallel in form and connected in substance. The latter is the answer to the former. The cry of Zion is responded to by the call of God. The awaking of the arm of the Lord is followed by the awaking of the Church. He puts on strength in clothing us with His might, which becomes ours.

The mere juxtaposition of these verses suggests the point of view from which I wish to treat them on this occasion. I hope that the thoughts to which they lead may help to further that quickened earnestness and expectancy of blessing, without which Christian work is a toil and a failure.

We have here a common principle underlying both the clauses of our text, to which I must first briefly ask attention, namely-

I. The occurrence in the Church’s history of successive periods of energy and of languor.

It is freely admitted that such alternation is not the highest ideal of growth, either in the individual or in the community. Our Lord’s own parables set forth a more excellent way-the way of uninterrupted increase, whereof the type is the springing corn, which puts forth ‘first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear,’ and passes through all the stages from the tender green spikelets that gleam over the fields in the spring-tide to the yellow abundance of autumn, in one unbroken season of genial months. So would our growth be best, healthiest, happiest. So *might* our growth be, if the mysterious life in the seed met no checks. But, as a matter of fact, the Church has not thus grown. Rather at the best, its emblem is to be looked for, not in corn, but in the forest tree-the very rings in whose trunk tell of recurring seasons when the sap has risen at the call of spring, and sunk again before the frowns of winter. I have not to do now with the causes of this. These will fall to be considered presently. Nor am I saying that such a manner of growth is inevitable. I am only pointing out a fact, capable of easy verification and familiar to us all. Our years have had summer and winter. The evening and the morning have completed all the days since the first.

We all know it only too well. In our own hearts we have known such times, when some cold clinging mist wrapped us round and hid all the heaven of God’s love and the starry lights of His truth; when the visible was the only real, and He seemed far away and shadowy; when there was neither confidence in our belief, nor heat in our love, nor enthusiasm in our service; when the shackles of conventionalism bound our souls, and the fetters of the frost imprisoned all their springs. And we have seen a like palsy smite whole regions and ages of the Church of God, so that even the sensation of impotence was dead like all the rest, and the very tradition of spiritual power had faded away. I need not point to the signal historical examples of such times in the past. Remember England a hundred years ago-but what need to travel so far? May I venture to draw my example from nearer home, and ask, have we not been living in such an epoch? I beseech you, think whether the power which the Gospel preached by us wields on ourselves, on our churches, on the world, is what Christ meant it and fitted to exercise. Why, if we hold our own in respect to the material growth of our population, it is as much as we do. Where is the joyful buoyancy and expansive power with which the Gospel burst into the world? It looks like some stream that leaps from the hills, and at first hurries from cliff to cliff full of light and music, but flows slower and more sluggish as it advances, and at last almost stagnates in its flat marshes. Here we are with all our machinery, our culture, money, organisations-and the net result of it all at the year’s end is but a poor handful of ears. ‘Ye sow much and bring home little.’ Well may we take up the wail of the old Psalm, ‘We see not our signs. There is no more any prophet; neither is there any among us that knoweth how long-arise, O Lord, plead Thine own cause.’

If, then, there are such recurring seasons of languor, they must either go on deepening till sleep becomes death, or they must be broken by a new outburst of vigorous life. It would be better if we did not need the latter. The uninterrupted growth would be best; but if that has not been attained, then the ending of winter by spring, and the suppling of the dry branches, and the resumption of the arrested growth, is the next best, and the only alternative to rotting away.

And it is by such times that the Kingdom of Christ always has grown. Its history has been one of successive impulses gradually exhausted, as by friction and gravity, and mercifully repeated just at the moment when it was ceasing to advance and had begun to slide backwards. And in such a manner of progress, the Church's history has been in full analogy with that of all other forms of human association and activity. It is not in religion alone that there are 'revivals,' to use the word of which some people have such a dread. You see analogous phenomena in the field of literature, arts, social and political life. In them all, there come times of awakened interest in long-neglected principles. Truths which for many years had been left to burn unheeded, save by a faithful few watchers of the beacon, flame up all at once as the guiding pillars of a nation's march, and a whole people strike their tents and follow where they lead. A mysterious quickening thrills through society. A contagion of enthusiasm spreads like fire, fusing all hearts in one. The air is electric with change. Some great advance is secured at a stride; and before and after that supreme effort are years of comparative quiescence; those before being times of preparation, those after being times of fruition and exhaustion-but slow and languid compared with the joyous energy of that moment. One day may be as a thousand years in the history of a people, and a nation may be born in a day.

So also is the history of the Church. And thank God it is so, for if it had not been for the dawning of these times of refreshing, the steady operation of the Church's worldliness would have killed it long ago.

Surely, dear brethren, we ought to desire such a merciful interruption of the sad continuity of our languor and decay. The surest sign of its coming would be a widespread desire and expectation of its coming, joined with a penitent consciousness of our heavy and sinful slumber. For we believe in a God who never sends mouths but He sends meat to fill them, and in whose merciful providence every desire is a prophecy of its own fruition. This attitude of quickened anticipation, diffusing itself silently through many hearts, is like the light air that springs up before sunrise, or like the solemn hush that holds all nature listening before the voice of the Lord in the thunder.

And another sign of its approach is the extremity of the need. 'If winter come, can spring be far behind?' For He who is always with Zion strikes in with His help when the want is at its sorest. His 'right early' is often the latest moment before destruction. And though we are all apt to exaggerate the urgency of the hour and the severity of *our* conflict, it certainly does seem that, whether we regard the languor of the Church or the strength of our adversaries, succour delayed a little longer would be succour too late. ‘The tumult of those that rise up against Thee increaseth continually. It is time for Thee to work.’

The juxtaposition of these passages suggests for us-

II. The twofold explanation of these variations.

That bold metaphor of God’s sleeping and waking is often found in Scripture, and generally expresses the contrast between the long years of patient forbearance, during which evil things and evil men go on their rebellious road unchecked but by Love, and the dread moment when some throne of iniquity, some Babylon cemented by blood, is smitten to the dust. Such is the original application of the expression here. But the contrast may fairly be widened beyond that specific form of it, and taken to express any apparent variations in the forth-putting of His power. The prophet carefully avoids seeming to suggest that there are changes in God Himself. It is not He but His arm, that is to say. His active energy, that is invoked to awake. The captive Church prays that the dormant might which could so easily shiver her prison-house would flame forth into action.

We may, then, see here implied the cause of these alternations, of which we have been speaking, on its divine side, and then, in the corresponding verse addressed to the Church, the cause on the human side.

As to the former, it is true that God’s arm sometimes slumbers, and is not clothed with power. There are, as a fact, apparent variations in the energy with which He works in the Church and in the world. And they are real variations, not merely apparent. But we have to distinguish between the power, and what Paul calls ‘the might of the power.’ The one is final, constant, unchangeable. It does not necessarily follow that the other is. The rate of operation, so to speak, and the amount of energy actually brought into play may vary, though the force remains the same.

It is clear from experience that there are these variations; and the only question with which we are concerned is, are they mere arbitrary jets and spurts of a divine power, sometimes gushing out in full flood, sometimes trickling in painful drops, at the unknown will of the unseen hand which controls the flow? Is the ‘law of the Spirit of life’ at all revealed to us; or are the reasons occult, if there be any reasons at all other than a mere will that it shall be so? Surely, whilst we never can know all the depths of His counsels and all the solemn concourse of reasons which, to speak in man’s language, determine the energy of His manifested power, He has left us in no doubt that this is the weightiest part of the law which it follows-the might with which God works on the world through His Church varies according to the Church’s receptiveness and faithfulness.

Our second text tells us that if God’s arm seems to slumber and really does so, it is because Zion sleeps. In itself that immortal energy knows no variableness. ‘He fainteth not, neither is weary.’ ‘The Lord’s arm is not shortened that He cannot save.’ ‘He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.’ But He works through us; and we have the solemn and awful power of checking the might which would flow through us; of restraining and limiting the Holy One of Israel. It avails nothing that the ocean stretches shoreless to the horizon; a jar can hold only a jarful. The receiver’s capacity determines the amount received, and the receiver’s desire determines his capacity. The law has ever been, ‘according to your faith be it unto you.’ God gives as much as we will, as much as we can hold, as much as we use, and far more than we deserve. As long as we will bring our vessels the golden oil will flow, and after the last is filled, there yet remains more that we might have had, if we could have held it, and might have held if we would. ‘Ye are not straitened in Me, ye are straitened in yourselves.’

So, dear brethren, if we have to lament times of torpor and small success, let us be honest with ourselves, and recognise that all the blame lies with us. If God’s arm seems to slumber, it is because we are asleep. His power is invariable, and the Gospel which is committed to our trust has lost none of its ancient power, whatsoever men may say. If there be variations, they cannot be traced to the divine element in the Church, which in itself is constant, but altogether to the human, which shifts and fluctuates, as we only too sadly know. The light in the beacon-tower is steady, and the same;

but the beam it throws across the waters sometimes fades to a speck, and sometimes flames out clear and far across the heaving waves, according to the position of the glasses and shades around it. The sun pours out heat as profusely and as long at midwinter as on midsummer-day, and all the difference between the frost and darkness and glowing brightness and flowering life, is simply owing to the earth’s place in its orbit and the angle at which the unalterable rays fall upon it. The changes are in the terrestrial sphere; the heavenly is fixed for ever the same.

May I not venture to point an earnest and solemn appeal with these truths? Has there not been poured over us the spirit of slumber? Does it not seem as if an opium sky had been raining soporifics on our heads? We have had but little experience of the might of God amongst us of late years, and we need not wonder at it. There is no occasion to look far for the reason. We have only to regard the low ebb to which religious life has been reduced amongst us to have it all and more than all accounted for. I fully admit that there has been plenty of activity, perhaps more than the amount of real life warrants, not a little liberality, and many virtues. But how languid and torpid the true Christian life has been! how little enthusiasm! how little depth of communion with God! how little unworldly elevation of soul! how little glow of love! An improvement in social position and circumstances, a freer blending with the national life, a full share of civic and political honours, a higher culture in our pulpits, fine chapels, and applauding congregations-are but poor substitutes for what many of us have lost in racing after them. We have the departed prophets’ mantle, the outward resemblance to the fathers who have gone, but their fiery zeal has passed to heaven with them; and softer, weaker men, we stand timidly on the river’s brink, invoking the Lord God of Elijah, and too often the flood that obeyed them has no ear for our feebler voice.

I speak to many who are in some sort representatives of the churches throughout the land, and they can tell whether my words are on the whole true or overstrained. We who labour in our great cities, what say we? If one of the number may speak for the rest, we have to acknowledge that commercial prosperity and business cares, the eagerness after pleasure and the exigencies of political strife, diffused doubt and widespread artistic and literary culture, are eating the very life out of thousands in our churches, and lowering their fervour till, like molten iron cooling in the air, what was once all glowing with ruddy heat is crusted over with foul black scoriae ever encroaching on the tiny central warmth. You from rural churches, what say you? Have you not to speak of deepening torpor settling down on quiet corners, of the passing away of grey heads which leave no successors, of growing difficulties and lessened power to meet them, that make you sometimes all but despair?

I am not flinging indiscriminate censures. I know that there are lights as well as shades in the picture. I am not flinging censures at all. But I am giving voice to the confessions of many hearts, that our consciousness of our blame may be deepened, and we may hasten back to that dear Lord whom we have left to serve alone, as His first disciples left Him once to agonise alone under the gnarled olives in Gethsemane, while they lay sleeping in the moonlight. Listen to His gentle rebuke, full of pain and surprised love, 'What, could ye not watch with Me one hour?' Listen to His warning call, loving as the kiss with which a mother wakes her child, 'Arise, let us be going'-and let us shake the spirit of slumber from our limbs, and serve Him as those unsleeping spirits do, who rest not day nor night from vision and work and praise.

III. The beginning of all awaking is the Church's earnest cry to God.

It is with us as with infants, the first sign of whose awaking is a cry. The mother's quick ear hears it through all the household noises, and the poor little troubled life that woke to a scared consciousness of loneliness and darkness, is taken up into tender arms, and comforted and calmed. So, when we dimly perceive how torpid we have been, and start to find that we have lost our Father's hand, the first instinct of that waking, which must needs be partly painful, is to call to Him, whose ear hears our feeble cry amid the sound of praise like the voice of many waters, that billows round His throne, and whose folding arms keep us 'as one whom his mother comforteth.' The beginning of all true awaking must needs be prayer.

For every such stirring of quickened religious life must needs have in it bitter penitence and pain at the discovery flashed upon us of the wretched deadness of our past-and, as we gaze like some wakened sleepwalker into the abyss where another step might have smashed us to atoms, a shuddering terror seizes us that must cry, ‘Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.’ And every such stirring of quickened life will have in it, too, desire for more of His grace, and confidence in His sure bestowal of it, which cannot but breathe itself in prayer.

Nor is Zion’s cry to God only the beginning and sign of all true awaking: it is also the condition and indispensable precursor of all perfecting of recovery from spiritual languor.

I have already pointed out the relation between the waking of God and the waking of His Church, from which that necessarily follows. God’s power flows into our weakness in the measure and on condition of our desires. We are sometimes told that we err in praying for the outpouring of His Holy Spirit, because ever since Pentecost His Church has had the gift. The objection alleges an unquestioned fact, but the conclusion drawn from it rests on an altogether false conception of the manner of that abiding gift. The Spirit of God, and the power which comes from Him, are not given as a purse of money might be put into a man’s hand once and for all, but they are given in a continuous impartation and communication and are received and retained moment by moment, according to the energy of our desires and the faithfulness of our use. As well might we say, Why should I ask for natural life, I received it half a century ago? Yes, and at every moment of that half-century I have continued to live, not because of a past gift, but because at each moment God is breathing into my nostrils the breath of life. So is it with the life which comes from His Spirit. It is maintained by constant efflux from the fountain of Life, by constant impartation of His quickening breath. And as He must continually impart, so must we continually receive, else we perish. Therefore, brethren, the first step towards awaking, and the condition of all true revival in our own souls and in our churches, is this earnest cry, ‘Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord.

Thank God for the outpouring of a long unwonted spirit of prayer in many places. It is like the melting of the snows in the high Alps, at once the sign of spring and the cause of filling the stony river beds with flashing waters, that bring verdure and growth wherever they come. The winter has been long and hard. We have all to confess that we have been restraining prayer before God. Our work has been done with but little sense of our need of His blessing, with but little ardour of desire for His power. We have prayed lazily, scarcely believing that answers would come; we have not watched for the reply, but have been like some heartless marksman who draws his bow and does not care to look whether his arrow strikes the target. These mechanical words, these conventional petitions, these syllables winged by no real desire, inspired by no faith, these expressions of devotion, far too wide for their real contents, which rattle in them like a dried kernel in a nut, are these prayers? Is there any wonder that they have been dispersed in empty air, and that we have been put to shame before our enemies? Brethren in the ministry, do we need to be surprised at our fruitless work, when we think of our prayerless studies and of our faithless prayers? Let *us* remember that solemn word, ‘The pastors have become brutish, and have not sought the Lord, therefore they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered.’ And let us all, brethren, betake ourselves, with penitence and lowly consciousness of our sore need, to prayer, earnest and importunate, believing and persistent, like this heaven-piercing cry which captive Israel sent up from her weary bondage.

Look at the passionate earnestness of it-expressed in the short, sharp cry, thrice repeated, as from one in mortal need; and see to it that our drowsy prayers be like it. Look at the grand confidence with which it founds itself on the past, recounting the mighty deeds of ancient days, and looking back, not for despair but for joyful confidence, to the generations of old; and let our faint-hearted faith be quickened by the example, to expect great things of God. The age of miracles is not gone. The mightiest manifestations of God’s power in the spread of the Gospel in the past remain as patterns for His future. We have not to look back as from low-lying plains to the blue peaks on the horizon, across which the Church’s path once lay, and sigh over the changed conditions of the journey. The highest watermark that the river in flood has ever reached will be reached and overpassed again, though to-day the waters may seem to have hopelessly subsided. Greater triumphs and deliverances shall crown the future than have signalised the past. Let our faithful prayer base itself on the prophecies of history and on the unchangeableness of God.

Think, brethren, of the prayers of Christ. Even He, whose spirit needed not to be purged from stains or calmed from excitement, who was ever in His Father's house whilst He was about His Father's business, blending in one, action and contemplation, had need to pray. The moments of His life thus marked are very significant. When He began His ministry, the close of the first day of toil and wonders saw Him, far from gratitude and from want, in a desert place in prayer. When He would send forth His apostles, that great step in advance, in which lay the germ of so much, was preceded by solitary prayer. When the fickle crowd desired to make Him the centre of political revolution, He passed from their hands and beat back that earliest attempt to secularise His work, by prayer. When the seventy brought the first tidings of mighty works done in His name, He showed us how to repel the dangers of success, in that He thanked the Lord of heaven and earth who had revealed these things to babes. When He stood by the grave of Lazarus, the voice that waked the dead was preceded by the voice of prayer, as it ever must be. When He had said all that He could say to His disciples, He crowned all with His wonderful prayer for Himself, for them, and for us all. When the horror of great darkness fell upon His soul, the growing agony is marked by His more fervent prayer, so wondrously compact of shrinking fear and filial submission. When the cross was hid in the darkness of eclipse, the only words from the gloom were words of prayer. When, Godlike, He dismissed His spirit, manlike He commended it to His Father, and sent the prayer from His dying lips before Him to herald His coming into the unseen world. One instance remains, even more to our present purpose than all these-'It came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon Him.' Mighty mystery! In Him, too, the Son's desire is connected with the Father's gift, and the unmeasured possession of the Spirit was an answer to *His* prayer.

Then, brethren, let us lift our voices and our hearts. That which ascends as prayer descends as blessing, like the vapour that is drawn up by the kiss of the sun to fall in freshening rain. 'Call upon Me, and I will answer thee, and show thee great and hidden things which thou knowest not.'

IV. The answering call from God to Zion.

Our truest prayers are but the echo of God’s promises. God’s best answers are the echo of our prayers. As in two mirrors set opposite to each other, the same image is repeated over and over again, the reflection of a reflection, so here, within the prayer, gleams an earlier promise, within the answer is mirrored the prayer.

And in that reverberation, and giving back to us our petition transformed into a command, we are not to see a dismissal of it as if we had misapprehended our true want. It is not tantamount to, Do not ask me to put on my strength, but array yourselves in your own. The very opposite interpretation is the true one. The prayer of Zion is heard and answered. God awakes, and clothes Himself with might. Then, as some warrior king, himself roused from sleep and girded with flashing steel, bids the clarion sound through the grey twilight to summon the prostrate ranks that lie round his tent, so the sign of God’s awaking and the first act of His conquering might is this trumpet call-’The night is far spent, the day is at hand, let us put off the works of darkness,’-the night gear that was fit for slumber-’and put on the armour of light,’ the mail of purity that gleams and glitters even in the dim dawn. God’s awaking is our awaking. He puts on strength by making us strong; for His arm works through us, clothing itself, as it were, with our arm of flesh, and perfecting itself even in our weakness.

Nor is it to be forgotten that this, like all God’s commands, carries in its heart a promise. That earliest word of God’s is the type of all His latter behests: ‘Let there be light,’ and the mighty syllables were creative and self-fulfilling. So ever, with Him, to enjoin and to bestow are one and the same, and His command is His conveyance of power. He rouses us by His summons, He clothes us with power in the very act of bidding us put it on. So He answers the Church’s cry by stimulating us to quickened zeal, and making us more conscious of, and confident in, the strength which, in answer to our cry, He pours into our limbs.

But the main point which I would insist on in what remains of this sermon, is the practical discipline which this divine summons requires from us.

And first, let us remember that the chief means of quickened life and strength is deepened communion with Christ.

As we have been saying, our strength is ours by continual derivation from Him. It has no independent existence, any more than a sunbeam could have, severed from the sun. It is ours only in the sense that it flows through us, as a river through the land which it enriches. It is His whilst it is ours, it is ours when we know it to be His. Then, clearly, the first thing to do must be to keep the channels free by which it flows into our souls, and to maintain the connection with the great Fountainhead unimpaired. Put a dam across the stream, and the effect will be like the drying up of Jordan before Israel: ‘the waters that were above rose up upon an heap, and the waters that were beneath failed and were cut off,’ and the foul oozy bed was disclosed to the light of day. It is only by constant contact with Christ that we have any strength to put on.

That communion with Him is no mere idle or passive attitude, but the active employment of our whole nature with His truth, and with Him whom the truth reveals. The understanding must be brought into contact with the principles of His word, the heart must touch and beat against His heart, the will meekly lay its hand in His, the conscience draw at once its anodyne and its stimulus from His sacrifice, the passions know His finger on the reins, and follow, led in the silken leash of love. Then, if I may so say, Elisha’s miracle will be repeated in nobler form, and from Himself, the Life thus touching all our being, life will flow into our deadness. ‘He put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and he stretched himself upon the child, and the flesh of the child waxed warm.’ So, dear brethren, all our practical duty is summed up in that one word, the measure of our obedience to which is the measure of all our strength-’Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.’

Again, this summons calls us to the faithful use of the power which, on condition of that communion, we have.

There is no doubt a temptation, in all times like the present, to look for some new and extraordinary forms of blessing, and to substitute such expectation for present work with our present strength. There is nothing new to look for. There is no need to wait for anything more than we possess. Remember the homely old proverb, ‘You never know what you can do till you try,' and though we are conscious of much unfitness, and would sometimes gladly wait till our limbs are stronger, let us brace ourselves for the work, assured that in it strength will be given to us that equals our desire. There is a wonderful power in honest work to develop latent energies and reveal a man to himself. I suppose, in most cases, no one is half so much surprised at a great man's greatest deeds as he is himself. They say that there is dormant electric energy enough in a few raindrops to make a thunderstorm, and there is dormant spiritual force enough in the weakest of us to flash into beneficent light, and peal notes of awaking into many a deaf ear. The effort to serve your Lord will reveal to you strength that you know not. And it will increase the strength which it brings into play, as the used muscles grow like whipcord, and the practised fingers become deft at their task, and every faculty employed is increased, and every gift wrapped in a napkin melts like ice folded in a cloth, according to that solemn law, 'To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.'

Then be sure that to its last particle you are using the strength you have, ere you complain of not having enough for your tasks. Take heed of the vagrant expectations that wait for they know not what, and the apparent prayers that are really substitutes for possible service. 'Why liest thou on thy face? Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward.'

The Church's resources are sufficient for the Church's work, if the resources are used. We are tempted to doubt it, by reason of our experience of failure and our consciousness of weakness. We are more than ever tempted to doubt it to-day, when so many wise men are telling us that our Christ is a phantom, our God a stream of tendency, our Gospel a decaying error, our hope for the world a dream, and our work in the world done. We stand before our Master with doubtful hearts, and, as we look along the ranks sitting there on the green grass, and then at the poor provisions which make all our store, we are sometimes tempted almost to think that He errs when He says with that strange calmness of His, 'They need not depart, give ye them to eat.' But go out among the crowds and give confidently what you have, and you will find that you have enough and to spare. If ever our stores seem inadequate, it is because they are reckoned up by sense, which takes cognizance of the visible, instead of by faith which beholds the real. Certainly five loaves and two small fishes are not enough, but are not five loaves and two small fishes and a miracle-working hand behind them, enough? It is poor calculation that leaves out Christ from the estimate of our forces. The weakest man and Jesus to back him are more than all antagonism, more than sufficient for all duty. Be not seduced into doubt of your power, or of your success, by others' sneers, or by your own faint-heartedness. The confidence of ability is ability. 'Screw your courage to the sticking place,' and you will *not* fail-and see to it that you use the resources you have, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 'Put on *thy* strength, O Zion.'

So, dear brethren, to gather all up in a sentence, let us confidently look for times of blessing, penitently acknowledge that our own faithlessness has hindered the arm of the Lord, earnestly beseech Him to come in His rejoicing strength, and, drawing ever fresh power from constant communion with our dear Lord, use it to its last drop for Him. Then, like the mortal leader of Israel, as he pondered doubtingly with sunken eyes on the hard task before his untrained host, we shall look up and be aware of the presence of the sworded angel, the immortal Captain of the host of the Lord, standing ready to save, 'putting on righteousness as a breastplate, an helmet of salvation on His head, and clad with zeal as a cloak.' From His lips, which give what they command, comes the call, 'Take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.' Hearkening to His voice, the city of the strong ones shall be made an heap before our wondering ranks, and the land shall lie open to our conquering march.

Wheresoever *we* lift up the cry, 'Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord,' there follows, swift as the thunderclap on the lightning flash, the rousing summons, 'Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem!' Wheresoever it is obeyed there will follow in due time the joyful chorus, as in this context, 'Sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem; the Lord hath made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.'

72)Isaiah 52:3

A PARADOX OF SELLING AND BUYING

Isa. 52:3.

THE first reference of these words is of course to the Captivity. They come in the midst of a grand prophecy of freedom, all full of leaping gladness and buoyant hope. The Seer speaks to the captives; they had ‘sold themselves for nought.’ What had they gained by their departure from God?-bondage. What had they won in exchange for their freedom?- only the hard service of Babylon. As Deuteronomy puts it: ‘Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God with joyfulness. . . by reason of the abundance of all things, therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies. . . in want of all things.’ A wise exchange! a good market they had brought their goods to! In striking ironical parallel the prophet goes on to say that so should they be redeemed. They had got nothing by bondage, they should give nothing for liberty. This text has its highest application in regard to our captivity and our redemption.

I. The reality of the captivity.

The true idea of bondage is that of coercion of will and conscience, the dominance and tyranny of what has no right to rule. So men are really in bondage when they think themselves most free. The only real slavery is that in which we are tied and bound by our own passions and lusts. ‘He that committeth sin is the slave of sin.’ He thinks himself master of himself and his actions, and boasts that he has broken away from the restraints of obedience, but really he has only exchanged masters. What a Master to reject-and what a master to prefer!

II. The voluntariness of the captivity.

‘Ye have sold *yourselves*,’ and become authors of your own bondage. No sin is forced upon any man, and no one is to blame for it but himself. The many excuses which people make to themselves are hollow. Now-a-days we hear a great deal of heredity, how a man is what his ancestors have made him, and of organisation, how a man is what his body makes him, and of environment, how a man is what his surroundings make him. There is much truth in all that, and men’s guilt is much diminished by circumstances, training, and temperament. The amount of responsibility is not for us to settle, in regard to others, or even in regard to ourselves. But all that does not touch the fact that we ourselves have sold ourselves. No false brethren have sold us as they did Joseph.

The strong tendency of human nature is always to throw the blame on some one else; God or the devil, the flesh or the world, it does not matter which. But it remains true that every man sinning is ‘drawn away of *his own* lust and enticed.’

After all, conscience witnesses to the truth, and by that mysterious sense of guilt and gnawing of remorse which is quite different from the sense of mistake, tears to tatters the sophistries. Nothing is more truly my own than my sin.

III. The profitlessness of the captivity.

‘For nought’; that is a picturesque way of putting the truth that all sinful life fails to satisfy a man. The meaning of one of the Hebrew words for sin is ‘missing the mark.’ It is a blunder as well as a crime. It is trying to draw water from broken cisterns. It is ‘as when a hungry man dreameth and behold he eateth, but he awaketh and his soul is empty.’ Sin buys men with fairy money, which looks like gold, but in the morning is found to be but a handful of yellow and faded leaves. ‘Why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread?’ It cannot but be so, for only God can satisfy a man, and only in doing His will are we sure of sowing seed which will yield us bread enough and to spare, and nothing but bread. In all other harvests, tares mingle and they yield poisoned flour. We never get what we aim at when we do wrong, for what we aim at is not the mere physical or other satisfaction which the temptation offers us, but rest of soul-and that we do *not* get. And we are sure to get something that we did not aim at or look for-a wounded conscience, a worsened nature, often hurts to health or reputation, and other consequent ills, that were carefully kept out of sight, while we were being seduced by the siren voice. The old story of the traitress, who bargained to let the enemies into the city, if they would give her ‘what they wore on their left arms,’ meaning bracelets, and was crushed to death under their shields heaped on her, is repeated in the experience of every man who listens to the ‘juggling fiends, who keep the word of promise to the ear, but break it to the hope.’ The truth of this is attested by a cloud of witnesses. Conscience and experience answer the question, ‘What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed?’ Wasted lives answer; tyrannous evil habits answer; diseased bodies, blighted reputations, bitter memories answer.

IV. The unbought freedom.

‘Ye shall be redeemed without money.’ You gained nothing by your bondage; you need give nothing for your emancipation. The original reference is, of course, to the great act of divine power which set these literal captives free, not for price nor reward. As in the Exodus from Egypt, so in that from Babylon, no ransom was paid, but a nation of bondsmen was set at liberty without war or compensation. That was a strange thing in history. The paradox of buying back without buying is a symbol of the Christian redemption.

[1] A price has been paid.

‘Ye were redeemed not with corruptible things as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ.’ The New Testament idea of redemption, no doubt, has its roots in the Old Testament provisions for the Goel or kinsman redeemer, who was to procure the freedom of a kinsman. But whatever figurative elements may enter into it, its core is the ethical truth that Christ’s death is the means by which the bonds of sin are broken. There is much in the many-sided applications and powers of that Death which we do not know, but this is clear, that by it the power of sin is destroyed and the guilt of sin taken away.

[2] That price has been paid for all.

We have therefore nothing to pay. A slave cannot redeem himself, for all that he has is his master’s already. So, no efforts of ours can set ourselves free from the ‘cords of our sins.’ Men try to bring something of their own. ‘I do my best and God will have mercy.’ We will bring our own penitence, efforts, good works, or rely on Church ordinances, or anything rather than sue *in forma pauperis*. How hard it is to get men to see that 'It is finished,' and to come and rest only on the mere mercy of God.

How do we ally ourselves with that completed work? By simple faith, of which an essential is the recognition that we have nothing and can do nothing.

Suppose an Israelite in Babylon who did not choose to avail himself of the offered freedom; he must die in bondage. So must we if we refuse to have eternal life as the gift of God. The prophet's paradoxical invitation, 'He that hath no money, come ye, buy. . . without money,' is easily solved. The price is to give up ourselves and forsake all self-willed striving after self-purchased freedom which is but subtler bondage. 'If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.' If not, then are ye slaves indeed, having 'sold yourselves for nought,' and declined to be 'redeemed without money.'

73)Isaiah 52:11

Isaiah

MARCHING ORDERS

CLEAN CARRIERS

Isa. 52:11.

The context points to a great deliverance. It is a good example of the prophetical habit of casting prophecies of the future into the mould of the past. The features of the Exodus are repeated, but some of them are set aside. This deliverance, whatever it be, is to be after the pattern of that old story, but with very significant differences. Then, the departing Israelites had spoiled the Egyptians and come out, laden with silver and gold which had been poured into their hands; now there is to be no bringing out of anything which was tainted with the foulness of the land of captivity. Then the priests had borne the sacred vessels for sacrifice, now they are to exercise the same holy function, and for its discharge purity is demanded. Then, they had gone out in haste; now, there is to be no precipitate flight, but calmly, as those who are guided by God for their leader, and shielded from all pursuit by God as their rearward, the men of this new Exodus are to take their march from the new Egypt.

No doubt the nearest fulfilment is to be found in the Return from Babylon, and the narrative in Ezra may be taken as a remarkable parallel to the prophecy here. But the restriction to Babylon must seem impossible to any reader who interprets aright the significance of the context, and observes that our text follows the grand words of verse 10, and precedes the Messianic prophecy of Isa. 52:13 and of Isa. 53:1 - Isa. 53:12. To such a reader the principle will not be doubtful according to which Egypt and Babylon are transparencies through which mightier forms shine, and a more wonderful and world-wide making bare of the arm of the Lord is seen. Christ's great redemption is the highest interpretation of these words; and the trumpet-call of our text is addressed to all who have become partakers of it.

So Paul quotes the text in 2Co. 6:17, blending with it other words which are gathered from more than one passage of Scripture. We may then take the whole as giving the laws of the new Exodus, and also as shadowing certain great peculiarities connected with it, by which it surpasses all the former deliverances.

I. The Pilgrims of this new Exodus.

A true Christian is a pilgrim, not only because he, like all men, is passing through a life which is transient, but because he is consciously detached from the Visible and Present, as a consequence of his conscious attachment to the Unseen and Eternal. What is said in Hebrews of Abraham is true of all inheritors of his faith: 'dwelling in tabernacles, for he looked for the city.'

II. The priests.

Priests and Levites bore the sacred vessels. All Christians are priests. The only true priesthood is Christ's, ours is derived from Him. In that universal priesthood of believers are included the privileges and obligations of a. Access to God-Communion.

b. Offering spiritual sacrifices. Service and self-surrender.

c. Mediation with men.

Proclamation. Intercession. Thus follows d. Bearing the holy vessels. A sacred deposit is entrusted to them-the honour and name of God; the treasure of the Gospel.

III. The separation that becomes pilgrims.

‘Come out and be ye separate.’ The very meaning of our Christian profession is separation. There is ludicrous inconsistency in saying that we are Christians and not being pilgrims. Of course, the separation is not to be worked out by mere external asceticism or withdrawal from the world. That has been so thoroughly preached and practised of late years that we much need the other side to be put. There should be some plain difference between the life of Christians and that of men whose portion is in this life. They should differ in the aspect under which all outward things are regarded.

To a Christian they are to be means to an end, and ever to be felt to be evanescent. They should differ in the motive for action, which should, for a Christian, ever be the love of God. They should differ in that a Christian abstains from much which non-Christians feel free to do, and often has to say, ‘So did not I, because of the fear of the Lord.’ He who marches light marches quickly and marches far; to bring the treasures of Egypt along with us, is apt to retard our steps.

IV. The purity that becomes priests.

The Levites would cleanse themselves before taking up the holy vessels. And for us, clean hands and a pure heart are essential. There is no communion with God without these; a small speck of dust in the eye blinds us. There is no sacrificial service without them. No efficient work among men can be done without them. One main cause of the weakness of our Christian testimony is the imperfection of character in the witnesses, which is more powerful than all talk and often neutralises much effort. Keen eyes are watching us.

The consciousness of our own impurity should send us to Jesus, with the prayer and the confidence, 'Cleanse me and I shall be clean.' 'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.' 'He hath loosed us from our sins and made us kings and priests to God.'

74)Isaiah 52:12

Isaiah

MARCHING ORDERS

Isa. 52:11 - Isa. 52:12.

These ringing notes are parts of a highly poetic picture of that great deliverance which inspired this prophet's most exalted strains. It is described with constant allusion to the first Exodus, but also with significant differences. Now no doubt the actual historical return of the Jews from the Babylonish captivity is the object that fills the foreground of this vision, but it by no means exhausts its significance. The restriction of the prophecy to that more immediate fulfilment may well seem impossible when we note that my text follows the grand promise that 'all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God,' and immediately precedes the Messianic prophecy of the fifty-third chapter. Egypt was transparent, and through it shone Babylon; Babylon was transparent, and through it shone Christ's redemption. That was the real and highest fulfilment of the prophet's anticipations, and the trumpet-calls of my text are addressed to all who have a share in it. We have, then, here, under highly metaphorical forms, the grand ideal of the Christian life; and I desire to note briefly its various features.

I. First, then, we have it set forth as a march of warrior priests.

Note that phrase-'Ye that bear the vessels of the Lord.' The returning exiles as a whole are so addressed, but the significance of the expression, and the precise metaphor which it is meant to convey, may be questionable. The word rendered 'vessel' is a wide expression, meaning any kind of equipment, and in other places of the Old Testament the whole phrase rendered here, 'ye that bear the vessels,' is translated 'armour-bearers.' Such an image would be quite congruous with the context here, in which warlike figures abound. And if so, the picture would be that of an army on the march, each man carrying some of the weapons of the great Captain and Leader. But perhaps the other explanation is more likely, which regards 'the vessels of the Lord' as being an allusion to the sacrificial and other implements of worship, which, in the first Exodus, the Levites carried on the march. And if that be the meaning, as seems more congruous with the command of purity which is deduced from the function of bearing the vessels, then the figure here, of course, is that of a company of priests. I venture to throw the two ideas together, and to say that we may here find an ideal of the Christian community as being a great company of warrior-priests on the march, guarding a sacred deposit which has been committed to their charge.

Look, then, at that combination in the true Christian character of the two apparently opposite ideas of warrior and priest. It suggests that all the life is to be conflict, and that all the conflict is to be worship; that everywhere, in the thick of the fight, we may still bear the remembrance of the 'secret place of the most High.' It suggests, too, that the warfare is worship, that the offices of the priest and of the warrior are one and the same thing, and both consist in their mediating between man and God, bringing God in His Gospel to men, and bringing men through their faith to God. The combination suggests, likewise, how, in the true Christian character, there ought ever to be blended, in strange harmony, the virtues of the soldier and the qualities of the priest; compassion for the ignorant and them that are out of the way, with courage; meekness with strength; a quiet, placable heart hating strife, joined to a spirit that cheerily fronts every danger and is eager for the conflict in which evil is the foe and God the helper. The old Crusaders went to battle with the Cross on their hearts, and on their shoulders, and on the hilts of their swords; and we, too, in all our warfare, have to remember that its weapons are not carnal but spiritual, and that only then do we fight as the Captain of our salvation fought, when our arms are meekness and pity, and our warfare is waged in gentleness and love.

Note, further, that in this phrase we have the old, old metaphor of life as a march, but so modified as to lose all its melancholy and weariness and to become an elevating hope. The idea which runs through all poetry, of life as a journey, suggests effort, monotonous change, a uniform law of variety and transiency, struggle and weariness, but the Christian thought of life, while preserving the idea of change, modifies it into the blessed thought of progress. Life, if it is as Christ meant it to be, is a journey in the sense that it is a continuous effort, not unsuccessful, toward a clearly discerned goal, our eternal home. The Christian march is a march from slavery to freedom, and from a foreign land to our native soil.

Again, this metaphor suggests that this company of marching priests have in charge a sacred deposit. Paul speaks of the ‘glorious Gospel which was committed to my trust.’ ‘That good thing which was committed unto thee by the Holy Ghost, keep.’ The history of the return from Babylon in the Book of Ezra presents a remarkable parallel to the language of my text, for there we are told how, in the preparation for the march, the leader entrusted the sacred vessels of the temple, which the liberality of the heathen king had returned to him, to a group of Levites and priests, weighing them at the beginning, and bidding them keep them safe until they were weighed again in the courts of the Lord’s house in Jerusalem.

And, in like manner, to us Christians is given the charge of God’s great weapons of warfare, with which He contends with the wickedness of the world-viz. that great message of salvation through, and in, the Cross of Jesus Christ. And there are committed to us, further, to guard sedulously, and to keep bright and untarnished and undiminished in weight and worth, the precious treasures of the Christian life of communion with Him. And we may give another application to the figure and think of the solemn trust which is put into our hands, in the gift of our own selves, which we ourselves can either waste, and stain, and lose, or can guard and polish into vessels ‘meet for the Master’s use.’

Gathering, then, these ideas together, we take this as the ideal of the Christian community-a company of priests on the march, with a sacred deposit committed to their trust. If we reflected more on such a conception of the Christian life, we should more earnestly hearken to, and more sedulously discharge, the commands that are built thereon. To these commands I now turn.

II. Note the separation that befits the marching company.

‘Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing, go ye out of the midst of her.’ In the historical fulfilment of my text, separation from Babylon was the preliminary of the march. Our task is not so simple; our separation from Babylon must be the constant accompaniment of our march. And day by day it has to be repeated, if we would lift a foot in advance upon the road. There is still a Babylon. The order in the midst of which we live is not organised on the fundamental laws of Christ’s Kingdom. And wherever there are men who seek to order their lives as Christ would have them to be ordered, the first necessity for them is, ‘Come out from amongst them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord.’ There is no need in this day to warn Christian people against an exaggerated interpretation of these commandments. I almost wish there were more need. We have been told so often, in late years, of how Christian men ought to mingle with all the affairs of life, and count nothing that is human foreign to themselves, that it seems to me there is vast need for a little emphasis being put on the other side of the truth, and for separation being insisted upon. Wherever there is a real grasp of Jesus Christ for a man’s own personal Saviour, and a true submission to Him as the Pattern and Guide of life, a broad line of demarcation between that man and the irreligious life round him will draw itself. If the heart have its tendrils twined round the Cross, it will have detached them from the world around. Separation by reason of an entirely different conception of life, separation because the present does not look to you as it looks to the men who see only it, separation because you and they have not only a different ideal and theory of life, but are living from different motives and for different ends and by different powers, will be the inevitable result of any real union with Jesus Christ. If I am joined to Him I am separated from the world; and detachment from it is the simple and necessary result of any real attachment to Him. There will always be a gulf in feeling, in purpose, in view, and therefore there will often have to be separation outward things. ‘So did not I because of the fear of the Lord’ will have to be said over and over again by any real and honest follower of the Master.

This separation will not only be the result of union with Jesus Christ, but it is the condition of all progress in our union with Him. We must be unmoored before we can advance. Many a caravan has broken down in African exploration for no other reason than because it was too well provided with equipments, and so collapsed of its own weight. Therefore, our prophet in the context says, ‘Touch no unclean thing.’ *There* is one of the differences between the new Exodus and the old. When Israel came out of Egypt they spoiled the Egyptians, and came away laden with gold and jewels; but it is dangerous work bringing anything away from Babylon with us. Its treasure has to be left if we would march close behind our Lord and Master. We must touch ‘no unclean thing,’ because our hands are to be filled with the ‘vessels of the Lord.’ I am preaching no impossible asceticism, no misanthropical withdrawal from the duties of life, and the obligations that we owe to society. God’s world is a good one; man’s world is a bad one. It is man’s world that we have to leave, but the lofties, sanctity requires no abstention from anything that God has ordained.

Now, dear friends, I venture to think that this message is one that we all dreadfully need to-day. There are a great many Christians, so-called, in this generation, who seem to think that the main object they should have in view is to obliterate the distinction between themselves and the world of ungodly men, and in occupation and amusements to be as like people that have no religion as they possibly can manage. So they get credit for being ‘liberal’ Christians, and praise from quarters whose praise is censure, and whose approval ought to make a Christian man very uncomfortable. Better by far the narrowest Puritanism-I was going to say better by far monkish austerities-than a Christianity which knows no self-denial, which is perfectly at home in an irreligious atmosphere, and which resents the exhortation to separation, because it would fain keep the things that it is bidden to drop. God’s reiteration of the text through Paul to the Church in luxurious, corrupt, wealthy Corinth is a gospel for this day for English Christians, ‘Come out from among them, and I will receive you.’

III. Further, note the purity which becomes the bearers of the vessels of the Lord.

‘Be ye clean.’ The priest’s hands must be pure, which figure, being translated, is that transparent purity of conduct and character is demanded from all Christian men who profess to bear God’s sacred deposit. You cannot carry it unless your hands are clean, for all the gifts that God gives us glide from our grasp if our hands be stained. Monkish legends tell of sacred pictures and vessels which, when an impure touch was laid upon them, refused to be lifted from their place, and grew there, as rooted, in spite of all efforts to move them. Whoever seeks to hold the gifts of God in His Gospel in dirty hands will fail miserably in the attempt; and all the joy and peace of communion, the assurance of God's love, and the calm hope of immortal life will vanish as a soap bubble, grasped by a child, turns into a drop of foul water on its palm, if we try to hold them in foul hands. Be clean, or you cannot bear the vessels of the Lord.

And further, remember that no priestly service nor any successful warfare for Jesus Christ is possible, except on the same condition. One sin, as well as one sinner, destroys much good, and a little inconsistency on the part of us professing Christians neutralises all the efforts that we may ever try to put forth for Him. Logic requires that God's vessels should be carried with clean hands. God requires it, men require it, and have a right to require it. The mightiest witness for Him is the witness of a pure life, and if we go about the world professing to be His messengers, and carrying His epistle in our dirty fingers, the soiled thumb-mark upon it will prevent men from caring for the message; and the Word will be despised because of the unworthiness of its bearers. 'Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord.'

IV. Lastly, notice the leisurely confidence which should mark the march that is guarded by God. 'Ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight, for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your reward.'

This is partly an analogy and partly a contrast with the story of the first Exodus. The unusual word translated 'with haste' is employed in the Pentateuch to describe the hurry and bustle, not altogether due to the urgency of the Egyptians, but partly also to the terror of Israel, with which that first flight was conducted. And, says my text, in this new coming out of bondage there shall be no need for tremor or perturbation, lending wings to any man's feet; but, with quiet deliberation, like that with which Peter was brought out of his dungeon, because God knew that He could bring him out safely, the new Exodus shall be carried on.

'He that believeth shall not make haste.' Why should he? There is no need for a Christian man ever to be flurried, or to lose his self-command, or ever to be in an undignified and unheroic hurry. His march should be unceasing, swift, but calm and equable, as the motions of the planets, unhasting and unresting.

There is a very good reason why we need not be in any haste due to alarm. For, as in the first Exodus, the guiding pillar led the march, and sometimes, when there were foes behind, as at the Red Sea, shifted its place to the rear, so ‘the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rereward.’ He besets us behind and before, going in front to be our Guide, and in the rear for our protection, gathering up the stragglers, so that there shall not be ‘a hoof left behind,’ and putting a wall of iron between us and the swarms of hovering enemies that hang on our march. Thus encircled by God, we shall be safe. Christ fulfils what the prophet pledged God to do; for He goes before us, the Pattern, the Captain of our salvation, the Forerunner, ‘the Breaker is gone up before them ‘; and He comes behind us to guard us from evil; for He is ‘the *Alpha* and *Omega*, the beginning and the ending, the Almighty.’

Dear brethren, life for us all must be a weary pilgrimage. We cannot alter that. It is the lot of every son of man. But we have the power of either making it a dreary, solitary tramp over an undefended desert, to end in the great darkness, or else of making it a march in which the twin sisters Joy and Peace shall lead us forth, and go out with us, and the other pair of angel-forms, ‘Goodness and Mercy,’ shall follow us all the days of our lives. We may make it a journey with Jesus for Guide and Companion, to Jesus as our Home. ‘The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs, and everlasting joy upon their heads.’

75)Isaiah 53:1

Isaiah

THE ARM OF THE LORD

Isa. 53:1.

In the second Isaiah there are numerous references to ‘the arm of the Lord.’ It is a natural symbol of the active energy of Jehovah, and is analogous to the other symbol of ‘the Face of Jehovah,’ which is also found in this book, in so far as it emphasises the notion of power in manifestation, though 'the Face' has a wider range and may be explained as equivalent to that part of the divine Nature which is turned to men. The latter symbol will then be substantially parallel with 'the Name.' But there are traces of a tendency to conceive of 'the arm of the Lord' as personified, for instance, where we read [Isa. 63:12] that Jehovah 'caused His glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses.' Moses was not the true leader, but was himself led and sustained by the divine Power, dimly conceived as a person, ever by his side to sustain and direct. There seems to be a similar imperfect consciousness of personification in the words of the text, especially when taken in their close connection with the immediately following prophecy of the suffering servant. It would be doing violence to the gradual development of Revelation, like tearing asunder the just-opening petals of a rose, to read into this question of the sad prophet full-blown Christian truth, but it would be missing a clear anticipation of that truth to fail to recognise the forecasting of it that *is* here.

I. We have here a prophetic forecast that the arm of the Lord is a person.

The strict monotheism of the Old Testament does not preclude some very remarkable phenomena in its modes of conception and speech as to the divine Nature. We hear of the 'angel of His face,' and again of 'the angel in whom is His Name.' We hear of 'the angel' to whom divine worship is addressed and who speaks, as we may say, in a divine dialect and does divine acts. We meet, too, with the personification of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs, to which are ascribed characteristics and are attributed acts scarcely distinguishable from divine, and eminently associated in the creative work. Our text points in the same direction as these representations. They all tend in the direction of preparing for the full Christian truth of the personal 'Power of God.' What was shown by glimpses 'at sundry times and in divers manners,' with many gaps in the showing and much left all unshown, is perfectly revealed in the Son. The New Testament, by its teaching as to 'the Eternal Word,' endorses, clears, and expands all these earlier dimmer adumbrations. That Word is the agent of the divine energy, and the conception of power as being exercised by the Word is even loftier than that of it as put forth by 'the arm,' by as much as intelligent and intelligible utterance is more spiritual and higher than force of muscle. The apostolic designation of Jesus as ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God’ blends the two ideas of these two symbols. The conception of Jesus Christ as the arm of the Lord, when united with that of the Eternal Word, points to a threefold sphere and manner of His operations, as the personal manifestation of the active power of God. In the beginning, the arm of the Lord stretched out the heavens as a tent to dwell in, and without Him ‘was not anything made that was made.’ In His Incarnation, He carried into execution all God’s purposes and fulfilled His whole will. From His throne He wields divine power, and rules the universe. ‘The help that is done on earth, He doeth it all Himself,’ and He works in the midst of humanity that redeeming work which none but He can effect.

II. We have here a prophetic paradox that the mightiest revelation of the arm of the Lord is in weakness.

The words of the text stand in closest connection with the great picture of the Suffering Servant which follows, and the pathetic figure portrayed there is the revealing of the arm of the Lord. The close bringing together of the ideas of majesty and power and of humiliation, suffering, and weakness, would be a paradox to the first hearers of the prophecy. Its solution lies in the historical manifestation of Jesus. Looking on Him, we see that the growing up of that root out of a dry ground was the revelation of the great power of God. In Jesus’ lowly humanity God’s power is made perfect in man’s weakness, in another and not less true sense than that in which the apostle spoke. There we see divine power in its noblest form, in its grandest operation, in its widest sweep, in its loftiest purpose. That humble man, lowly and poor, despised and rejected in life, hanging faint and pallid on the Roman cross, and dying in the dark, seems a strange manifestation of the ‘glory’ of God, but the Cross is indeed His throne, and sublime as are the other forms in which Omnipotence clothes itself, this is, to human eyes and hearts, the highest of them all. In Jesus the arm of the Lord is revealed in its grandest operation. Creation and the continual sustaining of a universe are great, but redemption is greater. It is infinitely more to say, ‘He giveth power to the faint,’ than to say, ‘For that He is strong in might, not one faileth,’ and to principalities and powers in heavenly places who have gazed on the grand operations of divine power for ages, new lessons of what it can effect are taught by the redemption of sinful men. The divine power that is enshrined in Jesus' weakness is power in its widest sweep, for it is to every one that believeth, and in its loftiest purpose, for it is 'unto salvation.'

III. We have here a prophetic lament that the power revealed to all is unseen by many.

The text is a wail over darkened eyes, blind at noonday. The prophet's radiant anticipations of the Servant's exaltation, and of God's holy arm being made bare in the eyes of all nations, are clouded over by the thought of the incredulity of the multitude to 'our report.' Jehovah had indeed 'made bare His arm,' as a warrior throws back his loose robe, when he would strike. But what was the use of that, if dull eyes would not look? The 'report' had been loudly proclaimed, but what was the use of that, if ears were obstinately stopped? Alas, alas! nothing that God can do secures that men shall see what He shows, or listen to what He speaks. The mystery of mysteries is that men can, the tragedy of tragedies is that they will, make any possible revelation of none effect, so far as they are concerned.

The Arm is revealed, but only by those who have 'believed our report' does the prophet deem it to be actually beheld. Faith is the individual condition on which the perfected revelation becomes a revelation to me. The 'salvation of our God' is shown in splendour to 'all the ends of the earth,' but only they who exercise faith in Jesus, who is the power of God, will see that far-shining light. If we are not of those who 'believe the report,' we shall, notwithstanding that 'He hath made bare His holy arm,' be of those who grope at noonday as in the dark.

76)Isaiah 53:2-3

Isaiah

THE SUFFERING SERVANT-I

Isa. 53:2 - Isa. 53:3.

To hold fast the fulfilment of this prophecy of the Suffering Servant in Jesus it is not necessary to deny its reference to Israel. Just as offices, institutions, and persons in it were prophetic, and by their failures to realise to the full their own *role*, no less than by their partial presentation of it, pointed onwards to Him, in whom their idea would finally take form and substance, so this great picture of God’s Servant, which was but imperfectly reproduced even by the Israel within Israel, stood on the prophet’s page a fair though sad dream, with nothing corresponding to it in the region of reality and history, till He came and lived and suffered.

If we venture to make it the theme of a short series of sermons, our object is simply to endeavour to bring out clearly the features of the wonderful portrait. If they are fully apprehended, it seems to us that the question of who is the original of the picture answers itself. We must note that the whole is introduced by a ‘For,’ that is to say, that it is all explanatory of the unbelief and blindness to the revealed arm of the Lord, which the prophet has just been lamenting. This close connection with the preceding words accounts for the striking way in which the description of the person of the Servant is here blended with, or interrupted by, that of the manner in which he was treated.

I. The Servant’s lowly origin and growth.

‘He *grew*,’-not ‘*shall* grow.’ The whole is cast into the form of history, and to begin the description with a future tense is not only an error in grammar but gratuitously introduces an incongruity. The word rendered ‘tender plant’ means a sucker, and ‘root’ probably would more properly be taken as a shoot from a root, the tree having been felled, and nothing left but the stump. There is here, then, at the outset, an unmistakable reference to the prophecy in Isa. 11:1, which is Messianic prophecy, and therefore there is a presumption that this too has a Messianic reference. In the original passage the stump or ‘stock’ is explained as being the humiliated house of David, and it is only following the indications supplied by the fact of the second Isaiah’s quotation of the first, if we take the implication in his words to be the same. Royal descent, but from a royal house fallen on evil days, is the plain meaning here.

And the eclipse of its glory is further brought out in that not only does the shoot spring from a tree, all whose leafy honours have long been lopped away, but which is ‘in a dry ground.’ Surely we do not force a profounder meaning than is legitimate into this feature of the picture when we think of the Carpenter's Son 'of the house and lineage of David,' of the Son of God 'who was found in fashion as a man,' of Him who was born in a stable, and grew up in a tiny village hidden away among the hills of Galilee, who, as it were, stole into the world 'not with observation,' and opened out, as He grew, the wondrous blossom of a perfect humanity such as had never before been evolved from any root, nor grown on the most sedulously cultured plant. Is this part of the prophet's ideal realised in any of the other suggested realisations of it?

But there is still another point in regard to the origin and growth of the lowly shoot from the felled stump-it is 'before Him.' Then the unnoticed growth is noticed by Jehovah, and, though cared for by no others, is cared for, tended, and guarded, by Him.

II. The Servant's unattractive form.

Naturally a shoot springing in a dry ground would show but little beauty of foliage or flower. It would be starved and colourless beside the gaudy growths in fertile, well-watered gardens. But that unattractiveness is not absolute or real; it is only 'that *we* should desire Him.' We are but poor judges of true 'form or comeliness,' and what is lustrous with perfect beauty in God's eyes may be, and generally is, plain and dowdy in men's. Our tastes are debased. Flaunting vulgarities and self-assertive ugliness captivate vulgar eyes, to which the serene beauties of mere goodness seem insipid. Cockatoos charm savages to whom the iridescent neck of a dove has no charms. Surely this part of the description fits Jesus as it does no other. The entire absence of outward show, or of all that pleases the spoiled tastes of sinful men, need not be dwelt on. No doubt the world has slowly come to recognise in Him the moral ideal, a perfect man, but He has been educating it for nineteen hundred years to get it up to that point, and the educational process is very far from complete. The real desire of most men is for something much more pungent and dashing than Jesus' meek wisdom and stainless purity, which breed in them ennui rather than longing. 'Not this man but Barabbas,' was the approximate realisation of the Jewish ideal then; not this man but-some type or other of a less oppressive perfection, and that calls for less effort to imitate it, is the world's real cry still. Pilate's scornfully wondering question: Art *Thou*-such a poor-looking creature-the King of the Jews? is very much of a piece with the world's question still: Art Thou the perfect instance of manhood? Art Thou the highest revelation of God?

III. The Servant's reception by men.

The two preceding characteristics naturally result in this third. For lowliness of condition and lack of qualities appealing to men's false ideals will certainly lead to being 'despised and rejected.' The latter expression is probably better taken, as in the margin of the Rev. Ver. as 'forsaken.' But whichever meaning is adopted, what an Iliad of woes is condensed into these two words! 'The spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes,' the loneliness of one who, in all the crowd descries none to trust-these are the wages that the world ever gives to its noblest, who live but to help it and be misunderstood by it, and as these are the wages of all who with self-devotion would serve God by serving the world for its good, they were paid in largest measure to '*the* Servant of the Lord.' His claims were ridiculed, His words of wisdom thrown back on Himself; none were so poor but could afford to despise Him as lower than they, His love was repulsed, surely He drank the bitterest cup of contempt. All His life He walked in the solitude of uncomprehended aims, and at His hour of extremest need appealed in vain for a little solace of companionship, and was deserted by those whom He trusted most. His was a lifelong martyrdom inflicted by men. His was a lifelong solitude which was most utter at the last. And He brought it all on Himself because He *would* be God's Servant in being men's Saviour.

IV. The Servant's sorrow of heart.

The remarkable expression 'acquainted with grief' seems to carry an allusion to the previous clause, in which men are spoken of as despising and rejecting the Servant. They left Him alone, and His only companion was 'grief'-a grim associate to walk at a man's side all his days! It is to be noted that the word rendered 'grief' is literally sickness. That description of mental or spiritual sorrows under the imagery of bodily sicknesses is intensified in the subsequent terrible picture of Him as one from whom men hide their faces with disgust at His hideous appearance, caused by disease.

Possibly the meaning may rather be that He hides His face, as lepers had to do.

Now probably the ‘sorrows’ touched on at this point are to be distinguished from those which subsequently are spoken of in terms of such poignancy as laid on the Servant by God. Here the prophet is thinking rather of those which fell on Him by reason of men’s rejection and desertion. We shall not rightly estimate the sorrowfulness of Christ’s sorrows, unless we bring to our meditations on them the other thought of His joys. How great these were we can judge, when we remember that He told the disciples that by His joy remaining in them their joy would be full. As much joy then as human nature was capable of from perfect purity, filial obedience, trust, and unbroken communion with God, so much was Jesus’ permanent experience. The golden cup of His pure nature was ever full to the brim with the richest wine of joy. And that constant experience of gladness in the Father and in Himself made more painful the sorrows which He encountered, like a biting wind shrieking round Him, whenever He passed out from fellowship with God in the stillness of His soul into the contemptuous and hostile world. His spirit carrying with it the still atmosphere of the Holy Place, would feel more keenly than any other would have done the jarring tumult of the crowds, and would know a sharper pain when met with greetings in which was no kindness. Jesus was sinless, His sympathy with all sorrow was thereby rendered abnormally keen, and He made others’ griefs His own with an identification born of a sympathy which the most compassionate cannot attain. The greater the love, the greater the sorrow of the loving heart when its love is spurned. The intenser the yearning for companionship, the sharper the pang when it is repulsed. The more one longs to bless, the more one suffers when his blessings are flung off. Jesus was the most sensitive, the most sympathetic, the most loving soul that ever dwelt in flesh. He saw, as none other has ever seen, man’s miseries. He experienced, as none else has ever experienced, man’s ingratitude, and, therefore, though God, even His God, ‘anointed Him with the oil of gladness above His fellows,’ He was ‘a Man of Sorrows,’ and grief was His companion during all His life’s course.

77)Isaiah 53:4-6

THE SUFFERING SERVANT-II

Isa. 53:4 - Isa. 53:6.

The note struck lightly in the close of the preceding paragraph becomes dominant here. One notes the accumulation of expressions for suffering, crowded into these verses-griefs, sorrows, wounded, bruised, smitten, chastisement, stripes. One notes that the cause of all this multiform infliction is given with like emphasis of reiteration-our griefs, our sorrows, and that these afflictions are invested with a still more tragic and mysterious aspect, by being traced to our transgressions, our iniquities. Finally, the deepest word of all is spoken when the whole mystery of the servant's sufferings is referred to Jehovah's making the universal iniquity to lie, like a crushing burden, on Him.

I. The Burdened Servant.

It is to be kept in view that the 'griefs' which the servant is here described as bearing are literally 'sicknesses,' and that, similarly, the 'sorrows' may be diseases. Matthew in his quotation of the verse [Mat. 8:17] takes the words to refer to bodily ailments, and finds their 'fulfilment' in Christ's miracles of healing. And that interpretation is part of the whole truth, for Hebrew thought drew no such sharp line of distinction between diseases of the body and those of the soul as we are accustomed to draw. All sickness was taken to be the consequence of sin, and the intimate connection between the two was, as it were, set forth for all forms of bodily disease by the elaborate treatment prescribed for leprosy, as pre-eminently fitted to stand as type of the whole. But the fulfilment through the miracles is but a parable of the deeper fulfilment in regard to the more virulent and deadly diseases of the soul. Sin is the sickness, as it is also the grief, which most afflicts humanity. Of the two words expressing the Servant's taking their burden on His shoulders, the former implies not only the taking of it but the bearing of it away, and the latter emphasises the weight of the load.

Following Matthew's lead, we may regard Christ's miracles of healing as one form of His fulfilment of the prophecy, in which the principles that shape all the forms are at work, and which, therefore, may stand as a kind of pictorial illustration of the way in which He bears and bears away the heavier burden of sin. And one point which comes out clearly is that, in these acts of healing, He felt the weight of the affliction that He took away. Even in that region, the condition of ability to remove it, was identifying Himself with the sorrow. Did He not 'sigh and look up' in silent appeal to heaven before He could say, Ephphatha? Did He not groan in Himself before He sent the voice into the tomb which the dead heard? His miracles were not easy, though He had all power, for He felt all that the sufferers felt, by the identifying power of the unparalleled sympathy of a pure nature. In that region His pain on account of the sufferers stood in vital relation with His power to end their sufferings. The load must gall His shoulders, ere He could bear it away from theirs.

But the same principles as apply to these deeds of mercy done on diseases apply to all His deeds of deliverance from sorrow and from sin. In Him is set forth in highest fashion the condition of all brotherly help and alleviation. Whoever would lighten a brother's load must stoop his own shoulders to carry it. And whilst there is an element in our Lord's sufferings, as the text passes on to say, which is not explained by the analogy with what is required from all human succourers and healers, the extent to which the lower experience of such corresponds with His unique work should always be made prominent in our devout meditations.

II. The Servant's sufferings in their reason, their intensity, and their issue.

The same measure that was meted out to Job by his so-called friends was measured to the servant, and at the Impulse of the same heartless doctrinal prepossession. He must have been had to suffer so much; that is the rough and ready verdict of the self-righteous. With crashing emphasis, that complacent explanation of the Servant's sufferings and their own prosperity is shivered to atoms, by the statement of the true reason for both the one and the other. You thought that He was afflicted because He was bad and you were spared because you were good-no, He was afflicted because *you* were bad, and you were spared because He was afflicted.

The reason for the Servant's sufferings was 'our transgressions.' More is suggested now than sympathetic identification with others' sorrows. This is an actual bearing of the consequences of sins which He had not committed, and that not merely as an innocent man may be overwhelmed by the flood of evil which has been let loose by others' sins to sweep over the earth. The blow that wounds Him is struck directly and solely at Him. He is not entangled in a widespread calamity, but is the only victim. It is presupposed that all transgression leads to wounds and bruises; but the transgressions are done by us, and the wounds and bruises fall on Him. Can the idea of vicarious suffering be more plainly set forth?

The intensity of the Servant's sufferings is brought home to our hearts by the accumulation of epithets, to which reference has already been made. He was 'wounded' as one who is pierced by a sharp sword; 'bruised' as one who is stoned to death; beaten and with livid weales on His flesh. A background of unnamed persecutors is dimly seen. The description moves altogether in the region of physical violence, and that violence is more than symbol.

It is no mere coincidence that the story of the Passion reproduces so many of the details of the prophecy, for, although the fulfilment of the latter does not depend on such coincidences, they are not to be passed by as of no importance. Former generations made too much of the physical sufferings of Jesus; is not this generation in danger of making too little of them?

The issue of the Servant's sufferings is presented in a startling paradox. His bruises and weales are the causes of our being healed. His chastisement brings our peace. Surely it is very hard work, and needs much forcing of words and much determination not to see what is set forth in as plain light as can be conceived, to strike the idea of atonement out of this prophecy. It says as emphatically as words can say, that we have by our sins deserved stripes, that the Servant bears the stripes which we have deserved, and that therefore we do not bear them.

III. The deepest ground of the Servant's sufferings.

The sad picture of humanity painted in that simile of a scattered flock lays stress on the universality of transgression, on its divisive effect, on the solitude of sin, and on its essential characteristic as being self-willed rejection of control. But the isolation caused by transgression is blessedly counteracted by the concentration of the sin of all on the Servant. Men fighting for their own hand, and living at their own pleasure, are working to the disruption of all sweet bonds of fellowship. But God, in knitting together all the black burdens into one, and loading the Servant with that tremendous weight, is preparing for the establishment of a more blessed unity, in experience of the healing brought about by His sufferings.

Can one man's 'iniquity,' as distinguished from the consequences of iniquity, be made to press upon any other? It is a familiar and not very profound objection to the Christian Atonement that guilt cannot be transferred. True, but in the first place, Christ's nature stands in vital relations to every man, of such intimacy that what is impossible between two of us is not impossible between Christ and any one of us; and, secondly, much in His life, and still more in His passion, is unintelligible unless the black mass of the world's sin was heaped upon Him, to His own consciousness. In that dread cry, wrung from Him as He hung there in the dark, the consciousnesses of possessing God and of having lost Him are blended inextricably and inexplicably. The only approach to an explanation of it is that then the world's sin was felt by Him, in all its terrible mass and blackness, coming between Him and God, even as our own sins come, separating us from God. That grim burden not only came on Him, but was *laid* on Him by God. The same idea is expressed by the prophet in that awful representation and by Jesus in that as awful cry, 'Why hast Thou *forsaken* Me?'

The prophet constructs no theory of Atonement. But no language could be chosen that would more plainly set forth the fact of Atonement. And it is to be observed that, so far as this prophecy is concerned, the Servant's sole form of service is to suffer. He is not a teacher, an example, or a benefactor, in any of the other ways in which men need help. His work is to bear our griefs and be bruised for our healing.

78)Isaiah 53:7-9

Isaiah

THE SUFFERING SERVANT-III.

Isa. 53:7 - Isa. 53:9

In this section of the prophecy we pass from contemplating the sufferings inflicted on the Servant to the attitude of Himself and of His contemporaries towards these, His patience and their blindness. To these is added a remarkable reference to His burial, which strikes one at first sight as interrupting the continuity of the prophecy, but on fuller consideration assumes great significance.

I. The unresisting endurance of the Servant.

The Revised Version's rendering of the first clause is preferable to that of the Authorised Version. 'Afflicted' would be little better than tautology, but 'humbled Himself' strikes the keynote of the verse, which dwells not on the Servant's afflictions, but on His bearing under them. Similarly, the pathetic imagery of the lamb led and the sheep dumb gives the same double representation, first of the indignities, and next of His demeanour in enduring them, as is conveyed in 'He was oppressed, yet He humbled Himself.' Unremonstrating, unresisting endurance, then, is the point emphasised in the lovely metaphor.

We recall the fact that this emphatically reduplicated phrase 'opened not His mouth' was verbally fulfilled in our Lord's silence before each of the three authorities to whom He was presented, before the Jewish rulers, before Pilate, and before Herod. Only when adjured by the living God and when silence would have been tantamount to withdrawal of His claims, did He speak before the Sanhedrin. Only when silence would have been taken as disowning His Kingship, did He speak before Pilate. And Herod, who had no right to question Him, received no answer at all. Jesus' lips were opened in witness but never in complaint or remonstrance. No doubt, the prophecy would have been as really fulfilled though there had been no such majestic silences, for its substance is patient endurance, not mere abstinence from speech. Still, as with other events in His life, the verbal correspondence with prophetic details may help, and be meant to help, to bring out more clearly, for purblind eyes, the true fulfilment. So we may meditate on the wonder and the beauty of that picture which the evangelists draw, and which the world has recognised, with whatever differences as to its interpretation, as the most perfect, pathetic, and majestic picture of meek endurance that has ever been painted.

But we gather only the most superficial of its lessons, if that is all that we find to say about it. For the main point for us to lay to heart is not merely the fact of that silent submission, but the motive which led to it. He opened not His mouth, because He willingly embraced the Cross, and He willingly embraced the Cross because He loved the Father and would do His will, because He loved the world and would be its Saviour,

That touching imagery of the dumb lamb has manifold felicities and significances beyond serving to figure meekness. And we are not forcing unintended meanings into a mere piece of poetic imagination when we note how remarkably the metaphor links on to that of strayed sheep in the preceding verse, or when we venture to recall John Baptist's first proclamation of the Lamb of God, and Peter's quotation of this very prophecy, and the continual recurrence in the Apocalypse of the name of The Lamb as *the* title of honour of 'Him who sitteth on the throne.' A kind of nimbus or aureole shines round the humble figure as drawn by the prophet.

II. The misunderstood end of the Servant's life.

The difficult expressions of Isa. 53:8 are rendered in the Revised Version with clearness and so as to yield a profound meaning. We may note that here, for the first time, is spoken out that end to which all the preceding description of sufferings has been leading up, and yet it is spoken with a kind of solemn reticence, very impressive. The Servant is 'taken away,' 'cut off,' 'stricken.' Not yet is the grim word 'death' plainly uttered; that comes in the next verse, only after the Servant's death is supposed to be past. The three words suggest, at all events, though in half-veiled language, violence and suddenness in the Servant's fate. Who were the agents who took Him, cut Him off and struck Him, is left in impressive obscurity. But the fact that His death was a judicial murder is set in clear light. Whether we read 'By' or 'From-oppression and judgment He was taken away,' the forms of law are represented as wrested to bring about flagrant injustice. And, if it were my object now to defend the Messianic interpretation, one might ask where any facts corresponding to this element in the picture are to be found in regard to either the national Israel, or the Israel within the nation.

That unjust death by illegal violence under the mask of law was, further, wholly misunderstood by ‘His generation.’ We need not do more than remark in a sentence how that feature corresponds with the facts in regard to Jesus, and ask whether it does so on any other theory of ‘fulfilment.’ Neither friends nor foes had even the faintest conception of what the death of Jesus was or was to effect. And it is worth while to dwell for a moment on this, because we are often told that there is no trace of the doctrine of an atoning sacrifice in the Gospels, and the inference is drawn that it was an afterthought of the apostles, and therefore to be set aside as an excrescence on Christianity according to Christ. The silence of Jesus on that subject is exaggerated; but certainly no thought of His being the Sacrifice for the sins of the world was in the minds of the sad watchers by the Cross, nor for many a day thereafter. Is it not worth noting that precisely such a blindness to the meaning of His death had been prophesied eight hundred years before?

But the reason why this feature is introduced seems mainly to be to underscore the lesson, that those who exercised the violence which hurried the Servant from the land of the living were blind instruments of a higher power. And may we not also see in it a suggestion of the great solitude of sorrow in which the Servant was to die, even as He had lived in it? Misapprehended and despised He lived, misapprehended He died. Jesus was the loneliest man that ever breathed human breath. He gave up His breath in a more awful solitude than ever isolated any other dying man. Utterly solitary, He died that none of us need ever face death alone.

III. The Servant’s Grave.

Following on the mystery of the uncomprehended death comes the enigma of the burial. The words are an enigma, but they seem meaningless on any hypothesis but the Messianic one. As they stand, they assert that unnamed persons gave Him a grave with the wicked, as they would do by putting Him to death under strained forms of law, and that then, somehow, the criminal destined to be buried with other criminals in a dishonoured grave was laid in a tomb with the rich. It seems a singularly minute trait to find place in such a prophecy. The remarks already made as to similar minute correspondences in details of the prophecy with purely external facts in Christ's life need not be repeated now. One does not see that it is a self-evident axiom needing only to be enunciated in order to be accepted, that such minute prophecies are beneath the dignity of revelation. It might rather seem that, as one element in prophecy, they are eminently valuable. The smaller the detail, the more remarkable the prevision and the more striking the fulfilment. For a keen-sighted man may forecast tendencies and go far to anticipate events on the large scale, but only God can foresee trifles. The difficulty in which this prediction of the Servant's grave being 'with the rich' places those who reject the Messianic reference of the prophecy to our Lord may be measured by the desperate attempts to evade it by suggesting other readings, or by making 'rich' to be synonymous with 'wicked.' The words as they stand have a clear and worthy meaning on one interpretation, and we even venture to say, on one interpretation only, namely, that they refer to the reverent laying of the body of the Lord in the new tomb belonging to 'a certain rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph.'

If in the latter clause of Isa. 53:9 we render 'Because' rather than 'Although,' we get the thought that the burial was a sign that the Servant, slain as a criminal, yet was not a criminal. The criminals were either left unburied or disgraced by promiscuous interment in an unclean place. But that body reverently bedewed with tears, wrapped in fine linen clean and white, softly laid down by loving hands, watched by love stronger than death, lay in fitting repose as the corpse of a King till He came forth as a Conqueror. So once more the dominant note is struck, and this part of the prophecy closes with the emphatic repetition of the sinlessness of the Suffering Servant, which makes His sufferings a deep and bewildering mystery, unless they were endured because of 'our transgressions.'

79)Isaiah 53:10

Isaiah

THE SUFFERING SERVANT-IV

Isa. 53:10.

We have seen a distinct progress of thought in the preceding verses. There was first the outline of the sorrows and rejection of the Servant; second, the profound explanation of these as being for us; third, the sufferings, death and burial of the Servant.

We have followed Him to the grave. What more can there be to be said? Whether the Servant of the Lord be an individual or a collective or an ideal, surely all fitness of metaphor, all reality of fact would require that His work should be represented as ending with His life, and that what might follow His burial should be the influence of His memory, the continued operation of the principles He had set agoing and so on, but nothing more.

Now observe that, however we may explain the fact, this is the fact to be explained, that there is a whole section, this closing one, devoted to the celebration of His work after His death and burial, and, still more remarkable, that the prophecy says nothing about His activity on the world till *after* death. In all the former portion there is not a syllable about His doing anything, only about His suffering; and then when He is dead He begins to work. That is the subject of these last three verses, and it would be proper to take them all for our consideration now, but fur two reasons, one, because of their great fulness and importance, and one because, as you will observe, the two latter verses are a direct address of God's concerning the Servant. The prophetic words, spoken as in his own person, end with Isa. 53:10, and, catching up their representations, expanding, defining, glorifying them, comes the solemn thunder of the voice of God. I now deal only with the prophet's vision of the work of the Servant of the Lord.

One other preliminary remark is that the work of the Servant after death is described in these verses with constant and very emphatic reference to His previous sufferings. The closeness of connection between these two is thus thrown into great prominence.

I. The mystery of God's treatment of the sinless Servant.

The first clause is to be read in immediate connection with the preceding verse. The Servant was of absolute sinlessness, and yet the Divine Hand crushed and bruised Him. Certainly, if we think of the vehemence of prophetic rebukes, and of the standing doctrine of the Old Testament that

Israel was punished for its sin, we shall be slow to believe that this picture of the Sinless One, smitten for the sins of others, can have reference to the nation in any of its parts, or to any one man. However other poetry may lament over innocent sufferers, the Old Testament always takes the ground: ‘Our iniquities, like the wind, have carried us away.’ But mark that here, however understood, the prophet paints a figure so sinless that God’s bruising Him is an outstanding wonder and riddle, only to be solved by regarding these bruises as the stripes by which our sins were healed, and by noting that ‘the pleasure of the Lord’ is carried on through Him, after and through His death. What conceivable application have such representations except to Jesus? We note, then, here:-

1. The solemn truth that His sufferings were divinely inflicted. That is a truth complementary to the other views in the prophecy, according to which these sufferings are variously regarded as either inflicted by men [‘By oppression and judgment He was taken away’] or drawn on Him by His own sacrificial act [‘His soul shall make an offering for sin’]. It was the divine counsel that used men as its instruments, though they were none the less guilty. The hands that ‘crucified and slew’ were no less ‘the hands of lawless men,’ because it was ‘the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God’ that ‘delivered Him up.’

But a still deeper thought is in these words. For we can scarcely avoid seeing in them a glimpse into that dim region of eclipse and agony of soul from which, as from a cave of darkness, issued that last cry: ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani?’ The bruises inflicted by the God, who made to meet on Him the iniquities of us all, were infinitely more severe than the weales of the soldiers’ rods, or the wounds of the nails that pierced His hands and feet.

2. The staggering mystery of His sinlessness and sufferings.

The world has been full from of old of stories of goodness tortured and evil exalted, which have drawn tears and softened hearts, but which have also bewildered men who would fain believe in a righteous Governor and loving Father. But none of these have cast so black a shadow of suspicion on the government of the world by a good God as does the fate of Jesus, unless it is read in the light of this prophecy. Standing at the cross, faith in God’s goodness and providence can scarcely survive, unless it rises to be faith in the atoning sacrifice of Him who was wounded there for our transgressions.

II. The Servant’s work in His sufferings.

The margin of the Revised Version gives the best rendering-’His soul shall make an offering for sin.’ The word employed for ‘offering’ means a trespass offering, and carries us at once back to the sacrificial system. The trespass offering was distinguished from other offerings. The central idea of it seems to have been to represent sin or guilt as *debt*, and the sacrifice as making compensation. We must keep in view the variety of ideas embodied in His sacrifice, and how all correspond to realities in our wants and spiritual experience.

Now there are three points here:-

> a. The representation that Christ’s death is a sacrifice. Clearly connecting with whole Mosaic system-and that in the sense of a trespass offering. Christ seems to quote this verse in Joh. 10:15, when He speaks of laying down His life, and when He declares that He came to ‘give His life a *ransom* for many.’ At any rate here is the great word, sacrifice, proclaimed for the first time in connection with Messiah. Here the prophet interprets the meaning of all the types and shadows of the law.

That sacrificial system bore witness to deep wants of men’s souls, and prophesied of One in whom these were all met and satisfied.

> b. His voluntary surrender.

He is sacrifice, but He is Priest also. His soul makes the offering, and His soul is the offering and offers itself in concurrence with the Divine Will. It is difficult and necessary to keep that double aspect in view, and never to think of Jesus as an unwilling Victim, nor of God as angry and needing to be appeased by blood.

> c. The thought that the true meaning of His sufferings is only reached when we contemplate the effects that have flowed from them. The

pleasure of the Lord in bruising Him is a mystery until we see how pleasure of the Lord prospers in the hand of the Crucified.

III. The work of the Servant after death.

Surely this paradox, so baldly stated, is meant to be an enigma to startle and to rouse curiosity. This dead Servant is to see of the travail of His soul, and to prolong His days. All the interpretations of this chapter which refuse to see Jesus in it shiver on this rock. What a contrast there is between platitudes about the spirit of the nation rising transformed from its grave of captivity [which was only very partially the case], and the historical fulfilment in Jesus Christ! Here, at any rate, hundreds of years before His Resurrection, is a word that seems to point to such a fact, and to me it appears that all fair interpretation is on the side of the Messianic reference.

Note the singularity of special points.

a. Having died, the Servant sees His offspring.

The sacrifice of Christ is the great power which draws men to Him, and moves to repentance, faith, love. His death was the communication of life. Nowhere else in the world’s history is the teacher’s death the beginning of His gathering of pupils, and not only has the dead Servant children, but He *sees* them. That representation is expressive of the mutual intercourse, strange and deep, whereby we feel that He is truly with us, ‘Jesus Christ, whom having not seen we love.’

b. Having died, the Servant prolongs His days.

He lives a continuous life, without an end, for ever. The best commentary is the word which John heard, as he felt the hand of the Christ laid on his prostrate form: ‘I became dead, and lo, I am alive for evermore.’

c. Having died, the Servant carries into effect the divine purposes.

‘Prosper’ implies progressive advancement. Christ’s Sacrifice carried out the divine pleasure, and by His Sacrifice the divine pleasure is further carried out.

If Christ is the means of carrying out the divine purpose, consider what this implies of divinity in His nature, of correspondence between His will and the divine.

But Jesus not only carries into effect the divine purpose as a consequence of a past act, but by His present energy this dead man is a living power in the world today. Is He not?

The sole explanation of the vitality of Christianity, and the sole reason which makes its message a gospel to any soul, is Christ's death for the world and present life in the world.

80)Isaiah 53:11

Isaiah

THE SUFFERING SERVANT-V

Isa. 53:11.

These are all but the closing words of this great prophecy, and are the fitting crown of all that has gone before. We have been listening to the voice of a member of the race to whom the Servant of the Lord belonged, whether we limit that to the Jewish people or include in it all humanity. That voice has been confessing for the speaker and his brethren their common misapprehensions of the Servant, their blindness to the meaning of His sufferings and the mystery of His death. It has been proclaiming the true significance of these as now he had learned them, and has in Isa. 53:10 touched the mystery of the reward and triumph of the Servant.

That note of His glory and coronation is caught up in the two closing verses, which, in substance, are the continuation of the idea of Isa. 53:10. But this identity of substance makes the variety of form the more emphatic. Observe the '*My* Servant' of Isa. 53:11, and the '*I* will divide' of Isa. 53:12. These oblige us to take this as the voice of God. The confession and belief of earth is hushed, that the recognition and the reward of the Servant may be declared from heaven. An added solemnity is thus given to the words, and the prophecy comes round again to the keynote on which it started in

Isa. 52:13, ‘*My* Servant.’ Notice, too, how the same characteristic is here as in Isa. 53:10 -that the recapitulation of the sufferings is almost equally prominent with the description of the reward. The two are so woven together that no power can part them. We may take these two verses as setting forth mainly two things-the divine promise that the Servant shall give righteousness to many, and the divine promise that the Servant shall conquer many for Himself.

As to the exposition, ‘of’ here is probably casual, not partitive, as the Authorised Version has it; ‘travail’ is not to be understood in the sense of childbirth, but of toil and suffering; ‘soul’ is equivalent to *life*. This fruit of His soul’s travail is further defined in the words which follow. The great result which will be beheld by Him and will fill and content His heart is that ‘by His knowledge He shall justify many.’ ‘By *His* knowledge’ certainly means, by the knowledge of Him on the part of others. The phrase might be taken either objectively or subjectively, but it seems to me that only the former yields an adequate sense. ‘My righteous servant’ is scarcely emphatic enough. The words in the original stand in an unusual order, which might be represented by ‘the righteous one, My servant,’ and is intended to put emphasis on the Servant’s righteousness, as well as to suggest the connection between His righteousness and His ‘justifying,’ in virtue of His being righteous. ‘Justify’ is an unusual form, and means to procure for, or impart righteousness to. ‘*The* many’ has stress on the article, and is the antithesis not to *all*, but to *few*. We might render it ‘the masses,’ an indefinite expression, which if not declaring universality, approaches very near to it, as in Rom. 5:19 and Mat. 26:28. ‘He shall bear,’ a future referring to the Servant in a state of exaltation, and pointing to His continuous work after death. This bearing is the root of our righteousness.

We may put the thoughts here in a definite order.

I. The great work which the Servant carries on.

It consists in giving or imparting righteousness. It seems to me that it is out of place to be too narrow here in interpreting so as to draw distinctions between righteousness imparted and righteousness bestowed. We should rather take the general idea of *making righteous*, making, in fact, like

Himself. Note that this is the work which is Christ’s characteristic one. All thoughts of His blessings to the world which omit that are imperfect.

II. The preparation for that making of us righteous.

The roots of our being made righteous by the righteous Servant are found in His bearing our sins. His sin-bearing work is basis of our righteousness. Christ justifies men by giving to them His own righteousness, and taking in turn their sins on Himself that He may expiate them.

Not only ‘did He bear our sins in His own body on the tree,’ but He *will* bear them in His exaltation to the Throne, and only because He continuously and eternally does so are we justified on earth and shall we be sanctified in heaven.

III. The condition on which He imparts righteousness.

‘His knowledge,’ which is to be taken in the profound Biblical sense as including not only understanding but experience also.

Parallels are found in ‘This is life eternal to know Thee’ [Joh. 17:3], and in ‘That I may know Him’ [Php. 3:10]. So this prophecy comes very near to the New Testament proclamation of righteousness by faith.

IV. The grand sweep of the Servant’s work.

‘The many’ is indefinite, and its very indefiniteness approximates it to universality. A shadowy vision of a great multitude that no man can number stretches out, as to the horizon, before the prophet. How many they are he knows not. He knows that they are numerous enough to ‘satisfy’ the Servant for all His sufferings. He knows, too, that there is no limit to the happy crowd except that which is set by the necessary condition of joining the bands of ‘the justified’-namely, ‘the knowledge of Him.’ They who receive the benefits which the Servant has died and will live to bring cannot be few; they may be all. If any are shut out, they are self-excluded.

V. The Servant’s satisfaction.

It may be that the word employed means ‘full,’ rather than ‘content,’ but the latter idea can scarcely be altogether absent from it. We have, then, the great hope that the Servant, gazing on the results of His sufferings, will be content, content to have borne them, content with what they have effected.

‘The glory dies not and the grief is past.’

And the ‘grief’ has had for fruit not only ‘glory’ gathering round the thorn-pierced head, but reflected glory shining on the brows of ‘the many,’ whom He has justified and sanctified by their experience of Him and His power. The creative week ended with the ‘rest’ of the Creator, not because His energy was tired and needed repose, but because He had fully carried out His purpose, and saw the perfected idea embodied in a creation that was ‘very good.’ The redemptive work ends with the Servant’s satisfied contemplation of the many whom He has made like Himself, His better creation.

81)Isaiah 53:12

Isaiah

THE SUFFERING SERVANT-VI

Isa. 53:12.

The first clause of this verse is somewhat difficult. There are two ways of understanding it. One is that adopted in A. V., according to which the suffering Servant is represented as equal to the greatest conquerors. He is to be as gloriously successful in His victory as they have been in theirs. But there are two very strong objections to this rendering-first, that it takes ‘the many’ in the sense of *mighty*, thus obscuring the identity of the expression here and in the previous verse and in the end of this verse; and secondly, that it gives a very feeble and frigid ending to the prophecy. It does not seem a worthy close simply to say that the Servant is to be like a Cyrus or a Nebuchadnezzar in His conquests.

The other rendering, though there are some difficulties, is to be preferred. According to it ‘the many’ and ‘the strong’ are themselves the prey or spoil.

The words might be read, ‘I will apportion to Him the many, and He shall apportion to Himself the strong ones.’

This retains the same meaning of ‘many’ for the same expression throughout the context, and is a worthy ending to the prophecy. The force of the clause is then to represent the suffering Servant as a conqueror, leading back from His conquests a long train of captives, a rich booty.

Notice some points about this closing metaphor.

Mark its singular contrast to the tone of the rest of the prophecy. Note the lowliness, the suffering, the minor key of it all, and then, all at once, the leap up to rapture and triumph. The special form of the metaphor strikes one as singular. Nothing in the preceding context even remotely suggests it. Even the previous clause about ‘making the many righteous’ does not do much to prepare the way for it. Whatever be our explanation of the words, it must be one that does full justice to this metaphor, and presents some conquering power or person, whose victories are brilliant and real enough to be worthy to stand at the close of such a prophecy. We must keep in mind, too, what has been remarked on the two previous verses, that this victorious campaign and growing conquest is achieved after the Servant is dead. That is a paradox. And note that the strength of language representing His activity can scarcely be reconciled with the idea that it is only the post-mortem influence of His life which is meant.

Note, too, the singular blending of God’s power and the Servant’s own activity in the winning of this extended sovereignty. Side by side the two are put. The same verb is used in order to emphasise the intended parallel. ‘I will divide,’ ‘He shall divide.’ I will give Him-He shall conquer for Himself. Remember the intense vehemence with which the Old Testament guards the absolute supremacy of divine power, and how strongly it always puts the thought that God is everything and man nothing. Look at the contrast of the tone when a human conqueror, whose conquests are the result of God’s providence, is addressed [Isa. 45:1 - Isa. 45:3]. There is an entire suppression of his personality, not a word about his bravery, his military genius, or anything in him. It is all *I, I, I*. Remember how, in Isa. 10:13, one of the sins for which the Assyrian is to be destroyed is precisely that he thought of his victories as due to his own strength and wisdom. So he is indignantly reminded that he is only ‘a staff in Mine hand,’ the axe with which God hewed the nations, whereas here the voice of God Himself speaks, and gives a strange place beside Himself to the will and power of this Conqueror. This feature of the prophecy should be accounted for in any satisfactory interpretation.

Note, too, the wide sweep of the Servant’s dominion, which carries us back to the beginning of this prophecy in Isa. 52:15, where we hear of the Servant as ‘sprinkling’ [or startling’] many nations, and the ‘kings’ is parallel with the ‘strong’ in this verse. No bounds are assigned to the Servant’s conquests, which are, if not declared to be universal, at least indefinitely extended and striding on to world-wide empire.

These points are plainly here. I do not dilate upon them. But I ask whether any of the interpretations of these words, except one, gives adequate force to them? Is there anything in the history of the restored exiles which corresponds to this picture? Even if you admit the violent hypothesis that there was a better part of the nation, so good that the national sorrows had no chastisement for them, and the other violent hypothesis that the devoutest among the exiles suffered most, and the other that the death and burial and resurrection of the Servant only mean the reformation wrought on Israel by captivity. What is there in the history of Israel which can be pointed at as the conquest of the world? Was the nation that bore the yokes of a Ptolemy, an Antiochus, a Herod, a Caesar, the fulfiller of this dream of world-conquest? There is only one thing which can be called the Jew conquering the world. It is that which, as I believe, is meant here, viz. Christ’s conquest. Apart from that, I know of nothing which would not be ludicrously disproportionate if it were alleged as fulfilment of this glowing prophecy.

This prophetic picture is at least four hundred years before Christ, by the admission of those who bring it lowest down, in their eagerness to get rid of prophecy. The life of Christ does correspond to it, in such a way that, clause by clause, it reads as if it were quite as much a history of Jesus as a prophecy of the Servant. This certainly is an extraordinary coincidence if it be not a prophecy. And there is really no argument against the Messianic interpretation, except dogmatic prejudice-’there cannot be prophecy.’

No straining is needed in order to fit this great prophetic picture of the world-Conqueror to Jesus. Even that, at first sight incongruous, picture of a victor leading long lines of captives, such as we see on Assyrian slabs and Egyptian paintings, is historically true of Him who 'leads captivity captive,' and is, through the ages, winning ever fresh victories, and leading His enemies, turned into lovers, in His triumphal progress. He, and He only, really owns men. His slaves have made real self-surrenders to Him. Other conquerors may imprison or load with irons or deport to other lands, but they are only lords of bodies. Jesus' chains are silken, and bind hearts that are proud of their bonds. He carries off His free prisoners 'from the power of darkness' into His kingdom of light. His slaves rejoice to say, 'I am not my own,' and he only truly possesses himself who has given himself away to the Conquering Christ. For all these centuries He has been conquering hearts, enthralling and thereby liberating wills, making Himself the life of lives. There is nothing else the least like the bond between Jesus and millions who never saw him. Who among all the leaders of thought or religious teachers has been able to impress his personality on others and to dominate them in the fashion that Jesus has done and is doing to-day? How has He done this thing, which no other man has been able in the least to do? What is His charm, the secret of His power? The prophet has no doubt what it is, and unfolds it to us with a significant 'For.' We turn, then, to the prophetic explanation of that worldwide empire and note-

II. The foundation of the Servant's dominion.

That explanation is given in four clauses which fall into two pairs. They remarkably revert to the thought of the Servant's sufferings, but in how different a tone these are now spoken of, when they are no longer regarded as the results of man's blind failure to see His beauty, or as inflicted by the mysterious 'pleasure of Jehovah,' but as the causes of His triumph! Echoes of both the two first clauses are heard from the lips of Jesus. As He passed beneath the tremulous shadow of the olives of Gethsemane, He appealed for the companionship of the three, by an all but solitary revelation of His weakness and sorrow, 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death; abide ye here and watch with Me.' And even more distinctly did He lay His hand on this prophecy when He ended all His words in the upper room with 'This which is written must be fulfilled in Me, And He was reckoned with “transgressors.”‘ May we not claim Jesus as endorsing the Messianic interpretation of this prophecy? He gazed on the portrait painted ages before that night of sorrow, and saw in it His own likeness, and said, That is meant for Me. Some of us feel that, *kenosis* or no *kenosis*, He is the best judge of who is the original of the prophet’s portrait.

The two final clauses are separated from the preceding by the emphatic introduction of the pronominal nominative, and cohere closely as gathering up for the last time all the description of the Servant, and as laying broad and firm the basis of His dominion, in the two great facts which sum up His office and between them stretch over the past and the future. ‘He bare the sin of many, and maketh intercession for the transgressors.’ The former of these two clauses brings up the pathetic picture of the scapegoat who ‘bore upon him all their iniquities into a solitary land.’ The Servant conquers hearts because He bears upon Him the grim burden which a mightier hand than Aaron’s has made to meet on His head, and because He bears it away. The ancient ceremony, and the prophet’s transference of the words describing it to his picture of the Servant who was to be King, floated before John the Baptist, when he pointed his brown, thin finger at Jesus and cried: ‘Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.’ The goat had borne the sins of one nation; the prophet had extended the Servant’s ministry indefinitely, so as to include unnumbered ‘many’; John spoke the universal word, ‘the world.’ So the circles widened.

But it is not enough to bear away sins. We need continuous help in the present. Our daily struggles, our ever-felt weakness, all the ills that flesh is heir to, cry aloud for a mightier than we to be at our sides. So on the Servant’s bearing the sins of the many there follows a continuous act of priestly intercession, in which, not merely by prayer, but by meritorious and prevailing intervention, He makes His own the cause of the many whose sins He has borne.

On these two acts His dominion rests. Sacrifice and Intercession are the foundations of His throne.

The empire of men’s hearts falls to Him because of what He has done and is doing for them. He who is to possess us absolutely must give Himself to us utterly. The empire falls to Him who supplies men’s deepest need. He who can take away men’s sins rules. He who can effectually undertake men’s cause will be their King.

If Jesus is or does anything less or else, He will not rule men for ever. If He is but a Teacher and a Guide, oblivion, which shrouds all, will sooner or later wrap Him in its misty folds. That His name should so long have resisted its influence is due altogether to men having believed Him to be something else. He will exercise an everlasting dominion only if He have brought in an everlasting righteousness. He will sit King for ever, if and only if He is a priest for ever. All other rule is transient.

A remarkable characteristic of this entire prophecy is the frequent repetition of expressions conveying the idea of sufferings borne for others. In one form or another that thought occurs, as we reckon, eleven times, and it is especially frequent in the last verses of the chapter. Why this perpetual harking back to that one aspect? It is to be further noticed that throughout there is no hint of any other kind of work which this Servant had to do. He fulfils His service to God and man by being bruised for men’s iniquities. He came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and the chief form of His ministry was that He gave His life a ransom for the many. He came not to preach a gospel, but to die that there might be a gospel to preach. The Cross is the centre of His work, and by it He becomes the Centre of the world.

Look once more at the sorrowful, august figure that rose before the prophet’s eye-with its strange blending of sinlessness and sorrow, God’s approval and God’s chastisement, rejection and rule, death and life, abject humiliation and absolute dominion. Listen to the last echoes of the prophet’s voice as it dies on our ear-’He bore the sins of the many.’ And then hearken how eight hundred years after another voice takes up the echoes-but instead of pointing away down the centuries, points to One at his side, and cries, ‘Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.’ Look at that life, that death, that grave, that resurrection, that growing dominion, that inexhaustible intercession-and say, ‘Of whom speaketh the prophet this?’

May we all be able to answer with clear confidence, ‘These things saith Esaias when he saw *His* glory and spake of *Him*.’ May we all take up the ancient confession: ‘Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed.'

82)Isaiah 54:10

Isaiah

THE PASSING AND THE PERMANENT

Isa. 54:10.

There is something of music in the very sound of these words. The stately march of the grand English translation lends itself with wonderful beauty to the melody of Isaiah's words. But the thought that lies below them, sweeping as it does through the whole creation, and parting all things into the transient and eternal, the mortal and immortal, is still greater than the music of the words. These are removed; this abides. And the thing in God which abides is all-gentle tenderness, that strange love mightier than all the powers of Deity beside, permanent with the permanence of His changeless heart. The mountains shall depart, the emblems of eternity shall crumble and change and pass, and the hills be removed; but this immortal, impalpable, and, in some men's minds, fantastic and unreal something, 'My loving kindness and the covenant of My peace,' shall outlast them all. And this great promise is stamped with the sign manual of Heaven, being spoken by the Lord that hath mercy on thee.'

So then, dear friends, I think I shall most reverentially deal with these words if I handle them in the simplest possible way, and think, first of all, of that great antithesis that is set before us here-what passes and what abides; and, secondly, draw two or three plain, homely lessons and applications from the thoughts thus suggested.

I. First, then, we have to deal with the contrast between the apparently enduring which passes, and that which truly abides.

'The mountains depart, the hills remove, My loving-kindness shall not depart, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed.' Let me then say a word or two about that first thought-'the mountains shall depart.' There they tower over the plains, looking down upon the flat valley beneath as they did when the prophet spoke. The eternal buttresses of the hills stand to the eyes of the fleeting generations as emblems of permanence, and yet winter storms and summer heats, and the slow processes of decay which we call the gnawing of time, are ever working upon them, and changing their forms, and at last they shall pass. Modern science, whilst it has all but incalculably enlarged our conceptions of the duration of the material universe, emphasises, as faith alone never could, the thought of the ultimate perishing of this material world. For geology tells us that 'where rears the cliff there rolled the sea,' that through the cycles of the shifting history of the world there have been elevations and depressions so that the ancient hills in many places are the newest of all things, and the world's form has changed many and many a time since first it circled as a planet. And researches into the ultimate constitution of matter have taught us to think of solids and liquids and gases, as being an infinite multitude of atoms all in rapid motion with inconceivable velocity, and have shown us the very atoms in the act of breaking up. So that the old guess of the infancy of physical science which divined that 'all things are in a state of flux' is confirmed by its last utterances. Science prophesies too, and bids us expect that the earth shall one day become, like some of the stars, a burnt out mass of uniform temperature, incapable of change or of sustaining life, and shall end by falling into the diminished sun, and so the old word will be fulfilled that 'the earth and the works that are therein shall be burnt up.' None should be able to utter the words of my text, 'The mountains shall depart and the hills be removed,' with such emphasis of certitude as the present students of physical science.

But our text does not stop there. It brings into view the transiency of the transient, in order to throw into greater relief and prominence the perpetuity of the abiding. If we had nothing abiding beyond this perishable material universe, it would indeed be misery to exist. Life would be not only insignificant but wretched, and a ghastly irony, a meaningless, aimless ripple on the surface of that silent, shoreless sea. The great 'But' of this text lifts the oppression from humanity with which the one-sided truth of the passing of all the Visible loads it.

And so turn for a moment to the other side of this great text. There stands out above all that is mortal, which, although it counts its existence by millenniums, is but for an instant, visible to the eye of faith, the Great Spirit who moves all the material universe, Himself unmoved, and lives undiminished by creation, and undiminished if creation were swept out of existence. Let that which may pass, pass; let that which can perish, perish; let the mountains crumble and the hills melt away; beyond the smoke and conflagration, and rising high above destruction and chaos, stands the calm throne of God, with a loving Heart upon it, with a council of peace and purpose of mercy for you and for me, the creatures of a day indeed, but who are to live when the days shall cease to be. ‘My kindness!’ What a wonderful word that is, so far above all the cold delusion of so-called theism! ‘My kindness!’ the tender-heartedness of an infinite love, the abounding favour of the Father of my spirit, His gentle goodness bending down to me, His tenderness round about me, eternal love that never can die; the thing that lasts in the universe is His kindness, which continues from everlasting to everlasting. What a revelation of God! Oh, dear friends, if only our hearts could open to the full acceptance of that thought, sorrow and care and anxiety, and every other form of trouble, would fade away and we should be at rest. The infinite, undying, imperishable love of God is mine. Older than the mountains, deeper than their roots, wider than the heavens, and stronger than all my sin, is the love that grasps me and keeps me and will not let me go, and lavishes its tenderness upon me, and beseeches me, and pleads with me, and woos me, and rebukes me, and corrects me when I need, and sent His Son to die for me. ‘My kindness shall not depart from thee.’

But even that great conception does not exhaust the encouragement which the prophet has to give to souls weighed upon with the transiency of the material. He speaks of ‘the covenant of My peace.’ We are to think of this great, tender, changeless love of God, which underlies all things and towers above all things, which overlaps them all and fills eternity, as being placed, so to speak, under the guarantee of a solemn obligation. God’s covenant is a great thought of Scripture which we far too little apprehend in the depth and power of its meaning. His covenant with you and me, poor creatures, is this, ‘I promise that My love shall never leave thee.’ He makes Himself a constitutional monarch, so to speak, giving us a plighted word to which we can appeal and go to Him and say, ‘There, that is the charter given by Thyself, given irrevocably for ever, and I hold Thee to it. Fulfil it, O Thou God of Truth.’

‘My covenant of peace.’ Dear friends, the prophet spoke a deeper thing than he knew when he uttered these words. Let me remind you of the large meaning which the New Testament puts into them. ‘Now the God of Peace that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep, through the blood of the everlasting Covenant, make us perfect in every good work, to do His will.’ God has bound Himself by His promise to give you and me the peace that belongs to His own nature, and that covenant is sealed to us in the blood of Jesus Christ upon the Cross, and so we sinful men, with all the burden of our evil upon us, with all our sins known to us, with all our manifest failings and infirmities, can turn to Him and say, ‘Thou hast pledged Thyself to forgive and accept, and that covenant is made sure to me because Thy Son hath died, and I come and ask Thee to fulfil it.’ And be sure of this, that no poor creature upon earth, however lame his hand, who puts out that hand to grasp that peaceful covenant-that new covenant in the blood of Christ-can plead in vain.

My brother, have you done that? Have you entered into this covenant of peace with God-peace in believing, peace by the blood of Christ, peace that fills a new heart, peace that rules amidst all the perturbations and disappointments of life? Then you may be sure that that covenant will stand for evermore, though the mountains depart and the hills be removed.

II. Now turn with me to a few practical lessons which we may gather from these great contrasts here, between the perishable mortal and the immortal divine love.

Surely the first plain one is a warning against fastening our love, our hope, or our trust on these transient things.

What folly it is for a man to risk his peace and the strength and the joy of his life upon things that crumble and change, when all the while there is lying before him open for his entrance, and wooing him to come into the eternal home of his spirit, this covenant! Here are we, from day to day, plunged into these passing vanities, and always tempted to think that they are the true abiding things, and it needs great discipline and watchfulness to live the better life. There is nothing that will help us to do it like a firm grasp of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Then we can hold these mortal joys with a loose hand, knowing that they are only for a little time, and feeling that they are passing whilst we look at them, and are changing like the scenery in the sky on a summer's night, with its cliffs and hills in the clouds, even while we gaze. Where there was a mountain a moment ago up there, there is now a depression, and the world and everything in it lasts very little longer than these. It is only a film on the surface of the great sea of eternity-there is no reality about it. It is but a dream-a vision, slipping, slipping, slipping away, and you and I slipping along with it. How foolishly, how obstinately, we all cling to it, though even the very grasp of our hands tends to make it pass away, as the children coming in from the fields with their store of buttercups and daisies in their hot hands, which by their very clutch hasten the withering. And that is just our position. We have them for a brief moment, and they all perish in the using. Oh, brother, have you set your heart on that which is not, when all the while there, longing to bless and love us, stands the Eternal God, with His unchanging love and faithful covenant of His perpetual peace? Surely it were wiser-wiser, to put it on the lowest ground-to seek the things that are above, and, knowing as we do that the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, so make our portion the kindness which shall not depart, and seek our share in the peace that shall not pass away.

But there is another lesson to be put in the same simple fashion. Surely we ought to use thoughts like these of my text in order to stay the soul in seasons which come to every one sometimes, when we are made painfully conscious of the transiency of this Present. Meditative hours come to us all-moments when perhaps some strain of music gives us back childhood's days; when perhaps some perfume of a flower reminds us of long-vanished gardens and hands that have crumbled into dust; when some touch of a sunset sky, or some word of a book, or some providence of our lives, comes upon the heart and mind, reminding us how everything is passing. You have all had these thoughts. Some of us stifle them-they are not pleasant to many of us; some of us brood over them unwholesomely, and that is not wise; but the best use of them is to bear us onward into the peaceful region where we clasp to our troubled hearts that which cannot go. If any of us are making experience to-day of earthly change, if any of us have hearts heavy with earthly losses, if any of us are bending under the weight of that awful law, that everything becomes part and parcel of that dreadful past, if any of us are looking at our empty hands and saying, ‘They have taken away my god and what have I more?’ let us listen to the better voice that says, ‘My kindness shall not depart from thee, and so, whatever goes, thou canst not be desolate if thou hast Me.’

And then, still further, let me remind you that this same thought may avail to give to us hopes of years as immortal as itself. We do not belong to the mountains and hills that shall depart, or to the order of things to which they belong. There is coming a very solemn day, I believe, not by any mere processes of natural decay as I take it, but by the action of God Himself, the Judge that ‘day of the Lord that shall come as a thief in the night’-when the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed, and the throne of judgment shall be set, and you and I will be there. My brother, lay your hand on that covenant of peace which is made for us all in Christ Jesus the Lord, and then ‘calm as the summer’s ocean we shall be, and all the wreck of nature’ cannot disturb us, for we shall abide unshaken as the throne of God. The mountains may pass, the hills be removed, but herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of ‘judgment,’ for that kindness shall not depart from us, and God’s gentle tenderness is eternal as Himself. Then we shall not depart from it either, and we are immortal as the tenderness that encloses us. God’s endless love must have undying creatures on whom to pour itself out, and if to-day I possess-as we all may possess in however feeble a measure-some sips and prelibations of that great flood of love that is in God, I can look unblanched right into the eyes of death and say, ‘Thou hast no power at all over me, I am eternal because the God that loves me is so, and since He hath loved me with an everlasting love, His loving-kindness shall not depart from me. Therefore, seeing that all these things shall be dissolved, I know that I have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, and because He lives I shall live also.’ The hope that is built upon the eternal love of God in Christ is the true guarantee to me of immortal existence, and this hope is ours if, and only if, we come into the covenant-the covenant of peace. God says, ‘I will love thee, I will bless thee, I will keep thee, I will pardon thee, I will save thee, I will glorify thee, and there is My bond on that Cross, the new covenant in

His blood.’ Close with the covenant that God is ready to make with you, and then ‘life and death, principalities and powers, things present and things to come, height and depth, and every other creature shall be impotent to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

83)Isaiah 55:1

Isaiah

THE CALL TO THE THIRSTY

THE GREAT PROCLAMATION

Isa. 55:1.

The meaning of the word *preach* is ‘proclaim like a herald’; or, what is perhaps more familiar to most of us, like a town-crier; with a loud voice, clearly and plainly delivering the message. Now, there are other notions of a sermon than that; and there is other work which ministers have to do, of an educational kind. But my business now is to preach. We have ventured to ask others than the members of our own congregation to join us in this service; and I should be ashamed of myself, and have good reason to be so, if I had asked you to come to hear me talk, or to entertain you with more or less eloquent and thoughtful discourses. There is a time for everything; and what this is the time for is to ring out like a bellman the message which I believe God has given me for you. It cannot but suffer in passing through human lips; but I pray that my poor words may not be all unworthy of its stringency, and of the greatness of its blessing. My text is God’s proclamation, and all that the best of us can do is but to reiterate that, more feebly alas, but still earnestly.

Suppose there was an advertisement in to-morrow morning’s papers that any one that liked to go to a certain place might get a fortune for going, what a *queue* of waiting suppliants there would be at the door! Here is God’s greatest gift going a-begging; and there are no doubt some among you who listen to my text with only the thought, ‘Oh, the old threadbare story is what we have been asked to come and hear!’ Brethren, have you taken the offer? If not, it needs to be pressed upon you once more. So my purpose in this sermon is a very simple one. I wish, as a brother to a brother, to put before you these three things: to whom this offer is made; what it consists of; and how it may be ours.

I. To whom this offer is made.

It is to every one thirsty and penniless. That is a melancholy combination, to be needing something infinitely, and to have not a farthing to get it with. But that is the condition in which we all stand, in regard to the highest and best things. This invitation of my text is as universal as if it had stopped with its third word. ‘Ho, every one’ would have been no broader than is the offer as it stands. For the characteristics named are those which belong, necessarily and universally, to human experience. If my text had said, ‘Ho, every one that breathes human breath,’ it would not have more completely covered the whole race, and enfolded thee and me, and all our brethren, in the amplitude of its promise, than it does when it sets up as the sole qualifications thirst and penury-that we infinitely need, and that we are absolutely unable to acquire, the blessings that it offers.

‘Every one that thirsteth’-that means desire. Yes; but it means need also. And what is every man but a great bundle of yearnings and necessities? None of us carry within ourselves that which suffices for ourselves. We are all dependent upon external things for being and for wellbeing.

There are thirsts which infallibly point to their true objects. If a man is hungry he knows that it is food that he wants. And just as the necessities of the animal life are incapable of being misunderstood, and the objects which will satisfy them incapable of being confused or mistaken, so there are other nobler thirsts, which, in like manner, work automatically, and point to the thing that they need. We have social instincts; we need love; we need friendship; we need somebody to lean upon; we thirst for some heart to rest our heads upon, for hands to clasp ours; and we know where the creatures and the objects are that will satisfy these desires. And there are the higher thirsts of the spirit, that ‘follows knowledge, like a sinking star, beyond the furthest bounds of human thought’; and a man knows where and how to gratify the impulse that drives him to seek after the many forms of knowledge and wisdom.

But besides all these, besides sense, besides affection, besides emotions, besides the intellectual spur of which we are all more or less conscious, there come in a whole set of other thirsts that do not in themselves carry the intimation of the place where they can be slaked. And so you get men restless, as some of you are; always dissatisfied, as some of you are; feeling that there is something wanting, yet not knowing what, as some of you are. You remember the old story in the *Arabian Nights*, of the man who had a grand palace, and lived in it quite contentedly, until some one told him that it needed a roc's egg hanging from the roof to make it complete, and he did not know where to get that, and was miserable accordingly. We build our houses, we fancy that we are satisfied; and then there comes the stinging thought that it is not all complete yet, and we go groping, groping in the dark, to find out where the lacking thing is. Shipwrecked sailors sometimes, in their desperation, drink salt water, and that makes them thirstier than ever, and brings on madness and death. Some publicans drug the vile liquors which they sell, so that they increase thirst. We may make no mistake about how to satisfy the desires of sense or of earthly affections; we may be quite certain that 'money answereth all things,' and that it is good to get on in business in Manchester; or may have found a pure and enduring satisfaction in study and in books-yet we have thirsts that some of us know not where to satisfy; and so we have parched lips and swollen tongues, and raging desire that earth can give nothing to fill.

My brother, do you know what it is that you want?

It is God. Nothing else, nothing less. 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.' The man that knows what it is of which he is in such sore need, is blessed. The man who only feels dimly that he needs something, and does not know that it is God whom he does need, is condemned to wander in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is, and where his heart gapes, parched and cracked like the soil upon which he treads. Understand your thirst. Interpret your desires aright. Open your eyes to your need; and be sure of this, that mountains of money and the clearest insight into intellectual problems, and fame, and love, and wife, and children, and a happy home, and abundance of all things that you can desire, will leave a central aching emptiness that nothing and no person but God can ever fill. Oh, that we all knew what these yearnings of our hearts mean!

Aye! but there are *dormant* thirsts too. It is no proof of superiority that a savage has fewer wants than you and I have, for the want is the open mouth into which supply comes. And it is no proof that you have not, deep in your nature, desires which, unless they are satisfied, will prevent your being blessed, that these desires are all unconscious to yourselves. The business of us preachers is, very largely, to get the people who will listen to us, to recognise the fact that they do want things which they do not wish; and that, for the perfection of their natures, the cherishing of noble longings and thirstings is needful, and that to be without this sense of need is to be without one of the loftiest prerogatives of humanity.

Some of you do not wish forgiveness. Many of you would much rather not have holiness. You do not want to have God. The promises of the Gospel go clean over your heads, and are as impotent to influence you as the wind whistling through a keyhole, because you have never been aware of the wants to which these promises correspond, and do not understand what it is that you truly require.

And yet there is no desire-that is to say, consciousness of necessities-so dormant but that its being un-gratified makes a man restless. You do not wish forgiveness, but you will never be happy till you get it. You do not wish to be good and true and holy men, but you will never be blessed till you are. You do not want to have God, some of you, but you will be restless till you find Him. You fancy you wish heaven when you are dead; you do not want it while you are living. But until your earthly life is like the life of Jesus Christ in heaven, though in an inferior degree, whilst it is on earth, you will never be at rest. You are thirsty enough after these things to be ill at ease without them, when you bethink yourselves and pass out of the region of mere mechanical and habitual existence; but until you get these things that you do not desire, be sure of this: that you will be tortured with vain unrest, and will find that the satisfactions which you do seek turn to ashes in your mouth. ‘Bread of deceit,’ says the Book, ‘is sweet to a man.’ The writer meant by that that there were people to whom it was pleasant to tell profitable lies. But we might widen the meaning, and say that all these lower satisfactions, apart from the loftier ones of forgiveness, acceptance, reconciliation with God, the conscious possession of Him, a well-grounded hope of immortality, the power to live a noble life and to look forward to a glorious heaven, are ‘bread of deceit,’ which promises nourishment and does not give it, but breaks the teeth that try to masticate it; ‘it turneth to gravel.’

‘Ho, every one that thirsteth.’ That designation includes us all. ‘And he that hath no money.’ Who has any? Notice that the persons represented in our text as penniless are, in the next verse, remonstrated with for spending ‘money.’ So then the penniless man had some pence away in some corner of his pocket which he could spend. He had the money that would buy shams, ‘that which is not bread’ but a stone though it looks like a loaf, but he had no money for the true food. Which being translated out of parable into fact, is simply this, that our efforts may and do win for us the lower satisfactions which meet our transitory and superficial necessities, but that no effort of ours can secure for us the loftier blessings which slake the diviner thirsts of immortal souls. A man lands in a far country with English shillings in his pocket, but he finds that no coins go there but thalers, or francs, or dollars, or the like; and his money is only current in his own land, and he must have it changed before he can make his purchases. So though he has a pocketful of it he may as well be penniless.

And, in like fashion, you and I, with all our strenuous efforts, which we are bound to make, and which there is joy in making, after these lower good things that correspond to our efforts, find that we have no coinage that will buy the good things of the kingdom of heaven, without which we faint and die. For them our efforts are useless. Can a man by his penitence, by his tears, by his amendment, make it possible for the consequences of his past to be obliterated, or all changed in their character into fatherly chastisement? No! A thousand times, no! The superficial notions of Christianity, which are only too common amongst both educated and uneducated, may say to a man, ‘You need no divine intervention, if only you will get up from the dust, and do your best to keep up when you are up.’ But those who realise more deeply what the significance of sin is, and what the eternal operation of its consequences upon the soul is, and what the awful majesty of a divine righteousness is, learn that the man who has sinned can, by nothing that he can do, obliterate that awful fact, or reduce it to insignificance, in regard to the divine relations to him. It is only God who can do that. We have no money.

So we stand thirsty and penniless-a desperate condition! Ay! brother, it *is* desperate, and it is the condition of every one of us. I wish I could turn the generalities of my text into the individuality of a personal address. I wish I could bring its wide-flowing beneficence to a sharp point that might touch your conscience, heart, and will. I cannot do that; you must do it for yourself.

‘Ho, every one that thirsteth.’ Will you pause for a moment, and say to yourself, ‘That is I’? ‘And he that hath no money’-that is I. ‘Come ye to the waters’-that is I. The proclamation is for thine ear and for thy heart; and the gift is for thy hand and thy lips.

II. In what this offer consists.

They tell an old story about the rejoicings at the coronation of some great king, when there was set up in the market-place a triple fountain, from each of whose three lips flowed a different kind of rare liquor which any man who chose to bring a pitcher might fill it with, at his choice. Notice my text, ‘come ye to the *waters*’ . . . ‘buy *wine* and *milk*.’ The great fountain is set up in the market-place of the world, and every man may come; and whichever of this glorious triad of effluents he needs most, there his lip may glue itself and there it may drink, be it ‘water’ that refreshes, or ‘wine’ that gladdens, or ‘milk’ that nourishes. They are all contained in this one great gift that flows out from the deep heart of God to the thirsty lips of parched humanity.

And what is that gift? Well, we may say, salvation; or we may use many other words to define the nature of the gifts. I venture to take a shorter one, and say, it means Christ. He, and not merely some truth about Him and His work; He Himself, in the fulness of His being, in the all-sufficiency of His love, in the reality of His presence, in the power of His sacrifice, in the daily derivation, into the heart that waits upon Him, of His life and His spirit, He is the all-sufficient supply of every thirst of every human soul. Do we want happiness? Christ gives us His joy, abiding and full, and not as the world gives. Do we want love? He gathers us to His heart, in which ‘there is no variableness, neither shadow cast by turning,’ and binds us to Himself by bonds that death, the separator, vainly attempts to untie, and which no unworthiness, ingratitude or coldness of ours will ever be able to unloose.

Do we want wisdom? He will dwell with us as our light. Do our hearts yearn for companionship? With Him we shall never be solitary. Do we long for a bright hope which shall light up the dark future, and spread a rainbow span over the great gorge and gulf of death? Jesus Christ spans the void, and gives us unfailing and undeceiving hope. For everything that you and I need here or yonder, in heart, in will, in practical life, Jesus Christ Himself is the all-sufficient supply.

‘My life in death, my all in all.’ What is offered in Him may be described by all the glorious and blessed names which men have invented to designate the various aspects of the Good. These are the goodly pearls that men seek, but there is one of great price which is worth them all, and gathers into itself all their clouded and fragmentary splendours. Christ is all, and the soul that has Him shall never thirst.

‘Thou of life the fountain art,

Freely let me take of Thee.'

III. Lastly, how do we obtain the offered gifts?

The paradox of my text needs little explanation, 'Buy without money and without price.' The contradiction on the surface is but intended to make emphatic this blessed truth, which I pray may reach your memories and hearts, that the only conditions are a sense of need, and a willingness to take-nothing less and nothing more. We must recognise our penury and must abandon self, and put away all ideas of having a finger in our own salvation, and be willing-which, strangely and sadly enough, many of us are not-to be under obligations to God's unhelped and undeserved love for all.

Cheap things are seldom valued. Ask a high price and people think that the commodity is precious. A man goes into a fair, for a wager, and he carries with him a try full of gold watches and offers to sell them for a farthing apiece, and nobody will buy them. It does not, I hope, degrade the subject, if I say Jesus Christ comes into the market-place of the world with His hands full of the gifts which His pierced hands have bought, that He may give them away. He says, 'Will you take them?' And you, and you, and you, pass by on the other side, and go away to another merchant, and buy dearly things that are not worth the having.

'My father, my father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it?' Would you not? Swing at the end of a pole, with hooks in your back; measure all the way from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas, lying down on your face and rising at each length; do a hundred things which heathens and Roman Catholics and unspiritual Protestants think to be the way to get salvation; deny yourselves things that you would like to do; do things that you do not want to do; give money that you would like to keep; avoid habits that are very sweet, go to church or chapel when you have no heart for worship; and so try to balance the account. If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, thou wouldst have done it. How much rather when he says, 'Wash, and be clean.' 'Nothing in my heart I bring.' You do *not* bring anything. 'Simply to Thy Cross I cling.' Do you? Do you? Jesus Christ catches up the 'comes' of my text, and He says, 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' Brethren, I lay it on your hearts and consciences to answer Him-never mind about me-to answer *Him*: 'Sir, give me this water that I thirst not.'

84)Isaiah 55:2-7

Isaiah

THE CALL TO THE THIRSTY

Isa. 55:1 - Isa. 55:13.

The call to partake of the blessings of the Messianic salvation worthily follows the great prophecy of the suffering Servant. No doubt the immediate application of this chapter is to the exiled nation, who in it are summoned from their vain attempts to find satisfaction in the material prosperity realised in exile, and to make the only true blessedness their own by obedience to God's voice. But if ever the prophet spoke to the world he does so here. It is no unwarranted spiritualising of his invitation which hears in it the voice which invites all mankind to share the blessings of the gospel feast.

The glorious words need little exposition. What we have to do is to see that they do not fall on our ears in vain. They may be roughly divided into two sections-the invitation to the feast, with the promises to the obedient Israel [Isa. 55:1 - Isa. 55:5], and the summons to the necessary preparation for the feast, namely, repentance, with the reason for its necessity, and the encouragements to it in the might of God's faithful promises [Isa. 55:6 - Isa. 55:13].

I. Whose voice sounds so beseechingly and welcoming in this great call, which rings out to all thirsty souls? If we note the 'Me' and 'I' which follow, we shall hear God Himself thus taking the office of summoner to His own feast. By whatever media the gospel call reaches us, it is in reality God's own voice to our hearts, and that makes the responsibility of hearing more tremendous, and the folly of refusing more inexcusable.

Who are invited? There are but two conditions expressed in Isa. 55:1, and these are fulfilled in every soul. All are summoned who are thirsty and penniless. If we have in our souls desires that all the broken cisterns of earth can never slake-and we all have these-and if we have nothing by which we can procure what will still the gnawing hunger and burning thirst of our souls-and none of us has-then we are included in the call. Universal as are the craving for blessedness and the powerlessness to satisfy it, are the adaptation and destination of the gospel.

What is offered? Water, wine, milk-all the beverages of a simple civilisation, differing in their operation, but all precious to a thirsty palate. Water revives, wine gladdens and inspirits, milk nourishes. All that any man needs or desires is to be found in Christ. We shall not understand the nature of the feast unless we remember that He Himself is the 'gift of God.' What these three draughts mean is best perceived when we listen to Him saying, in a plain quotation of this call, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' Nothing short of Himself can satisfy the thirst of one soul, much less of all the thirsty. Like the flow from the magic fountain of the legend, Jesus becomes to each what each most desires.

How does He become ours? The paradox of buying with what is not money is meant, by its very appearance of contradiction, to put in strongest fashion that the possession of Him depends on nothing in us but the sense of need and the willingness to accept. We buy Christ when we part with self, which is all that we have, in order to win Him. We must be full of conscious emptiness and desire, if we are to be filled with His fulness. Jesus interpreted the meaning of 'come to the waters' when He said, 'He that cometh to Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst.' Faith is coming, faith is drinking, faith is buying.

The universal call, with is clear setting forth of blessing and conditions of possessing, is followed by a pleading remonstrance as to the folly of lavishing effort and money on what is not bread. It is strange that men will cheerfully take more pains to continue thirsty than to accept the satisfaction which God provides. They toil and continue unsatisfied. Experience does not teach them, and all the while the one real good is waiting to be theirs for nothing.

"Tis heaven alone that is given away;

'Tis only God may be had for the asking.'

Christ goes a-begging, and we spend our strength in vain toil to acquire what we turn away from when it is offered us in Him. When the great Father offers bread for nothing, we will not have it, but we are ready to give any price for a stone. It is not the wickedness, but the folly, of unbelief, which is the marvel.

The contrast between the heavy price at which men buy hunger, and the easy rate at which they may have full satisfaction, is further set forth by the call to 'incline the ear,' which is all that is needed in order that life and nourishment which delights the soul may be ours. 'Hearken, and eat' is equivalent to 'Hearken, and ye shall eat.' The real 'good' for man is only to be found in listening to and obeying the divine voice, whether it sound in invitation, promise, or command. The true life of the soul lies in that listening receptiveness which takes for one's own God's great gift of Christ, and yields glad obedience to His every word.

The exiled Israel was promised an 'everlasting covenant' as the result of their acceptance of the invitation; and we know whose blood it is that has sealed the new covenant, which abides as long as Christ's fulness and men's need shall last. That covenant, of which we seldom hear in Isaiah, but which fills a prominent place in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, is further explained as being 'the sure mercies of David.' This phrase and its context are difficult, but the general meaning is clear. The great promises of God's unfailing mercy, made to the historical founder of the royal house, shall be transferred and continued, with inviolable faithfulness, to those who drink of the gift of God.

This parallel between the great King and the whole mass of the true Israel is further set forth in Isa. 55:4 - Isa. 55:5. Each begins with 'Behold,' and the similar form indicates similarity in contents. The son of Jesse was in some degree God's witness to the heathen nations, as is expressed in several psalms; and, what he was imperfectly, the ransomed Israel would be to the world. The office of the Christian Church is to draw nations that it knew not, to follow in the blessed path, in which it has found satisfaction and the dawnings of a more than natural glory transfiguring it. They who have themselves drunk of the unfailing fountain in Christ are thereby fitted and called to cry to others, ‘Come ye to the waters.’ Experience of Christ’s preciousness, and of the rest of soul which comes from partaking of His salvation, impels and obliges to call others to share the bliss.

II. The second part of the chapter begins with an urgent call to repentance, based upon the difference between God’s ways and man’s, and on the certainty that the divine promises will be fulfilled. The summons in Isa. 55:6 - Isa. 55:7 is first couched in most general terms, which are then more closely defined. To ‘seek the Lord’ is to direct conduct and heart to obtain possession of God as one’s own. Of that seeking, the chief element is calling upon Him; since such is His desire to be found of us that it only needs our asking in order to receive. As surely as the mother hears her child’s cry, so surely does He catch the faintest voice addressed to Him. But, men being what they are, a change of ways and of their root in thoughts is indispensable. Seeking which is not accompanied by forsaking self and an evil past is no genuine seeking, and will end in no finding. But this forsaking is only one side of true repentance; the other is return to God, as is expressed in the New Testament word for it, which implies a change of mind, purpose, and conduct. The faces which were turned earthward and averted from God are to be turned God-ward and diverted from earth. Whosoever thus seeks may be confident of finding and of abundant pardon. The belief in God’s loving forgivingness is the strongest motive to repentance, and the most melting argument to listen to the call to seek Him. But there is another motive of a more awful kind; namely, the consideration that the period of mercy is limited, and that a time may come, and that soon, when God no longer ‘may be found’ nor ‘is near.’

The need for such a radical change in conduct and mind is further enforced, in Isa. 55:8 - Isa. 55:9, by the emphatic statement of present discord between the exiled Israel and God. Mark that the deepest seat of the discord is first dealt with, and then the manifestation of it in active life. Mark also that the order of comparison is inverted in the two successive clauses in Isa. 55:8. God’s thoughts have not entered into Israel’s mind and become theirs. The ‘thinkings’ not being regulated according to God’s truth, nor the desires and sentiments brought into accord with His will and mind, a contrariety of ‘ways’ must follow, and the paths which men choose for themselves cannot run parallel with God’s, nor be pleasing to Him. Therefore the stringent urgency of the call to forsake ‘the crooked, wandering ways in which we live,’ and to come back to the path of righteousness which is traced by God for our feet.

But divergence which necessitates repentance is not the only relation between our ways and God’s. There is elevation, transcendency, like that of the eternal heavens, high, boundless, the home of light, the storehouse of beneficent influences which fertilise. If we think of the dreary, flat plains where the exiles were, and the magnificent sweep of the sky over them, we shall feel the beauty of the figure. If ‘My thoughts are not your thoughts’ was all that was to be said, repentance would be of little use, and there would be little to encourage to it; but if God’s thoughts of love and ways of blessing arch themselves above our low lives as the sky bends, pitying and bestowing, above squalor, barrenness, and darkness, then penitence is not in vain, and the low earth may be visited with gifts from the highest heaven.

The certainty that such gifts will be bestowed is the last thought of this magnificent summons. The prophet dilates on that assurance to the end of the chapter. He seems to catch fire, as it were, from the introduction of that grand figure of the lofty heavens domed above the flat earth. In effect, what he says is: They are high and inaccessible, but think what pours down from them, and how all fertility depends on their gifts of rain and snow, and how the moisture which they drop is turned into ‘seed to the sower, and bread to the eater.’ Thinking of that continuous benefaction and miracle, we should see in it a symbol of the better gifts from the higher heavens. So does God’s word come down from His throne. So does it turn barrenness into nodding harvest. So does it quicken undreamed of powers of fruitfulness in human nature and among the forces of the world. So does it supply nourishment for hungry souls, and germs which shall bear fruit in coming years. No complicated machinery nor the most careful culture can work what the gentle dropping rain effects. There is mightier force in it than in many thunder-clouds. The gospel does with ease and in silence what nothing else can do. It makes barren souls fruitful in all good works, and in all happiness worthy of men. Therefore the summons to drink of the springing fountain and to turn from evil ways and thoughts is recommended by the assurance that God’s word is faithful, and all His promises firm.

The final verses [Isa. 55:12 - Isa. 55:13] give the glowing picture of the return from exile amid the jubilation of a transformed world, as the strongest motive to the obedient hearkening to God's voice, to which the chapter has summoned, and as the great instance of God's keeping His word.

The flight from Egypt was 'in haste' [Deu. 16:3]; but this shall be a triumphal exodus, without conflict or alarms. All nature shall participate in the joy. Mountains and hills shall raise the shrill note of rejoicing, and the trees wave their branches, as if clapping hands in delight. This is more than mere poetic rhetoric. A redeemed humanity implies a glorified world. Nature has been involved in the consequences of sin, and will share in the results of redemption, and have some humble reflected light from 'the liberty of the glory of the sons of God.'

The fulfilment of this final promise is not yet. All earlier returns of the exiled Israel from the Babylon of their bondage to God and the city of God, such as the historical one which the prophet foretold, and the spiritual one which is repeated age by age in the history of the Christian Church and of single penitent souls, point on to that last triumphant day when 'the ransomed of the Lord shall return,' and the world be transfigured to match the glory that they inherit. That fair world without poison or offence, and the nations of the saved who inhabit its peaceful spaces, shall be, in the fullest stretch of the words, 'to the Lord for a name, and for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.' The redemption of man and his establishing amid the felicities of a state correspondent to His God-given glory shall be to all eternity and to all possible creations the highest evidence of what God is, and His token to all beings.

85)Isaiah 55:8-9

Isaiah

THE CALL TO THE THIRSTY

GOD'S WAYS AND MAN'S

Isa. 55:8 - Isa. 55:9.

Scripture gives us no revelations concerning God merely in order that we may know about Him. These words are grand poetry and noble theology, but they are meant practically and in fiery earnestness. The 'for' at the beginning of each clause points us back to the previous statement, and both of the verses of our text are in different ways its foundation. And what has preceded is this: 'Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, for He will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.' That is why the prophet dilates upon the difference between the 'thoughts' and the 'ways' of God and of men.

If we look at these two verses a little more closely we shall perceive that they by no means cover the same ground nor suggest the same idea as to the relationship between God's 'ways' and 'thoughts' and ours. The former of them speaks of unlikeness and opposition, the latter of elevation and superiority; the former of them is the basis of an indictment and an exhortation, the latter is the basis of an encouragement and a promise. The former of them is the reason why 'the wicked' and 'unrighteous man' ought to and must 'turn' from 'his ways' and 'thoughts,' the latter of them is the reason why, 'turning,' he may be sure that the Lord 'will abundantly pardon.'

And so we have here two things to consider in reference to the relation between the divine purposes and acts and man's purposes and acts. First, the antagonism, and the indictment and exhortation that are based upon that; second, the analogy but superiority, and the exhortation and hope that are built upon that. Let me deal, then, with these separately.

I. We have here an unlikeness declared, and upon that is rested an appeal.

Notice the remarkable order and alternation of pronouns in the first verse. '*My* thoughts are not *your* thoughts,' saith the Lord. The things that God thinks and purposes are not the things that man thinks and purposes, and therefore, because the thoughts are different, the outcomes of them in deeds are divergent. God's 'ways' are His acts, the manner and course of His working considered as a path on which He moves, and on which, in some sense, we can also journey. Our ‘ways’-our manner of life-are not parallel with His, as they should be.

But that opposition is expressed with a remarkable variation. Observe the change of pronouns in the two clauses. First, ‘*My* thoughts are not your thoughts’-you have not taken My truth into your minds, nor My purposes into your wills; you do riot think God’s thoughts. Therefore-’*your* ways [instead of ‘My,’ as we should have expected, to keep the regularity of the parallelism] are not My ways’-I repudiate and abjure your conduct and condemn it utterly.

Now, of course, in this charge of man’s unlikeness to God, there is no contradiction of, nor reference to, man’s natural constitution, in which there are, at one and the same time, the likeness of the child with the parent and the unlikeness between the creature and the Creator. If our thoughts were not in a measure like God’s thoughts, we should know nothing about Him. If our thoughts were not like God’s thoughts, we should have no standard for life or thinking. Righteousness and beauty and truth and goodness are the same things in heaven and earth, and alike in God and man. We are made after His image, poor creatures though we be; and though there must ever be a gulf of unlikeness, which we cannot bridge, between the thoughts of Him whose knowledge has no growth nor uncertainty, whose wisdom is infinite and all whose nature is boundless light, and our knowledge, and must ever be a gulf between the workings and ways of Him who works without effort, and knows neither weariness nor limitation, and our work, so often foiled, so always toilsome, yet in all the unlikeness there is [and no man can denude himself of it] a likeness to the Father. For the image in which God made man at the beginning is not an image that it is in the power of men to cast away, and in the worst of his corruptions and the widest of his departures he still bears upon him the signs of likeness ‘to Him that created him.’ The coin is rusty, battered, defaced; but still legible are the head and the writing. ‘Whose image and superscription hath it?’ Render unto God the things that are declared to be God’s, because they bear His likeness and are stamped with His signature.

But that very necessary and natural likeness between God and man makes more solemnly sinful the voluntary unlikeness which we have brought upon ourselves. If there were no analogy, there could be no contrast. If God and man were utterly unlike, then there would be no evil in our unlikeness and no need for our repentance.

The true state for each of us is that we should, as the great astronomer said he had done in regard to his own science, 'think God's thoughts after Him,' and have our minds filled with His truth and our wills all harmonised with His purposes, and that we should thus make our ways to run parallel with the ways of God. The blessedness, the peace, the true manhood of a man, are that his ways and thoughts should be like God's. And so my text comes with its indictment-You who by nature were formed in His image, you to whom it is open to sympathise with His designs, to harmonise your wills with His will, and to bring all the dark and crooked ways in which you walk into full parallelism with His way-you have departed into darkness of unlikeness, and in thought and in ways are the opposites of God.

Mark how wonderfully, in the simple language of my text, deep truths about this sin of ours are conveyed. Notice its growth and order. It begins with a heart and mind that do not take in God's thoughts, truths, purposes, desires, and then the alienated will and the darkened understanding and the conscience which has closed itself against His imperative voice issue afterwards in conduct which He cannot accept as in any way corresponding with His. First comes the thought unreceptive of God's thought, and then follow ways contrary to God's ways.

Notice the profound truth here in regard to the essential and deepest evil of all our evil. '*Your* thoughts'; '*your* ways,'-self-dependence and self-confidence are the master-evils of humanity. And every sin is at bottom the result of saying-'I will not conform myself to God, but I am going to please myself, and take my own way.' My own way is never God's way; my own way is always the devil's way. And the root of all sin lies in these two strong, simple words, '*Your* thoughts not Mine; *your* ways not Mine.'

Notice, too, how there are suggested the misery and retribution of this unlikeness. 'If you will not make My thoughts your thoughts, I shall not take your ways as My ways. I will leave you to them.' 'You will be filled with the fruit of your own devices. I shall not incorporate your actions into My great scheme and purpose.' Men

‘Would not know His ways,
And He has left them to their own.’

So here we have the solemn indictment brought by God’s own voice against us all. The criminality of our unlikeness to Him rests upon our original likeness.

The unlikeness roots itself in thought, and blossoms in the poisonous flower of God-displeasing acts. It brings down upon our heads the solemn retribution of separation from Him, and being filled with the fruit of our own devices. Such is the indictment brought against every soul of man upon the earth, and there is built upon it the call to repentance and change,’ let the wicked forsake his *way*, and the unrighteous man his *thoughts*.’ The question rises in many a heart, ‘How am I to forsake these paths on which my feet have so longed walked?’ And if I do, what about all the years behind me, full of wild wanderings and thoughts in all of which God was not?

II. The second verse of our text meets that despairing question. It proclaims the elevation of God’s ways and thoughts above ours, and thereon bases the assurance of pardon.

The relation is not only one of unlikeness and opposition, but it is also one of analogy and superiority. The former clause began with thoughts which are the parents of ways, and, as befits the all-seeing Judge, laid bare first the hidden discord of man’s heart and will, ere it pointed to the manifest antagonism of his doings. This clause begins with God’s ways, from which alone men can reach the knowledge of His thoughts. The first follows the order of God’s knowledge of man; the second, that of man’s knowledge of God.

It is a wonderful and beautiful turn which the prophet here gives to the thought of the transcendent elevation of God. The heavens are the very type of the unattainable; and to say that they are ‘higher than the earth’ seems, at first sight, to be but to say, ‘No man hath ascended into the heavens,’ and you sinful men must grovel here down upon your plain, whilst they are far above, out of your reach. But the heavens bend. They are an arch, and not a straight line. They touch the horizon; and there come from them the sweet influences of sunshine and of rain, of dew and of blessing, which bring fertility. So they are not only far and unattainable, but friendly and beneficent, and communicative of good. Like them, in true analogy but yet infinite superiority to the best and noblest in man, is the boundless mercy of our pardoning God:

'The glorious sky, embracing all,
Is like its Maker's love,
Wherewith encompassed, great and small
In peace and order move.'

'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways.' *The* special 'thought' and 'way' which is meant here is God's thought and way about sin. There are three points here on which I would touch for a moment. First, God's way of dealing with sin is lifted up above all human example. There is such a thing as pardoning mercy amongst men. It is a faint analogy of, as it is an offshoot from, the divine pardon, but all the forgivingness of the most placable and long-suffering and gladly pardoning of men is but as earth to heaven compared with the greatness of His. Our forgiveness has its limitations. We sometimes cannot pardon as freely as we thought, because there blends with our indignation against evil a passionate personal sense of wrong done to us which we cannot get rid of, and that disturbs the freeness and the joyfulness of many a human pardon. But God's pardon is undisturbed and hindered by any sense of personal resentment, though sin is an offense against Him, and in its freeness, its fulness, its frequency, and its sovereign power to melt away that which it forgives, it towers above the loftiest of earth's beauties of forgiveness, as the starry heavens do above the flat plain.

God's pardon is above all human example, even though, having once been received by us, it ought to become for us the pattern by which we shape and regulate our own lives. Nothing of which we have any experience in ourselves or in others is more than as a drop to the ocean compared with the absolute fulness and perfect freeness and unwearied frequency of His forgiveness. 'He will abundantly pardon.' He will multiply pardon. 'With Him there is plenteous redemption.' We think we have stretched the elasticity of long suffering and forgiveness further than we might have been reasonably expected to do if seven times we forgive the erring brother, but God’s measure of pardon is seventy times seven, two perfectnesses multiplied into themselves perfectly; for the measure of His forgiveness is boundless, and there is no searching of the depths of His pardoning mercy. You cannot weary Him out, you cannot exhaust it. It is full at the end as at the beginning; and after all its gifts still it remains true, ‘With Him is the multiplying of redemption.’

Again, God’s way of dealing with sin surpasses all our thought. All religion has been pressed with this problem, how to harmonise the perfect rectitude of the divine nature and the solemn claims of law with forgiveness. All religions have borne witness to the fact that men are dimly aware of the discord and dissonance between themselves and the divine thoughts and ways; and a thousand altars proclaim to us how they have felt that something must be done in order that forgiveness might be possible to an all-righteous and Sovereign Judge. The Jew knew that God was a pardoning God, but to him that fact stood as needing much explanation and much light to be thrown upon its relations with the solemn law under which he lived. We have Jesus Christ. The mystery of forgiveness is solved, in so far as it is capable of solution, in Him and in Him alone. His death somewhat explains how God is just and the Justifier of him that believeth. High above man’s thoughts this great central mystery of the Gospel rises, that with God there is forgiveness and with God there is perfect righteousness. The Cross as the basis of pardon is the central mystery of revelation; and it is not to be expected that our theories shall be able to sound the depths of that great act of the divine love. Perhaps our plummets do not go to the bottom of the bottomless after all; but is it needful that we should have gone to the rim of the heavens, and round about it on the outside, before we rejoice in the sunshine? Is it needful that we should have traversed the abysses of the heavens, and passed from star to star and told their numbers, before we can say that they are bright, or before we can walk in their light? We do not need to understand the ‘how’ in order to be sure of the fact that Christ’s death is our forgiveness. Do not be in such a hurry as some people are nowadays, to declare that the doctrine of the Cross is contrary to man’s conceptions. It *surpasses* them, and the very fact that it surpasses ought to stop us from pronouncing that it *contradicts*. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My thoughts higher than your thoughts.’

Lastly, we are taught here that God’s way of dealing with sin is the very highest point of His self-revelation. There are many glories of the divine nature set forth in all His ways, but the loftiest of them all is this, that He can neutralise and destroy the fact of man’s transgressing, wiping it out by pardon; and in the very act of pardon reconstituting in purity, and with a heart for all holiness, the sinful men whom He forgives. This is the shining apex of all that He has done, rising above creation and every other ‘way’ of His, as high as the loftiest heavens are above the earth.

Therefore, have a care of all forms of Christianity which do not put God’s pardoning mercy in the foreground. They are maimed, and in them mist and cloud have covered with a roof of doleful grey the low-lying earth, and separated it from the highest heavens. The true glory of the revelation of God gathers round that central Cross; and there, in that Man dying upon it in the dark-the sacrifice for a world’s sin-is the loftiest, most heavenly revelation of the all-revealing God. Strike out the Cross from Christianity, or weaken its aspect as a message of forgiveness and redemption, and you have quenched its brightest light, and dragged it down to be but a little higher, if any, than many another scheme of other moralists, philosophers, poets, and religious teachers. The distinctive glory of Christianity is this-it tells us how God sweeps away sin.

And so my last thought is that, if we desire to see up on the highest heavens of God’s character, we must go down into the depths of the consciousness of our own sin, and learn first, how unlike our ways and thoughts are to God, ere we can understand how high above us, and yet beneficently arching over us, are His ways and thoughts to us. We lie beneath the heavens like some foul bog full of black ooze, rotten earth and putrid water, where there is nothing green or fair. But the promise of the bending heavens, with their sweet influences, declares the possibility of reclaiming even that waste, and making it rejoice and blossom as the rose. Spread yourselves out, dear friends, in lowly submission and penitent acknowledgment beneath the all-vivifying mercy of that shining heaven of God’s pardon; and then the old promise will be fulfilled in you: ‘Truth shall spring out of the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven; yea, the Lord shall give that which is good, and our land'-barren and poisoned as it has been- responding to the skyey influences, 'shall yield her increase.'

86)Isaiah 55:10-11

Isaiah

THE CALL TO THE THIRSTY

Isa. 55:1 - Isa. 55:13.

The call to partake of the blessings of the Messianic salvation worthily follows the great prophecy of the suffering Servant. No doubt the immediate application of this chapter is to the exiled nation, who in it are summoned from their vain attempts to find satisfaction in the material prosperity realised in exile, and to make the only true blessedness their own by obedience to God's voice. But if ever the prophet spoke to the world he does so here. It is no unwarranted spiritualising of his invitation which hears in it the voice which invites all mankind to share the blessings of the gospel feast.

The glorious words need little exposition. What we have to do is to see that they do not fall on our ears in vain. They may be roughly divided into two sections-the invitation to the feast, with the promises to the obedient Israel [Isa. 55:1 - Isa. 55:5], and the summons to the necessary preparation for the feast, namely, repentance, with the reason for its necessity, and the encouragements to it in the might of God's faithful promises [Isa. 55:6 - Isa. 55:13].

I. Whose voice sounds so beseechingly and welcoming in this great call, which rings out to all thirsty souls? If we note the 'Me' and 'I' which follow, we shall hear God Himself thus taking the office of summoner to His own feast. By whatever media the gospel call reaches us, it is in reality God's own voice to our hearts, and that makes the responsibility of hearing more tremendous, and the folly of refusing more inexcusable.

Who are invited? There are but two conditions expressed in Isa. 55:1, and these are fulfilled in every soul. All are summoned who are thirsty and penniless. If we have in our souls desires that all the broken cisterns of earth can never slake-and we all have these-and if we have nothing by which we can procure what will still the gnawing hunger and burning thirst of our souls-and none of us has-then we are included in the call. Universal as are the craving for blessedness and the powerlessness to satisfy it, are the adaptation and destination of the gospel.

What is offered? Water, wine, milk-all the beverages of a simple civilisation, differing in their operation, but all precious to a thirsty palate. Water revives, wine gladdens and inspirits, milk nourishes. All that any man needs or desires is to be found in Christ. We shall not understand the nature of the feast unless we remember that He Himself is the 'gift of God.' What these three draughts mean is best perceived when we listen to Him saying, in a plain quotation of this call, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.' Nothing short of Himself can satisfy the thirst of one soul, much less of all the thirsty. Like the flow from the magic fountain of the legend, Jesus becomes to each what each most desires.

How does He become ours? The paradox of buying with what is not money is meant, by its very appearance of contradiction, to put in strongest fashion that the possession of Him depends on nothing in us but the sense of need and the willingness to accept. We buy Christ when we part with self, which is all that we have, in order to win Him. We must be full of conscious emptiness and desire, if we are to be filled with His fulness. Jesus interpreted the meaning of 'come to the waters' when He said, 'He that cometh to Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst.' Faith is coming, faith is drinking, faith is buying.

The universal call, with is clear setting forth of blessing and conditions of possessing, is followed by a pleading remonstrance as to the folly of lavishing effort and money on what is not bread. It is strange that men will cheerfully take more pains to continue thirsty than to accept the satisfaction which God provides. They toil and continue unsatisfied. Experience does not teach them, and all the while the one real good is waiting to be theirs for nothing.

“Tis heaven alone that is given away;
‘Tis only God may be had for the asking.’

Christ goes a-begging, and we spend our strength in vain toil to acquire what we turn away from when it is offered us in Him. When the great Father offers bread for nothing, we will not have it, but we are ready to give any price for a stone. It is not the wickedness, but the folly, of unbelief, which is the marvel.

The contrast between the heavy price at which men buy hunger, and the easy rate at which they may have full satisfaction, is further set forth by the call to ‘incline the ear,’ which is all that is needed in order that life and nourishment which delights the soul may be ours. ‘Hearken, and eat’ is equivalent to ‘Hearken, and ye shall eat.’ The real ‘good’ for man is only to be found in listening to and obeying the divine voice, whether it sound in invitation, promise, or command. The true life of the soul lies in that listening receptiveness which takes for one’s own God’s great gift of Christ, and yields glad obedience to His every word.

The exiled Israel was promised an ‘everlasting covenant’ as the result of their acceptance of the invitation; and we know whose blood it is that has sealed the new covenant, which abides as long as Christ’s fulness and men’s need shall last. That covenant, of which we seldom hear in Isaiah, but which fills a prominent place in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, is further explained as being ‘the sure mercies of David.’ This phrase and its context are difficult, but the general meaning is clear. The great promises of God’s unfailing mercy, made to the historical founder of the royal house, shall be transferred and continued, with inviolable faithfulness, to those who drink of the gift of God.

This parallel between the great King and the whole mass of the true Israel is further set forth in Isa. 55:4 - Isa. 55:5. Each begins with ‘Behold,’ and the similar form indicates similarity in contents. The son of Jesse was in some degree God’s witness to the heathen nations, as is expressed in several psalms; and, what he was imperfectly, the ransomed Israel would be to the world. The office of the Christian Church is to draw nations that it knew not, to follow in the blessed path, in which it has found satisfaction and the dawnings of a more than natural glory transfiguring it. They who have themselves drunk of the unfailing fountain in Christ are thereby fitted and called to cry to others, ‘Come ye to the waters.’ Experience of Christ’s preciousness, and of the rest of soul which comes from partaking of His salvation, impels and obliges to call others to share the bliss.

II. The second part of the chapter begins with an urgent call to repentance, based upon the difference between God’s ways and man’s, and on the certainty that the divine promises will be fulfilled. The summons in Isa. 55:6 - Isa. 55:7 is first couched in most general terms, which are then more closely defined. To ‘seek the Lord’ is to direct conduct and heart to obtain possession of God as one’s own. Of that seeking, the chief element is calling upon Him; since such is His desire to be found of us that it only needs our asking in order to receive. As surely as the mother hears her child’s cry, so surely does He catch the faintest voice addressed to Him. But, men being what they are, a change of ways and of their root in thoughts is indispensable. Seeking which is not accompanied by forsaking self and an evil past is no genuine seeking, and will end in no finding. But this forsaking is only one side of true repentance; the other is return to God, as is expressed in the New Testament word for it, which implies a change of mind, purpose, and conduct. The faces which were turned earthward and averted from God are to be turned God-ward and diverted from earth. Whosoever thus seeks may be confident of finding and of abundant pardon. The belief in God’s loving forgivingness is the strongest motive to repentance, and the most melting argument to listen to the call to seek Him. But there is another motive of a more awful kind; namely, the consideration that the period of mercy is limited, and that a time may come, and that soon, when God no longer ‘may be found’ nor ‘is near.’

The need for such a radical change in conduct and mind is further enforced, in Isa. 55:8 - Isa. 55:9, by the emphatic statement of present discord between the exiled Israel and God. Mark that the deepest seat of the discord is first dealt with, and then the manifestation of it in active life. Mark also that the order of comparison is inverted in the two successive clauses in Isa. 55:8. God’s thoughts have not entered into Israel’s mind and become theirs. The ‘thinkings’ not being regulated according to God’s truth, nor the desires and sentiments brought into accord with His will and mind, a contrariety of ‘ways’ must follow, and the paths which men choose for themselves cannot run parallel with God’s, nor be pleasing to Him. Therefore the stringent urgency of the call to forsake ‘the crooked, wandering ways in which we live,’ and to come back to the path of righteousness which is traced by God for our feet.

But divergence which necessitates repentance is not the only relation between our ways and God’s. There is elevation, transcendency, like that of the eternal heavens, high, boundless, the home of light, the storehouse of beneficent influences which fertilise. If we think of the dreary, flat plains where the exiles were, and the magnificent sweep of the sky over them, we shall feel the beauty of the figure. If ‘My thoughts are not your thoughts’ was all that was to be said, repentance would be of little use, and there would be little to encourage to it; but if God’s thoughts of love and ways of blessing arch themselves above our low lives as the sky bends, pitying and bestowing, above squalor, barrenness, and darkness, then penitence is not in vain, and the low earth may be visited with gifts from the highest heaven.

The certainty that such gifts will be bestowed is the last thought of this magnificent summons. The prophet dilates on that assurance to the end of the chapter. He seems to catch fire, as it were, from the introduction of that grand figure of the lofty heavens domed above the flat earth. In effect, what he says is: They are high and inaccessible, but think what pours down from them, and how all fertility depends on their gifts of rain and snow, and how the moisture which they drop is turned into ‘seed to the sower, and bread to the eater.’ Thinking of that continuous benefaction and miracle, we should see in it a symbol of the better gifts from the higher heavens. So does God’s word come down from His throne. So does it turn barrenness into nodding harvest. So does it quicken undreamed of powers of fruitfulness in human nature and among the forces of the world. So does it supply nourishment for hungry souls, and germs which shall bear fruit in coming years. No complicated machinery nor the most careful culture can work what the gentle dropping rain effects. There is mightier force in it than in many thunder-clouds. The gospel does with ease and in silence what nothing else can do. It makes barren souls fruitful in all good works, and in all happiness worthy of men. Therefore the summons to drink of the springing fountain and to turn from evil ways and thoughts is recommended by the assurance that God’s word is faithful, and all His promises firm.

The final verses [Isa. 55:12 - Isa. 55:13] give the glowing picture of the return from exile amid the jubilation of a transformed world, as the strongest motive to the obedient hearkening to God’s voice, to which the chapter has summoned, and as the great instance of God’s keeping His word.

The flight from Egypt was ‘in haste’ [Deu. 16:3]; but this shall be a triumphal exodus, without conflict or alarms. All nature shall participate in the joy. Mountains and hills shall raise the shrill note of rejoicing, and the trees wave their branches, as if clapping hands in delight. This is more than mere poetic rhetoric. A redeemed humanity implies a glorified world. Nature has been involved in the consequences of sin, and will share in the results of redemption, and have some humble reflected light from ‘the liberty of the glory of the sons of God.’

The fulfilment of this final promise is not yet. All earlier returns of the exiled Israel from the Babylon of their bondage to God and the city of God, such as the historical one which the prophet foretold, and the spiritual one which is repeated age by age in the history of the Christian Church and of single penitent souls, point on to that last triumphant day when ‘the ransomed of the Lord shall return,’ and the world be transfigured to match the glory that they inherit. That fair world without poison or offence, and the nations of the saved who inhabit its peaceful spaces, shall be, in the fullest stretch of the words, ‘to the Lord for a name, and for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.’ The redemption of man and his establishing amid the felicities of a state correspondent to His God-given glory shall be to all eternity and to all possible creations the highest evidence of what God is, and His token to all beings.

87)Isaiah 55:13

Isaiah

THE CALL TO THE THIRSTY

Isa. 55:1 - Isa. 55:13.

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This parallel between the great King and the whole mass of the true Israel is further set forth in Isa. 55:4 - Isa. 55:5. Each begins with ‘Behold,’ and the similar form indicates similarity in contents. The son of Jesse was in some degree God’s witness to the heathen nations, as is expressed in several psalms; and, what he was imperfectly, the ransomed Israel would be to the world. The office of the Christian Church is to draw nations that it knew not, to follow in the blessed path, in which it has found satisfaction and the dawnings of a more than natural glory transfiguring it. They who have themselves drunk of the unfailing fountain in Christ are thereby fitted and called to cry to others, ‘Come ye to the waters.’ Experience of Christ’s preciousness, and of the rest of soul which comes from partaking of His salvation, impels and obliges to call others to share the bliss.

II. The second part of the chapter begins with an urgent call to repentance, based upon the difference between God’s ways and man’s, and on the certainty that the divine promises will be fulfilled. The summons in

Isa. 55:6 - Isa. 55:7 is first couched in most general terms, which are then more closely defined. To ‘seek the Lord’ is to direct conduct and heart to obtain possession of God as one’s own. Of that seeking, the chief element is calling upon Him; since such is His desire to be found of us that it only needs our asking in order to receive. As surely as the mother hears her child’s cry, so surely does He catch the faintest voice addressed to Him. But, men being what they are, a change of ways and of their root in thoughts is indispensable. Seeking which is not accompanied by forsaking self and an evil past is no genuine seeking, and will end in no finding. But this forsaking is only one side of true repentance; the other is return to God, as is expressed in the New Testament word for it, which implies a change of mind, purpose, and conduct. The faces which were turned earthward and averted from God are to be turned God-ward and diverted from earth. Whosoever thus seeks may be confident of finding and of abundant pardon. The belief in God’s loving forgivingness is the strongest motive to repentance, and the most melting argument to listen to the call to seek Him. But there is another motive of a more awful kind; namely, the consideration that the period of mercy is limited, and that a time may come, and that soon, when God no longer ‘may be found’ nor ‘is near.’

The need for such a radical change in conduct and mind is further enforced, in Isa. 55:8 - Isa. 55:9, by the emphatic statement of present discord between the exiled Israel and God. Mark that the deepest seat of the discord is first dealt with, and then the manifestation of it in active life. Mark also that the order of comparison is inverted in the two successive clauses in Isa. 55:8. God’s thoughts have not entered into Israel’s mind and become theirs. The ‘thinkings’ not being regulated according to God’s truth, nor the desires and sentiments brought into accord with His will and mind, a contrariety of ‘ways’ must follow, and the paths which men choose for themselves cannot run parallel with God’s, nor be pleasing to Him. Therefore the stringent urgency of the call to forsake ‘the crooked, wandering ways in which we live,’ and to come back to the path of righteousness which is traced by God for our feet.

But divergence which necessitates repentance is not the only relation between our ways and God’s. There is elevation, transcendency, like that of the eternal heavens, high, boundless, the home of light, the storehouse of beneficent influences which fertilise. If we think of the dreary, flat plains where the exiles were, and the magnificent sweep of the sky over them, we shall feel the beauty of the figure. If ‘My thoughts are not your thoughts’ was all that was to be said, repentance would be of little use, and there would be little to encourage to it; but if God’s thoughts of love and ways of blessing arch themselves above our low lives as the sky bends, pitying and bestowing, above squalor, barrenness, and darkness, then penitence is not in vain, and the low earth may be visited with gifts from the highest heaven.

The certainty that such gifts will be bestowed is the last thought of this magnificent summons. The prophet dilates on that assurance to the end of the chapter. He seems to catch fire, as it were, from the introduction of that grand figure of the lofty heavens domed above the flat earth. In effect, what he says is: They are high and inaccessible, but think what pours down from them, and how all fertility depends on their gifts of rain and snow, and how the moisture which they drop is turned into ‘seed to the sower, and bread to the eater.’ Thinking of that continuous benefaction and miracle, we should see in it a symbol of the better gifts from the higher heavens. So does God’s word come down from His throne. So does it turn barrenness into nodding harvest. So does it quicken undreamed of powers of fruitfulness in human nature and among the forces of the world. So does it supply nourishment for hungry souls, and germs which shall bear fruit in coming years. No complicated machinery nor the most careful culture can work what the gentle dropping rain effects. There is mightier force in it than in many thunder-clouds. The gospel does with ease and in silence what nothing else can do. It makes barren souls fruitful in all good works, and in all happiness worthy of men. Therefore the summons to drink of the springing fountain and to turn from evil ways and thoughts is recommended by the assurance that God’s word is faithful, and all His promises firm.

The final verses [Isa. 55:12 - Isa. 55:13] give the glowing picture of the return from exile amid the jubilation of a transformed world, as the strongest motive to the obedient hearkening to God’s voice, to which the chapter has summoned, and as the great instance of God’s keeping His word.

The flight from Egypt was ‘in haste’ [Deu. 16:3]; but this shall be a triumphal exodus, without conflict or alarms. All nature shall participate in the joy. Mountains and hills shall raise the shrill note of rejoicing, and the trees wave their branches, as if clapping hands in delight. This is more than mere poetic rhetoric. A redeemed humanity implies a glorified world. Nature has been involved in the consequences of sin, and will share in the results of redemption, and have some humble reflected light from ‘the liberty of the glory of the sons of God.’

The fulfilment of this final promise is not yet. All earlier returns of the exiled Israel from the Babylon of their bondage to God and the city of God, such as the historical one which the prophet foretold, and the spiritual one which is repeated age by age in the history of the Christian Church and of single penitent souls, point on to that last triumphant day when ‘the ransomed of the Lord shall return,’ and the world be transfigured to match the glory that they inherit. That fair world without poison or offence, and the nations of the saved who inhabit its peaceful spaces, shall be, in the fullest stretch of the words, ‘to the Lord for a name, and for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.’ The redemption of man and his establishing amid the felicities of a state correspondent to His God-given glory shall be to all eternity and to all possible creations the highest evidence of what God is, and His token to all beings.

88)Isaiah 56:12

Isaiah

THE CALL TO THE THIRSTY

WE SURE OF TO-MORROW? A NEW YEAR’S SERMON

Isa. 56:12.

These words, as they stand, are the call of boon companions to new revelry. They are part of the prophet’s picture of a corrupt age when the men of influence and position had thrown away their sense of duty, and had given themselves over, as aristocracies and plutocracies are ever tempted to do, to mere luxury and good living. They are summoning one another to their coarse orgies. The roystering speaker says, ‘Do not be afraid to drink; the cellar will hold out. To-day’s carouse will not empty it; there will be enough for to-morrow.’ He forgets to-morrow’s headaches; he forgets that on some tomorrow the wine will be finished; he forgets that the fingers of a hand may write the doom of the rioters on the very walls of the banqueting chamber.

What have such words, the very motto of insolent presumption and short-sighted animalism, to do with New Year’s thoughts? Only this, that base and foolish as they are on such lips, it is possible to lift them from the mud, and take them as the utterance of a lofty and calm hope which will not be disappointed, and of a firm and lowly resolve which may ennoble life. Like a great many other sayings, they may fit the mouth either of a sot or of a saint. All depends on what the things are which we are thinking about when we use them. There are things about which it is absurd and worse than absurd to say this, and there are things about which it is the soberest truth to say it. So looking forward into the merciful darkness of another year, we may regard these words as either the expressions of hopes which it is folly to cherish, or of hopes that it is reasonable to entertain.

I. This expectation, if directed to any outward things, is an illusion and a dream.

These coarse revellers into whose lips our text is put only meant by it to brave the future and defy to-morrow in the riot of their drunkenness. They show us the vulgarest, lowest form which the expectation can take, a form which I need say nothing about now.

But I may just note in passing that to look forward principally as anticipating pleasure or enjoyment is a very poor and unworthy thing. We weaken and lower every day, if we use our faculty of hope mainly to paint the future as a scene of delights and satisfactions. We spoil to-day by thinking how we can turn it to the account of pleasure. We spoil to-morrow before it comes, and hurt ourselves, if we are more engaged with fancying how it will minister to our joy, than how we can make it minister to our duty. It is base and foolish to be forecasting our pleasures; the true temper is to be forecasting our work.

But, leaving that consideration, let us notice how useless such anticipation, and how mad such confidence, as that expressed in the text is, if directed to anything short of God.

We are so constituted as that we grow into a persuasion that what has been will be, and yet we can give no sufficient reason to ourselves of why we expect it. 'The uniformity of the course of nature is the corner-stone, not only of physical science, but, in a more homely form, of the wisdom which grows with experience, We all believe that the sun will rise to-morrow because it rose to-day, and on all the yesterdays. But there was a today which had no yesterday, and there will be a to-day which will have no to-morrow. The sun will rise for the last time. The uniformity had a beginning and will have an end.

So, even as an axiom of thought, the anticipation that things will continue as they have been because they have been, seems to rest on an insufficient basis. How much more so, as to our own little lives and their surroundings! There the only thing which we may be quite sure of about to-morrow is that it will not be 'as this day.' Even for those of us who may have reached, for example, the level plateau of middle life, where our position and tasks are pretty well fixed, and we have little more to expect than the monotonous repetition of the same duties recurring at the same hour every day-even for such each day has its own distinctive character. Like a flock of sheep they seem all alike, but each, on closer inspection, reveals a physiognomy of its own. There will be so many small changes that even the same duties or enjoyments will not be quite the same, and even if the outward things remained absolutely unaltered, we who meet them are not the same. Little variations in mood and tone, diminished zest here, weakened power there, other thoughts breaking in, and over and above all the slow, silent change wrought on us by growing years, make the perfect reproduction of any past impossible. So, however familiar may be the road which we have to traverse, however uneventfully the same our days may sometimes for long spaces in our lives seem to be, though to ourselves often our day's work may appear as a mill-horse round, yet in deepest truth, if we take into account the whole sum of the minute changes in it and in us, it may be said of each step of our journey, 'Ye have not passed this way heretofore.'

But, besides all this, we know that these breathing-times when ‘we have no changes,’ are but pauses in the storm, landing-places in the ascent, the interspaces between the shocks. However hope may tempt us to dream that the future is like the present, a deeper wisdom lies in all our souls which says ‘No.’ Drunken bravery may front that darkness with such words as these of our text, but the least serious spirit, in its most joyous moods, never quite succeeds in forgetting the solemn probabilities, possibilities, and certainties which lodge in the unknown future. So to a wise man it is ever a sobering exercise to look forward, and we shall be nearest the truth if we take due account, as we do today, of the undoubted fact that the only thing certain about to-morrow is that it will not be as this day.

There are the great changes which come to some one every day, which may come to any of us any day, which will come to all of us some day. Some of us will die this year; on a day in our new diaries some of us will make no entry, for we shall be gone. Some of us will be smitten down by illness; some of us will lose our dearest; some of us will lose fortune. Which of us it is to be, and where within these twelve months the blow is to fall, are mercifully hidden. The only thing that we certainly know is that these arrows will fly. The thing we do not know is whose heart they will pierce. This makes the gaze into the darkness grave and solemn. There is ever something of dread in Hope’s blue eyes.

True, the ministry of change is blessed and helpful; true, the darkness which hides the future is merciful and needful, if the present is not to be marred. But helpful and merciful as they are, they invest the unknown to-morrow with a solemn power which it is good, though sobering, for us to feel, and they silence on every lip but that of riot and foolhardy debauchery the presumptuous words, ‘To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.’

II. But yet there is a possibility of so using the words as to make them the utterance of a sober certainty which will not be put to shame.

So long as our hope and anticipations creep along the low levels of earth, and are concerned with external and creatural good, their language can never rise beyond, ‘To-morrow *may* be as this day.’ Oftenest they reach only to the height of the wistful wish, ‘May it be as this day!’ But there is no need for our being tortured with such slippery possibilities. We may send out our hope like Noah’s dove, not to hover restlessly over a heaving ocean of change, but to light on firm, solid certainty, and fold its wearied wings there. Forecasting is ever close by foreboding. Hope is interwoven with fear, the golden threads of the weft crossing the dark ones of the warp, and the whole texture gleaming bright or glooming black according to the angle at which it is seen. So is it always until we turn our hope away from earth to God, and fill the future with the light of His presence and the certainty of His truth. Then the mists and doubts roll away; we get above the region of ‘perhaps’ into that of ‘surely’; the future is as certain as the past, hope as assured of its facts as memory, prophecy as veracious as history.

Looking forward, then, let us not occupy ourselves with visions which we know may or may not come true. Let us not feed ourselves with illusions which may make the reality, when it comes to shatter them, yet harder to bear. But let us make God in Christ our hope, and pass from peradventures to certitudes; from ‘To-morrow may he as this day-would that it might,’ to ‘It shall be, it shall be, for God is my expectation and my hope.’ We have an unchanging and an inexhaustible God, and He is the true guarantee of the future for us. The more we accustom ourselves to think of Him as shaping all that is contingent and changeful in the nearest and in the remotest to-morrow, and as being Himself the immutable portion of our souls, the calmer will be our outlook into the darkness, and the more bright will be the clear light of certainty which burns for us in it.

To-day’s wealth may be to-morrow’s poverty, to-day’s health to-morrow’s sickness, to-day’s happy companionship of love to-morrow’s aching solitude of heart, but to-day’s God will be to-morrow’s God, to-day’s Christ will be to-morrow’s Christ. Other fountains may dry up in heat or freeze in winter, but this knows no change, ‘in summer and winter it shall be.’ Other fountains may sink low in their basins after much drawing, but this is ever full, and after a thousand generations have drawn from it, its stream is broad and deep as ever. Other springs may be left behind on the march, and the wells and palm-trees of each Elim on our road may be succeeded by a dry and thirsty land where no water is, but this spring follows us all through the wilderness, and makes music and spreads freshness ever by our path. We can forecast nothing beside; we can be sure of this, that God will be with us in all the days that lie before us. What may be round the next headland we know not; but this we know, that the same sunshine will make a broadening path across the waters right to where we rock on the unknown sea, and the same unmoving mighty star will burn for our guidance. So we may let the waves and currents roll as they list-or rather as He wills, and be little concerned about the incidents or the companions of our voyage, since He is with us. We can front the unknown to-morrow, even when we most keenly feel how solemn and sad are the things it may bring.

'It can bring with it nothing
But He will bear us through.'

If only our hearts be fixed on God and we are feeding our minds and wills on Him, His truth and His will, then we may be quite certain that, whatever goes, our truest riches will abide, and whoever leaves our little company of loved ones, our best Friend will not go away. Therefore, lifting our hopes beyond the low levels of earth, and making our anticipations of the future the reflection of the brightness of God thrown on that else blank curtain, we may turn into the worthy utterance of sober and saintly faith, the folly of the riotous sensualist when he said, 'To-morrow shall be as this day.'

The past is the mirror of the future for the Christian; we look back on all the great deeds of old by which God has redeemed and helped souls that cried to Him, and we find in them the eternal laws of His working. They are all true for to-day as they were at first; they remain true forever. The whole history of the past belongs to us, and avails for our present and for our future. 'As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of our God.'

To-day's experience runs on the same lines as the stories of the 'years of old,' which are 'the years of the right hand of the Most High.' Experience is ever the parent of hope, and the latter can only build with the bricks which the former gives. So the Christian has to lay hold on all that God's mercy has done in the ages that are gone by, and because He is a 'faithful Creator' to transmute history into prophecy, and triumph in that 'the God of Jacob is our refuge.'

Nor only does the record of what He has been to others come in to bring material for our forecast of the future, but also the remembrance of what He has been to ourselves. Has He been with us in six troubles? We may be sure He will not abandon us at the seventh. He is not in the way of beginning to build and leaving His work unfinished. Remember what He has been to you, and rejoice that there has been one thing in your lives which, you may be sure, will always be there. Feed your certain hopes for to-morrow on thankful remembrances of many a yesterday. ‘Forget not the works of God,’ that you may ‘set your hopes on God.’ Let our anticipations base themselves on memory, and utter themselves in the prayer, ‘Thou hast been my help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.’ Then the assurance that He whom we know to be good and wise and strong will shape the future, and Himself be the Future for us, will take all the fear out of that forward gaze, will condense our light and unsubstantial hopes into solid realities, and set before us an endless line of days, in each of which we may gain more of Him whose face has brightened the past and will brighten the future, till days shall end and time open into eternity.

III. Looked at in another aspect, these words may be taken as the vow of a firm and lowly resolve.

There is a future which we can but very slightly influence, and the less we look at that the better every way. But there is also a future which we can mould as we wish-the future of our own characters, the only future which is really ours at all-and the more clearly we set it before ourselves and make up our minds as to whither we wish it to be tending, the better. In that region, it is eminently true that ‘to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.’ The law of continuity shapes our moral and spiritual characters. What I am to-day, I shall increasingly be to-morrow. The awful power of habit solidifies actions into customs, and prolongs the reverberation of every note once sounded, along the vaulted roof of the chamber where we live. To-day is the child of yesterday and the parent of to-morrow.

That solemn certainty of the continuance and increase of moral and spiritual characteristics works in both good and bad, but with a difference. To secure its full blessing in the gradual development of the germs of good, there must be constant effort and tenacious resolution. So many foes beset the springing of the good seed in our hearts-what with the flying flocks of light-winged fugitive thoughts ever ready to swoop down as soon as the sower's back is turned and snatch it away, what with the hardness of the rock which the roots soon encounter, what with the thick-sown and quick-springing thorns-that if we trust to the natural laws of growth and neglect careful husbandry, we may sow much but we shall gather little. But to inherit the full consequences of that same law working in the growth and development of the evil in us, nothing is needed but carelessness.

Leave it alone for a year or two and the 'fruitful field will be a forest,' a jungle of matted weeds, with a straggling blossom where cultivation had once been.

But if humbly we resolve and earnestly toil, looking for His help, we may venture to hope that our characters will grow in goodness and in likeness to our dear Lord, that we shall not cast away our confidence nor make shipwreck of our faith, that each new day shall find in us a deeper love, a perfecter consecration, a more joyful service, and that so, in all the beauties of the Christian soul and in all the blessings of the Christian life, 'to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.' 'To him that hath shall be given.' 'The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more until the noontide of the day.'

So we may look forward undismayed, and while we recognise the darkness that wraps to-morrow in regard to all mundane affairs, may feed our fortitude and fasten our confidence on the double certainties that we shall have God and more of God for our treasure, that we shall have likeness to Him and more of likeness in our characters. Fleeting moments may come and go. The uncertain days may exercise their various ministry of giving and taking away, but whether they plant or root up our earthly props, whether they build or destroy our earthly houses, they will increase our riches in the heavens, and give us fuller possession of deeper draughts from the inexhaustible fountain of living waters.

How dreadfully that same law of the continuity and development of character works in some men there is no need now to dwell upon. By slow, imperceptible, certain degrees the evil gains upon them. Yesterday's sin smooths the path for to-day’s. The temptation once yielded to gains power. The crack in the embankment which lets a drop or two ooze through is soon a great hole which lets in a flood. It is easier to find a man who has never done a wrong thing than to find a man who has done it only once. Peter denied his Lord thrice, and each time more easily than the previous time. So, before we know it, the thin gossamer threads of single actions are twisted into a rope of habit, and we are ‘tied with the cords of our sins.’ Let no man say, ‘Just for once I may venture on evil; so far I will go and no farther.’ Nay, ‘to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.’

How important, then, the smallest acts become when we think of them as thus influencing character! The microscopic creatures, thousands of which will go into a square inch, make the great white cliffs that beetle over the wildest sea and front the storm. So, permanent and solid character is built up out of trivial actions, and this is the solemn aspect of our passing days, that they are making *us*.

We might well tremble before such a thought, which would be dreadful to the best of us, if it were not for pardoning mercy and renewing grace. The law of reaping what we have sown, or of continuing as we have begun, may be modified as far as our sins and failures are concerned. The entail may be cut off, and to-morrow need not inherit to-day’s guilt, nor to-day’s habits. The past may be all blotted out through the mercy of God in Christ. No debt need be carried forward to another page of the book of our lives, for Christ has given Himself for us, and He speaks to us all-’Thy sins be forgiven thee.’ No evil habit need continue its dominion over us, nor are we obliged to carry on the bad tradition of wrongdoing into a future day, for Christ lives, and ‘if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away, all things are become new.’

So then, brethren, let us humbly take the confidence which these words may be used to express, and as we stand on the threshold of a new year and wait for the curtain to be drawn, let us print deep on our hearts the uncertainty of our hold of all things here, nor seek to build nor anchor on these, but lift our thoughts to Him, who will bless the future as He has blessed the past, and will even enlarge the gifts of His love and the help of His right hand. Let us hope for ourselves not the continuance or increase of outward good, but the growth of our souls in all things lovely and of good report, the daily advance in the love and likeness of our Lord.

So each day, each succeeding wave of the ocean of time shall cast up treasures for us as it breaks at our feet. As we grow in years, we shall grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, until the day comes when we shall exchange earth for heaven. That will be the sublimest application of this text, when, dying, we can calmly be sure that though to-day be on this side and to-morrow on the other bank of the black river, there will be no break in the continuity, but only an infinite growth in our life, and heaven's to-morrow shall be as earth's to-day, and much more abundant.

89)Isaiah 59:6

Isaiah

FLIMSY GARMENTS

Isa. 59:6. - Rev. 3:18.

The force of these words of the prophet is very obvious. He has been pouring out swift, indignant denunciation on the evil-doers in Israel; and, says he, 'they hatch cockatrice's eggs and spin spiders' webs,' pointing, as I suppose, to the patient perseverance, worthy of a better cause, which bad men will exercise in working out their plans. Then with a flash of bitter irony, led on by his imagination to say more than he had meant, he adds this scathing parenthesis, as if he said, 'Yes, they spin spiders' webs, elaborate toil and creeping contrivance, and what comes of it all! The flimsy foul thing is swept away by God's besom sooner or later. A web indeed! but they will never make a garment out of it. It looks like cloth, but it is useless.' That is the old lesson that all sin is profitless and comes to nothing.

I venture to connect with that strongly figurative declaration of the essential futility of godless living, our second text, in which Jesus uses a similar figure to express one aspect of His gifts to the believing soul. He is ready to clothe it, so that 'being clothed, it will not be found naked.'

I. Sin clothes no man even here.

Notice in passing what a hint there is of the toil and trouble that men are so willing to take in a wrong course. Hatching and spinning both suggest protracted, sedulous labour. And then the issue of it all is- *nothing*.

Take the plainest illustrations of this truth first-the breach of common laws of morality, the indulgence, for instance, in dissipation. A man gets a certain coarse delight out of it, but what does he get besides? A weakened body, a tyrannous craving, ruined prospects, oftenest poverty and shame, the loss of self-respect and love; of moral excellences, of tastes for what is better. He is not a beast, and he cannot live for pure animalism without injuring himself.

Then take actual breaches of human laws. How seldom these ‘pay,’ even in the lowest sense. Thieves are always poor. The same experience of futility dogs all coarse and palpable breaches of morality. It is always true that ‘He that breaketh a hedge, a serpent shall bite him.’

The reasons are not far to seek. This is, on the whole, God’s world, a world of retribution. Things are, on the whole, on the side of goodness. God is in the world, and that is an element not to be left out in the calculation. Society is on the side of goodness to a large extent. The constitution of a man’s own soul, which God made, works in the same direction. Young men who are trembling on the verge of youthful yieldings to passion, are tempted to fancy that they can sow sin and not reap suffering or harm. Would that they settled it in their thoughts that he who fires a fuse must expect an explosion!

But the same rule applies to every godless form of life. Take our Manchester temptation, money or success in business. Take ambition. Take culture, literary fame. Take love and friendship. What do they all come to, if godless? I do not point to the many failures, but suppose success: would that make you a happy man? If you won what you wanted, would it be enough? What ‘garments’ for your conscience, for your sense of sin, for your infinite longings would success in any godless course provide? You would have what you wanted, and what would it bring with it? Cares and troubles and swift satiety, and not seldom incapacity to enjoy what you had won with so much toil. If you gained the prize, you would find clinging to it something that you did not bargain for, and that took most of the dazzle away from it.

II. The rags are all stripped off some day.

Death is a becoming naked as to the body, and as to all the occupations that terminate with bodily life. It necessarily involves the loss of possessions, the cessation of activities, the stripping off of self-deceptions, and exposure to the gaze of the Judge, without defence. The godless soul will ‘be found naked’ and ashamed. All ‘works of darkness,’ laden with rich blossom or juicy fruit though they have seemed to be, will then be seen to be in tragic truth ‘fruitless.’ A life’s spinning and weaving, and not a rag to cover the toiler after all! Is that ‘productive labour’?

III. Christ will clothe you.

‘White raiment.’ Pure character. Covering before the Judge. Festal robe of Victory.

‘Buy’-how? By giving up self.

90)Isaiah 60:1-3

Isaiah

THE SUNLIT CHURCH

Isa. 60:1 - Isa. 60:3.

The personation of Israel as a woman runs through the whole of this second portion of Isaiah’s prophecy. We see her thrown on the earth a mourning mother, a shackled captive. We hear her summoned once and again to awake, to arise, to shake herself from the dust, to loose the bands of her neck. These summonses are prophecies of the impending Messianic deliverance. The same circle of truths, in a somewhat different aspect, is presented in the verses before us. The prophet sees the earth wrapped in a funeral pall of darkness, and a beam of more than natural light falling on one prostrate form. The old story is repeated, Zion stands in the light, while

Egypt cowers in gloom. The light which shines upon her is 'the Glory of the Lord,' the ancient brightness that dwelt between the cherubim within the veil in the secret place of the Most High, and is now come out into the open world to envelop the desolate captive. Thus touched by the light she becomes light, and in her turn is bidden to shine. There is a very remarkable correspondence reiterated in my text between the illuminating God and the illuminated Zion. The word for shine is connected with the word for light, and might fairly be rendered 'lighten,' or 'be light.' Twice the phrase 'thy light' is employed; once to mean the light which is thine because it shines on thee; once to mean the light which is thine because it shines from thee. The other word, three times repeated, for *rising*, is the technical word which expresses the sunrise, and it is applied both to the flashing glory that falls upon Zion and to the light that gleams from her. Touched by the sun, she becomes a sun, and blazes in her heaven in a splendour that draws men's hearts. So, then, if that be the fair analysis of the words before us, they present to us some thoughts bearing on the Missionary work of the Church, and I gather them all up in three-the fact, the ringing summons, and the confident promise.

I. Now, as to the fact.

Beneath the poetry of my text there lie very definite conceptions of a very solemn and grave character, and these conceptions are the foundation of the ringing summons that follows, and which reposes upon a double basis-viz. '*for* thy light is come,' and '*for* darkness covers the earth.' There is a double element in the representation. We have a darkened earth, and a sunlit and a sunlike church; and unless we hold these two convictions-both of them-in firm grasp, and that not merely as convictions that influence our understanding, but as ever present forces acting on our emotions, our consciences, our wills, we shall not do the work which God has set us to do in the world. I need not dwell long on the former of these, or speak of that funeral pall that wraps the whole earth. Only remember that it is no darkness that came from His hand who forms the light and creates darkness, but is like the smoke that lies over our great cities-the work of many an earth-born fire, whose half-consumed foulness hides the sun from us. If we take the sulphureous and smoky pall that wraps the earth, and analyse its contents, they are these: the darkness of ignorance, the darkness of sorrow, the darkness of sin. Of ignorance; for throughout the wide regions that lie beneath that covering spread over all nations is there any certitude about God, about man, about morals, about responsibilities, about eternity? Peradventures, guesses, dreams, precious fragments of truth, twisted in with the worst of lies, noble aspirations side by side with bestial representations-these are the things on which our brethren repose, or try to repose. We do not forget that light which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world.

We do not forget, of course, that everywhere there are feelings after Him, and everywhere there are gleams and glimpses of a vanishing light, else life were impossible; but oh, dear brethren, let us not forget either that the people sit in darkness of ignorance, which is the saddest darkness that can afflict men.

And it is a darkness of sorrow, for all the ills that flesh is heir to press, unalleviated and unsustained by any known helper in the heavens, upon millions of our fellows. They stand, as the great German poet describes himself as standing, in one of the most pathetic of his lyrics, before the marble image of the fair goddess, who has pity on her face and beauty raying from her limbs, but she has no arms. So tears fall undried. The light-hearted savage is a fiction. What a heavy gloom lies upon his past and his present, which darkens into an impenetrable mist that wraps and hides the future!

And the darkness is a darkness of sin as well as of sorrow and of ignorance. On that point I need not dwell. We all believe that all have ‘sinned and come short of the glory of God,’ and we all believe that idolatry, as we see it, and as it is wrought out, is an ally of impurity and of sin. The process is this: men make gods in their own image, and the gods make devils of the men. ‘They that make them are like unto them, so is every one that trusteth in them.’ We need no other principle than that to account for the degradation of heathenism and for the obscenities and foul transgression within the very courts of the temple.

Now, dear friends, that I may not dwell too long upon the A B C of our belief, let me urge you in one sentence to be on your guard against present-day tendencies which weaken the force of this solemn, tragical conviction as to the realities of heathendom. The new science of comparative religion has done much for us. I am not saying one word against this pursuit, or the conclusions which are drawn from it. But I pray you to remember that the underlying truths buried beneath the system that any men hold as their religion are one thing, and the practical working of that system, as we see it in daily life, is altogether another. The actual character of heathenism is not to be learned from the sacred books of all nations and the precious gleams of wisdom and feeling after the Divine which we recognise in man. As a simple matter of fact, all over the world the religion of heathen nations is a mass of obscenity, intertwined so closely with nobler thoughts that the two seem to be inseparable. Unalleviated sorrows, hideous foulnesses, a gross ignorance covering all the most important realities for men-these are the facts with which we have to grapple. Do not let us forget them.

And on the other side, remember the contrasted picture here of the sunlit and sunny church. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of my text. ‘We behold His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.’ If you and I are Christians, we are bound to believe in Him as the exclusive source of certainty. We hear from Him no peradventure, but His word is, ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you,’ and on that word we rest all our knowledge of God, of duty, of man, and of the future. Instead of fears, doubt, perhapses, we have a living Christ and His rock-word. And in Him is all joy, and in Him is the cleansing from all sin. And this threefold radiance, into which the one pure light may be analysed, falls upon us. It falls all over the world as well; but they into whose hearts it has come, they whose faces are turned to it, they receive it in a sense in which the unreceptive and unresponsive darkness of the world does not. The light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness will have none of it, and so it is darkness yet. The light shineth upon us, and if by His mercy we have opened our hearts to it, then, according to the profound teaching of this context, we are not only a sun-lighted but a sunlike Church, and to us the commandment comes, ‘Arise, shine, for thy light is come,’ and has turned thy poor darkness into a sun too.

If we have the light we shall be light. That is but putting in a picturesque form the very central truth of Christianity. The last word of the gospel is transformation. We become like Him if we live near Him, and the end for which the Master became like unto us in His incarnation and passion was that we might become like to Him by the reception of His very own life unto our souls. Light makes many a surface on which it falls flash, but in the optics of earth it is the rays which are not absorbed that are reflected; but in this loftier region the illumination is not superficial but inward, and it is the light which is swallowed up within us that then comes forth from us. Christ will dwell in our hearts, and we shall be like some poor little diamond-shaped pane of glass in a cottage window which, when the sun smites it, is visible over miles of the plain. If that sun falls upon us, its image will be mirrored in our hearts and flashing in our lives. The clouds that lie over the sunset, though in themselves they be but poor, grey, and moist vapour, when smitten by its beneficent radiance, become not unworthy ministers and attendants upon its glory. So, my brethren, it may be with us, for Christ comes to be our light, Because He is in us and with us we are changed into His likeness, and the names that are most appropriate to Him He shares with us. Is He the 'Son'?-we are sons. Is He 'the Light of the world'? His own lips tell us, 'Ye are the light of the world.' Is He the Christ? The Psalm says: 'Touch not my Christs, and do My prophets no harm.' Critics have quarrelled over these last chapters of the Book of Isaiah, as to whom the servant of the Lord is; whether he is the personal or collective Israel, whether he is Christ or His Church. Let us take the lesson that He and we are so united that His office that made the union possible, wherein He was sacrificed on the Cross for us all-belongs by derivation to His servants, and that He, the Sun of Righteousness, moves in the heavens circled by many another sun.

So, dear friends, these two convictions of these two facts, the dark earth, the sunlit, sunlike church, lie at the basis of all our missionary work. If once we begin to doubt about them, if once we begin to think that men have got a good deal of light already, and can do very well without much more, or if we at all are hesitant about our possession of the light, and the certitudes and the joys that are in it, then good-bye to our missionary zeal. We shall soon begin to ask the question, 'To what purpose is this waste?'-though the lips that first asked it, by the bye, did not much recommend it-and shall consider that money and resources and precious lives are too precious to be thrown away thus. But if we rightly appreciate the force of these twin principles, then we shall be ready to listen to the ringing summons.

II. We have here, in the second place, based upon these two facts, the summons to the Church. ‘Shine, for thy light is come.’ If we *have* light, we *are* light. If we are light, we shall shine; but the shining is not altogether spontaneous and effortless. Stars do not need to be bidden to shine nor candles either; but *we* need the exhortation, because there are many things that dim the brilliance of our light and interfere with its streaming forth. True, the property of light is to shine, but we can rob the inward light of its beams. The silent witness of a Christian life transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ is, perhaps, the best contribution that any of us can make to the spread of His kingdom. It is with us as it is with the great lights in the heavens. ‘There is no speech nor language; their voice is not heart,’ yet, ‘their line has gone through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.’ So we may quietly ray out the light in us and witness the transforming power of our Master by the transparent purity of our lives. But the command suggests likewise effort, and that effort must be in the direction of the specific vocal proclamation of His name.

I take both these methods of fulfilling the command into my view, in the further remarks that I make, and I put that which I have to say upon this into three sentences: if we are light, we shall be able to shine; if we are light, we are bound to shine; if we are light, we shall wish to shine. We shall be able to shine. And man can manifest what he is unless he is a coward. Any man can talk about the things that are interesting to him if only they are interesting to him. Any man that has Jesus Christ can say so; and perhaps the utterance of the simple personal conviction is the best method of proclaiming His name. All other things are surplusage. They are good when they come, they may be done without. Learning, eloquence, and the like of these, are the adornments of the lamp, but it does not matter whether the lamp be a gorgeous affair of gilt and crystal, or whether it be a poor piece of block tin; the main question is: are there wick and oil in it? The pitcher may be gold and silver, or costly china, or it may be a poor potsherd. Never mind. If there is water in it, it will be precious to a thirsty lip. And so, dear brethren, I press this upon you: every Christian man has the power, if he is a Christian, to proclaim his Master, and if he has the Light he will be able to show it. I pause for a moment to say that this suggests for us the condition of all faithful and effectual witness for Jesus Christ. Cultivate understanding and all other faculties as much as you like: but oh! you Christian ministers, as well as others in less official and public positions, remember this: the fitness to impart is to possess, and that being taken for granted, the main thing is secured. As long as the electric light is in contact with the battery, so long does it burn. Electricians have been trying during the past few years to make accumulators, things in which they can store the influence and put it away in a corner and use it so that the light need not be in connection with the battery; and they have not succeeded-at least it is only a very partial success. You and I cannot start accumulators. Let us remember that personal contact with Jesus is power, and only that personal contact is so. Arise, shine! but if thou hast gone out of the light, thou wilt shine no more.

But again, if we are light we are bound to shine. That is an obvious principle. The capacity to shine is the obligation to shine, for we are all knit together by such mystical cords in this strange brotherhood of humanity that every one of us holds his possession as trust property for the use and behoof of others, and in the present case that which we have received, and the price at which we have received it, give an edge to the keenness of the obligation, and add a new grip to the stringency of the command. It is because Christ has given Himself thus to us that the possession of Him binds us to the imitation of His example, and the impartation of Him to all our brethren. The obligation lies at our doors, and cannot be delegated or devolved.

If we have light, we shall wish to shine. What shall we say about the Christian people who never really had such a wish? God forbid that I should say they have no light; but this I will say, it burns very dimly. Dear brethren, there is no better test of the depth and the purity of our personal attachment to, and possession of, our Master than the impulse that will spring from them to communicate Him to others. ‘Necessity is laid upon me, yea, woe is me if I preach not.’ That should be the word of every one of us, and it will be so in the measure in which we ourselves have thoroughly laid hold of Jesus Christ. ‘This is a day of good tidings, and we cannot hold our peace,’ said the handful of lepers in the camp. ‘If we are silent some mischief will come to us.’ ‘Thy word, when I shut it up in my bones and said, I will speak no more in Thy name, was like a fire, and was weary of forbearing and could not stay.’ Brother, do you know anything of the divine necessity to share your blessing with the men around you? Did you ever feel what it was to carry a burden of the Lord that drove you to speech, and left you no rest until you had done what it impelled you to do? If not, I beseech you to ask yourselves whether you cannot get nearer to the sun than away out there on the very edge of its system, receiving so few of its beams, and these so impotent that they can scarcely do more than melt the surface of the thick-ribbed ice that warps your spirit. If we are light we shall be enabled, we shall be bound, we shall wish, to shine. Christian men and women, is this true of you?

III. Lastly, notice here the confident promise.

‘The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.’ If we have the light we shall be light; if we are light we shall shine, and if we shine we shall attract. Certainly men and women with the light of Christ in them will draw others to them, just as many an eye that cannot look undazzled upon the sun can look upon it mirrored upon some polished surface. A painter will fling upon his canvas a scene that you and I, with our purblind eyes, have looked at hundreds of times, and seen no beauty; but when we gaze on the picture, then we know how fair it is. There is an attractive power in the light of Christ shining from the face of a man. Of course, we have to moderate our expectations. We have to remember that whilst it is true that some men will come to the light, it is also true that some men ‘love the darkness, and will not come to the light because their deeds are evil’; and we have to remember that we have no right to anticipate rapid results. ‘An inheritance may be begotten hastily at the beginning, but the end thereof shall not be blessed,’ said the wise man; and the history of the Christian Church in many of its missionary operations is a sad commentary upon the saying. We must remember that we cannot estimate how long the preparation for a change, which will be developed swiftly, may be. The sun on autumn mornings shines upon the fog; and the people below, because there is a fog, do not know that it is shining; but it is doing its work on the upper layer all the while, and at length eats its way through the fleecy obstruction, which then swiftly disappears. That must be a very, very long day of which the morning twilight has been nineteen hundred years. Therefore, although the vision tarries, we may fall back with unswerving confidence on these words of my text-’The Gentiles shall come to the brightness of thy rising.’

But after all this has been said, are you satisfied with the rate of progress, are you satisfied with the swiftness of the fulfilment of such hopes? Whose fault is it that the rate of progress is what it is? Yours and mine and our predecessors'. There is such a thing as 'hasting the day of the Lord,' and there is such a thing as protracting the time of waiting. Dear brethren, the secret of our slow growth at home and abroad lies in my text. Fulfil the conditions and you will get the result; but if you are not shining by a light which is Christ's light, who promised that *it* would have attraction or draw men to it? A great deal of the work of the Christian Church-but do not let us hide ourselves in the generality of that word-a great deal of *our* work is artificial light, brewed out of retorts, and smelling sulphureous; and a great deal more of it is the phosphorescence that glimmers above decay. If the Christian Church has ceased in any measure, or in any of its members, to be able to attract by the exhibition of its light, let the Christian Church sit down and bethink itself of the sort of light it gives, and perhaps it will find a reason for its failure. It is Christ, the holy Christ, the loving Christ, the Christ in us making us wise and gentle, it is the Christ manifested by word and by work, who will draw the nations to Him.

So, men and brethren, do you keep near your Master and live close by His side till you are drenched and saturated with His glory, and all your cold vapours turned into visible divinity and manifested Jesus. Keep near to Him. As long as a bit of scrap-iron touches a magnet, *it* is a magnet: as soon as the contact is broken it ceases to attract. If you live in the full sunshine of Christ and have Him, not merely playing upon the surface of your mind, but sinking deep down into it and transforming your whole being, then some men will, as they look at you, be filled with strange longings, and will say: 'Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.' So may you and I live, like the morning star, which, from its serene altitudes, touched into radiance by the sun unseen from the darkened plains, prophesies its rising to a sleeping world, and is content to be lost in the lustre of that unsetting Light!

91)Isaiah 60:18

Isaiah

WALLS AND GATES

Isa. 60:18.

The prophet reaches the height of eloquence in his magnificent picture of the restored Jerusalem, ‘the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.’ To him the city stands for the embodiment of the nation, and his vision of the future is moulded by his knowledge of the past. Israel and Jerusalem were to him the embodiments of the divine idea of God’s dwelling with men, and of a society founded on the presence of God in its midst. We are not forcing meanings on his words which they will not bear, when we see in the society of men redeemed by Christ the perfect embodiment of his vision. Nor is the prophet of the New Testament doing so when he casts his vision of the future which is to follow Resurrection and Judgment into a like form, and shows us the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.

The end of the world’s history is to be, not a garden but a city, a visible community, bound together because God dwells in it, and yet not having lost the blessed characteristics of the Garden from which man set out on his long and devious march.

The Christian form of the prophet’s vision is the Christian Society, and in that society, each individual member possesses his own portion of the common blessings, so that the great words of this text have a personal as well as a general application. We shall best bring out their rich contents by simply taking them as they stand, and considering what is promised by the two eloquent metaphors, which liken salvation to the walls and praise to the gates of the City of God.

I. Salvation is to be the city’s wall.

Another prophet foretold that the returning exiles would dwell in a Jerusalem that had no walls, ‘for I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about’; and Isaiah sang, ‘We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks.’ There is no need for material defences for the community or the individual whom God defends. Would that the Church had lived up to the height of that great thought! Would that we each believed it true in regard to our own lives! There are three ways in which this promise may be viewed. We may think of ‘salvation’ as meaning God’s purpose to save. And then the comfort and sense of security will be derived from the thought that what He intends He performs, and that nothing can traverse that purpose except our own rebellions self-will. They whom God designs to keep are kept; they whom God wills to save are saved, unless they oppose His will, which opposition is in itself to be lost, and leads to ultimate and irreparable loss.

We may think of salvation as an actually begun work. Then the comfort and sense of security will be derived from that great work by which salvation has begun to be ours. The work of Christ keeps us from all danger, and no foes can make a breach in that wall, nor reach those who stand safe behind its strong towers.

We may think of salvation as a personal experience, and then the comfort and sense of security will be derived from that blessed consciousness of possessing in some measure at least the spirit, not of bondage, but of a son. The consciousness of having ‘salvation’ is our best defence against spiritual foes and our best shield against temporal calamities.

It is good for us to live by faith, to be thrown back on our unseen protector, to feel with the psalmist, ‘Thou, Lord, makest me to dwell in safety, though alone,’ and to see the wall great and high that is drawn round our defenceless tent pitched on the sands of the flat desert.

II. Praise is to be the city’s gate.

As to the Church, this prophecy anticipates the Apostle’s teaching that the whole divine work of Redemption, from its fore-ordination before the foundation of the world, to its application to each sinful soul, is ‘to the end that we should be unto the praise of His glory’ or, as he elsewhere expands and enriches the expression, ‘to the praise of the glory of His grace.’

We are ‘secretaries of His praise.’ A gate is that by which the safe inhabitants go out into the region beyond, and the outgoings of the active life of every Christian should be such as to make manifest the blessings that he enjoys within the shelter of the city’s walls. Only if our hidden life is blessed with a begun salvation will our outward life be vocal with the music of praise. The gate will be praise if, and only if, the wall is salvation.

And praise is the gate by which we should go out into the world, even when the world into which we go is dark and the ways rough and hard. If we have the warm glow of a realised salvation in our hearts, sorrows that are but for a moment will not silence the voice of praise, though they may cast it into a minor key. The praise that rises from a sad heart is yet more melodious in God's ear than that which carols when all things go well. The bird that sings in a darkened cage makes music to its owner. 'Songs in the night' have a singular pathos and thrill the listeners. When we 'take the cup of salvation' and call on the name of the Lord, we shall offer to Him the sacrifices of thanksgiving, though He may recall some of the precious gifts that He gave. For He never takes away the wall of salvation which He has built around us, and as long as that wall stands, its gates will be praise. Submission, recognition of His will, and even 'silence because Thou didst it,' are praise to His ear.

92)Isaiah 61:3

Isaiah

THE JOY-BRINGER

Isa. 61:3.

In the little synagogue of Nazareth Jesus began His ministry by laying His hand upon this great prophecy and saying, 'It is Mine! I have fulfilled it.' The prophet had been painting the ideal Messianic Deliverer, with special reference to the return from the Babylonian captivity. That was 'the liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound,' and about which he was thinking. But no external deliverance of that sort could meet the needs, nor satisfy the aspirations, of a soul that knows itself and its circumstances. Isaiah, or the man who goes by his name, spoke greater things than he knew. I am not going to enter upon questions of interpretation; but I may say, that no conception of Jewish prophecy can hold its ground which is not framed in the light of that great saying in the synagogue of Nazareth. So, then, we have here the 'Man of Sorrows,' as this very prophet calls Him in another place, presenting Himself as the Transformer of sorrow and the Bringer of joy, in regard to infinitely deeper griefs than those which sprang in the heart of the nation because of the historical captivity.

There is another beautiful thing in our text, which comes out more distinctly if we follow the Revised Version, and read ‘to give unto them a *garland* for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.’ There we have two contrasted pictures suggested: one of a mourner with grey ashes strewed upon his dishevelled locks, and his spirit clothed in gloom like a black robe; and to him there comes One who, with gentle hand, smoothes the ashes out of his hair, trains a garland round his brow, anoints his head with oil, and, stripping off the trappings of woe, casts about him a bright robe fit for a guest at a festival. That is the miracle that Jesus Christ can do for every one, and is ready to do for us, if we will let Him. Let us look at this wonderful transformation, and at the way by which it is effected.

The first point I would make is that-

I. Jesus Christ is the Joy-bringer to men because He is the Redeemer of men.

Remember that in the original application of my text to the deliverance from captivity, this gift of joy and change of sorrow into gladness was no independent and second bestowment, but was simply the issue of the one that preceded it, viz., the gift of liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that were bound. The gladness was a gladness that welled up in the heart of the captives set free, and coming out from the gloom of the Babylonian dungeon into the sunshine of God’s favour, with their faces set towards Zion ‘with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads.’

Now you have only to keep firm hold of this connection between these two thoughts to come to the crown and centre-point of this great prophecy, as far as it applies to us, and that is that it is Christ as the Emancipator, Christ as the Deliverer, Christ as He who brings us out of the prison of bondage of the tyranny of sin, who is the great Joy-Giver. For there is no real, deep, fundamental and impregnable gladness possible to a man until his relations to God have been rectified, and until, with these rectified relations, with the consciousness of forgiveness and the divine love nestling warm at his heart, he has turned himself away from his dread and his sin, and has recognised in his Father God 'the gladness of his joy.'

Of course, there are many of us who feel that life is sufficiently comfortable and moderately happy, or at least quite tolerable, without any kind of reference to God at all. And in this day of growing materialism, and growing consequent indifference to the deepest needs of the spirit and the claims of religion, more and more men are finding, or fancying that they find, that they can rub along somehow, and have a fair share of gladness and satisfaction, without any need for a redeeming gospel and a forgiving Christ. But about all that kind of surface-joy the old words are true, 'even in laughter the heart is sorrowful,' and hosts of us are satisfied with joys which Jesus has no part in bringing, simply because our truest self has never once awakened. When it does-and perhaps it will do so with some of you, like the sleeping giant that is fabled to lie beneath the volcano whose sunny slopes are smiling with flowers-then you will find out that no one can bring real joy who does not take away guilt and sin.

Jesus Christ is the Joy-bringer, because Jesus Christ is the Emancipator. And true gladness is the gladness that springs from the conscious possession of liberty from the captivity which holds men slaves to evil and to their worst selves. Brethren, let us not fancy that these surface-joys are the joys adequate to a human spirit. They are ignoble, and they are infinitely foolish, because a touch of an awakened conscience, a stirring of one's deeper self, can scatter them all to pieces. So then, that is my first thought.

Let us suggest a second, that-

II. Jesus Christ transforms sorrow because He transforms the mourner.

In my text, all that this Joy-bringer and Transmuter of grief into its opposite is represented as doing is on the man who feels the sorrow. And although, as I have said, the text, in its original position, is simply a deduction from the previous great prophecy which did point to a change of circumstances, and although Jesus does bring the 'joy of salvation' by a great change in a man's relations, yet in regard to the ordinary sorrows of life, He affects these not so much by an operation upon our circumstances as by an operation upon ourselves, and transforms sorrow and brings gladness, because He transforms the man who endures it. The landscape remains the same, the difference is in the colour of the glass through which we look at it. Instead of having it presented through some black and smoked medium, we see it through what the painter calls a ‘Claude Lorraine’ glass, tinged golden, and which throws its own lovely light upon all that it shows us. It is possible-the eye that looks being purged and cleansed, so as to see more clearly-that the facts remaining identical, their whole aspect and bearing may be altered, and that which was felt, and rightly felt, to be painful and provocative of sadness and gloom, may change its character and beget a solemn joy. It would be but a small thing to transform the conditions; it is far better and higher to transform us. We all need, and some of us, I have no doubt, do especially need, to remember that the Lord who brings this sudden transformation for us, does so by His operation within us, and, therefore, to that operation we should willingly yield ourselves.

How does He do this? One answer to that question is-by giving to the man with ashes on his head and gloom wrapped about his spirit, sources of joy, if he will use them, altogether independent of external circumstances.’ Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, and there be no fruit in the vine . . . yet will I rejoice in the Lord.’ And every Christian man, especially when days are dark and clouds are gathering, has it open to him, and is bound to use the possibility, to turn away his mind from the external occasions of sadness, and fix it on the changeless reason for deep and unchanging joy-the sweet presence, the strong love, the sustaining hand, the infinite wisdom, of his Father God.

Brethren, “the paradox of the Christian life” is, ‘as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.’ Christ calls for no hypocritical insensibility to ‘the ills that flesh is heir to.’ He has sanctioned by His example the tears that flow when death hurts loving hearts. He commanded the women of Jerusalem to ‘weep for themselves and for their children.’ He means that we should feel the full bitterness and pain of sorrows which will not be medicinal unless they are bitter, and will not be curative unless they cut deep. But He also means that whilst thus we suffer as men, in the depths of our own hearts we should, at the same time, be turning away from the sufferings and their cause, and fixing our hearts, quiet even then amidst the distractions, upon God

Himself. Ah! it is hard to do, and because we do not do it, the promise that He will turn the sorrow into joy often seems to be a vain word for us.

It is not ours to rejoice as the world does, nor is it ours to sorrow as those who have no hope, or as those who have no God with them. But the two opposite emotions may, to a large extent, be harmonised and co-existent in a Christian heart, and, since they can be, they should be. The Christian in sorrow should be as an island set in some stormy sea, with wild waves breaking against its black, rocky coast, and the wind howling around it, but in the centre of it there is a deep and shady dell 'that heareth not the loud winds when they call,' and where not a leaf is moved by the tempest. In a like depth of calm and central tranquillity it is possible for us to live, even while the storm hurtles its loudest on the outermost coasts of our being; 'as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,' because the Joy-bringer has opened for us sources of gladness independent of externals.

And then there is another way by which, for us, if we will use our privileges, the sorrows of life may be transmuted, because we, contemplating them, have come to a changed understanding of their meaning. That is, after all, the secret charm to be commended to us at all times, but to be commended to us most when our hearts are heavy and the days are dark around us. We shall never understand life if we class its diverse events simply under the two opposite categories of good- evil; prosperity-adversity; gains-losses; fulfilled expectations- disappointed hopes, Put them all together under one class-discipline and education; means for growth; means for Christlikeness. When we have found out, what it takes a long while for us to learn, that the lancet and the bandage are for the same purpose, and that opposite weathers conspire to the same end, that of the harvest, the sting is out of the sorrow, the poison is wiped off the arrow. We can have, if not a solemn joy, at least a patient acquiescence, in the diversities of operation, when we learn that the same hand is working in all for the same end, and that all that contributes to that end is good.

Here we may suggest a third way by which a transformation wrought upon ourselves transforms the aspect of our sorrows, and that is, that possessing independent sources of joy, and having come to learn the educational aspect of all adversity, we hereby are brought by Jesus Christ Himself to the position of submission. And that is the most potent talisman to transform mourning into praise. An accepted grief is a conquered grief; a conquered grief will very soon be a comforted grief; and a comforted grief is a joy. By all these means Jesus Christ, here and now, is transmuting the lead and iron of our griefs into the gold of a not ignoble nor transient gladness.

And may I say one last word? My text suggests not only these two points to which I have already referred-viz. that Jesus Christ is the Joy-bringer because He is the Emancipator, and that He transforms sorrow by transforming the mourner-but, lastly, that III. Jesus gives joy after sorrow.

‘Nevertheless, afterward’ is a great word of glowing encouragement for all sad hearts. ‘Fools and children,’ says the old proverb, ‘should not see half-done work ‘; at least, they should not judge it. When the ploughshare goes deep into the brown, frosty ground, the work is only begun. The earth may seem to be scarped and hurt, and, if one might say, to bleed, but in six months’ time ‘you scarce can see’ the soil for waving corn. Yes; and sorrow, as some of us could witness, is the forecast of purest joy. I have no doubt that there are men and women here who could say, ‘I never knew the power of God, and the blessedness of Christ as a Saviour, until I was in deep affliction, and when everything else went dark, then in His light I saw light.’ Do not some of you know the experience? and might we not all know it? and why do we not know it?

Jesus Christ, even here and now, gives these blessed results of our sorrows, if they are taken to the right place, and borne in right fashion. For it is they ‘that mourn in Zion’ that He thus blesses. There are some of us, I fear, whose only resource in trouble is to fling ourselves into some work, or some dissipation. There are people who try to work away their griefs, as well as people who try feverishly to drink them away. And there are some of us whose only resource for deliverance from our sorrows is that, after the wound has bled all it can, it stops bleeding, and the grief simply dies by lapse of time and for want of fuel. An affliction wasted is the worst of all waste. But if we carry our grief into the sanctuary, then, here and now, it will change its aspect and become a solemn joy.

I say nothing about the ultimate result where every sorrow rightly borne shall be represented in the future life by some stage in grace or glory, where every tear shall be crystallised, if I might say so, into a flashing diamond, which flings off the reflection of the divine light, where 'there shall be no sorrow nor sighing, nor any more pain, for the former things are passed away.' When the lesson has been learned, God burns the rod.

But, brethren, there is another sadder transformation. I have been speaking about the transformation of sorrow into joy. There is also the transformation of joy into sorrow. I spoke a little while ago about the 'laughter' in which the heart is 'sorrowful,' and the writer from whom I quoted the words goes on to say, 'The end of that mirth is heaviness.' 'Thereof cometh in the end despondency and madness.' I saw, on a hilltop, a black circle among the grass and heather. There had been a bonfire there on Coronation Night, and it had all died down, and that was the end-a hideous ring of scorched barrenness amidst the verdure. Take care that your gladnesses do not die down like that, but that they are pure, and being pure are undying. Union with Jesus Christ makes sorrow light, and secures that it shall merge at last into 'joy unspeakable and full of joy.' I believe that separation from Christ makes joy shallow, and makes it certain that at last, instead of a garland, shall be ashes on the head, and that, instead of a festal robe, the spirit shall be wrapped in a garment of heaviness.

93)Isaiah 62:1

Isaiah

THE HEAVENLY WORKERS AND THE EARTHLY WATCHERS

Isa. 62:1, Isa. 62:6 - Isa. 62:7.

Two remarks of an expository nature will prepare the way for the consideration of these words. The first is that the speaker is the personal Messiah. The second half of Isaiah's prophecies forms one great whole, which might be called The Book of the Servant of the Lord. One majestic figure stands forth on its pages with ever-growing clearness of outline and form. The language in which He is described fluctuates at first between the collective Israel and the one Person who is to be all that the nation had failed to attain. But even near the beginning of the prophecy we read of 'My servant whom I uphold,' whose voice is to be low and soft, and whose meek persistence is not to fail till He have 'set judgment in the earth.' And as we advance the reference to the nation becomes less and less possible, and the recognition of the person more and more imperative. At first the music of the prophetic song seems to move uncertainly amid sweet sounds, from which the true theme by degrees emerges, and thenceforward recurs over and over again with deeper, louder harmonies clustering about it, till it swells into the grandeur of the choral close.

In the chapter before our text we read, 'The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek.' Throughout the remainder of the prophecy, with the exception of one section which contains the prayer of the desolate Israel, this same person continues to speak; and who he is was taught in the synagogue of Nazareth. Whilst the preceding chapter, then, brings in Christ as proclaiming the great work of deliverance for which He is anointed of God, the following chapter presents Him as 'treading the wine-press alone,' which is a symbol of the future judgment by the glorified Saviour. Between these two prophecies of the earthly life and of the still future judicial energy, this chapter of our text lies, referring, as I take it, to the period between these two-that is, to all the ages of the Church's development on earth. For these Christ here promises His continual activity, and His continual bestowment of grace to His servants who watch the walls of His Jerusalem.

The second point to be noticed is the remarkable parallelism in the expressions selected as the text: 'I will not hold *My* peace'; the watchmen 'shall never hold *their peace*.' And His command to them is literally, 'Ye that remind Jehovah-no *rest* [or silence] to you, and give not *rest* to Him.'

So we have here Christ, the Church, and God all represented as unceasingly occupied in the one great work of establishing 'Zion' as the centre of light, salvation, and righteousness for the whole world. The consideration of these three perpetual activities may open for us some great truths and stimulating lessons.

I. First, then, The glorified Christ is constantly working for His Church.

We are too apt to regard our Lord's real work as all lying in the past, and, from the very greatness of our estimate of what He has done, to forget the true importance of what He evermore does. 'Christ that died' is the central object of trust and contemplation for devout souls-and that often to the partial hiding of Christ that is 'risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.' But Scripture sets forth the present glorious life of our ascended Lord under two contrasted and harmonious aspects-as being rest, and as being continuous activity in the midst of rest. He was 'received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.' In that session on the throne manifold and mighty truths are expressed. It proclaims the full accomplishment of all the purposes of His earthly ministry; it emphasises the triumphant completion of His redeeming work by His death; it proclaims the majesty of His nature, which returns to the 'glory which He had with the Father before the world was'; it shows to the world, as on some coronation day, its King on His throne, girded with power and holding the far-reaching sceptre of the universe; it prophesies for men, in spite of all present sin and degradation, a share in the dominion which manhood has in Christ attained, for though we see not yet all things put under Him, we see Jesus crowned with glory and honour. It prophesies, too, His final victory over all that sets itself in unavailing antagonism to His love. It points us backward to an historical fact as the basis of all our hopes for ourselves and for our fellows, giving us the assurance that the world's deliverance will come from the slow operation of the forces already lodged in its history by Christ's finished work. It points us forwards to a future as the goal of all these hopes, giving us that confidence of victory which He has who, having kindled the fire on earth, henceforward sits at God's right hand, waiting in the calm and sublime patience of conscious omnipotence and clear foreknowledge 'until His enemies become His footstool.'

But whilst on the one side Christ rests as from a perfected work which needs no addition nor repetition, on the other He 'rests not day nor night.' And this aspect of His present state is as distinctly set forth in Scripture as that is. Indeed the words already quoted as embodying the former phase contain the latter also. For is not 'the right hand of God' the operative energy of the divine nature? And is not 'sitting at the right hand of God' equivalent to possessing and wielding that unwearied, measureless power? Are there not blended together in this pregnant phrase the ideas of profoundest calm and of intensest action, that being expressed by the attitude, and this by the locality? Therefore does the evangelist who uses the expression expand it into words which wonderfully close his gospel, with the same representation of Christ's swift and constant activity as he had been all along pointing out as characterising His life on earth. 'They went forth,' says he, 'and preached everywhere'-so far the contrast between the Lord seated in the heavens and His wandering servants fighting on earth is sharp and almost harsh. But the next words tone it down, and weave the two apparently discordant halves of the picture into a whole: 'the Lord *working* with them.' Yes! in all His rest He is full of work, in all their toils He shares, in all their journeys His presence goes beside them. Whatever they do is His deed, and the help that is done upon the earth He doeth it all Himself.

Is not this blessed conviction of Christ's continuous operation in and for His Church that which underlies, as has often been pointed out, the language of the introduction to the Acts of the Apostles, where mention is made of the former treatise that told 'all which Jesus began both to do and teach'? The gospel records the beginning, the Book of the Acts the continuance; it is one biography in two volumes. Being yet present with them He spoke and acted. Being exalted He 'speaketh from heaven,' and from the throne carries on the endless series of His works of power and healing. The whole history is shaped by the same conviction. Everywhere 'the Lord' is the true actor, the source of all the life which is in the Church, the arranger of all the providences which affect its progress. The Lord adds to the Church daily. His name works miracles. To the Lord believers are added. His angel, His Spirit, bring messages to His servants. He appears to Paul, and speaks to Ananias. The Gentiles turn to the Lord because the hand of the Lord is with the preachers. The Lord calls Paul to carry the gospel to Macedonia. The Lord opens the heart of Lydia, and so throughout. Not 'the Acts of the Apostles,' but 'the Acts of the Lord in and by His servants,' is the accurate title of this book. The vision which flashed angel radiance on the face, and beamed with divine comfort into the heart, of Stephen, was a momentary revelation of an abiding reality, and completes the representation of the Saviour throned beside Almighty power. He beheld his Lord, not seated, as if careless or resting, while His servant's need was so sore, but as if risen with intent to help, and ready to defend-'*standing* on the right hand of God.'

And when once again the heavens opened to the rapt eyes of John in Patmos, the Lord whom he beheld was not only revealed as glorified in the lustre of the inaccessible light, but as actively sustaining and guiding the human reflectors of it. He 'holdeth the seven stars in His right hand,' and '*walketh* in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.'

Not otherwise does my text represent the present relation of Christ to His Church. It speaks of a continuous forth-putting of power, which it is, perhaps, not over-fanciful to regard as dimly set forth here in a twofold form-namely, work and word. At all events, that division stands out clearly on the pages of the New Testament, which ever holds forth the double truth of our Lord's constant action on, in, through, and for His Zion, and of our High Priest's constant intercession.

'I will not rest.' Through all the ages His power is in exercise. He inspires in good men all their wisdom, and every grace of life and character. He uses them as His weapons in the contest of His love with the world's hatred; but the hand that forged, and tempered, and sharpened the blade is that which smites with it; and the axe must not boast itself against him that heweth. He, the Lord of lords, orders providences, and shapes the course of the world for that Church which is His witness: 'Yea, He reproved kings for their sake, saying, Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm.' The ancient legend which told how, on many a well-fought field, the ranks of Rome discerned through the battle-dust the gleaming weapons and white steeds of the Great Twin Brethren far in front of the solid legions, is true in loftier sense in our Holy War. We may still see the vision which the leader of Israel saw of old, the man with the drawn sword in his hand, and hear the majestic word, 'As Captain of the Lord's host am I now come.' The Word of God, with vesture dipped in blood, with eyes alit with His flaming love, with the many crowns of unlimited sovereignty upon His head, rides at the head of the armies of heaven; 'and in righteousness doth He judge and make war.' For the single soul struggling with daily tasks and petty cares, His help is near and real, as for the widest work of the collective whole. He sends none of us tasks in which He has no share. The word of this Master is never 'Go,' but 'Come.' He unites Himself with all our sorrows, with all our efforts. 'The Lord also working with them' is a description of all the labours of Christian men, be they great or small.

Nor is this all. There still remains the wonderful truth of His continuous intercession for us. In its widest meaning that word expresses the whole of the manifold ways by which Christ undertakes and maintains our cause. But the narrower signification of prayer on our behalf is applicable, and is in Scripture applied, to our Lord. As on earth, the climax of all His intercourse with His disciples was that deep yet simple prayer which forms the Holy of Holies of John's Gospel, so in heaven His loftiest office for us is set forth under the figure of His intercession. Before the Throne stands the slain Lamb, and therefore do the elders in the outer circle bring acceptable praises. Within the veil stands the Priest, with the names of the tribes blazing on the breastplate and on the shoulders of His robes, near the seat of love, near the arm of power. And whatever difficulty may surround that idea of Christ's priestly intercession, this at all events is implied in it, that the mighty work which He accomplished on earth is ever present to the divine mind as the ground of our acceptance and the channel of our blessings; and this further, that the utterance of Christ's will is ever in harmony with the divine purpose. Therefore His prayer has in it a strange tone of majesty, and, if we may so say, of command, as of one who knows that He is ever heard: '*I will* that they whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am.'

The instinct of the Church has, from of old, laid hold of an event in His earthly life to shadow forth this great truth, and has bid us see a pledge and a symbol of it in that scene on the Lake of Galilee: the disciples toiling in the sudden storm, the poor little barque tossing on the waters tinged by the wan moon, the spray dashing over the wearied rowers. They seem alone, but up yonder, in some hidden cleft of the hills, their Master looks down on all the weltering storm, and lifts His voice in prayer. Then when the need is sorest, and the hope least, He comes across the waves, making their surges His pavement, and using all opposition as the means of His approach, and His presence brings calmness, and immediately they are at the land.

So we have not only to look back to the Cross, but up to the Throne. From the Cross we hear a voice, 'It is finished.' From the Throne a voice, 'For Zion's sake I will not hold My peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest.'

II. Secondly, Christ’s servants on earth derive from Him a like perpetual activity for the same object.

The Lord, who in the former portion of these verses declares His own purpose of unwearied action for Zion, associates with Himself in the latter portion the watchmen, whom He appoints and endows for functions in some measure resembling His own, and exercised with constancy derived from Him. ‘I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night.’ On the promise follows, as ever, a command [for all divine gifts involve the responsibility of their use, and it is not His wont either to bestow without requiring, or to require before bestowing], ‘Ye that remind Jehovah, keep not silence.’

There is distinctly traceable before a reference to a two-fold form of occupation devolving on these Christ-sent servants. They are watchmen, and they are also God’s remembrancers. In the one capacity as in the other, their voices are to be always heard. The former metaphor is common in the Old Testament, as a designation of the prophetic office, but, in the accordance with the genius of the New Testament, as expressed on Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out on the lowly as well as on the high, on the young as on the old, and all prophesied, it may be fairly extended to designated not to some selected few, but the whole mass of Christian people. The watchman’s office falls to be done by all who see the coming peril, and have a tongue to echo it forth. The remembrancer’s priestly office belongs to every member of Christ’s priestly kingdom, the lowest and least of whom has the privilege of unrestrained entry into God’s presence-chamber, and the power of blessing the world by faithful prayer. What should we think of a citizen in a beleaguered city, who saw enemy mounting the very ramparts, and gave no alarm because that was the sentry’s business? In such extremity every man is a soldier, and women and children can at least keep watch and raise shrill cries of warning. The gifts, then, here promised, and the duties that flow from them, are not the prerogatives or the tasks of any class or order, but the heritage and the burden of the Lord to every member of His Church.

Our voices should ever be heard on earth. A solemn message is committed to us, by the very fact of our belief in Jesus Christ and His work. With that faith come responsibilities of which no Christian can denude himself. To warn the wicked man to turn from His wickedness; to blow the trumpet when we see the sword coming; to catch ever gleaming on the horizon, like the spears of an army through the dust of the march, the outriders and advance-guard of the coming of Him whose coming is life or death to all, and to lift up our voices with strength and say, ‘Behold your God’; to peal into the ears of men, sunken in earthliness and dreaming of safety, the cry which may startle and save; to ring out in glad tones to all who wearily ask, ‘Watchman, what of the night? will the night soon pass?’ the answer which the slow dawning east has breathed into our else stony lips, ‘The morning cometh’; to proclaim Christ, who came once to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, who comes ever, through the ages, to bless and uphold the righteousness which He loves and to destroy the iniquity which He hates, who will come at the last to judge the world-this is the never-ending task of the watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem. The New Testament calls it ‘preaching,’ proclaiming as a herald does. And both metaphors carry one common lesson of the manner in which the work should be done. With clear loud voice, with earnestness and decision, with faithfulness and self-oblivion, forgetting himself in his message, must the herald sound out the will of his King, the largess of his Lord. And the watchman who stands on his watch-tower whole nights, and sees foemen creeping through the gloom, or fire bursting out among the straw-roofed cottages within the walls, shouts with all his might the short, sharp alarm, that wakes the sleepers to whom slumber were death. Let us ponder the pattern.

Our voices should ever be heard in heaven. They who trust God remind Him of His promises by their very faith; it is a mute appeal to His faithful love, which He cannot but answer. And, beyond that, their prayers come up for a memorial before God, and have as real an effect in furthering Christ’s kingdom on earth as is exercised by their entreaties and proclamations to men.

How distinctly these words of our text define the region within which our prayers should ever move, and the limits which bound their efficacy! They *remind* God. Then the truest prayer is that which bases itself on God’s uttered will, and the desires which are born of our own fancies or heated enthusiasms have no power with Him. The prayer that prevails is a reflected promise. Our office in prayer is but to receive on our hearts the bright rays of His word, and to flash them back from the polished surface to the heaven from whence they came.

These two forms of action ought to be inseparable. Each, if genuine, will drive us to the other, for who could fling himself into the watchman's work, with all its solemn consequences, knowing how weak his voice was, and how deaf the ears that should hear, unless he could bring God's might to his help? and who could honestly remind God of His promises and forget his own responsibilities? Prayerless work will soon slacken, and never bear fruit; idle prayer is worse than idle. You cannot part them if you would. How much of the busy occupation which is called 'Christian work' is detected to be spurious by this simple test! How much so-called prayer is reduced by it to mere noise, no better than the blaring trumpet or the hollow drum!

The power for both is derived from Christ. He sets the watchmen; He commands the remembrancers. From Him flows the power, from His good Spirit comes the desire, to proclaim the message. That message is the story of His life and death. But for what He does and is we should have nothing to say; but for His gift we should have no power to say it; but for His influence we should have no will to say it. He commands and fits us to be intercessors, for His mighty work brings us near to God; He opens for us access with confidence to God. He inspires our prayers. He 'hath made us priests to God.'

And, as the Christian power of discharging these twofold duties is drawn from Christ, so our pattern is His manner of discharging them, and the condition of receiving the power is to abide in Him. He proposes Himself as our Example. He calls us to no labours which He has not Himself shared, nor to any earnestness or continuance in prayer which He has not Himself shown forth. This Master works in front of His men. The farmer that goes first among all the sowers, and heads the line of reapers in the yellowing harvest-field, may well have diligent servants. Our Master 'went forth, weeping, bearing precious seed,' and has left it in our hands to sow in all furrows. Our Master is the Lord of the harvest, and has borne the heat of the day before His servants. Look at the amount of work, actual hard work, compressed into these three short years of His ministry. Take the records of the words He spake on that last day of His public teaching, and see what unwearied toil they represent. Ponder upon that life till you catch the spirit which breathed through it all, and, like Him, embrace gladly the welcome necessity of labour for God, under the sense of a vocation conferred upon you, and of the short space within which your service must be condensed. ‘I must work the work of Him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.’

Christ asks no romantic impossibilities from us, but He does ask a continuous, systematic discharge of the duties which depend on our relation to the world, and on our relation to Him. Let it be our life’s work to show forth His praise; let the very atmosphere in which we move and have our being be prayer. Let two great currents set ever through our days, which two, like the great movements in the ocean of the air, are but the upper and under halves of the one movement-that beneath with constant energy of desire rushing in from the cold poles to be warmed and expanded at the tropics, where the all-moving sun pours his directest rays; that above charged with rich gifts from the Lord of light, glowing with heat drawn from Him, and made diffusive by His touch, spreading itself out beneficent and life-bringing into all colder lands, swathing the world in soft, warm folds, and turning the polar ice into sweet waters.

In the tabernacle of Israel stood two great emblems of the functions of God’s people, which embodied these two sides of the Christian life. Day by day, there ascended from the altar of incense the sweet odour, which symbolised the fragrance of prayer as it wreathes itself upwards to the heavens. Night by night, as darkness fell on the desert and the camp, there shone through the gloom the hospitable light of the great golden candlestick with its seven lamps, whose steady rays outburned the stars that paled with the morning. Side by side they proclaimed to Israel its destiny to be the light of the world, to be a kingdom of priests.

The offices and the honour have passed over to us, and we shall fall beneath our obligations unless we let our light shine constantly before men, and let our voice rise like a fountain night and day’ before God- even as He did who, when every man went to his own house, went alone to the Mount of

Olives, and in the morning, when every man returned to his daily task, went into the Temple and taught. By His example, by His gifts, by the motive of His love, our resting, working Lord says to each of us, ‘Ye that remind God, keep not silence.’ Let us answer, ‘For Zion’s sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest.’

III. Finally, The constant activity of the servants of Christ will secure the constant operation of God’s power.

‘*Give* Him no rest’: let there be no cessation to Him. These are bold words, which many people would not have been slow to rebuke if they had been anywhere else than in the Bible. Those who remind God are not to suffer Him to be still. The prophet believes that they can regulate the flow of divine energy, can stir up the strength of the Lord.

It is easy to puzzle ourselves with insoluble questions about the co-operation of God’s power and man’s; but practically, is it not true that God reaches His end, of the establishment of Zion, through the Church? He has not barely willed that the world should be saved, nor barely that it should be saved through Christ, nor barely that it should be saved through the knowledge of Christ; but His will is that the world shall be saved, by faith in the person and work of Christ, proclaimed as a gospel by men who believe it. And, as a matter of fact, is it not true that the energy with which God’s power in the gospel manifests itself depends on the zeal and activity and prayerfulness of the Church? The great reservoir is always full-full to the brim; however much may be drawn from it, the water sinks not a hairsbreadth; but the bore of the pipe and the power of the pumping-engine determine the rate at which the stream flows from it. ‘He could there do no mighty works because of their unbelief.’ The obstruction of indifference dammed back the water of life. The city perishes for thirst if the long line of aqueduct that strides across the plain towards the home of the mountain torrents be ruinous, broken down, choked with rubbish.

God is always the same-equally near, equally strong, equally gracious. But our possession of His grace, and the impartation of His grace through us to others, vary, because our faith, our earnestness, our desires, vary. True, these no doubt are also His gifts and His working, and nothing that we say now touches in the least on the great truth that God is the sole originator of all good in man; but while believing that, as no less sure in itself than blessed in its message of confidence and consolation to us, we also have to remember, ‘If any man open the door, I will come in to him.’ We may have as much of God as we want, as much as we can hold, far more than we deserve. And if ever the victorious power of His Church seems to be almost paling to defeat, and His servants to be working no deliverance upon the earth, the cause is not to be found in Him who is ‘without variableness,’ nor in His gifts, which are ‘without repentance,’ but solely in us, who let go our hold of the Eternal Might. No ebb withdraws the waters of that great ocean; and if sometimes there be sand and ooze where once the flashing flood brought life and motion, it is because careless warders have shut the sea-gates.

An awful responsibility lies on us. We can resist and refuse, or we can open our hearts and draw into ourselves His strength. We can bring into operation those energies which act through faithful men faithfully proclaiming the faithful saying; or we can limit the Holy One of Israel. ‘Why could not we cast him out?’ ‘Because of your unbelief.’

With what grand confidence, then, may the weakest of us go to his task. We have a right to feel that in all our labour God works with us; that, in all our words for Him, it is not we that speak, but the Spirit of our Father that speaks in us; that if humbly and prayerfully, with self-distrust and resolute effort to crucify our own intrusive individuality, we wait for Him to enshrine Himself within us, strength will come to us, drawn from the deep fountains of God, and we too shall be able to say, ‘Not I, but the grace of God in me.’

How this sublime confidence should tell on our characters, destroying all self-confidence, repressing all pride, calming all impatience, brightening all despondency, and ever stirring us anew to deeds worthy of the ‘exceeding greatness of the power which worketh in us’-I can only suggest.

On all sides motives for strenuous toil press in upon us-chiefly those great examples which we have now been contemplating. But, besides these, there are other forms of activity which may point the same lesson. Look at the energy *around* us. We live in a busy time. Life goes swiftly in all regions. Men seem to be burning away faster than ever before, in an atmosphere of pure oxygen. Do we work as hard for God as the world does for itself? Look at the energy *beneath* us: how evil in every form is active; how lies and half-truths propagate themselves quick as the blight on a rose-tree; how profligacy, and crime, and all the devil's angels are busy on his errands. If *we* are sitting drowsy by our camp-fires, the enemy is on the alert. You can hear the tramp of their legions and the rumble of their artillery through the night as they march to their posts on the field. It is no time for God's sentinels to nod. If they sleep, the adversary does not, but glides in the congenial darkness, sowing his baleful tares. Do we work as hard for God as the emissaries of evil do for their master? Look at the energy *above* us. On the throne of the universe is the immortal Power who slumbereth not nor sleepeth. Before the altar of the heavens is the Priest of the world, the Lord of His Church, 'who ever liveth to make intercession for us.' Round Him stand perfected spirits, the watchmen on the walls of the New Jerusalem, who 'rest not day and night, saying, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.' From His presence come, filling the air with the rustle of their swift wings and the light of their flame-faces, the ministering spirits who evermore 'do His commandments, hearkening to the voice of His word.' And we, Christian brethren, where are we in all this magnificent concurrence of activity, for purposes which ought to be dear to our hearts as they are to the heart of God? Do we work for Him as He and all that are with Him do? Is His will done by us on earth, as it is heaven?

Alas! alas! have we not all been like those three apostles whose eyes were heavy with sleep even while the Lord was wrestling with the tempter under the gnarled olives in the pale moonlight of Gethsemane? Let us arouse ourselves from our sloth. Let us lift up our cry to God: 'Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord, as in the ancient days in the generations of old'; and the answer shall sound from the heavens to us as it did to the prophet, an echo of his prayer turned into a command, 'Awake, awake, put on *thy* strength, O Zion.'

94)Isaiah 62:3

Isaiah

MAN'S CROWN AND GOD'S

Isa. 28:5. - Isa. 62:3.

Connection of first prophecy-destruction of Samaria. Its situation, crowning the hill with its walls and towers, its fertile ‘fat valley,’ the flagrant immorality and drunkenness of its inhabitants, and its final ruin, are all presented in the highly imaginative picture of its fall as being like the trampling under foot of a garland on a reveller’s head, the roses of which fade and droop amid the fumes of the banqueting hall, and are then flung out on the highway. The contrast presented is very striking and beautiful. When all that gross and tumultuous beauty has faded and died, then God Himself will be a crown of beauty to His people.

The second text comes into remarkable line with this. The verbal resemblance is not quite so strong in the original. The words for *diadem* and *crown* are not the same; the word rendered *glory* in the second text is rendered *beauty* in the first, but the two texts are entirely one in meaning. The same metaphor, then, is used with reference to what God is to the Church and what the Church is to God. He is its crown, it is His.

I. The Possession of God is the Coronation of Man.

> [a] Crowns were worn by guests at feasts. They who possess God sit at a table perpetually spread with all which the soul can wish or want. Contrast the perishable delights of sense and godless life with the calm and immortal joys of communion with God; ‘a crown that fadeth not away’ beside withered garlands.
>
> [b] Crowns were worn by kings. They who serve God are thereby invested with rule over selves, over circumstances, over all externals. He alone gives completeness to self-control.
>
> [c] Crowns were worn by priests. The highest honour and dignity of man’s nature is thereby reached. To have God is like a beam of sunshine on a garden, which brings out the colours of all the flowers; contrast with the same garden in the grey monotony of a cloudy twilight.

II. The Coronation of Man in God is the Coronation of God in Man.

That includes the following thoughts.

The true glory of God is in the communication of Himself. What a wonderful light that throws on divine character! It is equivalent to ‘God is Love.’

He who is glorified by God glorifies God, as showing the most wonderful working of His power in making such a man out of such material, by an alchemy that can convert base metal into fine gold; as showing the most wonderful condescension of His love in taking to His heart man, into whose flesh the rotting leprosy of sin has eaten.

Such a man will glorify God by becoming a conscious herald of His praise. He who has God in his heart will magnify Him by lip and life. Redeemed men are ‘secretaries of His praise’ to men, and ‘to principalities and powers in heavenly places is made known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God.’

He who thus glorifies God is held in God’s hand.

‘None shall pluck them out of My Father’s hand.’

All this will be perfected in heaven. Redeemed men lead the universal chorus that thunders forth ‘glory to Him that sitteth on the throne.’

‘He shall come to be glorified in His saints.’

‘Glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son also may glorify Thee.’

95)Isaiah 62:6-7

Isaiah

THE HEAVENLY WORKERS AND THE EARTHLY WATCHERS

Isa. 62:1, Isa. 62:6 - Isa. 62:7.

Two remarks of an expository nature will prepare the way for the consideration of these words. The first is that the speaker is the personal Messiah. The second half of Isaiah’s prophecies forms one great whole, which might be called The Book of the Servant of the Lord. One majestic figure stands forth on its pages with ever-growing clearness of outline and form. The language in which He is described fluctuates at first between the collective Israel and the one Person who is to be all that the nation had failed to attain. But even near the beginning of the prophecy we read of ‘My servant whom I uphold,’ whose voice is to be low and soft, and whose meek persistence is not to fail till He have ‘set judgment in the earth.’ And as we advance the reference to the nation becomes less and less possible, and the recognition of the person more and more imperative. At first the music of the prophetic song seems to move uncertainly amid sweet sounds, from which the true theme by degrees emerges, and thenceforward recurs over and over again with deeper, louder harmonies clustering about it, till it swells into the grandeur of the choral close.

In the chapter before our text we read, ‘The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek.’ Throughout the remainder of the prophecy, with the exception of one section which contains the prayer of the desolate Israel, this same person continues to speak; and who he is was taught in the synagogue of Nazareth. Whilst the preceding chapter, then, brings in Christ as proclaiming the great work of deliverance for which He is anointed of God, the following chapter presents Him as ‘treading the wine-press alone,’ which is a symbol of the future judgment by the glorified Saviour. Between these two prophecies of the earthly life and of the still future judicial energy, this chapter of our text lies, referring, as I take it, to the period between these two-that is, to all the ages of the Church’s development on earth. For these Christ here promises His continual activity, and His continual bestowment of grace to His servants who watch the walls of His Jerusalem.

The second point to be noticed is the remarkable parallelism in the expressions selected as the text: ‘I will not hold *My* peace’; the watchmen ‘shall never hold *their peace*.’ And His command to them is literally, ‘Ye that remind Jehovah-no *rest* [or silence] to you, and give not *rest* to Him.’

So we have here Christ, the Church, and God all represented as unceasingly occupied in the one great work of establishing ‘Zion’ as the centre of light, salvation, and righteousness for the whole world. The consideration of these three perpetual activities may open for us some great truths and stimulating lessons.

I. First, then, The glorified Christ is constantly working for His Church.

We are too apt to regard our Lord’s real work as all lying in the past, and, from the very greatness of our estimate of what He has done, to forget the true importance of what He evermore does. ‘Christ that died’ is the central object of trust and contemplation for devout souls-and that often to the partial hiding of Christ that is ‘risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.’ But Scripture sets forth the present glorious life of our ascended Lord under two contrasted and harmonious aspects-as being rest, and as being continuous activity in the midst of rest. He was ‘received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.’ In that session on the throne manifold and mighty truths are expressed. It proclaims the full accomplishment of all the purposes of His earthly ministry; it emphasises the triumphant completion of His redeeming work by His death; it proclaims the majesty of His nature, which returns to the ‘glory which He had with the Father before the world was’; it shows to the world, as on some coronation day, its King on His throne, girded with power and holding the far-reaching sceptre of the universe; it prophesies for men, in spite of all present sin and degradation, a share in the dominion which manhood has in Christ attained, for though we see not yet all things put under Him, we see Jesus crowned with glory and honour. It prophesies, too, His final victory over all that sets itself in unavailing antagonism to His love. It points us backward to an historical fact as the basis of all our hopes for ourselves and for our fellows, giving us the assurance that the world’s deliverance will come from the slow operation of the forces already lodged in its history by Christ’s finished work. It points us forwards to a future as the goal of all these hopes, giving us that confidence of victory which He has who, having kindled the fire on earth, henceforward sits at God’s right hand, waiting in the calm and sublime patience of conscious omnipotence and clear foreknowledge ‘until His enemies become His footstool.’

But whilst on the one side Christ rests as from a perfected work which needs no addition nor repetition, on the other He ‘rests not day nor night.’ And this aspect of His present state is as distinctly set forth in Scripture as that is. Indeed the words already quoted as embodying the former phase contain the latter also. For is not ‘the right hand of God’ the operative energy of the divine nature? And is not ‘sitting at the right hand of God’ equivalent to possessing and wielding that unwearied, measureless power? Are there not blended together in this pregnant phrase the ideas of profoundest calm and of intensest action, that being expressed by the attitude, and this by the locality? Therefore does the evangelist who uses the expression expand it into words which wonderfully close his gospel, with the same representation of Christ’s swift and constant activity as he had been all along pointing out as characterising His life on earth. ‘They went forth,’ says he, ‘and preached everywhere’-so far the contrast between the Lord seated in the heavens and His wandering servants fighting on earth is sharp and almost harsh. But the next words tone it down, and weave the two apparently discordant halves of the picture into a whole: ‘the Lord *working* with them.’ Yes! in all His rest He is full of work, in all their toils He shares, in all their journeys His presence goes beside them. Whatever they do is His deed, and the help that is done upon the earth He doeth it all Himself.

Is not this blessed conviction of Christ’s continuous operation in and for His Church that which underlies, as has often been pointed out, the language of the introduction to the Acts of the Apostles, where mention is made of the former treatise that told ‘all which Jesus began both to do and teach’? The gospel records the beginning, the Book of the Acts the continuance; it is one biography in two volumes. Being yet present with them He spoke and acted. Being exalted He ‘speaketh from heaven,’ and from the throne carries on the endless series of His works of power and healing. The whole history is shaped by the same conviction. Everywhere ‘the Lord’ is the true actor, the source of all the life which is in the Church, the arranger of all the providences which affect its progress. The Lord adds to the Church daily. His name works miracles. To the Lord believers are added. His angel, His Spirit, bring messages to His servants. He appears to Paul, and speaks to Ananias. The Gentiles turn to the Lord because the hand of the Lord is with the preachers. The Lord calls Paul to carry the gospel to Macedonia. The Lord opens the heart of Lydia, and so throughout. Not ‘the Acts of the

Apostles,' but 'the Acts of the Lord in and by His servants,' is the accurate title of this book. The vision which flashed angel radiance on the face, and beamed with divine comfort into the heart, of Stephen, was a momentary revelation of an abiding reality, and completes the representation of the Saviour throned beside Almighty power. He beheld his Lord, not seated, as if careless or resting, while His servant's need was so sore, but as if risen with intent to help, and ready to defend-'*standing* on the right hand of God.'

And when once again the heavens opened to the rapt eyes of John in Patmos, the Lord whom he beheld was not only revealed as glorified in the lustre of the inaccessible light, but as actively sustaining and guiding the human reflectors of it. He 'holdeth the seven stars in His right hand,' and '*walketh* in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.'

Not otherwise does my text represent the present relation of Christ to His Church. It speaks of a continuous forth-putting of power, which it is, perhaps, not over-fanciful to regard as dimly set forth here in a twofold form-namely, work and word. At all events, that division stands out clearly on the pages of the New Testament, which ever holds forth the double truth of our Lord's constant action on, in, through, and for His Zion, and of our High Priest's constant intercession.

‘I will not rest.’ Through all the ages His power is in exercise. He inspires in good men all their wisdom, and every grace of life and character. He uses them as His weapons in the contest of His love with the world’s hatred; but the hand that forged, and tempered, and sharpened the blade is that which smites with it; and the axe must not boast itself against him that heweth. He, the Lord of lords, orders providences, and shapes the course of the world for that Church which is His witness: ‘Yea, He reproved kings for their sake, saying, Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm.’ The ancient legend which told how, on many a well-fought field, the ranks of Rome discerned through the battle-dust the gleaming weapons and white steeds of the Great Twin Brethren far in front of the solid legions, is true in loftier sense in our Holy War. We may still see the vision which the leader of Israel saw of old, the man with the drawn sword in his hand, and hear the majestic word, ‘As Captain of the Lord’s host am I now come.’ The Word of God, with vesture dipped in blood, with eyes alit with His flaming love, with the many crowns of unlimited sovereignty upon His head, rides at the head of the armies of heaven; ‘and in righteousness doth He judge and make war.’ For the single soul struggling with daily tasks and petty cares, His help is near and real, as for the widest work of the collective whole. He sends none of us tasks in which He has no share. The word of this Master is never ‘Go,’ but ‘Come.’ He unites Himself with all our sorrows, with all our efforts. ‘The Lord also working with them’ is a description of all the labours of Christian men, be they great or small.

Nor is this all. There still remains the wonderful truth of His continuous intercession for us. In its widest meaning that word expresses the whole of the manifold ways by which Christ undertakes and maintains our cause. But the narrower signification of prayer on our behalf is applicable, and is in Scripture applied, to our Lord. As on earth, the climax of all His intercourse with His disciples was that deep yet simple prayer which forms the Holy of Holies of John’s Gospel, so in heaven His loftiest office for us is set forth under the figure of His intercession. Before the Throne stands the slain Lamb, and therefore do the elders in the outer circle bring acceptable praises. Within the veil stands the Priest, with the names of the tribes blazing on the breastplate and on the shoulders of His robes, near the seat of love, near the arm of power. And whatever difficulty may surround that idea of Christ’s priestly intercession, this at all events is implied in it, that the mighty work which He accomplished on earth is ever present to the divine mind as the ground of our acceptance and the channel of our blessings; and this further, that the utterance of Christ’s will is ever in harmony with the divine purpose. Therefore His prayer has in it a strange tone of majesty, and, if we may so say, of command, as of one who knows that He is ever heard: ‘*I will* that they whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am.’

The instinct of the Church has, from of old, laid hold of an event in His earthly life to shadow forth this great truth, and has bid us see a pledge and a symbol of it in that scene on the Lake of Galilee: the disciples toiling in the sudden storm, the poor little barque tossing on the waters tinged by the wan moon, the spray dashing over the wearied rowers. They seem alone, but up yonder, in some hidden cleft of the hills, their Master looks down on all the weltering storm, and lifts His voice in prayer. Then when the need is sorest, and the hope least, He comes across the waves, making their surges His pavement, and using all opposition as the means of His approach, and His presence brings calmness, and immediately they are at the land.

So we have not only to look back to the Cross, but up to the Throne. From the Cross we hear a voice, ‘It is finished.’ From the Throne a voice, ‘For Zion’s sake I will not hold My peace, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest.’

II. Secondly, Christ’s servants on earth derive from Him a like perpetual activity for the same object.

The Lord, who in the former portion of these verses declares His own purpose of unwearied action for Zion, associates with Himself in the latter portion the watchmen, whom He appoints and endows for functions in some measure resembling His own, and exercised with constancy derived from Him. ‘I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night.’ On the promise follows, as ever, a command [for all divine gifts involve the responsibility of their use, and it is not His wont either to bestow without requiring, or to require before bestowing], ‘Ye that remind Jehovah, keep not silence.’

There is distinctly traceable before a reference to a two-fold form of occupation devolving on these Christ-sent servants. They are watchmen, and they are also God's remembrancers. In the one capacity as in the other, their voices are to be always heard. The former metaphor is common in the Old Testament, as a designation of the prophetic office, but, in the accordance with the genius of the New Testament, as expressed on Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out on the lowly as well as on the high, on the young as on the old, and all prophesied, it may be fairly extended to designated not to some selected few, but the whole mass of Christian people. The watchman's office falls to be done by all who see the coming peril, and have a tongue to echo it forth. The remembrancer's priestly office belongs to every member of Christ's priestly kingdom, the lowest and least of whom has the privilege of unrestrained entry into God's presence-chamber, and the power of blessing the world by faithful prayer. What should we think of a citizen in a beleaguered city, who saw enemy mounting the very ramparts, and gave no alarm because that was the sentry's business? In such extremity every man is a soldier, and women and children can at least keep watch and raise shrill cries of warning. The gifts, then, here promised, and the duties that flow from them, are not the prerogatives or the tasks of any class or order, but the heritage and the burden of the Lord to every member of His Church.

Our voices should ever be heard on earth. A solemn message is committed to us, by the very fact of our belief in Jesus Christ and His work. With that faith come responsibilities of which no Christian can denude himself. To warn the wicked man to turn from His wickedness; to blow the trumpet when we see the sword coming; to catch ever gleaming on the horizon, like the spears of an army through the dust of the march, the outriders and advance-guard of the coming of Him whose coming is life or death to all, and to lift up our voices with strength and say, 'Behold your God'; to peal into the ears of men, sunken in earthliness and dreaming of safety, the cry which may startle and save; to ring out in glad tones to all who wearily ask, 'Watchman, what of the night? will the night soon pass?' the answer which the slow dawning east has breathed into our else stony lips, 'The morning cometh'; to proclaim Christ, who came once to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, who comes ever, through the ages, to bless and uphold the righteousness which He loves and to destroy the iniquity which He hates, who will come at the last to judge the world-this is the never-ending task of the watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem. The New Testament calls it ‘preaching,’ proclaiming as a herald does. And both metaphors carry one common lesson of the manner in which the work should be done. With clear loud voice, with earnestness and decision, with faithfulness and self-oblivion, forgetting himself in his message, must the herald sound out the will of his King, the largess of his Lord. And the watchman who stands on his watch-tower whole nights, and sees foemen creeping through the gloom, or fire bursting out among the straw-roofed cottages within the walls, shouts with all his might the short, sharp alarm, that wakes the sleepers to whom slumber were death. Let us ponder the pattern.

Our voices should ever be heard in heaven. They who trust God remind Him of His promises by their very faith; it is a mute appeal to His faithful love, which He cannot but answer. And, beyond that, their prayers come up for a memorial before God, and have as real an effect in furthering Christ’s kingdom on earth as is exercised by their entreaties and proclamations to men.

How distinctly these words of our text define the region within which our prayers should ever move, and the limits which bound their efficacy! They *remind* God. Then the truest prayer is that which bases itself on God’s uttered will, and the desires which are born of our own fancies or heated enthusiasms have no power with Him. The prayer that prevails is a reflected promise. Our office in prayer is but to receive on our hearts the bright rays of His word, and to flash them back from the polished surface to the heaven from whence they came.

These two forms of action ought to be inseparable. Each, if genuine, will drive us to the other, for who could fling himself into the watchman’s work, with all its solemn consequences, knowing how weak his voice was, and how deaf the ears that should hear, unless he could bring God’s might to his help? and who could honestly remind God of His promises and forget his own responsibilities? Prayerless work will soon slacken, and never bear fruit; idle prayer is worse than idle. You cannot part them if you would. How much of the busy occupation which is called ‘Christian work’ is detected to be spurious by this simple test! How much so-called prayer is reduced by it to mere noise, no better than the blaring trumpet or the hollow drum!

The power for both is derived from Christ. He sets the watchmen; He commands the remembrancers. From Him flows the power, from His good Spirit comes the desire, to proclaim the message. That message is the story of His life and death. But for what He does and is we should have nothing to say; but for His gift we should have no power to say it; but for His influence we should have no will to say it. He commands and fits us to be intercessors, for His mighty work brings us near to God; He opens for us access with confidence to God. He inspires our prayers. He 'hath made us priests to God.'

And, as the Christian power of discharging these twofold duties is drawn from Christ, so our pattern is His manner of discharging them, and the condition of receiving the power is to abide in Him. He proposes Himself as our Example. He calls us to no labours which He has not Himself shared, nor to any earnestness or continuance in prayer which He has not Himself shown forth. This Master works in front of His men. The farmer that goes first among all the sowers, and heads the line of reapers in the yellowing harvest-field, may well have diligent servants. Our Master 'went forth, weeping, bearing precious seed,' and has left it in our hands to sow in all furrows. Our Master is the Lord of the harvest, and has borne the heat of the day before His servants. Look at the amount of work, actual hard work, compressed into these three short years of His ministry. Take the records of the words He spake on that last day of His public teaching, and see what unwearied toil they represent. Ponder upon that life till you catch the spirit which breathed through it all, and, like Him, embrace gladly the welcome necessity of labour for God, under the sense of a vocation conferred upon you, and of the short space within which your service must be condensed. 'I must work the work of Him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.'

Christ asks no romantic impossibilities from us, but He does ask a continuous, systematic discharge of the duties which depend on our relation to the world, and on our relation to Him. Let it be our life's work to show forth His praise; let the very atmosphere in which we move and have our being be prayer. Let two great currents set ever through our days, which two, like the great movements in the ocean of the air, are but the upper and under halves of the one movement-that beneath with constant energy of desire rushing in from the cold poles to be warmed and expanded at the tropics, where the all-moving sun pours his directest rays; that above charged with rich gifts from the Lord of light, glowing with heat drawn from Him, and made diffusive by His touch, spreading itself out beneficent and life-bringing into all colder lands, swathing the world in soft, warm folds, and turning the polar ice into sweet waters.

In the tabernacle of Israel stood two great emblems of the functions of God’s people, which embodied these two sides of the Christian life. Day by day, there ascended from the altar of incense the sweet odour, which symbolised the fragrance of prayer as it wreathes itself upwards to the heavens. Night by night, as darkness fell on the desert and the camp, there shone through the gloom the hospitable light of the great golden candlestick with its seven lamps, whose steady rays outburned the stars that paled with the morning. Side by side they proclaimed to Israel its destiny to be the light of the world, to be a kingdom of priests.

The offices and the honour have passed over to us, and we shall fall beneath our obligations unless we let our light shine constantly before men, and let our voice rise like a fountain night and day’ before God- even as He did who, when every man went to his own house, went alone to the Mount of Olives, and in the morning, when every man returned to his daily task, went into the Temple and taught. By His example, by His gifts, by the motive of His love, our resting, working Lord says to each of us, ‘Ye that remind God, keep not silence.’ Let us answer, ‘For Zion’s sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest.’

III. Finally, The constant activity of the servants of Christ will secure the constant operation of God’s power.

‘*Give* Him no rest’: let there be no cessation to Him. These are bold words, which many people would not have been slow to rebuke if they had been anywhere else than in the Bible. Those who remind God are not to suffer Him to be still. The prophet believes that they can regulate the flow of divine energy, can stir up the strength of the Lord.

It is easy to puzzle ourselves with insoluble questions about the co-operation of God's power and man's; but practically, is it not true that God reaches His end, of the establishment of Zion, through the Church? He has not barely willed that the world should be saved, nor barely that it should be saved through Christ, nor barely that it should be saved through the knowledge of Christ; but His will is that the world shall be saved, by faith in the person and work of Christ, proclaimed as a gospel by men who believe it. And, as a matter of fact, is it not true that the energy with which God's power in the gospel manifests itself depends on the zeal and activity and prayerfulness of the Church? The great reservoir is always full-full to the brim; however much may be drawn from it, the water sinks not a hairsbreadth; but the bore of the pipe and the power of the pumping-engine determine the rate at which the stream flows from it. 'He could there do no mighty works because of their unbelief.' The obstruction of indifference dammed back the water of life. The city perishes for thirst if the long line of aqueduct that strides across the plain towards the home of the mountain torrents be ruinous, broken down, choked with rubbish.

God is always the same-equally near, equally strong, equally gracious. But our possession of His grace, and the impartation of His grace through us to others, vary, because our faith, our earnestness, our desires, vary. True, these no doubt are also His gifts and His working, and nothing that we say now touches in the least on the great truth that God is the sole originator of all good in man; but while believing that, as no less sure in itself than blessed in its message of confidence and consolation to us, we also have to remember, 'If any man open the door, I will come in to him.' We may have as much of God as we want, as much as we can hold, far more than we deserve. And if ever the victorious power of His Church seems to be almost paling to defeat, and His servants to be working no deliverance upon the earth, the cause is not to be found in Him who is 'without variableness,' nor in His gifts, which are 'without repentance,' but solely in us, who let go our hold of the Eternal Might. No ebb withdraws the waters of that great ocean; and if sometimes there be sand and ooze where once the flashing flood brought life and motion, it is because careless warders have shut the sea-gates.

An awful responsibility lies on us. We can resist and refuse, or we can open our hearts and draw into ourselves His strength. We can bring into operation those energies which act through faithful men faithfully proclaiming the faithful saying; or we can limit the Holy One of Israel. ‘Why could not we cast him out?’ ‘Because of your unbelief.’

With what grand confidence, then, may the weakest of us go to his task. We have a right to feel that in all our labour God works with us; that, in all our words for Him, it is not we that speak, but the Spirit of our Father that speaks in us; that if humbly and prayerfully, with self-distrust and resolute effort to crucify our own intrusive individuality, we wait for Him to enshrine Himself within us, strength will come to us, drawn from the deep fountains of God, and we too shall be able to say, ‘Not I, but the grace of God in me.’

How this sublime confidence should tell on our characters, destroying all self-confidence, repressing all pride, calming all impatience, brightening all despondency, and ever stirring us anew to deeds worthy of the ‘exceeding greatness of the power which worketh in us’-I can only suggest.

On all sides motives for strenuous toil press in upon us-chiefly those great examples which we have now been contemplating. But, besides these, there are other forms of activity which may point the same lesson. Look at the energy *around* us. We live in a busy time. Life goes swiftly in all regions. Men seem to be burning away faster than ever before, in an atmosphere of pure oxygen. Do we work as hard for God as the world does for itself? Look at the energy *beneath* us: how evil in every form is active; how lies and half-truths propagate themselves quick as the blight on a rose-tree; how profligacy, and crime, and all the devil’s angels are busy on his errands. If *we* are sitting drowsy by our camp-fires, the enemy is on the alert. You can hear the tramp of their legions and the rumble of their artillery through the night as they march to their posts on the field. It is no time for God’s sentinels to nod. If they sleep, the adversary does not, but glides in the congenial darkness, sowing his baleful tares. Do we work as hard for God as the emissaries of evil do for their master? Look at the energy *above* us. On the throne of the universe is the immortal Power who slumbereth not nor sleepeth. Before the altar of the heavens is the Priest of the world, the

Lord of His Church, ‘who ever liveth to make intercession for us.’ Round Him stand perfected spirits, the watchmen on the walls of the New Jerusalem, who ‘rest not day and night, saying, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.’ From His presence come, filling the air with the rustle of their swift wings and the light of their flame-faces, the ministering spirits who evermore ‘do His commandments, hearkening to the voice of His word.’ And we, Christian brethren, where are we in all this magnificent concurrence of activity, for purposes which ought to be dear to our hearts as they are to the heart of God? Do we work for Him as He and all that are with Him do? Is His will done by us on earth, as it is heaven?

Alas! alas! have we not all been like those three apostles whose eyes were heavy with sleep even while the Lord was wrestling with the tempter under the gnarled olives in the pale moonlight of Gethsemane? Let us arouse ourselves from our sloth. Let us lift up our cry to God: ‘Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord, as in the ancient days in the generations of old’; and the answer shall sound from the heavens to us as it did to the prophet, an echo of his prayer turned into a command, ‘Awake, awake, put on *thy* strength, O Zion.’

96)Isaiah 63:1

Isaiah

MIGHTY TO SAVE

Isa. 63:1.

We have here a singularly vivid and dramatic prophecy, thrown into the form of a dialogue between the prophet and a stranger whom he sees from afar striding along from the mountains of Edom, with elastic step, and dyed garments. The prophet does not recognise him, and asks who he is. The Unknown answers, ‘I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save.’ Another question follows, seeking explanation of the splashed crimson garments of the stranger, and its answer tells of a tremendous act of retributive destruction which he has recently launched at the nations hostile to ‘My redeemed.’

Now we note that this prophecy follows, both in the order of the book and in the evolution of events, on those in Isa. 61:1 - Isa. 61:11, which referred to our Lord’s work on earth, and inIsaiah 62:1 - Isa. 62:12, which has for part of its theme His intercession in heaven. And we are entitled to take the view that the place as well as the substance of this prophecy referred to the solemn act of final Judgment in which the returning Lord will manifest Himself. Very significant is it that the prophet does not recognise in this Conqueror, with blood-bespattered robes, the meek sufferer of Isa. 53:1 - Isa. 53:12, or Him who in Isa. 62:1 - Isa. 62:12 came to bind up the broken-hearted. And very instructive is it that the title in our text comes from the stranger’s own lips, as relevant to the tremendous act of judgment from which He is seen returning. The title might seem rather to look back to the former manifestation of Him as bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows. It does indeed, thank God, look back to that never-to-be-forgotten miracle of mercy and power, but it also brings within the sweep of His saving might the judgment still to come.

I. The mighty Saviour as made known in the past and present.

We think much of the meek and gentle side of Christ’s character. Perhaps we do not think enough of the strength of it. We trace His great sacrifice to His love, and we can never sufficiently adore that incomparable manifestation of a love deeper than our plummets can fathom. But probably we do not sufficiently realise what gigantic strength went to the completion of that sacrifice. We know the solemn imagining of a great artist who has painted a colossal Death overbearing the weak resistance of a puny Love; but here love is the giant, and his sovereign command brings Death obedient to it, to do his work. Yes, that weak man hanging on the Cross is therein revealed as ‘the power of God.’ Strange clothing of weakness which yet cannot hide the mighty limbs that wear it!

And if we think of our Lord’s life we see the same combination of gentleness and power. His very name rings with memories of the captain whose one commanded duty was to ‘be strong and of a good courage.’

In Him was all strength of manhood-inflexible, iron will, unchanging purpose, strength from consecration, strength from righteousness. In Him was the heroism of prophets and martyrs in supreme degree.

In Him was the strength of indwelling Divinity. He fought and conquered all man’s enemies, routed sin, and triumphed over Death.

In the Cross we see divine power in operation in its noblest form, in its intensest energy, in its widest sweep, in its most magnificent result. He is able to save, to save all, to save any.

He is mighty to save, and is able to save unto the uttermost, because He lives for ever, and His power is eternal as Himself.

II. The mighty Saviour as to be manifested in the future.

Clearly the imagery of the context describes a tremendous act of judgment. And as clearly the Apocalyptic Seer understood this prophecy as not only pointing to Christ, but as to be fulfilled in the final act of judgment. He quotes its words when he paints his magnificent vision of the Conqueror riding forth on his white horse, with garments sprinkled with blood and treading the ‘winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.’ And the vision is interpreted unmistakably when we read that, though this Conqueror had a name unknown to any but Himself, ‘His name is called the Word of God.’ So the unity of person in the Word made flesh who dwelt among us, full of grace and of this Mighty One girt for battle, is taught.

Keeping fast hold of this clue, the contrast between the characteristics of the historical Jesus and of the rider on the white horse becomes solemn and full of warning. And the contrast between the errand of the historical Jesus and that of the Conqueror bids us ponder on the possibilities that may sleep in perfect love. We have to widen our conceptions, if we have thought of our Jesus only as love, and have thought of love as shallow, as most men do. We are sometimes told that these two pictures, that of the Christ of the Gospels and that of the Christ of the Apocalypse, are incapable of being fused together in one original. But they can be stereoscoped, if we may say so. And they must be, if we are ever to understand the greatness of His love or the terribleness of His judgments. ‘The wrath of the Lamb’ sounds an impossibility, but if we ponder it, we shall find depths of graciousness as well as of awe in it.

Let us learn that the righteous Judge is logically and chronologically the completion of the picture of the merciful Saviour. In this age there is a tendency to treat sin with too much pity and too little condemnation. And there is not a sufficiently firm grasp of the truth that divine love must be in irreconcilable antagonism with human sin, and can do nothing but chastise and smite it.

III. The saving purpose of even that destructive might.

Through the whole Old Testament runs the longing that God would ‘awake’ to smite evil.

The tragedy of the drowned hosts in the Red Sea, and Miriam and her maidens standing with their timbrels and shrill song of triumph on the bank, is a prophecy of what shall be. ‘Ye shall have a song as in the night a holy feast is kept, and gladness of heart as when one goeth with a pipe to come unto the mountain of the Lord.’ And at the thought of that solemn act of judgment they who love the Judge, and have long known Him, ‘may lift up their heads’ in the confidence that ‘their redemption draweth nigh.’ That is the last, and in some sense the mightiest, greatest act by which He shows Himself ‘mighty to save His redeemed.’

So we may, like the prophet, see that swift form striding nearer and nearer, but, unlike the prophet, we need not to ask, ‘Who is this that cometh?’ for we have known Him from of old, and we remember the voice that said, ‘This same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.’ ‘Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness before Him in the day of judgment.’

97)Isaiah 63:2-3

Isaiah

THE WINEPRESS AND ITS TREADER

Isa. 63:2 - Isa. 63:3.

The structure of these closing chapters is chronological, and this is the final scene. What follows is epilogue. The reference of this magnificent imagery to the sufferings of Jesus is a complete misapprehension. These sufferings were dealt with once for all in Isa. 53:1 - Isa. 53:12, and it is Messiah triumphant who has filled the prophet's vision since then.

I. The treading of the winepress.

The nations are flung into the press, as ripe grapes. The picture is plainly a figure of some tremendous judgment in which the powers that oppose the majestic march of the triumphant Messiah will be crushed and trampled to ruin. They are trodden 'in Mine anger, and their life-blood is sprinkled on My garments.' It is He who crushes, not He who is crushed. The winepress which He treads is the 'winepress of the wrath of Almighty God,' and His treading of it is His executing of God's judgments on those whose antagonism to Him and to His 'redeemed' has brought them within their sweep. The prophetic imagination kindles and casts its thought into that terrible picture, which some fastidious people would think coarse, of a peasant standing up to his knees in a vat heaped with purple clusters, and fiercely trampling them down, while the red juice splashes upon his girt-up clothes.

The prophet does not date his vision. It has been realised many a time, and will be many a time still. Wherever opposition to Christ and His kingdom has reached ripeness, wherever antagonistic tendencies have borne fruit which has matured, the winepress is set up and the treading begins. 'Wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.' 'Immediately he putteth in the sickle because the harvest is done.' The judgments tarry long, and Christ's servants, oppressed or hard pressed, get impatient, and cry 'How long, O Lord, dost Thou not judge? It is time for Thee to work.' But long patience precedes the divine awaking, for it is not God's way nor Christ's to cut down even a cumbering tree, until the possibility of its bearing fruit is plainly ended, and the last use that He makes of anything is to burn it. The repeated settings up of Christ's winepress have all been one in principle, and they all point onwards to a final one. There have been many 'days of the Lord,' and if men were wise and 'observed these things,'-which most of them are not,-they would see that these lesser ‘days’ made a ‘final great and terrible day of the Lord’ supremely probable, and in perfect analogy with all that experience and history have testified as to the method of the divine government.

Surely it is strange that the groundless expectation of the unbroken continuance of the present order should be so strong that many should utterly ignore the truth taught by such teachers as these, and reiterated by science, which declares that the physical universe had a beginning and will have an end, and confirmed by Jesus Himself. There will come a to-morrow when the sun will *not* rise. There will come a to-morrow which will be ‘*the* day of the Lord,’ of which all these earlier and partial epochs of judgment were but precursors and prophets.

II. The Treader of the Winepress.

The context clearly shows that, in the prophet’s view, the suffering Messiah in His exalted royalty is the agent of this, as of all divine acts. He is clothed with majesty, and it is ‘in His hand,’ or through His agency, that all ‘the pleasure of the Lord’ is brought to pass. The contrast with the figure in Isa. 53:1 - Isa. 53:12 is ever to be kept in view. The lowliness, the weales and bruises, the form without comeliness are gone, and for these we see a conqueror, glorious in apparel and striding onwards in conscious strength.

But the access of majesty does not imply the putting off of lowliness and meekness. There is much that is severe and terrible in the figure that rises here before the prophet’s vision, but both aspects equally belong to the glorified Christ, and that duality in His character makes each element more impressive. His long-suffering mercy and more than human tenderness do not hamper His arm when it is bared to smite; His judicial severity does not dam up the flow of His mercy and tenderness. When He was on earth, He wept over Jerusalem, but His tears did not hinder His pronouncing woe on the city. His love leads Him to warn before He smites, but it does not contradict His threatenings, nor augur our impunity. Nay rather, love compels Him to smite. And, more terrible still, it is His very love that smites most severely hearts that have rejected it and learn their folly and sin too late.

III. Why the winepress is trodden.

The context tells us. The triumphant figure, seen by the prophet striding onwards from Edom, answers the question as to His identity with, ‘I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save.’ Then the treading of the winepress, from which He is represented as coming, is regarded as an exemplification of both these characteristics. It is a great act of righteousness. It is a great act of salvation. Similarly, He is represented as having been moved to that destructive judgment by the ‘vengeance’ that burned in His heart, and by His seeing that there were none to help His ‘redeemed.’

So, then, the destructive act is a manifestation of Righteousness, which in such a connection means retributive justice. Awe-inspiring as it may be, the thunderstorm brings relief to a world sweltering in a stagnant atmosphere, and each blinding flash freshens the air. ‘When the wicked perish, there is shouting.’ The destruction of some hoary evil that has long afflicted humanity and blocked the progress of the kingdom which is ‘righteousness and peace and joy,’ is a good. Christ’s ‘terrible things’ are all ‘in righteousness,’ and meant to set Him forth as ‘the confidence of all the ends of the earth.’ To clear His character and government from all suspicion of moral indifference, to demonstrate by facts which the blindest can see, that it is not all the same to Him whether men are good or bad, to write in great letters which, like the capitals on a map, stretch across a whole land, ‘The Judge of all the earth shall do right’-surely these are worthy ends to move even the loving Christ to tread the winepress.

Further, His destructive judgments, however terrible, will always be accurately measured by righteousness. They are not outbursts of feeling; they are in exact correspondence with the evils that bring them down. The lava flows according to its own density and the lie of the land which it covers. These judgments are deformed by no undue severity; no base elements of temper, no errors as to the degree of criminality mar them. They are calm and absolutely accurate judgments of Him who is not only just but Justice.

But the context further teaches us that the true point of view from which to regard Christ’s treading of the winepress is to think of it as redemptive and contributory to the salvation of ‘My redeemed.’ Therefore there follows immediately on this picture of the conqueror treading the peoples in His fury and pouring their life-blood on the earth, the song of the delivered. Up through the troubled air, heavy with thunder-clouds, soars their praise, as a lark might rise and pour its strains above a volcano in eruption-'I will mention the loving kindness of the Lord, and the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord hath bestowed on us and the great goodness toward the house of Israel which He hath bestowed on them, according to His mercies, and according to the multitude of His loving kindnesses.' Pharaoh is drowned in the Red Sea; Miriam and her maidens on the bank clash their cymbals, and lift shrill voices in their triumphant hymn. Babylon sinks like a millstone in the great waters-'and I heard as it were a great voice of a great multitude in heaven saying, Hallelujah; salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and righteous are His judgments.' The innermost impulse of judgment is love.

98)Isaiah 63:9

Isaiah

THE SYMPATHY OF GOD

Isa. 63:9.

I. The wonderful glimpse opened here into the heart of God.

It is not necessary to touch upon the difference between the text and margin of the Revised Version, or to enter on the reason for preferring the former. And what a deep and wonderful thought that is, of divine sympathy with human sorrow! We feel that this transcends the prevalent tone of the Old Testament. It is made the more striking by reason of the other sides of the divine nature which the Old Testament gives so strongly; as, for instance, the unapproachable elevation and absolute sovereignty of God, and the retributive righteousness of God.

Affliction is His chastisement, and is ever righteously inflicted. But here is something more, tender and strange. Sympathy is a necessary part of love. There is no true affection which does not put itself in the place and share the sorrows of its objects. And His sympathy is none the less because He inflicts the sorrow. These afflictions wherein He too was afflicted, were sent by Him. Like an earthly father who suffers more than the child whom he chastises, the Heavenly Father feels the strokes that He inflicts.

That sympathy is consistent with the blessedness of God. Even in the pain of our human sympathy there is a kind of joy, and we may be sure that in His nature there is nothing else.

Contrast with other thoughts about God.

The vague agnosticism of the present day, which knows only a dim Something of which we can predicate nothing.

The God of the philosophers-whom we are bidden to think of as passionless and unemotional. No wave of feeling ever ripples that tideless sea. The attribute of infinitude or sovereign completeness is dwelt on with such emphasis as to obscure all the rest.

The gods of men’s own creation are careless in their happiness, and cruel in their vengeance. But here is a God for all the weary and the sorrowful. What a thought for us in our own burdened days!

II. The mystery of the divine salvation.

Of course the salvation here spoken of is the deliverance from Egyptian bondage. This is a summary of the Exodus. But we must mark well that significant expression, ‘the angel of His face’ or ‘presence.’ We can only attempt a partial and bald enumeration of some of the very remarkable references to that mysterious person, ‘the angel of the Lord ‘or ‘of the presence.’ The dying Jacob ascribed his being ‘redeemed from all evil’ to ‘the Angel,’ and invoked his blessing on ‘the lads.’ ‘*The* angel of the Lord’ appeared to Moses out of the midst of the burning bush. On Sinai, Jehovah promised to send an ‘angel’ in whom was His own name, before the people. The promise was renewed after Israel’s sin and repentance, and was then given in the form, ‘*My* presence shall go with thee.’ Joshua saw a man with a drawn sword in his hand, who declared himself to be the Captain of the Lord’s host. ‘The angel of the Lord’ appeared to Manoah and his wife, withheld his name from them because it was ‘wonderful’ or ‘secret,’ accepted their sacrifice, and went up to heaven in its flame. Wherefore

Manoah said, ‘We have seen God.’ Long after these early visions, a psalmist knows himself safe because ‘the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him.’ Hosea, looking back on the story of Jacob’s wrestling at Peniel, says, first, that ‘he had power with *God*, yea, he had power over the *angel*,’ and then goes on to say that ‘there He spake with us, even *Jehovah*.’ And Malachi, on the last verge of Old Testament prophecy, goes furthest of all in seeming to run together the conceptions of Jehovah and the Angel of Jehovah, for he says, ‘The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His temple; and the angel of the covenant . . . behold, *he* cometh.’ From this imperfect *resume*, we see that there appears in the earliest as in the latest books of the Old Testament, a person distinguished from the hosts of angels, identified in a very remarkable manner with Jehovah, by alternation of names, in attributes and offices, and in receiving worship, and being the organ of His revelation. That special relation to the divine revelation is expressed by both the representation that ‘Jehovah’s name is in him,’ and by the designation in our text, ‘the angel of His presence,’ or literally, ‘of His face.’ For ‘name’ and ‘face’ are in so far synonymous that they mean the side of the divine nature which is turned to the world.

For the present I go no further than this. It is clear, then, that our text is at all events remarkable, in that it ascribes to this ‘angel of His presence’ the praise of Jehovah’s saving work. The loving heart, afflicted in all their afflictions, sends forth the messenger of His face, and by Him is salvation wrought. The whole sum of the deliverance of Israel in the past is attributed to Him. Surely this must have been felt by a devout Jew to conceal some great mystery.

III. The crowning revelation both of the heart of God and of His saving power.

[a] Jesus Christ is the true ‘angel of the face.’

I do not need to enter on the question of whether in the Old Testament the angel of the Covenant was indeed a pre-manifestation of the eternal Son. I am disposed to answer it in the affirmative. But be that as it may, all that was spoken of the angel is true of Him. God’s name is in Him, and that not in fragments or half-syllables but complete. The face of God looks lovingly on men in Him, so that Jesus could declare, ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.' His presence brings God's presence, and He can venture to say, '*We* will come and make our abode with Him.' He is the agent of the divine salvation.

The identity and the difference are here in their highest form.

[b] The mystery of God's sharing our sorrows is explained in Him.

We may find a difficulty in the thought of a suffering and sympathising God. But if we believe that 'My name is in Him,' then the sympathy and gentleness of Jesus is the compassion of God. This is a true revelation. So tears at the grave sighs in healing, and all the sorrows which He bore are an unveiling of the heart of God.

That sharing our sorrows is the very heart of His work. We might almost say that He became man in order to increase His power of sympathy, as a prince might temporarily become a pauper. But certainly He became man that He might bear our burdens. 'Himself took our infirmities.' 'Forasmuch as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He himself also likewise took part of the same.'

The atoning death is the climax of Christ's being afflicted with our afflictions. His priestly sympathy flows out now and for ever to us all.

So complete is His unity with God, that He works the salvation which is God's, and that God's name is in Him. So complete is His union with us, that our sorrows touch Him and His life becomes ours. 'Ye have done it unto Me.' 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?'

For us in all our troubles there are no darker rooms than Christ has been in before us. We are like prisoners put in the same cell as some great martyr. He drank the cup, and we can put the rim to our lips at the place that His lips have touched. But not only may we have our sufferings lightened by the thought that He has borne the same, and that we know the 'fellowship of Christ's sufferings,' but we have the further alleviation of being sure that He makes our afflictions His by perfect sympathy, and, still more wonderful and blessed, that there is such unity of life and sensation between the Head and the members that our afflictions *are* His, and are not merely made so.

‘Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,
And thy Saviour is not by;
Think not thou canst shed a tear
And thy Saviour is not near.’

Do not front the world alone. *In* all our afflictions He is with us; *out* of them all He saves.

99)Isaiah 64:5

Isaiah

HOW TO MEET GOD

Isa. 64:5.

The prophet here shows us how there is a great staircase which we ourselves build, which leads straight from earth to heaven, and how we can secure that we shall meet with God and God with us. ‘Isaiah’ is often called the evangelical prophet. He is so, not only because of his predictions of the suffering Servant of Jehovah which are ‘fulfilled’ in Christ, but because his conceptions of the religious life tremble on the very verge of the full-orbed teaching of the New Testament. In these ancient words of my text, in very different phraseology indeed, we see a strikingly accurate and full anticipation of the very central teaching of Paul and his brother apostles, as to the way by which God and man come into union with one another. ‘Thou meetest him that rejoiceth’; that joy is to be manifested by ‘working righteousness,’ but the joy which is the parent of righteousness is the child of something else-’those that remember Thee in Thy ways.’ If we ponder these words, and carefully mark their relation to each other, we may discern, as it were, a great staircase with three flights in it, and at the top God’s face.

We have to begin with the last clause of our text-’Thou meetest him . . . that remembers Thee in Thy ways.’

The first stage on the road which will bring any man into, and keep any man in, contact with God, and loving fellowship with Him, is the contemplation of His character as it is made known to us by His acts. God, like man, is known by His 'fruits.' You cannot get at a clear conception of God by speculation, or by thinking about Him or about what He is in Himself. Lay hold of the clue of His acts, and it leads you straight into His heart. But the act of acts, in which the whole Godhead concurs, in which all its depths and preciousness are concentrated, like wine in a golden cup, is the incarnation and life and death of Jesus Christ our Lord. There, and not in the thoughts of our own hearts nor the tremors of our own consciences, nor in the enigmatical witness of Providence-which is enigmatical until it is interpreted in the light of the Incarnation and the Crucifixion-there we see most clearly the 'ways' of God, the beaten, trodden path by which He is wont to come forth out of the thick darkness into which no speculation can peer an inch, and walk amongst men. The cross of Christ, and, subordinately, His other dealings with us, as interpreted thereby, is the 'way of the Lord,' from everlasting to everlasting. And it is by a loving gaze upon that 'way' that we learn to know Him for what He is. It is there, and there only, that the thick darkness passes into glorious light. It is at that point alone that the closed circle of the Infinite nature of Deity opens so as that a man can press into the very centre of the glory, and feel himself at home in the blaze. It is 'those that remember Thee in Thy ways,' and especially in that way of righteousness and peace, the way of the cross-it is they who have built the first flight of the solemn staircase that leads up from the lownesses and darknesses of earth into the loftinesses and lights of heaven.

But note that word 'Remember,' for it suggests the warning that such contemplation of the ways of the Lord will not be realised by us without effort. We shall forget, assuredly, unless we earnestly try to 'remember.' There are so many things within us to draw us away, the duties, and the joys, and the sorrows of life so insist upon having a place in our hearts and thoughts, that assuredly, unless by resolute effort, frequently repeated, we clear a space in this crowded and chattering market-place, where we can stand and gaze on the white summits far beyond the bustling crowd, we shall never see them, though they are visible from every place. Unless you try to remember, you will certainly forget.

Many voices preach to-day many duties for Christians. Let me plead for times of quiet, for times of 'doing' nothing, for fruitful times of growth, for times when we turn all the rout and rabble of earthly things, and even the solemn company of pressing duties, out of our hearts and thoughts, and shut up ourselves alone with God. Be sure you will never build even the first step of the staircase unless you know what it is to go into the secret place of the Most High, and, alone with God, to summon to 'the sessions of sweet, silent thought' His ways, and especially Him who is 'the Way,' both of God to us, and of us to God.

Now, the second flight of this great staircase is pointed out in the first clause of my text: 'Thou meetest him that rejoiceth.'

That meditative remembrance of the ways of God will be the parent of holy joy which will bring God near to our heart. Alas! it is too often the very opposite of true that men's joys are such as to bring God to them. The excitement, and often the impure elements, that mingle with what the world calls 'joy,' are such as to shut Him out from us. But there is a gladness which comes from the contemplation of Him as He is, and as He is known by His 'ways' to be, which brings us very near to God, and God very near to us. It is that joy which was spoken of in an earlier part of this context: 'I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, My soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation.' Here, then, is the second stage-gladness, deep, pure, based upon the contemplation of God's character as manifested in His work. I do not think that the ordinary type of modern Christianity is half joyful enough. And I think that we have largely lost the very thought that gladness is a plain Christian *duty*, to be striven after in the appropriate manner which my text suggests, and certainly to be secured if we seek it in the right way. We all know how outward cares, and petty annoyances, and crushing sorrows, and daily anxieties, and the tear and wear of work, and our own restlessness and ungovernableness, and the faults that still haunt our lives, and sometimes make us feel as if our Christianity was all a sham-how all these things are at enmity with joy in God. But in face of them all, I would echo the old grand words of the epistle of gladness written by the apostle in prison, and within hail of his death: 'Rejoice in the Lord alway, and again I say rejoice.' Recognise it as your duty to be glad, and if it is hard to be so, ask yourselves whether you are doing what will make you so, remembering ‘Thee in Thy ways.’ That is the second flight of the staircase.

The third stage is working righteousness because of such joy. ‘Thou meetest him that rejoiceth, and ‘-because he does-’worketh righteousness.’ Every master knows how much more work can be got out of a servant who works with a cheery heart than out of one that is driven reluctantly to his task. You remember our Lord’s parable where He traces idleness to fear: ‘I knew thee that thou wast an austere man, gathering where thou didst not strew, and I was afraid, and I went and hid thy talent.’ No work was got out of that servant because there was no joy in him. The opposite state of mind-diligence in righteous work, inspired by gladness which in its turn is inspired by the remembrance of God’s ways-is the mark of a true servant of God. The prophet’s words have the germ of the full New Testament doctrine that the first step to all practical obedience and righteous living is the recognition of the great truth of Christ’s death for us on the Cross; that the second step is the acceptance of that great work, and the gladness that comes from the assurance of forgiveness and acceptance with God, and that the issue of both these things, the preached gospel and the faith that grasps it and the love by which the faith is followed, is obedience, instinct with willingness and buoyant with joyfulness, and therefore tending to be perfect in degree and in kind. The work that is worth doing, the work which God regards as ‘righteous,’ comes, and comes only, from the motives of ‘remembering Thee in Thy ways,’ and rejoicing because we do remember.

And the gladness which is wholesome and blessed, and is ‘joy in the Lord,’ will manifest itself by efflorescing into all holiness and all loftiness and largeness of obedience. You may try to frighten men into righteousness, you will never succeed. You may try to coerce their wills, and your strongest bands will be broken as the iron chains were by the demoniac. But put upon them the silken leash of love, and you may lead them where you will. You cannot grow grapes on an iceberg, and you cannot get works of righteousness out of a man that has a dread of God at the back of his heart, killing all its joy. But let the spring sunshine come, and then all the frost-bound earth opens and softens, and the tender green spikelets push themselves up through the brown soil, and in due time come ‘the blade, and the ear, and the full corn in the ear.' Isaiah anticipated Paul when he said, 'Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness.'

Lastly, we have the landing-place to which the stair leads. God comes to such a man. He meets him indeed at all the stages, for there is a blessed communion with God, that springs immediately from remembering Him in His ways, and a still more blessed one that springs from rejoicing in His felt friendship and Fatherhood, and a yet more blessed one that comes from practical righteousness. For if there is anything that breaks our communion with God, it is that there linger in our lives evils which make it impossible for God and us to come close together. The thinnest film of a non-conductor will stop the flow of the strongest electric current, and an almost imperceptible film of self-will and evil, dropped between oneself and God, will make a barrier impermeable except by that divine Spirit who worketh upon a man's heart and who may thin away the film through his repentance, and then the Father and the prodigal embrace. 'Thou meetest him,' not only 'that worketh righteousness,' but that hates his sin.

Only remember, if there is the practice of evil, there cannot be the sunshine of the Presence of God. But remember, too, that the commonest, homeliest, smallest, most secular tasks may become the very highest steps of the staircase that brings us into His Presence. If we go about our daily work, however wearisome and vulgar and commonplace it often seems to us, and make it a work of righteousness resting on the joy of salvation, and that reposing on the contemplation of God as He is revealed in Jesus Christ, our daily work may bring us as close to God as if we dwelt in the secret place of the Most High, and the market and the shop may be a temple where we meet with Him.

Dear brethren, there are two kinds of meeting God: 'Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness,' and that is blessed, as when Christ met the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. There is another kind of meeting with God. 'Who, making war, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand?'

100) Isaiah 65:16

‘THE GOD OF THE AMEN’

Isa. 65:16.

The full beauty and significance of these remarkable words are only reached when we attend to the literal rendering of a part of them which is obscured in our version. As they stand in the original they have, in both cases, instead of the vague expression, ‘The God of truth,’ the singularly picturesque one, ‘The God of the Amen.’

I. Note the meaning of the name. Now, *Amen* is an adjective, which means literally firm, true, reliable, or the like. And, as we know, its liturgical use is that, in the olden time, and to some extent in the present time, it was the habit of the listening people to utter it at the close of prayer or praise. But besides this use at the end of some one else’s statement, which the sayer of the ‘Amen’ confirms by its utterance, we also find it used at the beginning of a statement, by the speaker, in order to confirm his own utterance by it.

And these two uses of the expression reposing on its plain meaning, in the first instance signifying, ‘I tell you that it is so’; and in the second instance signifying, ‘So may it be!’ or, ‘So we believe it is,’ underlie this grand title which God takes to Himself here, ‘the God of the Amen,’ both His Amen and ours. So that the thought opens up very beautifully and simply into these two, His truth and our faith.

First, it emphasises the absolute truthfulness of every word that comes from His lips. There is implied in the title that He really *has* spoken, and declared to man something of His will, something of His nature, something of His purposes, something of our destiny. And now He puts, as it were, the broad seal upon the charter and says, ‘Amen! Verily it is so, and My word of Revelation is no man’s imagination, and My word of command is the absolute unveiling of human duty and human perfectness, and My word of promise is that upon which a man may rest all his weight and be safe for ever.’ God’s word is ‘Amen!’ man’s word is ‘perhaps.’ For in regard to the foundation truths of man’s belief and experience and need, no human tongue can venture to utter its own asseverations with nothing behind them but itself, and expect men to accept them; but that is exactly what God does, and alone has the right to do. His word absolutely, and through and through, in every fibre of it, is reliable and true.

Now do not forget that there was one who came to us and said, ‘Amen! Amen! I say unto you.’ Jesus Christ, in all His deep and wonderful utterances, arrogated to Himself the right which God here declares to be exclusively His, and He said, ‘I too have, and I too exercise, the right and the authority to lay My utterances down before you, and expect you to take them because of nothing else than because I say them.’ God is the God of the Amen! The last book of Scripture, when it draws back the curtain from the mysteries of the glorified session of Jesus Christ at the right hand of God, makes Him say to us, ‘These things saith the Amen!’ And if you want to know what that means, its explanation follows in the next clause, ‘the faithful and true witness.’

But then, on the other hand, necessarily involved in this title, though capable of being separately considered, is not only the absolute truthfulness of the divine word, but also the thorough-going reliance, on our parts, which that word expects and demands. God’s ‘Amen,’ and ‘Verily,’ of confirmation, should ever cause the ‘Amen’ of acceptance and assent to leap from our lips. If He begins with that mighty word, so soon as the solemn voice has ceased its echo should rise from our hearts. The city that cares for the charter which its King has given it will prepare a fitting, golden receptacle in which to treasure it. And the men who believe that God in very deed has spoken laws that illuminate, and commandments that guide, and promises that calm and strengthen and fulfil themselves, will surely prepare in their hearts an appropriate receptacle for those precious and infallible words. God’s truth has corresponding to it our trust. God’s faithfulness demands, and is only adequately met by, our faith. If He gives us the sure foundation to build upon, it will be a shame for us to bring wood, hay, stubble, and build these upon the Rock of Ages. The building should correspond with its foundation, and the faith which grasps the sure word should have in it something of the unchangeableness and certainty and absoluteness of that word which it grasps. If His revelation of Himself is certain, you and I ought to be certain of His revelation of Himself. Our certitude should correspond to its certainty.

Ah! my friend, what a miserable contrast there is between the firm, unshaken, solid security of the divine word upon which we say that we trust, and the poor, feeble, broken trust which we build upon it. ‘Let not that man think that He shall receive anything of the Lord’; but let us expect, as well as ‘ask, in faith, nothing wavering’; and let our ‘Amen!’ ring out in answer to God’s.

The Apostle Paul has a striking echo of the words of my text in the second Epistle to the Corinthians: ‘All the promises of God in Him are yea! and through Him also is the Amen!’ The assent, full, swift, frank -the assent of the believing heart to the great word of God comes through the same channel, and reaches God by the same way, as God’s word on which it builds comes to us. The ‘God of the Amen,’ in both senses of the word, is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the seal as well as the substance of the divine promises, and whose voice in us is the answer to, and the grasp of, the promises of which He is the substance and soul.

II. Now notice, next, how this God of the Amen is, by reason of that very characteristic, the source of all blessing.

‘He who blesseth himself in the earth shall bless himself in the God of Truth.’ That phrase of *blessing oneself in*, which is a frequent Old Testament expression, is roughly equivalent to invoking, and therefore receiving, blessing from. You find it, for instance, in the seventy-second Psalm, in that grand burst which closes one of the books of the Psalter and hails the coming of the Messianic times, of which my text also is a prediction. ‘Men shall be blessed in Him,’ or rather, ‘shall bless themselves in Him,’ which is a declaration, that all needful benediction shall come down upon humanity through the coming Messias, as well as that men shall recognise in that Messias the source of all their blessing and good. So the text declares that, in those days that are yet to come, the whole earth shall be filled with men whose eyes have been purged from ignorance and sin, and from the illusions of sense and the fascinations of folly, and who have learned that only in the God of the Amen is the blessing of their life to be found.

Of course it is so. For only on Him can I lean all my weight and be sure that the stay will not give. All other bridges across the great abysses which we have to traverse or be lost in them, are like those snow-cornices upon some Alp, which may break when the climber is on the very middle of them, and let him down into blackness out of which he will never struggle. There is only one path clear across the deepest gulf, which we poor pilgrims can tread with absolute safety that it will never yield beneath our feet. My brother! there is one support that is safe, and one stay upon which a man can lean his whole weight and be sure that the staff will never either break or pierce his palm, and that is the faithful God, in whose realm are no disappointments, amongst whose trusters are no heart-broken and deceived men, but who gives bountifully, and over and above all that we are able to ask or think. They who have made experience, as we have all made experience, of the insufficiency of earthly utterances, of the doubtfulness of the clearest words of men, of the possible incapacity of the most loving, to be what they pledge themselves to be, and of the certainty that even if they are so for a while they cannot be so always-have surely learned one half, at least, of the lesson that life is meant to teach us; and it is our own fault if we have not bettered it with the better half, having uncoiled the tendrils of our hearts from the rotten props round which they have been too apt to twine themselves, and wreathed them about the pillars of the eternal throne, which can never shake nor fail. 'He that blesseth himself in the earth shall bless himself'-unless he is a fool-'in the God of the Amen!' and not in the *man* of the 'peradventure.'

III. Lastly, note how the God of the Amen should be the pattern of His servants.

'He that sweareth in the earth shall swear by the God of truth,' or, 'of the Amen.' The prophet deduces from the name the solemn thought that those who truly feel its significance will shape *their* words accordingly, and act and speak so that they shall not fear to call His pure eyes to witness that there are neither, hypocrisy, nor insincerity, nor vacillation, nor the 'hidden things of dishonesty' nor any of the skulking meannesses of craft and self-seeking in them. 'I swear by the God of the Amen, and call Thy faithfulness to witness that I am trying to be like Thee,' that is what we ought to do if we call ourselves Christians. If we have any hold at all of Him, and of His love, and of the greatness and majesty of His faithfulness, we shall try to make our poor little lives, in such measure as the dewdrops may be like the sun, radiant like His, and of the same shape as His, for the dewdrop and the sun are both of them spheres. That is exactly what the apostle does, in that same chapter in 2 Cor., to which I already referred. He takes these very thoughts of my text, and in their double aspect too, and says, ‘Just because God is faithful, do you Corinthians think that, when I told you that I was coming to see you, I did not mean it?’ He brings the greatest thought that He can find about God and God’s truth, down to the settlement of this very little matter, the vindication of Himself from the charge, on the one hand, of facile and inconsiderate vacillation, and, on the other hand, of insincerity. So, we may say, the greatest thoughts should regulate the smallest acts. Though our maps be but a quarter of an inch to a hundred miles, let us see that they are drawn to scale. Let us see that He is our Pattern; and that the truthfulness, the simplicity, and faithfulness, which we rest upon as the very foundation of our intellectual as well as our moral and religious being, are, in our measure, copied in ourselves. ‘As God is faithful,’ said Paul, ‘our word to you was not yea! and nay!’ And they who are trusting to the God of the Amen! will live in all simplicity and godly sincerity; their yea will be yea, and their nay, nay.

Jeremiah

1) JEREMIAH 2:9
2) JEREMIAH 2:11
3) JEREMIAH 2:13
4) JEREMIAH 2:19
5) JEREMIAH 3:21-22
6) JEREMIAH 5:31
7) JEREMIAH 10:16
8) JEREMIAH 12:5
9) JEREMIAH 13:23
10) JEREMIAH 14:7-9
11) JEREMIAH 17:1
12) JEREMIAH 17:6
13) JEREMIAH 17:8
14) JEREMIAH 17:12
15) JEREMIAH 17:13
16) JEREMIAH 28:13

17) JEREMIAH 31:36
18) JEREMIAH 31:37
19) JEREMIAH 33:8
20) JEREMIAH 35:16
21) JEREMIAH 36:32
22) JEREMIAH 37:1
23) JEREMIAH 37:11-21
24) JEREMIAH 39:1-10
25) JEREMIAH 39:18
26) JEREMIAH 44:4
27) JEREMIAH 47:6-7
28) JEREMIAH 50:34
29) JEREMIAH 52:1-11

1) Jeremiah 2:9

Jeremiah

GOD'S LAWSUIT

Jer. 2:9.

Point out that 'plead' is a forensic term. There is a great lawsuit in which God is plaintiff and men defendants. The word is frequent in Isaiah.

I. The reason for God's pleading.

The cause-'wherefore.' Our transgression does not make Him turn away from us. It does profoundly modify the whole relation between us. It does give an aspect of antagonism to His dealings.

II. The manner.

The whole history of the world and of each individual. All outward providences. All the voice of Conscience. Christ. Spirit, who convinces the world of Sin.

III. The purpose.

Wholly our being drawn from our evil. The purely reformatory character of all punishment here. The sole object to win us back to Himself. He conquers in this lawsuit when we come to love Him.

IV. The patience.

That merciful pleading-'I will *yet*'-runs on through all sin, and is only made more earnest by deepening hostility. After rejections still lingers. Extends over a thousand generations. Is exercised even where He foresees failure.

2) Jeremiah 2:11

Jeremiah

STIFF-NECKED IDOLATERS AND PLIABLE CHRISTIANS

Jer. 2:11.

The obstinacy of the adherents of idolatry is in striking contrast with Israel's continual tendency to forsake Jehovah. It reads a scarcely less forcible lesson to many nominal and even to some real Christians.

I. That contrast carries with it a disclosure of the respective origins of the two kinds of Religion.

The strangeness of the contrasted conduct is intensified when we take into account the tremendous contrast between the two Objects of worship. Israel's God was Israel's 'Glory'; the idol-worshipper bowed down before 'that which doth not profit,' and yet no experience of God could bind His fickle worshippers to Him, and no experience of the impotence of the idol could shake its votaries' devotion. They cried and were not heard. They toiled and had no results. They broke their teeth on 'that which is not bread,' and filled their mouths with gritty ashes that mocked them with a semblance of nourishment and left them with empty stomachs and excoriated gums, yet by some strange hallucination they clung to 'vanities,' while Israel was always hankering after opportunity to desert Jehovah. The stage of civilisation partly accounts for the strange fascination of idolatry over the Israelites. But the deeper solution lies in the fact that the one religion rises from the hearts of men, corresponds to their moral condition, and is largely moulded by their lower nature; while the other is from above, corresponds, indeed, with the best and deepest longings and needs of souls, but contravenes many of their most clamant wishes, and necessarily sets before them a standard high and difficult to reach. Men make their gods in their own image, and are conscious of no rebuke nor stimulus to loftier living when they gaze on them. The God of Revelation bids men remake themselves in His image, and that command requires endless effort. The average man has to put a strain on his intellect in order to rise to the apprehension of God, and a still more unwelcome strain on his moral nature to rise to the imitation of God. No wonder, then, if the dwellers on the low levels should cleave to them, and the pilgrims to the heights should often weary of their toil and be distressed with the difficulty of breathing the thin air up there, and should give up climbing and drop down to the flats once more.

II. That contrast carries with it a rebuke.

Many voices echo the prophet’s contrast nowadays. Our travelling countrymen, especially those of them who have no great love for earnest religion, are in the habit of drawing disparaging contrasts between Buddhists, Brahmins, Mohammedans, any worshippers of other gods and Christians. One may not uncharitably suspect that a more earnest Christianity would not please these critics much better than does the tepid sort, and that the pictures they draw both of heathenism and of Christianity are coloured by their likes and dislikes. But it is well to learn from an enemy, and caricatures may often be useful in calling attention to features which would escape notice but for exaggeration. So we may profit by even the ill-natured and distorted likenesses of ourselves as contrasted with the adherents of other religions which so many ‘liberal-minded’ writers of travels delight to supply.

Think, then, of the rebuke which the obstinate adherence of idolaters to their idols gives to the slack hold which so many professing Christians have on their religion.

Think of the way in which these lower religions pervade the whole life of their worshippers, and of how partial is the sway over a little territory of life and conduct which Christianity has in many of its adherents. The absorption in worship shown by Mohammedans, who will spread their prayer carpets anywhere and perform their drill of prayers without embarrassment or distraction in the sight of a crowd, or the rapt 'devotion' of fakirs, are held up as a rebuke to us 'Christians' who are ashamed to be caught praying. One may observe, in mitigation, that the worship which is of the heart is naturally more sensitive to surrounding distractions than that which is a matter of posturing and repetition by rote. But there still remains substance enough in the contrast to point a sharp arrow of rebuke.

And there is no denying that in these 'heathen' religions, religion is intertwined with every act of life in a fashion which may well put to shame many of us. Remember how Paul had to deal at length with the duty of the Corinthians in view of the way in which every meal was a sacrifice to some god, and how the same permeation of life with religion is found in all these 'false faiths.' The octopus has coiled its tentacles round the whole body of its victim. Bad and sad and mad as idolatry is, it reads a rebuke to many of us, who keep life and religion quite apart, and lock up our Christianity in our pews with our prayer-books and hymnaries.

Think of the material sacrifices made by idolaters, in costly offerings, in painful self-tortures, and in many other ways, and the niggardliness and self-indulgence of so many so-called Christians.

III. The contrast suggests the greatness of the power which can overcome even such obstinate adherence to idols.

There is one, and only one, solvent for that rock-like obstinacy-the Gospel. The other religions have seldom attempted to encroach on each other's territory, and where they have, their instrument of conversion has generally been the sword. The Gospel has met and mastered them all. It, and it only, has had power to draw men to itself out of every faith. The ancient gods who bewitched Israel, the gods of Greece, the gods of our own ancestors, the gods of the islands of the South Seas, lie huddled together, in undistinguished heaps, like corpses on a battlefield, and the deities of India and the East are wounded and slowly bleeding out their lives. 'Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth, the idols are upon the beasts,' all packed up, as it were, and ready to be carried off.

The rate of progress in dethroning them varies with the varying national conditions. It is easier to cut a tunnel through chalk than through quartz.

IV. That contrast carries with it a call for Christian effort to spread the conquering Gospel.

3) Jeremiah 2:13

Jeremiah

FOUNTAIN AND CISTERNS

Jer. 2:13.

The proclivity of the Jews to idolatry is an outstanding fact all through their history. That persistent national tendency surely compels us to recognise a divine inspiration as the source of the prophetic teaching and of the lofty spiritual theology of the Old Testament, which were in sharpest unlikeness and opposition to the whole trend of the people's thoughts.

It is this apostasy which is referred to here. The false gods made by men are the broken cisterns. But the text embodies a general truth.

I. The irksomeness of a godless life.

The contrast is between the springing fountain, there in the desert, with the lush green herbage round about, where a man has only to stoop and drink, and the painful hewing of cisterns.

This emblem of the fountain beautifully suggests the great thought of God's own loving will as the self-originated impulse by which He pours out all good. Apart from all our efforts, the precious gift is provided for us. Our relation is only that of receivers.

We have the contrast with this in the laborious toils to which they condemn themselves who seek for created sources of good. ‘Hewn out cisterns’-think of a man who, with a fountain springing in his courtyard, should leave it and go to dig in the arid desert, or to hew the live rock in hopes to gain water. It was already springing and sparkling before him. The conduct of men, when they leave God and seek for other delights, is like digging a canal alongside a navigable river. They condemn themselves to a laborious and quite superfluous task. The true way to get is to take.

Illustrations in religion. Think of the toil and pains spent in idolatry and in corrupt forms of Christianity.

Illustrations in common life. Your toils-aye, and even your pleasures -how much of them is laboriously digging for the water which all the while is flowing at your side.

II. The hopelessness of a godless life.

The contrast further is between living waters and broken cisterns. God is the fountain of living waters; in other words, in fellowship with God there is full satisfaction for all the capacities and desires of the soul; heart-conscience-will-understanding-hope and fear.

The contrast of the empty cisterns. What a deep thought that with all their work men only make ‘cisterns,’ *i.e.* they only provide circumstances which *could hold* delights, but cannot secure that water should be in them! The men-made cisterns must be God-filled, if filled at all. The true joys from earthly things belong to him who has made God his portion.

Further, they are ‘broken cisterns,’ and all have in them some flaw or crack out of which the water runs. That is a vivid metaphor for the fragmentary satisfaction which all earthly good gives, leaving a deep yearning unstilled. And it is temporary as well as partial. ‘He that drinketh of this water shall thirst again’-nay, even as with those who indulge in intoxicating drinks, the appetite increases while the power of the draught to satisfy it diminishes. But the crack in the cistern points further to the uncertain tenure of all earthly goods and the certain leaving of them all.

All godless life is a grand mistake.

III. The crime of a godless life.

It is right to seek for happiness. It is sin to go away from God. You are thereby not merely flinging away your chances, but are transgressing against your sacredest obligations. Our text is not only a remonstrance on the grounds of prudence, showing God-neglecting men that they are foolish, but it is an appeal to conscience, convincing them that they are sinful. God loves us and cares for us. We are bound to Him by ties which do not depend on our own volition. And so there is punishment for the sin, and the evils experienced in a godless life are penal as well as natural.

We recall the New Testament modification of this metaphor, ‘The water that I shall give him shall be *in* him a fountain of water.’ Arabs in desert round dried-up springs. Hagar. Shipwrecked sailors on a reef. Christ opens ‘rivers in the wilderness and streams in the desert.’

4) Jeremiah 2:19

Jeremiah

FORSAKING JEHOVAH

Jer. 2:19.

Of course the original reference is to national apostasy, which was aggravated by the national covenant, and avenged by national disasters, which are interpreted and urged by the prophet as God’s merciful pleading with men. But the text is true in reference to individuals.

I. The universal indictment.

This is not so much a charge of isolated overt acts, as of departure from God. That departure, itself a sin, is the fountain of all other sins. Every act which is morally wrong is religiously a departure from God; it could not be done, unless heart and will had moved away from their allegiance to Him.

So the solemn mystery of right and wrong becomes yet more solemn, when our personal relation to the personal God is brought in.

Then-consider what this forsaking is-at bottom aversion of will, or rather of the whole nature, from Him.

How strange and awful is that power which a creature possesses of closing his heart against God, and setting up a quasi-independence!

How universal it is-appeal to each man’s own consciousness.

II. The special aggravation.

‘*Thy God* ‘-the original reference is to Israel, whom God had taken for His and to whom He had given Himself as theirs, by His choice from of old, by redemption from Egypt, by covenant, and by centuries of blessings. But the designation is true in regard to God and each of us. It points to the personal relation which we each sustain to Him, and so is a pathetic appeal to affection and gratitude.

III. The bitter fruit.

6 Evil’ may express rather the moral character of forsaking God, while ‘bitter’ expresses rather the consequences of it, which are sorrows.

So the prophet appeals to experience. As the Psalmist confidently invites to ‘taste and see that God is good,’ so Jeremiah boldly bids the apostates know and see that departing is bitter.

It is so, for it leaves the soul unsatisfied.

It leads to remorse.

It drags after it manifold bitter fruits. ‘The wages of sin is death.’

Sin without consequent sorrow is an impossibility if there is a God.

IV. The loving appeal.

The text is not denunciation, but tender, though indignant, pleading, in hope of winning back the wanderers. The prophet has just been pointing to the sorrowful results which necessarily follow on the nation's apostasy, and tells Israel that its own wickedness shall correct it, and then, in the text, he beseeches them not to be blind to the meaning of their miseries, but to let these teach them how sinful and how sorrowful their apostasy is. Men's sorrows are a mystery, but that sinners should not have sorrows were a sadder mystery still. And God pleads with us all not to lose the good of our experiences of the bitterness of sin by our levity or our blindness to their meaning. By His providences, by His Spirit working on us, by the plain teachings and loving pleadings of His word, He is ever striving to open our eyes that we may see Good and Evil, and recognise that all Good is bound up for us with cleaving to God, and all Evil with departing from Him. When we turn our backs on Him we are full front with the deformed figure of Evil; when we turn away from it, we are face to face with Him, and in Him, with all Good.

5) Jeremiah 3:21-22

Jeremiah

A COLLOQUY BETWEEN A PENITENT AND GOD

Jer. 3:21 - Jer. 3:22.

We have here a brief dramatic dialogue. First is heard a voice from the bare heights, the sobs and cries of penitence, produced by the prophet's earnest remonstrance. The penitent soul is absorbed in the thought of its own evil. Its sin stands clear before it. Israel sees its sin in its two forms. 'They have perverted their way,' or have led a wrong outward life of action, and the reason is that 'they have forgotten God,' or have been guilty of inward alienation and departure from Him. Here is the consciousness of sin in its essential character, and that produces godly sorrow. The distinction between mere remorse and repentance is here already, in the 'weeping and supplication.'

I. So we have here a consciousness of sin in its true nature, as embracing both deeds and heart, as originating in departure from God, and manifested in perverted conduct.

Further, we have here sorrow. There may be consciousness of sin in its true nature without any sorrow of heart. It is fatal when a man looks upon his evil, gets a more or less clear sight of it, and is not sorry and penitent. It is conceivable that there should be perfect knowledge of sin and perfect insensibility in regard to it.

A sinful man's true mood should be sorrow-not flinging the blame on others, or on fate, or circumstances; not regarding his sin as misfortune or as inevitable or as disease.

Conscience is meant to produce that consciousness and that sorrow: but conscience may be dulled or silenced. It cannot be anyhow induced to call evil good, but it may be mistaken in what is evil. The gnomon is true, but a veil of cloud may be drawn over the sky.

Further, we have here supplication. These two former may both be experienced, without this third. There may be consciousness of sin and sorrow which lead to no blessing. 'My bones waxed old through my roaring.' Sorrow after a godly sort may be hindered by false notions of God's great love, or by false notions of what a man ought to do when he finds he has gone wrong. It may be hindered by cleaving, subtle love of sin, or by self-trust. But where all these have been overcome there is true repentance.

II. The loving divine answer.

Another ear than the prophet's has heard the plaint from the bare heights. Many a frenzied shriek had gone up from these shrines of idolatrous worship, and as with Baal's prophets, it had brought no answer, nor had there been any that regarded. But this weeping reaches the ear that is never closed. Contrast with Jer. 3:23 : 'Truly in vain is the help that is looked for from the hills, the shouting [of idol-worshippers] on the mountains.'

The instantaneousness of God’s answer is very beautiful. It is like the action of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who saw his repentant boy afar off and ran and kissed him.

There seems to be, in both the invitation to return and in the promise to hear the backslidings, a quotation from Hos. 14:1 - Hos. 14:4. We see here how God meets the penitent with a love that recognises all his sin and yet is love. It is not rebuke or reproach that lies in that designation, ‘backsliding children.’ It is tenderest mercy that lets us see that He knows exactly what we are, and yet promises His love and forgiveness. He loves us sinners with a love that beckons us back to Himself, with a love that promises healing. The truth which should be taken into the mind and heart of the man conscious of sin is God’s knowledge of it all already and yet His undiminished love, God’s welcome of him back, God’s ready pardon. All this is true for the world in Christ, and is true for every individual soul.

The answer and the invitation here are immediate.

There is often a long period of painful struggle. It looks as if the answer were not immediate. But that is because we do not listen to it.

III. The happy response of the returning soul.

That too is immediate. The soul believes God’s promises. It recognises God’s claim. It returns to Him. We are attracted by His grace. The sunflower turns to the sun. The penitent is not driven only, but drawn - God’s own loving self-revelation in Christ is His true power. ‘I, if I am lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.’

The consciousness of sin remains and is even deepened [subsequent verses], and yet is different. A light of hope is in it. The very sense of sin brings us to Him, to hide our faces on His heart like a child in its mother’s lap.

This response of the soul may be instantaneous. If it is not immediate, it too probably will never be at all.

6) Jeremiah 5:31

Jeremiah

A QUESTION FOR THE BEGINNING

Jer. 5:31.

I find that I preached to the young from this text just thirty years since-nearly a generation ago. How few of my then congregation are here to-night! how changed they and I are! and how much nearer the close we have drifted! How many of the young men and women of that evening have gone to meet the end, and how many of them have wrecked their lives because they would not face and answer this question!

Ah, dear young friends, if I could bring some of the living and some of the dead, and set them to witness here instead of me, they would burn in on you, as my poor words never can do, the insanity of living without a satisfactory and sufficient reply to the question of my text, ‘What will ye do in the end?’

In its original application these words referred to a condition of religious and moral corruption in which a whole nation was involved. The men that should have spoken for God were ‘prophesying lies.’ The priests connived at profitable falsehoods because by these their rule was confirmed. And the deluded populace, as is always the case, preferred smooth falsehoods to stern truths. So the prophet turns round indignantly, and asks what can be the end of such a welter and carnival of vice and immorality, and beseeches his contemporaries to mend their ways by bethinking themselves of what their course led to.

But we may dismiss the immediate application of the words for the sake of looking at the general principle which underlies them. It is a very familiar and well-worn one. It is simply this, that a large part of the wise conduct of life depends on grave consideration of consequences. It is a sharp-pointed question, that pricks many a bubble, and brings much wisdom down into the category of folly. There would be less misery in the world, and fewer fair young lives cast away upon grim rocks, if the question of my text were oftener asked and answered.

I. I note, first, that here is a question which every wise man will ask himself.

I do not mean to say that the consideration of consequences is the highest guide, nor that it is always a sufficient one; nor that it is, by any means, in every case, an easily applied one. For we can all conceive of circumstances in which it is the plainest duty to take a certain course of action, knowing that, as far as this life is concerned, it will bring down disaster and ruin. Do right! and face *any* results therefrom. He who is always forecasting possible issues has a very leaden rule of conduct, and will be so afraid of results that he will not dare to move; and his creeping prudence will often turn out to be the truest imprudence.

But whilst all that is true, and many deductions must be made from the principle which I have laid down, that the consideration of circumstances is a good guide in life, yet there are regions in which the question comes home with direct and illuminating force. Let me just illustrate one or two of these.

Take the lower application of the question to nearer ends in life. Now this awful life that we live is so strangely concatenated of causes and effects, and each little deed drags after it such a train of eternal and ever-widening consequences, that a man must be an idiot if he never looks an inch beyond his nose to see the bearing of his actions. I believe that, in the long-run, and in the general, condition is the result of character and of conduct; and that, whatsoever deductions may be necessary, yet, speaking generally, and for the most part, men are the architects of their own condition, and that they make the houses that they dwell in to fit the convolutions of the body that dwells within them. And, that being so, it being certain that 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,' and that no deed, be it ever so small, be it ever so evanescent, be it ever so entirely confined within our own inward nature, and never travelling out into visibility in what men call actions-that every one of such produces an eternal, though it may be an all but imperceptible effect, upon ourselves; oh, surely there can be nothing more ridiculous than that a man should refrain from forecasting the issue of his conduct, and saying to himself? 'What am I to do in the end?'

If you would only do that in regard to hosts of things in your daily life you *could* not be the men and women that you are. If the lazy student would only bring clearly before his mind the examination-room, and the unanswerable paper, and the bitter mortification when the pass-list comes out and his name is not there, he would not trifle and dawdle and seek all manner of diversions as he does, but he would bind himself to his desk and his task. If the young man who begins to tamper with purity, and in the midst of the temptations of a great city to gratify the lust of the eye and the lust of the flesh, because he is away from the shelter of his father's house, and the rebuke of his mother's purity, could see, as the older of us have seen, men with their bones full of the iniquity of their youth, or drifted away from the city to die, down in the country like a rat in a hole, do you think the temptations of the streets and low places of amusement would not be stripped of their fascination? If the man beginning to drink were to say to himself, 'What am I to do in the end?' when the craving becomes physical, and volition is suspended, and anything is sacrificed in order to still the domineering devil within, do you think he would begin? I do not believe that all sin comes from ignorance, but sure I am that if the sinful man saw what the end is he would, in nine cases out of ten, be held back. 'What will ye do in the end?' Use that question, dear friends, as the Ithuriel spear which will touch the squatting tempter at your ear, and there will start up, in its own shape, the fiend.

But the main application that I would ask you to make of the words of my text is in reference to the final end, the passing from life. Death, the end, is likewise Death, the beginning. If it were an absolute end, as coarse infidelity pretends to believe it is, then, of course, such a question as my text would have no kind of relevance. 'What will ye do in the end?' 'Nothing! for I shall be nothing. I shall just go back to the nonentity that I was. I do not need to trouble myself.' Ah, but Janus has two faces, one turned to the present and one to the future. His temple has two gates, one which admits from this lower level, and one, at the back, which launches us out on to the higher level. The end is a beginning, and the beginning is retribution. The end of sowing is the beginning of harvest. The man finishes his work and commences to live on his wages. The brewing is over, and the drinking of the brewst commences.

And so, brother, 'What will ye do in the end-which is not an end, but which is a beginning? 'Surely every wise man will take that question into consideration. Surely, if it be true that we all of us are silently drifting to that one little gateway through which we have to pass one by one, and then find ourselves in a region all full of consequences of the present, he has a good claim to be counted a prince of fools who 'jumps the life to come,' and, in all his calculations of consequences, which he applies wisely and prudently to the trifles of the present, forgets to ask himself, 'And, after all that is done, what shall I do then?' You remember the question in the old ballad:

"'What good came of it at last?' . . .
'Nay, that I cannot tell,' quoth he;
But 'twas a famous victory.'"

Ay, but what came of it at the last? Oh brother, that one question, pushed to its issues, condemns the wisdom of this world as folly, and pulverises into nothingness millions of active lives and successful schemes. What then? What then? 'I have much goods laid up for many years.' Well and good, what then? 'I will say to my soul, Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.' Yes, what then? 'This night thy soul shall be required of thee.' He never thought of that! And so his epitaph was 'Thou fool!'

II. So, secondly, mark, here is a question which a great many of us never think about.

I do not mean, now, so much in reference to the nearer ends compassed in this life, though even in regard to them it is only too true; I mean rather in regard to that great and solemn issue to which we are all tending. But in regard of both, it seems to me one of the strangest things in all the world that men should be content so commonly to be ignorant of what they perfectly well know, and never to give attention to that of which, should they bethink themselves, they are absolutely certain.

'What will ye do in the end?' Why! half of us put away that question with the thought in our minds, if not expressed, at least most operative, 'There is not going to be any end; and it is always going to be just like what it is to-day.' Did you ever think that there is no good ground for being sure that the sun will rise to-morrow; that it rose for the first time once; that there will come a day when it will rise for the last time? The uniformity of Nature may be a postulate, but you cannot find any logical basis for it. Or, to come down from heights of that sort, have you ever laid to heart, brother, that the only unchangeable thing in this world is change, and the only thing certain, that there is no continuance of anything; and that, therefore, you and I are bound, if we are wise, to look that fact in the face, and not to allow ourselves to be befooled by the difficulty of imagining that things will ever be different from what they are? Oh! many of us- I was going to say most of men, I do not know that it would be an exaggeration-are like the careless inhabitants of some of those sunny, volcanic isles in the Eastern Ocean, where Nature is prodigally luxuriant and all things are fair, but every fifty years or so there comes a roar and the island shakes, and half of it, perhaps, is overwhelmed, and the lava flows down and destroys gleaming houses and smiling fields, and heaven is darkened with ashes, and then everything goes on as before, and people live as if it was never going to happen again, though every morning, when they go out, they see the cone towering above their houses, and the thin column of smoke, pale against the blue sky.

It is not altogether sinful or bad that we should live, to some extent, under the illusion of a fixity and a perpetuity which has no real existence, for it helps to concentrate effort and to consolidate habit, and to make life possible. But for men to live, as so many of us do, never thinking of what is more certain than anything else about us, that we shall slide out of this world, and find ourselves in another, is surely not the part of wisdom.

Another reason why so many of us shirk this question is the lamentable want of the habit of living by principle and reflection. Most men never see their life steadily, and see it whole. They live from hand to mouth, they are driven this way and that way; they adapt means to ends In regard to business or the like, but in the formation of their character, and in the moulding of their whole being, crowds of them live a purely mechanical, instinctive, unreflective life. There is nothing more deplorable than the small extent to which reflection and volition really shape the lives of the bulk of mankind. Most of us take our cue from our circumstances, letting them dominate us. They tell us that in Nature there is such a thing as protective mimicry, as it is called-animals having the power-some of them to a much larger extent than others-of changing their hues in order to match the gravel of the stream in which they swim or the leaves of the trees on which they feed. That is like what a great many of us do. Put us into a place where certain forms of frivolity or vice are common, and we go in for them. Take us away from these and we change our hue to something a little whiter. But all through we never know what it is to put forth a good solid force of resistance and to say, ‘No! I will not!’ or, what is sometimes quite as hard to say, ‘Yes! though,’ as Luther said in his strong way, ‘there were as many devils in Worms as there are tiles on the housetops, I will!’ If people would live more by reflection and by the power of a resisting will, this question of my text would come oftener to them.

And there is another cause that I must touch on for one moment, why so many people neglect this question, and that is because they are uneasily conscious that they durst not face it. I know of no stranger power than that by which men can ignore unwelcome questions; and I know of nothing more tragical than the fact that they choose to exercise the power. What would you think of a man who never took stock because he knew that he was insolvent, and yet did not want to know it? And what do you think of yourselves if, knowing that the thought of passing into that solemn eternity is anything but a cheering one, and that you have to pass thither, you never turn your head to look at it? Ah, brother, if it be true that this question of my text is unpleasant to you to hear put, be sure that that is the strongest reason why you should put it.

III. Thirdly, here is a question especially directed to you young folk.

It is so because you are specially tempted to forget it. It may seem as if there were no people in the world that had less need to be appealed to, as I have been appealing to you, by motives drawn from the end of life, than you who are only standing at its beginning. But it is not so. An old rabbi was once asked by his pupil when he should fulfil a certain precept of the law, and the answer was, ‘The day before you die.’ ‘But,’ said the disciple, ‘I may die to-morrow.’ ‘Then,’ said the master, ‘do it to-day.’ And so I say to you, do not make sure that the beginning at which you stand is separated by a long tract of years from the end to which you go. It may be, but it may not be. I know that arguments pleading with men to be Christians, and drawn from the consideration of a future life, are not fashionable nowadays, but I am persuaded that that preaching of the Gospel is seriously defective, and will be lamentably ineffective, which ignores this altogether. And, therefore, dear friends, I say to you that, although in all human probability a stretch of years may lie between you and the end of life, the question of my text is one specially adapted to you.

And it is so because, with your buoyancy, with your necessarily limited experience, with the small accumulation of results that you have already in your possession, and with the tendencies of your age to live rather by impulse than by reflection, you are specially tempted to forget the solemn significance of this interrogation. And it is a question especially for you, because you have special advantages in the matter of putting it. We older people are all fixed and fossils, as you are very fond of telling us. The iron has cooled and gone into rigid shapes with us. It is all fluent with you. You may become pretty nearly what you like. I do not mean in regard to circumstances: other considerations come in to determine these; but circumstances are second, character is first; and I do say, in regard to character, you young folk have all but infinite possibilities before you; and, I repeat, may become almost anything that you set yourselves to be. You have no long, weary trail of failures behind you, depressing and seeming to bring an entail of like failure with them for the future. You have not yet acquired habits-those awful things that may be our worst foes or our best friends-you have not yet acquired habits that almost smother the power of reform and change. You have, perhaps, years before you in which you may practise the lessons of wisdom and self-restraint which this question fairly fronted would bring. And so I lay it on your hearts, dear young friends. I have little hope of the old people. I do not despair of any, God forbid! but the fact remains that the most of the men who have done anything for God and the world worth doing have been under the influence of Christian principle in their early days. And from fifteen to one or two and twenty is the period in which you get the set which, in all likelihood, you will retain through eternity. So, ‘What will ye do in the end?’ Answer the question whilst yet it is possible to answer it, with a stretch of years before you in which you may work out the conclusions to which the answer brings.

IV. And that leads me to say, last of all, and but a word, that here is a question which Jesus Christ alone enables a man to answer with calm

confidence.

As I have said, the end is a beginning; the passage from life is the entrance on a progressive and eternal state of retribution. And Jesus Christ tells us two other things. He tells us that that state has two parts; that in one there is union with Him, life, blessedness for ever; and that in the other there is darkness, separation from Him, death, and misery. These are the facts, as revealed by the incarnate Word of God, on which answers to this question must be shaped.

'What will ye do in the end?' If I am trusting to Him; if I have brought my poor, weak nature and sinful soul to Him, and cast them upon His merciful sacrifice and mighty intercession and life-giving Spirit, then I can say: 'As for me, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness.' Ay, and what about those who do not take Him for their Prince and their Saviour? 'What will *ye* do in the end?' When life's illusions are over, when all its bubbles are burst, when conscience awakes, and when you stand to give an account of yourself to God, 'What will ye do in the end' which is a beginning? 'Can thy heart endure and thy hand be strong in the day that I shall deal with thee?' Oh brother, do not turn away from that Christ who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending! If you will cleave to Him, then you may let the years and weeks slip away without regret; and whether the close be far off or near, death will be robbed of all its terrors, and the future so filled with blessedness, that of you the wise man's paradox will be true: 'Better is the end of a thing than the beginning, and the day of death than the day of birth.'

7) Jeremiah 10:16

Jeremiah

POSSESSING AND POSSESSED

Jer. 10:16

Here we have set forth a reciprocal possession. We possess God, He possesses us. We are His inheritance, He is our portion. I am His; He is mine.

This mutual ownership is the very living centre of all religion. Without it there is no relation of any depth between God and us. How much profounder such a conception is than the shallow notions about religion which so many men have! It is not a round of observance; not a painful effort at obedience, not a dim reverence for some vague supernatural, not a far-off bowing before Omnipotence, not the mere acceptance of a creed, but a life in which God and the soul blend in the intimacies of mutual possession.

I. The mutual possession.

God is our portion.

That thought presupposes the possibility of our possessing God. It presupposes the fact that He has given Himself to us, and the answering fact that we have taken Him for ours.

We are God's inheritance.

We give ourselves to Him-we do so where we apprehend that He has given Himself to us; it is His giving love that moves men to yield themselves to God. He takes us for His. What a wonderful thought that He delights in possessing us! The all-sufficiency of our portion is guaranteed because He is 'the former of all things.' The safety of His inheritance is secured because 'the Lord of Hosts is His name.' And that name accentuates the wonder that He to whom all the ordered armies of the universe submit and belong should still take us for His inheritance.

Mark the contrast of this true possession with the false and merely external possessions of the world. Those outward things which a man has stand in no real relation with him. They fade and fleet away, or have to be left, and, even while they last, are not his in any real sense. Only what has indissolubly entered into, and become one with, our very selves is truly ours.

Our possession of God suggests a view of our blessedness and our obligation. It secures blessedness-for we have in Him an all-sufficient object and a treasure for all our nature. It imposes the obligation to let our whole nature feed upon, and be filled by, Him, to see that the temple where He dwells is clean, and not to fling away our treasure.

His possession of us suggests a corresponding view of our blessedness and our obligation.

We are His-as slaves are their owners' property. So we are bound to submission of will. To be owned by God is an honour. The slave's goods and chattels belong to the master.

His possession of us binds us to consecrate ourselves, and so to glorify Him in 'body and spirit which are His.'

It ensures our safety. How constantly this calming thought is dwelt on in Scripture-that they who belong to Him need fear nothing. 'Fear not, I have called thee by thy name, them art Mine.' God does not hold His possessions with so slack a grasp as to lose them or to suffer them to be wrenched away. A psalmist rose to the hope of immortality by meditating on what was involved in his being God's possession here and now. He was sure that even Death's bony fingers could not keep their hold on him, and so he sang, 'Thou wilt not suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption.' The seal on the foundation of God which guarantees its standing sure is, 'The Lord knoweth them that are His.' 'They shall be Mine in the day that I do make, even a peculiar treasure,' is His own assurance, on which resting, a trembling soul may 'have boldness in the day of judgment.'

II. The human response by which God becomes ours and we His.

That response is first the act of faith, which is an act of both reason and will, and then the act of love and self-surrender which follows faith, and then the continuous acts of communion and consecration.

All must commence with recognition of His free gift of Himself to us in Christ. We come empty-handed. That gift recognised and accepted moves us to give ourselves to Him. When we give ourselves to Him we find that we possess Him.

Further, there must be continuous communion. This mutual possession depends on our occupation of mind and heart with Him. We possess Him and are possessed by Him, when our wills are kept in harmony with, and submission to, Him, when our thoughts are occupied with Him and His truth, when our affections rest in Him, when our desires go out to Him, when our hopes are centred in Him, when our practical life is devoted to Him.

III. The blessedness of this mutual possession.

To possess God is to have an all-sufficient object for all our nature. He who has God for his very own has the fountain of life in himself, has the spring of living water, as it were, in his own courtyard, and needs not to go elsewhere to draw. He need fear no loss, for his wealth is so engrained in the very substance of his being that nothing can rob him of it but himself, and that whilst he lasts it will last with, because in, him.

How marvellous that into the narrow room of one poor soul He should come whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain! Solomon said, ‘How much less this house which I have built,’-well may we say the same of our little hearts. But He can compress Himself into that small compass and expand His abode by dwelling in it.

Nor is the blessedness of being possessed by Him less than the blessedness of possessing Him. For so long as we own ourselves we are burdens to ourselves, and we only own ourselves truly when we give ourselves away utterly. Earthly love, with its blessed mysteries of mutual possession, teaches us that. But all its depth and joy are as nothing when set beside the liberty, the glad peace, the assured possession of our enriched selves, which are ours when we give ourselves wholly to God, and so for the first time are truly lords of ourselves, and find ourselves by losing ourselves in Him.

Nor need we fear to say that God, too, delights in that mutual possession, for the very essence of love is the desire to impart itself, and He is love supreme and perfect. Therefore is He glad when we let Him give Himself to us, and moved by ‘the mercies of God, yield ourselves to Him a sacrifice of a sweet smell, acceptable to God.’

8) Jeremiah 12:5

Jeremiah

CALMS AND CRISES

Jer. 12:5

The prophet has been complaining of his persecutors. The divine answer is here, reproving his impatience, and giving him to understand that harder trials are in store for him.

Both clauses mean substantially the same thing, and are of a parabolic nature. The one adduces the metaphor of a race: ‘Footmen have beaten you, have they? Then how will you run with cavalry?’ The other is more clear in the Revised Version rendering: ‘Though in a land of peace you are secure, what will you do in Jordan when it swells?’ The ‘swelling of Jordan’ is a figure for extreme danger.

The questions may be taken as referring to our own lives. Note how the one refers more to strength for duties, the other to peace and safety in dangers. They both recognise that life has great alternations as to the magnitude of its tasks and trials, and they call on experience to answer the question whether we are ready for times of stress and peril.

I. Think of what may come to us.

We all have had the experience of how in our lives there are long stretches of uneventful days, and then, generally without warning, some crisis is sprung on us, which demands quite a different order of qualities to cope with it. Our typhoons generally come without any warning from a falling barometer.

We may at any moment be confronted with some hard duty which will task our utmost energy.

We may at any moment be plunged in some great calamity to which the quiet course of our lives for years will be as the still flow of the river between smiling lawns is to the dash and fierce currents of the rapids in a grim canyon.

The tasks that may come on us and the tasks that must come, the dangers that may beset us and the dangers that must envelop us, the possibilities that lie hidden in the future, and the certainties that we know to be shrouded there, should surely sometimes occupy a wise man’s thoughts. It is but living in a fool’s paradise to soothe ourselves with the assurance which a moment’s thought will shatter: ‘To-morrow shall be as this day.’ We shall not always have the easy competition with footmen; there will some time come a call to strain our muscles to keep up with the gallop of cavalry. We shall have to struggle to keep our feet in the swelling of Jordan, and must not expect to have a continual leisurely life in ‘a land of peace.’

II. Think of what experience tells us as to our power to meet these crises.

The footmen have wearied you. The small tasks have been more than your patience and strength could manage. No doubt great exigencies often call forth great powers that were dormant in the humdrum of ordinary life. But the man who knows himself best will be the most ready to shrink with distrust from the dread possibilities of duty.

If we think of the ‘footmen’ with whom we have contended as representing the smaller faults that we have tried to overcome, does our success in conquering some small bad habit, some ‘little sin,’ encourage the hope that we could keep our footing when some great temptation of a lifetime came down on us with a rush like the charge of a battalion of horsemen? Or, if we cast our eyes forward to the calamities that lie still ‘on the knees of the gods’ for us, do we feel ready to meet the hours of desolating disaster, the ‘hour of death and the day of judgment’? Even in a land of peace we have all had alarms, perturbations, and defeats enough, and our security has been at the mercy of marauders so often that if we are wise, and take due heed of what experience has to say to us of our reserve of force, we shall not be hopeful of keeping our footing in the whirling currents of a river in full flood.

III. Think of the power that will fit us for all crises.

With the power of Jesus in our spirits we shall never have to attempt a duty for which we are not strengthened, nor to front a danger from and in which He will not defend us. With His life in us we shall be ready for the long hours of uneventful, unexciting duties, and for the short spurts that make exacting calls on us. We ‘shall run and not be weary; we shall walk and not faint.’ If we live in Jesus we shall always be in ‘a land of peace,’ and no ‘plague shall come nigh our dwelling.’ Even when the soles of our feet rest in the waters of Jordan, the waters of Jordan shall be cut off, and we shall pass over on dry ground into the land of peace, where they that would swallow us up shall be far away for ever.

9) Jeremiah 13:23

Jeremiah

AN IMPOSSIBILITY MADE POSSIBLE

Jer. 13:23. - 2Co. 5:17. - Rev. 21:5.

Put these three texts together. The first is a despairing question to which experience gives only too sad and decisive a negative answer. It is the answer of many people who tell us that character must be eternal, and of many a baffled man who says, ‘It is of no use-I have tried and can do nothing.’ The second text is the grand Christian answer, full of confidence. It was spoken by one who had no superficial estimate of the evil, but who had known in himself the power of Christ to revolutionise a life, and make a man love all he had hated, and hate all he had loved, and fling away all he had treasured. The last text predicts the completion of the renovating process lying far ahead, but as certain as sunrise.

I. The unchangeableness of character, especially of faults.

We note the picturesque rhetorical question here. They were occasionally accustomed to see the dark-skinned, Ethiopian, whether we suppose that these were true negroes from Southern Egypt or dark Arabs, and now and then leopards came up from the thickets on the Jordan, or from the hills of the southern wilderness about the Dead Sea. The black hue of the man, the dark spots that starred the skin of the fierce beast, are fitting emblems of the evil that dyes and speckles the soul. Whether it wraps the whole character in black, or whether it only spots it here and there with tawny yellow, it is ineradicable; and a man can no more change his character once formed than a negro can cast his skin, or a leopard whiten out the spots on his hide.

Now we do not need to assert that a man has no power of self-improvement or reformation. The exhortations of the prophet to repentance and to cleansing imply that he has. If he has not, then it is no blame to him that he does not mend. Experience shows that we have a very considerable power of such a kind. It is a pity that some Christian teachers speak in exaggerated terms about the impossibility of such self-improvement.

But it is very difficult.

Note the great antagonist as set forth here-Habit, that solemn and mystical power. We do not know all the ways in which it operates, but one chief way is through physical cravings set up. It is strange how much easier a second time is than a first, especially in regard to evil acts. The hedge once broken down, it is very easy to get through it again. If one drop of water has percolated through the dyke, there will be a roaring torrent soon. There is all the difference between once and never; there is small difference between once and twice. By habit we come to do things mechanically and without effort, and we all like that. One solitary footfall across the snow soon becomes a beaten way. As in the banyan-tree, each branch becomes a root. All life is held together by cords of custom which enable us to reserve conscious effort and intelligence for greater moments. Habit tends to weigh upon us with a pressure ‘heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.’ But also it is the ally of good.

The change to good is further made difficult because liking too often goes with evil, and good is only won by effort. It is a proof of man’s corruption that if left alone, evil in some form or other springs spontaneously, and that the opposite good is hard to win. Uncultivated soil bears thistles and weeds. Anything can roll downhill. It is always the least trouble to go on as we have been going.

Further, the change is made difficult because custom blinds judgment and conscience. People accustomed to a vitiated atmosphere are not aware of its foulness.

How long it takes a nation, for instance, to awake to consciousness of some national crime, even when the nation is ‘Christian’! And how men get perfectly sophisticated as to their own sins, and have all manner of euphemisms for them!

Further, how hard it is to put energy into a will that has been enfeebled by long compliance. Like prisoners brought out of the Bastille.

So if we put all these reasons together, no wonder that such reformation is rare.

I do not dwell on the point that it must necessarily be confined within very narrow limits. I appeal to experience. You have tried to cure some trivial habit. You know what a task that has been-how often you thought that you had conquered, and then found that all had to be done over again. How much more is this the case in this greater work! Often the efforts to break off evil habits have the same effect as the struggles of cattle mired in a bog, who sink the deeper for plunging. The sad cry of many a foiled wrestler with his own evil is, ‘O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’ We do not wish to exaggerate, but simply to put it that experience shows that for men in general, custom and inclination and indolence and the lack of adequate motive weigh so heavily that a thorough abandonment of evil, much more a hearty practice of good, are not to be looked for when once a character has been formed. So you young people, take care. And all of us listen to-

II. The great hope for individual renewal.

The second text sets forth a possibility of entire individual renewal, and does so by a strong metaphor.

‘If any man be in Christ he is a new creature,’ or as the words might be rendered, ‘there is a new creation,’ and not only is he renewed, but all things are become new. He is a new Adam in a new world.

Now [a] let us beware of exaggeration about this matter. There are often things said about the effects of conversion which are very far in advance of reality, and give a handle to caricature. The great law of continuity runs on through the change of conversion. Take a man who has been the slave of some sin. The evil will not cease to tempt, nor will the effects of the past on character be annihilated. ‘Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,’ remains true. In many ways there will be permanent consequences.

There will remain the scars of old wounds; old sores will be ready to burst forth afresh. The great outlines of character do remain.

[b] What is the condition of renewal?

‘If any man be in Christ’-how distinctly that implies something more than human in Paul’s conception of Christ. It implies personal union with Him, so that He is the very element or atmosphere in which we live. And that union is brought about by faith in Him.

[c] How does such a state of union with Christ make a man over again?

It gives a new aim and centre for our lives. Then we live not unto ourselves; then everything is different and looks so, for the centre is shifted. That union introduces a constant reference to Him and contemplation of His death for us, it leads to self-abnegation.

It puts all life under the influence of a new love. ‘The love of Christ constraineth.’ As is a man’s love, so is his life. The mightiest devolution is to excite a new love, by which old loves and tastes are expelled. ‘A new affection’ has ‘expulsive power,’ as the new sap rising in the springtime pushes off the lingering withered leaves. So union with Him meets the difficulty arising from inclination still hankering after evil. It lifts life into a higher level where the noxious creatures that were proper to the swamps cannot live. The new love gives a new and mighty motive for obedience.

That union breaks the terrible chain that binds us to the past. ‘All died.’ The past is broken as much as if we were dead. It is broken by the great act of forgiveness. Sin holds men by making them feel as if what has been must be-an awful entail of evil. In Christ we die to former self.

That union brings a new divine power to work in us. ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’

It sets us in a new world which yet is the old. All things are changed if we are changed. They are the same old things, but seen in a new light, used for new purposes, disclosing new relations and powers. Earth becomes a school and discipline for heaven. The world is different to a blind man when cured, or to a deaf one,-there are new sights for the one, new sounds for the other.

All this is true in the measure in which we live in union with Christ.

So no man need despair, nor think, ‘I cannot mend now.’ You may have tried and been defeated a thousand times. But still victory is possible, not without effort and sore conflict, but still possible. There is hope for all, and hope for ME.

III. The completion in a perfectly renewed creation.

The renovation here is only partial. Its very incompleteness is prophetic. If there be this new life in us, it obviously has not reached its fulness here, and it is obviously not manifested here for all that even here it is.

It is like some exotic that does not show its true beauty in our greenhouses. The life of a Christian on earth is a prophecy by both its greatness and its smallness, by both its glory and its shame, by both its brightness and its spots. It cannot be that there is always to be this disproportion between aspiration and performance, between willing and doing. Here the most perfect career is like a half-lighted street, with long gaps between the lamps.

The surroundings here are uncongenial to the new creatures. ‘Foxes have holes’-all creatures are fitted for their environment; only man, and eminently renewed man, wanders as a pilgrim, not in his home. The present frame of things is for discipline. The schooling over, we burn the rod. So we look for an external order in full correspondence with the new nature.

And Christ throned ‘makes all things new.’ How far the old is renewed we cannot tell, and we need not ask. Enough that there shall be a universe in perfect harmony with the completely renewed nature, that we shall find a home where all things will serve and help and gladden and further us, where the outward will no more distract and clog the spirit.

Brethren, let that mighty love constrain you; and look to Christ to renew you. Whatever your old self may have been, you may bury it deep in His grave, and rise with Him to newness of life. Then you may walk in this old world, new creatures in Christ Jesus, looking for the blessed hope of entire renewal into the perfect likeness of Him, the perfect man, in a perfect world, where all old sorrows and sins have passed away and He has made all things new. Through eternity, new joys, new knowledge, new progress, new likeness, new service will be ours- and not one leaf shall ever wither in the amaranthine crown, nor 'the cup of blessing' ever become empty or flat and stale. Eternity will be but a continual renewal and a progressive increase of ever fresh and ever familiar treasures. The new and the old will be one.

Begin with trusting to Him to help you to change a deeper blackness than that of the Ethiopian's skin, and to erase firier spots than stain the tawny leopard's hide, and He will make you a new man, and set you in His own time in a 'new heaven and earth, where dwelleth righteousness.'

10)Jeremiah 14:7-9

Jeremiah

TRIUMPHANT PRAYER

Jer. 14:7 - Jer. 14:9.

My purpose now carries me very far away from the immediate occasion of these words; yet I cannot refrain from a passing reference to the wonderful pathos and picturesque power with which the long-forgotten calamity that evoked them is portrayed in the context. A terrible drought has fallen upon the land, and the prophet's picture of it is, if one might say so, like some of Dante's in its realism, in its tenderness, and in its terror. In the presence of a common calamity all distinctions of class have vanished, and the nobles send their little ones to the well, and they come back with empty vessels and drooping heads instead of with the gladness that used to be heard in the place of drawing of water. The ploughmen are standing among the cracked furrows, gazing with despair on the brown chapped earth, and in the field the very dumb creatures are sharing in the common sorrow, and the imperious law of self-preservation overpowers and crushes the maternal instincts. 'Yea, the hind also calved in the field, and forsook it, because there was no grass.' And on every little hilltop where cooler air might be found, the once untamable wild asses are standing with open nostrils panting for the breeze, their filmy eyes failing them, gazing for the rain that will not come. And then, from contemplating all that sorrow, the prophet turns to God with a wondrous burst of strangely blended confidence and abasement, penitence and trust, and fuses together the acknowledgment of sin and reliance upon the established and perpetual relation between Israel and God, pleading with Him about His judgments, presenting before Him the mysterious contradiction that such a calamity should fall on those with whom God dwelt, and casting himself lowly before the throne, and pleading the ancient name: 'Do Thou it! Leave us not.'

It is to the wonderful fulness and richness of this prayer that I ask your attention in these few remarks. Expositors have differed as to whether the drought that forms its basis was a literal one, or is the prophet's way of putting the sore calamities that had fallen on Israel. Be that as it may, I need not remind you how often in Scripture that metaphor of the 'rain that cometh down from heaven and watereth the earth' is the symbol for God's divine gift of His Spirit, and how, on the other hand, the picture of the 'dry and thirsty land where no water is' is the appropriate figure for the condition of the soul or of the Church void of the divine presence. And I think I shall not mistake if I say that though we have much to make us thankful, yet you and I, dear brethren, and all our Churches and congregations, are suffering under this drought, and the merciful 'rain, wherewith Thou dost confirm Thine inheritance when it is weary' has not yet come as we would have it. May we find in these words some gospel for the day that may help us to come to the temper of mind into which there shall descend the showers to 'make soft the earth and bless the springing thereof!'

Glancing over these clauses, then, and trying to put them into something like order for our purpose, there are four things that I would have you note. The first is the mysterious contradiction between the ideal Israel and the actual state of things; the second is the earnest inquiry as to the cause; the third the penitent confession of our sinfulness; and the last, the triumphant confidence of believing prayer.

I. First of all, then, look at the illustration given to us by these words of the mysterious contradiction between the ideal of Israel and the actual condition of things.

Recur, for the sake of illustration, to the historical event upon which our text is based. The old prophet had said, 'The Lord thy God giveth thee a good land, a land full of brooks and water, rivers and depths, a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack anything in it'; and the startling fact is, that these men saw around them a land full of misery for want of that very gift which had been promised. The ancient charter of Israel's existence was that God should dwell in the midst of them, and what was it that they beheld? 'As things are,' says the prophet, 'it looks as if that perennial presence which Thou hast promised had been changed into visits, short and far between. Why shouldest Thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man, that turneth aside to tarry for a night?'

Now, I suppose there are two ideas intended to be conveyed-the brief, transitory, interrupted visits, with long, dreary stretches of absence between them; and the indifference of the visitant, as a man who pitches his tent in some little village to-night cares very little about the people that he never saw before this afternoon's march, and will never see after to-morrow morning. And not only is it so, but, instead of the perpetual energy of this divine aid that had been promised to Israel, as things are now, it looks as if He was a mighty man astonied, a hero that cannot save-some warrior stricken by panic fear into a paralysis of all his strength-a Samson with his locks shorn. The ideal had been so great-perpetual gifts, perpetual presence, perpetual energy; the reality is chapped ground and parched places, occasional visitations, like vanishing gleams of sunshine in a winter's day, and a paralysis, as it would appear, of all the ancient might.

Dear Christian friends, am I exaggerating, or dealing only with one set of phenomena, and forgetting the counterpoising ones on the other side, when I say, Change the name, and the story is told about us? God be thanked we have much that shows us that He has not left us, but yet, when we think of what we are, and of what God has promised that we should be, surely we must confess that there is the most sad, and, but for one reason, the most mysterious contradiction between the divine ideal and the actual facts of the case. Need we go further to learn what God meant His Church to be, than the last words that Jesus Christ said to us-'Lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the world'? Need we go further than those metaphors which come from His lips as precepts, and, like all His precepts, are a commandment upon the surface, but a promise in the sweet kernel-'Ye are the salt of the earth,' 'ye are the light of the world'-or than the prophet's vision of an Israel which 'shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord'? Is that the description of what you and I are? Have not we to say, 'We have not wrought any deliverance in the earth, neither have the inhabitants of the world fallen'? 'Salt of the earth,' and we can hardly keep our own souls from going putrid with the corruption that is round about us. 'Light of the world,' and our poor candles burnt low down into the socket, and sending up rather stench and smoke than anything like a clear flame. The words sound like irony rather than promises, like the very opposite of what we are rather than the ideals towards which our lives strive. In our lips they are presumption, and in the lips of the world, as we only too well know, they are a not undeserved scoff, to be said with curved lip, 'The salt of the earth,' and 'the light of the world'!

And look at what we are doing: scarcely holding our own numerically. Here and there a man comes and declares what God has done for his soul. But what is the Church, what are the Christian men of England, with all their multifarious activities, performing? Are we leavening the national mind? Are we breathing a higher godliness into trade, a more wholesome, simple style of living into society? And as for expansion, why, the Church at home does not keep up with the actual increase of the population; and we are conquering heathendom as we might hope to drain the ocean by taking out thimblefuls at a time. Is that what the Lord meant us to do? Our Father with us; yes, but oh! as a 'mighty man, astonied,' as He might well be, 'that cannot save' for the old, old reason, 'He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief.' No wonder that on the other side men are saying-and it is not such a very presumptuous thing to say, if you have regard only to the facts that appear on the surface-men are saying, 'wait a little while, and all these organisations will come to nothing; these Christian churches, as they are called,' and everything that you and I regard as distinctive of Christianity, 'will be gone and be forgotten.' We believe ourselves to be in possession of an eternal light; the world looks at us and sees that it is like a flickering flame in a dying lamp. Dear brethren, if I think of the lowness of our own religious characters, the small extent to which we influence the society in which we live, of the slow rate at which the Gospel progresses in our land, I can only ask the question, and pray you to lay it to heart, which the old prophet asked long ago: ‘O Thou that art named the house of Jacob, is the Spirit of the Lord straitened? Are these His doings? Do not my words do good to them that walk uprightly?’ ‘Why shouldest Thou be as a mighty man that cannot save?’

II. Let me ask you to look at the second thought that I think may fairly be gathered from these words, namely, that this consciousness of our low and evil condition ought to lead to very earnest and serious inquiry as to its cause.

The prophet having acknowledged transgression yet asks a question, ‘Why shouldest Thou leave us? Why have all these things come upon us?’ And he asks it not as ignorant of the answer, but in order that the answer may be deepened in the consciences and perceptions of those that listen to him, and that they together may take the answer to the Throne of God. There can be no doubt in a Christian mind as to the reason, and yet there is an absolute necessity that the familiar truth as to the reason should be driven home to our own consciences, and made part of our own spiritual experience, by our own honest reiteration of it and reflection upon it.

‘Why shouldest Thou leave us?’ Now, I need not spend time by taking into consideration answers that other people might give. I suppose that none of us will say that the reason is in any variableness of that unalterable, uniform, ever present, ever full, divine gift of God’s Spirit to His children. We do not believe in any arbitrary sovereignty that withdraws that gift; we do not believe that that gift rises and falls in its fulness and its abundance. We believe that the great reservoir is always full, and that, if ever our small tanks be empty, it is because there is something choking the pipe, not because there is anything less in the centre storehouse. We believe, if I may take another illustration, that it is with the seasons and the rotation of day and night in the religious experience as it is with them in the natural world. Summer and winter come and go, not because of any variableness in the centre orb, but because of the variation in the inclination of the circling satellite; day and night come not by reason of any ‘shadow cast by turning’ from the sun that revolves not at all- but by reason of the side that is turned to his life-giving and quickening beams. We believe that all the clouds and mist that come between us and God are like the clouds and mist of the sky, not dropped upon us from the blue empyrean above, but sucked up from the undrained swamps and poisonous fens of the lower earth. That is to say, if there be any change in the fulness of our possession of the divine Spirit, the fault lies wholly within the region of the mutable and of the human, and not at all in the region of the perennial and divine.

Nor do we believe, I suppose, any of us, that we are to look for any part of the reason in failure of the adaptation of God’s work and God’s ordinances to the great work which they have to do. Other people may tell us, if they like-it will not shake our confidence-that the fire that was kindled at Pentecost has all died down to grey ashes, and that it is of no use trying to cower over the burnt-out embers any more in order to get heat out of them. They may, and do, tell us that the ‘rushing, mighty wind that filled the house’ obeys the law of cycles as the wind of the natural universe, and will calm into stillness after a while, and then set in and blow from the opposite quarter. They may tell us, and they do tell us, that the ‘river of the water of life that flows from the Throne of God and of the Lamb’ is lost in the sands of time, like the streams in the great Mongolian plateau. We do not believe that. Everything stands exactly as it always has been in regard to the perennial possession of Christ’s Spirit as the strength and resource of His Church; and the fault, dear friends, lies only here: ‘O Lord, our iniquities testify against us; our backslidings are many; we have sinned against Thee.’

Oh, let me urge upon you, and upon myself, that the first thing which we have to do is prayerfully and patiently and honestly to search after this cause, and not look to superficial trifles such as possible variations and improvements in order and machinery, and polity or creed, or anything else, as the means of changing and bettering the condition of things, but to recognise this as being the one sole cause that hinders-the slackness of our own hold on Christ’s hand, and the feebleness and imperfection of our own spiritual life. Dear brethren, there is no worse sign of the condition of churches than the calm indifference and complacency in the present condition of things which visits very many of us; it is like a deadly malaria wherever it is to be found, and there is no more certain precursor of a blessed change than a widespread dissatisfaction with what we are, and an honest, earnest search after the cause. The sleeper that is restless, and tosses and turns, is near awakening; and the ice that cracks, and crumbles, and groans, and heaves, is on the point of breaking up. When Christian men and women are aroused to this, the startled recognition of how far beneath the ideal-no, I should not say how far beneath, but rather how absolutely opposed to, the ideal-so much of our Christian life and work is, and when further they push the inquiry for the cause, so as to find that it lies in their own sin, then we shall be near the time, yea, the 'set time, to favour Zion.'

III. And so let me point you, in the next place-and but a word or two on that matter-to the consideration that the consciousness of the evil condition and knowledge of its cause leads on to lowly penitence and confession.

I dwell upon that for a moment for one reason mainly. I suppose that it is a very familiar observation with us all that when, by God's mercy, any of us individually, or as communities, are awakened to a sense of our own departure from what He would have us be, and the feebleness of all our Christian work, we are very apt to be led away upon the wrong scent altogether, and instead of seeking improvement and revivification in God's order, we set up an order of our own, which is a great deal more pleasing to our own natural inclinations. For instance, to bring the thing to a practical illustration, suppose I were, after these remarks of mine, as a kind of corollary from them, to ask for volunteers for some new form of Christian work, I believe I should get twenty for one that I should get if I simply said, 'Brethren, let us go together and confess our sins before God, and ask Him not to leave us.' We are always tempted to originate some new kind of work, to manufacture a revival, to begin by bringing together the outcasts into the fold, instead of to begin by trying to deepen our own Christian character, and purifying our own hearts, and getting more and more of the life of God into our own spirits, and then to let the increase from without come as it may. The true law for us to follow is to begin with lowly abasement at His footstool, and when we have purged ourselves from faults and sins in the very act of confessing them, and of shaking them from us, then when we are fit for growth, external growth, we shall get it. But the revival of the Church is not what people fancy it to be so often nowadays, the gathering in of the unconverted into its fold-that is the consequence of the revival. The revival comes by the path of recognition of sin, and confession of sin, and forsaking of sin, and waiting before Him for His blessing and His Spirit. Let me put all that I would say about this matter into the one remark, that the law of the whole process is the old one which was exemplified on the day of Pentecost. 'Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly; gather the people, assemble the elders; let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet; let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar. Yea, the Lord will be zealous for His land, and will pity His people; and I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh.' Brethren, to our knees and to confessions! Let us see to it that we are right in our own inmost hearts.

IV. And so, finally, look at the wonderful way in which in this text of ours the prophet fuses together into one indistinguishable and yet not confused whole, confession, and pleading remonstrance and also the confidence of triumphant prayer.

I cannot touch upon the various points of that as I would gladly do; but I must suggest one or two of them for your consideration. Look at the substance of his petition: 'Do Thou it for Thy name's sake.' 'Leave us not.' That is all he asks. He does not prescribe what is to be done. He does not ask for the taking away of the calamity, he simply asks for the continual presence and the operation of the divine hand, sure that God is in the midst of them, and working all things right. Let us shape our expectations in like fashion, not being careful to discover paths for Him to run in; but contented if we can realise the sweetness and the strength of His calming and purging presence, and willing to leave the manner of His working in His own hand.

Then, look at what the text suggests as pleas with God, and grounds of confidence for ourselves. 'Do Thou it for Thy name's sake, the hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof in time of trouble. Thou art in the midst of us, we are called by Thy name.' There are three grounds upon which we may base our firm confidence. The one is the name-all the ancient manifestations of Thy character, which have been from of old, and remain for our perpetual strength. 'As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of

Hosts.' 'That which is Thy memorial unto all generations pledges Thee to the constant reiteration and reproduction, hour by hour, according to our necessity, of all the might, and the miracles, and the mercies of the past. Do Thou it for Thy name's sake.'

And then Jeremiah turns to the throne of God with another plea-'the hope of Israel'-and thereby fills his mouth with the argument drawn from the fact that the confidence of the Church is fixed upon Him, and that it cannot be that He will disappoint it. 'Because Thou hast given us Thy name, and because Thy name, by Thy grace, has become, through our faith, our hope, Thou art doubly bound-bound by what Thou art, bound by what we expect-to be with us, our strength and our confidence.'

And the final plea is the appeal to the perennial and essential relationship of God to His Church. 'We are called by Thy name'-'we belong to Thee. It were Thy concern and ours that Thy Gospel should spread in the world, and the honour of our Lord should be advanced. Thou hast not surely lost Thy hold of Thine own, or Thy care for Thine own property.' The psalmist said, 'Thou wilt not suffer him that is devoted to Thee to see corruption.' And what his faith felt to be impossible in regard to the bodily life is still more unthinkable in regard to the spiritual. It cannot be that that which belongs to Him should pass and perish. 'We are called by Thy name, and Thou, Lord, art in the midst of us'-not a Samson shorn of his locks; not a wayfaring man turning aside to delay for a night; but the abiding Presence which makes the Church glad.

Dear brethren, calm and confident expectation should be our attitude, and lowly repentance should rise to triumphant believing hope, because God is moving round about us in this day. Thanks be to His name, there is spread through us all an expectation of great things. That expectation brings its own fulfilment, and is always God's way of preparing the path for His own large gifts, like the strange, indefinable attitude of expectation which we know filled the civilised world before the birth of Jesus Christ-like the breath of the morning that springs up before the sun rises, and says, 'The dawn; the dawn,' and dies away. The expectation is the precursor of the gift, and the prayer is the guarantee of the acceptance. Take an illustration. Those great lakes in Central Africa that are said to feed the Nile are filled with melting snows weeks and weeks before the water rises away down in Egypt, and brings fertility across the desert that it makes to glisten with greenness, and to rejoice and blossom as the rose. And so in silence, high up upon the mountains of God, fed by communion with Himself, the expectation rises to a flood-tide ere it flows down through all the channels of Christian organisation and activity, and blesses the valleys below. It is not for us to hurry the work of God, nor spasmodically to manufacture revivals. It is not for us, under the pretence of waiting for Him, to be cold and callous; but it is for us to question ourselves wherefore these things have come upon us, with lowly, penitent confession to turn to God, and ask Him to bless us. Oh, if we were to do this, we should not ask in vain! Let us take the prayer of our context, and say, 'We acknowledge, O Lord, our wickedness, and the iniquity of our fathers; for we have sinned against Thee. Are there any among the vanities of the Gentiles that can cause rain? or can the heavens give showers? art not Thou He, O Lord, our God? Therefore we will wait upon Thee.' Be sure that the old merciful answer will come to us, 'I will pour rivers of water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground; and I will pour My Spirit upon thy seed, and My blessing upon thine offspring.'

11)Jeremiah 17:1

Jeremiah

SIN'S WRITING AND ITS ERASURE

Jer. 17:1. - 2Co. 3:3. - Col. 2:14.

I have put these verses together because they all deal with substantially the same metaphor. The first is part of a prophet's solemn appeal. It describes the sin of the nation as indelible. It is written in two places. First, on their hearts, which reminds us of the promise of the new covenant to be written on the heart. The 'red-leaved tablets of the heart' are like waxen tables on which an iron stylus makes a deep mark, an ineradicable scar. So Judah's sin is, as it were, eaten into their heart, or, if we might so say, tattooed on it. It is also written on the stone horns of the altar, with a diamond which can cut the rock [an illustration of ancient knowledge of the properties of the diamond]. That sounds a strange place for the record of sin to appear, but the image has profound meaning, as we shall see presently.

Then the two New Testament passages deal with other applications of the same metaphor. Christ is, in the first, represented as writing on the hearts of the Corinthians, and in the second, as taking away ‘the handwriting contrary to us.’ The general thought drawn from all is that sin’s writing on men’s hearts is erased by Christ and a new inscription substituted.

I. The handwriting of sin.

Sin committed is indelibly written on the heart of the doer.

‘The heart,’ of course, in Hebrew means more than merely the supposed seat of the affections. It is figuratively the centre of the spiritual life, just as physically it is the centre of the natural. Thoughts and affections, purposes and desires are all included, and out of it are ‘the issues of life,’ the whole outgoings of the being. It is the fountain and source of all the activity of the man, the central unity from which all comes. Taken in this wide sense it is really the whole inner self that is meant, or, as is said in one place, ‘the hidden man of the heart.’ And so the thought in this vigorous metaphor may be otherwise put, that all sin makes indelible marks on the whole inward nature of the man who does it.

Now to begin with, think for a moment of that truth that everything which we do reacts on us the doers.

We seldom think of this. Deeds are done, and we fancy that when done, they are done *with*. They pass, as far as outward seeming goes, and their distinguishable consequences in the outward world, in the vast majority of cases, soon apparently pass. All seems evanescent and irrecoverable as last year’s snows, or the water that flowed over the cataract a century ago. But there is nothing more certain than that all which we do leaves indelible traces on ourselves. The mightiest effect of a man’s actions is on his own inward life. The recoil of the gun is more powerful than the blow from its shot. Our actions strike inwards and there produce their most important effects. The river runs ceaselessly and its waters pass away, but they bring down soil, which is deposited and makes firm land, or perhaps they carry down grains of gold.

This is the true solemnity of life, that in all which we do we are carrying on a double process, influencing others indeed, but influencing ourselves far more.

Consider the illustrations of this law in regard to our sins.

Now the last thing people think of when they hear sermons about ‘sin’ is that what is meant is the things that they are doing every day. I can only ask you to try to remember, while I speak, that I mean those little acts of temper, or triflings with truth, or yieldings to passion or anger, or indulgence in sensuality, and above all, the living without God, to which we are all prone.

> [a] All wrong-doing makes indelible marks on character. It makes its own repetition easier. Habit strengthens inclination. Peter found denying his Lord three times easier than doing it once. It weakens resistance. In going downhill the first step is the only one that needs an effort; gravity will do the rest.

It drags after it a tendency to other evil. All wrong things have so much in common that they lead on to one another. A man with only one vice is a rare phenomenon. Satan sends his apostles forth two by two. Sins hunt in couples, or more usually in packs, like wolves, only now and then do they prey alone like lions. Small thieves open windows for greater ones. It requires continually increasing draughts, like indulgence in stimulants. The palate demands cayenne tomorrow, if it has had black pepper to-day.

So, whatever else we do by our acts, we are making our own characters, either steadily depraving or steadily improving them. There will come a slight slow change, almost unnoticed but most certain, as a dim film will creep over the peach, robbing it of all its bloom, or some microscopic growth will steal across a clearly cut inscription, or a breath of mist will dim a polished steel mirror.

> [b] All wrong-doing writes indelible records on the memory, that awful and mysterious power of recalling past things out of the oblivion in which they seem to lie. How solemn and miserable it is to defile it with the pictures of things evil! Many a man in his later years has tried to 'turn over a new leaf,' and has never been able to get the filth out of his memory, for it has been printed on the old page in such strong colours that it shines through. I beseech you all, and especially you young people, to keep yourselves 'innocent of much transgression,' and 'simple concerning evil'-to make your memories like an illuminated missal with fair saints and calm angels bordering the holy words, and not an *Illustrated* Police News. Probably there is no real oblivion. Each act sinks in as if forgotten, gets overlaid with a multitude of others, but it is there, and memory will one day bring it to us.

And all sin pollutes the imagination. It is a miserable thing to have one's mind full of ugly foul forms painted on the inner walls of our chamber of imagery, like the hideous figures in some heathen temple, where gods of lust and murder look out from every inch of space on the walls.

> [c] All wrong-doing writes indelible records on the conscience. It does so partly by sophisticating it-the sensibility to right and wrong being weakened by every evil act, as a cold in the head takes away the sense of smell. It brings on colour-blindness to some extent. One does not know how far one may go towards 'Evil! be thou my good'-or how far towards incapacity of distinguishing evil. But at all events the tendency of each sin is in that direction. So conscience may become seared, though perhaps never so completely as that there are no intervals when it speaks. It may long lie dormant, as Vesuvius did, till great trees grow on the floor of the crater, but all the while the communication with the central fires is open, and one day they will burst out.

The writing may be with invisible ink, but it will be legible one day. So, then, all this solemn writing on the heart is done by ourselves. What are you writing? There is a presumption in it of a future retribution, when you will have to read your autobiography, with clearer light and power of judging yourselves. At any rate there is retribution now, which is described by many metaphors, such as sowing and reaping, drinking as we have brewed, and others-but this one of indelible writing is not the least striking.

Sin is graven deep on sinful men’s worship.

The metaphor here is striking and not altogether clear. The question rises whether the altars are idolatrous altars, or Jehovah’s. If the former, the expression may mean simply that the Jews’ idolatry, which was their sin, was conspicuously displayed in these altars, and had, as it were, its most flagrant record in their sacrifices. The altar was the centre point of all heathen and Old Testament worship, and altars built by sinners were the most conspicuous evidences of their sins.

So the meaning would be that men’s sin shapes and culminates in their religion; and that is very true, and explains many of the profanations and abominations of heathenism, and much of the formal worship of so-called Christianity.

For instance, a popular religion which is a mere Deism, a kind of vague belief in a providence, and in a future state where everybody is happy, is but the product of men’s sin, striking out of Christianity all which their sin makes unwelcome in it. The justice of God, punishment, sinfulness of sin, high moral tone, are all gone. And the very horns of their altars are marked with the signs of the worshippers’ sin.

But the ‘altars’ may be God’s altars, and then another idea will come in. The horns of the altar were the places where the blood of the sacrifice was smeared, as token of its offering to God. They were then a part of the ritual of propitiation. They had, no doubt, the same meaning in the heathen ritual. And so regarded, the metaphor means that a sense of the reality of sin shapes sacrificial religion.

There can be no doubt that a very real conviction of sin lies at the foundation of much, if not all, of the system of sacrifices. And it is a question well worth considering whether a conviction so widespread is not valid, and whether we should not see in it the expression of a true human need which no mere culture, or the like, will supply.

At all events, altars stand as witnesses to the consciousness of sin. And the same thought may be applied to much of the popular religion of this day. It may be ineffectual and shallow but it bears witness to a consciousness of evil. So its existence may be used in order to urge profounder realisation of evil on men. You come to worship, you join in confessions, you say 'miserable sinners'-do you mean anything by it? If all that be true, should it not produce a deeper impression on you?

But another way of regarding the metaphor is this. The horns of the altar were to be touched with the blood of propitiation. But look! the blood flows down, and after it has trickled away, there, deep carven on the horns, still appears the sin, *i.e.* the sin is not expiated by the sinner's sacrifice. Jeremiah is then echoing Isaiah's word, 'Bring no more vain oblations.' The picture gives very strikingly the hopelessness, so far as men are concerned, of any attempt to blot out this record. It is like the rock-cut cartouches of Egypt on which time seems to have no effect. There they abide deep for ever. Nothing that we can do can efface them. 'What I have written, I have written.' Pen-knives and detergents that we can use are all in vain.

II. Sin's writing may be erased, and another put in its place.

The work of Christ, made ours by faith, blots it out.

> [a] Its influence on conscience and the sense of guilt. The accusations of conscience are silenced. A red line is drawn across the indictment, or, as Colossians has it, it is 'nailed to the cross.' There is power in His death to set us free from the debt we owe.
>
> [b] Its influence on memory. Christ does not bring oblivion, but yet takes away the remorse of remembrance. Faith in Christ makes memory no longer a record which we blush to turn over, or upon which we gloat with imaginative delight in guilty pleasures past, but a record of our shortcomings that humbles us with a penitence which is not pain, but serves as a beacon and warning for the time to come. He who has a clear beam of memory on his backward track, and a bright light of hope on his forward one, will steer right.
>
> [c] Its influence on character.

We attain new hopes and tastes. 'We become epistles of Christ known and read of all men,' like palimpsests, Homer or Ovid written over with the New Testament gospels or epistles.

Christ's work is twofold, erasure and rewriting. For the one, 'I will blot out as a cloud their transgressions.' None but He can remove these. For the other, 'I will put My law into their minds and will write it on their hearts.' He can impress all holy desires on, and can put His great love and His mighty spirit into, our hearts.

So give your hearts to Him. They are all scrawled over with hideous and wicked writing that has sunk deep into their substance. Graven as if on rock are your sins in your character. Your worship and sacrifices will not remove them, but Jesus Christ can. He died that you might be forgiven, He lives that you may be purified. Trust yourself to Him, and lean all your sinfulness on His atonement and sanctifying power, and the foul words and bad thoughts that have been scored so deep into your nature will be erased, and His own hand will trace on the page, poor and thin though it be, which has been whitened by His blood, the fair letters and shapes of His own likeness. Do not let your hearts be the devil's copybooks for all evil things to scrawl their names there, as boys do on the walls, but spread them before Him, and ask Him to make them clean and write upon them His new name, indicating that you now belong to another, as a new owner writes his name on a book that he has bought.

12)Jeremiah 17:6

Jeremiah

THE HEATH IN THE DESERT AND THE TREE BY THE RIVER

Jer. 17:6, Jer. 17:8.

The prophet here puts before us two highly finished pictures. In the one, the hot desert stretches on all sides. The fierce 'sunbeams like swords' slay every green thing. The salt particles in the soil glitter in the light. No living creature breaks the melancholy solitude. It is a 'waste land where no one came, or hath come since the making of the world.' Here and there a stunted, grey, prickly shrub struggles to live, and just manages not to die. But it has no grace of leaf, nor profitableness of fruit; and it only serves to make the desolation more desolate.

The other carries us to some brimming river, where everything lives because water has come. The pictures are coloured by Eastern experience. For in those lands more than beneath our humid skies and weaker sunshine, the presence or absence of running water makes the difference between barrenness and fertility. Dipping their boughs in the sparkling current, and driving their roots through the moist soil, the bordering trees lift aloft their pride of foliage and bear fruits in their season.

So, says Jeremiah, the two pictures represent two sets of men; the one, he who diverts from their true object his heart-capacities of love and trust, and clings to creatures and to men, 'making flesh his arm and departing from the living God'; the other, he who leans the whole weight of his needs and cares and sins and sorrows upon God. We can make choice of which shall be the object of our trust, and according as we choose the one or the other, the experience of these vivid pictures will be ours.

Let me briefly, then, draw out the points of contrast in these two companion sketches.

I. The one is in the desert, the other by the river.

Underneath the pictures there lies this thought, that the direction of a man's trust determines the whole cast of his life, because it determines, as it were, the soil in which he grows. We can alter our habitat. The plant is fixed; but 'I saw men as trees-yes! but as 'trees walking.' We can walk, and can settle where we shall be rooted and whence we shall draw our inspiration, our confidence, our security. The man that chooses-for it is a matter of choice-to trust in any creature thereby wills, though he does not know it, that he shall dwell in a 'salt land and not inhabited.' The man that chooses to cast his whole self into the arms of God, and in a paroxysm of self-distrust to realise the divine helpfulness and presence, that man will soon know that he is 'planted by the river.'

Now, the poor, little dusty shrub in the desert, whose very leaves have been modified into prickles, is fit for the desert, and is as much at home there as are the willows by the water-courses with their lush vegetation in their moist bed. But if a *man* makes that fatal choice which so-many of us are making, of shutting out God from his confidence and his love, and squandering these upon earth and upon creatures, he is as fatally out of harmony with the place which he has chosen for himself, and as much away from his natural soil, as a tropical plant would be amongst the snows of Arctic glaciers, or a water-lily in the Sahara.

Considering all that I am and need, what and where is my true home and the soil in which I can grow securely, and fear no evil? Brethren, there is only one answer to that question. The very make of a man's spirit points to God, and to God alone, as the natural place for him to root and grow in. You, I, the poorest and humblest of men, will never be right, never feel that we are in our native soil, and compassed with the appropriate surroundings, until we have laid our hearts and our hands on the breast of God, and rested ourselves on Him. Not more surely do gills and fins proclaim that the creature that has them is meant to roam through the boundless ocean, nor the anatomy and wings of the bird witness more plainly to its destination to soar in the open heavens than the make of your spirits testifies that God, and none less or lower, is your portion. We are built for God, and unless we recognise and act upon that conviction, we are like the prickly shrub in the desert, whatever good may be around us; and if we do recognise and act upon it, whatever parched ground may seem to stretch on all sides, there will be soil moist enough for us to draw refreshment and vitality from it.

If that be so, brethren, what insanity the lives of multitudes of us are! As well might bees try to suck honey from a vase of wax flowers as we to draw what we need from creatures, from ourselves, from visible and material things.

What would you business men think of some one who went and sold out all his stock of Government or other sound securities, and then flung the proceeds down a hole in South Africa, out of which no gold will ever come? He would be about as wise as are the people who fancy that these hearts of theirs will ever be at home except they find a home in God.

Where else will you find love that will never fail, nor change, nor die? Where else will you find an object for the intellect that will yield inexhaustible material of contemplation and delight? Where else infallible direction for the will? Where else shall weakness find unfailing strength, or sorrow, adequate consolation, or hope, certain fulfilment, or fear, a safe hiding-place? Nowhere besides. Oh! then, brethren, do, I beseech you, turn away your heart's confidence and love from earth and creatures; for until the roots of your life go down into God, and you draw your life from Him, you are not in your right soil.

II. The one can take in no real good; the other can fear no evil.

One verse of our text says, 'He shall not see when good cometh'; the other one, according to our Authorised Version, 'He shall not see when heat cometh.' But a very slight alteration of one word in the original gives a better reading, which is adopted in the Revised Version, where we have, 'and shall not fear when heat cometh.' That alteration is obviously correct, because there follows immediately a parallel clause, 'and shall not be careful'-or anxious-'in the year of drought.' In both these clauses the metaphor of the tree is a little let go; and the man who is signified by it comes rather more to the front than in the remainder of the picture. But that is quite natural.

So look at these two simple thoughts for a moment. He whose trust is set upon creatures is thereby disabled from recognising what is his highest good. His judgment is perverted. *There* is the explanation of the fact that men are contented with the partial and evanescent blessedness that may be drawn from human loves and companionship and material things. It is because they have gone blind, and the false direction of their confidence, has put out their eyes. And if any of my hearers are living careless about God, and all that comes from Him, and perfectly contented with that which they find in this visible, diurnal sphere, that is not because they have the good which they need, but because they do not know that good when they see it, and have lost the power of discerning what is really for their benefit and blessedness.

There is nothing sadder in this world than the conspiracy into which men seem to have entered to ignore the highest good, and to profess themselves contented with the lowest. I remember a rough parable of Luther's-the roughness of which may be pardoned for the force and vividness of it-which bears on this matter. He tells how a company of swine were offered all manner of dainty and refined foods, and how, with a unanimous swinish grunt, they answered that they preferred the warm, reeking 'grains' from the mash-tub. The illustration is coarse, but it is not an unfair representation of the choice that some of us are making.

'He cannot see when good cometh.' God comes, and I would rather have some more money. God comes, and I prefer some woman's love. God comes, and I would rather have a prosperous business. God comes, and I prefer beer. So I might go the whole round. The man that cannot see good when it is there before his face, because the false direction of his confidence has blinded his eyes, cannot open his heart to it. It comes, but it does not come in. It surrounds him, but it does not enter into him. You are plunged, as it were, in a sea of possible felicity, which will be yours if your heart's direction is towards God, and the surrounding ocean of blessedness has as little power to fill your heart as the sea has to enter some hermetically sealed flask, dropped into the middle of the Atlantic. 'He cannot see when good cometh.' Blind, blind, blind! are multitudes of us.

Turn to the other side. 'He shall not fear when heat cometh,' which is evil in those Eastern lands, 'and shall not be careful in the year of drought.' The tree, that sends its roots towards a river that never fails, does not suffer when all the land is parched. The man who has driven his roots into God, and is drawing from that deep source what is needful for his life and fertility, has no occasion to dread any evil, nor to gnaw his heart with anxiety as to what he is to do in parched days. Troubles may come, but they do not go deeper than the surface. It may be all cracked and caked and dry, 'a thirsty land where no water is,' and yet deep down there may be moisture and coolness.

Faith, which is trust, and fear are opposite poles. If a man has the one, he can scarcely have the other in vigorous operation. He that has his trust set upon God does not need to dread anything except the weakening or the paralysing of that trust; for so long as it lasts it is a talisman which changes evil into good, the true philosopher's stone which transmutes the baser metals into gold; and, so long as it lasts, God's shield is round him and no evil can befall him.

Brethren, if our trust is in God, it is unworthy of it and of us to fear, for all things are His, and there is no evil in evil as men call it, so long as it does not draw away our hearts from our Father and our Hope. Therefore, he that fears let him trust; he that trusts let him not be afraid. He that sets his heart and anchors his hopes of safety on any except God, let him be afraid, for he is in a very stern world, and if he is not fearful he is a fool.

So the direction of our trust, if it is right, shuts all real evil out from us, and if it is wrong, shuts us out from all real good.

III. The one is bare, the other clothed with the beauty of foliage.

The word which is translated 'heat' has a close connection with, if it does not literally mean, 'naked' or 'bare.' Probably, as I have said, it designates some inconspicuously leaved desert shrub, the particular species not being ascertainable or a matter of any consequence. Leaves, in Scripture, have a recognised symbolical meaning. 'Nothing but leaves' in the story of the fig-tree meant only beautiful outward appearance, with no corresponding outcome of goodness of heart, in the shape of fruit. So I may venture here to draw a distinction between leafage and fruit, and say that the one points rather to a man's character and conduct as lovely in appearance, and in the other as morally good and profitable.

This is the lesson of these two clauses-misdirected confidence in creatures strips a man of much beauty of character, and true faith in God adorns a soul with a leafy vesture of loveliness. Now, I have no doubt that there start up in your minds at once two objections to that statement: first, that a great many godless men do present fair and attractive features of character; and secondly, that a great many Christian men do not. I admit both things frankly, and yet I say that, for the highest good, the perfect crowning beauty of any human character, this is needed, that it should cling to God. 'Whatsoever things are lovely and of good report' lack their supreme excellence, the diamond on the top of the royal crown, the glittering gold on the summit of the campanile, unless there is in them a distinct reference to God.

I believe that I am speaking to some who would not profess themselves to be religious men, and who yet are truly desirous of cultivating in their character the Fair and the Good. To them I would venture to say- brethren, you will never be so completely, so refinedly, so truly, graceful as you might be, unless the roots of your character 'are hid with Christ in God.'

'A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine,'

said good old George Herbert. And any act, however humble, on which the light from God falls, will gleam with a lustre else unattainable, like some piece of broken glass in the furrows of a ploughed field.

Sure I am that if we Christian people had a deeper faith, we should have fairer lives. And I beseech you, my fellow-believers in Jesus Christ, not to supply the other side with arguments against Christianity, by showing that it is possible for a man to say and to suppose that he sets his heart on God, and yet to bear but little leafage of beauty or grace of character. Goodness is beauty; beauty is goodness. Both are to be secured by communion and union with Him who is fairer than the children of men. Dip your roots into the fountain of life-it is the fountain of beauty as well as of life, and your lives will be green.

IV. Lastly, the one is sterile, the other fruitful.

I admit, as before, that this statement often seems to be contradicted, both by the good works of godless men, and by the bad works of godly ones. But for all that, I would urge you to consider that the only works of men worth calling 'fruit,' if regard is had to their capacities, relations, and obligations, are those done as the outcome and consequence of hearts trusting in the Lord. The rest of the man's activities may be busy and multiplied, and, from the point of view of a godless morality, many may be fair and good; but if we think of him as being destined, as his chief end, 'to glorify God, and [so] to enjoy Him for ever,' what correspondence between such a creature and acts that are done without reference to God can there ever be? They are not worth calling 'fruit.' At the most they are 'wild grapes,' and there comes a time when they will be tested and the axe laid to the root of the trees, and these imperfect deeds will shrivel up and disappear.

Trust will certainly be fruitful. In so saying we are upon Christian ground, which declares that the outcome of faith is conduct in conformity with the will of Him in whom we trust, and that the productive principle of all good in man is confidence in God manifest to us in Jesus Christ.

So we have not to begin with work; we have to begin with character. ‘Make the tree good,’ and its fruit will be good. Faith will give power to bring forth such fruit; and faith will set agoing the motive of love which will produce it. Thus, dear brethren, we come back to this-the prime thing about a man is the direction which his trust takes. Is it to God? Then the tree is good; and its fruit will be good too. If you will trust yourselves to ‘God manifest in the flesh,’ to Jesus Christ and His work for you and in you, then you will be as if ‘planted by the rivers of water,’ you will be able to receive into yourselves, and will receive, all good, and be masters of all evil, will exhibit graces of character else impossible, and will bring forth ‘fruit that shall remain.’ Separated from Him we are nothing, and can bring forth nothing that will stand the light of that last moment.

Brother, turn your trust to that dear Lord, and then you will have your ‘fruit unto holiness, and the end shall be everlasting life,’ when the transplanting season comes, and they that have been ‘planted in the house of the Lord’ below shall ‘flourish in the courts of our God’ above, and grow more green and fruitful, beside the ‘river of the water of life that proceedeth from the throne of God and of the Lamb.’

13)Jeremiah 17:8

Jeremiah

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Turn to the other side. 'He shall not fear when heat cometh,' which is evil in those Eastern lands, 'and shall not be careful in the year of drought.' The tree, that sends its roots towards a river that never fails, does not suffer when all the land is parched. The man who has driven his roots into God, and is drawing from that deep source what is needful for his life and fertility, has no occasion to dread any evil, nor to gnaw his heart with anxiety as to what he is to do in parched days. Troubles may come, but they do not go deeper than the surface. It may be all cracked and caked and dry, 'a thirsty land where no water is,' and yet deep down there may be moisture and coolness.

Faith, which is trust, and fear are opposite poles. If a man has the one, he can scarcely have the other in vigorous operation. He that has his trust set upon God does not need to dread anything except the weakening or the paralysing of that trust; for so long as it lasts it is a talisman which changes evil into good, the true philosopher's stone which transmutes the baser metals into gold; and, so long as it lasts, God's shield is round him and no evil can befall him.

Brethren, if our trust is in God, it is unworthy of it and of us to fear, for all things are His, and there is no evil in evil as men call it, so long as it does not draw away our hearts from our Father and our Hope. Therefore, he that fears let him trust; he that trusts let him not be afraid. He that sets his heart and anchors his hopes of safety on any except God, let him be afraid, for he is in a very stern world, and if he is not fearful he is a fool.

So the direction of our trust, if it is right, shuts all real evil out from us, and if it is wrong, shuts us out from all real good.

III. The one is bare, the other clothed with the beauty of foliage.

The word which is translated 'heat' has a close connection with, if it does not literally mean, 'naked' or 'bare.' Probably, as I have said, it designates some inconspicuously leaved desert shrub, the particular species not being ascertainable or a matter of any consequence. Leaves, in Scripture, have a recognised symbolical meaning. 'Nothing but leaves' in the story of the fig-tree meant only beautiful outward appearance, with no corresponding outcome of goodness of heart, in the shape of fruit. So I may venture here to draw a distinction between leafage and fruit, and say that the one points rather to a man's character and conduct as lovely in appearance, and in the other as morally good and profitable.

This is the lesson of these two clauses-misdirected confidence in creatures strips a man of much beauty of character, and true faith in God adorns a soul with a leafy vesture of loveliness. Now, I have no doubt that there start up in your minds at once two objections to that statement: first, that a great many godless men do present fair and attractive features of character; and secondly, that a great many Christian men do not. I admit both things frankly, and yet I say that, for the highest good, the perfect crowning beauty of any human character, this is needed, that it should cling to God. 'Whatsoever things are lovely and of good report' lack their supreme excellence, the diamond on the top of the royal crown, the glittering gold on the summit of the campanile, unless there is in them a distinct reference to God.

I believe that I am speaking to some who would not profess themselves to be religious men, and who yet are truly desirous of cultivating in their character the Fair and the Good. To them I would venture to say- brethren, you will never be so completely, so refinedly, so truly, graceful as you might be, unless the roots of your character 'are hid with Christ in God.'

'A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine,'

said good old George Herbert. And any act, however humble, on which the light from God falls, will gleam with a lustre else unattainable, like some piece of broken glass in the furrows of a ploughed field.

Sure I am that if we Christian people had a deeper faith, we should have fairer lives. And I beseech you, my fellow-believers in Jesus Christ, not to supply the other side with arguments against Christianity, by showing that it is possible for a man to say and to suppose that he sets his heart on God, and yet to bear but little leafage of beauty or grace of character. Goodness is beauty; beauty is goodness. Both are to be secured by communion and union with Him who is fairer than the children of men. Dip your roots into the fountain of life-it is the fountain of beauty as well as of life, and your lives will be green.

IV. Lastly, the one is sterile, the other fruitful.

I admit, as before, that this statement often seems to be contradicted, both by the good works of godless men, and by the bad works of godly ones. But for all that, I would urge you to consider that the only works of men worth calling 'fruit,' if regard is had to their capacities, relations, and obligations, are those done as the outcome and consequence of hearts trusting in the Lord. The rest of the man's activities may be busy and multiplied, and, from the point of view of a godless morality, many may be fair and good; but if we think of him as being destined, as his chief end, 'to glorify God, and [so] to enjoy Him for ever,' what correspondence between such a creature and acts that are done without reference to God can there ever be? They are not worth calling ‘fruit.’ At the most they are ‘wild grapes,’ and there comes a time when they will be tested and the axe laid to the root of the trees, and these imperfect deeds will shrivel up and disappear.

Trust will certainly be fruitful. In so saying we are upon Christian ground, which declares that the outcome of faith is conduct in conformity with the will of Him in whom we trust, and that the productive principle of all good in man is confidence in God manifest to us in Jesus Christ.

So we have not to begin with work; we have to begin with character. ‘Make the tree good,’ and its fruit will be good. Faith will give power to bring forth such fruit; and faith will set agoing the motive of love which will produce it. Thus, dear brethren, we come back to this-the prime thing about a man is the direction which his trust takes. Is it to God? Then the tree is good; and its fruit will be good too. If you will trust yourselves to ‘God manifest in the flesh,’ to Jesus Christ and His work for you and in you, then you will be as if ‘planted by the rivers of water,’ you will be able to receive into yourselves, and will receive, all good, and be masters of all evil, will exhibit graces of character else impossible, and will bring forth ‘fruit that shall remain.’ Separated from Him we are nothing, and can bring forth nothing that will stand the light of that last moment.

Brother, turn your trust to that dear Lord, and then you will have your ‘fruit unto holiness, and the end shall be everlasting life,’ when the transplanting season comes, and they that have been ‘planted in the house of the Lord’ below shall ‘flourish in the courts of our God’ above, and grow more green and fruitful, beside the ‘river of the water of life that proceedeth from the throne of God and of the Lamb.’

14)Jeremiah 17:12

Jeremiah

A SOUL GAZING ON GOD

Jer. 17:12.

I must begin by a word or two of explanation as to the language of this passage. The word ‘is’ is a supplement, and most probably it ought to be omitted, and the verse treated as being, not a statement, but a series of exclamations. The next verse runs thus, ‘O Lord! the hope of Israel, all that forsake Thee shall be ashamed’; and the most natural and forcible understanding of the words of my text is reached by connecting them with these following clauses: ‘O Lord! the hope of Israel,’ and, regarding the whole as one long exclamation of adoring contemplation, ‘A glorious throne,’ or ‘*Thou* glorious throne, high from the beginning; the place of our sanctuary, O Lord! the hope of Israel.’

I. If we look at the words so, we have here, to begin with, a wonderful vision of what God is.

‘A glorious throne,’ or, as the original has it, ‘a throne of glory,’- which is not quite the same thing-’high from the beginning, the place of our sanctuary.’ There are three clauses. Now they all seem to me to have reference to the Temple in Jerusalem, which is taken, by a very natural figure of speech, as a kind of suggestive description of Him who is worshipped there. There is the same kind of use of the name of a place to stand for the person who occupies or inhabits it, in many familiar phrases. For instance, ‘The Sublime Porte’ is properly the name of a lofty gateway which belonged to the palace in Constantinople, and so has come to mean the Turkish Government if Government it can be called. So we talk of the ‘Papal See’ having done this or that, and scarcely remember that a ‘see’ is a bishop’s seat, or, again, the decision of ‘the Chair’ is final in the House of Commons. Or, if you will accept a purely municipal parallel, if any one were told that ‘the Town Hall’ had issued a certain order, he would know that our authorities, the Mayor and Corporation, had decreed so and so. So, in precisely the same way here, the prophet takes the outward facts of the Temple as symbolising great and blessed spiritual thoughts of the God that filled the Temple with His own lustre.

‘A glorious throne’-that is grand, but that is not what Jeremiah means-’A throne of glory’ is the true rendering. And to what does that refer? Now, in the greater number of cases, you will find that in the Old Testament, where ‘glory’ is ascribed to God, the word has a very distinct and specific meaning, viz. the light which was afterwards called the ‘Shekinah,’ and dwelt between the cherubim, and was the symbol of the divine presence and the assurance that that presence would be self-revealing and would manifest Himself to His people. So here the throne on which glory rests is what we call the *mercy-seat* within the veil, where, above the propitiatory table on which once a year the High Priest sprinkled the blood of sacrifice, and beneath which were shut up the tables of the covenant which constituted the bond between God and Israel, shone the Light in the midst of the darkness of the enclosed inner shrine, the token of the divine presence. The throned glory, the glory that reigns and rules as King in Israel, is the idea of the words before us. It is the same throne that a later writer in the New Testament speaks of when he says, ‘Let us come boldly to the Throne of Grace.’ For that light of a manifested divine presence was no malign lustre that blinded or slew those who gazed upon it, but though no eye but that of the High Priest dared of old to look, yet he, the representative and, as it were, the concentration of the collective Israel, could stand, unshrinking and unharmed, before that piercing light, because he bore in his hand the blood of sacrifice and sprinkled it on the mercy-seat. So was it of old, but now we all can draw near, through the rent veil, and wall rejoicingly in the light of the Lord. His glory is grace; His grace is glory.

This, then, is the first of Jeremiah’s great thoughts of God, and it means-’The Lord God omnipotent reigneth,’ there is none else but He, and His will runs authoritative and supreme into all corners of the universe. But it is ‘glory’ that is throned. That is equivalent to the declaration that our God has never spoken in secret, in the dark places of the earth, nor said to any seeking heart, ‘Seek ye My face in vain.’ For the light which shone in that Holy Place as His symbol, had for its message to Israel the great thought that, as the sun pours out its lustre into all the corners of its system, so He, by the self-communication which is inherent in His very nature, manifests Himself to every gazing eye, and is a God who is Light, ‘and in whom is no darkness at all.’

But reigning glory is also redeeming grace. For the light of the bright cloud, which is the glory of the Lord, shines still, with no thunder in its depths, nor tempests in its bosom, above the mercy-seat, where spreads the blood of sprinkling by which Israel’s sins are all taken away. Well may the prophet lift up his heart in adoring wonder, and translate the outward symbol into this great word, ‘The throne of glory; Jehovah, the hope of Israel.’

Then the next clause is, I think, equally intelligible by the same process of interpretation-’High from the beginning.’ It was a piece of the patriotic exaggeration of Israel’s prophets and psalmists that they made much of the little hill upon which the Temple was set. We read of the ‘hill of the Lord’s house’ being ‘exalted above the tops of the mountains.’ We read of it being a high hill, ‘as the hill of Bashan.’ And though to the eye of sense it is a very modest elevation, to the eye of faith it was symbolical of much. Jeremiah felt it to be a material type, both of the elevation and of the stable duration of the God whom he would commend to Israel’s and to all men’s trust. ‘High from the beginning,’ separated from all creatural limitation and lowness, He whose name is the Most High, and on whose level no other being can stand, towers above the lowness of the loftiest creature, and from that inaccessible height He sends down His voice, like the trumpet from amidst the darkness of Sinai, proclaiming, ‘I am God, and there is none beside Me.’ Yet while thus ‘holy’-that is, separate from creatures-He makes communion with Himself possible to us, and draws near to us in Christ, that we in Christ may be made nigh to Him.

And the loftiness involves, necessarily, timeless and changeless Being; so that we can turn to Him, and feel Him to be ‘the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.’ No words are needed, and no human words are anything but tawdry attempts to elaborate, which only result in weakening, these two great thoughts. ‘High-from the beginning.’

The last of this series of symbols, even more plainly than the other two, refers originally to the Temple upon the hill of Zion; and symbolically, to the God who filled the Temple. He is ‘the place of our sanctuary.’ That is as though the prophet would point, as the wonderful climax of all, to the fact that He of whom the former things were true should yet be accessible to our worship; that, if I might so say, our feet could tread the courts of the great Temple; and we draw near to Him who is so far above the loftiest, and separate from all the magnificences which Himself has made, and who yet is ‘our sanctuary,’ and accessible to our worship.

Ay! and more than that-'Lord! Thou hast been our *dwelling-place* in all generations.' In old days the Temple was more than a place of worship. It was a place where a man coming had, according to ancient custom, guest rights with God; and if he came into the Temple of the Most High as to an asylum, he dwelt there safe and secure from avengers or foes.

'The place of our sanctuary,' then, declares that God Himself, like some ancestral dwelling-place in which generation after generation of fathers and children have abode, whence they have been carried, and where their children still live, is to all generations their home and their fortress. The place of our sanctuary implies access to the inaccessibly High, communion with the infinitely Separate, security and abode in God Himself. He that dwelleth in God dwelleth in peace. These, then, are the points of the prophet's vision of God.

II. Note, further, the soul rapt in meditation and this vision of God.

To me, this long-drawn-out series of linked clauses without grammatical connection, this succession of adoring exclamations of rapture, wonder, and praise, is very striking. It suggests the manner in which we should vivify all our thoughts of God, by turning them into material for devout reverence; awe-struck, considering meditation. There is nothing told us in the Bible about God simply in order that we may know it. It is all meant to be fuel to the fire of our divine affection; to kindle in us the sentiments of faith and love and rapturous adoration. It is easy to know the theology of the Old and the New Testaments, and a man may rattle over the catalogue of the divine 'attributes,' as they are called, with perfect accuracy, and never be a hair the better for knowing all of them. So I urge, on you and on myself, the necessity of warming our thoughts and kindling our conceptions of what God is until they melt us into fluidity and adoration and love.

I believe that there are few things which we Christian people more lack in this generation, and by the lack of which we suffer more, than the comparative decay of the good old habit of frequent and patient meditation on the things that we most surely believe. We are so busy in adding to our stock of knowledge, in following out to their latest consequence the logical effects of our Christianity, and in defending it, or seeking to be familiar with the defences, against modern assaults, or in practical work on its behalf, that the last thing that a great many of us do is to feed upon the truth which we know already. We should be like ruminant animals who first crop the grass-which, being interpreted, means, get Scripture truth into our heads-and then chew the cud, which being interpreted is, then put these truths through a second process by meditation on them, so that they may turn into nourishment and make flesh. ‘He that eateth Me,’ said Jesus Christ [and He used there the word which is specially applied to rumination], ‘shall live by Me.’ It does us no good to know that God is ‘the Throne of Glory, high from the beginning, the place of our sanctuary,’ unless we turn theology into devotion by meditation upon it. ‘Suffer the word of exhortation ‘-in busy, great communities like ours, where we are all driven so hard, there is need for some voices sometimes to be lifted up in pressing upon Christian people the duty of quiet rumination upon the truths that they have.

III. We may see in our text, further, the meditative soul going out to grasp God thus revealed, as its portion and hope.

As I have already said, the text is best understood as part of a series of exclamations which extends into the following verse. If we take account of the whole series, and regard the subsequent part of it as led up to, by the part which is our text, we get an important thought as to what should be the outcome of the truths concerning God, and of our meditative contemplation of them.

My relation to these truths is not exhausted even when I have meditated upon them, and they have touched me into a rapture of devotion. I can conceive that to have been done, and yet the next necessary step not to have been taken. What is that step? The next verse tells us, when it goes on to exclaim, ‘O Lord! *the hope of Israel*.’ I must cast myself upon Him by faith as my only hope, and turn away from all other confidences which are vain and impotent. So we are back upon that familiar Christian ground, that the bond which knits a man to God, and by which all that God is becomes that man’s personal property, and available for the security and the shaping of his life, is the simple flinging of himself into God’s arms, in sure and certain trust. Then, every one of these characteristics of which I have been speaking will contribute its own special part to the serenity, the security, the godlikeness, the blessedness, the righteousness, the strength of the man who thus trusts.

But such confidence which makes all these things my own possessions, which makes Him ‘a throne of glory,’ to which I have access; which makes Him a place in which I dwell by this exercise of personal faith; which makes Him my hope, has for its other side the turning away from all other grounds of confidence and security. The subsequent context tells us how wise it is thus to turn away, and what folly it is to make anything else our hope except that ‘throne of glory.’ ‘They that depart from Me shall be written in the earth,’ because ‘they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters.’ If we say, ‘O Lord! Thou art my hope,’ we shall have the ‘anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, which entereth within the veil,’ and fixes on Him who is within it, the throned Grace between the cherubim, our Brother and our Hope. So we may dwell in God, and from the secure height of our house look down serenely on impotent foes, and never know the bitterness of vain hopes, nor remove from the safe asylum of our home in God.

15)Jeremiah 17:13

Jeremiah

TWO LISTS OF NAMES

Jer. 17:13. - Luk. 10:20.

A name written on earth implies that the bearer of the name belongs to earth, and it also secondarily suggests that the inscription lasts but for a little while. Contrariwise, a name written in heaven implies that its bearer belongs to heaven, and that the inscription will abide.

We find running throughout Scripture the metaphor of books in which men’s names are written. Moses thought of a book which God has written, and in which his name was enrolled. A psalmist speaks of the ‘book of the living,’ and Isaiah of those who are ‘written among the living in Jerusalem.’ Ezekiel threatens the prophets who speak lies in Jehovah’s name that they ‘shall not be written in the writing of the house of Israel.’ The Apocalypse has many references to the book which is designated as ‘the Lamb’s book of life,’ and which is opened at the final judgment along with the books in which each man’s life-history is written, and only ‘they who are written in the Lamb’s book of life’ enter into the city that comes down out of heaven.

I. The principle on which the two lists are made up.

It is commonly supposed that the idea of unconditional predestination is implied in the writing of the names in the book of life. There is nothing in the figure itself to lead to that, and the text from Jeremiah suggests, on the contrary, that the voluntary attitude of men to God determines their being or not being inscribed in the book of heaven, since it is ‘they who depart from God’ whose ‘names are written on earth.’

Then, since in the New Testament the book of life is called ‘the Lamb’s,’ we are led to think of Christ as writing in it, and hence of our faith in Him as being the condition of enrolling our names.

II. The significance of the lists.

They are lists of the living and of the dead.

True life is in fellowship with God. The other is the register of the burials in a graveyard.

They are lists of the citizens of two cities.

The idea is that the one class have relations and affinities with the celestial, are ‘fellow-citizens with the saints,’ and have heaven as their metropolis, their mother city. Therefore they are but as aliens here, and should not wish to be naturalised. The other class are citizens of the earthly, belonging to the present, with all their thoughts and desires bounded by this visible diurnal sphere.

They are lists of those who shall be forgotten, and their works annihilated, and of those who shall be remembered and their work crowned.

The names written on earth are swiftly obliterated, like a child’s scrawl on the sand which is washed away by the next tide, or covered up by the next storm that blows about the sand-hills. What a contrast is that of the names written on the heavens, high up above all earthly mutations!

In one sense oblivion soon seizes on us all. In another none of us is ever forgotten by God, but good and bad alike live in His thought. Still this idea of a special remembrance has place, as suggesting that, however unnoticed or forgotten on earth, God’s children live in the true ‘Golden Book.’ Their names are in the book of life. ‘Of so much fame, in heaven expect the meed.’ Ay, and as, too, suggesting how brief after all is the honour that comes from men.

Also, there will be annihilation or perpetuation of their life’s work. Nothing lasts but the will of God. Men who live godless lives are engaged in true Sisyphean labour. They are running counter to the whole stream of things, and what can be left at the end but frustrated endeavours covered with a gloomy pall?

Is your life to be wasted?

They are lists of those who are accepted in judgment, and of those who are not.

Rev. 20:12, Rev. 20:15; Rev. 21:27.

The books of men’s lives are to be opened, and also the book of life. What is written in the former can only bring condemnation. If our names are written in the latter, then He will ‘confess our names before His Father and the holy angels.’ And He will joyfully inscribe them there if we say to Him, like the man in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, ‘Set down my name.’ He will write them not only there, but on the palms of His hands and the tablets of His heart.

16)Jeremiah 28:13

Jeremiah

YOKES OF WOOD AND IRON

Jer. 28:13.

I suppose that I had better begin by a word of explanation as to the occasion of this saying. One king of Judah had already been carried off to Babylon, and the throne refilled by his brother, a puppet of the conquerors. This shadow of a king, with the bulk of the nation, was eager for revolt. Jeremiah had almost single-handed to stem the tide of the popular wish. He steadfastly preached submission, not so much to Nebuchadnezzar as to God, who had sent the invaders as chastisement. The lesson was a difficult one to learn, and the people hated the teacher. In the Jerusalem of Jeremiah’s day, as in other places and at other times, a love of country which is not blind to its faults and protests against a blatant militarism, was scoffed at as ‘unpatriotic,’ ‘playing into the hands of the enemy,’ ‘seeking peace at any price,’ whilst an insane eagerness to rush to arms without regard to resources or righteousness was called a ‘spirited foreign policy.’ So Jeremiah had plenty of enemies.

He had adopted a strange way of enforcing his counsel, which would be ridiculous to-day, but was natural and impressive then and there. He constantly for months went about with an ox-yoke on his neck, as a symbol of the submission which he advocated. One day, in the temple, before a public assembly, a certain Hananiah, a member of the opposite faction, made a fierce attack on the prophet and his teaching, and uttered a counter-prophecy to the effect that, in two years, the foreign invasion would be at an end, and all would be as it used to be. Our prophet answered very quietly, saying in effect, ‘I hope to God that it may be true; the event will show.’ And then Hananiah, encouraged by his meekness, proceeded to violence, tore the yoke off his shoulders and snapped it in two, reiterating his prophecy. Then Jeremiah went away home.

Soon after, the voice which he knew to be God’s, and not his own thoughts, spoke within him, and gave a much sharper answer. God declared, through Jeremiah, the plain truth that, for a tiny kingdom like Judah to perk itself up in the face of a world-conquering power like Babylon, could only bring down greater severity from the conqueror. And then he declared that Hananiah, for rebellion-not against Babylon, but against God, the true King of Israel-would be taken from the earth. He died in a couple of months.

My text forms the first word of this divine message. I have nothing more to do with its original application. It gives a picturesque setting to a very impressive and solemn truth; very familiar, no doubt, but none the less because of its familiarity needing to be dinned into people's ears. It is that to throw off legitimate authority is to bind on a worse tyranny. To some kind of yoke all of us must bend our necks, and if we slip them out we do not thereby become independent, but simply bring upon ourselves a heavier pressure of a harder bondage. The remainder of my remarks will simply go to illustrate that principle in two or three cases of ascending importance. I begin at the bottom.

I. We have the choice between the yoke of law and the iron yoke of lawlessness.

We all know that society could not be held together without some kind of restraints upon what is done, and some stimulus to do what is apt to be neglected. Even a band of brigands, or a crew of pirates, must have some code. I have read somewhere that the cells in a honeycomb are circles squeezed by the pressure of the adjacent cells into the hexagonal shape which admits of contiguity. If they continued circles there would be space and material lost, and no complete continuity. So, in like manner, you cannot keep five men together without some mutual limitations which are shaped into a law. Now, as long as a man keeps inside it, he does not feel its pressure. A great many of us, for instance, who are in the main law-abiding people, do not ever remember that there is such a thing as restrictions upon our licence, or as obligations to perform certain duties; for we never think either of taking the licence or of shirking the duties. The yoke that is accepted ceases to press. Once let a man step outside, and what then? Why, then, he is an outlaw; and the rough side of the law is turned to him, and all possible terrors, which people within the boundary have nothing to do with, gather themselves together and frown down upon him. The sheep that stops inside the pasture is never torn by the barbed wires of the fence. If you think of the life of a criminal, with all its tricks and evasions, taking 'every bush to be an officer,' as Shakespeare says; or as the first of the brood who was the type of them all said, 'Every man that seeth me shall kill me': if you think of the sword that hangs over the head of every law-breaker, and which he knows is hanging by a hair; if you think of men in counting-houses who have manipulated the books of the firm, and who durst not be away from their desks for a day lest all should come to light; and if you think of the punishment that follows sooner or later, you will see that it is better to bear the light yoke of the law than the heavy yoke of crime. Some men buy their ruin very dearly.

So much for the individual. But there is another aspect of this same principle on which I venture to say a word, although it is only a word, in passing. I do not suppose that there are many of my hearers who are likely to commit overt breaches of the law. But there are a great many of us who are apt to neglect the obligations of citizenship. In a community like ours, laziness, fastidiousness, absorption in our own occupations, and a number of other more or less reputable reasons, tempt many to stand aloof from the plain imperative obligations of every citizen in a free country. Every man who thus neglects to do his part for the common weal does his part in handing over the rule of the community to the least worthy. You will find-as you see in some democratic countries to-day, where the cultivated classes, and the classes with the sternest morality, have withdrawn in disgust from the turmoil-the mob having the upper hand, the least worthy scrambling into high places, and the community suffering, and bearing a heavier yoke, by reason of the unwillingness of some to bear the yoke and do the duty of a citizen. Vice lifts up its head, morality is scouted, self-interest is pursued unblushingly, and the whole tone of public opinion is lowered. Christian men and women, remember that you are members of a community, and you bear the yoke of responsibility therefore; and if you do not discharge your obligation, then you will have a heavier burden still to bear.

I need not remind you, I suppose, of how this same thesis-that we have to choose between the yoke of law and the iron yoke of lawlessness-is illustrated in the story of almost all violent revolutions. They run the same course. First a nation rises up against intolerable oppression, then revolution devours its own children, and the scum rises to the top of the boiling pot. Then comes, in the language of the picturesque historian of the French Revolution, the type of them all-then comes at the end ‘the whiff of grapeshot’ and the despot. First the government of a mob, and then the tyranny of an emperor, crush the people that shake off the yoke of reasonable law. That is my first point.

II. Let me take a higher illustration;-we have to choose between the yoke of virtue and the iron yoke of vice.

We are under a far more spiritual and searching law than that written in any statute-book, or administered by any court. Every man carries within his own heart the court, the tribunal; the culprit and the judge. And here too, if law is not obeyed, the result is not liberty, but the slavery of lawlessness.

No man can ponder his own nature and make without feeling that on every fibre of him is stamped a great law which he is bound to obey, and that on every fibre of him is impressed the necessity of part of his nature coercing, restraining, or spurring other parts of it. For, if we take stock of ourselves, what do we find? The broad basis of the pyramid, as it were, is laid in the faculties nearest the earth, the appetites which are inseparable from our corporeal being, and these know nothing about right or wrong, but are utterly blind to such distinctions. Put a loaf before a hungry man, and his mouth waters, whether the loaf belongs to himself or whether it is inside a baker’s window.

Then above these, as the next course of the pyramid, there are other desires, sentiments, affections, and emotions, less grossly sensuous than those of which I have been speaking, but still equally certain to be excited by the presence of their appropriate object, without any consideration of whether law is broken or kept in securing of it. Above these, which are, so to speak, branded on their very foreheads with the iron of slavery, stand certain faculties which are as clearly anointed to rule as the others are intended to serve. There is reason or intelligence, which is evidently meant to be eyes to these blind instincts and emotions of desire, and there is what we call the power of will, that stands like an engine-driver with his hand upon the lever which will either stop the engine or accelerate its revolutions. It says to passions and desires ‘Go!’ and they go; and, alas! it sometimes says ‘Halt!’ and they will not halt. Then there is conscience, which brings to light for every man something higher than himself. A great philosopher once said that the two sublimest things in the universe were the moral law and the starry heavens; and that law ‘I ought’ bends over us like the starry heavens with which he associated it. No man can escape from the pressure of duty, and on every man is laid, by his very make, the twofold obligation, first to look upwards and catch the behests of that solemn law, and then to turn his eyes and his strength inwards and coerce or spur, as the case may be, the powers of his nature, and rule the kingdom within himself.

Now, as long as a man lets the ruling parts of his nature guide the lower faculties, he feels comparatively no pressure from the yoke. But, if he once allows beggars to ride on horseback whilst princes walk- sense and appetite and desire, and more or less refined forms of inclination, to take the place which belongs only to conscience interpreting duty-then he has exchanged the easy yoke for one that is heavy indeed.

What does a man do when, instead of loyally accepting the conditions of his nature, and bowing himself to serve the all-embracing and all-penetrating law of duty, he sets up inclination of any sort in its place? What does he do? I will tell you. He unships the helm; he flings compass and sextant overboard; he fires up the furnaces, and screws down the safety-valve, and says, ‘Go ahead!’ And what will be the end of that, think you? Either an explosion or a crash upon a reef; and you may take your choice of which is the better kind of death-to be blown up or to go down. Keep within the law of conscience, and let it govern all inclinations, and most of all the animal part of your nature; and you will feel little pressure, and no pain, from the yoke. Shake it off, and there is fulfilled in the disobedient man the threatening of my text, which rightly translated ought to be, ‘Thou hast broken the yokes of wood, and thou *hast* made instead of them yokes of iron.’

For do you think it will be easy to serve the base-born parts of your nature, when you set them on the throne and tell them to govern you? Did you never hear of such a thing as a man’s vices getting such a hold on him that, when his weakened will tried to shake them off, they laughed in his face and said, ‘Here we are still’? Did you never hear of that other solemn truth-and have you never experienced how true it is?-that no man can say, ‘I will let my inclination have its fling this once’? There are never ‘this onces.’ or very, very seldom. When you are glissading down a snowy Alpine slope, you cannot stop when you like, though you strike your alpenstock ever so deep into the powdery snow. If you have started, away you must go. God be thanked! the illustration does not altogether apply, for a man can stop if he will repent, but he cannot stop unless he does. Did you never hear that a teaspoonful of narcotic to-day will have to be a tablespoonful in a week or two, to produce the same effect? Are there not plenty of men who have said with all the force that a weakened will has left in it, ‘I will never touch a drop of drink again, as long as I live, God helping me’?-and they have gone down the street, and they have turned in, not at the first or the second public-house, but at the fourth or the fifth. Ah! brother, ‘they promised them liberty, but they are the servants of corruption.’ Fix this in your minds. ‘He that committeth sin is the slave of sin,’ of the sin that he commits. Do not put off the easy yoke of obedience to conscience and duty, or you will find that there is an iron one, with many a sharp point in its unpolished surface rubbing into your skin and wounding your shoulders. ‘It’s wiser to be good than bad. It’s safer to be meek than fierce.’ ‘Thou hast broken the yokes of wood’; it is not difficult to do that; ‘thou hast made instead of them yokes of iron.’ That is my second point.

III. Lastly, we have the choice between the yoke of Christ and the iron yoke of godlessness.

You may think that to be a very harsh saying, and much too vehement an antithesis. Let me vindicate it according to my own belief in a sentence or two. It seems to me that for civilised and cultivated Europe at this day, the choice lies between accepting Jesus Christ as the *Revealer* of God, or wandering away out into the wastes of uncertainty, or as they call it nowadays, agnosticism and doubt. I believe myself, and I venture to state it here-though there is not time to do more than state it-that no form of what is now called Theism, which does not accept the historic revelation of God in Jesus Christ as the ‘master-light of all our seeing,’ will ever be able to sustain itself permanently in the face of present currents of opinion. If you do not take Christ for your Teacher, you are handed over either to the uncertainty of your own doubts, or to pinning your faith to some man and enrolling yourself as a disciple who is prepared to swallow down whole whatsoever the rabbi may say, and so giving to him what you will not give to Jesus; or else you will sink back into utter indolence and carelessness about the whole matter; or else you will go and put your belief and your soul into the hands of a priest, and shut your eyes and open your mouth and take whatever tradition may choose to send you. The one refuge from all these, as I believe, is to go to Him and learn of Him, and so take His yoke upon your shoulders.

But, let me say further, it is better to obey Christ's *commandments* than to set ourselves against them. For if we will take His will for our law, and meekly assume the yoke of loyal and loving obedience to Him, the door into an earthly paradise is thrown open to us. His yoke is easy, not because its prescriptions and provisions lower the standard of righteousness and morality, but because love becomes the motive; and it is always blessed to do that which the Beloved desires. When 'I will' and 'I ought' cover exactly the same ground, then there is no kind of pressure from the yoke. Christ's yoke is easy because, too, He gives the power to obey His commandments. His burden is such a burden [as I think one of the old fathers puts it] as sails are to a ship or wings to a bird. They add to the weight, but they carry that which carries them. So Christ's yoke bears the man that bears it. It is easy, too, because 'in,' and not only after or for, 'keeping of it there is great reward'; seeing that He commands nothing which is not congruous with the highest good, and bringing along with it the purest blessing. Instead of that yoke, what has the world to offer, or what do we get to dominate us, if we cast off Christ? Self, the old anarch self, and that is misery. To be self-ruled is to be self-destroyed.

There is no need that I should remind you of how it is better to accept Christ's *providences* than to kick against them. Sorrow to which we submit loses all its bitterness and much of its sadness. Kicking against the affliction makes its sharp point penetrate our limbs. The bird that will dash itself against the wires of its cage beats itself all bloody and torn. Let us take the providence and it ceases to be hard.

One last word;-we all carry an iron yoke upon our shoulders. For, hard as it is for us preachers to get our friends that listen to us to believe and realise it, 'We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' That yoke is on us all. And I, for my part, believe that no man by his own efforts can cast it off, but that the attempt to do so often brings greater strength to the sins that we seek to cast out, just as the more you mow the grass, the thicker and the stronger it grows. So I come with the great message which Jesus Christ Himself struck as the keynote and prelude of His whole ministry, when in the synagogue He said, ‘The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me . . . to preach deliverance to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.’ He, and He only, will break every yoke and let the oppressed go free. And then He addresses us, after He has done that, with the immortal words, the sweetness of whose sound, sweet as it is, is less than the sweetness of their sense: ‘Take My yoke upon you . . . and ye shall find rest to your souls.’ Oh, brother! will you not answer, ‘O Lord! truly I am Thy servant. Thou hast loosed my bonds, and thereby bound me for ever to wear Thy yoke’; as the slave clings to his ransomer, and delights to serve him all the days of his life?

17)Jeremiah 31:36

Jeremiah

WHAT THE STABLE CREATION TEACHES

Jer. 31:36.

This is the seal of the new covenant, which is to be made in days future to the prophet and his contemporaries, with the house of Israel and of Judah. That new covenant is referred to in Hebrews as the fundamental law of Christ’s kingdom. Therefore we have the right to take to ourselves the promises which it contains, and to think of ‘the house of Israel’ and ‘the seed of Jacob’ as including us, ‘though Abraham be ignorant of us.’

The covenant and its pledge are equally grand. The very idea of a covenant as applied to God is wonderful. It is meant to teach us that, from all the infinite modes of action possible to Him, He has chosen One; that He has, as it were, marked out a path for Himself, and confined the freedom of His will and the manifold omnipotences of His power to prescribed limits, that He has determined the course of His future action. It is meant to teach us, too, the other grand thought that He has declared to us what that course is, not leaving us to learn it piecemeal by slow building up of conclusions about His mind from His actions as they come forth, but inversely telling us His mind and purpose in articulate and authentic words by which we are to interpret each successive work of His. He makes known His purposes. ‘Before they spring forth I tell you of them.’

It is meant to teach us, too, that He regards Himself as bound by the declaration which He has made, so that we may rest secure on this strong foundation of His faithfulness and His truth, and for all doubts and fears find the sufficient cure in His own declaration: ‘My covenant will I not break nor alter the thing that is gone out of My lips.’ No wonder that the dying king found the strength of his failing heart in the thought, ‘He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure.’

The weighty promises of this solemn bond of God’s cover the whole ground of our spiritual necessities-forgiveness of sins, true, personal, direct acquaintance with God, an intercommunion of mutual possession between Him who is ours and us who are His, and an inward sanctification by which His precepts shall coincide with our desires. These are the blessings which He binds Himself to bestow.

And of this transcendent pact, the seal and guarantee is worthy. God descends to ratify a bond with man. By it He binds Himself to give all possible good for the soul. And to confirm it heaven and earth are called in. He points us to all that is august, stable, immense, inscrutable in the works of His hands, and bids us see there His pledge that He will be a faithful, covenant-keeping God. Sun, moon and stars, heaven, earth and sea-’ye are My witnesses,’ saith the Lord.

God’s unchangeable love is the true lesson from the stable regularity of the universe. The tone in which Scripture speaks of external nature in all its parts is very remarkable, altogether peculiar. It does not take the aesthetic or the scientific, but the purely religious point of view.

I. The facts. All nature is directly the effect of God’s will and power. ‘He giveth,’ ‘He divideth’ [Jer. 31:35]**.**

The physical universe presents a spectacle of stable regularity.

This regularity is the consequence of sovereign, divine will. These ordinances are not laws of *nature*, but of God.

II. The use commonly made of the facts.

Ordinary unthinking worldliness sees nothing noticeable in them because they come uniformly. Earthquakes startle, but the firmness of the solid earth attracts no observation. God is thought to speak in the extraordinary, but most men do not hear His voice in the normal.

Scientific godlessness formularises this tendency into a system, and proclaims that laws are everything and God a mere algebraical *x*.

III. The lesson which they are meant to teach.

God’s works are a revelation of God.

There is nothing in effect which is not in cause, and the stability of these ordinances carries our thoughts back to an unchanging Ordainer.

They witness to His constancy of purpose or will. His acts do not come from caprice, nor are done as experiments, but are the stable expression of uniform and unchanging will.

They witness to His unfailing energy of power, which ‘operates unspent’ and is to-day as fresh as at creation’s birth.

They witness to a single end pursued through all changes, and by all varieties of means. Darkness and light, sun rising and setting, storm and sunshine, summer and winter, all serve one end. As a horizontal thrust may give rise to opposite circular motions which all issue in working out an onward progress, so the various dealings of Providence with us are all adapted to ‘work together,’ and that ‘for good.’

They witness that life, joy, beauty, flow from obedience.

Thus, then, these ordinances in their stability are witnesses. But they are inferior witnesses. The noblest revelation of the divine faithfulness and unchangeable purpose of good is in Jesus. And these witnesses will one day pass. Even now they have their changes, slow and unmarked by a short-lived man. Stars burn out, there have been violent convulsions, shocks and shatterings in the heavens, and a time comes, as even physical science predicts, when ‘the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment,’ but that to which they witnessed shall endure, ‘My salvation shall be for ever, and My righteousness shall not be abolished.’ The created lights grow dim and die out, but in ‘the Father of lights’ is ‘no variableness, neither shadow that is cast by turning.’

Hence we see what our confidence should be. It should stand firm and changeless as the Covenant, and we should move in our orbits as the stars and hearken to the voice of His word as do they. Let us see to it that we have faith to match His faithfulness, and that our confidence shall be firmer than the mountains, more stable than the stars.

18)Jeremiah 31:37

Jeremiah

WHAT THE IMMENSE CREATION TEACHES

Jer. 31:37.

In the former sermon we considered the previous verse as presenting the stability of creation as a guarantee of the firmness of God’s gracious covenant. Now we have to consider these grand closing words which bring before us another aspect of the universe as a guarantee for another side of God’s gracious character. The immensity of creation is a symbol of the inexhaustibleness of the forgiving love of God.

I. A word or two as to the fact here used as a symbol of the divine long-suffering.

The prophet had very likely no idea at all beyond the ordinary one that presents itself to the senses-a boundless vault above an endless plain on which we stand, deep, sunless foundations, the Titanic substructions on which all rests, going down who knows where, resting on who knows what. We may smile at the rude conception, but it will be well for us if we can get as vivid an impression of the fact as He had.

We thankfully avail ourselves of modern science to tell us something about the dimensions of this awful universe of ours. We learn to know that there are millions of miles between these neighbour orbs, that light which has been travelling for thousands of years may not yet have fallen on some portion of the mighty whole, that the planetary masses of our system are but tiny specks in the whole, that every fresh stride which astronomical observation takes but opens up new nebulae to be resolved, where suns and constellations and systems are dwarfed by distance into hazy brightness which hardly deserves the name of light. We know all this, and can find all about the distances in any book. So much for space. Then the geologist comes to bewilder us still more, with extension in time.

But while all this may serve to give definiteness to the impression, after all, perhaps, it is the eye alone, as it gazes, that really feels the impression. Astronomy is really a very prosaic science.

II. The effects which this immensity often produces on men.

Very commonly in old days it led to actual idolatry, bowing down before these calm, unreachable brightnesses. In our days it too often leads to forgetting God altogether, and not seldom to disbelief that man can be of any account in such a universe. We are told that the notions of a covenant, a redemption, or that God cares about us are presumptuous. We all know the talk of men who are so modestly conscious of their own insignificance that they rebuke God for saying that He loves us, and Christians for believing Him.

III. The true lesson.

The immensity of the material universe is for us a symbol of the infinity of God’s long-suffering love.

The creation proceeds from a greater Creator. That gigantic and overwhelming magnitude, that hoary and immemorial age, that complicated and innumerable multitude of details, what less can they show than ONE Eternal and Infinite?

The immense suggests the infinite.

Granted that you cannot from the immense creation rise logically to the Infinite Creator, still the facts that the soul conceives that there is an infinite God, and is conscious of the spontaneous evoking of that thought by the contemplation of the immeasurable, are strong reasons for believing that it is a legitimate process of thought which hears the name of God thundered from the far-off depths of the silent heavens. The heavens cannot be measured, no plummet can reach to the deep foundations of the earth. We are surrounded by a universe which to our apprehensions is boundless. How much more so from expansions of our conceptions of celestial magnitudes since Jeremiah’s days, and what is to be the lesson from that? That we are insignificant atoms in this mighty whole? that God is far away from us? that the material stretches so far that perhaps there is nothing beyond?

The thought of faith is that the material immensity teaches me my God’s infinity, and especially His inexhaustible patience with us sinners. It teaches us the unfathomed depths of His gracious heart, and the abysses of His mysterious providence, and the unbounded sweep of His long-suffering forgiveness. His forgiving forbearance reaches further than the limits of the heavens. Not till these can be measured will it be exhausted, and the seed of Israel cast off for what they have done.

He, the Infinite Father, above all creation, mightier than it, is our true home, and living in Him we have an abode which can never be ‘dissolved,’ and above us stretch far-shining glories, unapproached masses of brightness, nebulae of blessedness, spaces where the eye fails and the imagination faints. All is ours, our eternal possession, the inexhaustible source of our joy. Astronomers tell of light which has been travelling for millenniums and has not yet reached this globe; but what is that to the flashing glories which through eternity shall pour on us from Him? So, then, our confidence should be firm and inexhaustible.

God has written wondrous lessons in His creation. But they are hieroglyphs, of which the key is lost, till we hear Christ and learn of Him. God has set His glories in the heavens and the earth is full of His mercy, but these are lesser gifts than that which contains them all and transcends them all, even His Son by whom He made the worlds, and- mightier still-by whom He redeemed man. God has written His mercy in the heavens and His faithfulness in the clouds, but His mercy and His faithfulness are more commended to us in Him who was before all things, and of whom it is written: ‘As a vesture shalt Thou fold them up, but Thou art the same and Thy years shall not fail.’ God has confirmed the covenant of His love to us by the faithful witnesses in the heavens, but the love shall abide when they have perished. The heavens bend above us all, and over the head of every man the zenith stands. Every spot of this low earth is smiled upon by that serene apocalypse of the loving will of God. No lane is so narrow and foul in the great city, no spot is so bare and lonely in the waste desert, but that thither the sunlight comes, and there some patch of blue above beckons the downcast eye to look up. The day opens its broad bosom bathed in light, and shows the sun in the heavens, the Lord of light, to preach to us of the true light. The night opens deeper abysses and fills them with stars, to preach to us how fathomless and immense His loving kindnesses and tender mercy are. They are witnesses to thee, dear friend, whatsoever thy heart, whatsoever thy sins, whatsoever thy memories. No iniquity can shut out God’s forgiving love. You cannot build out the heavens. He will not be sent away; you cannot measure, you cannot conceive, you cannot exhaust, His pardoning love. No storms disturb that serene sky. It is always there, blazing down upon us unclouded with all its orbs. Trust Christ; and then as years roll on, you will find that infinite love growing ever greater to your loving eyes, and through eternity will move onwards in the happy atmosphere and boundless heaven of the inexhaustible, deep heart and changeless love of God.

19)Jeremiah 33:8

Jeremiah

A THREEFOLD DISEASE AND A TWOFOLD CURE.

Jer. 33:8.

Jeremiah was a prisoner in the palace of the last King of Judah. The long, national tragedy had reached almost the last scene of the last act. The besiegers were drawing their net closer round the doomed city. The prophet had never faltered in predicting its fall, but he had as uniformly pointed to a period behind the impending ruin, when all should be peace and joy. His song was modulated from a saddened minor to triumphant jubilation. In the beginning of this chapter he has declared that the final struggles of the besieged will only end in filling the land with their corpses, and then, from that lowest depth, he soars in a burst of lyrical prophecy conceived in the highest poetic style. The exiles shall return, the city shall be rebuilt, its desolate streets shall ring with hymns of praise and the voices of the bridegroom and the bride. The land shall be peopled with peaceful husbandmen, and white with flocks. There shall be again a King upon the throne; sacrifices shall again be offered. ‘In those days, and at that time, will I cause the branch of righteousness to grow up unto David. . . . In those days shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely; and this is the name wherewith she shall be called, the Lord our righteousness.’ That fair vision of the future begins with the offer of healing and cure, and with the exuberant promise of my text. The first thing to be dealt with was Judah’s sin; and that being taken away, all good and blessing would start into being, as flowerets will spring when the baleful shadow of some poisonous tree is removed. Now, my text at first reading seems to expend a great many unnecessary words in saying the same thing over and over again, but the accumulation of synonyms not only emphasises the completeness of the promise, but also presents different aspects of that promise. And it is to these that I crave your attention in this sermon. The great words of my text are as true a gospel for us-and as much needed by us, God knows!-as they were for Jeremiah’s contemporaries; and we can understand them better than either he or they did, because the days that were to come then have come now, and the King who was to reign in righteousness is reigning to-day, and His Name is Christ. My object now is, as simply as I can, to draw your attention to the two points in this text: a threefold view of our sad condition, and a twofold bright hope.

Now for the first of these. There is here-

I. A threefold view of the sad condition of humanity.

Observe the recurrence of the same idea in our text in different words: ‘Their iniquity whereby they have sinned against Me.’ . . . ‘Their iniquity whereby they have sinned, and whereby they have transgressed against Me.’ You see there are three expressions which roughly may be taken as referring to the same ugly fact, but yet not meaning quite the same-’iniquity, or iniquities, sin, transgression.’ These three all speak of the same sad element in your experience and mine, but they speak it from somewhat different points of view, and I wish to try to bring out that difference for you.

Suppose that three men were to describe a snake. One of them fixes his attention on its slimy coils, and describes its sinuous gliding movements. Another of them is fascinated by its wicked beauty, and talks about its livid markings and its glittering eye. The third thinks only of the swift-darting fangs, and of the poison-glands. They all three describe the snake, but they describe it from different points of view; and so it is here. ‘Iniquity,’ ‘sin,’ ‘transgression’ are synonyms to some extent, but they do not cover the same ground. They look at the serpent from different points of view.

First, a sinful life is a twisted or warped life. The word rendered ‘iniquity,’ in the Old Testament, in all probability literally means something that is not straight, but is bent, or, as I said, twisted or warped. That is a metaphor that runs through a great many languages. I suppose ‘right’ expresses a corresponding image, and means that which is straight and direct; and I suppose that ‘wrong’ has something to do with ‘wrung’-that which has been forcibly diverted from a right line. We all know the conventional colloquialism about a man being ‘straight,’ and such-and-such a thing being ‘on the straight.’ All sin is a twisting of the man from his proper course. Now there underlies that metaphor the notion that there is a certain line to which we are to conform. The schoolmaster draws a firm, straight line in the child’s copybook; and then the little unaccustomed hand takes up on the second line its attempt, and makes tremulous, wavering pot-hooks and hangers. There is a copyhead for us, and our writing is, alas! all uneven and irregular, as well as blurred and blotted. There is a law, and you know it. You carry in yourself-I was going to say, the standard measure, and you can see whether when you put your life by the side of that, the two coincide. It is not for me to say; I know about my own, and you may know about yours, if you will be honest. The warped life belongs to us all.

The metaphor may suggest another illustration. A Czar of Russia was once asked what should be the course of the railway from St. Petersburg to Moscow, and he took up a ruler and drew a straight line upon the chart, and said, ‘There; that is the course.’ There is a straight road marked out for us all, going, like the old Roman roads, irrespective of physical difficulties in the contour of the country, climbing right over Alps if necessary, and plunging down into the deepest valleys, never deflecting one hairsbreadth, but going straight to its aim. And we-what are we? what are ‘our crooked, wandering ways in which we live,’ by the side of that straight path? This very prophet has a wonderful illustration, in which he compares the lives of men who have departed from God to the racing about in the wilderness of a wild dromedary, ‘entangling her ways,’ as he says, crossing and recrossing, and getting into a maze of perplexity. Ah, my friend, is that not something like your life? Here is a straight road, and there are the devious footpaths that we have made, with many a detour, many a bend, many a coming back instead of going forward. ‘The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because he knoweth not how to go to the city.’ All sin is deflection from the straight road, and we are all guilty of that.

Let me urge you to consult the standard that you carry within yourselves. If you never have done it before, do it now; or, better, when you are alone by yourselves. It is easy to imagine that a line is straight. But did you ever see the point of a needle under a microscope? However finely it is polished, and apparently tapering regularly, the scrutinising investigation of the microscope shows that it is all rough and irregular. What would a builder do if he had not a T-square and a level? His wall would be ever so far out, whilst he thought it perfectly perpendicular. And remember that a line at a very acute angle of deflection only needs to be carried out far enough to diverge so widely from the other line that you could put the whole solar system in between the two. The smallest departure from the line of right will end, unless it is checked, away out in the regions of darkness beyond. That is the lesson of the first of the words here.

The second of them, rendered in our version ‘sin,’ if I may recur to my former illustration, looks at the snake from a different point of view, and it declares that all sin misses the aim. The meaning of the word in the original is simply ‘that which misses its mark.’ And the meaning of the prevalent word in the New Testament for ‘sin’ means, in accordance with the ethical wisdom of the Greek, the same thing. Now, there are two ways in which that thought may be looked at. Every wrong thing that we do misses the aim, if you consider what a man’s aim ought to be. We have grown a great deal wiser than the Puritans nowadays, and people make cheap reputations for advanced thought by depreciating their theology. We have not got beyond the first answer of the Shorter Catechism, ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever.’ That is the only aim which corresponds to our constitution, to our circumstances. A palaeontologist will pick up part of a skeleton embedded in the rocks, and from the study of a bone or two will tell you whether that creature was meant to swim, or to fly, or to walk; whether its element was sea, or sky, or land. Our destination for God is as plainly stamped on heart, mind, will, practical powers, as is the destination of such a creature deducible from its skeleton. ‘Whose image and superscription hath it?’ God’s, stamped deep upon us all. And so, brother, whatever you win, unless you win God, you have missed the aim. Anything short of knowing Him and loving Him, serving Him, being filled and inspired by Him, is contrary to the destiny stamped upon us all. And if you have won God, then, whatever other human prizes you may have missed, you have made the best of life. Unless He is yours, and you are His, you have made a miss, and if I might venture to add, a mess, of yourself and of your life.

Then there is another side to this. The solemn teaching of this word is not confined to that thought, but also opens out into this other, that all godlessness, all the low, sinful lives that so many of us live, miss the shabby aim which they set before themselves. I do not believe that any men or women ever got as much good, even of the lowest kind, out of a wrong thing as they expected to get when they ventured on it. If they did, they got something else along with it that took all the gilt off the gingerbread. Take the lowest kind of gross evil-sins of lust or of drunkenness. Well, no doubt the physical satisfaction desired is secured. Yes; and what about what comes after, in addition, that was not aimed at? The drunkard gets his pleasurable oblivion, his desired excitement. What about the corrugated liver, the palsied hand, the watery eye, the wrecked life, the broken hearts at home, and all the other accompaniments? There is an old Greek legend about a certain messenger that came to earth with a box, in which were all manner of pleasant gifts, and down at the bottom was a speckled pest that, when the box was emptied, crawled out into the sunshine and infected the land. That Pandora's box is like 'the good things' that sin brings to men. You gain, perhaps, your advantage, and you get something that spoils it all. Is not that your experience? I do not deny that you may satisfy your lower desires by a godless life. I know only too well how hard it is to get people to have higher tastes, and how all we ministers of religion are spending our efforts in order to win people to love something better than the world can give them. I also know that, if I could get to the very deepest recess of your hearts, you would admit that pleasures or advantages that are complete, that is to say, that satisfy you all round, and that are lasting, and that can front conscience and God who is at the back of conscience, are not to be won on the paths of sin and godlessness.

There is an old story that speaks of a knight and his company who were travelling through a desert, and suddenly beheld a castle into which they were invited and hospitably welcomed. A feast was spread before them, and each man ate and drank his fill. But as soon as they left the enchanted halls, they were as hungry as before they sat at the magic table. That is the kind of food that all our wrongdoing provides for us. 'He feedeth on ashes,' and hungers after he has fed. So, dear friends, learn this ancient wisdom, which is as true today as it ever was; and be sure, of this, that there is only one course in this world which will give a man true, lasting satisfaction; that there is only one life, the life of obedience to and love of God, about which, at the end, there will not need to be said, ‘This their way is their folly.’

And now, further, there is yet another word here, carrying with it important lessons. The expression which is translated in our text ‘transgressed,’ literally means ‘rebelled.’ And the lesson of it is, that all sin is, however little we think it, a rebellion against God. That introduces a yet graver thought than either of the former have brought us face to face with. Behind the law is the Lawgiver. When we do wrong, we not only blunder, we not only go aside from the right line, but also we lift up ourselves against our Sovereign King, and we say, ‘Who is the Lord that we should serve Him? Our tongues are our own. Who is Lord over us? Let us break His bands asunder, and cast away His cords from us.’ There are crimes against law; there are faults against one another. Sins are against God; and, dear friends, though you do not realise it, this is plain truth, that the essence, the common characteristic, of all the acts which, as we have seen, are twisted and foolish, is that in them we are setting up another than the Lord our God to be our ruler. We are enthroning ourselves in His place. Do you not feel that that is true, and that in some small thing in which you go wrong, the essence of it is that you are seeking to please yourself, no matter what duty-which is only a heathen name for God-says to you?

Does not that thought make all these apparently trivial and insignificant deeds terribly important? Treason is treason, no matter what the act by which it is expressed. It may be a little thing to haul down a union-jack from a flagstaff, or to tear off a barn-door a proclamation with the royal arms at the top of it, but it may be rebellion. And if it is, it is as bad as to turn out a hundred thousand men in the field, with arms in their hands. There are small faults, there are trivial crimes; there are no small sins. An ounce of arsenic is arsenic, just as much as a ton; and it is a poison just as surely.

Now I have enlarged perhaps unduly on this earlier part of my subject, and can but briefly turn to the second division which I suggested, viz.:-

II. The twofold bright hope which shines through this darkness.

‘I will cleanse . . . I will pardon.’

If sin combines in itself all these characteristics that I have touched upon, then clearly there is guilt, and clearly there are stains; and the gracious promise of this text deals with both the one and the other.

‘I will pardon.’ What is pardon? Do not limit it to the analogy of a criminal court. When the law of the land pardons, or rather when the administrator of the law pardons, that simply means that the penalty is suspended. But is that forgiveness? Certainly it is only a part of it, even if it is a part. What do you fathers and mothers do when you forgive your child? You may use the rod or you may not, that is a question of what is best for the child. Forgiveness does not lie in letting him off the punishment; but forgiveness lies in the flowing to the child, uninterrupted, of the love of the parent heart, and that is God’s forgiveness. Penalties, some of them, remain-thank God for it! ‘Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions,’ and the chastisement was part of the sign of the forgiveness. The great penalty of all, which is separation from God, is taken away; but the essence of that pardon, which it is my blessed work to proclaim to all men, is, that in spite of the prodigal’s rags and the stench of the sty, the Father’s love is round about him. It is round about you, brother.

Do you need pardon? Do you not? What does conscience say? What does the sense of remorse that sometimes blesses you, though it tortures, say? There are tendencies in this generation, as always, but very strong at present, to ignore the fact that all sin must necessarily lead to tremendous consequences of misery. It does so in this world, more or less. A man goes into another world as he left this one, and you and I believe that ‘after death is the judgment.’ Do you not require pardon? And how are you to get it? ‘Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree.’ Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died that the loving forgiveness of God might find its way to every heart, and might take all men to its bosom, whilst yet the righteousness of God remained untarnished. I know not any gospel that goes deep enough to touch the real sore place in human nature, except the gospel that says to you and me and all of us, ‘Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.’

But forgiveness is not enough, for the worst results of past sin are the habits of sin which it leaves within us; so that we all need cleansing. Can we cleanse ourselves? Let experience answer. Did you ever try to cure yourself of some little trick of gesture, or manner, or speech? And did you not find out then how strong the trivial habit was? You never know the force of a current till you try to row against it. ‘Can the Ethiopian change his skin?’ No; but God can change it for him. So, again, we say that Jesus Christ who died for ‘the remission of sins that are past,’ lives that He may give to each of us His own blessed life and power, and so draw us from our evil, and invest us in His good. Dear brother, I beseech you to look in the face the fact of your rebellion, of your missing your aim, of your perverted life, and to ask yourself the question, ‘Can I deal either with the guilt of the past, or with the imperative tendency to repeated sin in the future?’ You may have your leprous flesh made ‘like the flesh of a little child.’ You may have your stained robe washed and made lustrous ‘white in the blood of the Lamb.’ Pardon and cleansing are our two deepest needs. There is one hand from which we can receive them both, and one only. There is one condition on which we shall receive them, which is that we trust in Him, ‘Who was crucified for our offences, and lives to hallow us into His own likeness.’

20)Jeremiah 35:16

Jeremiah

THE RECHABITES

Jer. 35:16.

The Rechabites had lived a nomad life, dwelling in tents, not practising agriculture, abstaining from intoxicants. They were therein obeying the command of their ancestor, Jonadab. They had been driven by the Babylonian invasion to take refuge in Jerusalem, and, no doubt, were a nine days’ wonder there, with their strange ways. Jeremiah seized on their loyalty to their dead ancestor’s command as an object-lesson, by which he put a still sharper edge on his rebukes. The Rechabites gave their ancestral law an obedience which shamed Judah’s disobedience to Jehovah. God asks from us only what we are willing to give to one another, and God is often refused what men have but to ask and it is given. The virtues which we exercise to each other rebuke us, because we so often refuse to exercise them towards God.

I. Men’s love to men condemns their lovelessness towards God.

These Rechabites witnessed to the power of loyal love to their ancestor. Think of the wealth of love which we have all poured out on husbands, wives, parents, children, and of the few drops that we have diverted to flow towards God. What a full flood fills the one channel; what a shrunken stream the other!

Think of the infinitely stronger reasons for loving God than for loving our dearest.

II. Men’s faith in men condemns their distrust of God.

However you define faith, you find it abundantly exercised by us on the low plane of earthly relations. Is it belief in testimony? You men of business regulate your course by reports of markets on the other side of the world, and in a hundred ways extend your credence to common report, with but little, and often with no examination of the evidence. ‘If we believe the witness of men, the witness of God is greater.’ And how do we treat it? We are ready to accept and to act on men’s testimony; we are slow to believe God’s, and still slower to act on it, and to let it mould our lives.

Is faith the realising of the unseen? We exercise it in reference to the earthly unseen; we are slow to do so in reference to the heavenly things which are invisible.

Is faith the act of trust? Life is impossible without it. Not only is commerce a great system of credit, but no relations of life could last for a day without mutual confidence. We depend on one another, like a row of slightly built houses that help to hold each other up. These earthly exercises of trust should make it easier for us to rise to trusting God as much as we do each other. They ought to reveal to us the heavenly things. For indeed our human trust in one another should be a sample and shadow of our wise trust in the adequate Object of trust.

III. Men’s obedience to human authority condemns their rebellion against God.

Jonadab’s commandment evoked implicit obedience from his descendants for generations. Side by side in man’s strange nature, with his self-will and love of independence, lies an equally strong tendency to obey and follow any masterful voice that speaks loudly and with an assumption of authority. The opinions of a clique, the dogmas of a sect, the habits of a set, the sayings of a favourite author, the fashions of our class-all these rule men with a sway far more absolute than is exercised on them by the known will of God. The same man is a slave to usurped authority and a rebel against rightful and divine dominion.

Whether we consider the law of God in its claims or its contents, or its ultimate object, it is worthy of entire obedience. And what does it receive?

God asks from us only what we willingly give to men. Even the qualities and acts, such as love, trust, obedience, which as exercised towards men give dignity and beauty and strength, rise up in judgment to condemn us. There is a sense in which Augustine’s often-denounced saying that they are ‘splendid vices’ is true, for they are turned in the wrong direction, and very often their being directed so completely towards men and women is the reason why they are not directed towards God, who alone deserves and alone can satisfy and reward them. Then they become sins and condemn us.

21)Jeremiah 36:32

Jeremiah

JEREMIAH’S ROLL BURNED AND REPRODUCED

Jer. 36:32.

This story brings us into the presence of the long death agony of the Jewish monarchy. The wretched Jehoiakim, the last king but two who reigned in Jerusalem, was put on the throne by the King of Egypt, as his tributary, and used by him as a buffer to bear the brunt of the Babylonian invasion. He seems to have had all the vices of Eastern sovereigns. He was covetous, cruel, tyrannous, lawless, heartless, senseless. He was lavishing money on a grand palace, built with cedar and painted in vermilion, when the nation was in its death-throes. He had neither valour nor goodness, and so little did he understand the forces at work in his times that he held by the rotten support of Egypt against the grim power of Babylon, and of course, when the former was driven like chaff before the assault of the latter, he shared the fate of his principal, and Judaea was overrun by Babylon, Jerusalem captured, and the poor creature on the throne bound in chains to be carried to Babylon, but, as would appear, discovered by Nebuchadnezzar to be pliable enough to make it safe to leave him behind, as his vassal. His capture took place but a few months after the incident with which I am dealing now. It would appear probable that the confusion and alarm of the Babylonian assault on Egypt had led to a solemn fast in Jerusalem, at which the nation assembled. Jeremiah, who had been prophesying for some thirty years, and had already been in peril of his life from the godless tyrant on the throne, was led to collect, in one book, his scattered prophecies and read them in the ears of the people gathered for the fast. That reading had no effect at all on the people. The roll was then read to the princes, and in them roused fear and interested curiosity, and kindly desire for the safety of Jeremiah and Baruch, his amanuensis. It was next read to the king, and he cut the roll leaf by leaf and threw it on the brasier, not afraid, nor penitent, but enraged and eager to capture Jeremiah and Baruch. The burnt roll was reproduced by God’s command, ‘and there were added besides . . . many like words.’

I. The love of God necessarily prophesying evil.

As a matter of fact, the prophets of the Old Testament were all prophets of evil. They were watchmen seeing the sword and giving warning. No one ever spoke more plainly of the penalties of sin than did Christ. The authoritative revelation of the consequences of wrongdoing is an integral part of the gospel.

It is not the highest form of appeal. It would be higher to say, ‘Do right because it is right; love Christ because Christ is lovely.’ The purpose of such an appeal is to prepare us for the true gospel. But the appeal to a reasonable self-love, by warnings of the death which is the wages of sin, is perfectly legitimate. Dehortations from sin on the ground of its consequences is part of God’s message.

Further, the warning comes from love. Punishment must needs follow on sin. Even His love must compel God to punish, and to warn before He does. Surely that is kind. His punishments are made known beforehand that we may be sure that caprice and anger have no part in inflicting them, but that they are the settled order of an inviolable law, and constitutional procedure of a just kind. Whether is it better to live under a despot who smites as he will, or under a constitutional king whose code is made public.

Surely it is needful to have clearly set forth the consequences of sin, in view of the sophistries buzzing round us all and nestling in our own hearts, of the deceitfulness of sin, of siren voices whispering, ‘Ye shall not surely die.’

God’s prophecies of evil are all conditional. They are sent on purpose that they may not be fulfilled.

II. The loving warnings disregarded and disliked. Jehoiakim’s behaviour is very human and like what we all do. We see the same thing repeated in all similar crises. Cassandra. Jewish prophets. Christ. English Commonwealth. French Revolution. Blindness to all signs and hostility to the men that warn.

We see it in the attitude to the gospel revelation. The Scripture doctrine of punishment always rouses antagonism, and in this day revolts men. There is much in present tendencies to weaken the idea of future retribution. Modern philanthropy makes it hard sometimes to administer even human laws. The feeling is good, but this exaggeration of it bad. It is a reaction to some extent against an unchristian way of preaching Christian truth, but even admitting that, it still remains true that an integral part of the Christian revelation is the revelation of death as the wages of sin.

We see the same recoil of feeling operating in individual cases. How many of you are quite indifferent to the preaching of a judgment to come, or only conscious of a movement of dislike! But how foolish this is! If a man builds a house on a volcano, is it not kind to tell him that the lava is creeping over the side? Is it not kind to wake, even violently, a traveller who has fallen asleep on the snow, before drowsiness stiffens into death?

III. The impotent rejection and attempted destruction of the message.

The roll is destroyed, but it is renewed. You do not alter facts by neglecting them, nor abrogate a divine decree by disbelieving it. The awful law goes on its course. It is not pre-eminent seamanship to put the look-out man in irons because he sings out, ‘Breakers ahead.’ The crew do not abolish the reef *so*, but they end their last chance of avoiding it, and presently the shock comes, and the cruel coral tears through the hull.

IV. The neglected message made harder and heavier.

Every rejection makes a man more obdurate. Every rejection increases criminality, and therefore increases punishment. Every rejection brings the punishment nearer.

The increased severity of the message comes from love.

Oh, think of the infinite ‘treasures of darkness’ which God has in reserve, and let the words of warning lead you to Jesus, that you may only hear and never experience the judgments of which they warn. Give Christ the roll of judgment and He will destroy it, nailing it to His cross, and instead of it will give you a book full of blessing.

22)Jeremiah 37:1

Jeremiah

ZEDEKIAH

Jer. 37:1.

Zedekiah was a small man on a great stage, a weakling set to face circumstances that would have taxed the strongest. He was a youth at his accession to the throne of a distracted kingdom, and if he had had any political insight he would have seen that his only chance was to adhere firmly to Babylon, and to repress the foolish aristocracy who hankered after alliance with the rival power of Egypt. He was mad enough to form an alliance with the latter, which was constructive rebellion against the former, and was strongly reprobated by Jeremiah. Swift vengeance followed; the country was ravaged, Zedekiah in his fright implored Jeremiah's prayers and made faint efforts to follow his counsels. The pressure of invasion was lifted, and immediately he forgot his terrors and forsook the prophet. The Babylonian army was back next year, and the final investment of Jerusalem began. The siege lasted sixteen months, and during it, Zedekiah miserably vacillated between listening to the prophet's counsels of surrender and the truculent nobles' advice to resist to the last gasp. The miseries of the siege live for ever in the Book of Lamentations. Mothers boiled their children, nobles hunted on dunghills for food. Their delicate complexions were burned black, and famine turned them into living skeletons. Then, on a long summer day in July came the end. The king tried to skulk out by a covered way between the walls, his few attendants deserted him in his flight, he was caught at last down by the fords of the Jordan, carried prisoner to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah away up in the north beyond Baalbec, and there saw his sons slain before his eyes, and, as soon as he had seen that last sight, was blinded, fettered, and carried off to Babylon, where he died. His career teaches us lessons which I may now seek to bring out.

I. A weak character is sure to become a wicked one.

Moral weakness and inability to resist strong pressure was the keynote of Zedekiah's character. There were good things in him; he had kindly impulses, as was shown in his emancipation of the slaves at a crisis of Jerusalem's fate. Left to himself, he would at least have treated Jeremiah kindly, and did rescue him from lingering death in the foul dungeon to which the ruffian nobility had consigned him, and he provided for his being at least saved from dying of starvation during the siege. He listened to him secretly, and would have accepted his counsel if he had dared. But he yielded to the stronger wills of the nobles, though he sometimes bitterly resented their domination, and complained that 'the king is not he that can do anything against you.'

Like most weak men, he found that temptations to do wrong abounded more than visible inducements to do right, and he was afraid to do right, and fancied that he was compelled by the force of circumstances to do wrong. So he drifted and drifted, and at last was smashed to fragments on the rocks, as all men are who do not keep a strong hand on the helm and a steady eye on the compass. The winds are good servants but bad masters. If we do not coerce circumstances to carry us on the course which conscience has pricked out on the chart, they will wreck us.

II. A man may have a good deal of religion and yet not enough to mould his life.

Zedekiah listened to the prophet by fits and starts. He was eager to have the benefit of the prophet's prayers. He liberated the slaves in Jerusalem. He came secretly to Jeremiah more than once to know if there were any message from God for him. Yet he had not faith enough nor submission enough to let the known will of God rule his conduct, whatever the nobles might say.

Are there not many of us who have a belief in God and a general acquiescence in Christ's precepts, who order our lives now and then by these, and yet have not come up to the point of full and final surrender? Alas, alas, for the multitudes who are 'not far from the kingdom,' but who never come near enough to be actually *in* it! To be not far from *is* to be out of, and to be out of is to be, like Zedekiah, blinded and captived and dead in prison at last.

III. God's love is wonderfully patient.

Jeremiah was to Zedekiah the incarnation of God's unwearied pleadings. During his whole reign, the prophet's voice sounded in his ears, through all the clamours and cries of factions, and mingled at last with the shouts of the besiegers and the groans of the wounded, like the sustained note of some great organ, persisting through a babel of discordant noises. It was met with indifference, and it sounded on. It provoked angry antagonism and still it spoke. Violence was used to stifle it in vain. And it was not only Jeremiah's courageous pertinacity that spoke through that persistent voice, but God's unwearied love, which being rejected is not driven away, being neglected becomes more beseeching, 'is not easily provoked 'to cease its efforts, but 'beareth all' despite, and hopeth for softened hearts till the last moment before doom falls.

That patient love pleads with each of us as persistently as Jeremiah did with Zedekiah.

IV. The long-delayed judgment falls at last.

With infinite reluctance the divine love had to do what God Himself has called ‘His strange work.’ Divine Justice travels slowly, but arrives at last. Her foot is ‘leaden’ both in regard to its tardiness and its weight. There is no ground in the long postponement of retribution for the fond dream that it will never come, though men lull themselves to sleep with that lie. ‘Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is thoroughly set in them to do evil.’ But the sentence will be executed. The pleading love, which has for many returning autumns spared the barren tree and sought to make it fit to bear fruit, does not prevent the owner saying at last to his servant with the axe in his hand, ‘Now! thou shalt cut it down.’

23)Jeremiah 37:11-21

Jeremiah

THE WORLD’S WAGES TO A PROPHET

Jer. 37:11 - Jer. 37:21.

SOME sixteen years had passed since Jehoiakim had burned the roll, during all of which the slow gathering of the storm, which was to break over the devoted city, had been going on, and Jeremiah had been vainly calling on the people to return to Jehovah. The last agony was now not far off. But there came a momentary pause in the siege, produced by the necessity of an advance against a relieving army from Egypt, which created fallacious hopes in the doomed city. It was only a pause. Back came the investing force, and again the terrible, lingering process of starving into surrender was resumed. Our text begins with the raising of the siege, and extends to some point after its resumption. It needs little elucidation, so clearly is the story told, and so natural are the incidents; but perhaps we shall best gather its instruction if we look at the three sets of actors separately, and note the hostile authorities, the patient prophet and prisoner, and the feeble king. The play of these strongly contrasted characters is full of vividness and instruction.

I. We have that rough ‘captain of the ward,’ who laid hands on the prophet at the gate on the north side of the city, leading to the road to the territory of Benjamin. No doubt there was a considerable exodus from Jerusalem when the Assyrian lines were deserted, and common prudence would have facilitated it, as reducing the number of mouths to be fed, in case the siege were renewed; but malice is not prudent, and, instead of letting the hated Jeremiah slip quietly away home to Anathoth, and so getting rid of his prophecies and him, Irijah [‘the Lord is a beholder’] arrested him on a charge of meditating desertion to the enemy. It was a colourable accusation, for Jeremiah’s constant exhortation had been to ‘go out to the Chaldeans,’ and so secure life and mild treatment. But it was clearly false, for the Chaldeans were for the moment gone, and the time was the very worst that could have been chosen for a contemplated flight to their camp.

The real reason for the prophet’s wish to leave the city was only too simple. It was to see if he could get ‘a portion’-some of his property, or perhaps rather some little store of food-to take back to the famine-scourged city, which, he knew, would soon be again at starvation-point. There appears to have been a little company of fellow-villagers with him, for ‘in the midst of the people’ [Jer. 37:12] is to be construed with ‘to go into the land of Benjamin.’ The others seem to have been let pass, and only Jeremiah detained, which makes the charge more evidently a trumped-up excuse for laying hands on him. Jeremiah calls it in plain words what it was-’a lie’-and protests his innocence of any such design. But the officious Irijah knew too well how much of a feather in his cap his getting hold of the prophet would be, to heed his denials, and dragged him off to the princes.

Sixteen years ago ‘the princes’ round Jehoiakim had been the prophet’s friends; but either a new generation had come with a new king, or else the tempers of the men had changed with the growing misery. Their behaviour was more lawless than the soldiers’ had been. They did not even pretend to examine the prisoner, but blazed up at once in anger. They had him in their power now, and did their worst, lawlessly scourging him first, and then thrusting him into ‘the house of the pit’-some dark, underground hole, below the house of an official, where there were a number of ‘cells’-filthy and stifling, no doubt; and there they left him. What for?

The charge of intended desertion was a mere excuse for wreaking their malice on him. They hated Jeremiah because he had steadily opposed the popular determination to fight, and had foretold disaster. Add to this that he had held up a high standard of religion and morality to a corrupt and idolatrous people, and his ‘unpopularity’ is sufficiently explained.

Would that the same causes did not produce the same effects now! Individuals still think an honest rebuke of their faults an insult, and a plain statement of their danger a sign of ill-feeling. Try to warn a drunkard or a profligate by telling him of the disease and misery which will dog his sins, or by setting plainly before him God’s law of purity and sobriety, and you will find that the prophet’s function still brings with it, in many cases, the prophet’s doom. But still more truly is this the case with masses, whether nations or cities. A spurious patriotism resents as unpatriotic the far truer love of country which sets a trumpet to its mouth to tell the people their sins. In all democratic communities, whether republican or regal in their form of government, a crying evil is flattery of the masses, exalting their virtues and foretelling their prosperity, while hiding their faults and slurring over the requirements of morality and religion, which are the foundations of prosperity. What did England do with her prophets? What did America do with hers? What wages do they get to-day? The men who dare to tell their countrymen their faults, and to preach temperance, peace, civic purity, personal morality, are laid hold of by the Irijahs who preside over the newspapers, and are pilloried as deserters and half traitors at heart.

II. We see the patient, unmoved prophet. One flash of honest indignation repels the charge of deserting, and then he is silent. ‘As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.’ It is useless to plead before lawless violence. A silent martyr eloquently condemns an unjust judge. So, without opposition or apparent remonstrance, Jeremiah is cast into the foul den where he lies for ‘many days,’ patiently bearing his fate, and speaking his complaint to God only. How long his imprisonment lasted does not appear; but the context implies that during it the siege was resumed, and that there was difficulty in procuring bread. Then the king sent for him secretly.

Zedekiah’s temper at the time will be considered presently. Here we have to do with Jeremiah’s answer to his question. In it we may note, as equally prominent and beautifully blended, respect, submission, consciousness of peril and impending death, and unshaken boldness. He knew that his life was at the disposal of the capricious, feeble Zedekiah. He bows before him as his subject, and brings his ‘supplication’; but not one jot of his message will he abate, nor smooth down its terribleness an atom. He repeats as unfalteringly as ever the assurance that the king of Babylon will take the city. He asserts his own innocence as regards king and courtiers and people; and he asks the scornful question what has become of all the smooth-tongued prophets of prosperity, as if he were bidding the king look over the city wall and see the tokens of their lies and of Jeremiah’s truth in the investing lines of the all but victorious enemy.

Such a combination of perfect meekness and perfect courage, unstained loyalty to his king, and supreme obedience to his God, was only possible to a man who lived in very close communion with Jehovah, and had learned thereby to fear none less, because he feared Him so well, and to reverence all else whom He had set in places of reverence. True courage, of the pattern which befits God’s servants, is ever gentle. Bluster is the sign of weakness. A Christian hero-and no man will be a Christian as he ought to be, who has not something of the hero in him-should win by meekness. Does not the King of all such ride prosperously ‘because of truth and meekness,’ and must not the armies which follow Him do the same? Faithful witnessing to men of their sins need not be rude, harsh, or self-asserting. But we must live much in fellowship with the Lord of all the meek and the pattern of all patient sufferers and faithful witnesses, if we are ever to be like Him, or even like His pale shadow as seen in this meek prophet. The fountains of strength and of patience spring side by side at the foot of the cross.

III. We have the weak Zedekiah, with his pitiable vacillation. He had been Nebuchadnezzar’s nominee, and had served him for some years, and then rebelled. His whole career indicates a feeble nature, taking the impression of anything which was strongly laid on it. He was a king of putty, when the times demanded one of iron. He was cowed by the ‘princes.’ Sometimes he was afraid to disobey Jeremiah, and then afraid to let his masters know that he was so. Thus he sends for the prophet stealthily, and his first question opens a depth of conflict in his soul. He did believe that the prophet spoke the word of Jehovah, and yet he could not muster up courage to follow his convictions and go against the princes and the mob. He wanted another ‘word’ from Jehovah, by which he meant a word of another sort than the former. He could not bring his mind to obey the word which he had, and so he weakly hoped that perhaps God’s word might be changed into one that he would be willing to obey. Many men are, like him, asking, ‘Is there any word from the Lord?’ and meaning, ‘Is there any change in the condition of receiving His favour?’

He had interest enough in the prophet to interfere for his comfort, and to have him put into better quarters in the palace and provided with a ‘circle’ [a round loaf] of bread out of Baker Street, as long as there was any in the city-not a very long time. But why did he do so much, and not do more? He knew that Jeremiah was innocent, and that his word was God’s; and what he should have done was to have shaken off his masterful ‘servants,’ followed his conscience, and obeyed God. Why did he not? Because he was a coward, infirm of purpose, and therefore ‘unstable as water.’

He is another of the tragic examples, with which all life as well as scripture is studded, of how much evil is possible to a weak character. In this world, where there are so many temptations to be bad, no man will be good who cannot strongly say ‘No.’ The virtue of strength of will may be but like the rough fence round young trees to keep cattle from browsing on them and east winds from blighting them. But the fence is needed, if the trees are to grow. ‘To be weak is to be miserable,’ and sinful too, generally. ‘Whom resist’ must be the motto for all noble, God-like, and God-pleasing life.

24)Jeremiah 39:1-10

Jeremiah

THE LAST AGONY

Jer. 39:1 - Jer. 39:10.

Two characteristics of this account of the fall of Jerusalem are striking,-its minute particularity, giving step by step the details of the tragedy, and its entire suppression of emotion. The passionless record tells the tale without a tear or a sob. For these we must go to the Book of Lamentations. This is the history of God's judgment, and here emotion would be misplaced. But there is a world of repressed feeling in the long-drawn narrative, as well as in the fact that three versions of the story are given here [Jer. 52:1 - Jer. 52:34, 2Ki. 25:1 - 2Ki. 25:30]. Sorrow curbed by submission, and steadily gazing on God's judicial act, is the temper of the narrative. It should be the temper of all sufferers. 'I was dumb, I opened not my mouth; because thou didst it.' But we may note the three stages in the final agony which this section distinguishes.

I. There is the entrance of the enemy. Jerusalem fell not by assault, but by famine. The siege lasted eighteen months, and ended when 'all the bread in the city was spent.' The pitiful pictures in Lamentations fill in the details of misery, telling how high-born women picked garbage from dung-heaps, and mothers made a ghastly meal of their infants, while the nobles were wasted to skeletons, and the little children piteously cried for bread. At length a breach was made in the northern wall [as Josephus tells us, 'at midnight'], and through it, on the ninth day of the fourth month [corresponding to July], swarmed the conquerors, unresisted. The commanders of the Babylonians planted themselves at 'the middle gate,' probably a gate in the wall between the upper and lower city, so securing for them the control of both.

How many of these fierce soldiers are named in Jer. 39:3? At first sight there seem to be six, but that number must be reduced by at least two, for Rab-saris and Rab-mag are official titles, and designate the offices [chief eunuch and chief magician] of the two persons whose names they respectively follow. Possibly Samgar-Nebo is also to be deducted, for it has been suggested that, as that name stands, it is anomalous, and it has been proposed to render its first element, *Samgar*, as meaning *cup-bearer*, and being the official title attached to the name preceding it; while its second part, *Nebo*, is regarded as the first element in a new name obtained by reading *shashban* instead of Sarsechim, and attaching that reading to Nebo.

This change would bring Jer. 39:3 into accord with Jer. 39:13, for in both places we should then have Nebo-shashban designated as chief of the eunuchs. However the number of the commanders is settled, and whatever their names, the point which the historian emphasises is their presence there. Had it come to this, that men whose very names were invocations of false gods [‘Nergal protect the king,’ ‘Nebo delivers me’ if we read ‘Nebo-shashban,’ or ‘Be gracious, Nebo,’ if Samgar-nebo] should sit close by the temple, and have their talons fixed in the Holy City?

These intruders were all unconscious of the meaning of their victory, and the tragedy of their presence there. They thought that they were Nebuchadnezzar’s servants, and had captured for him, at last, an obstinate little city, which had given more trouble than it was worth. Its conquest was but a drop in the bucket of his victories. How little they knew that they were serving that Jehovah whom they thought that Nebo had conquered in their persons! How little they knew that they were the instruments of the most solemn act of judgment in the world’s history till then!

The causes which led to the fall of Jerusalem could be reasonably set forth as purely political without a single reference to Israel’s sins or God’s judgment; but none the less was its capture the divine punishment of its departure from Him, and none the less were Nergal-sharezer and his fellows God’s tools, the axes with which He hewed down the barren tree. So does He work still, in national and individual history. You may, in a fashion, account for both without bringing Him in at all; but your philosophy of either will be partial, unless you recognise that ‘the history of the world is the judgment of the world.’ It was the same hand which set these harsh conquerors at the middle gate of Jerusalem that sent the German armies to encamp in the Place de la Concorde in Paris; and in neither case does the recognition of God in the crash of a falling throne absolve the victors from the responsibility of their deeds.

II. We have the flight and fate of Zedekiah and his evil advisers [Jer. 39:4 - Jer. 39:7]. His weakness of character shows itself to the end. Why was there no resistance? It would have better beseemed him to have died on his palace threshold than to have skulked away in the dark between the shelter of the ‘two walls.’ But he was a poor weakling, and the curse of God sat heavy on his soul, though he had tried to put it away. Conscience made a coward of him; for he, at all events, knew who had set the strangers by the middle gate. Men who harden heart and conscience against threatened judgments are very apt to collapse, when the threats are fulfilled. The frost breaks up with a rapid thaw.

Ezekiel [Eze. 12:12] prophesied the very details of the flight. It was to be 'in the dark,' the king himself was to 'carry' some of his valuables, they were to 'dig through' the earthen ramparts; and all appears to have been literally fulfilled. The flight was taken in the opposite direction from the entrance of the besiegers; two walls, which probably ran down the valley between Zion and the temple mount, afforded cover to the fugitives as far as to the south city wall, and there some postern let them out to the king's garden. That is a tragic touch. It was no time then to gather flowers. The forlorn and frightened company seems to have scattered when once outside the city; for there is a marked contrast in Jer. 39:4 between 'they fled' and 'he went.' In the description of his flight Zedekiah is still called, as in Jer. 39:1 - Jer. 39:2, the king; but after his capture he is only 'Zedekiah.'

Down the rocky valley of the Kedron he hurried, and had a long enough start of his pursuers to get to Jericho. Another hour would have seen him safe across Jordan, but the prospect of escape was only dangled before his eyes to make capture more bitter. Probably he was too much absorbed with his misery and fear to feel any additional humiliation from the mighty memories of the scene of his capture; but how solemnly fitting it was that the place which had seen Israel's first triumph, when 'by faith the walls of Jericho fell down,' should witness the lowest shame of the king who had cast away his kingdom by unbelief! The conquering dead might have gathered in shadowy shapes to reproach the weakling and sluggard who had sinned away the heritage which they had won. The scene of the capture underscores the lesson of the capture itself; namely, the victorious power of faith, and the defeat and shame which, in the long-run, are the fruits of an 'evil heart of unbelief, departing from the living God.'

That would be a sad march through all the length of the fair land that had slipped from his slack fingers, up to far-off Riblah, in the great valley between the Lebanon and the anti-Lebanon. Observe how, in Jer. 39:5 - Jer.

39:6, the king of Babylon has his royal title, and Zedekiah has not. The crown has fallen from his head, and there is no more a king in Judah. He who had been king now stands chained before the cruel conqueror. Well might the victor think that Nebo had overcome Jehovah, but better did the vanquished know that Jehovah had kept his word.

Cruelty and expediency dictated the savage massacre and mutilation which followed. The death of Zedekiah's sons, and of the nobles who had scoffed at Jeremiah's warnings, and the blinding of Zedekiah, were all measures of precaution as well as of savagery. They diminished the danger of revolt; and a blind, childless prisoner, without counsellors or friends, was harmless. But to make the sight of his slaughtered sons the poor wretch's last sight, was a refinement of gratuitous delight in torturing. Thus singularly was Ezekiel's enigma solved and harmonised with its apparent contradictions in Jeremiah's prophecies: 'Yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there' [Eze. 12:13].

Zedekiah is one more instance of the evil which may come from a weak character, and of the evil which may fall on it. He had good impulses, but he could not hold his own against the bad men round him, and so he stumbled on, not without misgivings, which only needed to be attended to with resolute determination, in order to have reversed his conduct and fate. Feeble hands can pull down venerable structures built in happier times. It takes a David and a Solomon to rear a temple, but a Zedekiah can overthrow it.

III. We have the completion of the conquest [Jer. 39:8 - Jer. 39:10]. The first care of the victors was, of course, to secure themselves, and fires and crowbars were the readiest way to that end. But the wail in the last chapter of Lamentations hints at the usual atrocities of the sack of a city, when brutal lust and as brutal ferocity are let loose. Jer. 52:1 - Jer. 52:34 shows that the final step in our narrative was separated from the capture of the city by a month, which was, no doubt, a month of nameless agonies, horrors, and shame. Then the last drop was added to the bitter cup, in the deportation of the bulk of the inhabitants, according to the politic custom of these old military monarchies. What rending of ties, what weariness and years of long-drawn-out yearning, that meant, can easily be imagined. The residue left behind to keep the country from relapsing into waste land was too weak to be dangerous, and too cowed to dare anything. One knows not who had the sadder lot, the exiles, or the handful of peasants left to till the fields that had once been their own, and to lament their brethren gone captives to the far-off land.

Surely the fall of Jerusalem, though all the agony is calmed ages ago, still remains as a solemn beacon-warning that the wages of sin is death, both for nations and individuals; that the threatenings of God’s Word are not idle, but will be accomplished to the utmost tittle; and that His patience stretches from generation to generation, and His judgments tarry because He is not willing that any should perish, but that for all the long-suffering there comes a time when even divine love sees that it is needful to say ‘Now!? and the bolt falls. The solemn word addressed to Israel has application as real to all Christian churches and individual souls: ‘You only have I known of all the inhabitants of the earth; therefore I will punish you for your iniquities.’

25)Jeremiah 39:18

Jeremiah

EBEDMELECH THE ETHIOPIAN

Jer. 39:18.

Ebedmelech is a singular anticipation of that other Ethiopian eunuch whom Philip met on the desert road to Gaza. It is prophetic that on the eve of the fall of the nation, a heathen man should be entering into union with God. It is a picture in little of the rejection of Israel and the ingathering of the Gentiles.

I. The identity in all ages of the bond that unites men to God.

It is a common notion that faith is peculiar to the New Testament. But the Old Testament ‘trust’ is identical with the New Testament ‘faith,’ and it is a great pity that the variation in translation has obscured that identity. The fact of the prominence given to law in the Old Testament does not affect this. For every effort to keep the law must have led to consciousness of imperfection, and that consciousness must have driven to the exercise of penitent trust. The difference of degrees of revelation does not affect it, for faith is the same, however various the contents of the creed.

Note further the personal object of Faith-'in ME.' The object of Faith is not a proposition but a Person. That Person is the same in the Old Testament and in the New. The Jehovah of the one is the God in Christ of the other. Consequently faith must be more than intellectual assent, it must be voluntary and emotional, the act of the whole man, 'the synthesis of the reason and the will.'

II. The contrast of a formal and real union with God.

The king, prophets, priests, the whole nation, had an outward connection with Him, but it meant nothing. And this foreigner, a slave, perhaps not even a proselyte, a eunuch, had what the children of the covenant had not, a true union with God through Faith.

Judaism was not an exclusive system, but was intended to bring in the nations to share in its blessings. Outward descent gave outward place within the covenant, but the distinction of real and formal place there was established from the beginning. What else than this is the meaning of all the threatenings of Deuteronomy? What else did Isaiah mean when he called the rulers in Jerusalem 'Rulers of Sodom'? Here the fates of Ebedmelech and of Zedekiah illustrate both sides of the truth. The danger of trusting in outward possession and of thinking that God's mercy is our property besets all Churches. Organisations of Christianity are necessary, but it is impossible to tell the harm that formal connection with them has done. There is only one bond that unites men to God-personal trust in Him as 'in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.'

III. The possibility of exercising uniting faith even in most unfavourable circumstances.

This Ebedmelech had everything against him. The contemptuous exclusion of him from any share in the covenant might well have discouraged him. The poorest Jew treated him as a heathen dog, who had no right even to crumbs from the table spread for the children only. He was plunged into a sea of godlessness, and saw examples enough of utter carelessness as to Jehovah in His professed servants to drive him away from a religion which had so little hold on its professed adherents. The times were gloomy, and the Jehovah whom Judah professed to worship seemed to have small power to help His worshippers. It would have been no wonder if the conduct of the people of Jerusalem had caused the name of Jehovah to be blasphemed by this Gentile, nor if he had revolted from a religion that was alleged to be the special property of one race, and that such a race! But he listened to the cry of his own heart, and to the words of God's prophet, and his faith pierced through all obstacles-like the roots of some tree feeling for the water. He found the vitalising fountain that he sought, and His name stands to all ages as a witness that no seeking heart, that longs for God, is ever balked in its search, and that a faith, very imperfect as to its knowledge, may be so strong as to its substance that it unites him who exercises it with God, while the possessors of ecclesiastical privileges and of untarnished and full-orbed orthodox knowledge have no fellowship with Him.

IV. The safety given by such uniting faith.

To Ebedmelech, escape from death by the besiegers' swords was promised. To us a more blessed safety and exemption from a worse destruction are assured. 'The life which is life indeed' may be ours, and shall assuredly be ours, if our trust knits us to Him who is the Life, and who has said 'He that liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.'

26)Jeremiah 44:4

Jeremiah

GOD'S PATIENT PLEADINGS

Jer. 44:4.

The long death-agony of the Jewish kingdom has come to an end. The frivolous levity, which fed itself on illusions and would not be sobered by facts, has been finally crushed out of the wretched people. The dreary succession of incompetent kings-now a puppet set up by Egypt, now another puppet set up by Babylon, has ended with the weak Zedekiah. The throne of David is empty, and the long line of kings, which numbered many a strong, wise, holy man, has dwindled into a couple of captives, one of them blind and both of them paupers on an idolatrous monarch's bounty. The country is desolate, the bulk of the people exiles, and the poor handful, who had been left by the conqueror, flitting like ghosts, or clinging, like domestic animals, to their burnt homes and wasted plains, have been quarrelling and fighting among themselves, murdering the Jewish ruler whom Babylon had left them, and then in abject terror have fled *en masse* across the border into Egypt, where they are living wretched lives. What a history that people had gone through since they had lived on the same soil before! From Moses to Zedekiah, what a story! From Goshen till now it had been one long tragedy which seems to have at last reached its fifth act. Nine hundred years have passed, and this is the issue of them all!

The circumstances might well stir the heart of the prophet, whose doleful task it had been to foretell the coming of the storm, who had had to strip off Judah's delusions and to proclaim its certain fall, and who in doing so had carried his life in his hand for forty years, and had never met with recognition or belief.

Jeremiah had been carried off by the fugitives to Egypt, and there he made a final effort to win them back to God. He passed before them the outline of the whole history of the nation, treating it as having accomplished one stadium-and what does he find? In all these days since Goshen there has been one monotonous story of vain divine pleadings and human indifference, God beseeching and Israel turning away-and now at last the crash, long foretold, never credited, which had been drawing nearer through all the centuries, has come, and Israel is scattered among the people.

Such are the thoughts and emotions that speak in the exquisitely tender words of our text. It suggests-

I. God's antagonism to sin.

It is the one thing in the universe to which He is opposed. Sin is essentially antagonism to God. People shrink from the thought of God's hatred of sin, because of-

An underestimate of its gravity. Contrast the human views of its enormity, as shown by men's playing with it, calling it by half-jocose names and the like, with God's thought of its heinousness.

A false dread of seeming to attribute human emotions to God. But there is in God what corresponds to our human feelings, something analogous to the attitude of a pure human mind recoiling from evil.

The divine love must necessarily be pure, and the mightier its energy of forth-going, the mightier its energy of recoil. God's 'hate' is Love inverted and reverted on itself. A divine love which had in it no necessity of hating evil would be profoundly immoral, and would be called devilish more fitly than divine.

II. The great purpose of the divine pleadings.

To wean from sin is the main end of prophecy. It is the main end of all revelation. God must chiefly desire to make His creatures like Himself. Sin makes a special revelation necessary. Sin determines the form of it.

III. God's tender and unwearied efforts.

'Rising early' is a strong metaphor to express persistent effort. The more obstinate is our indifference, the more urgent are His calls. He raises His voice as our deafness grows. Mark, too, the tenderness of the entreaty in this text, 'Oh, do not this abominable thing that I hate!' His hatred of it is adduced as a reason which should touch any heart that loves Him. He beseeches as if He, too, were saying, 'Though I might be bold to enjoin thee' that which is fitting, 'yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee.' The manifestation of His disapproval and the appeal to our love by the disclosure of His own are the most powerful, winning and compelling dehortations from sin. Not by brandishing the whip, not by a stern law written on tables of stone, but by unveiling His heart, does God win us from our sins.

IV. The obstinate resistance to God's tender pleadings.

The tragedy of the nation is summed up in one word, 'They hearkened not.'

That power of neglecting God’s voice and opposing God’s will is the mystery of our nature. How strange it is that a human will should be able to lift itself in opposition to the Sovereign Will! But stranger and more mysterious and tragic still is it that we should choose to exercise that power and find pleasure, and fancy that we shall ever find advantage, in refusing to listen to His entreaties and choosing to flout His uttered will.

Such opposition was Israel’s ruin. It will be ours if we persist in it. ‘If God spared not the natural branches, neither will He spare thee.’

27)Jeremiah 47:6-7

Jeremiah

THE SWORD OF THE LORD

Jer. 47:6 - Jer. 47:7.

The prophet is here in the full tide of his prophecies against the nations round about. This paragraph is entirely occupied with threatenings. Bearing the cup of woes, he turns to one after another of the ancestral enemies of Israel, Egypt and Philistia on the south and west, Moab on the south and east, then northwards to Ammon, south to Edom, north to Damascus, Kedar, Hagor, Elam, and finally to the great foe-Babylon. In the hour of Israel’s lowest fortunes and the foe’s proudest exultation these predictions are poured out. Jeremiah stands as if wielding the sword of which our text speaks, and whirls and points the flashing terror of its sharpened edge against the ring of foes. It turns every way, like the weapon of the angelic guard before the lost paradise, and wherever it turns a kingdom falls.

In the midst of his stern denunciations he checks himself to utter this plaintive cry of pity and longing. A tender gleam of compassion breaks through the heart of the thunder-cloud. It is very beautiful to note that the point at which the irrepressible welling up of sweet waters breaks the current of his prophecy is the prediction against Israel’s bitterest, because nearest, foe, ‘these uncircumcised Philistines.’ He beholds the sea of wrath drowning the great Philistine plain, its rich harvests trampled under foot by ‘stamping of hoofs of his strong ones,’ and that desolation wrings from his heart the words of our text. I take them to be spoken by the prophet. That, of course, is doubtful. It may be that they are meant to give in a vivid dramatic form the effect of the judgments on the sufferers. They recognise these as ‘the sword of the Lord.’ Their only thought is an impatient longing that the judgments would cease,-no confession of sin, no humbling of them selves, but only-’remove Thy hand from us.’

And the answer is either the prophet’s or the divine voice; spoken in the one case to himself, in the other to the Philistines; but in either setting forth the impossibility that the sweeping sword should rest, since it is the instrument in God’s hand, executing His charge and fulfilling His appointment.

I. The shrinking from the unsheathed sword of the Lord.

We may deal with the words as representing very various states of mind.

They may express the impatience of sufferers. Afflictions are too often wasted. Whatever the purpose of chastisement, the true lesson of it is so seldom learned, even in regard to the lowest wisdom it is adapted to teach. In an epidemic, how few people learn to take precautions, such as cleanliness or attention to diet! In hard times commercially, how slow most are to learn the warning against luxury, over-trading, haste to be rich! And in regard to higher lessons, men have a dim sense sometimes that the blow comes from God, but, like Balaam, go on their way in spite of the angel with the sword. It does not soften, nor restrain, nor drive to God. The main result is, impatient longing for its removal.

The text may express the rooted dislike to the thought and the fact of punishment as an element in divine government. This is a common phase of feeling always, and especially so now. There is a present tendency, good in many aspects, but excessive, to soften away the thought of punishment; or to suppose that God’s punishments must have the same purposes as men’s. We cannot punish by way of retribution, for no balance of ours is fine enough to weigh motives or to determine criminality. Our punishments can only be deterrent or reformatory, but this is by reason of our weakness. He has other objects in view.

Current ideas of the love of God distort it by pitting it against His retributive righteousness. Current ideas of sin diminish its gravity by tracing it to heredity or environment, or viewing it as a necessary stage in progress. The sense of God's judicial action is paralysed and all but dead in multitudes.

All these things taken together set up a strong current of opinion against any teaching of punitive energy in God.

The text may express the pitying reluctance of the prophet.

Jeremiah is remarkable for the weight with which 'the burden of the Lord' pressed upon him. The true prophet feels the pang of the woes which he is charged to announce more than his hearers do.

Unfair charges are made against gospel preachers, as if they delighted in the thought of the retribution which they have to proclaim.

II. The solemn necessity for the unsheathing of the sword.

The judgments must go on. In the text the all-sufficient reason given is that God has willed it so. But we must take into account all that lies in that name of 'Lord' before we understand the message, which brought patience to the heart of the prophet. If a Jewish prophet believed anything, he believed that the will of the Lord was absolutely good. Jeremiah's reason for the flashing sword is no mere beating down human instincts, by alleging a will which is sovereign, and there an end. We have to take into account the whole character of Him who has willed it, and then we can discern it to be inevitable that God should punish evil.

His character makes it inevitable. God's righteousness cannot but hate sin and fight against it. To leave it unpunished stains His glory.

God's love cannot but draw and wield the sword. It is unsheathed in the interests of all that is 'lovely and of good report.' If God is God at all, and not an almighty devil, He must hate sin. The love and the righteousness, which in deepest analysis are one, must needs issue in punishment. There would be a blight over the universe if they did not.

The very order of the universe makes it inevitable. All things, as coming from Him, must work for His lovers and against His enemies, as ‘the stars in their courses fought against Sisera.’

The constitution of men makes it inevitable. Sin brings its own punishment, in gnawing conscience, defiled memories, incapacity for good, and many other penalties.

It is to be remembered that the text originally referred to retribution on nations for national sins, and that what Jeremiah regarded as the strokes of the Lord might be otherwise regarded as political catastrophes. Let us not overlook that application of the principles of the text. Scripture regards the so-called ‘natural consequences’ of a nation’s sins as God’s judgments on them. The Christian view of the government of the world looks on all human affairs as moved by God, though done by men. It takes full account of the responsibility of men the doers, but above all, recognises ‘the rod and Him who hath appointed it.’ We see exemplified over and over again in the world’s history the tragic truth that the accumulated consequences of a nation’s sins fall on the heads of a single generation. Slowly, drop by drop, the cup is filled. Slowly, moment by moment, the hand moves round the dial, and then come the crash and boom of the hammer on the deep-toned bell. Good men should pray not, ‘Put up thyself into thy scabbard,’ but, ‘Gird Thy sword on Thy thigh, O thou most mighty. . . on behalf of truth and meekness and righteousness.’

III. The sheathing of the sword.

The passionate appeal in the text, which else is vain, has in large measure its satisfaction in the work of Christ.

God does not delight in punishment. He has provided a way. Christ bears the consequence of man’s sin, the sense of alienation, the pains and sorrows, the death. He does not bear them for Himself. His bearing them accomplishes the ends at which punishment aims, in expressing the divine hatred of sin and in subduing the heart. Trusting in Him, the sword does not fall on us. In some measure indeed it still does. But it is no longer a sword to smite, but a lancet to inflict a healing wound. And the worst punishment does not fall on us. God’s sword was sheathed in Christ’s breast. So trust in Him, then shall you have ‘boldness in the day of judgment.’

28)Jeremiah 50:34

Jeremiah

THE KINSMAN-REDEEMER

Jer. 50:34.

Among the remarkable provisions of the Mosaic law there were some very peculiar ones affecting the next-of-kin. The nearest living blood relation to a man had certain obligations and offices to discharge, under certain contingencies, in respect of which he received a special name; which is sometimes translated in the Old Testament ‘Redeemer,’ and sometimes ‘Avenger’ of blood. What the etymological signification of the word may be is, perhaps, somewhat doubtful. It is taken by some authorities to come from a word meaning ‘to set free.’ But a consideration of the offices which the law prescribed for the ‘Goel’ is of more value for understanding the peculiar force of the metaphor in such a text as this, than any examination of the original meaning of the word. Jehovah is represented as having taken upon Himself the functions of the next-of-kin, and is the Kinsman-Redeemer of His people. The same thought recurs frequently in the Old Testament, especially in the second half of the prophecies of Isaiah, and it were much to be desired that the Revised Version had adopted some means of showing an English reader the instances, since the expression suggests a very interesting and pathetic view of God’s relation to His people.

I. Let me state briefly the qualifications and offices of the kinsman-redeemer, ‘*the Goel.’* The qualifications may be all summed up in one-that he must be the nearest blood relation of the person whose Goel he was. He might be brother, or less nearly related, but this was essential, that of all living men, he was the most closely connected. That qualification has to be kept well in mind when thinking of the transference of the office to God in His relation to Israel, and through Israel to us.

Such being his qualification, what were his duties? Mainly three. The first was connected with property, and is thus stated in the words of the law, ‘If thy brother be waxen poor, and sell some of his possession, then shall his *kinsman* that is next unto him come, and shall redeem that which his brother hath sold’ [Lev. 25:25]. The Mosaic law was very jealous of large estates. The prophet pronounced a curse upon those who joined ‘land to land, and field to field. . . that they may be alone in the midst of the earth.’ One great purpose steadily kept in view in all the Mosaic land-laws was the prevention of the alienation of the land from its original holders, and of its accumulation in a few hands. The idea underlying the law was that of the tribal or family ownership-or rather occupancy, for God was the owner and Israel but a tenant-and not individual possession. That thought carries us back to a social state long since passed away, but of which traces are still left even among ourselves. It was carried out thoroughly in the law of Moses, however imperfectly in actual practice. The singular institution of the year of Jubilee operated, among other effects, to check the acquisition of large estates. It provided that land which had been alienated was to revert to its original occupants, and so, in substance, prohibited purchase and permitted only the lease of land for a maximum term of fifty years. We do not know how far its enactments were a dead letter, but their spirit and intention were obviously to secure the land of the tribe to the tribe for ever, to keep the territory of each distinct, to discourage the creation of a landowning class, with its consequent landless class, to prevent the extremes of poverty and wealth, and to perpetuate a diffused, and nearly uniform, modest wellbeing amongst a pastoral and agricultural community, and to keep all in mind that the land was ‘not to be sold for ever, for it is Mine,’ saith the Lord.

The obligation on the next-of-kin to buy back alienated property was quite as much imposed on him for the sake of the family as of the individual.

The second of his duties was to buy back a member of his family fallen into slavery. ‘If a stranger or sojourner with thee be waxen rich, and thy brother be waxen poor beside him, and sell himself unto the stranger. . . after that he is sold, he may be redeemed; one of his brethren may redeem him.’ The price was to vary according to the time which had to elapse before the year of Jubilee, when all slaves were necessarily set free. So Hebrew slavery was entirely unlike the thing called by the same name in other countries, and by virtue of this power of purchase at any time, which was vested in the nearest relative, taken along with the compulsory manumission of all ‘slaves’ every fiftieth year, came to be substantially a voluntary engagement for a fixed time, which might be ended even before that time had expired, if compensation for the unexpired term was made to the master.

It is to be observed that this provision applied only to the case of a Hebrew who had sold himself. No other person could sell a man into slavery. And it applied only to the case of a Hebrew who had sold himself to a foreigner. No Jew was allowed to hold a Jew as a slave. ‘If thy brother be waxen poor with thee, and sell himself unto thee, thou shalt not make him to serve as a bondservant: as an hired servant, and as a sojourner, he shall be with thee.’ [Lev. 25:39].

The last of the offices of the kinsman-redeemer was that of avenging the blood of a murdered relative. If a man were stricken to death, it became a solemn obligation to exact life for life, and the blood-feud incumbent on all the family was especially binding on the next-of-kin. The obligation shocks a modern mind, accustomed to relegate all punishment to the action of law which no criminal thinks of resisting. But customs and laws are unfairly estimated when the state of things which they regulated is forgotten or confused with that of today. The law of blood-feud among the Hebrews was all in the direction of restricting the wild justice of revenge, and of entrusting it to certain chosen persons out of the kindred of the murdered man. The savage vendetta was too deeply engrained in the national habits to be done away with altogether. All that was for the time possible was to check and systematise it, and this was done by the institution in question, which did not so much put the sword into the hand of the next-of-kin as strike it out of the hand of all the rest of the clan.

These, then, were the main parts of the duty of the Goel, the kinsman-redeemer-buying back the alienated land, purchasing the freedom of the man who had voluntarily sold himself as a slave, and avenging the slaying of a kinsman.

II. Notice the grand mysterious transference of this office to Jehovah.

This singular institution was gradually discerned to be charged with lofty meaning and to be capable of being turned into a dim shadowing of something greater than itself. You will find that God begins to be spoken of in the later portions of Scripture as the Kinsman-Redeemer. I reckon eighteen instances, of which thirteen are in the second half of Isaiah. The reference is, no doubt, mainly to the great deliverance from captivity in Egypt and Babylon, but the thought sweeps a much wider circle and goes much deeper down than these historical facts. There was in it some dim feeling that though God was separated from them by all the distance between finitude and infinitude, yet they were nearer to Him than to any one else; that the nearest living relation whom these poor persecuted Jews had was the Lord of Hosts, beneath whose wings they might come to trust. Therefore does the prophet kindle into rapture and triumphant confidence as he thinks that the Lord of Hosts, mighty, unspeakable, high above our thoughts, our words, or our praise, is Israel's Kinsman, and, therefore, their Redeemer. How profound a consciousness that man was made in the image of God, and that, in spite of all the gulf between finite and infinite, and the yet deeper gulf between sinful man and righteous God, He was closer to a poor struggling soul than even the dearest were, must have been at all events dawning on the prophet who dared to think of the Holy One in the Heavens as Israel's Kinsman. No doubt, he was dwelling mostly on historical outward deliverances wrought for the nation, and his idea of Israel's kinship to God applied to the people, not to individuals, and meant chiefly that the nation had been chosen for God's. But still the thought must have been felt to be great and wonderful, and some faint apprehension of the yet deeper sense in which it is true that God is the next-of-kin to every soul and ready to be its Redeemer, would no doubt begin to be felt.

The deepening of the idea from a reference to external and national deliverances, and the large, dim hopes which clustered round it, may be illustrated by one or two significant instances. Take, for example, that mysterious and very beautiful utterance in the Book of Job, where the man, in the very depth of his despair, and just because there is not a human being that has any drop of pity for him, turns from earth, and striking confidence out of his very despair, like fire from flint, sees there his Kinsman-Redeemer. 'I know that my Redeemer liveth.' Men may mock him, friends may turn against him, the wife of his bosom may tempt him, comforters may pour vitriol instead of oil into his wounds, yet he, sitting on his dunghill there, poverty-stricken and desolate, knows that God is of kin to him, and will do the kinsman's part by him. The very metaphor implies that the divine intervention which he expects is to take place after his death. It was a dead man whose blood the Goel avenged. Thus the view which sees in the subsequent words a hope, however dim and undefined, of an experience of a divine manifestation on his behalf beyond the grave is the only one which gives its full force to the central idea of the passage, as well as to the obscure individual expressions. Most strikingly, then, he goes on to say, carrying out the allusion, 'and that he shall stand at the last upon the dust.' Little did it boot the murdered man, lying there stark, with the knife in his bosom, that the murderer should be slain by the swift justice of his kinsman-avenger, but Job felt that, in some mysterious way, God would appear for him, after he had been laid in the dust, and that he would somehow share in the gladness of His manifestation-for he believes that 'without his flesh' he will see God, 'whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another.' Large and mysterious hopes are gathering round the metaphor, which flash some light into the darkness of the grave, and give to the troubled soul the assurance that when life with all its troubles is past, and flesh has seen corruption, the inmost personal being of every man who commits his cause to God will behold Him coming forth his Kinsman-Redeemer.

Another illustration of the hopes which gathered round this image is found in the great psalm which prophesies of the true King of Peace, in language too wide for any poetical licence to warrant if intended only to describe a Jewish king [Psa. 72:14]. The universal dominion of this great King is described in terms which, though they may be partly referred to the Jewish monarchy at its greatest expansion, sweep far beyond its bounds in exulting anticipation that 'all kings shall fall down before Him, all nations shall serve Him.' The reason for this world-wide dominion is not military power, as was the case with the warrior kings of old, who bound nations together for a little while in an artificial unity with iron chains, but His dominion is universal, '*for* He shall deliver the needy when he crieth, . . . He shall *redeem* their souls from oppression and violence, and precious shall their blood be in His sight.' Two of the functions of the Kinsman-Redeemer are here united. He buys back slaves from their tyrannous masters, and He avenges their shed blood. And because His Kingdom is a kingdom of gentle pity and loving help, because He is of the same blood with His subjects, and brings liberty to the captives, therefore it is universal and everlasting. For the strongest thing in all the world is love, and He who can staunch men's wounds, and will hear their cries and help them, will rule them with authority which conquerors cannot wield.

This universal King, the kinsman and the sovereign of all the needy, is not God. A human figure is rising before the prophet-psalmist's eye, whose meekness as well as His majesty, and whose kingdom as well as His redeeming power, seem to pass beyond human limits. Divine offices seem to be devolved on a man's shoulders. Dim hopes are springing which point onwards. So that great psalm leads us a step further.

III. See the perfect fulfilment of this divine office by the man Christ Jesus.

Job's anticipation and the psalmist's rapturous vision are fulfilled in the Incarnate Word, in whom God comes near to us all and makes Himself kindred to our flesh, that He may discharge all those blessed offices, of redeeming from slavery, of recovering our alienated inheritance, and of guarding our lives, which demand at once divine power and human nearness. Christ is our Kinsman. True, the divine nature and the human are nearly allied, so that even apart from the Incarnation, men may feel that none is so truly and closely akin to them as their Father in Heaven is. But how much more blessed than even that kinship is the consanguinity of Christ, who is doubly of kin to each soul of man, both because in His true manhood He is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, and because in His divinity He is nearer to us than the closest human kindred can ever be. By both He comes so near to us that we may clasp Him by our faith, and rest upon Him, and have Him for our nearest friend, our brother. He is nearer to each of us than our dearest is. He loves us with the love of kindred, and can fill our hearts and wills, and help our weakness in better, more inward ways than all sympathy and love of human hearts can do. Between the atoms of the densest of material bodies there is an interspace of air, as is shown by the fact that everything is compressible if you can find the force sufficient to compress it. That is to say, in the material universe no particle touches another. And so in the spiritual region, there is an awful film of separation between each of us and all others, however closely we may be united. We each live on our own little island in the deep, ‘with echoing straits between us thrown.’ We have a solemn consciousness of personality, of responsibility unshared by any, of a separate destiny parting us from our dearest. Arms may be twined, but they must be unlinked some day, and each in turn must face the awful solitude of death, as each has really faced that scarcely less awful solitude of life, alone. But ‘he that is joined to the Lord is one spirit,’ and our kinsman, Christ, will come so near to us, that we shall be in Him and He in us, one spirit and one life. He is your nearest relation, nearer than husband, wife, parent, brother, sister, or friend. He is nearer to you than your very selves. He is your better self. That is His qualification for His office.

Because He is man’s kinsman, He buys back His enslaved brethren. The bondage from which ‘one of His brethren’ might ‘redeem’ the Israelite was a voluntary bondage into which he had sold himself. And such is our slavery. None can rob us of our freedom but ourselves. The world and the flesh and the devil cannot put their chains on us unless our own wills hold out our hands for the manacles.

And, alas! it is often an unsuspected slavery. ‘How sayest thou, ye shall be made free. We were never in bondage to any man,’ boasted the angry disputants with Christ. And if they had lifted up their eyes they might have seen from the Temple courts in which they stood, the citadel full of Roman soldiers, and perhaps the golden eagles gleaming in the sunshine on the loftiest battlements. Yet with that strange power of ignoring disagreeable facts they dared to assert their freedom. ‘Never in bondage to any man!’- what about Egypt, and Assyria, and Babylon? Had there never been an Antiochus? Was Rome a reality? Did it lay no yoke on them? Was it all a dream?

Some of us are just as foolish, and try as desperately to annihilate facts by ignoring them, and to make ourselves free by passionately denying that we are slaves. But ‘he that committeth sin is the slave of sin.’ That sounds a paradox. I am master of my own actions, you may say, and never freer than when I break the bonds of right and duty and choose to do what is contrary to them, for no reason on earth but because I choose. That is liberty, emancipation from the burdensome restraints which your narrow preaching about law and conscience would impose. Yes, you are masters of your actions, and your sinful actions very soon become masters of you. Do we not know that that is true? You fall into, or walk into a habit, and then it gets the mastery of you, and you cannot get rid of it. Whosoever sets his foot upon that slippery inclined plane of wrongdoing, after he has gone a little way, gravitation is too much for him and away he goes down the hill. ‘Whosoever committeth sin is the slave of sin.’ Did you ever try to kill a bad habit, a vice? Did you find it easy work? Was it not your master? You thought that a chain no stronger than a spider’s web was round your wrist till you tried to break it; and then you found it a chain of adamant. Many men who boast themselves free are ‘tied and bound with the cords of their sins.’

Dreaming of freedom, you have sold yourself, and that ‘for nought.’ Is that not true, tragically true?

What have you made out of sin? Is the game worth the candle? Will it continue to be so? Ye shall be redeemed without money, for Jesus Christ laid down His life for you and me, that by His death we might receive forgiveness and deliverance from the power of sin. And so your Kinsman, nearer to you than all else, has bought you back. Do not refuse the offered emancipation, but ‘if thou mayest be made free, use it rather.’ Be not like the spiritless slaves, for whose servile choice the law provided, who had rather remain bond than go out free. Surely when Christ calls you to liberty, you will not turn from Him to the tyrannous masters whom you have served, and, like the Hebrew slave, let them fasten you to their door-posts with their awl through your ear. Do you hug your chains and prefer your bondage?

Your Kinsman-Redeemer brings back your squandered inheritance, which is God. God is the only possession that makes a man rich. He alone is worth calling ‘my portion.’ It is only when we have God in our hearts, God in our heads, God in our souls, God in our life-it is only when we love Him, and think about Him, and obey Him, and bring our characters into harmony with Him, and so possess Him-it is only then that we become truly rich. No other possession corresponds to our capacities so as to fill up all our needs and satisfy all our being. No other possession passes into our very substance and becomes inseparable from ourselves. So the mystical fervour of the psalmist's devotion spoke a simple prose truth when he exclaimed, 'The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup.'

We have squandered our inheritance. We have sinned away fellowship with God. We have flung away our true wealth, 'wasted our substance in riotous living.' And here is our Elder Brother, our nearest relative, who has always been with the Father; but who, instead of grudging the prodigals their fatted calf and their hearty welcome when they come back, has Himself, by the sacrifice of Himself, won for them the inheritance, its earnest in the possession of God's spirit here and its completion in the broad fields of 'the inheritance of the saints in light,' the entire fruition and possession of the divine in the life to come. 'If children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.'

Your Kinsman-Redeemer will keep your lives under His care, and be ready to plead your cause. 'He that touches you, touches the apple of Mine eye.' 'He reproved kings for their sake, saying, Touch not Mine anointed.' Not in vain does the cry go up to Him, 'Avenge, O Lord, Thy slaughtered saints,'- and if no apparent retribution has followed, and if often His servant's blood seems to have been shed in vain, still we know that it has often been the seed of the Church, and that He who puts our tears into His bottle will not count our blood less precious in His sight. So we may rest confident that our Kinsman-Redeemer will charge Himself with pleading our cause and intervening in our behalf, that He will compass us about with His protection, and that we are knit so close to Him that our woes and foes are His, and that we cannot die as long as He lives.

So, dear brethren, be sure of this, that if only you will take Christ for your Saviour and brother, your Helper and Friend, if only you will rest yourself upon that complete sacrifice which He has made for the sins of the world, He will give you liberty, and restore your lost inheritance, and your blood shall be precious in His sight, and He will keep His hand around you and preserve you; and finally will bring you into His home and yours. 'In Him we have redemption through His blood,' and He comes to every one of you now, even through my poor lips, with His ancient word of merciful invitation: 'Behold! I have blotted out as a cloud thy sins and as a thick cloud thy transgressions. Turn unto Me, for I have redeemed thee.'

29)Jeremiah 52:1-11

Jeremiah

'AS SODOM'

Jer. 52:1 - Jer. 52:11.

This account of the fall of Jerusalem is all but identical with that in 2Ki. 25:1 - 2Ki. 25:30 It was probably taken thence by some editor of Jeremiah's prophecies, perhaps Baruch, who felt the appropriateness of appending to these the verification of them in that long-foretold and disbelieved judgment.

The absence of every expression of emotion is most striking. In one sentence the wrath of God is pointed to as the cause of all; and, for the rest, the tragic facts which wrung the writer's heart are told in brief, passionless sentences, which sound liker the voice of the recording angel than that of a man who had lived through the misery which he recounts. The Book of Lamentations weeps and sobs with the grief of the devout Jew; but the historian smothers feeling while he tells of God's righteous judgment.

Zedekiah owed his throne to 'the king of Babylon,' and, at first, was his obedient vassal, himself going to Babylon [Jer. 51:59] and swearing allegiance [Eze. 17:13]. But rebellion soon followed, and the perjured young king once more pursued the fatal, fascinating policy of alliance with Egypt. There could be but one end to that madness, and, of course, the Chaldean forces soon appeared to chastise this presumptuous little monarch, who dared to defy the master of the world. Our narrative curtails its account of Zedekiah's reign, bringing into strong relief only the two facts of his following Jehoiakim's evil ways, and his rebellion against Babylon. But behind the rash, ignorant young man, it sees God working, and traces all the insane bravado by which he was ruining his kingdom and himself to God's 'wrath,' not thereby diminishing Zedekiah's responsibility for his own acts, but declaring that his being ‘given over to a reprobate mind’ was the righteous divine punishment for past sin.

An eighteen months’ agony is condensed into three verses [Jer. 52:4 - Jer. 52:6], in which the minute care to specify dates pathetically reveals the depth of the impression which the first appearance of the besieging army made, and the deeper wound caused by the city’s fall. The memory of these days has not faded yet, for both are still kept as fasts by the synagogue. We look with the narrator’s eye at the deliberate massing of the immense besieging force drawing its coils round the doomed city, like a net round a deer, and mark with him the piling of the mounds, and the erection on them of siege-towers. We hear of no active siege operations till the final assault. Famine was Nebuchadnezzar’s best general. ‘Sitting down they watched’ *her* ‘there,’ and grimly waited till hunger became unbearable. We can fill up much of the outline in this narrative from the rest of Jeremiah, which gives us a vivid and wretched picture of imbecility, divided counsels, and mad hatred of God’s messenger, blind refusal to see facts, and self-confidence which no disaster could abate. And, all the while, the monstrous serpent was slowly tightening its folds round the struggling, helpless rabbit. We have to imagine all the misery.

The narrative hurries on to its close. What widespread and long-drawn-out privation that one sentence covers: ‘The famine was sore in the city, so that there was no bread for the people’! Lamentations is full of the cries of famished children and mothers who eat the fruit of their own bodies. At last, on the memorable black day, the ninth of the fourth month [say July], ‘a breach was made,’ and the Chaldean forces poured in through it. Jer. 39:3 tells the names of the Babylonian officers who ‘sat in the middle gate’ of the Temple, polluting it with their presence. There seems to have been no resistance from the enfeebled, famished people; but apparently some of the priests were slain in the sanctuary, perhaps in the act of defending it from the entrance of the enemy. The Chaldeans would enter from the north, and, while they were establishing themselves in the Temple, Zedekiah ‘and all the men of war’ fled, stealing out of the city by a covered way between two walls, on the south side, and leaving the city to the conqueror, without striking a blow. They had talked large when danger was not near; but braggarts are cowards, and they thought now of nothing but their own worthless lives. Then, as always, the men who feared God feared nothing else, and the men who scoffed at the day of retribution, when it was far off, were unmanned with terror when it dawned.

The investment had not been complete on the southern side, and the fugitives got away across Kedron and on to the road to Jericho, their purpose, no doubt, being to put the Jordan between them and the enemy. One can picture that stampede down the rocky way, the anxious looks cast backwards, the confusion, the weariness, the despair when the rush of the pursuers overtook the famine-weakened mob. In sight of Jericho, which had witnessed the first onset of the irresistible desert-hardened host under Joshua, the last king of Israel, deserted by his army, was ‘taken in their pits,’ as hunters take a wild beast. The march to Riblah, in the far north, would be full of indignities arid of physical suffering. The soldiers of that ‘bitter and hasty’ nation would not spare him one insult or act of cruelty, and he had a tormentor within worse than they. ‘Why did I not listen to the prophet? What a fool I have been! If I had only my time to come over again, how differently I would do!’ The miserable self-reproaches, which shoot their arrows into our hearts when it is too late, would torture Zedekiah, as they will sooner or later do to all who did not listen to God’s message while there was yet time. The sinful, mad past kept him company on one hand; and, on the other, there attended him a dark, if doubtful, future. He knew that he was at the disposal of a fierce conqueror, whom he had deeply incensed, and who had little mercy. ‘What will become of me when I am face to face with Nebuchadnezzar? Would that I had kept subject to him!’ A past gone to ruin, a present honey-combed with gnawing remorse and dread, a future threatening, problematical, but sure to be penal- these were what this foolish young king had won by showing his spirit and despising Jeremiah’s warnings, It is always a mistake to fly in the face of God’s commands. All sin is folly, and every evildoer might say with poor Robert Burns:

‘I backward cast my e’e

On prospects drear!

An’ forward, tho’ I canna see,

I guess an’ fear.’

Nebuchadnezzar was in Riblah, away up in the north, waiting the issue of the campaign. Zedekiah was nothing to him but one of the many rebellious vassals of whom he had to make an example lest rebellion should spread, and who was especially guilty because he was Nebuchadnezzar's own nominee, and had sworn allegiance. Policy and his own natural disposition reinforced by custom dictated his barbarous punishment meted to the unfortunate kinglet of the petty kingdom that had dared to perk itself up against his might. How little he knew that he was the executioner of God's decrees! How little the fact that he was so, diminished his responsibility for his cruelty! The savage practice of blinding captive kings, so as to make them harmless and save all trouble with them, was very common. Zedekiah was carried to Babylon, and thus was fulfilled Ezekiel's enigmatical prophecy, 'I will bring him to Babylon, . . . yet shall he not see it, though he shall die there' [Eze. 12:13].

The fall of Jerusalem should teach us that a nation is a moral whole, capable of doing evil and of receiving retribution, and not a mere aggregation of individuals. It should teach us that transgression does still, though not so directly or certainly as in the case of Israel, sap the strength of kingdoms; and that to-day, as truly as of old, 'righteousness exalteth a nation.' It should accustom us to look on history as not only the result of visible forces, but as having behind it, and reaching its end through the visible forces, the unseen hand of God. For Christians, the vision of the Apocalypse contains the ultimate word on 'the philosophy of history.' It is 'the Lamb before the Throne,' who opens the roll with the seven seals, and lets the powers of whom it speaks loose for their march through the world. It should teach us God's long-suffering patience and loving efforts to escape the necessity of smiting, and also God's rigid justice, which will not shrink from smiting when all these efforts have failed.

Ezekiel

1) EZEKIEL 8:12
2) EZEKIEL 12:27
3) EZEKIEL 36:25-38
4) EZEKIEL 37:1-14
5) EZEKIEL 47:1

1) **Ezekiel 8:12**

Ezekiel

CHAMBERS OF IMAGERY

Eze. 8:12.

This is part of a vision which came to the prophet in his captivity. He is carried away in imagination from his home amongst the exiles in the East to the Temple of Jerusalem. There he sees in one dreadful series representations of all the forms of idolatry to which the handful that were left in the land were cleaving. There meets him on the threshold of the court ‘the image of jealousy,’ the generalised expression for the aggregate of idolatries which had stirred the anger of the divine husband of the nation. Then he sees within the Temple three groups representing the idolatries of three different lands. First, those with whom my text is concerned, who, in some underground room, vaulted and windowless, were bowing down before painted animal forms upon the walls. Probably they were the representatives of Egyptian worship, for the description of their temple might have been taken out of any book of travels in Egypt in the present day. It is only an ideal picture that is represented to Ezekiel, and not a real fact. It is not at all probable that all these various forms of idolatry were found at any time within the Temple itself. And the whole cast of the vision suggests that it is an ideal picture, and not reality, with which we have to do. Hence the number of these idolaters was seventy-the successors of the seventy whom Moses led up to Sinai to see the God of Israel! And now here they are grovelling before brute forms painted on the walls in a hole in the dark. Their leader bears a name which might have startled them in their apostasy, and choked their prayers in their throats, for Jaazan-iah means ‘the Lord hears.’ Each man has a censer in his hand-self-consecrated priests of self-chosen deities. Shrouded in obscurity, they pleased themselves with the ancient lie, ‘The Lord sees not; He hath forsaken the earth.’ And then, into that Sanhedrim of apostates there comes, all unknown to them, the light of God’s presence; and the eye of the prophet marks their evil.

I have nothing to do here with the other groups which Ezekiel saw in his vision. The next set were the representatives of the women of Israel, who, false at once to their womanhood and to their God, were taking part in the nameless obscenities and abominations of the worship of the Syrian Adonis. And the next, who from their numbers seem to be intended to stand for the representatives of the priesthood, as the former were of the whole people, represent the worshippers who had fallen under the fascinations of a widespread Eastern idolatry, and with their backs to the house of the Lord were bowing before the rising sun.

All these false faiths got on very well together. Their worshippers had no quarrel with each other. Polytheism, by its very nature and the necessity of its being, is tolerant. All its rabble of gods have a mutual understanding, and are banded together against the only One that says, ‘Thou shalt have none other gods beside Me.’

But now, I take this vision in a meaning which the prophet had no intention to put on it. I do not often do that with my texts, and when I do I like to confess frankly that I am doing it. So I take the words now as a kind of symbol which may help to put into a picturesque and more striking form some very familiar and homely truths. Look at that dark-painted chamber that we have all of us got in our hearts; at the idolatries that go on there, and at the flashing of the sudden light of God who marks, into the midst of the idolatry, ‘Hast thou seen what the ancients of the children of Israel do in the dark, each man in the chambers of his imagery?’

I. Think of the dark and painted chamber which we all of us carry in our hearts.

Every man is a mystery to himself as to his fellows. With reverence, we may say of each other as we say of God-’Clouds and darkness are round about Him.’ After all the manifestations of a life, we remain enigmas to one another and mysteries to ourselves. For every man is no fixed somewhat, but a growing personality, with dormant possibilities of good and evil lying in him, which up to the very last moment of his life may flame up into altogether unexpected and astonishing developments. Therefore we have all to feel that after all self-examination there lie awful depths within us which we have not fathomed; and after all our knowledge of one another we yet do see but the surface, and each soul dwells alone.

There is in every heart a dark chamber. Oh, brethren! there are very, very few of us that dare tell all our thoughts and show our inmost selves to our dearest ones. The most silvery lake that lies sleeping amidst beauty, itself the very fairest spot of all, when drained off shows ugly ooze and filthy mud, and all manner of creeping abominations in the slime. I wonder what we should see if our hearts were, so to speak, drained off, and the very bottom layer of every thing brought into the light. Do you think you could stand it? Well, then, go to God and ask Him to keep you from unconscious sins. Go to Him and ask Him to root out of you the mischiefs that you do not know are there, and live humbly and self-distrustfully, and feel that your only strength is: 'Hold Thou me up, and I shall be saved.' 'Hast thou seen what they do in the *dark*?'

Still further, we may take another part of this description with possibly permissible violence as a symbol of another characteristic of our inward nature. The walls of that chamber were all painted with animal forms, to which these men were bowing down. By our memory, and by that marvellous faculty that people call the imagination, and by our desires, we are for ever painting the walls of the inmost chambers of our hearts with such pictures. That is an awful power which we possess, and, alas! too often use for foul idolatries.

I do not dwell upon that, but I wish to drop one very earnest caution and beseeching entreaty, especially to the younger members of my congregation now. You, young men and women, especially you young men, mind what you paint upon those mystic walls! Foul things, as my text says, 'creeping things and abominable beasts,' only too many of you are tracing there. Take care, for these figures are ineffaceable. No repentance will obliterate them. I do not know whether even Heaven can blot them out. What you love, what you desire, what you think about, you are photographing on the walls of your immortal soul. And just as to-day, thousands of years after the artists have been gathered to the dust, we may go into Egyptian temples and see the figures on their walls, in all the freshness of their first colouring, as if the painter had but laid down his pencil a moment ago; so, on your hearts, youthful evils, the sins of your boyhood, the pruriences of your earliest days, may live in ugly shapes, that no tears and no repentance will ever wipe out. Nothing can do away with ‘the marks of that which once hath been.’ What are you painting on the chambers of imagery in your hearts? Obscenity, foul things, mean things, low things? Is that mystic shrine within you painted with such figures as were laid bare in some chambers in Pompeii, where the excavators had to cover up the pictures because they were so foul? Or, is it like the cells in the convent of San Marco at Florence, where Fra Angelico’s holy and sweet genius has left on the bare walls, to be looked at, as he fancied, only by one devout brother in each cell, angel imaginings, and noble, pure celestial faces that calm and hallow those who gaze upon them? What are you doing, my brother, in the dark, in your chambers of imagery?

II. Now look with me briefly at the second thought that I draw from this symbol,-the idolatries of the dark chamber.

All these seventy grey-bearded elders that were bowing there before the bestial gods which they had portrayed, had, no doubt, often stood in the courts of the Temple and there made prayers to the God of Israel, with broad phylacteries, to be seen of men. Their true worship was their worship in the dark. The other was conscious or unconscious hypocrisy. And the very chamber in which they were gathered, according to the ideal representation of our text, was a chamber in, and therefore partaking of the consecration of, the Temple. So their worship was doubly criminal, in that it was sacrilege as well as idolatry. Both things are true about us.

A man’s true worship is not the worship which he performs in the public temple, but that which he offers down in that little private chapel, where nobody goes but himself. Worship is the attribution of supreme excellence to, and the entire dependence of the heart upon, a certain person. And the people or the things to which a man attributes the highest excellence, and on which he hangs his happiness and well-being, these be his gods, no matter what his outward profession is. You can find out what these are for you, if you will ask yourself, and honestly answer, one or two questions. What is that I want most? What is it which makes my ideal of happiness? What is that which I feel that I should be desperate without? What do I think about most naturally and spontaneously, when the spring is taken off, and my thoughts are allowed to go as they will? And if the answer to none of these questions is ‘God!’ then I do not know why you should call yourself a worshipper of God. It is of no avail that we pray in the temple, if we have a dark underground shrine where our true adoration is rendered.

Oh, dear brethren! I am afraid there are a great many of us nominal Christians, connected with Christian Churches, posing before men as orthodox religionists, who keep this private chapel where we do our devotion to an idol and not to God. If our real gods could be made visible, what a pantheon they would make! All the foul forms painted on that cell of this vision would be paralleled in the creeping things, which crawl along the low earth and never soar nor even stand erect, and in the vile, bestial forms of passion to which some of us really bow down. Honour, wealth, literary or other distinction, the sweet sanctities of human love dishonoured and profaned by being exalted to the place which divine love should hold, ease, family, animal appetites, lust, drink-these are the gods of some of us. Bear with my poor words and ask yourselves, not whom do you worship before the eye of men, but who is the God to whom in your inmost heart you bow down? What do you do in the dark? That is the question. Whom do you worship there? Your other worship is not worship at all.

Do not forget that all such diversion of supreme love and dependence from God alone is like the sin of these men in our text, in that it is sacrilege. They had taken a chamber in the very Temple, and turned it into a temple of the false gods. Whom is your heart made to enshrine? Why! every stone, if I may so say, of the fabric of our being bears marked upon it that it was laid in order to make a dwelling-place for God. Whom are you meant to worship, by the witness of the very constitution of your nature and make of your spirits? Is there anybody but One who is worthy to receive the priceless gift of human love absolute and entire? Is there any but One to whom it is aught but degradation and blasphemy for a man to bow down? Is there any being but One that can still the tumult of my spirit, and satisfy the immortal yearnings of my soul? We were made for God, and whensoever we turn the hopes, the desires, the affections, the obedience, and that which is the root of them all, the confidence that ought to fix and fasten upon Him, to other creatures, we are guilty not only of idolatry but of sacrilege. We commit the sin of which that wild reveller in Babylon was guilty, when, at his great feast, in the very madness of his presumption he bade them bring forth the sacred vessels from the Temple at Jerusalem; ‘and the king and his princes and his concubines drank in them and praised the gods.’ So we take the sacred chalice of the human heart, on which there is marked the sign manual of Heaven, claiming it for God’s, and fill it with the spiced and drugged draught of our own sensualities and evils, and pour out libations to vain and false gods. Brethren! Render unto Him that which is His; and see even upon the walls scrabbled all over with the deformities that we have painted there, lingering traces, like those of some dropping fresco in a roofless Italian church, which suggest the serene and perfect beauty of the image of the One whose likeness was originally traced there, and for whose worship it was all built.

III. And now, lastly, look at the sudden crashing in upon the cowering worshippers of the revealing light.

Apparently the picture of my text suggests that these elders knew not the eyes that were looking upon them. They were hugging themselves in the conceit, ‘the Lord seeth not; the Lord hath forsaken the earth.’ And all the while, all unknown, God and His prophet stand in the doorway and see it all. Not a finger is lifted, not a sign to the foolish worshippers of His presence and inspection, but in stern silence He records and remembers.

And does that need much bending to make it an impressive form of putting a solemn truth? There are plenty of us-alas! alas! that it should be so-to whom it is the least welcome of all thoughts that there in the doorway stand God and His Word. Why should it be, my brother, that the properly blessed thought of a divine eye resting upon you should be to you like the thought of a policeman’s bull’s-eye to a thief? Why should it not be rather the sweetest and the most calming and strength-giving of all convictions-’Thou God seest me’? The little child runs about the lawn perfectly happy as long as she knows that her mother is watching her from the window. And it ought to be sweet and blessed to each of us to know that there is no darkness where a Father’s eye comes not. But oh! to the men that stand before bestial idols and have turned their backs on the beauty of the one true God, the only possibility of composure is that they shall hug themselves in the vain delusion:-'The Lord seeth not.'

I beseech you, dear friends, do not think of His eye as the prisoner in a cell thinks of the pin-hole somewhere in the wall, through which a jailer's jealous inspection may at any moment be glaring in upon him, but think of Him your Brother, who 'knew what was in man,' and who knows each man, and see in Christ the all-knowing Godhood that loves yet better than it knows, and beholds the hidden evils of men's hearts, in order that it may cleanse and forgive all which it beholds.

One day a light will flash in upon all the dark cells. We must all be manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ. Do you like that thought? Can you stand it? Are you ready for it? My friend! let Jesus Christ come to you with His light. Let Him come into the dark corners of your hearts. Cast all your sinfulness, known and unknown, upon Him that died on the Cross for every soul of man, and He will come; and His light, streaming into your hearts, like the sunbeam upon foul garments, will cleanse and bleach them white by its shining upon them. Let Him come into your hearts by your lowly penitence, by your humble faith, and all these vile shapes that you have painted on its walls will, like phosphorescent pictures in the daytime, pale and disappear when the 'Sun of Righteousness, with healing in His beams, floods your soul, leaving no part dark, and turning all into a temple of the living God.'

2) Ezekiel 12:27

Ezekiel

A COMMON MISTAKE AND LAME EXCUSE

Eze. 12:27.

Human nature was very much the same in the exiles that listened to Ezekiel on the banks of the Chebar and in Manchester to-day. The same neglect of God's message was grounded then on the same misapprehension of its bearings which profoundly operates in the case of many people now. Ezekiel had been proclaiming the fall of Jerusalem to the exiles whose captivity preceded it by a few years; and he was confronted by the incredulity which fancied that it had a great many facts to support it, and so it generalised God's long-suffering delay in sending the threatened punishment into a scoffing proverb which said, 'The days are prolonged, and every vision faileth.' To translate it into plain English, the prophets had cried 'Wolf! wolf!' so long that their alarms were disbelieved altogether.

Even the people that did not go the length of utter unbelief in the prophetic threatening took the comfortable conclusion that these threatenings had reference to a future date, and they need not trouble themselves about them. And so they said, according to my text, 'They of the house of Israel say, The vision that he sees is for many days to come, and he prophesieth of the times that are far off.' 'It may be all quite true, but it lies away in the distant future there; and things will last our time, so we do not need to bother ourselves about what he says.'

So the imagined distance of fulfilment turned the edge of the plainest denunciations, and was like wool stuffed in the people's ears to deaden the reverberations of the thunder.

I wonder if there is anybody here now whom that fits, who meets the preaching of the gospel with a shrug, and with this saying, 'He prophesies of the times that are far off.' I fancy that there are a few; and I wish to say a word or two about this ground on which the widespread disregard of the divine message is based.

I. First, then, notice that the saying of my text-in the application which I now seek to make of it-is a truth, but it is only half a truth.

Of course, Ezekiel was speaking simply about the destruction of Jerusalem. If it had been true, as his hearers assumed, that that was not going to happen for a good many years yet, the chances were that it had no bearing upon them, and they were right enough in neglecting the teaching. And, of course, when I apply such a word as this in the direction in which I wish to do now, we do bring in a different set of thoughts; but the main idea remains the same. The neglect of God's solemn message by a great many people is based, more or less consciously, upon the notion that the message of Christianity-or, if you like to call it so, of the gospel; or, if you like to call it more vaguely, religion-has to do mainly with blessings and woes beyond the grave, and that there is plenty of time to attend to it when we get nearer the end.

Now is it true that ‘he prophesies of times that are far off’? Yes! and No! Yes! it is true, and it is the great glory of Christianity that it shifts the centre of gravity, so to speak, from this poor, transient, contemptible present, and sets it away out yonder in an august and infinite future. It brings to us not only knowledge of the future, but certitude, and takes the conception of another life out of the region of perhapses, possibilities, dreads, or hopes, as the case may be, and sets it in the sunlight of certainty. There is no more mist. Other faiths, even when they have risen to the height of some contemplation of a future, have always seen it wrapped in nebulous clouds of possibilities, but Christianity sets it clear, definite, solid, as certain as yesterday, as certain as to-day.

It not only gives us the knowledge and the certitude of the times that are afar off, and that are not times but eternities, but it gives us, as the all-important element in that future, that its ruling characteristic is retribution. It ‘brings life and immortality to light,’ and just because it does, it brings the dark orb which, like some of the double stars in the heavens, is knit to the radiant sphere by a necessary band. It brings to light, with life and immortality, death and woe. It is true-’he prophesies of times that are far off’ and it is the glory of the gospel of Christ’s revelation, and of the religion that is based thereon, that its centre is beyond the grave, and that its eye is so often turned to the clearly discerned facts that lie there.

But is that all that we have to say about Christianity? Many representations of it, I am free to confess, from pulpits and books and elsewhere, do talk as if that was all, as if it was a magnificent thing to have when you came to die. As the play has it, ‘I said to him that I hoped there was no need that he should think about God yet,’ because he was not going to die. But I urge you to remember, dear brethren, that all that prophesying of times that are far off has the closest bearing upon this transient, throbbing moment, because, for one thing, one solemn part of the Christian revelation about the future is that Time is the parent of Eternity, and that, in like manner as in our earthly course ‘the child is father of the man,’ so the man as he has made himself is the author of himself as he will be through the infinite spaces that lie beyond the grave. Therefore, when a Christian preacher prophesies of times that are afar off, he is prophesying of present time, between which and the most distant eternity there is an iron nexus-a band which cannot be broken.

Nor is that all. Not only is the truth in my text but a half truth, if it is supposed that the main business of the gospel is to talk to us about heaven and hell, and not about the earth on which we secure and procure the one or the other; but also it is a half truth because, large and transcendent, eternal in their duration, and blessed beyond all thought in their sweetness as are the possibilities, the certainties that are opened by the risen and ascended Christ, and tremendous beyond all words that men can speak as are the alternative possibilities, yet these are not all the contents of the gospel message; but those blessings and penalties, joys and miseries, exaltations and degradations, which attend upon righteousness and sin, godliness and irreligion to-day are a large part of its theme and of its effects. Therefore, whilst on the one hand it is true, blessed be Christ's name! that 'he prophesies of times that are far off'; on the other hand it is an altogether inadequate description of the gospel message and of the Christian body of truth to say that the future is its realm, and not the present.

II. So, then, in the second place, my text gives a very good reason for prizing and attending to the prophecy.

If it is true that God, speaking through the facts of Christ's death and Resurrection and Ascension, has given to us the sure and certain hope of immortality, and has declared to us plainly the conditions upon which that immortality may be ours, and the woful loss and eclipse into the shadow of which we shall stumble darkling if it is not ours, then surely that is a reason for prizing and laying to heart, and living by the revelation so mercifully made. People do not usually kick over their telescopes, and neglect to look through them, because they are so powerful that they show them the craters in the moon and turn faint specks into blazing suns. People do not usually neglect a word of warning or guidance in reference to the ordering of their earthly lives because it is so comprehensive, and covers so large a ground, and is so certain and absolutely true. Surely there can be no greater sign of divine loving-kindness, of a Saviour's tenderness and care for us, than that He should come to each of us, as He does come, and say to each of us, 'Thou art to live for ever; and if thou wilt take Me for thy Life, thou shalt live for ever, blessed, calm, and pure.' And we listen, and say, 'He prophesies of times that are far off!' Oh! is that not rather a reason for coming very close to, and for grappling to our hearts and living always by the power of, that great revelation? Surely to announce the consequences of evil, and to announce them so long beforehand that there is plenty of time to avoid them and to falsify the prediction, is the token of love.

Now I wish to lay it on the hearts of you people who call yourselves Christians, and who are so in some imperfect degree, whether we do at all adequately regard, remember, and live by this great mercy of God, that He *should* have prophesied to us 'of the times that are far off.' Perhaps I am wrong, but I cannot help feeling that, for this generation, the glories of the future rest with God have been somewhat paled, and the terrors of the future unrest away from God have been somewhat lightened. I hope I am wrong, but I do not think that the modern average Christian thinks as much about heaven as his father did. And I believe that his religion has lost something of its buoyancy, of its power, of its restraining and stimulating energy, because, from a variety of reasons, the bias of this generation is rather to dwell upon, and to realise, the present social blessings of Christianity than to project itself into that august future. The reaction may be good. I have no doubt it was needed, but I think it has gone rather too far, and I would beseech Christian men and women to try and deserve more the sarcasm that is flung at us that we live for another world. Would God it were true-truer than it is! We should see better work done in this world if it were. So I say, that 'he prophesieth of times that are far off' is a good reason for prizing and obeying the prophet.

III. Lastly, this is a very common and a very bad reason for neglecting the prophecy.

It does operate as a reason for giving little heed to the prophet, as I have been saying. In the old men-of-war, when an engagement was impending, they used to bring up the hammocks from the bunks and pile them into the nettings at the side of the ship, to defend it from boarders and bullets. And then, after these had served their purpose of repelling, they were taken down again and the crew went to sleep upon them. That is exactly what some of my friends do with that misconception of the genius of Christianity which supposes that it is concerned mainly with another world. They put it up as a screen between them and God, between them and what they know to be their duty-viz., the acceptance of Christ as their Saviour. It is their hammock that they put between the bullets and themselves; and many a good sleep they get upon it!

Now, that strange capacity that men have of ignoring a certain future is seen at work all round about us in every region of life. I wonder how many young men there are in Manchester to-day that have begun to put their foot upon the wrong road, and who know just as well as I do that the end of it is disease, blasted reputation, ruined prospects, perhaps an early death. Why! there is not a drunkard in the city that does not know that. Every man that takes opium knows it. Every unclean, unchaste liver knows it; and yet he can hide the thought from himself, and go straight on as if there was nothing at all of the sort within the horizon of possibility. It is one of the most marvellous things that men have that power; only beaten by the marvel that, having it, they should be such fools as to choose to exercise it. The peasants on the slopes of Vesuvius live very careless lives, and they have their little vineyards and their olives. Yes, and every morning when they come out, they can look up and see the thin wreath of smoke going up in the dazzling blue, and they know that some time or other there will be a roar and a rush, and down will come the lava. But ‘a short life and a merry one’ is the creed of a good many of us, though we do not like to confess it. Some of you will remember the strange way in which ordinary habits survived in prisons in the dreadful times of the French Revolution, and how ladies and gentlemen, who were going to have their heads chopped off next morning, danced and flirted, and sat at entertainments, just as if there was no such thing in the world as the public prosecutor and the tumbril, and the gaoler going about with a bit of chalk to mark each door where were the condemned for next day.

That same strange power of ignoring a known future, which works so widely and so disastrously round about us, is especially manifested in regard to religion. The great bulk of English men and women who are not

Christians, and the little sample of such that I have in my audience now, as a rule believe as fully as we do the truths which they agree to neglect. Let me speak to them individually. You believe that death will introduce you into a world of two halves-that if you have been a good, religious man, you will dwell in blessedness; that if you have not, you will not-yet you never did a single thing, nor refrained from a single thing, because of that belief. And when I, and men of my profession, come and plead with you and try to get through that strange web of insensibility that you have spun round you, you listen, and then you say, with a shrug, 'He prophesies of things that are far off.' and you turn with relief to the trivialities of the day. Need I ask you whether that is a wise thing or not?

Surely it is not wise for a man to ignore a future that is certain simply because it is distant. So long as it is certain, what in the name of common-sense has the time when it begins to be a present to do with our wisdom in regard to it? It is the uncertainty in future anticipations which makes it unwise to regulate life largely by them, and if you can eliminate that element of uncertainty-which you can do if you believe in Jesus Christ-then the question is not when is the prophecy going to be fulfilled, but is it true and trustworthy? The man is a fool who, because it is far off, thinks he can neglect it.

Surely it is not wise to ignore a future which is so incomparably greater than this present, and which also is so connected with this present as that life here is only intelligible as the vestibule and preparation for that great world beyond.

Surely it is not wise to ignore a future because you fancy it is far away, when it may burst upon you at any time. These exiles to whom Ezekiel spoke hugged themselves in the idea that his words were not to be fulfilled for many days to come; but they were mistaken, and the crash of the fall of Jerusalem stunned them before many months had passed by. We have to look forward to a future which must be very near to some of us, which may be nearer to others than they think, which at the remotest is but a little way from us, and which must come to us all. Oh, dear friends, surely it is not wise to ignore as far off that which for some of us may be here before this day closes, which will probably be ours in some cases before the fresh young leaves now upon the trees have dropped yellow in the autumn frosts, which at the most distant must be very near us, and which waits for us all.

What would you think of the crew and passengers of some ship lying in harbour, waiting for its sailing orders, who had got leave on shore, and did not know but that at any moment the blue-peter might be flying at the fore-the signal to weigh anchor-if they behaved themselves in the port as if they were never going to embark, and made no preparations for the voyage? Let me beseech you to rid yourselves of that most unreasonable of all reasons for neglecting the gospel, that its most solemn revelations refer to the eternity beyond the grave.

There are many proofs that man on the whole is a very foolish creature, but there is not one more tragical than the fact that believing, as many of you do, that ‘the wages of sin is death, and the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ,’ you stand aloof from accepting the gift, and risk the death.

The ‘times far off’ have long since come near enough to those scoffers. The most distant future will be present to you before you are ready for it, unless you accept Jesus Christ as your All, for time and for eternity. If you do, the time that is near will be pure and calm, and the times that are far off will be radiant with unfading bliss.

3) Ezekiel 36:25-38

Ezekiel

THE HOLY NATION

Eze. 36:25 - Eze. 36:38.

This great prophecy had but a partial fulfilment, though a real one, in the restored Israel. The land was given back, the nation *was* multiplied, fertility again blessed the smiling fields and vineyards, and, best of all, the people *were* cleansed ‘from all their idols’ by the furnace of affliction. Nothing is more remarkable than the transformation effected by the captivity, in regard to the idolatrous propensities of the people. Whereas before it they were always hankering after the gods of the nations, they came back from

Babylon the resolute champions of monotheism, and never thereafter showed the smallest inclination for what had before been so irresistible.

But the fulness of Ezekiel's prophecy is not realised until Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant is brought to pass. Nor does the state of the militant church on earth exhaust it. Future glories gleam through the words. They have a 'springing accomplishment' in the Israel of the restoration, a fuller in the New Testament church, and their ultimate realisation in the New Jerusalem, which shall yet descend to be the bride, the Lamb's wife. The principles involved in the prophecy belong to the region of purely spiritual religion, and are worth pondering, apart from any question of the place and manner of fulfilment.

First comes the great truth that the foundation, so far as concerns the history of a soul or of a community, of all other good is divine forgiveness [Eze. 36:25]. Ezekiel, the priest, casts the promise into ceremonial form, and points to the sprinklings of the polluted under the law, or to the ritual of consecration to the priesthood. That cleansing is the removal of already contracted defilement, especially of the guilt of idolatry. It is clearly distinguished from the operation on the inward nature which follows; that is to say, it is the promise of forgiveness, or of justification, not of sanctification.

From what deep fountains in the divine nature that 'clean water' was to flow, Ezekiel does not know; but we have learned that a more precious fluid than water is needed, and have to think of Him 'who came not by water only, but by water and blood,' in whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of our sins. But the central idea of this first promise is that it must be God's hand which sprinkles from an evil conscience. Forgiveness is a divine prerogative. He only can, and He will, cleanse from all filthiness. His pardon is universal. The most ingrained sins cannot be too black to melt away from the soul. The dye-stuffs of sin are very strong, but there is one solvent which they cannot resist. There are no 'fast colours' which God's 'clean water' cannot move. This cleansing of pardon underlies all the rest of the blessings. It is ever the first thing needful when a soul returns to God.

Then follows an equally exclusively divine act, the impartation of a new nature, which shall secure future obedience [Eze. 36:26 - Eze. 36:27]. Who can thrust his hand into the depths of man’s being, and withdraw one life-principle and enshrine another, while yet the individuality of the man remains untouched? God only. How profound the consciousness of universal obstinacy and insensibility which regards human nature, apart from such renewal, as possessing but a ‘heart of stone’! There are no sentimental illusions about the grim facts of humanity here. Superficial views of sin and rose-tinted fancies about human nature will not admit the truth of the Scripture doctrine of sinfulness, alienation from God. They diagnose the disease superficially, and therefore do not know how to cure it. The Bible can venture to give full weight to the gravity of the sickness, because it knows the remedy. No surgery but God’s can perform that operation of extracting the stony heart and inserting a heart of flesh. No system which cannot do that can do what men want. The gospel alone deals thoroughly with man’s ills.

And how does it effect that great miracle? ‘I will put My Spirit within you.’ The new life-principle is the effluence of the Spirit of God. The promise does not merely offer the influence of a divine spirit, working on men as from without, or coming down upon them as an afflatus, but the actual planting of God’s Spirit in the deep places of theirs. We fail to apprehend the most characteristic blessing of the gospel if we do not give full prominence to that great gift of an indwelling Spirit, the life of our lives. Cleansing is much, but is incomplete without a new life-principle which shall keep us clean; and that can only be God’s Spirit, enshrined and operative within us; for only thus shall we ‘walk in His statutes, and keep His judgments.’ When the Lawgiver dwells in our hearts, the law will be our delight; and keeping it will be the natural outcome and expression of our life, which is His life.

Then follows the picture of the blessed effects of obedience [Eze. 36:28 - Eze. 36:30]. These are cast into the form appropriate to the immediate purpose of the prophecy, and received fulfilment in the actual restoration to the land, which fulfilment, however, was imperfect, inasmuch as the obedience and renewal of the people’s hearts were incomplete. These can only be complete under the gospel, and, in the fullest sense, only in another order than the present. When men fully keep God’s judgments, they shall dwell permanently in a good land. Israel’s hold on its country was its obedience, not its prowess. Our real hold on even earthly good is the choosing of God for our supreme good. In the measure in which we can say ‘Thy law is within my heart,’ all things are ours; and we may possess all things while having nothing in the vulgar world’s sense of having. Similarly that obedience, which is the fruit of the new life of God’s Spirit in our spirits, is the condition of close mutual possession in the blessed reciprocity of trust and faithfulness, love bestowing and love receiving, by which the quiet heart knows that God is its, and it is God’s. If stains and interruptions still sometimes break the perfectness of obedience and continuity of reciprocal ownership, there will be a further cleansing for such sins. ‘If we walk in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin’ [Eze. 36:29].

The lovely picture of the blessed dwellers in their good land is closed by the promise of abundant harvests from corn and fruit-tree; that is, all that nourishes or delights. The deepest truth taught thereby is that he who lives in God has no unsatisfied desires, but finds in Him all that can sustain, strengthen, and minister to growth, and all that can give gladness and delight. If we make God our heritage, we dwell secure in a good land; and ‘the dust of that land is gold,’ and its harvests ever plenteous.

Very profoundly and beautifully does Ezekiel put as the last trait in his picture, and as the upshot of all this cornucopia of blessings, the penitent remembrance of past evils. Undeserved mercies steal into the heart like the breath of the south wind, and melt the ice. The more we advance in holiness and consequent blessed communion with God, the more clearly shall we see the evil of our past. Forgiven sin looks far blacker because it is forgiven. When we are not afraid of sin’s consequences, we see more plainly its sinfulness. When we have tasted God’s sweetness, we think with more shame of our ingratitude and folly. If God forgets, the more reason for us to remember our transgressions. The man who ‘has forgotten that he was purged from his old sins’ is in danger of finding out that he is not purged from them. There is no gnawing of conscience, nor any fearful looking for of judgment in such remembrance, but a wholesome humility passing into thankful wonder that such sin is pardoned, and such a sinner made God's friend.

The deep foundation of all the blessedness is finally laid bare [Eze. 36:32] as being God's undeserved mercy. 'For Mine holy name' [Eze. 36:22] is God's reason. He is His own motive, and He wills that the world should know His name,-that is, His manifested character,-and understand how loving and long-suffering He is. So He wills, not because such knowledge adds to His glory, but because it satisfies His love, since it will make the men who know His name blessed. The truth that God's motive is His own name's sake may be so put as to be hideous and repellent; but it really proclaims that He is love, and that His motive is His poor creatures' blessing.

To this great outline of the blessings of the restored nations are appended two subsidiary prophecies, marked by the recurring 'Thus saith the Lord.' The former of these [Eze. 36:33 - Eze. 36:36] deals principally with the new beauty that was to clothe the land. The day in which the inhabitants were cleansed from their sins was to be the day in which the land was to be raised from its ruin. Cities are to be rebuilt, the ground that had lain fallow and tangled with briers and thorns is to be tilled, and to bloom like Eden, a restored paradise. How far the fulfilment has halted behind the promise, the melancholy condition of Palestine to-day may remind us. Whether the literal fulfilment is to be anticipated or no seems less important than to note that the experience of forgiveness [and of the consequent blessings described above] is the precursor of this fair picture. Therefore, the Church's condition of growth and prosperity is its realisation in the persons of its individual members, of pardon, the renewal of the inner man by the indwelling Spirit, faithful obedience, communion with God, and lowly remembrance of past sins. Where churches are marked by such characteristics, they will grow. If they are not, all their 'evangelistic efforts' will be as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

The second appended prophecy [Eze. 36:37 - Eze. 36:38] is that of increase of population. The picture of the flocks of sheep for sacrifice, which thronged Jerusalem at the feasts, is given as a likeness of the swarms of inhabitants in the 'waste cities.' The point of comparison is chiefly the number. One knows how closely a flock huddles and seems to fill the road in endless procession. But the destination as well as the number comes into view. All these patient creatures, crowding the ways, are meant for sacrifices. So the inhabitants of the land then shall all yield themselves to God, living sacrifices. The first words of our text point to the priesthood of all believers; the last words point to the sacrifice of themselves which they have to offer.

‘For this moreover will I be inquired of by the house of Israel.’ The blessings promised do not depend on our merits, as we have heard, but yet they will not be given without our co-operation in prayer. God promises, and that promise is not a reason for our not asking the gifts from Him, but for our asking. Faith keeps within the lines of God’s promise, and prayers which do not foot themselves on a promise are the offspring of presumption, not of faith. God ‘lets Himself be inquired of’ for that which is in accordance with His will; and, accordant with His will though it be, He will not ‘do it for them,’ unless His flock ask of Him the accomplishment of His own word.

4) Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel

THE DRY BONES AND THE SPIRIT OF LIFE

Eze. 37:1 - Eze. 37:14.

This great vision apparently took its form from a despairing saying, which had become a proverb among the exiles, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost: we are clean cut off’ [Eze. 37:11]. Ezekiel lays hold of the metaphor, which had been taken to express the hopeless destruction of Israel’s national existence, and even from it wrings a message of hope. Faith has the prerogative of seeing possibilities of life in what looks to sense hopeless death. We may look at the vision from three points of view, considering its bearing on Israel, on the world, and on the resurrection of the body.

I. The saying, already referred to, puts the hopelessness of the mass of the exiles in a forcible fashion. The only sense in which living men could say that their bones were dried up, and they cut off, is a figurative one, and obviously it is the national existence which they regarded as irretrievably ended. The saying gives us a glimpse into the despair which had settled down on the exiles, and against which Ezekiel had to contend, as he had also to contend against its apparently opposite and yet kindred feeling of presumptuous, misplaced hope. We observe that he begins by accepting fully the facts which bred despair, and even accentuating them. The true prophet never makes light of the miseries of which he knows the cure, and does not try to comfort by minimising the gravity of the evil. The bones *are* very many, and they *are* very dry. As far as outward resources are concerned, despair was rational, and hope as absurd as it would have been to expect that men, dead so long that their bones had been bleached by years of exposure to the weather, should live again.

But while Ezekiel saw the facts of Israel's powerlessness as plainly as the most despondent, he did not therefore despair. The question which rose in his mind was God's question, and the very raising it let a gleam of hope in. So he answered with that noble utterance of faith and submission, 'O Lord God, Thou knowest.' 'With God all things are possible.' Presumption would have said 'Yes'; Unbelief would have said 'No'; Faith says, 'Thou knowest.'

The grand description of the process of resurrection follows the analogy of the order in the creation of man, giving, first, the shaping of the body, and afterwards the breathing into it of the breath which is life. Both stages are wholly God's work. The prophet's part was to prophesy to the bones first; and his word, in a sense, brought about the effect which it foretold, since his ministry was the most potent means of rekindling dying hopes, and bringing the *disjecta membra* of the nation together again. The vivid and gigantic imagination of the prophet gives a picture of the rushing together of the bones, which has no superior in any literature. He hears a noise, and sees a 'shaking' [by which is meant the motion of the bones to each other, rather than an 'earthquake,' as the Revised Version has it, which inserts a quite irrelevant detail], and the result of all is that the skeletons are complete.

Then follows the gradual clothing with flesh. There they lie, a host of corpses.

The second stage is the quickening of these bodies with life, and here again Ezekiel, as God's messenger, has power to bring about what he announces; for, at his command, the breath, or wind, or spirit, comes, and the stiff corpses spring to their feet, a mighty army. The explanation in the last verses of the text somewhat departs from the tenor of the vision by speaking of Israel as buried, but keeps to its substance, and point the despairing exiles to God as the source of national resurrection. But we must not force deeper meaning on Ezekiel's words than they properly bear. The spirit promised in them is simply the source of life,-literally, of physical life; metaphorically, of national life. However that national restoration was connected with holiness, that does not enter into the prophet's vision. Israel's restoration to its land is all that Ezekiel meant by it. True, that restoration was to lead to clearer recognition by Israel of the name of Jehovah, and of all that it implied in him and demanded from them. But the proper scope of the vision is to assure despairing Israelites that God would quicken the apparently slain national life, and replace them in the land.

II. We may extend the application of the vision to the condition of humanity and the divine intervention which communicates life to a dead world, but must remember that no such meaning was in Ezekiel's thoughts. The valley full of dry bones is but too correct a description of the aspect which a world 'dead in trespasses and sins' bears, when seen from the mountain-top by pure and heavenly eyes. The activities of godless lives mask the real spiritual death, which is the condition of every soul that is separate from God. Galvanised corpses may have muscular movements, but they are dead, notwithstanding their twitching. They that live without God are dead while they live.

Again, we may learn from the vision the preparation needful for the prophet, who is to be the instrument of imparting divine life to a dead world. The sorrowful sense of the widespread deadness must enter into a man's spirit, and be ever present to him, in order to fit him for his work. A dead world is not to be quickened on easy terms. We must see mankind in some measure as God sees them if we are to do God's work among them.

So-called Christian teachers, who do not believe that the race is dead in sin, or who, believing it, do not feel the tragedy of the fact, and the power lodged in their hands to bring the true life, may prophesy to the dry bones for ever, and there will be no shaking among them.

The great work of the gospel is to communicate divine life. The details of the process in the vision are not applicable in this respect. As we have pointed out, they are shaped after the pattern of the creation of Adam, but the essential point is that what the world needs is the impartation from God of His Spirit. We know more than Ezekiel did as to the way by which that Spirit is given to men, and as to the kind of life which it imparts, and as to the connection between that life and holiness. It is a diviner voice than Ezekiel's which speaks to us in the name of God, and says to us with deeper meaning than the prophet of the Exile dreamed of, 'I will put my Spirit in you, and ye shall live.'

But we may note that it is possible to have the outward form of a living body, and yet to have no life. Churches and individuals may be perfectly organised and perfectly dead. Creeds may be articulated most correctly, every bone in its place, and yet have no vitality in them. Forms of worship may be punctiliously proper, and have no breath of life in them. Religion must have a body, but often the body is not so much the organ as the sepulchre of the spirit. We have to take heed that the externals do not kill the inward life.

Again, we note that this great act of life-giving is God's revelation of His name,-that is, of His character so far as men can know it. 'Ye shall know that I am the Lord' [Eze. 37:13 - Eze. 37:14]. God makes Himself known in His divinest glory when He quickens dead souls. The world may learn what He is therefrom, but they who have experienced the change, and have, as it were, been raised from the grave to new life, have personal experience of His power and faithfulness so sure and sweet that henceforward they cannot doubt Him nor forget His grace.

III. As to the bearing of the vision on the doctrine of the resurrection little need be said. It does not necessarily presuppose the people's acquaintance with that doctrine, for it would be quite conceivable that the vision had revealed to the prophet the thought of a resurrection, which had not been in his beliefs before. The vision is so entirely figurative, that it cannot be employed as evidence that the idea of the resurrection of the dead was part of the Jewish beliefs at this date. It does, however, seem most natural to suppose that the exiles were familiar with the idea, though the vision cannot be taken as a revelation of a literal resurrection of dead men. For clear expectations of such a resurrection we must turn to such scriptures as Dan. 12:2, Dan. 12:13.

5) Ezekiel 47:1

Ezekiel

THE RIVER OF LIFE

Eze. 47:1.

Unlike most great cities, Jerusalem was not situated on a great river. True, the inconsiderable waters of Siloam-'which flow softly' because they were so inconsiderable-rose from a crevice in the Temple rock, and beneath that rock stretched the valley of the Kedron, dry and bleached in the summer, and a rainy torrent during the rainy seasons; but that was all. So, many of the prophets, who looked forward to the better times to come, laid their finger upon that one defect, and prophesied that it should be cured. Thus we read in a psalm: ‘There is a river, the divisions whereof make glad the City of our God.’ Faith saw what sense saw not. Again, Isaiah says: ‘There’-that is to say, in the new Jerusalem-'the glorious Lord shall be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams.’ And so, this prophet casts his anticipations of the abundant outpouring of blessing that shall come when God in very deed dwells among men, into this figure of a river pouring out from beneath the Temple-door, and spreading life and fertility wherever its waters come. I need not remind you how our Lord Himself uses the same figure, and modifies it, by saying that whosoever believeth on Him, ‘out of him shall flow rivers of living waters’; or how, in the very last words of the Apocalyptic seer, we hear again the music of the ripples of the great stream, ‘the river of the water of life proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb.’ So then, all through Scripture, we may say that we hear the murmur of the stream, and can catch the line of verdure upon its banks. My object now is not only to deal with the words that I have read as a starting-point, but rather to seek to draw out the wonderful significance of this great prophetic parable.

I. I notice, first, the source from which the river conies.

I have already anticipated that in pointing out that it flows from the very Temple itself. The Prophet sees it coming out of the house-that is to say, the Sanctuary. It flows across the outer court of the house, passes the altar, comes out under the threshold, and then pours itself down on to the plain beneath. This is the symbolical dress of the thought that all spiritual blessings, and every conceivable form of human good, take their rise in the fact of God’s dwelling with men. From beneath the Temple threshold comes the water of life; and wherever it is true that in any heart-or in any community-God dwells, there will be heard the tinkling of its ripples, and freshness and fertility will come from the stream. The dwelling of God with a man, like the dwelling of God in humanity in the Incarnation of His own dear Son, is, as it were, the opening of the fountain that it may pour out into the world. So, if we desire to have the blessings that are possible for us, we must comply with the conditions, and let God dwell in our hearts, and make them His temples; and then from beneath the threshold of that temple, too, will pour out, according to Christ’s own promise, rivers of living water which will be first for ourselves to drink of and be blessed by, and then will refresh and gladden others.

Another thought connected with this source of the river of life is that all the blessings which, massed together, are included in that one word ‘salvation’-which is a kind of nebula made up of many unresolved stars-take their rise from nothing else than the deep heart of God Himself. This river rose in the House of the Lord, and amidst the mysteries of the Divine Presence; it took its rise, one might say, from beneath the Mercy-seat where the brooding Cherubim sat in silence and poured itself into a world that had not asked for it, that did not expect it, that in many of its members did not desire it and would not have it. The river that rose in the secret place of God symbolises for us the great thought which is put into plainer words by the last of the apostles when he says, ‘We love Him because He first loved us.’ All the blessings of salvation rise from the unmotived, self-impelled, self-fed divine love and purpose. Nothing moves Him to communicate Himself but His own delight in giving Himself to His poor creatures; and it is all of grace that it might be all through faith.

Still further, another thought that may be suggested in connection with the source of this river is, that that which is to bless the world must necessarily take its rise above the world. Ezekiel has sketched, in the last portion of his prophecy, an entirely ideal topography of the Holy Land. He has swept away mountains and valleys, and levelled all out into a great plain, in the midst of which rises the mountain of the Lord's House, far higher than the Temple hill. In reality, opposite it rose the Mount of Olives, and between the two there was the deep gorge of the Valley of the Kedron. The Prophet smooths it all out into one great plain, and high above all towers the Temple-mount, and from it there rushes down on to the low levels the fertilising, life-giving flood.

That imaginary geography tells us this, that what is to bless the world must come from above the world. There needs a waterfall to generate electricity; the power which is to come into humanity and deal with its miseries must have its source high above the objects of its energy and its compassion, and in proportion to the height from which it falls will be the force of its impact and its power to generate the quickening impulse. All merely human efforts at social reform, rivers that do not rise in the Temple, are like the rivers in Mongolia, that run for a few miles and then get sucked up by the hot sands and are lost and nobody sees them any more. Only the perennial stream, that comes out from beneath the Temple threshold, can sustain itself in the desert, to say nothing of transforming the desert into a Garden of Eden. So moral and social and intellectual and political reformers may well go to Ezekiel, and learn that the 'river of the water of life,' which is to heal the barren and refresh the thirsty land, must come from below the Temple threshold.

II. Note the rapid increase of the stream.

The Prophet describes how his companion, the interpreter, measured down the stream a thousand cubits-about a quarter of a mile-and the waters were ankle-deep another thousand, making half a mile from the start, and the water was knee-deep. Another thousand-or three-quarters of a mile-and the water was waist-deep; another thousand-about a mile in all-and the water was unfordable, 'waters to swim in, a river that could not be passed over.' Where did the increase come from? There were no tributaries. We do not hear of any side-stream flowing into the main body. Where did the increase come from? It came from the abundant welling-up in the sanctuary. The fountain was the mother of the river-that is to say, God’s ideal for the world, for the Church, for the individual Christian, is rapid increase in their experience of the depth and the force of the stream of blessings which together make up salvation. So we come to a very sharp testing question. Will anybody tell me that the rate at which Christianity has grown for these nineteen centuries corresponds with Ezekiel’s vision-which is God’s ideal? Will any Christian man say, ‘My own growth in grace, and increase in the depth and fulness of the flow of the river through my spirit and my life correspond to that ideal’? A mile from the source the river is unfordable. How many miles from the source of *our* first experience do we stand? How many of us, instead of having ‘a river that could not be passed over, waters to swim in,’ have but a poor and all but stagnant feeble trickle, as shallow as or shallower than it was at first?

I was speaking a minute ago about Mongolian rivers. Australian rivers are more like some men’s lives. A chain of ponds in the dry season-nay! not even a chain, but a series, with no connecting channel of water between them. That is like a great many Christian people; they have isolated times when they feel the voice of Christ’s love, and yield themselves to the powers of the world to come, and then there are long intervals, when they feel neither the one nor the other. But the picture that ought to be realised by each of us is God’s ideal, which there is power in the gospel to make real in the case of every one of us, the rapid and continuous increase in the depth and in the scour of ‘the river of the water of life,’ that flows through our lives. Luther used to say, ‘If you want to clean out a dunghill, turn the Elbe into it.’ If you desire to have your hearts cleansed of all their foulness, turn the river into it. But it needs to be a progressively deepening river, or there will be no scour in the feeble trickle, and we shall not be a bit the holier or the purer for our potential and imperfect Christianity.

III. Lastly, note the effects of the stream.

These are threefold: fertility, healing, life. Fertility. In the East one condition of fertility is water. Irrigate the desert, and you make it a garden. Break down the aqueduct, and you make the granary of the world into a waste. The traveller as he goes along can tell where there is a stream of water, by the verdure along its banks. You travel along a plateau, and it is all baked and barren. You plunge into a wâ¤¹, and immediately the ground is clothed with under-growth and shrubs, and the birds of the air sing among the branches. And so, says Ezekiel, wherever the river comes there springs up, as if by magic, fair trees ‘on the banks thereof, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed.’

Fertility comes second, the reception of the fertilising agent comes first. It is wasted time to tinker at our characters unless we have begun with getting into our hearts the grace of God, and the new spirit that will be wrought out by diligent effort into all beauty of life and character. Ezekiel seems to be copying the first psalm, or vice versa, the Psalmist is copying Ezekiel. At any rate, there is a verbal similarity between them, in that both dwell upon the unfading leaf of the tree that grows planted by rivers of water. And our text goes further, and speaks about perennial fruitfulness month by month, all the year round. In some tropical countries you will find blossoms, buds in their earliest stage, and ripened fruit all hanging upon one laden branch. Such ought to be the Christian life-continuously fruitful because dependent upon continual drawing into itself, by means of its roots and suckers, of the water of life by which we are fructified.

There is yet another effect of the waters-healing. As we said, Ezekiel takes great liberties with the geography of the Holy Land, levelling it all, so his stream makes nothing of the Mount of Olives, but flows due east until it comes to the smitten gorge of the Jordan, and then turns south, down into the dull, leaden waters of the Dead Sea, which it heals. We all know how these are charged with poison. Dip up a glassful anywhere, and you find it full of deleterious matter. They are the symbol of humanity, with the sin that is in solution all through it. No chemist can eliminate it, but there is One who can. ‘He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.’ The pure river of the water of life will cast out from humanity the malignant components that are there, and will sweeten it all. Ay, all, and yet not all, for very solemnly the Prophet’s optimism pauses, and he says that the salt marshes by the side of the sea are not healed. They are by the side of it. The healing is perfectly available for them, but they are not healed. It is possible for men to reject the influences that make for the destruction of sin and the establishment of righteousness. And although the waters are healed, there still remain the obstinate marshes with the white crystals efflorescing on their surface, and bringing salt and barrenness. You can put away the healing and remain tainted with the poison.

And then the last thought is the life-giving influence of the river. Everything lived whithersoever it went. Contrast Christendom with heathendom. Admit all the hollowness and mere nominal Christianity of large tracts of life in so-called Christian countries, and yet why is it that on the one side you find stagnation and death, and on the other side mental and manifold activity and progressiveness? I believe that the difference between 'the people that *sit* in darkness' and 'the people that *walk* in the light is that one has the light and the other has not, and activity befits the light as torpor befits the darkness.

But there is a far deeper truth than that in the figure, a truth that I would fain lay upon the hearts of all my hearers, that unless we our own selves have this water of life which comes from the Sanctuary and is brought to us by Jesus Christ, 'we are dead in trespasses and sins.' The only true life is in Christ. 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink. He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'

Daniel

1) DANIEL 1:8-21
2) DANIEL 2:36-49
3) DANIEL 3:13-25
4) DANIEL 5:17-31
5) DANIEL 6:5
6) DANIEL 6:16-28
7) DANIEL 12:13

1) Daniel 1:8-21

Daniel

YOUTHFUL CONFESSORS

Dan. 1:8 - Dan. 1:21.

Daniel was but a boy at the date of the Captivity, and little more at the time of the attempt to make a Chaldean of him. The last verse says that he 'continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus,' the date given elsewhere as the close of the Captivity [2Ch. 36:22; Ezr. 1:1; Ezr. 6:3]. From Dan. 10:1 we learn that he lived on till Cyrus's third year, if not later; but the date in Dan. 1:21 is probably given in order to suggest that Daniel's career covered the whole period of the Captivity, and burned like a star of hope for the exiles. The incident in our passage is a noble example of religious principle applied to small details of daily life, and shows how God crowns such conscientious self-restraint with success. The lessons which it contains are best gathered by following the narrative.

I. The heroic determination of the boyish confessor is first set forth. The plan of taking leading young men from the newly captured nation and turning them into Babylonians was a stroke of policy as heartless and high-handed as might be expected from a great conqueror. In some measure, the same thing has been done by all nations who have built up a world-wide dominion. The new names given to the youths, the attaching of them to the court, their education in Babylonish fashion, all were meant for the same purpose,-to denationalise them, and strip them of their religion, and thus to make them tools for more easily governing their countrymen.

Most men would yield to the influences, and be so lapped in the comforts of their new position as to become pliable as wax in the conqueror's hands; but here and there he would come across a bit of stiffer stuff, which would break rather than bend. Such an obstinate piece of humanity was found in the Hebrew youth, of some fifteen years, whose Hebrew name ['God is my judge'] expressed a truth that ruled him, when the name was exchanged for one that invoked Bel. It took some firmness for a captive lad, without friends or influence, to take Daniel's stand; for the motive of his desire to be excused from taking the fare provided can only have been religious. He was determined, in his brave young heart, not to 'defile' himself with the king's meat. The phrase points to the pollution incurred by eating things offered to idols, and does not imply scrupulousness like that of Pharisaic times, nor necessarily suggest a late date for the book. Probably there had been some kind of religious consecration of the food to Babylonian gods, and Daniel, in his solitary faithfulness, was carrying out the same principles which Paul afterwards laid down for Corinthian Christians as to partaking of things offered to idols. Similar difficulties are sure to emerge in analogous cases, and do so, on many mission fields.

The motive here, then, is distinctly religious. Common life was so woven in with idolatrous worship that every meal was in some sense a sacrifice. Therefore 'Touch not, taste not, handle not,' was the inevitable dictate for a devout heart. Daniel seems to have been the moving spirit; but as is generally the case, he was able to infuse his own strong convictions into his companions, and the four of them held together in their protest. The great lesson from the incident is that religion should regulate the smallest details of life, and that it is not narrow over-scrupulousness, but fidelity to the highest duty, when a man sets his foot down about any small matter, and says, 'No, I dare not do it, little as it is, and pleasant as it might be to sense, because I should thereby be mixed up in a practical denial of my God.' 'So did not I, because of the fear of God' [Neh. 5:15], is a motto which will require from many a young man abstinence from many things which it would be much easier to accept.

II. This young confessor was as prudent as he was brave; and the story goes on to show how wisely he played his part, and how willing he was to accept all working compromises which might smooth his way. He did not at all want to pose as a martyr, and had no pleasure in making a noise. The favour which he had won with the high officer who looked after the lads before their formal examination [graduation we might call it], is set down in the narrative to the divine favour; but that favour worked by means, and no doubt the lad had done his part to win the important good opinion of his superior. The more firm is our determination to take no step beyond the line of duty, the more conciliatory we should be. But many people seem to think that heroism is shown by rudeness, and that if we are afraid that we shall some time have to say 'No' very emphatically, we should prepare for it by a great many preliminary and unnecessary negatives. The very stern need for parting company, when conscience points one way and companions another, is a reason for keeping cordially together whenever we can.

‘The prince of the eunuchs’ made a very reasonable objection. He had been appointed to see after the health of the lads, and had ample means at his disposal; and if they lost their health in this chase after what he could only think a superstitious fad, the despot whom he served would think nothing of making him answer with his head. His fear gives a striking side-light as to the conditions of service in such a court, where no man’s head was firm between his shoulders. Why should the prince of the eunuchs have supposed that the diet asked for would not nourish the lads? It was that of the bulk of men everywhere, and he had only to go out into the streets or the nearest barrack in Babylon to see what thews and muscles could be nurtured on vegetable diet and water. But whatever the want of ground in his objection, it was enough that he made it. Note that he puts it entirely on possible harmful results to himself, and that silences Daniel, who had no right to ask another to run his head into the noose, into which he was ready to put his own, if necessary. Martyrs by proxy, who have such strong convictions that they think it somebody else’s duty to run risk for them, are by no means unknown.

This boy was made of other metal. So, apparently he gives up the prince of the eunuchs, and turns to another of the friends whom he had made in his short captivity-the person in whose more immediate charge he and his three friends were. He is named Melzar in the Authorised Version; but the Revised Version more accurately takes that to be a name of office, and translates it as ‘steward.’ He did the catering for them, and was sufficiently friendly to listen to Daniel’s reasonable proposal to try the vegetable diet for ‘ten days’-probably meaning an indefinite period, sufficiently long to test results, which a literal ten days would perhaps scarcely be. So the good-natured steward let the lads have their way, much wondering in his soul, no doubt, why they should take as much trouble to avoid good living as most youths would have taken to get it.

III. The success of the experiment comes next.

We do not need to suppose a miracle as either wrought or suggested by the narrative. The issue might have taught the steward a wholesome lesson in dietetics, which he and a great many of us much need. ‘A man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth,’ and his bodily life consisteth not in the abundance and variety of the things that he eateth. The teaching of this lesson is, not that vegetarianism or total abstinence is obligatory, for diet is here regarded only as part of idolatrous worship; but certainly a secondary conclusion, fairly drawn from the story, is that vigorous health is best kept up on very simple fare. Many dinner-tables, over which God's blessing is formally asked, are spread in such a fashion as it is hard to suppose deserves His blessing. The simpler the fare, the fewer the wants: the fewer the wants, the greater the riches; the freer the life, the more leisure for higher pursuits, and the more sound the bodily health.

But the rosy faces and vigorous health of Daniel and his friends may illustrate, by a picturesque example, a large truth-that God suffers no man to be a loser by faithfulness, and more than makes up all that is surrendered for His sake. The blessing of God on small means makes them fountains of truer joy than large ones unblessed. No man hath left anything for Christ's sake but he receives a hundred-fold in this life, if not in the actual blessings surrendered, at all events in the peace and joy of heart of which they were supposed to be bearers. God fills places emptied by Himself, and those emptied by us for His sake.

IV. The conscientious abstinence of Daniel had limits.

The learning of the 'Chaldeans' was largely ritualistic, and magic, incantations, divination, and mythology constituted a most important part of it. Did not the conscience, which could not swallow idolatrous food, resent being forced to assimilate idolatrous learning? No; for all that learning could be acquired by a faithful monotheist, and could be used against the system which gave it birth. Like Moses, or like the young Pharisee Saul, these Jewish boys nurtured their faith by knowledge of their enemies' belief, and used their childhood's lessons as weapons in fighting for God's truth. It is not every man's duty to become familiar with error, or to master anti-Christian systems. But if it become ours, we are not to turn away from the task, nor to doubt that God will keep His own truth alight in our minds, if we realise the danger of the position, and seek to cling to Him.

V. So we have the last scene in the youths' appearance before Nebuchadnezzar.

A three years' curriculum was considered necessary to turn a Jewish boy into a Chaldean expert, fit to be a traitor to his nation, an apostate from his God, and a tool of the tyrant. So far as knowledge of the priestly and astronomical science went, the four Hebrews came out at the top of the lists. The great king himself, with that personal interference in all departments which makes a despot's life so burdensome, put them through their paces, and was satisfied. His object had been to get instruments with which he could work on the Captivity, and, no doubt, also to secure servants who had no links with anybody in Babylon. Foreigners, 'kinless loons,' are favourites with despots, for plain reasons. But Nebuchadnezzar could not fathom the hearts of the lads. An incarnation of unbridled will would find it difficult to understand a life guided by conscience, and religious scruples would have sounded as an unknown tongue to him. But yet, as he and they stood face to face, who was stronger, the conqueror or the youths who feared God, and none besides? They were in their right place at the head of the examination lists. They had not said, 'We do not believe in all this rubbish, and we are not going to trouble ourselves to master it,' but they had set themselves determinedly to work, and been all the more persevering because of their objection to the diet. If a young man has to be singular by reason of his religion, let him be singularly diligent in his work, and seek to be first, not merely for his own glory, but for the sake of the religion which he professes.

'Plain living and high thinking' ought to go together. England and America have many names carved high on their annals, and written deep on their citizens' hearts, who have nourished a sublime, studious youth in poverty, 'cultivating literature on a little oatmeal,' and who all their lives have 'scorned delights and lived laborious days.' It is the temper which is most likely to succeed, but which, whether it succeeds or not, brings the best blessings to those who cultivate it. Such a youth will generally be followed by an honoured manhood like Daniel's, but will, at all events, be its own reward, and have God's blessing.

'Daniel continued unto the first year of king Cyrus.' These simple words contain volumes. During all the troubles of the nation, from the king's insanity, and the murders of his successors, amidst whirling intrigues, envies, plots, and persecutions, this one man stood firm, like a pillar amid blowing sands. So God keeps the steadfast soul which is fixed on Him; and while the world passeth away, and the fashion thereof, he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

2) Daniel 2:36-49

Daniel

THE IMAGE AND THE STONE

Dan. 2:36 - Dan. 2:49.

The colossal image, seen by Nebuchadnezzar in his dream, was a reproduction of those which met his waking eyes, and still remain for our wonder in our museums. The mingled materials are paralleled in ancient art. The substance of the dream is no less natural than its form. The one is suggested by familiar sights; the other, by pressing anxieties. What more likely than that, ‘in the second year of his reign’ [Dan. 2:1], waking thoughts of the future of his monarchy should trouble the warrior-king, scarcely yet firm on his throne, and should repeat themselves in nightly visions? God spoke through the dream, and He is not wont to answer questions before they are asked, nor to give revelations to men on points which they have not sought to solve. We may be sure that Nebuchadnezzar’s dream met his need.

The unreasonable demand that the ‘Chaldeans’ should show the dream as well as interpret it, fits the character of the king, as an imperious despot, intolerant of obstacles to his will, and holding human life very cheap. Daniel’s knowledge of the dream and of its meaning is given to him in a vision by night, which is the method of divine illumination throughout the book, and may be regarded as a lower stage thereof than the communications to prophets of ‘the word of the Lord.’

The passage falls into two parts: the image and the stone.

I. The Image.

It was a human form of strangely mingled materials, of giant size no doubt, and of majestic aspect. Barbarous enough it would have looked beside the marble lovelinesses of Greece, but it was quite like the coarser art which sought for impressiveness through size and costliness. Other people than Babylonian sculptors think that bigness is greatness, and dearness preciousness.

This image embodied what is now called a philosophy of history. It set forth the fruitful idea of a succession and unity in the rise and fall of conquerors and kingdoms. The four empires represented by it are diverse, and yet parts of a whole, and each following on the other. So the truth is taught that history is an organic whole, however unrelated its events may appear to a superficial eye. The writer of this book had learned lessons far in advance of his age, and not yet fully grasped by many so-called historians.

But, further, the human figure of the image sets forth all these kingdoms as being purely the work of men. Not that the overruling divine providence is ignored, but that the play of human passions, the lust of conquest and the like, and the use of human means, such as armies, are emphasised.

Again, the kingdoms are seen in their brilliancy, as they would naturally appear to the thoughts of a conqueror, whose highest notion of glory was earthly dominion, and who was indifferent to the suffering and blood through which he waded to a throne. When the same kingdoms are shown to Daniel in Dan. 7:1 - Dan. 7:28 they are represented by beasts. Their cruelty and the destruction of life which they caused were uppermost in a prophet’s view; their vulgar splendour dazzled a king’s sleeping eyes, because it had intoxicated his waking thoughts. Much worldly glory and many of its aims appear as precious metal to dreamers, but are seen by an illuminated sight to be bestial and destructive.

Once more there is a steady process of deterioration in the four kingdoms. Gold is followed by silver, and that by brass, and that by the strange combination of iron and clay. This may simply refer to the diminution of worldly glory, but it may also mean deterioration, morally and otherwise. Is it not the teaching of Scripture that, unless God interpose, society will steadily slide downwards? And has not the fact been so, wherever the brake and lever of revelation have not arrested the decline and effected elevation?

We are told nowadays of evolution, as if the progress of humanity were upwards; but if you withdraw the influence of supernatural revelation, the evidence of power in manhood to work itself clear of limitations and lower forms is very ambiguous at the best-in reference to morals, at all events. Evil is capable of development, as well as good; and perhaps Nebuchadnezzar's colossus is a truer representation of the course of humanity than the dreams of modern thinkers who see manhood becoming steadily better by its own effort, and think that the clay and iron have inherent power to pass into fine gold.

The question of the identification of these successive monarchies does not fall to be discussed here. But I may observe that the definite statement of Dan. 2:44 ['in the days of these kings'] seems to date the rise of the everlasting kingdom of God in the period of the last of the four, and therefore that the old interpretation of the fourth kingdom as the Roman seems the most natural. The force of that remark may, no doubt, be weakened by the consideration that the Old Testament prophets' perspective of the future brought the coming of Messiah into immediate juxtaposition with the limits of their own vision; but still it has force.

The allocation of each part of the symbol is of less importance for us than the lessons to be drawn from it as a whole. But the singular amalgam of iron and clay in the fourth kingdom is worth notice. No sculptor or metallurgist could make a strong unity out of such materials, of which the combination could only be apparent and superficial. The fact to which it points is the artificial unity into which the great conquering empires of old crushed their unfortunate subject peoples, who were hammered, not fused, together. 'They shall mingle themselves with the seed of men' [Dan. 2:43], may either refer to the attempts to bring about unity by marriages among different races, or to other vain efforts to the same end. To obliterate nationalities has always been the conquering despot's effort, from Nebuchadnezzar to the Czar of Russia, and it always fails. This is the weakness of these huge empires of antiquity, which have no internal cohesion, and tumble to pieces as soon as some external bond is loosened. There is only one kingdom which has no disintegrating forces lodged in it, because it unites men individually to its king, and so binds them to one another; and that is the kingdom which Nebuchadnezzar saw in its destructive aspect.

II. So we have now to think of the stone cut out without hands.

Three things are specified with regard to it: its origin, its duration, and its destructive energy. The origin is heavenly, in sharp contrast to the human origin of the kingdoms symbolised in the colossal man. That idea is twice expressed: once in plain words, 'the God of heaven shall set up a kingdom'; and once figuratively as being cut out of the mountain without hands. By the mountain we are probably to understand Zion, from which, according to many a prophecy, the Messiah King was to rule the earth [Psa. 2:1 - Psa. 2:12; Isa. 2:3].

The fulfilment of this prediction is found, not only in the supernatural birth of Jesus Christ, but in the spread of the gospel without any of the weapons and aids of human power. Twelve poor men spoke, and the world was shaken and the kingdoms remoulded. The seer had learned the omnipotence of ideas and the weakness of outward force. A thought from God is stronger than all armies, and outconquers conquerors. By the mystery of Christ's Incarnation, by the power of weakness in the preachers of the Cross, by the energies of the transforming Spirit, the God of heaven has set up the kingdom. 'It shall never be destroyed.' Its divine origin guarantees its perpetual duration. The kingdoms of man's founding, whether they be in the realm of thought or of outward dominion, 'have their day, and cease to be,' but the kingdom of Christ lasts as long as the eternal life of its King. He cannot die any more, and He cannot live discrowned. Other forms of human association perish, as new conditions come into play which antiquate them; but the kingdom of Jesus is as flexible as it is firm, and has power to adapt to itself all conditions in which men can live. It will outlast earth, it will fill eternity; for when He 'shall have delivered up the kingdom to His Father,' the kingdom, which the God of heaven set up, will still continue.

It 'shall not be left to other people.' By that, seems to be meant that this kingdom will not be like those of human origin, in which dominion passes from one race to another, but that Israel shall ever be the happy subjects and the dominant race. We must interpret the words of the spiritual Israel, and remember how to be Christ’s subject is to belong to a nation who are kings and priests.

The destructive power is graphically represented. The stone, detached from the mountain, and apparently self-moved, dashes against the heterogeneous mass of iron and clay on which the colossus insecurely stands, and down it comes with a crash, breaking into a thousand fragments as it falls. ‘Like the chaff of the summer threshingfloors’ [Dan. 2:35] is the débris, which is whirled out of sight by the wind. Christ and His kingdom have reshaped the world. These ancient, hideous kingdoms of blood and misery are impossible now. Christ and His gospel shattered the Roman empire, and cast Europe into another mould. They have destructive work to do yet, and as surely as the sun rises daily, will do it. The things that can be shaken will be shaken till they fall, and human society will never obtain its stable form till it is moulded throughout after the pattern of the kingdom of Christ.

The vision of our passage has no reference to the quickening power of the kingdom; but the best way in which it destroys is by transformation. It slays the old and lower forms of society by substituting the purer which flow from possession of the one Spirit. That highest glory of the work of Christ is but partially represented here, but there is a hint in Dan. 2:35, which tells that the stone has a strange vitality, and can grow, and does grow, till it becomes an earth-filling mountain.

That issue is not reached yet; but ‘the dream is certain.’ The kingdom is concentrated in its King, and the life of Jesus, diffused through His servants, works to the increase of the empire, and will not cease till the kingdoms of the world are the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ. That stone has vital power, and if we build on it we receive, by wonderful impartation, a kindred derived life, and become ‘living stones.’ It is laid for a sure foundation. If a man stumble over it while it lies there to be built upon, he will lame and maim himself. But it will one day have motion given to it, and, falling from the height of heaven, when He comes to judge the world which He rules and has redeemed, it will grind to powder all who reject the rule of the everlasting King of men.

3) Daniel 3:13-25

Daniel

HARMLESS FIRES

Dan. 3:13 - Dan. 3:25.

The way in which the ‘Chaldeans’ describe the three recusants, betrays their motive in accusing them. ‘Certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon’ could not but be envied and hated, since their promotion wounded both national pride and professional jealousy. The form of the accusation was skilfully calculated to rouse a despot’s rage. ‘They have not regarded thee’ is the head and front of their offending. The inflammable temper of the king blazed up according to expectation, as is the way with tyrants. His passion of rage is twice mentioned [Dan. 3:13, Dan. 3:19], and in one of the instances, is noted as distorting his features. What a picture of ungoverned fury as of one who had never been thwarted! It is the true portrait of an Eastern despot.

Where was Daniel in this hour of danger? His absence is not accounted for, and conjecture is useless; but the fact that he has no share in the incident seems to raise a presumption in favour of the disputed historical character of the Book, which, if it had been fiction, could scarcely have left its hero out of so brilliant an instance of faithfulness to Jehovah.

Nebuchadnezzar’s vehement address to the three culprits is very characteristic and instructive. Fixed determination to enforce his mandate, anger which breaks into threats that were by no means idle, and a certain wish to build a bridge for the escape of servants who had done their work well, are curiously mingled in it. His question, best rendered as in the Revised Version, ‘Is it of purpose . . . that ye’ do so and so? seems meant to suggest that they may repair their fault by pleading inadvertence, accident, or the like, and that He will accept the transparent excuse. The renewed offer of an opportunity of worship does not say what will happen should they obey; and the omission makes the clause more emphatic, as insisting on the act, and slurring over the self-evident result.

On the other hand, in the next clause the act is slightly touched [‘if ye worship not’]; and all the stress comes on the grim description of the consequence. This monarch, who has been accustomed to bend men’s wills like reeds, tries to shake these three obstinate rebels by terror, and opens the door of the furnace, as it were, to let them hear it roar. He finishes with a flash of insolence which, if not blasphemy, at least betrays his belief that he was stronger than any god of his conquered subject peoples.

But the main point to notice in this speech is the unconscious revelation of his real motive in demanding the act of worship. The crime of the three was not that they worshipped wrongly, but that they disobeyed Nebuchadnezzar. He speaks of ‘my gods’, and of the ‘image which I have set up.’ Probably it was an image of the god of the Babylonian pantheon whom he took for his special patron, and was erected in commemoration of some victorious campaign.

At all events, the worship required was an act of obedience to him, and to refuse it was rebellion. Idolatry is tolerant of any private opinions about gods, and intolerant of any refusal to obey authority in worship. So the early Christians were thrown to the lions, not because they worshipped Jesus, but because they would not sacrifice at the Emperor’s command. It is not only heathen rulers who have confounded the spheres of civil and religious obedience. Nonconformity in England was long identified with disloyalty; and in many so-called Christian countries to-day a man may think what he likes, and worship as he pleases in his chamber, if only he will decently comply with authority and pretend to unite in religious ceremonies, which those who appoint and practise them observe with tongue in cheek.

But we may draw another lesson from this truculent apostle of his god. He is not the only instance of apparent religious zeal which is at bottom nothing but masterfulness. ‘You shall worship my god, not because he is God, but because he is mine.’ That is the real meaning of a great deal which calls itself ‘zeal for the Lord.’ The zealot’s own will, opinions, fancies, are crammed down other people’s throats, and the insult in not thinking or worshipping as he does, is worse in his eyes than the offence against God.

The kind of furnace in which recusants are roasted has changed since Nebuchadnezzar’s time, and what is called persecution for religion is out of fashion now. But every advance in the application of Christian principle to social and civil life brings a real martyrdom on its advocates. Every audacious refusal to bow to the habits or opinions of the majority, is visited by consequences which only the martyr spirit will endure. Despots have no monopoly of imperious intolerance. A democracy is more cruel and more impatient of singularity, and especially of religious singularity, than any despot.

England and America have no need to fear the old forms of religious persecution. In both, a man may profess and proclaim any kind of religion or of no religion. But in both, the advance guard of the Christian Church, which seeks to apply Christ's teachings more rigidly to individual and social life, has to face obloquy, ostracism, misrepresentation, from the world and the fossil church, for not serving their gods, nor worshipping the golden image which they have set up. Martyrs will be needed and persecutors will exist till the world is Christian.

How did the three confessors meet this rumble of thunder about their ears? The quiet determination of their reply is very striking and beautiful. It is perfectly loyal, and perfectly unshaken. 'We have no need to answer thee' [Revised Version]. 'It is ill sitting at Rome and striving with the Pope.' Nebuchadnezzar's palace was not precisely the place to dispute with Nebuchadnezzar; and as his logic was only 'Do as I bid you, or burn,' the sole reply possible was, 'We will not do as you bid, and we will burn.' The 'If' which is immediately spoken is already in the minds of the speakers, when they say that *they* do not need to answer. They think that God will take up the taunt which ended the king's tirade. Beautifully they are silent, and refer the blusterer to God, whose voice they believe that He will hear in His deed. 'But Thou shalt answer, Lord, for me,' is the true temper of humble faith, dumb before power as a sheep before her shearers, and yet confident that the meek will not be left unvindicated. Let us leave ourselves in God's hands; and when conscience accuses, or the world maligns or threatens, let us be still, and feel that we have One to speak for us, and so we may hold our peace.

The rendering of Dan. 3:17 is doubtful, but the general meaning is clear. The brave speakers have hope that God will rebuke the king's taunt, and will prove Himself to be able to deliver out of his hand. So they repeat his very words with singular boldness, and contradict him to his face. They have no absolute certainty of deliverance, but whether it comes or not will make no manner of difference to them. They have absolute certainty as to duty; and so they look the furious tyrant right in the eyes, and quietly say, ‘We will not serve thy gods.’ Nothing like that had ever been heard in those halls.

Duty is sovereign. The obligation to resist all temptations to go against conscience is unaffected by consequences. There may be hope that God will not suffer us to be harmed, but whether He does or not should make no difference to our fixed resolve. That temper of lowly faith and inflexible faithfulness which these Hebrews showed in the supreme moment, when they took their lives in their hands, may be as nobly illustrated in the small difficulties of our peaceful lives. The same laws shape the curves of the tiny ripples in a basin and of the Atlantic rollers. No man who cannot say ‘I will not’ in the face of frowns and dangers, be they what they may, and stick to it, will do his part, He who has conquered regard for personal consequences, and does not let them deflect his course a hairsbreadth, is lord of the world.

How small Nebuchadnezzar was by the side of his three victims! How empty his threats to men who cared nothing whether they burned or not, so long as they did not apostatise! What can the world do against a man who says, ‘It is all one to me whether I live or die; I will not worship at your shrines?’ The fire of the furnace is but painted flames to such an one.

The savage punishment intended for the audacious rebels is abundantly confirmed as common in Babylon by the inscriptions, which may be seen quoted by many commentators. The narrative is exceedingly graphic. We see the furious king, with features inflamed with passion. We hear his hoarse, angry orders to heat the furnace seven times hotter, which he forgot would be a mercy, as shortening the victims’ agonies. We see the swift execution of the commands, and the unresisting martyrs bound as they stood, and dragged away by the soldiers to the near furnace, the king following. Its shape is a matter of doubt. Probably the three were thrown in from above, and so the soldiers were caught by the flames.

‘And these three men . . . fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace’ Their helplessness and desperate condition are pathetically suggested by that picture, which might well be supposed to be the last of them that mortal eyes would see. Down into the glowing mass, like chips of wood into Vesuvius, they sank. The king sitting watching, to glut his fury by the sight of their end, had some way of looking into the core of the flames.

The story shifts its point of view with very picturesque abruptness after Dan. 3:23. The vaunting king shall tell what he saw, and thereby convict himself of insolent folly in challenging 'any god' to deliver out of his hand. He alone seems to have seen the sight, which he tells to his courtiers. The bonds were gone, and the men walking free in the fire, as if it had been their element. Three went in bound, four walk there at large; and the fourth is 'like a son of the gods,' by which expression Nebuchadnezzar can have meant nothing more than he had learned from his religion; namely, that the gods had offspring of superhuman dignity. He calls the same person an angel in Dan. 3:28. He speaks there as the three would have spoken, and here as Babylonian mythology spoke.

But the great lesson to be gathered from this miracle of deliverance is simply that men who sacrifice themselves for God find in the sacrifice abundant blessing. They may, or may not, be delivered from the external danger. Peter was brought out of prison the night before his intended martyrdom; James, the brother of John, was slain with the sword, but God was equally near to both, and both were equally delivered from 'Herod and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews.' The disposal of the outward event is in His hands, and is a comparatively small matter. But no furnace into which a man goes because he will be true to God, and will not yield up his conscience, is a tenth part so hot as it seems, and it will do no real harm. The fire burns bonds, but not Christ's servants, consuming many things that entangled, and setting them free. 'I will walk at liberty: for I seek Thy precepts'-even if we have to walk in the furnace. No trials faced in obedience to God will be borne alone. 'When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; . . . when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned.'

The form which Nebuchadnezzar saw amid the flame, as invested with more than human majesty, may have been but one of the ministering spirits sent forth to minister to the martyrs-the embodiment of the divine power which kept the flames from kindling upon them. But we have Jesus for our Companion in all trials, and His presence makes it possible for us to pass over hot ploughshares with unblistered feet; to bathe our hands in fire and not feel the pain; to accept the sorest consequences of fidelity to Him, and count them as 'not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed,' and is made more glorious through these light afflictions. A present Christ will never fail His servants, and will make the furnace cool even when its fire is fiercest.

4) Daniel 5:17-31

Daniel

MENE, TEKEL, PERES

Dan. 5:17 - Dan. 5:31.

Belshazzar is now conceded to have been a historical personage, the son of the last monarch of Babylon, and the other name in the narrative which has been treated as erroneous-namely, Darius-has not been found to be mentioned elsewhere, but is not thereby proved to be a blunder. For why should it not be possible for Scripture to preserve a name that secular history has not yet been ascertained to record, and why must it always be assumed that, if Scripture and cuneiform or other documents differ, it is Scripture that must go to the wall?

We do not deal with the grim picture of the drunken orgy, turned into abject terror as 'the fingers of a man's hand' came forth out of empty air, and in the full blaze of 'the candlestick' wrote the illegible signs. There is something blood-curdling in the visibility of but a part of the hand and its busy writing. Whose was the body, and where was it? No wonder if the riotous mirth was frozen into awe, and the wine lost flavour. Nor need we do more than note the craven-hearted flattery addressed to Daniel by the king, who apparently had never heard of him till the queen spoke of him just before. We have to deal with the indictment, the sentence, and the execution.

I. The indictment.

Daniel’s tone is noticeably stern. He has no reverential preface, no softening of his message. His words are as if cut with steel on the rock. He brushes aside the promises of vulgar decorations and honours with undisguised contempt, and goes straight to his work of rousing a torpid conscience.

Babylon was the embodiment and type of the godless world-power, and Belshazzar was the incarnation of the spirit which made Babylon. So Daniel’s indictment gathers together the main forms of sin, which cleave to every godless national or individual life. And he begins with that feather-brained frivolity which will learn nothing by example. Nebuchadnezzar’s fate might have taught his successors what came of God-forgetting arrogance, and attributing success to oneself; and his restoration might have been an object-lesson to teach that devout recognition of the Most High as sovereign was the beginning of a king’s prosperity and sanity. But Belshazzar knew all this, and ignored it all. Was he singular in that? Is not the world full of instances of the ruin that attends godlessness, which yet do not check one godless man in his career? The wrecks lie thick on the shore, but their broken sides and gaunt skeletons are not warnings sufficient to keep a thousand other ships from steering right on to the shoals. Of these godless lives it is true, ‘This their way is their folly; yet their posterity approve their sayings,’ and their doings, and say and do them over again. Incapacity to learn by example is a mark of godless lives.

Further, Belshazzar ‘lifted up’ himself ‘against the Lord of heaven,’ and ‘glorified not Him in whose hand was his breath and whose were all his ways.’ The very essence of all sin is that assertion of self as Lord, as sufficient, as the director of one’s path. To make myself my centre, to depend on myself, to enthrone my own will as sovereign, is to fly in the face of nature and fact, and is the mother of all sin. To live to self is to die while we live; to live to God is to live even while we die. Nations and individuals are ever tempted thus to ignore God, and rebelliously to say, ‘Who is Lord over us?’ or presumptuously to think themselves architects of their own fortunes, and sufficient for their own defence. Whoever yields to that temptation has let the ‘prince of the devils’ in, and the inferior evil spirits will follow. Positive acts are not needed; the negative omission to ‘glorify’ the God of our life binds sin on us.

Further, Belshazzar, the type of godlessness, had desecrated the sacrificial vessels by using them for his drunken carouse, and therein had done just what we do when we take the powers of heart and mind and will, which are meant to be filled with affections, thoughts, and purposes, that are ‘an odour of a sweet smell, well-pleasing to God,’ and desecrate them by pouring from them libations before creatures. Is not love profaned when it is lavished on men or women without one reference to God? Is not the intellect desecrated when its force is spent on finite objects of thought, and never a glance towards God? Is not the will prostituted from its high vocation when it is used to drive the wheels of a God-ignoring life?

The coin bears the image and superscription of the true king. It is treason to God to render it to any paltry ‘Cæ³¡r’ of our own coronation. Belshazzar was an avowed idolater, but many of us are worshipping gods ‘which see not, nor hear, nor know’ as really as he did. We cannot but do so, if we are not worshipping God; for men must have some person or thing which they regard as their supreme good, to which the current of their being sets, which, possessed, makes them blessed; and that is our god, whether we call it so or not.

Further, Belshazzar was carousing while the Medes and Persians were ringing Babylon round, and his hand should have been grasping a sword, not a wine-cup. Drunkenness and lust, which sap manhood, are notoriously stimulated by peril, as many a shipwreck tells when desperate men break open the spirit casks, and go down to their death intoxicated, and as many an epidemic shows when morality is flung aside, and mad vice rules and reels in the streets before it sinks down to die. A nation or a man that has shaken off God will not long keep sobriety or purity.

II. After the stern catalogue of sins comes the tremendous sentence.

Daniel speaks like an embodied conscience, or like an avenging angel, with no word of pity, and no effort to soften or dilute the awful truth. The day for wrapping up grim facts in muffled words was past. Now the only thing to be done was to bare the sword, and let its sharp edge cut. The inscription, as given in Dan. 5:25, is simply ‘Numbered, numbered, weighed and breakings.’ The variation in Dan. 5:28 [Peres] is the singular of the noun used in the plural in Dan. 5:25, with the omission of ‘U,’ which is merely the copulative ‘and.’ The disjointed brevity adds to the force of the words. Apparently, they were not written in a character which ‘the king’s wise men’ could read, and probably were in Aramaic letters as well as language, which would be familiar to Daniel. Of course, a play on the word ‘Peres’ suggests the *Persian* as the agent of the *breaking*. Daniel simply supplied the personal application of the oracular writing. He fits the cap on the king’s head. ‘God hath numbered *thy* kingdom . . . *thou* art weighed . . . *thy* kingdom is divided’ [broken].

These three fatal words carry in them the summing up of all divine judgment, and will be rung in the ears of all who bring it on themselves. Belshazzar is a type of the end of every godless world-power and of every such individual life. ‘Numbered’-for God allows to each his definite time, and when its sum is complete, down falls the knife that cuts the threads. ‘Weighed’-for ‘after death the judgment,’ and a godless life, when laid in the balance which His hand holds, is ‘altogether lighter than vanity.’ ‘Breakings’-for not only will the godless life be torn away from its possessions with much laceration of heart and spirit, but the man himself will be broken like some earthen vessel coming into sharp collision with an express engine. Belshazzar saw the handwriting on the same night in which it was carried out in act; we see it long before, and we can read it. But some of us are mad enough to sit unconcerned at the table, and go on with the orgy, though the legible letters are gleaming plain on the wall.

III. The execution of the sentence need not occupy us long.

Belshazzar so little realised the facts, that he issued his order to deck out Daniel in the tawdry pomp he had promised him, as if a man with such a message would be delighted with purple robes and gold chains, and made him third ruler of the kingdom which he had just declared was numbered and ended by God. The force of folly could no further go. No wonder that the hardy invaders swept such an Imbecile from his throne without a struggle! His blood was red among the lees of the wine-cups, and the ominous writing could scarcely have faded from the wall when the shouts of the assailants were heard, the palace gates forced, and the half-drunken king, alarmed too late, put to the sword. ‘He that, being often reproved, hardeneth his neck shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.’

5) Daniel 6:5

Daniel

A TRIBUTE FROM ENEMIES

Dan. 6:5.

Daniel was somewhere about ninety years old when he was cast to the lions. He had been for many years the real governor of the whole empire; and, of course, in such a position had incurred much hatred and jealousy. He was a foreigner and a worshipper of another God, and therefore was all the more unpopular, as a Brahmin would be in England if he were a Cabinet Minister. He was capable and honest, and therefore all the incompetent and all the knavish officials would recognise in him their natural enemy. So, hostile intrigues, which grow quickly in courts, especially in Eastern courts, sprung up round him, and his subordinates laid their heads together in order to ruin him. They say, in the words of my text, ‘We cannot find any holes to pick. There is only one way to put him into antagonism to the law, and that is by making a law which shall be in antagonism to God’s law.’ And so they scheme to have the mad regulation enacted, which, in the sequel of the story, we find was enforced.

These intriguers say, ‘We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God.’

Now, then, if we look at that confession, wrung from the lips of malicious observers, we may, I think, get two or three lessons.

I. First, note the very unfavourable soil in which a character of singular beauty and devout consecration may be rooted and grow.

What sort of a place was that court where Daniel was? Half shambles and half pigsty. Luxury, sensuality, lust, self-seeking, idolatry, ruthless cruelty, and the like were the environment of this man. And in the middle of these there grew up that fair flower of a character, pure and stainless, by the acknowledgment of enemies, and in which not even accusers could find a speck or a spot. There are no circumstances in which a man must have his garments spotted by the world. However deep the filth through which he has to wade, if God sent him there, and if he keeps hold of God’s hand, his purity will be more stainless by reason of the impurity round him. There were saints in Cæ³¡r’s household, and depend upon it, they were more saintly saints just because they were in Cæ³¡r’s household. You will always find that people who have any goodness in them, and who live in conditions unusually opposed to goodness, have a clearer faith, and a firmer grasp of their Master, and a higher ideal of Christian life, just because of the foulness in which they have to live. It may sound a paradox, but it is a deep truth that unfavourable circumstances are the most favourable for the development of Christian character. For that development comes, not by what we draw from the things around, but by what we draw from the soil in which we are rooted, even God Himself, in whom the roots find both anchorage and nutriment. And the more we are thrown back upon Him, and the less we find food for our best selves in the things about us, the more likely is our religion to be robust and thorough-going, and conscious ever of His presence. Resistance strengthens muscles, and the more there is need for that in our Christian lives, the manlier and the stronger and the better shall we probably be. Let no man or woman say, ‘If only circumstances were more favourable, oh, what a saint I could be; but how can I be one, with all these unfavourable conditions? How can a man keep the purity of his Christian life and the fervour of his Christian communion amidst the tricks and chicanery and small things of Manchester business? How can a woman find time to hold fellowship with God, when all day long she is distracted in her nursery with all these children hanging on her to look after? How can we, in our actual circumstances, reach the ideal of Christian character?’

Ah, brother, if the ideal’s being realised depends on circumstances, it is a poor affair. It depends on you, and he that has vitality enough within him to keep hold of Jesus Christ, has thereby power enough within him to turn enemies into friends, and unfavourable circumstances into helps instead of hindrances. Your ship can sail wonderfully near to the wind if you trim the sails rightly, and keep a good, strong grip on the helm, and the blasts that blow all but in your face, may be made to carry you triumphantly into the haven of your desire. Remember Daniel, in that godless court reeking with lust and cruelty, and learn that purity and holiness and communion with God do not depend on environment, but upon the inmost will of the man.

II. Notice the keen critics that all good men have to face.

In this man's case, of course, their eyesight was mended by the microscope of envy and malice. That is no doubt the case with some of us too. But whether that be so or no, however unobtrusive and quiet a Christian person's life may be, there will be some people standing close by who, if not actually watching for his fall, are at least by no means indisposed to make the worst of a slip, and to rejoice over an inconsistency.

We do not need to complain of that. It is perfectly reasonable and perfectly right. There will always be a tendency to judge men, who by any means profess that they are living by the highest law, with a judgment that has very little charity in it. And it is perfectly right that it should be so. Christian people need to be trained to be indifferent to men's opinions, but they also need to be reminded that they are bound, as the Apostle says, to 'provide things honest in the sight of all men.' It is a reasonable and right requirement that they should 'have a good report of them that are without.' Be content to be tried by a high standard, and do not wonder, and do not forget that there are keen eyes watching your conduct, in your home, in your relations to your friends, in your business, in your public life, which would weep no tears, but might gleam with malicious satisfaction, if they saw inconsistencies in you. Remember it, and shape your lives so that they may be disappointed.

If a minister falls into any kind of inconsistency or sin, if a professing Christian makes a bad failure in Manchester, what a talk there is, and what a pointing of fingers! We sometimes think it is hard; it is all right. It is just what should be meted out to us. Let us remember that unslumbering tribunal which sits in judgment upon all our professions, and is very ready to condemn, and very slow to acquit.

III. Notice, again, the unblemished record.

These men could find no fault, ‘forasmuch as Daniel was faithful.’ Neither was there any error’-of judgment, that is,-’or fault’-dereliction of duty, that is,-’found in him.’ They were very poor judges of his religion, and they did not try to judge that; but they were very good judges of his conduct as prime minister, and they did judge that. The world is a very poor critic of my Christianity, but it is a very sufficient one of my conduct. It may not know much about the inward emotions of the Christian life, and the experiences in which the Christian heart expatiates and loves to dwell, but it knows what short lengths, and light weights, and bad tempers, and dishonesty, and selfishness are. And it is by our conduct, in the things that they and we do together, that worldly men judge what we are in the solitary depths where we dwell in communion with God. It is useless for Christians to be talking, as so many of them are fond of doing, about their spiritual experiences and their religious joy, and all the other sweet and sacred things which belong to the silent life of the spirit in God, unless, side by side with these, there is the doing of the common deeds which the world is actually able to appraise in such a fashion as to extort, even from them, the confession, ‘We find no occasion against this man.’

You remember the pregnant, quaint old saying, ‘If a Christian man is a shoeblack, he ought to be the best shoeblack in the parish.’ If we call ourselves Christians, we are bound, by the very name, to live in such a fashion as that men shall have no doubt of the reality of our profession and of the depth of our fellowship with Christ. It is by our common conduct that they judge us. And the ‘Christian Endeavourer’ needs to remember, whether he or she be old or young, that the best sign of the reality of the endeavour is the doing of common things with absolute rightness, because they are done wholly for Christ’s sake.

It is a sharp test, and I wonder how many of us would like to go out into the world, and say to all the irreligious people who know us, ‘Now come and tell me what the faults are that you have seen in me.’ There would be a considerable response to the invitation, and perhaps some of us would learn to know ourselves rather better than we have been able to do. ‘We shall not find any occasion in *this* Daniel’-I wonder if they would find it in *that* Daniel-’except we find it concerning the law of his God.’ There is a record for a man!

IV. Lastly, note obedient disobedience.

The plot goes on the calculation that, whatever happens, this man may be trusted to do what his God tells him, no matter who tells him not to do it. And so on that calculation the law, surely as mad a one as any Eastern despot ever hatched, is passed that, for a given space of time, nobody within the dominions of this king, Darius, is to make any petition or request of any man or god, save of the king only. It was one of the long series of laws that have been passed in order to be broken, and being broken, might be an instrument to destroy the men that broke it. It was passed with no intention of getting obedience, but only with the intention of slaying one faithful man, and the plot worked according to calculation.

What did it matter to Daniel what was forbidden or commanded? He needed to pray to God, and nothing shall hinder him from doing that. And so, obediently disobedient, he brushes the preposterous law of the poor, shadowy Darius on one side, in order that he may keep the law of his God.

Now I do not need to remind you how obedience to God has in the past often had to be maintained by disobedience to law. I need not speak of martyrs, nor of the great principle laid down so clearly by the apostle Peter, ‘We ought to obey God rather than man.’ Nor need I remind you that if a man, for conscience sake, refuses to render active obedience to an unrighteous law, and unresistingly accepts the appointed penalty, he is not properly regarded as a law-breaker.

If earthly authorities command what is clearly contrary to God’s law, a Christian is absolved from obedience, and cannot be loyal unless he is a rebel. That is how our forefathers read constitutional obligations. That is how the noble men on the other side of the Atlantic, fifty years ago, read their constitutional obligations in reference to that devilish institution of slavery. And in the last resort-God forbid that we should need to act on the principle-Christian men are set free from allegiance when the authority over them commands what is contrary to the will and the law of God.

But all that does not touch us. But I will tell you what does touch us. Obedience to God needs always to be sustained-in some cases more markedly, in some cases less so-but always in some measure, by disobedience to the maxims and habits of most men round about us. If they say ‘Do this,’ and Jesus Christ says ‘Don’t,’ then they may talk as much as they like, but we are bound to turn a deaf ear to their exhortations and threats.

‘He is a slave that dare not be In the right with two or three,’

as that peaceful Quaker poet of America sings.

And for us, in our little lives, the motto, ‘This did not I, because of the fear of the Lord,’ is absolutely essential to all noble Christian conduct. Unless you are prepared to be in the minority, and now and then to be called ‘narrow,’ ‘fanatic,’ and to be laughed at by men because you will not do what they do, but abstain and resist, then there is little chance of your ever making much of your Christian profession.

These people calculated upon Daniel, and they had a right to calculate upon him. Could the world calculate upon us, that we would rather go to the lions’ den than conform to what God and our consciences told us to be a sin? If not, we have not yet learned what it means to be a disciple. The commandment comes to us absolutely, as it came to the servants in the first miracle, ‘Whatsoever He saith unto you’-that, and that only-’whatsoever He saith unto you, do it.’

6) Daniel 6:16-28

Daniel

FAITH STOPPING THE MOUTHS OF LIONS

Dan. 6:16 - Dan. 6:28.

Daniel was verging on ninety when this great test of his faithfulness was presented to him. He had been honoured and trusted through all the changes in the kingdom, and, when the Medo-Persian conquest came, the new monarch naturally found in him, as a foreigner, a more reliable minister than in native officials. ‘Envy doth merit as its shade pursue,’ and the crafty trick by which his subordinates tried to procure his fall, was their answer to

Darius’s scheme of making him prime minister. Our passage begins in the middle of the story, but the earlier part will come into consideration in the course of our remarks.

I. We note, first, the steadfast, silent confessor and the weak king.

Darius is a great deal more conspicuous in the narrative than Daniel. The victim of injustice is silent. He does not seem to have been called on to deny or defend the indictment. His deed was patent, and the breach of the law flagrant. He, too, was ‘like a sheep before the shearers,’ dumb. His silence meant, among other things, a quiet, patient, fixed resolve to bear all, and not to deny his God. Weak men bluster. Heroic endurance has generally little to say. Without resistance, or a word, the old man, an hour ago the foremost in the realm, is hauled off and flung into the pit or den. It is useless and needless to ask its form. The entrance was sealed with two seals, one the king’s, one the conspirators’, that neither party might steal a march on the other. Fellows in iniquity do not trust each other. So, down in the dark there, with the glittering eyeballs of the brutes round him, and their growls in his ears, the old man sits all night long, with peace in his heart, and looking up trustfully, through the hole in the roof, to his Protector’s stars, shining their silent message of cheer.

The passage dwells on the pitiable weakness and consequent unrest of the king. He had not yielded Daniel to his fate without a struggle, which the previous narrative describes in strong language. ‘Sore displeased,’ he ‘set his heart’ on delivering him, and ‘laboured’ to do so. The curious obstacle, limiting even his power, is a rare specimen of conservatism in its purest form. So wise were our ancestors, that nothing of theirs shall ever be touched. Infallible legislators can make immutable laws; the rest of us must be content to learn by blundering, and to grow by changing. The man who says, ‘I never alter my opinions,’ condemns himself as either too foolish or too proud to learn.

But probably, if the question had been about a law that was inconvenient to Darius himself, or to these advocates of the constitution as it has always been, some way of getting round it would have been found out. If the king had been bold enough to assert himself, he could have walked through the cobweb. But this is one of the miseries of yielding to evil counsels, that one step taken calls for another. ‘In for a penny, in for a pound.’ Therefore let us all take heed of small compliances, and be sure that we can never say about any doubtful course, ‘Thus far will I go, and no farther.’ Darius was his servants’ servant when once he had put his name to the arrogant decree. He did not know the incidence of his act, and we do not know that of ours; therefore let us take heed of the quality of actions and motives, since we are wholly incapable of estimating the sweep of their consequences.

Darius’s conduct to Daniel was like Herod’s to John the Baptist and Pilate’s to Jesus. In all the cases the judges were convinced of the victim’s innocence, and would have saved him; but fear of others biassed justice, and from selfish motives, they let fierce hatred have its way. Such judges are murderers. From all come the old lessons, never too threadbare to be dinned into the ears, especially of the young, that to be weak is, in a world so full of temptation, the same as to be wicked, and that he who has a sidelong eye to his supposed interest, will never see the path of duty plainly.

What a feeble excuse to his own conscience was Darius’s parting word to Daniel! ‘Thy God, whom thou servest continually, He will deliver thee!’ And was flinging him to the lions the right way to treat a man who served God continually? Or, what right had Darius to expect that any god would interfere to stop the consequences of his act, which he thus himself condemned? We are often tempted to think, as he did, that a divine intervention will come in between our evil deeds and their natural results. We should be wiser if we did not do the things that, by our own confession, need God to avert their issues.

But that weak parting word witnessed to the impression made by the lifelong consistency of Daniel. He must be a good man who gets such a testimony from those who are harming him. The busy minister of state had done his political work so as to extort that tribute from one who had no sympathy with his religion. Do we do ours in that fashion? How many of our statesmen ‘serve God continually’ and obviously in their public life?

What a contrast between the night passed in the lions’ den and the palace! ‘Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage,’ and soft beds and luxurious delights of sense bring no ease to troubled consciences. Daniel is more at rest, though his ‘soul is among lions,’ than Darius in his palace.

Peter sleeps soundly, though the coming morning is to be his last. Better to be the victim than the doer of injustice!

The verdict of nightly thoughts on daily acts is usually true, and if our deeds do not bear thinking of ‘on our beds,’ the sooner we cancel them by penitence and reversed conduct, the better. But weak men are often prone to swift and shallow regrets, which do not influence their future any more than a stone thrown into the sea makes a permanent gap. Why should Darius have waited for morning, if his penitence had moved him to a firm resolution to undo the evil done? He had better have sprung from his bed, and gone with his guards to open the den in the dark. Feeble lamentations are out of place when it is still time to act.

The hurried rush to the den in the morning twilight, and the ‘lamentable voice,’ so unlike royal impassiveness, indicate the agitation of an impulsive nature, accustomed to let the feeling of the moment sway it unchecked. Absolute power tends to make that type of man. The question thrown into the den seems to imply that its interior was not seen. If so, the half-belief in Daniel’s survival is remarkable. It indicates, as before, the impression of steadfast devoutness made by the old man’s life, and also a belief that his God was possibly a true and potent divinity.

Such a belief was quite natural, but it does not mean that Darius was prepared to accept Daniel’s God as his god. His religion was probably elastic and hospitable enough to admit that other nations might have other gods. But his thoughts about this ‘living God’ are a strange medley. He is not sure whether He is stronger than the royal lions, and he does not seem to feel that if a god delivers, his own act in surrendering a favoured servant of such a god looks very black. A half-belief blinds men to the opposition between their ways and God’s, and to the certain issue of their going in one direction and God in another. If Daniel be delivered, what will become of Darius? But, like most men, he is illogical, and that question does not seem to have occurred to him. Surely this man may sit for a portrait of a weak, passionate nature, in the feebleness of his resistance to evil, the half hopes that wrong would be kept from turning out so badly as it promised, the childish moanings over wickedness that might still have been mended, and the incapacity to take in the grave, personal consequences of his crime.

II. We next note the great deliverance.

The king does not see Daniel, and waits in sickening doubt whether any sound but the brutes’ snarl at the disturber of their feast will be heard. There must have been a sigh of relief when the calm accents were audible from the unseen depth. And what dignity, respect, faith, and innocence are in them! Even in such circumstances the usual form of reverential salutation to the king is remembered. That night’s work might have made a sullen rebel of Daniel, and small blame to him if he had had no very amiable feelings to Darius; but he had learned faithfulness in a good school, and no trace of returning evil for evil was in his words or tones.

The formal greeting was much more than a form, when it came up from among the lions. It heaped coals of fire on the king’s head, let us hope, and taught him, if he needed the lesson, that Daniel’s disobedience had not been disloyalty. The more religion compels us to disregard the authority and practices of others, the more scrupulously attentive should we be to demonstrate that we cherish all due regard to them, and wish them well. How simply, and as if he saw nothing in it to wonder at, he tells the fact of his deliverance! ‘My God has sent His angel, and hath shut the lions’ mouths.’ He had not been able to say, as the king did before the den was opened, ‘Thy God will deliver thee’; but he had gone down into it, knowing that He was able, and leaving himself in God’s care. So it was no surprise to him that he was safe. Thankfulness, but not astonishment, filled his heart. So faith takes God’s gifts, however great and beyond natural possibility they may be; for the greatest of them are less than the Love which faith knows to move all things, and whatsoever faith receives is just like Him.

Daniel did not say, as Darius did, that he served God continually, but he did declare his own innocency in God’s sight and unimpeachable fidelity to the king. His reference is probably mainly to his official conduct; but the characteristic tone of the Old Testament saint is audible, which ventured on professions of uprightness, accordant with an earlier stage of revelation and religious consciousness, but scarcely congruous with the deeper and more inward sense of sin produced by the full revelation in Christ. But if the tone of the latter part of Dan. 6:22 is somewhat strange to us, the historian’s summary in Dan. 6:23 gives the eternal truth of the matter: ‘No manner of hurt was found upon him, because he had trusted in his God.' That is the basis of the reference in Heb. 11:33 : 'Through faith . . . stopped the mouths of lions.'

Simple trust in God brings His angel to our help, and the deliverance, which is ultimately to be ascribed to His hand muzzling the gaping beasts of prey, may also be ascribed to the faith which sets His hand in motion. The true cause is God, but the indispensable condition without which God will not act, and with which He cannot but act, is our trust. Therefore all the great things which it is said to do are due, not to anything in it, but wholly to that of which it lays hold. A foot or two of lead pipe is worth little, but if it is the channel through which water flows into a city, it is priceless.

Faith may or may not bring external deliverances, such as it brought to Daniel; but the good cheer which this story brings us does not depend on these. When Paul lay in Rome, shortly before his martyrdom, the experience of Daniel was in his mind, as he thankfully wrote to Timothy, 'I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.' He adds a hope which contrasts strangely, at first sight, with the clear expectation of a speedy and violent death, expressed a moment or two before ['I am already being offered, and the time of my departure is come'] when he says, 'The Lord will deliver me from every evil work'; but he had learned that it was possible to pass through the evil and yet to be delivered from it, and that a man might be thrown to the lions and devoured by them, and yet be truly shielded from all harm from them. So he adds, 'And will save me unto His heavenly kingdom,' thereby teaching us that the true deliverance is that which carries us into, or something nearer towards, the eternal home. Thus understood, the miracle of Daniel's deliverance is continually repeated to all who partake of Daniel's faith, 'Thou hast made the Most High thy habitation . . . thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder.'

The savage vengeance on the conspirators and the proclamation of Darius must be left untouched. The one is a ghastly example of retributive judgment, in which, as sometimes is the case even now, men fall into the pit they have digged for others, and it shows the barbarous cruelty of that gorgeous civilisation. The other is an example of how far a man may go in perceiving and acknowledging the truth without its influencing his heart.

The decree enforces recognition of Daniel’s God, in language which even prophets do not surpass; but it is all lip-reverence, as evanescent as superficial. It takes more than a fright caused by a miracle to make a man a true servant of the living God.

The final verse of the passage implies Daniel’s restoration to rank, and gives a beautiful, simple picture of the old man’s closing days, which had begun so long before, in such a different world as Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, and closed in Cyrus’s, enriched with all that should accompany old age-honour, obedience, troops of friends. ‘When a man’s ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.’

7) Daniel 12:13

Daniel

A NEW YEARS MESSAGE

Dan. 12:13.

Daniel had been receiving partial insight into the future by the visions recorded in previous chapters. He sought for clearer knowledge, and was told that the book of the future was sealed and closed, so that no further enlightenment was possible for him. But duty was clear, whatever might be dark; and there were some things in the future certain, whatever might be problematic. So he is bidden back to the common paths of life, and is enjoined to pursue his patient course with an eye on the end to which it conducts, and to leave the unknown future to unfold itself as it may.

I do not need, I suppose, to point the application. Anticipations of what may be before us have, no doubt, been more or less in the minds of all of us in the last few days. The cast of them will have been very different, according to age and present circumstances. But bright or dark, hopes or dreads, they reveal nothing. Sometimes we think we see a little way ahead, and then swirling mists hide all.

So I think that the words of my text may help us not only to apprehend the true task of the moment, but to discriminate between the things in the unknown future that are hidden and those that stand clear. There are three points, then, in this message-the journey, the pilgrim’s resting-place, and the final home. ‘Go thou thy way till the end be: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days.’ Let us, then, look at these three points briefly.

I. The journey.

That is a threadbare metaphor for life. But threadbare as it is, its significance is inexhaustible. But before I deal with it, note that very significant ‘but’ with which my text begins. The Prophet has been asking for a little more light to shine on the dark unknown that stretches before him. And his request is negatived-’*But* go thou thy way.’ In the connection that means, ‘Do not waste your time in dreaming about, or peering into, what you can never see, but fill the present with strenuous service.’ ‘Go thou thy way.’ Never mind the far-off issues; the step before you is clear, and that is all that concerns you. Plod along the path, and leave to-morrow to take care of itself. There is a piece of plain practical wisdom, none the less necessary for us to lay to heart because it is so obvious and commonplace.

And then, if we turn to the emblem with which the continuity of daily life and daily work is set forth here, as the path along which we travel, how much wells up in the shape of suggestion, familiar, it may be, but very needful and wholesome for us all to lay to heart!

The figure implies perpetual change. The landscape glides past us, and we travel on through it. How impossible it would be for us older people to go back to the feelings, to the beliefs, to the tone and the temper with which we used to look at life thirty or forty years ago! Strangely and solemnly, like the silent motion of some gliding scene in a theatre, bit by bit, inch by inch, change comes over all surroundings, and, saddest of all, in some aspects, over ourselves.

‘We all are changed, by still degrees,
All but the basis of the soul.’

And it is foolish for us ever to forget that we live in a state of things in which constant alteration is the law, as surely as, when the train whizzes through the country, the same landscape never meets the eye twice, as the traveller looks through the windows. Let us, then, accept the fact that nothing abides with us, and so not be bewildered nor swept away from our moorings, nor led to vain regrets and paralysing retrospects when the changes that must come do come, sometimes slowly and imperceptibly, sometimes with stunning suddenness, like a bolt out of the blue. If life is truly represented under the figure of a journey, nothing is more certain than that we sleep in a fresh hospice every night, and leave behind us every day scenes that we shall never traverse again. What madness, then, to be putting out eager and desperate hands to clutch what must be left, and so to contradict the very law under which we live!

Then another of the well-worn commonplaces which are so believed by us all that we never think about them, and therefore need to be urged, as I am trying, poorly enough, to do now-another of the commonplaces that spring from this image is that life is continuous. Geologists used to be divided into two schools, one of whom explained everything by invoking great convulsions, the other by appealing to the uniform action of laws. There are no convulsions in life. To-morrow is the child of to-day, and yesterday was the father of this day. What we are, springs from what we have been, and settles what we shall be. The road leads somewhither, and we follow it step by step. As the old nursery rhyme has it-

‘One foot up and one foot down,
That’s the way to London town.’

We make our characters by the continual repetition of small actions. Let no man think of his life as if it were a heap of unconnected points. It is a chain of links that are forged together inseparably. Let no man say, ‘I do this thing, and there shall be no evil consequences impressed upon my life as results of it.’ It cannot be. ‘To-morrow *shall be* as this day, and much more abundant.’ We shall to-morrow be more of everything that we are to-day, unless by some strong effort of repentance and change we break the fatal continuity, and make a new beginning by God’s grace. But let us lay to heart this, as a very solemn truth which lifts up into mystical and unspeakable importance the things that men idly call trifles, that life is one continuous whole, a march towards a definite end.

And therefore we ought to see to it that the direction in which our life runs is one that conscience and God can approve. And, since the rapidity with which a body falls increases as it falls, the more needful that we give the right direction and impulses to the life. It will be a dreadful thing if our downward course acquires strength as it travels, and being slow at first, gains in celerity, and accrues to itself mass and weight, like an avalanche started from an Alpine summit, which is but one or two bits of snow and ice at first, and falls at last into the ravine, tons of white destruction. The lives of many of us are like it.

Further, the metaphor suggests that no life takes its fitting course unless there is continuous effort. There will be crises when we have to run with panting breath and strained muscles. There will be long stretches of level commonplace where speed is not needed, but ‘pegging away’ is, and the one duty is persistent continuousness in a course. But whether the task of the moment is to ‘run and not be weary,’ or to ‘walk and not faint,’ crises and commonplace stretches of land alike require continuous effort, if we are to ‘run with patience the race that is set before us.’

Mark the emphasis of my text, ‘Go thy way *till* the end.’ You, my contemporaries, you older men! do not fancy that in the deepest aspect any life has ever a period in it in which a man may ‘take it easy.’ You may do that in regard to outward things, and it is the hope and the reward of faithfulness in youth and middle age that, when the grey hairs come to be upon us, we may slack off a little in regard to outward activity. But in regard to all the deepest things of life, no man may ever lessen his diligence until he has attained the goal.

Some of you will remember how, in a stormy October night, many years ago, the *Royal Charter* went down when three hours from Liverpool, and the passengers had met in the saloon and voted a testimonial to the captain because he had brought them across the ocean in safety. Until the anchor is down and we are inside the harbour, we may be shipwrecked, if we are careless in our navigation. ‘Go thou thy way *until the end*.’ And remember, you older people, that until that end is reached you have to use all your power, and to labour as earnestly, and guard yourself as carefully, as at any period before.

And not only '*till* the end,' but 'go thou thy way *to* the end.' That is to say, let the thought that the road has a termination be ever present with us all. Now, there is a great deal of the so-called devout contemplation of death which is anything but wholesome. People were never meant to be always looking forward to that close. Men may think of 'the end' in a hundred different connections. One man may say, 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.' Another man may say, 'I have only a little while to master this science, to make a name for myself, to win wealth. Let me bend all my efforts in a fierce determination-made the fiercer because of the thought of the brevity of life-to win the end.' The mere contemplation of the shortness of our days may be an ally of immorality, of selfishness, of meanness, of earthly ambitions, or it may lay a cooling hand on fevered brows, and lessen the pulsations of hearts that throb for earth.

But whilst it is not wholesome to be always thinking of death, it is more unwholesome still never to let the contemplation of that end come into our calculations of the future, and to shape our lives in an obstinate blindness to what is the one certain fact which rises up through the whirling mists of the unknown future, like some black cliff from the clouds that wreath around it. Is it not strange that the surest thing is the thing that we forget most of all? It sometimes seems to me as if the sky rained down opiates upon people, as if all mankind were in a conspiracy of lunacy, because they, with one accord, ignore the most prominent and forget the only certain fact about their future; and in all their calculations do *not*' so number their days' as to 'apply' their 'hearts unto wisdom.' 'Go thou thy way until the end,' and let thy way be marked out with a constant eye towards the end.

II. Note, again, the resting-place.

'Go thou thy way, for thou shalt rest.' Now, I suppose, to most careful readers that clearly is intended as a gracious, and what they call a euphemistic way of speaking about death. 'Thou shalt rest'; well, that is a thought that takes away a great deal of the grimness and the terror with which men generally invest the close. It is a thought, of course, the force of which is very different in different stages and conditions of life. To you young people, eager, perhaps ambitious, full of the consciousness of inward power, happy, and, in all human probability, with the greater portion of your lives before you in which to do what you desire, the thought of ‘rest’ comes with a very faint appeal. And yet I do not suppose that there is any one of us who has not some burden that is hard to carry, or who has not learned what weariness means.

But to us older people, who have tasted disappointments, who have known the pressure of grinding toil for a great many years, whose hearts have been gnawed by harassments and anxieties of different kinds, whose lives are apparently drawing nearer their end than the present moment is to their beginning, the thought, ‘Thou shalt rest,’ comes with a very different appeal from that which it makes to these others.

‘There remaineth a rest for the people of God,
And I have had trouble enough for one,’

says our great modern poet; and therein he echoes the deepest thoughts of most of this congregation. That rest is the cessation of toil, but the continuance of activity-the cessation of toil, and anxiety, and harassment, and care, and so the darkness is made beautiful when we think that God draws the curtain, as a careful mother does in her child’s chamber, that the light may not disturb the slumberer.

But, dear friends, that final cessation of earthly work has a double character. ‘Thou shalt rest’ was said to this man of God. But what of people whom death takes away from the only sort of work that they are fit to do? It will be no rest to long for the occupations which you never can have any more. And if you have been living for this wretched present, to be condemned to have nothing to do any more in it and with it will be torture, and not repose. Ask yourselves how you would like to be taken out of your shop, or your mill, or your study, or your laboratory, or your counting-house, and never be allowed to go into it again. Some of you know how wearisome a holiday is when you cannot get to your daily work. You will get a very long holiday after you are dead. And if the hungering after the withdrawn occupation persists, there will be very little pleasure in rest. There is only one way by which we can make that inevitable end a blessing, and turn death into the opening of the gate of our resting-place; and that is by setting our heart’s desires and our spirit’s trust on Jesus Christ, who is the ‘Lord both of the dead and of the living.' If we do that, even that last enemy will come to us as Christ's representative, with Christ's own word upon his lip, 'Come unto Me, ye that are weary and are heavy laden, and I'-because He has given Me the power-'*I* will give you rest.'

'Sleep, full of rest, from head to foot;
Lie still, dry dust, secure of change.'

III. That leads me to the last thought, the home.

'Thou shalt stand in thy lot at the end of the days.' 'Stand'-that is Daniel's way of preaching, what he has been preaching in several other parts of his book, the doctrine of the resurrection. 'Thou shalt stand in *thy lot*.' That is a reference to the ancient partition of the land of Canaan amongst the tribes, where each man got his own portion, and sat under his own vine and fig-tree. And so there emerge from these symbolical words thoughts upon which, at this stage of my sermon, I can barely touch. First comes the thought that, however sweet and blessed that reposeful state may be, humanity has not attained its perfection until once again the perfected spirit is mated with, and enclosed within, its congenial servant, a perfect body. 'Corporeity is the end of man.' Body, soul, and spirit partake of the redemption of God.

But then, apart from that, on which I must not dwell, my text suggests one or two thoughts. God is the true inheritance. Each man has his own portion of the common possession, or, to put it into plainer words, in that perfect land each individual has precisely so much of God as he is capable of possessing. 'Thou shalt stand in thy lot,' and what determines the lot is how we wend our way till that other end, the end of life. 'The end of the days' is a period far beyond the end of the life of Daniel. And as the course that terminated in repose has been, so the possession of 'the portion of the inheritance of the saints in light' shall be, for which that course has made men meet. Destiny is character worked out. A man will be where he is fit for, and have what he is fit for. Time is the lackey of eternity. His life here settles how much of God a man shall be able to hold, when he stands in his lot at the 'end of the days,' and his allotted portion, as it stretches around him, will be but the issue and the outcome of his life here on earth.

Therefore, dear brethren, tremendous importance attaches to each fugitive moment. Therefore each act that we do is weighted with eternal consequences. If we will put our trust in Him, 'in whom also we obtain the inheritance,' and will travel on life's common way in cheerful godliness, we may front all the uncertainties of the unknown future, sure of two things-that we shall rest, and that we shall stand in our lot. We shall all go where we have fitted ourselves, by God's grace, to go; get what we have fitted ourselves to possess; and be what we have made ourselves. To the Christian man the word comes, 'Thou shalt stand in thy lot.' And the other word that was spoken about one sinner, will be fulfilled in all whose lives have been unfitting them for heaven: 'Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.' He, too, stands in his lot. Now settle which lot is yours.

Hosea

1) HOSEA 2:15
2) HOSEA 4:17
3) HOSEA 5:13
4) HOSEA 10:1-15
5) HOSEA 13:9
6) HOSEA 14:1-4
7) HOSEA 14:5-6
8) HOSEA 14:7-9

1) Hosea 2:15

Hosea

THE VALLEY OF ACHOR

Hos. 2:15.

The Prophet Hosea is remarkable for the frequent use which he makes of events in the former history of his people. Their past seems to him a mirror in which they may read their future. He believes that 'which is to be hath already been,' the great principles of the divine government living on through all the ages, and issuing in similar acts when the circumstances are similar. So he foretells that there will yet be once more a captivity and a bondage, that the old story of the wilderness will be repeated once more. In that wilderness God will speak to the heart of Israel. Its barrenness shall be changed into the fruitfulness of vineyards, where the purpling clusters hang ripe for the thirsty travellers. And not only will the sorrows that He sends thus become sources of refreshment, but the gloomy gorge through which they journey-the valley of Achor-will be a door of hope.

One word is enough to explain the allusion. You remember that after the capture of Jericho by Joshua, the people were baffled in their first attempt to press up through the narrow defile that led from the plain of Jordan to the highlands of Canaan. Their defeat was caused by the covetousness of Achan, who for the sake of some miserable spoil which he found in a tent, broke God's laws, and drew down shame on Israel's ranks When the swift, terrible punishment on him had purged the camp, victory again followed their assault, and Achan lying stiff and stark below his cairn, they pressed on up the glen to their task of conquest. The rugged valley, where that defeat and that sharp act of justice took place, was named in memory thereof, the valley of *Achor*, that is, *trouble*; and our Prophet's promise is that as then, so for all future ages, the complicity of God's people with an evil world will work weakness and defeat, but that, if they will be taught by their trouble and will purge themselves of the accursed thing, then the disasters will make a way for hope to come to them again. The figure which conveys this is very expressive. The narrow gorge stretches before us, with its dark overhanging cliffs that almost shut out the sky; the path is rough and set with sharp pebbles; it is narrow, winding, steep; often it seems to be barred by some huge rock that juts across it, and there is barely room for the broken ledge yielding slippery footing between the beetling crag above and the steep slope beneath that dips so quickly to the black torrent below. All is gloomy, damp, hard; and if we look upwards the glen becomes more savage as it rises, and armed foes hold the very throat of the pass. But, however long, however barren, however rugged, however black, however trackless, we may see if we will, a bright form descending the rocky way with radiant eyes and calm lips, God's messenger, Hope; and the rough rocks are like the doorway through which she comes near to us in our weary struggle. For us all, dear friends, it is true. In all our difficulties and sorrows, be they great or small; in our business perplexities; in the losses that rob our homes of their light; in the petty annoyances that diffuse their irritation through so much of our days; it is within our power to turn them all into occasions for a firmer grasp of God, and so to make them openings by which a happier hope may flow into our souls.

But the promise, like all God's promises, has its well-defined conditions. Achan has to be killed and put safe out of the way first, or no shining Hope will stand out against the black walls of the defile. The tastes which knit us to the perishable world, the yearnings for Babylonish garments and wedges of gold, must be coerced and subdued. Swift, sharp, unrelenting justice must be done on the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the pride of life, if our trials are ever to become *doors of hope.* There is no natural tendency in the mere fact of sorrow and pain to make God's love more discernible, or to make our hope any firmer. All depends on how we use the trial, or as I say-first stone Achan, and then hope!

So, the trouble which detaches us from earth gives us new hope. Sometimes the effect of our sorrows and annoyances and difficulties is to rivet us more firmly to earth. The eye has a curious power, which they call persistence of vision, of retaining the impression made upon it, and therefore of seeming to see the object for a definite time after it has really been withdrawn. If you whirl a bit of blazing stick round, you will see a circle of fire though there is only a point moving rapidly in the circle. The eye has its memory like the soul. And the soul has its power of persistence like the eye, and that power is sometimes kindled into activity by the fact of loss. We often see our departed joys, and gaze upon them all the more eagerly for their departure. The loss of dear ones should stamp their image on our hearts, and set it as in a golden glory. But it sometimes does more than that; it sometimes makes us put the present with its duties impatiently away from us. Vain regret, absorbed brooding over what is gone, a sorrow kept gaping long after it should have been healed, like a grave-mound off which desperate love has pulled turf and flowers, in the vain attempt to clasp the cold hand below-in a word, the trouble that does not withdraw us from the present will never be a door of hope, but rather a grim gate for despair to come in at.

The trouble which knits us to God gives us new hope. That bright form which comes down the narrow valley is His messenger and herald-sent before His face. All the light of hope is the reflection on our hearts of the light of God. Her silver beams, which shed quietness over the darkness of earth, come only from that great Sun. If our hope is to grow out of our sorrow, it must be because our sorrow drives us to God. It is only when we by faith stand in His grace, and live in the conscious fellowship of peace with Him, that we rejoice in hope. If we would see Hope drawing near to us, we must fix our eyes not on Jericho that lies behind among its palm-trees, though it has memories of conquests, and attractions of fertility and repose, nor on the corpse that lies below that pile of stones, nor on the narrow way and the strong enemy in front there; but higher up, on the blue sky that spreads peaceful above the highest summits of the pass, and from the heavens we shall see the angel coming to us. Sorrow forsakes its own nature, and leads in its own opposite, when sorrow helps us to see God. It clears away the thick trees, and lets the sunlight into the forest shades, and then in time corn will grow. Hope is but the brightness that goes before God's face, and if we would see it we must look at Him.

The trouble which we bear rightly with God's help, gives new hope. If we have made our sorrow an occasion for learning, by living experience, somewhat more of His exquisitely varied and ever ready power to aid and bless, then it will teach us firmer confidence in these inexhaustible resources which we have thus once more proved, 'Tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope.' That is the order. You cannot put patience and experience into a parenthesis, and omitting them, bring hope out of tribulation. But if, in my sorrow, I have been able to keep quiet because I have had hold of God's hand, and if in that unstruggling submission I have found that from His hand I have been upheld, and had strength above mine own infused into me, then my memory will give the threads with which Hope weaves her bright web. I build upon two things-God's unchangeableness, and His help already received; and upon these strong foundations I may wisely and safely rear a palace of Hope, which shall never prove a castle in the air. The past, when it is God's past, is the surest pledge for the future. Because He has been with us in six troubles, therefore we may be sure that in seven He will not forsake us. I said that the light of hope was the brightness from the face of God. I may say again, that the light of hope which fills our sky is like that which, on happy summer nights, lives till morning in the calm west, and with its colourless, tranquil beauty, tells of a yesterday of unclouded splendour, and prophesies a to-morrow yet more abundant. The glow from a sun that is set, the experience of past deliverances, is the truest light of hope to light our way through the night of life.

One of the psalms gives us, in different form, a metaphor and a promise substantially the same as that of this text. ‘Blessed are the men who, passing through the valley of weeping, make it a well.’ They gather their tears, as it were, into the cisterns by the wayside, and draw refreshment and strength from their very sorrows, and then, when thus we in our wise husbandry have irrigated the soil with the gathered results of our sorrows, the heavens bend over us, and weep their gracious tears, and ‘the rain also covereth it with blessings.’ No chastisement for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness.’

Then, dear friends, let us set ourselves with our loins girt to the road. Never mind how hard it may be to climb. The slope of the valley of trouble is ever upwards. Never mind how dark is the shadow of death which stretches athwart it. If there were no sun there would be no shadow; presently the sun will be right overhead, and there will be no shadow then. Never mind how black it may look ahead, or how frowning the rocks. From between their narrowest gorge you may see, if you will, the guide whom God has sent you, and that Angel of Hope will light up all the darkness, and will only fade away when she is lost in the sevenfold brightness of that upper land, whereof our ‘God Himself is Sun and Moon’-the true Canaan, to whose everlasting mountains the steep way of life has climbed at last through valleys of trouble, and of weeping, and of the shadow of death.

2) Hosea 4:17

Hosea

‘LET HIM ALONE’

Hos. 4:17.

The tribe of Ephraim was the most important member of the kingdom of Israel; consequently its name was not unnaturally sometimes used in a wider application for the whole of the kingdom, of which it was the principal part. Being the 'predominant partner,' its name was used alone for that of the whole firm, just as in our own empire, we often say 'England,' meaning thereby the three kingdoms: England, Scotland, and Ireland. So 'Ephraim' here does not mean the single tribe, but the whole kingdom of Israel.

Now Hosea himself was a Northerner, a subject of that kingdom; and its iniquities and idolatries weighed heavily on his heart, and were ripped up and brought to light with burning eloquence in his prophecies. The words of my text have often, and terribly, been misunderstood. And I wish now to try to bring out their true meaning and bearing. They have a message for us quite as much as they had for the people who originally received them.

I. I must begin by explaining what, in my judgment, this text does not mean.

First, it is not what it is often taken to be, a threatening of God's abandoning of the idolatrous nation. I dare say we have all heard grim sermons from this text, which have taken that view of it, and have tried to frighten men into believing now, by telling them that, perhaps, if they do not, God will never move on their hearts, or deal with them any more, but withdraw His grace, and leave them to insensibility. There is not a word of that sort in the text. Plainly enough it is not so, for this vehement utterance of the Prophet is not a declaration as to God, and what He is going to do, but it is a commandment to some men, telling them what *they* are to do. 'Let him alone' does not mean the same thing as '*I* will let him alone'; and if people had only read with a little more care, they would have been delivered from perpetrating a libel on the divine loving-kindness and forbearance.

It is clear enough, too, that such a meaning as that which has been forced upon the words of my text, and is the common use of it, I believe, in many evangelical circles, cannot be its real meaning, because the very fact that Hosea was prophesying to call Ephraim from his sin showed that God had *not* let Ephraim alone, but was wooing him by His prophet, and seeking to win him back by the words of his mouth. God was doing all that He could do, rising early and sending His messenger and calling to Ephraim: ‘Turn ye! Turn ye! why will ye die?’ For Hosea, in the very act of pleading with Israel on God’s behalf, to have declared that God had abandoned it, and ceased to plead, would have been a palpable absurdity and contradiction.

But beyond considerations of the context, other reasons conclusively negative such an interpretation of this text. I, for my part, do not believe that there are any bounds or end to God’s forbearing pleading with men in this life. I take, as true, the great words of the old Psalm, in their simplest sense-’His mercy endureth for ever’; and I fall back upon the other words which a penitent had learned to be true by reflecting on the greatness of his own sin: ‘With Him are multitudes of redemptions’; and I turn from psalmists and prophets to the Master who showed us God’s heart, and knew what He spake when He laid it down as the law and the measure of human forgiveness which was moulded upon the pattern of the divine, that it should be ‘seventy times seven’-the multiplication of both the perfect numbers into themselves-than which there can be no grander expression for absolute innumerableness and unfailing continuance.

No, no! men may say to God, ‘Speak no more to us’; or they may get so far away from Him, as that they only hear God’s pleading voice, dim and faint, like a voice in a dream. But surely the history of His progressive revelation shows us that, rather than such abandonment of the worst, the law of the divine dealing is that the deafer the man, the more piercing the voice beseeching and warning. The attraction of gravitation decreases as distance increases, but the further away we are from Him, the stronger is the attraction which issues from Him, and would draw us to Himself.

Clear away, then, altogether out of your minds any notion that there is here declared what, in my judgment, is not declared anywhere in the Bible, and never occurs in the divine dealings with men. Be sure that He never ceases to seek to draw the most obstinate, idolatrous, and rebellious heart to Himself. That divine charity ‘suffereth long, and is kind’ . . . ‘hopeth all things, and beareth all things.’

Again, let me point out that the words of my text do not enjoin the cessation of the efforts of Christian people for the recovery of the most deeply sunken in sin. ‘Let him alone’ is a commandment, and it is a commandment to

God’s Church, but it is not a commandment to despair of any that they may be brought into the fold, or to give up efforts to that end. If our Father in heaven never ceases to bear in His heart His prodigal children, it does not become those prodigals, who have come back, to think that any of their brethren are too far away to be drawn by their loving proclamation of the Father’s heart of love.

There is the glory of our Gospel, that, taking far sadder, graver views of what sin and alienation from God are, than the world’s philosophers and philanthropists do, it surpasses them just as much as in the superb confidence with which it sets itself to the cure of the disease as in the unflinching clearness with which it diagnoses the disease as fatal, if it be not dealt with by the all-healing Gospel. All other methods for the restoration and elevation of mankind are compelled to recognise that there is an obstinate residuum that will not and cannot be reached by their efforts. It used to be said that some old cannon-balls, that had been brought from some of the battlefields of the Peninsula, resisted all attempts to melt them down; so there are ‘cannon-balls,’ as it were, amongst the obstinate evil-doers, and the degraded and ‘dangerous’ classes, which mark the despair of our modern reformers and civilisers and elevators, for no fire in their furnaces can melt down their hardness. No; but there is the furnace of the Lord in Jerusalem, and the fire of God in Zion, which can melt them down, and has done so a hundred and a thousand times, and is as able to do it again to-day as it ever was. Despair of no human soul. That boundless confidence in the power of the Gospel is the duty of the Christian Church. ‘The damsel is not dead, but sleepeth!’ They laughed Him to scorn, knowing that she was dead. But He put out His hand, and said unto her ‘*Talitha cumi*, I say unto thee, Arise!’ When we stand on one side of the bed with your social reformers on the other, and say ‘The damsel is not dead, but sleepeth,’ they laugh us to scorn, and bid us try our Gospel upon these people in our slums, or on those heathens in the New Hebrides. We have the right to answer, ‘We have tried it, and man after man, and woman after woman have risen from the sick-bed, like Peter’s wife’s mother; and the fever has left them, and they have ministered unto Him. There are no people in the world about whom Christians need despair, none that Christ’s Gospel cannot redeem. Whatever my text means, it does not mean cowardly and unbelieving doubt as to the power of the Gospel on the most degraded and sinful.

II. So, the text enjoins on the Christian Church separation from an idolatrous world.

‘Ephraim is joined to idols.’ Do you ‘let him alone.’ Now, there has been much harm done by misreading the force of the injunction of separation from the world. There is a great deal of union and association with the most godless people in our circle, which is inevitable. Family bonds, business connections, civic obligations-all these require that the Church shall not withdraw from the world. There is the wide common ground of Politics and Art and Literature, and a hundred other interests, on which it does Christian men no good, and the world much harm, if the former withdraw to themselves, and on the plea of superior sanctity, leave these great departments of interest and influence to be occupied only by non-Christians.

Then, besides these thoughts of necessary union and association upon common ground, there is the other consideration that absolute separation would defeat the very purpose for which Christian people are here. ‘Ye are the salt of the earth,’ said Christ. Yes, and if you keep the meat on one plate and the salt on another, what good will the salt be? It has to be rubbed in particle by particle, and brought into contact over all the surface, and down into the depths of the meat that it is to preserve from putrefaction. And no Christian churches or individuals do their duty, and fulfil their function on earth, unless they are thus closely associated and intermingled with the world that they should be trying to leaven and save. A cloistered solitude, or a proud standing apart from the ordinary movements of the community, or a neglect, on the plea of our higher duties, of the duties of the citizen of a free country-these are not the ways to fulfil the exhortation of my text. ‘Let the dead bury their dead,’ said Christ; but He did not mean that His Church was to stand apart from the world, and let it go its own way. It is a bad thing for both when little Christian c?ies gather themselves together, and talk about their own goodness and religion, and leave the world to perish. Clotted blood is death; circulated, it is life.

But, whilst all this is perfectly true-and there are associations that we must not break if we are to do our work as Christian people-it is also true that it is possible, in the closest unions with men who do not share our faith, to do the same thing that they are doing, with a difference which separates us from them, even whilst we are united with them. They tell us that, however dense any material substance may seem to be, there is always a film of air between contiguous particles. And there should be a film between us and our Christless friends and companions and partners, not perceptible perhaps to a superficial observer, but most real. If we do our common work as a religious duty, and in the exercise of all our daily occupations 'set the Lord always before' us, however closely we may be associated with people who do not so live, they will know the difference; never fear! And you will know the difference, and will not be identified with them, but separate in a wholesome fashion from them.

And, dear brethren, if I may go a step further, I would venture to say that it seems to me that our Christian communities want few things more in this day than the reiteration of the old saying, 'Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.' There is so much in this time to break down the separation between him that believeth in Christ and him that doth not; narrowness has come to be thought such an enormous wickedness, and liberality is so lauded by all sorts of superficial people, that Christian men need to be summoned back to their standard. 'Being let go, they went to their own company'-there is a natural affinity which should, and will, if our faith is vital, draw us to those who, on the gravest and solemnest things, have the same thoughts, the same hopes, the same faith. I do not urge you, God knows, to be bigoted and narrow, and shut yourselves up in your faith, and leave the world to go to the devil; but I do not wish, either, that Christian people should fling themselves into the arms and nestle in the hearts of persons who do not share with them 'like precious faith.'

I am sure that there are many Christian people, old and young, who are suffering in their religious life because they are neglecting this commandment of my text. 'Let him alone.' There can be no deep affection, and, most of all-if I may venture on such ground-no wedded love worth the name, where there is not unanimity in regard to the deepest matters. It does not say much for the religion of a professing Christian who finds his heart's friends and his chosen companions in people that have no sympathy with the religion which he professes. It does not say much for you if it is so with you, for the Christian, whom you like least, is nearer you in the depths of your true self than is the non-Christian whom you love most.

Be sure, too, that if we mix ourselves up with Ephraim, we shall find ourselves grovelling beside him before his idols ere long. Godlessness is infectious. Many a young woman, a professing Christian, has married a godless man in the fond hope that she might win him. It is a great deal more frequently the case that he perverts her than that she converts him. Do not let us knit ourselves in these close bonds with the worshippers of idols, lest we 'learn their ways, and get a snare into our souls.' 'Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers. What fellowship hath light with darkness? Wherefore, come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord. Touch not the unclean thing, and I will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and My daughters.'

3) Hosea 5:13

Hosea

'PHYSICIANS OF NO VALUE'

Hos. 5:13.

The long tragedy which ended in the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by Assyrian invasion was already beginning to develop in Hosea's time. The mistaken politics of the kings of Israel led them to seek an ally where they should have dreaded an enemy. As Hosea puts it in figurative fashion, Ephraim's discovery of his 'sickness' sent him in the vain quest for help to the apparent source of the 'sickness,' that is to Assyria, whose king in the text is described by a name which is not his real name, but is a significant epithet, as the margin puts it, 'a king that should contend'; and who, of course, was not able to heal nor to cure the wounds which he had inflicted. Ephraim's suicidal folly is but one illustration of a universal madness which drives men to seek for the healing of their misery, and the alleviation of their discomfort, in the repetition of the very acts which brought these about. The attempt to get relief in such a fashion, of course, fails; for as the verse before our text emphatically proclaims, it is God who has been ‘as a moth unto Ephraim,’ gnawing away his strength: and it is only He who can heal, since in reality it is He, and not the quarrelsome king of Assyria, who has inflicted the sickness.

Thus understood, the text carries wide lessons, and may serve us as a starting-point for considering man’s discovery of his ‘sickness,’ man’s mad way of seeking healing, God’s way of giving it.

I. First, then, man’s discovery of his sickness.

The greater part of most lives is spent in mechanical, unreflecting repetition of daily duties and pleasures. We are all apt to live on the surface, and it requires an effort, which we are too indolent to make except under the impulse of some arresting motive, to descend into the depths of our own souls, and there to face the solemn facts of our own personality. The last place with which most of us are familiar, is our innermost self. Men are dimly conscious that things within are not well with them; but it is only one here and there that says so distinctly to himself, and takes the further step of thoroughly investigating the cause. But that superficial life is at the mercy of a thousand accidents, each one of which may break through the thin film, and lay bare the black depths.

But there is another aspect of this discovery of sickness, far graver than the mere consciousness of unrest. Ephraim does not see his sickness unless he sees his sin. The greater part of every life is spent without that deep, all-pervading sense of discord between itself and God. Small and recurrent faults may evoke recurring remonstrances of conscience, but that is a very different thing from the deep tones and the clear voice of condemnation in respect to one’s whole life and character which sounds in a heart that has learned how ‘deceitful and desperately wicked’ it is. Such a conviction may flash upon a man at any moment, and from a hundred causes. A sorrow, a sunset-sky, a grave, a sermon, may produce it.

But even when we have come to recognise clearly our unrest, we have gone but part of the way, we have become conscious of a symptom, not of the disease. Why is it that man is alone among the creatures in that discontent with externals, and that dissatisfaction with himself? ‘Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have roosting-places’: why is it that amongst all God’s happy creatures, and God’s shining stars, men stand ‘strangers in a strange land,’ and are cursed with a restlessness which has not ‘where to lay its head’? The consciousness of unrest is but the agitation of the limbs which indicates disease. That disease is the twitching paralysis of sin. Like ‘the pestilence that walketh in darkness,’ it has a fell power of concealing itself, and the man whose sins are the greatest is always the least conscious of them. He dwells in a region where the malaria is so all-pervading that the inhabitants do not know what the sweetness of an unpoisoned atmosphere is. If there is a ‘worst man’ in the world, we may be very sure that no conscience is less troubled than his is.

So the question may well be urged on those so terribly numerous amongst us, whose very unconsciousness of their true condition is the most fatal symptom of their fatal disease. What is the worth of a peace which is only secured by ignoring realities, and which can be shattered into fragments by anything that compels a man to see himself as he is? In such a fool’s paradise thousands of us live. ‘Use and wont,’ the continual occupation with the trifles of our daily lives, the fleeting satisfactions of our animal nature, the shallow wisdom which bids us ‘let sleeping dogs lie,’ all conspire to mask, to many consciences, their unrest and their sin. We abstain from lifting the curtain behind which the serpent lies coiled in our hearts, because we dread to see its loathly length, and to rouse it to lift its malignant head, and to strike with its forked tongue. But sooner or later-may it not be too late-we shall be set face to face with the dark recess, and discover the foul reptile that has all the while been coiled there.

II. Man’s mad way of seeking healing.

Can there be a more absurd course of action than that recorded in our text? ‘When Ephraim saw his sickness, then went Ephraim to Assyria.’ The Northern Kingdom sought for the healing of their national calamities from the very cause of their national calamities, and in repetition of their national sin. A hopeful policy, and one which speedily ended in the only possible result! But that insanity was but a sample of the infatuation which besets us all. When we are conscious of our unrest, are we not all tempted to seek to conceal it with what has made it? Take examples from the grosser forms of animal indulgence. The drunkard's vulgar proverb recommending 'a hair of the dog that bit you,' is but a coarse expression of a common fault. He is wretched until 'another glass' steadies, for a moment, his trembling hand, and gives a brief stimulus to his nerves. They say that the Styrian peasants, who habitually eat large quantities of arsenic, show symptoms of poison if they leave it off suddenly. These are but samples, in the physical region, of a tendency which runs through all lire, and leads men to drown thought by plunging into the thick of the worldly absorptions that really cause their unrest. The least persistent of men is strangely obstinate in his adherence to old ways, in spite of all experience of their crooked slipperiness. We wonder at the peasants who have their cottages and vineyards on the slopes of Vesuvius, and who build them, and plant them, over and over again after each destructive eruption. The tragedy of Israel is repeated in many of our lives; and the summing up of the abortive efforts of one of its kings to recover power by following the gods that had betrayed him, might be the epitaph of the infatuated men who see their sickness and seek to heal it by renewed devotion to the idols who occasioned it: 'They were the ruin of him and of all Israel.' The experience of the woman who had 'spent all her living on physicians, and was nothing the better, but rather the worse,' sums up the sad story of many a life.

But again the sense of sin sometimes seeks to conceal itself by repetition of sin. When the dormant snake begins to stir, it is lulled to sleep again by absorption of occupations, or by an obstinate refusal to look inwards, and often by plunging once more into the sin which has brought about the sickness. To seek thus for ease from the stings of conscience, is like trying to silence a buzzing in the head by standing beside Niagara thundering in our ears. They used to beat the drums when a martyr died, in order to drown his testimony; and so foolish men seek to silence the voice of conscience by letting passions shout their loudest. It needs no words to demonstrate the incurable folly of such conduct; but alas, it takes many words far stronger than mine to press home the folly upon men. The condition of such a half-awakened conscience is very critical if it is soothed by any means by which it is weakened and its possessor worsened. In the sickness of the soul homoeopathic treatment is a delusion. Ephraim may go to Assyria, but there is no healing of him there.

III. God's way of giving true healing.

Ephraim thought that, because the wounds were inflicted by Assyria, it was the source to which to apply for bandages and balm. If it had realised that Assyria was but the battle-axe wherewith the hand of God struck it, it would have learned that from God alone could come healing and health. The unrest which betrays the presence in our souls of a deep-seated sin, is a divine messenger. We terribly misinterpret the true source of all that disturbs us when we attribute it only to the occasions which bring it about; for the one purpose of all our restlessness is to drive us nearer to God, and to wrench us away from our Assyria. The true issue of Ephraim's sickness would have been the penitent cry, 'Come, let us return to the Lord our God, for He hath smitten, and He will bind us up.' It is in the consciousness of loving nearness to Him that all our unrest is soothed, and the heaving ocean in our hearts becomes as a summer's sea and 'birds of peace sit brooding on the charmed waves.' It is in that same consciousness that conscience ceases to condemn, and loses its sting. The prophet from whom our text is taken ends his wonderful ministry, that had been full of fiery denunciations and dark prophecies, with words that are only surpassed in their tenderness and the outpouring of the heart of God, by the fuller revelation in Jesus Christ: 'O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God. Take with you words, and return unto the Lord, and say unto Him: Assyria shall not save us, for in Thee the fatherless findeth mercy.' The divine answer which he was commissioned to bring to the penitent Israel-'I will heal their backslidings, I will love them freely; if Mine anger is turned away from Me'-is, in all its wealth of forgiving love but an imperfect prophecy of the great Physician, from the hem of whose garment flowed out power to one who 'had spent all her living on physicians and could not be healed of any,' and who confirmed to her the power which she had thought to steal from Him unawares by the gracious words which bound her to Him for ever-'Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace.'

4) Hosea 10:1-15

‘FRUIT WHICH IS DEATH’

Hos. 10:1 - Hos. 10:15.

The prophecy of this chapter has two themes-Israel’s sin, and its punishment. These recur again and again. Reiteration, not progress of thought, characterises Hosea’s fiery stream of inspired eloquence. Conviction of sin and prediction of judgment are his message. We trace a fourfold repetition of it here, and further note that in each case there is a double reference to Israel’s sin as consisting in the rebellion which set up a king and in the schism which established the calf worship; while there is also a double phase of the punishment corresponding to these, in the annihilation of the kingdom and the destruction of the idols.

The first section may be taken to be Hos. 10:1 - Hos. 10:3. The image of a luxuriant vine laden with fruit is as old as Jacob’s blessing of the tribes [Gen. 49:22], where it is applied to Joseph, whose descendants were the strength of the Northern Kingdom. Hosea has already used it, and here it is employed to set forth picturesquely the material prosperity of Israel. Probably the period referred to is the successful reign of Jeroboam II. But prosperity increased sin. The more fruit or material wealth, the more altars; the better the harvests, the more the obelisks or pillars to gods, falsely supposed to be the authors of the blessings. The words are as condensed as a proverb, and are as true to-day as ever. Israel had attributed its prosperity to Baal [Hos. 2:8]. The misuse of worldly wealth and the tendency of success to draw us away from God, and to blind to the true source of all blessing, are as rife now as then.

The root of the evil was, as always, a heart divided-that is, between God and Baal-or, perhaps, ‘smooth’; that is, dissimulating and insincere. In reality, Baal alone possesses the heart which its owner would share between him and Jehovah. ‘All in all, or not at all,’ is the law. Whether Baals or calves were set beside God, He was equally deposed.

Then, with a swift turn, Hosea proclaims the impending judgment, setting himself and the people as if already in the future. He hears the first peal of the storm, and echoes it in that abrupt ‘now.’ The first burst of the judgment shatters dreams of innocence, and the cowering wretches see their sin by the lurid light. That discovery awaits every man whose heart has been ‘divided.’ To the gazers and to himself masks drop, and the true character stands out with appalling clearness. What will that light show us to be? An unnamed hand overthrows altars and pillars. No need to say whose it is. One half of Israel’s sin is crushed at a blow, and the destruction of the other follows immediately.

They themselves abjure their allegiance; for they have found out that their king is a king Log, and can do them no good. A king, set up in opposition to God’s will, cannot save. The ruin of their projects teaches godless men at last that they have been fools to take their own way; for all defences, recourses, and protectors, chosen in defiance of God, prove powerless when the strain comes. The annihilation of one half of their sin sickens them of the other. The calves and the monarchy stood or fell together. It is a dismal thing to have to bear the brunt of chastisement for what we see to have been a blunder as well as a crime. But such is the fate of those who seek other gods and another king.

In Hos. 10:4 Hosea recurs to Israel’s crime, and appends a description of the chastisement, substantially the same as before, but more detailed, which continues till Hos. 10:8. The sin now is contemplated in its effects on human relations. Before, it was regarded in relation to God. But men who are wrong with Him cannot be right with one another. Morality is rooted in religion, and if we lie to God, we shall not be true to our brother. Hence, passing over all other sins for the present, Hosea fixes upon one, the prevalence of which strikes at the very foundation of society. What can be done with a community in which lying has become a national characteristic, and that even in formal agreements? Honey-combed with falsehood, it is only fit for burning.

Sin is bound by an iron link to penalty. Therefore, says Hosea, God’s judgment springs up, like a bitter plant [the precise name of which is unknown] in the furrows, where the farmer did not know that its seeds lay. They little dreamed what they were sowing when they scattered abroad their lies, but this is the fruit of these. ‘Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap'; and whatever other crop we may hope to gather from our sins, we shall gather that bitter one which we did not expect. The inevitable connection of sin and judgment, the bitterness of its results, the unexpectedness of them, are all here, and to be laid to heart by us.

Then Hos. 10:5 - Hos. 10:6 dilate with keen irony on the fate of the first half of Israel's sin-the calf. It was thought a god, but its worshippers shall be in a fright for it. 'Calves,' says Hosea, though there was but one at Beth-el; and he uses the feminine, as some think, depreciatingly. 'Beth-aven' or the 'house of vanity,' he says, instead of Beth-el, 'the house of God.' A fine god whose worshippers had to be alarmed for its safety! 'Its people'-what a contrast to the name they might have borne, 'My people'! God disowns them, and says, 'They belong to it, not to Me.' The idolatrous priests of the calf worship will tremble when that image, which had been shamefully their 'glory,' is carried off to Assyria, and given as a present to 'king Jareb'-a name for the king of Assyria meaning the fighting or quarrelsome king. The captivity of the god is the shame of the worshippers. To be 'ashamed of their own counsel' is the certain fate of all who depart from God; for, sooner or later, experience will demonstrate to the blindest that their refuges of lies can neither save themselves nor those who trust in them. But shame is one thing and repentance another; and many a man will say, 'I have been a great fool, and my clever policy has all crumbled to pieces,' who will only therefore change his idols, and not return to God.

Hos. 10:7 recurs to the political punishment of the civil rebellion. The image for the disappearance of the king is striking, whether we render 'foam' or 'chip,' but the former has special beauty. In the one case we see the unsubstantial bubble,

'A moment white, then melts for ever';

and in the other, the helpless twig swept down by the stream. Either brings vividly before us the powerlessness of Israel against the roaring torrent of Assyrian power; and the figure may be widened out to teach what is sure to become of all man-made and self-chosen refuges when the floods of God's judgments sweep over the world. The captivity of the idol and the burst bubble of the monarchy bid us all make Jehovah our God and King. The vacant shrine and empty throne are followed by utter and long-continued desolation. Thorns and thistles have time to grow on the altars, and no hand cuts them down. What of the men thus stripped of all in which they had trusted? Desperate, they implore the mountains to fall on them, as preferring to die, and the hills to cover them, as willing to be crushed, if only they may be hidden. That awful cry is heard again in our Lord's predictions of judgment, and in the Apocalypse. Therefore this prophecy foreshadows, in the destruction of Israel's confidences and in their shame and despair, a more dreadful coming day, in which we shall be concerned.

Hos. 10:9 - Hos. 10:11 again give the sin and its punishment. 'The days of Gibeah' recall the hideous story of lust and crime which was the low-water mark of the lawless days of old. That crime had been avenged by merciless war. But its taint had lived on, and the Israel of Hosea's day 'stood,' obstinately persistent, just where the Benjamites had been then, and set themselves in dogged resistance, as these had done, 'that the battle against the children of unrighteousness might not touch them.'

Stiff-necked setting oneself against God's merciful fighting with evil lasts for a little while, but verse 10 tells how soon and easily it is annihilated. God's 'desire' brushes away all defences, and the obstinate sinners are like children, who are whipped when their father wills, let them struggle as they may. The instruments of chastisement are foreign armies, and the chastisement itself is described with a striking figure as 'binding them to their two transgressions'; that is, the double sin which is the keynote of the chapter. Punishment is yoking men to their sins, and making them drag the burden like bullocks in harness. What sort of load are we getting together for ourselves? When we have to drag the consequences of our doings behind us, how shall we feel?

The figure sets the Prophet's imagination going, and he turns it another way, comparing Israel to a heifer, broken in, and liking the easy work of threshing, in which the unmuzzled ox could eat its fill, but now set to harder tasks in the fields. Judah, too, is to share in the punishment. If men will not serve God in and because of prosperous ease, He will try what toil and privation will do. Abused blessings are withdrawn, and the abundance of the threshing-floor is changed for dragging a heavy plough or harrow.

Hos. 10:12 still deals with the figure suggested in the close of the previous verse. It is the only break in the clouds in this chapter. It is a call to amendment, accompanied by a promise of acceptance. If we ‘sow for righteousness’-that is, if our efforts are directed to embodying it in our lives-we ‘shall reap according to mercy.’ That is true universally, whether it is taken to mean God’s mercy to us, or ours to others. The aim after righteousness ever secures the divine favour, and usually ensures the measure which we mete being measured to us again.

But sowing is not all; thorns must be grubbed up. We must not only turn over a new leaf, but tear out the old one. The old man must be slain if the new man is to live. The call to amend finds its warrant in the assurance that there is still time to seek the Lord, and that, for all His threatenings, He is ready to rain blessings upon the seekers. The unwearying patience of God, the possibility of the worst sinner’s repentance, the conditional nature of the threatenings, the possibility of breaking the bond between sin and sorrow, the yet deeper thought that righteousness must come from above, are all condensed in this brief gospel before the Gospel.

But that bright gleam passes, and the old theme recurs. Once more we have sin and punishment exhibited in their organic connection in Hos. 10:13 - Hos. 10:14. Israel’s past had been just the opposite of sowing righteousness and reaping mercy. Wickedness ploughed in, iniquity will surely be its fruit. Sin begets sin, and is its own punishment. What fruit have we of doing wrong? ‘Lies’; that is, unfulfilled expectations of unrealised satisfaction. No man gets the good that he aimed at in sinning, or he gets something more that spoils it. At last the deceitfulness of sin will be found out, but we may be sure of it now. The root of all Israel’s sin was the root of ours; namely, trust in self, and consequent neglect of God. The first half of Hos. 10:13 is an exhaustive analysis of the experience of every sinful life; the second, a penetrating disclosure of the foundation of it.

Then the whole closes with the repeated threatening, dual as before, and illustrated by the forgotten horrors of some dreadful siege, one of the ‘unhappy, far-off things,’ fallen silent now. A significant variation occurs in the final threatening, in which Beth-el is set forth as the cause, rather than as the object, of the destruction. ‘They were the ruin of him and of all

Israel.’ Our vices are made the whips to scourge us. Our idols bring us no help, but are the causes of our misery.

The Prophet ends with the same double reference which prevails throughout, when he once more declares the annihilation of the monarchy, which, rather than a particular person, is meant by ‘the king.’ ‘In the morning’ is enigmatical. It may mean ‘prematurely,’ or ‘suddenly,’ or ‘in a time of apparent prosperity,’ or, more probably, the Prophet stands in vision in that future day of the Lord, and points to ‘the king’ as the first victim. The force of the prophecy does not depend on the meaning of this detail. The teaching of the whole is the certainty that suffering dogs sin, but yet does so by no iron, impersonal law, but according to the will of God, who will rain righteousness even on the sinner, being penitent, and will endow with righteousness from above every lowly soul that seeks for it.

5) Hosea 13:9

Hosea

DESTRUCTION AND HELP

Hos. 13:9.

These words are obscure by reason of their brevity. Literally they might be rendered, ‘Thy destruction for, in, or against Me; in, or against thy Help.’ Obviously, some words must be supplied to bring out any sense. Our Authorised Version has chosen the supplement ‘is,’ which fails to observe the second occurrence with ‘thy Help’ of the preposition, and is somewhat lax in rendering the ‘for’ of the second clause by the neutral ‘but.’ It is probably better to read, as the Revised Version, with most modern interpreters, ‘Thou art against Me, against thy Help,’ and to find in the second clause the explanation, or analysis, of the destruction announced in the first. So we have here the wail of the parental love of God over the ruin which Israel has brought on itself, and that parental love is setting forth Israel’s true condition, in the hope that they may discern it. Thus, even the rebuke holds enclosed a promise and a hope. Since God is their help, to depart from Him has been ruin, and the return to Him will be life. Hosea, or rather the Spirit that spake through Hosea, blended wonderful tenderness with unflinching decision in rebuke, and unwavering certainty in foretelling evil with unfaltering hope in the promise of possible blessing. His words are set in the same key as the still more wonderfully tender ones that Jesus uttered as He looked across the valley from Olivet to the gleaming city on the other side, and wailed, ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Therefore your house is left unto you desolate.’

We may note here

I. The loving discovery of ruin.

It is strange that men should need to be told, and that with all emphasis, the evil case in which they are; and stranger still that they should resent the discovery and reject it. This pathetic pleading is the voice of a divine Father trying to convince His son of misery and danger; and the obscurity of the text is as if that voice was choked with sobs, and could only speak in broken syllables the tragical word in which all the evil of Israel’s sin is gathered up-’his destruction,’ or ‘corruption.’ It gathers up in one terrible picture the essential nature of sin and the death of the soul, which is its wages-inward misery and unrest, outward sorrows, the decay of mental and moral powers, the spreading taint which eats its way through the whole personality of a man who has sinned, and pauses not till it has reduced his corpse to putrefaction. All these, and a hundred more effects of sin, are crowded together in that one word ‘thy destruction.’

It is strange that it needs God’s voice, and that in its most piercing tones, to convince men of ruin brought by sin. A mortifying limb is painless. There is no consciousness in the drugged sleep which becomes heavier and heavier till it ends in death. There is no surer sign of the reality and extent of the corruption brought about by sin, than man’s ignorance of it. There is no more tragical proof that a man is ‘wretched, and miserable, and blind, and naked’ than his vehement affirmation, ‘I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing,’ and his self-complacent rejection of the counsel to ‘buy refined gold, and white garments, and eye-salve to anoint his eyes.’ So obstinately unconscious are we of our ruin that even God’s voice, whether uttered in definite words, or speaking in sharp sorrows and punitive acts, but too often fails to pierce the thick layer of self complacency in which we wrap ourselves, and to pierce the heart with the arrow of conviction. Indeed we may say that the whole process of divine education of a soul, conducted through many channels of providences, has for its end mainly this-to convince His wandering children that to be against Him, against their Help, is their destruction.

But, perhaps, the strangest of all is the attitude which we often take up of resenting the love that would reveal our ruin. It is stupid of the ox to kick against its driver's goad; but that is wise in comparison with the action of the man who is angry with God because He warns that departure from Him is ruin. Many of us treat Christianity as if it had made the mischief which it reveals, and would fain mend; and we all need to be reminded that it is cruel kindness to conceal unpleasant truths, and that the Gospel is no more to be blamed for the destruction which it declares than is the signalman with his red flag responsible for the broken-down viaduct to which the train is rushing that he tries to save.

II. The loving appeal to conscience as to the cause.

Israel's destruction arose from the fact of Israel having turned against God, its Help. Sin is suicide. God is our Help, and only Help. His will is love and blessing. His only relation to our sin is to hate it, and fight against it. In conflict of love with lovelessness one of His chiefest weapons is to drive home to our consciousness the conviction of our sin. When He is driven to punish, it is our wrongdoing that forces Him to what Isaiah calls, 'His strange act.' The Heavenly Father is impelled by His love not to spare the rod, lest the sparing spoil the child. An earthly father suffers more punishment than he inflicts upon the little rebel whom, unwillingly and with tears, he may chastise; and God's love is more tender, as it is more wise, than that of the fathers of our flesh who corrected us. 'He doth not willingly afflict nor is soon angry'; and of all the mercies which He bestows upon us, none is more laden with His love than the discipline by which He would make us know, through our painful experience, that it is 'an evil and bitter thing to forsake the Lord, and that His fear is not in us.' In its essence and depth, separation from God is death to the creature that wrenches itself away from the source of life; and all the weariness and pains of a godless life are, if we take them as He meant them, the very angels of His presence.

Just as the sole reason for our sorrows lies in our wrongdoing, the sole cause of our wrongdoing is in ourselves. It is because ‘Israel is against Me’ that Israel’s destruction rushes down upon it. It could have defended its hankering after Assyria and idols, by wise talk about political exigencies and the wisdom of trying to turn possibly powerful enemies into powerful allies, and the folly of a little nation, on a narrow strip of territory between the desert and the sea, fancying itself able to sustain itself uncrushed between the upper millstone of Assyria on the north, and the under one, Egypt, on the south. But circumstances are never the cause, though they may afford the excuse of rebellion against our Helper, God; and all the modern talk about environments and the like, is merely a cloak cast round, but too scanty to conceal the ugly fact of the alienated will. All the excuses for sin, which either modern scientific jargon about ‘laws,’ or hyper-Calvinistic talk about ‘divine decrees,’ alleges, are alike shattered against the plain fact of conscience, which proclaims to every evil-doer, ‘Thou art the man!’ We shall get no further and no deeper than the truth of our text: ‘It is thy destruction that thou art against Me.’

The pleading God has from the beginning spoken words as tender as they are stern, and as stern as they are tender. His voice to the sons of men has from of old asked the unanswerable question, ‘Why should ye be stricken any more?’ and has answered it, so far as answer is possible, by the fact, which is as mysterious as it is undeniable, ‘Ye will revolt more and more.’ God calls upon man to judge between Him and His vineyard, and asks, ‘What could have been done more to My vineyard that I have not done unto it? Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?’ The fault lay not in the vine-dresser, but in some evil influence that had found its way into the life and sap of the vine, and bore fruits in an unnatural product, which could not have been traced to the vine-dresser’s action. So God stands, as with clean hands, declaring that ‘He is pure from the blood of all men; that He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked’; and His word to the men on whom falls the whole weight of His destroying power is, ‘Thou hast procured this unto thyself.’

III. The loving forbearance which still offers restoration.

He still claims to be Israel's Help. Separation from Him has all but destroyed the rebellious; but it has not in the smallest degree affected the fulness of His power, nor the fervency of His desire to help. However earth may be shaken by storms, or swathed in mist that darkens all things and shuts out heaven, the sun is still in its tabernacle and pouring down its rays through the cloudless blue that is above the enfolding cloud. Our text has wrapped up in it the broad gospel that all our self-inflicted destruction may be arrested, and all the evil which brought it about swept away. God is ready to prove Himself our true and only Helper in that, as our prophet says, 'He will ransom us from the power of the grave'; and, even when death has laid its cold hand upon us, will redeem us from it, and destroy the destruction which had fixed its talons in us. All the guilt is ours; all the help is His; His work is to conquer and cast out our sins, to heal our sicknesses, to soothe our sorrows. And He has Himself vindicated His great name of our Help when He has revealed Himself as 'the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.'

6) Hosea 14:1-4

Hosea

ISRAEL RETURNING

Hos. 14:1 - Hos. 14:9.

Hosea is eminently the prophet of divine love and of human repentance. Both streams of thought are at their fullest in this great chapter. In Hos. 14:1 - Hos. 14:3 the very essence of true return to God is set forth in the prayer which Israel is exhorted to offer, while in Hos. 14:4 - Hos. 14:8 the forgiving love of God and its blessed results are portrayed with equal poetical beauty and spiritual force. Hos. 14:9 closes the chapter and the book with a kind of epilogue.

I. The summons to repentance.

‘Israel,’ of course, here means the Northern Kingdom, with which Hosea’s prophecies are chiefly occupied. ‘Thou hast fallen by thine iniquity’-that is the lesson taught by all its history, and in a deeper sense it is the lesson of all experience. Sin brings ruin for nations and individuals, and the plain teachings of each man’s own life exhort each to ‘return unto the Lord.’ We have all proved the vanity and misery of departing from Him; surely, if we are not drawn by His love, we might be driven by our own unrest, to go back to God.

The Prophet anticipates the clear accents of the New Testament call to repentance in his expansion of what he meant by returning. He has nothing to say about sacrifices, nor about self-reliant efforts at moral improvement. ‘Take with you *words*,’ not ‘the blood of bulls and goats.’ Confession is better than sacrifice. What words are they which will avail? Hosea teaches the penitent’s prayer. It must begin with the petition for forgiveness, which implies recognition of the petitioner’s sin. The cry, ‘Take away all iniquity,’ does not specify sins, but masses the whole black catalogue into one word. However varied the forms of our transgressions, they are in principle one, and it is best to bind them all into one ugly heap, and lay it at God’s feet. We have to confess not only sins, but sin, and the taking away of it includes divine cleansing from its power, as well as divine forgiveness of its guilt. Hosea bids Israel ask that God would take away all iniquity; John pointed to ‘the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.’ But beyond forgiveness and cleansing, the penitent heart will seek that God would ‘accept the good’ in it, which springs up by His grace, when the evil has been washed from it, like flowers that burst from soil off which the matted under-growth of poisonous jungle has been cleared. Mere negative absence of ‘evil’ is not all that we should desire or exhibit; there must be positive good; and however sinful may have been the past, we are not too bold when we ask and expect that we may be made able to produce ‘good,’ which shall be fragrant as sweet incense to God.

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II. God’s welcoming answer.

The very abruptness of its introduction, without any explanation as to the speaker, suggests how swiftly and joyfully the Father hastens to meet the returning prodigal while he is yet afar off. Like pent-up waters rushing forth as soon as a barrier is taken away, God’s love pours itself out immediately. His answer ever gives more than the penitent asks-robe and ring and shoes, and a feast to him who dared not expect more than a place among the hired servants. He gives not by drops, but in floods, answering the prayer for the taking away of iniquity by the promise to heal backsliding, going beyond desires and hopes in the gift of love which asks for no recompense, is drawn forth by no desert, but wells up from the depths of God’s heart, and strengthens the new, tremulous trust of the penitent by the assurance that every trace of anger is effaced from God’s heart.

The blessings consequent on the gift of God’s love are described in lovely imagery, drawn, like Hosea’s other abundant similes, from nature, and especially from trees and flowers. The source of all fruitfulness is a divine influence, which comes silently and refreshing as the ‘dew,’ or, rather, as the ‘night mist,’ a phenomenon occurring in Palestine in summer, and being, accurately, rolling masses of vapour brought from the Mediterranean, which counteract the dry heat and keep vegetation alive. The influences which refresh and fructify our souls must fall in many a silent hour of meditation and communion. They will effloresce into manifold shapes of beauty and fruitfulness, of which the Prophet signalises three. The lily may stand for beauty of purity, though botanists differ as to the particular flower meant. Christians should present to the world ‘whatsoever things are lovely,’ and see to it that their goodness is attractive. But the fragrant, pure lily has but shallow roots, and beauty is not all that a character needs in this world of struggle and effort. So there are to be both the lily’s blossom and roots like Lebanon. The image may refer to the firm buttresses of the widespread foot-hills, from which the sovereign summits of the great mountain range rise, or, as is rather suggested by the accompanying similes from the vegetable world, it may refer to the cedars growing there. Their roots are anchored deep and stretch far underground; therefore they rear towering heads, and spread broad shelves of dark foliage, safe from any blast. Our lives must be deep rooted in God if they are to be strong. Boots generally spread beneath the soil about as far as branches extend above it. There should be at least as much underground, ‘hid with Christ in God,’ as is visible to the world.

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Further, in the third clause, Ephraim is joyfully conscious of the change that has passed on him, in accordance with the great promises just spoken, and with grateful astonishment that such verdure should have burst out from the dry and rotten stump of his own sinful nature, exclaims, 'I am like a green fir-tree.' That is another reason why he will have no more to do with idols. They could never have made his sapless nature break into leafage. But what of the fourth clause-'From Me is thy fruit found'? Can we understand that to mean that Ephraim still speaks, keeping up the image of the previous clause, and declaring that all the new fruitfulness which he finds in himself he recognises to be God's, both in the sense that, in reality, it is produced by Him, and that it belongs to Him? He comes seeking fruit, and He finds it. All our good is His, and we shall be happy, productive, and wise, in proportion as we offer all our works to Him, and feel that, after all, they are not ours, but the works of that Spirit which dwells in penitent and believing hearts. Some have thought that this last clause must be taken as spoken by God; but, even if so taken, it conveys substantially the same thought as to the divine origin of man's fruitfulness.

The last verse is rather a general reflection summing up the whole than an integral part of this wonderful representation of penitence, pardon, and fruitfulness. It declares the great truth that the knowledge of the pardoning mercy of God, and of the ways by which He weans men from sin and makes them fruitful of good, makes us truly wise. That knowledge is more than intellectual apprehension; it is experience. Providence has its mysteries, but they who keep near to God, and are 'just' because they do, will find the opportunity of free, unfettered activity in God's ways, and transgressors will stumble therein. Therefore wisdom and safety lie in penitence and confession, which will ever be met by gracious pardon and showers of blessing that will cause our hearts, which sin has made desert, to rejoice and blossom like the rose.

7) Hosea 14:5-6

Hosea

ISRAEL RETURNING

THE DEW AND THE PLANTS

Hos. 14:5 - Hos. 14:6.

Like his brethren, Hosea was a poet as well as a prophet. His little prophecy is full of similes and illustrations drawn from natural objects; scarcely any of them from cities or from the ways of men; almost all of them from Nature, as seen in the open country, which he evidently loved, and where he had looked upon things with a clear and meditative eye. This whole chapter is full of emblems drawn from the vegetable world. The lily, the cedar, the olive, are in my text. And there follow, in the subsequent verses, the corn, and the vine, and the green fir-tree.

The words which I have read, no doubt originally had simply a reference to the numerical increase of the people and their restoration to their land, but they may be taken by us quite fairly as having a very much deeper and more blessed reference than that. For they describe the uniform condition of all spiritual life and growth,' I will be as the dew unto Israel'; and then they set forth some of the manifold aspects of that growth, and the consequences of receiving that heavenly dew, under the various metaphors to which I have referred. It is in that higher signification that I wish to look at them now.

I. The first thought that comes out of the words is that for all life and growth of the spirit there must be a bedewing from God.

‘I will be as the dew unto Israel.’ Now, scholars tell us that the kind of moisture that is meant in these words is not what we call dew, of which, as a matter of fact, there falls, in Palestine, little or none at the season of the year referred to in my text, but that the word really means the heavy night-clouds that come upon the wings of the south-west wind, to diffuse moisture and freshness over the parched plains, in the very height and fierceness of summer. The metaphor of my text becomes more beautiful and striking, if we note that, in the previous chapter, where the Prophet was in his threatening mood, he predicts that ‘an east wind shall come, the wind of the Lord shall come up from the wilderness’-the burning sirocco, with death upon its wings-’and his spring shall become dry, and his fountain shall be dried up.’ We have then to imagine the land gaping and parched, the hot air having, as with invisible tongue of flame, licked streams and pools dry, and having shrunken fountains and springs. Then, all at once there comes down upon the baking ground and on the faded, drooping flowers that lie languid and prostrate on the ground in the darkness, borne on the wings of the wind, from the depths of the great unfathomed sea, an unseen moisture. You cannot call it rain, so gently does it diffuse itself; it is liker a mist, but it brings life and freshness, and everything is changed. The dew, or the night mist, as it might more properly be rendered, was evidently a good deal in Hosea’s mind; you may remember that he uses the image again in a remarkably different aspect, where he speaks of men’s goodness as being like ‘a morning cloud, and the early dew that passes away.’

The natural object which yields the emblem was all inadequate to set forth the divine gift which is compared to it, because as soon as the sun has risen, with burning heat, it scatters the beneficent clouds, and the ‘sunbeams like swords’ threaten to slay the tender green shoots. But this mist from God that comes down to water the earth is never dried up. It is not transient. It may be ours, and live in our hearts. Dear brethren, the prose of this sweet old promise is ‘If I depart, I will send Him unto you.’ If we are Christian people, we have the perpetual dew of that divine Spirit, which falls on our leaves and penetrates to our roots, and communicates life, freshness, and power, and makes growth possible-more than possible, certain-for us. 'I'-Myself through My Son, and in My Spirit-'I will be'-an unconditional assurance-'as the dew unto Israel.'

Yes! That promise is in its depth and fulness applicable only to the Christian Israel, and it remains true to-day and for ever. Do we see it fulfilled? One looks round upon our congregations, and into one's own heart, and we behold the parable of Gideon's fleece acted over again-some places soaked with the refreshing moisture, and some as hard as a rock and as dry as tinder and ready to catch fire from any spark from the devil's forge and be consumed in the everlasting burnings some day. It will do us good to ask ourselves why it is that, with a promise like this for every Christian soul to build upon, there are so few Christian souls that have anything like realised its fulness and its depth. Let us be quite sure of this-God has nothing to do with the failure of His promise, and let us take all the blame to ourselves.

'I will be as the dew unto Israel.' Who was Israel? The man that wrestled all night in prayer with God, and took hold of the angel and prevailed and wept and made supplication to Him. So Hosea tells us; and as he says in the passage where he describes the Angel's wrestling with Jacob at Peniel, 'there He spake with us'-when He spake, He spake with him who first bore the name. Be you Israel, and God will surely be your dew; and life and growth will be possible. That is the first lesson of this great promise.

II. The second is, that a soul thus bedewed by God will spring into purity and beauty.

We go back to Hosea's vegetable metaphors. 'He shall grow as the lily' is his first promise. If I were addressing a congregation of botanists, I should have something to say about what kind of a plant is meant, but that is quite beside the mark for my present purpose. It is sufficient to notice that in this metaphor the emphasis is laid upon the two attributes which I have named-beauty and purity. The figure teaches us that ugly Christianity is not Christ's Christianity. Some of us older people remember that it used to be a favourite phrase to describe unattractive saints that they had 'grace grafted on a crab stick.' There are a great many Christian people whom one would compare to any other plant rather than a lily. Thorns and thistles and briers are a good deal more like what some of them appear to the world. But we are bound, if we are Christian people, by our obligations to God, and by our obligations to men, to try to make Christianity look as beautiful in people’s eyes as we can. That is what Paul said, ‘Adorn the teaching’; make it look well, inasmuch as it has made you look attractive to men’s eyes. Men have a fairly accurate notion of beauty and goodness, whether they have any goodness or any beauty in their own characters or not. Do you remember the words: ‘Whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, whatsoever things are venerable . . . if there be any praise’-from men-’think on these things’? If we do not keep that as the guiding star of our lives, then we have failed in one very distinct duty of Christian people-namely, to grow more like a lily, and to be graceful in the lowest sense of that word, as well as *grace full* in the highest sense of it. We shall not be so in the lower, unless we are so in the higher. It may be a very modest kind of beauty, very humble, and not at all like the flaring reds and yellows of the gorgeous flowers that the world admires. These are often like a great sunflower, with a disc as big as a cheese. But the Christian beauty will be modest and unobtrusive and shy, like the violet half buried in the hedge-bank, and unnoticed by careless eyes, accustomed to see beauty only in gaudy, flaring blooms. But unless you, as a Christian, are in your character arrayed in the “beauty of holiness,’ and the holiness of beauty, you are not quite the Christian that Jesus Christ wants you to be; setting forth all the gracious and sweet and refining influences of the Gospel in your daily life and conduct. That is the second lesson of our text.

III. The third is, that a God-bedewed soul that has been made fair and pure by communion with God, ought also to be strong.

He “shall cast forth his roots like Lebanon.” Now I take it that simile does not refer to the roots of that giant range that slope away down under the depths of the Mediterranean. That is a beautiful emblem, but it is not in line with the other images in the context. As these are all dependent on the promise of the dew, and represent different phases of the results of its fulfilment, it is natural to expect thus much uniformity in their variety, that they shall all be drawn from plant-life. If so, we must suppose a condensed metaphor here, and take “Lebanon” to mean the forest which another prophet calls “the glory of Lebanon.” The characteristic tree in these, as we all know, was the cedar.

It is named in Hebrew by a word which is connected with that for “strength.” It stands as the very type and emblem of stability and vigour. Think of its firm roots by which it is anchored deep in the soil. Think of the shelves of massive dark foliage. Think of its unchanged steadfastness in storm. Think of its towering height; and thus arriving at the meaning of the emblem, let us translate it into practice in our own lives. “He shall cast forth his roots as Lebanon.” Beauty? Yes! Purity? Yes! And braided in with them, if I may so say, the strength which can say “No!” which can resist, which can persist, which can overcome; power drawn from communion with God. “Strength and beauty” should blend in the worshippers, as they do in the “sanctuary” in God Himself. There is nothing admirable in mere force; there is often something sickly and feeble, and therefore contemptible in mere beauty. Many of us will cultivate the complacent and the amiable sides of the Christian life, and be wanting in the manly “thews that throw the world,” and can fight to the death. But we have to try and bring these two excellences of character together, and it needs an immense deal of grace and wisdom and imitation of Jesus Christ, and a close clasp of His hand, to enable us to do that. Speak we of strength? He is the type of strength. Of beauty? He is the perfection of beauty. And it is only as we keep close to Him that our lives will be all fair with the reflected loveliness of His, and strong with the communicated power of His grace-“strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.” Brethren, if we are to set forth anything, in our daily lives, of this strength, remember that our lives must be rooted in, as well as bedewed by, God. Hosea’s emblems, beautiful and instructive as they are, do not reach to the deep truth set forth in still holier and sweeter words; “I am the Vine, ye are the branches.” The union of Christ and His people is closer than that between dew and plant. Our growth results from the communication of His own life to us. Therefore is the command stringent and obedience to it blessed, “Abide in Me, for apart from Me ye can do”-and are-“nothing.” Let us remember that the loftier the top of the tree and the wider the spread of its shelves of dark foliage, if it is steadfastly to stand, unmoved by the loud winds when they call, the deeper must its roots strike into the firm earth. If your life is to be a fair temple-palace worthy of God’s dwelling in, if it is to be impregnable to assault, there must be quite as much masonry underground as above, as is the case in great old buildings and palaces. And such a life must be a life “hid with Christ in God,” then it will be strong. When we strike our roots deep into Him, our branch also shall not wither, and our leaf shall be green, and all that we do shall prosper. The wicked are not so. They are like chaff-rootless, fruitless, lifeless, which the wind driveth away.

IV. Lastly, the God-bedewed soul, beautiful, pure, strong, will bear fruit.

That is the last lesson from these metaphors. “His beauty shall be as the olive-tree.” Anybody that has ever seen a grove of olives knows that their beauty is not such as strikes the eye. If it was not for the blue sky overhead, that rays down glorifying light, they would not be much to look at or talk about. The tree has a gnarled, grotesque trunk which divides into insignificant branches, bearing leaves mean in shape, harsh in texture, with a silvery underside. It gives but a quivering shade and has no massiveness, nor symmetry. Ay! but there are olives on the branches. And so the beauty of the humble tree is in what it grows for man’s good. After all, it is the outcome in fruitfulness which is the main thing about us. God’s meaning, in all His gifts of dew, and beauty, and purity, and strength, is that we should be of some use in the world.

The olive is crushed into oil, and the oil is used for smoothing and suppling joints and flesh, for nourishing and sustaining the body as food, for illuminating darkness as oil in the lamp. And these three things are the three things for which we Christian people have received all our dew, and all our beauty, and all our strength-that we may give other people light, that we may be the means of conveying to other people nourishment, that we may move gently in the world as lubricating, sweetening, soothing influences, and not irritating and provoking, and leading to strife and alienation. *The* question after all is, Does anybody gather fruit off us, and would anybody call *us* ‘trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified’? That is lesson four from this text. May we all open our hearts for the dew from heaven, and then use it to produce in ourselves beauty, purity, strength, and fruitfulness!

8) Hosea 14:7-9

Hosea

ISRAEL RETURNING

Hos. 14:1 - Hos. 14:9.

Hosea is eminently the prophet of divine love and of human repentance. Both streams of thought are at their fullest in this great chapter. In Hos. 14:1 - Hos. 14:3 the very essence of true return to God is set forth in the prayer which Israel is exhorted to offer, while in Hos. 14:4 - Hos. 14:8 the forgiving love of God and its blessed results are portrayed with equal poetical beauty and spiritual force. Hos. 14:9 closes the chapter and the book with a kind of epilogue.

I. The summons to repentance.

'Israel,' of course, here means the Northern Kingdom, with which Hosea's prophecies are chiefly occupied. 'Thou hast fallen by thine iniquity'-that is the lesson taught by all its history, and in a deeper sense it is the lesson of all experience. Sin brings ruin for nations and individuals, and the plain teachings of each man's own life exhort each to 'return unto the Lord.' We have all proved the vanity and misery of departing from Him; surely, if we are not drawn by His love, we might be driven by our own unrest, to go back to God.

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In Hos. 14:7 there are difficulties, both as to the application of the ‘his,’ and as to the reading and rendering of some of the words. But the general drift is clear. It prolongs the tones of the foregoing verses, keeping to the same class of images, and expressing fruitfulness, abundant as the corn and precious as the grape, and fragrance like the ‘bouquet’ of the choicest wine.

Hos. 14:8 offers great difficulties on any interpretation. The supplement ‘shall say’ is questionable, and it is doubtful whether Ephraim is the speaker at all, and whether, if so, he speaks all the four clauses, and who speaks any or all of them, if not he. To the present writer, it seems best to take the supplement as right, and possible to regard the whole verse as spoken by Ephraim, though perhaps the last clause is meant to be God’s utterance. The meaning will then come out as follows. The penitent Israel again speaks, after the gracious promises preceding. The tribal name is, as usual in Hosea, equivalent to Israel, whose penitent cry we heard at the beginning of the passage. Now we hear his glad response to God’s abundant answer. ‘What have I to do any more with idols?’ He had vowed [Hos. 14:3] to have no more to do with them, and the resolve is deepened by the rich grace held forth to him. Hosea had lamented Ephraim’s mad adherence to ‘his idols’ [Hos. 4:17], but now the union is dissolved, and by penitence and reception of God’s grace, he is joined to the Lord, and parted from them. His renunciation of idolatry is based, in the second clause, on his experience of what God can do, and on his having heard God’s gracious voice of pardon and promise. If a man hears God, he will not be drawn to worship at any idol’s shrine.

Further, in the third clause, Ephraim is joyfully conscious of the change that has passed on him, in accordance with the great promises just spoken, and with grateful astonishment that such verdure should have burst out from the dry and rotten stump of his own sinful nature, exclaims, ‘I am like a green fir-tree.’ That is another reason why he will have no more to do with idols. They could never have made his sapless nature break into leafage. But what of the fourth clause-’From Me is thy fruit found’? Can we understand that to mean that Ephraim still speaks, keeping up the image of the previous clause, and declaring that all the new fruitfulness which he finds in himself he recognises to be God’s, both in the sense that, in reality, it is produced by Him, and that it belongs to Him? He comes seeking fruit, and He finds it. All our good is His, and we shall be happy, productive, and wise, in proportion as we offer all our works to Him, and feel that, after all, they are not ours, but the works of that Spirit which dwells in penitent and believing hearts. Some have thought that this last clause must be taken as spoken by God; but, even if so taken, it conveys substantially the same thought as to the divine origin of man’s fruitfulness.

The last verse is rather a general reflection summing up the whole than an integral part of this wonderful representation of penitence, pardon, and fruitfulness. It declares the great truth that the knowledge of the pardoning mercy of God, and of the ways by which He weans men from sin and makes them fruitful of good, makes us truly wise. That knowledge is more than intellectual apprehension; it is experience. Providence has its mysteries, but they who keep near to God, and are ‘just’ because they do, will find the opportunity of free, unfettered activity in God’s ways, and transgressors will stumble therein. Therefore wisdom and safety lie in penitence and confession, which will ever be met by gracious pardon and showers of blessing that will cause our hearts, which sin has made desert, to rejoice and blossom like the rose.

Amos

1) AMOS 3:3
2) AMOS 4:4-13
3) AMOS 5:4-15
4) AMOS 6:1-8
5) AMOS 8:1-14

1) Amos 3:3

Amos

A PAIR OF FRIENDS

Amo. 3:3.

They do not need to be agreed about everything. They must, however, wish to keep each others company, and they must be going by the same road to the same place. The application of the parable is very plain, though there are differences of opinion as to the bearing of the whole context which need not concern us now. The 'two,' whom the Prophet would fain see walking together, are God and Israel, and his question suggests not only the companionship and communion with God which are the highest form of religion and the aim of all forms and ceremonies of worship, but also the inexorable condition on which alone that height of communion can be secured and sustained. Two *may* walk together, though the one be God in heaven and the other be I on earth. But they have to be agreed thus far, at any rate, that both shall wish to be together, and both be going the same road.

I. So I ask you to look, first, at that possible blessed companionship which may cheer a life.

There are three phrases in the Old Testament, very like each other, and yet presenting different facets or aspects of the same great truth. Sometimes we read about 'walking before God' as Abraham was bid to do. That means ordering the daily life under the continual sense that we are 'ever in the great Taskmaster's eye' Then there is 'walking after God,' and that means conforming the will and active efforts to the rule that He has laid down, setting our steps firm on the paths that He has prepared that we should walk in them, and accepting His providences. But also, high above both these conceptions of a devout life is the one which is suggested by my text, and which, as you remember, was realised in the case of the patriarch Enoch-'walking with God.' For to walk before Him may have with it some tremor, and may be undertaken in the spirit of the slave who would be glad to get away from the jealous eye that rebukes his slothfulness; and 'walking after Him' may be a painful and partial effort to keep His distant figure in sight; but to 'walk with Him' implies a constant, quiet sense of His Divine Presence which forbids that I should ever be lonely, which guides and defends, which floods my soul and fills my life, and in which, as the companions pace along side by side, words may be spoken by either, or blessed silence may be eloquent of perfect trust and rest.

But, dear brother, far above us as such experience seems to sound, such a life is a possibility for every one of us. We may be able to say, as truly as our Lord said it, 'I am not alone, for the Father is with me.' It is possible that the dreariest solitude of a soul, such as is not realised when the body is removed from men, but is felt most in the crowded city where there is none that loves or fathoms and sympathises, may be turned into blessed fellowship with Him. Yes, but that solitude will not be so turned unless it is first painfully felt. As Daniel said, 'I was left alone, and I saw the great vision.' We need to feel in our deepest hearts that loneliness on earth before we walk with God.

If we are so walking, it is no piece of fanaticism to say that there will be mutual communications. Do you not believe that God knows His way into the spirits that He has endowed with conscious life? Do you not believe that He speaks now to people as truly as He did to prophets and Apostles of old? as truly; though the results of His speech to us of to-day be not of the same authority for others as the words that He spoke to a Paul or a John. The belief in God's communications as for ever sounding in the depths of the Christian spirit does not at all obliterate the distinction between the kind of inspiration which produced the New Testament and that which is realised by all believing and obedient souls. High above all our experience of hearing the words of God in our hearts stands that of those holy men of old who heard God's message whispered in their ears, that they might proclaim it on the housetops to all the world through all generations. But though they and we are on a different level, and God spoke to them for a different purpose, He speaks in our spirits, if we will comply with the conditions, as truly as He did in theirs. As really as it was ever true that the Lord spoke to Abraham, or Isaiah, or Paul, it is true that He now speaks to the man who walks with Him. Frank speech on both sides beguiles many a weary mile, when lovers or friends foot it side by side; and this pair of friends of whom our text speaks have mutual intercourse. God speaks with His servant now, as of old, ‘as a man speaketh with his friend’; and we on our parts, if we are truly walking with Him, shall feel it natural to speak frankly to God. As two friends on the road will interchange remarks about trifles, and if they love each other, the remarks about the trifles will be weighted with love, so we can tell our smallest affairs to God; and if we have Him for our Pilgrim-Companion, we do not need to lock up any troubles or concerns of any sort, big or little, in our hearts, but may speak them all to our Friend who goes with us.

The two *may* walk together. That is the end of all religion. What are creeds for? What are services and sacraments for? What is theology for? What is Christ’s redeeming act for? All culminate in this true, constant fellowship between men and God. And unless, in some measure, that result is arrived at in our cases, our religion, let it be as orthodox as you like, our faith in the redemption of Jesus Christ, let it be as real as you will, our attendances on services and sacraments, let them be as punctilious and regular as may be, are all ‘sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.’ Get side by side with God; that is the purpose of all these, and fellowship with Him is the climax of all religion.

It is also the secret of all blessedness, the only thing that will make a life absolutely sovereign over sorrow, and fixedly unperturbed by all tempests, and invulnerable to all ‘the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.’ Hold fast by God, and you have an amulet against every evil, and a shield against every foe, and a mighty power that will calm and satisfy your whole being. Nothing else, nothing else will do so. As Augustine said, ‘O God! Thou hast made us for Thyself, and in Thyself only are we at rest.’ If the Shepherd is with us we will fear no evil.

II. Now, a word, in the next place, as to the sadly incomplete reality, in much Christian experience, which contrasts with this possibility.

I am afraid that very, very few so-called Christian people habitually feel, as they might do, the depth and blessedness of this communion. And sure I am that only a very small percentage of us have anything like the continuity of companionship which my text suggests as possible. There may be, and therefore there should be, running unbroken through a Christian life one long, bright line of communion with God and happy inspiration from the sense of His presence with us. Is it a line in *my* life, or is there but a dot here, and a dot there, and long breaks between? The long, embarrassed pauses in a conversation between two who do not know much of, or care much for, each other are only too like what occurs in many professing Christians' intercourse with God. Their communion is like those time-worn inscriptions that archæ¯¬ogists dig up, with a word clearly cut and then a great gap, and then a letter or two, and then another gap, and then a little bit more legible, and then the stone broken, and all the rest gone. Did you ever read the meteorological reports in the newspapers and observe a record like this, 'Twenty minutes' sunshine out of a possible eight hours'? Do you not think that such a state of affairs is a little like the experience of a great many Christian people in regard to their communion with God? It is broken at the best, and imperfect at the completest, and shallow at the deepest. O, dear brethren! rise to the height of your possibilities, and live as close to God as He lets you live, and nothing will much trouble you.

III. And now, lastly, a word about the simple explanation of the failure to realise this continual presence.

'Can two walk together except they be agreed?' Certainly not. Our fathers, in a sterner and more religious age than ours, used to be greatly troubled how to account for a state of Christian experience which they supposed to be due to God's withdrawing of the sense of His presence from His children. Whether there is any such withdrawal or not, I am quite certain that that is not the cause of the interrupted communion between God and the average Christian man.

I make all allowance for the ups and downs and changing moods which necessarily affect us in this present life, and I make all allowance, too, for the pressure of imperative duties and distracting cares which interfere with our communion, though, if we were as strong as we might be, they would not wile us away from, but drive us to, our Father in heaven. But when all such allowances have been made, I come back to my text as *the* explanation of interrupted communion. The two are *not* agreed; and that is why they are not walking together. The consciousness of God’s presence with us is a very delicate thing. It is like a very sensitive thermometer, which will drop when an iceberg is a league off over the sea, and scarcely visible. We do not wish His company, or we are not in harmony with His thoughts, or we are not going His road, and therefore, of course, we part. At bottom there is only one thing that separates a soul from God, and that is sin-sin of some sort, like tiny grains of dust that get between two polished plates in an engine that ought to move smoothly and closely against each other. The obstruction may be invisible, and yet be powerful enough to cause friction, which hinders the working of the engine and throws everything out of gear. A light cloud that we cannot see may come between us and a star, and we shall only know it is there, because the star is *not* visibly there. Similarly, many a Christian, quite unconsciously, has something or other in his habits, or in his conduct, or in his affections, which would reveal itself to him, if he would look, as being wrong, because it blots out God.

Let us remember that very little divergence will, if the two paths are prolonged far enough, part their other ends by a world. Our way may go off from the ways of the Lord at a very acute angle. There may be scarcely any consciousness of parting company at the beginning. Let the man travel on upon it far enough, and the two will be so far apart that he cannot see God or hear Him speak. Take care of the little divergences which are habitual, for their accumulated results will be complete separation. There must be absolute surrender if there is to be uninterrupted fellowship.

Such, then, is the direction in which we are to look for the reasons for our low and broken experiences of communion with God. Oh, dear friends! when we do as we sometimes do, wake with a start, like a child that all at once starts from sleep and finds that its mother is gone-when we wake with a start to feel that we are alone, then do not let us be afraid to go straight back. Only be sure that we leave behind us the sin that parted us.

You remember how Peter signalised himself on the lake, on the occasion of the second miraculous draught of fishes, when he floundered through the water and clasped Christ’s feet. He did not say then, ‘Depart from Me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!’ He had said that before on a similar occasion, when he felt his sin less, but now he knew that the best place for the denier was with his head on Christ’s bosom. So, if we have parted from our Friend, there should be no time lost ere we go back. May it be true of us that we walk with God, so that at last the great promise may be fulfilled about us, ‘that we shall walk with Him in white,’ being by His love accounted ‘worthy,’ and so ‘follow’ and keep company with, ‘the Lamb whithersoever He goeth!’

2) Amos 4:4-13

Amos

SMITTEN IN VAIN

Amo. 4:4 - Amo. 4:13.

The reign of Jeroboam II. was one of brilliant military success and of profound moral degradation. Amos was a simple, hardy shepherd from the southern wilds of Judah, and his prophecies are redolent of his early life, both in their homely imagery and in the wholesome indignation and contempt for the silken-robed vice of Israel. No sterner picture of an utterly rotten social state was ever drawn than this book gives of the luxury, licentiousness, and oppressiveness of the ruling classes. This passage deals rather with the religious declension underlying the moral filth, and sets forth the self-willed idolatry of the people [Amo. 4:4 - Amo. 4:5], their obstinate resistance to God’s merciful chastisement [Amo. 4:6 - Amo. 4:11], and the heavier impending judgment [Amo. 4:12 - Amo. 4:13].

I. Indignant irony flashes in that permission or command to persevere in the calf worship.

The seeming command is the strongest prohibition. There can be no worse thing befall a man than that he should be left to go on forwardly in the way of his heart. The real meaning is sufficiently emphasised by that second verb, ‘and *transgress*’. ‘Flock to one temple after another, and heap altars with sacrifices which you were never bid to offer, but understand that what you do is not worship, but sin.’ That is a smiting sentence to pass upon elaborate ceremonial. The word literally means treason or rebellion, and by it Amos at one blow shatters the whole fabric. Note, too, that the offering of tithes was not called for by Mosaic law, ‘every three days’ [Revised Version], and that the use of leaven in burnt offerings was prohibited by it, and also that to call for freewill offerings was to turn spontaneousness into something like compulsion, and to bring ostentation into worship. All these characteristics spoiled the apparent religiousness, over and above the initial evil of disobedience, and warrant Amos’s crushing equation, ‘Your worship = rebellion.’ All are driven home by the last words of Amo. 4:5, ‘So ye love it.’ The reason for all this prodigal ostentatious worship was to please themselves, not to obey God. That tainted everything, and always does.

The lessons of this burst of sarcasm are plain. The subtle influence of self creeps in even in worship, and makes it hollow, unreal, and powerless to bless the worshipper. Obedience is better than costly gifts. The beginning and end of all worship, which is not at same time ‘transgression’ is the submission of tastes, will, and the whole self. Again, men will lavish gifts far more freely in apparent religious service, which is but the worship of their reflected selves, than in true service of God. Again, the purity of willing offerings is marred when they are given in response to a loud call, or, when given, are proclaimed with acclamations. Let us not suppose that all the brunt of Amos’s indignation fell only on these old devotees. The principles involved in it have a sharp edge, turned to a great deal which is allowed and fostered among ourselves.

II. The blaze of indignation changes in the second part of the passage into wounded tenderness, as the Prophet speaks in the name of God, and recounts the dreary monotony of failure attending all God’s loving attempts to arrest Israel’s departure by the mercy of judgment.

Mark the sad cadence of the fivefold refrain, ‘Ye have not returned unto Me, saith the Lord.’ The ‘unto’ implies reaching the object to which we turn, and is not the less forcible but more usual word found in this phrase, which simply means ‘towards’ and indicates direction, without saying anything as to how far the return has gone. So there may have been partial moments of bethinking themselves, when the chastisement was on Israel; but there had been no thorough ‘turning,’ which had landed them at the side of God. Many a man turns *towards* God, who, for lack of resolved perseverance, never so turns as to get *to* God. The repeated complaint of the inefficacy of chastisements has in it a tone of sorrow and of wonder which does not belong only to the Prophet. If we remember who it was who was ‘grieved at the blindness of their heart,’ and who ‘wondered at their unbelief’ we shall not fear to recognise here the attribution of the same emotions to the heart of God.

To Amos, famine, drought, blasting, locusts, pestilence, and probably earthquake, were five messengers of God, and Amos was taught by God. If we looked deeper, we should see more clearly. The true view of the relation of all material things and events to God is this which the herdsman of Tekoa proclaimed. These messengers were not ‘miracles,’ but they were God’s messengers all the same. Behind all phenomena stands a personal will, and they are nearer the secret of the universe who see God working in it all, than they who see all forces except the One which is the only true force. ‘I give cleanness of teeth. I have withholden the rain. I have smitten. I have sent the pestilence. I have overthrown some of you.’ To the Prophet’s eye the world is all aflame with a present God. Let no scientific views, important and illuminating as these may be, hide from us the deeper truth, which lies beyond their region. The child who says ‘God,’ has got nearer the centre than the scientist who says ‘Force.’

But Amos had another principle, that God sent physical calamities because of moral delinquencies and for moral and religious ends. These disasters were meant to bring Israel back to God, and were at once punishments and reformatory methods. No doubt the connection between sin and material evils was closer under the Old Testament than now. But if we may not argue as Amos did, in reference to such calamities as drought, and failures of harvests, and the like, as these affect communities, we may, at all events, affirm that, in the case of the individual, he is a wise man who regards all outward evil as having a possible bearing on his bettering spiritually. ‘If a drought comes, learn to look to your irrigation, and don’t cut down your forests so wantonly,’ say the wise men nowadays; ‘if pestilence breaks out, see to your drainage.’ By all means. These things, too, are God’s commandments, and we have no right to interpret the consequences of infraction of physical laws as being meant to punish nations for their breach of moral and religious ones. If we were prophets, we might, but not else. But still, is God so poor that He can have but one purpose in a providence?

Every sorrow, of whatever sort, is meant to produce all the good effects which it naturally tends to produce; and since every experience of pain and loss and grief naturally tends to wean us from earth, and to drive us to find in God what earth can never yield, all our sorrows are His messengers to draw us back to Him. Amos' lesson as to the purpose of trials is not antiquated.

But he has still another to teach us; namely, the awful power which we have of resisting God's efforts to draw us back. 'Our wills are ours, we know not how,' but alas! it is too often not 'to make them Thine.' This is the true tragedy of the world that God calls, and we do refuse, even as it is the deepest mystery of sinful manhood that God calls and we can refuse. What infinite pathos and grieved love, thrown back upon itself, is in that refrain, 'Ye have not returned unto Me!' How its recurrence speaks of the long-suffering which multiplied means as others failed, and of the divine charity, which 'suffered long, was not soon angry, and hoped all things!' How vividly it gives the impression of the obstinacy that to all effort opposed insensibility, and clung the more closely and insanely to the idolatry which was its crime and its ruin! The very same temper is deep in us all. Israel holds up the mirror in which we may see ourselves. If blows do not break iron, they harden it. A wasted sorrow-that is, a sorrow which does not drive us to God-leaves us less impressible than it found us.

III. Again the mood changes, and the issue of protracted resistance is prophesied [Amo. 4:12 - Amo. 4:13].

'Therefore' sums up the instances of refusal to be warned, and presents them as the cause of the coming evil. The higher the dam is piled, the deeper the water that is gathered behind it, and the surer and more destructive the flood when it bursts. Long-delayed judgments are severe in proportion as they are slow. Note the awful vagueness of threatening in that emphatic 'thus,' as if the Prophet had the event before his eyes. There is no need to specify, for there can be but one result from such obstinacy. The 'terror of the Lord' is more moving by reason of the dimness which wraps it. The contact of divine power with human rebellion can only end in one way, and that is too terrible for speech. Conscience can translate 'thus.' The thunder-cloud is all the more dreadful for the vagueness of its outline, where its livid hues melt into formless black. What bolts lurk in its gloom?

The certainty of judgment is the basis of a call to repentance, which may avert it. The meeting with God for which Israel is besought to prepare, was, of course, not judgment after death, but the impending destruction of the Northern Kingdom. But Amos’s prophetic call is not misapplied when directed to that final day of the Lord. Common-sense teaches preparation for a certain future, and Amos’s trumpet-note is deepened and re-echoed by Jesus: ‘Be ye ready also, for . . . the Son of man cometh.’ Note, too, that Israel’s peculiar relation to God is the very ground of the certainty of its punishment, and of the appeal for repentance. Just because He is ‘thy God,’ will He assuredly come to judge, and you may assuredly prepare, by repentance, to meet Him. The conditions of meeting the Judge, and being ‘found of Him in peace,’ are that we should be ‘without spot, and blameless’; and the conditions of being so spotless and uncensurable are, what they were in Amos’s day, repentance and trust. Only we have Jesus as the brightness of the Father’s glory to trust in, and His all-sufficient work to trust to, for pardon and purifying.

The magnificent proclamation of the name of the Lord which closes the passage, is meant as at once a guarantee of His judgment and an enforcement of the call to be ready to meet Him. He in creation forms the solid, changeless mountains and the viewless, passing wind. The most stable and the most mobile are His work. He reads men’s hearts, and can tell them their thoughts afar off. He is the Author of all changes, both in the physical and the moral world, bringing the daily wonder of sunrise and the nightly shroud of darkness, and with like alternation blending joy and sorrow in men’s lives. He treads ‘on the high places of the earth,’ making all created elevations the path of His feet, and crushing down whatever exalts itself. Thus, in creation almighty, in knowledge omniscient, in providence changing all things and Himself the same, subjugating all, and levelling a path for His purposes across every opposition, He manifests His name, as the living, eternal Jehovah, the God of the Covenant, and therefore of judgment on its breakers, and as the Commander and God of the embattled forces of the universe. Is this a God whose coming to judge is to be lightly dealt with? Is not this a God whom it is wise for us to be ready to meet?

3) Amos 5:4-15

Amos

THE SINS OF SOCIETY

Amo. 5:4 - Amo. 5:15.

The reign of Jeroboam II, in which Amos prophesied, was a period of great prosperity and of great corruption. Amos, born in the Southern Kingdom, and accustomed to the simple life of a shepherd, blazed up in indignation at the signs of misused wealth and selfish luxury that he saw everywhere, in what was to him almost a foreign country. If one fancies a godly Scottish Highlander sent to the West end of London, or a Bible-reading New England farmer's man sent to New York's 'upper ten,' one will have some notion of this prophet, the impressions made, and the task laid on him. He has a message to our state of society which, in many particulars, resembles that which he had to rebuke.

There seems to be a slight dislocation in the order of the verses of the passage, for Amo. 5:7 comes in awkwardly, breaking the connection between Amo. 5:6 and Amo. 5:8, and itself cut off from Amo. 5:10, to which it belongs. If we remove the intruding verse to a position after Amo. 5:9, the whole passage is orderly and falls into three coherent parts: an exhortation to seek Jehovah, enforced by various considerations [Amo. 5:4 - Amo. 5:9]; a vehement denunciation of social vices [Amo. 5:7, Amo. 5:10 - Amo. 5:13]; and a renewed exhortation to seek God by doing right to man [Amo. 5:14 - Amo. 5:15].

Amos's first call to Israel is but the echo of God's to men, always and everywhere. All circumstances, all inward experiences, joy and sorrow, prosperity and disaster, our longings and our fears, they all cry aloud to us to seek His face. That loving invitation is ever sounding in our ears. And the promise which Amos gave, though it may have meant on his lips the continuance of national life only, yet had, even on his lips, a deeper meaning, which we now cannot but hear in it. For, just as to 'seek the Lord' means more to us than it did to Israel, so the consequent life has greatened, widened, deepened into life eternal. But Amos’s narrower, more external promise is true still, and there is no surer way of promoting true well-being than seeking God. ‘With Thee is the fountain of life,’ in all senses of the word, from the lowest purely physical to the highest, and it is only they who go thither to draw that will carry away their pitchers full of the sparkling blessing. The fundamental principle of Amos’s teaching is an eternal truth, that to seek God is to find Him, and to find Him is life.

But Amos further teaches us that such seeking is not real nor able to find, unless it is accompanied with turning away from all sinful quests after vanities. We must give up seeking Bethel, Gilgal, or Beersheba, seats of the calf worship, if we are to seek God to purpose. The sin of the Northern Kingdom was that it wanted to worship Jehovah under the symbol of the calves, thus trying to unite two discrepant things. And is not a great deal of our Christianity of much the same quality? Too many of us are doing just what Elijah told the crowds on Carmel that they were doing, trying to ‘shuffle along on both knees.’ We would seek God, but we would like to have an occasional visit to Bethel. It cannot be done. There must be detachment, if there is to be any real attachment. And the certain transiency of all creatural objects is a good reason for not fastening ourselves to them, lest we should share their fate. ‘Gilgal shall go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nought,’ therefore let us join ourselves to the Eternal Love and we shall abide, as it abides, for ever.

The exhortation is next enforced by presenting the consequences of neglecting it. To seek Him is life, not to seek Him incurs the danger of finding Him in unwelcome ways. That is for ever true. We do not get away from God by forgetting Him, but we run the risk of finding in Him, not the fire which vitalises, purifies, melts, and gladdens, but that which consumes. The fire is one, but its effects are twofold. God is for us either that fire into which it is blessedness to be baptized, or that by which it is death to be burned up. And what can Bethel, or calves, or all the world do to quench it or pluck us out of it?

Once more the exhortation is urged, if we link Amo. 5:8 with Amo. 5:6, and supply ‘Seek ye’ at its beginning. Here the enforcement is drawn from the considerations of God’s workings in nature and history. The shepherd from

Tekoa had often gazed up at the silent splendours of the Pleiades and Orion, as he kept watch over his flocks by night, and had seen the thick darkness on the wide uplands thinning away as the morning stole op over the mountains across the Dead Sea, and the day dying as he gathered his sheep together. He had cowered under the torrential rains which swept across his exposed homeland, and had heard God's voice summoning the obedient waters of the sea, that He might pour them down in rain. But the moral government of the world also calls on men to seek Jehovah. 'He causeth destruction to flash forth on the strong, so that destruction cometh upon the fortress.' High things attract the lightning. Godless strength is sure, sooner or later, to be smitten down, and no fortress is so impregnable that He cannot capture and overthrow it. Surely wisdom bids us seek Him that does all these wonders, and make Him our defence and our high tower.

The second part gives a vivid picture of the vices characteristic of a prosperous state of society which is godless, and therefore selfishly luxurious. First, civil justice is corrupted, turned into bitterness, and prostrated to the ground. Then bold denouncers of national sins are violently hated. Do we not know that phase of an ungodly and rich society? What do the newspapers say about Christians who try to be social reformers? Are the epithets flung at them liker bouquets or rotten eggs? 'Fanatics and faddists' are the mildest of them. Then the poor are trodden down and have to give large parts of their scanty harvests to the rich. Have capital and labour just proportions of their joint earnings? Would a sermon on Amo. 5:11 be welcome in the suburbs of industrial centres, where the employers have their 'houses of hewn stone'? Such houses, side by side with the poor men's huts, struck the eye of the shepherd from Tekoa as the height of sinful luxury, and still more sinful disproportion in the social condition of the two classes. What would he have said if he had lived in England or America? Justice, too, was bought and sold. A murderer could buy himself off, while the poor man, who could not pay, lost his case. We do not bribe juries, but [legal] justice is an expensive luxury still, and counsel's fees put it out of the reach of poor men.

One of the worst features of such a state of society as Amos saw is that men are afraid to speak out in condemnation of it, and the ill weeds grow apace for want of a scythe. Amos puts a certain sad emphasis on 'prudent,' as if he was feeling how little he could be called so, and yet there is a touch of scorn in him too. The man who is over-careful of his skin or his reputation will hold his tongue; even good men may become so accustomed to the glaring corruptions of society in the midst of which they have always lived, that they do not feel any call to rebuke or wage war against them; but the brave man, the man who takes his ideals from Christ, and judges society by its conformity with Christ's standard, will not keep silence, and the more he feels that 'It is an evil time' the more will he feel that he cannot but speak out, whatever comes of his protest. What masquerades as prudence is very often sinful cowardice, and such silence is treason against Christ.

The third part repeats the exhortation to 'seek,' with a notable difference. It is now 'good' that is to be sought, and 'evil' that is to be turned from. These correspond respectively to 'Jehovah,' and 'Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba,' in former verses. That is to say, morality is the garb of religion, and religion is the only true source of morality. If we are not seeking the things that are lovely and of good report, our professions of seeking God are false; and we shall never earnestly and successfully seek good and hate evil unless we have begun by seeking and finding God, and holding Him in our heart of hearts. Modern social reformers, who fancy that they can sweeten society without religion, might do worse than go to school to Amos.

Notable, too, is the lowered tone of confidence in the beneficial result of obeying the Prophet's call. In the earlier exhortation the promise had been absolute. 'Seek ye Me, and ye *shall* live'; now it has cooled to 'it may be.' Is Amos faltering? No; but while it is always true that blessed life is found by the seeker after God, because He finds the very source of life, it is not always true that the consequences of past turnings from Him are diverted by repentance. 'It may be' that these have to be endured, but even they become tokens of Jehovah's graciousness, and the purified 'remnant of Joseph' will possess the true life more abundantly because they have been exercised thereby.

4) Amos 6:1-8

THE CARCASS AND THE EAGLES

Amo. 6:1 - Amo. 6:8.

Amos prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam, the son of Joash. Jeroboam's reign was a time of great prosperity for Israel. Moab, Gilead, and part of Syria were reconquered, and the usual effects of conquest, increased luxury and vainglory, followed. Amos was not an Israelite born, for he came from Tekoa, away down south, in the wild country west of the Dead Sea, where he had been a simple herdsman till the divine call sent him into the midst of the corrupt civilisation of the Northern Kingdom. The first words of his prophecy give its whole spirit: 'The Lord will roar from Zion.' The word rendered 'roar' is the term specially used for the terrible cry with which a lion leaps on its surprised prey [Amo. 3:4, Amo. 3:8]. It is from Zion, the seat of God's Temple, that the 'roar' proceeds, and Amos's prophecy is but the echo of it in Israel.

The prophecy of judgment in this passage is directed against the sins of the upper classes in Samaria. They are described in verse 1 as the 'notable men . . . to whom the house of Israel come,' which, in modern language, is just 'conspicuous citizens,' who set the fashion, and are looked to as authorities and leaders, whether in political or commercial or social life. The word by which they are designated is used in Num. 1:17 : 'Which are *expressed* by name.' The word 'carried back the thoughts of the degenerate aristocracy of Israel to the faith and zeal of their forefathers' [Pusey, *Minor Prophets*, on this verse]. Israel, Amos calls 'The first of the nations.' It is singular that such a title should be given to the nation against whose corruption his one business is to testify, but probably there is keen irony in the word. It takes Israel at its own estimate, and then goes on to show how rotten, and therefore short-lived, was the prosperity which had swollen national pride to such a pitch. The chiefs of the foremost nation in the world should surely be something better than the heartless debauchees whom the Prophet proceeds to paint. Anglo-Saxons on both sides of the Atlantic, who are by no means deficient in this same complacent estimate of their own superiority to all other peoples, may take note. The same thought is prominent in the description of these notables as 'at ease.' They are living in a fool's paradise, shutting their eyes to the thunder-clouds that begin to rise slowly above the horizon, and keeping each other in countenance in laughing at Amos and his gloomy forecasts. They ‘trusted in the mountain of Samaria,’ which, they thought, made the city impregnable to assault. No doubt they thought that the Prophet’s talk about doing right and trusting in Jehovah was very fanatical and unpractical, just as many in England and America think that their nations are exalted, not by righteousness, but by armies, navies, and dollars or sovereigns.

Amo. 6:2 is very obscure to us from our ignorance of the facts underlying its allusions. In fact, it has been explained in exactly opposite ways, being taken by some to enumerate three instances of prosperous communities, which yet are not more prosperous than Israel, and by others to enumerate three instances of God’s judgments falling on places which, though strong, had been conquered. In the former explanation, God’s favour to Israel is made the ground of an implied appeal to their gratitude; in the latter, His judgments on other nations are made the ground of an appeal to their fear, lest like destruction should fall on them.

But the main points of the passage are the photograph of the crimes which are bringing the judgment of God, and the solemn divine oath to inflict the judgment. The crimes rebuked are not the false worship of the calves, though in other parts of his prophecy Amos lashes that with terrible invectives, nor foul breaches of morality, though these were not wanting in Israel, but the vices peculiar to selfish, luxurious upper classes in all times and countries, who forget the obligations of wealth, and think only of its possibilities of self-indulgence. French *noblesse* before the Revolution, and English peers and commercial magnates, and American millionaires, would yield examples of the same sin. The hardy shepherd from Tekoa had learned ‘plain living and high thinking’ before he was a prophet, and would look with wondering and disgusted eyes at the wicked waste which he saw in Samaria. He begins with scourging the reckless security already referred to. These notables in Israel were ‘at ease’ because they ‘put far away the evil day,’ by refusing to believe that it was at hand, and paying no heed to prophets’ warnings, as their fellows do still and always, and as we all are tempted to do. They who see and declare the certain end of national or personal sins are usually jeered at as pessimists, fanatics, alarmists, bad patriots, or personal ill-wishers, and the men whom they try to warn fancy that they hinder the coming of a day of retribution by disbelieving in its coming. Incredulity is no lightning-conductor to keep off the flash, and, listened to or not, the low growls of the thunder are coming nearer.

With one hand these sinners tried to push away the evil day, while with the other they drew near to themselves that which made its coming certain-’the seat of violence,’ or, rather, ‘the sitting,’ or ‘session.’ Violence, or wrongdoing, is enthroned by them, and where men enthrone iniquity, God’s day of vengeance is not far off.

Then follows a graphic picture of the senseless, corrupting luxury of the Samaritan magnates, on which the Tekoan shepherd pours his scorn, but which is simplicity itself, and almost asceticism, before what he would see if he came to London or New York. To him it seemed effeminate to loll on a divan at meals, and possibly it was a custom imported from abroad. It is noted that ‘the older custom in Israel was to sit while eating.’ The woodwork of the divans, inlaid with ivory, had caught his eye in some of his peeps into the great houses, and he inveighs against them very much as one of the Pilgrim Fathers might do if he could see the furniture in the drawing-rooms of some of his descendants. There is no harm in pretty things, but the æ³´hetic craze does sometimes indicate and increase selfish heartlessness as to the poverty and misery, which have not only no ivory on their divans, but no divans at all. Thus stretched in unmanly indolence on their cushions, they feast on delicacies. ‘Lambs out of the flock’ and ‘calves out of the stall’ seem to mean animals too young to be used as food. These gourmands, like their successors, prided themselves on having dainties out of season, because they were more costly then. And their feasts had the adornment of music, which the shepherd, who knew only the pastoral pipe that gathered his sheep, refers to with contempt. He uses a very rare word of uncertain meaning, which is probably best rendered in some such way as the Revised Version does: ‘They sing idle songs.’ To him their elaborate performances seemed like empty babble. Worse than that, they ‘devise musical instruments like David.’ But how unlike him in the use they make of art! What a descent from the praises of God to the ‘idle songs’ fit for the hot dining-halls and the guests there! Amos was indignant at the profanation of art, and thought it best used in the service of God. What would he have said if he had been ‘fastened into a front-row box’ and treated to a modern opera?

The revellers ‘drink wine in bowls’ by which larger vessels than generally employed are intended. They drank to excess, or as we might say, by bucketfuls. So the dainty feast, with its artistic refinement and music, ends at last in a brutal carouse, and the heads anointed with the most costly unguents drop in drunken slumber. A similar picture of Samaritan manners is drawn by Isa. 28:1 - Isa. 28:29, and obviously drunkenness was one of the besetting sins of the capital.

But the darkest hue in the dark picture has yet to be added: ‘They are not grieved for the affliction [literally, the ‘breach’ or ‘wound’] of Joseph.’ The tribe of Ephraim, Joseph’s son, being the principal tribe of the Northern Kingdom, Joseph is often employed as a synonym for Israel. All these pieces of luxury, corrupting and effeminate as they are, might be permitted, but heartless indifference to the miseries groaning at the door of the banqueting-hall goes with them. ‘The classes’ are indifferent to the condition of ‘the masses.’ Put Amos into modern English, and he is denouncing the heartlessness of wealth, refinement, art, and culture, which has no ear for the complaining of the poor, and no eyes to see either the sorrows and sins around it, or the lowering cloud that is ready to burst in tempest.

The inevitable issue is certain, because of the very nature of God. It is outlined with keen irony. Amos sees in imagination the long procession of sad captives, and marching in the front ranks, the self-indulgent Sybarites, whose pre-eminence is now only the melancholy prerogative of going first in the fettered train. What has become of their revelry? It is gone, like the imaginary banquets of dreams, and instead of luxurious lolling on silken couches, there is the weary tramp of the captive exiles. Such result must be, since God is what He is. He has sworn ‘by Himself’; His being and character are the pledge that it will be so as Amos has declared. How can such a God as He is do otherwise than hate the pride of such a selfish, heartless, God-forgetting aristocracy? How can He do otherwise than deliver up the city? God has not changed, and though His mills grind slowly, they do grind still; and it is as true for England and America, as it was for Samaria, that a wealthy and leisurely upper class, which cares only for material luxury glossed over by art, which has condescended to be its servant, is bringing near the evil day which it hugs itself into believing will never come.

5) Amos 8:1-14

Amos

RIPE FOR GATHERING

Amo. 8:1 - Amo. 8:14.

There are three visions in the former chapter, each beginning as Amo. 8:1. This one is therefore intended to be taken as the continuation of these, and it is in substance a repetition of the third, only with more detail and emphasis. An insolent attempt, by the priest of Beth-el, to silence the Prophet, and the fiery answer which he got for his pains, come between. The stream of Amos's prophecy flows on, uninterrupted by the boulder which had tried to dam it up. Some courage was needed to treat Amaziah and his blasphemous bluster as a mere parenthesis.

We have first to note the vision and its interpretation. It is such as a countryman, 'a dresser of sycamore trees' would naturally have. Experience supplies forms and material for the imagination, and moulds into which God-given revelations run. The point of the vision is rather obscured by the rendering 'summer fruit.' 'Ripe fruit' would be better, since the emblem represents the Northern Kingdom as ripe for the dreadful ingathering of judgment. The word for this [*qayits*] and that for 'the end' [*qets*] are alike in sound, but the play of words cannot be reproduced, except by some clumsy device, such as 'the end ripens' or 'the time of ripeness comes.' The figure is frequent in other prophecies of judgment, as, for instance, in Rev. 14:14 - Rev. 14:20.

Observe the repetition, from the preceding vision, of 'I will not pass by them any more.' The first two visions had threatened judgments, which had been averted by the Prophet's intercession; but the third, and now the fourth, declare that the time for prolonged impunity is passed. Just as the mellow ripeness of the fruit fixes the time of gathering it, so there comes a stage in national and individual corruption, when there is nothing to be done but to smite. That period is not reached because God changes, but because men get deeper in sin. Because 'the harvest is ripe,' the long-delayed command, 'Put in thy sickle' is given to the angel of judgment, and the clusters of those black grapes, whose juice in the wine-press of the wrath of God is blood, are cut down and cast in. It is a solemn lesson, applying to each soul as well as to communities. By neglect of God's voice, and persistence in our own evil ways, we can make ourselves such that we are ripe for judgment, and can compel long-suffering to strike. Which are we ripening for-the harvest when the wheat shall be gathered into Christ's barns, or that when the tares shall be bound in bundles for burning?

The tragedy of that fruit-gathering is described with extraordinary grimness and force in the abrupt language of Amo. 8:3. The merry songs sung in the palace [this rendering seems more appropriate here than 'temple'] will be broken off, and the singers' voices will quaver into shrill shrieks, so suddenly will the judgment be. Then comes a picture as abrupt in its condensed terribleness as anything in Tacitus-'Many the corpses; everywhere they fling them; hush!' We see the ghastly masses of dead ['corpse' is in the singular, as if a collective noun], so numerous that no burial-places could hold them; and no ceremonial attended them, but they were rudely flung anywhere by anybody [no nominative is given], with no accustomed voice of mourning, but in gloomy silence. It is like Defoe's picture of the dead-cart in the plague of London. Such is ever the end of departing from God-songs palsied into silence or turned into wailing when the judgment bursts; death stalking supreme, and silence brooding over all.

The crimes that ripened men for this terrible harvest are next set forth, in part, in Amo. 8:4 - Amo. 8:6. These verses partly coincide verbally with the previous indictment in Amo. 2:6, etc., which, however, is more comprehensive. Here only one form of sin is dealt with. And what was the sin that deserved the bad eminence of being thus selected as the chief sign that Israel was ripe and rotten? Precisely the one which gets most indulgence in the Christian Church; namely, eagerness to be rich, and sharp, unkindly dealing. These men, who were only fit to be swept out of the land, were most punctual in their religious duties. They would not on any account do business either on a festival or on Sabbath, but they were very impatient till-shall we say? Monday morning came-that they might get to their beloved work again.

Their lineal descendants are no strangers on the exchanges, or in the churches of London or New York. They were not only outwardly scrupulous and inwardly weary of religious observances, but when they did get to ‘business,’ they gave short measure and took a long price, and knew how to turn the scales always in their own favour. It was the expedient of rude beginners in the sacred art of getting the best of a bargain, to put a false bottom in the *ephah*, and to stick a piece of lead below the shekel weight, which the purchaser had to make go up in the scale with his silver. There are much neater ways of doing the same thing now; and no doubt some very estimable gentlemen in high repute as Christians, who give respectability to any church or denomination, could have taught these early practitioners a lesson or two.

They were as cruel as they were greedy. They bought their brethren as slaves, and if a poor man had run into their debt for even a pair of shoes, they would sell him up in a very literal sense. Avarice, unbridled by the fear of God, leads by a short cut to harshness and disregard of the claims of others. There are more ways of buying the needy for a pair of shoes than these people practised.

The last touch in the picture is meanness, which turned everything into money. Even what fell through the sieve when wheat was winnowed, which ought to have been given to anybody, was carefully scraped up, and, dirty as it was, sold. Is not ‘nothing for nothing’ an approved maxim to-day? Are not people held up as shining lights of commerce, who have the faculty of turning everything into saleable articles? Some serious reflections ought to be driven home to us who live in great commercial communities, and are in manifold ways tempted to ‘learn their ways, and so get a snare unto our souls,’ by this gibbeting of tempers and customs, very common among ourselves, as the very head and front of the sin of Israel, which determined its ripeness for destruction.

The catalogue of sins is left incomplete [compare with Amo. 2:1 - Amo. 2:16], as if holy indignation turned for relief to the thought of the certain judgment. That certainly is strongly affirmed by the representation of the oath of Jehovah. ‘He can swear by no other,’ therefore He ‘swears by Himself’; and the ‘excellency of Jacob’ cannot with propriety mean anything else than Him who is, or ought to be, the sole ground of confidence and occasion of ‘boasting’ to the nation [Hos. 5:5]. He gives His own being as the guarantee that judgment shall fall. As surely as God is God, injustice and avarice will ruin a nation. We talk now about necessary consequences and natural laws rendering penalties inevitable. The Bible suggests a deeper foundation for their certain incidence-even the very nature of God Himself. As long as He is what He is, covetousness and its child, harshness to the needy, will be sin against Him, and be avenged sooner or later. God has a long and a wide memory, and the sins which He ‘remembers’ are those which He has not forgiven, and will punish.

Amos heaps image on image to deepen the impression of terror and confusion. Everything is turned to its opposite. The solid land reels, rises, and falls, like the Nile in flood [see Revised Version]. The sun sets at midday, and noon is darkness. Feasts change to mourning, songs to lamentations. Rich garments are put aside for sackcloth, and flowing locks drop off and leave bald heads. These are evidently all figures vividly piled together to express the same thought. The crash that destroyed their national prosperity and existence would shake the most solid things and darken the brightest. It would come suddenly, as if the sun plunged from the zenith to the west. It would make joy a stranger, and bring grief as bitter as when a father or a mother mourns the death of an only son. Besides all this, something darker beyond is dimly hinted in that awful, vague, final threat, ‘The end thereof as a bitter day.’

Now all these threats were fulfilled in the fall of the kingdom of Israel; but that ‘day of the Lord’ was in principle a miniature foreshadowing of the great final judgment. Some of the very features of the description here are repeated with reference to it in the New Testament. We cannot treat such prophecies as this as if they were exhausted by their historical fulfilment. They disclose the eternal course of divine judgment, which is to culminate in a future day of judgment. The oath of God is not yet completely fulfilled. Assuredly as He lives and is God, so surely will modern sinners have to stand their trial; and, as of old, the chase after riches will bring down crashing ruin. We need that vision of judgment as much as Samaria did when Amos saw the basket of ripe fruit, craving, as it were, to be plucked. So do obstinate sinners invite destruction.

The last section specifies one feature of judgment, the deprivation of the despised word of the Lord [Amo. 8:11 - Amo. 8:14]. Like Saul, whose piteous wail in the witch's hovel was, 'God . . . answereth me no more,' they who paid no heed to the word of the Lord shall one day seek far and wearily for a prophet, and seek in vain. The word rendered 'wander,' which is used in the other description of people seeking for water in a literal drought [Amo. 4:8], means 'reel,' and gives the picture of men faint and dizzy with thirst, yet staggering on in vain quest for a spring. They seek everywhere, from the Dead Sea on the east to the Mediterranean on the west, and then up to the north, and so round again to the starting-point. Is it because Judah was south that that quarter is not visited? Perhaps, if they had gone where the Temple was, they would have found the stream from under its threshold, which a later prophet saw going forth to heal the marshes and dry places. Why was the search vain? Has not God promised to be found of those that seek, however far they have gone away? The last verse tells why. They still were idolaters, swearing by the 'sin of Samaria,' which is the calf of Beth-el, and by the other at Dan, and going on idolatrous pilgrimages to Beer-sheba, far away in the south, across the whole kingdom of Judah [Amo. 5:5]. It was vain to seek for the word of the Lord with such doings and worship.

The truth implied is universal in its application. God's message neglected is withdrawn. Conscience stops if continually unheeded. The Gospel may still sound in a man's ears, but have long ceased to reach farther. There comes a time when men shall wish wasted opportunities back, and find that they can no more return than last summer's heat. There may be a wish for the prophet in time of distress, which means no real desire for God's word, but only for relief from calamity. There may be a sort of seeking for the word, which seeks in the wrong places and in the wrong ways, and without abandoning sins. Such quest is vain. But if, driven by need and sorrow, a poor soul, feeling the thirst after the living God, cries from ever so distant a land of bondage, the cry will be answered. But let us not forget that our Lord has told us to take heed how we hear, on the very ground that 'to him that hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away.’

Jonah

1) JONAH 1:1-17
2) JONAH 2:8
3) JONAH 3:1-10

1) Jonah 1:1-17

Jonah

GUILTY SILENCE AND ITS REWARD

Jon. 1:1 - Jon. 1:17.

Jonah was apparently an older contemporary of Hosea and Amos. The Assyrian power was looming threateningly on the northern horizon, and a flash or two had already broken from that cloud. No doubt terror had wrought hate and intenser narrowness. To correct these by teaching, by an instance drawn from Assyria itself, God’s care for the Gentiles and their susceptibility to His voice, was the purpose of Jonah’s mission. He is a prophet of Israel, because the lesson of his history was for them, though his message was for Nineveh. He first taught by example the truth which Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue of Nazareth, and Peter learned on the housetop at Joppa, and Paul took as his guiding star. A truth so unwelcome and remote from popular belief needed emphasis when first proclaimed; and this singular story, as it were, underlines it for the generation which heard it first. Its place would rather have been among the narratives than the prophets, except for this aspect of it. So regarded, Jonah becomes a kind of representative of Israel; and his history sets forth large lessons as to its function among the nations, its unwillingness to discharge it, the consequences of disobedience, and the means of return to a better mind.

Note then, first, the Prophet’s unwelcome charge. There seems no sufficient reason for doubting the historical reality of Jonah’s mission to Nineveh; for we know that intercourse was not infrequent, and the silence of other records is, in their fragmentary condition, nothing wonderful. But the fact that a prophet of Israel was sent to a heathen city, and that not to denounce destruction except as a means of winning to repentance, declared emphatically God's care for the world, and rebuked the exclusiveness which claimed Him for Israel alone. The same spirit haunts the Christian Church, and we have all need to ponder the opposite truth, till our sympathies are widened to the width of God's universal love, and we discern that we are bound to care for all men, since He does so.

Jonah sullenly resolved not to obey God's voice. What a glimpse into the prophetic office that gives us! The divine Spirit could be resisted, and the Prophet was no mere machine, but a living man who had to consent with his devoted will to bear the burden of the Lord. One refused, and his refusal teaches us how superb and self-sacrificing was the faithfulness of the rest. So we have each to do in regard to God's message intrusted to us. We must bow our wills, and sink our prejudices, and sacrifice our tastes, and say, 'Here am I; send me.'

Jonah represents the national feelings which he shared. Why did he refuse to go to Nineveh? Not because he was afraid of his life, or thought the task hopeless. He refused because he feared success. God's goodness was being stretched rather too far, if it was going to take in Nineveh. Jonah did not want it to escape. If he had been sent to destroy it, he would probably have gone gladly. He grudged that heathen should share Israel's privileges, and probably thought that gain to Nineveh would be loss to Israel. It was exactly the spirit of the prodigal's elder brother. There was also working in him the concern for his own reputation, which would be damaged if the threats he uttered turned out to be thunder without lightning, by reason of the repentance of Nineveh.

Israel was set among the nations, not as a dark lantern, but as the great lampstand in the Temple court proclaimed, to ray out light to all the world. Jonah's mission was but a concrete instance of Israel's charge. The nation was as reluctant to fulfil the reason of its existence as the Prophet was. Both begrudged sharing privileges with heathen dogs, both thought God's care wasted, and neither had such feelings towards the rest of the world as to be willing to be messengers of forgiveness to them. All sorts of religious exclusiveness, contemptuous estimates of other nations, and that bastard patriotism which would keep national blessings for our own country alone, are condemned by this story. In it dawns the first faint light of that sun which shone at its full when Jesus healed the Canaanite's daughter, or when He said, 'Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold.'

Note, next, the fatal consequences of refusal to obey the God-given charge. We need not suppose that Jonah thought that he could actually get away from God's presence. Possibly he believed in a special presence of God in the land of Israel, or, more probably, the phrase means to escape from service. At any rate, he determined to do his flight thoroughly. Tarshish was, to a Hebrew, at the other end of the world from Nineveh. The Jews were no sailors, and the choice of the sea as means of escape indicates the obstinacy of determination in Jonah.

The storm is described with a profusion of unusual words, all apparently technical terms, picked up on board, just as Luke, in the only other account of a storm in Scripture, has done. What a difference between the two voyages! In the one, the unfaithful prophet is the cause of disaster, and the only sluggard in the ship. In the other, the Apostle, who has hazarded his life to proclaim his Lord, is the source of hope, courage, vigour, and safety. Such are the consequences of silence and of brave speech for God. No wonder that the fugitive Prophet slunk down into some dark corner, and sat bitterly brooding there, self-accused and condemned, till weariness and the relief of the tension of his journey lulled him to sleep. It was a stupid and heavy sleep. Alas for those whose only refuge from conscience is oblivion!

Over against this picture of the insensible Prophet, all unaware of the storm [which may suggest the parallel insensibility of Israel to the impending divine judgments], is set the behaviour of the heathen sailors, or 'salts,' as the story calls them. Their conduct is part of the lesson of the book; for, heathen as they are, they have yet a sense of dependence, and they pray; they are full of courage, battling with the storm, jettisoning the cargo, and doing everything possible to save the ship. Their treatment of Jonah is generous and chivalrous. Even when they hear his crime, and know that the storm is howling like a wild beast for him, they are unwilling to throw him overboard without one more effort; and when at last they do it, their prayer is for forgiveness, inasmuch as they are but carrying out the will of Jehovah. They are so much touched by the whole incident that they offer sacrifices to the God of the Hebrews, and are, in some sense, and possibly but for a time, worshippers of Him.

All this holds the mirror up to Israel, by showing how much of human kindness and generosity, and how much of susceptibility for the truth which Israel had to declare, lay in rude hearts beyond its pale. This crew of heathen of various nationalities and religions were yet men who could be kind to a renegade Prophet, peril their lives to save his, and worship Jehovah. ‘I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel,’ is the same lesson in another form. We may find abundant opportunities for learning it; for the characters of godless men, and of some among the heathen, may well shame many a Christian.

Jonah’s conduct in the storm is no less noble than his former conduct had been base. The burst of the tempest blew away all the fog from his mind, and he saw the stars again. His confession of faith; his calm conviction that he was the cause of the storm; his quiet, unhesitating command to throw him into the wild chaos foaming about the ship; his willing acceptance of death as the wages of his sin, all tell how true a saint he was in the depth of his soul. Sorrow and chastisement turn up the subsoil. If a man has any good in him, it generally comes to the top when he is afflicted and looks death in the face. If there is nothing but gravel beneath, it too will be brought up by the plough. There may be much selfish unfaithfulness overlying a real devoted heart.

Jonah represented Israel here too, both in that the consequence of the national unfaithfulness and greedy, exclusive grasp of their privileges would lead to their being cast into the roaring waves of the sea of nations, amid the tumult of the peoples, and in that, for them as for him, the calamity would bring about a better mind, the confession of their faith, and acknowledgment of their sin. The history of Israel was typified in this history, and the lessons it teaches are lessons for all churches, and for all God’s children for all time. If we shirk our duty of witnessing for Him, or any other of His plain commands, unfaithfulness will be our ruin. The storm is sure to break where His Jonahs try to hide, and their only hope lies in bowing to the chastisement and consenting to be punished, and avowing whose they are and whom they serve. If we own Him while the storm whistles round us, the worst of it is past, and though we have to struggle amid its waves, He will take care of us, and anything is possible rather than that we should be lost in them.

The miracle of rescue is the last point. Jonah's repentance saved his life. Tossed overboard impenitent he would have been drowned. So Israel was taught that the break-up of their national life would not be their destruction if they turned to the Lord in their calamity. The wider lesson of the means of making chastisement into blessing, and securing a way of escape-namely, by owning the justice of the stroke, and returning to duty-is meant for us all. He who sends the storm watches its effect on us, and will not let His repentant servants be utterly overwhelmed. That is a better use to make of the story than to discuss whether any kind of known Mediterranean fish could swallow a man. If we believe in miracles, the question need not trouble us. And miracle there must be, not only in the coincidence of the fish and the Prophet being in the same bit of sea at the same moment, but in his living for so long in his strange 'ark of safety.'

The ever-present providence of God, the possible safety of the nation, even when in captivity, the preservation of every servant of God who turns to the Lord in his chastisement, the exhibition of penitence as the way of deliverance, are the purposes for which the miracle was wrought and told. Flippant sarcasms are cheap. A devout insight yields a worthy meaning. Jesus Christ employed this incident as a symbol of His Death and Resurrection. That use of it seems hard to reconcile with any view but that the story is true. But it does not seem necessary to suppose that our Lord regarded it as an intended type, or to seek to find in Jonah's history further typical prophecy of Him. The salient point of comparison is simply the three days' entombment; and it is rather an illustrative analogy than an intentional prophecy. The subsequent action of the Prophet in Nineveh, and the effect of it, were true types of the preaching of the Gospel by the risen Lord, through His servants, to the Gentiles, and of their hearing the Word. But it requires considerable violence in manipulation to force the bestowing of Jonah, for safety and escape from death, in the fish’s maw, into a proper prophecy of the transcendent fact of the Resurrection.

2) Jonah 2:8

Jonah

‘LYING VANITIES’

Jon. 2:8.

Jonah’s refusal to obey the divine command to go to Nineveh and cry against it is best taken, not as prosaic history, but as a poetical representation of Israel’s failure to obey the divine call of witnessing for God. In like manner, his being cast into the sea and swallowed by the great fish, is a poetic reproduction, for homiletical purposes, of Israel’s sufferings at the hands of the heathen whom it had failed to warn. The song which is put into Jonah’s mouth when in the fish’s belly, of which our text is a fragment, represents the result on the part of the nation of these hard experiences. ‘Lying vanities’ mean idols, and ‘their own mercy’ means God. The text is a brief, pregnant utterance of the great truth which had been forced home to Israel by sufferings and exile, that to turn from Jehovah to false gods was to turn from the sure source of tender care to lies and emptiness. That is but one case of the wider truth that an ungodly life is the acme of stupidity, a tragic mistake, as well as a great sin.

In confirmation and enforcement of our text we may consider:-

I. The illusory vanity of the objects pursued.

The Old Testament tone of reference to idols is one of bitter contempt. Its rigid monotheism was intensified and embittered by the universal prevalence of idolatry; and there is a certain hardness in its tone in reference to the gods of the nations round about, which has little room for pity, and finds expression in such names as those of our text-’vanities,’ ‘lies,’ ‘nothingness,’ and the like. To the Jew, encompassed on all sides by idol-worshippers, the alternative was vehement indignation or entire surrender. The Mohammedan in British India exhibits much the same attitude to

Vishnu and Siva as the Jew did to Baal and Ashtoreth. It is easy to be tolerant of dead gods, but it becomes treason to Jehovah to parley with them when they are alive.

But the point which we desire to insist upon here is somewhat wider than the vanity of idols. It is the emptiness of all objects of human pursuit apart from God. These last three words need to be made very prominent; for in itself ‘every creature of God is good,’ and the emptiness does not inhere in themselves, but first appears when they are set in His place. He, and only He, can, and does, satisfy the whole nature-is authority for the will, peace for the conscience, love for the heart, light for the understanding, rest for all seeking. He, and He alone, can fill the past with the light in which is no regret, the present with a satisfaction rounded and complete, the future with a hope certain as experience, to which we shall ever approximate, and which we can never exhaust and outgrow. Any, or all, the other objects of human endeavour may be won, and yet we may be miserable. The inadequacy of all these ought to be pressed home upon us more than it is, not only by their limitations whilst they last, but by the transiency of them all. ‘The fashion of this world passeth away,’ as the Apostle John puts it, in a forcible expression which likens all this frame of things to a panorama being unwound from one roller and on to another. The painted screen is but paint at the best, and is in perpetual motion, which is not arrested by the vain clutches of hands that would fain stop the irresistible and tragic gliding past.

These vanities are ‘lying vanities.’ There is only one aim of life which, being pursued and attained, fulfils the promises by which it drew man after it. It is a bald commonplace, reiterated not only by preachers but by moralists of every kind, and confirmed by universal experience, that a hope fulfilled is a hope disappointed. There is only one thing more tragic than a life which has failed in its aims, and it is a life which has perfectly succeeded in them, and has found that what promised to be bread turns to ashes. The word of promise may be kept to the ear, but is always broken to the hope. Many a millionaire loses the power to enjoy his millions by the very process by which he gains them. The old Jewish thinker was wise not only in taking as the summing up of all worldly pursuits the sad sentence, ‘All is vanity,’ but in putting it into the lips of a king who had won all he sought. The sorceress draws us within her charmed circle by lying words and illusory charms, and when she has so secured the captives, her mask is thrown off and her native hideousness displayed.

II. The hard service which lying vanities require.

The phrase in our text is a quotation, slightly altered, from Psa. 31:6 : ‘I hate them that regard lying vanities; but I trust in the Lord.’ The alteration in the form of the verb as it occurs in Jonah expresses the intensity of regard, and gives the picture of watching with anxious solicitude, as the eyes of a servant turned to his master, or those of a dog to its owner. The world is a very hard master, and requires from its servants the concentration of thought, heart, and effort. We need only recall the thousand sermons devoted to the enforcement of ‘the gospel of getting on,’ which prosperous worldlings are continually preaching. A chorus of voices on every side of us is dinning into the ears of every young man and woman the necessity for success in life’s struggle of taking for a motto, ‘This one thing I do.’ How many a man is there, who in the race after wealth or fame, has flung away aspirations, visions of noble, truthful love to life, and a hundred other precious things? Browning tells a hideous story of a mother flinging, one after another, her infants to the wolves as she urged her sledge over the snowy plain. No less hideous, and still more maiming, are the surrenders that men make when once their hearts have been filled with the foolish ambitions of worldly success. Let us fix it in our minds, that nothing that time and sense can give is worth the price that it exacts.

‘It is only heaven that can be had for the asking;
It is only God that is given away.’

All sin is slavery. Its yoke presses painfully on the neck, and its burden is heavy indeed, and the rest which it promises never comes.

III. The self-inflicted loss.

Our text suggests that there are two ways by which we may learn the folly of a godless life-One, the consideration of what it turns to, the other, the thought of what it departs from.

‘They forsake their own Mercy,’ that is God. The phrase is here almost equivalent to ‘His name’; and it carries the blessed thought that He has entered into relations with every soul, so that each man of us-even if he have turned to ‘lying vanities’-can still call Him, ‘my own Mercy.’ He is ours; more our own than is anything without us. He is ours, because we are made for Him, and He is all for us. He is ours by His love, and by His gift of Himself in the Son of His love. He is ours; if we take Him for ours by an inward communication of Himself to us in the innermost depths of our being. He becomes ‘the Master-Light of all our seeing.’ In the mysterious inwardness of mutual possession, the soul which has given itself to God and possesses Him, has not only communion, but may even venture to claim as its own the deeper and more mysterious *union* with God. Those multiform mercies, ‘which endure for ever,’ and speed on their manifold errands into every remotest region of His universe, gather themselves together, as the diffused lights of some nebulæ £oncentrate themselves into a sun. That sun, like the star that led the wise men from the East, and finally stood over one poor house in an obscure village, will shine lambent above, and will pass into, the humblest heart that opens for it. They who can say, as we all can if we will, ‘My God,’ can never want.

And if we turn to the alternative in our text, and consider who they are to whom we turn when we turn from God, there should be nothing more needed to drive home the wholesome conviction of the folly of the wisest, who deliberately prefers shadow to substance, lying vanities to the one true and only reality. I beseech you to take that which is your own, and which no man can take from you. Weigh in the scales of conscience, and in the light of the deepest necessities of your nature, the whole pile of those emptinesses that have been telling you lies ever since you listened to them; and place in the other scale the mercy of God, and the Christ who brings it to you, and decide which is the weightier, and which it becomes you to take for your pattern for ever.

3) Jonah 3:1-10

Jonah

THREEFOLD REPENTANCE

Jon. 3:1 - Jon. 3:10.

This passage falls into three parts: Jonah’s renewed commission and new obedience [Jon. 3:1 - Jon. 3:4], the repentance of Nineveh [Jon. 3:5 - Jon. 3:9], and the acceptance thereof by God [Jon. 3:10]. We might almost call these three the repentance of Jonah, of Nineveh, and of God. The evident intention of the narrative is to parallel the Ninevites turning from their sins, and God’s turning from His anger and purpose of destruction; and if the word ‘repentance’ is not applied to Jonah, his conduct sufficiently shows the thing.

I. Note the renewed charge to the penitent Prophet, and his new eagerness to fulfil it.

His deliverance and second commission are put as if all but simultaneous, and his obedience was swift and glad. Jonah did not venture to take for granted that the charge which he had shirked was still continued to him. If God commands to take the trumpet, and we refuse, we dare not assume that we shall still be honoured with the delivery of the message. The punishment of dumb lips is often dumbness. Opportunities of service, slothfully or faintheartedly neglected, are often withdrawn. We can fancy how Jonah, brought back to the better mind which breathes in his psalm, longed to be honoured by the trust of preaching once more, and how rapturously his spirit would address itself to the task. Duties once unwelcome become sweet when we have passed through the experience of the misery that comes from neglecting them. It is God’s mercy that gives us the opportunity of effacing past disobedience by new alacrity.

The second charge is possibly distinguishable from the first as being less precise. It may be that the exact nature of ‘the preaching that I bid thee’ was not told Jonah till he had to open his mouth in Nineveh; but, more probably, the second charge was identical with the first.

The word rendered ‘preach’ is instructive. It means ‘to cry’ and suggests the manner befitting those who bear God’s message. They should sound it out loudly, plainly, urgently, with earnestness and marks of emotion in their voice. Languid whispers will not wake sleepers. Unless the messenger is manifestly in earnest, the message will fall flat. Not with bated breath, as if ashamed of it; nor with hesitation, as if not quite sure of it; nor with coldness, as if it were of little urgency,-is God's Word to be pealed in men's ears. The preacher is a crier. The substance of his message, too, is set forth. 'The preaching which I bid thee'-not his own imaginations, nor any fine things of his own spinning. Suppose Jonah had entertained the Ninevites with dissertations on the evidences of his prophetic authority, or submitted for their consideration a few thoughts tending to show the agreement of his message with their current opinions in religion, or an argument for the existence of a retributive Governor of the world, he would not have shaken the city. The less the Prophet shows himself, the stronger his influence. The more simply he repeats the stern, plain, short message, the more likely it is to impress. God's Word, faithfully set forth, will prove itself. The preacher or teacher of this day has substantially the same charge as Jonah had; and the more he suppresses himself, and becomes but a voice through which God speaks, the better for himself, his hearers, and his work.

Nineveh, that great aggregate of cities, was full, as Eastern cities are, of open spaces, and might well be a three days' journey in circumference. What a task for that solitary stranger to thunder out his loud cry among all these crowds! But he had learned to do what he was bid; and without wasting a moment, he 'began to enter into the city a day's journey,' and, no doubt, did not wait till the end of the day to proclaim his message. Let us learn that there is an element of threatening in God's most merciful message, and that the appeal to terror and to the desire for self-preservation is part of the way to preach the Gospel. Plain warnings of coming evil may be spoken tenderly, and reveal love as truly as the most soothing words. The warning comes in time. 'Forty days' of grace are granted. The gospel warns us in time enough for escape. It warns us because God loves; and they are as untrue messengers of His love as of His justice who slur over the declaration of His wrath.

II. Note the repentance of Nineveh [Jon. 3:5 - Jon. 3:9].

The impression made by Jonah's terrible cry is perfectly credible and natural in the excitable population of an Eastern city, in which even now any appeal to terror, especially if associated with religious and prophetic claims, easily sets the whole in a frenzy. Think of the grim figure of this foreign man, with his piercing voice and half-intelligible speech, dropped from the clouds as it were, and stalking through Nineveh, pealing out his confident message, like that gaunt fanatic who walked Jerusalem in its last agony, crying, ‘Woe! woe unto the bloody city!’ or that other, who, with flaming fire on his head and madness in his eyes, affrighted London in the plague. No wonder that alarm was kindled, and, being kindled, spread like wildfire. Apparently the movement was first among the people, who began to fast before the news penetrated to the seclusion of the palace. But the contagion reached the king, and the popular excitement was endorsed and fanned by a royal decree. The specified tokens of repentance are those of ordinary mourning, such as were common all over the East, with only the strange addition, which smacks of heathen ideas, that the animals were made sharers in them.

There is great significance in that ‘believed God’ [Jon. 3:5]. The foundation of all true repentance is crediting God’s word of threatening, and therefore realising the danger, as well as the disobedience, of our sin. We shall be wise if we pass by the human instrument, and hear God speaking through the Prophet. Never mind about Jonah, believe God.

We learn from the Ninevites what is true repentance They brought no sacrifices or offerings, but sorrow, self-abasement, and amendment. The characteristic sin of a great military power would be ‘violence,’ and that is the specific evil from which they vow to turn. The loftiest lesson which prophets found Israel so slow to learn, ‘A broken and a contrite heart Thou wilt not despise,’ was learned by these heathens. We need it no less. Nineveh repented on a peradventure that their repentance might avail. How pathetic that ‘Who can tell?’ [Jon. 3:9] is! We *know* what they *hoped*. Their doubt might give fervour to their cries, but our certainty should give deeper earnestness and confidence to ours.

The deepest meaning of the whole narrative is set forth in our Lord’s use of it, when He holds up the men of Nineveh as a condemnatory instance to the hardened consciences of His hearers. Probably the very purpose of the book was to show Israel that the despised and yet dreaded heathen were more susceptible to the voice of God than they were: ‘I will provoke you to jealousy by them which are no people.’ The story was a smiting blow to the proud exclusiveness and self-complacent contempt of prophetic warnings, which marked the entire history of God's people. As Ezekiel was told: 'Thou are not sent . . . to many peoples of a strange speech and of an hard language. . . . Surely, if I sent thee to them, they would hearken unto thee. But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee.' It is ever true that long familiarity with the solemn thoughts of God's judgment and punishment of sin abates their impression on us. Our Puritan forefathers used to talk about 'gospel-hardened sinners,' and there are many such among us. The man who lives by Niagara does not hear its roar as a stranger does. The men of Nineveh will rise in the judgment with other generations than that which was 'this generation' in Christ's time; and that which is 'this generation' to-day will, in many of its members, be condemned by them.

But the wave of feeling soon retired, and there is no reason to believe that more than a transient impression was made. It does not seem certain that the Ninevites knew what 'God' they hoped to appease. Probably their pantheon was undisturbed, and their repentance lasted no longer than their fear. Transient repentance leaves the heart harder than before, as half-melted ice freezes again more dense. Let us beware of frost on the back of a thaw. 'Repentance which is repented of' is worse than none.

III. We note the repentance of God [Jon. 3:10].

Mark the recurrence of the word 'turn,' employed in Jon. 3:8 - Jon. 3:10 in reference to men and to God. Mark the bold use of the word 'repent,' applied to God, which, though it be not applied to the Ninevites in the previous verses, is implied in every line of them. The same expression is found in Exo. 32:14, which may be taken as the classical passage warranting its use. The great truth involved is one that is too often lost sight of in dealing with prophecy; namely, that all God's promises and threatenings are conditional. Jeremiah learned that lesson in the house of the potter, and we need to keep it well in mind. God threatens, precisely in order that He may not have to perform His threatenings. Jonah was sent to Nineveh to cry, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown,' in order that it might not be overthrown. What would have been the use of proclaiming the decree, if it had been irreversible? There is an implied 'if' in all God's words. 'Except ye repent' underlies the most absolute threatenings of evil. ‘If we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end,’ is presupposed in the brightest and broadest promises of good.

The word ‘repent’ is denied and affirmed to have application to God. He is not ‘a son of man, that He should repent,’ inasmuch as His immutability and steadfast purpose know no variableness. But just because they cannot change, and He must ever be against them that do evil, and ever bless them that turn to Him with trust, therefore He changes His dealings with us according to our relation to Him, and because He cannot repent, or be other than He was and is, ‘repents of the evil that He had said that He would do’ unto sinners when they repent of the evil that they have done against Him, inasmuch as He leaves His threatening unfulfilled, and ‘does it not.’

So we might almost say that the purpose of this book of Jonah is to teach the possibility and efficacy of repentance, and to show how the penitent man, heathen or Jew, ever finds in God changed dealings corresponding to his changed heart. The widest charity, the humbling lesson for people brought up in the blaze of revelation, that dwellers in the twilight or in the darkness are dear to God and may be more susceptible of divine impressions than ourselves, the rebuke of all pluming ourselves on our privileges, the boundlessness of God’s mercy, are among the other lessons of this strange book; but none of them is more precious than its truly evangelic teaching of the blessedness of true penitence, whether exemplified in the renegade Prophet returning to his high mission, or the fierce Ninevites humbled and repentant, and finding mercy from the God of the whole earth.

Micah

1) MICAH 2:7
2) MICAH 2:13
3) MICAH 4:5
4) MICAH 5:7
5) MICAH 6:8

1) Micah 2:7

IS THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD STRAITENED?

Mic. 2:7.

The greater part of so-called Christendom is to-day 1 celebrating the gift of a Divine Spirit to the Church; but it may well be asked whether the religious condition of so-called Christendom is not a sad satire upon Pentecost. There seems a woful contrast, very perplexing to faith, between the bright promise at the beginning and the history of the development in the future. How few of those who share in to-day's services have any personal experience of such a gift! How many seem to think that that old story is only the record of a past event, a transient miracle which has no kind of relation to the experience of the Christians of this day! There were a handful of believers in one of the towns of Asia Minor, to whom an Apostle came, and was so startled at their condition that he put to them in wonder the question that might well be put to multitudes of so-called Christians amongst us: 'Did you receive the Holy Ghost when you believed?' And their answer is only too true a transcript of the experience of large masses of people who call themselves Christians: 'We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.'

I desire, then, dear brethren, to avail myself of this day's associations in order to press upon your consciences and upon my own some considerations naturally suggested by them, and which find voice in those two indignant questions of the old Prophet:-'Is the Spirit of the Lord straitened?' 'Are these'-the phenomena of existing popular Christianity-'are these His doings?' And if we are brought sharp up against the consciousness of a dreadful contrast, it may do us good to ask what is the explanation of so cloudy a day following a morning so bright.

I. First, then, I have to ask you to think with me of the promise of the Pentecost.

What did it declare and hold forth for the faith of the Church? I need not dwell at any length upon this point. The facts are familiar to you, and the inferences drawn from them are commonplace and known to us all. But let me just enumerate them as briefly as may be.

‘Suddenly there came a sound, as of the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared cloven tongues as of fire, and it sat upon each of them; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost.’

What lay in that? First, the promise of a Divine Spirit by symbols which express some, at all events, of the characteristics and wonderfulness of His work. The ‘rushing of a mighty wind’ spoke of a power which varies in its manifestations from the gentlest breath that scarce moves the leaves on the summer trees to the wildest blast that casts down all which stands in its way.

The natural symbolism of the wind, to popular apprehension the least material of all material forces, and of which the connection with the immaterial part of a man’s personality has been expressed in all languages, points to a divine, to an immaterial, to a mighty, to a life-giving power which is free to blow whither it listeth, and of which men can mark the effects, though they are all ignorant of the force itself.

The other symbol of the fiery tongues which parted and sat upon each of them speaks in like manner of the divine influence, not as destructive, but full of quick, rejoicing energy and life, the power to transform and to purify. Whithersoever the fire comes, it changes all things into its own substance. Whithersoever the fire comes, there the ruddy spires shoot upwards towards the heavens. Whithersoever the fire comes, there all bonds and fetters are melted and consumed. And so this fire transforms, purifies, ennobles, quickens, sets free; and where the fiery Spirit is, there are energy, swift life, rejoicing activity, transforming and transmuting power which changes the recipient of the flame into flame himself.

Then, still further, in the fact of Pentecost there is the promise of a Divine Spirit which is to influence all the moral side of humanity. This is the great and glorious distinction between the Christian doctrine of inspiration and all others which have, in heathen lands, partially reached similar conceptions-that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has laid emphasis upon the *Holy* Spirit, and has declared that holiness of heart is the touchstone and test of all claims of divine inspiration. Gifts are much, graces are more. An inspiration which makes wise is to be coveted, an inspiration which makes holy is transcendently better. There we find the safeguard against all the fanaticisms which have sometimes invaded the Christian Church, namely, in the thought that the Spirit which dwells in men, and makes them free from the obligations of outward law and cold morality, is a Spirit that works a deeper holiness than law dreamed, and a more spontaneous and glad conformity to all things that are fair and good, than any legislation and outward commandment could ever enforce. The Spirit that came at Pentecost is not merely a Spirit of rushing might and of swift-flaming energy, but it is a Spirit of holiness, whose most blessed and intimate work is the production in us of all homely virtues and sweet, unpretending goodnesses which can adorn and gladden humanity.

Still further, the Pentecost carried in it the promise and prophecy of a Spirit granted to all the Church. ‘They were all filled with the Holy Ghost.’ This is the true democracy of Christianity, that its very basis is laid in the thought that every member of the body is equally close to the Head, and equally recipient of the life. There is none now who has a Spirit which others do not possess. The ancient aspiration of the Jewish law-giver: ‘Would God that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them,’ is fulfilled in the experience of Pentecost; and the handmaiden and the children, as well as the old men and the servants, receive of that universal gift. Therefore sacerdotal claims, special functions, privileged classes, are alien to the spirit of Christianity, and blasphemies against the inspiring God. If ‘one is your Master, all ye are brethren,’ and if we have all been made to drink into one Spirit, then no longer hath any man dominion over our faith nor power to intervene and to intercede with God for us.

And still further, the promise of this early history was that of a Spirit which should fill the whole nature of the men to whom He was granted; filling-in the measure, of course, of their receptivity-them as the great sea does all the creeks and indentations along the shore. The deeper the creek, the deeper the water in it; the further inland it runs, the further will the refreshing tide penetrate the bosom of the continent. And so each man, according to his character, stature, circumstances, and all the varying conditions which determine his power of receptivity, will receive a varying measure of that gift. Yet it is meant that all shall be full. The little vessel, the tiny cup, as well as the great cistern and the enormous vat, each contains according to its capacity. And if all are filled, then this quick Spirit must have the power to influence all the provinces of human nature, must touch the moral, must touch the spiritual. The temporary manifestations and extraordinary signs of His power may well drop away as the flower drops when the fruit has set. The operations of the Divine Spirit are to be felt thrilling through all the nature, and every part of the man's being is to be recipient of the power. Just as when you take a candle and plunge it into a jar of oxygen it blazes up, so my poor human nature immersed in that Divine Spirit, baptized in the Holy Ghost, shall flame in all its parts into unsuspected and hitherto inexperienced brightness. Such are the elements of the promise of Pentecost.

II. And now, in the next place, look at the apparent failure of the promise.

'Is the Spirit of the Lord straitened?' Look at Christendom. Look at all the churches. Look at yourselves. Will any one say that the religious condition of any body of professed believers at this moment corresponds to Pentecost? Is not the gap so wide that to fill it up seems almost impossible? Is not the stained and imperfect fulfilment a miserable satire upon the promise? 'If the Lord be with us,' said one of the heroes of ancient Israel, 'wherefore is all this come upon us?' I am sure that we may say the same. If the Lord be with us, what is the meaning of the state of things which we see around us, and must recognise in ourselves? Do any existing churches present the final perfect form of Christianity as embodied in a society? Would not the best thing that could happen, and the thing that will have to happen some day, be the disintegration of the existing organisations in order to build up a more perfect habitation of God through the Spirit? I do not wish to exaggerate. God knows there is no need for exaggerating. The plain, unvarnished story, without any pessimistic picking out of the black bits and forgetting ail the light ones, is bad enough.

Take three points on which I do not dwell and apply them to yourselves, dear brethren, and estimate by them the condition of things around us. First, say whether the ordinary tenor of our own religious life looks as if we had that Divine Spirit in us which transforms everything into its own beauty, and makes men, through all the regions of their nature, holy and pure. Then ask yourselves the question whether the standard of devotion and consecration in any church witnesses of the presence of a Divine Spirit. A little handful of people, the best of them very partially touched with the life of God, and very imperfectly consecrated to His service, surrounded by a great mass about whom we can scarcely, in the judgment of charity, say even so much, that is the description of most of our congregations. ‘Are these His doings?’ Surely somebody else’s than His.

Take another question. Do the relations of modern Christians and their churches to one another attest the presence of a unifying Spirit? ‘We have all been made to drink into one Spirit,’ said Paul. Alas, alas! does it seem as if we had? Look round professing Christendom, look at the rivalries and the jealousies between two chapels in adjoining streets. Look at the gulfs between Christian men who differ only on some comparative trifle of organisation and polity, and say if such things correspond to the Pentecostal promise of one Spirit which is to make all the members into one body? ‘Is the Spirit of the Lord straitened? Are these *His* doings?’

Take another branch of evidence. Look at the comparative impotence of the Church in its conflict with the growing worldliness of the world. I do not forget how much is being done all about us to-day, and how still Christ’s Gospel is winning triumphs, but I do not suppose that any man can look thoughtfully and dispassionately on the condition, say, for instance, of Manchester, or of any of our great towns, and mark how the populace knows nothing and cares nothing about us and our Christianity, and never comes into our places of worship, and has no share in our hopes any more than if they lived in Central Africa, and that after eighteen hundred years of nominal Christianity, without feeling that some malign influence has arrested the leaping growth of the early Church, and that somehow or other that lava stream, if I might so call it, which poured hot from the heart of God in the old days has had its flow checked, and over its burning bed there has spread a black and wrinkled crust, whatsoever lingering heat there may still be at the centre. ‘If God be with us, why has all this come upon us?’

III. And now, lastly, let us think for a moment of the solution of the contradiction.

The indignant questions of my text may be taken, with a little possibly permissible violence, as expressing and dismissing some untrue explanations. One explanation that sometimes is urged is, the Spirit of the Lord *is* straitened. That explanation takes two forms. Sometimes you hear people saying, ‘Christianity is effete. We have to go now to fresh fountains of inspiration, and turn away from these broken cisterns that can hold no water.’ I am not going to argue that question. I do not think for my part that Christianity will be effete until the world has got up to it and beyond it in its practice, and it will be a good while before that happens. Christianity will not be worn out until men have copied and reduced to practice the example of Jesus Christ, and they have not quite got that length yet. No shadow of a fear that the gospel has lost its power, or that God’s Spirit has become weak, should be permitted to creep over our hearts. The promise is, ‘I will send another Comforter, and He shall abide with you *for ever*.’ It is a permanent gift that was given to the Church on that day. We have to distinguish in the story between the symbols, the gift, and the consequences of the gift. The first and the last are transient, the second is permanent. The symbols were transient. The people who came running together saw no tongues of fire. The consequences were transient. The tongues and the miraculous utterances were but for a time. The results vary according to the circumstances; but the central thing, the gift itself, is an irrevocable gift, and once bestowed is ever with the Church to all generations.

Another form of the explanation is the theory that God in His sovereignty is pleased to withhold His Spirit for reasons which we cannot trace. But it is not true that the gift once given varies in the degree in which it is continued. There is always the same flow from God. There are ebbs and flows in the spiritual power of the Church. Yes! and the tide runs out of your harbours. Is there any less water in the sea because it does? So the gift may ebb away from a man, from a community, from an epoch, not because God’s manifestation and bestowment fluctuate, but because our receptivity changes. So we dismiss, and are bound to dismiss, if we are Christians, the unbelieving explanation, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is straitened,’ and not to sit with our hands folded, as if an inscrutable sovereignty, with which we have nothing to do, sometimes sent more and sometimes less of His spiritual gifts upon a waiting Church. It is not so. 'With Him is no variableness.' The gifts of God are without repentance; and the Spirit that was given once, according to the Master's own word already quoted, is given that He may abide with us for ever.

Therefore we have to come back to this, which is the point to which I seek to bring you and myself, in lowly penitence and contrite acknowledgment- that it is all our own fault and the result of evils in ourselves that may be remedied, that we have so little of that divine gift; and that if the churches of this country and of this day seem to be cursed and blasted in so much of their fruitless operations and formal worship, it is the fault of the churches, and not of the Lord of the churches. The stream that poured forth from the throne of God has not lost itself in the sands, nor is it shrunken in its volume. The fire that was kindled on Pentecost has not died down into grey ashes. The rushing of the mighty wind that woke on that morning has not calmed and stilled itself into the stagnancy and suffocating breathlessness of midday heat. The same fulness of the Spirit which filled the believers on that day is available for us all. If, like that waiting Church of old, we abide in prayer and supplication, the gift will be given to us too, and we may repeat and reproduce, if not the miracles which we do not need, yet the necessary inspiration of the highest and the noblest days and saints in the history of the Church. 'If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?' 'Ask and ye shall receive,' and be filled 'with the Holy Ghost and with power.'

1 Whitsunday

2) Micah 2:13

Micah

CHRIST THE BREAKER

Mic. 2:13.

Micah was contemporary with Isaiah. The two prophets stand, to a large extent, on the same level of prophetic knowledge. Characteristic of both of them is the increasing clearness of the figure of the personal Messiah, and the increasing fulness of detail with which His functions are described. Characteristic of both of them is the presentation which we find in this text of that Messiah's work as being the gathering together of the scattered captive people and the leading them back in triumph into the blessed land.

Such is the image which underlies my text. Of course I have nothing to do now with questions as to any narrower and nearer historical fulfilment, because I believe that all these Messianic prophecies which were susceptible of, and many of which obtained, a historical and approximate fulfilment in the restoration of the Jews from the Babylonish captivity, have a higher and broader and more real accomplishment in that great deliverance wrought by Jesus Christ, of which all these earlier and partial and outward manifestations were themselves prophecies and shadows.

So I make no apology for taking the words before us as having their only real accomplishment in the office and working of Jesus Christ. He is 'the Breaker which is come up before us.' He it is that has broken out the path on which we may travel, and in whom, in a manner which the Prophet dreamed not of, 'the Lord is at the head' of us, and our King goes before us. So that my object is simply to take that great name, the Breaker, and to see the manifold ways in which in Scripture it is applied to the various work of Jesus Christ in our redemption.

I. I follow entirely the lead of corresponding passages in other portions of Scripture, and to begin with, I ask you to think of that great work of our Divine Redeemer by which He has broken for the captives the prison-house of their bondage.

The image that is here before us is either that of some foreign land in which the scattered exiles were bound in iron captivity, or more probably some dark and gloomy prison, with high walls, massive gates, and barred windows, wherein they were held; and to them sitting hopeless in the shadow of death, and bound in affliction and iron, there comes one mysterious figure whom the Prophet could not describe more particularly, and at His coming the gates flew apart, and the chains dropped from their hands; and the captives had heart put into them, and gathering themselves together into a triumphant band, they went out with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads; freemen, and on the march to the home of their fathers. ‘The Breaker is gone up before them; they have broken, and passed through the gate, and are gone out by it.’

And is not that our condition? Many of us know not the bondage in which we are held. We are held in it all the more really and sadly because we conceit ourselves to be free. Those poor, light-hearted people in the dreadful days of the French Revolution, used to keep up some ghastly mockery of society and cheerfulness in their prisons; and festooned the bars with flowers, and made believe to be carrying on their life freely as they used to do; but for all that, day after day the tumbrils came to the gates, and morning after morning the jailer stood at the door of the dungeons with the fatal list in his hand, and one after another of the triflers was dragged away to death. And so men and women are living a life which they fancy is free, and all the while they are in bondage, held in a prison-house. You, my brother! are chained by guilt; you are chained by sin, you are chained by the habit of evil with a strength of which you never know till you try to shake it off.

And there comes to each of us a mighty Deliverer, who breaks the gates of brass, and who cuts the bars of iron in sunder. Christ comes to us. By His death He has borne away the guilt; by His living Spirit He will bear away the dominion of sin from our hearts; and if the Son will make us free we shall be free indeed. Oh! ponder that deep truth, I pray you, which the Lord Christ has spoken in words that carry conviction in their very simplicity to every conscience: ‘He that committeth sin is the slave of sin.’ And as you feel sometimes-and you all feel sometimes-the catch of the fetter on your wrists when you would fain stretch out your hands to good, listen as to a true gospel to this old word which, in its picturesque imagery, carries a truth that should be life. To us all ‘the Breaker is gone up before us,’ the prison gates are open. Follow His steps, and take the freedom which He gives; and be sure that you ‘stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free, and be not entangled again with any yoke of bondage.’

Men and women! Some of you are the slaves of your own lusts. Some of you are the slaves of the world's maxims. Some of you are held in bondage by some habit that you abominate, but cannot get away from. Here is freedom for you. The dark walls of the prison are round us all. 'The Scripture hath shut up all in sin, that He might have mercy upon all.' Blessed be His name! As the angel came to the sleeping Apostle, and to his light touch the iron gates swung obedient on their hinges, and Roman soldiers who ought to have watched their prey were lulled to sleep, and fetters that held the limbs dropped as if melted; so, silently, in His meek and merciful strength, the Christ comes to us all, and the iron gate which leadeth out into freedom opens of its own accord at His touch, and the fetters fall from our limbs, and we go forth free men. 'The Breaker is gone up before us.'

II. Again, take another application of this same figure found in Scripture, which sets forth Jesus Christ as being the Opener of the path to God.

'I am the Way and the Truth and the Life, no man cometh to the Father but by Me,' said He. And again, 'By a new and living way which He hath opened for us through the veil' [that is to say, His flesh], we can have free access 'with confidence by the faith of Him.' That is to say, if we rightly understand our natural condition, it is not only one of bondage to evil, but it is one of separation from God. Parts of the divine character are always beautiful and sweet to every human heart when it thinks about them. Parts of the divine character stand frowning before a man who knows himself for what he is; and conscience tells us that between God and us there is a mountain of impediment piled up by our own evil. To us Christ comes, the Path-finder and the Path; the Pioneer who breaks the way for us through all the hindrances, and leads us up to the presence of God.

For we do not know God as He is except by Jesus Christ. We see fragments, and often distorted fragments, of the divine nature and character apart from Jesus, but the real divine nature as it is, and as it is in its relation to me, a sinner, is only made known to me in the face of Jesus Christ. When we see Him we see God; Christ's tears are God's pity, Christ's gentleness is God's meekness, Christ's tender, drawing love is not only a revelation of a most pure and sweet Brother’s heart, but a manifestation through that Brother’s heart of the deepest depths of the divine nature. Christ is the heart of God. Apart from Him, we come to the God of our own consciences and we tremble; we come to the God of our own fancies and we presume; we come to the God dimly guessed at and pieced together from out of the hints and indications of His works, and He is little more than a dead name to us. Apart from Christ we come to a peradventure which we call a God; a shadow through which you can see the stars shining. But we know the Father when we believe in Christ. And so all the clouds rising from our own hearts and consciences and fancies and misconceptions, which we have piled together between God and ourselves, Christ clears away; and thus He opens the path to God.

And He opens it in another way too, on which I cannot dwell. It is only the God manifest in Jesus Christ that draws men’s hearts to Him. The attractive power of the divine nature is ail in Him who has said, ‘I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.’ The God whom men know, or think they know, outside of the revelation of divinity in Jesus Christ, is a God before whom they sometimes tremble, who is far more often their terror than their love, who is their ‘ghastliest doubt’ still more frequently than He is their ‘dearest faith.’ But the God that is in Christ woos and wins men to Him, and from His great sweetness there streams out, as it were, a magnetic influence that draws hearts to Him. The God that is in Christ is the only God that humanity ever loved. Other gods they may have worshipped with cowering terror and with far-off lip reverence, but this God has a heart, and wins hearts because He has. So Christ opens the way to Him.

And still further, in a yet higher fashion, that Saviour is the Path-breaker to the Divine Presence, in that He not only makes God known to us, and not only makes Him so known to us as to draw us to Him, but in that likewise He, by the fact of His Cross and passion, has borne and borne away the impediments of our own sin and transgression which rise for ever between us and Him, unless He shall sweep them out of the way. He has made ‘the rough places plain and the crooked things straight’; levelled the mountains and raised the valleys, and cast up across all the wilderness of the world a highway along which ‘the wayfaring man though a fool’ may travel. Narrow understandings may know, and selfish hearts may love, and low-pitched confessions may reach the ear of the God who comes near to us in Christ, that we in Christ may come near to Him. The Breaker is gone up before us; ‘having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest of all . . . by a new and living way, which He hath consecrated for us . . . let us draw near with true hearts’

III. Then still further, another modification of this figure is found in the frequent representations of Scripture, by which our Lord is the Breaker, going up before us in the sense that He is the Captain of our life’s march.

We have, in the words of my text, the image of the gladly-gathered people flocking after the Leader. ‘They have broken up, and have passed through the gate, and are gone out by it; and their King shall pass before them, and the Lord on the head of them.’ The Prophet knew not that the Lord their King, of whom it is enigmatically said that He too, as well as ‘the Breaker,’ is to go before them, was in mysterious fashion to dwell in that Breaker; and that those two, whom He sees separately, are yet in a deep and mysterious sense one. The host of the captives, returning in triumphant march through the wilderness and to the promised land, is, in the Prophet’s words, headed both by the Breaker and by the Lord. We know that the Breaker is the Lord, the Angel of the Covenant in whom is the name of Jehovah.

And so we connect with all these words of my text such words as designate our Saviour as the Captain of our salvation; such words as His own in which He says, ‘When He putteth forth His sheep He goeth before them’-such words as His Apostle used when he said, ‘Leaving us an ensample that we should follow in His steps.’ And by all there is suggested this-that Christ, who breaks the prison of our sins, and leads us forth on the path to God, marches at the head of our life’s journey, and is our Example and Commander; and Himself present with us through all life’s changes and its sorrows.

Here is the great blessing and peculiarity of Christian morals that they are all brought down to that sweet obligation: ‘Do as I did.’ Here is the great blessing and strength for the Christian life in all its difficulties-you can never go where you cannot see in the desert the footprints, haply spotted with blood, that your Master left there before you, and planting your trembling feet in the prints, as a child might imitate his father's strides, may learn to recognise that all duty comes to this: 'Follow Me'; and that all sorrow is calmed, ennobled, made tolerable, and glorified, by the thought that He has borne it.

The Roman matron of the legend struck the knife into her bosom, and handed it to her husband with the words, 'It is not painful!' Christ has gone before us in all the dreary solitude, and in all the agony and pains of life. He has hallowed them all, and has taken the bitterness and the pain out of each of them for them that love Him. If we feel that the Breaker is before us, and that we are marching behind Him, then whithersoever He leads us we may follow, and whatsoever He has passed through we may pass through. We carry In His life the all-sufficing pattern of duty. We have in His companionship the all-strengthening consolation. Let us leave the direction of our road in His hands, who never says 'Go!' but always 'Come!' This General marches in the midst of His battalions and sets His soldiers on no enterprises or forlorn hopes which He has not Himself dared and overcome.

So Christ goes as our Companion before us, the true pillar of fire and cloud in which the present Deity abode, and He is with us in real companionship. Our joyful march through the wilderness is directed, patterned, protected, companioned by Him, and when He 'putteth forth His own sheep,' blessed be His name, 'He goeth before them.'

IV. And now, lastly, there is a final application of this figure which sets forth our Lord as the Breaker for us of the bands of death, and the Forerunner 'entered for us into the heavens.'

Christ's resurrection is the only solid proof of a future life. Christ's present resurrection life is the power by partaking in which, 'though we were dead, yet shall we live.'

He has trodden that path, too, before us. He has entered into the great prison-house into which the generations of men have been hounded and hurried; and where they lie in their graves, as in their narrow cells. He has entered there; with one blow He has struck the gates from their hinges, and has passed out, and no soul can any longer be shut in as for ever into that ruined and opened prison. Like Samson, He has taken the gates which from of old barred its entrance, and borne them on His strong shoulders to the city on the hill, and now Death's darts are blunted, his fetters are broken, and his gaol has its doors wide open, and there is nothing for him to do now but to fall upon his sword and to kill himself, for his prisoners are free. 'Oh, death! I will be thy plague; oh, grave! I will be thy destruction.' 'The Breaker has gone up before us'; therefore it is not possible that we should be holden of the impotent chains that He has broken.

The Forerunner is for us entered and passed through the heavens, and entered into the holiest of all. We are too closely knit to Him, if we love Him and trust Him, to make it possible that we shall be where He is not, or that He shall be where we are not. Where He has gone we shall go. In heaven, blessed be His name! He will still be the leader of our progress and the captain at the head of our march. For He crowns all His other work by this, that having broken the prison-house of our sins, and opened for us the way to God, and been the leader and the captain of our march through all the pilgrimage of life, and the opener of the gate of the grave for our joyful resurrection, and the opener of the gate of heaven for our triumphal entrance, He will still as the Lamb that is in the midst of the Throne, go before us, and lead us into green pastures and by the still waters, and this shall be the description of the growing blessedness and power of the saints' life above, 'These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.'

3) Micah 4:5

Micah

AS GOD, SO WORSHIPPER

Mic. 4:5.

This is a statement of a general truth which holds good of all sorts of religion. 'To walk' is equivalent to carrying on a course of practical activity. 'The name' of a god is his manifested character. So the expression 'Walk in the name' means, to live and act according to, and with reference to, and in reliance on, the character of the worshipper's god. In the Lord's prayer the petition 'Hallowed be Thy name' precedes the petition 'Thy will be done.' From reverent thoughts about the name must flow life in reverent conformity to the will.

I. A man's god is what rules his practical life.

Religion is dependence upon a Being recognised to be perfect and sovereign, whose will guides, and whose character moulds, the whole life. That general statement may be broken up into parts; and we may dwell upon the attitude of dependence, or of that of submission, or upon that of admiration and recognition of ideal perfection, or upon that of aspiration; but we come at last to the one thought-that the goal of religion is likeness and the truest worship is imitation. Such a view of the essence of religion gives point to the question, What is our god? and makes it a very easily applied, and very searching test, of our lives. Whatever we profess, that which we feel ourselves dependent on, that which we invest, erroneously or rightly, with supreme attributes of excellence, that which we aspire after as our highest good, that which shapes and orders the current of our lives, is our god. We call ourselves Christians. I am afraid that if we tried ourselves by such a test, many of us would fail to pass it. It would thin the ranks of all churches as effectually as did Gideon's ordeal by water, which brought down a mob of ten thousand to a little steadfast band of three hundred. No matter to what church we belong, or how flaming our professions, our practical religion is determined by our answer to the question, What do we most desire? What do we most eagerly pursue? England has as much need as ever the house of Jacob had of the scathing words that poured like molten lead from the lips of Isaiah the son of Amoz, 'Their land is full of silver and gold, neither is there any end of their treasures. Their land is also full of idols: they worship the work of their own hands.' Money, knowledge, the good opinion of our fellows, success in a political career-these, and the like, are our gods. There is a worse idolatry than that which bows down before stocks and stones. The aims that absorb us; our highest ideal of excellence; that which possessed, we think would secure our blessedness; that lacking which everything else is insipid and vain-these are our gods: and the solemn prohibition may well be thundered in the ears of the unconscious idolaters not only in the English world, but also in the

English churches. ‘Thou shalt not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images.’

II. The worshipper will resemble his god in character.

As we have already said, the goal of religion is likeness, and the truest worship is imitation. It is proved by the universal experience of humanity that the level of morality will never rise above the type enshrined in their gods; or if it does, in consequence of contact with a higher type in a higher religion, the old gods will be flung to the moles and the bats. ‘They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them.’ That is a universal truth. The worshippers were in the Prophet’s thought as dumb and dead as the idols. They who ‘worship vanity’ inevitably ‘become vain.’ A Venus or a Jupiter, a Baal or an Ashtoreth, sets the tone of morals.

This truth is abundantly enforced by observation of the characters of the men amongst us who are practical idolaters. They are narrowed and lowered to correspond with their gods. Low ideals can never lead to lofty lives. The worship of money makes the complexion yellow, like jaundice. A man who concentrates his life’s effort upon some earthly good, the attainment of which seems to be, so long as it is unattained, his passport to bliss, thereby blunts many a finer aspiration, and makes himself blind to many a nobler vision. Men who are always hunting after some paltry and perishable earthly good, become like dogs who follow scent with their noses at the ground, and are unconscious of everything a yard above their heads. We who live amidst the rush of a great commercial community see many instances of lives stiffened, narrowed, impoverished, and hardened by the fierce effort to become rich. And wherever we look with adequate knowledge over the many idolatries of English life, we see similar processes at work on character. Everywhere around us ‘the peoples are walking every one in the name of his god.’ That character constitutes the worshipper’s ideal; it is a pattern to which he aims to be assimilated; it is a good the possession of which he thinks will make him blessed; it is that for which he willingly sacrifices much which a clearer vision would teach him is far more precious than that for which he is content to barter it.

The idolaters walking in the name of their god is a rebuke to the Christian men who with faltering steps and many an aberration are seeking to walk in the name of the Lord their God. If He is in any real and deep sense ‘our God,’ we shall see in Him the realised ideal of all excellence, the fountain of all our blessedness, the supreme good for our seeking hearts, the sovereign authority to sway our wills; the measure of our conscious possession of Him will be the measure of our glad imitation of Him, and our joyful spirits, enfranchised by the assurance of our loving possession of Him who is love, will hear Him ever whisper to us, ‘Be ye perfect as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.’ The desire to reproduce in the narrow bounds of our human spirits the infinite beauties of the Lord our God will give elevation to our lives, and dignity to our actions attainable from no other source. If we hallow His name, we shall do His will, and earth will become a foretaste of heaven.

III. The worshipper will resemble his god in fate.

We may observe that it is only of God’s people that Micah in our text applies the words ‘for ever and ever.’ ‘The peoples’’ worship perishes. They walk for a time in the name of their god, but what comes of it at last is veiled in silence. It is Jehovah’s worshippers who walk in His name for ever and ever, and of whom the great words are true, ‘Because I live ye shall live also.’ We may be sure of this that all the divine attributes are pledged for our immortality; we may be sure, too, that a soul which here follows in the footsteps of Jesus, which in its earthly life walked in the name of the Lord its God, will continue across the narrow bridge, and go onward ‘for ever and ever’ in direct progress in the same direction in which it began on earth. The imitation, which is the practical religion of every Christian, has for its only possible result the climax of likeness. The partial likeness is attained on earth by contemplation, by aspiration, and by effort; but it is perfected in the heavens by the perfect vision of His perfect face. ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ Not till it has reached its goal can the Christian life begun here be conceived as ended. It shall never be said of any one who tried by God’s help to walk ‘in the name of the Lord’ that he was lost in the desert, and never reached his journey’s end. The peoples who walked in the name of any false god will find their path ending as on the edge of a precipice, or in an unfathomable bog; loss, and woe, and shame will be their portion. But ‘the name of the Lord is a strong tower,’ into which whoever will may run and be safe, and to walk in the name of the Lord is to walk on a way ‘that shall be called the Way of Holiness, whereon no ravenous beast shall go up, but the redeemed shall walk there,’ and all that are on it ‘shall come with singing to Zion, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads.’

4) Micah 5:7

Micah

‘A DEW FROM THE LORD’

Mic. 5:7.

The simple natural science of the Hebrews saw a mystery in the production of the dew on a clear night, and their poetic imagination found in it a fit symbol for all silent and gentle influences from heaven that refreshed and quickened parched and dusty souls. Created by an inscrutable process in silence and darkness, the dewdrops lay innumerable on the dry plains and hung from every leaf and thorn, each little globule a perfect sphere that reflected the sun, and twinkled back the beams in its own little rainbow. Where they fell the scorched vegetation lifted its drooping head. That is what Israel is to be in the world, says Micah. He saw very deep into God’s mind and into the function of the nation.

It may be a question as to whether the text refers more especially to the place and office of Israel when planted in its own land, or when dispersed among the nations. For, as you see, he speaks of ‘the remnant of Jacob’ as if he was thinking of the survivors of some great calamity which had swept away the greater portion of the nation. Both things are true. When settled in its own land, Israel’s office was to teach the nations God; when dispersed among the Gentiles, its office ought to have been the same. But be that as it may, the conception here set forth is as true to-day as ever it was. For the prophetic teachings, rooted though they may be in the transitory circumstances of a tiny nation, are ‘not for an age, but for all time,’ and we get a great deal nearer the heart of them when we grasp the permanent truths that underlie them, than when we learnedly exhume the dead history which was their occasion.

Micah's message comes to all Christians, and very eminently to English Christians. The subject of Christian missions is before us to-day, and some thoughts in the line of this great text may not be inappropriate.

We have here, then,

I. The function of each Christian in his place.

'The remnant of Jacob shall be as a dew from the Lord in the midst of many nations.' What made Israel 'as a dew'? One thing only; its religion, its knowledge of God, and its consequent purer morality. It could teach Greece no philosophy, no art, no refinement, no sensitiveness to the beautiful. It could teach Rome no lessons of policy or government. It could bring no wisdom to Egypt, no power or wealth to Assyria. But God lit His candle and set it on a candlestick, that it 'might give light to all that were in the house.' The same thing is true about Christian people. We cannot teach the world science, we cannot teach it philosophy or art, but we can teach it God. Now the possibility brings with it the obligation. The personal experience of Jesus Christ in our hearts, as the dew that brings to us life and fertility, carries with it a commission as distinct and imperative as if it had been pealed into each single ear by a voice from heaven. That which made Israel the 'dew amidst many nations,' parched for want of it, makes Christian men and women fit to fill the analogous office, and calls upon them to discharge the same functions. For-in regard to all our possessions, and therefore most eminently and imperatively in regard to the best-that which we have, we have as stewards, and the Gospel, as the Apostle found, was not only given to him for his own individual enjoyment, elevation, ennobling, emancipation, salvation, but was 'committed to his charge,' and he was 'entrusted' with it, as he says, as a sacred deposit.

Remember, too, that, strange as it may seem, the only way by which that knowledge of God which was bestowed upon Israel could become the possession of the world was by its first of all being made the possession of a few. People talk about the unfairness, the harshness, of the providential arrangement by which the whole world was not made participant of the revelation which was granted to Israel. The fire is gathered on to a hearth. Does that mean that the corners of the room are left uncared for? No! the brazier is in the middle-as Palestine was, even geographically in the centre of the then civilised world-that from the centre the beneficent warmth might radiate and give heat as well as light to ‘all them that are in the house.’

So it is in regard to all the great possessions of the race. Art, literature, science, political wisdom, they are all intrusted to a few who are made their apostles; and the purpose is their universal diffusion from these human centres. It is in the line of the analogy of all the other gifts of God to humanity, that chosen men should be raised up in whom the life is lodged, that it may be diffused.

So to us the message comes: ‘The Lord hath need of thee.’ Christ has died; the Cross is the world’s redemption. Christ lives that He may apply the power and the benefits of His death and of His risen life to all humanity. But the missing link between the all sufficient redemption that is in Christ Jesus, and the actual redemption of the world, is ‘the remnant of Jacob,’ the Christian Church which is to be ‘in the midst of many people, as a dew from the Lord.’

Now, that diffusion from individual centres of the life that is in Jesus Christ is the chiefest reason-or at all events, is one chief reason-for the strange and inextricable intertwining in modern society, of saint and sinner, of Christian and non-Christian. The seed is sown among the thorns; the wheat springs up amongst the tares. Their roots are so matted together that no hand can separate them. In families, in professions, in business relations, in civil life, in national life, both grow together. God sows His seed thin that all the field may smile in harvest. The salt is broken up into many minute particles and rubbed into that which it is to preserve from corruption. The remnant of Jacob is in the *midst* of many peoples; and you and I are encompassed by those who need our Christ, and who do not know Him or love Him; and one great reason for the close intertwining is that, scattered, we may diffuse, and that at all points the world may be in contact with those who ought to be working to preserve it from putrefaction and decay.

Now there are two ways by which this function may be discharged, and in which it is incumbent upon every Christian man to make his contribution, be it greater or smaller, to the discharge of it. The one is by direct efforts to impart to others the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ which we have, and which we profess to be the very root of our lives. We can all do that if we will, and we are here to do it. Every one of us has somebody or other close to us, bound to us, perhaps, by the tie of kindred and love, who will listen to us more readily than to anybody else. Christian men and women, have you utilised these channels which God Himself, by the arrangements of society, has dug for you, that through them you may pour upon some thirsty ground the water of life? We could also help, and help far more than any of us do, in associated efforts for the same purpose. The direct obligation to direct efforts to impart the Gospel cannot be shirked, though, alas! it is far too often ignored by us professing Christians.

But there is another way by which 'the remnant of Jacob' is to be 'a dew from the Lord,' and that is by trying to bring to bear Christian thoughts and Christian principles upon all the relations of life in which we stand, and upon all the societies, be they greater or smaller-the family, the city, or the nation-of which we form parts. We have heard a great deal lately about what people that know very little about it, are pleased to call 'the Nonconformist conscience,' I take the compliment, which is not intended, but is conveyed by the word. But I venture to say that what is meant, is not the 'Nonconformist' conscience, it is the *Christian* conscience. We Nonconformists have no monopoly, thank God, of that. Nay, rather, in some respects, our friends in the Anglican churches are teaching some of us a lesson as to the application of Christian principles to civic duty and to national life. I beseech you, although I do not mean to dwell upon that point at all at this time, to ask yourselves whether, as citizens, the vices, the godlessness, the miseries-the removable miseries-of our great town populations, lie upon your hearts. Have you ever lifted a finger to abate drunkenness? Have you ever done anything to help to make it possible that the masses of our town communities should live in places better than the pigsties in which many of them have to wallow? Have you any care for the dignity, the purity, the Christianity of our civic rulers; and do you, to the extent of your ability, try to ensure that Christ's teaching shall govern the life of our cities? And the same question may be put yet more emphatically with regard to wider subjects, namely, the national life and the national action, whether in regard to war or in regard to other pressing subjects for national consideration. I do not touch upon these; I only ask you to remember the grand ideal of my text, which applies to the narrowest circle-the family; and to the wider circles-the city and the nation, as well as to the world. Time was when a bastard piety shrank back from intermeddling with these affairs and gathered up its skirts about it in an ecstasy of unwholesome unworldliness. There is not much danger of that now, when Christian men are in the full swim of the currents of civic, professional, literary, national life. But I will tell you of what there is a danger-Christian men and women moving in their families, going into town councils, going into Parliament, going to the polling booths, and leaving their Christianity behind them. ‘The remnant of Jacob shall be as a dew from the Lord.’

Now let me turn for a moment to a second point, and that is

II. The function of English Christians in the world.

I have suggested in an earlier part of this sermon that possibly the application of this text originally was to the scattered remnant. Be that as it may, wherever you go, you find the Jew and the Englishman. I need not dwell upon the ubiquity of our race. I need not point you to the fact that, in all probability, our language is destined to be the world’s language some day. I need do nothing more than recall the fact that a man may go on board ship, in Liverpool or London, and go round the world; everywhere he sees the Union Jack, and everywhere he lands upon British soil. The ubiquity of the scattered Englishman needs no illustration.

But I do wish to remind you that that ubiquity has its obligation. We hear a great deal to-day about Imperialism, about ‘the Greater Britain,’ about ‘the expansion of England.’ And on one side all that new atmosphere of feeling is good, for it speaks of a vivid consciousness which is all to the good in the pulsations of the national life. But there is another side to it that is not so good. What is the expansion sought for? Trade? Yes! necessarily; and no man who lives in Lancashire will speak lightly of that necessity. Vulgar greed, and earth-hunger? *that* is evil. Glory? that is cruel, blood-stained, empty. My text tells us why expansion should be sought, and what are the obligations it brings with it. ‘The remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord’ There are two kinds of Imperialism: one which regards the Empire as a thing for the advantage of us here, in this little land, and another which regards it as a burden that God has laid on the shoulders of the men whom John Milton, two centuries ago, was not afraid to call ‘His Englishmen.’

Let me remind you of two contrasted pictures which will give far more forcibly than anything I can say, the two points of view from which our world-wide dominion may be regarded. Here is one of them: ‘By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent. And I have removed the bounds of the people, and have robbed their treasures, and my hand hath found as a nest the riches of the people; and as one gathereth eggs that are left, have I gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing, or opened a mouth, or peeped.’ That is the voice of the lust for Empire for selfish advantages. And here is the other one: ‘The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents; yea, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him, for He shall deliver the needy when he crieth, the poor also, and him that hath no helper. He shall redeem their soul from deceit and violence, and precious shall their blood be in His sight.’ That is the voice that has learned: ‘He that is greatest among you, let him be your servant’; and that the dominion founded on unselfish surrender for others is the only dominion that will last. Brethren! that is the spirit in which alone England will keep its Empire over the world.

I need not remind you that the gift which we have to carry to the heathen nations, the subject peoples who are under the æ§©s of our laws, is not merely our literature, our science, our Western civilisation, still less the products of our commerce, for all of which some of them are asking; but it is *the* gift that they do *not* ask for. The dew ‘waiteth not for man, nor tarrieth for the sons of men.’ We have to create the demand by bringing the supply. We have to carry Christ’s Gospel as the greatest gift that we have in our hands.

And now, I was going to have said a word, lastly, but I see it can only be a word, about-

III. The failure to fulfil the function.

Israel failed. Pharisaism was the end of it-a hugging itself in the possession of the gift which it did not appreciate, and a bitter contempt of the nations, and so destruction came, and the fire on the hearth was scattered and died out, and the vineyard was taken from them and ‘given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.’ Change the name, as the Latin poet says, and the story is told about us. England largely fails in this function; as witness in India godless civilians; as witness on every palm-shaded coral beach in the South Seas, profligate beach-combers, drunken sailors, unscrupulous traders; as witness the dying out of races by diseases imported with profligacy and gin from this land. ‘A dew from the Lord!’; say rather a malaria from the devil! ‘By you,’ said the Prophet, ‘is the name of God blasphemed among the Gentiles.’ By Englishmen the missionary’s efforts are, in a hundred cases, neutralised, or hampered if not neutralised.

We have failed because, as Christian people, we have not been adequately in earnest. No man can say with truth that the churches of England are awake to the imperative obligation of this missionary enterprise. ‘If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He spare not thee.’ Israel’s religion was not diffusive, therefore it corrupted; Israel’s religion did not reach out a hand to the nations, therefore its heart was paralysed and stricken. They who bring the Gospel to others increase their own hold upon it. There is a joy of activity, there is a firmer faith, as new evidences of its power are presented before them. There is the blessing that comes down upon all faithful discharge of duty; ‘If the house be not worthy, your peace shall return to you.’ After all, our Empire rests on moral foundations, and if it is administered by us-and we each have part of the responsibility for all that is done-on the selfish ground of only seeking the advantage of ‘the predominant partner,’ then our hold will be loosened. There is no such cement of empire as a common religion. If we desire to make these subject peoples loyal fellow-subjects, we must make them true fellow-worshippers. The missionary holds India for England far more strongly than the soldier does. If we apply Christian principles to our administration of our Empire, then instead of its being knit together by iron bands, it will be laced together by the intertwining tendrils of the hearts of those who are possessors of ‘like precious faith.’ Brethren, there is another saying in the Old Testament, about the dew. ‘I will be as the dew unto Israel,’ says God through the Prophet. We must have Him as the dew for our own souls first. Then only shall we be able to discharge the office laid upon us, to be in the midst of many peoples as ‘dew from the Lord.’ If our fleece is wet and we leave the ground dry, our fleece will soon be dry, though the ground may be bedewed.

5) Micah 6:8

GOD'S REQUIREMENTS AND GOD'S GIFT

Mic. 6:8.

This is the Prophet's answer to a question which he puts into the mouth of his hearers. They had the superstitious estimate of the worth of sacrifice, which conceives that the external offering is pleasing to God, and can satisfy for sin. Micah, like his great contemporary Isaiah, and the most of the prophets, wages war against that misconception of sacrifice, but does not thereby protest against its use. To suppose that he does so is to misunderstand his whole argument. Another misuse of the words of my text is by no means uncommon to-day. One has heard people say, 'We are plain men; we do not understand your theological subtleties; we do not quite see what you mean by "Repentance toward God, and faith in Jesus Christ." "To do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with my God," that is my religion, and I leave all the rest to you.' That is our religion too, but notice that word 'require.' It is a harsh word, and if it is the last word to be said about God's relation to men, then a great shadow has fallen upon life.

But there is another word which Micah but dimly caught uttered amidst the thunders of Sinai, and which you and I have heard far more clearly. The Prophet read off rightly God's *requirements*, but he had not anything to say about God's *gifts*. So his word is a half-truth, and the more clearly it is seen, and the more earnestly a man tries to live up to the standard of the requirements laid down here, the more will he feel that there is something else needed, and the more will he see that the great central peculiarity and glory of Christianity is not that it reiterates or alters God's requirements, but that it brings into view God's gifts. 'To do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God,' is possible only through repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And if you suppose that these words of my text disclose the whole truth about God's relation to men, and men's to God, you have failed to apprehend the flaming centre of the Light that shines from heaven.

I. So, then, the first thing that I wish to suggest is God's requirements.

Now, I do not need to say more than just a word or two about the summing-up in my text of the plain, elementary duties of morality and religion. It covers substantially the same ground, in a condensed form, as does the Decalogue, only that Moses began with the deepest thing and worked outwards, as it were; laying the foundation in a true relation to God, which is the most important, and from which will follow the true relation to men. Micah begins at the other end, and starting with the lesser, the more external, the purely human, works his way inwards to that which is the centre and the source of all.

‘To do justly,’ that is elementary morality in two words. Whatever a man has a right to claim from you, give him; that is the sum of duty. And yet not altogether so, for we all know the difference between a righteous man and a good man, and how, if there is only rigidly righteous action, there is something wanting to the very righteousness of the action and to the completeness of the character. ‘To do’ is not enough; we must get to the heart, and so ‘*love* mercy.’ Justice is not all. If each man gets his deserts, as Shakespeare says, ‘who of us shall scape whipping?’ There must be the mercy as well as the justice. In a very deep sense no man renders to his fellows all that his fellows have a right to expect of him, who does not render to them mercy. And so in a very deep sense, mercy is part of justice, and you have not given any poor creature all that that poor creature has a right to look for from you, unless you have given him all the gracious and gentle charities of heart and hand. Justice and mercy do, in the deepest view, run into one.

Then Micah goes deeper. ‘And to walk humbly with thy God.’ Some people would say that this summary of the divine requirements is defective, because there is nothing in it about a man’s duty to himself, which is as much a duty as his duty to his fellows, or his duty to God. But there is a good deal of my duty to myself crowded into that one word, ‘humbly.’ For I suppose we might almost say that the basis of all our obligations to our own selves lies in this, that we shall take the right view-that is, the lowly view-of ourselves. But I pass that.

‘To walk humbly with thy God.’ ‘Can two walk together unless they be agreed?’ For walking with God there must be communion, based in love, and resulting in imitation. And that communion must be constant, and run through all the life, like a golden thread through some web. So, then, here is the minimum of the divine requirements, to give everybody what he has a right to, including the mercy to which he has a right, to have a lowly estimate of myself, and to live continually grasping the hand of God, and conscious of His overshadowing wing at all moments, and of conformity to His will at every step of the road. That is the minimum; and the people who so glibly say, ‘That is my religion,’ have little consciousness of how far-reaching and how deep-down-going the requirements of this text are. The requirements result from the very nature of God, and our relation to Him, and they are endorsed by our own consciences, for we all know that these, and nothing less than these are the duties that we owe to God. So much for God’s requirements.

II. Our failure.

There is not one of us that has come up to the standard. Man after man may be conceived of as bringing in his hands the actions of his life, and laying them in the awful scales which God’s hand holds. In the one are God’s requirements, in the other my life; and in every case down goes the weight, and ‘weighed in the balances we are altogether lighter than vanity.’ We stand before the great Master in the school, and one by one we take up our copybooks; and there is not one of them that is not black with blots and erasures and swarming with errors. The great cliff stands in front of us with the victor’s prize on its topmost ledge, and man after man tries to climb, and falls bruised and broken at the base. ‘There is none righteous, no, not one.’ Micah’s requirements come to every man that will honestly take stock of his life and his character as the statement of an unreached and unreachable ideal to which he never has climbed nor ever can climb.

Oh, brethren! if these words are all the words that are to be said about God and me, then I know not what lies before the enlightened conscience except shuddering despair, and a paralysing consciousness of inevitable failure. I beseech you, take these words, and go apart with them, and test your daily life by them. God requires me to do justly. Does there not rise before my memory many an act in which, in regard to persons and in regard to circumstances, I have fallen beneath that requirement? He requires me ‘to love mercy.’ He requires me ‘to walk humbly,’ and I have often been inflated and self-conceited and presumptuous. He requires me to walk with Himself, and I have shaken away His hand from me, and passed whole days without ever thinking of Him, and ‘the God in whose hands’ my ‘breath is, and whose are all’ my ‘ways,’ I have ‘not glorified.’ I cannot hammer this truth into your consciences. You have to do it for yourselves. But I beseech you, recognise the fact that you are implicated in the universal failure, and that God’s requirement is God’s condemnation of each of us.

If, then, that is true, that all have come short of the requirement, then there should follow a universal sense of guilt, for there is the universal fact of guilt, whether there be the sense of it or not. There must follow, too, consequences resulting from the failure of each of us to comply with these divine requirements, consequences very alarming, very fatal; and there must follow a darkening of the thought of God. ‘I knew thee that thou wert an austere man, reaping where thou didst not sow, and gathering where thou didst not straw.’ That is the God of all the people who take my text as the last word of their religion-God ‘requires of me. The blessed sun in the heavens becomes a lurid ball of fire when it is seen through the mist of such a conception of the divine character, and its relation to men. There is nothing that so drapes the sky in darkness, and hides out the great light of God, as the thought of His requirements as the last thought we cherish concerning Him.

There follows, too, upon this conception, and the failure that results to fulfil the requirements, a hopelessness as to ever accomplishing that which is demanded of us. Who amongst us is there that, looking back upon his past in so far as it has been shaped by his own effort and his own unaided strength, can look forward to a future with any hope that it will mend the past? Brethren! experience teaches us that we have not fulfilled, and cannot fulfil, what remains our plain duty, notwithstanding our inability to discharge it-viz., ‘To do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.’ To think of God’s requirements, and of my own failure, is the sure way to paralyse all activity; just as that man in the parable who said, ‘Thou art an austere man,’ went away and hid his talent in the earth. To think of God’s requirements and my own failures, if heaven has nothing more to say to me than this stern ‘Thou shalt,’ is the short way to despair. And that is why most of us prefer to be immersed in the trivialities of daily life rather than to think of God, and of what He asks from us. For the only way by which some of us can keep our equanimity and our cheerfulness is by ignoring Him and forgetting what He demands, and never taking stock of our own lives.

III. Lastly, my text leads us to think of God’s gift.

I said it is a half-truth, for it only tells us of what He desires us to be, and does not tell us of how we may be it. It is meant, like the law of which it is a condensation, to be the *pedagogue*, to lead the child to Jesus Christ, the true Master, and the true Gift of God.

God ‘requires.’ Yes, and He requires, in order that we should say to Him, ‘Lord, Thou hast a right to ask this, and it is my blessedness to give it, but I cannot. Do Thou give me what Thou dost require, and then I can.’

The gift of God is Jesus Christ, and that gift meets all our failures. I have spoken of the sense of guilt that rises from the consciousness of failure to keep the requirements of the divine law; and the gift of God deals with that. It comes to us as we lie wounded, bruised, conscious of failure, alarmed for results, sensible of guilt, and dreading the penalties, and it says to us, ‘Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.’ ‘God requires of thee what thou hast not done. Trust yourselves to Me, and all iniquity is passed from your souls.’

I spoke of the hopelessness of future performance, which results from experience of past failures; and the gift of God deals with that. You cannot meet the requirements. Christ will put His Spirit into your spirits, if you will trust yourselves to Him, and then you will meet them, for the things which are impossible with men are possible with God. So, if led by Micah, we pass from God’s requirements to His gifts, look at the change in the aspect which God bears to us. He is no longer standing strict to mark, and stern to judge and condemn: but bending down graciously to help. His last word to us is not ‘Thou shalt do’ but ‘I will give.’ His utterance in the Gospel is not ‘do,’ but it is ‘take’; and the vision of God, which shines out upon us from the life and from the Cross of Jesus Christ, is not that of a great Taskmaster, but that of Him who helps all our weakness, and makes it strength. A God who ‘requires’ paralyses men, shuts men out from hope and joy and fellowship; a God who gives draws men to His heart, and makes them diligent in fulfilling all His blessed requirements.

Think of the difference which the conception of God as giving makes to the spirit in which we work. No longer, like the Israelites in Egypt, do we try to make bricks without straw, and break our hearts over our failures, or desperately abandon the attempt, and live in neglect of God and His will; but joyfully, with the clear confidence that ‘our labour is not in vain in the Lord,’ we seek to keep the commandments which we have learned to be the expressions of His love. One of the Fathers puts all in one lovely sentence: ‘Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt.’

Think, too, of the difference which this conception of the giving rather than of the requiring God brings into what we have to do. We have not to begin with effort, we have to begin with faith. The fountain must be filled from the spring before it can send up its crystal pillar flashing in the sunlight; and we must receive by our trust the power to will and to do. First fill the lamp with oil, and let the Master light it, and then let its blaze beam forth. First, we have to go to the giving God, with thanks ‘unto Him for His unspeakable gift’; and then we have to say to Him, ‘Thou hast given me Thy Son. What dost Thou desire that I shall give to Thee?’ We have first to accept the gift, and then, moved by the mercy of God, to ask, ‘Lord I what wilt Thou have me to do?’

Habakkuk

1) HABAKKUK 3:19

1) Habakkuk 3:19

Habakkuk

THE IDEAL DEVOUT LIFE

Hab. 3:19.

So ends one of the most magnificent pieces of imaginative poetry in Scripture or anywhere else. The singer has been describing a great delivering manifestation of the Most High God, which, though he knew it was for the deliverance of God's people, shed awe and terror over his soul. Then he gathers himself together to vow that in this God, thus manifested as the God of his salvation, he 'will rejoice,' whatever penury or privation may attach to his outward life. Lastly, he rises, in these final words, to the apprehension of what this God, thus rejoiced in, will become to those who so put their trust and their gladness upon Himself.

The expressions are of a highly metaphorical and imaginative character, but they admit of being brought down to very plain facts, and they tell us the results in heart and mind of true faith and communion with God.

It is to be noticed that a parallel saying, almost verbatim the same as that of my text, occurs in the 18th psalm, and that there, too, it is the last and joyous result of a tremendous manifestation of the delivering energy of God.

Without any attempt to do more than bring out the deep meaning of the words, I note that the three clauses of our text present three aspects of what our lives and ourselves may steadfastly be if we, too, will rejoice in the God of our salvation.

I. First, such communion with God brings God to a man for his strength.

The 18th psalm, which is closely parallel, as I have remarked, with this one, gives a somewhat different and inferior version of that thought when it says, 'It is the Lord that girdeth me with strength.' But Habakkuk, though perhaps he could not have put into dogmatic shape all that he meant, had come farther than that with this: 'The Lord is my strength.' He not only *gives*, as one might put a coin into the hand of a beggar, while standing separate from him all the while, but 'He is my strength.'

And what does that mean? It is an anticipation of that most wonderful and highest of all the New Testament truths which the Apostle declared when he said: 'I can do all things in Christ which strengtheneth me within.' It is the anticipation in experience-which always comes before dogmatic formulas that reduce experiences into articulate utterances, of what the Apostle recorded when he said that he had heard the voice that declared, ‘My grace is sufficient for thee, and My strength is made perfect in weakness.’

Ah, brother! do not let us deprive ourselves of the lofty consolations and the mysterious influx of power which may be ours, if we will open our eyes to see, and our hearts to receive, what is really the central blessing of the Gospel, the communication through the same faith as Habakkuk exercised when he said, ‘I will rejoice in the God of my salvation,’ of an actual divine strength to dwell in and manifest itself majestically and triumphantly through, our weakness. ‘The Lord is my strength,’ and if we will rejoice in the Lord we shall find that Habakkuk’s experience was lower than ours, inasmuch as he knew less of God than we do; and we shall be able to surpass his saying with the other one of the Prophet: ‘The Lord is my strength and song; He also is become my salvation.’ That is the first blessing that this ancient believer, out of the twilight of early revelation, felt as certain to come through communion with God.

II. The second is like unto it. Such rejoicing communion with God will give light-footedness in the path of life.

‘He makes my feet like hinds’ feet.’ The stag is, in all languages spoken by people that have ever seen it, the very type and emblem of elastic, springing ease, of light and bounding gracefulness, that clears every obstacle, and sweeps swiftly over the moor. And when this singer, or his brother psalmist in the other psalm that we have referred to, says, ‘Thou makest my feet like hinds’ feet,’ what he is thinking about is that light and easy, springing, elastic gait, that swiftness of advance. What a contrast that is to the way in which most of us get through our day’s work! Plod, plod, plod, in a heavy-footed, spiritless grind, like that with which the ploughman toils down the sticky furrows of a field, with a pound of clay at each heel; or like that with which a man goes wearied home from his work at night. The monotony of trivial, constantly recurring doings, the fluctuations in the thermometer of our own spirits; the stiff bits of road that we have all to encounter sooner or later; and as days go on, our diminishing buoyancy of nature, and the love of walking a little slower than we used to do; we all know these things, and our gait is affected by them. But then my text brings a bright assurance, that swift and easy and springing as the course of a stag on a free hill-side may be the gait with which we run the race set before us.

It is the same thought, under a somewhat different garb, which the Apostle has when he tells us that the Christian soldier ought to have his ‘feet shod with the alacrity that comes from the gospel of peace.’ We are to be always ready to run, and to run with light hearts when we do. That is a possible result of Christian communion, and ought, far more than it is, to be an achieved reality with each of us. Of course physical conditions vary. Of course our spirits go up and down. Of course the work that we have to do one day seems easier than the same work does another. All these fluctuations and variations, and causes of heavy-footedness-and sometimes more sinful ones, causes of sluggishness-will survive; but in spite of them all, and beneath them all, it is possible that we may have ourselves thus equipped for the road, and may rejoice in our work ‘as a strong man to run a race,’ and may cheerily welcome every duty, and cast ourselves into all our tasks. It is possible, because communion with God manifest in Christ does, as we have been seeing, actually breathe into men a vigour, and consequently a freshness and a buoyancy that do not belong to themselves, and do not come from nature or from surrounding things. Unless that is true, that Christianity gives to a man the divine gladness which makes him ready for work, I do not know what is the good of his Christianity to him.

But not only is that so, but this same communion with God, which is the opening of the heart for the influx of the divine power, brings to bear upon all our work new motives which redeem it from being oppressive, tedious, monotonous, trivial, too great for our endurance, or too little for our effort. All work that is not done in fellowship with Jesus Christ tends to become either too heavy to be tackled successfully, or too trivial to demand our best energies, and in either case will be done perfunctorily, and as the days go on, mechanically and wearisomely, as a grind and a pled. ‘Thou makest my feet like hinds’ feet’-if I get the new motive of love to God in Christ well into my heart so that it comes out and influences all my actions, there will be no more tasks too formidable to undertake, or too small to be worth an effort. There will be nothing unwelcome. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked things straight, and our feet will be shod with the preparedness of the gospel of peace.

If we live in daily communion with God, another thought, too, will come in, which will, in like manner, make us ready ‘to run with’ cheerfulness ‘the race that is set before us.’ We shall connect everything that befalls us, and everything that we have to do, with the final issue, and life will become solemn, grave, and blessed, because it is the outer court and vestibule of the eternal life with God in Christ. They that hold communion with Him, and only they, will, as another prophet says, ‘run and not be weary,’ when there come the moments that require a special effort; and ‘will walk and not faint’ through the else tediously long hours of commonplace duty and dusty road.

III. The last of the thoughts here is-Communion with God brings elevation.

‘He will make me to walk upon my high places.’ One sees the herd on the skyline of the mountain ridge, and at home up there, far above dangers and attack; able to keep their footing on cliff and precipice, and tossing their antlers in the pure air. One wave of the hand, and they are miles away. ‘He sets me upon my high places’; if we will keep ourselves in simple, loving fellowship with God in Christ; and day by day, even when ‘the fig-tree does not blossom, and there is no fruit in the vine,’ will still ‘rejoice in the God of our salvation,’ He will lift us up, and Isaiah’s other clause in the verse which I have quoted will be fulfilled: ‘They shall mount up with wings as eagles.’ Communion with God does not only help us to plod and to travel, but it helps us to soar. If we keep ourselves in touch with Him, we shall be like a weight that is hung on to a balloon. The buoyancy of the one will lift the leadenness of the other. If we hold fast by Christ’s hand that will lift us up to the high places, the heights of God, in so far as we may reach them in this world; and we shall be at home up there. They will be ‘*my* high places,’ that I never could have got at by my own scrambling, but to which Thou hast lifted me up, and which, by Thy grace, have become my natural abode. I am at home there, and walk at liberty in the loftiness, and fear no fall amongst the cliffs.

Are you and I familiar with these upper ranges of thought and experience and life? Do we feel at home there more than down in the bottoms, amongst the swamps, and the miasma, and the mists? Where is your home, brother? The Mass begins with *Sursum corda*: 'Up with your hearts,' and that is the word for us. But the way to get up is to keep ourselves in touch with Jesus Christ, and then He will, even whilst our feet are travelling along this road of earth, set us at His own right hand in the heavenly places, and make them '*our* high places.' It is safe up there. The air is pure; the poison mists are down lower; the hunters do not come there; their arrows or their rifles will not carry so far. It is only when the herd ventures a little down the hill that it is in danger from shots.

But the elevation will not be such as to make us despise the low paths on which duty-the sufficient and loftiest thing of all-lies for us. Our souls may be like stars, and dwell apart, and yet may lay the humblest duties upon themselves, and whilst we live in the high places, we 'may travel on life's common way in cheerful godliness.' Communion with Him will make us light-footed, and lift us high, and yet it will keep us at desk, and mill, and study, and kitchen, and nursery, and shop, and we shall find that the high places are reachable in every life, and in every task. So we may go on until at last we shall hear the Voice that says, 'Come up higher,' and shall he lifted to the mountain of God, where the living waters are, and shall fear no snares or hunters any more for ever.

Zephaniah

1) ZEPHANIAH 3:14
2) ZEPHANIAH 3:17

1) Zephaniah 3:14

Zephaniah

ZION'S JOY AND GOD'S

Zep. 3:14, Zep. 3:17.

What a wonderful rush of exuberant gladness there is in these words! The swift, short clauses, the triple invocation in the former verse, the triple promise in the latter, the heaped together synonyms, all help the impression. The very words seem to dance with joy. But more remarkable than this is the parallelism between the two verses. Zion is called to rejoice in God because God rejoices in her. She is to shout for joy and sing because God's joy too has a voice, and breaks out into singing. For every throb of joy in man's heart, there is a wave of gladness in God's. The notes of our praise are at once the echoes and the occasions of His. We are to be glad because He is glad: He is glad because we are so. We sing for joy, and He joys over us with singing because we do.

I. God's joy over Zion.

It is to be noticed that the former verse of our text is followed by the assurance: 'The Lord is in the midst of thee'; and that the latter verse is preceded by the same assurance. So, then, intimate fellowship and communion between God and Israel lies at the root both of God's joy in man and man's joy in God.

We are solemnly warned by 'profound thinkers' of letting the shadow of our emotions fall upon God. No doubt there is a real danger there; but there is a worse danger, that of conceiving of a God who has no life and heart; and it is better to hold fast by this-that in Him is that which corresponds to what in us is gladness. We are often told, too, that the Jehovah of the Old Testament is a stern and repellent God, and the religion of the Old Testament is gloomy and servile. But such a misconception is hard to maintain in the face of such words as these. Zephaniah, of whom we know little, and whose words are mainly forecasts of judgments and woes pronounced against Zion that was rebellious and polluted, ends his prophecy with these companion pictures, like a gleam of sunshine which often streams out at the close of a dark winter's day. To him the judgments which he prophesied were no contradiction of the love and gladness of God. The thought of a glad God might be a very awful thought; such an insight as this prophet had gives a blessed meaning to it. We may think of the joy that belongs to the divine nature as coming from the completeness of His being, which is raised far above all that makes of sorrow. But it is not in Himself alone that He is glad; but it is because He loves. The exercise of love is ever blessedness. His joy is in self-impartation; His delights are in the sons of men: 'As the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee.' His gladness is in His children when they let Him love them, and do not throw back His love on itself. As in man's physical frame it is pain to have secretions dammed up, so when God's love is forced back upon itself and prevented from flowing out in blessing, some shadow of suffering cannot but pass across that calm sky. He is glad when His face is mirrored in ours, and the rays from Him are reflected from us.

But there is another wonderfully bold and beautiful thought in this representation of the gladness of God. Note the double form which it assumes: 'He will rest'-literally, be silent-'in His love; He will joy over thee with singing.' As to the former, loving hearts on earth know that the deepest love knows no utterance, and can find none. A heart full of love rests as having attained its desire and accomplished its purpose. It keeps a perpetual Sabbath, and is content to be silent.

But side by side with this picture of the repose of God's joy is set with great poetic insight the precisely opposite image of a love which delights in expression, and rejoices over its object with singing. The combination of the two helps to express the depth and intensity of the one love, which like a song-bird rises with quivering delight and pours out as it rises an ever louder and more joyous note, and then drops, composed and still, to its nest upon the dewy ground.

II. Zion's joy in God.

To the Prophet, the fact that 'the Lord is in the midst of thee' was the guarantee for the confident assurance 'Thou shalt not fear any more'; and this assurance was to be the occasion of exuberant gladness, which ripples over in the very words of our first text. That great thought of 'God dwelling in the midst' is rightly a pain and a terror to rebellious wills and alienated hearts. It needs some preparation of mind and spirit to be glad because God is near; and they who find their satisfaction in earthly sources, and those who seek for it in these, see no word of good news, but rather a 'fearful looking for of judgment' in the thought that God is in their midst. The word rendered 'rejoices' in the first verse of our text is not the same as that so translated in the second. The latter means literally, to move in a circle; while the former literally means, to leap for joy. Thus the gladness of God is thought of as expressing itself in dignified, calm movements, whilst Zion's joy is likened in its expression to the more violent movements of the dance. True human joy is like God's, in that He delights in us and we in Him, and in that both He and we delight in the exercise of love. But we are never to forget that the differences are real as the resemblances, and that it is reserved for the higher form of our experiences in a future life to 'enter into the joy of the Lord.'

It becomes us to see to it that our religion is a religion of joy. Our text is an authoritative command as well as a joyful exhortation, and we do not fairly represent the facts of Christian faith if we do not 'rejoice in the Lord always.' In all the sadness and troubles which necessarily accompany us, as they do all men, we ought by the effort of faith to set the Lord always before us that we be not moved. The secret of stable and perpetual joy still lies where Zephaniah found it-in the assurance that the Lord is with us, and in the vision of His love resting upon us, and rejoicing over us with singing. If thus our love clasps His, and His joy finds its way into our hearts, it will remain with us that our 'joy may be full'; and being guarded by Him whilst still there is fear of stumbling, He will set us at last 'before the presence of His glory without blemish in exceeding joy.

2) Zephaniah 3:17

Zephaniah

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Haggai

Haggai

1) HAGGAI 1:6
2) HAGGAI 2:1-9

1) Haggai 1:6

Haggai

VAIN TOIL

Hag. 1:6.

A large emigration had taken place from the land of captivity to Jerusalem. The great purpose which the returning exiles had in view was the rebuilding of the Temple, as the centre-point of the restored nation. With true heroism, and much noble and unselfish enthusiasm, they began the work, postponing to it all considerations of personal convenience. But the usual fate of all great national enthusiasms attended this. Political difficulties, hard practical realities, came in the way, and the task was suspended for a time. A handful remained true to the original ideas; the rest fell away. Personal comfort, love of ease, the claims of domestic life, the greed of gain, all the ignoble motives which, like gravitation and friction, check such movements after the first impulse is exhausted, came into play. Like every great cause, this one was launched amidst high hopes and honest zeal: but by degrees the hopes faded and became nothing better than 'godly imaginations.' The exiles took to building their own ceiled houses, and let the House of God lie waste. They began to think more of settling on the land than of building the Temple. No doubt they said all the things with which men are wont to hide their selfishness under the mask of duty:-Men must live; we must take care of ourselves; it is mad enthusiasm to build a temple when we have not homes; we mean to build it some time, but we are practical men and must provide for our wants first.'

This wisdom of theirs turned out folly, as it generally does. There came, as we learn from this prophet, a season of distress, in which the harvest, for which they had sacrificed their duties and their calling, failed: and in spite of their prudent diligence, or rather, just because of their misplaced and selfish attention to their worldly well-being, they were poor and hungry. 'The heaven over them was stayed from dew, and the earth from her fruit.' Haggai was sent by God to interpret the calamity, and to urge to the fulfilment of their earlier purposes.

His words apply to a supernatural condition of things with which he is dealing, but they contain truths illustrated by it and true for ever. For us all, as truly as for those Jews, the first thing, the primary, all-embracing duty, is to serve God, to obey, love, and live with Him. The same selfish and worldly excuses have force with us: 'We have business to look after; men must live; we have no time to think about religion; I have built a new mill that occupies my thoughts; I have found a new plaything, and I must try it; I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So God and His claims, Christ and His love, are hustled into a corner to be attended to when opportunity serves, but to be neglected in the meantime. And the same result follows, not by miracle, but by natural necessity. Haggai puts these results in our text with bitter, indignant amplification. His words are all the working out of one idea-the unprofitableness, on the whole and in the long-run, of a godless life. He illustrates this in the clauses of our text in various forms, and my purpose now is simply to apply each of these to the realities of a godless life.

I. It is a life of fruitless toil.

The Prophet pictures the sowing, the abundant seed thrown broadcast, the long waiting, and then, finally, a wretched harvest-a few prematurely yellow ears and short stalks. I remember a friend telling me that when he was a boy he went out reaping with his father in one of our years of great drought; and after a day's work threshed out all that he had cut, and carried it home with him in his handkerchief. That is what Haggai saw realised in fact, because the sowing had been without God. It is what we may see in others and feel in ourselves. It is the very law and curse of godless toil with its unproductive harvest. The builders set out to build a tower whose top shall reach to heaven, and they never get higher than a story or two. There is nothing more tragic than the contrast between what a man actually accomplishes in his life and what he planned when he began it. Many and many of our lives are like the half-built houses in Pompeii, where the stones are lying that had been all squared and polished, and have never been lifted to their place in the unfinished walls. Much of the seed never comes up at all; and what we gather is always less than what we expected. The prize gleams before us; when we get it, is it as good as it looked when it hung tempting at the unreached goal? A fox-brush is scarcely sufficient payment for riding over half a county. Ah! but you say, there is the enthusiasm and stir of the pursuit. Well, yes; it is something if it is *training* you for something, and if you can say that faculties worth the cultivating are developed in that way: and whether that is so depends on what you think a man is made for, and on whether these are faculties which will last and find their scope as long as you last. Consider what you are, what you seek; and then say whether the most fruitful harvest from which God and His love are left out is not little.

This fruitlessness of toil is inevitable unless it springs from a motive which in itself is sufficient, pursues a purpose which will surely be accomplished, and is done in hope of the world where 'our works do follow us.' If we are allied to Christ, then whether our work be great or small, apparently successful or frustrated, it will be all right. Though we do not see our fruit, we know that He will bless the springing thereof, and that no least deed done for Him but shall in the harvest-day be found waving a nodding head of multiplied results. ‘God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him’; and ‘he that goeth forth weeping shall doubtless return, bringing his sheaves with him.’ ‘Your labour is not in vain to the Lord.’

II. A godless life is one of unsatisfied hunger and thirst.

The poor results of the exiles’ toil did not avail to stay gnawing hunger nor slake burning thirst, and the same result applies only too sadly to lives lived apart from God. There are a multitude of desires proper to the human soul besides those which belong to the bodily frame, and these have their proper objects. Is it true that the objects are sufficient to satisfy the desires? Does any one of the things for which we toil feed us full when we have it? Do we not always want just a little more? And is not that want accompanied with a real and sharp sense of hunger? Is it not true the appetite GROWS with what it feeds on? And even if a man schools himself to something like content, it comes not because the desire is satisfied, but because it is somehow bridled. Cerberus often breaks his chain, in spite of honied cakes that have been tossed into the wide mouths of his tripled heads. What do wealth and ambition do for their votaries? And even he who thirsts for nobler occupations and lives for higher aims is often obliged to admit, in weariness, that ‘this also is vanity.’

But even when the desire is satisfied, the man desiring is not. To feed their bodies men starve their souls. How many longings are crushed or neglected by him who pushes eagerly after any one longing! We have either to race from one course to another, splitting life into intolerable distractions, or we have to circumscribe and limit ourselves in order to devote all our power to securing one; and if we secure it, then a hundred others will bark like a kennel of hounds.

And if you say, ‘I know nothing about all this; I have my aims, and on the whole I secure a tolerable satisfaction for them,’ do you not know a nameless unrest? If you do not, then you are so much the poorer and the lower, and you have murdered part of yourself. Some one single tyrannous desire sits solitary in your heart. He has slain all his brethren that he may rule, as sultans used to do in Constantinople. One big fish in the aquarium has eaten up all the others.

God only satisfies the soul. It is only the ‘bread which came down from Heaven,’ of which if we eat our souls shall live, and be filled as with marrow and fatness. That One is all-sufficient in His Oneness. Possessing Him, we know no satiety; possessing Him, we do not need to maim any part of our nature; possessing Him, we shall not covet divers multifarious objects. The loftiest powers of the soul find in Him their adequate, inexhaustible, eternal object. The lowest desires may, like the beasts of the forest, seek their meat from God. If we take Him for our own and live on Him by faith, our blessed experience will be, ‘I am full: I have all and abound.’

III. The godless life is one of futile defences.

‘Ye clothe you, but there is none warm.’ The clothing was to guard against the nipping air that blew shrewdly on their hills, and it failed to keep them from the weather. We may be indulging in fancy in this application of our text, but still raiment is as needful as food, and its failure to answer its purpose points to a real sorrow and insufficiency of a life lived without God. In it there is no real defence against the manifold evils which storm upon all of us. When the bitter, biting weather comes, what have you to shelter you from the cold blast? Some rags of stoical resignation or proverbial commonplaces? ‘What is done cannot be helped’; ‘What cannot be cured must be endured’; ‘It is a long lane that has no turning,’ and the like. But what are these? You may have other occupations to interest you, but these will not heal, though they may divert your attention from, your gaping wounds. You have friends, and the like, but though you have all these and much beside, these will not avail. ‘The covering is shorter than that a man can wrap himself in it.’ Naked and shivering, exposed to the pelting and the pitiless storm, with rags soaked through, and chilled to the bone, what is there but death before the man in the wild weather on some trackless moor? And what is there for us if we have to bear the storms and cold of life without God? No doubt most of us struggle through somehow. Time heals much; work does a great deal; to live is so much, that no living being can be wholly miserable. Other cares and other occupations blossom and grow, and the brown mounds get covered with sweet springing grass. But how many lie down and die? How many for the rest of their lives go crushed and broken-spirited? How many carry about with them, deep in their hearts, a sleepless sorrow? How many have to bear passionate paroxysms of agony and bursts of angry grief, all of which might have been softened and soothed and made to gleam with the mellow light of hope as from a hidden sun, if only, instead of defiantly and weakly fronting the world alone, they had found in the man Christ the refuge from the storm and the covert from the tempest. How can a man face all the awful possibilities and the solemn certainties of life without God and not go mad? It is impossible to work without Him; it is impossible to rejoice without Him; but more impossible still, if that could be, is it to endure without Him. It is in union with Jesus Christ, and with Him alone, that we shall receive 'the pure linen, clean and white,' which is a surer defence than the warrior's mail, and 'being clothed we shall not be found naked.'

IV. A godless life is one of fleeting riches.

In Haggai's strong metaphor, the poor day-labourer earns his small wage and puts it into a ragged bag, or as we should say, a pocket with a hole in it; and when he comes to look for it, it is gone, and all his toil is for nothing. What a picture this is of the very experience that befalls all men who work for less wages than God's 'Well done.' Take an instance or two: here is a man who works hard for a long time, and puts his money into some bank, and one morning he gets a letter to tell him the bank's doors are closed, and his savings gone-a bag with holes. Here is a man who climbs by slow degrees to the head of his profession and lives in popular admiration, and some day he sees a younger competitor shooting ahead of him, and all is lost-a bag with holes. Here is a man who has, by some great discovery, established his fame or his fortune, and a new man, standing on his shoulders, makes a greater, and his fame dwarfs and his trade runs into other channels-a bag with holes. Here is a man who has conquered a world, and dies on the rock of St. Helena, with his pompous titles stripped off him, and instead of kingdoms a rood or two of garden, and instead of his legions, half a dozen soldiers, a doctor, and a jailer-a bag with holes. Here is a man who, having amassed his riches and kept them without loss all his life, is dying. They cannot go with him. That would not matter; but unfortunately he has to live yonder, and he will have ‘nothing of all his labour that he can carry away in his hands’-a bag with holes.

Such loss and final separation befall us all; but he who loves God loses none of his real treasure when he parts from earthly treasures. Fortune may turn her wheel as she pleases, his wealth cannot be taken from him. His riches are laid up in a sure storehouse, ‘where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt.’ We each live for ever. Should we not have for our object in life that which is eternal as ourselves? Why should we fix our hopes on that which is not abiding-on things that can perish, on things that we must lose? Let us not run this awful risk. Do not impoverish or darken life here; do not condemn yourselves to unfruitful toil, to unsatisfied desires, to unguarded calamities, to unstable possessions; but come, as sinful men ought to come, to Jesus Christ for pardon and for life. Then, in due season, you will reap if you faint not; and the harvest will not be little, but ‘some sixty-fold and some an hundred-fold’; then you will ‘hunger no more, neither thirst any more,’ but ‘He that hath mercy on you will lead you to living fountains of water’; then you will not have to draw your poor rags round you for warmth, but shall be clothed with the robe of righteousness and the garment of praise; then you will never need to fear the loss of your riches, but bear with you whilst you live your treasures beyond the reach of change, and will find them multiplied a thousand-fold when you die and go to God, your portion and your joy for ever.

2) Haggai 2:1-9

Haggai

BRAVE ENCOURAGEMENTS

Hag. 2:1 - Hag. 2:9.

The second year of Darius, in which Haggai prophesied, was 520 B.C. Political intrigues had stopped the rebuilding of the Temple, and the enthusiasm of the first return had died away in the face of prolonged difficulties. The two brave leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua, still survived, and kept alive their own zeal; but the mass of the people were more concerned about their comforts than about the restoration of the house of Jehovah. They had built for themselves ‘ceiled houses,’ and were engrossed with their farms.

The Book of Ezra dwells on the external hindrances to the rebuilding. Haggai goes straight at the selfishness and worldliness of the people as the great hindrance. We know nothing about him beyond the fact that he was a prophet working in conjunction with Zechariah. He has been thought to have been one of the original company who came back with Zerubbabel, and it has been suggested, though without any certainty, that he may have been one of the old men who remembered the former house. But these conjectures are profitless, and all that we know is that God sent him to rouse the slackened earnestness of the people, and that his words exercised a powerful influence in setting forward the work of rebuilding. This passage is the second of his four short prophecies. We may call it a vision of the glory of the future house of Jehovah.

The prophecy begins with fully admitting the depressing facts which were chilling the popular enthusiasm. Compared with the former Temple, this which they had begun to build could not but be ‘as nothing.’ So the murmurers said, and Haggai allows that they are quite right. Note the turn of his words: ‘Who is left . . . that saw this house in its former glory?’ There had been many eighteen years ago; but the old eyes that had filled with tears then had been mostly closed by death in the interval, and now but few survived. Perhaps if the eyes had not been so dim with age, the rising house would not have looked so contemptible. The pessimism of the aged is not always clear-sighted, nor their comparisons of what was, and what is beginning to be, just. But it is always wise to be frank in admitting the full strength of the opinions that we oppose; and encouragements to work will never tell if they blink difficulties or seek to deny plain facts. Haggai was wise when he began with echoing the old men’s disparagements, and in full view of them, pealed out his brave incitements to the work.

The repetition of the one exhortation, ‘Be strong, be strong, be strong,’ is very impressive. The very monotony has power. In the face of the difficulties which beset every good work the cardinal virtue is strength. ‘To be weak is to be miserable,’ and is the parent of failures. One hears in the exhortation an echo of that to Joshua, to whom and to his people the command ‘Be strong and of good courage’ was given with like repetition [Jos. 1:1 - Jos. 1:18].

But there is nothing more futile than telling feeble men to be strong, and trembling ones to be very courageous. Unless the exhorter can give some means of strength and some reason for courage, his word is idle wind. So Haggai bases his exhortation upon its sufficient ground, ‘For I am with you, saith Jehovah of hosts.’ Strength is a duty, but only if we have a source of strength available. The one basis of it is the presence of God. His name reveals the immensity of His power, who commands all the armies of heaven, angels, or stars, and to whom the forces of the universe are as the ordered ranks of His disciplined army; and who is, moreover, the Captain of earthly hosts, ever giving victory to those who are His ‘willing soldiers in the day of His power.’ It is not vain to bid a man be strong, if you can assure him that God is with him. Unless you can, you may save your breath.

Here is the temper for all Christian workers. Let them realise the duty of strength; let them have recourse to the Fountain of strength; let them mark the purpose of strength, which is ‘work,’ as Haggai puts it so emphatically. We have nothing to do with the magnitude of what we may be able to build. It may be very poor beside the great houses that greater ages or men have been able to rear. But whether it be a temple brave with gold and cedar, or a log, it is our business to put all our strength into the task, and to draw that strength from the assurance that God is with us.

The difficulties connected with the translation of Hag. 2:5 need not concern us here. For my purpose, the general sense resulting from any translation is clear enough. The covenant made of old, when Israel came from an earlier captivity, is fresh as ever, and God’s Spirit is with the people; therefore they need not fear. ‘Fear ye not’ is another of the well-meant exhortations which often produce the opposite effect from the intended one. One can fancy some of the people saying, ‘It is all very well to talk about not being afraid; but look at our feebleness, our defencelessness, our enemies; we cannot but fear, if we open our eyes.’ Quite true; and there is only one antidote to fear, and that is the assurance that God’s covenant binds Him to take care of me.

Unless one believes that, he must be strangely blind to the facts of life if he has not a cold dread coiled round his heart and ever ready to sting.

The Prophet rises into grand predictions of the glory of the poor house which the weak hands were raising. Hag. 2:6 set things invisible over against the visible. In general terms the Prophet announces a speedy convulsion, partly symbolical and partly real, in which 'all nations' shall be revolutionised, and as a consequence, shall become Jehovah's worshippers, bringing their treasures to the Temple, and so filling the house with glory. This shall be because Jehovah is the true Possessor of all their wealth. But the scope of Hag. 2:9 seems to transcend these promises, and to point to an undescribed 'glory,' still greater than that of the universal flocking of the nations with their gifts, and to reach a climax in the wide promise of peace given in the Temple, and thence, as is implied, flowing out 'like a river' through a tranquillised world.

'Yet once, it is a little while.' How long did the little while last? There were, possibly, some feeble incipient fulfilments of the prophecy in the immediate future; for, after the exile, there were convulsions in the political world which resulted in security to the Jews, and the religion of Israel began to draw some scattered proselytes. But the prophecy is not completely fulfilled even now, and it covers the entire development of the 'kingdom that cannot be moved' until the end of time. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews thus understands the prophecy [Heb. 12:26 - Heb. 12:27], and there are echoes of it in Rev. 21:1 - Rev. 21:27, which describes the final form of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. So the chronology of prophecy is not altogether that of history; and while the events stand clear, their perspective is foreshortened. All the ages are but 'a little while' in the calendar of heaven. In regard to the whole of the prophetic utterances, we have often to say with the disciples, 'What is this that he saith, a little while?' Eighteen centuries have rolled away since the seer heard, 'Behold, I come quickly,' and the vision still tarries.

The old interpretation of 'the desire of all nations' as meaning Jesus Christ gave a literal fulfilment of the prophecy by His presence in the Temple; but that meaning of the phrase is untenable, both because the verb is in the plural, which would be impossible if a person were meant, and because the only interpretation which gives relevancy to Hag. 2:8 is that the expression means the silver and gold, there declared to be Jehovah’s. That venerable explanation, then, cannot stand. There were offerings from heathen kings, such as those from Darius recorded in Ezr. 6:6 - Ezr. 6:10, and the gifts of Artaxerxes [Ezr. 7:15], which may be regarded as incipient accomplishments; but such facts as these cannot exhaust the prophecy.

It must be admitted that nothing happened during the history of that Temple to answer to the full meaning of this prophecy. But was it therefore a delusion that God spoke by Haggai? We must distinguish between form and substance. The Temple was the centre point of the kingdom of God on earth, the place of meeting between God and men, the place of sacrifice. The fulfilment of the prophecy is not to be found in any house made with hands, but in the true Temple which Jesus Christ has builded. He in His own humanity was all that the Temple shadowed and foretold. It is in Him, and in the spiritual Temple which He has reared, that Haggai’s vision will find its full realisation, which is yet future. The powers that issue from Him shattered the Roman empire, have ever since been casting earth’s kingdoms into new moulds, and have still destructive work to do. The ‘once more’ began when Jesus came, but the final ‘shaking’ lies in front still. Every smaller revolution in thought or sweeping away of institutions is a prelude to that great ‘shaking’ when everything will go except the kingdom that cannot be moved. Its result shall be that the treasures of the nations shall be poured at His feet who is ‘worthy to receive riches,’ even as other prophecies have foretold that ‘men shall bring unto Thee the wealth of the nations’ [Isa. 60:11; Rev. 21:24, Rev. 21:26].

In that true Temple the glory of the Shechinah, which was wanting in the second, for ever abides, ‘the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father’; and in it dwells for ever the dove of peace, ready to glide into every heart that enters to worship at the shrine. Jesus Christ is not the ‘desire of all nations’ which shall come to the Temple, but is the Temple to which the wealth of all nations shall be brought, in whom the true glory of a manifested God abides, and from whom the peace of God which passeth all understanding, and is His own peace too, shall enter reconciled souls, and calm turbulent passions, and reconcile contending peoples, and diffuse its calm through all the nations of the saved who there ‘walk in the light of the Lord.’

Zechariah

1) ZECHARIAH 1:5-6
2) ZECHARIAH 2:4-5
3) ZECHARIAH 3:1-6
4) ZECHARIAH 3:7
5) ZECHARIAH 3:8-10
6) ZECHARIAH 4:1-8
7) ZECHARIAH 4:9
8) ZECHARIAH 4:10
9) ZECHARIAH 6:13
10) ZECHARIAH 14:20

1) Zechariah 1:5-6

Zechariah

DYING MEN AND THE UNDYING WORD

Zec. 1:5 - Zec. 1:6.

Zechariah was the Prophet of the Restoration. Some sixteen years before this date a feeble band of exiles had returned from Babylon, with high hopes of rebuilding the ruined Temple. But their designs had been thwarted, and for long years the foundations stood unbuilded upon. The delay had shattered their hopes and flattened their enthusiasm; and when, with the advent of a new Persian king, a brighter day dawned, the little band was almost too dispirited to avail itself of it. At that crisis, two prophets ‘blew soul-animating strains,’ and as the narrative says elsewhere, ‘the work prospered through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah.’

My text comes from the first of Zechariah’s prophecies. In it he lays the foundation for all that he has subsequently to say. He points to the past, and summons up the august figures of the great pre-Exilic prophets, and reminds his contemporaries that the words which they spoke had been verified in the experience of past generations. He puts himself in line with these, his mighty predecessors, and declares that, though the hearers and the speakers of that prophetic word had glided away into the vast unknown, the word remained, lived still, and on his lips demanded the same obedience as it had vainly demanded from the generation that was past.

It has sometimes been supposed that of the two questions in my text the first is the Prophet's-'Your fathers, where are they?' and that the second is the retort of the people-'The prophets, do they live for ever?' 'It is true that our fathers are gone, but what about the prophets that you are talking of? Are they any better off? Are they not dead, too?' But though the separation of the words into dialogue gives vivacity, it is wholly unnecessary. And it seems to me that Zechariah's appeal is all the more impressive if we suppose that he here gathers the mortal hearers and speakers of the immortal word into one class, and sets over against them the Eternal Word, which lives to-day as it did then, and has new lessons for a new generation. So it is from that point of view that I wish to look at these words now, and try to gather from them some of the solemn, and, as it seems to me, striking lessons which they inculcate. I follow with absolute simplicity the Prophet's thoughts.

I. The mortal hearers and speakers of the abiding Word.

'Your fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever?' It is all but impossible to invest that well-known thought with any fresh force; but, perhaps, if we look at it from the special angle from which the Prophet here regards it, we may get some new impression of the old truth. That special angle is to bring into connection the Eternal Word and the transient vehicles and hearers of it.

Did you ever stand in some roofless, ruined cathedral or abbey church, and try to gather round you the generations that had bowed and worshipped there? Did you ever step across the threshold of some ancient sanctuary, where the feet of vanished generations had worn down the sand-stone steps at the entrance? It is solemn to think of the fleeting series of men; it is still more striking to bring them into connection with that everlasting Word which once they heard, and accepted or rejected.

But let me bring the thought a little closer. There is not a sitting in our churches that has not been sat in by dead people. As I stand here and look round I can re-people almost every pew with faces that we shall see no more. Many of you, the older *habitués* of this place, can do the same, and can look and think, ‘Ah! *he* used to sit there; *she* used to be in that corner.’ And I can remember many mouldering lips that have stood in this place where I stand, of friends and brethren that are gone. ‘Your fathers, where are they?’ ‘Graves under us, silent,’ is the only answer. ‘And the prophets, do they live for ever?’ No memories are shorter-lived than the memories of the preachers of God’s Word.

Take another thought, that all these past hearers and speakers of the Word had that Word verified in their lives. ‘Took it not hold of your fathers?’ Some of them neglected it, and its burdens were upon them, little as they felt them sometimes. Some of them clave to it, and accepted it, and its blessed promises were all fulfilled to them. Not one of those who, for the brief period of their earthly lives, came in contact with that divine message but realised, more or less consciously, some blessedly and some in darkened lives and ruined careers, the solemn truth of its promises and of its threatenings. The Word may have been received, or it may have been neglected, by the past generations; but whether the members thereof put out a hand to accept, or withheld their grasp, whether they took hold of it or it took hold of them-wherever they are now, their earthly relation to that word is a determining factor in their condition. The syllables died away into empty air, the messages were forgotten, but the men that ministered them are eternally influenced by the faithfulness of their ministrations, and the men that heard them are eternally affected by the reception or rejection of that word. So, when we summon around us the congregation of the dead, which is more numerous than the audience of the living to whom I now speak, the lesson that their silent presence teaches us is, ‘Wherefore we should give the more earnest heed to the things that we have heard.’

II. Let us note the abiding Word, which these transient generations of hearers and speakers have had to do with.

It is maddening to think of the sure decay and dissolution of all human strength, beauty, wisdom, unless that thought brings with it immediately, like a pair of coupled stars, of which the one is bright and the other dark, the corresponding thought of that which does not pass, and is unaffected by time and change. Just as reason requires some unalterable substratum, below all the fleeting phenomena of the changeful creation-a God who is the Rock-basis of all, the staple to which all the links hang-so we are driven back and back and back, by the very fact of the transiency of the transient, to grasp, for a refuge and a stay, the permanency of the permanent. ‘In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne’-the passing away of the mortal shadow of sovereignty revealed the undying and true King. It is blessed for us when the lesson which the fleeting of all that *can* flee away reads to us is that, beneath it all, there is the Unchanging. When the leaves drop from the boughs of the trees that veil the face of the cliff, then the steadfast rock is visible; and when the generations, like leaves, drop and rot, then the rock background should stand out the more clearly.

Zechariah meant by the ‘word of God’ simply the prophetic utterances about the destiny and the punishment of his nation. We ought to mean by the ‘word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever,’ not merely the written embodiment of it in the Old or New Testament, but the Personal Word, the Incarnate Word, the everlasting Son of the Father, who came upon earth to be God’s mouthpiece and utterance, and who is for us all *the* Word, the Eternal Word of the living God. It is His perpetual existence rather than the continuous duration of the written word, declaration of Himself though it is, that is mighty for our strength and consolation when we think of the transient generations.

Christ lives. That is the deepest meaning of the ancient saying, ‘All flesh is grass. . . . The Word of the Lord endureth for ever.’ He lives; therefore we can front change and decay in all around calmly and triumphantly. It matters not though the prophets and their hearers pass away. Men depart; Christ abides. Luther was once surprised by some friends sitting at a table from which a meal had been removed, and thoughtfully tracing with his fingers upon its surface with some drop of water or wine the one word ‘Vivit’; He lives. He fell back upon that when all around was dark. Yes, men may go; what of that? Aaron may have to ascend to the summit of Hor, and put off his priestly garments and die there. Moses may have to climb Pisgah, and with one look at the land which he must never tread, die there alone by the kiss of God, as the Rabbis say. Is the host below leaderless? The Pillar of Cloud lies still over the Tabernacle, and burns steadfast and guiding in front of the files of Israel. 'Your fathers, where are they? The prophets, do they live for ever?' 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and to-day and for ever.'

Another consideration to be drawn from this contrast is, since we have this abiding Word, let us not dread changes, however startling and revolutionary. Jesus Christ does not change. But there is a human element in the Church's conceptions of Jesus Christ, and still more in its working out of the principles of the Gospel in institutions and forms, which partakes of the transiency of the men from whom it has come. In such a time as this, when everything is going into the melting-pot, and a great many timid people are trembling for the Ark of God, quite unnecessarily as it seems to me, it is of prime importance for the calmness and the wisdom and the courage of Christian people, that they should grasp firmly the distinction between the divine treasure which is committed to the churches, and the earthen vessels in which it has been enshrined. Jesus Christ, the man Jesus, the divine person, His incarnation, His sacrifice, His resurrection, His ascension, the gift of His Spirit to abide for ever with His Church-these are the permanent 'things which cannot be shaken.' And creeds and churches and formulas and forms-these are the human elements which are capable of variation, and which need variation from time to time. No more is the substance of that eternal Gospel affected by the changes, which are possible on its vesture, than is the stateliness of some cathedral touched, when the reformers go in and sweep out the rubbish and the trumpery which have masked the fair outlines of its architecture, and vulgarised the majesty of its stately sweep. Brethren! let us fix this in our hearts, that nothing which is of Christ can perish, and nothing which is of man can or should endure. The more firmly we grasp the distinction between the permanent and the transient in existing embodiments of Christian truth, the more calm shall we be amidst the surges of contending opinions. 'He that believeth shall not make haste.'

III. Lastly, the present generation and its relation to the abiding Word.

Zechariah did not hesitate to put himself in line with the mighty forms of Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and Hosea. He, too, was a prophet. We claim, of course, no such authority for present utterers of that eternal message, but we do claim for our message a higher authority than the authority of this ancient Prophet. He felt that the word of God that was put into his lips was a new word, addressed to a new generation, and with new lessons for new circumstances, fitting as close to the wants of the little band of exiles as the former messages, which it succeeded, had fitted to the wants of their generation. We have no such change in the message, for Jesus Christ speaks to us all, speaks to all times and to all circumstances, and to every generation. And so, just as Zechariah based upon the history of the past his appeal for obedience and acceptance, the considerations which I have been trying to dwell upon bring with them stringent obligations to us who stand, however unworthy, in the place of the generations that are gone, as the hearers and ministers of the Word of God. Let me put two or three very simple and homely exhortations. First, see to it, brother, that you accept that Word. By acceptance I do not mean a mere negative attitude, which is very often the result of lack of interest, the negative attitude of simply not rejecting; but I mean the opening not only of your minds but of your hearts to it. For if what I have been saying is true, and the Word of God has for its highest manifestation Jesus Christ Himself, then you cannot accept a person by pure head-work. You must open your hearts and all your natures, and let Him come in with His love, with His pity, with His inspiration of strength and virtue and holiness, and you must yield yourselves wholly to Him. Think of the generations that are gone. Think of their brief moment when the great salvation was offered to them. Think of how, whether they received or rejected it, that Word took hold upon them. Think of how they regard it now, wherever they are in the dimness; and be you wise in time and be not as those of your fathers who rejected the Word.

Hold it fast. In this time of unrest make sure of your grasp of the eternal, central core of Christianity, Jesus Christ Himself, the divine-human Saviour of the world. There are too many of us whose faith oozes out at their finger ends, simply because they have so many around them that question and doubt and deny. Do not let the floating icebergs bring down *your* temperature; and have a better reason for not believing, if you do not believe, than that so many and such influential and authoritative men have ceased to believe. When Jesus asks, ‘Will ye also go away?’ our answer should be, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.’

Accept Him, hold Him fast, trust to His guidance in present day questions. Zechariah felt that his message belonged to the generation to whom he spoke. It was a new message. We have no new message, but there are new truths to be evolved from the old message. The questionings and problems, social, economical, intellectual, moral-shall I say political?-of this day, will find their solution in that ancient word, ‘God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish.’ There is the key to all problems. ‘In Him are hid all the treasures and wisdom of knowledge.’

Zechariah pointed to the experiences of a past generation as the basis of his appeal. We can point back to eighteen centuries, and say that the experiences of these centuries confirm the truth that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world. The blessedness, the purity, the power, the peace, the hope which He has breathed into humanity, the subsidiary and accompanying material and intellectual prosperity and blessings that attend His message, its independence of human instruments, its adaptation to all varieties of class, character, condition, geographical position, its power of recuperating itself from corruptions and distortions, its undiminished adaptedness to the needs of this generation and of each of us-enforce the stringency of the exhortation, and confirm the truth of the assertion: ‘This is My beloved Son; hear ye Him!’ ‘The voice said, Cry. And I said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the Word of our God shall stand for ever.’ Three hundred years after Isaiah a triumphant Apostle added, ‘This is the word which by the Gospel is preached unto you.’ Eighteen hundred years after Peter we can echo his confident declaration, and, with the history of these centuries to support our faith, can affirm that the Christ of the Gospel and the Gospel of the Christ are in deed and in truth the Living Word of the Living God.

2) Zechariah 2:4-5

Zechariah

THE CITY WITHOUT WALLS

Zec. 2:4 - Zec. 2:5.

Zechariah was the Prophet of the returning exiles, and his great work was to hearten them for their difficult task, with their small resources and their many foes, and to insist that the prime condition to success, on the part of that portion of the nation that had returned, was holiness. So his visions, of which there is a whole series, are very largely concerned with the building of the Temple and of the city. In this one, he sees a man with a measuring-rod in his hand coming forth to take the dimensions of the still un-existing city of God. The words that I have read are the centre portion of that vision. You notice that there are three clauses, and that the first in order is the consequence of the other two. 'Jerusalem shall be builded as a city without walls . . . for I will be a wall of fire round about her, and the glory in the midst of her.'

And that exuberant promise was spoken about the Jerusalem over which Christ wept when he foresaw its inevitable destruction. When the Romans had cast a torch into the Temple, and the streets of the city were running with blood, what had become of Zechariah's dream of a wall of fire round about her? Then can the divine fire be quenched? Yes. And who quenched it? Not the Romans, but the people that lived within that flaming rampart. The apparent failure of the promise carries the lesson for churches and individuals to-day, that in spite of such glowing predictions, there may again sound the voice that the legend says was heard within the Temple, on the night before Jerusalem fell. 'Let us depart,' and there was a rustling of unseen wings, and on the morrow the legionaries were in the shrine. 'If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee.'

Now let us look, in the simplest possible way, at these three clauses, and the promises that are in them; keeping in mind that, like all the divine promises, they are conditional.

The first is this:-

I. 'I will be a wall of fire round about her.'

I need not dwell on the vividness and beauty of that metaphor. These encircling flames will consume all antagonism, and defy all approach. But let me remind you that the conditional promise was intended for Judæ¡ and Jerusalem, and was fulfilled in literal fact. So long as the city obeyed and trusted God it was impregnable, though all the nations stood round about it, like dogs round a sheep. The fulfilment of the promise has passed over, with all the rest that characterised Israel's position, to the Christian Church, and to-day, in the midst of all the agitations of opinion, and all the vauntings of men about an effete Christianity, and dead churches, it is as true as ever it was that the living Church of God is eternal. If it had not been that there was a God as a wall of fire round about the Church, it would have been wiped off the face of the earth long ago. If nothing else had killed it the faults of its members would have done so. The continuance of the Church is a perpetual miracle, when you take into account the weakness, and the errors, and the follies, and the stupidities, and the narrownesses, and the sins, of the people who in any given day represent it. That it should stand at all, and that it should conquer, seems to me to be as plain a demonstration of the present working of God, as is the existence still, as a separate individuality amongst the peoples of the earth, of His ancient people, the Jews. Who was it who said, when somebody asked him for the best proof of the truth of Christianity, 'The Jews'? and so we may say, if you want a demonstration that God is working in the world, 'Look at the continuance of the Christian Church.'

In spite of all the vauntings of people that have already discounted its fall, and are talking as if it needed no more to be reckoned with, that calm confidence is the spirit in which we are to look around and forward. It does not become any Christian ever to have the smallest scintillation of a fear that the ship that bears Jesus Christ can fail to come to land, or can sink in the midst of the waters. There was once a timid would-be helper who put out his hand to hold up the Ark of God. He need not have been afraid. The oxen might stumble, and the cart roll about, but the Ark was safe and stable. A great deal may go, but the wall of fire will be around the Church. In regard to its existence, as in regard to the immortal being of each of its members, the great word remains for ever true: 'Because I live ye shall live also.'

But do not let us forget that this great promise does not belong only to the Church as a whole, but that we have each to bring it down to our own individual lives, and to be quite sure of this, that in spite of all that sense says, in spite of all that quivering hearts and weeping eyes may seem to prove, there is a wall of fire round each of us, if we are keeping near Jesus Christ, through which it is as impossible that any real evil should pass and get at us, as it would be impossible that any living thing should pass through the flaming battlements that the Prophet saw round his ideal city. Only we have to interpret that promise by faith and not by sense, and we have to make it possible that it shall be fulfilled by keeping inside the wall, and trusting to it. As faith dwindles, the fiery wall burns dim, and evil can get across its embers, and can get at us. Keep within the battlements, and they will flame up bright and impassable, with a fire that on the outer side consumes, but to those within is a fire that cherishes and warms.

II. The next point of the promise passes into a more intimate region.

It is well to have a defence from that which is without us; but it is more needful to have, if a comparison can be made between the two, a glory 'in the midst' of us.

The one is external defence; the other inward illumination, with all which light symbolises-knowledge, joy, purity.

There is even more than that meant by this great promise. For notice that emphatic little word *the-the* glory, not *a* glory-in the midst of her. Now you all know what 'the glory' was. It was that symbolic Light that spoke of the special presence of God, and went with the Children of Israel in their wanderings, and sat between the Cherubim. There was no 'Shechinah,' as it is technically called, in that second Temple. But yet the Prophet says, 'The glory'-the actual presence of God-'shall be in the midst of her,' and the meaning of that great promise is taught us by the very last vision in the New Testament, in which the Seer of the Apocalypse says, 'The glory of the Lord did lighten it' [evidently quoting Zechariah], 'and the Lamb is the light thereof.' So the city is lit as by one central glow of radiance that flashes its beams into every corner, and therefore 'there shall be no night there.'

Now this promise, too, bears on churches and on individuals. On the Church as a whole it bears in this way: the only means by which a Christian community can fulfil its function, and be the light of the world, is by having the presence of God, in no metaphor, the actual presence of the illuminating Spirit in its midst. If it has not that, it may have anything and everything else-wealth, culture, learning, eloquence, influence in the world-but all is of no use; it will be darkness. We are light only in proportion as we are 'light in the Lord.' As long as we, as communities, keep our hearts in touch with Him, so long do we shine. Break the contact, and the light fades and flickers out.

The same thing is true, dear brethren, about individuals. For each of us the secret of joy, of purity, of knowledge, is that we be holding close communion with God. If we have Him in the depths of our hearts, then, and only then, shall we be 'light in the Lord.'

And now look at the last point which follows, as I have said, as the result of the other two.

III. 'Jerusalem shall be without walls.'

It is to be like the defenceless villages scattered up and down over Israel. There is no need for bulwarks of stone. The wall of fire is round about. The Prophet has a vision of a great city, of a type unknown in those old times, though familiar to us in our more peaceful days, where there was no hindrance to expansion by encircling ramparts, no crowding together of the people because they needed to hide behind the city walls; and where the growing community could spread out into the outer suburbs, and have fresh air and ample space. That is the vision of the manner of city that Jerusalem was to be. It did not come true, but the ideal was this. It has not yet come true sufficiently in regard to the churches of to-day, but it ought to be the goal to which they are tending. The more a Christian community is independent of external material supports and defences the better.

I am not going to talk about the policy or impolicy of Established Churches, as they are called. But it seems to me that the principle that is enshrined in this vision is their condemnation. Never mind about stone and lime walls, trust in God and you will not need them, and you will be strong and 'established' just in the proportion in which you are cut loose from all dependence upon, and consequent subordination to, the civil power.

But there is another thought that I might suggest, though I do not know that it is directly in the line of the Prophet's vision; and that is-a Christian Church should neither depend on, nor be cribbed and cramped by, men-made defences of any kind. Luther tells us somewhere, in his parabolic way, of people that wept because there were no visible pillars to hold up the heavens, and were afraid that the sky would fall upon their heads. No, no, there is no fear of that happening, for an unseen hand holds them up. A church that hides behind the fortifications of its grandfathers' erection has no room for expansion; and if it has no room for expansion it will not long continue as large as it is. It must either grow greater, or grow, and deserve to grow, less.

The same thing is true, dear brethren, about ourselves individually. Zechariah's prophecy was never meant to prevent what he himself helped to further, the building of the actual walls of the actual city. And our dependence upon God is not to be so construed as that we are to waive our own common-sense and our own effort. That is not faith; it is fanaticism.

We have to build ourselves round, in this world, with other things than the 'wall of fire,' but in all our building we have to say, 'Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it. Except the Lord keep the city, the watchers watch in vain.' But yet neither Jerusalem nor the Church, nor the earthly state of that believer who lives most fully the life of faith, exhausts this promise. It waits for the day when the city shall descend, 'like a bride adorned for her husband, having no need of the sun nor of the moon, for the glory . . . lightens it.' Having walls, indeed, but for splendour, not for defence; and having gates, which have only one of the functions of a gate-to stand wide open, to the east and the west, and the north and the south, for the nations to enter in; and never needing to be barred against enemies by day, 'for there shall be no night there.'

3) Zechariah 3:1-6

Zechariah

A VISION OF JUDGEMENT AND CLEANSING

Zec. 3:1 - Zec. 3:10.

Zechariah worked side by side with Haggai to quicken the religious life of the people, and thus to remove the gravest hindrances to the work of rebuilding the Temple. Inward indifference, not outward opposition, is the real reason for slow progress in God's work, and prophets who see visions and preach repentance are the true practical men.

This vision followed Haggai's prophecy at the interval of a month. It falls into two parts-a symbolical vision and a series of promises founded on it.

I. The Symbolical Vision [Zec. 3:1 - Zec. 3:5].

The scene of the vision is left undetermined, and the absence of any designation of locality gives the picture the sublimity of indefiniteness. Three figures, seen he knows not where, stand clear before the Prophet's inward eye. They were shown him by an unnamed person, who is evidently Jehovah Himself. The real and the ideal are marvellously mingled in the conception of Joshua the high priest-the man whom the people saw every day going about Jerusalem-standing at the bar of God, with Satan as his accuser. The trial is in process when the Prophet is permitted to see. We do not hear the pleadings on either side, but the sentence is solemnly recorded. The accusations are dismissed, their bringer rebuked, and in token of acquittal, the filthy garments which the accused had worn are changed for the full festal attire of the high priest.

What, then, is the meaning of this grand symbolism? The first point to keep well in view is the representative character of the high priest. He appears as laden not with individual but national sins. In him Israel is, as it were, concentrated, and what befalls him is the image of what befalls the nation. His dirty dress is the familiar symbol of sin; and he wears it, just as he wore his sacerdotal dress, in his official capacity, as the embodied nation. He stands before the judgment seat, bearing not his own but the people's sins.

Two great truths are thereby taught, which are as true to-day as ever. The first is that representation is essential to priesthood. It was so in shadowy and external fashion in Israel; it is so in deepest and most blessed reality in Christ's priesthood. He stands before God as our representative-'And the

Lord hath made to meet on Him the iniquity of us all.' If by faith we unite ourselves with Him, there ensues a wondrous transference of characteristics, so that our sin becomes His, and His righteousness becomes ours; and that in no mere artificial or forensic sense, but in inmost reality. Theologians talk of a *communicatio idiomatum* as between the human and the divine elements in Christ. There is an analogous passage of the attributes of either to the other, in the relation of the believer to his Saviour.

The second thought in this symbolic appearance of Joshua before the angel of the Lord is that the sins of God's people are even now present before His perfect judgment, as reasons for withdrawing from them His favour. That is a solemn truth, which should never be forgotten. A Christian man's sins do accuse him at the bar of God. They are all visible there; and so far as their tendency goes, they are like wedges driven in to rend him from God.

But the second figure in the vision is 'the Satan,' standing in the plaintiff's place at the Judge's right hand, to accuse Joshua. The Old Testament teaching as to the evil spirit who 'accuses' good men is not so developed as that of the New, which is quite natural, inasmuch as the shadow of bright light is deeper than that of faint rays. It is most full in the latest books, as here and in Job; but doctrinal inferences drawn from such highly imaginative symbolism as this are precarious. No one who accepts the authority of our Lord can well deny the existence and activity of a malignant spirit, who would fain make the most of men's sins, and use them as a means of separating their doers from God. That is the conception here.

But the main stress of the vision lies, not on the accuser or his accusation, but on the Judge's sentence, which alone is recorded. 'The Angel of the Lord' is named in Zec. 3:1 as the Judge, while the sentence in Zec. 3:2 is spoken by 'the Lord.' It would lead us far away from our purpose to inquire whether that Angel of the Lord is an earlier manifestation of the eternal Son, who afterwards became flesh-a kind of preluding or rehearsing of the Incarnation. But in any case, God so dwells in Him as that what the Angel says God says and the speaker varies as in our text. The accuser is rebuked, and God's rebuke is not a mere word, but brings with it punishment. The malicious accusations have failed, and their aim is to be gathered from the language which announces their miscarriage. Obviously Satan sought to procure the withdrawal of divine favour from Joshua, because of his sin; that is, to depose the nation from its place as the covenant people, because of its transgressions of the covenant. Satan here represents what might otherwise have been called, in theological language, 'the demands of justice.' The answer given him is deeply instructive as to the grounds of the divine forbearance.

Note that Joshua's guilt as the representative of the people is not denied, but tacitly admitted and actually spoken of in Zec. 3:4. Why, then, does not the accuser have his way? For two reasons. God has chosen Jerusalem. His great purpose, the fruit of His undeserved mercy, is not to be turned aside by man's sins. The thought is the same as that of Jeremiah: 'If heaven above can be measured . . . then I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done' [Jer. 31:37]. Again, the fact that Joshua was 'a brand plucked from the burning'-that is, that the people whom he represented had been brought unconsumed from the furnace of captivity-is a reason with God for continuing to extend His favour, though they have sinned. God's past mercies are a motive with him. Creatural love is limited, and too often says, 'I have forgiven so often, that I am wearied, and can do it no more.' He *has*, therefore he *will*. We often come to the end of our long-suffering a good many times short of the four hundred and ninety a day which Christ prescribes. But God never does. True, Joshua and his people have sinned, and that since their restoration, and Satan had a good argument in pointing to these transgressions; but God does not say, 'I will put back the half-burned brand in the fire again, since the evil is not burned out of it,' but forgives again, because He has forgiven before.

The sentence is followed by the exchange of the filthy garments symbolical of sin, for the full array of the high priest. Ministering angels are dimly seen in the background, and are summoned to unclothe and clothe Joshua. The Prophet ventures to ask that the sacerdotal attire should be completed by the turban or mitre, probably that headdress which bore the significant writing 'Holiness to the Lord,' expressive of the destination of Israel and of its ceremonial cleanness. The meaning of this change of clothing is given in Zec. 3:4 : 'I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee.' Thus the complete restoration of the pardoned and cleansed nation to its place as a nation of priests to Jehovah is symbolised. To us the gospel of forgiveness fills up the outline in the vision; and we know how, when sin testifies against us, we have an Advocate with the Father, and how the infinite love flows out to us notwithstanding all sin, and how the stained garment of our souls can be stripped off, and the ‘fine linen clean and white,’ the priestly dress on the day of atonement, be put on us, and we be made priests unto God.

II. The remainder of the vision is the address of the Angel of the Lord to Joshua, developing the blessings now made sure to him and his people by this renewed consecration and cleansing.

First [Zec. 3:7] is the promise of continuance in office and access to God’s presence, which, however, are contingent on obedience. The forgiven man must keep God’s charge, if he is to retain his standing. On that condition, he has ‘a place of access among those that stand by’; that is, the privilege of approach to God, like the attendant angels. This promise may be taken as surpassing the prerogatives hitherto accorded to the high priest, who had only the right of entrance into the holiest place once a year, but now is promised the *entrée* to the heavenly court, as if he were one of the bright spirits who stand there. They who have access with confidence within the veil because Christ is there, have more than the ancient promise of this vision.

The main point of Zec. 3:8 is the promise of the Messiah, but the former part of the verse is remarkable. Joshua and his fellows are summoned to listen, ‘for they are men which are a sign.’ The meaning seems to be that he and his brethren who sat as his assessors in official functions, are collectively a sign or embodied prophecy of what is to come. Their restoration to their offices was a shadowy prophecy of a greater act of forgiving grace, which was to be effected by the coming of the Messiah.

The name ‘Branch’ is used here as a proper name. Jeremiah [Jer. 23:5; Jer. 33:15] had already employed it as a designation of Messiah, which he had apparently learned from Isa. 4:2. The idea of the word is that of the similar names used by Isaiah, ‘a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a Branch out of his roots’ [Isa. 11:1], and ‘a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground’ [Isa. 53:2]; namely, that of his origin from the fallen house of David, and the lowliness of his appearance.

The Messiah is again meant by the ‘stone’ in Zec. 3:9. Probably there was some great stone taken from the ruins, to which the symbol attaches itself. The foundation of the second Temple had been laid years before the prophecy, but the stone may still have been visible. The Rabbis have much to say about a great stone which had been in the first Temple, and there used for the support of the ark, but in the second was set in the empty place where the ark should have been. Isaiah had prophesied of the ‘tried corner-stone’ laid in Zion, and Psa. 118:22 had sung of the stone rejected and made the head of the corner. We go in the track, then, of established usage, when we see in this stone the emblem of Messiah, and associate with it all thoughts of firmness, preciousness, support, foundation of the true Temple, basis of hope, ground of certitude, and whatever other substratum of fixity and immovableness men’s hearts or lives need. In all possible aspects of the metaphor, Jesus is the Foundation.

And what are the ‘seven eyes on the stone’? That may simply be a vivid way of saying that the fulness of divine Providence would watch over the Messiah, bringing Him when the time was ripe, and fitting Him for His work. But if we remember the subsequent explanation [Zec. 4:10] of the ‘seven,’ as ‘the eyes of the Lord which run to and fro through the whole earth,’ and connect this with Rev. 5:6, we can scarcely rest content with that meaning, but find here the deeper thought that the fulness of the divine Spirit was given to Messiah, even as Isa. 11:2 prophesies of the sevenfold Spirit.

‘I will engrave the graving thereof’ is somewhat obscure. It seems to mean that the seven eyes will be cut on the stone, like masons’ marks. If the seven eyes are the full energies of the Holy Spirit, God’s cutting of them on the stone is equivalent to His giving them to His Son; and the fulfilment of the promise was when He gave the Holy Spirit not ‘by measure unto Him.’

The blessed purpose of Messiah’s coming and endowment with the Spirit is gloriously stated in the last clause of Zec. 3:9 : ‘I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day.’ Jesus Christ has ‘once for all’ made atonement, as the Epistle to the Hebrews so often says. The better Joshua by one offering has taken away sin. ‘The breadth of Thy land, O Immanuel,’ stretched far beyond the narrow bounds which Zechariah knew for Israel’s territory. It includes the whole world. As has been beautifully said, ‘That one day is the day of Golgotha.’

The vision closes with a picture of the felicity of Messianic times, which recalls the description of the golden age of Solomon, when ‘Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig-tree’ [1Ki. 4:25]. In like manner the nation, cleansed, restored to its priestly privilege of free access to God by the Messiah who comes with the fulness of the Spirit, shall dwell in safety, and shall be knit together by friendship, and unenvyingly shall each share his good with all others, recognising in every man a neighbour, and gladly welcoming him to partake of all the blessings which the true Solomon has brought to his house and heart.

4) Zechariah 3:7

Zechariah

A VISION OF JUDGEMENT AND CLEANSING

THE RIGHT OF ENTRY

Zec. 3:7.

A WORD or two of explanation will probably be necessary in order to see the full meaning of this great promise. The Prophet has just been describing a vision of judgment which he saw, in which the high priest, as representative of the nation, stood before the Angel of the Lord as an unclean person. He is cleansed and clothed, his foul raiment stripped off him, and a fair priestly garment, with ‘Holiness to the Lord’ written on the front of it, put upon him. And then follow a series of promises, of which the climax is the one that I have read. ‘I will give thee a place of access,’ says the Revised Version, instead of ‘places to walk’; ‘I will give thee a place of access among those that stand by’; the attendant angels are dimly seen surrounding their Lord. And so the promise of my text, in highly figurative fashion, is that of free and unrestrained approach to God, of a life that is like that of the angels that stand before His Face.

So, then, the words suggest to us, first, what a Christian life may be.

There are two images blended together in the great words of my text; the one is that of a king's court, the other is that of a temple. With regard to the former it is a privilege given to the highest nobles of a kingdom-or it was so in old days-to have the right of *entrée*, at all moments and in all circumstances, to the monarch. With regard to the latter, the prerogative of the high priest, who was the recipient of this promise, as to access to the Temple, was a very restricted one. Once a year, with the blood that prevented his annihilation by the brightness of the Presence into which he ventured, he passed within the veil, and stood before that mysterious Light that coruscated in the darkness of the Holy of Holies. But this High Priest is promised an access on all days and at all times; and that He may stand there, beside and like the seraphim, who with one pair of wings veiled their faces in token of the incapacity of the creature to behold the Creator; 'with twain veiled their feet' in token of the unworthiness of creatural activities to be set before Him, 'and with twain did fly' in token of their willingness to serve Him with all their energies. This Priest passes within the veil when He will. Or, to put away the two metaphors, and to come to the reality far greater than either of them, we can, whensoever we please, pass into the presence before which the splendours of an earthly monarch's court shrink into vulgarity, and attain to a real reception of the light that irradiates the true Holy Place, before which that which shone in the earthly shrine dwindles and darkens into a shadow. We may live with God, and in Him, and wrap a veil and 'privacy of glorious light' about us, whilst we pilgrim upon earth, and may have hidden lives which, notwithstanding all their surface occupation with the distractions and duties and enjoyments of the present, deep down in their centres are knit to God. Our lives may on the outside thus be largely amongst the things seen and temporal, and yet all the while may penetrate through these, and lay hold with their true roots on the eternal. If we have any religious life at all, the measure in which we possess it is the measure in which we may ever more dwell in the house of the Lord, and have our hearts in the secret place of the Most High, amid the stillnesses and the sanctities of His immediate dwelling.

Our Master is the great Example of this, of whom it is said, not only in reference to His mysterious and unique union of nature with the Father in His divinity, but in reference to the humanity which He had in common with us all, yet without sin, that the Son of Man came down from heaven, and even in the act of coming, and when He had come, was yet the Son of Man ‘which *is in heaven*.’ Thus we, too, may have ‘a place of access among them that stand by,’ and not need to envy the angels and the spirits of the just made perfect, the closeness of their communion, and the vividness of their vision, for the same, in its degree, may be ours. We, too, can turn all our desires into petitions, and of every wish make a prayer. We, too can refer all our needs to His infinite supply. We, too may consciously connect all our doings with His will and His glory; and for us it is possible that there shall be, as if borne on those electric wires that go striding across pathless deserts, and carry their messages through unpeopled solitudes, between Him and us a communication unbroken and continuous, which, by a greater wonder than even that of the telegraph, shall carry two messages, going opposite ways simultaneously, bearing to Him the swift aspirations and supplications of our spirits, and bringing to us the abundant answer of His grace. Such a conversation in heaven, and such association with the bands of the blessed is possible even for a life upon earth.

Secondly, let us consider this promise as a pattern for us of what Christian life should be, and, alas! so seldom is.

All privilege is duty, and everything that is possible for any Christian man to become, it is imperative on him to aim at. There is no greater sin than living beneath the possibilities of our lives, in any region, whether religious or other it matters not. Sin is not only going contrary to the known law of God, but also a falling beneath a divine ideal which is capable of realisation. And in regard to our Christian life, if God has flung open His temple-gates and said to us, ‘Come in, My child, and dwell in the secret place of the Most High, and abide there under the shadow of the Almighty, finding protection and communion and companionship in My worship,’ there can be nothing more insulting to Him, and nothing more fatally indicative of the alienation of our hearts from Him, than that we should refuse to obey the merciful invitation.

What should we say of a subject who never presented himself in the court to which he had the right of free *entré¥¿* His absence would be a mark of disloyalty, and would be taken as a warning-bell in preparation for his rebellion. What should we say of a son or a daughter, living in the same city with their parents, who never crossed the threshold of the father's house, but that they had lost the spirit of a child, and that if there was no desire to be near there could be no love?

So, if we will ask ourselves, 'How often do I use this possibility of communion with God, which might irradiate all my daily life?' I think we shall need little else, in the nature of evidence, that our piety and our religious experience are terribly stunted and dwarfed, in comparison with what they ought to be.

There is an old saying, 'He that can tell how often he has thought of God in a day has thought of Him too seldom.' I dare say many of us would have little difficulty in counting on the fingers of one hand, and perhaps not needing them all, the number of times in which, to-day, our thoughts have gone heavenwards. What we may be is what we ought to be, and not to use the prerogatives of our position is the worst of sins.

Again, my text suggests to us what every Christian life will hereafter perfectly be.

Some commentators take the words of my text to refer only to the communion of saints from the earth, with the glorified angels, in and after the Resurrection. That is a poor interpretation, for heaven is here to-day. But still there is a truth in the interpretation which we need not neglect. Only let us remember that nothing-so far as Scripture teaches us-begins yonder except the full reaping of the fruits of what has been sown here, and that if a man's feet have not learned the path into the Temple when he was here upon earth, death will not be the guide for him into the Father's presence. All that here has been imperfect, fragmentary, occasional, interrupted, and marred in our communion with God, shall one day be complete. And then, oh! then, who can tell what undreamed-of depths and sweetnesses of renewed communion and of intercourses begun, for the first time then, between 'those that stand by,' and have stood there for ages, will then be realised?

'Ye are come'-even here on earth-'to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and Church of the first-born,' but for us all there may be the quiet hope that hereafter we shall 'dwell in the house of the Lord for ever'; and 'in solemn troops and sweet societies' shall learn what fellowship, and brotherhood, and human love may be.

Lastly, notice, not from my text but from its context, how any life may become thus privileged.

The promise is preceded by a condition: 'If thou wilt walk in My ways, and if thou wilt keep My charge, then . . . I will give thee access among those that stand by.' That is to say, you cannot keep the consciousness of God's presence, nor have any blessedness of communion with Him, if you are living in disobedience of His commandments or in neglect of manifest duty. A thin film of vapour in our sky tonight will hide the moon. Though the vapour itself may be invisible, it will be efficacious as a veil. And any sin, great or small, fleecy and thin, will suffice to shut me out from God. If we are keeping His commandments, then, and only then, shall we have access with free hearts into His presence.

But to lay down that condition seems the same thing as slamming the door in every man's face. But let us remember what went before my text, the experience of the priest to whom it was spoken in the vision. His filthy garments were stripped off him, and the pure white robes worn on the great Day of Atonement, the sacerdotal dress, were put upon him. It is the *cleansed* man that has access among 'those that stand by.' And if you ask how the cleansing is to be effected, take the great words of the Epistle to the Hebrews as an all-sufficient answer, coinciding with, but transcending, what this vision taught Zechariah: 'Having, therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest of all, by the blood of Jesus, . . . and having a High Priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience.' Cleansed by Christ, and with Him for our Forerunner, we have boldness and 'access with confidence by the faith of Him,' who proclaims to the whole world, 'No man cometh to the Father but by Me.'

5) Zechariah 3:8-10

Zechariah

A VISION OF JUDGEMENT AND CLEANSING

Zec. 3:1 - Zec. 3:10.

Zechariah worked side by side with Haggai to quicken the religious life of the people, and thus to remove the gravest hindrances to the work of rebuilding the Temple. Inward indifference, not outward opposition, is the real reason for slow progress in God's work, and prophets who see visions and preach repentance are the true practical men.

This vision followed Haggai's prophecy at the interval of a month. It falls into two parts-a symbolical vision and a series of promises founded on it.

I. The Symbolical Vision [Zec. 3:1 - Zec. 3:5].

The scene of the vision is left undetermined, and the absence of any designation of locality gives the picture the sublimity of indefiniteness. Three figures, seen he knows not where, stand clear before the Prophet's inward eye. They were shown him by an unnamed person, who is evidently Jehovah Himself. The real and the ideal are marvellously mingled in the conception of Joshua the high priest-the man whom the people saw every day going about Jerusalem-standing at the bar of God, with Satan as his accuser. The trial is in process when the Prophet is permitted to see. We do not hear the pleadings on either side, but the sentence is solemnly recorded. The accusations are dismissed, their bringer rebuked, and in token of acquittal, the filthy garments which the accused had worn are changed for the full festal attire of the high priest.

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The name 'Branch' is used here as a proper name. Jeremiah [Jer. 23:5; Jer. 33:15] had already employed it as a designation of Messiah, which he had apparently learned from Isa. 4:2. The idea of the word is that of the similar names used by Isaiah, 'a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a Branch out of his roots' [Isa. 11:1], and 'a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground'

[Isa. 53:2]; namely, that of his origin from the fallen house of David, and the lowliness of his appearance.

The Messiah is again meant by the ‘stone’ in Zec. 3:9. Probably there was some great stone taken from the ruins, to which the symbol attaches itself. The foundation of the second Temple had been laid years before the prophecy, but the stone may still have been visible. The Rabbis have much to say about a great stone which had been in the first Temple, and there used for the support of the ark, but in the second was set in the empty place where the ark should have been. Isaiah had prophesied of the ‘tried corner-stone’ laid in Zion, and Psa. 118:22 had sung of the stone rejected and made the head of the corner. We go in the track, then, of established usage, when we see in this stone the emblem of Messiah, and associate with it all thoughts of firmness, preciousness, support, foundation of the true Temple, basis of hope, ground of certitude, and whatever other substratum of fixity and immovableness men’s hearts or lives need. In all possible aspects of the metaphor, Jesus is the Foundation.

And what are the ‘seven eyes on the stone’? That may simply be a vivid way of saying that the fulness of divine Providence would watch over the Messiah, bringing Him when the time was ripe, and fitting Him for His work. But if we remember the subsequent explanation [Zec. 4:10] of the ‘seven,’ as ‘the eyes of the Lord which run to and fro through the whole earth,’ and connect this with Rev. 5:6, we can scarcely rest content with that meaning, but find here the deeper thought that the fulness of the divine Spirit was given to Messiah, even as Isa. 11:2 prophesies of the sevenfold Spirit.

‘I will engrave the graving thereof’ is somewhat obscure. It seems to mean that the seven eyes will be cut on the stone, like masons’ marks. If the seven eyes are the full energies of the Holy Spirit, God’s cutting of them on the stone is equivalent to His giving them to His Son; and the fulfilment of the promise was when He gave the Holy Spirit not ‘by measure unto Him.’

The blessed purpose of Messiah’s coming and endowment with the Spirit is gloriously stated in the last clause of Zec. 3:9 : ‘I will remove the iniquity of that land in one day.’ Jesus Christ has ‘once for all’ made atonement, as the Epistle to the Hebrews so often says. The better Joshua by one offering has taken away sin. ‘The breadth of Thy land, O Immanuel,’ stretched far beyond the narrow bounds which Zechariah knew for Israel’s territory. It includes the whole world. As has been beautifully said, ‘That one day is the day of Golgotha.’

The vision closes with a picture of the felicity of Messianic times, which recalls the description of the golden age of Solomon, when ‘Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig-tree’ [1Ki. 4:25]. In like manner the nation, cleansed, restored to its priestly privilege of free access to God by the Messiah who comes with the fulness of the Spirit, shall dwell in safety, and shall be knit together by friendship, and unenvyingly shall each share his good with all others, recognising in every man a neighbour, and gladly welcoming him to partake of all the blessings which the true Solomon has brought to his house and heart.

6) Zechariah 4:1-8

Zechariah

THE SOURCE OF POWER

Zec. 4:1 - Zec. 4:10.

THE preceding vision had reference to Joshua the priest, and showed him restored to his prerogative of entrance into the sanctuary. This one concerns his colleague Zerubbabel, the representative of civil power, as he of ecclesiastical, and promises that he shall succeed in rebuilding the Temple. The supposition is natural that the actual work of reconstruction was mainly in the hands of the secular ruler.

Flesh is weak, and the Prophet had fallen into deep sleep, after the tension of the previous vision. That had been shown him by Jehovah, but in this vision we have the same angel interpreter who had spoken with Zechariah before. He does not bring the vision, but simply wakes the Prophet that he may see it, and directs his attention to it by the question, ‘What seest thou?’ The best way to teach is to make the learner put his conceptions into definite words. We see things more clearly, and they make a deeper impression, when we tell what we see. How many lazy looks we give at things temporal as well as at things eternal, after which we should be unable to answer the Angel’s question! It is not every one who sees what he looks at.

The passage has two parts-the vision and its interpretation, with related promises.

The vision may be briefly disposed of. Its original is the great lamp which stood in the tabernacle, and was replaced in the Solomonic Temple by ten smaller ones. These had been carried away at the Captivity, and we do not read of their restoration. But the main thing to note is the differences between this lamp and the one in the tabernacle. The description here confines itself to these: They are three-the ‘bowl’ or reservoir above the lamp, the pipes from it to the seven lights, and the two olive-trees which stood on either side of the lamp and replenished from their branches the supply in the reservoir. The tabernacle lamp had no reservoir, and consequently no pipes, but was fed with oil by the priests. The meaning of the variations, then, is plain. They were intended to express the fuller and more immediately divine supply of oil. If the Revised Version’s rendering of the somewhat doubtful numerals in Zec. 4:2 be accepted, each several light had seven pipes, thus expressing the perfection of its supplies.

Now, there can be no doubt about the symbolism of the tabernacle lamp. It represented the true office of Israel, as it rayed out its beams into the darkness of the desert. It meant the same thing as Christ’s words, ‘Ye are the light of the world,’ and as the vision of the seven golden candlesticks, in Rev. 1:12 - Rev. 1:13, Rev. 1:20. The substitution of separate lamps for one with seven lights may teach the difference between the mere formal unity of the people of God in the Old Testament and the true oneness, conjoined with diversity, in the New Testament Church, which is one because Christ walks in the midst. Zechariah’s lamp, then, called to the minds of the little band of restored exiles their high vocation, and the changed arrangements for the supply of that oil, which is the standing emblem for divine communications fitting for service, or, to keep to the metaphor, fitting to shine, signified the abundance of these.

The explanation of the vision is introduced, as at Zec. 1:9, Zec. 1:19, by the Prophet’s question of its meaning. His angelic teacher is astonished at his dullness, as indeed heavenly eyes must often be at ours, and asks if he does not know so familiar an object. The Prophet's 'No, my Lord,' brings full explanation. Ingenuously acknowledged ignorance never asks Heaven for enlightenment in vain.

First, the true source of strength and success, as shown by the vision, is declared in plain terms. What fed the lamp? Oil, which symbolises the gift of a divine Spirit, if not in the full personal sense as in the New Testament, yet certainly as a God-breathed influence, preparing prophets, priests, kings, and even artificers, for their several forms of service. Whence came the oil? From the two olive-trees, which though, as Zec. 4:14 shows, they represented the two leaders, yet set forth the truth that their power for their work was from God; for the Bible knows nothing of 'nature' as a substitute for or antithesis to God, and the growth of the olive and its yield of oil is His doing.

This, then, was the message for Zerubbabel and his people, that God would give such gifts as they needed, in order that the light which He Himself had kindled should not be quenched. If the lamp was fed with oil, it would burn, and there would be a Temple for it to stand in. If we try to imagine the feebleness of the handful of discouraged men, and the ring of enemies round them, we may feel the sweetness of the promise which bade them not despond because they had little of what the world calls might.

We all need the lesson; for the blustering world is apt to make us forget the true source of all real strength for holy service or for noble living. The world's power at its mightiest is weak, and the Church's true power, at her feeblest, is omnipotent, if only she grasps the strength which is hers, and takes the Spirit which is given. The eternal antithesis of man's weakness at his haughtiest, and God's strength even in its feeblest possessors, is taught by that lamp flaming, whatever envious hands or howling storms might seek to quench it, because fed by oil from on high. Let us keep to God's strength, and not corrupt His oil with mixtures of foul-smelling stuff of our own compounding.

Next, in the strength of that revelation of the source of might a defiant challenge is blown to the foe. The 'great mountain' is primarily the frowning difficulties which lifted themselves against Zerubbabel's enterprise, and more widely the whole mass of worldly opposition encountered by God's servants in every age. It seems to bar all advance; but an unseen Hand crushes it down, and flattens it out into a level, on which progress is easy. The Hebrew gives the suddenness and completeness of the transformation with great force; for the whole clause, 'Thou shalt become a plain,' is one word in the original.

Such triumphant rising above difficulties is not presumption when it has been preceded by believing gaze on the source of strength. If we have taken to heart the former words of the Prophet, we shall not be in danger of rash overconfidence when we calmly front obstacles in the path of duty, assured that every mountain shall be made low. A brave scorn of the world, both in its sweetnesses and its terrors, befits God's men, and is apt to fulfil its own confidences; for most of these terrors are like ghosts, who will not wait to be spoken to, but melt away if fairly faced. Nor should we forget the other side of this thought; namely, that it is the constant drift of Providence to abase the lofty in mind, and to raise the lowly. What is high is sure to get many knocks which pass over lower heads. To men of faith every mountain shall either become a plain or be cast into the sea.

Then follows, on the double revelation of the source of strength and the futility of opposition, the assurance of the successful completion of the work. The stone which is to crown the structure shall be brought forth and set in its place amid jubilant prayers not offered in vain, that 'grace'-that is, the protecting favour of God-may rest on it.

The same thought is reiterated and enlarged in the next 'word,' which is somewhat separated from the former, as if the flow of prophetic communication had paused for a moment, and then been resumed. In Zec. 4:9 we have the assurance, so seldom granted to God's workers, that Zerubbabel shall be permitted to complete the task which he had begun. It is the fate of most of us to inherit unfinished work from our predecessors, and to bequeath the like to our successors. And in one aspect, all human work is unfinished, as being but a fragment of the fulfilment of the mighty purpose which runs through all the ages. Yet some are more happy than others, in that they see an approximate completion of their work. But whether it be so or not, our task is to 'do the little we can do, and leave the rest with God,' sure that He will work all the fragments into a perfect whole, and content to do the smallest bit of service for Him. Few of us are strong enough to do separate building. We are like coral insects, whose reef is one, though its makers are millions.

Zerubbabel finished his task, but its end was but a new beginning of an order of things of which he did not see the end. There are no beginnings or endings, properly speaking, in human affairs, but all is one unbroken flow. One man only has made a real new beginning, and that is Jesus Christ; and He only will really carry His work to its very last issues. He is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending. He is the Foundation of the true Temple, and He is also the Headstone of the corner, the foundation on which all rests, the apex to which all runs up. 'When He begins, He will also make an end.'

The completion of the work is to be the token that the 'angel who spake with me' was God's messenger. We can know that before the fulfilment, but we cannot but know it after. Better to be sure that the message is from God while yet the certainty is the result of faith, than to be sure of it afterwards, when the issue has shattered and shamed our doubts.

If we realise that God's Spirit is the guarantee for the success of work done for God, we shall escape the vulgar error of measuring the importance of things by their size, as, no doubt, many of these builders were doing. No one will help on the day of great things who despises that of small ones. They say that the seeds of the 'big trees' in California are the smallest of all the conifers. I do not vouch for the truth of the statement, but God's work always begins with little seeds, as the history of the Church and of every good cause shows. 'What do these feeble Jews?' sneered the spectators of their poor little walls, painfully piled up, over which a fox could jump. They did very little, but they were building the city of God, which has outlasted all the mockers.

Men might look with contempt on the humble beginning, but other eyes than theirs looked at it with other emotions. The eyes which in the last vision were spoken of as directed on the foundation stone, gaze on the work with joy. These are the seven eyes of 'the Lord,' which are 'the seven Spirits of God, sent forth into all the earth' [Rev. 5:6]. The Spirit is here contemplated in the manifoldness of His operations rather than in the unity of His person. Thus the closing assurance, which involves the success of the work, since God's eyes rest on it with delight, comes round to the first declaration, 'Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit.' Note the strong contrast between 'despise' and 'rejoice.' What matter the scoffs of mockers, if God approves? What are they but fools who look at that which moves His joy, and find in it only food for scorn? What will become of their laughter at last? If we try to get so near God as to see things with His eyes, we shall be saved from many a false estimate of what is great and what is small, and may have our own poor little doings invested with strange dignity, because He deigns to behold and bless them.

7) Zechariah 4:9

Zechariah

THE SOURCE OF POWER

THE FOUNDER AND FINISHER OF THE TEMPLE

Zec. 4:9.

I am afraid that Zerubbabel is very little more than a grotesque name to most Bible-readers, so I may be allowed a word of explanation as to him and as to the original force of my text. He was a prince of the blood royal of Israel, and the civil leader of the first detachment of returning exiles. With Joshua, the high priest, he came, at the head of a little company, to Palestine, and there pathetically attempted, with small resources, to build up some humble house that might represent the vanished glories of Solomon's Temple. Political enmity on the part of the surrounding tribes stopped the work for nearly twenty years. During all that time, the hole in the ground, where the foundations had been dug and a few courses of stones been laid, gaped desolate, a sad reminder to the feeble band of the failure of their hopes. But with the accession of a new Persian king, new energy sprang up, and new, favourable circumstances developed themselves. The Prophet Zechariah came to the front, although quite a young man, and became the mainspring of the renewed activity in building the Temple. The words of my text are, of course, in their plain, original meaning, the prophetic assurance that the man, grown an old man by this time, who had been honoured to take the first spadeful of soil out of the earth should be the man ‘to bring forth the headstone with shoutings of Grace, grace unto it!’

But whilst that is the original application, and whilst the words open to us a little door into long years of constrained suspension of work and discouraged hope, I think we shall not be wrong if we recognise in them something deeper than a reference to the Prince of David’s line, concerning whom they were originally spoken. I take them to be, in the true sense of the term, a Messianic prophecy; and I take it that, just because Zerubbabel, a member of that royal house from which the Messiah was to come, was the builder of the Temple, he was a prophetic person. What was true about him primarily is thereby shown to have a bearing upon the greater Son of David who was to come thereafter, and who was to build the Temple of the Lord. In that aspect I desire to look at the words now: ‘His hands have laid the foundation of the house, and His hands shall also finish it.’

I. There is, then, here a large truth as to Christ, the true Temple-builder.

It is the same blessed message which was given from His own lips long centuries after, when He spoke from heaven to John in Patmos, and said, ‘I am Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last.’ The first letter of the Greek alphabet, and the last letter of the Greek alphabet, and all the letters that lie between, and all the words that you can make out of the letters-they are all from Him, and He underlies everything.

Now that is true about creation, in the broadest and in the most absolute sense. For what does the New Testament say, with the consenting voice of all its writers? ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Without Him was not anything made that was made.’ His hands laid the foundations of this great house of the universe, with its ‘many mansions.’ And what says Paul? ‘He is the Beginning, in Him all things consist’ . . . ‘that in all things He might have the pre-eminence.’ And what says He Himself from heaven? ‘I am the First and the Last.’ So, in regard to everything in the universe, Christ is its origin, and

Christ is its goal and its end. He ‘has laid the foundation, and His hands shall also finish it.’

But, further, we turn to the application which is the more usual one, and say that He is the Beginner and Finisher of the work of redemption, which is His only from its inception to its accomplishment, from the first breaking of the ground for the foundations of the Temple to the triumphant bringing forth of the last stone that crowns the corner and gleams on the topmost pinnacle of the completed structure. There is nothing about Jesus Christ, as it seems to me, more manifest, unless our eyes are blinded by prejudice, than that the Carpenter of Nazareth, who grew up amidst the ordinary conditions of infant manhood, was trained as other Jewish children, increased in wisdom, spoke a language that had been moulded by man, and inherited His nation’s mental and spiritual equipment, yet stands forth on the pages of these four Gospels as a perfectly original man, to put it on the lowest ground, and as owing nothing to any predecessor, and not as merely one in a series, or naturally accounted for by reference to His epoch or conditions. He makes a new beginning; He presents a perfectly fresh thing in the history of human nature. Just as His coming was the introduction into the heart of humanity of a new type, the second Adam, the Lord from heaven, so the work that He does is all His own. He does it all Himself, for all that His servants do in carrying out the purposes dear to His heart is done by His working in and through them, and though we are fellow-labourers with Him, His hands alone lay every stone of the Temple.

Not only does my text, in its highest application, point to Jesus Christ as the Author of redemption from its very beginning, but it also declares that all through the ages His hand is at work. ‘Shall also finish it’-then He is labouring at it now; and we have not to think of a Christ who once worked, and has left to us the task of developing the consequences of His completed activity, but of a Christ who is working on and on, steadily and persistently. The builders of some great edifice, whilst they are laying its lower courses, are down upon our level, and as the building rises the scaffolding rises, and sometimes the platform where they stand is screened off by some frail canvas stretched round it, so that we cannot see them as they ply their work with trowel and mortar. So Christ came down to earth to lay the courses of His Temple that had to rest upon earth, but now the scaffolding is raised and

He is working at the top stories. Though out of our sight, He is at work as truly and energetically as He was when He was down here. You remember how strikingly one of the Evangelists puts that thought in the last words of his Gospel-if, indeed, they are his words. ‘He was received up into heaven, and sat at the right hand of God, and they went everywhere, preaching the word.’ Well, that looks as if there were a sad separation between the Commander and the soldiers that He had ordered to the front, as if He were sitting at ease on a hill overlooking the battlefield from a safe distance and sending His men to death. But the next words bring Him and them together-’The Lord also working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.’ And so, brethren, a work begun, continued, and ended by the same immortal Hand, is the work on which the redemption of the world depends.

II. Notice, secondly, that we have here the assurance of the triumph of the Gospel.

No doubt, in the long-forgotten days in which my text was spoken, there were plenty of over-prudent calculators in the little band of exiles who said, ‘What is the use of our trying to build in face of all this opposition and with these poor resources of ours?’ They would throw cold water enough on the works of Zerubbabel, and on Zechariah who inspired them. But there came the great word of promise to them, ‘He shall bring forth the headstone with shoutings.’ The text is the cure for all such calculations by us Christian people, and by others than Christian people. When we begin to count up resources, and to measure these against the work to be done, there is little wonder if good men and bad men sometimes concur in thinking that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has very little chance of conquering the world. And that is perfectly true, unless you take Him into the calculation, and then the probabilities look altogether different. We are but like a long row of ciphers, but put one significant figure in front of the row of ciphers and it comes to be of value. And so, if you are calculating the probabilities of the success of Christianity in the world and forget to start with Christ, you have left out the principal factor in the problem. Churches lose their fervour, their members die and pass away. He renews and purifies the corrupted Church, and He liveth for ever. Therefore, because we may say, with calm confidence, ‘His hands have laid the foundation of the house, and His hands are at work on all the courses of it as it rises,' we may be perfectly sure that the Temple which He founded, at which He still toils, shall be completed, and not stand a gaunt ruin, looking on which passers-by will mockingly say, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' When Brennus conquered Rome, and the gold for the city's ransom was being weighed, he clashed his sword into the scale to outweigh the gold. Christ's sword is in the scale, and it weighs more than the antagonism of the world and the active hostility of hell. 'His hands have laid the foundation; His hands shall also finish it.'

III. Still further, here is encouragement for despondent and timid Christians.

Jesus Christ is not going to leave you half way across the bog. That is not His manner of guiding us. He began; He will finish. Remember the words of Paul which catch up this same thought: 'Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perfect the same until the day of Jesus Christ.' Brethren! if the seed of the kingdom is in our hearts, though it be but as a grain of mustard seed, be sure of this, that He will watch over it and bless the springing thereof. So, although when we think of ourselves, our own slowness of progress, our own feeble resolutions, our own wayward hearts, our own vacillating wills, our many temptations, our many corruptions, our many follies, we may well say to ourselves, 'Will there ever be any greater completeness in this terribly imperfect Christian character of mine than there is to-day?' Let us be of good cheer, and not think only of ourselves, but much rather of Him who works on and in and for us. If we lift up our hearts to Him, and keep ourselves near Him, and let Him work, He will work. If we do not-like the demons in the old monastic stories, who every night pulled down the bit of walling that the monks had in the daytime built for their new monastery-by our own hands pull down what He, by His hand, has built up, the structure will rise, and we shall be 'builded together for a habitation of God through the Spirit.' Be of good cheer, only keep near the Master, and let Him do what He desires to do for us all. God is 'faithful who hath called us to the fellowship of His Son,' and He also will do it.

IV. Lastly, here is a striking contrast to the fate which attends all human workers.

There are very few of us who even partially seem to be happy enough to begin and finish any task, beyond the small ones of our daily life. Authors die, with books half finished, with sentences half finished sometimes, where the pen has been laid down. No man starts an entirely fresh line of action; he inherits much from his past. No man completes a great work that he undertakes; he leaves it half-finished, and coming generations, if it is one of the great historical works of the world, work out its consequences for good or for evil. The originator has to be contented with setting the thing going and handing on unfinished tasks to his successors. That is the condition under which we live. We have to be contented to do our little bit of work, that will fit in along with that of a great many others, like a chain of men who stand between a river and a burning house, and pass the buckets from end to end. How many hands does it take to make a pin? How many did it take to make the cloth of our dress? The shepherd out in Australia, the packer in Melbourne, the sailors on the ship that brought the wool home, the railwayman that took it to Bradford, the spinner, the weaver, the dyer, the finisher, the tailor-they all had a hand in it, and the share of none of them was fit to stand upright by itself, as it were, without something on either side of it to hold it up.

So it is in all our work in the world, and eminently in our Christian work. We have to be contented with being parts of a mighty whole, to do our small piece of service, and not to mind though it cannot be singled out in the completed whole. What does that matter, as long as it is there? The waters of the brook are lost in the river, and it, in turn, in the sea. But each drop is there, though indistinguishable.

Multiplication of joy comes from division of labour, ‘One soweth and another reapeth,’ and the result is that there are two to be glad over the harvest instead of one-’that he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.’ So it is a good thing that the hands that laid the foundations so seldom are the hands that finish the work; for thereby there are more admitted into the social gladness of the completed results. The navvy that lifted the first spadeful of earth in excavating for the railway line, and the driver of the locomotive over the completed track, are partners in the success and in the joy. The forgotten bishop who, I know not how many centuries ago, laid the foundations of Cologne Cathedral, and the workmen who, a few years since, took down the old crane that had stood for long years on the spire, and completed it to the slender apex, were partners in one work that reached through the ages.

So let us do our little bit of work, and remember that whilst we do it, He for whom we are doing it is doing it in us, and let us rejoice to know that at the last we shall share in the 'joy of our Lord,' when He sees of the travail of His soul and is satisfied. Though He builds all Himself, yet He will let us have the joy of feeling that we are labourers together with Him. 'Ye are God's building'; but the Builder permits us to share in His task and in His triumph.

8) Zechariah 4:10

Zechariah

THE SOURCE OF POWER

Zec. 4:1 - Zec. 4:10.

THE preceding vision had reference to Joshua the priest, and showed him restored to his prerogative of entrance into the sanctuary. This one concerns his colleague Zerubbabel, the representative of civil power, as he of ecclesiastical, and promises that he shall succeed in rebuilding the Temple. The supposition is natural that the actual work of reconstruction was mainly in the hands of the secular ruler.

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We all need the lesson; for the blustering world is apt to make us forget the true source of all real strength for holy service or for noble living. The world’s power at its mightiest is weak, and the Church’s true power, at her feeblest, is omnipotent, if only she grasps the strength which is hers, and takes the Spirit which is given. The eternal antithesis of man’s weakness at his haughtiest, and God’s strength even in its feeblest possessors, is taught by that lamp flaming, whatever envious hands or howling storms might seek to quench it, because fed by oil from on high. Let us keep to God’s strength, and not corrupt His oil with mixtures of foul-smelling stuff of our own compounding.

Next, in the strength of that revelation of the source of might a defiant challenge is blown to the foe. The ‘great mountain’ is primarily the frowning difficulties which lifted themselves against Zerubbabel’s enterprise, and more widely the whole mass of worldly opposition encountered by God’s servants in every age. It seems to bar all advance; but an unseen Hand crushes it down, and flattens it out into a level, on which progress is easy. The Hebrew gives the suddenness and completeness of the transformation with great force; for the whole clause, ‘Thou shalt become a plain,’ is one word in the original.

Such triumphant rising above difficulties is not presumption when it has been preceded by believing gaze on the source of strength. If we have taken to heart the former words of the Prophet, we shall not be in danger of rash overconfidence when we calmly front obstacles in the path of duty, assured that every mountain shall be made low. A brave scorn of the world, both in its sweetnesses and its terrors, befits God’s men, and is apt to fulfil its own confidences; for most of these terrors are like ghosts, who will not wait to be spoken to, but melt away if fairly faced. Nor should we forget the other side of this thought; namely, that it is the constant drift of Providence to abase the lofty in mind, and to raise the lowly. What is high is sure to get many knocks which pass over lower heads. To men of faith every mountain shall either become a plain or be cast into the sea.

Then follows, on the double revelation of the source of strength and the futility of opposition, the assurance of the successful completion of the work. The stone which is to crown the structure shall be brought forth and set in its place amid jubilant prayers not offered in vain, that ‘grace’-that is, the protecting favour of God-may rest on it.

The same thought is reiterated and enlarged in the next ‘word,’ which is somewhat separated from the former, as if the flow of prophetic communication had paused for a moment, and then been resumed. In Zec. 4:9 we have the assurance, so seldom granted to God’s workers, that Zerubbabel shall be permitted to complete the task which he had begun. It is the fate of most of us to inherit unfinished work from our predecessors, and to bequeath the like to our successors. And in one aspect, all human work is unfinished, as being but a fragment of the fulfilment of the mighty purpose which runs through all the ages. Yet some are more happy than others, in that they see an approximate completion of their work. But whether it be so or not, our task is to 'do the little we can do, and leave the rest with God,' sure that He will work all the fragments into a perfect whole, and content to do the smallest bit of service for Him. Few of us are strong enough to do separate building. We are like coral insects, whose reef is one, though its makers are millions.

Zerubbabel finished his task, but its end was but a new beginning of an order of things of which he did not see the end. There are no beginnings or endings, properly speaking, in human affairs, but all is one unbroken flow. One man only has made a real new beginning, and that is Jesus Christ; and He only will really carry His work to its very last issues. He is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending. He is the Foundation of the true Temple, and He is also the Headstone of the corner, the foundation on which all rests, the apex to which all runs up. 'When He begins, He will also make an end.'

The completion of the work is to be the token that the 'angel who spake with me' was God's messenger. We can know that before the fulfilment, but we cannot but know it after. Better to be sure that the message is from God while yet the certainty is the result of faith, than to be sure of it afterwards, when the issue has shattered and shamed our doubts.

If we realise that God's Spirit is the guarantee for the success of work done for God, we shall escape the vulgar error of measuring the importance of things by their size, as, no doubt, many of these builders were doing. No one will help on the day of great things who despises that of small ones. They say that the seeds of the 'big trees' in California are the smallest of all the conifers. I do not vouch for the truth of the statement, but God's work always begins with little seeds, as the history of the Church and of every good cause shows. 'What do these feeble Jews?' sneered the spectators of their poor little walls, painfully piled up, over which a fox could jump. They did very little, but they were building the city of God, which has outlasted all the mockers.

Men might look with contempt on the humble beginning, but other eyes than theirs looked at it with other emotions. The eyes which in the last vision were spoken of as directed on the foundation stone, gaze on the work with joy. These are the seven eyes of 'the Lord,' which are 'the seven Spirits of God, sent forth into all the earth' [Rev. 5:6]. The Spirit is here contemplated in the manifoldness of His operations rather than in the unity of His person. Thus the closing assurance, which involves the success of the work, since God's eyes rest on it with delight, comes round to the first declaration, 'Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit.' Note the strong contrast between 'despise' and 'rejoice.' What matter the scoffs of mockers, if God approves? What are they but fools who look at that which moves His joy, and find in it only food for scorn? What will become of their laughter at last? If we try to get so near God as to see things with His eyes, we shall be saved from many a false estimate of what is great and what is small, and may have our own poor little doings invested with strange dignity, because He deigns to behold and bless them.

9) Zechariah 6:13

Zechariah

THE PRIEST OF THE WORLD AND KING OF MEN

Zec. 6:13.

A handful of feeble exiles had come back from their Captivity. 'The holy and beautiful house' where their fathers praised Him was burned with fire. There was no king among them, but they still possessed a representative of the priesthood, the other great office of divine appointment. Their first care was to rear some poor copy of the Temple; and the usual difficulties that attend reconstruction of any sort, and dog every movement that rests upon religious enthusiasm, beset them -strong enemies, and half-hearted friends, and personal jealousies weakening still more their weak forces. In this time of anarchy, of toil at a great task with inadequate resources, of despondency that was rapidly fulfilling its own forebodings, the Prophet, who was the spring of the whole movement, receives a word in season from the Lord. He is bidden to take from some of the returned exiles the tribute-money which they had brought, and having made of it golden and silver crowns-the sign of kingship-to set them on the high priest's head, thus uniting the sacerdotal and regal offices, which had always been jealously separated in Israel. This singular action is explained, by the words which he is commanded to speak, as being a symbolic prophecy of Him who is ‘the Branch’-the well-known name which older prophets had used for the Messiah-indicating that in Him were the reality which the priesthood shadowed, and the rule which was partly delegated to Israel’s king as well as the power which should rear the true temple of God among men.

It is in accordance with the law of prophetic development from the beginning, that the external circumstances of the nation at the moment should supply the mould into which the promise is run. The earliest of all Messianic predictions embraced only the existence of evil, as represented by the serpent, and the conquest of it by one who was known but as a son of Eve. When the history reaches the patriarchal stage, wherein the family is the predominant conception, the prophecy proportionately advances to the assurance, ‘In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.’ When the mission of Moses had made the people familiar with the idea of a man who was the medium of revelation, then a further stage was reached-’a Prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you, of your brethren, like unto me.’ The kingdom of David prepared the way for the prediction of the royal dignity of the Messiah, as the peaceful reign of Solomon for the expectation of one who should bring peace by righteousness. The approach of national disaster and sorrow was reflected in Isaiah’s vision of the suffering Messiah, and that prophet’s announcements of exile had for their counterpoise the proclamation of Him who should bring liberty to the captive. So, here, the kingless band of exiles, painfully striving to rear again the tabernacle which had fallen down, are heartened for their task by the thought of the priest-king of the nation, the builder of an imperishable dwelling-place for God.

To-day we need these truths not less than Zechariah’s contemporaries did. And, thank God! we can believe that, for every modern perplexity, the blessed old words carry the same strength and consolation. If kings seem to have perished from among men, if authorities are dying out, and there are no names of power that can rally the world-yet there is a Sovereign. If old institutions are crumbling, and must still further decay ere the site for a noble structure be cleared, yet He shall build the Temple. If priest be on some lips a name of superstitious folly, and on others a synonym for all that is despised as effete in religion, yet this Priest abideth for ever, the guide and the hope for the history of humanity and for the individual spirit. Let us, then, put ourselves under the Prophet's guidance, and consider the eternal truths which he preaches to us too.

I. The true hope of the world is a priest.

The idea of priesthood is universal. It has been distorted and abused; it has been made the foundation of spiritual tyranny. The priest has not been the teacher nor the elevator of the people. All over the world he has been the ally of oppression and darkness, he has hindered and cramped social and intellectual progress. And yet, in spite of all this, there the office stands, and wherever men go, by some strange perversity they take with them this idea, and choose from among themselves those who, being endowed with some sort of ceremonial and symbolic purity, shall discharge for their brethren the double office of representing them before God, of representing God to them. That is what the world means, with absolute and entire unanimity, by a priest-one who shall be sacrificer, intercessor, representative; bearer of man's worship, channel of God's blessing. How comes it, that, in spite of all the cruelties and lies that have gathered round the office, it lives, indestructible, among the families of men? Why, because it springs from, and corresponds to, real and universal wants in their nature. It is the result of the universal consciousness of sin. Men feel that there is a gulf betwixt them and God. They know themselves to be all foul. True, as their knowledge of God dims and darkens, their conscience hardens and their sense of sin lessens; but, as long as there is any notion of God at all, there will be a parallel and corresponding conviction of moral evil. And so, feeling that, and feeling it, as I believe, not because they are rude and barbarous, but because, though rude and barbarous, they still preserve some trace of their true relation to God, they lay hold upon some of their fellows, and say, 'Here! be thou for us this thing which we cannot be for ourselves-stand thou there in front of us, and be at once the expression of our knowledge that we dare not come before our gods, and likewise, if it may be, the medium by which their gifts may come on us, unworthy.'

That is a wide-spread and all but universally expressed instinct of human nature. Argue about it as you like, explain it away how you choose, charge the notions of priesthood and sacrifice with exaggeration, immorality, barbarism, if you will-still the thing remains. And I believe for my part that, so far from that want being one which will be left behind, with other rude and savage desires, as men advance in civilisation-it is as real and as permanent as the craving of the understanding for truth, and of the heart for love. When men lose it, it is because they are barbarised, not civilised, into forgetting it. On that rock all systems of religion and eminently all theories of Christianity, that leave out priest and sacrifice, will strike and split. The Gospel for the world must be one which will meet all the facts of man's condition. Chief among these facts is this necessity of the conscience, as expressed by the forms in which for thousands of years the worship of mankind has been embodied all but everywhere-an altar, and a priest standing by its side.

I need not pause to remind you how this Jewish people, who have at all events taught the world the purest Theism, and led men up to the most spiritual religion, had this same institution of a priesthood for the very centre of its worship. Nor need I dwell at length on the fact that the New Testament gives-in its full adhesion to the same idea. We are told that all these sacerdotal allusions in it are only putting pure spiritual truth in the guise of the existing stage of religious development-the husk, not the kernel. It seems to me much rather that the Old Testament ceremonial-Temple, priesthood, sacrifice-was established for this along with other purposes, to be a shadow of things to come. Christ's office is not metaphorically illustrated by reference to the Jewish ritual; but the Jewish ritual is the metaphor, and Christ's office the reality. He is the Priest.

And what is the priest whom men crave?

The first requisite is oneness with those whom he represents. Men have ever felt that one of themselves must fill this office, and have taken from among their brethren their medium of communication with God. And we have a Priest who, 'in all things, is made like unto His brethren,' having taken part of their flesh and blood, and being 'in all points tempted like as we are.' The next requisite is that these men, who minister at earth's altars, should, by some lustration, or abstinence, or white robe, or other external sign, be separated from the profane crowd, and possess, at all events, a symbolic purity-expression of the conviction that a priest must be cleaner and closer to God than his fellows. And we have a Priest who is holy, harmless, undefiled, radiant in perfect purity, lustrous with the light of constant union with God.

And again, as in nature and character, so in function, Christ corresponds to the widely expressed wants of men, as shown in their priesthoods. They sought for one who should offer gifts and sacrifices on their behalf, and we have One who is ‘a merciful and faithful High Priest to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.’ They sought for a man who should pass into the awful presence, and plead for them while they stood without, and we lift hopeful eyes of love to the heavens, ‘whither the Forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an High Priest for ever.’ They sought for a man who should be the medium of divine blessings bestowed upon the worshippers, and we know who hath gone within the veil, having ascended up on high, that He might give gifts unto men.

The world needs a priest. Its many attempts to find such show how deep is the sense of need, and what he must be who shall satisfy them. We have the Priest that the world and ourselves require. I believe that modern Englishmen, with the latest results of civilisation colouring their minds and moulding their characters, stand upon the very same level, so far as this matter is concerned, as the veriest savage in African wilds, who has darkened even the fragment of truth which he possesses, till it has become a lie and the parent of lies. You and I, and all our brethren, alike need a brother who shall be holy and close to God, who shall offer sacrifices for us, and bring God to us. For you and me, and all our brethren alike, the good news is true, ‘we have a great High Priest that is passed into the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God.’ That message quenches the fire on every other altar, and strips the mitre from every other head. It, and it alone, meets fully and for ever that strange craving, which, though it has been productive of so many miseries and so many errors, though it has led to grinding tyranny and dark superstitions, though it has never anywhere found what it longs for, remains deep in the soul, indestructible and hungry, till it is vindicated and enlightened and satisfied by the coming of the true Priest,’ made not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life.’

II. Our text tells us, secondly, that ‘the priest of the world is the king of men.’ ‘He shall be a Priest upon His throne.’

In Israel these two offices were jealously kept apart, and when one monarch, in a fit of overweening self-importance, tried to unite in his own person the kingly and the priestly functions, ‘the leprosy rose up in his forehead,’ even as he stood with the censer in his hand, and ‘Uzziah the king was a leper unto the day of his death.’ And the history of the world is full of instances, in which the struggles of the temporal and spiritual power have caused calamities only less intolerable than those which flowed from that alliance of priests and kings which has so often made monarchy a grinding tyranny, and religion a mere instrument of statecraft. History being witness, it would seem to be a very doubtful blessing for the world that one man should wield both forms of control without check or limitation, and be at once king and priest. If the words before us refer to any one but to Christ, the prophet had an altogether mistaken notion about what would be good for men, politically and ecclesiastically, and we may be thankful that his dream has never come true. But if they point to the Son of David who has died for us, and declare that because He is Priest, He is therefore King-oh! then they are full of blessed truth concerning the basis and the nature and the purpose of His dominion, which may well make us lift up our heads and rejoice that in the midst of tyranny and anarchy, of sovereignties whose ultimate resort is force, there is another kingdom-the most absolute of despotisms and yet the most perfect democracy, whose law is love, whose subjects are every one the children of a King, the kingdom of that Priest-ruler on whose head is Aaron’s mitre, and more than David’s crown.

He does rule. ‘The kingdom of Christ’ is no unreal fanciful phrase. Take the lowest ground. Who is it that, by the words He spoke, by the deeds He did, by the life He lived, has shaped the whole form of moral and religious thought and life in the civilised world? Is there One among the great of old, the dead yet sceptred sovereigns, who still rule our spirits from their urns, whose living power over thought and heart and deed among the dominant races of the earth is to be compared with His? And beyond that, we believe that, as the result of His mighty work on earth, the dominion of the whole creation is His, and He is King of kings, and Lord of lords, that His will is sovereign and His voice is absolute law, to which all the powers of nature, all the confusions of earth’s politics, all the unruly wills of men, all the pale kingdoms of the dead, and all the glorious companies of the heavens, do bow in real though it be sometimes unconscious and sometimes reluctant obedience.

The foundation of His rule is His sacrifice; or in other words-no truer though a little more modern in their sound-men will do anything for Him who does *that* for them. Men will yield their whole souls to the warmth and light that stream from the Cross, as the sunflower turns itself to the sun. He that can give an anodyne which is not an opiate, to my conscience-He that can appeal to my heart and will, and say, ‘I have given Myself for thee,’ will never speak in vain to those who accept His gift, when He says, ‘Now give thyself to Me.’

Brethren! it is not the thinker who is the true king of men, as we sometimes hear it proudly said. We need One who will not only show but be the Truth; who will not only point, but open and be, the Way; who will not only communicate thought, but give, because He is, the Life. Not the rabbi’s pulpit, nor the teacher’s desk, still less the gilded chairs of earthly monarchs, least of all the tents of conquerors, are the throne of the true King. He rules from the Cross. The one dominion worth naming, that over men’s inmost spirits, springs from the one sacrifice which alone calms and quickens men’s inmost spirits. ‘Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ,’ for Thou art ‘the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.’

His rule is wielded In gentleness. Priestly dominion has ever been fierce, suspicious, tyrannous. ‘His words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords.’ But the sway of this merciful and faithful High Priest is full of tenderness. His sceptre is not the warrior’s mace, nor the jewelled rod of gold, but the reed-emblem of the lowliness of His heart, and of authority guided by love. And all His rule is for the blessing of His subjects, and the end of it is that they may be made free by obedience, emancipated in and for service, crowned as kings by submission to the King of kings, consecrated as priests by their reliance on the only Priest over the house of

God, whose loving will rests not until it has made all His people like Himself.

Then, dear brethren! amid all the anarchic chaos of this day, when old institutions are crumbling or crashing into decay, when the whole civilised world seems slowly and painfully parting from its old moorings, and like some unwieldy raft, is creaking and straining at its chains as it feels the impulse of the swift current that is bearing it to an unknown sea, when venerable names cease to have power, when old truths are flouted as antiquated, and the new ones seem so long in making their appearance, when a perfect Babel of voices stuns us, and on every side are pretenders to the throne which they fancy vacant, let us joyfully welcome all change, and hopefully anticipate the future. Lifting our eyes from the world, let us fix them on the likeness of a throne above the firmament that is above the cherubs, and rejoice since there we behold 'the likeness as the appearance of a man upon it.' 'Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, thy King cometh unto thee.'

III. Our text still further reminds us that the Priest-King of men builds among men the Temple of God.

The Prophet and his companions had become familiar in their captivity with the gigantic palaces and temples which Assyrian and Babylonian monarchs had a passion for rearing. They had learned to regard the king as equally magnified by his conquests and by his buildings. Zechariah foretells that the true King shall rear a temple more lasting than Solomon's, more magnificent than those which towered on their marble-faced platforms over the Chaldean plain.

Christ is Himself the true Temple of God. Whatsoever that shadowed Christ is or gives. In Him dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead. 'The glory' which once dwelt between the cherubim, 'tabernacled among us' in His flesh. As the place of sacrifice, as the place where men meet God, as the seat of revelation of the divine will, the true tabernacle which the Lord hath pitched is the Manhood of our Lord.

Christ builds the temple. By faith, the individual soul becomes the abode of God, and into our desecrated spirits there comes the King of Glory. 'Know ye not that ye are the temples of God?' By faith, the whole body of believing men 'are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.'

Christ builds this temple because He is the Temple. By His incarnation and work, He makes our communion with God and God's dwelling in us possible. By His death and sacrifice He draws men to Himself, and blends them in a living unity. By the gift of His Spirit and His life, He hallows their wills, and makes them partakers of His own likeness; so that 'coming to Him, we also are built up a spiritual house.'

Christ builds the temple, and uses us as His servants in the work. Our prophecy was given to encourage faint-hearted toilers, not to supply an excuse for indolence. Underlying all our poor labours, and blessing them all, is the power of Christ. We may well work diligently who work in the line of His purposes, after the pattern of His labours, in the strength of His power, under the watchfulness of His eye. The little band may be few and feeble; let them not be fearful, for He, the throned Priest, even *He*, and not they with their inadequate resources, shall build the temple.

Christ builds on through all the ages, and the prophecy of our text is yet unfulfilled. Its fulfilment is the meaning and end of all history. For the present, there has to be much destructive as well as constructive work done. Many a wretched hovel, the abode of sorrow and want, many a den of infamy, many a palace of pride, many a temple of idols, will have to be pulled down yet, and men's eyes will be blinded by the dust, and their hearts will ache as they look at the ruins. Be it so. The finished structure will obliterate the remembrance of poor buildings that cumbered its site. This Emperor of ours may indeed say, that He found the city of brick and made it marble. Have patience if His work is slow; mourn not if it is destructive; doubt not, though the unfinished walls, and corridors that seem to lead nowhere, and all the confusion of unfinished toils puzzle you, when you try to make out the plan. See to it, my brother, that you lend a hand and help to rear the true temple, which is rising slowly through the ages, at which successive generations toil, and from whose unfinished glories they dying depart, but which shall be completed, because the true Builder 'ever liveth,' and is 'a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.' Above all, brethren! take heed that you are yourselves builded in that temple. Travellers sometimes find in lonely quarries long abandoned or once worked by a vanished race, great blocks squared and dressed, that seem to have been meant for palace or shrine. But there they lie, neglected and forgotten, and the building for which they were hewn has been reared without them. Beware lest God’s grand temple should be built up without you, and you be left to desolation and decay. Trust your souls to Christ, and He will set you in the spiritual house which the King greater than Solomon is building still.

In one of the mosques of Damascus, which has been a Christian church, and before that was a heathen temple, the portal bears, deep cut in Greek characters, the inscription, ‘Thy kingdom, O Christ, is an everlasting kingdom, and Thy dominion endureth throughout all generations.’ The confident words seem contradicted by the twelve centuries of Mohammedanism on which they have looked down. But though their silent prophecy is unheeded and unheard by the worshippers below, it shall be proved true one day, and the crescent shall wane before the steady light of the Sun of Righteousness. The words are carven deep over the portals of the temple which Christ rears; and though men may not be able to read them, and may not believe them if they do, though for centuries traffickers have defiled its courts, and base-born usurpers have set up their petty thrones, yet the writing stands sure, a dumb witness against the transient lies, a patient prophet of the eternal truth. And when all false faiths, and their priests who have oppressed men and traduced God, have vanished; and when kings that have prostituted their great and godlike office to personal advancement and dynastic ambition are forgotten; and when every shrine reared for obscene and bloody rites, or for superficial and formal worship, has been cast to the ground, then from out of the confusion and desolation shall gleam the temple of God, which is the refuge of men, and on the one throne of the universe shall sit the Eternal Priest-our Brother, Jesus the Christ.

10)Zechariah 14:20

Exodus

THREE INSCRIPTIONS WITH ONE MEANING

HOLINESS TO THE LORD.' - Exo. 28:36.

HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD.' - Zec. 14:20.

'His name shall be in their foreheads.' - Rev. 22:4.

You will have perceived my purpose in putting these three widely separated texts together. They all speak of inscriptions, and they are all obviously connected with each other. The first of them comes from the ancient times of the institution of the ceremonial ritual, and describes a part of the high priest's official dress. In his mitre was a thin plate of gold on which was written, 'Holiness to the Lord.' The second of them comes from almost the last portion recorded of the history of Israel in the Old Testament, and is from the words of the great Prophet of the Restoration-his ideal presentation of the Messianic period, in which he recognises as one feature, that the inscription on the mitre of the high priest shall be written on 'the bells of the horses.' And the last of them is from the closing vision of the celestial kingdom, the heavenly and perfected form of the Christian Church. John, probably remembering the high priest and his mitre, with its inscription upon the forehead, says: 'His servants shall do Him priestly service'-for that is the meaning of the word inadequately translated 'serve Him'-'and see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads.'

These three things, then-the high priest's mitre, the horses' bells, the foreheads of the perfected saints-present three aspects of the Christian thought of holiness. Take them one by one.

I. The high priest's mitre.

The high priest was the official representative of the nation. He stood before God as the embodied and personified Israel. For the purposes of worship Israel was the high priest, and the high priest was Israel. And so, on his forehead, not to distinguish him from the rest of the people, but to include all the people in his consecration, shone a golden plate with the motto, 'Holiness to the Lord.' So, at the very beginning of Jewish ritual there stands a protest against all notions that make 'saint' the designation of any abnormal or exceptional sanctity, and confine the name to the members of any selected aristocracy of devoutness and goodness. All Christian men, *ex* *officio*, by the very fact of their Christianity, are saints, in the true sense of the word. And the representative of the whole of Israel stood there before God, with this inscription blazing on his forehead, as a witness that, whatsoever holiness may be, it belongs to every member of the true Israel.

And what is it? It is a very unfortunate thing-indicating superficiality of thought-that the modern popular notion of 'holiness' identifies it with purity, righteousness, moral perfection. Now that idea *is* in it, but is not the whole of it. For, not to spend time upon mere remarks on words, the meaning of the word thus rendered is in Hebrew, as well as in Greek and in our own English, one and the same. The root-meaning is 'separated,' 'set apart,' and the word expresses primarily, not moral character, but relation to God. That makes all the difference; and it incalculably deepens the conception, as well as puts us on the right track for understanding the only possible means by which there can ever be realised that moral perfection and excellence which has unfortunately monopolised the meaning of the word in most people's minds. The first thought is 'set apart to God.' That is holiness, in its root and germ.

And how can we be set apart for God? You may devote a dead thing for certain uses easily enough. How can a man be separated and laid aside?

Well, there is only one way, brethren, and that is by self-surrender. 'Yield yourselves to God' is but the other side, or, rather, the practical shape, of the Old and the New Testament doctrine of holiness. A man becomes God's when he says, 'Lord, take me and mould me, and fill me and cleanse me, and do with me what Thou wilt.' In that self-surrender, which is the tap-root of all holiness, the first and foremost thing to be offered is that most obstinate of all, the will that is in us. And when we yield our wills in submission both to commandments and providences, both to gifts and to withdrawals, both to gains and to losses, both to joys and to sorrows, then we begin to write upon our foreheads 'Holiness to the Lord.' And when we go on to yield our hearts to Him, by enshrining Him sole and sovereign in their innermost chamber, and turning to Him the whole current of our lives and desires, and hopes and confidences, which we are so apt to allow to run to waste and be sucked up in the desert sands of the world, then we write more of that inscription. And when we fill our minds with joyful submission to His truth, and occupy our thoughts with His mighty Name and His great revelation, and carry Him with us in the hidden corners of our consciousness, even whilst we are busy about daily work, then we add further letters to it. And when the submissive will, and the devoted heart, and the occupied thoughts are fully expressed in daily life and its various external duties, then the writing is complete. ‘Holiness to the Lord’ is self-surrender of will and heart and mind and everything. And that surrender is of the very essence of Christianity.

What is a saint? Some man or woman that has practised unheard-of austerities? Somebody that has lived an isolated and self-regarding life in convent or monastery or desert? No! a man or woman in the world who, moved by the mercies of God, yields self to God as ‘a living sacrifice.’

So the New Testament writers never hesitate to speak even of such very imperfect Christians as were found in abundance in churches like Corinth and Galatia as being all ‘saints,’ every man of them. That is not because the writers were minimising their defects, or idealising their persons, but because, if they are Christians at all, they are saints; seeing that no man is a Christian who has not been drawn by Christ’s great sacrifice for him to yield himself a sacrifice for Christ.

Of course that intrusive idea which has, in popular apprehension, so swallowed up the notion of holiness-viz. that of perfection of moral character or conduct-is included in this other, or rather is developed from it. For the true way to conquer self is to surrender self; and the more entire our giving up of ourselves, the more certainly shall we receive ourselves back again from His hands. ‘By the mercies of God, I beseech you, yield yourselves living sacrifices.’

II. I come to my next text-the horses’ bells.

Zechariah has a vision of the ideal Messianic times, and, of course, as must necessarily be the case, his picture is painted with colours laid upon his palette by his experience, and he depicts that distant future in the guise suggested to him by what he saw around him. So we have to disentangle from his words the sentiment which he expresses, and to recognise the symbolic way in which he puts it. His thought is this,-the inscription on the high priest’s mitre will be written on the bells which ornament the harness of the horses, which in Israel were never used as with us, but only either for war or for pomp and display, and the use of which was always regarded with a certain kind of doubt and suspicion. Even these shall be consecrated in that far-off day.

And then he goes on with variations on the same air, ‘In that day there shall be upon the bells of the horses, "Holiness unto the Lord,"‘ and adds that ‘the pots in the Lord’s house’-the humble vessels that were used for the most ordinary parts of the Temple services-’shall be like the bowls before the altar,’ into which the sacred blood of the offerings was poured. The most external and secular thing bearing upon religion shall be as sacred as the sacredest. But that is not all. ‘Yea! every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holiness unto the Lord of hosts, and all they that sacrifice shall come and take of them,’ and put their offerings therein. That is to say, the coarse pottery vessels that were in every poverty-stricken house in the city shall be elevated to the rank of the sacred vessels of the Temple. Domestic life with all its secularities shall be hallowed. The kitchens of Jerusalem shall be as truly places of worship as is the inner shrine of the Most High.

On the whole, the prophet’s teaching is that, in the ideal state of man upon earth, there will be an entire abolition of the distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’; a distinction that has wrought infinite mischief in the world, and in the lives of Christian people.

Let me translate these words of our prophet into English equivalents. Every cup and tumbler in a poor man’s kitchen may be as sacred as the communion chalice that passes from lip to lip with the ‘blood of Jesus Christ’ in it. Every common piece of service that we do, down among the vulgarities and the secularities and the meannesses of daily life, may be lifted up to stand upon precisely the same level as the sacredest office that we undertake. The bells of the horses may jingle to the same tune as the trumpets of the priests sounded within the shrine, and on all, great and small, may be written, ‘Holiness to the Lord.’

But let us remember that that universally diffused sanctity will need to have a centre of diffusion, else there will be no diffusion, and that all life will become sacred when the man that lives it has ‘Holiness to the Lord’ written on his forehead, and not else. If that be the inscription on the driver's heart, the horses that he drives will have it written on their bells, but they will not have it unless it be. Holy men make all things holy. 'To the pure all things are pure,' but unto them that are unclean and disobedient there is nothing pure. Hallow thyself, and all things are clean unto thee.

III. And so I come to my third text-the perfected saints' foreheads.

The connection between the first and the last of these texts is as plain and close as between the first and the second. For John in his closing vision gives emphasis to the priestly idea as designating in its deepest relations the redeemed and perfected Christian Church. Therefore he says, as I have already explained, 'His servants shall do Him *priestly* service, and His name shall be in their foreheads.' The old official dress of the high priest comes into his mind, and he paints the future, just as Zechariah did, under the forms of the past, and sees before the throne the perfected saints, each man of them with that inscription clear and conspicuous.

But there is an advance in his words which I think it is not fanciful to note. It is only the *name* that is written in the perfected saint's forehead. Not the 'Holiness unto the Lord,' but just the bare name. What does that mean? Well, it means the same as your writing your name in one of your books does, or as when a man puts his initials on the back of his oxen, or as the old practice of branding the master's mark upon the slave did. It means absolute ownership.

But it means something more. The name is the manifested personality, the revealed God, or, as we say in an abstract way, the character of God. That Name is to be in the foreheads of His perfected people. How does it come to be there? Read also the clause before the text-'His servants shall see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads.' That is to say, the perfected condition is not reached by surrender only, but by assimilation; and that assimilation comes by contemplation. The faces that are turned to Him, and behold Him, are smitten with the light and shine, and those that look upon them see 'as it had been the face of an angel,' as the Sanhedrim saw that of Stephen, when he beheld the Son of Man 'standing at the right hand of God.'

My last text is but a picturesque way of saying what the writer of it says in plain words when he declares, ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ The name is to be ‘in their foreheads,’ where every eye can see it. Alas! alas! it is so hard for us to live out our best selves, and to show to the world what is in us. Cowardice, sheepishness, and a hundred other reasons prevent it. In this poor imperfect state no emotion ever takes shape and visibility without losing more or less of its beauty. But yonder the obstructions to self-manifestation will be done away; and ‘when He shall be manifested, we also shall be manifested with Him in glory.’

‘Then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun in My heavenly Father’s Kingdom.’ But the beginning of it all is ‘Holiness to the Lord’ written on our hearts; and the end of that is the vision which is impossible without holiness, and which leads on to the beholder’s perfect likeness to his Lord.

Malachi

1) MALACHI 1:6-7
2) MALACHI 1:8
3) MALACHI 2:12
4) MALACHI 2:14
5) MALACHI 3:1-5
6) MALACHI 3:6
7) MALACHI 3:7
8) MALACHI 3:8-12
9) MALACHI 3:13-18
10) MALACHI 4:1-5
11) MALACHI 4:6

1) Malachi 1:6-7

Malachi

A DIALOGUE WITH GOD

Mal. 1:6 - Mal. 1:7.

A charactistic of this latest of the prophets is the vivacious dialogue of which our text affords one example. God speaks and the people question His word, which in reply He reiterates still more strongly. The other instances of its occurrence may here be briefly noted, and we shall find that they cover all the aspects of the divine speech to men, whether He charges sin home upon them or pronounces threatenings of judgment, or invites by gracious promises the penitent to return. His charges of sin are repelled in our text and in the following verse by the indignant question, 'Wherein have we polluted Thee?' And similarly in the next chapter the divine accusation, 'Ye have wearied the Lord with your words,' is thrown back with the contemptuous retort, 'Wherein have we wearied Him?' And in like manner in the third chapter, 'Ye have robbed Me,' calls forth no confession but only the defiant answer,' Wherein have we robbed Thee?' And in a later verse, the accusation, 'Your words have been stout against Me,' is traversed by the question, 'What have we spoken so much against Thee?' Similarly the threatening of judgment that the Lord will 'cut off' the men that 'profane the holiness of the Lord' calls forth only the rebutting question, 'Wherefore?' [Mal. 2:14]. And even the gracious invitation, 'Return unto Me, and I will return unto you,' evokes not penitence, but the stiff-necked reply, 'Wherein shall we return?' [Mal. 3:7]. In this sermon we may deal with the first of these three cases, and consider, God's Indictment, and man's plea of 'Not guilty.'

I. God's Indictment.

The precise nature of the charge is to be carefully considered. The Name is the sum of the revealed character, and that Name has been despised. The charge is not that it has been blasphemed, but that it has been neglected, or under-estimated, or cared little about. The pollution of the table of the Lord is the overt act by which the attitude of mind and heart expressed in despising His Name is manifested; but the overt act is secondary and not primary-a symptom of a deeper-lying disease. And herein our Prophet is true to the whole tenor of the Old Testament teaching, which draws its indictment against men primarily in regard to their attitude, and only as a manifestation of that, to their acts. The same deed may be, if estimated in relation to human law, a crime: if estimated in relation to godless ethics, a wrong; and if estimated in the only right way, namely, the attitude towards

God which it reveals, a sin. ‘The despising of His Name’ may be taken as the very definition of sin. It is usual with men to-day to say that ‘Sin is selfishness’; but that statement does not go deep enough unless it be recognised that self-regard only becomes sin when it rears its puny self in opposition to, or in disregard of, the plain will of God. The ‘New Theology,’ of course, minimises, even where it does not, as it to be consistent should, deny the possibility of sin: for, if God is all and all is God, there can be no opposition, there can be no divine will to be opposed, and no human will to oppose it. But the fact of sin certified by men’s own consciences is the rock on which Pantheism must always strike and sink. A superficial view of human history and of human nature may try to explain away the fact of sin by shallow talk about ‘heredity’ and ‘environment,’ or about ‘ignorance’ and ‘mistakes’; but after all such euphemistic attempts to rechristen the ugly thing by beguiling names, the fact remains, and conscience bears sometimes unwilling witness to its existence, that men do set their own inclinations against God’s commands, and that there is in them that which is ‘not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.’ The root of all sin is the despising of His Name.

And as sin has but one root, it has many branches, and as working backwards from deed to motive, we find one common element in all the various acts; so working outwards from motive to deed, we have to see one common character stamped upon a tragical variety of acts. The poison-water is exhibited in many variously coloured and tasted draughts, but however unlike each other they may be, it is always the same.

The great effort of God’s love is to press home this consciousness of despising His Name upon all hearts. The sorrows, losses, and disappointments which come to us all are not meant only to make us suffer, but through suffering to lead us to recognise how far we have wandered from our Father, and to bring us back to His heart and our home. The beginning of all good in us is the contrite acknowledgment of our evil. Christ’s first preaching was the continuation of John’s message, ‘Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’; and His tenderest revelation of the divine love incarnated in Himself was meant to arouse the penitent confession, ‘I am no more worthy to be called Thy son,’ and the quickening resolve, ‘I will arise and go to my Father.’ There is no way to God but through the narrow gate of repentance. There is no true reception of the gift of Christ which does not begin with a vivid and heart-broken consciousness of my own sin. We can pass into, and abide in, the large room of joyous acceptance and fellowship, but we must reach it by a narrow path walled in by gloomy rocks and trodden with bleeding feet. The penitent knowledge of oar sin is the first step towards the triumphant knowledge of Christ's righteousness as ours. Only they who have called out in the agony of their souls, 'Lord, save us, we perish,' have truly learned the love of God, and truly possess the salvation that is in Christ.

II. Man's plea of 'Not Guilty.'

That such an answer should be given to such a charge is a strange, solemn fact, which tragically confirms the true indictment. The effect of all sin is to make us less conscious of its presence, as persons in an unventilated room are not aware of its closeness. It is with profound truth that the Apostle speaks of being hardened by the 'deceitfulness' of sin. It comes to us in a cloud and enfolds us in obscure mist. Like white ants, it never works in the open, but makes a tunnel or burrows under ground, and, hidden in some piece of furniture, eats away all its substance whilst it seems perfectly solid. The man's perception of the standard of duty is enfeebled. We lose our sense of the moral character of any habitual action, just as a man who has lived all his life in a slum sees little of its hideousness, and knows nothing of green fields and fresh air. Conscience is silenced by being neglected. It can be wrongly educated and perverted, so that it may regard sin as doing God's service; and the only judgment in which it can be absolutely trusted is the declaration that it is right to do right, while all its other decisions as to what is right may be biassed by self-interest; but the force with which it pronounces its only unalterable decision depends on the whole tenor of the life of the man. The sins which are most in accordance with our characters, and are therefore most deeply rooted in us, are those which we are least likely to recognise as sins. So, the more sinful we are, the less we know it; therefore there is need for a fixed standard outside of us. The light on the deck cannot guide us; there must be the lighthouse on the rock. This sad answer of the heart untouched by God's appeal prevents all further access of God's love to that heart. That love can only enter when the reply to its indictment is, 'I have despised Thy name.'

Let us not forget the New Testament modification of the divine accusation. 'In Christ' is the Name of God fully and finally revealed to men. For us who live in the blaze of the ineffable brightness of the revelation, our attitude towards Him who brings it is the test of our 'hallowing of the Name' which He brings. He Himself has varied Malachi's indictment when He said, 'He that despiseth Me despiseth Him that sent Me.' Our sin is now to be measured by our under-estimate and neglect of Him, and chiefly of His Cross. That Cross prevents our consciousness of sin from becoming despair of pardon. Judas went out, and with bitter weeping, himself ended his traitorous life. If God's last word to us were, 'Ye have despised My Name,' and it sank into our souls, there would be no hope for any of us. But the message which begins with the universal indictment of sin passes into the message which holds forth forgiveness and freedom as universal as the sin, and 'God hath concluded all in unbelief that He may have mercy upon all.'

2) Malachi 1:8

Malachi

BLEMISHED OFFERINGS

Mal. 1:8.

A word of explanation may indicate my purpose in selecting this, I am afraid, unfamiliar text. The Prophet has been vehemently rebuking a characteristic mean practice of the priests, who were offering maimed and diseased animals in sacrifice. They were probably dishonest as well as mean, because the worshippers would bring sound beasts, and the priests, for their own profit, slipped in a worthless animal, and kept the valuable one for themselves. They had become so habituated to this piece of economical religion, that they saw no harm in it, and when they offered the lame and the sick and the blind for sacrifice they said to themselves, 'It is not evil.' And so Malachi, with the sudden sharp thrust of my text, tries to rouse their torpid consciences. He says to them: 'Take that diseased creature that you are not ashamed to lay on God's altar, and try what the governor'-the official appointed by the Persian Kings to rule over the returned exiles-'will think about it. Will an offering of that sort be considered a compliment or an insult? Do you think it will smooth your way or help your suit with him? Surely God deserves as much reverence as the deputy of Artaxerxes. Surely what is not good enough for a Persian satrap is not good enough for the Lord of Hosts. Offer it to the governor, will he be pleased with it? Will he accept thy person?'

Now, it seems to me that this cheap religion of the priests, and this scathing irony of the Prophet's counsel need little modification to fit us very closely. You will bear me witness, I think, that I do not often speak to you about money. But I am going to try to bring out something about the great subject of Christian administration of earthly possessions from this text, because I believe that the Christian consciousness of this generation does need a great deal of rousing and instructing about this matter.

I. We note the startling and strange contrast which the text suggests.

The diseased lamb was laid without scruple or hesitation on God's altar, and not one of these tricky priests durst have taken it to Court in order to secure favour there. Generalise that, and it comes to this-the gifts that we lavish on men are the condemnation of the gifts that we bring to God; and further, we should be ashamed to offer to men what we are not in the least ashamed to bring to God. Let me illustrate in one or two points.

Let us contrast in our own consciences, for instance, the sort of love that we give to one another with the sort of love that we bring to Him. How strong, how perennially active, how delighting in sacrifice and service, what a felt source of blessedness is the love that knits many husbands and wives, many parents and children, many lovers and friends together! And in dreadful contrast, how languid, how sporadic and interrupted, how reluctant when called upon for service and sacrifice, how little operative in our lives is the love we bring to God! We durst not lay upon the altar of family affection, of wedded love, of true friendship, a love of such a sort as we take to God and expect Him to he satisfied with. It would be an insult if offered to 'the governor,' but we think it good enough for the King of kings. Here a gushing flood, there a straitened trickle coming drop by drop; here a glowing flame that fills life with warmth and light, there a few dying embers. Measure and contrast the love that is lavished by men upon one another, and the love that is coldly brought to Him. And I think we must all bow our heads penitently.

Contrast the trust that we put in one another, and the trust that we direct to Him. In the one case it is absolute. ‘I am as sure as I am of my own existence that so-and-so will always be as true as steel to me, and will never fail me, and whatever he, or she, does, or fails to do, no shadow of suspicion, or mist of doubt, will creep across the sunshine of our sky.’ And in contrast to the firm grasp with which we clasp an infirm human hand, there is a tremulous touch, scarcely a grasp at all, which we lay upon the one Hand that is strong enough always to be outstretched for our defence and our blessing. Contrast your confidence in men, and your confidence in God. Are we not all committing the absurdity of absolutely trusting that which has no stability or stay, and refusing so to trust that which is the Rock of Ages? God’s faithfulness is absolute, our faith in it is tremulous. Men’s faithfulness is uncertain, our faith in it is entire.

We might contrast the submission and obedience with which we follow those who have secured our confidence and evoked our love, as contrasted with the rebellion, the reluctance, the self-will, which come in to break and mar our submission to God. Men that will not take Jesus Christ for their Master, and refuse to follow Him when He speaks, will bind themselves to some human teacher, and enrol themselves as disciples in some school of thought or science or philosophy, with a submission so entire, that it puts to shame the submission which Christians render to the Incarnate Truth Himself.

And so I might go on, all round the horizon of our human nature, and signalise the difference that exists between the blemished sacrifices which each part of our being dares to bring to God and expects Him to accept, and the sacrifices, unblemished and spotless, which we carry to one another.

But let me say a word more directly about the subject of which Malachi is speaking. It seems to me that we may well take a very condemnatory contrast between what we offer to God in regard to our administration of earthly good, and what we offer on other altars. Contrast what you give, for directly beneficent and Christian purposes, with what you spend, without two thoughts, on your own comfort, indulgence, recreation, tastes-sometimes doubtful tastes-and the like. Contrast England's drink bill and England's missionary contribution. We spend ?10,000,000 on some wretched war, and some of you think it is cheap at the price, and the whole contributions of English Christians to missionary purposes in a twelvemonth do not amount to a tenth of that sum. You offer that to the spread of Christ's kingdom. 'Offer it to your Government,' and try to compound for your share of the ten millions that you are going to spend in shells and gunpowder by the amount you give to Christian missions, and you will very soon have the tax-gatherer down on you. 'Will he be pleased with it?'

This one Missionary Society with which we are nominally connected has an income of ?70,000 a year. I suppose that is about a shilling per head from the members of our congregations. Of this congregation there are many that never give us a farthing, except, perhaps, the smallest coin in their pockets when the collecting-box comes round. I do not suppose that there is one of us that applies the underlying principle in our text, of giving God our best, to this work. I am not going to urge you. It is my business now simply to state, as boldly and strongly as I can, the fact; and I say with all sadness, with self-condemnation, as well as bringing an indictment against my brethren, but with the clearest conviction that I am not exaggerating in the smallest degree, that the contrast between what we lavish on other things and what we give for God's work in the world, is a shameful contrast, like that other which the Prophet gibbeted with his indignant eloquence.

II. And now let me come to another point-viz., that we have here suggested and implied the true law and principle on which all Christian giving of all sorts is to be regulated.

And that is-give the best. The diseased animal was no more fit for the altar of God than it was for the shambles of the viceroy. It was the entire and unblemished one that would be accepted in either case. But for us Christian people that general principle has to be expanded. Let me do it in two or three sentences.

The foundation of all is 'the unspeakable Gift.' Jesus Christ has given Himself, God has given His Son. And Jesus Christ and God, in giving, gave up that we might receive. Do you believe that? Do you believe it about yourself? If you do, then the next step becomes certain. That gift, truly received by any man, will infallibly lead to a kindred [though infinitely inferior] self-surrender. If once we come within the circle of the attraction of that great Sun, if I might so say, it will sweep us clean out of our orbit, and turn us into satellites reflecting His light. To have self for our centre is death and misery, to have Christ for our centre is life and blessedness. And the one power that decentralises a man, and sweeps him into an orbit around Jesus, is the faithful acceptance of His great gift. Just as some little State will give up its independence in order to be blessedly absorbed into a great Empire, on the frontiers of which it maintains a precarious existence, so a man is never so strong, never so blessed, never so truly himself, as when the might of Christ's sacrifice has melted down all his selfishness, and has made it flow out in rivers of self-surrender, self-absorption, self-annihilation, and so self-preservation. 'He that loseth his life shall find it.'

Then the next step is that this self-surrender, consequent upon my faithful acceptance of the Lord's surrender for me, changes my whole conception as to what I call my possessions. If I, in the depths of my soul, have yielded myself to Jesus Christ, which I shall have done if I have truly accepted Him as yielding Himself for me, then the yielding of self draws after it, necessarily, and without a question, a new relation between me and all that I have and all that I can do. Capacities, faculties, means, opportunities, powers of brain and heart and mind, and everything else-they all belong to Him. As in old times a nobleman came and put his hands between the King's hands, and kneeling before him surrendered his lands, and all his property, to the over-lord, and got them back again for his own, so we shall do, in the measure in which we have accepted Christ as our Saviour and our Guide. And so, because am His, I shall feel that I am His steward to administer what He gives me, not for myself, but for men and for God.

Then there follows another thing, and that is, that Christian giving, not of money only, but of money in a very eminent degree, is only right and truly Christian when you give yourself with your gift. A great many of us put our sixpence, or our half-crown, or our sovereign, into the plate, and no part of ourselves goes with it, except a little twinge of unwillingness to part with it. That is how they fling bones to dogs. That is not how you have to give your money and your efforts to God and God's cause. Farmers nowadays sow their seed-corn out of a machine with a number of little conical receptacles at the back of it and a small hole in the bottom of each, and as the thing goes bumping along over the furrows, out they fall. That drill does as well as, and better than, the hand of the sower scattering the seed, but it does not do near as well in the Christian agriculture in sowing the seed of the Kingdom. Machine-work will not do there; we have to have the sower's hand, and the sower's heart with his hand, as he scatters the seed. Brethren! apply the lesson to yourselves, and let your sympathies and your prayers and your wishes to help go along with your gifts, if you intend them to be of any good.

And there is another thing, and that is that, somehow or other, if not in the individual gifts, at all events in their aggregate, there must be present the fact of sacrifice. 'I will not offer unto the Lord burnt offerings of that which doth cost me nothing,' said the old king. And we do not give as we ought, unless our gifts involve some measure of sacrifice. From many a subscription list some of the biggest donations would disappear, like the top-writing in one of those old manuscripts where the Gospel has been half-erased and written over with some foolish legend, which vanishes when the detergent liquid is applied to the parchment, if that thought were brought to bear upon it. God asks how much is kept, not how much is given.

Now, dear friends, these are all threadbare, elementary, 'A.B.C.' truths. Are they the alphabet of our stewardship and administration of our possessions?

III. One last suggestion I would make on this text is that it brings before us the possible blessing and possible grave results of right or wrong Christian giving.

'Will he be pleased with it? Or will he accept thy person?' Will the governor think the hobbling creature, blind of an eye, and infected with some sickness, to be a beautiful addition to his flock? Will it help your suit with him? No!

It is New Testament teaching that our faithfulness in the administration of earthly possessions of all sorts has a bearing on our spiritual life. Remember our Lord's triple illustration of this principle, when He speaks about faithfulness 'in that which is least,' leading on to the possession of that which is the greatest; when He speaks of faithfulness in regard to 'the unrighteous Mammon' leading on to being intrusted with the true riches; when He speaks of faithfulness in our administration of that which is another's-alien to ourselves, and which may pass into the possession of a thousand more-leading on to our firmer hold, and our deeper and fuller possession of the riches which, in the deepest sense of the word, are our own. One very important element in the development and advance of the religious life is our right use of these earthly things. I have seen many a case in which a man was far better when he was a poor man than he was when a rich one, in which slowly, stealthily, certainly, the love of wealth has closed round a man like an iron band round a sapling, and has hindered the growth of his Christian character, and robbed him of the best things. And, God be thanked! one has seen cases, too, in which, by their Christian use of outward possessions, men have weakened the dominion of self upon themselves, have learned the subordinate value of the wealth that can be counted and detached from its possessor, and have grown in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Dear friends, God has given all of us something in charge, the faithful use of which is a potent factor in the growth of our Christian characters.

It is New Testament teaching that our faithful administration of earthly possessions has a bearing on the future. Remember what Jesus Christ said, 'That when ye fail they may receive you into everlasting habitations.' Remember what His Apostle says, 'Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.' Let no fear of imperilling the great truth of salvation by faith lead us to forget that the faith which saves manifests its vitality and genuineness, by its effects upon our lives, and that no small part of our lives is concerned with the right acquisition and right use of these perishable outward gifts. And let us take care that we do not, in our dread of damaging the free grace of God, forget that although we do not earn blessedness, here or hereafter, by gifts whilst we are living or legacies when we are dead, the administration of money has an important part to play in shaping Christian character, and the Christian character which we acquire here settles our hereafter.

Brethren! we all need to revise our scale of giving, especially in regard to missionary operations. And if we will do that at the foot of the Cross, then we shall join the chorus, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive *riches*,’ and we shall come to Him ‘bringing our silver and our gold with us,’ rejoicing that He gives us the possibility of sharing His blessedness, ‘according to the word of the Lord Jesus which He spake, It is more blessed to give than to receive.’

3) Malachi 2:12

Malachi

A DIALOGUE WITH GOD

Mal. 2:12, Mal. 2:14.

It is obvious from the whole context that divorce and foreign inter-marriage were becoming increasingly prevalent in Malachi’s time. The conditions in these respects were nearly similar to that prevailing in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is these sins which the Prophet is here vehemently condemning, and for which he threatens to cut off the transgressors out of the tents of Jacob, and to regard no more their offerings and simulated worship. They might cover ‘the altar of the Lord with tears,’ but the sacrifice which they laid upon it was polluted by the sins of their daily domestic life, and therefore was not ‘regarded by Him any more.’ Malachi is true to the prophetic spirit when he denounces a religion which has the form of godliness without its power over the practical life. But his sharp accusations have their edge turned by the question, ‘Wherefore?’ which again calls out from the Prophet’s lips a more sharply-pointed accusation, and a solemner warning that none should ‘deal treacherously against the wife of his youth,’ ‘for I hate putting away, saith the Lord.’ We may dismiss any further reference to the circumstances of the text, and regard it as but one instance of man’s way of treating the voice of God when it warns of the consequences of the sin of man. Looked at from such a point of view the words of our text bring before us God’s merciful threatenings and man’s incredulous rejection of them.

I. God’s merciful threatenings.

The fact of sin affects God’s relation to and dealings with the sinner. It does not prevent the flowing forth of His love, which is not drawn out by anything in us, but wells up from the depths of His being, like the Jordan from its source at Dan, a broad stream gushing forth from the rock. But that love which is the outgoing of perfect moral purity must necessarily become perfect opposition to its own opposite in the sinfulness of man. The divine character is many-sided, and whilst ‘to the pure’ it ‘shows itself pure,’ it cannot but be that ‘to the froward’ it ‘will show itself froward.’ Man’s sin has for its most certain and dreadful consequence that, if we may so say, it forces God to present the stern side of His nature which hates evil. But not merely does sin thus modify the fact of the divine relation to men, but it throws men into opposition in which they can see only the darkness which dwells in the light of God. To the eye looking through a red tinted medium all things are red, and even the crystal sea before the throne is ‘a sea of glass mingled with fire.’

No sin can stay our reception of a multitude of good gifts appealing to our hearts and revealing the patient love of our Father in heaven, but every sin draws after it as certainly as the shadow follows the substance, evil consequences which work themselves out on the large scale in nations and communities, and in the smaller spheres of individual life. And surely it is the voice of love and not of anger that comes to warn us of the death which is the wages of sin. It is not God who has ordained that ‘the soul that sinneth it shall die,’ but it is God who tells us so. The train is rushing full steam ahead to the broken bridge, and will crash down the gulph and be huddled, a hideous ruin, on the rocks; surely it is care for life that holds out the red flag of danger, and surely God is not to be blamed if in spite of the flag full speed is kept up and the crash comes.

The miseries and sufferings which follow our sins are self-inflicted, and for the most part automatic. ‘Whatsoever a man soweth, that’-and not some other crop-’will he also reap.’ The wages of sin are paid in ready money; and it is as just to lay them at God’s door as it would be to charge Him with inflicting the disease which the dissolute man brings upon himself. It is no arbitrary appointment of God’s that ‘he that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption'; nor is it His will acting as that of a jealous despot which makes it inevitably true that here and hereafter, 'Every transgression and disobedience shall receive its just recompense of reward,' and that to be parted from Him is death.

If then we rightly understand the connection between sin and suffering, and the fact that the sorrows which are but the echoes of preceding sins have all a distinctly moral and restorative purpose, we are prepared rightly to estimate how tenderly the God who warns us against our sins by what men call threatenings loves us while He speaks.

II. Man's rejection of God's merciful threatenings.

It is the great mystery and tragedy of life that men oppose themselves to God's merciful warnings that all sin is a bitter, because it is an evil, thing. He has to lament, 'I have smitten your children, and they have received no correction.' The question 'Wherefore?' is asked in very various tones, but none of them has in it the accent of true conviction; and there is a whole world of difference between the lowly petition, 'Show me wherefore Thou contendest with me,' and the curt, self-complacent brushing aside of God's merciful threatenings in the text. The last thing which most of us think of as the cause of our misfortunes is ourselves; and we resent as almost an insult the word, which if we were wise, we should welcome as the crowning proof of the seeking love of our Father in heaven. We are more obstinate and foolish than Balaam, who persisted in his purpose when the angel with the drawn sword in his hand would have barred his way, not to the tree of life, but to death. The awful mystery that a human will can, and the yet sadder mystery that it does, set itself against the divine, is never more unintelligible, never so stupid, and never so tragic as when God says, 'Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?' and we say, 'Why need I die? I will not turn.'

The 'Wherefore?' of our text is widely asked in the present day as an expression of utter bewilderment at the miseries of humanity, both in the wide area of this disordered world and in the narrower field of individual lives. There are whole schools of so-called political and social thinkers who have yet to learn that the one thing which the world and the individual need is not a change of conditions or environment, but redemption from sin. Man's sorrows are but a symptom of his disease, and he is no more to be healed by tinkering with these than a fever-stricken patient can be restored to health by treating the blotches on his skin which tell of the disease that courses through his veins.

But sometimes the question is more than an expression of bewilderment; it conceals an arraignment of God’s justice, or even a denial that there is a God at all. There are men among us who hesitate not to avow that the miseries of the world have rooted out of their minds a belief in Him; and who point to all the ills under which humanity staggers as conclusive against the ancient faith of a God of love. They, too, forget that that love is righteousness, and that if there be sin in the world and God above it, He must necessarily war against it and hate it.

Our right response to God’s merciful threatenings is to ask this question in the right spirit. We are not wise if we turn a deaf ear to His warnings, or go on in a headlong course which He by His providences declared to be dangerous and fatal. We use them as wise men should, only if our ‘Wherefore?’ is asked in order to learn our evil, and having learned it, to purge our bosoms of the perilous stuff by confession and to seek pardon and victory in Christ. Then we shall ‘know the secret of the Lord’ which is ‘with them that fear Him’; and the mysteries that still hang over our own histories and the world’s destiny will have shining down upon them the steadfast light of that love which seeks to make men blessed by making them good.

4) Malachi 2:14

Malachi

A DIALOGUE WITH GOD

Mal. 2:12, Mal. 2:14.

It is obvious from the whole context that divorce and foreign inter-marriage were becoming increasingly prevalent in Malachi’s time. The conditions in these respects were nearly similar to that prevailing in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is these sins which the Prophet is here vehemently condemning, and for which he threatens to cut off the transgressors out of the tents of Jacob, and to regard no more their offerings and simulated worship. They might cover 'the altar of the Lord with tears,' but the sacrifice which they laid upon it was polluted by the sins of their daily domestic life, and therefore was not 'regarded by Him any more.' Malachi is true to the prophetic spirit when he denounces a religion which has the form of godliness without its power over the practical life. But his sharp accusations have their edge turned by the question, 'Wherefore?' which again calls out from the Prophet's lips a more sharply-pointed accusation, and a solemner warning that none should 'deal treacherously against the wife of his youth,' 'for I hate putting away, saith the Lord.' We may dismiss any further reference to the circumstances of the text, and regard it as but one instance of man's way of treating the voice of God when it warns of the consequences of the sin of man. Looked at from such a point of view the words of our text bring before us God's merciful threatenings and man's incredulous rejection of them.

I. God's merciful threatenings.

The fact of sin affects God's relation to and dealings with the sinner. It does not prevent the flowing forth of His love, which is not drawn out by anything in us, but wells up from the depths of His being, like the Jordan from its source at Dan, a broad stream gushing forth from the rock. But that love which is the outgoing of perfect moral purity must necessarily become perfect opposition to its own opposite in the sinfulness of man. The divine character is many-sided, and whilst 'to the pure' it 'shows itself pure,' it cannot but be that 'to the froward' it 'will show itself froward.' Man's sin has for its most certain and dreadful consequence that, if we may so say, it forces God to present the stern side of His nature which hates evil. But not merely does sin thus modify the fact of the divine relation to men, but it throws men into opposition in which they can see only the darkness which dwells in the light of God. To the eye looking through a red tinted medium all things are red, and even the crystal sea before the throne is 'a sea of glass mingled with fire.'

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5) **Malachi 3:1-5**

Malachi

THE LAST WORD OF PROPHECY

Mal. 3:1 - Mal. 3:12.

Deep obscurity surrounds the person of this last of the prophets. It is questioned whether Malachi is a proper name at all. It is the Hebrew word rendered in Mal. 3:1 of our passage ‘My messenger,’ and this has led many authorities to contend that the prophecy is in fact anonymous, the name being only a designation of office. Whether this is so or not, the name, if it is a name, is all that we know about him. The tenor of his prophecy shows that he lived after the restoration of the Temple and its worship, and the sins which he castigates are substantially those with which Ezra and Nehemiah had to fight. One ancient Jewish authority asserts that he was Ezra; but the statement has no confirmation, and if it had been correct, we should not have expected that such an author would have been anonymous. This dim figure, then, is the last of the mighty line of prophets, and gives strong utterance to the ‘hope of Israel’! One clear voice, coming from we scarcely know whose lips, proclaims for the last time, ‘He comes! He comes!’ and then all is silence for four hundred years. Modern critics, indeed, hold that the bulk of the Psalter is of later date; but that contention has much to do before it can be regarded as established.

The first point worthy of notice in this passage, then, is the concentration, in this last prophetic utterance, of that element of forward-looking expectancy which marked all the earlier revelation. From the beginning, the selectest spirits in Israel had set their faces and pointed their fingers to a great future, which gathered distinctness as the ages rolled, and culminated in the King from David’s line, of whom many psalms sung, and in the suffering Servant of the Lord, who shines out from the pages of the second part of Isaiah’s prophecy. This Messianic hope runs through all the Old Testament, like a broadening river. ‘They that went before cried, Hosanna! Blessed is He that cometh.’

That hope gives unity to the Old Testament, whatever criticism may have to teach about the process of its production. The most important thing about the book is that one purpose informs it all; and the student who misses the truth that ‘the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy’ has a less accurate conception of the meaning and inter-relations of the Old Testament than the unlearned who has accepted that great truth. We should be willing to learn all that modern scholarship has to teach about the course of revelation. But we should take care that the new knowledge does not darken the old certainty that the prophets ‘testified beforehand of the sufferings of Christ and of the glory that should follow,’ Here, at the very end, stands Malachi, reiterating the assurance which had come down through the centuries. The prophets, as it were, had lit a beacon which flamed through the darkness. Hand after hand had flung new fuel on it when it burned low. It had lighted up many a stormy night of exile and distress. Now we can dimly see one more, the last of his order, casting his brand on the fire, which leaps up again; and then he too passes into the darkness, but the beacon burns on.

The next point to note is the clear prophecy of a forerunner. ‘My messenger’ is to come, and to ‘prepare the way before Me.’ Isaiah had heard a voice calling, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,’ and Malachi quotes his words, and ascribes the same office to the ‘messenger.’ In the last verses of his prophecy he calls this messenger ‘Elijah the prophet.’ Here, then, we have a remarkable instance of a historical detail set forth in prophecy. The coming of the Lord is to be immediately preceded by the appearance of a prophet, whose function is to effect a moral and religious reformation, which shall prepare a path for Him. This is no vague ideal, but definite announcement of a definite fact, to be realised in a historical personality. How came this half-anonymous Jew, four hundred years beforehand, to hit upon the fact that the next prophet in Israel would herald the immediate coming of the Lord? There ought to be but one answer possible.

Another point to note is the peculiar relation between Jehovah and Him who comes. Emphatically and broadly it is declared that Jehovah Himself ‘shall suddenly come to His temple’; and then the prophecy immediately passes on to speak of the coming of ‘the Messenger of the covenant,’ and dwells for a time exclusively on his work of purifying; and then again it glides, without conscious breach of continuity or mark of transition, into, ‘And *I* will come near to you in judgment.’ A mysterious relationship of oneness and yet distinctness is here shadowed, of which the solution is only found in the Christian truth that the Word, which was Grod, and was in the beginning with God, became flesh, and that in Him Jehovah in very deed tabernacled among men. The expression ‘the Messenger [or Angel] of the covenant’ is connected with the remarkable representations in other parts of the Old Testament, of ‘the Angel of Jehovah,’ in whom many commentators recognise a pre-incarnate manifestation of the eternal Word. That ‘Angel’ had redeemed Israel from Egypt, had led them through the desert, had been the ‘Captain of the Lord’s host.’ The name of Jehovah was ‘in Him.’ He it is whose coming is here prophesied, and in His coming Jehovah comes to His temple.

We next note the aspect of the coming which is prominent here. Not the kingly, nor the redemptive, but the judicial, is uppermost. With keen irony the Prophet contrasts the professed eagerness of the people for the appearance of Jehovah and their shrinking terror when He does come. He is ‘the Lord whom ye seek’; the Messenger of the covenant is He ‘whom ye delight in.’ But all that superficial and partially insincere longing will turn into dread and unwillingness to abide His scrutiny. The images of the refiner’s fire and the fullers’ soap imply painful processes, of which the intention is to burn out the dross and beat out the filth. It sounds like a prolongation of Malachi’s voice when John the Baptist peals out his herald cry of one whose ‘fan was in His hand,’ and who should plunge men into a fiery baptism, and consume with fire that destroyed what would not submit to be cast into the fire that cleansed. Nor should we forget that our Lord has said, ‘For judgment am I come into the world.’ He came to ‘purify’; but if men would not let Him do what He came for, He could not but be their bane instead of their blessing.

The stone is laid. If we build on it, it is a sure foundation; if we stumble over it, we are broken. The double aspect and effect of the gospel, which was meant only to have the single operation of blessing, are clearly set forth in this prophecy, which first promises purging from sin, so that not only the 'sons of Levi' shall offer in righteousness, but that the 'offerings of Judah and Jerusalem shall be pleasant,' and then passes immediately to foretell that God will come in judgment and witness against evil-doers. Judgment is the shadow of salvation, and constantly attends on it. Neither Malachi nor the Baptist gives a complete view of Messiah's work, but still less do they give an erroneous one; for the central portion of both prophecies is His purifying energy which both liken to cleansing fire.

That real and inward cleansing is the great work of Christ. It was wrought on as many of His contemporaries as believed on Him, and for such as did not He was a swift Witness against them. Nor are we to forget that the prophecy is not exhausted yet; for there remains another 'day of His coming' for judgment. The prophets did not see the perspective of the future, and often bring together events widely separated in time, just as, to a spectator on a mountain, distances between points far away towards the horizon are not measurable. We have to allow for foreshortening.

This blending of events historically widely apart is to be kept in view in interpreting Malachi's prediction that the coming would result in Judah's and Israel's offerings being 'pleasant unto the Lord as in former years.' That prediction is not yet fulfilled, whether we regard the name of Israel and the relation expressed in it as having passed over to the Christian Church, or whether we look forward to that bringing in of all Israel which Paul says will be as 'life from the dead.' But by slow degrees it is being fulfilled, and by Christ men are being led to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God.

The more directly Messianic part of this prophecy is closed in Mal. 3:6 by a great saying, which at once gives the reason for the coming and for its severe aspect of witness against sin. The unchangeableness of God, which is declared in His very name, guarantees the continued existence of Israel. As Paul says in regard to the same subject, 'The calling of God is without change of purpose' [on His part]. But it is as impossible that God should leave them to their sins, which would destroy them, as that He should Himself consume them. Therefore He will surely come; and coming, will deliver from evil. But they who refuse to be so delivered will forfeit that title and the pledge of preservation which it implies.

A new paragraph begins with Mal. 3:7, which is not closely connected with the promises preceding. It recurs to the prevailing tone of Malachi, the rebuke of negligence in attending to the legal obligations of worship. That negligence is declared to be a reason for God’s withdrawal from them. But the ‘return,’ which is promised on condition of their renewed obedience, can scarcely be identified with the coming just foretold. That coming was to bring about offerings of righteousness which should be pleasant to the Lord. This section [Mal. 3:7 - Mal. 3:12] promises blessings as results of such offerings, and a ‘return’ of Jehovah to His people contingent upon their return to Him. If the two sections of this passage are taken as closely connected, this one must describe the consequences of the coming. But, more probably, this accusation of negligence and promise of blessing on a change of conduct are independent of the previous verses. We, however, may fairly take them as exhibiting the obligations of those who have received that great gift of purifying from Jesus Christ, and are thereby consecrated as His priests.

The key-word of the Christian life is ‘sacrifice’-surrender, and that to God. That is to be stamped on the inmost selves, and by the act of the will, on the body as well. ‘Yield yourselves to God, and your members as instruments of righteousness to Him.’ It is to be written on possessions. Malachi necessarily keeps within the limits of the sacrificial system, but his impetuous eloquence hits us no less. It is still possible to ‘rob God.’ We do so when we keep anything as our own, and use it at our own will, for our own purposes. Only when we recognise His ownership of ourselves, and consequently of all that we call ‘ours,’ do we give Him His due. All the slave’s chattels belong to the owner to whom he belongs. Such thorough-going surrender is the secret of thorough possession. The true way to enjoy worldly goods is to give them to God.

The lattices of heaven are opened, not to pour down, as of old, fiery destruction, but to make way for the gentle descent of God’s blessing, which will more than fill every vessel set to receive it. This is the universal law, not always fulfilled in increase of outward goods, but in the better riches of communion and of larger possession in God Himself. He suffers no man to be His creditor, but more than returns our gifts, as legends tell of some peasant who brought his king a poor tribute of fruits of his fields, and went away from the presence-chamber with a jewel in his hand.

6) Malachi 3:6

Malachi

THE LAST WORD OF PROPHECY

THE UNCHANGING LORD

Mal. 3:6.

The scriptural revelations of the divine Name are always the basis of intensely practical admonition. The Bible does not think it worth while to proclaim the Name of God without building on the proclamation promises or commandments. There is no ‘mere theology’ in Scripture; and it does not speak of ‘attributes,’ nor give dry abstractions of infinitude, eternity, omniscience, unchangeableness, but lays stress on the personality of God, which is so apt to escape us in these abstract conceptions, and thus teaches us to think of this personal God our Father, as infinite, eternal, knowing all things, and never changing. There is all the difference in our attitude towards the very same truth if we think of the unchangeableness of God, or if we think that our Father God is unchangeable. In our text the thought of Him as unchanging comes into view as the foundation of the continuance of the unfaithful sons of Jacob in their privileges and in their very lives. ‘I am the Lord,’ Jehovah, the Self-existent, the Eternal whose being is not under the limitations of succession and time. ‘Because I am Jehovah, I change not’; and because Jehovah changes not, therefore our finite and mortal selves abide, and our infinite and sinful selves are still the objects of His steadfast love.

Let us consider, first, the unchangeable God, and second, the unchanging God as the foundation of our changeful lives.

I. The unchangeable God.

In the great covenant-name Jehovah there is revealed an existence which reverses all that we know of finite and progressive being, or finite and mortal being, or finite and variable nature. With us there are mutations arising from physical nature. The material must needs be subject to laws of growth and decadence. Our spiritual nature is subject to changes arising from the advancement in knowledge. Our moral nature is subject to fluctuations; circumstances play upon us, and ‘nothing continueth in one stay.’ Change is the condition of life. It means growth and happiness; it belongs to the perfection of creatures. But the unchangeableness of God is the negation of all imperfection, it is the negation of all dependence on circumstances, it is the negation of all possibility of decay or exhaustion, it is the negation of all caprice. It is the assurance that His is an underived, self-dependent being, and that with Him is the fountain of light; it is the assurance that, raised above the limits of time and the succession of events, He is in the eternal present, where all things that were and are, and are to come, stand naked and open. It is the assurance that the calm might of His eternal will acts, not in spasms of successive volitions preceded by a period of indecision and equilibrium between contending motives, but is one continuous uniform energy, never beginning, never bending, never ending; that the purpose of His will is ‘the eternal purpose which He hath purposed in Himself.’ It is the assurance that the clear vision of His infinite knowledge, from the heat of which nothing is hid, has no stages of advancement, and no events lying nebulous in a dim horizon by reason of distance, or growing in clearness as they draw nearer, but which pierces the mists of futurity and the veils of the past and the infinities of the present, and ‘from the beginning to the end knoweth all things.’ It is the assurance that the mighty stream of love from the heart of God is not contingent on the variations of our character and the fluctuations of our poor hearts, but rises from His deep well, and flows on for ever, ‘the river of God’ which ‘is full of water.’ It is the assurance that round all the majesty and the mercy which He has revealed for our adoration and our trust there is the consecration of permanence, that we might have a rock on which to build and never be confounded. Is there anywhere in the past an act of His power, a word of His lip, a revelation of His heart which has been a strength or a joy or a light to any man? It is valid for me, and is intended for my use. ‘He fainteth not, nor is weary.’ The bush burns and is not consumed. ‘I will not alter the thing that has gone out of my lips.’ ‘By two immutable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we have strong consolation.’

II. The unchanging God as the foundation of our changeful lives.

In the most literal sense our text is true. Because He lives we live also. He is the same for ever, therefore we are not consumed. The foundation of our being lies beyond and beneath all the mutable things from which we are tempted to believe that we draw our lives, and is in God. The true lesson to be drawn from the mutable phenomena of earth is-heaven. The many links in the chain must have a staple. Reason requires that behind all the fleeting shall be the permanent. There must be a basis which does not partake of change. The lesson from all the mutable creation is the immutable God.

Since God changes not, the life of our spirits is not at the mercy of changing events. We look back on a lifetime of changing scenes through which we have passed, and forward to a similar succession, and this mutability is sad to many of us, and in some aspects sad to all, so powerless we are to fix and arrest any of our blessings. Which we shall keep we know not; we only know that, as certainly as buds and blossoms of spring drop, and the fervid summer darkens to November fogs and December frosts, so certainly we shall have to part with much in our passage through life. But if we let God speak to us, the necessary changes that come to us will not be harmful but blessed, for the lesson that the mutability of the mutual is meant to impress upon us is, the permanency of the divine, and our dependence, not on them, but on Him. We may look upon all the world of time and chance and think that He who Himself is unchanging changeth all. The eye of the tempest is a point of rest. The point in the heavens towards which, according to some astronomers, the whole of the solar system is drifting, is a fixed point. If we depend on Him, then change is not all sad; it cannot take God away, but it may bring us nearer to Him. We cannot be desolate as long as we have Him. We know not what shall be on the morrow. Be it so; it will be God’s to-morrow. When the leaves drop we can see the rock on which the trees grow; and when changes strip the world for us of some of its waving beauty and leafy shade, we may discern more clearly the firm foundation on which our hopes rest. All else changes. Be it so; that will not kill us, nor leave us utterly forlorn as long as we hear the voice which says, ‘I am the Lord; I change not; therefore ye are not consumed.’

God’s purposes and promises change not, therefore our faith may rest on Him, notwithstanding our own sins and fluctuations. It is this aspect of the divine immutability which is the thought of our text. God does not turn from His love, nor cancel His promises, nor alter His purposes of mercy because of our sins. If God could have changed, the godless forgetfulness of, and departure from, Him of ‘the Sons of Jacob’ would have driven Him to abandon His purposes; but they still live-living evidences of His long-suffering. And in that preservation of them God would have them see the basis of hope for the future. So this is the confidence with which we should cheer ourselves when we look upon the past, and when we anticipate the future. The sins that have been in our past have deserved that we should have been swept away, but we are here still. Why are we? Why do we yet live? Because we have to do with an unchanging love, with a faithfulness that never departs from its word, with a purpose of blessing that will not be turned aside. So let us look back with this thought and be thankful; let us look forward with it and be of good cheer. Trust yourself, weak and sinful as you are, to that unchanging love. The future will have in it faults and failures, sins and shortcomings, but rise from yourself to God. Look beyond the light and shade of your own characters, or of earthly events to the central light, where there is no glimmering twilight, no night, ‘no variableness nor shadow of turning.’ Let us live in God, and be strong in hope. Forward, not backward, let us look and strive; so our souls, fixed and steadied by faith in Him, will become in a manner partakers of His unchangeableness; and we too in our degree will be able to say, ‘The Lord is at my side; I shall not be moved.’

7) Malachi 3:7

Malachi

THE LAST WORD OF PROPHECY

A DIALOGUE WITH GOD

Mal. 3:7.

In previous sermons we have considered God’s indictment of man’s sin met by man’s plea of ‘not guilty,’ and God’s threatenings brushed aside by man’s question. Here we have the climax of self-revealing and patient love in God’s wooing voice to draw the wanderer back, met by man’s refusing answer. These three divine utterances taken together cover the whole ground of His speech to us; and, alas! these three human utterances but too truly represent for the most part our answers to Him.

I. God’s invitation to His wandering child.

The gracious invitation of our text presupposes a state of departure. The child who is tenderly recalled has first gone away. There has been a breach of love. Dependence has been unwelcome, and cast off with the vain hope of a larger freedom in the far-off land; and this is the true charge against us. It is not so much individual acts of sin but the going away in heart and spirit from our Father God which describes the inmost essence of our true condition, and is itself the source of all our acts of sin. Conscience confirms the description. We know that we have departed from Him in mind, having wasted our thoughts on many things and not having had Him in the multitude of them in us. We have departed from Him in heart, having squandered our love and dissipated our desires on many objects, and sought in the multiplicity of many pearls-some of them only paste-a substitute for the all-sufficient simplicity of the One of great price. We have departed from Him in will, having reared up puny inclinations and fleeting passions against His calm and eternal purpose, and so bringing about the shock of a collision as destructive to us as when a torpedo-boat crashes in the dark against a battleship, and, cut in two, sinks.

The gracious invitation of our text follows, ‘I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.’ Threatenings, and the execution of these in acts of judgment, are no indication of a change in the loving heart of God; and because it is the same, however we have sinned against it and departed from it, there is ever an invitation and a welcome. We may depart from Him, but He never departs from us. Nor does He wait for us to originate the movement of return, but He invites us back. By all His words in His threatenings and in His commandments, as in the acts of

His providence, we can hear His call to return. The fathers of our flesh never cease to long for their prodigal child’s return; and their patient persistence of hope is but brief and broken when contrasted with the infinite long-suffering of the Father of spirits. We have heard of a mother who for long empty years has nightly set a candle in her cottage window to guide her wandering boy back to her heart; and God has bade us think more loftily of the unchangeableness of His love than that of a woman who may forget, that she should not have compassion upon the son of her womb.

II. Man’s answer to God’s invitation.

It is a refusal which is half-veiled and none the less real. There is no unwillingness to obey professed, but it is concealed under a mask of desiring a little more light as to how a return is to be accomplished. There are not many of us who are rooted enough in evil as to be able to blurt out a curt ‘I will not’ in answer to His call. Conscience often bars the way to such a plain and unmannerly reply; but there are many who try to cheat God, and who do to some extent cheat themselves, by professing ignorance of the way which would lead them to His heart. Some of us have learned only too well to raise questions about the method of salvation instead of accepting it, and to dabble in theology instead of making sure work of return. Some of us would fain substitute a host of isolated actions, or apparent moral or religious observance, for the return of will and heart to God; and all who in their consciences answer God’s call by saying, ‘Wherein shall we return?’ with such a meaning are playing tricks with themselves, and trying to hoodwink God.

But the question of our text has often a nobler origin, and comes from the depths of a troubled heart. Not seldom does God’s loving invitation rouse the dormant conscience to the sense of sin. The man, lying broken at the foot of the cliff down which he has fallen, and seeing the brightness of God far above, has his heart racked with the question: How am I, with lame limbs, to struggle back to the heights above? ‘How shall man be just with God?’ All the religions of the world, with their offerings and penances and weary toils, are vain attempts to make a way back to the God from whom men have wandered, and that question, ‘Wherein shall we return?’ is really the meaning of the world’s vain seeking and profitless effort.

God has answered man’s question; for Christ is at once the way back to God, and the motive which draws us to walk in it. He draws us back by the magnetism of His love and sacrifice. We return to God when we cling to Jesus. He is the highest, the tenderest utterance of the divine voice; and when we yield to His invitation to Himself we return to God. He calls to each of us, ‘Come unto Me, and I will give you rest.’ What can we reply but, ‘I come; let me never wander from Thee’?

8) Malachi 3:8-12

Malachi

THE LAST WORD OF PROPHECY

Mal. 3:1 - Mal. 3:12.

Deep obscurity surrounds the person of this last of the prophets. It is questioned whether Malachi is a proper name at all. It is the Hebrew word rendered in Mal. 3:1 of our passage ‘My messenger,’ and this has led many authorities to contend that the prophecy is in fact anonymous, the name being only a designation of office. Whether this is so or not, the name, if it is a name, is all that we know about him. The tenor of his prophecy shows that he lived after the restoration of the Temple and its worship, and the sins which he castigates are substantially those with which Ezra and Nehemiah had to fight. One ancient Jewish authority asserts that he was Ezra; but the statement has no confirmation, and if it had been correct, we should not have expected that such an author would have been anonymous. This dim figure, then, is the last of the mighty line of prophets, and gives strong utterance to the ‘hope of Israel’! One clear voice, coming from we scarcely know whose lips, proclaims for the last time, ‘He comes! He comes!’ and then all is silence for four hundred years. Modern critics, indeed, hold that the bulk of the Psalter is of later date; but that contention has much to do before it can be regarded as established.

The first point worthy of notice in this passage, then, is the concentration, in this last prophetic utterance, of that element of forward-looking expectancy which marked all the earlier revelation. From the beginning, the selectest spirits in Israel had set their faces and pointed their fingers to a great future, which gathered distinctness as the ages rolled, and culminated in the King from David's line, of whom many psalms sung, and in the suffering Servant of the Lord, who shines out from the pages of the second part of Isaiah's prophecy. This Messianic hope runs through all the Old Testament, like a broadening river. 'They that went before cried, Hosanna! Blessed is He that cometh.'

That hope gives unity to the Old Testament, whatever criticism may have to teach about the process of its production. The most important thing about the book is that one purpose informs it all; and the student who misses the truth that 'the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy' has a less accurate conception of the meaning and inter-relations of the Old Testament than the unlearned who has accepted that great truth. We should be willing to learn all that modern scholarship has to teach about the course of revelation. But we should take care that the new knowledge does not darken the old certainty that the prophets 'testified beforehand of the sufferings of Christ and of the glory that should follow,' Here, at the very end, stands Malachi, reiterating the assurance which had come down through the centuries. The prophets, as it were, had lit a beacon which flamed through the darkness. Hand after hand had flung new fuel on it when it burned low. It had lighted up many a stormy night of exile and distress. Now we can dimly see one more, the last of his order, casting his brand on the fire, which leaps up again; and then he too passes into the darkness, but the beacon burns on.

The next point to note is the clear prophecy of a forerunner. 'My messenger' is to come, and to 'prepare the way before Me.' Isaiah had heard a voice calling, 'Prepare the way of the Lord,' and Malachi quotes his words, and ascribes the same office to the 'messenger.' In the last verses of his prophecy he calls this messenger 'Elijah the prophet.' Here, then, we have a remarkable instance of a historical detail set forth in prophecy. The coming of the Lord is to be immediately preceded by the appearance of a prophet, whose function is to effect a moral and religious reformation, which shall prepare a path for Him. This is no vague ideal, but definite announcement of a definite fact, to be realised in a historical personality. How came this half-anonymous Jew, four hundred years beforehand, to hit upon the fact that the next prophet in Israel would herald the immediate coming of the Lord? There ought to be but one answer possible.

Another point to note is the peculiar relation between Jehovah and Him who comes. Emphatically and broadly it is declared that Jehovah Himself ‘shall suddenly come to His temple’; and then the prophecy immediately passes on to speak of the coming of ‘the Messenger of the covenant,’ and dwells for a time exclusively on his work of purifying; and then again it glides, without conscious breach of continuity or mark of transition, into, ‘And *I* will come near to you in judgment.’ A mysterious relationship of oneness and yet distinctness is here shadowed, of which the solution is only found in the Christian truth that the Word, which was Grod, and was in the beginning with God, became flesh, and that in Him Jehovah in very deed tabernacled among men. The expression ‘the Messenger [or Angel] of the covenant’ is connected with the remarkable representations in other parts of the Old Testament, of ‘the Angel of Jehovah,’ in whom many commentators recognise a pre-incarnate manifestation of the eternal Word. That ‘Angel’ had redeemed Israel from Egypt, had led them through the desert, had been the ‘Captain of the Lord’s host.’ The name of Jehovah was ‘in Him.’ He it is whose coming is here prophesied, and in His coming Jehovah comes to His temple.

We next note the aspect of the coming which is prominent here. Not the kingly, nor the redemptive, but the judicial, is uppermost. With keen irony the Prophet contrasts the professed eagerness of the people for the appearance of Jehovah and their shrinking terror when He does come. He is ‘the Lord whom ye seek’; the Messenger of the covenant is He ‘whom ye delight in.’ But all that superficial and partially insincere longing will turn into dread and unwillingness to abide His scrutiny. The images of the refiner’s fire and the fullers’ soap imply painful processes, of which the intention is to burn out the dross and beat out the filth. It sounds like a prolongation of Malachi’s voice when John the Baptist peals out his herald cry of one whose ‘fan was in His hand,’ and who should plunge men into a fiery baptism, and consume with fire that destroyed what would not submit to be cast into the fire that cleansed. Nor should we forget that our Lord has said, ‘For judgment am I come into the world.’ He came to ‘purify’; but if men would not let Him do what He came for, He could not but be their bane instead of their blessing.

The stone is laid. If we build on it, it is a sure foundation; if we stumble over it, we are broken. The double aspect and effect of the gospel, which was meant only to have the single operation of blessing, are clearly set forth in this prophecy, which first promises purging from sin, so that not only the 'sons of Levi' shall offer in righteousness, but that the 'offerings of Judah and Jerusalem shall be pleasant,' and then passes immediately to foretell that God will come in judgment and witness against evil-doers. Judgment is the shadow of salvation, and constantly attends on it. Neither Malachi nor the Baptist gives a complete view of Messiah's work, but still less do they give an erroneous one; for the central portion of both prophecies is His purifying energy which both liken to cleansing fire.

That real and inward cleansing is the great work of Christ. It was wrought on as many of His contemporaries as believed on Him, and for such as did not He was a swift Witness against them. Nor are we to forget that the prophecy is not exhausted yet; for there remains another 'day of His coming' for judgment. The prophets did not see the perspective of the future, and often bring together events widely separated in time, just as, to a spectator on a mountain, distances between points far away towards the horizon are not measurable. We have to allow for foreshortening.

This blending of events historically widely apart is to be kept in view in interpreting Malachi's prediction that the coming would result in Judah's and Israel's offerings being 'pleasant unto the Lord as in former years.' That prediction is not yet fulfilled, whether we regard the name of Israel and the relation expressed in it as having passed over to the Christian Church, or whether we look forward to that bringing in of all Israel which Paul says will be as 'life from the dead.' But by slow degrees it is being fulfilled, and by Christ men are being led to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God.

The more directly Messianic part of this prophecy is closed in Mal. 3:6 by a great saying, which at once gives the reason for the coming and for its severe aspect of witness against sin. The unchangeableness of God, which is declared in His very name, guarantees the continued existence of Israel.

As Paul says in regard to the same subject, ‘The calling of God is without change of purpose’ [on His part]. But it is as impossible that God should leave them to their sins, which would destroy them, as that He should Himself consume them. Therefore He will surely come; and coming, will deliver from evil. But they who refuse to be so delivered will forfeit that title and the pledge of preservation which it implies.

A new paragraph begins with Mal. 3:7, which is not closely connected with the promises preceding. It recurs to the prevailing tone of Malachi, the rebuke of negligence in attending to the legal obligations of worship. That negligence is declared to be a reason for God’s withdrawal from them. But the ‘return,’ which is promised on condition of their renewed obedience, can scarcely be identified with the coming just foretold. That coming was to bring about offerings of righteousness which should be pleasant to the Lord. This section [Mal. 3:7 - Mal. 3:12] promises blessings as results of such offerings, and a ‘return’ of Jehovah to His people contingent upon their return to Him. If the two sections of this passage are taken as closely connected, this one must describe the consequences of the coming. But, more probably, this accusation of negligence and promise of blessing on a change of conduct are independent of the previous verses. We, however, may fairly take them as exhibiting the obligations of those who have received that great gift of purifying from Jesus Christ, and are thereby consecrated as His priests.

The key-word of the Christian life is ‘sacrifice’-surrender, and that to God. That is to be stamped on the inmost selves, and by the act of the will, on the body as well. ‘Yield yourselves to God, and your members as instruments of righteousness to Him.’ It is to be written on possessions. Malachi necessarily keeps within the limits of the sacrificial system, but his impetuous eloquence hits us no less. It is still possible to ‘rob God.’ We do so when we keep anything as our own, and use it at our own will, for our own purposes. Only when we recognise His ownership of ourselves, and consequently of all that we call ‘ours,’ do we give Him His due. All the slave’s chattels belong to the owner to whom he belongs. Such thorough-going surrender is the secret of thorough possession. The true way to enjoy worldly goods is to give them to God.

The lattices of heaven are opened, not to pour down, as of old, fiery destruction, but to make way for the gentle descent of God's blessing, which will more than fill every vessel set to receive it. This is the universal law, not always fulfilled in increase of outward goods, but in the better riches of communion and of larger possession in God Himself. He suffers no man to be His creditor, but more than returns our gifts, as legends tell of some peasant who brought his king a poor tribute of fruits of his fields, and went away from the presence-chamber with a jewel in his hand.

9) Malachi 3:13-18

Malachi

'STOUT WORDS,' AND THEIR CONFUTATION

Mal. 3:13 - Mal. 3:18; Mal. 4:1 - Mal. 4:6.

This passage falls into three parts,-the 'stout words' against God which the Prophet sets himself to confute [Mal. 3:13 - Mal. 3:15]; the prophecy of the day which will show their falsehood [Mal. 3:16 - Mal. 4:3]; and the closing exhortation and prediction [Mal. 4:4 - Mal. 4:6].

I. The returning exiles had not had the prosperity which they had hoped.

So many of them, even of those who had served God, began to let doubts darken their trust, and to listen to the whispers of their own hearts, reinforced by the mutterings of others, and to ask: 'What is the use of religion? Does it make any difference to a man's condition?' Here had they been keeping God's charge, and going in black garments 'before the Lord,' in token of penitence, and no good had come to them, while arrogant neglect of His commandments did not seem to hinder happiness, and 'they that work wickedness are built up.' Sinful lives appeared to have a firm foundation, and to rise high and palace-like, while righteous ones were like huts. Goodness seemed to spell ruin.

What was wrong in these 'stout words'? It was wrong to attach such worth to external acts of devotion, as if these were deserving of reward. It was wrong to suspend the duty of worship on the prosperity resulting from it, and to seek ‘profit’ from ‘keeping his charge.’ Such religion was shallow and selfish, and had the evils of the later Pharisaism in germ in it. It was wrong to yield to the doubts which the apparently unequal distribution of worldly prosperity stirred in their hearts. But the doubts themselves were almost certain to press on Old Testament believers, as well as on Old Testament scoffers, especially under the circumstances of Malachi’s time. The fuller light of Christianity has eased their pressure, but not removed it, and we have all had to face them, both when our own hearts have ached with sorrow and when pondering on the perplexities of this confused world. We look around, and, like the psalmist, see ‘the prosperity of the wicked,’ and, like him, have to confess that our ‘steps had wellnigh slipped’ at the sight. The old, old question is ever starting up. ‘Doth God know?’ The mystery of suffering and the mystery of its distribution, the apparent utter want of connection between righteousness and well-being, are still formidable difficulties in the way of believing in a loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful God, and are stock arguments of the unbeliever and perplexities of humble faith. Never to have felt the force of the difficulty is not so much the sign of steadfast faith as of scant reflection. To yield to it, and still more, to let it drive us to cast religion aside, is not merely folly, but sin. So thinks Malachi.

II. To the stout words of the doubters is opposed the conversation of the godly.

‘*Then* they that feared the Lord spake one with another,’ nourishing their faith by believing speech with like-minded. The more the truths by which we believe are contradicted, the more should we commune with fellow-believers. Attempts to rob us should make us hold our treasure the faster. Bold avowal of the faith is especially called for when many potent voices deny it. And, whoever does not hear, God hears. Faithful words may seem lost, but they and every faithful act are written in His remembrance and will be recompensed one day. If our names and acts are written there, we may well be content to accept scanty measures of earthly good, and not be ‘envious of the foolish’ in their prosperity.

Malachi's answer to the doubters leaves all other considerations which might remove the difficulty unmentioned, and fixes on the one, the prophecy of a future which will show that it is not all the same whether a man is good or bad. It was said of an English statesman that he called a new world into existence to redress the balance of the old, and that is what the Prophet does. Christianity has taught us many other ways of meeting the doubters' difficulty, but the sheet anchor of faith in that storm is the unconquerable assurance that a day comes when the righteousness of providence will be vindicated, and the eternal difference between good and evil manifested in the fates of men. The Prophet is declaring what will be a fact one day, but he does not know when. Probably he never asked himself whether 'the day of the Lord' was near or far off, to dawn on earth or to lie beyond mortal life. But this he knew-that God was righteous, and that sometime and somewhere character would settle destiny, and even outwardly it would be good to be good. He first declares this conviction in general terms, and then passes on to a magnificent and terrible picture of that great day.

The promise, which lay at the foundation of Israel's national existence, included the recognition of it as 'a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people,' and Malachi looks forward to that day as the epoch when God will show by His acts how precious the righteous are in His sight. Not the whole Israel, but the righteous among them, are the heirs of the old promise. It is an anticipation of the teaching that 'they are not all Israel which are of Israel,' And it bids us look for the fulfilment of every promise of God's to that great day of the Lord which lies still before us all, when the gulf between the righteous and the wicked shall be solemnly visible, wide, and profound. There have been many 'days which I make' in the world's history, and in a measure each of them has re-established the apparently tottering truth that there is a God who judgeth in the earth, but the day of days is yet to come.

No grander vision of judgment exists than Malachi's picture of 'the day,' lurid, on the one hand, with the fierce flame, before which the wicked are as stubble that crackles for a moment and then is grey ashes, or as a tree in a forest fire, which stands for a little while, a pillar of flame, and then falls with a crash, shaking the woods; and on the otherhand, radiant with the early beams of healing sunshine, in whose sweet morning light the cattle, let out from their pent-up stalls, gambol in glee. But let us not forget while we admire the noble poetry of its form that this is God's oracle, nor that we have each to settle for ourselves whether that day shall be for us a furnace to destroy or a sun to cheer and enlighten.

We can only note in a sentence the recurrence in Mal. 4:1 of the phrases 'the proud' and they 'that work wickedness,' from Mal. 3:15 The end of those whom the world called happy, and who seemed stable and elevated, is to be as stubble before the fire. We must also point out that 'the sun of righteousness' means the sun which is righteousness, and is not a designation of the Messiah. Nor can we dwell on the picture of the righteous treading down the wicked, which seems to prolong the previous metaphor of the leaping young cattle. Then shall 'the upright have dominion over them in the morning.'

III. The final exhortation and promise point backwards and forwards, summing up duty in obedience to the law, and fixing hope on a future reappearance of the leader of the prophets.

Moses and Elijah are the two giant figures which dominate the history of Israel. Law and prophecy are the two forms in which God spoke to the fathers. The former is of perpetual obligation, the latter will flash up again in power on the threshold of the day. Jesus has interpreted this closing word for us. John came 'in the spirit and power of Elijah,' and the purpose of his coming was to 'turn the hearts of the fathers to the children' [Luk. 1:16 - Luk. 1:17]; that is, to bring back the devout dispositions of the patriarchs to the existing generations, and so to bring the 'hearts of the children to their fathers,' as united with them in devout obedience. If John's mission had succeeded, the 'curse' which smote Israel would have been stayed. God has done all that He can do to keep us from being consumed by the fire of that day. The Incarnation, Life, and Death of Jesus Christ made a day of the Lord which has the twofold character of that in Malachi's vision, for He is a 'saviour of life unto life' or 'of death unto death,' and must be one or other to us. But another day of the Lord is still to come, and for each of us it will come burning as a furnace or bright as sunrise. Then the universe shall ‘discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth Him not.’

10)Malachi 4:1-5

Malachi

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11)Malachi 4:6

Malachi

‘STOUT WORDS,’ AND THEIR CONFUTATION

THE LAST WORDS OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

Mal. 4:6. - Rev. 22:21.

It is of course only an accident that these words close the Old and the New Testaments. In the Hebrew Bible Malachi’s prophecies do not stand at the end; but he was the last of the Old Testament prophets, and after him there were ‘four centuries of silence.’ We seem to hear in his words the dying echoes of the rolling thunders of Sinai. They gather up the whole burden of the Law and of the prophets; of the former in their declaration of a coming retribution, of the latter in the hope that that retribution may be averted.

Then, in regard to John’s words, of course as they stand they are simply the parting benediction with which he takes leave of his readers; but it is fitting that the Book of which they are the close should seal up the canon, because it stands as the one prophetic book of the New Testament, and so reaches forward into the coming ages, even to the consummation of all things. And just as Christ in His Ascension was taken from them whilst His hands were lifted up in the act of blessing, so it is fitting that the revelation of which He is the centre and the theme should part from us as He did, shedding with its final words the dew of benediction on our upturned heads.

I venture, then, to look at these significant closing words of the two Testaments as conveying the spirit of each, and suggesting some thoughts about the contrast and the harmony and the order that subsist between them.

I. I ask you, first, to notice the apparent contrast and the real harmony and unity of these two texts.

‘Lest I come and smite the land with a curse.’ That last awful word does not convey, in the original, quite the idea of our English word ‘curse.’ It refers to a somewhat singular institution in the Mosaic Law according to which things devoted, in a certain sense, to God were deprived of life. And the reference historically is to the judgments that were inflicted upon the nations that occupied the land before the Israelitish invasion, those Canaanites and others who were put under ‘the ban’ and devoted to utter destruction. So, says my text, Israel, which has stepped into their places, may bring down upon its head the same devastation; and as they were swept off the face of the land that they had polluted with their iniquities, so an apostate and God-forgetting Judah may again experience the same utter destruction falling upon them. If instead of the word ‘curse’ we were to substitute the word ‘destruction,’ we should get the true idea of the passage.

And the thought that I want to insist upon is this, that here we have distinctly gathered up the whole spirit of millenniums of divine revelation, all of which declare this one thing, that as certainly as there is a God, every transgression and disobedience receives, and must receive, its just recompense of reward.

That is the spirit of law, for law has nothing to say, except, ‘Do this, and thou shalt live; do not this, and thou shalt die.’

And then turn to the other. ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.’ What has become of the thunder? All melted into dewy rain of love and pity and compassion. Grace is love that stoops; grace is love that foregoes its claims, and forgives sins against itself. Grace is love that imparts, and this grace, thus stooping, thus pardoning, thus bestowing, is a universal gift. The Apostolic benediction is the declaration of the divine purpose, and the inmost heart and loftiest meaning of all the words which from the beginning God hath spoken is that His condescending, pardoning, self-bestowing mercy may fall upon all hearts, and gladden every soul.

So there seems to emerge, and there is, a very real and a very significant contrast. ‘I come and smite the earth with a curse’ sounds strangely unlike ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.’ And, of course, in this generation there is a strong tendency to dwell upon that contrast and to exaggerate it, and to assert that the more recent has antiquated the more ancient, and that now the day when we have to think of and to dread the curse that smites the earth is past, ‘because the true Light now shineth.’

So I ask you to notice that beneath this apparent contrast there is a real harmony, and that these two utterances, though they seem to be so diverse, are quite consistent at bottom, and must both be taken into account if we would grasp the whole truth. For, as a matter of fact, nowhere are there more tender utterances and sweeter revelations of a divine mercy than in that ancient law with its attendant prophets. And as a matter of fact, nowhere, through all the thunderings and lightnings of Sinai, are there such solemn words of retribution as dropped from the lips of the Incarnate Love. There is nothing anywhere so dreadful as Christ's own words about what comes, and must come, to sinful men. Is there any depth of darkness in the Old Testament teaching of retribution half as deep, half as black, and as terrible, as the gulf that Christ opens at your feet and mine? Is there anything so awful as the threatenings of Infinite Love?

And the same blending of the widest proclamation of, and the most perfect rejoicing confidence in, the universal and all-forgiving love of God, with the teaching of the sharpest retribution, lies in the writings of this very Apostle about whose words I am speaking. There are nowhere in Scripture more solemn pictures than those in that book of the Apocalypse, of the inevitable consequences of departure from the love and the faith of God, and John, the Apostle of love, is the preacher of judgment as none of the other writers of the New Testament are.

Such is the fact, and there is a necessity for it. There must be this blending; for if you take away from your conception of God the absolute holiness which hates sin, and the rigid righteousness which apportions to all evil its bitter fruits, you have left a maimed God that has not power to love but is nothing but weak, good-natured indulgence. Impunity is not mercy, and punishment is never the negation of perfect love, but rather, if you destroy the one you hopelessly maim the other. The two halves are needed in order to give full emphasis to either. Each note alone is untrue; blended, they make the perfect chord.

II. And now, let me ask you to look with me at another point, and that is, the relation of the grace to the punishment.

Is it not love which proclaims judgment? Are not the words of my first text, if you take them all, merciful, however they wear a surface of threatening? 'Lest I come.' Then He speaks that He may not come, and declares the issue of sin in order that that issue may never need to be experienced by us that listen to Him. Brethren! both in regard to the Bible and in regard to human ministrations of the Gospel, it is all-important, as it seems to me at present, to insist that it is the cruellest kindness to keep back the threatenings for fear of darkening the grace; and that, on the other hand, it is the truest tenderness to warn and to proclaim them. It is love that threatens; ‘tis mercy to tell us that the wrath will come.

And just as one relation between the grace and the retribution is that the proclamation of the retribution is the work of the grace, so there is another relation-the grace is manifested in bearing the punishment, and in bearing it away by bearing it. Oh! there is no adequate measure of what the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is except the measure of the smiting destruction from which He frees us. It is because every transgression receives its just recompense of reward, because the wages of sin is death, because God cannot but hate and punish the evil, that we get our truest standard of what Christ’s love is to every soul of us. For on Him have met all the converging rays of the divine retribution, and burnt the penal fire into His very heart. He has come between every one of us, if we will, and that certain incidence of retribution for our evil, taking upon Himself the whole burden of our sin and of our guilt, and bearing that awful death which consists not in the mere dissolution of the tie between soul and body, but in the separation of the conscious spirit from God, in order that we may stand peaceful, serene, untouched, when the hail and the fire of the divine judgment are falling from the heavens and running along the earth. The grace depends for all our conceptions of its glory, its tenderness, and its depth, on our estimate of the wrath from which it delivers.

So, dear brethren, remember, if you tamper with the one you destroy the other; if there be no fearful judgment from which men need to be delivered, Christ has borne nothing for us that entitles Him to demand our hearts; and all the ascriptions of praise and adoration to Him, and all the surrender of loving hearts, in utter self-abandonment, to Him that has borne the curse for us, fade and are silent. If you strike out the truth of Christ’s bearing the results of sin from your theology, you do not thereby exalt, but you fatally lower the love; and in the interests of the loftiest conceptions of a divine loving-kindness and mercy that ever have blessed the world, I beseech you, be on your guard against all teachings that diminish the sinfulness of sin, and that ask again the question which first of all came from lips that do not commend it to us-’*Hath* God said?’ or advance to the assertion-’Ye shall *not* surely die.’ If ‘I come to smite the earth with a curse’ ceases to be a truth to you, ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’ will fade away for you likewise.

III. Now, still further, let me ask you to consider, lastly, the alternative which these texts open for us.

I believe that the order in which they stand in Scripture is the order in which men generally come to believe them, and to feel them. I am old-fashioned enough and narrow enough to believe in conversion; and to believe further that, as a rule, the course through which the soul passes from darkness into light is the course which divine revelation took: first, the unveiling of sin and its issues, and then the glad leaping up of the trustful heart to the conception of redeeming grace.

But what I seek briefly to suggest now is, not only the order of manifestation as brought out in these words, but also the alternative which they present to us, one branch or other of which every soul of you will have to experience. You must have either the destruction or the grace. And, more wonderful still, the same coming of the same Lord will be to one man the destruction, and to another the manifestation and reception of His perfect grace. As it was in the Lord’s first coming, ‘He is set for the rise and the fall of many in Israel.’ The same heat softens some substances and bakes others into hardness. A bit of wax and a bit of clay put into the same fire-one becomes liquefied and the other solidified. The same light is joy to one eye and torture to another. The same pillar of cloud was light to the hosts of Israel, and darkness and dismay to the armies of Egypt. The same Gospel is ‘a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death,’ by the giving forth of the same influences killing the one and reviving the other; the same Christ is a Stone to build upon or a Stone of stumbling; and when He cometh at the last, Prince, King, Judge, to you and me, His coming shall be prepared as the morning; and ye ‘shall have a song as when one cometh with a pipe to the mountain of the Lord’; or else it shall be a day of darkness and not of light. He comes to me, to you; He comes to smite or He comes to glorify.

Oh, brethren! do not believe that God’s threatenings are wind and words; do not let teachings that sap the very foundations of morality and eat all the power out of the Gospel persuade you that the solemn words, ‘The soul that sinneth it shall die,’ are not simple verity.

And then, my brethren, oh! then, do you turn yourselves to that dear Lord whose grace is magnified in this most chiefly, that ‘He hath borne our sins and carried our sorrows’; and taking Him for your Saviour, your King, your Shield, your All, when He cometh it will be life to you; and the grace that He imparts will be heaven for ever more.

Matthew

1) MATTHEW 5:33-37
2) MATTHEW 5:38-42
3) MATTHEW 5:43-48
4) MATTHEW 7:28-29
5) MATTHEW 8:28-34
6) MATTHEW 9:18-31
7) MATTHEW 9:36
8) MATTHEW 10:26-31
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10) MATTHEW 10:39
11) MATTHEW 10:41-42
12) MATTHEW 11:28-29
13) MATTHEW 12:33
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16) MATTHEW 13:24-30
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36) MATTHEW 26:66-68
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39) MATTHEW 27:41-43
40) MATTHEW 27:44-50
41) MATTHEW 27:51

1) Matthew 5:33-37

Matthew

‘SWEAR NOT AT ALL’

Mat. 5:33-37.

In His treatment of the sixth and seventh commandments, Jesus deepened them by bringing the inner man of feeling and desire under their control. In His treatment of the old commandments as to oaths, He expands them by extending the prohibitions from one kind of oath to all kinds. The movement in the former case is downwards and inwards; in the latter it is outwards, the compass sweeping a wider circle. Perjury, a false oath, was all that had been forbidden. He forbids all. We may note that the forms of colloquial swearing, which our Lord specifies, are not to be taken as an exhaustive enumeration of what is forbidden. They are in the nature of a parenthesis, and the sentence runs on continuously without them-’Swear not at all . . . but let your communication be Yea, yea; Nay, nay.’ The reason appended is equally universal, for it suggests the deep thought that ‘whatsoever is more than these’ that is to say, any form of speech that seeks to strengthen a simple, grave asseveration by such oaths as He has just quoted, ‘cometh of evil’ inasmuch as it springs from, and reveals, the melancholy fact that his bare word is not felt binding by a man, and is not accepted as conclusive by others. If lies were not so common, oaths would be needless. And oaths increase the evil from which they come, by confirming the notion that there is no sin in a lie unless it is sworn to.

The oaths specified are all colloquial, which were and are continually and offensively mingled with common speech in the East. Nowhere are there such habitual liars, and nowhere are there so many oaths. Every traveller there knows that, and sees how true is Christ's filiation of the custom of swearing from the custom of falsehood. But these poisonous weeds of speech not only tended to degrade plain veracity in the popular mind, but were themselves parents of immoral evasions, for it was the teaching of some Rabbis, at all events, that an oath 'by heaven' or 'by earth' or 'by Jerusalem' or 'by my head' did not bind. That further relaxation of the obligation of truthfulness was grounded on the words quoted in Mat. 5:33, for, said the immoral quibblers, 'it is "thine oaths to the Lord" that thou "shalt perform," and for these others you may do as you like' Therefore our Lord insists that every oath, even these mutilated, colloquial ones which avoid His name, is in essence an appeal to God, and has no sense unless it is. To swear such a truncated oath, then, has the still further condemnation that it is certainly an irreverence, and probably a quibble, and meant to be broken. It must be fully admitted that there is little in common between such pieces of senseless profanity as these oaths, or the modern equivalents which pollute so many lips to-day, and the oath administered in a court of justice, and it may further be allowed weight that Jesus does not specifically prohibit the oath 'by the Lord,' but it is difficult to see how the principles on which He condemns are to be kept from touching even judicial oaths. For they, too, are administered on the ground of the false idea that they add to the obligation of veracity, and give a guarantee of truthfulness which a simple affirmation does not give. Nor can any one, who knows the perfunctory formality and indifference with which such oaths are administered and taken, and what a farce 'kissing the book' has become, doubt that even judicial oaths tend to weaken the popular conception of the sin of a lie and the reliance to be placed upon the simple 'Yea, yea; Nay, nay.'

2) Matthew 5:38-42

Matthew

NON-RESISTANCE

Mat. 5:38-42.

The old law directed judges to inflict penalties precisely equivalent to offences-'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth' [Exo. 21:24], but that direction was not for the guidance of individuals. It was suited for the stage of civilisation in which it was given, and probably was then a restriction, rather than a sanction, of the wild law of retaliation. Jesus sweeps it away entirely, and goes much further than even its abrogation. For He forbids not only retaliation but even resistance. It is unfortunate that in this, as in so many instances, controversy as to the range of Christ's words has so largely hustled obedience to them out of the field, that the first thought suggested to a modern reader by the command 'Resist not evil' [or, an evil man] is apt to be, Is the Quaker doctrine of uniform non-resistance right or wrong, instead of, Do I obey this precept? If we first try to understand its meaning, we shall be in a position to consider whether it has limits, springing from its own deepest significance, or not. What, then, is it not to resist? Our Lord gives three concrete illustrations of what He enjoins, the first of which refers to insults such as contumelious blows on the cheek, which are perhaps the hardest not to meet with a flash of anger and a returning stroke; the second of which refers to assaults on property, such as an attempt at legal robbery of a man's undergarment; the third of which refers to forced labour, such as impressing a peasant to carry military or official baggage or documents-a form of oppression only too well known under Roman rule in Christ's days. In regard to all three cases, He bids His disciples submit to the indignity, yield the coat, and go the mile. But such yielding without resistance is not to be all. The other cheek is to be given to the smiter; the more costly and ample outer garment is to be yielded up; the load is to be carried for two miles. The disciple is to meet evil with a manifestation, not of anger, hatred, or intent to inflict retribution, but of readiness to submit to more. It is a hard lesson, but clearly here, as always, the chief stress is to be laid, not on the outward action, but on the disposition, and on the action mainly as the outcome and exhibition of that. If the cheek is turned, or the cloak yielded, or the second mile trudged with a lowering brow, and hate or anger boiling in the heart, the commandment is broken. If the inner man rises in hot indignation against the evil and its doer, he is resisting evil more harmfully to himself than is many a man who makes his adversary's cheeks tingle before his own have ceased to be reddened. We have to get down into the depths of the soul, before we understand the meaning of non-resistance. It would have been better if the eager controversy about the breadth of this commandment had oftener become a study of its depth, and if, instead of asking, ‘Are we ever warranted in resisting?’ men had asked, ‘What in its full meaning is non-resistance?’ The truest answer is that it is a form of Love,-love in the face of insults, wrongs, and domineering tyranny, such as are illustrated in Christ’s examples. This article of Christ’s New Law comes last but one in the series of instances in which His transfiguring touch is laid on the Old Law, and the last of the series is that to which He has been steadily advancing from the first-namely, the great Commandment of Love. This precept stands immediately before that, and prepares for it. It is, as suffused with the light of the sun that is all but risen, ‘Resist not evil,’ for ‘Love beareth all things.’

It is but a shallow stream that is worried into foam and made angry and noisy by the stones in its bed; a deep river flows smooth and silent above them. Nothing will enable us to meet ‘evil’ with a patient yielding love which does not bring the faintest tinge of anger even into the cheek reddened by a rude hand, but the ‘love of God shed abroad in the heart,’ and when that love fills a man, ‘out of him will flow a river of living water,’ which will bury evil below its clear, gentle abundance, and, perchance, wash it of its foulness. The ‘quality of’ this non-resistance ‘is twice blessed,’ ‘it blesseth him that gives and him that takes.’ For the disciple who submits in love, there is the gain of freedom from the perturbations of passion, and of steadfast abiding in the peace of a great charity, the deliverance from the temptation of descending to the level of the wrong-doer, and of losing hold of God and all high visions. The tempest-ruffled sea mirrors no stars by night, nor is blued by day. If we are to have real communion with God, we must not flush with indignation at evil, nor pant with desire to shoot the arrow back to him that aimed it at us. And in regard to the evil-doer, the most effectual resistance is, in many cases, not to resist. There is something hid away somewhere in most men’s hearts which makes them ashamed of smiting the offered left cheek, and then ashamed of having smitten the right one. ‘It is a shame to hit him, since he does not defend himself,’ comes into many a ruffian’s mind. The safest way to travel in savage countries is to show oneself quite unarmed. He that meets evil with evil is ‘overcome of evil’; he that meets it with patient love is likely in most cases to ‘overcome evil with good.’ And even if he fails, he has, at all events, used the only weapon that has any chance of beating down the evil, and it is better to be defeated when fighting hate with love than to be victorious when fighting it with itself, or demanding an eye for an eye.

But, if we take the right view of this precept, its limitations are in itself. Since it is love confronting, and seeking to transform evil into its own likeness, it may sometimes be obliged by its own self not to yield. If turning the other cheek would but make the assaulter more angry, or if yielding the cloak would but make the legal robber more greedy, or if going the second mile would but make the press-gang more severe and exacting, resistance becomes a form of love and a duty for the sake of the wrong-doer. It may also become a duty for the sake of others, who are also objects of love, such as helpless persons who otherwise would be exposed to evil, or society as a whole. But while clearly that limit is prescribed by the very nature of the precept, the resistance which it permits must have love to the culprit or to others as its motive, and not be tainted by the least suspicion of passion or vengeance. Would that professing Christians would try more to purge their own hearts, and bring this solemn precept into their daily lives, instead of discussing whether there are cases in which it does not apply! There are great tracts in the lives of all of us to which it should apply and is not applied; and we had better seek to bring these under its dominion first, and then it will be time enough to debate as to whether any circumstances are outside its dominion or not.

3) Matthew 5:43-48

Matthew

THE LAW OF LOVE

Mat. 5:43-48.

The last of the five instances of our Lord’s extending and deepening and spiritualising the old law is also the climax of them. We may either call it the highest or the deepest, according to our point of view. His transfiguring touch invests all the commandments with which He has been dealing with new inwardness, sweep, and spirituality, and finally He proclaims the supreme, all-including commandment of universal love. ‘It hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour’-that comes from Lev. 19:18; but where does ‘and hate thine enemy’ come from? Not from Scripture, but in the passage in Leviticus ‘neighbour’ is co-extensive with ‘children of thy people,’ and the hatred and contempt of all men outside Israel which grew upon the Jews found a foothold there. ‘Who is my neighbour?’ was apparently a well-discussed question in the schools of the Rabbis, and, whether any of these teachers ever committed themselves to plainly formulating the principle or not, practically the duty of love was restricted to a narrow circle, and the rest of the wide world left out in the cold. But not only was the circumference of love’s circle drawn in, but to hate an enemy was elevated almost into a duty. It is the worst form of retaliation. ‘An eye for an eye’ is bad enough, but hate for hate plunges men far deeper in the devil’s mire. To flash back from the mirror of the heart the hostile looks which are flung at us, is our natural impulse; but why should we always leave it to the other man to pitch the keynote of our relations with him? Why should we echo only his tones? Cannot we leave his discord to die into silence and reply to it by something more musical? Two thunder-clouds may cast lightnings at each other, but they waste themselves in the process. Better to shine meekly and victoriously on as the moon does on piled masses of darkness till it silvers them with its quiet light. So Jesus bids us do. We are to suppress the natural inclination to pay back in the enemy’s own coin, to ‘give him as good as he gave us,’ to ‘show proper spirit,’ and all the other fine phrases with which the world whitewashes hatred and revenge. We are not only to allow no stirring of malice in our feelings, but we are to let kindly emotions bear fruit in words blessing the cursers, and in deeds of goodness, and, highest of all, in prayers for those whose hate is bitterest, being founded on religion, and who are carrying it into action in persecution. We cannot hate a man if we pray for him; we cannot pray for him if we hate him. Our weakness often feels it so hard not to hate our enemies, that our only way to get strength to keep this highest, hardest commandment is to begin by trying to pray for the foe, and then we gradually feel the infernal fires dying down in our temper, and come to be able to meet his evil with good, and his curses with blessings. It is a difficult lesson that Jesus sets us. It is a blessed possibility that Jesus opens for us, that our kindly emotions towards men need not be at the mercy of theirs to us. It is a fair ideal that He paints, which, if Christians deliberately and continuously took it for their aim to realise, would revolutionise society, and make the fellowship of man with man a continual joy. Think of what any community, great or small, would be, if enmity were met by love only and always. Its fire would die for want of fuel. If the hater found no answering hate increasing his hate, he would often come to answer love with love. There is an old legend spread through many lands, which tells how a princess who had been changed by enchantment into a loathly serpent, was set free by being thrice kissed by a knight, who thereby won a fair bride with whom he lived in love and joy. The only way to change the serpent of hate into the fair form of a friend is to kiss it out of its enchantment.

No doubt, partial anticipations of this precept may be found, buried under much ethical rubbish, elsewhere than in the Sermon on the Mount, and more plainly in Old Testament teaching, and in Rabbinical sayings; but Christ's 'originality' as a moral teacher lies not so much in the absolute novelty of His commandments, as in the perspective in which He sets them, and in the motives on which He bases them, and most of all in His being more than a teacher, namely, the Giver of power to fulfil what He enjoins. Christian ethics not merely recognises the duty of love to men, but sets it as the foundation of all other duties. It is root and trunk, all others are but the branches into which it ramifies. Christian ethics not merely recognises the duty, but takes a man by the hand, leads him up to his Father God, and says: There, that is your pattern, and a child who loves his Father will try to copy his ways and be made like Him by his love. So Morality passes into Religion, and through the transition receives power beyond its own. The perfection of worship is imitation, and when men 'call Him Father' whom they adore, imitation becomes the natural action of a child who loves.

A dew-drop and a planet are both spheres, moulded by the same law of gravitation. The tiny round of our little drops of love may be not all unlike the colossal completeness of that Love, which owns the sun as 'His sun,' and rays down light and distils rain over the broad world. God loves all men apart altogether from any regard to character, therefore He gives to all men all the good gifts that they can receive apart from character, and if evil men do not get His best gifts, it is not because He withholds, but because they cannot take. There are human love-gifts which cannot be bestowed on enemies or evil persons. It is not possible, nor fit, that a Christian should feel to such as he does to those who share his faith and sympathies; but it is possible, and therefore incumbent, that he should not only negatively clear his heart of malice and hatred, but that he should positively exercise such active beneficence as they will receive. That is God's way, and it should be His children's.

The thought of the divine pattern naturally brings up the contrast between it and that which goes by the name of love among men. Just because Christians are to take God as their example of love, they must transcend human examples. Here again Jesus strikes the note with which He began His teaching of His disciples' 'righteousness'; but very significantly He does not now point to Pharisees, but to publicans, as those who were to be surpassed. The former, no doubt, were models of 'righteousness' after a rigid, whitewashed-sepulchre sort, but the latter had bigger hearts, and, bad as they were and were reputed to be, they loved better than the others. Jesus is glad to see and point to even imperfect sparks of goodness in a justly condemned class. No doubt, publicans in their own homes, with wife and children round them, let their hearts out, and could be tender and gentle, however gruff and harsh in public. When Jesus says '*even* the publicans,' He is not speaking in contempt, but in recognition of the love that did find some soil to grow on, even in that rocky ground. But is not the bringing in of the 'reward' as a motive a woful downcome? and is love that loves for the sake of reward, love at all? The criticism and questions forget that the true motive has just been set forth, and that the thought of 'reward' comes in, only as secondary encouragement to a duty which is based upon another ground. To love because we shall gain something, either in this world or in the next, is not love but long-sighted selfishness; but to be helped in our endeavours to widen our love so as to take in all men, by the vision of the reward, is not selfishness but a legitimate strengthening of our weakness. Especially is that so, in view of the fact that 'the reward' contemplated is nothing else than the growth of likeness to the Father in heaven, and the increase of filial consciousness, and the clearer, deeper cry, 'Abba, Father.' If longing for, and having regard to, that 'recompense of reward' is selfishness, and if the teaching which permits it is immoral, may God send the world more of such selfishness and of teachers of it!

But the reference to the shrunken love-streams that flow among men passes again swiftly to the former thought of likeness to God as the great pattern. Like a bird glancing downwards for a moment to earth, and then up again and away into the blue, our Lord’s words re-soar, and settle at last by the throne of God. The command, ‘Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,’ may be intended to refer only to the immediately preceding section, but one is inclined to regard it rather as the summing up of the whole of the preceding series of commandments from Mat. 5:20 onwards. The sum of religion is to imitate the God whom we worship. The ideal which draws us to aim at its realisation must be absolutely perfect, however imperfect may be all our attempts to reproduce it. We sometimes hear it said that to set up perfection as our goal is to smite effort dead and to enthrone despair. But to set up an incomplete ideal is the surest way to take the heart out of effort after it. It is the Christian’s prerogative to have ever gleaming before him an unattained aim, to which he is progressively approximating, and which, unreached, beckons, feeds hope of endless approach, and guarantees immortality.

4) Matthew 7:28-29

Matthew

THE CHRIST OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Mat. 7:28 - Mat. 7:29.

It appears, then, from these words, that the first impression made on the masses by the Sermon on the Mount was not so much an appreciation of its high morality, as a feeling of the personal authority with which Christ spoke. Had the scribes, then, no authority? They ruled the whole life of the nation with tyrannical power. They sat in Moses’ seat, and claimed all manner of sway and control. And yet when people listened to Jesus, they heard something ringing in His voice that they missed in the rabbis. They only set themselves up, in their highest claims, as being commentators upon, and the expositors of, the Law. Their language was ‘Moses commanded’; ‘Rabbi *this* said *so-and-so*; Rabbi *that* said *such-and-such*.’ But as even the crowd that listened to Him detected, Jesus Christ, in these great laws of His kingdom, adduced no authority but His own; stood forth as a Legislator, not as a commentator; and commanded, and prohibited, and repealed, and promised, on His own bare word. That is a characteristic of all Christ's teaching; and, as we see from my text, to the apprehension of the first auditors, it was deeply stamped on the Sermon on the Mount.

I purpose to turn to that Sermon now, and try if we can make out the points in it which impressed these people, who first heard it, with the sense that they were in the presence of an autocratic Voice that had a right to speak, and which did speak, with absolute and unexampled authority.

And I do that the more readily because I dare say you have all heard people that said 'Oh! I do not care about the dogmas of Christianity; give me the Sermon on the Mount and its sublime morality; that is Christianity enough for me.' Well, I should be disposed to say so pretty nearly too, if you will take *all* the Sermon on the Mount, and not go picking and choosing bits out of it. For I am sure that if you will take the whole of its teaching you will find yourself next door to, if not in the very inmost chamber of, the mysticism of the Gospel of John and the theology of Paul.

I. I ask you, then, to note that the Sermon claims for Jesus Christ the authority of supremacy above all former revelation and revealers.

'Think not,' says He, 'that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.' And then He goes on, in five cases, to illustrate, in a very remarkable way, the authority that He claimed over the former Law, moulding it according to His will.

Now I do not propose to do more than suggest, in a sentence, two points that I think of importance. Observe that remarkable form of speech, 'I am come.' May we not fairly say that it implies that He existed before birth, and that His appearance among men was the result of His own act? Does it not imply that He was not merely born, but *came*, choosing to be born just as He chose to die? In what sense can we understand the Apostle's view that it was an infinite and stupendous act of condescension in Christ to 'be found in fashion as a man,' unless we believe that by His own will and act He came forth from the Father and entered into the world, just as by His own will and act He left the world and went unto the Father?

But I do not dwell upon that, nor upon another very important consideration. Why was it that Jesus Christ, at the very beginning of His mission, felt Himself bound to disclaim any intention of destroying the law or the prophets? Must not the people have begun to feel that there was something revolutionary and novel about His teaching, and that it was threatening to disturb what had been consecrated by ages? So that it was needful that He should begin His career with this disclaimer of the intention of destruction. Strange for a divine messenger, if He simply stood as one in the line and sequence of divine revelation, to begin His work by saying, 'Now, I do not mean to annihilate all that is behind Me!' The question arises how anybody should have supposed that He did, and why it should ever have been needful for Him to say that He did not.

But I pass by all that, and ask you to think how much lies in these words of our Lord: 'I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.' They imply a claim that His life was a complete embodiment of God's law. Here is a man beginning His ministry as a religious teacher, with the assertion, stupendous, and, upon any other lips but His, insane arrogance, that He had come to do everything which God demanded, and to set forth before the world a living Pattern of the whole obedience of a human nature to the whole law of God. Who is He that said that? And how do we account for the fact that nineteen centuries have passed, and, excepting in the case of here and there a bitter foe whose hostility had robbed him of his common sense, no lip has ventured to say that He claimed too much for Himself when He said, 'I am come to fulfil the law'; or that He falsely read the facts of His own experience and consciousness when He declared, 'I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do.'

Still further, here our Lord claims specifically and expressly to fulfil not only law but prophets. That is to say, He sets Himself forth as the Reality which had filled the imaginations and the hearts of a whole nation for centuries; as the living Reality which had been meant by all those lofty words of seers and prophets in the past. He declares that all those rapturous forecastings, all those dim anticipations, all those triumphant promises, were not left to swing *in vacuo*, or to float about unfulfilled, but that He stood there, the actual Realisation of them all; and in Him, wrapped up as in a seed, the Kingdom of Heaven was among men.

And still further, He claims not only personal purity and completeness, and the fulfilment of all prior and prophetic anticipation, but also He claims to have, and He exercises, the power of moulding, expanding, interpreting, and in some cases brushing aside, laws which He and they alike knew to be the laws of God. I do not need to specify in detail the instances which are contained in this Sermon on the Mount. But I simply ask you to consider the formula with which our Lord introduces each of His references to that subject. 'Ye have heard that it hath been said to them of old time' so-and-so,-and then follows a command of the Mosaic law; but '*I* say unto you' so-and-so,-and then follows a deepening or a modification or a repeal, of statutes acknowledged by Him and His hearers to be divine. He certainly claims to speak with the same right and authority as the old Law did. He as certainly claims to speak with incomparably higher authority than Moses did, for the latter never professed to give precepts of his own. He was not the Lawgiver, as he is often called, but only the messenger of the Lawgiver. But Christ is Himself the fountain of the laws of His Kingdom. Nor only so, but He puts Himself without apology or explanation in front of Moses and asserts power to modify, to set aside, or to re-enact with new stringency, the precepts of the divine law.

One supposition alone accounts for Christ's attitude to law and prophets in this Sermon, and that is that the Eternal Wisdom and Personal Word of God, which at sundry times and in 'divers manners' spake to the old world by Moses, itself at last, in human form and personal guise, came here on earth and spake to us men. It is the same Voice that breathed through the prophets of old, and that spake on the lips of the Christ of Nazareth; the same Eternal Word who manifested Himself in a 'fiery law' on Sinai, and in words of no less majesty and of deepened gentleness, when He gathered the people round about Him, and said to them, 'It hath been said to them of old time, . . . but *I* say unto you . . . '

Here is the sum and climax of all revelation, the last word of the divine mind and will and heart, to the world. Moses and Elias stand beside Him on the Mount of Transfiguration, witnesses of His superiority and servants at His feet, and they vanish into mist and darkness, and leave there, erect, white-robed, solitary, the unique figure of the One Lawgiver and the perfect Revealer of God to men.

And this is the authority which struck even on the unsusceptible hearts of the listening crowds.

II. Still further, let me ask you to consider how, in this same great Sermon, He claims the authority of One who is unique in His relation to the Father.

You will find that in it there occurs very frequently the expression, ‘*your* Father which is in Heaven’; or sometimes with the variation, ‘*thy* Father which is in Heaven,’ or, ‘which seeth in secret.’ But you will also find that whilst our Lord speaks about ‘*My* Father which is in Heaven,’ He never says ‘*our* Father’; excepting in the exception which proves the rule when He is putting into the lips of His disciples the great formula of prayer which we call the ‘Lord’s Prayer’; and there speaking as through their consciousness, and teaching them their lesson, He says ‘*Our* Father,’ not as if He Himself were praying, but as if He were telling them how to pray. But when He speaks out of His own consciousness He speaks of ‘*My* Father’ and ‘*your* Father,’ never of ‘*our* Father.’

And that corresponds with other phenomena in Scripture in our Lord’s own language where you find that always He draws this broad distinction. He never associates Himself with us in His Sonship. He ever asserts that He is *the* Son of God. Even when He wishes to speak with the utmost tenderness, He bids the weeping Mary hear the message, ‘I go unto My Father and your Father.’ This doctrine is thought by many to be one of those which they get rid of by professing the Christianity of the Sermon on the Mount. But it is there as plainly as in other parts of Scripture. If we accept all which it teaches, we cannot escape from the belief that He is the only begotten and well-beloved Son of the Father; and also that through Him and in Him we, too, may receive the adoption of sons.

Dear friends, I press this upon you as no mere piece of hard theological doctrine, but as containing in it the very essentials of all spiritual life for each of us, that all our spiritual life must come by participation in Christ, and that we enter into an altogether new and blessed relation to God when, laying our humble and penitent hands on the head of that dear Sacrifice that died on the Cross for as, we through Him cease to be children of wrath and become heirs of God. ‘To as many as received Him, to them gave He authority to become the children of God, even to them that believe in His name,’ but His Sonship stands unique and unapproachable, though it is the foundation from which flows all the sonship of the whole family in heaven and in earth. Moses and the prophets, teachers and guides, Apostles and Helpers, they are all but the servants of the family; this is the Son through whom we receive the adoption of sons.

III. We have in this great discourse the authority of One who is absolute Lord and Master over men.

‘Not every one that saith unto me, Lord! Lord! shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, Lord! Lord! have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name done many wonderful works?’ ‘Whoso heareth these sayings of Mine, and doeth them, I will liken him to a wise man, which built his house upon a rock.’

Jesus Christ here comes before the whole race, and claims an absolute submission. His word is to control, with authoritative and all-comprehensive scrutiny and power, every aim of our lives, and every action. In His name we may be strong, in His name we may cast out devils, in His name we may do many wonderful works. If we build upon Him we build upon a rock; if we build anywhere else we build upon the sand.

Strange, outrageous claims for a *man* to make! ‘Give me the Sermon on the Mount, and keep your doctrinal theology,’ say people. But I want to know what kind of morality it is that is all traceable up to this-’Do as I bid you, My will is your law; My smile is your reward; to obey Me is perfection.’ I think that takes you a good long way into ‘theology.’ I think that the Man who said that-and you all know that He said it-must he either a good deal more or a good deal less than a perfect man. If He is only that He is not that; for if He is only that, He has no business to tell me to obey Him. He has no business to substitute His will for every other law; and you have no business-and it will be at the peril of your manhood if you do-to take any man, the Man Christ or any other, as an absolute example and pattern and master.

My brethren, Christ’s claim to absolute obedience rests upon His divine nature and on His redeeming work. He has delivered us from our enemies, and therefore He commands us. He has given Himself for us, and therefore He has a right to say, ‘Give yourselves to Me.’ He is God manifest in the flesh, and therefore absolute power becomes His lips, and utter submission is our dignity. To say to Him ‘Lord, Lord,’ carries us whole universes beyond saying to Him, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi.’

IV. And now, lastly, we have in this great discourse the authority of our Lord set forth as being the authority of Him who is to be the Judge of the world.

‘Then will *I* profess unto you I never knew you; depart from *Me*, ye that work iniquity.’ He, the meek, the humble, who never claimed for Himself anything except what His consciousness compelled Him to assert, who desired only that men should know Him for what He was, because it was their life so to know Him, here declares that the whole world is to be judged by Him, that He has such knowledge of men as will pierce beneath the surface of professions and will be undazzled by the most stupendous miracles, and beneath the eloquent words of many a preacher and the wonderful works of many a so-called Christian philanthropist, will see the hidden rottenness that they never saw, and, tearing down the veil, will reveal men at the last to themselves.

That is no human function, that is no work that belongs to a mere teacher, pattern, martyr, sage, philosopher, or saint. That is a divine work; and the authority of Him whose final word to each of us will settle beyond appeal our fate, and reveal beyond cavil our character, is a divine authority. He has a right to command because He is going to judge; and the lips that declare the law are the lips that will read the sentence.

So, my brethren, do you take the whole Christ for yours, the Son of God, the crown and end of revelation, the sinless and the perfect, who died on the Cross for our salvation, and loves and pities, and is ready to help every one of us; who, therefore, commands us with an absolute authority, and who one day comes to be our Judge? If you turn to Him and ask Him, ‘Art Thou He that should come?’ let Him speak for Himself, and He will answer you: ‘I that speak unto thee am He.’ When He asks each of us, as He does now, ‘Whom sayest thou that I am?’ oh that we may all answer, with the assent of our understandings, with the love of our hearts, with the submission of our wills, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.’

5) Matthew 8:28-34

Matthew

THE PEACE-BRINGER IN THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

Mat. 8:28-34.

Matthew keeps to chronological order in the first and second miracles of the second triplet, but probably His reason for bringing them together was rather similarity in their contents than proximity in their time. For one cannot but feel that the stilling of the storm, which manifested Jesus as the Peace-bringer in the realm of the Natural, is fitly followed by the casting out of demons, which showed Him as the Lord of still wider and darker realms, and the Peace-bringer to spirits tortured and torn by a mysterious tyranny. His meek power sways all creatures; His ‘word runneth very swiftly.’ Winds and seas and demons hearken and obey. Cheap ridicule has been plentifully flung at this miracle, and some defenders of the Gospels have tried to explain it away, and have almost apologised for it, but, while it raises difficult problems in its details, the total effect of it is to present a sublime conception of Jesus and of His absolute, universal authority. The conception is heightened in sublimity when the two adjacent miracles are contemplated in connection.

There is singular variation in the readings of the name of the scene of the miracle in the three evangelists. According to the reading of the Authorised Version, Matthew locates it in the ‘country of the Gergesenes’; Mark and Luke, in the ‘country of the Gadarenes’; whereas the Revised Version, following the general consensus of textual critics, reads ‘Gadarenes’ in Matthew and ‘Gerasenes’ in Mark and Luke. Now, Gadara is over six miles from the lake, and the deep gorge of a river lies between, so that it is out of the question as the scene of the miracle. But the only Gerasa known, till lately, is even more impossible, for it is far to the east of the lake. But some years since, Thomson found ruins bearing the name of Khersa or Gersa, ‘at the only portion of that coast on which the steep hills come down to the shore' [Smith, Historical Geography of the Holy Land, p. 459]. This is probably the site of the miracle, and may have been included in the territory dependent on Gadara, and so have been rightly described as in 'the country of the Gadarenes.'

Matthew again abbreviates, omitting many of the most striking and solemn features of the narrative as given by the other two evangelists, and he also diverges from them in mentioning two demoniacs instead of one. That is not contradiction, for if there were two, there was one, but it is divergence, due to more accurate information. Whether they were meant so or no, the abbreviations have the striking result that Jesus speaks but one word, the permissive 'Go,' and that thus His simple presence is the potent spell before which the demons cower and flee. They know Him as 'the Son of God'; a name which, on their lips, must be taken in its full significance. If demoniacal possession is a fact, there is no difficulty in accounting for the name here given to Jesus, nor for the sudden change from the fierce purpose of barring an intruder's path to abject submission. If it is not a fact, to make a plausible explanation of either circumstance will be a task needing many contortions, as is seen by the attempts to achieve it. For example, we are told that the demoniacs were afraid of Jesus, because He 'was not afraid of them,' and they knew Him, because 'men with shattered reason also felt the spell, while the wise and the strong-minded often used their intellect, under the force of passion or prejudice, to resist the force of truth.' Possibly the last clause goes as far to explain some critics' non-recognition of demoniacal possession as the first does to explain the demoniacs' recognition of Jesus!

To the demonic nature Christ's coming brought torture, as the sunbeam, which gives life to many, also gives death to ugly creatures that crawl and swarm in the dark. Turn up a stone, and the creeping things hurry out of the penetrating glare so unwelcome. 'What maketh heaven, that maketh hell,' and the same presence is life or death, joy or agony. The dear perception of divine purity and the shuddering recoil of impotent hatred from it are surely of the very essence of the demonic nature, and every man, who looks into the depths of his own spirit, knows that the possibilities of such a state are in him.

Our Lord discriminated between healing the sick and casting out demons. He distinguished between forms of disease due to possession and the same diseases when dissociated from it, as, for example, cases of dumbness. His whole attitude, both in His actual dealing with the possessed and in His referring to the subject, gave His complete adhesion to the reality of the awful thing. It is vain to say that He humoured the delusions of insanity in order to cure them. That theory does not adequately explain any of the facts and does not touch some of them. It is perilous to try to weaken the force of the narrative by saying that the evangelists were under the influence of popular notions [which are quietly assumed to have been wrong], and hence that their prepossessions coloured their representations. If the mirror was so distorted, what reliance can be placed on any part of its reflection of Jesus? There can be no doubt that the Gospel narrative asserts and assumes the reality of demoniacal possession, and if the representation that Jesus also assumed it is due to the evangelists, what trust can be reposed in authorities which misrepresent Him in such a matter? On the other hand, if they do not misrepresent Him, and He blundered, confounding mere insanity with possession by a demon, what reliance can be reposed in Him as our Teacher of the Unseen World? The issues involved are very grave and far-reaching, and raillery or sarcasm is out of place.

But the question is pertinent: By what right do we allege that demoniacal possession is an exploded figment and an impossibility? Do we know ourselves or our fellows so thoroughly as to be warranted in denying that deep down in the mysterious ‘subliminal consciousness’ there is a gate through which spiritual beings may come into contact with human personalities? He would be bold, to the verge of presumption or somewhat further, who should take up such a position. And have we any better right to assume that we know so much of the universe as to be sure that there are no evil spirits there, who can come into contact with human spirits and wield an alien tyranny over them? The Christian attitude is not that of such far-reaching denial which outruns our knowledge, but that of calm belief that Jesus is the head of all principality and power, and that to Him all are subject. It is taken for granted that the supposed possession is insanity. But may it not rather be that to-day some of the supposed insanity is possession? Be that as it may-and perhaps those who have the widest experience of ‘lunatics’ would be the least ready to dismiss the possibility,-

Jesus recognised the reality that there were souls oppressed by a real personality, which had settled itself in the house of life, and none of us has wide and deep enough knowledge to contradict Him. Might it not be better to accept His witness in this, as in other matters beyond our ken, as true, and to ponder it?

The demons' petition, according to the Received Text, takes the form, 'Suffer us to go,' while the reading adopted by most modern editors is 'Send us.' The former reading seems to be taken from Luk. 8:32, while Mark has 'Send' [not the same word as now read in Matthew]. But Mark goes on to say, not that Jesus sent them, but that He 'suffered them' or 'gave them leave' [the same word as in Matthew, according to the Received Text]. Thus, Jesus' part in the transaction is simply permissive, and the one word which He speaks is authoritative indeed in its curtness, and means simply 'away,' or 'begone.' It casts them out but does not send them in. He did not send them into the herd, but out of the men, and did not prevent their entrance into the swine. It should further be noted that nothing in the narrative suggests that the destruction of the herd was designed even by the demons, much less by Jesus. The maddened brutes rushed straight before them, not knowing why or where; the steep slope was in front, and the sea was at its foot, and their terrified, short gallop ended there. The last thing the demons would have done would have been to banish themselves, as the death of the swine did banish them, from their new shelter. There is no need, then, to invent justifications for Christ's destroying the herd, for He did not destroy it. No doubt, keeping swine was a breach of Jewish law; no doubt the two demoniacs and the bystanders would be more convinced of the reality of the exorcism by the fate of the swine, but these apologies are needless.

The narrative suggests some affinity between the demoniac and the animal nature, and though it is easy to ridicule, it is impossible to disprove, the suggestion. We know too little about either to do that, and what we cannot disprove it is somewhat venturesome hardily to deny. There are depths in the one nature, which we cannot fathom though its possessors are close to us; the other is removed from our investigation altogether. Where we are so utterly ignorant we had better neither affirm nor deny. But we may take a homiletical use out of that apparent affinity, and recognise that a spirit in rebellion against God necessarily gravitates downwards, and becomes more or less bestialised.

No wonder that the swineherds fled, but, surely, it is a wonder that eagerness to be rid of Jesus was the sole result of the miracle. Perhaps the reason was the loss of the swine, which would bulk largest in their keepers' excited story; perhaps the reason was a fear that He would find out and rebuke other instances of breach of strict Jewish propriety, perhaps it was simply the shrinking from any close contact with the heavenly, or apparently supernatural, which is so instinctive in us, and witnesses to a dormant consciousness of discord with Heaven. 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man,' is the cry of the roused conscience. And, alas! it has power to send away Him whom we need, and who comes to us, just because we are sinful, and just that He may deliver us from our sin.

6) Matthew 9:18-31

Matthew

THE TOUCH OF FAITH AND THE TOUCH OF CHRIST

Mat. 9:18-31.

The three miracles included in the present section belong to the last group of this series. Those of the second group were all effected by Christ's word. Those now to be considered are all effected by touch. The first two are intertwined. The narrative of the healing of the woman is embedded in the account of the raising of Jairus's daughter.

Mark the impression of calm consciousness of power and leisurely dignity produced by Christ's having time to pause, even on such an errand, in order to heal, by the way, the other sufferer. The father and the disciples would wonder at Him as He stayed His steps, and be apt to feel that priceless moments were being lost; but He knows His own resources, and can afford to let the child die while He heals the woman. The one shall receive no harm by the delay, and the other will be blessed. Our Lord is sitting at the feast which Matthew gave on the occasion of his call, engaged in vindicating His sharing in innocent festivity against the cavils of the

Pharisees, when the summons to the death-bed comes to Him from the lips of the father, who breaks in on the banquet with his imploring cry. Matthew gives the story much more summarily than the other evangelists, and does not distinguish, as they do, between Jairus's first words, 'at the point of death, and the message of her actual decease, which met them on the way. The call of sorrow always reaches Christ's ear, and the cry for help is never deemed by Him an interruption. So this 'man, gluttonous and a wine-bibber,' as these Pharisees thought Him, willingly and at once leaves the house of feasting for that of mourning. How near together, in this awful life of ours, the two lie, and how thin the partition walls! Well for those whose feasts do not bar them out from hearing the weeping next door.

As the crowd accompanies Jesus, His hasting love is, for a moment, diverted by another sufferer. We never go on an errand of mercy but we pass a hundred other sorrowing hearts, so close packed lie the griefs of men. This woman is a poor shrinking creature, broken down by long illness [which had lasted for the same length of time as the joyous life of Jairus's child], made more timid by disappointed hopes of cure, and depressed by poverty to which her many doctors had brought her. She does not venture to stop this new Rabbi-physician, as He goes with the church dignitary of the town to heal his daughter, but lets Him pass before she can make up her mind to go near Him; and then she comes creeping up behind the crowd, puts out her wasted, trembling hand to the hem of His garment,-and she is whole.

The other evangelists give us a more extended account, but Matthew throws into prominence, in his condensed narrative, the essential points.

Notice her real but imperfect faith. There was unquestionable confidence in Christ's power, and very genuine desire for healing. But it was a very ignorant faith. She believes that her touch of the garment will heal without Christ's will or knowledge, much more His pitying love, having any part in it. She thinks that she may win her desire furtively, and may carry it away, and He be none the wiser nor the poorer for the stolen blessing. What utter, blank ignorance of His character and way of working! What gross superstition! Yes, and withal what a hunger of desire, what absolute assurance of confidence that one finger-tip on His robe was enough!

Therefore she had her desire, and her Healer recognised her faith as true, though blended with much ignorance of Him. Her error was very like that which many Christians entertain with less excuse. To attach importance to external means of grace, rites, ordinances, sacraments, outward connection with Christian organisations, is the very same misconception in a slightly different form. Such error is always near us; it is especially rife in countries where there has long been a visible Church. It has received strange new vigour to-day, partly by reaction from extreme rationalism, partly by the growing cultivation of the aesthetic faculties. It is threatening to corrupt the simplicity and spirituality of Christian worship, and needs to be strenuously resisted. But the more we have to fight against it, the more do we need to remember that, along with this clinging to the hem of the garment instead of to the heart of its Wearer, there may be a very real trust, which might shame some of those who profess to hold a less sensuous form of faith. Many a poor soul clasping a crucifix clings to the Cross. Many a devout heart kneeling at mass sees through the incense-smoke the face of Christ.

This woman's faith was selfish. She wanted health; she did not care much about the Healer. She would have been quite contented to have had no more to do with Him, if she could only have stolen out of the crowd cured. She would have had little gratitude to the unconscious Giver of a stolen good. So, many a Christian life in its earlier stages is more absorbed with its own deep misery and its desire for deliverance, than with Him. Love comes after, born of the experience of His love. But faith precedes love, and the predominant motive impelling to faith at first is distinctly self-regard. That is all as it should be. The most purely self-absorbed wish to escape from the most rudely pictured hell is often the beginning of a true trust in Christ, which, in due time, will be elevated into perfect consecration. Some of our modern teachers, who are shocked at Christianity because it lays the foundation of the most self-denying morality in such 'selfishness,' would be none the worse for going to school to this story, and learning from it how a desire for nothing more than to get rid of a painful disease, started a process which turned a life into a peaceful, thankful surrender of the cured self to the love and service of the mighty Healer.

Observe, next, how Christ answers the imperfect faith, and, by answering, corrects and confirms it. Matthew omits Christ's question as to who touched

Him, the disciples’ reply, and His renewed asseveration that He was conscious of power having gone forth from Him. All these belong to the loving method by which our Lord sought to draw forth an open acknowledgment. Womanly diffidence, enfeebled health, her special disease, all made the woman wish to hide herself. She wanted to steal away unnoticed, as she hoped that she had come. But Christ forces her to stand out before all the crowd, and there, with all eyes upon her,-cold, cruel eyes, some of them-to conquer her shame, and tell all the truth. Strange kindness that; strangely contrasted with His ordinary desire to avoid notoriety, and with His ordinary tender consideration for shrinking weakness! He did it for her sake, not for His own. She is changed from timidity to courage. At one moment she stretches out her wasted finger, a tremulous invalid; at the next, she flings herself at His feet, a confessor. He would have us testify for Him, because faith unavowed, like a plant in the dark, is apt to become pale and sickly; but ere He bids us own His name, He pours into our hearts, in answer to our secret appeal, the health of His own life, and the blissful consciousness of that great gift which makes the tongue of the dumb sing.

His words to her are full of tenderness. She receives the name of ‘daughter.’ Gently He encourages her timidity by that ‘Be of good cheer,’ and then He sets right her error: ‘Thy faith’-not thy finger-’hath made thee whole.’ There was no real connection between the touch of the robe and healing; but the woman thought that there was, and so Christ stooped to her childish thought, and allowed her to prescribe the road which His mercy should take. But He would not leave her with her error. The true means of contact between us and Him is not our outward contact with external means of grace, but the touch of our spirits by faith. Faith is nothing in itself, and heals only because it brings us into union with His power, which is the sole cause of our healing. Faith is the hand which receives the blessing. It may be a wasted and tremulous hand, like that which this woman laid lightly on His robe. But He feels its touch, though a universe presses on Him, and He answers. Not the garment’s hem, but Christ’s love, is the cause of our salvation. Not an outward contact with it or with Him, but faith, is the condition on which His life, which knows no disease, pours into our souls. The hand of my faith lifted to Him will receive into its empty palm and clasping fingers the special blessing for my special wants.

The other evangelists tell us that, at the moment of His words to the woman, the messengers came bearing tidings of the child’s death. How Jairus must have grudged the pause! A word from Christ, like the pressure of His hand, heartened him. Like a river turned from its course for a space, to fill some empty reservoir, His love comes back to its original direction. How abundant the power and mercy, to which such a work as that just done was but a parenthesis! The doleful music and the shrill shrieks of Eastern mourning, which met them as they entered Jairus’s house, disturbed the sanctity of the hour, and were in strong contrast with the majestic calmness of Jesus. Not amid venal lamentations and excited cries will He do His work. He bids the noisy crowd forth with curt, almost stern, command, and therein rebukes all such hollow and tumultuous scenes, in the presence of the stillness of death, still more where faith in Him has robbed it of its terror, in robbing it of its perpetuity. It is strange that believing readers should have thought that our Lord meant to say that the little girl was not really dead, but only in a swoon. The scornful laughter of the flute-players and hired mourners understood Him better. They knew that it was real death, as men count death, and, as has often been the case, the laughter of His foes has served to establish the truth. That was not worthy to be called death from which the child was so soon and easily to be awaked. But, besides this special application to the case in hand, that great saying of our Lord’s carries the blessed truth that, since He has come, death is softened into sleep for all who love Him. The euphemism is not peculiar to Christianity, but has a deeper meaning on Christian lips than when Greeks or Romans spoke of the eternal sleep. Others speak of death by any name rather than its own, because they fear it so much. The Christian does so, because he fears it so little,-and, as a matter of fact, the use of the word death as meaning merely the separation of soul and body by the physical act is exceptional in the New Testament. This name of sleep, sanctioned thus by Christ, is the sweetest of all. It speaks of the cessation of connection with the world of sense, and ‘long disquiet merged in rest.’ It does not imply unconsciousness, for we are not unconscious when we sleep, but only unaware of externals. It holds the promise of waking when the sun comes. So it has driven out the ugly old name. Our tears flow less bitterly when we think of our dear ones as ‘sleeping in Jesus.’ Their bodies, like this little child’s, are dead, but *they* are not. They rest, conscious of their own blessedness and of Him ‘in whom they live, and have their being,’ whether they ‘move’ or no.

Then comes the great deed. The crowd is shut out. For such a work silence is befitting. The father and mother, with His foremost three disciples, go with Him into the chamber. There is no effort, repeated and gradually successful, as when Elisha raised the dead boy; no praying, as when Peter raised Dorcas; only the touch of the hand in which life throbbed in fulness, and, as the other narratives record, two words, spoken strangely to, and yet more strangely heard by, the dull, cold ear of death. Their echo lingered long with Peter, and Mark gives us them in the original Aramaic. But Matthew passes them by, as he seems here to have desired to emphasise the power of Christ’s touch. But touch or word, the real cause of the miracle was simply His will; and whether He used media to help men’s faith, or said only ‘I will,’ mattered little. He varied His methods as the circumstances of the recipients required, and in order that they and we might learn that He was tied to none. These miracles of raising the dead are three in number. Jairus’s daughter is raised from her bed, just having passed away; the widow’s son at Nain from his bier, having been for a little longer separated from his body; Lazarus from the grave, having been dead four days. A few minutes, or days, or four thousand years, are one to His power. These three are in some sense the first-fruits of the great harvest; the stars that shone out singly before all the heaven is in a blaze. For, though they died again, and so left to Him the precedence in resurrection, as in all besides, they are still prophetic of His power in the hour when they ‘that sleep in the dust’ shall awake at His voice. Blessed they who, like this little maiden, are awakened, not only by His voice, but by His touch, and to find, as she did, their hand in His!

The third of these miracles, which Matthew seems to reckon as the second in the group, because he treats the two former as so closely connected as to be but one in numeration, need not detain us long. It is found only in this Gospel. The first point to be observed in it is the cry of these two blind men. There is something pathetic and exquisitely natural in the two being together, as is also the case in the similar miracle, at a later period, on the outskirts of Jericho. Equal sorrows drive men together for such poor help and solace as they can give each other. They have common experiences which isolate them from others, and they creep close for warmth and companionship. All the blind men in the Gospels have certain resemblances. One is that they are all sturdily persevering, as perhaps was easier for them because they could not see the impatience of the listeners, and possibly because, in most cases, persistent begging was their trade, and they were used to refusals. But a more important trait is their recognition of Jesus as ‘Son of David.’ Blind as they are, they see more than do the seeing. Thrown in upon themselves, they may have been led to ponder the old words, and by their affliction been made more ready to welcome One who, if He were Messiah, was coming with a special blessing for them-’to open the blind eyes.’ Men who deeply desire a good are quick to listen to the promise of its accomplishment. So these two followed Him along the road, loudly and perseveringly calling out their profession of faith, and their entreaty for sight.

The next point is our Lord’s treatment. He let them cry on, apparently unheeding. Had, then, the two miracles just done exhausted His stock of power or of pity? Certainly His reason was, as it always was, their good. We do not know why it was better for them to have to wait, and continue their entreaty; but we may be quite sure that the reason for all His delays is the same,-the larger blessing which comes with the answer when it comes, and the large blessings which may be gathered while we wait its coming. Christ’s question to them, when at last they have found their way even indoors, holds out more hope than they had yet received. By it, Christ established a close relation with them, and implied to them that He was willing to answer their cry. One can fancy how the poor blind faces would light up with a flush of eager expectation, and how swift would be the answer. The question is not cold or inquisitorial. It is more than half a promise, and a powerful aid to the faith which it requires.

There is something very beautiful and pathetic in the simple brevity of the unhesitating answer, ‘Yea, Lord.’ Sincerity needs few words. Faith can put an infinite deal of meaning into a monosyllable. Their eagerness to reach the goal made their answer brief. But it was enough. Again the hand which had clasped the maiden’s palm is put out and laid gently on the useless eyes, and the great word spoken, ‘According to your faith be it unto you.’ Their blindness made the touch peculiarly fitting in their case, as bringing evidence of sense to those who could not see the gracious pity of His looks. The word spoken was, like that to the centurion, a declaration of the power of faith, which determines the measure, and often the manner, of His gifts to us. The containing vessel not only settles the quantity of, but the shape assumed by, the water which is taken up in it from the sea. Faith, which keeps inside of Christ's promises [and what goes outside of them is not faith], decides how much of Christ we shall have for our very own. He condescends to run the molten gold of His mercies into the moulds which our faith prepares.

These two men, who had used their tongues so well in their persistent cry for healing, went away to make a worse use of them in telling everywhere of their cure. Jesus desired silence. Possibly He did not wish His reputation as a mere worker of miracles to be spread abroad. In all His earlier ministry He avoided publicity, singularly contrasting therein with the evident desire to make Himself the centre of observation which marks its close. He dreaded the smoky flame of popular excitement. His message was to individuals, not to crowds. It was a natural impulse to tell the benefits these two had received; but truer gratitude and deeper faith would have made them obey His lightest word, and have shut their mouths. We honour Christ most, not by taking our way of honouring Him, but by absolute obedience.

The final miracle of the nine [or ten] marshalled in long procession in Mat. 8:1 - Mat. 8:34 and Mat. 9:1 - Mat. 9:38 is told with singular brevity. There is nothing individual in our Lord's treatment of the sufferer, as there was in the previous healing of the two blind men, and no details are given of either the appeal to His pity or the method of His cure. The dumb demoniac could lift no cry, nor exercise any faith, and all the petitions and hopes of his bearers were expressed in the act of bringing the sufferer thither, and silently setting him there before these eyes of universal pity. It was enough. With Jesus, to see was to compassionate, and to compassionate was to help. In the other instances of casting out demons, the method is an authoritative command, addressed not to the possessed, but to the alien personality that has seized on him, and we conclude that such was the method here. Jesus undoubtedly believed in demoniacal possession, if we can at all rely on the Gospel narratives; and it may be humbly suggested that there are dark depths in humanity, which had need to be fathomed more completely, before any one is warranted in dogmatically pronouncing that He was wrong in His diagnosis. There are ugly facts which should give pause to those who are inclined to say-'There are no demons, and if there were, they could not dominate a human consciousness.'

But the effects of the miracle are emphasised more than itself. They are two, neither of them what might or should have been. The dumb man is not said to have used his recovered speech to thank his deliverer, nor is there any sign that he clung to Him, either for fear of being captured again or in passionate gratitude. It looks as if he selfishly bore away his blessing and cared nothing for its giver. That is very human, and we all are too often guilty of the same sin. Nor was the effect on the multitudes much better, for they were only struck with vulgar wonder, which had no moral quality in it and led to nothing. They saw 'the miracle,' that is, the wonderfulness of the act made some dint even on their minds, but these were either too fluid to retain the impression, or too hard to let it be deep, and so it soon filled up again. We have to think of Christ's deeds as 'signs,' not only as 'wonders,' or they will do little to draw us to Him. Wonder is a necessarily evanescent emotion, which may indeed set something better stirring in us, but is quite as likely to die barren.

The Pharisees did not wonder, and did look into the phenomenon with sharp eyes; and in so far, they were in advance of the gaping multitudes. They were much too superior persons to be astonished at anything, and they had already settled on a formula which was delightfully easy of application, and had the further advantage of turning the miracles into evidences that the doer of them was a child of the Devil. It appears to have been a well-worked formula too, for it is found again in Mat. 12:24, and in Luk. 11:15, in the account of another cure of a dumb demoniac. It is possible that the incident now before us may be the same as this, but there is nothing improbable in the occurrence of such a case twice, nor in the repetition of what had become the commonplace of the Pharisaic polemic. But what a piercing example that explanation is of the blinding power of prejudice, determined to hold on to a foregone conclusion, and not to see the sun at noon! Jesus in league with 'the prince of the devils'! And that was gravely said by religious authorities! They saw the loveliness of His perfect life, His gentle goodness, His self-forgetting love, His swift-springing pity, and they set it all down to His commerce with the Evil One. He was so good that He must be more than humanly bad.

7) Matthew 9:36

Matthew

A CHRISTLIKE JUDGMENT OF MEN

Mat. 9:36.

In the course of our Lord’s wandering life of teaching and healing, there had naturally gathered around Him a large number of persons who followed Him from place to place, and we have here cast into a symbol the impression produced upon Him by their outward condition. That is to say, He sees them lying there weary, and footsore, and travel-stained. They have flung themselves down by the wayside. There is no leader or guide, no Joshua or director to order their march; they are a worn-out, tired, unregulated mob, and the sight smites upon His eye, and it smites upon His heart. He says to Himself, if I may venture to put words into His lips, ‘There are a worse weariness, and a worse wandering, and a worse anarchy, and a worse disorder afflicting men than that poor mob of tired pedestrians shows.’ Matthew, who was always fond of showing the links and connections between the Old Testament and the New, casts our Lord’s impression of what He then saw into language borrowed from the prophecy of Ezekiel [Eze. 34:12], which tells of a flock that is scattered in a dark and cloudy day, that is broken, and torn, and driven away. I venture to see in the text three points: [1] Christ teaching us how to look at men; [2] Christ teaching us how to feel at such a sight; and [3] Christ teaching us what to do with the feeling. ‘When He saw the multitude, He was moved with compassion, because they fainted and were scattered abroad.’ ‘Then He said unto His disciples, the harvest is plenteous, the labourers are few, pray ye the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers unto the harvest.’ And then there follows, ‘And when He had called unto Him His twelve disciples, He gave them power against unclean spirits to cast them out.’ There are, then, these three points;-just a word or two about each of them.

I. Here we have our Lord teaching us how to look at men.

The picture of my text is, of course, in its broad outlines, very clear and intelligible, but there may be a little difficulty as to the precise force of the language. The obscurity of it is in some degree reflected in the margin of our Bibles; so, perhaps, you will permit one word of an expository nature. The description of the flock, 'Because they fainted and were scattered abroad,' is couched in the original in a couple of words, one of which means properly 'torn' or 'fainting,' according as one or other of two readings of the text is adopted, and the other means 'lying down.' Now, the former of these gives a very pathetic picture if we apply it to the individuals that made up the flock. We have then the image of the poor sheep that has lost its way, struggling through briars and thorns, getting out of them with its fleece all torn and hanging in strips dangling at its heels, or of it as lacerated by the beasts of the field to whom it is a prey. If we take the metaphor, as seems more probably to be intended, as applying not so much to the individuals as to the flock, then it comes to mean 'torn asunder,' 'thrown apart,' and gives us the notion of anarchic confusion into which the flock comes if there be no shepherd to lead it. Then the other word, which our Bible translates 'were scattered abroad,' seems to mean more properly 'lying down,' and it gives the idea of the poor, wearied creature, after all its struggles and wanderings, utterly beaten and dejected, having lost its way, at its wits' end and resourceless, flinging itself down there in despair, and panting its timid life out anywhere where it finds itself. So it comes to be a picture of the utter weariness and hopelessness of all men's efforts apart from that Guide and Shepherd, who alone can lead them in the way. And then both of these miserable states, the laceration if you take the one explanation, the disintegration and casting apart if you take the other, the weariness and exhaustion, are traced to their source, they are 'as sheep having no shepherd.' He has gone, and so all this comes. With this explanation we may take the points of view that are thus suggested simply as they lie before us.

First of all, notice how here, as always to Jesus Christ, the outward was nothing, except as a symbol and manifestation of the inward; how the thing that He saw in a man was not the external accidents of circumstance or position, for His true, clear gaze and His loving, wise heart went straight to the essence of the matter, and dealt with the man not according to what he might happen to be in the categories of earth, but to what he was in the categories of heaven. All the same to Him whether it was some poor harlot, or a rabbi; all the same to Him whether it was Pilate on the judgment-seat, or the penitent thief hanging at His side. These gauds and shows were nothing; sheer away He cut them all, and went down to the hidden heart of the man, and He allocated and ranged them according to that. Christian men and women, do you try to do the same thing, and to get rid of all these superficial veils and curtains with which we drape ourselves and attitudinise in the world, and to see men as Christ saw them, both in regard to your judgment of them, and in regard to your judgment of yourselves? ‘I am a scholar and a wise man; a great thinker; a rich merchant; a man of rising importance and influence.’ Very well; what does that matter? ‘I am ignorant or a pauper’; be it so. Let us get below all that. The one question worth asking and worth answering is, ‘How am I affected towards Him?’ There are many temporary and local principles of arrangement and order among men; but they will all vanish some day, and there will be one regulating and arranging principle, and it is this: ‘Do I love God in Jesus Christ, or do I not?’ Oh! for myself, for yourself, and for all our outlook towards others, let us not forget that the inmost, deepest, hidden man of the heart is the man, and that all else is naught, and that its whole character is absolutely determined by its relation to Jesus Christ.

But this is somewhat aside from my main purpose, which is rather briefly to expand the various phases which, as I have already suggested, are included in such an emblem. The first of them is this: Try to think for yourselves of the condition of humanity as apart from Christ-shepherdless. That old metaphor of a shepherd which comes out of the Old Testament is there sometimes used to indicate a prophet, and sometimes to indicate a king. I suppose we may put both of these uses together, as far as our present purposes are concerned; and this is what I want to insist upon. I dare say some people here will think it is very old-fashioned, very narrow in these broad and liberal days; but what I would say is this, that unless Jesus Christ is both Guide and Teacher, we have neither guide nor teacher but are shepherdless without Him. There are plenty of rulers. There was no lack of other authority in the days of His flesh. There were crowds of rabbis, guides, and directors. The life of the nation was throttled by the authorities that had planted themselves upon its back, and yet Christ saw that there were none of those who were fit for the work, or afforded the adequate guidance. And so it is, now and always. There have been hosts of men who have sought to impose their authority upon an era. Where is there one that has swayed passion, that has ruled hearts, that has impressed his own image on the will, that has made obedience an honour, and absolute, abject devotion to his command a very patent of nobility? Here, and nowhere beside. Besides that Christ there is no ruler amongst men who can come to them and say to his servant, 'Go,' and he goeth, and to this man, 'Do this,' and he doeth it. Obedience to any besides is treason against the dignity of our own nature; disobedience to Him is both treason against our nature and blasphemy against God. 'Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ, Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.' *There* is the deepest reason for His rule.

And as for 'teacher,' whom are we to put up beside Him? Is it to be these dim figures of religious reformers that are gliding, ghostlike, to their doom, being wrapped round and round about by ever thicker and thicker folds of the inevitable oblivion that swallows all that is human? Brethren, by common consent it is Christ or nobody. Aaron dies upon Hor; Moses dies upon Pisgah; the teachers, the leaders, the guides, the under-shepherds, pass away one by one; and if this Christ be but a Man and a Teacher, He too will pass away. Shall I be thought very blind to the signs of the times if I say that I see no sign of His dominion being exhausted, of His influence being diminished, of His guidance being capable of being dispensed with? You may say, 'Oh, we do not want any teacher or guide; we do not want a shepherd.' I am not going to enter upon that question now at all, except just to say this, that the instincts of humanity rise up in contradiction, as it seems to me, of that cold and cheerless creed, and that we have this fact staring us in the face, that men are made capable of a devotion and submission the most passionate, the most absolute, the most mighty force in their lives, to human guides and ensamples, and that it is all wasted unless there be somewhere a Man, our Brother, who shall come to us and say, 'All that ever went before Me are thieves and robbers; I am the Good Shepherd; follow Me, and ye shall not walk in darkness,' 'He saw the multitudes as sheep having no shepherd.'

Still further, take that other phase of the metaphor which, as I suggested, the text includes, namely, the idea of disintegration, the rending apart of social ties and union, unless there be the centre of unity in the shepherd of the flock. ‘I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered,’ says the old prophecy. Of course, for what is there to hold them together unless it be their guide and their director? So we are brought face to face with this plain prosaic rendering of the metaphor-that but for the centre of unity provided for mankind in the person and work of Jesus Christ, there is no satisfaction of the deep hunger for unity and society with which in that case God would have cursed mankind. For whilst there are many other bonds most true, most blessed, God-given, and mighty, such as that of the sacred unity of the family, and that of the nation and many others of which we need not speak, yet all these are constantly being disintegrated by the unresting waves of that gnawing sea of selfishness, if I may so say, which, like the waters upon our eastern coasts, eats and eats for ever at the base of the cliffs, so that society in all its forms, whether it be built upon identity of opinion, which is perhaps the shabbiest bond of all, or whether it be built upon purposes of mutual action, which is a great deal better, or whether it be built upon hatred of other people, which is the modern form of patriotism, or whether it be built upon the domestic affections, which are the purest and highest of all-all the other bonds of society, such as creeds, schools, nations, associations, leagues, families, denominations, all go sooner or later. The base is eaten out of them, because every man that belongs to them has in him that tyrannous, dominant self, which is ever seeking to assert its own supremacy. Here is Babel, with its half-finished tower, built on slime; and there is Pentecost, with its great Spirit; here is the confusion, there is the unifying; here the disintegration, there the power that draws them all together. ‘They were scattered abroad as sheep having no shepherd,’ and one looks out over the world and sees great tracts of country and long dismal generations of time, in which the very thought of unity and charity and human bonds knitting men together has faded from the consciousness of the race, and then one turns to blessed, sweet, simple words that say, ‘there shall be one flock and one shepherd,’ and ‘I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.’ Drawing thus, He will draw them into the eternal, mighty bond of union that shall never be broken, and is all the more precious and all the more true because it is not a unity like the vulgar unities that express themselves in external associations. You know, of course or if you do not know it will be a good thing that you should know, that that verse in John's Gospel which I have quoted has been terribly mangled by a little slip of our translators. Christ said, 'Other sheep I must bring which are not of this fold,' the fold being the external unity of the Jewish church-an enclosure made of hurdles that you can stick in the ground. 'I shall bring them,' says He, 'and there shall be one'-[not, as our Bible says, 'fold,'-but something far better]-'there shall be one flock'; which becomes a unity not by wattling round about it on the outside, but by a shepherd standing in the middle. 'There shall be one flock and one shepherd'-a unity which is neither the destruction of the variety of the churches, nor the crushing of men, nationalities, and types of character all down into one dead level beneath the heel of a conqueror, but the unity which subsists in the many operations of the one Spirit, and is expressed by all the forms of the one inspired grace.

Then passing by altogether the other idea which I said was only doubtfully suggested by the words-namely, that of laceration and wounding-let me say a word about the last of the aspects of humanity when Christless, which is set forth in this text, and that is, the dejected weariness arising from the fruitless wanderings wherewith men are cursed. As a verse in the Book of Proverbs puts it, 'The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, because they know not how to go to the city.' Putting aside the metaphor, the plain truth which it embodies is just this, that there is in all men's souls a deep longing after peace and rest, after goodness and beauty and truth, and that all the strenuous efforts to satisfy these longings, either by social reforms or by individual culture and discipline, are pathetically vain and profitless, because there is none to guide them. The sheep go wandering in any direction, and with no goal; and wherever one has jumped, a dozen others will go after him, and so they are wearied out long before the day's journey is ended, and they never reach the goal. Put that into less vivid, and, therefore, as people generally suppose, more accurate, language, and it is a statement of the universal law of human history that, after any epoch of great aspirations and strong excitement of the noblest parts of human nature, there has always come a reaction of corruption and a collapse from weariness. What did 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' end in? A guillotine. What do all similar epochs end in, when they do not take the Christ to march ahead of them? An utter disgust and disillusion, and a despair of all progress. That is why wild revolutionists in their youth are always obstinate Conservatives in their old age. The wandering sheep are footsore, and they fling themselves down by the wayside. That is why heathenism presents to us the aspect that it does. There is nothing about it that seems to me more tragical than the weary languor that besets it. Do you ever think of the depth of pathetic, tragic meaning that there is in that verse in one of the Psalms, 'Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death'? There they sit, because there is no hope in rising and moving. They would have to grope if they arose, and so with folded hands they sit like the Buddha, which one great section of heathenism has taken as being the true emblem and ideal of the noblest life. Absolute passivity lays hold upon them all-torpor, stagnation, no dream of advance or progress. The sheep are dejected, despairing, anarchic, disintegrated, lacerated, guideless, and shepherdless-away from Christ. So He thought them. God give you and me grace, dear brethren, to see, as Christ saw, the condition of humanity and our own apart from Him.

II. And now let me say a word in the next place as to the second movement of His mind and heart here. He teaches us not only how to think of men, but how that sight should touch us.

'He was moved with compassion on them when He saw the multitude'-with the eye of a god, I was going to say, and the heart of a man. Pity belongs to the idea of divinity; compassion belongs to the idea of divinity incarnate; and the motion that passed across His heart is the motion that I would seek may pass, with its sweet and healing breath, across yours and mine. The right emotion for a Christian looking on the Christless crowds is pity, not aversion; pity, not anger; pity, not curiosity; pity, not indifference. How many of us walk the streets of the towns in which our lot is cast, and never know one touch of that emotion, when we look at these people here in England torn, and anarchic, and wearied, and shepherdless, within sound of our psalm-singing in our chapels? Why, on any Sunday there are thousands of men and women standing about the streets who, we may be sure, have not seen the inside of a church or a chapel since they were married, and that not one in five hundred of all the good people that are going with their prayer-books and hymn-books to church and chapel ever think anything about them as they pass them by; and some of them, perhaps, if they come to any especially disreputable one, will gather up their skirts and keep on the safe side of the pavement, and there an end of it. But Jesus Christ had no aversions. His white purity was a great deal nearer to the blackness of the woman that was a sinner, than was the leprous whiteness of the whited sepulchre of the self-righteous Pharisee. He had neither aversion, nor anger, nor indifference.

And, if I might venture to touch upon another matter, compassion and not curiosity is an especial lesson for the day to the more thoughtful and cultivated amongst our congregations. I have just said that the appropriate Christian feeling in contemplating the state of the sheep without the Shepherd is compassion, not curiosity. That reminder is particularly needful in view of the prominence to-day of investigations into the new science of Comparative Religion. I speak with most unfeigned respect of it and of its teachers, and gratefully hail the wonderful light that it is casting upon ideas underlying the strange and often savage and obscene rites of heathenism; but it has a side of danger in it against which I would warn you all, especially young, reading men and women. The time has not yet come when we can afford to let such investigations be our principal occupation in the face of heathenism. If idolatry was dead we could afford to do that, but it is alive-the more's the pity; and it is not only a curious instance of the workings of man's intelligence, and a great apocalypse of earlier stages of society, but, besides that, it is a lie that is deceiving and damning our brethren, and we have got to kill it first and dissect it afterwards. So I say, do not only think of heathenism in its various forms as a subject for speculation and analysis; as much as you like of that, only do not let it drive out the other thing, and after you have tried to understand it, then come back to my text, 'He was moved with compassion.' And so pity, and neither anger, nor aversion, nor curiosity, nor indifference is what I urge as the Christian emotion.

III. Let us take this text as teaching us how Christ would have us act, after such emotion built and based upon such a look.

It is perfectly legitimate, although it is by no means the highest motive, to appeal to feeling as a stimulus to action. We have a right to base our urging of Christian men and women to missionary work either at home or abroad, upon the ground of the condition of the men to whom the Gospel has to be carried. I know that if taken alone it is a very inadequate motive. I believe that any failure that may be manifest in the interest of Christian people in missionary work is largely traceable to the blunder we have made in dwelling on superficial motives more than we ought to have done, in proportion to the degree in which we have dwelt on the deepest. We have been gathering the surface-water instead of going right down to the green sand, to which the artesian well must be sunk if the stream is to come up without pumping or wasting. So I say that a deeper reason than the sorrow and darkness of the heathen is-'the love of Christ constraineth me'; but yet the first is a legitimate one. Only remember this, that Bishop Butler taught us long ago, that if you excite emotions which are intended to lead to action, and the action does not follow, the excitation of the emotion without its appropriate action makes the heart a great deal harder than it was before. That is why it is playing with edged tools to speak so much to our Christian audiences, as we sometimes hear done, about the condition of the heathen as a stimulus to missionary work. If a man does not respond and do something, some crust of callousness and coldness comes over his own heart. You cannot indulge in the luxury of emotion which you do not use to drive your spindles, without doing yourselves harm. It is never intended to be blown off as waste steam and allowed to vanish into the air. It is meant to be conserved and guided, and to have something done with it. Therefore beware of sentimental contemplation of the sad condition of the shepherdless sheep which does not move you to do anything to help them.

One word more. Take my text as a guide to the form of action into which we are to cast the emotions that should spring from this gaze upon the world. I will only name three points. Christ opened His mouth and spake to them, and taught them many things; Christ said to His disciples, 'Pray ye the Lord of the harvest'; and Christ sent out His apostles to preach the Kingdom. These three things in their bearing upon us are-personal work, prayer, help to send forth Christ's messengers. There is nothing like personal work for making a man understand and feel the miseries of his fellows. Christian men and women, it is your first business everywhere to proclaim the name of Jesus Christ, and no prayers and no subscriptions absolve you from that. In this army a man cannot buy himself off and send in a substitute at the cost of an annual guinea. If Christ sent the apostles, do you hold up the hands of the apostles' successors, and so by God's grace you and I may help on the coming of that blessed day when there shall be one flock and one Shepherd, and when 'the Lamb that is in the midst of the throne'-for the Shepherd is Himself a lamb-'shall feed them and lead them, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.'

8) Matthew 10:26-31

Matthew

THE WIDENED MISSION, ITS PERILS AND DEFENCES

Mat. 10:16-31.

We have already had two instances of Matthew's way of bringing together sayings and incidents of a like kind without regard to their original connection. The Sermon on the Mount and the series of miracles in Mat. 8:1 - Mat. 8:34 and Mat. 9:1 - Mat. 9:38 are groups, the elements of which are for the most part found disconnected in Mark and Luke. This charge to the twelve in Mat. 10:1 - Mat. 10:42 seems to present a third instance, and to pass over in Mat. 10:16 to a wider mission than that of the twelve during our Lord's lifetime, for it forebodes persecution, whereas the preceding verses opened no darker prospect than that of indifference or non-reception. The 'city' which, in that stage of the gospel message, simply would 'not receive you nor hear your words,' in this stage has worsened into one where 'they persecute you,' and the persecutors are now 'kings' and 'Gentiles,' as well as Jewish councils and synagogue-frequenters. The period covered in these verses, too, reaches to the 'end,' the final revelation of all hidden things.

Obviously, then, our Lord is looking down a far future, and giving a charge to the dim crowd of His later disciples, whom His prescient eye saw pressing behind the twelve in days to come. He had no dreams of swift success, but realised the long, hard fight to which He was summoning His disciples. And His frankness in telling them the worst that they had to expect was as suggestive as was His freedom from the rosy, groundless visions of at once capturing a world which enthusiasts are apt to cherish, till hard experience shatters the illusions. He knew the future in store for Himself, for His Gospel, for His disciples. And He knew that dangers and death itself will not appal a soul that is touched into heroic self-forgetfulness by His love. ‘Set down my name,’ says the man in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, though he knew-may we not say, because he knew?-that the enemies were outside waiting to fall on him.

A further difference between this and the preceding section is, that there the stress was laid on the contents of the disciples’ message, but that here it is laid on their sufferings. Not so much by what they say, as by how they endure, are they to testify. ‘The noble army of martyrs praise Thee,’ and the primitive Church preached Jesus most effectually by dying for Him.

The keynote is struck in Mat. 10:16, in which are to be noted the ‘Behold,’ which introduces something important and strange, and calls for close attention; the majestic ‘*I* send you,’ which moves to obedience whatever the issues, and pledges Him to defend the poor men who are going on His errands and the pathetic picture of the little flock huddled together, while the gleaming teeth of the wolves gnash all round them. A strange theme to drape in a metaphor! but does not the very metaphor help to lighten the darkness of the picture, as well as speak of His calmness, while He contemplates it? If the Shepherd sends His sheep into the midst of wolves, surely He will come to their help, and surely any peril is more courageously faced when they can say to themselves, ‘He put us here.’ The sheep has no claws to wound with nor teeth to tear with, but the defenceless Christian has a defence, and in his very weaponlessness wields the sharpest two-edged sword. ‘Force from force must ever flow.’ Resistance is a mistake. The victorious antagonist of savage enmity is patient meekness. ‘Sufferance is the badge of all’ true servants of Jesus. Wherever they have been misguided enough to depart from Christ’s law of endurance and to give blow for blow, they have lost their cause in the long run, and have hurt their own Christian life more than their enemies’ bodies. Guilelessness and harmlessness are their weapons. But ‘be ye wise as serpents’ is equally imperative with ‘guileless as doves.’ Mark the fine sanity of that injunction, which not only permits but enjoins prudent self-preservation, so long as it does not stoop to crooked policy, and is saved from that by dove-like guilelessness. A difficult combination, but a possible one, and when realised, a beautiful one!

The following verses [Mat. 10:17] expand the preceding, and mingle in a very remarkable way plain predictions of persecution to the death and encouragements to front the worst. Jewish councils and synagogues, Gentile governors and kings, will unite for once in common hatred, than which there is no stronger bond. That is a grim prospect to set before a handful of Galilean peasants, but two little words turn its terror into joy; it is 'for My sake,' and that is enough. Jesus trusted His humble friends, as He trusts all such always, and believed that 'for My sake' was a talisman which would sweeten the bitterest cup and would make cowards into heroes, and send men and women to their deaths triumphant. And history has proved that He did not trust them too much. 'For His sake'-is that a charm for *us*, which makes the crooked straight and the rough places plain, which nerves for suffering and impels to noble acts, which moulds life and takes the sting and the terror out of death? Nor is that the only encouragement given to the twelve, who might well be appalled at the prospect of standing before Gentile kings. Jesus seems to discern how they shrank as they listened, at the thought of having to bear 'testimony' before exalted personages, and, with beautiful adaptation to their weakness, He interjects a great promise, which, for the first time, presents the divine Spirit as dwelling in the disciples' spirits. The occasion of the dawning of that great Christian thought is very noteworthy, and not less so is the designation of the Spirit as 'of your Father,' with all the implications of paternal care and love which that name carries. Special crises bring special helps, and the martyrologies of all ages and lands, from Stephen outside the city wall to the last Chinese woman, have attested the faithfulness of the Promiser. How often have some calm, simple words from some slave girl in Roman cities, or some ignorant confessor before Inquisitors, been manifestly touched with heavenly light and power, and silenced sophistries and threats!

The solemn foretelling of persecution, broken for a moment, goes on and becomes even more foreboding, for it speaks of dearest ones turned to foes, and the sweet sanctities of family ties dissolved by the solvent of the new Faith. There is no enemy like a brother estranged, and it is tragically significant that it is in connection with the rupture of family bonds that death is first mentioned as the price that Christ’s messengers would have to pay for faithfulness to their message. But the prediction springs at a bound, as it were, from the narrow circle of home to the widest range, and does not fear to spread before the eyes of the twelve that they will become the objects of hatred to the whole human race if they are true to Christ’s charge. The picture is dark enough, and it has turned out to be a true forecast of facts. It suggests two questions. What right had Jesus to send men out on such an errand, and to bid them gladly die for Him? And what made these men gladly take up the burden which He laid on them? He has the right to dispose of us, because He is the Son of God who has died for us. Otherwise He is not entitled to say to us, Do my bidding, even if it leads you to death. His servants find their inspiration to absolute, unconditional self-surrender in the Love that has died for them. That which gives Him His right to dispose of us in life and death gives us the disposition to yield ourselves wholly to Him, to be His apostles according to our opportunities, and to say, ‘Whether I live or die, I am the Lord’s.’

That thought of world-wide hatred is soothed by the recurrence of the talisman, ‘For My name’s sake,’ and by a moment’s showing of a fair prospect behind the gloom streaked with lightning in the foreground. ‘He that endureth to the end shall be saved.’ The same saying occurs in Mat. 24:13, in connection with the prediction of the fall of Jerusalem, and in the same connection in Mar. 13:13, in both of which places several other sayings which appear in this charge to the apostles are found. It is impossible to settle which is the original place for these, or whether they were twice spoken. The latter supposition is very unfashionable at present, but has perhaps more to say for itself than modern critics are willing to allow. But Luk. 21:19 has a remarkable variation of the saying, for his version of it is, ‘In your patience, ye shall win your souls.’ His word ‘patience’ is a noun cognate with the verb rendered in Matthew and Mark ‘endureth,’ and to ‘win one’s soul’ is obviously synonymous with being ‘saved.’ The saying cannot be limited, in any of its forms, to a mere securing of earthly life, for in this context it plainly includes those who have been delivered to death by parents and brethren, but who by death have won their lives, and have been, as Paul expected to be, thereby ‘saved into His heavenly kingdom.’ To the Christian, death is the usher who introduces him into the presence-chamber of the King, and he that loseth his life ‘for My name’s sake,’ finds it glorified in, and into, life eternal.

But willingness to endure the utmost is to be accompanied with willingness to take all worthy means to escape it. There has been a certain unwholesome craving for martyrdom generated in times of persecution, which may appear noble but is very wasteful. The worst use that you can put a man to is to burn him, and a living witness may do more for Christ than a dead martyr. Christian heroism may be shown in not being afraid to flee quite as much as in courting, or passively awaiting, danger. And Christ’s Name will be spread when His lovers are hounded from one city to another, just as it was when ‘they that were scattered abroad, went everywhere, preaching the word.’ When the brands are kicked apart by the heel of violence, they kindle flames where they fall.

But the reason for this command to flee is perplexing. ‘Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel till the Son of Man be come.’ Is Jesus here reverting to the narrower immediate mission of the apostles? What ‘coming’ is referred to? We have seen that the first mission of the twelve was the theme of Mat. 10:5 - Mat. 10:15, and was there pursued to its ultimate consequences of final judgment on rejecters, whilst the wider horizon of a future mission opens out from Mat. 10:16 onwards. A renewed contraction of the horizon is extremely unlikely. It would be as if ‘a flower should shut and be a bud again.’ The recurrence in Mat. 10:23 of ‘Verily I say unto you,’ which has already occurred in Mat. 10:15, closing the first section of the charge, makes it probable that here too a section is completed, and that probability is strengthened if it is observed that the same phrase occurs, for a third time, in the last verse of the chapter, where again the discourse soars to the height of contemplating the final reward. The fact that the apostles met with no persecution on their first mission, puts out of court the explanation of the words that refers them to that mission, and takes the ‘coming’ to be Jesus’ own appearances in the places they had preceded Him as His heralds. The difficult question as to what is the *terminus ad quem* pointed to here seems best solved by taking the ‘coming of the Son of Man’ to be His judicial manifestation in the destruction of Jerusalem and the consequent desolation of many of ‘the cities of Israel,’ whilst at the same time, the nearer and smaller catastrophe is a prophecy and symbol of the remoter and greater ‘day of the Son of Man’ at the end of the days. The recognition of that aspect of the fall of Jerusalem is forced on us by the eschatological parts of the Gospels, which are a bewildering whirl without it. Here, however, it is the crash of the fall itself which is in view, and the thought conveyed is that there would be cities enough to serve for refuges, and scope enough for evangelistic work, till the end of the Jewish possession of the land.

In Mat. 10:26 - Mat. 10:31, ‘fear not’ is thrice spoken, and at each occurrence is enforced by a reason. The first of these encouragements is the assurance of the certain ultimate world-wide manifestation of hidden things. That same dictum occurs in other connections, and with other applications, but in the present context can only be taken as an assurance that the Gospel message, little known as it thus far was, was destined to fill all ears. Therefore the disciples were to be fearless in doing their part in making it known, and so working in alliance with the divine purpose. It is the same thing that is meant by the ‘covered’ that ‘shall be revealed,’ the ‘hidden’ that ‘shall be known,’ ‘that which is spoken in darkness,’ and ‘that which is whispered in the ear’; and all four designations refer to the word which every Christian has it in charge to sound out. We note that Jesus foresees a far wider range of publicity for His servants’ ministry than for His own, just as He afterwards declared that they would do ‘greater works’ than His. He spoke to a handful of men in an obscure corner of the world. His teaching was necessarily largely confidential communication to the fit few. But the spark is going to be a blaze, and the whisper to become a shout that fills the world. Surely, then, we who are working in the line of direction of God’s working should let no fear make us dumb, but should ever hear and obey the command: ‘Lift up thy voice with strength, lift it up, be not afraid.’

A second reason for fearlessness is the limitation of the enemy’s power to hurt, reinforced by the thought that, while the penalties that man can inflict for faithfulness are only corporeal, transitory, and incapable of harming the true self, the consequences of unfaithfulness fling the whole man, body and soul, down to utter ruin. There is a fear that makes cowards and apostates; there is a fear which makes heroes and apostles. He who fears God, with the awe that has no torment and is own sister to love, is afraid of nothing and of no man. That holy and blessed fear drives out all other, as fire draws the heat out of a burn. He that serves Christ is lord of the world; he that fears God fronts the world, and is not afraid.

The last reason for fearlessness touches a tender chord, and discloses a gracious thought of God as Father, which softens the tremendous preceding word: ‘Who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.’ Take both designations together, and let them work together in producing the awe which makes us brave, and the filial trust which makes us braver. A bird does not ‘fall to the ground’ unless wounded, and if it falls it dies. Jesus had looked pityingly on the great mystery, the woes of the creatures, and had stayed Himself on the thought of the all-embracing working of God. The very dying sparrow, with broken wing, had its place in that universal care. God is ‘immanent’ in nature. The antithesis often drawn between His universal care and His ‘special providence’ is misleading. Providence is special because it is universal. That which embraces everything must embrace each thing. But the immanent God is ‘your Father,’ and because of that sonship, ‘ye are of more value than many sparrows.’ There is an ascending order, and an increasing closeness and tenderness of relation. ‘A man is better than a sheep,’ and Christians, being God’s children, may count on getting closer into the Father’s heart than the poor crippled bird can, or than the godless man can. ‘Your Father,’ on the one hand, can destroy soul and body, therefore fear Him; but, on the other, He determines whether you shall ‘fall to the ground’ or soar above dangers, therefore fear none but Him.

9) Matthew 10:32-42

Matthew

THE KING’S CHARGE TO HIS AMBASSADORS

Mat. 10:32 - Mat. 10:42.

The first mission of the apostles, important as it was, was but a short flight to try the young birds’ wings. The larger portion of this charge to them passes far beyond the immediate occasion, and deals with the permanent relations of Christ’s servants to the world in which they live, for the purpose of bringing it into subjection to its true King. These solemn closing words, which make our present subject, contain the duty and blessedness of confessing Him, the vision of the antagonisms which He excites, His demand for all-surrendering following, and the rewards of those who receive Christ's messengers, and therein receive Himself and His Father.

I. The duty and blessedness of confessing Him [Mat. 10:32 - Mat. 10:33].

The 'therefore' is significant. It attaches the promise which follows to the immediately preceding thoughts of a watchful, fatherly care, extending like a great invisible hand over the true disciple. Because each is thus guarded, each shall be preserved to receive the honour of being confessed by Christ. No matter what may befall His witnesses, the extremest disaster shall not rob them of their reward. They may be flung down from the house-tops where they lift up their bold voices, but He who does not let a sparrow fall to the ground uncared for, will give His angels charge concerning them who are so much more precious, and they shall be borne up on outstretched wings, lest they be dashed on the pavement below. Thus preserved, they shall all attain at last to their guerdon. Nothing can come between Christ's servant and his crown. The tender providence of the Father, whose mercy is over all His works, makes sure of that. The river of the confessor's life may plunge underground, and be lost amid persecutions, but it will emerge again into the brighter sunshine on the other side of the mountains.

The confession which is to be thus rewarded, like the denial opposed to it, is, of course, not merely a single utterance of the lip. So far Judas Iscariot confessed Christ, and Peter denied Him. But it is the habitual acknowledgment by lip and life, unwithdrawn to the end. The context implies that the confession is maintained in the face of opposition, and that the denial is a cowardly attempt to save one's skin at the cost of treason to Jesus. The temptation does not come in that sharpest form to us. Perhaps some cowards would be made brave if it did. It is perhaps easier to face the gibbet and the fire, and screw oneself up for once to a brief endurance, than to resist the more specious blandishments of the world, especially when it has been christened, and calls itself religious. The light laugh of scorn, the silent pressure of the low average of Christian character, the close associations in trade, literature, public and domestic life which Christians have with non-Christians, make many a man’s tongue lie silent, to the sore detriment of his own religious life. ‘Ye have not yet resisted unto blood,’ and find it hard to fulfil the easier conflict to which you are called. The sun has more power than the tempest to make the pilgrim drop his garment. But the duty remains the same for all ages. Every man is bound to make the deepest springs of his life visible, and to stand to his convictions, whatever they be. If he do not, his convictions will disappear like a piece of ice hid in a hot hand, which will melt and trickle away. This obligation lies with infinitely increased weight on Christ’s servants; and the consequences of failing to discharge it are more tragic in their cases, in the exact proportion of the greater preciousness of their faith. Corn hoarded is sure to be spoiled by weevils and rust. The bread of life hidden in our sacks will certainly go mouldy.

The reward and punishment of confession and denial come to them not as separate acts, but as each being the revelation of the spiritual condition of the doers. Christ implies that a true disciple cannot but be a confessor, and that therefore the denier must certainly be one whom He has never known. Because, therefore, each act is symptomatic of the doer, each receives the congruous and correspondent reward. The confessor is confessed; the denier is denied. What calm and assured consciousness of His place as Judge underlies these words! His recognition is God’s acceptance; His denial is darkness and misery. The correspondence between the work and the reward is beautifully brought out by the use of the same word to express each. And yet what a difference between our confession of Him and His of us! And what a hope is here for all who have tremblingly, and in the consciousness of much unworthiness, ventured to say that they were Christ’s subjects, and He their King, brother, and all! Their poor, feeble confession will be endorsed by His. He will say, ‘Yes, this man is mine, and I am his.’ That will be glory, honour, blessedness, life, heaven.

II. The vision of the discord which follows the coming of the King of peace.

It is not enough to interpret these words as meaning that our Lord’s purpose indeed was to bring peace, but that the result of His coming was strife. The ultimate purpose is peace; but an immediate purpose is conflict, as the only road to the peace. He is first King of righteousness, and after that also King of peace. But, if His kingdom be righteousness, purity, love, then unrighteousness, filthiness, and selfishness will fight against it for their lives. The ultimate purpose of Christ's coming is to transform the world into the likeness of heaven; and all in the world which hates such likeness is embattled against Him. He saw realities, and knew men's hearts, and was under no illusion, such as many an ardent reformer has cherished, that the fair form of truth need only be shown to men, and they will take her to their hearts. Incessant struggle is the law for the individual and for society till Christ's purpose for both is realised.

That conflict ranges the dearest in opposite ranks. The gospel is the great solvent. As when a substance is brought into contact with some chemical compound, which has greater affinity for one of its elements than the other element has, the old combination is dissolved, and a new and more stable one is formed, so Christianity analyses and destroys in order to synthesis and construction. In Mat. 10:21 our Lord had foretold that brother should deliver up brother to death. Here the severance is considered from the opposite side. The persons who are 'set at variance' with their kindred are here Christians. Perhaps it is fanciful to observe that they are all junior members of families, as if the young would be more likely to flock to the new light. But however that may be, the separation is mutual, but the hate is all on one side. The 'man's foes' are of his own household; but he is not their foe, though he be parted from them.

III. Earthly love may be a worse foe to a true Christian than even the enmity of the dearest; and that enmity may often be excited by the Christian subordination of earthly to heavenly love. So our Lord passes from the warnings of discord and hate to the danger of the opposite-undue love.

He claims absolute supremacy in our hearts. He goes still farther, and claims the surrender, not only of affections, but of self and life to Him. What a strange claim this is! A Jewish peasant, dead nineteen hundred years since, fronts the whole race of man, and asserts His right to their love, which is strange, and to their supreme love, which is stranger still. Why should we love Him at all, if He were only a man, however pure and benevolent? We may admire, as we do many another fair nature in the past; but is there any possibility of evoking anything as warm as love to an unseen person, who can have had no knowledge of or love to us? And why should we love Him more than our dearest, from whom we have drawn, or to whom we have given, life? What explanation or justification does He give of this unexampled demand? Absolutely none. He seems to think that its reasonableness needs no elucidation. Surely never did teacher professing wisdom, modesty, and, still more, religion, put forward such a claim of right; and surely never besides did any succeed in persuading generations unborn to yield His demand, when they heard it. The strangest thing in the world's history is that to-day there are millions who do love Jesus Christ more than all besides, and whose chief self-accusation is that they do not love Him more. The strange, audacious claim is most reasonable, if we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, who died for each of us, and that each man and woman to the last of the generations had a separate place in His divine human love when He died. It is meet to love Him, if that be true; it is not, unless it be. The requirement is as stringent as strange. If the two ever seem to conflict, the earthly must give way. If the earthly be withdrawn, there must be found sufficiency for comfort and peace in the heavenly. The lower must not be permitted to hinder the flight of the heavenly to its home. 'More than Me' is a rebuke to most of us. What a contrast between the warmth of our earthly and the tepidity or coldness of our heavenly love! How spontaneously our thoughts, when left free, turn to the one; how hard we find it to keep them fixed on the other! How sweet service is to the dear ones here; how reluctantly it is given to Christ! How we long, when parted, to rejoin them; how little we are drawn to the place where He is! We have all to confess that we are 'not worthy of' Him; that we requite His love with inadequate returns, and live lives which tax His love for its highest exercise, the free forgiveness of sins against itself. Compliance with that stringent law, and subordinating all earthly love to His, is the true elevating and ennobling of the earthly. It is promoted, not degraded, when it is made second, and is infinitely sweeter and deeper then than when it was set in the place of supremacy, where it had no right to be.

But Christ's demand is not only for the surrender of the heart, but for the giving up of self, and, in a very profound sense, for the surrender of life.

How enigmatical that saying about taking up the cross must have sounded to the disciples! They knew little about the cross, as a punishment; they had not yet associated it in any way with their Lord. This seems to have been the first occasion of His mentioning it, and the allusion is so veiled as to be but partially intelligible. But what was intelligible was bewildering. A strange royal procession that, of the King with a cross on His shoulder, and all His subjects behind Him with similar burdens! Through the ages that procession has marched, and it marches still. Self-denial for Christ's sake is 'the badge of all our tribe.' Observe that word 'take.' The cross must be willingly and by ourselves assumed. No other can lay it on our shoulders. Observe that other word 'his.' Each man has his own special form in which self-denial is needful for him. We require pure eyes, and hearts kept in very close communion with Jesus, to ascertain what our particular cross is. He has them of many patterns, shapes, sizes, and materials. We can always make sure of strength to carry the one which He means us to carry, but not of strength to bear what is not ours.

IV. We have the rewards of those who receive Christ's messengers, and therein receive Him and His Father.

Our Lord first identifies these twelve with Himself in a manner which must have sounded strange to them then, but have heartened them for their work by the consciousness of His mysterious oneness with them. The whole doctrine of Christ's unity with His people lay in germ in these words, though much more was needed, both of teaching and of experience, before their depth of blessing and strengthening could be apprehended. *We* know that He dwells in His true subjects by His Spirit, and that a most real union subsists between the head and the members, of which the closest unions of earth are but faint shadows, so as that not only those who receive His followers receive Him, but, more wonderful still, His followers are received at the last by God Himself as joined to Him, and portions of His very self, and therefore 'accepted in the Beloved.' Our Lord adds to these words the thought that, in like manner, to receive Him is to receive the Father, and so implies that our relation to Him is in certain real respects parallel with His relation to the Father. We too are sent. He who sends abides with us, as the Son ever abode in God, and God in Him. We are sent to be the brightness of

Christ’s glory, and to manifest Him to men, as He was sent to reveal the Father.

10)Matthew 10:39

Matthew

A LIFE LOST AND FOUND 1

Mat. 10:39.

My heart impels me to break this morning my usual rule of avoiding personal references in the pulpit. Death has been busy in our own congregation this last week, and yesterday we laid in the grave all that was mortal of a man to whom Manchester owes more than it knows. Mr. Crossley has been for thirty years my close and dear friend. He was long a member of this church and congregation. I need not speak of his utter unselfishness, of his lifelong consecration, of his lavish generosity, of his unstinted work for God and man; but thinking of him and of it, I have felt as if the words of my text were the secret of his life, and as if he now understood the fulness of the promise they contain: ‘He that loseth his life for My sake shall find it.’ Now, looking at these words in the light of the example so tenderly beloved by some of us, so sharply criticised by many, but now so fully recognised as saintly by all, I ask you to consider-

I. The stringent requirement for the Christian life that is here made.

Now we shall very much impoverish the meaning and narrow the sweep of these great and penetrating words, if we understand by ‘losing one’s life’ only the actual surrender of physical existence. It is not only the martyr on whose bleeding brows the crown of life is gently placed; it is not only the temples that have been torn by the crown of thorns, that are soothed by that unfading wreath; but there is a daily dying, which is continually required from all Christian people, and is, perhaps, as hard as, or harder than, the brief and bloody passage of martyrdom by which some enter into rest. For the true losing of life is the slaying of self, and that has to be done day by day, and not once for all, in some supreme act of surrender at the end, or in some initial act of submission and yielding at the beginning, of the

Christian life. We ourselves have to take the knife into our own hands and strike, and that not once, but ever, right on through our whole career. For, by natural disposition, we are all inclined to make our own selves to be our own centres, our own aims, the objects of our trust, our own law; and if we do so, we are dead whilst we live, and the death that brings life is when, day by day, we 'crucify the old man with his affections and lusts.' Crucifixion was no sudden death; it was an exquisitely painful one, which made every nerve quiver and the whole frame thrill with anguish; and that slow agony, in all its terribleness and protractedness, is the image that is set before us as the true ideal of every life that would not be a living death. The world is to be crucified to me, and I to the world.

We have our centre in ourselves, and we need the centre to be shifted, or we live in sin. If I might venture upon so violent an image, the comets that career about the heavens need to be caught and tamed, and bound to peaceful revolution round some central sun, or else they are 'wandering stars to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever.' So, brethren, the slaying of self by a painful, protracted process, is the requirement of Christ.

But do not let us confine ourselves to generalities. What is meant? This is meant-the absolute submission of the will to commandments and providences, the making of that obstinate part of our nature meek and obedient and plastic as the clay in the potter's hands. The tanner takes a stiff hide, and soaks it in bitter waters, and dresses it with sharp tools, and lubricates it with unguents, and his work is not done till all the stiffness is out of it and it is flexible. And we do not lose our lives in the lofty, noble sense, until we can say-and verify the speech by our actions-'Not my will but Thine be done.' They who thus submit, they who thus welcome into their hearts, and enthrone upon the sovereign seat in their wills, Christ and His will-these are they who have lost their lives. When we can say, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,' then, and only then, have we in the deepest sense of the words 'lost our lives.'

The phrase means the suppression, and sometimes the excision, of appetites, passions, desires, inclinations. It means the hallowing of all aims; it means the devotion and the consecration of all activities. It means the surrender and the stewardship of all possessions. And only then, when we have done these things, shall we have come to practical obedience to the initial requirement that Christ makes from us all-to lose our lives for His sake.

I need not diverge here to point to that life from which my thoughts have taken their start in this sermon. Surely if there was any one characteristic in it more distinct and lovely than another, it was that self was dead and that Christ lived. There may be sometimes a call for the actual-which is the lesser-surrender of the bodily life, in obedience to the call of duty. There have been Christian men who have wrought themselves to death in the Master's service. Perhaps he of whom I have been speaking was one of these. It may be that, if he had done like so many of our wealthy men-had flung himself into business and then collapsed into repose-he would have been here to-day. Perhaps it would have been better if there had been a less entire throwing of himself into arduous and clamant duties. I am not going to enter on the ethics of that question. I do not think there are many of this generation of Christians who are likely to work themselves to death in Christ's cause; and perhaps, after all, the old saying is a true one, 'Better to wear out than to rust out.' But only this I will say: we honour the martyrs of Science, of Commerce, of Empire, why should not we honour the martyrs of Faith? And why should they be branded as imprudent enthusiasts, if they make the same sacrifice which, when an explorer or a soldier makes, his memory is honoured as heroic, and his cold brows are crowned with laurels? Surely it is as wise to die for Christ as for England. But be that as it may; the requirement, the stringent requirement, of my text is not addressed to any spiritual aristocracy, but is laid upon the consciences of all professing Christians.

II. Observe the grounds of this requirement.

Did you ever think-or has the fact become so familiar to you that it ceases to attract notice?-did you ever think what an extraordinary position it is for the son of a carpenter in Nazareth to plant Himself before the human race and say, 'You will be wise if you die for My sake, and you will be doing nothing more than your plain duty'? What business has He to assume such a position as that? What warrants that autocratic and all-demanding tone from

His lips? 'Who art Thou'-we may fancy people saying-'that Thou shouldst put out a masterful hand and claim to take as Thine the life of my heart?' Ah! brethren, there is but one answer: 'Who loved me, and gave Himself for me.' The foolish, loving, impulsive apostle that blurted out, before his time had come, 'I will lay down my life for Thy sake,' was only premature; he was not mistaken. There needed that His Lord should lay down His life for Peter's sake; and then He had a right to turn to the apostle and say, 'Thou shalt follow Me afterwards,' and 'lay down thy life for My sake.' The ground of Christ's unique claim is Christ's solitary sacrifice. He who has died for men, and He only, has the right to require the unconditional, the absolute surrender of themselves, not only in the sacrifice of a life that is submitted, but, if circumstances demand, in the sacrifice of a death. The ground of the requirement is laid, first in the fact of our Lord's divine nature, and second, in the fact that He who asks my life has first of all given His.

But that same phrase, 'for My sake,' suggests-

III. The all-sufficient motive which makes such a loss of life possible.

I suppose that there is nothing else that will wholly dethrone self but the enthroning of Jesus Christ. That dominion is too deeply rooted to be abolished by any enthusiasms, however noble they may be, except the one that kindles its undying torch at the flame of Christ's own love. God forbid that I should deny that wonderful and lovely instances of self-oblivion may be found in hearts untouched by the supreme love of Christ! But whilst I recognise all the beauty of such, I, for my part, humbly venture to believe and assert that, for the entire deliverance of a man from self-regard, the one sufficient motive power is the reception into his opening heart of the love of Jesus Christ.

Ah! brethren, you and I know how hard it is to escape from the tyrannous dominion of self, and how the evil spirits that have taken possession of us mock at all lesser charms than the name which 'devils fear and fly'; 'the Name that is above every name.' We have tried other motives. We have sought to reprove our selfishness by other considerations. Human love-which itself is sometimes only the love of self, seeking satisfaction from another-human love does conquer it, but yet conquers it partially. The demons turn round upon all other would-be exorcists, and say, ‘Jesus we know . . . but who are ye?’ It is only when the Ark is carried into the Temple that Dagon falls prone before it. If you would drive self out of your hearts-and if you do not it will slay you-if you would drive self out, let Christ’s love and sacrifice come in. And then, what no brooms and brushes, no spades nor wheelbarrows, will ever do-namely, cleanse out the filth that lodges there-the turning of the river in will do, and float it all away. The one possibility for complete, conclusive deliverance from the dominion and tyranny of Self is to be found in the words ‘For My sake.’ Ah! brethren, I suppose there are none of us so poor in earthly love, possessed or remembered, but that we know the omnipotence of these words when whispered by beloved lips, ‘For My sake’; and Jesus Christ is saying them to us all.

IV. Lastly, notice the recompense of the stringent requirement.

‘Shall find it,’ and that finding, like the losing, has a twofold reference and accomplishment: here and now, yonder and then.

Here and now, no man possesses himself till he has given himself to Jesus Christ. Only then, when we put the reins into His hands, can we coerce and guide the fiery steeds of passion and of impulse, And so Scripture, in more than one place, uses a remarkable expression, when it speaks of those that believe to the ‘acquiring of their souls.’ You are not your own masters until you are Christ’s servants; and when you fancy yourselves to be most entirely your own masters, you have promised yourselves liberty and have become the slave of corruption. So if you would own yourselves, give yourselves away. And such an one ‘shall find’ his life, here and now, in that all earthly things will be sweeter and better. The altar sanctifies the gift. When some pebble is plunged into a sunlit stream, the water brings out the veined colourings of the stone that looked all dull and dim when it was lying upon the bank. Fling your whole being, your wealth, your activities, and everything, into that stream, and they will flash in splendour else unknown. Did not my friend, of whom I have been speaking, enjoy his wealth far more, when he poured it out like water upon good causes, than if he had spent it in luxury and self-indulgence? And shall we not find that everything is sweeter, nobler, better, fuller of capacity to delight, if we give it all to our Master? The stringent requirement of Christ is the perfection of prudence. 'Who pleasure follows pleasure slays,' and who slays pleasure finds a deeper and a holier delight. The keenest epicureanism could devise no better means for sucking the last drop of sweetness out of the clustering grapes of the gladnesses of earth than to obey this stringent requirement, and so realise the blessed promise, 'Whoso loseth his life for My sake shall find it.' The selfish man is a roundabout fool. The self-devoted man, the Christ-enthroning man, is the wise man.

And there will be the further finding hereafter, about which we cannot speak. Only remember, how in a passage parallel with this of my text, spoken when almost within sight of Calvary, our Lord laid down not only the principle of His own life but the principle for all His servants, when He said, 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.' The solitary grain dropped into the furrow brings forth a waving harvest. We may not, we need not, particularise, but the life that is found at last is as the fruit an hundredfold of the life that men called 'lost' and God called 'sown.'

'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord; they rest from their labours, and their works do follow them.'

[1] Preached after the funeral of Mr. F. W. Crossley.

11)Matthew 10:41-42

Matthew

THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM, AND THEIR REWARD

Mat. 10:41 - Mat. 10:42.

There is nothing in these words to show whether they refer to the present or to the future. We shall probably not go wrong if we regard them as having reference to both. For all godliness has 'promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come,' and '*in* keeping God's commandments,' as well as *for* keeping them, 'there is great reward,' a reward realised in the present, even although Death holds the keys of the treasure-house in which the richest rewards are stored. No act of holy obedience is here left without foretastes of joy, which, though they be but ‘brooks by the way,’ contain the same water of life which hereafter swells to an ocean.

Some people tell us that it is defective morality in Christianity to bribe men to be good by promising them Heaven, and that he who is actuated by such a motive is selfish. Now that fantastic and overstrained objection may be very simply answered by two considerations: self-regard is not selfishness, and Christianity does not propose the future reward as the motive for goodness. The motive for goodness is love to Jesus Christ; and if ever there was a man who did acts of Christian goodness only for the sake of what he would get by them, the acts were not Christian goodness, because the motive was wrong. But it is a piece of fastidiousness to forbid us to reinforce the great Christian motive, which is love to Jesus Christ, by the thought of the recompense of reward. It is a stimulus and an encouragement of, not the motive for, goodness. This text shows us that it is a subordinate motive, for it says that the reception of a prophet, or of a righteous man, or of ‘one of these little ones,’ which is rewardable, is the reception ‘in the name of’ a prophet, a disciple, and so on, or, in other words, is the recognising of the prophet, or the righteous man, or the disciple for what he is, and because he is that, and not because of the reward, receiving him with sympathy and solace and help.

So, with that explanation, let us look at these very remarkable words of our text.

I. The first thing which I wish to observe in them is the three classes of character which are dealt with-’prophet,’ ‘righteous man,’ ‘these little ones.’

Now the question that I would suggest is this: Is there any meaning in the order in which these are arranged? If so, what is it? Do we begin at the bottom, or at the top? Have we to do with an ascending or with a descending scale? Is the prophet thought to be greater than the righteous man, or less? Is the righteous man thought to be higher than the little one, or to be lower? The question is an important one, and worth considering.

Now, at first sight, it certainly does look as if we had here to do with a descending scale, as if we began at the top and went downwards. A prophet, a man honoured with a distinct commission from God to declare His will, is, in certain very obvious respects, loftier than a man who is not so honoured, however pure and righteous he may be. The dim and venerable figures, for instance, of Isaiah and Jeremiah, tower high above all their contemporaries; and godly men who hung upon their lips, like Baruch on Jeremiah's, felt themselves to be, and were, inferior to them. And, in like manner, the little child who believes in Christ may seem to be insignificant in comparison with the prophet with his God-touched lips, or the righteous man of the old dispensation with his austere purity; as a humble violet may seem by the side of a rose with its heart of fire, or a white lily regal and tall. But one remembers that Jesus Christ Himself declared that 'the least of the little ones' was greater than the greatest who had gone before; and it is not at all likely that He who has just been saying that whosoever received His followers received Himself, should classify these followers beneath the righteous men of old. The Christian type of character is distinctly higher than the Old Testament type; and the humblest believer is blessed above prophets and righteous men because his eyes behold and his heart welcomes the Christ.

Therefore I am inclined to believe that we have here an ascending series-that we begin at the bottom and not at the top; that the prophet is less than the righteous man, and the righteous man less than the little one who believes in Christ. For, suppose there were a prophet who was not righteous, and a righteous man who was not a prophet. Suppose the separation between the two characters were complete, which of them would be the greater? Balaam was a prophet; Balaam was not a righteous man; Balaam was immeasurably inferior to the righteous whose lives he did not emulate, though he could not but envy their deaths. In like manner the humblest believer in Jesus Christ has something that a prophet, if he is not a disciple, does not possess; and that which he has, and the prophet has not, is higher than the endowment that is peculiar to the prophet alone.

May we say the same thing about the difference between the righteous man and the disciple? Can there be a righteous man that is not a disciple? Can there be a disciple that is not a righteous man? Can the separation between these two classes be perfect and complete? No! in the profoundest sense, certainly not. But then at the time when Christ spoke there were some men standing round Him, who, ‘as touching the righteousness which is of the law,’ were ‘blameless.’ And there are many men to-day, with much that is noble and admirable in their characters, who stand apart from the faith that is in Jesus Christ; and if the separation be so complete as that, then it is to be emphatically and decisively pronounced that, if we have regard to all that a man ought to be, and if we estimate men in the measure in which they approximate to that ideal in their lives and conduct, ‘the Christian is the highest style of man.’ The disciple is above the righteous men adorned with many graces of character, who, if they are not Christians, have a worm at the root of all their goodness, because it lacks the supreme refinement and consecration of faith; and above the fiery-tongued prophet, if he is not a disciple.

Now, brethren, this thought is full of very important practical inferences. Faith is better than genius. Faith is better than brilliant gifts. Faith is better than large acquirements. The poet’s imagination, the philosopher’s calm reasoning, the orator’s tongue of fire, even the inspiration of men that may have their lips touched to proclaim God to their brethren, are all less than the bond of living trust that knits a soul to Jesus Christ, and makes it thereby partaker of that indwelling Saviour. And, in like manner, if there be men, as there are, and no doubt some of them among my hearers, adorned with virtues and graces of character, but who have not rested their souls on Jesus Christ, then high above these, too, stands the lowliest person who has set his faith and love on that Saviour. Neither intellectual endowments nor moral character are the highest, but faith in Jesus Christ. A man may be endowed with all brilliancy of intellect and fair with many beauties of character, and he may be lost; and on the other hand simple faith, rudimentary and germlike as it often is, carries in itself the prophecy of all goodness, and knits a man to the source of all blessedness. ‘Whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. Now abideth these three, faith, hope, charity.’ ‘Rejoice not that the spirits are subject unto you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in Heaven.’

Ah! brethren, if we believed in Christ's classification of men, and in the order of importance and dignity in which He arranges them, it would make a wonderful practical difference to the lives, to the desires, and to the efforts of a great many of us. Some of you students, young men and women that are working at college or your classes, if you believed that it was better to trust in Jesus Christ than to be wise, and gave one-tenth, ay! one-hundredth part of the attention and the effort to secure the one which you do to secure the other, would be different people. 'Not many wise men after the flesh,' but humble trusters in Jesus Christ, are the victors in the world. Believe you that, and order your lives accordingly.

Oh! what a reversal of this world's estimates is coming one day, when the names that stand high in the roll of fame shall pale, like photographs that have been shut up in a portfolio, and when you take them out have faded off the paper. 'The world knows nothing of its greatest men,' but there is a time coming when the spurious mushroom aristocracy that the world has worshipped will be forgotten, like the nobility of some conquered land, who are brushed aside and relegated to private life by the new nobility of the conquerors, and when the true nobles, God's aristocrats, the righteous, who are righteous because they have trusted in Christ, shall shine forth like the sun 'in the Kingdom of My Father.'

Here is the climax: gifts and endowments at the bottom, character and morality in the middle, and at the top faith in Jesus Christ.

II. Now notice briefly in the second place the variety of the reward according to the character.

The prophet has his, the righteous man has his, the little one has his. That is to say, each level of spiritual or moral stature receives its own prize. There is no difficulty in seeing that this is so in regard to the rewards of this life. Every faithful message delivered by a prophet increases that prophet's own blessedness, and has joys in the receiving of it from God, in the speaking of it to men, in the marking of its effects as it spreads through the world, which belong to him alone. In all these, and in many other ways, the 'prophet' has rewards that no stranger can intermeddle with. All courses of obedient conduct have their own appropriate consequences and satisfaction. Every character is adapted to receive, and does receive, in the measure of its goodness, certain blessings and joys, here and now. ‘Surely the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth.’

And the same principle, of course, applies if we think of the reward as altogether future. It must be remembered, however, that Christianity does not teach, as I believe, that if there be a prophet or a righteous man who is not a disciple, that prophet or righteous man will get rewards in the future life. It must be remembered, too, that every disciple is righteous in the measure of his faith. Discipleship being presupposed, then the disciple who is a prophet will have one reward, and the disciple who is a righteous man shall have another; and where all three characteristics coincide, there shall be a triple crown of glory upon his head.

That is all plain and obvious enough, if only we get rid of the prejudice that the rewards of a future life are merely bestowed upon men by God’s arbitrary good pleasure. What is the reward of Heaven? ‘Eternal life,’ people say. Yes! ‘Blessedness.’ Yes! But where does the life come from, and where does the blessedness come from? They are both derived, they come from God in Christ; and in the deepest sense, and in the only true sense, God is Heaven, and God is the reward of Heaven. ‘I am thy shield,’ so long as dangers need to be guarded against, and then, thereafter, ‘I am thine exceeding great Reward.’ It is the possession of God that makes all the Heaven of Heaven, the immortal life which His children receive, and the blessedness with which they are enraptured. We are heirs of immortality, we are heirs of life, we are heirs of blessedness, because, and in the measure in which, we become heirs of God.

And if that be so, then there is no difficulty in seeing that in Heaven, as on earth, men will get just as much of God as they can hold; and that in Heaven, as on earth, capacity for receiving God is determined by character. The gift is one, the reward is one, and yet the reward is infinitely various. It is the same light which glows in all the stars, but ‘star differeth from star in glory.’ It is the same wine, the new wine of the Kingdom, that is poured into all the vessels, but the vessels are of divers magnitudes, though each be full to the brim.

And so in those two sister parables of our Master’s, which are so remarkably discriminated and so remarkably alike, we have both these aspects of the Heavenly reward set forth-both that which declares its identity in all cases, and the other which declares its variety according to the recipient’s character. All the servants receive the same welcome, the same prize, the same entrance into the same joy; although one of them had ten talents, and another five, and another two. But the servants who were each sent out to trade with one poor pound in their hands, and by their varying diligence reaped varying profits, were rewarded according to the returns that they had brought; and one received ten, and the other five, and the other two, cities over which to have authority and rule. So the reward is one, and yet infinitely diverse. It is not the same thing whether a man or a woman, being a Christian, is an earnest, and devoted, and growing Christian here on earth, or a selfish, and an idle, and a stagnant one. It is not the same thing whether you content yourselves with simply laying hold on Christ, and keeping a tremulous and feeble hold of Him for the rest of your lives, or whether you grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour. There is such a fate as being saved, yet so as by fire, and going into the brightness with the smell of the fire on your garments. There is such a fate as having just, as it were, squeezed into Heaven, and got there by the skin of your teeth. And there is such a thing as having an abundant entrance ministered, when its portals are thrown wide open. Some imperfect Christians die with but little capacity for possessing God, and therefore their heaven will not be as bright, nor studded with as majestic constellations, as that of others. The starry vault that bends above us so far away, is the same in the number of its stars when gazed on by the savage with his unaided eye, and by the astronomer with the strongest telescope; and the Infinite God, who arches above us, but comes near to us, discloses galaxies of beauty and oceans of abysmal light in Himself, according to the strength and clearness of the eye that looks upon Him. So, brethren, remember that the one glory has infinite degrees; and faith, and conduct, and character here determine the capacity for God which we shall have when we go to receive our reward.

III. The last point that is here is the substantial identity of the reward to all that stand on the same level, however different may be the form of their lives.

‘He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward.’ And so in the case of the others. The active prophet, righteous man, or disciple, and the passive recogniser of each in that character, who receives each as a prophet, or righteous man, or disciple, stand practically and substantially on the same level, though the one of them may have his lips glowing with the divine inspiration and the other may never have opened his mouth for God.

That is beautiful and deep. The power of sympathising with any character is the partial possession of that character for ourselves. A man who is capable of having his soul bowed by the stormy thunder of Beethoven, or lifted to Heaven by the ethereal melody of Mendelssohn, is a musician, though he never composed a bar. The man who recognises and feels the grandeur of the organ music of ‘Paradise Lost’ has some fibre of a poet in him, though he be but ‘a mute, inglorious Milton.’

All sympathy and recognition of character involve some likeness to that character. The poor woman who brought the sticks and prepared food for the prophet entered into the prophet’s mission and shared in the prophet’s work and reward, though his task was to beard Ahab, and hers was only to bake Elijah’s bread. The old knight that clapped Luther on the back when he went into the Diet of Worms, and said to him, ‘Well done, little monk!’ shared in Luther’s victory and in Luther’s crown. He that helps a prophet because he is a prophet, has the making of a prophet in himself.

As all work done from the same motive is the same in God’s eyes, whatever be the outward shape of it, so the work that involves the same type of spiritual character will involve the same reward. You find the Egyptian medal on the breasts of the soldiers that kept the base of communication as well as on the breasts of the men that stormed the works at Tel-el-Kebir. It was a law in Israel, and it is a law in Heaven: ‘As his part is that goeth down into the battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff, they shall part alike.’ ‘I am going down into the pit, you hold the ropes,’ said Carey, the pioneer missionary. They that hold the ropes, and the daring miner that swings away down in the blackness, are one in the work, may be one in the motive, and, if they are, shall be one in the reward. So, brethren, though no coal of fire may be laid upon your lips, if you sympathise with the workers that are trying to serve God, and do what you can to help them, and identify yourself with them, and so hold the ropes, my text will be true about you. ‘He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward.’ They who by reason of circumstances, by deficiency of power, or by the weight of other tasks and duties, can only give silent sympathy, and prayer, and help, are one with the men whom they help.

Dear brethren! remember that this awful, mystical life of ours is full everywhere of consequences that cannot be escaped. What we sow we reap, and we grind it, and we bake it, and we live upon it. We have to drink as we have brewed; we have to lie on the beds that we have made. ‘Be not deceived: God is not mocked.’ The doctrine of reward has two sides to it. ‘Nothing human ever dies.’ All our deeds drag after them inevitable consequences; but if you will put your trust in Jesus Christ, He will not deal with you according to your sins, nor reward you according to your iniquities; and the darkest features of the recompense of your evil will all be taken away by the forgiveness which we have in His blood. If you will trust yourselves to Him you will have that eternal life, which is not wages, but a gift; which is not reward, but a free bestowment of God’s love. And then, if we build upon that Foundation on which alone men can build their hopes, their thoughts, their characters, their lives, however feeble may be our efforts, however narrow may be our sphere,-though we be neither prophets nor sons of prophets, and though our righteousness may be all stained and imperfect, yet, to our own amazement and to God’s glory, we shall find, when the fire is kindled which reveals and tests our works, that, by the might of humble faith in Christ, we have built upon that Foundation, gold and silver and precious stones; and shall receive the reward given to every man whose work abides that trial by fire.

12)Matthew 11:28-29

Matthew

THE REST GIVER

Mat. 11:28 - Mat. 11:29.

One does not know whether tenderness or majesty is predominant in these wonderful words. A divine penetration into man's true condition, and a divine pity, are expressed in them. Jesus looks with clearsighted compassion into the inmost history of all hearts, and sees the toil and the sorrow which weigh on every soul. And no less remarkable is the divine consciousness of power, to succour and to help, which speaks in them. Think of a Jewish peasant of thirty years old, opening his arms to embrace the world, and saying to all men, 'Come and rest on My breast.' Think of a man supposing himself to be possessed of a charm which could soothe all sorrow and lift the weight from every heart.

A great sculptor has composed a group where there diverge from the central figure on either side, in two long lines, types of all the cruel varieties of human pains and pangs; and in the midst stands, calm, pure, with the consciousness of power and love in His looks, and with outstretched hands, as if beckoning invitation and dropping benediction, Christ the Consoler. The artist has but embodied the claim which the Master makes for Himself here. No less remarkable is His own picture of Himself, as 'meek and lowly in heart.' Did ever anybody before say, 'I am humble,' without provoking the comment, 'He that says he is humble proves that he is not'? But Jesus Christ said it, and the world has allowed the claim; and has answered, 'Though Thou bearest record of Thyself, Thy record is true.'

But my object now is not so much to deal with the revelation of our Lord contained in these marvellous words, as to try, as well as I can, to re-echo, however faintly, the invitation that sounds in them. There is a very striking reduplication running through them which is often passed unnoticed. I shall shape my remarks so as to bring out that feature of the text, asking you to look first with me at the twofold designation of the persons addressed; next at the twofold invitation; and last at the twofold promise of rest.

I. Consider then the twofold designation here of the persons addressed, 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden.'

The one word expresses effort and toil, the other a burden and endurance. The one speaks of the active, the other of the passive, side of human misery and evil. Toil is work which is distasteful in itself, or which is beyond our faculties. Such toil, sometime or other, more or less, sooner or later, is the lot of every man. All work becomes labour, and all labour, sometime or other, becomes toil. The text is, first of all, and in its most simple and surface meaning, an invitation to all the men who know how ceaseless, how wearying, how empty the effort and energy of life is, to come to this Master and rest.

You remember those bitter words of the Book of Ecclesiastes, where the preacher sets forth a circle of labour that only comes back to the point where it began, as being the law for nature and the law for man. And truly much of our work seems to be no better than that. We are like squirrels in a cage, putting forth immense muscular effort, and nothing to show for it after all. 'All is vanity, and striving after wind.'

Toil is a curse; work is a blessing. But all our work darkens into toil; and the invitation, 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour,' reaches to the very utmost verge of the world and includes every soul.

And then, in like manner, the other side of human experience is set forth in that other word. For most men have not only to work, but to bear; not only to toil, but to sorrow. There are efforts that need to be put forth, which task all our energy, and leave the muscles flaccid and feeble. And many of us have, at one and the same moment, to work and to weep, to toil whilst our hearts are beating like a forge-hammer; to labour whilst memories and thoughts that might enfeeble any worker, are busy with us. A burden of sorrow, as well as effort and toil, is, sooner or later, the lot of all men.

But that is only surface. The twofold designation here before us goes a great deal deeper than that. It points to two relationships to God and to God's law of righteousness. Men labour with vague and yet with noble effort, sometimes, to do the thing that is right, and after all efforts there is left a burden of conscious defect. In the purest and the highest lives there come both of these things. And Jesus Christ, in this merciful invitation of His, speaks to all the men that have tried, and tried in vain, to satisfy their consciences and to obey the law of God, and says to them, 'Cease your efforts, and no longer carry that burden of failure and of sin upon your shoulders. Come unto Me, and I will give you rest.'

I should be sorry to think that I was speaking to any man or woman who had not, more or less, tried to do what is right. You have laboured at that effort with more or less of consistency, with more or less of earnestness. Have you not found that you could not achieve it?

I am sure that I am speaking to no man or woman who has not upon his or her conscience a great weight of neglected duties, of actual transgressions, of mean thoughts, of foul words and passions, of deeds that they would be ashamed that any should see; ashamed that their dearest should catch a glimpse of. My friend, universal sinfulness is no mere black dogma of a narrow Calvinism; it is no uncharitable indictment against the race; it is simply putting into definite words the consciousness that is in every one of your hearts. You know that, whether you like to think about it or not, you have broken God's law, and are a sinful man. You carry a burden on your back whether you realise the fact or no, a burden that clogs all your efforts, and that will sink you deeper into the darkness and the mire. 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour,' and with noble, but, at bottom, vain, efforts have striven after right and truth. 'Come unto Me all ye that are burdened,' and bear, sometimes forgetting it, but often reminded of its pressure by galled shoulders and wearied limbs, the burden of sin on your bent backs.

This invitation includes the whole race. In it, as in a blank form, you may each insert your name. Jesus Christ speaks to thee, John, Thomas, Mary, Peter, whatever thy name may be, as distinctly as if you saw your name written on the pages of your New Testament, when He says to you, 'Come unto Me, *all* ye that labour and are heavy laden.' For the 'all' is but the sum of the units; and I, and thou, and thou, have our place within the word.

II. Now, secondly, look at the twofold invitation that is here.

'Come unto Me . . . Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me.' These two things are not the same. 'Coming unto Me,' as is quite plain to the most superficial observation, is the first step in the approach to a companionship, which companionship is afterwards perfected and kept up by obedience and imitation. The 'coming' is an initial act which makes a man Christ's companion. And the 'Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me,' is the continuous act by which that companionship is manifested and preserved. So that in these words, which come so familiarly to most of our memories that they have almost ceased to present a sharp meaning, there is not only a merciful summons to the initial act, but a description of the continual life of which that act is the introduction.

And now, to put that into simpler words, when Jesus Christ says ‘Come unto Me,’ He Himself has taught us what is His inmost meaning in that invitation, by another word of His: ‘He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst’; where the parallelism of the clauses teaches us that to come to Christ is simply to put our trust in Him. There is in faith a true movement of the whole soul towards the Master. I think that this metaphor teaches us a great deal more about that faith that we are always talking about in the pulpit, and which, I am afraid, many of our congregations do not very distinctly understand, than many a book of theology does. To ‘come to Him’ implies, distinctly, that He, and no mere theological dogma, however precious and clear, is the Object on which faith rests.

And, therefore, if Christ, and not merely a doctrinal truth about Christ, be the Object of our faith, then it is very clear that faith, which grasps a Person, must be something more than the mere act of the understanding which assents to a truth. And what more is it? How is it possible for one person to lay hold of and to come to another? By trust and love, and by these alone. These be the bonds that bind men together. Mere intellectual consent may be sufficient to fasten a man to a dogma, but there must be will and heart at work to bind a man to a person; and if it be Christ and not a theology, to which we come by our faith, then it must be with something more than our brains that we grasp Him and draw near to Him. That is to say, your will is engaged in your confidence. Trust Him as you trust one another, only with the difference befitting a trust directed to an absolute and perfect object of trust, and not to a poor, variable human heart. Trust Him as you trust one another. Then, just as husband and wife, parent and child, friend and friend, pass through all intervening hindrances and come together when they trust and love, so you come closer to Christ as the very soul of your soul by an inward real union, than you do even to your dear ones, if you grapple Him to your heart with the hoops of steel, which, by simple trust in Him, the Divine Redeemer forges for us. ‘Come unto Me,’ being translated out of metaphor into fact, is simply ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.’

And still further, we have here, not only the initial act by which companionship and union with Jesus Christ is brought about, but the continual course by which it is kept up, and by which it is manifested. The faith which saves a man’s soul is not all which is required for a Christian life. ‘Take My yoke upon you, and *learn of Me*.’ The yoke is that which, laid on the broad forehead or the thick neck of the ox, has attached to it the cords which are bound to the burden that the animal draws. The burden, then, which Christ gives to His servants to pull, is a metaphor for the specific duties which He enjoins upon them to perform; and the yoke by which they are fastened to their burdens, ‘obliged’ to their duties, is His authority, So to ‘take His yoke’ upon us is to submit our wills to His authority. Therefore this further call is addressed to all those who have come to Him, feeling their weakness and their need and their sinfulness, and have found in Him a Saviour who has made them restful and glad; and it bids them live in the deepest submission of will to Him, in joyful obedience, in constant service; and, above all, in the daily imitation of the Master.

You must put both these commandments together before you get Christ’s will for His children completely expressed. There are some of you who think that Christianity is only a means by which you may escape the penalty of your sins; and you are ready enough, or fancy yourselves so, to listen when He says, ‘Come to Me that you may be pardoned,’ but you are not so ready to listen to what He says afterwards, when He calls upon you to take His yoke upon you, to obey Him, to serve Him, and above all to copy Him. And I beseech you to remember that if you go and part these two halves from one another, as many people do, some of them bearing away the one half and some the other, you have got a maimed Gospel; in the one case a foundation without a building, and in the other case a building without a foundation. The people who say that Christ’s call to the world is ‘Come unto Me,’ and whose Christianity and whose Gospel is only a proclamation of indulgence and pardon for past sin, have laid hold of half of the truth. The people who say that Christ’s call is ‘Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me,’ and that Christianity is a proclamation of the duty of pure living after the pattern of Jesus Christ our great Example, have laid hold of the other half of the truth. And both halves bleed themselves away and die, being torn asunder; put them together, and each has power.

That separation is one reason why so many Christian men and women are such poor Christians as they are-having so little real religion, and consequently so little real joy. I could lay my fingers upon many men, professing Christians-I do not say whether in this church or in other churches-whose whole life shows that they do not understand that Jesus Christ has a twofold summons to His servants; and that it is of no avail once, long ago, to have come, or to think that you have come, to Him to get pardon, unless day by day you are keeping beside Him, doing His commandments, and copying His sweet and blessed example.

III. And now, lastly, look at the twofold promise which is here.

I do not know if there is any importance to be attached to the slight diversity of language in the two verses, so as that in the one case the promise runs, ‘I will *give* you rest,’ and in the other, ‘Ye shall *find* rest.’ That sounds as if the rest that was contingent upon the first of the invitations was in a certain and more direct and exclusive fashion Christ’s gift than the rest which was contingent upon the second. It may be so, but I attach no importance to that criticism; only I would have you observe that our Lord distinctly separates here between the rest of ‘coming,’ and the rest of wearing His ‘yoke.’ These two, howsoever they may be like each other, are still not the same. The one is the perfecting and the prolongation, no doubt, of the other, but has likewise in it some other, I say not more blessed, elements. Dear brethren, here are two precious things held out and offered to us all. There is rest in coming to Christ; the rest of a quiet conscience which gnaws no more; the rest of a conscious friendship and union with God, in whom alone are our soul’s home, harbour, and repose; the rest of fears dispelled; the rest of forgiveness received into the heart. Do you want that? Go to Christ, and as soon as you go to Him you will get that rest.

There is rest in faith. The very act of confidence is repose. Look how that little child goes to sleep in its mother’s lap, secure from harm because it trusts. And, oh! if there steal over our hearts such a sweet relaxation of the tension of anxiety when there is some dear one on whom we can cast all responsibility, how much more may we be delivered from all disquieting fears by the exercise of quiet confidence in the infinite love and power of our Brother Redeemer, Christ! He will be ‘a covert from the storm, and a refuge from the tempest’; as ‘rivers of water in a dry place, and the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.’ If we come to Him, the very act of coming brings repose.

But, brethren, that is not enough, and, blessed be God! that is not all. There is a further, deeper rest in obedience, and emphatically and most blessedly there is a rest in Christ-likeness. ‘Take My yoke upon you.’ There is repose in saying ‘Thou art my Master, and to Thee I bow.’ You are delivered from the unrest of self-will, from the unrest of contending desires, you get rid of the weight of too much liberty. There is peace in submission; peace in abdicating the control of my own being; peace in saying, ‘Take Thou the reins, and do Thou rule and guide me.’ There is peace in surrender and in taking His yoke upon us.

And most especially the path of rest for men is in treading in Christ’s footsteps. ‘Learn of Me,’ it is the secret of tranquillity. We have done with passionate hot desires,-and it is these that breed all the disquiet in our lives-when we take the meekness and the lowliness of the Master for our pattern. The river will no longer roll, broken by many a boulder, and chafed into foam over many a fall, but will flow with even foot, and broad, smooth bosom, to the parent sea.

There is quietness in self-sacrifice, there is tranquillity in ceasing from mine own works and growing like the Master.

‘The Cross is strength; the solemn Cross is gain.

The Cross is Jesus’ breast,

Here giveth He the rest,

That to His best beloved doth still remain.’

‘Take up thy cross daily,’ and thou enterest into His rest.

My brother, ‘the wicked is like the troubled sea that cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt.’ But you, if you come to Christ, and if you cleave to Christ, may be like that ‘sea of glass, mingled with fire,’ that lies pure, transparent, waveless before the Throne of God, over which no tempests rave, and which, in its deepest depths, mirrors the majesty of ‘Him that sitteth upon the Throne, and of the Lamb.’

13)Matthew 12:33

Matthew

‘MAKE THE TREE GOOD’

Mat. 12:33.

In this Gospel we find that our Lord twice uses this image of a tree and its fruit. In the Sermon on the Mount He applies it as a test to false teachers, who hide, beneath the wool of the sheep’s clothing, the fangs and paws of ravening wolves. He says, ‘By their deeds ye shall know them; for as is the tree so is its fruit.’ That is a rough and ready test, which applies rather to the teacher than to his doctrine, but it applies, to some extent, to the doctrine too, on the hypothesis that the teacher’s life fairly represents it. Of course, it is not the only thing that we have to take into account; but it may prick many a bladder, and unmask many an error, and it is the way by which the masses generally judge of systems and of their apostles. A saintly life has more power than dusty volumes of controversy.

But in our text Christ applies the same thoughts in rather a deeper fashion. Here the lesson that He would have us draw is of the connection between character and conduct; how what we do is determined by what we are, and how, not of course with the same absolute regularity and constancy, but still somewhat in the same fashion as the fruit is true to the tree, so, after all allowance made for ups and downs, for the irregular play of will and conscience, for the strife that is waged within a man, for the temptations of external circumstances, and the like-still, in general, as is the inner man, so is the outward manifestation. The facts of a life are important mainly as registering and making visible the inner condition of the doer. Now, that seems very elementary. Everybody believes that ‘out of the heart are the issues of life,’ as a wise man said long ago, but it is one of the truths that, if grasped and worked into our consciousness, and out in our lives, would do much to revolutionise them. And so, though it is a very old story, and though we all admit it, I wish now to come face to face with the consequences of this thought, that behind action lies character, and that Doing is the second step, and Being is the first.

I. I would ask you to notice how here we are confronted with the great problem for every man.

'Make the tree good.' It takes a good man to do good things. So how shallow is all that talk, 'do, do, do,' this, that, and the other thing. All right, but *be*; that is the first thing; or, as Christ said, 'Make the tree good, and the fruit' will take care of itself. So do you not see how, if that is true about us, we are each brought full front up to this, 'Am I trying to make my tree good? And what kind of success am I having in the attempt?' The water that rises from some spring will bring up with it, in solution, a trace of a bed of salt through which it has come, and of all the minerals in the soil through which it has passed. And as its sparkling waters come out into the light, if one could analyse them completely, one might register a geological section of the strata through which it has risen. So, our acts bear in them a revelation of all the hidden beds through which they have risen; and sometimes they are bitter and salt, but they are always true to the self whose apocalypse they are to the world, or at all events to God.

Therefore, brethren, I have to urge this, that we shall not be doing our true work as men and women, if we are simply trying to better our actions, important as these are. By this saying the centre of gravity is shifted, and in one aspect, the deeds are made less important. The condition of the hidden man of the heart is the all-important thing. Christ's word comes to each of us as the briefest statement of all that it is our highest duty and truest wisdom to aim at in life-'Make the tree good.'

If you have ever tried it honestly, and have not been contented with the superficial cleaning up of outsides, which consists in shifting the dirt into another place only, not in getting rid of it, I know what met you almost as soon as you began, like some great black rock that rises in a mountain-pass, and forbids all farther advance-the consciousness that you were *not* good met you. I am not going to talk theological technicalities. Never mind about phrases-they have been the ruin of a great deal of earnest preaching-call it what you like, here is a fact, that whenever a man sets himself, with anything like resolute determination and rigid self-examination, to the task of getting himself right, he finds that he is wrong. That being the case, each of us has to deal with a tremendous problem; and the more earnestly and honestly we try to deal with it, the more we shall feel how grave it is. You can cure a great deal, I know. God forbid that I should say one word that seems to deny a man's power to do much in the direction of self-improvement, but after all that is done, again you are brought short up on this fact, the testimony of conscience. And so I see men labouring at a task as vain as that of those who would twist the sands into ropes, according to the old fable. I see men seeking after higher perfection of purity than they will ever attain. That is the condition of us all, of course, for our ideal must always outrun our realisation, else we may as well lie down and die. But there is a difference between the imperfect approximation, which we feel to be imperfect, and yet feel to be approximation, and the despairing consciousness, that I am sure a great many of my audience have had, more or less, that I have a task set for me that is far beyond my strength. 'Talk about making the tree good! I cannot do it.' So men fold their hands, and the foiled endeavour begets despair. Or, as is the case with some of you, it begets indifference, and you do not care to try any more, because you have tried so often, and have made nothing of it.

There is the problem, how 'make the tree good,' the tree being bad, or, at all events, if you do not like that broad statement, the tree having an element of badness, if I may so say, in and amongst any goodness that it has. I do not care which of the two forms of statement you take, the fact remains the same.

II. Note the universal failure to solve the problem.

'Make the tree good.'

Yes. And there are a whole set of would-be arboriculturists who tell you they will do it if you will trust to them. Let us look at them. First comes one venerable personage. He says, 'I am Law, and I prescribe this, and I forbid that, and I show reward and punishment, and I tell you-be a good man.' Well! what then? It is not for want of telling that men are bad. The worst man in the world knows his duty a great deal more than the best man in the world does it. And whether it is the law of the land, or whether it is the law of society, or the law written in Scripture, or the law written in a man's own heart, they all come under the same fatal disability. They tell us what to do, and they do not put out a finger to help us to do it. A lame man does not get to the city because he sees a guide-post at the turning which tells him which road to take. The people who do not believe in certain modern agitations about the restrictions of the liquor traffic say, 'You cannot make people sober by Act of Parliament,' which is absolutely true, although it does not bear, I think, the inference that they would draw from it, and it just puts into a rough form the fatal weakness of this would-be gardener and improver of the nature of the trees. He tells us our duty, and there an end.

Do you remember how the Apostle put the weakness of law in words, the antique theological terminology of which should not prevent us from seeing the large truth in them? 'If there had been a law given which could have given life, then righteousness should have been by the law,' which being translated into modern English is just this, If Law could impart a power to obey its behests, then it is all that we want to make us right. But until it can do that it fails in two points. It deals with conduct, and we need to have character dealt with; and it does not lift the burden that it lays on me with one of its fingers. So we may rule Law out of court.

And then comes another, and he says, 'I am Culture, and intellectual acquirement; or my name is Education, and I am going to make the tree good in the most scientific fashion, because what makes men bad is that they do not know, and if they only knew they would do the right.' Now, I thoroughly believe that education diminishes crime. I believe it weans from certain forms of evil. I believe that, other things being equal, an educated man, with his larger interests and his cultivated tastes, has a certain fastidiousness developed which keeps him from being so much tempted by the grosser forms of transgression. I believe that very largely you will empty your gaols in proportion as you fill your schools. And let no man say that I am an obscurantist, or that I am indifferent to the value of education and the benefits of intellectual culture, when I declare that all these may be attained, and the nature of the tree remain exactly what it was. You may prune, you may train along the wall, you may get bigger fruit, you will not get better fruit. Did you ever hear the exaggerated line that describes one of the pundits of science as ‘the greatest, wisest, meanest of mankind’? The plain fact is that the cultivation of the understanding has little to do with the purifying of the depths of the heart.

And then comes another, and says, ‘I am the genius of Beauty and Art. And my recipe is pictures and statues, and all that will refine the mind, and lift the taste.’ That is the popular gospel of this day, in a great many quarters. Yes, and have we never heard of a period in European history which was, as they call it, ‘the Renaissance’ of art and the death of morality? Do we not know that side by side there have been cultivated in all ages, and are being cultivated to-day, the most exclusive devotion to the beauty that can be expressed by art, and the most intense indifference to the beauty of holiness? Ah! brethren, it wants something far deeper-going than pictures to purge the souls of men. And whilst, as before, I thankfully acknowledge the refining influence of this new cult, I would protest against the absurdity of putting it upon a pedestal as the guide and elevator of corrupted humanity.

And then come others, and they say, ‘Environment is the thing that is to blame for it all. How can you get decent lives in the slums?’ No, I know you cannot; and God bless every effort made to get the people out of the slums, I say. Only do not let us exaggerate. You cannot change a man, as deeply as we need to be changed, by any change of his circumstances. ‘Take the bitter tree,’ as I remember an old Jewish saying has it, ‘take the bitter tree and plant it in Eden, and water it with the rivers there; and let the angel Gabriel be the gardener, and the tree will still bear bitter fruit.’ Are all the people who live in good houses good? Will a ‘living wage’-eight shillings a day and eight hours’ play-will these change a man’s character? Will these go deep enough down to touch the springs of evil? You cannot alter the nature of a set of objects by arranging them in different shapes, parallelograms, or squares, or circles, or any others. As long as you have the elements that are in human nature to deal with, you may do as you like about the distribution of wealth, and the relation of Capital to Labour, and the various cognate questions which are all included in the vague word Socialism; and human nature will be too strong for you, and you will have the old mischiefs cropping out again. Brethren, you cannot put out Vesuvius by bringing to bear on it the squirts of all the fire engines in creation. The water will go up in steam, and do little or nothing to extinguish the fire. And whilst I would thankfully help in all these other movements, and look for certain limited results of good from them, I, for my part, believe, and therefore I am bound to declare, that neither singly, nor all of them in combination, will they ever effect the change on human nature which Jesus Christ regarded as the only possible means for securing that human nature should bear good fruit.

For, if there were no other reason, there are two plain ones which I only touch. God is the source of all good, of all creatural purity as well as all creatural blessedness. And if a life has a blank wall turned to Him, and has cut itself off from Him, I do not care how you educate it, fill it full of science, plunge it into an atmosphere of art, make the most perfect arrangements for social and economical and political circumstances, that soul is cut off from the possibility of good, because it is cut off from the fontal source of all good. And there is another reason which is closely connected with this, and that is that the true bitter tang in us all is self-centring regard. That is the mother-tincture that, variously coloured and compounded, makes in all the poisonous element that we call sin, and until you get something that will cast that evil out of a man's heart, you may teach and refine and raise him and arrange things for him as you like, and you will not master the source of all wrong and corrupt fruit.

III. Lastly, let me say a word about the triumphant solution.

Law says, 'Make the tree good,' and does not try to do it. Christ said, 'Make the tree good,' and proceeds to do it. And how does He do it?

He does it by coming to us; to every soul of man on the earth, and offering, first, forgiveness for all the past. I do not know that amongst all the bonds by which evil holds a poor soul that struggles to get away from it, there is one more adamantine and unyielding than the consciousness that the past is irrevocable, and that 'what I have written I have written,' and never can blot out. But Jesus Christ deals with that consciousness. It is true that 'whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap,' and the Christian doctrine of forgiveness does not contradict that solemn truth, but it assures us that God's heart is not turned away from us, notwithstanding the past, and that we can write the future better, and break altogether the fatal bond that decrees, apart from Him, that 'to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant,' and that past sin shall beget a progeny of future sins. That fruitfulness of sin is at an end, if we take Christ for our Saviour.

He makes the tree good in another fashion still; for the very centre, as it seems to me, of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that into our spirits He will breathe a new life kindred with His own, a new nature which is free from the law and bonds of past sin, and of present and future death. The tree is made good because He makes those who believe in Him 'new creatures in Christ Jesus.' Now, do not turn away and say that that is mysticism. Be it mysticism or not, it is God's truth. It is the truth of the Christian Revelation, that faith in Jesus Christ puts a new nature into any man, however sinful he may have been, and however deep the marks of the fetters may have been upon his limbs.

Christ makes the tree good in yet another fashion, because He brings to the reinforcement of the new life which He imparts the mightiest motives, and sways by love, which leads to the imitation of the Beloved, which leads to obedience to the Beloved, which leads to shunning as the worst of evils anything that would break the communion with the Beloved, and which is in itself the decentralising of the sinful soul from its old centre, and the making of Christ the Beloved the centre round which it moves, and from which it draws radiance and light and motion. By all these methods, and many more that I cannot dwell upon now, the problem is triumphantly solved by Christianity. The tree is made good, and 'instead of the briar shall come up the myrtle tree.'

You may say, 'That is all very well in theory. What about the practice? I do not see such a mighty difference between you Christians and us.' Well, for myself and my brethren, I accept the rebuke. There is not such a difference as there ought to be. But do you know why? Not because our great Gardener cannot change the nature of the plant, but because we do not submit ourselves to His power as we ought to do. Debit us with as many imperfections and inconsistencies as you like, do not lay them to the charge of Christ.

And yet we are willing to accept the test of Christianity which lies in its power to change men. I point to the persecutor on the road to Damascus. I point to the Bedfordshire tinker, to him that wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*. I point to the history of the Christian Church all down through the ages. I point to our mission fields to-day. I point to every mission hall, where earnest, honest men are working, and where, if you go and ask them, they will let you see people lifted from the very depths of degradation and sin, and made honest, sober, respectable, hard-working, though not very intelligent or refined, Christian people. I suppose that there is no man in an official position like mine who cannot look back over his ministry and remember, some of them dozens, some of them scores, some of them hundreds, of cases in which the change was made on the most hopeless people, by the simple acceptance of the simple gospel, ‘Christ died for me, and Christ lives in me.’ I know that I can recall such, and I am sure that my brethren can.

People who are not Christians talk glibly about the failure of Christianity to transform men. They have never seen the transformations because they have never put themselves in the way of seeing them. They are being worked to-day; they might be worked here and now.

Try the power of the Gospel for yourselves. You cannot make the tree good, but you can let Jesus Christ do it. The Ethiopian cannot change his skin, nor the leopard his spots, but Jesus can do both. ‘The lion shall eat straw like the ox.’ It is weary work to be tinkering at your acts. Take the comprehensive way, and let Him change your character. I believe that in some processes of dyeing, a piece of cloth, prepared with a certain liquid, is plunged into a vat full of dye-stuffs of one colour, and is taken out tinged of another. The soul, wet with the waters of repentance, and plunged into the ‘Fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness,’ the crimson fountain of the blood of Christ, emerges ‘whiter than snow.’ Let Him ‘make the tree good and fruit will be good,’ for if not we shall be ‘hewn down and cast into the fire,’ because we cannot bear any fruit unto holiness, nor can the end be everlasting life.

14)Matthew 12:41

Matthew

‘A GREATER THAN JONAS’

Mat. 12:41.

There never was any man in his right mind, still more of influence on his fellows, who made such claims as to himself in such unmistakable language as Jesus Christ does. To say such things of oneself as come from His lips is a sign of a weak, foolish nature. It is fatal to all influence, to all beauty of character. It is not only that He claims official attributes as a fanatical or dishonest pretender to inspiration may do. He does that, but He does more-He declares Himself possessed of virtues which, if a man said he had them, it would be the best proof that he did not possess them and did not know himself. 'I am the way and the truth and the life.' 'I am the light of the world'-a 'greater than the temple,' a greater than Jonah, a 'greater than Solomon,' and then withal 'I am meek and lowly of heart.' And the world believes Him, and says, Yes! it is true.

These three comparisons of Jesus with Temple, Jonas, and Solomon, carry great claims and great lessons. By the first Jesus asserts that He is in reality all that the Temple was in shadowy symbol, and sets Himself above ritual, sacrifices, and priests. By the second he asserts His superiority not only to one prophet but to them all. By the third He asserts His superiority to Solomon, whom the Jews reverenced as the bright, consummate flower of kinghood.

Now we may take this comparison as giving us positive thoughts about our Lord. The points of comparison may be taken to be three, with Jonah as one of an order, with Jonah in his personal character as a servant of God, with Jonah as a prophet charged with a special work.

I. The prophets and the Son.

The whole prophetic order may fairly be taken as included here. And over against all these august and venerable names, the teachers of wisdom, the speakers of the oracles of God, this Nazarene peasant stands there before Pharisees and Scribes, and asserts His superiority. It is either the most insane arrogance of self-assertion, or it is a sober truth. If it be true that self-consciousness is ever the disease of the soul, and that the religious teacher who begins to think of himself is lost, how marvellous is this assertion!

Compare it with Paul’s, ‘Unto me who am less than the least of all saints’-’I am not a whit behind the chief of the Apostles’-’though I be nothing’-’Not I, but Christ in me.’ And yet this is meekness, for it is infinite condescension in Him to compare Himself with any son of man.

[*a*] The contrast is suggested between the prophets and the theme of the prophets.

‘The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.’ Though undoubtedly the prophet order had other work than prediction to do, yet the soul of their whole work was the announcement of the Messiah.

In testimony whereof, Elijah, who was traditionally the chief of the prophets, stood beside Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, and passed away as lost in His light.

[*b*] The contrast is suggested between the recipients of the word of God and the Word of God.

The relation of the prophets to their message is contrasted with His who was the Truth, who not merely received, but was, the Word of God.

There is nothing in Christ’s teaching to show that He was conscious of standing in a human relation to the truths which He spoke. His own personality is ever present in His teaching instead of being suppressed-as in all the prophets. His own personality is His teaching, for His revelation is by being as much as by saying. Similarly, His miracles are done by His own power.

[*c*] The contrast is suggested between the partial teacher of God’s Name and the complete revealer of it.

The foundation was laid by the prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone [Heb. 1:1].

II. The disobedient prophet and the perfect Son.

Jonah stands as the great example of human weakness in the chosen instruments of God's hand.

Take the story-his shrinking from the message given him. We know not why; but perhaps from faint-hearted fear, or from a sense of his unworthiness and unfitness for the task. His own words about God as long-suffering seem to suggest another reason, that he feared to go with a message of judgment which seemed to him so unlikely to be executed by the long-suffering God. If so, then what made him recreant was not so much fear from personal motives as intellectual perplexity and imperfect comprehension of the ways of God. Then we hear of his pitiable flight with its absurdity and its wickedness. Then comes the prayer which shows him to have been right and true at bottom, and teaches us that what makes a good man is not the absence of faults, but the presence of love and longing after God. Then we see the boldness of his mission. Then follows the reaction from that lofty height, the petulance or whatever else it was with which he sees the city spared. Even the mildest interpretation cannot acquit him of much disregard for the poor souls whom he had brought to repentance, and of dreadful carelessness for the life and happiness of his fellows.

Now Jonah's behaviour is but a specimen of the vacillations, the alternations of feeling which beset every man; the loftiest, the truest, the best. Moses, David, Solomon, Elijah, John the Baptist, Peter, Luther, Cranmer. And it is full of instruction for us.

Then we turn to the contrast in Christ's perfect obedience and faithfulness in His prophetic office. In Him is no trace of shrinking even when the grimness of the Cross weighed most on His heart. No confusion of mind as to the Father's will, or as to the union in Him of perfect righteousness and infinite mercy, ever darkened His clear utterances or cast a shadow over his own soul. He was never weakened by the collapse that follows on great effort or strong emotion. He never failed in his mission through lack of pity.

But there is no need to draw out the comparison. We look on all God's instruments, and see them all full of faults and flaws. Here is one stainless name, one life in which is no blot, one heart in which are no envy, no failings-one obedience which never varied. He says of Himself, 'I do always those things which please Him,’ and we, thinking of all the noblest examples of virtue that the world has ever seen, and seeing in them all some speck, turn to this whole and perfect chrysolite and say, Yes! ‘a greater than they!’

III. The bearer of a transitory message of repentance to one Gentile people, and the bearer of an eternal message of grace and love to the whole earth.

Jonah is remarkable as having had the sphere of his activity wholly outside Israel.

The nature of his message; a preaching of punishment; a call to repentance.

The sphere of it-one Gentile city. The effect of it-transitory. We know what Nineveh became.

Jesus is greater than Jonah or any prophet in this respect, that His message is to the world, and in this, that what He preaches and brings far transcends even the loftiest and most spiritual words of any of them.

His voice is sweetest, tenderest, clearest and fullest of all that have ever sounded in men’s ears. And just because it is so, the hearing of it brings the most solemn responsibility that was ever laid on men, and to us still more gravely and truly may it be said than to those who heard Jesus speak on earth, ‘The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation and condemn it.’

15)Matthew 12:42

Matthew

‘A GREATER THAN SOLOMON’

Mat. 12:42.

It is condescension in Him to compare Himself with any; yet if any might have been selected, it is that great name. To the Jews Solomon is an ideal figure, who appealed so strongly to popular imagination as to become the centre of endless legends; whose dominion was the very apex of national glory, in recounting whose splendours the historical books seem to be scarce able to restrain their triumph and pride.

I. The Man.

The story gives us a richly endowed and many-sided character. It begins with lovely, youthful enthusiasm, with a profound sense of his own weakness, with earnest longings after wisdom and guidance. He lived a pure and beautiful youth, and all his earlier and middle life was adorned with various graces. There is a certain splendid largeness about the character. He had a rich variety of gifts: he was statesman, merchant, sage, physicist, builder, one of the many-sided men whom the old world produced. And on this we may build a comparison and contrast.

The completeness of Christ's Humanity transcends all other men, even the most various, and transcends all gathered together. Every type of excellence is in Him. We cannot say that His character is any one thing in special, it falls under no classification. It is a pure white light in which all rays are blended. This all-comprehensiveness and symmetry of character are remarkably shown in four brief records.

But we have to take into account the dark shadows that fell on Solomon's later years. He clearly fell away from his early consecration and noble ideals, and let his sensuous appetites gain power. He countenanced, if he did not himself practise, idolatry. As a king he became an arbitrary tyrant, and his love of building led him to oppress his subjects, and so laid the foundation for the revolt under Jeroboam which rent the kingdom. So his history is another illustration of the possible shipwreck of a great character. It is one more instance of the fall of a 'son of the morning.' We need not elaborate the contrast with Christ's character. In Him is no falling from a high ideal, no fading of morning glory into a cloudy noon or a lurid evening. There is no black streak in that flawless white marble. Jesus draws the perfect circle, like Giotto's O, while all other lives show some faltering of hand, and consequent irregularity of outline. Greater than Solomon, with his over-clouded glories and his character worsened by self-indulgence, is Jesus, 'the Sun of righteousness,' the perfect round of whose lustrous light is broken by no spots on the surface, no indentations in the circumference, nor obscured by any clouds over its face.

II. The Teacher.

Solomon was traditionally regarded as the author of much of the Book of Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes was written as by him. Possibly the attribution to him of some share in the former book may be correct, but at any rate, his wisdom was said to have drawn the Queen of Sheba to hear him, and that is the point of the comparison of our text.

If we take these two books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes into account, as popularly attributed to him, they suggest points of comparison and contrast with Jesus as a teacher, which we may briefly point out. Now, Proverbs falls into two very distinct portions, the former part being a connected fatherly admonition to the pursuit of wisdom, and the latter a collection of prudential maxims, in which it is rare for any two contiguous verses to have anything to do with each other. In the former part Wisdom is set forth as man’s chief good, and the Wisdom which is so set forth is mainly moral wisdom, the right disposition of will and heart, and almost identical with what the Old Testament elsewhere calls righteousness. But it is invested, as the writer proceeds, with more and more august and queenly attributes, and at last stands forth as being, if not a divine person, at least a personification of a divine attribute.

Bring that ancient teaching and set it side by side with Jesus, and what can we say but that He is what the old writer, be he Solomon or another, dimly saw? He is the ‘wisdom’ which was traditionally called the ‘wisdom of Solomon,’ and which the Queen came from far to hear. Jesus is greater, as the light is more than the eye, or as the theme is more than the speaker. ‘The power of God and the wisdom of God’ is greater than the sage or seer who celebrates it. What is true of Solomon or whoever wrote that praise of Wisdom, is true of all teachers and wise men, they are ‘not that light,’ they are ‘sent to bear witness of that light.’ Jesus is Wisdom, other men are wise. Jesus is the greatest teacher, for He teaches us Himself. He is lesson as well as teacher. Unless He was a great deal more than Teacher, He could not be the perfect Teacher for whom the world groans.

The second half of Proverbs is, as I have said, mostly a collection of prudential and moral maxims, with very little reference to God or high ideals of duty in them. They may represent to us the impotence of wise saws to get themselves practised. A guide-post is not a guide. It stretches out its gaunt wooden arms towards the city, but it cannot bend them to help a lame man lying at its foot. Men do not go wrong for lack of knowing the road, nearly so often as for lack of inclination to walk in it. We have abundant voices to tell us what we ought to do. But what we want is the swaying of inclination to do it, and the gift of power to do it. And it is precisely because Jesus gives us both these that He is what no collection of the wisest sayings can ever be, the efficient teacher of all righteousness, and of the true wisdom which is 'the principal thing.'

As for Ecclesiastes, though not his, it represents not untruly the tone which we may suppose to have characterised his later days in its dwelling on the vanity of life. The sadness of it may be contrasted with the light thrown by the Gospel on the darkest problems. Solomon cries, 'All is vanity'-Jesus teaches His scholars to sing, 'All things work together for good.'

III. The Temple builder.

In this respect 'a greater than Solomon is here,' inasmuch as Jesus is Himself the true Temple, being for all men, which Solomon's structure only shadowed, the meeting-place of God and man, in whom God dwells and through whom we can draw near to Him, the place where the true Sacrifice is once for all offered, by which Sacrifice sin is truly put away. And, further, Jesus is greater than Solomon in that He is, through the ages, building up the great Temple of His Church of redeemed men, the eternal temple of which not one stone shall ever be taken down.

IV. The peaceful King.

There were no wars in Solomon's reign. But a dark shadow brooded over it in its later years, which were darkened by oppression, luxury, and incipient revolt.

Contrast with that merely external and sadly imperfect peacefulness, the deep, inward peace of spirit which Jesus breathes into every man who trusts and obeys Him, and with the peace among men which the acceptance of His rule brings, and will one day bring perfectly, to a regenerated humanity dwelling on a renewed earth. He is King of righteousness, and after that also King of peace.

Surely from all these contrasts it is plain that ‘a greater than Solomon is here.’

16)Matthew 13:24-30

Matthew

MINGLED IN GROWTH, SEPARATED IN MATURITY

Mat. 13:24 - Mat. 13:30.

The first four parables contained in this chapter were spoken to a miscellaneous crowd on the beach, the last three to the disciples in the house. The difference of audience is accompanied with a diversity of subject. The former group deals with the growth of the kingdom, as it might be observed by outsiders, and especially with aspects of the growth on which the multitude needed instruction; the latter, with topics more suited to the inner circle of followers. Of these four, the first three are parables of vegetation; the last, of assimilation. The first two are still more closely connected, inasmuch as the person of the sower is prominent in both, while he is not seen in the others. The general scenery is the same in both, but with a difference. The identification of the seed sown with the persons receiving it, which was hinted at in the first, is predominant in the second. But while the former described the various results of the seed, the latter drops out of sight the three failures, and follows its fortunes in honest and good hearts, showing the growth of the kingdom in the midst of antagonistic surroundings. It may conveniently be considered in three sections: the first teaching how the work of the sower is counter-worked by his enemy; the second, the patience of the sower with the thick-springing tares; and the third, the separation at the harvest.

I. The work of the sower counter-worked by his enemy, and the mingled crops.

The peculiar turn of the first sentence, ‘The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man that sowed,’ etc., suggests that the main purpose of the parable is to teach the conduct of the king in view of the growth of the tares. The kingdom is concentrated in Him, and the ‘likening’ is not effected by the parable, but, as the tenses of both verbs show, by the already accomplished fact of His sowing. Our Lord veils His claims by speaking of the sower in the third person; but the hearing ear cannot fail to catch the implication throughout that He Himself is the sower and the Lord of the harvest. The field is ‘his field,’ and His own interpretation tells us that it means ‘the world.’ Whatever view we take of the bearing of this parable on purity of communion in the visible Church, we should not slur over Christ’s own explanation of ‘the field,’ lest we miss the lesson that He claims the whole world as His, and contemplates the sowing of the seed broadcast over it all. The Kingdom of Heaven is to be developed on, and to spread through, the whole earth. The world belongs to Christ not only when it is filled with the kingdom, but before the sowing. The explanation of the good seed takes the same point of view as in the former parable. What is sown is ‘the word’; what springs from the seed is the new life of the receiver. Men become children of the kingdom by taking the Gospel into their hearts, and thereby receive a new principle of growth, which in truth becomes themselves.

Side by side with the sower’s beneficent work the counter-working of ‘his enemy’ goes on. As the one, by depositing holy truth in the heart, makes men ‘children of the kingdom,’ the other, by putting evil principles therein, makes men ‘children of evil.’ Honest exposition cannot eliminate the teaching of a personal antagonist of Christ, nor of his continuous agency in the corruption of mankind. It is a glimpse into a mysterious region, none the less reliable because so momentary. The sulphurous clouds that hide the fire in the crater are blown aside for an instant, and we see. Who would doubt the truth and worth of the unveiling because it was short and partial? ‘The devil is God’s ape.’ His work is a parody of Christ’s. Where the good seed is sown, there the evil is scattered thickest. False Christs and false apostles dog the true like their shadows. Every truth has its counterfeit. Neither institutions, nor principles, nor movements, nor individuals, bear unmingled crops of good. Not merely creatural imperfection, but hostile adulteration, marks them all. The purest metal oxidises, scum gathers on the most limpid water, every ship's bottom gets foul with weeds. The history of every reformation is the same: radiant hopes darkened, progress retarded, a second generation of dwarfs who are careless or unfaithful guardians of their heritage.

There are, then, two classes of men represented in the parable, and these two are distinguishable without doubt by their conduct. Tares are said to be quite like wheat until the heads show, and then there is a plain difference. So our Lord here teaches that the children of the kingdom and those of evil are to be discriminated by their actions. We need not do more than point in a sentence to His distinct separation of men [where the seed of the kingdom has been sown] into two sets. Jesus Christ holds the unfashionable, 'narrow' opinion that, at bottom, a man must either be His friend or His enemy. We are too much inclined to weaken the strong line of demarcation, and to think that most men are neither black nor white, but grey.

The question has been eagerly debated whether the tares are bad men in the Church, and whether, consequently, the mingled crop is a description of the Church only. The following considerations may help to an answer. The parable was spoken, not to the disciples, but to the crowd. An instruction to them as to Church discipline would have been signally out of place; but they needed to be taught that the kingdom was to be 'a rose amidst thorns,' and to grow up among antagonisms which it would slowly conquer, by the methods which the next two parables set forth. This general conception, and not directions about ecclesiastical order, was suited to them. Again, the designation of the tares as 'the children of evil' seems much too wide, if only a particular class of evil men-namely, those who are within the Church-are meant by it. Surely the expression includes all, both in and outside the Church, who 'do iniquity.' Further, the representation of the children of the kingdom, as growing among tares in the field of the world, does not seem to contemplate them as constituting a distinct society, whether pure or impure; but rather as an indefinite number of individuals, intermingled in a common soil with the other class. 'The kingdom of heaven' is not a synonym for the Church. Is it not an anachronism to find the Church in the parable at all? No doubt, tares are in the Church, and the parable has a bearing on it; but its primary lesson seems to me to be much wider, and to reveal rather the conditions of the growth of the kingdom in human society.

II. We have the patience of the husbandman with the quick-springing tares.

The servants of the householder receive no interpretation from our Lord. Their question is silently passed by in His explanation. Clearly then, for some reason, He did not think it necessary to say any more about them; and the most probable reason is, that they and their words have no corresponding facts, and are only introduced to lead up to the Master's explanation of the mystery of the growth of the tares, and to His patience with it. The servants cannot be supposed to represent officials in the Church, without hopelessly destroying the consistency of the parable; for surely all the children of the kingdom, whatever their office, are represented in the crop. Many guesses have been made,-apostles, angels, and so on. It is better to say 'The Lord hath not showed it me.'

The servant's first question expresses, in vivid form, the sad, strange fact that, where good was sown, evil springs. The deepest of all mysteries is the origin of evil. Explain sin, and you explain everything. The question of the servants is the despair of thinkers in all ages. Heaven sows only good; where do the misery and the wickedness come from? That is a wider and sadder question than, How are churches not free from bad members? Perhaps Christ's answer may go as far towards the bottom of the bottomless as those of non-Christian thinkers, and, if it do not solve the metaphysical puzzles, at any rate gives the historical fact, which is all the explanation of which the question is susceptible.

The second question reminds us of 'Wilt Thou that we command fire. . . from heaven, and consume them?' It is cast in such a form as to put emphasis on the householder's will. His answer forbidding the gathering up of the tares is based, not upon any chance of mistaking wheat for them, nor upon any hope that, by forbearance, tares may change into wheat, but simply on what is best for the good crop. There was a danger of destroying some of it, not because of its likeness to the other, but because the roots of both were so interlaced that one could not be pulled up without dragging the other after it.

Is this prohibition, then, meant to forbid the attempt to keep the Church pure from un-Christian members? The considerations already adduced are valid in answering this question, and others may be added. The crowd of listeners had, no doubt, many of them, been influenced by John the Baptist's fiery prophecies of the King who should come, fan in hand, to 'purge His floor,' and were looking for a kingdom which was to be inaugurated by sharp separation and swift destruction. Was not the teaching needed then, as it is now, that that is not the way in which the kingdom of heaven is to be founded and grow? Is not the parable best understood when set in connection with the expectations of its first hearers, which are ever floating anew before the eyes of each generation of Christians? Is it not Christ's *apologia* for His delay in filling the *r*? which John had drawn out for him? And does that conception of its meaning make it meaningless for us? Observe, too, that the rooting up which is forbidden is, by the proprieties of the emblem, and by the parallel which it must necessarily afford to the final burning, something very solemn and destructive. We may well ask whether excommunication is a sufficiently weighty idea to be taken as its equivalent. Again, how does the interpretation which sees ecclesiastical discipline here comport with the reason given for letting the tares grow on? By the hypothesis in the parable, there is no danger of mistake; but is there any danger of casting out good men from the Church along with the bad, except through mistake? Further, if this parable forbids casting manifestly evil men out of the Church, it contradicts the divinely appointed law of the Church as administered by the apostles. If it is to be applied to Church action at all, it absolutely forbids the separation from the Church of any man, however notoriously un-Christian, and that, as even the strongest advocates of comprehension admit, would destroy the very idea of the Church. Surely an interpretation which lands us in such a conclusion cannot be right. We conclude, then, that the intermingling which the parable means is that of good men and bad in human society, where all are so interwoven that separation is impossible without destroying its whole texture; that the rooting up, which is declared to be inconsistent with the growth of the crop, means removal from the field, namely, the world; that the main point of the second part of the parable is to set forth the patience of the Lord of the harvest, and to emphasise this as the law of the growth of His kingdom, that it advances amidst antagonism; and that its members are interlaced by a thousand rootlets with those who are not subjects of their King. What the interlacing is for, and whether tares may become wheat, are no parts of its teaching. But the lesson of the householder's forbearance is meant to be learned by us. While we believe that the scope of the parable is wider than instruction in Church discipline, we do not forget that a fair inference from it is that, in actual churches, there will ever be a mingling of good and evil; and, though that fact is no reason for giving up the attempt to make a church a congregation of faithful men, and of such only, it is a reason for copying the divine patience of the sower in ecclesiastical dealings with errors of opinion and faults of conduct.

III. The final separation at the harvest.

The period of development is necessarily a time of intermingling, in which, side by side, the antagonistic principles embodied in their representatives work themselves out, and beneficially affect each other. But each grows towards an end, and, when it has been reached, the blending gives place to separation. John's prophecy is plainly quoted in the parable, which verbally repeats his 'gather the wheat into his barn,' and alludes to his words in the other clause about burning the tares. He was right in his anticipations; his error was in expecting the King to wield His fan at the beginning, instead of at the end of the earthly form of His kingdom. At the consummation of the allotted era, the bands of human society are to be dissolved, and a new principle of association is to determine men's place. Their moral and religious affinities will bind them together or separate them, and all other ties will snap. This marshalling according to religious character is the main thought of the solemn closing words of the parable and of its interpretation, in which our Lord presents Himself as directing the whole process of judgment by means of the 'angels' who execute His commands. They are 'His angels,' and whatever may be the unknown activity put forth by them in the parting of men, it is all done in obedience to Him. What stupendous claims Jesus makes here! What becomes of the tares is told first in words awful in their plainness, and still more awful in their obscurity. They speak unmistakably of the absolute separation of evil men from all society but that of evil men; of a close association, compelled, and perhaps unwelcome. The tares are gathered out of ‘His kingdom,’-for the field of the world has then all become the kingdom of Christ. There are two classes among the tares: men whose evil has been a snare to others [for the ‘things that offend’ must, in accordance with the context, be taken to be persons], and the less guilty, who are simply called ‘them that do iniquity.’

Perhaps the ‘bundles’ may imply assortment according to sin, as in Dante’s circles. What a bond of fellowship that would be! ‘The furnace,’ as it is emphatically called by eminence, burns up the bundles. We may freely admit that the fire is part of the parable, but yet let us not forget that it occurs not only in the parable, but in the interpretation; and let us learn that the prose reality of ‘everlasting destruction,’ which Christ here solemnly announces, is awful and complete. For a moment He passes beyond the limits of that parable, to add that terrible clause about ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth,’ the tokens of despair and rage. So spoke the most loving and truthful lips. Do we believe His warnings as well as His promises?

The same law of association according to character operates in the other region. The children of the kingdom are gathered together in what is now ‘the kingdom of My Father,’ the perfect form of the kingdom of Christ, which is still His kingdom, for ‘the throne of God and of the Lamb,’ the one throne on which both sit to reign, is ‘in it.’ Freed from association with evil, they are touched with a new splendour, caught from Him, and blaze out like the sun; for so close is their association, that their myriad glories melt as into a single great light. Now, amid gloom and cloud, they gleam like tiny tapers far apart; then, gathered into one, they flame in the forehead of the morning sky, ‘a glorious church, not having spot, nor wrinkle, nor any such thing.’

17)Matthew 13:33

Matthew

LEAVEN

Mat. 13:33.

How lovingly and meditatively Jesus looked upon homely life, knowing nothing of the differences, the vulgar differences, between the small and great! A poor woman, with her morsel of barm, kneading it up among three measures of meal, in some coarse earthenware pan, stands to Him as representing the whole process of His work in the world. Matthew brings together in this chapter a series of seven parables of the kingdom, possibly spoken at different times, and gathered here into a sequence and series, just as he has done with the great procession of miracles that follows the Sermon on the Mount, and just as, perhaps, he has done with that sermon itself. The two first of the seven deal with the progress of the Gospel in individual minds and the hindrances thereto. Then there follows a pair, of which my text is the second, which deal with the geographical expansion of the kingdom throughout the world, in the parable of the grain of mustard-seed growing into the great herb, and with the inward, penetrating, diffusive influence of the kingdom, working as an assimilating and transforming force in the midst of society.

I do not purpose to enter now upon the wide and difficult question of the relation of the kingdom to the Church. Suffice it to say that the two terms are by no means synonymous, but that, at the same time, inasmuch as a kingdom implies a community of subjects, the churches, in the proportion in which they have assimilated the leaven, and are holding fast by the powers which Christ has lodged within them, are approximate embodiments of the kingdom. The parable, then, suggests to us, in a very striking and impressive form, the function and the obligations of Christian people in the world.

Let me deal, in a purely expository fashion, with the emblem before us.

‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven.’ Now of course, leaven is generally in Scripture taken as a symbol of evil or corruption. For example, the preliminary to the Passover Feast was the purging of the houses of the Israelites of every scrap of evil ferment, and the bread which was eaten on that Feast was prescribed to be unleavened. But fermentation works ennobling as well as corruption, and our Lord lays hold upon the other possible use of the metaphor. The parable teaches that the effect of the Gospel, as ministered by, and residing in, the society of men, in whom the will of God is supreme, is to change the heavy lump of dough into light, nutritious bread. There are three or four points suggested by the parable which I could touch upon; and the first of them is that significant disproportion between the apparent magnitude of the dead mass that is to be leavened, and the tiny piece of active energy which is to diffuse itself throughout it.

We get there a glimpse into our Lord's attitude, measuring Himself against the world and the forces that were in it. He knows that in Him, the sole Representative, at the moment, of the kingdom of heaven upon earth-because in Him, and in Him alone, the divine will was, absolutely and always, supreme-there lie, for the time confined to Him, but never dormant, powers which are adequate to the transformation of humanity from a dead, lumpish mass into an aggregate all-penetrated by a quickening influence, and, if I might so say, fermented with a new life that He will bring. A tremendous conception, and the strange thing about it is that it looks as if the Nazarene peasant's dream was going to come true! But He was speaking to the men whom He was charging with a delegated task, and to them He says, 'There are but twelve of you, and you are poor, ignorant men, and you have no resources at your back, but you have Me, and that is enough, and you may be sure that the tiny morsel of yeast will penetrate the whole mass.' Small beginnings characterise the causes which are destined to great endings; the things that are ushered into the world large, generally grow very little further, and speedily collapse. 'An inheritance may be gotten hastily at the beginning, but the end shall not be blessed.' The force which is destined to be worldwide, began with the one Man in Nazareth, and although the measures of meal are three, and the ferment is a scrap, it is sure to permeate and transform the mass.

Therefore, brethren, let us take the encouragement that our Lord here offers. If we are adherents of unpopular causes, if we have to 'stand alone with two or three,' do not let us count heads, but measure forces. 'What everybody says must be true,' is a cowardly proverb. It may be a correct statement that an absolutely universal opinion is a true opinion, but what most people say is usually false, and what the few say is most generally true. So if we have to front-and if we are true men we shall sometimes have to front-an embattled mass of antagonism, and we be in a miserable minority, never mind! We can say, ‘They that be with us are more than they that be with them.’ If we have anything of the leaven in us, we are mightier than the lump of dough.

But there is another point here, and that is the contact that is necessary between the leaven and the dough. We have passed from the old monastic idea of Religion being seclusion from life. But that mistake dies hard, and there are many very Evangelical and very Protestant-and in their own notions superlatively good-people, who hold a modern analogue of the old monastic idea; and who think that Christian men and women should be very tepidly interested in anything except what they call the preaching of the Gospel, and the saving of men’s souls. Now nobody that knows me, and the trend of my preaching, will charge me with undervaluing either of these things, but these do not exhaust the function of the Church in the world, nor the duty of the Church to society. We have to learn from the metaphor in the parable. The dough is not kept on one shelf and the leaven on another; the bit of leaven is plunged into the heart of the mass, and then the woman kneads the whole up in her pan, and so the influence is spread. We Christians are not doing our duty, nor are we using our capacities, unless we fling ourselves frankly and energetically into all the currents of the national life, commercial, political, municipal, intellectual, and make our influence felt in them all. The ‘salt of the earth’ is to be rubbed into the meat in order to keep it from putrefaction; the leaven is to be kneaded up into the dough in order to raise it. Christian people are to remember that they are here, not for the purpose of isolating themselves, but in order that they may touch life at all points, and at all points bring into contact with earthly life the better life and the principles of Christian morality.

But in this contact with all phases of life and forms of activity, Christian men are to be sure that they take the leaven with them. There are professing Christians that say: ‘Oh! I am not strait-laced and pharisaical. I do not keep myself apart from any movements of humanity. I count nothing that belongs to men alien to a Christian.’ All right! but when you go into these movements, when you go into Parliament, when you become a city Councillor, when you mingle with other men in commerce, when you meet other students in the walks of intellect, do you take your Christianity there, or do you leave it behind? The two things are equally necessary, that

Christians should be in all these various spheres of activity, and that they should be there, distinctly, manifestly, and, when need be, avowedly, as Christian men.

Further, there is another thought here, on which I just say one word, and that is the effect of the leaven on the dough.

It is to assimilate, to set up a ferment. And that is what Christianity did when it came into the world, and

'Cast the kingdoms old
Into another mould.'

And that is what it ought to do to-day, and will do, if Christian men are true to themselves and to their Lord. Do you not think that there would be a ferment if Christian principles were applied, say, for instance, to national politics? Do you not think there would be a ferment if Christian principles were brought to bear upon all the transactions on the Exchange? Is there any region of life into which the introduction of the plain precepts of Christianity as the supreme law would not revolutionise it? We talk about England as a Christian country. Is it? A Christian country is a country of Christians, and Christians are not people that only say 'I have faith in Jesus Christ.' but people that do His will. That is the leaven that is to change, and yet not to change, the whole mass; to change it by lightening it, by putting a new spirit into it, leaving the substance apparently unaffected except in so far as the substance has been corrupted by the evil spirit that rules. Brethren, if we as Christians were doing our duty, it would be true of us as it was of the early preachers of the Cross, that we are men who turn the world upside down.

But there is one more point on which I touch. I have already anticipated some of what I would say upon it, but I must dwell upon it for a little longer; and that is, the manner in which the leaven is to work.

Here is a morsel of barm in the middle of a lump of dough. It works by contact, touches the particles nearest it, and transforms them into vehicles for the further transmission of influence. Each particle touched by the ferment becomes itself a ferment, and so the process goes on, outwards and ever outwards, till it permeates the whole mass. That is to say, the individual is to become the transmitter of the influence to him who is next him. The individuality of the influence, and the track in which it is to work, viz. upon those in immediate contiguity to the transformed particle which is turned from dough into leaven, are taught us here in this wonderful simile.

Now that carries a very serious and solemn lesson for us all. If you have received, you are able, and you are bound, to transmit this quickening, assimilating, transforming, lightening influence, and you need never complain of a want of objects upon which to exercise it, for the man or woman that is next you is the person that you ought to affect.

Now I have already said, in an earlier portion of these remarks, that some good people, taking an erroneous view of the function and obligations of the Church in the world, would fain keep its work to purely evangelistic effort upon individual souls in presenting to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Saviour. But whilst I vehemently protest against the notion that that is the whole function of the Christian Church, I would as vehemently protest against the notion that the so-called social work of the Church can ever be efficiently done except upon the foundation laid of this evangelistic work. First and foremost amongst the ways in which this great obligation of leavening humanity is to be discharged, must ever stand, as I believe, the appeal to the individual conscience and heart, and the presentation to single souls of the great Name in which are stored all the regenerative and quickening impulses that can ever alleviate and bless humanity. So that, first and foremost, I put the preaching of the Gospel, the Gospel of our salvation, by the death and in the life of the Incarnate Son of God.

But then, besides that, let me remind you there are other ways, subsidiary but indispensable ways, in which the Church has to discharge its function; and I put foremost amongst these, what I have already touched upon, and therefore need not dilate on now, the duty of Christians as Christians to take their full share in all the various forms of national life. I need not dwell upon the evils rampant amongst us, which have to be dealt with, and, as I believe, may best if not only, be dealt with, upon Christian principles. Think of drink, lust, gambling, to name but three of them, the hydra-headed serpent that is poisoning the English nation. Now it seems to me to be a deplorable, but a certainly true thing, that not only are these evils not attacked by the Churches as they ought to be, but that to a very large extent the task of attacking them has fallen into the hands of people who have little sympathy with the Church and its doctrines. They are fighting the evils on principles drawn from Jesus Christ, but they are not fighting the evils to the extent that they ought to do, with the Churches alongside. I beseech you, in your various spheres, to see to it that, as far as you can make it so, Christian people take the place that Christ meant them to take in the conflict with the miseries, the sorrows, the sins that honeycomb England to-day, and not to let it be said that the Churches shut themselves up and preach to people, but do not lift a finger to deal with the social evils of the nation.

18)Matthew 13:43

Proverbs

FROM DAWN TO NOON

Pro. 4:18. - Mat. 13:43.

The metaphor common to both these texts is not infrequent throughout Scripture. In one of the oldest parts of the Old Testament, Deborah’s triumphal song, we find, ‘Let all them that love Thee be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.’ In one of the latest parts of the Old Testament, Daniel’s prophecy, we read, ‘They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.’ Then in the New Testament we have Christ’s comparison of His servants to light, and the great promise which I have read as my second text. The upshot of them all is this-the most radiant thing on earth is the character of a good man. The world calls men of genius and intellectual force its lights. The divine estimate, which is the true one, confers the name on righteousness.

But my first text follows out another analogy; not only brightness, but progressive brightness, is the characteristic of the righteous man.

We are to think of the strong Eastern sun, whose blinding light steadily increases till the noontide. ‘The perfect day’ is a somewhat unfortunate translation. What is meant is the point of time at which the day culminates, and for a moment, the sun seems to stand steady, up in those southern lands, in the very zenith, raying down ‘the arrows that fly by noonday.’ The text does not go any further, it does not talk about the sad diminution of the afternoon. The parallel does not hold; though, if we consult appearance and sense alone, it seems to hold only too well. For, sadder than the setting of the suns, which rise again to-morrow, is the sinking into darkness of death, from which there seems to be no emerging. But my second text comes in to tell us that death is but as the shadow of eclipse which passes, and with it pass obscuring clouds and envious mists, and ‘then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun in their Heavenly Father’s kingdom.’

And so the two texts speak to us of the progressive brightness, and the ultimate, which is also the progressive, radiance of the righteous.

I. In looking at them together, then, I would notice, first, what a Christian life is meant to be.

I must not linger on the lovely thoughts that are suggested by that attractive metaphor of life. It must be enough, for our present purpose, to say that the light of the Christian life, like its type in the heavens, may be analysed into three beams-purity, knowledge, blessedness. And these three, blended together, make the pure whiteness of a Christian soul.

But what I wish rather to dwell upon is the other thought, the intention that every Christian life should be a life of increasing lustre, uninterrupted, and the natural result of increasing communion with, and conformity to, the very fountain itself of heavenly radiance.

Remember how emphatically, in all sorts of ways, progress is laid down in Scripture as the mark of a religious life. There is the emblem of my text. There is our Lord’s beautiful one of vegetable growth: ‘First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.’ There is the other metaphor of the stages of human life, ‘babes in Christ,’ young men in Him, old men and fathers. There is the metaphor of the growth of the body. There is the metaphor of the gradual building up of a structure. We are to ‘edify ourselves together,’ and to ‘build ourselves up on our most holy faith.’

There is the other emblem of a race-continual advance as the result of continual exertion, and the use of the powers bestowed upon us.

And so in all these ways, and in many others that I need not now touch upon, Scripture lays it down as a rule that life in the highest region, like life in the lowest, is marked by continual growth. It is so in regard to all other things. Continuity in any kind of practice gives increasing power in the art. The artisan, the blacksmith with his hammer, the skilled artificer at his trade, the student at his subject, the good man in his course of life, and the bad man in his, do equally show that use becomes second nature. And so, in passing, let me say what incalculable importance there is in our getting habit, with all its mystical power to mould life, on the side of righteousness, and of becoming accustomed to do good, and so being unfamiliar with evil.

Let me remind you, too, how this intention of continuous growth is marked by the gifts that are bestowed upon us in Jesus Christ. He gives us-and it is by no means the least of the gifts that He bestows-an absolutely unattainable aim as the object of our efforts. For He bids us not only be 'perfect, as our Father in Heaven is perfect,' but He bids us be entirely conformed to His own Self. The misery of men is that they pursue aims so narrow and so shabby that they can be attained, and are therefore left behind, to sink hull down on the backward horizon. But to have before us an aim which is absolutely unreachable, instead of being, as ignorant people say, an occasion of despair and of idleness, is, on the contrary, the very salt of life. It keeps us young, it makes hope immortal, it emancipates from lower pursuits, it diminishes the weight of sorrows, it administers an anaesthetic to every pain. If you want to keep life fresh, seek for that which you can never fully find.

Christ gives us infinite powers to reach that unattainable aim, for He gives us access to all His own fullness, and there is more in His storehouses than we can ever take, not to say more than we can ever hope to exhaust. And therefore, because of the aim that is set before us, and because of the powers that are bestowed upon us to reach it, there is stamped upon every Christian life unmistakably as God's purpose and ideal concerning it, that it should for ever and for ever be growing nearer and nearer, as some ascending spiral that ever circles closer and closer, and yet never absolutely unites with the great central Perfection which is Himself.

So, brethren, for every one of us, if we are Christian people at all, ‘this is the will of God, even your perfection.’

II. Consider the sad contrast of too many Christian lives.

I would not speak in terms that might seem to be reproach and scolding. The matter is far too serious, the disease far too widespread, to need or to warrant any exaggeration. But, dear brethren, there are many so-called and, in a fashion, really Christian people to whom Christ and His work are mainly, if not exclusively, the means of escaping the consequences of sin-a kind of ‘fire-escape.’ And to very many it comes as a new thought, in so far as their practical lives are concerned, that these ought to be lives of steadily increasing deliverance from the love and the power of sin, and steadily increasing appropriation and manifestation of Christ’s granted righteousness. There are, I think, many of us from whom the very notion of progress has faded away. I am sure there are some of us who were a great deal farther on on the path of the Christian life years ago, when we first felt that Christ was anything to us, than we are to-day. ‘When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you which be the first principles of the oracles of God.’

There is an old saying of one of the prophets that a child would die a hundred years old, which in a very sad sense is true about very many folk within the pale of the Christian Church who are seventy-year-old babes still, and will die so. Suns ‘growing brighter and brighter until the noonday!’ Ah! there are many of us who are a great deal more like those strange variable stars that sometimes burst out in the heavens into a great blaze, that brings them up to the brightness of stars of the first magnitude, for a day or two; and then they dwindle until they become little specks of light that the telescope can hardly see.

And there are hosts of us who are instances, if not of arrested, at any rate of unsymmetrical, development. The head, perhaps, is cultivated; the intellectual apprehension of Christianity increases, while the emotional, and the moral, and the practical part of it are all neglected. Or the converse may be the case; and we may be full of gush and of good emotion, and of fervour when we come to worship or to pray, and our lives may not be a hair the better for it all. Or there may be a disproportion because of an exclusive attention to conduct and the practical side of Christianity, while the rational side of it, which should be the basis of all, and the emotional side of it, which should be the driving power of all, are comparatively neglected.

So, dear brethren! what with interruptions, what with growing by fits and starts, and long, dreary winters like the Arctic winters, coming in between the two or three days of rapid, and therefore brief and unwholesome, development, we must all, I think, take to heart the condemnation suggested by this text when we compare the reality of our lives with the divine intention concerning them. Let us ask ourselves, ‘Have I more command over myself than I had twenty years ago? Do I live nearer Jesus Christ today than I did yesterday? Have I more of His Spirit in me? Am I growing? Would the people that know me best say that I am growing in the grace and knowledge of my Lord and Saviour?’ Astronomers tell us that there are dark suns, that have burnt themselves out, and are wandering unseen through the skies. I wonder if there are any extinguished suns of that sort listening to me at this moment.

III. How the divine purpose concerning us may be realised by us.

Now the *Alpha* and the *Omega* of this, the one means which includes all other, is laid down by Jesus Christ Himself in another metaphor when He said, ‘Abide in Me, and I in you; so shall ye bring forth much fruit.’ Our path will brighten, not because of any radiance in ourselves, but in proportion as we draw nearer and nearer to the Fountain of heavenly radiance.

The planets that move round the sun, further away than we are on earth, get less of its light and heat; and those that circle around it within the limits of our orbit, get proportionately more. The nearer we are to Him, the more we shall shine. The sun shines by its own light, drawn indeed from the shrinkage of its mass, so that it gives away its very life in warming and illuminating its subject-worlds. But we shine only by reflected light, and therefore the nearer we keep to Him the more shall we be radiant.

That keeping in touch with Jesus Christ is mainly to be secured by the direction of thought, and love, and trust to Him. If we follow close upon Him we shall not walk in darkness. It is to be secured and maintained very largely by what I am afraid is much neglected by Christian people of all sorts nowadays, and that is the devotional use of their Bibles. That is the food by which we grow. It is to be secured and maintained still more largely by that which I, again, am afraid is but very imperfectly attained to by Christian people now, and that is, the habit of prayer. It is to be secured and maintained, again, by the honest conforming of our lives, day by day, to the present amount of our knowledge of Him and of His will. Whosoever will make all his life the manifestation of his belief, and turn all his creed into principles of action, will grow both in the comprehensiveness, and in the depths of his Christian character. 'Ye are the light in the Lord.' Keep in Him, and you will become brighter and brighter. So shall we 'go from strength to strength, till we appear before God in Zion.'

IV. Lastly, what brighter rising will follow the earthly setting?

My second text comes in here. Beauty, intellect, power, goodness; all go down into the dark. The sun sets, and there is left a sad and fading glow in the darkening pensive sky, which may recall the vanished light for a little while to a few faithful hearts, but steadily passes into the ashen grey of forgetfulness.

But 'then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun, in their Heavenly Father's kingdom.' The momentary setting is but apparent. And ere it is well accomplished, a new sun swims into the 'ampler ether, the diviner air' of that future life, 'and with new spangled beams, flames in the forehead of the morning sky.'

The reason for that inherent brightness suggested in our second text is that the soul of the righteous man passes from earth into a region out of which we 'gather all things that offend, and them that do iniquity.' There are other reasons for it, but that is the one which our Lord dwells on. Or, to put it into modern scientific language, environment corresponds to character. So, when the clouds have rolled away, and no more mists from the undrained swamps of selfishness and sin and animal nature rise up to hide the radiance, there shall be a fuller flood of light poured from the re-created sun.

That brightness thus promised has for its highest and most blessed character that it is conformity to the Lord Himself. For, as you may remember, the last use of this emblem that we find in Scripture refers not to the servant but to the Master, whom His beloved disciple in Apocalyptic vision saw, with His ‘countenance as the sun shining in his strength.’ Thus ‘we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ And therefore that radiance of the sainted dead is progressive, too. For it has an infinite fulness to draw upon, and the soul that is joined to Jesus Christ, and derives its lustre from Him, cannot die until it has outgrown Jesus and emptied God. The sun will one day be a dark, cold ball. We shall outlast it.

But, brethren, remember that it is only those who here on earth have progressively appropriated the brightness that Christ bestows who have a right to reckon on that better rising. It is contrary to all probability to believe that the passage from life can change the ingrained direction and set of a man’s nature. We know nothing that warrants us in affirming that death can revolutionise character. Do not trust your future to such a dim peradventure. Here is a plain truth. They who on earth are as ‘the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day,’ shall, beyond the shadow of eclipse, shine on as the sun does, behind the opaque, intervening body, all unconscious of what looks to mortal eyes on earth an eclipse, and ‘shall blaze out like the sun in their Heavenly Father’s kingdom.’ For all that we know and are taught by experience, religious and moral distinctions are eternal. ‘He that is righteous, let him be righteous still; and he that is filthy, let him be filthy still.’

19)Matthew 13:44-46

Matthew

TREASURE AND PEARL

Mat. 13:44 - Mat. 13:46.

In this couple of parables, which are twins, and must be taken together, our Lord utilises two very familiar facts of old-world life, both of them arising from a similar cause. In the days when there were no banks and no limited liability companies, it was difficult for a man to know what to do with his little savings. In old times government meant oppression, and it was dangerous to seem to have any riches. In old days war stalked over the land, and men's property must be portable or else concealed. So, on the one hand we find the practice of hiding away little hoards in some suitable place, beneath a rock, in the cleft of a tree, or a hole dug in the ground, and then, perhaps, the man died before he came back for his wealth. Or, again, another man might prefer to carry his wealth about with him. So he went and got jewels, easily carried, not easily noticed, easily convertible into what he might require.

And, says our Lord, these two practices, with which all the people to whom He was speaking were very much more familiar than we are, teach us something about the kingdom of God. Now, I am not going to be tempted to discuss what our Lord means by that phrase, so frequent upon His lips, 'the kingdom of God' or 'of heaven.' Suffice it to say that it means, in the most general terms, a state or order of things in which God is King, and His will supreme and sovereign. Christ came, as He tells us, to found and to extend that kingdom upon earth. A man can go into it, and it can come into a man, and the conditions on which he enters into it, and it into him, are laid down in this pair of parables. So I ask you to notice their similarities and their divergences. They begin alike and they run on alike for a little way, and then they diverge. There is a fork in the road, and they reunite at the end again. They agree in their representation of the treasure; they diverge in their explanation of the process of discovering it, and they unite at last in the final issue. So, then, we have to look at these three points.

I. Let me ask you to think that the true treasure for a man lies in the kingdom of God.

It is not exactly said that the treasure is the kingdom, but the treasure is found in the kingdom, and nowhere else. Let us put away the metaphor; it means that the only thing that will make us rich is loving submission to the supreme law of the God whom we love because we know that He loves us.

You may put that thought into half a dozen different forms. You may say that the treasure is the blessing that comes from Christianity, or the inward wealth of a submissive heart, or may use various modes of expression, but below them all lies this one great thought, that it is laid on my heart, dear brethren, to try and lay on yours now, that, when all is said and done, the only possession that makes us rich is-is what? God Himself. For that is the deepest meaning of the treasure. And whatever other forms of expression we may use to designate it, they all come back at last to this, that the wealth of the human soul is to have God for its very own.

Let me run over two or three points that show us that. That treasure is the only one that meets our deepest poverty. We do not all know what that is, but whether you know it or not, dear friend, the thing that you want most is to have your sins dealt with, in the double way of having them forgiven as guilt, and in having them taken away from you as tyrants and dominators over your wills. And it is only God who can do that, 'God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them,' and giving them, by a new life which He breathes into dead souls, emancipation from the tyrants that rule over them, and thus bringing them 'into the liberty of the glory of the sons of God.' 'Thou sayest that Thou art rich and increased with goods . . . and knowest not that thou art poor . . . and naked.' Brother, until you have found out that it is only God who will save you from being bankrupt, and enable you to pay your debts, which are your duties, you do not know where your true riches are. And if you have all that men can acquire of the lower things of life, whether of what is generally called wealth or of other material benefits, and have that great indebtedness standing against you, you are but an insolvent after all. Here is the treasure that will make you rich, because it will pay your debts, and endow you with capacity enough to meet all future expenditure-viz. the possession of the forgiving and cleansing grace of God which is in Jesus Christ. If you have that, you are rich; if you do not possess it, you are poor. Now you believe that, as much as I do, most of you. Well, what do you do in consequence?

Further, the possession of God, who belongs to all those that are the subjects of the kingdom of God, is our true treasure, because that wealth, and that alone, meets at once all the diverse wants of the human soul. There is nothing else of which that can be said. There are a great many other precious things in this world-human loves, earthly ambitions of noble and legitimate kinds. No one but a fool will deny the convenience and the good of having a competency of this world's possessions. But all these have this miserable defect, or rather limitation, that they each satisfy some little corner of a man's nature, and leave all the rest, if I may so say, like the beasts in a menagerie whose turn has not yet come to be fed, yelping and growling while the keeper is at the den of another one. There is only one thing that, being applied, as it were, at the very centre, will diffuse itself, like some fragrant perfume, through the whole sphere, and fill the else scentless air with its rich and refreshing fragrance. There is but one wealth which meets the whole of human nature. You, however small you are, however insignificant people may think you, however humbly you may think of yourselves, you are so great that the whole created Universe, if it were yours, would be all too little for you. You cannot fill a bottomless bog with any number of cartloads of earth. And you know as well as I can tell you that 'he that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase,' and that none of the good things here below, rich and precious as many of them are, are large enough to fill, much less to expand, the limitless desires of one human heart. As the ancient Latin father said, 'Lord, Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is unquiet till it attains to Thee.'

Closely connected with that thought, but capable of being dealt with for a moment apart, is the other, that this is our true treasure, because we have it all in one.

You remember the beautiful emphasis of one of the parables in our text about the man that dissipated himself in seeking for many goodly pearls? He had secured a whole casket full of little ones. They were pearls, they were many; but then he saw one Orient pearl, and he said, 'The one is more than the many. Let me have unity, for there is rest; whereas in multiplicity there is restlessness and change.' The sky to-night may be filled with galaxies of stars. Better one sun than a million twinkling tininesses that fill the heavens, and yet do not scatter the darkness. Oh, brethren, to have one aim, one love, one treasure, one Christ, one God-there is the secret of blessedness. 'Unite my heart to fear Thy name'; and then all the miseries of multiplicity, and of drawing our supplies from a multitude of separate lakes, will be at an end, when our souls are flooded from the one fountain of life that can never fail or be turbid. Thus, the unity of the treasure is the supreme excellence of the treasure.

Nor need I remind you in more than a word of how this is our true treasure, because it is our permanent one. Nothing that can be taken from me is truly mine. Those of you who have lived in a great commercial community as long as I have done, know that it is not for nothing that sovereigns are made circular, for they roll very rapidly, and ‘riches take to themselves wings and fly away.’ We can all go back to instances of men who set their hearts upon wealth, and flaunted their little hour before us as kings of the Exchange, and were objects of adoration and of envy, and at last were left stranded in poverty. Nothing that can be stripped from you by the accidents of life, or by inevitable death, is worth calling your ‘good.’ You must have something that is intertwined with the very fibres of your being. And I, unworthy as I am, come to you, dear friends, now, with this proffer of the great gift of wealth from which ‘neither life, nor death, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us.’ And I beseech you to ask yourselves, Is there anything worth calling wealth, except that wealth which meets my deepest need, which satisfies my whole nature, which I may have all in one, and which, if I have, I may have for ever? That wealth is the God who may be ‘the strength of your hearts and your heritage for ever.’

II. Now notice, secondly, the concealment of the treasure.

According to the first of our parables, the treasure was hid in a field. That is very largely local colouring, which gives veracity and vraisemblance to the fact of the story. And there has been a great deal of very unnecessary and misplaced ingenuity spent in trying to force interpretations upon every feature of the parable, which I do not intend to imitate, but I just wish to suggest one thing. Here was this man in the story, who had plodded across that field a thousand times, and knew every clod of it, and had never seen the wealth that was lying six inches below the surface. Now, that is very like some of my present hearers. God’s treasure comes to the world in a form which to a great many people veils, if it does not altogether hide, its preciousness. You have heard sermons till you are sick of sermons, and I do not wonder at it, if you have heard them and never thought of acting on them. You know all that I can tell you, most of you, about Jesus Christ, and what He has done for you, and what you should do towards Him, and your familiarity with the Word has blinded you to its spirit and its power. You have gone over the field so often that you have made a path across it, and it seems incredible to you that there should be anything worth your picking up there. Ah! dear friends, Jesus Christ, when He was here, 'in whom were hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,' had to the men that looked upon Him 'neither form nor comeliness that they should desire Him,' and He was to them a stumbling-block and foolishness. And Christ's Gospel comes among busy men, worldly men, men who are under the dominion of their passions and desires, men who are pursuing science and knowledge, and it looks to them very homely, very insignificant; they do not know what treasure is lying in it. You do not know what treasure is lying-may I venture to say it?-in these poor words of mine, in so far as they truly represent the mind and will of God. Dear brethren, the treasure is hid, but that is not because God did not wish you to see it; it is because you have made yourselves blind to its flashing brightness. 'If our Gospel be hid, it is hid to them . . . in whom the god of this world hath blinded their eyes.' If your whole desires are passionately set on that which Manchester recognises as the summum bonum, or, if you are living without a thought beyond this present, how can you expect to see the treasure, though it is lying there before your eyes? You have buried it, or, rather, you have made that which is its necessary envelope to be its obscuration. I pray you, look through the forms, look beneath the words of Scripture, and try and clear your eyesight from the hallucinations of the dazzling present, and you will see the treasure that is hid in the field.

III. Again, let me ask you to notice, further, the two ways of finding.

The rustic in the first story, who, as I said, had plodded across the field a hundred times, was doing it for the hundred and first, or perhaps was at work there with his mattock or his homely plough. And, perchance, some stroke of the spade, or push of the coulter, went a little deeper than usual, and there flashed the gold, or some shower of rain came on, and washed away a little of the superincumbent soil, and laid bare the bag. Now, that is what often happens, for you have to remember that though you are not seeking God, God is always seeking you, and so the great saying comes to be true, ‘I am found of them that sought Me not.’ There have been many cases like the one of the man who, breathing out threatenings and slaughter, with no thought in his mind except to bind the disciples and bring them captive to Jerusalem, saw suddenly a light from heaven flashing down upon him, and a Voice that pulled him up in the midst of his career. Ah! it would be an awful thing if no one found Christ except those who set out to seek for Him. Like the dew on the grass ‘that waiteth not for men, nor tarrieth for the sons of men,’ He often comes to hearts that are thinking about nothing less than about Him.

There are men and women listening to me now who did not come here with any expectation of being confronted with this message to their souls; they may have been drawn by curiosity or by a hundred other motives. If there is one such, to whom I am speaking, who has had no desires after the treasure, who has never thought that God was his only Good, who has been swallowed up in worldly things and the common affairs of life, and who now feels as if a sudden flash had laid bare the hidden wealth in the familiar Gospel, I beseech such a one not to turn away from the discovered treasure, but to make it his own. Dear friend, you may not be looking for the wealth, but Christ is looking for His lost coin. And, though it has rolled away into some dusty corner, and is lying there all unaware, I venture to say that He is seeking you by my poor words to-night, and is saying to you: ‘I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire.’

But then another class is described in the other parable of the merchantman who was seeking many goodly pearls. I suppose he may stand as a representative of a class of whom I have no doubt there are some other representatives hearing me now, namely, persons who, without yielding themselves to the claims of Christ, have been searching, honestly and earnestly, for ‘whatsoever things are lovely and of good report.’ Dear brethren, if you have been smitten by the desire to live noble lives, if you have been roused

‘To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,
Beyond the furthest bounds of human thought,’

or if in any way you are going through the world with your eyes looking for something else than the world's gross good, and are seeking for the many pearls, I beseech you to lay this truth to heart, that you will never find what you seek, until you understand that the many have not it to give you, and that the One has. And when Christ draws near to you and says, 'Whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are venerable, if thou seekest them, take Me, and thou wilt find them all,' I beseech you, accept Him. There are two ways of finding the treasure. It is flashed on unexpectant eyes, and it is disclosed to seeking souls.

III. And now, lastly, let us look at the point where the parables converge.

There are two ways of finding; there is only one way of getting. The one man went and sold all that he had and bought the field. Never mind about the morality of the transaction: that has nothing to do with our Lord's purpose. Perhaps it was not quite honest of this man to bury the treasure again, and then to go and buy the field for less than it was worth, but the point is that, however a soul is brought to see that God in Christ is all that he needs, there is only one way of getting Him, and that is, 'sell all that thou hast.'

'Then it is barter, is it? Then it is salvation by works after all?' No! To 'sell all that thou hast' is first, to abandon all hope of acquiring the treasure by anything that thou hast. We buy it when we acknowledge that we have nothing of our own to buy it with. Buy it 'without money and without price'; buy it by yielding your hearts; buy it by ceasing to cling to earth and creatures, as if they were your good. That trust in Jesus Christ, which is the condition of salvation is selling 'all that thou hast.' Self is 'all that thou hast.' Abandon self and clutch Him, and the treasure is thine. But the initial act of faith has to be carried on through a life of self-denial and self-sacrifice, and the subjection of self-will, which is the hardest of all, and the submission of one's self altogether to the kingdom of God and to its King. If we do thus we shall have the treasure, and if we do not thus we shall not.

Surely it is reasonable to fling away paste pearls for real ones. Surely it is reasonable to fling away brass counters for gold coins. Surely, in all regions of life, we willingly sacrifice the second best in order to get the very best.

Surely if the wealth which is in God is more precious than all besides, you have the best of the bargain, if you part with the world and yourselves and get Him. And if, on the other hand, you stick to the second best and cleave to yourselves and to this poor diurnal sphere and what it contains, then I will tell you what your epitaph will be. It is written in one of the Psalms, ‘He shall leave them in the midst of his days, and at his latter end shall be a fool.’

And there is a more foolish fool still-the man who, when he has seen the treasure, flings another shovelful of earth upon it, and goes away and does not buy it, nor think anything more about it. Dear brother, do not do that, but if, by God’s help, any poor words of mine have stirred anything in your hearts of recognition of what your true wealth is, do not rest until you have done what is needful to possess it, given away yourselves, and in exchange received Christ, and in Him wealth for evermore.

20)Matthew 14:29-36

Matthew

THE KING’S HIGHWAY

Mat. 14:22 - Mat. 14:36.

The haste and urgency with which the disciples were sent away, against their will, after the miracle of feeding the five thousand, is explained in John’s account. The crowd had been excited to a dangerous enthusiasm by a miracle so level to their tastes. A prophet who could feed them was something like a prophet. So they determine to make him a king. Our Lord, fearing the outburst, resolves to withdraw into the lonely hills, that the fickle blaze may die down. If the disciples had remained with Him, He could not have so easily stolen away, and they might have caught the popular fervour. To divide would distract the crowd, and make it easier for Him to disperse them, while many of them, as really happened, would be likely to set off by land for Capernaum, when they saw the boat had gone. The main teaching of this miracle, over and above its demonstration of the

Messianic power of our Lord, is symbolical. All the miracles are parables, and this eminently so. Thus regarding it, we have-

I. The struggling toilers and the absent Christ.

They had a short row of some five or six miles in prospect, when they started in the early evening. An hour or so might have done it, but, for some unknown reason, they lingered. Perhaps instead of pulling across, they may have kept inshore, by the head of the lake, expecting Jesus to join them at some point. Thus, night finds them but a short way on their voyage. The paschal moon would be shining down on them, and perhaps in their eager talk about the miracle they had just seen, they did not make much speed. A sudden breeze sprang up, as is common at nightfall on mountain lakes; and soon a gale, against which they could make no headway, was blowing in their teeth. This lasted for eight or nine hours. Wet and weary, they tugged at the oars through the livelong night, the seas breaking over them, and the wind howling down the glens.

They had been caught in a similar storm once before, but then He had been on board, and it was daylight. Now it was dark, ‘and Jesus had not yet come to them,’ How they would look back at the dim outline of the hills, where they knew He was, and wonder why He had sent them out into the tempest alone! Mark tells us that He saw them distressed, hours before He came to them, and that makes His desertion the stranger. It is but His method of lovingly training them to do without His personal presence, and a symbol of what is to be the life of His people till the end. He is on the mountain in prayer, and He sees the labouring boat and the distressed rowers. The contrast is the same as is given in the last verses of Mark’s Gospel, where the serene composure of the Lord, sitting at the right hand of God, is sharply set over against the wandering, toiling lives of His servants, in their evangelistic mission. The commander-in-chief sits apart on the hill, directing the fight, and sending regiment after regiment to their deaths. Does that mean indifference? So it might seem but for the words which follow, ‘the Lord working with them.’ He shares in all the toil; and the lifting up of His holy hands sways the current of the fight, and inclines the balance. His love appoints effort and persistent struggle as the law of our lives. Nor are we to mourn or wonder; for the purpose of the appointment, so far as we are concerned, is to make character, and to give us ‘the wrestling thews that throw the world.’ Difficulties make men of us. Summer sailors, yachting in smooth water, have neither the joy of conflict nor the vigour which it gives. Better the darkness, when we cannot see our way, and the wind in our faces, if the good of things is to be estimated by their power to ‘strengthen us with strength in our soul!’

II. We have the approaching Christ.

Not till the last watch of the night does He come, when they have long struggled, and the boat is out in the very middle of the lake, and the storm is fiercest. We may learn from this the delays of His love. Because He loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus, He stayed still, in strange inaction, for two days, after their message. Because He loved Peter and the praying band, He let him lie in prison till the last hour of the last watch of the last night before his intended execution, and then delivered him with a leisureliness [making him put on article after article of dress] which tells of conscious omnipotence. Heaven’s clock goes at a different rate from our little timepieces. God’s day is a thousand years, and the longest tarrying is but ‘a little while.’ When He has come, we find that it is ‘right early,’ though before He came He seemed to us to delay. He comes across the waves. Their restless and yielding crests are smoothed and made solid by the touch of His foot. ‘He walketh on the sea as on a pavement’ [Septuagint version of Job. 9:8]. It is a revelation of divine power. It is one of the very few miracles affecting Christ’s own person, and may perhaps be regarded as being, like the Transfiguration, a casual gleam of latent glory breaking through the body of His humiliation, and so, in some sense, prophetic. But it is also symbolic. He ever uses tumults and unrest as a means of advancing His purposes. The stormy sea is the recognised Old Testament emblem of antagonism to the divine rule; and just as He walked on the billows, so does He reach His end by the very opposition to it, ‘girding Himself’ with the wrath of men, and making it to praise Him. In this sense, too, His ‘paths are in the great waters.’ In another aspect, we have here the symbol of Christ’s using our difficulties and trials as the means of His loving approach to us. He comes, giving a deeper and more blessed sense of His presence by means of our sorrows, than in calm sunny weather. It is generally over a stormy sea that He comes to us, and golden treasures are thrown on our shores after a tempest.

III. We have the terror and the recognition.

The disciples were as yet little lifted above their fellows; they had no expectation of His coming, and thought just what any rude minds would have thought, that this mysterious Thing stalking towards them across the waters came from the unseen world, and probably that it was the herald of their drowning. Terror froze their blood, and brought out a shriek [as the word might be rendered] which was heard above the dash of waves and the raving wind. They had gallantly fought the tempest, but this unmanned them. We too often mistake Christ, when He comes to us. We do not recognise His working in the storm, nor His presence giving power to battle with it. We are so absorbed in the circumstances that we fail to see Him through them. Our tears weave a veil which hides Him, or the darkness obscures His face, and we see nothing but the threatening crests of the waves, curling high above our little boat. We mistake our best friend, and we are afraid of Him as we dimly see Him; and sometimes we think that the tokens of His presence are only phantasms of our own imagination.

They who were deceived by His appearance knew Him by His voice, as Mary did at the sepulchre. How blessed must have been the moment when that astounding certitude thrilled through their souls! That low voice is audible through all the tumult. He speaks to us by His word, and by the silent speech in our spirits, which makes us conscious that He is there. He does speak to us in the deepest of our sorrows, in the darkest of our nights; and when we hear of His voice, and with wonder and joy cry out, ‘It is the Lord,’ our sorrow is soothed, and the darkness is light about us.

The consciousness of His presence banishes all fear. ‘Be not afraid,’ follows ‘It is I.’ It is of no use to preach courage unless we preach Christ first. If we have not Him with us, we do well to fear: His presence is the only rational foundation for calm fearlessness. Only when the Lord of Hosts is with us, ought we not to fear, ‘though the waters roar . . . and be troubled.’ ‘Through the dear might of Him that walked the waves’ can we feeble creatures face all terrors, and feel no terror.

IV. We have the end of the storm and of the voyage.

The storm ceases as soon as Jesus is on board. John does not mention the cessation of the tempest, but tells us that they were immediately at the shore. It does not seem necessary to suppose another miracle, but only that the voyage ended very speedily. It is not always true that His presence is the end of dangers and difficulties, but the consciousness of His presence does hush the storm. The worst of trouble is gone when we know that He shares it; and though the long swell after the gale may last, it no longer threatens. Nor is it always true that His coming, and our consciousness that He has come, bring a speedy close to toils. We have to labour on, but in how different a mood these men would bend to their oars after they had Him on board! With Him beside us toil is sweet, burdens are lighter, and the road is shortened. Even with Him on board, life is a stormy voyage; but without Him, it ends in shipwreck. With Him, it may be long, but it will look all the shorter while it lasts, and when we land the rough weather will be remembered but as a transient squall. These wearied rowers, who had toiled all night, stepped on shore as the morning broke on the eastern bank. So we, if we have had Him for our shipmate, shall land on the eternal shore, and dry our wet garments in the sunshine, and all the stormy years that seemed so long shall be remembered but as a watch in the night.

21)Matthew 15:21-31

Matthew

CRUMBS AND THE BREAD

Mat. 15:21 - Mat. 15:31.

The King of Israel has passed beyond the bounds of Israel, driven by the hostility of those who should have been His subjects. The delegates of the priestly party from Jerusalem, who had come down to see into this dangerous enthusiasm which was beginning in Galilee, have made Christ’s withdrawal expedient, and He goes northward, if not actually into the territory of Tyre and Sidon, at any rate to the border land. The incident of the Syro-Phoenician woman becomes more striking if we suppose that it took place on Gentile ground. At all events, after it, we learn from Mark that He made a considerable circuit, first north and then east, and so came round to the eastern side of the sea of Galilee, where the last paragraph of this section finds Him. The key to its meaning lies in the contrast between the single cure of the woman's demoniac daughter, obtained after so long imploring, and the spontaneous abundance of the cures wrought when Jesus again had Jewish sufferers to do with, even though it were on the half-Gentilised eastern shore of the lake. The contrast is an illustration of His parable of the crumbs that fell from the table and the plentiful feast that was spread upon it for the children.

The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman naturally falls into four parts, each marked by the recurrence of 'He answered.'

I. There is the piteous cry, and the answer of silence.

Mark tells us that Jesus sought concealment in this journey; but distress has quick eyes, and this poor woman found Him. Canaanite as she is, and thus a descendant of the ancient race of Israel's enemies, she has learned to call Him the Son of David, owning His kingship, which His born subjects disowned. She beseeches for that which He delights to give, identifying herself with her poor child's suffering, and asking as for herself His mercy. As Chrysostom says: 'It was a sight to stir pity to behold a woman calling aloud in such distress, and that woman a mother, and pleading for a daughter, and that daughter in such evil plight.' In her humility she does not bring her child, nor ask Him to go to her. In her agony, she has nothing to say but to spread her grief before Him, as thinking that He, of whose pity she has heard, needs but to know in order to alleviate, and requires no motives urged to induce Him to help. In her faith, she thinks that His power can heal from afar. What more could He have desired? All the more startling, then, is His demeanour. All the conditions which He usually required, were present in her; but He, who was wont to meet these with swift and joyful over-answers, has no word to say to this poor, needy, persevering, humble, and faithful suppliant. The fountain seems frozen, from which such streams of blessing were wont to flow. His mercy seems clean gone, and His compassion to have failed. A Christ silent to a sufferer's cry is a paradox which contradicts the whole gospel story, and which, we may be very sure, no evangelist would have painted, if he had not been painting from the life.

II. There is the disciples' intercession answered by Christ's statement of the limitations of His mission.

Their petition evidently meant, 'Dismiss her by granting her request'; they knew in what fashion He was wont to 'send away' such suppliants. They seem, then, more pitiful than He is. But their thoughts are more for themselves than for her. That 'us' shows the cloven foot. They did not like the noise, and they feared it might defeat His purpose of secrecy; and so, by their phrase, 'Send her away,' they unconsciously betray that what they wanted was not granting the prayer, but getting rid of the petitioner. Perhaps, too, they mean, 'Say something to her; either tell her that Thou wilt or that Thou wilt not; break Thy silence somehow.' No doubt, it was intensely disagreeable to have a shrieking woman coming after them; and they were only doing as most of us would have done, and as so many of us do, when we give help without one touch of compassion, in order to stop some imploring mouth.

Their apparently compassionate but really selfish intercession was put aside by the answer, which explains the paradox of His silence. It puts emphasis on two things: His subordination to the divine will of the Father, and the restrictions imposed thereby on the scope of His beneficent working. He was obeying the divine will in confining His ministry to the Jewish people, as we know that He did. Clearly, that restriction was necessary. It was a case of concentration in order to diffusion. The fire must be gathered on the hearth, if it is afterward to warm the chamber. There must be geographical and national limits to His life; and the Messiah, who comes last in the long series of the kings and prophets, can only be authenticated as the world's Messiah, by being first the fulfiller to the children of the promises made to the fathers. The same necessity, which required that revelation should be made through that nation, required that the climax and fulfiller of all revelation should limit His earthly ministry to it. This limitation must be regarded as applying only to His own personal ministry. It did not limit His sympathies, nor interfere with His consciousness of being the Saviour and King of the whole world. He had already spoken the parables which claimed it all for the area of the development of His kingdom, and in many other ways had given utterance to His consciousness of universal dominion, and His purpose of universal mercy. But He knew that there was an order of development in the kingdom, and that at its then stage the surest way to attain the ultimate universality was rigid limitation of it to the chosen people. This conviction locked His gracious lips against even this poor woman's piteous cry. We may well believe that His sympathy outran His commission, and that it would have been hard for so much love to be silent in the presence of so much sorrow, if He had not felt the solemn pressure of that divine necessity which ruled all His life. He was bound by His instructions, and therefore He answered her not a word. Individual suffering is no reason for transcending the limits of God-appointed functions; and he is absolved from the charge of indifference who refrains from giving help, which he can only give by overleaping the bounds of his activity, which have been set by the Father.

III. We have, next, the persistent suppliant answered by a refusal which sounds harsh and hopeless.

Christ's former words were probably not heard by the woman, who seems to have been behind the group. She saw that something was being said to Him, and may have gathered, from gestures or looks, that His reply was unfavourable. Perhaps there was a short pause in their walk, while they spoke, during which she came nearer. Now she falls at His feet, and with 'beautiful shamelessness,' as Chrysostom calls it, repeats her prayer, but this time with pathetic brevity, uttering but the one cry, 'Lord, help me!' The intenser the feeling, the fewer the words. Heart-prayers are short prayers. She does not now invoke Him as the Son of David, nor tell her sorrow over again, but flings herself in desperation on His pity, with the artless and unsupported cry, wrung from her agony, as she sees the hope of help fading away. Like Jacob, in his mysterious struggle, 'she wept, and made supplication unto Him.'

As it would seem, her distress touched no chord of sympathy; and from the lips accustomed to drop oil and wine into every wound, came words like swords, cold, unfeeling, keen-edged, fitted and meant to lacerate. We shall not understand them, or Him, if we content ourselves with the explanation which jealousy for His honour as compassionate and tender has led many to adopt, that He meant all the long delay in granting her request, and the words which He spoke, only as tests of her faith. His refusal was a real refusal, founded on the divine decree, which He was bound to obey. His words to her, harsh as they unquestionably sound, are but another way of putting the limitation on which He had just insisted in His answer to the disciples. The 'bread' is the blessing which He, as the sent of God, brings; the 'children' are the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel'; the 'dogs' are the Gentile world. The meaning of the whole is simply the necessary restriction of His personal activity to the chosen nation. It is not meant to wound nor to insult, though, no doubt, it is cast in a form which might have been offensive, and would have repelled a less determined or less sorrowful heart. The form may be partly explained by the intention of trying her earnestness, which, though it is not the sole, or even the principal, is a subordinate, reason of our Lord's action. But it is also to be considered in the light of the woman's quick-witted retort, which drew out of it an inference which we cannot suppose that Christ did not intend. He uses a diminutive for 'dogs,' which shows that He is not thinking of the fierce, unclean animals, masterless and starving, that still haunt Eastern cities, and deserve their bad character, but of domestic pets, who live with the household, and are near the table. In fact, the woman seized His intention much better than later critics who find 'national scorn' in the words; and the fair inference from them is just that which she drew, and which constituted the law of the preaching of the Gospel,-'To the Jew first, and also to the Gentile.'

IV. We have the woman's retort, which wrings hope out of apparent discouragement, answered by Christ's joyful granting of her request.

Out of His very words she weaves a plea. 'Yes, Lord; I am one of the dogs; then I am not an alien, but belong to the household.' The Revised Version does justice to her words by reading 'for even' instead of 'yet,' She does not enter a caveat against the analogy, but accepts it wholly, and only asks Him to carry out His own metaphor. She takes the sword from His hand, or, as Luther says, 'she catches Him in His own words.' She does not ask a place at the table, nor anything taken from those who have a prior claim to a more abundant share in His mercies. A crumb is enough for her, which they will never miss. In other and colder words, she acquiesces in the divine appointment which limits His mission to Israel; but she recognises that all nations belong to God's household, and that she and her countrymen have a real, though for the time inferior, position in it. She pleads that her gain will not be the children's loss, nor the answer to her prayers an infraction of the spirit of His mission. Perhaps, too, there may be a reference to the fact of His being there on Gentile soil, in her words, 'Which fall from the children's table.' She does not want the bread to be thrown from the table to her. She is not asking Him to transfer His ministry to Gentiles; but here He is. A crumb has fallen, in His brief visit. May she not eat of that? In this answer faith, humility, perseverance, swift perception of His meaning, and hallowed ingenuity and boldness, are equally admirable. By admitting that she was 'a dog,' and pleading her claim on that footing, she shows that she was 'a child.' And therefore, because she has shown herself one of the true household, in the fixedness of her faith, in the meekness of her humility, in the persistence of her prayers, Christ joyfully recognises that here is a case in which He may pass the line of ordinary limitation, and that, in doing so, He does not exceed His commission. Such faith is entitled to the fullest share of His gift. She takes her place beside the Gentile centurion as the two recipients of commendation from Him for the greatness of their faith. It had seemed as if He would give nothing; but He ends with giving all, putting the key of the storehouse into her hand, and bidding her take, not a crumb, but 'as thou wilt.' Her daughter is healed, by His power working at a distance; but that was not, we may be very sure, the last nor the best of the blessings which she took from that great treasure of which He made her mistress. Nor can we doubt that He rejoiced at the removal of the barrier which dammed back His help, as much as she did at the abundance of the stream which reached her at last.

V. The final verses of our lesson give us a striking contrast to this story.

Jesus is again on the shores of the lake, after a tour through the Tyrian and Sidonian territory, and then eastwards and southwards, to its eastern bank. There He, as on several former occasions, seeks seclusion and repose in the hills, which is broken in upon by the crowds. The old excitement and rush of people begin again. And large numbers of sick, 'lame, blind, dumb, maimed and many others,' are brought. They are cast 'down at His feet' in hot haste, with small ceremony, and, as would appear, with little petitioning for His healing power. But the same grace, for which the Canaanitish woman had needed to plead so hard, now seems to flow almost unasked. She had, as it were, wrung a drop out; now it gushes abundantly. She had not got her ‘crumb’ without much pleading; these get the bread almost without asking. It is this contrast of scant and full supplies which the evangelist would have us observe. And he points his meaning plainly enough by that expression, ‘they glorified the God of Israel,’ which seems to be Matthew’s own, and not his quotation of what the crowd said. This abundance of miracle witnesses to the pre-eminence of Israel over the Gentile nations, and to the special revelation of Himself which God made to them in His Son. The crowd may have found in it only fuel for narrow national pride and contempt; but it was the divine method for the founding of the kingdom none the less; and these two scenes, set thus side by side, teach the same truth, that the King of men is first the King of Israel.

22)Matthew 21:33-43

Matthew

THE VINEYARD AND ITS KEEPERS

Mat. 21:33 - Mat. 21:46.

This parable was apparently spoken on the Tuesday of the Passion Week. It was a day of hand-to-hand conflict with the Jewish authorities and of exhausting toil, as the bare enumeration of its incidents shows. It included all that Matthew records between Mat. 21:20 of this chapter and the end of the twenty-fifth chapter-the answer to the deputation from the Sanhedrin; the three parables occasioned by it, namely, those of the two sons, this one, and that of the marriage of the king’s son; the three answers to the traps of the Pharisees and Herodians about the tribute, of the Sadducees about the resurrection, and of the ruler about the chief commandment; Christ’s question to His questioners about the Son and Lord of David; the stern woes hurled at the unmasked hypocrites; to which must be added, from other gospels, the sweet eulogium on the widow’s mite, and the deep saying to the Greeks about the corn of wheat, with, possibly, the incident of the woman taken in adultery; and then, following all these, the solemn prophecies of the end contained in Mat. 24:1 - Mat. 24:51 and Mat. 25:1 - Mat. 25:46, spoken on the way to Bethany, as the evening shadows were falling. What a day! What a fountain of wisdom and love which poured out such streams! The pungent severity of this parable, with its transparent veil of narrative, is only appreciated by keeping clearly in view the circumstances and the listeners. They had struck at Jesus with their question as to His authority, and He parries the blow. Now it is His turn, and the sharp point goes home.

I. The first stage is the preparation of the vineyard, in which three steps are marked.

It is planted and furnished with all appliances needful for making wine, which is its great end. The direct divine origin of the religious ideas and observances of 'Judaism' is thus asserted by Christ. The only explanation of them is that God enclosed that bit of the wilderness, and with His own hands set growing there these exotics. Neither the theology nor the ritual is of man's establishing. We need not seek for special meanings for wall, wine-press, and tower. They simply express the completeness of the equipment of the vineyard, as in Isaiah's song, which lies at the foundation of the parable, and suggest his question, 'What could have been done more?' Thus furnished, the vineyard is next handed over to the husbandmen, who, in Matthew, are exclusively the rulers, while in Luke they are the people. No doubt it was 'like people, like priest.' The strange dominion of the Pharisees rested entirely on popular consent, and their temper accurately indexed that of the nation. The Sanhedrin was the chief object at which Christ aimed the parable. But it only gave form and voice to the national spirit, and 'the people loved to have it so.' National responsibilities are not to be slipped out of by being shifted on to the broad shoulders of governments or influential men. Who lets them be governments and influential?

'Guv'ment ain't to answer for it,
God will send the bill to you.'

Christ here teaches both rulers and ruled the ground and purpose of their privileges. They prided themselves on these as their own, but they were only tenants. They made their 'boast of the law'; but they forgot that fruit was the end of the divine planting and equipment. Holiness and glad obedience were what God sought, and when He found them, He was refreshed as with 'grapes in the wilderness.'

Having installed the husbandmen, the owner goes into another country. The cluster of miracles which inaugurate an epoch of revelation are not continued beyond its beginning. Centuries of comparative divine silence followed the planting of the vineyard. Having given us our charge, God, as it were, steps aside to leave us room to work as we will, and so to display what we are made of. He is absent in so far as conspicuous oversight and retribution are concerned. He is present to help, love, and bless. The faithful husbandman has Him always near, a joy and a strength, else no fruit would grow; but the sin and misery of the unfaithful are that they think of Him as far off.

II. Then comes the habitual ill-treatment of the messengers.

These are, of course, the prophets, whose office was not only to foretell, but to plead for obedience and trust, the fruits sought by God. The whole history of the nation is summed up in this dark picture. Generation after generation of princes, priests, and people had done the same thing. There is no more remarkable historical fact than that of the uniform hostility of the Jews to the prophets. That a nation of such a sort as always to hate and generally to murder them should have had them in long succession, throughout its history, is surely inexplicable on any naturalistic hypothesis. Such men were not the natural product of the race, nor of its circumstances, as their fate shows. How did they spring up? No 'philosophy of Jewish history' explains the anomaly except the one stated here,-'He sent His servants.' We are told nowadays that the Jews had a natural genius for religion, just as the Greeks for art and thought, and the Romans for law and order, and that that explains the origin of the prophets. Does it explain their treatment?

The hostility of the husbandmen grows with indulgence. From beating they go on to killing, and stoning is a specially savage form of killing. The opposition which began, as the former parable tells us, with polite hypocrisy and lip obedience, changed, under the stimulus of prophetic appeals, to honest refusal, and from that to violence which did not hesitate to slay. The more God pleads with men, the more self-conscious and bitter becomes their hatred; and the more bitter their hatred, the more does He plead, sending other messengers, more perhaps in number, or possibly of more weight, with larger commission and clearer light. Thus both the antagonistic forces grow, and the worse men become, the louder and more beseeching is the call of God to them. That is always true; and it is also ever true that he who begins with ‘I go, sir, and goes not, is in a fair way to end with stoning the prophets.

Christ treats the whole long series of violent rejections as the acts of the same set of husbandmen. The class or nation was one, as a stream is one, though all its particles are different; and the Pharisees and scribes, who stood with frowning hatred before Him as He spoke, were the living embodiment of the spirit which had animated all the past. In so far as they inherited their taint, and repeated their conduct, the guilt of all the former generations was laid at their door. They declared themselves their predecessors’ heirs; and as they reproduced their actions, they would have to bear the accumulated weight of the consequences.

III. Mat. 21:37 - Mat. 21:39 **tell of the mission of the Son and of its fatal issue.**

Three points are prominent in them. The first is the unique position which Christ here claims, with unwonted openness and decisiveness, as apart from and far above all the prophets. They constitute one order, but He stands alone, sustaining a closer relation to God. They were faithful ‘as servants,’ but He ‘as a Son,’ or, as Mark has it, ‘the only and beloved Son.’ The listeners understood Him well enough. The assertion, which seemed audacious blasphemy to them, fitted in with all His acts in that last week, which was not only the crisis of His life, but of the nation’s fate. Rulers and people must decide whether they will own or reject their King, and they must do it with their eyes open. Jesus claimed to fill a unique position. Was He right or wrong in His claim? If He was wrong, what becomes of His wisdom, His meekness, His religion? Is a religious teacher, who made the mistake of thinking that He was the Son of God in a sense in which no other man is so, worthy of admiration? If He was right, what becomes of a Christianity which sees in Him only the foremost of the prophets?

The next point marked is the owner’s vain hope, in sending his Son. He thought that He would be welcomed, and He was disappointed. It was His last attempt. Christ knew Himself to be God’s last appeal, as He is to all men, as well as to that generation. He is the last arrow in God’s quiver. When it has shot that bolt, the resources even of divine love are exhausted, and no more can be done for the vineyard than He has done for it. We need not wonder at unfulfilled hopes being here ascribed to God. The startling thought only puts into language the great mystery which besets all His pleadings with men, which are carried on, though they often fail, and which must, therefore, in view of His foreknowledge, be regarded as carried on with the knowledge that they will fail. That is the long-suffering patience of God. The difficulty is common to the words of the parable and to the facts of God’s unwearied pleading with impenitent men. Its surface is a difficulty, its heart is an abyss of all-hoping charity.

The last point is the vain calculation of the husbandmen. Christ puts hidden motives into plain words, and reveals to these rulers what they scarcely knew of their own hearts. Did they, in their secret conclaves, look each other in the face, and confess that He was the Heir? Did He not Himself ground His prayer for their pardon on their ignorance? But their ignorance was not entire, else they had had no sin; neither was their knowledge complete, else they had had no pardon. Beneath many an obstinate denial of Him lies a secret confession, or misgiving, which more truly speaks the man than does the loud negation. And such strange contradictions are men, that the secret conviction is often the very thing which gives bitterness and eagerness to the hostility. So it was with some of those whose hidden suspicions are here set in the light. How was the rulers’ or the people’s wish to ‘seize on His inheritance’ their motive for killing Jesus? Their great sin was their desire to have their national prerogatives, and yet to give no true obedience. The ruling class clung to their privileges and forgot their responsibilities, while the people were proud of their standing as Jews, and careless of God’s service. Neither wished to be reminded of their debt to the Lord of the vineyard, and their hostility to Jesus was mainly because He would call on them for fruits. If they could get this unwelcome and persistent voice silenced, they could go on in the comfortable old fashion of lip-service and real selfishness. It is an account, in vividly parabolic language, not only of their hostility, but of that of many men who are against Him. They wish to possess life and its good, without being for ever pestered with reminders of the terms on which they hold it, and of God’s desire for their love and obedience. They have a secret feeling that Christ has the right to ask for their hearts, and so they often turn from Him angrily, and sometimes hate Him.

With what sad calmness does Jesus tell the fate of the son, so certain that it is already as good as done! It was done in their counsels, and yet He does not cease to plead, if perchance some hearts may be touched and withdraw themselves from the confederacy of murder.

IV. We have next the self-condemnation from unwilling lips.

Our Lord turns to the rulers with startling and dramatic suddenness, which may have thrown them off their guard, so that their answer leaped out before they had time to think whom it hit. His solemn earnestness laid a spell on them, which drew their own condemnation from them, though they had penetrated the thin veil of the parable, and knew full well who the husbandmen were. Nor could they refuse to answer a question about legal punishments for dishonesty, which was put to them, the fountains of law, without incurring a second time the humiliation just inflicted when He had forced them to acknowledge that they, the fountains of knowledge, did not know where John came from. So from all these motives, and perhaps from a mingling of audacity, which would brazen it out and pretend not to see the bearing of the question, they answer. Like Caiaphas in his counsel, and Pilate with his writing on the Cross, and many another, they spoke deeper things than they knew, and confessed beforehand how just the judgments were, which followed the very lines marked out by their own words.

V. Then come the solemn application and naked truth of the parable.

We have no need to dwell on the cycle of prophecies concerning the corner-stone, nor on the original application of the psalm. We must be content with remarking that our Lord, in this last portion of His address, throws away even the thin veil of parable, and speaks the sternest truth in the nakedest words. He puts His own claim in the plainest fashion, as the corner-stone on which the true kingdom of God was to be built. He brands the men who stood before Him as incompetent builders, who did not know the stone needed for their edifice when they saw it. He declares, with triumphant confidence, the futility of opposition to Himself-even though it kill Him. He is sure that God will build on Him, and that His place in the building, which shall rise through the ages, will be, to even careless eyes, the crown of the manifest wonders of God’s hand. Strange words from a Man who knew that in three days He would be crucified! Stranger still that they have come true! He is the foundation of the best part of the best men; the basis of thought, the motive for action, the pattern of life, the ground of hope, for countless individuals; and on Him stands firm the society of His Church, and is hung all the glory of His Father’s house.

Christ confirms the sentence just spoken by the rulers on themselves, but with the inversion of its clauses. All disguise is at an end. The fatal ‘you’ is pronounced. The husbandmen’s calculation had been that killing the heir would make them lords of the vineyard; the grim fact was that they cast themselves out when they cast him out. He is the heir. If we desire the inheritance, we must get it through Him, and not kill or reject, but trust and obey Him. The sentence declares the two truths, that possession of the vineyard depends on honouring the Son, and on bringing forth the fruits. The kingdom has been taken from the churches of Asia Minor, Africa, and Syria, because they bore no fruit. It is not held by us on other conditions. Who can venture to speak of the awful doom set forth in the last words here? It has two stages: one a lesser misery, which is the lot of him who stumbles against the stone, while it lies passive to be built on; one more dreadful, when it has acquired motion and comes down with irresistible impetus. To stumble at Christ, or to refuse His grace, and not to base our lives and hopes on Him is maiming and damage, in many ways, here and now. But suppose the stone endowed with motion, what can stand against it? And suppose that the Christ, who is now offered for the rock on which we may pile our hopes and never be confounded, comes to judge, will He not crush the mightiest opponent as the dust of the summer threshing-floor?

23)Matthew 21:44

THE VINEYARD AND ITS KEEPERS

THE STONE OF STUMBLING

Mat. 21:44.

As Christ’s ministry drew to its close, its severity and its gentleness both increased; its severity to the class to whom it was always severe, and its gentleness to the class from whom it never turned away. Side by side, through all His manifestation of Himself, there were the two aspects: ‘He showed Himself froward’ [if I may quote the word] to the self-righteous and the Pharisee; and He bent with more than a woman’s tenderness of yearning love over the darkness and sinfulness, which in its great darkness dimly knew itself blind, and in its sinfulness stretched out a lame hand of faith, and groped after a divine deliverer. Here, in my text, there are only words of severity and awful foreboding. Christ has been telling those Pharisees and priests that the kingdom is to be taken from them, and given to a nation that brings forth the fruits thereof. He interprets for them an Old Testament figure, often recurring, which we read in the Psa. 118:1 - Psa. 118:29 [and I may just say, in passing, that we get here His interpretation of that psalm, and the vindication of our application of it, and other similar ones, to Him and His office]; ‘The stone which the builders rejected,’ said He, ‘is become the head of the corner’; and then, falling back on other Old Testament uses of the same figure, He weaves into one the whole of them-that in Isaiah about the ‘sure foundation,’ and that in Daniel about ‘the stone cut out without hands, which became a great mountain,’ crushing down all opposition,-and centres them all in Himself; as fulfilled in Himself, in His person and His work.

The two clauses of my text figuratively point to two different classes of operation on the rejecters of the Gospel. What are these two classes? ‘Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.’ In the one case, the stone is represented as passive, lying quiet; in the other, it has acquired motion. In the one case, the man stumbles and hurts himself; a remediable injury, a self-inflicted injury, a natural injury, without the active operation of Christ to produce it at all; in the other case the injury is worse than remediable, it is utter, absolute, grinding destruction, and it comes from the active operation of the ‘stone of stumbling.’ That is to say, the one class represents the present hurts and harms which, by the natural operation of things, without the action of Christ judicially at all, every man receives in the very act of rejecting the Gospel; and the other represents the ultimate issue of that rejection, which rejection is darkened into opposition and fixed hostility, when the stone that was laid ‘for a foundation’ has got wings [if I may so say], and comes down in judgment, crushing and destroying the antagonist utterly. ‘Whosoever falls on this stone is broken,’ here and now; and ‘on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder,’ hereafter and yonder.

Taking, then, into account the weaving together in this passage of the three figures from the Old Testament to which I have already referred,-the rejected stone, the foundation, and the mountain-stone of Daniel, and looking in the light of these, at the twofold issues, one present and one future, which the text distinctly brings before us,-we have just three points to which I ask your attention now. First, Every man has some kind of contact with Christ. Secondly, Rejection of Him, here and now, is harm and maiming. And, lastly, Rejection of Him, hereafter and yonder, is hopeless, endless, utter destruction.

I. In the first place, every man has some kind of connection with Christ.

I am not going to enter at all now upon any question about the condition of the ‘dark places of the earth’ where the Gospel has not come as a well-known preached message; we have nothing to do with that; the principles on which they are judged is not the question before us now. I am speaking exclusively about persons who have heard the word of salvation, and are dwelling in the midst of what we call a Christian land. Christ is offered to each of us, in good faith on God’s part, as a means of salvation, a foundation on which we may build. A man is free to accept or to reject that offer. If he reject it, he has not thereby cut himself off from all contact and connection with that rejected Saviour, but he still sustains a relation to Him; and the message that he has refused to believe, is exercising an influence upon his character and his destiny.

Christ comes, I say, offered to us all in good faith on the part of God, as a foundation upon which we may build. And then comes in that strange mystery, that a man, consciously free, turns away from the offered mercy, and makes Him that was intended to be the basis of his life, the foundation of his hope, the rock on which, steadfast and serene, he should build up a temple-home for his soul to dwell in,-makes Him a stumbling-stone against which, by rejection and unbelief, he breaks himself!

My friend, will you let me lay this one thing upon your heart,-you cannot hinder the Gospel from influencing you somehow. Taking it in its lowest aspects, it is one of the forces of modern society, an element in our present civilisation. It is everywhere, it obtrudes itself on you at every turn, the air is saturated with its influence. To be unaffected by such an all-pervading phenomenon is impossible. To no individual member of the great whole of a nation is it given to isolate himself utterly from the community. Whether he oppose or whether he acquiesce in current opinions, to denude himself of the possessions which belong in common to his age and state of society is in either case impracticable. 'That which cometh into your mind,' said one of the prophets to the Jews who were trying to cut themselves loose from their national faith and their ancestral prerogatives, 'That which cometh into your mind shall not be at all, that ye say, We will be as the heathen, as the families of the countries to serve wood and stone.' Vain dream! You can no more say, I will pass the Gospel by, and it shall be nothing to me, I will simply let it alone, than you can say, I will shut myself up from other influences proper to my time and nation. You cannot go back to the old naked barbarism, and you cannot reduce the influence of Christianity, even considered merely as one of the characteristics of the times, to zero. You may fancy you are letting it alone, but it does not let you alone; it is here, and you cannot shut yourself off from it.

But it is not merely as a subtle and diffused influence that the Gospel exercises a permanent effect upon us. It is presented to each of us here individually, in the definite form of an actual offer of salvation for each, and of an actual demand of trust from each. The words pass into our souls, and thenceforward we can never be the same as if they had not been there. The smallest ray of light falling on a sensitive plate produces a chemical change that can never be undone again, and the light of Christ's love, once brought to the knowledge and presented for the acceptance of a soul, stamps on it an ineffaceable sign of its having been there. The Gospel once heard, is always the Gospel which has been heard. Nothing can alter that. Once heard, it is henceforward a perpetual element in the whole condition, character, and destiny of the hearer.

Christ does something to every one of us. His Gospel will tell upon you, it is telling upon you. If you disbelieve it, you are not the same as if you had never heard it. Never is the box of ointment opened without some savour from it abiding in every nostril to which its odour is wafted. Only the alternative, the awful ‘either, or,’ is open for each-the ‘savour of life unto life, or the savour of death unto death.’ To come back to the illustration of the text, Christ is something, and does something to every one of us. He is either the rock on which I build, poor, weak, sinful creature as I am, getting security, and sanctity, and strength from Him, I being a living stone’ built upon ‘the living stone,’ and partaking of the vitality of the foundation; or else He is the other thing, ‘a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence to them which stumble at the word.’ Christ stands for ever in some kind of relation to, and exercises for ever some kind of influence on, every man who has heard the Gospel.

II. The immediate issue of rejection of Him is loss and maiming.

‘Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken.’ Just think for a moment, by way of illustrating this principle, first of all, of the positive harm which you do to yourself in the act of turning away from the mercy offered you in Christ; and then think for a moment of the negative loss which you sustain by the same act.

Note the positive harm. Am I uncharitable when I say that no man ever yet passively neglected the message of love in God’s Son; but that always this is the rude outline of the experience of people who know what it is to have a Saviour offered to them, and know what it is to put Him away,-that there is a feeble and transitory movement of heart and will; that Conscience says, ‘Thou oughtest’; that Will says, ‘I would’; that the heart is touched by some sense of that great and gentle vision of light and love which passes before the eye; that the man, as it were, like some fever-ridden patient, lifts himself up for an instant from the bed on which he is lying, and puts out a hand, and then falls back again, the vacillating, fevered, paralysed will recoiling from the resolution, and the conscience having power to say, ‘Thou oughtest,’ but no power to enforce the execution of its decrees, and the heart turning away from the salvation that it would have found in the love of love, to the loss that it finds in the love of self and earth? Or in other words, is it not true that every man who rejects Christ does in simple verity reject Him, and not merely neglect Him; that there is always an effort, that there is a struggle, feeble, perhaps, but real, which ends in the turning away? It is not that you stand there, and simply let Him go past. That were bad enough; but the fact is worse than that. It is that you turn your back upon Him. It is not that His hand is laid on yours, and yours remains dead and cold, and does not open to clasp it; but it is that His hand being laid on yours, you clench yours the tighter, and will not have it. And so every man [I believe] who rejects Christ does these things thereby-wounds his own conscience, hardens his own heart, makes himself a worse man, just because he has had a glimpse, and has willingly, and almost consciously, ‘loved darkness rather than light.’ Oh, brethren, the message of love can never come into a human soul, and pass away from it unreceived, without leaving that spirit worse, with all its lowest characteristics strengthened, and all its best ones depressed, by the fact of rejection. I have nothing to do now with pursuing that process to its end; but the natural result-if there were no future Judgment at all, if there were no movement ever given to the stone that you ought to build on-the natural result of the simple rejection of the Gospel is that, bit by bit, all the lingering remains of nobleness that hover about the man, like scent about a broken vase, pass away; and that, step by step, through the simple process of saying, ‘I will not have Christ to rule over me,’ the whole being degenerates, until manhood becomes devil-hood, and the soul is lost by its own want of faith. Unbelief is its own judgment; unbelief is its own condemnation; unbelief, as sin, is punished, like all other sins, by the perpetuation of deeper and darker forms of itself. Every time that you stifle a conviction, fight down a conviction, or drive away a conviction; and every time that you feebly move towards the decision, ‘I will trust Him, and love Him, and be His,’ yet fail to realise it, you have harmed your soul, you have made yourself a worse man, you have lowered the tone of your conscience, you have enfeebled your will, you have made your heart harder against love, you have drawn another horny scale over the eye, that will prevent you from seeing the light that is yonder; you have, as much as in you is, withdrawn from God, and approximated to the other pole of the universe [if I may say that], to the dark and deadly antagonist of mercy, and goodness, and truth, and grace. ‘Whosoever falls on this stone,’ by the natural result of his unbelief, ‘shall be broken’ and maimed, and shall mar his own nature.

I need not dwell on the negative evil results of unbelief; the loss of that which is the only guide for a man, the taking away, or rather the failing to possess, that great love above us, that divine Spirit in us, by which only we are ever made what we ought to be. This only I would leave with you, in this part of my subject, Whoever is not in Christ is maimed. Only he that is ‘a man in Christ’ has come ‘to the measure of the stature of a perfect man.’ There, and there alone, do we get the power which will make us full-grown. There alone is the soul planted in that good soil in which, growing, it becomes as a rounded, perfect tree, with leaves and fruits in their season. All other men are half-men, quarter-men, fragments of men, parts of humanity exaggerated and contorted and distorted from the reconciling whole which the Christian ought to be, and in proportion to his Christianity is on the road to be, and one day will assuredly and actually be, a ‘complete and entire man, wanting nothing’; nothing maimed, nothing broken, the realisation of the ideal of humanity, the renewed copy ‘of the second Adam, the Lord from heaven.’

There is another consideration closely connected with this second part of my subject, that I just mention and pass on. Not only by the act of rejection of Christ do we harm and maim ourselves, but also all attempts at opposition-formal opposition-to the Gospel as a system, stand self-convicted and self-condemned to speedy decay. What a commentary upon that word, ‘Whosoever falls on this stone shall be broken,’ is the whole history of the heresies of the Church and the assaults of unbelief! Man after man, rich in gifts, endowed often with far larger and nobler faculties than the people who oppose him, with indomitable perseverance, a martyr to his error, sets himself up against the truth that is sphered in Jesus Christ; and the great divine message simply goes on its way, and all the babblement and noise are like so many bats flying against a light, or like the sea-birds that come sweeping up in the tempest and the night, to the hospitable Pharos that is upon the rock, and smite themselves dead against it. Sceptics well known in their generation, who made people's hearts tremble for the ark of God, what has become of them? Their books lie dusty and undisturbed on the top shelf of libraries; whilst there the Bible stands, with all the scribblings wiped off the page, as though they had never been! Opponents fire their small shot against the great Rock of Ages, and the little pellets fall flattened, and only scale off a bit of the moss that has gathered there! My brother, let the history of the past teach you and me, with other deeper thoughts, a very calm and triumphant confidence about all that opponents say nowadays; for all the modern opposition to this Gospel will go as all the past has done, and the newest systems which cut and carve at Christianity, will go to the tomb where all the rest have gone; and dead old infidelities will rise up from their thrones, and say to the bran-new ones of this generation, when their day is worked out, 'Are ye also become weak as we? art thou also become like one of us?' 'Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken': personally, he will be harmed; and his opinions, and his books, and his talk, and all his argumentation, will come to nothing, like the waves that break into impotent foam against the rocky cliffs.

III. Last of all, the issue, the ultimate issue, of unbelief is irremediable destruction when Christ begins to move.

The former clause has spoken about the harm that naturally follows unbelief whilst the Gospel is being preached; the latter clause speaks about the active agency of Christ when the end shall have come, and the preaching of the Gospel shall have merged into the act of judgment. I do not mean to dwell, brethren, upon that thought; it seems to me far too awful a one to be handled by my hands, at any rate. Let us leave it in the vagueness and dreadfulness of the words of Him who never spoke exaggerated words, and who, when He said, 'It shall grind him to powder,' meant [as it seems to me] nothing less than a destruction which, contrasted with the former remediable wounding and breaking, was a destruction utter, and hopeless, and everlasting, and without remedy. Ground-ground to powder! Any life left in that? any gathering up of that, and making a man of it again? All the humanity battered out of it, and the life clean gone from it! Does not that sound very much like 'everlasting destruction from the presence of God and from the glory of His power'? Christ, silent now, will begin to speak; passive now, will begin to act. The stone comes down, and the fall of it will be awful. I remember, away up in a lonely Highland valley, where beneath a tall black cliff, all weather-worn, and cracked, and seamed, there lies at the foot, resting on the greensward that creeps round its base, a huge rock, that has fallen from the face of the precipice. A shepherd was passing beneath it; and suddenly, when the finger of God's will touched it, and rent it from its ancient bed in the everlasting rock, it came down, leaping and bounding from pinnacle to pinnacle-and it fell; and the man that was beneath it is there now! 'Ground to powder.' Ah, my brethren, that is not my illustration-that is Christ's. Therefore I say to you, since all that stand against Him shall become 'as the chaff of the summer threshing-floor,' and be swept utterly away, make Him the foundation on which you build; and when the storm sweeps away every 'refuge of lies,' you will be safe and serene, builded upon the Rock of Ages.

24)Matthew 21:45-46

Matthew

THE VINEYARD AND ITS KEEPERS

Mat. 21:33 - Mat. 21:46.

This parable was apparently spoken on the Tuesday of the Passion Week. It was a day of hand-to-hand conflict with the Jewish authorities and of exhausting toil, as the bare enumeration of its incidents shows. It included all that Matthew records between Mat. 21:20 of this chapter and the end of the twenty-fifth chapter-the answer to the deputation from the Sanhedrin; the three parables occasioned by it, namely, those of the two sons, this one, and that of the marriage of the king's son; the three answers to the traps of the Pharisees and Herodians about the tribute, of the Sadducees about the resurrection, and of the ruler about the chief commandment; Christ's question to His questioners about the Son and Lord of David; the stern woes hurled at the unmasked hypocrites; to which must be added, from other gospels, the sweet eulogium on the widow's mite, and the deep saying to the Greeks about the corn of wheat, with, possibly, the incident of the woman taken in adultery; and then, following all these, the solemn prophecies of the end contained in Mat. 24:1 - Mat. 24:51 and Mat. 25:1 -

Mat. 25:46, spoken on the way to Bethany, as the evening shadows were falling. What a day! What a fountain of wisdom and love which poured out such streams! The pungent severity of this parable, with its transparent veil of narrative, is only appreciated by keeping clearly in view the circumstances and the listeners. They had struck at Jesus with their question as to His authority, and He parries the blow. Now it is His turn, and the sharp point goes home.

I. The first stage is the preparation of the vineyard, in which three steps are marked.

It is planted and furnished with all appliances needful for making wine, which is its great end. The direct divine origin of the religious ideas and observances of ‘Judaism’ is thus asserted by Christ. The only explanation of them is that God enclosed that bit of the wilderness, and with His own hands set growing there these exotics. Neither the theology nor the ritual is of man’s establishing. We need not seek for special meanings for wall, wine-press, and tower. They simply express the completeness of the equipment of the vineyard, as in Isaiah’s song, which lies at the foundation of the parable, and suggest his question, ‘What could have been done more?’ Thus furnished, the vineyard is next handed over to the husbandmen, who, in Matthew, are exclusively the rulers, while in Luke they are the people. No doubt it was ‘like people, like priest.’ The strange dominion of the Pharisees rested entirely on popular consent, and their temper accurately indexed that of the nation. The Sanhedrin was the chief object at which Christ aimed the parable. But it only gave form and voice to the national spirit, and ‘the people loved to have it so.’ National responsibilities are not to be slipped out of by being shifted on to the broad shoulders of governments or influential men. Who lets them be governments and influential?

‘Guv’ment ain’t to answer for it,
God will send the bill to you.’

Christ here teaches both rulers and ruled the ground and purpose of their privileges. They prided themselves on these as their own, but they were only tenants. They made their ‘boast of the law’; but they forgot that fruit was the end of the divine planting and equipment. Holiness and glad obedience were what God sought, and when He found them, He was refreshed as with ‘grapes in the wilderness.’

Having installed the husbandmen, the owner goes into another country. The cluster of miracles which inaugurate an epoch of revelation are not continued beyond its beginning. Centuries of comparative divine silence followed the planting of the vineyard. Having given us our charge, God, as it were, steps aside to leave us room to work as we will, and so to display what we are made of. He is absent in so far as conspicuous oversight and retribution are concerned. He is present to help, love, and bless. The faithful husbandman has Him always near, a joy and a strength, else no fruit would grow; but the sin and misery of the unfaithful are that they think of Him as far off.

II. Then comes the habitual ill-treatment of the messengers.

These are, of course, the prophets, whose office was not only to foretell, but to plead for obedience and trust, the fruits sought by God. The whole history of the nation is summed up in this dark picture. Generation after generation of princes, priests, and people had done the same thing. There is no more remarkable historical fact than that of the uniform hostility of the Jews to the prophets. That a nation of such a sort as always to hate and generally to murder them should have had them in long succession, throughout its history, is surely inexplicable on any naturalistic hypothesis. Such men were not the natural product of the race, nor of its circumstances, as their fate shows. How did they spring up? No ‘philosophy of Jewish history’ explains the anomaly except the one stated here,-’He sent His servants.’ We are told nowadays that the Jews had a natural genius for religion, just as the Greeks for art and thought, and the Romans for law and order, and that that explains the origin of the prophets. Does it explain their treatment?

The hostility of the husbandmen grows with indulgence. From beating they go on to killing, and stoning is a specially savage form of killing. The opposition which began, as the former parable tells us, with polite hypocrisy and lip obedience, changed, under the stimulus of prophetic appeals, to honest refusal, and from that to violence which did not hesitate to slay. The more God pleads with men, the more self-conscious and bitter becomes their hatred; and the more bitter their hatred, the more does He plead, sending other messengers, more perhaps in number, or possibly of more weight, with larger commission and clearer light. Thus both the antagonistic forces grow, and the worse men become, the louder and more beseeching is the call of God to them. That is always true; and it is also ever true that he who begins with ‘I go, sir, and goes not, is in a fair way to end with stoning the prophets.

Christ treats the whole long series of violent rejections as the acts of the same set of husbandmen. The class or nation was one, as a stream is one, though all its particles are different; and the Pharisees and scribes, who stood with frowning hatred before Him as He spoke, were the living embodiment of the spirit which had animated all the past. In so far as they inherited their taint, and repeated their conduct, the guilt of all the former generations was laid at their door. They declared themselves their predecessors’ heirs; and as they reproduced their actions, they would have to bear the accumulated weight of the consequences.

III. Mat. 21:37 - Mat. 21:39 **tell of the mission of the Son and of its fatal issue.**

Three points are prominent in them. The first is the unique position which Christ here claims, with unwonted openness and decisiveness, as apart from and far above all the prophets. They constitute one order, but He stands alone, sustaining a closer relation to God. They were faithful ‘as servants,’ but He ‘as a Son,’ or, as Mark has it, ‘the only and beloved Son.’ The listeners understood Him well enough. The assertion, which seemed audacious blasphemy to them, fitted in with all His acts in that last week, which was not only the crisis of His life, but of the nation’s fate. Rulers and people must decide whether they will own or reject their King, and they must do it with their eyes open. Jesus claimed to fill a unique position. Was He right or wrong in His claim? If He was wrong, what becomes of His wisdom, His meekness, His religion? Is a religious teacher, who made the mistake of thinking that He was the Son of God in a sense in which no other man is so, worthy of admiration? If He was right, what becomes of a Christianity which sees in Him only the foremost of the prophets?

The next point marked is the owner's vain hope, in sending his Son. He thought that He would be welcomed, and He was disappointed. It was His last attempt. Christ knew Himself to be God's last appeal, as He is to all men, as well as to that generation. He is the last arrow in God's quiver. When it has shot that bolt, the resources even of divine love are exhausted, and no more can be done for the vineyard than He has done for it. We need not wonder at unfulfilled hopes being here ascribed to God. The startling thought only puts into language the great mystery which besets all His pleadings with men, which are carried on, though they often fail, and which must, therefore, in view of His foreknowledge, be regarded as carried on with the knowledge that they will fail. That is the long-suffering patience of God. The difficulty is common to the words of the parable and to the facts of God's unwearied pleading with impenitent men. Its surface is a difficulty, its heart is an abyss of all-hoping charity.

The last point is the vain calculation of the husbandmen. Christ puts hidden motives into plain words, and reveals to these rulers what they scarcely knew of their own hearts. Did they, in their secret conclaves, look each other in the face, and confess that He was the Heir? Did He not Himself ground His prayer for their pardon on their ignorance? But their ignorance was not entire, else they had had no sin; neither was their knowledge complete, else they had had no pardon. Beneath many an obstinate denial of Him lies a secret confession, or misgiving, which more truly speaks the man than does the loud negation. And such strange contradictions are men, that the secret conviction is often the very thing which gives bitterness and eagerness to the hostility. So it was with some of those whose hidden suspicions are here set in the light. How was the rulers' or the people's wish to 'seize on His inheritance' their motive for killing Jesus? Their great sin was their desire to have their national prerogatives, and yet to give no true obedience. The ruling class clung to their privileges and forgot their responsibilities, while the people were proud of their standing as Jews, and careless of God's service. Neither wished to be reminded of their debt to the Lord of the vineyard, and their hostility to Jesus was mainly because He would call on them for fruits. If they could get this unwelcome and persistent voice silenced, they could go on in the comfortable old fashion of lip-service and real selfishness. It is an account, in vividly parabolic language, not only of their hostility, but of that of many men who are against Him. They wish to possess life and its good, without being for ever pestered with reminders of the terms on which they hold it, and of God's desire for their love and obedience. They have a secret feeling that Christ has the right to ask for their hearts, and so they often turn from Him angrily, and sometimes hate Him.

With what sad calmness does Jesus tell the fate of the son, so certain that it is already as good as done! It was done in their counsels, and yet He does not cease to plead, if perchance some hearts may be touched and withdraw themselves from the confederacy of murder.

IV. We have next the self-condemnation from unwilling lips.

Our Lord turns to the rulers with startling and dramatic suddenness, which may have thrown them off their guard, so that their answer leaped out before they had time to think whom it hit. His solemn earnestness laid a spell on them, which drew their own condemnation from them, though they had penetrated the thin veil of the parable, and knew full well who the husbandmen were. Nor could they refuse to answer a question about legal punishments for dishonesty, which was put to them, the fountains of law, without incurring a second time the humiliation just inflicted when He had forced them to acknowledge that they, the fountains of knowledge, did not know where John came from. So from all these motives, and perhaps from a mingling of audacity, which would brazen it out and pretend not to see the bearing of the question, they answer. Like Caiaphas in his counsel, and Pilate with his writing on the Cross, and many another, they spoke deeper things than they knew, and confessed beforehand how just the judgments were, which followed the very lines marked out by their own words.

V. Then come the solemn application and naked truth of the parable.

We have no need to dwell on the cycle of prophecies concerning the corner-stone, nor on the original application of the psalm. We must be content with remarking that our Lord, in this last portion of His address, throws away even the thin veil of parable, and speaks the sternest truth in the nakedest words. He puts His own claim in the plainest fashion, as the corner-stone on which the true kingdom of God was to be built. He brands the men who stood before Him as incompetent builders, who did not know the stone needed for their edifice when they saw it. He declares, with triumphant confidence, the futility of opposition to Himself-even though it kill Him. He is sure that God will build on Him, and that His place in the building, which shall rise through the ages, will be, to even careless eyes, the crown of the manifest wonders of God's hand. Strange words from a Man who knew that in three days He would be crucified! Stranger still that they have come true! He is the foundation of the best part of the best men; the basis of thought, the motive for action, the pattern of life, the ground of hope, for countless individuals; and on Him stands firm the society of His Church, and is hung all the glory of His Father's house.

Christ confirms the sentence just spoken by the rulers on themselves, but with the inversion of its clauses. All disguise is at an end. The fatal 'you' is pronounced. The husbandmen's calculation had been that killing the heir would make them lords of the vineyard; the grim fact was that they cast themselves out when they cast him out. He is the heir. If we desire the inheritance, we must get it through Him, and not kill or reject, but trust and obey Him. The sentence declares the two truths, that possession of the vineyard depends on honouring the Son, and on bringing forth the fruits. The kingdom has been taken from the churches of Asia Minor, Africa, and Syria, because they bore no fruit. It is not held by us on other conditions. Who can venture to speak of the awful doom set forth in the last words here? It has two stages: one a lesser misery, which is the lot of him who stumbles against the stone, while it lies passive to be built on; one more dreadful, when it has acquired motion and comes down with irresistible impetus. To stumble at Christ, or to refuse His grace, and not to base our lives and hopes on Him is maiming and damage, in many ways, here and now. But suppose the stone endowed with motion, what can stand against it? And suppose that the Christ, who is now offered for the rock on which we may pile our hopes and never be confounded, comes to judge, will He not crush the mightiest opponent as the dust of the summer threshing-floor?

25)Matthew 22:34-46

Matthew

THE TABLES TURNED: THE QUESTIONERS QUESTIONED

Mat. 22:34.

Herodians, Sadducees, Pharisees, who were at daggers drawn with each other, patched up an alliance against Jesus, whom they all hated. Their questions were cunningly contrived to entangle Him in the cobwebs of casuistry and theological hair-splitting, but He walked through the fine-spun snares as a lion might stalk away with the nooses set for him dangling behind him. The last of the three questions put to Jesus, and the one question with which He turned the tables and silenced His questioners, are our subject. In the former, Jesus declares the essence of the law or of religion; in the latter, He brings to light the essential loftiness of the Messiah.

I. The two preceding questions are represented to have been asked by deputations; this is specially noted as emanating from an individual.

The 'lawyer' seems to have anticipated his colleagues, and possibly his question was not that which they had meant to put. His motive in asking it was that of 'tempting' Jesus, but we must not give that word too hostile a sense, for it may mean no more than 'testing' or trying. The legal expert wished to find out the attainments and standpoint of this would-be teacher, and so he proposed a question which would bring out the whereabouts of Jesus, and give opportunity for a theological wrangle. He did not ask the question for guidance, but as an inquisitor cross-examining a suspected heretic. Probably the question was a stereotyped one, and there are traces in the Gospels that the answer recognised as orthodox was that which Jesus gave [Luk. 10:27]. The two commandments are quoted from Deu. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18 respectively. The lawyer probably only desired to raise a discussion as to the relative worth of isolated precepts. Jesus goes deep down below isolated precepts, and unifies, as well as transforms, the law. Supreme and undivided love to God is not only the great, but also the first, commandment. In more modern phrase, it is the sum of man's duty and the germ of all goodness. Note that Jesus shifts the centre from conduct to character, from deeds to affections. 'As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he,' said the sage of old; Christ says, 'As a man loves, so is he.' Two loves we have,-either the dark love of self and sense, or the white love of God, and all character and conduct are determined by which of these sways us.

Note, further, that love to God must needs be undivided. God is one and all; man is one and finite. To love such an object with half a heart is not to love. True, our weakness leads astray, but the only real love corresponding to the natures of the lover and the loved is whole-hearted, whole-souled, whole-minded. It must be ‘all in all, or not at all.’

‘A second is like unto it,’-love to man is the under side, as it were, of love to God. The two commandments are alike, for both call for love, and the second is second because it is a consequence of the first. Each sets up a lofty standard; ‘with all thy heart’ and ‘as thyself’ sound equally impossible, but both result necessarily from the nature of the case. Religion is the parent of all morality, and especially of benevolent love to men. Innate self-regard will yield to no force but that of love to God. It is vain to try to create brotherhood among men unless the sense of God’s fatherhood is its foundation. Love of neighbours is the second commandment, and to make it the first, as some do now, is to end all hope of fulfilling it. Still further, Jesus hangs law and prophets on these two precepts, which, at bottom, are one. Not only will all other duties be done in doing these, since ‘love is the fulfilling of the law,’ but all other precepts, and all the prophets’ appeals and exhortations, are but deductions from, or helps to the attainment of, these. All our forms of worship, creeds, and the like, are of worth in so far as they are outcomes of love to God, or aid us in loving Him and our neighbours. Without love, they are ‘as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.’

II. The Pharisees remained ‘gathered together,’ and may have been preparing another question, but Jesus had been long enough interrogated.

It was not fitting that He should be catechised only. His questions teach. He does not seek to ‘entangle’ the Pharisees ‘in their speech,’ nor to make them contradict themselves, but brings them full up against a difficulty, that they may open their eyes to the great truth which is its only solution. His first question, ‘What think ye of the Christ?’ is simply preparatory to the second. The answer which He anticipated was given,-as, of course, it would be, for the Davidic descent of the Messiah was a commonplace universally accepted. One can fancy that the Pharisees smiled complacently at the attempt to puzzle them with such an elementary question, but the smile vanished when the next one came. They interpreted Psa. 110:1 - Psa. 110:7 as Messianic, and David in it called Messiah 'my Lord.' How can He be both? Jesus' question is in two forms,-'If He is son, how does David call Him Lord?' or, if He is Lord, 'how then is He his son?' Take either designation, and the other lands you in inextricable difficulties.

Now what was our Lord's purpose in thus driving the Pharisees into a corner? Not merely to 'muzzle' them, as the word in Mat. 22:34, rendered 'put to silence,' literally means, but to bring to light the inadequate conceptions of the Messiah and of the nature of His kingdom, to which exclusive recognition of his Davidic descent necessarily led. David's son would be but a king after the type of the Herods and Cæ³¡rs, and his kingdom as 'carnal' as the wildest zealot expected, but David's Lord, sitting at God's right hand, and having His foes made His footstool by Jehovah Himself,-what sort of a Messiah King would that be? The majestic image, that shapes itself dimly here, was a revelation that took the Pharisees' breath away, and made them dumb. Nor are the words without a half-disclosed claim on Christ's part to be that which He was so soon to avow Himself before the high priest as being. The first hearers of them probably caught that meaning partly, and were horrified; we hear it clearly in the words, and answer, 'Thou art the King of glory, O Christ! Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.'

Jesus here says that Psa. 110:1 - Psa. 110:7 is Messianic, that David was the author, and that he wrote it by divine inspiration. The present writer cannot see how our Lord's argument can be saved from collapse if the psalm is not David's.

26)Matthew 23:27-39

Matthew

THE KING'S FAREWELL

Mat. 23:27 - Mat. 23:39.

If, with the majority of authorities, we exclude Mat. 23:14 from the text, there are, in this chapter, seven woes, like seven thunders, launched against the rulers. They are scathing exposures, but, as the very word implies, full of sorrow as well as severity. They are not denunciations, but prophecies warning that the end of such tempers must be mournful. The wailing of an infinite compassion, rather than the accents of anger, sounds in them; and it alone is heard in the outburst of lamenting in which Christ's heart runs over, as in a passion of tears, at the close. The blending of sternness and pity, each perfect, is the characteristic of this wonderful climax of our Lord's appeals to His nation. Could such tones of love and righteous anger joined have been sent echoing through the ages in this Gospel, if they had not been heard?

I. The woe of the 'whited sepulchres.'

The first four woes are directed mainly to the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees; the last three to their characters. The two first of these fasten on the same sin, of hypocritical holiness. There is, however, a difference between the representation of hypocrites under the metaphor of the clean outside of the cup and platter, and that of the whited sepulchre. In the former, the hidden sin is 'extortion and excess'; that is, sensual enjoyment wrongly procured, of which the emblems of cup and plate suggest that good eating and drinking are a chief part. In the latter, it is 'iniquity'-a more general and darker name for sin. In the former, the Pharisee is 'blind,' self-deceived in part or altogether; in the latter, stress is rather laid on his 'appearance unto men.' The repetition of the same charge in the two woes teaches us Christ's estimate of the gravity and frequency of the sin.

The whitened tombs of Mohammedan saints still gleam in the strong sunlight on many a knoll in Palestine. If the Talmudical practice is as old as our Lord's time, the annual whitewashing was lately over. Its purpose was not to adorn the tombs, but to make them conspicuous, so that they might be avoided for fear of defilement. So He would say, with terrible irony, that the apparent holiness of the rulers was really a sign of corruption, and a warning to keep away from them. What a blow at their self-complacency! And how profoundly true it is that the more punctiliously white the hypocrite's outside, the more foul is he within, and the wider berth will all discerning people give him! The terrible force of the figure needs no dwelling on. In Christ's estimate, such a soul was the very dwelling-place of death; and foul odours and worms and corruption filled its sickening recesses. Terrible words to come from His lips into which grace was poured, and bold words to be flashed at listeners who held the life of the Speaker in their hands! There are two sorts of hypocrites, the conscious and the unconscious; and there are ten of the latter for one of the former, and each ten times more dangerous. Established religion breeds them, and they are specially likely to be found among those whose business is to study the documents in which it is embodied. These woes are not like thunder-peals rolling above our heads, while the lightning strikes the earth miles away. A religion which is mostly whitewash is as common among us as ever it was in Jerusalem; and its foul accompaniments of corruption becoming more rotten every year, as the whitewash is laid on thicker, may be smelt among us, and its fatal end is as sure.

II. The woe of the sepulchre builders [Mat. 23:29 - Mat. 23:36].

In these verses we have, first, the specification of another form of hypocrisy, consisting in building the prophets' tombs, and disavowing the fathers' murder of them. Honouring dead prophets was right; but honouring dead ones and killing living ones was conscious or unconscious hypocrisy. The temper of mind which leads to glorifying the dead witnesses, also leads to supposing that all truth was given by them; and hence that the living teachers, who carry their message farther, are false prophets. A generation which was ready to kill Jesus in honour of Moses, would have killed Moses in honour of Abraham, and would not have had the faintest apprehension of the message of either.

It is a great deal easier to build tombs than to accept teachings, and a good deal of the posthumous honour paid to God's messengers means, 'It's a good thing they are dead, and that we have nothing to do but to put up a monument.' Bi-centenaries and ter-centenaries and jubilees do not always imply either the understanding or the acceptance of the principles supposed to be glorified thereby. But the magnifiers of the past are often quite unconscious of the hollowness of their admiration, and honest in their horror of their fathers' acts; and we all need the probe of such words as Christ's to pierce the skin of our lazy reverence for our fathers' prophets, and let out the foul matter below-namely, our own blindness to God’s messengers of to-day.

The statement of the hypocrisy is followed, in Mat. 23:31, with its unmasking and condemnation. The words glow with righteous wrath at white heat, and end in a burst of indignation, most unfamiliar to His lips. Three sentences, like triple lightning flash from His pained heart. With almost scornful subtlety He lays hold of the words which He puts into the Pharisees’ mouths, to convict them of kindred with those whose deeds they would disown. ‘Our fathers, say you? Then you do belong to the same family, after all. You confess that you have their blood in your veins; and, in the very act of denying sympathy with their conduct, you own kindred. And, for all your protestations, spiritual kindred goes with bodily descent.’ Christ here recognises that children probably ‘take after their parents,’ or, in modern scientific terms, that ‘heredity’ is the law, and that it works more surely in the transmission of evil than of good.

Then come the awful words bidding that generation ‘fill up the measure of the fathers.’ They are like the other command to Judas to do his work quickly. They are more than permission, they are command; but such a command as, by its laying bare of the true character of the deed in view, is love’s last effort at prevention. Mark the growing emotion of the language. Mark the conception of a nation’s sins as one through successive generations, and the other, of these as having a definite measure, which being filled, judgment can no longer tarry. Generation after generation pours its contributions into the vessel, and when the last black drop which it can hold has been added, then comes the catastrophe. Mark the fatal necessity by which inherited sin becomes darker sin. The fathers’ crimes are less than the sons’. This inheritance increases by each transmission. The cloak strikes one more at each revolution of the hands.

It is hard to recognise Christ in the terrible words that follow. We have heard part of them from John the Baptist; and it sounded natural for him to call men serpents and the children of serpents, but it is somewhat of a shock to hear Jesus hurling such names at even the most sinful. But let us remember that He who sees hearts, has a right to tell harsh truths, and that it is truest kindness to strip off masks which hide from men their own real character, and that the revelation of the divine love in Jesus would be a partial and impotent revelation if it did not show us the righteous love which is wrath. There is nothing so terrible as the anger of gentle compassion, and the fiercest and most destructive wrath is ‘the wrath of the Lamb.’ Seldom, indeed, did He show that side of His character; but it is there, and the other side would not be so blessed as it is, unless that were there too.

The woe ends with the double prophecy that that generation would repeat and surpass the fathers’ guilt, and that on it would fall the accumulated penalties of past bloodshed. Note that solemn ‘therefore,’ which looks back to the whole preceding context, and forward to the whole subsequent. Because the rulers professed abhorrence of their fathers’ deeds, and yet inherited their spirit, they too would have their prophets, and would slay them. God goes on sending His messengers, because we reject them; and the more deaf men are, the more does He peal His words into their ears. That is mercy and compassion, that all men may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth; but it is judgment too, and its foreseen effect must be regarded as part of the divine purpose in it. Christ’s desire is one thing, His purpose another. His desire is that all should find in His gospel ‘the savour of life’; but His purpose is that, if it be not that to any, it shall be to them the savour of death. Mark, too, the authority with which He, in the face of these scowling Pharisees, assumes the distinct divine prerogative of sending forth inspired men, who, as His messengers, shall stand on a level with the prophets of old. Mark His silence as to His own fate, which is only obscurely hinted at in the command to fill up the measure of the fathers. Observe the detailed enumeration of His messengers’ gifts,-’prophets’ under direct inspiration, like those of old, which may especially refer to the apostles; ‘wise men,’ like a Stephen or an Apollos; ‘scribes,’ such as Mark and Luke and many a faithful servant since, whose pen has loved to write the name above every name. Note the detailed prophecy of their treatment, which begins with slaying and goes down to the less severe scourging, and thence to the milder persecution. Do the three punishments belong to the three classes of messengers, the severest falling to the lot of the most highly endowed, and even the quiet penman being hunted from city to city?

We need not wriggle and twist to try to avoid admitting that the calling of the martyred Zacharias, ‘the son of Barachias,’ is an error of some one who confused the author of the prophetic book with the person whose murder is narrated in 2Ch. 24:1 - 2Ch. 24:27 We do not know who made the mistake, or how it appears in our text, but it is not honest to try to slur it over. The punishment of long ages of sin, carried on from father to son, does in the course of that history of the world, which is a part of the judgment of the world, fall upon one generation. It takes long for the mass of heaped-up sin to become top-heavy; but when it is so, it buries one generation of those who have worked at piling it up, beneath its down-rushing avalanche.

‘The mills of God grind slowly,
But they grind exceeding small.’

The catastrophes of national histories are prepared for by continuous centuries. The generation that laid the first powder-hornful of the train is dead and buried, long before the explosion which sends constituted order and institutions sky-high. The misery is that often the generation which has to pay the penalty has begun to awake to the sin, and would be glad to mend it, if it could. England in the seventeenth century, France in the eighteenth, America in the nineteenth, had to reap harvests from sins sown long before. Such is the law of the judgment wrought out by God’s providence in history. But there is another judgment, begun here and perfected hereafter, in which fathers and sons shall each bear their own burden, and reap accurately the fruit of what they have sown. ‘The soul that sinneth, it shall die.’

III. The parting wail of rejected love.

The lightning flashes of the sevenfold woes end in a rain of pity and tears. His full heart overflows in that sad cry of lamentation over the long-continued foiling of the efforts of a love that would fain have fondled and defended. What intensity of feeling is in the redoubled naming of the city! How yearningly and wistfully He calls, as if He might still win the faithless one, and how lingeringly unwilling He is to give up hope! How mournfully, rather than accusingly, He reiterates the acts which had run through the whole history, using a form of the verbs which suggests continuance. Mark, too, the matter-of-course way in which Christ assumes that He sent all the prophets whom, through the generations, Jerusalem had stoned.

So the lament passes into the solemn final leave-taking, with which our Lord closes His ministry among the Jews, and departs from the temple. As, in the parable of the marriage-feast, the city was emphatically called 'their city,' so here the Temple, in whose courts He was standing, and which in a moment He was to quit for ever, is called 'your house,' because His departure is the withdrawing of the true Shechinah. It had been the house of God: now He casts it off, and leaves it to them to do as they will with it. The saddest punishment of long-continued rejection of His pleading love, is that it ceases at last to plead. The bitterest woe for those who refuse to render to Him the fruits of the vineyard, is to get the vineyard for their own, undisturbed. Christ's utmost retribution for obstinate blindness is to withdraw from our sight. All the woes that were yet to fall, in long, dreary succession on that nation, so long continued in its sin, so long continued in its misery, were hidden in that solemn departure of Christ from the henceforward empty temple. Let us fear lest our unfaithfulness meet the like penalty! But even the departure does not end His yearnings, nor close the long story of the conflict between God's beseeching love and their unbelief. The time shall come when the nation shall once more lift up, with deeper, truer adoration, the hosannas of the triumphal entry. And then a believing Israel shall see their King, and serve Him. Christ never takes final leave of any man in this world. It is ever possible that dumb lips may be opened to welcome Him, though long rejected; and His withdrawals are His efforts to bring about that opening. When it takes place, how gladly does He return to the heart which is now His temple, and unveil His beauty to the long-darkened eyes!

27)Matthew 24:42-51

Matthew

WATCHING FOR THE KING

Mat. 24:42 - Mat. 24:51.

The long day’s work was nearly done. Christ had left the temple, never to return. He took His way across the Mount of Olives to Bethany, and was stayed by the disciples’ question as to the date of the destruction of the temple, which He had foretold, and of the ‘end of the world,’ which they attached to it. They could not fancy the world lasting without the temple! We often make a like mistake. So there, on the hillside, looking across to the city lying in the sad, fading evening light, He spoke the prophecies of this chapter, which begin with the destruction of Jerusalem, and insensibly merge into the final coming of the Son of Man, of which that was a prelude and a type. The difficulty of accurately apportioning the details of this prophecy to the future events which fulfil them is common to it with all prophecy, of which it is a characteristic to blend events which, in the fulfilment, are far apart. From the mountain top, the eye travels over great stretches of country, but does not see the gorges, separating points which seem close together, foreshortened by distance.

There are many comings of the Son of Man before His final coming for final judgment, and the nearer and smaller ones are themselves prophecies. So, we do not need to settle the chronology of unfulfilled prophecy in order to get the full benefit of Christ’s teachings here. In its moral and spiritual effect on us, the uncertainty of the time of our going to Christ is nearly identical with the uncertainty of the time of His coming to us.

I. The command of watchfulness enforced by our ignorance of the time of His coming [Mat. 24:42 - Mat. 24:44].

The two commands at the beginning and end of the paragraph are not quite the same. ‘Be ye ready’ is the consequence of watchfulness. Nor are the two appended reasons the same; for the first command is grounded on His coming at a day when ‘ye know not,’ and the second on His coming ‘in an hour that ye think not,’ that is to say, it not only is uncertain, but unexpected and surprising. There may also be a difference worth noting in the different designations of Christ as ‘your Lord,’ standing in a special relation to you, and as ‘the Son of Man,’ of kindred with all men, and their Judge. What is this ‘watchfulness’? It is literally wakefulness. We are beset by perpetual temptations to sleep, to spiritual drowsiness and torpor. ‘An opium sky rains down soporifics.’ And without continual effort, our perception of the unseen realities and our alertness for service will be lulled to sleep. The religion of multitudes is a sleepy religion. Further, it is a vivid and ever-present conviction of His certain coming, and consequently a habitual realising of the transience of the existing order of things, and of the fast-approaching realities of the future. Further, it is the keeping of our minds in an attitude of expectation and desire, our eyes ever travelling to the dim distance to mark the far-off shining of His coming. What a miserable contrast to this is the temper of professing Christendom as a whole! It is swallowed up in the present, wide awake to interests and hopes belonging to this ‘bank and shoal of time,’ but sunk in slumber as to that great future, or, if ever the thought of it intrudes, shrinking, rather than desire, accompanies it, and it is soon hustled out of mind.

Christ bases His command on our ignorance of the time of His coming. It was no part of His purpose in this prophecy to remove that ignorance, and no calculations of the chronology of unfulfilled predictions have pierced the darkness. It was His purpose that from generation to generation His servants should be kept in the attitude of expectation, as of an event that may come at any time and must come at some time. The parallel uncertainty of the time of death, though not what is meant here, serves the same moral end if rightly used, and the fact of death is exposed to the same danger of being neglected because of the very uncertainty, which ought to be one chief reason for keeping it ever in view. Any future event, which combines these two things, absolute certainty that it will happen, and utter uncertainty when it will happen, ought to have power to insist on being remembered, at least, till it was prepared for, and would have it, if men were not such fools. Christ’s coming would be oftener contemplated if it were more welcome. But what sort of a servant is he, who has no glow of gladness at the thought of meeting his lord? True Christians are ‘all them that have loved His appearing.’

The illustrative example which separates these two commands is remarkable. The householder’s ignorance of the time when the thief would come is the reason why he does not watch. He cannot keep awake all night, and every night, to be ready for him; so he has to go to sleep, and is robbed. But our ignorance is a reason for wakefulness, because we can keep awake all the night of life. The householder watches to prevent, but we to share in, that for which the watch is kept. The figure of the thief is chosen to illustrate the one point of the unexpected stealthy approach. But is there not deep truth in it, to the effect that Christ's coming is like that of a robber to those who are asleep, depriving them of earthly treasures? The word rendered 'broken up' means literally 'dug through,' and points to a clay or mud house, common in the East, which is entered, not by bursting open doors or windows, but by digging through the wall. Death comes to men sunk in spiritual slumber, to strip them of good which they would fain keep, and makes his entrance by a breach in the earthly house of this tabernacle. So St. Paul, in his earliest Epistle, refers to this saying [a proof of the early diffusion of the gospel narrative], and says, 'Ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.'

II. The picture and reward of watchfulness.

The general exhortation to watch is followed by a pair of contrasted parable portraits, primarily applicable to the apostles and to those 'set over His household.' But if we remember what Christ taught as the condition of pre-eminence in His kingdom, we shall not confine their application to an order.

'The least flower with a brimming cup may stand,
And share its dew-drop with another near,'

and the most slenderly endowed Christian has some crumb of the bread of life intrusted to him to dispense. It is to be observed that watchfulness is not mentioned in this portraiture of the faithful servant. It is presupposed as the basis and motive of his service. So we learn the double lesson that the attitude of continual outlook for the Lord is needed, if we are to discharge the tasks which He has set us, and that the true effect of watchfulness is to harness us to the car of duty. Many other motives actuate Christian faithfulness, but all are reinforced by this, and where it is feeble they are more or less inoperative. We cannot afford to lose its influence. A Church or a soul which has ceased to be looking for Him will have let all its tasks drop from its drowsy hands, and will feel the power of other constraining motives of Christian service but faintly, as in a half-dream.

On the other hand, true waiting for Him is best expressed in the quiet discharge of accustomed and appointed tasks. The right place for the servant to be found, when the Lord comes, is ‘so doing’ as He commands, however secular the task may be. That was a wise judge who, when sudden darkness came on, and people thought the end of the world was at hand, said, ‘Bring lights, and let us go on with the case. We cannot be better employed, if the end has come, than in doing our duty.’ Flighty impatience of common tasks is not watching for the King, as Paul had to teach the Thessalonians, who were ‘shaken’ in mind by the thought of the day of the Lord; but the proper attitude of the watchers is ‘that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business.’

Observe, further, the interrogative form of the parable. The question is the sharp point which gives penetrating power, and suggests Christ’s high estimate of the worth and difficulty of such conduct, and sets us to ask for ourselves, ‘Lord, is it I?’ The servant is ‘faithful’ inasmuch as he does his Lord’s will, and rightly uses the goods intrusted to him, and ‘wise’ inasmuch as he is ‘faithful.’ For a single-hearted devotion to Christ is the parent of insight into duty, and the best guide to conduct; and whoever seeks only to be true to his Lord in the use of his gifts and possessions, will not lack prudence to guide him in giving to each his food, and that in due season. The two characteristics are connected in another way also; for, if the outcome of faithfulness be taken into account, its wisdom is plain, and he who has been faithful even unto death will be seen to have been wise though he gave up all, when the crown of eternal life sparkles on his forehead. Such faithfulness and wisdom [which are at bottom but two names for one course of conduct] find their motive in that watchfulness, which works as ever in the great Taskmaster’s eye, and as ever keeping in view His coming, and the rendering of account to Him.

The reward of the faithful servant is stated in language similar to that of the parable of the talents. Faithfulness in a narrower sphere leads to a wider. The reward for true work is more work, of nobler sort and on a grander scale. That is true for earth and for heaven. If we do His will here, we shall one day exchange the subordinate place of the steward for the authority of the ruler, and the toil of the servant for the ‘joy of the Lord.’ The soul that is joined to Christ and is one in will with Him has all things for its servants;

and he who uses all things for his own and his brethren’s highest good is lord of them all, while he walks amid the shadows of time, and will be lifted to loftier dominion over a grander world when he passes hence.

III. The picture and doom of the unwatchful servant.

This portrait presupposes that a long period will elapse before Christ comes. The secret thought of the evil servant is the thought of a time far down the ages from the moment of our Lord’s speaking. It would take centuries for such a temper to be developed in the Church. What is the temper? A secret dismissal of the anticipation of the Lord’s return, and that not merely because He has been long in coming, but as thinking that He has broken His word, and has not come when He said that He would. This unspoken dimming over of the expectation and unconfessed doubt of the firmness of the promise, is the natural product of the long time of apparent delay which the Church has had to encounter. It will cloud and depress the religion of later ages, unless there be constant effort to resist the tendency and to keep awake. The first generations were all aflame with the glad hope ‘Maranatha’-’The Lord is at hand.’ Their successors gradually lost that keenness of expectation, and at most cried, ‘Will not He come soon?’ Their successors saw the starry hope through thickening mists of years; and now it scarcely shines for many, or at least is but a dim point, when it should blaze as a sun.

He was an ‘evil’ servant who said so in his heart. He was evil because he said it, and he said it because he was evil; for the yielding to sin and the withdrawal of love from Jesus dim the desire for His coming, and make the whisper that He delays, a hope; while, on the other hand, the hope that He delays helps to open the sluices, and let sin flood the life. So an outburst of cruel masterfulness and of riotous sensuality is the consequence of the dimmed expectation. There would have been no usurpation of authority over Christ’s heritage by priest or pope, or any other, if that hope had not become faint. If professing Christians lived with the great white throne and the heavens and earth fleeing away before Him that sits on it, ever burning before their inward eye, how could they wallow amid the mire of animal indulgence? The corruptions of the Church, especially of its official members, are traced with sad and prescient hand in these foreboding words, which are none the less a prophecy because cast by His forbearing gentleness into the milder form of a supposition.

The dreadful doom of the unwatchful servant is couched in terms of awful severity. The cruel punishment of sawing asunder, which, tradition says, was suffered by Isaiah and was not unfamiliar in old times, is his. What concealed terror of retribution it signifies we do not know. Perhaps it points to a fate in which a man shall be, as it were, parted into two, each at enmity with the other. Perhaps it implies a retribution in kind for his sin, which consisted, as the next clause implies, in hypocrisy, which is the sundering in twain of inward conviction and practice, and is to be avenged by a like but worse rending apart of conscience and will. At all events, it shadows a fearful retribution, which is not extinction, inasmuch as, in the next clause, we read that his portion-his lot, or that condition which belongs to him by virtue of his character-is with 'the hypocrites.' He was one of them, because, while he said 'my lord,' he had ceased to love and obey, having ceased to desire and expect; and therefore whatever is their fate shall be his, even to the 'dividing asunder of soul and spirit,' and setting eternal discord among the thoughts and intents of the heart. That is not the punishment of unwatchfulness, but of what unwatchfulness leads to, if unawakened. Let these words of the King ring an alarum for us all, and rouse our sleepy souls to watch, as becomes the children of the day.

28)Matthew 25:26-30

Matthew

TRADERS FOR THE MASTER

Mat. 25:14 - Mat. 25:30.

The parable of the Ten Virgins said nothing about their working whilst they waited. This one sets forth that side of the duties of the servants in their master's absence, and so completes the former. It is clearly in its true historical connection here, and is closely knit to both the preceding and following context. It is a strange instance of superficial reading that it should ever have been supposed to be but another version of Luke's parable of the pounds. The very resemblances of the two are meant to give force to their differences, which are fundamental. They are the converse of each other. That of the pounds teaches that men who have the same gifts intrusted to them may make a widely different use of these, and will be rewarded differently, in strictly graduated proportion to their unlike diligence. The lesson of the parable before us, on the other hand, is that men with dissimilar gifts may employ them with equal diligence; and that, if they do, their reward shall be the same, however great the endowments of one, and slender those of another. A reader who has missed that distinction must be very shortsighted, or sworn to make out a case against the Gospels.

I. We may consider the lent capital and the business done with it.

Masters nowadays do not give servants their money to trade with, when they leave home; but the incident is true to the old-world relations of master and slave. Our Lord’s consciousness of His near departure, which throbs in all this context, comes out emphatically here. He is preparing His disciples for the time when they will have to work without Him, like the managers of some branch house of business whose principal has gone abroad. What are the ‘talents’ with which He will start them on their own account? We have taken the word into common language, however little we remember the teaching of the parable as to the hand that gives ‘men of talent’ their endowments. But the natural powers usually called by the name are not what Christ means here, though the principles of the parable may be extended to include them. For these powers are the ‘ability’ according to which the talents are given. But the talents themselves are the spiritual knowledge and endowments which are properly the gifts of the ascended Lord to His Church. Two important lessons as to these are conveyed. First, that they are distributed in varying measure, and that not arbitrarily, by the mere will of the giver, but according to his discernment of what each servant can profitably administer. The ‘ability’ which settles their amount is not more closely defined. It may include natural faculty, for Christ’s gifts usually follow the line of that; and the larger the nature, the more of Him it can contain. But it also includes spiritual receptiveness and faithfulness, which increase the absorbing power. The capacity to receive will also be the capacity to administer, and it will be fully filled.

The second lesson taught is that spiritual gifts are given for trading with. In other words, they are here considered not so much as blessings to the possessor as his stock-in-trade, which he can employ for the Master's enrichment. We are all tempted to think of them mostly as given us for our own blessing and joy; and the reminder is never unseasonable that a Christian receives nothing for himself alone. God hath shined into our hearts, that we may give to others the light of the knowledge which has flashed glad day into our darkness. The Master intrusts us with a portion of His wealth, not for expending on ourselves, but for trading with.

A third principle here is that the right use of His gifts increases them in our hands. 'Money makes money.' The five talents grow to ten, the two to four. The surest way to increase our possession of Christ's grace is to try to impart it. There is no better way of strengthening our own faith than to seek to make others share in it. Christian convictions, spoken, are confirmed, but muffled in silence are weakened. 'There is that scattereth and yet increaseth.' Seed heaped and locked up in a granary breeds weevils and moths; flung broadcast over the furrows, it multiplies into seed that can be sown again, and bread that feeds the sower. So we have in this part of the parable almost the complete summary of the principles on which, the purposes for which, and the results to faithful use with which, Christ gives His gifts.

The conduct of the slenderly endowed servant who hides his talent will be considered farther on.

II. We note the faithful servants' balance-sheet and reward.

Our Lord again sounds the note of delay-'After a long time'-an indefinite phrase which we know carries centuries in its folds, how many more we know not nor are intended to know. The two faithful servants present their balance-sheet in identical words, and receive the same commendation and reward. Their speech is in sharp contrast with the idle one's excuse, inasmuch as it puts a glad acknowledgment of the lord's giving in the forefront, as if to teach that the thankful recognition of his liberality underlies all joyful and successful service, and deepens while it makes glad the sense of responsibility. The cords of love are silken; and he who begins with setting before himself the largeness of Christ's gifts to him, will not fail in using these so as to increase them. In the light of that day, the servant sees more clearly than when he was at work the results of his work. We do not know what the year's profits have been till stock-taking and balancing-time comes. Here we often say, 'I have laboured in vain.' There we shall say, 'I have gained five talents.'

The verbatim repetition of the same words to both servants teaches the great lesson of this parable as contrasted with that of the pounds, that where there has been the same faithful work, with different amounts of capital, there will be the same reward. Our Master does not care about quantity, but about quality and motive. The slave with a few shillings, enough to stock meagrely a little stall, may show as much business capacity, diligence, and fidelity, as if he had millions to work with. Christ rewards not actions, but the graces which are made visible in actions; and these can be as well seen in the tiniest as in the largest deeds. The light that streams through a pin-prick is the same that pours through the widest window. The crystals of a salt present the same facets, flashing back the sun at the same angles, whether they be large or microscopically small. Therefore the judgment of Christ, which is simply the utterance of fact, takes no heed of the extent but only of the kind of service, and puts on the same level of recompense all who, with however widely varying powers, were one in spirit, in diligence, and devotion. The eulogium on the servants is not 'successful' or 'brilliant,' but 'faithful,' and both alike get it.

The words of the lord fall into three parts. First comes his generous and hearty praise,-the brief and emphatic monosyllable 'Well,' and the characterisation of the servants as 'good and faithful.' Praise from Christ's lips is praise indeed; and here He pours it out in no grudging or scanty measure, but with warmth and evident delight. His heart glows with pleasure, and His commendation is musical with the utterance of His own joy in His servants. He 'rejoices over them with singing'; and more gladly than a fond mother speaks honeyed words of approval to her darling, of whose goodness she is proud, does He praise these two. When we are tempted to disparage our slender powers as compared with those of His more conspicuous servants, and to suppose that all which we do is nought, let us think of this merciful and loving estimate of our poor service. For such words from such lips, life itself were wisely flung away; but such words from such lips will be spoken in recognition of many a piece of service less high and heroic than a martyr's. 'Good and faithful' refers not to the more general notion of goodness, but to the special excellence of a servant, and the latter word seems to define the former. Fidelity is the grace which He praises,-manifested in the recognition that the capital was a loan, given to be traded with for Him, and to be brought back increased to Him. He is faithful who ever keeps in view, and acts on, the conditions on which, and the purposes for which, he has received his spiritual wealth; and 'he who is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in much.'

The second part of the lord's words is the appointment to higher office, as the reward of faithfulness. Here on earth, the tools come, in the long run, to the hands that can use them, and the best reward of faithfulness in a narrower sphere is to be lifted to a wider. Promotion means more to do; and if the world were rightly organised, the road to advancement would be diligence; and the higher a man climbed, the wider would be the horizon of his labour. It is so in Christ's kingdom, and should be so in His visible Church. It will be so in heaven. Clearly this saying implies the active theory of the future life, and the continuance in some ministry of love, unknown to us, of the energies which were trained in the small transactions of earth. 'If five talents are "a few things," how great the "many things" will be!' In the parable of the pounds, the servant is made a ruler; here being 'set over' seems rather still to point to the place of a steward or servant. The sphere is enlarged, but the office is unaltered. The manager who conducted a small trade rightly will be advanced to the superintendence of a larger business.

'We doubt not that for one so true
There must be other, nobler work to do,'

and that in that work the same law will continue to operate, and faithfulness be crowned with ever-growing capacities and tasks through a dateless eternity.

The last words of the lord pass beyond our poor attempts at commenting. No eye can look undazzled at the sun. When Christ was near the Cross, He left His disciples a strange bequest at such a moment,-His joy; and that is their brightest portion here, even though it be shaded with many sorrows.

The enthroned Christ welcomes all who have known ‘the fellowship of His sufferings’ into the fulness of His heavenly joy, unshaded, unbroken, unspeakable; and they pass into it as into an encompassing atmosphere, or some broad land of peace and abundance. Sympathy with His purposes leads to such oneness with Him that His joy is ours, both in its occasions and in its rapture. ‘Thou makest them drink of the river of Thy pleasures,’ and the lord and the servant drink from the same cup.

III. The excuse and punishment of the indolent servant.

His excuse is his reason. He did think hardly of his lord, and, even though he had His gift in his hand to confute him, he slandered Him in his heart as harsh and exacting. To many men the requirements of religion are more prominent than its gifts, and God is thought of as demanding rather than as ‘the giving God.’ Such thoughts paralyse action. Fear is barren, love is fruitful. Nothing grows on the mountain of curses, which frowns black over against the sunny slopes of the mountain of blessing with its blushing grapes. The indolence was illogical, for, if the master was such as was thought, the more reason for diligence; but fear is a bad reasoner, and the absurd gap between the premises and the conclusion is matched by one of the very same width in every life that thinks of God as rigidly requiring obedience, which, therefore, it does not give! Still another error is in the indolent servant’s words. He flings down the hoarded talent with ‘Lo, thou hast thine own.’ He was mistaken. Talents hid are not, when dug up, as heavy as they were when buried. This gold does rust, and a life not devoted to God is never carried back to Him unspoiled.

The lord’s answer again falls into three parts, corresponding to that to the faithful servants. First comes the stern characterisation of the man. As with the others’ goodness, his badness is defined by the second epithet. It is slothfulness. Is that all? Yes; it does not need active opposition to pull down destruction on one’s head. Simple indolence is enough, the negative sin of not doing or being what we ought. Ungirt loins, unlit lamps, unused talents, sink a man like lead. Doing nothing is enough for ruin.

The remarkable answer to the servant’s charge seems to teach us that timid souls, conscious of slender endowments, and pressed by the heavy sense of responsibility, and shrinking from Christian enterprises, for fear of incurring heavier condemnation, may yet find means of using their little capital. The bankers, who invest the collective contributions of small capitalists to advantage, may, or may not, be intended to be translated into the Church; but, at any rate, the principle of united service is here recommended to those who feel too weak for independent action. Slim houses in a row hold each other up; and, if we cannot strike out a path for ourselves, let us seek strength and safety in numbers.

The fate of the indolent servant has a double horror. It is loss and suffering. The talent is taken from the slack hands and coward heart that would not use it, and given to the man who had shown he could and would. Gifts unemployed for Christ are stripped off a soul yonder. How much will go from many a richly endowed spirit, which here flashed with unconsecrated genius and force! We do not need to wait for eternity to see that true possession, which is use, increases powers, and that disuse, which is equivalent to not possessing, robs of them. The blacksmith's arm, the scout's eye, the craftsman's delicate finger, the student's intellect, the sensualist's passions, all illustrate the law on its one side; and the dying out of faculties and tastes, and even of intuitions and conscience, by reason of simple disuse, are melancholy instances of it on the other. But the solemn words of this condemnation seem to point to a far more awful energy in its working in the future, when everything that has not been consecrated by employment for Jesus shall be taken away, and the soul, stripped of its garb, shall 'be found naked.' How far that process of divesting may affect faculties, without touching the life, who can tell? Enough to see with awe that a spirit may be cut, as it were, to the quick, and still exist.

But loss is not all the indolent servant's doom. Once more, like the slow toll of a funeral bell, we hear the dread sentence of ejection to the 'mirk midnight' without, where are tears undried and passion unavailing. There is something very awful in the monotonous repetition of that sentence so often in these last discourses of Christ's. The most loving lips that ever spoke, in love, shaped this form of words, so heart-touching in its wailing, but decisive, proclamation of blackness, homelessness, and sorrow, and cannot but toll them over and over again into our ears, in sad knowledge of our forgetfulness and unbelief,-if perchance we may listen and be warned, and, having heard the sound thereof, may never know the reality of that death in life which is the sure end of the indolent who were blind to His gifts, and therefore would not listen to His requirements.

29)Matthew 25:31-46

Matthew

THE KING ON HIS JUDGMENT THRONE

Mat. 25:31 - Mat. 25:46.

The teachings of that wonderful last day of Christ’s ministry, which have occupied so many of our pages, are closed with this tremendous picture of universal judgment. It is one to be gazed upon with silent awe, rather than to be commented on. There is fear lest, in occupying the mind in the study of the details, and trying to pierce the mystery it partly unfolds, we should forget our own individual share in it. Better to burn in on our hearts the thought, ‘I shall be there,’ than to lose the solemn impression in efforts to unravel the difficulties of the passage. Difficulties there are, as is to be expected in even Christ’s revelation of so unparalleled a scene. Many questions are raised by it which will never be solved till we stand there. Who can tell how much of the parabolic element enters into the description? We, at all events, do not venture to say of one part, ‘This is merely drapery, the sensuous representation of spiritual reality,’ and of another, ‘That is essential truth.’ The curtain is the picture, and before we can separate the elements of it in that fashion, we must have lived through it. Let us try to grasp the main lessons, and not lose the spirit in studying the letter.

I. The first broad teaching is that Christ is the Judge of all the earth.

Sitting there, a wearied man on the Mount of Olives, with the valley of Jehoshaphat at His feet, which the Jew regarded as the scene of the final judgment, Jesus declared Himself to be the Judge of the world, in language so unlimited in its claims that the speaker must be either a madman or a god. Calvary was less than three days off, when He spoke thus. The contrast between the vision of the future and the reality of the present is overwhelming. The Son of Man has come in weakness and shame; He will come in His glory, that flashing light of the self-revealing God, of which the symbol was the ‘glory’ which shone between the cherubim, and which Jesus Christ here asserts to belong to Him as ‘His glory.’ Then, heaven will be emptied of its angels, who shall gather round the enthroned Judge as His handful of sorrowing followers were clustered round Him as He spoke, or as the peasants had surrounded the meek state of His entry yesterday. Then, He will take the place of Judge, and ‘sit,’ in token of repose, supremacy, and judgment, ‘on the throne of His glory,’ as He now sat on the rocks of Olivet. Then, mankind shall be massed at His feet, and His glance shall part the infinite multitudes, and discern the character of each item in the crowd as easily and swiftly as the shepherd’s eye picks out the black goats from among the white sheep. Observe the difference in the representation from those in the previous parables. There, the parting of kinds was either self-acting, as in the case of the foolish maidens; or men gave account of themselves, as in the case of the servants with the talents. Here, the separation is the work of the Judge, and is completed before a word is spoken. All these representations must be included in the complete truth as to the final judgment. It is the effect of men’s actions; it is the result of their compelled disclosing of the deepest motives of their lives; it is the act of the perfect discernment of the Judge. Their deeds will judge them; they will judge themselves; Christ will judge.

Singularly enough, every possible interpretation of the extent of the expression ‘all nations’ has found advocates. It has been taken in its widest and plainest meaning, as equivalent to the whole race; it has been confined to mankind exclusive of Christians, and it has been confined to Christians exclusive of heathens. There are difficulties in all these explanations, but probably the least are found in the first. It is most natural to suppose that ‘all nations’ means all nations, unless that meaning be impossible. The absence of the limitation to the ‘kingdom of heaven,’ which distinguishes this section from the preceding ones having reference to judgment, and the position of the present section as the solemn close of Christ’s teachings, which would naturally widen out into the declaration of the universal judgment, which forms the only appropriate climax and end to the foregoing teachings, seem to point to the widest meaning of the phrase. His office of universal Judge is unmistakably taught throughout the New Testament, and it seems in the highest degree unnatural to suppose that He did not speak of it in these final words of prophetic warning. We may therefore, with some confidence, see in the magnificent and awful picture here drawn the vision of universal judgment. Parabolic elements there no doubt are in the picture; but we have no governing revelation, free from these, by which we can check them, and be sure of how much is form and how much substance. This is clear, ‘that we must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ’; and this is clear, that Jesus Christ put forth, when at the very lowest point of His earthly humiliation, these tremendous claims, and asserted His authority as Judge over every soul of man. We are apt to lose ourselves in the crowd. Let us pause and think that ‘all’ includes ‘me.’

II. Note the principles of Christ’s universal judgment.

It is important to remember that this section closes a series of descriptions of the judgment, and must not be taken as if, when isolated, it set forth all the truth. It is often harped upon by persons who are unfriendly to evangelical teaching, as if it were Christ’s only word about judgment, and interpreted as if it meant that, no matter what else a man was, if only he is charitable and benevolent, he will find mercy. But this is to forget all the rest of our Lord’s teaching in the context, and to fly in the face of the whole tenor of New Testament doctrine. We have here to do with the principles of judgment which apply equally to those who have, and to those who have not, heard the gospel. The subjects of the kingdom are shown the principles more immediately applicable to them, in the previous parables, and here they are reminded that there is a standard of judgment absolutely universal. All men, whether Christians or not, are judged by ‘the things done in the body, whether they be good or bad.’ So Christ teaches in His closing words of the Sermon on the Mount, and in many another place. ‘Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.’ The productive source of good works is not in question here; stress is laid on the fruits, rather than on the root. The gospel is as imperative in its requirements of righteousness as the law is, and its conception of the righteousness which it requires is far deeper and wider. The subjects of the kingdom ever need to be reminded of the solemn truth that they have not only, like the wise maidens, to have their lights burning and their oil vessels filled, nor only, like the wise servants, to be using the gifts of the kingdom for their lord, but, as members of the great family of man, have to cultivate the common moralities which all men, heathen and Christian, recognise as binding on all, without which no man shall see the Lord. The special form of righteousness which is selected as the test is charity. Obviously it is chosen as representative of all the virtues of the second table of the law. Taken in its bare literality, this would mean that men’s relations to God had no effect in the judgment, mid that no other virtues but this of charity came into the account. Such a conclusion is so plainly repugnant to all Christ’s teaching, that we must suppose that love to one’s neighbour is here singled out, just as it is in His summary of ‘the law and the prophets,’ as the crown and flower of all relative duties, and as, in a very real sense, being ‘the fulfilling of the law.' The omission of any reference to the love of God sufficiently shows that the view here is rigidly limited to acts, and that all the grounds of judgment are not meant to be set forth.

But the benevolence here spoken of is not the mere natural sentiment, which often exists in great energy in men whose moral nature is, in other respects, so utterly un-Christlike that their entrance into the kingdom prepared for the righteous is inconceivable. Many a man has a hundred vices and yet a soft heart. It is very much a matter of temperament. Does Christ so contradict all the rest of His teaching as to say that such a man is of 'the sheep,' and 'blessed of the Father'? Surely not. Is every piece of kindliness to the distressed, from whatever motive, and by whatsoever kind of person done, regarded by Him as done to Himself? To say so, would be to confound moral distinctions, and to dissolve all righteousness into a sentimental syrup. The deeds which He regards as done to Himself, are done to His 'brethren.' That expression carries us into the region of motive, and runs parallel with His other words about 'receiving a prophet,' and 'giving a cup of cold water to one of these little ones,' because they are His. Seeing that all nations are at the bar, the expression, 'My brethren,' cannot be confined to the disciples, for many of those who are being judged have never come in contact with Christians, nor can it be reasonably supposed to include all men, for, however true it is that Christ is every man's brother, the recognition of kindred here must surely be confined to those at the right hand. Whatever be included under the 'righteous,' that is included under the 'brethren.' We seem, then, led to recognise in the expression a reference to the motive of the beneficence, and to be brought to the conclusion that what the Judge accepts as done to Himself is such kindly help and sympathy as is extended to these His kindred, with some recognition of their character, and desire after it. To 'receive a prophet' implies that there is some spiritual affinity with him in the receiver. To give help to His brethren, because they are so, implies some affinity with Him or feeling after likeness to Him and them. Now, if we hold fast by the universality of the judgment here depicted, we shall see that this recognition must necessarily have different degrees in those who have heard of Christ and in those who have not. In the former, it will be equivalent to that faith which is the root of all goodness, and grasps the Christ revealed in the gospel. In the latter, it can be no more than a feeling after Him who is the 'light that lighteneth every man that cometh into the world.’ Surely there are souls amid the darkness of heathenism yearning toward the light, like plants grown in the dark. By ways of His own, Christ can reach such hearts, as the river of the water of life may percolate through underground channels to many a tree which grows far from its banks.

III. Note the surprises of the judgment.

The astonishment of the righteous is not modesty disclaiming praise, but real wonder at the undreamed-of significance of their deeds. In the parable of the talents, the servants unveiled their inmost hearts, and accurately described their lives. Here, the other side of the truth is brought into prominence, that, at that day, we shall be surprised when we hear from His lips what we have really done. True Christian beneficence has consciously for its motive the pleasing of Christ; but still he who most earnestly strove, while here, to do all as unto Jesus, will be full of thankful wonder at the grace which accepts his poor service, and will learn, with fresh marvelling, how closely He associates Himself with His humblest servant. There is an element of mystery hidden from ourselves in all our deeds. Our love to Christ’s followers never goes out so plainly to Him that, while here, we can venture to be sure that He takes it as done for Him. We cannot here follow the flight of the arrow, nor know what meaning He will attach to, or what large issues He will evolve from, our poor doings. So heaven will be full of blessed surprises, as we reap the fruit growing ‘in power’ of what we sowed ‘in weakness,’ and as doleful will be the astonishment which will seize those who see, for the first time, in the lurid light of that day, the true character of their lives, as one long neglect of plain duties, which was all a defrauding the Saviour of His due. Mere doing nothing is enough to condemn, and its victims will be shudderingly amazed at the fatal wound it has inflicted on them.

IV. The irrevocableness of the judgment.

That is an awful contrast between the ‘Come! ye blessed,’ and ‘Depart! ye cursed.’ That is a more awful parallel between ‘eternal punishment’ and ‘eternal life.’ It is futile to attempt to alleviate the awfulness by emptying the word ‘eternal’ of reference to duration. It no doubt connotes quality, but its first meaning is ever-during. There is nothing here to suggest that the one condition is more terminable than the other. Rather, the emphatic repetition of the word brings the unending continuance of each into prominence, as the point in which these two states, so wofully unlike, are the same. In whatever other passages the doctrine of universal restoration may seem to find a foothold, there is not an inch of standing-room for it here. Reverently accepting Christ's words as those of perfect and infallible love, the present writer feels so strongly the difficulty of bringing all the New Testament declarations on this dread question into a harmonious whole, that he abjures for himself dogmatic certainty, and dreads lest, in the eagerness of discussing the duration [which will never be beyond the reach of discussion], the solemn reality of the fact of future retribution should be dimmed, and men should argue about 'the terror of the Lord' till they cease to feel it.

30)Matthew 26:29

Matthew

THE NEW PASSOVER

'UNTIL THAT DAY'

Mat. 26:29.

This remarkable saying of our Lord's is recorded in all of the accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper. The thought embodied in it ought to be present in the minds of all who partake of that rite. It converts what is primarily a memorial into a prophecy. It bids us hope as well as, and because we, remember. The light behind us is cast forward on to the dimness before. So the Apostle Paul, in his solitary reference to the Communion-which, indeed, is an entirely incidental one, and evoked simply by the corruptions in the Corinthian Church, emphasises this prophetic and onward-looking aspect of the backward-looking rite when he says, 'Ye do show the Lord's death till He come.'

Now, it seems to me that those of us who so strongly hold that the Communion is primarily a simple memorial service, with no mysterious or magical efficacy of any sort about it, do rather ignore in our ordinary thoughts the other aspect which is brought out in my text; and that comparative ignoring seems to me to be but a part of a very lamentable and general tendency of this day, whereby the prospect of a future life has become somewhat dimmed and does not fill the place either in ordinary Christian thinking, or as a motive for Christian service which the proportion of faith, and the relative importance of the present and the future suggest that it ought to fill. The Christianity of this day has so much to do with the present life, and the thought of the Gospel as a power in the present has been so emphasised, in legitimate reaction from the opposite exaggeration, that there is great need, as I believe, to preach to Christian people the wisdom of making more prominent in their faith their immortal hope. I wish, then, to turn now to this aspect of the rite which we regard as a memorial, and try to emphasise its forward-looking attitude, and the large blessed truths that emerge if we consider that.

I. First, let me say just a word about the twin aspect of the Communion as a memorial prophecy, or prophetic remembrance.

Now, I need not remind you, I suppose, that according to the view which, as I believe, the New Testament takes, and which certainly we Nonconformists take, of all the rites of external worship, every one of them is a prophecy, because every act in which our sense is brought in to reinforce the spirit-and by outward forms, be they vocal, or be they manual, or be they of any other sort, we try to express and to quicken spiritual emotions and intellectual convictions-declares its own imperfection, digs its own grave, and prophecies its own resurrection in a nobler and better fashion. Just because these outward symbols of bread and wine do, through the senses, quicken the faith and the love of the spirit, they declare themselves to be transitory, and they point onwards to the time when that which is perfect shall absorb, and so destroy, that which is in part, and when sense shall be no longer necessary as the ally and humble servant of spirit. ‘I saw no temple therein.’ Temples, and rites, and services, and holy days, and all the external apparatus of worship, are but scaffolding, and just as the scaffolding round a building is a prophecy of its own being pulled down when the building is reared and completed, so we cannot partake of these external symbols rightly, unless we recognise their transiency, and feel that they say to us, ‘A mightier than I cometh after me, the latchet of whose shoe I am not worthy to unloose.’ The light that shines in the dark heralds the day and its own extinction.

So, looking back we must look forward, and partaking of the symbol, we must reach out to the time when the symbol shall be antiquated, the reality having come. The Passover of Israel did not more truly point onwards to the true Lamb of Sacrifice, and to the true Passover that was slain for us, and to its own elevation into the Lord’s Supper of the Christian Church, than the Lord’s Supper of the Christian Church points onwards to the ‘marriage supper of the Lamb,’ and its own cessation.

But then, again, let me remind you that this prophetic aspect is inherent in the memorial aspect of the Communion, because what we remember necessarily demands the coming of what we hope. That is to say, if Jesus Christ be what the Lord’s Supper says that He is, and if He has done what that broken bread and poured out wine proclaim, according to His own utterance, that He has done, then clearly that death which was for the life of the world, that death which was the seal of a covenant, that body broken for the remission of sins, that wine partaken of as a reception into ourselves of the very life-blood of Jesus Christ, do all demand something far nobler and more perfect than the broken, incomplete obedience and loyalties and communions which Christian men here exercise and possess.

If He died, as the rite says that He did, and if dying He left such a commentary upon His act as that ordinance affords, then He cannot have done with the world; then the powers that were set in motion by His death cannot pause nor cease their action until they have reached their appropriate culmination in effecting all that it was in them to effect. If, leaving His people, He said to them, ‘Never forget My death for you, My broken body, and My shed blood,’ He therein said that the time will come, must come, when all the powers of the Cross shall be incorporated in humanity, and when the parted shall be reunited. The Communion would stand as the expression of Christ’s mistaken estimate of His own importance, if there were not beyond the grave the perfecting of it, and the full appropriation and joyful possession of all which the death that it signifies brought to mankind.

Therefore, dear brethren, it seems to me that the best way by which Christians can deepen their confidence and brighten their hope in the perfect reunion and blessedness of the heavens, is to increase the firmness of their faith in, and the depth of their apprehension of, the sacrifice of the Cross. If the Cross demands the Crown, then our surest way to realise as certain our own possession of that Crown is to cling very close to that Cross. The more we look backwards to it the more will it fling its light into all the dark places that are in front of us, and flush the heavens up to the seventh and beyond, with the glories that stream from it. Hold fast by the Cross, and the more fully, believingly, joyously, unfalteringly, we recognise in it the foundation of our salvation, the more gladly, clearly, operatively, shall we cherish the hope that 'the headstone shall be brought forth with shoutings,' and that the imperfect symbolical communion of earth will grow and greaten into complete and real union in eternal bliss.

Let me urge, then, this, that, as a matter of fact, a faith in eternal glory goes with and fluctuates in the same degree and manner as does the faith in the past sacrifice that Christ has made. He, and He alone, as I believe, turns nebulae into solidity, and makes of the more or less tremulous anticipation of a more or less dim and distant future, a calm, still certainty. We know that He will come because, and in proportion as, we believe that He has come. Keep these two things, then, always together, the memory and the hope. They stand like two great piers, one on either side of a narrow, dark glen, and suspended from them is stretched the bridge, along which the happy pilgrims may travel and enter into rest.

II. And now, let us turn for a moment to the lovely vision of that future which is suggested by our text.

The truest way, I was going to say the only way, by which we can have any conceptions of a condition of being of which we have no experience, is to fall back upon the experiences which we have, and use them as symbols and metaphors. The curtain is the picture. So our Lord here, in accordance with the necessary limitations of our human knowledge, contents Himself with using what lay at His hand, and taking it as giving faint shadows and metaphorical suggestions as to spiritual blessedness yonder.

There is one other way, as it seems to me, by which we can in any measure body forth to ourselves that unknown condition of things, and that is to fall back upon our present experiences in another fashion, and negative all of them which involve pain and limitation and incompleteness. There shall be no night-no sorrow-no tears-no sighing, and the like. These negatives of the strong and stinging griefs and limitations of the present are perhaps our second-best way of coming to some prophetic vision of that great future.

Remembering, then, that we are dealing with pure metaphor, and that the exact translation of the metaphor into reality is not yet possible for us, let us take one or two very plain thoughts out of this great saying-'Until I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom.'

Then, we have to think of the completion of the Christian life beyond, which is also the completion of the results of Christ's death on the Cross, as being, according to the very frequent metaphor both of the Old and the New Testament, a prolonged festival. I do not need to speak of the details of the thoughts that thence emerge. Let me sum them up as briefly as may be. They include the satisfaction of every desire and the nourishment of all strength, and food for every faculty. When we think of the hungry hearts that all men carry, and how true it is that even the wisest and the holiest of us are 'spending our money for that which is not bread, and our labour for that which satisfieth not'; when we think of how the choicest foods that life can provide, even for the noblest hunger of noble hearts, are too often to us but as a feeding on ashes that will leave grit between the teeth and a foul taste upon the palate, surely it is blessed to think that we may, after all life's disappointments, cherish the hope of a perfect fruition, and that yonder, if not here, it will be fully true that 'God never sends mouths but He sends meat to feed them.' That is not so in this world, for we all carry hungers which impel us forward to nobler living, and which it would not be good for us to have satisfied here. But, unless the whole universe is a godless chaos, there must be somewhere a state in which a man shall have all that he wants, and shall want only what he ought.

The emblem of a feast suggests also society. The solitary travellers who have been toiling and moiling through the desert all the day long, snatching up a hasty mouthful as they march, and lonely many a time, come together at last, and sit together there joyous and united. Deep down in our hearts some of us have gashes that always bleed. We know losses and loneliness, and we can feel, I hope, how blessed is the thought that all the wanderers shall sit there together, and rejoice in each other's communion, 'and so shall we ever be with the Lord.'

But besides satisfaction and society the figure suggests repose. That rest is not indolence, for we have to carry other metaphors with us in order to come to the full significance of this one, and the festal imagery is not all that we have to take into account; for we read, 'I grant unto you a kingdom, and ye shall sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel,' as well as 'ye shall eat and drink with Me at My table in My kingdom.' So repose, which is consistent and coexistent with the intensest activity, is the great hope that comes out of these metaphors. But for many of us-I suppose for all of us elderly people-who are about weary of work and worry, there is no deeper hope than the hope of rest. 'I have had labour enough for one,' says one of our poets. And I think there is something in most of our hearts that echoes that and rejoices to hear that, after the long march, 'ye shall sit with Me at My table.'

But besides satisfaction, society, and rest, the figure suggests gladness. Wine is the emblem of the joyous side of a feast, just as bread is the emblem of the necessary nourishment. And it is new wine; joy raised to a higher power, transformed and glorified; and yet the old emotion in a new form. As for that gladness, 'eye hath not seen, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive, the things that God hath prepared for them that love Him.' Only all we weary, heavy-laden, saddened, anxious, disappointed, tormented people may hope for these festal joys, if we are Christ's. The feast will last when all the troubles and the cares which helped us to it are dead and buried and forgotten.

These four things, brethren-satisfaction, society, rest, new gladness-are proclaimed and prophesied to each of us, if we will, by this memorial rite.

Again, there comes from this aspect of the Communion the thought that the blessed condition of the Christian soul hereafter is a feast on a sacrifice. We must distinguish between the sense in which our Lord drinks with us, and the sense in which we alone partake of that feast of which He provides the viands. But just as in the symbolic ordinance of the Communion the very essence of it is that what was offered as sacrifice is now incorporated into the participant's spiritual being, and becomes part of himself, and the life of his life, so, in the future, all the blessedness of the clustered and constellated joys of that life, which is one eternal festival, shall arise from the reception into perfected spirits with ever-growing greatness and blessedness of the Christ that died and ever lives for them. That heavenly glory, to its highest pinnacle of aspiration, to its most rapt completeness of gladness, is all the consequence of Christ's death on the Cross. That death, which we commemorate, is the procuring cause of man's entrance into bliss, and that death is the subject of the continual, grateful remembrance of the saints in the seventh heaven of their glory. Life yonder, as all true life here, consists in taking into ourselves the life of Jesus Christ, and the law for heaven is the same as the law for earth, 'He that eateth Me, even he shall live by Me.'

Lastly, the conception of the future for Christian souls arising from this aspect of the Lord's Supper is that it is not only a feast, and a feast on a sacrifice, but that it is a feast with the King.

'With you I will drink it.' Brethren, we pass beyond metaphor when we gather up and condense all the vague brightness and glories of that perfect future into this one rapturous, overwhelming, all-embracing thought: 'So shall we ever be with the Lord.' I could almost wish that Christian people had no other thought of that future than this, for surely in its grand simplicity, in its ineffable depth, there lie the germs of every blessedness. How poor all the material emblems are of which sensuous imaginations make so much, when compared with that hope! As the good old hymn has it, which to me says more, in its bold simplicity, than all the sentimental enlargements of Scriptural metaphors which some people admire so much-

'It is enough that Christ knows all,
And I shall be with Him.'

Strange that He says, 'I will drink it with you.' Does He need sustenance? Does He need any external things in order to make His feast? No! and Yes! 'I will sup with Him' as well as 'He with me.' And, surely, His meat and drink are the love, the loyalty, the obedience, the receptiveness, the society of His redeemed children. ‘The joy of the Lord’ comes from ‘seeing of the travail of His soul,’ and His servants do enter into that joy in deep and wondrous fashion. We not only shall live on Christ, but He Himself puts to His own lips the chalice that He commends to ours, and in marvellous condescension to, and identity with, our glorified humanity drinks with us the ‘new wine’ in the Father’s kingdom.

31)Matthew 26:30

Matthew

THE NEW PASSOVER

Mat. 26:17 - Mat. 26:30.

The Tuesday of Passion Week was occupied by the wonderful discourses which have furnished so many of our meditations. At its close Jesus sought retirement in Bethany, not only to soothe and prepare His spirit but to ‘hide Himself’ from the Sanhedrin. There He spent the Wednesday. Who can imagine His thoughts? While He was calmly reposing in Mary’s quiet home, the rulers determined on His arrest, but were at a loss how to effect it without a riot. Judas comes to them opportunely, and they leave it to him to give the signal. Possibly we may account for the peculiar secrecy observed as to the place for the last supper, by our Lord’s knowledge that His steps were watched, and by His earnest wish to eat the Passover with the disciples before He suffered. The change between the courting of publicity and almost inviting of arrest at the beginning of the week, and the evident desire to postpone the crisis till the fitting moment which marks the close of it, is remarkable, and most naturally explained by the supposition that He wished the time of His death to be that very hour when, according to law, the paschal lamb was slain. On the Thursday, then, he sent Peter and John into the city to prepare the Passover; the others being in ignorance of the place till they were there, and Judas being thus prevented from carrying out his purpose till after the celebration.

The precautions taken to ensure this have left their mark on Matthew’s narrative, in the peculiar designation of the host,-’Such a man!’ It is a kind of echo of the mystery which he so well remembered as round the errand of the two. He does not seem to have heard of the token by which they knew the house, viz., the man with the pitcher whom they were to meet. But he does know that Peter and John got secret instructions, and that he and the others wondered where they were to go. Had there been a previous arrangement with this unnamed ‘such an one,’ or were the token and the message alike instances of Christ’s supernatural knowledge and authority? It is difficult to say. I incline to the former supposition, which would be in accordance with the distinct effort after secrecy which marks these days; but the narratives do not decide the question. At all events, the host was a disciple, as appears from the authoritative ‘the Master saith’; and, whether he had known beforehand that ‘this day’ incarnate ‘salvation would come to his house’ or no, he eagerly accepts the peril and the honour. His message is royal in its tone. The Lord does not ask permission, but issues His commands. But He is a pauper King, not having where to lay His head, and needing another man’s house in which to gather His own household together for the family feast of the Passover. What profound truths are wrapped up in that ‘My time is come’! It speaks of the voluntariness of His surrender, the consciousness that His Cross was the centre point of His work, His superiority to all external influences as determining the hour of His death, and His submission to the supreme appointment of the Father. Obedience and freedom, choice and necessity, are wonderfully blended in it.

So, late on that Thursday evening, the little band left Bethany for the last time, in a fashion very unlike the joyous stir of the triumphal entry. As the evening is falling, they thread their way through the noisy streets, all astir with the festal crowds, and reach the upper room, Judas vainly watching for an opportunity to slip away on his black errand. The chamber, prepared by unknown hands, has vanished, and the hands are dust; but both are immortal. How many of the living acts of His servants in like manner seem to perish, and the doers of them to be forgotten or unknown! But He knows the name of ‘such an one,’ and does not forget that he opened his door for Him to enter in and sup.

The fact that Jesus put aside the Passover and founded the Lord’s Supper in its place, tells much both about His authority and its meaning. What must He have conceived of Himself, who bade Jew and Gentile turn away from that God-appointed festival, and think not of Moses, but of Him? What did He mean by setting the Lord’s Supper in the place of the Passover, if He did not mean that He was the true Paschal Lamb, that His death was a true sacrifice, that in His sprinkled blood was safety, that His death inaugurated the better deliverance of the true Israel from a darker prison-house and a sorer bondage, that His followers were a family, and that ‘the children’s bread’ was the sacrifice which He had made? There are many reasons for the doubling of the commemorative emblem, but this is obviously one of the chief-that, by the separation of the two in the rite, we are carried back to the separation in fact; that is to say, to the violent death of Christ. Not His flesh alone, in the sense of Incarnation, but His body broken and His blood shed, are what He wills should be for ever remembered. His own estimate of the centre point of His work is unmistakably pronounced in His institution of this rite.

But we may consider the force of each emblem separately. In many important points they mean the same things, but they have each their own significance as well. Matthew’s condensed version of the words of institution omits all reference to the breaking of the body and to the memorial character of the observance, but both are implied. He emphasises the reception, the participation, and the significance of the bread. As to the latter, ‘This is My body’ is to be understood in the same way as ‘the field is the world,’ and many other sayings. To speak in the language of grammarians, the copula is that of symbolic relationship, not that of existence; or, to speak in the language of the street, ‘is’ here means, as it often does, ‘represents.’ How could it mean anything else, when Christ sat there in His body, and His blood was in His veins? What, then, is the teaching of this symbol? It is not merely that He in His humanity is the bread of life, but that He in His death is the nourishment of our true life. In that great discourse in John’s Gospel, which embodies in words the lessons which the Lord’s Supper teaches by symbols, He advances from the general statement, ‘I am the Bread of Life,’ to the yet more mysterious and profound teaching that His flesh, which at some then future point He will ‘give for the life of the world,’ is the bread; thus distinctly foreshadowing

His death, and asserting that by that death we live, and by partaking of it are nourished. The participation in the benefits of Christ’s death, which is symbolised by ‘Take, eat,’ is effected by living faith. We feed on Christ when our minds are occupied with His truth, and our hearts nourished by His love, when it is the ‘meat’ of our wills to do His will, and when our whole inward man fastens on Him as its true object, and draws from Him its best being. But the act of reception teaches the great lesson that Christ must be in us, if He is to do us any good. He is not ‘for us’ in any real sense, unless He be ‘in us.’ The word rendered in John’s Gospel ‘eateth’ is that used for the ruminating of cattle, and wonderfully indicates the calm, continual, patient meditation by which alone we can receive Christ into our hearts, and nourish our lives on Him. Bread eaten is assimilated to the body, but this bread eaten assimilates the eater to itself, and he who feeds on Christ becomes Christ-like, as the silk-worm takes the hue of the leaves on which it browses. Bread eaten to-day will not nourish us to-morrow, neither will past experiences of Christ’s sweetness sustain the soul. He must be ‘our daily bread’ if we are not to pine with hunger.

The wine carries its own special teaching, which clearly appears in Matthew’s version of the words of institution. It is ‘My blood,’ and by its being presented in a form separate from the bread which is His body suggests a violent death. It is ‘covenant blood,’ the seal of that ‘better covenant’ than the old, which God makes now with all mankind, wherein are given renewed hearts which carry the divine law within themselves; the reciprocal and mutually blessed possession of God by men and of men by God, the universally diffused knowledge of God, which is more than head knowledge, being the consciousness of possessing Him; and, finally, the oblivion of all sins. These promises are fulfilled, and the covenant made sure, by the shed blood of Christ. So, finally, it is ‘shed for many, for the remission of sins.’ The end of Christ’s death is pardon which can only be extended on the ground of His death. We are told that Christ did not teach the doctrine of atonement. Did He establish the Lord’s Supper? If He did [and nobody denies that], what did He mean by it, if He did not mean the setting forth by symbol of the very same truth which, stated in words, is the doctrine of His atoning death? This rite does not, indeed, explain the rationale of the doctrine; but it is a piece of unmeaning mummery, unless it preaches plainly the fact that Christ’s death is the ground of our forgiveness.

Bread is the ‘staff of life,’ but blood is the life. So ‘this cup’ teaches that ‘the life’ of Jesus Christ must pass into His people’s veins, and that the secret of the Christian life is ‘I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’ Wine is joy, and the Christian life is not only to be a feeding of the soul on Christ as its nourishment, but a glad partaking, as at a feast, of His life and therein of His joy. Gladness of heart is a Christian duty, ‘the joy of the Lord is your strength’ and should be our joy; and though here we eat with loins girt, and go out, some of us to deny, some of us to flee, all of us to toil and suffer, yet we may have His joy fulfilled in ourselves, even whilst we sorrow.

The Lord’s Supper is predominantly a memorial, but it is also a prophecy, and is marked as such by the mysterious last words of Jesus, about drinking the new wine in the Father’s kingdom. They point the thoughts of the saddened eleven, on whom the dark shadow of parting lay heavily, to an eternal reunion, in a land where ‘all things are become new,’ and where the festal cup shall be filled with a draught that has power to gladden and to inspire beyond any experience here. The joys of heaven will be so far analogous to the Christian joys of earth that the same name may be applied to both; but they will be so unlike that the old name will need a new meaning, and communion with Christ at His table in His kingdom, and our exuberance of joy in the full drinking in of His immortal life, will transcend the selectest hours of communion here. Compared with that fulness of joy they will be ‘as water unto wine,’-the new wine of the kingdom.

32)Matthew 26:36-46

Matthew

GETHSEMANE, THE OIL-PRESS

Mat. 26:36 - Mat. 26:46.

One shrinks from touching this incomparable picture of unexampled sorrow, for fear lest one’s finger-marks should stain it. There is no place here for picturesque description, which tries to mend the gospel stories by dressing them in to-day’s fashions, nor for theological systematisers and analysers of the sort that would ‘botanise upon their mother’s grave.’ We must put off our shoes, and feel that we stand on holy ground. Though loving eyes saw something of Christ’s agony, He did not let them come beside Him, but withdrew into the shadow of the gnarled olives, as if even the moonbeams must not look too closely on the mystery of such grief. We may go as near as love was allowed to go, but stop where it was stayed, while we reverently and adoringly listen to what the Evangelist tells us of that unspeakable hour.

I. Mark the ‘exceeding sorrow’ of the Man of Sorrows.

Somewhere on the western foot of Olivet lay the garden, named from an oil-press formerly or then in it, which was to be the scene of the holiest and sorest sorrow on which the moon, that has seen so much misery, has ever looked. Truly it was ‘an oil-press,’ in which ‘the good olive’ was crushed by the grip of unparalleled agony, and yielded precious oil, which has been poured into many a wound since then. Eight of the eleven are left at or near the entrance, while He passes deeper into the shadows with the three. They had been witnesses of His prayers once before, on the slopes of Hermon, when He was transfigured before them. They are now to see a no less wonderful revelation of His glory in His filial submission. There is something remarkable in Matthew’s expression, ‘He began to be sorrowful,’-as if a sudden wave of emotion, breaking over His soul, had swept His human sensibilities before it. The strange word translated by the Revisers ‘sore troubled’ is of uncertain derivation, and may possibly be simply intended to intensify the idea of sorrow; but more probably it adds another element, which Bishop Lightfoot describes as ‘the confused, restless, half-distracted state which is produced by physical derangement or mental distress.’ A storm of agitation and bewilderment broke His calm, and forced from His patient lips, little wont to speak of His own emotions, or to seek for sympathy, the unutterably pathetic cry, ‘My soul is exceeding sorrowful’-compassed about with sorrow, as the word means-’even unto death.’ No feeble explanation of these words does justice to the abyss of woe into which they let us dimly look. They tell the fact, that, a little more and the body would have sunk under the burden. He knew the limits of human endurance, for ‘all things were made by Him,’ and, knowing it, He saw that He had grazed the very edge. Out of the darkness He reaches a hand to feel for the grasp of a friend, and piteously asks these humble lovers to stay beside Him, not that they could help Him to bear the weight, but that their presence had some solace in it. His agony must be endured alone, therefore He bade them tarry there; but He desired to have them at hand, therefore He went but ‘a little forward.’ They could not bear it with Him, but they could ‘watch with’ Him, and that poor comfort is all He asks. No word came from them. They were, no doubt, awed into silence, as the truest sympathy is used to be, in the presence of a great grief. Is it permitted us to ask what were the fountains of these bitter floods that swept over Christ’s sinless soul? Was the mere physical shrinking from death all? If so, we may reverently say that many a maiden and old man, who drew all their fortitude from Jesus, have gone to stake or gibbet for His sake, with a calm which contrasts strangely with His agitation. Gethsemane is robbed of its pathos and nobleness if that be all. But it was not all. Rather it was the least bitter of the components of the cup. What lay before Him was not merely death, but the death which was to atone for a world’s sin, and in which, therefore, the whole weight of sin’s consequences was concentrated. ‘The Lord hath made to meet on Him the iniquities of us all’; that is the one sufficient explanation of this infinitely solemn and tender scene. Unless we believe that, we shall find it hard to reconcile His agitation in Gethsemane with the perfection of His character as the captain of ‘the noble army of martyrs.’

II. Note the prayer of filial submission.

Matthew does not tell us of the sweat falling audibly and heavily, and sounding to the three like slow blood-drops from a wound, nor of the strengthening angel, but he gives us the prostrate form, and the threefold prayer, renewed as each moment of calm, won by it, was again broken in upon by a fresh wave of emotion. Thrice He had to leave the disciples, and came back, a calm conqueror; and twice the enemy rallied and returned to the assault, and was at last driven finally from the field by the power of prayer and submission. The three Synoptics differ in their report of our Lord’s words, but all mean the same thing in substance; and it is obvious that much more must have been spoken than they report. Possibly what we have is only the fragments that reached the three before they fell asleep. In any case, Jesus was absent from them on each occasion long enough to allow of their doing so.

Three elements are distinguishable in our Lord’s prayer. There is, first, the sense of Sonship, which underlies all, and was never more clear than at that awful moment. Then there is the recoil from ‘the cup,’ which natural instinct could not but feel, though sinlessly. The flesh shrank from the Cross, which else had been no suffering; and if no suffering, then had been no atonement. His manhood would not have been like ours, nor His sorrows our pattern, if He had not thus drawn back, in His sensitive humanity, from the awful prospect now so near. But natural instinct is one thing, and the controlling will another. However currents may have tossed the vessel, the firm hand at the helm never suffered them to change her course. The will, which in this prayer He seems so strangely to separate from the Father’s, even in the act of submission, was the will which wishes, not that which resolves. His fixed purpose to die for the world’s sin never wavered. The shrinking does not reach the point of absolutely and unconditionally asking that the cup might pass. Even in the act of uttering the wish, it is limited by that ‘if it be possible,’ which can only mean-possible, in view of the great purpose for which He came. That is to be accomplished, at any cost; and unless it can be accomplished though the cup be withdrawn, He does not even wish, much less will, that it should be withdrawn. So, the third element in the prayer is the utter resignation to the Father’s will, in which submission He found peace, as we do.

He prayed His way to perfect calm, which is ever the companion of perfect self-surrender to God. They who cease from their own works do ‘enter into rest.’ All the agitations which had come storming in massed battalions against Him are defeated by it. They have failed to shake His purpose, they now fail even to disturb His peace. So, victorious from the dreadful conflict, and at leisure of heart to care for others, He can go back to the disciples. But even whilst seeking to help them, a fresh wave of suffering breaks in on His calm, and once again He leaves them to renew the struggle. The instinctive shrinking reasserts itself, and, though overcome, is not eradicated. But the second prayer is yet more rooted in acquiescence than the first. It shows that He had not lost what He had won by the former; for it, as it were, builds on that first supplication, and accepts as answer to its contingent petition the consciousness, accompanying the calm, that it was not possible for the cup to pass from Him. The sense of Sonship underlies the complete resignation of the second prayer as of the first. It has no wish but God’s will, and is the voluntary offering of Himself. Here He is both Priest and Sacrifice, and offers the victim with this prayer of consecration. So once more He triumphs, because once more, and yet more completely, He submits, and accepts the Cross. For Him, as for us, the Cross accepted ceases to be a pain, and the cup is no more bitter when we are content to drink it. Once more in fainter fashion the enemy came on, casting again his spent arrows, and beaten back by the same weapon. The words were the same, because no others could have expressed more perfectly the submission which was the heart of His prayers and the condition of His victory.

Christ’s prayer, then, was not for the passing of the cup, but that the will of God might be done in and by Him, and ‘He was heard in that He feared,’ not by being exempted from the Cross, but by being strengthened through submission for submission. So His agony is the pattern of all true prayer, which must ever deal with our wishes, as He did with His instinctive shrinking,-present them wrapped in an ‘if it be possible,’ and followed by a ‘nevertheless.’ The meaning of prayer is not to force our wills on God’s, but to bend our wills to His; and that prayer is really answered of which the issue is our calm readiness for all that He lays upon us.

III. Note the sad and gentle remonstrance with the drowsy three.

‘The sleep of the disciples, and of these disciples, and of all three, and such an overpowering sleep, remains even after Luke’s explanation, “for sorrow,” a psychological riddle’ [Meyer]. It is singularly parallel with the sleep of the same three at the Transfiguration-an event which presents the opposite pole of our Lord’s experiences, and yields so many antithetical parallels to Gethsemane. No doubt the tension of emotion, which had lasted for many hours, had worn them out; but, if weariness had weighed down their eyelids, love should have kept them open. Such sleep of such disciples may have been a riddle, but it was also a crime, and augured imperfect sympathy. Gentle surprise and the pain of disappointed love are audible in the question, addressed to Peter especially, as he had promised so much, but meant for all. This was all that Jesus got in answer to His yearning for sympathy. ‘I looked for some to take pity, but there was none.’ Those who loved Him most lay curled in dead slumber within earshot of His prayers. If ever a soul tasted the desolation of utter loneliness, that suppliant beneath the olives tasted it. But how little of the pain escapes His lips! The words but hint at the slightness of their task compared with His, at the brevity of the strain on their love, and at the companionship which ought to have made sleep impossible. May we not see in Christ's remonstrance a word for all? For us, too, the task of keeping awake in the enchanted ground is light, measured against His, and the time is short, and we have Him to keep us company in the watch, and every motive of grateful love should make it easy; but, alas, how many of us sleep a drugged and heavy slumber!

The gentle remonstrance soon passes over into counsel as gentle. Watchfulness and prayer are inseparable. The one discerns dangers, the other arms against them. Watchfulness keeps us prayerful, and prayerfulness keeps us watchful. To watch without praying is presumption, to pray without watching is hypocrisy. The eye that sees clearly the facts of life will turn upwards from its scanning of the snares and traps, and will not look in vain. These two are the indispensable conditions of victorious encountering of temptation. Fortified by them, we shall not 'enter into' it, though we encounter it. The outward trial will remain, but its power to lead us astray will vanish. It will still be danger or sorrow, but it will not be temptation; and we shall pass through it, as a sunbeam through foul air, untainted, and keeping heaven's radiance. That is a lesson for a wider circle than the sleepy three.

It is followed by words which would need a volume to expound in all their depth and width of application, but which are primarily a reason for the preceding counsel, as well as a loving apology for the disciples' sleep. Christ is always glad to give us credit for even imperfect good; His eye, which sees deeper than ours, sees more lovingly, and is not hindered from marking the willing spirit by recognising weak flesh. But these words are not to be made a pillow for indolent acquiescence in the limitations which the flesh imposes on the spirit. He may take merciful count of these, and so may we, in judging others, but it is fatal to plead them at the bar of our own consciences. Rather they should be a spur to our watchfulness and to our prayer. We need these because the flesh is weak, still more because, in its weakness toward good, it is strong to evil. Such exercise will give governing power to the spirit, and enable it to impose its will on the reluctant flesh. If we watch and pray, the conflict between these two elements in the renewed nature will tend to unity and peace by the supremacy of the spirit; if we do not, it will tend to cease by the unquestioned tyranny of the flesh. In one or other direction our lives are tending.

Strange that such words had no effect. But so it was, and so deep was the apostles' sleep that Christ left them undisturbed the second time. The relapse is worse than the original disease. Sleep broken and resumed is more torpid and fatal than if it had not been interrupted. We do not know how long it lasted, though the whole period in the garden must have been measured by hours; but at last it was broken by the enigmatical last words of our Lord. The explanation of the direct opposition between the consecutive sentences, by taking the 'Sleep on now' as ironical, jars on one's reverence. Surely irony is out of keeping with the spirit of Christ then. Rather He bids them sleep on, since the hour is come, in sad recognition that the need for their watchful sympathy is past, and with it the opportunity for their proved affection. It is said with a tone of contemplative melancholy, and is almost equivalent to 'too late, too late.' The memorable sermon of F. W. Robertson, on this text, rightly grasps the spirit of the first clause, when it dwells with such power on the thought of 'the irrevocable past' of wasted opportunities and neglected duty. But the sudden transition to the sharp, short command and broken sentences of the last verse is to be accounted for by the sudden appearance of the flashing lights of the band led by Judas, somewhere near at hand, in the valley. The mood of pensive reflection gives place to rapid decision. He summons them to arise, not for flight, but that He may go out to meet the traitor. Escape would have been easy. There was time to reach some sheltering fold of the hill in the darkness; but the prayer beneath the silver-grey olives had not been in vain, and these last words in Gethsemane throb with the Son's willingness to yield Himself up, and to empty to its dregs the cup which the Father had given Him.

33)Matthew 26:50

Matthew

THE LAST PLEADING OF LOVE

Mat. 26:50.

We are accustomed to think of the betrayer of our Lord as a kind of monster, whose crime is so mysterious in its atrocity as to put him beyond the pale of human sympathy. The awful picture which the great Italian poet draws of him as alone in hell, shunned even there, as guilty beyond all others, expresses the general feeling about him. And even the attempts which have been made to diminish the greatness of his guilt, by supposing that his motive was only to precipitate Christ's assumption of His conquering Messianic power, are prompted by the same thought that such treason as his is all but inconceivable. I cannot but think that these attempts fail, and that the narratives of the Gospels oblige us to think of his crime as deliberate treachery. But even when so regarded, other emotions than wondering loathing should be excited by the awful story.

There had been nothing in his previous history to suggest such sin, as is proved by the disciples' question, when our Lord announced that one of them should betray Him. No suspicion lighted on him-no finger pointed to where he sat. But self-distrust asked, 'Lord, is it I?' and only love, pillowed on the Master's breast, and strong in the happy sense of His love, was sufficiently assured of its own constancy, to change the question into 'Lord! who is it?' The process of corruption was unseen by all eyes but Christ's. He came to his terrible pre-eminence in crime by slow degrees, and by paths which we may all tread. As for his guilt, that is in other hands than ours. As for his fate, let us copy the solemn and pitying reticence of Peter, and say, 'that he might go to his own place'-the place that belongs to him, and that he is fit for, wherever that may be. As for the growth and development of his sin, let us remember that 'we have all of us one human heart,' and that the possibilities of crime as dark are in us all. And instead of shuddering abhorrence at a sin that can scarcely be understood, and can never be repeated, let us be sure that whatever man has done, man may do, and ask with humble consciousness of our own deceitful hearts, 'Lord, is it I?' These remarkable and solemn words of Christ, with which He meets the treacherous kiss, appear to be a last appeal to Judas. They may possibly not be a question, as in our version-but an incomplete sentence, 'What thou hast come to do’-leaving the implied command, ‘That do,’ unexpressed. They would then be very like other words which the betrayer had heard but an hour or two before, ‘That thou doest, do quickly.’ But such a rendering does not seem so appropriate to the circumstances as that which makes them a question, smiting on his heart and conscience, and seeking to tear away the veil of sophistications with which he had draped from his own eyes the hideous shape of his crime. And, if so, what a wonderful instance we have here of that long-suffering love. They are the last effort of the divine patience to win back even the traitor. They show us the wrestle between infinite mercy and a treacherous, sinful heart, and they bring into awful prominence the power which that heart has of rejecting the counsel of God against itself. I venture to use them now as suggesting these three things: the patience of Christ’s love; the pleading of Christ’s love; and the refusal of Christ’s love.

I. The patience of Christ’s love.

If we take no higher view of this most pathetic incident than that the words come from a man’s lips, even then all its beauty will not be lost. There are some sins against friendship in which the manner is harder to bear than the substance of the evil. It must have been a strangely mean and dastardly nature, as well as a coarse and cold one, that could think of fixing on the kiss of affection as the concerted sign to point out their victim to the legionaries. Many a man who could have planned and executed the treason would have shrunk from that. And many a man who could have borne to be betrayed by his own familiar friend would have found that heartless insult worse to endure than the treason itself. But what a picture of perfect patience and unruffled calm we have here, in that the answer to the poisonous, hypocritical embrace was these moving words! The touch of the traitor’s lips has barely left His cheek, but not one faint passing flush of anger tinges it. He is perfectly self-oblivious-absorbed in other thoughts, and among them in pity for the guilty wretch before Him. His words have no agitation in them, no instinctive recoil from the pollution of such a salutation. They have grave rebuke, but it is rebuke which derives its very force from the appeal to former companionship. Christ still recognises the ancient bond, and is true to it. He will still plead with this man who has been beside Him long; and though His heart be wounded yet He is not wroth, and He will not cast him off. If this were nothing more than a picture of human friendship it would stand alone, above all other records that the world cherishes in its inmost heart, of the love that never fails, and is not soon angry.

But we, I hope, dear brethren, think more loftily and more truly of our dear Lord than as simply a perfect manhood, the exemplar of all goodness. How He comes to be that, if He be not more than that, I do not understand, and I, for one, feel that my confidence in the flawless completeness of His human character lives or dies with my belief that He is the Eternal Word, God manifest in the flesh. Certainly we shall never truly grasp the blessed meaning of His life on earth until we look upon it all as the revelation of God. The tears of Christ are the pity of God. The gentleness of Jesus is the long-suffering of God. The tenderness of Jesus is the love of God. 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father'; and all that life so beautiful but so anomalous as to be all but incredible, when we think of it as only the life of a man, glows with a yet fairer beauty, and corresponds with the nature which it expresses, when we think of it as being the declaration to us by the divine Son of the divine Father-our loftiest, clearest, and authentic revelation of God.

How that thought lifts these words before us into a still higher region! We are now in the presence of the solemn greatness of a divine love. If the meaning of this saying is what we have suggested, it is pathetic even in the lower aspect, but how infinitely that pathos is deepened when we view it in the higher!

Surely if ever there was a man who might have been supposed to be excluded from the love of God, it was Judas. Surely if ever there was a moment in a human life, when one might have supposed that even Christ's ever open heart would shut itself together against any one, it was this moment. But no, the betrayer in the very instant of his treason has that changeless tenderness lingering around him, and that merciful hand beckoning to him still.

And have we not a right to generalise this wonderful fact, and to declare its teaching to be-that the love of God is extended to us all, and cannot be made to turn away from us by any sins of ours? Sin is mighty; it can work endless evils on us; it can disturb and embitter all our relations with God; it can, as we shall presently have to point out, make it necessary for the tenderest ‘grace of God to come disciplining’-to ‘come with a rod,’ just because it comes in ‘the spirit of meekness.’ But one thing it cannot do, and that is-make God cease to love us. I suppose all human affection can be worn out by constant failure to evoke a response from cold hearts. I suppose that it can be so nipped by frosts, so constantly checked in blossoming, that it shrivels and dies. I suppose that constant ingratitude, constant indifference can turn the warmest springs of our love to a river of ice. ‘Can a mother forget her child?-Yea, she may forget.’ But we have to do with a God, whose love is His very being; who loves us not for reasons in us but in Himself; whose love is eternal and boundless as all His nature; whose love, therefore, cannot be turned away by our sin-but abides with us for ever, and is granted to every soul of man. Dear brethren, we cannot believe too firmly, we cannot trust too absolutely, we cannot proclaim too broadly that blessed thought, without which we have no hope to feed on for ourselves, or to share with our fellows-the universal love of God in Christ.

Is there a worst man on earth at this moment? If there be, he, too, has a share in that love. Harlots and thieves, publicans and sinners, leprous outcasts, and souls tormented by unclean spirits, the wrecks of humanity whom decent society and respectable Christianity passes by with averted head and uplifted hands, criminals on the gibbet with the rope round their necks-and those who are as hopeless as any of these, self-complacent formalists and ‘Gospel-hardened professors’-all have a place in that heart. And that, not as undistinguished members of a class, but as separate souls, singly the objects of God’s knowledge and love. He loves all, because He loves each. We are not massed together in His view, nor in His regard. He does not lose the details in the whole; as we, looking on some great crowd of upturned faces, are conscious of all but recognise no single one. He does not love a class-a world-but He loves the single souls that make it up-you and me, and every one of the millions that we throw together in the vague phrase, ‘the race.’ Let us individualise that love in our thoughts as it individualises us in its outflow-and make our own the ‘exceeding broad’ promises, which include us, too. ‘God loves me; Christ gave Himself for me. I have a place in that royal, tender heart.’

Nor should any sin make us doubt this. He loved us with exceeding love, even when we were ‘dead in trespasses.’ He did not begin to love because of anything in us; He will not cease because of anything in us. We change; ‘He abideth faithful, He cannot deny Himself.’ As the sunshine pours down as willingly and abundantly on filth and dunghills, as on gold that glitters in its beam, and jewels that flash back its lustre, so the light and warmth of that unsetting and unexhausted source of life pours down ‘on the unthankful and on the good.’ The great ocean clasps some black and barren crag that frowns against it, as closely as with its waves it kisses some fair strand enamelled with flowers and fragrant with perfumes. So that sea of love in which we ‘live, and move, and have our being,’ encircles the worst with abundant flow. He Himself sets us the pattern, which to imitate is to be the children of ‘our Father which is in heaven,’ in that He loves His enemies, blessing them that curse, and doing good to them that hate. He Himself is what He has enjoined us to be, in that He feeds His enemies when they hunger, and when they thirst gives them drink, heaping coals of fire on their heads, and seeking to kindle in them thereby the glow of answering love, not being overcome of their evil, so that He repays hate with hate and scorn with scorn, but in patient continuance of loving kindness seeking to overcome evil with good. He is Himself that ‘charity’ which ‘is not easily provoked, is not soon angry, beareth all things, hopeth all things, and never faileth.’ His love is mightier than all our sins, and waits not on our merits, nor is turned away by our iniquities. ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’

II. Then, secondly, we have here-the pleading of Christ’s patient love.

I have been trying to say as broadly and strongly as I can, that our sins do not turn away the love of God in Christ from us. The more earnestly we believe and proclaim that, the more needful is it to set forth distinctly-and that not as limiting, but as explaining the truth-the other thought, that the sin which does not avert, does modify the expression of, the love of God. Man’s sin compels Him to do what the prophet calls his ‘strange work’-the work which is not dear to His heart, nor natural, if one may so say, to His hands-His work of judgment.

The love of Christ has to come to sinful men with patient pleading and remonstrance, that it may enter their hearts and give its blessings. We are familiar with a modern work of art in which that long-suffering appeal is wonderfully portrayed. He who is the Light of the world stands, girded with the royal mantle clasped with the priestly breastplate, bearing in His hand the lamp of truth, and there, amidst the dew of night and the rank hemlock, He pleads for entrance at the closed door which has no handle on its outer side, and is hinged to open only from within. 'I stand at the door and knock. If any man open the door, I will come in.'

And in this incident before us, we see represented not only the endless patience of God's pitying love, but the method which it needs to take in order to reach the heart.

There is an appeal to the traitor's heart, and an appeal to his conscience. Christ would have him think of the relations that have so long subsisted between them; and He would have him think, too, of the real nature of the deed he is doing, or, perhaps, of the motives that impel him. The grave, sad word, by which He addresses him, is meant to smite upon his heart. The sharp question which He puts to him is meant to wake up his conscience; and both taken together represent the two chief classes of remonstrance which He brings to bear upon us all-the two great batteries from which He assails the fortress of our sins.

There is first, then-Christ's appeal to the heart. He tries to make Judas feel the considerations that should restrain him. The appellation by which our Lord addresses him does not in the original convey quite so strongly the idea of amity, as our word 'Friend' does. It is not the same as that which He had used a few hours before in the upper chamber, when He said, 'Henceforth I call you not servants, but I have called you friends.-Ye are My friends if ye do whatsoever I command you.' It is the same as is put into the lips of the Lord of the vineyard, remonstrating with his jealous labourer, 'Friend, I do thee no wrong.' There is a tone, then, of less intimate association and graver rebuke in it than in that name with which He honours those who make His will theirs, and His word the law of their lives. It does not speak of close confidence, but it does suggest companionship and kindness on the part of the speaker. There is rebuke in it, but it is rebuke which derives its whole force from the remembrance of ancient concord and connection. Our Lord would recall to the memory of the betrayer the days in which they had taken sweet counsel together. It is as if He had said-'Hast thou forgotten all our former intercourse? Thou hast eaten My bread, thou hast been Mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted-canst thou lift up thy heel against Me?' What happy hours of quiet fellowship on many a journey, of rest together after many a day of toil, what forgotten thoughts of the loving devotion and the glow of glad consecration that he had once felt, what a long series of proofs of Christ's gentle goodness and meek wisdom should have sprung again to remembrance at such an appeal! And how black and dastardly would his guilt have seemed if once he had ventured to remember what unexampled friendship he was sinning against!

Is it not so with us all, dear brethren? All our evils are betrayals of Christ, and all our betrayals of Christ are sins against a perfect friendship and an unvaried goodness. We, too, have sat at His table, heard His wisdom, seen His miracles, listened to His pleadings, have had a place in His heart; and if we turn away from Him to do our own pleasure, and sell His love for a handful of silver, we need not cherish shuddering abhorrence against that poor wretch who gave Him up to the cross. Oh! if we could see aright, we should see our Saviour's meek, sad face standing between us and each of our sins, with warning in the pitying eyes, and His pleading voice would sound in our ears, appealing to us by loving remembrances of His ancient friendship, to turn from the evil which is treason against Him, and wounds His heart as much as it harms ours. Take heed lest in condemning the traitor we doom ourselves. If we flush into anger at the meanness of his crime, and declare, 'He shall surely die,' do we not hear a prophet's voice saying to each, 'Thou art the man'?

The loving hand laid on the heart-strings is followed by a strong stroke on conscience. The heart vibrates most readily in answer to gentle touches: the conscience, in answer to heavier, as the breath that wakes the chords of an Aeolian harp would pass silent through the brass of a trumpet. 'Wherefore art thou come?'-if to be taken as a question at all, which, as I have said, seems most natural, is either, 'What hast thou come to do?'-or, 'Why hast thou come to do it?' Perhaps it maybe fairly taken as including both. But, at all events, it is clearly an appeal to Judas to make him see what his conduct really is in itself, and possibly in its motive too. And this is the constant effort of the love of Christ-to get us to say to ourselves the real name of what we are about.

We cloak our sins from ourselves with many wrappings, as they swathe a mummy in voluminous folds. And of these veils, one of the thickest is woven by our misuse of words to describe the very same thing by different names, according as we do it, or another man does it. Almost all moral actions-the thing to which we can apply the words right or wrong-have two or more names, of which the one suggests the better and the other the worse side of the action. For instance what in ourselves we call prudent regard for our own interest, we call, in our neighbour, narrow selfishness; what in ourselves is laudable economy, in him is miserable avarice. We are impetuous, he is passionate; we generous, he lavish; we are clever men of business, he is a rogue; we sow our wild oats and are gay, he is dissipated. So we cheat ourselves by more than half-transparent veils of our own manufacture, which we fling round the ugly features and misshapen limbs of these sins of ours, and we are made more than ever their bond-slaves thereby.

Therefore, it is the office of the truest love to force us to look at the thing as it is. It would go some way to keep a man from some of his sins if he would give the thing its real name. A distinct conscious statement to oneself, ‘Now I am going to tell a lie’-’This that I am doing is fraud’-’This emotion that I feel creeping with devilish warmth about the roots of my heart is revenge’-and so on, would surely startle us sometimes, and make us fling the gliding poison from our breast, as a man would a snake that he found just lifting its head from the bosom of his robe. Suppose Judas had answered the question, and, gathering himself up, had looked his Master in the face, and said-’What have I come for?’ ‘I have come to betray Thee for thirty pieces of silver!’ Do you not think that putting his guilt into words might have moved even him to more salutary feelings than the remorse which afterwards accompanied his tardy discernment of what he had done? So the patient love of Christ comes rebuking, and smiting hard on conscience. ‘The grace of God that bringeth salvation to all men hath appeared disciplining’-and His hand is never more gentle than when it plucks away the films with which we hide our sins from ourselves, and shows us the ‘rottenness and dead men’s bones’ beneath the whited walls of the sepulchres and the velvet of the coffins.

He must begin with rebukes that He may advance to blessing. He must teach us what is separating us from Him that, learning it, we may flee to His grace to help us. There is no entrance for the truest gifts of His patient love into any heart that has not yielded to His pleading remonstrance, and in lowly penitence has answered His question as He would have us answer it, ‘Friend and Lover of my soul, I have sinned against Thy tender heart, against the unexampled patience of Thy love. I have departed from Thee and betrayed Thee. Blessed be Thy merciful voice which hath taught me what I have done! Blessed be Thine unwearied goodness which still bends over me! Raise me fallen! forgive me treacherous! Keep me safe and happy, ever true and near to Thee!’

III. Notice the possible rejection of the pleading of Christ’s patient love.

Even that appeal was vain. Here we are confronted with a plain instance of man’s mysterious and awful power of ‘frustrating the counsel of God’-of which one knows not whether is greater, the difficulty of understanding how a finite will can rear itself against the Infinite Will, or the mournful mystery that a creature should desire to set itself against its loving Maker and Benefactor. But strange as it is, yet so it is; and we can turn round upon Sovereign Fatherhood bidding us to its service, and say, ‘I will not.’ He pleads with us, and we can resist His pleadings. He holds out the mercies of His hands and the gifts of His grace, and we can reject them. We cannot cease to be the objects of His love, but we can refuse to be the recipients of its most precious gifts. We can bar our hearts against it. Then, of what avail is it to us? To go back to an earlier illustration, the sunshine pours down and floods a world, what does that matter to us if we have fastened up shutters on all our windows, and barred every crevice through which the streaming gladness can find its way? We shall grope at noontide as in the dark within our gloomy house, while our neighbours have light in theirs. What matters it though we float in the great ocean of the divine love, if with pitch and canvas we have carefully closed every aperture at which the flood can enter? A hermetically closed jar, plunged in the Atlantic, will be as dry inside as if it were lying on the sand of the desert. It is possible to perish of thirst within sight of the fountain. It is possible to separate ourselves from the love of God, not to separate the love of God from ourselves.

The incident before us carries another solemn lesson-how simple and easy a thing it is to repel that pleading love. What did Judas do? Nothing; it was enough. He merely held his peace-no more. There was no need for him to break out with oaths and curses, to reject his Lord with wild words. Silence was sufficient. And for us-no more is required. We have but to be passive; we have but to stand still. Not to accept is to refuse; non-submission is rebellion. We do not need to emphasise our refusal by any action-no need to lift our clenched hands in defiance. We have simply to put them behind our backs or to keep them folded. The closed hand must remain an empty hand. ‘He that believeth not is condemned.’ My friend, remember that, when Christ pleads and draws, to do nothing is to oppose, and to delay is to refuse. It is a very easy matter to ruin your soul. You have simply to keep still when He says ‘Come unto Me’-to keep your eyes fixed where they were, when He says, ‘Look unto Me, and be ye saved,’ and all the rest will follow of itself.

Notice, too, how the appeal of Christ’s love hardens where it does not soften. That gentle voice drove the traitor nearer the verge over which he fell into a gulf of despair. It should have drawn him closer to the Lord, but he recoiled from it, and was thereby brought nearer destruction. Every pleading of Christ’s grace, whether by providences, or by books, or by His own word, does something with us. It is never vain. Either it melts or it hardens. The sun either scatters the summer morning mists, or it rolls them into heavier folds, from whose livid depths the lightning will be flashing by mid-day. You cannot come near the most inadequate exhibition of the pardoning love of Christ without being either drawn closer to Him or driven further from Him. Each act of rejection prepares the way for another, which will be easier, and adds another film to the darkness which covers your eyes, another layer to the hardness which incrusts your hearts.

Again, that silence, so eloquent and potent in its influence, was probably the silence of a man whose conscience was convicted while his will was unchanged. Such a condition is possible. It points to solemn thoughts, and to deep mysteries in man’s awful nature. He knew that he was wrong, he had no excuse, his deed was before him in some measure in its true character, and yet he would not give it up. Such a state, if constant and complete, presents the most frightful picture we can frame of a soul. That a man shall not be able to say, ‘I did it ignorantly’; that Christ shall not be able to ground His intercession on, ‘They know not what they do’; that with full knowledge of the true nature of the deed, there shall be no wavering of the determination to do it-we may well turn with terror from such an awful abyss. But let us remember that, whether such a condition in its completeness is conceivable or not, at all events we may approach it indefinitely; and we do approach it by every sin, and by every refusal to yield to the love that would touch our consciences and fill our hearts.

Have you ever noticed what a remarkable verbal correspondence there is between these words of our text, and some other very solemn ones of Christ’s? The question that He puts into the lips of the king who came in to see his guests is, ‘Friend, how camest thou in hither, not having on a wedding garment?’ The question asked on earth shall be repeated again at last. The silence which once indicated a convinced conscience and an unchanged will may at that day indicate both of these and hopelessness beside. The clear vision of the divine love, if it do not flood the heart with joy and evoke the bliss of answering love, may fill it with bitterness. It is possible that the same revelation of the same grace may be the heaven of heaven to those who welcome it, and the pain of hell to those who turn from it. It is possible that love believed and received may be life, and love recognised and rejected may be death. It is possible that the vision of the same face may make some break forth with the rapturous hymn, ‘Lo, this is our God, we have waited for Him!’ and make others call on the hills to fall on them and cover them from its brightness.

But let us not end with such words. Rather, dear brethren, let us yield to His patient beseechings; let Him teach us our evil and our sin. Listen to His great love who invites us to plead, and promises to pardon-’Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.’

34)Matthew 26:57-64

THE REAL HIGH PRIEST AND HIS COUNTERFEIT

Mat. 26:57 - Mat. 26:68.

John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus was brought before ‘Annas first,’ probably in the same official priestly residence as Caiaphas, his son-in-law, occupied. That preliminary examination brought out nothing to incriminate the prisoner, and was flagrantly illegal, being an attempt to entrap Him into self-accusing statements. It was baffled by Jesus being silent first, and subsequently taking His stand on the undeniable principle that a charge must be sustained by evidence, not based on self-accusation. Annas, having made nothing of this strange criminal, ‘sent Him bound unto Caiaphas.’

A meeting of the Sanhedrin had been hastily summoned in the dead of night, which was itself an illegality. Now Jesus stands before the poor shadow of a judicial tribunal, which, though it was all that Rome had left a conquered people, was still entitled to sit in judgment on Him. Strange inversion, and awful position for these formalists! And with sad persistence of bitter prejudice they proceeded to try the prisoner, all unaware that it was themselves, not Him, that they were trying.

They began wrongly, and betrayed their animus at once. They were sitting there to inquire whether Jesus was guilty or no; they had made up their minds beforehand that He was, and their effort now was but to manufacture some thin veil of legality for a judicial murder. So they ‘sought false witness, . . . that they might put Him to death.’ Matthew simply says that no evidence sufficient for the purpose was forthcoming; Mark adds that the weak point, was that the lies contradicted each other. Christ’s presence has a strange, solemn power of unmasking our falsehoods, both of thought and deed, and it is hard to speak evil of Him before His face. If His calumniators were confused when He stood as Prisoner, what will they be when He sits as a Judge?

Only Matthew and Mark tell us of the two witnesses whose twisted version of the word about ‘destroying the Temple and rebuilding it in three days’ seemed to Caiaphas serious enough to require an answer. Their mistake was one which might have been made in good faith, but none the less was their travesty ‘false witness.’ Their version of His great word shows how easily the teaching of a lofty soul, passed through the popular brain, is degraded, and made to mean the opposite of what he had meant by it. For the destruction of the Temple had appeared in the saying as the Jews’ work, and Jesus had presented Himself in it as the Restorer, not the Destroyer, of the Temple and of all that it symbolised. We destroy, He rebuilds. The murder of Jesus was the suicide of the nation. Caiaphas and his council were even now pulling down the Temple. And that murder was the destruction, so far as men could effect it, of the true ‘Temple of His body,’ in which the fulness of the Godhead dwelt, and which was more gloriously reconstituted in the Resurrection. The risen Christ rears the true temple on earth, for through Him the Holy Ghost dwells in His Church, which is collectively ‘the Temple,’ and in all believing spirits, which are individually ‘the temples’ of God. So the false witnesses distorted into a lie a great truth.

The Incarnate Word was dumb all the while. He ‘was still and refrained’ Himself. It was the silence of the King before a lawless tribunal of rebels, of patient meekness, ‘as a sheep before her shearers’; of innocence that will not stoop to defend itself from groundless accusations; of infinite pity and forbearing love, which sees that it cannot win, but will not smite. Jesus is still silent, but one day, ‘with the breath of His lips shall He slay the wicked.’ Caiaphas seems to have been annoyed as well as surprised at Jesus’ silence, for there is a trace of irritation, as at ‘contempt of court,’ in his words. But our Lord’s continued silence appears to have somewhat awed him, and the dawning consciousness of his dignity is, perhaps, the reason for the high priest’s casting aside all the foolery of false witnessing, and coming at last to the real point,- the Messianic claims of Jesus.

Caiaphas was doing his duty as high priest in inquiring into such claims, but he was somewhat late in the day, and he had made up his mind before he inquired. What he wished to get was a plain assertion on which the death sentence could be pronounced. Jesus knew this, and yet He answered. But Luke tells us that He first scathingly pointed to the unreality and animus of the question by saying, ‘If I tell you, ye will not believe.’ But yet it was fitting that He should solemnly, before the supreme court, representative of the nation, declare that He was the Messiah, and that, if He was to be rejected and condemned, it should be on the ground of that declaration. Before Caiaphas He claimed to be Messiah, before Pilate He claimed to be King. Each rejected Him in the character that appealed to them most. The many-sidedness of the perfect Revealer of God brings Him to each soul in the aspect that most loudly addresses each. Therefore the love in the appeal and the guilt in its rejection are the greater.

But Christ's self-attestation to the council was not limited to the mere claim to the name of Messiah. It disclosed the implications of that name in a way altogether unlike the conceptions held by Caiaphas. When Caiaphas put in apposition 'the Christ' and 'the Son of God,' he was not speaking from the ordinary Jewish point of view, but from some knowledge, of Christ's teaching, and there are two charges combined into one.

But Jesus' answer, while plainly claiming to be the Messiah, expands itself in regard to the claim to be 'Son of God,' and shows its tremendous significance. It involves participation in divine authority and omnipotence. It involves a future coming to be the Judge of His judges. It declares that these blind scribes and elders will see Him thus exalted, and it asserts that all this is to begin then and there ['henceforth'], as if that hour of humiliation was to His consciousness the beginning of His manifestation as Lord, or, as John has it, 'the hour that the Son of Man should be glorified.' Nor must we leave out of sight the fact that it is 'the Son of Man' of whom all this is said, for thereby are indicated the raising of His perfect humanity to participation in Deity, and the possibility that His brethren, too, may sit where He sits. Much was veiled in the answer to the council, much is veiled to us. But this remains,-that Jesus, at that supreme moment, when He was bound to leave no misunderstandings, made the plainest claim to divinity, and could have saved His life if He had not done so. Either Caiaphas, in his ostentatious horror of such impiety, was right in calling Christ's words blasphemy, and not far wrong in inferring that Jesus was not fit to live, or He is the everlasting 'Son of the Father,' and will 'come to be our Judge.'

35)Matthew 26:65

THE REAL HIGH PRIEST AND HIS COUNTERFEIT

JESUS CHARGED WITH BLASPHEMY

Mat. 26:65.

Jesus was tried and condemned by two tribunals, the Jewish ecclesiastical and the Roman civil. In each case the charge corresponded to the Court. The Sanhedrin took no cognisance of, and had no concern with, rebellion against Caesar; though for the time they pretended loyalty. Pilate had still less concern about Jewish superstitions. And so the investigation in each case turned on a different question. In the one it was, ‘Art Thou the Son of God?’ in the other, ‘Art Thou the King of Israel?’ The answer to both was a simple ‘Yes!’ but with very significant differences. Pilate received an explanation; the Sanhedrin none. The Roman governor was taught that Christ’s title of King belonged to another region altogether from that of Caesar, and did not in the slightest degree infringe upon the dominion that he represented. But ‘Son of God’ was capable of no explanation that could make it any less offensive; and the only thing to be done was to accept it or to condemn Him.

So this saying of the high priest differs from other words of our Lord’s antagonists, which we have been considering in recent pages, in that it is no distortion of our Lord’s characteristics or meaning. It correctly understands, but it fatally rejects, His claims; and does not hesitate to take the further step, on the ground of these, of branding Him as a blasphemer.

We may turn the high priest’s question in another direction: ‘What further need have we of witnesses?’ These horror-stricken judges, rending their garments in simulated grief and zeal, and that silent Prisoner, knowing that His life was the forfeit of His claims, yet saying no word of softening or explanation of them, may teach us much. They are witnesses to some of the central facts of the revelation of God in Christ. Let us turn to these for a few moments.

I. First, then, they witness to Christ’s claims.

The question that was proposed to Jesus, ‘Art Thou the Christ, the Son of the living God?’ was suggested by the facts of His ministry, and not by anything that had come out in the course of this investigation. It was the summing up of the impression made on the ecclesiastical authorities of Judaism by His whole attitude and demeanour. And if we look back to His life we shall see that there were instances, long before this, on which, on the same ground, the same charge was flung at Him. For example, when He would heal the paralytic, and, before He dealt with bodily disease, attended to spiritual weakness, and said, ‘Thy sins be forgiven thee,’ ere He said, ‘Take up thy bed and walk,’ there was a group of keen-eyed hunters after heresy sitting eagerly on the watch, who snatched at the words in a moment, and said, ‘Who is this that forgiveth sins? No man forgiveth sins, but God only! This man speaketh blasphemies!’ And they were right. He did claim a divine prerogative; and either the claim must be admitted or the charge of blasphemy urged.

Again, when He infringed Rabbinical Sabbath law by a cure, and they said, ‘This Man has broken the Sabbath day,’ His vindication was worse than His offence, for He answered, ‘My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.’ And then they sought the more to kill Him, because He not only brake the Sabbath, but also called God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.’ And again, when He declared that the safety of His sheep in His hands was identical with their safety in His Father’s hands, and vindicated the audacious parallelism by the tremendous assertion, ‘I and My Father are One,’ the charge of blasphemy rang out; and was inevitable, unless the claim was true.

These outstanding instances are but, as it were, summits that rise above the general level. But the general level is that of One who takes an altogether unique position. No one else, professing to lead men in paths of righteousness, has so constantly put the stress of His teaching, not upon morality, nor religion, nor obedience to God, but upon this, ‘Believe in Me’; or ever pushed forward His own personality into the foreground, and made the whole nobleness and blessedness and security and devoutness of a life to hinge upon that one thing, its personal relation to Him.

People talk about the sweet and gentle wisdom that flowed from Christ's lips, and so on; about the lofty morality, about the beauty of pity and tenderness, and all the other commonplaces so familiar to us, and we gladly admit them all. But I venture to go a step further than all these, and to say that the outstanding differentia, the characteristic which marks off Christ's teaching as something new, peculiar, and altogether per se, is not its morality, not its philanthropy, not its meek wisdom, not its sweet reasonableness, but its tremendous assertions of the importance of Himself.

And if I am asked to state the ground upon which such an assertion may be vindicated, I would point you to such facts as these, that this Man took up a position of equality with, and of superiority to, the legislation which He and the people to whom He was speaking regarded as being divinely sent, and said, 'Ye have heard that it hath been said to them of old time' so and so; 'but I say unto you': that this Man declared that to build upon His words was to build upon a rock; that this Man declared that He-He-was the legitimate object of absolute trust, of utter submission and obedience; that He claimed from His followers affiance, love, reverence which cannot be distinguished from worship, and that He did not therein conceive that He was intercepting anything that belonged to the Father. This Man professed to be able to satisfy the desires of every human heart when He said, 'If any man thirst let him come to Me and drink.' This Man claimed to be able to breathe the sanctity of repose in the blessedness of obedience over all the weary and the heavy laden; and assured them that He Himself, through all the ages, and in all lands, and for all troubles, would give them rest. This Man declared that He who stood there, in the quiet homes of Galilee, and went about its acres with those blessed feet for our advantage, was to be Judge of the whole world. This Man said that His name was 'Son of God'; and this Man declared, 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.'

And then people say to us, 'Oh! your Gospel narratives, even if they be the work of men in good faith, telling what they suppose He said, mistook the Teacher; and if we could strip away the accretion of mistaken reverence, and come to the historical person, we should find no claims like these.'

Well, this is not the time to enter into the large questions which that contention involves, but I point you to the incident which makes my text, and I say, ‘What need we any further witnesses?’ Nobody denies that Jesus Christ was crucified as the result of a combination of Sanhedrin and Pilate. What set the Jewish rulers against Him with such virulent and murderous determination? Is there anything in the life of Jesus Christ, if it is watered down as the people, who want to knock out all the supernatural, desire to water it down-is there anything in the life that will account for the inveterate acrimony and hostility which pursued Him to the death? The fact remains that, whether or not Evangelists and Apostles misconceived His teaching when they gave such prominence to His personality and His lofty claims, His enemies were under the same delusion, if it were a delusion; and the reason why the whole orthodox religionism of Judaism rejoiced when He was nailed to the Cross was summed up in the taunt which they flung at Him as He hung there, ‘If He be the Son of God, let Him come down, and we will believe Him.’

So, brethren, I put into the witness-box Annas and Caiaphas and all their satellites, and I say, ‘What need we any further witnesses?’ He died because He declared that He was the Son of God.

And I beseech you ask yourselves whether we are not being put off with a maimed version of His teaching, if there is struck out of it this its central characteristic, that He, ‘the sage and humble,’ declared that He was ‘likewise One with the Creator.’

II. Secondly, note how we have here the witness that Jesus Christ assented always to the loftiest meaning that men attached to His claims.

I have already pointed out the remarkable difference between the explanations which He condescended to give to the Roman governor as to the perfectly innocent meaning of His claim to be the King of Israel, and His silence before the Sanhedrin. That silence is only explicable because they rightly understood the meaning of the claim which they contemptuously and perversely rejected. Jesus Christ knew that His death was the forfeit, as I have said, and yet He locked His lips and said not a word.

In like manner when, on the other occasion to which I have already referred, the Pharisees stumbled at His claims to forgive sins, He said nothing to soften down that claim. If He had meant then only what some people would desire to make Him mean when He said, ‘Thy sins be forgiven thee’-viz., that He was simply acting as a minister of the divine forgiveness, and assuring a poor sinner that God had pardoned him-why in common honesty, in discharge of His plain obligations of a teacher, did He not say so-not for His own sake, but for the sake of preventing such a tremendous misunderstanding of His meaning? But He let them go away with the conviction that He intended to claim a divine prerogative, and vindicated the assertion by doing what only a divine power could do: ‘That ye may know that the Son of Man hath power enough on earth to forgive sins, He saith unto the sick of the palsy, Take up thy bed and walk.’ There was no need for Him to have wrought a miracle to establish His right to tell a poor soul that God forgave sin. And the fact that the miracle was supposed to be the demonstration and the vindication of His right to declare forgiveness shows that He was exercising that prerogative which belongs, as they rightly said, to God only.

And in precisely the same manner, the commonest obligations of honesty, the plain duty of a misunderstood Teacher, to say nothing of the duty of self-preservation, ought to have opened His lips in the presence of the Jewish authorities, if they understood wrongly and set too high their estimate of the meaning of His claims. His silence establishes the fact that they understood these aright.

And so, all through His life, we note this peculiarity, that He never puts aside as too lofty for truth men’s highest interpretations of His claims, nor as too lowly for their mutual relation the lowest reverence which bowed before Him. Peter, in the house of Cornelius, said, ‘Stand up! for I myself also am a man.’ Paul and Barnabas, when the priests brought out the oxen and garlands to the gates of Lystra, could say, ‘We also are men of like passions with yourselves.’ But this meek Jesus lets men fall at His feet; and women wash them with their tears and wipe them with the hairs of their head; and souls stretch out maimed hands of faith, and grasp Him as their only hope. When His apostle said, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,’ His answer was, ‘Blessed art thou, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee,’ and when another exclaimed, ‘My Lord and my God!’ this Pattern of all meekness accepted and endorsed the title, and pronounced a benediction on all who, not having seen Him, should hereafter attain a like faith.

Now I want to know whether that characteristic, which runs through all His life, and is inseparable from it, can be vindicated on any ground except the ground that He was ‘God manifest in the flesh.’ Either Jesus Christ had a greedy appetite for excessive adoration, was a victim to diseased vanity and ever-present self-regard-the most damning charge that you can bring against a religious teacher-or He accepted love and reverence and trust, because the love and the reverence and the trust knit souls to the Incarnate God their Saviour.

III. And so, lastly we have here witness to the only alternative to the acceptance of His claims.

He hath spoken ‘blasphemy,’ not because He had derogated from the dignity of divinity, but because He had presumed to participate in it. And it seems to me, with all deference, that this rough alternative is the only legitimate one. If Jesus Christ did make such claims, and His relation to the Jewish hierarchy and His death are, as I have shown you, apart even from the testimony of the Evangelists, strong confirmation of the fact that He did-if Jesus Christ did make such claims, and they were not valid, one of two things follows. Either He believed them, and then, what about His sanity? or He did not believe them, and then, what about His honesty? In either case, what about His claims to be a Teacher of religion? What about His claims to be the Pattern of humanity? That part of His teaching and character is either the manifestation of His glory or it is like one of those fatal black seams that run through and penetrate into the substance of a fair white marble statue, marring all the rest of its pale and celestial beauty. Brethren, it seems to me that, when all is said and done, we come to one of three things about Jesus Christ. Either ‘He blasphemeth’ if He said these things, and they were not true, or ‘He is beside Himself’ if He said these things and believed them, or

‘Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ;
Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.’

Now I know that there are many men who, I venture to say, are far better than their creed, and who, believing it impossible to accept, in their plain meaning, the plain claims of Jesus Christ to divinity, do yet cleave to Him with a love and a reverence and an obedience which more orthodox men might well copy. And far be it from me to say one word which might seem even to quench the faintest beam of light that, shining from His perfect character, draws any heart, however imperfectly, to Himself. Only, if I speak to any such at this time, I beseech them to follow the light which draws them, and to see whether their reverence for that fair character should not lead them to accept implicitly the claims that came from His own lips. I humbly venture to say that if we know anything at all about Jesus Christ, we know that He lived declaring Himself to be the Everlasting Son of the Father, and that He died because He did so declare Himself. And I beseech you to ponder the question whether reverence for Him and admiration of His character can be logically and reasonably retained, side by side with the repudiation of that which is the most distinctive part of His message to men.

Oh, brethren, if it is true that God has come in the flesh, and that that sweet, gracious, infinitely beautiful life is really the revelation of the heart of God, then what a beam of sunshine falls upon all the darkness of this world! Then God is love; then that love holds us all; did not shrink from dying for us, and lives for ever to bless us. If these claims are true, what should our attitude be but that of infinite trust, love, submission, obedience, and the shaping of our lives after the pattern of His life?

These rejectors, when they said, ‘He speaketh blasphemies,’ were sealing their own doom, and the ruined Temple and nineteen centuries of wandering misery show what comes to men who hear Christ declaring that He is the Son of the living God and the Judge of the world, and who find nothing in the words but blasphemy. On the other hand, if we will answer His question, ‘Whom say ye that I am?’ as the apostle answered it, we shall, like the apostle, receive a benediction from His lips, and be set on that faith as on a rock against which the ‘gates of hell’ shall not prevail.

36)Matthew 26:66-68

THE REAL HIGH PRIEST AND HIS COUNTERFEIT

Mat. 26:57 - Mat. 26:68.

John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus was brought before ‘Annas first,’ probably in the same official priestly residence as Caiaphas, his son-in-law, occupied. That preliminary examination brought out nothing to incriminate the prisoner, and was flagrantly illegal, being an attempt to entrap Him into self-accusing statements. It was baffled by Jesus being silent first, and subsequently taking His stand on the undeniable principle that a charge must be sustained by evidence, not based on self-accusation. Annas, having made nothing of this strange criminal, ‘sent Him bound unto Caiaphas.’

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37)Matthew 27:33-35

Matthew

THE CRUCIFIXION

Mat. 27:33 - Mat. 27:50.

The characteristic of Matthew's account of the crucifixion is its representation of Jesus as perfectly passive and silent. His refusal of the drugged wine, His cry of desolation, and His other cry at death, are all His recorded acts. The impression of the whole is 'as a sheep before his shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth.' We are bid to look on the grim details of the infliction of the terrible death, and to listen to the mockeries of people and priests; but reverent awe forbids description of Him who hung there in His long, silent agony. Would that like reticence had checked the ill-timed eloquence of preachers and teachers of later days!

I. We have the ghastly details of the crucifixion.

Conder's suggestion of the site of Calvary as a little knoll outside the city, seems possible. It is now a low, bare hillock, with a scanty skin of vegetation over the rock, and in its rounded shape and bony rockiness explains why it was called 'skull.' It stands close to the main Damascus road, so that there would be many 'passers by' on that feast day. Its top commands a view over the walls into the temple enclosure, where, at the very hour of the death of Jesus, the Passover lamb was perhaps being slain. Arrived at the place, the executioners go about their task with stolid precision. What was the crucifying of another Jew or two to them? Before they lift the cross or fasten their prisoner to it, a little touch of pity, or perhaps only the observance of the usual custom, leads them to offer a draught of wine, in which some anodyne had been mixed, to deaden agony. But the cup which He had to drink needed that He should be in full possession of all His sensibilities to pain, and of all His unclouded firmness of resolve; and so His patient lips closed against the offered mercy. He would not drink because He would suffer, and He would suffer because He would redeem. His last act before He was nailed to the cross was an act of voluntary refusal of an opened door of escape from some portion of His pains.

What a gap there is between Mat. 27:34 - Mat. 27:35! The unconcerned soldiers went on to the next step in their ordinary routine on such an occasion,-the fixing of the cross and fastening of the victim to it. To them it was only what they had often done before; to Matthew, it was too sacred to be narrated, He cannot bring his pen to write it. As it were, he bids us turn away our eyes for a moment; and when next we look, the deed is done, and there stands the cross, and the Lord hanging, dumb and unresisting, on it. We see not Him, but the soldiers, busy at their next task. So little were they touched by compassion or awe, that they paid no heed to Him, and suspended their work to make sure of their perquisites,-the poor robes which they stripped from His body. Thus gently Matthew hints at the ignominy of exposure attendant on crucifixion, and gives the measure of the hard stolidity of the guards. Gain had been their first thought, comfort was their second. They were a little tired with their march and their work, and they had to stop there on guard for an indefinite time, with nothing to do but two more prisoners to crucify: so they take a rest, and idly keep watch over Him till He shall die. How possible it is to look at Christ's sufferings and see nothing! These rude legionaries gazed for hours on what has touched the world ever since, and what angels desired to look into, and saw nothing but a dying Jew. They thought about the worth of the clothes, or about how long they would have to stay there, and in the presence of the most stupendous fact in the world's history were all unmoved. We too may gaze on the cross and see nothing. We too may look at it without emotion, because without faith, or any consciousness of what it may mean for us. Only they who see there the sacrifice for their sins and the world's, see what is there. Others are as blind as, and less excusable than, these soldiers who watched all day by the Cross, seeing nothing, and tramped back at night to their barrack utterly ignorant of what they had been doing. But their work was not quite done. There was still a piece of grim mockery to be performed, which they would much enjoy. The 'cause,' as Matthew calls it, had to be nailed to the upper part of the cross. It was tri-lingual, as John tells us,-in Hebrew, the language of revelation; in Greek, the tongue of philosophy and art; in Latin, the speech of law and power. The three chief forces of the human spirit gave unconscious witness to the King; the three chief languages of the western world proclaimed His universal monarchy, even while they seemed to limit it to one nation. It was meant as a gibe at Him and at the nation, and as Pilate's statement of the reason for his sentence; but it meant more than Pilate meant by it, and it was fitting that His royal title should hang above His head; for the cross is His throne, and He is the King of men because He has died for them all. One more piece of work the soldiers had still to do. The crucifixion of the two robbers [perhaps of Barabbas' gang, though less fortunate than he] by Christ's side was intended to associate Him in the public mind with them and their crimes, and was the last stroke of malice, as if saying, 'Here is your King, and here are two of His subjects and ministers.' Matthew says nothing of the triumph of Christ's love, which won the poor robber for a disciple even at that hour of ignominy. His one purpose seems to be to accumulate the tokens of suffering and shame, and so to emphasise the silent endurance of the meek Lamb of God. Therefore, without a word about any of our Lord's acts or utterances, he passes on to the next group of incidents.

II. The mockeries of people and priests.

There would be many coming and going on the adjoining road, most of them too busy about their own affairs to delay long; for crucifixion was a slow process, and, when once the cross has been lifted, there would be little to see. But they were not too busy to spit venom at Him as they passed. How many of these scoffers, to whom death cast no shield round the object of their poor taunts, had shouted themselves hoarse on the Monday, and waved palm branches that were not withered yet! What had made the change? There was no change. They were running with the stream in both their hosannas and their jeers, and the one were worth as much as the other. They had been tutored to cry, 'Blessed is He that cometh!' and now they were tutored to repeat what had been said at the trial about destroying the temple. The worshippers of success are true to themselves when they mock at failure. They who shout round Jesus, when other people are doing it, are only consistent when they join in the roar of execration. Let us take care that our worship of Him is rooted in our own personal experience, and independent of what rulers or influential minds today say of Him.

A common passion levels all distinctions of culture and rank. The reverend dignitaries echoed the ferocious ridicule of the mob, whom they despised so much. The poorest criminal would have been left to die in peace; but brutal laughter surged round the silent sufferer, and showers of barbed sarcasms were flung at Him. The throwers fancied them exquisite jests, and demonstrations of the absurdity of Christ's claims; but they were really witnesses to His claims, and explanations of His sufferings. Look at them in turn, with this thought in our minds. 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save,' was launched as a sarcasm which confuted His alleged miracles by His present helplessness. How much it admits, even while it denies! Then, He did work miracles; and they were all for others, never for His own ends; and they were all for saving, never for destroying. Then, too, by this very taunt His claim to be the 'Saviour' is presupposed. And so, 'Physician, heal Thyself,' seemed to them an unanswerable missile to fling. If they had only known what made the 'cannot,' and seen that it was a 'will not,' they would have stood full in front of the great miracle of love which was before them unsuspected, and would have learned that the not saving Himself, which they thought blew to atoms His pretensions to save others, was really the condition of His saving a world. If He is to save others He cannot save Himself. That is the law for all mutual help. The lamp burns out in giving light, but the necessity for the death of Him who is the life of the world is founded on a deeper 'must.' His only way of delivering us from the burden of sin is His taking it on Himself. He has to 'bear our griefs and carry our sorrows,' if He is to bear away the sin of the world. But the 'cannot' derives all its power from His own loving will. The rulers' taunt was a venomous lie, as they meant it. If for 'cannot' we read 'will not,' it is the central truth of the Gospel.

Nor did they succeed better with their second gibe, which made mirth of such a throne, and promised allegiance if He would come down. O blind leaders of the blind! That death which seemed to them to shatter His royalty really established it. His Cross is His throne of saving power, by which He sways hearts and wills, and because of it He receives from the Father universal dominion, and every knee shall bow to Him. It is just because He did not come down from it that we believe on Him. On His head are many crowns; but, however many they be, they all grow out of the crown of thorns. The true kingship is absolute command over willingly submitted spirits; and it is His death which bows us before Him in raptures of glad love which counts submission, liberty, and sacrifice blessed. He has the right to command because He has given Himself for us, and His death wakes all-surrendering and all-expecting faith.

Nor was the third taunt more fortunate. These very religious men had read their Bibles so badly that they might never have heard of Job, nor of the latter half of Isaiah. They had been poring over the letter all their lives, and had never seen, with their microscopes, the great figure of the Innocent Sufferer, so plain there. So they thought that the Cross demonstrated the hollowness of Jesus' trust in God, and the rejection of Him by God. Surely religious teachers should have been slow to scoff at religious trust, and surely they might have known that failure and disaster even to death were no signs of God's displeasure. But, in one aspect, they were right. It is a mystery that such a life should end thus; and the mystery is none the less because many another less holy life has also ended in suffering. But the mystery is solved when we know that God did not deliver Him, just because He 'would have Him,' and that the Father's delight in the Son reached its very highest point when He became obedient until death, and offered Himself 'a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing unto God.'

III. We pass on to the darkness, desolation, and death.

Matthew represents these three long hours from noon till what answers to our 3 P.M. as passed in utter silence by Christ. What went on beneath that dread veil, we are not meant to know. Nor do we need to ask its physical cause or extent. It wrapped the agony from cruel eyes; it symbolised the blackness of desolation in His spirit, and by it God draped the heavens in mourning for man's sin. What were the onlookers doing then? Did they cease their mocking, and feel some touch of awe creeping over them?

'His brow was chill with dying,
And His soul was faint with loss.'

The cry that broke the awful silence, and came out of the darkness, was more awful still. The fewer our words the better; only we may mark how, even in His agony, Jesus has recourse to prophetic words, and finds in a lesser sufferer's cry voice for His desolation. Further, we may reverently note the marvellous blending of trust and sense of desertion. He feels that God has left Him, and yet he holds on to God. His faith, as a man, reached its climax in that supreme hour when, loaded with the mysterious burden of God's abandonment, He yet cried in His agony, 'My God!' and that with reduplicated appeal. Separation from God is the true death, the 'wages of sin'; and in that dread hour He bore in His own consciousness the uttermost of its penalty. The physical fact of Christ's death, if it could have taken place without this desolation from the consciousness of separation from God, would not have been the bearing of all the consequences of man's sins. The two must never be parted in our grateful contemplations; and, while we reverently abjure the attempt to pierce into that which God hid from us by the darkness, we must reverently ponder what Christ revealed to us by the cry that cleft it, witnessing that He then was indeed bearing the whole weight of a world's sin. By the side of such thoughts, and in the presence of such sorrow, the clumsy jest of the bystanders, which caught at the half-heard words, and pretended to think that Jesus was a crazy fanatic calling for Elijah with his fiery chariot to come and rescue Him, may well be passed by. One little touch of sympathy moistened His dying lips, not without opposition from the heartless crew who wanted to have their jest out. Then came the end. The loud cry of the dying Christ is worthy of record; for crucifixion ordinarily killed by exhaustion, and this cry was evidence of abundant remaining vitality. In accordance therewith, the fact of death is expressed by a phrase, which, though used for ordinary deaths, does yet naturally express the voluntariness of Christ. 'He sent away His spirit,' as if He had bid it depart, and it obeyed. Whether the expression may be fairly pressed so far or no, the fact is the same, that Jesus died, not because He was crucified, but because He chose. He was the Lord and Master of Death; and when He bid His armour-bearer strike, the slave struck, and the King died, not like Saul on the field of his defeat, but a victor in and by and over death.

38)Matthew 27:36

Matthew

THE CRUCIFIXION

THE BLIND WATCHERS AT THE CROSS

Mat. 27:36.

Our thoughts are, rightly, so absorbed by the central Figure in this great chapter that we pass by almost unnoticed the groups round the cross. And yet there are large lessons to be learned from each of them. These rude soldiers, four in number, as we infer from John's Gospel, had no doubt joined with their comrades in the coarse mockery which preceded the sad procession to Calvary; and then they had to do the rough work of the executioners, fastening the sufferers to the rude wooden crosses, lifting these, with their burden, filing them into the ground, then parting the raiment. And when all that is done they sit stolidly down to take their ease at the foot of the cross, and idly to wait, with eyes that look and see nothing, until the sufferers die. A strange picture; and a strange thing to think of, how they were so close to the great event in the world's history, and had to stare at it for three or four hours, and never saw anything!

The lessons that the incident teaches us may be very simply gathered together.

I. First we infer from this the old truth of how ignorant men are of the real meaning and outcome of what they do.

These four Roman soldiers were foreigners; I suppose that they could not speak a word to a man in that crowd. They had no means of communication with them. They had had plenty of practice in crucifying Jews. It was part of their ordinary work in these troublesome times, and this was just one more. Think of what a corporal's guard of rough English soldiers, out in Northern India, would think if they were bidden to hang a native who was charged with rebellion against the British Government. So much, and not one whit more, did these men know of what they were doing; and they went back to their barracks, stolid and unconcerned, and utterly ignorant of what they had been about.

But in part it is so with us all, though in less extreme fashion. None of us know the real meaning, and none of us know the possible issues and outcome of a great deal of our lives. We are like people sowing seed in the dark; it is put into our hands and we sow. We do the deed; this end of it is in our power, but where it runs out to, and what will come of it, lie far beyond our ken. We are compassed about, wherever we go, by this atmosphere of mystery, and enclosed within a great ring of blackness.

And so the simple lesson to be drawn from that clear fact, about all our conduct, is this-let results alone. Never mind about what you cannot get hold of; you cannot see to the other end, and you have nothing to do with it. You can see this end; make that right. Be sure that the motive is right, and then into whatever unlooked-for consequences your act may run out at the further end, you will be right. Never mind what kind of harvest is coming out of your deeds, you cannot forecast it. 'Thou soweth not that body that shall be, but bare grain. . .. God giveth it a body as it pleaseth Him.' Let alone that profitless investigation, the attempt to fashion and understand either the significance or the issues of your conduct, and stick fast by this-look after your motive for doing it, and your temper in doing it; and then be quite sure, 'Thou shalt find it after many days,' and the fruit will be 'unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.'

II. Take another very simple and equally plain lesson from this incident, viz., the limitation of responsibility by knowledge.

These men, as I said, were ignorant of what they were doing, and, therefore, they were guiltless. Christ Himself said so: 'They know not what they do.' But it is marvellous to observe that whilst the people who stood round the cross, and were associated in the act that led Jesus there, had all degrees of responsibility, the least guilty of the whole were the men who did the actual work of nailing Him to the cross, and lifting it with Him upon it. These soldiers were not half as much to blame as were many of the men that stood by; and just in the measure in which the knowledge or the possibility of knowledge increased, just in that measure did the responsibility increase. The high priest was a great deal more to blame than the Roman soldiers. The rude tool that nailed Christ to the cross, the hammer that was held in the hand of the legionary, was almost as much to blame as the hand that wielded it. For the hand that wielded it had very little more knowledge than it had.

In so far as it was possible that these men might have known something of what they were doing, in so far were they to blame; but remember what a very, very little light could possibly have shone upon these souls. If there is no light there cannot be any shadow; and if these men were, as certainly they were, all but absolutely ignorant, and never could have been anything else, of what they were doing, then they were all but absolutely guiltless. And so you come to this, which is only a paradox to superficial thinkers, that the men that did the greatest crime in the whole history of the world, did it with all but clean hands; and the people that were to be condemned were those who delivered ‘the Just One’ into the hands of more lawless, and therefore less responsible, men.

So here is the general principle, that as knowledge and light rise and fall, so responsibility rises and falls along with them. And therefore let us be thankful that we have not to judge one another, but that we have all to stand before that merciful and loving tribunal of the God who is a God of knowledge, and by whom actions are weighed, as the Old Book has it-not counted, but weighed. And let us be thankful, too, that we may extend our charity to all round us, and refrain from thinking of any man or woman that we can pronounce upon their criminality, because we do not know the light in which they walk.

III. And now the last lesson, and the one that I most desire to lay upon your hearts, is this, how possible it is to look at Christ on the cross, and see nothing.

For half a day there they sat, and it was but a dying Jew that they saw, one of three. A touch of pity came into their hearts once or twice, alternating to mockery, which was not savage because it was simply brutal; but when it was all over, and they had pierced His side, and gone away back to their barracks, they had not the least notion that they, with their dim, purblind eyes, had been looking at the most stupendous miracle in the whole world’s history, had been gazing at the thing into which angels desired to look; and had seen that to which the hearts and the gratitude of unconverted millions would turn for all eternity. They laid their heads down on their pillows that night and did not know what had passed before their eyes, and they shut the eyes that had served them so ill, and went to sleep, unconscious that they had seen the pivot on which the whole history of humanity had turned; and been the unmoved witnesses of ‘God manifest in the flesh,’ dying on the cross for the whole world, and for them. What should they have seen if they had seen the reality? They should have seen not a dying rebel but a dying Christ; they should have looked with emotion, they should have looked with faith, they should have looked with thankfulness.

Any one who looks at that cross, and sees nothing but a pure and perfect man dying upon it, is very nearly as blind as the Roman legionaries. Any one to whom it is only an example of perfect innocence and patient suffering has only seem an inch into the Infinite; and the depths of it are as much concealed from him as they were from them. Any one who looks with an unmoved heart, without one thrill of gratitude, is nearly as blind as the rough soldiers. He that looks and does not say-

‘My faith would lay her hand

On that dear head of Thine;

While like a penitent I stand

And there confess my sin,’

has not learned more of the meaning of the Cross than they did. And any one who looks to it, and then turns away and forgets, or who looks at it and fails to recognise in it the law of his own life and pattern for his own conduct, has yet to see more deeply into it before he sees even such portion of its meaning as here we can apprehend.

Oh! dear friends, we all of us, as the apostle says in one of his letters, have had this Christ ‘manifestly set forth before us as if painted upon a placard upon a wall’ [for that is the meaning of the picturesque words that he employs]. And if we look with calm, unmoved hearts; if we look without personal appropriation of that Cross and dying love to ourselves, and if we look without our hearts going out in thankfulness and laying themselves at His feet in a calm rapture of life-long devotion, then we need not wonder that four ignorant heathen men sat and looked at Him for four long hours and saw nothing, for we are as blind as ever they were.

You say, ‘We see.’ Do you see? Do you look? Does the look touch your hearts? Have you fathomed the meaning of the fact? Is it to you the sacrifice of the living Christ for your salvation? Is it to you the death on which all your hopes rest? You say that you see. Do you see that in it? Do you see your only ground of confidence and peace? And do you so see that, like a man who has looked at the sun for a moment or two, when you turn away your head you carry the image of what you beheld still stamped on your eyeball, and have it both as a memory and a present impression? So is the cross photographed on your heart; and is it true about us that every day, and all days, we behold our Saviour, and beholding Him are being changed into His likeness? Is it true about us that we thus bear about with us in the body ‘the dying of the Lord Jesus’? If we look to Him with faith and love, and make His Cross our own, and keep it ever in our memory, ever before us as an inspiration and a hope and a joy and a pattern, then we see. If not, ‘for judgment am I come into the world, that they which see not may see, and that they which see might be made blind.’ For what men are so blind to the infinite pathos and tenderness, power, mystery, and miracle of the Cross, as the men and women who all their lives long have heard a Gospel which has been held up before their lack-lustre eyes, and have looked at it so long that they cannot see it any more?

Let us pray that our eyes may be purged, that we may see, and seeing may copy, that dying love of the ever-loving Lord.

39)Matthew 27:41-43

Matthew

THE CRUCIFIXION

TAUNTS TURNING TO TESTIMONIES

Mat. 27:41 - Mat. 27:43.

It is an old saying that the corruption of the best is the worst. What is more merciful and pitiful than true religion? What is more merciless and malicious than hatred which calls itself ‘religious’? These priests, like many a persecutor for religion since, came to feast their eyes on the long-drawn-out agonies of their Victim, and their rank tongues blossomed into foul speech. Characteristically enough, though they shared in the mockeries of the mob, they kept themselves separate. The crowd pressed near enough to the cross to speak their gibes to Jesus; the dignified movers of the ignorant crowd stood superciliously apart, and talked scoffingly about Him. Whilst the populace yelled, ‘Thou that destroyest the Temple and buildest it in three days, come down,’ the chief priests, with the scribes, looked at each other with a smile, and said, ‘He saved others; Himself He cannot save.’

Now, these brutal taunts have lessons for us. They witness to the popular impression of Christ, and what His claims were. He asserted Himself to be a worker of miracles, the Messiah-King of Israel, the Son of God, therefore He died. And they witness to the misconception which ruled in the minds of these priests as to the relation of His claims to the Cross. They thought that it had finally burst the bubble, and disposed once for all of these absurd and blasphemous pretensions. Was it credible that a man who possessed miraculous power should not, in this supreme moment, use it to deliver Himself? Did not 'Physician, heal Thyself,' come in properly there? Would any of the most besotted followers of this pretender retain a rag of belief in His Messiahship if He was crucified? Could it be possible that, if there was a God at all, He should leave a man that really trusted in Him, not to say who was really His Son, to die thus? A cracked mirror gives a distorted image. The facts were seen, but their relation was twisted. If we will take the guidance of these gibes, and see what is the real explanation to the anomaly that they suggest, then we shall find that the taunts turn to Him for a testimony, and that 'out of the mouths of mockers there is 'perfected praise.' The stones flung at the Master turn to roses strewed in His path.

I. So, then, first the Cross shows us the Saviour who could not save Himself.

The priests did not believe in Christ's miracles, and they thought that this final token of his impotence, as they took it to be, was clear proof that the miracles were either tricks or mistakes. They saw the two things, they fatally misunderstood the relation between them. Let us put the two things together.

Here, on the one hand, is a Man who has exercised absolute authority in all the realms of the universe, who has spoken to dead matter, and it has obeyed; who by His word has calmed the storm, and hushed the winds by His word, has multiplied bread, has transmuted pale water into ruddy wine; who has moved omnipotent amongst the disturbed minds and diseased bodies of men, who has cast His sovereign word into the depth and darkness of the grave, and brought out the dead, stumbling and entangled in the grave-clothes. All these are facts on the one side. And on the other there is this-that there, passive, and, to superficial eyes, impotent, He hangs the helpless Victim of Roman soldiers and of Jewish priests. The short and easy vulgar way to solve the apparent contradiction was to deny the reality of the one of its members; to say ‘Miracles? Absurd! He never worked one, or He would have been working one now.’

But let their error lead us into truth, and let us grasp the relation of the two apparently contradictory facts. ‘He saved others,’ that is certain. He did not ‘save Himself,’ that is as certain. Was the explanation ‘cannot’? The priests by ‘cannot’ meant physical impossibility, defect of power, and they were wrong. But there is a profound sense in which the word ‘cannot’ is absolutely true. For this is in all time, and in all human relations, the law of service-sacrifice; and no man can truly help humanity, or an individual, unless he is prepared to surrender himself in the service. The lamp burns away in giving light. The fire consumes in warming the hearth, and no brotherly sympathy or help has ever yet been rendered, or ever will be, except at the price of self-surrender. Now, some people think that this is the whole explanation of our Lord’s history, both in His life and in His death. I do not believe that it is the whole explanation, but I do believe it carries us some way towards the central sanctuary, where the explanation lies. And yet it is not complete or adequate, because, to parallel Christ’s work with the work of any of the rest of us to our brethren, however beautiful, disinterested, self-oblivious, and self-consuming it may be, seems to me-I say it with deference, though I must here remember considerations of brevity and be merely assertive-entirely to ignore the unique special characteristic of the work of Jesus Christ-viz., that it was the atonement for the sins of the world. He could not bear away our sins, unless the burden of them was laid on His own back, and He carried our griefs, our sorrows, our diseases, and our transgressions. ‘He saved others, Himself He cannot save.’ But the impossibility was purely the result of His own willing and obedient love; or, if I put it in more epigrammatic form, the priests’ ‘cannot’ was partially true, but if they had said ‘would not’ they would have hit the mark, and come to full truth. The reason for His death becomes clear, and each of the contrasted facts is enhanced, when we set side by side the opulence and ease of His manifold miracles and the apparent impotence and resourcelessness of the passive Victim on the cross.

That ‘cannot’ did not come from defect of power, but from plenitude of love, and it was a ‘will not’ in its deepest depths. For you will find scattered throughout Scripture, especially these Gospels, indications from our Lord’s own lips, and by His own acts, that, in the truest and fullest sense, His sufferings were voluntary. ‘No man taketh it from me’-He says about His life-’I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.’ And once He did choose to flash out for a moment the always present power, that we might learn that when it did not appear, it was not because he could not, but because he would not. When the soldiers came to lay their hands upon Him, He presented Himself before them, saving them all the trouble of search, and when He asked a question, and received the answer that it was He of whom they were in search, there came one sudden apocalypse of His majesty, and they fell to the ground, and lay there prone before Him. They could have had no power at all against Him, except He had willed to surrender Himself to them. Again, though it is hypercritical perhaps to attach importance to what may only be natural idiomatic forms of speech, yet in this connection it is not to be overlooked that the language of all the Evangelists, in describing the supreme moment of Christ’s death, is congruous with the idea that He died neither from the exhaustion of crucifixion, nor from the thrust of the soldier’s spear, but because He would. For they all have expressions equivalent to that of one of them, ‘He gave up His spirit.’ Be that as it may, the ‘cannot’ was a ‘will not’; and it was neither nails that fastened Him to the tree, nor violence that slew Him, but He was fixed there by His own steadfast will, and He died because He would. So if we rightly understand the ‘cannot’ we may take up with thankfulness the taunt which, as I say, is tuned to a testimony, and reiterate adoringly, ‘He saved others, Himself He cannot save.’

II. The Cross shows us the King on His throne.

To the priests it appeared ludicrous to suppose that a King of Israel should, by Israel, be nailed upon the cross. ‘Let Him come down, and we will believe Him.’ They saw the two facts, they misconceived their relation. There was a relation between them, and it is not difficult for us to apprehend it.

The Cross is Christ’s throne. There are two ways in which the tragedy of His crucifixion is looked at in the Gospels, one that prevails in the three first, another that prevails in the fourth. These two seem superficially to be opposite; they are complementary. It depends upon your station whether a point in the sky is your zenith or your nadir. Here it is your zenith; at the antipodes it is the nadir. In the first three gospels the aspect of humiliation, degradation, inanition, suffering, is prominent in the references to the Crucifixion. In the fourth gospel the aspect of glory and triumph is uppermost. ‘Even so must the Son of Man be lifted up’; ‘I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me’; ‘Now the hour is come that the Son of Man should be glorified.’ And it is His glory, for on that Cross Jesus Christ manifests, in transcendent and superlative form, at once power and love that are boundless and divine. The Cross is the foundation of His kingdom. In his great passage in Philippians the Apostle brings together, in the closest causal connection, His obedience unto death, the death of the Cross, and His exaltation and reception of ‘the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.’ The title over the Cross was meant for a gibe. It was a prophecy. By the Cross He becomes the ‘King,’ and not only the ‘King of the Jews.’ The sceptre that was put in His hand, though it was meant for a sneer, was a forecast of a truth, for He rules, not with a rod of iron, but with the reed of gentleness; and the crown of thorns, that was pressed down on His wounded and bleeding head, foretold for our faith the great truth that suffering is the foundation of dominion, and that men will bow as to their King and Lord before Him who died for them, with a prostration of spirit, a loyalty of allegiance, and an alertness of service, which none other, monarch or superior, may even dream of attaining. The Cross establishes, not destroys, Christ’s dominion over men.

Yes; and that Cross wins their faith as nothing else can. The blind priests said, ‘Let Him come down, and we will believe Him.’ Precisely because He did not come down, do sad and sorrowful and sinful hearts turn to Him from the ends of the earth, and from the distances of the ages pour the treasures of their trust and their love at His feet. Did you ever think how strange it is, except with one explanation, that the gibes of the priests did not turn out to be true? Why is it that Christ’s shameful death did not burst the bubble, as they thought it had done? Why is it that in His case-and I was going to say, and it would have been no exaggeration, in His case only-the death of the leader did not result in the dispersion of the led? Why is it that His fate and future were the opposite of that of multitudes of other pseudo-Messiahs, of whom it is true that when they were slain their followers came to nought? Why? There is only one explanation, I think, and that is that the death was not the end, but that He rose again from the dead. My brother, you will either have to accept the Resurrection, with all that comes from it, or else you will have to join the ranks of the priests, and consider that Christ's death blew to atoms Christ's pretensions. If we know anything about Him, we know that He asserted miraculous power, Messiahship, and a filial relation to God. These things are facts. Did He rise or did He not? If He did not, He was an enthusiast. If He did, He is the King to whom our hearts can cleave, and to whom our loyalty is due.

III. Now, lastly, the Cross shows us the Son, beloved of the Father.

The priests thought that it was altogether incredible that His devotion should have been genuine, or His claim to be the Son of God should have any reality, since the Cross, to their vulgar eyes, disproved them both. Like all coarse-minded people, they estimated character by condition, but they who do that make no end of mistakes. They had forgotten their own Prophecies, which might have told them that 'the Servant of the Lord in whom' His 'heart delighted,' was a suffering Servant. But whilst they recognised the facts, here again, as in the other two cases, they misconceived the relation. We have the means of rectifying the distorted image.

We ought to know, and to be sure, that the Cross of Christ was the very token that this was God's 'beloved Son in whom He was well pleased.' If we dare venture on the comparison of parts of that which is all homogeneous and perfect, we might say that in the moment of His death Jesus Christ was more than ever the object of the Father's delight.

Why? It is not my purpose now to enlarge upon all the reasons which might be suggested. Let me put them together in a sentence or two. In that Cross Jesus Christ revealed God as God's heart had always yearned to be revealed, infinite in love, pitifulness, forbearance, and pardoning mercy. There was the highest manifestation of the glory of God. 'What?' you say, 'a poor weak Man, hanging on a cross, and dying in the dark-is that the very shining apex of all that humanity can know of divinity?' Yes, for it is the pure manifestation that God is Love. Therefore the whole sunshine of the Father's presence rested on the dying Saviour. It was the hour when God most delighted in Him, if I may venture the comparison, for the other reasons that then He carried filial obedience to its utmost perfection, that then His trust in God was deepest, even at the hour when His spirit was darkened by the cloud that the world's sin, which He was carrying, had spread thunderous between Him and the sunshine of the Father's face. For in that mysterious voice, which we can never understand in its depths, there were blended trust and desolation, each in its highest degree: 'My God! my God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me?' And the Cross was the complete carrying out of God's dearest purpose for the world, that He might be 'just, and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus.' Therefore, then-I was going to say as never before-was Christ His Son, in whom He delighted.

Brethren, let us, led by the errors of these scoffers, grasp the truths that they pervert. Let us see that weak Man hanging helpless on the cross, whose 'cannot' is the impotence of omnipotence, imposed by His own loving will to save a world by the sacrifice of Himself. Let us crown Him our King, and let our deepest trust and our gladdest obedience be rendered to Him because He did not come down from, but 'endured, the cross.' Let us behold with wonder, awe, and endless love the Father not withholding His only Son, but 'delivering Him up to the death for us all,' and from the empty grave and the occupied Throne let us learn how the Father by both proclaims to all the world concerning Him hanging dying on the cross: 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'

40)Matthew 27:44-50

Matthew

THE CRUCIFIXION

Mat. 27:33 - Mat. 27:50.

The characteristic of Matthew's account of the crucifixion is its representation of Jesus as perfectly passive and silent. His refusal of the drugged wine, His cry of desolation, and His other cry at death, are all His recorded acts. The impression of the whole is ‘as a sheep before his shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth.’ We are bid to look on the grim details of the infliction of the terrible death, and to listen to the mockeries of people and priests; but reverent awe forbids description of Him who hung there in His long, silent agony. Would that like reticence had checked the ill-timed eloquence of preachers and teachers of later days!

I. We have the ghastly details of the crucifixion.

Conder’s suggestion of the site of Calvary as a little knoll outside the city, seems possible. It is now a low, bare hillock, with a scanty skin of vegetation over the rock, and in its rounded shape and bony rockiness explains why it was called ‘skull.’ It stands close to the main Damascus road, so that there would be many ‘passers by’ on that feast day. Its top commands a view over the walls into the temple enclosure, where, at the very hour of the death of Jesus, the Passover lamb was perhaps being slain. Arrived at the place, the executioners go about their task with stolid precision. What was the crucifying of another Jew or two to them? Before they lift the cross or fasten their prisoner to it, a little touch of pity, or perhaps only the observance of the usual custom, leads them to offer a draught of wine, in which some anodyne had been mixed, to deaden agony. But the cup which He had to drink needed that He should be in full possession of all His sensibilities to pain, and of all His unclouded firmness of resolve; and so His patient lips closed against the offered mercy. He would not drink because He would suffer, and He would suffer because He would redeem. His last act before He was nailed to the cross was an act of voluntary refusal of an opened door of escape from some portion of His pains.

What a gap there is between Mat. 27:34 - Mat. 27:35! The unconcerned soldiers went on to the next step in their ordinary routine on such an occasion,-the fixing of the cross and fastening of the victim to it. To them it was only what they had often done before; to Matthew, it was too sacred to be narrated, He cannot bring his pen to write it. As it were, he bids us turn away our eyes for a moment; and when next we look, the deed is done, and there stands the cross, and the Lord hanging, dumb and unresisting, on it.

We see not Him, but the soldiers, busy at their next task. So little were they touched by compassion or awe, that they paid no heed to Him, and suspended their work to make sure of their perquisites,-the poor robes which they stripped from His body. Thus gently Matthew hints at the ignominy of exposure attendant on crucifixion, and gives the measure of the hard stolidity of the guards. Gain had been their first thought, comfort was their second. They were a little tired with their march and their work, and they had to stop there on guard for an indefinite time, with nothing to do but two more prisoners to crucify: so they take a rest, and idly keep watch over Him till He shall die. How possible it is to look at Christ's sufferings and see nothing! These rude legionaries gazed for hours on what has touched the world ever since, and what angels desired to look into, and saw nothing but a dying Jew. They thought about the worth of the clothes, or about how long they would have to stay there, and in the presence of the most stupendous fact in the world's history were all unmoved. We too may gaze on the cross and see nothing. We too may look at it without emotion, because without faith, or any consciousness of what it may mean for us. Only they who see there the sacrifice for their sins and the world's, see what is there. Others are as blind as, and less excusable than, these soldiers who watched all day by the Cross, seeing nothing, and tramped back at night to their barrack utterly ignorant of what they had been doing. But their work was not quite done. There was still a piece of grim mockery to be performed, which they would much enjoy. The 'cause,' as Matthew calls it, had to be nailed to the upper part of the cross. It was tri-lingual, as John tells us,-in Hebrew, the language of revelation; in Greek, the tongue of philosophy and art; in Latin, the speech of law and power. The three chief forces of the human spirit gave unconscious witness to the King; the three chief languages of the western world proclaimed His universal monarchy, even while they seemed to limit it to one nation. It was meant as a gibe at Him and at the nation, and as Pilate's statement of the reason for his sentence; but it meant more than Pilate meant by it, and it was fitting that His royal title should hang above His head; for the cross is His throne, and He is the King of men because He has died for them all. One more piece of work the soldiers had still to do. The crucifixion of the two robbers [perhaps of Barabbas' gang, though less fortunate than he] by Christ's side was intended to associate Him in the public mind with them and their crimes, and was the last stroke of malice, as if saying, 'Here is your King, and here are two of His subjects and ministers.' Matthew says nothing of the triumph of Christ's love, which won the poor robber for a disciple even at that hour of ignominy. His one purpose seems to be to accumulate the tokens of suffering and shame, and so to emphasise the silent endurance of the meek Lamb of God. Therefore, without a word about any of our Lord's acts or utterances, he passes on to the next group of incidents.

II. The mockeries of people and priests.

There would be many coming and going on the adjoining road, most of them too busy about their own affairs to delay long; for crucifixion was a slow process, and, when once the cross has been lifted, there would be little to see. But they were not too busy to spit venom at Him as they passed. How many of these scoffers, to whom death cast no shield round the object of their poor taunts, had shouted themselves hoarse on the Monday, and waved palm branches that were not withered yet! What had made the change? There was no change. They were running with the stream in both their hosannas and their jeers, and the one were worth as much as the other. They had been tutored to cry, 'Blessed is He that cometh!' and now they were tutored to repeat what had been said at the trial about destroying the temple. The worshippers of success are true to themselves when they mock at failure. They who shout round Jesus, when other people are doing it, are only consistent when they join in the roar of execration. Let us take care that our worship of Him is rooted in our own personal experience, and independent of what rulers or influential minds today say of Him.

A common passion levels all distinctions of culture and rank. The reverend dignitaries echoed the ferocious ridicule of the mob, whom they despised so much. The poorest criminal would have been left to die in peace; but brutal laughter surged round the silent sufferer, and showers of barbed sarcasms were flung at Him. The throwers fancied them exquisite jests, and demonstrations of the absurdity of Christ's claims; but they were really witnesses to His claims, and explanations of His sufferings. Look at them in turn, with this thought in our minds. 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save,' was launched as a sarcasm which confuted His alleged miracles by His present helplessness. How much it admits, even while it denies! Then, He did work miracles; and they were all for others, never for His own ends;

and they were all for saving, never for destroying. Then, too, by this very taunt His claim to be the 'Saviour' is presupposed. And so, 'Physician, heal Thyself,' seemed to them an unanswerable missile to fling. If they had only known what made the 'cannot,' and seen that it was a 'will not,' they would have stood full in front of the great miracle of love which was before them unsuspected, and would have learned that the not saving Himself, which they thought blew to atoms His pretensions to save others, was really the condition of His saving a world. If He is to save others He cannot save Himself. That is the law for all mutual help. The lamp burns out in giving light, but the necessity for the death of Him who is the life of the world is founded on a deeper 'must.' His only way of delivering us from the burden of sin is His taking it on Himself. He has to 'bear our griefs and carry our sorrows,' if He is to bear away the sin of the world. But the 'cannot' derives all its power from His own loving will. The rulers' taunt was a venomous lie, as they meant it. If for 'cannot' we read 'will not,' it is the central truth of the Gospel.

Nor did they succeed better with their second gibe, which made mirth of such a throne, and promised allegiance if He would come down. O blind leaders of the blind! That death which seemed to them to shatter His royalty really established it. His Cross is His throne of saving power, by which He sways hearts and wills, and because of it He receives from the Father universal dominion, and every knee shall bow to Him. It is just because He did not come down from it that we believe on Him. On His head are many crowns; but, however many they be, they all grow out of the crown of thorns. The true kingship is absolute command over willingly submitted spirits; and it is His death which bows us before Him in raptures of glad love which counts submission, liberty, and sacrifice blessed. He has the right to command because He has given Himself for us, and His death wakes all-surrendering and all-expecting faith.

Nor was the third taunt more fortunate. These very religious men had read their Bibles so badly that they might never have heard of Job, nor of the latter half of Isaiah. They had been poring over the letter all their lives, and had never seen, with their microscopes, the great figure of the Innocent Sufferer, so plain there. So they thought that the Cross demonstrated the hollowness of Jesus' trust in God, and the rejection of Him by God. Surely religious teachers should have been slow to scoff at religious trust, and surely they might have known that failure and disaster even to death were no signs of God’s displeasure. But, in one aspect, they were right. It is a mystery that such a life should end thus; and the mystery is none the less because many another less holy life has also ended in suffering. But the mystery is solved when we know that God did not deliver Him, just because He ‘would have Him,’ and that the Father’s delight in the Son reached its very highest point when He became obedient until death, and offered Himself ‘a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing unto God.’

III. We pass on to the darkness, desolation, and death.

Matthew represents these three long hours from noon till what answers to our 3 P.M. as passed in utter silence by Christ. What went on beneath that dread veil, we are not meant to know. Nor do we need to ask its physical cause or extent. It wrapped the agony from cruel eyes; it symbolised the blackness of desolation in His spirit, and by it God draped the heavens in mourning for man’s sin. What were the onlookers doing then? Did they cease their mocking, and feel some touch of awe creeping over them?

‘His brow was chill with dying,
And His soul was faint with loss.’

The cry that broke the awful silence, and came out of the darkness, was more awful still. The fewer our words the better; only we may mark how, even in His agony, Jesus has recourse to prophetic words, and finds in a lesser sufferer’s cry voice for His desolation. Further, we may reverently note the marvellous blending of trust and sense of desertion. He feels that God has left Him, and yet he holds on to God. His faith, as a man, reached its climax in that supreme hour when, loaded with the mysterious burden of God’s abandonment, He yet cried in His agony, ‘My God!’ and that with reduplicated appeal. Separation from God is the true death, the ‘wages of sin’; and in that dread hour He bore in His own consciousness the uttermost of its penalty. The physical fact of Christ’s death, if it could have taken place without this desolation from the consciousness of separation from God, would not have been the bearing of all the consequences of man’s sins. The two must never be parted in our grateful contemplations; and, while we reverently abjure the attempt to pierce into that which God hid from us by the darkness, we must reverently ponder what Christ revealed to us by the cry that cleft it, witnessing that He then was indeed bearing the whole weight of a world’s sin. By the side of such thoughts, and in the presence of such sorrow, the clumsy jest of the bystanders, which caught at the half-heard words, and pretended to think that Jesus was a crazy fanatic calling for Elijah with his fiery chariot to come and rescue Him, may well be passed by. One little touch of sympathy moistened His dying lips, not without opposition from the heartless crew who wanted to have their jest out. Then came the end. The loud cry of the dying Christ is worthy of record; for crucifixion ordinarily killed by exhaustion, and this cry was evidence of abundant remaining vitality. In accordance therewith, the fact of death is expressed by a phrase, which, though used for ordinary deaths, does yet naturally express the voluntariness of Christ. ‘He sent away His spirit,’ as if He had bid it depart, and it obeyed. Whether the expression may be fairly pressed so far or no, the fact is the same, that Jesus died, not because He was crucified, but because He chose. He was the Lord and Master of Death; and when He bid His armour-bearer strike, the slave struck, and the King died, not like Saul on the field of his defeat, but a victor in and by and over death.

41)Matthew 27:51

Matthew

THE VEIL RENT

Mat. 27:51.

As I suppose we are all aware, the Jewish Temple was divided into three parts: the Outer Court, open to all; the Holy Place, to which the ministering priests had daily access to burn incense and trim the lamps; and the Holy of Holies, where only the High Priest was permitted to go, and that but once a year, on the great Day of Atonement. For the other three hundred and sixty-four days the shrine lay silent, untrodden, dark. Between it and the less sacred Holy Place hung the veil, whose heavy folds only one man was permitted to lift or to pass. To all others it was death to peer into the mysteries, and even to him, had he gone at another time, and without the blood of the sacrifice, death would have ensued.

If we remember all this and try to cast ourselves back in imagination to the mental attitude of the ordinary Jew, the incident of my text receives its true interpretation. At the moment when the loud cry of the dying Christ rung over the heads of the awestruck multitude, that veil was, as it were, laid hold of by a pair of giant hands and torn asunder, as the Evangelist says, ‘from the top to the bottom.’ The incident was a symbol. In one aspect it proclaimed the end of the long years of Israel’s prerogative. In another it ushered in an epoch of new relations between man and God. If Jesus Christ was what He said He was, if His death was what He declared it to be, it was fitting that it should be attended by a train of subordinate and interpreting wonders. These were, besides that of my text, the darkened sun, the trembling earth, the shivered rocks, the open graves, the rising saints-all of them, in their several ways, illuminating the significance of that death on Calvary.

Not less significant is this symbol of my text, and I desire now to draw your attention to its meanings.

I. The rent veil proclaims the desecrated temple.

There is a striking old legend, preserved by the somewhat mendacious historian of the Jewish people, that, before Jerusalem fell, the anxious watchers heard from within the sanctuary a great voice saying, ‘Let us depart hence!’ and through the night were conscious of the winnowing of the mighty wings of the withdrawing cherubim. And soon a Roman soldier tossed a brand into the most Holy Place, and the ‘beautiful house where their fathers praised was burned with fire.’ The legend is pathetic and significant. But that ‘departing’ had taken place forty years before; and at the moment when Jesus ‘gave up the ghost,’ purged eyes might have seen the long trail of brightness as the winged servitors of the Most High withdrew from the desecrated shrine. The veil rent declared that the sacred soil within it was now common as any foot of earth in Galilee; and its rending, so to speak, made way for a departing God.

That conception, that the death of Christ Jesus was the de-consecration-if I may coin a word-of the Temple, and the end of all its special sanctity, and that thenceforward the Presence had departed from it, is distinctly enough taught us by Himself in words which move in the same circle of ideas as that in which the symbol resides. . .. You remember, no doubt, that, if we accept the testimony of John's Gospel, at the very beginning of our Lord's ministry He vindicated His authority to cleanse the sanctuary against the cavils of the sticklers for propriety by the enigmatical words, 'Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will build it up,' to which the Evangelist appends the comment, 'He spake of the Temple of His body,' that body in which 'all the fulness of the Godhead' dwelt, and which was, and is to-day, all that the Temple shadowed and foretold, the dwelling-place of God in humanity, the place of sacrifice, the meeting-place between God and man. But just because our Lord in these dark words predicted His death and His resurrection, He also hinted the destruction of the literal stone and lime building, and its rearing again in nobler and more spiritual form. When He said, 'Destroy this Temple,' He implied, secondarily, the destruction of the house in which He stood, and laid that destruction, whensoever it should come to pass, at their doors. And, inasmuch as the saying in its deepest depth meant His death by their violence and craft, therefore, in that early saying of His, was wrapped up the very same truth which was symbolised by the rent veil, and was bitterly fulfilled at last. When they slew Christ they killed the system under which they lived, and for which they would have been glad to die, in a zeal without knowledge; and destroyed the very Temple on the distorted charge of being the destroyer of which, they handed Him over to the Roman power.

The death of Christ is, then, the desecration and the destruction of that Temple. Of course it is; because when a nation that had had millenniums of education, of forbearance, of revelation, turned at last upon the very climax and brightest central light of all the Revelation, standing there amongst them in a bodily form, there was nothing more to be done. God had shot His last arrow; His quiver was empty. 'Last of all He sent unto them His Son, saying,' with a wistful kind of half-confidence, 'They will reverence My Son,' and the divine expectation was disappointed, and exhaustless Love was empty-handed, and all was over. He could turn to themselves and say, 'Judge between Me and My vineyard. What more could have been done that I have not done to it?’ Therefore, there was nothing left but to let the angels of destruction loose, and to call for the Roman eagles with their broad-spread wings, and their bloody beaks, and their strong talons, to gather together round the carcase. When He gave up the Ghost, ‘the veil of the Temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.’

A time of repentance was given. It was possible for the most guilty participator in that judicial murder to have his gory hands washed and made white in the very blood that he had shed; but, failing repentance, that death was the death of Israel, and the destruction of Israel’s Temple. Let us take the lesson, dear brethren. If we turn away from that Saviour, and refuse the offered gifts of His love, there is no other appeal left in the power of Heaven; and there is nothing for it after that except judgment and destruction. We can ‘crucify the Son of God afresh and put Him to an open shame.’ And the hearts that are insensitive, as are some of our hearts, to that great love and grace, are capable of nothing except to be pulverised by means of a judgment. Repentance is possible for us all, but, failing that, the continuance of rejection of Christ is the pulling down, on our own heads, of the ruins of the Temple, like the Israelitish hero in his blindness and despair.

II. Now, secondly, the rent veil means, in another way of looking at the incident, light streaming in on the mystery of God.

Let me recall to your imaginations what lay behind that heavy veil. In the Temple, in our Lord’s time, there was no presence of the Shekinah, the light that symbolised the divine presence. There was the mercy-seat, with the outstretched wings of the cherubim; there were the dimly pictured forms on the tapestry hangings; there was silence deep as death; there was darkness absolute and utter, whilst the Syrian sun was blazing down outside. Surely that is the symbol of the imperfect knowledge or illumination as to the divine nature which is over all the world. ‘The veil is spread over all nations, and the covering over all people.’ And surely that sudden, sharp tearing asunder of the obscuring medium, and letting the bright sunlight stream into every corner of the dark chamber, is for us a symbol of the great fact that in the life, and especially in the death, of Jesus Christ our Lord, we have light thrown in to the depths of God.

What does that Cross tell us about God that the world did not know? And how does it tell us? and why does it tell us? It tells us of absolute righteousness, of that in the divine nature which cannot tolerate sin; of the stern law of retribution which must be wrought out, and by which the wages of every sin is death. It tells us not only of a divine righteousness which sees guilt and administers punishment, but it tells us of a divine love, perfect, infinite, utter, perennial, which shrinks from no sacrifice, which stoops to the lowest conditions, which itself takes upon it all the miseries of humanity, and which dies because it loves and will save men from death. And as we look upon that dying Man hanging on the cross, the very embodiment and consummation of weakness and of shame, we have to say, ‘Lo! this is our God! We have waited for Him’-through all the weary centuries-’and He will save us.’ How does it tell us all this? Not by eloquent and gracious thoughts, not by sweet and musical words, but by a deed. The only way by which we can know men is by what they do. The only way by which we know God is by what He does. And so we point to that Cross and say, ‘There! not in words, not in thoughts, not in speculations, not in hopes and fears and peradventures and dim intuitions, but in a solid fact; there is the Revelation which lays bare the heart of God, and shows us its very throbbing of love to every human soul.’ ‘The veil was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.’

The Cross will reveal God to you only if you believe that Jesus Christ was the Incarnate Word. Brethren, if that death was but the death of even the very holiest, noblest, sweetest, perfectest soul that ever lived on earth and breathed human breath, there is no revelation of God in it for us. It tells us what Jesus was, and by a very roundabout inference may suggest something of what the divine nature is, but unless you can say, as the New Testament says, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . .. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth,’ I fail to see how the death of Christ can be a revelation of the love of God.

I need not occupy time in dilating upon the contrast between this solid certitude, and all that the world, apart from Jesus Christ, has to lay hold of about God. We want something else than mist on which to build, and on which to lay hold. And there is a substantial, warm, flesh-and-blood hand, if I may so say, put out to us through the mist when we believe in Christ the Son of God, who died on the cross for us all. Then, amidst whirling mists and tossing seas, there is a fixed point to which we can moor; then our confidence is built, not on peradventures or speculations or wishes or dreams or hopes, but on a historical fact, and grasping that firm we may stand unmoved.

Dear friends, I may be very old-fashioned and very narrow-I suppose I am; but I am bound to declare my conviction, which I think every day's experience of the tendency of thought only makes more certain, that, practically for this generation, the choice lies between accepting the life and death of Jesus Christ as the historical Revelation of God, or having no knowledge of Him-knowledge, I say,-of Him at all; you must choose between the barred sanctuary, within which lies couched a hidden Something-with a capital S-or perhaps a hidden Someone whom you never can know and never will; or the rent veil, rent by Christ's death, through which you can pass, and behold the mercy-seat and, above the outstretched wings of the adoring cherubim, the Father whose name is Love.

III. Lastly, the rent veil permits any and every man to draw near to God.

You remember what I have already said as to the jealous guarding of the privacy of that inner shrine, and how not only the common herd of the laity, but the whole of the priesthood, with the solitary exception of its titular head, were shut out from ever entering it. In the old times of Israel there was only one man alive at once who had ever been beyond the veil. And now that it is rent, what does that show but this, that by the death of Jesus Christ any one, every one, is welcome to pass in to the very innermost sanctuary, and to dwell, nestling as close as he will, to the very heart of the throned God? There is a double veil, if I may so say, between man and God: the side turned outward is woven by our own sins; and the other turned inwards is made out of the necessary antagonism of the divine nature to man's sin. There hangs the veil, and when the Psalmist asked, 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord; or who shall stand in His holy place?' he was putting a question which echoes despairingly in the very heart of all religions. And he answered it as conscience ever answers it when it gets fair play: ‘He that hath clean hands and a pure heart, who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity.’ And where or who is he? Nowhere; nobody. Access is barred, because it is impossible that a holy and righteous God should communicate the selectest gifts of His love, even the sense of His favour, and of harmony and fellowship with Him, to sinful men, and barred, because it is impossible that men, with the consciousness of evil and the burden of guilt sometimes chafing their shoulders, and always bowing down their backs, should desire to possess, or be capable of possessing, that fellowship and union with God. A black, frowning wall, if I may change the metaphor of my text, rises between us and God. But One comes with the sacrificial vessel in His hand, and pours His blood on the barrier, and that melts the black blocks that rise between us and God, and the path is patent and permeable for every foot. ‘The veil of the Temple was rent in twain’ when Christ died. That death, because it is a sacrifice, makes it possible that the whole fulness of the divine love should be poured upon man. That death moves our hearts, takes away our sense of guilt, draws us nearer to Him; and so both by its operation-not on the love of God-but on the government of God, and by its operation on the consciousness of men, throws open the path into His very presence.

If I might use abstract words, I would say that Christ’s death potentially opens the path for every man, which being put into plain English-which is better-is just that by the death of Christ every man can, if he will, go to God, and live beside Him. And our faith is our personal laying hold of that great sacrifice and treading on that path. It turns the ‘potentiality’ into an actuality, the possibility into a fact. If we believe on Him who died on the cross for us all, then by that way we come to God, than which there is none other given under heaven among men.

So all believers are priests, or none of them are. The absolute right of direct access to God, without the intervention of any man who has an officially greater nearness to Him than others, and through whom as through a channel the grace of sacrament comes, is contained in the great symbol of my text. And it is a truth that this day needs. On the one hand there is agnostic unbelief, which needs to see in the rent veil the illumination streaming through it on to the depths of God; and on the other hand there is the complementary error-and the two always breed each other-the superstition which drags back by an anachronism the old Jewish notions of priesthood into the Christian Church. It needs to see in the rent veil the charter of universal priesthood for all believers, and to hearken to the words which declare, ‘Ye are a chosen generation, a spiritual house, a royal priesthood, that ye should offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable unto God by Jesus Christ.’ That is the lesson that this day wants. ‘Having, therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest of all, by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which He has consecrated for us through the veil, that is His flesh, let us draw near with true hearts in full assurance of faith.’

Mark

1) MARK 1:1
2) MARK 1:2-11
3) MARK 1:21-29
4) MARK 1:30-31
5) MARK 1:32-34
6) MARK 1:41
7) MARK 1:42
8) MARK 2:1-12
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11) MARK 2:20-22
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14) MARK 3:5
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36) MARK 5:35-43
37) MARK 6:1-4
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1) Mark 1:1

Mark

THE STRONG FORERUNNER AND THE STRONGER SON

WHAT 'THE GOSPEL' IS

Mar. 1:1.

My purpose now is to point out some of the various connections in which the New Testament uses that familiar phrase, 'the gospel,' and briefly to gather some of the important thoughts which these suggest. Possibly the process may help to restore freshness to a word so well worn that it slips over our tongues almost unnoticed and excites little thought.

The history of the word in the New Testament books is worth notice. It seldom occurs in those lives of our Lord which now are emphatically so called, and where it does occur, it is ‘the gospel of the Kingdom’ quite as frequently as ‘the gospel’ of the King. The word is never used in Luke, and only twice in the Acts of the Apostles, both times in quotations. The Apostle John never employs it, either in his ‘gospel’ or in his epistles, and in the Apocalypse the word is only once found, and then it may be a question whether it refers to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. John thought of the word which he had to proclaim as ‘the message,’ ‘the witness,’ ‘the truth,’ rather than as ‘the gospel.’ We search for the expression in vain in the epistles of James, Jude, and to the Hebrews. Thrice it is used by Peter. The great bulk of the instances of its occurrence are in the writings of Paul, who, if not the first to use it, at any rate is the source from which the familiar meaning of the phrase, as describing the sum total of the revelation in Jesus Christ, has flowed.

The various connections in which the word is employed are remarkable and instructive. We can but touch lightly on the more important lessons which they are fitted to teach.

I. The Gospel is the ‘Gospel of Christ.’

On our Lord’s own lips and in the records of His life we find, as has already been noticed, the phrase, ‘the gospel of the kingdom’-the good news of the establishment on earth of the rule of God in the hearts and lives of men. The person of the King is not yet defined by it. The diffused dawn floods the sky, and upon them that sit in darkness the greatness of its light shines, before the sun is above the horizon. The message of the Forerunner proclaimed, like a herald’s clarion, the coming of the Kingdom, before he could say to a more receptive few, ‘Behold the Lamb of God.’ The order is first the message of the Kingdom, then the discovery of the King. And so that earlier phrase falls out of use, and when once Christ’s life had been lived, and His death died, the gospel is no longer the message of an impersonal revolution in the world’s attitude to God’s will, but the biography of Him who is at once first subject and monarch of the Kingdom of Heaven, and by whom alone we are brought into it. The standing expression comes to be ‘the gospel of Christ.’

It is His, not so much because He is the author, as because He is the subject of it. It is the good news about Christ. He is its contents and great theme.

And so we are led up at once to the great central peculiarity of Christianity, namely that it is a record of historical fact, and that all the world's life and blessedness lie in the story of a human life and death. Christ is Christianity. His biography is the good news for every child of man.

Neither a philosophy nor a morality, but a history, is the true good news for men. The world is hungry, and when it cries for bread wise men give it a stone, but God gives it the fare it needs in the bread that comes down from Heaven. Though it be of small account in many people's eyes, like the common barley cakes, the poor man's food, it is what we all need; and humble people, and simple people, and uneducated people, and barbarous people, and dying people, and the little children can all eat and live. They would find little to keep them from starving in anything more ambitious, and would only break their teeth in mumbling the dry bones of philosophies and moralities. But the story of their Brother who has lived and died for them feeds heart and mind and will, fancy and imagination, memory and hope, nourishes the whole nature into health and beauty, and alone deserves to be called good news for men.

All that the world needs lies in that story. Out of it have come peace and gladness to the soul, light for the understanding, cleansing for the conscience, renovation for the will, which can be made strong and free by submission, a resting-place for the heart, and a starting-point and a goal for the loftiest flights of hope. Out of it have come the purifying of family and civic life, the culture of all noble social virtues, the sanctity of the household, and the elevation of the state. The thinker has found the largest problems raised and solved therein. The setting forth of a loftier morality, and the enthusiasm which makes the foulest nature aspire to and reach its heaven-touching heights, are found together there. To it poet and painter, architect and musician, owe their noblest themes. The good news of the world is the story of Christ's life and death. Let us be thankful for its form; let us be thankful for its substance.

But we must not forget that, as Paul, who is so fond of the word, has taught us, the historical fact needs some explanation and commentary to make the history a gospel. He has declared to us 'the gospel which he preached,' and to which he ascribes saving power, and he gives these as its elements, 'How that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures.' There are three facts-death, burial, resurrection. These are the things that any eye could have seen. Are these the gospel? Is there any saving power in them? Not unless you add the commentary 'for our sins,' and 'according to the Scriptures.' That death was a death for us all, by which we are delivered from our sins-that is the main thing; and in subordination to that thought, the other that Christ's death was the accomplishment of prophecies-these make the history a gospel. The bare facts, without the exhibition of their purpose and meaning, are no more a gospel than any other story of a death would be. The facts with any lower explanation of their meaning are no gospel, any more than the story of the death of Socrates or any innocent martyr would be. If you would know the good news that will lift your heavy heart from sorrow and break your chains of sin, that will put music into your life and make your days blaze into brightness as when the sunlight strikes some sullen mountain-side that lay black in shadow, you must take the fact with its meaning, and find your gospel in the life and death of Him who is more than example and more than martyr. 'How that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures,' is 'the gospel of Christ.'

II. The Gospel of Christ is the 'Gospel of God.'

This form of the expression, though by no means so frequent as the other, is found throughout Paul's epistles, thrice in the earliest-Thessalonians [1Th. 2:8], once in the great Epistle to the Romans [Rom. 1:1], once in Corinthians [2Co. 11:7], and once in a modified form in the pathetic letter from the dungeon, which the old man addressed to his 'son Timothy' [1Ti. 1:11]. It is also found in the writings of Peter [1Pe. 4:17]. In all these cases the phrase, 'the gospel of God,' may mean the gospel which has God for its author or origin, but it seems rather to mean 'which has God for its subject.'

It was, as we saw, mainly designated as the good news about Jesus Christ, but it is also the good news about God. So in one and the same set of facts we have the history of Jesus and the revelation of God. They are not only the biography of a man, but they are the unveiling of the heart of God. These Scripture writers take it for granted that their readers will understand that paradox, and do not stop to explain how they change the statement of the subject matter of their message, in this extraordinary fashion, between their Master who had lived and died on earth, and the Unseen Almightiness throned above all heavens. How comes that to be?

It is not that the gospel has two subjects, one of which is the matter of one portion, and the other of another. It does not sometimes speak of Christ, and sometimes rise to tell us of God. It is always speaking of both, and when its subject is most exclusively the man Christ Jesus, it is then most chiefly the Father God. How comes that to be? Surely this unconscious shifting of the statement of their theme, which these writers practise as a matter of course, shows us how deeply the conviction had stamped itself on their spirits, 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father,' and how the point of view from which they had learned to look on all the sweet and wondrous story of their Master's life and death, was that of a revelation of the deepest heart of God.

And so must we look on that whole career, from the cradle to the cross, from Calvary to Olivet, if we are to know its deepest tenderness and catch its gladdest notes. That such a man has lived and died is beautiful, and the portrait will hang for ever as that of the fairest of the children of men. But that in that life and death we have our most authentic knowledge of what God is, and that all the pity and truth, the gentleness and the brotherliness, the tears and the self-surrender, are a revelation to us of God; and that the cross, with its awful sorrow and its painful death, tells us not only how a man gave himself for those whom he loved, but how God loves the world and how tremendous is His law-this is good news of God indeed. We have to look for our truest knowledge of Him not in the majesties of the starry heavens, nor in the depths of our own souls, not in the scattered tokens of His character given by the perplexed order of the world, nor in the intuitions of the wise, but in the life and death of His Son, whose tears are the pity of God as well as the compassion of a man, and in whose life and death the whole world may behold 'the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person,' and be delivered from all their fears of an angry, and all their doubts of an unknown, God.

There is a double modification of this phrase. We hear of 'the gospel of the grace of God' and 'the gospel of the glory of God,' which latter expression, rendered in the English version misleadingly 'the glorious gospel,' is given in its true shape in the Revised Version. The great theme of the message is further defined in these two noteworthy forms. It is the tender love of God in exercise to lowly creatures who deserve something else that the gospel is busy in setting forth, a love which flows forth unbought and unmotived save by itself, like some stream from a hidden lake high up among the pure Alpine snows. The story of Christ's work is the story of God's rich, unmerited love, bending down to creatures far beneath, and making a radiant pathway from earth to heaven, like the sevenfold rainbow. It is so, not merely because this mission is the result of God's love, but also because His grace is God's grace, and therefore every act of Christ which speaks His own tenderness is therein an apocalypse of God.

The second of these two expressions, 'the gospel of the glory of God,' leads up to that great thought that the true glory of the divine nature is its tenderness. The lowliness and death of Christ are the glory of God! Not in the awful attributes which separate that inconceivable Nature from us, not in the eternity of His existence, nor in the Infinitude of His Being, not in the Omnipotence of His unwearied arm, nor in fire-eyed Omniscience, but in the pity and graciousness which bend lovingly over us, is the true glory of God. These pompous 'attributes' are but the fringes of the brightness, the living white heart of which is love. God's glory is God's grace, and the purest expression of both is found there, where Jesus hangs dying in the dark, The true throne of God's glory is not builded high in a remote heaven, flashing intolerable brightness and set about with bending principalities and powers, but it is the Cross of Calvary. The story of the 'grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,' with its humiliation and shame, is the 'gospel of the grace,' and therefore is the 'gospel of the glory, of God.'

III. The good news of Christ and of God is the gospel of our salvation and peace.

We read of 'the gospel of your salvation' [Eph. 1:13], and in the same letter [Mar. 6:15] of 'the gospel of peace.' In these expressions we pass from the consideration of the author or of the subject matter of the good news to that of its purpose and issue. It is meant to bring to men, and it does in fact bring to all who accept it, those wide and complex blessings described by those two great words.

That good news about Christ and God brings to a man salvation, if he believes it. To know and feel that I have a loving Father who has so cared for me and all my brethren that He has sent His Son to live and die for me, is surely enough to deliver me from all the bonds and death of sin, and to quicken me into humble consecration to His service. And such emancipation from the burden and misery of sin, from the gnawing consciousness of evil and the weakening sense of guilt, from the dominion of wrong tastes and habits, and from the despair of ever shaking them off which is only too well grounded in the experience of the past, is the beginning of salvation for each of us. That great keyword of the New Testament covers the whole field of positive and negative good which man can need or God can give. Negatively it includes the removal of every evil, whether of the nature of sorrow or of sin, under which men can groan. Positively it includes the endowment with all good, whether of the nature of joy or of purity, which men can hope for or receive. It is past, present, and future, for every heart that accepts 'the word of the truth of the gospel'-past, inasmuch as the first effect of even the most incomplete acceptance is to put us in a new position and attitude towards the law of God, and to plant the germs of all holiness and joy in our souls; present, inasmuch as salvation is a growing possession and a continuous process running on all through our lives, if we be true to ourselves and our calling; future, inasmuch as its completion waits to be unveiled in another order of things, where perfect purity and perfect consecration shall issue in perfect joy. And all this ennobling and enriching of human nature is produced by that good news about the grace and glory of God and of Christ, if we will only listen to it, and let it work its work on our souls.

Substantially the same set of facts is included under that other expression, 'the gospel of peace.' The Hebrew use of the word 'peace' as a kind of shorthand for all good is probably to be remembered. But even in the narrower sense of the word, how great are the blessings set forth by it! All inward serenity and outward calm, the tranquillity of a soul free from the agitations of emotion and the storms of passions and the tumults of desire, as well as the security of a life guarded from the assaults of foes and girded about with an impregnable barrier which nothing can destroy and no enemy overleap, are ours, if we take the good news about God to our heart. They are ours in the measure in which we take it. Clearly such truths as those which the gospel brings have a plain tendency to give peace. They give peace with God, with the world, and with ourselves. They lead to trust, and trust is peace. They lead to union with God, and that is peace. They lead to submission, and that is peace. They lead to consecration, and that is peace. They lead to indifference to fleeting joys and treasures, and that is peace. They give to heart and mind and will an all-sufficient and infinite object, and that is peace. They deliver us from ourselves, and that is peace. They fill the past, the present, and the future with the loving Father's presence, and brighten life and death with the Saviour's footsteps-and so to live is calm, and to die is to lay ourselves down in peace and sleep, quiet by His side, like a child by its mother. The good news about God and Christ is the good news of our salvation and of our peace.

IV. The good news about Christ and God is *the* gospel.

By far the most frequent form in which the word gospel occurs is that of the simple use of the noun with the definite article. This message is emphatically *the* good news. It is the tidings which men most of all want. It stands alone; there is no other like it. If this be not the glad tidings of great joy for the world, then there are none.

Let no false liberality lead us to lose sight of the exclusive claims which are made in this phrase for the set of facts the narrative of which constitutes 'the gospel.' The life and death of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world, His resurrection and continuous life for the saving of the world-these are the truths, without which there can be no gospel. They may be apprehended in different ways, set forth in different perspective, proclaimed in different dialects, explained in different fashion, associated with different accompaniments, drawn out into different consequences, and yet, through all diversity of tones, the message may be one. Sounded on a ram's horn or a silver trumpet, it may be the same saving and joy-bringing proclamation, and it will be, if Christ and His life and death are plainly set forth as the beginning and ending of all. But if there be an omission of that mighty name, or if a Christ be proclaimed without a Cross, a salvation without a Saviour, or a Saviour without a Sacrifice, all the adornments of genius and sincerity will not prevent such a half gospel from falling flat. Its preachers have never been able, and never will be able, to touch the general heart or to bring good cheer to men. They have always had to complain, ‘We have piped unto you and ye have not danced.’ They cannot get people to be glad over such a message. Only when you speak of a Christ who has died for our sins, will you cause the heavy heart of the world to sing for joy. Only that old, old message is the good news which men want.

There is no second gospel. Men who preach a message of a different kind, as Paul tells us, are preaching what is not really another gospel. There cannot be two messages. There is but one genuine; all others are counterfeits. For us it is all-important that we should be no less narrow than the truth, and no more liberal than he was to whom the message ‘how that Jesus died for our sins’ was the only thing worth calling the gospel. Our own salvation depends on our firm grasp of that one message, and for some of us, the clear decisiveness with which our lips ring it out determines whether we shall be blessings or curses to our generation. There is a Babel of voices now preaching other messages which promise good tidings of good. Let us cleave with all our hearts to Christ alone, and let our tongues not falter in proclaiming, ‘Neither is there salvation in any other.’ The gospel of the Christ who died for our sins, is *the* gospel.

And what we have for ourselves to do with it is told us in that pregnant phrase of the apostle’s, ‘my gospel,’ and ‘our gospel’; meaning not merely the message which he was charged to proclaim, but the good news which he and his brethren had made their own. So we have to make it ours. It is of no use to us, unless we do. It is not enough that it echoes all around us, like music borne upon the wind. It is not enough that we hear it, as men do some sweet melody, while their thoughts are busy on other things. It is not enough that we believe it, as we do other histories in which we have no concern. What more is needed? Another expression of the apostle’s gives the answer. He speaks of ‘the faith of the gospel,’ that is the trust which that glad message evokes, and by which it is laid hold of.

Make it yours by trusting your whole self to the Christ of whom it tells you. The reliance of heart and will on Jesus who has died for me, makes it ‘my gospel.’ There is one God, one Christ, one gospel which tells us of them, and one faith by which we lay hold upon the gospel, and upon the loving Father and the ever-helpful Saviour of whom it tells. Let us make that great word our own by simple faith, and then ‘as cold water to our thirsty soul,’ so will be that ‘good news from a far country,’ the country where the Father’s house is, and to which He has sent the Elder Brother to bring back us prodigal children.

2) Mark 1:2-11

Mark

THE STRONG FORERUNNER AND THE STRONGER SON

Mar. 1:1 - Mar. 1:11.

The first words of *In Memoriam* might be taken to describe the theme of Mark’s Gospel. It is the ‘strong Son of God’ whom he sets forth in his rapid, impetuous narrative, which is full of fiery energy, and delights to paint the unresting continuity of Christ’s filial service. His theme is not the King, as in Matthew; nor the Son of Man, as in Luke; nor the eternal Word manifested in flesh, as in John. Therefore he neither begins by tracing His kingly lineage, as does the first evangelist; nor by dwelling on the humanities of wedded life and the sacredness of the family since He has been born; nor by soaring to the abysses of the eternal abiding of the Word with God, as the agent of creation, the medium of life and light; but plunges at once into his subject, and begins the Gospel with the mission of the Forerunner, which melts immediately into the appearance of the Son.

I. We may note first, in this passage, the prelude, including Mar. 1:1 - Mar. 1:3.

We need not discuss the grammatical connection of these verses, nor the relation of Mar. 1:2 - Mar. 1:3 to the following section. However that be settled, the result, for our present purpose, is the same. Mark considers that John’s mission is the beginning of the gospel. Here are two noteworthy points,-his use of that well-worn word, ‘the gospel,’ and his view of John’s place in relation to it. The gospel is the narrative of the facts of Christ’s life and death. Later usage has taken it to be, rather, the statement of the truths deducible from these facts, and especially the proclamation of salvation by the power of Christ’s atoning death; but the primitive application of the word is to the history itself. So Paul uses it in his formal statement of the gospel which he preached, with the addition, indeed, of the explanation of the meaning of Christ's death [1Co. 15:1 - 1Co. 15:6]. The very name 'good news' necessarily implies that the gospel is, primarily, history; but we cannot exclude from the meaning of the word the statement of the significance of the facts, without which the facts have no message of blessing. Mark adds the dogmatic element when he defines the subject of the Gospel as being 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' In the remainder of the book the simple name 'Jesus' is used; but here, in starting, the full, solemn title is given, which unites the contemplation of Him in His manhood, in His office as fulfiller of prophecy and crown of revelation, and in His mysterious, divine nature.

Whether we regard Mar. 1:2 - Mar. 1:3 as connected grammatically with the preceding or the following verses, they equally refer to John, and define his position in relation to the Gospel. The Revised Version restores the true reading, 'in Isaiah the prophet,' which some unwise and timid transcriber has, as he thought, mended into 'the prophets,' for fear that an error should be found in Scripture. Of course, Mar. 1:2 is not Isaiah's, but Malachi's; but Mar. 1:3, which is Isaiah's, was uppermost in Mark's mind, and his quotation of Malachi is, apparently, an afterthought, and is plainly merely introductory of the other, on which the stress lies. The remarkable variation in the Malachi quotation, which occurs in all three Evangelists, shows how completely they recognised the divinity of our Lord, in their making words which, in the original, are addressed by Jehovah to Himself, to be addressed by the Father to the Son. There is a difference in the representation of the office of the forerunner in the two prophetic passages. In the former 'he' prepares the way of the coming Lord; in the latter he calls upon his hearers to prepare it. In fact, John prepared the way, as we shall see presently, just by calling on men to do so. In Mark's view, the first stage in the gospel is the mission of John. He might have gone further back-to the work of prophets of old, or to the earliest beginnings in time of the self-revelation of God, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews does; or he might have ascended even higher up the stream-to the true 'beginning,' from which the fourth Evangelist starts. But his distinctly practical genius leads him to fix his gaze on the historical fact of John's mission, and to claim for it a unique position, which he proceeds to develop.

II. So we have, next, the strong servant and fore runner [Mar. 1:4 - Mar. 1:8].

The abruptness with which the curtain is drawn, and the gaunt figure of the desert-loving ascetic shown us, is very striking. It is like the way in which Elijah, his prototype, leaps, as it were, full-armed, into the arena. The parallel passage in Matthew links his appearance with the events which it has been narrating by the phrase ‘in these days,’ and calls him ‘the Baptist.’ Mark has no such words, but lets him stand forth in his isolation. The two accounts may profitably be compared. Their likenesses suggest that they rest on a common basis, probably of oral tradition, while their differences are, for the most part, significant. Mark differs in his arrangement of the common matter, in omissions, and in some variations of expression. Each account gives a general summary of John’s teaching at the beginning; but Matthew puts emphasis on the Baptist’s proclamation that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, to which nothing in Mark corresponds. His Gospel does not dwell on the royalty of Jesus, but rather represents Him as the Servant than as the King. Mark begins with describing John as baptizing, which only appears later in Matthew’s account. Mark omits all reference to the Sadducees and Pharisees, and to John’s sharp words to them. He has nothing about the axe laid to the trees, nothing about the children of Abraham, nothing about the fan in the hand of the great Husbandman. All the theocratic aspect of the Messiah, as proclaimed by John, is absent; and, as there is no reference to the fire which destroys, so neither is there to the fire of the Holy Ghost, in which He baptizes. Mark reports only John’s preaching and baptism of repentance, and his testimony to Christ as stronger than he, and as baptizing with the Holy Ghost.

So, on the whole, Mark’s picture brings out prominently the following traits in John’s personality and mission:-First, his preparation for Christ by preaching repentance. The truest way to create in men a longing for Jesus, and to lead to a true apprehension of His unique gift to mankind, is to evoke the penitent consciousness of sin. The preacher of guilt and repentance is the herald of the bringer of pardon and purity. That is true in reference to the relation of Judaism and Christianity, of John and Jesus, and is as true to-day as ever it was. The root of maimed conceptions of the work and nature of Jesus Christ is a defective sense of sin. When men are roused to believe in judgment, and to realise their own evil, they are ready to listen to the blessed news of a Saviour from sin and its curse. The Christ whom John heralds is the Christ that men need; the Christ whom men receive, without having been out in the wilderness with the stern preacher of sin and judgment, is but half a Christ-and it is the vital half that is missing.

Again, Mark brings out John’s personal asceticism. He omits much; but he could not leave out the picture of the grim, lean solitary, who stalked among soft-robed men, like Elijah come to life again, and held the crowds by his self-chosen privations no less than by his fierce, fiery eloquence. His desert life and contempt for ease and luxury spoke of a strength of character and purpose which fascinated commoner men, and make the next point the more striking-namely, the utter humility with which this strong, self-reliant, fiery rebuker of sin, and despiser of rank and official dignities, flings himself at the feet of the coming One. He is strong, as his life and the awestruck crowds testified; how strong must that Other be! He feared not the face of man, nor owned inferiority to any; but his whole soul melted into joyful submission, and confessed unworthiness even to unlace the sandals of that mightier One. His transitional position is also plainly marked by our Evangelist. He is the end of prophecy, the beginning of the Gospel, belonging to neither and to both. He is not merely a prophet, for he is prophesied of as well; and he stands so near Him whom he foretells, that his prediction is almost fact. He is not an Evangelist, nor, in the closest sense, a servant of the coming Christ; for his lowly confession of unworthiness does not imply merely his humility, but accurately defines the limits of his function. It was not for him to bear or to loose that Lord’s sandals. There were those who did minister to Him, and the least of those, whose message to the world was ‘Christ has come,’ had the honour of closer service than that greatest among women-born, whose task was to run before the chariot of the King and tell that He was at hand.

III. We have the gentle figure of the stronger Son.

The introduction of Jesus is somewhat less abrupt than that of John; but if we remember whom Mark believed Him to be, the quiet words which tell of His first appearance are sufficiently remarkable. There is no mention of His birth or previous years. His deeds will tell who He is. The years before His baptism were of no moment for Mark’s purpose. Nor has he any report of the precious conversation of Jesus with John, when the forerunner testified to Christ’s purity, which needed no washing nor repentance, and acknowledged at once his own sinfulness and the Lord’s cleansing power, and when Christ accepted the homage, and, by implication, claimed the character, purity, and power which John attributed to Him. The omission may be accounted for on a principle which seems to run through all this Gospel-of touching lightly or omitting indications of our Lord’s dignity, and dwelling by preference on His acts of lowliness and service. The baptism is recorded; but the conversation, which showed that the King of Israel, in submitting to it, acknowledged no need of it for Himself, but regarded it as ‘fulfilling righteousness’ is passed by. The sinlessness of Jesus, and the special meaning of His baptism, are sufficiently shown by the descending Spirit and the approving voice. These Mark does record; for they warrant the great name by which, in his first verse, he has described Jesus as ‘the Son of God.’

The brief account of these is marked by the Evangelist’s vivid pictorial faculty, which we shall frequently have to notice as we read his Gospel. Here he puts us, by a word, in the position of eye-witnesses of the scene as it is passing, when he describes the heavens as ‘being rent asunder’-a much more forcible and pictorial word than Matthew’s ‘opened.’ He says nothing of John’s share in the vision. All is intended for the Son. It is Jesus who sees the rending heavens and the descending dove. The voice which Matthew represents as speaking *of* Christ, Mark represents as speaking *to* Him.

The baptism of Jesus, then, was an epoch in His own consciousness. It was not merely His designation to John or to others as Messiah, but for Himself the sense of Sonship and the sunlight of divine complacency filled His spirit in new measure or manner. Speaking as we have to do from the outside, and knowing but dimly the mysteries of His unique personality, we have to speak modestly and little. But we know that our Lord grew, as to His manhood, in wisdom, and that His manhood was continually the receiver, from the Father, of the Spirit; and the reality of His divinity, as dwelling in His manhood from the beginning of that manhood, is not affected by the belief that when the dovelike Spirit floated down on His meek head, glistening with the water of baptism, His manhood then received a new and special consciousness of His Messianic office and of His Sonship.

Whilst that voice was for His sake, it was for others too; for John himself tells us [Joh. 1:29] that the sign had been told him beforehand, and that it was his sight of the descending dove which heightened his thoughts and gave a new turn to his testimony, leading him to know and to show ‘that this is the Son of God.’ The rent heavens have long since closed, and that dread voice is silent; but the fact of that attestation remains on record, that we, too, may hear through the centuries God speaking of and to His Son, and may lay to heart the commandment to us, which naturally follows God’s witness to Jesus, ‘Hear ye Him.’

The symbol of the dove may be regarded as a prophecy of the gentleness of the Son. Thus early in His course the two qualities were harmonised in Him, which so seldom are united, and each of which dwelt in Him in divinest perfection, both as to degree and manner. John’s anticipations of the strong coming One looked for the manifestations of His strength in judgment and destruction. How strangely his images of the axe, the fan, the fire, are contrasted with the reality, emblemed by this dove dropping from heaven, with sunshine on its breast and peace in its still wings! Through the ages, Christ’s strength has been the strength of gentleness, and His coming has been like that of Noah’s dove, with the olive-branch in its beak, and the tidings of an abated flood and of a safe home in its return. The ascetic preacher of repentance was strong to shake and purge men’s hearts by terror; but the stronger Son comes to conquer by meekness, and reign by the omnipotence of love. The beginning of the gospel was the anticipation and the proclamation of strength like the eagle’s, swift of flight, and powerful to strike and destroy. The gospel, when it became a fact, and not a hope, was found in the meek Jesus, with the dove of God, the gentle Spirit, which is mightier than all, nestling in His heart, and uttering soft notes of invitation through His lips.

3) Mark 1:21-29

Mark

MIGHTY IN WORD AND DEED

Mar. 1:21 - Mar. 1:34.

None of the incidents in this section are peculiar to Mark, but the special stamp of his Gospel is on them all; and, both in the narration of each and in the swift transition from one to another, the impression of Christ's strength and unpausing diligence in filial service is made. The short hours of that first Sabbath's ministry are crowded with work; and Christ's energy bears Him through exhausting physical labours, and enables Him to turn with unwearied sympathy and marvellous celerity to each new form of misery, and to throw Himself with freshness undiminished into the relief of each. The homely virtue of diligence shines out in this lesson no less clearly than superhuman strength that tames demons and heals all manner of sickness. There are four pictures here, compressed and yet vivid. Mark can condense and keep all the essentials, for his keen eye and sure hand go straight to the heart of his incidents.

I. The strong Son of God teaching with authority.

'They enter; we see the little group, consisting of Jesus and of the two pairs of brothers, in whose hearts the mighty conviction of His Messiahship had taken root. Simon and Andrew were at home in Capernaum; but we may, perhaps, infer from the manner in which the sickness of Peter's wife's mother is mentioned, that Peter had not been to his house till after the synagogue service. At all events, these four were already detached from ordinary life and bound to Him as disciples. We meet here with our first instance of Mark's favourite 'straightway,' the recurrence of which, in this chapter, so powerfully helps the impression of eager and yet careful swiftness with which Christ ran His course, 'unhasting, unresting.' From the beginning Mark stamps his story with the spirit of our Lord's own words, 'I must work the works of Him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh.' And yet there is no hurry, but the calm, equable rapidity with which planets move. The unostentatious manner of Christ's beginning is noteworthy. He seeks to set Himself in the line of the ordinary teaching of the day. He knew all the faults of the synagogue and the rabbis, and He had come to revolutionise the very conception of religious teaching and worship; but He prefers to intertwine the new with the old, and to make as little disturbance as possible. It is easy to get the cheap praise of ‘originality’ by brushing aside existing methods. It is harder and nobler to use whatever methods may be going, and to breathe new value and life into them. Drowsy, hair-splitting disputations about nothings and endless casuistry were the staple of the synagogue talk; but when He opened His mouth there, the weary formalism went out of the service, and men’s hearts glowed again when they once more heard a Voice that lived, speaking from a Soul that saw the invisible. Mark has no mission to record many of our Lord’s sayings. His Gospel deals more with deeds. The sermon he does not give, but the hearer’s comment he does. Matthew has the same words at the close of the Sermon on the Mount, from which it would seem that they were part of the oral tradition which underlies the written Gospels; but Mark probably has them in their right place. Very naturally, the first synagogue discourse in Capernaum would surprise. Deeper impressions might be made by its successors, but the first hearing of that voice would be an experience that could never be repeated.

The feature of His teaching which astonished the villagers most was its ‘authority.’ That fits in with the impression of strength which Mark wishes to make. Another thing that struck them was its unlikeness to the type of synagogue teaching to which they had been accustomed all their lives. They had got so accustomed to the droning dreariness and trivial subtleties of the rabbis, that it had never entered their heads that there could be any other way of teaching religion than boring men with interminable pedantries about trifles of ritual or outward obedience. This new Teacher would startle all, as an eagle suddenly appearing in a sanhedrim of owls. He would shock many; He would fascinate a few. Nor was it only the dissimilarity of His teaching, but also its authority, that was strange. The scribes spoke with authority enough of a sort, lording it over the despised common people-’men of the earth,’ as they called them-and exacting punctilious obedience and much obsequiousness; but authority over the spirit they had none. They pretended to no power but as expositors of a law; and they fortified themselves by citations of what this, that, and the other rabbi had said, which was all their learning. Christ quoted no one. He did not even say, ‘Moses has said.’ He did not even preface His commands with a ‘Thus saith the Lord.’ He spoke of His own authority: ‘Verily, *I say* unto you.’ Other teachers explained the law; He is a lawgiver. Others drew more or less pure waters from cisterns; He is in Himself a well of water, from which all may draw. To us, as to these rude villagers in the synagogue of the little fishing-town, Christ's teaching is unique in this respect. He does not argue; He affirms. He seeks no support from others' teachings; He alone is sufficient for us. He not only speaks the truth, which needs no other confirmation than His own lips, but He is the truth. We may canvass other men's teachings, and distinguish their insight from their errors; we have but to accept His. The world outgrows all others; it can only grow up towards the fulness of His. Us and all the ages He teaches with authority, and the guarantee for the truth of His teaching is Himself. 'Verily, verily, I say unto you.' No other man has a right to say that to me. But Christ dominates the race, and the strong Son of God is the world's Teacher.

II. The strong conqueror of demons.

Again we have 'straightway.' The language seems to imply that this wretched sufferer burst hurriedly into the synagogue and interrupted the utterance of astonishment by giving it new food. Perhaps the double consciousness of the demoniac may be recognised, the humanity being drawn to Jesus by some disturbed longings, the demoniac consciousness, on the other hand, being repelled. It is no part of my purpose to discuss demoniacal possession. I content myself with remarking that I, for one, do not see how Christ's credit as a divine Teacher is to be saved without admitting its reality, nor how such phenomena as the demoniac's knowledge of His nature are to be accounted for on the hypothesis of disease or insanity. It is assuming rather too encyclopædical a knowledge to allege the impossibility of such possession. There are facts enough around us still, which would be at least as satisfactorily accounted for by it as by natural causes; but as to the incident before us, Mark puts it all into three sentences, each of which is pregnant with suggestions. There is, first, the demoniac's shriek of hatred and despair. Christ had said nothing. If, as we suppose, the man had broken in on the worship, drawn to Jesus, he is no sooner in His presence than the other power that darkly lodged in him overpowers him, and pours out fierce passions from his reluctant lips. There is dreadful meaning in the preposition here used, 'a man *in* an unclean spirit,' as if his human self was immersed in that filthy flood. The words embody three thoughts-the fierce hatred, which disowns all connection with Jesus; the wild terror, which asks or affirms Christ’s destructive might over all foul spirits [for the ‘us’ means not the man and the demon, but the demon and his fellows]; and the recognition of Christ’s holiness, which lashes unholiness into a paroxysm of mingled despair and hate. Does this sound like a madman, or an epileptic, or like a spirit which knew more than men knew, and trembled and hated more than they could do? There is nothing more terrible than the picture, self-drawn in these spasmodic words, of a spirit which, by its very foulness, is made shudderingly sensitive to the disturbing presence of purity, and would fain have nothing to do with Him whom it recognises for the Holy One of God, and therefore its destroyer. Foul things that lurk under stones hurry out of the light when you lift the covering. Spirits that love the darkness are hurt by the light. It is possible to recognise Jesus for what He is, and to hate Him all the more. What a miserable state that is, to hope that we shall have nothing to do with Him! These wild utterances, seething with evil passions and fierce detestation, do point to the possible terminus for men. A black gulf opens in them, from which we are meant to start back with the prayer, ‘Preserve me from going down into that pit!’

What a contrast to the tempest of the demoniac’s wild and whirling words is the calm speech of Christ! He knows His authority, and His word is imperative, curt, and assured: ‘Hold thy peace!’ literally, ‘Be muzzled,’ as if the creature were a dangerous beast, whose raving and snapping must be stopped. Jesus wishes no acknowledgments from such lips. They who bear the vessels of the Lord must be clean. He had taught with authority, and now He in like manner commands. His teaching rested on His own assurance. His miracle is done by His own power. That power is put forth by His simple word; that is to say, the bare exercise or expression of His will is potent.

The third step in the narrative is the immediate obedience of the demon. Reluctant but compelled, malicious to the last, doing the house which he has to leave all the harm he can, and though no longer venturing to speak, yet venting his rage and mortification, and acknowledging his defeat by one parting howl, he comes out.

Again, we are bid to note the impression produced. The interrupted buzz of talk begins once more, and is vividly reported by the fragmentary sentences of Mar. 1:27, and by the remark that it was ‘among themselves’ that they compared notes. Two things startled the people:-first, the ‘new teaching’; and second, the authority over demons, into which they naturally generalise the one instance. The busy tongues were not silenced when they left the synagogue. Mar. 1:28 shows what happened, in one direction, when the meeting broke up. With another ‘straightway,’ Mark paints the swift flight of the rumour over all the district, and somewhat overleaps the strict line of chronology, to let us hear how far the echo of such a blow sounded. This first miracle recorded by him is as a duel between Christ and the ‘strong man armed,’ who ‘keeps his house.’ The shield of the great oppressor is first struck in challenge by the champion, and His first essay at arms proves Him mightiest. Such a victory well heads the chronicle.

III. The tenderness of the strong Son.

We come back to the strict order of succession with another ‘straightway,’ which opens a very different scene. The Authorised Version gives three ‘straightways’ in the three verses as to the cure of Peter’s mother-in-law. ‘Immediately’ they go to the house; ‘immediately’ they tell Jesus of her; ‘immediately’ the fever leaves her; and even if we omit the third of these, as the Revised Version does, we cannot miss the rapid haste of the narrative, which reflects the unwearied energy of the Master. Peter and Andrew had apparently been ignorant of the sickness till they reached the house, from which the inference is not that it was a slight attack which had come on after they went to the synagogue, but that the two disciples had so really left house and kindred, that though in Capernaum, they had not gone home till they took Jesus there for rest and quiet and food after the toil of the morning. The owners would naturally first know of the sickness, which would interfere with their hospitable purpose; and so Mark’s account seems more near the details than Matthew’s, inasmuch as the former says that Jesus was ‘told’ of the sick woman, while Matthew’s version is that He ‘saw’ her. Luke says that they ‘besought Him for her.’ No doubt that was the meaning of ‘telling’ Him; but Mark’s representation brings out very beautifully the confidence already beginning to spring in their hearts that He needed but to know in order to heal, and the reverence which hindered them from direct asking. The instinct of the devout heart is to tell Christ all its troubles, great or small; and He does not need beseeching before He answers. He did not need to be told either, but He would not rob them or us of the solace of confiding all griefs to Him.

Their confidence was not misplaced. No moment intervened unused between the tidings and the cure. ‘He came,’ as if He had been in some outer room, or not yet in the house, and now passed into the sick chamber. Then comes one of Mark’s minute and graphic details, in which we may see the keen eye and faithful memory of Peter. He ‘took her by the hand, and lifted her up.’ Mark is fond of telling of Christ’s taking by the hand; as, for instance, the little child whom He set in the midst, the blind man whom He healed, the child with the dumb spirit. His touch has power. His grasp means sympathy, tenderness, identification of Himself with us, the communication of upholding, restoring strength. It is a picture, in a small matter, of the very heart of the gospel. ‘He layeth not hold of angels, but He layeth hold of the seed of Abraham.’ It is a lesson for all who would help their fellows, that they must not be too dainty to lay hold of the dirtiest hand, both metaphorically and literally, if they want their sympathy to be believed. His hand banishes not only the disease, but its consequences. Immediate convalescence and restoration to strength follow; and the strength is used, as it should be, in ministering to the Healer who, notwithstanding His power, needed the humble ministration and the poor fare of the fisherman’s hut. What a lesson for all Christian homes is here! Let Jesus know all that troubles them, welcome Him as a guest, tell Him everything, and He will cure all diseases and sorrows, or give the light of His presence to make them endurable. Consecrate to Him the strength which He gives, and let deliverances teach trust, and inflame grateful love, which delights in serving Him who needs no service, but delights in all.

IV. The strong Son, unwearied by toil and sufficient for all the needy.

Each incident in this lesson has a note appended of the impression it made. Mar. 1:32 - Mar. 1:34 give the united result of all, on the people of Capernaum. They wait till the Sabbath is past, and then, without thought of His long day of work, crowd round the house with their sick. The sinking sun brought no rest for Him, but the new calls found Him neither exhausted nor unwilling. Capernaum was but a little place, and the whole city might well be 'gathered together at the door,' some sick, some bearing the sick, all curious and eager. There was no depth in the excitement. There was earnestness enough, no doubt, in the wish for healing, but there was no insight into His message. Any travelling European with a medicine chest can get the same kind of cortege round his tent. These people, who hung upon Him thus, were those of whom He had afterwards to say that it would be 'more tolerable for Sodom, in the day of judgment, than for them.' But though He knew the shallowness of the impression, He was not deaf to the misery; and, with power which knew no weariness, and sympathy which had no limit, and a reservoir of healing virtue which the day's draughts had not emptied by a hairs-breadth, He healed them all. Remarkable is the prohibition of the demons' speech, They knew Him, while men were ignorant; for they had met Him before to-day. He would have no witness from them; not merely, as has been said, because their attestation would hinder, rather than further, His acceptance by the people, nor because they may be supposed to have spoken in malice, but because a divine decorum forbade that He should accept acknowledgments from such tainted sources.

So ended this first of 'the days of the Son of Man,' which our Evangelist records. It was a day of hard toil, of merciful and manifold self-revelation. As teacher and doer, in the synagogue, and in the home, and in the city; as Lord of the dark realms of evil and of disease; as ready to hear hinted and dumb prayers, and able to answer them all; as careless of His own ease, and ready to spend Himself for others' help,-Jesus showed Himself, on that Sabbath day, strong and tender, the Son of God and the servant of men.

4) Mark 1:30-31

Mark

MIGHTY IN WORD AND DEED

HEALING AND SERVICE

Mar. 1:30 - Mar. 1:31

This miracle is told us by three of the four Evangelists, and the comparison of their brief narratives is very interesting and instructive. We all know, I suppose, that the common tradition is that Mark was, in some sense, Peter’s mouthpiece in this Gospel. The truthfulness of that ancient statement is borne out by little morsels of evidence that crop up here and there throughout the Gospel. There is one of them in this context. The other two Evangelists tell us that our Lord, with His four attendant disciples, ‘entered into the house of Simon’; Mark knows that Simon’s brother Andrew shared the house with him. Who was likely to have told him such an insignificant thing as that? We seem to hear the Apostle himself recounting the whole story to his amanuensis.

Then, further, Mark’s narrative is distinguished from that of the other two Evangelists in very minute and yet interesting points, which will come out as we go along. So I think we may fairly say that we have here Peter himself telling us the story of his mother-in-law’s cure. Now, one thing that strikes one is that this is a very small miracle. It is by no means-if we can apply the words ‘great’ and ‘small’ to these miraculous events-one of the more striking and significant. Another point to note is that it was done evidently without the slightest intention of vindicating Christ’s mission, or of preaching any truth whatever, and so it starts up into a new beauty as being simply and solely a manifestation of His love. I think, when some people are so busy in denying, and others in proving, the miraculous element in Scripture, and others in drawing doctrinal or symbolical lessons out of it, that there is great need to emphasise this, that the first thing about all Christ’s miracles, and most conspicuously about this one, is that they were the welling out of His loving heart which responded to the sight of human sorrow-I was going to say instinctively; but I will find a better word, and say divinely. The deed that had no purpose whatsoever except to lighten the burden upon a disciple’s heart, and to heal the passing physical trouble of one poor old woman, is great, just because it is small; and full of teaching because, to the superficial eye, it teaches nothing.

The first thing in the story is, as it seems to me-

I. The disciple’s intercession.

I wonder if Peter knew that his wife’s mother was ill, when he said to Jesus Christ, after that exciting morning in the synagogue, ‘Come home, and rest in our house’? Probably not. One can scarcely imagine hospitality proffered under such circumstances, or with a knowledge of them. And if we look a little more closely into the preceding narrative we shall see that it is at least possible that Peter and his brother had been away from home for some time; so that the old woman might easily have fallen ill during their temporary absence. But be that as it may, they expect to find rest and food, and they find a sick woman.

There must have been at least two rooms in the humble house, because they ‘come to Jesus Christ and tell Him of her.’ Now if we turn to the other Evangelists, we shall find that Matthew says nothing about any message being communicated to Jesus, but brings Him at once, as It were, to the side of the sick-bed. That is evidently an incomplete account. And then we find in Luke’s Gospel that, instead of the simple ‘tell Him of her’ of Mark, he intensifies the telling into ‘they besought Him for her.’ Now, I think that Mark’s is plainly the more precise story, because he lets us see that Jesus Christ did not commit such a breach of courtesy, due to the humblest home, as to go to the woman’s bedside without being summoned, and he also lets us see that the ‘beseeching’ was a simple intimation to Him. They did not ask; they tell Him; being, perhaps, restrained from definite petitioning partly by reverence, and partly, no doubt, by hesitation in these early days of their discipleship-for this incident occurred at the very beginning, when all the subsequent manifestations of His character were yet waiting to be flashed upon them-as to whether it might be in accordance with their new Teacher’s very little known disposition and mind to help. They knew that He could, because He had just healed a demoniac in the synagogue, but one can understand how, at the beginning of their discipleship, there was a little faltering of confidence as to whether they should go so far as to ask Him to do such a thing. So they ‘tell Him of her,’ and do you not think that the tone of petition vibrated in the intimation, and that there looked out of the eyes of the impulsive, warm-hearted Peter, an unspoken prayer? So Luke was perfectly right in his interpretation of the incident, though not precise in his statement of the external fact, when, instead of saying ‘they tell Him of her,’ he translated that telling into what it meant, and put it, ‘they besought Him for her.’

Ah! dear brethren, there are a great many things in our lives which, though we ought to know Jesus Christ better than the first disciples at first did, scarcely seem to us fit to be turned into subjects of petition, partly because we have wrong notions as to the sphere and limits of prayer, and partly because they seem to be such transitory things that it is a shame to trouble Him about such insignificant matters. Well, go and tell Him, at any rate. I do not think that Christians ought to have anything in their heads or hearts that they do not take to Jesus Christ, and it is an uncommonly good test-and one very easily applied-of our hopes, fears, purposes, thoughts, deeds, and desires-'Should I like to go and make a clean breast of it to the Master?'

'They tell Him of her,' and that meant petition, and Jesus Christ can interpret an unspoken petition, and an unexpressed desire appeals to His sympathetic heart. Although the words be but 'O Lord! I am troubled, perplexed; and I do not know what to do,' He translates them into 'Calm Thou me; enlighten Thou me; guide Thou me'; and be sure of this, that as in the story before us, so in our lives, He will answer the unspoken petition in so far as may be best for us.

The next thing to note in this incident is-

II. The Healers method.

There, again, the three stories diverge, and yet are all one. Matthew says, 'He touched her'; Luke says, 'He *stood*'-or rather, as the Greek means, 'He *bent over her*-and rebuked the fever.' Perhaps Peter was close to the pallet, and saw and remembered that there were not a standing over and rebuking the fever only, but that there was the going out of His tender sympathy to the sufferer, and that if there were stern words as of indignation and authority addressed to the disease as if to an unlawful intruder, there were also compassion and tenderness for the victim. For Mark tells that it was not a touch only, but that 'He took her by the hand and lifted her up,' and the grasp banished sickness and brought strength.

Now the most precious of the lessons that we can gather from the variety of Christ's methods of healing is this: that all methods which He used were in themselves equally powerless, and that the curative virtue was in neither the word nor the touch, nor the spittle, nor the clay, nor the bathing in the pool of Siloam, but was purely and simply in the outgoing of His will. The reasons for the wonderful variety of ways in which He communicated His healing power are to be sought partly in the respective moral, and spiritual, and intellectual condition of the people to be healed, and partly in wider reasons and considerations. Why did He stoop and touch the woman, and take her by the hand and gently lift her up? Because His heart went out to her, because He felt the emotion and sympathy which makes the whole world kin, and because His heart was a heart of love, and bade Him come into close contact with the poor fever-ridden woman. Unless we regard that hand-clasp as being such an instinctive attitude and action of Christ's sympathetic love, we lose the deepest significance of it. And then, when we have given full weight to that, the simplest and yet the most blessed of all the thoughts that cluster round the deed, we can venture further to say that in that small matter we see mirrored, as a wide sweep of country in a tiny mirror, or the sun in a bowl of water, the great truth: 'He took not hold of angels, but He took hold of the seed of Abraham, wherefore it behoved Him to be made in all things like unto His brethren.' The touch upon the fevered hand of that old woman in Capernaum was as a condensation into one act of the very principle of the Incarnation and of the whole power which Christ exercises upon a fevered and sick world. For it is by His touch, by His lifting hand, by His sympathetic grasp, and by our real contact with Him, that all our sicknesses are banished, and health and strength come to our souls.

So let us learn a lesson for our own guidance. We can do no man any real good unless we make ourselves one with him, and benefits that we bestow will hurt rather than help, if they are flung down upon men as from a height, or as people cast a bone to a dog. The heart must go with them; and identification with the sufferer is a condition of succour. If we would take lepers and blind beggars and poor old women by the hand-I mean, of course, by giving them our sympathy along with our help-we should see larger results from, and be more Christ-like in, our deeds of beneficence.

The last point is-

III. The healed sufferer's service.

‘She arose’-yes, of course she did, when Christ grasped her. How could she help it? ‘And she ministered to them,’-how could she help that either, if she had any thankfulness in her heart? What a lovely, glad, awe-stricken meal that would be, to which they all sat down in Simon’s house, on that Sabbath night, as the sun was setting! It was a humble household. There were no servants in it. The convalescent old woman had to do all the ministering herself, and that she was able to do it was, of course, as everybody remarks on reading the narrative, the sign of the completeness of the cure. But it was a great deal more than that. How could she sit still and not minister to Him who had done so much for her? And if you and I, dear friends, have any living apprehension of Christ’s healing power, and understand and respond at all to ‘that for which we have been laid hold of’ by Him, our thankfulness will take the same shape, and we, too, shall become His servants. Up yonder, amidst the blaze of the glory, He is still capable of being ministered to by us. The woman who did so on earth had no monopoly of this sacred office, but it continues still. And every housewife, as she goes about her duties, and every domestic servant, as she moves round her mistress’s dinner-table, and all of us, in our secular avocations, as people call them, may indeed serve Christ, if only we have regard to Him in the doing of them. There is also a yet higher sense in which that ministration, incumbent upon all the healed, and spontaneous on their part if they have truly been recipients of the healing grace, is still possible for us. ‘When saw we Thee. . . in need. . . and served Thee?’ ‘Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye did it unto Me.’

5) Mark 1:32-34

Mark

MIGHTY IN WORD AND DEED

Mar. 1:21 - Mar. 1:34.

None of the incidents in this section are peculiar to Mark, but the special stamp of his Gospel is on them all; and, both in the narration of each and in the swift transition from one to another, the impression of Christ’s strength and unpausing diligence in filial service is made. The short hours of that first Sabbath's ministry are crowded with work; and Christ's energy bears Him through exhausting physical labours, and enables Him to turn with unwearied sympathy and marvellous celerity to each new form of misery, and to throw Himself with freshness undiminished into the relief of each. The homely virtue of diligence shines out in this lesson no less clearly than superhuman strength that tames demons and heals all manner of sickness. There are four pictures here, compressed and yet vivid. Mark can condense and keep all the essentials, for his keen eye and sure hand go straight to the heart of his incidents.

I. The strong Son of God teaching with authority.

'They enter; we see the little group, consisting of Jesus and of the two pairs of brothers, in whose hearts the mighty conviction of His Messiahship had taken root. Simon and Andrew were at home in Capernaum; but we may, perhaps, infer from the manner in which the sickness of Peter's wife's mother is mentioned, that Peter had not been to his house till after the synagogue service. At all events, these four were already detached from ordinary life and bound to Him as disciples. We meet here with our first instance of Mark's favourite 'straightway,' the recurrence of which, in this chapter, so powerfully helps the impression of eager and yet careful swiftness with which Christ ran His course, 'unhasting, unresting.' From the beginning Mark stamps his story with the spirit of our Lord's own words, 'I must work the works of Him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh.' And yet there is no hurry, but the calm, equable rapidity with which planets move. The unostentatious manner of Christ's beginning is noteworthy. He seeks to set Himself in the line of the ordinary teaching of the day. He knew all the faults of the synagogue and the rabbis, and He had come to revolutionise the very conception of religious teaching and worship; but He prefers to intertwine the new with the old, and to make as little disturbance as possible. It is easy to get the cheap praise of 'originality' by brushing aside existing methods. It is harder and nobler to use whatever methods may be going, and to breathe new value and life into them. Drowsy, hair-splitting disputations about nothings and endless casuistry were the staple of the synagogue talk; but when He opened His mouth there, the weary formalism went out of the service, and men's hearts glowed again when they once more heard a Voice that lived, speaking from a Soul that saw the invisible. Mark has no mission to record many of our Lord's sayings. His Gospel deals more with deeds. The sermon he does not give, but the hearer's comment he does. Matthew has the same words at the close of the Sermon on the Mount, from which it would seem that they were part of the oral tradition which underlies the written Gospels; but Mark probably has them in their right place. Very naturally, the first synagogue discourse in Capernaum would surprise. Deeper impressions might be made by its successors, but the first hearing of that voice would be an experience that could never be repeated.

The feature of His teaching which astonished the villagers most was its 'authority.' That fits in with the impression of strength which Mark wishes to make. Another thing that struck them was its unlikeness to the type of synagogue teaching to which they had been accustomed all their lives. They had got so accustomed to the droning dreariness and trivial subtleties of the rabbis, that it had never entered their heads that there could be any other way of teaching religion than boring men with interminable pedantries about trifles of ritual or outward obedience. This new Teacher would startle all, as an eagle suddenly appearing in a sanhedrim of owls. He would shock many; He would fascinate a few. Nor was it only the dissimilarity of His teaching, but also its authority, that was strange. The scribes spoke with authority enough of a sort, lording it over the despised common people-'men of the earth,' as they called them-and exacting punctilious obedience and much obsequiousness; but authority over the spirit they had none. They pretended to no power but as expositors of a law; and they fortified themselves by citations of what this, that, and the other rabbi had said, which was all their learning. Christ quoted no one. He did not even say, 'Moses has said.' He did not even preface His commands with a 'Thus saith the Lord.' He spoke of His own authority: 'Verily, *I say* unto you.' Other teachers explained the law; He is a lawgiver. Others drew more or less pure waters from cisterns; He is in Himself a well of water, from which all may draw. To us, as to these rude villagers in the synagogue of the little fishing-town, Christ's teaching is unique in this respect. He does not argue; He affirms. He seeks no support from others' teachings; He alone is sufficient for us. He not only speaks the truth, which needs no other confirmation than His own lips, but He is the truth. We may canvass other men's teachings, and distinguish their insight from their errors; we have but to accept His. The world outgrows all others; it can only grow up towards the fulness of His. Us and all the ages He teaches with authority, and the guarantee for the truth of His teaching is Himself. ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you.’ No other man has a right to say that to me. But Christ dominates the race, and the strong Son of God is the world’s Teacher.

II. The strong conqueror of demons.

Again we have ‘straightway.’ The language seems to imply that this wretched sufferer burst hurriedly into the synagogue and interrupted the utterance of astonishment by giving it new food. Perhaps the double consciousness of the demoniac may be recognised, the humanity being drawn to Jesus by some disturbed longings, the demoniac consciousness, on the other hand, being repelled. It is no part of my purpose to discuss demoniacal possession. I content myself with remarking that I, for one, do not see how Christ’s credit as a divine Teacher is to be saved without admitting its reality, nor how such phenomena as the demoniac’s knowledge of His nature are to be accounted for on the hypothesis of disease or insanity. It is assuming rather too encyclopædical a knowledge to allege the impossibility of such possession. There are facts enough around us still, which would be at least as satisfactorily accounted for by it as by natural causes; but as to the incident before us, Mark puts it all into three sentences, each of which is pregnant with suggestions. There is, first, the demoniac’s shriek of hatred and despair. Christ had said nothing. If, as we suppose, the man had broken in on the worship, drawn to Jesus, he is no sooner in His presence than the other power that darkly lodged in him overpowers him, and pours out fierce passions from his reluctant lips. There is dreadful meaning in the preposition here used, ‘a man *in* an unclean spirit,’ as if his human self was immersed in that filthy flood. The words embody three thoughts-the fierce hatred, which disowns all connection with Jesus; the wild terror, which asks or affirms Christ’s destructive might over all foul spirits [for the ‘us’ means not the man and the demon, but the demon and his fellows]; and the recognition of Christ’s holiness, which lashes unholiness into a paroxysm of mingled despair and hate. Does this sound like a madman, or an epileptic, or like a spirit which knew more than men knew, and trembled and hated more than they could do? There is nothing more terrible than the picture, self-drawn in these spasmodic words, of a spirit which, by its very foulness, is made shudderingly sensitive to the disturbing presence of purity, and would fain have nothing to do with Him whom it recognises for the Holy One of God, and therefore its destroyer. Foul things that lurk under stones hurry out of the light when you lift the covering. Spirits that love the darkness are hurt by the light. It is possible to recognise Jesus for what He is, and to hate Him all the more. What a miserable state that is, to hope that we shall have nothing to do with Him! These wild utterances, seething with evil passions and fierce detestation, do point to the possible terminus for men. A black gulf opens in them, from which we are meant to start back with the prayer, ‘Preserve me from going down into that pit!’

What a contrast to the tempest of the demoniac’s wild and whirling words is the calm speech of Christ! He knows His authority, and His word is imperative, curt, and assured: ‘Hold thy peace!’ literally, ‘Be muzzled,’ as if the creature were a dangerous beast, whose raving and snapping must be stopped. Jesus wishes no acknowledgments from such lips. They who bear the vessels of the Lord must be clean. He had taught with authority, and now He in like manner commands. His teaching rested on His own assurance. His miracle is done by His own power. That power is put forth by His simple word; that is to say, the bare exercise or expression of His will is potent.

The third step in the narrative is the immediate obedience of the demon. Reluctant but compelled, malicious to the last, doing the house which he has to leave all the harm he can, and though no longer venturing to speak, yet venting his rage and mortification, and acknowledging his defeat by one parting howl, he comes out.

Again, we are bid to note the impression produced. The interrupted buzz of talk begins once more, and is vividly reported by the fragmentary sentences of Mar. 1:27, and by the remark that it was ‘among themselves’ that they compared notes. Two things startled the people:-first, the ‘new teaching’; and second, the authority over demons, into which they naturally generalise the one instance. The busy tongues were not silenced when they left the synagogue. Mar. 1:28 shows what happened, in one direction, when the meeting broke up. With another ‘straightway,’ Mark paints the swift flight of the rumour over all the district, and somewhat overleaps the strict line of chronology, to let us hear how far the echo of such a blow sounded. This first miracle recorded by him is as a duel between Christ and the ‘strong man armed,’ who ‘keeps his house.’ The shield of the great oppressor is first struck in challenge by the champion, and His first essay at arms proves Him mightiest. Such a victory well heads the chronicle.

III. The tenderness of the strong Son.

We come back to the strict order of succession with another ‘straightway,’ which opens a very different scene. The Authorised Version gives three ‘straightways’ in the three verses as to the cure of Peter’s mother-in-law. ‘Immediately’ they go to the house; ‘immediately’ they tell Jesus of her; ‘immediately’ the fever leaves her; and even if we omit the third of these, as the Revised Version does, we cannot miss the rapid haste of the narrative, which reflects the unwearied energy of the Master. Peter and Andrew had apparently been ignorant of the sickness till they reached the house, from which the inference is not that it was a slight attack which had come on after they went to the synagogue, but that the two disciples had so really left house and kindred, that though in Capernaum, they had not gone home till they took Jesus there for rest and quiet and food after the toil of the morning. The owners would naturally first know of the sickness, which would interfere with their hospitable purpose; and so Mark’s account seems more near the details than Matthew’s, inasmuch as the former says that Jesus was ‘told’ of the sick woman, while Matthew’s version is that He ‘saw’ her. Luke says that they ‘besought Him for her.’ No doubt that was the meaning of ‘telling’ Him; but Mark’s representation brings out very beautifully the confidence already beginning to spring in their hearts that He needed but to know in order to heal, and the reverence which hindered them from direct asking. The instinct of the devout heart is to tell Christ all its troubles, great or small; and He does not need beseeching before He answers. He did not need to be told either, but He would not rob them or us of the solace of confiding all griefs to Him.

Their confidence was not misplaced. No moment intervened unused between the tidings and the cure. ‘He came,’ as if He had been in some outer room, or not yet in the house, and now passed into the sick chamber.

Then comes one of Mark's minute and graphic details, in which we may see the keen eye and faithful memory of Peter. He 'took her by the hand, and lifted her up.' Mark is fond of telling of Christ's taking by the hand; as, for instance, the little child whom He set in the midst, the blind man whom He healed, the child with the dumb spirit. His touch has power. His grasp means sympathy, tenderness, identification of Himself with us, the communication of upholding, restoring strength. It is a picture, in a small matter, of the very heart of the gospel. 'He layeth not hold of angels, but He layeth hold of the seed of Abraham.' It is a lesson for all who would help their fellows, that they must not be too dainty to lay hold of the dirtiest hand, both metaphorically and literally, if they want their sympathy to be believed. His hand banishes not only the disease, but its consequences. Immediate convalescence and restoration to strength follow; and the strength is used, as it should be, in ministering to the Healer who, notwithstanding His power, needed the humble ministration and the poor fare of the fisherman's hut. What a lesson for all Christian homes is here! Let Jesus know all that troubles them, welcome Him as a guest, tell Him everything, and He will cure all diseases and sorrows, or give the light of His presence to make them endurable. Consecrate to Him the strength which He gives, and let deliverances teach trust, and inflame grateful love, which delights in serving Him who needs no service, but delights in all.

IV. The strong Son, unwearied by toil and sufficient for all the needy.

Each incident in this lesson has a note appended of the impression it made. Mar. 1:32 - Mar. 1:34 give the united result of all, on the people of Capernaum. They wait till the Sabbath is past, and then, without thought of His long day of work, crowd round the house with their sick. The sinking sun brought no rest for Him, but the new calls found Him neither exhausted nor unwilling. Capernaum was but a little place, and the whole city might well be 'gathered together at the door,' some sick, some bearing the sick, all curious and eager. There was no depth in the excitement. There was earnestness enough, no doubt, in the wish for healing, but there was no insight into His message. Any travelling European with a medicine chest can get the same kind of cortege round his tent. These people, who hung upon Him thus, were those of whom He had afterwards to say that it would be 'more tolerable for Sodom, in the day of judgment, than for them.' But though He knew the shallowness of the impression, He was not deaf to the misery; and, with power which knew no weariness, and sympathy which had no limit, and a reservoir of healing virtue which the day's draughts had not emptied by a hairs-breadth, He healed them all. Remarkable is the prohibition of the demons' speech, They knew Him, while men were ignorant; for they had met Him before to-day. He would have no witness from them; not merely, as has been said, because their attestation would hinder, rather than further, His acceptance by the people, nor because they may be supposed to have spoken in malice, but because a divine decorum forbade that He should accept acknowledgments from such tainted sources.

So ended this first of 'the days of the Son of Man,' which our Evangelist records. It was a day of hard toil, of merciful and manifold self-revelation. As teacher and doer, in the synagogue, and in the home, and in the city; as Lord of the dark realms of evil and of disease; as ready to hear hinted and dumb prayers, and able to answer them all; as careless of His own ease, and ready to spend Himself for others' help,-Jesus showed Himself, on that Sabbath day, strong and tender, the Son of God and the servant of men.

6) Mark 1:41

Mark

A PARABLE IN A MIRACLE

CHRIST'S TOUCH

Mar. 1:41.

Behold the servant of the Lord' might be the motto of this Gospel, and 'He went about doing good and healing' the summing up of its facts. We have in it comparatively few of our Lord's discourses, none of His longer, and not very many of His briefer ones. It contains but four parables. This Evangelist gives no miraculous birth as in Matthew, no angels adoring there as in Luke, no gazing into the secrets of Eternity, where the Word who afterwards became flesh dwelt in the bosom of the Father, as in John. He begins with a brief reference to the Forerunner, and then plunges into the story of Christ's life of service to man and service for God.

In carrying out his conception the Evangelist omits many things found in the other Gospels, which involve the idea of dignity and dominion, while he adds to the incidents which he has in common with them not a few fine and subtle touches to heighten the impression of our Lord's toil and eagerness in His patient, loving service. Perhaps it may be an instance of this that we find more prominence given to our Lord's touch as connected with His miracles than in the other Gospels, or perhaps it may merely be an instance of the vivid portraiture, the result of a keen eye for externals, which is so marked a characteristic of this gospel. Whatever the reason, the fact is plain, that Mark delights to dwell on Christ's touch. The instances are these-first, He puts out His hand, and 'lifts up' Peter's wife's mother, and immediately the fever leaves her [Mar. 1:31]; then, unrepelled by the foul disease, He lays His pure hand upon the leper, and the living mass of corruption is healed [Mar. 1:41]; again, He lays His hand on the clammy marble of the dead child's forehead, and she lives [Mar. 5:41]. Further, we have the incidental statement that He was so hindered in His mighty works by unbelief that He could only lay His hands on a few sick folk and heal them [Mar. 6:5]. We find next two remarkable incidents, peculiar to Mark, both like each other and unlike our Lord's other miracles. One is the gradual healing of that deaf and dumb man whom Christ took apart from the crowd, laid His hands on him, thrust His fingers into his ears as if He would clear some impediment, touched his tongue with saliva, said to him, 'Be opened'; and the man could hear [Mar. 8:34]. The other is, the gradual healing of a blind man whom our Lord again leads apart from the crowd, takes by the hand, lays His own kind hands upon the poor, sightless eyeballs, and with singular slowness of progress effects a cure, not by a leap and a bound as He generally does, but by steps and stages; tries it once and finds partial success, has to apply the curative process again, and then the man can see [Mar. 8:23]. In addition to these instances there are two other incidents which may also be adduced. It is Mark alone who records for us the fact that He took little children in His arms, and blessed them. And it is Mark alone who records for us the fact that when He came down from the Mount of Transfiguration He laid His hand upon the demoniac boy, writhing in the grip of his tormentor, and lifted him up.

There is much taught us, if we will patiently consider it, by that touch of Christ's, and I wish to try to bring out its meaning and power.

I. Whatever diviner and sacreder aspect there may be in these incidents, the first thing, and in some senses the most precious thing, in them is that they are the natural expression of a truly human tenderness and compassion.

Now we are so accustomed, and as I believe quite rightly, to look at all Christ's life down to its minutest events as intended to be a revelation of God, that we are sometimes apt to think about it as if His motive and purpose in everything was didactic. So an unreality creeps over our conceptions of Christ's life, and we need to be reminded that He was not always acting and speaking in order to convey instruction, but that words and deeds were drawn from Him by the play of simple human feelings. He pitied not only in order to teach us the heart of God, but because His own man's heart was touched with a feeling of men's infirmities. We are too apt to think of Him as posing before men with the intent of giving the great revelation of the Love of God. It is the love of Christ Himself, spontaneous, instinctive, without the thought of anything but the suffering that it sees, which gushes out and leads Him to put forth His hand to the outcast beggars, the blind, the deaf, the lepers. That is the first great lesson we have to learn from this and other stories-the swift human sympathy and heart of grace and tenderness which Jesus Christ had for all human suffering, and has to-day as truly as ever.

There is more than this instinctive sympathy taught by Christ's touch, but it is distinctly taught. How beautifully that comes out in the story of the leper! That wretched man had long dwelt in his isolation. The touch of a friend's hand or the kiss of loving lips had been long denied him. Christ looks on him, and before He reflects, the spontaneous impulse of pity breaks through the barriers of legal prohibitions and of natural repugnance, and leads Him to lay His holy and healing hand on his foulness.

True pity always instinctively leads us to seek to come near those who are its objects. A man tells his friend some sad story of his sufferings, and while he speaks, unconsciously his listener lays his hand on his arm, and, by a silent pressure, speaks his sympathy. So Christ did with these men-not only in order that He might reveal God to us, but because He was a man, and therefore felt ere He thought. Out flashed from His heart the swift sympathy, followed by the tender pressure of the loving hand-a hand that tried through flesh to reach spirit, and come near the sufferer that it might succour and remove the sorrow.

Christ’s pity is shown by His touch to have this true characteristic of true pity, that it overcomes disgust. All real sympathy does that. Christ is not turned away by the shining whiteness of the leprosy, nor by the eating pestilence beneath it; He is not turned away by the clammy marble hand of the poor dead maiden, nor by the fevered skin of the old woman gasping on her pallet. He lays hold on each, the flushed patient, the loathsome leper, the sacred dead, with the all-equalising touch of a universal love and pity, which disregards all that is repellent, and overflows every barrier and pours itself over every sufferer. We have the same pity of the same Christ to trust to and to lay hold of to-day. He is high above us and yet bending over us; stretching His hand from the throne as truly as He put it out when here on earth; and ready to take us all to His heart in spite of our weakness and wickedness, our failings and our shortcomings, the fever of our flesh and hearts’ desires, the leprosy of our many corruptions, and the death of our sins,-and to hold us ever in the strong, gentle clasp of His divine, omnipotent, and tender hand. This Christ lays hold on us because He loves us, and will not be turned from His compassion by the most loathsome foulness of ours.

II. And now take another point of view from which we may regard this touch of Christ: namely, as the medium of His miraculous power.

There is nothing to me more remarkable about the miracles of our Lord than the royal variety of His methods of healing. Sometimes He works at a distance, sometimes He requires, as it would appear for good reasons, the proximity of the person to be blessed. Sometimes He works by a simple word: ‘Lazarus, come forth!’ ‘Peace be still!’ ‘Come out of him!’ sometimes by a word and a touch, as in the instances before us; sometimes by a touch without a word; sometimes by a word and a touch and a vehicle, as in the saliva that was put on the tongue and in the ears of the deaf, and on the eyes of the blind; sometimes by a vehicle without a word, without a touch, without His presence, as when He said, ‘Go wash in the pool of Siloam, and he washed and was clean.’ So the divine worker varies infinitely and at pleasure, yet not arbitrarily but for profound, even if not always discoverable, reasons, the methods of His miracle-working power, in order that we may learn by these varieties of ways that He is tied to no way; and that His hand, strong and almighty, uses methods and tosses aside methods according to His pleasure, the methods being vitalised when they are used by His will, and being nothing at all in themselves.

The very variety of His methods, then, teaches us that the true cause in every case is His own bare will. A simple word is the highest and most adequate expression of that will. His word is all-powerful: and that is the very signature of divinity. Of whom has it been true from of old that ‘He spake and it was done, He commanded and it stood fast’? Do you believe in a Christ whose bare will, thrown among material things, makes them all plastic, as clay in the potter’s hands, whose mouth rebukes the demons and they flee, rebukes death and it looses its grasp, rebukes the tempest and there is a calm, rebukes disease and there comes health? But this use of Christ’s touch as apparent means for conveying His miraculous power also serves as an illustration of a principle which is exemplified in all His revelation, namely, the employment in condescension to men’s weakness, of outward means as the apparent vehicles of His spiritual power. Just as by the material vehicle sometimes employed for cure, He gave these poor sense-bound natures a ladder by which their faith in His healing power might climb, so in the manner of His revelation and communication of His spiritual gifts, there is provision for the wants of us men, who ever need some body for spirit to make itself manifest by, some form for the ethereal reality, some ‘tabernacle’ for the ‘sun.’ ‘Sacraments,’ outward ceremonies, forms of worship, are vehicles which the Divine Spirit uses in order to bring His gifts to the hearts and the minds of men. They are like the touch of the Christ which heals, not by any virtue in itself, apart from His will which chooses to make it the apparent medium of healing. All these externals are nothing, as the pipes of an organ are nothing, until His breath is breathed through them, and then the flood of sweet sound pours out.

Do not despise the material vehicles and the outward helps which Christ uses for the communication of His healing and His life, but remember that the help that is done upon earth, He does it all Himself. Even Christ’s touch is nothing, if it were not for His own will which flows through it.

III. Consider Christ’s touch as a shadow and symbol of the very heart of His work.

Go back to the past history of this man. Ever since his disease declared itself no human being had touched him. If he had a wife he had been separated from her; if he had children their lips had never kissed his, nor their little hands found their way into his hard palm. Alone he had been walking with the plague-cloth over his face, and the cry ‘Unclean!’ on his lips, lest any man should come near him. Skulking in his isolation, how he must have hungered for the touch of a hand! Every Jew was forbidden to approach him but the priest, who, if he were cured, might pass his hand over the place and pronounce him clean. And here comes a Man who breaks down all the restrictions, stretches a frank hand out across the walls of separation, and touches him. What a reviving assurance of love not yet dead must have come to the man as Christ grasped his hand, even if he saw in Him only a stranger who was not afraid of him and did not turn from him! But beside this thrill of human sympathy, which came hope-bringing to the leper, Christ’s touch had much significance, if we remember that, according to the Mosaic legislation, the priest and the priest alone was to lay his hands on the tainted skin and pronounce the leper whole. So Christ’s touch was a priest’s touch. He lays His hand on corruption and is not tainted. The corruption with which He comes in contact becomes purity. Are not these really the profoundest truths as to His whole work in the world? What is it all but laying hold of the leper and the outcast and the dead-His sympathy leading to His identification of Himself with us in our weakness and misery? That sympathetic life-bringing touch is put forth once for all in His Incarnation and Death. ‘He taketh hold of the seed of Abraham,’ says the Epistle to the Hebrews, looking at our Lord’s work under this same metaphor, and explaining that His laying hold of men was His being ‘made in all points like unto His brethren.’ Just as he took hold of the fevered woman and lifted her from her bed; or, as He thrust His fingers into the deaf ears of that poor man stopped by some impediment, so, in analogous fashion, He becomes one of those whom He would save and help. In His assumption of humanity and in His bowing of His head to death, we behold Him laying hold of our weakness and entering into the fellowship of our pains and of the fruit of sin.

Just as He touches the leper and in unpolluted, or the fever patient and receives no contagion, or the dead and draws no chill of mortality into His warm hand, so He becomes like His brethren in all things, yet without sin. Being found in 'the likeness of sinful flesh,' He knows no sin, but wears His manhood unpolluted and dwells among men 'blameless and harmless, the Son of God, without rebuke.' Like a sunbeam passing through foul water untarnished and unstained; or like some sweet spring rising in the midst of the salt sea, which yet retains its freshness and pours it over the surrounding bitterness, so Christ takes upon Himself our nature and lays hold of our stained hands with the hand that continues pure while it grasps us, and will make us purer if we grasp it.

Brethren, let your touch answer to His; and as He lays hold of us, in His incarnation and His death, let the hand of our faith clasp His outstretched hand, and though our hold be as faltering and feeble as that of the trembling, wasted fingers which one timid woman once laid on His garment's hem, the blessing which we need will flow into our veins from the contact. There will be cleansing for our leprosy, sight for our blindness, life driving out death from its throne in our hearts, and we shall be able to recount our joyful experience in the old Psalmist's triumphant strains-'He sent me from above, He laid hold upon me, He drew me out of many waters.'

IV. Finally, we may look upon these incidents as being in a very important sense a pattern for us.

No good is to be done by any man to his fellows except at the cost of true sympathy which leads to identification and contact. The literal touch of your hand would do more good to some poor outcasts than much solemn advice, or even much material help flung to them as from a height above them. A shake of the hand might be more of a means of grace than a sermon, and more comforting than ever so many free breakfasts and blankets given superciliously.

And, symbolically, we may say that we must be willing to take those by the hand whom we wish to help; that is to say, we must come down to their level, try to see with their eyes, and to think their thoughts, and let them feel that we do not think our purity too fine to come beside their filth, nor shrink from them With repugnance, however we may show disapproval and pity for their sin. Much work done by Christian people has no effect, nor ever will have, because it has peeping through it a poorly concealed ‘I am holier than thou.’ An instinctive movement of repugnance has ruined many a well-meant effort.

Christ has come down to us, and has taken all our nature upon Himself. If there is an outcast and abandoned soul on earth which may not feel that Jesus has laid a loving and healing touch on him, Jesus is not the Saviour for the world. He shrinks from none, He unites Himself with all, therefore ‘He is able to save to the uttermost all who come unto God by Him.’ His conduct is the pattern and the law for us. A Church is a poor affair if it is not a body of people whose experience of Christ’s pity and gratitude for the life which has become theirs through His wondrous making Himself one with them, compels them to do the like in their degree for the sinful and the outcast. Thank God, there are many in every communion who know that constraint of the love of Christ. But the world will not be healed of its sickness till the great body of Christian people awakes to feel that the task and honour of each of them is to go forth bearing Christ’s pity certified by their own.

The sins of professing Christian countries are largely to be laid at the door of the Church. We are idle when we ought to be at work. We ‘pass by on the other side’ when bleeding brethren lie with wounds gaping to be bound up by us. And even when we are moved to service by Christ’s love, and try to do something for our fellows, our work is often tainted by a sense of our own superiority, and we patronise when we should sympathise, and lecture when we should beseech.

We must be content to take lepers by the hand, if we would help them to purity, and to let every outcast feel the warmth of our pitying, loving grasp, if we would draw them into the forsaken Father’s House. Lay your hands on the sinful as Christ did, and they will recover. All your holiness and hope come from Christ’s laying hold of you. Keep hold of Him, and make His great pity and loving identification of Himself with the world of sinners and sufferers, your pattern as well as your hope, and your touch, too, will have virtue. Keeping hold of Him who has taken hold of us, you too may be able to say, ‘Ephphatha, be opened,’ or to lay your hand on the leper, and he will be cleansed.

7) **Mark 1:42**

Mark

A PARABLE IN A MIRACLE

Mar. 1:40 f11 - Mar. 1:42.

Christ’s miracles are called wonders-that is, deeds which, by their exceptional character, arrest attention and excite surprise. Further, they are called ‘mighty works’-that is, exhibitions of superhuman power. They are still further called ‘signs’-that is, tokens of His divine mission. But they are signs in another sense, being, as it were, parables as well as miracles, and representing on the lower plane of material things the effects of His working on men’s spirits. Thus, His feeding of the hungry speaks of His higher operation as the Bread of Life. His giving sight to the blind foreshadows His illumination of darkened minds. His healing of the diseased speaks of His restoration of sick souls. His stilling of the tempest tells of Him as the Peace-bringer for troubled hearts; and His raising of the dead proclaims Him as the Life-giver, who quickens with the true life all who believe on Him. This parabolic aspect of the miracles is obvious in the case before us. Leprosy received exceptional treatment under the Mosaic law, and the peculiar restrictions to which the sufferer was subjected, as well as the ritual of his cleansing, in the rare cases where the disease wore itself out, are best explained by being considered as symbolical rather than as sanitary. It was taken as an emblem of sin. Its hideous symptoms, its rotting sores, its slow, stealthy, steady progress, its defiance of all known means of cure, made its victim only too faithful a walking image of that worse disease. Remembering this deeper aspect of leprosy, let us study this miracle before us, and try to gather its lessons.

I. First, then, notice the leper’s cry.

Mark connects the story with our Lord’s first journey through Galilee, which was signalised by many miracles, and had excited much stir and talk.

The news of the Healer had reached the isolated huts where the lepers herded, and had kindled a spark of hope in one poor wretch, which emboldened him to break through all regulations, and thrust his tainted and unwelcome presence into the shrinking crowd. He seems to have appeared there suddenly, having forced or stolen his way somehow into Christ's presence. And there he was, with his horrible white face, with his tightened, glistening skin, with some frowsy rag over his mouth, and a hunted look as of a wild beast in his eyes. The crowd shrank back from him; he had no difficulty in making his way to where Christ is sitting, calmly teaching. And Mark's vivid narrative shows him to us, flinging himself down before the Lord, and, without waiting for question or pause, interrupting whatever was going on, with his piteous cry. Misery and wretchedness make short work of conventional politeness.

Note the keen sense of misery that impels to the passionate desire for relief. A leper with the flesh dropping off his bones could not suppose that there was nothing the matter with him. His disease was too gross and palpable not to be felt; and the depth of misery measured the earnestness of desire. The parallel fails us there. The emblem is all insufficient, for here is the very misery of our deepest misery, that we are unconscious of it, and sometimes even come to love it. There are forms of sickness in which the man goes about, and to each inquiry says, 'I am perfectly well,' though everybody else can see death written on his face. And so it is with this terrible malady that has laid its corrupting and putrefying finger upon us all. The worse we are, the less we know that there is anything the matter with us; and the deeper the leprosy has struck its filthy fangs into us, the more ready we are to say that we are sound. We preachers have it for one of our first duties to try to rouse men to the recognition of the facts of their spiritual condition, and all our efforts are too often-as I, for my part, sometimes half despairingly feel when I stand in the pulpit-like a firebrand dropped into a pond, which hisses for a moment and then is extinguished. Men and women sit in pews listening contentedly and quietly, who, if they saw themselves, I do not say even as God sees them, but as others see them, would know that the leprosy is deep in them, and the taint patent to every eye. I do not charge you, my brother, with gross transgressions of plain moralities; I know nothing about that. I know this: 'As face answereth to face in a glass,' so doth the heart of man to man, and I bring this message, verified to me by my own consciousness, that we have all gone astray, and 'wounds and bruises and putrefying sores' mark us all. If the best of us could see himself for once, in the light of God, as the worst of us will see himself one day, the cry would come from the purest lips, 'Oh! wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?'-this life in death that I carry, rotting and smelling foul to Heaven, about with me, wheresoever I go.

Note, further, this man's confidence in Christ's power: 'Thou canst make me clean.' He had heard all about the miracles that were being wrought up and down over the country, and he came to the Worker, with nothing of the nature of religious faith in Him, but with entire confidence, based upon the report of previous miracles, in Christ's ability to heal. I do not suppose that in its nature it was very different from the trust with which savages will crowd round a traveller who has a medicine-chest with him, and expect to be cured of their diseases. But still it was real confidence in our Lord's power to heal. As a rule, though not without exceptions, He required [we may perhaps say He needed] such confidence as a condition of His miracle-working power.

If we turn from the emblem to the thing signified, from the leprosy of the body to that of the spirit, we may be sure of Christ's omnipotent ability to cleanse from the extremest severity of the disease, however inveterate and chronic it may have become. Sin dominates men by two opposite lies. I have said how hard it is to get people's consciences awakened to see the facts of their moral and religious condition; but then, when they are waked up, it is almost as hard to keep them from the other extreme. The devil, first of all, says to a man, 'It is only a little sin. Do it; you will be none the worse. You can give it up when you like, you know. That is the language before the act. Afterwards, his language is, first, 'You have done no harm, never mind what people say about sin. Make yourself comfortable,' and then, when that lie wears itself out, the mask is dropped, and this is what is said: 'I have got you now, and you cannot get away. Done is done! What thou hast written thou hast written; and neither thou nor anybody else can blot it out.' Hence the despair into which awakened consciences are apt to drop, and the feeling, which dogs the sense of evil like a spectre, of the hopelessness of all attempts to make oneself better. Brethren, they are both lies; the lie that we are pure is the first; the lie that we are too black to be purified is the second. ‘If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and make God a liar,’ but if we say, as some of us, when once our consciences are stirred, are but too apt to say, ‘We have sinned, and it cleaves to us for ever,’ we deceive ourselves still worse, and still more darkly and doggedly contradict the sure word of God. Christ’s blood atones for all past sin, and has power to bring forgiveness to every one. Christ’s vital Spirit will enter into any heart, and, abiding there, has power to make the foulest clean.

Note, again, the leper’s hesitation. ‘If Thou wilt’-he had no right to presume on Christ’s good will. He knew nothing about the principles upon which His miracles were wrought and His mercy extended. He supposed, no doubt, as he was bound to suppose, in the absence of any plain knowledge, that it was a mere matter of accident, of caprice, of momentary inclination and good nature, to whom the gift of healing should come. And so he draws near with the modest ‘If Thou wilt’; not pretending to know more than he knew, or to have a claim which he had not. But his hesitation is quite as much entreaty as hesitation. What do we mean when we say about a man, ‘He can do it, if he likes,’ but to imply that it is so easy to do it, that it would be cruel not to do it? And so, when the leper said, ‘If Thou wilt, Thou canst,’ he meant, ‘There is no obstacle standing between me and health but Thy will, and surely it cannot be Thy will to leave me in this life in death.’ He, as it were, throws the responsibility for his health or disease upon Christ’s shoulders, and thereby makes the strongest appeal to that loving heart.

We stand on another level. The leper’s hesitation is our certainty. We know the principle upon which His mercy is dispensed; we know that it is a universal, all-embracing love; we know that no caprice nor passing spasm of good nature lies at the bottom of it. We know that if any men are not healed, it is not because Christ will not, but because they will not. If ever there springs in our hearts the dark doubt ‘If Thou wilt,’ which was innocent in this man in the twilight of his knowledge, but is wrong in us in the full noontide of ours, we ought to be able to banish it at once, and to lay none of the responsibility of our continuing unhealed on Christ, but all on ourselves. He has laid it there, when He lamented, ‘How often would I-and ye would not!’ Nothing can be more in accordance with the will of God, of which

Jesus Christ is the embodiment, than to deliver men from sin, which is the opposite of His will.

II. Notice, secondly, the Lord's answer.

Mark's record of this incident puts the miracle in very small compass, and dilates rather upon the attitude and mind of Jesus Christ preparatory to it. As if, apart altogether from the supernatural element and the lessons that are to be drawn from it, it was worth our while to ponder, for the gladdening of our hearts and the strengthening of our hopes, that lovely picture of sheer simple compassion and tender-heartedness. 'Jesus, *moved with compassion*'-a clause which occurs only in Mark's account-'put forth His hand and touched him, and said, I will; be thou clean.' Note, then, three things-the compassion, the touch, the word.

As to the first, is it not a precious boon for us, in the midst of our many wearinesses and sorrows and sicknesses, to have that picture of Jesus Christ bending over the leper, and sending, as it were, a gush of pitying love from His heart to flood away all his miseries? It is a true revelation of the heart of Jesus Christ. Simple pity is its very core. That pity is eternal, and subsists as He sits in the calm of the heavens, even as it was manifest whilst He sat teaching in the humble house in Galilee. For 'we have not a High Priest which cannot be touched with a feeling of our infirmities.' The pitying Christ is near us all. Nor let us forget that it is this swift shoot of pity which underlies all that follows-the touch, the word, and the cure. Christ does not wait to be moved by the prayers that come from these leprous lips, but He is moved by the leprous lips themselves. The sight of the man affects His pitying heart, which sets in motion all the wheels of His healing powers. So we may learn that the impulse to which His redeeming activity owes its origin wells up from His own heart. Show Him sorrow, and He answers it by a pity of such a sort that it is restless till it helps and assuages. We may rise higher. The pity of Jesus Christ is the summit of His revelation of the Father, and, looking upon that gentle heart, into whose depths we can see as through a little window by these words of my text, we must stand with hushed reverence as beholding not only the compassion of the Man, but therein manifested the pity of the God who, 'Like as a father pitieth his children, pitieth them that fear Him,' and pities yet more the more miserable men who fear and love Him not. The Christian’s God is no impassive Being, indifferent to mankind, but ‘One who in all our afflictions is afflicted, and, in His love and in His pity,’ redeems and bears and carries.

Note, still further, the Lord’s touch. With swift obedience to the impulse of His pity, Christ thrusts forth His hand and touches the leper. There was much in that touch, but whatever more we may see in it, we should not be blind to the loving humanity of the act. Remember that the man kneeling there had felt no touch of a hand for years; that the very kisses of his own children and his wife’s embrace of love were denied him. And now Jesus puts out His hand, and, without thinking of Mosaic restrictions and ceremonial prohibitions, yields to the impulse of His pity, and gives assurance of His sympathy and His brotherhood, as He lays His pure fingers upon the rotting ulcers. All men that help their fellows must be contented thus to identify themselves with them and to take them by the hand, if they would seek to deliver them from their evils.

Remember, too, that according to the Mosaic law it was forbidden to any but the priest to touch a leper. Therefore, in this act, beautiful as it is in its uncalculated humanity, there may have been something intended of a deeper kind. Our Lord thereby does one of two things-either He asserts His authority as overriding that of Moses and all his regulations, or He asserts His sacerdotal character. Either way there is a great claim in the act.

Further, we may take that touch of Christ’s as being a parable of His whole work. It was a piece of wonderful sympathy and condescension that He should put out His hand to touch the leper; but it was the result of a far greater and more wonderful piece of sympathy and condescension that He had a hand to touch him with. For the ‘sweet human hands and lips and eyes’ which He wore in this world were assumed by Him in order that He might make Himself one with all sufferers and bear the burden of all their sins. So His touch of the leper symbolises His identifying of Himself with mankind, the foulest and the most degraded; and in this connection there is a profound meaning in one of the ordinarily trivial legends of the Rabbis, who, founding upon a word of the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, tell us that when Messias comes He will be found sitting amongst the lepers at the gate of the city. So He was numbered amongst the transgressors in His life, and ‘with the wicked in His death.’ He touches, and, touching, contracts no impurity, cleansing as the sunlight and the fire do, by burning up the impurity, and not by receiving it into Himself.

Note the Lord’s word, ‘I will; be thou clean.’ It is shaped, convolution for convolution, so to speak, to match the man’s prayer. He ever moulds His response according to the feebleness and imperfection of the petitioner’s faith. But, at the same time, what a ring of autocratic authority and conscious sovereignty there is in the brief, calm, imperative word, ‘I will; be thou clean!’ He accepts the leper’s ascription of power; He claims to work the miracle by His own will, and therein He is either guilty of what comes very near arrogant blasphemy, or He is rightly claiming for Himself a divine prerogative. If His word can tell as a force on material things, what is the conclusion? He who ‘spake and it was done’ is Almighty and Divine.

III. Lastly, note the immediate cure.

Mark tells, with his favourite word ‘straightway,’ how as soon as Christ had spoken, the leprosy departed from the leper. And to turn from the symbol to the fact, the same sudden and complete cleansing is possible for us. Our cleansing from sin must depend upon the present love and present power of Jesus Christ. On account of Christ’s sacrifice, whose efficacy is eternal and lies at the foundation of all our blessedness and our purity until the heavens shall be no more, we are forgiven our sins and our guilt is taken away. By the present indwelling of that cleansing Spirit of the ever-living Christ, which will be given to us each if we seek it, we are cleansed day by day from our evil. ‘The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin,’ not only when shed as propitiatory, but when applied as sanctifying. We must come to Christ, and there must be a real living contact between us and Him through our faith, if we are to possess either the forgiveness or the cleansing which are wrapped up inseparable in His gift.

Further, the suddenness of this cure and its completeness may be reproduced in us. People tell us that to believe in sudden conversion is fanatical. This is not the place to argue that question. It seems to me that such suddenness is in accordance with analogy. And I, for my part, preach with full belief and in the hope that the words may not be spoken altogether in vain to every man, woman, and child listening to me, irrespective of their condition, character, and past, that there is no reason why they should not go to Him straightway; no reason why He should not put out His hand straightway and touch them; no reason why their leprosy should not pass from them straightway, and they lie down to sleep to-night ‘accepted in the Beloved’ and cleansed in Him. Trust Him and He will do it.

Only remember, it was of no use to the leper that crowds had been healed, that floods of blessing had been poured over the land. What he wanted was that a rill should come and refresh his own lips. If you wish to have Christ’s cleansing you must make personal work of it, and come with this prayer, ‘On *me* be all that cleansing shown!’ You do not need to go to Him with an ‘If’ nor a prayer, for His gift has not waited for our asking, and He has anticipated us by coming with healing in His wings. The parts are reversed, and He prays you to receive the gift, and stands before each of us with the gentle remonstrance upon His lips, ‘Why will ye die when I am here ready to cure you?’ Take Him at His word, for He offers to us all, whether we desire it or no, the cleansing which we need. Take Him at His word, trust Him wholly, trust to His death for forgiveness, to His sanctifying Spirit for cleansing, and ‘straightway’ your ‘leprosy will depart from you,’ and your flesh shall become like the flesh of a little child, and you shall be clean.

8) Mark 2:1-12

Mark

CHRIST’S AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE

Mar. 2:1 - Mar. 2:12.

Mark alone gives Capernaum as the scene of this miracle. The excitement which had induced our Lord to leave that place had been allowed ‘some days’ to quiet down, ‘after’ which He ventures to return, but does not seem to have sought publicity, but to have remained in ‘the house’-probably Peter’s. There would be at least one woman’s heart there, which would love to lavish grateful service on Him. But ‘He could not be hid,’ and, however little genuine or deep the eagerness might be, He will not refuse to meet it. Mark paints vividly the crowd flocking to the humble home, overflowing its modest capacity, blocking the doorway, and clustering round it outside as far as they could hear Christ's voice. 'He was speaking the word to them,' proclaiming His mission, as He had done in their synagogue, when He was interrupted by the events which follow, no doubt to the gratification of some of His hearers, who wanted something more exciting than 'teaching.'

I. We note the eager group of interrupters.

Mark gives one of the minute touches which betray an eye-witness and a close observer when he tells us that the palsied man was carried by four friends-no doubt one at each corner of the bed, which would be some light framework, or even a mere quilt or mattress. The incident is told from the point of view of one sitting beside Jesus; they 'come to Him,' but 'cannot come near.' The accurate specification of the process of removing the roof, which Matthew omits altogether, and Luke tells much more vaguely, seems also to point to an eye-witness as the source of the narrative, who would, of course, be Peter, who well remembered all the steps of the unceremonious treatment of his property. His house was, probably, one of no great pretensions or size, but like hundreds of poor men's houses in Palestine still-a one-storied building with a low, flat roof, mostly earthen, and easily reached from the ground by an outside stair. It would be somewhat difficult to get a sick man and his bed up there, however low, and somewhat free-and-easy dealing with another man's house to burrow through the roof a hole wide enough for the purpose; but there is no impossibility, and the difficulty is part of the lesson of the incident, and is recognised expressly in the narrative by Christ's notice of their 'faith.' We can fancy the blank looks of the four bearers, and the disappointment on the sick man's thin face and weary eyes, as they got to the edge of the crowd, and saw that there was no hope of forcing a passage. Had they been less certain of a cure, and less eager, they would have shouldered their burden and carried him home again. They could well have pleaded sufficient reason for giving up the attempt. But 'we cannot' is the coward's word. 'We must' is the earnest man's. If we have any real consciousness of our need to get to Christ, and any real wish to do so, it is not a crowd round the door that will keep us back. Difficulties test, and therefore increase, faith. They develop a sanctified ingenuity in getting over them, and bring a rich harvest of satisfaction when at last conquered. These four eager faces looked down through the broken roof, when they had succeeded in dropping the bed right at Christ's feet, with a far keener pleasure than if they had just carried him in by the door. No doubt their act was inconvenient; for, however light the roofing, some rubbish must have come down on the heads of some of the notabilities below. And, no doubt, it was interfering with property as well as with propriety. But here was a sick man, and there was his Healer; and it was their business to get the two together somehow. It was worth risking a good deal to accomplish. The rabbis sitting there might frown at rude intrusiveness; Peter might object to the damage to his roof; some of the listeners might dislike the interruption to His teaching; but Jesus read the action of the bearers and the consent of the motionless figure on the couch as the indication of 'their faith,' and His love and power responded to its call.

II. Note the unexpected gift with which Christ answers this faith.

Neither the bearers nor the paralytic speak a word throughout the whole incident. Their act and his condition spoke loudly enough. Obviously, all five must have had, at all events, so much 'faith' as went to the conviction that He could and would heal; and this faith is the occasion of Christ's gift. The bearers had it, as is shown by their work. It was a visible faith, manifest by conduct. He can see the hidden heart; but here He looks upon conduct, and thence infers disposition. Faith, if worth anything, comes to the surface in act. Was it the faith of the bearers, or of the sick man, which Christ rewarded? Both. As Abraham's intercession delivered Lot, as Paul in the shipwreck was the occasion of safety to all the crew, so one man's faith may bring blessings on another. But if the sick man too had not had faith, he would not have let himself be brought at all, and would certainly not have consented to reach Christ's presence by so strange and, to him, dangerous a way-being painfully hoisted up some narrow stair, and then perilously let down, at the risk of cords snapping, or hands letting go, or bed giving way. His faith, apparently, was deeper than theirs; for Christ's answer, though it went far beyond his or their expectations, must have been moulded to meet his deepest sense of need. His heart speaks in the tender greeting 'son,' or, as the margin has it, 'child'-possibly pointing to the man's youth, but more probably an appellation revealing the mingled love and dignity of Jesus, and taking this man into the arms of His sympathy. The palsy may have been the consequence of ‘fast’ living; but, whether it were so or no, Christ saw that, in the dreary hours of solitary inaction to which it had condemned the sufferer, remorse had been busy gnawing at his heart, and that pain had done its best work by leading to penitence. Therefore He spoke to the conscience before He touched the bodily ailment, and met the sufferer’s deepest and most deeply felt disease first. He goes to the bottom of the malady with His cure. These great words are not only closely adapted to the one case before Him, but contain a general truth, worthy to be pondered by all philanthropists. It is of little use to cure symptoms unless you cure diseases. The tap-root of all misery is sin; and, until it is grubbed up, hacking at the branches is sad waste of time. Cure sin, and you make the heart a temple and the world a paradise. We Christians should hail all efforts of every sort for making men nobler, happier, better physically, morally, intellectually; but let us not forget that there is but one effectual cure for the world’s misery, and that it is wrought by Him who has borne the world’s sins.

III. Note the snarl of the scribes.

‘Certain of the scribes,’ says Mark-not being much impressed by their dignity, which, as Luke tells us, was considerable. He says that they were ‘Pharisees and doctors of the law . . . out of every village of Galilee and Judaea and Jerusalem itself, who had come on a formal errand of investigation. Their tempers would not be improved by the tearing up of the roof, nor sweetened by seeing the ‘popularity’ of this doubtful young Teacher, who showed that He had the secret, which they had not, of winning men’s hearts. Nobody came crowding to them, nor hung on their lips. Professional jealousy has often a great deal to do in helping zeal for truth to sniff out heresy. The whispered cavillings are graphically represented. The scribes would not speak out, like men, and call on Jesus to defend His words. If they had been sure of their ground, they should have boldly charged Him with blasphemy; but perhaps they were half suspicious that He could show good cause for His speech. Perhaps they were afraid to oppose the tide of enthusiasm for Him. So they content themselves with comparing notes among themselves, and wait for Him to entangle Himself a little more in their nets. They affect to despise Him, ‘This man’ is spoken in contempt. If He were so poor a creature, why were they there, all the way from Jerusalem, some of them? They overdo their part. The short, snarling sentences of their muttered objections, as given in the Revised Version, may be taken as shared among three speakers, each bringing his quota of bitterness. One says, ‘Why doth He thus speak?’ Another curtly answers, ‘He blasphemeth’; while a third formally states the great truth on which they rest their indictment. Their principle is impregnable. Forgiveness is a divine prerogative, to be shared by none, to be grasped by none, without, in the act, diminishing God’s glory. But it is not enough to have one premise of your syllogism right. Only God forgives sins; and if this man says that He does, He, no doubt, claims to be, in some sense, God. But whether He ‘blasphemeth’ or no depends on what the scribes do not stay to ask; namely, whether He has the right so to claim: and, if He has, it is they, not He, who are the blasphemers. We need not wonder that they recoiled from the right conclusion, which is-the divinity of Jesus. Their fault was not their jealousy for the divine honour, but their inattention to Christ’s evidence in support of His claims, which inattention had its roots in their moral condition, their self-sufficiency and absorption in trivialities of externalism. But we have to thank them for clearly discerning and bluntly stating what was involved in our Lord’s claims, and for thus bringing up the sharp issue-blasphemer, or ‘God manifest in the flesh.’

IV. Note our Lord’s answer to the cavils.

Mark would have us see something supernatural in the swiftness of Christ’s knowledge of the muttered criticisms. He perceived it ‘straightway’ and ‘in His spirit,’ which is tantamount to saying by divine discernment, and not by the medium of sense, as we do. His spirit was a mirror, in which looking He saw externals. In the most literal and deepest sense, He does ‘not judge after the sight of His eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of His ears.’

The absence from our Lord’s answer of any explanation that He was only declaring the divine forgiveness and not Himself exercising a divine prerogative, shuts us up to the conclusion that He desired to be understood as exercising it. Unless His pardon is something quite different from the ministerial announcement of forgiveness, which His servants are empowered to make to penitents, He wilfully led the cavillers into error. His answer starts with a counter-question- another ‘why?’ to meet their’ why?’

It then puts into words what they were thinking; namely, that it was easy to assume a power the reality of which could not be tested. To say, ‘Thy sins be forgiven,’ and to say, ‘Take up thy bed,’ are equally easy. To effect either is equally beyond man’s power; but the one can be verified and the other cannot, and, no doubt, some of the scribes were maliciously saying: ‘It is all very well to pretend to do what cannot be tested. Let Him come out into daylight, and do a miracle which we can see.’ He is quite willing to accept the challenge to test His power in the invisible realm of conscience by His power in the visible region. The remarkable construction of the long sentence in Mar. 2:10 - Mar. 2:11, which is almost verbally identical in the three Gospels, parenthesis and all, sets before us the suddenness of the turn from the scribes to the patient with dramatic force. Mark that our Lord claims ‘authority’ to forgive, the same word which had been twice in the people’s mouths in reference to His teaching and to His sway over demons. It implies not only power, but rightful power, and that authority which He wields as ‘Son of Man’ and ‘on earth.’ This is the first use of that title in Mark. It is Christ’s own designation of Himself, never found on other lips except the dying Stephen’s. It implies His Messianic office, and points back to Daniel’s great prophecy; but it also asserts His true manhood and His unique relation to humanity, as being Himself its sum and perfection-not *a*, but *the* Son of Man. Now the wonder which He would confirm by His miracle is that such a manhood, walking on earth, has lodged in it the divine prerogative. He who is the Son of Man must be something more than man, even the Son of God. His power to forgive is both derived and inherent, but, in either aspect, is entirely different from the human office of announcing God’s forgiveness.

For once, Christ seems to work a miracle in response to unbelief, rather than to faith. But the real occasion of it was not the cavils of the scribes, but the faith and need of the man and His friends; while the silencing of unbelief, and the enlightenment of honest doubt, were but collateral benefits.

V. Note the cure and its effect.

This is another of the miracles in which no vehicle of the healing power is employed. The word is enough; but here the word is spoken, not as if to the disease, but to the sufferer; and in His obedience he receives strength to obey. Tell a palsied man to rise and walk when his disease is that he cannot! But if he believes that Christ has power to heal, he will try to do as he is bid; and, as he tries, the paralysis steals out of the long-unused limbs. Jesus makes us able to do what He bids us do. The condition of healing is faith, and the test of faith is obedience. We do not get strength till we put ourselves into the attitude of obedience. The cure was immediate; and the cured man, who was 'borne of four' into the healing presence, walked away, with his bed under his arm, 'before them all.' They were ready enough to make way for him then. And what said the wise doctors to it all? We do not hear that any of them were convinced. And what said the people? They were 'amazed,' and they 'glorified God,' and recognised that they had seen something quite new. That was all. Their glorifying God cannot have been very deep-seated, or they would have better learned the lesson of the miracle. Amazement was but a poor result. No emotion is more transient or less fruitful than gaping astonishment; and that, with a little varnish of acknowledgment of God's power, which led to nothing, was all the fruit of Christ's mighty work. Let us hope that the healed man carried his unseen blessing in a faithful and grateful heart, and consecrated his restored strength to the Lord who healed him!

9) Mark 2:13-18

Mark

THE PUBLICANS' FRIEND

Mar. 2:13 - Mar. 2:22.

By calling a publican, Jesus shocked 'public opinion and outraged propriety, as the Pharisees and scribes understood it. But He touched the hearts of the outcasts. A gush of sympathy melts souls frozen hard by icy winds of scorn. Levi [otherwise Matthew] had probably had wistful longings after Jesus which he had not dared to show, and therefore he eagerly and instantly responded to Christ's call, leaving everything in his custom-house to look after itself. Mark emphasises the effect of this advance towards the disreputable classes by Jesus, in his repeated mention of the numbers of them who followed Him. The meal in Matthew's house was probably not immediately after his call. The large gathering attracted the notice of Christ's watchful opponents, who pounced upon His sitting at meat with such 'shady' people as betraying His low tastes and disregard of seemly conduct, and, with characteristic Eastern freedom, pushed in as uninvited spectators. They did not carry their objection to Himself, but covertly insinuated it into the disciples' minds, perhaps in hope of sowing suspicions there. Their sarcasm evoked Christ's own 'programme' of His mission, for which we have to thank them.

I. We have, first, Christ's vindication of His consorting with the lowest.

He thinks of Himself as 'a physician,' just as He did in another connection in the synagogue of Nazareth. He is conscious of power to heal all soul-sickness, and therefore He goes where He is most needed. Where should a doctor be but where disease is rife? Is not his place in the hospital? Association with degraded and vicious characters is sin or duty, according to the purpose of it. To go down in the filth in order to wallow there is vile; to go down in order to lift others up is Christ's mission and Christ-like.

But what does He mean by the distinction between sick and sound, righteous and sinners? Surely all need His healing, and there are not two classes of men. Have not all sinned? Yes, but Jesus speaks to the cavillers, for the moment, in their own dialect, saying, in effect, 'I take you at your own valuation, and therein find My defence. You do not think that you need a physician, and you call yourselves 'righteous and these outcasts 'sinners.' So you should not be surprised if I, being the healer, turn away to them, and prefer their company to yours.' But there is more than taking them at their own estimate in the great words, for to conceit ourselves 'whole' bars us off from getting any good from Jesus. He cannot come to the self-righteous heart. We must feel our sickness before we can see Him in His true character, or be blessed by His presence with us. And the apparent distinction, which seems to limit His work, really vanishes in the fact that we all are sick and sinners, whatever we may think of ourselves, and that, therefore, the errand of the great Physician is to us all. The Pharisee who knows himself a sinner is as welcome as the outcast. The most outwardly respectable, clean-living, orthodoxly religious formalist needs Him as much, and may have Him as healingly, as the grossest criminal, foul with the stench of loathsome disease. That great saying has changed the attitude towards the degraded and unclean, and many a stream of pity and practical work for such has been drawn off from that Nile of yearning love, though all unconscious of its source.

II. We have Christ's vindication of the disciples from ascetic critics.

The assailants in the second charge were reinforced by singular allies. Pharisees had nothing in common with John's disciples, except some outward observances, but they could join forces against Jesus. Common hatred is a wonderful unifier. This time Jesus Himself is addressed, and it is the disciples with whom fault is found. To speak of His supposed faults to them, and of theirs to Him, was cunning and cowardly. His answer opens up many great truths, which we can barely mention.

First, note that He calls Himself the 'bridegroom'-a designation which would surely touch some chords in John's disciples, remembering how their Master had spoken of the 'bridegroom' and his 'friend.' The name tells us that Jesus claimed the psalms of the 'bride-groom' as prophecies of Himself, and claimed the Church that was to be as His bride. It speaks tenderly of His love and of our possible blessedness. Next, we note the sweet suggestion of the joyful life of the disciples in intercourse with Him. We perhaps do not sufficiently regard their experience in that light, but surely they were happy, being ever with Him, though they knew not yet all the wonder and blessedness which His presence involved and brought. They were a glad company, and Christians ought now to be joyous, because the bridegroom is still with them, and the more really so by reason of His ascending up where He was before. We have seen Him again, as He promised, and our hearts should rejoice with a joy which no man can take from us.

Next, we note Christ's clear prevision of His death, the violence of which is hinted at in the words, 'Shall be taken away from them.' Further, we note the great principle that outward forms must follow inward realities, and are genuine only when they are the expression of states of mind and feeling. That is a far-reaching truth, ever being forgotten in the tyranny which the externals of religion exercise. Let the free spirit have its own way, and cut its own channels. Laughter may be as devout as fasting. Joy is to be expressed in religion as well as grief. No outward form is worth anything unless the inner man vitalises it, and such a mere form is not simply valueless, but may quickly become hypocrisy and conscious make-believe.

III. Jesus adds two similes, which are condensed parables, to deal with a wider question rising out of the preceding principles.

The difference between His disciples' religious demeanour and that of their critics is not merely that the former are not now in a mood for fasting, but that a new spirit is beginning to work in them, and therefore it will go hard with a good many old forms besides fasting.

The essential point in both the similes of the raw cloth stitched on to the old, and of the new wine poured into stiff old skins, is the necessary incongruity between old forms and new tendencies. Undressed cloth is sure to shrink when wetted, and, being stronger than the old, to draw its frayed edges away. So, if new truth, or new conceptions of old truth, or new enthusiasms, are patched on to old modes, they will look out of place, and will sooner or later rend the old cloth. But the second simile advances on the first, in that it points not only to harm done to the old by the unnatural marriage, but also to mischief to the new. Put fermenting wine into a hard, unyielding, old wine-skin, and there can be but one result,-the strong effervescence will burst the skin, which may not matter much, and the precious wine will run out and be lost, sucked up by the thirsty soil, which matters more. The attempt to confine the new within the limits of the old, or to express it by the old forms, destroys them and wastes it. The attempt was made to keep Christianity within the limits of Judaism; it failed, but not before much harm had been done to Christianity. Over and over again the effort has been made in the Church, and it has always ended disastrously,-and it always will. It will be a happy day for both the old and the new when we all learn to put new wine into new skins, and remember that 'God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him, and to every seed his *own* body.'

10)Mark 2:19

Mark

THE PUBLICANS’ FRIEND

THE SECRET OF GLADNESS

Mar. 2:19.

This part of our Lord’s answer to the question put by John’s disciples as to the reason for the omission of the practice of fasting by His followers. The answer is very simple. It is-’My disciples do not fast because they are not sad.’ And the principle which underlies the answer is a very important one. It is this: that all outward forms of religion, appointed by man, ought only to be observed when they correspond to the feeling and disposition of the worshipper. That principle cuts up all religious formalism by the very roots. The Pharisee said: ‘Fasting is a good thing in itself, and meritorious in the sight of God.’ The modern Pharisee says the same about many externals of ritual and worship; Jesus Christ says, ‘No! The thing has no value except as an expression of the feeling of the doer.’ Our Lord did not object to fasting; He expressly approved of it as a means of spiritual power. But He did object to the formal use of it or of any outward form. The formalist’s form, whether it be the elaborate ritual of the Catholic Church, or the barest Nonconformist service, or the silence of a Friends’ meeting-house, is rigid, unbending, and cold, like an iron rod. The true Christian form is elastic, like the stem of a palm-tree, which curves and sways and yields to the wind, and has the sap of life in it. If any man is sad, let him fast; ‘if any man is merry, let him sing psalms.’ Let his ritual correspond to his spiritual emotion and conviction.

But the point which I wish to consider now is not so much this, as the representation that is given here of the reason why fasting was incongruous with the condition and disposition of the disciples. Jesus says: ‘We are more like a wedding-party than anything else. Can the children of the bridechamber fast as long as the bridegroom is with them?’

The ‘children of the bridechamber’ is but another name for those who were called the ‘friends’ or companions ‘of the bridegroom.’ According to the Jewish wedding ceremonial it was their business to conduct the bride to the home of her husband, and there to spend seven days in festivity and rejoicing, which were to be so entirely devoted to mirth and feasting that the companions of the bridegroom were by the Talmudic ritual absolved even from prayer and from worship, and had for their one duty to rejoice.

And that is the picture that Christ holds up before the disciples of the ascetic John as the representation of what He and His friends were most truly like. Very unlike our ordinary notion of Christ and His disciples as they walked the earth! The presence of the Bridegroom made them glad with a strange gladness, which shook off sorrow as the down on a sea-bird's breast shakes off moisture, and leaves it warm and dry, though it floats amidst boundless seas. I wish now to meditate on this secret of imperviousness to sorrow arising from the felt presence of the Christ.

There are three subjects for consideration arising from the words of my text: The Bridegroom; the presence of the Bridegroom; the joy of the Bridegroom's presence.

I. Now with regard to the first, a very few words will suffice.

The first thing that strikes me is the singular appropriateness and the delicate, pathetic beauty in the employment of this name by Christ in the existing circumstances. Who was it that had first said: 'He that hath the bride is the bridegroom, but the friend of the bridegroom that standeth by and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. This my joy therefore is fulfilled'? Why, it was the master of these very men who were asking the question. John's disciples came and said, 'Why do not your disciples fast?' and our Lord reminded them of their own teacher's words, when he said, 'The friend of the bridegroom can only be glad.' And so He would say to them, 'In your master's own conception of what I am, and of the joy that comes from My presence, you have an answer to your question. He might have taught you who I am, and why it is that the men that stand around Me are glad.'

But this is not all. We cannot but connect this name with a whole circle of ideas found in the Old Testament, especially with that most familiar and almost stereotyped figure which represents the union between Israel and Jehovah, under the emblem of the marriage bond. The Lord is the 'husband'; and the nation whom He has loved and redeemed and chosen for Himself, is the 'wife'; unfaithful and forgetful, often requiting love with indifference and protection with unthankfulness, and needing to be put away, and debarred of the society of the husband who still yearns for her; but a wife still, and in the new time to be joined to Him by a bond that shall never be broken and a better covenant.

And so Christ lays His hand upon all that old history and says, ‘It is fulfilled here in Me.’ A familiar note in Old Testament Messianic prophecy too is caught and echoed here, especially that grand marriage ode of the forty-fifth psalm, in which he must be a very prosaic or very deeply prejudiced reader who hears nothing more than the shrill wedding greetings at the marriage of some Jewish king with a foreign princess. Its bounding hopes and its magnificent sweep of vision are a world too wide for such interpretation. The Bridegroom of that psalm is the Messiah, and the Bride is the Church.

I need only refer in a sentence to what this indicates of Christ’s self-consciousness. What must He, who takes this name as His own, have thought Himself to be to the world, and the world to Him? He steps into the place of the Jehovah of the Old Testament, and claims as His own all these great and wonderful prophecies. He promises love, protection, communion, the deepest, most mystical union of spirit and heart with Himself; and He claims quiet, restful confidence in His love, absolute, loving obedience to His authority, reliance upon His strong hand and loving heart, and faithful cleaving to Him. The Bridegroom of humanity, the Husband of the world, if it will only turn to Him, is Christ Himself.

II. But a word as to the presence of the Bridegroom.

It might seem as if this text condemned us who love an unseen and absent Lord to exclusion from the joy which is made to depend on His presence. Are we in the dreary period when ‘the Bridegroom is taken away’ and fasting appropriate? Surely not. The time of mourning for an absent Christ was only three days; the law for the years of the Church’s history between the moment when the uplifted eyes of the gazers lost Him in the symbolic cloud and the moment when He shall come again is, ‘Lo, I am with you alway.’ The absent Christ is the present Christ. He is really with us, not as the memory or the influence of the example of the dead may be said to remain, not as the spirit of a teacher may be said to abide with his school of followers. We say that Christ has gone up on high and sits on ‘the right hand of God.’ The right hand of God is His active power. Where is ‘the right hand of God’? It is wherever His divine energy works. He that sits at the right hand of God is thereby declared to be wherever the divine energy is in operation, and to be Himself the wielder of that divine Power. I believe in a local abode of the glorified human body of Jesus Christ now, but I believe likewise that all through God’s universe, and eminently in this world, which He has redeemed, Christ is present, in His consciousness of its circumstances, and in the activity of His influence, and in whatsoever other incomprehensible and unspeakable mode Omnipresence belongs to a divine Person. So that He is with us most really, though the visible, bodily Form is no longer by our sides.

That Presence which survives, which is true for us here to-day, may be a far better and more blessed and real thing than the presence of the mere bodily Form in which He once dwelt. We may have lost something by His going away in visible form; I doubt whether we have. We have lost the manifestation of Him to the sense, but we have gained the manifestation of Him to the spirit. And just as the great men, who are only men, need to die and go away in order to be measured in their true magnitude and understood in their true glory; just as when a man is in amongst the mountains, he cannot tell which peak is the dominant one, but when he gets away a little space across the sea and looks back, distance helps to measure magnitude and reveal the sovereign summit which towers above all the rest, so, looking back across the ages with the foreground between us and Him of the history of the Christian Church ever since, and noticing how other heights have sunk beneath the waves and have been wrapped in clouds and have disappeared behind the great round of the earth, we can tell how high this One is; and know better than they knew who it is that moves amongst men in ‘the form of a servant,’ even the Bridegroom of the Church and of the world. ‘It is expedient for you that I go away,’ and Christ is, or ought to be, nearer to us to-day in all that constitutes real nearness, in our apprehension of His essential character, in our reception of His holiest influences, than He ever was to them who walked beside Him on the earth.

But, brethren, that presence is of no use at all to us unless we daily try to realise it. He was with these men whether they would or no. Whether they thought about Him or no, there He was; and just because His presence did not at all depend upon their spiritual condition, it was a lower kind of presence than that which you and I have now, and which depends altogether on our realising it by the turning of our hearts to Him, and by the daily contemplation of Him amidst all our bustle and struggle.

Do you, as you go about your work, feel His nearness and try to keep the feeling fresh and vivid, by occupying heart and mind with Him, by referring everything to His supreme control? By trusting yourselves utterly and absolutely in His hand, and gathering round you, as it were, the sweetness of His love by meditation and reflection, do you try to make conscious to yourselves your Lord's presence with you? If you do, that presence is to you a blessed reality; if you do not, it is a word that means nothing and is of no help, no stimulus, no protection, no satisfaction, no sweetness whatever to you. The children of the Bridegroom are glad only when, and as, they know that the Bridegroom is with them.

III. And now a word, last of all, about the joy of the Bridegroom's presence.

What was it that made these humble lives so glad when Christ was with them, filling them with strange new sweetness and power? The charm of personal character, the charm of contact with one whose lips were bringing to them fresh revelations of truth, fresh visions of God, whose whole life was the exhibition of a nature beautiful, and noble, and pure, and tender, and sweet, and loving, beyond anything they had ever seen before.

Ah! brethren, there is no joy in the world like that of companionship, in the freedom of perfect love, with one who ever keeps us at our best, and brings the treasures of ever fresh truth to the mind, as well as beauty of character to admire and imitate. That is one of the greatest gifts that God gives, and is a source of the purest joy that we can have. Now we may have all that and much more in Jesus Christ. He will be with us if we do not drive Him away from us, as the source of our purest joy, because He is the all-sufficient Object of our love.

Oh! you men and women who have been wearily seeking in the world for love that cannot change, for love that cannot die and leave you; you who have been made sad for life by irrevocable losses, or sorrowful in the midst of your joy by the anticipated certain separation which is to come, listen to this One who says to you: ‘I will never leave thee, and My love shall be round thee for ever’; and recognise this, that there is a love which cannot change, which cannot die, which has no limits, which never can be cold, which never can disappoint, and therefore, in it, and in His presence, there is unending gladness.

He is with us as the source of our joy, because He is the Lord of our lives, and the absolute Commander of our wills. To have One present with us whose loving word it is delight to obey, and who takes upon Himself all responsibility for the conduct of our lives, and leaves us only the task of doing what we are bid-that is peace, that is gladness, of such a kind as none else in the world gives.

He is with us as the ground of perfect joy, because He is the adequate object of all our desires, and the whole of the faculties and powers of a man will find a field of glad activity in leaning upon Him, and realising His presence. Like the Apostle whom the old painters loved to represent lying with his happy head on Christ’s heart, and his eyes closed in a tranquil rapture of restful satisfaction, so if we have Him with us and feel that He is with us, our spirits may be still, and in the great stillness of fruition of all our wishes and fulfilment of all our needs, may know a joy that the world can neither give nor take away.

He is with us as the source of endless gladness, in that He is the defence and protection for our souls. And as men live in a victualled fortress, and care not though the whole surrounding country may be swept bare of all provision, so when we have Christ with us we may feel safe, whatsoever befalls, and ‘in the days of famine we shall be satisfied.’

He is with us as the source of our perfect joy, because His presence is the kindling of every hope that fills the future with light and glory. Dark or dim at the best, trodden by uncertain shapes, casting many a deep shadow over the present, that future lies, unless we see it illumined by Christ, and have Him by our sides. But if we possess His companionship, the present is but the parent of a more blessed time to come; and we can look forward and feel that nothing can touch our gladness, because nothing can touch our union with our Lord.

So, dear brethren, from all these thoughts and a thousand more which I have no time to dwell upon, comes this one great consideration, that the joy of the presence of the Bridegroom is the victorious antagonist of all sorrow and mourning. ‘Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, while the bridegroom is with them?’ The answer sometimes seems to be, ‘Yes, they can.’ Our own hearts, with their experience of tears, and losses, and disappointments, seem to say: ‘Mourning is possible, even whilst He is here. We have our own share, and we sometimes think, more than our share, of the ills that flesh is heir to.’ And we have, over and above them, in the measure in which we are Christians, certain special sources of sorrow and trial, peculiar to ourselves alone; and the deeper and truer our Christianity the more of these shall we have. But notwithstanding all that, what will the felt presence of the Bridegroom do for these griefs that will come? Well, it will limit them, for one thing; it will prevent them from absorbing the whole of our nature. There will always be a Goshen in which there is ‘light in the dwelling,’ however murky may be the darkness that wraps the land. There will always be a little bit of soil above the surface, however weltering and wide may be the inundation that drowns our world. There will always be a dry and warm place in the midst of the winter, a kind of greenhouse into which we may get from out of the tempest and fog. The joy of the Bridegroom’s presence will last through the sorrow, like a spring of fresh water welling up in the midst of the sea. We may have the salt and the sweet waters mingling in our lives, not sent forth by one fountain, but flowing in one channel.

Our joy will sometimes be made sweeter and more wonderful by the very presence of the mourning and the pain. Just as the pillar of cloud, that glided before the Israelites through the wilderness, glowed into a pillar of fire as the darkness deepened, so, as the outlook around becomes less and less cheery and bright, and the night falls thicker and thicker, what seemed to be but a thin, grey, wavering column in the blaze of the sunlight will gather warmth and brightness at the heart of it when the midnight comes. You cannot see the stars at twelve o’clock in the day; you have to watch for the dark hours ere heaven is filled with glory. And so sorrow is often the occasion for the full revelation of the joy of Christ's presence.

Why have so many Christian men so little joy in their lives? Because they look for it in all sorts of wrong places, and seek to wring it out of all sorts of sapless and dry things. 'Do men gather grapes of thorns?' If you fling the berries of the thorn into the winepress, will you get sweet sap out of them? That is what you are doing when you take gratified earthly affections, worldly competence, fulfilled ambitions, and put them into the press, and think that out of these you can squeeze the wine of gladness. No! No! brethren, dry and sapless and juiceless they all are. There is one thing that gives a man worthy, noble, eternal gladness, and that is the felt presence of the Bridegroom.

Why have so many Christians so little joy in their lives? A religion like that of John's disciples and that of the Pharisees is a poor affair. A religion of which the main features are law and restriction and prohibition, cannot be joyful. And there are a great many people who call themselves Christians, and have just religion enough to take the edge off worldly pleasures, and yet have not enough to make fellowship with Christ a gladness for them.

There is a cry amongst us for a more cheerful type of religion. I re-echo the cry, but I am afraid that I do not mean by it quite the same thing that some of my friends do. A more cheerful type of Christianity means to many of us a type of Christianity that will interfere less with our amusements; a more indulgent doctor that will prescribe a less rigid diet than the old Puritan type used to do. Well, perhaps they went too far; I do not care to deny that. But the only cheerful Christianity is a Christianity that draws its gladness from deep personal experience of communion with Jesus Christ. There is no way of men being religious and happy except being profoundly religious, and living very near their Master, and always trying to cultivate that spirit of communion with Him which shall surround them with the sweetness and the power of His felt presence. We do not want Pharisaic fasting, but we do want that the reason for not fasting shall not be that Christians like eating better, but that their religion must be joyful because they have Christ with them, and therefore cannot choose but sing, as a lark cannot choose but carol. 'Religion has no power over us, but as it is our happiness,' and we shall never make it our happiness, and therefore never know its beneficent control, until we lift it clean out of the low region of outward forms and joyless service, into the blessed heights of communion with Jesus Christ, ‘Whom having not seen we love.’

I would that Christian people saw more plainly that joy is a duty, and that they are bound to make efforts to obey the command, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always,’ no less than to keep other precepts. If we abide in Christ, His joy ‘will abide in us, and our joy will be full.’ We shall have in our hearts a fountain of true joy which will never be turbid with earthly stains, nor dried up by heat, nor frozen by cold. If we set the Lord always before us our days may be at once like the happy hours of the ‘children of the bridechamber,’ bright with gladness and musical with song; and also saved from the enervation that sometimes comes from joy, because they are also like the patient vigils of the servants who ‘wait for the Lord, when He shall return from the wedding.’ So strangely blended of fruition and hope, of companionship and solitude, of feasting and watching, is the Christian life here, until the time comes when His friends go in with the Bridegroom to the banquet, and drink for ever of the new joy of the kingdom.

11)Mark 2:20-22

Mark

THE PUBLICANS’ FRIEND

Mar. 2:13 - Mar. 2:22.

By calling a publican, Jesus shocked ‘public opinion and outraged propriety, as the Pharisees and scribes understood it. But He touched the hearts of the outcasts. A gush of sympathy melts souls frozen hard by icy winds of scorn. Levi [otherwise Matthew] had probably had wistful longings after Jesus which he had not dared to show, and therefore he eagerly and instantly responded to Christ’s call, leaving everything in his custom-house to look after itself. Mark emphasises the effect of this advance towards the disreputable classes by Jesus, in his repeated mention of the numbers of them who followed Him. The meal in Matthew’s house was probably not immediately after his call. The large gathering attracted the notice of Christ’s watchful opponents, who pounced upon His sitting at meat with such ‘shady’ people as betraying His low tastes and disregard of seemly conduct, and, with characteristic Eastern freedom, pushed in as uninvited spectators. They did not carry their objection to Himself, but covertly insinuated it into the disciples’ minds, perhaps in hope of sowing suspicions there. Their sarcasm evoked Christ’s own ‘programme’ of His mission, for which we have to thank them.

I. We have, first, Christ’s vindication of His consorting with the lowest.

He thinks of Himself as ‘a physician,’ just as He did in another connection in the synagogue of Nazareth. He is conscious of power to heal all soul-sickness, and therefore He goes where He is most needed. Where should a doctor be but where disease is rife? Is not his place in the hospital? Association with degraded and vicious characters is sin or duty, according to the purpose of it. To go down in the filth in order to wallow there is vile; to go down in order to lift others up is Christ’s mission and Christ-like.

But what does He mean by the distinction between sick and sound, righteous and sinners? Surely all need His healing, and there are not two classes of men. Have not all sinned? Yes, but Jesus speaks to the cavillers, for the moment, in their own dialect, saying, in effect, ‘I take you at your own valuation, and therein find My defence. You do not think that you need a physician, and you call yourselves ‘righteous and these outcasts ‘sinners.’ So you should not be surprised if I, being the healer, turn away to them, and prefer their company to yours.’ But there is more than taking them at their own estimate in the great words, for to conceit ourselves ‘whole’ bars us off from getting any good from Jesus. He cannot come to the self-righteous heart. We must feel our sickness before we can see Him in His true character, or be blessed by His presence with us. And the apparent distinction, which seems to limit His work, really vanishes in the fact that we all are sick and sinners, whatever we may think of ourselves, and that, therefore, the errand of the great Physician is to us all. The Pharisee who knows himself a sinner is as welcome as the outcast. The most outwardly respectable, clean-living, orthodoxly religious formalist needs Him as much, and may have Him as healingly, as the grossest criminal, foul with the stench of loathsome disease. That great saying has changed the attitude towards the degraded and unclean, and many a stream of pity and practical work for such has been drawn off from that Nile of yearning love, though all unconscious of its source.

II. We have Christ’s vindication of the disciples from ascetic critics.

The assailants in the second charge were reinforced by singular allies. Pharisees had nothing in common with John’s disciples, except some outward observances, but they could join forces against Jesus. Common hatred is a wonderful unifier. This time Jesus Himself is addressed, and it is the disciples with whom fault is found. To speak of His supposed faults to them, and of theirs to Him, was cunning and cowardly. His answer opens up many great truths, which we can barely mention.

First, note that He calls Himself the ‘bridegroom’-a designation which would surely touch some chords in John’s disciples, remembering how their Master had spoken of the ‘bridegroom’ and his ‘friend.’ The name tells us that Jesus claimed the psalms of the ‘bride-groom’ as prophecies of Himself, and claimed the Church that was to be as His bride. It speaks tenderly of His love and of our possible blessedness. Next, we note the sweet suggestion of the joyful life of the disciples in intercourse with Him. We perhaps do not sufficiently regard their experience in that light, but surely they were happy, being ever with Him, though they knew not yet all the wonder and blessedness which His presence involved and brought. They were a glad company, and Christians ought now to be joyous, because the bridegroom is still with them, and the more really so by reason of His ascending up where He was before. We have seen Him again, as He promised, and our hearts should rejoice with a joy which no man can take from us.

Next, we note Christ’s clear prevision of His death, the violence of which is hinted at in the words, ‘Shall be taken away from them.’ Further, we note the great principle that outward forms must follow inward realities, and are genuine only when they are the expression of states of mind and feeling. That is a far-reaching truth, ever being forgotten in the tyranny which the externals of religion exercise. Let the free spirit have its own way, and cut its own channels. Laughter may be as devout as fasting. Joy is to be expressed in religion as well as grief. No outward form is worth anything unless the inner man vitalises it, and such a mere form is not simply valueless, but may quickly become hypocrisy and conscious make-believe.

III. Jesus adds two similes, which are condensed parables, to deal with a wider question rising out of the preceding principles.

The difference between His disciples' religious demeanour and that of their critics is not merely that the former are not now in a mood for fasting, but that a new spirit is beginning to work in them, and therefore it will go hard with a good many old forms besides fasting.

The essential point in both the similes of the raw cloth stitched on to the old, and of the new wine poured into stiff old skins, is the necessary incongruity between old forms and new tendencies. Undressed cloth is sure to shrink when wetted, and, being stronger than the old, to draw its frayed edges away. So, if new truth, or new conceptions of old truth, or new enthusiasms, are patched on to old modes, they will look out of place, and will sooner or later rend the old cloth. But the second simile advances on the first, in that it points not only to harm done to the old by the unnatural marriage, but also to mischief to the new. Put fermenting wine into a hard, unyielding, old wine-skin, and there can be but one result,-the strong effervescence will burst the skin, which may not matter much, and the precious wine will run out and be lost, sucked up by the thirsty soil, which matters more. The attempt to confine the new within the limits of the old, or to express it by the old forms, destroys them and wastes it. The attempt was made to keep Christianity within the limits of Judaism; it failed, but not before much harm had been done to Christianity. Over and over again the effort has been made in the Church, and it has always ended disastrously,-and it always will. It will be a happy day for both the old and the new when we all learn to put new wine into new skins, and remember that 'God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him, and to every seed his *own* body.'

12)Mark 2:23-28

WORKS WHICH HALLOW THE SABBATH

Mar. 2:23 - Mar. 2:28. - Mar. 3:1 - Mar. 3:5.

These two Sabbath scenes make a climax to the preceding paragraphs, in which Jesus has asserted His right to brush aside Rabbinical ordinances about eating with sinners and about fasting. Here He goes much further, in claiming power over the divine ordinance of the Sabbath. Formalists are moved to more holy horror by free handling of forms than by heterodoxy as to principles. So we can understand how the Pharisees' suspicions were exacerbated to murderous hate by these two incidents. It is doubtful whether Mark puts them together because they occurred together, or because they bear on the same subject. They deal with the two classes of 'works' which later Christian theology has recognised as legitimate exceptions to the law of the Sabbath rest; namely, works of necessity and of mercy.

Whether we adopt the view that the disciples were clearing a path through standing corn, or the simpler one, that they gathered the ears of corn on the edge of a made path as they went, the point of the Pharisees' objection was that they broke the Sabbath by plucking, which was a kind of reaping. According to Luke, their breach of the Rabbinical exposition of the law was an event more dreadful in the eyes of these narrow pedants; for there was not only reaping, but the analogue of winnowing and grinding, for the grains were rubbed in the disciples' palms. What daring sin! What impious defiance of law! But of what law? Not that of the Fourth Commandment, which simply forbade 'labour,' but that of the doctors' expositions of the commandment, which expended miraculous ingenuity and hair-splitting on deciding what was labour and what was not. The foundations of that astonishing structure now found in the Talmud were, no doubt, laid before Christ. This expansion of the prohibition, so as to take in such trifles as plucking and rubbing a handful of heads of corn, has many parallels there.

But it is noteworthy that our Lord does not avail Himself of the distinction between God's commandment and men's exposition of it. He does not embarrass himself with two controversies at once. At fit times He disputed Rabbinical authority, and branded their casuistry as binding grievous burdens on men; but here He allows their assumption of the equal authority of their commentary and of the text to pass unchallenged, and accepts the statement that His disciples had been doing what was unlawful on the Sabbath, and vindicates their breach of law.

Note that His answer deals first with an example of similar breach of ceremonial law, and then rises to lay down a broad principle which governed that precedent, vindicates the act of the disciples, and draws for all ages a broad line of demarcation between the obligations of ceremonial and of moral law. Clearly, His adducing David's act in taking the shewbread implies that the disciples' reason for plucking the ears of corn was not to clear a path but to satisfy hunger. Probably, too, it suggests that He also was hungry, and partook of the simple food.

Note, too, the tinge of irony in that 'Did ye *never* read?' In all your minute study of the letter of the Scripture, did you never take heed to that page? The principle on which the priest at Nob let the hungry fugitives devour the sacred bread, was the subordination of ceremonial law to men's necessities. It was well to lay the loaves on the table in the Presence, but it was better to take them and feed the fainting servant of God and his followers with them. Out of the very heart of the law which the Pharisees appealed to, in order to spin restricting prohibitions, Jesus drew an example of freedom which ran on all-fours with His disciples' case. The Pharisees had pored over the Old Testament all their lives, but it would have been long before they had found such a doctrine as this in it.

Jesus goes on to bring out the principle which shaped the instance he gave. He does not state it in its widest form, but confines it to the matter in hand-Sabbath obligations. Ceremonial law in all its parts is established as a means to an end-the highest good of men. Therefore, the end is more important than the means; and, in any case of apparent collision, the means must give way that the end may be secured. External observances are not of permanent, unalterable obligation. They stand on a different footing from primal moral duties, which remain equally imperative whether doing them leads to physical good or evil. David and his men were bound to keep these, whether they starved or not; but they were not bound to leave the shew bread lying in the shrine, and starve.

Man is made for the moral law. It is supreme, and he is under it, whether obedience leads to death or not. But all ceremonial regulations are merely established to help men to reach the true end of their being, and may be suspended or modified by his necessities. The Sabbath comes under the class of such ceremonial regulations, and may therefore be elastic when the pressure of necessity is brought to bear.

But note that our Lord, even while thus defining the limits of the obligation, asserts its universality. 'The Sabbath was made for man'-not for a nation or an age, but for all time and for the whole race. Those who would sweep away the observance of the weekly day of rest are fond of quoting this text; but they give little heed to its first clause, and do not note that their favourite passage upsets their main contention, and establishes the law of the Sabbath as a possession for the world for ever. It is not a burden, but a privilege, made and meant for man's highest good.

Christ's conclusion that He is 'Lord even of the Sabbath' is based upon the consideration of the true design of the day. If it is once understood that it is appointed, not as an inflexible duty, like the obligation of truth or purity, but as a means to man's good, physical and spiritual, then He who has in charge all man's higher interests, and who is the perfect realisation of the ideal of manhood, has full authority to modify and suspend the ceremonial observance if in His unerring judgment the suspension is desirable.

This is not an abrogation of the Sabbath, but, on the contrary, a confirmation of the universal and merciful appointment. It does not give permission to keep or neglect it, according to whim or for the sake of amusement, but it does draw, strong and clear, the distinction between a positive rite which may be modified, and an unchangeable precept of the moral law which it is better for a man to die than to neglect or transgress.

The second Sabbath scene deals with the same question from another point of view. Works of necessity warranted the supercession of Sabbath law; works of beneficence are no breaches of it. There are circumstances in which it is right to do what is not 'lawful' on the Sabbath, for such works as healing the man with a withered hand are always 'lawful.'

We note the cruel indifference to the sufferer's woe which so characteristically accompanies a religion which is mainly a matter of outside observances. What cared the Pharisees whether the poor cripple was healed or no? They wanted him cured only that they might have a charge against Jesus. Note, too, the strange condition of mind, which recognised Christ’s miraculous power, and yet considered Him an impious sinner.

Observe our Lord’s purpose to make the miracle most conspicuous. He bids the man stand out in the midst, before all the cold eyes of malicious Pharisees and gaping spectators. A secret espionage was going on in the synagogue. He sees it all, and drags it into full light by setting the man forth and by His sudden, sharp thrust of a question. He takes the first word this time, and puts the stealthy spies on the defensive. His interrogation may possibly be regarded as having a bearing on their conduct, for there was murder in their hearts [Mar. 2:6]. There they sat with solemn faces, posing as sticklers for law and religion, and all the while they were seeking grounds for killing Him. Was that Sabbath work? Whether would He, if He cured the shrunken arm, or they, if they gathered accusations with the intention of compassing His death, be the Sabbath-breakers?

It was a sharp, swift cut through their cloak of sanctity; but it has a wider scope than that. The question rests on the principle that good omitted is equivalent to evil committed. If we can save, and do not, the responsibility of loss lies on us. If we can rescue, and let die, our brother’s blood reddens our hands. Good undone is not merely negative. It is positive evil done. If from regard to the Sabbath we refrained from doing some kindly deed alleviating a brother’s sorrow, we should not be inactive, but should have done something by our very not doing, and what we should do would be evil. It is a pregnant saying which has many solemn applications.

No wonder that they ‘held their peace.’ Unless they had been prepared to abandon their position, there was nothing to be said. That silence indicated conviction and obstinate pride and rooted hatred which would not be convinced, conciliated, or softened. Therefore Jesus looked on them with that penetrating, yearning gaze, which left ineffaceable remembrances on the beholders, as the frequent mention of it indicates.

The emotions in Christ’s heart as He looked on the dogged, lowering faces are expressed in a remarkable phrase, which is probably best taken as meaning that grief mingled with His anger. A wondrous glimpse into that tender heart, which in all its tenderness is capable of righteous indignation, and in all its indignation does not set aside its tenderness! Mark that not even the most rigid prohibitions were broken by the process of cure. It was no breach of the fantastic restrictions which had been engrafted on the commandment, that Jesus should bid the man put out his hand. Nobody could find fault with a man for doing that. These two things, a word and a movement of muscles, were all. So He did ‘heal on the Sabbath,’ and yet did nothing that could be laid hold of.

But let us not miss the parable of the restoration of the maimed and shrunken powers of the soul, which the manner of the miracle gives. Whatever we try to do because Jesus bids us, He will give us strength to do, however impossible to our unaided powers it is. In the act of stretching out the hand, ability to stretch it forth is bestowed, power returns to atrophied muscles, stiffened joints are suppled, the blood runs in full measure through the veins. So it is ever. Power to obey attends on the desire and effort to obey.

13)Mark 3:1-4

Mark

WORKS WHICH HALLOW THE SABBATH

Mar. 2:23 - Mar. 2:28. - Mar. 3:1 - Mar. 3:5.

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14)Mark 3:5

Mark

WORKS WHICH HALLOW THE SABBATH

THE ANGER AND GRIEF OF JESUS

Mar. 3:5.

Our Lord goes into the synagogue at Capernaum, where He had already wrought more than one miracle, and there He finds an object for His healing power, in a poor man with a withered hand; and also a little knot of His enemies. The scribes and Pharisees expect Christ to heal the man. So much had they learned of His tenderness and of His power.

But their belief that He could work a miracle did not carry them one step towards a recognition of Him as sent by God. They have no eye for the miracle, because they expect that He is going to break the Sabbath. There is nothing so blind as formal religionism. This poor man’s infirmity did not touch their hearts with one little throb of compassion. They had rather that he had gone crippled all his days than that one of their Rabbinical Sabbatarian restrictions should be violated. There is nothing so cruel as formal religionism. They only think that there is a trap laid-and perhaps they had laid it-into which Christ is sure to go.

So, as our Evangelist tells us, they sat there stealthily watching Him out of their cold eyes, whether He would heal on the Sabbath day, that they might accuse Him. Our Lord bids the man stand out into the middle of the little congregation. He obeys, perhaps, with some feeble glimmer of hope playing round his heart. There is a quickened attention in the audience; the enemies are watching Him with gratification, because they hope He is going to do what they think to be a sin.

And then He reduces them all to silence and perplexity by His question-sharp, penetrating, unexpected: ‘Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath day, or to do evil? You are ready to blame Me as breaking your Sabbatarian regulations if I heal this man. What if I do not heal him? Will that be doing nothing? Will not that be a worse breach of the Sabbath day than if I heal him?’

He takes the question altogether out of the region of pedantic Rabbinism, and bases His vindication upon the two great principles that mercy and help hallow any day, and that not to do good when we can is to do harm, and not to save life is to kill.

They are silenced. His arrow touches them; they do not speak because they cannot answer; and they will not yield. There is a struggle going on in them, which Christ sees, and He fixes them with that steadfast look of His; of which our Evangelist is the only one who tells us what it expressed, and by what it was occasioned. ‘He looked round about on them *with anger*, being *grieved*.’ Mark the combination of emotions, anger and grief. And mark the reason for both; ‘the hardness,’ or as you will see, if you use the Revised Version, ‘the *hardening*’ of their hearts-a process which He saw going on before Him as He looked at them.

Now I do not need to follow the rest of the story, how He turns away from them because He will not waste any more words on them, else He had done more harm than good. He heals the man. They hurry from the synagogue to prove their zeal for the sanctifying of the Sabbath day by hatching a plot on it for murdering Him. I leave all that, and turn to the thoughts suggested by this look of Christ as explained by the Evangelist.

I. Consider then, first, the solemn fact of Christ’s anger.

It is the only occasion, so far as I remember, upon which that emotion is attributed to Him. Once, and once only, the flash came out of the clear sky of that meek and gentle heart. He was once angry; and we may learn the lesson of the possibilities that lay slumbering in His love. He was only once angry, and we may learn the lesson that His perfect and divine charity ‘is not easily provoked.’ These very words from Paul’s wonderful picture may teach us that the perfection of divine charity does not consist in its being incapable of becoming angry at all, but only in its not being angry except upon grave and good occasion.

Christ's anger was part of the perfection of His manhood. The man that cannot be angry at evil lacks enthusiasm for good. The nature that is incapable of being touched with generous and righteous indignation is so, generally, either because it lacks fire and emotion altogether, or because its vigour has been dissolved into a lazy indifference and easy good nature which it mistakes for love. Better the heat of the tropics, though sometimes the thunderstorms may gather, than the white calmness of the frozen poles. Anger is not weakness, but it is strength, if there be these three conditions, if it be evoked by a righteous and unselfish cause, if it be kept under rigid control, and if there be nothing in it of malice, even when it prompts to punishment. Anger is just and right when it is not produced by the mere friction of personal irritation [like electricity by rubbing], but is excited by the contemplation of evil. It is part of the marks of a good man that he kindles into wrath when he sees 'the oppressor's wrong.' If you went out hence to-night, and saw some drunken ruffian beating his wife or ill-using his child, would you not do well to be angry? And when nations have risen up, as our own nation did seventy years ago in a paroxysm of righteous indignation, and vowed that British soil should no more bear the devilish abomination of slavery, was there nothing good and great in that wrath? So it is one of the strengths of man that he shall be able to glow with indignation at evil.

Only all such emotion must be kept well in hand must never be suffered to degenerate into passion. Passion is always weak, emotion is an element of strength.

'The gods approve
The depth and not the tumult of the soul.'

But where a man does not let his wrath against evil go sputtering off aimlessly, like a box of fireworks set all alight at once, then it comes to be a strength and a help to much that is good.

The other condition that makes wrath righteous and essential to the perfection of a man, is that there shall be in it no taint of malice. Anger may impel to punish and not be malicious, if its reason for punishment is the passionless impulse of justice or the reformation of the wrong-doer. Then it is pure and true and good. Such wrath is a part of the perfection of humanity, and such wrath was in Jesus Christ.

But, still further, Christ's anger was part of His revelation of God. What belongs to perfect man belongs to God in whose image man was made. People are very often afraid of attributing to the divine nature that emotion of wrath, very unnecessarily, I think, and to the detriment of all their conceptions of the divine nature.

There is no reason why we should not ascribe emotion to Him. Passions God has not; emotions the Bible represents Him as having. The god of the philosopher has none. He is a cold, impassive Somewhat, more like a block of ice than a god. But the God of the Bible has a heart that can be touched, and is capable of something like what we call in ourselves emotion. And if we rightly think of God as Love, there is no more reason why we should not think of God as having the other emotion of wrath; for as I have shown you, there is nothing in wrath itself which is derogatory to the perfection of the loftiest spiritual nature. In God's anger there is no self-regarding irritation, no passion, no malice. It is the necessary displeasure and aversion of infinite purity at the sight of man's impurity. God's anger is His love thrown back upon itself from unreceptive and unloving hearts. Just as a wave that would roll in smooth, unbroken, green beauty into the open door of some sea-cave is dashed back in spray and foam from some grim rock, so the love of God, meeting the unloving heart that rejects it, and the purity of God meeting the impurity of man, necessarily become that solemn reality, the wrath of the most high God. 'A God all mercy were a God unjust.' The judge is condemned when the culprit is acquitted; and he that strikes out of the divine nature the capacity for anger against sin, little as he thinks it, is degrading the righteousness and diminishing the love of God.

Oh, dear brethren, I beseech you do not let any easygoing gospel that has nothing to say to you about God's necessary aversion from, and displeasure with, and chastisement of, your sins and mine, draw you away from the solemn and wholesome belief that there is that in God which must hate and war against and chastise our evil, and that if there were not, He would be neither worth loving nor worth trusting. And His Son, in His tears and in His tenderness, which were habitual, and also in that lightning flash which once shot across the sky of His nature, was revealing Him to us. The Gospel is not only the revelation of God's righteousness for faith, but is also 'the revelation of His wrath against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.'

'It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.' The ox, with the yoke on his neck, lashes out with his obstinate heels against the driver's goad. He does not break the goad, but only embrues his own limbs. Do not you do that!

II. And now, once more, let me ask you to look at the compassion which goes with our Lord's anger here; 'being grieved at the hardness of their hearts.'

The somewhat singular word rendered here 'grieved,' may either simply imply that this sorrow co-existed with the anger, or it may describe the sorrow as being sympathy or compassion. I am disposed to take it in the latter application, and so the lesson we gather from these words is the blessed thought that Christ's wrath was all blended with compassion and sympathetic sorrow.

He looked upon these scribes and Pharisees sitting there with hatred in their eyes; and two emotions, which many men suppose as discrepant and incongruous as fire and water, rose together in His heart: wrath, which fell on the evil; sorrow, which bedewed the doers of it. The anger was for the hardening, the compassion was for the hardeners.

If there be this blending of wrath and sorrow, the combination takes away from the anger all possibility of an admixture of these questionable ingredients, which mar human wrath, and make men shrink from attributing so turbid and impure an emotion to God. It is an anger which lies harmoniously in the heart side by side with the tenderest pity-the truest, deepest sorrow.

Again, if Christ’s sorrow flowed out thus along with His anger when He looked upon men’s evil, then we understand in how tragic a sense He was ‘a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.’ The pain and the burden and the misery of His earthly life had no selfish basis. They were not like the pain and the burdens and the misery that so many of us howl out so loudly about, arising from causes affecting ourselves. But for Him-with His perfect purity, with His deep compassion, with His heart that was the most sensitive heart that ever beat in a human breast, because it was the only perfectly pure one that ever beat there-for Him to go amongst men was to be wounded and bruised and hacked by the sharp swords of their sins.

Everything that He touched burned that pure nature, which was sensitive to evil, like an infant’s hand to hot iron. His sorrow and His anger were the two sides of the medal. His feelings in looking on sin were like a piece of woven stuff with a pattern on either side, on one the fiery threads-the wrath; on the other the silvery tints of sympathetic pity. A warp of wrath, a woof of sorrow, dew and flame married and knit together.

And may we not draw from this same combination of these two apparently discordant emotions in our Lord, the lesson of what it is in men that makes them the true subjects of pity? Ay, these scribes and Pharisees had very little notion that there was anything about them to compassionate. But the thing which in the sight of God makes the true evil of men’s condition is not their circumstances but their sins. The one thing to weep for when we look at the world is not its misfortunes, but its wickedness. Ah! brother, that is the misery of miseries; that is the one thing worth crying about in our own lives, or in anybody else’s. From this combination of indignation and pity, we may learn how we should look upon evil. Men are divided into two classes in their way of looking at wickedness in this world. One set are rigid and stern, and crackling into wrath; the other set placid and good-natured, and ready to weep over it as a misfortune and a calamity, but afraid or unwilling to say: ‘These poor creatures are to be blamed as well as pitied.’ It is of prime importance that we all should try to take both points of view, looking on sin as a thing to be frowned at, but also looking on it as a thing to be wept over; and to regard evil-doers as persons that deserve to be blamed and to be chastised, and made to feel the bitterness of their evil, and not to interfere too much with the salutary laws that bring down sorrow upon men’s heads if they have been doing wrong, but, on the other hand, to take care that our sense of justice does not swallow up the compassion that weeps for the criminal as an object of pity. Public opinion and legislation swing from the one extreme to the other. We have to make an effort to keep in the centre, and never to look round in anger, unsoftened by pity, nor in pity, enfeebled by being separated from righteous indignation.

III. Let me now deal briefly with the last point that is here, namely, the occasion for both the sorrow and the anger, ‘Being grieved at the *hardening* of the hearts.’

As I said at the beginning of these remarks, ‘hardness,’ the rendering of our Authorised Version, is not quite so near the mark as that of the Revised Version, which speaks not so much of a condition as of a process: ‘He was grieved at the hardening of their hearts,’ which He saw going on there.

And what was hardening their hearts? It was He. Why were their hearts being hardened? Because they were looking at Him, His graciousness, His goodness, and His power, and were steeling themselves against Him, opposing to His grace and tenderness their own obstinate determination. Some little gleams of light were coming in at their windows, and they clapped the shutters up. Some tones of His voice were coming into their ears, and they stuffed their fingers into them. They half felt that if they let themselves be influenced by Him it was all over, and so they set their teeth and steadied themselves in their antagonism.

And that is what some of you are doing now. Jesus Christ is never preached to you, even although it is as imperfectly as I do it, but that you either gather yourselves into an attitude of resistance, or, at least, of mere indifference till the flow of the sermon’s words is done; or else open your hearts to His mercy and His grace.

Oh, dear brethren, will you take this lesson of the last part of my text, that nothing so tends to harden a man’s heart to the gospel of Jesus Christ as religious formalism? If Jesus Christ were to come in here now, and stand where I am standing, and look round about upon this congregation, I wonder how many a highly respectable and perfectly proper man and woman, church and chapel-goer, who keeps the Sabbath day, He would find on whom He had to look with grief not unmingled with anger, because they were hardening their hearts against Him now. I am sure there are some of such among my present audience. I am sure there are some of you about whom it is true that ‘the publicans and the harlots will go into the Kingdom of God before you,’ because in their degradation they may be nearer the lowly penitence and the consciousness of their own misery and need, which will open their eyes to see the beauty and the preciousness of Jesus Christ.

Dear brother, let no reliance upon any external attention to religious ordinances; no interest, born of long habit of hearing sermons; no trust in the fact of your being communicants, blind you to this, that all these things may come between you and your Saviour, and so may take you away into the outermost darkness.

Dear brother or sister, you are a sinner. ‘The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, thou hast not glorified.’ You have forgotten Him; you have lived to please yourselves. I charge you with nothing criminal, with nothing gross or sensual; I know nothing about you in such matters; but I know this-that you have a heart like mine, that we have all of us the one character, and that we all need the one gospel of that Saviour ‘who bare our sins in His own body on the tree,’ and died that whosoever trusts in Him may live here and yonder. I beseech you, harden not your hearts, but to-day hear His voice, and remember the solemn words which not I, but the Apostle of Love, has spoken: ‘He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life, he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth upon him.’ Flee to that sorrowing and dying Saviour, and take the cleansing which He gives, that you may be safe on the sure foundation when God shall arise to do His strange work of judgment, and may never know the awful meaning of that solemn word-’the wrath of the Lamb.’

15)Mark 3:6-19

Mark

AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST

Mar. 3:6 - Mar. 3:19.

A common object of hatred cements antagonists into strange alliance. Hawks and kites join in assailing a dove. Pharisees and Herod’s partisans were antipodes; the latter must have parted with all their patriotism and much of their religion, but both parties were ready to sink their differences in order to get rid of Jesus, whom they instinctively felt to threaten destruction to them both. Such alliances of mutually repellent partisans against Christ’s cause are not out of date yet. Extremes join forces against what stands in the middle between them.

Jesus withdrew from the danger which was preparing, not from selfish desire to preserve life, but because His ‘hour’ was not yet come. Discretion is sometimes the better part of valour. To avoid peril is right, to fly from duty is not. There are times when Luther’s ‘Here I stand; I can do nothing else; God help me! Amen,’ must be our motto; and there are times when the persecuted in one city are bound to flee to another. We shall best learn to distinguish between these times by keeping close to Jesus.

But side by side with official hatred, and in some measure the cause of it, was a surging rush of popular enthusiasm. Pharisees took offence at Christ’s breaches of law in his Sabbath miracles. The crowd gaped at the wonders, and grasped at the possibility of cures for their afflicted. Neither party in the least saw below the surface. Mark describes two ‘multitudes’-one made up of Galileans who, he accurately says, ‘followed Him’; while the other ‘came to Him’ from further afield. Note the geographical order in the list: the southern country of Judea, and the capital; then the trans-Jordanic territories beginning with Idumea in the south, and coming northward to Perea; and then the north-west bordering lands of Tyre and Sidon. Thus three parts of a circle round Galilee as centre are described. Observe, also, how turbid and impure the full stream of popular enthusiasm was.

Christ’s gracious, searching, illuminating words had no attraction for the multitude. ‘The great things He *did*’ drew them with idle curiosity or desire for bodily healing. Still more impure was the motive which impelled the ‘evil spirits’ to approach Him, drawn by a strange fascination to gaze on Him whom they knew to be their conqueror, and hated as the Son of God. Terror and malice drove them to His presence, and wrung from them acknowledgment of His supremacy. What intenser pain can any hell have than the clear recognition of Christ’s character and power, coupled with fiercely obstinate and utterly vain rebellion against Him? Note, further, our Lord’s recoil from the tumult. He had retired before cunning plotters; He withdrew from gaping admirers, who did not know what they were crowding to, nor cared for His best gifts. It was no fastidious shrinking from low natures, nor any selfish wish for repose, that made Him take refuge in the fisherman’s little boat. But His action teaches us a lesson that the best Christian work is hindered rather than helped by the ‘popularity’ which dazzles many, and is often mistaken for success. Christ’s motive for seeking to check rather than to stimulate such impure admiration, was that it would certainly increase the rulers’ antagonism, and might even excite the attention of the Roman authorities, who had to keep a very sharp outlook for agitations among their turbulent subjects. Therefore Christ first took to the boat, and then withdrew into the hills above the lake.

In that seclusion He summoned to Him a small nucleus, as it would appear, by individual selection. These would be such of the ‘multitude’ as He had discerned to be humble souls who yearned for deliverance from worse than outward diseases or bondage, and who therefore waited for a Messiah who was more than a physician or a patriot warrior. A personal call and a personal yielding make true disciples. Happy we if our history can be summed up in ‘He called them unto Him, and they came.’ But there was an election within the chosen circle.

The choice of the Twelve marks an epoch in the development of Christ’s work, and was occasioned, at this point of time, by both the currents which we find running so strong at this point in it. Precisely because Pharisaic hatred was becoming so threatening, and popular enthusiasm was opening opportunities which He singly could not utilise, He felt His need both for companions and for messengers. Therefore He surrounded Himself with that inner circle, and did it then, The appointment of the Apostles has been treated by some as a masterpiece of organisation, which largely contributed to the progress of Christianity, and by others as an endowment of the Twelve with supernatural powers which are transmitted on certain outward conditions to their successors, and thereby give effect to sacraments, and are the legitimate channels for grace. But if we take Mark’s statement of their function, our view will be much simpler. The number of twelve distinctly alludes to the tribes of Israel, and implies that the new community is to be the true people of God.

The Apostles were chosen for two ends, of which the former was preparatory to the latter. The latter was the more important and permanent, and hence gave the office its name. They were to be ‘with Christ,’ and we may fairly suppose that He wished that companionship for His own sake as well as for theirs. No doubt, the primary purpose was their training for their being sent forth to preach. But no doubt, also, the lonely Christ craved for companions, and was strengthened and soothed by even the imperfect sympathy and unintelligent love of these humble adherents. Who can fail to hear tones which reveal how much He hungered for companions in His grateful acknowledgment, ‘Ye are they which have continued with Me in My temptations’? It still remains true that we must be ‘with Christ’ much and long before we can go forth as His messengers.

Note, too, that the miracle-working power comes last as least important. Peter had understood his office better than some of his alleged successors, when he made its qualification to be having been with Jesus during His life, and its office to be that of being witnesses of His resurrection [Act. 1:1 - Act. 1:26].

The list of the Apostles presents many interesting points, at which we can only glance. If compared with the lists in the other Gospels and in Acts, it brings out clearly the division into three groups of four persons each. The order in which the four are named varies within the limits of each group; but none of the first four are ever in the lists degraded to the second or third group, and none of these are ever promoted beyond their own class. So there were apparently degrees among the Twelve, depending, no doubt, on spiritual receptivity, each man being as close to the Lord, and gifted with as much of the sunshine of His love, as he was fit for.

Further, their places in relation to each other vary. The first four are always first, and Peter is always at their head; but in Matthew and Luke, the pairs of brothers are kept together, while, in Mark, Andrew is parted from his brother Simon, and put last of the first four. That place indicates the closer relation of the other three to Jesus, of which several instances will occur to every one. But Mark puts James before John, and his list evidently reflects the memory of the original superiority of James as probably the elder. There was a time when John was known as ‘James’s brother.’ But the time came, as Acts shows, when John took precedence, and was closely linked with Peter as the two leaders. So the ties of kindred may be loosened, and new bonds of fellowship created by similarity of relation to Jesus. In His kingdom, the elder may fall behind the younger. Rank in it depends on likeness to the king.

The surname of Boanerges, ‘Sons of Thunder,’ given to the brothers, can scarcely be supposed to commemorate a characteristic prior to discipleship. Christ does not perpetuate old faults in his servants’ new names. It must rather refer to excellences which were heightened and hallowed in them by following Jesus. Probably, therefore, it points to a certain majesty of utterance. Do we not hear the boom of thunder-peals in the prologue to John’s Gospel, perhaps the grandest words ever written?

In the second quartet, Bartholomew is probably Nathanael; and, if so, his conjunction with Philip is an interesting coincidence with Joh. 1:45, which tells that Philip brought him to Jesus. All three Gospels put the two names together, as if the two men had kept up their association; but, in Acts, Thomas takes precedence of Bartholomew, as if a closer spiritual relationship had by degrees sprung up between Philip, the leader of the second group, and Thomas, which slackened the old bond. Note that these two, who are coupled in Acts, are two of the interlocutors in the final discourses in the upper room [Joh. 14:1 - Joh. 14:31]. Mark, like Luke, puts Matthew before Thomas; but Matthew puts himself last, and adds his designation of ‘publican,’-a beautiful example of humility.

The last group contains names which have given commentators trouble. I am not called on to discuss the question of the identity of the James who is one of its members. Thaddeus is by Luke called Judas, both in his Gospel and in the Acts; and by Matthew, according to one reading, Lebbaeus. Both names are probably surnames, the former being probably derived from a word meaning *breast*, and the latter from one signifying *heart*. They seem, therefore, to be nearly equivalent, and may express large-heartedness.

Simon 'the Canaanite' [Auth. Ver.] is properly 'the Cananæan' [Rev. Ver.]. There was no alien in blood among the Twelve. The name is a late Aramaic word meaning *zealot*. Hence Luke translates it for Gentile readers. He was one of the fanatical sect who would not have anything to do with Rome, and who played such a terrible part in the final catastrophe of Israel. The baser elements were purged out of his fiery enthusiasm when he became Christ's man. The hallowing and curbing of earthly passion, the ennobling of enthusiasm, are achieved when the pure flame of love to Christ burns up their dross.

Judas Iscariot closes the list, cold and venomous as a snake. Enthusiasm in him there was none. The problem of his character is too complex to be entered on here. But we may lay to heart the warning that, if a man is not knit to Christ by heart's love and obedience, the more he comes into contact with Jesus the more will he recoil from Him, till at last he is borne away by a passion of detestation. Christ is either a sure foundation or a stone of stumbling.

16)Mark 3:21

Mark

'HE IS BESIDE HIMSELF'

Mar. 3:21.

There had been great excitement in the little town of Capernaum in consequence of Christ's teachings and miracles. It had been intensified by His infractions of the Rabbinical Sabbath law, and by His appointment of the twelve Apostles. The sacerdotal party in Capernaum apparently communicated with Jerusalem, with the result of bringing a deputation from the Sanhedrim to look into things, and see what this new rabbi was about. A plot for His assassination was secretly on foot. And at this juncture the incident of my text, which we owe to Mark alone of the Evangelists, occurs. Christ's friends, apparently the members of His own family-sad to say, as would appear from the context, including His mother-came with a kindly design to rescue their misguided kinsman from danger, and laying hands upon Him, to carry Him off to some safe restraint in Nazareth, where He might indulge His delusions without doing any harm to Himself. They wish to excuse His eccentricities on the ground that He is not quite responsible-scarcely Himself; and so to blunt the point of the more hostile explanation of the Pharisees that He is in league with Beelzebub.

Conceive of that! The Incarnate Wisdom shielded by friends from the accusation that He is a demoniac by the apology that He is a lunatic! What do you think of popular judgment? But this half-pitying, half-contemptuous, and wholly benevolent excuse for Jesus, though it be the words of friends, is like the words of His enemies, in that it contains a distorted reflection of His true character. And if we will think about it, I fancy that we may gather from it some lessons not altogether unprofitable.

I. The first point, then, that I make, is just this-there was something in the character of Jesus Christ which could be plausibly explained to commonplace people as madness.

A well-known modern author has talked a great deal about ‘the sweet reasonableness of Jesus Christ.’ His contemporaries called it simple insanity; if they did not say ‘He hath a devil,’ as well as ‘He is mad.’

Now, if we try to throw ourselves back to the life of Jesus Christ, as it was unfolded day by day, and think nothing about either what preceded in the revelation of the Old Covenant, or what followed in the history of Christianity, we shall not be so much at a loss to account for such explanations of it as these of my text. Remember that charges like these, in all various keys of contempt or of pity, or of fierce hostility, have been cast against all innovators, against every man that has broken a new path; against all teachers that have cut themselves apart from tradition and encrusted formulas; against every man that has waged war with the conventionalisms of society; against all idealists who have dreamed dreams and seen visions; against every man that has been touched with a lofty enthusiasm of any sort; and, most of all, against all to whom God and their relations to Him, the spiritual world and their relations to it, the future life and their relations to that, have become dominant forces and motives in their lives.

The short and easy way with which the world excuses itself from the poignant lessons and rebukes which come from such lives is something like that of my text, ‘He is beside himself.’ And the proof that he is beside himself is that he does not act in the same fashion as these incomparably wise people that make up the majority in every age. There is nothing that commonplace men hate like anything fresh and original. There is nothing that men of low aims are so utterly bewildered to understand, and which so completely passes all the calculus of which they are masters, as lofty self-abnegation. And wherever you get men smitten with such, or with anything like it, you will find all the low-aimed people gathering round them like bats round a torch in a cavern, flapping their obscene wings and uttering their harsh croaks, and only desiring to quench the light.

One of our cynical authors says that it is the mark of a genius that all the dullards are against him. It is the mark of the man who dwells with God that all the people whose portion is in this life with one consent say, ‘He is beside himself.’

And so the Leader of them all was served in His day; and that purest, perfectest, noblest, loftiest, most utterly self-oblivious, and God-and-man-devoted life that ever was lived upon earth, was disposed of in this extremely simple method, so comforting to the complacency of the critics-either ‘He is beside Himself,’ or ‘He hath a devil.’

And yet, is not the saying a witness to the presence in that wondrous and gentle career of an element entirely unlike what exists in the most of mankind? Here was a new star in the heavens, and the law of its orbit was manifestly different from that of all the rest. That is what ‘eccentric’ means-that the life to which it applies does not move round the same centre as do the other satellites, but has a path of its own. Away out yonder somewhere, in the infinite depths, lay the hidden point which drew it to itself and determined its magnificent and overwhelmingly vast orbit. These men witness to Jesus Christ, even by their half excuse, half reproach, that His was a life unique and inexplicable by the ordinary motives which shape the little lives of the masses of mankind. They witness to His entire neglect of ordinary and low aims; to His complete absorption in lofty purposes, which to His purblind would-be critics seem to be delusions and fond imaginations that could never be realised. They witness to what His disciples remembered had been written of Him, ‘The zeal of Thy house hath eaten Me up’; to His perfect devotion to man and to God. They witness to His consciousness of a mission; and there is nothing that men are so ready to resent as that. To tell a world, engrossed in self and low aims, that one is sent from God to do His will, and to spread it among men, is the sure way to have all the heavy artillery and the lighter weapons of the world turned against one.

These characteristics of Jesus seem then to be plainly implied in that allegation of insanity-lofty aims, absolute originality, utter self-abnegation, the continual consciousness of communion with God, devotion to the service of man, and the sense of being sent by God for the salvation of the world. It was because of these that His friends said, ‘He is beside Himself.’

These men judged themselves by judging Jesus Christ. And all men do. There are as many different estimates of a great man as there are people to estimate, and hence the diversity of opinion about all the characters that fill history and the galleries of the past. The eye sees what it brings and no more. To discern the greatness of a great man, or the goodness of a good one, is to possess, in lower measure, some portion of that which we discern. Sympathy is the condition of insight into character. And so our Lord said once, ‘He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward,’ because he is a dumb prophet himself, and has a lower power of the same gift in him, which is eloquent on the prophet’s lips.

In like manner, to discern what is in Christ is the test of whether there is any of it in myself. And thus it is no mere arbitrary appointment which suspends your salvation and mine on our answer to this question, ‘What think ye of Christ?’ The answer will be-I was going to say-the elixir of our whole moral and spiritual nature. It will be the outcome of our inmost selves. This ploughshare turns up the depths of the soil. That is eternally true which the grey-bearded Simeon, the representative of the Old, said when he took the Infant in his arms and looked down upon the unconscious, placid, smooth face. ‘This Child is set for the rise and fall of many in Israel, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.’ Your answer to that question discloses your whole spiritual condition and capacities. And so to judge

Christ is to be judged by Him; and what we think Him to be, that we make Him to ourselves. The question which tests us is not merely, ‘Whom do men say that I am?’ It is easy to answer that; but this is the all-important interrogation, ‘Whom do *ye* say that I am?’ I pray that we may each answer as he to whom it was first put answered it, ‘Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God, Thou art the King of Israel!’

II. Secondly, mark the similarity of the estimate which will be passed by the world on all Christ’s true followers.

The same elements exist to-day, the same intolerance of anything higher than the low level, the same incapacity to comprehend simple devotion and lofty aims, the same dislike of a man who comes and rebukes by his silent presence the vices in which he takes no part. And it is a great deal easier to say, ‘Poor fool! enthusiastic fanatic!’ than it is to lay to heart the lesson that lies in such a life.

The one thing, or at least the principal thing, which the Christianity of this generation wants is a little more of this madness. It would be a great deal better for us who call ourselves Christians if we had earned and deserved the world’s sneer, ‘He is beside himself.’ But our modern Christianity, like an epicure’s rare wines, is preferred iced. And the last thing that anybody would think of suggesting in connection with the demeanour-either the conduct or the words-of the average Christian man of this day is that his religion had touched his brain a little.

But, dear friends, go in Christ’s footsteps and you will have the same missiles flung at you. If a church or an individual has earned the praise of the outside ring of godless people because its or his religion is ‘reasonable and moderate; and kept in its proper place; and not allowed to interfere with social enjoyments, and political and municipal corruptions,’ and the like, then there is much reason to ask whether that church or man is Christian after Christ’s pattern. Oh, I pray that there may come down on the professing Church of this generation a baptism of the Spirit; and I am quite sure that when that comes, the people that admire moderation and approve of religion, but like it to be ‘kept in its own place,’ will be all ready to say, when they hear the ‘sons and the daughters prophesying, and the old men seeing visions, and the young men dreaming dreams,’ and the fiery tongues uttering their praises of God, ‘These men are full of new wine!’ Would we *were* full of the new wine of the Spirit! Do you think any one would say of your religion that you were ‘beside yourself,’ because you made so much of it? They said it about your Master, and if you were like Him it would be said, in one tone or another, about you. We are all desperately afraid of enthusiasm to-day. It seems to me that it is *the* want of the Christian Church, and that we are not enthusiastic because we don’t half believe the truths that we say are our creed.

One more word. Christian men and women have to make up their minds to go on in the path of devotion, conformity to Christ’s pattern, self-sacrificing surrender, without minding one bit what is said about them. Brethren, I do not think Christian people are in half as much danger of dropping the standard of the Christian life by reason of the sarcasms of the world, as they are by reason of the low tone of the Church. Don’t you take your ideas of what a reasonable Christian life is from the men round you, howsoever they may profess to be Christ’s followers. And let us keep so near the Master that we may be able to say, ‘With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you, or of man’s judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord.’ Never mind, though they say, ‘Beside himself!’ Never mind, though they say, ‘Oh! utterly extravagant and impracticable.’ Better that than to be patted on the back by a world that likes nothing so well as a Church with its teeth drawn, and its claws cut; which may be made a plaything and an ornament by the world. And that is what much of our modern Christianity has come to be.

III. Lastly, notice the sanity of the insane.

I have only space to put before you three little pictures, and ask you what you think of them. I dare say the originals might be found among us without much search.

Here is one. Suppose a man who, like the most of us, believes that there is a God, believes that he has something to do with Him, believes that he is going to die, believes that the future state is, in some way or other, and in some degree, one of retribution; and from Monday morning to Saturday night he ignores all these facts, and never allows them to influence one of his actions. May I venture to speak direct to this hypothetical person, whose originals are dotted about in my audience? It would be the very same to you if you said ‘No’ instead of ‘Yes’ to all these affirmations. The fact that there is a God does not make a bit of difference to what you do, or what you think, or what you feel. The fact that there is a future life makes just as little difference. You are going on a voyage next week, and you never dream of getting your outfit. You believe all these things, you are an intelligent man-you are very likely, in a great many ways, a very amiable and pleasant one; you do many things very well; you cultivate congenial virtues, and you abhor uncongenial vices; but you never think about God; and you have made absolutely no preparation whatever for stepping into the scene in which you know that you are to live.

Well, you may be a very wise man, a student with high aims, cultivated understanding, and all the rest of it. I want to know whether, taking into account all that you are, and your inevitable connection with God, and your certain death and certain life in a state of retribution-I want to know whether we should call your conduct sanity or insanity? Which? Take another picture. Here is a man that believes-really believes-the articles of the Christian creed, and in some measure has received them into his heart and life. He believes that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for him upon the Cross, and yet his heart has but the feeblest tick of pulsating love in answer. He believes that prayer will help a man in all circumstances, and yet he hardly ever prays. He believes that self-denial is the law of the Christian life, and yet he lives for himself. He believes that he is here as a ‘pilgrim’ and as a ‘sojourner,’ and yet his heart clings to the world, and his hand would fain cling to it, like that of a drowning man swept over Niagara, and catching at anything on the banks. He believes that he is sent into the world to be a ‘light’ of the world, and yet from out of his self-absorbed life there has hardly ever come one sparkle of light into any dark heart. And that is a picture, not exaggerated, of the enormous majority of professing Christians in so-called Christian lands. And I want to know whether we shall call that sanity or insanity? The last of my little miniatures is that of a man who keeps in close touch with Jesus Christ, and so, like Him, can say, ‘Lo! I come; I delight to do Thy will, O Lord. Thy law is within my heart.’ He yields to the strong motives and principles that flow from the Cross of Jesus Christ, and, drawn by the ‘mercies of God,’ gives himself a ‘living sacrifice’ to be used as God will. Aims as lofty as the Throne which Christ His Brother fills; sacrifice as entire as that on which his trembling hope relies; realisation of the unseen future as vivid and clear as His who could say that He was '*in* Heaven' whilst He walked the earth; subjugation of self as complete as that of the Lord's, who pleased not Himself, and came not to do His own will-these are some of the characteristics which mark the true disciple of Jesus Christ. And I want to know whether the conduct of the man who believes in the love that God hath to him, as manifested in the Cross, and surrenders his whole self thereto, despising the world and living for God, for Christ, for man, for eternity-whether his conduct is insanity or sanity? 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.'

17)Mark 3:22-30

Mark

THE MISTAKES OF CHRIST'S FOES AND FRIENDS

Mar. 3:22 - Mar. 3:35.

We have in this passage three parts,-the outrageous official explanation of Christ and His works, the Lord's own solution of His miracles, and His relatives' well-meant attempt to secure Him, with His answer to it.

I. The scribes, like Christ's other critics, judged themselves in judging Him, and bore witness to the truths which they were eager to deny.

Their explanation would be ludicrous, if it were not dreadful. Mark that it distinctly admits His miracles. It is not fashionable at present to attach much weight to the fact that none of Christ's enemies ever doubted these. Of course, the credence of men, in an age which believed in the possibility of the supernatural, is more easy, and their testimony less cogent, than that of a jury of twentieth-century scientific sceptics. But the expectation of miracle had been dead for centuries when Christ came; and at first, at all events, no anticipation that He would work them made it easier to believe that He did.

It would have been a sure way of exploding His pretensions, if the officials could have shown that His miracles were tricks. Not without weight is the attestation from the foe that 'this man casteth out demons.' The preposterous explanation that He cast out demons by Beelzebub, is the very last resort of hatred so deep that it will father an absurdity rather than accept the truth. It witnesses to the inefficiency of explanations of Him which omit the supernatural. The scribes recognised that here was a man who was in touch with the unseen. They fell back upon ‘by Beelzebub,’ and thereby admitted that humanity, without seeing something more at the back of it, never made such a man as Jesus.

It is very easy to solve an insoluble problem, if you begin by taking the insoluble elements out of it. That is how a great many modern attempts to account for Christianity go to work. Knock out the miracles, waive Christ’s own claims as mistaken reports, declare His resurrection to be entirely unhistorical, and the remainder will be easily accounted for, and not worth accounting for. But the whole life of the Christ of the Gospels is adequately explained by no explanation which leaves out His coming forth from the Father, and His exercise of powers above those of humanity and ‘nature.’

This explanation is an instance of the credulity of unbelief. It is more difficult to believe the explanation than the alternative which it is framed to escape. If like produces like, Christ cannot be explained by anything but the admission of His divine nature. Serpents’ eggs do not hatch out into doves. The difficulties of faith are ‘gnats’ beside the ‘camels’ which unbelief has to swallow.

II. The true explanation of Christ’s power over demoniacs.

Jesus has no difficulty in putting aside the absurd theory that, in destroying the kingdom of evil, He was a servant of evil and its dark ruler. Common-sense says, If Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself, and his kingdom cannot stand. An old play is entitled, ‘The Devil is an Ass,’ but he is not such an ass as to fight against himself. As the proverb has it, ‘Hawks do not pick out hawks’ eyes.’

It would carry us too far to deal at length with the declarations of our Lord here, which throw a dim light into the dark world of supernatural evil. His words are far too solemn and didactic to be taken as accommodations to popular prejudice, or as mere metaphor. Is it not strange that people will believe in spiritual communications, when they are vouched for by a newspaper editor, more readily than when Christ asserts their reality? Is it not strange that scientists, who find difficulty in the importance which Christianity attaches to man in the plan of the universe, and will not believe that all its starry orbs were built for him [which Christianity does not allege], should be incredulous of teachings which reveal a crowd of higher intelligences? Jesus not only tests the futile explanation by common-sense, but goes on to suggest the true one. He accepts the belief that there is a 'prince of the demons.' He regards the souls of men who have not yielded themselves to God as His 'goods.' He declares that the lord of the house must be bound before his property can be taken from him. We cannot stay to enlarge on the solemn view of the condition of unredeemed men thus given. Let us not put it lightly away. But we must note how deep into the centre of Christ's work this teaching leads us. Translated into plain language it just means that Christ by incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and present work from the throne, has broken the power of evil in its central hold. He has crushed the serpent's head, his heel is firmly planted on it, and, though the reptile may still 'swinge the scaly horror of his folded tail,' it is but the dying flurries of the creature. He was manifested 'that He might destroy the works of the devil.'

No trace of indignation can be detected in Christ's answer to the hideous charge. But His patient heart overflows in pity for the reckless slanderers, and He warns them that they are coming near the edge of a precipice. Their malicious blindness is hurrying them towards a sin which hath never forgiveness. Blasphemy is, in form, injurious speaking, and in essence, it is scorn or malignant antagonism. The Holy Spirit is the divine agent in revealing God's heart and will. To blaspheme Him is 'the external symptom of a heart so radically and finally set against God that no power which God can consistently use will ever save it.' 'The sin, therefore, can only be the culmination of a long course of self-hardening and depraving.' It is unforgivable, because the soul which can recognise God's revelation of Himself in all His goodness and moral perfection, and be stirred only to hatred thereby, has reached a dreadful climax of hardness, and has ceased to be capable of being influenced by His beseeching. It has passed beyond the possibility of penitence and acceptance of forgiveness. The sin is unforgiven, because the sinner is fixed in impenitence, and his stiffened will cannot bow to receive pardon.

The true reason why that sin has never forgiveness is suggested by the accurate rendering, ‘Is guilty of an eternal sin’ [R.V.]. Since the sin is eternal, the forgiveness is impossible. Practically hardened and permanent unbelief, conjoined with malicious hatred of the only means of forgiveness, is the unforgivable sin. Much torture of heart would have been saved if it had been observed that the Scripture expression is not *sin*, but *blasphemy*. Fear that it has been committed is proof positive that it has not; for, if it have been, there will be no relenting in enmity, nor any wish for deliverance.

But let not the terrible picture of the depths of impenitence to which a soul may fall, obscure the blessed universality of the declaration from Christ’s lips which preludes it, and declares that all sin but the sin of not desiring pardon is pardoned. No matter how deep the stain, no matter how inveterate the habit, whosoever will can come and be sure of pardon.

III. The attempt of Christ’s relatives to withdraw Him from publicity, and His reply to it.

Mar. 3:21 tells us that His kindred sent out to lay hold on Him; for they thought Him beside Himself. He was to be shielded from the crowd of followers, and from the plots of scribes, by being kept at home and treated as a harmless lunatic. Think of Jesus defended from the imputation of being in league with Beelzebub by the excuse that He was mad! This visit of His mother and brethren must be connected with their plan to lay hold on Him, in order to apprehend rightly Christ’s answer. If they did not mean to use violence, why should they have tried to get Him away from the crowd of followers, by a message, when they could have reached Him as easily as it did? He knew the snare laid for Him, and puts it aside without shaming its contrivers. With a wonderful blending of dignity and tenderness, He turns from kinsmen who were not akin, to draw closer to Himself, and pour His love over, those who do the will of God.

The test of relationship with Jesus is obedience to His Father. Christ is not laying down the means of becoming His kinsmen, but the tokens that we are such. He is sometimes misunderstood as saying, ‘Do God’s will without My help, and ye will become My kindred.’ What He really says is, ‘If ye are My kindred, you will do God’s will; and if you do, you will show that you are such.’ So the statement that we become His kindred by faith does not conflict with this great saying. The two take hold of the Christian life at different points: the one deals with the means of its origination, the other with the tokens of its reality. Faith is the root of obedience, obedience is the blossom of faith. Jesus does not stand like a stranger till we have hammered out obedience to His Father, and then reward us by welcoming us as His brethren, but He answers our faith by giving us a life kindred with, because derived from, His own, and then we can obey.

It is active submission to God’s will, not orthodox creed or devout emotion, which shows that we are His blood relations. By such obedience, we draw His love more and more to us. Though it is not the means of attaining to kinship with Him, it *is* the condition of receiving love-tokens from Him, and of increasing affinity with Him.

That relationship includes and surpasses all earthly ones. Each obedient man is, as it were, all three,-mother, sister, and brother. Of course the enumeration had reference to the members of the waiting group, but the remarkable expression has deep truth in it. Christ’s relation to the soul covers all various sweetnesses of earthly bonds, and is spoken of in terms of many of them. He is the bridegroom, the brother, the companion, and friend. All the scattered fragrances of these are united and surpassed in the transcendent and ineffable union of the soul with Jesus. Every lonely heart may find in Him what it most needs, and perhaps is bleeding away its life for the loss or want of. To many a weeping mother He has said, pointing to Himself, ‘Woman, behold thy son’; to many an orphan He has whispered, revealing His own love, ‘Son, behold thy mother.’

All earthly bonds are honoured most when they are woven into crowns for His head; all human love is then sweetest when it is as a tiny mirror in which the great Sun is reflected. Christ is husband, brother, sister, friend, lover, mother, and more than all which these sacred names designate,-even Saviour and life. If His blood is in our veins, and His spirit is the spirit of our lives, we shall do the will of His and our Father in heaven.

18)Mark 3:31-34

THE MISTAKES OF CHRIST’S FOES AND FRIENDS

CHRIST’S KINDRED

Mar. 3:31 - Mar. 3:35.

We learn from an earlier part of this chapter, and from it only, the significance of this visit of Christ’s brethren and mother. It was prompted by the belief that ‘He was beside Himself,’ and they meant to lay hands on Him, possibly with a kindly wish to save Him from a worse fate, but certainly to stop His activity. We do not know whether Mary consented, in her mistaken maternal affection, to the scheme, or whether she was brought unwillingly to give a colour to it, and influence our Lord. The sinister purpose of the visit betrays itself in the fact that the brethren did not present themselves before Christ, but sent a messenger; although they could as easily have had access to His presence as their messenger could. Apparently they wished to get Him by Himself, so as to avoid the necessity of using force against the force that His disciples would be likely to put forth. Jesus knew their purpose, though they thought it was hidden deep in the recesses of their breasts. And that falls in with a great many other incidents which indicate His superhuman knowledge of ‘the thoughts and intents of the heart.’

But, however that may be, our Lord here, with a singular mixture of dignity, tenderness, and decisiveness, puts aside the insidious snare without shaming its contrivers, and turns from the kinsmen, with whom He had no real bond, to draw closer to Himself, and pour out His love over, those who do the will of His Father in heaven. His words go very deep; let us try to gather some, at any rate, of the surface lessons which they suggest.

I. First, then, the true token of blood relationship to Jesus Christ is obedience to God.

‘Whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is My brother, and My sister, and mother.’ Now I must not be betrayed into a digression from my main purpose by dwelling upon what yet is worthy of notice-viz., the consciousness, on the part of Jesus Christ, which here is evidently implied, that the doing of the will of God was the very inmost secret of His own being. He was conscious, only and always, of delighting to do the will of God. When, therefore, He found that delight in others, there He recognised a bond of union between Him and them.

We must carefully observe that these great words of our Lord are not intended to describe the means by which men become His kinsfolk, but the tokens that they are such. He is not saying-as superficial readers sometimes run away with the notion that He is saying-'If a man will, apart from Me, do the will of God, then he will become My true kinsman,' but He is saying, 'If you are My kinsman, you will do the will of God, and if you do it, you will show that you are related to Myself.' In other words, He is not speaking about the means of originating this relationship, but about the signs of its reality. And, therefore, the words of my text need, for their full understanding, and for placing them in due relation to all the rest of Christ's teaching, to be laid side by side with other words of His, such as these:-'Apart from Me ye can do nothing.' For the deepest truth in regard to relationship to Jesus Christ and obedience is this, that the way by which men are made able to do the will of God is by receiving into themselves the very life-blood of Jesus Christ. The relationship must precede the obedience, and the obedience is the sign, because it is the sequel, of the relationship.

But far deeper down than mere affinity lies the true bond between us and Christ, and the true means of performing the commandments of God. There must be a passing over into us of His own life-spirit. By His inhabiting our hearts, and moulding our wills, and being the life of our lives and the soul of our souls, are we made able to do the commandments of the Lord. And so, seeing that actual union with Jesus Christ, and the reception into ourselves of His life, is the precedent condition of all true obedience, then the more familiar form of presenting the bond between Him and us, which runs through the New Testament, falls into its proper place, and the faith, which is the condition of receiving the life of Christ into our hearts, is at once the affinity which makes us His kindred, and the means by which we appropriate to ourselves the power of obedient submission and conformity to the will of God. ‘This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.’

So, then, my text does not in the slightest degree contradict or interfere with the great teaching that the one way by which we become Christ’s brethren is by trusting in Him. For the text and the doctrine that faith unites us to Him take up the process at different stages: the one pointing to the means of origination, the other to the tokens of reality. Faith is the root, obedience is the flower and the fruit. He that doeth the will of God, does it, not in order that he may become, but because he already is, possessor of a blood-relationship to Jesus Christ.

Then, notice, again, with what emphatic decisiveness our Lord here takes simple, practical obedience in daily life, in little and in great things, as the manifestation of being akin to Himself. Orthodoxy is all very well; religious experiences, inward emotions, sweet, precious, secret feelings and sentiments cannot be over-estimated. External forms, whether of the more simple or of the more ornate and sensuous kind, may be helps for the religious life; and are so in view of the weaknesses that are always associated with it. But all these, a true creed, a belief in the creed, the joyous and deep and secret emotions that follow thereupon, and the participation in outward services which may help to these, all these are but scaffolding: the building is character and conduct conformed to the will of God.

Evangelical preachers, and those who in the main hold that faith, are often charged with putting too little stress on practical homely righteousness. I would that the charge had less substance in it. But let me lay it upon your consciences, dear brethren, now, that no amount of right credence, no amount of trust, nor of love and hope and joy will avail to witness kindred to Christ. It must be the daily life, in its efforts after conformity to the known will of God, in great things and in small things, that attests the family resemblance. If Christ’s blood be in our veins, if ‘the law of the spirit of life’ in Him is the law of the spirit of our lives, then these lives will run parallel with His, in some visible measure, and we, too, shall be able to say, ‘Lo! I come. I delight to do Thy will; and Thy law is within my heart.’ Obedience is the test of relationship to Jesus.

Then, still further, note how, though we must emphatically dismiss the mistake that we make our selves Christ's brethren and friends by independent efforts after keeping the commandments, it is true that, in the measure in which we do thus bend our wills to God's will, whether in the way of action or of endurance, we realise more blessedly and strongly the tie that binds us to the Lord, and as a matter of fact do receive, in the measure of our obedience, sweet tokens of union with Him, and of love in His heart to us. No man will fully feel living contact with Jesus Christ if between Christ and him there is a film of conscious and voluntary disobedience to the will of God. The smallest crumb that can come in between two polished plates will prevent their adherence. A trivial sin will slip your hand out of Christ's hand; and though His love will still come and linger about you, until the sin is put out it cannot enter in.

'It can but listen at the gate,
And hear the household jar within.'

'He that doeth the will of God, the same is'-and feels himself to be-'My brother, and sister, and mother.'

II. This relationship includes all others.

That is a very singular form of expression which our Lord employs. 'Whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is My brother, and sister, and mother.' We should have expected, seeing that He was speaking about three different relationships, that He would have used the plural verb, and said, 'The same are My brother, and sister, and mother.' And I do not think that it is pedantic grammatical accuracy to point out this remarkable form of speech, and even to venture to draw a conclusion from it-viz., that what our Lord meant was, not that if there were three people, of different sexes, and of different ages, all doing the will of God, one of these sweet names of relationship would apply to A, another to B, and the other to C; but that to each who does the will of God, all the sweetnesses that are hived in all the names, and in any other analogous ones that can be uttered, belong. Of course the selection here of relationships specified has reference to the composition of that group outside the circle. But there is a great deal more than that in it. Whether you accept the grammatical remark that I have made or no, we shall, at least, I suppose, all agree in this, that, in fact, the bond of kindred that unites a trusting obedient soul with Jesus Christ does in itself include whatsoever of sweetness, of power, of protection, of clinging trust, and of any other blessed emotion that makes a shadow of Eden still upon earth, has ever been attached to human bonds.

Remember how many of these, Christ, and His servants for Him, have laid their hands upon, and claimed to be His. ‘Thy Maker is thy husband’; ‘He that hath the Bride is the bridegroom’; ‘Go tell My brethren’; ‘I have not called you servants, but friends.’ And if there be any other sweet names, they belong to Him, and in His one pure, all-sufficient love they are all enclosed. Fragmentary preciousnesses are strewed about us. There is ‘one pearl of great price.’ Many fragrances come from the flowers that grow on the dunghill of the world, but they are all gathered in Him whose name is ‘as ointment poured forth,’ filling the house with its fragrance.

For Christ is to us all that all separated lovers and friends can be. And whatsoever our poor hearts may need most, of human affection and sympathy, and may see least possibility of finding now, among the incompletenesses and limitations of earth, that Jesus Christ is waiting to be. All solitary souls and mourning hearts may turn themselves to, and rest themselves on, these great words. And as they look at the empty places in their circle, in their homes, and feel the ache of the empty places in their hearts, they may hear His voice saying, ‘Behold My mother and My brethren.’ He comes to us all in the character that we need most. Just as the great ocean, when it flows in amongst the land, takes the shape imposed upon it by the containing banks of the loch, so Christ pours Himself into our hearts, and there assumes the form that the outline of their emptiness tells we need most. To many, in all generations, who have been weeping over departed joys, He says again, though with a different application, turning not away from but to Himself mourning eyes and hearts, ‘Woman, behold thy Son’-not on the cross nor in the grave, but on the throne-’Son, behold Thy mother.’

III. Lastly, this relationship requires always the subordination, and sometimes the sacrifice, of the lower ones.

We have to think of Christ here as Himself putting away the lower claims, in order more fully to yield Himself to the higher. It was because it would have been impossible for Him to do the will of His Father if He had yielded to the purposes of His brethren and His mother, that He steeled His heart and made solemn His tone in refusing to go with them.

That group that had come for Him suggests to us the ways in which earthly ties may limit heavenly obedience. In regard to them the situation was complicated, because Jesus Christ was their kinsman according to the flesh, and their Messiah, according to the spirit. But in them their earthly love, and familiarity with Him, hid from them His higher glory; and in them He found impediments to His true consecration, and would-be thwarters of His highest work. And, in like manner, all our earthly relationships may become means of obscuring to us the transcendent brightness and greatness of Jesus Christ as our Saviour And, in like manner as to Him these, His brethren, became ‘stumbling blocks’ that He had decisively to put behind Him, so in regard to us ‘a man’s foes may be those of his own household’; and not least his foes when they are most his idols, his comforts, and his sweetnesses. If our earthly loves and relationships obscure to us the face of Christ; if we find enough in them for our hearts, and go not beyond them for our true love; if they make us negligent of duty; if they bind us to the present; if they make us careless of that loftier affection which alone can satisfy us; if they clog our steps in the divine life, then they are our foes. They need to be always subordinated, and, so subordinated, they are more precious than when they are placed mistakenly foremost. They are better second than first. They are full of sweetness when our hearts know a sweetness surpassing theirs; they are robbed of their possible power to harm when they are rigidly held in inferiority to the one absolute and supreme love. There need be no collision-there will be no collision-if the second is second and the first is first. But sometimes beggars get upon horseback, and the crew mutinies and would displace the commander, and then there is nothing for it but sacrifice. ‘If thy hand offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee.’ ‘I communed not with flesh and blood,’ and we must not, if ever they conflict with our supreme devotion to Jesus Christ.

These other things and relationships are precious to us, but He is priceless. They are shadows, but He is the substance. They are brooks by the way; He is the boundless, bottomless ocean of delights and loves. Shall we not always subordinate-and sometimes, if needful, sacrifice-the less to the greater? If we do, we shall get the less back, greatened by its surrender. ‘He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me’ commands the sacrifice. ‘There is no man that hath left brethren or sisters, or father or mother, or wife or children, for My sake and the Gospel’s, but he shall receive a hundredfold *now*, in this time’ promises the reward.

19)Mark 3:35

Mark

THE MISTAKES OF CHRIST’S FOES AND FRIENDS

CHRIST’S KINDRED

CHRIST’S RELATIONS

Mar. 3:35.

There was a conspiracy to seize Jesus because He is ‘mad,’ and Mary was in the plot!

I. The example for us.

[1] Of how all natural and human ties and affections are to be subordinated to doing God’s will.

Obedience to Him is the first and main thing to which everything else bows, and which determines everything.

If others compete or interfere, reject them.

Out of that common obedience new ties are formed among men.

[2] Of how all these ties may be doubled in power and preciousness by being based on that obedience.

II. The promise for us.

Of Christ's loving relationship in which He finds delight; in which He sustains and transcends all these in His own proper person and to each.

20)Mark 4:10-20

Mark

FOUR SOILS FOR ONE SEED

Mar. 4:10 - Mar. 4:20.

Dean Stanley and others have pointed out how the natural features of the land round the lake of Gennesaret are reflected in the parable of the sower. But we must go deeper than that to find its occasion. It was not because Jesus may have seen a sower in a field which had these three varieties of soil that He spoke, but because He saw the frivolous crowd gathered to hear His words. The sad, grave description of the threefold kinds of vainly-sown ground is the transcript of His clear and sorrowful insight into the real worth of the enthusiasm of the eager listeners on the beach. He was under no illusions about it; and, in this parable, He seeks to warn His disciples against expecting much from it, and to bring its subjects to a soberer estimate of what His word required of them. The full force and pathos of the parable is felt only when it is regarded as the expression of our Lord's keen consciousness of His wasted words. This passage falls into two parts-Christ's explanation of the reasons for His use of parables, and His interpretation of the parable itself.

I. Christ was the centre of three circles:

The outermost consisting of the fluctuating masses of merely curious hearers; the second, of true but somewhat loosely attached disciples, whom Mark here calls 'they that were about Him'; and the innermost, the twelve. The two latter appear, in our first verse, as asking further instruction as to 'the parable,' a phrase which includes both parts of Christ's answer. The statement of His reason for the use of parables is startling. It sounds as if those who needed light most were to get least of it, and as if the parabolic form was deliberately adopted for the express purpose of hiding the truth. No wonder that men have shrunk from such a thought, and tried to soften down the terrible words. Inasmuch as a parable is the presentation of some spiritual truth under the guise of an incident belonging to the material sphere, it follows, from its very nature, that it may either reveal or hide the truth, and that it will do the former to susceptible, and the latter to unsusceptible, souls. The eye may either dwell upon the coloured glass or on the light that streams through it; and, as is the case with all revelations of spiritual realities through sensuous mediums, gross and earthly hearts will not rise above the medium, which to them, by their own fault, becomes a medium of obscuration, not of revelation. This double aspect belongs to all revelation, which is both a ‘savour of life unto life and of death unto death.’ It is most conspicuous in the parable, which careless listeners may take for a mere story, and which those who feel and see more deeply will apprehend in its depth. These twofold effects are certain, and must therefore be embraced in Christ’s purpose; for we cannot suppose that issues of His teaching escaped His foresight; and all must be regarded as part of His design. But may we not draw a distinction between design and desire? The primary purpose of all revelation is to reveal. If the only intention were to hide, silence would secure that, and the parable were needless. But if the twofold operation is intended, we can understand how mercy and righteous retribution both preside over the use of parables; how the thin veil hides that it may reveal, and how the very obscurity may draw some grosser souls to a longer gaze, and so may lead to a perception of the truth, which, in its purer form, they are neither worthy nor capable of receiving. No doubt, our Lord here announces a very solemn law, which runs through all the divine dealings, ‘To him that hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, shall be taken away even that which he hath.’

II. We turn to the exposition of the parable of the sower, or rather of the fourfold soils in which he sows the seed.

A sentence at the beginning disposes of the personality of the sower, which in Mark’s version does not refer exclusively to Christ, but includes all who carry the word to men. The likening of ‘the word’ to seed needs no explanation. The tiny, living nucleus of force, which is thrown broadcast, and must sink underground in order to grow, which does grow, and comes to light again in a form which fills the whole field where it is sown, and nourishes life as well as supplies material for another sowing, is the truest symbol of the truth in its working on the spirit. The threefold causes of failure are arranged in progressive order. At every stage of growth there are enemies. The first sowing never gets into the ground at all; the second grows a little, but its greenness soon withers; the third has a longer life, and a yet sadder failure, because a nearer approach to fertility. The types of character represented are unreceptive carelessness, emotional facility of acceptance, and earthly-mindedness, scotched, but not killed, by the word. The dangers which assault, but too successfully, the seed are the personal activity of Satan, opposition from without, and conflicting desires within. On all the soils the seed has been sown by hand; for drills are modern inventions; and sowing broadcast is the only right husbandry in Christ's field with Christ's seed. He is a poor workman, and an unfaithful one, who wants to pick his ground. Sow everywhere; 'Thou canst not tell which shall prosper, whether this or that.' The character of the soil is not irrevocably fixed; but the trodden path may be broken up to softness, and the stony heart changed, and the soul filled with cares and lusts be cleared, and any soil may become good ground. So the seed is to be flung out broadcast; and prayer for seed and soil will often turn the weeping sower into the joyous reaper.

The seed sown on the trodden footpath running across the field never sinks below the surface. It lies there, and has no real contact, nor any chance of growth. It must be in, not on, the ground, if its mysterious power is to be put forth. A pebble is as likely to grow as a seed, if both lie side by side, on the surface. Is not this the description of a mournfully large proportion of hearers of God's truth? It never gets deeper than their ears, or, at the most, effects a shallow lodgment on the surface of their minds. So many feet pass along the path, and beat it into hardness, that the truth has no chance to take root. Habitual indifference to the gospel, masked by an utterly unmeaning and unreal acceptance of it, and by equally habitual decorous attendance on its preaching, is the condition of a dreadfully large proportion of church-goers. Their very familiarity with the truth robs it of all penetrating power. They know all about it, as they suppose; and so they listen to it as they would to the clank of a mill-wheel to which they were accustomed, missing its noise if it stops, and liking to be sent to sleep by its hum. Familiar truth often lies ‘bedridden in the dormitory of the soul, beside exploded errors.’

And what comes of this idle hearing, without acceptance or obedience? Truth which is common, and which a man supposes himself to believe, without having ever reflected on it, or let it influence conduct, is sure to die out. If we do not turn our beliefs into practice they will not long be our beliefs. Neglected impressions fade; the seed is only safe when it is buried. There are flocks of hungry, sharp-eyed, quick-flying thieves ready to pounce down on every exposed grain. So Mark uses here again his favourite ‘straightway’ to express the swift disappearance of the seed. As soon as the preacher’s voice is silent, or the book closed, the words are forgotten. The impression of a gliding keel on a smooth lake is not more evanescent.

The distinct reference to Satan as the agent in removing the seed is not to be passed by lightly. Christ’s words about demons have been emptied of meaning by the allegation that He was only accommodating Himself to the superstition of the times, but no explanation of that sort will do in this case. He surely commits Himself here to the assertion of the existence and agency of Satan; and surely those who profess to receive His words as the truth ought not to make light of them, in reference to so solemn and awe-inspiring a revelation.

The seed gets rather farther on the road to fruit in the second case. A thin surface of mould above a shelf of rock is like a forcing-house in hot countries. The stone keeps the heat and stimulates growth. The very thing that prevents deep rooting facilitates rapid shooting. The green spikelets will be above ground there long before they show in deeper soil. There would be many such hearers in the ‘very great multitude’ on the shore, who were attracted, they scarcely knew why, and were the more enthusiastic the less they understood the real scope of Christ’s teaching. The disciple who pressed forward with his excited and unasked ‘Master, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest!’ was one of such-well-meaning, perfectly sincere, warmly affected, and completely unreliable. Lightly come is lightly go. When such people forsake their fervent purposes, and turn their backs on what they have been so eagerly pursuing, they are quite consistent; for they are obeying the uppermost impulse in both cases, and, as they were easily drawn to follow without consideration, they are easily driven back with as little. The first taste of supposed good secured their giddy-pated adhesion; the first taste of trouble ensures their desertion. They are the same men acting in the same fashion at both times. Two things are marked by our Lord as suspicious in such easily won discipleship-its suddenness and its joyfulness. Feelings which are so easily stirred are superficial. A puff of wind sets a shallow pond in wavelets. Quick maturity means brief life and swift decay, as every ‘revival’ shows. The more earnestly we believe in the possibility of sudden conversions, the more we should remember this warning, and make sure that, if they are sudden, they shall be thorough, which they may be. The swiftness is not so suspicious if it be not accompanied with the other doubtful characteristic-namely, immediate joy. Joy is the result of true acceptance of the gospel; but not the first result. Without consciousness of sin and apprehension of judgment there is no conversion. We lay down no rules as to depth or duration of the ‘godly sorrow’ which precedes all well-grounded ‘joy in the Lord’; but the Christianity which has taken a flying leap over the valley of humiliation will scarcely reach a firm standing on the rock. He who ‘straightway with joy’ receives the word, will straightway, with equal precipitation, cast it away when the difficulties and oppositions which meet all true discipleship begin to develop themselves. Fair-weather crews will desert when storms begin to blow.

The third sort of soil brings things still farther on before failure comes. The seed is not only covered and germinating, but has actually begun to be fruitful. The thorns are supposed to have been cut down, but their roots have been left, and they grow faster than the wheat. They take the ‘goodness’ out of the ground, and block out sun and air; and so the stalks, which promised well, begin to get pale and droop, and the half-formed ear comes to nothing, or, as the other version of the parable has it, brings ‘forth no fruit to perfection.’ There are two crops fighting for the upper hand on the one ground, and the earlier possessor wins. The ‘struggle for existence’ ends with the ‘survival of the fittest’; that is, of the worst, to which the natural bent of the desires and inclinations of the unrenewed man is more congenial. The ‘cares of this world’ and the ‘deceitfulness of riches’ are but two sides of one thing. The poor man has cares; the rich man has the illusions of his wealth. Both men agree in thinking that this world’s good is most desirable. The one is anxious because he has not enough of it, or fears to lose what he has; the other man is full of foolish confidence because he has much. Eager desires after creatural good are common to both; and, what with the anxiety lest they lose, and the self-satisfaction because they have, and the mouths watering for the world's good, there is no force of will, nor warmth of love, nor clearness of vision, left for better things. That is the history of the fall of many a professing Christian, who never apostatises, and keeps up a reputable appearance of godliness to the end; but the old worldliness, which was cut down for a while, has sprung again in his heart, and, by slow degrees, the word is 'choked'-a most expressive picture of the silent, gradual dying-out of its power for want of sun and air-and 'he' or 'it' 'becometh unfruitful,' relapsing from a previous condition of fruit-bearing into sterility. No heart can mature two crops. We must choose between God and Mammon-between the word and the world.

There is nothing fixed or necessary in the faults of these three classes, and they are not so much the characteristics of separate types of men as evils common to all hearers, against which all have to guard. They depend upon the will and affections much more than on anything in temperament fixed and not to be got rid of. So there is no reason why any one of the three should not become 'good soil': and it is to be noted that the characteristic of that soil is simply that it receives and grows the seed. Any heart that will, can do that; and that is all that is needed. But to do it, there will have to be diligent care, lest we fall into any of the evils pointed at in the preceding parts of the parable, which are ever waiting to entrap us. The true 'accepting' of the word requires that we shall not let it lie on the surface of our minds, as in the case of the first; nor be satisfied with its penetrating a little deeper and striking root in our emotions, like the second, of whom it is said with such profound truth, that they 'have no root in themselves,' their roots being only in the superficial part of their being, and never going down to the true central self; nor let competing desires grow up unchecked, like the third; but cherish the 'word of the truth of the gospel' in our deepest hearts, guard it against foes, let it rule there, and mould all our conduct in conformity with its blessed principles. The true Christian is he who can truly say, 'Thy word have I hid in mine heart.' If we do, we shall be fruitful, because *it* will bear fruit in us. No man is obliged, by temperament or circumstances, to be 'wayside,' or 'stony,' or 'thorny' ground. Wherever a heart opens to receive the gospel, and keeps it fast, there the increase will be realised-not in equal measure in all, but in each according to faithfulness and diligence. Mark arranges the various yields in ascending scale, as if to teach our hopes and aims a growing largeness, while Matthew orders them in the opposite fashion, as if to teach that, while the hundredfold, which is possible for all, is best, the smaller yield is accepted by the great Lord of the harvest, who Himself not only sows the seed, but gives it its vitality, blesses its springing, and rejoices to gather the wheat into His barn.

21)Mark 4:21

Mark

LAMPS AND BUSHELS

Mar. 4:21.

The furniture of a very humble Eastern home is brought before us in this saying. In the original, each of the nouns has the definite article attached to it, and so suggests that in the house there was but one of each article; one lamp, a flat saucer with a wick swimming in oil; one measure for corn and the like; one bed, raised slightly, but sufficiently to admit of a flat vessel being put under it without danger, if for any reason it were desired to shade the light; and one lampstand.

The saying appeals to common-sense. A man does not light a lamp and then smother it. The act of lighting implies the purpose of illumination, and, with everybody who acts logically, its sequel is to put the lamp on a stand, where it may be visible. All is part of the nightly routine of every Jewish household. Jesus had often watched it; and, commonplace as it is, it had mirrored to Him large truths. If our eyes were opened to the suggestions of common life, we should find in them many parables and reminders of high matters.

Now this saying is a favourite and familiar one of our Lord, occurring four times in the Gospels. It is interesting to notice that He, too, like other teachers, had His favourite maxims, which He turned round in all sorts of ways, and presented as reflecting light at different angles and suggesting different thoughts. The four occurrences of the saying are these. In my text, and in the parallel in Luke's Gospel, it is appended to the Parable of the Sower, and forms the basis of the exhortation, 'Take heed how ye hear.' In another place in Luke's Gospel it is appended to our Lord's words about 'the sign of the prophet Jonah,' which is explained to be the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it forms the basis of the exhortation to cultivate the single eye which is receptive of the light. In the Sermon on the Mount it is appended to the declaration that the disciples are the lights of the world, and forms the basis of the exhortation, 'Let your light so shine before men.' I have thought that it may be interesting and instructive if in this sermon we throw together these three applications of this one saying, and try to study the threefold lessons which it yields, and the weighty duties which it enforces.

I. So, then, I have to ask you, first, to consider that we have a lesson as to the apparent obscurities of revelation and of our duty concerning them.

That is the connection in which the words occur in our text, and in the other place in Luke's Gospel, to which I have referred. Our Lord has just been speaking the Parable of the Sower. The disciples' curiosity has been excited as to its significance. They ask Him for an explanation, which He gives minutely point by point. Then he passes to this general lesson of the purpose of the apparent veil which He had cast round the truth, by throwing it into a parabolic form. In effect He says: If I had meant to hide My teaching by the form into which I cast it, I should have been acting as absurdly and as contradictorily as a man would do who should light a lamp and immediately obscure it.' True, there is the veil of parable, but the purpose of that relative concealment is not hiding, but revelation. 'There is nothing covered but that it should be made known.' The veil sharpens attention, stimulates curiosity, quickens effort, and so becomes positively subsidiary to the great purpose of revelation for which the parable is spoken. The existence of this veil of sensuous representation carries with it the obligation, 'Take heed how ye hear.'

Now all these thoughts have a far wider application than in reference to our Lord's parables. And I may suggest one or two of the considerations that flow from the wider reference of the words before us.

‘Is a candle brought to be put under a bushel, or under a bed and not upon a candlestick?’ There are no gratuitous and dark places in anything that God says to us. His revelation is absolutely clear. We may be sure of that if we consider the purpose for which He spoke at all. True, there are dark places; true, there are great gaps; true, we sometimes think, ‘Oh! it would have been so easy for Him to have said one word more; and the one word more would have been so infinitely precious to bleeding hearts or wounded consciences or puzzled understandings.’ But ‘is a candle brought to be set under a bushel?’ Do you think that if He took the trouble to light it He would immediately smother it, or arbitrarily conceal anything that the very fact of the revelation declares His intention to make known? His own great word remains true, ‘I have never spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth.’ If there be, as there are, obscurities, there are none there that would have been better away.

For the intention of all God’s hiding-which hiding is an integral part of his revealing-is not to conceal, but to reveal. Sometimes the best way of making a thing known to men is to veil it in a measure, in order that the very obscurity, like the morning mists which prophesy a blazing sun in a clear sky by noonday, may demand search and quicken curiosity and spur to effort. He is not a wise teacher who makes things too easy. It is good that there should be difficulties; for difficulties are like the veins of quartz in the soil, which may turn the edge of the ploughshare or the spade, but prophesy that there is gold there for the man who comes with fitting tools. Wherever, in the broad land of God’s word to us, there lie dark places, there are assurances of future illumination. God’s hiding is in order to revelation, even as the prophet of old, when he was describing the great Theophany which flashed in light from the one side of the heaven to the other, exclaimed, ‘There was the hiding of His power.’

‘He hides the purpose of His grace
To make it better known.’

And the end of all the concealments, and apparent and real obscurities, that hang about His word, is that for many of them patient and diligent attention and docile obedience should unfold them here, and for the rest, 'the day shall declare them.' The lamp is the light for the night-time, and it leaves many a corner in dark shadow; but, when 'night's candles are burnt out, and day sits jocund on the misty mountain-tops,' much will be plain that cannot be made plain now.

Therefore, for us the lesson from this assurance that God will not stultify Himself by giving to us a revelation that does not reveal, is, 'Take heed how ye hear.' The effort will not be in vain. Patient attention will ever be rewarded. The desire to learn will not be frustrated. In this school truth lightly won is truth loosely held; and only the attentive scholar is the receptive and retaining disciple. A great man once said, and said, too, presumptuously and proudly, that he had rather have the search after truth than truth. But yet there is a sense in which the saying may be modifiedly accepted; for, precious as is all the revelation of God, not the least precious effect that it is meant to produce upon us is the consciousness that in it there are unscaled heights above, and unplumbed depths beneath, and untraversed spaces all around it; and that for us that Word is like the pillar of cloud and fire that moved before Israel, blends light and darkness with the single office of guidance, and gleams ever before us to draw desires and feet after it. The lamp is set upon a stand. 'Take heed how ye hear.'

II. Secondly, the saying, in another application on our Lord's lips, gives us a lesson as to Himself and our attitude to Him.

I have already pointed out the other instance in Luke's Gospel in which this saying occurs, in the 11th chapter, where it is brought into immediate connection with our Lord's declaration that the sign to be given to His generation was 'the sign of the prophet Jonah,' which sign He explains as being reproduced in His own case in His Resurrection. And then he adds the word of our text, and immediately passes on to speak about the light in us which perceives the lamp, and the need of cultivating the single eye.

So, then, we have, in the figure thus applied, the thought that the earthly life of Jesus Christ necessarily implies a subsequent elevation from which He shines down upon all the world. God lit that lamp, and it is not going to be quenched in the darkness of the grave. He is not going to stultify Himself by sending the Light of the World, and then letting the endless shades of death muffle and obscure it. But, just as the conclusion of the process which is begun in the kindling of the light is setting it on high on the stand, that it may beam over all the chamber, so the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, His exaltation to the supremacy from which He shall draw all men unto Him, are the necessary and, if I may so say, the logical result of the facts of His incarnation and death.

Then from this there follows what our Lord dwells upon at greater length. Having declared that the beginning of His course involved the completion of it in His exaltation to glory, He then goes on to say to us, ‘You have an organ that corresponds to Me. I am the kindled lamp; you have the seeing eye.’ ‘If the eye were not sunlike,’ says the great German thinker, ‘how could it see the sun?’ If there were not in me that which corresponds to Jesus Christ, He would be no Light of the World, and no light to me. My reason, my affection, my conscience, my will, the whole of my spiritual being, answer to Him, as the eye does to the light, and for everything that is in Christ there is in humanity something that is receptive of, and that needs, Him.

So, then, that being so, He being our light, just because He fits our needs, answers our desires, satisfies our cravings, fills the clefts of our hearts, and brings the response to all the questions of our understandings-that being the case, if the lamp is lit and blazing on the lampstand, and you and I have eyes to behold it, let us take heed that we cultivate the single eye which apprehends Christ. Concentration of purpose, simplicity and sincerity of aim, a heart centred upon Him, a mind drawn to contemplate unfalteringly and without distraction of crosslights His beauty, His supremacy, His completeness, and a soul utterly devoted to Him-these are the conditions to which that light will ever manifest itself, and illumine the whole man. But if we come with divided hearts, with distracted aims, giving Him fragments of ourselves, and seeking Him by spasms and at intervals, and having a dozen other deities in our Pantheon, beside the calm form of the Christ of Nazareth, what wonder is there that we see in Him ‘no beauty that we should desire Him’? ‘Unite my heart to fear Thy name.’ Oh I if that were our prayer, and if the effort to secure its answer were honestly the effort of our lives, all His loveliness, His sweetness, His adaptation to our whole being, would manifest themselves to us. The eye must be ‘single,’ directed to Him, if the heart is to rejoice in His light.

I need not do more than remind you of the blessed consequence which our Lord represents as flowing from this union of the seeing heart and the revealing light-viz., ‘Thy whole body shall be full of light.’ In every eye that beholds the flame of the lamp there is a little lamp-flame mirrored and manifested. And just as what we see makes its image on the seeing organ of the body, so the Christ beheld is a Christ embodied in us; and we, gazing upon Him, are ‘changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Lord the Spirit.’ Light that remains without us does not illuminate; light that passes into us is the light by which we see, and the Christ beheld is the Christ ensphered in our hearts.

III. So, lastly, this great saying gives us a lesson as to the duties of Christian men as lights in the world.

I pointed out that another instance of the occurrence of the saying is in the Sermon on the Mount, where it is transferred from the revelation of God in His written word, and in His Incarnate Word, to the relation of Christian men to the world in which they dwell. I need not remind you how frequently that same metaphor occurs in Scripture; how in the early Jewish ritual the great seven-branched lampstand which stood at first in the Tabernacle was the emblem of Israel’s office in the whole world, as it rayed out its light through the curtains of the Tabernacle into the darkness of the desert. Nor need I remind you how our Lord bare witness to His forerunner by the praise that ‘He was a burning and a shining light,’ nor how He commanded His disciples to have their ‘loins girt and their lamps burning,’ nor how He spoke the Parable of the Ten Virgins with their lamps.

From all these there follows the same general thought that Christian men, not so much by specific effort, nor by words, nor by definite proclamation, as by the raying out from them in life and conduct of a Christlike spirit, are set for the illumination of the world. The bearing of our text in reference to that subject is just this-our obligation as Christians to show forth the glories of Him who hath ‘called us out of darkness into His marvellous light’ is rested upon His very purpose in drawing us to Himself, and receiving us into the number of his people. If God in Christ, by communicating to us ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ,’ has made us lights of the world, it is not done in order that the light may be smothered incontinently, but His act of lighting indicates His purpose of illumination. What are you a Christian for? That you may go to Heaven? Certainly. That your sins may be forgiven? No doubt. But is that the only end? Are you such a very great being as that your happiness and well-being can legitimately be the ultimate purpose of God’s dealings with you? Are you so isolated from all mankind as that any gift which He bestows on you is to be treated by you as a morsel that you can take into your corner and devour, like a grudging dog, by yourselves? By no means. ‘God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined into our hearts in order that’ we might impart the light to others. Or, as Shakespeare has it, in words perhaps suggested by the Scripture metaphor,

‘Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
Not light them for themselves.’

He gave you His Son that you may give the gospel to others, and you stultify His purpose in your salvation unless you become ministers of His grace and manifesters of His light.

Then take from this emblem, too, a homely suggestion as to the hindrances that stand in the way of our fulfilling the Divine intention in our salvation. It is, perhaps, a piece of fancy, but still it may point a lesson. The lamp is not hid ‘under a bushel,’ which is the emblem of commerce or business, and is meant for the measurement of material wealth and sustenance, or ‘under a bed’-the place where people take their ease and repose. These two loves-the undue love of the bushel and the corn that is in it, and the undue love of the bed and the leisurely ease that you may enjoy there-are large factors in preventing Christian men from fulfilling God’s purpose in their salvation.

Then take a hint as to the means by which such a purpose can be fulfilled by Christian souls. They are suggested in the two of the other uses of this emblem by our Lord Himself. The first is when He said, ‘Let your loins be girded’-they are not so, when you are in bed-’and your lamps burning.’ Your light will not shine in a naughty world without your strenuous effort, and ungirt loins will very shortly lead to extinguished lamps. The other means to this manifestation of visible Christlikeness lies in that tragical story of the foolish virgins who took no oil in their vessels. If light expresses the outward Christian life, oil, in accordance with the whole tenor of Scripture symbolism, expresses the inward gift of the Divine Spirit. And where that gift is neglected, where it is not earnestly sought and carefully treasured, there may be a kind of smoky illuminations, which, in the dark, may pass for bright lights, but, when the Lord comes, shudder into extinction, and, to the astonishment of the witless five who carried them, are found to be 'going out.' Brethren, only He who does not quench the smoking flax but tends it to a flame, will help us to keep our lamps bright.

First of all, then, let us gaze upon the light in Him, until we become 'light in the Lord.' And then let us see to it that, by girt loins and continual reception of the illuminating principle of the Divine Spirit's oil, we fill our lamps with 'deeds of odorous light, and hopes that breed not shame.' Then,

'When the Bridegroom, with his feastful friends,
Passes to bliss on the mid-hour of night,'

we shall have 'gained our entrance' among the 'virgins wise and pure.'

22)Mark 4:35

Mark

THE STORM STILLED

Mar. 4:35.

Mark seldom dates his incidents, but he takes pains to tell us that this run across the lake closed a day of labour, Jesus was wearied, and felt the need of rest, He had been pressed on all day by 'a very great multitude,' and felt the need of solitude. He could not land from the boat which had been His pulpit, for that would have plunged Him into the thick of the crowd, and so the only way to get away from the throng was to cross the lake. But even there He was followed; 'other boats were with Him.'

I. The first point to note is the wearied sleeper.

The disciples 'take Him, . . . even as He was,' without preparation or delay, the object being simply to get away as quickly as might be, so great was His fatigue and longing for quiet. We almost see the hurried starting and the intrusive followers scrambling into the little skiffs on the beach and making after Him. The 'multitude' delights to push itself into the private hours of its heroes, and is devoured with rude curiosity. There was a leather, or perhaps wooden, movable seat in the stern for the steersman, on which a wearied-out man might lay his head, while his body was stretched in the bottom of the boat. A hard 'pillow' indeed, which only exhaustion could make comfortable! But it was soft enough for the worn-out Christ, who had apparently flung Himself down in sheer tiredness as soon as they set sail. How real such a small detail makes the transcendent mystery of the Incarnation! Jesus is our pattern in small common things as in great ones, and among the sublimities of character set forth in Him as our example, let us not forget that the homely virtue of hard work is also included. Jonah slept in a storm the sleep of a skulking sluggard, Jesus slept the sleep of a wearied labourer.

II. The next point is the terrified disciples.

The evening was coming on, and, as often on a lake set among hills, the wind rose as the sun sank behind the high land on the western shore astern. The fishermen disciples were used to such squalls, and, at first, would probably let their sail down, and pull so as to keep the boat's head to the wind. But things grew worse, and when the crazy, undecked craft began to fill and get water-logged, they grew alarmed. The squall was fiercer than usual, and must have been pretty bad to have frightened such seasoned hands. They awoke Jesus, and there is a touch of petulant rebuke in their appeal, and of a sailor's impatience at a landsman lying sound asleep while the sweat is running down their faces with their hard pulling. It is to Mark that we owe our knowledge of that accent of complaint in their words, for he alone gives their 'Carest Thou not?'

But it is not for us to fling stones at them, seeing that we also often may catch ourselves thinking that Jesus has gone to sleep when storms come on the Church or on ourselves, and that He is ignorant of, or indifferent to, our plight. But though the disciples were wrong in their fright, and not altogether right in the tone of their appeal to Jesus, they were supremely right in that they did appeal to Him. Fear which drives us to Jesus is not all wrong. The cry to Him, even though it is the cry of unnecessary terror, brings Him to His feet for our help.

III. The next point is the word of power.

Again we have to thank Mark for the very words, so strangely, calmly authoritative. May we take ‘Peace!’ as spoken to the howling wind, bidding it to silence; and ‘Be still!’ as addressed to the tossing waves, smoothing them to a calm plain? At all events, the two things to lay to heart are that Jesus here exercises the divine prerogative of controlling matter by the bare expression of His will, and that this divine attribute was exercised by the wearied man, who, a moment before, had been sleeping the sleep of human exhaustion. The marvellous combination of apparent opposites, weakness, and divine omnipotence, which yet do not clash, nor produce an incredible monster of a being, but coalesce in perfect harmony, is a feat beyond the reach of the loftiest creative imagination. If the Evangelists are not simple biographers, telling what eyes have seen and hands have handled, they have beaten the greatest poets and dramatists at their own weapons, and have accomplished ‘things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.’

A word of loving rebuke and encouragement follows. Matthew puts it before the stilling of the storm, but Mark’s order seems the more exact. How often we too are taught the folly of our fears by experiencing some swift, easy deliverance! Blessed be God! He does not rebuke us first and help us afterwards, but rebukes by helping. What *could* the disciples say, as they sat there in the great calm, in answer to Christ’s question, ‘Why are ye fearful?’ Fear can give no reasonable account of itself, if Christ is in the boat. If our faith unites us to Jesus, there is nothing that need shake our courage. If He is ‘our fear and our dread,’ we shall not need to ‘fear their fear,’ who have not the all-conquering Christ to fight for them.

‘Well roars the storm to them who hear

A deeper voice across the storm.’

Jesus wondered at the slowness of the disciples to learn their lesson, and the wonder was reflected in the sad question, ‘Have ye not *yet* faith?’-not yet, after so many miracles, and living beside Me for so long? How much more keen the edge of that question is when addressed to us, who know Him so much better, and have centuries of His working for His servants to look back on. When, in the tempests that sweep over our own lives, we sometimes pass into a great calm as suddenly as if we had entered the centre of a typhoon, we wonder unbelievingly instead of saying, out of a faith nourished by experience, ‘It is just like Him.’

23)Mark 4:36

Mark

THE STORM STILLED

THE TOILING CHRIST

Mar. 4:36, Mar. 4:38.

Among the many loftier characteristics belonging to Christ’s life and work, there is a very homely one which is often lost sight of; and that is, the amount of hard physical exertion, prolonged even to fatigue and exhaustion, which He endured.

Christ is our pattern in a great many other things more impressive and more striking; and He is our pattern in this, that ‘in the sweat of His brow’ He did His work, and knew not only what it was to suffer, but what it was to toil for man’s salvation. And, perhaps, if we thought a little more than we do of such a prosaic characteristic of His life as that, it might invest it with some more reality for us, besides teaching us other large and important lessons.

I have thrown together these two clauses for our text now, simply for the sake of that one feature which they both portray so strikingly.

‘They took Him even as He was in the ship.’ Now many expositors suppose that in the very form of that phrase there is suggested the extreme of weariness and exhaustion which He suffered, after the hard day’s toil.

Whether that be so or no, the swiftness of the move to the little boat, although there was nothing in the nature of danger or of imperative duty to hurry Him away, and His going on board without a moment's preparation, leaving the crowd on the beach, seem most naturally accounted for by supposing that He had come to the last point of physical endurance, and that His frame, worn out by the hard day's work, needed one thing-rest.

And so, the next that we see of Him is that, as soon as He gets into the ship He falls fast asleep on the wooden pillow-a hard bed for His head!-in the stern of the little fishing boat, and there He lies so tired-let us put it into plain prose and strip away the false veil of big words with which we invest that nature-so tired that the storm does not awake Him; and they have to come to Him, and lay their hands upon Him, and say to Him, 'Master, carest Thou not that we perish?' before compassion again beat back fatigue, and quickened Him for fresh exertions.

This, then, is the one lesson which I wish to consider now, and there are three points which I deal with in pursuance of my task. I wish to point out a little more in detail the signs that we have in the Gospels of this characteristic of Christ's work-the toilsomeness of His service; then to consider, secondly, the motives which He Himself tells us impelled to such service; and then, finally, the worth which that toil bears for us.

I. First, then, let me point out some of the significant hints which the gospel records give us of the toilsomeness of Christ's service.

Now we are principally indebted for these to this Gospel by Mark, which ancient tradition has set forth as being especially and eminently the 'Gospel of the Servant of God,' therein showing a very accurate conception of its distinguishing characteristics. Just as Matthew's Gospel is the Gospel of the King, regal in tone from beginning to end; just as Luke's is the Gospel of the Man, human and universal in its tone; just as John's is the Gospel of the Eternal Word, so Mark's is the Gospel of the Servant. The inscription written over it all might be, 'Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God.' 'Behold my Servant whom I uphold.'

And if you will take this briefest of all the Gospels, and read it over from that point of view, you will be surprised to discover what a multitude of minute traits make up the general impression, and what a unity is thereby breathed into the narrative.

For instance, did you ever observe the peculiar beginning of this Gospel? There are here none of the references to the prophecies of the King, no tracing of His birth through the royal stock to the great progenitor of the nation, no adoration by the Eastern sages, which we find in Matthew, no miraculous birth nor growing childhood as in Luke, no profound unveiling of the union of the Word with God before the world was, as in John; but the narrative begins with His baptism, and passes at once to the story of His work. The same ruling idea accounts for the uniform omission of the title 'Lord' which in Mark's Gospel is never applied to Christ until after the resurrection. There is only one apparent exception, and there good authorities pronounce the word to be spurious. Even in reports of conversations which are also given in the other Gospels, and where 'Lord' occurs, Mark, of set purpose, omits it, as if its presence would disturb the unity of the impression which he desires to leave. You will find the investigation of the omissions in this Gospel full of interest, and remarkably tending to confirm the accuracy of the view which regards it as the Gospel of the Servant.

Notice then these traits of His service which it brings out.

The first of them I would suggest is-how distinctly it gives the impression of swift, strenuous work. The narrative is brief and condensed. We feel, all through these earlier chapters, at all events, the presence of the pressing crowd coming to Him and desiring to be healed, and but a word can be spared for each incident as the story hurries on, trying to keep pace with His rapid service of quick-springing compassion and undelaying help. There is one word which is reiterated over and over again in these earlier chapters, remarkably conveying this impression of haste and strenuous work; Mark's favourite word is 'straightway,' 'immediately,' 'forthwith,' 'anon,' which are all translations of one expression. You will find, if you glance over the first, second, or third chapters at your leisure, that it comes in at every turn. Take these instances which strike one's eye at the moment. '*Straightway* they forsook their nets'; '*Straightway* He entered into the synagogue'; '*Immediately* His fame spread abroad throughout all the region'; '*Forthwith* they entered into the house of Simon's mother'; '*Anon*, they tell Him of her'; '*Immediately* the fever left her.' And so it goes on through the whole story, a picture of a constant succession of rapid acts of mercy and love. The story seems, as it were, to pant with haste to keep up with Him as He moves among men, swift as a sunbeam, and continuous in the outflow of His love as are these unceasing rays.

Again, we see in Christ's service, toil prolonged to the point of actual physical exhaustion. The narrative before us is the most striking instance of that which we meet with. It had been a long wearying day of work. According to this chapter, the whole of the profound parables concerning the kingdom of God had immediately preceded the embarkation. But even these, with their explanation, had been but a part of that day's labours. For, in Matthew's account of them, we are told that they were spoken on the same day as that on which His mother and brethren came desiring to speak with Him,-or, as we elsewhere read, with hostile intentions to lay hold on Him as mad and needing restraint. And that event, which we may well believe touched deep and painful chords of feeling in His human heart, and excited emotions more exhausting than much physical effort, occurred in the midst of an earnest and prolonged debate with emissaries from Jerusalem, in the course of which He spoke the solemn words concerning blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, and Satan casting out Satan, and poured forth some of His most terrible warnings, and some of His most beseeching entreaties. No wonder that, after such a day, the hard pillow of the boat was a soft resting-place for His wearied head; no wonder that, as the evening quiet settled down on the mountain-girdled lake, and the purple shadows of the hills stretched athwart the water, He slept; no wonder that the storm which followed the sunset did not wake Him; and beautiful, that wearied as He was, the disciples' cry at once rouses Him, and the fatigue which shows His manhood gives place to the divine energy which says unto the sea, 'Peace! be still.' The lips which, a moment before, had been parted in the soft breathing of wearied sleep, now open to utter the omnipotent word-so wonderfully does He blend the human and the divine, 'the form of a servant' and the nature of God.

We see, in Christ, toil that puts aside the claims of physical wants. Twice in this Gospel we read of this 'The multitude cometh together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread.' 'There were many coming, and they had no leisure so much as to eat.'

We see in Christ's service a love which is at every man's beck and call, a toil cheerfully rendered at the most unreasonable and unseasonable times. As I said a moment or two ago, this Gospel makes one feel, as none other of these narratives do, the pressure of that ever-present multitude, the whirling excitement that eddied round the calm centre. It tells us, for instance, more than once, how Christ, wearied with His toil, feeling in body and in spirit the need of rest and still communion, withdrew Himself from the crowd. He once departed alone that He might seek God in prayer; once He went with His wearied disciples apart into a desert place to rest awhile. On both occasions the retirement is broken in upon before it is well begun. The sigh of relief in the momentary rest is scarcely drawn, and the burden laid down for an instant, when it has to be lifted again. His solitary prayer is interrupted by the disciples, with 'All men seek for Thee,' and, without a murmur or a pause, He buckles to His work again, and says, 'Let us go into the next towns that I may preach there also; for therefore am I sent.'

When He would carry His wearied disciples with Him for a brief breathing time to the other side of the sea, and get away from the thronging crowd, 'the people saw Him departing, and ran afoot out of all cities,' and, making their way round the head of the lake, were all there at the landing place before Him. Instead of seclusion and repose He found the same throng and bustle. Here they were, most of them from mere curiosity, some of them no doubt with deeper feelings; here they were, with their diseased and their demoniacs, and as soon as His foot touches the shore He is in the midst of it all again. And He meets it, not with impatience at this rude intrusion on His privacy, not with refusals to help. Only one emotion filled His heart. He forgot all about weariness, and hunger, and retirement, and 'He was moved with compassion towards them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd, and He began to teach them many things.' Such a picture may well shame our languid, self-indulgent service, may stir us to imitation and to grateful praise.

There is only one other point which I touch upon for a moment, as showing the toil of Christ, and that is drawn from another Gospel. Did you ever notice the large space occupied in Matthew’s Gospel by the record of the last day of His public ministry, and how much of all that we know of His mission and message, and the future of the world and of all men, we owe to the teaching of these four-and-twenty hours? Let me put together, in a word, what happened on that day.

It included the conversation with the chief priests and elders about the baptism of John, the parable of the householder that planted a vineyard and digged a winepress, the parables of the kingdom of heaven, the controversy with the Herodians about the tribute money, the conversation with the Sadducees about the resurrection, with the Pharisee about the great commandment in the law, the silencing of the Pharisees by pointing to the 110th Psalm, the warning to the multitude against the scribes and Pharisees who were hypocrites, protracted and prolonged up to that wail of disappointed love, ‘Behold! your house is left unto you desolate.’ And, as though that had not been enough for one day, when He is going home from the Temple to find, for a night, in that quiet little home of Bethany, the rest that He wants, as He rests wearily on the slopes of Olivet, the disciples come to Him, ‘Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of Thy coming?’ and there follows all that wonderful prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world, the parable of the fig tree, the warning not to suffer the thief to come, and the promise of reward for the faithful and wise servant, the parable of the ten virgins, and in all probability the parable of the king with the five talents; and the words, that might be written in letters of fire, that tell us the final course of all things, and the judgment of life eternal and death everlasting! All this was the work of ‘one of the days of the Son of Man.’ Of Him it was prophesied long ago, ‘For Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest’; and His life on earth, as well as His life in heaven, fulfils the prediction-the one by the toilsomeness of His service, the other by the unceasing energy of His exalted power. He toiled unwearied here, He works unresting there.

II. In the second place, let me ask you to notice how we get from our Lord’s own words a glimpse into the springs of this wonderful activity.

There are three points which distinctly come out in various places in the Gospels as His motives for such unresting sedulousness and continuance of toil. The first is conveyed by such words as these: ‘I must work the works of Him that sent Me.’ ‘Let us preach to other cities, also: for therefore am I sent.’ ‘Wist ye not that I must be about My Father’s business?’ ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work.’ All these express one thought. Christ lived and toiled, and bore weariness and exhaustion, and counted every moment as worthy to be garnered up and precious, as to be filled with deeds of love and kindness, because wherever He went, and to whatsoever He set His hand, He had the one consciousness of a great task laid upon Him by a loving Father whom He loved, and whom, therefore, it was His joy and His blessedness to serve.

And, remember that this motive made the life homogeneous-of a piece. In all the variety of service, one spirit was expressed, and, therefore, the service was one. No matter whether He were speaking words of grace or of rebuke, or working works of power and love, or simply looking a look of kindness on some outcast, or taking a little child in His arms, or stilling with the same arms outstretched the wild uproar of the storm-it was all the same. To Him life was all one. There was nothing great, nothing small; nothing so insignificant that it could be done negligently; nothing so hard that it surpassed His power. The one motive made all duties equal; obedience to the Father called forth His whole energy at every moment. To Him life was not divided into a set of tasks of varying importance, some of which could be accomplished with a finger’s touch, and some of which demanded a dead lift and strain of all the muscles. But whatsoever His hand found to do He did with His might and that because He felt, be it great or little, that it all came, if I may so say, into the day’s work, and all was equally great because the Father that sent Him had laid it upon Him.

There is one thing that makes life mighty in its veriest trifles, worthy in its smallest deeds, that delivers it from monotony, that delivers it from insignificance. All will be great, and nothing will be overpowering, when, living in communion with Jesus Christ, we say as He says, ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me.’

And then, still further, another of the secret springs that move His unwearied activity, His heroism of toil, is the thought expressed in such words as these:-’While I am in the world I am the light of the world.’ ‘I must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work.'

Jesus Christ manifested on earth performs indeed a work-the mightiest which He came to do-which was done precisely then when the night did come-namely, the work of His death, which is the atonement and 'propitiation for the sins of the world.' And, further, the 'night, when no man can work,' was not the end of His activity for us; for He carries on His work of intercession and rule, His work of bestowing the gifts purchased by His blood, amidst the glories of heaven; and that perpetual application and dispensing of the blessed issues of His death He has Himself represented as greater than the works, to which His death put a period, in which He healed the bodies and spoke to the hearts of those who heard, and lived a perfect life here upon this sinful earth. But yet even He recognised the brief hour of sunny life as being an hour that must be filled with service, and recognised the fact that there was a task that He could only do when He lived the life of a man upon earth. And so, if I might so say, He was a miser of the moments, and carefully husbanding and garnering up every capacity and every opportunity. He toiled with the toil of a man who has a task before him, that must be done before the clock strikes six, and who sees the hands move over the dial, and by every glance that he casts at it is stimulated to intenser service and to harder toil. Christ felt that impulse to service which we all ought to feel-'The night cometh; let me fill the day with work.'

And then there is a final motive which I need barely touch. He was impelled to His sedulous service not only by loving, filial obedience to the divine law, and by the consciousness of a limited and defined period into which all the activity of one specific kind must be condensed, but also by the motive expressed in such words as these, in which this Gospel is remarkably rich, 'And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth His hand and touched him.' Thus, along with that supreme consecration, along with that swift ardour that will fill the brief hours ere nightfall with service, there was the constant pity of that beating heart that moved the diligent hand. Christ, if I may so say, could not help working as hard as He did, so long as there were so many men round about Him that needed His sympathy and His aid.

III. So much then for the motives; and now a word finally as to the worth of this toil for us.

I do not stay to elucidate one consideration that might be suggested, viz., how precious a proof it is of Christ's humanity. We find it easier to bring home His true manhood to our thoughts, when we remember that He, like us, knew the pressure of physical fatigue. Not only was it a human spirit that wept and rejoiced, that was moved with compassion, and sometimes with indignation, but it was a human body, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, that, wearied with walking in the burning sun, sat on the margin of the well; that was worn out and needed to sleep; that knew hunger, as is testified by His sending the disciples to buy meat; that was thirsty, as is testified by His saying, 'Give Me to drink.' The true corporeal manhood of Jesus Christ, and the fact that that manhood is the tabernacle of God-without these two facts the morality and the teaching of Christianity swing loose *in vacuo*, and have no holdfast in history, nor any leverage by which they can move men's hearts! But, when we know that the common necessities of fatigue, and hunger, and thirst belonged to Him, then we gratefully and reverently say, 'Forasmuch as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, he also Himself took part of the same.'

This fact of Christ's toil is of worth to us in other ways.

Is not that hard work of Jesus Christ a lesson for us, brethren, in our daily tasks and toils-a lesson which, if it were learnt and practised, would make a difference not only on the intensity but upon the spirit with which we labour? A great deal of fine talk is indulged in about the dignity of labour and the like. Labour is a curse until communion with God in it, which is possible through Jesus Christ, makes it a blessing and a joy. Christ, in the sweat of His brow, won our salvation; and our work only becomes great when it is work done in, and for, and by Him.

And what do we learn from His example? We learn these things: the plain lesson, first,-task all your capacity and use every minute in doing the duty that is plainly set before you to do. Christian virtues are sometimes thought to be unreal and unworldly things. I was going to say the root of them, certainly the indispensable accompaniment for them all, is the plain, prosaic, most unromantic virtue of hard work.

And beyond that, what do we learn? The lesson that most toilers in England want. There is no need to preach to the most of us to work any harder, in one department of work at any rate; but there is great need to remind us of what it was that at once stirred Jesus Christ into energy and kept Him calm in the midst of labour-and that was that everything was equally and directly referred to His Father's will. People talk nowadays about 'missions.' The only thing worth giving that name to is the 'mission' which *He* gives us, who sends us into the world not to do our own will, but to do the will of Him that sent us. There is a fatal monotony in all our lives-a terrible amount of hard drudgery in them all. We have to set ourselves morning after morning to tasks that look to be utterly insignificant and disproportionate to the power that we bring to bear upon them, so that men are like elephants picking up pins with their trunks; and yet we may make all our commonplace drudgery great, and wondrous, and fair, and full of help and profit to our souls, if, over it all-our shops, our desks, our ledgers, our studies, our kitchens, and our nurseries-we write, 'My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me.' We may bring the greatest principles to bear upon the smallest duties.

What more do we learn from Christ's toil? The possible harmony of communion and service. His labour did not break His fellowship with God. He was ever in the 'secret place of the Most High,' even while He was in the midst of crowds. He has taught us that it is possible to be in the 'house of the Lord' all the days of our lives, and by His ensample, as by His granted Spirit, encourages us to aim at so serving that we shall never cease to behold, and so beholding that we shall never cease to serve our Father. The life of contemplation and the life of practice, so hard to harmonise in our experience, perfectly meet in Christ.

What more do we learn from our Lord's toils? The cheerful constant postponement of our own ease, wishes, or pleasure to the call of the Father's voice, or to the echo of it in the sighing of such as be sorrowful. I have already referred to the instances of His putting aside His need for rest, and His desire for still fellowship with God, at the call of whoever needed Him. It was the same always. If a Nicodemus comes by night, if a despairing father forces his way into the house of feasting, if another suppliant finds Him in a house, where He would have remained hid, if they come running to Him in the way, or drop down their sick before Him through the very roof-it is all the same. He never thinks of Himself, but gladly addresses Himself to heal and bless. How such an example followed would change our lives and amaze and shake the world!-'I come, not to do Mine own will.' 'Even Christ pleased not Himself.'

But that toil is not only a pattern for our lives; it is an appeal to our grateful hearts. Surely a toiling Christ is as marvellous as a dying Christ. And the immensity and the purity and the depth of His love are shown no less by this, that He labours to accomplish it, than by this, that He dies to complete it. He will not give blessings which depend upon mere will, and can be bestowed as a king might fling a largess to a beggar without effort, and with scarce a thought, but blessings which He Himself has to agonise and to energise, and to lead a life of obedience, and to die a death of shame, in order to procure. 'I will not offer burnt-offering to God of that which doth cost me nothing,' says the grateful heart. But in so saying it is but following in the track of the loving Christ, who will not give unto man that which cost Him nothing, and who works, as well as dies, in order that we may be saved.

And, O brethren! think of the contrast between what Christ has done to save us, and what we do to secure and appropriate that salvation! He toiled all His days, buying our peace with His life, going down into the mine and bringing up the jewels at the cost of His own precious blood. And you and I stand with folded arms, too apathetic to take the rich treasures that are freely given to us of God! He has done everything, that we may have nothing to do, and we will not even put out our slack hands to clasp the grace purchased by His blood, and commended by His toil! 'Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.'

24)Mark 4:37

Mark

THE STORM STILLED

Mar. 4:35.

Mark seldom dates his incidents, but he takes pains to tell us that this run across the lake closed a day of labour, Jesus was wearied, and felt the need of rest, He had been pressed on all day by ‘a very great multitude,’ and felt the need of solitude. He could not land from the boat which had been His pulpit, for that would have plunged Him into the thick of the crowd, and so the only way to get away from the throng was to cross the lake. But even there He was followed; ‘other boats were with Him.’

I. The first point to note is the wearied sleeper.

The disciples ‘take Him, . . . even as He was,’ without preparation or delay, the object being simply to get away as quickly as might be, so great was His fatigue and longing for quiet. We almost see the hurried starting and the intrusive followers scrambling into the little skiffs on the beach and making after Him. The ‘multitude’ delights to push itself into the private hours of its heroes, and is devoured with rude curiosity. There was a leather, or perhaps wooden, movable seat in the stern for the steersman, on which a wearied-out man might lay his head, while his body was stretched in the bottom of the boat. A hard ‘pillow’ indeed, which only exhaustion could make comfortable! But it was soft enough for the worn-out Christ, who had apparently flung Himself down in sheer tiredness as soon as they set sail. How real such a small detail makes the transcendent mystery of the Incarnation! Jesus is our pattern in small common things as in great ones, and among the sublimities of character set forth in Him as our example, let us not forget that the homely virtue of hard work is also included. Jonah slept in a storm the sleep of a skulking sluggard, Jesus slept the sleep of a wearied labourer.

II. The next point is the terrified disciples.

The evening was coming on, and, as often on a lake set among hills, the wind rose as the sun sank behind the high land on the western shore astern. The fishermen disciples were used to such squalls, and, at first, would probably let their sail down, and pull so as to keep the boat’s head to the wind. But things grew worse, and when the crazy, undecked craft began to fill and get water-logged, they grew alarmed. The squall was fiercer than usual, and must have been pretty bad to have frightened such seasoned hands. They awoke Jesus, and there is a touch of petulant rebuke in their appeal, and of a sailor’s impatience at a landsman lying sound asleep while the sweat is running down their faces with their hard pulling. It is to Mark that we owe our knowledge of that accent of complaint in their words, for he alone gives their ‘Carest Thou not?’

But it is not for us to fling stones at them, seeing that we also often may catch ourselves thinking that Jesus has gone to sleep when storms come on the Church or on ourselves, and that He is ignorant of, or indifferent to, our plight. But though the disciples were wrong in their fright, and not altogether right in the tone of their appeal to Jesus, they were supremely right in that they did appeal to Him. Fear which drives us to Jesus is not all wrong. The cry to Him, even though it is the cry of unnecessary terror, brings Him to His feet for our help.

III. The next point is the word of power.

Again we have to thank Mark for the very words, so strangely, calmly authoritative. May we take ‘Peace!’ as spoken to the howling wind, bidding it to silence; and ‘Be still!’ as addressed to the tossing waves, smoothing them to a calm plain? At all events, the two things to lay to heart are that Jesus here exercises the divine prerogative of controlling matter by the bare expression of His will, and that this divine attribute was exercised by the wearied man, who, a moment before, had been sleeping the sleep of human exhaustion. The marvellous combination of apparent opposites, weakness, and divine omnipotence, which yet do not clash, nor produce an incredible monster of a being, but coalesce in perfect harmony, is a feat beyond the reach of the loftiest creative imagination. If the Evangelists are not simple biographers, telling what eyes have seen and hands have handled, they have beaten the greatest poets and dramatists at their own weapons, and have accomplished ‘things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.’

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25)Mark 4:38

Mark

THE STORM STILLED

THE TOILING CHRIST

Mar. 4:36, Mar. 4:38.

Among the many loftier characteristics belonging to Christ's life and work, there is a very homely one which is often lost sight of; and that is, the amount of hard physical exertion, prolonged even to fatigue and exhaustion, which He endured.

Christ is our pattern in a great many other things more impressive and more striking; and He is our pattern in this, that 'in the sweat of His brow' He did His work, and knew not only what it was to suffer, but what it was to toil for man's salvation. And, perhaps, if we thought a little more than we do of such a prosaic characteristic of His life as that, it might invest it with some more reality for us, besides teaching us other large and important lessons.

I have thrown together these two clauses for our text now, simply for the sake of that one feature which they both portray so strikingly.

'They took Him even as He was in the ship.' Now many expositors suppose that in the very form of that phrase there is suggested the extreme of weariness and exhaustion which He suffered, after the hard day's toil. Whether that be so or no, the swiftness of the move to the little boat, although there was nothing in the nature of danger or of imperative duty to hurry Him away, and His going on board without a moment's preparation, leaving the crowd on the beach, seem most naturally accounted for by supposing that He had come to the last point of physical endurance, and that His frame, worn out by the hard day’s work, needed one thing-rest.

And so, the next that we see of Him is that, as soon as He gets into the ship He falls fast asleep on the wooden pillow-a hard bed for His head!-in the stern of the little fishing boat, and there He lies so tired-let us put it into plain prose and strip away the false veil of big words with which we invest that nature-so tired that the storm does not awake Him; and they have to come to Him, and lay their hands upon Him, and say to Him, ‘Master, carest Thou not that we perish?’ before compassion again beat back fatigue, and quickened Him for fresh exertions.

This, then, is the one lesson which I wish to consider now, and there are three points which I deal with in pursuance of my task. I wish to point out a little more in detail the signs that we have in the Gospels of this characteristic of Christ’s work-the toilsomeness of His service; then to consider, secondly, the motives which He Himself tells us impelled to such service; and then, finally, the worth which that toil bears for us.

I. First, then, let me point out some of the significant hints which the gospel records give us of the toilsomeness of Christ’s service.

Now we are principally indebted for these to this Gospel by Mark, which ancient tradition has set forth as being especially and eminently the ‘Gospel of the Servant of God,’ therein showing a very accurate conception of its distinguishing characteristics. Just as Matthew’s Gospel is the Gospel of the King, regal in tone from beginning to end; just as Luke’s is the Gospel of the Man, human and universal in its tone; just as John’s is the Gospel of the Eternal Word, so Mark’s is the Gospel of the Servant. The inscription written over it all might be, ‘Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God.’ ‘Behold my Servant whom I uphold.’

And if you will take this briefest of all the Gospels, and read it over from that point of view, you will be surprised to discover what a multitude of minute traits make up the general impression, and what a unity is thereby breathed into the narrative.

For instance, did you ever observe the peculiar beginning of this Gospel? There are here none of the references to the prophecies of the King, no tracing of His birth through the royal stock to the great progenitor of the nation, no adoration by the Eastern sages, which we find in Matthew, no miraculous birth nor growing childhood as in Luke, no profound unveiling of the union of the Word with God before the world was, as in John; but the narrative begins with His baptism, and passes at once to the story of His work. The same ruling idea accounts for the uniform omission of the title 'Lord' which in Mark's Gospel is never applied to Christ until after the resurrection. There is only one apparent exception, and there good authorities pronounce the word to be spurious. Even in reports of conversations which are also given in the other Gospels, and where 'Lord' occurs, Mark, of set purpose, omits it, as if its presence would disturb the unity of the impression which he desires to leave. You will find the investigation of the omissions in this Gospel full of interest, and remarkably tending to confirm the accuracy of the view which regards it as the Gospel of the Servant.

Notice then these traits of His service which it brings out.

The first of them I would suggest is-how distinctly it gives the impression of swift, strenuous work. The narrative is brief and condensed. We feel, all through these earlier chapters, at all events, the presence of the pressing crowd coming to Him and desiring to be healed, and but a word can be spared for each incident as the story hurries on, trying to keep pace with His rapid service of quick-springing compassion and undelaying help. There is one word which is reiterated over and over again in these earlier chapters, remarkably conveying this impression of haste and strenuous work; Mark's favourite word is 'straightway,' 'immediately,' 'forthwith,' 'anon,' which are all translations of one expression. You will find, if you glance over the first, second, or third chapters at your leisure, that it comes in at every turn. Take these instances which strike one's eye at the moment. '*Straightway* they forsook their nets'; '*Straightway* He entered into the synagogue'; '*Immediately* His fame spread abroad throughout all the region'; '*Forthwith* they entered into the house of Simon's mother'; '*Anon*, they tell Him of her'; '*Immediately* the fever left her.' And so it goes on through the whole story, a picture of a constant succession of rapid acts of mercy and love. The story seems, as it were, to pant with haste to keep up with Him as He moves among men, swift as a sunbeam, and continuous in the outflow of His love as are these unceasing rays.

Again, we see in Christ's service, toil prolonged to the point of actual physical exhaustion. The narrative before us is the most striking instance of that which we meet with. It had been a long wearying day of work. According to this chapter, the whole of the profound parables concerning the kingdom of God had immediately preceded the embarkation. But even these, with their explanation, had been but a part of that day's labours. For, in Matthew's account of them, we are told that they were spoken on the same day as that on which His mother and brethren came desiring to speak with Him,-or, as we elsewhere read, with hostile intentions to lay hold on Him as mad and needing restraint. And that event, which we may well believe touched deep and painful chords of feeling in His human heart, and excited emotions more exhausting than much physical effort, occurred in the midst of an earnest and prolonged debate with emissaries from Jerusalem, in the course of which He spoke the solemn words concerning blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, and Satan casting out Satan, and poured forth some of His most terrible warnings, and some of His most beseeching entreaties. No wonder that, after such a day, the hard pillow of the boat was a soft resting-place for His wearied head; no wonder that, as the evening quiet settled down on the mountain-girdled lake, and the purple shadows of the hills stretched athwart the water, He slept; no wonder that the storm which followed the sunset did not wake Him; and beautiful, that wearied as He was, the disciples' cry at once rouses Him, and the fatigue which shows His manhood gives place to the divine energy which says unto the sea, 'Peace! be still.' The lips which, a moment before, had been parted in the soft breathing of wearied sleep, now open to utter the omnipotent word-so wonderfully does He blend the human and the divine, 'the form of a servant' and the nature of God.

We see, in Christ, toil that puts aside the claims of physical wants. Twice in this Gospel we read of this 'The multitude cometh together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread.' 'There were many coming, and they had no leisure so much as to eat.'

We see in Christ’s service a love which is at every man’s beck and call, a toil cheerfully rendered at the most unreasonable and unseasonable times. As I said a moment or two ago, this Gospel makes one feel, as none other of these narratives do, the pressure of that ever-present multitude, the whirling excitement that eddied round the calm centre. It tells us, for instance, more than once, how Christ, wearied with His toil, feeling in body and in spirit the need of rest and still communion, withdrew Himself from the crowd. He once departed alone that He might seek God in prayer; once He went with His wearied disciples apart into a desert place to rest awhile. On both occasions the retirement is broken in upon before it is well begun. The sigh of relief in the momentary rest is scarcely drawn, and the burden laid down for an instant, when it has to be lifted again. His solitary prayer is interrupted by the disciples, with ‘All men seek for Thee,’ and, without a murmur or a pause, He buckles to His work again, and says, ‘Let us go into the next towns that I may preach there also; for therefore am I sent.’

When He would carry His wearied disciples with Him for a brief breathing time to the other side of the sea, and get away from the thronging crowd, ‘the people saw Him departing, and ran afoot out of all cities,’ and, making their way round the head of the lake, were all there at the landing place before Him. Instead of seclusion and repose He found the same throng and bustle. Here they were, most of them from mere curiosity, some of them no doubt with deeper feelings; here they were, with their diseased and their demoniacs, and as soon as His foot touches the shore He is in the midst of it all again. And He meets it, not with impatience at this rude intrusion on His privacy, not with refusals to help. Only one emotion filled His heart. He forgot all about weariness, and hunger, and retirement, and ‘He was moved with compassion towards them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd, and He began to teach them many things.’ Such a picture may well shame our languid, self-indulgent service, may stir us to imitation and to grateful praise.

There is only one other point which I touch upon for a moment, as showing the toil of Christ, and that is drawn from another Gospel. Did you ever notice the large space occupied in Matthew’s Gospel by the record of the last day of His public ministry, and how much of all that we know of His mission and message, and the future of the world and of all men, we owe to the teaching of these four-and-twenty hours? Let me put together, in a word, what happened on that day.

It included the conversation with the chief priests and elders about the baptism of John, the parable of the householder that planted a vineyard and digged a winepress, the parables of the kingdom of heaven, the controversy with the Herodians about the tribute money, the conversation with the Sadducees about the resurrection, with the Pharisee about the great commandment in the law, the silencing of the Pharisees by pointing to the 110th Psalm, the warning to the multitude against the scribes and Pharisees who were hypocrites, protracted and prolonged up to that wail of disappointed love, ‘Behold! your house is left unto you desolate.’ And, as though that had not been enough for one day, when He is going home from the Temple to find, for a night, in that quiet little home of Bethany, the rest that He wants, as He rests wearily on the slopes of Olivet, the disciples come to Him, ‘Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of Thy coming?’ and there follows all that wonderful prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world, the parable of the fig tree, the warning not to suffer the thief to come, and the promise of reward for the faithful and wise servant, the parable of the ten virgins, and in all probability the parable of the king with the five talents; and the words, that might be written in letters of fire, that tell us the final course of all things, and the judgment of life eternal and death everlasting! All this was the work of ‘one of the days of the Son of Man.’ Of Him it was prophesied long ago, ‘For Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest’; and His life on earth, as well as His life in heaven, fulfils the prediction-the one by the toilsomeness of His service, the other by the unceasing energy of His exalted power. He toiled unwearied here, He works unresting there.

II. In the second place, let me ask you to notice how we get from our Lord’s own words a glimpse into the springs of this wonderful activity.

There are three points which distinctly come out in various places in the Gospels as His motives for such unresting sedulousness and continuance of toil. The first is conveyed by such words as these: ‘I must work the works of Him that sent Me.’ ‘Let us preach to other cities, also: for therefore am I sent.’ ‘Wist ye not that I must be about My Father’s business?’ ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work.’ All these express one thought. Christ lived and toiled, and bore weariness and exhaustion, and counted every moment as worthy to be garnered up and precious, as to be filled with deeds of love and kindness, because wherever He went, and to whatsoever He set His hand, He had the one consciousness of a great task laid upon Him by a loving Father whom He loved, and whom, therefore, it was His joy and His blessedness to serve.

And, remember that this motive made the life homogeneous-of a piece. In all the variety of service, one spirit was expressed, and, therefore, the service was one. No matter whether He were speaking words of grace or of rebuke, or working works of power and love, or simply looking a look of kindness on some outcast, or taking a little child in His arms, or stilling with the same arms outstretched the wild uproar of the storm-it was all the same. To Him life was all one. There was nothing great, nothing small; nothing so insignificant that it could be done negligently; nothing so hard that it surpassed His power. The one motive made all duties equal; obedience to the Father called forth His whole energy at every moment. To Him life was not divided into a set of tasks of varying importance, some of which could be accomplished with a finger’s touch, and some of which demanded a dead lift and strain of all the muscles. But whatsoever His hand found to do He did with His might and that because He felt, be it great or little, that it all came, if I may so say, into the day’s work, and all was equally great because the Father that sent Him had laid it upon Him.

There is one thing that makes life mighty in its veriest trifles, worthy in its smallest deeds, that delivers it from monotony, that delivers it from insignificance. All will be great, and nothing will be overpowering, when, living in communion with Jesus Christ, we say as He says, ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me.’

And then, still further, another of the secret springs that move His unwearied activity, His heroism of toil, is the thought expressed in such words as these:-’While I am in the world I am the light of the world.’ ‘I must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work.’

Jesus Christ manifested on earth performs indeed a work-the mightiest which He came to do-which was done precisely then when the night did come-namely, the work of His death, which is the atonement and ‘propitiation for the sins of the world.’ And, further, the ‘night, when no man can work,’ was not the end of His activity for us; for He carries on His work of intercession and rule, His work of bestowing the gifts purchased by His blood, amidst the glories of heaven; and that perpetual application and dispensing of the blessed issues of His death He has Himself represented as greater than the works, to which His death put a period, in which He healed the bodies and spoke to the hearts of those who heard, and lived a perfect life here upon this sinful earth. But yet even He recognised the brief hour of sunny life as being an hour that must be filled with service, and recognised the fact that there was a task that He could only do when He lived the life of a man upon earth. And so, if I might so say, He was a miser of the moments, and carefully husbanding and garnering up every capacity and every opportunity. He toiled with the toil of a man who has a task before him, that must be done before the clock strikes six, and who sees the hands move over the dial, and by every glance that he casts at it is stimulated to intenser service and to harder toil. Christ felt that impulse to service which we all ought to feel-’The night cometh; let me fill the day with work.’

And then there is a final motive which I need barely touch. He was impelled to His sedulous service not only by loving, filial obedience to the divine law, and by the consciousness of a limited and defined period into which all the activity of one specific kind must be condensed, but also by the motive expressed in such words as these, in which this Gospel is remarkably rich, ‘And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth His hand and touched him.’ Thus, along with that supreme consecration, along with that swift ardour that will fill the brief hours ere nightfall with service, there was the constant pity of that beating heart that moved the diligent hand. Christ, if I may so say, could not help working as hard as He did, so long as there were so many men round about Him that needed His sympathy and His aid.

III. So much then for the motives; and now a word finally as to the worth of this toil for us.

I do not stay to elucidate one consideration that might be suggested, viz., how precious a proof it is of Christ's humanity. We find it easier to bring home His true manhood to our thoughts, when we remember that He, like us, knew the pressure of physical fatigue. Not only was it a human spirit that wept and rejoiced, that was moved with compassion, and sometimes with indignation, but it was a human body, bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, that, wearied with walking in the burning sun, sat on the margin of the well; that was worn out and needed to sleep; that knew hunger, as is testified by His sending the disciples to buy meat; that was thirsty, as is testified by His saying, 'Give Me to drink.' The true corporeal manhood of Jesus Christ, and the fact that that manhood is the tabernacle of God-without these two facts the morality and the teaching of Christianity swing loose *in vacuo*, and have no holdfast in history, nor any leverage by which they can move men's hearts! But, when we know that the common necessities of fatigue, and hunger, and thirst belonged to Him, then we gratefully and reverently say, 'Forasmuch as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, he also Himself took part of the same.'

This fact of Christ's toil is of worth to us in other ways.

Is not that hard work of Jesus Christ a lesson for us, brethren, in our daily tasks and toils-a lesson which, if it were learnt and practised, would make a difference not only on the intensity but upon the spirit with which we labour? A great deal of fine talk is indulged in about the dignity of labour and the like. Labour is a curse until communion with God in it, which is possible through Jesus Christ, makes it a blessing and a joy. Christ, in the sweat of His brow, won our salvation; and our work only becomes great when it is work done in, and for, and by Him.

And what do we learn from His example? We learn these things: the plain lesson, first,-task all your capacity and use every minute in doing the duty that is plainly set before you to do. Christian virtues are sometimes thought to be unreal and unworldly things. I was going to say the root of them, certainly the indispensable accompaniment for them all, is the plain, prosaic, most unromantic virtue of hard work.

And beyond that, what do we learn? The lesson that most toilers in England want. There is no need to preach to the most of us to work any harder, in one department of work at any rate; but there is great need to remind us of what it was that at once stirred Jesus Christ into energy and kept Him calm in the midst of labour-and that was that everything was equally and directly referred to His Father’s will. People talk nowadays about ‘missions.’ The only thing worth giving that name to is the ‘mission’ which *He* gives us, who sends us into the world not to do our own will, but to do the will of Him that sent us. There is a fatal monotony in all our lives-a terrible amount of hard drudgery in them all. We have to set ourselves morning after morning to tasks that look to be utterly insignificant and disproportionate to the power that we bring to bear upon them, so that men are like elephants picking up pins with their trunks; and yet we may make all our commonplace drudgery great, and wondrous, and fair, and full of help and profit to our souls, if, over it all-our shops, our desks, our ledgers, our studies, our kitchens, and our nurseries-we write, ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me.’ We may bring the greatest principles to bear upon the smallest duties.

What more do we learn from Christ’s toil? The possible harmony of communion and service. His labour did not break His fellowship with God. He was ever in the ‘secret place of the Most High,’ even while He was in the midst of crowds. He has taught us that it is possible to be in the ‘house of the Lord’ all the days of our lives, and by His ensample, as by His granted Spirit, encourages us to aim at so serving that we shall never cease to behold, and so beholding that we shall never cease to serve our Father. The life of contemplation and the life of practice, so hard to harmonise in our experience, perfectly meet in Christ.

What more do we learn from our Lord’s toils? The cheerful constant postponement of our own ease, wishes, or pleasure to the call of the Father’s voice, or to the echo of it in the sighing of such as be sorrowful. I have already referred to the instances of His putting aside His need for rest, and His desire for still fellowship with God, at the call of whoever needed Him. It was the same always. If a Nicodemus comes by night, if a despairing father forces his way into the house of feasting, if another suppliant finds Him in a house, where He would have remained hid, if they come running to Him in the way, or drop down their sick before Him through the very roof-it is all the same. He never thinks of Himself, but gladly addresses Himself to heal and bless. How such an example followed would change our lives and amaze and shake the world!-'I come, not to do Mine own will.' 'Even Christ pleased not Himself.'

But that toil is not only a pattern for our lives; it is an appeal to our grateful hearts. Surely a toiling Christ is as marvellous as a dying Christ. And the immensity and the purity and the depth of His love are shown no less by this, that He labours to accomplish it, than by this, that He dies to complete it. He will not give blessings which depend upon mere will, and can be bestowed as a king might fling a largess to a beggar without effort, and with scarce a thought, but blessings which He Himself has to agonise and to energise, and to lead a life of obedience, and to die a death of shame, in order to procure. 'I will not offer burnt-offering to God of that which doth cost me nothing,' says the grateful heart. But in so saying it is but following in the track of the loving Christ, who will not give unto man that which cost Him nothing, and who works, as well as dies, in order that we may be saved.

And, O brethren! think of the contrast between what Christ has done to save us, and what we do to secure and appropriate that salvation! He toiled all His days, buying our peace with His life, going down into the mine and bringing up the jewels at the cost of His own precious blood. And you and I stand with folded arms, too apathetic to take the rich treasures that are freely given to us of God! He has done everything, that we may have nothing to do, and we will not even put out our slack hands to clasp the grace purchased by His blood, and commended by His toil! 'Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.'

26)Mark 4:39-41

Mark

THE STORM STILLED

Mar. 4:35.

Mark seldom dates his incidents, but he takes pains to tell us that this run across the lake closed a day of labour, Jesus was wearied, and felt the need of rest, He had been pressed on all day by ‘a very great multitude,’ and felt the need of solitude. He could not land from the boat which had been His pulpit, for that would have plunged Him into the thick of the crowd, and so the only way to get away from the throng was to cross the lake. But even there He was followed; ‘other boats were with Him.’

I. The first point to note is the wearied sleeper.

The disciples ‘take Him, . . . even as He was,’ without preparation or delay, the object being simply to get away as quickly as might be, so great was His fatigue and longing for quiet. We almost see the hurried starting and the intrusive followers scrambling into the little skiffs on the beach and making after Him. The ‘multitude’ delights to push itself into the private hours of its heroes, and is devoured with rude curiosity. There was a leather, or perhaps wooden, movable seat in the stern for the steersman, on which a wearied-out man might lay his head, while his body was stretched in the bottom of the boat. A hard ‘pillow’ indeed, which only exhaustion could make comfortable! But it was soft enough for the worn-out Christ, who had apparently flung Himself down in sheer tiredness as soon as they set sail. How real such a small detail makes the transcendent mystery of the Incarnation! Jesus is our pattern in small common things as in great ones, and among the sublimities of character set forth in Him as our example, let us not forget that the homely virtue of hard work is also included. Jonah slept in a storm the sleep of a skulking sluggard, Jesus slept the sleep of a wearied labourer.

II. The next point is the terrified disciples.

The evening was coming on, and, as often on a lake set among hills, the wind rose as the sun sank behind the high land on the western shore astern. The fishermen disciples were used to such squalls, and, at first, would probably let their sail down, and pull so as to keep the boat’s head to the wind. But things grew worse, and when the crazy, undecked craft began to fill and get water-logged, they grew alarmed. The squall was fiercer than usual, and must have been pretty bad to have frightened such seasoned hands. They awoke Jesus, and there is a touch of petulant rebuke in their appeal, and of a sailor’s impatience at a landsman lying sound asleep while the sweat is running down their faces with their hard pulling. It is to Mark that we owe our knowledge of that accent of complaint in their words, for he alone gives their ‘Carest Thou not?’

But it is not for us to fling stones at them, seeing that we also often may catch ourselves thinking that Jesus has gone to sleep when storms come on the Church or on ourselves, and that He is ignorant of, or indifferent to, our plight. But though the disciples were wrong in their fright, and not altogether right in the tone of their appeal to Jesus, they were supremely right in that they did appeal to Him. Fear which drives us to Jesus is not all wrong. The cry to Him, even though it is the cry of unnecessary terror, brings Him to His feet for our help.

III. The next point is the word of power.

Again we have to thank Mark for the very words, so strangely, calmly authoritative. May we take ‘Peace!’ as spoken to the howling wind, bidding it to silence; and ‘Be still!’ as addressed to the tossing waves, smoothing them to a calm plain? At all events, the two things to lay to heart are that Jesus here exercises the divine prerogative of controlling matter by the bare expression of His will, and that this divine attribute was exercised by the wearied man, who, a moment before, had been sleeping the sleep of human exhaustion. The marvellous combination of apparent opposites, weakness, and divine omnipotence, which yet do not clash, nor produce an incredible monster of a being, but coalesce in perfect harmony, is a feat beyond the reach of the loftiest creative imagination. If the Evangelists are not simple biographers, telling what eyes have seen and hands have handled, they have beaten the greatest poets and dramatists at their own weapons, and have accomplished ‘things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.’

A word of loving rebuke and encouragement follows. Matthew puts it before the stilling of the storm, but Mark’s order seems the more exact. How often we too are taught the folly of our fears by experiencing some swift, easy deliverance! Blessed be God! He does not rebuke us first and help us afterwards, but rebukes by helping. What *could* the disciples say, as they sat there in the great calm, in answer to Christ’s question, ‘Why are ye fearful?’ Fear can give no reasonable account of itself, if Christ is in the boat. If our faith unites us to Jesus, there is nothing that need shake our courage. If He is ‘our fear and our dread,’ we shall not need to ‘fear their fear,’ who have not the all-conquering Christ to fight for them.

‘Well roars the storm to them who hear
A deeper voice across the storm.’

Jesus wondered at the slowness of the disciples to learn their lesson, and the wonder was reflected in the sad question, ‘Have ye not *yet* faith?’-not yet, after so many miracles, and living beside Me for so long? How much more keen the edge of that question is when addressed to us, who know Him so much better, and have centuries of His working for His servants to look back on. When, in the tempests that sweep over our own lives, we sometimes pass into a great calm as suddenly as if we had entered the centre of a typhoon, we wonder unbelievingly instead of saying, out of a faith nourished by experience, ‘It is just like Him.’

27)Mark 5:1-17

Mark

THE LORD OF DEMONS

Mar. 5:1 - Mar. 5:20.

The awful picture of this demoniac is either painted from life, or it is one of the most wonderful feats of the poetic imagination. Nothing more terrible, vivid, penetrating, and real was ever conceived by the greatest creative genius. If it is not simply a portrait, Æ³chylus or Dante might own the artist for a brother. We see the quiet landing on the eastern shore, and almost hear the yells that broke the silence as the fierce, demon-ridden man hurried to meet them, perhaps with hostile purpose. The dreadful characteristics of his state are sharply and profoundly signalised. He lives up in the rock-hewn tombs which overhang the beach; for all that belongs to corruption and death is congenial to the subjects of that dark kingdom of evil. He has superhuman strength, and has known no gentle efforts to reclaim, but only savage attempts to ‘tame’ by force, as if he were a beast. Fetters and manacles have been snapped like rushes by him. Restless, sleepless, hating men, he has made the night hideous with his wild shrieks, and fled, swift as the wind, from place to place among the lonely hills. Insensible to pain, and deriving some dreadful satisfaction from his own wounds, he has gashed himself with splinters of rock, and howled, in a delirium of pain and pleasure, at the sight of his own blood. His sharpened eyesight sees Jesus from afar, and, with the disordered haste and preternatural agility which marked all his movements, he runs towards Him. Such is the introduction to the narrative of the cure. It paints for us not merely a maniac, but a demoniac. He is not a man at war with himself, but a man at war with other beings, who have forced themselves into his house of life. At least, so says Mark, and so said Jesus; and if the story before us is true, its subsequent incidents compel the acceptance of that explanation. What went into the herd of swine? The narrative of the restoration of the sufferer has a remarkable feature, which may help to mark off its stages. The word ‘besought’ occurs four times in it, and we may group the details round each instance.

I. The demons beseeching Jesus through the man’s voice.

He was, in the exact sense of the word, *distracted*-drawn two ways. For it would seem to have been the self in him that ran to Jesus and fell at His feet, as if in some dim hope of rescue; but it is the demons in him that speak, though the voice be his. They force him to utter their wishes, their terrors, their loathing of Christ, though he says ‘I’ and ‘me’ as if these were his own. That horrible condition of a double, or, as in this case, a manifold personality, speaking through human organs, and overwhelming the proper self, mysterious as it is, is the very essence of the awful misery of the demoniacs. Unless we are resolved to force meanings of our own on Scripture, I do not see how we can avoid recognising this. What black thoughts, seething with all rebellious agitation, the reluctant lips have to utter! The self-drawn picture of the demoniac nature is as vivid as, and more repellent than, the Evangelist’s terrible portrait of the outward man. Whatever dumb yearning after Jesus may have been in the oppressed human consciousness, his words are a shriek of terror and recoil. The mere presence of Christ lashes the demons into paroxysms: but before the man spoke, Christ had spoken His stern command to come forth. He is answered by this howl of fear and hate. Clear recognition of Christ's person is in it, and not difficult to explain, if we believe that others than the sufferer looked through his wild eyes, and spoke in his loud cry. They know Him who had conquered their prince long ago; if the existence of fallen spirits be admitted, their knowledge is no difficulty.

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II. The demons beseeching Jesus without disguise.

There seems to be intended a distinction between ‘he besought,’ in Mar. 5:10, and they ‘besought,’ in Mar. 5:12. Whether we are to suppose that, in the latter case, the man’s voice was used or no, the second request was more plainly not his, but theirs. It looks as if, somehow, the command was already beginning to take effect, and ‘he’ and ‘they’ were less closely intertwined. It is easy to ridicule this part of the incident, and as easy to say that it is incredible; but it is wiser to remember the narrow bounds of our knowledge of the unseen world of being, and to be cautious in asserting that there is nothing beyond the horizon but vacuity. If there be unclean spirits, we know too little about them to say what is possible. Only this is plain-that the difficulty of supposing them to inhabit swine is less, if there be any difference, than of supposing them to inhabit men, since the animal nature, especially of such an animal, would correspond to their impurity, and be open to their driving. The house and the tenant are well matched. But why should the expelled demons seek such an abode? It would appear that anywhere was better than ‘the abyss,’ and that unless they could find some creature to enter, thither they must go. It would seem, too, that there was no other land open to them-for the prayer on the man’s lips had been not to send them ‘out of the country,’ as if that was the only country on earth open to them. That makes for the opinion that demoniacal possession was the dark shadow which attended, for reasons not discoverable by us, the light of Christ’s coming, and was limited in time and space by His earthly manifestation. But on such matters there is not ground enough for certainty.

Another difficulty has been raised as to Christ’s right to destroy property. It was very questionable property, if the owners were Jews. Jesus owns all things, and has the right and the power to use them as He will; and if the purposes served by the destruction of animal life or property are beneficent and lofty, it leaves no blot on His goodness. He used His miraculous power twice for destruction-once on a fig-tree, once on a herd of swine. In both cases, the good sought was worth the loss. Whether was it better that the herd should live and fatten, or that a man should be delivered, and that he and they who saw should be assured of his deliverance and of Christ’s power? ‘Is not a man much better than a sheep,’ and much more than a pig? They are born to be killed, and nobody cries out cruelty. Why should not Christ have sanctioned this slaughter, if it helped to steady the poor man’s nerves, or to establish the reality of possession and of his deliverance? Notice that the drowning of the herd does not appear to have entered into the calculations of the unclean spirits. They desired houses to live in after their expulsion, and for them to plunge the swine into the lake would have defeated their purpose. The stampede was an unexpected effect of the commingling of the demonic with the animal nature, and outwitted the demons. ‘The devil is an ass.’ There is a lower depth than the animal nature; and even swine feel uncomfortable when the demon is in them, and in their panic rush anywhere to get rid of the incubus, and, before they know, find themselves struggling in the lake. ‘Which things are an allegory.’

III. The terrified Gerasenes beseeching Jesus to leave them.

They had rather have their swine than their Saviour, and so, though they saw the demoniac sitting, ‘clothed, and in his right mind,’ at the feet of Jesus, they in turn beseech that He should take Himself away. Fear and selfishness prompted the prayer. The communities on the eastern side of the lake were largely Gentile; and, no doubt, these people knew that they did many worse things than swine-keeping, and may have been afraid that some more of their wealth would have to go the same road as the herd. They did not want instruction, nor feel that they needed a healer. Were their prayers so very unlike the wishes of many of us? Is there nobody nowadays unwilling to let the thought of Christ into his life, because he feels an uneasy suspicion that, if Christ comes, a good deal will have to go? How many trades and schemes of life really beseech Jesus to go away and leave them in peace! And He goes away. The tragedy of life is that we have the awful power of severing ourselves from His influence. Christ commands unclean spirits, but He can only plead with hearts. And if we bid Him depart, He is fain to leave us for the time to the indulgence of our foolish and wicked schemes. If any man open, He comes in-oh, how gladly I but if any man slam the door in His face, He can but tarry without and knock. Sometimes His withdrawing does more than His loudest knocking; and sometimes they who repelled Him as He stood on the beach call Him back, as He moves away to the boat. It is in the hope that they may, that He goes.

IV. The restored man’s beseeching to abide with Christ.

No wonder that the spirit of this man, all tremulous with the conflict, and scarcely able yet to realise his deliverance, clung to Christ, and besought Him to let him continue by His side. Conscious weakness, dread of some recurrence of the inward hell, and grateful love, prompted the prayer. The prayer itself was partly right and partly wrong. Right, in clinging to Jesus as the only refuge from the past misery; wrong, in clinging to His visible presence as the only way of keeping near Him. Therefore, He who had permitted the wish of the demons, and complied with the entreaties of the terrified mob, did *not* yield to the prayer, throbbing with love and conscious weakness. Strange that Jesus should put aside a hand that sought to grasp His in order to be safe; but His refusal was, as always, the gift of something better, and He ever disappoints the wish in order more truly to satisfy the need. The best defence against the return of the evil spirits was in occupation. It is the ‘empty’ house which invites them back. Nothing was so likely to confirm and steady the convalescent mind as to dwell on the fact of his deliverance. Therefore he is sent to proclaim it to friends who had known his dreadful state, and amidst old associations which would help him to knit his new life to his old, and to treat his misery as a parenthesis. Jesus commanded silence or speech according to the need of the subjects of His miracles. For some, silence was best, to deepen the impression of blessing received; for others, speech was best, to engage and so to fortify the mind against relapse.

28)Mark 5:18-19

Mark

THE LORD OF DEMONS

A REFUSED REQUEST

Mar. 5:18 - Mar. 5:19.

There are three requests, singularly contrasted with each other, made to Christ in the course of this miracle of healing the Gadarene demoniac. The evil spirits ask to be permitted to go into the swine; the men of the country, caring more for their swine than their Saviour, beg Him to take Himself away, and relieve them of His unwelcome presence; the demoniac beseeches Him to be allowed to stop beside Him. Two of the requests are granted; one is refused. The one that was refused is the one that we might have expected to be granted.

Christ forces Himself upon no man, and so, when they besought Him to go, He went, and took salvation with Him in the boat. Christ withdraws Himself from no man who desires Him. ‘Howbeit Jesus suffered him not, and said, Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee.’

Now, do you not think that if we put these three petitions and their diverse answers together, and look especially at this last one, where the natural wish was refused, we ought to be able to learn some lessons? The first thing I would notice is, the clinging of the healed man to his Healer.

Think of him half an hour before, a raging maniac; now all at once conscious of a strange new sanity and calmness; instead of lashing himself about, and cutting himself with stones, and rending his chains and fetters, ‘sitting clothed, and in his right mind,’ at the feet of Jesus. No wonder that he feared that when the Healer went the demons would come back-no wonder that he besought Him that he might still keep within that quiet sacred circle of light which streamed from His presence, across the border of which no evil thing could pass. Love bound him to his Benefactor; dread made him shudder at the thought of losing his sole Protector, and being again left, in that partly heathen land, solitary, to battle with the strong foes that had so long rioted in his house of life. And so ‘he begged that he might be with Him.’

That poor heathen man-for you must remember that this miracle was not wrought on the sacred soil of Palestine-that poor heathen man, just having caught a glimpse of how calm and blessed life might be, is the type of us all. And there is something wrong with us if our love does not, like his, desire above all things the presence of Jesus Christ; and if our consciousness of impotence does not, in like manner, drive us to long that our sole Deliverer shall not be far away from us. Merchant-ships in time of war, like a flock of timid birds, keep as near as they can to the armed convoy, for the only safety from the guns of the enemy’s cruisers is in keeping close to their strong protector. The traveller upon some rough, unknown road, in the dark, holds on by his guide’s skirts or hand, and feels that if he loses touch he loses the possibility of safety. A child clings to his parent when dangers are round him. The convalescent patient does not like to part with his doctor. And if we rightly learned who it is that has cured us, and what is the condition of our continuing whole and sound, like this man we shall pray that He may suffer us to be with Him. Fill the heart with Christ, and there is no room for the many evil spirits that make up the legion that torments it The empty heart invites the devils, and they come back, Even if it is ‘swept and garnished,’ and brought into respectability, propriety, and morality, they come back, There is only one way to keep them out; when the ark is in the Temple, Dagon will be lying, like the brute form that he is, a stump upon the threshold. The condition of our security is close contact with Jesus Christ. If we know the facts of life, the temptations that ring us round, the weakness of these wayward wills of ours, and the strength of this intrusive and masterful flesh and sense that we have to rule, we shall know and feel that our only safety is our Master’s presence.

Further, note the strange refusal.

Jesus Christ went through the world, or at least the little corner of it which His earthly career occupied, seeking for men that desired to have Him, and it is impossible that He should have put away any soul that desired to be present with Him. Yet, though His one aim was to draw men to Him, and the prospect that He should be able to exercise a stronger attraction over a wider area reconciled Him to the prospect of the Cross, so that He said in triumph, ‘I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me,’ he meets this heathen man, feeble in his crude and recent sanity, with a flat refusal. ‘He suffered him not.’ Most probably the reason for the strange and apparently anomalous dealing with such a desire was to be found in the man’s temperament. Most likely it was the best thing for *him* that he should stop quietly in his own house, and have no continuance of the excitement and perpetual change which would have necessarily been his lot if he had been allowed to go with Jesus Christ. We may be quite sure that when the Lord with one hand seemed to put him away, He was really, with a stronger attraction, drawing him to Himself; and that the peculiarity of the method of treatment was determined with exclusive reference to the real necessities of the person who was subject to it.

But yet, underlying the special case, and capable of being stated in the most general terms, lies this thought, that Jesus Christ’s presence, the substance of the demoniac’s desire, may be as completely, and, in some cases, will be more completely, realised amongst the secularities of ordinary life than amidst the sanctities of outward communion and companionship with Him. Jesus was beginning here to wean the man from his sensuous dependence upon His localised and material presence. It was good for him, and it is good for us all, to ‘feel our feet,’ so to speak. Responsibility laid, and felt to be laid, upon us is a steadying and ennobling influence. And it was better that the demoniac should learn to stand calmly, when apparently alone, than that he should childishly be relying on the mere external presence of his Deliverer.

Be sure of this, that when the Lord went away across the lake, He left His heart and His thoughts, and His care and His power over there, on the heathen side of the sea; and that when ‘the people thronged Him’ on the other side, and the poor woman pressed through the crowd, that virtue might come to her by her touch, virtue was at the same time raying out across the water to the solitary newly healed demoniac, to sustain him too.

And so we may all learn that we may have, and it depends upon ourselves whether we do or do not have, all protection all companionship, and all the sweetness of Christ's companionship and the security of Christ's protection just as completely when we are at home amongst our friends-that is to say, when we are about our daily work, and in the secularities of our calling or profession-as when we are in the 'secret place of the Most High' and holding fellowship with a present Christ. Oh, to carry Him with us into every duty, to realise Him in all circumstances, to see the light of His face shine amidst the darkness of calamity, and the pointing of His directing finger showing us our road amidst all perplexities of life! Brethren, that is possible. When Jesus Christ 'suffered him not to go with Him,' Jesus Christ stayed behind with the man.

Lastly, we have here the duty enjoined.

'Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee.' The man went home and translated the injunction into word and deed. As I said, the reason for the peculiarity of his treatment, in his request being refused, was probably his peculiar temperament. So again I would say the reason for the commandment laid upon him, which is also anomalous, was probably the peculiarity of his disposition. Usually our Lord was careful to enjoin silence upon those whom He benefited by His miraculous cures. That injunction of silence was largely owing to His desire not to create or fan the flame of popular excitement. But that risk was chiefly to be guarded against in the land of Israel, and here, where we have a miracle upon Gentile soil, there was not the same occasion for avoiding talk and notoriety.

But probably the main reason for the exceptional commandment to go and publish abroad what the Lord had done was to be found in the simple fact that this man's malady and his disposition were such that external work of some sort was the best thing to prevent him from relapsing into his former condition. His declaration to everybody of his cure would help to confirm his cure; and whilst he was speaking about being healed, he would more and more realise to himself that he was healed. Having work to do would take him out of himself, which no doubt was a great security against the recurrence of the evil from which he had been delivered. But however that may be, look at the plain lesson that lies here. Every healed man should be a witness to his Healer; and there is no better way of witnessing than by our lives, by the elevation manifested in our aims, by our aversion from all low, earthly, gross things, by the conspicuous-not made conspicuous by us, conspicuous because it cannot be hid-concentration and devotion, and unselfishness and Christlikeness of our daily lives to show that we are really healed. If we manifest these things in our conduct, then, when we say 'it was Jesus Christ that healed me,' people will be apt to believe us. But if this man had gone away into the mountains and amongst the tombs as he used to do, and had continued all the former characteristics of his devil-ridden life, who would have believed him when he talked about being healed? And who ought to believe you when you say, 'Christ is my Saviour,' if your lives are, to all outward seeming, exactly what they were before? The sphere in which the healed man's witness was to be borne tested the reality of his healing. 'Go home to thy friends, and tell *them*.' I wonder how many Christian professors there are who would be least easily believed by those who live in the same house with them, if they said that Jesus had cast their devils out of them. It is a great mistake to take recent converts, especially if they have been very profligate beforehand, and to hawk them about the country as trophies of God's converting power. Let them stop at home, and bethink themselves, and get sober and confirmed, and let their changed lives prove the reality of Christ's healing power. They can speak to some purpose after that.

Further, remember that there is no better way for keeping out devils than working for Jesus Christ. Many a man finds that the true cure-say, for instance, of doubts that buzz about him and disturb him, is to go away and talk to some one about his Saviour. Work for Jesus amongst people that do not know Him is a wonderful sieve for sifting out the fundamental articles of the Christian faith. And when we go to other people, and tell them of that Lord, and see how the message is sometimes received, and what it sometimes does, we come away with confirmed faith.

But, in any case, it is better to work for Him than to sit alone, thinking about Him. The two things have to go together; and I know very well that there is a great danger, in the present day, of exaggeration, and insisting too exclusively upon the duty of Christian work whilst neglecting to insist upon the duty of Christian meditation. But, on the other hand, it blows the cobwebs out of a man's brain; it puts vigour into him, it releases him from himself, and gives him something better to think about, when he listens to the Master's voice, 'Go home to thy friends, and tell them what great things the Lord hath done for thee.'

'Master! it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tabernacles. Stay here; let us enjoy ourselves up in the clouds, with Moses and Elias; and never mind about what goes on below.' But there was a demoniac boy down there that needed to be healed; and the father was at his wits' end, and the disciples were at theirs because they could not heal him. And so Jesus Christ turned His back upon the Mount of Transfiguration, and the company of the blessed two, and the Voice that said, 'This is My beloved Son,' and hurried down where human woes called Him, and found that He was as near God, and so did Peter and James and John, as when up there amid the glory.

'Go home to thy friends, and tell them'; and you will find that to do that is the best way to realise the desire which seemed to be put aside, the desire for the presence of Christ. For be sure that wherever He may not be, He always is where a man, in obedience to Him, is doing His commandments. So when He said, 'Go home to thy friends,' He was answering the request that He seamed to reject, and when the Gadarene obeyed, he would find, to his astonishment and his grateful wonder, that the Lord had *not* gone away in the boat, but was with him still. 'Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel. Lo! I am with you always.'

29)Mark 5:20

Mark

THE LORD OF DEMONS

Mar. 5:1 - Mar. 5:20.

The awful picture of this demoniac is either painted from life, or it is one of the most wonderful feats of the poetic imagination. Nothing more terrible, vivid, penetrating, and real was ever conceived by the greatest creative genius. If it is not simply a portrait, Æ³chylus or Dante might own the artist for a brother. We see the quiet landing on the eastern shore, and almost hear the yells that broke the silence as the fierce, demon-ridden man hurried to meet them, perhaps with hostile purpose. The dreadful characteristics of his state are sharply and profoundly signalised. He lives up in the rock-hewn tombs which overhang the beach; for all that belongs to corruption and death is congenial to the subjects of that dark kingdom of evil. He has superhuman strength, and has known no gentle efforts to reclaim, but only savage attempts to 'tame' by force, as if he were a beast. Fetters and manacles have been snapped like rushes by him. Restless, sleepless, hating men, he has made the night hideous with his wild shrieks, and fled, swift as the wind, from place to place among the lonely hills. Insensible to pain, and deriving some dreadful satisfaction from his own wounds, he has gashed himself with splinters of rock, and howled, in a delirium of pain and pleasure, at the sight of his own blood. His sharpened eyesight sees Jesus from afar, and, with the disordered haste and preternatural agility which marked all his movements, he runs towards Him. Such is the introduction to the narrative of the cure. It paints for us not merely a maniac, but a demoniac. He is not a man at war with himself, but a man at war with other beings, who have forced themselves into his house of life. At least, so says Mark, and so said Jesus; and if the story before us is true, its subsequent incidents compel the acceptance of that explanation. What went into the herd of swine? The narrative of the restoration of the sufferer has a remarkable feature, which may help to mark off its stages. The word 'besought' occurs four times in it, and we may group the details round each instance.

I. The demons beseeching Jesus through the man's voice.

He was, in the exact sense of the word, *distracted*-drawn two ways. For it would seem to have been the self in him that ran to Jesus and fell at His feet, as if in some dim hope of rescue; but it is the demons in him that speak, though the voice be his. They force him to utter their wishes, their terrors, their loathing of Christ, though he says 'I' and 'me' as if these were his own. That horrible condition of a double, or, as in this case, a manifold personality, speaking through human organs, and overwhelming the proper self, mysterious as it is, is the very essence of the awful misery of the demoniacs. Unless we are resolved to force meanings of our own on Scripture, I do not see how we can avoid recognising this. What black thoughts, seething with all rebellious agitation, the reluctant lips have to utter! The self-drawn picture of the demoniac nature is as vivid as, and more repellent than, the Evangelist's terrible portrait of the outward man. Whatever dumb yearning after Jesus may have been in the oppressed human consciousness, his words are a shriek of terror and recoil. The mere presence of Christ lashes the demons into paroxysms: but before the man spoke, Christ had spoken His stern command to come forth. He is answered by this howl of fear and hate. Clear recognition of Christ's person is in it, and not difficult to explain, if we believe that others than the sufferer looked through his wild eyes, and spoke in his loud cry. They know Him who had conquered their prince long ago; if the existence of fallen spirits be admitted, their knowledge is no difficulty.

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and even swine feel uncomfortable when the demon is in them, and in their panic rush anywhere to get rid of the incubus, and, before they know, find themselves struggling in the lake. ‘Which things are an allegory.’

III. The terrified Gerasenes beseeching Jesus to leave them.

They had rather have their swine than their Saviour, and so, though they saw the demoniac sitting, ‘clothed, and in his right mind,’ at the feet of Jesus, they in turn beseech that He should take Himself away. Fear and selfishness prompted the prayer. The communities on the eastern side of the lake were largely Gentile; and, no doubt, these people knew that they did many worse things than swine-keeping, and may have been afraid that some more of their wealth would have to go the same road as the herd. They did not want instruction, nor feel that they needed a healer. Were their prayers so very unlike the wishes of many of us? Is there nobody nowadays unwilling to let the thought of Christ into his life, because he feels an uneasy suspicion that, if Christ comes, a good deal will have to go? How many trades and schemes of life really beseech Jesus to go away and leave them in peace! And He goes away. The tragedy of life is that we have the awful power of severing ourselves from His influence. Christ commands unclean spirits, but He can only plead with hearts. And if we bid Him depart, He is fain to leave us for the time to the indulgence of our foolish and wicked schemes. If any man open, He comes in-oh, how gladly I but if any man slam the door in His face, He can but tarry without and knock. Sometimes His withdrawing does more than His loudest knocking; and sometimes they who repelled Him as He stood on the beach call Him back, as He moves away to the boat. It is in the hope that they may, that He goes.

IV. The restored man’s beseeching to abide with Christ.

No wonder that the spirit of this man, all tremulous with the conflict, and scarcely able yet to realise his deliverance, clung to Christ, and besought Him to let him continue by His side. Conscious weakness, dread of some recurrence of the inward hell, and grateful love, prompted the prayer. The prayer itself was partly right and partly wrong. Right, in clinging to Jesus as the only refuge from the past misery; wrong, in clinging to His visible presence as the only way of keeping near Him. Therefore, He who had permitted the wish of the demons, and complied with the entreaties of the terrified mob, did *not* yield to the prayer, throbbing with love and conscious weakness. Strange that Jesus should put aside a hand that sought to grasp His in order to be safe; but His refusal was, as always, the gift of something better, and He ever disappoints the wish in order more truly to satisfy the need. The best defence against the return of the evil spirits was in occupation. It is the ‘empty’ house which invites them back. Nothing was so likely to confirm and steady the convalescent mind as to dwell on the fact of his deliverance. Therefore he is sent to proclaim it to friends who had known his dreadful state, and amidst old associations which would help him to knit his new life to his old, and to treat his misery as a parenthesis. Jesus commanded silence or speech according to the need of the subjects of His miracles. For some, silence was best, to deepen the impression of blessing received; for others, speech was best, to engage and so to fortify the mind against relapse.

30)Mark 5:22-24

Mark

TALITHA CUMI

Mar. 5:22 - Mar. 5:24, Mar. 5:35 - Mar. 5:43.

The scene of this miracle was probably Capernaum; its time, according to Matthew, was the feast at his house after his call. Mark’s date appears to be later, but he may have anticipated the feast in his narrative, in order to keep the whole of the incidents relating to Matthew’s apostleship together. Jairus’s knowledge of Jesus is implied in the story, and perhaps Jesus’ acquaintance with him.

I. We note, first, the agonised appeal and the immediate answer.

Desperation makes men bold. Conventionalities are burned up by the fire of agonised petitioning for help in extremity. Without apology or preliminary, Jairus bursts in, and his urgent need is sufficient excuse. Jesus never complains of scant respect when wrung hearts cry to Him. But this man was not only driven by despair, but drawn by trust. He was sure that, even though his little darling had been all but dead when he ran from his house, and was dead by this time, for all he knew, Jesus could give her life. Perhaps he had not faced the stern possibility that she might already be gone, nor defined precisely what he hoped for in that case. But he was sure of Jesus' power, and he says nothing to show that he doubted His willingness. A beautiful trust shines through his words, based, no doubt, on what he had known and seen of Jesus' miracles. *We* have more pressing and deeper needs, and we have fuller and deeper knowledge of Jesus, wherefore our approach to Him should be at least as earnest and confidential as Jairus's was. If our Lord was at the feast when this interruption took place, His gracious, immediate answer becomes more lovely, as a sign of His willingness to bring the swiftest help. 'While they are yet speaking, I will hear.' Jairus had not finished asking before Jesus was on His feet to go.

The father's impatience would be satisfied when they were on their way, but how he would chafe, and think every moment an age, while Jesus stayed, as if at entire leisure, to deal with another silent petitioner! But His help to one never interferes with His help to another, and no case is so pressing as that He cannot spare time to stay to bless some one else. The poor, sickly, shamefaced woman shall be healed, and the little girl shall not suffer.

II. We have next the extinction and rekindling of Jairus's glimmer of hope.

Distances in Capernaum were short, and the messenger would soon find Jesus. There was little sympathy in the harsh, bald announcement of the death, or in the appended suggestion that the Rabbi need not be further troubled. The speaker evidently was thinking more of being polite to Jesus than of the poor father's stricken heart, Jairus would feel then what most of us have felt in like circumstances,-that he had been more hopeful than he knew. Only when the last glimmer is quenched do we feel, by the blackness, how much light had lingered in our sky, But Jesus knew Jairus's need before Jairus himself knew it, and His strong word of cheer relit the torch ere the poor father had time to speak. That loving eye reads our hearts and anticipates our dreary hopelessness by His sweet comfortings. Faith is the only victorious antagonist of fear. Jairus had every reason for abandoning hope, and his only reason for clinging to it was faith. So it is with us all. It is vain to bid us not be afraid when real dangers and miseries stare us in the face; but it is not vain to bid us 'believe,' and if we do that, faith, cast into the one scale, will outweigh a hundred good reasons for dread and despair cast into the other.

III. We have next the tumult of grief and the word that calms.

The hired mourners had lost no time, and in Eastern fashion were disturbing the solemnity of death with their professional shrieks and wailings. True grief is silent. Woe that weeps aloud is soon consoled.

What a contrast between the noise outside and the still death-chamber and its occupant, and what a contrast between the agitation of the sham comforters and the calmness of the true Helper! Christ's great word was spoken for us all when our hearts are sore and our dear ones go. It dissolves the dim shape into nothing ness, or, rather, it transfigures it into a gracious, soothing form. Sleep is rest, and bears in itself the pledge of waking. So Christ has changed the 'shadow feared of man' into beauty, and in the strength of His great word we can meet the last enemy with 'Welcome! friend.' It is strange that any one reading this narrative should have been so blind to its deepest beauty as to suppose that Jesus was here saying that the child had only swooned, and was really alive. He was not denying that she was what men call 'dead,' but He was, in the triumphant consciousness of His own power, and in the clear vision of the realities of spiritual being, of which bodily states are but shadows, denying that what men call death deserves the name. 'Death' is the state of the soul separated from God, whether united to the body or no,-not the separation of body and soul, which is only a visible symbol of the more dread reality.

IV. We have finally the life-giving word and the life-preserving care.

Probably Jesus first freed His progress from the jostling crowd, and then, when arrived, made the further selection of the three apostles,-the first three of the mighty ones-and, as was becoming, of the father and mother.

With what hushed, tense expectation they would enter the chamber! Think of the mother's eyes watching Him. The very words that He spoke were like a caress. There was infinite tenderness in that 'Damsel!' from His lips, and so deep an impression did it make on Peter that he repeated the very words to Mark, and used them, with the change of one letter ['Ta*b*itha' for 'Ta*l*itha'], in raising Dorcas. The same tenderness is expressed by His taking her by the hand, as, no doubt, her mother had done, many a morning, on waking her. The father had asked Him to lay His hand on her, that she might be made whole and live. He did as He was asked,-He always does-and His doing according to our desire brings larger blessings than we had thought of. Neither the touch of His hand nor the words He spoke were the real agents of the child's returning to life. It was His will which brought her back from whatever vasty dimness she had entered. The forth-putting of Christ's will is sovereign, and His word runs with power through all regions of the universe. 'The dull, cold ear of death' hears, and 'they that hear shall live,' whether they are, as men say, dead, or whether they are 'dead in trespasses and sins.' The resurrection of a soul is a mightier act-if we can speak of degrees of might in His acts-than that of a body.

It would be calming for the child of such strange experiences to see, for the first thing that met her eyes opening again on the old familiar home as on a strange land, the bending face of Jesus, and His touch would steady her spirit and assure of His love and help. The quiet command to give her food knits the wonder with common life, and teaches precious lessons as to His economy of miraculous power, like His bidding others loosen Lazarus's wrappings, and as to His devolution on us of duties towards those whom He raises from the death of sin. But it was given, not didactically, but lovingly. The girl was exhausted, and sustenance was necessary, and would be sweet. So He thought upon a small bodily need, and the love that gave life took care to provide what was required to support it. He gives the greatest; He will take care that we shall not lack the least.

31)Mark 5:25

Mark

THE POWER OF FEEBLE FAITH

Mar. 5:25, Mar. 5:27 - Mar. 5:28.

In all the narratives of this miracle, it is embedded in the story of Jairus's daughter, which it cuts in twain. I suppose that the Evangelists felt, and would have us feel, the impression of calm consciousness of power and of leisurely dignity produced by Christ's having time to pause even on such an errand, in order to heal by the way, as if parenthetically, this other poor sufferer. The child's father with impatient earnestness pleads the urgency of her case-'She lieth at the point of death'; and to him and to the group of disciples, it must have seemed that there was no time to be lost. But He who knows that His resources are infinite can afford to let her die, while He cures and saves this woman. She shall receive no harm, and her sister suppliant has as great a claim on Him. 'The eyes of all wait' on His equal love; He has leisure of heart to feel for each, and fulness of power for all; and none can rob another of his share in the Healer's gifts, nor any in all that dependent crowd jostle his neighbour out of the notice of the Saviour's eye.

The main point of the story itself seems to be the illustration which it gives of the genuineness and power of an imperfect faith, and of Christ's merciful way of responding to and strengthening such a faith. Looked at from that point of view, the narrative is very striking and instructive.

The woman is a poor shrinking creature, broken down by long illness, made more timid still by many disappointed hopes of core, depressed by poverty to which her many doctors had brought her. She does not venture to stop this new Rabbi-physician, as He goes with the rich church dignitary to heal his daughter, but lets Him pass before she can make up her mind to go near Him at all, and then comes creeping up in the crowd behind, puts out her wasted, trembling hand to His garment's hem-and she is whole. She would fain have stolen away with her new-found blessing, but Christ forces her to stand out before the throng, and there, with all their eyes upon her-cold, cruel eyes some of them-to conquer her diffidence and shame, and tell all the truth. Strange kindness that! strangely contrasted with His ordinary care to avoid notoriety, and with His ordinary tender regard for shrinking weakness! What may have been the reason? Certainly it was not for His own sake at all, nor for others' chiefly, but for hers, that He did this. The reason lay in the incompleteness of her faith. It was very incomplete-although it was, Christ answered it. And then He sought to make the cure, and the discipline that followed it, the means of clearing and confirming her trust in Himself.

I. Following the order of the narrative thus understood, we have here first the great lesson, that very imperfect faith may be genuine faith.

There was unquestionable confidence in Christ's healing power, and there was earnest desire for healing. Our Lord Himself recognises her faith as adequate to be the condition of her receiving the cure which she desired. Of course, it was a very different thing from the faith which unites us to Christ, and is the condition of our receiving our soul's cure; and we shall never understand the relation of multitudes of the people in the Gospels to Jesus, if we insist upon supposing that the 'faith to be healed,' which many of them had, was a religious, or, as we call it, 'saving faith.' But still, the trust which was directed to Him, as the giver of miraculous temporal blessings, is akin to that higher trust into which it often passed, and the principles regulating the operation of the loftier are abundantly illustrated in the workings of the lower.

The imperfections, then, of this woman's faith were many. It was intensely *ignorant* trust. She dimly believes that, somehow or other, this miracle-working Rabbi will heal her, but the cure is to be a piece of magic, secured by material contact of her finger with His robe. She has no idea that Christ's will, or His knowledge, much less His pitying love, has anything to do with it. She thinks that she may get her desire furtively, and may carry it away out of the crowd, and He, the source of it, be none the wiser, and none the poorer, for the blessing which she has stolen from Him. What utter blank ignorance of Christ's character and way of working! What complete misconception of the relation between Himself and His gift! What low, gross, superstitious ideas! Yes, and with them all what a hunger of intense desire to be whole; what absolute assurance of confidence that one finger-tip on His robe was enough! Therefore she had her desire, and her Lord recognised her faith as true, foolish and unworthy as were the thoughts which accompanied it! Thank God! the same thing is true still, or what would become of any of us? There may be a real faith in Christ, though there be mixed with it many and grave errors concerning His work, and the manner of receiving the blessings which He bestows. A man may have a very hazy apprehension of the bearing and whole scope of even Scripture declarations concerning the profounder aspects of Christ's person and work, and yet be holding fast to Him by living confidence. I do not wish to underrate for one moment the absolute necessity of clear and true conceptions of revealed truth, in order to a vigorous and fully developed faith; but, while there can be no faith worth calling so, which is not based upon the intellectual reception of truth, there may be faith based upon the very imperfect intellectual reception of very partial truth. The power and vitality of faith are not measured by the comprehensiveness and clearness of belief. The richest soil may bear shrunken and barren ears; and on the arid sand, with the thinnest layer of earth, gorgeous cacti may bloom out, and fleshy aloes lift their sworded arms, with stores of moisture to help them through the heat. It is not for us to say what amount of ignorance is destructive of the possibility of real confidence in Jesus Christ. But for ourselves, feeling how short a distance our eyesight travels, and how little, after all our systems, the great bulk of men in Christian lands know lucidly and certainly of theological truth, and how wide are the differences of opinion amongst us, and how soon we come to towering barriers, beyond which our poor faculties can neither pass nor look, it ought to be a joy to us all, that a faith which is clouded with such ignorance may yet be a faith which Christ accepts. He that knows and trusts Him as Brother, Friend, Saviour, in whom he receives the pardon and cleansing which he needs and desires, may have very much misconception and error cleaving to him, but Christ accepts him. If at the beginning His disciples know but this much, that they are sick unto death, and have tried without success all other remedies, and this more, that Christ will heal them; and if their faith builds upon that knowledge, then they will receive according to their faith. By degrees they will be taught more; they will be brought to the higher benches in His school; but, for a beginning, the most cloudy apprehension that Christ is the Saviour of the world, and my Saviour, may become the foundation of a trust which will bind the heart to Him and knit Him to the heart in eternal union. This poor woman received her healing, although she said, 'If I may touch but the hem of His garment, I shall be whole.'

Her error was akin to one which is starting into new prominence again, and with which I need not say that I have no sort of sympathy,-that of people who attach importance to externals as means and channels of grace, and in whose system the hem of the garment and the touch of the finger are apt to take the place which the heart of the wearer and the grasp of faith should hold. The more our circumstances call for resistance to this error, the more needful is it to remember that, along with it and uttering itself through it, may be a depth of devout trust in Christ, which should shame us. Many a poor soul that clasps the base of the crucifix clings to the cross; many a devout heart, kneeling before the altar, sees through the incense-smoke the face of the Christ. The faith that is tied to form, though it be no faith for a man, though in some respects it darken God's Gospel, and bring it down to the level of magical superstition, may yet be, and often is, accepted by Him whose merciful eye recognised, and whose swift power answered, the mistaken trust of her who believed that healing lay in the fringes of His robe, rather than in the pity of His heart.

Again, her trust was very *selfish*. She wanted health; she did not care about the Healer. She thought much of the blessing in itself, little or nothing of the blessing as a sign of His love. She would have been quite contented to have had nothing more to do with Christ if she could only have gone away cured. She felt but little glow of gratitude to Him whom she thought of as unconscious of the good which she had stolen from Him. All this is a parallel to what occurs in the early stages of many a Christian life. The first inducement to a serious contemplation of Christ is, ordinarily, the consciousness of one's own sore need. Most men are driven to Him as a refuge from self, from their own sin, and from the wages of sin. The soul, absorbed in its own misery, and groaning in a horror of great darkness, sees from afar a great light, and stumbles towards it. Its first desire is deliverance, forgiveness, escape; and the first motions of faith are impelled by consideration of personal consequences. Love comes after, born of the recognition of Christ's great love to which we owe our salvation; but faith precedes love in the natural order of things, however closely love may follow faith; and the predominant motive in the earlier stages of many men's faith is distinctly self-regard. Now, that is all right, and as it was meant to be. It is an overstrained and caricatured doctrine of self-abnegation, which condemns such a faith as wrong. The most purely self-absorbed wish to escape from the most rudely pictured hell may be, and often is, the beginning of a true trust in Christ. Some of our superfine modern teachers who are shocked at Christianity, because it lays the foundation of the loftiest, most self-denying morality in ‘selfishness’ of that kind, would be all the wiser for going to school to this story, and laying to heart the lesson it contains, of how a desire no nobler than to get rid of a painful disease was the starting-point of a moral transformation, which turned a life into a peaceful, thankful surrender of the cured self to the service and love of the mighty Healer. But while this faith, for the sake of the blessing to be obtained, is genuine, it is undoubtedly imperfect. Quite legitimate and natural at first, it must grow into something nobler when it has once been answered. To think of the disease mainly is inevitable before the cure, but, after the cure, we should think most of the Physician. Self-love may impel to His feet; but Christ-love should be the moving spring of life thereafter. Ere we have received anything from Him, our whole soul may be a longing to have our gnawing emptiness filled; but when we have received His own great gift, our whole soul should be a thank-offering. The great reformation which Christ produces is, that He shifts the centre for us from ourselves to Himself; and whilst He uses our sense of need and our fear of personal evil as the means towards this, He desires that the faith, which has been answered by deliverance, should thenceforward be a ‘faith which worketh by love.’ As long as we live, either here or yonder, we shall never get beyond the need for the exercise of the primary form of faith, for we shall ever be compassed by many needs, and dependent for all help and blessedness on Him; but as we grow in experience of His tender might, we should learn more and more that His gifts cannot be separated from Himself. We should prize them most for His sake, and love Him more than we do them. We should be drawn to Him as well as driven to Him. Faith may begin with desiring the blessing rather than the Christ. It must end with desiring Him more than all besides, and with losing self utterly in His great love. Its starting-point may rightly be, ‘Save, Lord, or I perish.’ Its goal must be, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’

Again, here is an instance of real faith weakened and interrupted by much *distrust*. There was not a full, calm reliance on Christ’s power and love. She dare not appeal to His heart, she shrinks from meeting His eye. She will let Him pass, and then put forth a tremulous hand. Cross-currents of emotion agitate her soul. She doubts, yet she believes; she is afraid, yet emboldened by her very despair; too diffident to cast herself on His pity, she is too confident not to resort to His healing virtue.

And so is it ever with our faith. Its ideal perfection would be that it should be unbroken, undashed by any speck of doubt. But the reality is far different. It is no full-orbed completeness, but, at the best, a growing segment of reflected light, with many a rough place in its jagged outline, prophetic of increase; with many a deep pit of blackness on its silver surface; with many a storm-cloud sweeping across its face; conscious of eclipse and subject to change. And yet it is the light which He has set to rule the night of life, and we may rejoice in its crescent beam. We are often tempted to question the reality of faith in ourselves and others, by reason of the unbelief and disbelief which co-exist with it. But why should we do so? May there not be an inner heart and centre of true trust, with a nebulous environment of doubt, through which the nucleus shall gradually send its attracting and consolidating power, and turn it, too, into firm substance? May there not be a germ, infinitesimal, yet with a real life throbbing in its microscopic minuteness, and destined to be a great tree, with all the fowls of the air lodging in its branches? May there not be hid in a heart a principle of action, which is obviously marked out for supremacy, though it has not yet come to sovereign power and manifestation in either the inward or the outward being? Where do we learn that faith must be complete to be genuine? Our own weak hearts say it to us often enough; and our lingering unbelief is only too ready to hiss into our ears the serpent’s whisper, ‘You are deceiving yourself; look at your doubts, your coldness, your forgetfulness: *you* have no faith at all.’ To all such morbid thoughts, which only sap the strength of the spirit, and come from beneath, not from above, we have a right to oppose the first great lesson of this story-the reality of an imperfect faith. And, turning from the profitless contemplation of the feebleness of our grasp of Christ’s robe to look on Him, the fountain of all spiritual energy, let us cleave the more confidently to Him for every discovery of our own weakness, and cry to Him for help against ourselves, that He would not ‘quench the smoking flax’; for the old prayer is never offered in vain, when offered, as at first, with tears, ‘Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.’

II. The second stage of this story sets forth a truth involved in what I have already said, but still needing to be dealt with for a moment by itself-namely, that Christ answers the imperfect faith.

There was no real connection between the touch of His robe and the cure, but the poor ignorant sufferer thought that there was; and, therefore, Christ stoops to her childish thought, and allows her to prescribe the path by which His gift shall reach her. That thin wasted hand stretched itself up beyond the height to which it could ordinarily reach, and, though that highest point fell far short of Him, He lets His blessing down to her level. He does not say, 'Understand Me, put away thy false notion of healing power residing in My garment's hem, or I heal thee not.' But He says, 'Dost thou think that it is through thy finger on My robe? Then, through thy finger on My robe it shall be. According to thy faith, be it unto thee.'

And so it is ever. Christ's mercy, like water in a vase, takes the shape of the vessel that holds it. On the one hand, His grace is infinite, and 'is given to every one of us according to the measure of the gift of Christ'-with no limitation but His own unlimited fulness; on the other hand, the amount which we practically receive from that inexhaustible store is, at each successive moment, determined by the measure and the purity and the intensity of our faith. On His part there is no limit but infinity, on our sides the limit is our capacity, and our capacity is settled by our desires. His word to us ever is, 'Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.' 'Be it unto thee even as thou wilt.'

A double lesson, therefore, lies in this thought for us all. First, let us labour that our faith may be enlightened, importunate, and firm: for every flaw in it will injuriously affect our possession of the grace of God. Errors in opinion will hinder the blessings that flow from the truths which we misconceive or reject. Languor of desire will diminish the sum and enfeeble the energy of the powers that work in us. Wavering confidence, crossed and broken, like the solar spectrum, by many a dark line of doubt, will make our conscious possession of Christ's gift fitful. We have a deep well to draw from. Let us take care that the vessel with which we draw is in size proportionate to *its* depth and *our* need, that the chain to which it hangs is strong, and that no leaks in it let the full supply run out, nor any stains on its inner surface taint and taste the bright treasure.

And the other lesson is this. There can be no faith so feeble that Christ does not respond to it. The most ignorant, self-regarding, timid trust may unite the soul to Jesus Christ. To desire is to have; and ‘whosoever will, may take of the water of life freely.’ If you only come to Him, though He have passed, He will stop. If you come trusting and yet doubting, He will forgive the doubt and answer the trust. If you come to Him, knowing but that your heart is full of evil which none save He can cure, and putting out a lame hand-or even a tremulous finger-tip-to touch His garment, be sure that anything is possible rather than that He should turn away your prayer, or His mercy from you.

III. The last part of this miracle teaches us that Christ corrects and confirms an imperfect faith by the very act of answering it.

Observe how the process of cure and the discipline which followed are, in Christ’s loving wisdom, made to fit closely to all the faults and flaws in the suppliant’s faith.

She had thought of the healing energy as independent of the Healer’s knowledge and will. Therefore His very first word shows her that He is aware of her mute appeal, and conscious of the going forth from Him of the power that cures-’Who touched Me?’ As was said long ago, ‘the multitudes thronged Him, but the woman touched.’ Amidst all the jostling of the unmannerly crowd that trod with rude feet on His skirts, and elbowed their way to see this new Rabbi, there was one touch unlike all the rest; and, though it was only that of the finger-tip of a poor woman, wasted to skin and bone with twelve years’ weakening disease, He knew it; and His will and love sent forth the ‘virtue’ which healed. May we not fairly apply this lesson to ourselves? Christ is, as most of us, I suppose, believe, Lord of all creatures, administering the affairs of the universe; the steps of His throne and the precincts of His court are thronged with dependants whose eyes wait upon Him, and who are fed from His stores; and yet my poor voice may steal through that chorus-shout of petition and praise, and His ear will detect its lowest note, and will separate the thin stream of my prayer from the great sea of supplication which rolls to His seat, and will answer *me*. My hand uplifted among the millions of empty and imploring palms that are raised towards the heaven will receive into its clasping fingers the special blessing for my special wants.

Again, she had been selfish in her faith, had not cared for any close personal relation with Him; and so she was taught that He was in all His gifts, and that He was more than all His gifts. He compels her to come to His feet that she may learn His heart, and may carry away a blessing not stolen, but bestowed

‘With open love, not secret cure,
The Lord of hearts would bless.’

And thus is laid the foundation for a personal bond between her and Christ, which shall be for the joy of her life, and shall make of that life a thankful sacrifice to Him, the Healer.

Thus it is with us all. We may go to Him, at first, with no thought but for ourselves. But we have not to carry away His gift hidden in our hands. We learn that it is a love-token from Him. And so we find in His answer to faith the true and only cure for all self-regard; and moved by the mercies of Christ, are led to do what else were impossible-to yield ourselves as ‘living sacrifices’ to Him.

Again, she had shrunk from publicity. Her womanly diffidence, her enfeebled health, the shame of her disease, all made her wish to hide herself and her want from His eye, and to hide herself and her treasure from men. She would fain steal away unnoticed, as she hoped she had come. But she is dragged out before all the thronging multitude, and has to tell the whole. The answer to her faith makes her bold. In a moment she is changed from timidity to courage; a tremulous invalid ready to creep into any corner to escape notice, she stretched out her hand-the instant after, she knelt at His feet in the spirit of a confessor. This is Christ’s most merciful fashion of curing our cowardice-not by rebukes, but by giving us, faint-hearted though we be, the gift which out of weakness makes us strong. He would have us testify to Him before men, and that for our own sakes, since faith unacknowledged, like a plant in the dark, is apt to become pale and sickly, and bear no bright blossoms nor sweet fruit. But, ere He bids us own His name, He pours into our hearts, in answer to our secret appeal, the health of His own life, and the blissful consciousness of that great gift which makes the tongue of the dumb sing. Faith at first may be very timid, but faith will grow bold to witness of Him and not be ashamed, in the exact proportion in which it is genuine, and receives from Christ of His fulness.

And then-with a final word to set forth still more clearly that she had received the blessing from His love, not from His magical power, and through her confidence, not through her touch-'Daughter! thy faith'-not thy finger-'hath made thee whole; go in peace and *be* whole'-Jesus confirms by His own authoritative voice the furtive blessing, and sends her away, perhaps to see Him no more, but to live in tranquil security, and in her humble home to guard the gift which He had bestowed on her imperfect faith, and to perfect-we may hope-the faith which He had enlightened and strengthened by the over-abundance of His gift.

Dear friends, this poor woman represents us all. Like her, we are sick of a sore sickness, we have spent our substance in trying physicians of no value, and are 'nothing the better, but rather the worse.' Oh! is it not strange that you should need to be urged to go to the Healer to whom she went? Do not be afraid, my brother, of telling Him all your pain and pining-He knows it already. Do not be afraid that your hand may not reach Him for the crowd, or that your voice may fail to fall on His ear. Do not be afraid of your ignorance, do not be afraid of your wavering confidence and many doubts. All these cannot separate you from Him who 'Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses.' Fear but one thing-that He pass on to carry life and health to other souls, ere you resolve to press to His feet. Fear but one thing-that whilst you delay, the hem of the garment may be swept beyond the reach of your slow hand. Imperfect faith may bring salvation to a soul: hesitation may ruin and wreck a life.

32)Mark 5:27

Mark

THE POWER OF FEEBLE FAITH

Mar. 5:25, Mar. 5:27 - Mar. 5:28.

In all the narratives of this miracle, it is embedded in the story of Jairus's daughter, which it cuts in twain. I suppose that the Evangelists felt, and would have us feel, the impression of calm consciousness of power and of leisurely dignity produced by Christ's having time to pause even on such an errand, in order to heal by the way, as if parenthetically, this other poor sufferer. The child's father with impatient earnestness pleads the urgency of her case-'She lieth at the point of death'; and to him and to the group of disciples, it must have seemed that there was no time to be lost. But He who knows that His resources are infinite can afford to let her die, while He cures and saves this woman. She shall receive no harm, and her sister suppliant has as great a claim on Him. 'The eyes of all wait' on His equal love; He has leisure of heart to feel for each, and fulness of power for all; and none can rob another of his share in the Healer's gifts, nor any in all that dependent crowd jostle his neighbour out of the notice of the Saviour's eye.

The main point of the story itself seems to be the illustration which it gives of the genuineness and power of an imperfect faith, and of Christ's merciful way of responding to and strengthening such a faith. Looked at from that point of view, the narrative is very striking and instructive.

The woman is a poor shrinking creature, broken down by long illness, made more timid still by many disappointed hopes of core, depressed by poverty to which her many doctors had brought her. She does not venture to stop this new Rabbi-physician, as He goes with the rich church dignitary to heal his daughter, but lets Him pass before she can make up her mind to go near Him at all, and then comes creeping up in the crowd behind, puts out her wasted, trembling hand to His garment's hem-and she is whole. She would fain have stolen away with her new-found blessing, but Christ forces her to stand out before the throng, and there, with all their eyes upon her-cold, cruel eyes some of them-to conquer her diffidence and shame, and tell all the truth. Strange kindness that! strangely contrasted with His ordinary care to avoid notoriety, and with His ordinary tender regard for shrinking weakness! What may have been the reason? Certainly it was not for His own sake at all, nor for others' chiefly, but for hers, that He did this. The reason lay in the incompleteness of her faith. It was very incomplete-although it was, Christ answered it. And then He sought to make the cure, and the discipline that followed it, the means of clearing and confirming her trust in Himself.

I. Following the order of the narrative thus understood, we have here first the great lesson, that very imperfect faith may be genuine faith.

There was unquestionable confidence in Christ's healing power, and there was earnest desire for healing. Our Lord Himself recognises her faith as adequate to be the condition of her receiving the cure which she desired. Of course, it was a very different thing from the faith which unites us to Christ, and is the condition of our receiving our soul's cure; and we shall never understand the relation of multitudes of the people in the Gospels to Jesus, if we insist upon supposing that the 'faith to be healed,' which many of them had, was a religious, or, as we call it, 'saving faith.' But still, the trust which was directed to Him, as the giver of miraculous temporal blessings, is akin to that higher trust into which it often passed, and the principles regulating the operation of the loftier are abundantly illustrated in the workings of the lower.

The imperfections, then, of this woman's faith were many. It was intensely *ignorant* trust. She dimly believes that, somehow or other, this miracle-working Rabbi will heal her, but the cure is to be a piece of magic, secured by material contact of her finger with His robe. She has no idea that Christ's will, or His knowledge, much less His pitying love, has anything to do with it. She thinks that she may get her desire furtively, and may carry it away out of the crowd, and He, the source of it, be none the wiser, and none the poorer, for the blessing which she has stolen from Him. What utter blank ignorance of Christ's character and way of working! What complete misconception of the relation between Himself and His gift! What low, gross, superstitious ideas! Yes, and with them all what a hunger of intense desire to be whole; what absolute assurance of confidence that one finger-tip on His robe was enough! Therefore she had her desire, and her Lord recognised her faith as true, foolish and unworthy as were the thoughts which accompanied it! Thank God! the same thing is true still, or what would become of any of us? There may be a real faith in Christ, though there be mixed with it many and grave errors concerning His work, and the manner of receiving the blessings which He bestows. A man may have a very hazy apprehension of the bearing and whole scope of even Scripture declarations concerning the profounder aspects of Christ's person and work, and yet be holding fast to Him by living confidence. I do not wish to underrate for one moment the absolute necessity of clear and true conceptions of revealed truth, in order to a vigorous and fully developed faith; but, while there can be no faith worth calling so, which is not based upon the intellectual reception of truth, there may be faith based upon the very imperfect intellectual reception of very partial truth. The power and vitality of faith are not measured by the comprehensiveness and clearness of belief. The richest soil may bear shrunken and barren ears; and on the arid sand, with the thinnest layer of earth, gorgeous cacti may bloom out, and fleshy aloes lift their sworded arms, with stores of moisture to help them through the heat. It is not for us to say what amount of ignorance is destructive of the possibility of real confidence in Jesus Christ. But for ourselves, feeling how short a distance our eyesight travels, and how little, after all our systems, the great bulk of men in Christian lands know lucidly and certainly of theological truth, and how wide are the differences of opinion amongst us, and how soon we come to towering barriers, beyond which our poor faculties can neither pass nor look, it ought to be a joy to us all, that a faith which is clouded with such ignorance may yet be a faith which Christ accepts. He that knows and trusts Him as Brother, Friend, Saviour, in whom he receives the pardon and cleansing which he needs and desires, may have very much misconception and error cleaving to him, but Christ accepts him. If at the beginning His disciples know but this much, that they are sick unto death, and have tried without success all other remedies, and this more, that Christ will heal them; and if their faith builds upon that knowledge, then they will receive according to their faith. By degrees they will be taught more; they will be brought to the higher benches in His school; but, for a beginning, the most cloudy apprehension that Christ is the Saviour of the world, and my Saviour, may become the foundation of a trust which will bind the heart to Him and knit Him to the heart in eternal union. This poor woman received her healing, although she said, ‘If I may touch but the hem of His garment, I shall be whole.’

Her error was akin to one which is starting into new prominence again, and with which I need not say that I have no sort of sympathy,-that of people who attach importance to externals as means and channels of grace, and in whose system the hem of the garment and the touch of the finger are apt to take the place which the heart of the wearer and the grasp of faith should hold. The more our circumstances call for resistance to this error, the more needful is it to remember that, along with it and uttering itself through it, may be a depth of devout trust in Christ, which should shame us. Many a poor soul that clasps the base of the crucifix clings to the cross; many a devout heart, kneeling before the altar, sees through the incense-smoke the face of the Christ. The faith that is tied to form, though it be no faith for a man, though in some respects it darken God's Gospel, and bring it down to the level of magical superstition, may yet be, and often is, accepted by Him whose merciful eye recognised, and whose swift power answered, the mistaken trust of her who believed that healing lay in the fringes of His robe, rather than in the pity of His heart.

Again, her trust was very *selfish*. She wanted health; she did not care about the Healer. She thought much of the blessing in itself, little or nothing of the blessing as a sign of His love. She would have been quite contented to have had nothing more to do with Christ if she could only have gone away cured. She felt but little glow of gratitude to Him whom she thought of as unconscious of the good which she had stolen from Him. All this is a parallel to what occurs in the early stages of many a Christian life. The first inducement to a serious contemplation of Christ is, ordinarily, the consciousness of one's own sore need. Most men are driven to Him as a refuge from self, from their own sin, and from the wages of sin. The soul, absorbed in its own misery, and groaning in a horror of great darkness, sees from afar a great light, and stumbles towards it. Its first desire is deliverance, forgiveness, escape; and the first motions of faith are impelled by consideration of personal consequences. Love comes after, born of the recognition of Christ's great love to which we owe our salvation; but faith precedes love in the natural order of things, however closely love may follow faith; and the predominant motive in the earlier stages of many men's faith is distinctly self-regard. Now, that is all right, and as it was meant to be. It is an overstrained and caricatured doctrine of self-abnegation, which condemns such a faith as wrong. The most purely self-absorbed wish to escape from the most rudely pictured hell may be, and often is, the beginning of a true trust in Christ. Some of our superfine modern teachers who are shocked at Christianity, because it lays the foundation of the loftiest, most self-denying morality in 'selfishness' of that kind, would be all the wiser for going to school to this story, and laying to heart the lesson it contains, of how a desire no nobler than to get rid of a painful disease was the starting-point of a moral transformation, which turned a life into a peaceful, thankful surrender of the cured self to the service and love of the mighty Healer. But while this faith, for the sake of the blessing to be obtained, is genuine, it is undoubtedly imperfect. Quite legitimate and natural at first, it must grow into something nobler when it has once been answered. To think of the disease mainly is inevitable before the cure, but, after the cure, we should think most of the Physician. Self-love may impel to His feet; but Christ-love should be the moving spring of life thereafter. Ere we have received anything from Him, our whole soul may be a longing to have our gnawing emptiness filled; but when we have received His own great gift, our whole soul should be a thank-offering. The great reformation which Christ produces is, that He shifts the centre for us from ourselves to Himself; and whilst He uses our sense of need and our fear of personal evil as the means towards this, He desires that the faith, which has been answered by deliverance, should thenceforward be a 'faith which worketh by love.' As long as we live, either here or yonder, we shall never get beyond the need for the exercise of the primary form of faith, for we shall ever be compassed by many needs, and dependent for all help and blessedness on Him; but as we grow in experience of His tender might, we should learn more and more that His gifts cannot be separated from Himself. We should prize them most for His sake, and love Him more than we do them. We should be drawn to Him as well as driven to Him. Faith may begin with desiring the blessing rather than the Christ. It must end with desiring Him more than all besides, and with losing self utterly in His great love. Its starting-point may rightly be, 'Save, Lord, or I perish.' Its goal must be, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.'

Again, here is an instance of real faith weakened and interrupted by much *distrust*. There was not a full, calm reliance on Christ's power and love. She dare not appeal to His heart, she shrinks from meeting His eye. She will let Him pass, and then put forth a tremulous hand. Cross-currents of emotion agitate her soul. She doubts, yet she believes; she is afraid, yet emboldened by her very despair; too diffident to cast herself on His pity, she is too confident not to resort to His healing virtue.

And so is it ever with our faith. Its ideal perfection would be that it should be unbroken, undashed by any speck of doubt. But the reality is far different. It is no full-orbed completeness, but, at the best, a growing segment of reflected light, with many a rough place in its jagged outline, prophetic of increase; with many a deep pit of blackness on its silver surface; with many a storm-cloud sweeping across its face; conscious of eclipse and subject to change. And yet it is the light which He has set to rule the night of life, and we may rejoice in its crescent beam. We are often tempted to question the reality of faith in ourselves and others, by reason of the unbelief and disbelief which co-exist with it. But why should we do so? May there not be an inner heart and centre of true trust, with a nebulous environment of doubt, through which the nucleus shall gradually send its attracting and consolidating power, and turn it, too, into firm substance? May there not be a germ, infinitesimal, yet with a real life throbbing in its microscopic minuteness, and destined to be a great tree, with all the fowls of the air lodging in its branches? May there not be hid in a heart a principle of action, which is obviously marked out for supremacy, though it has not yet come to sovereign power and manifestation in either the inward or the outward being? Where do we learn that faith must be complete to be genuine? Our own weak hearts say it to us often enough; and our lingering unbelief is only too ready to hiss into our ears the serpent's whisper, 'You are deceiving yourself; look at your doubts, your coldness, your forgetfulness: *you* have no faith at all.' To all such morbid thoughts, which only sap the strength of the spirit, and come from beneath, not from above, we have a right to oppose the first great lesson of this story-the reality of an imperfect faith. And, turning from the profitless contemplation of the feebleness of our grasp of Christ's robe to look on Him, the fountain of all spiritual energy, let us cleave the more confidently to Him for every discovery of our own weakness, and cry to Him for help against ourselves, that He would not 'quench the smoking flax'; for the old prayer is never offered in vain, when offered, as at first, with tears, 'Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.'

II. The second stage of this story sets forth a truth involved in what I have already said, but still needing to be dealt with for a moment by itself-namely, that Christ answers the imperfect faith.

There was no real connection between the touch of His robe and the cure, but the poor ignorant sufferer thought that there was; and, therefore, Christ stoops to her childish thought, and allows her to prescribe the path by which His gift shall reach her. That thin wasted hand stretched itself up beyond the height to which it could ordinarily reach, and, though that highest point fell far short of Him, He lets His blessing down to her level. He does not say, ‘Understand Me, put away thy false notion of healing power residing in My garment’s hem, or I heal thee not.’ But He says, ‘Dost thou think that it is through thy finger on My robe? Then, through thy finger on My robe it shall be. According to thy faith, be it unto thee.’

And so it is ever. Christ’s mercy, like water in a vase, takes the shape of the vessel that holds it. On the one hand, His grace is infinite, and ‘is given to every one of us according to the measure of the gift of Christ’-with no limitation but His own unlimited fulness; on the other hand, the amount which we practically receive from that inexhaustible store is, at each successive moment, determined by the measure and the purity and the intensity of our faith. On His part there is no limit but infinity, on our sides the limit is our capacity, and our capacity is settled by our desires. His word to us ever is, ‘Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.’ ‘Be it unto thee even as thou wilt.’

A double lesson, therefore, lies in this thought for us all. First, let us labour that our faith may be enlightened, importunate, and firm: for every flaw in it will injuriously affect our possession of the grace of God. Errors in opinion will hinder the blessings that flow from the truths which we misconceive or reject. Languor of desire will diminish the sum and enfeeble the energy of the powers that work in us. Wavering confidence, crossed and broken, like the solar spectrum, by many a dark line of doubt, will make our conscious possession of Christ’s gift fitful. We have a deep well to draw from. Let us take care that the vessel with which we draw is in size proportionate to *its* depth and *our* need, that the chain to which it hangs is strong, and that no leaks in it let the full supply run out, nor any stains on its inner surface taint and taste the bright treasure.

And the other lesson is this. There can be no faith so feeble that Christ does not respond to it. The most ignorant, self-regarding, timid trust may unite the soul to Jesus Christ. To desire is to have; and ‘whosoever will, may take of the water of life freely.’ If you only come to Him, though He have passed, He will stop. If you come trusting and yet doubting, He will forgive the doubt and answer the trust. If you come to Him, knowing but that your heart is full of evil which none save He can cure, and putting out a lame hand-or even a tremulous finger-tip-to touch His garment, be sure that anything is possible rather than that He should turn away your prayer, or His mercy from you.

III. The last part of this miracle teaches us that Christ corrects and confirms an imperfect faith by the very act of answering it.

Observe how the process of cure and the discipline which followed are, in Christ's loving wisdom, made to fit closely to all the faults and flaws in the suppliant's faith.

She had thought of the healing energy as independent of the Healer's knowledge and will. Therefore His very first word shows her that He is aware of her mute appeal, and conscious of the going forth from Him of the power that cures-'Who touched Me?' As was said long ago, 'the multitudes thronged Him, but the woman touched.' Amidst all the jostling of the unmannerly crowd that trod with rude feet on His skirts, and elbowed their way to see this new Rabbi, there was one touch unlike all the rest; and, though it was only that of the finger-tip of a poor woman, wasted to skin and bone with twelve years' weakening disease, He knew it; and His will and love sent forth the 'virtue' which healed. May we not fairly apply this lesson to ourselves? Christ is, as most of us, I suppose, believe, Lord of all creatures, administering the affairs of the universe; the steps of His throne and the precincts of His court are thronged with dependants whose eyes wait upon Him, and who are fed from His stores; and yet my poor voice may steal through that chorus-shout of petition and praise, and His ear will detect its lowest note, and will separate the thin stream of my prayer from the great sea of supplication which rolls to His seat, and will answer *me*. My hand uplifted among the millions of empty and imploring palms that are raised towards the heaven will receive into its clasping fingers the special blessing for my special wants.

Again, she had been selfish in her faith, had not cared for any close personal relation with Him; and so she was taught that He was in all His gifts, and that He was more than all His gifts. He compels her to come to

His feet that she may learn His heart, and may carry away a blessing not stolen, but bestowed

‘With open love, not secret cure,
The Lord of hearts would bless.’

And thus is laid the foundation for a personal bond between her and Christ, which shall be for the joy of her life, and shall make of that life a thankful sacrifice to Him, the Healer.

Thus it is with us all. We may go to Him, at first, with no thought but for ourselves. But we have not to carry away His gift hidden in our hands. We learn that it is a love-token from Him. And so we find in His answer to faith the true and only cure for all self-regard; and moved by the mercies of Christ, are led to do what else were impossible-to yield ourselves as ‘living sacrifices’ to Him.

Again, she had shrunk from publicity. Her womanly diffidence, her enfeebled health, the shame of her disease, all made her wish to hide herself and her want from His eye, and to hide herself and her treasure from men. She would fain steal away unnoticed, as she hoped she had come. But she is dragged out before all the thronging multitude, and has to tell the whole. The answer to her faith makes her bold. In a moment she is changed from timidity to courage; a tremulous invalid ready to creep into any corner to escape notice, she stretched out her hand-the instant after, she knelt at His feet in the spirit of a confessor. This is Christ’s most merciful fashion of curing our cowardice-not by rebukes, but by giving us, faint-hearted though we be, the gift which out of weakness makes us strong. He would have us testify to Him before men, and that for our own sakes, since faith unacknowledged, like a plant in the dark, is apt to become pale and sickly, and bear no bright blossoms nor sweet fruit. But, ere He bids us own His name, He pours into our hearts, in answer to our secret appeal, the health of His own life, and the blissful consciousness of that great gift which makes the tongue of the dumb sing. Faith at first may be very timid, but faith will grow bold to witness of Him and not be ashamed, in the exact proportion in which it is genuine, and receives from Christ of His fulness.

And then-with a final word to set forth still more clearly that she had received the blessing from His love, not from His magical power, and through her confidence, not through her touch-'Daughter! thy faith'-not thy finger-'hath made thee whole; go in peace and *be* whole'-Jesus confirms by His own authoritative voice the furtive blessing, and sends her away, perhaps to see Him no more, but to live in tranquil security, and in her humble home to guard the gift which He had bestowed on her imperfect faith, and to perfect-we may hope-the faith which He had enlightened and strengthened by the over-abundance of His gift.

Dear friends, this poor woman represents us all. Like her, we are sick of a sore sickness, we have spent our substance in trying physicians of no value, and are 'nothing the better, but rather the worse.' Oh! is it not strange that you should need to be urged to go to the Healer to whom she went? Do not be afraid, my brother, of telling Him all your pain and pining-He knows it already. Do not be afraid that your hand may not reach Him for the crowd, or that your voice may fail to fall on His ear. Do not be afraid of your ignorance, do not be afraid of your wavering confidence and many doubts. All these cannot separate you from Him who 'Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses.' Fear but one thing-that He pass on to carry life and health to other souls, ere you resolve to press to His feet. Fear but one thing-that whilst you delay, the hem of the garment may be swept beyond the reach of your slow hand. Imperfect faith may bring salvation to a soul: hesitation may ruin and wreck a life.

33)Mark 5:28

Mark

THE POWER OF FEEBLE FAITH

TOUCH OR FAITH?

Mar. 5:28, Mar. 5:34.

I. The erroneous faith.

In general terms there is here an illustration of how intellectual error may coexist with sincere faith. The precise form of error is clearly that she looked on the physical contact with the material garment as the vehicle of healing-the very same thing which we find ever since running through the whole history of the Church, *e.g.* the exaltation of externals, rites, ordinances, sacraments, etc.

Take two or three phases of it-

1. You get it formularised into a system in sacramentarianism.

[a] Baptismal regeneration,

[b] Holy Communion.

Religion becomes largely a thing of rites and ceremonies.

2. You get it in Protestant form among Dissenters in the importance attached to Church membership.

Outward acts of worship.

There is abroad a vague idea that somehow we get good from external association with religious acts, and so on. This feeling is deep in human nature, is not confined to the Roman Catholic Church, and is not the work of priests. There is a strange revival of it to-day, and so there is need of protest against it in every form.

II. The blessing that comes to an erroneous faith.

The woman here was too ‘ritualistic.’ How many good people there are in that same school to-day! Yet how blessed for us all, that, even along with many errors, if we grasp *Him* we shall not lose the grace.

III. Christ’s gentle enlightenment on the error.

‘Thy faith hath saved thee.’ How wonderfully beautiful! He cures by giving the blessing and leading on to the full truth. In regard to the woman, it might have been that her touch *did* heal; but even there in the physical realm, since it was He, not His robe, that healed, it was her faith, not her hand, that procured the blessing. This is universally true in the spiritual realm.

[a] Salvation is purely spiritual and inward in its nature-not an outward work, but a new nature, ‘love, joy, peace.’ Hence [b] Faith is the condition of salvation. Faith saves because *He* saves, and faith is contact with Him. It is the only thing which joins a soul to Christ. Then learn what makes a Christian.

[c] Hence, the place of externals is purely subsidiary to faith. If they help a man to believe and feel more strongly, they are good. Their only office is the same as that of preaching or reading. In both, truth is the agent. Their power is in enforcing truth.

34)Mark 5:32

Mark

THE LOOKS OF JESUS

Mar. 5:32.

This Gospel of Mark is full of little touches that speak an eye-witness who had the gift of noting and reproducing vividly small details which make a scene live before us. Sometimes it is a word of description: ‘There was much grass in the place.’ Sometimes it is a note of Christ’s demeanour: ‘Looking up to heaven, He sighed.’ Sometimes it is the very Aramaic words He spoke: ‘Ephphatha.’ Very often the Evangelist tells us of our Lord’s looks, the gleams of pity and melting tenderness, the grave rebukes, the lofty authority that shone in them. We may well believe that on earth as in heaven, ‘His eyes were as a flame of fire,’ burning with clear light of knowledge and pure flame of love. These looks had pierced the soul, and lived for ever in the memory, of the eye-witness, whoever he was, who was the informant of Mark. Probably the old tradition is right, and it is Peter’s loving quickness of observation that we have to thank for these precious minutiae. But be that as it may, the records in this Gospel of the *looks* of Christ are very remarkable. My present purpose is to gather them together, and by their help to think of Him whose meek, patient 'eye' is 'still upon them that fear Him,' beholding our needs and our sins.

Taking the instances in the order of their occurrence, they are these-'He looked round on the Pharisees with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts' [Mar. 3:5]. He looked on His disciples and said, 'Behold My mother and My brethren!' [Mar. 3:32]. He looked round about to see who had touched the hem of His garment [Mar. 5:32]. He turned and looked on His disciples before rebuking Peter [Mar. 8:33], He looked lovingly on the young questioner, asking what he should do to obtain eternal life [Mar. 10:21], and in the same context, He looked round about to His disciples after the youth had gone away sorrowful, and enforced the solemn lesson of His lips with the light of His eye [Mar. 10:23, Mar. 10:27]. Lastly, He looked round about on all things in the temple on the day of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem [Mar. 11:11]. These are the instances in this Gospel. One look of Christ's is not mentioned in it, which we might have expected-namely, that which sent Peter out from the judgment hall to break into a passion of penitent tears. Perhaps the remembrance was too sacred to be told-at all events, the Evangelist who gives us so many similar notes is silent about that look, and we have to learn of it from another.

We may throw these instances into groups according to their objects, and so bring out the many-sided impression which they produce.

I. The welcoming look of love and pity to those who seek Him.

Two of the recorded instances fall into their place here. The one is this of our text, of the woman who came behind Christ to touch His robe, and be healed: the other is that of the young ruler.

Take that first instance of the woman, wasted with disease, timid with the timidity of her sex, of her long sickness, of her many disappointments. She steals through the crowd that rudely presses on this miracle-working Rabbi, and manages somehow to stretch out a wasted arm through some gap in the barrier of people about Him, and with her pallid, trembling finger to touch the edge of His robe. The cure comes at once. It was all that she wanted, but not all that He would give her. Therefore He turns and lets His eye fall upon her. That draws her to Him. It told her that she had not been too bold. It told her that she had not surreptitiously stolen healing, but that He had knowingly given it, and that His loving pity went with it. So it confirmed the gift, and, what was far more, it revealed the Giver. She had thought to bear away a secret boon unknown to all but herself. She gets instead an open blessing, with the Giver's heart in it.

The look that rested on her, like sunshine on some plant that had long pined and grown blanched in the shade, revealed Christ's knowledge, sympathy, and loving power. And in all these respects it is a revelation of the Christ for all time, and for every seeking timid soul in all the crowd. Can my poor feeble hand find a cranny anywhere through which it may reach the robe? What am I, in all this great universe blazing with stars, and crowded with creatures who hang on Him, that I should be able to secure personal contact with Him? The multitude-innumerable companies from every corner of space-press upon Him and throng Him, and I-out here on the verge of the crowd-how can I get at Him?-how can my little thin cry live and be distinguishable amid that mighty storm of praise that thunders round His throne? We may silence all such hesitancies of faith, for He who knew the difference between the light touch of the hand that sought healing, and the jostling of the curious crowd, bends on us the same eye, a God's in its perfect knowledge, a man's in the dewy sympathy which shines in it. However imperfect may be our thoughts of His blessing, their incompleteness will not hinder our reception of His gift in the measure of our faith, and the very bestowment will teach us worthier conceptions of Him, and hearten us for bolder approaches to His grace. He still looks on trembling suppliants, though they may know their own sickness much better than they understand Him, and still His look draws us to His feet by its omniscience, pity, and assurance of help.

The other case is very different. Instead of the invalid woman, we see a young man in the full flush of his strength, rich, needing no material blessing. Pure in life, and righteous according to even a high standard of morality, he yet feels that he needs something. Having real and strong desires after 'eternal life,' he comes to Christ to try whether this new Teacher could say anything that would help him to the assured inward peace and spontaneous goodness for which he longed, and had not found in all the round of punctilious obedience to unloved commandments. As he kneels there before Jesus, in his eager haste, with sincere and high aspirations stamped on his young ingenuous face, Christ’s eyes turn on him, and that wonderful word stands written, ‘Jesus, beholding him, loved him.’

He reads him through and through, knowing all the imperfection of his desires after goodness and eternal life, and yet loving him with more than a brother’s love. His sympathy does not blind Jesus to the limitations and shallowness of the young man’s aspirations, but His clear knowledge of these does not harden the gaze into indifference, nor check the springing tenderness in the Saviour’s heart. And the Master’s words, though they might sound cold, and did embody a hard requirement, are beautifully represented in the story as the expression of that love. He cared for the youth too much to deceive him with smooth things. The truest kindness was to put all his eagerness to the test at once. If he accepted the conditions, the look told him what a welcome awaited him. If he started aside from them, it was best for him to find out that there were things which he loved more than eternal life. So with a gracious invitation shining in His look, Christ places the course of self-denial before him; and when he went away sorrowful, he left behind One more sorrowful than himself. We can reverently imagine with what a look Christ watched his retreating figure; and we may hope that, though he went away then, the memory of that glance of love, and of those kind, faithful words, sooner or later drew him back to his Saviour.

Is not all this too an everlasting revelation of our Lord’s attitude? We may be sure that He looks on many a heart-on many a young heart-glowing with noble wishes and half-understood longings, and that His love reaches every one who, groping for the light, asks Him what to do to inherit eternal life. His great charity ‘hopeth all things,’ and does not turn away from longings because they are too weak to lift the soul above all the weights of sense and the world. Rather He would deepen them and strengthen them, and His eternal requirements addressed to feeble wills are not meant to ‘quench the smoking flax,’ but to kindle it to decisive consecration and self-surrender. The loving look interprets the severe words. If once we meet it full, and our hearts yield to the heart that is seen in it, the cords that bind us snap, and it is no more hard to ‘count all things but loss,’ and to give up ourselves, that we may follow Him. The sad and feeble and weary who may be half despairingly seeking for alleviation of outward ills, and the young and strong and ardent whose souls are fed with high desires, have but little comprehension of one another, but Christ knows them both, and loves them both, and would draw them both to Himself.

II. The Lord’s looks of love and warning to those who have found Him.

There are three instances of this class. The first is when He looked round on His disciples and said, ‘Behold My mother and My brethren!’ [Mar. 3:34]. Perhaps no moment in all Christ’s life had more of humiliation in it than that. There could be no deeper degradation than that His own family should believe Him insane. Not His brethren only, but His mother herself seems to have been shaken from her attitude of meek obedience so wonderfully expressed in her two recorded sayings, ‘Be it unto me according to Thy word,’ and ‘Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it.’ She too appears to be in the shameful conspiracy, and to have consented that her name should be used as a lure in the wily message meant to separate Him from His friends, that He might be seized and carried off as a madman. What depth of tenderness was in that slow circuit of His gaze upon the humble loving followers grouped round Him! It spoke the fullest trustfulness of them, and His rest in their sympathy, partial though it was. It went before His speech, like the flash before the report, and looked what in a moment He said, ‘Behold My mother and My brethren!’ It owned spiritual affinities as more real than family bonds, and proved that He required no more of us than He was willing to do Himself when He bid us ‘forsake father and mother, and wife and children’ for Him. We follow Him when we tread that road, hard though it be. In Him every mother may behold her son, in Him we may find more than the reality of every sweet family relationship. That same love, which identified Him with those half-enlightened followers here, still binds Him to us, and He looks down on us from amid the glory, and owns us for His true kindred.

That look of unutterable love is strangely contrasted with the next instance. We read [Mar. 8:32] that Peter ‘took Him’-apart a little way, I suppose-’and began to rebuke Him.’ He turns away from the rash Apostle, will say no word to him alone, but summons the others by a glance, and then, having made sure that all were within hearing, He solemnly rebukes Peter with the sharpest words that ever fell from His lips. That look calls them to listen, not that they may be witnesses of Peter's chastisement, but because the severe words concern them all. It bids them search themselves as they hear. They too may be 'Satans.' They too may shrink from the cross, and 'mind the things that be of men.'

We may take the remaining instance along with this. It occurs immediately after the story of the young seeker, to which we have already referred. Twice within five verses [Mar. 10:23 - Mar. 10:27] we read that He 'looked on His disciples,' before He spoke the grave lessons and warnings arising from the incident. A sad gaze that would be!-full of regret and touched with warning. We may well believe that it added weight to the lesson He would teach, that surrender of all things was needed for discipleship. We see that it had been burned into the memory of one of the little group, who told long years after how He had looked upon them so solemnly, as seeming to read their hearts while He spoke. Not more searching was the light of the eyes which John in Patmos saw, 'as a flame of fire.' Still He looks on His disciples, and sees our inward hankerings after the things of men. All our shrinkings from the cross and cleaving to the world are known to Him. He comes to each of us with that sevenfold proclamation, 'I know thy works,' and from His loving lips falls on our ears the warning, emphasised by that sad, earnest gaze, 'How hard is it for them that have riches to enter into the Kingdom of God!' But, blessed be His name, the stooping love which claims us for His brethren shines in His regard none the less tenderly, though He reads and warns us with His eye. So, we can venture to spread all our evil before Him, and ask that He would look on it, knowing that, as the sun bleaches cloth laid in its beams, He will purge away the evil which He sees, if only we let the light of His face shine full upon us.

III. The Lord's look of anger and pity on His opponents.

That instance occurs in the account of the healing of a man with a withered arm, which took place in the synagogue of Capernaum [Mar. 3:1 - Mar. 3:5]. In the vivid narrative, we can see the scribes and Pharisees, who had already questioned Him with insolent airs of authority about His breach of the Rabbinical Sabbatic rules, sitting in the synagogue, with their gleaming eyes 'watching Him' with hostile purpose. They hope that He will heal on the Sabbath day. Possibly they had even brought the powerless-handed man there, on the calculation that Christ could not refrain from helping him when He saw his condition. They are ready to traffic in human misery if only they can catch Him in a breach of law. The fact of a miracle if nothing. Pity for the poor man is not in them. They have neither reverence for the power of the miracle-worker, nor sympathy with His tenderness of heart. The only thing for which they have eyes is the breach of the complicated web of restrictions which they had spun across the Sabbath day. What a strange, awful power the pedantry of religious forms has of blinding the vision and hardening the heart as to the substance and spirit of religion! That Christ should heal neither made them glad nor believing, but that He should heal on the Sabbath day roused them to a deadly hatred. So there they sit, on the stretch of expectation, silently watching. He bids the man stand forth-a movement, and there the cripple stands alone in the midst of the seated congregation. Then comes the unanswerable question which cut so deep, and struck their consciences so hard that they could answer nothing, only sit and scowl at Him with a murderous light gleaming in their eyes. He fronts them with a steady gaze that travels over the whole group, and that showed to at least one who was present an unforgettable mingling of displeasure and pity. ‘He looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts.’ In Christ’s perfect nature, anger and pity could blend in wondrous union, like the crystal and fire in the abyss before the throne.

The soul that has not the capacity for anger at evil wants something of its due perfection, and goes ‘halting’ like Jacob after Peniel. In Christ’s complete humanity, it could not but be present, but in pure and righteous form. His anger was no disorder of passion, or ‘brief madness’ that discomposed the even motion of His spirit, nor was there in it any desire for the hurt of its objects, but, on the contrary, it lay side by side with the sorrow of pity, which was intertwined with it like a golden thread. Both these two emotions are fitting to a pure manhood in the presence of evil. They heighten each other. The perfection of righteous anger is to be tempered by sympathy. The perfection of righteous pity for the evildoer is to be saved from immoral condoning of evil as if it were only calamity, by an infusion of some displeasure. We have to learn the lesson and take this look of Christ’s as our pattern in our dealings with evildoers. Perhaps our day needs more especially to remember that a righteous severity and recoil of the whole nature from sin is part of a perfect Christian character. We are so accustomed to pity transgressors, and to hear sins spoken of as if they were misfortunes mainly due to environment, or to inherited tendencies, that we are apt to forget the other truth, that they are the voluntary acts of a man who could have refrained if he had wished, and whose not having wished is worthy of blame. But we need to aim at just such a union of feeling as was revealed in that gaze of Christ's, and neither to let our wrath dry up our pity nor our pity put out the pure flame of our indignation at evil.

That look comes to us too with a message, when we are most conscious of the evil in our own hearts. Every man who has caught even a glimpse of Christ's great love, and has learned something of himself in the light thereof, must feel that wrath at evil sits ill on so sinful a judge as he feels himself to be. How can I fling stones at any poor creature when I am so full of sin myself? And how does that Lord look at me and all my wanderings from Him, my hardness of heart, my Pharisaism and deadness to His spiritual power and beauty? Can there be anything but displeasure in Him? The answer is not far to seek, but, familiar though it be, it often surprises a man anew with its sweetness, and meets recurring consciousness of unworthiness with a bright smile that scatters fears. In our deepest abasement we may take courage anew when we think of that wondrous blending of anger shot with pity.

IV. The look of the Lord on the profaned Temple.

On the day of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, apparently the Sunday before His crucifixion, we find [Mar. 11:11] that He went direct to the Temple, and 'looked round about on all things.' The King has come to His palace, the Lord has 'suddenly come to His Temple.' How solemn that careful, all-comprehending scrutiny of all that He found there-the bustle of the crowds come up for the Passover, the trafficking and the fraud, the heartless worship! He seems to have gazed upon all, that evening in silence, and, as the shades of night began to fall, He went back to Bethany with the Twelve. To-morrow will be time enough for the 'whip of small cords,' for to-day enough to have come as Lord to the temple, and with intent, all-comprehending gaze to have traversed its courts. Apparently He passed through the crowds there unnoticed, and beheld all, while Himself unrecognised.

Is not that silent, unobserved Presence, with His keen searching eye that lights on all, a solemn parable of a perpetual truth? He ‘walks amidst the seven golden candlesticks’ to-day, as in the temple of Jerusalem, and in the vision of Patmos. His eyes like a flame of fire regard and scrutinise us too. ‘I know thy works’ is still upon His lips. Silent and by many unseen, that calm, clear-eyed, loving but judging Christ walks amongst His churches to-day. Alas! what does He see there? If He came in visible form into any congregation in England to-day, would He not find merchandise in the sanctuary, formalism and unreality standing to minister, and pretence and hypocrisy bowing in worship? How much of all our service could live in the light of His felt presence? And are we never going to stir ourselves up to a truer devotion and a purer service by remembering that He is here as really as He was in the Temple of old? Our drowsy prayers, and all our conventional repetitions of devout aspirations, not felt at the moment, but inherited from our fathers, our confessions which have no penitence, our praises without gratitude, our vows which we never mean to keep, and our creeds which in no operative fashion we believe-all the hollowness of profession with no reality below it, like a great cooled bubble on a lava stream, would crash in and go to powder if once we really believed what we so glibly say-that Jesus Christ was looking at us. He keeps silence to-day, but as surely as He knows us now, so surely will He come to-morrow with a whip of small cords and purge His Temple from hypocrisy and unreality, from traffic and thieves. All the churches need the sifting. Christ has done and suffered too much for the world, to let the power of His gospel be neutralised by the sins of His professing followers, and Christ loves the imperfect friends that cleave to Him, though their service be often stained, and their consecration always incomplete, too well to suffer sin upon them. Therefore He will come to purify His Temple. Well for us, if we thankfully yield ourselves to His merciful chastisements, howsoever they may fall upon us, and believe that in them all He looks on us with love, and wishes only to separate us from that which separates us from Him! On us all that eye rests with all these emotions fused and blended in one gaze of love that passeth knowledge-a look of love and welcome whensoever we seek Him, either to help us in outward or inward blessings; a look of love and warning to us, owning us also for His brethren, and cautioning us lest we stray from His side; a look of love and displeasure at any sin that blinds us to His gracious beauty; a look of love and observance of our poor worship and spotted sacrifices.

Let us lay ourselves full in the sunshine of His gaze, and take for ours the old prayer, ‘Search me, O Christ, and know my heart!’ It is heaven on earth to feel His eye resting upon us, and know that it is love. It will be the heaven of heaven to see Him ‘face to face,’ and ‘to know even as we are known.’

35)Mark 5:34

Mark

TOUCH OR FAITH?

Mar. 5:28, Mar. 5:34.

I. The erroneous faith.

In general terms there is here an illustration of how intellectual error may coexist with sincere faith. The precise form of error is clearly that she looked on the physical contact with the material garment as the vehicle of healing-the very same thing which we find ever since running through the whole history of the Church, *e.g.* the exaltation of externals, rites, ordinances, sacraments, etc.

Take two or three phases of it-

1. You get it formularised into a system in sacramentarianism.

[a] Baptismal regeneration,

[b] Holy Communion.

Religion becomes largely a thing of rites and ceremonies.

2. You get it in Protestant form among Dissenters in the importance attached to Church membership.

Outward acts of worship.

There is abroad a vague idea that somehow we get good from external association with religious acts, and so on. This feeling is deep in human nature, is not confined to the Roman Catholic Church, and is not the work of priests. There is a strange revival of it to-day, and so there is need of protest against it in every form.

II. The blessing that comes to an erroneous faith.

The woman here was too ‘ritualistic.’ How many good people there are in that same school to-day! Yet how blessed for us all, that, even along with many errors, if we grasp *Him* we shall not lose the grace.

III. Christ’s gentle enlightenment on the error.

‘Thy faith hath saved thee.’ How wonderfully beautiful! He cures by giving the blessing and leading on to the full truth. In regard to the woman, it might have been that her touch *did* heal; but even there in the physical realm, since it was He, not His robe, that healed, it was her faith, not her hand, that procured the blessing. This is universally true in the spiritual realm.

[a] Salvation is purely spiritual and inward in its nature-not an outward work, but a new nature, ‘love, joy, peace.’ Hence [b] Faith is the condition of salvation. Faith saves because *He* saves, and faith is contact with Him. It is the only thing which joins a soul to Christ. Then learn what makes a Christian.

[c] Hence, the place of externals is purely subsidiary to faith. If they help a man to believe and feel more strongly, they are good. Their only office is the same as that of preaching or reading. In both, truth is the agent. Their power is in enforcing truth.

36)Mark 5:35-43

TALITHA CUMI

Mar. 5:22 - Mar. 5:24, Mar. 5:35 - Mar. 5:43.

The scene of this miracle was probably Capernaum; its time, according to Matthew, was the feast at his house after his call. Mark's date appears to be later, but he may have anticipated the feast in his narrative, in order to keep the whole of the incidents relating to Matthew's apostleship together. Jairus's knowledge of Jesus is implied in the story, and perhaps Jesus' acquaintance with him.

I. We note, first, the agonised appeal and the immediate answer.

Desperation makes men bold. Conventionalities are burned up by the fire of agonised petitioning for help in extremity. Without apology or preliminary, Jairus bursts in, and his urgent need is sufficient excuse. Jesus never complains of scant respect when wrung hearts cry to Him. But this man was not only driven by despair, but drawn by trust. He was sure that, even though his little darling had been all but dead when he ran from his house, and was dead by this time, for all he knew, Jesus could give her life. Perhaps he had not faced the stern possibility that she might already be gone, nor defined precisely what he hoped for in that case. But he was sure of Jesus' power, and he says nothing to show that he doubted His willingness. A beautiful trust shines through his words, based, no doubt, on what he had known and seen of Jesus' miracles. *We* have more pressing and deeper needs, and we have fuller and deeper knowledge of Jesus, wherefore our approach to Him should be at least as earnest and confidential as Jairus's was. If our Lord was at the feast when this interruption took place, His gracious, immediate answer becomes more lovely, as a sign of His willingness to bring the swiftest help. 'While they are yet speaking, I will hear.' Jairus had not finished asking before Jesus was on His feet to go.

The father's impatience would be satisfied when they were on their way, but how he would chafe, and think every moment an age, while Jesus stayed, as if at entire leisure, to deal with another silent petitioner! But His help to one never interferes with His help to another, and no case is so pressing as that He cannot spare time to stay to bless some one else. The poor, sickly, shamefaced woman shall be healed, and the little girl shall not suffer.

II. We have next the extinction and rekindling of Jairus’s glimmer of hope.

Distances in Capernaum were short, and the messenger would soon find Jesus. There was little sympathy in the harsh, bald announcement of the death, or in the appended suggestion that the Rabbi need not be further troubled. The speaker evidently was thinking more of being polite to Jesus than of the poor father’s stricken heart, Jairus would feel then what most of us have felt in like circumstances,-that he had been more hopeful than he knew. Only when the last glimmer is quenched do we feel, by the blackness, how much light had lingered in our sky, But Jesus knew Jairus’s need before Jairus himself knew it, and His strong word of cheer relit the torch ere the poor father had time to speak. That loving eye reads our hearts and anticipates our dreary hopelessness by His sweet comfortings. Faith is the only victorious antagonist of fear. Jairus had every reason for abandoning hope, and his only reason for clinging to it was faith. So it is with us all. It is vain to bid us not be afraid when real dangers and miseries stare us in the face; but it is not vain to bid us ‘believe,’ and if we do that, faith, cast into the one scale, will outweigh a hundred good reasons for dread and despair cast into the other.

III. We have next the tumult of grief and the word that calms.

The hired mourners had lost no time, and in Eastern fashion were disturbing the solemnity of death with their professional shrieks and wailings. True grief is silent. Woe that weeps aloud is soon consoled.

What a contrast between the noise outside and the still death-chamber and its occupant, and what a contrast between the agitation of the sham comforters and the calmness of the true Helper! Christ’s great word was spoken for us all when our hearts are sore and our dear ones go. It dissolves the dim shape into nothing ness, or, rather, it transfigures it into a gracious, soothing form. Sleep is rest, and bears in itself the pledge of waking. So Christ has changed the ‘shadow feared of man’ into beauty, and in the strength of His great word we can meet the last enemy with ‘Welcome! friend.’ It is strange that any one reading this narrative should have been so blind to its deepest beauty as to suppose that Jesus was here saying that the child had only swooned, and was really alive. He was not denying that she was what men call ‘dead,’ but He was, in the triumphant consciousness of His own power, and in the clear vision of the realities of spiritual being, of which bodily states are but shadows, denying that what men call death deserves the name. ‘Death’ is the state of the soul separated from God, whether united to the body or no,-not the separation of body and soul, which is only a visible symbol of the more dread reality.

IV. We have finally the life-giving word and the life-preserving care.

Probably Jesus first freed His progress from the jostling crowd, and then, when arrived, made the further selection of the three apostles,-the first three of the mighty ones-and, as was becoming, of the father and mother.

With what hushed, tense expectation they would enter the chamber! Think of the mother’s eyes watching Him. The very words that He spoke were like a caress. There was infinite tenderness in that ‘Damsel!’ from His lips, and so deep an impression did it make on Peter that he repeated the very words to Mark, and used them, with the change of one letter [‘Ta*b*itha’ for ‘Ta*l*itha’], in raising Dorcas. The same tenderness is expressed by His taking her by the hand, as, no doubt, her mother had done, many a morning, on waking her. The father had asked Him to lay His hand on her, that she might be made whole and live. He did as He was asked,-He always does-and His doing according to our desire brings larger blessings than we had thought of. Neither the touch of His hand nor the words He spoke were the real agents of the child’s returning to life. It was His will which brought her back from whatever vasty dimness she had entered. The forth-putting of Christ’s will is sovereign, and His word runs with power through all regions of the universe. ‘The dull, cold ear of death’ hears, and ‘they that hear shall live,’ whether they are, as men say, dead, or whether they are ‘dead in trespasses and sins.’ The resurrection of a soul is a mightier act-if we can speak of degrees of might in His acts-than that of a body.

It would be calming for the child of such strange experiences to see, for the first thing that met her eyes opening again on the old familiar home as on a strange land, the bending face of Jesus, and His touch would steady her spirit and assure of His love and help. The quiet command to give her food knits the wonder with common life, and teaches precious lessons as to His economy of miraculous power, like His bidding others loosen Lazarus's wrappings, and as to His devolution on us of duties towards those whom He raises from the death of sin. But it was given, not didactically, but lovingly. The girl was exhausted, and sustenance was necessary, and would be sweet. So He thought upon a small bodily need, and the love that gave life took care to provide what was required to support it. He gives the greatest; He will take care that we shall not lack the least.

37)Mark 6:1-4

Mark

THE MASTER REJECTED: THE SERVANTS SENT FORTH

Mar. 6:1 - Mar. 6:13.

An easy day's journey would carry Jesus and His followers from Capernaum, on the lake-side, to Nazareth, among the hills. What took our Lord back there? When last He taught in the synagogue of Nazareth, His life had been in danger; and now He thrusts Himself into the wolf's den. Why? Mark seems to wish us to observe the connection between this visit and the great group of miracles which he has just recorded; and possibly the link may be our Lord's hope that the report of these might have preceded Him and prepared His way. In His patient long-suffering He will give His fellow-villagers another chance; and His heart yearns for 'His own country,' and 'His own kin,' and 'His own house,' of which He speaks so pathetically in the context.

I. We have here unbelief born of familiarity, and its effects on Christ [Mar. 6:1 - Mar. 6:6].

Observe the characteristic avoidance of display, and the regard for existing means of worship, shown in His waiting till the Sabbath, and then resorting to the synagogue. He and His hearers would both remember His last appearance in it; and He and they would both remember many a time before that, when, as a youth, He had sat there. The rage which had exploded on His first sermon has given place to calmer, but not less bitter, opposition. Mark paints the scene, and represents the hearers as discussing Jesus while He spoke. The decorous silence of the synagogue was broken by a hubbub of mutual questions. ‘Many’ spoke at once, and all had the same thing to say. The state of mind revealed is curious. They own Christ’s wisdom in His teaching, and the reality of His miracles, of which they had evidently heard; but the fact that He was one of themselves made them angry that He should have such gifts, and suspicious of where He had got them. They seem to have had the same opinion as Nathanael-that no ‘good thing’ could ‘come out of Nazareth.’ Their old companion could not be a prophet; that was certain. But He had wisdom and miraculous power; that was as certain. Where had they come from? There was only one other source; and so, with many headshakings, they were preparing to believe that the Jesus whom they had all known, living His quiet life of labour among them, was in league with the devil, rather than believe that He was a messenger from God.

We note in their questions, first, the glimpse of our Lord’s early life. They bring before us the quiet, undistinguished home and the long years of monotonous labour. We owe to Mark alone the notice that Jesus actually wrought at Joseph’s handicraft. Apparently the latter was dead, and, if so, Jesus would be the head of the house, and probably the ‘breadwinner.’ One of the fathers preserves the tradition that He ‘made plows and yokes, by which He taught the symbols of righteousness and an active life.’ That good father seems to think it needful to find symbolical meanings, in order to save Christ’s dignity; but the prose fact that He toiled at the carpenter’s bench, and handled hammer and saw, needs nothing to heighten its value as a sign of His true participation in man’s lot, and as the hallowing of manual toil. How many weary arms have grasped their tools with new vigour and contentment when they thought of Him as their Pattern in their narrow toils! The Nazarenes’ difficulty was but one case of a universal tendency. Nobody finds it easy to believe that some village child, who has grown up beside him, and whose undistinguished outside life he knows, has turned out a genius or a great man. The last people to recognise a prophet are always his kindred and his countrymen. ‘Far-away birds have fine feathers.’ Men resent it as a kind of slight on themselves that the other, who was one of them but yesterday, should be so far above them to-day. They are mostly too blind to look below the surface, and they conclude that, because they saw so much of the external life, they knew the man that lived it. The elders of Nazareth had seen Jesus grow up, and to them He would be ‘the carpenter’s son’ still. The more important people had known the humbleness of His home, and could not adjust themselves to look up to Him, instead of down. His equals in age would find their boyish remembrances too strong for accepting Him as a prophet. All of them did just what the most of us would have done, when they took it for certain that the Man whom they had known so well, as they fancied, could not be a prophet, to say nothing of the Messiah so long looked for. It is easy to blame them; but it is better to learn the warning in their words, and to take care that we are not blind to some true messenger of God just because we have been blessed with close companionship with him. Many a household has had to wait for death to take away the prophet before they discern him. Some of us entertain ‘angels unawares,’ and have bitterly to feel, when too late, that our eyes were holden that we should not know them.

These questions bring out strongly what we too often forget in estimating Christ’s contemporaries-namely, that His presence among them, in the simplicity of His human life, was a positive hindrance to their seeing His true character. We sometimes wish that we had seen Him, and heard His voice. We should have found it more difficult to believe in Him if we had. ‘His flesh’ was a ‘veil’ in other sense than the Epistle to the Hebrews means; for, by reason of men’s difficulty in piercing beneath it, it hid from many what it was meant and fitted to reveal. Only eyes purged beheld the glory of ‘the Word’ become flesh when it ‘dwelt among us’-and even they saw Him more clearly when they saw Him no more. Let us not be too hard on these simple Nazarenes, but recognise our kith and kin.

The facts on which the Nazarenes grounded their unbelief are really irrefragable proof of Christ’s divinity. Whence had this man His wisdom and mighty works? Born in that humble home, reared in that secluded village, shut out from the world’s culture, buried, as it were, among an exclusive and abhorred people, how came He to tower above all teachers, and to sway the world? ‘With whom took He counsel? and who instructed Him, and taught Him?’ The character and work of Christ, compared with the circumstances of His origin and environment, are an insoluble riddle, except on one supposition-that He was the word and power of God.

The effects of this unbelief on our Lord were twofold. It limited His power. Matthew says that ‘He did not many mighty works.’ Mark goes deeper, and boldly days ‘He could not.’ It is mistaken jealousy for Christ’s honour to seek to pare down the strong words. The atmosphere of chill unbelief froze the stream. The power was there, but it required for its exercise some measure of moral susceptibility. His miraculous energy followed, in general, the same law as His higher exercise of saving grace does; that is to say, it could not force itself upon unwilling men. Christ ‘cannot’ save a man who does not trust Him. He was hampered in the outflow of His healing power by unsympathetic disparagement and unbelief. Man can thwart God. Faith opens the door, and unbelief shuts it in His face. He ‘would have gathered,’ but they ‘would not,’ and therefore He ‘could not.’

The second effect of unbelief on Him was that He ‘marvelled.’ He is twice recorded to have wondered-once at a Gentile’s faith, once at His townsmen’s unbelief. He wondered at the first because it showed so unusual a susceptibility; at the second, because it showed so unreasonable a blindness. All sin is a wonder to eyes that see into the realities of things and read the end; for it is all utterly unreasonable [though it is, alas! not unaccountable] and suicidal. ‘Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this.’ Unbelief in Christ is, by Himself, declared to be the very climax of sin, and its most flagrant evidence [Joh. 16:9]; and of all the instances of unbelief which saddened His heart, none struck more chill than that of these Nazarenes. They had known His pure youth; He might have reckoned on some touch of sympathy and predisposition to welcome Him. His wonder is the measure of His pain as well as of their sin.

Nor need we wonder that He wondered; for He was true man, and all human emotions were His. To one who lives ever in the Father’s bosom, what can seem so strange as that men should prefer homeless exposedness and dreary loneliness? To one whose eyes ever behold unseen realities, what so marvellous as men’s blindness? To one who knew so assuredly His own mission and rich freightage of blessing, how strange it must have been that He found so few to accept His gifts! Jesus knew that bitter wonder which all men who have a truth to proclaim which the world has not learned, have to experience-the amazement at finding it so hard to get any others to see what they see. In His manhood, He shared the fate of all teachers, who have, in their turn, to marvel at men's unbelief.

II. The new instrument which Christ fashions to cope with unbelief.

What does Jesus do when thus 'wounded in the house of His friends'? Give way to despondency? No; but meekly betake Himself to yet obscurer fields of service, and send out the Twelve to prepare His way, as if He thought that they might have success where He would fail. What a lesson for people who are always hankering after conspicuous 'spheres,' and lamenting that their gifts are wasted in some obscure corner, is that picture of Jesus, repulsed from Nazareth, patiently turning to the villages! The very summary account of the trial mission of the Twelve here given presents only the salient points of the charge to them, and in its condensation makes these the more emphatic. Note the interesting statement that they were sent out two-and-two. The other Evangelists do not tell us this, but their lists of the Apostles are arranged in pairs. Mark's list is not so arranged, but he supplies the reason for the arrangement, which he does not follow; and the other Gospels, by their arrangement, confirm his statement, which they do not give. Two-and-two is a wise rule for all Christian workers. It checks individual peculiarities of self-will, helps to keep off faults, wholesomely stimulates, strengthens faith by giving another to hear it and to speak it, brings companionship, and admits of division of labour. One-and-one are more than twice one.

The first point is the gift of power. Unclean spirits are specified, but the subsequent verses show that miracle-working power in its other forms was included. We may call that Christ's greatest miracle. That He could, by His mere will, endow a dozen men with such power, is more, if degree come into view at all, than that He Himself should exercise it. But there is a lesson in the fact for all ages-even those in which miracles have ceased. Christ gives before He commands, and sends no man into the field without filling his basket with seed-corn. His gifts assimilate the receiver to Himself, and only in the measure in which His servants possess power which is like His own, and drawn from Him, can they proclaim His coming, or prepare hearts for it. The second step is their equipment. The special commands here given were repealed by Jesus when He gave His last commands. In their letter they apply only to that one journey, but in their spirit they are of universal and permanent obligation. The Twelve were to travel light. They might carry a staff to help them along, and wear sandals to save their feet on rough roads; but that was to be all. Food, luggage, and money, the three requisites of a traveller, were to be ‘conspicuous by their absence.’ That was repealed afterwards, and instructions given of an opposite character, because, after His ascension, the Church was to live more and more by ordinary means; but in this journey they were to learn to trust Him without means, that afterwards they might trust Him in the means. He showed them the purpose of these restrictions in the act of abrogating them. ‘When I sent you forth without purse . . . lacked ye anything?’ But the spirit remains unabrogated, and the minimum of outward provision is likeliest to call out the maximum of faith. We are more in danger from having too much baggage than from having too little. And the one indispensable requirement is that, whatever the quantity, it should hinder neither our march nor our trust in Him who alone is wealth and food.

Next comes the disposition of the messengers. It is not to be self-indulgent. They are not to change quarters for the sake of greater comfort. They have not gone out to make a pleasure tour, but to preach, and so are to stay where they are welcomed, and to make the best of it. Delicate regard for kindly hospitality, if offered by ever so poor a house, and scrupulous abstinence from whatever might suggest interested motives, must mark the true servant. That rule is not out of date. If ever a herald of Christ falls under suspicion of caring more about life’s comforts than about his work, good-bye to his usefulness! If ever he does so care, whether he be suspected of it or no, spiritual power will ebb from him.

The next step is the messengers’ demeanour to the rejecters of their message. Shaking the dust off the sandals is an emblem of solemn renunciation of participation, and perhaps of disclaimer of responsibility. It meant certainly, ‘We have no more to do with you,’ and possibly, ‘Your blood be on your own heads.’ This journey of the Twelve was meant to be of short duration, and to cover much ground, and therefore no time was to be spent unnecessarily. Their message was brief, and as well told quickly as slowly. The whole conditions of work now are different. Sometimes, perhaps, a Christian is warranted in solemnly declaring to those who receive not his message, that he will have no more to say to them. That may do more than all his other words. But such cases are rare; and the rule that it is safest to follow is rather that of love which despairs of none, and, though often repelled, returns with pleading, and, if it have told often in vain, now tells with tears, the story of the love that never abandons the most obstinate.

Such were the prominent points of this first Christian mission. They who carry Christ's banner in the world must be possessed of power, His gift, must be lightly weighted, must care less for comfort than for service, must solemnly warn of the consequences of rejecting the message; and so they will not fail to cast out devils, and to heal many that are sick.

38)Mark 6:5-6

Mark

THE MASTER REJECTED: THE SERVANTS SENT FORTH

CHRIST THWARTED

Mar. 6:5 - Mar. 6:6.

It is possible to live too near a man to see him. Familiarity with the small details blinds most people to the essential greatness of any life. So these fellow-villagers of Jesus in Nazareth knew Him too well to know Him rightly as they talked Him over; they recognised His wisdom and His mighty works; but all the impression that these would have made was neutralised by their acquaintance with His former life, and they said, 'Why, we have known Him ever since He was a boy. We used to take our ploughs and yokes to Him to mend in the carpenter's shop. His brothers and sisters are here with us. Where did *He* get His wisdom?' So *they* said; and so it has been ever since. 'A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country.'

Surrounded thus by unsympathetic carpers, Jesus Christ did not exercise His full miraculous power. Other Evangelists tell us of these limitations, but Mark is alone in the strength of his expression. The others say '*did* no mighty works'; Mark says '*could* do no mighty works.' Startling as the expression is, it is not to be weakened down because it is startling, and if it does not fit in with your conceptions of Christ's nature, so much the worse for the conceptions. Matthew states the reason for this limitation more directly than Mark does, for he says, 'He did no mighty works because of their unbelief.' But Mark suggests the reason clearly enough in his next clause, when he says: 'He marvelled because of their unbelief.' There is another limitation of Christ's nature, He wondered as at an astonishing and unexpected thing, We read that He 'marvelled' twice: once at great faith, once at great unbelief. The centurion's faith was marvellous; the Nazarenes' unbelief was as marvellous. The 'wild grapes' bore clusters more precious than the tended 'vines' in the 'vineyard.' Faith and unbelief do not depend upon opportunity, but upon the bent of the will and the sense of need.

But I have chosen these words now because they put in its strongest shape a truth of large importance, and of manifold applications-viz., that man's unbelief hampers and hinders Christ’s power. Now let me apply that principle in two or three directions.

I. Let us look at this principle in connection with the case before us in the text.

You will find that, as a rule and in the general, our Lord’s miracles require faith, either on the part of the persons helped, or on the part of those who interceded for them. But whilst that is the rule there are distinct exceptions, as for instance, in the case of the feeding of the thousands, and in the case of the raising of the widow’s son of Nain, as well as in other examples. And here we find that, though the prevalent unbelief hindered the flow of our Lord’s miraculous power, it did not so hinder it as to stop some little trickle of the stream. ‘He laid His hands on a few sick folk, and healed them.’ The brook was shrunken as compared with the abundance of the flood recorded in the previous chapter.

Now, why was that? There is no such natural connection between faith and the working of a miracle as that the latter is only possible in conjunction with the former. And the exceptions show us that Jesus Christ was not so limited as that men’s unbelief could wholly prevent the flow of His love and His power. But still there was a restriction. And what sort of a ‘could not’ was it that thus hampered Him in His work? We know far too little about the conditions of miracle-working to entitle us to dogmatise on such a matter, but I suppose that we may venture to say this, that the working of the miracles was ‘impossible’ in the absence of faith and the presence of its opposite, regard being had to the purposes of the miracle and of Christ’s whole work. It was not congruous, it was not morally possible, that He should force His benefits upon unwilling recipients.

Now, I need not do more than just in a sentence call attention to the bearing of this fact upon the true notion of the purpose of Christ’s miraculous works. A superficial, and, as I think, very vulgar, estimate, says that Christ’s miracles were chiefly designed to produce faith in Him and in His mission. If that had been their purpose, the very place for the most abundant exhibition of them would have been the place where unbelief was most pronounced. The atmosphere of non-receptiveness and non-sympathy would have been the very one that ought to have evoked them most. Where the darkness was the deepest, there should the torch have flared. Where the stupor was most complete, there should the rousing shock have been administered. But the very opposite is the case. Where faith is present already, the miracle comes. Where faith is absent, miracles fail. Therefore, though a subsidiary purpose of our Lord's miracles was, no doubt, to evoke faith in His mission, their chief purpose is not to be found in that direction. It was a condescension to men's weakness and obstinacy when He said, 'If ye believe not Me, believe the works.' But the works were signs, symbols, manifestations on the lower material platform of what lie would be and do for men in the higher, and they were the outcome of His own loving heart and ever-flowing compassion, and only secondarily were they taken, and have they ever been taken, when Christian faith has been robust and intelligent, as being evidences of His Messiahship and Divinity.

But there is another consideration that I would like to suggest in reference to this limitation of our Lord's power, by reason of the prevalence of an atmosphere of unbelief, and that is that it is a pathetic proof of His manhood's being influenced by all the emotions and circumstances that influence us. We all know how hearts expand in the warm atmosphere of affection and sympathy, and shut themselves up like tender flowerets when the cold east wind blows. And just as a great orator subtly feels the sympathy of his audience, and is buoyed up by it to higher flights, while in the presence of cold and indifferent and critical hearers his tongue stammers, and he falls beneath himself, so we may reverently say Jesus Christ *could* not put forth His mightiest and most abundant miraculous powers when the cold wind of unbelieving criticism blew in His face.

If that is true, what a glimpse it gives us of the conditions of His earthly life, and how wonderful it makes that love which, though it was hampered, was never stifled by the presence of scorn and malice and of hatred. He is our Brother, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh; and even when the divinity within was in possession of the power of working the miracle, the humanity in which it dwelt felt the presence of the cold frost and closed its petals. 'He could do no mighty works,' and it was 'because of their unbelief.'

II. But now, secondly, let us apply this principle in regard to Christ's working on ourselves.

I have said that there was no such natural connection between faith and miracle as that miracle was absolutely impossible in the absence of faith. But when we lift the thought into the higher region of our religious and spiritual life, we do come across an absolute impossibility. There, in regard to all that appertains to the inward life of a soul, Christ *can* do no mighty works, in the absence of our faith. By faith, I mean, of course, not the mere intellectual reception of the Christian narratives or of the Christian doctrines as true, but I mean what the Bible means by it always, a process subsequent to that intellectual reception-viz., the motion of the will and of the heart towards Christ. Faith is belief, but belief is not faith. Faith is belief *plus* trust. And it is that which is the condition of all Christ's gifts being received by any of us.

Now, a great many people seem to think that what Jesus Christ brings to the world, and offers to each of us, is simply the escape from the penal consequences of our past transgressions. If you conceive salvation to be nothing else than shutting the doors of an outward hell, and opening the doors of an outward Heaven, I can quite understand why you should boggle at the thought that faith is a condition of these. For if salvation is such a material, external, and forensic matter as that, then I do not see why God should not have given it to everybody, without any conditions at all. But if you will understand rightly what Christ's gifts are, you will see that they cannot be bestowed upon men irrespective of the condition of their wills, desires, and hearts.

For what is salvation? What are the blessings that Jesus Christ bestows? A new life, a new love, new desires, a new direction of the whole being, a new spirit within us. These are the gifts; and how can these be given to a man if he has not trust in the Giver? Salvation is at bottom that a man's will shall be harmonised with the will of God. But if a man has not faith, his will is discordant with the will of God, and how can it be harmonised and discordant at the same time? What are the powers by which Christ works upon men's hearts? His truth, His love, His Spirit. How can a truth operate if it is not believed? How can love bless and cherish if it is not trusted?

How can the Spirit hallow and cleanse if it is not yielded to? The condition is inherent in the nature of God the Giver, of man the receiver, and of the gifts bestowed.

And so we understand the metaphors that put that inevitable connection in various forms. Faith is ‘a door.’ How can you enter if the door be fast closed? He knocks; if any man opens He comes in. If a man does not open,

‘He can but listen at the gate,
And hear the household jar within.’

Faith is the connection between the fountain and the reservoir. If there be no such connection, how can the reservoir be filled? Faith is the hand with stretched-out empty palms, and widespread fingers for the reception of the gifts. How can the gifts be put into it if it hangs listless by the side, or in obstinately closed and pushed behind the back? He ‘can do no mighty works’ on an unbelieving soul.

Now, brethren, let me insist, in one sentence, on this solemn truth; God would save every man if He could, faith or no faith. But the condition which brings faith into connection with salvation as its necessary prerequisite is no arbitrary condition. The love of God cannot alter it. In the nature of things it must be so. ‘He that believeth shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be condemned.’ That is no result of an artificial scheme, but of the necessities of the case.

Again, let me remind you that the measure of our faith is the measure of our possession of these gifts. Our Lord more than once put the whole doctrine of this matter, in regard, however, to the lower plane of miracle, when He said, ‘According to your faith be it unto you,’ ‘Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.’ We have an inheritance like that of men who get a piece of land in some mining district: so much as we peg out and claim is ours, and no more.

Let me narrate a parable of my own making. There was once a king who told all his people that on a given day the fountain in the market-place in the centre of the city would flow with wine and other precious liquors, and that every man was free to bring his vessel and carry away as much as he would.

The man that brought a tiny wineglass got a glassful; the man that brought a gallon pitcher got that full. The measure of your desires is the measure of your possessions of Christ's power. Our faith determines the amount of His cleansing, healing, vivifying energy which will reside in us. The width of the bore of the water-pipe that is laid down settles the amount of water that will come into your cistern. The water may be high outside the lock. If the lock-gate be kept fast closed, the height of the water outside produces no raising of the low level of that within, If you open a chink of the gate a trickle will pass through, and if you fling the gates wide the levels will be the same on both sides. The only limit of our possession of God is our faith and desire. The true limit is His own boundlessness. It is possible that a man may be 'filled with all the fulness of God; but the real working limit for each of us is our own faith. So, brethren, endless progress is possible for us, on condition of continual trust.

III. Lastly, let us apply this principle in regard to Christ's working through His people.

Jesus Christ cannot work mightily through a feebly believing Church. And here is the reason why Christianity has taken so long to do so little in this world of ours; and why nineteen centuries after the Cross and Pentecost there remaineth yet so much land to be possessed. 'Ye are not straitened in Me, ye are straitened in your own selves.' We hinder Christ from doing His work through us by reason of our own unbelief. The men that have done most for the Lord Jesus, and for their fellows in this world, have been of all sorts, of all conditions, of all grades of intellectual ability and acquirement; some of them scholars, some of them tinkers, some of them philosophers, some of them next door to fools. They have belonged to different communions and have held different ecclesiastical and theological dogmas, and sometimes, alas! they have not been able to discern each other's Christlike lineaments. But there is one thing in which they have all been alike, and that is that they have been men of faith, intense, operative, perpetual. And that is why they have succeeded. If we were what we might be, 'full of faith.' we should, as the Acts of the Apostles teaches us, by its collocation in the description of one of its characters, be 'full of the Holy Spirit and of power.'

Brethren, you hear a great deal to-day about new ways of Christian working, about the necessity of adapting the forms of setting forth Christ's truth to the spirit of the age, and new ideas. Adopt new methods if you like; methods are not sacred. Fashion new forms of presenting Christian truths if you please; our forms are only forms. But you may alter your methods and you may modify your dogmas as you like, and you will do nothing to move the world unless the Church is again baptized with the Divine Spirit, which will only be the case if the Church again puts forth a far mightier faith than it exercises to-day. If only we will trust Jesus Christ absolutely, and live near Him by our faith, His power will flow into us, and of us, too, it will be said, 'through faith they wrought righteousness . . . subdued kingdoms . . . waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.' But if the low level of average Christian faith in all the churches is not elevated, then the attempts to conquer the world by half-believing Christians will meet with the old fate, and the man in whom the evil spirit was will leap upon them and overcome them, and say, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are ye?' 'Why could we not cast him out?' And He answered and said unto them, 'Because of your unbelief.'

Brethren, we may starve in the midst of plenty, if we lock our lips. We can be like some obstinate black rock, washed over for ever by the Atlantic surges, and yet so close-grained that only the surface is moistened, and, an inch within, it is dry. 'Neither life, nor death, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, is able to separate you from the love and power of God which are in Christ Jesus our Lord,' But you can separate yourselves, and you do separate yourselves, by your unbelief. The all-sufficiency of Christ's redemption, and the yearning of His love to bless each of us individually, will be nothing to us if we lift up between Him and us the black barrier of unbelief, and so dam back the stream that was meant to give life to all the world and life to us. Christ infinitely desires to bless us, but He cannot unless we trust Him. I beseech you, do not let this be the epitaph on your tombstone:-'Christ could there do no mighty work because of *his* unbelief.'

39)Mark 6:7-13

THE MASTER REJECTED: THE SERVANTS SENT FORTH

Mar. 6:1 - Mar. 6:13.

An easy day’s journey would carry Jesus and His followers from Capernaum, on the lake-side, to Nazareth, among the hills. What took our Lord back there? When last He taught in the synagogue of Nazareth, His life had been in danger; and now He thrusts Himself into the wolf’s den. Why? Mark seems to wish us to observe the connection between this visit and the great group of miracles which he has just recorded; and possibly the link may be our Lord’s hope that the report of these might have preceded Him and prepared His way. In His patient long-suffering He will give His fellow-villagers another chance; and His heart yearns for ‘His own country,’ and ‘His own kin,’ and ‘His own house,’ of which He speaks so pathetically in the context.

I. We have here unbelief born of familiarity, and its effects on Christ [Mar. 6:1 - Mar. 6:6].

Observe the characteristic avoidance of display, and the regard for existing means of worship, shown in His waiting till the Sabbath, and then resorting to the synagogue. He and His hearers would both remember His last appearance in it; and He and they would both remember many a time before that, when, as a youth, He had sat there. The rage which had exploded on His first sermon has given place to calmer, but not less bitter, opposition. Mark paints the scene, and represents the hearers as discussing Jesus while He spoke. The decorous silence of the synagogue was broken by a hubbub of mutual questions. ‘Many’ spoke at once, and all had the same thing to say. The state of mind revealed is curious. They own Christ’s wisdom in His teaching, and the reality of His miracles, of which they had evidently heard; but the fact that He was one of themselves made them angry that He should have such gifts, and suspicious of where He had got them. They seem to have had the same opinion as Nathanael-that no ‘good thing’ could ‘come out of Nazareth.’ Their old companion could not be a prophet; that was certain. But He had wisdom and miraculous power; that was as certain. Where had they come from? There was only one other source; and so, with many headshakings, they were preparing to believe that the Jesus whom they had all known, living His quiet life of labour among them, was in league with the devil, rather than believe that He was a messenger from God.

We note in their questions, first, the glimpse of our Lord's early life. They bring before us the quiet, undistinguished home and the long years of monotonous labour. We owe to Mark alone the notice that Jesus actually wrought at Joseph's handicraft. Apparently the latter was dead, and, if so, Jesus would be the head of the house, and probably the 'breadwinner.' One of the fathers preserves the tradition that He 'made plows and yokes, by which He taught the symbols of righteousness and an active life.' That good father seems to think it needful to find symbolical meanings, in order to save Christ's dignity; but the prose fact that He toiled at the carpenter's bench, and handled hammer and saw, needs nothing to heighten its value as a sign of His true participation in man's lot, and as the hallowing of manual toil. How many weary arms have grasped their tools with new vigour and contentment when they thought of Him as their Pattern in their narrow toils! The Nazarenes' difficulty was but one case of a universal tendency. Nobody finds it easy to believe that some village child, who has grown up beside him, and whose undistinguished outside life he knows, has turned out a genius or a great man. The last people to recognise a prophet are always his kindred and his countrymen. 'Far-away birds have fine feathers.' Men resent it as a kind of slight on themselves that the other, who was one of them but yesterday, should be so far above them to-day. They are mostly too blind to look below the surface, and they conclude that, because they saw so much of the external life, they knew the man that lived it. The elders of Nazareth had seen Jesus grow up, and to them He would be 'the carpenter's son' still. The more important people had known the humbleness of His home, and could not adjust themselves to look up to Him, instead of down. His equals in age would find their boyish remembrances too strong for accepting Him as a prophet. All of them did just what the most of us would have done, when they took it for certain that the Man whom they had known so well, as they fancied, could not be a prophet, to say nothing of the Messiah so long looked for. It is easy to blame them; but it is better to learn the warning in their words, and to take care that we are not blind to some true messenger of God just because we have been blessed with close companionship with him. Many a household has had to wait for death to take away the prophet before they discern him. Some of us entertain 'angels unawares,' and have bitterly to feel, when too late, that our eyes were holden that we should not know them.

These questions bring out strongly what we too often forget in estimating Christ's contemporaries-namely, that His presence among them, in the simplicity of His human life, was a positive hindrance to their seeing His true character. We sometimes wish that we had seen Him, and heard His voice. We should have found it more difficult to believe in Him if we had. 'His flesh' was a 'veil' in other sense than the Epistle to the Hebrews means; for, by reason of men's difficulty in piercing beneath it, it hid from many what it was meant and fitted to reveal. Only eyes purged beheld the glory of 'the Word' become flesh when it 'dwelt among us'-and even they saw Him more clearly when they saw Him no more. Let us not be too hard on these simple Nazarenes, but recognise our kith and kin.

The facts on which the Nazarenes grounded their unbelief are really irrefragable proof of Christ's divinity. Whence had this man His wisdom and mighty works? Born in that humble home, reared in that secluded village, shut out from the world's culture, buried, as it were, among an exclusive and abhorred people, how came He to tower above all teachers, and to sway the world? 'With whom took He counsel? and who instructed Him, and taught Him?' The character and work of Christ, compared with the circumstances of His origin and environment, are an insoluble riddle, except on one supposition-that He was the word and power of God.

The effects of this unbelief on our Lord were twofold. It limited His power. Matthew says that 'He did not many mighty works.' Mark goes deeper, and boldly days 'He could not.' It is mistaken jealousy for Christ's honour to seek to pare down the strong words. The atmosphere of chill unbelief froze the stream. The power was there, but it required for its exercise some measure of moral susceptibility. His miraculous energy followed, in general, the same law as His higher exercise of saving grace does; that is to say, it could not force itself upon unwilling men. Christ 'cannot' save a man who does not trust Him. He was hampered in the outflow of His healing power by unsympathetic disparagement and unbelief. Man can thwart God.

Faith opens the door, and unbelief shuts it in His face. He ‘would have gathered,’ but they ‘would not,’ and therefore He ‘could not.’

The second effect of unbelief on Him was that He ‘marvelled.’ He is twice recorded to have wondered-once at a Gentile’s faith, once at His townsmen’s unbelief. He wondered at the first because it showed so unusual a susceptibility; at the second, because it showed so unreasonable a blindness. All sin is a wonder to eyes that see into the realities of things and read the end; for it is all utterly unreasonable [though it is, alas! not unaccountable] and suicidal. ‘Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this.’ Unbelief in Christ is, by Himself, declared to be the very climax of sin, and its most flagrant evidence [Joh. 16:9]; and of all the instances of unbelief which saddened His heart, none struck more chill than that of these Nazarenes. They had known His pure youth; He might have reckoned on some touch of sympathy and predisposition to welcome Him. His wonder is the measure of His pain as well as of their sin.

Nor need we wonder that He wondered; for He was true man, and all human emotions were His. To one who lives ever in the Father’s bosom, what can seem so strange as that men should prefer homeless exposedness and dreary loneliness? To one whose eyes ever behold unseen realities, what so marvellous as men’s blindness? To one who knew so assuredly His own mission and rich freightage of blessing, how strange it must have been that He found so few to accept His gifts! Jesus knew that bitter wonder which all men who have a truth to proclaim which the world has not learned, have to experience-the amazement at finding it so hard to get any others to see what they see. In His manhood, He shared the fate of all teachers, who have, in their turn, to marvel at men’s unbelief.

II. The new instrument which Christ fashions to cope with unbelief.

What does Jesus do when thus ‘wounded in the house of His friends’? Give way to despondency? No; but meekly betake Himself to yet obscurer fields of service, and send out the Twelve to prepare His way, as if He thought that they might have success where He would fail. What a lesson for people who are always hankering after conspicuous ‘spheres,’ and lamenting that their gifts are wasted in some obscure corner, is that picture of Jesus, repulsed from Nazareth, patiently turning to the villages! The very summary account of the trial mission of the Twelve here given presents only the salient points of the charge to them, and in its condensation makes these the more emphatic. Note the interesting statement that they were sent out two-and-two. The other Evangelists do not tell us this, but their lists of the Apostles are arranged in pairs. Mark's list is not so arranged, but he supplies the reason for the arrangement, which he does not follow; and the other Gospels, by their arrangement, confirm his statement, which they do not give. Two-and-two is a wise rule for all Christian workers. It checks individual peculiarities of self-will, helps to keep off faults, wholesomely stimulates, strengthens faith by giving another to hear it and to speak it, brings companionship, and admits of division of labour. One-and-one are more than twice one.

The first point is the gift of power. Unclean spirits are specified, but the subsequent verses show that miracle-working power in its other forms was included. We may call that Christ's greatest miracle. That He could, by His mere will, endow a dozen men with such power, is more, if degree come into view at all, than that He Himself should exercise it. But there is a lesson in the fact for all ages-even those in which miracles have ceased. Christ gives before He commands, and sends no man into the field without filling his basket with seed-corn. His gifts assimilate the receiver to Himself, and only in the measure in which His servants possess power which is like His own, and drawn from Him, can they proclaim His coming, or prepare hearts for it. The second step is their equipment. The special commands here given were repealed by Jesus when He gave His last commands. In their letter they apply only to that one journey, but in their spirit they are of universal and permanent obligation. The Twelve were to travel light. They might carry a staff to help them along, and wear sandals to save their feet on rough roads; but that was to be all. Food, luggage, and money, the three requisites of a traveller, were to be 'conspicuous by their absence.' That was repealed afterwards, and instructions given of an opposite character, because, after His ascension, the Church was to live more and more by ordinary means; but in this journey they were to learn to trust Him without means, that afterwards they might trust Him in the means. He showed them the purpose of these restrictions in the act of abrogating them. 'When I sent you forth without purse . . . lacked ye anything?' But the spirit remains unabrogated, and the minimum of outward provision is likeliest to call out the maximum of faith. We are more in danger from having too much baggage than from having too little. And the one indispensable requirement is that, whatever the quantity, it should hinder neither our march nor our trust in Him who alone is wealth and food.

Next comes the disposition of the messengers. It is not to be self-indulgent. They are not to change quarters for the sake of greater comfort. They have not gone out to make a pleasure tour, but to preach, and so are to stay where they are welcomed, and to make the best of it. Delicate regard for kindly hospitality, if offered by ever so poor a house, and scrupulous abstinence from whatever might suggest interested motives, must mark the true servant. That rule is not out of date. If ever a herald of Christ falls under suspicion of caring more about life's comforts than about his work, good-bye to his usefulness! If ever he does so care, whether he be suspected of it or no, spiritual power will ebb from him.

The next step is the messengers' demeanour to the rejecters of their message. Shaking the dust off the sandals is an emblem of solemn renunciation of participation, and perhaps of disclaimer of responsibility. It meant certainly, 'We have no more to do with you,' and possibly, 'Your blood be on your own heads.' This journey of the Twelve was meant to be of short duration, and to cover much ground, and therefore no time was to be spent unnecessarily. Their message was brief, and as well told quickly as slowly. The whole conditions of work now are different. Sometimes, perhaps, a Christian is warranted in solemnly declaring to those who receive not his message, that he will have no more to say to them. That may do more than all his other words. But such cases are rare; and the rule that it is safest to follow is rather that of love which despairs of none, and, though often repelled, returns with pleading, and, if it have told often in vain, now tells with tears, the story of the love that never abandons the most obstinate.

Such were the prominent points of this first Christian mission. They who carry Christ's banner in the world must be possessed of power, His gift, must be lightly weighted, must care less for comfort than for service, must solemnly warn of the consequences of rejecting the message; and so they will not fail to cast out devils, and to heal many that are sick.

40)Mark 6:16

Mark

HEROD-A STARTLED CONSCIENCE

Mar. 6:16.

The character of this Herod, surnamed Antipas, is a sufficiently common and a sufficiently despicable one. He was the very type of an Eastern despot, exactly like some of those half-independent Rajahs, whose dominions march with ours in India; capricious, crafty, as the epithet which Christ applied to him, 'That fox!' shows; cruel, as the story of the murder of John the Baptist proves; sensuous and lustful; and withal weak of fibre and infirm of purpose. He, Herodias, and John the Baptist make a triad singularly like the other triad in the Old Testament, of Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah. In both cases we have the weak ruler, the beautiful she-devil at his side, inspiring him for all evil, and the stern prophet, the rebuker and the incarnate conscience for them both.

The words that I have read are the terrified exclamation of this weak and wicked man when he was brought in contact with the light and beauty of Jesus Christ. And if we think who it was that frightened him, and ponder the words in which his fear expressed itself, we get, as it seems to me, some lessons worth the drawing.

I. You have here the voice of a startled conscience.

Herod killed John without much sense of doing wrong. He was sorry, no doubt, for he had a kind of respect for the man, and he was reluctant to put him to death. But though there was reluctance, there was no hesitation. His fantastic sense of honour came in the way. In the one scale there was the life of a poor enthusiast who had amused him for a while, but of whom he had got tired. In the other scale there were his word, the pleasure of Herodias, and the applause of the half-drunken boon companions that were sitting with them at the table. So, of course, the prophet was slain, and the pale head brought in to that wild revel, and, except for the malignant gloating of the woman over her gratified revenge, the event, no doubt, very quickly passed from the memories of all concerned.

But then there came stealing into the silken seclusion of the palace, where he was wallowing in his sensuality like a hog in the sty, the tidings of another peasant Teacher that had risen up among the people. Christ's name had been ringing through the land, and been sounded with blessings in poor men's huts long before it got within the gates of Herod's palace. That is the place where religious earnestness makes its mark last of all. But it finally ran thither also; and light gossip went round concerning this new sensation. 'Who is He? Who is He?' Each man had his own theory about Him, but a sudden memory started up in the frivolous despot's soul, and it was with a trembling heart that he said to himself, 'I know! I know! It is John, whom I beheaded! He is risen from the dead!' His conscience and his memory and his fears all awoke.

Now, my friends, I pray you to lay that simple lesson to heart. We all of us do evil things with regard to which it is not hard for us to bribe or to silence our memories and our consciences. The hurry and bustle of daily life, the very weakness of our characters, the rush of sensuous delights, may make us blind and deaf to the voice of conscience; and we think that all chance of the evil deed rising again to harm us is past. But some trifle touches the hidden spring by mere accident; as in the old story of the man groping along a wall till his finger happens to fall upon one inch of it, and immediately the concealed door flies open, and there is the skeleton. So with us, some merely fortuitous association may freshen faded memories and wake a dormant conscience. An apparently trivial circumstance, like some hooked pole pushed at random into the sea, may bring up by the locks some pale and drowned memory long plunged in an ocean of oblivion. Here, in Herod's case, a report reaches him of a new Rabbi who bears but a very faint resemblance to John, and that is enough to bring his crime back in its naked atrocity.

My friends, we all have these hibernating serpents in our consciences, and nobody knows when the needful warmth may come that will wake them and make them lift their forked heads to sting. The whole landscape of my past life lies there behind the mists of apparent forgetfulness, and any light air of suggestion may sweep away the clouds and show it all. What have you laid up in these memories of yours to start into life some day: ‘at the last biting like a serpent and stinging like an adder’? ‘It is John! It is John, whom I beheaded!’

Take this other thought, how, as the story shows us, when once at the bidding of memory conscience begins to work, all illusions as to the nature of my action and as to my share in it are swept away.

When the evil deed was done, Herod scarcely felt as if he did it. There was his plighted troth, there was Herodias’s pressure, there was the excitement of the moment. He seemed forced to do it, and scarcely responsible for doing it. And no doubt, if he ever thought about it afterwards, he shuffled off a large percentage of the responsibility of the guilt upon the shoulders of the others. But when,

‘In the silent sessions of things past,’

the image and remembrance of the deed come up to him, all the helpers and tempters have disappeared, and ‘It is John, whom *I* beheaded!’ [There is emphasis in the Greek upon the ‘I.’] ‘Yes, it was *I*. Herodias tempted me; Herodias’ daughter titillated my lust; I fancied that my oath bound me; I could not help doing what would please those who sat at the table-I said all that *before* I did it. But now, when it is done, they have all disappeared, every one of them to his quarter; and I and the ugly thing are left together alone. It was I that did it, and nobody besides.’

The blackness of the crime, too, presents itself to the startled conscience as it did not in the doing. There are many euphemisms and soft words in which, as in cotton-wool, we wrap our evil deeds and so deceive ourselves as to their hardness and their edge; but when conscience gets hold of them, and they pass out of the realm of fact into the mystical region of remembrance, all the wrappings, and all the apologies, and all the soft phrases drop away; and the ugliest, briefest, plainest word is the one by which my conscience describes my own evil. ‘*I* beheaded him! *I*, and none else, was the murderer.’ Oh! dear brethren, do you see to it that what you store up in these caves and treasure-cellars of memory which we all carry with us, are deeds that will bear being brought out again and looked at in the pure white light of conscience, and which you will neither be ashamed nor afraid to lay your hand upon and say: ‘It is mine; *I* planted and sowed and worked it, and I am ready to reap the fruit.’ ‘If thou be wise thou shalt be wise for thyself, if thou scornest thou alone shalt bear it.’ Take care of the storehouses of memory and of conscience, and mind what kind of things you lay up there.

II. Now, once more, I take these words as setting before us an example of a conscience awakened to the unseen world.

Many commentators tell us that this Herod was a Sadducee; that is to say that theologically and theoretically he had given up the belief in a future state and in spiritual existence. I do not know that that can be sustained, but much more probably he was only a Sadducee in the way in which a great many of us are Sadducees: he never thought about these things, he did not think about them enough to know whether he believed in them or not. He was a practical, if not a theoretical Sadducee; that is to say, this present was his world, and as for the future, it did not come much into his mind. But now, notice that when conscience begins to stir, it at once sends his thoughts into that unseen world beyond.

There is a very close connection, as all history proves, between theoretical disbelief in a future life and in spiritual existence, and superstition. So strong is the bond which unites men with the unseen world, that if they do not link themselves with that world in the legitimate and true fashion, it is almost certain to avenge itself upon them by leading them to all manner of low and abject superstitions. Spiritualism is the disease of a generation that disbelieves in another life. The French Revolution, with its infidelities, was also the age of quacks and impostors such as Cagliostro and the like. The time when Christ lived presented precisely the same phenomena. If Herod was a Sadducee, Herod’s Sadduceeism, like frost upon the window-panes, was such a thin layer shutting out the invisible world, that the least warmth of conscience melted it, and the clear daylight glared in upon him. And I am afraid that there are a great many of us who may be half-inclined to reject the belief in another life, who would find precisely the same thing happening to us.

But be that as it may, it seems to me that whenever a man comes to think very seriously about his conduct as being wrong in the sight of God, there at once starts up before him the thought of a future life and a judgment-bar. And I want to know why and how it is that the vigorous operation of conscience is always accompanied with a ‘fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation.’ I think it is worth your while to reflect upon the fact, and to try and ascertain for yourselves the reason of it, that whenever a man’s conscience begins to tell him of his wrong, its message is not only of transgressions but of judgment, and that beyond the grave.

And, moreover, notice here how the startled conscience, when it becomes aware of an unseen world beyond the grave, cannot but think that out of that world there will come evil for it. These words of my text are obviously the words of a frightened man. It was terror that made Herod say: ‘It is John, whom I beheaded. He is risen from the dead!’ Who was it that frightened Herod? It was He who came from the bosom of the Father, with His hands full of blessings and His heart full of love: who came to quiet all fears, and to cleanse all consciences, and to satisfy all men’s souls with His own sweet love and His perfect righteousness. And it was this genial and gracious and divine form, with all its actualities of gentleness and its possibilities of grace, which the evil conscience of the terrified tetrarch converted into a messenger of judgment come from the tomb to rebuke and to smite him for his evils.

That is to say, men may always make that future life and their relation to it what they will. Either the heavens may pour down their dewy influences of benediction and fruitfulness upon them, or may pour down fire and brimstone upon their spirits. Men have the choice which it shall be. The evil conscience drapes the future in darkness, and is right in doing it. The evil conscience forebodes chastisement, judgment, condemnation coming to it from out of the unseen world, and, with limitations, it is right in doing it. You can make Christ Himself the Messenger of condemnation and of death to you. My dear friends, do you choose whether, fronting eternity with an unforgiven burden of sin upon your shoulders and a conscience unsprinkled by the blood of Jesus Christ, you make of it one great fear; or whether you make it what it really is, a lustrous hope, a perfect joy. Is the Messenger that comes out of the unseen to come to you as a Judge of your buried evils started into life, or is He to come to you as the Christ that bears in His hand the price of your redemption, and with His blood 'sprinkles your conscience from dead works' and from all its terrors?

III. And now, lastly, I see in this saying an illustration of a conscience which, partially stirred, soon went finally to sleep again.

Strangely enough, if we pursue the story, this very terror and clear-eyed perception of the nature of his action led the frivolous king to nothing more than a curious wish to see this new Teacher. It was not gratified; and thus by degrees he came to hate Him and to wish to kill Him. And then, finally, on the eve of the Crucifixion Jesus was brought into his presence, and Herod was glad that his curiosity was satisfied at last. His conscience lay perfectly still. There was no trace of the old convictions or of the old tremor. He 'questioned Jesus many things, and Christ answered him nothing,' because He knew it was of no use to speak to him. So 'Herod and his men of war mocked Him and set Him at nought'; and sent Him back to Pilate; and he let his last chance of salvation go, and never knew what he had done.

Now, *there* is a lesson for us all. Do not tamper with partially awakened consciences; do not rest satisfied till they are quieted in the legitimate way. There was a man who trembled when he heard Paul remonstrating with him about 'righteousness and temperance'-both of which the unjust judge had set at naught-'and judgment to come' And he 'sent for him often and communed with him gladly,' but we never hear that Felix trembled any more. It is possible for you so to lull yourselves into indifference, and, as it were, so to waterproof your consciences that appeals, threatenings, pleadings, mercies, the words of men, the Gospel of God, and the beseechings of Christ Himself may all run off them and leave them dry and hard.

One very potent means of rendering consciences insensible is to neglect their voice. The convictions which you have not followed out, like the ruins of a bastion shattered by shell, protect your remaining fortifications against the impact of God's truth. I believe that there is no man, woman, or child listening to me at this moment but has had, some time or other in the course of his or her life, convictions which only needed to be followed out, gleams of guidance which only required to be faithfully pursued, to bring him or her into loving fellowship with, and true faith in, Jesus Christ. But some of you have neglected them; some of you have choked them with cares and studies and occupations of different kinds; and you are driving on to this result,-I do not know that it is ever reached in this life, but a man may come indefinitely near it,-that you shall stand, like Herod, face to face with Jesus Christ and feel nothing, and that all His love and grace shall be offered and not excite the faintest stirring in your hearts of a desire to accept it.

Oh! my friend, we have all of us evils enough in these charnel-houses of our memory to make us dread the awakening of conscience, to make us look with fear and apprehension beyond the veil to a judgment-seat. And, blessed be God! we have all of us had, and some of us have now, drawings to which we need but to yield ourselves in order to find that He who comes from the heavens is no 'John whom we beheaded,' risen for judgment, but a mightier than he, that Son of God who came 'not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.'

41)Mark 6:17-28

Mark

THE MARTYRDOM OF JOHN

Mar. 6:17 - Mar. 6:28.

This Herod was a son of the grim old tiger who slew the infants of Bethlehem. He was a true cub of a bad litter, with his father's ferocity, but without his force. He was sensual, cruel, cunning, and infirm of purpose. Rome allowed him to play at being a king, but kept him well in hand. No doubt his anomalous position as a subject prince helped to make him the bad man he was. Herodias, the Jezebel to this Ahab, was his brother's wife, and niece to both her husband and Herod. Elijah was not far off; John's daring outspokenness, of course, made the indignant woman his implacable enemy.

I. This story gives an example of the waking of conscience.

When Christ’s name reached even the court, where such tidings would have no ready entrance, what was only an occasion of more or less languid gossip and curiosity to others stirred the sleeping accuser in Herod’s breast. He had no doubt as to who this new Teacher, armed with mightier powers than John who ‘did no miracles’ had ever possessed, was. His conviction that he was John, come back with increased power, was immediate, and was held fast, in spite of the buzz of other opinions.

Note the unusual order of the sentence in Mar. 6:16 : ‘John whom I beheaded, he is,’ etc. The terrified king blurts out the name of his dread first, then tremblingly takes the guilt of the deed to himself, and last speaks the terrifying thought that he is risen. A man who has a sin in his memory can never be sure that its ghost will not suddenly start up. Trivial incidents will rouse the sleeping conscience. Some nothing, a chance word, a scent, a sound, the look on a face, the glow of an evening sky, may bring all the foul past up again. A puff of wind clears away the mist of oblivion, and the old sin starts into vividness as if done yesterday. You touch a secret spring, and there yawns in the floor a gap leading down to a dungeon.

Conscience thus wakened is free from all illusions as to guilt. ‘*I* beheaded.’ There are no excuses now about Herodias’ urgency, or Salome’s beauty, or the rash oath, or the need of keeping it, before his guests. The deed stands clear of all these, as his own act. It is ever so. When conscience speaks, sophistications about temptations or companions, or necessity, or the more learned excuses which philosophers make about environment and heredity as weakening responsibility and diminishing guilt, shrivel to nothing. The present operations of conscience distinctly predict future still more complete remembrance of, and sense of responsibility for, long past sins. There will be a resurrection of men’s evil deeds, as well as of their bodies, and each of them will shake its gory locks at its author, and say, ‘Thou didst it.’

There is no proof that Herod was a Sadducee, disbelieving in a resurrection; but, whether he was or not, the terrors of conscience made short work of the difficulties in the way of his supposition. He was right in believing that evil deeds are gifted with an awful immortality, and will certainly rise again to shake their doer’s soul with terrors.

II. The narrative harks back to tell the story of John’s martyrdom.

It sets vividly forth the inner discord and misery of half-and-half convictions. Herodias was strong enough to get John put in prison, and apparently she tried with all the tenacity of a malignant woman to have him assassinated, by contrived accident or open sentence; but *that* she could not manage.

Mark’s analysis of the play of contending feeling in the weak king is barely intelligible in the Authorised Version, but is clearly shown in the Revised Version. He ‘feared John,’-the jailer afraid of his prisoner,-’knowing that he was a righteous man and an holy.’ Goodness is awful. The worst men know it when they see it, and pay it the homage of dread, if not of love. ‘And kept him safe’ [not *ob*- but *pre*-served him]; that is, from Herodias’ revenge. ‘And when he heard him, he was much perplexed.’ The reading thus translated differs from that in the Authorised Version by two letters only, and obviously is preferable. Herod was a weak-willed man, drawn by two stronger natures pulling in opposite directions.

So he alternated between lust and purity, between the foul kisses of the temptress at his side and the warnings of the prophet in his dungeon. But in all his vacillation he could not help listening to John, but ‘heard him gladly,’ and mind and conscience approved the nobler voice. Thus he staggered along, with religion enough to spoil some of his sinful delights, but not enough to make him give them up.

Such a state of partial conviction is not unusual. Many of us know quite well that, if we would drop some habit, which may not be very grave, we should be less encumbered in some effort which it is our interest or duty to make; but the conviction has not gone deeper than the understanding. Like a shot which has only got half way through the armoured skin of a man-of-war, it has done no execution, nor reached the engine-room where the power that drives the life is. In more important matters such imperfect convictions are widespread. The majority of slaves to vice know perfectly well that they should give it up. And in regard to the salvation which is in Christ, there are multitudes who know in their inmost consciousness that they ought to be Christians.

Such a condition is one liable to unrest and frequent inner conflict. Truly, he is ‘much perplexed’ whose conscience pulls him one way, and his inclinations another. There is no more miserable condition than that of the man whose will is cleft in twain, and who has a continual battle raging within. Conscience may be bound and thrust down into a dungeon, like John, and lust and pride may be carousing overhead, but their mirth is hollow, and every now and then the stern voice comes up through the gratings, and the noisy revelry is hushed, while *it* speaks doom.

Such a state of inner strife comes often from unwillingness to give up one special evil. If Herod could have plucked up resolve to pack Herodias about her business, other things might have come right. Many of us are ruined by being unwilling to let some dear delight go. ‘If thine eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out.’

We do not make up for such cowardly shrinking from doing right by pleasure in the divine word which we are not obeying. Herod no doubt thought that his delight in listening to John went some way to atone for his refusal to get rid of Herodias. Some of us think ourselves good Christians because we assent to truth, and even like to hear it, provided the speaker suit our tastes. Glad hearing only aggravates the guilt of not doing. It is useless to admire John if you keep Herodias.

III. The end of the story gives an example of the final powerlessness of such half-convictions.

One need not repeat the grim narrative of the murder. We all know it. One knows not which is the more repugnant-the degradation of the poor child Salome to the level of a dancing-girl, the fell malignity of the mother who would shame her daughter for such an end, the maudlin generosity of Herod, flushed with wine and excited passion, the hideous request from lips so young, the ineffectual sorrow of Herod, his fantastic sense of obligation, which scrupled to break a wicked promise and did not scruple to murder a prophet, or the ghastly picture of the girl hurrying to her mother with the freshly severed head, dripping on to the platter and staining her fair young hands.

This was what all the convictions of John's righteousness had come to. So had ended the half yielding to his brave rebukes and the ineffectual aspirations after cleaner living. That chaos of lust and blood teaches that partial reformation is apt to end in a deeper plunge into fouler mire. If a man is false to his feeblest conviction, he makes himself a worse man all through. A partial thaw is generally followed by keener frost than before. A soul half melted and cooled again is harder to melt than before. An abortive slave-rising rivets the chains.

The incident teaches that simple weakness may come to be the parent of great sin. In a world like this, where there are always more voices soliciting to wrong than to right, to be weak is in the long run to be wicked. Fatal facility of disposition ruins hundreds of unthinking men. Nothing is more needful than that young people should learn to say 'No,' and should cultivate a wholesome obstinacy which is afraid of nothing but of sinning against God.

If we look onwards to this Herod's last appearance in Scripture, we get further lessons. He desired to see Jesus that he might see a miracle done to amuse him, like a conjuring trick. Convictions and terrors had faded from his frivolous soul. He has forgotten that he once thought Jesus to be John come again. He sees Christ, and sees nothing in Him; and Christ says nothing to Herod, because He knew it would be useless.

It is an awful thing to put one's self beyond the hearing of that voice, which 'all that are in the graves shall hear.' The most effectual stopping for our ears is neglect of what we know to be His will. If we will not listen to Him, we shall gradually lose the power of hearing Him, and then He will lock His lips, and answer nothing. We dare not say that Jesus is dumb to any man while life lasts, but we dare not refrain from saying that that condition of utter insensibility to His voice may be indefinitely approached by us, and that neglected convictions bring us terribly far on the way towards it.

42)Mark 6:30-44

THE WORLD'S BREAD

Mar. 6:30 - Mar. 6:44.

This is the only miracle recorded by all four Evangelists. Matthew brings it into immediate connection with John's martyrdom, while Mark links it with the Apostles' return from their first mission. His account is, as usual, full of graphic touches, while John shows more intimate knowledge of the parts played by the Apostles, and sets the whole incident in a clearer light.

I. Mark brings out the preceding events, and especially the seeking for solitude, which was baulked by popular enthusiasm.

The Apostles came back to Jesus full of wondering joy, and were eager to tell what they had done and taught. Note that order, which hints that they thought more of the miracles than of the message. They were flushed and excited by success, and needed calming down even more than physical rest. So Jesus, knowing their need, bids them come with Him into healing solitude, and rest awhile.

After any great effort, the body cries for repose, but still more does the soul's health demand quiet after exciting and successful work for Christ. Without much solitary communion with Jesus, effort for Him tends to become mechanical, and to lose the elevation of motive and the suppression of self which give it all its power. It is not wasted time which the busiest worker, confronted with the most imperative calls for service, gives to still fellowship in secret with God. There can never be too much activity in Christian work, but there is often disproportioned activity, which is too much for the amount of time given to meditation and communion. That is one reason why there is so much sowing and so little reaping in Christian work to-day.

But, on the other hand, we have sometimes to do as Jesus was driven to do in this incident; namely, to forgo cheerfully, after brief repose, the blessed and strengthening hour of quiet. The motives of the crowds that hurried round the head of the lake while the boat was pulled across, and so got to the other side before it, were not very pure. Curiosity drove them as much as any nobler impulse. But we must not be too particular about the reasons that induce men to resort to Jesus, and if we can give them more than they sought, so much the better. Let us be thankful if, for any reason, we can get them to listen.

Jesus ‘came forth’; that is, probably from a short withdrawal with the Twelve. Brief repose snatched, He turned again to the work. The ‘great multitude’ did not make Him impatient, though, no doubt, some of the Apostles were annoyed. But He saw deeply into their condition, and pity welled in His heart. If we looked on the crowds in our great cities with Christ’s eyes, their spiritual state would be the most prominent thing in sight. And if we saw that as He saw it, disgust, condemnation, indifference, would not be uppermost, as they too often are, but some drop of His great compassion would trickle into our hearts. The masses are still ‘as sheep without a shepherd,’ ignorant of the way, and defenceless against their worst foes. Do we habitually try to cultivate as ours Christ’s way of looking at men, and Christ’s emotions towards men? If we do, we shall imitate Christ’s actions for men, and shall recognise that, to reproduce as well as we can the ‘many things’ which He taught them, is the best contribution which His disciples can make to healing the misery of a Christless world.

II. The difference between John and Mark in regard to the conversation of Jesus with the disciples about finding food for the crowd, is easily harmonised.

John tells us what Jesus said at the first sight of the multitude; Mark takes up the narrative at the close of the day. We owe to John the knowledge that the exigency was not first pointed out by the disciples, but that His calm, loving prescience saw it, and determined to meet it, long before they spoke. No needs arise unforeseen by Christ, and He requires no prompting to help. Difficulties which seem insoluble to us, when we too late wake to perceive them, have long ago been taken into account and solved by Him.

The Apostles, according to Mark, came with a suggestion of helpless embarrassment. They could think of nothing but to disperse the crowd, and so get rid of responsibility. He answers with a paradox of conscious power, which commands a seeming impossibility, and therein prophesies endowment that will make it possible. Has not the Church ever since been but too often faithless enough to let the multitudes drift away to ‘the cities and villages round about,’ and there, amid human remedies for their sore needs, ‘buy themselves,’ with much expenditure, a scanty provision? Are we not all tempted to shuffle off responsibility for the world’s hunger? Do we not often think that our resources are absurdly insufficient, and so, faintheartedly make them still less? Is not His command still, ‘Give ye them to eat’? Let us rise to the height of our duties and of our power, and be sure that whoever has Christ has enough for the world’s hunger, and is bound to call men from ‘that which is not bread,’ and to feed them with Him who is.

Philip’s morning calculation [curiously in keeping with his character] seems to have been repeated by the Apostles, as, no doubt, he had been saying the same thing all day at intervals. They had made a rough calculation of how much would be wanted. It was a sum far beyond their means. It was as much as about ?7. And where was such wealth as that in that company? But calculations which leave out Christ’s power are not quite conclusive. The Apostles had reckoned up the requirement, but they had not taken stock of their resources. So they were sent to hunt up what they could, and John tells us that it was Andrew who found the boy with five barley loaves and two fishes. How came a boy to be so provident? Probably he had come to try a bit of trade on his own account. At all events, the Twelve seem to have been able to buy his little stock, which done, they went back to tell Jesus, no doubt thinking that such a meagre supply would end all talk of their giving the crowd to eat. Jesus would have us count our own resources, not that we may fling up His work in despair, but that we may realise our dependence on Him, and that the consciousness of our own insufficiency may not diminish one jot our sense of obligation to feed the multitude. It is good to learn our own weakness if it drives us to lean on His strength. ‘Five loaves and two fishes,’ plus Jesus Christ, come to a good deal more than ‘two hundred pennyworth of bread.’

III. The miracle is told with beautiful vividness and simplicity.

Mark’s picturesque words show the groups sitting by companies of hundreds or of fifties. He uses a word which means ‘the square garden plots in which herbs are grown.’ So they sat on the green grass, which at that Passover season would be fresh and abundant. What half-amused and more than half-incredulous wonder as to what would come next would be in the people! Many of them would be saying in their hearts, and perhaps some in words, ‘Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?’ [Psa. 78:19]. In that small matter Jesus shows that He is ‘not the Author of confusion,’ but of order. The rush of five thousand hungry men struggling to get a share of what seemed an insufficient supply would have been unseemly and dangerous to the women and children, but the seated groups become as companies of guests, and He the orderer of the feast. To get at the numbers would be easy, while the passage of the Apostles through the groups was facilitated, and none would be likely to remain unsupplied or passed over.

The point at which the miraculous element entered is not definitely stated, but if each portion passed through the hands of Christ to the servers, and from them to the partakers, the multiplication of the bread must have been effected while it lay in His hand; that is to say, the loaves were not diminished by His giving. That is true about all divine gifts. He bestows, and is none the poorer. The streams flow from the golden vase, and, after all outpouring, it is brimful.

Many irrelevant difficulties have been raised about the mode of the miracle, and many lame analogies have been suggested, as if it but hastened ordinary processes. But these need not detain us. Note rather the great lesson which John records that our Lord Himself drew from this miracle. It was a symbol, in the material region, of His work in the spiritual, as all His miracles were. He is the Bread of the world. Ho gives Himself still, and in a yet more wonderful sense He gave His flesh for the life of the world. He gives us Himself for our own nourishment, and also that we may give Him to others. It was an honour to the Twelve that they should be chosen to be His almoners. It should be felt an honour by all Christians that through them Christ wills to feed a hungry world.

A somewhat different application of the miracle reminds us that Jesus uses our resources, scanty and coarse as five barley loaves, for the basis of His wonders. He did not create the bread, but multiplied it. Our small abilities, humbly acknowledged to be small, and laid in His hands, will grow. There is power enough in the Church, if the power were consecrated, to feed the world.

All four Gospels tell the command to gather up the ‘broken pieces’ [not the fragments left by the eaters, but the unused pieces broken by Christ]. This union of economy with creative power could never have been invented. Unused resources are retained. The exercise of Christian powers multiplies them, and after the feeding of thousands more remains than was possessed before. ‘There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth.’

43)Mark 7:24-30

Mark

CHILDREN AND LITTLE DOGS

Mar. 7:24 - Mar. 7:30.

Our Lord desired to withdraw from the excited crowds who were flocking after Him as a mere miracle-worker and from the hostile espionage of emissaries of the Pharisees, ‘which had come from Jerusalem.’ Therefore He sought seclusion in heathen territory. He, too, knew the need of quiet, and felt the longing to plunge into privacy, to escape for a time from the pressure of admirers and of foes, and to go where no man knew Him. How near to us that brings Him! And how the remembrance of it helps to explain His demeanour to the Syrophcenician woman, so unlike His usual tone! Naturally the presence of Jesus leaked out, and perhaps the very effort to avoid notice attracted it. Rumour would have carried His name across the border, and the tidings of His being among them would stir hope in some hearts that felt the need of His help. Of such was this woman, whom Mark describes first, generally, as a ‘Greek’ [that is, a Gentile], and then particularly as ‘a Syrophcenician by race’; that is, one of that branch of the Phoenician race who inhabited maritime Syria, in contradistinction from the other branch inhabiting North-eastern Africa, Carthage, and its neighbourhood. Her deep need made her bold and persistent, as we learn in detail from Matthew, who is in this narrative more graphic than Mark. He tells us that she attacked Jesus in the way, and followed Him, pouring out her loud petitions, to the annoyance of the disciples. They thought that they were carrying out His wish for privacy in suggesting that it would be best to ‘send her away’ with her prayer granted, and so stop her ‘crying after us,’ which might raise a crowd, and defeat the wish. We owe to Matthew the further facts of the woman's recognition of Jesus as 'the Son of David,' and of the strange ignoring of her cries, and of His answer to the disciples' suggestion, in which He limited His mission to Israel, and so explained to them His silence to her. Mark omits all these points, and focuses all the light on the two things-Christ's strange and apparently harsh refusal, and the woman's answer, which won her cause.

Certainly our Lord's words are startlingly unlike Him, and as startlingly like the Jewish pride of race and contempt for Gentiles. But that the woman did not take them so is clear; and that was not due only to her faith, but to something in Him which gave her faith a foothold. We are surely not to suppose that she drew from His words an inference which He did not perceive in them, and that He was, as some commentators put it, 'caught in His own words.' Mark alone gives us the first clause of Christ's answer to the woman's petition: 'Let the children first be filled.' And that 'first' distinctly says that their prerogative is priority, not monopoly. If there is a 'first,' there will follow a second. The very image of the great house in which the children sit at the table, and the 'little dogs' are in the room, implies that children and dogs are part of one household; and Jesus meant by it just what the woman found in it,-the assurance that the meal-time for the dogs would come when the children had done. That is but a picturesque way of stating the method of divine revelation through the medium of the chosen people, and the objections to Christ's words come at last to be objections to the 'committing' of the 'oracles of God' to the Jewish race; that is to say, objections to the only possible way by which a historical revelation could be given. It must have personal mediums, a place and a sequence. It must prepare fit vehicles for itself and gradually grow in clearness and contents. And all this is just to say that revelation for the world must be first the possession of a race. The fire must have a hearth on which it can be kindled and burn, till it is sufficient to bear being carried thence.

Universalism was the goal of the necessary restriction. Pharisaism sought to make the restriction permanent. Jesus really threw open the gates to all in this very saying, which at first sounds so harsh. 'First' implies second, children and little dogs are all parts of the one household. Christ's personal ministry was confined to Israel for obvious and weighty reasons. He felt, as Matthew tells us, that He said in this incident that He was not sent but to the lost sheep of that nation. But His world-wide mission was as clear to Him as its temporary limit, and in His first discourse in the synagogue at Nazareth He proclaimed it to a scowling crowd. We cannot doubt that His sympathetic heart yearned over this poor woman, and His seemingly rough speech was meant partly to honour the law which ruled His mission even in the act of making an exception to it, and partly to test, and so to increase, her faith.

Her swift laying of her finger on the vulnerable point in the apparent refusal of her prayer may have been due to a woman's quick wit, but it was much more due to a mother's misery and to a suppliant's faith. There must have been something in Christ's look, or in the cadence of His voice, which helped to soften the surface harshness of His words, and emboldened her to confront Him with the plain implications of His own words. What a constellation of graces sparkles in her ready reply! There is humility in accepting the place He gives her; insight in seeing at once a new plea in what might have sent her away despairing; persistence in pleading; confidence that He can grant her request and that He would gladly do so. Our Lord's treatment of her was amply justified by its effects. His words were like the hard steel that strikes the flint and brings out a shower of sparks. Faith makes obstacles into helps, and stones of stumbling into 'stepping-stones to higher things.' If we will take the place which He gives us, and hold fast our trust in Him even when He seems silent to us, and will so far penetrate His designs as to find the hidden purpose of good in apparent repulses, the honey secreted deep in the flower, we shall share in this woman's blessing in the measure in which we share in her faith.

Jesus obviously delighted in being at liberty to stretch His commission so as to include her in its scope. Joyful recognition of the ingenuity of her pleading, and of her faith's bringing her within the circle of the 'children,' are apparent in His word, 'For this saying go thy way.' He ever looks for the disposition in us which will let Him, in accordance with His great purpose, pour on us His full-flowing tide of blessing, and nothing gladdens Him more than that, by humble acceptance of our assigned place, and persistent pleading, and trust that will not be shaken, we should make it possible for Him to see in us recipients of His mercy and healing grace.

44)Mark 7:33-34

Mark

THE PATTERN OF SERVICE

Mar. 7:33 - Mar. 7:34.

For what reason was there this unwonted slowness in Christ’s healing works? For what reason was there this unusual emotion ere He spoke the word which cleansed? As to the former question, a partial answer may perhaps be that our Lord is here on half-heathen ground, where aids to faith were much needed, and His power had to be veiled that it might be beheld. Hence the miracle is a process rather than an act; and, advancing as it does by distinct stages, is conformed in appearance to men’s works of mercy, which have to adapt means to ends, and creep to their goal by persevering toil. As to the latter, we know not why the sight of this one poor sufferer should have struck so strongly on the ever-tremulous chords of Christ’s pitying heart; but we do know that it was the vision brought before His spirit by this single instance of the world’s griefs and sicknesses-in which mass, however, the special case before Him was by no means lost-that raised His eyes to heaven in mute appeal, and forced the groan from His breast.

The ‘missionary spirit’ is but one aspect of the Christian spirit. We shall only strengthen the former as we invigorate the latter. Harm has been done, both to ourselves and to that great cause, by seeking to stimulate compassion and efforts for heathen lands by the use of other excitements, which have tended to vitiate even the emotions they have aroused, and are apt to fail as when we need them most. It may therefore be profitable if we turn to Christ’s own manner of working, and His own emotions in His merciful deeds, set forth in this remarkable narrative, as containing lessons for us in our missionary and evangelistic work. I must necessarily omit more than a passing reference to the slow process of healing which this miracle exhibits. But that, too, has its teaching for us, who are so often tempted to think ourselves badly used, unless the fruit of our toil grows up, like Jonah's gourd, before our eyes. If our Lord was content to reach His end of blessing step by step, we may well accept 'patient continuance in well-doing' as the condition indispensable to reaping in due season.

But there are other thoughts still more needful which suggest themselves. Those minute details which this Evangelist ever delights to give of our Lord's gestures, words, looks, and emotions, not only add graphic force to the narrative but are precious glimpses into the very heart of Christ. That fixed gaze into heaven, that groan which neither the glories seen above nor the conscious power to heal could stifle, that most gentle touch, as if removing material obstacles from the deaf ears, and moistening the stiff tongue that it might move more freely in the parched mouth, that word of authority which could not be wanting even when His working seemed likest a servant's, do surely carry large lessons for us. The condition of all service, the cost of feeling at which our work must be done, the need that the helpers should identify themselves with the sufferers, and the victorious power of Christ's word over all deaf ears-these are the thoughts which I desire to connect with our text and to commend to your meditation now.

I. We have here set forth, in the Lord's heavenward look, the foundation and condition of all true work for God.

The profound questions which are involved in the fact that, as man, Christ held communion with God in the exercise of faith and aspiration, the same in kind as ours, do not concern us here. I speak to those who believe that Jesus is for us the perfect example of complete manhood, and who therefore believe that He is 'the leader of faith,' the head of the long processions of those who in every age have trusted in God and been 'lightened.' But, perhaps, though that conviction holds its place in our creeds, it has not been as completely incorporated with our thoughts as it should have been. There has, no doubt, been a tendency, operating in much of our evangelical teaching, and in the common stream of orthodox opinion, to except, half unconsciously, the exercises of the religious life from the sphere of Christ's example, and we need to be reminded that Scripture presents His vow, 'I will put my trust in Him,' as the crowning proof of His brotherhood, and that the prints of His kneeling limbs have left their impressions where we kneel before the throne. True, the relation of the Son to the Father involves more than communion-namely, unity. But if we follow the teaching of the Bible, we shall not presume that the latter excludes the former, but understand that the unity is the foundation of perfect communion, and the communion the manifestation, so far as it can be manifested, of the unspeakable unity. The solemn words which shine like stars-starlike in that their height above us shrinks their magnitude and dims their brightness, and in that they are points of radiance partially disclosing, and separated by, abysses of unlighted infinitude-tell us that in the order of eternity, before creatures were, there was communion, for ‘the Word was with God,’ and there was unity, for ‘the Word was God.’ And in the records of the life manifested on earth the consciousness of unity loftily utters itself in the unfathomable declaration, ‘I and my Father are one’; whilst the consciousness of communion, dependent like ours on harmony of will and true obedience, breathes peacefully in the witness which He leaves to Himself: ‘The Father has not left Me alone, for I do always the things that please Him.’

We are fully warranted, then, in supposing that that wistful gaze to heaven means, and may be taken to symbolise, our Lord’s conscious direction of thought and spirit to God as He wrought His work of mercy. There are two distinctions to be noted between His communion with God and ours before we can apply the lesson to ourselves. His heavenward look was not the renewal of interrupted fellowship, but rather, as a man standing firmly on firm rock may yet lift his foot to plant it again where it was before, and settle himself in his attitude before he strikes with all his might; so we may say Christ fixes Himself where He always stood, and grasps anew the hand that He always held, before He does the deed of power. The communion that had never been broken was renewed; how much more the need that in *our* work for God the renewal of the-alas! too sadly sundered-fellowship should ever precede and always accompany our efforts! And again, Christ’s fellowship was with the Father, while ours must be with the Father through the Son. The communion to which we are called is with Jesus Christ, in whom we find God.

The manner of that intercourse, and the various discipline of ourselves with a view to its perfecting which Christian prudence prescribes, need not concern us here. As for the latter, let us not forget that a wholesome and wide-reaching self-denial cannot be dispensed with. Hands that are full of gilded toys and glass beads cannot grasp durable riches, and eyes that have been accustomed to glaring lights see only darkness when they look up to the violet heaven with all its stars. As to the former, every part of our nature above the simply animal is capable of God, and the communion ought to include our whole being. Christ is truth for the understanding, authority for the will, love for the heart, certainty for the hope, fruition for all the desires, and for the conscience at once cleansing and law. Fellowship with Him is no indolent passiveness, nor the luxurious exercise of certain emotions, but the contact of the whole nature with its sole adequate object and rightful Lord.

Such intercourse, brethren, lies at the foundation of all work for God. It is the condition of all our power. It is the measure of all our success. Without it we may seem to realise the externals of prosperity, but it will be all illusion. With it we may perchance seem to 'spend our strength for nought'; but heaven has its surprises; and those who toiled, nor left their hold of their Lord in all their work, will have to say at last with wonder, as they see the results of their poor efforts, 'Who hath begotten me these? behold, I was left alone; these, where had they been?'

Consider in few words the manifold ways in which the indispensable prerequisite of all right effort for Christ may be shown to be communion with Christ.

The heavenward look is the renewal of our own vision of the calm verities in which we trust, the recourse for ourselves to the realities which we desire that others should see. And what is equal in persuasive power to the simple utterance of one's own intense conviction? He only will infuse his own religion into other minds, whose religion is not a set of hard dogmas, but is fused by the heat of personal experience into a river of living fire. It will flow then, not otherwise. The only claim which the hearts of men will listen to, in those who would win them to spiritual beliefs, is that ancient one: 'That which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, declare we unto you.’ Mightier than all arguments, than all ‘proofs of the truth of the Christian religion,’ and penetrating into a sphere deeper than that of the understanding, is the simple proclamation, ‘We have found the Messias.’ If we would give sight to the blind, we must ourselves be gazing into heaven. Only when we testify of that which we see, as one might who, standing in a beleaguered city, discerned on the horizon the filmy dust-cloud through which the spearheads of the deliverers flashed at intervals, shall we win any to gaze with us till they too behold and know themselves set free.

The heavenward look draws new strength from the source of all our might. In our work, dear brethren, contemplating as it ought to do exclusively spiritual results, what we do depends largely on what we are, and what we are depends on what we receive, and what we receive depends on the depth and constancy of our communion with God. ‘The help which is done upon earth He doeth it all Himself.’ We and our organisations are but the channels through which this might is poured; and if we choke the bed with turbid masses of drift and heavy rocks of earthly thoughts, or build from bank to bank thick dams of worldliness compact with slime of sin, how shall the full tide flow through us for the healing of the salt and barren places? Will it not leave its former course silted up with sand, and cut for itself new outlets, while the useless quays that once rang with busy life stand silent, and ‘the cities are solitary that were full of people’? We are

‘The trumpet at Thy lips, the clarion
Full of Thy cry, sonorous with Thy breath.’

Let us see to it that by fellowship with Christ we keep the passage clear, and become recipients of the inspiration which shall thrill our else-silent spirits into the blast of loud alarum and the ringing proclamation of the true King.

The heavenward look will guard us from the temptations which surround all our service, and the distractions which lay waste our lives. It is habitual communion with Christ that alone will give the persistency that makes systematic, continuous efforts for Him possible, and yet will keep systematic work from degenerating, as it ever tends to do, into mechanical work. There is no greater virtue in irregular desultory service than in systematised labour. The one is not freer from besetting temptations than the other, only the temptations are of different sorts. Machinery saves manual toil, and multiplies force. But we may have too heavy machinery for what engineers call the boiler power,-too many wheels and shafts for the steam we have to drive them with. What we want is not less organisation, or other sorts of it, but more force. Any organisation will do if we have God's Spirit breathing through it. None will be better than so much old iron if we have not.

We are ever apt to trust to our work, to do it without a distinct recurrence at each moment to the principles on which it rests, and the motives by which it should be actuated,-to become so absorbed in details that we forget the purpose which alone gives them meaning, to over-estimate the external aspects of it, to lose sight of the solemn truths which make it so grand, and to think of it as commonplace because it is common, as ordinary because it is familiar. And from these most real dangers, which beset us all, there is no refuge but the frequent, the habitual, gaze into the open heavens, which will show us again the realities of things, and bring to our spirits, dwarfed even by habits of goodness, the renewal of former motives by the vision of Jesus Christ.

Such constant communion will further surround us with an atmosphere through which none of the many influences which threaten our Christian life and our Christian work can penetrate. As the diver in his bell sits dry at the bottom of the sea, and draws a pure air from the free heavens far above him, and is parted from that murderous waste of green death that clings so closely round the translucent crystal walls which keep him safe; so we, enclosed in God, shall repel from ourselves all that would overflow to destroy us and our work, and may by His grace lay deeper than the waters some courses in the great building that shall one day rise, stately and many-mansioned, from out of the conquered waves. For ourselves, and for all that we do for Him, living communion with God is the means of power and peace, of security and success.

It was never more needful than now. Feverish activity rules in all spheres of life. The iron wheels of the car which bears the modern idol of material progress whirl fast, and crush remorselessly all who cannot keep up the pace. Christian effort is multiplied and systematised beyond all precedent. And all these facts make calm fellowship with God hard to compass. The measure of the difficulty is the measure of the need. I, for my part, believe that there are few Christian duties more neglected than that of meditation, the very name of which has fallen of late into comparative disuse, that augurs ill for the frequency of the thing. We are so busy thinking, discussing, defending, inquiring; or preaching, and teaching, and working, that we have no time and no leisure of heart for quiet contemplation, without which the exercise of the intellect upon Christ's truth will not feed, and busy activity in Christ's cause may starve, the soul. There are few things which the Church of this day in all its parts needs more than to obey the invitation, 'Come ye yourselves apart into a lonely place, and rest a while.'

Christ has set us the example. Let our prayers ascend as His did, and in our measure the answers which came to Him will not fail us. For us, too, 'praying, the heavens' shall be 'opened,' and the peace-bringing spirit fall dove-like on our meek hearts. For us, too, when the shadow of our cross lies black and gaunt upon our paths, and our souls are troubled, communion with heaven will bring the assurance, audible to our ears at least, that God will glorify Himself even in us. If, after many a weary day, we seek to hold fellowship with God as He sought it on the Mount of Olives, or among the solitudes of the midnight hills, or out in the morning freshness of the silent wilderness, like Him we shall have men gathering around us to hear us speak when we come forth from 'the secret place of the Most High.' If our prayer, like His, goes before our mighty deeds, the voice that first pierced the skies will penetrate the tomb, and make the dead stir in their grave-clothes. If our longing, trustful look is turned to the heavens, we shall not speak in vain on earth when we say, 'Be opened!'

Brethren, we cannot do without the communion which our Master needed. Do we delight in what strengthened Him? Does our work rest upon the basis of inward fellowship with God which underlay His? Alas! that our Pattern should be our rebuke, and that the readiest way to force home our faults on our consciences should be the contemplation of the life which we say that we try to copy!

II. We have here pity for the evils we would remove, set forth by the Lord's sigh.

The frequency with which this Evangelist records our Lord's emotions on the sight of sin and sorrow has been often noticed. In his pages we read of Christ's grief at the hardness of men's hearts, of His marvelling because of their unbelief, of His being moved with compassion for an outcast leper and a hungry multitude, of His sighing deeply in His spirit when prejudiced hostility, assuming the appearance of candid inquiry, asked of Him a sign from heaven. All these instances of true human feeling, like His tears at the grave of Lazarus, and His weariness as He sat on the well, and His tired sleep in the stern of the little fishing-boat, and His hunger and His thirst, are very precious as aids in realising His perfect manhood; but they have a worth beyond even that. They show us how the manifold ills and evils of man's fate and conduct appealed to the only pure heart that ever beat, and how quickly and warmly it, by reason of its purity, throbbed in sympathy with all the woe. One might have thought that in the present case the consciousness that His help was so near would have been sufficient to repress the sigh. One might have thought that the heavenward look would have stayed the tears. But neither the happiness of active benevolence, nor the knowledge of immediate cure, nor the glories above flooding His vision, could lift the burden from His labouring breast. And surely in this too, we may discern a law for all our efforts, that their worth shall be in proportion to the expense of feeling at which they are done. Men predict the harvests in Egypt by the height which the river marks on the gauge of the inundation. So many feet there represent so much fertility. Tell me the depth of a Christian man's compassion, and I will tell you the measure of his fruitfulness.

What was it that drew that sigh from the heart of Jesus? One poor man stood before him, by no means the most sorely afflicted of the many wretched ones whom He healed. But He saw in him more than a solitary instance of physical infirmities. Did there not roll darkly before His thoughts that whole weltering sea of sorrow that moans round the world of which here is but one drop that He could dry up? Did there not rise black and solid, against the clear blue to which He had been looking, the mass of man's sin, of which these bodily infirmities were but a poor symbol as well as a consequence? He saw, as none but He could bear to see, the miserable realities of human life. His knowledge of all that man might be, of all that the most of men were becoming, His power of contemplating in one awful aggregate the entire sum of sorrows and sins, laid upon His heart a burden which none but He has ever endured. His communion with heaven deepened the dark shadow on earth, and the eyes that looked up to God and saw Him, could not but see foulness where others suspected none, and murderous messengers of hell walking in darkness unpenetrated by mortal sight. And all that pain of clearer knowledge of the sorrowfulness of sorrow, and the sinfulness of sin, was laid upon a heart in which was no selfishness to blunt the sharp edge of the pain nor any sin to stagnate the pity that flowed from the wound. To Jesus Christ, life was a daily martyrdom before death had 'made the sacrifice complete,' and He 'bore our griefs and carried our sorrows' through many a weary hour before He 'bare them in His own body on the tree.' Therefore, 'Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law' which Christ obeyed, becomes a command for all who would draw men to Him. And true sorrow, a sharp and real sense of pain, becomes indispensable as preparation for, and accompaniment to, our work.

Mark how in us, as in our Lord, the sigh of compassion is to be connected with the look to heaven. It follows upon that gaze. The evils become more real, more terrible, by their startling contrast with the unshadowed light which lives above cloudracks and mists. It is a sharp shock to turn from the free sweep of the heavens, starry and radiant, to the sights that meet us in 'this dim spot which men call earth.' Thus habitual communion with God is the root of the truest and purest compassion. It does not withdraw us from our fellow feeling with our brethren, it cultivates no isolation for undisturbed beholding of God. It at once supplies a standard by which to measure the greatness of man's godlessness, and therefore of his gloom, and a motive for laying the pain of these upon our hearts, as if they were our own. He has looked into the heavens to little purpose who has not learned how bad and how sad the world now is, and how God bends over it in pitying love.

And that same fellowship which will clear our eyes and soften our hearts, is also the one consolation which we have when our sense of 'all the ills that flesh is heir to' becomes deep nearly to despair. When one thinks of the real facts of human life, and tries to conceive of the frightful meanness and passion and hate and wretchedness that have been howling and shrieking and gibbering and groaning through dreary millenniums, one's brain reels, and hope seems to be absurdity, and joy a sin against our fellows, as a feast would be in a house next door to where was a funeral. I do not wonder at settled sorrow falling upon men of vivid imagination, keen moral sense, and ordinary sensitiveness, when they brood long on the world as it is. But I do wonder at the superficial optimism which goes on with its little prophecies about human progress, and its rose-coloured pictures of human life, and sees nothing to strike it dumb for ever in men's writhing miseries, blank failures, and hopeless end. Ah! brethren, if it were not for the heavenward look, how could we bear the sight of earth? 'We see not yet all things put under Him.' No! God knows, far enough off from that. Man's folly, man's submission to the creatures he should rule, man's agonies, and man's transgression, are a grim contrast to the Psalmist's vision. If we had only earth to look to, despair of the race, expressed in settled melancholy apathy or in fierce cynicism, were the wisest attitude. But there is more within our view than earth; 'we see Jesus'; we look to the heaven, and as we behold the true Man, we see more than ever, indeed, how far from that pattern we all are; but we can bear the thought of what men as yet have been, when we see that perfect Example of what men shall be. The root and the consolation of our sorrow for men's evils is communion with God.

Let me remind you, too, that still more dangerous than the pity which is not based upon, and corrected by, the look to heaven, is the pity which does not issue in strenuous work. It is easy to excite people's emotions; but it is perilous for both the operator and the subject, unless they be excited through the understanding, and pass on the impulse to the will and the practical powers. The surest way to petrify a heart is to stimulate the feelings, and give them nothing to do. They will never recover their original elasticity if they have been wantonly drawn forth thus. Coldness, hypocrisy, spurious sentimentalism, and a whole train of affectations and falsehoods follow the steps of an emotional religion, which divorces itself from active work. Pity is meant to impel to help. Let us not be content with painting sad and true pictures of men's woes,-of the gloomy hopelessness of idolatry, for instance-but let us remember that every time our compassion is stirred, and no action ensues, our hearts are in some measure indurated, and the sincerity of our religion in some degree impaired. White-robed Pity is meant to guide the strong powers of practical help to their work. She is to them as eyes to go before them and point their tasks. They are to her as hands to execute her gentle will. Let us see to it that we rend them not apart; for idle pity is unblessed and fruitless as a sigh cast into the fragrant air, and unpitying work is more unblessed and fruitless still. Let us remember, too, that Christlike and indispensable as Pity is, she is second, and not first. Let us take heed that we preserve that order in our own minds, and in our endeavours to stimulate one another. For if we reverse it, we shall surely find the fountains of compassion drying up long before the wide stretches of thirsty land are watered, and the enterprises which we have sought to carry on by appealing to a secondary motive, languishing when there is most need for vigour. Here is the true sequence which must be observed in our missionary and evangelistic work, ‘Looking up to heaven, He sighed.’

Dear brethren! must we not all acknowledge woful failures in this regard? How much of our service, our giving, our preaching, our planning, has been carried on without one thought of the ills and godlessness we profess to be seeking to cure! If some angel’s touch could annihilate all that portion of our activity, what gaps would be left in all our subscription lists, our sermons, and our labours both at home and abroad! Annihilate, do I say? It is done already. Such work is nothing, and comes to nothing. ‘Yea, it shall not be planted; yea, it shall not be sown; and He shall also blow upon it, and it shall wither.’

The hindrances to such abiding consciousness of and pity for the world’s woes run all down to the one tap-root of all sin, selfishness. The remedies run all up to the common form of all goodness, the self-absorbing communion with Jesus Christ. And besides that mother-tincture of everything wrong, subsidiary impediments may be found in the small amounts of time and effort which any of us give to bring the facts of the world’s condition vividly before our minds. The destruction of all emotion is the indolent acquiescence in general statements which we are too lazy or busy to break up into individual cases. To talk about hundreds of millions of idolaters leaves the heart untouched. But take one soul out of all that mass, and try to feel what his life is in its pitchy darkness, broken only by lurid lights of fear and sickly gleams of hope, in its passions ungoverned by love, its remorse uncalmed by pardon, its affections feeling like the tendrils of some climbing plant for the stay they cannot find, and in the cruel blackness that swallows it up irrevocably at last. Follow it from the childhood that knows no discipline to the grave that knows no waking, and will not the solitary instance come nearer our hearts than the millions? But however that may be, the sluggishness of our imaginations, the very familiarity with the awful facts, our own feeble hold on Christ, our absorption in personal interests, the incompleteness and desultoriness of our communion with our Lord, do all concur with our natural selfishness to make a sadly large proportion of our apparent labours for God and men utterly cold and unfeeling, and therefore utterly worthless. Has the benighted world ever caused us as much pain as some trivial pecuniary loss has done? Have we ever felt the smart of the gaping wounds through which our brothers' blood is pouring forth as much as we do the tiniest scratch on our own fingers? Does it sound to us like exaggerated rhetoric when a prophet breaks out, 'Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep night and day!' or when an Apostle in calmer tones declares, 'I have great heaviness and continual sorrow of heart'? Some seeds are put to steep and swell in water, that they may be tested before sowing. The seed which we sow will not germinate unless it be saturated with our tears. And yet the sorrow must be blended with joy; for it is glad labour which is ordinarily productive labour-just as the growing time is the changeful April, and one knows not whether the promise of harvest is most sure in the clouds that drop fatness, or in the sunshine that makes their depths throb with whitest light, and touches the moist-springing blades into emeralds and diamonds. The gladness comes from the heavenward look, the pain is breathed in the deep-drawn sigh; both must be united in us if we would 'approve ourselves as the servants of God-as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.'

III. We have here loving contact with those whom we would help set forth in the Lord's touch.

The reasons for the variety observable in Christ's method of communicating supernatural blessing were, probably, too closely connected with unrecorded differences in the spiritual conditions of the recipients to be distinctly traceable by us. But though we cannot tell why a particular method was employed in a given case, why now a word, and now a symbolic action, now the touch of His hand, and now the hem of His garment, appeared to be the vehicles of His power, we can discern the significance of these divers ways, and learn great lessons from them all.

His touch was sometimes obviously the result of what one may venture to call instinctive tenderness, as when He lifted the little children in His arms and laid His hands upon their heads. It was, I suppose, always the spontaneous expression of love and compassion, even when it was something more. The touch of His hand on the ghastly glossiness of the leper’s skin was, no doubt, His assertion of priestly functions, and of elevation above all laws of defilement; but what was it to the poor outcast, who for years had never felt the warm contact of flesh and blood? It always indicated that He Himself was the source of healing and life. It always expressed His identification of Himself with sorrow and sickness. So that it is in principle analogous to, and may be taken as illustrative of, that transcendent act whereby He ‘became flesh, and dwelt among us.’ Indeed, the very word by which our Lord’s taking the blind man by the hand is described in the chapter following our text, is that employed in the Epistle to the Hebrews when, dealing with the true brotherhood of Jesus, the writer says, ‘He took not hold of angels, but of the seed of Abraham He taketh hold.’ Christ’s touch is His willing contact with man’s infirmities and sins, that He may strengthen and hallow.

And the lesson is one of universal application. Wherever men would help their fellows, this is a prime requisite, that the would-be helper should come down to the level of those whom he desires to aid. If we wish to teach, we must stoop to think the scholar’s thoughts. The master who has forgotten his boyhood will have poor success. If we would lead to purer emotions, we must try to enter into the lower feelings which we labour to elevate. It is of no use to stand at the mouth of the alleys we wish to cleanse, with our skirts daintily gathered about us, and smelling-bottle in hand, to preach homilies on the virtues of cleanliness. We must go in among the filth, and handle it, if we want to have it cleared away. The degraded must feel that we do not shrink from them, or we shall do them no good. The leper, shunned by all, and ashamed of himself because everybody loathes him, hungers in his hovel for the grasp of a hand that does not care for defilement, if it can bring cleansing. Even in regard to common material helps the principle holds good. We are too apt to cast our doles to the poor like bones to a dog, and then to wonder at what we are pleased to think men's ingratitude. A benefit may be so conferred as to hurt more than a blow; and we cannot be surprised if so-called charity which is given with contempt and a sense of superiority, should be received with a scowl, and chafe a man's spirit like a fetter. Such gifts bless neither him who gives nor him who takes. We must put our hearts into them, if we would win hearts by them. We must be ready, like our Master, to take blind beggars by the hand, if we would bless or help them. The despair and opprobrium of our modern civilisation; the gulf growing wider and deeper between Dives and Lazarus, between Belgravia and Whitechapel; the mournful failure of legalised help, and of delegated efforts to bridge it over, the darkening ignorance, the animal sensuousness, the utter heathenism that lives in every town of England, within a stone's-throw of Christian houses, and near enough to hear the sound of public worship-will yield to nothing but that sadly forgotten law which enjoins personal contact with the sinful and the suffering, as one chief condition of raising them from the black mire in which they welter.

But the same law has its special application in regard to the enterprise of Christian missions.

It defines the spirit in which Christian men should proclaim the Gospel. The effect of much well-meant Christian effort is simply to irritate. People are very quick to catch delicate intonations which reveal a secret sense, 'how much better, wiser, more devout I am than these people!' and wherever a trace of that appears in our work, the good of it is apt to be marred. We all know how hackneyed the charge of spiritual pride and Pharisaic self-complacency is, and, thank God, how unjust it often is. But averse as men may be to the truths which humble, and willing as they may be to assume that the very effort on our parts to present these to others implies a claim which they resent, we may at least learn from the threadbare calumny, what strikes men about our position, and what rouses their antagonism to us. It is allowable to be taught by our enemies, especially when it is such a lesson as this, that we must carefully divest our evangelistic work of apparent pretensions to superiority, and take our stand by the side of those to whom we speak. We cannot lecture men into the love of Christ, We can win them to it only by showing Christ’s love to them; and not the least important element in that process is the exhibition of our own love. We have a Gospel to speak of which the very heart is that the Son of God stooped to become one with the lowliest and most sinful; and how can that Gospel be spoken with power unless we too stoop like Him? We have to echo the invitation, ‘Learn of Me, for I am lowly in heart’; and how can such divine words flow from lips into which like grace has not been poured? Our theme is a Saviour who shrank from no sinner, who gladly consorted with publicans and harlots, who laid His hand on pollution, and His heart, full of God and of love, on hearts reeking with sin; and how can our message correspond with our theme if, even in delivering it, we are saying to ourselves, ‘The Temple of the Lord are we: this people which knoweth not the law is cursed’? Let us beware of the very real danger which besets us in this matter, and earnestly seek to make ourselves one with those whom we would gather into Christ, by actual familiarity with their condition, and by identification of ourselves in feeling with them, after the example of that greatest of Christian teachers who became ‘all things to all men, that by all means he might gain some’; after the higher example, which Paul followed, of that dear Lord who, being Highest, descended to the lowest, and in the days of His humiliation was not content with speaking words of power from afar, nor abhorred the contact of mortality and disease and loathsome corruption; but laid His hands upon death, and it lived; upon sickness, and it was whole; on rotting leprosy, and it was sweet as the flesh of a little child.

The same principle might be further applied to our Christian work, as affecting the form in which we should present the truth. The sympathetic identification of ourselves with those to whom we try to carry the Gospel will certainly make us wise to know how to shape our message. Seeing with their eyes, we shall be able to graduate the light. Thinking their thoughts, and having in some measure succeeded, by force of sheer community of feeling, in having, as it were, got inside their minds, we shall unconsciously, and without effort, be led to such aspects of Christ’s all-comprehensive truth as they most need. There will be no shooting over people’s heads, if we love them well enough to understand them. There will be no toothless generalities, when our interest in men keeps their actual condition and temptations clear before us. There will be no flinging fossil doctrines at them from a height, as if Christ’s blessed Gospel were, in another than the literal sense, ‘a stone of offence,’ if we have taken our place on their level. And without such sympathy, these and a thousand other weaknesses and faults will certainly vitiate much of our Christian effort.

Let me not be misunderstood when I speak of adapting our presentation of the Gospel to the wants of those to whom we carry it. That general statement may express the plainest dictate of Christian prudence or the most dangerous practical error. The one great truth of the Gospel wants no adaptation, by our handling, to any soul of man. It is fitted for all, and demands only plain, loving, earnest statement. There must be no tampering with central verities, nor any diplomatic reserve on the plea of consulting the needs of the men whom we address. Every sinful spirit needs the simple Gospel of salvation by Jesus Christ more than it needs anything else. Nor does adaptation mean deferential stretching a point to meet man’s wishes in our presentation of the truth. Their wishes have to be contravened, that their wants may be met. The truth which a man or a generation requires most is the truth which he or it likes least; and the true Christian teacher’s adaptation of his message will consist quite as much in opposing the desires and contradicting the lies, as in seeking to meet the felt wants, of the world. Nauseous medicines or sharp lancets are adapted to the sick man, quite as truly as pleasant food and soothing ointment.

But remembering all this, we still have a wide field for the operation of practical wisdom and loving common-sense, in determining the form of our message and the manner of our action. And not the least important of qualifications for solving the problems connected therewith is cheerful identification of ourselves with the thoughts and feelings of those whom we would fain draw to the love of God. Such contact with men will win their hearts, as well as soften ours, It will make them willing to hear, as well as us wise to speak. It will enrich our own lives with wide experience and multiplied interests. It will lift us out of the enchanted circle which selfishness draws around us. It will silently proclaim the Lord from whom we have learnt it. The clasp of the hand will be precious, even apart from the virtue that may flow from it, and may be to many a soul burdened with a consciousness of corruption, the dawning of belief in a love that does not shrink even from its foulness. Let us preach the Lord’s touch as the source of all cleansing. Let us imitate it in our lives, that ‘if any will not hear the word, they may without the word be won.’

IV. We have here the true healing power and the consciousness of wielding it set forth in the Lord’s authoritative word.

All the rest of His action was either the spontaneous expression of His true participation in human sorrow, or a merciful veiling of His glory that sense-bound eyes might see it the better. But the word was the utterance of His will, and that was omnipotent. The hand laid on the sick, the blind or the deaf was not even the channel of His power. The bare putting forth of His energy was all-sufficient. In these we see the loving, pitying man. In this blazes forth, yet more loving, yet more compassionate, the effulgence of manifest God. Therefore so often do we read the very syllables with which His ‘voice then shook the earth,’ vibrating through all the framework of the material universe. Therefore do the Gospels bid us listen when He rebukes the fever, and it departs; when He says to the demons ‘Go,’ and they go; when one word louder in its human articulation than the howling wind hushes the surges; when ‘Talitha cumi’ brings back the fair young spirit from dreary wanderings among the shades of death. Therefore was it a height of faith not found in Israel when the Gentile soldier, whose training had taught him the power of absolute authority, as heathenism had driven him to long for a man who should speak with the imperial sway of a god, recognised in His voice an all-commanding power. From of old, the very signature of divinity has been declared to be, ‘He spake, and it was done’; and He, the breath of whose lips could set in motion material changes, is that Eternal Word, by whom all things were made.

What unlimited consciousness of sovereign dominion sounds in that imperative from His autocratic lips! It is spoken in deaf ears, but He knows that it will be heard. He speaks as the fontal source, not as the recipient channel, of healing. He anticipates no delay, no resistance. There is neither effort nor uncertainty in the curt command. He is sure that He has power, and He is sure that the power is His own.

There is no analogy here between us and Him. Alone, fronting the whole race of man, He stands-utterer of a word which none can say after Him, possessor of unshared might, ‘and of His fulness do all we receive.’ But even from that divine authority and solitary sovereign consciousness we may gather lessons of infinite value for all Christian workers. Of His fulness we *have* received, and the power of the word on His lips may teach us that of His word even on ours, as the victorious certainty with which He spake His will of healing may remind us of the confidence with which it becomes us to proclaim His name.

His will was almighty then. Is it less mighty or less loving now? Does it not gather all the world in the sweep of its mighty purpose of mercy? His voice pierced then into the dull, cold ear of death, and has it become weaker since? His word spoken *by* Him was enough to banish the foul spirits that run riot, swine-like, in the garden of God in man's soul, trampling down and eating up its flowers and fruitage; is the word spoken *of* Him less potent to cast them out? Were not all the mighty deeds which He wrought by the breath of His lips on men's bodies prophecies of the yet mightier ones which His Will of love, and the utterance of that Will by stammering lips, may work on men's souls? Let us not in our faintheartedness number up our failures, the deaf that will not hear, the dumb that will not speak His praise, nor unbelievingly say, 'Christ's own word was mighty, but the word concerning Christ is weak on our lips.' Not so; our lips are unclean, and our words are weak, but His word-the utterance of His loving Will that men should be saved-is what it always was and always will be. We have it, brethren, to proclaim. Did our Master countenance the faithless contrast between the living force of His word when He dwelt on earth, and the feebleness of it as He speaks through His servant? If He did, what did He mean when He said, 'He that believeth on Me, the works that I do shall he do also, and greater works than these shall he do, because I go unto the Father'? And the reflection of Christ's triumphant consciousness of power should irradiate our spirits as we do His work, like the gleam from gazing on God's glory which shone on the lawgiver's stern face while he talked with men. We have everything to assure us that we cannot fail. The manifest fitness of the Gospel to be the food of all souls; the victories of nineteen centuries, which at least prove that all conditions of society, all classes of civilisation, all varieties of race, all peculiarities of individual temperament, all depths of degradation and distances of alienation, are capable of receiving the word, which, like corn, can grow in every latitude, and, though it be an exotic everywhere, can anywhere be naturalised; the firm promises of unchanging faithfulness, the universal aspect of Christ's work, the prevalence of His continual intercession, the indwelling of His abiding Spirit, and, not least, the unerring voice of our own experience of the power of the truth to bless and save-all these are ours. In view of these, what should make us doubt? Unwavering confidence is the only attitude that corresponds to such certainties. We have a rock to build on; let us build on it *with* rock. Putting fear and hesitancy far from us, let us gird ourselves with the joyful strength of assured victory, striking as those who know that conquest is bound to their standard, and who through all the dust of the field see the fair vision of the final triumph. The work is done before we begin it. 'It is finished' was a clarion blast proclaiming that all was won when all seemed lost. Weary ages have indeed to roll away before the great voice from heaven shall declare, 'It is done'; but all that lies between the two is but the gradual unfolding and appropriating of the results which are already secured. The 'strong man' is bound; what remains is but the 'spoiling of his house.' The head is bruised; what remains is but the dying lashing of the snaky horror's powerless coils. 'I send you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labour.' The tearful sowing in the stormy winter's day has been done by the Son of Man. For us there remains the joy of harvest-hot and hard work, indeed, but gladsome too.

Then, however languor and despondency may sometimes tempt us, thinking of slow advancement and of dying men who fade from the place of the living before the gradual light has reached their eyes, our duty is plain-to be sure that the word we carry cannot fail. You remember the old story how, when Jerusalem was in her hour of direst need, and the army of Babylon lay around her battered walls, the prophet was bid to buy 'the field that is in Anathoth, in the country of Benjamin,' for a sign that the transient fury of the invader would be beaten back, that Israel might again dwell safely in the land. So with us, the host of our King's enemies comes up like a river strong and mighty; but all this world, held though it be by the usurper is still 'Thy land, O Immanuel,' and over it all Thy peaceful rule shall be established! Many things in this day tempt the witnesses of God to speak with doubting voice. Angry opposition, contemptuous denial, complacent assumption that a belief in old-fashioned evangelical truth is, *ipso facto*, a proof of mental weakness, abound. Let them not rob us of our confidence. Shame on us if we let ourselves be frightened from it by a sarcasm or a laugh! Do you fall back on all these grounds for assured reliance to which I have referred, and make the good old answer yours, ‘Why, herein is a marvellous thing, that ye know not whence He is, and yet-He hath opened mine eyes’! Trust the word which you have to speak. Speak it and work for its diffusion as if you did trust it. Do not preach it as if it were a notion of your own. In so far as it is, it will share the fate of all human conceptions of divine realities-’will have its day, and cease to be.’ Do not speak it as if it were some new nostrum for curing the ills of humanity, which might answer or might not. Speak it as if it were what it is-’the word of God which liveth and abideth for ever.’ Speak it as if you were what you are, neither its inventors nor its discoverers, but only its messengers, who have but to ‘preach the preaching which He bids’ you. And to all the widespread questionings of this day, filmy and air-filling as the gossamers of an autumn evening, to all the theories of speculation, and all the panaceas of unbelieving philanthropy, present the solid certainties of your inmost experience, and the yet more solid certainty of that all-loving name and all-sufficient work on which these repose. ‘*We know* that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness. And we know that the Son of God is come.’ Then our proclamation, ‘This is the true God and eternal life,’ will not be in vain; and our loving entreaty, ‘Keep yourselves from idols,’ will be heard and yielded to in many a land.

The sum of the whole matter is briefly this. The root of all our efficiency in this great task to which we, unworthy, have been called, is in fellowship with Jesus Christ. ‘The branch cannot bear fruit of itself; without Me ye can do nothing.’ Living near Him, and growing like Him by gazing upon Him, His beauty will pass into our faces, His tender pity into our hearts, His loving identification of Himself with men’s pains and sins will fashion our lives; and the word which He spoke with authority and assured confidence will be strong when we speak it with like calm certainty of victory. If the Church of Christ will but draw close to her Lord till the fulness of His life and the gentleness of His pity flow into her heart and limbs, she will then be able to breathe the life which she has received into the prostrate bulk of a dead world. Only she must do as the meekest of the prophets did in a like miracle. She must not shrink from the touch of the cold clay nor the odour of incipient corruption, but lip to lip and heart to heart must lay herself upon the dead and he will live.

The pattern for our work, dear brethren, is before us in the Lord's look, His sigh, His touch, His word. If we take Him for the example, and Him for the motive, Him for the strength, Him for the theme, Him for the reward, of our service, we may venture to look to Him as the prophecy of our success, and to be sure that when our own faint hearts or an unbelieving world question the wisdom of our enterprise or the worth of our efforts, we may answer as He did, 'Go and show again those things which ye do hear and see; the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached unto them.'

45)Mark 8:17

Mark

THE PATIENT TEACHER, AND THE SLOW SCHOLARS

Mar. 8:17 - Mar. 8:18.

How different were the thoughts of Christ and of His disciples, as they sat together in the boat, making their way across the lake! He was pursuing a train of sad reflections which, the moment before their embarkation, had caused Him to sigh deeply in His spirit and say, 'Why doth this generation seek after a sign?' Absorbed in thought, He spoke, 'Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees,' who had been asking that question.

So meditated and spoke Jesus in the stern, and amidships the disciples' thoughts were only concerned about the negligent omission, very excusable in the hurry of embarkation, by which they had forgotten to lay in a fresh supply of provisions, and had set sail with but one loaf left in the boat. So taken up were they with this petty trouble that they twisted the Master's words as they fell from His lips, and thought that He was rebuking them for what they were rebuking themselves for. So apt are we to interpret others' sayings by the thoughts uppermost in our own minds.

And then our Lord poured out this altogether unusual-perhaps I may say unique-hail of questions which indicate how deeply moved from His ordinary calm He was by this strange slowness of apprehension on the part of His disciples. There is no other instance that I can recall in the whole Gospels, with the exception of Gethsemane, where our Lord’s words seem to indicate such agitation of the windless sea of His spirit as this rapid succession of rebuking interrogations. They give a glimpse into the depths of His mind, showing us what He generally kept sacredly shut up, and let us see how deeply He was touched and pained by the slowness of apprehension of His servants.

Let us look at these questions as suggesting to us two things-the grieved Teacher and the slow scholars.

I. The grieved Teacher.

I have said that the revelation of the depths of our Lord’s experience here is unexampled. We can understand the mood of which it is the utterance; the feeling of despair that sometimes comes over the most patient instructor when he finds that all his efforts to hammer some truth into, or to print some impression on, the brain or heart of man or boy, have been foiled, and that years, it may be, of patient work have scarcely left more traces on unretentive minds than remain on the ocean of the passage through it of a keel.

Christ felt that; and I do not think we half enough realise how large an element in the sorrows of the Man of Sorrows, and of the grief with which He was acquainted, was His necessary association with people who, He felt, did not in the least degree understand Him, however truly, blindly, and almost animally, they might love Him. It was His disciples’ misconception that stung him most. If I might so say, He *calculated* upon being misunderstood by Pharisees and outsiders, but that these followers who had been gathered round about Him all these months, and had been the subjects of His sedulous toil, should blurt out such words as these which precede the question of my text, cut deep into that loving heart. It was not only the pain of being misunderstood, but also the pain of feeling that the people who cared most for Him did not understand Him, and were so hard to drag up to the level where they could even catch a glimpse of His meaning, that struck His heart with almost a kind of despair; and, as I said, made Him pour out this rain of questions.

And what do the questions suggest? Not only emotion very unusual in Him, yet truly human, and showing Him to be our Brother; but they suggest three distinct types of emotion, all of them dashed with pain.

‘Why reason ye? Having eyes, see ye not? Do ye not remember?’ That speaks of His astonishment. Do not start at the word, or suppose that it in any degree contradicts the lofty beliefs that I suppose most of us have with regard to the Deity of our Lord and Saviour. We find in another place in the Gospels, not by inference as here, but in plain words, the ascription to Him of wonder; ‘He marvelled at their unbelief.’ And we read of a more blessed kind of surprise as having once been His, when He wondered at the faith of the heathen centurion. But here His astonishment is that after all these years of toil, and of sympathy, and of discipleship, and of listening and trying to get hold of His meaning, His disciples were so far away from any understanding of what He was driving at. He had to learn by experience the depths of men’s stupidity and ignorance. And although He was the Word of God made flesh, we recognise here the token of a true brother in that He was capable not only of the physical feelings of weariness, and hunger, and thirst, and pain, but that He, too, had that emotion which only a limited understanding can have-the emotion of wonder. And it was drawn out by His disciples’ denseness and inertness.

Ah! dear friends, does He not wonder at us? One of the prophets says, ‘Be astonished, O heavens!’ And be sure of this, that the manhood of Jesus Christ is not now so lifted up above what it was upon earth as that that same sensation-twin-sister to yours and mine-of surprise, does not sometimes visit Him when He looks down upon us; and has to say to us-as, alas! He has to say-what He once said to one of the Twelve, ‘Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip?’ Is not the same question coming to us? Why is it that we do not understand? Wonder, then, is the first emotion that is expressed in this question. There is another one: Pain. And there again I fall back not upon inference, but upon plain words of another part of the Gospels. ‘He looked round upon them with anger, being *grieved* at the hardness of their hearts.’ It seems daring to venture to say that the exalted and glorified humanity of Jesus Christ to-day is, in any measure, capable of feeling analogous to that; but it will not seem so daring if you remember the solemn charge of one of the Apostles, ‘Grieve not the

Holy Spirit of God.' It is Christ's disciples that pain Him most. 'They vexed His Holy Spirit, therefore He fought against them.' Brethren, let us look into our own hearts and our own lives, and ask ourselves if there is not something there that gives a pang even to the heart of the glorified Master, and makes Him sigh deeply within Himself? May I add one more emotion which seems to me to be unmistakably expressed by this rapid fusilade of questions? That is indignation. Again I fall back upon plain words: 'He looked round about upon them with anger, being grieved.' The two things were braided together in His heart, and did not conflict with each other There were infinite sorrow, infinite pity, and real displeasure. You must take all notions of passion and of malignity, and of desire to do harm to the subject, out of the conception of anger as applied to God or to Christ who is the revelation of God. But it seems to me that it is a maimed Christ that we put before the world unless we say that in the Love there lie the possibilities of Wrath. 'Behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and I beheld, and lo! a Lamb!' Wrath and gentleness are in Him inseparably united, neither of them limiting nor making impossible the other.

So here we have a self-revelation, as by one glimpse into a great chamber, of the deep heart of Christ, the great Teacher, moved to astonishment, grief, and indignation.

II. Now let me say a word about the slow scholars.

I have spoken of these questions as being rapid and repeated, and as a rain of what we may almost call fiery interrogation. But they are by no means tautology or useless and aimless repetition. If we look at them closely, I think we shall see that they open out to us several different sides and phases of the fault in His disciples that moves these emotions.

There is, first, His scholars' stolid insensibility, which moves Him to anger, to astonishment, and to grief. 'Are your hearts yet hardened?' by which is meant, not hardened in the sense of being suddenly and stiffly set in antagonism to Him, but simply in the sense of being-may I use the word?-so pachydermatous, so thick-skinned, that nothing can go through them. They showed it is a dull, stolid insensibility, and it marks some of us professing Christians, on whom promises and invitations and revelations of truth all fall with equal ineffectiveness, and from whom they glide off with equal rapidity. You may rain upon a black basalt rock to all eternity, and nothing will grow upon it. All the drops will run down the polished sides, and a quarter of an inch below the surface it will be as dry as it was before the first drop fell. And here are we Christian ministers, talk-talk-talking, week in and week out; and here is Christ, by His providences and by His word, speaking far more loudly than any of us; and it all falls with absolute impotence on hosts of people that call themselves Christians. Ah! brethren, it is not only unbelievers who have their hearts hardened. Orthodox professors are often guilty of the same. If I might alter the metaphor, many of us have waterproofed our minds, and the ingredients of the mixture by which we have waterproofed them are our knowledge of 'the plan of salvation,' our connection with a Christian community, our membership in a church, our obedience to the formalisms of the devout life. All these have only made a non-transmitting medium interposed between ourselves and the concentrated electric energy that ever flashes from Jesus Christ. Our hardened hearts, with their stolid insensibility, amaze our Master, and no wonder that they do.

But that is not all. There is not only what I have ventured to call stolid insensibility, but, as a result of it, there is the not using the capacities that we have. 'Having eyes, see ye not? Having ears, hear ye not?' We are not like children that cannot, but like careless, untrained schoolboys that will not, learn. We have the capacity, and it is our own fault that we are dunces in the school, and at the bottom of the class. Use the power that you have, and 'unto him that hath shall be given, and he shall have in abundance.' There are fishes in the caverns of North America that have lived so long in the dark, underground channels, that the present generation of them has no eyes. We are doing our best to deprive ourselves of our capacities of beholding by refusing to use them. 'Having eyes, see ye not?' Our non-use of the powers we have amazes and grieves our Master.

Further, the reason why there are this stolid insensibility and this non-use of capacity lies here: 'Ye reason about the bread.' The absorption of our minds and efforts and time with material things, that perish with the using, come in between us and our apprehension of Christ's teaching. Ah! brethren, it is not only the rich man that is swallowed up with the present world; the poor man may be so as really. All of us, by reason of the absolute necessities of our lives, are in danger of getting our hearts so filled and crowded with the things that are ‘seen and temporal’ that we have no time, nor room, for the things that are ‘unseen and eternal.’ I do not need to elaborate that point. We all know that it is there that our danger, in various forms, lies. If you in the bows of the ship are reasoning about bread, you will misunderstand Christ in the stern warning against ‘the leaven of the Pharisees.’

The last suggestion from these questions is that the cure for all that stolid insensibility, and its resulting misuse of capacity, and the absorption in daily visible things, is remembrance of His and our past-’Do ye not remember?’ It was only that same morning, or the day before at the furthest, that one of the miracles of feeding the thousands had been performed. Christ wonders, as well He might, at the short memories of the disciples who, with the baskets-full of fragments scarcely eaten yet, could worry themselves because there was only one loaf in the locker. ‘Do ye not remember, when I broke the loaves among the thousands, how many baskets took ye up? And they said, seven. And He said, How is it that ye do not understand?’ Yes, Memory is the one wing and Hope the other, that lift our heaviness from earth towards heaven. And any man who will bethink himself of what Jesus Christ has been for him, did for him on earth, and has done for him during his life, will not be so absorbed in worldly cares as that he will have no eyes to see the things unseen and eternal; and the hard, dead insensibility of his heart will melt into thankful consecration, and so he will rise nearer and nearer to intelligent apprehension of the lofty and deep things that the Incarnate Word says to him. We are here in Christ’s school, and it depends upon the place in the class that we take here where we shall be put at what schoolboys call the ‘next remove.’ If here we have indeed ‘learned of Him the truth as it is in Jesus,’ we shall be put up into the top classes yonder, and get larger and more blessed lessons in the Father’s house above.

46)Mark 8:18

Mark

THE PATIENT TEACHER, AND THE SLOW SCHOLARS

THE RELIGIOUS USES OF MEMORY

Mar. 8:18.

The disciples had misunderstood our Lord’s warning ‘against the leaven of the Pharisees,’ which they supposed to have been occasioned by their neglect to bring with them bread. Their blunder was like many others which they committed, but it seems to have singularly moved our Lord, who was usually so patient with His slow scholars. The swift rain of questions, like bullets rattling against a cuirass, of which my text is one, shows how much He was moved, if not to impatience or anger, at least to wonder.

But what I wish particularly to notice is that He traces the disciples’ slowness of perception and distrust mainly to forgetfulness. There was a special reason for that, of course, in that the two miracles of the feeding the multitude, one of which had just before occurred, ought to have delivered them from any uneasiness, and to have led them to apprehend His higher meaning.

But there is a wider reason for the collocation of questions than this. There is no better armour against distrust, nor any surer purge of our spiritual sight, than religious remembrance. So my text falls in with what I hope are, or at any rate should be, thoughts which are busy in many of our hearts now. Every Sunday is the last Sunday of a year. But we are influenced by the calendar, even though there is nothing in reality to correspond with the apparent break, and though time runs on in a continuous course. I would fain say a word or two now which may fit in with thoughts that are wholesome for us always, but, I suppose, come with most force to most of us at such a date as this. And, if you will let me, I will put my observations in the form of exhortations.

I. First of all, then, remember and be thankful.

There are few of us who have much time for retrospect, and there is a very deep sense in which it is wise to ‘forget the things that are behind,’ for the remembrance of them may burden us with a miserable entail of failure; may weaken us by vain regrets, may unfit us for energetic action in the living and available present. But oblivion is foolish, if it is continual, and a remembered past has treasures in it which we can little afford to lose.

Chiefest of these is the power of memory, when applied to our own past lives, to bring out, more clearly than was possible while that past was being lived, the perception of the ever-present care and working of our Father, God. It is hard to recognise Him in the bustle and hurry of our daily lives, and the meaning of each event can only be seen when it is seen in its relation to the rest of a life. Just as a landscape, which we may look at without the smallest perception of its beauty, becomes another thing when the genius of a painter puts it on canvas, and its symmetry and proportion become more manifest, and an ethereal clearness broods over it, and its colours are seen to be deeper than our eyes had discerned, so the common events of life, trivial and insignificant while they are passing, become, when painted on the canvas of memory, nobler and greater, and we understand them more completely than we can do whilst we are living in them.

We need to be at the goal in order to judge of the road. The parts are only explicable when we see the whole. The full interpretation of to-day is reserved for eternity. But, by combining and massing and presenting the consequences of the apparently insignificant and isolated events of the past, memory helps us to a clearer perception of God, and a better understanding of our own lives, On the mountain-summit a man can look down all along the valley by which he has wearily plodded, and understand the meaning of the divergences in the road, and the rough places do not look quite so rough when their proportion to the whole is a little more clearly in his view.

Only, brethren, if we are wisely to exercise remembrance, and to discover God in the lives which, whilst they are passing, had little perception of Him, we must take into account what the meaning of all life is-that is, to make men of us after the pattern of His will.

'Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way.'

But the growth of Christlike and God-pleasing character is the divine purpose, and should be the human aim, of all lives. Our tasks, our joys, our sorrows, our gains, our losses-these are all but the scaffolding, and the scaffolding is only there in order that, course upon course, may rise the temple-palace of a spirit, devoted to, shaped and inhabited by, our Father, God.

So I venture to say that thankful remembrance should exclude no single incident, however bitter, however painful, of any life. There is a remembrance of vanished hands, of voices for ever stilled, which is altogether wrong and weakening. There is a regret, a vain regret which comes with memory for some of us, that interferes with thankfulness.

But it is possible-and, if we understand that the meaning of all is to make us Godlike, it is not hard-to remember vanished joys, and to confer upon them by remembrance a kind of gentle immortality. And, thus remembered, they are ennobled; for all the gross material body of them, as it were, is got rid of, and only the fine spirit is left. The roses bloom, and over bloom, and drop, but a poignant perfume is distilled from the fallen petals. The departed are greatened by distance; when they are gone we recognise the ‘angels’ that we ‘entertained unawares’: and that recognition is no illusion, but it is the disclosure of their real character, to which they were sometimes untrue, and we were often blind. Therefore I say, ‘Thou shalt remember all the way by which the Lord thy God hath led thee,’ and in the thankfulness include departed joys, vanished hands, present sorrows, the rough places as well as the smooth, the crooked things as well as the straight.

II. Secondly, let me say, remember and repent.

Memory is not wise unless it is, so to speak, the sergeant-at-arms of Conscience, and brings our past before the bar of that judge within, and puts into the hands of that judge the law of the Lord by which to estimate our deeds. We all have been making up our accounts to the 31st of December-or are going to do it to-morrow. And what I plead for is that we should take stock of our own characters and aims, and sum up our accounts with duty and with God.

We look back upon a past, of which God gave us the warp and we had to put in the woof. The warp is all bright and pure. The threads that have crossed it from our shuttles are many of them very dark, and all of them stained in some part. So, dear brethren, let us take the year that has gone, and spread them out by the agency of this servant of the court, Memory, before the supreme judge, Conscience.

Let us remember that we may be warned and directed. We shall understand the true moral character of our actions a great deal better when we look back upon them calmly, and when all the rush of temptation and the reducing whispers of our own weak wills are silenced. There is nothing more terrible, in one aspect, there is nothing more salutary and blessed in another, than the difference between the front and the back view of any temptation to which we yield-all radiant and beautiful on the hither side, and when we get past it and look back at it, all hideous. Like some of those painted canvases upon the theatre-stage: seen from this side, with the delusive brilliancy of the footlights thrown upon them, they look beautiful works of art; seen at the back, dirty and cobwebbed canvas, all splashes and spots and uglinesses. Let us be thankful if memory can show us the reverse side of the temptations that on the near side were so seductive.

It is when you see your life in retrospect that you understand the significance of the single deeds in it. We are so apt to isolate our actions that we are startled-and it is a wholesome shock-when we see how, without knowing it, we have dropped into a habit. When each temptation comes, as the moments are passing, we say, ‘Oh, just this once, just this once.’ And the ‘*onces*’ come nearer and nearer together; and what seem to be distinctly separated points, coalesce into a line; and the acts that we thought isolated we find out to our horror-our wholesome horror-have become a chain that binds and holds us. Look back over the year, and drag its events to the bar of Conscience, and I shall be surprised if you do not discover that you have fallen into wrong habits that you never dreamed had dominion over you. So, I say, remember and repent.

Brethren, I do not wish to exaggerate, I do not wish to urge upon you one-sided views of your character or conduct. I give all credit to many excellences, many acts of sacrifice, many acts of service; and yet I say that the main reason why any of us have a good opinion of ourselves is because we have no knowledge of ourselves; and that the safest attitude for all of us, in looking back over what we have made of life, is, hands on mouths, and mouths in dust, and the cry coming from them, ‘Unclean! unclean!’ A little mud in a stream may not be perceptible when you take a wine-glassful of it and look at it, but if you saw a river-full or a lake-full you would soon discover the taint. Summon up the past year to the sessions of silent thought, and let the light of God's will pour in upon it, and you will find how dark has been the flow of the river of your lives.

The best use which the memory can serve for us is that it should drive us closer to Jesus Christ, and make us cling more closely to Him. That past can be cancelled, these multitudinous sins can be forgiven. Memory should be one of the strongest strands in the cord that binds our helplessness to the all-forgiving and all-cleansing Christ.

III. Lastly, let me say, remember and hope.

Memory and Hope are twins. The latter can only work with the materials supplied by the former. Hope could paint nothing on the blank canvas of the future unless its palette were charged by Memory. Memory brings the yarn which Hope weaves.

Our thankful remembrance of a past which was filled and moulded by God's perpetual presence and care ought to make us sure of a future which will in like manner be moulded. 'Thou hast been my help'-if we can say that, then we may confidently pray, and be sure of the answer, 'Leave me not nor forsake me, O God of my salvation.' And if we feel, as memory teaches us to feel, that God has been working for us, and with us, we can say with another Psalmist: 'Thy mercy, O Lord, endureth for ever. Forsake not the work of Thine own hands'; and we can rise to his confidence, 'The Lord with perfect that which concerneth me.'

Our remembrance, even of our imperfections and our losses and our sorrows, may minister to our hope. For surely the life of every man on earth, but most eminently the life of a Christian man, is utterly unintelligible, a mockery and a delusion and an incredibility, if there be a God at all, unless it prophesies of a region in which imperfection will be ended, aspirations will be fulfilled, desires will be satisfied. We have so much, that unless we are to have a great deal more, we had better have had nothing. We have so much, that if there be a God at all, we must have a great deal more. The new moon, with a ragged edge, 'even in its imperfection beautiful,' is a prophet of the complete resplendent orb. 'On earth the broken arc, in heaven the perfect round.'

Further, the memory of defeat may be the parent of the hope of victory. The stone Ebenezer, 'Hitherto hath the Lord helped us,' was set up to commemorate a victory that had been won on the very site where Israel, fighting the same foes, had once been beaten. There is no remembrance of failure so mistaken as that which takes the past failure as certain to be repeated in the future. Surely, though we have fallen seventy times seven-that is 490, is it not?-at the 491st attempt we may, and if we trust in God we shall, succeed.

So, brethren, let us set our faces to a new year with thankful remembrance of the God who has shaped the past, and will mould the future. Let us remember our failures, and learn wisdom and humility and trust in Christ from our sins. Let us set our 'hope on God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments.'

47)Mark 8:22-25

Mark

THE GRADUAL HEALING OF THE BLIND MAN

Mar. 8:22 - Mar. 8:25.

This miracle, which is only recorded by the Evangelist Mark, has about it several very peculiar features. Some of these it shares with one other of our Lord's miracles, which also is found only in this Gospel, and which occurred nearly about the same time-that miracle of healing the deaf and dumb man recorded in the previous chapter. Both of them have these points in common: that our Lord takes the sufferer apart and works His miracle in privacy; that in both there is an abundant use of the same singular means-our Lord's touch and the saliva upon His finger; and that in both there is the urgent injunction of entire secrecy laid upon the recipient of the benefit.

But this miracle had another peculiarity in which it stands absolutely alone, and that is that the work is done in stages; that the power which at other times has but to speak and it is done, here seems to labour, and the cure comes slowly; that in the middle Christ pauses, and, like a physician trying the experiment of a drug, asks the patient if any effect is produced, and, getting the answer that some mitigation is realised, repeats the application, and perfect recovery is the result.

Now, how unlike that is to all the rest of Christ's miraculous working we do not need to point out; but the question may arise, What is the meaning, and what the reason, and what the lessons of this unique and anomalous form of miraculous working? It is to that question that I wish to turn now; for I think that the answer will open up to us some very precious things in regard to that great Lord, the revelation of whose heart and character is the inmost and the loftiest meaning of both His words and His works.

I take these three points of peculiarity to which I have referred: the privacy, the strange and abundant use of means veiling the miraculous power, and the gradual, slow nature of the cure. I see in them these three things: Christ isolating the man that He would heal; Christ stooping to the sense-bound nature by using outward means; and Christ making His power work slowly, to keep abreast of the man's slow faith.

I. First, then, here we have Christ isolating the man whom He wanted to heal.

Now, there may have been something about our Lord's circumstances and purposes at the time of this miracle which accounted for the great urgency with which at this period He impressed secrecy upon all around Him. What that was it is not necessary for us to inquire here, but this is worth noticing, that in obedience to this wish, on His own part, for privacy at the time, He covers over with a veil His miraculous working, and does it quietly, as one might almost say, in a corner. He never sought to display His miraculous working; here He absolutely tries to hide it. That fact of Christ's taking pains to conceal His miracle carries in it two great truths-first, about the purpose and nature of miracles in general, and second, about His character-as to each of which a few words may be said.

This fact, of a miracle done in intended secrecy, and shrouded in deep darkness, suggests to us the true point of view from which to look at the whole subject of miracles.

People say they were meant to be attestations of His divine mission. Yes, no doubt that is true partially; but that was never the sole nor even the main purpose for which they were wrought; and when any one asked Jesus Christ to work a miracle for that purpose only, He rebuked the desire and refused to gratify it. He wrought His miracles, not coldly, in order to witness to His mission, but every one of them was the token, because it was the outcome, of His own sympathetic heart brought into contact with human need. And instead of the miracles of Jesus Christ being cold, logical proofs of His mission, they were all glowing with the earnestness of a loving sympathy, and came from Him at sight of sorrow as naturally as rays beam out from the sun.

Then, on the other hand, the same fact carries with it, too, a lesson about His character. Is not He here doing what He tells us to do; ‘Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth’? He dares not wrap His talent in a napkin, He would be unfaithful to His mission if He hid His light under a bushel. All goodness ‘does good by stealth,’ even if it does not ‘blush to find it fame’-and that universal mark of true benevolence marked His. He had to solve in His human life what we have to solve, the problem of keeping the narrow path between ostentation of powers and selfish concealment of faculty; and He solved it thus, ‘leaving us an example that we should follow in His steps.’

But that is somewhat aside from the main purpose to which I intended to turn in these first remarks. Christ did not invest the miracle with any of its peculiarities for His own sake only. All that is singular about it, will, I think, find its best explanation in the condition and character of the subject, the man on whom it was wrought. What sort of a man was he? Well, the narrative does not tell us much, but if we use our historical imagination and our eyes we may learn something about him. First he was a Gentile; the land in which the miracle was wrought was the half-heathen country on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. In the second place, it was other people that brought him; he did not come of his own accord. Then again, it is their prayer that is mentioned, not his-he asked nothing.

You see him standing there hopeless, listless; not believing that this Jewish stranger is going to do anything for him; with his impassive blind face glowing with no entreaty to reinforce his companions' prayers. And suppose he was a man of that sort, with no expectation of anything from this Rabbi, how was Christ to get at him? It is of no use to speak to him. His eyes are shut, so cannot see the sympathy beaming in His face. There is one thing possible-to lay hold of Him by the hand; and the touch, gentle, loving, firm, says this at least: 'Here is a man that has some interest in me, and whether He can do anything or not for me, He is going to try something.' Would not that kindle an expectation in him? And is it not in parable just exactly what Jesus Christ does for the whole world? Is not that act of His by which He put out His hand and seized the unbelieving limp hand of the blind man that hung by his side, the very same in principle as that by which He 'taketh hold of the seed of Abraham,' and is made like to His brethren? Are not the mystery of the Incarnation and the meaning of it wrapped up as in a germ in that little simple incident, 'He put out His hand and touched him'?

Is there not in it, too, a lesson for all you good-hearted Christian men and women, in all your work? If you want to do anything for your afflicted brethren, there is only one way to do it-to come down to their level and get hold of their hands, and then there is some chance of doing them good. We must be content to take the hands of beggars if we are to make the blind to see.

And then, having thus drawn near to the man, and established in his heart some dim expectation of something coming, He gently led him away out of the little village. I wonder no painter has ever painted that, instead of repeating *ad nauseam* two or three scenes out of the Gospels. I wonder none of them has ever seen what a parable it is-the Christ leading the blind man out into solitude before He can say to him, 'Behold!' How, as they went, step by step, the poor blind eyes not telling the man where they were going, or how far away he was being taken from his friends, his conscious dependence upon this stranger would grow! How he would feel more and more at each step, 'I am at His mercy; what is He going to do with me?' And how thus there would be kindled in his heart some beginnings of an expectation, as well as some surrendering of himself to Christ's guidance! These two things, the expectation and the surrender, have in them, at all events, some faint beginnings and rude germs of the highest faith, to lead up to which is the purpose of all that Christ here does.

And is not that what He does for us all? Sometimes by sorrows, sometimes by sick-beds, sometimes by shutting us out from chosen spheres of activity, sometimes by striking down the dear ones at our sides, and leaving us lonely in the desert-is He not saying to us in a thousand ways, ‘Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place’? As Israel was led into the wilderness that God might ‘speak to her heart,’ so often Christ draws us aside, if not by outward providences such as these, yet by awaking in us the solemn sense of personal responsibility and making us feel our solitude, that He may lead us to feel His all-sufficient companionship.

Ah! brethren, here is a lesson from all this-if you wish Jesus Christ to give you His highest gifts and to reveal to you His fairest beauty, you must be alone with Him. He loves to deal with single souls. Our lives, many of them, can never be outwardly alone. We are jammed up against one another in such a fashion, and the hurry and pressure of city life is so great with us all, that it is often impossible for us to secure outward secrecy and solitude. But a man maybe alone in a crowd; the heart may be gathered up into itself, and there may be a still atmosphere round about us in the shop and in the market and amongst the busy ways of men, in which we and Christ shall be alone together. Unless there be, I do not think any of us will see the King in His beauty or the far-off land. ‘I was left alone, and I saw this great vision,’ is the law for all true beholding.

So, dear brethren, try to feel how awful this earthly life of ours is in its necessary solitude; that each of us by himself must shape out his own destiny, and make his own character; that every unit of the swarms upon our streets is a unit that has to face the solemn facts of life for and by itself; that alone we live, that alone we shall die; that alone we shall have to give account of ourselves before God, and in the solitude let the hand of your heart feel for His hand that is stretched out to grasp yours, and listen to Him saying, ‘Lo! I am with you always, even to the end of the world.’ There was no dreariness in the solitude when it was *Christ* that ‘took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the city.’

II. We have Christ stooping to a sense-bound nature by the use of material helps.

No doubt there was something in the man, as I have said, which made it advisable that these methods should be adopted. If he were the sort of person that I have described, slow of faith, not much caring about the possibility of cure, and not having much hope that any cure would come to pass-then we can see the fitness of the means adopted: the hand laid upon the eyes, the finger, possibly moistened with saliva, touching the ball, the pausing to question, the repeated application. These make a ladder by which his hope and confidence might climb to the apprehension of the blessing. And that points to a general principle of the divine dealings. God stoops to a feeble faith, and gives to it outward things by which it may rise to an apprehension of spiritual realities.

Is not that the meaning of the whole complicated system of Old Testament revelation? Is not that the meaning of the altars, and priests, and sacrifices, and the old cumbrous apparatus of the Mosaic law? Was it not all a picture-book in which the infant eyes of the race might see in a material form deep spiritual realities? Was not that the meaning and explanation of our Lord’s parabolic teaching? He veils spiritual truth in common things that He may reveal it by common things-taking fishermen’s boats, their nets, a sower’s basket, a baker’s dough, and many another homely article, and finding in them the emblems of the loftiest truth.

Is not that the meaning of His own Incarnation? It is of no use to talk to men about God-let them see Him; no use to preach about principles-give them the facts of His life. Revelation does not consist in the setting forth of certain propositions about God, but in the exhibition of the acts of God in a human life.

‘And so the Word had breath, and wrought
With human hands the creed of creeds.’

And still further, may we not say that this is the inmost meaning and purpose of the whole frame of the material universe? It exists in order that, as a parable and a symbol, it may proclaim the things that are unseen and eternal. Its depths and heights, its splendours and its energies are all in order that through them spirits may climb to the apprehension of the 'King, eternal, immortal, invisible,' and the realities of His spiritual kingdom.

So in regard to all the externals of Christianity, forms of worship, ordinances, and so on-all these, in like manner, are provided in condescension to our weakness, in order that by them we may be lifted above themselves; for the purpose of the Temple is to prepare for the time and the place where the seer 'saw no temple therein.' They are but the cups that carry the wine, the flowers whose chalices bear the honey, the ladders by which the soul may climb to God Himself, the rafts upon which the precious treasure may be floated into our hearts.

If Christ's touch and Christ's saliva healed, it was not because of anything in them; but because He willed it so; and He Himself is the source of all the healing energy. Therefore, let us keep these externals in their proper place of subordination, and remember that in Him, not in them, lies the healing power; and that even Christ's touch may become the object of superstitious regard, as it was when that poor woman came through the crowd to lay her finger on the hem of His garment, thinking that she could bear away a surreptitious blessing without the conscious outgoing of His power. He healed her because there was a spark of faith in her superstition, but she had to I earn that it was not the hem of the garment but the loving will of Christ that cured, in order that the dross of superstitious reliance on the outward vehicle might be melted away, and the pure gold of faith in His love and power might remain.

III. Lastly, we have Christ accommodating the pace of His power to the slowness of the man's faith.

The whole story, as I have said, is unique, and especially this part of it-'He put His hands upon him, and asked him if he saw aught.' One might have expected an answer with a little more gratitude in it, with a little more wonder in it, with a little more emotion in it. Instead of these it is almost surly, or at any rate strangely reticent-a matter-of-fact answer to the question, and there an end. As our Revised Version reads it better: 'I see men, for I behold them as trees walking.' Curiously accurate! A dim glimmer had come into the eye, but there is not yet distinctness of outline nor sense of magnitude, which must be acquired by practice. The eye has not yet been educated, and it was only because these blurred figures were in motion that he knew they were not trees. ‘After that He put His hands upon his eyes and made him look up,’ or, as the Revised Version has it with a better reading, ‘and he looked steadfastly,’ with an eager straining of the new faculty to make sure that he had got it, and to test its limits and its perfection. ‘And he was restored and saw all things clearly.’

Now I take it that the worthiest view of that strangely protracted process, broken up into two halves by the question that is dropped into the middle, is this, that it was determined by the man’s faith, and was meant to increase it. He was healed slowly because he believed slowly. His faith was a condition of his cure, and the measure of it determined the measure of the restoration; and the rate of the growth of his faith settled the rate of the perfecting of Christ’s work on him. As a rule, faith in His power to heal was a condition of Christ’s healing, and that mainly because our Lord would rather make men believing than sound of body. They often wanted only the outward miracle, but He wanted to make it the means of insinuating a better healing into their spirits. And so, not that there was any necessary connection between their faith and the exercise of His miraculous power, but in order that He might bless them with His best gifts, He usually worked on the principle ‘According to your faith be it unto you.’ And here, as a nurse or a mother with her child might do, He keeps step with the little steps, and goes slowly because the man goes slowly.

Now, both the gradual process of illumination and the rate of that process as determined by faith, are true for us. How dim and partial a glimmer of light comes to many a soul at the outset of the Christian life! How little a new convert knows about God and self and the starry truths of His great revelation! Christian progress does not consist in seeing new things, but in seeing the old things more clearly: the same Christ, the same Cross, only more distinctly and deeply apprehended, and more closely incorporated into my very being. We do not grow away from Him, but we grow into knowledge of Him. The first lesson that we get is the last lesson that we shall learn, and He is the ‘Alpha’ at the beginning, and the ‘Omega’ at the end of that alphabet, the letters of which make up our knowledge for earth and heaven.

But then let me remind you that just in the measure in which you expect blessing of any kind, illumination and purifying and help of all sorts from Jesus Christ, just in that measure will you get it. You can limit the working of Almighty power, and can determine the rate at which it shall work on you. God fills the water-pots 'to the brim,' but not beyond the brim; and if, like the woman in the Old Testament story, we stop bringing vessels, the oil will stop flowing. It is an awful thing to think that we have the power, as it were, to turn a stopcock, and so increase or diminish, or cut off altogether, the supply of God's mercy and Christ's healing and cleansing love in our hearts. You will get as much of God as you want and no more. The measure of your desire is the measure of your capacity, and the measure of your capacity is the measure of God's gift. 'Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it!' And if your faith is heavily shod and steps slowly, His power and His grace will step slowly along with it, keeping rank and step. 'According to your faith shall it be unto you.'

Ah! dear friends, 'Ye are not straitened in Me, ye are straitened in yourselves.' Desire Him to help and bless you, and He will do it. Expect Him to do it, and He will do it. Go to Him like the other blind man and say to Him-'Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me, that I may receive my sight,' and He will lay His hand upon you, and at any rate a glimmer will come, which will grow in the measure of your humble, confident desire, until at last He takes you by the hand and leads you out of this poor little village of a world and lays His finger for a brief moment of blindness upon your eyes and asks you if you see aught. Then you will look up, and the first face that you will behold will be His, whom you saw 'as through a glass darkly' with your dim eyes in this twilight world.

May that be your experience and mine, through His mercy!

48)Mark 8:27-38

Mark

CHRIST'S CROSS, AND OURS

Mar. 8:27 - Mar. 9:1.

Our Lord led His disciples away from familiar ground into the comparative seclusion of the country round Caesarea Philippi, in order to tell them plainly of His death. He knew how terrible the announcement would be, and He desired to make it in some quiet spot, where there would be collectedness and leisure to let it sink into their minds. His consummate wisdom and perfect tenderness are equally and beautifully shown in His manner of disclosing the truth which would try their faithfulness and fortitude. From the beginning He had given hints, gradually increasing in clearness; and now the time had come for full disclosure. What a journey that was! He, with the heavy secret filling His thoughts; they, dimly aware of something absorbing Him, in which they had no part. And at last, 'in the way,' as if moved by some sudden impulse-like that which we all know, leading us to speak out abruptly what we have long waited to say-He gives them a share in the burden of His thought. But, even then, note how He leads up to it by degrees. This passage has the announcement of the Cross as its centre, prepared for, on the one hand, by a question, and followed, on the other, by a warning that His followers must travel the same road.

I. Note the preparation for the announcement of the Cross [Mar. 8:27 - Mar. 8:30].

Why did Christ begin by asking about the popular judgment of His personality? Apparently in order to bring clearly home to the disciples that, as far as the masses were concerned, His work and theirs had failed, and had, for net result, total misconception. Who that had the faintest glimmer of what He was could suppose that the stern, fiery spirits of Elijah or John had come to life again in Him? The second question, 'But whom say ye that I am?' with its sharp transition, is meant to force home the conviction of the gulf between His disciples and the whole nation. He would have them feel their isolation, and face the fact that they stood alone in their faith; and He would test them whether, knowing that they did stand alone, they had courage and tenacity to re-assert it. The unpopularity of a belief drives away cowards, and draws the brave and true. If none else believed in Him, that was an additional reason for loving hearts to cleave to Him; and those only truly know and love Him who are ready to stand by Him, if they stand alone- *Athanasius contra mundum*. Mark, too, that this is the all-important question for every man. Our own individual ‘thought’ of Him determines our whole worth and fate.

Mark gives Peter’s confession in a lower key, as it were, than Matthew does, omitting the full-toned clause, ‘The Son of the living God.’ This is not because Mark has a lower conception than his brother Evangelist, for the first words of this Gospel announce that it is ‘the Gospel of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God.’ And, as he has identified the two conceptions at the outset, he must, in all fairness, be supposed to consider that the one implies the other, and to include both here. But possibly there is truth in the observation that the omission is one of a number of instances in which this Gospel passes lightly over the exalted side of Christ’s nature, in accordance with its purpose of setting Him forth rather as the Servant than as the Lord. It is not meant that that exalted side was absent from Mark’s thoughts, but that his design led him rather to emphasise the other. Matthew’s is the Gospel of the King; Mark’s, of the Worker.

The omission of Christ’s eulogium on Peter has often been pointed out as an interesting corroboration of the tradition that he was Mark’s source; and perhaps the failure to record the praise, and the carefulness to tell the subsequent rebuke, reveal the humble-hearted ‘elder’ into whom the self-confident young Apostle had grown. Flesh delights to recall praise; faith and self-knowledge find more profit in remembering errors forgiven and rebukes deserved, and in their severity, most loving. How did these questions and their answers serve as introduction to the announcement of the Cross? In several ways. They brought clearly before the disciples the hard fact of Christ’s rejection by the popular voice, and defined their own position as sharply antagonistic. If His claims were thus unanimously tossed aside, a collision must come. A rejected Messiah could not fail to be, sooner or later, a slain Messiah. Then clear, firm faith in His Messiahship was needed to enable them to stand the ordeal to which the announcement, and, still more, its fulfilment, would subject them. A suffering Messiah might be a rude shock to all their dreams; but a suffering Jesus, who was not Messiah, would have been the end of their discipleship. Again, the significance and worth of the Cross could only be understood when seen in the light of that great confession. Even as now, we must believe that He who died was the Son of the living God before we can see what that Death was and did. An imperfect conception of who Jesus is takes the meaning and the power out of all His life, but, most of all, impoverishes the infinite preciousness of His Death.

The charge of silence contrasts singularly with the former employment of the Apostles as heralds of Jesus. The silence was partly punitive and partly prudential. It was punitive, inasmuch as the people had already had abundantly the proclamation of His gospel, and had cast it away. It was in accordance with the solemn law of God's retributive justice that offers rejected should be withdrawn; and from them that had not, even that which they had should be taken away. Christ never bids His servants be silent until men have refused to hear their speech. The silence enjoined was also prudential, in order to avoid hastening on the inevitable collision; not because Christ desired escape, but because He would first fulfil His day.

II. We have here the announcement of the Cross [Mar. 8:31 - Mar. 8:33].

There had been many hints before this; for Christ saw the end from the beginning, however far back in the depths of time or eternity we place that beginning. We do not sufficiently realise that His Death was before Him, all through His days, as the great purpose for which He had come. If the anticipation of sorrow is the multiplication of sorrow, even when there is hope of escaping it, how much must His have been multiplied, and bitterness been diffused through all His life, by that foresight, so clear and constant, of the certain end! How much more gracious and wonderful His quick sympathy, His patient self forgetfulness, His unwearied toil, show against that dark background! Mark here the solemn necessity. Why 'must' He suffer? Not because of the enmity of the three sets of rejecters. He recognises no necessity which is imposed by hostile human power. The cords which bind this sacrifice to the horns of the altar were not spun by men's hands. The great 'must' which ruled His life was a cable of two strands- obedience to the Father, and love to men. These haled Him to the Cross, and fastened Him there. He would save; therefore He 'must' die. The same 'must' stretches beyond death. Resurrection is a part of His whole work; and, without it, His Death has no power, but falls into the undistinguished mass of human mortality. Bewildered as the disciples were, that assurance of resurrection had little present force, but even then would faintly hint at some comfort and blessed mystery. What was to them a nebulous hope is to us a sun of certitude and cheer, ‘Christ that died’ is no gospel until you go on to say, ‘Yea, rather, that is risen again.’

Peter’s rash ‘rebuke,’ like most of his appearances in the Gospel, is strangely compounded of warm-hearted, impulsive love and presumptuous self-confidence. No doubt, the praise which he had just received had turned his head, not very steady in these early days at its best, and the dignity which had been promised him would seem to him to be sadly overclouded by the prospect opened in Christ’s forecast. But he was not thinking of himself; and when he said, ‘This shall not be unto Thee,’ probably he meant to suggest that they would all draw the sword to defend their Master. Mark’s use of the word ‘rebuke,’ which is also Matthew’s, seems to imply that he found fault with Christ. For what? Probably for not trusting to His followers’ arms, or for letting Himself become a victim to the ‘must,’ which Peter thought of as depending only on the power of the ecclesiastics in Jerusalem. He blames Christ for not hoisting the flag of a revolt.

This blind love was the nearest approach to sympathy which Christ received; and it was repugnant to Him, so as to draw the sharpest words from Him that He ever spoke to a loving heart. In his eagerness, Peter had taken Jesus on one side to whisper his suggestion; but Christ will have all hear His rejection of the counsel. Therefore He ‘turned about,’ facing the rest of the group, and by the act putting Peter behind Him, and spoke aloud the stern words. Not thus was He wont to repel ignorant love, nor to tell out faults in public; but the act witnessed to the recoil of His fixed spirit from the temptation which addressed His natural human shrinking from death, as well as to His desire that once for all, every dream of resistance by force should be shattered. He hears in Peter’s voice the tone of that other voice, which, in the wilderness, had suggested the same temptation to escape the Cross and win the crown by worshipping the Devil; and he puts the meaning of His instinctive gesture into the same words in which he had rejected that earlier seducing suggestion. Jesus was a man, and ‘the things that be of men’ found a response in His sinless nature. It shrank from pain and the Cross with innocent and inevitable shrinking. Does not the very severity of the rebuke testify to its having set some chords vibrating in His soul? Note that it may be the work of ‘Satan’ to appeal to ‘the things that be of men,’ however innocent, if by so doing obedience to God’s will is hindered. Note, too, that a Simon may be ‘Peter’ at one moment, and ‘Satan’ at the next.

III. We have here the announcement of the Cross as the law for the disciples too [Mar. 8:34 - Mar. 8:38].

Christ’s followers must follow, but men can choose whether they will be His followers or not. So the ‘must’ is changed into ‘let him,’ and the ‘if any man will’ is put in the forefront. The conditions are fixed, but the choice as to accepting the position is free. A wider circle hears the terms of discipleship than heard the announcement of Christ’s own sufferings. The terms are for all and for us. The law is stated in Mar. 8:34, and then a series of reasons for it, and motives for accepting it, follow.

The law for every disciple is self-denial and taking up his cross. How present His own Cross must have been to Christ’s vision, since the thought is introduced here, though He had not spoken of it, in foretelling His own death! It is not Christ’s Cross that we have to take up. His sufferings stand alone, incapable of repetition and needing none; but each follower has his own. To slay the life of self is always pain, and there is no discipleship without crucifying ‘the old man.’ Taking up my cross does not merely mean meekly accepting God-sent or men-inflicted sorrows, but persistently carrying on the special form of self-denial which my special type of character requires. It will include these other meanings, but it goes deeper than they. Such self-immolation is the same thing as following Christ; for, with all the infinite difference between His Cross and ours, they are both crosses, and on the one hand there is no real discipleship without self-denial, and on the other there is no full self-denial without discipleship.

The first of the reasons for the law, in Mar. 8:35, is a paradox, and a truth with two sides. To wish to save life is to lose it; to lose it for Christ’s sake is to save it. Both are true, even without taking the future into account. The life of self is death; the death of the lower self is the life of the true self. The man who lives absorbed in the miserable care for his own well-being is dead to all which makes life noble, sweet, and real. Flagrant vice is not needed to kill the real life. Clean, respectable selfishness does the work effectually. The deadly gas is invisible, and has no smell. But while all selfishness is fatal, it is self-surrender and sacrifice, ‘for My sake and the gospel’s,’ which is life-giving. Heroism, generous self-devotion without love to Christ, is noble, but falls short of discipleship, and may even aggravate the sin of the man who exhibits it, because it shows what treasures he could lay at Christ’s feet, if he would. It is only self-denial made sweet by reference to Him that leads to life. Who is this who thus demands that He should be the motive for which men shall ‘hate’ their own lives, and calmly assumes power to reward such sacrifice with a better life? The paradox is true, if we include a reference to the future, which is usually taken to be its only meaning; but on that familiar thought we need not enlarge.

The ‘for’ of Mar. 8:36 seems to refer back to the law in Mar. 8:34, and the verse enforces the command by an appeal to self-interest, which, in the highest sense of the word, dictates self-sacrifice. The men who live for self are dead, as Christ has been saying. Suppose their self-living had been ‘successful’ to the highest point, what would be the good of all the world to a dead man? ‘Shrouds have no pockets.’ He makes a poor bargain who sells his soul for the world. A man gets rich, and in the process drops generous impulses, affections, interest in noble things, perhaps principle and religion. He has shrivelled and hardened into a mere fragment of himself; and so, when success comes, he cannot much enjoy it, and was happier, poor and sympathetic and enthusiastic and generous, than he is now, rich and dwindled. He who loses himself in gaining the world does not win it, but is mastered by it. This motive, too, like the preceding, has a double application-to the facts of life here, when they are seen in their deepest reality, and to the solemn future.

To that future our Lord passes, as His last reason for the command and motive for obeying it, in Mar. 8:38. One great hindrance to out-and-out discipleship is fear of what the world will say. Hence come compromises and weak compliance on the part of disciples too timid to stand alone, or too sensitive to face a sarcasm and a smile. A wholesome contempt for the world’s cackle is needed for following Christ. The geese on the common hiss at the passer-by who goes steadily through the flock. How grave and awful is that irony, if we may call it so, which casts the retribution in the mould of the sin! The judge shall be ‘ashamed’ of such unworthy disciples-shall blush to own such as His. May we venture to put stress on the fact that He does not say that He will reject them? They who were ashamed of Him were secret and imperfect disciples. Perhaps, though He be ashamed of them, though they have brought Him no credit, He will not wholly turn from them.

How marvellous the transition from the prediction of the Cross to this of the Throne! The Son of Man must suffer many things, and the same Son of Man shall come, attended by hosts of spirits who own Him for their King, and surrounded by the uncreated blaze of the glory of God in which He sits throned as His native abode. We do not know Jesus unless we know Him as the crucified Sacrifice for the world’s sins, and as the exalted Judge of the world’s deeds.

He adds a weighty word of enigmatical meaning, lest any should think that He was speaking only of some far-off judgment. The destruction of Jerusalem seems to be the event intended, which was, in fact, the beginning of retribution for Israel, and the starting-point of a more conspicuous manifestation of the kingdom of God. It was, therefore, a kind of rehearsal, or picture in little, of that coming and ultimate great day of the Lord, and was meant to be a ‘sign’ that it should surely come.

49)Mark 9:2-6

Mark

THE TRANSFIGURATION

Mar. 9:2 - Mar. 9:13.

All three Evangelists are careful to date the Transfiguration by a reference to the solemn new teaching at Caesarea, and Mark’s ‘six days’ plainly cover the same time as Luke’s ‘eight’-the former reckoning excluding in the count, and the latter including, the days on which the two incidents occurred. If we would understand the Transfiguration, then, we must look at it as the sequel to Jesus’ open announcement of His death. His seeking the seclusion of the hills, attended only by the innermost group of the faithful three, is a touching token of the strain to which that week had subjected Him. How Peter's heart must have filled with thankfulness that, notwithstanding the stern rebuke, he was taken with the other two! There were three stages in the complex incident which we call the Transfiguration-the change in Jesus' appearance, the colloquy with Moses and Elijah, and the voice from the cloud.

Luke, who has frequent references to Jesus' prayers, tells us that the change in our Lord's countenance and raiment took place 'as He prayed'; and probably we are reverently following his lead if we think of Jesus' prayer as, in some sense, the occasion of the glorious change. So far as we know, this was the only time when mortal eyes saw Him absorbed in communion with the Father. It was only 'when He ceased praying' in a certain place that 'they came to Him' asking to be taught to pray [Luk. 11:1]; and in Gethsemane the disciples slept while He prayed beneath the olives quivering in the moonlight. It may be that what the three then saw did not occur then only. 'In such an hour of high communion with' His Father the elevated spirit may have more than ordinarily illuminated the pure body, and the pure body may have been more than ordinarily transparent. The brighter the light, fed by fragrant oil within an alabaster lamp, the more the alabaster will glow. Faint foreshadowings of the spirit's power to light up the face with unearthly beauty of holiness are not unknown among us. It may be that the glory which always shone in the depths of His perfectly holy manhood rose, as it were, to the surface for that one time, a witness of what He really was, a prophecy of what humanity may become.

Did Jesus will His transfiguration, or did it come about without His volition, or perhaps even without His consciousness? Did it continue during all the time on the mountain, or did it pass when the second stage of the incident began? We cannot tell. Matthew and Mark both say that Jesus was transfigured 'before' the three, as if the making visible of the glory had special regard to them. It may be that Jesus, like Moses, 'knew not that the skin of His face shone'; at all events, it was the second stage of the incident, the conversation with Elijah and Moses, that had a special message of strength for Him. The first and third stages were, apparently, intended for the three and for us all; and the first is a revelation, not only of the veiled glory that dwelt in Jesus, but of the beauty that may pass into a holy face, and of the possibilities of a bodily frame becoming a ‘spiritual body,’ the adequate organ and manifestation of a perfect spirit. Paul teaches the prophetic aspect of the Transfiguration when he says that Jesus ‘shall *change* the body of our humiliation that it may be fashioned like unto the body of His glory.’

Luke adds two very significant points to the accounts by Matthew and Mark-namely, the disciples’ sleep, and the subject on which Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus. Mark lays the main stress on the fact that the two great persons of the old economy, its founder and its restorer, the legislator and the chief of the prophets, came from the dim region to which one of them had passed in a chariot of fire, and stood by the transfigured Christ, as if witnessing to Him as the greater, to whom their ministries were subordinate, and in whom their teachings centred. Jesus is the goal of all previous revelation, mightier than the mightiest who are honoured by being His attendants. He is the Lord both of the dead and of the living, and the ‘spirits of just men made perfect’ bow before Him, and reverently watch His work on earth.

So much did that appearance proclaim to the mortal three, but their slumber showed that they were not principally concerned, and that the other three had things to speak which they were not fit to hear. The theme was the same which had been, a week before, spoken to them, and had doubtless been the subject of all Jesus’ teachings for these ‘six days.’ No doubt, their horror at the thought, and His necessary insistence on it, had brought Him to need strengthening. And these two came, as did the angel in Gethsemane, and, like him, in answer to Christ’s prayer, to bring the sought-for strength. How different it would be to speak to them ‘of the decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem,’ from speaking to the reluctant, protesting Twelve! And how different to listen to them speaking of that miracle of divine love expressed in human death from the point of view of the ‘principalities and powers in heavenly places,’ as over against the remonstrances and misunderstandings with which He had been struggling for a whole week! The appearance of Moses and Elijah teaches us the relation of Jesus to all former revelation, the interest of the dwellers in heavenly light in the Cross, and the need which Jesus felt for strengthening to endure it.

Peter’s foolish words, half excused by his being scarcely awake, may be passed by with the one remark that it was like him to say something, though he did not know what to say, and that it would therefore have been wise to say nothing.

The third part of this incident, the appearance of the cloud and the voice from it, was for the disciples. Luke tells us that it was a ‘bright’ cloud, and yet it ‘overshadowed them.’ That sets us on the right track and indicates that we are to think of the cloud of glory, which was the visible token of the divine presence, the cloud which shone lambent between the cherubim, the cloud which at last ‘received Him out of their sight.’ Luke tells, too, that ‘they entered into it.’ Who entered? Moses and Elijah had previously ‘departed from Him.’ Jesus and the disciples remained, and we cannot suppose that the three could have passed into that solemn glory, if He had not led them in. In that sacred moment He was ‘the way,’ and keeping close to Him, mortal feet could pass into the glory which even a Moses had not been fit to behold. The spiritual significance of the incident seems to require the supposition that, led by Jesus, they entered the cloud. They were men, therefore they were afraid; Jesus was with them, therefore they stood within the circle of that light and lived.

The voice repeated the attestation of Jesus as the ‘beloved Son’ of the Father, which had been given at the baptism, but with the addition, ‘Hear Him,’ which shows that it was now meant for the disciples, not, as at the baptism, for Jesus Himself. While the command to listen to His voice as to the voice from the cloud is perfectly general, and lays all His words on us as all God’s words, it had special reference to the disciples, and that in regard to the new teaching which had so disturbed them-the teaching of the necessity for His death. ‘The offence of the Cross’ began with the first clear statement of it, and in the hearts that loved Him best and came most near to understanding Him. To fail in accepting His teaching that it ‘behoved the Son of Man to suffer,’ is to fail in accepting it in the most important matter. There are sounds in nature too low-pitched to be audible to untrained ears, and the message of the Cross is unheard unless the ears of the deaf are unstopped. If we do not hear Jesus when He speaks of His passion, we may almost as well not hear Him at all.

Moses and Elijah had vanished, having borne their last testimony to Jesus. Peter had wished to keep them beside Jesus, but that could not be. Their highest glory was to fade in His light. They came, they disappeared; He remained-and remains. ‘They saw no man any more, save Jesus only with themselves.’ So should it be for us in life. So may it be with us in death! ‘Hear Him,’ for all other voices are but for a time, and die into silence, but Jesus speaks for eternity, and ‘His words shall not pass away.’ When time is ended, and the world’s history is all gathered up into its final issue, His name shall stand out alone as Author and End of all.

50)Mark 9:7

Mark

THE TRANSFIGURATION

‘THIS IS MY BELOVED SON: HEAR HIM’

Mar. 9:7.

With regard to the first part of these words spoken at the Transfiguration, they open far too large and wonderful a subject for me to do more than just touch with the tip of my finger, as it were, in passing, because the utterance of the divine words, ‘This is My beloved Son,’ in all the depth of their meaning and loftiness, is laid as the foundation of the two words that come after, which, for us, are the all-important things here. And so I would rather dwell upon them than upon the mysteries of the first part, but a sentence must be spared. If we accept this story before us as the divine attestation of the mystery of the person and nature of Jesus Christ, we must take the words to mean-as these disciples, no doubt, took them to mean-something pointing to a unique and solitary revelation which He bore to the Divine Majesty. We have to see in them the confirmation of the great truth that the manhood of Jesus Christ was the supernatural creation of a direct divine power. ‘Conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary’; therefore, ‘that Holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.’ And we have to go, as I take it, farther back than the earthly birth, and to say, ‘No man hath seen God at any time-the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father.' He was the Son here by human birth, and was in the bosom of the Father all through that human life. 'He hath declared Him,' and so not only is there here the testimony to the miraculous incarnation, and to the true and proper Divinity and Deity of Jesus Christ, but there is also the witness to the perfectness of His character in the great word, 'This is My beloved Son,' which points us to an unbroken communion of love between Him and the Father, which tells us that in the depths of that divine nature there has been a constant play of mutual love, which reveals to us that in His humanity there never was anything that came as the faintest film of separation between His will and the will of the Father, between His heart and the heart of God.

But this revelation of the mysterious personality of the divine Son, the perfect harmony between Him and God, is here given as the ground of the command that follows: 'Hear Him.' God's voice bids you listen to Christ's voice-God's voice bids you listen to Christ's voice as His voice. Listen to Him when He speaks to you about God-do not trust your own fancy, do not trust your own fear, do not trust the dictates of your conscience, do not consult man, do not listen to others, do not speculate about the mysteries of the earth and the heavens, but go to Him, and listen to the only begotten Son in the bosom of the Father. He declares unto us God; in Him alone we have certain knowledge of a loving Father in heaven. Hear Him when He tells us of God's tenderness and patience and love. Hear Him above all when He says to us, 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.' Hear Him when He says, 'The Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for many.' Hear Him when He speaks of Himself as Judge of you and me and all the world, and when He says, 'The Son of Man shall come in His glory, and before Him shall be gathered all nations.' Hear Him then. Hear Him when He calls you to Himself. Hear Him when He says to you, 'Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden.' Hear Him when He says, 'If any man come unto Me he shall never thirst.' Hear Him when He says, 'Cast your burden upon Me, and I will sustain you.' Hear Him when He commands. Hear Him when He says, 'If ye love Me keep My commandments,' and when He says, 'Abide in Me and I in you,' hear Him then. 'In all time of our tribulation, in all time of our well-being, in the hour of death, and in the day of judgment,' let us listen to Him.

Dear friends there is no rest anywhere else; there is no peace, no pleasure, no satisfaction-except close at His side. ‘Speak Lord! for Thy servant heareth.’ ‘To whom shall we go but unto Thee? Thou hast the words of eternal life.’ Look how these disciples, grovelling there on their faces, were raised by the gentle hand laid upon their shoulder, and the blessed voice that brought them back to consciousness, and how, as they looked about them with dazed eyes, all was gone. The vision, the cloud, Moses and Elias-the lustre and radiance and the dread voice were past, and everything was as it used to be. Christ stood alone there like some solitary figure relieved against a clear daffodil sky upon some extended plain, and there was nothing else to meet the eye but He. Christ is there, and in Him is all.

That is a summing up of all Divine revelation. ‘God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath, in these last days, spoken unto us by His Son.’ Moses dies, Elijah fades, clouds and symbols and voices and all mortal things vanish, but Jesus Christ stands before us, the manifest God, for ever and ever, the sole illumination of the world, It is also a summing up of all earthly history. All other people go. The beach of time is strewed with wrecked reputations and forgotten glories. And I am not ashamed to say that I believe that, as the ages grow, and the world gets further away in time from the Cross upon Calvary, more and more everything else will sink beneath the horizon, and Christ alone be left to fill the past as He fills the present and the future.

We may make that scene the picture of our lives. Distractions and temptations that lie all round us are ever seeking to drag us away. There is no peace anywhere but in having Christ only-my only pattern, my only hope, my only salvation, my only guide, my only aim, my only friend. The solitary Christ is the sufficient Christ, and that for ever. Take Him for your only friend, and you need none other. Then at death there may be a brief spasm of darkness, a momentary fear, perchance, but then the touch of a Brother’s hand will be upon us as we lie there prone in the dust, and we shall lift up our eyes, and lo! life’s illusions are gone, and life’s noises are fallen dumb, and we ‘see no man any more, save Jesus only,’ with ourselves.

51)Mark 9:8

THE TRANSFIGURATION

JESUS ONLY!

Mar. 9:8.

The Transfiguration was the solemn inauguration of Jesus for His sufferings and death.

Moses, the founder, and Elijah, the restorer, of the Jewish polity, the great Lawgiver and the great Prophet, were present. The former had died and been mysteriously buried, the latter had been translated without ‘seeing death.’ So both are visitors from the unseen world, appearing to own that Jesus is the Lord of that dim land, and that there they draw their life from Him. The conversation is about Christ’s ‘decease,’ the wonderful event which was to constitute Him Lord of the living and of the dead. The divine voice of command, ‘Hear Him!’ gives the meaning of their disappearance. At that voice they depart and Jesus is left alone. The scene is typical of the ultimate issue of the world’s history. The King’s name only will at last be found inscribed on the pyramid. Typical, too, is it not, of a Christian’s blessed death? When the ‘cloud’ is past no man is seen any more but ‘Jesus only.’

I. The solitary Saviour.

The disciples are left alone with the divine Saviour.

1. He is alone in His nature. ‘Son of God.’

2. He is alone in the sinlessness of His manhood. ‘My Beloved Son!’

3. He is alone as God’s Voice to men. ‘Hear Him!’

The solitary Saviour, because sufficient. ‘Thou, O Christ, art all I want.’

Sufficient, too, for ever.

His life is eternal.

His love is eternal.

The power of His Cross Is eternal.

II. The vanishing witnesses.

1. The connection of the past with Christ. The authority of the two representatives of the Old Covenant was only [a] derived and subordinate; [b] prophetic; [c] transient.

2. The thought may be widened into that of the relation of all teachers and guides to Jesus Christ.

3. The two witness to the relation of the unseen world to Jesus Christ.

[a] Its inhabitants are undying.

[b] Are subject to the sway of Jesus.

[c] Are expectantly waiting a glorious future.

4. They witness to the central point of Christ's work-'His decease.' This great event is the key to the world's history.

III. The waiting disciples.

1. What Christian life should be. Giving Him our sole trust and allegiance.

[a] Seeing Him in all things.

[b] Constant communion. 'Abide in Me.'

[c] Using everything as helps to Him.

2. What Christian death may become.

52)Mark 9:9-13

THE TRANSFIGURATION

Mar. 9:2 - Mar. 9:13.

All three Evangelists are careful to date the Transfiguration by a reference to the solemn new teaching at Caesarea, and Mark's 'six days' plainly cover the same time as Luke's 'eight'-the former reckoning excluding in the count, and the latter including, the days on which the two incidents occurred. If we would understand the Transfiguration, then, we must look at it as the sequel to Jesus' open announcement of His death. His seeking the seclusion of the hills, attended only by the innermost group of the faithful three, is a touching token of the strain to which that week had subjected Him. How Peter's heart must have filled with thankfulness that, notwithstanding the stern rebuke, he was taken with the other two! There were three stages in the complex incident which we call the Transfiguration-the change in Jesus' appearance, the colloquy with Moses and Elijah, and the voice from the cloud.

Luke, who has frequent references to Jesus' prayers, tells us that the change in our Lord's countenance and raiment took place 'as He prayed'; and probably we are reverently following his lead if we think of Jesus' prayer as, in some sense, the occasion of the glorious change. So far as we know, this was the only time when mortal eyes saw Him absorbed in communion with the Father. It was only 'when He ceased praying' in a certain place that 'they came to Him' asking to be taught to pray [Luk. 11:1]; and in Gethsemane the disciples slept while He prayed beneath the olives quivering in the moonlight. It may be that what the three then saw did not occur then only. 'In such an hour of high communion with' His Father the elevated spirit may have more than ordinarily illuminated the pure body, and the pure body may have been more than ordinarily transparent. The brighter the light, fed by fragrant oil within an alabaster lamp, the more the alabaster will glow. Faint foreshadowings of the spirit's power to light up the face with unearthly beauty of holiness are not unknown among us. It may be that the glory which always shone in the depths of His perfectly holy manhood rose, as it were, to the surface for that one time, a witness of what He really was, a prophecy of what humanity may become.

Did Jesus will His transfiguration, or did it come about without His volition, or perhaps even without His consciousness? Did it continue during all the time on the mountain, or did it pass when the second stage of the incident began? We cannot tell. Matthew and Mark both say that Jesus was transfigured 'before' the three, as if the making visible of the glory had special regard to them. It may be that Jesus, like Moses, 'knew not that the skin of His face shone'; at all events, it was the second stage of the incident, the conversation with Elijah and Moses, that had a special message of strength for Him. The first and third stages were, apparently, intended for the three and for us all; and the first is a revelation, not only of the veiled glory that dwelt in Jesus, but of the beauty that may pass into a holy face, and of the possibilities of a bodily frame becoming a 'spiritual body,' the adequate organ and manifestation of a perfect spirit. Paul teaches the prophetic aspect of the Transfiguration when he says that Jesus 'shall *change* the body of our humiliation that it may be fashioned like unto the body of His glory.'

Luke adds two very significant points to the accounts by Matthew and Mark-namely, the disciples' sleep, and the subject on which Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus. Mark lays the main stress on the fact that the two great persons of the old economy, its founder and its restorer, the legislator and the chief of the prophets, came from the dim region to which one of them had passed in a chariot of fire, and stood by the transfigured Christ, as if witnessing to Him as the greater, to whom their ministries were subordinate, and in whom their teachings centred. Jesus is the goal of all previous revelation, mightier than the mightiest who are honoured by being His attendants. He is the Lord both of the dead and of the living, and the 'spirits of just men made perfect' bow before Him, and reverently watch His work on earth.

So much did that appearance proclaim to the mortal three, but their slumber showed that they were not principally concerned, and that the other three had things to speak which they were not fit to hear. The theme was the same which had been, a week before, spoken to them, and had doubtless been the subject of all Jesus' teachings for these 'six days.' No doubt, their horror at the thought, and His necessary insistence on it, had brought Him to need strengthening. And these two came, as did the angel in Gethsemane, and, like him, in answer to Christ's prayer, to bring the sought-for strength. How different it would be to speak to them 'of the decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem,' from speaking to the reluctant, protesting Twelve! And how different to listen to them speaking of that miracle of divine love expressed in human death from the point of view of the 'principalities and powers in heavenly places,' as over against the remonstrances and misunderstandings with which He had been struggling for a whole week! The appearance of Moses and Elijah teaches us the relation of Jesus to all former revelation, the interest of the dwellers in heavenly light in the Cross, and the need which Jesus felt for strengthening to endure it.

Peter's foolish words, half excused by his being scarcely awake, may be passed by with the one remark that it was like him to say something, though he did not know what to say, and that it would therefore have been wise to say nothing.

The third part of this incident, the appearance of the cloud and the voice from it, was for the disciples. Luke tells us that it was a 'bright' cloud, and yet it 'overshadowed them.' That sets us on the right track and indicates that we are to think of the cloud of glory, which was the visible token of the divine presence, the cloud which shone lambent between the cherubim, the cloud which at last 'received Him out of their sight.' Luke tells, too, that 'they entered into it.' Who entered? Moses and Elijah had previously 'departed from Him.' Jesus and the disciples remained, and we cannot suppose that the three could have passed into that solemn glory, if He had not led them in. In that sacred moment He was 'the way,' and keeping close to Him, mortal feet could pass into the glory which even a Moses had not been fit to behold. The spiritual significance of the incident seems to require the supposition that, led by Jesus, they entered the cloud. They were men, therefore they were afraid; Jesus was with them, therefore they stood within the circle of that light and lived.

The voice repeated the attestation of Jesus as the 'beloved Son' of the Father, which had been given at the baptism, but with the addition, 'Hear Him,' which shows that it was now meant for the disciples, not, as at the baptism, for Jesus Himself. While the command to listen to His voice as to the voice from the cloud is perfectly general, and lays all His words on us as all God’s words, it had special reference to the disciples, and that in regard to the new teaching which had so disturbed them-the teaching of the necessity for His death. ‘The offence of the Cross’ began with the first clear statement of it, and in the hearts that loved Him best and came most near to understanding Him. To fail in accepting His teaching that it ‘behoved the Son of Man to suffer,’ is to fail in accepting it in the most important matter. There are sounds in nature too low-pitched to be audible to untrained ears, and the message of the Cross is unheard unless the ears of the deaf are unstopped. If we do not hear Jesus when He speaks of His passion, we may almost as well not hear Him at all.

Moses and Elijah had vanished, having borne their last testimony to Jesus. Peter had wished to keep them beside Jesus, but that could not be. Their highest glory was to fade in His light. They came, they disappeared; He remained-and remains. ‘They saw no man any more, save Jesus only with themselves.’ So should it be for us in life. So may it be with us in death! ‘Hear Him,’ for all other voices are but for a time, and die into silence, but Jesus speaks for eternity, and ‘His words shall not pass away.’ When time is ended, and the world’s history is all gathered up into its final issue, His name shall stand out alone as Author and End of all.

53)Mark 9:19

Mark

CHRIST’S LAMENT OVER OUR FAITHLESSNESS

Mar. 9:19.

There is a very evident, and, I think, intentional contrast between the two scenes, of the Transfiguration, and of this healing of the maniac boy. And in nothing is the contrast more marked than in the demeanour of these enfeebled and unbelieving Apostles, as contrasted with the rapture of devotion of the other three, and with the lowly submission and faith of Moses and Elias. Perhaps, too, the difference between the calm serenity of the mountain, and the hell-tortured misery of the plain-between the converse with the sainted perfected dead, and the converse with their unworthy successors-made Christ feel more sharply and poignantly than He ordinarily did His disciples' slowness of apprehension and want of faith. At any rate, it does strike one as remarkable that the only occasion on which there came from His lips anything that sounded like impatience and a momentary flash of indignation was, when in sharpest contrast with 'This is my beloved Son: hear Him,' He had to come down from the mountain to meet the devil-possessed boy, the useless agony of the father, the sneering faces of the scribes, and the impotence of the disciples. Looking on all this, He turns to His followers-for it is to the Apostles that the text is spoken, and not to the crowd outside-with this most remarkable exclamation: 'O faithless generation! how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?'

Now, I said that these words at first sight looked almost like a momentary flash of indignation, as if for once a spot had come on His pallid cheek-a spot of anger-but I do not think that we shall find it so if we look a little more closely.

The first thing that seems to be in the words is not anger, indeed, but a very distinct and very pathetic expression of Christ's infinite pain, because of man's faithlessness. The element of personal sorrow is most obvious here. It is not only that He is sad for their sakes that they are so unreceptive, and He can do so little for them-I shall have something to say about that presently-but that He feels for Himself, just as we do in our poor humble measure, the chilling effect of an atmosphere where there is no sympathy. All that ever the teachers and guides and leaders of the world have in this respect had to bear-all the misery of opening out their hearts in the frosty air of unbelief and rejection-Christ endured. All that men have ever felt of how hard it is to keep on working when not a soul understands them, when not a single creature believes in them, when there is no one that will accept their message, none that will give them credit for pure motives-Jesus Christ had to feel, and that in an altogether singular degree. There never was such a lonely soul on this earth as His, just because there never was one so pure and loving. 'The little hills rejoice *together*? as the Psalm says, 'on every side,' but the great Alpine peak is alone there, away up amongst the cold and the snows. Thus lived the solitary Christ, the uncomprehended Christ, the unaccepted Christ. Let us see in this exclamation of His how humanly, and yet how divinely, He felt the loneliness to which His love and purity condemned Him.

The plain felt soul-chilling after the blessed communion of the mountain. There was such a difference between Moses and Elias and the voice that said, ‘This is My beloved Son: hear Him,’ and the disbelief and slowness of spiritual apprehension of the people down below there, that no wonder that for once the pain that He generally kept absolutely down and silent, broke the bounds even of His restraint, and shaped for itself this pathetic utterance: ‘How long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?’

Dear friends, here is ‘a little window through which we may see a great matter’ if we will only think of how all that solitude, and all that sorrow of uncomprehended aims, was borne lovingly and patiently, right away on to the very end, for every one of us. I know that there are many of the aspects of Christ’s life in which Christ’s griefs tell more on the popular apprehension; but I do not know that there is one in which the title of ‘The Man of Sorrows’ is to all deeper thinking more pathetically vindicated than in this-the solitude of the uncomprehended and the unaccepted Christ and His pain at His disciples’ faithlessness.

And then do not let us forget that in this short sharp cry of anguish-for it is that-there may be detected by the listening ear not only the tone of personal hurt, but the tone of disappointed and thwarted love. Because of their unbelief He knew that they could not receive what He desired to give them. We find Him more than once in His life, hemmed in, hindered, baulked of His purpose, thwarted, as I may say, in His design, simply because there was no one with a heart open to receive the rich treasure that He was ready to pour out. He had to keep it locked up in His own spirit, else it would have been wasted and spilled upon the ground. ‘He could do no mighty works there because of their unbelief’; and here He is standing in the midst of the men that knew Him best, that understood Him most, that were nearest to Him in sympathy; but even they were not ready for all this wealth of affection, all this infinitude of blessing, with which His heart is charged. They offered no place to put it. They shut up the narrow cranny through which it might have come, and so He has to turn from them, bearing it away unbestowed, like some man who goes out in the morning with his seed-basket full, and finds the whole field where he would fain have sown covered already with springing weeds or encumbered with hard rock, and has to bring back the germs of possible life to bless and fertilise some other soil. ‘He that goeth forth weeping, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with joy’; but He that comes back weeping, bearing the precious seed that He found no field to sow in, knows a deeper sadness, which has in it no prophecy of joy. It is wonderfully pathetic and beautiful, I think, to see how Jesus Christ knew the pains of wounded love that cannot get expressed because there is not heart to receive it.

Here I would remark, too, before I go to another point, that these two elements-that of personal sorrow and that of disappointed love and baulked purposes-continue still, and are represented as in some measure felt by Him now. It was to disciples that He said, ‘O faithless generation!’ He did not mean to charge them with the entire absence of all confidence, but He did mean to declare that their poor, feeble faith, such as it was, was not worth naming in comparison with the abounding mass of their unbelief. There was one spark of light in them, and there was also a great heap of green wood that had not caught the flame and only smoked instead of blazing. And so He said to them, ‘O *faithless* generation!’

Ay, and if He came down here amongst us now, and went through the professing Christians in this land, to how many of us-regard being had to the feebleness of our confidence and the strength of our unbelief-He would have to say the same thing, ‘O faithless generation!’

The version of that clause in Matthew and Luke adds a significant word,-’faithless and *perverse* generation.’ The addition carries a grave lesson, as teaching us that the two characteristics are inseparably united; that the want of faith is morally a crime and sin; that unbelief is at once the most tragic manifestation of man’s perverse will, and also in its turn the source of still more obstinate and wide-spreading evil. Blindness to His light and rejection of His love, He treats as the very head and crown of sin. Like intertwining snakes, the loathly heads are separate; but the slimy convolutions are twisted indistinguishably together, and all unbelief has in it the nature of perversity, as all perversity has in it the nature of unbelief. ‘He will convince the world of sin, because they believe not on Me.’

May we venture to say, as we have already hinted, that all this pain is in some mysterious way still inflicted on His loving heart? Can it be that every time we are guilty of unbelieving, unsympathetic rejection of His love, we send a pang of real pain and sorrow into the heart of Christ? It is a strange, solemn thought. There are many difficulties which start up, if we at all accept it. But still it does appear as if we could scarcely believe in His perpetual manhood, or think of His love as being in any real sense a human love, without believing that He sorrows when we sin; and that we can grieve, and wound, and cause to recoil upon itself, as it were, and close up that loving and gracious Spirit that delights in being met with answering love. If we may venture to take our love as in any measure analogous to His-and unless we do, His love is to us a word without meaning-we may believe that it is so. Do not we know that the purer our love, and the more it has purified us, the more sensitive it becomes, even while the less suspicious it becomes? Is not the purest, most unselfish, highest love, that by which the least failure in response is felt most painfully? Though there be no anger, and no change in the love, still there is a pang where there is an inadequate perception, or an unworthy reception, of it. And Scripture seems to countenance the belief that Divine Love, too, may know something, in some mysterious fashion, like that feeling, when it warns us, ‘Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.’ So *we* may venture to say, Grieve not the Christ of God, who redeems us; and remember that we grieve Him most when we will not let Him pour His love upon us, but turn a sullen, unresponsive unbelief towards His pleading grace, as some glacier shuts out the sunshine from the mountain-side with its thick-ribbed ice.

Another thought, which seems to me to be expressed in this wonderful exclamation of our Lord’s, is-that this faithlessness bound Christ to earth, and kept Him here. As there is not anger, but only pain, so there is also, I think, not exactly impatience, but a desire to depart, coupled with the feeling that He cannot leave them till they have grown stronger in faith. And that feeling is increased by the experience of their utter helplessness and shameful discomfiture during His brief absence They had shown that they were not fit to be trusted alone. He had been away for a day up in the mountain there, and though they did not build an altar to any golden calf, like their ancestors, when their leader was absent, still when He comes back

He finds things all gone wrong because of the few hours of His absence. What would they do if He were to go away from them altogether? They would never be able to stand it at all. It is impossible that He should leave them thus-raw, immature. The plant has not yet grown sufficiently strong to take away the prop round which it climbed. ‘How long must I be with you?’ says the loving Teacher, who is prepared ungrudgingly to give His slow scholars as much time as they need to learn their lesson. He is not impatient, but He desires to finish the task; and yet He is ready to let the scholars’ dulness determine the duration of His stay. Surely that is wondrous and heart-touching love, that Christ should let their slowness measure the time during which He should linger here, and refrain from the glory which He desired. We do not know all the reasons which determined the length of our Lord’s life upon earth, but this was one of them,-that He could not go away until He had left these men strong enough to stand by themselves, and to lay the foundations of the Church. Therefore He yielded to the plea of their very faithlessness and backwardness, and with this wonderful word of condescension and appeal bade them say for how many more days He must abide in the plain, and turn His back on the glories that had gleamed for a moment on the mountain of transfiguration.

In this connection, too, is it not striking to notice how long His short life and ministry appeared to our Lord Himself? There is to me something very pathetic in that question He addressed to one of His Apostles near the end of His pilgrimage: ‘Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me?’ It was not so very long-three years, perhaps, at the outside-and much less, if we take the shortest computation; and yet to Him it had been long. The days had seemed to go tardily. He longed that the ‘fire’ which He came to fling on earth were already ‘kindled,’ and the moments seemed to drop so slowly from the urn of time. But neither the holy longing to consummate His work by the mystery of His passion, to which more than one of His words bear witness, nor the not less holy longing to be glorified with ‘the glory which He had with the Father before the world was,’ which we may reverently venture to suppose in Him, could be satisfied till his slow scholars were wiser, and His feeble followers stronger.

And then again, here we get a glimpse into the depth of Christ’s patient forbearance. We might read these other words of our text, ‘How long shall I suffer you?’ with such an intonation as to make them almost a threat that the limits of forbearance would soon be reached, and that lie was not going to ‘suffer them’ much longer. Some commentators speak of them as expressing ‘holy indignation,’ and I quite believe that there is such a thing, and that on other occasions it was plainly spoken in Christ’s words. But I fail to catch the tone of it here. To me this plaintive question has the very opposite of indignation in its ring. It sounds rather like a pledge that as long as they need forbearance they will get it; but, at the same time, a question of ‘how long’ that is to be. It implies the inexhaustible riches and resources of His patient mercy. And Oh, dear brethren! that endless forbearance is the only refuge and ground of hope we have. *His* perfect charity ‘is not soon angry; beareth all things,’ and ‘never faileth.’ To it we have all to make the appeal-

‘Though I have most unthankful been
Of all that e’er Thy grace received;
Ten thousand times Thy goodness seen,
Ten thousand times Thy goodness grieved;
Yet, Lord, the chief of sinners spare.’

And, thank God! we do not make our appeal in vain.

There is rebuke in His question, but how tender a rebuke it is! He rebukes without anger. He names the fault plainly. He shows distinctly His sorrow, and does not hide the strain on His forbearance. That is His way of cure for His servants’ faithlessness. It was His way on earth; it is His way in heaven. To us, too, comes the loving rebuke of this question, ‘How long shall I suffer you?’

Thank God that our answer may be cast into the words of His own promise: ‘I say not unto thee, until seven times; but until seventy times seven.’ ‘Bear with me till Thou hast perfected me; and then bear me to Thyself, that I may be with Thee for ever, and grieve Thy love no more.’ So may it be, for ‘with Him is plenteous redemption,’ and His forbearing ‘mercy endureth for ever.’

54)Mark 9:23

Mark

THE OMNIPOTENCE OF FAITH

Mar. 9:23.

The necessity and power of faith is the prominent lesson of this narrative of the healing of a demoniac boy, especially as it is told by the Evangelist Mark, The lesson is enforced by the actions of all the persons in the group, except the central figure, Christ. The disciples could not cast out the demon, and incur Christ’s plaintive rebuke, which is quite as much sorrow as blame: ‘O faithless generation I how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?’ And then, in the second part of the story, the poor father, heart-sick with hope deferred, comes into the foreground. The whole interest is shifted to him, and more prominence is given to the process by which his doubting spirit is led to trust, than to that by which his son is healed.

There is something very beautiful and tender in Christ’s way of dealing with him, so as to draw him to faith. He begins with the question, ‘How long is it ago since this came unto him?’ and so induces him to tell all the story of the long sorrow, that his burdened heart might get some ease in speaking, and also that the feeling of the extremity of the necessity, deepened by the very dwelling on all his boy’s cruel sufferings, might help him to the exercise of faith. Truly ‘He knew what was in man,’ and with tenderness born of perfect knowledge and perfect love, He dealt with sore and sorrowful hearts. This loving artifice of consolation, which drew all the story from willing lips, is one more little token of His gentle mode of healing. And it is profoundly wise, as well as most tender. Get a man thoroughly to know his need, and vividly to feel his helpless misery, and you have carried him a long way towards laying hold of the refuge from it.

How wise and how tender the question is, is proved by the long circumstantial answer, in which the pent-up trouble of a father’s heart pours itself out at the tiny opening which Christ has made for it. He does not content himself with the simple answer, ‘Of a child,’ but with the garrulousness of sorrow that has found a listener that sympathises, goes on to tell all the misery, partly that he may move his hearer’s pity, but more in sheer absorption with the bitterness that had poisoned the happiness of his home all these years. And then his graphic picture of his child’s state leads him to the plaintive cry, in which his love makes common cause with his son, and unites both in one wretchedness. ‘If thou canst do anything, have compassion on *us* and help *us*.’

Our Lord answers that appeal in the words of our text. There are some difficulties in the rendering and exact force of these words with which I do not mean to trouble you. We may accept the rendering as in our Bible, with a slight variation in the punctuation. If we take the first clause as an incomplete sentence, and put a break between it and the last words, the meaning will stand out more clearly: ‘If thou canst believe-all things are possible to him that believeth.’ We might paraphrase it somewhat thus: Did you say ‘If thou canst do anything’? That is the wrong ‘if.’ There is no doubt about that. The only ‘if’ in the question is another one, not about me, but about you. ‘If *thou* canst believe-’ and then the incomplete sentence might be supposed to be ended with some such phrase as ‘That is the only question. If thou canst believe-all depends on that. If thou canst believe, thy son will be healed,’ or the like. Then, in order to explain and establish what He had meant in the half-finished saying, He adds the grand, broad statement, on which the demand for the man’s faith as the only condition of his wish being answered reposes: ‘All things are possible to him that believeth.’

That wide statement is meant, I suppose, for the disciples as well as for the father. ‘All things are possible’ both in reference to benefits to be received, and in reference to power to be exercised. ‘If thou canst believe, poor suppliant father, thou shalt have thy desire. If thou canst believe, poor devil-ridden son, thou shalt be set free. If ye can believe, poor baffled disciples, you will be masters of the powers of evil.’

Do you remember another ‘if’ with which Christ was once besought? ‘There came a leper to Him, beseeching Him, and kneeling down to Him, and saying unto Him, If Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean.’ In some respects that man had advanced beyond the father in our story, for he had no doubt at all about Christ’s power, and he spoke to Him as ‘Lord.’ But he was somehow not quite sure about Christ’s heart of pity. On the other hand, the man in our narrative has no doubt about Christ’s compassion. He may have seen something of His previous miracles, or there may still have been lying on our Lord’s countenance some of the lingering glory of the Transfiguration-as indeed the narrative seems to hint, in its emphatic statement of the astonishment and reverential salutations of the crowd when He approached-or the tenderness of our Lord’s listening sympathy may have made him feel sure of His willingness to help. At any rate, the leper’s ‘if’ has answered itself for him. His own lingering doubt, Christ waives aside as settled. His ‘if’ is answered for ever. So these two ‘ifs’ in reference to Christ are beyond all controversy; His power is certain, and His love. The third ‘if’ remains, the one that refers to us-’If thou canst believe’; all hinges on that, for ‘all things are possible to him that believeth.’

Here, then, we have our Lord telling us that faith is omnipotent. That is a bold word; He puts no limitations; ‘all things are possible.’ I think that to get the true force of these words we should put alongside of them the other saying of our Lord’s, ‘With God all things are possible.’ That is the foundation of the grand prerogative in our text. The power of faith is the consequence of the power of God. All things are possible to Him; therefore, all things are possible to me, believing in Him. If we translate that into more abstract words, it just comes to the principle that the power of faith consists in its taking hold of the power of God. It is omnipotent because it knits us to Omnipotence. Faith is nothing in itself, but it is that which attaches us to God, and then His power flows into us. Screw a pipe on to a water main and turn a handle, and out flows the water through the pipe and fills the empty vessel. Faith is as impotent in itself as the hollow water pipe is, only it is the way by which the connection is established between the fulness of God and the emptiness of man. By it divinity flows into humanity, and we have a share even in the divine Omnipotence. ‘My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ In itself nothing, it yet grasps God, and therefore by it we are strong, because by it we lay hold of His strength. Great and wonderful is the grace thus given to us, poor, struggling, sinful men, that, looking up to the solemn throne, where He sits in His power, we have a right to be sure that a true participation in His greatness is granted to us, if once our hearts are fastened to Him.

And there is nothing arbitrary nor mysterious in this flowing of divine power into our hearts on condition of our faith. It is the condition of possessing Christ, and in Christ, salvation, righteousness, and strength, not by any artificial appointment, but in the very nature of things. There is no other way possible by which God could give men what they receive through their faith, except only their faith.

In all trust in God there are two elements: a sense of need and of evil and weakness, and a confidence more or less unshaken and strong in Him, His love and power and all-sufficiency; and unless both of these two be in the heart, it is, in the nature of things, impossible, and will be impossible to all eternity, that purity and strength and peace and joy, and all the blessings which Christ delights to give to faith, should ever be ours.

Unbelief, distrust of Him, which separates us from Him and closes the heart fast against His grace, must cut us off from that which it does not feel that it needs, nor cares to receive; and must interpose a non-conducting medium between us and the electric influences of His might. When Christ was on earth, man’s want of faith dammed back His miracle-working power, and paralysed His healing energy. How strange that paradox sounds at first hearing, which brings together Omnipotence and impotence, and makes men able to counter-work the loving power of Christ. ‘He could there do no mighty work.’ The Evangelist intends a paradox, for he uses two kindred words to express the inability and the mighty work; and we might paraphrase the saying so as to bring out the seeming contradiction: ‘He there had no power to do any work of power.’ The same awful, and in some sense mysterious, power of limiting and restraining the influx of His love belongs to unbelief still, whether it take the shape of active rejection, or only of careless, passive non-reception. For faith makes us partakers of divine power by the very necessity of the case, and that power can attach itself to nothing else. So, ‘if thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.’

Still further, we may observe that there is involved here the principle that our faith determines the amount of our power. That is true in reference to our own individual religious life, and it is true in reference to special capacities for Christ's service. Let me say a word or two about each of these. They run into each other, of course, for the truest power of service is found in the depth and purity of our own personal religion, and on the other hand our individual Christian character will never be deep or pure unless we are working for the Master. Still, for our present purpose, these two inseparable aspects of the one Christian life may be separated in thought.

As to the former, then, the measure of my trust in Christ is the measure of all the rest of my Christian character. I shall have just as much purity, just as much peace, just as much wisdom or gentleness or love or courage or hope, as my faith is capable of taking up, and, so to speak, holding in solution. The 'point of saturation' in a man's soul, the quantity of God's grace which he is capable of absorbing, is accurately measured by his faith. How much do I trust God? That will settle how much I can take in of God.

So much as we believe, so much can we contain. So much as we can contain, so much shall we receive. And in the very act of receiving the 'portion of our Father's goods that falleth' to us, we shall feel that there is a boundless additional portion ready to come as soon as we are ready for it, and thereby we shall be driven to larger desires and a wider opening of the lap of faith, which will ever be answered by 'good measure, pressed together and running over, measured into our bosoms.' But there will be no waste by the bestowment of what we cannot take. 'According to your faith, be it unto you.' That is the accurate thermometer which measures the temperature of our spiritual state. It is like the steam-gauge outside the boiler, which tells to a fraction the pressure of steam within, and so the power which can at the moment be exerted.

May I make a very simple, close personal application of this thought? We have as much religious life as we desire; that is, we have as much as our faith can take. There is the reason why such hosts of so-called Christians have such poor, feeble Christianity. *We* dare not say of any, 'They have a name to live, and are dead.' There is only one Eye who can tell when the heart has ceased to beat. But we may say that there are a mournful number of people who call themselves Christians, who look so like dead that no eye but Christ's can tell the difference. They are in a syncope that will be death soon, unless some mighty power rouse them.

And then, how many more of us there are, not so bad as that, but still feeble and languid, whose Christian history is a history of weakness, while God's power is open before us, of starving in the midst of abundance, broken only by moments of firmer faith, and so of larger, happier possession, that make the poverty-stricken ordinary days appear ten times more poverty-stricken. The channel lies dry, a waste chaos of white stones and driftwood for long months, and only for an hour or two after the clouds have burst on the mountains does the stream fill it from bank to bank. Do not many of us remember moments of a far deeper and more earnest trust in Christ than marks our ordinary days? If such moments were continuous, should not we be the happy possessors of beauties of character and spiritual power, such as would put our present selves utterly to shame? And why are they not continuous? Why are our possessions in God so small, our power so weak? Dear friends! 'ye are not straitened in yourselves.' The only reason for defective spiritual progress and character is defective faith.

Then look at this same principle as it affects our faculties for Christian service. There, too, it is true that all things are possible to him that believeth. The saying had an application to the disciples who stood by, half-ashamed and half-surprised at their failure to cast out the demon, as well as to the father in his agony of desire and doubt. For them it meant that the measure of Christian service was mainly determined by the measure of their faith. It would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that in Christ's service a man can do pretty nearly what he believes he can do, if his confidence is built, not on himself, but on Christ.

If those nine Apostles, waiting there for their Master, had thought they could cast out the devil from the boy, do you not think that they could have done it? I do not mean to say that rash presumption, undertaking in levity and self-confidence unsuitable kinds of work, will be honoured with success. But I do mean to say that, in the line of our manifest duty, the extent to which we can do Christ's work is very much the extent to which we believe, in dependence on Him, that we can do it. If we once make up our minds that we shall do a certain thing by Christ's help and for His sake, in ninety cases out of a hundred the expectation will fulfil itself, and we shall do it. ‘Why could not we cast him out?’ They need not have asked the question. ‘Why could not you cast him out? Why, because you did not think you could, and with your timid attempt, making an experiment which you were not sure would succeed, provoked the failure which you feared.’ The Church has never believed enough in its Christ-given power to cast out demons. We have never been confident enough that the victory was in our hands if we knew how to use our powers.

The same thing is true of each one of us. Audacity and presumption are humility and moderation, if only we feel that ‘our sufficiency is of God.’ ‘I can do all things’ is the language of simple soberness, if we go on to say ‘through Christ which strengthened me.’

There is one more point, drawn from these words, viz., our faith can only take hold on the divine promises. Such language as this of my text and other kindred sayings of our Lord’s has often been extended beyond its real force, and pressed into the service of a mistaken enthusiasm, for want of observing that very plain principle. The principle of our text has reference to outward things as well as to the spiritual life. But there are great exaggerations and misconceptions as to the province of faith in reference to these temporal things, and consequently there are misconceptions and exaggerations on the part of many very good people as to the province of prayer in regard to them.

It seems to me that we shall be saved from these, if we distinctly recognise a very obvious principle, namely, that ‘faith’ can never go further than God’s clear promises, and that whatever goes beyond God’s word is not faith, but something else assuming its appearance.

For instance, suppose a father nowadays were to say: ‘My child is sore vexed with sickness. I long for his recovery. I believe that Christ can heal him. I believe that He will. I pray in faith, and I know that I shall be answered.’ Such a prayer goes beyond the record. Has Christ told you that it is His will that your child shall be healed? If not, how can you pray in faith that it is? You may pray in confidence that he will be healed, but such confident persuasion is not faith. Faith lays hold of Christ’s distinct declaration of His will, but such confidence is only grasping a shadow, your own wishes. The father in this story was entitled to trust, because Christ told him that his trust was the condition of his son's being healed. So in response to the great word of our text, the man's faith leaped up and grasped our Lord's promise, with 'Lord, I believe.' But before Christ spoke, his desires, his wistful longing, his imploring cry for help, had no warrant to pass into faith, and did not so pass.

Christ's word must go before our faith, and must supply the object for our faith, and where Christ has not spoken, there is no room for the exercise of any faith, except the faith, 'It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth to Him good.' That is the true prayer of faith in regard to all matters of outward providence where we have no distinct word of God's which gives unmistakable indication of His will. The 'if' of the leper, which has no place in the spiritual region, where we know that 'this is the will of God, even our sanctification,' has full force in the temporal region, where we do not know before the event what the will of the Lord is, 'If Thou wilt, Thou canst,' is there our best prayer.

Wherever a distinct and unmistakable promise of God's goes, it is safe for faith to follow; but to outrun His word is not faith, but self-will, and meets the deserved rebuke, 'Should it be according to thy mind?' There *are* unmistakable promises about outward things on which we may safely build. Let us confine our expectations within the limits of these, and turn them into the prayer of faith, so shooting back whence they came His winged words, 'This is the confidence that we have, that if we ask anything according to His will He heareth us.' Thus coming to Him, submitting all our wishes in regard to this world to His most loving will, and widening our confidence to the breadth of His great and loving purpose in regard to our own inward life, as well as in regard to our practical service, His answer will ever be, 'Great is thy faith; be it unto thee even as thou wilt.'

55)Mark 9:24

Mark

UNBELIEVING BELIEF

Mar. 9:24.

We owe to Mark's Gospel the fullest account of the pathetic incident of the healing of the demoniac boy. He alone gives us this part of the conversation between our Lord and the afflicted child's father. The poor man had brought his child to the disciples, and found them unable to do anything with him. A torrent of appeal breaks from his lips as soon as the Lord gives him an opportunity of speaking. He dwells upon all the piteous details with that fondness for repetition which sorrow knows so well. Jesus gives him back his doubts. The father said, 'If thou canst do anything, have compassion on us and help us.' Christ's answer, according to the true reading, is not as it stands in our Authorised Version, 'If thou canst *believe*'-throwing, as it were, the responsibility on the man-but it is a quotation of the father's own word, 'If Thou *canst*,' as if He waved it aside with superb recognition of its utter unfitness to the present case. 'Say not, If Thou canst. *That* is certain. All things are possible to thee' [not to *do*, but to *get*] 'if'-which is the only 'if' in the case-'thou believest. I can, and if thy faith lays hold on My Omnipotence, all is done.'

That majestic word is like the blow of steel upon flint; it strikes a little spark of faith which lights up the soul and turns the smoky pillar of doubt into clear flame of confidence. 'Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.'

I think in these wonderful words we have four things-the birth, the infancy, the cry, and the education, of faith. And to these four I turn now.

I. First, then, note here the birth of faith.

There are many ways to the temple, and it matters little by which of them a man travels, if so be he gets there. There is no royal road to the Christian faith which saves the soul. And yet, though identity of experience is not to be expected, men are like each other in the depths, and only unlike on the surfaces, of their being. Therefore one man's experience carefully analysed is very apt to give, at least, the rudiments of the experience of all others who have been in similar circumstances. So I think we can see here, without insisting on any pedantic repetition of the same details in every case, in broad outline, a sketch-map of the road. There are three elements here:

eager desire, the sense of utter helplessness, and the acceptance of Christ's calm assurances. Look at these three.

This man knew what he wanted, and he wanted it very sorely. Whosoever has any intensity and reality of desire for the great gifts which Jesus Christ comes to bestow, has taken at least one step on the way to faith. Conversely, the hindrances which block the path of a great many of us are simply that we do not care to possess the blessings which Jesus Christ in His Gospel offers. I am not talking now about the so-called intellectual hindrances to belief, though I think that a great many of these, if carefully examined, would be found, in the ultimate analysis, to repose upon this same stolid indifference to the blessings which Christianity offers. But what I wish to insist upon is that for large numbers of us, and no doubt for many men and women whom I address now, the real reason why they have not trust in Jesus Christ is because they do not care to possess the blessings which Jesus Christ brings. Do you desire to have your sins forgiven? Has purity any attraction for you? Do you care at all about the calm and pure blessings of communion with God? Would you like to live always in the light of His face? Do you want to be the masters of your own lusts and passions? I do not ask you, Do you want to go to Heaven or to escape Hell, when you die? but I ask, Has that future in any of its aspects any such power over you as that it stirs you to any earnestness and persistency of desire, or is it all shadowy and vain, ineffectual and dim? What we Christian teachers have to fight against is that we are charged to offer to men a blessing that they do not want, and have to create a demand before there can be any acceptance of the supply. 'Give us the leeks and garlics of Egypt,' said the Hebrews in the wilderness; 'our soul loatheth this light bread.' So it is with many of us; we do not want God, goodness, quietness of conscience, purity of life, self-consecration to a lofty ideal, one-thousandth part as much as we want success in our daily occupations, or some one or other of the delights that the world gives. I remember Luther, in his rough way, has a story-I think it is in his *Table-talk*-about a herd of swine to whom their keeper offered some rich dainties, and the pigs said, 'Give us grains.' That is what so many men do when Jesus Christ comes with His gifts and His blessings. They turn away, but if they were offered some poor earthly good, all their desires would go out towards it, and their eager hands would be scrambling who should first possess it.

Oh brethren, if we saw things as they are, and our needs as they are, nothing would kindle such intensity of longing in our hearts as that rejected or neglected promise of life eternal and divine which Jesus Christ brings. If I could only once wake in some indifferent heart this longing, that heart would have taken at least the initial step to a life of Christian godliness.

Further, we have here the other element of a sense of utter helplessness. How often this poor father had looked at his boy in the grip of the fiend, and had wrung his hands in despair that he could not do anything for him! That same sense of absolute impotence is one which we all, if we rightly understand what we need, must cherish. Can you forgive your own sins? Can you cleanse your own nature? Can you make yourselves other than you are by any effort of volition, or by any painfulness of discipline? To a certain small extent you can. In regard to superficial culture and eradication, your careful husbandry of your own wills may do much, but you cannot deal with your deepest needs. If we understand what is required, in order to bring one soul into harmony and fellowship with God, we shall recognise that we ourselves can do nothing to save, and little to help ourselves. ‘Every man his own redeemer,’ which is the motto of some people nowadays, may do very well for fine weather and for superficial experience, but when the storm comes it proves a poor refuge, like the gay pavilions that they put up for festivals, which are all right whilst the sun is shining and the flags are fluttering, but are wretched shelters when the rain beats and the wind howls. We can do nothing for ourselves. The recognition of our own helplessness is the obverse, so to speak, and underside, of confidence in the divine help. The coin, as it were, has its two faces. On the one is written, ‘Trust in the Lord’; on the other is written, ‘Nothing in myself.’ A drowning man, if he tries to help himself, only encumbers his would-be rescuer, and may drown him too. The truest help he can give is to let the strong arm that has cleft the waters for his sake fling itself around him and bear him safe to land. So, eager desire after offered blessings and consciousness of my own impotence to secure them-these are the initial steps of faith.

And the last of the elements here is, listening to the calm assurance of Jesus Christ: ‘If Thou canst! Do not say that to Me; I can, and because I can, all things are possible for thee to receive.’ In like manner He stands at the door of each of our hearts and speaks to each of our needs, and says: ‘I can satisfy it. Rest for thy soul, cleansing for thy sins, satisfaction for thy desires, guidance for thy pilgrimage, power for thy duties, patience in thy sufferings-all these will come to thee, if thou layest hold of My hand.' His assurance helps trembling confidence to be born, and out of doubt the great calm word of the Master smites the fire of trust. And we, dear brethren, if we will listen to Him, shall surely find in Him all that we need. Think how marvellous it is that this Jewish peasant should plant Himself in the front of humanity, over against the burdened, sinful race of men, and pledge Himself to forgive and to cleanse their sins, to bear all their sicknesses, to be their strength in weakness, their comfort in sorrow, the rest of their hearts, their heaven upon earth, their life in death, their glory in heaven, and their all in all; and not only should pledge Himself, but in the blessed experience of millions should have more than fulfilled all that He promised. 'They trusted in Him, and were lightened, and their faces were not ashamed.' Will you not answer His sovereign word of promise with your 'Lord, I believe'?

II. Then, secondly, we have here the infancy of faith.

As soon as the consciousness of belief dawned upon the father, and the effort to exercise it was put forth, there sprang up the consciousness of its imperfection. He would never have known that he did not believe unless he had tried to believe. So it is in regard to all excellences and graces of character. The desire of possessing some feeble degree of any virtue or excellence, and the effort to put it forth, is the surest way of discovering how little of it we have. On the other side, sorrow for the lack of some form of goodness is itself a proof of the partial possession, in some rudimentary and incipient form, of that goodness. The utterly lazy man never mourns over his idleness; it is only the one that would fain work harder than he does, and already works tolerably hard, who does so. So the little spark of faith in this man's heart, like a taper in a cavern, showed the abysses of darkness that lay unillumined round about it.

Thus, then, in its infancy, faith may and does coexist with much unfaith and doubt. The same state of mind, looked at from its two opposite ends, as it were, may be designated faith or unbelief; just as a piece of shot silk, according to the angle at which you hold it, may show you only the bright colours of its warp or the dark ones of its weft. When you are travelling in a railway train with the sun streaming in at the windows, if you look out on the one hand you will see the illumined face of every tree and blade of grass and house; and if you look out on the other, you will see their shadowed side. And so the same landscape may seem to be all lit up by the sunshine of belief, or to be darkened by the gloom of distrust. If we consider how great and how perfect ought to be our confidence, to bear any due proportion to the firmness of that upon which it is built, we shall not be slow to believe that through life there will always be the presence in us, more or less, of these two elements. There will be all degrees of progress between the two extremes of infantile and mature faith.

There follows from that thought this practical lesson, that the discovery of much unbelief should never make a man doubt the reality or genuineness of his little faith. We are all apt to write needlessly bitter things against ourselves when we get a glimpse of the incompleteness of our Christian life and character. But there is no reason why a man should fancy that he is a hypocrite because he finds out that he is not a perfect believer. But, on the other hand, let us remember that the main thing is not the maturity, but the progressive character, of faith. It was most natural that this man in our text, at the very first moment when he began to put his confidence in Jesus Christ as able to heal his child, should be aware of much tremulousness mingling with it. But is it not most unnatural that there should be the same relative proportion of faith and unbelief in the heart and experience of men who have long professed to be Christians? You do not expect the infant to have adult limbs, but you do expect it to grow. True, faith at its beginning may be like a grain of mustard seed, but if the grain of mustard seed be alive it will grow to a great tree, where all the fowls of the air can lodge in the branches. Oh! it is a crying shame and sin that in all Christian communities there should be so many grey-headed babies, men who have for years and years been professing to be Christ's followers, and whose faith is but little, if at all, stronger-nay! perhaps is even obviously weaker-than it was in the first days of their profession. 'Ye have need of milk, and not of strong meat,' very many of you. And the vitality of your faith is made suspicious, not because it is feeble, but because it is not growing stronger.

III. Notice the cry of infant faith.

‘Help Thou mine unbelief’ may have either of two meanings. The man’s desire was either that his faith should be increased and his unbelief ‘helped’ by being removed by Christ’s operation upon his spirit, or that Christ would ‘help’ him and his boy by healing the child, though the faith which asked the blessing was so feeble that it might be called unbelief. There is nothing in the language or in the context to determine which of these two meanings is intended; we must settle it by our own sense of what would be most likely under the circumstances. To me it seems extremely improbable that, when the father’s whole soul was absorbed in the healing of his son, he should turn aside to ask for the inward and spiritual process of having his faith strengthened. Rather he said, ‘Heal my child, though it is unbelief as much as faith that asks Thee to do it.’

The lesson is that, even when we are conscious of much tremulousness in our faith, we have a right to ask and expect that it shall be answered. Weak faith *is* faith. The tremulous hand *does* touch. The cord may be slender as a spider’s web that binds a heart to Jesus, but it *does* bind. The poor woman in the other miracle who put out her wasted finger-tip, coming behind Him in the crowd, and stealthily touching the hem of His garment, though it was only the end of her finger-nail that was laid on the robe, carried away with her the blessing. And so the feeblest faith joins the soul, in the measure of its strength, to Jesus Christ.

But let us remember that, whilst thus the cry of infant faith is heard, the stronger voice of stronger faith is more abundantly heard. Jesus Christ once for all laid down the law when He said to one of the suppliants at His feet, ‘According to your faith be it unto you.’ The measure of our belief is the measure of our blessing. The wider you open the door, the more angels will crowd into it, with their white wings and their calm faces. The bore of the pipe determines the amount of water that flows into the cistern. Every man gets, in the measure in which he desires. Though a tremulous hand may hold out a cup into which Jesus Christ will not refuse to pour the wine of the kingdom, yet the tremulous hand will spill much of the blessing; and he that would have the full enjoyment of the mercies promised, and possible, must ‘ask in faith, nothing wavering.’ The sensitive paper which records the hours of sunshine in a day has great gaps upon its line of light answering to the times when clouds have obscured the sun; and the communication of blessings from God is intermittent, if there be intermittency of faith. If you desire an unbroken line of mercy, joy, and peace, keep up an unbroken continuity of trustful confidence.

IV. Lastly, we have here the education of faith.

Christ paid no heed in words to the man's confession of unbelief, but proceeded to do the work which answered his prayer in both its possible meanings. He responded to imperfect confidence by His perfect work of cure, and, by that perfect work of cure, He strengthened the imperfect confidence which it had answered.

Thus He educates us by His answers-His over-answers-to our poor desires; and the abundance of His gifts rebukes the poverty of our petitions more emphatically than any words of remonstrance beforehand could have done. He does not lecture us into faith, but He blesses us into it. When the Apostle was sinking in the flood, Jesus Christ said no word of reproach until He had grasped him with His strong hand and held him safe. And then, when the sustaining touch thrilled through all the frame, then, and not till then, He said-as we may fancy, with a smile on His face that the moonlight showed-as knowing how unanswerable His question was, 'O thou of little faith, *wherefore* didst thou doubt?' That is how He will deal with us if we will; over-answering our tremulous petitions, and so teaching us to hope more abundantly that 'we shall praise Him more and more.'

The disappointments, the weaknesses, the shameful defeats which come when our confidence fails, are another page of His lesson-book. The same Apostle of whom I have been speaking got that lesson when, standing on the billows, and, instead of looking at Christ, looking at their wrath and foam, his heart failed him, and because his heart failed him he began to sink. If we turn away from Jesus Christ, and interrupt the continuity of our faith by calculating the height of the breakers and the weight of the water that is in them, and what will become of us when they topple over with their white crests upon our heads, then gravity will begin to work, and we shall begin to sink. And well for us if, when we have sunk as far as our knees, we look back again to the Master and say, 'Lord, save me; I perish!' The weakness which is our own when faith sleeps, and the rejoicing power which is ours because it is His, when faith wakes, are God's education of it to fuller and ampler degrees and depth. We shall lose the meaning of life, and the best lesson that joy and sorrow, calm and storm, victory and defeat, can give us, unless all these make us ‘rooted and grounded in faith.’

Dear friend, do you desire your truest good? Do you know that you cannot win it, or fight for it to gain it, or do anything to obtain it, in your own strength? Have you heard Jesus Christ saying to you, ‘Come . . . and I will give you rest’? Oh! I beseech you, do not turn away from Him, but like this agonised father in our story, fall at His feet with ‘Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief,’ and He will confirm your feeble faith by His rich response.

56)Mark 9:33

Mark

RECEIVING AND FORBIDDING

AN UNANSWERED QUESTION

Mar. 9:33.

Was it not a strange time to squabble when they had just been told of His death? Note-

I. The variations of feeling common to the disciples and to us all: one moment ‘exceeding sorrowful,’ the next fighting for precedence.

II. Christ’s divine insight into His servants’ faults.

This question was put because He knew what the wrangle had been about. The disputants did not answer, but He knew without an answer, as His immediately following warnings show. How blessed to think that Psa. 139:1 applies to Him-’There is not a word in my tongue, but lo, O Lord! Thou knowest it altogether,’

III. The compassion of Christ seeking to cure the sins He sees.

His question is not to rebuke, but to heal; so His perfect knowledge is blended with perfect love.

IV. The test of evil. They were ashamed to tell Him the cause of their dispute.

V. The method of cure. The presence of Christ is the end of strife and of sin in general.

57)Mark 9:34-42

Mark

RECEIVING AND FORBIDDING

Mar. 9:33 - Mar. 9:42.

Surely the disciples might have found something better to talk about on the road from Caesarea, where they had heard from Jesus of His sufferings, than this miserable wrangle about rank! Singularly enough, each announcement of the Cross seems to have provoked something of the sort. Probably they understood little of His meaning, but hazily thought that the crisis was at hand when He should establish the kingdom; and so their ambition, rather than their affection, was stirred. Perhaps, too, the dignity bestowed on Peter after his confession, and the favour shown to the three witnesses of the Transfiguration, may have created jealousy. Matthew makes the quarrel to have been about future precedence; Mark about present. The one was striven for with a view to the other. How chill it must have struck on Christ's heart, that those who loved Him best cared so much more for their own petty superiority than for His sorrows!

I. Note the law of service as the true greatness [Mar. 9:33 - Mar. 9:35].

'When He was in the house, He asked them.' He had let them talk as they would on the road, walking alone in front, and they keeping, as they thought, out of ear-shot; but, when at rest together in the house [perhaps Peter's] where He lived in Capernaum, He lets them see, by the question and still more by the following teaching, that He knew what He asked, and needed no answer. The tongues that had been so loud on the road were dumb in the house-silenced by conscience. His servants still do and say many things on the road which they would not do if they saw Him close beside them, and they sometimes fancy that these escape Him. But when they are ‘in the house’ with Him, they will find that He knew all that was going on; and when He asks the account of it, they, too, will be speechless. ‘A thing which does not appear wrong by itself shows its true character when brought to the judgment of God and the knowledge of Jesus Christ. [*Bengel*].

Christ deals with the fault with much solemnity, seating Himself, as Teacher and Superior, and summoning the whole Twelve to hear. We do not enter on the difficult question of the relation of Mark’s report of our Lord’s words to those of the other Evangelists, but rather try to bring out the significance of their form and connection here. Note, then, that here we have not so much the nature of true greatness, as the road to it. ‘If any man would be first,’ he is to be least and servant, and thereby he will reach his aim. Of course, that involves the conception of the nature of true greatness as service, but still the distinction is to be kept in view. Further, ‘last of all’ is not the same as ‘servant of all.’ The one phrase expresses humility; the other, ministry. An indolent humility, so very humble that it does nothing for others, and a service which if not humble, are equally incomplete, and neither leads to or is the greatness at which alone a Christian ought to aim. There are two paradoxes here. The lowest is the highest, the servant is the chief; and they may be turned round with equal truth-the highest is the lowest, and the chief is the servant. The former tells us how things really are, and what they look like, when seen from the centre by His eye. The latter prescribes the duties and responsibilities of high position. In fact and truth, to sink is the way to rise, and to serve is the way to rule-only the rise and the rule are of another sort than contents worldly ambition, and the Christian must rectify his notions of what loftiness and greatness are. On the other hand, distinguishing gifts of mind, heart, leisure, position, possessions, or anything else, are given us for others, and bind us to serve. Both things follow from the nature of Christ’s kingdom, which is a kingdom of love; for in love the vulgar distinctions of higher and lower are abolished, and service is delight. This is no mere pretty sentiment, but a law which grips hard and cuts deep. Christ’s servants have not learned it yet, and the world heeds it not; but, till it governs all human society, and pulls up ambition, domination, and pride of place by the roots, society will groan under ills which increase with the increase of wealth and culture in the hands of a selfish few.

II. Note the exhibition of the law in a life.

Children are quick at finding out who loves them, and there would always be some hovering near for a smile from Christ. With what eyes of innocent wonder the child would look up at Him, as He gently set him there, in the open space in front of Himself! Mark does not record any accompanying words, and none were needed, The unconsciousness of rank, the spontaneous acceptance of inferiority, the absence of claims to consideration and respect, which naturally belong to childhood as it ought to be, and give it winningness and grace, are the marks of a true disciple, and are the more winning in such because they are not of nature, but regained by self-abnegation. What the child is we have to become. This child was the example of one-half of the law, being 'least of all,' and perfectly contented to be so; but the other half was not shown in him, for his little hands could do but small service. Was there, then, no example in this scene of that other requirement? Surely there was; for the child was not left standing, shy, in the midst, but, before embarrassment became weeping, was caught up in Christ's arms, and folded to His heart. He had been taken as the instance of humility, and he then became the subject of tender ministry. Christ and he divided the illustration of the whole law between them, and the very inmost nature of true service was shown in our Lord's loving clasp and soothing pressure to His heart. It is as if He had said, 'Look! this is how you must serve; for you cannot help the weak unless you open your arms and hearts to them.' Jesus, with the child held to His bosom, is the living law of service, and the child nestling close to Him, because sure of His love, is the type of the trustful affection which we must evoke if we are to serve or help. This picture has gone straight to the hearts of men; and who can count the streams of tenderness and practical kindliness of which it has been the source? Christ goes on to speak of the child, not as the example of service, but of being served. The deep words carry us into blessed mysteries which will recompense the lowly servants, and lift them high in the kingdom. Observe the precision of the language, both as regards the persons received and the motive of reception. 'One of such little children' means those who are thus lowly, unambitious, and unexacting. 'In

My name' defines the motive as not being simple humanity or benevolence, but the distinct recognition of Christ's command and loving obedience to His revealed character. No doubt, natural benevolence has its blessings for those who exercise it; but that which is here spoken of is something much deeper than nature, and wins a far higher reward.

That reward is held forth in unfathomable words, of which we can but skim the surface. They mean more than that such little ones are so closely identified with Him that, in His love, He reckons good done to them as done to Him. That is most blessedly true. Nor is it true only because He lovingly reckons the deed as done to Him, though it really is not; but, by reason of the derived life which all His children possess from Him, they are really parts of Himself; and in that most real though mystic unity, what is done to them is, in fact, done to Him. Further, if the service be done in His name, then, on whomsoever it may be done, it is done to Him. This great saying unveils the true sacredness and real recipient of all Christian service. But more than that is in the words. When we 'receive' Christ's little ones by help and loving ministry, we receive Him, and in Him God, for joy and strength. Unselfish deeds in His name open the heart for more of Christ and God, and bring on the doer the blessing of fuller insight, closer communion, more complete assimilation to his Lord. Therefore such service is the road to the true superiority in His kingdom, which depends altogether on the measure of His own nature which has flowed into our emptiness.

III. The Apostles' conscience-stricken confession of their breach of the law [Mar. 9:38 - Mar. 9:40].

Peter is not spokesman this time, but John, whose conscience was more quickly pricked. At first sight, the connection of his interruption with the theme of the discourse seems to be merely the recurrence of the phrase, 'in Thy name'; but, besides that, there is an obvious contrast between 'receiving' and 'forbidding.' The Apostle is uneasy when he remembers what they had done, and, like an honest man, he states the case to Christ, half-confessing, and half-asking for a decision. He begins to think that perhaps the man whom they had silenced was 'one such little child,' and had deserved more sympathetic treatment. How he came to be so true a disciple as to share in the power of casting out devils, and yet not to belong to the closer followers of Jesus, we do not know, and need not guess. So it was; and John feels, as he tells the story, that perhaps their motives had not been so much their Master’s honour as their own. ‘He followeth not us,’ and yet he is trenching on our prerogatives. The greater fact that he and they followed Christ was overshadowed by the lesser that he did not follow them. There spoke the fiery spirit which craved the commission to burn up a whole village, because of its inhospitality. There spoke the spirit of ecclesiastical intolerance, which in all ages has masqueraded as zeal for Christ, and taken ‘following us’ and ‘following Him’ to be the same thing. But there spoke, too, a glimmering consciousness that gagging men was not precisely ‘receiving’ them, and that if ‘in Thy name’ so sanctified deeds, perhaps the unattached exorcist, who could cast out demons by it, was ‘a little one’ to be taken to their hearts, and not an enemy to be silenced. Pity that so many listen to the law, and do not, like John, feel it prick them! Christ forbids such ‘forbidding,’ and thereby sanctions ‘irregularities’ and ‘unattached’ work, which have always been the bugbears of sticklers for ecclesiastical uniformity, and have not seldom been the life of Christianity. That authoritative, unconditional ‘forbid him not’ ought, long ago, to have rung the funeral knell of intolerance, and to have ended the temptation to idolise ‘conformity,’ and to confound union to organised forms of the Christian community with union to Christ. But bigotry dies hard. The reasons appended serve to explain the position of the man in question. If he had wrought miracles in Christ’s name, he must have had some faith in it; and his experience of its power would deepen that. So there was no danger of his contradicting himself by speaking against Jesus. The power of ‘faith in the Name’ to hallow deeds, the certainty that rudimentary faith will, when exercised, increase, the guarantee of experience as sure to lead to blessing from Jesus, are all involved in this saying. But its special importance is as a reason for the disciples’ action. Because the man’s action gives guarantees for his future, they are not to silence him. That implies that they are only to forbid those who do speak evil of Christ; and that to all others, even if they have not reached the full perception of truth, they are to extend patient forbearance and guidance. ‘The mouth of them that speak lies shall be stopped’; but the mouth that begins to stammer His name is to be taught and cherished.

Christ’s second reason still more plainly claims the man for an ally. Commentators have given themselves a great deal of trouble to reconcile this saying with the other-’He that is not with Me is against Me.’ If by reconciling is meant twisting both to mean the same thing, it cannot be done. If preventing the appearance of contradiction is meant, it does not seem necessary. The two sayings do not contradict, but they complete, each other. They apply to different classes of persons, and common-sense has to determine their application. This man did, in some sense, believe in Jesus, and worked deeds that proved the power of the Name. Plainly, such work was in the same direction as the Lord’s and the disciples’. Such a case is one for the application of tolerance. But the principle must be limited by the other, else it degenerates into lazy indifference. ‘He that is not against us is for us,’ if it stood alone, would dissolve the Church, and destroy distinctions in belief and practice which it would be fatal to lose. ‘He that is not with Me is against Me,’ if it stood alone, would narrow sympathies, and cramp the free development of life. We need both to understand and get the good of either.

IV. We have the reward of receiving Christ’s little ones set over against the retribution that seizes those who cause them to stumble [Mar. 9:41 - Mar. 9:42].

These verses seem to resume the broken thread of Mar. 9:37, whilst they also link on to the great principle laid down in Mar. 9:40. He that is ‘not against’ is ‘for,’ even if he only gives a ‘cup of water’ to Christ’s disciple because he is Christ’s. That shows that there is some regard for Jesus in him. It is a germ which may grow. Such an one shall certainly have his reward. That does not mean that he will receive it in a future life, but that here his deed shall bring after it blessed consequences to himself. Of these, none will be more blessed than the growing regard for the Name, which already is, in some degree, precious to him. The faintest perception of Christ’s beauty, honestly lived out, will be increased. Every act strengthens its motive. The reward of living our convictions is firmer and more enlightened conviction. Note, too, that the person spoken of belongs to the same class as the silenced exorcist, and that this reads the disciples a further lesson. Jesus will look with love on the acts which even a John wished to forbid. Note, also, that the disciples here are the recipients of the kindness.

They are no longer being taught to receive the ‘little ones,’ but are taught that they themselves belong to that class, and need kindly succour from these outsiders, whom they had proudly thought to silence.

The awful, reticent words, which shadow forth and yet hide the fate of those who cause the feeblest disciple to stumble, are not for us to dilate upon. Jesus saw the realities of future retribution, and deliberately declares that death is a less evil than such an act. The ‘little ones’ are sacred because they are His. The same relation to Him which made kindness to them so worthy of reward, makes harm to them so worthy of punishment. Under the one lies an incipient love to Him; under the other, a covert and perhaps scarcely conscious opposition. It is devil’s work to seduce simple souls from allegiance to Christ. There are busy hands to-day laying stumbling-blocks in the way, especially of young Christians-stumbling-blocks of doubt, of frivolity, of slackened morality, and the like. It were better, says One who saw clearly into that awful realm beyond, if a heavy millstone were knotted about their necks, and they were flung into the deepest place of the lake that lay before Him as he spoke. He does not speak exaggerated words; and if a solemn strain of vehemence, unlike His ordinary calm, is audible here, it is because what He knew, and did not tell, gave solemn earnestness to His veiled and awe-inspiring prophecy of doom. What imagination shall fill out the details of the ‘worse than’ which lurks behind that ‘better’?

58)Mark 9:49

Mark

SALTED WITH FIRE

Mark ix. 49.

Our Lord has just been uttering some of the most solemn words that ever came from His gracious lips. He has been enjoining the severest self-suppression, extending even to mutilation and excision of the eye, the hand, or the foot, that might cause us to stumble. He has been giving that sharp lesson on the ground of plain common sense and enlightened self-regard. It *is* better, obviously, to live maimed than to die whole. The man who elects to keep a mortified limb, and thereby to lose life, is a suicide and a fool. It is a solemn thought that a similar mad choice is possible in the moral and spiritual region.

To these stern injunctions, accompanied by the awful sanctions of that consideration, our Lord appends the words of my text. They are obscure and have often been misunderstood. This is not the place to enter on a discussion of the various explanations that have been proposed of them. A word or two is all that is needful to put us in possession of the point of view from which I wish to lay them on your hearts at this time.

I take the 'every one' of my text to mean not mankind generally, but every individual of the class whom our Lord is addressing-that is to say, His disciples. He is laying down the law for all Christians. I take the paradox which brings together 'salting' and 'fire,' to refer, not to salt as a means of communicating savour to food, but as a means of preserving from putrefaction. And I take the 'fire' here to refer, not to the same process which is hinted at in the awful preceding words, 'the fire in not quenched,' but to be set in opposition to that fire, and to mean something entirely different. There is a fire that destroys, and there is a fire that preserves; and the alternative for every man is to choose between the destructive and the conserving influences. Christian disciples have to submit to be 'salted with fire,' lest a worse thing befall them,

I. And so the first point that I would ask you to notice here is-that fiery cleansing to which every Christian must yield.

Now I have already referred to the relation between the words of my text and those immediately preceding, as being in some sense one of opposition and contrast. I think we are put on the right track for understanding the solemn words of this text if we remember the great saying of John the Baptist, where, in precisely similar fashion, there are set side by side the two conceptions of the chaff being cast into the unquenchable fire [the same expression as in our text], and 'He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.'

The salting fire, then, which cleanses and preserves, and to which every Christian soul must submit itself, to be purged thereby, is, as I take it, primarily and fundamentally the fire of that Divine Spirit which Christ Himself told us that He had come to cast upon the earth, and yearned, in a passion of desire, to see kindled. The very frequent use of the emblem in this same signification throughout Scripture, I suppose I need not recall to you. It seems to me that the only worthy interpretation of the words before us, which goes down into their depths and harmonises with the whole of the rest of the teaching of Scripture, is that which recognises these words of my text as no unwelcome threat, as no bitter necessity, but as a joyful promise bringing to men, laden and burdened with their sins, the good news that it is possible for them to be purged from them entirely by the fiery ministration of that Divine Spirit. Just as we take a piece of foul clay and put it into the furnace, and can see, as it gets red-hot, the stains melt away, as a cloud does in the blue, from its surface, so if we will plunge ourselves into the influences of that divine power which Christ has come to communicate to the world, our sin and all our impurities will melt from off us, and we shall be clean. No amount of scrubbing with soap and water will do it. The stain is a great deal too deep for that, and a mightier solvent than any that we can apply, if unaided and unsupplied from above, is needed to make us clean. ‘Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean,’ especially when the would-be bringer is himself the unclean thing? Surely not one. Unless there be a power *ab extra*, unparticipant of man’s evils, and yet capable of mingling with the evil man’s inmost nature, and dealing with it, then I believe that universal experience and our individual experience tell us that there is no hope that we shall ever get rid of our transgressions.

Brethren, for a man by his own unaided effort, however powerful, continuous, and wisely directed it may be, to cleanse himself utterly from his iniquity, is as hopeless as it would be for him to sit down with a hammer and a chisel and try by mechanical means to get all the iron out of a piece of ironstone. The union is chemical, not mechanical. And so hammers and chisels will only get a very little of the metal out. The one solvent is fire. Put the obstinate crude ore into your furnace, and get the temperature up, and the molten metal will run clear. There should be mountains of scoriae, the dross and relics of our abandoned sins, around us all.

If we desire to be delivered, let us go into the fire. It will burn up all our evil, and it will burn up nothing else. Keep close to Christ. Lay your hearts open to the hallowing influences of the motives and the examples that lie in the story of His life and death. Seek for the fiery touch of that transforming Spirit, and be sure that you quench Him not, nor grieve Him. And then your weakness will be reinvigorated by celestial powers, and the live coal upon your lips will burn up all your iniquity.

But, subordinately to this deepest meaning, as I take it, of the great symbol of our text, let me remind you of another possible application of it, which follows from the preceding. God's Spirit cleanses men mainly by raising their spirits to a higher temperature. For coldness is akin to sin, and heavenly warmth is akin to righteousness. Enthusiasm always ennobles, delivers men, even on the lower reaches of life and conduct from many a meanness and many a sin. And when it becomes a warmth of spirit kindled by the reception of the fire of God, then it becomes the solvent which breaks the connection between me and my evil. It is the cold Christian who makes no progress in conquering his sin. The one who is filled with the love of God, and has the ardent convictions and the burning enthusiasm which that love ought to produce in our hearts, is the man who will conquer and eject his evils.

Nor must we forget that there is still another possible application of the words. For whilst, on the one hand, the Divine Spirit's method of delivering us is very largely that of imparting to us the warmth of ardent, devout emotion; on the other hand, a part of this method is the passing of us through the fiery trials and outward disciplines of life. 'Every one shall be salted with fire' in that sense. And we have learned, dear brethren, but little of the loving kindness of the Lord if we are not able to say, 'I have grown more in likeness to Jesus Christ by rightly accepted sorrows than by anything besides.' Be not afraid of calamities; be not stumbled by disaster. Take the fiery trial which is sent to you as being intended to bring about, at the last, the discovery 'unto praise and honour and glory' of your faith, that is 'much more precious than gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire.' 'Every one shall be salted with fire,' the Christian law of life is, Submit to the fiery cleansing. Alas! alas! for the many thousands of professing Christians who are wrapping themselves in such thick folds of non-conducting material that that fiery energy can only play on the surface of their lives, instead of searching them to the depths. Do you see to it, dear brethren, that you lay open your whole natures, down to the very inmost roots, to the penetrating, searching, cleansing power of that Spirit. And let us all go and say to Him, ‘Search me, O God! and try me, and see if there be any wicked way in me.’

II. Notice the painfulness of this fiery cleansing.

The same ideas substantially are conveyed in my text as are expressed, in different imagery, by the solemn words that precede it. The ‘salting with fire’ comes substantially to the same thing as the amputation of the hand and foot, and the plucking out of the eye, that cause to stumble. The metaphor expresses a painful process. It is no pleasant thing to submit the bleeding stump to the actual cautery, and to press it, all sensitive, upon the hot plate that will stop the flow of blood. But such pain of shrinking nerves is to be borne, and to be courted, if we are wise, rather than to carry the hand or the eye that led astray unmutilated into total destruction. Surely that is common sense.

The process is painful because we are weak. The highest ideal of Christian progress would be realised if one of the metaphors with which our Lord expresses it were adequate to cover the whole ground, and we grew as the wheat grows, ‘first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.’ But the tranquillity of vegetable growth, and the peaceful progress which it symbolises, are not all that you and I have to expect. Emblems of a very different kind have to be associated with that of the quiet serenity of the growing corn, in order to describe all that a Christian man has to experience in the work of becoming like his Master. It is a fight as well as a growth; it is a building requiring our continuity of effort, as well as a growth. There is something to be got rid of as well as much to be appropriated. We do not only need to become better, we need to become less bad. Squatters have camped on the land, and cling to it and hold it *vi et armis*; and these have to be ejected before peaceful settlement is possible.

One might go on multiplying metaphors *ad libitum*, in order to bring out the one thought that it needs huge courage to bear being sanctified, or, if you do not like the theological word, to bear being made better. It is no holiday task, and unless we are willing to have a great deal that is against the grain done to us, and in us, and by us, we shall never achieve it. We have to accept the pain. Desires have to be thwarted, and that is not pleasant. Self has to be suppressed, and that is not delightsome. A growing conviction of the depth of one’s own evil has to be cherished, and that is not a grateful thought for any of us. Pains external, which are felt by reason of disciplinary sorrows, are not worthy to be named in the same day as those more recondite and inward agonies. But, brother, they are all ‘light’ as compared with the exceeding weight of ‘glory,’ coming from conformity to the example of our Master, which they prepare for us.

And so I bring you Christ’s message: He will have no man to enlist in His army under false pretences. He will not deceive any of us by telling us that it is all easy work and plain sailing. Salting by fire can never be other than to the worse self an agony, just because it is to the better self a rapture. And so let us make up our minds that no man is taken to heaven in his sleep, and that the road is a rough one, judging from the point of view of flesh and sense; but though rough, narrow, often studded with sharp edges, like the plough coulters that they used to lay in the path in the old rude ordeals, it still leads straight to the goal, and bleeding feet are little to pay for a seat at Christ’s right hand.

III. Lastly, notice the preservative result of this painful cleansing.

Our Lord brings together, in our text, as is often His wont, two apparently contradictory ideas, in order, by the paradox, to fix our attention the more vividly upon His words. Fire destroys; salt preserves. They are opposites. But yet the opposites may be united in one mighty reality, a fire which preserves and does not destroy. The deepest truth is that the cleansing fire which the Christ will give us preserves us, because it destroys that which is destroying us. If you kill the germs of putrefaction in a hit of dead flesh, you preserve the flesh; and if you bring to bear upon a man the power which will kill the thing that is killing him, its destructive influence is the condition of its conserving one.

And so it is, in regard to that great spiritual influence which Jesus Christ is ready to give to every one of us. It slays that which is slaying us, for our sins destroy in us the true life of a man, and make us but parables of walking death. When the three Hebrews were cast into the fiery furnace in Babylon, the flames burned nothing but their bonds, and they walked at liberty in the fire. And so it will be with us. We shall be preserved by that which slays the sins that would otherwise slay us.

Let me lay on your hearts before I close the solemn alternative to which I have already referred, and which is suggested by the connection of my text with the preceding words. There is a fire that destroys and is not quenched. Christ's previous words are much too metaphorical for us to build dogmatic definitions upon. But Jesus Christ did not exaggerate. If here and now sin has so destructive an effect upon a man, O, who will venture to say that he knows the limits of its murderous power in that future life, when retribution shall begin with new energy and under new conditions? Brethren, whilst I dare not enlarge, I still less dare to suppress; and I ask you to remember that not I, or any man, but Jesus Christ Himself, has put before each of us this alternative-either the fire unquenchable, which destroys a man, or the merciful fire, which slays his sins and saves him alive.

Social reformers, philanthropists, you that have tried and failed to overcome your evil, and who feel the loathly thing so intertwisted with your being that to pluck it from your heart is to tear away the very heart's walls themselves, here is a hope for you. Closely as our evil is twisted in with the fibres of our character, there is a hand that can untwine the coils, and cast away the sin, and preserve the soul. And although we sometimes feel as if our sinfulness and our sin were so incorporated with ourselves that it made oneself, with a man's head and a serpent's tail, let us take the joyful assurance that if we trust ourselves to Christ, and open our hearts to His power, we can shake off the venomous beast into the fire and live a fuller life, because the fire has consumed that which would otherwise have consumed us.

59)Mark 9:50

Mark

'SALT IN YOURSELVES'

Mar. 9:50.

In the context 'salt' is employed to express the preserving, purifying, divine energy which is otherwise spoken of as 'fire.' The two emblems produce the same result. They both salt-that is, they cleanse and keep. And if in the one we recognise the quick energy of the Divine Spirit as the central idea, no less are we to see the same typified under a slightly different aspect in the other. The fire transforms into its own substance and burns away all the grosser particles. The salt arrests corruption, keeps off destruction, and diffuses its sanative influence through all the particles of the substance with which it comes in contact. And in both metaphors it is the operation of God's cleansing Spirit, in its most general form, that is set forth, including all the manifold ways by which God deals with us to purge us from our iniquity, to free us from the death which treads close on the heels of wrongdoing, the decomposition and dissolution which surely follow on corruption.

This the disciples are exhorted to have in themselves that they may be at peace one with another. Perhaps we shall best discover the whole force of this saying by dealing-

I. With the symbol itself and the ideas derived from it.

The salt cleanses, arrests corruption which impends over the dead masses, sweetens and purifies, and so preserves from decay and dissolution. It works by contact, and within the mass. It thus stands as an emblem of the cleansing which God brings, both in respect [a] to that on which it operates, [b] to the purpose of its application, and [c] to the manner in which it produces its effects.

[a] That on which it operates.

There is implied here a view of human nature, not flattering but true. It is compared with a dead thing, in which the causes that bring about corruption are already at work, with the sure issue of destruction. This in its individual application comes to the assertion of sinful tendency and actual sin as having its seat and root in all our souls, so that the present condition is corruption, and the future issue is destruction. The consequent ideas are that any power which is to cleanse must come from without, not from within; that purity is not to be won by our own efforts, and that there is no disposition in human nature to make these efforts. There is no recuperative power in human nature. True, there may be outward reformation of habits, etc., but, if we grasp the thought that the taproot of sin is selfishness, this impotence becomes clearer, and it is seen that sin affects all our being, and that therefore the healing must come from beyond us.

[b] The purpose-namely, cleansing.

In salt we may include the whole divine energy; the Word, the Christ, the Spirit. So the intention of the Gospel is mainly to make clean. Preservation is a consequence of that.

[c] The manner of its application.

Inward, penetrating, by contact; but mainly the great peculiarity of Christian ethics is that the inner life is dealt with first, the will and the heart, and afterwards the outward conduct.

II. The part which we have to take in this cleansing process.

‘Have salt’ is a command; and this implies that while all the cleansing energy comes from God, the working of it on our souls depends on ourselves.

[a] Its original reception depends on our faith.

The ‘salt’ is here, but our contact with it is established by our acceptance of it. There is no magical cleansing; but it must be received within if we would share in its operation.

[b] Its continuous energy is not secured without our effort.

Let us just recall the principle already referred to, that the ‘salt’ implies the whole cleansing divine energies, and ask what are these? The Bible variously speaks of men as being cleansed by the ‘blood of Christ,’ by the ‘truth,’ by the ‘Spirit.’ Now, it is not difficult to bring all these into one focus, viz., that the Spirit of God cleanses us by bringing the truth concerning Christ to bear on our understandings and hearts.

We are sanctified in proportion as we are coming under the influence of Christian truth, which, believed by our understandings and our hearts, supplies motives to our wills which lead us to holiness by copying the example of Christ.

Hence the main principle is that the cleansing energy operates on us in proportion as we are influenced by the truths of the Gospel.

Again, it works in proportion as we seek for, and submit to, the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit.

In proportion as we are living in communion with Christ.

In proportion as we seek to deny ourselves and put away those evil things which ‘quench the Spirit.’

This great grace, then, is not ours without our own effort. No original endowment is enough to keep us right. There must be the daily contact with, and constant renewing of the Holy Ghost. Hence arises a solemn appeal to all Christians.

Note the independence of the Christian character.

‘In yourselves.’ ‘The water that I shall give him shall be in him a fountain,’ etc. Not, therefore, derived from the world, nor at second-hand from other men, but you have access to it for yourselves. See that you use the gift. ‘Hold fast that which thou hast,’ for there are enemies to withstand-carelessness, slothfulness, and self-confidence, etc.

III. The relation to one another of those who possess this energy.

In proportion as Christians have salt in themselves, they will be at peace with one another. Remember that all sin is selfishness; therefore if we are cleansed from it, that which leads to war, alienation, and coldness will be removed. Even in this world there will be an anticipatory picture of the perfect peace which will abound when all are holy. Even now this great hope should make our mutual Christian relations very sweet and helpful.

Thus emerges the great principle that the foundation of the only real love among men must be laid in holiness of heart and life. Where the Spirit of

God is working on a heart, there the seeds of evil passions are stricken out. The causes of enmity and disturbance are being removed. Men quarrel with each other because their pride is offended, or because their passionate desires after earthly things are crossed by a successful rival, or because they deem themselves not sufficiently respected by others. The root of all strife is self-love. It is the root of all sin. The cleansing which takes away the root removes in the same proportion the strife which grows from it. We should not be so ready to stand on our rights if we remembered how we come to have any hopes at all. We should not be so ready to take offence if we thought more of Him who is not soon angry. All the train of alienations, suspicions, earthly passions, which exist in our minds and are sure to issue in quarrels or bad blood, will be put down if we have 'salt in ourselves.'

This makes a very solemn appeal to Christian men. The Church is the garden where this peace should flourish. The disgrace of the Church is its envyings, jealousies, ill-natured scandal, idle gossip, love of preeminence, willingness to impute the worst possible motives to one another, sharp eyes for our brother's failings and none for our own. I am not pleading for any mawkish sentimentality, but for a manly peacefulness which comes from holiness. The holiest natures are always the most generous.

What a contrast the Church ought to present to the prevailing tone in the world! Does it? Why not? Because we do not possess the 'salt.' The dove flees from the cawing of rooks and the squabbling of kites and hawks.

The same principle applies to all our human affections. Our loves of all sorts are safe only when they are pure. Contrast the society based on common possession of the one Spirit with the companionships which repose on sin, or only on custom or neighbourhood. In all these there are possibilities of moral peril.

The same principle intensified gives us a picture of heaven and of hell. In the one are the 'solemn troops and sweet societies'; in the other, no peace, no confidence, no bonds, only isolation, because sin which is selfishness lies at the foundation of the awful condition.

Friends, without that salt our souls are dead and rotting. Here is the great cure. Make it your own. So purified, you will be preserved, but, on the other hand, unchecked sin leads to quick destruction.

The dead, putrefying carcass-what a picture of a soul abandoned to evil and fit only for Gehenna!

60)Mark 10:13-15

Mark

CHILDREN AND CHILDLIKE MEN

Mar. 10:13 - Mar. 10:15.

It was natural that the parents should have wanted Christ's blessing, so that they might tell their children in later days that His hand had been laid on their heads, and that He had prayed for them. And Christ did not think of it as a mere superstition. The disciples were not so akin to the children as He was, and they were a great deal more tender of His dignity than He. They thought of this as an interruption disturbing their high intercourse with Christ. 'These children are always in the way, this is tiresome,' etc.

I. Christ blessing children.

It is a beautiful picture: the great Messiah with a child in His arms. We could not think of Moses or of Paul in such an attitude. Without it, we should have wanted one of the sweetest, gentlest, most human traits in His character; and how world-wide in its effect that act has been! How many a mother has bent over her child with deeper love; how many a parent has felt the sacredness of the trust more vividly; how many a mother has been drawn nearer to Christ; and how many a little child has had childlike love to Him awakened by it; how much of practical benevolence and of noble sacrifice for children's welfare, how many great institutions, have really sprung from this one deed! And, if we turn from its effects to its meaning, it reveals Christ's love for children:-in its human side, as part of His character as man; in its deeper aspect as a revelation of the divine nature. It corrects dogmatic errors by making plain that, prior to all ceremonies or to repentance and faith, little children are loved and blessed by Him. Unconscious infants as these were folded in His arms and love. It puts away all gloomy and horrible thoughts which men have had about the standing of little children.

This is an act of Christ to infants expressive of His love to them, His care over them, their share in His salvation. Baptism is an act of man’s, a symbol of his repentance and dying to sin and rising to a new life in Christ, a profession of his faith, an act of obedience to his Lord. It teaches nothing as to the relation of infants to the love of Jesus or to salvation. It does not follow that because that love is most sure and precious, baptism must needs be a sign of it. The question, what does baptism mean, must be determined by examination of texts which speak about baptism; not by a side-light from a text which speaks about something else. There is no more reason for making baptism proclaim that Jesus Christ loves children than for making it proclaim that two and two make four.

II. The child’s nearness to Christ.

‘Of such is the kingdom.’ ‘Except ye be converted and become like little children,’ etc. Now this does not refer to innocence; for, as a matter of fact, children are not innocent, as all schoolmasters and nurses know, whatever sentimental poets may say. Innocence is not a qualification for admission to the kingdom. And yet it is true that ‘heaven lies about us in our infancy,’ and that we are further off from it than when we were children. Nor does it mean that children are naturally the subjects of the kingdom, but only that the characteristics of the child are those which the man must have, in order to enter the kingdom; that their natural disposition is such as Christ requires to be directed to Him; or, in other words, that childhood has a special adaptation to Christianity. For instance, take dependence, trust, simplicity, unconsciousness, and docility.

These are the very characteristics of childhood, and these are the very emotions of mind and heart which Christianity requires. Add the child’s strong faculty of imagination and its implicit belief; making the form of Christianity as the story of a life so easy to them. And we may add too: the absence of intellectual pride; the absence of the habit of dallying with moral truth. Everybody is to the child either a ‘good’ man or a ‘bad.’ They have an intense realisation of the unseen; an absence of developed vices and hard worldliness; a faculty of living in the present, free from anxious care and worldly hearts. But while thus they have special adaptation for receiving, they too need to come to Christ. These characteristics do not make Christians. They are to be directed to Christ. ‘Suffer them to come unto Me,’ the youngest child needs to, can, ought to, come to Christ. And how beautiful their piety is, ‘Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings Thou hast perfected praise.’ Their fresh, unworn trebles struck on Christ’s ear. Children ought to grow up in Christian households, ‘innocent from much transgression.’ We ought to expect them to grow up Christian.

III. The child and the Church.

The child is a pattern to us men. We are to learn of them as well as teach them; what they are naturally, we are to strive to become, not childish but childlike. ‘Even as a weaned child’ [see Psa. 131:1 - Psa. 131:3]. The child-spirit is glorified in manhood. It is possible for us to retain it, and lose none of the manhood. ‘In malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.’ The spirit of the kingdom is that of immortal youth.

The children are committed to our care.

The end of all training and care is that they should by voluntary act draw near to Him. This should be the aim in Sunday schools, for instance, and in families, and in all that we do for the poor around us.

See that we do not hinder their coming. This is a wide principle, viz., not to do anything which may interfere with those who are weaker and lower than we are finding their way to Jesus. The Church, and we as individual Christians, too often hinder this ‘coming.’

Do not hinder by the presentation of the Gospel in a repellent form, either hardly dogmatic or sour.

Do not hinder by the requirement of such piety as is unnatural to a child.

Do not hinder by inconsistencies. This is a warning for Christian parents in particular.

Do not hinder by neglect. ‘*Despise* not one of these little ones.’

61)Mark 10:17-27

Mark

ALMOST A DISCIPLE

Mar. 10:17 - Mar. 10:27.

There were courage, earnestness, and humility in this young ruler’s impulsive casting of himself at Christ’s feet in the way, with such a question. He was not afraid to recognise a teacher in Him whom his class scorned and hated; he was deeply sincere in his wish to possess eternal life, and in his belief that he was ready to do whatever was necessary for that end; he bowed himself as truly as he bent his knees before Jesus, and the noble enthusiasm of youth breathed in his desires, his words, and his gesture.

But his question betrayed the defect which poisoned the much that was right and lovable in him. He had but a shallow notion of what was ‘good,’ as is indicated by his careless ascription of goodness to one of whom he knew so little as he did of Jesus, and by his conception that it was a matter of deeds. He is too sure of himself; for he thinks that he is ready and able to do all good deeds, if only they are pointed out to him.

How little he understood the resistance of ‘the mind of the flesh’ to discerned duty! Probably he had had no very strong inclinations to contend against, in living the respectable life that had been his. It is only when we row against the stream that we find out how fast it runs. He was wrong about the connection of good deeds and eternal life, for he thought of them as done by himself, and so of buying it by his own efforts. Fatal errors could not have been condensed in briefer compass, or presented in conjunction with more that is admirable, than in his eager question, asked so modestly and yet so presumptuously.

Our Lord answers with a coldness which startles; but it was meant to rouse, like a dash of icy water flung in the face. ‘Why callest thou Me good?’ is more than a waving aside of a compliment, or a lesson in accuracy of speech. It rebukes the young man’s shallow conception of goodness, as shown by the facility with which he bestowed the epithet. ‘None is good save one, even God,’ cuts up by the roots his notion of the possibility of self-achieved goodness, since it traces all human goodness to its source in God. If He is the only good, then we cannot perform good acts by our own power, but must receive power from Him. How, then, can any man ‘inherit eternal life’ by good deeds, which he is only able to do because God has poured some of His own goodness into him? Jesus shatters the young man’s whole theory, as expressed in his question, at one stroke.

But while His reply bears directly on the errors in the question, it has a wider significance. Either Jesus is here repudiating the notion of His own sinlessness, and acknowledging, in contradiction to every other disclosure of His self-consciousness, that He too was not through and through good, or else He is claiming to be filled with God, the source of all goodness, in a wholly unique manner. It is a tremendous alternative, but one which has to be faced. While one is thankful if men even imperfectly apprehend the character and nature of Jesus, one cannot but feel that the question may fairly be put to the many who extol the beauty of His life, and deny His divinity, ‘Why callest thou Me good?’ Either He is ‘God manifest in the flesh,’ or He is not ‘good.’

The remainder of Christ’s answer tends to deepen the dawning conviction of the impossibility of meriting eternal life by acts of goodness, apart from dependence on God. He refers to the second half of the Decalogue only, not as if the first were less important, but because the breaches of the second are more easily brought to consciousness. In thus answering, Jesus takes the standpoint of the law, but for the purpose of bringing to the very opposite conviction from that which the young ruler expresses in reply. He declares that he has kept them all from his youth. Jesus would have had him confess that in them was a code too high to be fully obeyed. ‘By the law is the knowledge of sin,’ but it had not done its work in this young man. His shallow notion of goodness besets and blinds him still. He is evidently thinking about external deeds, and is an utter stranger to the depths of his own heart. It was an answer betraying great shallowness in his conception of duty and in his self-knowledge.

It is one which is often repeated still. How many of us are there who, if ever we cast a careless glance over our lives, are quite satisfied with their external respectability! As long as the chambers that look to the street are fairly clean, many think that all is right. But what is there rotting and festering down in the cellars? Do we ever go down there with the 'candle of the Lord' in our hands? If we do, the ruler's boast, 'All these have I kept,' will falter into 'All these have I broken.'

But let us be thankful for the love that shone in Christ's eyes as He looked on him. We may blame; He loved. Jesus saw the fault, but He saw the longing to be better. The dim sense of insufficiency which had driven this questioner to Him was clear to that all-knowing and all-loving heart. Do not let us harshly judge the mistakes of those who would fain be taught, nor regard the professions of innocence, which come from defective perception, as if they were the proud utterances of a Pharisee.

But Christ's love is firm, and can be severe. It never pares down His requirements to make discipleship easier. Rather it attracts by heightening them, and insisting most strenuously on the most difficult surrender. That is the explanation of the stringent demand next made by Him. He touched the poisonous swelling as with a sharp lancet when He called for surrender of wealth. We may be sure that it was this man's money which stood between him and eternal life. If something else had been his chief temptation, that something would have been signalised as needful to be given up. There is no general principle of conduct laid down here, but a specific injunction determined by the individual's character. All diseases are not treated with the same medicines. The command is but Christ's application of His broad requirement, 'If thine eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out.' The principle involved is, surrender what hinders entire following of Jesus. When that sacrifice is made, we shall be in contact with the fountain of goodness, and have eternal life, not as payment, but as a gift.

'His countenance fell,' or, according to Mark's picturesque word, 'became lowering,' like a summer sky when thunder-clouds gather. The hope went out of his heart, and the light faded from his eager face. The prick of the sharp spear had burst the bubble of his superficial earnestness. He had probably never had anything like so repugnant a duty forced upon him, and he cannot bring himself to yield. Like so many of us, he says, ‘I desire eternal life,’ but when it comes to giving up the dearest thing he recoils. ‘Anything else, Lord, thou shalt have, and welcome, but not that.’ And Christ says, ‘That, and nothing else, I must have, if thou art to have Me.’ So this man ‘went away sorrowful.’ His earnestness evaporated; he kept his possessions, and he lost Christ. A prudent bargain! But we may hope that, since ‘he went away sorrowful,’ he felt the ache of something lacking, that the old longings came back, and that he screwed up his resolution to make ‘the great surrender,’ and counted his wealth ‘but dung, that he might win Christ.’

What a world of sad and disappointed love there would be in that look of Jesus to the disciples, as the young ruler went away with bowed head! How graciously He anticipates their probable censure, and turns their thoughts rather on themselves, by the acknowledgment that the failure was intelligible, since the condition was hard! How pityingly His thoughts go after the retreating figure! How universal the application of His words! Riches may become a hindrance to entering the kingdom. They do so when they take the first place in the affections and in the estimates of good. That danger besets those who have them and those who have them not. Many a poor man is as much caught in the toils of the love of money as the rich are. Jesus modifies the form of His saying when He repeats it in the shape of ‘How hardly shall they that trust in riches,’ etc. It is difficult to have, and not to trust in them. Rich men’s disadvantages as to living a self-sacrificing Christian life are great. To Christ’s eyes, their position was one to be dreaded rather than to be envied.

So opposed to current ideas was such a thought, that the disciples, accustomed to think that wealth meant happiness, were amazed. If the same doctrine were proclaimed in any great commercial centre to-day, it would excite no less astonishment. At least, many Christians and others live as if the opposite were true. Wealth possessed, and not trusted in, but used aright, may become a help towards eternal life; but wealth as commonly regarded and employed by its possessors, and as looked longingly after by others, is a real, and in many cases an insuperable, obstacle to entering the strait gate. As soon drive a camel, humps and load and all, through ‘a needle’s eye,’ as get a man who trusts in the uncertainty of riches squeezed through that portal. No communities need this lesson more than our great cities.

No wonder that the disciples thought that, if the road was so difficult for rich men, it must be hard indeed. Christ goes even farther. He declares that it is not only hard, but ‘impossible,’ for a man by his own power to tread it. That was exactly what the young man had thought that he could do, if only he were directed.

So our Lord’s closing words in this context apply, not only to the immediately preceding question by the disciples, but may be taken as the great truth conveyed by the whole incident, Man’s efforts can never put him in possession of eternal life. He must have God’s power flowing into him if he is to be such as can enter the kingdom. It is the germ of the subsequent teaching of Paul; ‘The gift of God is eternal life.’ What we cannot do, Christ has done for us, and does in us. We must yield ourselves to Him, and surrender ourselves, and abandon what stands between us and Him, and then eternal life will enter into us here, and we shall enter into its perfect possession hereafter.

62)Mark 10:32

Mark

CHRIST ON THE ROAD TO THE CROSS

Mar. 10:32.

We learn from John’s Gospel that the resurrection of Lazarus precipitated the determination of the Jewish authorities to put Christ to death; and that immediately thereafter there was held the council at which, by the advice of Caiaphas, the formal decision was come to. Thereupon our Lord withdrew Himself into the wilderness which stretches south and east of Jerusalem; and remained there for an unknown period, preparing Himself for the Cross. Then, full of calm resolve, He came forth to die. This is the crisis in our Lord’s history to which my text refers. The graphic narrative of this Evangelist sets before us the little company on the steep rocky mountain road that leads up from Jericho to Jerusalem; our Lord, far in advance of

His followers, with a fixed purpose stamped upon His face, and something of haste in His stride, and that in His whole demeanour which shed a strange astonishment and awe over the group of silent and uncomprehending disciples.

That picture has not attracted the attention that it deserves. I think if we ponder it with sympathetic imagination helping us, we may get from it some very great lessons and glimpses of our Lord's inmost heart in the prospect of His Cross. And I desire simply to set forth two or three of the aspects of Christ's character which these words seem to me to suggest.

I. We have here, then, first, what, for want of a better name, I would call the heroic Christ.

I use the word to express simply strength of will brought to bear in the resistance to antagonism; and although that is a side of the Lord's character which is not often made prominent, it is there, and ought to have its due importance.

We speak of Him, and delight to think of Him, as the embodiment of all loving, gracious, gentle virtues, but Jesus Christ as the ideal man unites in Himself what men are in the habit, somewhat superciliously, of calling the masculine virtues, as well as those which they somewhat contemptuously designate the feminine. I doubt very much whether that is a correct distinction. I think that the heroism of endurance, at all events, is far more an attribute of a woman than of a man. But be that as it may, we are to look to Jesus Christ as presenting before us the very type of all which men call heroism in the sense that I have explained, of an iron will, incapable of deflection by any antagonism, and which coerces the whole nature to obedience to its behests.

There is nothing to be done in life without such a will. 'To be weak is to be miserable, doing or suffering.' And our Master has set us the example of this; that unless there run through a man's life, like the iron framework on the top of the spire of Antwerp Cathedral, on which graceful fancies are strung in stone, the rigid bar of an iron purpose that nothing can bend, the life will be nought and the man will be a failure. Christ is the pattern of heroic endurance, and reads to us the lesson to resist and persist, whatever stands between us and our goal.

So here, the Cross before Him flung out no repelling influence towards Him, but rather drew Him to itself. There is no reason that I can find for believing the modern theory of the rationalists' school that our Lord, in the course of His mission, altered His plan, or gradually had dawning upon His mind the conviction that to carry out His purposes He must be a martyr. That seems to me to be an entire misreading of the Gospel narrative which sets before us much rather this, that from the beginning of our Lord's public career there stood unmistakably before Him the Cross as the goal. He entertained no illusions as to His reception. He did not come to do certain work, and, finding that He could not do it, accepted the martyr's *death*; but He came for the twofold purpose of serving by His life, and of redeeming by His death. 'He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for the many.' And this purpose stood clear before Him, drawing Him to itself all through His career.

But, further, Christ's character teaches us what is the highest form of such strength and tenacity, viz., gentleness. There is no need to be brusque, obstinate, angular, self-absorbed, harsh, because we are fixed and determined in our course. These things are the caricatures and the diminutions, not the true forms nor the increase, of strength. The most tenacious steel is the most flexible, and he that has the most fixed and definite resolve may be the man that has his heart most open to all human sympathies, and is strong with the almightiness of gentleness, and not with the less close-knit strength of roughness and of hardness. Christ, because He is perfect love, is perfect power, and His will is fixed because it is love that fixes it. So let us take the lesson that the highest type of strength is strength in meekness, and that the Master who, I was going to say, kept His strength of will under, but I more correctly say, manifested His strength of will through, His gentleness, is the pattern for us.

II. Then again, we see here not only the heroic, but what I may call the self-sacrificing Christ.

We have not only to consider the fixed will which this incident reveals, but to remember the purpose on which it was fixed, and that He was hastening to His Cross. The very fact of our Lord's going back to Jerusalem, with that decree of the Sanhedrim still in force, was tantamount to His surrender of Himself to death. It was as if, in the old days, some excommunicated man with the decree of the Inquisition pronounced against him had gone into Rome and planted himself in the front of the piazza before the buildings of the Holy Office, and lifted up his testimony there. So Christ, knowing that this council has been held, that this decree stands, goes back, investing of set purpose His return with all the publicity that He can bring to bear upon it. For this once He seems to determine that He will 'cause His voice to be heard in the streets'; He makes as much of a demonstration as the circumstances will allow, and so acts in a manner opposite to all the rest of His life. Why? Because He had determined to bring the controversy to an end. Why? Was He flinging away His life in mere despair? Was He sinfully neglecting precautions? Was the same fanaticism of martyrdom which has often told upon men, acting upon Him? Were these His reasons? No, but He recognised that now that 'hour' of which He spoke so much had come, and of His own loving will offered Himself as our Sacrifice.

It is all-important to keep in view that Christ's death was His own voluntary act. Whatever external forces were brought to bear in the accomplishment of it, He died because He chose to die. The 'cords' which bound this sacrifice to the horns of the altar were cords woven by Himself.

So I point to the incident of my text, as linking in along with the whole series of incidents marking the last days of our Lord's life, in order to stamp upon His death unmistakably this signature, that it was His own act. Therefore the publicity that was given to His entry; therefore His appearance in the Temple; therefore the increased sharpness and unmistakableness of His denunciations of the ruling classes, the Pharisees and the scribes. Therefore the whole history of the Passion, all culminating in leaving this one conviction, that He had 'power to lay down His life,' that neither Caiaphas nor Annas, nor Judas, nor the band, nor priests, nor the Council, nor Pilate, nor Herod, nor soldiers, nor nails, nor cross, nor all together, killed Jesus, but that Jesus died because He would. The self-sacrifice of the Lord was not the flinging away of the life that He ought to have preserved, nor carelessness, nor the fanaticism of a martyr, nor the enthusiasm of a hero and a champion, but it was the voluntary death of Him who of His own will became in His death the ‘oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.’ Love to us, and obedience to the Father whose will He made His own, were the cords that bound Christ to the Cross on which He died. His sacrifice was voluntary; witness this fact that when He saw the Cross at hand He strode before His followers to reach that, the goal of His mission.

III. I venture to regard the incident as giving us a little glimpse of what I may call the shrinking Christ.

Do we not see here a trace of something that we all know? May not part of the reason for Christ’s haste have been that desire which we all have, when some inevitable grief or pain lies before us, to get it over soon, and to abbreviate the moments that lie between us and it? Was there not something of that feeling in our Lord’s sensitive nature when He said, for instance, ‘I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened until it be accomplished’? ‘I am come to send fire upon the earth, and O! how I wish that it were already kindled!’ Was there not something of the same feeling, which we cannot call impatient, but which we may call shrinking from the Cross, and therefore seeking to draw the Cross nearer, and have done with it, in the words which He addressed to the betrayer, ‘That thou doest, do quickly,’ as if He were making a last appeal to the man’s humanity, and in effect saying to him, ‘If you have a heart at all, shorten these painful hours, and let us have it over’? And may we not see, in that swift advance in front of the lagging disciples, some trace of the same feeling which we recognise to be so truly human? Christ did shrink from His Cross. Let us never forget that He recoiled from it, with the simple, instinctive, human shrinking from pain and death which is a matter of the physical nervous system, and has nothing to do with the will at all. If there had been no shrinking from it there had been no fixed will. If there had been no natural instinctive drawing back of the physical nature and its connections from the prospect of pain and death, there had been none of the heroism of which I am speaking. Though it does not become us to dogmatise about matters of which we know so little, I think we may fairly say that that shrinking never rose up into the regions of Christ’s will; never became a desire; never became a purpose. Howsoever the ship might be tossed by the waves, the will always kept its level equilibrium. Howsoever the physical nature might incline to this side or to that, the will always kept parallel with the great underlying divine will, the Father's purpose which He had come to effect. There was shrinking which was instinctive and human, but it never disturbed the fixed purpose to die. It had so much power over Him as to make Him march a little faster to the Cross, but it never made Him turn from it. And so He stands before us as the Conqueror in a real conflict, as having yielded Himself up by a real surrender, as having overcome a real difficulty, 'for the joy that was set before Him, having endured the Cross, despising the shame.'

IV. So, lastly, I would see here the lonely Christ.

In front of His followers, absorbed in the thought of what was drawing so near, gathering together His powers in order to be ready for the struggle, with His heart full of the love and the pity which impelled Him, He is surrounded as with a cloud which shuts Him 'out from their sight,' as afterwards the cloud of glory 'received Him.'

What a gulf there was between them and Him, between their thoughts and His, as He passed up that rocky way! What were they thinking about? 'By the way they had disputed amongst themselves which of them should be the greatest.' So far did they sympathise with the Master! So far did they understand Him! Talk about men with unappreciated aims, heroes that have lived through a lifetime of misunderstanding and never have had any one to sympathise with them! There never was such a lonely man in the world as Jesus Christ. Never was there one that carried so deep In His heart so great a purpose and so great a love, which none cared a rush about. And those that were nearest Him, and loved Him best, loved Him so blunderingly and so blindly that their love must often have been quite as much of a pain as of a joy.

In His Passion that solitude reached the point of agony. How touching in its unconscious pathos is His pleading request, 'Tarry ye here, and watch with Me!' How touching in their revelation of a subsidiary but yet very real addition to His pains are His words, 'All ye shall be offended because of Me this night.' Oh, dear brethren! every human soul has to go down into the darkness alone, however close may be the clasping love which accompanies us to the portal; but the loneliness of death was realised by Jesus Christ in a very unique and solemn manner. For round Him there gathered the clouds of a mysterious agony, only faintly typified by the darkness of eclipse which hid the material sun in the universe, what time He died.

And all this solitude, the solitude of unappreciated aims, and unshared purposes, and misunderstood sorrow during life, and the solitude of death with its elements ineffable of atonement;-all this solitude was borne that no human soul, living or dying, might ever be lonely any more. ‘Lo! I,’ whom you all left alone, ‘am with you,’ who left Me alone, ‘even till the end of the world.’

So, dear brethren, ponder that picture that I have been trying very feebly to set before you, of the heroic, self-sacrificing, shrinking, solitary Saviour. Take Him as your Saviour, your Sacrifice, your Pattern; and hear Him saying, ‘If any man serve Me, let him follow Me, and where I am there shall also My servant be.’

An old ecclesiastical legend conies into my mind at the moment, which tells how an emperor won the true Cross in battle from a pagan king, and brought it back, with great pomp, to Jerusalem; but found the gate walled up, and an angel standing before it, who said, ‘Thou bringest back the Cross with pomp and splendour. He that died upon it had shame for His companion; and carried it on His back, barefooted, to Calvary.’ Then, says the chronicler, the emperor dismounted from his steed, cast off his robes, lifted the sacred Rood on his shoulders, and with bare feet advanced to the gate, which opened of itself, and he entered in.

We have to go up the steep rocky road that leads from the plain where the Dead Sea is, to Jerusalem. Let us follow the Master, as He strides before us, the Forerunner and the Captain of our salvation.

63)Mark 10:35-45

Mark

DIGNITY AND SERVICE

Mar. 10:35 - Mar. 10:45.

How lonely Jesus was! While He strode before the Twelve, absorbed in thoughts of the Cross to which He was pressing, they, as they followed, ‘amazed’ and ‘afraid,’ were thinking not of what He would suffer, but of what they might gain. He saw the Cross. They understood little of it, but supposed that somehow it would bring in the kingdom, and they dimly saw thrones for themselves. Hence James and John try to secure the foremost places, and hence the others’ anger at what they thought an unfair attempt to push in front of them. What a contrast between Jesus, striding on ahead with ‘set’ face, and the Twelve unsympathetic and self-seeking, lagging behind to squabble about pre-eminence! We have in this incident two parts: the request and its answer, the indignation of the Ten and its rebuke. The one sets forth the qualifications for the highest place in the kingdom; the other, the paradox that pre-eminence there is service.

James and John were members of the group of original disciples who stood nearest to Jesus, and of the group of three whom He kept specially at His side. Their present place might well lead them to expect pre-eminence in the kingdom, but their trick was mean, as being an underhand attempt to forestall Peter, the remaining one of the three, as putting forward their mother as spokeswoman, and as endeavouring to entrap Jesus into promising before the disclosure of what was desired. Matthew tells that the mother was brought in order to make the request, and that Jesus brushed her aside by directing His answer to her sons [‘Ye know not what ye ask’]. The attempt to get Jesus’ promise without telling what was desired betrayed the consciousness that the wish was wrong. His guarded counter-question would chill them and make their disclosure somewhat hesitating.

Note the strangely blended good and evil of the request. The gold was mingled with clay; selfishness and love delighting in being near Him had both place in it. We may well recognise our own likenesses in these two with their love spotted with self-regard, and be grateful for the gentle answer which did not blame the desire for pre-eminence, but sought to test the love. It was not only to teach them, that He brought them back to think of the Cross which must precede the glory, but because His own mind was so filled with it that He saw that glory only as through the darkness which had to be traversed to reach it. But for us all the question is solemn and heart-searching.

Was not the answer, ‘We are able,’ too bold? They knew neither what they asked nor what they promised; but just as their ignorant question was partly redeemed by its love, their ignorant vow was ennobled by its very rashness, as well as by the unfaltering love in it. They did not know what they were promising, but they knew that they loved Him so well that to share anything with Him would be blessed. So it was not in their own strength that the swift answer rushed to their lips, but in the strength of a love that makes heroes out of cowards. And they nobly redeemed their pledge. We, too, if we are Christ’s, have the same question put to us, and, weak and timid as we are, may venture to give the same answer, trusting to His strength.

The full declaration of what had been only implied in the previous question follows. Jesus tells the two, and us all, that there are degrees in nearness to Him and in dignity in that future, but that the highest places are not given by favouritism, but attained by fitness. He does not deny that He gives, but only that He gives without regard to qualification. Paul expected the crown from ‘the righteous Judge,’ and one of these two brethren was chosen to record His promise of giving a seat on His throne to all that overcome. ‘Those for whom it is prepared’ are those who are prepared for it, and the preparation lies in ‘being made conformable to His death,’ and being so joined to Him that in spirit and mind we are partakers of His sufferings, whether we are called to partake of them in outward form or not.

The two had had their lesson, and next the Ten were to have theirs. The conversation with the former had been private, for it was hearing of it that made the others so angry. We can imagine the hot words among them as they marched behind Jesus, and how they felt ashamed already when ‘He called them.’ What they were to be now taught was not so much the qualifications for pre-eminence in the kingdom, whether here or hereafter, as the meaning of preeminence and the service to which it binds. In the world, the higher men are, the more they are served; in Christ’s kingdom, both in its imperfect earthly and in its perfect heavenly form, the higher men are, the more they serve. So-called ‘Christian’ nations are organised on the former un-Christian basis still. But wherever pre-eminence is not used for the general good, there authority rests on slippery foundations, and there will never be social wellbeing or national tranquillity until Christ’s law of dignity for service and dignity by service shapes and sweetens society. ‘But it is not so among you' laid down the constitution for earth, and not only for some remote heaven; and every infraction of it, sooner or later, brings a Nemesis.

The highest is to be the lowest; for He who is 'higher than the highest' has shown that such is the law which He obeys. The point in the heaven that is highest above our heads is in twelve hours deepest beneath our feet. Fellowship in Christ's sufferings was declared to be the qualification for our sharing in His dignity. His lowly service and sacrificial death are now declared to be the pattern for our use of dignity. Still the thought of the Cross looms large before Jesus, and He is not content with presenting Himself as the pattern of service only, but calls on His disciples to take Him as the pattern of utter self-surrender also. We cannot enter on the great teaching of these words, but can only beseech all who hear them to note how Jesus sets forth His death as the climax of His work, without which even that life of ministering were incomplete; how He ascribes to it the power of ransoming men from bondage and buying them back to God; and of how He presents even these unparalleled sufferings, which bear or need no repetition as long as the world lasts, as yet being the example to which our lives must be conformed. So His lesson to the angry Ten merges into that to the self-seeking two, and declares to each of us that, if we are ever to win a place at His right hand in His glory, we must here take a place with Him in imitating His life of service and His death of self-surrender for men's good. 'If we endure, we shall also reign with Him.'

64)Mark 10:46

Mark

BARTIMAEUS

Mar. 10:46.

The narrative of this miracle is contained in all the Synoptical Gospels, but the accounts differ in two respects-as to the number of men restored to sight, and as to the scene of the miracle. Matthew tells us that there were two men healed, and agrees with Mark in placing the miracle as Jesus was leaving Jericho. Mark says that there was one, and that the place was outside the gate in departing. Luke, on the other hand, agrees with Matthew as to the number, and differs from him and Mark as to the place, which he sets at the entrance into the city. The first of these two discrepancies may very easily be put aside. The greater includes the less; silence is not contradiction. To say that there was one does not deny that there were two. And if Bartimaeus was a Christian, and known to Mark's readers, as is probable from the mention of his name, it is easily intelligible how he, being also the chief actor and spokesman, should have had Mark's attention concentrated on him. As to the other discrepancy, many attempts have been made to remove it. None of them are altogether satisfactory. But what does it matter? The apparent contradiction may affect theories as to the characteristics of inspired books, but it has nothing to do with the credibility of the narratives, or with their value for us.

Mark's account is evidently that of an eye-witness. It is full of little particulars which testify thereto. Whether Bartimaeus had a companion or not, he was obviously the chief actor and spokesman. And the whole story seems to me to lend itself to the enforcement of some very important lessons, which I will try to draw from it.

I. Notice the beggar's petition and the attempts to silence it.

Remember that Jesus was now on His last journey to Jerusalem. That night He would sleep at Bethany; Calvary was but a week off. He had paused to win Zacchaeus, and now He has resumed His march to His Cross. Popular enthusiasm is surging round Him, and for the first time He does not try to repress it. A shouting multitude are escorting Him out of the city. They have just passed the gates, and are in the act of turning towards the mountain gorge through which runs the Jerusalem road. A long file of beggars is sitting, as beggars do still in Eastern cities, outside the gate, well accustomed to lift their monotonous wail at the sound of passing footsteps. Bartimaeus is amongst them. He asks, according to Luke, what is the cause of the bustle, and is told that 'Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.' The name wakes strange hopes in him, which can only be accounted for by his knowledge of Christ's miracles done elsewhere. It is a witness to their notoriety that they had filtered down to be the talk of beggars at city gates. And so, true to his trade, he cries, ‘Jesus . . . have mercy upon me!’

Now, note two or three things about that cry. The first is the clear insight into Christ’s place and dignity. The multitude said to him, ‘Jesus of Nazareth passeth by.’ That was all they cared for or knew. He cried, ‘Jesus, thou Son of David,’ distinctly recognising our Lord’s Messianic character, His power and authority, and on that power and authority he built a confidence; for he says not as some other suppliants had done, either ‘If Thou wilt Thou canst,’ or ‘If Thou canst do anything, have compassion on us.’ He is sure of both the power and the will.

Now, it is interesting to notice that this same clear insight other blind men in the Evangelist’s story are also represented as having had. Blindness has its compensations. It leads to a certain steadfast brooding upon thoughts, free from disturbing influences. Seeing Jesus did not produce faith; not seeing Him seems to have helped it. It left imagination to work undisturbed, and He was all the loftier to these blind men, because the conceptions of their minds were not limited by the vision of their eyes. At all events, here is a distinct piece of insight into Christ’s dignity, power, and will, to which the seeing multitudes were blind.

Note, further, how in the cry there throbs the sense of need, deep and urgent. And note how in it there is also the realisation of the possibility that the widely-flowing blessings of which Bartimaeus had heard might be concentrated and poured, in their full flood, upon himself. He individualises himself, his need, Christ’s power and willingness to help him. And because he has heard of so many who have, in like manner, received His healing touch, he comes with the cry, ‘Have mercy upon me.’

All this is upon the low level of physical blessings needed and desired. But let us lift it higher. It is a mirror in which we may see ourselves, our necessities, and the example of what our desire ought to be. Ah! brethren, the deep consciousness of impotence, need, emptiness, blindness, lies at the bottom of all true crying to Jesus Christ. If you have never gone to Him, knowing yourself to be a sinful man, in peril, present and future, from your sin, and stained and marred by reason of it, you never have gone to Him in any deep and adequate sense at all. Only when I thus know myself am I driven to cry, ‘Jesus! have mercy on me.’ And I ask you not to answer to me, but to press the question on your own consciences-’Have I any experience of such a sense of need; or am I groping in the darkness and saying, I see? am I weak as water, and saying I am strong?’ ‘Thou knowest not that thou art poor, and naked, and blind’; and so that Jesus of Nazareth should be passing by has never moved thy tongue to call, ‘Son of David, have mercy upon me!’

Again, this man’s cry expressed a clear insight into something at least of our Lord’s unique character and power. Brethren, unless we know Him to be all that is involved in that august title, ‘the Son of David,’ I do not think our cries to Him will ever be very earnest. It seems to me that they will only be so when, on the one hand, we recognise our need of a Saviour, and, on the other hand, behold in Him the Saviour whom we need. I can quite understand-and we may see plenty of illustrations of it all round us-a kind of Christianity real as far as it goes, but in my judgment very superficial, which has no adequate conception of what sin means, in its depth, in its power upon the victim of it, or in its consequences here and hereafter; and, that sense being lacking, the whole scale of Christianity, as it were, is lowered, and Christ comes to be, not, as I think the New Testament tells us that He is, the Incarnate Word of God, who for us men and for our salvation 'bare our sins in His own body on the tree,' and 'was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him,' but an Example, a Teacher, or a pure Model, or a social Reformer, or the like. If men think of Him only as such, they will never cry to Him, 'Have mercy upon me!'

Dear friends, I pray you, whether you begin with looking into your own hearts and recognising the crawling evils that have made their home there, and thence pass to the thought of the sort of Redeemer that you need and find in Christ-or whether you begin at the other side, and, looking upon the revealed Christ in all the fulness in which He is represented to us in the Gospels, from thence go back to ask yourselves the question, 'What sort of man must I be, if that is the kind of Saviour that I need?'-I pray you ever to blend these two things together, the consciousness of your own need of redemption in His blood and the assurance that by His death we are redeemed, and then to cry, 'Lord! have mercy upon me,' and claim your individual share in the wide-flowing blessing. Turn all the generalities of His grace into the particularity of your own possession of it. We have to go one by one to His cross, and one by one to pass through the wicket gate. We have not cried to Him as we ought, if our cry is only 'Christ, have mercy upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us.' We must be alone with Him, that into our own hearts we may receive all the fulness of His blessing; and our petition must be 'Thou Son of David! have mercy upon me.' Have you cried that? Notice, further, the attempts to stifle the cry. No doubt it was in defence of the Master's dignity, as they construed it, that the people sought to silence the persistent, strident voice piercing through their hosannas. Ah! they did not know that the cry of wretchedness was far sweeter to Him than their shallow hallelujahs. Christian people of all churches, and of some stiffened churches very especially, have been a great deal more careful of Christ’s dignity than He is, and have felt that their formal worship was indecorously disturbed when by chance some earnest voice forced its way through it with the cry of need and desire. But this man had been accustomed for many a day, sitting outside the gate, to reiterate his petition when it was unattended to, and to make it heard amidst the noise of passers-by. So he was persistently bold and importunate and shameless, as the shallow critics thought, in his crying. The more they silenced him, the more a great deal he cried. Would God that we had more crying like that; and that Christ’s servants did not so often seek to suppress it, as some of them do! If there are any of you who, by reason of companions, or cares, or habits, or sorrows, or a feeble conception of your own need or a doubtful recognition of Christ’s power and mercy, have been tempted to stop your supplications, do like Bartimaeus, and the more these, your enemies, seek to silence the deepest voice that is in you, the more let it speak.

II. So, notice Christ’s call and the suppliant’s response.

‘He stood still, and commanded him to be called.’ Remember that He was on His road to His Cross, and that the tension of spirit which the Evangelists notice as attaching to Him then, and which filled the disciples with awe as they followed Him, absorbed Him, no doubt, at that hour, so that He heard but little of the people’s shouts. But He did hear the blind beggar’s cry, and He arrested His march in order to attend to it.

Now, dear friends, I am not merely twisting a Biblical incident round to an interpretation which it does not bear, but am stating a plain un-rhetorical truth when I say that it is so still. Jesus Christ is no dead Christ who is to be remembered only. He is a living Christ who, at this moment, is all that He ever was, and is doing in loftier fashion all the gracious things that He did upon earth. That pause of the King is repeated now, and the quick ear which discerned the difference between the unreal shouts of the crowd, and the agony of sincerity in the cry of the beggar, is still open. He is in the heavens, surrounded by its glories, and, as I think Scripture teaches us, wielding providence and administering the affairs of the universe. He does not need to pause in order to hear you and me. If He did, He would-if I may venture upon such an impossible supposition-bid the hallelujahs of heaven hush themselves, and suspend the operations of His providence if need were, rather than that you or I, or any poor man who cries to Him, should be unheard and unhelped. The living Christ is as tender a friend, has as quick an ear, is as ready to help at once, to-day, as He was when outside the gate of Jericho; and every one of us may lift his or her poor, thin voice, and it will go straight up to the throne, and not be lost in the clamour of the hallelujahs that echo round His seat. Christ still hears and answers the cry of need. Send you it up, and you will find that true.

Notice the suppliant's response. That is a very characteristic right-about-face of the crowd, who one moment were saying, 'Hold your tongue and do not disturb Him,' and the next moment were all eager to encumber him with help, and to say, 'Rise up, be of good cheer; He calleth thee.' No thanks to them that He did. And what did the man do? Sprang to his feet-as the word rightly rendered would be-and flung away the frowsy rags that he had wrapped round him for warmth and softness of seat, as he waited at the gate; 'and he came to Jesus.' Brethren, 'casting aside every weight and the sin that doth so easily beset us, let us run' to the same Refuge. You have to abandon something if you are to go to Christ to be healed. I dare say you know well enough what it is. I do not; but certainly there is something that entangles your legs and keeps you from finding your way to Him. If there is nothing else, there is yourself and your trust in self, and that is to be put away. Cast away the 'garment spotted with the flesh' and go to Christ, and you will receive succour.

III. Notice the question of all-granting love, and the answer of conscious need.

'What wilt Thou that I should do unto thee?' A very few hours before He had put the same question with an entirely different significance, when the sons of Zebedee came to Him, and tried to get Him to walk blindfold into a promise. He upset their scheme with the simple question, 'What is it that you want?' which meant, 'I must know and judge before I commit Myself,' But when He said the same thing to Bartimaeus He meant exactly the opposite. It was putting the key of the treasure-house into the beggar's hand. It was the implicit pledge that whatever he desired he should receive.

He knew that the thing this man wanted was the thing that He delighted to give.

But the tenderness of these words, and the gracious promise that is hived in them, must not make us forget the singular authority that speaks in them. Think of a man doing as Jesus Christ did-standing before another and saying, ‘I will give you anything that you want.’ He must be either a madman or a blasphemer, or ‘God manifest in the flesh’; Almighty power guided by infinite love.

And what said the man? He had no doubt what he wanted most-the opening of these blind eyes of his. And, dear brother, if we knew ourselves as well as Bartimaeus knew his blindness, we should have as little doubt what it is that we need most. Suppose you had this wishing-cap that Christ put on Bartimaeus’s head put on yours: what would you ask? It is a penetrating question if men will answer it honestly. Think what you consider to be your chief need. Suppose Jesus Christ stood where I stand, and spoke to you: ‘What wilt thou that I should do for you?’ If you are a wise man, if you know yourself and Him, your answer will come as swiftly as the beggar’s-’Lord! heal me of my blindness, and take away my sin, and give me Thy salvation.’ There is no doubt about what it is that every one of us needs most. And there should be no doubt as to what each of us would ask first.

The supposition that I have been making is realised. That gracious Lord is here, and is ready to give you the satisfaction of your deepest need, if you know what it is, and will go to Him for it. ‘Ask! and ye shall receive.’

IV. Lastly, notice, sight given, and the Giver followed.

Bartimaeus had scarcely ended speaking when Christ began. He was blind at the beginning of Christ’s little sentence; he saw at the end of it. ‘Go thy way; thy faith hath saved thee.’ The answer came instantly, and the cure was as immediate as the movement of Christ’s heart in answer.

I am here to proclaim the possibility of an immediate passage from darkness to light. Some folk look askance at us when we talk about sudden conversions, but these are perfectly reasonable; and the experience of thousands asserts that they are actual. As soon as we desire, we have, and as soon as we have, we see. Whenever the lungs are opened the air rushes in; sometimes the air opens the lungs that it may. The desire is all but contemporaneous with the fulfilment, in Christ's dealing with men. The message is flashed along the wire from earth to heaven, in an incalculably brief space of time, and the answer comes, swift as thought and swifter than light. So, dear friends, there is no reason whatever why a similar instantaneous change should not pass over any man who hears the Good News. He may be unsaved when his hearing of it begins, and saved when his hearing of it ends. It is for himself to settle whether it shall be so or not.

Here we have a clear statement of the path by which Christ's mercy rushes into a man's soul. 'Thy faith hath saved thee.' But it was Christ's power that saved him. Yes, it was; but it was faith that made it possible for Christ's power to make him whole. Physical miracles indeed did not always require trust in Christ, as a preceding condition, but the possession of Christ's salvation does, and cannot but do so. There must be trust in Him, in order that we may partake of the salvation which is owing solely to His power, His love, His work upon the Cross. The condition is for us; the power comes from Him. My faith is the hand that grasps His; it is His hand, not mine, that holds me up. My faith lays hold of the rope; it is the rope and the Person above who holds it, that lift me out of the 'horrible pit and the miry clay.' My faith flees for refuge to the city; it is the city that keeps me safe from the avenger of blood. Brother! exercise that faith, and you will receive a better sight than was poured into Bartimaeus's eyes.

Now, all this story should be the story of each one of us. One modification we have to make upon it, for we do not need to cry persistently for mercy, but to trust in, and to take, the mercy that is offered. One other difference there is between Bartimaeus and many of my hearers. He knew what he needed, and some of you do not. But Christ is calling us all, and my business now is to say to each of you what the crowd said to the beggar, 'Rise! be of good cheer; He calleth thee.' If you will fling away your hindrances, and grope your path to His feet, and fall down before Him, knowing your deep necessity, and trusting to Him to supply it, He will save you. Your new sight will gaze upon your Redeemer, and you will follow Him in the way of loving trust and glad obedience.

Jesus Christ was passing by. He was never to be in Jericho any more. If Bartimaeus did not get His sight then, he would be blind all his days. Christ and His salvation are offered to thee, my brother, now. Perhaps if you let Him pass, you will never hear Him call again, and may abide in the darkness for ever. Do not run the risk of such a fate.

65)Mark 10:50

Mark

AN EAGER COMING

Mar. 10:50.

Mark's vivid picture-long wail of the man, crowd silencing him, but wheeling round when Christ calls him-and the quick energy of the beggar, flinging away his cloak, springing to his feet-and blind as he was, groping his way.

I. What we mean by coming to Jesus:-faith, communion, occupation of mind, heart, and will.

II. How eagerly we shall come when we are conscious of need. This man wanted his eyesight: do we not want too?

III. We must throw off our hindrances if we would come to Him.

Impediments of various kinds. 'Lay aside every weight'-not only sins, but even right things that hinder. Occupations, pursuits, affections, possessions, sometimes have to be put away altogether; sometimes but to be minimised and kept in restraint. There is no virtue in self-denial except as it helps us to come nearer Him.

IV. We must do it with quick, glad energy.

Bartimaeus springs to his feet at once with a bound. So we should leap to meet Jesus, our sight-giver. How slothful and languid we often are. We do not put half as much heart into our Christian life as people do into common things. Far more pains are taken by a ballet-dancer to learn her posturing than by most Christians to keep near Christ.

66)Mark 10:51

Mark

LOVE’S QUESTION

Mar. 10:51. - Act. 9:6.

Christ asks the first question of a petitioner, and the answer is a prayer for sight. Saul asks the second question of Jesus, and the answer is a command. Different as they are, we may bring them together. The one is the voice of love, desiring to be besought in order that it may bestow; the other is the voice of love, desiring to be commanded in order that it may obey.

Love delights in knowing, expressing, and fulfilling the beloved’s wishes.

I. The communion of Love delights on both sides in knowing the beloved’s wishes.

Christ delights in knowing ours. He encourages us to speak though He knows, because it is pleasant to Him to hear, and good for us to tell. His children delight in knowing His will.

II. It delights in expressing wishes-His commandments are the utterance of His Love:

His Providences are His loving ways of telling us what He desires of us, and if we love Him as we ought, both commandments and providences will be received by us as lovers do gifts that have ‘with my love’ written on them.

On the other hand, our love will delight in telling Him what we wish, and to speak all our hearts to Jesus will be our instinct in the measure of our love to Him.

III. It delights in fulfilling wishes-puts key of treasure-house into our hands.

He refused John and James. Be sure that He does still delight to give us our desires, and so be sure that when any of these are not granted there must be some loving reason for refusal.

Our delight should be in obedience, and only when our wills are submitted to His does He say to us, 'What wilt thou?' 'If ye abide in Me and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will and it shall be done unto you.'

67)Mark 11:2

Mark

A ROYAL PROGRESS

Mar. 11:2.

Two considerations help us to appreciate this remarkable incident of our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The first of these is its date. It apparently occurred on the Sunday of the Passion Week. The Friday saw the crosses on Calvary. The night before, Jesus had sat at the modest feast that was prepared in Bethany, where Lazarus was one of the guests, Martha was the busy servant, and Mary poured out the lavish treasures of her love upon His feet. The resurrection of Lazarus had created great popular excitement; and that excitement is the second consideration which throws light upon this incident. The people had rallied round Christ, and, consequently, the hatred of the official and ecclesiastical class had been raised to boiling-point. It was at that time that our Lord deliberately presented Himself before the nation as the Messiah, and stirred up still more this popular enthusiasm. Now, if we keep these two things in view, I think we shall be at the right point from which to consider the whole incident. To it, and not merely to the words which I have chosen as our starting-point, I wish to draw attention now. I am mistaken if there are not in it very important and practical lessons for ourselves.

I. First, note that deliberate assumption by Christ of royal authority.

I shall have a good deal to say presently about the main fact which bears upon that, but in the meantime I would note, in passing, a subsidiary illustration of it, in the errand on which He sent these messengers to the little ‘village over against’ them; and in the words which He put into their mouths. They were to go, and, without a word, to loose and bring away the colt fastened at a door, where it was evidently waiting the convenience of its owner to mount it. If, as was natural, any objection or question was raised, they were to answer exactly as servants of a king would do, if he sent them to make requisition on the property of his subjects, ‘The Lord hath need of him.’

I do not dwell on our Lord’s supernatural knowledge as coming out here; nor on the fact that the owner of the colt was probably a partial disciple, perhaps a secret one-ready to recognise the claim that was made. But I ask you to notice here the assertion, in act and word, of absolute authority, to which all private convenience and rights of possession are to give way unconditionally. The Sovereign’s need is a sovereign reason. What He requires He has a right to take. Well for us, brethren, if we yield as glad, as swift, and as unquestioning obedience to His claims upon us, and upon our possessions, as that poor peasant of Bethphage gave in the incident before us! But there is not only the assertion, here, of absolute authority, but note how, side by side with this royal style, there goes the acknowledgment of poverty. Here is a pauper King, who having nothing yet possesses all things. ‘The Lord’-that is a great title-’hath need of him’-that is a strange verb to go with such a nominative. But this little sentence, in its two halves of authority and of dependence, puts into four words the whole blessed paradox of the life of Jesus Christ upon earth. ‘Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor’; and being Lord and Owner of all things, yet owed His daily bread to ministering women, borrowed a boat to preach from, a house wherein to lay His head, a shroud and a winding-sheet to enfold His corpse, a grave in which to lie, and from which to rise, ‘the Lord of the dead and of the living.’

Not only so, but there is another thought suggested by these words. The accurate, or, at least, the probable reading, of one part of the third verse is given in the Revised Version, ‘Say ye that the Lord hath need of him, and straightway he will send him back hither.’ That is to say, these last words are not Christ's assurance to His two messengers that their embassy would succeed, but part of the message which He sends by them to the owner of the colt, telling him that it was only a loan which was to be returned. Jesus Christ is debtor to no man. Anything given to Him comes back again. Possessions yielded to that Lord are recompensed a hundredfold in this life, if in nothing else in that there is a far greater sweetness in that which still remains. 'What I gave I have,' said the wise old epitaph. It is always true. Do you not think that the owner of the patient beast, on which Christ placidly paced into Jerusalem on His peaceful triumph, would be proud all his days of the use to which his animal had been put, and would count it as a treasure for the rest of its life? If you and I will yield our gifts to Him, and lay them upon His altar, be sure of this, that the altar will ennoble and will sanctify all that is laid upon it. All that we have rendered to Him gains fragrance from His touch, and comes back to us tenfold more precious because He has condescended to use it.

So, brethren, He still moves amongst us, asking for our surrender of ourselves and of our possessions to Him, and pledging Himself that we shall lose nothing by what we give to Him, but shall be infinitely gainers by our surrender. He still needs us. Ah! if He is ever to march in triumph through the world, and be hailed by the hosannas of all the tribes of the earth, it is requisite for that triumph that His children should surrender first themselves, and then all that they are, and all that they have, to Him. To us there comes the message, 'The Lord hath need of you.' Let us see that we answer as becomes us.

But then, more important is the other instance here of this assertion of royal authority. I have already said that we shall not rightly understand it unless we take into full account the state of popular feeling at the time. We find in John's Gospel great stress laid on the movement of curiosity and half-belief which followed on the resurrection of Lazarus. He tells us that crowds came out from Jerusalem the night before to gaze upon the Lifebringer and the quickened man. He also tells us that another enthusiastic crowd flocked out of Jerusalem before Jesus sent for the colt to the neighbouring village. We are to keep in mind, therefore, that what He did here was done in the midst of a great outburst of popular enthusiasm. We are to keep in mind, too, the season of Passover, when religion and patriotism, which were so closely intertwined in the life of the Jews, were in full vigorous exercise. It was always a time of anxiety to the Roman authorities, lest this fiery people should break out into insurrection. Jerusalem at the Passover was like a great magazine of combustibles, and into it Jesus flung a lighted brand amongst the inflammable substances that were gathered there. We have to remember, too, that all His life long He had gone exactly on the opposite tack. Remember how He betook Himself to the mountain solitudes when they wanted to make Him a king. Remember how He was always damping down Messianic enthusiasm. But here, all at once, He reverses His whole conduct, and deliberately sets Himself to make the most public and the most exciting possible demonstration that He was 'King of Israel.'

For what was it that He did? Our Evangelist here does not quote the prophecy from Zechariah, but two other Evangelists do. Our Lord then deliberately dressed Himself by the mirror of prophecy, and assumed the very characteristics which the prophet had given long ago as the mark of the coming King of Zion. If He had wanted to excite a popular commotion, that is what He would have done.

Why did He act thus? He was under no illusion as to what would follow. For the night before He had said: 'She hath come beforehand to anoint My body for the burial.' He knew what was close before Him in the future. And, because He knew that the end was at hand, He felt that, once at least, it was needful that He should present Himself solemnly, publicly, I may almost say ostentatiously, before the gathered nation, as being of a truth the Fulfiller and the fulfilment of all the prophecies and the hopes built upon them that had burned in Israel, with a smoky flame indeed, but for so many ages. He also wanted to bring the rulers to a point. I dare not say that He precipitated His death, or provoked a conflict, but I do say that deliberately, and with a clear understanding of what He was doing, He took a step which forced them to show their hand. For after such a public avowal of who He was, and such public hosannas surging round His meek feet as He rode into the city, there were but two courses open for the official class: either to acknowledge Him, or to murder Him. Therefore He reversed His usual action, and deliberately posed, by His own act, as claiming to be the Messiah long prophesied and long expected.

Now, what do you think of the man that did that? If He did it, then either He is what the rulers called Him, a ‘deceiver,’ swollen with inordinate vanity and unfit to be a teacher, or else we must fall at His feet and say ‘Rabbi! Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel.’ I venture to believe that to extol Him and to deny the validity of His claims is in flagrant contradiction to the facts of His life, and is an unreasonable and untenable position.

II. Notice the revelation of a new kind of King and Kingdom.

Our Evangelist, from whom my text is taken, has nothing to say about Zechariah’s prophecy which our Lord set Himself to fulfil. He only dwells on the pathetic poverty of the pomp of the procession. But other Evangelists bring into view the deeper meaning of the incident. The centre-point of the prophecy, and of Christ’s intentional fulfilment of it, lies in the symbol of the meek and patient animal which He bestrode. The ass was, indeed, used sometimes in old days by rulers and judges in Israel, but the symbol was chosen by the prophet simply to bring out the peacefulness and the gentleness inherent in the Kingdom, and the King who thus advanced into His city. If you want to understand the meaning of the prophet’s emblem, you have only to remember the sculptured slabs of Assyria and Babylon, or the paintings on the walls of Egyptian temples and tombs, where Sennacherib or Rameses ride hurtling in triumph in their chariots, over the bodies of prostrate foes; and then to set by the side of these, ‘Rejoice! O daughter of Zion; thy King cometh unto thee riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.’ If we want to understand the significance of this sweet emblem, we need only, further, remember the psalm that, with poetic fervour, invokes the King: ‘Gird Thy sword upon Thy thigh, O Most Mighty, and in Thy majesty ride prosperously . . . and Thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things. Thine arrows are sharp in the heart of the King’s enemies; the people fall under Thee.’ That is all that that ancient singer could conceive of the triumphant King of the world, the Messiah; a conqueror, enthroned in His chariot, and the twanging bowstring, drawn by His strong hand, impelling the arrow that lodged in the heart of His foes. And here is the fulfilment. ‘Go ye into the village over against you, and ye shall find a colt tied . . . And they set Him thereon.’ Christ’s kingdom, like its King, has no power but gentleness and the omnipotence of patient love.

If ‘Christian’ nations, as they are called, and Churches had kept the significance of that emblem in mind, do you think that their hosannas would have gone up so often for conquerors on the battlefields; or that Christian communities would have been in complicity with war and the glorifying thereof, as they have been? And, if Christian churches had remembered and laid to heart the meaning of this triumphal entry, and its demonstration of where the power of the Master lay, would they have struck up such alliances with worldly powers and forms of force as, alas! have weakened and corrupted the Church for hundreds of years? Surely, surely, there is no more manifest condemnation of war and the warlike spirit, and of the spirit which finds the strength of Christ’s Church in anything material and violent, than is that solitary instance of His assumption of royal state when thus He entered into His city. I need not say a word, brethren, about the nature of Christ’s kingdom as embodied in His subjects, as represented in that shouting multitude that marched around Him. How Caesar in his golden house in Rome would have sneered and smiled at the Jewish peasant, on the colt, and surrounded by poor men, who had no banners but the leafy branches from the trees, and no pomp to strew in his way but their own worn garments! And yet these were stronger in their devotion, in their enthusiastic conviction that He was the King of Israel and of the whole earth, than Caesar, with all his treasures and with all his legions and their sharp swords. Christ accepts poor homage because He looks for hearts; and whatever the heart renders is sweet to Him. He passes on through the world, hailed by the acclamations of grateful hearts, needing no bodyguard but those that love Him; and they need to bear no weapons in their hands, but their mission is to proclaim with glad hearts hosannas to the King that ‘cometh in the name of the Lord.’

There is one more point that I may note. Another of the Evangelists tells us that it was when the humble cortège swept round the shoulder of Olivet, and caught sight of the city gleaming in the sunshine, across the Kedron valley, that they broke into the most rapturous of their hosannas, as if they would call to the city that came in view to rejoice and welcome its King. And what was the King doing when that sight burst upon Him, and while the acclamations eddied round Him? His thoughts were far away. His eyes with divine prescience looked on to the impending end, and then they dimmed, and filled with tears; and He wept over the city.

That is our King; a pauper King, a meek and patient King, a King that delights in the reverent love of hearts, a King whose armies have no swords, a King whose eyes fill with tears as He thinks of men’s woes and cries. Blessed be such a King!

III. Lastly, we have the Royal visitation of the Temple.

Our Evangelist has no word to speak about the march of the procession down into the valley, and up on the other side, and through the gate, and into the narrow streets of the city that was ‘moved’ as they passed through it. His language sounds as if he considered that our Lord’s object in entering Jerusalem at all was principally to enter the Temple. He ‘looked round on all things’ that were there. Can we fancy the keen observance, the recognition of the hidden bad and good, the blazing indignation, and yet dewy pity, in those eyes? His visitation of the Temple was its inspection by its Lord. And it was an inspection in order to cleanse. To-day He looked; to-morrow He wielded the whip of small cords. His chastisement is never precipitate. Perfect knowledge wields His scourge, and pronounces condemnation.

Brethren, Jesus Christ comes to us as a congregation, to the church to which we belong, and to us individually, with the same inspection. He whose eyes are a flame of fire, says to His churches to-day, ‘I know thy works.’ What would He think if He came to us and tested us?

In the incident of my text He was fulfilling another ancient prophecy, which says, ‘The Lord shall suddenly come to His Temple, and . . . sit as a refiner of silver . . . like a refiner’s fire and as fuller’s soap . . . and He shall purify the sons of Levi. . .. Then shall the offering of Jerusalem be pleasant, as in the days of old.’

We need nothing more, we should desire nothing more earnestly, than that He would come to us: ‘Search me, O Christ, and know me. And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.’ Jesus Christ is the King of England as truly as of Zion; and He is your King and mine. He comes to each of us, patient, meek, loving; ready to bless and to cleanse. Dear brother, do you open your heart to Him? Do you acknowledge Him as your King? Do you count it your highest honour if He will use you and your possessions, and condescend to say that He has need of such poor creatures as we are? Do you cast your garments in the way, and say: ‘Ride on, great Prince’? Do you submit yourself to His inspection, to His cleansing? Remember, He came once on ‘a colt, the foal of an ass, meek, and having salvation.’ He will come ‘on the white horse, in righteousness to judge and to make war’ and with power to destroy.

Oh! I beseech you, welcome Him as He comes in gentle love, that when He comes in judicial majesty you may be among the ‘armies of heaven that follow after,’ and from immortal tongues utter rapturous and undying hosannas.

68)Mark 11:3

Mark

CHRIST’S NEED OF US AND OURS

Mar. 11:3.

You will remember that Jesus Christ sent two of His disciples into the village that looked down on the road from Bethany to Jerusalem, with minute instructions and information as to what they were to do and find there. The instructions may have one of two explanations-they suggest either superhuman knowledge or a previous arrangement. Perhaps, although it is less familiar to our thoughts, the latter is the explanation. There is a remarkable resemblance, in that respect, to another incident which lies close beside this one in time, when our Lord again sent two disciples to make preparation for the Passover, and, with similar minuteness, told them that they would find, at a certain point, a man bearing a pitcher of water. Him they were to accost, and he would take them to the room that had been prepared. Now the old explanation of both these incidents is that Jesus Christ knew what was going to happen. Another possible explanation, and in my view more probable and quite as instructive, is, that Jesus Christ had settled with the two owners what was to happen. Clearly, the owner of the colt was a disciple, because at once he gave up his property when the message was repeated, ‘the Lord hath need of him.’ Probably he had been one of the guests at the modest festival that had been held the night before, in the village close by, in Simon’s house, and had seen how Mary had expended her most precious possession on the Lord, and, under the influence of the resurrection of Lazarus, he, too, perhaps, was touched, and was glad to arrange with Jesus Christ to have his colt waiting there at the cross-road for his Master’s convenience. But, be that as it may, it seems to me that this incident, and especially these words that I have read for a text, carry very striking and important lessons for us, whether we look at them in connection with the incident itself, or whether we venture to give them a somewhat wider application. Let me take these two points in turn.

I. Now, what strikes one about our Lord’s requisitioning the colt is this, that here is a piece of conduct on His part singularly unlike all the rest of His life.

All through it, up to this last moment, His one care was to damp down popular enthusiasm, to put on the drag whenever there came to be the least symptom of it, to discourage any reference to Him as the Messiah-King of Israel, to shrink back from the coarse adulation of the crowd, and to glide quietly through the world, blessing and doing good. But now, at the end, He flings off all disguise. He deliberately sets Himself, at a time when popular enthusiasm ran highest and was most turbid and difficult to manage, at the gathering of the nation for the Passover in Jerusalem, to cast an effervescing element into the caldron. If He had planned to create a popular rising, He could not have done anything more certain to bring it about than what He did that morning when He made arrangements for a triumphal procession into the city, amidst the excited crowds gathered from every quarter of the land. Why did He do that? What was the meaning of it? Then there is another point in this requisitioning of the colt. He not only deliberately set Himself to stir up popular excitement, but He consciously did what would be an outward fulfilment of a great Messianic prophecy. I hope you are wiser than to fancy that Zechariah’s prophecy of the peaceful monarch who was to come to Zion, meek and victorious, and riding upon a ‘colt the foal of an ass,’ was fulfilled by the outward fact of Christ being mounted on this colt ‘whereon never man sat.’ That is only the shell, and if there had been no such triumphal entry, our Lord would as completely have fulfilled Zechariah’s prophecy. The fulfilment of it did not depend on the petty detail of the animal upon which He sat when He entered the city, nor even on that entrance. The meaning of the prophecy was that to Zion, wherever and whatever it is, there should come that Messianic King, whose reign owed nothing to chariots and horses and weapons of war for its establishment, but who, meek and patient, pacing upon the humble animal used only for peaceful services, and not mounted on the prancing steed of the warrior, should inaugurate the reign of majesty and of meekness. Our Lord uses the external fact just as the prophet had used it, as of no value in itself, but as a picturesque emblem of the very spirit of His kingdom. The literal fulfilment was a kind of finger-post for inattentive onlookers, which might induce them to look more closely, and so see that He was indeed the King Messiah, because of more important correspondences with prophecy than His once riding on an ass. Do not so degrade these Old Testament prophecies as to fancy that their literal fulfilment is of chief importance. That is the shell: the kernel is the all-important thing, and Jesus Christ would have fulfilled the r? that was sketched for Him by the prophets of old, just as completely if there never had been this entrance into Jerusalem.

But, further, the fact that He had to borrow the colt was as significant as the choice of it. For so we see blended two things, the blending of which makes the unique peculiarity and sublimity of Christ’s life: absolute authority, and meekness of poverty and lowliness. A King, and yet a pauper-King! A King claiming His dominion, and yet obliged to borrow another man’s colt in order that He might do it! A strange kind of monarch!-and yet that remarkable combination runs through all His life. He had to be obliged to a couple of fishermen for a boat, but He sat in it, to speak words of divine wisdom. He had to be obliged to a lad in the crowd for barley loaves and fishes, but when He took them into His hands they were multiplied. He had to be obliged for a grave, and yet He rose from the borrowed grave the Lord of life and death. And so when He would pose as a King, He has to borrow the regalia, and to be obliged to this anonymous friend for the colt which made the emphasis of His claim. ‘Who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich.’

II. And now turn for a moment to the wider application of these words.

‘The Lord hath need of him.’ That opens the door to thoughts, that I cannot crowd into the few minutes that I have at my disposal, as to that great and wonderful truth that Christ cannot assume His kingdom in this world without your help, and that of the other people whose hearts are touched by His love. ‘The Lord hath need’ of them. Though upon that Cross of Calvary He did all that was necessary for the redemption of the world and the salvation of humanity as a whole, yet for the bearing of that blessing into individual hearts, and for the application of the full powers that are stored in the Gospel and in Jesus, to their work in the world, the missing link is man. We ‘are fellow-labourers with God.’ We are Christ’s tools. The instruments by which He builds His kingdom are the souls that have already accepted His authority. ‘The Lord hath need of him,’ though, as the psalmist sings, ‘If I were hungry I would not tell thee, for all the beasts of the forest are Mine.’ Yes, and when the Word was made flesh, He had need of one of the humblest of the beasts. The Christ that redeemed the world needs us, to carry out and to bring into effect His redemption. ‘God mend all,’ said one, and the answer was, ‘We must help Him to mend it.’

Notice again the authoritative demand, which does not contemplate the possibility of reluctance or refusal. ‘The Lord hath need of him.’ That is all. There is no explanation or motive alleged to induce surrender to the demand. This is a royal style of speech. It is the way in which, in despotic countries, kings lay their demands upon a poor man’s whole plenishing and possession, and sweep away all.

Jesus Christ comes to us in like fashion, and brushes aside all our convenience and everything else, and says, ‘I want you, and that is enough.’ Is it not enough? Should it not be enough? If He demands, He has the right to demand. For we are His, ‘bought with a price.’ All the slave’s possessions are his owner’s property. The slave is given a little patch of garden ground, and perhaps allowed to keep a fowl or two, but the master can come and say, ‘Now I want them,’ and the slave has nothing for it but to give them up.

‘The Lord hath need of him’ is in the autocratic tone of One who has absolute power over us and ours. And that power, where does it come from? It comes from His absolute surrender of Himself to us, and because He has wholly given Himself for us. He does not expect us to say one contrary word when He sends and says, ‘I have need of you, or of yours.’

Here, again, we have an instance of glad surrender. The last words of my text are susceptible of a double meaning. ‘Straightway he will send him hither’-who is ‘he’? It is usually understood to be the owner of the colt, and the clause is supposed to be Christ’s assurance to the two messengers of the success of their errand. So understood, the words suggest the great truth that Love loosens the hand that grasps possessions, and unlocks our treasure-houses. There is nothing more blessed than to give in response to the requirement of love. And so, to Christ’s authoritative demand, the only proper answer is obedience swift and glad, because it is loving. Many possibilities of joy and blessing are lost by us through not yielding on the instant to Christ’s demands. Hesitation and delay are dangerous. In ‘straightway’ complying are security and joy. If the owner had begun to say to himself that he very much needed the colt, or that he saw no reason why some one else’s beast should not have been taken, or that he would send the animal very soon, but must have the use of him for an hour or two first, he would probably never have sent him at all, and so would have missed the greatest honour of his life. As soon as I know what Christ wants from me, without delay let me do it; for if I begin with delaying I shall probably end with declining. The Psalmist was wise when he laid emphasis on the swiftness of his obedience, and said, ‘I made haste and delayed not, but made haste to keep Thy commandments.’

But another view of the words makes them part of the message to the owner of the colt, and not of the assurance to the disciples. ‘Say ye that the Lord hath need of him, and that straightway [when He has done with him] He will send him back again.’ That is a possible rendering, and I am disposed to think it is the proper one. By it the owner is told that he is not parting with his property for good and all, that Jesus only wishes to borrow the animal for the morning, and that it will be returned in the afternoon. What does that view of the words suggest to us? Do you not think that that colt, when it did come back-for of course it came back some time or other,-was a great deal more precious to its owner than it ever had been before, or ever could have been if it had not been lent to Christ, and Christ had not made His royal entry upon it? Can you not fancy that the man, if he was, as he evidently was, a disciple and lover of the Lord, would look at it, especially after the Crucifixion and the Ascension, and think, ‘What an honour to me, that I provided the mount for that triumphal entry!’? It is always so. If you wish anything to become precious, lend it to Jesus Christ, and when it comes back again, as it will come back, there will be a fragrance about it, a touch of His fingers will be left upon it, a memory that He has used it. If you desire to own yourselves, and to make yourselves worth owning, give yourselves to Christ. If you wish to get the greatest possible blessing and good out of possessions, lay them at His feet. If you wish love to be hallowed, joy to be calmed, perpetuated, and deepened, carry it to Him. ‘If the house be worthy, your peace shall rest upon it; if not,’ like the dove to the ark when it could find no footing in the turbid and drowned world, ‘it shall come back to you again. Straightway He will ‘send him back again,’ and that which I give to Jesus He will return enhanced, and it will be more truly and more blessedly mine, because I have laid it in His hands. This ‘altar’ sanctifies the giver and the gift.

69)Mark 11:13-14

Mark

NOTHING BUT LEAVES

Mar. 11:13 - Mar. 11:14.

The date of this miracle has an important bearing on its meaning and purpose. It occurred on the Monday morning of the last week of Christ’s ministry. That week saw His last coming to Israel, ‘if haply He might find any thing thereon.’ And if you remember the foot-to-foot duel with the rulers and representatives of the nation, and the words, weighty with coming doom, which He spoke in the Temple on the subsequent days, you will not doubt that the explanation of this strange and anomalous miracle is that it is an acted parable, a symbol of Israel in its fruitlessness and in its consequent barrenness to all coming time.

This is the only point of view, as it seems to me, from which the peculiarities of the miracle can either be warranted or explained. It is our

Lord’s only destructive act. The fig-tree grew by the wayside; probably, therefore, it belonged to nobody, and there was no right of property affected by its loss. He saw it from afar, ‘having leaves,’ and that was why, three months before the time, He went to look if there were figs on it. For experts tell us that in the fig-tree the leaves accompany, and do not precede, the fruit. And so this one tree, brave in its show of foliage amidst leafless companions, was a hypocrite unless there were figs below the leaves. Therefore Jesus came, if haply He might find anything thereon, and finding nothing, perpetuated the condition which He found, and made the sin its own punishment.

Now all that is plain symbol, and so I ask you to look with me, for a few moments, at these three things-[1] What Christ sought and seeks; [2] What He found and often finds; [3] What He did when He found it.

I. What Christ sought and seeks.

He came ‘seeking fruit.’ Now I may just notice, in passing, how pathetically and beautifully this incident suggests to us the true, dependent, weak manhood of that great Lord. In all probability He had just come from the home of Mary and Martha, and it is strange that having left their hospitable abode He should be ‘an hungered.’ But so it was. And even with all the weight of the coming crisis pressing upon His soul, He was conscious of physical necessities, as one of us might have been, and perhaps felt the more need for sustenance because so terrible a conflict was waiting Him. Nor, I think, need we shrink from recognising another of the characteristics of humanity here, in the limitations of His knowledge and in the real expectation, which was disappointed, that He might find fruit where there were leaves. I do not want to plunge into depths far too deep for any man to find sure footing in, nor seek to define the undefinable, nor to explain how the divine inosculates with the human, but sure I am that Jesus Christ was not getting up a scene in order to make a parable out of His miracle; and that the hunger and the expectancy and the disappointment were all real, however they afterwards may have been turned by Him to a symbolical purpose. And so here we may see the weak Christ, the limited Christ, the true human Christ. But side by side, as is ever the case, with this manifestation of weakness, there comes an apocalypse of power. Wherever you have, in the history of our Lord, some signal exemplification of human infirmity, you have flashed out through ‘the veil, that is, His flesh,’ some beam of His glory. Thus this hungry Man could say, ‘No fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever’; and His bare word, the mere forth-putting and manifestation of His will, had power on material things. That is the sign and impress of divinity.

But I pass from that, which is not my special point now. What did Christ seek? ‘Fruit.’ And what is fruit in contradistinction to leaves? Character and conduct like His. That is our fruit. All else is leafage. As the Apostle says, ‘Love, joy, hope, peace, righteousness in the Holy Ghost’; or, to put it into one word, Christ-likeness in our inmost heart and nature, and Christ-likeness, so far as it may be possible for us, in our daily life, that is the one thing that our Lord seeks from us.

O brethren! we do not realise enough for ourselves, day by day, that it was for this end that Jesus Christ came. The cradle in Bethlehem, the weary life, the gracious words, the mighty deeds, the Cross on Calvary, the open grave, Olivet with His last footprints; His place on the throne, Pentecost, they were all meant for this, to make you and me good men, righteous people, bearing the fruits of holy living and conduct corresponding to His own pattern. Emotions of the selectest kind, religious experience of the profoundest and truest nature, these are blessed and good. They are the blossom which sets into fruit. And they come for this end, that by the help of them we may be made like Jesus Christ. He has yet to learn what is the purpose and the meaning of the Gospel who fixes upon anything else as its ultimate design than the production in us, as the results of the life of Christ dwelling in our hearts, of character and conduct like to His.

I suppose I ought to apologise for talking such commonplace platitudes as these, but, brethren, the most commonplace truths are usually the most important and the most impotent. And no ‘platitude’ is a platitude until you have brought it so completely into your lives that there is no room for a fuller working of it out. So I come to you, Christian men and women, real and nominal, now with this for my message, that Jesus Christ seeks from you this first and foremost, that you shall be good men and women ‘according to the pattern that has been showed us in the Mount,’ according to the likeness of His own stainless perfection.

And do not forget that Jesus Christ hungers for that goodness. That is a strange, and infinitely touching, and absolutely true thing. He is only ‘satisfied,’ and the hunger of His heart appeased, when ‘He sees of the travail of His soul’ in the righteousness of His servants. I passed a day or two ago, in a country place, a great field on which there was stuck up a board that said, ‘--’s trial ground for seeds.’ This world is Christ’s trial ground for seeds, where He is testing you and me to see whether it is worth while cultivating us any more, and whether we can bring forth any ‘fruit to perfection’ fit for the lips and the refreshment of the Owner and Lord of the vineyard Christ longs for fruit from us. And-strange and wonderful, and yet true-the ‘bread’ that He eats is the service of His servants. That, amongst other things, is what is meant by the ancient institution of sacrifice, ‘the food of the gods.’ Christ’s food is the holiness and obedience of His children. He comes to us, as He came to that fig-tree, seeking from us this fruit which He delights in receiving. Brethren, we cannot think too much of Christ’s unspeakable gift in itself and in its consequences; but we may easily think too little, and I am sure that a great many of us do think too little, of Christ’s demands. He is not an austere man, ‘reaping where He did not sow’; but having sowed so much, He does look for the harvest. He comes to us with the heart-moving appeal, ‘I have given all to thee; what givest thou to Me?’ ‘My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill; and he fenced it and planted it, and built a tower and a wine-press in it’-and what then?-’and he looked that it should bring forth grapes.’ Christ comes to each of you professing Christians, and asks, ‘What fruit hast thou borne after all My sedulous husbandry?’

II. Now note, in the next place, what Christ found.

‘Nothing but leaves.’ I have already said that we are told that the habit of growth of these trees is that the fruit accompanies, and sometimes precedes, the leaves. Whether it is so or no, let me remind you that leaves are an outcome of the life as well as fruit, and that they benefit the tree, and assist in the production of the fruit which it ought to bear. And so the symbol suggests things that are good in themselves, ancillary and subsidiary to the production of fruit, but which sometimes tend to such disproportionate exuberance of growth as that all the life of the tree runs to leaf, and there is riot a berry to be found on it.

And if you want to know what such things are, remember the condition of the rulers of Israel at that time. They prided themselves upon their nominal, external, hereditary connection with a system of revelation, they trusted in mere ritualisms, they had ossified religion into theology, and degraded morality into casuistry. They thought that because they had been born Jews, and circumcised, and because there was a daily sacrifice going on in the Temple, and because they had Rabbis who could split hairs ad infinitum, therefore they were the ‘temple of the Lord,’ and God’s chosen.

And that is exactly what hosts of pagans, masquerading as Christians, are doing in all our so-called Christian lands, and in all our so-called Christian congregations. In any community of so-called Christian people there is a little nucleus of real, earnest, God-fearing folk, and a great fringe of people whose Christianity is mostly from the teeth outward, who have a nominal and external connection with religion, who have been ‘baptized’ and are ‘communicants,’ who think that religion lies mainly in coming on a Sunday, and with more or less toleration and interest listening to a preacher’s words and joining in external worship, and all the while the ‘weightier matters of the law’-righteousness, justice, and the love of God-they leave untouched. What describes such a type of religion with more piercing accuracy than ‘nothing but leaves’? External connection with God’s Church is a good thing. It is meant to make us better men and women. If it does not, it is a bad thing. Acts of worship, more or less elaborate-for it is not the elaboration of ceremonial, but the mistaken view of it, that does the harm-acts of worship may be helpful, or may be absolute barriers to real religious life. They are becoming so largely to-day. The drift and trend of opinion in some parts of so-called Christendom is in the direction of outward ceremonial. And I, for one, believe that there are few things doing more harm to the Christian character of England to-day than the preposterous recurrence to a reliance on the mere externals of worship. Of course we Dissenters pride ourselves on having no complicity with the sacramentarian errors which underlie these. But there may be quite as much of a barrier between the soul and Christ, reared by the bare worship of Nonconformists, or by the no-worship of the Society of Friends. If the absence of form be converted into a form, as it often is, there may be as lofty and wide a barrier raised by these as by the most elaborate ritual of the highest ceremonial that exists in Christendom. And so I say to you, dear brethren, seeing that we are all in danger of cleaving to externals and substituting these which are intended to be helps to the production of godly life and character, it becomes us all to listen to the solemn word of exhortation that comes out of my text, and to beware lest our religion runs to leaf instead of setting into fruit.

It does so with many of us; that is a certainty. I am thinking about no individual, about no individuals, but I am only speaking common sense when I say that amongst as many people as I am now addressing there will be an appreciable proportion who have no notion of religion as anything beyond a more or less imperative and more or less unwelcome set of external observances.

III. And so, lastly, let me ask you to notice what Christ did.

I do not need to trouble myself nor you with vindicating the morality of this miracle against the fantastic objections that often have been made against it; nor need I say a word more than I have already said about its symbolical meaning. Israel was in that week being asked for the last time to ‘bring forth fruit’ to the Lord of the vineyard. The refusal bound barrenness on the synagogue and on the nation, if not absolutely for ever, at all events until ‘it shall turn to the Lord,’ and partake again of ‘the root and fatness’ from which it has been broken off. What thirsty lips since that week have ever got any good out of Rabbinism and Judaism? No ‘figs’ have grown on that ‘thistle.’ The world has passed it by, and left all its subtle casuistries and painfully microscopic studies of the letter of Scripture-with utter oblivion of its spirit-left them all severely and wisely alone. Judaism is a dead tree.

And is there nothing else in this incident? ‘No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever’; the punishment of that fruitlessness was confirmed and eternal barrenness. There is the lesson that the punishment of any Bin is to bind the sin upon the doer of it.

But, further, the church or the individual whose religion runs to leaf is useless to the world. What does the world care about the ceremonials and the externals of worship, and a painful orthodoxy, and the study of the letter of Scripture? Nothing. A useless church or a Christian, from whom no man gets any fruit to cool a thirsty, parched lip, is only fit for what comes after the barrenness, and that is, that every tree that bringeth 'not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire.' The churches of England, and we, as integral parts of these, have solemn duties lying upon us to-day; and if we cannot help our brethren, and feed and nourish the hungry and thirsty hearts and souls of mankind, then-then! the sooner we are plucked up and pitched over the vineyard wall, which is the fate of the barren vine, the better for the world and the better for the vineyard.

The fate of Judaism teaches, to all of us professing Christians, very solemn lessons. 'If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee.' What has become of the seven churches of Asia Minor? They hardened into chattering theological 'orthodoxy,' and all the blood of them went to the surface, so to speak. And so down came the Mohammedan power-which was strong then because it did believe in a God, and not in its own belief about a God-and wiped them off the face of the earth. And so, brethren, we have, in this miracle, a warning and a prophecy which it becomes all the Christian communities of this day, and the individual members of such, to lay very earnestly to heart.

But do not let us forget that the Evangelist who does not tell us the story of the blasted fig-tree does tell us its analogue, the parable of the barren fig-tree, and that in it we read that when the fiat of destruction had gone forth, there was one who said, 'Let it alone this year also that I may dig about it, . . . and if it bear fruit, well! If not, after that thou shalt cut it down.' So the barren tree may become a fruitful tree, though it has hitherto borne nothing but leaves. Your religion may have been all on the surface and in form, but you can come into touch with Him in whom is our life and from whom comes our fruitfulness. He has said to each of us, 'As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.'

70)Mark 12:1-5

DISHONEST TENANTS

Mar. 12:1 - Mar. 12:12.

The ecclesiastical rulers had just been questioning Jesus as to the authority by which He acted. His answer, a counter-question as to John's authority, was not an evasion. If they decided whence John came, they would not be at any loss as to whence Jesus came. If they steeled themselves against acknowledging the Forerunner, they would not be receptive of Christ's message. That keen-edged retort plainly indicates Christ's conviction of the rulers' insincerity, and in this parable He charges home on these solemn hypocrites their share in the hereditary rejection of messengers whose authority was unquestionable. Much they cared for even divine authority, as they and their predecessors had shown through centuries! The veil of parable is transparent here. Jesus increased in severity and bold attack as the end drew near.

I. The parable begins with a tender description of the preparation and allotment of the vineyard.

The picture is based upon Isaiah's lovely apologue [Isa. 5:1], which was, no doubt, familiar to the learned officials. But there is a slight difference in the application of the metaphor which in Isaiah means the nation, and in the parable is rather the theocracy as an institution, or, as we may put it roughly, the aggregate of divine revelations and appointments which constituted the religious prerogatives of Israel.

Our Lord follows the original passage in the description of the preparation of the vineyard, but it would probably be going too far to press special meanings on the wall, the wine-press, and the watchman's tower. The fence was to keep off marauders, whether passers-by or 'the boar out of the wood' [Psa. 80:12 - Psa. 80:13]; the wine-press, for which Mark uses the word which means rather the vat into which the juice from the press proper flowed, was to extract and collect the precious liquid; the tower was for the watchman.

A vineyard with all these fittings was ready for profitable occupation. Thus abundantly had God furnished Israel with all that was needed for fruitful, happy service. What was true of the ancient Church is still more true of us who have received every requisite for holy living. Isaiah's solemn appeal has a still sharper edge for Christians: 'Judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard that I have not done in it?'

The 'letting of the vineyard to husbandmen' means the committal to Israel and its rulers of these divine institutions, and the holding them responsible for their fruitfulness. It may be a question whether the tenants are to be understood as only the official persons, or whether, while these are primarily addressed, they represent the whole people. The usual interpretation limits the meaning to the rulers, but, if so, it is difficult to carry out the application, as the vineyard would then have to be regarded as being the nation, which confuses all. The language of Matthew [which threatens the taking of the vineyard and giving it to another nation] obliges us to regard the nation as included in the husbandmen, though primarily the expression is addressed to the rulers.

But more important is it to note the strong expressions for man's quasi-independence and responsibility. The Jew was invested with full possession of the vineyard. We all, in like manner, have intrusted to us, to do as we will with, the various gifts and powers of Christ's gospel. God, as it were, draws somewhat apart from man, that he may have free play for his choice, and bear the burden of responsibility. The divine action was conspicuous at the time of founding the polity of Judaism, and then came long years in which there were no miracles, but all things continued as they were. God was as near as before, but He seemed far off. Thus Jesus has, in like manner, gone 'into a far country to receive a kingdom and to return'; and we, the tenants of a richer vineyard than Israel's, have to administer what He has intrusted to us, and to bring near by faith Him who is to sense far off.

II. The next scenes paint the conduct of the dishonest vine-dressers.

We mark the stern, dark picture drawn of the continued and brutal violence, as well as the flagrant unfaithfulness, of the tenants. Matthew's version gives emphasis to the increasing harshness of treatment of the owner's messengers, as does Mark’s. First comes beating, then wounding, then murder. The interpretation is self-evident. The ‘servants’ are the prophets, mostly men inferior in rank to the hierarchy, shepherds, fig-gatherers, and the like. They came to rouse Israel to a sense of the purpose for which they had received their distinguishing prerogatives, and their reward had been contempt and maltreatment. They ‘had trial of mockings and scourgings, of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, they were slain with the sword.’

The indictment is the same as that by which Stephen wrought the Sanhedrim into a paroxysm of fury. To make such a charge as Jesus did, in the very Temple courts, and with the already hostile priests glaring at Him while He spoke, was a deliberate assault on them and their predecessors, whose true successors they showed themselves to be. They had just been solemnly questioning Him as to His authority. He answers by thus passing in review the uniform treatment meted by them and their like to those who came with God’s manifest authority.

If a mere man had spoken this parable, we might admire the magnificent audacity of such an accusation. But the Speaker is more than man, and we have to recognise the judicial calmness and severity of His tone. Israel’s history, as it shaped itself before His ‘pure eyes and perfect judgment,’ was one long series of divine favours and of human ingratitude, of ample preparations for righteous living and of no result, of messengers sent and their contumelious rejection. We wonder at the sad monotony of such requital. Are we doing otherwise?

III. Then comes the last effort of the Owner, the last arrow in the quiver of Almighty Love.

Two things are to be pondered in this part of the parable. First, that wonderful glimpse into the depths of God’s heart, in the hope expressed by the Owner of the vineyard, brings out very clearly Christ’s claim, made there before all these hostile, keen critics, to stand in an altogether singular relation to God. He asserts His Sonship as separating Him from the class of prophets who are servants only, and as constituting a relationship with the Father prior to His coming to earth. His Sonship is no mere synonym for His Messiahship, but was a fact long before Bethlehem; and its assertion lifts for us a corner of the veil of cloud and darkness round the throne of God. Not less striking is the expression of a frustrated hope in ‘they will reverence My Son.’ Men can thwart God’s purpose. His divine charity ‘hopeth all things.’ The mystery thus sharply put here is but that which is presented everywhere in the co-existence of God’s purposes and man’s freedom.

The other noteworthy point is the corresponding casting of the vine-dressers’ thoughts into words. Both representations are due to the graphic character of parable; both crystallise into speech motives which were not actually spoken. It is unnecessary to suppose that even the rulers of Israel had gone the awful length of clear recognition of Christ’s Messiahship, and of looking each other in the face and whispering such a fiendish resolve. Jesus is here dragging to light unconscious motives. The masses did wish to have their national privileges and to avoid their national duties. The rulers did wish to have their sway over minds and consciences undisturbed. They did resent Jesus’ interference, chiefly because they instinctively felt that it threatened their position. They wanted to get Him out of the way, that they might lord it at will. They could have known that He was the Son, and they suppressed dawning suspicions that He was. Alas! they have descendants still in many of us who put away His claims, even while we secretly recognise them, in order that we may do as we like without His meddling with us! The rulers’ calculation was a blunder. As Augustine says, ‘They slew Him that they might possess, and, because they slew, they lost.’ So is it always. Whoever tries to secure any desired end by putting away his responsibility to render to God the fruit of his thankful service, loses the good which he would fain clutch at for his own. All sin is a mistake.

The parable passes from thinly veiled history to equally transparent prediction. How sadly and how unshrinkingly does the meek yet mighty Victim disclose to the conspirators His perfect knowledge of the murder which they were even now hatching in their minds! He foresees all, and will not lift a finger to prevent it. Mark puts the ‘killing’ before the ‘casting out of the vineyard,’ while Matthew and Luke invert the order of the two things. The slaughtered corpse was, as a further indignity, thrown over the wall, by which is symbolically expressed His exclusion from Israel, and the vine-dressers’ delusion that they now had secured undisturbed possession.

IV. The last point is the authoritative sentence on the evil-doers.

Mark’s condensed account makes Christ Himself answer His own question. Probably we are to suppose that, with hypocritical readiness, some of the rulers replied, as the other Evangelists represent, and that Jesus then solemnly took up their words. If anything could have enraged the rulers more than the parable itself, the distinct declaration of the transference of Israel’s prerogatives to more worthy tenants would do so. The words are heavy with doom. They carry a lesson for us. Stewardship implies responsibility, and faithlessness, sooner or later, involves deprivation. The only way to keep God’s gifts is to use them for His glory. ‘The grace of God,’ says Luther somewhere, ‘is like a flying summer shower.’ Where are Ephesus and the other apocalyptic churches? Let us ‘take heed lest, if God spared not the natural branches, He also spare not us.’

Jesus leaves the hearers with the old psalm ringing in their ears, which proclaimed that ‘the stone which the builders rejected becomes the head stone of the corner.’ Other words of the same psalm had been chanted by the crowd in the procession on entering the city. Their fervour was cooling, but the prophecy would still be fulfilled. The builders are the same as the vine-dressers; their rejection of the stone is parallel with slaying the Son.

But though Jesus foretells His death, He also foretells His triumph after death. How could He have spoken, almost in one breath, the prophecy of His being slain and ‘cast out of the vineyard,’ and that of His being exalted to be the very apex and shining summit of the true Temple, unless He had been conscious that His death was indeed not the end, but the centre, of His work, and His elevation to universal and unchanging dominion?

71)Mark 12:6

Mark

GOD’S LAST ARROW

Mar. 12:6.

Reference to Isa. 5:1 - Isa. 5:30 There are differences in detail here which need not trouble us.

Isaiah’s parable is a review of the theocratic history of Israel, and clearly the messengers are the prophets; here Christ speaks of Himself and His own mission to Israel, and goes on to tell of His death as already accomplished.

I. The Son who follows and surpasses the servants.

[a] Our Lord here places Himself in the line of the prophets as coming for a similar purpose. The mission to Israel was the same. The mission of His life was the same.

The last words of the lawgiver certainly point to a person [Deu. 18:18]: ‘A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you like unto me. Him shall ye hear.’ How ridiculous the cool superciliousness with which modern historical criticism ‘pooh-poohs’ that interpretation! But the contrast is quite as prominent as the resemblance. This saying is one which occurs in all the Synoptics, and is as full a declaration of Sonship as any in John’s Gospel. It reposes on the scene at the baptism [Mat. 3:17]: ‘This is My beloved Son!’ Such a saying was well enough understood by the Jews to mean more than the ‘Messiah.’ It clearly involves kindred to the divine in a far other and higher sense than any prophet ever had it. It involves pre-existence. It asserts that He was the special object of the divine love, the ‘heir.’

You cannot relieve the New Testament Christ of the responsibility of having made such assertions. There they are! He did deliberately declare that He was, in a unique sense, ‘the Son’ on whom the love and complacency of the Father rested continually.

II. The aggravation of men’s sins as tending to the enhancement of the divine efforts.

The terrible Nemesis of evil is that it ever tends to reproduce itself in aggravated forms. Think of the influence of habit; the searing of conscience, so that we become able to do things that we would have shrunk from at an earlier stage. Remember how impunity leads to greater sin. So here the first servant is merely sent away empty, the second is wounded and disgraced, the third is killed. All evil is an inclined plane, a steady, downward progress. How beautifully the opposite principle of the divine love and patience is represented as striving with the increasing hate and resistance! According to Matthew, the householder sent other servants 'more than the first,' and the climax was that he sent his son. Mightier forces are brought to bear. This attraction increases as the square of the distance. The blacker the cloud, the brighter the sun; the thicker the ice, the hotter the flame; the harder the soil, the stronger the ploughshare. Note, too, the undertone of sacrifice and of yearning for the son which may be discerned in the 'householder's' words. The son is his 'dearest treasure,' his mightiest gift, than which is nothing higher.

The mission of Christ is the ultimate appeal of God to men.

In the primary sense of the parable Jesus does close the history of the divine strivings with Israel. After Christ, the last of the prophets, the divine voice ceases; after the blaze of that light all is dark. There is nothing more remarkable in the whole history of the world than that cessation in an instant, as it were, of the long, august series of divine efforts for Israel. Henceforward there is an awful silence. 'Forsaken Israel wanders lone.'

And the principle involved for us is the same.

'Christ crucified' is more than Christ miracle-working. That 'more' we have, as the Jews had. But if that avails not, then nothing else will.

He is 'last' because highest, strongest, and all-sufficient.

He is 'last' inasmuch as all since are but echoes of His voice and proclaimers of His grace.

He is 'last' as the eternal and the permanent, the 'same for ever' [Heb. 13:8]. There are to be no new powers for the world; no new forces to draw men to God. God's quiver is empty, His last bolt shot, His most tender appeal made.

III. The unwearied divine charity.

‘They will reverence My Son.’ May we not say this is a divine hope? It is not worth while to make a difficulty of the bold representation. It is but parallel to all the dealings of God with men; and it sets forth the possibility that He might have won Israel back to God and to obedience. It suggests the good faith and the earnestness with which God sent Him, and He came, to bring Israel back to God. But we are not to suppose that this divine hope excluded the divine purpose of His death or was inconsistent with that, for He goes on to speak of His death as if it were past [Mar. 12:8]. This shows how distinctly He foreknew it.

Its highest aspect is not here, for it was not needed for the parable. ‘With wicked hands ye have crucified,’ etc., is true, as well as ‘I lay it down of Myself.’

Let us lay to heart the solemn love which warns by prophesying, tells what men are going to do in order that they may not do it [and what He will do in order that He may not have to do it]. And let us yield ourselves to the power of Christ’s death as God’s magnet for drawing us all back to Him; and as certain to bring about at last the satisfaction of the Father’s long-frustrated hope: ‘They will reverence my Son,’ and the fulfilment of the Son’s long-unaccomplished prediction: ‘I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.’

72)Mark 12:34

Mark

NOT FAR AND NOT IN

Mar. 12:34.

‘A bruised reed He will not break, and the smoking flax He will not quench.’

Here is Christ’s recognition of the low beginnings of goodness and faith.

This is a special case of a man who appears to have fully discerned the spirituality and inwardness of law, and to have felt that the one bond between God and man was love. He needed only to have followed out the former thought to have been smitten by the conviction of his own sinfulness, and to have reflected on the latter to have discovered that he needed some one who could certify and commend God's love to him, and thereby to kindle his to God. Christ recognises such beginnings and encourages him to persevere: but warns him against the danger of supposing himself in the kingdom, and against the prolongation of what is only good as a transition state.

This Scribe is an interesting study as being one who recognised the Law in its spiritual meaning, in opposition to forms and ceremonies. His intellectual convictions needed to be led on from recognition of the spirituality of the Law to recognition of his own failures. 'By law is the knowledge of sin.' His intellectual convictions needed to pass over into and influence his heart and life. He recognised true piety, and was earnestly striving after it, but entrance into the kingdom is by faith in the Saviour, who is 'the Way.' So Jesus' praise of him is but measured. For in him there was separation between knowing and doing.

I. Who are near?

Christ's kingdom is near us all, whether we are heathen, infidel, profligate or not.

Here is a distinct recognition of two things-[a] Degrees of approximation; [b] decisive separation between those who are, and those who are not, within the kingdom.

This Scribe was near, and yet not in, the kingdom, because, like so many in all ages, he had an intellectual hold of principles which he had never followed out to their intellectual issues, nor ever enthroned as, in their practical issues, the guides of his life. How constantly we find characters of similar incompleteness among ourselves! How many of us have true thoughts concerning God's law and what it requires, which ought, in all reason, to have brought us to the consciousness of our own sin, and are yet untouched by one pang of penitence! How many of us have lying in our heads, like disused furniture in a lumber-room, what we suppose to be beliefs of ours, which only need to be followed out to their necessary results to refurnish with a new equipment the whole of our religious thinking! How few of us do really take pains to bring our beliefs into clear sunlight, and to follow them wherever they lead us! There is no commoner fault, and no greater foe, than the hazy, lazy half-belief, of which its owner neither knows the grounds nor perceives the intellectual or the practical issues.

There are multitudes who have, or have had, convictions of which the only rational outcome is practical surrender to Jesus Christ by faith and love. Such persons abound in Christian congregations and in Christian homes. They are on the verge of 'the great surrender,' but they do not go beyond the verge, and so they perpetrate 'the great refusal.' And to all such the word of our text should sound as a warning note, which has also hope in its bone. 'Not far from' is still 'outside.'

II. Why they are only near.

The reason is not because of anything apart from themselves. The Christian gospel offers immediate entrance into the Kingdom, and all the gifts which its King can bestow, to all and every one who will. So that the sole cause of any man's non-entrance lies with himself.

We have spoken of failure to follow out truths partially grasped, and that constitutes a reason which affects the intellect mainly, and plays its part in keeping men out of the Kingdom.

But there are other, perhaps more common, reasons, which intervene to prevent convictions being followed out into their properly consequent acts.

The two most familiar and fatal of these are:-

[a] Procrastination.

[b] Lingering love of the world.

III. Such men cannot continue near.

The state is necessarily transitional. It must pass over into-[a] Either going on and into the Kingdom, or [b] going further away from it.

Christ warns here, and would stimulate to action, for-[a] Convictions not acted on die; [b] truths not followed out fade; [c] impressions resisted are harder to be made again; [d] obstacles increase with time; [e] the habit of lingering becomes strengthened.

IV. Unless you are in, you are finally shut out.

‘City of refuge.’ It was of no avail to have been near. ‘Strive to enter in.’

Appeal to all such as are in this transition stage.

73)Mark 13:6

Mark

THE CREDULITY OF UNBELIEF

Mar. 13:6. - Luk. 18:8.

It was the same generation that is represented in these two texts as void of faith in the Son of Man, and as credulously giving heed to impostors. Unbelief and superstition are closely allied. Religion is so vital a necessity, that if the true form of it be cast aside, some false form will be eagerly seized in order to fill the aching void. Men cannot permanently live without some sort of a faith in the Unseen, but they can determine whether it shall be a worthy recognition of a worthy conception of that Unseen, or a debasing superstition. An epoch of materialism in philosophic thought has always been followed by violent reaction, in which quacks and fanatics have reaped rich harvests. If the dark is not peopled with one loved Face, our busy imagination will fill it with a crowd of horrible ones.

Just as a sailor, looking out into the night over a solitary, islandless sea, sees shapes; intolerant of the islandless expanse, makes land out of fogbanks; and, sick of silence, hears ‘airy tongues’ in the moanings of the wind and the slow roll of the waves, so men shudderingly look into the dark unknown, and if they see not their Father there, will either shut their eyes or strain them in gazing it into shape. The sight of Him is religion, the closed eye is infidelity, the strained gaze is superstition. The second and the third are each so unsatisfying that they perpetually pass over into one another and destroy one another, as when I shut my eyes, I see slowly shaping itself a coloured image of my eye, which soon flickers and fluctuates into black nothingness again, and then rises once more, once more to fade. Men, if they believe not in God, then do service to ‘them which by nature are no gods.’

But let us come to more immediately Christian thoughts. Christ does what men so urgently require to be done, that if they do not believe in Him they will be forced to shape out for themselves some fancied ways of doing it. The emotions which men cherish towards Him so irrepressibly need an object to rest on, that if not He, then some far less worthy one, will be chosen to receive them.

It is just to the illustration of these thoughts that I seek to turn now, and in such alternatives as these-

I. Reception of Christ as the Revealer is the only escape from unmanly submission to unworthy pretenders.

That function is one which the instincts of men teach them that they need.

Christ comes to satisfy the need as the visible true embodiment of the Father’s love, of the Father’s wisdom.

If He be rejected-what then? Why, not that the men who reject will contentedly continue in darkness-that is never possible; but that some manner or other of satisfying the clamant need will be had recourse to, and then that to it will be transferred the submission and credence that should have been His. If we have Him for our Teacher and Guide, then all other teachers and guides will take their right places. We shall not angrily repel their power, nor talk loudly about ‘the right of private judgment,’ and our independence of all men’s thoughts. We are not so independent. We shall thankfully accept all help from all men wiser, better, more manly than ourselves, whether they give us uttered words of wisdom and beauty, having ‘grace poured into their lips,’ or whether they give us lives ennobled by strenuous effort, or whether they give us greater treasure than all these- the sight once more of a loving heart. All is good, all is helpful, all we shall receive; but in proportion to the felt obligations we are laid under to them will be the felt authority of that saying, ‘Call no man your master on earth, for One is your Master, even Christ.’ That command forbids our slavishly accepting any human domination over our faith, but it no less emphatically forbids our contemptuously rejecting any human helper of our joy, for it closes with ‘and all ye are brethren’-bound then to mutual observance, mutual helpfulness, mutual respect for each other’s individuality, mutual avoidance of needless division. To have Him for his Guide makes the human guide gentle and tender among his disciples ‘as a nurse among her children,’ for he remembers ‘the gentleness of Christ,’ and he dare not be other than an imitator of Him. A Christian teacher’s spirit will always be, ‘not for that we have dominion over your faith, but we are helpers of your joy’; his most earnest word, ‘I beseech you, therefore, brethren’; his constant desire, ‘He must increase. I must decrease.’ And to have Christ for our Guide makes the taught lovingly submissive to all who by largeness of gifts and graces are set by Him above them, and yet lovingly recalcitrant at any attempt to compel adhesion or force dogmas. The one freedom from undue dependence on men and men’s opinions lies in this submission to Jesus. Then we can say, when need is, ‘I have a Master. To Him I submit; if you seek to be master, I demur: of them who seemed to be somewhat, whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me.’

But the greatest danger is not that our guides shall insist on our submission, but that we shall insist on giving it. It is for all of us such a burden to have the management of our own fate, the forming of our own opinions, the fearful responsibility of our own destiny, that we are all only too ready to say to some man or other, from love or from laziness, ‘Where thou goest, I will go; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.’

Few things are more strange and tragic than the eagerness with which people who are a great deal too enlightened to render allegiance to Jesus Christ will install some teacher of their own choosing as their authoritative master, will swallow his dicta, swear by him, and glory in being called by his name. What they think it derogatory to their mental independence to give to the Teacher of Nazareth, they freely give to their chosen oracle. It is not in ‘the last times’ only that men who will not endure sound teaching ‘heap to themselves teachers after their own lusts,’ and have ‘the ears’ which are fast closed to ‘the Truth’ wide open ‘to fables.’

On the small scale we see this melancholy perversity of conduct exemplified in every little coterie and school of unbelievers.

On the great scale Mohammedanism and Buddhism, with their millions of adherents, write the same tragic truth large in the history of the world.

II. Faith in the reconciling Christ is the only sure deliverance from debasing reliance on false means of reconciliation.

In a very profound sense ignorance and sin are the same fact regarded under two different aspects. And in the depths of their natures men have the longing for some Power who shall put away sin, as they have the longing for one that will dispel ignorance. The consciousness of alienation from God lies in the human heart, dormant indeed for the most part, but like a coiled, hibernating snake, ready to wake and strike its poison into the veins. Christ by His great work, and specially by His sacrificial death, meets that universal need.

But closely as His work fits men’s needs, it sharply opposes some of their wishes, and of their interpretations of their needs. The Jew ‘demands a sign,’ the Greek craves a reasoned system of ‘wisdom,’ and both concur in finding the Cross an ‘offence.’

But the rejection of Jesus as the Reconciler does not quiet the cravings, which make themselves heard at some time or other in most consciences, for deliverance from the dominion and from the guilt of sin. And men are driven to adopt other expedients to fill up the void which their turning away from Jesus has left. Sometimes they fall back on a vague reliance on a vague assertion that ‘God is merciful’; sometimes they reason themselves into a belief-or, at any rate, an assertion-that the conception of sin is an error, and that men are not guilty. Sometimes they manage to silence the inward voice that accuses and condemns, by dint of not listening to it or drowning it by other noises.

But these expedients fail them some time or other, and then, if they have not cast the burden of their sin and their sins on the great Reconciler, they either have to weary themselves with painful and vain efforts to be their own redeemers, or they fall under the domination of a priest.

Hence the hideous penances of heathenism; and hence, too, the power of sacramentarian and sacerdotal perversions of evangelical truth.

III. Faith in Christ as the Regenerator is the only deliverance from baseless hopes for the world.

The world is today full of moaning voices crying, ‘Art thou He that should come, or do we look for another?’ and it is full of confident voices proclaiming other means of its regeneration than letting Christ ‘make all things new.’

The conviction that society needs to be reconstituted on other principles is spread everywhere, and is often associated with intense disbelief in Christ the Regenerator.

Has not the past proved that all schemes for the regeneration of society which do not grapple with the fact of sin, and which do not provide a means of infusing into human nature a new impulse and direction, will end in failure, and are only too likely to end in blood? These two requirements are met by Jesus, and by Him only, and whoever rejects Him and His gift of pardon and cleansing, and His inbreathing of a new life into the individual, will fail in his effort, however earnest and noble in many aspects, to redeem society and bring about a fair new world.

It is pitiable to see the waste of high aspiration and eager effort in so many quarters today. But that waste is sure to attend every scheme which does not start from the recognition of Christ’s work as the basis of the world’s transformation, and does not crown Him as the King, because He is the Saviour, of mankind.

74)Mark 13:34

AUTHORITY AND WORK

Mar. 13:34.

Church order is not directly touched on in the Gospels, but the principles which underlie all Church order are distinctly laid down. The whole community of Christian people is a family or household, being brethren because possessors of a new life through Christ. In that household there is one ‘Master,’ and all its members are ‘servants.’ That name suggests the purpose for which they exist; the meaning of all their offices, dignities, etc.

I. The authority with which the servants are invested.

We hear a great deal about the authority of the Church in these days, as a determiner of truth and as a prescriber of Christian action. It means generally official authority, the power of guidance and definition of the Church’s action, etc., which some people think is lodged in the hands of preachers, pastors, priests, either individually or collectively. There is nothing of that sort meant here. Whatever this authority is, it belongs to the whole body of the servants, not to individuals among them. It is the prerogative of the whole ecclesia, not of some handful of them. ‘This honour,’ whatever it be, ‘have all the saints.’

Explain by reference to ‘the kings of the earth exercise lordship over them’; ‘the greatest shall be your servant.’ It is then but another name for capacity for service, power to bless, etc.

And this idea is still further borne out if we go back to the parable of our text. A man leaves his house in charge of his servants. To them is committed the responsibility for his goods. His honour and interests are in their hands. They have control over his possessions. This is the analogy which our Lord suggests as presenting a vivid likeness to our position in the world.

Christ has committed the care of His kingdom, the glory of His name, the growth of His cause in the world to His Church, and has endowed it with all ‘talents,’ i.e. gifts needful for that work. Or, to put it in other words, they are His representatives in the world. They have to defend His honour. His name is scandalised or glorified by their actions. They have to see to His interests. They are charged with the carrying out of His mind and purposes.

The foundation of all is laid. Henceforth building on it is all, and that is to be done by men. Human lips and Christian effort-not without the divine Spirit in the word-are to be the means.

It is as when some commander plans his battle, and from an eminence overlooks the current of the fight, and marks the plunging legions as they struggle through the smoke. He holds all the tremendous machinery in his hands. The plan and the glory are his, but the execution of the plan lies with the troops.

In a still more true sense all the glory of the Christian conquest of the world is His, but still the instruments are ourselves. The whole counsel of God is on our side. We ‘go not a warfare at our own charges.’ Note the perfect consistency of this with all that we hold of the necessity of divine influence, etc.

His servants are intrusted with all His ‘goods.’ They have authority over the gifts which He has given them, i.e. Christian men are stewards of Christ’s riches for others.

They have access to the free use of them all for themselves.

Thus the ‘authority’ is all derived. It is all given for the sake of others. It is all capacity for service. Hence-

II. The authority with which the servants are invested binds every one of them to hard work for Christ.

‘To every man his work’

[1] Gifts involve duties. That is the first great thought. To have received binds us to impart. ‘Freely ye have received, freely give.’

All selfish possession of the gifts which Christ bestows is grave sin.

The price at which they were procured, that miracle and mystery of self-sacrifice, is the great pattern as well as the great motive for our service.

The purpose for which we have received them is plainly set forth: in the existence of the solidarity in which we are all bound; in the definite utterances of Scripture.

The need for their exercise is only too palpable in the condition of things around us.

[2] In this multitude of servants every one has his own task.

The universality of the great gift leads to a corresponding universality of obligation. All Christians have their gifts. Each of us has his special work marked out for him by character, relationships, circumstances, natural tastes, etc.

How solemn a divine call there is in these individual peculiarities which we so often think of as unimportant accidents, or regard mainly in their bearing on our own ease and comfort! How reverently we should regard the diversities which are thus revelations of God's will concerning our tasks! How earnestly we should seek to know what it is that we are fitted for! The importance of all protests against priestly assumption lies here, that they strengthen the force with which we proclaim that every man has his 'work.'

Ponder the variety of characters and gifts which Christ gives and desires His servants to use, and the indispensable need for them all. The ideal Church is the 'body' of Christ, in which each member has its place and function.

Our fault in this matter.

[3] The duties are to be done in the spirit of hard toil.

The servant has 'his work' allotted him, and the word implies that the work calls for effort. The race is not to be run without dust and sweat. Our Christian service is not to be regarded as a 'bye-product' or parergon. It is, so to speak, a vocation, not an avocation. It deserves and demands all the energy that we can put forth, continuity and constancy, plan and system. Nothing is to be done for God, any more than for ourselves, without toil. ‘In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread and give it to others.’

III, To do this work, watchfulness is needed.

The division of tasks between ‘servant’ and ‘porter’ is only part of the drapery of the parable. To show that watchfulness belongs to all, see the two following verses.

What is this watchfulness? Not constant fidgety curiosity about the coming of the Lord; not hunting after apocalyptic dates. The modern impression seems to be that such study is ‘watchfulness.’ Christ says that the time of His coming is hidden [see previous verses]. Ignorance of that is the very reason why we are to watch. Watchfulness, then, is just a profound and constant feeling of the transiency of this present. The mind is to be kept detached from it; the eye and heart are to be going out to things ‘unseen and eternal’; we are to be familiarising ourselves with the thought that the world is passing away.

This watchfulness is an indispensable part of our ‘work.’ The true Christian thought of the transiency of the world sets us to work the more vigorously in it, and increases, not diminishes, our sense of the importance of time and of earthly things, and braces us to our tasks by the thought of the brevity of opportunity, as well as by guarding us against tastes and habits which eat all earnestness out of the soul.

Thus ‘working and watching,’ happy will be the servant whom his Lord will find ‘so doing,’ i.e. at work, not idly looking for Him. Our common duties are the best preparation for our Lord’s coming.

75)Mark 14:6-9

Mark

THE ALABASTER BOX

Mar. 14:6 - Mar. 14:9.

John’s Gospel sets this incident in its due framework of time and place, and tells us the names of the actors. The time was within a week of Calvary, the place was Bethany, where, as John significantly reminds us, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, thereby connecting the feast with that incident; the woman who broke the box of ointment and poured the perfume on the head and feet of Jesus was Mary; the first critic of her action was Judas. Selfishness blames love for the profusion and prodigality, which to it seem folly and waste. The disciples chimed in with the objection, not because they were superior to Mary in wisdom, but because they were inferior in consecration.

John tells us, too, that Martha was ‘amongst them that served.’ The characteristics of the two sisters are preserved. The two types of character which they respectively represent have great difficulty in understanding and doing justice to one another. Christ understands and does justice to them both. Martha, bustling, practical, utilitarian to the finger-tips, does not much care about listening to Christ’s words of wisdom. She has not any very high-strung or finely-spun emotions, but she can busy herself in getting a meal ready; she loves Him with all her heart, and she takes her own way of showing it. But she gets impatient with her sister, and thinks that her sitting at Christ’s feet is a dreamy waste of time, and not without a touch of selfishness, ‘taking no care for me, though I have got so much on my back.’ And so, in like manner, Mary is made out to be a monster of selfishness; ‘Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?’ She could not serve, she would only have been in Martha’s road if she had tried. But she had one precious thing which was her very own, and she caught it up, and in the irrepressible burst of her thankful love, as she saw Lazarus sitting there at the table beside Jesus, she poured the liquid perfume on His head and feet. He casts His shield over the poor, unpractical woman, who did such an utterly useless thing, for which a basin of water and a towel would have served far better. There are a great many useless things which, in Heaven’s estimate, are more valuable than a great many apparently more practical ones. Christ accepts the service, and in His deep words lays down three or four principles which it would do us all good to carry with us into our daily lives. So I shall now try to gather from these utterances of our Lord’s some great truths about Christian service.

I. The first of them is the motive which hallows everything.

‘She hath wrought a good work on Me.’ Now that is pretty nearly a definition of what a good work is, and you see it is very unlike our conventional notions of what constitutes a ‘good work.’ Christ implies that anything, no matter what are its other characteristics, that is ‘on’ Him, that is to say, directed towards Him under the impulse of simple love to Him, is a ‘good work’; and the converse follows, that nothing which has not that saving salt of reference to Him in it deserves the title. Did you ever think of what an extraordinary position that is for a man to take up? ‘Think about Me in what you do, and you will do good. Do anything, no matter what, because you love Me, and it will be lifted up into high regions, and become transfigured; a good work.’ He took the best that any one could give Him, whether it was of outward possessions or of inward reverence, abject submission, and love and trust. He never said to any man, ‘You are going over the score. You are exaggerating about Me. Stand up, for I also am a Man.’ He did say once, ‘Why callest thou Me good?’ not because it was an incorrect attribution, but because it was a mere piece of conventional politeness. And in all other cases, not only does He accept as His rightful possession the utmost of reverence that any man can do Him, and bring Him, but He here implies, if He does not, as He almost does, specifically declare, that to be done for His sake lifts a deed into the region of ‘good’ works.

Have you reflected what such an attitude implies as to the self-consciousness of the Man who took it, and whether it is intelligible, not to say admirable, or rather whether it is not worthy of reprobation, except upon one hypothesis-’Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father,’ and all men honour God when they honour the Incarnate Word? But that is aside from my present purpose.

Is not this conception, that the motive of reverence and love to Him ennobles and sanctifies every deed, the very fundamental principle of Christian morality? All things are sanctified when they are done for His sake. You plunge a poor pebble into a brook, and as the sunlit ripples pass over its surface, the hidden veins of delicate colour come out and glow, and the poor stone looks a jewel, and is magnified as well as glorified by being immersed in the stream. Plunge your work into Christ, and do it for Him, and the giver and the gift will be greatened and sanctified.

But, brethren, if we take this point of view, and look to the motive, and not to the manner or the issues, or the immediate objects, of our actions, as determining whether they are good or no, it will revolutionise a great many of our thoughts, and bring new ideas into much of our conventional language. ‘A good work’ is not a piece of beneficence or benevolence, still less is it to be confined to those actions which conventional Christianity has chosen to dignify by the name. It is a designation that should not be clotted into certain specified corners of a life, but be extended over them all. The things which more specifically go under such a name, the kind of things that Judas wanted to have substituted for the utterly useless, lavish expenditure by this heart that was burdened with the weight of its own blessedness, come, or do not come, under the designation, according as there is present in them, not only natural charity to the poor whom ‘ye have always with you,’ but the higher reference of them to Christ Himself. All these lower forms of beneficence are imperfect without that. And instead of, as we have been taught by authoritative voices of late years, the service of man being the true service of God, the relation of the two terms is precisely the opposite, and it is the service of God that will effloresce into all service of man. Judas did not do much for the poor, and a great many other people who are sarcastic upon the ‘folly,’ the ‘uncalculating impulses’ of Christian love, with its ‘wasteful expenditure,’ and criticise us because we are spending time and energy and love upon objects which they think are moonshine and mist, do little more than he did, and what beneficence they do exercise has to be hallowed by this reference to Jesus before it can aspire to be beneficence indeed.

I sometimes wish that this generation of Christian people, amid its multifarious schemes of beneficence, with none of which would one interfere for a moment, would sometimes let itself go into manifestations of its love to Jesus Christ, which had no use at all except to relieve its own burdened heart. I am afraid that the lower motives, which are all right and legitimate when they are lower, are largely hustling the higher ones into the background, and that the river has got so many ponds to fill, and so many canals to trickle through, and so many plantations to irrigate and make verdant, that there is a danger of its falling low at its fountain, and running shallow in its course. One sometimes would like to see more things done for Him that the world would call ‘utter folly,’ and ‘prodigal waste,’ and ‘absolutely useless.’ Jesus Christ has a great many strange things in His treasure-house-widows’ mites, cups of water, Mary’s broken vase-has He anything of yours? ‘She hath wrought a good work on Me.’

II. Now, there is another lesson that I would gather from our Lord’s apologising for Mary, and that is the measure and the manner of Christian service.

‘She hath done what she could’; that is generally read as if it were an excuse. So it is, or at least it is a vindication of the manner and the direction of Mary’s expression of love and devotion. But whilst it is an apologia for the form, it is a high demand in regard to the measure.

‘She hath done what she could.’ Christ would not have said that if she had taken a niggardly spoonful out of the box of ointment, and dribbled that, in slow and half-grudging drops, on His head and feet. It was because it all went that it was to Him thus admirable. I think it is John Foster who says, ‘Power to its last particle is duty.’ The question is not how much have I done, or given, but could I have done or given more? We Protestants have indulgences of our own; the guinea or the hundred guineas that we give in a certain direction, we some of us seem to think, buy for us the right to do as we will with all the rest. But ‘she hath done what she could.’ It all went. And that is the law for us Christian people, because the Christian life is to be ruled by the great law of self-sacrifice, as the only adequate expression of our recognition of, and our being affected by, the great Sacrifice that gave Himself for us.

‘Give all thou canst! High Heaven rejects the lore
Of nicely calculated less or more.’

But whilst thus there is here a definite demand for the entire surrender of ourselves and our activities to Jesus Christ, there is also the wonderful vindication of the idiosyncrasy of the worker, and the special manner of her gift. It was not Mary’s mé´©er to serve at the table, nor to do any practical thing. She did not know what there was for her to do; but something she must do. So she caught up her alabaster box, and without questioning herself about the act, let her heart have its way, and poured it out on Christ. It was the only thing she could do, and she did it. It was a very useless thing. It was an entirely unnecessary expenditure of the perfume. There might have been a great many practical purposes found for it, but it was her way.

Christ says to each of us, Be yourselves, take circumstances, capacities, opportunities, individual character, as laying down the lines along which yon have to travel. Do not imitate other people. Do not envy other people; be yourselves, and let your love take its natural expression, whatever folk round you may snarl and sneer and carp and criticise. ‘She hath done what she could,’ and so He accepts the gift.

Engineers tell us that the steam-engine is a very wasteful machine, because so little of the energy is brought into actual operation. I am afraid that there are a great many of us Christian people like that, getting so much capacity, and turning out so little work. And there are a great many more of us who simply pick up the kind of work that is popular round us, and never consult our own bent, nor follow this humbly and bravely, wherever it will take us. ‘She hath done what she could.’

III. And now the last thought that I would gather from these words is as to the significance and the perpetuity of the work which Christ accepts.

‘She hath come beforehand to anoint My body to the burying.’ I do not suppose that such a thought was in Mary’s mind when she snatched up her box of ointment, and poured it out on Christ’s head. But it was a meaning that He, in His tender pity and wise love and foresight, put into it, pathetically indicating, too, how the near Cross was filling His thought, even whilst He sat at the humble rustic feast in Bethany village.

He puts meaning into the service of love which He accepts. Yes, He always does. For all the little bits of service that we can bring get worked up into the great whole, the issues of which lie far beyond anything that we conceive, ‘Thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain . . . and

God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him.' We cast the seed into the furrows. Who can tell what the harvest is going to be? We know nothing about the great issues that may suddenly, or gradually, burst from, or be evolved out of, the small deeds that we do. So, then, let us take care of the end, so to speak, which is under our control, and that is the motive. And Jesus Christ will take care of the other end that is beyond our control, and that is the issue. He will bring forth what seemeth to Him good, and we shall be as much astonished 'when we get yonder' at what has come out of what we did here, as poor Mary, standing there behind Him, was when He translated her act into so much higher a meaning than she had seen in it.

'Lord! when saw we Thee hungry and fed Thee?' We do not know what we are doing. We are like the Hindoo weavers that are said to weave their finest webs in dark rooms; and when the shutters come down, and not till then, shall we find out the meanings of our service of love.

Christ makes the work perpetual as well as significant by declaring that 'in the whole world this shall be preached for a memorial of her.' Have not 'the poor' got far more good out of Mary's box of ointment than the three hundred pence that a few of them lost by it? Has it not been an inspiration to the Church ever since? 'The house was filled with the odour of the ointment.' The fragrance was soon dissipated in the scentless air, but the deed smells sweet and blossoms for ever. It is perpetual in its record, perpetual in God's remembrance, perpetual in its results to the doer, and in its results in the world, though these may be indistinguishable, just as the brook is lost in the river and the river in the sea.

But did you ever notice that the Evangelist who records the promise of perpetual remembrance of the act does not tell us who did it, and that the Evangelists who tell us who did it do not record the promise of perpetual remembrance? Never mind whether your deed is labelled with your address or not, God knows to whom it belongs, and that is enough. As Paul says in one of his letters, 'other my fellow-labourers also, whose names are in the Book of Life.' Apparently he had forgotten the names, or perhaps did not think it needful to occupy space in his letter with detailing them, and so makes that graceful, half-apologetic suggestion that they are inscribed on a more august page. The work and the worker are associated in that Book, and that is enough.

Brethren, the question of Judas is far more fitting when asked of other people than of Christians. ‘To what purpose is this waste?’ may well be said to those of you who are taking mind, and heart, and will, capacity, and energy, and all life, and using it for lower purposes than the service of God, and the manifestation of loving obedience to Jesus Christ. ‘Why do ye spend money for that which is not bread?’ Is it not waste to buy disappointments at the price of a soul and of a life? Why do ye spend that money thus? ‘Whose image and superscription hath it?’ Whose name is stamped upon our spirits? To whom should they be rendered? Better for us to ask ourselves the question to-day about all the godless parts of our lives, ‘To what purpose is this waste?’ than to have to ask it yonder! Everything but giving our whole selves to Jesus Christ is waste. It is not waste to lay ourselves and our possessions at His feet. ‘He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for My sake, the same shall find it.’

76)Mark 14:12-16

Mark

THE NEW PASSOVER

A SECRET RENDEZVOUS

Mar. 14:12 - Mar. 14:16.

This is one of the obscurer and less noticed incidents, but perhaps it contains more valuable teaching than appears at first sight.

The first question is-Miracle or Plan? Does the incident mean supernatural knowledge or a preconcerted token, like the provision of the ass at the entry into Jerusalem? I think that there is nothing decisive either way in the narrative. Perhaps the balance of probability lies in favour of the latter theory. A difficulty in its way is that no communication seems to pass between the two disciples and the man by which he could know them to be the persons whom he was to precede to the house. There are advantages in either theory which the other loses; but, on the whole, I incline to believe in a preconcerted signal. If we lose the supernatural, we gain a suggestion of prudence and human adaptation of means to ends which makes the story even more startlingly real to us.

But whichever theory we adopt, the main points and lessons of the narrative remain the same.

I. The remarkable thing in the story is the picture it gives us of Christ as elaborately adopting precautions to conceal the place.

They are at Bethany. The disciples ask where the passover is to be eaten. The easy answer would have been to tell the name of the man and his house. That is not given. The deliberate round-aboutness of the answer remains the same whether miracle or plan. The two go away, and the others know nothing of the place. Probably the messengers did not come back, but in the evening Jesus and the ten go straight to the house which only He knew.

All this secrecy is in strong contrast with His usual frank and open appearances.

What is the reason? To baffle the traitor by preventing him from acquiring previous knowledge of the place. He was watching for some quiet hour in Jerusalem to take Jesus. So Christ does not eat the passover at the house of any well-known disciple who had a house in Jerusalem, but goes to some man unknown to the Apostolic circle, and takes steps to prevent the place being known beforehand.

All this looks like the ordinary precautions which a man who knew of the plots against him would take, and might mean simply a wish to save his life. But is that the whole explanation? Why did He wish to baffle the traitor? [a] Because of His desire to eat the passover with the disciples. His loving sympathy.

[b] Because of His desire to found the new rite of His kingdom.

[c] Because of His desire to bring His death into immediate connection with the Paschal sacrifice. There was no reason of a selfish kind, no shrinking from death itself.

The fact that such precautions only meet us here, and that they stand in strongest contrast with the rest of His conduct, emphasises the purely voluntary nature of His death: how He chose to be betrayed, taken, and to die. They suggest the same thought as do the staggering back of His would-be captors in Gethsemane, at His majestic word, 'I am He. . . . Let these go their way.' The narrative sets Him forth as the Lord of all circumstances, as free, and arranging all events.

Judas, the priests, Pilate, the soldiers, were swept by a power which they did not know to deeds which they did not understand. The Lord of all gives Himself up in royal freedom to the death to which nothing dragged Him but His own love.

Such seem to be the lessons of this narrative in so far as it bears on our Lord's own thoughts and feelings.

II. We note also the authoritative claim which He makes.

One reading is 'my guest-chamber,' and that makes His claim even more emphatic; but apart from that, the language is strong in its expression of a right to this unknown man's 'upper room.' Mark the singular blending here, as in all His earthly life, of poverty and dignity-the lowliness of being obliged to a man for a room; the royal style, 'The Master saith.'

So even now there is the blending of the wonderful fact that He puts Himself in the position of needing anything from us, with the absolute authority which He claims over us and ours.

III. The answer and blessedness of the unknown disciple.

[a] Jesus knows disciples whom the other disciples know not.

This man was one of the of 'secret' disciples. There is no excuse for shrinking from confession of His name; but it is blessed to believe that His eye sees many a ‘hidden one.’ He recognises their faith, and gives them work to do. Add the striking thought that though this man’s name is unrecorded by the Evangelist, it is known to Christ, was written in His heart, and, to use the prophetic image, ‘was graven on the palms of His hands.’

[b] The true blessedness is to be ready for whatever calls He may make on us. These may sometimes be sudden and unlooked for. But the preparation for obeying the most sudden or exacting summons of His is to have our hearts in fellowship with Him.

[c] The blessedness of His coming into our hearts, and accepting our service.

How honoured that man felt then! how much more so as years went on! how most of all now!

Our greatest blessedness that He does come into the narrow room of our hearts: ‘If any man open the door, I will sup with him.’

77)Mark 14:17-18

THE NEW PASSOVER

Mar. 14:12 - Mar. 14:26.

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Each figure in this preparatory scene yields important lessons. Our Lord's earnest desire to secure that still hour before pushing out into the storm speaks pathetically of His felt need of companionship and strengthening, as well as of His self-forgetting purpose to help His handful of bewildered followers and His human longing to live in faithful memories. His careful arrangements bring vividly into sight the limitations of His manhood, in that He, 'by whom all things consist,' had to contrive and plan in order to baffle for a moment His pursuers. And, side by side with the lowliness, as ever, is the majesty; for while He stoops to arrange, He sees with superhuman certitude what will happen, moves unconscious feet with secret and sovereign sway, and in royal tones claims possession of His servant's possessions.

The two messengers, sent out with instructions which would only guide them half-way to their destination, and obliged, if they were to move at all, to trust absolutely to His knowledge, present specimens of the obedience still required. He sends us out still on a road full of sharp turnings round which we cannot see. We get light enough for the first stage; and when it is traversed, the second will be plainer.

The man with the water-pot reminds us how little we may be aware of the Hand which guides us, or of our uses in His plans. 'I girded thee, though thou hast not known Me,'-how little the poor water-bearer knew who were following, or dreamed that he and his load would be remembered for ever! The householder responded at once, and gladly, to the authoritative message, which does not ask a favour, but demands a right. Probably he had intended to celebrate the Passover with his own family, in the large chamber on the roof, with the cool evening air about it, and the moonlight sleeping around. But he gladly gives it up. Are we as ready to surrender our cherished possessions for His use?

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As the Revised Version indicates more clearly than the Authorised, the purport of the announcement was not merely that the betrayer was an Apostle, but that he was to be known by his dipping his hand into the common dish at the same moment as our Lord. The prophetic psalm would have been abundantly fulfilled though Judas's fingers had never touched Christ's; but the minute accomplishment should teach us that Jewish prophecy was the voice of divine foreknowledge, and embraced small details as well as large tendencies. Many hands dipped with Christ's, and so the sign was not unmistakably indicative, and hence was privately supplemented, as John tells us, by the giving of 'the sop.' The uncertainty as to the indication given by the token is reflected by the reiterated questions of the Apostles, which, in the Greek, are cast in a form that anticipates a negative answer: 'Surely not I?' Mark omits the audacious hypocrisy of Judas's question in the same form, and Christ's curt, sad answer which Matthew gives. His brief and vivid sketch is meant to fix attention on the unanimous shuddering horror of these faithful hearts at the thought that they could be thus guilty-a horror which was not the child of presumptuous self-confidence, but of hearty, honest love. They thought it impossible, as they felt the throbbing of their own hearts-and yet-and yet-might it not be? As they probed their hearts deeper, they became dimly aware of dark gulfs of possible unfaithfulness half visible there, and so betook themselves to their Master, and strengthened their loyalty by the question, which breathed at once detestation of the treason and humble distrust of themselves. It is well to feel and speak the strong recoil from sin of a heart loyal to Jesus. It is better to recognise the sleeping snakes, the possibilities of evil in ourselves, and to take to Christ our ignorance and self-distrust. It is wiser to cry 'Is it I?' than to boast, 'Although all shall be offended, yet will not I.' 'Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.'

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The Lord’s Supper is a visible symbol of the Christian life, which should not only be all lived in remembrance of Him, but consists in partaking by faith of His life, and incorporating it in ours, until we come to the measure of perfect men, which, in one aspect, we reach when we can say, ‘I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’

There is a prophetic element, as well as a commemorative and symbolic, in the Lord’s Supper, which is prominent in Christ’s closing words. He does not partake of the symbols which He gives; but there comes a time, in that perfected form of the kingdom, when perfect love shall make all the citizens perfectly conformed to the perfect will of God. Then, whatsoever associations of joy, of invigoration, of festal fellowship, clustered round the wine-cup here, shall be heightened, purified, and perpetuated in the calm raptures of the heavenly feast, in which He will be Partaker, as well as Giver and Food. ‘Thou shalt make them drink of the river of Thy pleasures.’ The King’s lips will touch the golden cup filled with un-foaming wine, ere He commends it to His guests. And from that feast they will ‘go no more out,’ neither shall the triumphant music of its great ‘hymn’ be followed by any Olivet or Gethsemane, or any denial, or any Calvary; but there shall be ‘no more sorrow, nor sin, nor death’; for ‘the former things are passed away,’ and He has made ‘all things new.’

78)Mark 14:19

‘IS IT I?’

Mar. 14:19.

The scene shows that Judas had not as yet drawn any suspicion on himself.

Here the Apostles seem to be higher than their ordinary stature; for they do not take to questioning one another, or even to protest, ‘No!’ but to questioning Christ.

I. The solemn prophecy.

It seems strange at first sight that our Lord should have introduced such thoughts then, disturbing the sweet repose of that hallowed hour. But the terrible fact of the betrayal was naturally suggested by the emblems of His death, and still more by the very confiding familiarity of that hour. His household were gathered around Him, and the more close and confidential the intercourse, the bitterer that thought to Him, that one of the little band was soon to play the traitor. It is the cry of His wounded love, the wail of His unrequited affection, and, so regarded, is infinitely touching. It is an instance of that sad insight into man’s heart which in His divinity He possessed. What a fountain of sorrow for His manhood was that knowledge! how it increases the pathos of His tenderness! Not only did He read hearts as they thought and felt in the present, but He read their future with more than a prophet’s insight. He saw how many buds of promise would shrivel, how many would go away and walk no more with Him.’

That solemn prophecy may well be pondered by all Christian assemblies, and specially when gathered for the observance of the Lord’s Supper. Perhaps never since that first institution has a community met to celebrate it without Him who ‘walks amid the candlesticks,’ with eyes as a flame of fire marking a Judas among the disciples. There is, I think, no doubt that Judas partook of the Lord’s Supper. But be that as it may, he was among the number, and our Lord knew him to be ‘the traitor.’

In its essence Judas's sin can be repeated still, and the thought of that possibility may well mingle with the grateful and adoring contemplations suitable to the act of partaking of the Lord's Supper. In the hour of holiest Christian emotion the thought that I may betray the Lord who has died for me will be especially hateful, and to remember the possibility then will do much to prevent its ever becoming a reality.

II. The self-distrustful question, 'Is it I?'

It suggests that the possibilities of the darkest sin are in each of us, and especially, that the sin of treason towards Christ is in each of us.

Think generally of the awful possibilities of sin in every soul.

All sin has one root, so it is capable of passing from one form to another as light, heat, and motion do, or like certain diseases that are Protean in their forms. One sin is apt to draw others after it. 'None shall want her mate.' Wild beasts of 'the desert' meet with wild beasts of 'the islands.' Sins are gregarious, as it were; they 'hunt in couples.' 'Then goeth he, and taketh with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself.'

The roots of all sin are in each. Men may think that they are protected from certain forms of sin by temperament, but identity of nature is deeper than varieties of temperament. The greatest sins are committed by yielding to very common motives. Love of money is not a rare feeling, but it led Judas to betray Jesus. Anger is thought to be scarcely a sin at all, but it often moves an arm to murder.

Temptations to each sin are round us all. We walk in a tainted atmosphere.

There is progress in evil. No man reaches the extreme of depravity at a bound. Judas's treachery was of slow growth.

So still there is the constant operation and pressure of forces and tendencies drawing us away from Jesus Christ. We, every one of us, know that, if we allowed our nature to have its way, we should leave Him and 'make shipwreck of faith and of a good conscience.' The forms in which we might do it might vary, but do it we should. We are like a man desperately clutching some rocky projection on the face of a precipice, who knows that if once he lets go, he will be dashed to pieces. ‘There goes John Bradford, but for the grace of God!’ But for this same restraining grace, to what depths might we not sink? So, in all Christian hearts there should be profound consciousness of their own weakness. The man ‘who fears no fall’ is sure to have one. It is perilous to march through an enemy’s country in loose order, without scouts and rearguard. Rigorous control is ever necessary. Brotherly judgment, too, of others should result from our consciousness of weakness. Examples of others falling are not to make us say cynically, ‘We are all alike,’ but to set us to think humbly of ourselves, and to supplicate divine keeping,’ Lord, save me, or I perish!’

III. The safety of the self-distrustful.

When the consciousness of possible falling is brought home to us, we shall carry, if we are wise, all our doubts as to ourselves to Jesus. There is safety in asking Him, ‘Is it I?’ To bare our inmost selves before Him, and not to shrink, even if that piercing gaze lights on hidden meannesses and incipient treachery, may be painful, but is healing. He will keep us from yielding to the temptation of which we are aware, and which we tell frankly to Him. The lowly sense of our own liability to fall, if it drives us closer to Him, will make it certain that we shall not fall.

While the other disciples asked ‘Is it I?’ John asked ‘Who is it?’ The disciple who leaned on Christ’s bosom was bathed in such a consciousness of Christ’s love that treason against it was impossible. He, alone of the Evangelists, records his question, and he tells us that he put it, ‘leaning back as he was, on Jesus’s breast.’ For the purpose of whispering his interrogation, he changed his attitude for a moment so as to press still closer to Jesus. How could one who was thus nestling nearer to that heart be the betrayer? The consciousness of Christ’s love, accompanied with the effort to draw closer to Him, is our surest defence against every temptation to faithlessness or betrayal of Him.

Any other fancied ground of security is deceptive, and will sooner or later crumble beneath our deceived feet. On this very occasion, Peter built a towering fabric of profession of unalterable fidelity on such shifting ground, and saw it collapse into ruin in a few hours. Let us profit by the lesson! That wholesome consciousness of our weakness need not shade with sadness the hours of communion, but it may well help us to turn them to their highest use in making them occasions for lowlier self-distrust and closer cleaving to Him. If we thus use our sense of weakness, the sweet security will enter our souls that belongs to those who have trusted in the great promise: ‘He shall not fall, for God Is able to make him stand.’ The blessed ones who are kept from falling and ‘presented faultless before the presence of His glory,’ will hear with wonder the voice of the Judge ascribing to them deeds of service to Him of which they had not been conscious, and will have to ask once more the old question, but with a new meaning: ‘Lord, is it I? when saw we Thee an hungered, and fed Thee?’

79)Mark 14:20-26

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80)Mark 14:32-36

Mark

'STRONG CRYING AND TEARS'

Mar. 14:32 - Mar. 14:42.

The three who saw Christ's agony in Gethsemane were so little affected that they slept. We have to beware of being so little affected that we speculate and seek to analyse rather than to bow adoringly before that mysterious and heart-subduing sight. Let us remember that the place is 'holy ground.' It was meant that we should look on the Christ who prayed 'with strong crying and tears,' else the three sleepers would not have accompanied Him so far; but it was meant that our gaze should be reverent and from a distance, else they would have gone with Him into the shadow of the olives.

'Gethsemane' means 'an oil-press.' It was an enclosed piece of ground, according to Matthew and Mark; a garden, according to John. Jesus, by some means, had access to it, and had 'oft-times resorted thither with His disciples.' To this familiar spot, with its many happy associations, Jesus led the disciples, who would simply expect to pass the night there, as many Passover visitors were accustomed to bivouac in the open air.

The triumphant tone of spirit which animated His assuring words to His disciples, 'I have overcome the world,' changed as they passed through the moonlight down to the valley, and when they reached the garden deep gloom lay upon Him. His agitation is pathetically and most naturally indicated by the conflict of feeling as to companionship. He leaves the other disciples at the entrance, for He would fain be alone in His prayer. Then, a moment after, He bids the three, who had been on the Mount of Transfiguration and with Him at many other special times, accompany Him into the recesses of the garden. But again need of solitude overcomes longing for companionship, and He bids them stay where they were, while He plunges still further into the shadow. How human it is! How well all of us, who have been down into the depths of sorrow, know the drawing of these two opposite longings! Scripture seldom undertakes to tell Christ's emotions. Still seldomer does He speak of them. But at this tremendous hour the veil is lifted by one corner, and He Himself is fain to relieve His bursting heart by pathetic self-revelation, which is in fact an appeal to the three for sympathy, as well as an evidence of His sharing the common need of lightening the burdened spirit by speech. Mark's description of Christ's feelings lays stress first on their beginning, and then on their nature as being astonishment and anguish. A wave of emotion swept over Him, and was in marked contrast with His previous demeanour.

The three had never seen their calm Master so moved. We feel that such agitation is profoundly unlike the serenity of the rest of His life, and especially remarkable if contrasted with the tone of John's account of His discourse in the upper room; and, if we are wise, we shall gaze on that picture drawn for us by Mark with reverent gratitude, and feel that we look at something more sacred than human trembling at the thought of death.

Our Lord's own infinitely touching words heighten the impression of the Evangelist's 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful,' or, as the word literally means, 'ringed round with sorrow.' A dark orb of distress encompassed Him, and there was nowhere a break in the gloom which shut Him in. And this is He who, but an hour before, had bequeathed His 'joy' to His servants, and had bidden them 'be of good cheer,' since He had 'conquered the world.'

Dare we ask what were the elements of that all-enveloping horror of great darkness? Reverently we may. That astonishment and distress no doubt were partly due to the recoil of flesh from death. But if that was their sole cause, Jesus has been surpassed in heroism, not only by many a martyr who drew his strength from Him, but by many a rude soldier and by many a criminal. No! The waters of the baptism with which He was baptized had other sources than that, though it poured a tributary stream into them.

We shall not understand Gethsemane at all, nor will it touch our hearts and wills as it is meant to do, unless, as we look, we say in adoring wonder, ‘The Lord hath made to meet on Him the iniquity of us all.’ It was the weight of the world’s sin which He took on Him by willing identification of Himself with men, that pressed Him to the ground. Nothing else than the atoning character of Christ’s sufferings explains so far as it can be explained, the agony which we are permitted to behold afar off.

How nearly that agony was fatal is taught us by His own word ‘unto death,’ A little more, and He would have died. Can we retain reverence for Jesus as a perfect and pattern man, in view of His paroxysm of anguish in Gethsemane, if we refuse to accept that explanation? Truly was the place named ‘The Olive-press,’ for in it His whole being was as if in the press, and another turn of the screw would have crushed Him.

Darkness ringed Him round, but there was a rift in it right overhead. Prayer was His refuge, as it must be ours. The soul that can cry, ‘Abba, Father!’ does not walk in unbroken night. His example teaches us what our own sorrows should also teach us-to betake ourselves to prayer when the spirit is desolate. In that wonderful prayer we reverently note three things: there is unbroken consciousness of the Father’s love; there is the instinctive recoil of flesh and the sensitive nature from the suffering imposed; and there is the absolute submission of the will, which silences the remonstrance of flesh. Whatever the weight laid on Jesus by His bearing of the sins of the world, it did not take from Him the sense of sonship. But, on the other hand, that sense did not take from Him the consciousness that the world’s sin lay upon Him. In like manner His cry on the Cross mysteriously blended the sense of communion with God and of abandonment by God. Into these depths we see but a little way, and adoration is better than speculation.

Jesus shrank from ‘this cup,’ in which so many bitter ingredients besides death were mingled, such as treachery, desertion, mocking, rejection, exposure to ‘the contradiction of sinners.’ There was no failure of purpose in that recoil, for the cry for exemption was immediately followed by complete submission to the Father’s will. No perturbation in the lower nature ever caused His fixed resolve to waver. The needle always pointed to the pole, however the ship might pitch and roll. A prayer in which ‘remove this from me’ is followed by that yielding ‘nevertheless’ is always heard. Christ’s was heard, for calmness came back, and His flesh was stilled and made ready for the sacrifice.

So He could rejoin the three, in whose sympathy and watchfulness He had trusted-and they all were asleep! Surely that was one ingredient of bitterness in His cup. We wonder at their insensibility; and how they must have wondered at it too, when after years taught them what they had lost, and how faithless they had been! Think of men who could have seen and heard that scene, which has drawn the worshipping regard of the world ever since, missing it all because they fell asleep! They had kept awake long enough to see Him fall on the ground and to hear His prayer, but, worn out by a long day of emotion and sorrow, they slept.

Jesus was probably rapt in prayer for a considerable time, perhaps for a literal ‘hour.’ He was specially touched by Peter’s failure, so sadly contrasted with his confident professions in the upper room; but no word of blame escaped Him. Rather He warned them of swift-coming temptation, which they could only overcome by watchfulness and prayer. It was indeed near, for the soldiers would burst in, before many minutes had passed, polluting the moonlight with their torches and disturbing the quiet night with their shouts. What gracious allowance for their weakness and loving recognition of the disciples’ imperfect good lie in His words, which are at once an excuse for their fault and an enforcement of His command to watch and pray! ‘The flesh is weak,’ and hinders the willing spirit from doing what it wills. It was an apology for the slumber of the three; it is a merciful statement of the condition under which all discipleship has to be carried on. ‘He knoweth our frame.’ Therefore we all need to watch and pray, since only by such means can weak flesh be strengthened and strong flesh weakened, or the spirit preserved in willingness.

The words were not spoken in reference to Himself, but in a measure were true of Him. His second withdrawal for prayer seems to witness that the victory won by the first supplication was not permanent. Again the anguish swept over His spirit in another foaming breaker, and again He sought solitude, and again He found tranquillity-and again returned to find the disciples asleep. ‘They knew not what to answer Him’ in extenuation of their renewed dereliction.

Yet a third time the struggle was renewed. And after that, He had no need to return to the seclusion, where He had fought, and now had conclusively conquered by prayer and submission. We too may, by the same means, win partial victories over self, which may be interrupted by uprisings of flesh; but let us persevere. Twice Jesus’ calm was broken by recrudescence of horror and shrinking; the third time it came back, to abide through all the trying scenes of the passion, but for that one cry on the Cross, ‘Why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ So it may be with us.

The last words to the three have given commentators much trouble. ‘Sleep on now, and take your rest,’ is not so much irony as ‘spoken with a kind of permissive force, and in tones in which merciful reproach was blended with calm resignation.’ So far as He was concerned, there was no reason for their waking. But they had lost an opportunity, never to return, of helping Him in His hour of deepest agony. He needed them no more. And do not we in like manner often lose the brightest opportunities of service by untimely slumber of soul, and is not ‘the irrevocable past’ saying to many of us, ‘Sleep on now since you can no more do what you have let slip from your drowsy hands’? ‘It is enough’ is obscure, but probably refers to the disciples’ sleep, and prepares for the transition to the next words, which summon them to arise, not to help Him by watching, but to meet the traitor. They had slept long enough, He sadly says. That which will effectually end their sleepiness is at hand. How completely our Lord had regained His calm superiority to the horror which had shaken Him is witnessed by that majestic ‘Let us be going.’ He will go out to meet the traitor, and, after one flash of power, which smote the soldiers to the ground, will yield Himself to the hands of sinners.

The Man who lay prone in anguish beneath the olive-trees comes forth in serene tranquillity, and gives Himself up to the death for us all. His agony was endured for us, and needs for its explanation the fact that it was so. His victory through prayer was for us, that we too might conquer by the same weapons. His voluntary surrender was for us, that ‘by His stripes we might be healed.’ Surely we shall not sleep, as did these others, but, moved by His sorrows and animated by His victory, watch and pray that we may share in the virtue of His sufferings and imitate the example of His submission.

81)Mark 14:37

Mark

‘STRONG CRYING AND TEARS’

THE SLEEPING APOSTLE

Mar. 14:37.

It is a very old Christian tradition that this Gospel is in some sense the Apostle Peter’s. There are not many features in the Gospel itself which can be relied on as confirming this idea. Perhaps one such may be found in this plaintive remonstrance, which is only preserved for us here. Matthew’s Gospel, indeed, tells us that the rebuke was addressed to Peter, but blunts the sharp point of it as directed to him, by throwing it into the plural, as if spoken to all the three slumberers: ‘What, could ye not watch with Me one hour?’ To Matthew, the special direction of the words was unimportant, but Peter could never forget how the Master had come out from the shadow of the olives to him lying there in the moonlight, and stood before him worn with His solitary agony, and in a voice yet tremulous from His awful conflict, had said to him, so lately loud in his professions of fidelity, ‘Sleepest thou? ‘

It was but an hour or two since he had been saying, and meaning, ‘I will lay down my life for Thy sake,’ and this was what all that fervour had come to. No wonder if there is almost a tone of surprise discernible in our Lord’s word, as if He who ‘marvelled at the unbelief’ of those who were not His followers, marvelled still more at the imperfect sympathy of those who were, and marvelled most of all at such a sudden ebb of such a flood of devotion. Surprise and sorrow, the pain of a loving heart thrown back upon itself, the sharp pang of feeling how much less one is loved than one loves, the pleading with His forgetful servant, rebuke without anger, all breathe through the question, so pathetic in its simplicity, so powerful to bow in contrition by reason of its very gentleness and self-restraint.

The record of this Evangelist proves how deep it sank into the impulsive, loving heart of the apostle, and yet the denials in the high priest’s palace, which followed so soon, show how much less power it had on him on the day when it was spoken, than it gained as he looked back on it through the long vista of years that had passed, when he told the story to Mark.

The first lesson to be gathered from these words is drawn from the name by which our Lord here addresses the apostle: ‘Simon, sleepest thou?’

Now the usage of Mark’s Gospel in reference to this apostle’s name is remarkably uniform and precise. Both his names occur in Mark’s catalogue of the Apostles: ‘Simon he surnamed Peter.’ He is never called by both again, but before that point he is always Simon, and after it he is always Peter, except in this verse. The other Evangelists show similar purpose, for the most part, in their interchange of the names. Luke, for instance, always calls him Simon up to the same point as Mark, except once where he uses the form ‘Simon Peter,’ and thereafter always Peter, except in Christ’s solemn warning, ‘Simon, Simon, Satan hath desired to have you,’ and in the report of the tidings that met the disciples on their return from Emmaus, ‘The Lord hath appeared to Simon.’ So Matthew calls him Simon in the story of the first miraculous draught of fishes, and in the catalogue of Apostles, and afterwards uniformly Peter, except in Christ’s answer to the apostle’s great confession, where He names him ‘Simon Bar Jona,’ in order, as would appear, to bring into more solemn relief the significance of the immediately following words, ‘Thou art Peter.’ In John’s Gospel, again, we find the two forms ‘Simon Peter’ and the simple ‘Peter’ used throughout with almost equal frequency, while ‘Simon’ is only employed at the very beginning, and in the heart-piercing triple question at the end, ‘Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?’

The conclusion seems a fair one from these details that, on the whole, the name Simon brings into prominence the natural unrenewed humanity, and the name Peter suggests the Apostolic office, the bold confessor, the impulsive, warm-hearted lover and follower of the Lord. And it is worth noticing that, with one exception, the instances in which he is called by his former name, after his designation to the apostolate, occur in words addressed to him by our Lord.

He had given the name, and surely His withdrawal of it was meant to be significant, and must have struck with boding, rebuking emphasis on the ear and conscience of the apostle. ‘Simon, Simon, Satan hath desired to have you’: ‘Remember thy human weakness, and in the sore conflict that is before thee, trust not to thine own power.’ ‘Simon, sleepest thou?’ ‘Can I call thee Peter now, when thou hast not cared for My sorrow enough to wake while I wrestled? Is this thy fervid love?’ ‘Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?’ ‘Thou wast Peter because thou didst confess Me; thou hast fallen back to thine old level by denying Me. It is not enough that in secret I should have restored thee to My love. Here before thy brethren, thou must win back thy forfeited name and place by a confession as open as the denial, and thrice repeated like it. Once thou hast answered, but still thou art “Simon.” Twice thou hast answered, but not yet can I call thee “Peter.” Thrice thou hast answered, by each reply effacing a former denial, and now I ask no more. Take back thine office; henceforth thou shalt be called “Cephas” as before.’

And so it was. In the Acts of the Apostles, and in Paul’s letters, ‘Peter’ or ‘Cephas’ entirely obliterates ‘Simon.’ Only for ease in finding him, the messengers of Cornelius are to ask for him in Joppa by the name by which he would be known outside the Church, and his old companion James begins his speech to the council at Jerusalem by referring with approbation to what ‘Simeon’ had said, as if he liked to use the old name, that brought back memories of the far-off days in Galilee, before they had known the Master.

Very touching, too, is it to notice how the apostle himself, while using the name by which he was best known in the Church, in the introduction to his first Epistle, calls himself ‘Simon Peter’ in his second, as if to the end he felt that the old nature clung to him, and was not yet, ‘so long as he was in this tabernacle,’ wholly subdued under the dominion of the better self, which his Master had breathed into him.

So we see that a bit of biography and an illustration of a large truth are wrapped up for us in so small a matter as the apparently fortuitous use of one or other of these names. I do not suppose that in every instance where either of them occur, we can explain their occurrence by a reference to such thoughts. But still there is an unmistakable propriety in several instances in the employment of one rather than the other, and we may fairly suggest the lesson as put hero in a picturesque form, which Paul gives us in definite words, ‘The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh.’ The better and the worse nature contend in all Christian souls, or, as our Lord says with such merciful leniency in this very context, ‘The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ However real and deep the change which passes over us when ‘Christ is formed in us,’ it is only by degrees that the transformation spreads through our being. The renewing process follows upon the bestowment of the new life, and works from its deep inward centre outwards and upwards to the circumference and surface of our being, on condition of our own constant diligence and conflict.

True, ‘If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature’; but also, and precisely because he is, therefore the daily and hourly exhortation is, ‘Put on the new man.’ The leaven is buried in the dough, and must be well kneaded up with it if the whole is to be leavened. Peter is still Simon, and sometimes seems to be so completely Simon that he has ceased to be Peter. He continues Simon Peter to his own consciousness to the very end, however his brethren call him. The struggle between the two elements in his nature makes the undying interest of his story, and brings him nearer to us than any of the other disciples are. We, too, have to wage the conflict between the old nature and the new; for us, too, the worse part seems too often to be the stronger, if not the only part. The Master has often to speak to us, as if His merciful all-seeing eye could discern in us nothing of our better selves which are in truth Himself, and has to question our love. We, too, have often to feel how little those who think best of us know what we are. But let us take heart and remember that from every fall it is possible to rise by penitence and secret converse with Him, and that if only we remember to the end our lingering weakness, and ‘giving all diligence,’ cleave to Him, ‘an entrance shall be ministered unto us abundantly into His everlasting kingdom.’

We may briefly notice, too, some other lessons from this slumbering apostle.

Let us learn, for instance, to distrust our own resolutions. An hour or two at the most had passed since the eager protestation, ‘Though all should deny Thee, yet will not I. I will lay down my life for Thy sake.’ It had been most honestly said, at the dictate of a very loving heart, which in its enthusiasm was over-estimating its own power of resistance, and taking no due account of obstacles. The very utterance of the rash vow made him weaker, for some of his force was expended in making it. The uncalculating, impulsive nature of the man makes him a favourite with all readers, and we sympathise with him, as a true brother, when we hear him blurting out his big words, followed so soon by such a contradiction in deeds. He is the same man all through his story, always ready to push himself into dangers, always full of rash confidence, which passes at once into abject fear when the dangers which he had not thought about appear.

His sleep in the garden, following close on his bold words in the upper chamber, is just like his eager wish to come to Christ on the water, followed by his terror. He desires to be singled out from the others; he desires to be beside his Master, and then as soon as he feels a dash of spray on his cheek, and the heaving of that uneasy floor beneath him, all his confidence collapses and he shrieks to Christ to save him. It is just like his thrusting himself into the high priest’s palace-no safe place, and bad company for him by the coal fire-and then his courage oozing out at his fingers’ ends as soon as a maidservant’s sharp tongue questioned him. It is just like his hearty welcome of the heathen converts at Antioch, and his ready breaking through Jewish restrictions, and then his shrinking back into his old shell again, as soon as ‘certain came down from Jerusalem.’

And in it all, he is one of ourselves. We have to learn to distrust all our own resolutions, and to be chary of our vows. ‘Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.’ So, aware of our own weakness, and the flutterings of our own hearts, let us not mortgage the future, nor lightly say ‘I will’-but rather let us turn our vows into prayers,

‘Nor confidently say,
“I never will deny Thee, Lord”
But, “Grant I never may.”

Let us note, too, the slight value of even genuine emotion. The very exhaustion following on the strained emotions which these disciples had been experiencing had sent them to sleep. Luke, in his physician-like way, tells us this, when he says that they ‘slept for sorrow.’ We all know how some great emotion which we might have expected would have held our eyes waking, lulls to slumber. Men sleep soundly on the night before their execution. A widow leaves her husband’s deathbed as soon as he has passed away, and sleeps a dreamless sleep for hours. The strong current of emotion sweeps through us, and leaves us dry. Sheer exhaustion and collapse follow its intenser forms. And even in its milder, nothing takes so much out of a man as emotion. Reaction always follows, and people are in some degree unfitted for sober work by it. Peter, for example, was all the less ready for keeping awake, and for bold confession, because of the vehement emotions which had agitated him in the upper chamber. We have, therefore, to be chary, in our religious life, of feeding the flames of mere feeling. An unemotional Christianity is a very poor thing, and most probably a spurious and unreal thing. But a merely emotional Christianity is closely related to practical unholiness, and leads by a very short straight road to windy wordy insincerity and conscious hypocrisy. Emotion which is firmly based upon an intelligent grasp of God’s truth, and which is at once translated into action, is good. But unless these two conditions be rigidly observed, it darkens the understanding and enfeebles the soul.

Lastly, notice how much easier it is to purpose and to do great things than small ones.

I have little doubt that if the Roman soldiers had called on Peter to have made good his boast, and to give up his life to rescue his Master, he would have been ready to do it. We know that he was ready to fight for Him, and in fact did draw a sword and offer resistance. He could die for Him, but he could not keep awake for Him. The great thing he could have done, the little thing he could not do.

Brethren, it is far easier once in a way, by a dead lift, to screw ourselves up to some great crisis which seems worthy of a supreme effort of enthusiasm and sacrifice, than it is to keep on persistently doing the small monotonies of daily duty. Many a soldier will bravely rush to the assault in a storming-party, who would tremble in the trenches. Many a martyr has gone unblenching to the stake for Christ, who had found it far harder to serve Him in common duties. It is easier to die for Him than to watch with Him. So let us listen to His gentle voice, as He speaks to us, not as of old in the pauses of His agony, and His locks wet with the dews of the night, but bending from His throne, and crowned with many crowns: 'Sleepest them? Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation.'

82)Mark 14:38-42

Mark

'STRONG CRYING AND TEARS'

Mar. 14:32 - Mar. 14:42.

The three who saw Christ's agony in Gethsemane were so little affected that they slept. We have to beware of being so little affected that we speculate and seek to analyse rather than to bow adoringly before that mysterious and heart-subduing sight. Let us remember that the place is 'holy ground.' It was meant that we should look on the Christ who prayed 'with strong crying and tears,' else the three sleepers would not have accompanied Him so far; but it was meant that our gaze should be reverent and from a distance, else they would have gone with Him into the shadow of the olives.

'Gethsemane' means 'an oil-press.' It was an enclosed piece of ground, according to Matthew and Mark; a garden, according to John. Jesus, by some means, had access to it, and had 'oft-times resorted thither with His disciples.' To this familiar spot, with its many happy associations, Jesus led the disciples, who would simply expect to pass the night there, as many Passover visitors were accustomed to bivouac in the open air.

The triumphant tone of spirit which animated His assuring words to His disciples, 'I have overcome the world,' changed as they passed through the moonlight down to the valley, and when they reached the garden deep gloom lay upon Him. His agitation is pathetically and most naturally indicated by the conflict of feeling as to companionship. He leaves the other disciples at the entrance, for He would fain be alone in His prayer. Then, a moment after, He bids the three, who had been on the Mount of Transfiguration and with Him at many other special times, accompany Him into the recesses of the garden. But again need of solitude overcomes longing for companionship, and He bids them stay where they were, while He plunges still further into the shadow. How human it is! How well all of us, who have been down into the depths of sorrow, know the drawing of these two opposite longings! Scripture seldom undertakes to tell Christ's emotions. Still seldomer does He speak of them. But at this tremendous hour the veil is lifted by one corner, and He Himself is fain to relieve His bursting heart by pathetic self-revelation, which is in fact an appeal to the three for sympathy, as well as an evidence of His sharing the common need of lightening the burdened spirit by speech. Mark's description of Christ's feelings lays stress first on their beginning, and then on their nature as being astonishment and anguish. A wave of emotion swept over Him, and was in marked contrast with His previous demeanour.

The three had never seen their calm Master so moved. We feel that such agitation is profoundly unlike the serenity of the rest of His life, and especially remarkable if contrasted with the tone of John's account of His discourse in the upper room; and, if we are wise, we shall gaze on that picture drawn for us by Mark with reverent gratitude, and feel that we look at something more sacred than human trembling at the thought of death.

Our Lord's own infinitely touching words heighten the impression of the Evangelist's 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful,' or, as the word literally means, 'ringed round with sorrow.' A dark orb of distress encompassed Him, and there was nowhere a break in the gloom which shut Him in. And this is He who, but an hour before, had bequeathed His 'joy' to His servants, and had bidden them 'be of good cheer,' since He had 'conquered the world.'

Dare we ask what were the elements of that all-enveloping horror of great darkness? Reverently we may. That astonishment and distress no doubt were partly due to the recoil of flesh from death. But if that was their sole cause, Jesus has been surpassed in heroism, not only by many a martyr who drew his strength from Him, but by many a rude soldier and by many a criminal. No! The waters of the baptism with which He was baptized had other sources than that, though it poured a tributary stream into them.

We shall not understand Gethsemane at all, nor will it touch our hearts and wills as it is meant to do, unless, as we look, we say in adoring wonder, ‘The Lord hath made to meet on Him the iniquity of us all.’ It was the weight of the world’s sin which He took on Him by willing identification of Himself with men, that pressed Him to the ground. Nothing else than the atoning character of Christ’s sufferings explains so far as it can be explained, the agony which we are permitted to behold afar off.

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The Man who lay prone in anguish beneath the olive-trees comes forth in serene tranquillity, and gives Himself up to the death for us all. His agony was endured for us, and needs for its explanation the fact that it was so. His victory through prayer was for us, that we too might conquer by the same weapons. His voluntary surrender was for us, that ‘by His stripes we might be healed.’ Surely we shall not sleep, as did these others, but, moved by His sorrows and animated by His victory, watch and pray that we may share in the virtue of His sufferings and imitate the example of His submission.

83)Mark 14:43-54

Mark

THE CAPTIVE CHRIST AND THE CIRCLE ROUND HIM

Mar. 14:43 - Mar. 14:54.

A comparison of the three first Gospels in this section shows a degree of similarity, often verbal, which is best accounted for by supposing that a common [oral?] ‘Gospel,’ which had become traditionally fixed by frequent and long repetition, underlies them all. Mark’s account is briefest, and grasps with sure instinct the essential points; but, even in his brevity, he pauses to tell of the young man who so nearly shared the Lord’s apprehension. The canvas is narrow and crowded; but we may see unity in the picture, if we regard as the central fact the sacrilegious seizure of Jesus, and the other incidents and persons as grouped round it and Him, and reflecting various moods of men’s feelings towards Him.

I. The avowed and hypocritical enemies of incarnate love.

Again we have Mark’s favourite ‘straightway,’ so frequent in the beginning of the Gospel, and occurring twice here, vividly painting both the sudden inburst of the crowd which Interrupted Christ’s words and broke the holy silence of the garden, and Judas’s swift kiss. He is named-the only name but our Lord’s in the section; and the depth of his sin is emphasised by adding ‘one of the twelve.’ He is not named in the next verse, but gibbeted for immortal infamy by the designation, ‘he that betrayed Him.’ There is no dilating on his crime, nor any bespattering him with epithets. The passionless narrative tells of the criminal and his crime with unsparing, unmoved tones, which have caught some echo beforehand of the Judge’s voice. To name the sinner, and to state without cloak or periphrasis what his deed really was, is condemnation enough. Which of us could stand it? Judas was foremost of the crowd. What did he feel as he passed swiftly into the shadow of the olives, and caught the first sight of Jesus? That the black depths of his spirit were agitated is plain from two things-the quick kiss, and the nauseous repetition of it. Mark says, ‘Straightway . . . he kissed Him much.’ Probably the swiftness and vehemence, so graphically expressed by these two touches, were due, not only to fear lest Christ should escape, and to hypocrisy overacting its part, but to a struggle with conscience and ancient affection, and a fierce determination to do the thing and have it over. Judas is not the only man who has tried to drown conscience by hurrying into and reiterating the sin from which conscience tries to keep him. The very extravagances of evil betray the divided and stormy spirit of the doer. In the darkness and confusion, the kiss was a surer token than a word or a pointing finger would have been; and simple convenience appears to have led to its selection. But what a long course of hypocrisy must have preceded and how complete the alienation of heart must have become, before such a choice was possible! That traitor’s kiss has become a symbol for all treachery cloaked in the garb of affection. Its lessons and warnings are obvious, but this other may be added-that such audacity and nauseousness of hypocrisy is not reached at a leap, but presupposes long underground tunnels of insincere discipleship, through which a man has burrowed, unseen by others, and perhaps unsuspected by himself. Much hypocrisy of the unconscious sort precedes the deliberate and conscious.

How much less criminal and disgusting was the rude crowd at Judas’s heels! Most of them were mere passive tools. The Evangelist points beyond them to the greater criminals by his careful enumeration of all classes of the Jewish authorities, thus laying the responsibility directly on their shoulders, and indirectly on the nation whom they represented. The semi-tumultuous character of the crowd is shown by calling them ‘a multitude,’ and by the medley of weapons which they carried. Half-ignorant hatred, which had had ample opportunities of becoming knowledge and love, offended formalism, blind obedience to ecclesiastical superiors, the dislike of goodness-these impelled the rabble who burst into the garden of Gethsemane.

II. Incarnate love, bound and patient.

We may bring together Mar. 14:46, Mar. 14:48 - Mar. 14:49, the first of which tells in simplest, briefest words the sacrilegious violence done to Jesus, while the others record His calm remonstrance. ‘They laid hands on Him.’ That was the first stage in outrage-the quick stretching of many hands to secure the unresisting prisoner. They ‘took Him,’ or, as perhaps we might better render, ‘They held Him fast,’ as would have been done with any prisoner. Surely, the quietest way of telling that stupendous fact is the best! It is easy to exclaim, and, after the fashion of some popular writers of lives of Christ, to paint fancy pictures. It is better to be sparing of words, like Mark, and silently to meditate on the patient long-suffering of the love which submitted to these indignities, and on the blindness which had no welcome but this for ‘God manifest in the flesh.’ Both are in full operation to-day, and the germs of the latter are in us all.

Mark confines himself to that one of Christ’s sayings which sets in the clearest light His innocence and meek submissiveness. With all its calmness and patience, it is majestic and authoritative, and sounds as if spoken from a height far above the hubbub. Its question is not only an assertion of His innocence, and therefore of his captor’s guilt, but also declares the impotence of force as against Him-’Swords and staves to take Me!’ All that parade of arms was out of place, for He was no evil-doer; needless, for He did not resist; and powerless, unless He chose to let them prevail. He speaks as the stainless, incarnate Son of God. He speaks also as Captain of ‘the noble army of martyrs,’ and His question may be extended to include the truth that force is in its place when used against crime, but ludicrously and tragically out of place when employed against any teacher, and especially against Christianity. Christ, in His persecuted confessors, puts the same question to the persecutors which Christ in the flesh put to His captors.

The second clause of Christ’s remonstrance appeals to their knowledge of Him and His words, and to their attitude towards Him. For several days He had daily been publicly teaching in the Temple. They had laid no hands on Him. Nay, some of them, no doubt, had helped to wave the palm-branches and swell the hosannas. He does not put the contrast of then and now in its strongest form, but spares them, even while He says enough to bring an unseen blush to some cheeks. He would have them ask, ‘Why this change in us, since He is the same? Did He deserve to be hailed as King a few short hours ago? How, then, before the palm-branches are withered, can He deserve rude hands?’ Men change in their feelings to the unchanging Christ; and they who have most closely marked the rise and fall of the tide in their own hearts will be the last to wonder at Christ’s captors, and will most appreciate the gentleness of His rebuke and remonstrance.

The third clause rises beyond all notice of the human agents, and soars to the divine purpose which wrought itself out through them. That divine purpose does not make them guiltless, but it makes Jesus submissive. He bows utterly, and with no reluctance, to the Father’s will, which could be wrought out through unconscious instruments, and had been declared of old by half-understanding prophets, but needed the obedience of the Son to be clear-seeing, cheerful, and complete. We, too, should train ourselves to see the hand that moves the pieces, and to make God’s will our will, as becomes sons. Then Christ’s calm will be ours, and, ceasing from self, and conscious of God everywhere, and yielding our wills, which are the self of ourselves, to Him, we shall enter into rest.

III. Rash love defending its Lord with wrong weapons [Mar. 14:47].

Peter may have felt that he must do something to vindicate his recent boasting, and, with his usual headlong haste, stops neither to ask what good his sword is likely to do, nor to pick his man and take deliberate aim at him. If swords were to be used, they should do something more effectual than hacking off a poor servant’s ear. There was love In the foolish deeds and a certain heroism in braving the chance of a return thrust or capture, which should go to Peter’s credit. If he alone struck a blow for his Master, it was because the others were more cowardly, not more enlightened. Peter has had rather hard measure about this matter, and is condemned by some of us who would not venture a tenth part of what he ventured for his Lord then. No doubt, this was blind and blundering love, with an alloy of rashness and wish for prominence; but that is better than unloving enlightenment and caution, which is chiefly solicitous about keeping its own ears on. It is also worse than love which sees and reflects the image of the meek Sufferer whom it loves. Christ and His cause are to be defended by other weapons. Christian heroism endures and does not smite. Not only swords, but bitter words which wound worse than they, are forbidden to Christ’s soldier. We are ever being tempted to fight Christ's battles with the world's weapons; and many a 'defender of the faith' in later days, perhaps even in this very enlightened day, has repeated Peter's fault with less excuse than he, and with very little of either his courage or his love.

IV. Cowardly love forsaking its Lord [Mar. 14:50].

'They all forsook Him, and fled.' And who will venture to say that he would not have done so too? The tree that can stand such a blast must have deep roots. The Christ whom they forsook was, to them, but a fragment of the Christ whom we know; and the fear which scattered them was far better founded and more powerful than anything which the easy-going Christians of to-day have to resist. Their flight may teach us to place little reliance on our emotions, however genuine and deep, and to look for the security for our continual adherence to Christ, not to our fluctuating feelings, but to His steadfast love. We keep close to Him, not because our poor fingers grasp His hand-for that grasp is always feeble, and often relaxed-but because His strong and gentle hand holds us with a grasp which nothing can loosen. Whoso trusts in his own love to Christ builds on sand, but whoso trusts in Christ's love to him builds on rock.

V. Adventurous curiosity put to flight [Mar. 14:51 - Mar. 14:52].

Probably this young man was Mark. Only he tells the incident, which has no bearing on the course of events, and was of no importance but to the person concerned. He has put himself unnamed in a corner of his picture, as monkish painters used to do, content to associate himself even thus with his Lord. His hastily cast-on covering seems to show that he had been roused from sleep. Mingled love and curiosity and youthful adventurousness made him bold to follow when Apostles had fled. No effort appears to have been made to stop their flight; but he is laid hold of, and, terrified at his own rashness, wriggles himself out of his captors' hands. The whole incident singularly recalls Mark's behaviour on Paul's first missionary journey. There are the same adventurousness, the same inconsiderate entrance on perilous paths, the same ignominious and hasty retreat at the first whistle of the bullets. A man who pushes himself needlessly into difficulties and dangers without estimating their force is pretty sure to take to his heels as soon as he feels them, and to cut as undignified a figure as this naked fugitive.

VI. Love frightened, but following [Mar. 14:54].

Fear had driven Peter but a little way. Love soon drew him and John back. Sudden and often opposite impulses moved Ms conduct and ruffled the surface of his character, but, deep down, the core was loyal love. He followed, but afar off; though 'afar off,' he did follow. If his distance betrayed his terror, his following witnessed his bravery. He is not a coward who is afraid, but he who lets his fear hinder him from duty or drive him to flight. What is all Christian living but following Christ afar off? And do the best of us do more, though we have less apology for our distance than Peter had? 'Leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps' said he, long after, perhaps remembering both that morning and the other by the lake when he was bidden to leave other servants' tasks to the Master's disposal, and, for his own part, to follow Him.

His love pushed him into a dangerous place. He was in bad company among the inferior sort of servants huddled around the fire that cold morning, at the lower end of the hall; and as its light flickered on his face, he was sure to be recognised. But we have not now to do with his denial. Rather he is the type of a true disciple, coercing his human weakness and cowardice to yield to the attraction which draws him to his Lord, and restful in the humblest place where he can catch a glimpse of His face, and so be, as he long after alleged it as his chief title to authority to have been, 'a witness of the sufferings of Christ.'

84)Mark 14:55-65

Mark

THE CONDEMNATION WHICH CONDEMNS THE JUDGES

Mar. 14:55 - Mar. 14:65.

Mark brings out three stages in our Lord's trial by the Jewish authorities-their vain attempts to find evidence against Him, which were met by His silence; His own majestic witness to Himself, which was met by a unanimous shriek of condemnation; and the rude mockery of the underlings. The other Evangelists, especially John, supply many illuminative details; but the essentials are here. It is only in criticising the Gospels that a summary and a fuller narrative are dealt with as contradictory. These three stages naturally divide this paragraph.

I. The judges with evil thoughts, the false witnesses, and the silent Christ [Mar. 14:55].

The criminal is condemned before He is tried. The judges have made up their minds before they sit, and the Sanhedrim is not a court of justice, but a slaughter-house, where murder is to be done under sanction of law. Mark, like Matthew, notes the unanimity of the 'council,' to which Joseph of Arimathea-the one swallow which does not make a summer-appears to have been the only exception; and he probably was absent, or, if present, was silent. He did 'not consent'; but we are not told that he opposed. That ill-omened unanimity measures the nation's sin. Flagrant injustice and corruption in high places is possible only when society as a whole is corrupt or indifferent to corruption. This prejudging of a case from hatred of the accused as a destroyer of sacred tradition, and this hunting for evidence to bolster up a foregone conclusion, are preeminently the vices of ecclesiastical tribunals and not of Jewish Sanhedrim or Papal Inquisition only. Where judges look for witnesses for the prosecution, plenty will be found, ready to curry favour by lies. The eagerness to find witnesses against Jesus is witness for Him, as showing that nothing in His life or teaching was sufficient to warrant their murderous purpose. His judges condemn themselves in seeking grounds to condemn Him, for they thereby show that their real motive was personal spite, or, as Caiaphas suggested, political expediency.

The single specimen of the worthless evidence given may be either a piece of misunderstanding or of malicious twisting of innocent words; nor can we decide whether the witnesses contradicted one another or each himself. The former is the more probable, as the fundamental principle of the Jewish law of evidence ['two or three witnesses'] would, in that case, rule out the testimony. The saying which they garble meant the very opposite of what they made it mean. It represented Jesus as the restorer of that which Israel should destroy. It referred to His body which is the true Temple; but the symbolic temple 'made with hands' is so inseparably connected with the real, that the fate of the one determines that of the other. Strangely significant, therefore, is it, that the rulers heard again, though distorted, at that moment when they were on their trial, the far-reaching sentence, which might have taught them that in slaying Jesus they were throwing down the Temple and all which centred in it, and that by His resurrection, His own act, He would build up again a new polity, which yet was but the old transfigured, even 'the Church, which is His body.' His work destroys nothing but 'the works of the devil.' He is the restorer of the divine ordinances and gifts which men destroy, and His death and resurrection bring back in nobler form all the good things lost by sin, 'the desolations of many generations.' The history of all subsequent attacks on Christ is mirrored here. The foregone conclusion, the evidence sought as an afterthought to give a colourable pretext, the material found by twisting His teaching, the blindness which accuses Him of destroying what He restores, and fancies itself as preserving what it is destroying, have all reappeared over and over again.

Our Lord's silence is not only that of meekness, 'as a sheep before her shearers is dumb.' It is the silence of innocence, and, if we may use the word concerning Him, of scorn. He will not defend Himself to such judges, nor stoop to repel evidence which they knew to be worthless. But there is also something very solemn and judicial in His locked lips. They had ever been ready to open in words of loving wisdom; but now they are fast closed, and this is the penalty for despising, that He ceases to speak. Deaf ears make a dumb Christ, What will happen when Jesus and His judges change places, as they will one day do? When He says to each, 'Answerest thou nothing? What is it which these, thy sins, witness against thee?' each will be silent with the consciousness of guilt and of just condemnation by His all-knowing justice.

II. Christ's majestic witness to Himself received with a shriek of condemnation.

What a supreme moment that was when the head of the hierarchy put this question and received the unambiguous answer! The veriest impostor asserting Messiahship had a right to have his claims examined; but a howl of hypocritical horror is all which Christ's evoke. The high priest knew well enough what Christ's answer would be. Why, then, did he not begin by questioning Jesus, and do without the witnesses? Probably because the council wished to find some pretext for His condemnation without bringing up the real reason; for it looked ugly to condemn a man for claiming to be Messias, and to do it without examining His credentials. The failure, however, of the false witnesses compelled the council to 'show their hands,' and to hear and reject our Lord solemnly and, so to speak, officially, laying His assertion of dignity and office before them, as the tribunal charged with the duty of examining His proofs. The question is so definite as to imply a pretty full and accurate knowledge of our Lord's teaching about Himself. It embraces two points-office and nature; for 'the Christ' and 'the Son of the Blessed' are not equivalents. The latter title points to our Lord's declarations that He was the Son of God, and is an instance of the later Jewish superstition which avoided using the divine name. Loving faith delights in the name of the Lord. Dead formalism changes reverence into dread, and will not speak it.

Sham reverence, feigned ignorance, affected wish for information, the false show of judicial impartiality, and other lies and vices not a few, are condensed in the question; and the fact that the judge had to ask it and hear the answer, is an instance of a divine purpose working through evil men, and compelling reluctant lips to speak words the meaning and bearing of which they little know. Jesus could not leave such a challenge unanswered. Silence then would have been abandonment of His claims. It was fitting that the representatives of the nation should, at that decisive moment, hear Him declare Himself Messiah. It was not fitting that He should be condemned on any other ground. In that answer, and its reception by the council, the nation's rejection of Jesus is, as it were, focused and compressed. This was the end of centuries of training by miracle, prophet and psalmist-the saddest instance in man's long, sad history of his awful power to frustrate God's patient educating! Our Lord's majestic 'I am,' in one word answers both parts of the question, and then passes on, with strange calm and dignity, to point onwards to the time when the criminal will be the judge, and the judges will stand at His bar. ‘The Son of Man,’ His ordinary designation of Himself, implies His true manhood, and His representative character, as perfect man, or, to use modern language, the ‘realised ideal’ of humanity. In the present connection, its employment in the same sentence as His assertion that He is the Son of God goes deep into the mystery of His twofold nature, and declares that His manhood had a supernatural origin and wielded divine prerogatives. Accordingly there follows the explicit prediction of His assumption of the highest of these after His death. The Cross was as plain to Him as ever; but beyond it gleamed the crown and the throne. He anticipates ‘sitting on the right hand of power,’ which implies repose, enthronement, judicature, investiture with omnipotence, and administration of the universe. He anticipates ‘coming in the clouds of heaven,’ which distinctly claims to be the future Judge of the world. His hearers could scarcely fail to discern the reference to Daniel’s prophecy.

Was ever the irony of history more pungently exemplified than in an Annas and Caiaphas holding up hands of horror at the ‘blasphemies’ of Jesus? They rightly took His words to mean more than the claim of Messiahship as popularly understood. To say that He was the Christ was not ‘blasphemy,’ but a claim demanding examination; but to say that He, the Son of Man, was Son of God and supreme Judge was so, according to their canons. How unconsciously the exclamation, ‘What need we further witnesses?’ betrays the purpose for which the witnesses had been sought, as being simply His condemnation! They were ‘needed’ to compass His death, which the council now gleefully feels to be secured. So with precipitate unanimity they vote. And this was Israel’s welcome to their King, and the outcome of all their history! And it was the destruction of the national life. That howl of condemnation pronounced sentence on themselves and on the whole order of which they were the heads. The prisoner’s eyes alone saw then what we and all men may see now-the handwriting on the wall of the high priest’s palace: ‘Weighed in the balance, and found wanting.’

III. The savage mockers and the patient Christ [Mar. 14:65].

There is an evident antithesis between the ‘all’ of Mar. 14:64 and the ‘some’ of Mar. 14:65, which shows that the inflictors of the indignities were certain members of the council, whose fury carried them beyond all bounds of decency. The subsequent mention of the ‘servants’ confirms this, especially when we adopt the more accurate rendering of the Revised Version, ‘received Him with blows.’ Mark’s account, then, is this: that, as soon as the unanimous howl of condemnation had beep uttered, some of the ‘judges’[!] fell upon Jesus with spitting and clumsy ridicule and downright violence, and that afterwards He was handed over to the underlings, who were not slow to copy the example set them at the upper end of the hall.

It was not an ignorant mob who thus answered His claims, but the leaders and teachers-the crème de la crème of the nation. A wild beast lurks below the Pharisee’s long robes and phylacteries; and the more that men have changed a living belief in religion for a formal profession, the more fiercely antagonistic are they to every attempt to realise its precepts and hopes. The ‘religious’ men who mock Jesus in the name of traditional religion are by no means an extinct species. It is of little use to shudder at the blind cruelty of dead scribes and priests. Let us rather remember that the seeds of their sins are in us all, and take care to check their growth. What a volcano of hellish passion bursts out here! Spitting expresses disgust; blinding and asking for the names of the smiters is a clumsy attempt at wit and ridicule; buffeting is the last unrestrained form of hate and malice. The world has always paid its teachers and benefactors in such coin; but all other examples pale before this saddest, transcendent instance. Love is repaid by hate; a whole nation is blind to supreme and unspotted goodness; teachers steeped in ‘law and prophets’ cannot see Him of and for whom law and prophets witnessed and were, when He stands before them. The sin of sins is the failure to recognise Jesus for what He is. His person and claims are the touchstone which tries every beholder of what sort He is.

How wonderful the silent patience of Jesus! He withholds not His face ‘from shame and spitting.’ He gives ‘His back to the smiters.’ Meek endurance and passive submission are not all which we have to behold there. This is more than an uncomplaining martyr. This is the sacrifice for the world’s sin; and His bearing of all that men can inflict is more than heroism. It is redeeming love. His sad, loving eyes, wide open below their bandage, saw and pitied each rude smiter, even as He sees us all. They were and are eyes of infinite tenderness, ready to beam forgiveness; but they were and are the eyes of the Judge, who sees and repays His foes, as those who smite Him will one day find out.

85)Mark 15:1-20

Mark

CHRIST AND PILATE: THE TRUE KING AND HIS COUNTERFEIT

Mar. 15:1 - Mar. 15:20.

The so-called trial of Jesus by the rulers turned entirely on his claim to be Messias; His examination by Pilate turns entirely on His claim to be king. The two claims are indeed one, but the political aspect is distinguishable from the higher one; and it was the Jewish rulers' trick to push it exclusively into prominence before Pilate, in the hope that he might see in the claim an incipient insurrection, and might mercilessly stamp it out. It was a new part for them to play to hand over leaders of revolt to the Roman authorities, and a governor with any common sense must have suspected that there was something hid below such unusual loyalty. What a moment of degradation and of treason against Israel's sacredest hopes that was when its rulers dragged Jesus to Pilate on such a charge! Mark follows the same method of condensation and discarding of all but the essentials, as in the other parts of his narrative. He brings out three points-the hearing before Pilate, the popular vote for Barabbas, and the soldiers' mockery.

I. The true King at the bar of the apparent ruler [Mar. 15:1 - Mar. 15:6].

The contrast between appearance and reality was never more strongly drawn than when Jesus stood as a prisoner before Pilate. The One is helpless, bound, alone; the other invested with all the externals of power. But which is the stronger? and in which hand is the sceptre? On the lowest view of the contrast, it is ideas versus swords. On the higher and truer, it is the incarnate God, mighty because voluntarily weak, and man 'dressed in a little brief authority,' and weak because insolently 'making his power his god.' Impotence, fancying itself strong, assumes sovereign authority over omnipotence clothed in weakness. The phantom ruler sits in judgment on the true King. Pilate holding Christ’s life in his hand is the crowning paradox of history, and the mystery of self-abasing love. One exercise of the Prisoner’s will and His chains would have snapped, and the governor lain dead on the marble ‘pavement.’

The two hearings are parallel, and yet contrasted. In each there are two stages-the self-attestation of Jesus and the accusations of others; but the order is different. The rulers begin with the witnesses, and, foiled there, fall back on Christ’s own answer, Pilate, with Roman directness and a touch of contempt for the accusers, goes straight to the point, and first questions Jesus. His question was simply as to our Lord’s regal pretensions. He cared nothing about Jewish ‘superstitions’ unless they threatened political disturbance. It was nothing to him whether or no one crazy fanatic more fancied himself ‘the Messiah,’ whatever that might be. Was He going to fight?-that was all which Pilate had to look after. He is the very type of the hard, practical Roman, with a ‘practical’ man’s contempt for ideas and sentiments, sceptical as to the possibility of getting hold of ‘truth,’ and too careless to wait for an answer to his question about it; loftily ignorant of and indifferent to the notions of the troublesome people that he ruled, but alive to the necessity of keeping them in good humour, and unscrupulous enough to strain justice and unhesitatingly to sacrifice so small a thing as an innocent life to content them.

What could such a man see in Jesus but a harmless visionary? He had evidently made up his mind that there was no mischief in Him, or he would not have questioned Him as to His kingship. It was a new thing for the rulers to hand over dangerous patriots, and Pilate had experience enough to suspect that such unusual loyalty concealed something else, and that if Jesus had really been an insurrectionary leader, He would never have fallen into Pilate’s power. Accordingly, he gives no serious attention to the case, and his question has a certain half-amused, half-pitying ring about it. ‘Thou a king? ‘-poor helpless peasant! A strange specimen of royalty this! How constantly the same blindness is repeated, and the strong things of this world despise the weak, and material power smiles pityingly at the helpless impotence of the principles of Christ’s gospel, which yet will one day shatter it to fragments, like a potter’s vessel! The phantom ruler judges the real King to be a powerless shadow, while himself is the shadow and the other the substance. There are plenty of Pilates to-day who judge and misjudge the King of Israel.

The silence of Jesus in regard to the eager accusations corresponds to His silence before the false witnesses. The same reason dictated both. His silence is His most eloquent answer. It calmly passes by all these charges by envenomed tongues as needing no reply, and as utterly irrelevant. Answered, they would have lived in the Gospels; unanswered, they are buried. Christ can afford to let many of His foes alone. Contradictions and confutations keep slanders and heresies above water, which the law of gravitation would dispose of if they were left alone.

Pilate's wonder might and should have led him further. It should have prompted to further inquiry, and that might have issued in clearer knowledge. It was the little glimmer of light at the far-off end of his cavern, which, travelled towards, might have brought him into free air and broad day. One great part of his crime was neglecting the faint monitions of which he was conscious. His light may have been dim, but it would have brightened; and he quenched it. He stands as a tremendous example of possibilities missed, and of the tragedy of a soul that has looked on Jesus, and has not yielded to the impressions made on him by the sight.

II. The people's favourite [Mar. 15:7 - Mar. 15:15],

'Barabbas' means 'son of the father,' His very name is a kind of caricature of the 'Son of the Blessed,' and his character and actions present in gross form the sort of Messias whom the nation really wanted. He had headed some one of the many small riots against Rome which were perpetually sputtering up and being trampled out by an armed heel. There had been bloodshed, in which he had himself taken part ['a murderer,' Act. 3:14]. And this coarse, red-handed desperado is the people's favourite, because he embodied their notions and aspirations, and had been bold enough to do what every man of them would have done if he had dared. He thought and felt, as they did, that freedom was to be won by the sword. The popular hero is as a mirror which reflects the popular mind. He echoes the popular voice, a little improved or exaggerated. Jesus had taught what the people did not care to hear, and given blessings which even the recipients soon forgot, and lived a life whose ‘beauty of holiness’ oppressed and rebuked the common life of men. What chance had truth and kindness and purity against the sort of bravery that slashes with a sword, and is not elevated above the mob by inconvenient reach of thought or beauty of character? Even now, after nineteen centuries of Christ’s influence have modified the popular ideals, what chance have they? Are the popular ‘heroes’ of Christian nations saints, teachers, lovers of men, in whom their Christ-likeness is the thing venerated? The old saying that the voice of the people is the voice of God receives an instructive commentary in the vote for Barabbas and against Jesus. That was what a plebiscite for the discovery of the people’s favourite came to. What a reliable method of finding the best man universal suffrage, manipulated by wirepullers like these priests, is! and how wise the people are who let it guide their judgments, or still wiser, who fret their lives out in angling for its approval! Better be condemned with Jesus than adopted with Barabbas.

That fatal choice revealed the character of the choosers, both in their hostility and admiration; for excellence hated shows what we ought to be and are not, and grossness or vice admired shows what we would fain be if we dared. It was the tragic sign that Israel had not learned the rudiments of the lesson which ‘at sundry times and in divers manners’ God had been teaching them. In it the nation renounced its Messianic hopes, and with its own mouth pronounced its own sentence. It convicted them of insensibility to the highest truth, of blindness to the most effulgent light, of ingratitude for the richest gifts. It is the supreme instance of short-lived, unintelligent emotion, inasmuch as many who on Friday joined in the roar, ‘Crucify Him!’ had on Sunday shouted ‘Hosanna!’ till they were hoarse.

Pilate plays a cowardly and unrighteous part in the affair, and tries to make amends to himself for his politic surrender of a man whom he knew to be innocent, by taunts and sarcasm. He seems to see a chance to release Jesus, if he can persuade the mob to name Him as the prisoner to be set free, according to custom. His first proposal to them was apparently dictated by a genuine interest in Jesus, and a complete conviction that Rome had nothing to fear from this ‘King.’ But there are also in the question a sneer at such pauper royalty, as it looked to him, and a kind of scornful condescension in acknowledging the mob’s right of choice. He consults their wishes for once, but there is haughty consciousness of mastery in his way of doing it. His appeal is to the people, as against the priests whose motives he had penetrated. But in his very effort to save Jesus he condemns himself; for, if he knew that they had delivered Christ for envy, his plain duty was to set the prisoner free, as innocent of the only crime of which he ought to take cognisance. So his attempt to shift the responsibility off his own shoulders is a piece of cowardice and a dereliction of duty. His second question plunges him deeper in the mire. The people had a right to decide which was to be released, but none to settle the fate of Jesus. To put that in their hands was an unconditional surrender by Pilate, and the sneer in 'whom ye call the King of the Jews' is a poor attempt to hide from them and himself that he is afraid of them. Mark puts his finger on the damning blot in Pilate's conduct when he says that his motive for condemning Jesus was his wish to content the people. The life of one poor Jew was a small price to pay for popularity. So he let policy outweigh righteousness, and, in spite of his own clear conviction, did an innocent man to death. That would be his reading of his act, and, doubtless, it did not trouble his conscience much or long, but he would leave the judgment-seat tolerably satisfied with his morning's work. How little he knew what he had done! In his ignorance lies his palliation. His crime was great, but his guilt is to be measured by his light, and that was small. He prostituted justice for his own ends, and he did not follow out the dawnings of light that would have led him to know Jesus. Therefore he did the most awful thing in the world's history. Let us learn the lesson which he teaches!

III. The soldiers' mockery [Mar. 15:16 - Mar. 15:20].

This is characteristically different from that of the rulers, who jeered at His claim to supernatural enlightenment, and bade Him show His Messiahship by naming His smiters. The rough legionaries knew nothing about a Messiah, but it seemed to them a good jest that this poor, scourged prisoner should have called Himself a King, and so they proceed to make coarse and clumsy merriment over it. It is like the wild beast playing with its prey before killing it. The laughter is not only rough, but cruel. There was no pity for the Victim 'bleeding from the Roman rods,' and soon to die. And the absence of any personal hatred made this mockery more hideous. Jesus was nothing to them but a prisoner whom they were to crucify, and their mockery was sheer brutality and savage delight in torturing. The sport is too good to be kept by a few, so the whole band is gathered to enjoy it. How they would troop to the place! They get hold of some robe or cloth of the imperial colour, and of some flexible shoots of some thorny plant, and out of these they fashion a burlesque of royal trappings. Then they shout, as they would have done to Caesar, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ repeating again with clumsy iteration the stale jest which seems to them so exquisite. Then their mood changes, and naked ferocity takes the place of ironical reverence. Plucking the mock sceptre, the reed, from His passive hand, they strike the thorn-crowned Head with it, and spit on Him, while they bow in mock reverence before Him, and at last, when tired of their sport, tear off the purple, and lead him away to the Cross.

If we think of who He was who bore all this, and of why He bore it, we may well bow not the knee but the heart, in endless love and thankfulness. If we think of the mockers-rude Roman soldiers, who probably could not understand a word of what they heard on the streets of Jerusalem-we shall do rightly to remember our Lord’s own plea for them, ‘they know not what they do,’ and reflect that many of us with more knowledge do really sin more against the King than they did. Their insult was an unconscious prophecy. They foretold the basis of His dominion by the crown of thorns, and its character by the sceptre of reed, and its extent by their mocking salutations; for His Kingship is founded in suffering, wielded with gentleness, and to Him every knee shall one day bow, and every tongue confess that the King of the Jews is monarch of mankind.

86)Mark 15:21

Mark

THE DEATH WHICH GIVES LIFE

SIMON THE CYRENIAN

Mar. 15:21.

How little these soldiers knew that they were making this man immortal! What a strange fate that is which has befallen chose persons in the Gospel narrative, who for an instant came into contact with Jesus Christ. Like ships passing athwart the white ghostlike splendour of moonlight on the sea, they gleam silvery pure for a moment as they cross its broad belt, and then are swallowed up again in the darkness.

This man Simon, fortuitously, as men say, meeting the little procession at the gate of the city, for an instant is caught in the radiance of the light, and stands out visible for evermore to all the world; and then sinks into the blackness, and we know no more about him. This brief glimpse tells us very little, and yet the man and his act and its consequences may be worth thinking about.

He was a Cyrenian; that is, he was a Jew by descent, probably born, and certainly resident, for purposes of commerce, in Cyrene, on the North African coast of the Mediterranean. No doubt he had come up to Jerusalem for the Passover; and like very many of the strangers who flocked to the Holy City for the feast, met some difficulty in finding accommodation in the city, and so was obliged to go to lodge in one of the outlying villages. From this lodging he is coming in, in the morning, knowing nothing about Christ nor His trial, knowing nothing of what he is about to meet, and happens to see the procession as it is passing out of the gate. He is by the centurion impressed to help the fainting Christ to carry the heavy Cross. He probably thought Jesus a common criminal, and would resent the task laid upon him by the rough authority of the officer in command. But he was gradually touched into some kind of sympathy; drawn closer and closer, as we suppose, as he looked upon this dying meekness; and at last, yielded to the soul-conquering power of Christ.

Tradition says so, and the reasons for supposing that it was right may be very simply stated. The description of him in our text as ‘the father of Alexander and Rufus’ shows that, by the time when Mark wrote, his two sons were members of the Christian community, and had attained some eminence in it. A Rufus is mentioned in the salutations in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, as being ‘elect in the Lord,’ that is to say, ‘eminent,’ and his mother is associated in the greeting, and commended as having been motherly to Paul as well as to Rufus. Now, if we remember that Mark’s Gospel was probably written in Rome, and for Roman Christians, the conjecture seems a very reasonable one that the Rufus here was the Rufus of the Epistle to the Romans. If so, it would seem that the family had been gathered into the fold of the Church, and in all probability, therefore, the father with them.

Then there is another little morsel of possible evidence which may just be noticed. We find in the Acts of the Apostles, in the list of the prophets and teachers in the Church at Antioch, a ‘Simon, who is called Niger’ [that is, black, the hot African sun having tanned his countenance, perhaps], and side by side with him one ‘Lucius of Cyrene,’ from which place we know that several of the original brave preachers to the Gentiles in Antioch came. It is possible that this may be our Simon, and that he who was the last to join the band of disciples during the Master’s life and learned courage at the Cross was among the first to apprehend the world-wide destination of the Gospel, and to bear it beyond the narrow bounds of his nation.

At all events, I think we may, with something like confidence, believe that his glimpse of Christ on that morning and his contact with the suffering Saviour ended in his acceptance of Him as his Christ, and in his bearing in a truer sense the Cross after Him.

And so I seek now to gather some of the lessons that seem to me to arise from this incident.

I. First, the greatness of trifles.

If Simon had started from the little village where he lodged five minutes earlier or later, if he had walked a little faster or slower, if he had happened to be lodging on the other side of Jerusalem, or if the whim had taken him to go in at another gate, or if the centurion’s eye had not chanced to alight on him in the crowd, or if the centurion’s fancy had picked out somebody else to carry the Cross, then all his life would have been different. And so it is always. You go down one turning rather than another, and your whole career is coloured thereby. You miss a train, and you escape death. Our lives are like the Cornish rocking stones, pivoted on little points. The most apparently insignificant things have a strange knack of suddenly developing unexpected consequences, and turning out to be, not small things at all, but great and decisive and fruitful.

Let us then look with ever fresh wonder on this marvellous contexture of human life, and on Him that moulds it all to His own perfect purposes. Let us bring the highest and largest principles to bear on the smallest events and circumstances, for you can never tell which of these is going to turn out a revolutionary and formative influence in your life. And if the highest Christian principle is not brought to bear upon the trifles, depend upon it, it will never be brought to bear upon the mighty things. The most part of every life is made up of trifles, and unless these are ruled by the highest motives, life, which is divided into grains like the sand, will have gone by, while we are waiting for the great events which we think worthy of being regulated by lofty principles. ‘Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves.’

Look after the trifles, for the law of life is like that which is laid down by the Psalmist about the Kingdom of Jesus Christ: ‘There shall be a handful of corn in the earth,’ a little seed sown in an apparently ungenial place ‘on the top of the mountains.’ Ay! but this will come of it, ‘The fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon,’ and the great harvest of benediction or of curse, of joy or of sorrow, will come from the minute seeds that are sown in the great trifles of our daily life.

Let us learn the lesson, too, of quiet confidence in Him in whose hands the whole puzzling, overwhelming mystery lies. If a man once begins to think of how utterly incalculable the consequences of the smallest and most commonplace of his deeds may be, how they may run out into all eternity, and like divergent lines may enclose a space that becomes larger and wider the further they travel; if, I say, a man once begins to indulge in thoughts like these, it is difficult for him to keep himself calm and sane at all, unless he believes in the great loving Providence that lies above all, and shapes the vicissitude and mystery of life. We can leave all in His hands-and if we are wise we shall do so-to whom great and small are terms that have no meaning; and who looks upon men’s lives, not according to the apparent magnitude of the deeds with which they are filled, but simply according to the motive from which, and the purpose towards which, these deeds were done.

II. Then, still further, take this other lesson, which lies very plainly here-the blessedness and honour of helping Jesus Christ.

If we turn to the story of the Crucifixion, in John’s Gospel, we find that the narratives of the three other Gospels are, in some points, supplemented by it. In reference to our Lord’s bearing of the Cross, we are informed by John that when He left the judgment hall He was carrying it Himself, as was the custom with criminals under the Roman law. The heavy cross was laid on the shoulder, at the intersection of its arms and stem, one of the arms hanging down in front of the bearer’s body, and the long upright trailing behind.

Apparently our Lord’s physical strength, sorely tried by a night of excitement and the hearings in the High priest’s palace and before Pilate, as well as by the scourging, was unequal to the task of carrying, albeit for that short passage, the heavy weight. And there is a little hint of that sort in the context. In the verse before my text we read, ‘They led Jesus out to crucify Him,’ and in the verse after, ‘they bring,’ or bear ‘Him to the place Golgotha,’ as if, when the procession began, they led Him, and before it ended they had to carry Him, His weakness having become such that He Himself could not sustain the weight of His cross or of His own enfeebled limbs. So, with some touch of pity in their rude hearts, or more likely with professional impatience of delay, and eager to get their task over, the soldiers lay hold of this stranger, press him into the service and make him carry the heavy upright, which trailed on the ground behind Jesus. And so they pass on to the place of execution.

Very reverently, and with few words, one would touch upon the physical weakness of the Master. Still, it does not do us any harm to try to realise how very marked was the collapse of His physical nature, and to remember that that collapse was not entirely owing to the pressure upon Him of the mere fact of physical death; and that it was still less a failure of His will, or like the abject cowardice of some criminals who have had to be dragged to the scaffold, and helped up its steps; but that the reason why His flesh failed was very largely because there was laid upon Him the mysterious burden of the world’s sin. Christ’s demeanour in the act of death, in such singular contrast to the calm heroism and strength of hundreds who have drawn all their heroism and strength from Him, suggests to us that, looking upon His sufferings, we look upon something the significance of which does not lie on the surface; and the extreme pressure of which is to be accounted for by that blessed and yet solemn truth of prophecy and Gospel alike-'The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.'

But, apart from that, which does not enter properly into my present contemplations, let us remember that though changed in form, very truly and really in substance, this blessedness and honour of helping Jesus Christ is given to us; and is demanded from us, too, if we are His disciples. He is despised and set at nought still. He is crucified afresh still. There are many men in this day who scoff at Him, mock Him, deny His claims, seek to cast Him down from His throne, rebel against His dominion. It is an easy thing to be a disciple, when all the crowd is crying 'Hosanna!' It is a much harder thing to be a disciple when the crowd, or even when the influential cultivated opinion of a generation, is crying 'Crucify Him! crucify Him!' And some of you Christian men and women have to learn the lesson that if you are to be Christians you must be Christ's companions when His back is at the wall as well as when men are exalting and honouring Him, that it is your business to confess Him when men deny Him, to stand by Him when men forsake Him, to avow Him when the avowal is likely to bring contempt upon you from some people, and thus, in a very real sense, to bear His Cross after Him. 'Let us go forth unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach';-the tail end of His Cross, which is the lightest! He has borne the heaviest end on His own shoulders; but we have to ally ourselves with that suffering and despised Christ if we are to be His disciples.

I do not dwell upon the lesson often drawn from this story, as if it taught us to 'take up our cross daily and follow Him.' That is another matter, and yet is closely connected with that about which I speak; but what I say is, Christ's Cross has to be carried to-day; and if we have not found out that it has, let us ask ourselves if we are Christians at all. There will be hostility, alienation, a comparative coolness, and absence of a full sense of sympathy with you, in many people, if you are a true Christian. You will come in for a share of contempt from the wise and the cultivated of this generation, as in all generations. The mud that is thrown after the Master will spatter your faces too, to some extent; and if you are walking with Him you will be, to the extent of your communion with Him, objects of the aversion with which many men regard Him. Stand to your colours. Do not be ashamed of Him in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

And there is yet another way in which this honour of helping the Lord is given to us. As in His weakness He needed some one to aid Him to bear His Cross, so in His glory He needs our help to carry out the purposes for which the Cross was borne. The paradox of a man's carrying the Cross of Him who carried the world's burden is repeated in another form. He needs nothing, and yet He needs us. He needs nothing, and yet He needed that ass which was tethered at 'the place where two ways met,' in order to ride into Jerusalem upon it. He does not need man's help, and yet He does need it, and He asks for it. And though He bore Simon the Cyrenian's sins 'in His own body on the tree,' He needed Simon the Cyrenian to help Him to bear the tree, and He needs us to help Him to spread throughout the world the blessed consequences of that Cross and bitter Passion. So to us all is granted the honour, and from us all are required the sacrifice and the service, of helping the suffering Saviour.

III. Another of the lessons which may very briefly be drawn from this story is that of the perpetual recompense and record of the humblest Christian work.

There were different degrees of criminality, and different degrees of sympathy with Him, if I may use the word, in that crowd that stood round the Master. The criminality varied from the highest degree of violent malignity in the Scribes and Pharisees, down to the lowest point of ignorance, and therefore all but entire innocence, on the part of the Roman legionaries, who were merely the mechanical instruments of the order given, and stolidly 'watched Him there,' with eyes which saw nothing.

On the other hand, there were all grades of service and help and sympathy, from the vague emotions of the crowd who beat their breasts, and the pity of the daughters of Jerusalem, or the kindly-meant help of the soldiers, who would have moistened the parched lips, to the heroic love of the women at the Cross, whose ministry was not ended even with His life. But surely the most blessed share in that day's tragedy was reserved for Simon, whose bearing of the Cross may have been compulsory at first, but became, ere it was ended, willing service. But whatever were the degrees of recognition of Christ’s character, and of sympathy with the meaning of His sufferings, yet the smallest and most transient impulse of loving gratitude that went out towards Him was rewarded then, and is rewarded for ever, by blessed results in the heart that feels it.

Besides these results, service for Christ is recompensed, as in the instance before us, by a perpetual memorial. How little Simon knew that ‘wherever in the whole world this gospel was preached, there also, this that he had done should be told for a memorial of him! ‘ How little he understood when he went back to his rural lodging that night, that he had written his name high up on the tablet of the world’s memory, to be legible for ever. Why, men have fretted their whole lives away to win what this man won, and knew nothing of-one line in the chronicle of fame.

So we may say, it shall be always, ‘I will never forget any of their works.’ We may not leave our deeds inscribed in any records that men can read. What of that, If they are written in letters of light in the ‘Lamb’s Book of Life,’ to be read out by Him before His Father and the holy angels, in that last great day? We may not leave any separable traces of our services, any more than the little brook that comes down some gulley on the hillside flows separate from its sisters, with whom it has coalesced, in the bed of the great river, or in the rolling, boundless ocean, What of that so long as the work, in its consequences, shall last? Men that sow some great prairie broadcast cannot go into the harvest-field and say, ‘I sowed the seed from which that ear came, and you the seed from which this one sprang.’ But the waving abundance belongs to them all, and each may be sure that his work survives and is glorified there,-’that he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.’ So a perpetual remembrance is sure for the smallest Christian service.

IV. The last lesson that I would draw is, let us learn from this incident the blessed results of contact with the suffering Christ.

Simon the Cyrenian apparently knew nothing about Jesus Christ when the Cross was laid on his shoulders. He would be reluctant to undertake the humiliating task, and would plod along behind Him for a while, sullen and discontented, but by degrees be touched by more of sympathy, and get closer and closer to the Sufferer. And if he stood by the Cross when it was fixed, and saw all that transpired there, no wonder if, at last, after more or less protracted thought and search, he came to understand who He was that he had helped, and to yield himself to Him wholly.

Yes! dear brethren, Christ's great saying, 'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me,' began to be fulfilled when He began to be lifted up. The centurion, the thief, this man Simon, by looking on the Cross, learned the Crucified.

And it is the only way by which any of us will ever learn the true mystery and miracle of Christ's great and loving Being and work. I beseech you, take your places there behind Him, near His Cross; gazing upon Him till your hearts melt, and you, too, learn that He is your Lord, and your Saviour, and your God. The Cross of Jesus Christ divides men into classes as the Last Day will. It, too, parts men-'sheep' to the right hand, 'goats' to the left. If there was a penitent, there was an impenitent thief; if there was a convinced centurion, there were gambling soldiers; if there were hearts touched with compassion, there were mockers who took His very agonies and flung them in His face as a refutation of His claims. On the day when that Cross was reared on Calvary it began to be what it has been ever since, and is at this moment to every soul who hears the Gospel, 'a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death.' Contact with the suffering Christ will either bind you to His service, and fill you with His Spirit, or it will harden your hearts, and make you tenfold more selfish-that is to say, 'tenfold more a child of hell'-than you were before you saw and heard of that divine meekness of the suffering Christ. Look to Him, I beseech you, who bears what none can help Him to carry, the burden of the world's sin. Let Him bear yours, and yield to Him your grateful obedience, and then take up your cross daily, and bear the light burden of self-denying service to Him who has borne the heavy load of sin for you and all mankind.

87)Mark 15:22-39

Mark

THE DEATH WHICH GIVES LIFE

Mar. 15:21 - Mar. 15:39.

The narrative of the crucifixion is, in Mark's hands, almost entirely a record of what was done to Jesus, and scarcely touches what was done by Him. We are shown the executioners, the jeering rabble, the triumphant priests, the fellow-sufferers reviling; but the only glimpses we get of Him are His refusal of the stupefying draught, His loud cries, and His giving up the ghost. The narrative is perfectly calm, as well as reverently reticent. It would have been well if our religious literature had copied the example, and treated the solemn scene in the same fashion. Mark's inartificial style of linking long paragraphs with the simple 'and' is peculiarly observable here, where every verse but vv. Mar. 15:30 and Mar. 15:32, which are both quotations, begins with it. The whole section is one long sentence, each member of which adds a fresh touch to the tragic picture. The monotonous repetition of 'and,' 'and,' 'and,' gives the effect of an endless succession of the wares of sorrow, pain, and contumely which broke over that sacred head. We shall do best simply to note each billow as it breaks.

The first point is the impressing of Simon to bear the Cross. That was not dictated by compassion so much as by impatience. Apparently the weight was too heavy for Jesus, and the pace could be quickened by making the first man who could be laid hold of help to carry the load. Mark adds that Simon was the 'father of Alexander and Rufus,' whom he supposes to need no introduction to his readers. There is a Rufus mentioned in Rom. 16:13 as being, with his mother, members of the Roman Church. Mark's Gospel has many traces of being primarily intended for Romans. Possibly these two Rufuses are the same; and the conjecture may be allowable that the father's fortuitous association with the crucifixion led to the conversion of himself and his family, and that his sons were of more importance or fame in the Church than he was. Perhaps, too, he is the 'Simeon called Niger' [bronzed by the hot African sun] who was a prophet of Antioch, and stands by the side of a Cyrenian [Act. 13:1]. It is singular that he should be the only one of all the actors in the crucifixion who is named; and the fact suggests his subsequent connection with the Church. If so, the seeking love of God found him by a strange way. On what apparently trivial accidents a life may be pivoted, and how much may depend on turning to right or left in a walk! In this bewildering network of interlaced events, which each ramifies in so many directions, the only safety is to keep fast hold of God’s hand and to take good care of the purity of our motives, and let results alone.

The next verse brings us to Golgotha, which is translated by the three Evangelists, who give it as meaning ‘the place of a skull.’ The name may have been given to the place of execution with grim suggestiveness; or, more probably, Conder’s suggested identification is plausible, which points to a little, rounded, skull-shaped knoll, close outside the northern wall, as the site of the crucifixion. In that case, the name would originally describe the form of the height, and be retained as specially significant in view of its use as the place of execution. That was the ‘place’ to which Israel led its King! The place of death becomes a place of life, and from the mournful soil where the bones of evildoers lay bleaching in the sun springs the fountain of water of life.

Arrived at that doleful place, a small touch of kindness breaks the monotony of cruelty, if it be not merely apart of the ordinary routine of executions. The stupefying potion would diminish, but would therefore protract, the pain, and was possibly given for the latter rather than the former effect. But Jesus ‘received it not.’ He will not, by any act of His, lessen the bitterness. He will drink to the dregs the cup which His Father hath given Him, and therefore He will not drink of the numbing draught. It is a small matter comparatively, but it is all of a piece with the greater things. The spirit of His whole course of voluntary, cheerful endurance of all the sorrows needful to redeem the world, is expressed in His silent turning away from the draught which might have alleviated physical suffering, but at the cost of dulling conscious surrender.

The act of crucifixion is but named in a subsidiary clause, as if the writer turned away, with eyes veiled in reverence, from the sight of man’s utmost sin and Christ’s utmost mystery of suffering love. He can describe the attendant circumstances, but his pen refuses to dwell upon the central fact. The highest art and the simplest natural feeling both know that the fewest words are the most eloquent. He will not expressly mention the indignity done to the sacred Body in which ‘dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead,’ but leaves it to be inferred from the parting of Christ’s raiment, the executioner’s perquisite. He had nothing else belonging to Him, and of even that poor property He is spoiled. According to John’s more detailed account, the soldiers made an equal parting of His garments except the seamless robe, for which they threw lots. So the ‘parting’ applies to one portion, and the ‘casting lots’ to another. The incident teaches two things: on the one hand, the stolid indifference of the soldiers, who had crucified many a Jew, and went about their awful work as a mere piece of routine duty; and, on the other hand, the depth of the abasement and shame to which Jesus bowed for our sakes. ‘Naked shall I return thither’ was true in the most literal sense of Him whose earthly life began with His laying aside His garments of divine glory, and ended with rude legionaries parting ‘His raiment’ among them.

Mark alone tells the hour at which Jesus was nailed to the Cross [Mar. 15:25]. Matthew and Luke specify the sixth and ninth hours as the times of the darkness and of the death; but to Mark we owe our knowledge of the fact that for six slow hours Jesus hung there, tasting death drop by drop. At any moment of all these sorrow-laden moments He could have come down from the Cross, if He would. At each, a fresh exercise of His loving will to redeem kept Him there.

The writing on the Cross is given here in the most condensed fashion [Mar. 15:26]. The one important point is that His ‘accusation’ was-’King of the Jews.’ It was the official statement of the reason for His crucifixion, put there by Pilate as a double-barrelled sarcasm, hitting both Jesus and the nation. The rulers winced under the taunt, and tried to get it softened; but Pilate sought to make up for his unrighteous facility in yielding Jesus to death, by obstinacy and jeers. So the inscription hung there, a truth deeper than its author or its angry readers knew, and a prophecy which has not received all its fulfilment yet.

The narrative comes back, in Mar. 15:27, to the sad catalogue of the insults heaped on Jesus. Mar. 15:28 is probably spurious here, as the Revised Version takes it to be; but it truly expresses the intention of the crucifixion of the thieves as being to put Him in the same class as they, and to suggest that He was a ringleader, pre-eminent in evil. Possibly the two robbers may have been part of Barabbas’ band, who had been brigands disguised as patriots; and, if so, the insult was all the greater. But, in any case, the meaning of it was to bring Him down, in the eyes of beholders, to the level of vulgar criminals. If a Cranmer or a Latimer had been bound to the stake with a housebreaker or a cut-throat, that would have been a feeble image of the malicious contumely thus flung at Jesus; but His love had identified Him with the worst sinners in a far deeper and more real way, and not a crime had stained these men's hands, but its weight pressed on Him. He numbered Himself with transgressors, that they may be numbered with His saints.

Then follows [Mar. 15:29 - Mar. 15:32] the threefold mockery by people, priests, and fellow-sufferers. That is spread over three hours, and is all which Mark has to tell of them. Other Evangelists give us words spoken by Jesus; but this narrative has only one of the seven words from the Cross, and gives us the picture rather of the silent Sufferer, bearing in meek resolution all that men can lay on Him. Both pictures are true, for the words are too few to make notable breaches in the silence. The mockery harps on the old themes, and witnesses at once the malicious cruelty of the mockers and the innocence of the Victim, at whom even such malice could find nothing to fling except these stale taunts. The chance passengers, of whom there would be a stream to and from the adjacent city gate, 'wag their heads' in gratified and fierce hate. The calumny of the discredited witnesses, although even the biased judges had not dared to treat it as true, has lodged in the popular mind, and been accepted as proved. Lies are not killed when they are shown to be lies. They travel faster than truth. Ears were greedily open for the false witnesses' evidence which had been closed to Christ's gracious teaching. The charge that He was a would-be destroyer of the Temple obliterated all remembrance of miracles and benefits, and fanned the fire of hatred in men whose zeal for the Temple was a substitute for religion. Are there any of them left nowadays-people who have no real heart-hold of Christianity, but are fiercely antagonistic to supposed destroyers of its externals, and not over-particular to the evidence against them? These mockers thought that Christ's being fastened to the Cross was a reductio ad absurdum of His claim to build the Temple. How little they knew that it led straight to that rebuilding, or that they, and not He, were indeed the destroyers of the holy house which they thought that they were honouring, and were really making 'desolate'! The priests do not take up the people's mockery, for they know that it is based upon a falsehood; but they scoff at His miracles, which they assume to be disproved by His crucifixion. Their venomous gibe is profoundly true, and goes to the very heart of the gospel. Precisely because ‘He saved others,’ therefore ‘Himself He cannot save’-not, as they thought, for want of power, but because His will was fixed to obey the Father and to redeem His brethren, and therefore He must die and cannot deliver Himself. But the necessity and inability both depend on His will. The priests, however, take up the other part of the people’s scoff. They unite the two grounds of condemnation in the names ‘the Christ, the King of Israel,’ and think that both are disproved by His hanging there. But the Cross is the throne of the King. A sacrificial death is the true work of the Messiah of law, prophecy, and psalm; and because He did not come down from the Cross, therefore is He ‘crowned with glory and honour’ in heaven, and rules over grateful and redeemed hearts on earth.

The midday darkness lasted three hours, during which no word or incident is recorded. It was nature divinely draped in mourning over the sin of sins, the most tragic of deaths. It was a symbol of the eclipse of the Light of the world; but ere He died it passed, and the sun shone on His expiring head, in token that His death scattered our darkness and poured day on our sad night. The solemn silence was broken at last by that loud cry, the utterance of strangely blended consciousness of possession of God and of abandonment by Him, the depths of which we can never fathom. But this we know: that our sins, not His, wove the veil which separated Him from His God. Such separation is the real death. Where cold analysis is out of place, reverent gratitude may draw near. Let us adore, for what we can understand speaks of a love which has taken on itself the iniquity of us all. Let us silently adore, for all words are weaker than that mystery of love.

The first hearers of that cry misunderstood it, or cruelly pretended to do so, in order to find fresh food for mockery. ‘Eloi’ sounded like enough to ‘Elijah’ to suggest to some of the flinty hearts around a travesty of the piteous appeal. They must have been Jews, for the soldiers knew nothing about the prophet; and if they were Scribes, they could scarcely fail to recognise the reference to the Twenty-second Psalm, and to understand the cry. But the opportunity for one more cruelty was too tempting to be resisted, and savage laughter was man’s response to the most pitiful prayer ever uttered. One man in all that crowd had a small touch of human pity, and, dipping a sponge in the sour drink provided for the soldiers, reached it up to the parched lips. That was no stupefying draught, and was accepted. Matthew’s account is more detailed, and represents the words spoken as intended to hinder even that solitary bit of kindness.

The end was near. The lips, moistened by the ‘vinegar,’ opened once more in that loud cry which both showed undiminished vitality and conscious victory; and then He ‘gave up the ghost,’ sending away His spirit, and dying, not because the prolonged agony had exhausted His energy, but because He chose to die, He entered through the gate of death as a conqueror, and burst its bars when He went in, and not only when He came out.

His death rent the Temple veil. The innermost chamber of the Divine Presence is open now, and sinful men have ‘access with confidence by the faith of Him,’ to every place whither He has gone before. Right into the secret of God’s pavilion we can go, now and here, knowledge and faith and love treading the path which Jesus has opened, and coming to the Father by Him. Bight into the blaze of the glory we shall go hereafter; for He has gone to prepare a place for us, and when He overcame the sharpness of death He opened the gate of heaven to all believers.

Jews looked on, unconcerned and unconvinced by the pathos and triumph of such a death. But the rough soldier who commanded the executioners had no prejudices or hatred to blind his eyes and ossify his heart. The sight made its natural impression on him; and his exclamation, though not to be taken as a Christian confession or as using the phrase ‘Son of God’ in its deepest meaning, is yet the beginning of light. Perhaps, as he went thoughtfully to his barrack that afternoon, the process began which led him at last to repeat his first exclamation with deepened meaning and true faith. May we all gaze on that Cross, with fuller knowledge, with firm trust, and endless love!

88)Mark 16:1-4

Mark

THE INCREDULOUS DISCIPLES

Mar. 16:1 - Mar. 16:13.

It is not my business here to discuss questions of harmonising or of criticism. I have only to deal with the narrative as it stands. Its peculiar character is very plain. The manner in which the first disciples learned the fact of the Resurrection, and the disbelief with which they received it, much rather than the Resurrection itself, come into view in this section. The disciples, and not the risen Lord, are shown us. There is nothing here of the earthquake, or of the descending angel, or of the terrified guard, or of our Lord's appearance to the women. The two appearances to Mary Magdalene and to the travellers to Emmaus, which, in the hands of John and Luke, are so pathetic and rich, are here mentioned with the utmost brevity, for the sake chiefly of insisting on the disbelief of the disciples who heard of them. Mark's theme is mainly what they thought of the testimony to the Resurrection.

I. He shows us, first, bewildered love and sorrow.

We leave the question whether this group of women is the same as that of which Luke records that Joanna was one, as well as the other puzzle as to harmonising the notes of time in the Evangelists. May not the difference between the time of starting and that of arrival solve some of the difficulty? When all the notes are more or less vague, and refer to the time of transition from dark to day, when every moment partakes of both and may be differently described as belonging to either, is precision to be expected? In the whirl of agitation of that morning, would any one be at leisure to take much note of the exact minute? Are not these 'discrepancies' much more valuable as confirmation of the story than precise accord would have been? It is better to try to understand the feelings of that little band than to carp at such trifles.

Sorrow wakes early, and love is impatient to bring its tribute. So we can see these three women, leaving their abode as soon as the doleful grey of morning permitted, stealing through the silent streets, and reaching the rock-cut tomb while the sun was rising over Olivet. Where were Salome's ambitious hopes for her two sons now? Dead, and buried in the Master's grave. The completeness of the women's despair, as well as the faithfulness of their love, is witnessed by their purpose. They had come to anoint the body of Him to whom in life they had ministered. They had no thought of a resurrection, plainly as they had been told of it. The waves of sorrow had washed the remembrance of His assurances on that subject clean out of their minds. Truth that is only half understood, however plainly spoken, is always forgotten when the time to apply it comes. We are told that the disbelief of the disciples in the Resurrection, after Christ's plain predictions of it, is 'psychologically impossible.' Such big words are imposing, but the objection is shallow. These disciples are not the only people who forgot in the hour of need the thing which it most concerned them to remember, and let the clouds of sorrow hide starry promises which would have turned mourning into dancing, and night into day. Christ's sayings about His resurrection were not understood in their, as it appears to us, obvious meaning when spoken. No wonder, then, that they were not expected to be fulfilled in their obvious meaning when He was dead. We shall have a word to say presently about the value of the fact that there was no anticipation of resurrection on the part of the disciples. For the present it is enough to note how these three loving souls confess their hopelessness by their errand. Did they not know, too, that Joseph and Nicodemus had been beforehand with them in their labour of love? Apparently not. It might easily happen, in the confusion and dispersion, that no knowledge of this had reached them; or perhaps sorrow and agitation had driven it out of their memories; or perhaps they felt that, whether others had done the same before or no, they must do it too, not because the loved form needed it, but because their hearts needed to do it. It was the love which must serve, not calculation of necessity, which loaded their hands with costly spices. The living Christ was pleased with the 'odour of a sweet smell,' from the needless spices, meant to re-anoint the dead Christ, and accepted the purpose, though it came from ignorance and was never carried out, since its deepest root was love, genuine, though bewildered.

The same absence of 'calm practical common sense' is seen in the too late consideration, which never occurred to the three women till they were getting near the tomb, as to how to get into it. They do not seem to have heard of the guard; but they know that the stone is too heavy for them to move, and none of the men among the disciples had been taken into their confidence. ‘Why did they not think of that before? what a want of foresight!’ says the cool observer. ‘How beautifully true to nature!’ says a wiser judgment. To obey the impulse of love and sorrow without thinking, and then to be arrested on their road by a difficulty, which they might have thought of at first, but did not till they were close to it, is surely just what might have been expected of such mourners. Mark gives a graphic picture in that one word ‘looking up,’ and follows it with picturesque present tenses. They had been looking down or at each other in perplexity, when they lifted their eyes to the tomb, which was possibly on an eminence. What a flash of wonder would pass through their minds when they saw it open! What that might signify they would be eager to hurry to find out; but, at all events, their difficulty was at an end. When love to Christ is brought to a stand in its venturous enterprises by difficulties occurring for the first time to the mind, it is well to go close up to them; and it often happens that when we do, and look steadily at them, we see that they are rolled away, and the passage cleared which we feared was hopelessly barred.

II. The calm herald of the Resurrection and the amazed hearers.

Apparently Mary Magdalene had turned back as soon as she saw the opened tomb, and hurried to tell that the body had been carried off, as she supposed. The guard had also probably fled before this; and so the other two women enter the vestibule, and there find the angel. Sometimes one angel, sometimes two, sometimes none, were visible there. The variation in their numbers in the various narratives is not to be regarded as an instance of ‘discrepancy.’ Many angels hovered round the spot where the greatest wonder of the universe was to be seen, ‘eagerly desiring to look into’ that grave. The beholder’s eye may have determined their visibility. Their number may have fluctuated. Mark does not use the word ‘angel’ at all, but leaves us to infer what manner of being he was who first proclaimed the Resurrection.

He tells of his youth, his attitude, and his attire. The angelic life is vigorous, progressive, buoyant, and alien from decay. Immortal youth belongs to them who ‘excel in strength’ because they ‘do his commandments.’ That waiting minister shows us what the children of the Resurrection shall be, and so his presence as well as his speech expounds the blessed mystery of our life in the risen Lord. His serene attitude of sitting ‘on the right side’ is not only a vivid touch of description, but is significant of restfulness and fixed contemplation, as well as of the calmness of a higher life. That still watcher knows too much to be agitated; but the less he is moved, the more he adores. His quiet contrasts with and heightens the impression of the storm of conflicting feelings in the women’s tremulous natures. His garments symbolise purity and repose. How sharply the difference between heaven and earth is given in the last words of Mar. 16:5! They were ‘amazed,’ swept out of themselves in an ecstasy of bewilderment in which hope had no place. Terror, surprise, curiosity, wonder, blank incapacity to know what all this meant, made chaos in them.

The angel’s words are a succession of short sentences, which have a certain dignity, and break up the astounding revelation he has to make into small pieces, which the women’s bewildered minds can grasp. He calms their tumult of spirit. He shows them that he knows their errand. He adoringly names his Lord and theirs by the names recalling His manhood, His lowly home, and His ignominious death. He lingers on the thought, to him covering so profound a mystery of divine love, that his Lord had been born, had lived in the obscure village, and died on the Cross. Then, in one word, he proclaims the stupendous fact of His resurrection as His own act-’He is risen.’ This crown of all miracles, which brings life and immortality to light, and changes the whole outlook of humanity, which changes the Cross into victory, and without which Christianity is a dream and a ruin, is announced in a single word-the mightiest ever spoken save by Christ’s own lips. It was fitting that angel lips should proclaim the Resurrection, as they did the Nativity, though in either ‘He taketh not hold of angels,’ and they had but a secondary share in the blessings. Yet that empty grave opened to ‘principalities and powers in heavenly places’ a new unfolding of the manifold wisdom and love of God.

The angel-a true evangelist-does not linger on the wondrous intimation, but points to the vacant place, which would have been so drear but for his previous words, and bids them approach to verify his assurance, and with reverent wonder to gaze on the hallowed and now happy spot. A moment is granted for feeling to overflow, and certainty to be attained, and then the women are sent on their errand. Even the joy of that gaze is not to be selfishly prolonged, while others are sitting in sorrow for want of what they know. That is the law for all the Christian life. First make sure work of one's own possession of the truth, and then hasten to tell it to those who need it.

'And Peter'-Mark alone gives us this. The other Evangelists might pass it by; but how could Peter ever forget the balm which that message of pardon and restoration brought to him, and how could Peter's mouthpiece leave it out? Is there anything in the Gospels more beautiful, or fuller of long-suffering and thoughtful love, than that message from the risen Saviour to the denier? And how delicate the love which, by calling him Peter, not Simon, reinstates him in his official position by anticipation, even though in the subsequent full restoration scene by the lake he is thrice called Simon, before the complete effacement of the triple denial by the triple confession! Galilee is named as the rendezvous, and the word employed, 'goeth before you,' is appropriate to the Shepherd in front of His flock. They had been 'scattered,' but are to be drawn together again. He is to 'precede' them there, thus lightly indicating the new form of their relations to Him, marked during the forty days by a distance which prepared for his final withdrawal. Galilee was the home of most of them, and had been the field of His most continuous labours. There would be many disciples there, who would gather to see their risen Lord ['five hundred at once']; and there, rather than in Jerusalem which had slain Him, was it fitting that He should show Himself to His friends. The appearances in Jerusalem were all within a week [if we except the Ascension], and the connection in which Mark introduces them [if Mar. 16:14 be his] seems to treat them as forced on Christ by the disciples' unbelief, rather than as His original intention. It looks as if He meant to show Himself in the city only to one or two, such as Mary, Peter, and some others, but to reserve His more public appearance for Galilee.

How did the women receive the message? Mark represents them as trembling in body and in an ecstasy in mind, and as hurrying away silent with terror. Matthew says that they were full of 'fear and great joy,' and went in haste to tell the disciples. In the whirl of feeling, there were opposites blended or succeeding one another; and the one Evangelist lays hold of one set, and the other of the other. It is as impossible to catalogue the swift emotions of such a moment as to separate and tabulate the hues of sunrise. The silence which Mark tells of can only refer to their demeanour as they 'fled.' His object is to bring out the very imperfect credence which, at the best, was given to the testimony that Christ was risen, and to paint the tumult of feeling in the breasts of its first recipients. His picture is taken from a different angle from Matthew's; but Matthew's contains the same elements, for he speaks of 'fear,' though he completes it by 'joy.'

III. The incredulity of the disciples.

The two appearances to Mary Magdalene and the travellers to Emmaus are introduced mainly to record the unbelief of the disciples. A strange choice that was, of the woman who had been rescued from so low a debasement, to be first to see Him! But her former degradation was the measure of her love. Longing eyes, that have been washed clean by many a tear of penitent gratitude, are purged to see Jesus; and a yearning heart ever brings Him near. The unbelief of the story of the two from Emmaus seems to conflict with Luke's account, which tells that they were met by the news of Christ's appearance to Simon. But the two statements are not contradictory. If we remember the excitement and confusion of mind in which they were, we shall not wonder if belief and unbelief followed each other, like the flow and recoil of the waves. One moment they were on the crest of the billows, and saw land ahead; the next they were down in the trough, and saw only the melancholy surge. The very fact that Peter was believed, might make them disbelieve the travellers; for how could Jesus have been in Jerusalem and Emmaus at so nearly the same time? However the two narratives be reconciled, it remains obvious that the first disciples did not believe the first witnesses of the Resurrection, and that their unbelief is an important fact. It bears very distinctly on the worth of their subsequent conviction. It has special bearing on the most modern form of disbelief in the Resurrection, which accounts for the belief of the first disciples on the ground that they expected Christ to rise, and that they then persuaded themselves, in all good faith, that He had risen. That monstrous theory is vulnerable at all points, but one sufficient answer is-the disciples did not expect Christ to rise again, and were so far from it that they did not believe that He had risen when they were told it. Their original unbelief is a strong argument for the reliableness of their final faith. What raised them from the stupor of despair and incredulity? Only one answer is 'psychologically' reasonable: they at last believed because they saw. It is incredible that they were conscious deceivers; for such lives as they lived, and such a gospel as they preached, never came from liars. It is as incredible that they were unconsciously mistaken; for they were wholly unprepared for the Resurrection, and sturdily disbelieved all witnesses for it, till they saw with their own eyes, and had 'many infallible proofs.' Let us be thankful for their unbelief and its record, and let us seek to possess the blessing of those 'that have not seen, and yet have believed!'

89)Mark 16:5

Mark

THE INCREDULOUS DISCIPLES

THE ANGEL IN THE TOMB

PERPETUAL YOUTH

Mar. 16:5.

Many great truths concerning Christ's death, and its worth to higher orders of being, are taught by the presence of that angel form, clad in the whiteness of his own God-given purity, sitting in restful contemplation in the dark house where the body of Jesus had lain. 'Which things the angels desire to look into.' Many precious lessons of consolation and hope, too, lie in the wonderful words which he spake from his Lord and theirs to the weeping waiting women. But to touch upon these ever so slightly would lead us too far from our more immediate purpose.

It strikes one as very remarkable that this superhuman being should be described as a 'young man.' Immortal youth, with all of buoyant energy and fresh power which that attribute suggests, belongs to those beings whom Scripture faintly shows as our elder brethren. No waste decays their strength, no change robs them of forces which have ceased to increase. For them there never comes a period when memory is more than hope. Age cannot wither them. As one of our modern mystics has said, hiding imaginative spiritualism under a crust of hard, dry matter-of-fact, ‘In heaven the oldest angels are the youngest.’

What is true of them is true of God’s children, who are ‘accounted worthy to obtain that world and the resurrection from the dead,’ for ‘they are equal unto the angels.’ For believing and loving souls, death too is a birth. All who pass through it to God, shall, in deeper meaning than lay in the words at first, ‘return unto the days of their youth’; and when the end comes, and they are ‘clothed with their house from heaven,’ they shall stand by the throne, like him who sat in the sepulchre, clothed with lustrous light and radiant with unchanging youth.

Such a conception of the condition of the dead in Christ may be followed out in detail into many very elevating and strengthening thoughts. Let me attempt to set forth some of these now.

I. The life of the faithful dead is eternal progress towards infinite perfection.

For body and for spirit the life of earth is a definite whole, with distinct stages, which succeed each other in a well-marked order. There are youth, and maturity, and decay-the slow climbing to the narrow summit, a brief moment there in the streaming sunshine, and then a sure and gradual descent into the shadows beneath. The same equable and constant motion urges the orb of our lives from morning to noon, and from noon to evening. The glory of the dawning day, with its golden clouds and its dewy freshness, its new awakened hopes and its unworn vigour, climbs by silent, inevitable stages to the hot noon. But its ardours flame but for a moment; but for a moment does the sun poise itself on the meridian line, and the short shadow point to the pole. The inexorable revolution goes on, and in due time come the mists and dying purples of evening and the blackness of night. The same progress which brings April’s perfumes burns them in the censer of the hot summer, and buries summer beneath the falling leaves, and covers its grave with winter’s snow.

‘Everything that grows
Holds in perfection but a little moment.’

So the life of man, being under the law of growth, is, in all its parts, subject to the consequent necessity of decline. And very swiftly does the direction change from ascending to descending. At first, and for a little while, the motion of the dancing stream, which broadens as it runs, and bears us past fields each brighter and more enamelled with flowers than the one before it, is joyous; but the slow current becomes awful as we are swept along when we would fain moor and land-and to some of us it comes to be tragic and dreadful at last, as we sit helpless, and see the shore rush past and hear the roar of the falls in our ears, like some poor wretch caught in the glassy smoothness above Niagara, who has flung down the oars, and, clutching the gunwale with idle hands, sits effortless and breathless till the plunge comes. Many a despairing voice has prayed as the sands ran out, and joys fled, ‘Sun, stand thou still on Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon,’ but in vain. Once the wish was answered; but, for all other fighters, the twelve hours of the day must suffice for victory and for joy. Time devours his own children. The morning hours come to us with full hands and give, the evening hours come with empty hands and take; so that at the last ‘naked shall he return to go as he came.’ Our earthly life runs through its successive stages, and for it, in body and mind, old age is the child of youth.

But the perfect life of the dead in Christ has but one phase, youth. It is growth without a limit and without decline. To say that they are ever young is the same thing as to say that their being never reaches its climax, that it is ever but entering on its glory; that is, as we have said, that the true conception of their life is that of eternal progress towards infinite perfection.

For what is the goal to which they tend? The likeness of God in Christ-all His wisdom, His love, His holiness. He is all theirs, and His whole perfection is to be transfused into their growing greatness. ‘He is made unto them of God. wisdom, and righteousness, and salvation and redemption,’ nor can they cease to grow till they have outgrown Jesus and exhausted God. On the one hand is infinite perfection, destined to be imparted to the redeemed spirit. On the other hand is a capability of indefinite assimilation to, by reception of, that infinite perfection. We have no reason to set bounds to the possible expansion of the human spirit. If only there be fitting circumstances and an adequate impulse, it may have an endless growth.

Such circumstances and such impulse are given in the loving presence of Christ in glory. Therefore we look for an eternal life which shall never reach a point beyond which no advance is possible. ‘The path of the just’ in that higher state ‘shineth more and more,’ and never touches the zenith. Here we float upon a landlocked lake, and on every side soon reach the bounding land; but there we are on a shoreless ocean, and never hear any voice that says, ‘Hitherto shalt thou come, and no farther.’ Christ will be ever before us, the yet unattained end of our desires; Christ will be ever above us, fairer, wiser, holier, than we; after unsummed eternities of advance there will yet stretch before us a shining way that leads to Him. The language, which was often breathed by us on earth in tones of plaintive confession, will be spoken in heaven in gladness, ‘Not as though I had attained, either were perfect, but I follow after,’ The promise that was spoken by Him in regard to our mortality will be repeated by Him in respect to our celestial being, ‘I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.’ And as this advance has no natural limit, either in regard to our Pattern or to ourselves, there will be no reverse direction to ensue. Here the one process has its two opposite parts; the same impulse carries up to the summit and forces down from it. But it is not so then. There growth will never merge into decay, nor exacting hours come to recall the gifts, which their free-handed sisters gave.

They who live in Christ, beyond the grave, begin with a relative perfection. They are thereby rendered capable of more complete Christ-likeness. The eye, by gazing into the day, becomes more recipient of more light; the spirit cleaves closer to a Christ more fully apprehended and more deeply loved; the whole being, like a plant reaching up to the sunlight, grows by its yearning towards the light, and by the light towards which it yearns-lifts a stronger stem and spreads a broader leaf, and opens into immortal flowers tinted by the sunlight with its own colours. This blessed and eternal growth towards Him whom we possess, to begin with, and never can exhaust, is the perpetual youth of God’s redeemed.

We ought not to think of those whom we have loved and lost as if they had gone, carrying with them declining powers, and still bearing the marks of this inevitable law of stagnation, and then of decay, under which they groaned here. Think of them rather as having, if they sleep in Jesus, reversed all this, as having carried with them, indeed, all the gifts of matured experience and ripened wisdom which the slow years bring, but likewise as having left behind all the weariness of accomplished aims, the monotony of a formed character, the rigidity of limbs that have ceased to grow. Think of them as receiving again from the hands of Christ much of which they were robbed by the lapse of years. Think of them as then crowned with loving-kindness and satisfied with good, so that 'their youth is renewed like the eagle's.' Think of them as again joyous, with the joy of beginning a career, which has no term but the sum of all perfection in the likeness of the infinite God. They rise like the song-bird, aspiring to the heavens, circling round, and ever higher, which 'singing still doth soar, and soaring ever singeth'-up and up through the steadfast blue to the sun! 'Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall; but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.' They shall lose the marks of age as they grow in eternity, and they who have stood before the throne the longest shall be likest him who sat in the sepulchre young with immortal strength, radiant with unwithering beauty.

II. The life of the faithful dead recovers and retains the best characteristics of youth.

Each stage of our earthly course has its own peculiar characteristics, as each zone of the world has its own vegetation and animal life. And, for the most part, these characteristics cannot be anticipated in the preceding stage, nor prolonged into the succeeding. To some small extent they will bear transplanting, and he is nearest a perfect man who carries into each period of his life some trace of the special beauty of that which went before, making 'the child the father of the man,' and carrying deep into old age the simple self-forgetfulness of the child and the energy of the youth. But this can only be partially done by any effort; and even those whose happily constituted temperaments make it comparatively easy for them, do often carry the weakness rather than the strength of the earlier into the later epochs. It is easier to be always childish than to be always childlike. The immaturity and heedlessness of youth bear carriage better than the more precious vintages of that sunny land-its freshness of eye and heart, its openness of mind, its energy of hand. Even when these are in any measure retained-beautiful as they are in old age-they are but too apt to be associated with an absence of the excellences more proper to the later stages of life, and to involve a want of patient judgment, of sagacious discrimination, of rooted affections, of prudent, persistent action. Beautiful indeed it is when the grace of the child and the strength of the young man live on in the fathers, and when the last of life encloses all that was good in all that went before. But miserable it is, and quite as frequent a case, when grey hairs cover a childish brain, and an aged heart throbs with the feverish passion of youthful blood. So for this life it is difficult, and often not well, that youth should be prolonged into manhood and old age.

But the thought is none the less true, that the perfection of our being requires the reappearance and the continuance of all that was good in each successive stage of it in the past. The brightest aspects of youth will return to all who live in Jesus, beyond the grave, and will be theirs for ever. Such a consideration branches out into many happy anticipations, which we can but very cursorily touch on here.

For instance-Youth is the time for hope. The world then lies all before us, fair and untried. We have not learnt our own weakness by many failures, nor the dread possibilities that lie in every future. The past is too brief to occupy us long, and its furthest point too near to be clothed in the airy purple, which draws the eye and stirs the heart. We are conscious of increasing powers which crave for occupation. It seems impossible but that success and joy shall be ours. So we live for a little while in a golden haze; we look down from our peak upon the virgin forests of a new world, that roll away to the shining waters in the west, and then we plunge into their mazes to hew out a path for ourselves, to slay the wild beasts, and to find and conquer rich lands. But soon we discover what hard work the march is, and what monsters lurk in the leafy coverts, and what diseases hover among the marshes, and how short a distance ahead we can see, and how far off it is to the treasure-cities that we dreamed of; and if at last we gain some cleared spot whence we can look forward, our weary eyes are searching at most for a place to rest, and all our hopes have dwindled to hopes of safety and repose. The day brings too much toil to leave us leisure for much anticipation. The journey has had too many failures, too many wounds, too many of our comrades left to die in the forest glades, to allow of our expecting much. We plod on, sometimes ready to faint, sometimes with lighter hearts, but not any more winged by hope as in the golden prime,-unless indeed for those of us who have fixed our hopes on God, and so get through the march better, because, be it rough or smooth, long or short, He moves before us to guide, and all our ways lead to Him. But even for these there comes, before very long, a time when they are weary of hoping for much more here, and when the light of youth fades into common day. Be it so! They will get the faculty and the use of it back again in far nobler fashion, when death has taken them away from all that is transient, and faith has through death given for their possession and their expectation, the certitudes of eternity. It will be worth while to look forward again, when we are again standing at the beginning of a life. It will be possible once more to hope, when disappointments are all past. A boundless future stretching before us, of which we know that it is all blessed, and that we shall reach all its blessedness, will give back to hearts that have long ceased to drink of the delusive cup which earthly hope offered to their lips, the joy of living in a present, made bright by the certain anticipation of a yet brighter future. Losing nothing by our constant progress, and certain to gain all which we foresee, we shall remember and be glad, we shall hope and be confident. With ‘the past unsighed for, and the future sure,’ we shall have that magic gift, which earth’s disappointments dulled, quickened by the sure mercies of the heavens.

Again, youth has mostly a certain keenness of relish for life which vanishes only too soon. There are plenty of our young men and women too, of this day, no doubt, who are as blasé and wearied before they are out of their ‘teens as if they were fifty. So much the sadder for them, so much the worse for the social state which breeds such monsters. For monsters they are: there ought to be in youth a sense of fresh wonder undimmed by familiarity, the absence of satiety, a joy in joyful things because they are new as well as gladsome. The poignancy of these early delights cannot long survive. Custom stales them all, and wraps everything in its robe of ashen grey. We get used to what was once so fresh and wonderful, and do not care very much about anything any more. We smile pitying smiles-sadder than any tears-at ‘boyish enthusiasm,’ and sometimes plume ourselves on having come to ‘years which bring the philosophic mind’; and all the while we know that we have lost a great gift, which here can never come back any more.

But what if that eager freshness of delight may yet be ours once again? What if the eternal youth of the heavens means, amongst other things, that there are pleasures which always satisfy but never cloy? What if, in perpetual advance, we find and keep for ever that ever new gladness, which here we vainly seek in perpetual distraction? What if constant new influxes of divine blessedness, and constant new visions of God, keep in constant exercise that sense of wonder, which makes so great a part of the power of youth? What if, after all that we have learned and all that we have received, we still have to say, ‘It doth not yet appear what we shall be’? Then, I think, in very profound and blessed sense, heaven would be perpetual youth.

I need not pause to speak of other characteristics of that period of life-such as its enthusiasm, its life by impulse rather than by reason, its buoyant energy and delight in action. All these gifts, so little cared for when possessed, so often misused, so irrevocably gone with a few brief years, so bitterly bewailed, will surely be found again, where God keeps all the treasures that He gives and we let fall. For transient enthusiasm, heaven will give us back a fervour of love like that of the seraphs, that have burned before His throne unconsumed and undecaying for unknown ages. For a life of instinctive impulse, we shall titan receive a life in which impulse is ever parallel with the highest law, and, doing only what we would, we shall do only what we ought. For energy which wanes as the years wax, and delight in action which is soon worn down into mechanical routine of toil, there will be bestowed strength akin to His ‘who fainteth not, neither is weary.’ All of which maturity and old age robbed us is given back in nobler form. All the limitation and weakness which they brought, the coldness, the monotony, the torpor, the weariness, will drop away. But we shall keep all the precious things which they brought us. None of the calm wisdom, the ripened knowledge, the full-summed experience, the powers of service acquired in life’s long apprenticeship, will be taken from us.

All will be changed indeed. All will be cleansed of the impurity which attaches to all. All will be accepted and crowned, not by reason of its goodness, but by reason of Christ’s sacrifice, which is the channel of God’s mercy. Though in themselves unworthy, and having nothing fit for the heavens, yet the souls that trust in Jesus, the Lord of Life, shall bear into their glory the characters which by His grace they wrought out here on earth, transfigured and perfected, but still the same. And to make up that full-summed completeness, will be given to them at once the perfection of all the various stages through which they passed on earth. The perfect man in the heavens will include the graces of childhood, the energies of youth, the steadfastness of manhood, the calmness of old age; as on some tropical trees, blooming in more fertile soil and quickened by a hotter sun than ours, you may see at once bud, blossom, and fruit-the expectancy of spring, and the maturing promise of summer, and the fulfilled fruition of autumn-hanging together on the unexhausted bough.

III. The faithful dead shall live in a body that cannot grow old.

Scripture assures us, I believe, that the dead in Christ are now in full, conscious enjoyment of His presence, and of all the blessedness that to dwell in Christ can bring to a spirit. All, then, which we have been saying applies to the present condition of those who sleep in Jesus. As concerning toil and trouble they take rest in sleep, as concerning contact with an outer world they slumber untroubled by its noise; but as concerning their communion with their Lord they, like us, ‘whether we wake or sleep, live together with Him.’ But we know too, from Scripture, that the dead in Christ wait for the resurrection of the body, without which they cannot be perfected, nor restored to full activity of outward life in connection with an external creation.

The lesson which we venture to draw from this text enforces the familiar teaching of Scripture as to that body of glory-that it cannot decay, nor grow old. In this respect, too, eternal youth may be ours. Here we have a bodily organisation which, like all other living bodies, goes through its appointed series of changes, wastes in effort, and so needs reparation by food and rest, dies in growing, and finally waxes old and dissolves. In such a house, a man cannot be ever young. The dim eye and shaking hand, the wrinkled face and thin grey hairs cannot but age the spirit, since they weaken its instruments.

If the redeemed of the Lord are to be always young in spirit, they must have a body which knows no weariness, which needs no repose, which has no necessity of dying impressed upon it. And such a body Scripture plainly tells us will belong to those who are Christ’s, at His coming. Our present acquaintance with the conditions of life makes that great promise seem impossible to many learned men amongst us. And I know not that anything but acquaintance with the sure word of God and with a risen Lord will make that seeming impossibility again a great promise for us. If we believe it at all, I think we must believe it because the resurrection of Jesus Christ says so, and because the Scriptures put it into articulate words as the promise of His resurrection. ‘Ye do err,’ said Christ long ago, to those who denied a resurrection, ‘not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God.’ Then knowledge of the Scriptures leads to belief in the resurrection of the dead, and the remembrance of our ignorance of the power of God disposes of all the doubts which are raised on the supposition that His present works are the pattern of His future ones, or the limits of His unexhausted energy.

We are content then to fall back on Scripture words, and to believe in the resurrection of the dead simply because it is, as we believe, told us from God.

For all who accept the message, this hope shines clear, of a building of God imperishable and solid, when contrasted with the tent in which we dwell here-of a body ‘raised in incorruption,’ ‘clothed with immortality,’ and so, as in many another phrase, declared to be exempt from decay, and therefore vigorous with unchanging youth. How that comes we cannot tell. Whether because that body of glory has no proclivity to mutation and decay, or whether the perpetual volition and power of God counteract such tendency and give, as the Book of Revelation says,’ to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God’-matters not at all. The truth of the promise remains, though we have no means of knowing more than the fact, that we shall receive a body, fashioned like His who dieth no more. There shall be no weariness nor consequent need for repose- ‘they rest not day nor night.’ There shall be no faintness nor consequent craving for sustenance-’they shall hunger no more neither thirst any more.’ There shall be no disease-’the inhabitant thereof shall no more say, I am sick,’ ‘neither can they die any more, for they are equal unto the angels.’

And if all this is true, that glorious and undecaying body will then be the equal and fit instrument of the perfected spirit, not, as it is now, the adequate instrument only of the natural life. The deepest emotions then will be capable of expression, nor as now, like some rushing tide, choke the floodgates through whose narrow aperture they try to press, and be all tossed into foam in the attempt. We shall then seem what we are, as we shall also be what we ought. All outward things will then be fully and clearly communicated to the spirit, for that glorious body will be a perfect instrument of knowledge. All that we desire to do we shall then do, nor be longer tortured with tremulous hands which can never draw the perfect circle that we plan, and stammering lips that will not obey the heart, and throbbing brain that will ache when we would have it clear. The ever-young spirit will have for true yokefellow a body that cannot tire, nor grow old, nor die.

The aged saints of God shall rise then in youthful beauty. More than the long-vanished comeliness shall on that day rest on faces that were here haggard with anxiety, and pinched with penury and years. There will be no more palsied hands, no more scattered grey hairs, no more dim and horny eyes, no more stiffened muscles and slow throbbing hearts. ‘It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.’ It is sown in decaying old age, it is raised in immortal youth. His servants shall stand in that day among ‘the young-eyed cherubim,’ and be like them for ever. So we may think of the dead in Christ.

But do not forget that Christian faith may largely do for us here what God’s grace and power will do for us in heaven, and that even now we may possess much of this great gift of perpetual youth. If we live for Christ by faith in Him, then may we carry with us all our days the energy, the hope, the joy of the morning tide, and be children in evil while men in understanding. With unworn and fresh heart we may ‘bring forth fruit in old age,’ and have the crocus in the autumnal fields as well as in the spring-time of our lives. So blessed, we may pass to a peaceful end, because we hold His hand who makes the path smooth and the heart quiet. Trust yourselves, my brethren, to the immortal love and perfect work of the Divine Saviour, and by His dear might your days will advance by peaceful stages, whereof each gathers up and carries forward the blessings of all that went before, to a death which shall be a birth. Its chill waters will be as a fountain of youth from which you will rise, beautiful and strong, to begin an immortality of growing power. A Christian life on earth solves partly, a Christian life in heaven solves completely, the problem of perpetual youth. For those who die in His faith and fear, ‘better is the end than the beginning, and the day of one’s death than the day of one’s birth.’ Christ keeps the good wine until the close of the feast.

‘Such is Thy banquet, dearest Lord;
O give us grace, to cast
Our lot with Thine, to trust Thy word,
And keep our best till last.’

90)Mark 16:6

Mark

THE INCREDULOUS DISCIPLES

THE ANGEL IN THE TOMB

Mar. 16:5 - Mar. 16:6.

Each of the four Evangelists tells the story of the Resurrection from his own special point of view. None of them has any record of the actual fact, because no eye saw it. Before the earthquake and the angelic descent, before the stone was rolled away, while the guards perhaps slept, and before Love and Sorrow had awakened, Christ rose. And deep silence covers the event. But in treating of the subsequent portion of the narrative, each Evangelist stands at his own point of view. Mark has scarcely anything to say about our Lord’s appearance after the Resurrection. His object seems mainly to be to describe rather the manner in which the report of the Resurrection affected the disciples, and so he makes prominent the bewildered astonishment of the women. If the latter part of this chapter be his, he passes by the appearance of our Lord to Mary Magdalene and to the two travellers to Emmaus with just a word for each-contrasting singularly with the lovely narrative of the former in John’s Gospel and with the detailed account of the latter in Luke’s. He emphasises the incredulity of the Twelve after receiving the reports, and in like manner he lays stress upon the unbelief and hardness of heart which the Lord rebuked.

So, then, this incident, the appearance of the angel, the portion of his message to the women which we have read, and the way in which the first testimony to the Resurrection affected its hearers, may suggest to us some thoughts which, though subsidiary to the main teaching of the Resurrection, may yet be important in their place.

I. Note the first witness to the Resurrection.

There are singular diversities in the four Gospels in their accounts of the angelic appearances, the number, occupation, and attitude of these superhuman persons, and contradictions may be spun, if one is so disposed, out of these varieties. But it is wiser to take another view of them, and to see in the varying reports, sometimes of one angel, sometimes of two, sometimes of one sitting outside the sepulchre, sometimes one within, sometimes none, either different moments of time or differences produced by the different spiritual condition of the beholders. Who can count the glancing wings of the white-winged flock of sea-birds as they sail and turn in the sunshine? Who can count the numbers of these 'bright-harnessed angels,' sometimes more, sometimes less, flickering and fluttering into and out of sight, which shone upon the vision of the weeping onlookers? We know too little about the laws of angelic appearances; we know too little about the relation in that high region between the seeing eye and the objects beheld to venture to say that there is contradiction where the narratives present variety. Enough for us to draw the lessons that are suggested by that quiet figure sitting there in the inner vestibule of the grave, the stone rolled away and the work done, gazing on the tomb where the Lord of men and angels had lain.

He was a youth. 'The oldest angels are the youngest,' says a great mystic. The angels 'excel in strength' because they delight to do His commandments, hearkening unto the voice of His word.' The lapse of ages brings not age to them who 'wait on the Lord' in the higher ministries of heaven, and run unwearied, and walk unfainting, and when they are seen by men are radiant with immortal youth. He was 'clothed in a long white garment,' the sign at once of purity and of repose; and he was sitting in rapt contemplation and quiet adoration there, where the body of Jesus had lain.

But what had he to do with the joy of Resurrection? It delivered him from no fears, it brought to him no fresh assurance of a life which was always his. Wherefore was he there? Because that Cross strikes its power upwards as well as downwards; because He that had lain there is the Head of all creation, and the Lord of angels as well as of men; because that Resurrection following upon that Cross, 'unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places,' opened a new and wonderful door into the unsounded and unfathomed abyss of divine love; because into these things ‘angels desire to look,’ and, looking, are smitten with adoring wonder and flushed with the illumination of a new knowledge of what God is, and of what man is to God. The Resurrection of the Prince of Life was no mystery to the angel. To him the mystery was in His death. To us the death is not a mystery, but the Resurrection is. That gazing figure looks from the other side upon the grave which we contemplate from this side of the gulf of death; but the eyes of both orders of Being fix upon the same hallowed spot-they in adoring wonder that there a God should have lain; we in lowly thankfulness that thence a man should have risen.

Further, we see in that angel presence not only the indication that Christ is his King as well as ours, but also the mark of his and all his fellows’ sympathetic participation in whatsoever is of so deep interest to humanity. There is a certain tone of friendship and oneness in his words. The trembling women were smitten into an ecstasy of bewildered fear [as one of the words, ‘affrighted’ might more accurately be rendered], and his consolation to them, ‘Be not affrighted, ye seek Jesus,’ suggests that, in all the great sweep of the unseen universe, whatsoever beings may people that to us apparently waste and solitary space, howsoever many they may be, ‘thick as the autumn leaves in Vallambrosa’ or as the motes that dance in the sunshine, they are all friends and allies and elder brethren of those who seek for Jesus with a loving heart. No creature that owns His sway can touch or injure or need terrify the soul that follows after Christ. ‘All the servants of our King in heaven and earth are one,’ and He sends forth His brightest and loftiest to be brethren and ministers to them who shall be ‘heirs of salvation.’ So we may pass through the darkest spaces of the universe and the loneliest valleys of the shadow of death, sure that whosoever may be there will be our friend if we are the friends of Christ.

II. So much, then, for the first point that I would suggest here. Note, secondly, the triumphant light cast upon the cradle and the Cross.

There is something very remarkable, because for purposes of identification plainly unnecessary, in the minute particularity of the designation which the angel lips give to Jesus Christ. ‘Jesus, the Nazarene, who was crucified.’ Do you not catch a tone of wonder and a tone of triumph in this threefold particularising of the humanity, the lowly residence, and the Ignominious death? All that lowliness, suffering, and shame are brought into comparison with the rising from the dead. That is to say, when we grasp the fact of a risen Christ, we look back upon all the story of His birth, His lowly life, His death of shame, and see a new meaning in it, and new reasons for triumph and for wonder. The cradle is illuminated by the grave, the Cross by the empty sepulchre. As at the beginning there is a supernatural entrance into life, so at the end there is a supernatural resumption of it. The birth corresponds with the resurrection, and both witness to the divinity. The lowly life culminates in the conquest over death; the Nazarene despised, rejected, dwelling in a place that was a byword, sharing all the modest lowliness and self-respecting poverty of the Galilean peasants, has conquered death. The Man that was crucified has conquered death. And the fact that He has risen explains and illuminates the fact that He died.

Brethren, let us lay this to heart, that unless we believe in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the saying ‘He was crucified’ is the saddest word that can be spoken about any of the great ones of the past. If Jesus Christ be lying in some nameless grave, then all the power of His death is gone, and He and it are nothing to me, or to you, or to any of our fellow-men, more than a thousand deaths of the mighty ones of old. But Easter day transfigures the gloom of the day of the Crucifixion, and the rising sun of its morning gilds and explains the Cross. Now it stands forth as the great redeeming power of the world, where my sins and yours and the whole world’s have been expiated and done away. And now, instead of being ignominy, it is glory, and instead of being defeat it is victory, and instead of looking upon that death as the lowest point of the Master’s humiliation, we may look upon it as He Himself did, as the highest point of His glorifying. For the Cross then becomes His great means of winning men to Himself, and the very throne of His power. On the historical fact of a Resurrection depend all the worth and meaning of the death of Christ. ‘If He be not risen our preaching is vain, and your faith is also vain.’ ‘If Christ be not risen, ye are yet in your sins.’ But if what this day commemorates be true, then upon all His earthly life is thrown a new light; and we first understand the Cross when we look upon the empty grave.

III. Again, notice here the majestic announcement of the great fact, and its confirmation.

'He is risen; He is not here.' The first preacher of the Resurrection was an angel, a true ev-angel-ist. His message is conveyed in these brief sentences, unconnected with each other, in token, not of abruptness and haste, but of solemnity. 'He is risen' is one word in the original-a sentence of one word, which announces the mightiest miracle that ever was wrought upon earth, a miracle which opens the door wide enough for all supernatural events recorded of Jesus Christ to find an entrance to the understanding and the reason.

'He is risen.' The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is declared by angel lips to be His own act; not, indeed, as if He were acting separately from the Father, but still less as if in it He were merely passive. Think of that; a dead Christ raised Himself. That is the teaching of the Scripture. I do not dwell here, at this stage of my sermon, on the many issues that spring from such a conception, but this only I urge, Jesus Christ was the Lord of life; held life and death, His own and others', at His beck and will. His death was voluntary; He was not passive in it, but He died because He chose. His resurrection was His act; He rose because He willed. 'I have power to lay it down, I have power to take it again.' No one said to Him, 'I say unto Thee, arise!' The divine power of the Father's will did not work upon Him as from without to raise Him from the dead; but He, the embodiment of divinity, raised Himself, even though it is also true that He was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father. These two statements are not contradictory, but the former of them can only be predicated of Him; and it sets Him on a pedestal immeasurably above, and infinitely apart from, all those to whom life is communicated by a divine act. He Himself is 'the Life,' and it was not possible that Life should be holden of Death; therefore He burst its bonds, and, like the ancient Jewish hero, though in far nobler fashion, our Samson enters into the city which is a prison, and on His strong shoulders bears away the gates, that none may ever there be prisoners without hope.

Now, then, note the confirmation of this stupendous fact. 'He is risen; He is not here.' The grave was empty, and the trembling women were called upon to look and see for themselves that the body was not there. One remark is all that I wish to make about this matter-viz. this, all theories, ancient or modern, which deny the Resurrection, are shattered by this one question, What became of Jesus Christ's body? We take it as a plain historical fact, which the extremest scepticism has never ventured to deny, that the grave of Christ was empty. The trumped-up story of the guards sufficiently shows that. When the belief of a resurrection began to be spread abroad, what would have been easier for Pharisees and rulers than to have gone to the sepulchre and rolled back the stone, and said, 'Look there! there is your risen Man, lying mouldering, like all the rest of us.' They did not do it. Why? Because the grave was empty. Where was the body? They had it not, else they would have been glad to produce it. The disciples had it not, for if they had, you come back to the discredited and impossible theory that, having it, and knowing that they were telling lies, they got up the story of the Resurrection. Nobody believes that nowadays-nobody can believe it who looks at the results of the preaching of this, by hypothesis, falsehood. 'Men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles.' And whether the disciples were right or wrong, there can be no question in the mind of anybody who is not prepared to swallow impossibilities compared to which miracles are easy, that the first disciples heartily believed that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead. As I say, one confirmation of the belief lies in the empty grave, and this question may be put to anybody that says 'I do not believe in your Resurrection':-'What became of the sacred body of Jesus Christ?'

Now, note the way in which the announcement of this tremendous fact was received. With blank bewilderment and terror on the part of these women, followed by incredulity on the part of the Apostles and of the other disciples. These things are on the surface of the narrative, and very important they are. They plainly tell us that the first hearers did not believe the testimony which they themselves call upon us to believe. And, that being the state of mind of the early disciples on the Resurrection day, what becomes of the modern theory, which seeks to explain the fact of the early belief in the Resurrection by saying, 'Oh, they had worked themselves into such a fever of expectation that Jesus Christ would rise from the dead that the wish was father to the thought, and they said that He did because they expected that He would'? No! they did not expect that He would; it was the very last thing that they expected. They had not in their minds the soil out of which such imaginations would grow. They were perfectly unprepared to believe it, and, as a matter of fact, they did not believe until they had seen. So I think that that one fact disposes of a great deal of pestilent and shallow talk in these days that tries to deny the Resurrection and to save the character of the men that witnessed it.

IV. And now, lastly, note here the summons to grateful contemplation.

‘Behold the place where they laid Him.’ To these women the call was simply one to come and see what would confirm the witness. But we may, perhaps, permissibly turn it to a wider purpose, and say that it summons us all to thankful, lowly, believing, glad contemplation of that empty grave as the basis of all our hopes. Look upon it and upon the Resurrection which it confirms to us as an historical fact. It sets the seal of the divine approval on Christ’s work, and declares the divinity of His person and the all-sufficiency of His mighty sacrifice. Therefore let us, laden with our sins and seeking for reconciliation with God, and knowing how impossible it is for us to bring an atonement or a ransom for ourselves, look upon that grave and learn that Christ has offered the sacrifice which God has accepted, and with which He is well pleased.

‘Behold the place where they laid Him,’ and, looking upon it, let us think of that Resurrection as a prophecy, with a bearing upon us and upon all the dear ones that have trod the common road into the great darkness. Christ has died, therefore they live; Christ lives, therefore we shall never die. His grave was in a garden-a garden indeed. The yearly miracle of the returning ‘life re-orient out of dust,’ typifies the mightier miracle which He works for all that trust in Him, when out of death He leads them into life. The graveyard has become ‘God’s acre’; the garden in which the seed sown in weakness is to be raised in power, and sown corruptible is to be raised in incorruption.

‘Behold the place where they laid Him,’ and in the empty grave read the mystery of the Resurrection as the pattern and the symbol of our higher life; that, ‘like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.’ Oh to partake more and more of that power of His Resurrection!

In Christ’s empty grave is planted the true ‘tree of life, which is in the midst of the “true” Paradise of God.’ And we, if we truly trust and humbly love that Lord, shall partake of its fruits, and shall one day share the glories of His risen life in the heavens, even as we share the power of it here and now.

91)Mark 16:7

Mark

THE INCREDULOUS DISCIPLES

LOVE’S TRIUMPH OVER SIN

Mar. 16:7.

This prevailing tradition of Christian antiquity ascribes this Gospel to John Mark, sister’s son to Barnabas, and affirms that in composing it he was in some sense the ‘interpreter’ of the Apostle Peter. Some confirmation of this alleged connection between the Evangelist and the Apostle may be gathered from the fact that the former is mentioned by the latter as with him when he wrote his First Epistle. And, in the Gospel itself, there are some little peculiarities which seem to look in the same direction. A certain speciality is traceable here and there, both in omissions of incidents in the Apostle’s life recorded by some of the other Evangelists, and in the addition of slight facts concerning him unnoticed by them.

Chief among these is the place which his name holds in this very remarkable message, delivered by the angels to the women who came to Christ’s tomb on the Resurrection morning. Matthew, who also reports the angels’ words, has only ‘tell His disciples.’ Mark adds the words, which must have come like wine and oil to the bruised heart of the denier, ‘tell His disciples and Peter.’ To the others, it was of little importance that his name should have been named then; to him it was life from the dead, that he should have been singled out to receive a word of forgiveness and a summons to meet his Lord; as if He had said through His angel messengers-’I would see them all; but whoever may stay behind, let not him be absent from our glad meeting again.’

We find, too, that the same individualising of the Apostle, which led to his being thus greeted in the first thoughts of his risen Lord, led also to an interview with Him on that same day, about which not a syllable of detail is found in any Gospel, though the fact was known to the whole body of the disciples. For when the two friends who had met Christ at Emmaus came back in the night with their strange tidings, their eagerness to tell their joyful news is anticipated by the eagerness of the brethren to tell their wonderful story: ‘The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared to Simon.’ Paul, too, gives that meeting, when the Lord was alone with the penitent, the foremost place in his list of the evidences of Christ’s resurrection, ‘He was seen of Cephas.’ What passed then is hidden from all eyes. The secrets of that hour of deep contrition and healing love Peter kept secretly curtained from sight, in the innermost chamber of his memory. But we may be sure that then forgiveness was sought and granted, and the bond that fastened him to his Lord was welded together again, where it had snapped, and was the stronger because it had been broken, and at the point of fracture.

The man must be first re-united to his Saviour, before the Apostle can be reinstated in his functions. In secrecy, not beheld by any, is the personal act of restoration to love and friendship effected; and then in public, before his brethren, who were concerned in his official position, but not in his personal relation to his Lord, the reappointment of the pardoned disciple to his apostleship takes place. His sin had had a public aspect, and his threefold denial must, in so far as it was an outward act, be effaced by his threefold confession. Then he becomes again ‘Peter’-not merely ‘Simon Bar Jonas’; and, as the Book of the Acts shows, never ceases to hear the divine commissions, ‘Feed My sheep,’ ‘Follow Me’; nor ever forgets the lessons he had learned in these bitter hours of self-loathing, and in the rapturous moments when again he saw his Lord.

Putting all these things together-this message from Christ, the interview which followed it, and the subsequent history of the Apostle-we have a connected series of facts which may illustrate for us, better than many dry words of mine could do, the triumph over sin of the forgiving love of Christ.

I. Notice, then, first, the loving message with which He beckons the wanderer back.

If we try to throw ourselves back into the Apostle’s black thoughts during the interval between his denial and the Resurrection morning, we shall better feel what this love-token from the grave must have been to him. His natural character, as well as his real love for his Master, ensured that his lies could not long content him. They were uttered so vehemently because they were uttered in spite of inward resistance. Overpowered by fear, beaten down from all his vain-glorious self-confidence by a woman-servant’s sharp tongue and mocking eye, he lied-and then came the rebound. The same impulsive vehemence which had hurried him into the fault, would swing him back again to quick penitence when the cock crew, and that Divine Face, turning slowly from before the judgment-seat with the sorrow of wounded love upon it, silently said, ‘Remember.’ We can fancy how that bitter weeping, which began so soon, grew more passionate and more bitter when the end came. We are singularly happy if we do not know the pang of remembering some fault to the loved dead-some hasty word, some momentary petulance, some selfish disregard of their happiness, some sullen refusal of their tenderness. How the thought that it is all irrevocable now embitters the remorse! How passionately we long that we could have one of the moments again, which seemed so trivial while we possessed them, that we might confess and be forgiven, and atone! And this poor, warm-hearted, penitent denier had to think that his very last act to the Lord whom he loved so well had been such an act of cowardly shrinking from acknowledging Him; and that henceforward his memory of that dear face was to be for ever saddened by that last look! That they should have parted so! that that sad gaze was to be the last he should ever have, and that it was to haunt him for the rest of his life! We can understand how heavily the hours passed on that dreary Saturday. If, as seems probable, he was with John in his home, whither the latter had led the mother of our Lord, what a group were gathered there, each with a separate pang from the common sorrow!

Into this sorrow come the tidings that all was not over, that the irrevocable was not irrevocable, that perhaps new days of loyal love might still be granted, in which the doleful failure of the past might be forgotten; and then, whether before or after his hurried rush to the grave we need not here stay to inquire, follows the message of our text, a word of forgiveness and reconciliation, sent by the Lord as the herald and outrider of His own coming, to bring gladness and hope ere He Himself draws near.

Think of this message as a revelation of love that is stronger than death.

The news of Christ's resurrection must have struck awe, but not necessarily joy, into the disciples' hearts. The dearest ones suffer so solemn a change to our apprehensions when they pass into the grave, that to many a man it would be maddening terror to meet those whom he loved and still loves. So there must have been a spasm of fear even among Christ's friends when they heard of Him as risen again, and much confusing doubt as to what would be the amount of resemblance to His old self. They probably dreaded to find Him far removed from their familiar love, forgetful perhaps of much of the old life, with other thoughts than before, with the atmosphere of the other world round about Him, which glorified Him indeed, but separated Him too from those whose grosser lungs could live only in this thick air. These words of our text would go far to scatter all such fears. They link on the future to the past, as if His first thought when He rose had been to gather up again the dropped threads of their intercourse, and to carry on their ancient concord and companionship as though no break had been at all. For all the disciples, and especially for him who is especially named, they confirm the identity of Christ's whole dispositions towards them now, with those which He had before. Death has not changed Him at all. Much has been done since He left them; the world's history has been changed, but nothing which has happened has had any effect on the reality of His love, and on the inmost reality of their companionship. In these respects they are where they were, and even Calvary and the tomb are but as a parenthesis. The old bonds are all re-knit, and the junction is all but imperceptible.

This is how we have to think of our Lord now, in His attitude towards us. We, too, may have our share in that message, which came like morning twilight before He shone upon the apostles' darkness. To them it proclaimed a love which was stronger than death. To us it may declare a love which is stronger than all change of circumstances. He is no more parted from us by the Throne than from them by the Cross. He descended into 'the lower parts of the earth,' and His love lived on, and so it does now, when He has 'ascended up far above all heavens.' Love knows no difference of place, conditions, or functions. From out of the blazing heart of the Glory the same tender face looks that bent over sick men's pallets, and that turned on Peter in the judgment-hall. The hand that holds the sceptre of the universe is the hand that was nailed to the Cross, and that was stretched out to that same Peter when he was ready to sink. The breast that is girt with the golden girdle of priestly sovereignty is the same tender home on which John's happy head rested in placid contentment. All the love that ever flowed from Christ flows from Him still. To Him, 'whose nature and whose name are Love,' it matters nothing whether He is in the house at Bethany, or in the upper room, or hanging on the Cross, or lying in the grave, or risen from the dead, or seated on the right hand of God. He is the same everywhere and always. 'I have loved thee with an everlasting love.'

Again, this message is the revelation of a love that is not turned away by our sinful changes.

Peter may have thought that he had, with his own words, broken the bond between him and his Lord. He had renounced his allegiance; was the renunciation to be accepted? He had said, 'I am not one of them'; did Christ answer, 'Be it so; one of them thou shalt no more be'? The message from the women's lips settled the question, and let him feel that, though his grasp of Christ had relaxed, Christ's grasp of him had not, He might change, he might cease for a time to prize his Lord's love, he might cease either to be conscious of it or to wish for it; but that love could not change. It was unaffected by his unfaithfulness, even as it had not been originated by his fidelity. Repelled, it still lingered beside him. Disowned, it still asserted its property in him. Being reviled, it blessed; being persecuted, it endured; being defamed, it entreated; and, patient through all wrongs and changes, it loved on till it had won back the erring heart, and could fill it with the old blessedness again.

And is not that same miracle of long-enduring love presented before every one of us, as in Christ's heart for us? True, our sin interferes with our sense of it, and modifies the form in which it must deal with us; but, however real and disastrous may be the power of our evil in troubling the communion of love between us and our Lord, and in compelling Him to smite before He binds up, never forget that our sin is utterly impotent to turn away the tide that sets to us from the heart of Christ. Earthborn vapours may hang about the low levels, and turn the gracious sun himself into a blood-red ball of lurid fire; but they reach only a little way up, and high above their region is the pure blue, and the blessed light pours down upon the upper surface of the white mist, and thins away its opaqueness, and dries up its clinging damp, and at last parts it into filmy fragments that float out of sight, and the dwellers on the green earth see the sun, which was always there even when they could not behold it, and which, by shining on, has conquered all the obstructions that veiled its beams. Sin is mighty, but one thing sin cannot do, and that is to make Christ cease to love us. Sin is mighty, but one other thing sin cannot do, and that is to prevent Christ from manifesting His love to us sinners, that we may learn to love and so may cease to sin. Christ's love is not at the beck and call of our fluctuating affections. It has its source deeper than in the springs in our hearts, namely in the depths of His own nature. It is not the echo or the answer to ours, but ours is the echo to His; and that being so, our changes do not reach to it, any more than earth's seasons affect the sun. For ever and ever He loves. Whilst we forget Him, He remembers us. Whilst we repay Him with neglect or with hate, He still loves. If we believe not, He still abides faithful to His merciful purpose, and, in spite of all that we can do, will not deny Himself, by ceasing to be the incarnate Patience, the perfect Love. He is Himself the great ensample of that 'charity' which His Apostle painted; He is not easily provoked; He is not soon angry; He beareth all things; He hopeth all things. We cannot get away from the sweep of His love, wander we ever so far. The child may struggle in the mother's arms, and beat the breast that shelters it with its little hand; but it neither hurts nor angers that gentle bosom, nor loosens the firm but loving grasp that holds it fast. He carries, as a nurse does, His wayward children, and, blessed be His name! His arm is too strong for us to shake it off, His love too divine for us to dam it back.

And still further, here we see a love which sends a special message because of special sin.

If one was to be singled out from the little company to receive by name the summons of the Lord to meet Him in Galilee, we might have expected it to have been that faithful friend who stood beneath the Cross, till his Lord's command sent him to his own home; or that weeping mother whom he then led away with him; or one of the two who had been turned from secret disciples into confessors by the might of their love, and had laid His body with reverent care in the grave in the garden. Strange reward for true love that they should be merged in the general message, and strange recompense for treason and cowardice that Peter's name should be thus distinguished! Is sin, then, a passport to His deeper love? Is the murmur true after all, 'Thou never gavest me a kid, but as soon as this thy son is come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf'? Yes, and no. No, inasmuch as the unbroken fellowship hath in it calm and deep joys which the returning prodigal does not know, and all sin lays waste and impoverishes the soul. Yes, inasmuch as He, who knows all our needs, knows that the denier needs a special treatment to bring him back to peace, and that the further a poor heart has strayed from Him, the mightier must be the forthputting of manifested love, if it is to be strong enough to travel across all the dreary wastes, and draw back again, to its orbit among its sister planets, the wandering star. The depth of our need determines the strength of the restorative power put forth. They who had not gone away would come at the call addressed to them all, but he who had sundered himself from them and from the Lord would remain in his sad isolation, unless some special means were used to bring him back. The more we have sinned, the less can we believe in Christ's love; and so the more we have sinned, the more marvellous and convincing does He make the testimony and operations of His love to us. It is ever to the poor bewildered sheep, lying panting in the wilderness, that He comes. Among His creatures, the race which has sinned is that which receives the most stupendous proof of the seeking divine love. Among men, the publicans and the harlots, the denying Peters and the persecuting Pauls, are they to whom the most persuasive entreaties of His love are sent, and on whom the strongest powers of His grace are brought to bear. Our sin cannot check the flow of His love. More marvellous still, our sin occasions a mightier burst of the manifestation of His love, for eyes blinded by selfishness and carelessness, or by fear and despair, need to see a brightness beyond the noonday sun, ere they can behold the amazing truth of His love to them; and what they need, they get. 'Go, tell Peter.'

Here, too, is the revelation of a love which singles out a sinful man by name.

Christ does not deal with us in the mass, but soul by soul. Our finite minds have to lose the individual in order to grasp the class. Our eyes see the wood far off on the mountain-side, but not the single trees, nor each fluttering leaf. We think of ‘the race’-the twelve hundred millions that live to-day, and the uncounted crowds that have been, but the units in that inconceivable sum are not separate in our view. But He does not generalise so. He has a clear individualising knowledge of each; each separately has a place in His mind or heart. To each He says, ‘I know thee by name.’ He loves the world, because He loves every single soul with a distinct love. And His messages of blessing are as specific and individualising as the love from which they come. He speaks to each of us as truly as He singled out Peter here, as truly as when His voice from heaven said, ‘Saul, Saul.’ English names are on His lips as really as Jewish ones. He calls to thee by thy name-thou hast a share in His love. To thee the call to trust Him is addressed, and to thee forgiveness, help, purity, life eternal are offered. Thou hast sinned; that only infuses deeper tenderness into His beseeching tones. Thou hast gone further front Him than some of thy fellows; that only makes His recovering energy greater. Thou hast denied His name; that only makes Him speak thine with more persuasive invitation.

Look, then, at this one instance of a love stronger than death, mightier than sin, sending its special greeting to the denier, and learn how deep the source, how powerful the flow, how universal the sweep, of that river of the love of God, which streams to us through the channel of Christ His Son.

II. Notice, secondly, the secret meeting between our Lord and the Apostle.

That is the second stage in the victorious conflict of divine love with man’s sin. As I have said, that interview took place on the day of the Resurrection, apparently before our Lord joined the two sorrowful travellers to Emmaus, and certainly before He appeared to the company gathered by night in the closed chamber. The fact was well known, for it is referred to by Luke and by Paul, but nothing beyond the fact seems to have been known, or at all events is made public by them. All this is very significant and very beautiful.

What tender consideration there is in meeting Peter alone, before seeing him in the companionship of the others! How painful would have been the rush of the first emotions of shame awakened by Christ's presence, if their course had been checked by any eye but His own beholding them! How impossible it would have then been to have poured out all the penitent confessions with which his heart must have been full, and how hard it would have been to have met for the first time, and not to have poured them out! With most loving insight, then, into the painful embarrassment, and dread of unsympathising standers-by, which must have troubled the contrite Apostle, the Lord is careful to give him the opportunity of weeping his fill on His own bosom, unrestrained by any thought of others, and will let him sob out his contrition to His own ear alone. Then the meeting in the upper chamber will be one of pure joy to Peter, as to all the rest. The emotions which he has in common with them find full play, in that hour when all are reunited to their Lord. The experience which belongs to himself alone has its solitary hour of unrecorded communion. The first to whom He, who is 'separate from sinners,' appeared was 'Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven devils.' The next were the women who bore this message of forgiveness; and probably the next was the one among all the company who had sinned most grievously. So wondrous is the order of His preferences, coming ever nearest to those who need Him most.

And may we not regard this secret interview as representing for us what is needed on our part to make Christ's forgiving love our own? There must be the personal contact of my soul with the loving heart of Christ, the individual act of my own coming to Him, and, as the old Puritans used to say,' my transacting' with Him. Like the ocean of the atmosphere, His love encompasses me, and in it I 'live, and move, and have my being.' But I must let it flow into my spirit, and stir the dormant music of ray soul. I can shut it out, sealing my heart love-tight against it. I do shut it out, unless by my own conscious, personal act I yield myself to Him, unless by my own faith I come to Him, and meet Him, secretly and really as did the penitent Apostle, whom the message, that proclaimed the love of his Lord, emboldened to meet the Lord who loved, and by His own lips to be assured of forgiveness and friendship. It is possible to stumble at noontide, as in the dark. A man may starve, outside of barns filled with plenty, and his lips may be parched with thirst, though he is within sight of a broad river flowing in the sunshine. So a soul may stiffen into the death of self and sin, even though the voice that wakes the dead to a life of love be calling to it. Christ and His grace are yours if you will, but the invitations and beseechings of His mercy, the constant drawings of His love, the all-embracing offers of His forgiveness, may be all in vain, if you do not grasp them and hold them fast by the hand of faith.

That personal act must be preceded by the message of His mighty love. Ever He sends such messages as heralds of His coming, just as He prepared the way for His own approach to the Apostle, by the words of our text. Our faith must follow His word. Our love can only be called forth by the manifestation of His. But His message must be followed by that personal act, else His word is spoken in vain, and there is no real union between our need and His fulness, nor any cleansing contact of His grace with our foulness.

Mark, too, the intensely individual character of that act of faith by which a man accepts Christ’s grace. Friends and companions may bring the tidings of the risen Lord’s loving heart, but the actual closing with the Lord’s mercy must be done by myself, alone with Him.

As if there were not another soul on earth, I and He must meet, and in solitude deep as that of death, each man for himself must yield to Incarnate Love, and receive eternal life. The flocks and herds, the wives and children, have all to be sent away, and Jacob must be left alone, before the mysterious Wrestler comes whose touch of fire lames the whole nature of sin and death, whose inbreathed power strengthens to hold Him fast till He speaks a blessing, who desires to be overcome, and makes our yielding to Him our prevailing with Him. As one of the old mystics called prayer ‘the flight of the lonely man to the only God,’ so we may call the act of faith the meeting of the soul alone with Christ alone. Do you know anything of that personal communion? Have you, your own very self, by your own penitence for your own sin, and your own thankful faith in the Love which thereby becomes truly yours, isolated yourself from all companionship, and joined yourself to Christ? Then, through that narrow passage where we can only walk singly, you will come into a large place. The act of faith, which separates us from all men, unites us for the first time in real brotherhood, and they who, one by one, come to Jesus and meet Him alone, next find that they ‘are come to the city of God, to an innumerable company, to the festal choirs of angels, to the Church of the First-born, to the spirits of just men made perfect.’

III. Notice, finally, the gradual cure of the pardoned Apostle.

He was restored to his office, as we read in the supplement to John’s Gospel. In that wonderful conversation, full as it is of allusions to Peter’s fall, Christ asks but one question, ‘Lovest thou Me?’ That includes everything. ‘Hast thou learned the lesson of My mercy? hast thou responded to My love? then thou art fit for My work, and beginning to be perfected.’ So the third stage in the triumph of Christ’s love over man’s sin is, when we, beholding that love flowing towards us, and accepting it by faith, respond to it with our own, and are able to say, ‘Thou knowest that I love Thee.’

The all-embracing question is followed by an equally comprehensive command, ‘Follow thou Me,’ a two-worded compendium of all morals, a precept which naturally results from love, and certainly leads to absolute perfectness. With love to Christ for motive, and Christ Himself for pattern, and following Him for our one duty, all things are possible, and the utter defeat of sin in us is but a question of time.

And the certainty, as well as the gradual slowness, of that victory, are well set forth by the future history of the Apostle. We know how his fickleness passed away, and how his vehement character was calmed and consolidated into resolved persistency, and how his love of distinction and self-confidence were turned in a new direction, obeyed a divine impulse, and became powers. We read how he started to the front; how he guided the Church in the first stage of its development; how whenever there was danger he was in the van, and whenever there was work his hand was first on the plough; how he bearded and braved rulers and councils; how-more difficult still for him-he lay quietly in prison sleeping like a child, between his guards, on the night before his execution; how-most difficult of all-he acquiesced in Paul's superiority; and, if he still needed to be withstood and blamed, could recognise the wisdom of the rebuke, and in his calm old age could speak well of the rebuker as his 'beloved brother Paul.' Nor was the cure a change in the great lines of his character. These remain the same, the characteristic excellences possible to them are brought out, the defects are curbed and cast out. The 'new man' is the 'old man' with a new direction, obeying a new impulse, but retaining its individuality. Weaknesses become strengths; the sanctified character is the old character sanctified; and it is still true that 'every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that.'

It is very instructive to observe how deeply the experiences of his fall, and of Christ's mercy then, had impressed themselves on Peter's memory, and how constantly they were present with him all through his after-life. His Epistles are full of allusions which show this. For instance, to go a step further back in his life, he remembered that the Lord had said to him, 'Thou art Peter,' 'a stone,' and that his pride in that name had helped to his rash confidence, and so to his sin. Therefore, when he is cured of these, he takes pleasure in sharing his honour with his brethren, and writes, 'Ye also, as living stones, are built up.' He remembered the contempt for others and the trust in himself with which he had said, 'Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I'; and, taught what must come of that, he writes, 'Be clothed with humility, for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.' He remembered how hastily he had drawn his sword and struck at Malchus, and he writes, 'If when ye do well and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God.' He remembered how he had been surprised into denial by the questions of a sharp-tongued servant-maid, and he writes, 'Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, with meekness.' He remembered how the pardoning love of his Lord had honoured him unworthy, with the charge, 'Feed My sheep,' and he writes, ranking himself as one of the class to whom he speaks-'The elders I exhort, who am also an elder . . . feed the flock of God.' He remembered that last command, which sounded ever in his spirit, 'Follow thou Me,' and discerning now, through all the years that lay between, the presumptuous folly and blind inversion of his own work and his Master's which had lain in his earlier question, 'Why cannot I follow

Thee now? I will lay down my life for Thy sake'-he writes to all, 'Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps,'

So well had he learned the lesson of his own sin, and of that immortal love which had beckoned him back, to peace at its side and purity from its hand. Let us learn how the love of Christ, received into the heart, triumphs gradually but surely over all sin, transforms character, turning even its weakness into strength, and so, from the depths of transgression and very gates of hell, raises men to God.

To us all this divine message speaks. Christ's love is extended to us; no sin can stay it; no fall of ours can make Him despair. He will not give us up. He waits to be gracious. This same Peter once asked, 'How oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?' And the answer, which commanded unwearied brotherly forgiveness, revealed inexhaustible divine pardon-'I say not unto thee until seven times, but until seventy times seven.' The measure of the divine mercy, which is the pattern of ours, is completeness ten times multiplied by itself; we know not the numbers thereof. 'Let the wicked forsake his way . . . and let him return unto the Lord, for He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will multiply to pardon.'

92)Mark 16:8

Mark

THE INCREDULOUS DISCIPLES

Mar. 16:1 - Mar. 16:13.

It is not my business here to discuss questions of harmonising or of criticism. I have only to deal with the narrative as it stands. Its peculiar character is very plain. The manner in which the first disciples learned the fact of the Resurrection, and the disbelief with which they received it, much rather than the Resurrection itself, come into view in this section. The disciples, and not the risen Lord, are shown us. There is nothing here of the earthquake, or of the descending angel, or of the terrified guard, or of our Lord's appearance to the women. The two appearances to Mary Magdalene and to the travellers to Emmaus, which, in the hands of John and Luke, are so pathetic and rich, are here mentioned with the utmost brevity, for the sake chiefly of insisting on the disbelief of the disciples who heard of them. Mark’s theme is mainly what they thought of the testimony to the Resurrection.

I. He shows us, first, bewildered love and sorrow.

We leave the question whether this group of women is the same as that of which Luke records that Joanna was one, as well as the other puzzle as to harmonising the notes of time in the Evangelists. May not the difference between the time of starting and that of arrival solve some of the difficulty? When all the notes are more or less vague, and refer to the time of transition from dark to day, when every moment partakes of both and may be differently described as belonging to either, is precision to be expected? In the whirl of agitation of that morning, would any one be at leisure to take much note of the exact minute? Are not these ‘discrepancies’ much more valuable as confirmation of the story than precise accord would have been? It is better to try to understand the feelings of that little band than to carp at such trifles.

Sorrow wakes early, and love is impatient to bring its tribute. So we can see these three women, leaving their abode as soon as the doleful grey of morning permitted, stealing through the silent streets, and reaching the rock-cut tomb while the sun was rising over Olivet. Where were Salome’s ambitious hopes for her two sons now? Dead, and buried in the Master’s grave. The completeness of the women’s despair, as well as the faithfulness of their love, is witnessed by their purpose. They had come to anoint the body of Him to whom in life they had ministered. They had no thought of a resurrection, plainly as they had been told of it. The waves of sorrow had washed the remembrance of His assurances on that subject clean out of their minds. Truth that is only half understood, however plainly spoken, is always forgotten when the time to apply it comes. We are told that the disbelief of the disciples in the Resurrection, after Christ’s plain predictions of it, is ‘psychologically impossible.’ Such big words are imposing, but the objection is shallow. These disciples are not the only people who forgot in the hour of need the thing which it most concerned them to remember, and let the clouds of sorrow hide starry promises which would have turned mourning into dancing, and night into day. Christ’s sayings about His resurrection were not understood in their, as it appears to us, obvious meaning when spoken. No wonder, then, that they were not expected to be fulfilled in their obvious meaning when He was dead. We shall have a word to say presently about the value of the fact that there was no anticipation of resurrection on the part of the disciples. For the present it is enough to note how these three loving souls confess their hopelessness by their errand. Did they not know, too, that Joseph and Nicodemus had been beforehand with them in their labour of love? Apparently not. It might easily happen, in the confusion and dispersion, that no knowledge of this had reached them; or perhaps sorrow and agitation had driven it out of their memories; or perhaps they felt that, whether others had done the same before or no, they must do it too, not because the loved form needed it, but because their hearts needed to do it. It was the love which must serve, not calculation of necessity, which loaded their hands with costly spices. The living Christ was pleased with the ‘odour of a sweet smell,’ from the needless spices, meant to re-anoint the dead Christ, and accepted the purpose, though it came from ignorance and was never carried out, since its deepest root was love, genuine, though bewildered.

The same absence of ‘calm practical common sense’ is seen in the too late consideration, which never occurred to the three women till they were getting near the tomb, as to how to get into it. They do not seem to have heard of the guard; but they know that the stone is too heavy for them to move, and none of the men among the disciples had been taken into their confidence. ‘Why did they not think of that before? what a want of foresight!’ says the cool observer. ‘How beautifully true to nature!’ says a wiser judgment. To obey the impulse of love and sorrow without thinking, and then to be arrested on their road by a difficulty, which they might have thought of at first, but did not till they were close to it, is surely just what might have been expected of such mourners. Mark gives a graphic picture in that one word ‘looking up,’ and follows it with picturesque present tenses. They had been looking down or at each other in perplexity, when they lifted their eyes to the tomb, which was possibly on an eminence. What a flash of wonder would pass through their minds when they saw it open! What that might signify they would be eager to hurry to find out; but, at all events, their difficulty was at an end. When love to Christ is brought to a stand in its venturous enterprises by difficulties occurring for the first time to the mind, it is well to go close up to them; and it often happens that when we do, and look steadily at them, we see that they are rolled away, and the passage cleared which we feared was hopelessly barred.

II. The calm herald of the Resurrection and the amazed hearers.

Apparently Mary Magdalene had turned back as soon as she saw the opened tomb, and hurried to tell that the body had been carried off, as she supposed. The guard had also probably fled before this; and so the other two women enter the vestibule, and there find the angel. Sometimes one angel, sometimes two, sometimes none, were visible there. The variation in their numbers in the various narratives is not to be regarded as an instance of 'discrepancy.' Many angels hovered round the spot where the greatest wonder of the universe was to be seen, 'eagerly desiring to look into' that grave. The beholder's eye may have determined their visibility. Their number may have fluctuated. Mark does not use the word 'angel' at all, but leaves us to infer what manner of being he was who first proclaimed the Resurrection.

He tells of his youth, his attitude, and his attire. The angelic life is vigorous, progressive, buoyant, and alien from decay. Immortal youth belongs to them who 'excel in strength' because they 'do his commandments.' That waiting minister shows us what the children of the Resurrection shall be, and so his presence as well as his speech expounds the blessed mystery of our life in the risen Lord. His serene attitude of sitting 'on the right side' is not only a vivid touch of description, but is significant of restfulness and fixed contemplation, as well as of the calmness of a higher life. That still watcher knows too much to be agitated; but the less he is moved, the more he adores. His quiet contrasts with and heightens the impression of the storm of conflicting feelings in the women's tremulous natures. His garments symbolise purity and repose. How sharply the difference between heaven and earth is given in the last words of Mar. 16:5! They were 'amazed,' swept out of themselves in an ecstasy of bewilderment in which hope had no place. Terror, surprise, curiosity, wonder, blank incapacity to know what all this meant, made chaos in them.

The angel’s words are a succession of short sentences, which have a certain dignity, and break up the astounding revelation he has to make into small pieces, which the women’s bewildered minds can grasp. He calms their tumult of spirit. He shows them that he knows their errand. He adoringly names his Lord and theirs by the names recalling His manhood, His lowly home, and His ignominious death. He lingers on the thought, to him covering so profound a mystery of divine love, that his Lord had been born, had lived in the obscure village, and died on the Cross. Then, in one word, he proclaims the stupendous fact of His resurrection as His own act-’He is risen.’ This crown of all miracles, which brings life and immortality to light, and changes the whole outlook of humanity, which changes the Cross into victory, and without which Christianity is a dream and a ruin, is announced in a single word-the mightiest ever spoken save by Christ’s own lips. It was fitting that angel lips should proclaim the Resurrection, as they did the Nativity, though in either ‘He taketh not hold of angels,’ and they had but a secondary share in the blessings. Yet that empty grave opened to ‘principalities and powers in heavenly places’ a new unfolding of the manifold wisdom and love of God.

The angel-a true evangelist-does not linger on the wondrous intimation, but points to the vacant place, which would have been so drear but for his previous words, and bids them approach to verify his assurance, and with reverent wonder to gaze on the hallowed and now happy spot. A moment is granted for feeling to overflow, and certainty to be attained, and then the women are sent on their errand. Even the joy of that gaze is not to be selfishly prolonged, while others are sitting in sorrow for want of what they know. That is the law for all the Christian life. First make sure work of one’s own possession of the truth, and then hasten to tell it to those who need it.

‘And Peter’-Mark alone gives us this. The other Evangelists might pass it by; but how could Peter ever forget the balm which that message of pardon and restoration brought to him, and how could Peter’s mouthpiece leave it out? Is there anything in the Gospels more beautiful, or fuller of long-suffering and thoughtful love, than that message from the risen Saviour to the denier? And how delicate the love which, by calling him Peter, not Simon, reinstates him in his official position by anticipation, even though in the subsequent full restoration scene by the lake he is thrice called Simon, before the complete effacement of the triple denial by the triple confession! Galilee is named as the rendezvous, and the word employed, 'goeth before you,' is appropriate to the Shepherd in front of His flock. They had been 'scattered,' but are to be drawn together again. He is to 'precede' them there, thus lightly indicating the new form of their relations to Him, marked during the forty days by a distance which prepared for his final withdrawal. Galilee was the home of most of them, and had been the field of His most continuous labours. There would be many disciples there, who would gather to see their risen Lord ['five hundred at once']; and there, rather than in Jerusalem which had slain Him, was it fitting that He should show Himself to His friends. The appearances in Jerusalem were all within a week [if we except the Ascension], and the connection in which Mark introduces them [if Mar. 16:14 be his] seems to treat them as forced on Christ by the disciples' unbelief, rather than as His original intention. It looks as if He meant to show Himself in the city only to one or two, such as Mary, Peter, and some others, but to reserve His more public appearance for Galilee.

How did the women receive the message? Mark represents them as trembling in body and in an ecstasy in mind, and as hurrying away silent with terror. Matthew says that they were full of 'fear and great joy,' and went in haste to tell the disciples. In the whirl of feeling, there were opposites blended or succeeding one another; and the one Evangelist lays hold of one set, and the other of the other. It is as impossible to catalogue the swift emotions of such a moment as to separate and tabulate the hues of sunrise. The silence which Mark tells of can only refer to their demeanour as they 'fled.' His object is to bring out the very imperfect credence which, at the best, was given to the testimony that Christ was risen, and to paint the tumult of feeling in the breasts of its first recipients. His picture is taken from a different angle from Matthew's; but Matthew's contains the same elements, for he speaks of 'fear,' though he completes it by 'joy.'

III. The incredulity of the disciples.

The two appearances to Mary Magdalene and the travellers to Emmaus are introduced mainly to record the unbelief of the disciples. A strange choice that was, of the woman who had been rescued from so low a debasement, to be first to see Him! But her former degradation was the measure of her love. Longing eyes, that have been washed clean by many a tear of penitent gratitude, are purged to see Jesus; and a yearning heart ever brings Him near. The unbelief of the story of the two from Emmaus seems to conflict with Luke's account, which tells that they were met by the news of Christ's appearance to Simon. But the two statements are not contradictory. If we remember the excitement and confusion of mind in which they were, we shall not wonder if belief and unbelief followed each other, like the flow and recoil of the waves. One moment they were on the crest of the billows, and saw land ahead; the next they were down in the trough, and saw only the melancholy surge. The very fact that Peter was believed, might make them disbelieve the travellers; for how could Jesus have been in Jerusalem and Emmaus at so nearly the same time? However the two narratives be reconciled, it remains obvious that the first disciples did not believe the first witnesses of the Resurrection, and that their unbelief is an important fact. It bears very distinctly on the worth of their subsequent conviction. It has special bearing on the most modern form of disbelief in the Resurrection, which accounts for the belief of the first disciples on the ground that they expected Christ to rise, and that they then persuaded themselves, in all good faith, that He had risen. That monstrous theory is vulnerable at all points, but one sufficient answer is-the disciples did not expect Christ to rise again, and were so far from it that they did not believe that He had risen when they were told it. Their original unbelief is a strong argument for the reliableness of their final faith. What raised them from the stupor of despair and incredulity? Only one answer is 'psychologically' reasonable: they at last believed because they saw. It is incredible that they were conscious deceivers; for such lives as they lived, and such a gospel as they preached, never came from liars. It is as incredible that they were unconsciously mistaken; for they were wholly unprepared for the Resurrection, and sturdily disbelieved all witnesses for it, till they saw with their own eyes, and had 'many infallible proofs.' Let us be thankful for their unbelief and its record, and let us seek to possess the blessing of those 'that have not seen, and yet have believed!'

93)Mark 16:9

Mark

THE INCREDULOUS DISCIPLES

‘FIRST TO MARY’

Mar. 16:9.

A great pile of legend has been built on the one or two notices of Mary Magdalene in Scripture. Art, poetry, and philanthropy have accepted and inculcated these, till we almost feel as if they were bits of the Bible. But there is not the shadow of a foundation for them. She has generally been identified with the woman in Luke’s Gospel ‘who was a sinner.’ There is no reason at all for that identification. On the contrary, there is a reason against it, in the fact that immediately after that narrative she is named as one of the little band of women who ministered to Jesus.

Here is all that we know of her: that Christ cast out the seven devils; that she became one of the Galilean women, including the mothers of Jesus and of John, who ‘ministered to Him of their substance’; that she was one of the Marys at the Cross and saw the interment; that she came to the sepulchre, heard the angel’s message, went to John with it, came back and stood without at the sepulchre, saw the Lord, and, having heard His voice and clasped His feet, returned to the little company, and then she drops out of the narrative and is no more named. That is all. It is enough. There are large lessons in this fact which Mark [or whoever wrote this chapter] gives with such emphasis, ‘He appeared first to Mary Magdalene.’

Think what the Resurrection is-how stupendous and wonderful! Who might have been expected to be its witnesses? But see! the first eye that beholds is this poor sin-stained woman’s. What a distance between the two extremes of her experience-devil-ridden and gazing on the Risen Saviour!

I. An example of the depth to which the soul of man can descend.

This fact of possession is very obscure and strange. I doubt whether we can understand it. But I cannot see how we can bring it down to the level of mere disease without involving Jesus Christ in the charge of consciously aiding in upholding what, if it be not an awful truth, is one of the grimmest, ghastliest superstitions that ever terrified men.

In all ways He gives in His adhesion to the fact of demoniacal possession. He speaks to the demons, and of them, rebukes them, holds conversations with them, charges them to be silent. He distinguishes between possession and diseases. 'Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead'-these commands bring together forms of sickness running its course; why should He separate from them His next command and endowment, 'cast out devils,' unless because He regarded demoniacal possession as separate from sickness in any form? He sees in His casting of them out the triumph over the personal power of evil. 'I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven.' But while the fact seems to be established, the thing is only known to us by its signs. These were madness, melancholy, sometimes dumbness, sometimes fits and convulsions; the man was dominated by an alien power; there was a strange, awful double consciousness; 'We are many,' 'My name is Legion.' There was absolute control by this alien power, which like some parasitical worm had rooted itself within the poor wretch, and there lived upon his blood and life juices-only that it lived in the spirit, dominated the will, and controlled the nature.

Probably there had always been the yielding to the impulse to sin of some sort, or at any rate the man had opened the door for the devil to come in.

This woman had been in the deepest depths of this awful abyss. 'Seven' is the numerical symbol of completeness, so she had been utterly devil-ridden. And she had once been a little child in some Galilean home, and parents had seen her budding beauty and early, gentle, womanly ways. And now, think of the havoc! the distorted face, the foul words, the blasphemous thoughts! And is this worse than our sinful case? Are not the devils that possess us as real and powerful?

II. An example of the cleansing power of Christ.

We know nothing about how she had come under His merciful eye, nor any of the circumstances of her healing, but only that this woman, with whom the serpent was so closely intertwined, as in some pictures of Eve's temptation, was not beyond His reach, and was set free. Note- There is no condition of human misery which Christ cannot alleviate.

None is so sunk in sin that He cannot redeem them.

For all in the world there is hope.

Look on the extremest forms of sin. We can regard them all with the assurance that Christ can cleanse them-prostitutes, thieves, respectable worldlings.

None is so bad as to have lost His love.

None is so bad as to be excluded from the purpose of His death.

None is so bad as to be beyond the reach of His cleansing power.

None has wandered so far that he cannot come back.

Think of the earliest believers-a thief, a ‘woman that was a sinner,’ this Mary, a Zacchæus, a persecuting Paul, a rude, rough jailer, etc.

Remember Paul’s description of a class of the Corinthian saints-’such were some of you.’

As long as man is man, so long is God ready to receive him back. There is no place where sun does not shine. No heart is given over to irremediable hardness. None ever comes to Christ in vain.

The Saviour is greater than all our sins.

The deliverance is more than sufficient for the worst.

‘God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham.’

Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones.

III. An example of how the remembrance of past and pardoned sin may be a blessing.

Mary evidently tried always to be beside Him. The cure had been perfect, but perhaps there was a tremulous fear, as in the man that prayed ‘that he might be with Him.’

And so, look how all the notices give us one picture of a heart set on Him. There were- [a] Consciousness of weakness, that made her long for His presence as a security.

[b] Deep love, that made her long for His presence as a joy.

[c] Thankful gratitude, that made her long for opportunities to serve Him.

And this is what the remembrance of Jesus should be to us.

IV. An example of how the most degraded may rise highest in fellowship with Christ.

‘First’ to her, because she needed Him and longed for Him.

Now this is but an illustration of the great principle that by God’s mercy sin when it is hated and pardoned may be made to subserve our highest joys.

It is not sin which separates us from God, but it is unpardoned sin. Not that the more we sin the more we are fit for Him, for all sin is loss. There are ways in which even forgiven and repented sin may injure a man. But there is nothing in it to hinder our coming close to the Saviour and enjoying all the fulness of His love, so that if we use it rightly it may become a help.

If it leads us to that clinging of which we have just spoken, then we shall come nearer to God for it.

The divine presence is always given to those who long for it.

Sin may help to kindle such longings.

He who has been almost dead in the wilderness will keep near the guide. The man that has been starved with cold in Arctic night will prize the glory and grace of sunshine in fairer lands.

Instances in Church history-Paul, Augustine, Bunyan.

‘Publicans and harlots go into the kingdom before you.’

The noblest illustration is in heaven, where men lead the song of Redemption.

God uses sin as a black background on which the brightest rainbow tints of His mercy are displayed.

You can come to this Saviour whatever you have been. I say to no man, ‘Sin, for it does not matter.’ But I do say, ‘If you are conscious of sin, deep, dark, damning, that makes no barrier between you and God. You may come all the nearer for it if you will let your past teach you to long for His love and to lean on Him.’

‘He appeared first to Mary Magdalene,’ and those who stand nearest the throne and lead the anthems of heaven, and look up with undazzled angels’ faces to the God of their joy, whose name blazes on their foreheads, all these were guilty, sinful men. But they ‘have washed their robes and made them white.’ There will be in heaven some of the worst sinners that ever lived on earth. There will not be one out of whom He has not ‘cast seven devils.’

94)Mark 16:10-13

Mark

THE INCREDULOUS DISCIPLES

Mar. 16:1 - Mar. 16:13.

It is not my business here to discuss questions of harmonising or of criticism. I have only to deal with the narrative as it stands. Its peculiar character is very plain. The manner in which the first disciples learned the fact of the Resurrection, and the disbelief with which they received it, much rather than the Resurrection itself, come into view in this section. The disciples, and not the risen Lord, are shown us. There is nothing here of the earthquake, or of the descending angel, or of the terrified guard, or of our Lord’s appearance to the women. The two appearances to Mary Magdalene and to the travellers to Emmaus, which, in the hands of John and Luke, are so pathetic and rich, are here mentioned with the utmost brevity, for the sake chiefly of insisting on the disbelief of the disciples who heard of them. Mark’s theme is mainly what they thought of the testimony to the Resurrection.

I. He shows us, first, bewildered love and sorrow.

We leave the question whether this group of women is the same as that of which Luke records that Joanna was one, as well as the other puzzle as to harmonising the notes of time in the Evangelists. May not the difference between the time of starting and that of arrival solve some of the difficulty? When all the notes are more or less vague, and refer to the time of transition from dark to day, when every moment partakes of both and may be differently described as belonging to either, is precision to be expected? In the whirl of agitation of that morning, would any one be at leisure to take much note of the exact minute? Are not these ‘discrepancies’ much more valuable as confirmation of the story than precise accord would have been? It is better to try to understand the feelings of that little band than to carp at such trifles.

Sorrow wakes early, and love is impatient to bring its tribute. So we can see these three women, leaving their abode as soon as the doleful grey of morning permitted, stealing through the silent streets, and reaching the rock-cut tomb while the sun was rising over Olivet. Where were Salome’s ambitious hopes for her two sons now? Dead, and buried in the Master’s grave. The completeness of the women’s despair, as well as the faithfulness of their love, is witnessed by their purpose. They had come to anoint the body of Him to whom in life they had ministered. They had no thought of a resurrection, plainly as they had been told of it. The waves of sorrow had washed the remembrance of His assurances on that subject clean out of their minds. Truth that is only half understood, however plainly spoken, is always forgotten when the time to apply it comes. We are told that the disbelief of the disciples in the Resurrection, after Christ’s plain predictions of it, is ‘psychologically impossible.’ Such big words are imposing, but the objection is shallow. These disciples are not the only people who forgot in the hour of need the thing which it most concerned them to remember, and let the clouds of sorrow hide starry promises which would have turned mourning into dancing, and night into day. Christ’s sayings about His resurrection were not understood in their, as it appears to us, obvious meaning when spoken. No wonder, then, that they were not expected to be fulfilled in their obvious meaning when He was dead. We shall have a word to say presently about the value of the fact that there was no anticipation of resurrection on the part of the disciples. For the present it is enough to note how these three loving souls confess their hopelessness by their errand. Did they not know, too, that Joseph and Nicodemus had been beforehand with them in their labour of love? Apparently not. It might easily happen, in the confusion and dispersion, that no knowledge of this had reached them; or perhaps sorrow and agitation had driven it out of their memories; or perhaps they felt that, whether others had done the same before or no, they must do it too, not because the loved form needed it, but because their hearts needed to do it. It was the love which must serve, not calculation of necessity, which loaded their hands with costly spices. The living Christ was pleased with the 'odour of a sweet smell,' from the needless spices, meant to re-anoint the dead Christ, and accepted the purpose, though it came from ignorance and was never carried out, since its deepest root was love, genuine, though bewildered.

The same absence of 'calm practical common sense' is seen in the too late consideration, which never occurred to the three women till they were getting near the tomb, as to how to get into it. They do not seem to have heard of the guard; but they know that the stone is too heavy for them to move, and none of the men among the disciples had been taken into their confidence. 'Why did they not think of that before? what a want of foresight!' says the cool observer. 'How beautifully true to nature!' says a wiser judgment. To obey the impulse of love and sorrow without thinking, and then to be arrested on their road by a difficulty, which they might have thought of at first, but did not till they were close to it, is surely just what might have been expected of such mourners. Mark gives a graphic picture in that one word 'looking up,' and follows it with picturesque present tenses. They had been looking down or at each other in perplexity, when they lifted their eyes to the tomb, which was possibly on an eminence. What a flash of wonder would pass through their minds when they saw it open! What that might signify they would be eager to hurry to find out; but, at all events, their difficulty was at an end. When love to Christ is brought to a stand in its venturous enterprises by difficulties occurring for the first time to the mind, it is well to go close up to them; and it often happens that when we do, and look steadily at them, we see that they are rolled away, and the passage cleared which we feared was hopelessly barred.

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95)Mark 16:15

Mark

THE WORLD-WIDE COMMISSION

Mar. 16:15.

The missionary enterprise has been put on many bases. People do not like commandments, but yet it is a great relief and strength to come back to one, and answer all questions with ‘He bids me!’

Now, these words of our Lord open up the whole subject of the Universality of Christianity.

I. The divine audacity of Christianity.

Take the scene. A mere handful of men, whether ‘the twelve’ or ‘the five hundred brethren’ is immaterial.

How they must have recoiled when they heard the sweeping command, ‘Go ye into all the world’! It is like the apparent absurdity of Christ’s quiet word: ‘They need not depart; give ye them to eat,’ when the only visible stock of food was ‘five loaves and two small fishes.’ As on that occasion, so in this final commandment they had to take Christ’s presence into account. ‘I am with you.’

So note the obviously world-wide extent of Christ’s claim of dominion. He had come into the world, to begin with, that ‘the world through Him might be saved.’ ‘If any man thirst, let him come.’ The parables of the kingdom of heaven are planned on the same grand scale. ‘I will draw all men unto Me.’ It cannot be disputed that Jesus ‘lived and moved and had His being’ in this vision of universal dominion.

Here emerges the great contrast of Christianity with Judaism. Judaism was intolerant, as all merely monotheistic faiths must be, and sure of future universality, but it was not proselytising-not a missionary faith. Nor is it so to-day. It is exclusive and unprogressive still.

Mohammedanism in its fiery youth, because monotheistic was aggressive, but it enforced outward profession only, and left the inner life untouched. So it did not scruple to persecute as well as to proselytise. Christianity is alone in calmly setting forth a universal dominion, and in seeking it by the Word alone. ‘Put up thy sword into its sheath.’

II. The foundations of this bold claim.

Christ’s sole and singular relation to the whole race. There are profound truths embodied in this relation.

[a] There is implied the adequacy of Christ for all. He is for all, because He is the only and all-sufficient Saviour. By His death He offered satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. ‘Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God, and there is none else.’ ‘Neither is there ‘salvation in any other, for there is none other name,’ etc.

[b] The divine purpose of mercy for all. ‘God will have all men to be saved, and to come to a knowledge of the truth.’

[c] The adaptation of the Gospel message to all. It deals with all men as on one level. It addresses universal humanity. ‘Unto you, O men, I call, and My voice is to the sons of men.’ It speaks the same language to all sorts of men, to all stages of society, and in all ages. Christianity has no esoteric doctrine, no inner circle of the ‘initiated.’ Consequently it introduces a new notion of privileged classes.

Note the history of Christianity in its relation to slavery, and to inferior and down-trodden races. Christianity has no belief in the existence of ‘irreclaimable outcasts,’ but proclaims and glories in the possibility of winning any and all to the love which makes godlike. There is one Saviour, and so there is only one Gospel for ‘all the world.’

III. Its vindication in facts.

The history of the diffusion of the Gospel at first is significant. Think of the varieties of civilisation it approached and absorbed. See how it overcame the bonds of climate and language, etc. How unlike the Europe of to-day is to the Europe of Paul’s time!

In this twentieth century Christianity does not present the marks of an expiring superstition.

Note, further, that the history of missions vindicates the world-wide claim of the Gospel. Think of the wonderful number of converts in the first fifty years of gospel preaching. The Roman empire was Christianised in three centuries! Recall the innumerable testimonies down to date; e.g. the absolute abandonment of idols in the South Sea Islands, the weakening of caste in India, the romance of missions in Central Africa, etc. etc.

The character, too, of modern converts is as good as was that of Paul's. The gospel in this century produces everywhere fruits like those which it brought forth in Asia and Europe in the first century. The success has been in every field. None has been abandoned as hopeless. The Moravians in Greenland. The Hottentots. The Patagonians [Darwin's testimony]. Christianity has constantly appealed to all classes of society. Not many 'noble,' but some in every age and land.

IV. The practical duty.

'Go ye and preach.' The matter is literally left in our hands. Jesus has returned to the throne. Ere departing He announces the distinct command. There it is, and it is age-long in its application,- 'Preach!' that is the one gospel weapon. Tell of the name and the work of 'God manifest in the flesh.' First 'evangelise,' then 'disciple the nations.' Bring to Christ, then build up in Christ. There are no other orders. Let there be boundless trust in the divine gospel, and it will vindicate itself in every mission-field. Let us think imperially of 'Christ and the Church.' Our anticipations of success should be world-wide in their sweep.

As when they kindle the festival lamps round the dome of St. Peter's, there is a first twinkling spot here and another there, and gradually they multiply till they outline the whole in an unbroken ring of light, so 'one by one' men will enter the kingdom, till at last 'every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.'

'He shall reign from shore to shore.
With illimitable sway.'

96)Mark 16:19

THE ENTHRONED CHRIST

Mar. 16:19.

How strangely calm and brief is this record of so stupendous an event! Do these sparing and reverent words sound to you like the product of devout imagination, embellishing with legend the facts of history? To me their very restrainedness, calmness, matter-of-factness, if I may so call it, are a strong guarantee that they are the utterance of an eyewitness, who verily saw what he tells so simply. There is something sublime in the contrast between the magnificence and almost inconceivable grandeur of the thing communicated, and the quiet words, so few, so sober, so wanting in all detail, in which it is told.

That stupendous fact of Christ sitting at the right hand of God is the one that should fill the present for us all, even as the Cross should fill the past, and the coming for Judgment should fill the future. So for us the one central thought about the present, in its loftiest relations, should be the throned Christ at God’s right hand. It is to that thought of the session of Jesus by the side of the Majesty of the Heavens that I wish to turn now, to try to bring out the profound teaching that is in it, and the practical lessons which it suggests. I desire to emphasise very briefly four points, and to see, in Christ’s sitting at the right hand, the revelation of these things:-The exalted Man, the resting Saviour, the interceding Priest, and the ever-active Helper.

I. First, then, in that solemn and wondrous fact of Christ’s sitting at the right hand of God, we have the exalted Man.

We are taught to believe, according to His own words, that in His ascension Christ was but returning whence He came, and entering into the ‘glory which He had with the Father before the world was.’ And that impression of a return to His native and proper abode is strongly conveyed to us by the narrative of His ascension. Contrast it, for instance, with the narrative of Elijah’s rapture, or with the brief reference to Enoch’s translation. The one was taken by God up into a region and a state which he had not formerly traversed; the other was borne by a fiery chariot to the heavens; but Christ slowly sailed upwards, as it were, by His own inherent power, returning to His abode, and ascending up where He was before.

But whilst this is one side of the profound fact, there is another side. What was new in Christ's return to His Father's bosom? This, that He took His Manhood with Him. It was 'the Everlasting Son of the Father,' the Eternal Word, which from the beginning 'was with God and was God,' that came down from heaven to earth, to declare the Father; but it was the Incarnate Word, the Man Christ Jesus, that went back again. This most blessed and wonderful truth is taught with emphasis in His own words before the Council, 'Ye shall see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power.' Christ, then, to-day, bears a human body, not, indeed, the 'body of His humiliation,' but the body of His glory, which is none the less a true corporeal frame, and necessarily requires a locality. His ascension, whithersoever He may have gone, was the true carrying of a real humanity, complete in all its parts, Body, Soul, and Spirit, up to the very throne of God.

Where that locality is it is bootless to speculate. Scripture says that He ascended up 'far above all heavens'; or, as the Epistle to the Hebrews has it, in the proper translation, the High Priest 'is passed through the heavens,' as if all this visible material creation was rent asunder in order that He might soar yet higher beyond its limits wherein reign mutation and decay. But wheresoever that place may be, there is a place in which now, with a human body as well as a human spirit, Jesus is sitting 'at the right hand of God.'

Let us thankfully think how, in the profound language of Scripture, 'the Forerunner is for us entered'; how, in some mysterious manner, of which we can but dimly conceive, that entrance of Jesus in His complete humanity into the highest heavens is the preparation of a place for us. It seems as if, without His presence there, there were no entrance for human nature within that state, and no power in a human foot to tread upon the crystal pavements of the celestial City, but where He is, there the path is permeable, and the place native, to all who love and trust Him.

We may stand, therefore, with these disciples, and looking upwards as the cloud receives Him out of our sight, our faith follows Him, still our Brother, still clothed with humanity, still wearing a bodily frame; and we say, as we lose Him from our vision, ‘What is man’? Capable of being lifted to the most intimate participation in the glories of divinity, and though he be poor and weak and sinful here, yet capable of union and assimilation with the Majesty that is on high. For what Christ’s Body is, the bodies of them that love and serve Him shall surely be, and He, the Forerunner, is entered there for us; that we too, in our turn, may pass into the light, and walk in the full blaze of the divine glory; as of old the children in the furnace were, unconsumed, because companioned by ‘One like unto the Son of Man.’

The exalted Christ, sitting at the right hand of God, is the Pattern of what is possible for humanity, and the prophecy and pledge of what will be actual for all that love Him and bear the image of Him upon earth, that they may be conformed to the image of His glory, and be with Him where He is. What firmness, what reality, what solidity this thought of the exalted bodily Christ gives to the else dim and vague conceptions of a Heaven beyond the stars and beyond our present experience! I believe that no doctrine of a future life has strength and substance enough to survive the agonies of our hearts when we part from our dear ones, the fears of our spirits when we look into the unknown, inane future for ourselves; except only this which says Heaven is Christ and Christ is Heaven, and points to Him and says, ‘Where He is, there and that also shall His servants be.’

II. Now, secondly, look at Christ’s sitting at the right hand of God as presenting to our view the Resting Saviour.

That session expresses the idea of absolute repose after sore conflict. It is the same thought which is expressed in those solemn Egyptian colossal statues of deified conquerors, elevated to mysterious union with their gods, and yet men still, sitting before their temples in perfect stillness, with their mighty hands lying quiet on their restful limbs; with calm faces out of which toil and passion and change seem to have melted, gazing out with open eyes as over a silent, prostrate world. So, with the Cross behind, with all the agony and weariness of the arena, the dust and the blood of the struggle, left beneath, He ‘sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.’

The rest of the Christ after His Cross is parallel with and carries the same meaning as the rest of God after the Creation. Why do we read ‘He rested on the seventh day from all His works'? Did the Creative Arm grow weary? Was there toil for the divine nature in the making of a universe? Doth He not speak and it is done? Is not the calm, effortless forth-putting of His will the cause and the means of Creation? Does any shadow of weariness steal over that life which lives and is not exhausted? Does the bush consume in burning? Surely not. He rested from His works, not because He needed to recuperate strength after action by repose, but because the works were perfect, and in sign and token that His ideal was accomplished, and that no more was needed to be done.

And, in like manner, the Christ rests after His Cross, not because He needed repose even after that terrible effort, or was panting after His race, and so had to sit there to recover, but in token that His work was finished and perfected, that all which He had come to do was done; and in token, likewise, that the Father, too, beheld and accepted the finished work. Therefore, the session of Christ at the right hand of God is the proclamation from Heaven of what He cried with His last dying breath upon the Cross: 'It is finished!' It is the declaration that the world has had all done for it that Heaven can do for it. It is the declaration that all which is needed for the regeneration of humanity has been lodged in the very heart of the race, and that henceforward all that is required is the evolving and the development of the consequences of that perfect work which Christ offered upon the Cross. So the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews contrasts the priests who stood 'daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices' which 'can never take away sin,' with 'this Man who, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down at the right hand of God'; testifying thereby that His Cross is the complete, sufficient, perpetual atonement and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. So we have to look back to that past as interpreted by this present, to that Cross as commented upon by this Throne, and to see in it the perfect work which any human soul may grasp, and which all human souls need, for their acceptance and forgiveness. The Son of Man set at the right hand of God is Christ's declaration, 'I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do,' and is also God's declaration, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'

III. Once more, we see here, in this great fact of Christ sitting at the right hand of God, the interceding Priest.

So the Scripture declares. The Epistle to the Hebrews over and over again reiterates that thought that we have a Priest who has ‘passed into the heavens,’ there to ‘appear in the presence of God for us.’ And the Apostle Paul, in that great linked climax in the eighth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, has it, ‘Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.’ There are deep mysteries connected with that thought of the intercession of Christ. It does not mean that the divine heart needs to be won to love and pity. It does not mean that in any mere outward and formal fashion Christ pleads with God, and softens and placates the Infinite and Eternal love of the Father in the heavens. It, at least, plainly means this, that He, our Saviour and Sacrifice, is for ever in the presence of God; presenting His own blood as an element in the divine dealing with us, modifying the incidence of the divine law, and securing through His own merits and intercession the outflow of blessings upon our heads and hearts. It is not a complete statement of Christ’s work for us that He died for us. He died that He might have somewhat to offer. He lives that He may be our Advocate as well as our propitiation with the Father. And just as the High Priest once a year passed within the curtain, and there in the solemn silence and solitude of the holy place sprinkled the blood that he bore thither, not without trembling, and but for a moment permitted to stay in the awful Presence, thus, but in reality and for ever, with the joyful gladness of a Son in His ‘own calm home, His habitation from eternity,’ Christ abides in the Holy Place; and, at the right hand of the Majesty of the Heavens, lifts up that prayer, so strangely compact of authority and submission; ‘Father, I will that these whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am.’ The Son of Man at the right hand of God is our Intercessor with the Father. ‘Seeing, then, that we have a great High Priest that is passed through the heavens, let us come boldly to the Throne of Grace.’

IV. Lastly, this great fact sets before us the ever-active Helper.

The ‘right hand of God’ is the Omnipotent energy of God, and howsoever certainly the language of Scripture requires for its full interpretation that we should firmly hold that Christ’s glorified body dwells in a place, we are not to omit the other thought that to sit at the right hand also means to wield the immortal energy of that divine nature, over all the field of the Creation, and in every province of His dominion. So that the ascended Christ is the ubiquitous Christ; and He who is 'at the right hand of God' is wherever the power of God reaches throughout His whole Universe.

Remember, too, that it was once given to a man to look through the opened heavens [through which Christ had 'passed'] and to 'see the Son of Man standing'-not sitting-'at the right hand of God.' Why to the dying protomartyr was there granted that vision thus varied? Wherefore was the attitude changed but to express the swiftness, the certainty of His help, and the eager readiness of the Lord, who starts to His feet, as it were, to succour and to sustain His dying servant? And so, dear friends, we may take that great joyful truth that both as receiving 'gifts for men' and bestowing gifts upon them, and as working by His providence in the world, and on the wider scale for the well-being of His children and of the Church, the Christ who sits at the right hand of God wields, ever with eager cheerfulness, all the powers of omnipotence for our well-being, if we love and trust Him. We may look quietly upon all perplexities and complications, because the hands that were pierced for us hold the helm and the reins, because the Christ who is our Brother is the King, and sits supreme at the centre of the Universe. Joseph's brethren, that came up in their hunger and their rags to Egypt, and found their brother next the throne, were startled with a great joy of surprise, and fears were calmed, and confidence sprang in their hearts. Shall not we be restful and confident when our Brother, the Son of Man, sits ruling all things? 'We see not yet all things put under' us, 'but we see Jesus,' and that is enough.

So the ascended Man, the resting Saviour and His completed work, the interceding Priest, and the ever-active Helper, are all brought before us in this great and blessed thought, 'Christ sitteth at the right hand of God.' Therefore, dear friends, set your affection on things above. Our hearts travel where our dear ones are. Oh how strange and sad it is that professing Christians whose lives, if they are Christians at all, have their roots and are hid with Christ in God, should turn so few, so cold thoughts and loves thither! Surely 'where your treasure is there will your heart be also.' Surely if Christ is your Treasure you will feel that with Him is home, and that this is a foreign land. 'Set your affection,' then, 'on things above,' while life lasts, and when it is ebbing away, perhaps to our eyes too Heaven may be opened, and the vision of the Son of Man standing to receive and to welcome us may be granted. And when it has ebbed away, His will be the first voice to welcome us, and He will lift us to share in His glorious rest, according to His own wondrous promise, ‘To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My Throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with My Father in His Throne.’

Luke

1) LUKE 1:5-14
2) LUKE 1:15
3) LUKE 1:16-17
4) LUKE 1:46-55
5) LUKE 1:67-77
6) LUKE 1:78-79
7) LUKE 1:80
8) LUKE 2:8-15
9) LUKE 2:16
10) LUKE 2:17-20
11) LUKE 2:29-30
12) LUKE 2:49
13) LUKE 3:1-14
14) LUKE 3:15-22
15) LUKE 4:1-13
16) LUKE 4:21
17) LUKE 4:33-44
18) LUKE 5:4
19) LUKE 5:8
20) LUKE 5:17-26
21) LUKE 6:20-31
22) LUKE 6:41-49
23) LUKE 7:4
24) LUKE 7:6-7
25) LUKE 7:13-15
26) LUKE 7:18-27
27) LUKE 7:28
28) LUKE 7:30

29) LUKE 7:34
30) LUKE 7:41-43
31) LUKE 7:47
32) LUKE 7:50
33) LUKE 8:2-3
34) LUKE 8:4-13
35) LUKE 8:14
36) LUKE 8:15-16
37) LUKE 8:43-48
38) LUKE 8:50
39) LUKE 9:10
40) LUKE 9:11
41) LUKE 9:12-17
42) LUKE 9:18-27
43) LUKE 9:29
44) LUKE 9:30-31
45) LUKE 9:51
46) LUKE 10:1-11
47) LUKE 10:17-19
48) LUKE 10:20
49) LUKE 10:25-37
50) LUKE 11:1
51) LUKE 11:2-12
52) LUKE 12:13-21
53) LUKE 12:22-23
54) LUKE 12:24-28
55) LUKE 12:29
56) LUKE 12:30-31
57) LUKE 12:35-36
58) LUKE 12:37
59) LUKE 12:43-44
60) LUKE 12:49
61) LUKE 13:10-17
62) LUKE 13:22-30
63) LUKE 13:32-33
64) LUKE 14:1-14
65) LUKE 14:18

66) LUKE 14:28
67) LUKE 15:4
68) LUKE 15:8
69) LUKE 15:11
70) LUKE 15:12-21
71) LUKE 15:22-23
72) LUKE 15:24
73) LUKE 16:8
74) LUKE 16:10-11
75) LUKE 16:12
76) LUKE 16:19-24
77) LUKE 16:25
78) LUKE 16:26-31
79) LUKE 17:9-10
80) LUKE 17:11-19
81) LUKE 18:1-7
82) LUKE 18:8
83) LUKE 18:9-14
84) LUKE 18:15-30
85) LUKE 18:40-41
86) LUKE 19:5
87) LUKE 19:16
88) LUKE 19:17
89) LUKE 19:18
90) LUKE 19:19
91) LUKE 19:37-48
92) LUKE 20:9-19
93) LUKE 20:24
94) LUKE 21:19
95) LUKE 21:20-36
96) LUKE 22:7-20
97) LUKE 22:24
98) LUKE 22:25-26
99) LUKE 22:27
100) LUKE 22:28

101) LUKE 22:29-31
102) LUKE 22:32
103) LUKE 22:33-37
104) LUKE 22:39-52
105) LUKE 22:53
106) LUKE 22:54-60
107) LUKE 22:61
108) LUKE 22:62-71
109) LUKE 23:1-8
110) LUKE 23:9
111) LUKE 23:10-12
112) LUKE 23:13-26
113) LUKE 23:33-41
114) LUKE 23:42
115) LUKE 23:43-46
116) LUKE 24:1-4
117) LUKE 24:5-6
118) LUKE 24:7-12
119) LUKE 24:13-27
120) LUKE 24:28-29
121) LUKE 24:30-31
122) LUKE 24:32
123) LUKE 24:34
124) LUKE 24:36-47
125) LUKE 24:48-49
126) LUKE 24:50
127) LUKE 24:51
128) LUKE 24:52-53

1) Luke 1:5-14

Luke

ELIJAH COME AGAIN

Luk. 1:5 - Luk. 1:17.

The difference between the style of Luke's preface [Luk. 1:1 - Luk. 1:4] and the subsequent chapters relating to the Nativity suggests that these are drawn from some Hebrew source. They are saturated with Old Testament phraseology and constructions, and are evidently translated by Luke. It is impossible to say whence they came, but no one is more likely to have been their original narrator than Mary herself. Elisabeth or Zacharias must have communicated the facts in this chapter, for there is no indication that those contained in this passage, at all events, were known to any but these two.

If we were considering a fictitious story, we should note the artistic skill which prepared for the appearance of the hero by the introduction first of his satellite; but the order of the narrative is due, not to artistic skill, but to the divinely ordered sequence of events. It was fitting that John's office as Forerunner should begin even before his birth. So the story of his entrance into the world prepares for that of the birth which hallows all births.

I. We have first a beautiful outline picture of the quiet home in the hill country.

The husband and wife were both of priestly descent, and in their modest lives, away among the hills, were lovely types of Old Testament godliness. That they are pronounced 'blameless' militates against no doctrine of universal sinfulness. It is not to be taken as dogma at all, but as the expression of God's merciful estimate of His servants' characters. These two simple saints lived, as all married believers should do, yoked together in the sweet exercise of godliness, and helping each other to all high and noble things. Hideous corruption of wedlock reigned round them. Such profanations of it as were shown later by Herod and Herodias, Agrippa and Bernice, were but too common; but in that quiet nook these two dwelt 'as heirs together of the grace of life,' and their prayers were not hindered.

The most of the priests who appear in the Gospels are heartless formalists, if not worse; yet not only Annas and Caiaphas and their spiritual kindred ministered at the altar, but there were some in whose hearts the ancient fire burned. In times of religious declension, the few who still are true are mostly in obscure corners, and live quiet lives, like springs of fresh water rising in the midst of a salt ocean. John thus sprang from parents in whom the old system had done all that it could do. In his origin, as in himself, he represented the consummate flower of Judaism, and discharged its highest office in pointing to the coming One.

This ‘blameless’ pair had a crook in their lot. Childlessness was then an especial sorrow, and many a prayer had gone up from both that their solitary home might be gladdened by children’s patter and prattle. But their disappointed hope had not made them sour, nor turned their hearts from God. If they prayed about it, they would not murmur at it, and they were not thereby hindered from ‘walking in all God’s commandments and ordinances blameless.’ Let us learn that unfulfilled wishes are not to clog our devotion, nor to silence our prayers, nor to slacken our running the race set before us.

II. We are carried away from the home among the hills to the crowded Temple courts.

The devout priest has come up to the city, leaving his aged wife in solitude, for his turn of service has arrived. Details of the arrangements of the sacerdotal ‘courses’ need not detain us. We need only note that the office of burning incense was regarded as an honour, was determined by lot, and took place at the morning and evening sacrifice. So Zacharias, with his censer in his hand, went to the altar which stood in front of the veil, flanked on the right hand by the table of shewbread, and on the left by the great lamp-stand. The place, his occupation, the murmur of many praying voices without, would all tend to raise his thoughts to God; and the curling incense, as it ascended, would truly symbolise the going up of his heart in aspiration, desire, and trust. Such a man could not do his work heartlessly or formally.

Mark the manner of the angel’s appearance. He was not seen as in the act of coming, but was suddenly made visible standing by the altar, as if he had been stationed there before; and what had happened was not that he came, but that Zacharias’s eyes were opened. So, when Elisha’s servant was terrified at the sight of the besiegers, the prophet prayed that his eyes might be opened, and when they were, he saw what had been there before, ‘the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire.’ Not the Temple courts only, but all places are full of divine messengers, and we should see them if our vision was purged. But such considerations are not to weaken the supernatural element in the appearance of this angel with his message. He was sent, whatever that may mean in regard to beings whose relation to place must be different from ours. He had an utterance of God's will to impart.

It has often been objected to these chapters that they are full of angelic appearances, which modern thought deems suspicious. But surely if the birth of Jesus was what we hold it to have been, the coming into human life of the Incarnate Son of God, it is not legend that angel wings gleam in their whiteness all through the story, and angel voices adore the Lord of men as well as angels, and angel eyes gaze on His cradle, and learn new lessons there.

III. We have next the angel's message.

The devoutest heart is conscious of shrinking dread when brought face to face with celestial brightness that has overflowed into our darkness. So 'Fear not' is the first word on the messenger's lips, and one can fancy the accent of sweetness and the calm of heart which followed. It has often been thought that Zacharias had been praying for offspring while he was burning incense; but the narrative does not say so, and besides the fact that he had ceased to hope for children [as is shown by his incredulity], surely it casts a slur on his religious character to suppose that personal wishes were uppermost at so sacred a moment. Prayers that he had long ago put aside as finally refused, now started to life again. God delays often, but He does not forget. Blessings may come to-day as the result of old prayers which have almost passed from our memory and our hope.

Observe how brief is the announcement of the child's birth, important as that was to the father's heart, and how the prophecy lingers on the child's future work, which is important for the world. His name, character, and work in general are first spoken, and then his specific office as the Forerunner is delineated at the close. The name is significant. 'John' means 'The Lord is gracious.' It was an omen, a condensed prophecy, the fulfilment of which stretched beyond its bearer to Him as whose precursor alone was John a token of God's grace.

His character [Luk. 1:15] puts first 'great in the sight of the Lord.' Then there are some whom God recognises as great, small as we all are before

Him. And His estimate of greatness is not the world’s estimate. How Herod or Pilate or Caesar, or philosophers at Athens, or rabbis in Jerusalem would have scoffed if they had been pointed to the gaunt ascetic pouring out words which they would have thought wild, to a crowd of Jews, and been told that that was the greatest man in the world [except One]! The elements of greatness in the estimate of God which is truth, are devotion to His service, burning convictions, intense moral earnestness, superiority to sensuous delights, clear recognition of Jesus, and humble self-abnegation before Him. These are not the elements recognised in the world’s Pantheon. Let us take God’s standard.

John was to be a Nazarite, living not for the senses, but the soul, as all God’s great ones have to be. The form may vary, but the substance of the vow of abstinence remains for all Christians. To put the heel on the animal within, and keep it well chained up, is indispensable, if we are ever to know the buoyant inspiration which comes from a sacreder source than the fumes of the wine-cup. Like John, we must flee the one if we would have the other, and be ‘filled with the Holy Ghost.’

The consequence of his character is seen in his work, as described generally in Luk. 1:16. Only such a man can effect such a change, in a time of religious decay, as to turn many to God. It needs a strong arm to check the downward movement and to reverse it. No one who is himself entangled in sense, and but partially filled with God’s Spirit, will wield great influence for good. It takes a Hercules to stop the chariot racing down hill, and God’s Herculeses are all made on one pattern, in so far that they scorn delights, and empty themselves of self and sense that they may be filled with the Spirit.

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His great work is to go before the Messiah, and to prepare Israel for its King. Observe that the name of the coming One is not mentioned in Luk. 1:17. ‘Him’ is enough. Zacharias knew who ‘He’ was. But observe, too, that the same mysterious person is distinctly called ‘The Lord,’ which in this connection, and having regard to the original prophecy in Malachi, can only be the divine name. So, in some fashion not yet made plain, Messiah’s advent was to be the Lord’s coming to His people, and John was the Forerunner, in some sense, of Jehovah Himself.

But the way in which Israel was to be prepared is further specified in the middle clauses of the verse, which are also based on Malachi’s words. The interpretation of ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children’ is very doubtful; but the best explanation seems to be that the phrase means to bring back to the descendants of the ancient fathers of the nation the ancestral faith and obedience. They are to be truly Abraham’s seed, because they do the works and cherish the faith of Abraham. The words imply the same truth which John afterwards launched as a keen-edged dart, ‘Think not to say, We have Abraham to our father.’ Descent after the flesh should lead to kindred in spirit. If it does not, it is nought.

To turn ‘the disobedient to the wisdom of the just’ is practically the same change, only regarded from another point of view. John was sent to effect repentance, that change of mind and heart by which the disobedient to the commands of God should be brought to possess and exercise the moral and religious discernment which dwells only in the spirits of the righteous. Disobedience is folly. True wisdom cannot be divorced from rectitude. Real rectitude cannot live apart from obedience to God.

Such was God’s intention in sending John. How sadly the real effects of his mission contrast with its design! So completely can men thwart God, as Jesus said in reference to John’s mission, ‘The Pharisees and lawyers frustrated the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him.’ Let us take heed lest we bring to nothing, so far as we are concerned, His gracious purpose of redemption in Christ!

2) Luke 1:15

Luke

ELIJAH COME AGAIN

TRUE GREATNESS

Luk. 1:15.

So spake the angel who foretold the birth of John the Baptist. ‘In the sight of the Lord’-then men are not on a dead level in His eyes. Though He is so high and we are so low, the country beneath Him that He looks down upon is not flattened to Him, as it is to us from an elevation, but there are greater and smaller men in His sight, too. No epithet is more misused and misapplied than that of ‘a great man.’ It is flung about indiscriminately as ribbons and orders are by some petty State. Every little man that makes a noise for a while gets it hung round his neck. Think what a set they are that are gathered in the world’s Valhalla, and honoured as the world’s great men! The mass of people are so much on a level, and that level is so low, that an inch above the average looks gigantic. But the tallest blade of grass gets mown down by the scythe, and withers as quickly as the rest of its green companions, and goes its way into the oven as surely. There is the world’s false estimate of greatness and there is God’s estimate. If we want to know what the elements of true greatness are, we may well turn to the life of this man, of whom the prophecy went before him that he should be ‘great in the sight of the Lord.’ That is gold that will stand the test.

We may remember, too, that Jesus Christ, looking back on the career to which the angel was looking forward, endorsed the prophecy and declared that it had become a fact, and that ‘of them that were born of women there had not arisen a greater than John the Baptist.’ With the illumination of His eulogium we may turn to this life, then, and gather some lessons for our own guidance.

I. First, we note in John unwavering and immovable firmness and courage.

‘What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind?’ Nay! an iron pillar that stood firm whatsoever winds blew against it. This, as I take it, is in some true sense the basis of all moral greatness-that a man should have a grip which cannot be loosened, like that of the cuttle-fish with all its tentacles round its prey, upon the truths that dominate his being and make him a hero. ‘If you want me to weep,’ said the old artist-poet, ‘there must be tears in your own eyes.’ If you want me to believe, you yourself must be aflame with conviction which has penetrated to the very marrow of your bones. And so, as I take it, the first requisite either for power with others, or for greatness in a man’s own development of character, is that there shall be this unwavering firmness of grasp of clearly-apprehended truths, and unflinching boldness of devotion to them.

I need not remind you how magnificently, all through the life of our typical example, this quality was stamped upon every utterance and every act. It reached its climax, no doubt, in his bearding Herod and Herodias. But moral characteristics do not reach a climax unless there has been much underground building to bear the lofty pinnacle; and no man, when great occasions come to him, develops a courage and an unwavering confidence which are strange to his habitual life. There must be the underground building; and there must have been many a fighting down of fears, many a curbing of tremors, many a rebuke of hesitations and doubts in the gaunt, desert-loving prophet, before he was man enough to stand before Herod and say, ‘It is not lawful for thee to have her.’

No doubt there is much to be laid to the account of temperament, but whatever their temperament may be, the way to this unwavering courage and firm, clear ring of indubitable certainty, is open to every Christian man and woman; and it is our own fault, our own sin, and our own weakness, if we do not possess these qualities. Temperament! what on earth is the good of our religion if it is not to modify and govern our temperament? Has a man a right to jib on one side, and give up the attempt to clear the fence, because he feels that in his own natural disposition there is little power to take the leap? Surely not. Jesus Christ came here for the very purpose of making our weakness strong, and if we have a firm hold upon Him, then, in the measure in which His love has permeated our whole nature, will be our unwavering courage, and out of weakness we shall be made strong.

Of course the highest type of this undaunted boldness and unwavering firmness of conviction is not in John and his like. He presented strength in a lower form than did the Master from whom his strength came. The willow has a beauty as well as the oak. Firmness is not obstinacy; courage is not rudeness. It is possible to have the iron hand in the velvet glove, not of etiquette-observing politeness, but of a true considerateness and gentleness. They who are likest Him that was 'meek and lowly in heart,' are surest to possess the unflinching resolve which set His face like a flint, and enabled Him to go unhesitatingly and unrecalcitrant to the Cross itself.

Do not let us forget, either, that John's unwavering firmness wavered; that over the clear heaven of his convictions there did steal a cloud; that he from whom no violence could wrench his faith felt it slipping out of his grasp when his muscles were relaxed in the dungeon; and that he sent 'from the prison'-which was the excuse for the message-to ask the question, 'After all, art Thou He that should come?'

Nor let us forget that it was that very moment of tremulousness which Jesus Christ seized, in order to pour an unstinted flood of praise for the firmness of his convictions, on the wavering head of the Forerunner. So, if we feel that though the needle of our compass points true to the pole, yet when the compass-frame is shaken, the needle sometimes vibrates away from its true direction, do not let us be cast down, but believe that a merciful allowance is made for human weakness. This man was great; first, because he had such dauntless courage and firmness that, over his headless corpse in the dungeon at Machaerus, might have been spoken what the Regent Moray said over John Knox's coffin, 'Here lies one that never feared the face of man.'

II. Another element of true greatness that comes nobly out in the life with which I am dealing is its clear elevation above worldly good.

That was the second point that our Lord's eulogium signalised. 'What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment?' But you would have gone to a palace, if you had wanted to see that, not to the reed-beds of Jordan. As we all know, in his life, in his dress, in his food, in the aims that he set before him, he rose high above all regard for the debasing and perishable sweetnesses that appeal to flesh, and are ended in time. He lived conspicuously for the Unseen. His asceticism belonged to his age, and was not the highest type of the virtue which it expressed. As I have said about his courage, so I say about his self-denial-Christ's is of a higher sort. As the might of gentleness is greater than the might of such strength as John's, so the asceticism of John is lower than the self-government of the Man that came eating and drinking.

But whilst that is true, I seek, dear brethren, to urge this old threadbare lesson, always needed, never needed more than amidst the senselessly luxurious habits of this generation, needed in few places more than in a great commercial centre like that in which we live, that one indispensable element of true greatness and elevation of character is that, not the prophet and the preacher alone, but every one of us, should live high above these temptations of gross and perishable joys, should.

'Scorn delights and live laborious days.'

No man has a right to be called 'great' if his aims are small. And the question is, not as modern idolatry of intellect, or, still worse, modern idolatry of success, often makes it out to be, Has he great capacities? or has he won great prizes? but has he greatly used himself and his life? If your aims are small you will never be great; and if your highest aims are but to get a good slice of this world's pudding-no matter what powers God may have given you to use-you are essentially a small man.

I remember a vigorous and contemptuous illustration of St. Bernard's, who likens a man that lives for these perishable delights which John spurned, to a spider spinning a web out of his own substance, and catching in it nothing but a wretched prey of poor little flies. Such a one has surely no right to be called a great man. Our aims rather than our capacity determine our character, and they who greatly aspire after the greatest things within the reach of men, which are faith, hope, charity, and who, for the sake of effecting these aspirations, put their heels upon the head of the serpent and suppress the animal in their nature, these are the men 'great in the sight of the Lord.'

III. Another element of true greatness, taught us by our type, is fiery enthusiasm for righteousness.

You may think that that has little to do with greatness. I believe it has everything to do with it, and that the difference between men is very largely to be found here, whether they flame up into the white heat of enthusiasm for the things that are right, or whether the only things that can kindle them into anything like earnestness and emotion are the poor, shabby things of personal advantage. I need not remind you how, all through John's career, there burned, unflickering and undying, that steadfast light; how he brought to the service of the plainest teaching of morality a fervour of passion and of zeal almost unexampled and magnificent. I need not remind you how Jesus Christ Himself laid His hand upon this characteristic, when He said of him that 'he was a light kindled and shining.' But I would lay upon all our hearts the plain, practical lesson that, if we keep in that tepid region of lukewarmness which is the utmost approach to tropical heat that moral and religious questions are capable of raising in many of us, good-bye to all chance of being 'great in the sight of the Lord.' We hear a great deal about the 'blessings of moderation,' the 'dangers of fanaticism,' and the like. I venture to think that the last thing which the moral consciousness of England wants today is a refrigerator, and that what it needs a great deal more than that is, that all Christian people should be brought face to face with this plain truth-that their religion has, as an indispensable part of it, 'a Spirit of burning,' and that if they have not been baptized in fire, there is little reason to believe that they have been baptized with the Holy Ghost.

I long that you and myself may be aflame for goodness, may be enthusiastic over plain morality, and may show that we are so by our daily life, by our rebuking the opposite, if need be, even if it take us into Herod's chamber, and make Herodias our enemy for life.

IV. Lastly, observe the final element of greatness in this man-absolute humility of self-abnegation before Jesus Christ.

There is nothing that I know in biography anywhere more beautiful, more striking, than the contrast between the two halves of the character and demeanour of the Baptist; how, on the one side, he fronts all men undaunted and recognises no superior, and how neither threats nor flatteries nor anything else will tempt him to step one inch beyond the limitations of which he is aware, nor to abate one inch of the claims which he urges; and on the other hand how, like some tall cedar touched by the lightning's hand, he falls prone before Jesus Christ and says, 'He must increase, and I must decrease': 'A man can receive nothing except it be given him of God.' He is all boldness on one side; all submission and dependence on the other.

You remember how, in the face of many temptations, that attitude was maintained. The very message which he had to carry was full of temptations to a self-seeking man to assert himself. You remember the almost rough 'No!' with which, reiteratedly, he met the suggestions of the deputation from Jerusalem that sought to induce him to say that he was more than he knew himself to be, and how he stuck by that infinitely humble and beautiful saying, 'I am a voice'-that is all. You remember how the whole nation was in a kind of conspiracy to tempt him to assert himself, and was ready to break into a flame if he had dropped a spark, for all men were musing in their heart whether he was the Christ or not,' and all the lawless and restless elements would have been only too glad to gather round him, if he had declared himself the Messiah. Remember how his own disciples came to him, and tried to play upon his jealousy and to induce him to assert himself: 'Master, He whom thou didst baptize'-and so didst give Him the first credentials that sent men on His course-'has outstripped thee, and all men are coming to Him.' And you remember the lovely answer that opened such depths of unexpected tenderness in the rough nature: 'He that hath the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom heareth the voice; and that is enough to fill my cup with joy to the very brim.' And what conceptions of Jesus Christ had John, that he thus bowed his lofty crest before Him, and softened his heart into submission almost abject? He knew Him to be the coming Judge, with the fan in His hand, who could baptize with fire, and he knew Him to be 'the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.' Therefore he fell before Him.

Brethren, we shall not be 'great in the sight of the Lord' unless we copy that example of utter self-abnegation before Jesus Christ. Thomas a Kempis says somewhere, 'He is truly great who is small in his own sight, and thinks nothing of the giddy heights of worldly honour.' You and I know far more of Jesus Christ than John the Baptist did. Do we bow ourselves before Him as he did? The Source from which he drew his greatness is open to us all. Let us begin with the recognition of the Lamb of God that takes away the world's sin, and with it ours. Let the thought of what He is, and what He has done for us, bow us in unfeigned submission. Let it shatter all dreams of our own importance or our own desert. The vision of the Lamb of God, and it only, will crush in our hearts the serpent's eggs of self-esteem and self-regard.

Then, let our closeness to Jesus Christ, and our experience of His power, kindle in us the fiery enthusiasm with which He baptizes all His true servants, and let it because we know the sweetnesses that excel, take from us all liability to be tempted away by the vulgar and coarse delights of earth and of sense. Let us keep ourselves clear of the babble that is round about us, and be strong because we grasp Christ's hand.

I have been speaking about no characteristic which may not be attained by any man, woman, or child amongst us. 'The least in the kingdom of heaven' may be greater than John. It is a poor ambition to seek to be *called* 'great.' It is a noble desire to *be* 'great in the sight of the Lord.' And if we will keep ourselves close to Jesus Christ that will be attained. It will matter very little what men think of us, if at last we have praise from the lips of Him who poured such praise on His servant. We may, if we will. And then it will not hurt us though our names on earth be dark and our memories perish from among men..

'Of so much fame in heaven expect the meed.'

3) Luke 1:16-17

Luke

ELIJAH COME AGAIN

Luk. 1:5 - Luk. 1:17.

The difference between the style of Luke's preface [Luk. 1:1 - Luk. 1:4] and the subsequent chapters relating to the Nativity suggests that these are drawn from some Hebrew source. They are saturated with Old Testament phraseology and constructions, and are evidently translated by Luke. It is impossible to say whence they came, but no one is more likely to have been their original narrator than Mary herself. Elisabeth or Zacharias must have communicated the facts in this chapter, for there is no indication that those contained in this passage, at all events, were known to any but these two.

If we were considering a fictitious story, we should note the artistic skill which prepared for the appearance of the hero by the introduction first of his satellite; but the order of the narrative is due, not to artistic skill, but to the divinely ordered sequence of events. It was fitting that John's office as Forerunner should begin even before his birth. So the story of his entrance into the world prepares for that of the birth which hallows all births.

I. We have first a beautiful outline picture of the quiet home in the hill country.

The husband and wife were both of priestly descent, and in their modest lives, away among the hills, were lovely types of Old Testament godliness. That they are pronounced 'blameless' militates against no doctrine of universal sinfulness. It is not to be taken as dogma at all, but as the expression of God's merciful estimate of His servants' characters. These two simple saints lived, as all married believers should do, yoked together in the sweet exercise of godliness, and helping each other to all high and noble things. Hideous corruption of wedlock reigned round them. Such profanations of it as were shown later by Herod and Herodias, Agrippa and Bernice, were but too common; but in that quiet nook these two dwelt 'as heirs together of the grace of life,' and their prayers were not hindered.

The most of the priests who appear in the Gospels are heartless formalists, if not worse; yet not only Annas and Caiaphas and their spiritual kindred ministered at the altar, but there were some in whose hearts the ancient fire burned. In times of religious declension, the few who still are true are mostly in obscure corners, and live quiet lives, like springs of fresh water rising in the midst of a salt ocean. John thus sprang from parents in whom the old system had done all that it could do. In his origin, as in himself, he represented the consummate flower of Judaism, and discharged its highest office in pointing to the coming One.

This 'blameless' pair had a crook in their lot. Childlessness was then an especial sorrow, and many a prayer had gone up from both that their solitary home might be gladdened by children’s patter and prattle. But their disappointed hope had not made them sour, nor turned their hearts from God. If they prayed about it, they would not murmur at it, and they were not thereby hindered from ‘walking in all God’s commandments and ordinances blameless.’ Let us learn that unfulfilled wishes are not to clog our devotion, nor to silence our prayers, nor to slacken our running the race set before us.

II. We are carried away from the home among the hills to the crowded Temple courts.

The devout priest has come up to the city, leaving his aged wife in solitude, for his turn of service has arrived. Details of the arrangements of the sacerdotal ‘courses’ need not detain us. We need only note that the office of burning incense was regarded as an honour, was determined by lot, and took place at the morning and evening sacrifice. So Zacharias, with his censer in his hand, went to the altar which stood in front of the veil, flanked on the right hand by the table of shewbread, and on the left by the great lamp-stand. The place, his occupation, the murmur of many praying voices without, would all tend to raise his thoughts to God; and the curling incense, as it ascended, would truly symbolise the going up of his heart in aspiration, desire, and trust. Such a man could not do his work heartlessly or formally.

Mark the manner of the angel’s appearance. He was not seen as in the act of coming, but was suddenly made visible standing by the altar, as if he had been stationed there before; and what had happened was not that he came, but that Zacharias’s eyes were opened. So, when Elisha’s servant was terrified at the sight of the besiegers, the prophet prayed that his eyes might be opened, and when they were, he saw what had been there before, ‘the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire.’ Not the Temple courts only, but all places are full of divine messengers, and we should see them if our vision was purged. But such considerations are not to weaken the supernatural element in the appearance of this angel with his message. He was sent, whatever that may mean in regard to beings whose relation to place must be different from ours. He had an utterance of God’s will to impart.

It has often been objected to these chapters that they are full of angelic appearances, which modern thought deems suspicious. But surely if the birth of Jesus was what we hold it to have been, the coming into human life of the Incarnate Son of God, it is not legend that angel wings gleam in their whiteness all through the story, and angel voices adore the Lord of men as well as angels, and angel eyes gaze on His cradle, and learn new lessons there.

III. We have next the angel's message.

The devoutest heart is conscious of shrinking dread when brought face to face with celestial brightness that has overflowed into our darkness. So 'Fear not' is the first word on the messenger's lips, and one can fancy the accent of sweetness and the calm of heart which followed. It has often been thought that Zacharias had been praying for offspring while he was burning incense; but the narrative does not say so, and besides the fact that he had ceased to hope for children [as is shown by his incredulity], surely it casts a slur on his religious character to suppose that personal wishes were uppermost at so sacred a moment. Prayers that he had long ago put aside as finally refused, now started to life again. God delays often, but He does not forget. Blessings may come to-day as the result of old prayers which have almost passed from our memory and our hope.

Observe how brief is the announcement of the child's birth, important as that was to the father's heart, and how the prophecy lingers on the child's future work, which is important for the world. His name, character, and work in general are first spoken, and then his specific office as the Forerunner is delineated at the close. The name is significant. 'John' means 'The Lord is gracious.' It was an omen, a condensed prophecy, the fulfilment of which stretched beyond its bearer to Him as whose precursor alone was John a token of God's grace.

His character [Luk. 1:15] puts first 'great in the sight of the Lord.' Then there are some whom God recognises as great, small as we all are before Him. And His estimate of greatness is not the world's estimate. How Herod or Pilate or Caesar, or philosophers at Athens, or rabbis in Jerusalem would have scoffed if they had been pointed to the gaunt ascetic pouring out words which they would have thought wild, to a crowd of Jews, and been told that

that was the greatest man in the world [except One]! The elements of greatness in the estimate of God which is truth, are devotion to His service, burning convictions, intense moral earnestness, superiority to sensuous delights, clear recognition of Jesus, and humble self-abnegation before Him. These are not the elements recognised in the world's Pantheon. Let us take God's standard.

John was to be a Nazarite, living not for the senses, but the soul, as all God's great ones have to be. The form may vary, but the substance of the vow of abstinence remains for all Christians. To put the heel on the animal within, and keep it well chained up, is indispensable, if we are ever to know the buoyant inspiration which comes from a sacreder source than the fumes of the wine-cup. Like John, we must flee the one if we would have the other, and be 'filled with the Holy Ghost.'

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Such was God’s intention in sending John. How sadly the real effects of his mission contrast with its design! So completely can men thwart God, as Jesus said in reference to John’s mission, ‘The Pharisees and lawyers frustrated the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him.’ Let us take heed lest we bring to nothing, so far as we are concerned, His gracious purpose of redemption in Christ!

4) Luke 1:46-55

Luke

THE MAGNIFICAT

Luk. 1:46 - Luk. 1:55.

Birds sing at dawn and sunrise. It was fitting that the last strains of Old Testament psalmody should prelude the birth of Jesus. To disbelievers in the Incarnation the hymns of Mary and Zacharias are, of course, forgeries; but if it be true nothing can be more 'natural' than these. The very features in this song, which are appealed to as proof of its being the work of some unknown pious liar or dishonest enthusiast, really confirm its genuineness. Critics shake their heads over its many quotations and allusions to Hannah's song and to other poetical parts of the Old Testament, and declare that these are fatal to its being accepted as Mary's. Why? must the simple village maiden be a poetess because she is the mother of our Lord? What is more likely than that she should cast her emotions into forms so familiar to her, and especially that Hannah's hymn should colour hers? These old psalms provided the mould into which her glowing emotions almost instinctively would run, and the very absence of 'originality' in the song favours its genuineness.

Another point may be noticed as having a similar bearing; namely, the very general and almost vague outline of the consequences of the birth, which is regarded as being the consummation to Israel of the mercy promised to the fathers. Could such a hymn have been written when sad experience showed how the nation would reject their Messiah, and ruin themselves thereby? Surely the anticipations which glow in it bear witness to the time when they were cherished, as prior to the sad tragedy which history unfolded. Little does Mary as yet know that 'a sword shall pierce through' her 'own soul also,' and that not only will 'all generations' call her 'blessed,' but that one of her names will be 'Our Lady of Sorrows.' For her and for us, the future is mercifully veiled. Only one eye saw the shadow of the Cross stretching black and grim athwart the earliest days of Jesus, and that eye was His own. How wonderful the calmness with which He pressed towards that 'mark' during all His earthly life!

The hymn is sometimes divided into four strophes or sections: first, the expression of devout emotion [Luk. 1:46 - Luk. 1:48]; second, the great fact from which they arise [Luk. 1:48 - Luk. 1:50]; third, the consequences of the fact [Luk. 1:51 - Luk. 1:53]; fourth, its aspect to Israel as fulfilment of promise. This division is, no doubt, in accordance with the course of thought, but is perhaps somewhat too artificial for our purposes; and we may rather simply note that in the earlier part the personal element is present, and that in the later it fades entirely, and the mighty deeds of God alone fill the meek singer's eye and lips. We may consider the lessons of these two halves.

I. The more personal part extends to the end of Luk. 1:50.

It contains three turnings or strophes, the first two of which have two clauses each, and the third three. The first is Luk. 1:46 - Luk. 1:47, the purely personal expression of the glad emotions awakened by Elisabeth's presence and salutation, which came to Mary as confirmation of the angel's annunciation. Not when Gabriel spoke, but when a woman like herself called her 'mother of my Lord,' did she break into praise. There is a deep truth there. God's voice is made more sure to our weakness when it is echoed by human lips, and our inmost hopes attain substance when they are shared and spoken by another. We need not attribute to the maiden from Nazareth philosophical accuracy when she speaks of her 'soul' and 'spirit.' Her first words are a burst of rapturous and wondering praise, in which the full heart runs over. Silence is impossible, and speech a relief. They are not to be construed with the microscopic accuracy fit to be applied to a treatise on psychology. 'All that is within' her praises and is glad. She does not think so much of the stupendous fact as of her own meekly exultant heart, and of God, to whom its outgoings turn. There are moods in which the devout soul dwells on its own calm blessedness and on God, its source, more directly than on the gift which brings it. Note the twofold act-magnifying and rejoicing. We magnify God when we take into our vision some fragment more of the complete circle of His essential greatness, or when, by our means, our fellows are helped to do so. The intended effect of all His dealings is that we should think more nobly-that is, more worthily-of Him. The fuller knowledge of His friendly greatness leads to joy in Him which makes the spirit bound as in a dance-for such is the meaning of the word 'rejoice'-and which yet is calm and deep. Note the double name of God-Lord and Saviour. Mary bows in lowly obedience, and looks up in as lowly, conscious need of deliverance, and beholding in God both His majesty and His grace, magnifies and exults at once.

Verse 48 is the second turn of thought, containing, like the former, two clauses. In it she gazes on her great gift, which, with maiden reserve, she does not throughout the whole hymn once directly name. Here the personal element comes out more strongly. But it is beautiful to note that the 'lowliness' is in the foreground, and precedes the assurance of the benedictions of all generations. The whole is like a murmur of wonder that such honour should come to her, so insignificant, and the 'behold' of the latter half verse is an exclamation of surprise. In unshaken meekness of steadfast obedience, she feels herself 'the handmaid of the Lord.' In undisturbed humility, she thinks of her 'low estate,' and wonders that God's eye should have fallen on her, the village damsel, poor and hidden. A pure heart is humbled by honour, and is not so dazzled by the vision of future fame as to lose sight of God as the source of all. Think of that simple young girl in her obscurity having flashed before her the certainty that her name would be repeated with blessing till the world's end, and then thus meekly laying her honours down at God's feet. What a lesson of how to receive all distinctions and exaltations!

Luk. 1:49 - Luk. 1:50 end this part, and contain three clauses, in which the personal disappears, and only the thought of God's character as manifested in His wonderful act remains. It connects indeed with the preceding by the 'to me' of Luk. 1:49; but the main subject is the new revelation, which is not confined to Mary, of the threefold divine glory fused into one bright beam, in the Incarnation. Power, holiness, eternal mercy, are all there, and that in deeper and more wondrous fashion than Mary knew when she sang. The words are mostly quotations from the Old Testament, but with new application and meaning. But even Mary's anticipations fell far short of the reality of that power in weakness, that holiness mildly blended with tenderest pity and pardoning love; that mercy which for all generations was to stretch not only to 'them that fear Him,' but to rebels, whom it would make friends. She saw but dimly and in part. We see more plainly all the rays of divine perfection meeting in, and streaming out to, the whole world, from her Son 'the effulgence of the Father's glory.'

II. The second part of the song is a lyric anticipation of the historical consequences of the appearance of the Messiah, cast into forms ready to the singer's hand, in the strains of Old Testament prophecy.

The characteristics of Hebrew poetry, its parallelism, its antitheses, its exultant swing, are more conspicuous here than in the earlier half. The main thought of Luk. 1:51 - Luk. 1:53 is that the Messiah would bring about a revolution, in which the high would be cast down and the humble exalted. This idea is wrought out in a threefold antithesis, of which the first pair must have one member supplied from the previous verse. Those who ‘fear Him’ are opposed to ‘the proud in the imagination of their hearts.’ These are thought of as an army of antagonists to God and His anointed, and thus the word ‘scattered’ acquires great poetic force, and reminds us of many a psalm, such as the Second and One hundred and tenth, where Messiah is a warrior.

The next pair represent the antithesis as being that of social degree, and in it there may be traced a glance at ‘Herod the King’ and the depressed line of David, to which the singer belonged, while the meaning must not be confined to that. The third pair represent the same opposites under the guise of poverty and riches. Mary is not to be credited with purely spiritual views in these contrasts, nor to be discredited with purely material ones. She, no doubt, thought of her own oppressed nation as mainly meant by the hungry and lowly; but like all pious souls in Israel, she must have felt that the lowliness and hunger which Messiah was to ennoble and satisfy, meant a condition of spirit conscious of weakness and sin, and eagerly desiring a higher good and food than earth could give. So much she had learned from many a psalm and prophet. So much the Spirit which inspired psalmist and prophet spoke in her lowly and exultant heart now. But the future was only revealed to her in this wide, general outline. Details of manner and time were all still blank. The broad truth which she foretold remains one of the salient historical results of Christ’s coming, and is the universal condition of partaking of His gifts. He has been, and is, the most revolutionary force in history; for without Him society is constituted on principles the reverse of the true, and as the world, apart from Jesus, is down-side up, the mission of His gospel is to turn it upside-down, and so bring the right side uppermost. The condition of receiving anything from Him is the humble recognition of emptiness and need. If princes on their thrones will come to Him just in the same way as the beggar on the dunghill does, they will very probably be allowed to stay on them; and if the rich man will come to Him as poor and in need of all things, he will not be ‘sent empty away.’ But Christ is a discriminating Christ, and as the prophet said long before Mary, ‘I . . . will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick; and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment.’

The last turn in the song celebrates the faithfulness of God to His ancient promises, and His help by His Messiah to Israel. The designation of Israel as ‘His servant’ recalls the familiar name in Isaiah’s later prophecies. Mary sees in the great wonder of her Son’s birth the accomplishment of the hopes of ages, and an assurance of God’s mercy as for ever the portion of the people. We cannot tell how far she had learned that Israel was to be counted, not by descent but disposition. But, in any case, her eyes could not have embraced the solemn facts of her Son’s rejection by His and her people. No shadows are yet cast across the morning of which her song is the herald. She knew not the dark clouds of thunder and destruction that were to sweep over the sky. But the end has not yet come, and we have to believe still that the evening will fulfil the promise of the morning, and ‘all Israel shall be saved,’ and that the mercy which was promised from of old to Abraham and the fathers, shall be fulfilled at last and abide with their seed for ever.

5) Luke 1:67-77

Luke

ZACHARIAS’S HYMN

Luk. 1:67 - Luk. 1:80.

Zacharias was dumb when he disbelieved. His lips were opened when he believed. He is the last of the Old Testament prophets, [Footnote: In the strictest sense, John the Baptist was a prophet of the Old dispensation, even though he came to usher in the New. [See Mat. 11:9 - Mat. 11:11.] In the same sense, Zacharias was the last prophet of the Old dispensation, before the coming of his son to link the Old with the New.] and as standing nearest to the Messiah, his song takes up the echoes of all the past, and melts them into a new outpouring of exultant hope. The strain is more impassioned than Mary’s, and throbs with triumph over ‘our enemies,’ but rises above the mere patriotic glow into a more spiritual region. The complete subordination of the personal element is very remarkable, as shown by the slight and almost parenthetical reference to John. The father is forgotten in the devout Israelite. We may take the song as divided into three portions: the first [Luk. 1:68 - Luk. 1:75] celebrating the coming of Messiah, with special reference to its effect in freeing Israel from its foes; the second [Luk. 1:76 - Luk. 1:77], the highly dramatic address to his unconscious 'child'; the third [Luk. 1:78 - Luk. 1:79] returns to the absorbing thought of the Messiah, but now touches on higher aspects of His coming as the Light to all who sit in darkness.

I. If we remember that four hundred dreary years, for the most part of which Israel had been groaning under a foreign yoke, had passed since the last of the prophets, and that during all that time devout eyes had looked wearily for the promised Messiah, we shall be able to form some faint conception of the surprise and rapture which filled Zacharias's spirit, and leaps in his hymn at the thought that now, at last, the hour had struck, and that the child would soon be born who was to fulfil the divine promises and satisfy fainting hopes. No wonder that its first words are a burst of blessing of 'the God of Israel.' The best expression of joy, when long-cherished desires are at last on the eve of accomplishment, is thanks to God. How short the time of waiting seems when it is past, and how needless the impatience which marred the waiting! Zacharias speaks of the fact as already realised. He must have known that the Incarnation was accomplished; for we can scarcely suppose that the emphatic tenses 'hath visited, hath redeemed, hath raised' are prophetic, and merely imply the certainty of a future event. He must have known, too, Mary's royal descent; for he speaks of 'the house of David.'

'A horn' of salvation is an emblem taken from animals, and implies strength. Here it recalls several prophecies, and as a designation of the Messiah, shadows forth His conquering might, all to be used for deliverance to His people. The vision before Zacharias is that of a victor king of Davidic race, long foretold by prophets, who will set Israel free from its foreign oppressors, whether Roman or Idumean, and in whom God Himself 'visits and redeems His people.' There are two kinds of divine visitations-one for mercy and one for judgment. What an unconscious witness it is of men’s evil consciences that the use of the phrase has almost exclusively settled down upon the latter meaning! In Luk. 1:71 - Luk. 1:75, the idea of the Messianic salvation is expanded and raised. The word ‘salvation’ is best construed, as in the Revised Version, as in apposition with and explanatory of ‘horn of salvation.’ This salvation has issues, which may also be regarded as God’s purposes in sending it. These are threefold: first, to show mercy to the dead fathers of the race. That is a striking idea, and pictures the departed as, in their solemn rest, sharing in the joy of Messiah’s coming, and perhaps in the blessings which He brings. We may not too closely press the phrase, but it is more than poetry or imagination. The next issue is God’s remembrance of His promises, or in other words, His fulfilment of these. The last is that the nation, being set free, should serve God. The external deliverance was in the eyes of devout men like Zacharias precious as a means to an end. Political freedom was needful for God’s service, and was valuable mainly as leading to that. The hymn rises far above the mere impatience of a foreign yoke. ‘Freedom to worship God,’ and God worshipped by a ransomed nation, are Zacharias’s ideal of the Messianic times.

Note his use of the word for priestly ‘service.’ He, a priest, has not forgotten that by original constitution all Israel was a nation of priests; and he looks forward to the fulfilment at last of the ideal which so soon became impracticable, and possibly to the abrogation of his own order in the universal priesthood. He knew not what deep truths he sang. The end of Christ’s coming, and of the deliverance which He works for us from the hand of our enemies, cannot be better stated than in these words. We are redeemed that we may be priests unto God. Our priestly service must be rendered in ‘holiness and righteousness,’ in consecration to God and discharge of all obligations; and it is to be no interrupted or occasional service, like Zacharias’s, which occupied but two short weeks in the year, and might never again lead him within the sanctuary, but is to fill with reverent activity and thankful sacrifice all our days. However this hymn may have begun with the mere external conception of Messianic deliverance, it rises high above that here, and will still further soar beyond it. We may learn from this priest-prophet, who anticipated the wise men and brought his offerings to the unborn Christ, what Christian salvation is, and for what it is given us.

II. There is something very vivid and striking in the abrupt address to the infant, who lay, all unknowing, in his mother's arms. The contrast between him as he was then and the work which waited him, the paternal wonder and joy which yet can scarcely pause on the child, and hurries on to fancy him in the years to come, going herald-like before the face of the Lord, the profound prophetic insight into John's work, are all noteworthy. The Baptist did 'prepare the way' by teaching that the true 'salvation' was not to be found in mere deliverance from the Roman yoke, but in 'remission of sin.' He thus not only gave 'knowledge of salvation,' in the sense that he announced the fact that it would be given, but also in the sense that he clearly taught in what it consisted. John was no preacher of revolt, as the turbulent and impure patriots of the day would have liked him to be, but of repentance. His work was to awake the consciousness of sin, and so to kindle desires for a salvation which was deliverance from sin, the only yoke which really enslaves. Zacharias the 'blameless' saw what the true bondage of the nation was, and what the work both of the Deliverer and of His herald must be. We need to be perpetually reminded of the truth that the only salvation and deliverance which can do us any good consist in getting rid, by pardon and by holiness, of the cords of our sins.

III. The thoughts of the Forerunner and his office melt into that of the Messianic blessings from which the singer cannot long turn away. In these closing words, we have the source, the essential nature, and the blessed results of the gift of Christ set forth in a noble figure, and freed from the national limitations of the earlier part of the hymn. All comes from the 'bowels of mercy of our God,' as Zacharias, in accordance with Old Testament metaphor, speaks, allocating the seat of the emotions which we attribute to the heart. Conventional notions of delicacy think the Hebrew idea coarse, but the one allocation is just as delicate as the other. We can get no deeper down or farther back into the secret springs of things than this-that the root cause of all, and most especially of the mission of Christ, is the pitying love of God's heart. If we hold fast by that, the pain of the riddle of the world is past, and the riddle itself more than half solved. Jesus Christ is the greatest gift of that love, in which all its tenderness and all its power are gathered up for our blessing.

The modern civilised world owes most of its activity to the quickening influence of Christianity. The dayspring visits us that it may shine on us, and it shines that it may guide us into ‘the way of peace.’ There can be no wider and more accurate description of the end of Christ’s mission than this-that all His visitation and enlightenment are meant to lead us into the path where we shall find peace with God, and therefore with ourselves and with all mankind. The word ‘peace,’ in the Old Testament, is used to include the sum of all that men require for their conscious well-being. We are at rest only when all our relations with God and the outer world are right, and when our inner being is harmonised with itself, and supplied with appropriate objects. To know God for our friend, to have our being fixed on and satisfied in Him, and so to be reconciled to all circumstances, and a friend of all men-this is peace; and the path to such a blessed condition is shown us only by that Sun of Righteousness whom the loving heart of God has sent into the darkness and torpor of the benighted wanderers in the desert. The national reference has faded from the song, and though it still speaks of ‘us’ and ‘our,’ we cannot doubt that Zacharias both saw more deeply into the salvation which Christ would bring than to limit it to breaking an earthly yoke, and deemed more worthily and widely of its sweep, than to confine it within narrower bounds than the whole extent of the dreary darkness which it came to banish from all the world.

6) Luke 1:78-79

Luke

ZACHARIAS’S HYMN

THE DAYSPRING FROM ON HIGH

Luk. 1:78 - Luk. 1:79.

As the dawn is ushered in by the notes of birds, so the rising of the Sun of Righteousness was heralded by song, Mary and Zacharias brought their praises and welcome to the unborn Christ, the angels hovered with heavenly music over His cradle, and Simeon took the child in his arms and blessed it. The human members of this choir may be regarded as the last of the psalmists and prophets, and the first of Christian singers. The song of Zacharias, from which my text is taken, is steeped in Old Testament allusions, and redolent of the ancient spirit, but it transcends that. Its early part is purely national, and hails the coming of the Messiah chiefly as the deliverer of Israel from foreign oppressors, though even in it their deliverance is regarded mostly as the means to an end, and the end one very appropriate on the lips of a priestly prophet-viz. sacerdotal service by the whole nation 'in holiness and righteousness all their days.'

But in this latter portion, which is separated from the former by the pathetic, incidental, and slight reference to the singer's own child, the national limits are far surpassed. The song soars above them, and pierces to the very heart and kernel of Christ's work. 'The dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.' Nothing deeper, nothing wider, nothing truer about the mission and issue of Christ's coming could be spoken. And thus we have to look at the three things that lie in this text, as bearing upon our conceptions of Christ and His work-the darkness, the dawn, and the directing light.

I. The darkness.

Zacharias, as becomes the last of the prophets, and a man whose whole religious life was nourished upon the ancient Scriptures, speaks almost entirely in Old Testament phraseology in this song. And his description of 'them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death' is taken almost verbally from the great words from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, who speaks, in immediate connection with his prophecy of the coming of the Christ, of 'the people that walk in darkness and them that dwell,' or sit, 'in the shadow of death, upon whom the light hath shined.'

The picture that rises before us is that of a group of travellers benighted, bewildered, huddled together in the dark, afraid to move for fear of pitfalls, precipices, wild beasts, and enemies; and so sighing for the day and compelled to be inactive till it comes. That is the picture of humanity apart from Jesus Christ, a darkness so intense, so tragic, that it is, as it were, the very shadow of the ultimate and essential darkness which is death, and in it men are sitting torpid, unable to find their way and afraid to move.

Now darkness, all the world over, is the emblem of three things-ignorance, impurity, sorrow. And all men who are rent away from Jesus Christ, or on whom His beams have not yet fallen, this text tells us, have that triple curse lying upon them.

Ignorance. Think of what, without Jesus Christ, the world has deemed of the unseen, and of the God, if there be a God, that may inhabit there. He has been to them a great Peradventure, a great Terror, a great Inscrutable, a stone-eyed Fate, a thin, nebulous Nothing, with no emotion, no attributes, no heart, no ear to hear, the nearest approach to nonentity, according to the despairing saying of a master of philosophy, that 'pure Being is equal to pure Nothing.' And if all men do not rise to such heights of melancholy abstraction as that, still how little there is of blessed certainty, how little clearness of conception of a Divine Person that turns to us with love and tenderness in His heart, apart from Christ and His teaching! If you take away from civilised men all the knowledge of God that they owe to Jesus Christ, what have you left? The ladder by which they climbed is kicked away by a great many people nowadays, but it is to Him that they owe the very conceptions in the name of which some of them turn round and deny Him.

Ignorance of God, ignorance of one's own self and of one's deepest duties, and ignorance of that solemn future, the fact of which is plain to most men, but the how of which is such a blank mystery but for Jesus Christ-these things are elements of the darkness that wraps the world. Go to heathendom if you want to see the problem worked out, as to what men know outside of the revelation which culminates in Jesus Christ. And take your own hearts, dear friends who stand aside from that sweet Lord and light of our lives, and ask yourselves, What do I know, with a certainty which is to me as valid, as-yea! more valid than that given by sense and outward perceptions? What do I know of God that I do not owe to Jesus Christ? Nothing. You may guess much, you may hope a little, you may dread a great deal, you may question more than all, but you will *know* nothing.

Well, then, further, this solemn emblem stands for impurity. And we have only to consult our own hearts to feel how true it is about us all, that we dwell in a region all darkened, if not by the coarse transgressions which men consent to call sins, yet darkened more subtly and oftentimes more hopelessly by the obscuration of pure selfishness and living to myself and by myself. Wherever that comes, it is like the mists that steal up from some poisonous marsh, and shut out stars and sky, and drape the whole country in a melancholy veil. It is white but it is poisonous, it is white but it is darkness all the same. There are other kinds of sin than the sins that break the Ten Commandments; there are other kinds of sin than the sins that the world takes cognisance of. The worst poisons are the tasteless ones, and colourless gases are laden with fatal power. We may walk in a darkness that may be felt, though there be nothing in our lives that men call sin, and little there of which our consciences are as yet educated enough to be ashamed. Rent from God, man lives to himself, and so is sunk in darkness.

And what shall I say about the third of the doleful triad of which this pregnant emblem is the recognised symbol all the world over? Surely, though earth be full of blessing, and life of possibilities of joy, no man travels very far along the road without feeling that the burden of sorrow is a burden that we all have to carry. There are blessings in plenty, there is mirth more than enough. There is 'the laughter' which is 'the crackling of thorns' under a pot. There are plenty of distractions and amusements, 'blessings more plentiful than hope'; but yet the ground tone of every human life, when the first flush of inexperience and novelty has worn off, apart from God, is sadness, conscious of itself sometimes, and driven to all manner of foolish attempts at forgetfulness, unconscious of itself sometimes, and knowing not what is the disease of which it languishes. There it is, like some persistent minor in a great piece of music, wailing on through all the embroidery and lightsomeness of the cheerfuller and loftier notes. 'Every heart knoweth its own bitterness,' and every heart *has* a bitterness of its own to know.

I do not understand how it is that men who have no religion in them can bear their own sorrows and see their neighbours' and not go mad. Sometimes the world seems to me to be moving round its central sun with a doleful atmosphere of sighs wherever it goes, and all the mirth and stir and bustle are but like a thin crust of grass with flowers upon it, cast across the sulphurous depths of some volcano that may slumber for a while, but is there all the same.

Brother! you and I, away from Jesus Christ, have to face the certainties of ignorance, of sin, of sorrow-ignorance unenlightened, sin unconquered, sorrow uncomforted.

And then comes the other tragic, and yet most picturesque emblem in the representation here: ‘They *sit* in darkness.’ Yes! what can they do, poor creatures? They know not where to go. The light has left them, inactivity is a necessity. And so, with folded hands, they wish for the day, or try to forget the night by lighting some little torch of their own that only serves to make darkness visible, and dies all too soon, leaving them to lie down in sorrow.

But, you say, ‘What nonsense! Inactivity! look at the fierce energy of life in our Western lands.’ Well, grant it all, there may be plenty of material activity attendant upon inward stagnation and torpor. But, again, I would like to ask how much of the most godless, commercial, artistic, intellectual activity of so-called civilised and Christian countries is owing to the stimulus and ferment that Jesus Christ brought. If you want to see how true it is that men without Him *sit* in the darkness, go to heathen lands, and see the stagnation, the torpor, there.

Now, dear brethren, all this is true about us, in the measure in which we do not participate by faith and love, welcoming Him into our hearts in the illumination that Jesus Christ brings. And what I want to do is to lay upon the hearts and consciences of each of us here this thought, that the solemn, tragic picture of my text is the picture of me, separate from Christ, however I may try to conceal it from myself, and to mask it from other people by busying myself with inferior knowledges, by avoiding to listen to the answer that conscience gives to the question as to my moral character, and by befooling myself with noisy joys and tumultuous pleasures, in which there is no pleasure.

II. Now, note secondly, the dayspring, or dawn.

My text, in the part on which I have just been speaking, links itself with ancient Messianic prophecy, and this expression, ‘the dayspring from on high.’ also links itself with other prophecies of the same sort. Almost the last word of prophecy before the four centuries of silence which Mary and Zacharias broke, was, ‘Unto you that fear His name shall the Sun of

Righteousness arise with healing in His beams.’ There can be little doubt, I think, that the allusion of my text is to these all but the last words of the prophet Malachi. For that final chapter of the Old Testament colours the song both of Mary and of Zacharias. And it is to be observed that the Greek translation of the Hebrew uses the same verb, of which the cognate noun is here employed, for the rising of the Sun of Righteousness. The picturesque old English word ‘dayspring’ means neither more nor less than *sunrising*. And it is here used practically as a name for Jesus Christ, who is Himself the Sun, represented as rising over a darkened earth, and yet, with a singular neglect of the propriety of the metaphor, as descending from on high, not to shine on us from the sky, but to ‘visit us’ on earth.

Jesus Christ Himself, over and over again, said by implication, and more than once by direct claim, ‘I am the Light of the world.’ And my text is the anticipation, perhaps from lips that did not fully understand the whole significance of the prophecy which they spoke, of these later declarations. I have said that the darkness is the emblem of three baleful things, of the converse of which light is the symbol. As the darkness speaks to us of ignorance, so Christ, as the Sun illumines us with the light of ‘the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’ For doubt we have blessed certainty, for a far-off God we have the knowledge of God close at hand. For an impassive will or a stony-eyed fate we have the knowledge [and not only the wistful yearning after the knowledge] of a loving heart, warm and throbbing. Our God is no unemotional abstraction, but a living Person who can love, who can pity, and we are speaking more than poetry when we say, God is compassion, and compassion is God. This we know because ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.’ And the solid certainty of a loving God, tender, pitying, mighty to help, quick to hear, ready to forgive, waiting to bless, is borne into our hearts, and comes there, sweet as the sunshine, when we turn ourselves to the light of Christ.

In like manner the darkness, born of our own sin, which wraps our hearts, and shuts out so much that is fair and sweet and strong, will pass away if we turn ourselves to Him. His light pouring into our souls will hurt the eye at first, but it will hurt to cure. The darkness of sin and alienation will pass, and the true light will shine.

The darkness of sorrow-well! it will not cease, but He will ‘smooth the raven down of darkness till it smiles,’ and He will bring into our griefs such a spirit of quiet submission as that they shall change into a solemn scorn of ills, and be almost like gladnesses. Peace, which is better than exuberant delight, will come to quiet the sorrow of the soul that trusts in Jesus Christ. The day which is knowledge, purity, gladsomeness, the cheerful day will be ours if we hold by Him. We ‘are all the children of the light and of the day’; we ‘are not of the night nor of darkness.’

Brother, it is possible to grope at noontide as in the dark, and in all the blaze of Christ’s revelation still to be left in the Cimmerian folds of midnight gloom. You can shut your eyes to the sunshine; have you opened your hearts to its coming?

I cannot dwell [your time will not allow of it] upon the other points connected with this description of the day spring, except just to point out in passing the singular force and depth of the words-which I suppose are more forcible and deep than he who spoke them understood at the time that visitation was described. The dayspring is ‘from on high.’ This Sun has come down on to the earth. It has not risen on a far-off horizon, but it has come down and visited us, and walks among us. This Sun, our life-star, ‘hath had elsewhere its setting, and cometh from afar.’ For He that rises upon us as the Light of life, hath descended from the heavens, and was, before He appeared amongst men.

And His coming is a divine visitation. The word here ‘hath *visited* us’ [or ‘shall visit us,’ as the Revised Version varies it], is chiefly employed in the Old Testament to describe the divine acts of self-revelation, and these, mostly redemptive acts. Zacharias employs it in that sense in the earlier portion of the song, where he says that ‘God hath visited and redeemed His people.’ And so from the use of this word we gather these two thoughts-God comes to us when Christ comes to us, and His coming is wondrous, blessed nearness, and nearness to each of us. ‘What is man that Thou shouldst be mindful of him, or the son of man that Thou shouldst visit him?’ said the old Psalmist. We say ‘What is man that the Dayspring from on high should come down upon earth, and round His immortal beams, should, as it were, cast the veil and obscuration of a human form; and so walk amongst us, the embodied Light and the Incarnate God?’ ‘The dayspring from on high hath visited us.’

III. Lastly, note the directing by the light.

‘To guide our feet into the way of peace.’ This Sun stoops to the office of the star that moved before the wise men and hovered over His cradle, and becomes to each individual soul a guide and director. The picture of my text, I suppose, carries us on to the morning, when the benighted travellers catch the first gleams of the rising sun and resume their activity, and there is a cheerful stir through the encampment and the way is open before them once more, and they are ready to walk in it. The force of the metaphor, however, implies more than that, for it speaks to us of the wonder that this universal Light should become the special guide of each individual soul, and should not merely hang in the heavens, to cast the broad radiance of its beams over the whole surface of the earth, but should move before each man, a light unto *his* feet and a lamp to *his* path, in special manifestation to him of his duty and his life’s pilgrimage.

There is only one way of peace, and that is to follow His beams and to be directed by His preceding us. Then we shall realise the most indispensable of all the conditions of peace-Christ brings you and me the reconciliation which puts us at peace with God, which is the foundation of all other tranquillity. And He will guide docile feet into the way of peace in yet another fashion-in that the following of His example, the cleaving to Him, the holding by His skirts or by His hand, and the treading in His footsteps, is the only way by which the heart can receive the solid satisfaction in which it rests, and the conscience can cease from accusing and stinging. The way of wisdom is a path of pleasantness and a way of peace. Only they who walk in Christ’s footsteps have quiet hearts and are at amity with God, in concord with themselves, friends of mankind, and at peace with circumstances. There is no strife within, no strained relations or hostile alienation to God, no gnawing unrest of unsatisfied desires, no pricks of accusing conscience; for the man who puts his hand into Christ’s hand, and says, ‘Order Thou my footsteps by Thy word’; ‘Where Thou goest I will go, and what Thou commandest I will do.’

Brother, put thy hand out from the darkness and clasp His, and 'the darkness shall be light about thee'; and He will fulfil His own promise when He said, 'I am the Light of the world. He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the Light of life.

7) Luke 1:80

Luke

ZACHARIAS'S HYMN

Luk. 1:67 - Luk. 1:80.

Zacharias was dumb when he disbelieved. His lips were opened when he believed. He is the last of the Old Testament prophets, [Footnote: In the strictest sense, John the Baptist was a prophet of the Old dispensation, even though he came to usher in the New. [See Mat. 11:9 - Mat. 11:11.] In the same sense, Zacharias was the last prophet of the Old dispensation, before the coming of his son to link the Old with the New.] and as standing nearest to the Messiah, his song takes up the echoes of all the past, and melts them into a new outpouring of exultant hope. The strain is more impassioned than Mary's, and throbs with triumph over 'our enemies,' but rises above the mere patriotic glow into a more spiritual region. The complete subordination of the personal element is very remarkable, as shown by the slight and almost parenthetical reference to John. The father is forgotten in the devout Israelite. We may take the song as divided into three portions: the first [Luk. 1:68 - Luk. 1:75] celebrating the coming of Messiah, with special reference to its effect in freeing Israel from its foes; the second [Luk. 1:76 - Luk. 1:77], the highly dramatic address to his unconscious 'child'; the third [Luk. 1:78 - Luk. 1:79] returns to the absorbing thought of the Messiah, but now touches on higher aspects of His coming as the Light to all who sit in darkness.

I. If we remember that four hundred dreary years, for the most part of which Israel had been groaning under a foreign yoke, had passed since the last of the prophets, and that during all that time devout eyes had looked wearily for the promised Messiah, we shall be able to form some faint conception of the surprise and rapture which filled Zacharias's spirit, and leaps in his hymn at the thought that now, at last, the hour had struck, and that the child would soon be born who was to fulfil the divine promises and satisfy fainting hopes. No wonder that its first words are a burst of blessing of 'the God of Israel.' The best expression of joy, when long-cherished desires are at last on the eve of accomplishment, is thanks to God. How short the time of waiting seems when it is past, and how needless the impatience which marred the waiting! Zacharias speaks of the fact as already realised. He must have known that the Incarnation was accomplished; for we can scarcely suppose that the emphatic tenses 'hath visited, hath redeemed, hath raised' are prophetic, and merely imply the certainty of a future event. He must have known, too, Mary's royal descent; for he speaks of 'the house of David.'

'A horn' of salvation is an emblem taken from animals, and implies strength. Here it recalls several prophecies, and as a designation of the Messiah, shadows forth His conquering might, all to be used for deliverance to His people. The vision before Zacharias is that of a victor king of Davidic race, long foretold by prophets, who will set Israel free from its foreign oppressors, whether Roman or Idumean, and in whom God Himself 'visits and redeems His people.' There are two kinds of divine visitations-one for mercy and one for judgment. What an unconscious witness it is of men's evil consciences that the use of the phrase has almost exclusively settled down upon the latter meaning! In Luk. 1:71 - Luk. 1:75, the idea of the Messianic salvation is expanded and raised. The word 'salvation' is best construed, as in the Revised Version, as in apposition with and explanatory of 'horn of salvation.' This salvation has issues, which may also be regarded as God's purposes in sending it. These are threefold: first, to show mercy to the dead fathers of the race. That is a striking idea, and pictures the departed as, in their solemn rest, sharing in the joy of Messiah's coming, and perhaps in the blessings which He brings. We may not too closely press the phrase, but it is more than poetry or imagination. The next issue is God's remembrance of His promises, or in other words, His fulfilment of these. The last is that the nation, being set free, should serve God. The external deliverance was in the eyes of devout men like Zacharias precious as a means to an end. Political freedom was needful for God's service, and was valuable mainly as leading to that. The hymn rises far above the mere impatience of a foreign yoke. ‘Freedom to worship God,’ and God worshipped by a ransomed nation, are Zacharias’s ideal of the Messianic times.

Note his use of the word for priestly ‘service.’ He, a priest, has not forgotten that by original constitution all Israel was a nation of priests; and he looks forward to the fulfilment at last of the ideal which so soon became impracticable, and possibly to the abrogation of his own order in the universal priesthood. He knew not what deep truths he sang. The end of Christ’s coming, and of the deliverance which He works for us from the hand of our enemies, cannot be better stated than in these words. We are redeemed that we may be priests unto God. Our priestly service must be rendered in ‘holiness and righteousness,’ in consecration to God and discharge of all obligations; and it is to be no interrupted or occasional service, like Zacharias’s, which occupied but two short weeks in the year, and might never again lead him within the sanctuary, but is to fill with reverent activity and thankful sacrifice all our days. However this hymn may have begun with the mere external conception of Messianic deliverance, it rises high above that here, and will still further soar beyond it. We may learn from this priest-prophet, who anticipated the wise men and brought his offerings to the unborn Christ, what Christian salvation is, and for what it is given us.

II. There is something very vivid and striking in the abrupt address to the infant, who lay, all unknowing, in his mother’s arms. The contrast between him as he was then and the work which waited him, the paternal wonder and joy which yet can scarcely pause on the child, and hurries on to fancy him in the years to come, going herald-like before the face of the Lord, the profound prophetic insight into John’s work, are all noteworthy. The Baptist did ‘prepare the way’ by teaching that the true ‘salvation’ was not to be found in mere deliverance from the Roman yoke, but in ‘remission of sin.’ He thus not only gave ‘knowledge of salvation,’ in the sense that he announced the fact that it would be given, but also in the sense that he clearly taught in what it consisted. John was no preacher of revolt, as the turbulent and impure patriots of the day would have liked him to be, but of repentance. His work was to awake the consciousness of sin, and so to kindle desires for a salvation which was deliverance from sin, the only yoke which really enslaves. Zacharias the ‘blameless’ saw what the true bondage of the nation was, and what the work both of the Deliverer and of His herald must be. We need to be perpetually reminded of the truth that the only salvation and deliverance which can do us any good consist in getting rid, by pardon and by holiness, of the cords of our sins.

III. The thoughts of the Forerunner and his office melt into that of the Messianic blessings from which the singer cannot long turn away. In these closing words, we have the source, the essential nature, and the blessed results of the gift of Christ set forth in a noble figure, and freed from the national limitations of the earlier part of the hymn. All comes from the ‘bowels of mercy of our God,’ as Zacharias, in accordance with Old Testament metaphor, speaks, allocating the seat of the emotions which we attribute to the heart. Conventional notions of delicacy think the Hebrew idea coarse, but the one allocation is just as delicate as the other. We can get no deeper down or farther back into the secret springs of things than this-that the root cause of all, and most especially of the mission of Christ, is the pitying love of God’s heart. If we hold fast by that, the pain of the riddle of the world is past, and the riddle itself more than half solved. Jesus Christ is the greatest gift of that love, in which all its tenderness and all its power are gathered up for our blessing.

The modern civilised world owes most of its activity to the quickening influence of Christianity. The dayspring visits us that it may shine on us, and it shines that it may guide us into ‘the way of peace.’ There can be no wider and more accurate description of the end of Christ’s mission than this-that all His visitation and enlightenment are meant to lead us into the path where we shall find peace with God, and therefore with ourselves and with all mankind. The word ‘peace,’ in the Old Testament, is used to include the sum of all that men require for their conscious well-being. We are at rest only when all our relations with God and the outer world are right, and when our inner being is harmonised with itself, and supplied with appropriate objects. To know God for our friend, to have our being fixed on and satisfied in Him, and so to be reconciled to all circumstances, and a friend of all men-this is peace; and the path to such a blessed condition is shown us only by that Sun of Righteousness whom the loving heart of God has sent into the darkness and torpor of the benighted wanderers in the desert. The national reference has faded from the song, and though it still speaks of 'us' and 'our,' we cannot doubt that Zacharias both saw more deeply into the salvation which Christ would bring than to limit it to breaking an earthly yoke, and deemed more worthily and widely of its sweep, than to confine it within narrower bounds than the whole extent of the dreary darkness which it came to banish from all the world.

8) Luke 2:8-15

Luke

SHEPHERDS AND ANGELS

Luk. 2:8 - Luk. 2:20.

The central portion of this passage is, of course, the angels' message and song, the former of which proclaims the transcendent fact of the Incarnation, and the latter hymns its blessed results. But, subsidiary to these, the silent vision which preceded them and the visit to Bethlehem which followed are to be noted. Taken together, they cast varying gleams on the great fact of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Why should there be a miraculous announcement at all, and why should it be to these shepherds? It seems to have had no effect beyond a narrow circle and for a time. It was apparently utterly forgotten when, thirty years after, the carpenter's Son began His ministry. Could such an event have passed from memory, and left no ripple on the surface? Does not the resultlessness cast suspicion on the truthfulness of the narrative? Not if we duly give weight to the few who knew of the wonder; to the length of time that elapsed, during which the shepherds and their auditors probably died; to their humble position, and to the short remembrance of extraordinary events which have no immediate consequences. Joseph and Mary were strangers in Bethlehem. Christ never visited it, so far as we know. The fading of the impression cannot be called strange, for it accords with natural tendencies; but the record of so great an event, which was entirely ineffectual as regards future acceptance of Christ's claims, is so unlike legend that it vouches for the truth of the narrative. An apparent stumbling-block is left, because the story is true.

Why then, the announcement at all, since it was of so little use? Because it was of some; but still more, because it was fitting that such angel voices should attend such an event, whether men gave heed to them or not; and because, recorded, their song has helped a world to understand the nature and meaning of that birth. The glory died off the hillside quickly, and the music of the song scarcely lingered longer in the ears of its first hearers; but its notes echo still in all lands, and every generation turns to them with wonder and hope.

The selection of two or three peasants as receivers of the message, the time at which it was given, and the place, are all significant. It was no unmeaning fact that the 'glory of the Lord' shone lambent round the shepherds, and held them and the angel standing beside them in its circle of light. No longer within the secret shrine, but out in the open field, the symbol of the Divine Presence glowed through the darkness; for that birth hallowed common life, and brought the glory of God into familiar intercourse with its secularities and smallnesses. The appearance to these humble men as they 'sat simply chatting in a rustic row 'symbolised the destination of the Gospel for all ranks and classes.

The angel speaks by the side of the shepherds, not from above. His gentle encouragement 'Fear not!' not only soothes their present terror, but has a wider meaning. The dread of the Unseen, which lies coiled like a sleeping snake in all hearts, is utterly taken away by the Incarnation. All messages from that realm are thenceforward 'tidings of great joy,' and love and desire may pass into it, as all men shall one day pass, and both enterings may be peaceful and confident. Nothing harmful can come out of the darkness, from which Jesus has come, into which He has passed, and which He fills.

The great announcement, the mightiest, most wonderful word that had ever passed angels' immortal lips, is characterised as 'great joy' to 'all the people,' in which designation two things are to be noted-the nature and the limitation of the message. In how many ways the Incarnation was to be the fountain of purest gladness was but little discerned, either by the heavenly messenger or the shepherds. The ages since have been partially learning it, but not till the ‘glorified joy’ of heaven swells redeemed hearts will all its sorrow-dispelling power be experimentally known. Base joys may be basely sought, but His creatures’ gladness is dear to God, and if sought in God’s way, is a worthy object of their efforts.

The world-wide sweep of the Incarnation does not appear here, but only its first destination for Israel. This is manifest in the phrase ‘all the people,’ in the mention of ‘the city of David’ and in the emphatic ‘you,’ in contradistinction both from the messenger, who announced what he did not share, and Gentiles, to whom the blessing was not to pass till Israel had determined its attitude to it.

The titles of the Infant tell something of the wonder of the birth, but do not unfold its overwhelming mystery. Magnificent as they are, they fall far short of ‘The Word was made flesh.’ They keep within the circle of Jewish expectation, and announce that the hopes of centuries are fulfilled. There is something very grand in the accumulation of titles, each greater than the preceding, and all culminating in that final ‘Lord.’ Handel has gloriously given the spirit of it in the crash of triumph with which that last word is pealed out in his oratorio. ‘Saviour’ means far more than the shepherds knew; for it declares the Child to be the deliverer from all evil, both of sin and sorrow, and the endower with all good, both of righteousness and blessedness. The ‘Christ’ claims that He is the fulfiller of prophecy, perfectly endowed by divine anointing for His office of prophet, priest, and king-the consummate flower of ancient revelation, greater than Moses the law-giver, than Solomon the king, than Jonah the prophet. ‘The Lord’ is scarcely to be taken as the ascription of divinity, but rather as a prophecy of authority and dominion, implying reverence, but not unveiling the deepest secret of the entrance of the divine Son into humanity. That remained unrevealed, for the time was not yet ripe.

There would be few children of a day old in a little place like Bethlehem, and none but one lying in a manger. The fact of the birth, which could be verified by sight, would confirm the message in its outward aspect, and thereby lead to belief in the angel’s disclosure of its inward character. The ‘sign’ attested the veracity of the messenger, and therefore the truth of all his word-both of that part of it capable of verification by sight and that part apprehensible by faith.

No wonder that the sudden light and music of the multitude of the heavenly host' flashed and echoed round the group on the hillside. The true picture is not given when we think of that angel choir as floating in heaven. They stood in their serried ranks round the shepherds and their fellows on the solid earth, and 'the night was filled with music,' not from overhead, but from every side. Crowding forms became all at once visible within the encircling 'glory,' on every face wondering gladness and eager sympathy with men, from every lip praise. Angels can speak with the tongues of men when their theme is their Lord become man, and their auditors are men. They hymn the blessed results of that birth, the mystery of which they knew more completely than they were yet allowed to tell.

As was natural for them, their praise is first evoked by the result of the Incarnation in the highest heavens. It will bring 'glory to God' there; for by it new aspects of His nature are revealed to those clear-eyed and immortal spirits who for unnumbered ages have known His power, His holiness, His benignity to unfallen creatures, but now experience the wonder which more properly belongs to more limited intelligences, when they behold that depth of condescending Love stooping to be born. Even they think more loftily of God, and more of man's possibilities and worth, when they cluster round the manger, and see who lies there.

'On earth peace.' The song drops from the contemplation of the heavenly consequences to celebrate the results on earth, and gathers them all into one pregnant word, 'Peace.' What a scene of strife, discord, and unrest earth must seem to those calm spirits! And how vain and petty the struggles must look, like the bustle of an ant-hill! Christ's work is to bring peace into all human relations, those with God, with men, with circumstances, and to calm the discords of souls at war with themselves. Every one of these relations is marred by sin, and nothing less thorough than a power which removes it can rectify them. That birth was the coming into humanity of Him who brings peace with God, with ourselves, with one another. Shame on Christendom that nineteen centuries have passed, and men yet think the cessation of war is only a ‘pious imagination’! The ringing music of that angel chant has died away, but its promise abides.

The symmetry of the song is best preserved, as I humbly venture to think, by the old reading as in the Authorised Version. The other, represented by the Revised Version, seems to make the second clause drag somewhat, with two designations of the region of peace. The Incarnation brings God’s ‘good will’ to dwell among men. In Christ, God is well pleased; and from Him incarnate, streams of divine complacent love pour out to freshen and fertilise the earth.

The disappearance of the heavenly choristers does not seem to have been so sudden as their appearance. They ‘went away from them into heaven,’ as if leisurely, and so that their ascending brightness was long visible as they rose, and attestation was thereby given to the reality of the vision. The sleeping village was close by, and as soon as the last gleam of the departing light had faded in the depths of heaven, the shepherds went ‘with haste,’ untimely as was the hour. They would not have much difficulty in finding the inn and the manger. Note that they do not tell their story till the sight has confirmed the angel message. Their silence was not from doubt; for they say, before they had seen the child, that ‘this thing’ is ‘come to pass,’ and are quite sure that the Lord has told it them. But they wait for the evidence which shall assure others of their truthfulness.

There are three attitudes of mind towards God’s revelation set forth in living examples in the closing verses of the passage. Note the conduct of the shepherds, as a type of the natural impulse and imperative duty of all possessors of God’s truth. Such a story as they had to tell would burn its way to utterance in the most reticent and shyest. But have Christians a less wonderful message to deliver, or a less needful one? If the spectators of the cradle could not be silent, how impossible it ought to be for the witnesses of the Cross to lock their lips!

The hearers of the story did what, alas! too many of us do with the Gospel. ‘They wondered,’ and stopped there. A feeble ripple of astonishment ruffled the surface of their souls for a moment; but like the streaks on the sea made by a catspaw of wind, it soon died out, and the depths were unaffected by it.

The antithesis to this barren wonder is the beautiful picture of the Virgin’s demeanour. She ‘kept all these sayings, and pondered them in her heart.’ What deep thoughts the mother of the Lord had, were hers alone. But we have the same duty to the truth, and it will never disclose its inmost sweetness to us, nor take so sovereign a grip of our very selves as to mould our lives, unless we too treasure it in our hearts, and by patient brooding on it understand its hidden harmonies, and spread our souls out to receive its transforming power. A non-meditative religion is a shallow religion. But if we hide His word in our hearts, and often in secret draw out our treasure to count and weigh it, we shall be able to speak out of a full heart, and like these shepherds, to rejoice that we have seen even as it was spoken unto us.

9) Luke 2:16

Luke

SHEPHERDS AND ANGELS

WAS, IS, IS TO COME

Luk. 2:16. - Luk. 24:51. - Act. 1:11.

These three fragments, which I have ventured to isolate and bring together, are all found in one author’s writings. Luke’s biography of Jesus stretches from the cradle in Bethlehem to the Ascension from Olivet. He narrates the Ascension twice, because it has two aspects. In one it looks backward, and is necessary as the completion of what was begun in the birth. In one it looks forward, and makes necessary, as its completion, that coming which still lies in the future. These three stand up, like linked summits in a mountain. We can understand none of them unless we embrace them all. If the story of the birth is true, a life so begun cannot end in an undistinguished death like that of all men. And if the Ascension from Olivet is true, that cannot close the history of His relations to men. The creed which proclaims He was ‘born of the Virgin Mary’ must go on to say ‘. . . He ascended up into heaven’; and cannot pause till it adds ‘. . . From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.’ So we have then three points to consider in this sermon.

I. Note first, the three great moments.

The thing that befell at Bethlehem, in the stable of the inn, was a commonplace and insignificant enough event looked at from the outside: the birth of a child to a young mother. It had its elements of pathos in its occurring at a distance from home, among the publicity and discomforts of an inn stable, and with some cloud of suspicion over the mother’s fair fame. But the outside of a fact is the least part of it. A little film of sea-weed floats upon the surface, but there are fathoms of it below the water. Men said, ‘A child is born.’ Angels said, and bowed their faces in adoration, ‘The Word has become flesh’. The eternal, self-communicating personality in the Godhead, passed voluntarily into the condition of humanity. Jesus was born, the Son of God came. Only when we hold fast by that great truth do we pierce to the centre of what was done in that poor stable, and possess the key to all the wonders of His life and death.

From the manger we pass to the mountain. A life begun by such a birth cannot be ended, as I have said, by a mere ordinary death. The Alpha and the Omega of that alphabet must belong to the same fount of type. A divine conformity forbids that He who was born of the Virgin Mary should have His body laid to rest in an undistinguished grave. And so what Bethlehem began, Olivet carries on.

Note the circumstances of this second of these great moments. The place is significant. Almost within sight of the city, a stone’s throw probably from the home where He had lodged, and where He had conquered death in the person of Lazarus; not far from the turn of the road where the tears had come into His eyes amidst the shouting of the rustic procession, as He had looked across the valley; just above Gethsemane, where He had agonised on that bare hillside to which He had often gone for communion with the Father in heaven. There, in some dimple of the hill, and unseen but by the little group that surrounded Him, He passed from their midst. The manner of the departure is yet more significant than the place. Here were no whirlwind, no chariots and horses of fire, no sudden rapture; but, as the narrative makes emphatic, a slow, leisurely, self-originated floating upwards. He was borne up from them, and no outward vehicle or help was needed; but by His own volition and power He rose towards the heavens.

‘And a cloud received Him out of their sight’-the Shechinah cloud, the bright symbol of the Divine Presence which had shone round the shepherds on the pastures of Bethlehem, and enwrapped Him and the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. It came not to lift Him on its soft folds to the heavens, but in order that, first, He might be plainly seen till the moment that He ceased to be seen, and might not dwindle into a speck by reason of distance; and secondly, that it might teach the truth, that, as His body was received into the cloud, so He entered into the glory which He ‘had with the Father before the world was.’ Such was the second of these moments.

The third great moment corresponds to these, is required by them, and crowns them. The Ascension was not only the close of Christ’s earthly life which would preserve congruity with its beginning, but it was also the clear manifestation that, as He came of His own will, so He departed by His own volition. ‘I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go unto the Father.’ Thus the earthly life is, as it were, islanded in a sea of glory, and that which stretches away beyond the last moment of visibility, is like that which stretched away beyond the first moment of corporeity; the eternal union with the eternal Father. But such an entrance on and departure from earth, and such a career on earth, can only end in that coming again of which the angels spoke to the gazing eleven.

Mark the emphasis of their words. ‘This same Jesus,’ the same in His manhood, ‘shall so come, in like manner, as ye have seen Him go.’ How much the ‘in like manner’ may mean we can scarcely dogmatically affirm. But this, at least, is clear, that it cannot mean less than corporeally visible, locally surrounded by angel-guards, and perhaps, according to a mysterious prophecy, to the same spot from which He ascended. But, at all events, there are the three moments in the manifestation of the Son of God.

II. Look, in the second place, at the threefold phases of our Lord’s activity which are thus suggested.

I need not dwell, in more than a sentence or two, on the first of these. Each of these three moments is the inauguration of a form of activity which lasts till the emergence of the next of the triad.

The birth at Bethlehem had, for its consequence and purpose, a threefold end: the revelation of God in humanity, the manifestation of perfect manhood to men, and the rendering of the great sacrifice for the sins of the world. These three-showing us God; showing ourselves as we are and as we may be; as we ought to be, and, blessed be His name, as we shall be, if we observe the conditions; and the making reconciliation for the sins of the whole world-these are the things for which the Babe lying in the manger was born and came under the limitations of humanity.

Turn to the second of the three, and what shall we say of it? That Ascension has for its great purpose the application to men of the results of the Incarnation. He was born that He might show us God and ourselves, and that He might die for us. He ascended up on high in order that the benefits of that Revelation and Atonement might be extended through, and appropriated by, the whole world.

One chief thought which is enforced by the narrative of the Ascension is the permanence, the eternity of the humanity of Jesus Christ. He ascended up where He was before, but He who ascended is not altogether the same as He who had been there before, for He has taken up with Him our nature to the centre of the universe and the throne of God, and there, ‘bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh,’ a true man in body, soul, and spirit, He lives and reigns. The cradle at Bethlehem assumes even greater solemnity when we think of it as the beginning of a humanity that is never laid aside. So we can look confidently to all that blaze of light where He sits, and feel that, howsoever the body of His humiliation may have been changed into the body of His glory, He still remains corporeally and spiritually a true Son of man. Thus the face that looks down from amidst the blaze, though it be ‘as the sun shineth in his strength,’ is the old face; and the breast which is girded with the golden girdle is the same breast on which the seer had leaned his happy head; and the hand that holds the sceptre is the hand that was pierced with the nails; and the Christ that is ascended up on high is the Christ that loved and pitied adulteresses and publicans, and took the little child in His gracious arms-’The same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.’

Christ’s Ascension is as the broad seal of heaven attesting the completeness of His work on earth. It inaugurates His repose which is not the sign of His weariness, but of His having finished all which He was born to do. But that repose is not idleness. Rather it is full of activity.

On the Cross He shouted with a great voice ere He died, ‘It is finished.’ But centuries, perhaps millenniums, yet will have to elapse before the choirs of angels shall be able to chant, ‘It is done: the kingdoms of the world are the kingdoms of God and of His Christ.’ All the interval is filled by the working of that ascended Lord whose session at the right hand of God is not only symbolical of perfect repose and a completed sacrifice, but also of perfect activity in and with His servants.

He has gone-to rest, to reign, to work, to intercede, and to prepare a place for us. For if our Brother be indeed at the right hand of God, then our faltering feet may travel to the Throne, and our sinful selves may be at home there. The living Christ, working to-day, is that of which the Ascension from Olivet gives us the guarantee.

The third great moment will inaugurate yet another form of activity as necessary and certain as either of the two preceding. For if His cradle was what we believe it to have been, and if His sacrifice was what Scripture tells us it is, and if through all the ages He, crowned and regnant, is working for the diffusion of the powers of His Cross and the benefits of His Incarnation, there can be no end to that course except the one which is expressed for us by the angels’ message to the gazing disciples: He shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go. He will come to manifest Himself as the King of the world and its Lord and Redeemer. He will come to inaugurate the great act of Judgment, which His great act of Redemption necessarily draws after it, and Himself be the Arbiter of the fates of men, the determining factor in whose fates has been their relation to Him. No doubt many who never heard His name upon earth will, in that day be, by His clear eye and perfect judgment, discerned to have visited the sick and the imprisoned, and to have done many acts for His sake. And for us who know Him, and have heard His name, the way in which we stand affected in heart and will to Christ reveals and settles our whole character, shapes our whole being, and will determine our whole destiny. He comes, not only to manifest Himself so as that ‘every eye shall see Him,’ and to divide the sheep from the goats, but also in order that He may reign for ever and gather into the fellowship of His love and the community of His joys all who love and trust Him here. These are the triple phases of our Lord's activity suggested by the three great moments.

III. Lastly, notice the triple attitude which we should assume to Him and to them.

For the first, the cradle, with its consequence of the Cross, our response is clinging faith, grateful memory, earnest following, and close conformity. For the second, the Ascension, with its consequence of a Christ that lives and labours for us, and is with us, our attitude ought to be an intense realisation of the fact of His present working and of His present abode with us. The centre of Christian doctrine has, amongst average Christians, been far too exclusively fixed within the limits of the earthly life, and in the interests of a true and comprehensive grasp of all the blessedness that Christianity is capable of bringing to men, I would protest against that type of thought, earnest and true as it may be within its narrow limits, which is always pointing men to the past fact of a Cross, and slurs over and obscures the present fact of a living Christ who is with us, and in us. One difference between Him and all other benefactors and teachers and helpers is this, that, as ages go on, thicker and ever-thickening folds of misty oblivion wrap them, and their influence diminishes as new circumstances emerge, but this Christ's power laughs at the centuries, and is untinged by oblivion, and is never out of date. For all others we have to say-'having served his generation,' or a generation or two more, 'according to the will of God, he fell on sleep.' But Christ knows no corruption, and is for ever more the Leader, and the Companion, and the Friend, of each new age.

Brethren! the Cross is incomplete without the throne. We are told to go back to the historical Christ. Yes, Amen, I say! But do not let that make us lose our grasp of the living Christ who is with us to-day. Whilst we rejoice over the 'Christ that died,' let us go on with Paul to say, 'Yea! rather, that is risen again, and is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.'

For that future, discredited as the thought of the second corporeal coming of the Lord Jesus in visible fashion and to a locality has been by the fancies and the vagaries of so-called Apocalyptic expositors, let us not forget that it is the hope of Christ's Church, and that 'they who love His appearing' is, by the Apostle, used as the description and definition of the Christian character. We have to look forwards as well as backwards and upwards, and to rejoice in the sure and certain confidence that the Christ who has come is the Christ who will come.

For us the past should be full of Him, and memory and faith should cling to His Incarnation and His Cross. The present should be full of Him, and our hearts should commune with Him amidst the toils of earth. The future should be full of Him, and our hopes should be based upon no vague anticipations of a perfectibility of humanity, nor upon any dim dreams of what may lie beyond the grave; but upon the concrete fact that Jesus Christ has risen, and that Jesus Christ is glorified. Does my faith grasp the Christ that was-who died for me? Does my heart cling to the Christ who is-who lives and reigns, and with whom my life is hid in God? Do my hopes crystallise round, and anchor upon, the Christ that is to come, and pierce the dimness of the future and the gloom of the grave, looking onwards to that day of days when He, who is our life, shall appear, and we shall appear also with Him in glory?

10)Luke 2:17-20

Luke

SHEPHERDS AND ANGELS

Luk. 2:8 - Luk. 2:20.

The central portion of this passage is, of course, the angels' message and song, the former of which proclaims the transcendent fact of the Incarnation, and the latter hymns its blessed results. But, subsidiary to these, the silent vision which preceded them and the visit to Bethlehem which followed are to be noted. Taken together, they cast varying gleams on the great fact of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Why should there be a miraculous announcement at all, and why should it be to these shepherds? It seems to have had no effect beyond a narrow circle and for a time. It was apparently utterly forgotten when, thirty years after, the carpenter’s Son began His ministry. Could such an event have passed from memory, and left no ripple on the surface? Does not the resultlessness cast suspicion on the truthfulness of the narrative? Not if we duly give weight to the few who knew of the wonder; to the length of time that elapsed, during which the shepherds and their auditors probably died; to their humble position, and to the short remembrance of extraordinary events which have no immediate consequences. Joseph and Mary were strangers in Bethlehem. Christ never visited it, so far as we know. The fading of the impression cannot be called strange, for it accords with natural tendencies; but the record of so great an event, which was entirely ineffectual as regards future acceptance of Christ’s claims, is so unlike legend that it vouches for the truth of the narrative. An apparent stumbling-block is left, because the story is true.

Why then, the announcement at all, since it was of so little use? Because it was of some; but still more, because it was fitting that such angel voices should attend such an event, whether men gave heed to them or not; and because, recorded, their song has helped a world to understand the nature and meaning of that birth. The glory died off the hillside quickly, and the music of the song scarcely lingered longer in the ears of its first hearers; but its notes echo still in all lands, and every generation turns to them with wonder and hope.

The selection of two or three peasants as receivers of the message, the time at which it was given, and the place, are all significant. It was no unmeaning fact that the ‘glory of the Lord’ shone lambent round the shepherds, and held them and the angel standing beside them in its circle of light. No longer within the secret shrine, but out in the open field, the symbol of the Divine Presence glowed through the darkness; for that birth hallowed common life, and brought the glory of God into familiar intercourse with its secularities and smallnesses. The appearance to these humble men as they ‘sat simply chatting in a rustic row ‘symbolised the destination of the Gospel for all ranks and classes.

The angel speaks by the side of the shepherds, not from above. His gentle encouragement ‘Fear not!’ not only soothes their present terror, but has a wider meaning. The dread of the Unseen, which lies coiled like a sleeping snake in all hearts, is utterly taken away by the Incarnation. All messages from that realm are thenceforward ‘tidings of great joy,’ and love and desire may pass into it, as all men shall one day pass, and both enterings may be peaceful and confident. Nothing harmful can come out of the darkness, from which Jesus has come, into which He has passed, and which He fills.

The great announcement, the mightiest, most wonderful word that had ever passed angels’ immortal lips, is characterised as ‘great joy’ to ‘all the people,’ in which designation two things are to be noted-the nature and the limitation of the message. In how many ways the Incarnation was to be the fountain of purest gladness was but little discerned, either by the heavenly messenger or the shepherds. The ages since have been partially learning it, but not till the ‘glorified joy’ of heaven swells redeemed hearts will all its sorrow-dispelling power be experimentally known. Base joys may be basely sought, but His creatures’ gladness is dear to God, and if sought in God’s way, is a worthy object of their efforts.

The world-wide sweep of the Incarnation does not appear here, but only its first destination for Israel. This is manifest in the phrase ‘all the people,’ in the mention of ‘the city of David’ and in the emphatic ‘you,’ in contradistinction both from the messenger, who announced what he did not share, and Gentiles, to whom the blessing was not to pass till Israel had determined its attitude to it.

The titles of the Infant tell something of the wonder of the birth, but do not unfold its overwhelming mystery. Magnificent as they are, they fall far short of ‘The Word was made flesh.’ They keep within the circle of Jewish expectation, and announce that the hopes of centuries are fulfilled. There is something very grand in the accumulation of titles, each greater than the preceding, and all culminating in that final ‘Lord.’ Handel has gloriously given the spirit of it in the crash of triumph with which that last word is pealed out in his oratorio. ‘Saviour’ means far more than the shepherds knew; for it declares the Child to be the deliverer from all evil, both of sin and sorrow, and the endower with all good, both of righteousness and blessedness. The ‘Christ’ claims that He is the fulfiller of prophecy, perfectly endowed by divine anointing for His office of prophet, priest, and king-the consummate flower of ancient revelation, greater than Moses the law-giver, than Solomon the king, than Jonah the prophet. ‘The Lord’ is scarcely to be taken as the ascription of divinity, but rather as a prophecy of authority and dominion, implying reverence, but not unveiling the deepest secret of the entrance of the divine Son into humanity. That remained unrevealed, for the time was not yet ripe.

There would be few children of a day old in a little place like Bethlehem, and none but one lying in a manger. The fact of the birth, which could be verified by sight, would confirm the message in its outward aspect, and thereby lead to belief in the angel’s disclosure of its inward character. The ‘sign’ attested the veracity of the messenger, and therefore the truth of all his word-both of that part of it capable of verification by sight and that part apprehensible by faith.

No wonder that the sudden light and music of the multitude of the heavenly host’ flashed and echoed round the group on the hillside. The true picture is not given when we think of that angel choir as floating in heaven. They stood in their serried ranks round the shepherds and their fellows on the solid earth, and ‘the night was filled with music,’ not from overhead, but from every side. Crowding forms became all at once visible within the encircling ‘glory,’ on every face wondering gladness and eager sympathy with men, from every lip praise. Angels can speak with the tongues of men when their theme is their Lord become man, and their auditors are men. They hymn the blessed results of that birth, the mystery of which they knew more completely than they were yet allowed to tell.

As was natural for them, their praise is first evoked by the result of the Incarnation in the highest heavens. It will bring ‘glory to God’ there; for by it new aspects of His nature are revealed to those clear-eyed and immortal spirits who for unnumbered ages have known His power, His holiness, His benignity to unfallen creatures, but now experience the wonder which more properly belongs to more limited intelligences, when they behold that depth of condescending Love stooping to be born. Even they think more loftily of God, and more of man’s possibilities and worth, when they cluster round the manger, and see who lies there.

‘On earth peace.’ The song drops from the contemplation of the heavenly consequences to celebrate the results on earth, and gathers them all into one pregnant word, ‘Peace.’ What a scene of strife, discord, and unrest earth must seem to those calm spirits! And how vain and petty the struggles must look, like the bustle of an ant-hill! Christ’s work is to bring peace into all human relations, those with God, with men, with circumstances, and to calm the discords of souls at war with themselves. Every one of these relations is marred by sin, and nothing less thorough than a power which removes it can rectify them. That birth was the coming into humanity of Him who brings peace with God, with ourselves, with one another. Shame on Christendom that nineteen centuries have passed, and men yet think the cessation of war is only a ‘pious imagination’! The ringing music of that angel chant has died away, but its promise abides.

The symmetry of the song is best preserved, as I humbly venture to think, by the old reading as in the Authorised Version. The other, represented by the Revised Version, seems to make the second clause drag somewhat, with two designations of the region of peace. The Incarnation brings God’s ‘good will’ to dwell among men. In Christ, God is well pleased; and from Him incarnate, streams of divine complacent love pour out to freshen and fertilise the earth.

The disappearance of the heavenly choristers does not seem to have been so sudden as their appearance. They ‘went away from them into heaven,’ as if leisurely, and so that their ascending brightness was long visible as they rose, and attestation was thereby given to the reality of the vision. The sleeping village was close by, and as soon as the last gleam of the departing light had faded in the depths of heaven, the shepherds went ‘with haste,’ untimely as was the hour. They would not have much difficulty in finding the inn and the manger. Note that they do not tell their story till the sight has confirmed the angel message. Their silence was not from doubt; for they say, before they had seen the child, that ‘this thing’ is ‘come to pass,’ and are quite sure that the Lord has told it them. But they wait for the evidence which shall assure others of their truthfulness.

There are three attitudes of mind towards God’s revelation set forth in living examples in the closing verses of the passage. Note the conduct of the shepherds, as a type of the natural impulse and imperative duty of all possessors of God’s truth. Such a story as they had to tell would burn its way to utterance in the most reticent and shyest. But have Christians a less wonderful message to deliver, or a less needful one? If the spectators of the cradle could not be silent, how impossible it ought to be for the witnesses of the Cross to lock their lips!

The hearers of the story did what, alas! too many of us do with the Gospel. ‘They wondered,’ and stopped there. A feeble ripple of astonishment ruffled the surface of their souls for a moment; but like the streaks on the sea made by a catspaw of wind, it soon died out, and the depths were unaffected by it.

The antithesis to this barren wonder is the beautiful picture of the Virgin’s demeanour. She ‘kept all these sayings, and pondered them in her heart.’ What deep thoughts the mother of the Lord had, were hers alone. But we have the same duty to the truth, and it will never disclose its inmost sweetness to us, nor take so sovereign a grip of our very selves as to mould our lives, unless we too treasure it in our hearts, and by patient brooding on it understand its hidden harmonies, and spread our souls out to receive its transforming power. A non-meditative religion is a shallow religion. But if we hide His word in our hearts, and often in secret draw out our treasure to count and weigh it, we shall be able to speak out of a full heart, and like these shepherds, to rejoice that we have seen even as it was spoken unto us.

11)Luke 2:29-30

Luke

SIMEON’S SWAN-SONG

Luk. 2:29 - Luk. 2:30.

That scene, when the old man took the Infant in his withered arms, is one of the most picturesque and striking in the Gospel narrative. Simeon’s whole life appears, in its later years, to have been under the immediate direction of the Spirit of God. It is very remarkable to notice how, in the course of three consecutive verses, the operation of that divine Spirit upon him is noted. ‘It was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.’ ‘And he came by the Spirit into the Temple.’ I suppose that means that some inward monition, which he recognised to be of God, sent him there, in the expectation that at last he was to ‘see the Lord’s Christ.’ He was there before the Child was brought by His parents, for we read ‘He came by the Spirit into the Temple, and when the parents brought in the Child Jesus . . . he took Him in his arms.’ Think of the old man, waiting there in the Sanctuary, told by God that he was thus about to have the fulfilment of his life-long desire, and yet probably not knowing what kind of a shape the fulfilment would take. There is no reason to believe that he knew he was to see an infant; and he waits. And presently a peasant woman comes in with a child in her arms, and there arises in his soul the voice ‘Anoint Him! for this is He!’ And so, whether he expected such a vision or no, he takes the Child in his arms, and says, ‘Lord! Now, now !-after all these years of waiting-lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace.’

Now, it seems to me that there are two or three very interesting thoughts deducible from this incident, and from these words. I take three of them. Here we have the Old recognising and embracing the New; the slave recognising and submitting to his Owner; and the saint recognising and welcoming the approach of death.

I. The Old recognising and embracing the New.

It is striking to observe how the description of Simeon’s character expresses the aim of the whole Old Testament Revelation. All that was meant by the preceding long series of manifestations through all these years was accomplished in this man. For hearken how he is described-’just and devout,’ that is the perfection of moral character, stated in the terms of the Old Testament; ‘waiting for the Consolation of Israel,’ that is the ideal attitude which the whole of the gradual manifestation of God’s increasing purpose running through the ages was intended to make the attitude of every true Israelite-an expectant, eager look forwards, and in the present, the discharge of all duties to God and man. ‘And the Holy Ghost was upon him’; that, too, in a measure, was the ultimate aim of the whole Revelation of Israel. So this man stands as a bright, consummate flower which had at last effloresced from the roots; and in his own person, an embodiment of the very results which God had patiently sought through millenniums of providential dealing and inspiration. Therefore in this man's arms was laid the Christ for whom he had so long been waiting.

And he exhibits, still further, what God intended to secure by the whole previous processes of Revelation, in that he recognises that they were transcended and done with, that all that they pointed to was accomplished when a devout Israelite took into his arms the Incarnate Messiah, that all the past had now answered its purpose, and like the scaffolding when the top stone of a building is brought forth with shouting, might be swept away and the world be none the poorer. And so he rejoices in the Christ that he receives, and sings the swan-song of the departing Israel, the Israel according to the Spirit. And that is what Judaism was meant to do, and how it was meant to end, in an *euthanasia*, in a passing into the nobler form of the Christian Church and the Christian citizenship.

I do not need to remind you how terribly unlike this ideal the reality was, but I may, though only in a sentence or two, point out that that relation of the New to the Old is one that recurs, though in lees sharp and decisive forms, in every generation, and in our generation in a very special manner. It is well for the New when it consents to be taken in the arms of the Old, and it is ill for the Old when, instead of welcoming, it frowns upon the New, and instead of playing the part of Simeon, and embracing and blessing the Infant, plays the part of a Herod, and seeks to destroy the Child that seems to threaten its sovereignty. We old people who are conservative, if not by nature, by years, and you young people who are revolutionary and innovating by reason of your youth, may both find a lesson in that picture in the Temple, of Simeon with the Infant Christ in his arms.

II. Further, we have here the slave recognising and submitting to his Owner.

Now the word which is here employed for 'Lord' is one that very seldom occurs in the New Testament in reference to God; only some four or five times in all. And it is the harshest and hardest word that can be picked out. If you clip the Greek termination off it, it is the English word 'despot,' and it conveys all that that word conveys to us, not only a lord in the sense of a constitutional monarch, not only a lord in the polite sense of a superior in dignity, but a despot in the sense of being the absolute owner of a man who has no rights against the owner, and is a slave. For the word ‘slave’ is what logicians call the correlative of this word ‘despot,’ and as the latter asserts absolute ownership and authority, the former declares abject submission. So Simeon takes these two words to express his relation and feeling towards God. ‘Thou art the Owner, the Despot, and I am Thy slave.’ That relation of owner and slave, wicked as it is, when subsisting between two men-an atrocious crime, ‘the sum of all villainies,’ as the good old English emancipators used to call it-is the sum of all blessings when regarded as existing between man and God. For what does it imply? The right to command and the duty to obey, the sovereign will that is supreme over all, and the blessed attitude of yielding up one’s will wholly, without reserve, without reluctance, to that infinitely mighty, and-blessed be God!-infinitely loving Will Absolute authority calls for abject submission.

And again, the despot has the unquestioned right of life and death over his slave, and if he chooses, can smite him down where he stands, and no man have a word to say. Thus, absolutely, we hang upon God, and because He has the power of life and death, every moment of our lives is a gift from His hands, and we should not subsist for an instant unless, by continual effluence from Him, and influx into us, of the life which flows from Him, the Fountain of life.

Again, the slave-owner has entire possession of all the slave’s possessions, and can take them and do what he likes with them. And so, all that I call mine is His. It was His before it became mine; it remains His whilst it is mine, because I am His, and so what seems to belong to me belongs to Him, no less truly. What, then, do you do with your possessions? Use them for yourselves? Dispute His ownership? Forget His claims? Grudge that He should take them away sometimes, and grudge still more to yield them to Him in daily obedience, and when necessary, surrender them? Is such a temper what becomes the slave? What reason has he to grumble if the master comes to him and says, ‘This little bit of ground that I have given you to grow a few sugar-canes and melons on, I am going to take back again.’ What reason have we to set up our puny wills against Him, if He exercises His authority over us and demands that we should regard ourselves not only as sons but also as slaves to whom the owner of it and us has given a talent to be used for Him?

Now, all that sounds very harsh, does it not? Let in one thought into it, and it all becomes very gracious. The Apostle Peter, who also once uses this word ‘despot,’ does so in a very remarkable connection. He speaks about men’s ‘denying the despot that bought them.’ Ah, Peter! you were getting on very thin ice when you talked about denial. Perhaps it was just because he remembered his sin in the judgment hall that he used that word to express the very utmost degree of degeneration and departure from Jesus. But be that as it may, he bases the slave-owner’s right on purchase. And Jesus Christ has bought us by His own precious blood; and so all that sounds harsh in the metaphor, worked out as I have been trying to do, changes its aspect when we think of the method by which He has acquired His rights and the purpose for which He exercises them. As the Psalmist said, ‘Oh, Lord! truly I am Thy slave. Thou hast loosed my bonds.’

III. So, lastly, we have here the saint recognising and welcoming the approach of death.

Now, it is a very singular thing, but I suppose it is true, that somehow or other, most people read these words, ‘Lord! now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace,’ as being a petition; ‘Lord! now *let* Thy servant depart.’ But they are not that at all. We have here not a petition or an aspiration, but a statement of the fact that Simeon recognises the appointed token that his days were drawing to an end, and it is the glad recognition of that fact. ‘Lord! I see now that the time has come when I may put aside all this coil of weary waiting and burdened mortality, and go to rest.’ Look how he regards approaching death. ‘Thou lettest Thy servant depart’ is but a feeble translation of the original, which is better given in the version that has become very familiar to us all by its use in a musical service, the *Nunc Dimittis*; ‘Now Thou *dost send away*’ It is the technical word for relieving a sentry from his post. It conveys the idea of the hour having come when the slave who has been on the watch through all the long, weary night, or toiling through all the hot, dusty day, may extinguish his lantern, or fling down his mattock, and go home to his little hut. ‘Lord! Thou dost dismiss me now, and I take the dismission as the end of the long watch, as the end of the long toil.’

But notice, still further, how Simeon not only recognises, but welcomes the approach of death. ‘Thou lettest Thy servant depart in peace.’ Yes, there speaks a calm voice tranquilly accepting the permission. He feels no agitation, no fluster of any kind, but quietly slips away from his post. And the reason for that peaceful welcome of the end is ‘for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.’ That sight is the reason, first of all, for his being sure that the curfew had rung for him, and that the day’s work was done. But it is also the reason for the peacefulness of his departure. He went ‘in peace,’ because of what? Because the weary, blurred, old eyes had seen all that any man needs to see to be satisfied and blessed. Life could yield nothing more, though its length were doubled to this old man, than the sight of God’s salvation.

Can it yield anything more to us, brethren? And may we not say, if we have seen that sight, what an unbelieving author said, with a touch of self-complacency not admirable, ‘I have warmed both hands at the fire of life, and I am ready to depart.’ We may go in peace, if our eyes have seen Him who satisfies our vision, whose bright presence will go with us into the darkness, and whom we shall see more perfectly when we have passed from the sentry-box to the home above, and have ceased to be slaves in the far-off plantation, and are taken to be sons in the Father’s house. ‘Thou lettest Thy servant depart in peace.’

12)Luke 2:49

Luke

THE BOY IN THE TEMPLE

Luk. 2:49.

A number of spurious gospels have come down to us, which are full of stories, most of them absurd and some of them worse, about the infancy of Jesus Christ. Their puerilities bring out more distinctly the simplicity, the nobleness, the worthiness of this one solitary incident of His early days, which has been preserved for us. How has it been preserved? If you will look over the narratives there will be very little difficulty, I think, in answering that question. Observing the prominence that is given to the parents, and how the story enlarges upon what they thought and felt, we shall not have much doubt in accepting the hypothesis that it was none other than Mary from whom Luke received such intimate details. Notice, for instance, 'Joseph and His mother knew not of it.' 'They supposed Him to have been in the company.' 'And when they,' *i.e.* Joseph and Mary, 'saw Him, they were astonished'; and then that final touch, 'He was subject to them,' as if His mother would not have Luke or us think that this one act of independence meant that He had shaken off parental authority. And is it not a mother's voice that says, 'His mother kept all these things in her heart,' and pondered all the traits of boyhood? Now it seems to me that, in these words of the twelve-year-old boy, there are two or three points full of interest and of teaching for us. There is-

I. That consciousness of Sonship.

I am not going to plunge into a subject on which certainly a great deal has been very confidently affirmed, and about which the less is dogmatised by us, who must know next to nothing about it, the better; viz. the inter-connection of the human and the divine elements in the person of Jesus Christ. But the context leads us straight to this thought-that there was in Jesus distinct growth in wisdom as well as in stature, and in favour with God and man. And now, suppose the peasant boy brought up to Jerusalem, seeing it for the first time, and for the first time entering the sacred courts of the Temple. Remember, that to a Jewish boy, his reaching the age of twelve made an epoch, because he then became 'a son of the Law,' and took upon himself the religious responsibilities which had hitherto devolved upon his parents. If we will take that into account, and remember that it was a true manhood which was growing up in the boy Jesus, then we shall not feel it to be irreverent if we venture to say, not that here and then, there began His consciousness of His Divine Sonship, but that that visit made an epoch and a stage in the development of that consciousness, just because it furthered the growth of His manhood.

Further, our Lord in these words, in the gentlest possible way, and yet most decisively, does what He did in all His intercourse with Mary, so far as it is recorded for us in Scripture-relegated her back within limits beyond which she tended to advance. For she said, ‘Thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing,’ no doubt thus preserving what had been the usual form of speech in the household for all the previous years; and there is an emphasis that would fall upon her heart, as it fell upon none other, when He answered: ‘Wist ye not that I must be about My Father’s business?’ We are not warranted in affirming that the Child meant all which the Man afterwards meant by the claim to be the Son of God; nor are we any more warranted in denying that He did. We know too little about the mysteries of His growth to venture on definite statements of either kind. Our sounding-lines are not long enough to touch bottom in this great word from the lips of a boy of twelve; but this is clear, that as He grew into self-consciousness, there came with it the growing consciousness of His Sonship to His Father in heaven.

Now, dear brethren, whilst all that is unique, and parts Him off from us, do not let us forget that that same sense of Sonship and Fatherhood must be the very deepest thing in us, if we are Christian people after Christ’s pattern. We, too, can be sons through Him, and only through Him. I believe with all my heart in what we hear so much about now-’the universal Fatherhood of God.’ But I believe that there is also a special relation of Fatherhood and Sonship, which is constituted only, according to Scripture teaching in my apprehension, through faith in Jesus Christ, and the reception of His life as a supernatural life into our souls. God is Father of all men-thank God for it! And that means, that He gives life to all men; that in a very deep and precious sense the life which He gives to every man is not only derived from, but is kindred with, His own; and it means that His love reaches to all men, and that His authority extends over them. But there is an inner sanctuary, there is a better life than the life of nature, and the Fatherhood into which Christ introduces us means, that through faith in Him, and the entrance into our spirits of the Spirit of adoption, we receive a life derived from, and kindred with, the life of the Giver, and that we are bound to Him not only by the cords of love, but to obey the parental authority. Sonship is the deepest thought about the Christian life.

It was an entirely new thought when Jesus spoke to His disciples of their Father in heaven. It was a thrilling novelty when Paul bade servile worshippers realise that they were no longer slaves, but sons, and as such, heirs of God. It was the rapture of pointing to a new star flaming out, as it were, that swelled in John's exclamation: 'Beloved, now are we the sons of God!' For even though in the Old Testament there are a few occasional references to Israel's King or to Israel itself as being 'God's son,' as far as I remember, there is only one reference in all the Old Testament to parental love towards each of us on the part of God, and that is the great saying in the Psa. 103:13 : 'Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him.' For the most part the idea connected in the Old Testament with the Fatherhood of God is authority: 'If I be a Father, where is Mine honour?' says the last of the prophets. But when we pass into the New, on the very threshold, here we get the germ, in these words, of the blessed thought that, as His disciples, we, too, may claim sonship to God through Him, and penetrate beyond the awe of Divine Majesty into the love of our Father God. Brethren, notwithstanding all that was unique in the Sonship of Jesus Christ, He welcomes us to a place beside Himself, and if we are the children of God by faith in Him, then are we 'heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.'

Now the second thought that I would suggest from these words is-

II. The sweet 'must' of filial duty.

'How is it that ye sought Me?' That means: 'Did you not know where I should be sure to be? What need was there to go up and down Jerusalem looking for Me? You might have known there was only one place where you would find Me. Wist ye not that I *must* be about My Father's business?' Now, the last words of this question are in the Greek literally, as the margin of the Revised Version tells us, 'in the things of My Father'; and that idiomatic form of speech may either be taken to mean, as the Authorised Version does, 'about My Father's business,' or, with the Revised Version, 'in My Father's house.' The latter seems the rendering most relevant in this connection, where the folly of seeking is emphasised-the certainty of His place is more to the point than that of His occupation. But the locality carried the occupation with it, for why must He be in the Father's house but to be about the Father's business, 'to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His Temple'?

Do people know where to find us? Is it unnecessary to go hunting for us? Is there a place where it is certain that we shall be? It was so with this child Jesus, and it should be so with all of us who profess to be His followers.

All through Christ's life there runs, and occasionally there comes into utterance, that sense of a divine necessity laid upon Him; and here is its beginning, the very first time that the word occurs on His lips, 'I must.' There is as divine and as real a necessity shaping our lives because it lies upon and moulds our wills, if we have the child's heart, and stand in the child's position. In Jesus Christ the 'must' was not an external one, but He 'must be about His Father's business,' because His whole inclination and will were submitted to the Father's authority. And that is what will make any life sweet, calm, noble. 'The love of Christ constraineth us.' There is a necessity which presses upon men like iron fetters; there is a necessity which wells up within a man as a fountain of life, and does not so much drive as sweetly incline the will, so that it is impossible for him to be other than a loving, obedient child.

Dear friend, have we felt the joyful grip of that necessity? Is it impossible for me not to be doing God's will? Do I feel myself laid hold of by a strong, loving hand that propels me, not unwillingly, along the path? Does inclination coincide with obligation? If it does, then no words can tell the freedom, the enlargement, the calmness, the deep blessedness of such a life. But when these pull in two different ways, as, alas! they often do, and I have to say, 'I must be about my Father's business, and I had rather be about my own if I durst,' which is the condition of a great many so-called Christian people-then the necessity is miserable; and slavery, not freedom, is the characteristic of such Christianity. And there is a great deal of such to-day.

And now one last word. On this sweet 'must,' and blessed compulsion to be about the Father's business, there follows:

III. The meek acceptance of the lowliest duties.

'He went down to Nazareth, and was subject to them.' That is all that is told us about eighteen years, by far the largest part of the earthly life of Christ. Legend comes in, and for once not inappropriately, and tells us, what is probably quite true, that during these years, Jesus worked in the carpenter’s shop, and as one story says, ‘made yokes,’ or as another tells, made light implements of husbandry for the peasants round Nazareth. Be that as it may, ‘He was subject unto them,’ and that was doing the Father’s will, and being ‘about the Father’s business,’ quite as much as when He was amongst the doctors, and learning by asking questions as well as by hearkening to their instructions. Everything depends on the motive. The commonest duty may be ‘the Father’s business,’ when we are doing manfully the work of daily life. Only we do not turn common duty into the Father’s business, unless we remember Him in the doing of it. But if we carry the hallowing and quickening influence of that great ‘must’ into all the pettinesses, and paltrinesses, and wearinesses, and sorrows of our daily trivial lives, then we shall find, as Jesus Christ found, that the carpenter’s shop is as sacred as the courts of the Temple, and that to obey Mary was to do the will of the Father in heaven.

What a blessed transformation that would make of all lives! The psalmist long ago said: ‘One thing have I desired of the Lord, and that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.’ We may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives. We may be in one or other of the many mansions of the Father’s house where-ever we go, and may be doing the will of the Father in heaven in all that we do. Then we shall be at rest; then we shall be strong; then we shall be pure; then we shall have deep in our hearts the joyous consciousness, undisturbed by rebellious wills, that now ‘we are the sons of God,’ and the still more joyous hope, undimmed by doubts or mists, that ‘it doth not yet appear what we shall be’; but that wherever we go, it will be but passing from one room of the great home into another more glorious still. ‘I must be about my Father’s business’; let us make that the motto for earth, and He will say to us in His own good time ‘Come home from the field, and sit down beside Me in My house,’ and so we ‘shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.’

13)Luke 3:1-14

Luke

JOHN THE PREACHER OF REPENTANCE

Luk. 3:1 - Luk. 3:14.

Why does Luke enumerate so carefully the civil and ecclesiastical authorities in Luk. 3:1 - Luk. 3:2? Not only to fix the date, but, in accordance with the world-wide aspect of his Gospel, to set his narrative in relation with secular history; and, further, to focus into one vivid beam of light the various facts which witnessed to the sunken civil and darkened moral and religious condition of the Jews. What more needed to be said to prove how the ancient glory had faded, than that they were under the rule of such a delegate as Pilate, of such an emperor as Tiberius, and that the bad brood of Herod's descendants divided the sacred land between them, and that the very high-priesthood was illegally administered, so that such a pair as Annas and Caiaphas held it in some irregular fashion between them? It was clearly high time for John to come, and for the word of God to come to him.

The wilderness had nourished the stern, solitary spirit of the Baptist, and there the consciousness of his mission and his message 'came to him'-a phrase which at once declares his affinity with the old prophets. Out of the desert he burst on the nation, sudden as lightning, and cleaving like it. Luke says nothing as to his garb or food, but goes straight to the heart of his message, 'The baptism of repentance unto remission of sins,' in which expression the 'remission' depends neither on 'baptism' alone, nor on 'repentance' alone. The outward act was vain if unaccompanied by the state of mind and will; the state of mind was proved genuine by submitting to the act.

In Luk. 3:7 - Luk. 3:14 John's teaching as the preacher of repentance is summarised. Why did he meet the crowds that streamed out to him with such vehement rebuke? One would have expected him to welcome them, instead of calling them 'offspring of vipers,' and seeming to be unwilling that they should flee from the wrath to come. But Luke tells why. They wished to be baptized, but there is no word of their repentance. Rather, they were trusting to their descent as exempting them from the approaching storm, so that their baptism would not have been the baptism which John required, being devoid of repentance. Just because they thought themselves safe as being ‘children of Abraham,’ they deserved John’s rough name, ‘ye offspring of vipers.’

Rabbinical theology has much to say about ‘the merits of the fathers.’ John, like every prophet who had ever spoken to the nation of judgments impending, felt that the sharp edge of his words was turned by the obstinate belief that judgments were for the Gentile, and never would touch the Jew. Do we not see the same unbelief that God can ever visit England with national destruction in full force among ourselves? Not the virtues of past generations, but the righteousness of the present one, is the guarantee of national exaltation.

John’s crowds were eager to be baptized as an additional security, but were slow to repent. If heaven could be secured by submitting to a rite, ‘multitudes’ would come for it, but the crowd thins quickly when the administrator of the rite becomes the vehement preacher of repentance. That is so to-day as truly as it was so by the fords of Jordan. John demanded not only repentance, but its ‘fruits,’ for there is no virtue in a repentance which does not change the life, were such possible.

Repentance is more than sorrow for sin. Many a man has that, and yet rushes again into the old mire. To change the mind and will is not enough, unless the change is certified to be real by deeds corresponding. So John preached the true nature of repentance when he called for its fruits. And he preached the greatest motive for it which he knew, when he pressed home on sluggish consciences the close approach of a judgment for which everything was ready, the axe ground to a fine edge, and lying at the root of the trees. If it lay there, there was no time to lose; if it still lay, there was time to repent before it was swinging round the woodman’s head. We have a higher motive for repentance in ‘the goodness of God’ leading to it. But there is danger that modern Christianity should think too little of ‘the terror of the Lord,’ and so should throw away one of the strongest means of persuading men. John’s advice to the various classes of hearers illustrates the truth that the commonest field of duty and the homeliest acts may become sacred. Not high-flying, singular modes of life, abandoning the vulgar tasks, but the plainest prose of jog-trot duty will follow and attest real repentance. Every calling has its temptations-that is to say, every one has its opportunities of serving God by resisting the Devil.

14)Luke 3:15-22

Luke

JOHN’S WITNESS TO JESUS, AND GOD’S

Luk. 3:15 - Luk. 3:22.

This passage falls into three parts: John’s witness to the coming Messiah [Luk. 3:15 - Luk. 3:17]; John’s undaunted rebuke of sin in high places, and its penalty [Luk. 3:18 - Luk. 3:20]; and God’s witness to Jesus [Luk. 3:21 - Luk. 3:22].

I. Luke sharply parts off the Baptist’s work as a preacher of repentance and plain morality from his work as the herald who preceded the king.

The former is delineated in Luk. 3:7 - Luk. 3:14, and its effect was to set light to the always smouldering expectation of the Messiah. The people were ready to rally round him if he would say that he was the coming deliverer. It was a real temptation, but his unmoved humility, which lay side by side with his boldness, brushed it aside, and poured an effectual stream of cold water on the excitement. ‘John answered’ the popular questionings, of which he was fully aware, and his answer crushed them.

In less acute fashion, the same temptation comes to all who move the general conscience. Disciples always seek to hoist their teacher higher than is fitting. Adherence to him takes the place of obedience to his message, and, if he is a true man, he has to damp down misdirected enthusiasm.

Mark John’s clear apprehension of the limitations of his work. He baptized with water, the symbol and means of outward cleansing. He does not depreciate his position or the importance of his baptism, but his whole soul bows in reverence before the coming Messiah, whose great office was to transcend his, as the wide Mediterranean surpassed the little lake of Galilee. His outline of that work is grand, though incomplete. It is largely based upon Malachi’s closing prophecy, and the connection witnesses to John’s consciousness that he was the Elijah foretold there. He saw that the Messiah would surpass him in his special endowment. Strong as he was, that other was to be stronger. Probably he did not dream that that other was to wield the divine might, nor that His perfect strength was to be manifested in weakness, and to work its wonders by the might of gentle, self-sacrificing love. But, though he dimly saw, he perfectly adored. He felt himself unworthy [literally, insufficient] to be the slave who untied [or, according to Matthew, ‘bore’] his lord’s sandals. How beautiful is the lowliness of that strong nature! He stood erect in the face of priests and tetrarchs, and furious women, and the headsman with his sword, but he lay prostrate before his King.

Strength and royal authority were not all that he had to proclaim of Messiah. ‘He shall baptize you in the Holy Ghost and fire.’ We observe that the construction here is different from that in Luk. 3:16 [‘with water’], inasmuch as the preposition ‘in’ is inserted, which, though it is often used ‘instrumentaly,’ is here, therefore, more probably to be taken as meaning simply ‘in.’ The two nouns are coupled under one preposition, which suggests that they are fused together in the speaker’s mind as reality and symbol.

Fire is a frequently recurrent emblem of the Holy Spirit, both in the Old and New Testament. It is not the destructive, but the vitalising, glowing, transforming, energy of fire, which is expressed. The fervour of holy enthusiasm, the warmth of ardent love, the melting of hard hearts, the change of cold, damp material into its own ruddy likeness, are all set forth in this great symbol. John's water baptism was poor beside Messiah's immersion into that cleansing fire. Fire turns what it touches into kindred flame. The refiner's fire melts metal, and the scum carries away impurities. Water washes the surface, fire pierces to the centre.

But while that cleansing by the Spirit's fire was to be Messiah's primary office, man's freedom to accept or reject such blessing necessarily made His work selective, even while its destination was universal. So John saw that His coming would part men into two classes, according as they submitted to His baptism of fire or not. The homely image of the threshing-floor, on some exposed, windy height, carries a solemn truth. The Lord of the harvest has an instrument in His hand, which sets up a current of air, and the wheat falls in one heap, while the husks are blown farther, and lie at the edge of the floor. Mark the majestic emphasis on the Christ's ownership in the two phrases, '*His* floor' and '*His* garner.'

Notice, too, the fact which determines whether a man is chaff or wheat-namely, his yielding to or rejecting the fiery baptism which Christ offers. Ponder that awful emblem of an empty, rootless, fruitless, worthless life, which John caught up from Psa. 1:1 - Psa. 1:6 Thankfully think of the care and safe keeping and calm repose shadowed in that picture of the wheat stored in the garner after the separating act. And let us lay on awed hearts the terrible doom of the chaff. There are two fires, to one or other of which we must be delivered. Either we shall gladly accept the purging fire of the Spirit which burns sin out of us, or we shall have to meet the punitive fire which burns up us and our sins together. To be cleansed by the one or to be consumed by the other is the choice before each of us.

II. Luk. 3:18 - Luk. 3:20 show John as the preacher and martyr of righteousness.

Luke tells his fate out of its proper place, in order to finish with him, and, as it were, clear the stage for Jesus. Similarly the Baptist's desert life is told by anticipation in Luk. 1:80. That treatment of his story marks his subordination. His martyrdom is not narrated by Luke, though he knew of it [Luk. 9:7 - Luk. 9:9], and this brief summary is all that is said of his heroic vehemence of rebuke to sin in high places, and of his suffering for righteousness’ sake. John’s message had two sides to it, as every gospel of God’s has. To the people he spoke good tidings and exhortations; to lordly sinners he pealed out stern rebukes.

It needs some courage to tell a prince to his face that he is foul with corruption, and, still more, to put a finger on his actual sins. But he is no prophet who does not lift up his voice like a trumpet, and speak to hardened consciences. King Demos is quite as impatient of close dealing with his immorality as Herod was. London and New York get as angry with the Christian men who fight against their lust and drunkenness as ever he did, and would not be sorry if they could silence these persistent ‘fanatics’ as conveniently as he could. The need for courage like John’s, and plain speech like his, is not past yet. The ‘good tidings’ has rebuke as part of its substance. The sword is two-edged.

III. The narrative now turns to Jesus, and does not even name John as having baptized Him.

The peculiarities of Luke’s account of the baptism are instructive. He omits the conversation between Jesus and John, and the fact of John’s seeing the dove and hearing the voice. Like Mark, he makes the divine voice speak directly to Jesus, whereas Matthew represents it as spoken *concerning* Him. The baptism itself is disposed of in an incidental clause [*having been baptized*]. The general result of these characteristics is that this account lays emphasis on the bearing of the divine witness as borne to Jesus Himself. It does not deny, but simply ignores, its aspect as a witness borne to John.

Another striking point is Luke’s mention of Christ’s prayer, which is thus represented as answered by the opened heavens, the descending dove, and the attesting voice. We owe most of our knowledge of Christ’s prayers to this Evangelist, whose mission was to tell of the Son of man. Mysteries beyond our plummets are contained in this story; but however unique it is, it has this which may be reproduced, that prayer unveiled heaven, and brought down the dove to abide on the bowed head, and the divine attestation of sonship to fill the waiting heart.

We need not dwell on the beautiful significance of the emblem of the dove. It symbolised both the nature of that gracious, gentle Spirit, and the perpetuity and completeness of its abode on Jesus. Others receive portions of that celestial fullness, but itself, as if embodied in visible form, settled down on Him, and, with meekly folded wings, tarried there unscared. ‘God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto Him.’

Our Evangelist does not venture into the deep waters, nor attempt to tell what was the relation between the Incarnate Word, as it dwelt in Jesus before that descent, and the Spirit which came upon Him. We shall be wise if we refrain from speculating on such points, and content ourselves with knowing that there has been one manhood capable of receiving and retaining uninterruptedly the whole Spirit of God; and that He will fill us with the Spirit which dwelt in Him, in measure and manner corresponding to our need and our faith.

The heavenly voice spoke to the heart of the man Jesus. What was His need of it, and what were its effects on Him, we do not presume to affirm. But probably it originated an increased certitude of the consciousness which dawned, in His answer to Mary, of His unique divine sonship. To us it declares that He stands in an altogether unexampled relation of kindred to the Father, and that His whole nature and acts are the objects of God’s complacency. But He has nothing for Himself alone, and in Him we may become God’s beloved sons, well pleasing to the Father.

15)Luke 4:1-13

Luke

THE TEMPTATION

Luk. 4:1 - Luk. 4:13.

If we adopt the Revised Version’s reading and rendering, the whole of the forty days in the desert were one long assault of Jesus by Satan, during which the consciousness of bodily needs was suspended by the intensity of spiritual conflict. Exhaustion followed this terrible tension, and the enemy chose that moment of physical weakness to bring up his strongest battalions. What a contrast these days made with the hour of the baptism! And yet both the opened heavens and the grim fight were needful parts of

Christ’s preparation. As true man, He could be truly tempted; as perfect man, suggestions of evil could not arise within, but must be presented from without. He must know our temptations if He is to help us in them, and He must ‘first bind the strong man’ if He is afterwards ‘to spoil his house.’ It is useless to discuss whether the tempter appeared in visible form, or carried Jesus from place to place. The presence and voice were real, though probably if any eye had looked on, nothing would have been seen but the solitary Jesus, sitting still in the wilderness.

I. The first temptation is that of the Son of man tempted to distrust God.

Long experience had taught the tempter that his most taking baits were those which appealed to the appetites and needs of the body, and so he tries these first. The run of men are drawn to sin by some form or other of these, and the hunger of Jesus laid Him open to their power-if not on the side of delights of sense, yet on the side of wants. The tempter quotes the divine voice at the baptism with almost a sneer, as if the hungry, fainting Man before him were a strange ‘Son of God.’ The suggestion sounds innocent enough; for there would have been no necessary harm in working a miracle to feed Himself. But its evil is betrayed by the words, ‘If Thou art the Son of God,’ and the answer of our Lord, which begins emphatically with ‘man,’ puts us on the right track to understand why He repelled the insidious proposal even while He was faint with hunger. To yield to it would have been to shake off for His own sake the human conditions which He had taken for our sakes, and to seek to cease to be Son of man in acting as Son of God. He takes no notice of the title given by Satan, but falls back on His brotherhood with man, and accepts the laws under which they live as His conditions.

The quotation from Deuteronomy, which Luke gives in a less complete form than Matthew, implies, even in that incomplete form, that bread is not the only means of keeping a man in life, but that God can feed Him, as He did Israel in its desert life, with manna; or, if manna fails, by the bare exercise of His divine will. Therefore Jesus will not use His power as Son of God, because to do so would at once take Him out of His fellowship with man, and would betray His distrust of God’s power to feed Him there in the desert. How soon His confidence was vindicated Matthew tells us. As soon as the devil departed from Him, ‘angels came and ministered unto Him.’ The soft rush of their wings brought solace to His spirit, wearied with struggle, and once again ‘man did eat angels’ food.’

This first temptation teaches us much. It makes the manhood of our Lord pathetically true, as showing Him bearing the prosaic but terrible pinch of hunger, carried almost to its fatal point. It teaches us how innocent and necessary wants may be the devil’s levers to overturn our souls. It warns us against severing ourselves from our fellows by the use of distinctive powers for our own behoof. It sets forth humble reliance on God’s sustaining will as best for us, even if we are in the desert, where, according to sense, we must starve; and it magnifies the Brother’s love, who for our sakes waived the prerogatives of the Son of God, that He might be the brother of the poor and needy.

II. The second temptation is that of the Messiah, tempted to grasp His dominion by false means.

The devil finds that he must try a subtler way. Foiled on the side of the physical nature, he begins to apprehend that he has to deal with One loftier than the mass of men; and so he brings out the glittering bait, which catches the more finely organised natures. Where sense fails, ambition may succeed. There is nothing said now about ‘Son of God.’ The relation of Jesus to God is not now the point of attack, but His hoped-for relation to the world. Did Satan actually transport the body of Jesus to some eminence? Probably not. It would not have made the vision of all the kingdoms any more natural if he had. The remarkable language ‘showed . . . all . . . in a moment of time’ describes a physical impossibility, and most likely is meant to indicate some sort of diabolic phantasmagoria, flashed before Christ’s consciousness, while His eyes were fixed on the silent, sandy waste.

There is much in Scripture that seems to bear out the boast that the kingdoms are at Satan’s disposal. But he is ‘the father of lies’ as well as the ‘prince of this world,’ and we may be very sure that his authority loses nothing in his telling. If we think how many thrones have been built on violence and sustained by crime, how seldom in the world’s history the right has been uppermost, and how little of the fear of God goes to the organisation of society, even to-day, in so-called Christian countries, we shall be ready to feel that in this boast the devil told more truth than we like to believe. Note that he acknowledges that the power has been 'given,' and on the fact of the delegation of it rests the temptation to worship. He knew that Jesus looked forward to becoming the world's King, and he offers easy terms of winning the dignity. Very cunning he thought himself, but he had made one mistake. He did not know what kind of kingdom Jesus wished to establish. If it had been one of the bad old pattern, like Nebuchadnezzar's or Caesar's, his offer would have been tempting, but it had no bearing on One who meant to reign by love, and to win love by loving to the death.

Worshipping the devil could only help to set up a devil's kingdom. Jesus wanted nothing of the 'glory' which had been 'given' him. His answer, again taken from Deuteronomy, is His declaration that His kingdom is a kingdom of obedience, and that He will only reign as God's representative. It defines His own position and the genius of His dominion. It would come to the tempter's ears as the broken law, which makes his misery and turns all his 'glory' into ashes. This is our Lord's decisive choice, at the outset of His public work, of the path of suffering and death. He renounces all aid from such arts and methods as have built up the kingdoms of earth, and presents Himself as the antagonist of Satan and his dominion. Henceforth it is war to the knife.

For us the lessons are plain. We have to learn what sort of kingdom Jesus sets up. We have to beware, in our own little lives, of ever seeking to accomplish good things by questionable means, of trying to carry on Christ's work with the devil's weapons. When churches lower the standard of Christian morality, because keeping it up would alienate wealthy or powerful men, when they wink hard at sin which pays, when they enlist envy, jealousy, emulation of the baser sort in the service of religious movements, are they not worshipping Satan? And will not their gains be such as he can give, and not such as Christ's kingdom grows by? Let us learn, too, to adore and be thankful for the calm and fixed decisiveness with which Jesus chose from the beginning, and trod until the end, with bleeding but unreluctant feet, the path of suffering on His road to His throne.

III. The third temptation tempts the worshipping Son to tempt God.

Luke arranges the temptations partly from a consideration of locality, the desert and the mountain being near each other, and partly in order to bring out a certain sequence in them. First comes the appeal to the physical nature, then that to the finer desires of the mind; and these having been repelled, and the resolve to worship God having been spoken by Jesus, Luke’s third temptation is addressed to the devout soul, as it looks to the cunning but shallow eyes of the tempter. Matthew, on the other hand, in accordance with his point of view, puts the specially Messianic temptation last. The actual order is as undiscoverable as unimportant. In Luke’s order there is substantially but one change of place-from the solitude of the wilderness to the Temple. As we have said, the change was probably not one of the Lord’s body, but only of the scenes flashed before His mind’s eye. ‘The pinnacle of the Temple’ may have been the summit that looked down into the deep valley where the enormous stones of the lofty wall still stand, and which must have been at a dizzy height above the narrow glen on the one side and the Temple courts on the other. There is immense, suppressed rage and malignity in the recurrence of the sneer, ‘If Thou art the Son of God’ and in the use of Christ’s own weapon of defence, the quotation of Scripture.

What was wrong in the act suggested? There is no reference to the effect on the beholders, as has often been supposed; and if we are correct in supposing that the whole temptation was transacted in the desert, there could be none. But plainly the point of it was the suggestion that Jesus should, of His own accord and needlessly, put Himself in danger, expecting God to deliver Him. It looked like devout confidence; it was really ‘tempting God’. It looked like the very perfection of the trust with which, in the first round of this duel, Christ had conquered; it was really distrust, as putting God to proof whether He would keep His promises or no. It looked like the very perfection of that worship with which He had overcome in the second round of the fight; it wag really self-will in the mask of devoutness. It tempted God, because it sought to draw Him to fulfil to a man on self-chosen paths His promises to those who walk in ways which He has appointed.

We trust God when we look to Him to deliver us in perils met in meek acceptance of His will. We tempt Him when we expect Him to save us from those encountered on roads that we have picked oat for ourselves. Such presumption disguised as filial trust is the temptation besetting the higher regions of experience, to which the fumes of animal passions and the less gross but more dangerous airs from the desires of the mind do not ascend. Religious men who have conquered these have still this foe to meet. Spiritual pride, the belief that we may venture into dangers either to our natural or to our religious life, where no call of duty takes us, the thrusting ourselves, unbidden, into circumstances where nothing but a miracle can save us-these are the snares which Satan lays for souls that have broken his coarser nets. The three answers with which Jesus overcame are the mottoes by which we shall conquer. Trust God, by whose will we live. Worship God, in whose service we get all of this world that is good for us. Tempt not God, whose angels keep us in our ways, when they are His ways, and who reckons trust that is not submission to His ways to be tempting God, and not trusting Him.

'All the temptation' was ended. So these three made a complete whole, and the quiver of the enemy was for the time empty. He departed 'for a season,' or rather, until an opportunity. He was foiled when he tried to tempt by addressing desires. His next assault will be at Gethsemane and Calvary, when dread and the shrinking from pain and death will be assailed as vainly.

16)Luke 4:21

Luke

PREACHING AT NAZARETH

Luk. 4:21.

This first appearance of our Lord, in His public work at Nazareth, the home of His childhood, was preceded, as we learn from John's Gospel, by a somewhat extended ministry in Jerusalem. In the course of it, He cast the money-changers out of the Temple, did many miracles, had His conversation with Nicodemus, and on His return towards Galilee met the woman of Samaria at the well. The report of these things, no doubt, had preceded Him, and kindled the Nazarenes' curiosity to see their old companion who had suddenly shot up into a person of importance, and had even made a sensation in the metropolis. A great man's neighbours are keen critics of, and slow believers in, his greatness. So it was natural and very prudent that Jesus should not begin His ministry in Nazareth.

We can easily imagine the scene that morning in the little village, nestling among the hills. How many memories would occupy Christ as He entered the synagogue, where He had so often sat a silent worshipper! How Mary's eyes would fill with tears if she was there, and how the companions of His boyhood, who used to play with Him, would watch Him; all curious, some sympathetic, some jealous, some contemptuous!

The synagogue service began with prayer and praise. Then followed two readings, one from the Law, one from the Prophets. When the latter point was reached, in accordance with usage, Jesus rose, thereby signifying His desire to be reader of the Prophetic portion. We can understand how there would be a movement of quickened attention as the roll was handed to Him and He turned its sheets. He 'found the place'; that looks as if He sought for it; that is to say, that it was not the appointed lesson for the day-if there was such-but that it was a passage selected by Himself.

I need not enter upon the divergences between Luke's quotation as given in our English version and the Hebrew. They are partly due to the fact that he is quoting from memory the Greek version of the LXX. He inserts, for instance, one clause which is not found in that place in Isaiah, but in another part of the same prophet. Having read standing, as was the usage, in token of reverence for the Scripture, Jesus resumed His seat, not as having finished, but, as was the usage, taking the attitude of the teacher, which signified authority. And then, His very first sentence was the most unlimited assertion that the great words which He had been reading had reached their full accomplishment in Himself. They are very familiar to our ears. If we would understand their startling audacity we must listen to them with the ears of the Nazarenes, who had known Him ever since He was a child. 'This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears.' Now, it seems to me that this first sermon of our Lord's to His old fellow-townsmen brings into striking prominence some characteristics of His whole teaching, to which I desire briefly to direct attention.

I. I note Christ's self-assertion.

To begin in Nazareth with such words as these in my text was startling enough, but it is in full accord with the whole tone of our Lord's teaching. If you will carefully search for the most essential characteristics and outstanding differentia of the words of Jesus Christ, even if you make all allowance that some make for the non-historical character of the Gospels, you have this left as the residuum, that the impression which He made upon the men that were nearest to Him, and that caught up most fully the spirit of His teaching, was that the great thing that differentiated it from all other was His unhesitating persistence in pushing into the very forefront, His testimony about Himself. I do not think that there is anything parallel to that anywhere else amongst the men whom the world recognises as being great religious geniuses or great moral teachers. What characterises as perfectly unique our Lord's teaching is not only the blessed things that He said about God or the deep truths that He said about men and their duty, or the sad things that He said about men and their destiny, or the radiant hopes that He unveiled as to men and their possibility, but what He said about Himself. His message was not so much 'Believe in God and do right,' as it was 'Believe in Me and follow Me.'

I need only point you to the Sermon on the Mount, which is popularly supposed to contain very little of Christ's reference to Himself, and to remind you how there, in that authoritative proclamation of the laws of the new kingdom, He calmly puts His own utterances as co-ordinate with-nay! as superior to-the utterances of the ancient law, and sweeps aside Moses-though recognising Moses' divine mission-with an 'I say unto you.' I need only remind you, further, how, at the end of that 'compendium of reasonable morality,' He lays down this principle-that these sayings of 'Mine' are a rock-foundation, on which whoever builds shall never be put to confusion. This is but a specimen of the golden thread, if I may call it so, of self-assertion which runs through the whole of our Lord's teaching.

Now, I venture to say that this undeniable characteristic is only warranted on the supposition that He is the Son of God, and His work the salvation of the world. If He is so, if 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father,' if the revelation of Himself which He makes is the Revelation of God, if His death is for the life of the world; and if, when we honour Him, we honour God; when we trust Him, we trust God; when we obey Him we obey God; then I can understand His persistent self-assertion. But otherwise does He not deliberately intercept emotions which are only rightly directed to God? Does He not claim prerogatives, such as forgiveness of sins, bestowal of life, answering of prayer, which are only possessed by the Divine Being?

I know that many who will not go with me in my intellectual formularising of the truth about Christ's nature do bow to Him with unfeigned reverence. But it seems to me, I humbly confess, that there is no logical basis for such reverence except the full-toned recognition that the mystery of His self-assertion is explained by the mystery of His nature, God manifest in the flesh. I, for my part, do not see how the moral perfectness of Jesus Christ is to be saved, in view of that unmistakable strand in His teaching, unless by such admission. Rather, I feel that the recognition of it brings us face to face with the tremendous alternative, and that the people who were moved to indignation by His self-assertion because they recognised not His divine origin, and said 'This man blasphemeth'; 'This deceiver said,' have more to say in defence of their conclusion than those who bow before Him with reverence, and declare Him to be the pattern of all human perfectness, and yet falter when they are asked to join in the great confession, 'Thou are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

II. Secondly, note here our Lord's sad conception of humanity.

There are, as it were, two strands running through the prophetic passage which He quotes, one in reference to Himself, one in reference to those whom He came to help. To the latter I now turn, to get our Lord's point of view when He looked upon the facts of human life.

No man will ever do much for the world whose ears have not been opened to hear its sad music. An inadequate conception of its miseries is sure to lead to inadequate prescriptions for their remedy. We must bear upon our own hearts the burdens that we seek to lift off our brothers' shoulders.

There is nothing about the Master's words concerning mankind more pathetic and more plain than the sad, stern, and yet pitying view which He always took concerning them and their condition.

In the passage on which Jesus based His claims, as given by Luke, one of the clauses is probably not in this place genuine, for 'the healing of the brokenhearted' should be struck out of the true text. There are then four symbols employed: the poor, the captives, the blind, the bruised. And these four are representations of the result of one fell cause, and that is-sin.

Sin impoverishes. Our true wealth is God. No man that possesses Him, by love, and trust, and conformity of will and effort to His discerned will, is poor, whatever else he has, whatever else he lacks. And no man who has lost this one durable treasure, the loving communion with, and possession of, God, in mind and heart and will and effort, but is a pauper whatever else he possesses. Wherever a man has sold himself to his own will, and has made himself and his own inclinations and misread good his centre and his aim, which is the definition of sin, there bankruptcy and poverty have come. Thieves sometimes beset travellers from the gold mines, as they are bringing down their dust or their nuggets to market, and empty the pockets of the gold, and fill them up with sand. That is what sin does for us; it takes away our true treasure, and befools us by giving us what seems to be solid till we come to open the bag; and then there is no power in it to buy anything for us. 'Why will ye spend your labour for that which satisfieth not?' The one poverty is the impoverishment that lays hold of every soul that wrenches itself, in self-will, apart from God. Sin makes poor.

Sin not only impoverishes, but imprisons 'the captives.' Ah! you have only to think of your own experience to find out what that means. Is there nothing in the set of your affections, in the mastery that your passion has over you, in the habits of your lives, which you know as well as God knows it, to be wrong and ruinous, and of which you have tried to get rid? I know the answer, and every one of us, if we will look into our own hearts, knows it: we are 'tied and bound by the chains of our sin.' You do not need to go to inebriate homes, where there are people that would cut their right hands off if they could get rid of the craving, and cannot, to find instances of this bondage. We have only to be honest with ourselves, and to try to pull the boat against the stream instead of letting it drift with it, to know the force with which the current runs. A tiny thread like a spider's draws after it a bit of cotton a little thicker, and knotted to that there is a piece of pack-thread, and after that a two-stranded cord, and then a cable that might hold an ironclad at anchor. That is a parable of how we draw to ourselves, by imperceptible degrees, an ever-thickening set of manacles that bind our wills and make us the servants of sin. 'His slaves ye are whom ye obey.' Sin imprisons. That is, your sin-do not let us befool ourselves with abstractions-*your* sin imprisons you.

Sin blinds. Wherever there comes over a soul the mist of self-will and self-regard, sight fails; and all the greatest things are blurred and blotted. The man that is immersed in his own evil is like one plunged in the ocean. The cold, salt waters are about him, and above him; and to him the glories of the sky, and the brightness of the sun, the tenderness of the colouring, are all blotted out. He who goes through life as some of us do, never seeing God, never seeing the loftiest beauty of goodness, never beholding with any clearness of vision the radiant possibilities of the future and its awful threatenings, may indeed see the things an inch from the point of his nose; but he is blind and cannot see afar off, and can only behold, and that darkly, the insignificances that are around him. Sin blinds.

And sin bruises. It takes all the health out of us, and makes us, from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head, masses of 'wounds and bruises and putrifying sores.'

The enchantress having worked all this havoc, then gives us a cup of illusion which, when we drink, we know not that there is anything the matter with us. We are like a lunatic in a cell, who thinks himself a prince in a palace, and though living on porridge and milk, fancies that he is partaking of all the dainties of a luxurious table. The deceitfulness of sin is not the least of its tragical consequences.

III. Lastly, we have here our Lord's conception of Himself and of His own work.

Your time will not allow of my dwelling upon this as I would fain have done, but let me point out one or two of the salient features of this initial programme of His. He claims to be the theme and the fulfilment of prophecy. Now, whatever influences modern notions about the genesis of the Old Testament, and the characteristics of its prophetic utterances may have done, they have not touched, and they never will touch, this one central characteristic of all that old system, that embedded in it there was an onward-looking gaze, anticipatory of a higher fulfilment and a further development of all that it taught. To those of us to whom Christ's words are the end of all strife I need only point out that, here, He endorses the belief that prophetic utterances, however they may have had, and did have, a lower and immediate meaning, were only realised in the whole sweep and significance in Himself. So He presents Himself before His acquaintances in the little synagogue at Nazareth, and before the whole world to all time, as the centre-point and pivot on which the history of the world, so to speak, revolves; all that was before converging to Him, all that was after flowing down from Him. 'They that went before, and they that followed after, cried, Hosanna! blessed be He that cometh in the name of the Lord.'

He claims to possess the whole fullness of the divine Spirit: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me.' That is a reminiscence, no doubt, of the experience by the fords of the Jordan, at the Baptism. But it also opens up a wondrous consciousness, on His part, of a complete and uninterrupted possession of the divine life in all its fullness, which involves an entire separation from the miseries and needs of men. He claims to be the Messiah of the Old Covenant, with all the fullness of meaning, and loftiness of dignity which clustered round that word and that thought. He claims not only to proclaim, but to bestow, the blessings of which He speaks. For He not only comes to 'preach good tidings to the poor,' but 'to heal the broken-hearted,' and 'to set at liberty all them that are bound.' He is the Gospel which He utters. He not merely proclaims the favour of heaven, but He brings 'the acceptable year of the Lord.'

This, in barest outline-which is all that your time will admit-is the summary of what Jesus Christ, in that first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, asserted Himself to be.

He does not detail the means by which He is about to bring the golden year, the year of Jubilee, 'the acceptable year of the Lord.' But I venture to say that it is hard to find, in the life of Jesus Christ, that which fulfils Christ's own programme, as thus announced, unless you bring in His death on the Cross for the abolition of sin, His Resurrection for the abolition of death; His reign in glory for the bestowment on all sinful and bruised souls of the Spirit of healing and of righteousness.

These Nazarenes listened. Their hearts and consciences attested the magnetic power of His personality, and the truth of His word. So do the hearts and consciences of most of us. They wondered at the 'words of grace'-whose matter was grace, whose manner was gracious-that proceeded from His mouth. So do most of us. But they let the incipient movement of their hearts be arrested by the cold, carping question, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' and all the enthusiasm chilled into indifference; 'indignation' followed, and some of those who had almost been drawn to Him, in an hour's time had their hands on His robe, to cast Him from the brow of the hill on which their village was built. Every man who comes to the point of feeling some emotions towards Christ as his Redeemer, as his King, is at a fork of the road. He may either take to the right, which will lead him to full communion and acceptance; or he may go to the left, which will carry him away out into the desert. The critical hour in the alchemist's laboratory was when the lead in his crucible began to melt. If a cold current got at it, it resumed its dead solidity, and no gold could be made.

Brother! do not let the world's cold currents get at your heart and freeze it again, if you feel that in any measure it is beginning to melt into penitence, and to flow with faith. The same voice that in the synagogue of Nazareth said, 'He hath anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor' speaks to us to-day from heaven, saying, 'I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich . . . and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve that thou mayest see.'

17)Luke 4:33-44

Luke

A SABBATH IN CAPERNAUM

Luk. 4:33 - Luk. 4:44.

There are seven references to Christ's preaching in the synagogues in this chapter, and only two in the rest of this Gospel. Probably our Lord somewhat changed His method, and Luke, as the Evangelist of the gospel for Gentile as well as Jew, emphasises the change, as foreshadowing and warranting the similar procedure in Paul's preaching. This lesson takes us down from the synagogue at Nazareth, among its hills, to that at Capernaum, on the lakeside, where Jesus was already known as a worker of miracles. The two Sabbaths are in sharp contrast. The issue of the one is a tumult of fury and hate; that of the other, a crowd of suppliants and an eager desire to keep Him with them. The story is in four paragraphs, each showing a new phase of Christ's power and pity.

I. Luk. 4:33 - Luk. 4:37 present Christ as the Lord of that dark world of evil.

The hushed silence of the synagogue, listening to His gentle voice, was suddenly broken by shrieks of rage and fear, coming from a man who had been sitting quietly among the others. Possibly his condition had not been suspected until Christ's presence roused his dreadful tyrant. The man's voice is at the demon's service, and only Jesus recognises who speaks through the wretched victim. We take for granted the reality of demoniacal possession, as certified for all who believe Jesus, by His words and acts in reference to it, as well as forced on us, by the phenomena themselves, which are clearly distinguishable from disease, madness, or sin. The modern aversion to the supernatural is quite as much an unreasonable prejudice as any old woman's belief in witchcraft and Professor Huxley, making clumsy fun of the 'pigs at Gadara,' is holding opinions in the same sublime indifference to evidence of facts as the most superstitious object of his narrow-visioned scorn.

Napoleon called 'impossible' a 'beast of a word.' So it is in practical life,- and no less so when glibly used to discredit well-attested facts. We neither aspire to the omniscience which pronounces that there can be no possession by evil spirits, nor venture to brush aside the testimony of the Gospels and the words of Christ, in order to make out such a contention.

Note the rage and terror of the demon. The presence of purity is a sharp pain to impurity, and an evil spirit is stirred to its depths when in contact with Jesus. Monstrous growths that love the dark shrivel and die in sunshine. The same presence which is joy to some may be a very hell to others. We may approach even here that state of feeling which broke out in these shrieks of malignity, hatred, and dread. It is an awful thing when the only relief is to get away from Jesus, and when the clearest recognition of His holiness only makes us the more eager to disclaim any connection with Him. That is the hell of hells. In its completeness, it makes the anguish of the demon; in its rudiments, it is the misery of some men.

Observe too, the unclean spirit's knowledge, not only of the birthplace and name, but of the character and divine relationship of Jesus. That is one of the features of demoniacal possession which distinguish it from disease or insanity, and is quite incapable of explanation on any other ground. It gives a glimpse into a dim region, and suggests that the counsels of Heaven, as effected on earth, are keenly watched and understood by eyes whose gleam is unsoftened by any touch of pity or submission. It is most natural, if there are such spirits, that they should know Jesus while men knew Him not, and that their hatred should keep pace with their knowledge, even while by the knowledge the hatred was seen to be vain.

Observe Christ's tone of authority and sternness. He had pity for men, who were capable of redemption, but His words and demeanour to the spirits are always severe. He accepts the most imperfect recognition from men, and often seems as if labouring to evoke it, but He silences the spirits' clear recognition. The confession which is 'unto salvation' comes from a heart that loves, not merely from a head that perceives; and Jesus accepts nothing else. He will not have His name soiled by such lips.

Note, still further, Christ's absolute control of the demon. His bare word is sovereign, and secures outward obedience, though from an unsubdued and disobedient will. He cannot make the foul creature love, but He can make him act. Surely Omnipotence speaks, if demons hear and obey. Their king had been conquered, and they knew their Master. The strong man had been bound, and this is the spoiling of his house. The question of the wondering worshippers in the synagogue goes to the root of the matter, when they ask what they must think of the whole message of One whose word gives law to the unclean spirits; for the command to them is a revelation to us, and we learn His Godhead by the power of His simple word, which is but the forth-putting of His will.

We cannot but notice the lurid light thrown by the existence of such spirits on the possibility of undying and responsible beings reaching, by continued alienation of heart and will from God, a stage in which they are beyond the capacity of improvement, and outside the sweep of Christ's pity.

II. Luk. 4:38 - Luk. 4:39 show us Christ in the gentleness of His healing power, and the immediate service of gratitude to Him.

The scene in the synagogue manifested 'authority and power,' and was prompted by abhorrence of the demon even more than by pity for his victim; but now the Lord's tenderness shines unmingled with sternness. Mark gives details of this cure, which, no doubt, came from Peter-such as his joint ownership of the house with his brother, the names of the companions of Jesus, and the infinitely tender action of taking the sick woman by the hand and helping her to rise. But Luke, the physician, is more precise in his description of the case: 'holden by a great fever.' He traces the cure to the word of rebuke, which, no doubt, accompanied the clasp of the hand.

Here again Christ puts forth divine power in producing effects in the material sphere by His naked word. 'He spake and it was done.' That truly divine prerogative was put forth at the bidding of His own pity, and that pity which wielded Omnipotence was kindled by the beseechings of sorrowing hearts. Is not this miracle, which shines so lustrously by the side of that terrible scene with the demon, a picture in one case, and that the sickness of one poor and probably aged woman, of the great truth that heartens all our appeals to Him? He who moves the forces of Deity still from His throne lets us move His heart by our cry.

Luke is especially struck with one feature in the case-the immediate return of usual strength. The woman is lying, the one minute, pinned down and helpless with 'great fever,' and the next is bustling about her domestic duties. No wonder that a physician should think so abnormal a case worthy of note. When Christ heals, He heals thoroughly, and gives strength as well as healing. What could a woman, with no house of her own, and probably a poor dependant on her son-in-law, do for her healer? Not much. But she did what she could, and that without delay. The natural impulse of gratitude is to give its best, and the proper use of healing and new strength is to minister to Him. Such a guest made humble household cares worship; and all our poor powers or tasks, consecrated to His praise and become the offerings of grateful hearts, are lifted into greatness and dignity. He did not despise the modest fare hastily dressed for Him; and He still delights in our gifts, though the cattle on a thousand hills are His. 'I will sup with him,' says He, and therein promises to become, as it were, a guest at our humble tables.

III. Luk. 4:40 f11 - Luk. 4:41 show us the all-sufficiency of Christ's pity and power.

The synagogue worship would be in the early morning, and the healing of the woman immediately after, and the meal she prepared the midday repast. The news had time to spread; and as soon as the sinking sun relaxed the Sabbatical restrictions, a motley crowd came flocking round the house, carrying all the sick that could be lifted, all eager to share in His healing. The same kind of thing may be seen yet round many a traveller's tent. It did not argue real faith in Him, but it was genuine sense of need, and expectation of blessing from His hand; and the measure of faith was the measure of blessing. They got what they believed He could give. If their faith had been larger, the answers would have been greater.

But men are quite sure that they want to be well when they are ill, and bodily healing will be sought with far more earnestness and trouble than soul-healing. Crowds came to Jesus as Physician who never cared to come to Him as Redeemer. Offer men the smaller gifts, and they will run over one another in their scramble for them; but offer them the highest, and they will scarcely hold out a languid hand to take them.

But the point made prominent by Luke is the inexhaustible fullness of pity and power, which met and satisfied all the petitioners. The misery spoke to Christ's heart; and so as the level rays of the setting sun cast a lengthening shadow among the sad groups, He moved amidst them, and with gentle touch healed them all. To-day, as then, the fountain of His pity and healing power is full, after thousands have drawn from it, and no crowd of suppliants bars our way to His heart or His hands. He has 'enough for all, enough for each, enough for ever more.'

The reference to demoniacs adds nothing to the particulars in the earlier verses except the evidence it gives of the frequency of possession then.

IV. Luk. 4:42 - Luk. 4:44 show us Jesus seeking seclusion, but willingly sacrificing it at men's call.

He withdraws in early morning, not because His store of power was exhausted, or His pity had tired, but to renew His communion with the Father. He needed solitude and silence, and we need it still more. No work worth doing will ever be done for Him unless we are familiar with some quiet place, where we and God alone together can hold converse, and new strength be poured into our hearts. Our Lord is here our pattern, also, of willingly leaving the place of communion when duty calls and men implore. We must not stay on the Mount of Transfiguration when demoniac boys are writhing on the plain below, and heart-broken fathers wearying for our coming. A great, solemn 'must' ruled His life, as it should do ours, and the fulfilment of that for which He 'was sent' ever was His aim, rather than even the blessedness of solitary communion or repose of the silent hour of prayer.

18)Luke 5:4

Luke

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FISHERMEN

Luk. 5:4.

The day's work begins early in the East. So the sun, as it rose above the hills on the other side of the lake, shone down upon a busy scene, fresh with the dew and energy of the morning, on the beach by the little village of Bethsaida. One group of fishermen was washing their nets, their boats being hauled up on the strand. A crowd of listeners was thus early gathered round the Teacher; but the fishermen, who were His disciples, seem to have gone on with their work, never minding Christ or the crowd. It is sometimes quite as religious to be washing nets as to be listening to Christ's teaching.

The incident which follows the words of my text, and which is called the first miraculous draught of fishes, is stamped by our Lord Himself with a symbolic purpose; for at the end of it He says: 'Fear not! from henceforth thou shalt catch men.' And that flings back a flood of light on the whole story; and not only warrants but obliges us to take it as being by Him intended for the instruction in their Christian work of these four whom He has chosen to be His workers. However many of our Lord's miracles may not come under this category of symbolism [and I, for my part, do not believe that there are any of them which do not], this one clearly does. We have His own commentary to compel us to interpret its features as meaning something beyond what appears on the surface. I take it, then, that we have here a first vivid code of instructions which our Lord gives to all His servants who do work for Him; and I wish to look at the various stages of this incident from that point of view.

If there are any of my hearers who think to themselves, 'Ah, well! he is not going to say anything that I have anything to do with,' so much the worse for you, if you are not a Christian; or, so much the worse for you if, being a Christian, you are not an active servant. Jesus Christ had four disciples who were fishermen, and out of them He made four fishers of men. The obligation is universal.

I. The Law of Service.

'Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught.' Now there is nothing more remarkable in the whole narrative than the matter-of-course fashion in which our Lord takes the disposal of these men, and orders them about. It is not explicable unless we fall back upon what Luke does not tell us, but John does, in his Gospel, that this was by no means the first time that He had come across Peter and Andrew his brother, or James and John his brother. We do not need to trouble ourselves with the chronological question how long before they had been drawn to Him at the fords of Jordan by the witness of John the Baptist, and by the witness of some of them to the others. The relationship had been then commenced which is presupposed by our Lord's authoritative tone here. It leads in the incident of my text to a closer discipleship, which did not admit of Simon and John hauling or cleaning their nets any more. They had been disciples before in a certain loose fashion, a fashion which permitted them to go home and look after their ordinary avocations. Hence-forward they were disciples in a much more stringent fashion. It was because they had already said ‘Rabbi! Thou art the Son of God! Thou art the King of Israel,’ that this strange imperative command, inexplicable, except by the supplement of the last of the four Gospels, came from Christ’s lips and secured immediate obedience.

If we thus understand that His authority follows on our discipleship, and that the words of my text, first of all, insist upon and assert His right to command and absolutely dispose of the activities, resources, and persons of all His disciples, we have learned something that we only need to practise in order to make our lives noble with a strange nobility, and blessed and sweet with an unearthly sanctity and blessedness.

Further, the words of my text not only declare for us thus the absolute authority of Jesus Christ over all His disciples, but also reveal His sweet promise and gracious assurance that He cares to guide, to direct, to prescribe spheres, to determine methods, to lead those who docilely look to Him and wait upon Him, in paths in which their activity may most profitably be employed for Him and for His Church. If there is anything that is declared to us plainly in the Scriptures, with regard to the relationships between men and Jesus Christ, it is this, that a docile heart will always be a guided heart, partly by inward whispers, which only they disbelieve who limit God in His relation to men, beyond what they have a right to do; and partly by outward providences which only they disbelieve who limit God in His power over the external world, beyond what they have a right to do. He will guide, sometimes with His eye, to which the loving eye flashes back response; sometimes with His whispered word, when the noises of earth and the pulsations of self-will are stilled; sometimes with His rod, which the less sensitive of His sons do often need; sometimes by successes in paths that we venture upon tentatively and timidly; and sometimes by failures in paths into which we rush confidently and presumptuously; but always, the waiting heart is a guided heart, and if we listen we shall hear ‘This is the way, walk ye in it.’ And sometimes it is

God’s will that we should make mistakes, for these too help us to learn His will.

But, further, and more particularly, I do not think that I am unduly reading too much meaning into this story, if I ask you to put emphasis upon one word, ‘Launch out into the *deep*.’ As long as you keep pottering along, a boat’s length from the shore, you will only catch little fishes. The big ones, and the heavy takes are away out yonder. Go out there, if you want to get them. Which, being translated, is this-The same spirit of daring enterprise, which is a condition of success in secular matters, is no less potent a factor in the success of Christian men in their enterprises for Jesus Christ. As long as we keep Him down, within the limits of use and wont, and are horribly afraid of anything that our great-grandfathers did not use to do, there will be very few fish in the bottom of the boat.

Oh, brethren! if one thinks of the world into which it has been God’s providence to put us, a world all seething with new aspirations and unrest-if we think of the condition of the great city in which we live, which is only a specimen of the cities of England, and of the tragical insufficiency of Christian enterprise and effort, as compared with the overwhelming masses of the community, surely, surely, there is nothing more wanted to make Christian people wake up from their old jog-trot habits, and cast themselves with new earnestness, new daring and enterprise, into forms of service which conscience and sober wisdom may approve. Of course, I do not forget that any such new methods must each approve themselves at the tribunal of the Christian consciousness. It is no part of my business here to descend into details and particulars, but I do want to lay on my own heart, and especially on the hearts of the members of the church of which I have the honour to be the pastor, and also upon all other Christian people whom my voice may reach, the solemn responsibility which the conditions of life in our generation lay upon Christian men and women, ‘Launch out into the deep and let down your nets.’ I believe, for my part, that if all the good, God-fearing, Christ-loving men and women in Manchester were to hear this voice sounding in their ears, and to obey it, they would change the face of the city.

II. The Response.

Peter, characteristically, speaks out, and says exactly what a fisherman would be likely to say to a carpenter from Nazareth, that came down to teach him his business. The landsman would not know what the fisherman knew well enough, that it was useless to go fishing in the morning if you had not caught anything all night. There was very little chance of getting any better success when the sun's rays were glinting on the surface of the water.

'We have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing.' Experience said, 'No! do not.' Christ said, 'Yes! do.' And so when Peter has made a clean breast of his objection, founded on experience, he goes on with the consent prompted by the devotion and consecration of love, 'nevertheless.' A great word that. 'We have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing; nevertheless at *Thy* word we will let down the net. So here goes.' And away they went, breakfastless perhaps, with their nets half cleaned, and sleepy and tired with the night's work.

Here, then, we see obedience that springs delighted to obey, because it is impelled by love. That is the spirit which can be trusted to go out into the deep, which does not ask whether things are recognised and usual or not, but which, if once it is sure of the Lord's will, takes no counsel of anything else. How should it, seeing that there is nothing so delightsome to a heart that truly loves as to know and do the will of its beloved? And that, dear brethren, is the spirit that all we Christian people need-a deeper, more vivid, more continual, soul-subduing, muscle-straining consciousness that Jesus Christ 'loved me and gave Himself for me.' Then His whisper will be like thunder, and the motto of our lives will be 'At Thy word, I will!' Further, here is obedience that was not in the least degree depressed by the recognition of past failure. All night long they had been dropping the net overboard, and drawing it in, and with horny, wet hands seeking in its meshes, and finding nothing. Then overboard with it again, and more pulling at the heavy sweeps, till the dawn began to show, and all in vain. Now the weary task must be done all over again, though in all the past hours though they were the best, there has been only failure.

I think that our Christian courage and consecration would be immensely increased, if we could learn the lesson of my text; and feel that, however often in the past I may have broken down, the word of Christ's command, which thrills into my will, is also the word of Christ's promise which should stay my heart, and give me the assurance that past defeat shall be converted into future victory.

There is an obedience which did not grudge fresh toil before the effect of past toils had been quite got over. The nets, as I said, were only half cleaned. It was a pity to begin and dirty them again. The fishers had had a very hard night's toil. If they had been like some of us they would have said, 'Oh! I have been working hard all the night. I cannot possibly do any more this morning.' 'I am so very busy with my business all the week, that it is perfectly absurd to talk about my teaching in a Sunday-school.' That was not their spirit at all. No matter how they had to rub their eyes to get the sleep out of them, they just bundled the nets into the boat once more, pushed her down the strand, and shoved her out into the blue waters at Christ's bidding. And that is the sort of workmen that He wants, and that you and I should be.

Further, we have here an obedience that kept the Master's word sounding in its heart whilst it was at work. 'At Thy word will I let down the net.'

Ah! we very often begin working with a very pure motive, and as we go on, the motive gradually oozes away, and what was begun in the spirit is continued in the flesh; and what was begun with a true devotion to Jesus Christ is continued because we were doing it yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that, and because it is the custom to do it. So we go on. The heart having all gone out of our service, the blessing is gone out of it too. But if we will keep our hearts near that Lord and listen to His voice calling us, wearied or not wearied, beaten before or not beaten before, and do as He bids us, launch out into the deep, we shall not toil in vain.

III. The result.

Christ's command ever includes His promise. Work done for Him is never resultless. True, His most faithful servants have often to say, if they look at their few sheaves with the eye of sense, 'I have spent my strength for nought.' True, the Apostolic experience is, at the best, but too exactly repeated, 'Some believed, and some believed not.' Christ's Gospel always produces its twofold effect, being ‘a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death.’ If the great Sower, when He went forth to sow, expected but a fourth part of the seed to fall into good ground, His servants need look for no larger results. But still it remains true that honest, earnest work for Jesus, wisely planned and prayerfully carried out with self-oblivion and self-surrender, will not be unblessed. If our labour is ‘in the Lord,’ it will not be ‘in vain.’ Just as pain is a danger signal, pointing to mischief at work on the body, so failure in achieving the results of Christian service is, for the most part, an indication of something wrong in method or spirit.

But, if we are toiling in loving obedience to Christ’s voice, and seeking His direction as to sphere and manner of service, we may be quite sure of this, that whether we get, immediately or no, the outward and visible results which this incident promises to all who fulfil the conditions, we shall get the results which were symbolised in the second form of this miraculous draught of fishes. For, if you remember, there was another incident at the end of Christ’s life, modelled upon this one, and equally significant, though in a different fashion. On that occasion, when the disciples had been toiling all the night, and saw, in the dim twilight of the morning, the questionable figure standing on the shore there, they were bidden to bring of the fish that they had caught, and when they came to land they saw a fire of coals, and fish laid thereon, and bread; and His voice said, ‘Come, and eat!’ Blessed are the workers that work for the Master, for living they shall not be left without His blessing, and dying, ‘they rest from their labours’-by the side of that mysterious fire, and Christ-provided food-’and their works do follow them, in that they bring of the fish which they have caught.

19)Luke 5:8

Luke

FEAR AND FAITH

Luk. 5:8. - Joh. 21:7.

These two instances of the miraculous draught of fishes on the Lake of Gennesareth are obviously intended to be taken in conjunction. Their similarities and their differences are equally striking and equally instructive. In the fragment of the incident which I have selected for our consideration now, we have the same man, in the same scene and circumstances, in the presence of the same Lord, acting under the influences of the same motive, and doing two exactly opposite things.

In the first case, the miracle at once struck him with the consciousness that he was now, in some way, he knew not how, in the immediate presence of the supernatural. That was immediately followed by a quick spasm and sense of sin, and that again by a recoil of terror, and that again by the cry, ‘Go out of the boat; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.’

In the other instance, as soon as he saw [or rather, by the help of his friend’s clearer sight, learned] that that dim and questionable figure on the morning beach there, was the Lord, the sight brought back his sin to his mind. But this time the consciousness of sin sent him splashing over the side, and through the shallow water, to struggle anyhow to get close to his Lord, not because he thought more complacently of himself or less loftily of his Master, but because he had learned that the best place for a sinful man was as close to Christ as ever he could get. And so, if we put these two incidents together, we get two or three thoughts that it is worth our while to dwell upon.

I. I ask you to notice, first, that instinctive and swift awaking of conscience.

This was not Peter’s first acquaintance with Jesus Christ, nor his first enrolment in the ranks of disciples. John’s Gospel tells the very beginning, and how, long before this incident, he had recognised Jesus Christ to be the King of Israel. This was not his first experience of a miracle. There had been many wrought in Capernaum of which probably he was an observer; and he had been at the wedding of Cana of Galilee; and in many ways and at many times, no doubt had seen manifestations of our Lord’s supernatural power. But here, in his own boat, with his own nets, about his own sort of work, the thing came home to him as it never had come home before. And although he had long ago recognised Jesus Christ as the Messiah, there is a new, tremulous accession of conviction in that ‘O Lord!’ It means more than ‘Master,’ as he had just called Jesus. It means more than he knew himself, no doubt, but it means at least a great, sudden illumination as to who and what Christ was. And so the consciousness of sin flashes upon him at once, as a consequence of that new vision of the divine, as manifested in Jesus Christ. The links of the process of thought are suppressed. We only see the two ends of it. He passed through a series of thoughts with lightning rapidity. The beginning was the recognition of Christ as in some sense the manifestation to him of the Divine Presence, and the end of it was the recognition of his own sinfulness. He had no new facts; but new meaning and vitality were given to the facts that had long been familiar to him. The first result of this was a new conviction of his own hollowness and evil; and then, side by side with that sense of demerit and sin, came this other trembling apprehension of personal consequences. And so, not thinking so much about the sin as about the punishment that he thought must necessarily come when the holy and the impure collided, he cried, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!’ Now I take it that you get there, in that one instance, packed into small and picturesque compass, just the outlines of what it is reasonable and right that there should always go on in a heart when it first catches a glimpse of the purity, and holiness, and nearness of God, and of the awful, solemn verity that we do, each of us for himself, stand in a living, personal relation to Him. That sudden conviction may come by a thousand causes. A sunset opening the gates to the infinite distance may do it. A chance word may do it. A phrase in a sermon may do it. Some personal sorrow or sickness may do it. Any accidental push may touch the spring, and then the door flies open, for we all of us carry, buried deep down in most of us, and not easily got at, that hidden conviction, only needing the letting in of air to flame up, that we have indeed to do with a living God; that we are sinful and He is pure, and that, that being the case, the discord between us, if we come to close quarters, must end disastrously for us.

You remember the grand vision of Isaiah, how, when he saw the King sitting on His throne, ‘high and lifted up, and His train filled the Temple,’ the first thought was, not of rapture at the Apocalypse, not of adoration of the greatness, not of aspiration after the purity, not of any desire to join in the ‘Holy! Holy! Holy!’ of the burning spirits, but ‘Woe is me, for I am undone; for mine eyes have seen the King; for I am a man of unclean lips.’ Ah, brethren! whenever the commonplaces of our professed religious belief are turned into realities for us, and these things that we have all been familiar with from our childhood, flame before us as true and real, then there comes something analogous to the experience of that other Old Testament character-'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eyes see Thee; wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'

And then there comes, in like manner, and there ought to come, along with this new vision of a God in His purity, and the new sense of my own sinfulness, the apprehension of personal evil. For, although it be the lowest of its functions, it is a function of conscience, not only to say to me, 'It is wrong to do what is wrong,' but to say, too, 'If you do wrong, you will have to bear the consequences.' I believe that a part of the instinctive voice of conscience is the declaration, not only of a law, but of a Lawgiver, and that part of its message to me is not only that sin is a transgression of the law, but that 'the wages of sin is death.'

Now, let me ask you to ask yourselves whether it is not a strange and solemn and sad testimony to the reality and universality of the fact of sin that the sense of impurity and dread of its issues are the uniform results of any vivid, thrilling consciousness of nearness to God. And let me ask you to ask yourself one other question, and that is, whether it is a wise thing to live upon a surface that may be shattered at any moment; whether that is true peace which needs but a touch to melt away; whether you are wise with all this combustible material deep down in your conscience, in paying no regard to it but living and frolicking, and feasting and trafficking, and lusting and sinning on the surface, like those light-hearted, light-headed fools that build their houses on the slopes of volcanoes when the lava rush may come at any moment?

II. That brings me to note, secondly, the mistaken cry of fear.

Peter felt uneasy in the presence of that pure eye, and he also felt, and was mistaken in feeling, that somehow or other he would be safer if he was not so near the Master. Well, if it were true that Jesus Christ brought God near to him, and if it were true that the proximity of God was the revelation of his blackness and the premonition and prophecy of evil to himself, would getting Christ out of the boat help him much? The facts would remain the same. The departure of the physician does not tend to cure the disease; and thus the cry,' Go away from me because I am sinful,' was all but ludicrous if it had not been so tragical in its misapprehension of the facts of the case and the cure for them.

Now the parallel to that, with you and me, is-what? How do we commit this same error? By trying to get rid of the thoughts which evoke these uncomfortable feelings of being impure and in peril. But does ceasing to remember the facts make any difference in the facts? Surely not. Just recall for a moment the many ways in which people manage to blind themselves to these plain, and to some of us unwelcome, truths. You may do it by availing yourselves of that strange power that we all have, of not attending to things that we do not like to think about. It is a strange thing that a man should be able to do that; it is a sad thing that any man should be fool enough to do it. But there are many among my hearers, I have no doubt whatever, who know that if they were to let their thoughts dwell on the facts of their own characters and relation to God they would be uncomfortable, and who, therefore, do their best to keep such thoughts at a safe distance. So, as soon as the sermon is over, some of you will begin to criticise me, or to discuss politics, or gossip, and so get rid of the impressions that the truth might produce. Or you fling yourselves into business. One of the reasons for the fierce energy which some men throw into their common avocations is their knowledge that if they have leisure, there may come into their chambers, and sit down beside them there, these unwelcome thoughts, that kill mirth. Some of you try to get rid of the Christ out of your boat by another way. You plunge into sensualism, and live in the low, vulgar atmosphere of fleshly delight and sensuous excitements in order to drown thought. And some of you do it by the even simpler process of merely giving no heed to such thoughts when kindled. The fire, unfed and unstirred, goes out. That is one way in which people come to have consciences, to use the dreadful words of the New Testament, ‘seared as with a hot iron.’ If you will only never listen to it, it will stop speaking after a while, and then you will have an exemption from all these thoughts. When Felix first heard about temperance and righteousness and judgment to come he trembled, but paid no heed to his tremor, and said, ‘Go away for this time, and when I am not busy at anything else, I will have thee back again.’ He did have Paul back again many a time, and communed with him, but we never read that he trembled any more. The impression is not always reproduced, although the circumstances that produced it at first may be. The most impenetrable armour in which to clothe oneself against the sword of the Spirit is hammered out of former convictions that were never acted on. A soul cased in these is very hard to get at.

But consider the folly of seeking to get rid of truth, however unwelcome, under the delusion that it ceases to be true because we cease to look at it. Christ's leaving the boat would not have helped Peter. The facts remained, however he refused to look at them. If he could have changed them by getting rid of Him who reminded him of them, it might have been worth while to send Him away-but to dismiss the physician is a new way of curing the disease. Pain is an alarm bell for the physical nature to point to something wrong there, and this sense of evil, this shrinking from God regarded as the judge, is the alarm bell in the spiritual nature to warn of something wrong there. Do you think that you banish the danger for which the alarm bell is rung because you wrap a clout round the clapper so as to prevent it from sounding? and do you think that you make it less true that 'every transgression and disobedience shall receive its just recompense of reward' by bidding your conscience hold its peace when it tells you so, or by trying to drown its voice amidst the shouts of revelry, or the whirr of spindles, or the roar of traffic? By no means. The facts remain; and nothing except what deals with the facts is the cure which a wise man will adopt.

You remember the old story of the king of Babylon who sat feasting on the night when the city was captured. When the Finger came out and wrote upon the wall, 'Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin,' it did not stop the feast. They went on with their rioting, and whilst they were carousing, the enemy was creeping up the dried bed of the diverted river, 'and in that night was Belshazzar slain' amidst his wine-cups, and the flowers on his temples were dabbled with his blood. No more insane way of curing the consciousness of sin and the dread of judgment than that of stifling the voice that evokes it was ever dreamed of in an asylum.

III. Lastly, notice the right place for a sinful man.

On the second occasion to which our texts refer we have the Apostle far more deeply conscious of his sin than he was on the first. He remembered his denial, and no doubt he remembered also the secret interview that Jesus Christ had with him on the day of the Resurrection, when, no doubt, He communicated to him His frank and full assurance of forgiveness, He knows far more of Christ's dignity and character and nature after the Resurrection than he had done on that day, long ago, by the banks of the lake. The deeper sense of his own sin, and the clearer and loftier view of who and what Jesus Christ was, send him struggling to his Master, and make him blessed only at His feet.

Ah yes, brother! the superficial knowledge of my evil may drive me away from Jesus Christ; the deepest conviction of it will send me right into His arms. A partial knowledge of the divine nature as revealed in Him as judge, and punitive and necessarily antagonistic to the blackness of my sin, in the lustrous whiteness of His purity, may drive me away from Him, but the deeper knowledge of God manifested in Jesus Christ, the long-suffering, the gentle, loving, pardoning, will send me to Him in all the depth of my self-abasement and in the confidence in His love as covering over my sin and accepting me. Where does the child go when it has transgressed against its mother's word? Into its mother's arms to hide its face upon her bosom near her heart. 'Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned'; and therefore to Thee, Thee only will I go. Only in nearness to Jesus Christ can we get the anodyne that quiets the conscience-the blessed assurance of forgiveness that lightens us of our burden and dread, and the power for holiness that will change our impurity into the likeness of His own purity. He, and He only, can forgive. He, and He only, brings the loving God into the midst of unloving men. He, and He only, hath offered the sacrifice in which all sin is done away. He, and He only, by the communication of His Spirit and life to me, will make me pure and deliver me from the burden of my sin.

And so the man who knows his own need and Christ's grace will not say, 'Depart from me for I am a sinful man,' but he will say, 'Leave me never, nor forsake me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord; but in Thee I have forgiveness and righteousness.'

Dear friends! that consciousness of demerit once evoked in a man's heart, however imperfectly, as I believe it is in some of your hearts now, must issue in one of two things. Either it will send you further into darkness to get away from the light, as the bats in a cave will flit to the deepest recesses of it in order to escape the torch, or it will bring you nearer to Him, and at His feet you will find cleansing.

Oh, dear friends!-strangers many of you, but all friends-let me beseech you that, if the merciful Spirit of God is in any measure using my poor words to touch your consciences and hearts, you would not venture to seek escape from the convictions which are stirring in you by any other way than by betaking yourselves to the Cross. Let it not be, I pray you, that because you know yourselves to be in need of forgiveness, and to stand in peril of judgment, you say to God,' Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways.' But rather do you cast yourselves into Christ's arms and keep near Him; saying as this same Peter did, on another occasion, 'Lord! to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.'

20)Luke 5:17-26

Luke

BLASPHEMER, OR-WHO?

Luk. 5:17 - Luk. 5:26.

Luke describes the composition of the unfriendly observers in this crowd with more emphasis and minuteness than the other Evangelists do. They were Pharisees and doctors, and they were assembled from every part of Galilee, and even from Judea, and, what was most remarkable, from Jerusalem itself. Probably the conflict with the authorities in the capital recorded in Joh. 5:1 - Joh. 5:47 had taken place by this time, and if so, a deputation from the Sanhedrim would very naturally be despatched to Capernaum, and its members would as naturally summon the local lights to sit with them, and watch this revolutionary young teacher, who had no licence from them, and apparently not much reverence for them.

One can easily imagine that these heresy-hunters would be much too superior persons to mix with the crowd about the door of Peter's house, and would, as Luke says, be 'sitting by,' near enough to see and hear, but far enough to show that they had no share in the vulgar enthusiasm of these provincial peasants. They were too holy to mingle with the mob, so they kept together by themselves, and waited hopefully for some heresy or breach of their multitudinous precepts. They got more than they expected.

We may note the contrast between their cynical watchfulness and the glorious manifestations for which they had no eyes. ‘The power of the Lord’-that is, of Christ-’was’ [operative] ‘in His healing,’ or, according to another reading, ‘to heal them.’ But the critics took no heed of that. There is a temper of mind which is sharp-eyed as a lynx for faults, and blind as a bat to evidences of divine power in the Gospel or its adherents. Some noses are keen to smell stenches, and dull to perceive fragrance. The race of such inquisitors is not extinct.

They contrast, too, with the earnestness of the four friends who brought the paralysed man. The former sat cool and critical, because they had no sense of need either for themselves or for others. The latter made all the effort they could to fight through the crowd, and then took to the roof by some outside stair, and hastily stripping off enough of the tiling, lowered their friend, bed and all, right down in front of the young Rabbi. The house would be low, and the roof slight, and Jesus was probably seated in an open inner court or verandah, At any rate, the description gives a piece of local colour, and presents no improbability.

Earnestness in striving to come oneself or to bring a dear one to Christ’s feet seems a supremely absurd waste of energy to a cynical critic, who feels no need of anything that Christ can give. It looks rather different to the paralytic on his couch, and to the friends who long for his healing.

The first lesson from this incident is that our deepest need is forgiveness. No doubt, something in the paralytic’s case determined Christ’s method with him. Perhaps his sickness had been brought on by dissipation, and possibly conscience was lashing him with a whip of scorpions, so that, while his friends sought for his healing, he himself was more anxious for pardon. It is very unlikely that Jesus would have offered forgiveness unless He had known that it was yearned for. But whether that is so or not, we may fairly generalise the order of givings in this miracle, and draw from it the lesson that what Jesus then gave first is His chief gift. In most of His other miracles He gave bodily healing first. First or second, it is always Christ’s chief gift in the beginning of discipleship. His miracles of bodily healing are parables of that higher miracle. This incident brings out what is always the order of relative importance, whether it is that of chronological sequence or not.

And we all need to lay that truth to heart for ourselves. No tinkering with superficial discomforts, or culture of intellect and taste, or success in worldly pursuits, will avail to stanch the deep wound through which our life-blood is ebbing out. We need something that goes deeper than all these styptics. Only a power which can deal with our sense of sin, and soothe that into blessed assurance of pardon, is strong enough to grapple with our true root of misery. It is useless to give a man dying of cancer medicine for pimples. That is what all attempts to make man happy and restful while sin remains unforgiven, are doing.

Social reformers need this lesson. Many voices proclaim many gospels to-day. Culture, economical or social reconstruction, is trumpeted as the panacea. But it matters comparatively little how society is organised. If its individual members retain their former natures, the former evils will come back, whatever its organisation. The only thorough cure for social evils is individual regeneration. Christ deals with men singly, and remoulds society by renewing the individual. The most elaborate machinery may be used for filtering the black waters. What will be the good of that if the fountain of blackness is not sealed up, or rather purified, at its hidden source? Make the tree good, and its fruit will be good. To make the tree good, you must begin with dealing with sin.

The second lesson from this incident is that Christ’s claim to forgive sins is either blasphemy or the manifest token of divinity. These Pharisees scented heresy at once. They were blind to the pathos of the story, and hard as millstones towards the poor sufferer’s wistful looks. But they pounced at once gleefully on Christ’s words. They were perfectly right in their premises that forgiveness was a divine prerogative which no man could share. For sin is the name of evil, when considered in its relation to God. He only can forgive it, for ‘against Thee, Thee only,’ as David confessed, is it committed. True, the same act may be full of harmful results to men, and may be a breach of human law, but in its character as sin it refers to God only. Forgiveness is the outpouring of God’s love on a sinner, uninterrupted by his sin. Only God can pour out that love.

But the cavillers were quite wrong in their conclusion. He did not ‘blaspheme.’ The fact that Jesus knew and answered their whispered or unspoken ‘reasonings in their hearts’ might have taught them that here was more than a rabbi, or even a prophet. But He goes on to reiterate His assertion that He has power to forgive sins.

Observe that He does not deny their premises. Nor does He, as He was bound in common honesty to do, set them right if they were wrong in supposing that He had claimed divine power. A wise religious teacher, who saw himself misunderstood as asserting that he could give what he only meant to assure a penitent that God would give, would have instantly said, ‘Do not mistake me. I am only doing what every servant of God’s should and can do, telling this poor brother that God is ready to forgive. God forbid that I should be supposed to do more than to declare his forgiveness!’ Christ’s answer is the strongest possible contrast to that. He knew what these Pharisees supposed Him to have meant by His authoritative words, and knowing it, He repeats them, and points to the miracle about to be done as their vindication.

Is there any possible way of escaping from the conclusion that Jesus solemnly and deliberately laid claim to exercise the divine prerogative of dispensing pardon? If He did, what shall we say of Him? Surely there is no third judgment of Him and His words possible; but either the Pharisees were right, and ‘this man,’ this pattern of all meekness and perfect example of humility, blasphemed, or else Peter was right when he said, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.’

The third lesson is that the visible effects of Christ’s power attest the reality of His claim to produce the invisible effects of peaceful assurance of forgiveness. It was equally easy to say, ‘Thy sins are forgiven thee,’ and to say, ‘Take up thy bed and walk.’ It was equally impossible for a mere man to forgive, and to give the paralytic muscular force to move. But the one saying could be tested, and its fulfilment verified by sight. The other could not; but if the visible impossibility was done, it was a witness that the invisible one could be.

The striking way in which our Lord weaves in His command to the palsied man to take up his bed with His words to the Pharisees is preserved in all the Gospels, and gives vividness to the narrative, while it brings out the main purpose of the miracle. It was a demonstration in the visible sphere of Christ's power in the invisible. Both were divine acts, and that which could be verified by sight established the reality of that which could not.

The same principle may be widely extended. It includes all the outward effects of Christ's gospel in the world. There are abundance of these which are patent to fair-minded observers. If one wishes to know what these are, he has only to contrast heathen lands with those in which, however imperfectly, Jesus is recognised as King and Example. The lives of His disciples are full of faults, but they should, and in a measure, do, witness to the reality of His gifts of forgiveness and conquest of sin. He has done more to restore strength to humanity paralysed for good than all other would-be physicians put together have done; and since He has visibly effected such manifest changes on outward lives, it is no rash conclusion to draw that He can change the inward nature. If He has healed the palsy, that is a work surpassing human power, and it proves that He can forgive the sin which brought the paralysis, and tied the helpless sufferer to his couch of pain.

21)Luke 6:20-31

Luke

LAWS OF THE KINGDOM

Luk. 6:20 - Luk. 6:31.

Luke condenses and Matthew expands the Sermon on the Mount. The general outline is the same in both versions. The main body of both is a laying down the law for Christ's disciples. Luke, however, characteristically omits what is prominent in Matthew, the polemic against Pharisaic righteousness, and the contrast between the moral teaching of Christ and that of the law. These were appropriate in a Gospel which set forth Jesus as the crown of earlier revelation, while Luke is true to the broad humanities of his Gospel, in setting forth rather the universal aspect of Christian duty, and gathering it all into the one precept of love.

The fragment which forms the present passage falls into two parts-the description of the subjects of the kingdom and their blessedness, contrasted with the character of the rebels; and the summing up of the law of the kingdom in the all-including commandment of love.

I. The subjects and blessedness of the kingdom, and the rebels.

It is to be well kept in view that the discourse is addressed to 'His disciples.' That fact remembered would have saved some critics from talking nonsense about the discrepancy between Luke and Matthew, and supposing that the former meant merely literal poverty, hunger, and tears. No doubt he omits the decisive words which appear in Matthew, who appends 'in spirit' to 'poor,' and 'after righteousness' to 'hunger and thirst,' but there is no ground for supposing that Luke meant anything else than Matthew.

Notice that in our passage the sayings are directly addressed to the disciples, while in Matthew they are cast into the form of general propositions. In that shape, the additions were needed to prevent misunderstanding of Christ, as if He were talking like a vulgar demagogue, flattering the poor, and inveighing against the rich. Matthew's view of the force of the expressions is involved in Luke's making them an address *to the disciples.,* 'Ye poor' at once declares that our Lord is not thinking of the whole class of literally needy, but of such of these as He saw willing to learn of Him. No doubt, the bulk of them were poor men as regards the world's goods, and knew the pinch of actual want, and had often had to weep. But their earthly poverty and misery had opened their hearts to receive Him, and that had transmuted the outward wants and sorrows into spiritual ones, as is evident from their being disciples; and these are the characteristics which He pronounces blessed. In this democratic and socialistic age, it is important to keep clearly in view the fact that Jesus was no flatterer of poor men as such, and did not think that circumstances had such power for good or evil, as that virtue and true blessedness were their prerogatives.

The foundation characteristic is poverty of spirit, the consciousness of one's own weakness, the opposite of the delusion that we are 'rich and increased with goods.' All true subjection to the kingdom begins with that accurate, because lowly, estimate of ourselves. Humility is life, lofty mindedness is death. The heights are barren, rivers and fertility are down in the valleys.

Luke makes hunger the second characteristic, and weeping the third, while Matthew inverts that order. Either arrangement suggests important thoughts. Desire after the true riches naturally follows on consciousness of poverty, while, on the other hand, sorrow for one's conscious lack of these may be regarded as preceding and producing longing. In fact, the three traits of character are contemporaneous, and imply each other. Outward condition comes into view, only in so far as it tends to the production of these spiritual characteristics, and has, in fact, produced them, as it had done, in some measure, in the disciples. The antithetical characteristics of the adversaries of the kingdom are, in like manner, mainly spiritual; and their riches, fullness, and laughter refer to circumstances only in so far as actual wealth, abundance, and mirth tend to hide from men their inward destitution, starvation, and misery.

But what paradoxes to praise all that flesh abhors, and to declare that it is better to be poor than rich, better to feel gnawing desire than to be satisfied, better to weep than to laugh! How little the so-called Christian world believes it! How dead against most men's theory and practice Christ goes! These Beatitudes have a solemn warning for all, and if we really believed them, our lives would be revolutionised. The people who say, 'Give me the Sermon on the Mount: I don't care for your doctrines, but I can understand *it*,' have not felt the grip of these Beatitudes.

Note that the blessings and woes are based on the future issues of the two states of mind. These are not wholly in the future life, for Jesus says, 'Yours *is* the kingdom.' That kingdom is a state of obedience to God, complete in that future world, but begun here. True poverty secures entrance thither, since it leads to submission of will and trust. True hunger is sure of satisfaction, since it leads to waiting on God, who 'will fulfil the desire of them that fear Him.' Sorrow which is according to God, cannot but bring us near Him who 'will wipe away tears from off all faces.'

On the other hand, they who in condition are prosperous and satisfied with earth, and in disposition are devoid of suspicion of their own emptiness, and draw their joys and sorrows from this world alone, cannot but have a grim awaking waiting for them. Here they will often feel that earth's goods are no solid food, and that nameless yearnings and sadness break in on their mirth; and in the dim world beyond, they will start to find their hands empty and their souls starving.

The fourth of Luke's Beatitudes contrasts the treatment received from men by the subjects and the enemies of the kingdom. Better to be Christ's martyr than the world's favourite! Alas, how few Christians wear the armour of that great saying! They would not set so much store by popularity, nor be so afraid of being on the unpopular side, if they did.

II. The second part of the passage contains the summary of the laws of the kingdom from the lips of the King.

Its keynote is love. The precept follows strikingly on the predictions of excommunication and hatred. The only weapon to fight hate is love. 'The hate of hate, the scorn of scorn,' are not Christian dispositions, though Tennyson tells us that they are the poet's. So much the worse for him if they are! First, the commandment, so impossible to us unless our hearts are made Christlike by much dwelling with Christ, is laid down in the plainest terms. Enmity should only stimulate love, as a gash in some tree bearing precious balsam makes the fragrant treasure flow. Who of us has conformed to that law which in three words sums up perfection? How few of us have even honestly tried to conform to it!

But the command becomes more stringent as it advances. The sentiment is worth much, but it must bear fruit in act. So the practical manifestations of it follow. Deeds of kindness, words of blessing, and highest of all, and the best help to fulfilling the other two, prayer, are to be our meek answers to evil. Why should Christians always let their enemies settle the terms of intercourse? They are not to be mere reverberating surfaces, giving back echoes of angry voices. Let us take the initiative, and if men scowl, let us meet them with open hearts and smiles. 'A soft answer turneth away wrath.' 'It takes two to make a quarrel.' Frost and snow bind the earth in chains, but the silent sunshine conquers at last, and evil can be overcome with good.

Our Lord goes on to speak of another form of love-namely, patient endurance of wrong and unreasonableness. He puts that in terms so strong that many readers are fain to pare down their significance. Non-resistance is commanded in the most uncompromising fashion, and illustrated in the cases of assault, robbery, and pertinacious mendicancy. The world stands stiffly on its rights; the Christian is not to bristle up in defence of his, but rather to suffer wrong and loss. This is regarded by many as an impossible ideal. But it is to be observed that the principle involved is that love has no limits but itself. There may be resistance to wrong, and refusal of a request, if love prompts to these. If it is better for the other man that a Christian should not let him have his way or his wish, and if the Christian, in resisting or refusing, is honestly actuated by love, then he is fulfilling the precept when he says 'No' to some petition, or when he resists robbery. We must live near Jesus Christ to know when such limitations of the precept come in, and to make sure of our motives.

The world and the Church would be revolutionised if even approximate obedience were rendered to this commandment. Let us not forget that it *is* a commandment, and cannot be put aside without disloyalty.

Christ then crystallises His whole teaching on the subject of our conduct to others into the immortal words which make our wishes for ourselves the standard of our duty to others, and so give every man an infallible guide. We are all disposed to claim more from others than we give to them. What a paradise earth would be if the two measuring-lines which we apply to their conduct and to our own were exactly of the same length!

22)Luke 6:41-49

Luke

THREE CONDENSED PARABLES

Luk. 6:41 - Luk. 6:49.

Three extended metaphors, which may almost be called parables, close Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, and constitute this passage. These are the mote and the beam, the good and bad trees, the houses on the rock and on the sand. Matthew puts the first of these earlier in the sermon, and connects it with other precepts about judging others. But whichever order is the original, that adopted by Luke has a clear connection of thought underlying it which will come out as we proceed.

I. The striking and somewhat ludicrous image of the beam and the mote is found in Rabbinical writings, and may have been familiar to Christ's hearers.

But His use of it is deeper and more searching than the rabbis' was. He has just been speaking of blind guides and their blind followers. That 'parable,' as Luke calls it, naturally images another defect which may attach to the eye. A man may be partly blind because some foreign body has got in. If we might suppose a tacit reference to the Pharisees in the blind guides, their self-complacent censoriousness would be in view here; but the application of the saying is much wider than to them only.

Verse 41 teaches that the accurate measurement of the magnitude of our own failings should precede our detection of our brother's. Christ assumes the commonness of the opposite practice by asking 'why' it is so. And we have all to admit that the assumption is correct. The keenness of men's criticism of their neighbour's faults is in inverse proportion to their familiarity with their own. It is no unusual thing to hear some one, bedaubed with dirt from head to foot, declaiming with disgust about a speck or two on his neighbour's white robes.

Satan reproving sin is not an edifying sight, but Satan criticising sin is still less agreeable. If only 'he that is without sin among you' would fling stones, there would be fewer reputations pelted than there are. Most men know less about their own faults than about their brother's. They use two pairs of spectacles-one which diminishes, and is put on for looking at themselves; one which magnifies, and is worn for their neighbour's benefit. But when their respective good qualities are to be looked at, the other pair is used in each case. That is men's way, all the world over.

Christ's question asks the reason for this all but universal dishonesty of having two weights and measures for faults. He would have us ponder on the cause, that we may discover the remedy. He would have us reflect, that we may get a vivid conviction of the unreasonableness of the practice. There is nothing in the fact that a fault is mine which should make it small in my judgment; nor, on the other hand, in the accident that it is another's, which should make it seem large. A fault is a fault, whoever it belongs to, and we should judge ourselves and others by the same rule. Only we should be most severe in its application to ourselves, for we cannot tell how much our brother has had, to diminish the criminality of his sin, and we can tell, if we will be honest, how much we have had, to aggravate that of ours. So the conscience of a true Christian works as Paul's did when he said 'Of whom I am chief,' and is more disposed to make its own motes into beams than to censure its brother's.

The reason, so far as there is a reason, can only lie in our diseased selfishness, which is the source of all sin. And the blindness to our 'beams' is partly produced by their very presence. All sin blinds conscience. A man with a beam in his eye would not be able to see much. One device of sin, practised in order to withdraw the doer's attention from his own deed, is to make him censorious of his fellows, and to compound for the sins he is inclined to by condemning other people's.

Luk. 6:42 teaches that the conquest of our own discovered evils must precede efficient attempts to cure other people's. To pose as a curer of them while we are ignorant of our own faults is, consciously or unconsciously, hypocrisy, for it assumes a hatred of evil, which, if genuine, would have found first a field for its working in ourselves. An oculist with diseased eyes would not be likely to be a successful operator. 'Physician, heal thyself' would fit him well, and be certainly flung at him. A cleansed eye will see the brother's mote clearly, but only in order to help its extraction. It is a delicate bit of work to get it out, and needs a gentle hand.

Our discernment of others' faults must be compassionate, not to be followed by condemnation nor self-complacency but by loving efforts to help to a cure. And such will not be made unless we have learned our own sinfulness, and can go to the wrongdoer in brotherly humility, and win him to use the 'eye-salve' which our conduct shows has healed us.

II. The second compressed parable of the two trees springs from the former naturally, as stating the general law of which Luk. 6:42 gives

one case, namely, that good deeds [such as casting out the mote] can only come from a good heart [made good by confession of its own evils and their ejection].

It is often said that Christ's teaching is unlike that of His Apostles in that He places stress on works, and says little of faith. But how does He regard works? As fruits. That is to say, they are of value in His eyes only as being products and manifestations of character. He does not tell us in this parable how the character which will effloresce in blossoms and set in fruits of goodness is produced. That comes in the next parable. But here is sufficiently set forth the great central truth of Christian ethics that the inward disposition is the all-important thing, and that deeds are determined as to their moral quality by the character from which they have proceeded.

Our actions are our self-revelations. The words are not to be pressed, as if they taught the entire goodness of one class of men, so that all their acts were products of their good character, nor the unmingled evil of another, so that no good of any kind or in any degree is in them or comes from them. They must be read as embodying a general truth which is not as yet fully exemplified in any character or conduct.

In Luk. 6:45 the same idea is presented under a different figure-that of a wealthy man who brings his possessions out of his store-house. The application of the figure is significantly varied so as to include the other great department of human activity. Speech is act. It, too, will be according to the cast of the inner life. Of course, feigned speech of all sorts is not in view. The lazy judgment of men thinks less of words than of deeds. Christ always attaches supreme importance to them. Intentional lying being excluded, speech is an even more complete self-revelation than act. When one thinks of the floods of foul or idle or malicious talk which half drown the world as being revelations of the sort of hearts from which they have gushed, one is appalled. What a black, seething fountain that must be which spurts up such inky waters!

III. The third parable, of the two houses, shows in part how hearts may be made 'good.'

It is attached to the preceding by Luk. 6:46. Speech does not always come from ‘the abundance of the heart.’ Many call Him Lord who do not act accordingly. Deeds must confirm words. If the two diverge, the latter must be taken as the credible self-revelation. Now the first noticeable thing here is Christ’s bold assumption that His words are a rock foundation for any life. He claims to give an absolute and all-sufficient rule of conduct, and to have the right to command every man.

And people read such words and then talk about their Christianity not being the belief of His divinity, but the practice of the Sermon on the Mount! His words are the foundation for every firm, lasting life. They are the basis of all true thought about God, ourselves, our duties, our future. ‘That rock was Christ.’ Every other foundation is as sand. Unless we build on Him, we build on changeable inclinations, short-lived desires, transitory aims, evanescent circumstances. Only the Christ who ever liveth, and is ever ‘the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever,’ is fit to be the foundation of lives that are to be immortal.

Note the two houses built on the foundations. The metaphor suggests that each life is a whole with a definite character. Alas, how many of our lives are liker a heap of stones tilted at random out of a cart than a house with a plan. But there is a character stamped on every life, and however the man may have lived from hand to mouth without premeditation, the result has a character of its own, be it temple or pig-sty. Each life, too, is built up by slow labour, course by course. Our deeds become our dwelling-places. Like coral-insects, we live in what we build. Memory, habit, ever-springing consequences, shape by slow degrees our isolated actions into our abodes. What do we build?

One storm tries both houses. That may refer to the common trials of every life, but it is best taken as referring to the future judgment, when God ‘will lay judgment to the line, and righteousness to the plummet’; and whatever cannot stand that test will be swept away. Who would run up a flimsy structure on some windy headland in northern seas? The lighthouses away out in ocean are firmly bonded into living rock. Unless our lives are thus built on and into Christ, they will collapse into a heap of ruin. ‘Behold I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste.'

23)Luke 7:4

Luke

WORTHY-NOT WORTHY

Luk. 7:4, Luk. 7:6 - Luk. 7:7.

A Roman centurion, who could induce the elders of a Jewish village to approach Jesus on his behalf, must have been a remarkable person. The garrison which held down a turbulent people was not usually likely to be much loved by them. But this man, about whom the incident with which our texts are connected is related, was obviously one of the people of whom that restless age had many, who had found out that his creed was outworn, and who had been drawn to Judaism by its lofty monotheism and its austere morality. He had gone so far as to build a synagogue, and thereby, no doubt, incurred the ridicule of his companions, and perhaps the suspicions of his superiors. What would the English authorities think of an Indian district officer that conformed to Buddhism or Brahminism, and built a temple? That is what the Roman officials would think of our centurion. And there were other beautiful traits in his character. He had a servant 'that was dear to him.' It was not only the nexus of master and servant and cash payments that bound these two together. And very beautiful is this story, when he himself speaks about this servant. He does not use the rough word which implies a bondservant, and which is employed throughout the whole of the rest of the narrative, but a much gentler one, and speaks of him as his 'boy.' So he had won the hearts of these elders so far as to make them swallow their dislike to Jesus, and deign to go to Him with a request which implied His powers at which at all other times they scoffed.

Now, we owe to Luke the details which show us that there was a double deputation to our Lord-the first which approached Him to ask His intervention, and the second which the centurion sent when he saw the little group coming towards his house, and a fresh gush of awe rose in his heart.

The elders said, ‘He is worthy’; he said, ‘I am not worthy.’ The verbal resemblance is, indeed, not so close in the original as in our versions, for the literal rendering of the words put into the centurion’s mouth is ‘not fit.’ But still the evident antithesis is preserved: the one saying expresses the favourable view that partial outsiders took of the man, the other gives the truer view that the man took of himself. And so, putting away the story altogether, we may set these two verdicts side by side, as suggesting wider lessons than those which arise from the narrative itself.

I. And, first, we have here the shallow plea of worthiness.

These elders did not think loftily of Jesus Christ. The conception that we have of Him goes a long way to settle whether it is possible or not for us to approach Him with the word ‘worthy’ on our lips. The higher we lift our thought of Christ, the lower becomes our thought of ourselves. These elders saw the centurion from the outside, and estimated him accordingly. There is no more frequent, there is no more unprofitable and impossible occupation, than that of trying to estimate other people’s characters. Yet there are few things that we are so fond of doing. Half our conversation consists of it, and a very large part of what we call literature consists of it; and it is bound to be always wrong, whether it is eulogistic or condemnatory, because it only deals with the surface.

Here we have the shallow plea advanced by these elders in reference to the centurion which corresponds to the equally shallow plea that some of us are tempted to advance in reference to ourselves. The disposition to do so is in us all. Luther said that every man was born with a Pope in his belly. Every man is born with a Pharisee in himself, who thinks that religion is a matter of barter, that it is so much work, buying so much favour here, or heaven hereafter. Wherever you look, you see the working of that tendency. It is the very mainspring of heathenism, with all its penances and performances. It is enshrined in the heart of Roman Catholicism, with its dreams of a treasury of merits, and works of supererogation and the like. Ay! and it has passed over into a great deal of what calls itself Evangelical Protestantism, which thinks that, somehow or other, it is all for our good to come here, for instance on a Sunday, though we have no desire to come and no true worship in us when we have come, and to do a great many things that we would much rather not do, and to abstain from a great many things that we are strongly inclined to, and all with the notion that we have to bring some 'worthiness' in order to move Jesus Christ to deal graciously with us.

And then notice that the religion of barter, which thinks to earn God's favour by deeds, and is, alas! the only religion of multitudes, and subtly mingles with the thoughts of all, tends to lay the main stress on the mere external arts of cult and ritual. 'He loveth our nation, and hath built us a synagogue'; not, 'He is gentle, good, Godlike.' 'He has built a synagogue.' That is the type of work which most people who fall into the notion that heaven is to be bought, offer as the price. I have no doubt that there are many people who have never caught a glimpse of any loftier conception than that, and who, when they think-which they do not often do-about religious subjects at all, are saying to themselves, 'I do as well as I can,' and who thus bring in some vague thought of the mercy of God as a kind of make-weight to help out what of their own they put in the scale. Ah, dear brethren! that is a wearying, an endless, a self-torturing, an imprisoning, an enervating thought, and the plea of 'worthiness' is utterly out of place and unsustainable before God.

II. Now let me turn to the deeper conviction which silences that plea.

'I am not worthy that Thou shouldest enter under my roof, wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto Thee.' This man had a loftier conception of who and what Christ was than the elders had. To them He was only one of themselves, perhaps endowed with some kind of prophetic power, but still one of themselves. The centurion had pondered over the mystic power of the word of command, as he knew it by experience in the legion, or in the little troop of which he, though a man under the authority of his higher officers, was the commander; and he knew that even his limited power carried with it absolute authority and compelled obedience. And he had looked at Christ, and wondered, and thought, and had come at last to a dim apprehension of that great truth that, somehow or other, in this Man there did lie a power which, by the mere utterance of His will, could affect matter, could raise the dead, could still a storm, could banish disease, could quell devils. He did not formulate his belief, he could not have said exactly what it led to, or what it contained, but he felt that there was something divine about Him. And so, seeing, though it was but through mists, the sight of that great perfection, that divine humanity and human divinity, he bowed himself and said, ‘Lord! I am not worthy.’

When you see Christ as He is, and give Him the honour due to His name, all notions of desert will vanish utterly.

Further, the centurion saw himself from the inside, and that makes all the difference. Ah, brethren! most of us know our own characters just as little as we know our own faces, and find it as difficult to form a just estimate of what the hidden man of the heart looks like as we find it impossible to form a just estimate of what we look to other people as we walk down the street. But if we once turned the searchlight upon ourselves, I do not think that any of us would long be able to stand by that plea, ‘I am worthy.’ Have you ever been on a tour of discovery, like what they go through at the Houses of Parliament on the first day of each session, down into the cellars to see what stores of explosive material, and what villains to fire it, may be lurking there? If you have once seen yourself as you are, and take into account, not only actions but base tendencies, foul, evil thoughts, imagined sins of the flesh, meannesses and basenesses that never have come to the surface, but which you know are bits of you, I do not think that you will have much more to say about ‘I am worthy.’ The flashing waters of the sea may be all blazing in the sunshine, but if they were drained off, what a frightful sight the mud and the ooze at the bottom would be! Others look at the dancing, glittering surface, but you, if you are a wise man, will go down in the diving-bell sometimes, and for a while stop there at the bottom, and turn a bull’s-eye straight upon all the slimy, crawling things that are there, and that would die if they came into the light.

‘I am not worthy that Thou shouldest enter under my roof.’ But then, as I have said, most of us are strangers to ourselves. The very fact of a course of action which, in other people, we should describe with severe condemnation, being ours, bribes us to indulgence and lenient judgment. Familiarity, too, weakens our sense of the foulness of our own evils. If you have been in the Black Hole all night, you do not know how vitiated the atmosphere is. You have to come out into the fresh air to find out that. We look at the errors of others through a microscope; we look at our own through the wrong end of the telescope; and the one set, when we are in a cynical humour, seem bigger than they are; and the other set always seem smaller.

Now, that clear consciousness of my own sinfulness ought to underlie all my religious feelings and thoughts. I believe, for my part, that no man is in a position to apprehend Christianity rightly who has not made the acquaintance of his own bad self. And I trace a very large proportion of the shallow Christianity of this day as well as of the disproportion in which its various truths are set forth, and the rising of crops of erroneous conceptions just to this, that this generation has to a large extent lost-no, do not let me say this generation, *you and I*-have to a large extent lost, that wholesome consciousness of our own unworthiness and sin.

But on the other hand, let me remind you that the centurion’s deeper conviction is not yet the deepest of all, and that whilst the Christianity which ignores sin is sure to be impotent, on the other hand the Christianity which sees very little but sin is bondage and misery, and is impotent too. And there are many of us whose type of religion is far gloomier than it should be, and whose motive of service is far more servile than it ought to be, just because we have not got beyond the centurion, and can only say, ‘I am not worthy; I am a poor, miserable sinner.’

III. And so I come to the third point, which is not in my text, but which both my texts converge upon, and that is the deepest truth of all, that worthiness or unworthiness has nothing to do with Christ’s love.

When these elders interceded with Jesus, He at once rose and went with them, and that not because of their intercession or of the certificate of character which they had given, but because His own loving heart impelled Him to go to any soul that sought His help. So we are led away from all anxious questionings as to whether we are worthy or no, and learn that, far above all thoughts either of undue self-complacency or of undue self-depreciation, lies the motive for Christ’s gracious and healing approach in.

‘His ceaseless, unexhausted love,

Unmerited and free.’

This is the truth to which the consciousness of sinfulness and unworthiness points us all, for which that consciousness prepares us, in which that consciousness does not melt away, but rather is increased and ceases to be any longer a burden or a pain. Here, then, we come to the very bed-rock of everything, for

‘Merit lives from man to man,
But not from man, O Lord, to Thee.’

Jesus Christ comes to us, not drawn by our deserts, but impelled by His own love, and that love pours itself out upon each of us. So we do not need painfully to amass a store of worthiness, nor to pile up our own works, by which we may climb to heaven. ‘Say not, who shall ascend up into heaven,’ to bring Christ down again, ‘but the word is nigh thee, that if thou wilt believe with thine heart, thou shalt be saved.’ Worthiness or unworthiness is to be swept clean out of the field, and I am to be content to be a pauper, to owe everything to what I have done nothing to procure, and to cast myself on the sole, all-sufficient mercy of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And then comes liberty, and then comes joy. If the gift is given from no consideration of men’s deserts, then the only thing that men have to do is to exercise the faith that takes it. As the Apostle says in words that sound very hard and technical, but which, if you would only ponder them, are throbbing with vitality, ‘It is of faith that it might be by grace.’ Since He gives simply because He loves, the only requisites are the knowledge of our need, the will to receive, the trust that, in clasping the Giver, possesses the gift.

The consciousness of unworthiness will be deepened. The more we know ourselves to be sinful, the more we shall cleave to Christ, and the more we cleave to Christ, the more we shall know ourselves to be sinful. Peter caught a glimpse of what Jesus was when he sat in the boat, and he said, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!’ But Peter saw both himself and his Lord more clearly, that is more truly, when, subsequent to his black treachery, his brother Apostle said to him concerning the figure standing on the beach in the grey morning, ‘It is the Lord,’ and he flung himself over the side and floundered through the water to get to his

Master's feet. For that is the place for the man who knows himself unworthy. The more we are conscious of our sin, the closer let us cling to our Lord's forgiving heart, and the more sure we are that we have that love which we have not earned, the more shall we feel how unworthy of it we are. As one of the prophets says, with profound meaning, 'Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy transgression, when I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done.' The child buries its face on its mother's breast, and feels its fault the more because the loving arms clasp it close.

And so, dear brethren, deepen your convictions, if you are deluded by that notion of merit; deepen your convictions, if you see your own evil so clearly that you see little else. Come into the light, come into the liberty, rise to that great thought, 'Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us.' Have done with the religion of barter, and come to the religion of undeserved grace. If you are going to stop on the commercial level, 'the wages of sin is death'; rise to the higher ground: 'the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

24)Luke 7:6-7

Luke

WORTHY-NOT WORTHY

Luk. 7:4, Luk. 7:6 - Luk. 7:7.

A Roman centurion, who could induce the elders of a Jewish village to approach Jesus on his behalf, must have been a remarkable person. The garrison which held down a turbulent people was not usually likely to be much loved by them. But this man, about whom the incident with which our texts are connected is related, was obviously one of the people of whom that restless age had many, who had found out that his creed was outworn, and who had been drawn to Judaism by its lofty monotheism and its austere morality. He had gone so far as to build a synagogue, and thereby, no doubt, incurred the ridicule of his companions, and perhaps the suspicions of his superiors. What would the English authorities think of an Indian district officer that conformed to Buddhism or Brahminism, and built a temple? That is what the Roman officials would think of our centurion. And there were other beautiful traits in his character. He had a servant ‘that was dear to him.’ It was not only the nexus of master and servant and cash payments that bound these two together. And very beautiful is this story, when he himself speaks about this servant. He does not use the rough word which implies a bondservant, and which is employed throughout the whole of the rest of the narrative, but a much gentler one, and speaks of him as his ‘boy.’ So he had won the hearts of these elders so far as to make them swallow their dislike to Jesus, and deign to go to Him with a request which implied His powers at which at all other times they scoffed.

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I. And, first, we have here the shallow plea of worthiness.

These elders did not think loftily of Jesus Christ. The conception that we have of Him goes a long way to settle whether it is possible or not for us to approach Him with the word ‘worthy’ on our lips. The higher we lift our thought of Christ, the lower becomes our thought of ourselves. These elders saw the centurion from the outside, and estimated him accordingly. There is no more frequent, there is no more unprofitable and impossible occupation, than that of trying to estimate other people’s characters. Yet there are few things that we are so fond of doing. Half our conversation consists of it, and a very large part of what we call literature consists of it; and it is bound to be always wrong, whether it is eulogistic or condemnatory, because it only deals with the surface.

Here we have the shallow plea advanced by these elders in reference to the centurion which corresponds to the equally shallow plea that some of us are tempted to advance in reference to ourselves. The disposition to do so is in us all. Luther said that every man was born with a Pope in his belly. Every man is born with a Pharisee in himself, who thinks that religion is a matter of barter, that it is so much work, buying so much favour here, or heaven hereafter. Wherever you look, you see the working of that tendency. It is the very mainspring of heathenism, with all its penances and performances. It is enshrined in the heart of Roman Catholicism, with its dreams of a treasury of merits, and works of supererogation and the like. Ay! and it has passed over into a great deal of what calls itself Evangelical Protestantism, which thinks that, somehow or other, it is all for our good to come here, for instance on a Sunday, though we have no desire to come and no true worship in us when we have come, and to do a great many things that we would much rather not do, and to abstain from a great many things that we are strongly inclined to, and all with the notion that we have to bring some ‘worthiness’ in order to move Jesus Christ to deal graciously with us.

And then notice that the religion of barter, which thinks to earn God’s favour by deeds, and is, alas! the only religion of multitudes, and subtly mingles with the thoughts of all, tends to lay the main stress on the mere external arts of cult and ritual. ‘He loveth our nation, and hath built us a synagogue’; not, ‘He is gentle, good, Godlike.’ ‘He has built a synagogue.’ That is the type of work which most people who fall into the notion that heaven is to be bought, offer as the price. I have no doubt that there are many people who have never caught a glimpse of any loftier conception than that, and who, when they think-which they do not often do-about religious subjects at all, are saying to themselves, ‘I do as well as I can,’ and who thus bring in some vague thought of the mercy of God as a kind of make-weight to help out what of their own they put in the scale. Ah, dear brethren! that is a wearying, an endless, a self-torturing, an imprisoning, an enervating thought, and the plea of ‘worthiness’ is utterly out of place and unsustainable before God.

II. Now let me turn to the deeper conviction which silences that plea.

‘I am not worthy that Thou shouldest enter under my roof, wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto Thee.’ This man had a loftier conception of who and what Christ was than the elders had. To them He was only one of themselves, perhaps endowed with some kind of prophetic power, but still one of themselves. The centurion had pondered over the mystic power of the word of command, as he knew it by experience in the legion, or in the little troop of which he, though a man under the authority of his higher officers, was the commander; and he knew that even his limited power carried with it absolute authority and compelled obedience. And he had looked at Christ, and wondered, and thought, and had come at last to a dim apprehension of that great truth that, somehow or other, in this Man there did lie a power which, by the mere utterance of His will, could affect matter, could raise the dead, could still a storm, could banish disease, could quell devils. He did not formulate his belief, he could not have said exactly what it led to, or what it contained, but he felt that there was something divine about Him. And so, seeing, though it was but through mists, the sight of that great perfection, that divine humanity and human divinity, he bowed himself and said, ‘Lord! I am not worthy.’

When you see Christ as He is, and give Him the honour due to His name, all notions of desert will vanish utterly.

Further, the centurion saw himself from the inside, and that makes all the difference. Ah, brethren! most of us know our own characters just as little as we know our own faces, and find it as difficult to form a just estimate of what the hidden man of the heart looks like as we find it impossible to form a just estimate of what we look to other people as we walk down the street. But if we once turned the searchlight upon ourselves, I do not think that any of us would long be able to stand by that plea, ‘I am worthy.’ Have you ever been on a tour of discovery, like what they go through at the Houses of Parliament on the first day of each session, down into the cellars to see what stores of explosive material, and what villains to fire it, may be lurking there? If you have once seen yourself as you are, and take into account, not only actions but base tendencies, foul, evil thoughts, imagined sins of the flesh, meannesses and basenesses that never have come to the surface, but which you know are bits of you, I do not think that you will have much more to say about 'I am worthy.' The flashing waters of the sea may be all blazing in the sunshine, but if they were drained off, what a frightful sight the mud and the ooze at the bottom would be! Others look at the dancing, glittering surface, but you, if you are a wise man, will go down in the diving-bell sometimes, and for a while stop there at the bottom, and turn a bull's-eye straight upon all the slimy, crawling things that are there, and that would die if they came into the light.

'I am not worthy that Thou shouldest enter under my roof.' But then, as I have said, most of us are strangers to ourselves. The very fact of a course of action which, in other people, we should describe with severe condemnation, being ours, bribes us to indulgence and lenient judgment. Familiarity, too, weakens our sense of the foulness of our own evils. If you have been in the Black Hole all night, you do not know how vitiated the atmosphere is. You have to come out into the fresh air to find out that. We look at the errors of others through a microscope; we look at our own through the wrong end of the telescope; and the one set, when we are in a cynical humour, seem bigger than they are; and the other set always seem smaller.

Now, that clear consciousness of my own sinfulness ought to underlie all my religious feelings and thoughts. I believe, for my part, that no man is in a position to apprehend Christianity rightly who has not made the acquaintance of his own bad self. And I trace a very large proportion of the shallow Christianity of this day as well as of the disproportion in which its various truths are set forth, and the rising of crops of erroneous conceptions just to this, that this generation has to a large extent lost-no, do not let me say this generation, *you and I*-have to a large extent lost, that wholesome consciousness of our own unworthiness and sin.

But on the other hand, let me remind you that the centurion's deeper conviction is not yet the deepest of all, and that whilst the Christianity which ignores sin is sure to be impotent, on the other hand the Christianity which sees very little but sin is bondage and misery, and is impotent too. And there are many of us whose type of religion is far gloomier than it should be, and whose motive of service is far more servile than it ought to be, just because we have not got beyond the centurion, and can only say, ‘I am not worthy; I am a poor, miserable sinner.’

III. And so I come to the third point, which is not in my text, but which both my texts converge upon, and that is the deepest truth of all, that worthiness or unworthiness has nothing to do with Christ’s love.

When these elders interceded with Jesus, He at once rose and went with them, and that not because of their intercession or of the certificate of character which they had given, but because His own loving heart impelled Him to go to any soul that sought His help. So we are led away from all anxious questionings as to whether we are worthy or no, and learn that, far above all thoughts either of undue self-complacency or of undue self-depreciation, lies the motive for Christ’s gracious and healing approach in.

‘His ceaseless, unexhausted love,
Unmerited and free.’

This is the truth to which the consciousness of sinfulness and unworthiness points us all, for which that consciousness prepares us, in which that consciousness does not melt away, but rather is increased and ceases to be any longer a burden or a pain. Here, then, we come to the very bed-rock of everything, for

‘Merit lives from man to man,
But not from man, O Lord, to Thee.’

Jesus Christ comes to us, not drawn by our deserts, but impelled by His own love, and that love pours itself out upon each of us. So we do not need painfully to amass a store of worthiness, nor to pile up our own works, by which we may climb to heaven. ‘Say not, who shall ascend up into heaven,’ to bring Christ down again, ‘but the word is nigh thee, that if thou wilt believe with thine heart, thou shalt be saved.’ Worthiness or unworthiness is to be swept clean out of the field, and I am to be content to be a pauper, to owe everything to what I have done nothing to procure, and to cast myself on the sole, all-sufficient mercy of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And then comes liberty, and then comes joy. If the gift is given from no consideration of men’s deserts, then the only thing that men have to do is to exercise the faith that takes it. As the Apostle says in words that sound very hard and technical, but which, if you would only ponder them, are throbbing with vitality, ‘It is of faith that it might be by grace.’ Since He gives simply because He loves, the only requisites are the knowledge of our need, the will to receive, the trust that, in clasping the Giver, possesses the gift.

The consciousness of unworthiness will be deepened. The more we know ourselves to be sinful, the more we shall cleave to Christ, and the more we cleave to Christ, the more we shall know ourselves to be sinful. Peter caught a glimpse of what Jesus was when he sat in the boat, and he said, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!’ But Peter saw both himself and his Lord more clearly, that is more truly, when, subsequent to his black treachery, his brother Apostle said to him concerning the figure standing on the beach in the grey morning, ‘It is the Lord,’ and he flung himself over the side and floundered through the water to get to his Master’s feet. For that is the place for the man who knows himself unworthy. The more we are conscious of our sin, the closer let us cling to our Lord’s forgiving heart, and the more sure we are that we have that love which we have not earned, the more shall we feel how unworthy of it we are. As one of the prophets says, with profound meaning, ‘Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy transgression, when I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done.’ The child buries its face on its mother’s breast, and feels its fault the more because the loving arms clasp it close.

And so, dear brethren, deepen your convictions, if you are deluded by that notion of merit; deepen your convictions, if you see your own evil so clearly that you see little else. Come into the light, come into the liberty, rise to that great thought, ‘Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us.’ Have done with the religion of barter, and come to the religion of undeserved grace. If you are going to stop on the commercial level, ‘the wages of sin is death’; rise to the higher ground: ‘the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.’

25)Luke 7:13-15

Luke

JESUS AT THE BIER

Luk. 7:13 - Luk. 7:15.

We owe our knowledge of this incident to Luke only. He is the Evangelist who specially delights in recording the gracious relations of our Lord with women, and he is also the Evangelist who delights in telling us of unasked miracles which Christ performed. Both of these characteristics unite in this story, and it may have been these, rather than the fact of its being a narrative of a resurrection, that found for it a place in this Gospel.

Be that as it may, it is obvious to remark that this miracle was not wrought with any intention of establishing Christ's claims thereby. Its motive was simply pity; its purpose was merely to comfort a desolate woman whose hope and love and defence were lying stretched on her boy's bier. Was that a sufficient reason for a miracle? People tell us that a test of a spurious miracle is that it is done without any adequate purpose to be served. Jesus Christ thought that to comfort one poor, sorrowful heart was reason enough for putting His hand out, and dragging the prey from the very jaws of death, so loftily did He think of human sorrow and of the comforting thereof.

Now I think we unduly limit the meaning of our Lord's miracles when we regard them as specially intended to authenticate His claims. They are not merely the evidences of revelation; they are themselves a large part of revelation. My purpose in this sermon is to look at this incident from that one point of view, and to try to set clearly before our minds what it shows us of the character and work of Jesus Christ. And there are three things on which I desire to touch briefly. We have Him here revealed to us as the compassionate Drier of all tears; the life-giving Antagonist of death; and as the Re-uniter of parted hearts.

Note, then, these three things.

I. First of all, look at that wonderful revelation that lies here of Jesus Christ as the compassionate Drier of all tears.

The poor woman, buried in her grief, with her eyes fixed on the bier, has no thought for the little crowd that came up the rocky road, as she and her friends are hurrying down it to the place of graves. She was a stranger to Christ, and Christ a stranger to her. The last thing that she would have thought of would have been eliciting any compassion from those who thus fortuitously met her on her sad errand. But Christ looks, and His eye sees far more deeply and far more tenderly into the sorrow of the desolate, childless widow than any human eyes looked. And as swift as was His perception of the sorrow, so swiftly does He throw Himself into sympathy with it. The true human emotion of unmingled pity wells up in His heart and moves Him to action.

And just because the manhood was perfect and sinless, therefore the sympathy of Christ was deeper than any human sympathy, howsoever tender it may be; for what unfits us to feel compassion is our absorption with ourselves. That makes our hearts hard and insensitive, and is the true, 'witches' mark'-to recur to the old fable-the spot where no external pressure can produce sensation. The ossified heart of the selfish man is closed against divine compassion. Since Jesus Christ forgot Himself in pitying men, and Himself 'took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses,' He must have been what none of us are-free from all taint of selfishness, and from all insensibility born of sin.

But there is another step to be taken. That pitying Christ, on the rocky road outside the little Galilean village, feeling all the pain and sorrow of the lonely mother-that is God! 'Lo! this is our God; and we have waited for Him.' Ay! waited through all the uncompassionating centuries, waited in the presence of the false gods, waited whilst men have been talking about an impassive Deity careless in the heavens, over whose serene blessedness no shadow can ever pass. This is our God. No impassive monster that no man can love or care for, but a God with a heart, a God that can pity, a God who, wonderful as it is, can and does enter, in the humanity of Jesus Christ, into a fellow-feeling of our infirmities.

If Jesus Christ in His pity was only a perfect and lovely example of unselfish sympathy such as man can exercise, what in the name of common-sense does it matter to me how much, or how tenderly, He pitied those past generations? The showers and the sunshine of this summer will do as much good to the springing corn in the fields to-day as the pity of a dead, human Christ will do for you and me. In our weaknesses, in our sorrows great and small, in our troubles and annoyances, you and I need, dear brethren, a living Jesus to pity us, there in the heavens, just as He pitied that poor woman outside the gate of Nain. Blessed be God!, we have Him. The human Christ is the manifestation of the Divine, and as we listen to the Evangelist that says, 'When He saw her He had compassion upon her,' we bow our heads and feel that the old psalmist spoke a truth when He said, 'His compassions fail not,' and that the old prophet spoke a truth, the depth of which his experience did not enable him to fathom, when he said that 'in all their afflictions He was afflicted.'

Then, note that the pitying Christ dries the tears before He raises the dead. That is beautiful, I think. 'Weep not,' He says to the woman-a kind of a prophecy that He is going to take away the occasion for weeping; and so He calls lovingly upon her for some movement of hope and confidence towards Himself. With what an ineffable sweetness of cadence in His sympathetic voice these words would be spoken! How often, kindly and vainly, men say to one another, 'Weep not,' when they are utterly powerless to take away or in the smallest degree to diminish the occasion for weeping! And how often, unkindly, in mistaken endeavour to bring about resignation and submission, do well-meaning and erring good people say to mourners in the passion of their sorrow, 'Weep not!' Jesus Christ never dammed back tears when tears were wholesome, and would bring blessing. And Jesus Christ never said, 'Dry your tears,' without stretching out His own hand to do it.

How does He do it? First of all by the assurance of His sympathy. Ah! in that word there came a message to the lonely heart, as there comes a message, dear brethren, to any man or woman among us now who may be fighting with griefs and cares or sorrows, great or small-the assurance that Jesus Christ knows all about your pain and will help you to bear it if you will let Him. The sweet consciousness of Christ's sympathy is the true antidote to excessive grief.

And He dries the tears, not only by the assurance of His sympathy, but by encouraging expectation and hope. When He said, ‘Weep not,’ He was pledging Himself to do what was needed in order to stay the flow of weeping. And He would encourage us, in the midst of our cares and sorrows and loneliness, not indeed to suppress the natural emotion of sorrow, nor to try after a fantastic and unreal suppression of its wholesome signs, but to weep as though we wept not, because beyond the darkness and the dreariness we see the glimmering of the eternal day. He encourages expectation as the antagonist of sorrow, for the curse of sorrow is that it is ever looking backwards, and the true attitude for all men who have an immortal Christ to trust, and an immortality for themselves to claim, is that not ‘backward’ should their ‘glances be, but forward to their Father’s home.’ These are the thoughts that dry our tears, the assurance of the sympathy of Christ, and the joyous expectation of a great good to be ours, where beyond those voices there is peace.

Brother! it may be with all of us-for all of us carry some burden of sorrow or care-as it is with the hedgerows and wet ploughed fields to-day; on every spray hangs a raindrop, and in every raindrop gleams a reflected sun. And so all our tears and sorrows may flash into beauty, and sparkle into rainbowed light if the smile of His face falls upon us.

And then, still further, this pitying Christ is moved by His pity to bring unasked gifts. No petition, no expectation, not the least trace of faith or hope drew from Him this mighty miracle. It came welling up from His own heart. And therein it is of a piece with all His work. For the divine love of which Christ is the Bearer, the Agent, and the Channel for us men, ‘tarries not for men, nor waiteth for the sons of men,’ but before we ask, delights to bestow itself, and gives that which no man ever sought, even the miracles of the Incarnation and Crucifixion of Jesus Christ our Lord. If heaven had waited until men’s prayers had forced its gates ere it sent forth its greatest gift, it had waited for ever, and all mankind had perished. God’s love flows out of its own expansive and diffusive nature. Its necessity is to impart itself, and its nature and property is to give. A measureless desire to bestow itself, and in itself all good, is the definition of the love of God. And Christ comes ‘to the unthankful and to the evil,’ bringing a gift which none of us have asked, and giving as much of Himself as He can give, undesired, to every heart, that thereby we may be led to desire these better gifts which cannot be bestowed unless we seek them.

So here we have the compassion of the human Christ, which is the divine compassion, drying all tears and giving unasked blessings.

II. Note, secondly, the further revelation of our Lord here as being the life-giving Antagonist of Death.

There is something exceedingly picturesque, and if I might use the word, dramatic, in the meeting of these two processions outside the city gate, the little crowd of mourners hurrying, according to the Eastern fashion, down the hill to the place of tombs, and the other little group toiling up the hill to the city. There Life and Death stand face to face. Jesus Christ puts out His hand, and lays it upon the bier, not to communicate anything, but simply to arrest its progress. Is it not a parable of His work in the world? His great work is to stop the triumphant march of Death-that grim power which broods like a thundercloud over humanity, and sucks up all brightness into its ghastly folds, and silences all song. He comes and says ‘Stop’; and it stands fixed upon the spot. He arrests the march of Death. Not indeed that He touches the mere physical fact. The physical fact is not what men mean by death. It is not what they cower before. What the world shrinks from is the physical fact plus its associations, its dim forebodings, its recoilings from the unknown regions into which the soul goes from out of ‘the warm precincts of the cheerful day,’ and plus the possibilities of retribution, the certainty of judgment. All these Christ sweeps away, so that we may say, ‘He hath abolished Death,’ even though we all have to pass through the mere externals of dying, for the dread of Death is gone for ever, if we trust Him.

And then note, still further, we have Christ here as the Life-giver. ‘Young man, I say unto thee, Arise!’ Christ took various methods of imparting His miraculous power. These methods varied, as it would appear, according to the religious necessities of the subjects or beholders of the miracle. Sometimes He touched, sometimes He employed still more material vehicles, such as the clay with which He moistened the eyes of the blind man, and the spittle with which He touched the ears of the deaf. But all these various methods were but helps to feeble faith, and in the case of all the raisings from the dead it is the voice alone that is employed.

So, then, what is the meaning of that majestic ‘I say unto thee, Arise’? He claims to work by His own power. Unless Jesus Christ wielded divine authority in a fashion in which no mere human representative and messenger of God ever has wielded it, for Him to stand by that bier and utter, ‘I say unto thee, Arise!’ was neither more nor less than blasphemy. And yet the word had force. He assumed to act by His own power, and the event showed that He assumed not too much. ‘The Son quickeneth whom He will.’

Further, He acts by His bare word. So He did on many other occasions-rebuking the fever and it departs, speaking to the wind and it ceases, calling to the dead and they come forth. And who is He, the bare utterance of whose will is supreme, and has power over material things? Let that centurion whose creed is given to us in the earlier portion of this chapter answer the question. ‘I say to my servant, Go! and he goeth; Come! and he cometh; Do this! and he doeth it. Speak Thou, and all the embattled forces of the universe will obey Thine autocratic and sovereign behest,’ they ‘hearken to His commandments, and do the voice of His word.’

Then note, still further, that this voice of Christ’s has power in the regions of the dead. Wherever that young man was, he heard; in whatsoever state or condition he was, his personality felt and obeyed the magnetic force of Christ’s will. The fact that the Lord spake and the boy heard, disposes, if it be true, of much error, and clears away much darkness. Then the separation of body and soul *is* a separation and not a destruction. Then consciousness is not a function of the brain, as they tell us. Then man lives wholly after he is dead. Then it is possible for the spirit to come out of some dim region, where we know not, in what condition we know not. Only this we know-that, wherever it is, Christ’s will has authority there; and there, too, is obedience to His commandment.

And so let me remind you that this Voice is not only revealing as to Christ’s authority and power, and illuminative as to the condition of the disembodied dead, but it is also prophetic as to the future. It tells us that there is nothing impossible or unnatural in that great assurance. ‘The hour is coming when they that are in the graves shall hear His voice, and shall come forth.' There shall be for the dead a reunion with a body, which will bring men again into connection with an external universe, and be the precursor of a fuller judgment and an intenser retribution.

Brethren, that Voice that raised one poor bewildered boy to sit up on his bier, and begin to speak-broken exclamations possibly, and stammering words of astonishment-shall be flung, like a trumpet that scatters marvellous sounds, through the sepulchres of the nations and compel all to stand before the throne. You and I will hear it; let us be ready for it.

III. So, lastly, we have here the revelation of our Lord as the Reuniter of parted hearts.

That is a wonderfully beautiful touch, evidently coming from an eye-witness-'He delivered him to his mother.' That was what it had all been done for. The mighty miracle was wrought that that poor weeping woman might be comforted.

May we not go a step further? May we not say, If Jesus Christ was so mindful of the needs of a sorrowful solitary soul here upon earth, will He be less mindful of the enduring needs of loving hearts yonder in the heavens? If He raised this boy from the dead that his mother's arms might twine round him again, and his mother's heart be comforted, will He not in that great Resurrection give back dear ones to empty, outstretched arms, and thereby quiet hungry hearts? It is impossible to suppose that, continuing ourselves, we should be deprived of our loves. These are too deeply engrained and enwrought into the very texture of our being for that to be possible. And it is as impossible that, in the great day and blessed world where all lost treasures are found, hearts that have been sad and solitary here for many a day shall not clasp again the souls of their souls-'and with God be the rest.'

So, though we know very little, surely we may take the comfort of such a thought as this, which should be very blessed and sweet to some of us, and with some assurance of hope may feel that the risen boy at the gate of Nain was not the last lost one whom Christ, with a smile, will deliver to the hearts that mourn for them, and there we 'shall clasp inseparable hands with joy and bliss in over-measure for ever.’ ‘And so shall we’-they and I, for that is what *we* means-’ so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.’

26)Luke 7:18-27

Luke

JOHN’S DOUBTS AND CHRIST’S PRAISE

Luk. 7:18 - Luk. 7:28.

We take three stages in this passage-the pathetic message from the prisoner, Christ’s double answer to it, and His grand eulogium on John.

I. The message from the prisoner.

Had mists of doubt crept over John’s clear conviction that Jesus was the Messiah? Some have thought it incredible that the man who had seen the descending dove, and heard the voice proclaiming ‘This is My beloved Son,’ should ever have wavered. But surely our own experience of the effect of circumstances and moods on our firmest beliefs gives us parallels to John’s doubts. A prison would be especially depressing to the desert-loving Baptist; compelled inaction would fret his spirit; he would be tempted to think that, if Jesus were indeed the Bridegroom, he might have spared a thought for the friend of the Bridegroom languishing in Machaerus. Above all, the kind of works that Jesus was doing did not fill the *rôle* of the Messiah as he had conceived it. Where were the winnowing fan, the axe laid to the roots of the trees, the consuming fire? This gentle friend of publicans and sinners was not what he had expected the One mightier than himself to be.

Probably his disciples went farther in doubting than he did, but his message was the expression of his own hesitations, as is suggested by the answer being directed to him, not to the disciples. It may have also been meant to stir Jesus, if He were indeed Messiah, to ‘take to Himself His great power.’ But the most natural explanation of it is that John’s faith was wavering. The tempest made the good ship stagger. But reeling faith stretched out a hand to Jesus, and sought to steady itself thereby. We shall not come to much harm if we carry our doubts as to Him to be cleared by Himself. John's gloomy prison thoughts may teach us how much our faith may be affected by externals and by changing tempers of mind, and how lenient, therefore, should be our judgments of many whose trust may falter when a strain comes. It may also teach us not to write bitter things against ourselves because of the ups and downs of our religious experience, but yet to seek to resist the impression that circumstances make on it, and to aim at keeping up an equable temperature, both in the summer of prosperity and the winter of sorrow.

II. The twofold answer.

Its first part was a repetition of the same kind of miracles, the news of which had evoked John's message; and its second part was simply the command to report these, with one additional fact-that good tidings were preached to the poor. That seemed an unsatisfactory reply, but it meant just this-to send John back to think over these deeds of gracious pity and love as well as of power, and to ask himself whether they were not the fit signs of the Messiah. It is to be noted that the words which Christ bids the disciples speak to their master would recall the prophecies in Isa. 35:5 and Isa. 61:1, and so would set John to revise his ideas of what prophecy had painted Messiah as being. The deepest meaning of the answer is that love, pity, healing, are the true signs, not judicial, retributive, destructive energy. John wanted the lightning; Christ told him that the silent sunshine exerts energy, to which the fiercest flash is weak. We need the lesson, for we are tempted to exalt force above love, if not in our thoughts of God, yet in looking at and dealing with men; and we are slow to apprehend the teaching of Bethlehem and Calvary, that the divinest thing in God, and the strongest power among men, is gentle, pitying, self-sacrificing love. Rebuke could not be softer than that which was sent to John in the form of a benediction. To take offence at Jesus, either because He is not what we expect Him to be, or for any other reason, is to shut oneself out from the sum of blessings which to accept Him brings with it.

III. Christ's eulogium on John.

How lovingly it was timed! The people had heard John’s message and its answer, and might expect some disparaging remarks about his vacillation. But Jesus chooses that very time to lavish unstinted praise on him. That is praise indeed. The remembrance of the Jordan banks, where John had baptized, shapes the first question. The streams of people would not have poured out there to look at the tall reeds swaying in the breeze, nor to listen to a man who was like them. He who would rouse and guide others must have a firm will, and not be moved by any blast that blows. Men will rally round one who has a mind of his own and bravely speaks it, and who has a will of his own, and will not be warped out of his path. The undaunted boldness of John, of whom, as of John Knox, it might be said that ‘he never feared the face of man,’ was part of the secret of his power. His imprisonment witnessed to it. He was no reed shaken by the wind, but like another prophet, was made ‘an iron pillar, and brazen walls’ to the whole house of Israel. But he had more than strength of character, he had noble disregard for worldly ease. Not silken robes, like courtiers’, but a girdle of camels’ hair, not delicate food, but locusts and wild honey, were his. And that was another part of his power, as it must be, in one shape or other, of all who rouse men’s consciences, and wake up generations rotting away in self-indulgence. John’s fiery words would have had no effect if they had not poured hot from a life that despised luxury and soft ease. If a man is once suspected of having his heart set on material good, his usefulness as a Christian teacher is weakened, if not destroyed. But even these are not all, for Jesus goes on to attest that John was a prophet, and something even more; namely, the forerunner of the Messiah. As, in a royal progress, the nearer the king’s chariot the higher the rank, and they who ride just in front of him are the chiefest, so John’s proximity in order of time to Jesus distinguished him above those who had heralded him long ages ago. It is always true that, the closer we are to Him, the more truly great we are. The highest dignity is to be His messenger. We must not lose sight of the exalted place which Jesus by implication claims for Himself by such a thought, as well as by the quotation from Malachi, and by the alteration in it of the original ‘My’ and ‘Me’ to ‘Thy’ and ‘Thee.’ He does not mean that John was the greatest man that ever lived, as the world counts greatness, but that in the one respect of relation to Him, and consequent nearness to the kingdom, he surpassed all.

The scale employed to determine greatness in this saying is position in regard to the kingdom, and while John is highest of those who [historically] were without it, because [historically] he was nearest to it, the least *in* it is greater than the greatest without. The spiritual standing of John and the devout men before him is not in question; it is their position towards the manifestation of the kingdom in time that is in view. We rejoice to believe that John and many a saint from early days were subjects of the King, and have been ‘saved into His everlasting kingdom.’ But Jesus would have us think greatly of the privilege of living in the light of His coming, and of being permitted by faith to enter His kingdom. The lowliest believer knows more, and possesses a fuller life born of the Spirit, than the greatest born of woman, who has not received that new birth from above.

27)Luke 7:28

Luke

JOHN’S DOUBTS AND CHRIST’S PRAISE

GREATNESS IN THE KINGDOM

Luk. 7:28.

We were speaking in a preceding sermon about the elements of true greatness, as represented in the life and character of John the Baptist. As we remarked then, our Lord poured unstinted eulogium upon the head of John, in the audience of the people, at the very moment when he showed himself weakest. ‘None born of women’ was, in Christ’s eyes, ‘greater than John the Baptist.’ The eulogium, authoritative as it was, was immediately followed by a depreciation as authoritative, from Christ’s lips: ‘The least in the kingdom is greater than he.’ Greatness depends, not on character, but on position. The contrast that is drawn is between being *in* and being *out* of the kingdom; and this man, great as he was among them ‘that are born of women,’ stood but upon the threshold; therefore, and only therefore, and in that respect, was he ‘less than the least’ who was safely within it.

Now, there are two things in these great words of our Lord to notice by way of introduction. One is the calm assumption which He makes of authority to marshal men, to stand above the greatest of them, and to allocate their places, because He knows all about them; and the other is the equally calm and strange assumption of authority which He makes, in declaring that the least within the kingdom is greater than the greatest without. For the kingdom is embodied in Him, its King, and He claimed to have opened the door of entrance into it. ‘The kingdom of God,’ or of heaven-an old Jewish idea-means, whatever else it means, an order of things in which the will of God is supreme. Jesus Christ says, ‘I have come to make that real reign of God, in the hearts of men, possible and actual.’ So He presents Himself in these words as infinitely higher than the greatest within, or the greatest without the kingdom, and as being Himself the sovereign arbiter of men’s claims to greatness. Greater than the greatest is He, the King; for if to be barely across the threshold stamps dignity upon a man, what shall we say of the conception of His own dignity which He formed who declared that He sat on the throne of that kingdom, and was its Monarch?

I. The first thought that I suggest is the greatness of the little ones in the kingdom.

As I have said, our Lord puts the whole emphasis of His classification on men’s position. Inside all are great, greater than any that are outside. The least in the one order is greater than the greatest in the other. So, then, the question comes, How does a man step across that threshold? Our Lord evidently means the expression to be synonymous with His true disciples. We may avail ourselves, in considering how men come to be in the kingdom, of His own words. Once He said that unless we *received* it as little children, we should never be *within* it. There the blending of the two metaphors adds force and completeness to the thought. The kingdom is without us, and is offered to us; we must receive it as a gift, and it must come into us before we can be in it. The point of comparison between the recipients of the kingdom and little children does not lie in any sentimental illusions about the innocence of childhood, but in its dependence, in its absence of pretension, in its sense of clinging helplessness, in its instinctive trust. All these things in the child are natural, spontaneous, unreflecting, and therefore of no value. You and I have to think ourselves back to them, and to work ourselves back to them, and to fight ourselves back to them, and to strip off their opposites which gather round us in the course of our busy, effortful life. Then they become worth infinitely more than their instinctive analogues in the infant. The man’s absence of pretension and consciousness of helplessness and dependent trust are beautiful and great, and through them the kingdom of God, with all its lights and glories, pours into his heart, and he himself steps into it, and becomes a true servant and subject of the King.

Then there is another word of the Master’s, equally illuminative, as to how we pass into the kingdom, when He spoke to the somewhat patronising Pharisee that came to talk to Him by night, and condescended to give the young Rabbi a certificate of approval from the Sanhedrim, ‘We know that Thou art a Teacher come from God.’ Christ’s answer was, in effect, ‘Knowing will not serve your turn. There is something more than that wanted: “Except a man be born of water, and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”‘ So, another condition of entering the kingdom-that is, of coming for myself into the attitude of lowly, glad submission to God’s will-is the reception into our natures of a new life-principle, so that we are not only, like the men whom Christ compared with John, ‘born of women,’ but by a higher birth are made partakers of a higher life, and born of the Spirit of God. These are the conditions-on our side the reception with humility, helplessness, dependent trust like those of children, on God's side the imparting, in answer to that dependence and trust, of a higher principle of life-these are the conditions on which we can pass out of the realm of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of His love.

This being so, then we have next to consider the greatness that belongs to the least of those who thus have crossed the threshold, and have come to exercise joyous submission to the will of God. The highest dignity of human nature, the loftiest nobility of which it is capable, is to submit to God's will. 'Man's chief end is to glorify God.' There is nothing that leads life to such sovereign power as when we lay all our will at His feet, and say, 'Break, bend, mould, fashion it as Thou wilt.' We are in a higher position when we are in God's hand. His tools and the pawns on His board, than we are when we are seeking to govern our lives at our pleasure. Dignity comes from submission, and they who keep God's commandments are the aristocracy of the world.

Then, further, there comes the thought that the greatness that belongs to the least of the little ones within the kingdom springs from their closer relation to the Saviour, whose work they more clearly know and more fully appropriate. It is often said that the Sunday-school child who can repeat the great text, 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life,' stands far above prophet, righteous man, and John himself. This is not exactly true, for knowledge of the truth is not what introduces into the kingdom; but it is true that the weakest, the humblest, the most ignorant amongst us, who grasps that truth of the God-sent Son whose death is the world's life, and who lives, therefore, nestling close to Jesus Christ, walks in a light far brighter than the twilight that shone upon the Baptist, or the yet dimmer rays that reached prophets and righteous men of old. It is not a question of character; it is a question of position. True greatness is regulated, by closeness to Jesus Christ, and by apprehension and appropriation of His work to myself. The dwarf on the shoulders of the giant sees further than the giant; and 'the least in the kingdom,' being nearer to Jesus Christ than the men of old could ever be, because possessing the fuller revelation of God in Him, is greater than the greatest without. They who possess, even in germ, that new life-principle which comes in the measure of a man’s faith in Christ, thereby are lifted above saints and martyrs and prophets of old. The humblest Christian grasps a fuller Christ, and therein possesses a fuller spiritual life, than did the ancient heroes of the faith. Christ’s classification here says nothing about individual character. It says nothing about the question as to the possession of true religion or of spiritual life by the ancient saints, but it simply declares that because we have a completer revelation, we therefore, grasping that revelation, are in a more blessed position, ‘God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.’ The lowest in a higher order is higher than the highest in a lower order. As the geologist digs down through the strata, and, as he marks the introduction of new types, declares that the lowest specimen of the mammalia is higher than the highest preceding of the reptiles or of the birds, so Christ says, ‘He that is lowest in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.’

Brethren! these thoughts should stimulate and should rebuke us that having so much we make so little use of it. We know God more fully, and have mightier motives to serve Him, and larger spiritual helps in serving Him than had any of the mighty men of old. We have a fuller revelation than Abraham had; have we a tithe of his faith? We have a mightier Captain of the Lord’s host with us than stood before Joshua; have we any of his courage? We have a tenderer and fuller revelation of the Father than had psalmists of old; are our aspirations greater after God, whom we know so much better, than were theirs in the twilight of revelation? A savage with a shell and a knife of bone will make delicate carvings that put our workers, with their modern tools, to shame. A Hindoo, weaving in a shed, with bamboos for its walls and palm leaves for its roof, and a rude loom, the same as his ancestors used three thousand years ago, will turn out muslins that Lancashire machinery cannot rival. We are exalted in position, let us see to it that Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the saints, do not put us to shame, lest the greatest should become the guiltiest, and exaltation to heaven should lead to dejection to hell.

II. Notice the littleness of the great ones in the kingdom.

Our Lord here recognises the fact that there will be varieties of position, that there will be an outer and an inner court in the Temple, and an aristocracy in the kingdom. ‘In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but of wood and of clay.’ When a man passes into the territory, it still remains an open question how far into the blessed depths of the land he will penetrate. Or, to put away the figure, if as Christian people we have laid hold of Jesus Christ, and in Him have received the kingdom and the new life-power, there still remains the question, how much and how faithfully we shall utilise the gifts, and what place in the earthly experience and manifestation of His kingdom we shall occupy. There are great and small within it.

So it comes to be a very important question for us all, how we may not merely be content, as so many of us are, with having scraped inside and just got both feet across the boundary line, but may become great in the kingdom. Let me answer that question in three sentences. The little ones in Christ’s kingdom become great by the continual exercise of the same things which admitted them there at first. If greatness depends on position in reference to Jesus Christ, the closer we come to Him and the more we keep ourselves in loving touch and fellowship with Him, the greater in the kingdom we shall be. Again, the little ones in Christ’s kingdom become great by self-forgetting service. ‘He that will be great among you, let him be your minister.’ Self-regard dwarfs a man, self-oblivion magnifies him. If ever you come across, even in the walks of daily life, traces in people of thinking much of themselves, and of living mainly for themselves, down go these men in your estimation at once. Whether you have a beam of the same sort in your own eye or not, you can see the mote in theirs, and you lower your appreciation of them immediately. It is the same in Christ’s kingdom, only in an infinitely loftier fashion. There, to become small is to become great. Again, the little ones in Christ’s kingdom become great, not only by cleaving close to the Source of all greatness, and deriving thence a higher dignity by the suppression and crucifixion of self-esteem and self-regard, but by continual obedience to their Lord’s commandment. As He said on the Sermon on the Mount, ‘Whoso shall do and teach one of the least of these commandments shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.’ The higher we are, the more we are bound to punctilious obedience to the smallest injunction. The more we are obedient to the lightest of His commandments, the greater we become. Thus the least in the kingdom may become the greatest there, if only, cleaving close to Christ, he forgets himself, and lives for others, and does the Father's will.

III. Lastly, I travel for a moment beyond my text, and note the perfect greatness of all in the perfected kingdom.

The very notion of a kingdom of God established in reality, however imperfectly here on earth, demands that somewhere, and some time, and somehow, there should be an adequate, a universal and an eternal manifestation and establishment of it. If, here and now, dotted about over the world, there are men who, with much hindrance and many breaks in their obedience, are still the subjects of that realm, and trying to do the will of God, unless we are reduced to utter bewilderment intellectually, there must be a region in which that will shall be perfectly done, shall be continually done, shall be universally done. The obedience that we render to Him, just because it is broken by so much rebellion, slackened by so much indifference, hindered by so many clogs, hampered by so many limitations, points, by its attainments and its imperfections alike, to a region where the clogs and limitations and interruptions shall have all vanished, and the will of the Lord shall be the life and the light thereof.

So there rises up before us the fair prospect of that heavenly kingdom, in which all that here is interrupted and thwarted tendency shall have become realised effect.

That state must necessarily be a state of continual advance. For if greatness consists in apprehension and appropriation of Christ and His work, there are no limits to the possible expansion and assimilation of a human heart to Him, and the wealth of His glory is absolutely boundless. An infinite Christ to be assimilated, and an indefinite capacity of assimilation in us, make the guarantee that eternity shall see the growing progress of the subjects of the kingdom, in resemblance to the King.

If there is this endless progress, which is the only notion of heaven that clothes with joy and peace the awful thought of unending existence, then there will be degrees there too, and the old distinction of 'least' and 'greatest' in the kingdom will subsist to the end. The army marches onwards, but they are not all abreast. They that are in front do not intercept any of the blessings or of the light that come to the rearmost files; and they that are behind are advancing and envy not those who lead the march.

Only let us remember, brother, that the distinction of least and great in the kingdom, in its imperfect forms on earth, is carried onwards into the kingdom in its perfect form into heaven. The highest point of our attainment here is the starting-point of our progress yonder. ‘An entrance shall be ministered’; it may be ‘ministered abundantly,’ or we may be ‘saved yet so as by fire.’ Let us see to it that, being least in our own eyes, we belong to the greatest in the kingdom. And that we may, let us hold fast by the Source of all greatness, Christ Himself, and so we shall be launched on a career of growing greatness, through the ages of eternity. To be joined to Him is greatness, however small the world may think us. To be separate from Him is to be small, though the hosannas of the world may misname us great.

28)Luke 7:30

Luke

THWARTING GOD’S PURPOSE

Luk. 7:30.

Our Lord has just been pouring unstinted praise on the head of John the Baptist. The eulogium was tenderly timed, for it followed, and was occasioned by the expression, through messengers, of John’s doubts of Christ’s Messiahship. Lest these should shake the people’s confidence in the Forerunner, and make them think of him as weak and shifting, Christ speaks of him in the glowing words which precede my text, and declares that he is no ‘reed shaken with the wind.’

But what John was was of less moment to Christ’s listeners than was what they had done with John’s message. So our Lord swiftly passes from His eulogium upon John to the sharp thrust of the personal application to His hearers. In the context He describes the twofold treatment which that message had received; and so describes it as, in the description, to lay bare the inmost characteristics of the reception or rejection of the message. As to the former, He says that the mass of the common people, and the outcast publicans, ‘justified God’; by which remarkable expression seems to be meant that their reception of John’s message and baptism acknowledged God’s righteousness in accusing them of sin and demanding from them penitence.

On the other hand, the official class, the cultivated people, the orthodox respectable people-that is to say, the dead formalists-’rejected the counsel of God against themselves.’

Now the word ‘rejected’ would be more adequately rendered ‘*frustrated,*’ thwarted, made void, or some such expression, as indeed it is employed in other places of Scripture, where it is translated ‘disannulled,’ ‘made void,’ and the like. And if we take that meaning, there emerge from this great word of the Master’s two thoughts, that to disbelieve God’s word is to thwart God’s purpose, and that to thwart His purpose is to harm ourselves.

I. And I remark, first, that the sole purpose which God has in view in speaking to us men is our blessing.

I suppose I need not point out to you that ‘counsel’ here does not mean *advice*, but *intention*. In regard to the matter immediately in hand, God’s purpose or *counsel* in sending the Forerunner was, first of all, to produce in the minds of the people a true consciousness of their own sinfulness and need of cleansing; and so to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, who should bring the inward gift which they needed, and so secure their salvation. The intention was, first, to bring to repentance, but that was a preparation for bringing to them full forgiveness and cleansing. And so we may fairly widen the thought into the far greater and nobler one which applies especially to the message of God in Jesus Christ, and say that the only design which God has in view, in the gospel of His Son, is the highest blessing-that is, the salvation-of every man to whom it is spoken.

Now, by the gospel, which, as I say, has thus one single design in the divine mind, I mean, what I think the New Testament means, the whole body of truths which underlie and flow from the fact of Christ’s Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, which in brief are these-man’s sin, man’s helplessness, the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Death of Christ as the sacrifice for the world’s sin; Faith, as the one hand by which we grasp the blessing, and the gift of a Divine Spirit which follows upon our faith, and bestows upon us sonship and likeness to God, purity of life and character, and heaven at last. That, as I take it, is in the barest outline what is meant by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And now I want to press upon you, dear friends, that that great and sublime body of truths made known to us, as I believe, from God Himself, has one sole object in view and none beside-viz. that every man who hears it may partake of the salvation and the hope which it brings. It has a twofold effect, alas! but the twofold effect does not imply a twofold purpose. There have been schemes of so-called Christian theology which have darkened the divine character in this respect, and have obscured the great thought that God has one end in view, and one only, when He speaks to us in all good faith, desiring nothing else but only that we shall be gathered into His heart, and made partakers of His love. He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to the knowledge of the truth.

If so, the question comes very sharp and direct to each of us, Is that gospel fulfilling its purpose in me? There are many subordinate good things flowing from the Christian revelation, such as blessings for social outward life, which are as flowers that spring up in its path; but unless it has effected its one purpose in regard to you and me, it has failed altogether. God meant His word to save your soul. Has it done so? It is a question that any man can answer if he-will be honest with himself.

Further, this single purpose of the divine speech embraces in its intention each of the hearers of that message. I want to gather the wide-flowing generality, ‘God so loved the world that He sent His Son that whosoever believeth,’ into this sharp point, ‘God so loved *me*, that He sent His Son that *I*, believing, might have life eternal.’ We shall never understand the universality of Christianity until we have appreciated the personality and the individuality of its message to each of us. God does not lose thee in the crowd, do not thou lose thyself in it, nor fail to apprehend that *thou* art personally meant by His broadest declarations. It is *thy* salvation that Christ had in view when He became man and died on the Cross; and it is thy salvation that He had in view when He said to His servants, ‘Go into *all* the world'-there is universality-'and preach the Gospel to *every* creature'-there is individuality.

Then, further, God is verily seeking to accomplish this purpose even now, by my lips, in so far as I am true to my Master and my message. The outward appearance of what we are about now is that I am trying, lamely enough, to speak to you. You may judge this service by rules of rhetoric, or anything else you like. But you have not got to the bottom of things unless you feel, as I am praying that every one of you may feel, that even with all my imperfections on my head-and I know them better than you can tell me them-I, like all true men who are repeating God's message as they have caught it, neither more nor less, and have sunk themselves in it, may venture to say, as the Apostle said: 'Now, then, we are ambassadors for God, as though God did beseech by us, we pray in Christ's stead.' John's voice was a revelation of God's purpose, and the voice of every true preacher of Jesus Christ is no less so.

II. Secondly, this single divine purpose, or 'counsel,' may be thwarted.

'They frustrated the counsel of God.' Of all the mysteries of this inexplicable world, the deepest, the mother-mystery of all, is, that given an infinite will and a creature, the creature can thwart the infinite. I said that was the mystery of mysteries: 'Our wills are ours we know not how,'-No! indeed we don't!-'Our wills are ours to make them Thine.' But that purpose necessarily requires the possibility of the alternative that our wills are ours, and we *refuse* 'to make them Thine.' The possibility is mysterious; the reality of the fact is tragic and bewildering. We need no proof except our own consciousness; and if that were silenced we should have the same fact abundantly verified in the condition of the world around us, which sadly shows that not yet is God's 'will' done 'on earth as it is in heaven,' but that men can and do lift themselves up against God and set themselves in antagonism to His most gracious purposes. And whosoever refuses to accept God's message in Christ and God's salvation revealed in that message is thus setting himself in battle array against the infinite, and so far as in him lies [that is to say, in regard to his own personal condition and character] is thwarting God's most holy will.

Now, brethren, I said that there was only one thought in the divine heart when He sent His Son, and that was to save you and me and all of us. But that thought cannot but be frustrated, and made of none effect, as far as the individual is concerned, by unbelief. For there is no way by which any human being can become participant of the spiritual blessings which are included in that great word ‘salvation,’ except by simple trust in Jesus Christ. I cannot too often and earnestly insist upon this plain truth, which, plain as it is, is often obscured, and by many people is never apprehended at all, that when the Apostle says ‘It is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth,’ he is laying down no limitation of the universality or of the adequacy of that power, but is only setting forth the plain condition, inherent in the very nature of things and in the nature of the blessings bestowed, that if a man does not trust God he cannot get them, and God cannot give him them, though His heart yearns to give him them He cannot do it. How can any man get any good out of a medicine if he locks his teeth and won’t take it? How can any truth that I refuse to believe produce any effect upon me? How is it possible for the blessings of forgiveness and cleansing to be bestowed upon men who neither know their need of forgiveness nor desire to be washed from their sins? How can there be the flowing of the Divine Spirit into a heart which is tightly barred against His entrance? In a word, how a man can be saved with the salvation that the Gospel offers, except on condition of his simple trust in Christ the Giver, I, for my part, fail to see. And so I remind you that the thwarting of God’s counsel is the awful prerogative of unbelief.

Then, note that, in accordance with the context, you do not need to put yourselves to much effort in order to bring to nought God’s gracious intention about you. ‘They thwarted the counsel of God, being *not* baptized of Him.’ They did not *do* anything. They simply did nothing, and that was enough. There is no need for violent antagonism to the counsel. Fold your hands in your lap, and the gift will not come into them. Clench them tightly, and put them behind your back, and it cannot come. A negation is enough to ruin a man. You do not need to do anything to slay yourselves. In the ocean, when the lifebelt is within reach, simply forbear to put out your hand to it, and down you will go, like a stone, to the very bottom. ‘They rejected the counsel,’ ‘being *not*’-and that was all.

Further, the people who are in most danger of frustrating God’s gracious purpose are not blackguards, not men and women steeped to the eyebrows in the stagnant pool of sensuous sin, but clean, respectable church-and-chapel-going, sermon-hearing, doctrine-criticising Pharisees. The man or woman who is led away by the passions that are lodged in his or her members is not so hopeless as the man into whose spiritual nature there has come the demon of self-complacent righteousness, or who, as is the case with many a man and woman sitting in these pews now, has listened to, or at all events, has *heard*, men preaching, as I am trying to preach, ever since childhood, and has never done anything in consequence. These are the hopeless people. The Pharisees-and there are hosts of their great-great-grandchildren in all our congregations-’the Pharisees . . . frustrated the counsel of God.’

III. Lastly, this thwarting brings self-inflicted harm.

A little skiff of a boat comes athwart the bows of a six thousand ton steamer, with triple-expansion engines, that can make twenty knots an hour. What will become of the skiff, do you think? You can thwart God’s purpose about yourself, but the great purpose goes on and on. And ‘Who hath hardened himself against Him and prospered?’ You can thwart the purpose, but it is kicking against the pricks.

Consider what you lose when you will have nothing to do with that divine counsel of salvation. Consider not only what you lose, but what you bring upon yourself; how you bind your sin upon your hearts; how you put out your hands, and draw disease and death nearer to yourselves; how you cannot turn away from, or be indifferent to, the gracious, sweet, pleading voice that speaks to you from the Cross and the Throne, without doing damage-in many more ways than I have time to enlarge upon now-to your own character and inward nature. And consider how there lie behind dark and solemn results about which it does not become me to speak, but which it still less becomes me-believing as I do-to suppress. ‘After death the judgment’; and what will become of the thwarters of the divine counsel then?

These wounds, many, deep, deadly as they are, are self-inflicted. There do follow, on God’s message and unbelief of it, awful consequences; but these are not His intention. They are the results of our misuse of His gracious word. 'Oh, Israel!' wailed the prophet, 'thou hast destroyed *thyself*' Man's happiness or woe is his own making, and his own making only. There is no creature in heaven or earth or hell that is chargeable with your loss but yourself. We are our own betrayers, our own murderers, our own accusers, our own avengers, and-I was going to say, and it is true -our own hell.

Dear friends! this message comes to you once more now, that Jesus Christ has died for your sins, and that if you will trust Him as your Saviour, and obey Him as your Sovereign, you will he saved with an everlasting salvation. Even through my lips God speaks to you. What are you going to do with His message? Are you going to receive it, and 'justify' Him, or are you going to reject it, and thwart Him? You thwart Him if you treat my words now as a mere sermon to be criticised and forgotten; you thwart Him if you do anything with His message except take it to your heart and rest wholly upon it. Unless you do you are suicides; and neither God, nor man, nor devil is responsible for your destruction. He can say to you, as His servant said: 'Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean.' Jesus Christ is calling to every one of us, 'Turn ye! turn ye! Why will ye die? As I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.'

29)Luke 7:34

Luke

A GLUTTONOUS MAN AND A WINEBIBBER

Luk. 7:34.

Jesus Christ very seldom took any notice of the mists of calumny that drifted round Him. 'When He was reviled He reviled not again.' If ever He did allude to them it was for the sake of the people who were harming themselves by uttering them. So here, without the slightest trace of irritation, He quotes a malignant charge which was evidently in the popular mouth, and of which we should never have known if He had not repeated it; not with anger, but simply in order that He might point to the capricious inconsistency of finding fault with John and Himself on precisely opposite grounds. The former did not suit because he came neither eating nor drinking. Well, if His asceticism did not please, surely the geniality of a Christ who comes doing both will be hailed. But He is rejected like the other. What is the cause of this dislike that can look two different ways at once? Not the traits that it alleges, but something far deeper, a dislike to the heavenly wisdom of which John and Jesus were messengers. The children of wisdom would see that there was right in both courses; the children of folly would condemn them both. If the message is unwelcome, nothing that the messenger can say or do will be right.

The same kind of thing is common to-day. Never mind consistency, find fault with Christianity on all its sides, and with all its preachers, though you have to contradict yourself in doing so. Object to this man that he is too learned and doctrinal; to that one that he is too illiterate, and gives no food for thought; to this one that he is always thundering condemnation; to that one that he is always running over with love; to this one that he is perpetually harping upon duties; to that other one that he is up in the clouds, and forgets the tasks of daily life; to this one that he is sensational; to that one that he is dull; and so on, and so on. The generation that liked neither piping nor mourning has its representatives still.

But my business now is not with the inconsistency of the objectors to John and Jesus, but simply with this caricature which He quotes from them of some of His characteristics. It is a distorted refraction of the beam of light that comes from His face, through the muddy, thick medium of their prejudice. And if we can, I was going to say, pull it straight again, we shall see something of His glories. I take the two clauses of my text separately because they are closely connected with our design, and cover different ground.

I. I ask you to note, first, the enemies' attestation to Christ's genial participation in the joys and necessities of common life.

'The Son of man came eating and drinking.' There is nothing that calumny, if it be malignant enough, cannot twist into an accusation; and out of glorious and significant facts, full of lessons and containing strong buttresses of the central truth of the Gospel, these people made this charge, ‘a winebibber and gluttonous.’ The facts were facts; the inferences were slanders.

Notice how precious, how demonstrative of the very central truth of Christianity, is that plain fact, ‘The Son of man came eating and drinking.’ Then that pillar of all our hope, the Incarnation of the word of God, stands irrefragable. Sitting at tables, hungering in the wilderness, faint by the well, begging a draught of water from a woman, and saying on His Cross ‘I thirst!’-He is the Incarnation of Deity, the manifestation of God in the flesh. Awe and mystery and reverence and hope and trust clasp that fact, in which prejudice and dislike could only find occasion for a calumny.

By eating and drinking He declared that ‘forasmuch as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise took part in the same.’ If it is true that every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God,’ then it is true that no miracle in His life, nor any of the supernatural glories which we are accustomed to regard as evidences of His majesty, are more blessed, or more important as revelations of His nature, than the fact that ‘the Son of man came eating and drinking.’

But, still further, mark how the truth which gave colour to the slander attests that Jesus Christ presents to the world the highest type of manhood. The ideal for life is not the suppression, but the consecration, of material satisfactions and pleasures of appetite. And they are likest to the Master who, like the Master, come eating and drinking, and yet ever hold all appetites and desires rigidly under control, and subordinate them all to loftier purposes. John the Baptist could be an ascetic; the Pattern Man must not be.

The highest type of religion, as it is shown to us in His perfect life, includes the acceptance of all pure material blessings. Asceticism is second best; the religion that can take and keep secondary all outward and transitory sources of enjoyment, and can hallow common life, is loftier than all pale hermits and emaciated types of sanctity, who preserve their purity only by avoiding things which it were nobler to enjoy and to subdue.

There is nothing more striking about the Old Testament than the fact that its heroes and saints were kindly with their kind, and took part in common life, accepting, enjoying its blessings. They were warriors, statesmen, shepherds, vinedressers; ‘they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; they married and were given in marriage,’ and all the while they were the saints of God. That was a nobler type of religion than the one that came after it, into which Jesus Christ was born. When devotion cools it crusts; and the crust is superstition and formalism and punctilious attention to the proprieties of worship and casuistry, instead of joyful obedience to a law, and abstinence from, instead of sanctification of, earthly delights and supplies.

So, protesting against all that, and showing the more excellent way, and hallowing the way because He trod it, ‘the Son of man came eating and drinking.’ Hence-forward every table may be a communion table, and every meal may be a sacrament, eaten in obedience to His dying injunction: ‘This do in remembrance of Me.’ If we can feel that Christ sits with us at the feast, the feast will be pure and good. If it is of such a sort as that we dare not fancy Him keeping us company there, it is no place for us. Wherever Jesus Christ went the consecration of His presence lingers still; whatever Jesus Christ did His servants may do, if in the same spirit and in the same manner.

He hallowed infancy when He lay an infant in His mother’s arms; He hallowed childhood when, as a boy, He was obedient to His parents; He hallowed youth during all those years of quiet seclusion and unnoticed service in Nazareth; He hallowed every part of human life and experience by bearing it. Love is consecrated because He loved; tears are sacred because He wept; life is worship, or may be made so, because He passed through it; and death itself is ennobled and sanctified because He has died.

Only let us remember that, if we are to exercise this blessed hallowing of common things, of which He has set us the example, we must use them as He did; that is, in such sort as that our communion with God shall not be broken thereby, and that nothing in them shall darken the vision and clip the wings of the aspiring and heavenward-gazing spirit. Brethren! the tendency of this day-and one rejoices, in many respects, that it is so-is to revolt against the extreme of narrowness in the past that prescribed and proscribed a great many arbitrary and unnecessary abstinences and practices as the sign of a Christian profession. But whilst I would yield to no man in my joyful application of the principle that underlies that great fact that 'He came eating and drinking,' I do wish at this point to put in a *caveat* which perhaps may not be so welcome to some of you as the line of thought that I have been pursuing. It is this: it is an error to quote Christ's example as a cover for luxury and excess, and grasping at material enjoyments which are not innocent in themselves, or are mixed up with much that is not innocent. There is many a table spread by so-called Christian people where Jesus Christ will not sit. Many a man darkens his spirit, enfeebles his best part, blinds himself to the things beyond, by reason of his taking the liberty, as he says, which Christianity, broadly and generously interpreted, gives, of participating in all outward delights. I have said that asceticism is not the highest, but it is sometimes necessary. It is better to enjoy and to subdue than to abstain and to suppress, but abstinence and suppression are often essential to faithfulness and noble living. If I find that my enjoyment of innocent things harms me, or is tending to stimulate cravings beyond my control; or if I find that abstinence from innocent things increases my power to help a brother, and to fight against a desolating sin; or if things good and innocent in themselves, and in some respects desirable and admirable, like the theatre, for instance, are irretrievably intertwisted with evil things, then Christ's example is no plea for our sharing in such. It is better for us to cut off the offending hand, and so, though maimed, to enter into life, than to keep two hands and go into the darkness of death. Jesus Christ 'came eating and drinking,' and therefore the highest and the best thing is that Christian people should innocently, and with due control, and always keeping themselves in touch with God, enjoy all outward blessings, only subject to this law, 'whether ye eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, to do all to the glory of God,' and remembering this warning, 'He that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption.'

II. Now, secondly, notice the enemies' witness that Christ is the Friend of outcasts.

As I said about the other charge, so I say of this, the facts were facts, the inferences were errors. The slanderers saw, as nobody could help seeing, that there was a strange kind of mutual attraction between Jesus and publicans and sinners; that harlots as well as little children seemed to be drawn to Him; and that He obviously delighted in the company of those at whose presence, partly from pride, partly from national enmity, partly from heartless self-righteousness, Pharisaism gathered its dainty skirts around itself in abhorrence, lest a speck should fall upon their purity. That being the fact, low natures, who always misunderstand lofty ones, because they can only believe in motives as low as their own, said of Jesus, ‘Ah! you can tell what sort of a man He is by the company He keeps. He is the friend of publicans because He is a bad Jew; the friend of sinners because He likes their wicked ways.’

There was a mysterious sense of sympathy which drew Jesus Christ to these poor people and drew them to Him. It would have been a long while before any penitent woman would have come in and wept over the feet of Gamaliel and his like. It would have been a long while before any sinful men would have found their way, with tears and yet with trust, to these self-righteous hypocrites. But perfect purity somehow draws the impure, though assumed sanctity always repels them. And it is a sign, not that a man is bad, but that he is good in a Christlike fashion, if the outcasts that durst not come near your respectable people find themselves drawn to Him. Oh! if there were more of us liker Jesus Christ in our purity, there would be more of us who would deserve the calumny which is praise-’the friend of sinners.’

It was an attestation of His love, as I need not remind you. I suppose there is nothing more striking in the whole wonderful and unique picture of Jesus Christ drawn in the Gospels than the way in which two things, which we so often fancy to be contradictory, blend in the most beautiful harmony in Him-viz. infinite tenderness and absolute condemnation of transgression. To me the fact that these two characteristics are displayed in perfect harmony in the life of Jesus Christ as written in these Gospels, is no small argument for believing the historical veracity of the picture there drawn. For I do not know a harder thing for a dramatist, or a romancer, or a legend-monger to effect than to combine, in one picture-without making the combination monstrous-these two things, perfect purity and perfect love for the impure.

But, dear brethren, remember, that if we are to believe Jesus Christ’s own words, that strange love of His, which embraced in its pure clasp the outcasts, was not only the love of a perfect Man, but it was the love of God

Himself. ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.’ When we see Jesus Christ looking across the valley to the city, with tears in His sad and gentle eyes; and when we see harlots and sinners coming near Him with new hope, and a strange consciousness of a fascination which He wields; and when we see Him opening His heart to all the impure, just as He laid His clean hand on the leper’s ulcers, let us rejoice to believe that the Friend of publicans and sinners is God manifest in the flesh.

Then, still further, this wondrous, seeking love of His for all the outcasts is the sign to us of His boundless hopefulness concerning the most degraded.

The world talks of races too low to be elevated, of men too hardened to be softened. Jesus Christ walks through the hospitals of this world, and nowhere sees incurables. His hope is boundless, because, first of all, He sees the dormant possibilities that slumber in the most degraded; and because, still more, He knows that He bears in Himself a power that will cleanse the foulest and raise the most fallen. There are some metals that resist all attempts to volatilise them by the highest temperature producible in our furnaces. Carry them up into the sun and they will all pass into vapour. No man or woman who ever lived, or will live, is so absolutely besotted, and held by the chains of his or her sins, as that Jesus cannot set them free. His hope for outcasts is boundless, because He knows that every sin can be cleansed by His precious blood. Therefore, Christianity should know nothing of desperate cases. There should be no incurables in our estimate of the world, but our hope should be as boundless as the Master’s, who drew to Himself the publicans and sinners, and made them saints.

I need not remind you how this is the unique glory of Christ and of Christianity. Men have been asking the question whether Christianity is played out or not. What has been the motive power of all the great movements for the elevation of mankind that have occurred for the last nineteen centuries? What was it that struck the fetters of the slaves? What is it that sends men out amongst savage tribes? Has there ever been found a race of men so degraded that the message of Christ’s love could not find its way into their hearts? Did not Darwin subscribe to the Patagonian Mission-a mission which takes in hand perhaps the lowest types of humanity in the world-and did he not do it because his own eyes had taught him that in this strange superstition that we call the Gospel there is a power that, somehow or other, nothing else can wield? Brethren! if the Church begins to lose its care for, and its power of drawing, outcasts and sinners, it has begun to lose its hold on Christ. The sooner such a Church dies the better, and there will be few mourners at its funeral.

The Friend of publicans and sinners has set the example to all of us His followers. God be thanked that there are signs to-day that Christian people are more and more waking up to the consciousness of their obligations in regard to the outcasts in their own and other lands. Let them go to them, as Jesus Christ did, with no false flatteries, but with plain rebukes of sin, and yet with manifest outgoing of the heart, and they will find that the same thing which drew these poor creatures to the Master will draw others to the feeblest, faintest reflection of Him in His servants.

And, last of all, dear friends, let each think that Jesus Christ is my Friend, and your Friend, because He is the Friend of sinners, and we are sinners. If He did not love sinners there would be nobody for Him to love. The universality of sin, however various in its degrees and manifestations, makes more wonderful the universal sweep of His friendship.

How do I know that He is my Friend? ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends,’ and when we were yet enemies He was our Friend, and died for us. How shall we requite that love? ‘Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you to do.’ All over the Eastern world to this day the name by which the Patriarch Abraham is known is the ‘Friend’ or the ‘Companion.’ Well for us, for time and for eternity, if, knowing that Jesus is our Friend, we yield ourselves, in faith and love, to become His friends!

30)Luke 7:41-43

Luke

THE TWO DEBTORS

Luk. 7:41 - Luk. 7:43.

We all know the lovely story in which this parable is embedded. A woman of notoriously bad character had somehow come in contact with Jesus Christ, and had by Him been aroused from her sensuality and degradation, and calmed by the assurance of forgiveness. So, when she heard that He was in her own town, what could she do but hasten to the Pharisee's house, and brave the cruel, scornful eyes of the eminently respectable people that would meet her there? She carries with her part of the spoils and instruments of her sinful adornment, to devote it to His service; but before she can open the cruse, her heart opens, and the hot tears flow on His feet, inflicting an indignity where she had meant an honour. She has nothing at hand to repair the fault, she will not venture to take her poor garment, which might have done it, but with a touch, she loosens her long hair, and with the ingenuity and self-abasement of love, uses that for a towel. Then, gathering confidence from her reception, and carried further than she had meant, she ventures to lay her sinful lips on His feet, as if asking pardon for the tears that would come-the only lips, except those of the traitor, that are recorded as having touched the Master. And only then does she dare to pour upon Him her only wealth.

What says the Pharisee? Has he a heart at all? He is scandalised at such a scene at his respectable table; and no wonder, for he could not have known that a change had passed upon the woman, and her evil repute was obviously notorious. He does not wonder at her having found her way into his house, for the meal was half public. But he began to doubt whether a Man who tolerates such familiarities from such a person could be a prophet; or if He were, whether He could be a good man. 'He would have known her if He had been a prophet,' thinks he. The thought is only a questionably true one. 'If He had known her, He would have thrust her back with His foot,' he thinks; and that thought is obviously false. But Simon's righteousness was of the sort that gathers up its own robes about it, and shoves back the poor sinner into the filth. 'She is a sinner,' says he. No, Simon! she *was* a sinner, but she *is* a penitent, and is on the road to be a saint, and having been washed, she is a great deal cleaner than thou art, who art only white-washed.

Our Lord's parable is the answer to the Pharisee's thought, and in it Jesus shows Simon that He knows him and the woman a great deal better than he did. There are three things to which briefly I ask your attention-the common debt, in varying amounts; the common insolvency; and the love, like the debt, varying in amount. Now, note these things in order.

I. There is, first of all, the common debt.

I do not propose to dwell at all upon that familiar metaphor, familiar to us all from its use in the Lord's Prayer, by which sin and the guilt of sin are shadowed forth for us in an imperfect fashion by the conception of debt. For duty neglected is a debt to God, which can only be discharged by a penalty. And all sin, and its consequent guilt and exposure to punishment, may be regarded under the image of indebtedness.

But the point that I want you to notice is that these two in our parable, though they are meant to be portraits of Simon and the woman, are also representatives of the two classes to one or other of which we all belong. They are both debtors, though one owes but a tenth of what the other does. That is to say, our Lord here draws a broad distinction between people who are outwardly respectable, decent, cleanly living, and people who have fallen into the habit, and are living a life, of gross and open transgression. There has been a great deal of very pernicious loose representation of the attitude of Christianity in reference to this matter, common in evangelical pulpits. And I want you to observe that our Lord draws a broad line and says, 'Yes! you, Simon, are a great deal better than that woman was. She was coarse, unclean, her innocence gone, her purity stained. She had been wallowing in filth, and you, with your respectability, your rigid morality, your punctilious observance of the ordinary human duties, you were far better than she was, and had far less to answer for than she had.' Fifty is only a tenth of five hundred, and there is a broad distinction, which nothing ought to be allowed to obliterate, between people who, without religion, are trying to do right, to keep themselves in the paths of morality and righteousness, to discharge their duty to their fellows, controlling their passions and their flesh, and others who put the reins upon the necks of the horses and let them carry them where they will, and live in an eminent manner for the world and the flesh and the devil. And there is nothing in evangelical Christianity which in the smallest degree obliterates that distinction, but rather it emphasises it, and gives a man full credit for any difference that there is in his life and conduct and character between himself and the man of gross transgression.

But then it says, on the other side, the difference which does exist, and is not to be minimised, is, after all, a difference of degree. They are both debtors. They stand in the same relation to the creditor, though the amount of the indebtedness is extremely different. We are all sinful men, and we stand in the same relation to God, though one of us may be much darker and blacker than the other.

And then, remember, that when you begin to talk about the guilt of actions in God's sight, you have to go far below the mere surface. If we could see the infinite complexity of motives-aggravations on the one side and palliations on the other-which go to the doing of a single deed, we should not be so quick to pronounce that the publican and the harlot are worse than the Pharisee. It is quite possible that an action which passes muster in regard to the morality of the world may, if regard be had [which God only can exercise] to the motive for which it is done, be as bad as, if not worse than, the lust and the animalism, drunkenness and debauchery, crime and murder, which the vulgar scales of the world consider to be the heavier. If you once begin to try to measure guilt, you will have to pass under the surface appearance, and will find that many a white and dazzling act has a very rotten inside, and that many a very corrupt and foul one does not come from so corrupt a source as at first sight might seem to be its origin. Let us be very modest in our estimate of the varying guilt of actions, and remember that, deep down below all diversities, there lies a fundamental identity, in which there is no difference, that all of us respectable people that never broke a law of the nation, and scarcely ever a law of propriety, in our lives, and the outcasts, if there are any here now, the drunkards, the sensualists, all of us stand in this respect in the same class. We are all debtors, for we have 'all sinned and come short of the glory of God,' A viper an inch long and the thickness of whipcord has a sting and poison in it, and is a viper. And if the question is whether a man has got small-pox or not, one pustule is as good evidence as if he was spotted all over. So, remember, he who owes five hundred and he who owes the tenth part of it, which is fifty, are both debtors.

II. Now notice the common insolvency.

‘They had nothing to pay.’ Well, if there is no money, ‘no effects’ in the bank, no cash in the till, nothing to distrain upon, it does not matter very much what the amount of the debt is, seeing that there is nothing to meet it, and whether it is fifty or five hundred the man is equally unable to pay. And that is precisely our position.

I admit, of course, that men without any recognition of God’s pardoning mercy, or any of the joyful impulse that comes from the sense of Christ’s redemption, or any of the help that is given by the indwelling of the Spirit who sanctifies may do a great deal in the way of mending their characters and making themselves purer and nobler. But that is not the point which my text contemplates, because it deals with a past. And the fact that lies under the metaphor of my text is this, that none of us can in any degree diminish our sin, considered as a debt to God. What can you and I do to lighten our souls of the burden of guilt? What we have written we have written. Tears will not wash it out, and amendment will not alter the past, which stands frowning and irrevocable. If there be a God at all, then our consciences, which speak to us of demerit, proclaim guilt in its two elements-the sense of having done wrong, and the foreboding of punishment therefor. Guilt cannot be dealt with by the guilty one: it must be Some One else who deals with it. He, and only He against whom we have sinned, can touch the great burden that we have piled upon us.

Brother! we have nothing to pay. We may mend our ways; but that does not touch the past. We may hate the evil; that will help to keep us from doing it in the future, but it does not affect our responsibility for what is done. We cannot touch it; there it stands irrevocable, with this solemn sentence written over the black pile, ‘Every transgression and disobedience shall receive its just recompense of reward.’ We have nothing to pay.

But my text suggests, further, that a condition precedent to forgiveness is the recognition by us of our penniless insolvency. Though it is not distinctly stated, it is clearly and necessarily implied in the narrative, that the two debtors are to be supposed as having come and held out a couple of pairs of empty hands, and sued in *formâ pauperis*. You must recognise your insolvency if you expect to be forgiven. God does not accept dividends, so much in the pound, and let you off the rest on consideration thereof. If you are going to pay, you have to pay all; if He is going to forgive, you have to let Him forgive all. It must be one thing or the other, and you and I have to elect which of the two we shall stand by, and which of the two shall be applied to us.

Oh, dear friends! may we all come and say,

'Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy Cross I cling.

III. And so, lastly, notice the love, which varies with the forgiveness.

'Tell Me which of them will love him most.' Simon does not penetrate Christ's design, and there is a dash of supercilious contempt for the story and the question, as it seems to me, in the languid, half-courteous answer:-'I suppose, if it were worth my while to think about such a thing, that he to whom he forgave the most.' He did not know what a battery was going to be unmasked. Jesus says, 'Thou hast rightly judged.'

The man that is most forgiven is the man that will love most. Well, that answer is true if all other things about the two debtors are equal. If they are the same sort of men, with the same openness to sentiments of gratitude and generosity, the man who is let off the smaller debt will generally be less obliged than the man who is let off the larger. But it is, alas! not always the case that we can measure benefits conferred by gratitude shown. Another element comes in-namely, the consciousness of the benefit received-which measures the gratitude far more accurately than the actual benefit bestowed. And so we must take both these things, the actual amount of forgiveness, so to speak, which is conferred, and the depth of the sense of the forgiveness received, in order to get the measure of the love which answers it. So that this principle breaks up into two thoughts, of which I have only just a word or two to say.

First, it is very often true that the greatest sinners make the greatest saints. There have been plenty of instances all down the history of the world, and there are plenty of instances, thank God, cropping up every day still in which some poor, wretched outcast, away out in the darkness, living on the husks that the swine do eat, and liking to be in the pigstye, is brought back into the Father’s house, and turns out a far more loving son and a far better servant than the man that had never wandered away from it. ‘The publicans and the harlots’ do often yet ‘go into the Kingdom of God before’ the respectable people.

And there are plenty of people in Manchester that you would not touch with a pair of tongs who, if they could be got hold of, would make far more earnest and devoted Christians than you are. The very strength of passion and feeling which has swept them wrong, rightly directed, would make grand saints of them, just as the very same conditions of climate which, at tropics, bring tornadoes and cyclones and dreadful thunder-storms, do also bring abundant fertility. The river which devastates a nation, dammed up within banks, may fertilise half a continent. And if a man is brought out of the darkness, and looks back upon the years that are wasted, that may help him to a more intense consecration. And if he remembers the filth out of which Jesus Christ picked him, it will bind him to that Lord with a bond deep and sacred.

So let no outcast man or woman listening to me now despair. You can come back from the furthest darkness, and whatever ugly things you have in your memories and your consciences, you may make them stepping-stones on which to climb to the very throne of God. Let no respectable people despise the outcasts; there may be the making in them of far better Christians than we are.

But, on the other hand, let no man think lightly of sin. Though it can be forgiven and swept away, and the gross sinner may become the great saint, there will be scars and bitter memories and habits surging up again after we thought they were dead; and the old ague and fever that we caught in the pestilential land will hang by us when we have migrated into a more wholesome climate. It is never good for a man to have sinned, even though, through his sin, God may have taken occasion to bring him near to Himself.

But the second form of this principle is always true-namely, that those who are most conscious of forgiveness will be most fruitful of love. The depth and fervour of our individual Christianity depends more largely on the clearness of our consciousness of our own personal guilt and the firmness of our grasp of forgiveness than upon anything else.

Why is it that such multitudes of you professing Christians are such icebergs in your Christianity? Mainly for this reason-that you have never found out, in anything like an adequate measure, how great a sinner you are, and how sure and sweet and sufficient Christ's pardoning mercy is. And so you are like Simon-you will ask Jesus to dinner, but you will not give Him any water for His feet or ointment for His head. You will do the conventional and necessary pieces of politeness, but not one act of impulse from the heart ever comes from you. You discharge 'the duties of religion.' What a phrase! You discharge the duties of religion. Ah! My brother, if you had been down into the horrible pit and the miry clay, and had seen a hand and a face looking down, and an arm outstretched to lift you; and if you had ever known what the rapture was after that subterraneous experience of having your feet set upon a rock and your goings established, you would come to Him and you would say, 'Take me all, O Lord! for I am all redeemed by Thee.' 'To whom little is forgiven the same loveth little.' Does not that explain the imperfect Christianity of thousands of us?

Fifty pence and five hundred pence are both small sums. Our Lord had nothing to do here with the absolute amount of debt, but only with the comparative amount of the two debts. But when He wanted to tell the people what the absolute amount of the debt was, he did it in that other story of the Unfaithful Servant. He owed his lord, not fifty pence [fifty eightpences or thereabouts], not five hundred pence, but 'ten thousand talents,' which comes to near two and a half millions of English money. And that is the picture of our indebtedness to God. 'We have nothing to pay.' Here is the payment-that Cross, that dying Christ. Turn your faith there, my brother, and then you will get ample forgiveness, and that will kindle love, and that will overflow in service. For the aperture in the heart at which forgiveness enters in is precisely of the same width as the one at which love goes out. Christ has loved us all, and perfectly. Let us love Him back again, who has died that we might live, and borne our sins in His own body.

31)Luke 7:47

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

Luk. 7:47.

This story contains three figures, three persons, who may stand for us as types or representatives of the divine love and of all its operation in the world, of the way in which it is received or rejected, and of the causes and consequences of its reception or rejection. There is the unloving, cleanly, respectable, self-complacent Pharisee, with all his contempt for 'this woman.' There is the woman, with gross sin and mighty penitence, the great burst of love that is flowing out of her heart sweeping away before it, as it were, all the guilt of her transgressions. And, high over all, brooding over all, loving each, knowing each, pitying each, willing to save and be the Friend and Brother of each, is the embodied and manifested divine Love, the knowledge of whom is love in our hearts, and is 'life eternal.' So that now I have simply to ask you to look with me, for a little while, at these three persons as representing for us the divine love that comes forth amongst sinners, and the twofold form in which that love is received. There is, first, Christ the love of God appearing amongst men, the foundation of all our love to Him. Then there is the woman, the penitent sinner, lovingly recognising the divine love. And then, last, there is the Pharisee, the self-righteous man, ignorant of himself, and empty of all love to God. These are the three figures to which I ask your attention now.

I. We have Christ here standing as a manifestation of the divine love coming forth amongst sinners.

His person and His words, the part He plays in this narrative, and the parable that He speaks in the course of it, have to be noticed under this head.

First, then, you have this idea-that He, as bringing to us the love of God, shows it to us, as not at all dependent upon our merits or deserts: 'He frankly forgave them both' are the deep words in which He would point us to the source and the ground of all the love of God. Brethren, have you ever thought what a wonderful and blessed truth there lies in the old words of one of the Jewish prophets, ‘I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for Mine holy Name’s sake’? The foundation of all God’s love to us sinful men, that saying tells us, lies not in us, nor in anything about us, not in anything external to God Himself. He, and He alone, is the cause and reason, the motive and the end, of His own love to our world. And unless we have grasped that magnificent thought as the foundation of all our acceptance in Him, I think we have not yet learnt half of the fullness which, even in this world, may belong to our conceptions of the love of God-a love that has no motive but Himself; a love that is not evoked even [if I may so say] by regard to His creatures’ wants; a love, therefore, which is eternal, being in that divine heart before there were creatures upon whom it could rest; a love that is its own guarantee, its own cause-safe and firm, therefore, with all the firmness and serenity of the divine nature-incapable of being affected by our transgression, deeper than all our sins, more ancient than our very existence, the very essence and being of God Himself. ‘He frankly forgave them both.’ If you seek the source of divine love, you must go high up into the mountains of God, and learn that it, as all other of His [shall I say] emotions, and feelings, and resolutions, and purposes, owns no reason but Himself, no motive but Himself; lies wrapped in the secret of His nature, who is all-sufficient for His own blessedness, and all whose work and being is caused by, and satisfied, and terminates in His own fullness. ‘God is love’: therefore beneath all considerations of what we may want-deeper and more blessed than all thoughts of a compassion that springs from the feeling of human distress and the sight of man’s misery-lies this thought of an affection which does not need the presence of sorrow to evoke it, which does not want the touch of our finger to flow out, but by its very nature is everlasting, by its very nature is infinite, by its very nature must be pouring out the flood of its own joyous fullness for ever and ever!

Then, again, Christ standing here for us as the representative and revelation of this divine love which He manifests to us, tells us, too, that whilst it is not caused by us, but comes from the nature of God, it is not turned away by our sins. ‘This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth Him,’ says the unloving and self-righteous heart, ‘for she is a sinner.’ Ah! there is nothing more beautiful than the difference between the thought about sinful creatures which is natural to a holy being, and the thought about sinful creatures which is natural to a self-righteous being. The one is all contempt; the other, all pity. He knew what she was, and therefore He let her come close to Him with the touch of her polluted hand, and pour out the gains of her lawless life and the adornments of her former corruption upon His most blessed and most holy head. His knowledge of her as a sinner, what did it do to His love for her? It made that love gentle and tender, as knowing that she could not bear the revelation of the blaze of His purity. It smoothed His face and softened His tones, and breathed through all His knowledge and notice of her timid and yet confident approach. ‘Daughter, I know all about it-all thy wanderings and thy vile transgressions: I know them all, and My love is mightier than all these. They may be as the great sea, but my love is like the everlasting mountains, whose roots go down beneath the ocean, and My love is like the everlasting heaven, whose brightness covers it all over.’ God’s love is Christ’s love; Christ’s love is God’s love. And this is the lesson that we gather-that that infinite and divine loving-kindness does not turn away from thee, my brother and my friend, because thou art a sinner, but remains hovering about thee, with wooing invitations and with gentle touches, if it may draw thee to repentance, and open a fountain of answering affection in thy seared and dry heart. The love of God is deeper than all our sins. ‘For His great love wherewith He loved us, when we were dead in sins, He quickened us.’

Sin is but the cloud behind which the everlasting sun lies in all its power and warmth, unaffected by the cloud; and the light will yet strike, the light of His love will yet pierce through, with its merciful shafts bringing healing in their beams, and dispersing all the pitchy darkness of man’s transgression. And as the mists gather themselves up and roll away, dissipated by the heat of that sun in the upper sky, and reveal the fair earth below-so the love of Christ shines in, molting the mist and dissipating the fog, thinning it off in its thickest places, and at last piercing its way right through it, down to the heart of the man that has been lying beneath the oppression of this thick darkness, and who thought that the fog was the sky, and that there was no sun there above. God be thanked! the everlasting love of God that comes from the depth of His own being, and is there because of Himself, will never be quenched because of man’s sin.

And so, in the next place, Christ teaches us here that this divine love, when it comes forth among sinners, necessarily manifests itself first in the form of forgiveness. There was nothing to be done with the debtors until the debt was wiped out; there was no possibility of other gifts of the highest sort being granted to them, until the great score was cancelled and done away with. When the love of God comes down into a sinful world, it must come first and foremost as pardoning mercy. There are no other terms upon which there can be a union betwixt the loving-kindness of God, and the emptiness and sinfulness of my heart, except only this-that first of all there shall be the clearing away from my soul of the sins which I have gathered there, and then there will be space for all other divine gifts to work and to manifest themselves. Only do not fancy that when we speak about forgiveness, we simply mean that a man's position in regard to the penalties of sin is altered. That is not all the depth of the scriptural notion of forgiveness. It includes far more than the removal of outward penalties. The heart of it all is, that the love of God rests upon the sinner, unturned away even by his sins, passing over his sins, and removing his sins for the sake of Christ. My friend, if you are talking in general terms about a great divine loving-kindness that wraps you round-if you have a great deal to say, apart from the Gospel, about the love of God as being your hope and confidence-I want you to reflect on this, that the first word which the love of God speaks to sinful men is pardon; and unless that is your notion of God's love, unless you look to that as the first thing of all, let me tell you, you may have before you a very fair picture of a very beautiful, tender, good-natured benevolence, but you have not nearly reached the height of the vigour and yet the tenderness of the Scripture notion of the love of God. It is not a love which says, 'Well, put sin on one side, and give the man the blessings all the same,' not a love which has nothing to say about that great fact of transgression, not a love which gives it the go-by, and leaves it standing: but a love which passes into the heart through the portal of pardon, a love which grapples with the fact of sin first, and has nothing to say to a man until it has said that message to him.

And but one word more on this part of my subject-here we see the love of God thus coming from Himself; not turned away by man's sins; being the cause of forgiveness; expressing itself in pardon; and last of all, demanding service. 'Simon, thou gavest Me no water, thou gavest Me no kiss, My head thou didst not anoint: I expected all these things from thee-I desired them all from thee: My love came that they might spring in thy heart; thou hast not given them; My love is wounded, as it were disappointed, and it turns away from thee!' Yes, after all that we have said about the freeness and fullness, the unmerited, and uncaused, and unmotived nature of that divine affection-after all that we have said about its being the source of every blessing to man, asking nothing from him, but giving everything to him; it still remains true, that God's love, when it comes to men, comes that it may evoke an answering echo in the human heart, and 'though it might be much bold to enjoin, yet for love's sake rather beseeches' us to give unto Him who has given all unto us. There, then, stands forth in the narrative, Christ as a revelation of the divine love amongst sinners.

II. Now, in the second place, let us look for a moment at 'this woman' as the representative of a class of character-the penitent lovingly recognising the divine love.

The words which I have read as my text contain a statement as to the woman's character: 'Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much.' Allow me just one word of explanation, in the shape of exposition, on these words. Great blunders have been built upon them. I dare say you have seen epitaphs-[I have]-written often on gravestones with this misplaced idea on them-'Very sinful; but there was a great deal of love in the person; and for the sake of the love, God passed by the sin!' Now, when Christ says 'She loved much,' He does not mean to say that her love was the cause of her forgiveness-not at all. He means to say that her love was the proof of her forgiveness, and that it was so because her love was a consequence of her forgiveness. As, for instance, we might say, 'The woman is in great distress, for she weeps'; but we do not mean thereby that the weeping is the reason of the distress, but the means of our knowing the sorrow. It is the proof because it is the consequence. Or [to put it into the simplest shape] the love does not go before the forgiveness, but the forgiveness goes before the love; and because the love comes after the forgiveness, it is the sign of the forgiveness. That this is the true interpretation, you will see if you look back for a moment at the narrative which precedes, where He says, 'He frankly forgave them both: tell me, therefore, which of them will love him most?’ Pardon is the pre-requisite of love, and love is a consequence of the sense of forgiveness.

This, then, is the first thing to observe: all true love to God is preceded in the heart by these two things-a sense of sin, and an assurance of pardon. Brethren, there is no love possible-real, deep, genuine, worthy of being called love of God-which does not start with the belief of my own transgression, and with the thankful reception of forgiveness in Christ. You do nothing to get pardon for yourselves; but unless you have the pardon you have no love to God. I know that sounds a very hard thing-I know that many will say it is very narrow and very bigoted, and will ask, ‘Do you mean to tell me that the man whose bosom glows with gratitude because of earthly blessings, has no love-that all that natural religion which is in people, apart from this sense of forgiveness in Christ, do you mean to tell me that this is not all genuine?’ Yes, most assuredly; and I believe the Bible and man’s conscience say the same thing. I do not for one moment deny that there may be in the hearts of those who are in the grossest ignorance of themselves as transgressors, certain emotions of instinctive gratitude and natural religiousness, directed to some higher power dimly thought of as the author of their blessings and the source of much gladness: but has that kind of thing got any living power in it? I demur to its right to be called love to God at all, for this reason-because it seems to me that the object that is loved is not God, but a fragment of God. He who but says, ‘I owe to Him breath and all things; in Him I live and move, and have my being,’ has left out one-half at least of the Scriptural conception of God. Your God, my friend, is not the God of the Bible, unless He stands before you clothed in infinite loving-kindness indeed; but clothed also in strict and rigid justice. Is your God perfect and entire? If you say that you love Him, and if you do so, is it as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Have you meditated on the depths of the requirements of His law? Have you stood silent and stricken at the thought of the blaze of His righteousness? Have you passed through all the thick darkness and the clouds with which He surrounds His throne, and forced your way at last into the inner light where He dwells? Or is it a vague divinity that you worship and love? Which? Ah, if a man study his Bible, and try to find out for himself, from its veracious records, who and what manner of God the living God is, there will be no love in his heart to that Being except only when he has flung himself at His feet, and said, ‘Father of eternal purity, and God of all holiness and righteousness, forgive Thy child, a sinful broken man-forgive Thy child, for the sake of Thy Son!’ That, and that alone, is the road by which we come to possess the love of God, as a practical power, filling and sanctifying our souls; and such is the God to whom alone our love ought to be rendered; and I tell you [or rather the Bible tells you, and the Gospel and the Cross of Christ tell you], there is no love without pardon, no fellowship and sonship without the sense of sin and the acknowledgment of foul transgression!

So much, then, for what precedes the love of Christ in the heart; now a word as to what follows. ‘Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much.’ The sense of sin precedes forgiveness: forgiveness precedes love; love precedes all acceptable and faithful service. If you want to do, love. If you want to know, love. This poor woman knew Christ a vast deal better than that Pharisee there. He said, ‘This man is not a prophet; He does not understand the woman.’ Ay, but the woman knew herself better than the Pharisee knew himself, knew herself better than the Pharisee knew her, knew Christ, above all, a vast deal better than he did. Love is the gate of all knowledge.

This poor woman brings her box of ointment, a relic perhaps of past evil life, and once meant for her own adornment, and pours it on His head, lavishes offices of service which to the unloving heart seem bold in the giver and cumbersome to the receiver. It is little she can do, but she does it. Her full heart demands expression, and is relieved by utterance in deeds. The deeds are spontaneous, welling out at the bidding of an inward impulse, not drawn out by the force of an external command. It matters not what practical purpose they serve. The motive of them makes their glory. Love prompts them, love justifies them, and His love interprets them, and His love accepts them. The love which flows from the sense of forgiveness is the source of all obedience as well as the means of all knowledge.

Brethren, we differ from each other in all respects but one, ‘We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God’; we all need the love of Christ; it is offered to us all; but, believe me, the sole handle by which you can lay hold of it, is the feeling of your own sinfulness and need of pardon. I preach to you a love that you do not need to buy, a mercy that you do not need to bribe, a grace that is all independent of your character, and condition, and merits, which issues from God for ever, and is lying at your doors if you will take it. You are a sinful man; Christ died for you. He comes to give you His forgiving mercy. Take it, be at rest. So shalt thou love and know and do, and so shall He love and guide thee!

III. Now one word, and then I have done. A third character stands here-the unloving and self-righteous man, all ignorant of the love of Christ.

He is the antithesis of the woman and her character. You remember the traditional peculiarities and characteristics of the class to which he belonged. He is a fair specimen of the whole of them. Respectable in life, rigid in morality, unquestionable in orthodoxy; no sound of suspicion having ever come near his belief in all the traditions of the elders; intelligent and learned, high up among the ranks of Israel! What was it that made this man's morality a piece of dead nothingness? What was it that made his orthodoxy just so many dry words, from out of which all the life had gone? What was it? This one thing: there was no love in it. As I said, Love is the foundation of all obedience; without it, morality degenerates into mere casuistry. Love is the foundation of all knowledge; without it, religion degenerates into a chattering about Moses, and doctrines, and theories; a thing that will neither kill nor make alive, that never gave life to a single soul or blessing to a single heart, and never put strength into any hand for the conflict and strife of daily life. There is no more contemptible and impotent thing on the face of the earth than morality divorced from love, and religious thoughts divorced from a heart full of the love of God. Quick corruption or long decay, and in either case death and putrefaction, are the end of these. You and I need that lesson, my friends. It is of no use for us to condemn Pharisees that have been dead and in their graves for nineteen hundred years. The same thing besets us all; we all of us try to get away from the centre, and dwell contented on the surface. We are satisfied to take the flowers and stick them into our little gardens, without any roots to them, when of course they all die out! People may try to cultivate virtue without religion, and to acquire correct notions of moral and spiritual truth; and partially and temporarily they may succeed, but the one will be a yoke of bondage, and the other a barren theory. I repeat, love is the basis of all knowledge and of all right-doing. If you have got that firm foundation laid in the soul, then the knowledge and the practice will be builded in God's own good time; and if not, the higher you build the temple, and the more aspiring are its cloud-pointing pinnacles, the more certain will be its toppling some day, and the more awful will be the ruin when it comes. The Pharisee was contented with himself, and so there was no sense of sin in him, therefore there was no penitent recognition of Christ as forgiving and loving him, therefore there was no love to Christ. Because there was no love, there was neither light nor heat in his soul, his knowledge was barren notions, and his painful doings were soul-destructive self-righteousness.

And so it all comes round to the one blessed message: My friend, God hath loved us with an everlasting love. He has provided an eternal redemption and pardon for us. If you would know Christ at all, you must go to Him as a sinful man, or you are shut out from Him altogether. If you *will* go to Him as a sinful being, fling yourself down there, not try to make yourself better, but say, 'I am full of unrighteousness and transgression; let Thy love fall upon me and heal me'; you will get the answer, and in your heart there shall begin to live and grow up a root of love to Him, which shall at last effloresce into all knowledge and unto all purity of obedience; for he that hath had much forgiveness, loveth much; and 'he that loveth knoweth God,' and 'dwelleth in God, and God in Him'!

32)Luke 7:50

Luke

GO INTO PEACE

Luk. 7:50.

We find that our Lord twice, and twice only, employs this form of sending away those who had received benefits from His hand. On both occasions the words were addressed to women: once to this woman, who was a sinner, and who was gibbeted by the contempt of the Pharisee in whose house the Lord was; and once to that poor sufferer who stretched out a wasted hand to lay upon the hem of His garment, in the hope of getting healing-filching it away unknown to the Giver. In both cases there is great tenderness; in the latter case even more so than in the present, for there He addressed the tremulous invalid as ‘daughter’; and in both cases there is a very remarkable connection hinted at between faith and peace; ‘Thy faith hath saved thee, go in peace.’

Now, there are three things that strike me about these words; the first of them is this-

I. The dismissal of the woman.

One might have expected that our Lord would have flung the shield of His companionship, for a little while, at any rate, over this penitent, and so have saved her from the scoffs and sneers of her neighbours, who knew that she was a sinner. One might have supposed that the depth of her gratitude, as expressed by her costly offering and by her tears, would have spoken to His heart, and that He would have let her stop beside Him for a little while; but no! Jesus said to her in effect; ‘You have got what you wished; go away, and take care of it.’ Such a dismissal is in accordance with the way in which He usually acted. For very seldom indeed, after He had gathered the first nucleus of four disciples, do we find that He summoned any individual to His side. Generally He broke the connection between Himself and the recipients of His benefits at as early a moment as possible, and dismissed them. And that was not only because He did not wish to be surrounded and hampered by a crowd of slightly attached disciples, but for two other reasons; one, the good of the people themselves, and the other, that, scattered all over northern Palestine, they might in their several circles become centres of light and evangelists for the King. He dispersed them that He might fling the seed broadcast over the land.

Jesus Christ says to us, if we have been saved by our faith, ‘Go!’ And He intends two things thereby. First, to teach us that it is good for us to stand by ourselves, to feel responsibility for the ordering of our lives, not to have a visible Presence at our sides to fall back upon, but to grow by solitude. There is no better way of growing reliant, of becoming independent of circumstances, and in the depths of our own hearts being calm, than by being deprived of visible stay and support, and thus drawing closer and closer to our unseen Companion, and leaning harder and heavier upon Him.

‘It is expedient for you that I go away.’ For solitude and self-reliance, which is bottomed upon self-distrust and reliance upon Him, are the things that make men and women strong. So, if ever He carries us into the desert, if ever He leaves us forsaken and alone, as we think, if ever He seems-and sometimes He does with some people, and it is only seeming-to withdraw Himself from us, it is all for the one purpose, that we may grow to be mature men and women, not always children, depending upon go-carts of any kind, and nurses’ hands and leading-strings. Go, and alone with Christ realise by faith that you are not alone. Christian men and women, have you learned that lesson-to be able to do without anybody and anything because your whole hearts are filled, and your courage is braced up and strengthened by the thought that the absent Christ is the present Christ?

There is another reason, as I take it, for which this separation of the new disciple from Jesus was so apparently mercilessly and perpetually enforced. At the very moment when one would have thought it would have done this woman good to be with the Lord for a little while longer, she is sent out into the harshly judging world. Yes, that is always the way by which Christian men and women that have received the blessing of salvation through faith can retain it, and serve Him-by going out among men and doing their work there. The woman went home. I dare say it was a home, if what they said about her was true, that sorely needed the leavening which she now would bring. She had been a centre of evil. She was to go away back to the very place where she had been such, and to be a centre of good. She was to contradict her past by her present which would explain itself when she said she had been with Jesus. For the very same reason for which to one man that besought to be with Him, He said, ‘No, no! go away home and tell your friends what great things God has done for you,’ He said to this woman, and He says to you and me, ‘Go, and witness for Me.’ Communion with Him is blessed, and it is meant to issue in service for Him. ‘Let us make here three tabernacles,’ said the Apostle; and there was scarcely need for the parenthetical comment, ‘not knowing what he said.’ But there was a demoniac boy down there with the rest of the disciples, and they had been trying in vain to free him from the incubus that possessed him, and as long as that melancholy case was appealing to the sympathy and help of the transfigured Christ, it was no time to stop on the Mount. Although Moses and Elias were there, and the voice from God was there, and the Shechinah cloud was there, all were to be left, to go down and do the work of helping a poor, struggling child. So Jesus Christ says to us, ‘Go, and remember that work is the end of emotion, and that to do the Master’s will in the world is the surest way to realise His presence.’

II. Now, the second point I would suggest is-

The region into which Christ admitted this woman. It is remarkable that in the present case, and in that other to which I have already referred, the phraseology employed is not the ordinary one of that familiar Old Testament leave-taking salutation, which was the ‘goodbye’ of the Hebrews, ‘Go in peace.’ But we read occasionally in the Old Testament a slight but eloquent variation. It is not ‘Go in peace,’ as our Authorised Version has it, but ‘Go into peace,’ and that is a great deal more than the other. ‘Go in peace’ refers to the momentary emotion; ‘Go into peace’ seems, as it were, to open the door of a great palace, to let down the barrier on the borders of a land, and to send the person away upon a journey through all the extent of that blessed country. Jesus Christ takes up this as He does a great many very ordinary conventional forms, and puts a meaning into it. Eli had said to Hannah, ‘Go into peace.’ Nathan had said to David, ‘Go into peace.’ But Eli and Nathan could only wish that it might be so; their wish had no power to realise itself. Christ takes the water of the conventional salutation and turns it into the wine of a real gift. When He says, ‘Go into peace,’ He puts the person into the peace which He wishes them, and His word is like a living creature, and fulfils itself.

So He says to each of us: ‘If you have been saved by faith, I open the door of this great palace. I admit you across the boundaries of this great country. I give you all possible forms of peace for yours.’ Peace with God-that is the foundation of all-then peace with ourselves, so that our inmost nature need no longer be torn in pieces by contending emotions, ‘I dare not’ waiting upon ‘I would,’ and ‘I ought’ and ‘I will’ being in continual and internecine conflict; but heart and will, and calmed conscience, and satisfied desires, and pure affections, and lofty emotions being all drawn together into one great wave by the attraction of His love, as the moon draws the heaped waters of the ocean round the world. So our souls at rest in God may be at peace within themselves, and that is the only way by which the discords of the heart can be tuned to one key, into harmony and concord; and the only way by which wars and tumults within the soul turn into tranquil energy, and into peace which is not stagnation, but rather a mightier force than was ever developed when the soul was cleft by discordant desires.

In like manner, the man who is at peace with God, and consequently with himself, is in relations of harmony with all things and with all events. ‘All things are yours if ye are Christ’s.’ ‘The stars in their courses fought against Sisera,’ because Sisera was fighting against God; and all creatures, and all events, are at enmity with the man who is in antagonism and enmity to Him who is Lord of them all. But if we have peace with God, and peace with ourselves, then, as Job says, ‘Thou shalt make a league with the beasts of the field, and the stones of the field shall be at peace with thee.’ ‘Thy faith hath saved thee; go into peace.’

Remember that this commandment, which is likewise a promise and a bestowal, bids us progress in the peace into which Christ admits us. We should be growingly unperturbed and calm, and ‘there is no joy but calm,’ when all is said and done. We should be more and more tranquil and at rest; and every day there should come, as it were, a deeper and more substantial layer of tranquillity enveloping our hearts, a thicker armour against perturbation and calamity and tumult.

III. And now there is one last point here that I would suggest, namely:

The condition on which we shall abide in the Land of Peace.

Our Lord said to both these women: ‘Thy faith hath saved thee.’ To the other one it was even more needful to say it than to this poor penitent prostitute, because that other one had the notion that, somehow or other, she could steal away the blessing of healing by contact of her finger with the robe of Jesus. Therefore He was careful to lift her above that sensuous error, and to show her what it was in her that had drawn healing ‘virtue’ from Him. In substance He says to her: ‘Thy faith, not thy forefinger, has joined thee to Me; My love, not My garment, has healed thee.’

There have been, and still are, many copyists of the woman’s mistake who have ascribed too much healing and saving power to externals-sacraments, rites, and ceremonies. If their faith is real and their longing earnest, they get their blessing, but they need to be educated to understand more clearly what is the human condition of receiving Christ's saving power, and that robe and finger have little to do with it.

The sequence of these two sayings, the one pointing out the channel of all spiritual blessing, the other, the bestowment of the great blessing of perfect peace, suggests that the peace is conditional on the faith, and opens up to us this solemn truth, that if we would enjoy continuous peace, we must exercise continuous faith. The two things will cover precisely the same ground, and where the one stops the other will stop. Yesterday's faith does not secure to-day's peace. As long as I hold up the shield of faith, it will quench all the fiery darts of the wicked, but if I were holding it up yesterday, and have dropped it to-day, then there is nothing between me and them, and I shall be wounded and burned before long. No past religious experience avails for present needs. If you would have 'your peace' to be 'as the waves of the sea,' your trust in Christ must be continuous and strong. The moment you cease trusting, that moment you cease being peaceful. Keep behind the breakwater, and you will ride smoothly, whatever the storm. Venture out beyond it, and you will be exposed to the dash of the waves and the howling of the tempest. Your own past tells you where the means of blessing are. It was your faith that saved you, and it is as you go on believing that you 'Go into peace'.

33)Luke 8:2-3

Luke

THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN

Luk. 8:2 - Luk. 8:3.

The Evangelist Luke has preserved for us several incidents in our Lord's life in which women play a prominent part. It would not, I think, be difficult to bring that fact into connection with the main characteristics of his Gospel, but at all events it is worth observing that we owe to him those details, and the fact that the service of these grateful women was permanent during the whole of our Lord’s wandering life after His leaving Galilee. An incidental reference to the fact is found in Matthew’s account of the Crucifixion, but had it not been for Luke we should not have known the names of two or three of them, nor should we have known how constantly they adhered to Him. As to the women of the little group, we know very little about them. Mary of Magdala has had a very hard fate. The Scripture record of her is very sweet and beautiful. Delivered by Christ from that mysterious demoniacal possession, she cleaves to Him, like a true woman, with all her heart. She is one of the little group whose strong love, casting out all fear, nerved them to stand by the Cross when all the men except the gentle Apostle of love, as he is called, were cowering in corners, afraid of their lives, and she was one of the same group who would fain have prolonged their ministry beyond His death, and who brought the sweet spices with them in order to anoint Him, and it was she who came to the risen Lord with the rapturous exclamation, ‘Rabboni, my Master.’ By strange misunderstanding of the Gospel story, she has been identified with the woman who was a sinner in the previous chapter in this book, and her fair fame has been blackened and her very name taken as a designation of the class to which there is no reason whatever to believe she belonged. Demoniacal possession was neither physical infirmity nor moral evil, however much it may have simulated sometimes the one or the other.

Then as to Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, old Church tradition tells us that she was the consort of the nobleman whose son Christ healed at Capernaum. It does not seem very likely that Herod’s steward would have been living in Capernaum, and the narrative before us rather seems to show that she herself was the recipient of healing from His hands. However that may be, Herod’s court was not exactly the place to look for Christian disciples, was it? But you know they of Caesar’s household surrounded with their love the Apostle whom Nero murdered, and it is by no means an uncommon experience that the servants’ hall knows and loves the Christ that the lord in the saloon does not care about.

And then as for Susanna, is it not a sweet fate to be known to all the world for ever more by one line only, which tells of her service to her Master?

So I will try to take out of these little incidents in our text some plain lessons about this matter of Christian service and ministry to Christ, with which it seems to be so full. It will apply to missionary work and all other sorts of work, and perhaps will take us down to the bottom of it all, and show us the foundation on which it should all rest.

Let me ask you for a moment to look with me first of all at the centre figure, as being an illustration of-what shall I say? may I venture to use a rough word and say the pauper Christ?-as the great Pattern and Motive for us, of the love that becomes poor. We very often cover the life of our Lord with so much imaginative reverence that we sometimes lose the hard angles of the facts of it. Now, I want you to realise it, and you may put it into as modern English as you like, for it will help the vividness of the conception, which is a simple, prosaic fact, that Jesus Christ was, in the broadest meaning of the word, a pauper; not indeed with the sodden poverty that you can see in our slums, but still in a very real sense of the word. He had not a thing that He could call His own, and when He came to the end of His life there was nothing for His executioners to gamble for except His one possession, the seamless robe. He is hungry, and there is a fig-tree by the roadside, and He comes, expecting to get His breakfast off that. He is tired, and He borrows a fishing-boat to lie down and sleep in. He is thirsty, and He asks a woman of questionable character to give Him a draught of water. He wants to preach a sermon about the bounds of ecclesiastical and civil society, and He says, ‘Bring Me a penny.’ He has to be indebted to others for the beast of burden on which He made His modest entry into Jerusalem, for the winding sheet that wrapped Him, for the spices that would embalm Him, for the grave in which He lay. He was a pauper in a deeper sense of the word than His Apostle when he said, ‘Having nothing, and yet possessing all things, as poor, and yet making many rich.’ For let us remember that the great mystery of the Gospel system-the blending together in one act and in one Person all the extremes of lowliness and of the loftiness which go deep down into the very profundities of the Gospel, is all here dramatised, as it were, and drawn into a picturesque form on the very surface; and the same blending together of poverty and absolute love, which in its loftiest form is the union in one Person of Godhead and of manhood, is here for us in this fact, that all the dark cloud of poverty, if I may so say, is shot through with strange gleams of light like sunshine caught and tangled in some cold, wet fog, so that whenever you get some definite and strange mark of Christ’s poverty, you get lying beside it some definite and strange mark of His absoluteness and His worth. For instance, take the illustration I have already referred to-He borrows a fishing-boat and lies down, weary, to sleep on the wooden pillow at the end of it; aye, but He rises and He says, ‘Peace, be still,’ and the waves fall. He borrows the upper room, and with a stranger’s wine and another man’s bread He founds the covenant and the sacrament of His new kingdom. He borrows a grave; aye, but He comes out of it, the Lord both of the dead and of the living. And so we have to say, ‘Consider the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might become rich.’

The noblest life that was ever lived upon earth-I hope you and I think it is a great deal more than that, but we all think it is that at any rate-the noblest life that was ever lived upon earth was the life of a poor man. Remember that pure desires, holy aspirations, noble purposes, and a life peopled with all the refinement and charities that belong to the spirit, and that is ever conscious of the closest presence of God and of the innate union with Him, is possible under such conditions, and so remember that the pauper Christ is, at the least, the perfect Man.

But then what I more immediately intended was to ask you to take that central figure with this external fact of His poverty, of the depth of His true inanition, the emptying of Himself for our sakes, as being the great motive, and Oh! thank God that with all humility, we may venture to say, the great Pattern to which you and I have to conform. There is the reason why we say, ‘I love to speak His name,’ there is the true measure of the devotion of the consecration and the self-surrender which He requires. Christ gave all for us even to the uttermost circumference of external possession, and standing in the midst of those for whose sakes He became poor, He turns to them with a modest appeal when He says, ‘Minister unto Me, for I have made Myself to need your ministrations for the sake of your redemption.’ So much, then, for the first point which I would desire to urge upon you from this incident before us.

Now, in the next place, and pursuing substantially the same course of thought, let me suggest to you to look at the love-the love here that stoops to be served.

It is a familiar observation and a perfectly true one that we have no record of our Lord’s ever having used miraculous power for the supply of His own wants, and the reason for that, I suppose, is to be found not only in that principle of economy and parsimony of miraculous energy, so that the supernatural in His life was ever pared down to the narrowest possible limits, and inosculated immediately with the natural, but it is also to be found in this-let me put it into very plain words-that Christ liked to be helped and served by the people that He loved, and that Christ knew that they liked it as well as He. It delighted Him, and He was quite sure that it delighted them. You fathers and mothers know what it is when one of your little children comes, and seeing you engaged about some occupation says, ‘Let me help you.’ The little hand perhaps does not contribute much to the furtherance of your occupation. It may be rather an encumbrance than otherwise, but is not there a gladness in saying ‘Yes, here, take this and do this little thing for me’? And do not we all know how maimed and imperfect that love is which only gives, and how maimed and imperfect that love is which only receives, so that there must be an assumption of both attitudes in all true commerce of affection, and that same beautiful flashing backwards and forwards from the two poles which makes the sweetness of our earthly love find its highest example there in the heavens. There are the two mirrors facing each other, and they reverberate rays from one polished surface to another, and so Christ loves and gives, and Christ loves and takes, and His servants love and give, and His servants love and take. Sometimes we are accustomed to speak of it as the highest sign of our Lord’s true, deep conviction that He has given so much to us. It seems to me we may well pause and hesitate whether the mightiness and the wonderfulness of His love to us are shown more in that He gives everything to us, or in that He takes so much from us. It is much to say, ‘The Son of man came not to be ministered unto but to minister’; I do not know but that it is more to say that the Son of man let this record be written: ‘Certain women also which ministered to Him of their substance.’ At all events there it stands and for us. What although we have to come and say, ‘All that I bring is Thine’; what then? Does a father like less to get a gift from his boy because he gave him the shilling to buy it? And is there anything that diminishes the true sweetness of our giving to Christ, and as we may believe the true sweetness to Him of receiving it from us, because we have to herald all our offerings, all our love, aspirations, desires, trust, conformity, practical service, substantial help, with the old acknowledgment, ‘All things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee.’

Now, dear friends, all these principles which I have thus imperfectly touched upon as to the necessity of the blending of the two sides in all true commerce of love, the giving and bestowing the expression of the one affection in both hearts, all bears very directly upon the more special work of Christian men in spreading the name of Christ among those who do not know it. You get the same economy of power there that I was speaking about. The supernatural is finished when the divine life is cast into the world. ‘I am come to fling fire upon the earth,’ said He, ‘and oh, that it were already kindled!’ *There* is the supernatural; after that you have to deal with the thing according to the ordinary laws of human history and the ordinary conditions of man’s society. God trusts the spread of His word to His people; there will not be one moment’s duration of the barely, nakedly supernatural beyond the absolute necessity. Christ comes; after that you and I have to see to it, and then you say, ‘Collections, collections, collections, it is always collections. This society and that society and the other society, there is no end of the appeals that are made. Charity sermons-men using the highest motives of the Gospel for no purpose but to get a shilling or two out of people’s pockets. I am tired of it.’ Very well; all I have to say is, first of all, ‘Ye have not resisted unto blood’; some people have had to pay a great deal more for their Gospel than you have. And another thing, a man that had lost a great deal more for his Master than ever you or I will have to do, said, ‘Unto me who am less than the least of all saints is this grace given, that I should preach amongst the heathen the unsearchable riches of Christ.’ Ah! a generous, chivalrous spirit, a spirit touched to fine issues by the fine touch of the Lord’s love, will feel that it is no burden; or if it be a burden, it is only a burden as a golden crown heavy with jewels may be a burden on brows that are ennobled by its pressure. This grace is given, and He has crowned us with the honour that we may serve Him and do something for Him.

Dear brethren! of all the gracious words that our Master has spoken to us, I know not that there is one more gracious than when He said, ‘Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature’; and of all the tender legacies that He has left His Church, though there be included amongst these His own peace and His own Spirit, I know not that there is any more tender or a greater sign of His love towards us and His confidence in us than when departing to the far country to receive a kingdom and to return, He gave authority to His servants, and to every man his work.’

And so, in the next place, let me ask you to look for a moment at the complement to this love that stoops to serve and delights to serve-the ministry or service of our love. Let me point to two things.

It seems to me that the simple narrative we have before us goes very deep into the heart of this matter. It gives us two things-the foundation of the service and the sphere of the service.

First there is the foundation-’Certain women which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities.’ Ah, there you come to it! The consciousness of redemption is the one master touch that evokes the gratitude which aches to breathe itself in service. There is no service except it be the expression of love. That is the one great Christian principle; and the other is that there is no love that does not rest on the consciousness of redemption; and from these two-that all service and obedience are the utterance and eloquence of love, and that all love has its root in the sense of redemption-you may elaborate all the distinct characteristics and peculiarities of Christian ethics, whereby duty becomes gladness. ‘I will,’ and ‘I ought’ overlap and cover each other like two of Euclid’s triangles; and whatsoever He commands that I spring to do; and so though the burden be heavy, considered in regard to its requirements, and though the yoke do often press, considered *per se*, yet because the cords that fasten the yoke to our neck are the cords of love, I can say, ‘My burden is light.’ One of the old psalms puts it thus; ‘O Lord, truly I am Thy servant; Thou hast loosed my bonds; and because Thou hast loosed, therefore O hear me; speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.’

So much then for the foundation-now for the sphere. ‘Ah,’ you say, ‘there is no parallel there, at any rate. These women served Him with personal ministration of their substance.’ Well, I think there is a parallel notwithstanding. If I had time I should like to dwell upon the side thoughts connected with that sphere of service, and remind you how very prosaic were their common domestic duties, looking after the comfort of Christ and the travel-stained Twelve who were with Him-let us put it into plain English-cooking their dinners for them, and how that became a religious act. Take the lesson out of it, you women in your households, and you men in your counting-houses and behind your counters, and you students at your dictionaries and lexicons. The commonest things done for the Master flash up into worship, or as good old George Herbert puts it-

'A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room, as for Thy cause,
Makes that and th' action fine.'

But then beyond that, is there any personal ministration to do? If any of you have ever been in St. Mark's Convent at Florence, I dare say you will remember that in the Guest Chamber the saintly genius of Fra Angelico has painted, as an appropriate frontispiece, the two pilgrims on the road to Emmaus, praying the unknown man to come in and partake of their hospitality; and he has draped them in the habit of his order, and he has put Christ as the Representative of all the poor and wearied and wayworn travellers that might enter in there and receive hospitality, which is but the lesson, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.'

And there is another thing, dear friends. Do we not minister to Him best when we do the thing that is nearest His heart and help Him most in the purpose of His life and in His death? What would you think of a would-be helper of some great reformer who said: 'I will give you all sorts of material support; but I have not a grain of sympathy with the cause to which you have devoted your life. I think it is madness and nonsense: I will feed you and house you and make you comfortable, but I do not care one rush for the object for which you are to be housed and fed and made comfortable.' Jesus Christ let these poor women help Him that He might live to bear the Cross; He lets you and me help Him for that for which on the Cross He died; 'This honour have all the saints'; The foundation of our service is the consciousness of redemption; its sphere is ministering to Him in that which is nearest His heart.

And then, brethren, there is another thing that does not so immediately belong to the incident before us, but which suggests itself to me in connection with it. We have tried to show the motive and the pattern, the foundation and the sphere, of the service: let me add a last thought-the remembrance and the record of it.

How strange that is, that just as a beam of light coming into a room would enable us to see all the motes dancing up and down that lay in its path, so the beam from Christ's life shoots athwart the society of His age, and all those little insignificant people come for a moment into the full lustre of the light. Years before and years afterward they lived, and we do not know anything about them; but for an instant they crossed the illuminated track and there they blazed. How strange Pharisees, officials, and bookmen of all sorts would have felt if anybody had said to them: 'Do you see that handful of travel-stained Galileans there, those poor women you have just passed by the way? Well, do you know that these three women's names will never perish as long as the world lasts?' So we may learn the eternity of work done for Him. Ah, a great deal of it may be forgotten and unrecorded! How many deeds of faithful love and noble devotion are all compressed into those words, 'which ministered unto Him'! It is the old story of how life shrinks, and shrinks, and shrinks in the record. How many acres of green forest ferns in the long ago time went to make up a seam of coal as thick as a sixpence? But still there is the record, compressed indeed, but existent.

And how many names may drop out and not be associated with the work which they did? Do you not think that these anonymous 'many others which ministered' were just as dear to Jesus Christ as Mary and Joanna and Susannah? A great many people helped Him whose deeds are related in the Gospel, but whose names are not recorded. But what does it matter about that? With many 'others of my fellow-labourers also,' says St. Paul; 'whose names'-well, I have forgotten them; but that is of little consequence; they 'are in the Lamb's book of life.' And so the work is eternal, and will last on in our blessed consciousness and in His remembrance who will never forget any of it, and we shall self-enfold the large results, even if the rays of dying fame may fade.

And there is one other thought on this matter of the eternity of the work on which I would just touch for an instant.

How strange it must be to these women now! If, as I suppose, you and I believe, they are living with Christ, they will look up to Him and think, ‘Ah! we remember when we used to find your food and prepare for your household comforts, and there Thou art on the throne! How strange and how great our earthly service seems to us now!’ So it will be to us all when we get up yonder. We shall have to say, ‘Lord, when saw I Thee?’ He will put a meaning into our work and a majesty into it that we know nothing about at present. So, brethren, account the name of His slaves your highest honour, and the task that love gives you your greatest joy. When we have in our poor love poorly ministered unto Him who in His great love greatly died for us, then, at the last, the wonderful word will be fulfilled: ‘Verily I say unto you, He shall gird Himself and make them to sit down to meat and will come forth and serve them.’

34)Luke 8:4-13

Luke

ONE SEED AND DIVERSE SOILS

Luk. 8:4 - Luk. 8:16.

Luke is particular in dating this parable as spoken at a time when crowds resorted to Jesus, and the cities of Galilee seemed emptied out to hear Him. No illusions as to the depth or worth of this excitement beset Him. Sadly He looked on the eager multitudes, because He looked through them, and saw how few of them were bringing ‘an honest and good heart’ for the soil of His word. Just because He saw the shallowness of the momentary enthusiasm, He spoke this pregnant parable from a heavy heart, and as He tells us in His explanation of it to the disciples [ver. 10], uses the parabolic garb as a means of hiding the truth from the unsusceptible, and of bringing it home to those who were prepared to receive it. Every parable has that double purpose of obscuring and revealing. The obscuring is punitive, but the punishment is meant to be remedial. God never cheats men by a revelation that does not reveal, and the very hiding is meant to stimulate to a search which cannot be vain.

The broad outstanding fact of the parable is tragic. Three failures and one success! It may be somewhat lightened by observing that the proportion which each ‘some’ bears to the whole seed-basketful is not told; but with all alleviation, it is sad enough. What a lesson for all eager reformers and apostles of any truth, who imagine that they have but to open their mouths and the world will listen! What a warning for any who are carried off their feet by their apparent ‘popularity’! What a solemn appeal to all hearers of God’s message!

I. Commentators have pointed out that all four kinds of soil might have been found close together by the lake, and that there may have been a sower at work within sight.

But the occasion of the parable lay deeper than the accident of local surroundings. A path through a cornfield is a prosaic enough thing, but one who habitually holds converse with the unseen, and ever sees it shining through the seen, beholds all things ‘apparelled in celestial light,’ and finds deep truths in commonplace objects. The sower would not intentionally throw seed on the path, but some would find its resting-place there. It would lie bare on the surface of the hard ground, and would not be there long enough to have a chance of germinating, but as soon as the sower’s back was turned to go up the next furrow, down would come the flock of thievish birds that fluttered behind him, and bear away the grains. The soil might be good enough, but it was so hard that the seed did not get in, but only lay on it. The path was of the same soil as the rest of the field, only it had been trodden down by the feet of passengers, perhaps for many years.

A heart across which all manner of other thoughts have right of way will remain unaffected by the voice of Jesus, if He spoke His sweetest, divinest tones, still more when He speaks but through some feeble man. The listener hears the words, but they never get farther than the drum of his ear. They lie on the surface of his soul, which is beaten hard, and is non-receptive. How many there are who have been listening to the preaching of the Gospel, which is in a true sense the sowing of the seed, all their lives, and have never really been in contact with it! Tramp, tramp, go the feet across the path, heavy drays of business, light carriages of pleasure, a never-ending stream of traffic and noise like that which pours day and night through the streets of a great city, and the result is complete insensibility to Christ's voice.

If one could uncover the hearts of a congregation, how many of them would be seen to be occupied with business or pleasures, or some favourite pursuit, even while they sit decorously in their pews! How many of them hear the preacher's voice without one answering thought or emotion! How many could not for their lives tell what his last sentence was! No marvel, then, that, as soon as its last sound has ceased, down pounce a whole covey of light-winged fancies and occupations, and carry off the poor fragments of what had been so imperfectly heard. One wonders what percentage of remembrances of a sermon is driven out of the hearers' heads in the first five minutes of their walk home, by the purely secular conversation into which they plunge so eagerly.

II. The next class of hearers is represented by seed which has had somewhat better fate, inasmuch as it has sunk some way in, and begun to sprout.

The field, like many a one in hilly country, had places where the hard pan of underlying rock had only a thin skin of earth over it. Its very thinness helped quick germination, for the rock was near enough to the surface to get heated by the sun. So, with undesirable rapidity, growth began, and shoots appeared above ground before there was root enough made below to nourish them. There was only one possible end for such premature growth-namely, withering in the heat. No moisture was to be drawn from the shelf of rock, and the sun was beating fiercely down, so the feeble green stem drooped and was wilted.

It is the type of emotional hearers, who are superficially touched by the Gospel, and too easily receive it, without understanding what is involved. They take it for theirs 'with joy,' but are strangers to the deep exercises of penitence and sorrow which should precede the joy. 'Lightly come, lightly go,' is true in Christian life as elsewhere. Converts swiftly made are quickly lost. True, the most thorough and permanent change may be a matter of a moment; but, if so, into that moment emotions will be compressed like a great river forced through a mountain gorge, which will do the work of years.

Such surface converts fringe all religious revivals. The crowd listening to our Lord was largely made up of them. These were they who, when a ground of offence arose, ‘went back, and walked no more with Him.’ They have had their successors in all subsequent times of religious movement. Light things are caught up by the wind of a passing train, but they soon drop to the ground again. Emotion is good, if there are roots to it. But ‘these have no root.’ The Gospel has not really touched the depths of their natures, their wills, their reason, and so they shrivel up when they have to face the toil and self-sacrifice inherent in a Christian life.

III. The third parcel of seed advanced still farther.

It rooted and grew. But the soil had other occupants. It was full of seeds of weeds and thorns [not thorn *bushes*]. So the two crops ran a race, and as ill weeds grow apace, the worse beat, and stifled the green blades of the springing corn, which, hemmed in and shut out from light and air, came to nothing.

The man represented has not made clean work of his religion. He has received the good seed, but has forgotten that something has to be grubbed up and cast out, as well as something to be taken in, if he would grow the fair fruits of Christian character. He probably has cut down the thorns, but has left their roots or seeds where they were. He has fruit of a sort, but it is scanty, crude, and green. Why? Because he has not turned the world out of his heart. He is trying to unite incompatibles, one of which is sure to kill the other. His ‘thorns’ are threefold, as Luke carefully distinguishes them into ‘cares and riches and pleasures,’ but they are one in essence, for they are all ‘of this life.’ If he is poor, he is absorbed in cares; if rich, he is yet more absorbed in wealth, and his desires go after worldly pleasures, which he has not been taught, by experience of the supreme pleasure of communion with God, to despise.

Mark that this man does not ‘fall away.’ He keeps up his Christian name to the end. Probably he is a very influential member of the church, universally respected for his wealth and liberality, but his religion has been suffocated by the other growth. He has fruit, but it is not to ‘perfection.’ If Jesus Christ came to Manchester, one wonders how many such Christians He would discover in the chief seats in the synagogues.

IV. The last class avoids the defects of the three preceding.

The soil is soft, deep, and clean. The seed sinks, roots, germinates, has light and air, and brings forth ripened grain. The ‘honest and good heart’ in which it lodges has been well characterised as one ‘whose aim is noble, and who is generously devoted to his aim’ [Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ*, p. 33]. Such a soul Christ recognises as possible, prior to the entrance into it of the word. There are dispositions which prepare for the reception of the truth. But not only the previous disposition, but the subsequent attitude to the word spoken, is emphasised by our Lord. ‘They having heard the word, hold it fast.’ Docilely received, it is steadily retained, or held with a firm grip, whoever and whatever may seek to pluck it from mind or heart.

Further, not only tenacity of grasp, but patient perseverance of effort after the fruit of Christian character, is needed. There must be perseverance in the face of obstacles within and without, if there is to be fruitfulness. The emblem of growth does not suffice to describe the process of Christian progress. The blade becomes the ear, and the ear the full corn, without effort. But the Christian disciple has to fight and resist, and doggedly to keep on in a course from which many things would withdraw him. The nobler the result, the sorer the process. Corn grows; character is built up as the result, first of worthily receiving the good seed, and then of patient labour and much self-suppression.

These different types of character are capable of being changed. The path may be broken up, the rock blasted and removed, the thorns stubbed up. We make ourselves fit or unfit to receive the seed and bear fruit. Christ would not have spoken the parable if He had not hoped thereby to make some of His hearers who belonged to the three defective classes into members of the fourth. No natural, unalterable incapacity bars any from welcoming the word, housing it in his heart, and bringing forth fruit with patience.

35)Luke 8:14

Luke

ONE SEED AND DIVERSE SOILS

SEED AMONG THORNS

Luk. 8:14.

No sensible sower would cast his seed among growing thorn-bushes, and we must necessarily understand that the description in this verse is not meant to give us the picture of a field in which these were actually growing, but rather of one in which they had been grubbed up, and so preparation been made for the sowing of the seed. They had been grubbed up, but they had not been grubbed out. The roots were there, although the branches and the stems had been cut down, or if the roots were not there, abundant seeds were lying buried, and when the good seed was sown it went into ground full of them-and that was the blunder out of which all the mischief came.

I. These three different instances of failure in this parable represent to us, first, the seed carried off at the very beginning, before it has sunk into the ground and before it has had time to germinate.

It lies on the surface and it goes at once. But suppose it is safely piloted past that first danger, then comes another peril. It gets a little deeper into the ground, but there is a shelf of rock an inch or two below the skin of soil, and the poor little rootlets cannot get through that, and so when the hot Syrian sun shines down upon the field, there is an unnatural heat, and a swift vegetation. There is growth, but the same sun that at first stimulated the unnaturally rapid growth, gets a little hotter or continues to pour down during the fervid summer and dries up the premature vegetation which it had called into feeble life. That second seed went further on the road towards fruit.

But suppose a seed is piloted past that second risk, there comes this third one. This seed gets deeper still, and does take root, and does grow, and does bear fruit. That is to say, this is a picture of a real Christian, in whom the seed of the kingdom, which is the word of God, has taken root, and to whom there has been the communication of the divine life that is in the seed; and yet that, too, comes to grief, and our parable tells us how-by three things, the thorns, the growth of the thorns, and the choking of the word.

Luke puts the interpretation of the thorns even more vividly than the other Evangelists, because he represents them as being three different forms of one thing, 'cares and riches and pleasures,' which all come into the one class, 'of this life.' Or, in other words, the present world, with all its various appeals to our animal and sensual nature, with all its possible delights for part of our being, a real and important part of it; and with all the troubles and anxieties which it is cowardly for us to shirk, and impossible for us to escape-this world is ever present to each of us, and if there is anything in us to which it appeals, then certainly the thorns will come up. The cares and the wealth and the pleasures are three classes of one thing. Perhaps the first chiefly besets struggling people; the second mainly threatens well-to-do people; the third, perhaps, is most formidable to leisurely and idle people. But all three appeal to us all, for in every one of us there are the necessary anxieties of life, and every one of us knows that there is real and substantial good to a part of our being, in the possession of a share of this world's wealth, without which no man can live, and all of us carry natures to which the delights of sense do legitimately and necessarily appeal.

So the soil for the growth of the thorns is always in us all. But what then? Are these things so powerful in our hearts as that they become hindrances to our Christian life? That is the question. The cares and the occupation of mind with, and desire for, the wealth and the pleasures are of God's appointment. He did not make them thorns, but you and I make them thorns; and the question for us is, has our Christianity driven out the undue regard to this life, regarded in these three aspects-undue in measure or in any other respect, by which they are converted into hindrances that mar our Christian life? Dear brethren, it is not enough to say, 'I have received the word into my heart.' There is another question besides that-Has the word received into your heart cast out the thorns? Or are they and the seed growing there side by side? The picture of my text is that of a man who, in a real fashion, has accepted the Gospel, but who has accepted it so superficially as that it has not exercised upon him the effect that it ought to produce, of expelling from him the tendencies which may become hindrances to his Christian life. If we have known nothing of ‘the expulsive power of a new affection,’ and if we thought it was enough to cut down the thickest and tallest thorn-bushes, and to leave all the seeds and the roots of them in our hearts, no wonder if, as we get along in life, they grow up and choke the word. ‘Ye cannot serve God and Mammon’; that is just putting into a sentence the lesson of my text.

II. Further, note the growth of the thorns. Luke employs a very significant phrase.

He says, ‘When they have heard they *go forth*, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life.’ That is to say, the path of daily life upon which we all have to walk, the common duties which necessarily draw us to themselves, will certainly stimulate the growth of the thorns if these are not rooted out. Life is full of appeals to our desires after earthly good or pleasure, to our greed after earthly gain, to our dread of earthly sorrow, of pain, of loss, and of poverty. As surely as we are living, and have to go out into the world day by day, so surely will the thorns grow if they are left in us. And so we come back to the old lesson that because we are set in this world, with all its temptations that appeal so strongly to many needs and desires of our nature, we must make thorough work of our religion if it is to be of any good to us at all, and we are not to go on the Christian pilgrimage with one foot upon the higher level and the other upon the lower, like a man walking with one foot on the kerbstone and the other on the roadway. Let us be one thing or the other, out and out, thorough and consistent. If we have the seed in our hearts, remember that *we* are responsible for its growth.

Let us make certain that we have cast out the thorns. There is an old German proverb, the vulgarity of which may be excused for its point. ‘You must not sit near the fire if your head is made of butter.’ We should not try to walk through this wicked world without making very certain that we have stubbed the thorns out of our hearts. Oh, dear friends! here is the secret to the miserable inconsistencies of the great bulk of professing Christians. They have got the seed in, but they have not got the thorns out.

III. Lastly, mark the choking of the growth.

Of course it is rapid, according to the old saying, 'Ill weeds grow apace.' 'They are choked with the cares and riches and pleasures of this life and bring no fruit to perfection.' The weeds grow faster than the seed. 'Possession is nine-tenths of the law,' and they have got possession of the soil, and their roots go far and strike deep, and so they come up, with their great, strong, coarse, quick-growing stems and leaves, and surround the green, infant, slender shoot, and keep the air and light out from it, and exhaust all the goodness of the soil, which has not nutriment in it enough for the modest seed and for the self-asserting thorn. And so the thorn beats in the race, and grows inches whilst the other grows hairbreadths. Is not that a true statement of our experience? If Christian men and women permit as much of their interest and affection and effort and occupation of mind to go out towards the world and worldly things, as, alas! most of us do, no wonder if the tiny, yellow, rather than green, blade is choked and gets covered with parasitical disease, and perhaps dies at last. You cannot grow two crops on one field. Some of us have tried; it will never do. It must be one thing or another, and we must make up our minds whether we are going to cultivate corn or thorn. May God help us to make the right choice of the crop we desire to bear!

Our text tells us that this man, represented by the seed among thorns, was a Christian, did, and does, bear fruit, but, as Luke says, 'brings no fruit to perfection.' The first seed never grew at all; the second got the length of putting forth a blade; this one has got as far as the ear, but not so far as 'the full corn in the ear.' It has fruited, but the fruit is green and scanty, not ripened, as it ought to be, since it grows under such a sky and was taken out of such a seed-basket as our seed has come from. It brings forth no fruit *to perfection*';-is not that a picture of so many Christian people? One cannot say that they are not Christians. One cannot say that there are no signs of a divine life in them. One cannot say but that they do a good many things that are right and pure, and obviously the result of a Divine Spirit working upon them; but all that they do just falls short of the crowning grace and beauty.

There is always something about it that strikes one as being incomplete. They are Christian men and Christian women bringing forth many of the fruits of the Christian life, but the climax somehow or other is always absent. The pyramid goes up many stages, but there is never the gilded summit flashing in the light-'No fruit to perfection.'

Dear brethren, let us take our poor, imperfect services, and lay them down at the Master's feet, and ask Him to help us to make clean work of these hearts of ours, and to turn out of them all our worldly hankerings after the seen and temporal. Then we shall bear fruit that He will gather into His garner. The cares and the pleasures and the wealth that terminate in, and are occupied with, this poor fleeting present are small and insignificant. Let us try to yield ourselves up wholly to the higher influences of that Divine Spirit, and in true consecration receive the engrafted word. And then He will give to us to drink of that river of His pleasures, drinking of which we shall not thirst, nor need to come to any of earth's fountains to draw. If the Saviour comes in in His power, He will cast out the uncleanness that dwells in us and make us fruitful as He would have us to be.

36)Luke 8:15-16

Luke

ONE SEED AND DIVERSE SOILS

Luk. 8:4 - Luk. 8:16.

Luke is particular in dating this parable as spoken at a time when crowds resorted to Jesus, and the cities of Galilee seemed emptied out to hear Him. No illusions as to the depth or worth of this excitement beset Him. Sadly He looked on the eager multitudes, because He looked through them, and saw how few of them were bringing 'an honest and good heart' for the soil of His word. Just because He saw the shallowness of the momentary enthusiasm, He spoke this pregnant parable from a heavy heart, and as He tells us in His explanation of it to the disciples [ver. 10], uses the parabolic garb as a means of hiding the truth from the unsusceptible, and of bringing it home to those who were prepared to receive it. Every parable has that double purpose of obscuring and revealing. The obscuring is punitive, but the punishment is meant to be remedial. God never cheats men by a revelation that does not reveal, and the very hiding is meant to stimulate to a search which cannot be vain.

The broad outstanding fact of the parable is tragic. Three failures and one success! It may be somewhat lightened by observing that the proportion which each 'some' bears to the whole seed-basketful is not told; but with all alleviation, it is sad enough. What a lesson for all eager reformers and apostles of any truth, who imagine that they have but to open their mouths and the world will listen! What a warning for any who are carried off their feet by their apparent 'popularity'! What a solemn appeal to all hearers of God's message!

I. Commentators have pointed out that all four kinds of soil might have been found close together by the lake, and that there may have been a sower at work within sight.

But the occasion of the parable lay deeper than the accident of local surroundings. A path through a cornfield is a prosaic enough thing, but one who habitually holds converse with the unseen, and ever sees it shining through the seen, beholds all things 'apparelled in celestial light,' and finds deep truths in commonplace objects. The sower would not intentionally throw seed on the path, but some would find its resting-place there. It would lie bare on the surface of the hard ground, and would not be there long enough to have a chance of germinating, but as soon as the sower's back was turned to go up the next furrow, down would come the flock of thievish birds that fluttered behind him, and bear away the grains. The soil might be good enough, but it was so hard that the seed did not get in, but only lay on it. The path was of the same soil as the rest of the field, only it had been trodden down by the feet of passengers, perhaps for many years.

A heart across which all manner of other thoughts have right of way will remain unaffected by the voice of Jesus, if He spoke His sweetest, divinest tones, still more when He speaks but through some feeble man. The listener hears the words, but they never get farther than the drum of his ear. They lie on the surface of his soul, which is beaten hard, and is non-receptive. How many there are who have been listening to the preaching of the Gospel, which is in a true sense the sowing of the seed, all their lives, and have never really been in contact with it! Tramp, tramp, go the feet across the path, heavy drays of business, light carriages of pleasure, a never-ending stream of traffic and noise like that which pours day and night through the streets of a great city, and the result is complete insensibility to Christ's voice.

If one could uncover the hearts of a congregation, how many of them would be seen to be occupied with business or pleasures, or some favourite pursuit, even while they sit decorously in their pews! How many of them hear the preacher's voice without one answering thought or emotion! How many could not for their lives tell what his last sentence was! No marvel, then, that, as soon as its last sound has ceased, down pounce a whole covey of light-winged fancies and occupations, and carry off the poor fragments of what had been so imperfectly heard. One wonders what percentage of remembrances of a sermon is driven out of the hearers' heads in the first five minutes of their walk home, by the purely secular conversation into which they plunge so eagerly.

II. The next class of hearers is represented by seed which has had somewhat better fate, inasmuch as it has sunk some way in, and begun to sprout.

The field, like many a one in hilly country, had places where the hard pan of underlying rock had only a thin skin of earth over it. Its very thinness helped quick germination, for the rock was near enough to the surface to get heated by the sun. So, with undesirable rapidity, growth began, and shoots appeared above ground before there was root enough made below to nourish them. There was only one possible end for such premature growth-namely, withering in the heat. No moisture was to be drawn from the shelf of rock, and the sun was beating fiercely down, so the feeble green stem drooped and was wilted.

It is the type of emotional hearers, who are superficially touched by the Gospel, and too easily receive it, without understanding what is involved. They take it for theirs 'with joy,' but are strangers to the deep exercises of penitence and sorrow which should precede the joy. 'Lightly come, lightly go,' is true in Christian life as elsewhere. Converts swiftly made are quickly lost. True, the most thorough and permanent change may be a matter of a moment; but, if so, into that moment emotions will be compressed like a great river forced through a mountain gorge, which will do the work of years.

Such surface converts fringe all religious revivals. The crowd listening to our Lord was largely made up of them. These were they who, when a ground of offence arose, ‘went back, and walked no more with Him.’ They have had their successors in all subsequent times of religious movement. Light things are caught up by the wind of a passing train, but they soon drop to the ground again. Emotion is good, if there are roots to it. But ‘these have no root.’ The Gospel has not really touched the depths of their natures, their wills, their reason, and so they shrivel up when they have to face the toil and self-sacrifice inherent in a Christian life.

III. The third parcel of seed advanced still farther.

It rooted and grew. But the soil had other occupants. It was full of seeds of weeds and thorns [not thorn *bushes*]. So the two crops ran a race, and as ill weeds grow apace, the worse beat, and stifled the green blades of the springing corn, which, hemmed in and shut out from light and air, came to nothing.

The man represented has not made clean work of his religion. He has received the good seed, but has forgotten that something has to be grubbed up and cast out, as well as something to be taken in, if he would grow the fair fruits of Christian character. He probably has cut down the thorns, but has left their roots or seeds where they were. He has fruit of a sort, but it is scanty, crude, and green. Why? Because he has not turned the world out of his heart. He is trying to unite incompatibles, one of which is sure to kill the other. His ‘thorns’ are threefold, as Luke carefully distinguishes them into ‘cares and riches and pleasures,’ but they are one in essence, for they are all ‘of this life.’ If he is poor, he is absorbed in cares; if rich, he is yet more absorbed in wealth, and his desires go after worldly pleasures, which he has not been taught, by experience of the supreme pleasure of communion with God, to despise.

Mark that this man does not ‘fall away.’ He keeps up his Christian name to the end. Probably he is a very influential member of the church, universally respected for his wealth and liberality, but his religion has been suffocated by the other growth. He has fruit, but it is not to ‘perfection.’ If Jesus Christ came to Manchester, one wonders how many such Christians He would discover in the chief seats in the synagogues.

IV. The last class avoids the defects of the three preceding.

The soil is soft, deep, and clean. The seed sinks, roots, germinates, has light and air, and brings forth ripened grain. The ‘honest and good heart’ in which it lodges has been well characterised as one ‘whose aim is noble, and who is generously devoted to his aim’ [Bruce, *The Parabolic Teaching of Christ*, p. 33]. Such a soul Christ recognises as possible, prior to the entrance into it of the word. There are dispositions which prepare for the reception of the truth. But not only the previous disposition, but the subsequent attitude to the word spoken, is emphasised by our Lord. ‘They having heard the word, hold it fast.’ Docilely received, it is steadily retained, or held with a firm grip, whoever and whatever may seek to pluck it from mind or heart.

Further, not only tenacity of grasp, but patient perseverance of effort after the fruit of Christian character, is needed. There must be perseverance in the face of obstacles within and without, if there is to be fruitfulness. The emblem of growth does not suffice to describe the process of Christian progress. The blade becomes the ear, and the ear the full corn, without effort. But the Christian disciple has to fight and resist, and doggedly to keep on in a course from which many things would withdraw him. The nobler the result, the sorer the process. Corn grows; character is built up as the result, first of worthily receiving the good seed, and then of patient labour and much self-suppression.

These different types of character are capable of being changed. The path may be broken up, the rock blasted and removed, the thorns stubbed up. We make ourselves fit or unfit to receive the seed and bear fruit. Christ would not have spoken the parable if He had not hoped thereby to make some of His hearers who belonged to the three defective classes into members of the fourth. No natural, unalterable incapacity bars any from welcoming the word, housing it in his heart, and bringing forth fruit with patience.

37)Luke 8:43-48

Luke

A MIRACLE WITHIN A MIRACLE

Luk. 8:43 - Luk. 8:48.

The story of Jairus's daughter is, as it were, cut in two by that of the poor invalid woman. What an impression of calm consciousness of power and of leisurely dignity is made by Christ's having time to pause, even on His way to a dying sufferer, in order to heal, as if parenthetically, this other afflicted one! How Jairus must have chafed at the delay! He had left his child 'at the point of death' and here was the Healer loitering, as it must have seemed to a father's agony of impatience.

But Jesus, with His infinite calm and as infinite power, can afford to let the one wait and even die, while He tends the other. The child shall receive no harm, and her sister in sorrow has as great a claim on Him as she. He has leisure of heart to feel for each, and power for both. We do not rob one another of His gifts. Attending to one, He does not neglect another.

This miracle illustrates the genuineness and power of feeble and erroneous faith, and Christ's merciful way of strengthening and upholding it. The woman, a poor, shrinking creature, has been made more timid by long illness, disappointed hopes of cure, and by poverty. She does not venture to stop Jesus, as He goes with an important official of the synagogue to heal his daughter, but creeps up in the crowd behind Him, puts out a wasted, trembling hand to touch the tasselled fringe of His robe-and she is whole.

She would fain have glided away with a stolen cure, but Jesus forced her to stand out before the throng, and with all their eyes on her, to conquer diffidence and womanly reticence, and tell all the truth. Strange contrast, this, to His usual avoidance of notoriety and regard for shrinking weakness!

But it was true kindness, for it was the discipline by which her imperfect faith was cleared and confirmed.

It is easy to point out the imperfections in this woman’s faith. It was very ignorant. She was sure that this Rabbi would heal her, but she expected it to be done by the material contact of her finger with His robe. She had no idea that Christ’s will, much less His love, had anything to do with His cures. She thinks that she may carry away the blessing, and He be none the wiser. It is easy to say, What blank ignorance of Christ’s way of working! what grossly superstitious notions! Yes, and with them all what a hunger of intense desire to be whole, and what absolute confidence that a finger-tip on His robe was enough!

Her faith was very imperfect, but the main fact is that she had it. Let us be thankful for a living proof of the genuineness of ignorant and even of superstitious faith. There are many now who fall with less excuse into a like error with this woman’s, by attaching undue importance to externals, and thinking more of the hem of the garment and its touch by a finger than of the heart of the wearer and the grasp of faith. But while we avoid such errors, let us not forget that many a poor worshipper clasping a crucifix may be clinging to the Saviour, and that Christ does accept faith which is tied to outward forms, as He did this woman’s.

There was no real connection between the touch of her finger and her healing, but she thought that there was, and Christ stoops to her childish thought, and lets her make the path for His gift. ‘According to thy faith be it unto thee’: His mercy, like water, takes the shape of the containing vessel.

The last part of the miracle, when the cured woman is made the bold confessor, is all shaped so as to correct and confirm her imperfect faith. We note this purpose in every part of it. She had thought of the healing energy as independent of His knowledge and will. Therefore she is taught that He was aware of the mute appeal, and of the going out of power in answer to it. The question, ‘Who touched me?’ has been regarded as a proof that Jesus was ignorant of the person; but if we keep the woman’s character and the nature of her disease in view, we can suppose it asked, not to obtain information, but to lead to acknowledgment, and that without ascribing to Him in asking it any feigning of ignorance.

The contrast between the pressure of the crowd and the touch of faith has often been insisted on, and carries a great lesson. The unmannerly crowd hustled each other, trod on His skirts, and elbowed their way to gape at Him, and He took no heed. But His heart detected the touch, unlike all the rest, and went out with healing power towards her who touched. We may be sure that, though a universe waits before Him, and the close-ranked hosts of heaven stand round His throne, we can reach our hands through them all, and get the gifts we need.

She had shrunk from publicity, most naturally. But if she had stolen away, she would have lost the joy of confession and greater blessings than the cure. So He mercifully obliges her to stand forth. In a moment she is changed from a timid invalid to a confessor. A secret faith is like a plant growing in the dark, the stem of which is blanched and weak, and its few blossoms pale and never matured. ‘With the mouth confession is made unto salvation.’

Christ’s last word to her is tender. He calls her ‘Daughter’-the only woman whom He addressed by such a name. He teaches her that her faith, not her finger, had been the medium through which His healing power had reached her. He confirms by His authoritative word the furtive blessing: ‘*Be* whole of thy plague.’ And she goes, having found more than she sought, and felt a loving heart where she had only seen a magic-working robe.

38)Luke 8:50

Luke

CHRIST TO JAIRUS

Luk. 8:50.

The calm leisureliness of conscious power shines out very brilliantly from this story of the raising of Jairus’s daughter. The father had come to Jesus, in an agony of impatience, and besought Him to heal his child, who lay ‘at the point of death.’ Not a moment was to be lost. Our Lord sets out with him, but on the road pauses to attend to another sufferer, the woman who laid her wasted finger on the hem of Christ’s robe. How Jairus must have chafed at the delay, and thought every moment an eternity; and perhaps said hard things In his heart about Christ's apparent indifference! Delay seemed to be fatal, for before Christ had finished speaking to the woman, the messenger comes with a word which appears to me to have in it a touch of bitterness and of blame. 'Trouble not the Master' sounds as if the speaker hinted that the Master was thinking it a trouble, and had not put Himself much about to meet the necessity. But one's gain shall not be another's loss, and Christ does not let any applicant to Him suffer whilst He attends to any other. Each has an equal claim on His heart. So He turns to the father with the words that I have read for my text.

They are the first of three sayings of our Lord round which this whole narrative is remarkably grouped. I have read the first, but I mean to speak about all three. There is a word of encouragement which sustains a feeble faith: there is a word of revelation which smooths the grimness of death; 'She is not dead but sleepeth'; and there is a word of power which goes into the darkness, and brings back the child; 'Maiden, arise!' Now, I think if we take these three, we get the significance of this whole incident.

I. First, then, the word of cheer which sustains a staggering faith.

'When Jesus heard this, He said unto him, Fear not, believe only, and she shall be made whole.' How preposterous this rekindling of hope must have seemed to Jairus when the storm had blown out the last flickering spark! How irrelevant, if it were not cruel, the 'Fear not!' must have sounded when the last possible blow had fallen. And yet, because of the word in the middle, embedded between the obligation to hope and the prohibition to fear, neither the one nor the other is preposterous, 'Only believe.' That is in the centre; and on the one side,' Fear not!'-a command ridiculous without it; and on the other side, 'Hope!' an injunction impossible apart from faith.

Jesus Christ is saying the very same things to us. His fundamental commandment is 'Only believe,' and there effloresce from it the two things, courage that never trembles, and hope that never despairs. 'Only believe'-usually He made the outflow of His miraculous power contingent upon the faith, either of the sufferer himself or of some others. There was no necessity for the connection. We have instances in His life of miracles wrought without faith, without asking, simply at the bidding of His own irrepressible pity. But the rule in regard to His miracles is that faith was the condition that drew out the miraculous energy. The connection between our faith and our experience of His supernatural, sustaining, cleansing, gladdening, enlightening power is closer than that. For without our trust in Him, He can do no mighty works upon us, and there must be confidence, on our part, before there is in our experience the reception into our lives of His highest blessings; just because they are greater and deeper, and belong to a more inward sphere than these outward and inferior miracles of bodily healing. Therefore the connection between our faith and His gifts to us is inevitable, and constant, and the commandment 'Only believe,' assumes a more imperative stringency, in regard to our spiritual experience, than it ever did in regard to those who felt the power of His miracle-working hand. So it stands for us, as the one central appeal and exhortation which Christ, by His life, by the record of His love, by His Cross and Passion, by His dealings and pleadings with us through His Spirit, and His providence to-day, is making to us all. 'Only believe'-the one act that vitally knits the soul to Christ, and makes it capable of receiving unto itself the fullness of His loftiest blessings.

But we must note the two clauses which stand on either side of this central commandment. They deal with two issues of faith. One forbids fear, the other gives fuel for the fire of hope. On the one hand, the exhortation, 'Fear not,' which is the most futile that can be spoken if the speaker does not touch the cause of the fear, comes from His lips with a gracious power. Faith is the one counterpoise of fear. There is none other for the deepest dreads that lie cold and paralysing, though often dormant, in every human spirit; and that ought to lie there. If a man has not faith in God, in Christ, he ought to have fear. For there rise before him, solitary, helpless, inextricably caught into the meshes of this mysterious and awful system of things-a whole host of possible, or probable, or certain calamities, and what is he to do? stand there in the open, with the pelting of the pitiless storm coming down upon him? The man is an idiot if he is not afraid. And what is to calm those rational fears, the fear of wrath, of life, of death, of what lies beyond death? You cannot whistle them away. You cannot ignore them always. You cannot grapple with them in your own strength. 'Only believe,' says the Comforter and the Courage-bringer. The attitude of trust banishes dread, and nothing else will effectually and reasonably do it. 'I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear.' Him who can slay and who judges. You have, and you cannot break, a connection with God. He ought to be one of two things-your ghastliest dread or your absolute trust. 'Only believe then,' 'fear not.' Believe not, *then* be afraid; for you have reason to be.

Men say, 'Oh! keep your courage up'; and they contribute no means to keep it up: Christ says 'Fear not; only believe,' and gives to faith the courage which He enjoins. Like a child that never dreams of any mischief being able to reach it when the mother's breast is beneath its head, and the mother's arms are round its little body, each of us may rest on Christ's breast, and feel His arm round about us. Then we may smile at all that men call evils; and whether they are possible, or probable, or certain, we can look at them all and say, 'Ah! I have circumvented you.' 'All things work together for good to them that' trust Christ. 'Fear not; only believe.'

But on the other hand, from that simple faith will spring up also hope that cannot despair. 'She shall be made whole.' Irreversible disasters have no place in Christian experience. There are no irrevocable losses to him who trusts. There are no wounds that cannot be stanched, when we go to Him who has the balm and the bandage. Although it is true that dead faces do not smile again upon us until we get beyond earth's darkness, it is also true that bonds broken may be knit in a finer fashion, if faith instead of sense weaves them together; and that in the great future we shall find that the true healing of those that went before was not by deliverance from, but by passing through, the death that emancipates from the long disease of earthly life.

Brethren! if we trust Christ we may 'hope perfectly.' If we do not trust Him our firmest hopes are as spiders' webs that are swept away by a besom; and our deepest desires remain unfulfilled. 'Only believe,' then, on the one side, 'Fear not,' and on the other side 'Hope ever.'

II. We have here a word of revelation which softens the grimness of death.

Our Lord reaches the house of affliction, and finds it a house of hubbub and noise. The hired mourners, with their shrill shrieks, were there already, bewailing the child. The tumult jarred upon His calmness, and He says 'Weep not; she is not dead but sleepeth.' One wonders how some people have read those words as if they declared that the apparent physical death was only a swoon or a faint, or some kind of coma, and that so there was no miracle at all in the case. 'They laughed Him to scorn; knowing that she was dead.' You can measure the hollowness of their grief by its change into scornful laughter when a promise of consolation began to open before them. And you can measure their worth as witnesses to the child's resurrection by their absolute certainty of her death.

But notice that our Lord never forbids weeping unless He takes away its cause. 'Weep not,' is another of the futile forms of words with which men try to encourage and comfort one another. There is nothing more cruel than to forbid tears to the sad heart. Jesus Christ never did that except when He was able to bring that which took away occasion for weeping. He lets grief have its way. He means us to run rivers of waters down our cheeks when He sends us sorrows. We shall never get the blessing of these till we have felt the bitterness of them. We shall never profit by them if we stoically choke back the manifestations of our grief, and think that it is submissive to be dumb. Let sorrow have way. Tears purge the heart from which their streams come. But Jesus Christ says to us all, 'Weep not,' because He comes to us all with that which, if I may so say, puts a rainbow into the tear-drops, and makes it possible that the great paradox should be fulfilled in our hearts, 'As sorrowful yet always rejoicing.' Weep not; or if you weep, let the tears have thankfulness as well as grief in them. It is a difficult commandment, but it is possible when His lips tell us not to weep, and we have obeyed the central exhortation, 'Only believe.'

Note, further, in this second of our Lord's words, how He smooths away the grimness of death. I do not claim for Him anything like a monopoly of that most obvious and natural symbolism which regards death as a sleep. It must have occurred to all who ever looked upon a corpse. But I do claim that when He used the metaphor, and by His use of it modified the whole conception of death in the thoughts of His disciples, He put altogether different ideas into it from that which it contained on the lips of others. He meant to suggest the idea of repose-

'Sleep, full of rest from head to foot.'

The calm immobility of the body so lately racked with pain, or restless in feverish tossings, is but a symbol of the deeper stillness of truer repose which remaineth for the people of God and laps the blessed spirits who 'sleep in Jesus.' He meant to suggest the idea of separation from this material world. He did not mean to suggest the idea of unconsciousness. A man is not unconscious when he is asleep, as dreams testify. He meant, above all, if sleep, then waking.

So the grim fact is smoothed down, not by blinking any of its aspects, but by looking deeper into them. They who, only believing, have lived a life of courage and of hope, and have fronted sorrows, and felt the benediction of tears, pass into the great darkness, and know that they there are rocked to sleep on a loving breast, and, sleeping in Jesus, shall wake with the earliest morning light.

This is a revelation for all His servants. And how deeply these words, and others like them which He spake at the grave of Lazarus and at other times, were dinted into the consciousness of the Christian Church, is manifested by the fact, not only that they are recurrently used by Apostles in their Epistles, but that all through the New Testament you scarcely ever find the physical fact of dissolution designated by the name 'death,' but all sorts of gracious paraphrases, which bring out the attractive and blessed aspects of the thing, are substituted. It is a 'sleep'; it is a 'putting off the tabernacle'; it is a 'departure'; it is a pulling up of the tent-pegs, and a change of place. We do not need the ugly word, and we do not need to dread the thing that men call by it. The Christian idea of death is not the separation of self from its house, of the soul from the body, but the separation of self from God, who is the life.

III. So, lastly, the life-giving word of power.

'Maiden, arise!' All the circumstances of the miracle are marked by the most lovely consideration, on Christ's part, of the timidity of the little girl of twelve years of age. It is because of that that He seeks to raise her in privacy, whereas the son of the widow of Nain and Lazarus were raised amidst a crowd. It is because of that that He selects as His companions in the room only the three chief Apostles as witnesses, and the father and mother of the child. It is because of that that He puts forth His hand and grasps hers, in order that the child’s eyes when they open should see only the loving faces of parents, and the not less loving face of the Master; and that her hand, when it began to move again, should clasp, first, His own tender hand. It is for the same reason that the remarkable appendix to the miracle is given-’He commanded that they should give her food.’ Surely that is an inimitable note of truth. No legend-manufacturer would have dared to drop down to such a homely word as that, after such a word as ‘Maiden, arise!’ An economy of miraculous power is shown here, such as was shown when, after Lazarus came forth, other hands had to untie the grave-clothes which tripped him as he stumbled along. Christ will do by miracle what is needful and not one hairs-breadth more. In His calm majesty He bethinks Himself of the hungry child, and entrusts to others the task of giving her food. That homely touch is, to me, indicative of the simple veracity of the historian.

But the life-giving word itself; what can we say about it? Only this one thing: here Jesus Christ exercises a manifest divine prerogative. It was no more the syllables that He spoke than it was the touch of His hand that raised the child. What was it? The forth-putting of His will, which went away straight into the darkness; and if the disembodied spirit was in a locality, went straight there; and somehow or other, laid hold of the spirit, and somehow or other, reinstated it in its home. Christ’s will, like the king’s writ, runs through all the universe. ‘He spake, and it was done’;-whose prerogative is that? God’s; and God manifest in the flesh exercised it. The words of the Incarnate Word have power over physical things.

Here, too, are the prelude and first-fruits of our resurrection. Not that there are not wide differences between the raising of this child, and that future resurrection to which Christian hope looks forward, but that in this one little incident, little, compared with the majestic scale of the latter, there come out these two things-the demonstration that conscious life runs on, irrespective of the accident of its being united with or separated from a bodily organisation; and the other, that Jesus Christ has power over men’s spirits, and can fit them at His will to bodies appropriate to their condition. Time is no element in the case. What befalls the particles of the human frame is no element in the case. ‘Thou sowest not the body that shall be.’ But if that Lord had the power which He showed in that one chamber, with that one child, then, as a little window may show us great matters, so we see through this single incident the time when ‘they that are in the graves shall hear His voice, and shall come forth.’

Brethren! there is a higher lesson still; He that gives and gives again, physical life, does so as a symbol of the highest gift which He can bestow upon us all. If we ‘only believe,’ then, ‘you hath He quickened which were dead in trespasses and sins . . . and for His great love wherewith He loved us. . .. He hath raised us up together, and made us sit together, in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.’

39)Luke 9:10

Luke

BREAD FROM HEAVEN

Luk. 9:10 - Luk. 9:17.

The Apostles needed rest after their trial trip as evangelists. John the Baptist’s death had just been told to Christ. The Passover was at hand, and many pilgrims were on the march. Prudence and care for His followers as well as Himself suggested a brief retirement, and our Lord sought it at the Eastern Bethsaida, a couple of miles up the Jordan from its point of entrance to the lake. Matthew and Mark tell us that He went by boat, which Luke does not seem to have known. Mark adds that the curious crowd, which followed on foot, reached the place of landing before Him, and so effectually destroyed all hope of retirement. It was a short walk round the north-western part of the head of the lake, and the boat would be in sight all the way, so that there was no escape for its passengers.

Luke records the self-oblivious cordiality of Christ’s reception of the intrusive crowd. Without a sigh or sign of impatience, He ‘welcomed them’-a difficult thing to do, and one which few of us could have achieved. The motives of most of them can have been nothing higher than what leads vulgar people of all ranks and countries to buzz about distinguished men, utterly regardless of delicacy or considerateness. They want to see the notoriety, no matter what it costs him. But Jesus received them patiently, because, as Mark touchingly tells, He was ‘moved with pity,’ and saw in their rude crowding round Him the token of their lack of guides and teachers. They seemed to Him, not merely a mob of intrusive sight-seers, but like a huddled mass of unshepherded sheep.

Christ’s heart felt more lovingly than ours because His eye saw deeper, and His eye saw deeper because His heart felt more lovingly. If we would live nearer Him, we should see, as He did, enough in every man to draw our pity and help, even though he may jostle and interfere with us.

The short journey to Bethsaida would be in the early morning, and a long day of toil followed instead of the hoped-for quiet. Note that singular expression, ‘Them that had need of healing He healed.’ Why not simply ‘them that were sick’? Probably to bring out the thought that misery made unfailing appeal to Him, and that for Him to see need was to supply it. His swift compassion, His all-sufficient power to heal, and the conditions of receiving His healing, are all wrapped up in the words. Coming to the miracle itself, we may throw the narrative into three parts-the preliminaries, the miracle, and the abundant overplus.

I. Our Lord leads up to the miracle by forcing home on the minds of the disciples the extent of the need and the utter inadequacy of their resources to meet it, and by calling on them and the crowd for an act of obedience which must have seemed to many of them ludicrous.

John shows us that He had begun to prepare them, at the moment of meeting the multitude, by His question to Philip. That had been simmering in the disciples’ minds all day, while they leisurely watched Him toiling in word and work, and now they come with their solution of the difficulty. Their suggestion was a very sensible one in the circumstances, and they are not to be blamed for not anticipating a miracle as the way out. However many miracles they saw, they never seem to have expected another. That has been thought to be unnatural, but surely it is true to nature. They moved in a confusing mixture of the miraculous and the natural which baffled calculation as to which element would rule at any given moment. Their faith was feeble, and Christ rebuked them for their slowness to learn the lesson of this very miracle and its twin feeding of the four thousand. They were our true brothers in their failure to grasp the full meaning of the past, and to trust His power.

The strange suggestion that the disciples should feed the crowd must have appeared to them absurd, but it was meant to bring out the clear recognition of the smallness of their supply. Therein lie great lessons. Commands are given and apparent duties laid on us, in order that we may find out how impotent we are to do them. It can never be our duty to do what we cannot do, but it is often our duty to attempt tasks to which we are conspicuously inadequate, in the confidence that He who gives them has laid them on us to drive us to Himself, and there to find sufficiency. The best preparation of His servants for their work in the world is the discovery that their own stores are small. Those who have learned that it is their task to feed the multitude, and who have said ‘We have no more than such and such scanty resources,’ are prepared to be the distributors of His all-sufficient supply.

What a strange scene that must have been as the hundred groups of fifty each arranged themselves on the green grass, in the setting sunlight, waiting for a meal of which there were no signs! It took a good deal of faith to seat the crowd, and some faith for the crowd to sit. How expectant they would be! How they would wonder what was to be done next! How some of them would laugh, and some sneer, and all watch the event! We, too, have to put ourselves in the attitude to receive gifts of which sense sees no sign; and if, in obedience to Christ’s word, we sit down expecting Him to find the food, we shall not be disappointed, though the table be spread in the wilderness, and neither storehouse nor kitchen be in sight.

II. The miracle itself has some singular features.

Like that of the draught of fishes, it was not called forth by the cry of suffering, nor was the need which it met one beyond the reach of ordinary means. It was certainly one of the miracles most plainly meant to strike the popular mind, and the enthusiasm excited by it, according to John’s account, was foreseen by Christ. Why did He evoke enthusiasm which He did not mean to gratify? For the very purpose of bringing the carnal expectations of the crowd to a head, that they might be the more conclusively disappointed. The miracle and its sequel sifted and sent away many ‘disciples,’ and were meant to do so.

All the accounts tell of Christ’s ‘blessing.’ Matthew and Mark do not say what He blessed, and perhaps the best supplement is ‘God,’ but Luke says that He blessed the food. What He blesses is blessed; for His words are deeds, and communicate the blessing which they speak. The point at which the miraculous multiplication of the food came in is left undetermined, but perhaps the difference in the tenses of the verbs hints at it. ‘Blessed’ and ‘brake’ are in the tense which describes a single act; ‘gave’ is in that which describes a continuous repeated action. The pieces grew under His touch, and the disciples always found His hands full when they came back with their own empty. But wherever the miraculous element appeared, creative power was exercised by Jesus; and none the less was it creative, because there was the ‘substratum’ of the loaves and fishes. Too much stress has been laid on their being used, and some commentators have spoken as if without them the miracle could not have been wrought. But surely the distinction between pure creation and multiplication of a thing already existing vanishes when a loaf is ‘multiplied’ so as to feed a thousand men.

The symbolical aspect of the miracle is set forth in the great discourse which follows it in John’s Gospel. Jesus is the ‘Bread of God which came down from heaven.’ That Bread is broken for us. Not in His Incarnation alone, but in His Death, is He the food of the world; and we have not only to ‘eat His flesh,’ but to ‘drink His blood,’ if we would live. Nor can we lose sight of the symbol of His servants’ task. They are the distributors of the heaven-sent bread. If they will but take their poor stores to Jesus, with the acknowledgment of their insufficiency, He will turn them into inexhaustible supplies, and they will find that ‘there is that scattereth, and yet increaseth.’ What Christ blesses is always enough.

III. The abundance left over is significant.

Twelve baskets, such as poor travellers carried their belongings in, were filled; that is to say, each Apostle who had helped to feed the hungry had a basketful to bring off for future wants. The ‘broken pieces’ were not crumbs that littered the grass, but the portions that came from Christ’s hands.

His provision is more than enough for a hungry world, and they who share it out among their fellows have their own possession of it increased. There is no surer way to receive the full sweetness and blessing of the Gospel than to carry it to some hungry soul. These full baskets teach us, too, that In Christ’s gift of Himself as the Bread of Life there is ever more than at any given moment we can appropriate. The Christian’s spiritual experiences have ever an element of infinity in them; and we feel that if we were able to take in more, there would be more for us to take. Other food cloys and does not satisfy, and leaves us starving. Christ satisfies and does not cloy, and we have always remaining, yet to be enjoyed, the boundless stores which neither eternity will age nor a universe feeding on them consume. The Christian’s capacity of partaking of Christ grows with what it feeds on, and he alone is safe in believing that ‘To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.’

40)Luke 9:11

Luke

BREAD FROM HEAVEN

‘THE LORD THAT HEALETH THEE’

Luk. 9:11.

Jesus was seeking a little quiet and rest for Himself and His followers. For that purpose He took one of the fishermen's boats to cross to the other side of the sea. But the crowd, inconsiderate and selfish, like all crowds, saw the course of the boat, and hurried, as they could easily do, on foot round the head of the lake, to be ready for Him wherever He might land. So when He touched the shore, there they all were, open-mouthed and mostly moved by mere curiosity, and the prospect of a brief breathing-space vanished.

But not a word of rebuke or disappointment came from His lips, and no shade of annoyance crossed His spirit. Perhaps with a sigh, but yet cheerfully, He braced Himself to work where He had hoped for leisure. It was a little thing, but it was the same in kind, though infinitely smaller in magnitude, as that which led Him to lay aside 'the glory that He had with the Father before the world was,' and come to toil and die amongst men.

But what I especially would note are Luke's remarkable words here. Why does he use that periphrasis, 'Them that had need of healing,' instead of contenting himself with straightforwardly saying, 'Them that were sick,' as do the other Evangelists? Well, I suppose he wished to hint to us the Lord's discernment of men's necessities, the swift compassion which moved to supply a need as soon as it was observed, and the inexhaustible power by which, whatsoever the varieties of infirmity, He was able to cure and to bring strength. 'He healed them that had need of healing,' because His love could not look upon a necessity without being moved to supply it, and because that love wielded the resources of an infinite power.

Now, all our Lord's miracles are parables, illustrating upon a lower platform spiritual facts; and that is especially true about the miracles of healing. So I wish to deal with the words before us as having a direct application to ourselves, and to draw from them two or three very old, threadbare, neglected lessons, which I pray God may lead some of us to recognise anew our need of healing, and Christ's infinite power to bestow it. There are three things that I want to say, and I name them here that you may know where I am going. First, we all need healing; second, Christ can heal us all; third, we are not all healed.

I. We all need healing.

The people in that crowd were not all diseased. Some of them He taught; some of them He cured; but that crowd where healthy men mingled with cripples is no type of the condition of humanity. Rather we are to find it in that Pool of Bethesda, with its five porches, wherein lay a multitude of impotent folk, tortured with varieties of sickness, and none of them sound. Blessed be God! we are in *Bethesda*, which means ‘house of mercy,’ and the fountain that can heal is perpetually springing up beside us all. There is a disease, dear brethren, which affects and infects all mankind, and it is of that that I wish to speak to you two or three plain, earnest words now. Sin is universal.

What does the Bible mean by sin? Everything that goes against, or neglects God’s law. And if you will recognise in all the acts of every life the reference, which really is there, to God and His will, you will not need anything more to establish the fact that ‘all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.’ Whatever other differences there are between men, there is this fundamental similarity. Neglect-which is a breach-of the law of God pertains to all mankind. Everything that we do ought to have reference to Him. *Does* everything that we do have such reference? If not, there is a quality of evil in it. For the very definition of sin is living to myself and neglecting Him. He is the centre, and if I might use a violent figure, every planet that wrenches itself away from gravitation towards, and revolution round, that centre, and prefers to whirl on its own axis, has broken the law of the celestial spheres, and brought discord into the heavenly harmony. All men stand condemned in this respect.

Now, there is no need to exaggerate. I am not saying that all men are on the same level. I know that there are great differences in the nobleness, purity, and goodness of lives, and Christianity has never been more unfairly represented than when good men have called, as they have done with St. Augustine, the virtues of godless men, ‘splendid vices.’ But though the differences are not unimportant, the similarity is far more important. The pure, clean-living man, and the loving, gentle woman, though they stand high above the sensuality of the profligate, the criminal, stand in this respect on the same footing that they, too, have to put their hands on their mouths, and their mouths in the dust, and cry ‘Unclean!’ I do not want to exaggerate, and sure I am that if men will be honest with themselves there is a voice that responds to the indictment when I say sadly, in the solemn language of Scripture, ‘we all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.’ For there is no difference. If you do not believe in a God, you can laugh at the old wife’s notion of ‘sin.’ If you do believe in a God, you are shut up to believe this other thing, ‘Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned.’

And, brethren, if this universal fact is indeed a fact, it is the gravest element in human nature. It matters very little, in comparison, whether you and I are wise or foolish, educated or illiterate, rich or poor, happy or miserable. All the superficial distinctions which separate men from one another, and are all right in their own places, dwindle away into nothing before this solemn truth that in every frame there is a plague spot, and that the leprosy has smitten us all.

But, brethren, do not let us lose ourselves in generalities. All means each, and each means me. We all know how hard it is to bring general truths to bear, with all their weight, upon ourselves. That is an old commonplace: ‘All men think all men mortal but themselves’; and we are quite comfortable when this indictment is kept in the general terms of universality-’All have sinned.’ Suppose I sharpen the point a little. God grant that the point may get to some indurated conscience here. Suppose, instead of reading ‘All have sinned,’ I beseech each one of my hearers to strike out the general word, and put in the individual one, and to say ‘*I* have sinned.’ You have to do with this indictment just as you have to do with the promises and offers of the Gospel-wherever there is a ‘whosoever’ put your pen through it, and write your own name over it. The blank cheque is given to us in regard to these promises and offers, and we have to fill in our own names. The charge is handed to us, in regard to this indictment, and if we are wise we shall write our own names there, too.

Dear brethren, I leave this on your consciences, and I will venture to ask that, if not here, at any rate when you get quietly home to-night, and lie down on your beds, you would put to yourselves the question, ‘Is it I?’ And sure I am that, if you do, you will see a finger pointing out of the darkness, and hear a voice sterner than that of Nathan, saying ‘Thou art the man.’

II. Christ can heal us all.

I was going to use an inappropriate word, and say, the *superb* ease with which He grappled with, and overcame, all types of disease is a revelation on a lower level of the inexhaustible and all-sufficient fullness of His healing power. He can cope with all sin-the world's sin, and the individual's. And, as I believe, He alone can do it.

Just look at the problem that lies before any one who attempts to stanch these wounds of humanity. What is needed in order to deliver men from the sickness of sin? Well! that evil thing, like the fabled dog that sits at the gate of the infernal regions, is three-headed. And you have to do something with each of these heads if you are to deliver men from that power.

There is first the awful power that evil once done has over us of repeating itself on and on. There is nothing more dreadful to a reflective mind than the damning influence of habit. The man that has done some wrong thing once is a *rara avis* indeed. If once, then twice; if twice, then onward and onward through all the numbers. And the intervals between will grow less, and what were isolated points will coalesce into a line; and impulses wax as motives wane, and the less delight a man has in his habitual form of evil the more is its dominion over him, and he does it at last not because the doing of it is any delight, but because the *not* doing of it is a misery. If you are to get rid of sin, and to eject the disease from a man, you have to deal with that awful degradation of character, and the tremendous chains of custom. That is one of the heads of the monster.

But, as I said, sin has reference to God, and there is another of the heads, for with sin comes guilt. The relation to God is perverted, and the man that has transgressed stands before Him as guilty, with all the dolefulness that that solemn word means; and that is another of the heads.

The third is this-the consequences that follow in the nature of penalty. 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' So long as there is a universal rule by God, in which all things are concatenated by cause and effect, it is impossible but that 'Evil shall slay the wicked.' And that is the third head. These three, habit, guilt, and penalty, have all to be dealt with if you are going to make a thorough job of the surgery.

And here, brethren, I want not to argue but to preach. Jesus Christ died on the Cross for you, and your sin was in His heart and mind when He died, and His atoning sacrifice cancels the guilt, and suspends all that is dreadful in the penalty of the sin. Nothing else-nothing else will do that. Who can deal with guilt but the offended Ruler and Judge? Who can trammel up consequences but the Lord of the Universe? The blood of Jesus Christ is the sole and sufficient oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.

That disposes of two of the monster's heads. What about the third? Who will take the venom out of my nature? What will express the black drop from my heart? How shall the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? How can the man that has become habituated to evil 'learn to do well'? Superficially there may be much reformation. God forbid that I should forget that, or seem to minimise it. But for the thorough ejection from your nature of the corruption that you have yourselves brought into it, I believe-and that is why I am here, for I should have nothing to say if I did not believe it-I believe that there is only one remedy, and that is that into the sinful heart there should come, rejoicing and flashing, and bearing on its broad bosom before it all the rubbish and filth of that dunghill, the great stream of the new life that is given by Jesus Christ. He was crucified for our offences, and He lives to bestow upon us the fullness of His own holiness. So the monster's heads are smitten off. Our disease and the tendency to it, and the weakness consequent upon it, are all cast out from us, and He reveals Himself as 'the Lord who healeth thee.'

Now, dear brethren, you may say 'That is all very fine talking.' Yes! but it is something a great deal more than fine talking. For nineteen centuries have established the fact that it is so; and with all their imperfections there have been millions, and there are millions to-day, who are ready to say, 'Behold! it is not a delusion; it is not rhetoric, *I* have trusted in Him and He has made *me* whole.'

Now, if these things that I have been saying do fairly represent the gravity of the problem which has to be dealt with in order to heal the sicknesses of the world, then there is no need to dwell upon the thought of how absolutely confined to Jesus Christ is the power of thus dealing. God forbid that I should not give full weight to all other methods for partial reformation and bettering of humanity. I would wish them all God-speed. But, brethren, there is nothing else that will deal either with my sin in its relation to God, or in its relation to my character, or in its relation to my future, except the message of the Gospel. There are plenty of other things, very helpful and good in their places, but I do want to say, in one word, that there is nothing else that goes deep enough.

Education? Yes! it will do a great deal, but it will do nothing in regard to sin. It will alter the type of the disease, because the cultured man's transgressions will be very different from those of the illiterate boor. But wise or foolish, professor, student, thinker, or savage with narrow forehead and all but dead brain, are alike in this, that they are sinners in God's sight. I would that I could get through the fence that some of you have reared round you, on the ground of your superior enlightenment and education and refinement, and make you feel that there is something deeper than all that, and that you may be a very clever, and a very well educated, a very highly cultured, an extremely thoughtful and philosophical sinner, but you are a sinner all the same.

And again, we hear a great deal at present, and I do not desire that we should hear less, about social and economic and political changes, which some eager enthusiasts suppose will bring the millennium. Well, if the land were nationalised, and all 'the means of production and distribution' were nationalised, and everybody got his share, and we were all brought to the communistic condition, what then? That would not make men better, in the deepest sense of the word. The fact is, these people are beginning at the wrong end. You cannot better humanity merely by altering its environment for the better. Christianity reverses the process. It begins with the inmost man, and it works outwards to the circumference, and that is the thorough way. Why! suppose you took a company of people out of the slums, for instance, and put them into a model lodging-house, how long will it continue a model? They will take their dirty habits with them, and pull down the woodwork for firing, and in a very short time make the place where they are as like as possible to the hovel whence they came. You must change the men, and then you can change their circumstances, or rather they will change them for themselves. Now, all this is not to be taken as casting cold water on any such efforts to improve matters, but only as a protest against its being supposed that these *alone* are sufficient to rectify the ills and cure the sorrows of humanity. ‘Ye have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly.’ The patient is dying of cancer, and you are treating him for a skin disease. It is Jesus Christ alone who can cure the sins, and therein the sorrows, of humanity.

III. Lastly, we are not all healed.

That is only too plain. All the sick in the crowd round Christ were sent away well, but the gifts He bestowed so broadcast had no relation to their spiritual natures, and gifts that have relation to our spiritual nature cannot be thus given in entire disregard of our actions in the matter.

Christ cannot heal you unless you take His healing power. He did on earth sometimes, though not often, cure physical disease without the requirement of faith on the part of the healed person or his friends, but He cannot [He would if He could] do so in regard to the disease of sin. There, unless a man goes to Him, and trusts Him, and submits his spirit to the operation of Christ’s pardoning and hallowing grace, there cannot be any remedy applied, nor any cure effected. That is no limitation of the universal power of the Gospel. It is only saying that if you do not take the medicine you cannot expect that it will do you any good, and surely that is plain common-sense. There are plenty of people who fancy that Christ’s healing and saving power will, somehow or other, reach every man, apart from the man’s act. It is all a delusion, brethren. If it could it would. But if salvation could be thus given, independent of the man, it would come down to a mere mechanical thing, and would not be worth the having. So I say, first, if you will not take the medicine you cannot get the cure.

I say, second, if you do not feel that you are ill you will not take the medicine. A man crippled with lameness, or tortured with fever, or groping in the daylight and blind, or deaf to all the sounds of this sweet world, could not but know that he was a subject for the healing. But the awful thing about our disease is that the worse you are the less you know it; and that when conscience ought to be speaking loudest it is quieted altogether, and leaves a man often perfectly at peace, so that after he has done evil things he wipes his mouth and says, ‘I have done no harm.’

So, dear brethren, let me plead with you not to put away these poor words that I have been saying to you, and not to be contented until you have recognised what is true, that you-*you*, stand a sinful man before God.

There is surely no madness comparable to the madness of the man that prefers to keep his sin and die, rather than go to Christ and live. We all neglect to take up many good things that we might have if we would, but no other neglect is a thousandth part so insane as that of the man who clings to his evil and spurns the Lord. Will you look into your own hearts? Will you recognise that awful solemn law of God which ought to regulate all our doings, and, alas! has been so often neglected, and so often transgressed by each of us? Oh! if once you saw yourselves as you are, you would turn to Him and say, 'Heal me'; and you would be healed, and He would lay His hand upon you. If only you will go, sick and broken, to Him, and trust in His great sacrifice, and open your hearts to the influx of His healing power, He will give you 'perfect soundness'; and your song will be, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul. . .. Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth thy diseases.'

May it be so with each of us!

41)Luke 9:12-17

Luke

BREAD FROM HEAVEN

Luk. 9:10 - Luk. 9:17.

The Apostles needed rest after their trial trip as evangelists. John the Baptist's death had just been told to Christ. The Passover was at hand, and many pilgrims were on the march. Prudence and care for His followers as well as Himself suggested a brief retirement, and our Lord sought it at the Eastern Bethsaida, a couple of miles up the Jordan from its point of entrance to the lake. Matthew and Mark tell us that He went by boat, which Luke does not seem to have known. Mark adds that the curious crowd, which followed on foot, reached the place of landing before Him, and so effectually destroyed all hope of retirement. It was a short walk round the north-western part of the head of the lake, and the boat would be in sight all the way, so that there was no escape for its passengers.

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John shows us that He had begun to prepare them, at the moment of meeting the multitude, by His question to Philip. That had been simmering in the disciples’ minds all day, while they leisurely watched Him toiling in word and work, and now they come with their solution of the difficulty. Their suggestion was a very sensible one in the circumstances, and they are not to be blamed for not anticipating a miracle as the way out. However many miracles they saw, they never seem to have expected another. That has been thought to be unnatural, but surely it is true to nature. They moved in a confusing mixture of the miraculous and the natural which baffled calculation as to which element would rule at any given moment. Their faith was feeble, and Christ rebuked them for their slowness to learn the lesson of this very miracle and its twin feeding of the four thousand. They were our true brothers in their failure to grasp the full meaning of the past, and to trust His power.

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What a strange scene that must have been as the hundred groups of fifty each arranged themselves on the green grass, in the setting sunlight, waiting for a meal of which there were no signs! It took a good deal of faith to seat the crowd, and some faith for the crowd to sit. How expectant they would be! How they would wonder what was to be done next! How some of them would laugh, and some sneer, and all watch the event! We, too, have to put ourselves in the attitude to receive gifts of which sense sees no sign; and if, in obedience to Christ’s word, we sit down expecting Him to find the food, we shall not be disappointed, though the table be spread in the wilderness, and neither storehouse nor kitchen be in sight.

II. The miracle itself has some singular features.

Like that of the draught of fishes, it was not called forth by the cry of suffering, nor was the need which it met one beyond the reach of ordinary means. It was certainly one of the miracles most plainly meant to strike the popular mind, and the enthusiasm excited by it, according to John's account, was foreseen by Christ. Why did He evoke enthusiasm which He did not mean to gratify? For the very purpose of bringing the carnal expectations of the crowd to a head, that they might be the more conclusively disappointed. The miracle and its sequel sifted and sent away many 'disciples,' and were meant to do so.

All the accounts tell of Christ's 'blessing.' Matthew and Mark do not say what He blessed, and perhaps the best supplement is 'God,' but Luke says that He blessed the food. What He blesses is blessed; for His words are deeds, and communicate the blessing which they speak. The point at which the miraculous multiplication of the food came in is left undetermined, but perhaps the difference in the tenses of the verbs hints at it. 'Blessed' and 'brake' are in the tense which describes a single act; 'gave' is in that which describes a continuous repeated action. The pieces grew under His touch, and the disciples always found His hands full when they came back with their own empty. But wherever the miraculous element appeared, creative power was exercised by Jesus; and none the less was it creative, because there was the 'substratum' of the loaves and fishes. Too much stress has been laid on their being used, and some commentators have spoken as if without them the miracle could not have been wrought. But surely the distinction between pure creation and multiplication of a thing already existing vanishes when a loaf is 'multiplied' so as to feed a thousand men.

The symbolical aspect of the miracle is set forth in the great discourse which follows it in John's Gospel. Jesus is the 'Bread of God which came down from heaven.' That Bread is broken for us. Not in His Incarnation alone, but in His Death, is He the food of the world; and we have not only to 'eat His flesh,' but to 'drink His blood,' if we would live. Nor can we lose sight of the symbol of His servants' task. They are the distributors of the heaven-sent bread. If they will but take their poor stores to Jesus, with the acknowledgment of their insufficiency, He will turn them into inexhaustible supplies, and they will find that 'there is that scattereth, and yet increaseth.' What Christ blesses is always enough.

III. The abundance left over is significant.

Twelve baskets, such as poor travellers carried their belongings in, were filled; that is to say, each Apostle who had helped to feed the hungry had a basketful to bring off for future wants. The 'broken pieces' were not crumbs that littered the grass, but the portions that came from Christ's hands.

His provision is more than enough for a hungry world, and they who share it out among their fellows have their own possession of it increased. There is no surer way to receive the full sweetness and blessing of the Gospel than to carry it to some hungry soul. These full baskets teach us, too, that In Christ's gift of Himself as the Bread of Life there is ever more than at any given moment we can appropriate. The Christian's spiritual experiences have ever an element of infinity in them; and we feel that if we were able to take in more, there would be more for us to take. Other food cloys and does not satisfy, and leaves us starving. Christ satisfies and does not cloy, and we have always remaining, yet to be enjoyed, the boundless stores which neither eternity will age nor a universe feeding on them consume. The Christian's capacity of partaking of Christ grows with what it feeds on, and he alone is safe in believing that 'To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.'

42)Luke 9:18-27

Luke

CHRIST'S CROSS AND OURS

Luk. 9:18 - Luk. 9:27.

This passage falls into three distinct but closely connected parts: the disciples' confession of Christ by Peters mouth, the revelation to them of Christ's sufferings as necessarily involved in His Messiahship, and His extension to them of the law of suffering as necessarily involved in discipleship. Luke dwells much more lightly than Matthew on the first of these stages, omitting the eulogium and benediction on Simon Bar-Jona, and the great words about the rock on which the Church is built, but he retains the essentials, and emphasises the connection of the three parts by his very brevity in regard to the first.

I. Luke has special interest in recording Christ’s prayers, and though he does not tell us where the great confession was made, he tells what Jesus did before it was made.

We may well suppose that His solitary thoughts had been busied with the sufferings on which He was soon to enter, and that His resolve to impart the knowledge of these to His followers was felt by Him to be a sharp trial of their loyalty. The moment was a fateful one. How should fateful moments be prepared for but by communion with the Father? No doubt the feebleness of the disciples was remembered in His petitions.

Jesus’ double question was intended, first, to make the disciples feel the gulf which separated them from the rest of the nation, and so to make them hold the faster by their unshared faith, and be ready to suffer for it, if needful, as probably it would be. It braces true men to know that they are but a little company in the midst of multitudes who laugh at their belief. That Jesus should have seen that it was safe to accentuate the disciples’ isolation indicates the reality which He discerned in their faith, imperfect as it was.

‘Whom say ye that I am?’ Jesus brings them to articulate utterance of the thought that had been slowly gathering distinctness in their minds. We see our beliefs more clearly, and hold them more firmly, when we put them into definite words. The question acted like a chemical element dropped into a solution, which precipitates its solid matter. Nebulous opinions are gathered up into spheres of light by the process of speaking them. That question is all-important for us. Our conceptions of Christ’s nature and office determine our relation to Him and our whole cast of life. True, we may say that He is Lord, and not be His disciples, but we are not His disciples as He would have us unless His Messiahship stands out clear and axiomatic in our thoughts of Him. The conviction must pass into feeling, and thence into life, but it must underlie all real discipleship. Doctrine is not Christianity, but it is the foundation of Christianity. The Apostolic confession here is the ‘irreducible minimum’ of the Christian creed.

It does not contain more than Nathanael had said at the beginning, but here it is spoken, not as Peter's private belief, but he is the mouthpiece of all. 'Whether it were I or they, so we' believe. This confession summed up the previous development of the disciples, and so marked the end of one stage and the beginning of another. Christ would have them, as it were, take stock of their convictions, as preliminary to opening a new chapter of teaching.

II. That new chapter follows at once.

The belief in Him as Messiah is the first story of the building, and the second is next piled on it. The new lesson was a hard one for men whose hopes were coloured by Jewish dreams of a kingdom. They had to see all these vulgar visions melting away, and to face a stern, sad reality. The very fact that He was the Messiah necessarily drew after it the fact of suffering. Whence did the 'must' arise? From the divine purpose, from the necessities of the case, and the aim of His mission. These had shaped prophetic utterances, and hence there was yet another form of the 'must,' namely, the necessity for the Messiah's fulfilling these predictions.

No doubt our Lord led His saddened listeners to many a prophetic saying which current expositions had smoothed over, but which had for many years set before Him His destiny. What a scene that would be-the victim calmly pointing to the tragic words which flashed ominous new meanings to the silent hearers, stricken with awe and grief as the terrible truth entered their minds! What had become of their dreams? Gone, and in their place shame and death. They had fancied a throne; the vision melted into a cross.

We note the minute particularity of Jesus' delineation, and the absolute certainty in His plain declaration of the fact and time of the Resurrection. It is not wonderful that that declaration should have produced little effect. The disciples were too much absorbed and confounded by the dismal thought of His death to have ears for the assurance of His Resurrection. Comfort coming at the end of the announcement of calamities so great finds no entrance into, nor room in, the heart. We all let a black foreground hide from us a brighter distance.

III. The Master's feet mark the disciples' path.

If suffering was involved in Messiahship, it is no less involved in discipleship. The cross which is our hope is also our pattern. In a very real sense we have to be partakers of the sufferings of Christ, and no faith in these as substitutionary is vital unless it leads to being conformed to His death. The solemn verses at the close of this lesson draw out the law of Christian self-denial as being inseparable from true discipleship.

Luk. 9:23 lays down the condition of following Jesus as being the daily bearing, by each, of his own cross. Mark that self-denial is not prescribed for its own sake, but simply as the means of 'following.' False asceticism insists on it, as if it were an end; Christ treats it as a means. Mark, too, that it is 'self' which is to be denied-not this or that part of our nature, but the central 'self.' The will is the man, and *it* is to be brought into captivity to Jesus, so that the true Christian says, 'I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.' That is much deeper, harder, wholesomer teaching than separate austerities or forsakings of this or that.

Luk. 9:24 grounds this great requirement on the broad principle that to make self the main object of life is the sure way to ruin oneself, and that to slay self is the road to true life. Note that it is he who '*would* save' his life that loses it, because the desire is itself fatal, whether carried out or not; while it is he who *does* 'lose' his life for Christ that preserves it, because even if the extreme evil has been suffered, the possession of our true lives is not imperilled thereby. No doubt the words refer primarily to literal death, and threaten the cowards who sacrifice their convictions for the sake of keeping a whole skin with the failure of their efforts, while they promise the martyr dying in the arena or at the stake a crown of life. But they go far beyond that. They carry the great truth that to hug self and to make its preservation our first aim is ruinous, and the corresponding one, that to slay self for Christ's sake is to receive a better self. Self-preservation is suicide; self-immolation is not only self-preservation, but self-glorification with glory caught from Jesus. Give yourselves to Him, and He gives you back to yourselves, ennobled and transfigured.

Luk. 9:25 urges obedience to the precept, by an appeal to reasonable self-regard and common-sense. The abnegation enjoined does not require that we should be indifferent to our own well-being. It is right to consider what will ‘profit,’ and to act accordingly. The commercial view of life, if rightly taken, with regard to all a man’s nature through all the duration of it, will coincide accurately with the most exalted. It ‘pays’ to follow Christ. Christian morality has not the hypersensitive fear of appealing to self-interest which superfine moralists profess nowadays. And the question in verse 25 admits of only one answer, for what good is the whole world to a dead man? If our accounts are rightly kept, a world gained shows poorly on the one side, against the entry on the other of a soul lost.

Luk. 9:26 tells in what that losing oneself consists, and enforces the original exhortation by the declaration of a future appearance of the Son of man. He of whom Christ is then ashamed loses his own soul. To live without His smile is to die, to be disowned by Him is to be a wreck. To be ashamed of Jesus is equivalent to that base self-preservation which has been denounced as fatal. If a man disavows all connection with Him, He will disavow all connection with the disavower. A man separated from Jesus is dead while he lives, and hereafter will live a living death, and possess neither the world for which he sacrificed his own soul nor the soul for which he sacrificed it.

We cannot but note the authoritative tone of our Lord in these verses. He claims the obedience and discipleship of all men. He demands that all shall yield themselves unreservedly to Him, and that, even if actual surrender of life is involved, it shall be gladly given. He puts our relation to Him as determining our whole present and future. He assumes to be our Judge, whose smile is life, whose averted face darkens the destiny of a man. Whom say ye that He who dared to speak thus conceived Himself to be? Whom say ye that He is?

Luk. 9:27 recalls us from the contemplation of that far-off appearance to something nearer. Remembering the previous announcement of our Lord’s sufferings, these words seem intended to cheer the disciples with the hope that the kingdom would still be revealed within the lifetime of some then present. Remembering the immediately preceding words, this saying seems to assure the disciples that the blessed recompense of the life of self-crucifying discipleship is not to be postponed to that future, but may be enjoyed on earth. Remembering Christ’s word, ‘Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God,’ we doubt whether there is any reference here to the destruction of Jerusalem, as is commonly understood. Are not the words rather a declaration that they who are Christ’s true disciples shall even here enter into the possession of their true selves, and find the Messianic hopes more than fulfilled? The future indicated will then be no more remote than the completion of His work by His death and Resurrection, or, at the farthest, the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, by which the fuller life of renewed natures was bestowed on those who were following Jesus in daily self-surrender.

43)Luke 9:29

Luke

PRAYER AND TRANSFIGURATION

Luk. 9:29.

This Evangelist is especially careful to record the instances of our Lord’s prayers. That is in accordance with the emphasis which he places on Christ’s manhood. In this narrative of the Transfiguration it is to Luke that we owe our knowledge of the connection between our Lord’s prayer and the radiance of His face. It may be a question how far such transfiguration was the constant accompaniment of our Lord’s devotion. It is to be remembered that this is the only time at which others were present while He prayed, and perhaps it may be that whensoever, on the mountain top or in the solitude of the wilderness, He entered into closer communion with His heavenly Father, that radiance shone from His face, though no eye beheld and no tongue has recorded the glory.

But that is a mere supposition. However that may be, it would seem that the light on Christ’s face was not merely a reflection caught from above, but it was also a rising up from within of what always abode there, though it did not always shine through the veil of flesh. And in so far it presents no parallel with anything in our experience, nor any lesson for us. But to regard our Lord’s Transfiguration as only the result of the indwelling divinity manifested is to construe only one half of the fact that we have to deal with, and the other half does afford for us a precious lesson. ‘As He prayed the fashion of His countenance was altered'; and as we pray, and in the measure in which we truly and habitually do hold communion, shall we, too, partake of His Transfiguration.

The old story of the light that flashed upon the face of the Lawgiver, caught by reflection from the light of God in which He walked, is a partial parallel to Christ's Transfiguration, and both the one and the other incident, amongst their other lessons, do also point to some mysterious and occult relation between the indwelling soul and the envious veil of flesh which, under certain circumstances, might become radiant with the manifestation of that indwelling power.

I. The one great lesson which I seek now to enforce from this incident is, that communion with God transfigures.

Prayer is more than petitions. It is not necessarily cast into words at all. In its widest, which is its truest sense, it is the attitude and exercise of devout contemplation of God and intercourse in heart, mind, and will with Him, a communion which unites aspiration and attainment, longing and fruition, asking and receiving, seeking and finding, a communion which often finds itself beggared for words, and sometimes even seems to transcend thought. How different is such an hour of rapt communion with the living God from the miserable notions which so many professing Christians have of prayer, as if it were but spoken requests, more or less fervent and sincere, for things that they want! The noblest communion of a soul with God can never be free from the consciousness of need and dependence. Petition must ever be an element in it, but supplication is only a corner of prayer. Such conscious converse with God is the very atmosphere in which the Christian soul should always live, and if it be an experience altogether strange to us we had better ask ourselves whether we yet know the realities of the Christian life, or have any claim to the name. 'Truly, our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ,' and if we have no share in that fellowship we do not belong to the class of whom it is the mark and possession.

Of course, such communion is not to be attained or maintained without effort. Sense wars against it. Tasks which are duties interrupt the enjoyment of it in its more conscious forms. The hard-working man may well say, 'How can I, with my business cares calling-for my undivided attention all day long, keep up such communion?' The toiling mother may well say, 'How can I, in my little house, with my children round me, and never a quiet minute to myself, get such?' True, it is hard, and the highest and sweetest forms of communion cannot be reached by us while so engaged, and therefore we all need seasons of solitude and repose, in which, being left alone, we may see the Great Vision, and, the clank of the engines being silenced, we may hear the Great Voice saying, 'Come up hither.' Such seasons the busiest have on one day in every week, and such seasons we shall contrive to secure for ourselves daily, if we really want to be intimate with our heavenly Friend.

And for the rest it is not impossible to have real communion with God in the midst of anxious cares and absorbing duties; it is possible to be like the nightingales, that sing loudest in the trees by the dusty roadsides, possible to be in the very midst of anxiety and worldly work, and yet to keep our hearts in heaven and in touch with God. We do not need many words for communion, but we do need to make efforts to keep ourselves near Him in desire and aspiration, and we need jealous and constant watchfulness over our motives for work, and our temper and aim in it, that neither the work nor our way of doing it may draw us away. There will be breaches in the continuity of our conscious communion, but there need not be any in the reality of our touch with God. For He can be with us, 'like some sweet, beguiling melody, so sweet we know not we are listening to it.' There may be a real contact of the spirit with Him, though it would be hard at the moment to put it into words.

'As He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was altered.' Such communion changes and glorifies a man. The very secret of the Gospel way of making men better is-transfiguration by the vision of God. Yes! to be much with God is the true way to mend our characters, and to make them like His. I do not under-value the need of effort in order to correct faults and acquire virtues. We do not receive sanctification as we receive justification, by simple faith. For the latter the condition is 'Only believe,' for the former it is 'Work out your own salvation.' No man is cured of his evil tendencies without a great deal of hard work conscientiously directed to curbing them.

But all the hard work, and all the honest purpose in the world, will not do it without this other thing, the close communion with God, and incomparably the surest way to change what in us is wrong, and to raise what in us is low, and to illumine what in us is dark, is to live in habitual beholding of Him who is righteousness without flaw, and holiness supreme, and light without any darkness at all. That will cure faults. That will pull the poison fangs out of passions. That will do for the evil in us what the snake-charmers do by subtle touches, turn the serpent into a rigid rod that does not move nor sting. That will lift us up high above the trifles of life, and dwarf all here that imposes upon us with the lie that it is great, and precious, and permanent; and that will bring us into loving contact with the living 'Beauty of holiness,' which will change us into its own fair likeness.

We see illustrations of this transforming power of loving communion in daily life. People that love each other, and live beside each other, and are often thinking about one another, get to drop into each other's ways of looking at things; and even sometimes you will catch strange imitations and echoes of the face and voice, in two persons thus knit together. And if you and I are bound to God by a love which lasts, even when it does not speak, and which is with us even when our hands are busy with other things, then be sure of this, we shall get like Him whom we love. We shall be like Him even here, for even here we shall see Him. Partial assimilation is the condition of vision; and the vision is the condition of growing assimilation. The eye would not see the sun unless there were a little sun imaged on the retina. And a man that sees God gets like the God he sees; 'for we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a glass [or, rather, mirroring as a glass does] the glory of God, are changed into the same image.' The image on the mirror is only on the surface; but if my heart is mirroring God He sinks in, and abides there, and changes me from glory to glory. So it is when we keep near Christ, who is manifest in the flesh, that we get liker Him day by day, and the fashion of our countenances will be altered.

Now there is a test for our Christianity. Does my religion alter me? If it does not, what right or reason have I to believe that it is genuine at all? Is there a process of purifying going on in my inward nature? Am I getting any more like Jesus Christ than I was ten years ago? I say I live with Him and by Him. If I do I shall become like Him. Do not work at the hopeless task of purifying yourselves without His help, but go and stay in the sun if you want to get warm. Lo as the bleachers do, spread the foul cloth on the green grass, below the blazing sunshine, and that will take all the dirt out. Believing and loving, and holding fast by Jesus Christ in true communion, we, too, become like Him we love.

II. Another thought is suggested by these words-namely, that this transfiguring will become very visible in the life if it be really in our inmost selves.

Even in the most literal sense of the words it will be so. Did you never see anybody whose face was changed by holier and nobler purposes coming into their lives? I have seen more than one or two whose features became as the face of an angel as they grew more and more unselfish, and more and more full of that which, in the most literal sense of the words, was in them the beauty of holiness. The devil writes his mark upon people's faces. The world and the flesh do so. Go into the streets and look at the people that you meet. Care, envy, grasping griping avarice, discontent, unrest, blotches of animalism, and many other prints of black fingers are plain enough on many a face. And on the other hand, if a man or a woman get into their hearts the refining influences of God's grace and love by living near the Master, very soon the beauty of expression which is born of consecration and unselfishness, the irradiation of lofty emotions, the tenderness caught from Him, will not be lacking, and some eyes that look upon them will recognise the family likeness.

But that may be said to be mere fancy. Perhaps it is, or perhaps there is truth in it deeper and more far-reaching than we know. Perhaps the life fashions the body, and the 'body of our glory' may be moulded in immortal loveliness by the perfect Christ-derived life within it. But be that as it may, the main point to be observed here is rather this. If we have the real, transforming influence of communion with Jesus Christ in our hearts, it will certainly rise to the surface, and show itself in our lives. As oil poured into water will come to the top, so that inward transforming will not continue hidden within, 'The king's daughter is all-glorious *within*, but also 'her *clothing* is of wrought gold.' The inward life, beautiful because knit to Him, will have corresponding with it and flowing from it an outward life of manifest holy beauty.

‘His name shall be in their foreheads,’ stamped there, where everybody can see it. Is that where you and I carry Christ’s name? It is well that it should be in our hearts, it is hypocrisy that it should be in our foreheads unless it is in our hearts first. But if it be in the latter it will surely be in the former.

Now, dear friends, there is a simple and sure touchstone for us all. Do not talk about communion with Christ being the life of your religion, unless the people that have to do with you, your brothers and sisters, or fathers and mothers, your wives and children, your servants or your masters, would endorse it and say ‘Yes! I take knowledge of him, he has been with Jesus.’ Do you think that it is easier for anybody to believe in, and to love God, ‘whom he hath not seen’ because of you, ‘his brother whom he hath seen’? The Christ in the heart will be the Christ in the face and in the life.

Alas! why is it that so little of this radiance caught from heaven shines from us? There is but one answer. It is because our communion with God in Christ is so infrequent, hurried, and superficial. We should be like those luminous boxes which we sometimes see, shining in the dark with light absorbed from the day; but, like them, we need to be exposed to the light and to lie in it if we are to be light. ‘Now are ye light in the Lord,’ and only as we abide in Him by continuous communion shall we resemble Him or reflect Him.

III. The perfection of communion will be the perfection of visible transformation.

Possibly the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ had an element of prophecy in it, and pointed onwards to the order of things when His glorified humanity should be enthroned on the throne of the universe, and have left the limitations of flesh with the folded grave-clothes in the empty sepulchre. As the two majestic forms of the Lawgiver and the Prophet shared His glory on Hermon, and held converse with Him there, so we may see in that mysterious group wrapped in the bright cloud the hint of a hope which was destined to grow to clearness and certainty. Christ’s glorified bodily humanity is the type to which all His followers will be conformed. Gazing on Him they shall be like Him, and will grow liker as they gaze. Through eternal ages the double process will go on, and they shall become ever more assimilated, and therefore capable of truer, completer vision, and ever seeing Him more fully as He is, and therefore progressively changed into more perfect resemblance. Nor will that blessed change into advancing glory be shut up in their hearts nor lack beholders. For in that realm of truth and reality all that is within will be visible, our life will no longer fall beneath our aspirations, nor practice be at variance with the longings and convictions of our best selves. Then the Christlike spirit will possess a body which is its glad and perfect servant, and through which its beauty will shine undimmed. 'When Christ, who is our life, shall be manifested, then shall we also be manifested with Him in glory.'

44)Luke 9:30-31

Luke

'IN THE HOLY MOUNT'

Luk. 9:30 - Luk. 9:31.

The mysterious incident which is commonly called the Transfiguration contained three distinct portions, each having its own special significance and lesson. The first was that supernatural change in the face and garments of our Lord from which the whole incident derives its name. The second was the appearance by His side of these two mighty dead participating in the strange lustre in which He walked, and communing with Him of His death. And the last was the descent of the bright cloud, visible as bright even amidst the blazing sunshine on the lone hillside, and the mysterious attesting Voice that spoke from out of its depths.

I leave untouched altogether the first and the last of these three portions, and desire briefly to fix our attention on this central one. Now it is to be observed that whilst all the three Synoptic Evangelists tell us of the Transfiguration, of the appearance of Moses and Elias, and of the Cloud and the Voice, only Luke knows, or at least records, and therefore alone probably knows, what it was that they spoke of. Peter and James and John, the only human witnesses, were lying dazed and drunken with sleep, whilst Christ's countenance was changed; and during all the earlier portion at all events of His converse with Moses and Elias. And it was only when these were about to depart that the mortals awoke from their slumber. So they probably neither heard the voices nor knew their theme, and it was reserved for this Evangelist to tell us the precious truth that the thing about which Lawgiver, Prophet, and the Greater than both spake in that mysterious communion was none other than the Cross.

I think, then, that if we look at this incident from the point of view which our Evangelist enables us to take, we shall get large and important lessons as to the significance of the death of Jesus Christ, in many aspects, and in reference to very many different persons. I see at least four of these. This incident teaches us what Christ's death was to Himself; what it was in reference to previous revelation; what it was in reference to past generations; and what it may be in reference to His servants' death. And upon these four points I desire briefly to touch now.

I. First, then, I see here teaching as to what the death of the Lord Jesus Christ was in reference to Himself.

What was it that brought these men-the one who had passed in a whirlwind to heaven, and the other who had been led by a mysterious death to slumber in an unknown grave-what was it that brought these men to stand there upon the side of the slopes of Hermon? It was not to teach Christ of the impending Cross. For, not to touch upon other points, eight days before this mysterious interview He had foretold it in the minutest details to His disciples. It was not for the sake of Peter and James and John, lying coiled in slumber there, that they broke the bands of death, and came back from 'that bourne from which no traveller returns,' but it was for Christ, or for themselves, or perhaps for both, that they stood there.

You remember that in Gethsemane 'there appeared an angel from heaven strengthening Him.' And one of the old devout painters has marvellously embraced the deepest meaning of that vision when he has painted for us the strengthening angel displaying in the heavens the Cross on which He must die, as if the holding of it up before Him as the divine will gave the strength that He needed. And I think in some analogous way we are to regard the mission and message to Jesus of these two men in our text. We know that clear before Him, all His life long, there stood the certainty of the Cross. We know that He came, not merely to teach, to minister, to bless, to guide, but that He came to give His life a ransom for many. But we know, too, that from about this point of time in His life the Cross stood more distinctly, if that may be, before Him; or at all events, that it pressed more upon His vision and upon His spirit. And doubtless after that time when He spoke to the disciples so plainly and clearly of what was coming upon Him, His human nature needed the retirement of the mountain-side and prayer which preceded and occasioned this mysterious incident. Christ shrank from His Cross with sinless, natural, human shrinking of the flesh. That never altered His purpose nor shook His will, but He needed, and He got, strength from the Father, ministered once by an angel from heaven, and ministered, as I suppose, another time by two men who looked at death from the other side, and 'who spoke to Him of His decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem.'

And now it is to be noticed that the words which our Evangelist employs are remarkable, and one of them, at least, is all but unique. The expression translated in my text 'decease' is the same Greek word which, untranslated, names the second book of the Old Testament-*Exodus*. And it literally means neither more nor less than a departure or 'going out.' It is only employed in this one passage and in another one to which I shall have occasion to refer presently, which is evidently based and moulded upon this one, to signify *death*. And the employment of it, perhaps upon these undying tongues of the sainted dead-or, at all events, in reference to the subject of their colloquy-seems to us to suggest that part of what they had to say to the Master and what they had to hear from Him was that His death was His departure in an altogether unique, solitary, and blessed sense. 'I came forth from the Father, and I am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father.' Not dragged by any necessity, but of His own sovereign will, He passes from earth to the state where He was before. And as He stands there on the mountain with His radiant face and His white robes, this thought as to His death brings to Him comfort and strength, even whilst He thinks of the suffering of the Cross.

But, still further, the other word which is here employed helps us to understand what our Lord's death was to Him; 'He should *accomplish*' it as a thing to be fulfilled. And that involves two ideas, the one that Christ in His death was consciously submitting to a gladly accepted divine *must*, and was accomplishing the purpose of Love which dwelt in the heavens and sent Him, as well as His own purpose of love which would redeem and save. The necessity of the death of Christ if sin is to be put away, if we are ever to have a hope of immortality, the necessity of the death of Christ if the mercy of God is to pour out upon a sinful and rebellious world, the necessity of the death of Christ, if the deep purposes of the divine heart are ever to be realised, and the yearning compassion of the Saviour's soul is ever to reach its purpose-all lie in that great word that 'His decease' was by Him to be 'accomplished.' This is the fulfilling of the heart of God, this is the fulfilling of the compassion of the Christ. It is the accomplishment of the divine purpose from eternity.

Still further, the word, as I think, suggests another kind of fulfilment. He was to 'accomplish' His death. That is to say, every drop of that bitter cup, drop by drop, bitterness by bitterness, pang by pang, desolation by desolation, He was to drink; and He drank it. Every step of that road sown with ploughshares and live coals He was to tread, with bleeding, blistered, slow, unshrinking feet. And He trod it. He *accomplished* it; hurrying over none of the sorrow, perfunctorily doing none of the tasks. And after the weary moments had ticked themselves away, and the six hours of agony, when the minutes were as drops of blood falling slowly to the ground, were passed, He inverted the cup, and it was empty, and He said 'It is finished'; and He gave up the ghost, having accomplished His decease in Jerusalem.'

II. Further, note in this incident what that death is in regard to previous revelation.

I need not remind you, I suppose, that we have here the two great representative figures of the past history of Israel-the Lawgiver, who, according to the Old Testament, was not only the medium of declaring the divine will, but the medium of establishing Sacrifice as well as Law, and the Prophet, who, though no written words of his have been preserved, and nothing of a predictive and Messianic character seems to have dropped from His lips, yet stood as the representative and head of the great prophetic order to which so much of the earlier revelation was entrusted. And now here they two stand with Christ on the mountain; and the theme about which they spake with Him there is the theme of which the former revelation had spoken in type and shadow, in stammering words, ‘at sundry times and in divers manners,’ to the former generations-viz. the coming of the great Sacrifice and the offering of the great Propitiation. All the past of Israel pointed onwards to the Cross, and in that Cross its highest word was transcended, its faintest emblems were explained and expressed, its unsolved problems which it had raised in order that they might be felt to be unsolved, were all answered, and that which had been set forth but in shadow and symbol was given to the world in reality for evermore. In Moses Law and Sacrifice, and in Elijah the prophetic function, met by the side of Christ, ‘and spake of His decease.’

Now, dear friends, let me say one word here before I pass on. There is a great deal being said nowadays about the position of the Old Testament, the origin of its ritual, and other critical, and, to some extent, historical, questions. I have no doubt that we have much to learn upon these subjects; but what I would now insist upon is this, that all these subjects, about which people are getting so excited, and some of them so angry, stand, and may be dealt with, altogether apart from this central thought, that the purpose and meaning, the end and object of the whole preliminary and progressive revelation of God from the beginning, are to lead straight up to Jesus Christ and to His Cross. And if we understand that, and feel that ‘the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy,’ and that law and sacrifice, commandments and altar, Sinai and Zion, the fiery words that were spoken in the wilderness, and the perpetual burnt-offering that went up in the Temple, had one mission-viz. to ‘prepare the way of the Lord’-we have grasped the essential truth as to the Old Revelation; and if we do not understand that, we may be as scholarly and erudite and original as we please, but we miss the one truth which is worth grasping. The relation between the Old revelation and the New is this, that Christ was pointed to by it all, and that in Himself He sums up and surpasses and antiquates, because He fulfils, all the past.

Therefore Moses and Elijah came to witness as well as to encourage. Their presence proclaimed that Christ was the meaning of all the past, and the crown of the divine revelation. And they faded away, and Jesus was found alone standing there, as He stands for ever before all generations and all lands, the sole, the perfect, the eternal Revealer of the heart and will of God. 'God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son.'

III. Again, we have here set before us the death of Christ in its relation to past generations.

I need not dwell upon anything that was mysterious or anomalous in the last moments upon earth of either Moses or Elijah. I do not suppose that there is any reference to the undoubted peculiarities which existed in the case of both. But they came from that dim region where the dead were waiting for the coming of the Saviour, and by some means, we know not how, were clothed with something that was like an immortal body, and capable of entering into this material universe. There they stood, witnesses that Christ's death was of interest to all those sleeping generations in the past. We know not anything, or scarcely anything, of the condition of the sainted dead who died before Christ came. But this is clear, that these two came from the land where silent expectancy had ruled, and came perhaps to carry back to their brethren the tidings that the hour was ready to strike, and that soon amongst them there would stand the Eternal Life.

But, be that as it may, does not that group on the mountain-side teach us this, that the Cross of Jesus Christ had a backward as well as a forward power, and that for all the generations who had died, 'not having received the promises, but having seen them and saluted them from afar,' the influence of that Sacrifice had opened the gates of the Kingdom where they were gathered in hope, even as it opens for us, and all subsequent generations, the gates of the paradise of God?

I know not whether there be truth in the ancient idea that when the Master died He passed into that *Hades* where were assembled the disembodied spirits of the righteous dead, and led captivity captive, taking them with Him into a loftier Paradise. But this I am sure of, that Christ's Cross has always been the means and channel whereby forgiveness and hope and heaven have been given to men, and that the old dream of the devout painter which he has breathed upon the walls of the convent in Florence is true in spirit whatever it may be in letter, that the Christ who died went down into the dark regions, burst the bars and broke the gates of iron, and crushed the demon porter beneath the shattered portal, and that out of the dark rock-hewn caverns there came streaming the crowds of the sainted dead, with Adam at their head, and many another who had seen His day afar off and been glad, stretching out eager hands to grasp the life-giving hand of the Redeemer that had come to them too.

Moses and Elias were the 'first-fruits of them that slept,' and there were others, when the bodies of the saints rose from the grave and appeared in the Holy City unto many. And their presence, and the presence of these two there, typified for us the great fact that the Cross of Christ is the redemption of pre-Christian as well as of Christian ages; and that He is the Lord both of the dead and of the living.

IV. And so, lastly, this incident may suggest also what that death of Jesus Christ may be in reference to the deaths of His servants.

I do not find that thought in the words of our text, but in the reference to them which is made in the second epistle attributed to Peter, who was present at the Transfiguration. There is a very remarkable passage in that Epistle, in the context of which there are distinct verbal allusions to the narrative of the Transfiguration, and in it the writer employs the same word to describe his own death which is employed here. It is the only other instance in Scripture of its use in that sense. And so I draw this simple lesson; that mighty death which was accomplished upon Calvary, which is the crown and summit of all Revelation, beyond which God has nothing that He can say or do to make men sure of His heart and recipients of forgiveness, which was the channel of pardon for all past ages, and the hope of the sainted dead-that death may turn for us our departure into its own likeness. For us, too, all the grimness, all the darkness, all the terror, may pass away, and it may become simply a change of place, and a going home to God. If we believe that Jesus died, we believe that He has thereby smoothed and softened and lessened our death into a sleep in Him.

Nor need we forget the special meaning of the word. If we have set our hopes upon Christ, and, as sinful men and women, have cast the burden of our sins, and the weight of our salvation, on His strong arm, then life will be blessed, and death, when it comes, will be a true Exodus, the going out of the slaves from the land of bondage, and passing through the divided sea, not into a weary wilderness, but into the light of the love and the blessedness of the land where our Brother is King, and where we shall share His reign.

I have been speaking to you of what Christ's death is in many regions of the universe, in many eras of time. My brother, what is Christ's death to you? Can you say, 'The life that I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me?'

45)Luke 9:51

Luke

CHRIST HASTENING TO THE CROSS

Luk. 9:51.

There are some difficulties, with which I need not trouble you here, as to bringing the section of this Gospel to which these words are the introduction, into its proper chronological place in relation to the narratives; but, putting these on one side for the present, there seems no doubt that the Evangelist's intention here is to represent the beginning of our Lord's last journey from Galilee to Jerusalem-a journey which was protracted and devious, and the narrative of which in this Gospel, as you will perceive, occupies a very large portion of its whole contents.

The picture that is given in my text is that of a clear knowledge of what waited Him, of a steadfast resolve to accomplish the purpose of the divine love, and that resolve not without such a shrinking of some part of His nature that He had 'to *set* His face to go to Jerusalem.'

The words come into parallelism very strikingly with a great prophecy of the Messiah in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, where we read, 'The Lord

God will help me, therefore shall I not be confounded'-or, as the words have been rendered, 'shall not suffer myself to be overcome by mockery'-'therefore have I set my face like a flint.' In the words both of the Prophet and of the Evangelist there is the same idea of a resolved will, as the result of a conscious effort directed to prevent circumstances which tended to draw Him back, from producing their effect. The graphic narrative of the Evangelist Mark adds one more striking point to that picture of high resolve. He tells us, speaking of what appears to be the final epoch in this long journey to the Cross, 'They were in the way, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus went before them; and they were amazed: and as they followed, they were afraid.' What a picture that is, Christ striding along the steep mountain path far in advance-impelled by that same longing which sighs so wonderfully in His words, 'How am I straitened till it be accomplished,'-with solemn determination in the gentle face, and His feet making haste to run in the way of the Father's commandments! And lagging behind, the little group, awed into almost stupor, and shrinking in uncomprehending terror from that light of unconquerable resolve and more than mortal heroism that blazed in His eyes!

If we fix, then, on this picture, and as we are warranted in doing, regard it as giving us a glimpse of the very heart of Christ, I think it may well suggest to us considerations that may tend to make more real to us that sacrifice that He made, more deep to us that love by which He was impelled, and may perhaps tend to make our love more true and our resolve more fixed. 'He set His face to go to Jerusalem.'

I. First, then, we may take, I think, from these words, the thought of the perfect clearness with which all through Christ's life He foresaw the inevitable and purposed end.

Here, indeed, the Evangelist leaps over the suffering of the Cross, and thinks only of the time when He shall be lifted up upon the throne; but in that calm and certain prevision which, in His manhood, the Divine Son of God did exercise concerning His own earthly life, between Him and the glory there ever stood the black shadow thrown by Calvary. When He spoke of being 'lifted up,' He ever meant by that pregnant and comprehensive word, at once man's elevation of Him on the accursed tree, and the Father's elevation of Him upon the throne at His right hand! The future was, if I may so say, in His eye so foreshortened that the two things ran into one, and the ambiguous expression did truly connote the one undivided act of prescient consciousness in which He at once recognised the Cross and the throne. And so, when the time was come that He should be received up, He ‘steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem.’

Now, there is another thing to be noticed. That vision of the certain end which here fills His mind and impels His conduct, was by no means new with Him. Modern unbelieving commentators and critics upon the Gospels have tried their best to represent Christ’s life as, at a certain point in it, being modified by His recognition of the fact that His mission was a failure, and that there was nothing left for Him but martyrdom! I believe that that is as untrue to the facts of the Gospel story upon any interpretation of them, as it is repulsive to the instincts of devout hearts; and without troubling you with thoughts about it I need only refer to two words of His. When was it that He said, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will build it up’? When was it that He said, ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up’? The one saying was uttered at the very beginning of His public work, and the other in His conversation with Nicodemus. On the testimony of these two sayings, if there were none else, I think there is no option but to believe that from the first there stood clear before Him the necessity and the certainty of the Cross, and that it was no discovery made at a certain point of His course.

And then, remember that we are not to think of Him as, like many an earthly hero and martyr, regarding a violent and bloody death as being the very probable result of faithful boldness, but to believe that He, looking on from the beginning to that end, regarded it always as being laid upon Him by a certain divine necessity, into which necessity He entered with the full submission and acquiescence of His own will, and from the beginning knew that Calvary was the work for which He had come, and that His love would fail of its expression, and the divine purpose would fail of its realisation, and His whole mission would fail of all its meaning, unless He died for men. The martyr looks to the scaffold and says, ‘It stands in my way, and I must either be untrue to conscience or I must go there, and so I will go.’ Christ said, ‘The Cross is in My path, and on it and from it I shall exercise the influence, to exercise which I have come into the world, and there I shall *do* the thing which I came forth from the Father to do.' He thought of His death not as the end of His work, but as the centre-point of it; not as the termination of His activity, but as its climax, to which all the rest was subordinated, and without which all the rest was nought. He does not die, and so seal a faithful life by an heroic death,-but dies, so bearing and bearing away man's sin. He regarded from the beginning 'the glory that should follow,' and the suffering through which He had to wade to reach it, in one and the same act of prescience, and said, 'Lo, I come, in the volume of the book it is written of Me.'

And I think, dear friends, if we carried with us more distinctly than we do that one simple thought, that in all the human joys, in all the apparently self-forgetting tenderness, of that Lord who had a heart for every sorrow and an ear for every complaint, and a hand open as day and full of melting charity for every need-that in every moment of that life, in the boyhood, in the dawning manhood, in the maturity of His growing human powers-there was always present one black shadow, towards which He ever went straight with the consent of His will and with the clearest eye, we should understand something more of how His life as well as His death was a sacrifice for us sinful men!

We honour and love men who crush down their own sorrows in order to help their fellows. We wonder with almost reverence when we see some martyr, in sight of the faggots, pause to do a kindness to some weeping heart in the crowd, or to speak a cheering word. We admire the leisure and calm of spirit which he displays. But all these pale, and the very comparison may become an insult, before that heart which ever discerned Calvary, and never let the sight hinder one deed of kindness, nor silence one gracious word, nor check one throb of sympathy.

II. Still further, the words before us lead to a second consideration, which I have just suggested in my last sentence-Our Lord's perfect willingness for the sacrifice which He saw before Him.

We have here brought into the narrowest compass, and most clearly set forth, the great standing puzzle of all thought, which can only be solved by action. On the one side there is the distinctest knowledge of a divine purpose that *will* be executed; on the other side there is the distinctest consciousness that at each step towards the execution of it He is constrained by no foreign and imposed necessity, but is going to the Cross by His own will. ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up.’ ‘It *became* Him to make the Captain of salvation perfect through sufferings.’ ‘It *behoved* Him to be made in all points like His brethren.’ The Eternal Will of the Father, the purpose purposed before the foundation of the world, the solemn prophecies from the beginning of time, constituted the necessity, and involved the certainty, of His death on the Cross. But are we, therefore, to think that Jesus Christ was led along the path that ended there, by a force which overbore and paralysed His human will? Was not His life, and especially His death, *obedience*? Was there not, therefore, in Him, as in us all, the human will that could cheerfully submit; and must there not, then, have been, at each step towards the certain end, a fresh act of submission and acceptance of the will of the Father that had sent Him?

‘Clear knowledge of the end as divinely appointed and certain’; yes, one might say, and if so, there could have been no voluntariness in treading the path that leads to it. ‘Voluntariness in treading the path that leads to it, and if so, there could have been no divine ordination of the end.’ Not so! When human thought comes, if I may so say, full butt against a stark, staring contradiction like that, it is no proof that either of the propositions is false. It is only like the sign-boards that the iceman puts upon the thin ice, ‘dangerous!’ a warning that that is not a place for us to tread. We have to keep a firm hold of what is certified to us, on either side, by its appropriate evidence, and leave the reconciliation, if it can ever be given to finite beings, to a higher wisdom, and, perchance, to another world!

But that is a digression from my more immediate purpose, which is simply to bring before our minds, as clearly as I can, that perfect, continuous, ever-repeated willingness, expressing itself in a chain of constant acts that touch one upon the other, which Christ manifested to embrace the Cross, and to accomplish what was at once the purpose of the Father’s will and the purpose of His own.

And it may be worth while, just for a moment, to touch lightly upon some of the many points which bring out so clearly in these Gospel narratives the wholly and purely voluntary character of Christ’s death.

Take, for instance, the very journey which I am speaking of now. Christ went up to Jerusalem, says my text. What did He go there for? He went, as you will see, if you look at the previous circumstance,-He went in order, if I might use such a word, to precipitate the collision, and to make His Crucifixion certain. He was under the ban of the Sanhedrim; but perfectly safe as long as He had stopped up among the hills of Galilee. He was as unsafe when He went up to Jerusalem as John Huss when he went to the Council of Constance with the Emperor’s safe-conduct in his belt; or as a condemned heretic would have been in the old days, if he had gone and stood in that little dingy square outside the palace of the Inquisition at Rome, and there, below the obelisk, preached his heresies! Christ had been condemned in the council of the nation; but there were plenty of hiding-places among the Galilean hills, and the frontier was close at hand, and it needed a long arm to reach from Jerusalem all the way across Samaria to the far north. Knowing that, He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, and, if I might use the expression, went straight into the lion’s mouth. Why? Because He chose to die.

And, then, take another circumstance. If you will look carefully at the Scripture narrative, you will find that from about this point in His life onwards there comes a distinct change in one very important respect. Before this He shunned publicity; after this He courted it. Before this, when He spoke in veiled words of His sufferings, He said to His disciples, ‘Tell no man till the Son of man be risen from the dead.’ Hereafter though there are frequent prophecies of His sufferings, there is no repetition of that prohibition. He goes up to Jerusalem, and His triumphal entry adds fuel to the fire. His language at the last moment appeals to the publicity of His final visit to that city-’Was I not daily with you in the Temple and ye laid no hands upon Me?’ Everything that He could do He does to draw attention to Himself-everything, that is to say, within the limits of the divine decorum, which was ever observed in His life, of whom it was written long, long ago, ‘He shall not strive, nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets.’ There is, then, a most unmistakable change to be felt by any who will carefully read the narratives in their bearing upon this one point-a resolve to draw the eyes of the enemy upon Himself.

And to the same purpose, did you ever notice how calmly, with full self-consciousness, distinctly understanding what He is doing, distinctly knowing to what it will lead, He makes His words ever heavier and heavier, and more and more sharply pointed with denunciations, as the last loving wrestle between Himself and the scribes and Pharisees draws near to its bloody close? Instead of softening He hardens His tones-if I dare use the word, where all is the result of love-at any rate He keeps no terms; but as the danger increases His words become plainer and sterner, and approach as near as ever *His* words could do to bitterness and rebuke. It was then, whilst passionate hate was raging round Him, and eager eyes were gleaming revenge, that He poured out His sevenfold woes upon the 'hypocrites,' the 'blind guides,' the 'fools,' the 'whited sepulchres,' the 'serpents,' the 'generation of vipers,' whom He sees filling up the measure of their fathers in shedding His righteous blood.

And again, the question recurs-Why? And again, besides other reasons, which I have not time to touch upon here, the answer, as it seems to me, must unmistakably be, Because He willed to die, and He willed to die because He loved us.

The same lesson is taught, too, by that remarkable incident preserved for us by the Gospel of John, of the strange power which accompanied His avowal of Himself to the rude soldiers who had come to seize Him, and which struck them to the ground in terror and impotence. One flash comes forth to tell of the sleeping lightning that He will not use, and then having revealed the might that could have delivered Him from their puny arms, He returns to His attitude of self-surrender for our sakes, with those wonderful words which tell how He gave up Himself that we might be free, 'If ye seek Me, let these go their way.' The scene is a parable of the whole work of Jesus; it reveals His power to have shaken off every hand laid upon Him, His voluntary submission to His else impotent murderers, and the love which moved Him to the surrender.

Other illustrations of the same sort I must leave untouched at present, and only remind you of the remarkable peculiarity of the language in which all the Evangelists describe the supreme moment when Christ passed from His sufferings. 'When He had cried with a loud voice, He yielded up the ghost,'-He sent away the spirit-'He breathed out' [His spirit], 'He gave up the ghost.' In simple truth, He 'committed His spirit' into the Father's hand. And I believe that it is an accurate and fair comment to say, that that is no mere euphemism for death, but carries with it the thought that He was *active* in that moment; that the nails and the spear and the Cross did not kill Christ, but that Christ *willed* to die! And though it is true on the one side, as far as men's hatred and purpose are concerned. 'Whom with wicked hands ye have crucified and slain'; on the other side, as far as the deepest verity of the fact is concerned, it is still more true, 'I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.'

But at all events, whatever you may think of such an exposition as that, the great principle which my text illustrates for us at an earlier stage is, at least, irrefragably established-that our dear Lord, when He died, died, because He *willed* to do so. He was man and therefore He *could* die; but He was not man in such fashion as that He *must* die. In His bodily frame was the possibility, not the necessity, of death. And that being so, the very fact of His death is the most signal proof that He is Lord of death as well as of life. He dies not because He must, He dies not because of faintness and pain and wounds. These and they who inflicted them had no power at all over Him. He chooses to die; and He wills it because He wills to fulfil the eternal purpose of divine love, which is His purpose, and to bring life to the world. His hour of weakness was His hour of strength. They lifted Him on a cross, and it became a throne. In the moment when death seemed to conquer Him, He was really using it that He might abolish it. When He gave tip the ghost, He showed Himself Lord of death as marvellously and as gloriously as when He burst its bands and rose from the grave; for this grisly shadow, too, was His servant, and He says to him, 'Come, and he cometh; do this, and he doeth it.' 'Thou didst overcome the sharpness of death' when Thou didst willingly bow Thy head to it, and didst die not because Thou *must*, but because Thou *wouldest*.

III. Still further, let me remind you how, in the language of this verse, there is also taught us that there was in Christ a natural human shrinking from the Cross.

The steadfast and resolved will held its own, overcoming the natural human reluctance. ‘He *set* His face.’ People are afraid to talk-and the instinct, the reverent instinct, is right, however we may differ from the application of it-people are afraid to talk, as if there was any shrinking in Christ from the Cross. I believe there was. Was the agony in Gethsemane a reality or a shadow, when He said, ‘O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass?’ What did that prayer mean, if there was not something in His nature that recoiled from the agony and mysterious horror of these awful hours? Let us take heed lest in our reverence we destroy the very notion on which our hope rests-that of Christ as suffering. For that one word involves all that I say-Did Christ *suffer* or did He not? If He suffered, then human nature shrank from it. The two ideas are correlative, you cannot part them-suffering and reluctance, a perfectly innocent, natural, inevitable, human instinct, inseparable from corporeity, that makes men recoil from pain. ‘He endured the Cross,’ says the Book-if there was not reluctance what was there to ‘endure’? ‘Despising the shame’-if there was not something from which He shrank, what was there to ‘despise’? ‘He *set* His face’-if there was not something in Him that hung back, what need was there for the hardening of the countenance? If Christ has suffered, then His flesh and blood quivered beforehand with the pangs and shrank from these, and He would have been spared the cup. Such instinctive recoil is not evil, it is not rebellion, it is not unwillingness to submit to the Father’s will. His whole being clave to that, and never swerved from it for one moment. But still, because the path was darkened by mysterious blackness, and led to a Cross, therefore He, even He, who did always the things that pleased the Father, and ever delighted to do His will, needed to ‘*set* His face’ to go up to the mountain of sacrifice.

And now, if you will take along with that the other thought that I suggested at the beginning of these remarks, and remember that this shrinking must have been as continuous as the vision, and that this overcoming of it must have been as persistent and permanent as the resolve, I think we get a point of view from which to regard that life of Christ’s-full of pathos, full of tender appeals to our hearts and to our thankfulness.

All along that consecrated road He walked, and each step represented a separate act of will, and each separate act of will represented a triumph over the reluctance of flesh and blood. As we may say, every time that He planted His foot on the flinty path the blood flowed. Every step was a pain like that of a man enduring the ordeal and walking on burning iron or sharp steel.

The old taunt of His enemies, as they stood beneath His Cross, might have been yielded to-'If Thou be the Son of God, come down and we will believe.' I ask why did not He? I know that, to those who think less loftily of Christ than we who believe Him to be the Son of God, the words sound absurd-but I for one believe that the only thing that kept Him there, the only answer to that question is-Because He loved me with an everlasting love, and died to redeem me. Because of that love, He came to earth; because of that love, He tabernacled among us; because of that love, He gazed all His life long on the Cross of shame; because of that love, He trod unfaltering, with eager haste and solemn resolve, the rough and painful road; because of that love, He listened not to the voice that at the beginning tempted Him to win the world for Himself by an easier path; because of that love, He listened not-though He could have done so-to the voices that at the end taunted Him with their proffered allegiance if He would come down from the Cross; because of that love, He gave up His spirit. And through all the weariness and contumely and pain, that love held His will fixed to its purpose, and bore Him over every hindrance that barred His path. Many waters quench it not. *That* love is stronger than death; mightier than all opposing powers; deep and great beyond all thought or thankfulness. It silences all praise. It beggars all recompense. To believe it is life. To feel it is heaven.

But one more remark I would make on this whole subject. We are far too much accustomed to think of our Saviour as presenting only the gentle graces of human nature. He presents those that belong to the strong side of our nature just as much. In Him are all power, manly energy, resolved consecration; everything which men call heroism is there. 'He steadfastly set His face.' And everything which men call tenderest love, most dewy pity, most marvellous and transcendent patience, is all there too. The type of manhood and the type of womanhood are both and equally in Jesus Christ; and He is *the* Man, whole, entire, perfect, with all power breathed forth in all gentleness, with all gentleness made steadfast and mighty by His strength. ‘And he said unto me, Behold the lion of the tribe of Judah. And I beheld, and lo, a lamb!’-the blended symbols of kingly might, and lowly meekness, power in love, and love in power. The supremest act of resolved consecration and heroic self-immolation that ever was done upon earth-an act which we degrade by paralleling it with any other-was done at the bidding of love that pitied us. As we look up at that Cross we know not whether is more wonderfully set forth the pitying love of Christ’s most tender heart, or the majestic energy of Christ’s resolved will. The blended rays pour out, dear brethren, and reach to each of us. Do not look to that great sacrifice with idle wonder. Bend upon it no eye of mere curiosity. Beware of theorising merely about what it reveals and what it does. Turn not away from it carelessly as a twice-told tale. But look, believing that all that divine and human love pours out its treasure upon you, that all that firmness of resolved consecration and willing surrender to the death of the Cross was for you. Look, believing that you had then, and have now, a place in His heart, and in His sacrifice. Look, remembering that it was because He would save you, that Himself He could not save.

And as, from afar, we look on that great sight, let His love melt our hearts to an answering fervour, and His fixed will give us, too, strength to delight in obedience, to set our faces like a flint. Let the power of His sacrifice, and the influence of His example which that sacrifice commends to our loving copy, and the grace of His Spirit whom He, since that sacrifice, pours upon men, so mould us that we, too, like Him, may ‘quit us like men, be strong,’ and all our strength and ‘all our deeds’ be wielded and ‘done in charity.’

46)Luke 10:1-11

Luke

CHRIST’S MESSENGERS: THEIR EQUIPMENT AND WORK

Luk. 10:1 - Luk. 10:11, Luk. 10:17 - Luk. 10:20.

The mission of the Seventy is clearly distinguished from and contrasted with that of the Twelve by the word ‘others’ in verse 1, which points back to Luk. 9:1. The Twelve were prohibited from going beyond Jews; the Seventy were under no such restriction, and were probably sent to the half-Gentile districts on the east of Jordan. The number of twelve had reference to the number of the tribes; that of seventy may have referred to the number of the elders, but it has also been suggested that its reference is to the supposed number of the nations. The appointment of the Twelve was to a permanent office; that of the Seventy to a transitory mission. Much of the charge given to either is given to both, as is most natural, since they had the same message, and both were sent to prepare for Christ's personal ministry. But though the Seventy were sent out but for a short time, permanent principles for the guidance, not only of Christian workers, but of all Christian lives, are embodied in the charge which they received.

We note, first, that all personal service should be preceded by intense realisation of the immense field, and of the inadequacy, of Christian effort, which vision will culminate in prayer for more toilers to be 'sent forth.' The word implies a certain measure of compulsion, for an overmastering impulse is always needed to overcome human reluctance and laziness. No man has ever done large service for God who has not felt that, like the prophet, he was laid hold of by the Spirit, and borne away, whether he would or no. 'I must speak,' is felt by every true messenger of God. The prayer was answered by the sending of the pray-ers, as it often is. Note how Jesus implies that He is Lord of the harvest, in that His sending them is the answer to the petition. Note, too, the authority which He claims to exercise supreme sovereignty over the lives of men. He has the right to fling them into deadly peril for no other purpose than to proclaim His name. Lambs, ringed round by wolves with white, gleaming teeth, have little chance of life. Jesus gives His servants full warning of dangers, and on the very warning builds an exhortation to quiet confidence; for, if the sentence ends with 'lambs in the midst of wolves,' it begins with 'I send you forth,' and that is enough, for He will defend them when He seeth the wolf coming. Not only so, but He will also provide for all their needs, so they want no baggage nor money, nor even a staff. A traveller without any of these would be in poor case, but they are not to carry such things, because they carry Jesus. He who sends them forth goes with them whom He sends. Now, this precept, in its literal form, was expressly abolished afterwards [Luk. 22:36], but the spirit of it is permanent. If Christ sends us, we may trust Him to take care of us as long as we are on His errands.

Energetic pursuit of their work, unimpeded by distractions of social intercourse, is meant by the prohibition of saluting by the way. That does not mean churlish isolation, but any one who has ever seen two Easterns ‘saluting’ knows what a long-drawn-out affair it is. How far along the road one might have travelled while all that empty ceremony was being got through! The time for salutations is when the journey is over. They mean something then. The great effect of the presence of Christ’s servants should be to impart the peace which they themselves possess. We should put reality into conventional courtesies. All Christians are to be peacemakers in the deepest sense, and especially in regard to men’s relations with God. The whole scope of our work may be summed up as being to proclaim and bring peace with God, with ourselves, with all others, and with circumstances. The universality of our message is implied in the fact that the salutation is to be given in every house entered, and without any inquiry whether a ‘son of peace’ is there. The reflex blessedness of Christian effort is taught in the promise that the peace, vainly wished for those who would not receive it, is not wasted like spilt water, but comes back like a dove, to the hand of its sender. If we do no other person good, we bless ourselves by all work for others.

The injunctions as to conduct in the house or city that receives the messengers carry two principles of wide application. First, they demand clear disinterestedness and superiority to vulgar appetites. Christ’s servants are not to be fastidious as to their board and lodging. They are not to make demands for more refined diet than their hosts are accustomed to have, and they are not to shift their quarters, though it were from a hovel to a palace. The suspicion that a Christian worker is fond of good living and sensuous delights robs his work of power. But the injunction teaches also that there is no generosity in those who hear the message giving, and no obligation laid on those who deliver it by their receiving, enough to live and work on. The less we obviously look for, the more shall we probably receive. A high-minded man need not scruple to take the ‘hire’; a high-minded giver will not suppose that he has hired the receiver to be his servant.

The double substance of the work is next briefly stated. The order in which its two parts stands is remarkable, for the healing of the sick is put first, and the proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom second. Possibly the reason is that the power to heal was a new gift. Its very priority in mention may imply that it was but a means to an end, a part of the equipment for the true and proper work of preaching the coming of the kingdom and its King. At all events, let us learn that Jesus wills the continual combination of regard to the bodily wants and sicknesses, and regard to the spiritual needs of men.

The solemn instructions as to what was to be done in the case of rejection breathe a spirit the reverse of sanguine. Jesus had no illusions as to the acceptance of the message, and He will send no man out to work hiding from him the difficulties and opposition probably to be encountered. Much wisdom lies in deciding when a field of labour or a method of work should be abandoned as hopeless-for the present and for the individual worker, at all events. To do it too soon is cowardice; to delay it too long is not admirable perseverance, but blindness to plain providences. To shake off the dust is equivalent to severing all connection. The messenger will not bring away the least thing belonging to the city. But whatever men's unbelief, it does not affect the fact, but it does affect their relation to the fact. The gracious message was at first that 'the kingdom of God is come nigh *unto you*,' but the last shape of it leaves out 'unto you': for rejection of the word cuts off from beneficial share in the word, and the kingdom, when it comes, has no blessing for the unbelieving soul.

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47)Luke 10:17-19

Luke

CHRIST'S MESSENGERS: THEIR EQUIPMENT AND WORK

Luk. 10:1 - Luk. 10:11, Luk. 10:17 - Luk. 10:20.

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48)Luke 10:20

Jeremiah **- Luke**

CHRIST’S MESSENGERS: THEIR EQUIPMENT AND WORK

TWO LISTS OF NAMES

Jer. 17:13. - Luk. 10:20.

A name written on earth implies that the bearer of the name belongs to earth, and it also secondarily suggests that the inscription lasts but for a little while. Contrariwise, a name written in heaven implies that its bearer belongs to heaven, and that the inscription will abide.

We find running throughout Scripture the metaphor of books in which men's names are written. Moses thought of a book which God has written, and in which his name was enrolled. A psalmist speaks of the 'book of the living,' and Isaiah of those who are 'written among the living in Jerusalem.' Ezekiel threatens the prophets who speak lies in Jehovah's name that they 'shall not be written in the writing of the house of Israel.' The Apocalypse has many references to the book which is designated as 'the Lamb's book of life,' and which is opened at the final judgment along with the books in which each man's life-history is written, and only 'they who are written in the Lamb's book of life' enter into the city that comes down out of heaven.

I. The principle on which the two lists are made up.

It is commonly supposed that the idea of unconditional predestination is implied in the writing of the names in the book of life. There is nothing in the figure itself to lead to that, and the text from Jeremiah suggests, on the contrary, that the voluntary attitude of men to God determines their being or not being inscribed in the book of heaven, since it is 'they who depart from God' whose 'names are written on earth.'

Then, since in the New Testament the book of life is called 'the Lamb's,' we are led to think of Christ as writing in it, and hence of our faith in Him as being the condition of enrolling our names.

II. The significance of the lists.

They are lists of the living and of the dead.

True life is in fellowship with God. The other is the register of the burials in a graveyard.

They are lists of the citizens of two cities.

The idea is that the one class have relations and affinities with the celestial, are ‘fellow-citizens with the saints,’ and have heaven as their metropolis, their mother city. Therefore they are but as aliens here, and should not wish to be naturalised. The other class are citizens of the earthly, belonging to the present, with all their thoughts and desires bounded by this visible diurnal sphere.

They are lists of those who shall be forgotten, and their works annihilated, and of those who shall be remembered and their work crowned.

The names written on earth are swiftly obliterated, like a child’s scrawl on the sand which is washed away by the next tide, or covered up by the next storm that blows about the sand-hills. What a contrast is that of the names written on the heavens, high up above all earthly mutations!

In one sense oblivion soon seizes on us all. In another none of us is ever forgotten by God, but good and bad alike live in His thought. Still this idea of a special remembrance has place, as suggesting that, however unnoticed or forgotten on earth, God’s children live in the true ‘Golden Book.’ Their names are in the book of life. ‘Of so much fame, in heaven expect the meed.’ Ay, and as, too, suggesting how brief after all is the honour that comes from men.

Also, there will be annihilation or perpetuation of their life’s work. Nothing lasts but the will of God. Men who live godless lives are engaged in true Sisyphean labour. They are running counter to the whole stream of things, and what can be left at the end but frustrated endeavours covered with a gloomy pall?

Is your life to be wasted?

They are lists of those who are accepted in judgment, and of those who are not.

Rev. 20:12, Rev. 20:15; Rev. 21:27.

The books of men’s lives are to be opened, and also the book of life. What is written in the former can only bring condemnation. If our names are written in the latter, then He will ‘confess our names before His Father and the holy angels.’ And He will joyfully inscribe them there if we say to Him, like the man in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, ‘Set down my name.’ He will write them not only there, but on the palms of His hands and the tablets of His heart.

49)Luke 10:25-37

Luke

NEIGHBOURS FAR OFF

Luk. 10:25 - Luk. 10:37.

The lawyer’s first question was intended to ‘tempt’ Jesus, which here seems to mean, rather, ‘to test’; that is, to ascertain His orthodoxy or His ability. Christ walks calmly through the snare, as if not seeing it. His answer is unimpeachably orthodox, and withal just hints in the slightest way that the question was needless, since one so learned in the law knew well enough what were the conditions of inheriting life. The lawyer knows the letter too well to be at a loss what to answer. But it is remarkable that he gives the same combination of two passages which Jesus gives in His last duel with the Pharisees [Mat. 22:1 - Mat. 22:46; Mar. 12:1 - Mar. 12:44]. Did Jesus adopt this lawyer’s summary? Or is Luke’s narrative condensed, omitting stages by which Jesus led the man to so wise an answer?

Our Lord’s rejoinder has a marked tone of authority, which puts the lawyer in his right place. His answer is commended, as by one whose estimate has weight; and his practice is implicitly condemned, as by one who knows, and has a right to judge. ‘This do’ is a sharp sword-thrust. It also unites the two ‘loves’ as essentially one, by saying ‘This’-not ‘these’-’do.’ The lawyer feels the prick, and it is his defective practice, not his question, which he seeks to ‘justify.’ He did not think that his love to God needed any justification. He had fully done his duty there, but about the other half he was less sure. So he tried to ride off, lawyer-like, on a question of the meaning of words. ‘Who is my neighbour?’ is the question answered by the lovely story of the kindly Samaritan.

I. The main purpose, then, is to show how far off men may be, and yet be neighbours.

The lawyer’s question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ is turned round the other way in Christ’s form of it at the close. It is better to ask ‘Whose neighbour am I?’ than ‘Who is my neighbour?’ The lawyer meant by the word ‘a person whom I am bound to love.’ He wanted to know how far an obligation extended which he had no mind to recognise an inch farther than he was obliged. Probably he had in his thought the Rabbinical limitations which made it as much duty to ‘hate thine enemy’ as to ‘love thy neighbour.’ Probably, too, he accepted the national limitations, which refused to see any neighbours outside the Jewish people.

‘Neighbourhood,’ in his judgment, implied ‘nearness,’ and he wished to know how far off the boundaries of the region included in the command lay. There are a great many of us like him, who think that the obligation is a matter of geography, and that love, like force, is inversely as the square of the distance. A good deal of the so-called virtue of ‘patriotism’ is of this spurious sort. But Christ’s way of putting the question sweeps all such limitations aside. ‘Who became neighbour to’ the wounded man? ‘He who showed mercy on him,’ said the lawyer, unwilling to name the Samaritan, and by his very reluctance giving the point to his answer which Christ wished to bring out. We are not to love because we are neighbours in any geographical sense, but we become neighbours to the man farthest from us when we love and help him. The relation has nothing to do with proximity. If we prove ourselves neighbours to any man by exercising love to him, then the relation intended by the word is as wide as humanity. We recognise that A. is our neighbour when a throb of pity shoots through our heart, and thereby we become neighbours to him.

The story is not, properly speaking, a parable, or imaginary narrative of something in the physical world intended to be translated into something in the spiritual region, but it is an illustration [by an imaginary narrative] of the actual virtue in question. Every detail is beautifully adapted to bring out the lesson that the obligation of neighbourly affection has nothing to do with nearness either of race or religion, but is as wide as humanity. The wounded man was probably a Jew, but it is significant that his nationality is not mentioned. He is ‘a certain man,’ that is all. The Samaritan did not ask where he was born before he helped him. So Christ teaches us that sorrow and need and sympathy and help are of no nationality.

That lesson is still more strongly taught by making the helper a Samaritan. Perhaps, if Jesus had been speaking in America, he would have made him a negro; or, if in France, a German; or, if in England, a ‘foreigner.’ It was a daring stroke to bring the despised name of ‘Samaritan’ into the story, and one sees what a hard morsel to swallow the lawyer found it, by his unwillingness to name him after all.

The nations have not yet learned the deep, simple truth of this parable. It absolutely forbids all limitations of mercy and help. It makes every man the neighbour of every man. It carries in germ the great truth of the brotherhood of the race. ‘Humanity’ is a purely Christian word, and a conception that was never dreamed of before Christ had showed us the unity of mankind. We slowly approximate to the realisation of the teaching of this story, which is oftener admired than imitated, and perhaps oftenest on the lips of people who obey it least.

II. Another aspect of the parable is its lesson as to the true manifestations of neighbourliness.

The minutely detailed account of the Samaritan’s care for the half-dead man is not only graphic, but carries large lessons. Compassionate sentiments are very well. They must come first. The help that is given as a matter of duty, without the outgoing of heart, will be worth little, and soon cease to flow; but the emotion that does not drive the wheels of action, and set to work to stanch the sorrows which cause it to run so easily, is worth still less. It hardens the heart, as all feeling unexpressed in action does. If the priest and Levite had gone up to the man, and said, ‘Ah, poor fellow, poor fellow! how sorry we are for you! somebody ought to come and help you,’ and so had trudged on their way, they would have been worse than they are painted as being.

The various acts are enumerated as showing the genius of true love. We notice the swift, cool-headed deftness of the man, his having at hand the appliances needed, the business-like way in which he goes about his kindness, his readiness to expend his wine and oil, his willingness to do the surgeon’s work, his cheerful giving up of his ‘own beast,’ while he plodded along on foot, steadying the wounded man on his ass; his care for him at the inn; his generosity, and withal his prudence, in not leaving a great sum in the host’s hands, but just enough to tide over a day or two, and his wise hint that he would audit the accounts when he came back. This man’s quick compassion was blended with plenty of shrewdness, and was as practical as the hardest, least compassionate man could have been. There is need for organisation, ‘faculty,’ and the like, in the work of loving our neighbour. A thousand pities that sometimes Christian charity and Christian common-sense dissolve partnership. The Samaritan was a man of business, and he did his compassion in a business-like fashion, as we should try to do.

III. Another lesson inwrought into the parable is the divorce between religion and neighbourliness, as shown in the conduct of the priest and Levite.

Jericho was one of the priestly cities, so that there would be frequent travellers on ecclesiastical errands. The priest was ‘going down’ [that is from Jerusalem], so he could not plead a ‘pressing public engagement’ at the Temple. The verbal repetition of the description of the conduct of both him and the Levite serves to suggest its commonness. They two did exactly the same thing, and so would twenty or two hundred ordinary passers by. They saw the man lying in a pool of blood, and they made a wide circuit, and, even in the face of such a sight, went on their way. Probably they said to themselves, ‘Robbers again; the sooner we get past this dangerous bit, the better.’ We see that they were heartless, but they did not see it. We do the same thing ourselves, and do not see that we do; for who of us has not known of many miseries which we could have done something to stanch, and have left untouched because our hearts were unaffected? The world would be a changed place if every Christian attended to the sorrows that are plain before him.

Let professing Christians especially lay to heart the solemn lesson that there does lie in their very religion the possibility of their being culpably unconcerned about some of the world’s wounds, and that, if their love to God does not find a field for its manifestation in active love to man, worship in the Temple will be mockery. Philanthropy is, in our days, often substituted for religion. The service of man has been put forward as the only real service of God. But philanthropic unbelievers and unphilanthropic believers are equally monstrosities. What God hath joined let not man put asunder. That simple ‘and,’ which couples the two great commandments, expresses their indissoluble connection. Well for us if in our practice they are blended in one!

It is not spiritualising this narrative when we say that Jesus is Himself the great pattern of the swift compassion and effectual helpfulness which it sets forth. Many unwise attempts have been made to tack on spiritual meanings to the story. These are as irreverent as destructive of its beauty and significance. But to say that Christ is the perfect example of that love to every man which the narrative portrays, has nothing in common with these fancies. It is only when we have found in Him the pity and the healing which we need, that we shall go forth into the world with love as wide as His.

50)Luke 11:1

Luke

HOW TO PRAY

THE PRAYING CHRIST

Luk. 11:1.

It is noteworthy that we owe our knowledge of the prayers of Jesus principally to the Evangelist Luke. There is, indeed, one solemn hour of supplication under the quivering shadows of the olive-trees in Gethsemane which is recorded by Matthew and Mark as well; and though the fourth Gospel passes over that agony of prayer, it gives us, in accordance with its ruling purpose, the great chapter that records His priestly intercession. But in addition to these instances the first Gospel furnishes but one, and the second but two, references to the subject. All the others are found in Luke.

I need not stay to point out how this fact tallies with the many other characteristics of the third Gospel, which mark it as eminently the story of the Son of Man. The record which traces our Lord's descent to Adam rather than to Abraham; which tells the story of His birth, and gives us all we know of the 'child Jesus'; which records His growth in wisdom and stature, and has preserved a multitude of minute points bearing on His true manhood, as well as on the tenderness of His sympathy and the universality of His work, most naturally emphasises that most precious indication of His humanity-His habitual prayerfulness. The Gospel of the King, which is the first Gospel, or of the Servant, which is the second, or of the Son of God, which is the fourth, had less occasion to dwell on this. Royalty, practical Obedience, Divinity, are their respective themes. Manhood is Luke's, and he is ever pointing us to the kneeling Christ.

Consider, then, for a moment, how precious the prayers of Jesus are, as bringing Him very near to us in His true manhood. There are deep and mysterious truths involved with which we do not meddle now. But there are also plain and surface truths which are very helpful and blessed. We thank God for the story of His weariness when He sat on the well, and of His slumber when, worn out with a hard day's work, He slept on the hard wooden pillow in the stern of the fishing-boat among the nets and the litter. It brings Him near to us when we read that He thirsted, and nearer still when the immortal words fall on our wondering ears, 'Jesus wept.' But even more precious than these indications of His true participation in physical needs and human emotion, is the great evidence of His prayers, that He too lived a life of dependence, of communion, and of submission; that in our religious life, as in all our life, He is our pattern and forerunner. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, He shows that He is not ashamed to call us brethren by this, that He too avows that He lives by faith; and by His life-and surely pre-eminently by His prayers-declares, I will put my trust in Him.' We cannot think of Christ too often or too absolutely as the object of faith; and as the hearer of our cries; but we may, and some of us do, think of Him too seldom as the pattern of faith, and as the example for our devotion. We should feel Him a great deal nearer us; and the fact of His manhood would not only be grasped more clearly by orthodox believers, but would be felt in more of its true tenderness, if we gave more prominence in our thoughts to that picture of the praying Christ.

Another point that may be suggested is, that the highest, holiest life needs specific acts and times of prayer. A certain fantastical and overstrained spirituality is not rare, which professes to have got beyond the need of such beggarly elements. Some tinge of this colours the habits of many people who are scarcely conscious of its presence, and makes them somewhat careless as to forms and times of public or of that of private worship. I do not think that I am wrong in saying that there is a growing laxity in that matter among people who are really trying to live Christian lives. We may well take the lesson which Christ's prayers teach us, for we all need it, that no life is so high, so holy, so full of habitual communion with God, that it can afford to do without the hour of prayer, the secret place, the uttered word. If we are to 'pray without ceasing,' by the constant attitude of communion and the constant conversion of work into worship, we must certainly have, and we shall undoubtedly desire, special moments when the daily sacrifice of doing good passes into the sacrifice of our lips. The devotion which is to be diffused through our lives must be first concentrated and evolved in our prayers. These are the gathering-grounds which feed the river. The life that was all one long prayer needed the mountain-top and the nightly converse with God. He who could say, 'The Father hath not left Me alone, for I do always the things that please Him,' felt that He must also have the special communion of spoken prayer. What Christ needed we cannot afford to neglect.

Thus Christ's own prayers do, in a very real sense, 'teach us to pray.' But it strikes me that, if we will take the instances in which we find Him praying, and try to classify them in a rough way, we may gain some hints worth laying to heart. Let me attempt this briefly now.

First, then, the praying Christ teaches us to pray as a rest after service.

The Evangelist Mark gives us, in his brief, vivid way, a wonderful picture in his first chapter of Christ's first Sabbath-day of ministry in Capernaum. It was crowded with work. The narrative goes hurrying on through the busy hours, marking the press of rapidly succeeding calls by its constant reiteration-'straightway,' 'immediately,' 'forthwith,' 'anon,' 'immediately.' He teaches in the synagogue; without breath or pause He heals a man with an unclean spirit; then at once passes to Simon's house, and as soon as He enters has to listen to the story of how the wife’s mother lay sick of a fever. They might have let Him rest for a moment, but they are too eager, and He is too pitying, for delay. As soon as He hears, He helps. As soon as He bids it, the fever departs. As soon as she is healed, the woman is serving them. There can have been but a short snatch of such rest as such a house could afford. Then when the shadows of the western hills began to fall upon the blue waters of the lake, and the sunset ended the restrictions of the Sabbath, He is besieged by a crowd full of sorrow and sickness, and all about the door they lie, waiting for its opening. He could not keep it shut any more than His heart or His hand, and so all through the short twilight, and deep into the night, He toils amongst the dim, prostrate forms. What a day it had been of hard toil, as well as of exhausting sympathy! And what was His refreshment? An hour or two of slumber; and then, ‘in the morning, rising up a great while before day, He went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed’ [Mar. 1:35].

In the same way we find Him seeking the same repose after another period of much exertion and strain on body and mind. He had withdrawn Himself and His disciples from the bustle which Mark describes so graphically. ‘There were many coming and going, and they had no leisure, so much as to eat.’ So, seeking quiet, He takes them across the lake into the solitudes on the other side. But the crowds from all the villages near its head catch sight of the boat in crossing, and hurry round; and there they all are at the landing-place, eager and exacting as ever. He throws aside the purpose of rest, and all day long, wearied as He was, ‘taught them many things.’ The closing day brings no respite. He thinks of their hunger, before His own fatigue, and will not send them away fasting. So He ends that day of labour by the miracle of feeding the five thousand. The crowds gone to their homes, He can at last think of Himself; and what is His rest? He loses not a moment in ‘constraining’ His disciples to go away to the other side, as if in haste to remove the last hindrance to something that He had been longing to get to. ‘And when He had sent them away, He departed into a mountain to pray’ [Mar. 6:46; Mat. 14:23].

That was Christ’s refreshment after His toil. So He blended contemplation and service, the life of inward communion and the life of practical obedience. How much more do we need to interpose the soothing and invigorating influences of quiet communion between the acts of external work, since our work may harm us, as His never did Him. It may disturb and dissipate our communion with God; it may weaken the very motive from which it should arise; it may withdraw our gaze from God and fix it upon ourselves. It may puff us up with the conceit of our own powers; it may fret us with the annoyances of resistance; it may depress us with the consciousness of failure; and in a hundred other ways may waste and wear away our personal religion. The more we work the more we need to pray. In this day of activity there is great danger, not of doing too much, but of praying too little for so much work. These two-work and prayer, action and contemplation-are twin-sisters. Each pines without the other. We are ever tempted to cultivate one or the other disproportionately. Let us imitate Him who sought the mountain-top as His refreshment after toil, but never left duties undone or sufferers unrelieved in pain. Let us imitate Him who turned from the joys of contemplation to the joys of service without a murmur, when His disciples broke in on His solitude with, ‘all men seek Thee,’ but never suffered the outward work to blunt His desire for, nor to encroach on the hour of, still communion with His Father. Lord, teach us to work; Lord, teach us to pray.

The praying Christ teaches us to pray as a preparation for important steps.

Whilst more than one Gospel tells us of the calling of the Apostolic Twelve, the Gospel of the manhood alone narrates [Luk. 6:12] that on the eve of that great epoch in the development of Christ’s kingdom, ‘He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God.’ Then, ‘when it was day,’ He calls to Him His disciples, and chooses the Twelve.

A similar instance occurs, at a later period, before another great epoch in His course. The great confession made by Peter, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,’ was drawn forth by our Lord to serve as basis for His bestowment on the Apostles of large spiritual powers, and for the teaching, with much increased detail and clearness, of His approaching sufferings. In both aspects it distinctly marks a new stage. Concerning it, too, we read, and again in Luke alone [Luk. 9:18], that it was preceded by solitary prayer.

Thus He teaches us where and how we may get the clear insight into circumstances and men that may guide us aright. Bring your plans, your purposes to God’s throne. Test them by praying about them. Do nothing large or new-nothing small or old either, for that matter-till you have asked there, in the silence of the secret place, ‘Lord, what wouldest Thou have me to do?’ There is nothing bitterer to parents than when children begin to take their own way without consulting them. Do you take counsel of your Father, and have no secrets from Him. It will save you from many a blunder and many a heartache; it will make your judgment clear, and your step assured, even in new and difficult ways, if you will learn from the praying Christ to pray before you plan, and take counsel of God before you act.

Again, the praying Christ teaches us to pray as the condition of receiving the Spirit and the brightness of God.

There were two occasions in the life of Christ when visible signs showed His full possession of the Divine Spirit, and the lustre of His glorious nature. There are large and perplexing questions connected with both, on which I have no need to enter. At His baptism the Spirit of God descended visibly and abode on Jesus. At His transfiguration His face shone as the light, and His garments were radiant as sunlit snow. Now on both these occasions our Gospel, and our Gospel alone, tells us that it was whilst Christ was in the act of prayer that the sign was given: ‘Jesus being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended’ [Luk. 3:21 - Luk. 3:22]. ‘As He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was altered, and His raiment was white and glistening’ [Luk. 9:29].

Whatever difficulty may surround the first of these narratives especially, one thing is clear, that in both of them there was a true communication from the Father to the man Jesus. And another thing is, I think, clear too, that our Evangelist meant to lay stress on the preceding act as the human condition of such communication. So if we would have the heavens opened over our heads, and the dove of God descending to fold its white wings, and brood over the chaos of our hearts till order and light come there, we must do what the Son of Man did-pray. And if we would have the fashion of our countenances altered, the wrinkles of care wiped out, the traces of tears dried up, the blotches of unclean living healed, and all the brands of worldliness and evil exchanged for the name of God written on our foreheads, and the reflected glory irradiating our faces, we must do as Christ did-pray. So, and only so, will God’s Spirit fill our hearts, God’s brightness flash in our faces, and the vesture of heaven clothe our nakedness.

Again, the praying Christ teaches us to pray as the preparation for sorrow. Here all the three Evangelists tell us the same sweet and solemn story. It is not for us to penetrate further than they carry us into the sanctities of Gethsemane. Jesus, though hungering for companionship in that awful hour, would take no man with Him there; and He still says, ‘Tarry ye here, while I go and pray yonder.’ But as we stand afar off, we catch the voice of pleading rising through the stillness of the night, and the solemn words tell us of a Son’s confidence, of a man’s shrinking, of a Saviour’s submission. The very spirit of all prayer is in these broken words. That was truly ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ which He poured out beneath the olives in the moonlight. It was heard when strength came from heaven, which He used in ‘praying more earnestly.’ It was heard when, the agony past and all the conflict ended in victory, He came forth, with that strange calm and dignity, to give Himself first to His captors and then to His executioners, the ransom for the many.

As we look upon that agony and these tearful prayers, let us not only look with thankfulness, but let that kneeling Saviour teach us that in prayer alone can we be forearmed against our lesser sorrows; that strength to bear flows into the heart that is opened in supplication; and that a sorrow which we are made able to endure is more truly conquered than a sorrow which we avoid. We have all a cross to carry and a wreath of thorns to wear. If we want to be fit for our Calvary-may we use that solemn name?-we must go to our Gethsemane first.

So the Christ who prayed on earth teaches us to pray; and the Christ who intercedes in heaven helps us to pray, and presents our poor cries, acceptable through His sacrifice, and fragrant with the incense from His own golden censer.

‘O Thou by whom we come to God,

The Life, the Truth, the Way;
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod;
Lord! teach us how to pray.'

51)Luke 11:2-12

Luke

HOW TO PRAY

Luk. 11:1 - Luk. 11:13.

Christ's praying fired the disciples with desire to pray like Him. There must have been something of absorption and blessedness in His communion with the Father which struck them with awe and longing, and which they would fain repeat. Do our prayers move any to taste the devotion and joy which breathe through them? But low conceptions mingled with high desires in their request. They think that if He will give them a form, that will be enough; and they wish to be as well off as John's disciples, whose relation to their master seems to them parallel with theirs to Jesus.

Our Lord's answer meets and transcends their wish. He does give them a model prayer, and He adds encouragements to pray which inculcate confidence and persistence. The passage, then, falls into two parts-the pattern prayer [Luk. 11:2 - Luk. 11:4], and the spirit of prayer as enforced by some encouragements [Luk. 11:5 - Luk. 11:13]. The material is so rich that we can but gather the surface wealth. Deep mines must lie unexplored here.

I. The pattern of prayer.

We call it the Lord's Prayer, but it is so only in the sense that He gives it. It is our prayer for our use. His own prayers remain unrecorded, except those in the upper room and at Gethsemane. This is the type to which His servants' prayers are to be conformed. 'After this manner pray ye,' whether in these words or not. And the repetition of the words is often far enough away from catching their spirit. To suppose that our Lord simply met the disciples' wish by giving them a form misconceives the genius of His work. He gave something much better; namely, a pattern, the spirit of which we are to diffuse through all our petitions,

Two salient features of the prayer bring out the two great characteristics of all true Christian prayer. First, we note the invocation. It is addressed to the Father. Our prayers are, then, after the pattern only when they are the free, unembarrassed, confident, and utterly frank whispers of a child to its father. Confidence and love should wing the darts which are to reach heaven. That name, thoroughly realised, banishes fear and self-will, and inspires submission and aspiration. To cry,' Abba, Father,' is the essence of all prayer. Nothing more is needed.

The broad lesson drawn from the order of requests is the second point to be noticed. If we have the child's spirit, we shall put the Father's honour first, and absolutely subordinate our own interests to it. So the first half of the prayer, like the first half of the Decalogue, deals with God's name and its glory. Alas! it is hard even for His child to keep this order. Natural self-regard must be cast out by love, if we are thus to pray. How few of us have reached that height, not in mere words, but in unspoken desires!

The order of the several petitions in the first half of the prayer is significant. God's name [that is, His revealed character] being hallowed [that is, recognised as what it is], separate from all limitation and creatural imperfection, and yet near in love as a Father is, the coming of His kingdom will follow; for where He is known and honoured for what He is He will reign, and men, if they rightly knew Him, would fall before Him and serve Him. The hallowing of His name is the only foundation for His kingdom among us, and all knowledge of Him which does not lead to submission to His rule is false or incomplete.

The outward, visible establishment of God's kingdom in human society follows individual acquaintance with His name. The doing of God's will is the sign of His kingdom having come. The ocean is blue, like the sky which it mirrors. Earth will be like heaven.

The second half of the prayer returns to personal interests; but God's child has many brethren, and so His prayer is, not for 'me' and 'my,' but for 'us' and ‘ours.’ Our first need, if we start from the surface and go inwards, is for the maintenance of bodily life. So the petition for bread has precedence, not as being most, but least, important. We are to recognise God’s hand in blessing our daily toil. We are to limit our desires to necessaries, and to leave the future in His hands. Is this ‘the manner’ after which Christians pray for perishable good? Where would anxious care or eager rushing after wealth be, if it were?

A deeper need, the chief in regard to the inner man, is deliverance from sin, in its two aspects of guilt and power. So the next petition is for pardon. Sin incurs debt. Forgiveness is the remission of penalty, but the penalty is not merely external punishment. The true penalty is separation from God, and His forgiveness is His loving on, undisturbed by sin. If we truly call God Father, the image of His mercifulness will be formed in us; and unless we are forgiving, we shall certainly lose the consciousness of being forgiven, and bind our sins on our backs in all their weight. God’s children need always to pray ‘after this manner, ‘for sin is not entirely conquered.

Pardon is meant to lead on to holiness. Hence the next clause in effect prays for sanctification. Knowing our own weakness, we may well ask not to be placed in circumstances where the inducements to sin would be strong, even while we know that we may grow thereby, if we resist. The shortened form of the prayer in Luke, according to the Revised Version, omits ‘deliver us from evil’; but that clause is necessary to complete the idea. Whether we read ‘evil’ or ‘the evil one,’ the clause refers to us as tempted, and, as it were, in the grip of an enemy too strong for us. God alone can extricate us from the mouth of the lion. He will, if we ask Him. The only evil is to sin away our consciousness of sonship and to cling to the sin which separates us from God.

II. A type of prayer is not all that we need.

The spirit in which we pray is still more important. So Jesus goes on to enjoin two things chiefly; namely, persistence and filial confidence. He presents to us a parable with its application [Luk. 11:5 - Luk. 11:10], and the germ of a parable with its [Luk. 11:11 - Luk. 11:13]. Observe that these two parts deal with encouragements to confidence drawn, first, from our own experience in asking, and, second, with encouragements drawn from our own experience in giving. In the former we learn from the man who will not take ‘no,’ and so at last gets ‘yes’; in the latter, from the Father who will certainly give His child what he asks.

In the parable two points are to be specially noted-the persistent suppliant pleads not for himself so much as for the hungry traveller, and the man addressed gives without any kindliness, from the mere wish to be left at peace. As to both points, an *a fortiori* argument is implied. If a man can so persevere when pleading for another, how much more should we do so when asking for ourselves! And if persistence has such power with selfish men, how much more shall it avail with Him who slumbers not nor sleeps, and to whom we can never come at an inopportune moment, and who will give us because we are His friends, and He ours! The very ugliness of character ascribed to the owner of the loaves, selfish in his enjoyment of his bed, in his refusal to turn out on an errand of neighbourliness, and in his final giving, thus serves as a foil to the character of Him to whom our prayers are addressed.

The application of the parable lies in Luk. 11:9 - Luk. 11:10. The efforts enjoined are in an ascending scale, and ‘ask’ and ‘knock’ allude to the parable. To ‘seek’ is more than to ask, for it includes active exertion; and for want of seeking by conduct appropriate to our prayers, we often ask in vain. If we pray for temporal blessings, and then fold our hands, and sit with our mouths open for them to drop into, we shall not get them. If we ask for higher goods, and rise from our knees to live worldly lives, we shall get them as little. Knocking is more than either, for it implies a continuous hammering on the door, like Peter’s when he stood in the morning twilight at Mary’s gate. Asking and seeking must be continuous if they are to be rewarded.

Luk. 11:10 grounds the promise of Luk. 11:9 on experience. It is he who asks that gets. In men’s giving it is not universally true that petitions are answered, nor that gifts are not given unasked. Nor is it true about God’s lower gifts, which are often bestowed on the unthankful, and not seldom refused to His children. But it is universally true in regard to His highest gifts, which are never withheld from the earnest asker who adds to his prayers fitting conduct, and prays always without fainting, and which are not and cannot be given unless desire for them opens the heart for their reception, and faith in God assures him who prays that he cannot ask in vain.

The germ of a parable with its application [Luk. 11:11 - Luk. 11:13] draws encouragement from our own experience in giving. It guards against misconceptions of God which might arise from the former parable, and comes back to the first word of the Lord's Prayer as itself the guarantee of every true desire of His child being heard and met. Bread, eggs, and fish are staple articles of food. In each case something similar in appearance, but useless or hurtful, is contrasted with the thing asked by the child. The round loaves of the East are not unlike rounded, wave-washed stones, water-serpents are fishlike, and the oval body of a quiescent scorpion is similar to an egg. Fathers do not play tricks with their hungry children. Though we are all sinful, parental love survives, and makes a father wise enough to know what will nourish and what would poison his child.

Alas! that is only partially true, for many a parent has not a father's heart, and is neither impelled by love to give good things to, nor to withhold evil ones from, his child. But it is true with sufficient frequency to warrant the great *a fortiori* argument which Jesus bases on it. Our heavenly Father's love, the archetype of all parental affection, is tainted by no evil and darkened by no ignorance. He loves perfectly and wisely, therefore He cannot but give what His child needs.

But the child often mistakes, and thinks that stones are bread, serpents fish, and scorpions eggs. So God often has to deny the letter of our petitions, in order not to give us poison. Luke's version of the closing promise, in which 'the Holy Spirit' stands instead of Matthew's 'good things,' sets the whole matter in the true light; for that Spirit brings with Him all real good, and, while many of our desires have, for our own sakes, to be denied, we shall never hold up empty hands and have to let them fall still empty, if we desire that great encyclopediacal gift which our loving Father waits to bestow. It cannot be given without our petition, it will never be withheld from our petition.

52)Luke 12:13-21

Luke

HOW TO PRAY

THE RICH FOOL

Luk. 12:13 - Luk. 12:23.

What a gulf between the thoughts of Jesus and those of this unmannerly interrupter! Our Lord had been speaking solemnly as to confessing Him before men, the divine help to be given, and the blessed reward to follow, and this hearer had all the while been thinking only of the share in his father’s inheritance, out of which he considered that his brother had cheated him. Such indifference must have struck a chill into Christ’s heart, and how keenly he felt it is traceable in the curt and stern brushing aside of the man’s request. The very form of addressing him puts him at a distance. ‘Man’ is about as frigid as can be. Our Lord knew the discouragement of seeing that His words never came near some of His hearers, and had no power to turn their thoughts even for a minute from low objects. ‘What do I care about being confessed before the angels, or about the Holy Spirit to teach me? What I want is my share of the paternal acres. A rabbi who will help me to these is the rabbi for me.’ John Bunyan’s ‘man with the muck-rake’ had his eyes so glued to the ground and the muck that he did not see the crown hanging above him. How many of us find the sermon time a good opportunity for thinking about investments and business!

Christ’s answer is intentionally abrupt and short. It deals with part only of the man’s error, the rest of which, being an error to which we are all exposed, and which was the root of the part special to him, is dealt with in the parable that follows. Because the man was covetous, he could see in Jesus nothing more than a rabbi who might influence his brother. Our sense of want largely shapes our conception of Christ. Many to-day see in Him mainly a social [and economical] reformer, because our notion of what we and the world need most is something to set social conditions right, and so to secure earthly well-being. They who take Jesus to be first and foremost ‘a judge or a divider’ fail to see His deepest work or their own deepest need. He will be all that they wish Him to be, if they will take Him for something else first. He will 'bid' men 'divide the inheritance' with their brethren after men have gone to Him for salvation.

But covetousness, or the greedy clutching at more and more of earthly good, has its roots in us all, and unless there is the most assiduous weeding, it will overrun our whole nature. So Jesus puts great emphasis into the command, 'Take heed, and keep yourselves,' which implies that without much 'heed' and diligent inspection of ourselves [for the original word is 'see'], there will be no guarding against the subtle entrance and swift growth of the vice. We may be enslaved by it, and never suspect that we are. Further, the correct reading is 'from *all* covetousness,' for it has many shapes, besides the grossest one of greed for money. The reason for the exhortation is somewhat obscure in construction, but plain in its general meaning, and sufficiently represented by the Authorised and Revised Versions. The Revised Version margin gives the literal translation, 'Not in a man's abundance consisteth his life, from the things which he possesseth,' on which we may note that the second clause is obviously to be completed from the first, and that the difference between the two seems to lie mainly in the difference of prepositions, 'from' or 'out of in the second clause standing instead of 'in' in the first, while there may be also a distinction between 'abundance' and 'possessions' the former being a superfluous amount of the latter. The whole will then mean that life does not *consist in* possessions, however abundant, nor does it *come out of* anything that simply belongs to us in outward fashion. Not what we possess, but what we are, is the important matter.

But what does 'life' mean? The parable shows that we cannot leave out the notion of physical life. No possessions keep a man alive. Death knocks at palaces and poor men's hovels. Millionaires and paupers are huddled together in his net. But we must not leave out the higher meaning of life, for it is eminently true that the real life of a man has little relation to what he possesses. Neither nobleness nor peace nor satisfaction, nor anything in which man lives a nobler life than a dog, has much dependence on property of any sort. Wealth often chokes the channels by which true life would flow into us. 'We live by admiration, hope, and love,' and these may be ours abundantly, whatever our portion of earth's riches. Covetousness is folly, because it grasps at worldly good, under the false belief that thereby it will secure the true good of life, but when it has made its pile, it finds that it is no nearer peace of heart, rest, nobleness, or joy than before, and has probably lost much of both in the process of making it. The mad race after wealth, which is the sin of this luxurious, greedy, commercial age, is the consequence of a lie-that life does consist in the abundance of possessions. It consists in knowing ‘Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.’ Is there any saying of Jesus Christ’s more revolutionary, or less believed by His professed followers, than this?

The story of the rich fool is not a parable in the narrower meaning of that word-that is, a description of some event or thing in the natural sphere, transferred by analogy to the spiritual-but an imaginary narrative exemplifying in a concrete instance the characteristics of the class of covetous men. The first point noted is that accumulated wealth breeds anxiety rather than satisfaction. The man is embarrassed by his abundance. The trouble of knowing how to keep it is as great as the labour of acquiring it, and the enjoyment of it is still in the future. Many a rich man is more worried about his securities than he was in making his money. There are so many ‘bags with holes’ that he is at his wits’ end for investments, and the first thing he looks at in his morning’s paper is the share list, the sight of which often spoils his breakfast.

The next point is the selfish and arrogant sense of possession, as betrayed by the repetition of ‘my’-my fruits, my barns, my corn, and my goods. He has no thought of God, nor of his own stewardship. He recognises no claim on his wealth. If he had looked a little beyond himself, he would have seen many places where he could have bestowed his fruits. Were there no poor at his gates? He had better have poured some riches into the laps of these than have built a new barn. Corn laid up would breed weevils; dispersed, it would bring blessings.

Again, this type of covetous men is a fool because he reckons on ‘many years.’ The goods may last, but will he? He can make sure that they will suffice for a long time, but he cannot make sure of the long time. Again, he blunders tragically in his estimate of the power of worldly goods to satisfy. ‘Eat, drink,’ might be said to his body, but to say it to his soul, and to fancy that these pleasures of sense would put it at ease, is the fatal error which gnaws like a worm at the root of every worldly life. The word here rendered ‘take thine ease’ is cognate with Christ’s in His great promise, ‘Ye shall find rest unto your souls.’ Not in abundance of worldly goods, but in union with Him, is that rest to be found which the covetous man vainly promises himself in filled barns and luxurious idleness.

There is a grim contrast between what the rich man said and what God said. The man’s words were empty breath; God’s are powers, and what He says is a deed. The divine decree comes crashing into the abortive human plans like a thunder-clap into a wood full of singing birds, and they are all stricken silent. So little does life consist in possessions that all the abundance cannot keep the breath in a man for one moment. His life is ‘required of him,’ not only in the sense that he has to give it up, but also inasmuch as he has to answer for it. In that requirement the selfishly used wealth will be ‘a swift witness against’ him, and instead of ministering to life or ease, will ‘eat his flesh as fire.’ Molten gold dropping on flesh burns badly. Wealth, trusted in and selfishly clutched, without recognition of God the giver or of others’ claims to share it, will burn still worse.

The ‘parable’ is declared to be of universal application. Examples of it are found wherever there are men who selfishly lay up treasures for their own delectation, and ‘are not rich toward God.’ That expression is best understood in this connection to mean, not rich in spiritual wealth, but in worldly goods used with reference to God, or for His glory and service. So understood, the two phrases, laying up treasure for oneself and being rich towards God, are in full antithesis.

53)Luke 12:22-23

Luke

THE RICH FOOL

ANXIOUS ABOUT EARTH, OR EARNEST ABOUT THE KINGDOM

Luk. 12:22 - Luk. 12:31.

The parable of the rich fool was spoken to the multitude, but our Lord now addresses the disciples. ‘Therefore’ connects the following with the foregoing teachings. The warnings against anxiety are another application of the prohibition of laying up treasure for self. Torturing care is the poor man’s form of worldliness, as luxurious self-indulgence is the rich man’s. There are two kinds of gout, as doctors tell us-one from high living, and one from poverty of blood. This passage falls into two parts-the prohibition against anxious care [Luk. 12:22 - Luk. 12:31], and the exhortation to set the affections on the true treasure [Luk. 12:31 - Luk. 12:34].

I. The first part gives the condemnation of anxiety about earthly necessities.

The precept is first stated generally, and then followed by a series of reasons enforcing it. As to the precept, we may remark that the disciples were mostly poor men, who might think that they were in no danger of the folly branded in the parable. They had no barns bursting with plenty, and their concern was how to find food and clothing, not what to do with superfluities. Christ would have them see that the same temper may be in them, though it takes a different shape. Dives and Lazarus may be precisely alike.

The temper condemned here is ‘self-consuming care,’ the opposite of trust. Its misery is forcibly expressed by the original meaning of the Greek word, which implies being torn in pieces, and thus paints the distraction and self-inflicted harrassment which are the lot of the anxious mind. Prudent foresight and strenuous work are equally outside this prohibition. Anxiety is so little akin to foresight that it disables from exercising it, and both hinders from seeing what to do to provide daily bread, and from doing it.

The disciples’ danger of being thus anxious may be measured by the number and variety of reasons against it given by Jesus. The first of these is that such anxiety does not go deep enough, and forgets how we come to have lives to be fed and bodies to be clothed. We have received the greater, life and body, without our anxiety. The rich fool could keep his goods, but not his ‘soul’ or ‘life.’ How superficial, then, after all, our anxieties are, when God may end life at any moment! Further, since the greater is given, the less which it needs will also be given. The thought of God as ‘a faithful creator' is implied. We must trust Him for the 'more'; we may trust Him for the less.

The second reason bids us look with attention at examples of unanxious lives abundantly fed. Perhaps Elijah's feathered providers, or the words of the Psalmist [Psa. 147:9], were in Christ's mind. The raven was one of the 'unclean' birds, and of ill omen, from Noah's days, and yet had its meat in due season, though that meat was corpses. Notice the allusions to the preceding parable in 'sow not, neither reap,' and in 'neither have storehouse nor barn.' In these particulars the birds are inferior to us, and, so to speak, the harder to care for. If they who neither work nor store still get their living, shall not we, who can do both? Our superior value is in part expressed by the capacity to sow and reap; and these are more wholesome occupations for a man than worrying.

How lovingly Jesus looked on all creatures, and how clearly He saw everywhere God's hand at work! As Luther said, 'God spends every year in feeding sparrows more than the revenues of the King of France.'

The third reason is the impotence of anxiety [Luk. 12:25]. It is difficult to decide between the two possible renderings here. That of 'a cubit' to the 'stature' corresponds best with the growth of the lilies, while 'age' preserves an allusion to the rich fool, and avoids treating the addition of a foot and a half to an ordinary man's height as a small thing. But age is not measured by cubits, and it is best to keep to 'stature.'

At first sight, the argument of Luk. 12:23 seems to be now inverted, and what was 'more' to be now 'least.' But the supposed addition, if possible, would be of the smallest importance as regards ensuring food or clothing, and measured by the divine power required to effect it, is less than the continual providing which God does. That smaller work of His, no anxiety will enable us to do. How much less can we effect the complicated and wide-reaching arrangements needed to feed and clothe ourselves! Anxiety is impotent. It only works on our own minds, racking them in vain, but has no effect on the material world, not even on our own bodies, still less on the universe.

The fourth reason bids us look with attention at examples of unanxious existence clothed with beauty. Christ here teaches the highest use of nature, and the noblest way of looking at it. The scientific botanist considers how the lilies grow, and can tell all about cells and chlorophyll and the like. The poet is in raptures with their beauty. Both teach us much, but the religious way of looking at nature includes and transcends both the others. Nature is a parable. It is a visible manifestation of God, and His ways there shadow His ways with us, and are lessons in trust.

The glorious colours of the lily come from no dyer’s vats, nor the marvellous texture of their petals from any loom. They are inferior to us in that they do not toil or spin, and in their short blossoming time. Man’s ‘days are as grass; as a flower of the field so he flourisheth’; but his date is longer, and therefore he has a larger claim on God. ‘God clothes the grass of the field’ is a truth quite independent of scientific truths or hypotheses about how He does it. If the colours of flowers depend on the visits of insects, God established the dependence, and is the real cause of the resulting loveliness.

The most modern theories of the evolutionist do not in the least diminish the force of Christ’s appeal to creation’s witness to a loving Care in the heavens. But that appeal teaches us that we miss the best and plainest lesson of nature, unless we see God present and working in it all, and are thereby heartened to trust quietly in His care for us, who are better than the ravens because we have to sow and reap, or than the lilies because we must toil and spin.

Luk. 12:29 adds to the reference to clothing a repeated prohibition as to the other half of our anxieties, and thus rounds off the whole with the same double warning as in verse 22. But it gives a striking metaphor in the new command against ‘being of doubtful mind.’ The word so rendered means to be lifted on high, and thence to be tossed from height to depth, as a ship in a storm. So it paints the wretchedness of anxiety as ever shuttlecocked about between hopes and fears, sometimes up on the crest of a vain dream of good, sometimes down in the trough of an imaginary evil. We are sure to be thus the sport of our own fancies, unless we have our minds fixed on God in quiet trust, and therefore stable and restful.

Luk. 12:30 gives yet another reason against not only anxiety, but against that eager desire after outward things which is the parent of anxiety. If we ‘seek after’ them, we shall not be able to avoid being anxious and of doubtful mind. Such seeking, says Christ, is pure heathenism. The nations of the world who know not God make these their chief good, and securing them the aim of their lives. If we do the like, we drop to their level. What is the difference between a heathen and a Christian, if the Christian has the same objects and treasures as the heathen? That is a question which a good many so-called Christians at present would find it hard to answer.

But the crowning reason of all is kept for the last. Much of what precedes might be spoken by a man who had but the coldest belief in Providence. But the great and blessed faith in our Father, God, scatters all anxious care. How should we be anxious if we know that we have a Father in heaven, and that He knows our needs? He recognises our claims on Him. He made the needs, and will send the supply. That is a wide truth, stretching far beyond the mere earthly wants of food and raiment. My wants, so far as God has made me to feel them, are prophecies of God’s gifts. He has made them as doors by which He will come in and bless me. How, then, can anxious care fret the heart which feels the Father's presence, and knows that its emptiness is the occasion for the gift of a divine fullness? Trust is the only reasonable temper for a child of such a father. Anxious care is a denial of His love or knowledge or power.

II. Luk. 12:31 - Luk. 12:34 point out the true direction of effort and affection, and the true way of using outward good so as to secure the higher riches.

It is useless to tell men not to set their longings or efforts on worldly things unless you tell them of something better. Life must have some aim, and the mind must turn to something as supremely good. The only way to drive out heathenish seeking after perishable good is to fill the heart with the love and longing for eternal and spiritual good. The ejected demon comes back with a troop at his heels unless his house be filled. To seek 'the kingdom,' to count it our highest good to have our wills and whole being bowed in submission to the loving will of God, to labour after entire conformity to it, to postpone all earthly delights to that, and to count them all but loss if we may win it-this is the true way to conquer worldly anxieties, and is the only course of life which will not at last earn the stern judgment, 'Thou fool.'

That direction of all our desires and energies to the attainment of the kingdom which is the state of being ruled by the will of God, is to be accompanied with joyous, brave confidence. How should they fear whose desires and efforts run parallel with the 'Father's good pleasure'? They are seeking as their chief good what He desires, as His chief delight, to give them. Then they may be sure that, if He gives that, He will not withhold less gifts than may be needed. He will not 'spoil the ship for a ha'p'orth of tar,' nor allow His children, whom He has made heirs of a kingdom, to starve on their road to their crown. If they can trust Him to give them the kingdom, they may surely trust Him for bread and clothes.

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Seeking and courage are to be crowned by surrender of outward good and the use of earthly wealth in such manner as that it will secure an unfailing treasure in heaven. The manner of obeying this command varies with circumstances. For some the literal fulfilment is best; and there are more Christian men to-day whose souls would be delivered from the snares if they would part with their possessions than we are willing to believe.

Sometimes the surrender is rather to be effected by the conscientious consecration and prayerful use of wealth. That is for each man to settle for himself. But what is not variable is the obligation to set the kingdom high above all else, and to use all outward wealth, as Christ's servants, not for luxury and self-gratification, but as in His sight and for His glory. Let us not be afraid of believing what Jesus and His Apostles plainly teach, that wealth so spent here is treasured in heaven, and that a Christian's place in the future life depends upon this among other conditions-how he used his money here.

54)Luke 12:24-28

Luke

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55)Luke 12:29

Luke

ANXIOUS ABOUT EARTH, OR EARNEST ABOUT THE KINGDOM

STILLNESS IN STORM

Luk. 12:29.

I think that these words convey no very definite idea to most readers. The thing forbidden is not very sharply defined by the expression which our translators have employed, but the original term is very picturesque and precise.

The word originally means ‘to be elevated, to be raised as a meteor,’ and comes by degrees to mean to be raised in one special way-namely, as a boat is tossed by a tough sea. So there is a picture in this prohibition which the fishermen and folk dwelling by the Sea of Galilee with its sudden squalls would understand: ‘Be not pitched about’; now on the crest, now in the trough of the wave.

The meaning, then, is substantially identical with that of the previous words, ‘Take no thought for your life,’ with this difference, that the figures by which the thing prohibited is expressed are different, and that the latter saying is wider than the former.

The former prohibits ‘taking thought,’ by which our Lord of course means not reasonable foresight, but anxious foreboding. And the word which He uses, meaning at bottom as it does, ‘to be distracted or rent asunder,’ conveys a striking picture of the wretched state to which such anxiety brings a man. Nothing tears us to pieces like foreboding care. Then our text forbids the same anxiety, as well as other fluctuations of feeling that come from setting our hopes and hearts on aught which can change; and its figurative representation of the misery that follows on fastening ourselves to the perishable, is that of the poor little skiff, at one moment high on the crest of the billow, at the next down in the trough of the sea.

So both images point to the unrest of worldliness, and while the unrest of care is uppermost in the one, the other includes more than simply care, and warns us that all occupation with simply creatural things, all eager seeking after ‘what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink’ or after more refined forms of earthly good, brings with it the penalty and misery of ‘for ever tossing on the tossing wave.’ Whosoever launches out on to that sea is sure to be buffeted about. Whoso sets his heart on the uncertainty of anything below the changeless God will without doubt be driven from hope to fear, from joy to sorrow, and his soul will be agitated as his idols change, and his heart will be desolate when his idols perish.

Our Lord, we say, forbids our being thus tossed about. He seems to believe that it is in our own power to settle whether we shall be or no. That sounds strange; one can fancy the answer: ‘What is the use of telling a man not to be buffeted about by storm? Why, he cannot help it. If the sea is running high the little boat cannot lie quiet as if in smooth water. Do not talk to me about not being moved, unless you can say to the tumbling sea of life, “Peace, be still!” and make it

‘quite forget to rave,
While birds of peace sit brooding on the charmed wave.’

The objection is sound after a fashion. Change there must be, and fluctuation of feeling. But there is such a thing as ‘peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation.’ You may remember the attempt that was made some years ago to build a steamer in which the central saloon was to hang perfectly still while the outer hull of the ship pitched and rolled with the moving sea. It was a failure, but the theory was sound and looked practicable. At any rate, it is a parable of what may be in our lives. If I might venture, without seeming irreverence, to modernise and so to illustrate this command of our Lord’s, I would say, that He here bids us do for our life’s voyage across a stormy sea, exactly what the ‘Bessemer’ ship was an attempt to do in its region-so to poise and control the oscillations of the central soul that however the outward life may be buffeted about, there may be moveless rest within. He knows full well that we must have rough weather, but He would have us counteract the motion of the sea, and keep our hearts in stillness. ‘In the world ye shall have tribulation,’ but in Him ye may have peace.

He does not wish us to be blind to the facts of life, but to take *all* the facts into our vision. A partial view of the so-called facts certainly will lead to tumultuous alternations of hope and fear, of joy and sorrow. But if you will take them all into account, you can be quiet and at rest. For here is a fact as real as the troubles and changes of life: ‘Your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things.’ Ah! the recognition of that will keep our inmost hearts full of sweet peace, whatever may befall the outward life. Only take all the facts of your condition, and accept Christ’s word for that greatest and surest of all-the loving Father’s knowledge of your needs, and it will not be hard to obey Christ’s command, and keep yourself still, because fixed on Him.

But now consider the teachings here as to the true source of the agitation which our Lord forbids. The precept itself affords no light on that subject, but the context shows us the true origin of the evil.

The first point to observe is how remarkably our Lord identifies this anxiety and restlessness which He forbids with what at first sight seems its exact opposite, namely a calmness and peace which he also condemns as wholly bad. The whole series of warnings of which our text is part begins with the story of the rich man whose ground brought forth plentifully. His fault was not that he was tossed about with care and a doubtful mind, but the very opposite. His sin was in saying, ‘Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.’

Notice, then, that our Lord begins by pointing out the great madness and the great sin of being thus at rest, and trusting in earthly possessions: and then with a ‘Therefore, I say unto you,’ He turns to the opposite pole of worldly feeling, and shows us how, although opposite, it is yet related. The warning, ‘Take no thought for your life’ follows as an inference from the picture of the folly of the man that lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God.

That is to say, the two faults are kindred and in some sense the same. The rich fool stretching himself out to rest on the pile of his possessions, and the poor fool tossing about on the billows of unquiet thought, are at bottom under the influence of the same folly, though their circumstances are opposite, and their moods seem to be so too.

The one man is just the other turned inside out. When he is rich and has got plenty of outward goods, he has no anxiety, because he thinks that they are supreme and all-sufficient. When he is poor and has not got enough of them, he has no rest, because he thinks that they are supreme and all-sufficient. Anxious care and satisfied possession are at bottom the very same thing. The man who says, ‘My mountain stands strong,’ because he has got a quantity of money or the like; and the man who says, ‘Oh, dear me, what is going to become of me?’ because he thinks he has not got enough, only need to exchange circumstances and they will exchange cries.

The same figure is concave or convex according to the side from which you look at it. From one it swells out into rounded fullness; from the other it gapes as in empty hungriness. So the rich fool of the preceding parable and the anxious, troubled man of my text are the same man looked at from opposite sides or set in opposite circumstances. The root of both the rest of the one and of the anxiety of the other is the over-estimate of outward good.

Then, still further, notice how our Lord here brands this forbidden fluctuation of feeling as being at bottom pure heathenism. Most significant double reasons for our text follow it, introduced by a double ‘for.’ The first reason is, ‘For all these things do the nations of the world seek after’; the second is, ‘For your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things.’ The former points the lesson of the contradiction between such trouble of mind and the position of disciples. For pure heathens it is all natural; for men who do not know that they have a Father in heaven, there is nothing strange or anomalous in care and anxiety, nor in the race after riches. But for you, it is in diametrical contradiction to all your professions, in flagrant inconsistency with all your belief, in flat denial of that mighty truth that you have a Father who cares for you, and that His love is enough. Every time you yield to such cares or thoughts you are going down to the level of pure heathenism. That is a sharp saying. Our Lord’s steady hand wields the keen dissecting-knife here, and lays bare with unsparing cuts the ugly growth. We give the thing condemned a great many honourable names, such as ‘laying up for a rainy day,’ or ‘taking care for the future of my children,’ or ‘providing things honest in the sight of all men,’ and a host of others, with which we gloss and gild over unchristian worldly-mindedness.

There are actions and feelings which are rightly described by such phrases, that are perfectly right, and against them Jesus Christ never said a word.

But much of what we deceive ourselves by calling reasonable foresight is rooted distrust of God, and much practical heathenism creeps into our lives under the guise of ‘proper prudence.’ The ordinary maxims of the world christen many things by names of virtues and yet they remain vices notwithstanding.

I do not know that there is any region in which Christian men have more to be on their guard, lest they be betrayed into deadening inconsistencies, than this of the true limits of care for material wealth, and of provision for the future outward life.

Those of us, especially, who are engaged in business, and who live in our great commercial cities, have hard work to keep from dropping down to the heathen level which is adopted on all sides. It is not easy for such a man to resist the practical belief that money is the one thing needful, and he the happy man who has made a fortune. The false estimate of worldly good is in the air about us, and we have to be on our guard, or else, before we know where we are, we shall have breathed the stupefying poison and feel its narcotic influence slackening the pulses and dimming the eye of our spirits. We need special watchfulness and prayer, or we shall not escape this subtle danger, which is truly for many of us 'the pestilence that walketh in darkness.'

So be not tossed about by these secularities, for the root of them all is heathenish distrust of your Father in heaven.

Then, finally, we have the cure for all agitation. Christ here puts in our own hands, in that thought, 'Your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things,' the one weapon with which we can conquer. There is the true anchorage for tempest-tossed spirits, the land-locked haven where they can ride, whatever winds blow and waves break outside the bar.

I remarked that our Lord here seemed to give an injunction which the facts of life would prevent our obeying, and so it would be, had He not pointed us to that firm truth, which, if we believe it, will keep us unmoved. There is no more profitless expenditure of breath than the ordinary moralist's exhortations to, or warnings against, states of feeling and modes of mind. Our emotions are very partially under our direct control. Life cannot be calm by willing to be so. But what we can do is to think of a truth which will sway our moods. If you can substitute some other thought for the one which breeds the emotion you condemn, it will fall silent of itself, just as the spindles will stop if you shut off steam, or the mill-wheel if you turn the stream in another direction. So Christ gives us a great thought to cherish, knowing that if we let it have fair play in our minds, we shall be at rest: 'Your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things.' Surely that is enough for calmness. Why should, or how can we be, troubled if we believe that?

‘He knows.’ What a wonderful confidence in His heart and resources is silently implied in that word! If He knows that you need, you may be quite sure that you will not want. ‘He knows’; and His fatherly heart is our guarantee that to know and to supply our need, are one and the same thing with Him; and His deep treasure of exhaustless good is our guarantee that our need can never go beyond His fullness, nor He ever, like us, see a sorrow He cannot comfort, a want that He cannot meet.

Enough that He knows; ‘the rest goes without saying.’ The whole burden of solicitude is shifted off our shoulders, if once we get into the light of that great truth. A man is made restful in the midst of all the changes and storms of life, not by trying to work himself into tranquillity, not by mere dint of coercing his feelings through sheer force of will, not by ignoring any facts, but simply by letting this truth stand before his mind. It scatters cares, as the silent moon has power, by her mild white light, to clear away a whole skyful of piled blacknesses.

One other word of practical advice, as to how to carry out this injunction, is suggested by the context, which goes on, ‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God.’

A boat will roll most when, from lack of a strong hand at the helm, she has got broadside to the run of the sea. There she lies rocking about just as the blow of the wave may fall, and drifting wherever the wind may take her. There are two directions in which she will be comparatively steady; one, when her head is kept as near the wind as may be, and the other when she runs before it. Either will be quieter than washing about anyhow. May we make a parable out of that? If you want to have as little pitching and tossing as possible on your voyage, keep a good strong hand on the tiller. Do not let the boat lie in the trough of the sea, but drive her right against the wind, or as near it as she will sail. That is to say, have a definite aim to which you steer, and keep a straight course for that. So Christ says to us here. Be not filled with agitations, but seek the Kingdom. The definite pursuit of the higher good will deaden the lower anxieties. The active energies called out in the daily efforts to bring my whole being under the dominion of the sovereign will of God, will deliver me from a crowd of tumultuous desires and forebodings. I shall have neither leisure nor inclination to be anxious about outward things, when I am engaged and absorbed in seeking the kingdom. So ‘bear up and steer right onward,’ and it will be smooth sailing.

Sometimes, too, we shall have to try the other tack, and run *before* the storm, which again will give us the minimum of commotion. That, being translated, is, ‘Let the winds and the waves sometimes have their way.’ Yield to them in the sweetness of submission and the strength of resignation. Even when all the stormy winds strive on the surface sea, recognise them as God’s messengers ‘fulfilling His word.’ Submission is not rudderless yielding to the gale, that tosses us on high and sinks us again, as the waves list. This frees us from their power, even while they roll mountains high.

Then keep firm trust in your Father’s knowledge; strenuously seek the kingdom. In quietness accept the changeful methods of his unchanging providence. Thus shall your hearts be kept in peace amidst the storm of life, with the happy thought, ‘*So* He bringeth them unto their desired haven.’

56)Luke 12:30-31

Luke

ANXIOUS ABOUT EARTH, OR EARNEST ABOUT THE KINGDOM

Luk. 12:22 - Luk. 12:31.

The parable of the rich fool was spoken to the multitude, but our Lord now addresses the disciples. ‘Therefore’ connects the following with the foregoing teachings. The warnings against anxiety are another application of the prohibition of laying up treasure for self. Torturing care is the poor man’s form of worldliness, as luxurious self-indulgence is the rich man’s. There are two kinds of gout, as doctors tell us-one from high living, and one from poverty of blood. This passage falls into two parts-the prohibition against anxious care [Luk. 12:22 - Luk. 12:31], and the exhortation to set the affections on the true treasure [Luk. 12:31 - Luk. 12:34].

I. The first part gives the condemnation of anxiety about earthly necessities.

The precept is first stated generally, and then followed by a series of reasons enforcing it. As to the precept, we may remark that the disciples were mostly poor men, who might think that they were in no danger of the folly branded in the parable. They had no barns bursting with plenty, and their concern was how to find food and clothing, not what to do with superfluities. Christ would have them see that the same temper may be in them, though it takes a different shape. Dives and Lazarus may be precisely alike.

The temper condemned here is 'self-consuming care,' the opposite of trust. Its misery is forcibly expressed by the original meaning of the Greek word, which implies being torn in pieces, and thus paints the distraction and self-inflicted harrassment which are the lot of the anxious mind. Prudent foresight and strenuous work are equally outside this prohibition. Anxiety is so little akin to foresight that it disables from exercising it, and both hinders from seeing what to do to provide daily bread, and from doing it.

The disciples' danger of being thus anxious may be measured by the number and variety of reasons against it given by Jesus. The first of these is that such anxiety does not go deep enough, and forgets how we come to have lives to be fed and bodies to be clothed. We have received the greater, life and body, without our anxiety. The rich fool could keep his goods, but not his 'soul' or 'life.' How superficial, then, after all, our anxieties are, when God may end life at any moment! Further, since the greater is given, the less which it needs will also be given. The thought of God as 'a faithful creator' is implied. We must trust Him for the 'more'; we may trust Him for the less.

The second reason bids us look with attention at examples of unanxious lives abundantly fed. Perhaps Elijah's feathered providers, or the words of the Psalmist [Psa. 147:9], were in Christ's mind. The raven was one of the 'unclean' birds, and of ill omen, from Noah's days, and yet had its meat in due season, though that meat was corpses. Notice the allusions to the preceding parable in 'sow not, neither reap,' and in 'neither have storehouse nor barn.' In these particulars the birds are inferior to us, and, so to speak, the harder to care for. If they who neither work nor store still get their living, shall not we, who can do both? Our superior value is in part expressed by the capacity to sow and reap; and these are more wholesome occupations for a man than worrying.

How lovingly Jesus looked on all creatures, and how clearly He saw everywhere God's hand at work! As Luther said, 'God spends every year in feeding sparrows more than the revenues of the King of France.'

The third reason is the impotence of anxiety [Luk. 12:25]. It is difficult to decide between the two possible renderings here. That of 'a cubit' to the 'stature' corresponds best with the growth of the lilies, while 'age' preserves an allusion to the rich fool, and avoids treating the addition of a foot and a half to an ordinary man's height as a small thing. But age is not measured by cubits, and it is best to keep to 'stature.'

At first sight, the argument of Luk. 12:23 seems to be now inverted, and what was 'more' to be now 'least.' But the supposed addition, if possible, would be of the smallest importance as regards ensuring food or clothing, and measured by the divine power required to effect it, is less than the continual providing which God does. That smaller work of His, no anxiety will enable us to do. How much less can we effect the complicated and wide-reaching arrangements needed to feed and clothe ourselves! Anxiety is impotent. It only works on our own minds, racking them in vain, but has no effect on the material world, not even on our own bodies, still less on the universe.

The fourth reason bids us look with attention at examples of unanxious existence clothed with beauty. Christ here teaches the highest use of nature, and the noblest way of looking at it. The scientific botanist considers how the lilies grow, and can tell all about cells and chlorophyll and the like. The poet is in raptures with their beauty. Both teach us much, but the religious way of looking at nature includes and transcends both the others. Nature is a parable. It is a visible manifestation of God, and His ways there shadow His ways with us, and are lessons in trust.

The glorious colours of the lily come from no dyer's vats, nor the marvellous texture of their petals from any loom. They are inferior to us in that they do not toil or spin, and in their short blossoming time. Man's 'days are as grass; as a flower of the field so he flourisheth'; but his date is longer, and therefore he has a larger claim on God. ‘God clothes the grass of the field’ is a truth quite independent of scientific truths or hypotheses about how He does it. If the colours of flowers depend on the visits of insects, God established the dependence, and is the real cause of the resulting loveliness.

The most modern theories of the evolutionist do not in the least diminish the force of Christ’s appeal to creation’s witness to a loving Care in the heavens. But that appeal teaches us that we miss the best and plainest lesson of nature, unless we see God present and working in it all, and are thereby heartened to trust quietly in His care for us, who are better than the ravens because we have to sow and reap, or than the lilies because we must toil and spin.

Luk. 12:29 adds to the reference to clothing a repeated prohibition as to the other half of our anxieties, and thus rounds off the whole with the same double warning as in verse 22. But it gives a striking metaphor in the new command against ‘being of doubtful mind.’ The word so rendered means to be lifted on high, and thence to be tossed from height to depth, as a ship in a storm. So it paints the wretchedness of anxiety as ever shuttlecocked about between hopes and fears, sometimes up on the crest of a vain dream of good, sometimes down in the trough of an imaginary evil. We are sure to be thus the sport of our own fancies, unless we have our minds fixed on God in quiet trust, and therefore stable and restful.

Luk. 12:30 gives yet another reason against not only anxiety, but against that eager desire after outward things which is the parent of anxiety. If we ‘seek after’ them, we shall not be able to avoid being anxious and of doubtful mind. Such seeking, says Christ, is pure heathenism. The nations of the world who know not God make these their chief good, and securing them the aim of their lives. If we do the like, we drop to their level. What is the difference between a heathen and a Christian, if the Christian has the same objects and treasures as the heathen? That is a question which a good many so-called Christians at present would find it hard to answer.

But the crowning reason of all is kept for the last. Much of what precedes might be spoken by a man who had but the coldest belief in Providence. But the great and blessed faith in our Father, God, scatters all anxious care. How should we be anxious if we know that we have a Father in heaven, and that He knows our needs? He recognises our claims on Him. He made the needs, and will send the supply. That is a wide truth, stretching far beyond the mere earthly wants of food and raiment. My wants, so far as God has made me to feel them, are prophecies of God's gifts. He has made them as doors by which He will come in and bless me. How, then, can anxious care fret the heart which feels the Father's presence, and knows that its emptiness is the occasion for the gift of a divine fullness? Trust is the only reasonable temper for a child of such a father. Anxious care is a denial of His love or knowledge or power.

II. Luk. 12:31 - Luk. 12:34 point out the true direction of effort and affection, and the true way of using outward good so as to secure the higher riches.

It is useless to tell men not to set their longings or efforts on worldly things unless you tell them of something better. Life must have some aim, and the mind must turn to something as supremely good. The only way to drive out heathenish seeking after perishable good is to fill the heart with the love and longing for eternal and spiritual good. The ejected demon comes back with a troop at his heels unless his house be filled. To seek 'the kingdom,' to count it our highest good to have our wills and whole being bowed in submission to the loving will of God, to labour after entire conformity to it, to postpone all earthly delights to that, and to count them all but loss if we may win it-this is the true way to conquer worldly anxieties, and is the only course of life which will not at last earn the stern judgment, 'Thou fool.'

That direction of all our desires and energies to the attainment of the kingdom which is the state of being ruled by the will of God, is to be accompanied with joyous, brave confidence. How should they fear whose desires and efforts run parallel with the 'Father's good pleasure'? They are seeking as their chief good what He desires, as His chief delight, to give them. Then they may be sure that, if He gives that, He will not withhold less gifts than may be needed. He will not 'spoil the ship for a ha'p'orth of tar,' nor allow His children, whom He has made heirs of a kingdom, to starve on their road to their crown. If they can trust Him to give them the kingdom, they may surely trust Him for bread and clothes.

Mark, too, the tenderness of that ‘little flock.’ They might fear when they contrasted their numbers with the crowds of worldly men; but, being a flock, they have a shepherd, and that is enough to quiet anxiety.

Seeking and courage are to be crowned by surrender of outward good and the use of earthly wealth in such manner as that it will secure an unfailing treasure in heaven. The manner of obeying this command varies with circumstances. For some the literal fulfilment is best; and there are more Christian men to-day whose souls would be delivered from the snares if they would part with their possessions than we are willing to believe.

Sometimes the surrender is rather to be effected by the conscientious consecration and prayerful use of wealth. That is for each man to settle for himself. But what is not variable is the obligation to set the kingdom high above all else, and to use all outward wealth, as Christ’s servants, not for luxury and self-gratification, but as in His sight and for His glory. Let us not be afraid of believing what Jesus and His Apostles plainly teach, that wealth so spent here is treasured in heaven, and that a Christian’s place in the future life depends upon this among other conditions-how he used his money here.

57)Luke 12:35-36

Luke

THE EQUIPMENT OF THE SERVANTS

Luk. 12:35 - Luk. 12:36.

These words ought to stir us like the sound of a trumpet. But, by long familiarity, they drop upon dull ears, and scarcely produce any effect. The picture that they suggest, as an emblem of the Christian state, is a striking one. It is midnight, a great house is without its master, the lord of the palace is absent, but expected back, the servants are busy in preparation, each man with his robe tucked about his middle, in order that it may not interfere with his work, his lamp in his hand that he may see to go about his business and his eye ever turned to the entrance to catch the first sign of the coming of his master. Is that like your Christian life? If we are His servants that is what we ought to be, having three things-girded loins, lighted lamps, waiting hearts. These are sharp tests, solemn commandments, but great privileges, for blessedness as well as strength, and calm peace whatever happens, belong to those who obey these injunctions and have these things.

I. The girded loins.

Every child knows the long Eastern dress; and that the first sign that a man is in earnest about any work would be that he should gather his skirts around him and brace himself together.

The Christian service demands concentration. It needs the fixing of all a man’s powers upon the one thing, the gathering together of all the strength of one’s nature, and binding it with cords until its softest and loosest particles are knit together, and become strong. Why! you can take a handful of cotton-down, and if you will squeeze it tight enough, it will be as hard and as heavy as a bullet and will go as far, and have as much penetrating power and force of impact. The reason why some men hit and make no dint is because they are not gathered together and braced up by a vigorous concentration.

The difference between men that succeed and men that fail in ordinary pursuits is by no means so much intellectual as moral; and there is nothing which more certainly commands any kind of success than giving yourselves with your whole concentrated power to the task in hand. If we succeed in anything we must focus all our power on it. Only by so doing, as a burning-glass does the sun’s rays, shall we set anything on fire.

And can a vigorous Christian life be grown upon other conditions than those which a vigorous life of an ordinary sort demands? Why should it be easier to be a prosperous Christian than to be a prosperous tradesman? Why should there not be the very same law in operation in the realm of the higher riches and possessions that rules in the realm of the lower? ‘Gird up the loins *of your mind*,’ says the Apostle, echoing the Master’s word here. The first condition of true service is that you shall do it with concentrated power.

There is another requirement, or perhaps rather another side of the same, expressed in the figure. One reason why a man tucked up his robe around his waist, when he had anything to do that needed all his might, was that it might not catch upon the things that protruded, and so keep him back. Concentration, and what I may call detachment, go together. In order that there shall be the one, there must be the other. They require each other, and are, in effect, but the two sides of the same thing contemplated in regard to hindrances without, or contemplated in regard to the relation of the several parts of a man's nature to each other.

Observe that Luke immediately precedes the text with:-'Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Let your loins be girded about.' That is to say, do not let your affections go straggling anywhere and everywhere, but gather them together, and that you may gather them together tear away the robe from the briars and thorns which catch you as you pass, and gird the long flowing skirts close to yourselves in order that they may not be caught by these hindrances. There is no Christian life worth living except upon condition of wrenching oneself away from dependence upon idolatry of, or longing for, perishable things. The lesson of my text is the same as the solemn lesson which the beloved Apostle sharpened his gentle lips to pronounce when he said, 'If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.' 'Gird up your loins,' detach heart, desire, effort from perishable things, and lift them above the fleeting treasures and hollow delusive sparkles of earth's preciousness, and set them on the realities and eternities at God's right hand. 'For where the treasure is, there will the heart be also,' and only that heart can never be stabbed by disappointment, nor bled to death by losses, whose treasure is as sure as God and eternal as Himself. 'Let your loins be girded about.'

And then there is another thing suggested, which is the consequence of these two. The girding up of the loins is not only the symbol of concentration and detachment, but of that for which the concentration and the detachment are needful-viz. alert readiness for service. The servant who stands before his lord with his belt buckled tight indicates thereby that he is ready to run whenever and wherever he is bid. Our girded loins are not merely in order to give strength to our frame, but in order that, having strength given to our frame, we may be ready for all work. That which is needful for any faithful discharge of any servant's duty is most of all needful for the discharge of the highest duty and the noblest service to the Master who has the right to command all our service.

There are three emblems in Scripture to all of which this metaphor applies. The soldier, before he flings himself into the fight, takes in another hole in his leather belt in order that there may be strength given to his spine, and he may feel himself all gathered together for the deadly struggle, and the Christian soldier has to do the same thing. 'Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth.'

The traveller, before he starts upon his long road, girds himself, and gathers his robes round him; and we have to 'run with perseverance the race set before us'; and shall never do it if our garments, however delicately embroidered, are flapping about our feet and getting in our way when we try to run.

The servant has to be *succinct*, girded together for his work, even as the Master, when He took upon Him the form of a servant, 'took a towel and girded Himself.' His servants have to follow His example, to put aside the needless vesture and brace themselves with the symbol of service. So as soldiers, pilgrims, servants, the condition of doing our work is, girding up the loins.

II. Further, there are to be the burning lamps.

If we follow the analogy of Scripture symbolism, significance belongs to that emblem, making it quite worthy to stand by the side of the former one. You remember Christ's first exhortation in the Sermon on the Mount immediately following the Beatitudes: 'Ye are the salt of the earth, ye are the light of the world. Men do not light a candle, and put it under a bushel. *Let your light so shine before men*, that they may see your good deeds.' If we apply that key to decipher the hieroglyphics, the burning lamps which the girded servants are to bear in the darkness are the whole sum of the visible acts of Christian people, from which there may flash the radiance of purity and kindness, 'So shines a good deed in a naughty world.' The lamp which the Christian servant is to bear is a character illuminated from above [for it is a kindled lamp, and the light is derived], and streaming out a brilliance into the encircling murky midnight which speaks of hospitable welcome and of good cheer in the lighted hall within.

Now, what is the connection between that exhibition of a lustrous and pure Christian character and the former exhortation? Why this, if you do not gird your loins your lamp will go out. Without the concentrated effort and the continually repeated detachment and the daily renewed 'Lord! here am I, send me,' of the alert and ready servant, there will be no shining of the life, no beauty of the character, but dimness will steal over the exhibition of Christian graces. Just as, often, in the wintry nights, a star becomes suddenly obscured, and we know not why, but some thin vaporous cloud has come between us and it, invisible in itself but enough to blur its brightness, so obscuration will befall the Christian character unless there be continual concentration and detachment. Do you want your lights to blaze? You trim them-though it is a strange mixture of metaphor-you trim them when you gird your loins.

III. Lastly, the waiting hearts.

An attitude of expectancy does not depend upon theories about the chronology of prophecy. It is Christ's will that, till He comes, we know 'neither the day nor the hour.' We may, as I suppose most of us do, believe that we shall die before He comes. Be it so. That need not affect the attitude of expectance, for it comes to substantially the same thing whether Christ comes to us or we go to Him. And the certain uncertainty of the end of our individual connection with this fleeting world stands in the same relation to our hopes as the coming of the Master does, and should have an analogous effect on our lives. Whatever may be our expectation as to the literal coming of the Lord, that future should be very solid, very real, very near us in our thoughts, a habitual subject of contemplation, and ever operative upon our hearts and conduct.

Ah! if we never, or seldom, and then sorrowfully, look forward to the future, and contemplate our meeting with our Master, I do not think there is much chance of our having either our loins girt, or our lamps burning.

One great motive for concentration, detachment, and alertness of service, as well as for exhibiting the bright graces of the Christian character, is to be found in the contemplation of the two comings of the Lord. We should be ever looking back to the Cross, forward to the Throne, and upwards to the Christ, the same on them both. If we have our gathering together with Him ever in view, then we shall be willing to yield all for Him, to withdraw ourselves from everything besides for the excellency of His knowledge; and whatsoever He commands, joyfully and cheerfully to do.

The reason why such an immense and miserable proportion of professing Christians are all unbraced and loose-girt, and their lamps giving such smoky and foul-smelling and coarse radiance, is because they look little back to the Cross, and less forward to the Great White Throne. But these two solemn and sister sights are far more real than the vulgar and intrusive illusions of what we call the present. That is a shadow, they are the realities; that is but a transitory scenic display, like the flashing of the Aurora Borealis for a night in the wintry sky, these are the fixed, unsetting stars that guide our course. Therefore let us turn away from the lying present, with its smallnesses and its falsities, and look backwards to Him that died, forward to Him that is coming. And, as we nourish our faith on the twofold fact, a history and a hope, that Christ has come, and that Christ shall come, we shall find that all devotion will be quickened, and all earnestness stirred to zeal, and the dim light will flame into radiance and glory.

He comes in one of two characters which lie side by side here, as they do in fact. To the waiting servants He comes as the Master who shall gird Himself and go forth and serve them; to those who wait not, He comes as a thief, not only in the suddenness nor the unwelcomeness of His coming, but as robbing them of what they would fain keep, and dragging from them much that they ought never to have had. And it depends upon ourselves whether, we waiting and watching and serving and witnessing for Him, He shall come to us as our Joy, or as our Terror and our Judge.

58)Luke 12:37

SERVANTS AND STEWARDS HERE AND HEREAFTER

THE SERVANT-LORD

Luk. 12:37.

No one would have dared to say that except Jesus Christ. For surely, manifold and wonderful as are the glimpses that we get in the New Testament of the relation of perfect souls in heaven to Him, none of them pierces deeper, rises higher, and speaks more boundless blessing, than such words as these. Well might Christ think it necessary to preface them with the solemn affirmation which always, upon His lips, points, as it were, an emphatic finger to, or underlines that which He is about to proclaim. 'Verily I say unto you,' if we had not His own word for it, we might hesitate to believe. And while we have His own word for it, and do not hesitate to believe, it is not for us to fathom or exhaust, but lovingly and reverently and humbly, because we know it but partially, to try to plumb the unfathomable depth of such words. 'He shall gird Himself, and cause them to sit down to meat; and come forth and serve them.'

I. Then we have, first of all, the wonderful revelation of the Servant-Lord.

For the name of dignity is employed over and over again in the immediate context, and so makes more wonderful the assumption here of the promise of service.

And the words are not only remarkable because they couple so closely together the two antagonistic ideas, as we fancy them, of rule and service, authority and subordination, but because they dwell with such singular particularity of detail upon all the stages of the menial office which the Monarch takes upon Himself. First, the girding, assuming the servant's attire; then the leading of the guests, wondering and silent, to the couches where they can recline; then the coming to them as they thus repose at the table, and the waiting upon their wants and supplying all their need. It reminds us of the wonderful scene, in John's Gospel, where we have coupled together in the same intimate and interdependent fashion the two thoughts of dignity and of service-'Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hand, and that He came from God and went to God,' made this use of His consciousness and of His unlimited and universal dominion, that 'He laid aside His garments, and took a towel, and girded Himself, and washed the disciples' feet'; thus teaching what our text teaches in still another form, that the highest authority means the lowliest service, that the purpose of power is blessing, that the very sign and mark of dignity is to stoop, and that the crown of the Universe is worn by Him who is the Servant of all.

But beyond that general idea which applies to the whole of the divine dealings and especially to the earthly life of Him who came, not to be ministered unto, but to minister, the text sets forth special manifestations of Christ's ministering love and power, which are reserved for heaven, and are a contrast with earth. The Lord who is the Servant girds Himself. That corresponds with the commandment that went before, 'Let your loins be girded,' and to some extent covers the same ground and suggests the same idea. With all reverence, and following humbly in the thoughts that Christ has given us by the words, one may venture to say that He gathers all His powers together in strenuous work for the blessing of His glorified servants, and that not only does the metaphor express for us His taking upon Himself the lowly office, but also the employment of all that He is and has there in the heavens for the blessing of the blessed ones that sit at His table.

Here upon earth, when He assumed the form of a Servant in His entrance into humanity, it was accompanied with the emptying Himself of His glory. In the symbolical incident in John's Gospel, to which I have already referred, He laid aside His garments before He wrapped around Him the badge of service. But in that wondrous service by the glorified Lord there is no need for divesting ere He serves, but the divine glories that irradiate His humanity, and by which He, our Brother, is the King of kings and the Lord of the Universe, are all used by Him for this great, blessed purpose of gladdening and filling up the needs of the perfected spirits that wait, expectant of their food, upon Him. His girding Himself for service expresses not only the lowliness of His majesty and the beneficence of His power, but His use of all which He has and is for the blessing of those whom He keeps and blesses.

I need not remind you, I suppose, how in this same wonderful picture of the Servant-Lord there is taught the perpetual-if we may so say, the increased-lowliness of the crowned Christ. When He was here on earth, He was meek and holy; exalted in the heavens, He is, were it possible, meeker and more lowly still, because He stoops from a loftier elevation. The same loving, gentle, gracious heart, holding all its treasures for its brethren, is the heart that now is girded with the golden girdle of sovereignty, and which once was girt with the coarse towel of the slave. Christ is for ever the Servant, because He is for ever the Lord of them that trust in Him. Let us learn that service is dominion; that ‘he that is chiefest among us’ is thereby bound to be ‘the servant’ and the helper ‘of all.’

II. Notice, the servants who are served and serve.

There are two or three very plain ideas, suggested by the great words of my text, in regard to the condition of those whom the Lord thus ministers to, and waits upon. I need not expand them, because they are familiar to us all, but let me just touch them. ‘He shall make them to sit down to meat.’ The word, as many of you know, really implies a more restful attitude-’He shall make them recline at meat.’ What a contrast to the picture of toil and effort, which has just been drawn, in the command,’ Let your loins be girded about, and your lamps burning, and ye yourselves as men that wait for their Lord!’ Here, there must be the bracing up of every power, and the careful tending of the light amid the darkness and the gusts that threaten to blow it out, and every ear is to be listening and every eye strained, for the coming of the Lord, that there may be no unpreparedness or delay in flinging open the gates. But then the tension is taken off and the loins ungirded, for there is no need for painful effort, and the lamps that burn dimly and require tending in the mephitic air are laid aside, and ‘they need no candle, for the Lord is the light thereof’; and there is no more intense listening for the first foot-fall of One who is coming, for He has come, and expectation is turned into fellowship and fruition. The strained muscles can relax, and instead of effort and weariness, there is repose upon the restful couches prepared by Him. Threadbare and old as the hills as the thought is, it comes to us toilers with ever new refreshment, like a whiff of fresh air or the gleam of the far-off daylight at the top of the shaft to the miner, cramped at his work in the dark. What a witness the preciousness of that representation of future blessedness as rest to us all bears to the pressure of toil and the aching, weary hearts which we all carry! The robes may flow loose then, for there is neither pollution to be feared from the golden pavement, nor detention from briars or thorns, nor work that is so hard as to be toil or so unwelcome as to be pain. There is rest from labour, care, change, and fear of loss, from travel and travail, from tired limbs and hearts more tired still, from struggle and sin, from all which makes the unrest of life.

Further, this great promise assures us of the supply of all wants that are only permitted to last long enough to make a capacity for receiving the eternal and all-satisfying food which Christ gives the restful servants. Though ‘they hunger no more,’ they shall always have appetite. Though they ‘thirst no more,’ they shall ever desire deeper draughts of the fountain of life. Desire is one thing, longing is another. Longing is pain, desire is blessedness; and that we shall want and know ourselves to want, with a want which lives but for a moment ere the supply pours in upon it and drowns it, is one of the blessednesses to which we dare to look forward. Here we live, tortured by wishes, longings, needs, a whole menagerie of hungry mouths yelping within us for their food. There we wait upon the Lord, and He gives a portion in due season.

The picture in the text brings with it all festal ideas of light, society, gladness, and the like, on which I need not dwell. But let me just remind you of one contrast. The ministry of Christ, when He was a servant here upon earth, was symbolised by His washing His disciples’ feet, an act which was part of the preparation of the guests for a feast. The ministry of Christ in heaven consists, not in washing, for ‘he that is washed is clean every whit’ there, and for ever more-but in ministering to His guests that abundant feast for which the service and the lustration of earth were but the preparation. The servant Christ serves us here by washing us from our sins in His own blood, both in the one initial act of forgiveness and by the continual application of that blood to the stains contracted in the miry ways of life. The Lord and Servant serves His servants in the heavens by leading them, cleansed to His table, and filling up every soul with love and with Himself.

But all that, remember, is only half the story. Our Lord here is not giving us a complete view of the retributions of the heavens, He is only telling us one aspect of them. Repose, society, gladness, satisfaction, these things are all true. But heaven is not lying upon couches and eating of a feast. There is another use of this metaphor in this same Gospel, which, at first sight, strikes one as being contradictory to this. Our Lord said: 'Which of you, having a servant ploughing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, go and sit down to meat, and will not rather say unto him, make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink.' These two representations are not contradictory. Put the two halves together like the two pictures in a stereoscope and, as you look, they will go together into one solid image, of which the one part is the resting at the table of the feast, and the other part is that entrance into heaven is not cessation, but variation, of service. It was dirty, cold, muddy work out there in the field ploughing, and when the man comes back with his soiled, wet raiment and his weary limbs a change of occupation is rest. It is better for him to be set to 'make ready wherewith I may eat and drink,' than to be told to sit down and do nothing.

So the servants are served, and the servants serve. And these two representations are not contradictory, but they fill up the conception of perfect blessedness. For remember, if we may venture to say so, that the very same reason which makes Christ the Lord serve His servants makes the servants serve Christ the Lord. For love, which underlies their relationship, has for its very life-breath doing kindnesses and good to its objects, and we know not whether it is more blessed to the loving heart to minister to, or to be ministered to by, the heart which it loves. So the Servant-Lord and the servants, serving and served, are swayed in both by the same motive and rejoice in the interchange of offices and tokens of love.

III. Mark the earthly service which leads to the heavenly rest.

I have already spoken about Christ's earthly service, and reminded you that there is needed, first of all, that we should partake in His purifying work through His blood and His Spirit that dwells in us, ere we can share in His highest ministrations to His servants in the heavens. But there is also service of ours here on earth, which must precede our receiving our share in the wonderful things promised here. And the nature of that service is clearly stated in the preceding words, ‘Blessed are those servants whom the Lord when He cometh shall find’-doing what? Trying to make themselves better? Seeking after conformity to His commandments? No! ‘Whom the Lord when He cometh shall find *watching*.’ It is character rather than conduct, and conduct only as an index of character-disposition rather than deeds-that makes it possible for Christ to be hereafter our Servant-Lord. And the character is more definitely described in the former words. Loins girded, lights burning, and a waiting which is born of love. The concentration and detachment from earth, which are expressed by the girded loins, the purity and holiness of character and life, which are symbolised by the burning lights, and the expectation which desires, and does not shrink from, His coming in His Kingdom to be the Judge of all the earth-these things, being built upon the acceptance of Christ’s ministry of washing, fit us for participation in Christ’s ministry of the feast, and make it possible that even we shall be of those to whom the Lord, in that day, will come with gladness and with gifts. ‘Blessed are the servants whom the Lord shall find so watching.’

59)Luke 12:43-44

Luke

SERVANTS AND STEWARDS HERE AND HEREAFTER

Luk. 12:37, Luk. 12:43 - Luk. 12:44.

You will, of course, observe that these two passages are strictly parallel in form. Our Lord evidently intends them to run side by side, and to be taken together. The divergences are as significant and instructive as the similarities, and the force of these will be best brought out by just recalling, in a sentence or two, the occasion for the utterance of the second of the two passages which I have taken for my text. When our Lord had finished His previous address and exhortations, Peter characteristically pushed his oar in with the question, ‘Do these commandments refer to us, the Apostles, or to all,’ the whole body of disciples? Our Lord admits the distinction, recognises in His answer that the ‘us,’ the Twelve, were nearer Christ than the general mass of His followers, and answers Peter’s question by reiterating what He has been saying in a slightly different form. He had spoken before about servants. Now He speaks about ‘stewards,’ because the Apostles did stand in that relation to the other disciples, as being slaves indeed, like the rest of the household, but slaves in a certain position of authority, by the Master’s appointment, and charged with providing the nourishment which, of course, means the religious instruction, of their fellow-servants.

So, notice that the first benediction is upon the ‘servants,’ the second is upon the servants who are ‘stewards.’ The first exhortation requires that when the Master comes He shall find the servants watching; the second demands that when He comes He shall find the stewards doing their work. The first promise of reward gives the assurance that the watching servants shall be welcomed into the house, and be waited on by the Master himself; the second gives the assurance that the faithful steward shall be promoted to higher work. We are all servants, and we are all, if we are Christian men, stewards of the manifold grace of God.

So, then, out of these two passages thus brought together, as our Lord intended that they should be, we gather two things: the twofold aspect of life on earth-watchfulness and work; and the twofold hope of life in heaven-rest and rule. ‘Blessed is that servant whom his Lord, when He cometh, shall find watching.’ ‘Blessed is that steward whom his Lord, when He cometh, shall find’-not merely watching, but-’so doing.’

I. The twofold attitude here enjoined.

The first idea in watchfulness is keeping awake; and the second is looking out for something that is coming. Both these conceptions are intertwined in both our Lord’s use of the metaphor of the watching servant, and in the echoes of it which we find abundantly in the Apostolic letters. The first thing is to keep ourselves awake all through the soporific night, when everything tempts to slumber. Even the wise virgins, with trimmed lamps and girt loins, do in some degree succumb to the drowsy influences around them, and like the foolish ones, slumber, though the slumbers of the two classes be unlike. Christian people live in the midst of an order of things which tempts them to close the eyes of their hearts and minds to all the real and unseen glories above and around them, and that might be within them, and to live for the comparatively contemptible and trivial things of this present. Just as when a man sleeps, he loses his consciousness of solid external realities, and passes into a fantastic world of his own imaginations, which have no correspondence in external facts, and will vanish like

'The baseless fabric of a dream,
If but a cock shall crow,'

so the men who are conscious only of this present life and of the things that are seen, though they pride themselves on being wide awake, are, in the deepest of their being, fast asleep, and are dealing with illusions which will pass and leave nought behind, as really as are men who lie dreaming upon couches, and fancy themselves hard at work. Keep awake; that is the first thing; which, being translated into plain English, points just to this, that unless we make a dead lift of continuous effort to keep firm grasp of God and Christ, and of all the unseen magnificences that are included in these two names, as surely as we live we shall lose our hold upon them, and fall into the drugged and diseased sleep in which so many men around us are plunged. It sometimes seems to one as if the sky above us were raining down narcotics upon us, so profoundly are the bulk of men unconscious of realities, and befooled by the illusions of a dream.

Keep yourselves awake first, and then let the waking, wide-opened eye, be looking forward. It is the very *differentia*, so to speak, the characteristic mark and distinction of the Christian notion of life, that it shifts the centre of gravity from the present into the future, and makes that which is to come of far more importance than that which is, or which has been. No man is living up to the height of his Christian responsibilities or privileges unless there stands out before him, as the very goal and aim of his whole life, what can never be realised until he has passed within the veil, and is at rest in the 'secret place of the Most High.' To live for the future is, in one aspect, the very definition of a Christian.

But the text reminds us of the specific form which that future anticipation is to take. It is not for us, as it is for men in the world, to fix our hopes for the future on abstract laws of the progress of humanity, or the evolution of the species, or the gradual betterment of the world, and the like. All these may be true: I say nothing about them. But what we have to fill our future with is that ‘that same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go.’ It is much to be lamented that curious chronological speculations have so often discredited that great central hope of the Church, which is properly altogether independent of them; and that, because people have got befogged in interpreting such symbols as beasts, and horses, and trumpets, and seals, and the like, the Christian Church as a whole should so feebly be holding by that great truth, without which, as it seems to me, the truth which many of us are tempted to make the exclusive one, loses half its significance. No man can rightly understand the whole contents of the blessed proclamation, ‘Christ has come,’ unless he ends the sentence with ‘and Christ will come.’ Blessed is ‘that servant whom the Lord, when He cometh, shall find watching.’

Of course I need not remind you that much for which that second coming of the Lord is precious, and an object of hope to the world and the Church, is realised by the individual in the article of death. Whether Christ comes to the world or I go to Christ, the important thing is that there result union and communion, the reign of righteousness and peace, the felicities of the heavenly state. And so, dear brethren, just because of the uncertainty that drapes the future, and which we are often tempted to make a reason for dismissing the anticipation of it from our minds, we ought the more earnestly to give heed that we keep that end ever before us, and whether it is reached by His coming to us, or our going to Him, anticipate, by the power of realising faith grasping the firm words of Revelation, the unimaginable, and-until it is experienced-the incommunicable blessedness revealed in these great, simple words, ‘So shall we ever be with the Lord.’

But, then, look at the second of the aspects of Christian duty which is presented here, that watchfulness is to lead on to diligent work.

The temptation for any one who is much occupied with the hope of some great change and betterment in the near future is to be restless and unable to settle down to his work, and to yield to distaste of the humdrum duties of every day. If some man that kept a little chandler’s shop in a back street was expecting to be made a king to-morrow, he would not be likely to look after his poor trade with great diligence. So we find in the Apostle Paul's second letter-that to the Thessalonians-that he had to encounter, as well as he could, the tendency of hope to make men restless, and to insist upon the thought-which is the same lesson as is taught us by the second of our texts-that if a man hoped, then he had with quietness to work and eat his own bread, and not be shaken in mind.

'Blessed is that servant whom his Lord, when He cometh, shall find so doing.' It may seem humble work to serve out hunches of bread and pots of black broth to the family of slaves, when the steward is expecting the coming of the master of the house, and his every nerve is tingling with anticipation. But it is steadying work, and it is blessed work. It is better that a man should be found doing the homeliest duty as the outcome of his great expectations of the coming of his Master, than that he should be fidgeting and restless and looking only at that thought till it unfits him for his common tasks. Who was it who, sitting playing a game of chess, and being addressed by some scandalised disciple with the question, 'What would you do if Jesus Christ came, and you were playing your game?' answered, 'I would finish it'? The best way for a steward to be ready for the Master, and to show that he is watching, is that he should be 'found so doing' the humble task of his stewardship. The two women that were squatting on either side of the millstone, and helping each other to whirl the handle round in that night were in the right place, and the one that was taken had no cause to regret that she was not more religiously employed. The watchful servant should be a working servant.

II. And now I have spent too much time on this first part of my discourse; so I must condense the second. Here are two aspects of the heavenly state, rest and rule.

'Verily I say unto you, He shall gird Himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.' I do not know that there is a more wonderful promise, with more light lying in its darkness, in all Scripture than that. Jesus Christ continues in the heavens to be found in 'the form of a servant.' As here He girded Himself with the towel of humiliation in the upper room, so there He girds Himself with the robes of His imperial majesty, and uses all His powers for the nourishment and blessedness of His servants. His everlasting motto is, ‘I am among you as one that serveth.’ On earth His service was to wash His disciples’ feet; in heaven the pure foot contracts no stain, and needs no basin: but in heaven He still serves, and serves by spreading a table, and, as a King might do at some ceremonial feasts, waiting on the astonished guests.

I say nothing about all the wonderful ideas that gather round that familiar but never-to-be-worn-into-commonplace emblem of the feast. Repose, in contrast with the girded loins and the weary waiting of the midnight watch; nourishment, and the satisfaction of all desires; joy, society-all these things, and who knows how much more, that we shall have to get there to understand, lie in that metaphor, ‘Blessed is that servant’ who is served by the Master, and nourished by His presence?

But modern popular presentations of the future life have far too predominantly dwelt upon that side of it. It is a wonderful confession of ‘the weariness, the fever, and the fret,’ the hunger and loneliness of earthly experience, that the thought of heaven as the opposite of all these things should have almost swallowed up the other thought with which our Lord associates it here. He would not have us think only of repose. He unites with that representation, so fascinating to us weary and heavy-laden, the other of administrative authority. He will set him ‘over all that he hath.’

The steward gets promotion. ‘On twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel’-these are to be the seats, and that is to be the occupation of the Twelve. ‘Thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will make thee ruler over many things.’ The relation between earthly faithfulness and heavenly service is the same in essence as that between the various stages of our work here. The reward for work here is more work; a wider field, greater capacities. And what depths of authority, of new dignity, of royal supremacy, lie in those solemn and mysterious words, I know not-’He will set him over all that he hath.’ My union with Christ is to be so close as that all His is mine and I am master of it. But at all events this we can say, that faithfulness here leads to larger service yonder; and that none of the aptitudes and capacities which have been developed in us here on earth will want a sphere when we pass yonder.

So let watchfulness lead to faithfulness, and watchful faithfulness and faithful watchfulness will lead to repose which is activity, and rule which is rest.

60)Luke 12:49

Luke

FIRE ON EARTH

Luk. 12:49.

We have here one of the rare glimpses which our Lord gives us into His inmost heart, His thought of His mission, and His feelings about it. If familiarity had not weakened the impression, and dulled the edge, of these words, how startling they would seem to us! 'I am come'-then, He was, before He came, and He came by His own voluntary act. A Jewish peasant says that He is going to set the world on fire-and He did it. But the triumphant certitude and consciousness of a large world-wide mission is all shadowed in the next clause. I need not trouble you with questions as to the precise translation of the words that follow. There may be differences of opinion about that, but I content myself with simply suggesting that a fair representation of the meaning would be, 'How I wish that it was already kindled!' There is a longing to fulfil the purpose of His coming and a sense that something has to be done first, and what that something if, our Lord goes on to say in the next verse. This desirable end can only be reached through a preliminary painful ordeal, 'but I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished.' If I might use such an incongruous figure, the fire that is to flash and flame through the world emerges from the dark waters of that baptism. Our Lord goes on still further to dwell upon the consequence of His mission and of His sufferings. And that, too, shadows the first triumphant thought of the fire that He was to send on earth. For, the baptism being accomplished, and the fire therefore being set at liberty to flame through the world, what follows? Glad reception? Yes, and angry rejection. Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, nay! but rather division.' The fire, the baptism, and the sword; these three may sum up our Lord's vision of the purpose, means, and mingled result of His mission. But it is only with regard to the first of these that I wish to speak now.

I. The fire which Christ longed to cast upon the earth.

Now, opinions differ as to what is meant by this fire Some would have, it to mean the glow of love kindled in believing hearts, and others explain it by other human emotions or by the transformation effected in the world by Christ's coming. But while these things are the results of the fire kindled on earth, that fire itself means not these effects, but the cause of them. It is *brought* before it kindles a flame on earth.

He does not kindle it simply in humanity, but He launches it into the midst of humanity. It is something from above that He flings down upon the earth. So it is not merely a quickened intelligence, a higher moral life, or any other of the spiritual and religious transformations which are effected in the world by the mission of Christ that is primarily to be kept in view here, but it is the Heaven-sent cause of these transformations and that flame. If we catch the celestial fire, we shall flash and blaze, but the fire which we catch is not originated on earth. In a word it is God's Divine Spirit which Christ came to communicate to the world.

I need not remind you, I suppose, how such an interpretation of the words before us is in entire correspondence with the symbolism both of the Old and New Testament. I do not dwell upon the former at all, and with regard to the latter I need only remind you of the great words by which the Forerunner of the Lord set forth His mighty work, in contrast with the superficial cleansing which John himself had to proclaim. 'I indeed baptize you with water, but He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.' I need only point to the Pentecost, and the symbol there, of which the central point was the cloven tongues, which symbolised not only the speech which follows from all deep conviction, but the descent from above of the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of burning, on each bowed and willing head. With these analogies to guide us, I think we shall not go far wrong if we see in the words of my text our Lord's great symbolical promise that the issue of His mission shall be to bring into the heart of the world, so to speak, and to lodge in the midst of humanity which is one great whole, a new divine influence that shall flame and burn through the world.

So, then, my text opens out into thoughts of the many-sided applications of this symbol. What hopes for the world and ourselves are suggested by that fire? Let us stick to the symbol closely, and we shall then best understand the many-sided blessings that flash and coruscate in the gift of the Spirit.

It is the gift of life. No doubt, here and there in Scripture, fire stands for a symbol of destroying power. But that is a less frequent use than that in which it stands as a symbol of life. In a very real sense life is warmth and death is cold. Is not respiration a kind of combustion? Do not physiologists tell us that? Is not the centre of the system and the father of all physical life that great blazing sun which radiates heat? And is not this promise, ‘I will send fire on the earth,’ the assurance that into the midst of our death there shall come the quick energy of a living Spirit which shall give us to possess some shadow of the immortal Being from which itself flows?

But, beyond that, there is another great promise here, of a quickening energy. I use the word ‘quickening,’ not in the sense of life-giving, but in the sense of stimulating. We talk about ‘the flame of genius,’ the ‘fervour of conviction,’ about ‘fiery zeal,’ about ‘burning earnestness,’ and the like; and, conversely, we speak of ‘cold caution,’ and ‘chill indifference,’ and so on. Fire means love, zeal, swift energy. This, then, is another side of this great promise, that into the torpor of our sluggish lives He is waiting to infuse a swift Spirit that shall make us glow and flame with earnestness, burn with love, aspire with desire, cleave to Him with the fervour of conviction, and be, in some measure, like those mighty spirits that stand before the Throne, the seraphim that burn with adoration and glow with rapture. A fire that shall destroy all our sluggishness, and change it into swift energy of glad obedience, may be kindled in our spirits by the Holy Spirit whom Christ gives.

Still farther, the promise of my text sets forth, not only life-giving and stimulating energy, but purifying power. Fire cleanses, as many an ancient ritual recognised. For instance, the thought that underlay even that savage ‘passing the children through the fire to Moloch’ was, that thus passed, humanity was cleansed from its stains. And that is true. Every man must be cleansed, if he is cleansed at all, by the touch of fire. If you take a piece of foul clay, and push it into a furnace, as it warms it whitens, and you can see the stains melting off it as the fire exercises its beneficent and purifying mastery. So the promise to us is of a great Spirit that will come, and by communicating His warmth will dissipate our foulness, and the sins that are enwrought into the substance of our natures will exhale from the heated surface, and disappear. The ore is flung into the blast furnace, and the scum rises to the surface, and may be ladled off, and the pure stream, cleansed because it is heated, flows out without scoriae or ash. All that was 'fuel for the fire' is burned; and what remains is more truly itself and more precious. And so, brother, you and I have, for our hope of cleansing, that we shall be passed through the fire, and dwell in the everlasting burnings of a Divine Spirit and a changeless love.

The last thought suggested by the metaphor is that it promises not only life-giving, stimulating, purifying, but also transforming and assimilating energy. For every lump of coal in your scuttles may be a parable; black and heavy, it is cast into the fire, and there it is turned into the likeness of the flame which it catches and itself begins to glow, and redden, and crackle, and break into a blaze. That is like what you and I may experience if we will. The incense rises in smoke to the heavens when it is heated: and our souls aspire and ascend, an odour of a sweet smell, acceptable to God, when the fire of that Divine Spirit has loosed them from the bonds that bind them to earth, and changed them into His own likeness, We all are 'changed from glory to glory even as by the Spirit of the Lord.'

So I think if you take these plain teachings of this symbol you learn something of the operations of that Divine Spirit to which our Lord pointed in the great words of my text.

II. And now I have a second thought to suggest-viz., what Christ had to do before His longing could be satisfied.

He longed, but the longing wish was not able to bring that on which it was fixed. He had come to send this divine fire upon the earth; but there was something that stood in the way; and something needed to be done as a preliminary before the ultimate purpose of His coming could be accomplished. What that was, as I have already tried to point out, the subsequent verse tells us. I do not need, nor would it be congruous with my present purpose, to comment upon it at any length. We all know what He meant by the ‘baptism,’ that He had to be baptized with, and what were the dark waters into which He had to pass, and beneath which His sacred head had to be plunged. We all know that by the ‘baptism’ He meant His passion and His Cross. I do not dwell, either, upon the words of pathetic human shrinking with which His vision of the Cross is here accompanied, but I simply wish to signalise one thing, that in the estimation of Jesus Christ Himself it was not in His power to kindle this holy fire in humanity until He had died for men’s sins. That must come first; the Cross must precede Pentecost. There can be no Divine Spirit in His full and loftiest powers poured out upon humanity until the Sacrifice has been offered on the Cross for the sins of the world. We cannot read all the deep reasons in the divine nature, and in human receptivity, which make that sequence absolutely necessary, and that preliminary indispensable. But this, at least, we know, that the Divine Spirit whom Christ gives uses as His instrument and sword the completed revelation which Christ completed in His Cross, Resurrection, and Ascension, and that, until His weapon was fashioned, He could not come.

That thought is distinctly laid down in many places in Scripture, to which I need not refer in more than a word. For instance, the Apostle John tells us that, when our Lord spoke in a cognate figure about the rivers of water which should flow from them who believed on Him, He spake of that Holy Spirit who ‘was not given because that Jesus was not yet glorified.’ We remember the words in the upper chamber, ‘If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you, but if I depart I will send Him unto you.’ But enough for us that He recognised the necessity, and that here His baptism of suffering comes into view, not so much for what it was itself, the sacrifice for the world’s sin, as for that to which it was the necessary preliminary and introduction, the bestowment on humanity of the gift of the Divine Spirit. The old Greek legend of the Titan that stole fire from heaven tells us that he brought it to earth in a reed. Our Christ brings the heavenly fire in the fragile, hollow reed of His humanity, and the reed has to be broken in order that the fire may blaze out. ‘How I wish that it were kindled! but I have a baptism to be baptized with.’

III. Lastly, what the world has to do to receive the fire.

Take these triumphant words of our Lord about what He was to do after His Cross, and contrast with them the world as it is to-day, ay! and the Church as it is to-day. What has become of the fire? Has it died down into grey ashes, choked with the cold results of its own former flaming power? Was Jesus Christ deceiving Himself? was He cherishing an illusion as to the significance and permanence of the results of His work in the world? No! There is a difference between B.C. and A.D. which can only be accounted for by the fulfilment of the promise in my text, that He did bring fire and set the world aflame. But the condition on which that fire will burn either through communities, society, humanity, or in an individual life, is trust in Him that gives it, and cleaving to Him, and the appropriate discipline. 'This spake He of the Holy Spirit which they that believe on Him should receive.'

And they that do *not* believe upon Him-what of them? The fire is of no advantage to them. Some of you do as people in Swiss villages do where there is a conflagration-you cover over your houses with incombustible felts or other materials, and deluge them with water, in the hope that no spark may light on you. There is no way by which the fire can do its work on us except our opening our hearts for the Firebringer. When He comes He brings the vital spark with Him, and He plants it on the hearth of our hearts. Trust in Him, believe far more intensely than the most of Christian people of this day do in the reality of the gift of supernatural divine life from Jesus Christ. I do believe that hosts of professing Christians have no firm grip of this truth, and, alas! very little verification of it in their lives. Your heavenly Father gives the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him. 'Covet earnestly the best gifts'; and take care that you do not put the fire out-'quench not the Holy Spirit,' as you will do if you 'fulfil the lusts of the flesh.' I remember once being down in the engine-room of an ocean-going steamer. There were the furnaces, large enough to drive an engine of five or six thousand horsepower. A few yards off there were the refrigerators, with ice hanging round the spigots that were put in to test the temperature. Ah! that is like many a Christian community, and many an individual Christian. Here is the fire; there is the frost. Brethren, let us seek to be baptized with fire, lest we should be cast into it, and be consumed by it.

END OP VOL. I.

61) Luke 13:10-17

Luke

TRUE SABBATH OBSERVANCE

Luk. 13:10 - Luk. 13:17.

This miracle was wrought, unasked, on a woman, in a synagogue, and by all these characteristics was specially interesting to Luke. He alone records it. The narrative falls into two parts-the miracle, and the covert attack of the ruler of the synagogue, with our Lord's defence.

What better place than the synagogue could there be for a miracle of mercy? The service of man is best built on the service of God, and the service of God is as truly accomplished in deeds of human kindness done for His sake as in oral worship. The religious basis of beneficence and the beneficent manifestation of religion are commonplaces of Christian practice and thought from the beginning, and are both set forth in our Lord's life. He did not substitute doing good to men for worshipping God, as a once much-belauded but now all-but-forgotten anti-Christian writer has done; but He showed us both in their true relations. We have Christ's authority for regarding the woman's infirmity as the result of demoniacal possession, but the case presents some singular features. There seems to have been no other consequence than her incapacity to stand straight. Apparently the evil power had not touched her moral nature, for she had somehow managed to drag herself to the synagogue to pray; she 'glorified God' for her cure, and Christ called her 'a daughter of Abraham,' which surely means more than simply that she was a Jewess. It would seem to have been a case of physical infirmity only, and perhaps rather of evil inflicted eighteen years before than of continuous demoniacal possession.

But be that as it may, there is surely no getting over our Lord's express testimony here, that purely physical ills, not distinguishable from natural infirmity, were then, in some instances, the work of a malignant, personal power. Jesus knew the duration of the woman's 'bond' and the cause of it, by the same supernatural knowledge. That sad, bowed figure, with eyes fixed on the ground, and unable to look into His face, which yet had crawled to the synagogue, may teach us lessons of patience and of devout submission. She might have found good excuses for staying at home, but she, no doubt, found solace in worship; and she would not have so swiftly 'glorified God' for her cure, if she had not often sought Him in her infirmity. They who wait on Him often find more than they expect in His house.

Note the flow of Christ's unasked sympathy and help. We have already seen several instances of the same thing in this Gospel. The sight of misery ever set the chords of that gentle, unselfish heart vibrating, as surely as the wind draws music from the Aeolian harp strings. So it should be with us, and so would it be, if we had in us 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ' making us 'free from the law of' self. But His spontaneous sympathy is not merely the perfection of manhood; it is the revelation of God. Unasked, the divine love pours itself on men, and gives all that it can give to those who do not seek, that they may be drawn to seek the better gifts which cannot be given unasked. God 'tarrieth not for man, nor waiteth for the sons of men,' in giving His greatest gift. No prayers besought Heaven for a Saviour. God's love is its own motive, and wells up by its inherent diffusiveness. Before we call, He answers.

Note the manner of the cure. It is twofold-a word and a touch. The former is remarkable, as not being, like most of the cures of demoniacs, a command to the evil spirit to go forth, but an assurance to the sufferer, fitted to inspire her with hope, and to encourage her to throw off the alien tyranny. The touch was the symbol to her of communicated power-not that Jesus needed a vehicle for His delivering strength, but that the poor victim, crushed in spirit, needed the outward sign to help her in realising the new energy that ran in her veins, and strengthened her muscles. Unquestionably the cure was miraculous, and its cause was Christ's will.

But apparently the manner of cure gave more place to the faith of the sufferer, and to the effort which her faith in Christ's word and touch heartened her to put forth, than we find in other miracles. She 'could in no wise lift herself up,' not because of any malformation or deficiency in physical power, but because that malign influence laid a heavy hand on her will and body, and crushed her down. Only supernatural power could deliver from supernatural evil, but that power wrought through as well us OB her; and when she believed that she was loosed from her infirmity, and had received strength from Jesus, she was loosed.

This makes the miracle no less, but it makes it a mirror in which the manner of our deliverance from a worse dominion of Satan is shadowed. Christ is come to loose us all from the yoke of bondage, which bows our faces to the ground, and makes us unfit to look up. He only can loose us, and His way of doing it is to assure us that we are free, and to give us power to fling off the oppression in the strength of faith in Him.

Note the immediate cure and its immediate result. The ‘back bowed down always’ for eighteen weary years is not too stiff to be made straight at once. The Christ-given power obliterates all traces of the past evil. Where He is the physician, there is no period of gradual convalescence, but ‘the thing is done suddenly’; and, though in the spiritual realm, there still hang about pardoned men remains of forgiven sin, they are ‘sanctified’ in their inward selves, and have but to see to it that they work out in character and conduct that ‘righteousness and holiness of truth’ which they have received in the new nature given them through faith.

How rapturous was the gratitude from the woman’s lips, which broke in upon the formal, proper, and heartless worship of the synagogue! The immediate hallowing of her joy into praise surely augurs a previously devout heart. Thanksgiving generally comes thus swiftly after mercies, when prayer has habitually preceded them. The sweetest sweetness of all our blessings is only enjoyed when we glorify God for them. Incense must be kindled, to be fragrant, and our joys must be fired by devotion, to give their rarest perfume.

The cavils of the ruler and Christ’s defence are the second part of this incident. Note the blindness and cold-heartedness born of religious formalism. This synagogue official has no eye for the beauty of Christ’s pity, no heart to rejoice in the woman’s deliverance, no ear for the music of her praise. All that he sees is a violation of ecclesiastical order. That is the sin of sins in his eyes. He admits the reality of Christ’s healing power, but that does not lead him to recognition of His mission. What a strange state of mind it was that acknowledged the miracle, and then took offence at its being done on the Sabbath!

Note, too, his disingenuous cowardice in attacking the people when he meant Christ. He blunders, too, in his scolding; for nobody had come to be healed. They had come to worship; and even if they had come for healing, the coming was no breach of Sabbath regulations, whatever the healing might be. There are plenty of people like this stickler for propriety and form, and if you want to find men blind as bats to the manifest tokens of a divine hand, and hard as millstones towards misery, and utterly incapable of glowing with enthusiasm or of recognising it, you will find them among ecclesiastical martinets, who are all for having ‘things done decently and in order,’ and would rather that a hundred poor sufferers should continue bowed down than that one of their regulations should be broken in lifting them up. The more men are filled with the spirit of worship, the less importance will they attach to the pedantic adherence to its forms, which is the most part of some people’s religion.

Mark the severity, which is loving severity, of Christ’s answer. He speaks to all who shared the ruler’s thoughts, of whom there were several present [Luk. 5:17, ‘adversaries’]. Piercing words which disclose hidden and probably unconscious sins, are quite in place on the lips into which grace was poured. Well for those who let Him tell them their faults now, and do not wait for the light of judgment to show themselves to themselves for the first time.

Wherein lay these men’s hypocrisy? They were pretending zeal for the Sabbath, while they were really moved by anger at the miracle, which would have been equally unwelcome on any day of the week. They were pretending that their zeal for the Sabbath was the result of their zeal for God, while it was only zeal for their Rabbinical niceties, and had no religious element in it at all. They wished to make the Sabbath law tight enough to restrain Jesus from miracles, while they made it loose enough to allow them to look after their own interests.

Men may be unconscious hypocrites, and these are the most hopeless. We are all in danger of fancying that we are displaying our zeal for the Lord, when we are only contending for our own additions to, or interpretations of, His will. There is no religion necessarily implied in enforcing forms of belief or conduct.

Our Lord’s defence is, first of all, a conclusive *argumentum ad hominem*, which shuts the mouths of the objectors; but it is much more. The Talmud has minute rules for leading out animals on the Sabbath: An ass may go out with his pack saddle if it was tied on before the Sabbath, but not with a bell or a yoke; a camel may go out with a halter, but not with a rag tied to his tail; a string of camels may be led if the driver takes all the halters in his hand, and does not twist them, but they must not be tied to one another-and so on for pages. If, then, these sticklers for rigid observance of the Sabbath admitted that a beast’s thirst was reason enough for work to relieve it, it did not lie in their mouths to find fault with the relief of a far greater human need.

But the words hold a wider truth, applicable to our conduct. The relief of human sorrow is always in season. It is a sacred duty which hallows any hour. ‘Is not this the fast [and the feast too] that I have chosen . . . to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?’ The spirit of the words is to put the exercise of beneficence high above the formalities of worship.

Note, too, the implied assertion of the dignity of humanity, the pitying tone of the ‘lo, these eighteen years,’ the sympathy of the Lord with the poor woman, and the implication of the terrible tragedy of Satan’s bondage. If we have His Spirit in us, and look at the solemn facts of life as He did, all these pathetic considerations will be present to our minds as we behold the misery of men, and, moved by the thoughts of their lofty place in God’s scheme of things, of their long and dreary bondage, of the evil power that holds them fast, and of what they may become, even sons and daughters of the Highest, we shall be fired with the same longing to help which filled Christ’s heart, and shall count that hour consecrated, and not profaned, in which we are able to bring liberty to the captives, and an upward gaze of hope to them that have been bowed down.

62)Luke 13:22-30

THE STRAIT GATE

Luk. 13:22 - Luk. 13:30.

‘Are there few that be saved?’ The questioner’s temper and motives may be inferred from the tone of Christ’s answer, which turns attention from a mere piece of speculative curiosity to the grave personal aspect of the condition of ‘salvation,’ and the possibility of missing it. Whether few or many went in, there would be many left out, and among these some of the listeners. Jesus speaks to ‘them,’ the multitude, not to the questioner. The men who approach solemn subjects lightly, and use them as material for raising profitless questions for the sake of getting religious teachers in a corner, exist still, and are best answered after Christ’s manner.

Of course, the speaker meant by being ‘saved’ participation in Messiah’s kingdom, regarded in the carnal Jewish fashion; and our Lord’s reply is primarily directed to setting forth the condition of entrance into that kingdom, as the Jew expected it to be manifested on earth. But behind that immediate reference lies a solemn unveiling of the conditions of salvation in its deepest meaning, and of the danger of exclusion from it.

I. We note, first, the all-important exhortation with which Christ seeks to sober a frivolous curiosity.

In its primary application, the ‘strait gate’ may be taken to be the lowliness of the Messiah, and the consequent sharp contrast of His kingdom with Jewish high-flown and fleshly hopes. The passage to the promised royalty was not through a great portal worthy of a palace, but by a narrow, low-browed wicket, through which it took a man trouble to squeeze. For us, the narrow gate is the self-abandonment and self-accusation which are indispensable for entrance into salvation.

‘The door of faith’ is a narrow one; for it lets no self-righteousness, no worldly glories, no dignities, through. Like the Emperor at Canossa, we are kept outside till we strip ourselves of crowns and royal robes, and stand clothed only in the hair-shirt of penitence. Like Milton’s rebel angels entering their council chamber, we must make ourselves small to get in. We must creep on our knees, so low is the vault; we must leave everything outside, so narrow is it. We must go in one by one, as in the turnstiles at a place of entertainment. The door opens into a palace, but it is too strait for any one who trusts to himself.

There must be effort in order to enter by it. For everything in our old self-confident, self-centred nature is up in arms against the conditions of entrance. We are not saved by effort, but we shall not believe without effort. The main struggle of our whole lives should be to cultivate self-humbling trust in Jesus Christ, and to ‘fight the good fight of faith.’

II. We note the reason for the exhortation.

It is briefly given in Luk. 13:24 [last clause], and both parts of the reason there are expanded in the following verses. Effort is needed for entrance, because many are shut out. The questioner would be no better for knowing whether few would enter, but he and all need to burn in on their minds that many will *not*.

Very solemnly significant is the difference between *striving* and *seeking*. It is like the difference between wishing and willing. There may be a seeking which has no real earnestness in it, and is not sufficiently determined, to do what is needful in order to find. Plenty of people would like to possess earthly good, but cannot brace themselves to needful work and sacrifice. Plenty would like to ‘go to heaven,’ as they understand the phrase, but cannot screw themselves to the surrender of self and the world. Vagrant, halfhearted seeking, such as one sees many examples of, will never win anything, either in this world or in the other. We must strive, and not only seek.

That is true, even if we do not look beyond time; but Jesus carries our awed vision onwards to the end of the days, in the expansion of his warning, which follows in Luk. 13:25 - Luk. 13:27. No doubt, the words had a meaning for His hearers in reference to the Messianic kingdom, and a fulfilment in the rejection of the nation. But we have to discern in them a further and future significance.

Observe that the scene suggested differs from the similar parable of the virgins waiting for their Lord, in that it does not describe a wedding feast.

Here it is a householder already in his house, and, at the close of the day, locking up for the night. Some of his servants have not returned in time, have not come in through the narrow gate, which is now not only narrow, but closed by the master's own hand. The translation of that is that, by a decisive act of Christ's in the future, the time for entrance will he ended. As in reference to each stage of life, specific opportunities are given in it for securing specific results, and these can never be recovered if the stage is past; so mortal life, as a whole, is the time for entrance, and if it is not used for that purpose, entrance is impossible. If the youth will not learn, the man will be ignorant. If the sluggard will not plough because the weather is cold, he will 'beg in harvest.' If we do not strive to enter at the gate, it is vain to seek entrance when the Master's own hand has barred it.

The language of our Lord here seems to shut us up to the conclusion that life is the time in which we can gain our entrance. It is no kindness to suggest that perhaps He does not shut the door quite fast. We know, at all events, that it is wide open now.

The words put into the mouths of the excluded sufficiently define their characters, and the reasons why they sought in vain. Why did they want to be in? Because they wished to get out of the cold darkness into the warm light of the bountiful house. But they neither knew the conditions of entrance nor had they any desire after the true blessings within. Their deficiencies are plainly marked in their pleas for admission. At first, they simply ask for entrance, as if thinking that to wish was to have. Then, when the Householder says that He knows nothing about them, and cannot let strangers in, they plead as their qualification that they had eaten and drunk in His presence, and that He had taught in their streets. In these words, the relations of Christ's contemporaries are described, and their immediate application to them is plain.

Outward connection with Jesus gave no claim to share in His kingdom. We have to learn the lesson which we who live amidst a widely diffused, professing Christianity sadly need. No outward connection with Christ, in Christian ordinances or profession, will avail to establish a claim to have the door opened for us. A man may be a most respectable and respected church-member, and have listened to Christian teaching all his days, and have in life a vague wish to be ‘saved,’ and yet be hopelessly unfit to enter, and therefore irremediably shut out.

The Householder’s answer, in its severity and calmness, indicates the inflexible impossibility of opening to such seekers. It puts stress on two things-the absence of any vital relationship between Him and them, and their moral character. He knows nothing about them, and not to be known by the Master of the house is necessarily to be shut out from His household. They are known of the Shepherd who know Him and hear His voice. They who are not must stay in the desert. Such mutual knowledge is the basis of all righteousness, and righteousness is the essential condition of entrance.

These seekers are represented as still working iniquity. They had not changed their moral nature. They wished to enter heaven, but they still loved evil. How could they come in, even if the door had been open? Let us learn that, while faith is the door, without holiness no man shall see the Lord. The worker of iniquity has only an outward relation to Jesus. Inwardly he is separated from Him, and, at last, the outward relation will be adjusted to the inward, and departure from Him will be inevitable, and that is ruin.

III. Boldly and searchingly personal as the preceding words had been, the final turn of Christ’s answer must have had a still sharper and more distasteful edge.

He had struck a blow at Jewish trust in outward connection with Messiah as ensuring participation in His kingdom. He now says that the Gentiles shall fill the vacant places. Many Jews will be unable to enter, for all their seeking, but still there will be many saved; for troops of hated Gentiles shall come from every corner of the earth, and the sight of them sitting beside the fathers of the nation, while Israel after the flesh is shut out, will move the excluded to weeping-the token of sorrow, which yet has in it no softening nor entrance-securing effect, because it passes into ‘gnashing of teeth,’ the sign of anger. Such sorrow worketh death.

Such fierce hatred, joined with stiff-necked obstinacy, has characterised the Jew ever since Jerusalem fell. ‘If God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not thee.’ Israel was first, and has become last. The same causes which sent it from the van to the rear have worked like effects in 'Christendom,' as witness Asia Minor and the mosques into which Christian churches have been turned.

These causes will produce like effects wherever they become dominant. Any church and any individual Christian who trusts in outward connection with Christ, and works iniquity, will sooner or later fall into the rear, and if repentance and faith do not lead it or him through the strait gate, will be among those 'last' who are so far behind that they are shut out altogether. Let us 'be not high-minded, but fear.'

63)Luke 13:32-33

Luke

CHRIST'S MESSAGE TO HEROD

Luk. 13:32 - Luk. 13:33.

Even a lamb might be suspicious if wolves were to show themselves tenderly careful of its safety. Pharisees taking Christ's life under their protection were enough to suggest a trick. These men came to Christ desirous of posing as counterworking Herod's intention to slay Him. Our Lord's answer, bidding them go and tell Herod what He immediately communicates to them, shows that He regarded them as in a plot with that crafty, capricious kinglet. And evidently there was an understanding between them. For some reason or other, best known to his own changeable and whimsical nature, the man who at one moment was eagerly desirous to see Jesus, was at the next as eagerly desirous to get Him out of his territories; just as he admired and murdered John the Baptist. The Pharisees, on the other hand, desired to draw Him to Jerusalem, where they would have Him in their power more completely than in the northern district. If they had spoken all their minds they would have said, 'Go hence, or else we cannot kill Thee.' So Christ answers the hidden schemes, and not the apparent solicitude, in the words that I have taken for my text. They unmask the plot, they calmly put aside the threats of danger. They declare that His course was influenced by far other considerations. They show that He clearly saw what it was towards which He was journeying. And then, with sad irony, they declare that it, as it were, contrary to prophetic decorum and established usage that a prophet should be slain anywhere but in the streets of the bloody and sacred city.

There are many deep things in the words, which I cannot touch in the course of a single sermon; but I wish now, at all events, to skim their surface, and try to gather some of their obvious lessons.

I. First, then, note Christ's clear vision of His death.

There is some difficulty about the chronology of this period with which I need not trouble you. It is enough to note that the incident with which we are concerned occurred during that last journey of our Lord's towards Jerusalem and Calvary, which occupies so much of this Gospel of Luke. At what point in that fateful journey it occurred may be left undetermined. Nor need I enter upon the question as to whether the specification of time in our text, 'to-day, and to-morrow, and the third day,' is intended to be taken literally, as some commentators suppose, in which case it would be brought extremely near the goal of the journey; or whether, as seems more probable from the context, it is to be taken as a kind of proverbial expression for a definite but short period. That the latter is the proper interpretation seems to be largely confirmed by the fact that there is a slight variation in the application of the designation of time in the two verses of our text, 'the third day' in the former verse being regarded as the period of the perfecting, whilst in the latter verse it is regarded as part of the period of the progress towards the perfecting. Such variation in the application is more congruous with the idea that we have here to deal with a kind of proverbial expression for a limited and short period. Our Lord is saying in effect, 'My time is not to be settled by Herod. It is definite, and it is short. It is needless for him to trouble himself; for in three days it will be all over. It is useless for him to trouble himself, or for you Pharisees to plot, for until the appointed days are past it will not be over, whatever you and he may do.' The course He had yet to run was plain before Him in this last journey, every step of which was taken with the Cross full in view.

Now the worst part of death is the anticipation of death; and it became Him who bore death for every man to drink to its dregs that cup of trembling which the fear of it puts to all human lips. We rightly regard it as a cruel aggravation of a criminal's doom if he is carried along a level, straight road with his gibbet in view at the end of the march. But so it was that Jesus Christ travelled through life.

My text comes at a comparatively late period of His history. A few months or weeks at the most intervened between Him and the end. But the consciousness which is here so calmly expressed was not of recent origin. We know that from the period of His transfiguration He began to give His death a very prominent place in His teaching, but it had been present with Him long before He thus laid emphasis upon it in His communications with His disciples. For, if we accept John's Gospel as historical, we shall have to throw back His first public references to the end to the very beginning of His career. The cleansing of the Temple, at the very outset of His course, was vindicated by Him by the profound words, 'Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' During the same early visit to the capital city He said to Nicodemus, 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.' So Christ's career was not like that of many a man who has begun, full of sanguine hope as a possible reformer and benefactor of his fellows, and by slow degrees has awakened to the consciousness that reformers and benefactors need to be martyrs ere their ideals can be realised. There was no disillusioning in Christ's experience. From the commencement He knew that He came, not only to minister, but also 'to give His life a ransom for the many.' And it was *not* a mother's eye, as a reverent modern painter has profoundly, and yet erroneously, shown us in his great work in our own city gallery-it was not a mother's eye that first saw the shadow of the Cross fall on her unconscious Son, but it was Himself that all through His earthly pilgrimage knew Himself to be the Lamb appointed for the sacrifice. This Isaac toiled up the hill, bearing the wood and the knife, and knew where and who was the Offering.

Brethren, I do not think that we sufficiently realise the importance of that element in our conceptions of the life of Jesus Christ. What a pathos it gives to it all! What a beauty it gives to His gentleness, to His ready interest in others, to His sympathy for all sorrow, and tenderness with all sin! How wonderfully it deepens the significance, the loveliness, and the pathos of the fact that ‘the Son of Man came eating and drinking,’ remembering everybody but Himself, and ready to enter into all the cares and the sorrows of other hearts, if we think that all the while there stood, grim and certain, before Him that Calvary with its Cross! Thus, through all His path, He knew to what He was journeying.

II. Then again, secondly, let me ask you to note here our Lord’s own estimate of the place which His death holds in relation to His whole work.

Notice that remarkable variation in the expression in our text. ‘The third day I shall be *perfected*. . . . It cannot be that a prophet *perish* out of Jerusalem.’ Then, somehow or other, the ‘perishing’ is ‘perfecting.’ There may be a doubt as to the precise rendering of the word translated by ‘perfecting’; but it seems to me that the only meaning congruous with the context is that which is suggested by the translation of our Authorised Version, and that our Lord does not mean to say ‘on the third day I shall complete My work of casting out devils and curing diseases,’ but that He masses the whole of His work into two great portions-the one of which includes all His works and ministrations of miracles and of mercy; and the other of which contains one unique and transcendent fact, which outweighs and towers above all these others, and is the perfecting of His work, and the culmination of His obedience, service, and sacrifice.

Now, of course, I need not remind you that the ‘perfecting’ thus spoken of is not a perfecting of moral character or of individual nature, but that it is the same perfecting which the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks about when it says, ‘Being made perfect, He became the Author of eternal salvation to all them which obey Him.’ That is to say, it is His perfecting in regard to office, function, work for the world, and not the completion or elevation of His individual character. And this ‘perfecting’ is effected in His ‘perishing.’

Now I want to know in what conceivable sense the death of Jesus Christ can be the culmination and crown of His work, without which it would be a torso, an incomplete fragment, a partial fulfilment of the Father’s design, and of His own mission, unless it be that that death was, as I take it the New Testament with one voice in all its parts declares it to be, a sacrifice for the sins of the world. I know of no construing of the fact of the death on the

Cross which can do justice to the plain words of my text, except the old-fashioned belief that therein He made atonement for sin, and thereby, as the Lamb of God, bore away the sins of the world.

Other great lives may be crowned by fair deaths, which henceforward become seals of faithful witness, and appeals to the sentiments of the heart, but there is no sense that I know of in which from Christ's death there can flow a mightier energy than from such a life, unless in the sense that the death is a sacrifice.

Now I know there has been harm done by the very desire to exalt Christ's great sacrifice on the Cross; when it has been so separated from His life as that the life has not been regarded as a sacrifice, nor the death as obedience. Rather the sacrificial element runs through His whole career, and began when He became flesh and tabernacled amongst us; but yet as being the apex of it all, without which it were all-imperfect, and in a special sense redeeming men from the power of death, that Cross is set forth by His own word. For Him to 'perish' was to 'be perfected.' As the ancient prophet long before had said, 'When His soul shall make an offering for sin,' then, paradoxical as it may seem, the dead Man shall 'see,' and 'shall see His seed.' Or, as He Himself said, 'If a corn of wheat fall into the ground it abideth alone, but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit.'

I do not want to insist upon any theories of Atonement. I do want to insist that Christ's own estimate of the significance and purpose and issue of His death shall not be slurred over, but that, recognising that He Himself regarded it as the perfecting of His work, we ask ourselves very earnestly how such a conception can be explained if we strike out of our Christianity the thought of the sacrifice for the sins of the world. Unless we take Paul's gospel, 'How that He died for our sins according to the Scriptures,' I for one do not believe that we shall ever get Paul's results, 'Old things are passed away; all things are become new.' If you strike the Cross off the dome of the temple, the fires on its altars will soon go out. A Christianity which has to say much about the life of Jesus, and knows not what to say about the death of Christ, will be a Christianity that will neither have much constraining power in our lives, nor be able to breathe a benediction of peace over our deaths. If we desire to be perfected in character, we must have faith in that sacrificial death which was the perfecting of Christ's work.

III. And so, lastly, notice our Lord's resolved surrender to the discerned Cross.

There is much in this aspect in the words of my text which I cannot touch upon now; but two or three points I may briefly notice.

Note then, I was going to say, the superb heroism of His calm indifference to threats and dangers. He will go hence, and relieve the tyrant's dominions of His presence; but He is careful to make it plain that His going has no connection with the futile threatenings by which they have sought to terrify Him. 'Nevertheless'-although I do not care at all for them or for him-'nevertheless I must journey to-day and tomorrow! But that is not because I fear death, but because I am going to My death; for the prophet must die in Jerusalem.' We are so accustomed to think of the 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' that we forget the 'strong Son of God.' If we were talking about a man merely, we should point to this calm, dignified answer as being an instance of heroism, but we do not feel that that word fits Him. There are too many vulgar associations connected with it, to be adapted to the gentleness of His fixed purpose that blenched not, nor faltered, whatsoever came in the way.

Light is far more powerful than lightning. Meekness may be, and in Him was, wedded to a will like a bar of iron, and a heart that knew not how to fear. If ever there was an iron hand in a velvet glove it was the hand of Christ. And although the perspective of virtues which Christianity has introduced, and which Christ exhibited in His life, gives prominence to the meek and the gentle, let us not forget that it also enjoins the cultivation of the 'wrestling thews that throw the world.' 'Quit you like men; be strong; let all your deeds be done in charity.'

Then note, too, the solemn law that ruled His life. 'I *must* walk.' That is a very familiar expression upon His lips. From that early day when He said, 'Wist ye not that I *must* be about My Father's business,' to that last when He said, 'The Son of Man *must* be lifted up,' there crops out, ever and anon, in the occasional glimpses that He allows us to have of His inmost spirit, this reference of all His actions to a necessity that was laid upon Him, and to which He ever consciously conformed. That necessity determined what He calls so frequently ‘My time; My hour’; and influenced the trifles, as they are called, as well as the great crises, of His career. It was the Father’s will which made the Son’s *must*. Hence His unbroken communion and untroubled calm.

If we want to live near God, and if we want to have lives of peace amidst convulsions, we, too, must yield ourselves to that all encompassing sovereign necessity, which, like the great laws of the universe, shapes the planets and the suns in their courses and their stations; and holds together two grains of dust, or two motes that dance in the sunshine. To gravitation there is nothing great and nothing small. God’s *must* covers all the ground of our lives, and should ever be responded to by our ‘I will.’

And that brings me to the last point, and that is, our Lord’s glad acceptance of the necessity and surrender of the Cross. What was it that made Him willing to take that ‘must’ as the law of His life? First, a Son’s obedience; second, a Brother’s love. There was no point in Christ’s career, from the moment when in the desert He put away the temptation to win the kingdoms of the world by other than the God-appointed means, down to the last moment when on His dying ears there fell another form of the same temptation in the taunt, ‘Let Him come down from the cross, and we will believe on Him’; when He could not, if He had chosen to abandon His mission, have saved Himself. No compulsion, no outward hand impelling Him, drove Him along that course which ended on Calvary; but only that He would save others, and therefore ‘Himself He cannot save.’

True, there were natural human shrinkings, just as the weight and impetus of some tremendous billow buffeting the bows of the ship makes it quiver; but this never affected the firm hand on the rudder, and never deflected the vessel from its course. Christ’s ‘soul was troubled,’ but His will was fixed, and it was fixed by His love to us. Like one of the men who in after ages died for His dear sake, He may be conceived as refusing to be bound to the stake by any bands, willing to stand there and be destroyed because He wills. Nothing fastened Him to the Cross but His resolve to save the world, in which world was included each of us sitting listening and standing speaking, now. Oh, brethren! shall not we, moved by such love, with like cheerfulness of surrender, give ourselves to Him who gave Himself for us?

64)Luke 14:1-14

Luke

THE LESSONS OF A FEAST

Luk. 14:1 - Luk. 14:14.

Jesus never refused an invitation, whether the inviter were a Pharisee or a publican, a friend or a foe. He never mistook the disposition of His host. He accepted ‘greetings where no kindness is,’ and on this occasion there was none. The entertainer was a spy, and the feast was a trap. What a contrast between the malicious watchers at the table, ready to note and to interpret in the worst sense every action of His, and Him loving and wishing to bless even them! The chill atmosphere of suspicion did not freeze the flow of His gentle beneficence and wise teaching. His meek goodness remained itself in the face of hostile observers. The miracle and the two parables are aimed straight at their errors.

I. How came the dropsical man there?

Possibly he had simply strayed in to look on at the feast, as the freedom of manners then would permit him to do. The absence of any hint that he came hoping for a cure, and of any trace of faith on his part, or of speech to him on Christ’s, joined with his immediate dismissal after his cure, rather favours the supposition that he had been put as the bait of the trap, on the calculation that the sight of him would move Jesus to heal him. The setters of the snare were ‘watching’ whether it would work, and Jesus ‘answered’ their thoughts, which were, doubtless, visible in their eyes. His answer has three stages-a question which is an assertion, the cure, and another affirming question. All three are met with sulky silence, which speaks more than words would have done. The first question takes the ‘lawyers’ on their own ground, and in effect asserts that to heal did not break the Sabbath. Jesus challenges denial of the lawfulness of it, and the silence of the Pharisees confesses that they dare not deny. ‘The bare fact of healing is not prohibited,' they might have said, 'but the acts necessary for healing are.' But no acts were necessary for this Healer's power to operate. The outgoing of His will had power. Their finespun distinctions of deeds lawful and unlawful were spiders' webs, and His act of mercy flew high above the webs, like some fair winged creature glancing in the sunshine, while the spider sits in his crevice balked. The broad principle involved in Jesus' first question is that no Sabbath law, no so-called religious restriction, can ever forbid helping the miserable. The repose of the Sabbath is deepened, not disturbed, by activity for man's good.

The cure is told without detail, probably because there were no details to tell. There is no sign of request or of faith on the sufferer's part; there seems to have been no outward act on Christ's beyond 'taking' him, which appears simply to mean that He called him nearer, and then, by a simple exercise of His will, healed him. There is no trace of thanks or of wonder in the heart of the sufferer, who probably never had anything more to do with his benefactor. Silently he comes on the stage, silently he gets his blessing, silently he disappears. A strange, sad instance of how possible it is to have a momentary connection with Jesus, and even to receive gifts from His hand, and yet to have no real, permanent relation to Him!

The second question turns from the legal to a broader consideration. The spontaneous workings of the heart are not to be dammed back by ceremonial laws. Need calls for immediate succour. You do not wait for the Sabbath's sun to set when your ox or your ass is in a pit. [The reading 'son' instead of 'ox,' as in the Revised Version margin, is incongruous.] Jesus is appealing to the instinctive wish to give immediate help even to a beast in trouble, and implies that much more should the same instinct be allowed immediate play when its object is a man. The listeners were self-condemned, and their obstinate silence proves that the arrow had struck deep.

II. The cure seems to have taken place before the guests seated themselves.

Then came a scramble for the most honourable places, on which He looked with perhaps a sad smile. Again the silence of the guests is noticeable, as well as the calm assumption of authority by Jesus, even among such hostile company. Where He comes a guest, He becomes teacher, and by divine right He rebukes. The lesson is given, says Luke, as ‘a parable,’ by which we are to understand that our Lord is not here giving, as might appear if His words are superficially interpreted, a mere lesson of proper behaviour at a feast, but is taking that behaviour as an illustration of a far deeper thing. Possibly some too ambitious guest had contrived to seat himself in the place of honour, and had had to turn out, and, with an embarrassed mien, had to go down to the very lowest place, as all the intermediate ones were full. His eagerness to be at the top had ended in his being at the bottom. That is a ‘parable,’ says Jesus, an illustration in the region of daily life, of large truths in morals and religion. It is a poor motive for outward humility and self-abasement that it may end in higher honour. And if Jesus was here only giving directions for conduct in regard to men, He was inculcating a doubtful kind of morality. The devil’s

‘darling sin
Is the pride that apes humility.’

Jesus was not recommending that, but what is crafty ambition, veiling itself in lowliness for its own purposes, when exercised in outward life, becomes a noble, pure, and altogether worthy, thing in the spiritual sphere. For to desire to be exalted in the kingdom is wholly right, and to humble one’s self with a direct view to that exaltation is to tread the path which He has hallowed by His own footsteps. The true aim for ambition is the honour that cometh from God only, and the true path to it is through the valley; for ‘God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble.’

III. Unbroken silence still prevailed among the guests, but again Jesus speaks as teacher, and now to the host.

A guest does not usually make remarks on the composition of the company, Jesus could make no ‘recompense’ to His entertainer, but to give him this counsel. Again, He inculcated a wide general lesson under the guise of a particular exhortation appropriate to the occasion. Probably the bulk of the guests were well-to-do people of the host’s own social rank, and, as probably, there were onlookers of a lower degree, like the dropsical man. The prohibition is not directed against the natural custom of inviting one’s associates and equals, but against inviting them only, and against doing so with a sharp eye to the advantages to be derived from it. That weary round of giving a self-regarding hospitality, and then getting a return dinner or evening entertainment from each guest, which makes up so much of the social life among us, is a pitiful affair, hollow and selfish. What would Jesus say-what does Jesus say-about it all? The sacred name of hospitality is profaned, and the very springs of it dried up by much of our social customs, and the most literal application of our Lord's teaching here is sorely needed.

But the words are meant as a 'parable,' and are to be widened out to include all sorts of kindnesses and helps given in the sacred name of charity to those whose only claim is their need. 'They cannot recompense thee'-so much the better, for, if an eye to their doing so could have influenced thee, thy beneficence would have lost its grace and savour, and would have been simple selfishness, and, as such, incapable of future reward. It is only love that is lavished on those who can make no return which is so free from the taint of secret regard to self that it is fit to be recognised as love in the revealing light of that great day, and therefore is fit to be 'recompensed in the resurrection of the just.'

65)Luke 14:18

Luke

EXCUSES NOT REASONS

Luk. 14:18.

Jesus Christ was at a feast in a Pharisee's house. It was a strange place for Him-and His words at the table were also strange. For He first rebuked the guests, and then the host; telling the former to take the lower rooms, and bidding the latter widen his hospitality to those that could not recompense him. It was a sharp saying; and one of the other guests turned the edge of it by laying hold of our Lord's final words: 'Thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just,' and saying, no doubt in a pious tone and with a devout shake of the head, 'Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God.' It was a very proper thing to say, but there was a ring of conventional, commonplace piety about it, which struck unpleasantly on Christ's ear. He answers the speaker with that strange story of the great feast that nobody would come to, as if He had said, 'You pretend to think that it is a blessed thing to eat bread in the Kingdom of God, Why! You will not eat bread when it is offered to you.'

I dare say you all know enough of the parable to make it unnecessary for me to go over it. A great feast is prepared; invitations, more or less general, are sent out at first, everything is ready; and, behold, there is a table, and nobody to sit at it. A strange experience for a hospitable man! And so he sends his servants to beat up the unwilling guests, and, one after another, with more or less politeness, refuses to come.

I need not follow the story further. In the latter part of the parable our Lord shadows the transference of the blessings of the Kingdom to the Gentiles, outcasts as the Jews thought them, skulking in the hedges and tramping on the highways. In the first part He foreshadows the failure of His own preaching amongst His own people. But Jews and Englishmen are very much alike. The way in which these invited guests treated the invitation to this feast is being repeated, day by day, by thousands of men round us; and by some of ourselves. 'They all, with one consent, began to make excuse.'

I. The first thing that I would desire you to notice is the strangely unanimous refusal.

The guests' conduct in the story is such as life and reality would afford no example of. No set of people, asked to a great banquet, would behave as these people in the parable do. Then, is the introduction of such an unnatural trait as this a fault in the construction of narrative? No! Rather it is a beauty, for the very point of the story is the utter unnaturalness of the conduct described, and the contrast that is presented between the way in which men regard the lower blessings from which these people are represented as turning, and in which they regard the loftier blessings that are offered. Nobody would turn his hack upon such a banquet if he had the chance of going to it. What, then, shall we say of those who, by platoons and regiments, turn their backs upon this higher offer? The very preposterous unnaturalness of the conduct, if the parable were a true story, points to the deep meaning that lies behind it: that in that higher region the unnatural is the universal, or all but universal.

And, indeed, it is so. One would almost venture to say that there is a kind of law according to which the more valuable a thing is the less men care to have it; or, if you like to put it into more scientific language, the attraction of an object is in the inverse ratio to its worth. Small things, transitory things, material things, everybody grasps at; and the number of graspers steadily decreases as you go up the scale in preciousness, until, when you reach the highest of all, there are the fewest that want them. Is there anything lower than good that merely gratifies the body? Is there anything that the most of men want more? Are there many things lower in the scale than money? Are there many things that pull more strongly? Is not truth better than wealth? Are there more pursuers of it than there are of the former? For one man who is eager to know, and counts his life well spent, in following knowledge

'Like a sinking star,
Beyond the furthest bounds of human thought,'

there are a hundred who think it rightly expended in the pursuit after the wealth that perishes. Is not goodness higher than truth, and are not the men that are content to devote themselves to becoming wise more numerous than those that are content to devote themselves to becoming pure? And, topmost of all, is there anything to be compared with the gifts that are held out to us in that great Saviour and in His message? And is there anything that the mass of men pass by with more unanimous refusal than the offered feast which the great King of humanity has provided for His subjects? What is offered for each of us, pressed upon us, in the gift of Jesus Christ? Help, guidance, companionship, restfulness of heart, power of obedience, victory over self, control of passions, supremacy over circumstances, tranquillity deep and genuine, death abolished, Heaven opened, measureless hopes following upon perfect fruition, here and hereafter. These things are all gathered into, and their various sparkles absorbed in, the one steady light of that one great encyclopaediacal word-Salvation. These gifts are going begging, lying at our doors, offered to every one of us, pressed upon all on the simple condition of taking Christ for Saviour and King. And what do we do with them? ‘They all, with one consent, began to make excuse.’

One hears of barbarous people that have no use for the gold that abounds in their country, and do not think it half as valuable as glass beads. That is how men estimate the true and the trumpery treasures which Christ and the world offer. I declare it seems to me that, calmly looking at men’s nature, and their duration, and then thinking of the aims of the most of them, we should not be very far wrong if we said an epidemic of insanity sits upon the world. For surely to turn away from the gold and to hug the glass beads is very little short of madness. ‘This their way is their folly, and their posterity approve their sayings.’

And now notice that this refusal may be, and often in fact is, accompanied with lip recognition of the preciousness of the neglected things. That Pharisee who put up the pillow of his pious sentiment-a piece of cant, because he did not feel what he was saying-to deaden the cannon-ball of Christ’s word, is only a pattern of a good many of us who think that to say, ‘Blessed is he that eateth bread in the Kingdom of God,’ with the proper unctuous roll of the voice, is pretty nearly as good as to take the bread that is offered to us. There are no more difficult people to get at than the people, of whom I am sure I have some specimens before me now, who bow their heads in assent to the word of the Gospel, and by bowing them escape its impact, and let it whistle harmlessly over. You that believe every word that I or my brethren preach, and never dream of letting it affect your conduct-if there be degrees in that lunatic asylum of the world, surely you are candidates for the highest place.

II. Now, secondly, notice the flimsy excuses.

‘They all, with one consent, began.’ I do not suppose that they had laid their heads together, or that our Lord intends us to suppose that there was a conspiracy and concert of refusal, but only that without any previous consultation, all had the same sentiments, and offered substantially the same answer. All the reasons that are given come to one and the same thing-viz. occupation with present interests, duties, possessions, or affections. There are differences in the excuses which are not only helps to the vividness of the narrative, but also express differences in the speakers. One man is a shade politer than the others. He puts his refusal on the ground of necessity. He ‘must,’ and so he courteously prays that he may be held excused. The second one is not quite so polite; but still there is a touch of courtesy about him too. He does not pretend necessity as his friend had done, but he simply says, ‘I *am* going’; and that is not quite so courteous as the former answer, but still he begs to be excused. The last man thinks that he has such an undeniable reason that he may be as brusque as he likes, and so he says, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come’ and I do not make any apologies. So with varying degrees of apparent recognition of the claims of host and feast, the ground of refusal is set forth as possessions in two cases, and as affections in the third; and these so fill the men’s hearts and minds that they have no time to attend to the call that summons them to the feast.

Now it is obvious to note that the alleged necessity in one of these excuses was no necessity at all. Who made the ‘must’? The man himself. The field would not run away though he waited till to-morrow. The bargain was finished, for he had bought it. There was no necessity for his going, and the next day would have done quite as well as to-day; so the ‘must’ was entirely in his own mind. That is to say, a great many of us mask inclinations under the garb of imperative duties and say, ‘We are so pressed by necessary obligations and engagements that we really have not got any time to attend to these higher questions which you are trying to press upon us.’ You remember the old story. ‘I must live,’ said the thief. ‘I do not see the necessity,’ said the judge. A man says, ‘I *must* be at business to-morrow morning at half-past eight. How can I think about religion?’ Well, if you really *must*, you *can* think about it. But if you are only juggling and deceiving yourself with inclinations that pose as necessities, the sooner the veil is off the better, and you understand whereabouts you are, and what is your true position in reference to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But then let me, only in a word, remind you that the other side of the excuse is a very operative one. ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’ There are some of us around whom the strong grasp of earthly affections is flung so embracingly and sweetly that we cannot, as we think, turn our loves upward and fix them upon God. Fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, parents and children, remember Christ’s deep words, ‘A man’s foes shall be they of his own household’; and be sure that the prediction is fulfilled many a time by the hindrances of their love even more than by the opposition of their hatred.

All these excuses refer to legitimate things. It is perfectly right that the man should go and see after his field, perfectly right that the ten bullocks should be harnessed and tried, perfectly right that the sweetness of wedded love should be tasted and drunk, perfectly wrong that any of them should be put as a reason for not accepting Christ's offer. Let us take the lesson that legitimate business and lawful and pure affections may ruin a soul, and may constitute the hindrance that blocks its road to God.

Brethren, I said that these were flimsy excuses. I shall have to explain what I mean by that in a moment. As excuses they are flimsy; but as reasons which actually operate with hundreds of people, preventing them from being Christians, they are not flimsy; they are most solid and real. Our Lord does not mean them as exhaustive. There are a great many other grounds upon which different types of character turn away from the offered blessings of the Gospel, which do not come within view of the parable. But although not exhaustive they are widely operative. I wonder how many men and women there are listening to me now of whom it is true that they are so busy with their daily occupations that they have not time to be religious, and of how many men, and perhaps more especially women, among us at this moment it is true that their hearts are so ensnared with loves that belong to earth-beautiful and potentially sacred and elevating as these are-that they have not time to turn themselves to the one eternal Lover of their souls. Let me beseech you, dear friends-and you especially who are strangers to this place and to my voice-to do what I cannot, and would not if I could, lay these thoughts on your own hearts, and ask yourselves, 'Is it I?'

And then before I pass from this point of my discourse, remember that the contrariety between these duties and the acceptance of the offered feast existed only in the imagination of the men that made them. There is no reason why you should not go to the feast and see after your field. There is no reason why you should not love your wife and go to the feast. God's summons comes into collision with many wishes, but with no duties or legitimate occupations. The more a man accepts and lives upon the good that Jesus Christ spreads before him, the more fit will he be for all his work, and for all his enjoyments. The field will be better tilled, the bullocks will be better driven, the wife will be more wisely, tenderly, and sacredly loved if in your hearts Christ is enthroned, and whatsoever you do you do as for Him. It is only the excessive and abusive possession of His gifts and absorption in our duties and relations that turns them into impediments in the path of our Christian life. And the flimsiness of the excuse is manifest by the fact that the contrarity is self-created.

III. Lastly, note the real reason.

I have said that as pretexts the three explanations were unsatisfactory. When a man pleads a previous engagement as a reason for not accepting an invitation, nine times out of ten it is a polite way of saying, ‘I do not want to go.’ It was so in this case. How all these absolute impossibilities, which made it perfectly out of the question that the three recreants should sit down at the table, would have melted into thin air if, by any chance, there had come into their minds a wish to be there! They would have found means to look after the field and the cattle and the home, and to be in their places notwithstanding, if they had wanted. The real reason that underlies men’s turning away from Christ’s offer is, as I said in the beginning of my remarks, that they do not care to have it. They have no inclinations and no tastes for the higher and purer blessings.

Brother, do not let us lose ourselves in generalities. I am talking about you, and about the set of your inclinations and tastes. And I want you to ask yourself whether it is not a fact that some of you like oxen better than God; whether it is not a fact that if the two were there before you, you would rather have a good big field made over to you than have the food that is spread upon that table.

Well then what is the cause of the perverted inclination? Why is it that when Christ says, ‘Child, come to Me, and I will give thee pardon, peace, purity, power, hope, Heaven, Myself,’ there is no responsive desire kindled in the heart? Why do I not want God? Why do I not care for Jesus Christ? Why do the blessings about which preachers are perpetually talking seem to me so shadowy, so remote from anything that I need, so ill-fitting to anything that I desire? There must be something very deeply wrong. This is what is wrong, your heart has shaken itself loose from dependence upon God; and you have no love as you ought to have for Him. You prefer to stand alone. The prodigal son, having gone away into the far country, likes the swine’s husks better than the bread in his father’s house, and it is only when the supply of the latter coarse dainty gives out that the purer taste becomes strong. Strange, is it not? but yet it is true.

Now there are one or two things that I want to say about this indifference, resulting from preoccupation and from alienation, and which hides its ugliness behind all manner of flimsy excuses. One is that the reason itself is utterly unreasonable. I have said the true reason is indifference. Can anybody put into words which do not betray the absurdity of the position, the conduct of the man who says, ‘I do not want God; give me five yoke of oxen. That is the real good, and I will stick by that.’ There is one mystery in the world, and if it were solved everything would be solved; and that mystery is that men turn away from God and cleave to earth. No account can be given of sin. No account can be given of man’s preference for the lesser and the lower; and neglect of the greater and the higher, except to say it is utterly inexplicable and unreasonable.

I need not say such indifference is shameful ingratitude to the yearning love which provides, and the infinite sacrifice by which was provided, this great feast to which we are asked. It cost Christ pains, and tears, and blood, to prepare that feast, and He looks to us, and says to us, ‘Come and drink of the wine which I have mingled, and eat of the bread which I have provided at such a cost.’ There are monsters of ingratitude, but there are none more miraculously monstrous than the men who look, as some of us are doing, untouched on Christ’s sacrifice, and listen unmoved to Christ’s pleadings.

The excuses will disappear one day. We can trick our consciences; we can put off the messengers; we cannot deceive the Host. All the thin curtains that we weave to veil the naked ugliness of our unwillingness to accept Christ will be burnt up one day. And I pray you to ask yourselves, ‘What shall I say when He comes and asks me, “Why was thy place empty at My table”?’ ‘And he was speechless.’ Do not, dear brethren, refuse that gift, lest you bring upon yourselves the terrible and righteous wrath of the Host whose invitation you are slighting, and at whose table you are refusing to sit.

66)Luke 14:28

Luke

THE RASH BUILDER

Luk. 14:28.

Christ sought for no recruits under false pretences, but rather discouraged than stimulated light-hearted adhesion. His constant effort was to sift the crowds that gathered round Him. So here great multitudes are following Him, and how does He welcome them? Does He lay Himself out to attract them? Luke tells us that He *turned* and faced the following multitude; and then, with a steady hand, drenched with cold water the too easily kindled flame. Was that because He did not wish them to follow Him? He desired every soul in that crowd for His own, and He knew that the best way to attract is sometimes to repel; and that a plain statement of the painful consequences of a course will quench no genuine enthusiasm, but may turn a mere flash in the pan into a purpose that will flame through a life.

So our Lord lays down in stringent words the law of discipleship as being self-sacrifice; the abandonment of the dearest, and the acceptance of the most painful. And then He illustrates the law by these two expanded similes or condensed parables, of the rash builder and the rash soldier. Each contains a side of the Christian life, and represents one phase of what a true disciple ought to be. I wish to look with you now at the first of these two comparisons.

I. Consider then, first, the building, or the true aim of discipleship.

The building of the tower represents what every human life ought to aim at, the rearing up of a strong, solid structure in which the builder may dwell and be at rest.

But then remember we are always building, consciously or unconsciously. By our transitory actions we are all rearing up a house for our souls in which we have to dwell; building character from out of the fleeting acts of conduct, which character we have to carry with us for ever. Soft invertebrate animals secrete their own shells. That is what we are doing-making character, which is the shield of self, as it were; and in which we have to abide.

My friend, what are you building? A prison; a mere garden-house of lustful delights; or a temple fortress in which God may dwell reverenced, and you may abide restful? Observe that whilst all men are thus unconsciously and habitually rearing up a permanent abode by their transient actions, every life that is better than a brute's ought to have for its aim the building up of ourselves into firm strength. The development of character is what we ought to ask from, and to secure by, this fleeting life of ours. Not enjoyment; that is a miserable aim. Not the satisfaction of earthly desires; not the prosperity of our business or other ordinary avocations. The demand that we should make upon life, and the aim which we should have clearly before us in all that we do, is that it may contribute to the formation of a pure and noble self, to the development of character into that likeness to Jesus Christ, which is perfection and peace and blessedness.

And while that is true about all life, it is eminently true in regard to the highest form of life, which is the Christian life. There are dreadful mistakes and imperfections in the ordinary vulgar conception of what a Christian is, and what he is a Christian for. What do you think men and women are meant to be Christians for? That they may get away from some material and outward hell? Possibly. That they may get celestial happiness? Certainly. But are these the main things? By no means. What people are meant to be Christians for is that they may be shaped into the likeness of Jesus Christ; or to go back to the metaphor of my text, the meaning and aim of Christian discipleship is not happiness, but the building up of the tower in which the man may dwell.

Ah, friend; is that your notion of what a Christian is; and of what he is a Christian for, to be like the Master? Alas! alas! how few of us, honestly and continually and practically, lay to heart the stringent and grand conception which underlies this metaphor of our Lord's, who identifies the man that was thinking of being His disciple with the man that sits down intending to build a tower.

II. So, secondly, note the cost of the building, or the conditions of discipleship.

Building is an expensive amusement, as many a man who has gone rashly in for bricks and mortar has found out to his cost. And the most expensive of all sorts of building is the building up of Christian character. That costs more than anything else, but there are a number of other things less noble and desirable, which share with it, to some extent, in the expenditure which it involves.

Discipleship demands constant reference to the plan. A man that lives as he likes, by impulse, by inclination, or ignobly yielding to the pressure of circumstances and saying, 'I could not help myself, I was carried away by the flood,' or 'Everybody round about me is doing it, and I could not be singular'-will never build anything worth living in. It will be a born ruin-if I may so say. There must be continual reference to the plan. That is to say, if a man is to do anything worth doing, there must be a very clear marking out to himself of what he means to secure by life, and a keeping of the aim continually before him as his guide and his pole-star. Did you ever see the pretty architect's plans, that were all so white and neat when they came out of his office, after the masons have done with them-all thumb-marked and dirty? I wonder if your Bibles are like that? Do we refer to the standard of conduct with anything like the continual checking of our work by the architect's intention, which every man who builds anything that will stand is obliged to practise? Consult your plan, the pattern of your Master, the words of your Redeemer, the gospel of your God, the voice of judgment and conscience, and get into the habit of living, not like a vegetable, upon what happens to be nearest its roots, nor like a brute, by the impulses of the unreasoning nature, but clear above these put the understanding, and high above that put the conscience, and above them all put the will of the Lord. Consult your plan if you want to build your tower.

Then, further, another condition is continuous effort. You cannot ‘rush’ the building of a great edifice. You have to wait till the foundations get consolidated, and then by a separate effort every stone has to be laid in its bed and out of the builder’s hands. So by slow degrees, with continuity of effort, the building rises.

Now there has been a great deal of what I humbly venture to call one-sidedness talked about the way by which Christian character is to be developed and perfected. And one set of the New Testament metaphors upon that subject has been pressed to the exclusion of the others, and the effortless growth of the plant has been presented as if it were the complete example of Christian progress. I know that Jesus Christ has said: ‘First the blade, then the ear; after that the full corn in the ear.’ But I know that He has also said, ‘Which of you, intending to build a tower’-and that involves the idea of effort; and that He has further said, ‘Or what king, going to make war against another king’-and that involves the idea of antagonism and conflict. And so, on the whole, I lay it down that this is one of the conditions of building the tower, that the energy of the builder should never slacken, but, with continual renewal of effort, he should rear his life’s building.

And then, still further, there is the fundamental condition of all; and that is, self-surrender. Our Lord lays this down in the most stringent terms in the words before my text, where He points to two directions in which that spirit is required to manifest itself. One is detachment from persons that are dearest, and even from one’s own selfish life; the other is the acceptance of things that are most contrary to one’s inclinations, against the grain, painful and hard to bear. And so we may combine these two in this statement: If any man is going to build a Christlike life he will have to detach himself from surrounding things and dear ones, and to crucify self by suppression of the lower nature and the endurance of evils. The preceding parable which is connected in subject with the text, the story of the great supper, and the excuses made for not coming to it, represents two-thirds of the refusals as arising from the undue love for, and regard to, earthly possessions, and the remaining third as arising from the undue love to, and regard for, the legitimate objects of affection. And these are the two chords that hold most of us most tightly. It is not Christianity alone, dear brethren, that says that if you want to do anything worth doing, you must detach yourself from outward wealth. It is not Christianity alone that says that, if you want to build up a noble life, you must not let earthly love dominate and absorb your energy; but it is Christianity that says so most emphatically, and that has best reason to say so.

Concentration is the secret of all excellence. If the river is to have any scour in it that will sweep away pollution and corruption, it must not go winding and lingering in many curves, howsoever flowery may be the banks, nor spreading over a broad bed, but you must straighten it up and make it deep that it may run strong. And if you will diffuse yourself all over these poor, wretched worldly goods, or even let the rush of your heart's outflow go in the direction of father and mother, wife and children, brethren and sisters, forgetting Him, then you will never come to any good nor be of use in this world. But if you want to be Christians after Christ's pattern, remember that the price of the building is rigidly to sacrifice self, 'to scorn delights and live laborious days,' and to keep all vagrant desires and purposes within rigid limits, and absolutely subordinated to Himself.

On the other hand, there is to be the acceptance of what is painful to the lower nature. Unpleasant consequences of duty have to be borne, and the lower self, with its appetites and desires, has to be crucified. The vine must be mercilessly pruned in tendrils, leaves, and branches even, though the rich sap may seem to bleed away to waste, if we are to grow precious grapes out of which may be expressed the wine of the Kingdom. We must be dead to much if we are to be alive to anything worth living for.

Now remember that Christ's demand of self-surrender, self-sacrifice, continuous effort, rigid limitation, does not come from any mere false asceticism, but is inevitable in the very nature of the case, and is made also by all worthy work. How much every one of us has had to shear off our lives, how many tastes we have had to allow to go ungratified, how many capacities undeveloped, in how many directions we have had to hedge up our way, and not do, or be this, that, or the other; if we have ever done anything in any direction worthy the doing! Concentration and voluntary limitation, in order to fix all powers on the supreme aim which judgment and conscience have enjoined is the condition of all excellence, of all sanity of living, and eminently of all Christian discipleship.

III. Further, note the failures.

The tower of the rash builder stands a gaunt, staring ruin.

Whosoever throws himself upon great undertakings or high aims, without a deliberate forecast of the difficulties and sacrifices they involve, is sure to stop almost before he has begun. Many a man and woman leaves the starting-point with a rush, as if they were going to be at the goal presently, and before they have run fifty yards turn aside and quietly walk out of the course. I wonder how many of you began, when you were lads or girls, to study some language, and stuck before you had got through twenty pages of the grammar, or to learn some art, and have still got the tools lying unused in a dusty corner. And how many of you who call yourselves Christians began in the same fashion long ago to run the race? ‘Ye did run well.’ What did hinder you? What hindered Atalanta? The golden apples that were flung down on the path. Oh, the Church is full of these abortive Christians; ruins from their beginning, standing gaunt and windowless, the ground-plan a great palace, the reality a hovel that has not risen a foot for the last ten years. I wonder if there are any stunted Christians of that sort in this congregation before me, who began under the influence of some impulse or emotion, genuine enough, no doubt, but who had taken no account of how much it would cost to finish the building. And so the building is not finished, and never will be.

But I should remark here that what I am speaking about as failure is not incomplete attainment of the aim. For all our lives have to confess that they incompletely attain their aim; and lofty aims, imperfectly realised, and still maintained, are the very salt of life, and beautiful ‘as the new moon with a ragged edge, e’en in its imperfection beautiful.’ Paul was an old man and an advanced Christian when he said, ‘Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I follow after.’ And the highest completeness to which the Christian builder can reach in this life is the partial accomplishment of his aim and the persistent adherence to and aspiration after the unaccomplished aim. It is not these incomplete but progressive and aspiring lives that are failures, but it is the lives of men who have abandoned high aims, and have almost forgotten that they ever cherished them.

And what does our Lord say about such? That everybody laughs at them. It is not more than they deserve. An out-and-out Christian will often be disliked, but if he is made a mock of there will be a *soupçon* of awe and respect even in the mockery. Half-and-half Christians get, and richly deserve, the curled lip and sarcasm of a world that knows when a man is in earnest, and knows when he is an incarnate sham.

IV. Lastly, I would have you observe the inviting encouragement hidden in the apparent repelling warning.

If we read my text isolated, it may seem as if the only lesson that our Lord meant to be drawn from it was a counsel of despair. ‘Unless you feel quite sure that you can finish, you had better not begin.’ Is that what He meant to say? I think not. He did mean to say, ‘Do not begin without opening your eyes to what is involved in the beginning.’ But suppose a man had taken His advice, had listened to the terms, and had said, ‘I cannot keep them, and I am going to fling all up, and not try any more’-is that what Jesus Christ wanted to bring him to? Surely not. And that it is not so arises plainly enough from the observation that this parable and the succeeding one are both sealed up, as it were, with ‘So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be My disciple.’

Now, if I may so say, there are two kinds of ‘forsaking all that we have.’ One is the forsaking by which we become disciples; and the other the forsaking by which we continue true disciples. The conviction that they had not sufficient to finish is the very conviction that Christ wished to root in the minds of the crowds. He exhibits the difficulties in order that they may feel they cannot cope with them. What then? That they may ‘forsake’ all their own power to cope with them.

That is the first kind of ‘forsaking all that we have.’ That makes a disciple. The recognition of my own utter impotence to do the things which yet I see must be done, is the underside of trust in Him. And that trust in Him brings the power that makes it possible for us to do the things which we cannot of ourselves do, and the consciousness of the impotence to do which is the first step toward doing them. It is the self-sufficient man who is sure to be bankrupt before he has finished his building; but he who has no confidence in himself, and recognises the fact that he cannot build, will go to Jesus Christ and say, 'Lord, I am poor and needy. Come Thou Thyself and be my strength.' Such a forsaking of all that we have in the recognition of our own poverty and powerlessness brings into the field an Ally for our reinforcement that has more than the twenty thousand that are coming against us, and will make us strong.

And then, if, knowing our weakness, our misery, our poverty, and cleaving to Jesus Christ in simple confidence in His divine power breathed into our weakness, and His abundant riches lavished upon our poverty, we cast ourselves into the work to which He calls us by His grace, then we shall find that the sweet and certain assurance that we have Him for the possession and the treasure of our lives will make parting with everything else, not painful, but natural and necessary and a joy, as the expression of our supreme love to Him. It should not, and would not be difficult to fling away paste gems and false riches if our hands were filled with the jewels that Christ bestows. And it will not be difficult to slay the old man when the new Christ lives in us, by our faith and submission.

So, dear brethren, it all comes to this. We are all builders; what kind of a work is your life's work going to turn out? Are you building on the foundation, taking Jesus Christ for the anchor of your hope, for the basis of your belief, for the crown of your aims, for your all and in all? Are you building upon Him? If so, then the building will stand when the storm comes and the 'hail sweeps away the refuges' that other men have built elsewhere. But are you building on that foundation the gold of self-denial, the silver of white purity, the precious stones of variously-coloured and Christlike virtues? Then your work will indeed be incomplete, but its very incompleteness will be a prophecy of the time when 'the headstone shall be brought forth with shoutings'; and you may humbly trust that the day which 'declares every man's work of what sort it is' will not destroy yours, but that it will gleam and flash in the light of the revealing and reflecting fires.

See to it that you are building *for* eternity, *on* the foundation, *with* the fair stones which Jesus Christ gives to all those who let Him shape their lives. He is at once, Architect, Material, Foundation; and in Him 'every several building fitly framed together groweth into a holy temple in the Lord.'

67)Luke 15:4

Matthew

'THAT WHICH WAS LOST'

PERSISTENCE OF THWARTED LOVE

Mat. 18:13. - Luk. 15:4.

Like other teachers, Jesus seems to have had favourite points of view and utterances which came naturally to His lips. There are several instances in the gospels of His repeating the same sayings in entirely different connections and with different applications. One of these habitual points of view seems to have been the thought of men as wandering sheep, and of Himself as the Shepherd. The metaphor has become so familiar that we need a moment's reflection to grasp the mingled tenderness, sadness, and majesty of it. He thought habitually of all humanity as a flock of lost sheep, and of Himself as high above them, unparticipant of their evil, and having one errand-to bring them back.

And not only does He frequently refer to this symbol, but we have the two editions, from which my texts are respectively taken, of the Parable of the Lost Sheep. I say two editions, because it seems to me a great deal more probable that Jesus should have repeated Himself than that either of the Evangelists should have ventured to take this gem and set it in an alien setting. The two versions differ slightly in some unimportant expressions, and Matthew's is the more condensed of the two. But the most important variation is the one which is brought to light by the two fragments which I have ventured to isolate as texts. 'If He find' implies the possible failure of the Shepherd's search; 'till He find' implies His unwearied persistence in the teeth of all failure. And, taken in conjunction, they suggest some very blessed and solemn considerations, which I pray for strength to lay upon your minds and hearts now.

I. But first let me say a word or two upon the more general thought brought out in both these clauses-of the Shepherd's search.

Now, beautiful and heart-touching as that picture is, of the Shepherd away amongst the barren mountains searching minutely in every ravine and thicket, it wants a little explanation in order to be brought into correspondence with the fact which it expresses. For His search for His lost property is not in ignorance of where it is, and His finding of it is not His discovery of His sheep, but its discovery of its Shepherd. We have to remember wherein consists the loss before we can understand wherein consists the search.

Now, if we ask ourselves that question first, we get a flood of light on the whole matter. The great hundredth Psalm, according to its true rendering, says, 'It is He that hath made us, and we are His; . . . we are . . . the sheep of His pasture.' But God's true possession of man is not simply the possession inherent in the act of creation. For there is only one way in which spirit can own spirit, or heart can possess heart, and that is through the voluntary yielding and love of the one to the other. So Jesus Christ, who, in all His seeking after us men, is the voice and hand of Almighty Love, does not count that He has found a man until the man has learned to love Him. For He loses us when we are alienated from Him, when we cease to trust Him, when we refuse to obey Him, when we will not yield to Him, but put Him far away from us. Therefore the search which, as being Christ's is God's in Christ, is for our love, our trust, our obedience; and in reality it consists of all the energies by which Jesus Christ, as God's embodiment and representative, seeks to woo and win you and me back to Himself, that He may truly possess us.

If the Shepherd's seeking is but a tender metaphor for the whole aggregate of the ways by which the love that is divine and human in Jesus Christ moves round about our closed hearts, as water may feel round some hermetically sealed vessel, seeking for an entrance, then surely the first and chiefest of them, which makes its appeal to each of us as directly as to any man that ever lived, is that great mystery that Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God, left the ninety-and-nine that were safe on the high pastures of the mountains of God, and came down among us, out into the wilderness, ‘to seek and to save that which was lost.’

And, brother, that method of winning-I was going to say, of earning-our love comes straight in its appeal to every single soul on the face of the earth. Do not say that thou wert not in Christ’s heart and mind when He willed to be born and willed to die. Thou, and thou, and thou, and every single unit of humanity were there clear before Him in their individuality; and He died for thee, and for me, and for every man. And, in one aspect, that is more than to say that He died for all men. There was a specific intention in regard to each of us in the mission of Jesus Christ; and when He went to the Cross the Shepherd was not giving His life for a confused flock of which He knew not the units, but for sheep the face of each of whom He knows, and each of whom He loves. There was His first seeking; there is His chief seeking. There is the seeking which ought to appeal to every soul of man, and which, ever since you were children, has been making its appeal to you. Has it done so in vain? Dear friend, let not your heart still be hard.

He seeks us by every record of that mighty love that died for us, even when it is being spoken as poorly, and with as many limitations and imperfections, as I am speaking it now. ‘As though God did beseech you by us, pray you in Christ’s stead.’ It is not arrogance, God forbid! it is simple truth when I say, Never mind about me; but my word, in so far as it is true and tender, is Christ’s word to you. And here, in our midst, that unseen Form is passing along these pews and speaking to these hearts, and the Shepherd is seeking His sheep.

He seeks each of us by the inner voices and emotions in our hearts and minds, by those strange whisperings which sometimes we hear, by the suddenly upstarting convictions of duty and truth which sometimes, without manifest occasion, flash across our hearts. These voices are Christ’s voice, for, in a far deeper sense than most men superficially believe, ‘He is the true Light that lighteth every man coming into the world.’

He is seeking us by our unrest, by our yearnings after we know not what, by our dim dissatisfaction which insists upon making itself felt in the midst of joys and delights, and which the world fails to satisfy as much as it fails to interpret. There is a cry in every heart, little as the bearer of the heart translates it into its true meaning-a cry after God, even the living God. And by all your unrests, your disappointments, your hopes unfulfilled, your hopes fulfilled and blasted in the fulfilment, your desires that perish unfruited; by all the mystic movements of the spirit that yearns for something beyond the material and the visible, Jesus Christ is seeking His sheep.

He seeks us by the discipline of life, for I believe that Christ is the active Providence of God, and that the hands that were pierced on the Cross do move the wheels of the history of the world, and mould the destinies of individual spirits.

The deepest meaning of all life is that we should be won to seek Him who in it all is seeking us, and led to venture our hopes, and fling the anchor of our faith beyond the bounds of the visible, that it may fasten in the Eternal, even in Christ Himself, ‘the same yesterday and to-day and for ever’ when earth and its training are done with. Brethren, it is a blessed thing to live, when we interpret life’s smallnesses aright as the voice of the Master, who, by them all-our sadness and our gladness, the unrest of our hearts and the yearnings and longings of our spirits, by the ministry of His word, by the record of His sufferings-is echoing the invitation of the Cross itself, ‘Come unto Me, all ye . . . and I will give you rest!’ So much for the Shepherd’s search.

II. And now, in the second place, a word as to the possible thwarting of the search.

‘If so be that He find.’ That is an awful if, when we think of what lies below it. The thing seems an absurdity when it is spoken, and yet it is a grim fact in many a life-viz. that Christ’s effort can fail and be thwarted. Not that His search is perfunctory or careless, but that we shroud ourselves in darkness through which that love can find no way. It is we, not He, that are at fault when He fails to find that which He seeks. There is nothing more certain than that God, and Christ the image of God, desire the rescue of every man, woman, and child of the human race. Let no teaching blur that sunlight fact. There is nothing more certain than that Jesus Christ has done, and is doing, all that He can do to secure that purpose. If He could make every man love Him, and so find every man, be sure that He would do it. But He cannot. For here is the central mystery of creation, which if we could solve there would be few knots that would resist our fingers, that a finite will like yours or mine can lift itself up against God, and that, having the capacity, it has the desire. He says, 'Come!' We say, 'I will not.' That door of the heart opens from within, and He never breaks it open. He stands at the door and knocks. And then the same solemn if comes-'If any man opens, I will come in'; if any man keeps it shut, and holds on to prevent its being opened, I will stop out.

Brethren, I seek to press upon you now the one plain truth, that if you are not saved men and women, there is no person in heaven or earth or hell that has any blame in the matter but yourself alone. God appeals to us, and says, 'What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done unto it?' His hands are clean, and the infinite love of Christ is free from all blame, and all the blame lies at our own doors.

I must not dwell upon the various reasons which lead so many men among us-as, alas! the utmost charity cannot but see that there are-to turn away from Christ's appeals, and to be unwilling to 'have this Man' either 'to reign over' them or to save them. There are many such, I am sure, in my audience now; and I would fain, if I could, draw them to that Lord in whom alone they have life, and rest, and holiness, and heaven.

One great reason is because you do not believe that you need Him. There is an awful inadequacy in most men's conceptions-and still more in their feelings-as to their sin. Oh dear friends, if you would only submit your consciences for one meditative half-hour to the light of God's highest law, I think you would find out something more than many of you know, as to what you are and what your sin is. Many of us do not much believe that we are in any danger. I have seen a sheep comfortably cropping the short grass on a down over the sea, with one foot out in the air, and a precipice of five hundred feet below it, and at the bottom the crawling water. It did not know that there was any danger of going over. That is like some of us. If you believed what is true-that 'sin when it is finished, bringeth forth death,' and understood what 'death' meant, you would feel the mercy of the Shepherd seeking you. Some of us think we are in the flock when we are not. Some of us do not like submission. Some of us have no inclination for the sweet pastures that He provides, and would rather stay where we are, and have the fare that is going there.

We do not need to do anything to put Him away. I have no doubt that some of us, as soon as my voice ceases, will plunge again into worldly talk and thoughts before they are down the chapel steps, and so blot out, as well as they can, any vagrant and superficial impression that may have been made. Dear brethren, it is a very easy matter to turn away from the Shepherd's voice. 'I called, and ye refused. I stretched out My hands, and no man regarded.' That is all! That is what you do, and that is enough.

III. So, lastly, the thwarted search prolonged.

'Till He find'-that is a wonderful and a merciful word. It indicates the infinitude of Christ's patient forgiveness and perseverance. We tire of searching. 'Can a mother forget' or abandon her seeking after a lost child? Yes! if it has gone on for so long as to show that further search is hopeless, she will go home and nurse her sorrow in her heart. Or, perhaps, like some poor mothers and wives, it will turn her brain, and one sign of her madness will be that, long years after grief should have been calm because hope was dead, she will still be looking for the little one so long lost. But Jesus Christ stands at the closed door, as a great modern picture shows, though it has been so long undisturbedly closed that the hinges are brown with rust, and weeds grow high against it. He stands there in the night, with the dew on His hair, unheeded or repelled, like some stranger in a hostile village seeking for a night's shelter. He will not be put away; but, after all refusals, still with gracious finger, knocks upon the door, and speaks into the heart. Some of you have refused Him all your lives, and perhaps you have grey hairs upon you now. And He is speaking to you still. He 'suffereth long, is not easily provoked, is not soon angry; hopeth all things,' even of the obstinate rejecters.

For that is another truth that this word 'till' preaches to us-viz. the possibility of bringing back those that have gone furthest away and have been longest away. The world has a great deal to say about incurable cases of moral obliquity and deformity. Christ knows nothing about 'incurable cases.' If there is a worst man in the world-and perhaps there is-there is nothing but his own disinclination to prevent his being brought back, and made as pure as an angel.

But do not let us deal with generalities; let us bring the truths to ourselves. Dear brethren, I know nothing about the most of you. I should not know you again if I met you five minutes after we part now. I have never spoken to many of you, and probably never shall, except in this public way; but I know that you need Christ, and that Christ wants you. And I know that, however far you have gone, you have not gone so far but that His love feels out through the remoteness to grasp you, and would fain draw you to itself.

I dare say you have seen upon some dreary moor, or at the foot of some 'scaur' on the hillside, the bleached bones of a sheep, lying white and grim among the purple heather. It strayed, unthinking of danger, tempted by the sweet herbage; it fell; it vainly bleated; it died. But what if it had heard the shepherd's call, and had preferred to lie where it fell, and to die where it lay? We talk about 'silly sheep.' Are there any of them so foolish as men and women listening to me now, who will not answer the Shepherd's voice when they hear it, with, 'Lord, here am I, come and help me out of this miry clay, and bring me back.' He is saying to each of you, 'Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?' May He not have to say at last of any of us, 'Ye would not come to Me, that ye might have life!'

68)Luke 15:8

Luke

'THAT WHICH WAS LOST'

Luk. 15:4, Luk. 15:8, Luk. 15:11.

The immediate occasion of these three inimitable parables, which have found their way to the heart of the world, needs to be remembered in order to grasp their import and importance. They are intended to vindicate Christ's conduct in associating with outcasts and disreputable persons whom His Pharisaical critics thought a great deal too foul to be touched by clean hands. They were not meant to set forth with anything like completeness either what wanderers had to do to go back to God, or what God had done to bring wanderers back to Himself. If this had been remembered, many misconceptions, widespread and mischievous, especially affecting the meaning of the last of the three parables-that of the Prodigal Son-would have been avoided. The purpose of the parables accounts for Christ's accepting the division which His antagonists made of men, into 'righteous,' like themselves, and 'unclean,' like the publicans and sinners. There was a far deeper truth to be spoken about the condition of humanity than that. But for the purposes of His argument Christ passes it by. The remembrance of the intention of the parables explains their incompleteness as a statement of what people call 'the way of salvation.' They were not meant to teach us that, but they were meant to show us that a human instinct which prizes lost things because they are lost has something corresponding to it in the divine nature, and so to vindicate the conduct of Christ.

I venture to isolate these three statements of the subjects of the parables, because I think that looking at the threefold aspect in which the one general thought is presented may help us to some useful considerations.

I. I ask you, then, to look with me, first, at the varying causes of loss.

The sheep was lost, the *drachma* was lost, the son was lost. But in each case the reason for the loss was different. Whilst I would avoid all fanciful inserting into our Lord's words of more than they can fairly bear, I would also avoid superficial evacuating them of any of their depth of significance. So I think it is not unintentional nor unimportant that in these three metaphors there are set forth three obviously distinct operative causes for man's departure from God.

The sheep did not intend to go anywhere, either to keep with or to leave the shepherd. It simply knew that grass was sweet, and that there, ahead of it, was another tuft, and it went after that. So it nibbled itself away out of the path, out of the shepherd's care, out of the flock's companionship. It was heedless; and therefore it was lost.

Now that is a fair statement of facts in regard to thousands of men, of whom I have no doubt there are some listening to me now. They do not intend any mischief, they have no purpose of rebellion or transgression, but they live what we call animal lives. The sheep knows only where the herbage is abundant and fresh: and it goes there. An animal has no foresight, and is the happier because it cannot look before and after. It has only a rudimentary conscience, if it has that. Its inclinations are restrained by no sense of obligation. Many men live just so, without restraint upon appetite, without checking of inclination, without foresight except of the material good which a certain course of conduct may get. So, all unwitting, meaning no mischief, they wander further and further from the right road, and find themselves at last in a waterless desert.

Dear friends, am I speaking to any now who have too much yielded to inclinations, who have been unwilling to look forward to the end, and ask themselves what all will come to at the last, and who scarcely know what it is to take heed unto their ways, except in so far as worldly prudence may dictate certain courses of conduct for the purpose of securing certain worldly and perishable ends? I would plead, especially with the younger portion of my congregation, to take the touching picture of this first parable as a solemn prophecy of what certainly befalls every man who sets out upon his path without careful consideration of whither it leads to at the last; and who lives for the present, in any of its forms, and who lets himself be led by inclinations or appetites. The animal does so, and, as a rule, its instincts are its sufficient guide. But you and I are blessed or cursed, as the case may be, with higher powers, which, if we do not use, we shall certainly land in the desert. If a man who is meant to guide himself by intelligence, reason, will, foresight, conscience, chooses to go down to the level of the beast, the faculties that serve the beast will not serve the man. And even the sheep is lost from the flock if it yields only to these.

But how it speaks of the Lord’s tender sympathy for the wanderers that He should put in the forefront of the parables this explanation of the condition of men, and should not at first charge it upon them as sin, but only as heedlessness and folly! There is much that in itself is wrong and undesirable, the criminality of which is diminished by the fact that it was heedlessly done, though the heedlessness itself is a crime.

Now turn to the second parable. The coin was heavy, so it fell; it was round, so it rolled; it was dead, so it lay. And there are people who are things rather than persons, so entirely have they given up their wills, and so absolutely do they let themselves be determined by circumstances. It was not the *drachma* that lost itself, but it was the law of gravitation that lost it, and it had no power of resistance. This also is an explanation-partial, as I shall have to show you in a moment, but still real,-of a great deal of human wandering. There are masses of men who have no more power to resist the pressure of circumstances and temptations than the piece of silver had when it dropped from the woman's open palm and trundled away into some dark corner. That lightens the darkness of much of the world's sin.

But for you to abnegate the right and power of resisting circumstances is to abdicate the sovereignty with which God has crowned you. All men are shaped by externals, but the shape which the externals impose upon us is settled by ourselves. Here are two men, for instance, exposed to precisely the same conditions: but one of them yields, and is ruined; the other resists, and is raised and strengthened. As Jesus Christ, so all things have a double operation. They are 'either a savour of life unto life or a savour of death unto death.' There is the stone. You may build upon it, or you may stumble over it: you take your choice. Here is the adverse circumstance. You may rule it, or you may let it rule you. Circumstances and outward temptations are the fool's masters, and the wise man's servants. It all depends on the set of the sail and the firmness of the hand that grasps the tiller, which way the wind shall carry the ship. The same breeze speeds vessels on directly opposite courses, and so the same circumstances may drive men in two contrary directions, sending the one further and further away from, and drawing the other nearer and nearer to, the haven of their hearts.

Dear friends, as we have to guard against the animal life of yielding to inclinations and inward impulse, of forgetting the future, and of taking no heed to our paths, so, unless we wish to ruin ourselves altogether, we have to fight against the mechanical life which, with a minimum of volition, lets the world do with us what it will. And sure I am that there are men and women in this audience at this time who have let their lives be determined by forces that have swept them away from God.

In the third parable the foolish boy had no love to his father to keep him from emigrating. He wanted to be his own master, and to get away into a place where he thought he could sow his wild oats and no news of it ever reach the father's house. He wanted to have the fingering of the money, and to enjoy the sense of possession. And so he went off on his unblessed road to the harlots and the swine's trough.

And *that* is no parable; that is a picture. The other two were parabolical representations; this is the thing itself. For carelessness of the bonds that knit a heart to God; hardness of an unresponsive heart unmelted by benefits; indifference to the blessedness of living by a Father's side and beneath His eye; the uprising of a desire of independence and the impatience of control; the exercise of self will-these are causes of loss that underlie the others of which I have been speaking, and which make for every one of us the essential sinfulness of our sin. It is rebellion, and it is rebellion against a Father's love.

Now, notice, that whilst the other two that we have been speaking about do partially explain the terrible fact that we go away from God, their explanation is only partial, and this grimmer truth underlies them. There are modern theories, as there were ancient ones, that say: 'Oh! sin is a theological bugbear. There is not any such thing. It is only indifference, ignorance, error.' And then there are other theorists that say: 'Sin! There is no sin in following natural laws and impulses. Circumstances shape men; heredity shapes them. The notion that their actions are criminal is a mere figment of an exploded superstition.'

Yes! and down below the ignorance, and inadvertence, and error, and heredity, and domination of externals, there lies the individual choice in each case. The man knows-however he sophisticates himself, or uses other people to provide him with sophistries-that he need not have done that thing unless he had chosen to do it. You cannot get beyond or argue away that consciousness. And so I say that all these immoral teachings, which are very common to-day, omit from the thing that they profess to analyse the very characteristic element of it, which is, as our Lord taught us, not the following inclination like a silly sheep; not the rolling away, in obedience to natural law, like the drachma; but the rising up of a rebellious will that desires a separation, and kicks against control, as in the case of the son.

So, dear friends, whilst I thankfully admit that much of the darkness of human conduct may be lightened by the representations of our two first parables, I cannot but feel that we have to leave to God the determination in each case of how far these have diminished individual criminality; and that we have to remember for ourselves that our departure from God is not explicable unless we recognise the fact that we have chosen rather to be away from Him than to be with Him; and that we like better to have our goods at our own disposal, and to live as it pleases ourselves.

II. So note, secondly, the varying proportions of loss and possession.

A hundred sheep; ten drachmas; two sons. The loss in one case Isa. 1:1-31 per cent., a trifle; in the other case 10 per cent., more serious; in the last case 50 per cent., heartbreaking. Now, I do not suppose that our Lord intended any special significance to be attached to these varying numbers. Rather they were simply suggested by the cast of the parable in which they respectively occurred. A hundred sheep is a fair average flock; ten pieces of silver are the modest hoard of a poor woman; two sons are a family large enough to represent the contrast which is necessary to the parable. But still we may permissibly look at this varying proportion in order to see whether it, too, cannot teach us something.

It throws light upon the owner’s care and pains in seeking. In one aspect, these are set forth most strikingly by the parable in which the thing lost bears the smallest proportion to the thing still retained. The shepherd might well have said: ‘One in a hundred does not matter much. I have got the ninety and nine.’ But he went to look for it. But, in another aspect, the woman, of course, has a more serious loss to face, and possibly seeks with more anxiety. And when you come up to the last case, where half the household is blotted out, as it were, then we can see the depth of anxiety and pains and care which must necessarily follow.

But beyond the consideration that the ascending proportion suggests increasing pains and anxiety, there is another lesson, which seems to me even more precious, and it is this, that it matters very little to the loser how much he keeps, or what the worth of the lost thing is. There is something in human nature which makes anything that is lost precious by reason of its loss. Nobody can tell how large a space a tree fills until it is felled. If you lose one tiny stone out of a ring, or a bracelet, it makes a gap, and causes annoyance altogether disproportionate to the lustre that it had when it was there. A man loses a small portion of his fortune in some unlucky speculation, and the loss annoys him a great deal more than the possession solaced him, and he thinks more about the hundreds that have vanished than about the thousands that remain. Men are made so. It is a human instinct, that apart altogether from the consideration of its intrinsic worth, and the proportion it bears to that which is still possessed, the lost thing draws, and the loser will take any pains to find it.

So Christ says, When a woman will light a candle and sweep the house and search diligently till she finds her lost sixpence [for the drachma was worth little more], and will bring in all her neighbours to rejoice with her, that is like God; and the human instinct which prizes lost things, not because of their value, but because they are lost, has something corresponding to it in the heart of the Majesty of the heavens. It is Christ's vindication, of course, as I need not remind you, of His own conduct. He says in effect, to these Pharisees, 'You are finding fault with Me for doing what we all do. I am only acting in accordance with a natural human instinct; and when I thus act God Himself is acting in and through Me.'

If I had time, I think I could show that this principle, brought out in my texts, really sweeps away one of the difficulties which modern science has to suggest against Evangelical Christianity. We hear it said, 'How can you suppose that a speck of a world like this, amidst all these flaming orbs that stud the infinite depths of the heavens, is of so much importance in God's sight that His Son came down to die for it?' The magnitude of the world, as compared with others, has nothing to do with the question. God's action is determined by its moral condition. If it be true that here is sin, which rends men away from Him, and that so they are lost, then it is supremely natural that all the miracles of the Christian revelation should follow. The *rationale* of the Incarnation lies in this, 'A certain man had a hundred sheep. . .. One of them went astray . . . and He went into the wilderness and found it.'

III. Now I meant to have said a word about the varying glimpses that we have here, into God's claims upon us, and His heart.

Ownership is the word that describes His relation to us in the first two parables; love is the word that describes it in the third. But the ownership melts into love, because God does not reckon that He possesses men by natural right of creation or the like, unless they yield their hearts to Him, and give themselves, by their own joyful self-surrender, into His hands. But I must not be tempted to speak upon that matter; only, before I close, let me point you to that most blessed and heart-melting thought, that God accounts Himself to have lost something when a man goes away from Him.

That word 'the lost' has another, and in some senses a more tragical, significance in Scripture. The lost are lost to themselves and to blessedness. The word implies destruction; but it also carries with it this, that God prizes us, is glad to have us, and, I was going to say, feels an incompleteness in His possessions when men depart from Him.

Oh, brethren, surely such a thought as that should melt us; and if, as is certainly the case, we have strayed away from Him into green pastures, which have ended in a wilderness, without a blade of grass; or if we have rolled away from Him in passive submission to circumstances; or if we have risen up in rebellion against Him, and claimed our separate right of possession and use of the goods that fall to us, if we would only think that He considers that He has lost us, and prizes us because we are lost to Him, and wants to get us back again, surely, surely it would draw us to Himself. Think of the greatness of the love into which the ownership is merged, as measured by the infinite price which He has paid to bring us back, and let us all say, 'I will arise and go to my Father.'

69)Luke 15:11

Luke

'THAT WHICH WAS LOST'

THE PRODIGAL AND HIS FATHER

Luk. 15:11 - Luk. 15:24.

The purpose of the three parables in this chapter has to be kept in mind. Christ is vindicating His action in receiving sinners, which had evoked the murmurings of the Pharisees. The first two parables, those of the lost sheep and the lost drachma, appeal to the common feeling which attaches more importance to lost property just because it is lost than to that which is possessed safely. This parable rises to a higher level. It appeals to the universal emotion of fatherhood, which yearns over a wandering child just because he has wandered.

We note a further advance, in the proportion of one stray sheep to the ninety-nine, and of one lost coin to the nine, contrasted with the sad equality of obedience and disobedience in the two sons. One per cent., ten per cent., are bearable losses, but fifty per cent. is tragic.

I. The first part [Luk. 15:11 - Luk. 15:16] tells of the son's wish to be his own master, and what came of it.

The desire to be independent is good, but when it can only be attained by being dependent on him whose authority is irksome, it takes another colour. This foolish boy wished to be able to use his father's property as his own, but he had to get the father's consent first. It is a poor beginning of independence when it has to be set up in business by a gift.

That is the essential absurdity in our attempts to do without God and to shake off His control. We can only get power to seem to do it by misusing His gifts. When we say, 'Who is Lord over us?' the tongues which say it were given us by Him. The next step soon followed. 'Not many days after,' of course, for the sense of ownership could not be kept up while near the father. A man who wishes to enjoy worldly good without reference to God is obliged, in self-defence, to hustle God out of his thoughts as soon and as completely as possible.

The 'far country' is easily reached; and it is far, though a step can land us in it. A narrow bay may compel a long journey round its head before those on its opposite shores can meet. Sin takes us far away from God, and the root of all sin is that desire of living to one’s self which began the prodigal’s evil course.

The third step in his downward career, wasting his substance in riotous living, comes naturally after the two others; for all self-centred life is in deepest truth waste, and the special forms of gross dissipation to which youth is tempted are only too apt to follow the first sense of being their own masters, and removed from the safeguards of their earthly father’s home. Many a lad in our great cities goes through the very stages of the parable, and, when a mother’s eye is no longer on him, plunges into filthy debauchery. But living which does not outrage the proprieties may be riotous all the same; for all conduct which ignores God and asserts self as supreme is flagrantly against the very nature of man, and is reckless waste.

Such a ‘merry’ life is sure to be ‘short.’ There is always famine in the land of forgetfulness of God, and when the first gloss is off its enjoyments, and one’s substance is spent, its pinch is felt. The unsatisfied hunger of heart, which dogs godless living, too often leads but to deeper degradation and closer entanglement with low satisfactions. Men madly plunge deeper into the mud in hope of finding the pearl which has thus far eluded their search.

A miserable thing this young fool had made of his venture, having spent his capital, and now being forced to become a slave, and being set to nothing better than to feed swine. The godless world is a hard master, and has very odious tasks for its bondsmen. The unclean animals are fit companions for one who made himself lower than they, since filth is natural to them and shameful for him. They are better off than he is, for husks do nourish them, and they get their fill, but he who has sunk to longing for swine’s food cannot get even that. The dark picture is only too often verified in the experience of godless men.

II. The wastrel’s returning sanity is described in Luk. 15:17 - Luk. 15:20.

‘He came to himself.’ Then he had been beside himself before. It is insanity to try to shake off God, to aim at independence, to wander from Him, to fling away our ‘substance,’ that is, our true selves, and to starve among the swine-troughs. He remembers the bountiful housekeeping at home, as starving men dream of feasts, and he thinks of himself with a kind of pity and amazement.

There is no sign that his conscience smote him, or that his heart woke in love to his father. His stomach, and it only, urged him to go home. He did, indeed, feel that he had been wrong, and had forfeited the right to be called a son, but he did not care much for losing that name, or even for losing the love to which it had the right, if only he could get as much to eat as one of the hired servants, whose relation to the master was less close, and, in patriarchal times, less happy, than that of slaves born in the house.

One good thing about the lad was that he did not let the grass grow under his feet, but, as soon as he had made the resolution, began to carry it into effect. The bane of many a resolve to go back to God is that it is 'sicklied o'er' by procrastination. The ragged prodigal has not much to leave which need hold him, but many such a one says, 'I will arise and go to my father to-morrow,' and lets all the to-morrows become yesterdays, and is sitting among the swine still.

Low as the prodigal's motive for return was, the fact of his return was enough. So is it in regard to our attitude to the gospel. Men may be drawn to give heed to its invitations from the instinct of self-preservation, or from their sense of hungry need, and the belief that in it they will find the food they crave for, while there may be little consciousness of longing for more from the Father than the satisfaction of felt wants. The longing for a place in the Father's heart will spring up later, but the beginning of most men's taking refuge in God as revealed in Christ is the gnawing of a hungry heart. The call to all is, 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat.'

III. The climax of the parable, for which all the rest is but as scaffolding, is the father's welcome [vs. 20*b*-24].

Filial love may die in the son's heart, but paternal yearning lives in the father's. The wanderer's heart would be likely to sink as he came nearer the father's tent. It had seemed easy to go back when he acted the scene in imagination, but every step homewards made the reality more difficult.

No doubt he hesitated when the old home came in sight, and perhaps his resolution would have oozed out at his finger ends if he had had to march up alone in his rags, and run the gauntlet of servants before he came to speech with his father. So his father's seeing him far off and running to meet him is exquisitely in keeping, as well as movingly setting forth how God's love goes out to meet His returning prodigals. That divine insight which discerns the first motions towards return, that divine pity which we dare venture to associate with His infinite love, that eager meeting the shamefaced and slow-stepping boy half-way, and that kiss of welcome before one word of penitence or request had been spoken, are all revelations of the heart of God, and its outgoings to every wanderer who sets his face to return.

Beautifully does the father's welcome make the son's completion of his rehearsed speech impossible. It does not prevent his expression of penitence, for the more God's love is poured over us, the more we feel our sin. But he had already been treated as a son, and could not ask to be taken as a servant. Beautifully, too, the father gives no verbal answer to the lad's confession, for his kiss had answered it already; but he issues instructions to the servants which show that the pair have now reached the home and entered it together.

The gifts to the prodigal are probably significant. They not only express in general the cordiality of the welcome, but seem to be capable of specific interpretations, as representing various aspects of the blessed results of return to God. The robe is the familiar emblem of character. The prodigal son is treated like the high-priest in Zechariah's vision; his rags are stripped off, and he is clothed anew in a dress of honour. 'Them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also sanctified.' The ring is a token of wealth, position, and honour. It is also a sign of delegated authority, and is an ornament to the hand. So God gives His prodigals, when they come back, an elevation which unforgiven beings do not reach, and sets them to represent Him, and arrays them in strange beauty. No doubt the lad had come back footsore and bleeding, and the shoes may simply serve to keep up the naturalness of the story. But probably they suggest equipment for the journey of life. That is one of the gifts that accompany forgiveness. Our feet are shod with the preparedness of the gospel of peace.

Last of all comes the feast. Heaven keeps holiday when some poor waif comes shrinking back to the Father. The prodigal had been content to sink his sonship for the sake of a loaf, but he could not get bread on such terms. He had to be forgiven and bathed in the outflow of his father's love before he could be fed; and, being thus received, he could not but be fed. The feast is for those who come back penitently, and are received forgivingly, and endowed richly by the Father in heaven.

70)Luke 15:12-21

Luke

THE PRODIGAL AND HIS FATHER

Luk. 15:11 - Luk. 15:24.

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71)Luke 15:22-23

Luke

THE PRODIGAL AND HIS FATHER

GIFTS TO THE PRODIGAL

Luk. 15:22 - Luk. 15:23.

God’s giving always follows His forgiving. It is not so with us. We think ourselves very magnanimous when we pardon; and we seldom go on to lavish favours where we have overlooked faults. Perhaps it is right that men who have offended against men should earn restoration by acts, and should have to ride quarantine, as it were, for a time. But I question whether forgiveness is ever true which is not, like God’s, attended by large-hearted gifts. If pardon is only the non-infliction of penalty, then it is natural enough that it should be considered sufficient by itself, and that the evildoer should not be rewarded for having been bad. But if pardon is the outflow of the love of the offended to the offender, then it can scarcely be content with simply giving the debtor his discharge, and turning him into the world penniless.

However that may be with regard to men, God’s forgiveness is essentially the communication of God’s love to us sinners, as if we had never sinned at all. And, that being so, that love cannot stay its working until it has given all that it can bestow or we can receive. God does not do things by halves; and He always gives when He forgives.

Now that is the great truth of the last part of this immortal parable. And it is one of the points in which it differs from, and towers high above, the two preceding ones. The lost sheep was carried back to the pastures, turned loose there, needed no further special care, and began to nibble as if nothing had happened. The lost drachma was simply put back in the woman’s purse. But the lost son was pardoned, and, being pardoned, was capable of receiving, and received, greater gifts than he had before. These gifts are very remarkably detailed in the words of our text.

Now, of course, it is always risky to seek for a spiritual interpretation of every point in a parable, many of which points are mere drapery. But, on the other hand, we may very easily fall into the error of treating as insignificant details which really are meant to be full of instruction. And I cannot help thinking-although many would differ from me,-that this detailed enumeration of the gifts to the prodigal is meant to be translated into the terms of spiritual experience. So I desire to look at them as suggesting for us the gifts of God which accompany forgiveness. I take the catalogue as it stands-the Robe, the Ring, the Shoes, the Feast.

I. First, the Robe.

‘Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him.’ That was the command. This detail, of course, like all the others, refers back to, and casts light upon, the supposed condition of the spendthrift when he came back. There he stood, ragged, with the stain of travel and the stench of the pig-sty upon his garments, some of them, no doubt, remains of the tawdry finery that he had worn in the world; wine-spots, and stains, and filth of all sorts on the rags.

The father says, ‘Take them all off him, and put the best robe upon him.’ What does that mean?

Well, we all know the very familiar metaphor by which qualities of mind, traits of character, and the like are described as being the dress of the spirit. We talk about being ‘arrayed in purity,’ ‘clad in zeal,’ ‘clothed with humility,’ ‘vested with power,’ and so on. If we turn to Scripture, we find running through it a whole series of instances of this metaphor, which guide us at once to its true meaning. Zechariah saw in vision the high priest standing at the heavenly tribunal, clad in filthy garments. A voice said, ‘Take away the filthy garments from him,’ and the interpretation is added: ‘Behold! I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with a change of raiment.’ You remember our Lord’s parable of the man with a wedding garment. You remember the Apostle Paul’s frequent use of the metaphor of ‘putting off the old man, putting on the new.’ You remember, finally, the visions of the last days, in which the Seer in Patmos saw the armies in heaven that followed their victorious Commander, ‘clothed in fine linen, white and pure, which is the righteousness of the saints.’ If we put all these together, surely I am not forcing a meaning on a non-significant detail, when I say that here we have shadowed for us the great thought, that the result of the divine forgiveness coming upon a man is that he is clothed with a character which fits him to sit down at his Father’s table. They tell us that forgiveness is impossible, because things done must have their consequences, and that character is the slow formation of actions, precipitated, as it were, from our deeds. That is all true. But it does not conflict with this other truth that there may and does come into men’s hearts, when they set their faith on Jesus Christ, a new power which transforms the nature and causes old things to pass away.

God’s forgiveness revolutionises a life. Similar effects follow even human pardons for small offences. Brute natures are held in by penalties, and to them pardon means impunity, and impunity means licence, and licence means lust. But wherever there is a heart with love to the offended in it, there is nothing that will so fill it with loathing of its past self as the assurance that the offended, though loved, One loves, and is not offended, and that free forgiveness has come. Whether is it the rod or the mother’s kiss that makes a child hate its sin most? And if we lift our thoughts to Him, and think how He, up there in the heavens,

‘Who mightest vengeance best have took,’

bends over us in frank, free forgiveness, then surely that, more than all punishments or threatenings or terrors, will cause us to turn away from our evil, and to loathe the sins which are thus forgiven. The prophet went very deep when he said, ‘Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thine iniquity, when I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord.’

But not only so, there is given along with forgiveness, and wrapped up in it, a new power, which makes all things new, and changes a man. It would be a poor Gospel for me to stand up and preach if I had only to proclaim to men the divine forgiveness; and if that only meant that hell’s door was barred and some outward heaven was flung open. But the true Gospel offers forgiveness as preliminary to the bestowal of the highest gifts of God. The pardoned man is stripped of his rags and clothed with a new nature which God Himself bestows.

That is what we all need. We have not all been in the pig-sty; we have not all fallen into gross sin. We *have* all turned our backs on our Father; we *have* all wanted to be independent; we *have* all preferred the far-off land to being near home. And, dear brethren, the character that you have made for yourselves clings to you like the poisoned Nessus’ shirt to Hercules. You cannot strip it off. You may get part of it away, but you cannot entirely cast it from your limbs, nor free yourselves from the entanglements of its tatters. Go to God, and He will smile away your sin, and His forgiving love will melt the stains and the evil, as the sun this morning drank up the mists; and they who come knowing themselves to be foul, and needing forgiveness, will surely receive from Him ‘the fine linen white and pure, the righteousness of saints.’

II. The Ring.

This prodigal lad only wanted to be placed in the position of a slave, but his father said, ‘Put a ring on his finger.’ The ring is an emblem of wealth, position, honour; that is one signification of this gift to the penitent. Still further, it is an ornament to the hand on which it glistens; that is another. It is a sign of delegated authority and of representative character; as when Joseph was exalted to be the second man in Egypt, and Pharaoh's signet ring was plucked off and placed upon his finger. All these thoughts are, as it seems to me, clustered in, and fairly deducible from, this one detail.

Freedom, exaltation, dignity of position are expressed. And that opens up a thought which needs to be set forth with many reservations, and much guarding, but still is true-viz., that, by the mercy and miraculous loving-kindness and quickening power of God in the Gospel, it is possible that the lower a man falls the higher he may rise. I know, of course, that it is better to be innocent than to be cleansed. I know, and every man that looks into his own heart knows, that forgiven sins may leave scars; that the memory may be loaded with many a foul and many a painful remembrance; that the fetters may be stricken off the limbs, but the marks of them, and the way of walking that they compelled, may persist long after deliverance. But I know, too, that redeemed men are higher in final position than angels that never fell; and that, though it is too much to say that the greater the sinner the greater the saint, it still remains true that sin repented and forgiven may be, as it were, an elevation upon which a man may stand to reach higher than, apparently, he otherwise would in the divine life.

And so, though I do not say to any man, Make the experiment; for, indeed, the poorest of us has sins enough to get all the benefit out of repentance and forgiveness which is included in them, yet, if there is any man here-and I hope there is-saying to himself, 'I have got too low down ever to master this, that, or the other evil; I have stained myself so foully that I cannot hope to have the black marks erased,' I say to such; 'Remember that the man who ended with a ring on his finger, honoured and dignified, was the man that had herded with pigs, and stank, and all but rotted, with his fleshly crimes.' And so nobody need doubt but that for him, however low he has gone, and however far he has gone, there is restoration possible to a higher dignity than the pure spirits that never transgressed at any time God's commandment will ever attain; for he who has within himself the experience of repentance, of pardon, and who has come into living contact with Jesus Christ as Redeemer, can teach angels how blessed it is to be a child of God.

Nor less distinctly are the other two things which I have referred to brought out in this metaphor. Not only is the ring the sign of dignity, but it is also the sign of delegated authority and representative character. God sets poor penitents to be His witnesses in His world, and to do His work here. And a ring is an ornament to the hand that wears it; which being translated is this: where God gives pardon, He gives a strange beauty of character, to which, if a man is true to himself, and to his Redeemer, he will assuredly attain. There should be no lives so lovely, none that flash with so many jewelled colours, as the lives of the men and women who have learned what it is to be miserable, what it is to repent, what it is to be forgiven. So, though our 'hands have been full of blood,' as the prophet says, though they have dabbled in all manner of pollution, though they have been the ready instruments of many evil things, we may all hope that, cleansed and whitened, even our hands will not want the lustre of that adornment which the loving father clasped upon the fingers of his penitent boy.

III. Further, 'Shoes on his feet.'

No doubt he had come back barefooted and filthy and bleeding, and it was needful for the 'keeping' of the narrative that this detail should appear. But I think it is something more than drapery.

Does it not speak to us of equipment for the walk of life? God *does* prepare men for future service, and for every step that they have to take, by giving to them His forgiveness for all that is past. The sense of the divine pardon will in itself fit a man, as nothing else will, for running with patience the race that is set before him. God does communicate, along with His forgiveness, to every one who seeks it, actual power to 'travel on life's common way in cheerful godliness'; and his feet are 'shod with the preparedness of the gospel of peace.'

Ah, brethren, life is a rough road for us all, and for those whose faces are set towards duty, and God, and self-denial, it is especially so, though there are many compensating circumstances. There are places where sharp flints stick up in the path and cut the feet. There are places where rocks jut out for us to stumble over. There are all the trials and sorrows that necessarily attend upon our daily lives, and which sometimes make us feel as if our path were across heated ploughshares, and every step was a separate agony. God will give us, if we go to Him for pardon, that which will defend us against the pains and the sorrows of life. The bare foot is cut by that which the shod foot tramples upon unconscious.

There are foul places on all our paths, over which, when we pass, if we have not something else than our own naked selves, we shall certainly contract defilement. God will give to the penitent man, if he will have it, that which will keep his feet from soil, even when they walk amidst filth. And if, at any time, notwithstanding the defence, some mud should stain the foot, and he that is washed needs again to wash his feet, the Master, with the towel and the basin, will not be far away.

There are enemies and dangers in life. A very important part of the equipment of the soldier in antiquity was the heavy boot, which enabled him to stand fast, and resist the rush of the enemy. God will give to the penitent man, if he will have it, that which will set his foot upon a rock, 'and establish his goings,' and which 'will make him able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.'

Brethren, defence, stability, shielding from pains, and protection against evil are all included in this great promise, which each of us may realise, if we will, for ourselves.

IV. Lastly, the Feast.

Now that comes into view in the parable, mainly as teaching us the great truth that Heaven keeps holiday, when some poor waif comes shrinking back to his Father. But I do not touch upon that truth now, though it is the main significance of this last part of the story.

The prodigal was half starving, and the fatted calf was killed 'for him,' as his ill-conditioned brother grumbled. Remember what it was that drove him back-not his heart, nor his conscience, but his stomach. He did not bethink himself to go back, because dormant filial affection woke up, or because a sense that he had been wrong stirred in him, but because he was hungry;

and well he might be, when ‘the husks that the swine did eat’ were luxuries beyond his reach. Thank God for the teaching that even so low a motive as that is accepted by God; and that, if a man goes back, even for no better reason-as long as he does go back, he will be welcomed by the Father. This poor boy was quite content to sink his sonship for the sake of a loaf; and all that he wanted was to stay his hunger. So he had to learn that he could not get bread on the terms that he desired, and that what he wished most was not what he needed first. He had to be forgiven and bathed in the outflow of his father’s love before he could be fed. And, being thus received, he could not fail to be fed. So the message for us is, first, forgiveness, and then every hunger of the heart satisfied; all desires met; every needful nourishment communicated, and the true bread ours for ever, if we choose to eat. ‘The meek shall eat and be satisfied.’

I need not draw the picture-that picture of which there are many originals sitting in these pews before me-of the men that go for ever roaming with a hungry heart, through all the regions of life separate from God; and whether they seek their nourishment in the garbage of the sty, or whether fastidiously they look for it in the higher nutriment of mind and intellect and heart, still are condemned to be unfilled.

Brethren, ‘Why do you spend your money for that . . . which satisfies not?’ Here is the true way for all desires to be appeased. Go to God in Jesus Christ for forgiveness, and then everything that you need shall be yours. ‘I counsel thee to buy of Me . . . white raiment that thou mayest be clothed.’ ‘He that eateth of this bread shall live for ever.’

72)Luke 15:24

Luke

THE PRODIGAL AND HIS FATHER

Luk. 15:11 - Luk. 15:24.

The purpose of the three parables in this chapter has to be kept in mind. Christ is vindicating His action in receiving sinners, which had evoked the murmurings of the Pharisees. The first two parables, those of the lost sheep and the lost drachma, appeal to the common feeling which attaches more importance to lost property just because it is lost than to that which is possessed safely. This parable rises to a higher level. It appeals to the universal emotion of fatherhood, which yearns over a wandering child just because he has wandered.

We note a further advance, in the proportion of one stray sheep to the ninety-nine, and of one lost coin to the nine, contrasted with the sad equality of obedience and disobedience in the two sons. One per cent., ten per cent., are bearable losses, but fifty per cent. is tragic.

I. The first part [Luk. 15:11 - Luk. 15:16] tells of the son's wish to be his own master, and what came of it.

The desire to be independent is good, but when it can only be attained by being dependent on him whose authority is irksome, it takes another colour. This foolish boy wished to be able to use his father's property as his own, but he had to get the father's consent first. It is a poor beginning of independence when it has to be set up in business by a gift.

That is the essential absurdity in our attempts to do without God and to shake off His control. We can only get power to seem to do it by misusing His gifts. When we say, 'Who is Lord over us?' the tongues which say it were given us by Him. The next step soon followed. 'Not many days after,' of course, for the sense of ownership could not be kept up while near the father. A man who wishes to enjoy worldly good without reference to God is obliged, in self-defence, to hustle God out of his thoughts as soon and as completely as possible.

The 'far country' is easily reached; and it is far, though a step can land us in it. A narrow bay may compel a long journey round its head before those on its opposite shores can meet. Sin takes us far away from God, and the root of all sin is that desire of living to one's self which began the prodigal's evil course.

The third step in his downward career, wasting his substance in riotous living, comes naturally after the two others; for all self-centred life is in deepest truth waste, and the special forms of gross dissipation to which youth is tempted are only too apt to follow the first sense of being their own masters, and removed from the safeguards of their earthly father’s home. Many a lad in our great cities goes through the very stages of the parable, and, when a mother’s eye is no longer on him, plunges into filthy debauchery. But living which does not outrage the proprieties may be riotous all the same; for all conduct which ignores God and asserts self as supreme is flagrantly against the very nature of man, and is reckless waste.

Such a ‘merry’ life is sure to be ‘short.’ There is always famine in the land of forgetfulness of God, and when the first gloss is off its enjoyments, and one’s substance is spent, its pinch is felt. The unsatisfied hunger of heart, which dogs godless living, too often leads but to deeper degradation and closer entanglement with low satisfactions. Men madly plunge deeper into the mud in hope of finding the pearl which has thus far eluded their search.

A miserable thing this young fool had made of his venture, having spent his capital, and now being forced to become a slave, and being set to nothing better than to feed swine. The godless world is a hard master, and has very odious tasks for its bondsmen. The unclean animals are fit companions for one who made himself lower than they, since filth is natural to them and shameful for him. They are better off than he is, for husks do nourish them, and they get their fill, but he who has sunk to longing for swine’s food cannot get even that. The dark picture is only too often verified in the experience of godless men.

II. The wastrel’s returning sanity is described in Luk. 15:17 - Luk. 15:20.

‘He came to himself.’ Then he had been beside himself before. It is insanity to try to shake off God, to aim at independence, to wander from Him, to fling away our ‘substance,’ that is, our true selves, and to starve among the swine-troughs. He remembers the bountiful housekeeping at home, as starving men dream of feasts, and he thinks of himself with a kind of pity and amazement.

There is no sign that his conscience smote him, or that his heart woke in love to his father. His stomach, and it only, urged him to go home. He did, indeed, feel that he had been wrong, and had forfeited the right to be called a son, but he did not care much for losing that name, or even for losing the love to which it had the right, if only he could get as much to eat as one of the hired servants, whose relation to the master was less close, and, in patriarchal times, less happy, than that of slaves born in the house.

One good thing about the lad was that he did not let the grass grow under his feet, but, as soon as he had made the resolution, began to carry it into effect. The bane of many a resolve to go back to God is that it is 'sicklied o'er' by procrastination. The ragged prodigal has not much to leave which need hold him, but many such a one says, 'I will arise and go to my father to-morrow,' and lets all the to-morrows become yesterdays, and is sitting among the swine still.

Low as the prodigal's motive for return was, the fact of his return was enough. So is it in regard to our attitude to the gospel. Men may be drawn to give heed to its invitations from the instinct of self-preservation, or from their sense of hungry need, and the belief that in it they will find the food they crave for, while there may be little consciousness of longing for more from the Father than the satisfaction of felt wants. The longing for a place in the Father's heart will spring up later, but the beginning of most men's taking refuge in God as revealed in Christ is the gnawing of a hungry heart. The call to all is, 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat.'

III. The climax of the parable, for which all the rest is but as scaffolding, is the father's welcome [vs. 20*b*-24].

Filial love may die in the son's heart, but paternal yearning lives in the father's. The wanderer's heart would be likely to sink as he came nearer the father's tent. It had seemed easy to go back when he acted the scene in imagination, but every step homewards made the reality more difficult.

No doubt he hesitated when the old home came in sight, and perhaps his resolution would have oozed out at his finger ends if he had had to march up alone in his rags, and run the gauntlet of servants before he came to speech with his father. So his father's seeing him far off and running to meet him is exquisitely in keeping, as well as movingly setting forth how God's love goes out to meet His returning prodigals. That divine insight which discerns the first motions towards return, that divine pity which we dare venture to associate with His infinite love, that eager meeting the shamefaced and slow-stepping boy half-way, and that kiss of welcome before one word of penitence or request had been spoken, are all revelations of the heart of God, and its outgoings to every wanderer who sets his face to return.

Beautifully does the father's welcome make the son's completion of his rehearsed speech impossible. It does not prevent his expression of penitence, for the more God's love is poured over us, the more we feel our sin. But he had already been treated as a son, and could not ask to be taken as a servant. Beautifully, too, the father gives no verbal answer to the lad's confession, for his kiss had answered it already; but he issues instructions to the servants which show that the pair have now reached the home and entered it together.

The gifts to the prodigal are probably significant. They not only express in general the cordiality of the welcome, but seem to be capable of specific interpretations, as representing various aspects of the blessed results of return to God. The robe is the familiar emblem of character. The prodigal son is treated like the high-priest in Zechariah's vision; his rags are stripped off, and he is clothed anew in a dress of honour. 'Them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also sanctified.' The ring is a token of wealth, position, and honour. It is also a sign of delegated authority, and is an ornament to the hand. So God gives His prodigals, when they come back, an elevation which unforgiven beings do not reach, and sets them to represent Him, and arrays them in strange beauty. No doubt the lad had come back footsore and bleeding, and the shoes may simply serve to keep up the naturalness of the story. But probably they suggest equipment for the journey of life. That is one of the gifts that accompany forgiveness. Our feet are shod with the preparedness of the gospel of peace.

Last of all comes the feast. Heaven keeps holiday when some poor waif comes shrinking back to the Father. The prodigal had been content to sink his sonship for the sake of a loaf, but he could not get bread on such terms. He had to be forgiven and bathed in the outflow of his father's love before he could be fed; and, being thus received, he could not but be fed. The feast is for those who come back penitently, and are received forgivingly, and endowed richly by the Father in heaven.

73)Luke 16:8

Luke

THE FOLLIES OF THE WISE

Luk. 16:8.

The parable of which these words are the close is remarkable in that it proposes a piece of deliberate roguery as, in some sort, a pattern for Christian people. The steward's conduct was neither more nor less than rascality, and yet, says Christ, 'Do like that!' The explanation is to be found mainly in the consideration that what was faithless sacrifice of his master's interests, on the part of the steward, is, in regard to the Christian man's use of earthly gifts, the right employment of the possessions which have been entrusted to him. But there is another vindication of the singular selection of such conduct as an example, in the consideration that what is praised is not the dishonesty, but the foresight, realisation of the facts of the case, promptitude, wisdom of various kinds exhibited by the steward. And so says our Lord-shutting out the consideration of ends, and looking only for a moment at means,-the world can teach the Church a great many lessons; and it would be well for the Church if its members lived in the fashion in which the men of the world do. There is eulogium here, a recognition of splendid qualities, prostituted to low purposes; a recognition of wisdom in the adaptation of means to an end; and a limitation of the recognition, because it is only *in their generation* that 'the children of this world are wiser than the children of light.'

I. So we may look, first, at these two classes, which our Lord opposes here to one another.

'The children of this world' would have, for their natural antithesis, the children of another world. The 'children of light' would have, for their natural antithesis, 'the children of darkness.' But our Lord so orders His words as to suggest a double antithesis, one member of which has to be supplied in each case, and He would teach us that whoever the children of this world may be, they are ‘children of darkness’; and that the ‘children of light’ are so, just because they are the children of another world than this. Thus He limits His praise, because it is the sons of darkness that, in a certain sense, are wiser than the enlightened ones. And that is what makes the wonder and the inconsistency to which our Lord is pointing. We can understand a man being a consistent, thorough-paced fool all through. But men whose folly is so dashed and streaked with wisdom, and others whose wisdom is so spotted and blurred with folly, are the extraordinary paradoxes which experience of life presents to us.

The children of this world are of darkness; the children of light are the children of another world. Now I need not spend more than a sentence or two in further explaining these two antitheses. I do not intend to vindicate them, or to vindicate our Lord’s distinct classification of men into these two halves. What does He mean by the children of this world? The old Hebrew idiom, the children of so-and-so, simply suggests persons who are so fully possessed and saturated with a given quality, or who belong so entirely to a given person, as that they are spoken of as if they stood to it, or to him, in the relation of children to their parents. And a child of this world is a man whose whole thoughts, aims, and objects of life are limited and conditioned by this material present. But the word which is employed here, translated rightly enough ‘world,’ is not the same as that which is often used, especially in John’s writings, for the same idea. Although it conveys a similar idea, still it is different. The characteristic quality of the visible and material world which is set forth by the expression here employed is its transiency. ‘The children of this epoch’ rather than ‘of this world’ is the meaning of the phrase. And it suggests, not so much the inadequacy of the material to satisfy the spiritual, as the absurdity of a man fixing his hopes and limiting his aims and life-purpose within the bounds of what is destined to fade and perish. Fleeting wealth, fleeting honours, mortal loves, wisdom, and studies that pass away with the passing away of the material; these, however elevating some of them may be, however sweet some of them may be, however needful all of them are in their places, are not the things to which a man can safely lash his being, or entrust his happiness, or wisely devote his life. And therefore the men who, ignoring the fact that they live and the world passes, make themselves its slaves, and itself their object, are convicted by the very fact of the disproportion between the duration of themselves and of that which is their aim, of being children of the darkness.

Then we come to the other antithesis. The children of light are so in the measure in which their lives are not dependent exclusively upon, nor directed solely towards, the present order and condition of things. If there be a *this,* then there is a *that*. If there be an age which is qualified as being present, then that implies that there is an age or epoch which is yet to come. And that coming 'age' should regulate the whole of our relations to that age which at present is. For life is continuous, and the coming epoch is the outcome of the present. As truly as 'the child is father of the man,' so truly is Eternity the offspring of Time, and that which we are to-day determines that which we shall be through the ages. He that recognises the relations of the present and the future, who sees the small, limited things of the moment running out into the dim eternity beyond, and the track unbroken across the gulfs of death and the broad expanse of countless years, and who therefore orders the little things here so as to secure the great things yonder, he, and only he, who has made time the 'lackey to eternity,' and in his pursuit of the things seen and temporal, regards them always in the light of things unseen and eternal, is a child of light.

II. The second consideration suggested here is the limited and relative wisdom of the fools.

The children of this world, who are the children of darkness, and who at bottom are thoroughly unwise, considered relatively, 'are wiser than the children of light.' The steward is the example. 'A rogue is always'-as one of our thinkers puts it-'a roundabout fool.' He would have been a much wiser man if he had been an honester one; and, instead of tampering with his lord's goods, had faithfully administered them.

But, shutting out the consideration of the moral quality of his action, look how much there was in it that was wise, prudent, and worthy of praise. There were courage, fertility of resource, a clear insight into what was the right thing to do. There was a wise adaptation of means to an end. There was promptitude in carrying out the wise means that suggested themselves to him. The design was bad. Granted. We are not talking about goodness, but about cleverness. So, very significantly, in the parable the person cheated cannot help saying that the cheat was a clever one. The ‘lord,’ although he had suffered by it, ‘commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely.’

Did you never know in Manchester some piece of sharp practice, about which people said, ‘Ah, well, he is a clever fellow,’ and all but condoned the immorality for the sake of the smartness? The lord and the steward belong to the same level of character; and vulpine sagacity, astuteness, and qualities which ensure success in material things seem to both of them to be of the highest value. ‘The children of this world, *in their generation*’-but only in it-are wiser than the children of light.’

Now I draw a very simple, practical lesson, and it is just this, that if Christian men, in their Christian lives, would practise the virtues that the world practises, in pursuit of its shabby aims and ends, their whole Christian character would be revolutionised. Why, a boy will spend more pains in learning to whistle than half of you do in trying to cultivate your Christian character. The secret of success religiously is precisely the same as the secret of success in ordinary things. Look at the splendid qualities that go to the making of a successful housebreaker. Audacity, resource, secrecy, promptitude, persistence, skill of hand, and a hundred others, are put into play before a man can break into your back kitchen and steal your goods. Look at the qualities that go to the making of a successful amuser of people. Men will spend endless time and pains, and devote concentration, persistence, self-denial, diligence, to learning how to play upon some instrument, how to swing upon a trapeze, how to twist themselves into abnormal contortions. Jugglers and fiddlers, and circus-riders and dancers, and people of that sort spend far more time upon efforts to perfect themselves in their profession, than ninety-nine out of every hundred professing Christians do to make themselves true followers of Jesus Christ. They know that nothing is to be got without working for it, and there is nothing to be got in the Christian life without working for it any more than in any other.

Shut out the end for a moment, and look at the means. From the ranks of criminals, of amusers, and of the purely worldly men of business that we come in contact with every day, we may get lessons that ought to bring a blush to all our cheeks, when we think to ourselves how a wealth of intellectual and moral qualities and virtues, such as we do not bring to bear on our Christian lives, are by these men employed in regard of their infinitely smaller pursuits.

Oh, brethren! we ought to be our own rebukes, for it is not only other people who show forth in other fields of life the virtues that would make so much better Christians of us, if we used them in ours, but that we ourselves carry within ourselves the condemning contrast. Look at your daily life! Do you give anything like the effort to grow in the knowledge of your Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, that you do to make or maintain your position in the world? When you are working side by side with the children of this world for the same objects, you keep step with them, and are known to be diligent in business as they are. When you pass into the church, what do you do there? Are we not ice in one half of our lives, and fire in the other? We may well lay to heart these solemn words of our Lord, and take shame when we think that not only do the unwise, who choose the world as their portion, put us to shame in their self-denial, their earnestness, their absorption, their clear insight into facts, their swiftness in availing themselves of every opportunity, their persistence and their perseverance, but that we rebuke ourselves because of the difference between the earnestness with which we follow the things that are of this world, and the languor of our pursuit after the things that are unseen and eternal.

Of course the reasons for the contrast are easy enough to apprehend, and I do not need to spend time upon them. The objects that so have power to stimulate and to lash men into energy, continuously through their lives, lie at hand, and a candle near will dim the sunshine beyond. These objects appeal to sense, and such make a deeper impression than things that are shown to the mind, as every picture-book may prove to us. And we, in regard to the aims of our Christian life, have to make a continual effort to bring and keep them before us, or they are crowded out by the intrusive vulgarities and dazzling brilliances of the present. And so it comes to pass that the men who hunt after trifles that are to perish set examples to the men who say that they are pursuing eternal realities. ‘Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise.’ Go to the men of the world, thou

Christian, and do not let it be said that the devil’s scholars are more studious and earnest than Christ’s disciples.

III. Lastly, note the conclusive folly of the partially wise.

‘In their generation,’ says Christ; and that is all that can be said, The circle runs round its 360 degrees, and these people take a segment of it, say forty-five degrees, and all the rest is as non-existent. If I am to call a man a wise man out and out, there are two things that I shall have to be satisfied about concerning him. The one is, what is he aiming at? and the other, how does he aim at it? In regard to the means, the men of the world bear the bell, and carry away the supremacy. Let in the thought of the end, and things change. Two questions reduce all the world’s wisdom to stark, staring insanity. The first question is, ‘What are you doing it for?’ And the second question is, ‘And suppose you get it, what then?’ Nothing that cannot pass the barrier of these two questions satisfactorily is other than madness, if taken to be the aim of a man’s life. You have to look at the end, and the whole circumference of the circle of the human being, before you serve out the epithets of ‘wise’ and ‘foolish.’

I need not dwell on the manifest folly of men who give their lives to aims and ends of which I have already said that they are disproportioned to the capacity of the pursuer. Look at yourselves, brothers; these hearts of yours that need an infinite love for their satisfaction, these active spirits of yours that can never be at rest in creatural perfection; these troubled consciences of yours that stir and moan inarticulately over unperceived wounds until they are healed by Christ. How can any man with a heart and a will, and a progressive spirit and intellect, find what he needs in anything beneath the stars? ‘Whose image and superscription hath it? They say unto Him, Caesar’s’; we say ‘God’s.’ ‘Render unto God the things that are God’s.’ The man who makes anything but God his end and aim is relatively wise and absolutely foolish.

Let me remind you too, that the same sentence of folly passes, if we consider the disproportion between the duration of the objects and of him who makes them his aim. You live, and if you are a wise man, your treasures will be of the kind that last as long as you. ‘They call their lands after their own name; they think that their houses shall continue for ever.

They go down into the dust. Their glory shall not descend after them,’ and, therefore, ‘this, their way, is their folly.’

Brethren, all that I would say may be gathered into two words. Let there be a proportion between your aims and your capacity. That signifies, let God be your end. And let there be a correspondence between your end and your means. That signifies, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind.’ Or else, when everything comes to be squared up and settled, the epitaph on your gravestone will deservedly be; ‘Thou fool !’

74)Luke 16:10-11

Luke

TWO KINDS OF RICHES

Luk. 16:10 - Luk. 16:12.

That is a very strange parable which precedes my text, in which our Lord takes a piece of crafty dishonesty on the part of a steward who had been embezzling his lord’s money as in some sense an example for us Christian people, There are other instances in which He does the same thing, finding a soul of goodness in things evil, as, for instance, in the parable of the Unjust Judge. Similar is the New Testament treatment of war or slavery, both of which diabolical things are taken as illustrations of what in the highest sphere are noble and heavenly things.

But having delivered the parable, our Lord seems, in the verses that I have read, to anticipate the objection that the unfaithfulness of the steward can never be an example for God’s stewards; and in the words before us, amongst other things, He says substantially this, that whilst the steward’s using his lord’s wealth in order to help his lord’s debtors was a piece of knavery and unfaithfulness, in us it is not unfaithfulness, but the very acme of faithfulness. In the text we have the thought that there are two kinds of valuable things in the world, a lower and a higher; that men may be very rich in regard to the one, and very poor in regard to the other. In respect to these, ‘There is that maketh himself rich, and yet hath nothing; there is that maketh himself poor, and yet hath great riches.' More than that, the noblest use of the lower kind of possessions is to secure the possession of the highest. And so He teaches us the meaning of life, and of all that we have.

Now, there are three things in these words to which I would turn your attention-the two classes of treasure, the contrast of qualities between these two, and the noblest use of the lower.

I. The Two Classes of Treasure.

Now, we shall make a great mistake if we narrow down the interpretation of that word 'mammon' in the context [which is 'that which is least,' etc., here] to be merely money. It covers the whole ground of all possible external and material possessions, whatsoever things a man can only have in outward seeming, whatsoever things belong only to the region of sense and the present. All that is in the world, in fact, is included in the one name. And you must widen out your thoughts of what is referred to here in this prolonged contrast which our Lord runs between the two sets of treasures, so as to include, not only money, but all sorts of things that belong to this sensuous and temporal scene. And, on the other hand, there stands opposite to it, as included in, and meant by, that which is 'most,' 'that which is the true riches,' 'that which is your own'; everything that holds of the unseen and spiritual, whether it be treasures of intellect and lofty thought, or whether it be pure and noble aims, or whether it be ideals of any kind, the ideals of art, the aspirations of science, the lofty aims of the scholar and the student-all these are included. And the very same standard of excellence which declares that the treasures of a cultivated intellect, of a pure mind, of a lofty purpose, are higher than the utmost of material good, and that 'wisdom is better than rubies,' the very same standard, when applied in another direction, declares that above the treasures of the intellect and the taste are to be ranked all the mystical and great blessings which are summoned up in that mighty word salvation. And we must take a step further, for neither the treasures of the intellect, the mind, and the heart, nor the treasures of the spiritual life which salvation implies, can be realised and reached unless a man possesses God. So in the deepest analysis, and in the truest understanding of these two contrasted classes of wealth you have but the old antithesis: the world-and God. He that has God is rich, however poor he may be in reference to the other category; and he that has Him not is poor, however rich he may be. ‘The lines are fallen to me in pleasant places,’ says the Psalmist; and ‘I have a goodly heritage,’ because he could also say, ‘God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.’ So there is the antithesis, the things of time and sense, the whole mass of them knit together on the one hand; the single God alone by Himself on the other. Of these two classes of valuable things our Lord goes on next to tell us the relative worth. For we have here II. The Contrast between the Two.

That contrast is threefold, as you observe, ‘that which is least.’ or, perhaps better, ‘that which is very little.’ and ‘that which is much.’ That is a contrast in reference to degree. But degree is a shallow word, which does not cover the whole ground, nor go down to the depths. So our Lord comes next to a contrast in regard to essential nature, ‘the unrighteous mammon’ and ‘the true riches.’ But even these contrasts in degree and in kind do not exhaust all the contrasts possible, for there is another, the contrast in reference to the reality of our possession: ‘that which is another’s’; ‘that which is your own.’ Let us, then, take these three things, the contrast in degree, the contrast in kind, the contrast in regard to real possession.

First, then, and briefly, mental and spiritual and inward blessings, salvation, God, are more than all externals. Our Lord gathers all the conceivable treasures of earth, jewels and gold and dignities, and scenes of sensuous delights, and everything that holds to the visible and the temporal, and piles them into one scale, and then He puts into the other the one name, God; and the pompous nothings fly up and are nought, and have no weight at all. Is that not true? Does it need any demonstration, any more talk about it? No!

But then comes in sense and appeals to us, and says, ‘You cannot get beyond my judgment. These things are good.’ Jesus Christ does not say that they are not, but sense regards them as far better than they are. They are near us, and a very small object near us, by the laws of perspective, shuts out a mightier one beyond us. We in Manchester live in a community which is largely based on, and actuated and motived in its diligence by the lie that material good is better than spiritual good, that it is better to be a rich man and a successful merchant than to be a poor and humble and honest student; that it is better to have a balance at your bankers than to have great and pure and virginal thoughts in a clean heart; that a man has done better for himself when he has made a fortune than when he has God in his heart. And so we need, and God knows it was never more needed in Manchester than to-day, that we should preach and preach and preach, over and over again, this old-fashioned threadbare truth, which is so threadbare and certain that it has lost its power over the lives of many of us, that all that, at its mightiest, is very little, and that this, at its least, is very much. Dear brethren, you and I know how hard it is always, especially how hard it is in business lives, to keep this as our practical working faith. We say we believe, and then we go away and live as if we believed the opposite. I beseech you listen to the scale laid down by Him who knew all things in their measure and degree, and let us settle it in our souls, and live as if we had settled it, that it is better to be wise and good than to be rich and prosperous, and that God is more than a universe of worlds, if we have Him for our own.

But to talk about a contrast in degree degrades the reality, for it is no matter of difference of measurement, but it is a matter of difference of kind. And so our Lord goes on to a deeper phase of the contrast, when He pits against one another 'the unrighteous mammon' and 'the true riches.' Now, there is some difficulty in that contrast. The two significant terms do not seem to be precise opposites, and possibly they are not intended to be logically accurate counterparts of each other. But what is meant by 'the unrighteous mammon'? I do not suppose that the ordinary explanation of that verse is quite adequate. We usually suppose that by so stigmatising the material good, He means to suggest how hard it is to get it-and you all know that-and how hard it is to keep it, and how hard it is to administer it, without in some measure falling into the sin of unrighteousness. But whilst I dare say that may be the signification intended, if we were to require that the word here should be a full and correct antithesis to the other phrase, 'the true riches,' we should need to suppose that 'unrighteous' here meant that which falsely pretended to be what it was not. And so we come to the contrast between the deceitfulness of earthly good and the substantial reality of the heavenly. Will any fortune, even though it goes into seven figures, save a man from the miseries, the sorrows, the ills that flesh is heir to? Does a great estate make a man feel less desolate when he stands by his wife's coffin? Will any wealth 'minister to a mind diseased'? Will a mountain of material good calm and satisfy a man's soul? You see faces just as discontented, looking out of carriage windows, as you meet in the street. ‘Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.’ There is no proportion between abundance of external good of any kind and happy hearts. We all know that the man who is rich is not happier than the poor man. And I, for my part, believe that the raw material of happiness is very equally distributed through the world, and that it is altogether a hallucination by which a poor man thinks, ‘If I were wealthy like that other man, how different my life would be.’ No, it would not; you would be the same man. The rich man that fancies that because he is rich he is ‘better off,’ as they say, than his poor brother, and the poor man who thinks that he would be ‘better off’ if he were richer than he is now, are the same man turned inside out, so to speak; and common to both of them is that fallacy, that wealth and material good contribute much to the real blessedness and nobleness of the man who happens to own it.

But then, perhaps, we have rather to regard this unrighteous mammon as so designated from another point of view. You will remember that all through the context our Lord has been insisting on the notion of stewardship. And I take it that what He means here is to remind us that whenever we claim any of our possessions, especially our external ones, as our own, we thereby are guilty of defrauding both God and man, and are unrighteous, and it is unrighteous thereby. Stewardship is a word which describes our relation to all that we have. Forget that, and then whatever you have becomes ‘the unrighteous mammon.’ There is the point in which Christ’s teaching joins hands with a great deal of unchristian teaching in this present day which is called Socialism and Communism. Christianity is not communistic. It asserts as against other men your right of property, but it limits that right by this, that if you interpret your right of property to mean the right to ‘do what you like with your own,’ ignoring your stewardship to God, and the right of your fellows to share in what you have, then you are an unfaithful steward, and your mammon is unrighteous. And that principle, the true communism of Christianity, has to be worked into modern society in a way that some of us do not dream of, before modern society will be organised on Christian principles. These words of my text are no toothless words which are merely intended to urge Christian people on to a sentimental charity, and to a niggardly distribution of part of their possessions: but they underlie the whole conception of ownership, as the New Testament sets it forth.

Wherever the stewardship that we owe to God, and the participation that we owe to men, are neglected in regard to anything that we have, there God's good gifts are perverted and have become 'unrighteous mammon.'

And, then, on the other hand, our Lord sets forth here the contrast in regard to 'the true riches', which are such, inasmuch as they really correspond to the idea of wealth being a true good to a man, and making him rich to all the intents of bliss. He that has the treasures of a pure mind, of a lofty aim, of a quiet conscience, of a filled and satisfied and therefore calmed heart; he that has the treasure of salvation; he that has the boundless wealth of God--he has the bullion, while the poor rich people that have the material good have the scrip of an insolvent company, which is worth no more than the paper on which it is written. There are two currencies-one solid metal, the other worthless paper. The one is 'true riches,' and the other the 'unrighteous mammon.'

Then there is a last contrast, and that is with regard to the reality of our possession. On the one hand, that which I fondly call my own is by our Lord stamped with the proprietor's mark, of somebody else, 'that which is Another's.' It was His before He gave it, it was His when He gave it, it is His after He has given it. My name is never to be written on my property so as to erase the name of the Owner. I am a steward; I am a trustee; it all belongs to Him. That is one rendering of this word. But the phrase may perhaps point in another direction. It may suggest how shadowy and unreal, as being merely external, and how transitory is our ownership of wealth and outward possessions. A man says, 'It is mine.' What does he mean by that? It is not his own in any real sense. I get more good out of a rich man's pictures, or estate, if I look at them with an eye that loves them, than he does. The world belongs to the man that can enjoy it and rightly use it. And the man that enjoys it and uses it aright is the man who lives in God. Nothing is really yours except that which has entered into the substance of your soul, and become incorporated with your very being, so that, as in wool dyed in the grain, the colour will never come out. What I am, that I have; what I only have, that, in the deepest sense, I have not. 'Shrouds have no pockets,' says the Spanish proverb. 'His glory will not descend after him,' says the psalm. That is a poor possession which only is outward whilst it lasts, and which ends so soon. But there is wealth that comes into me. There are riches that cannot be parted from me. I can make my own a great inheritance, which is wrought into the very substance of my being, and will continue so inwrought, into whatsoever worlds or states of existence any future may carry me. So, and only so, is anything my own. Let these contrasts dominate our lives.

I see our space is gone; I must make this sermon a fragment, and leave what I intended to have made the last part of it for possible future consideration. Only let me press upon you in one closing word this, that the durable riches are only found in God, and the riches that can be found in God are brought to every one of us by Him 'in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,' of goodness and grace. If we will make ourselves poor, by consciousness of our need, and turn with faith to Jesus, then we shall receive from Him those riches which are greatest, which are true, which are our own in that they pass into our very being, in that they were destined for us from all eternity by the love of God; and in having them we shall be rich indeed, and for ever.

75)Luke 16:12

Luke

TWO KINDS OF RICHES

THE GAINS OF THE FAITHFUL STEWARD

Luk. 16:12.

In a recent sermon on this context I dealt mainly with the threefold comparison which our Lord runs between the higher and the lower kind of riches. The one is stigmatised as 'that which is least,' the unrighteous mammon,' 'that which is another's'; whilst the higher is magnified as being 'that which is most,' 'the true riches,' 'your own.' What are these two classes? On the one hand stand all possessions which, in and after possession, remain outside of a man, which may survive whilst he perishes, or perish while he survives. On the other hand are the riches which pass into him, and become inseparable from him. Noble aims, high aspirations, pure thoughts, treasures of wisdom, treasures of goodness-these are the real wealth corresponding to man’s nature, destined for his enrichment, and to last with him for ever. But we may gather the whole contrast into two words: the small, the ‘unrighteous,’ the wealth which being mine is not mine but remains another’s, and foreign to me, is the world. The great riches, the ‘true riches,’ the good destined for me, and for which I am destined, is God. In these two words you have the antithesis, the real antithesis, God *versus* the world.

Now let us turn rather to the principle which our Lord here lays down, in reference to these two classes of good, or of possessions. He tells us that the faithful use of the world helps us to the possession of God; or, to put it into other words, that how we handle money and what money can buy, has a great deal to do with our religious enjoyment and our religious life, and that that is true, both in regard to our partial possession of God here and now, and to our perfect possession of Him in the world to come.

Now I wish to say one or two very plain things about this matter, and I hope that you will not turn away from them because they are familiar and trite. Considering how much of your lives, especially as regards men of business, is taken up with money, its acquisition, its retention, its distribution, there are few things that have more to do with the vigour or feebleness of your Christian life than the way in which you handle these perishable things.

I wish to say a word or two, first, about I. What our Lord means by this faithfulness to which He attaches such tremendous issues.

Now, you will remember, that the starting point of my text is that parable of the unjust steward, whose conduct, knavish as it was, is in some sense presented by our Lord to His disciples, and to us, as a pattern. But my text, and the other two verses which are parallel with it, seem to have amongst their other purposes this: to put in a caveat against supposing that it is the unfaithfulness of the steward which is recommended for our imitation. And so the first point that is suggested in regard to this matter of faithfulness about the handling of outward good is that we have to take care that it is rightly acquired, for though the unjust steward was commended for the prudent use that he made of dishonestly acquired gain, it is the prudent use, and not the manner of the acquisition which we are to take as our examples. Initial unfaithfulness in acquisition is not condoned or covered over by any pious and benevolent use hereafter. Mediaeval barons left money for masses. Plenty of Protestants do exactly the same thing. Brewers will build cathedrals, and found picture galleries, and men that have made their money foully will fancy that they atone for that by leaving it for some charitable purpose. The caustic but true wit of a Scottish judge said about a great bequest which was supposed to be-whether rightly or wrongly, I know not-of that sort, that it was 'the heaviest fire insurance premium that had been paid in the memory of man.' 'The money does not stink,' said the Roman Emperor, about the proceeds of an unsavoury tax. But the money unfaithfully won does stink when it is thrown into God's treasury. 'The price of a dog shall not come into the sanctuary of the Lord.' Do not think that money doubtfully won is consecrated by being piously spent.

But there are more things than that here, for our Lord sums up the whole of a Christian man's duties in regard to the use of this external world and all its good, in that one word 'faithful,' which implies discharge of responsibility, recognition of obligation, the continual consciousness that we are not proprietors but stewards. Unless we carry that consciousness with us into all the phases of our connection with perishable goods they become-as I shall have to show you in a moment,-hindrances instead of helps to our possession of God.

I am not going to talk revolutionary socialism, or anything of that sort, but I am bound to reiterate my own solemn conviction that until, practically as well as theoretically, the Christian Church in all its branches brings into its creed, and brings out in its practice, the great thought of stewardship, especially in regard to material and external good, but also in regard to the durable riches of salvation, the nations will be full of unrest, and thunder-clouds heavily boding storm and destruction will lower on the horizon. What we have, we have that we may impart; what we have in all forms of having, we have because we have received. We are distributing centres, that is all-I was going to say like a nozzle, perforated with many holes, at the end of the spout of a watering-can. That is a Christian man's relation to his possessions. We are stewards. 'It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful' Now let me ask you to notice-

II. The bearing of this faithfulness in regard to the lower wealth on our possession of the higher.

Jesus says in this context, twice over, that faithfulness with regard to the former is the condition of our being entrusted with the latter. Now, remember, by way of illustration of this thought, what all this outward world of goodness and beauty is mainly meant for. What? It is all but scaffolding by which, and within the area of which, the building may arise. The meaning of the world is to make character. All that we have, aye! and all that we do, and the whole of the events and circumstances with which we come in contact here on earth, are then lifted to their noblest function, and are then understood in their deepest meaning when we look upon them as we do upon the leaping-poles and bars and swings of a gymnasium,-as meant to develop thews and muscles, and make men of us. That is what they are here for, and that is what we are here for. Not enjoyment, and not sorrow, except in so far as these two are powers in developing character, not plunging ourselves in the enjoyments of sense. Wealth and poverty, gain and loss, love gratified and love marred, possessions sweet, when preserved, and possessions that become sweeter by being removed; all these are simply meant as whetstones on which the keen blade may be sharpened, as forces against which, trying ourselves, our deftness and strength may be increased. They are all meant to make us men, and if we faithfully use these externals with a recognition of their source, with a wise estimate of their subordination so as that our desires shall not cleave to them solely, and with a fixed determination to use them as ministers to make ourselves nobler, wiser, stronger, liker to God and His Christ, then the world will minister to our possession of God, and being ‘faithful in that which is least,’ we shall thereby be more capable of receiving that which is greatest. But if, on the other hand, we so forget our true wealth, and become so besotted and absorbed in our adhesion to, and our desires after, fleeting good, then the capacities that were noble will fade and shrivel, being unused; aims and purposes that were elevated and pure will die out unsatisfied; windows in our souls which commanded a wide, glorious prospect will gradually be bricked up; burdens which hinder our running will be piled upon our backs, and the world will have conquered us, whilst we are dreaming that we have conquered the world. You look at a sea anemone in a pool on the rocks when the tide is out, all its tendrils outstretched, and its cavity wide open.

Some little bit of seaweed, or some morsel of half-putrefying matter, comes in contact with it, and instantly every tentacle is retracted, and the lips are tightly closed, so that you could not push a bristle in. And when your tentacles draw themselves in to clutch the little portion of worldly good, of whatever sort it is, that has come into your hold, there is no room to get God in there, and being ‘unfaithful in that which is least’ you have made it impossible that you should possess ‘that which is most.’ Ah! there are some of us that were far better Christians long ago, when we were poorer men, than we are to-day, and there are some of us that know what it is to have the heart so filled with baser liquors that there is no room for the ethereal nectar. If the world has filled my soul, where is God to dwell?

There is another way in which we may look at this matter. I have said that the main use of these perishable and fragmentary good things around us is to develop character, by our administration of them. Another way of putting the same thought is that their main use is to show us God. If we faithfully use the lesser good it will become transparent, and reveal to us the greater. We hear a great deal about deepening the spiritual life by prayers, and conventions, and Bible readings and the like. I have no word to say except in full sympathy with all such. But I do believe that the best means, the most powerful means, by which the great bulk of Christian men could deepen their spiritual lives would be a more honest and thoroughgoing attempt to ‘be faithful in that which is least.’ We have so much to do with it necessarily, that few, if any, things have more power in shaping our whole characters than our manner of administering the wealth, the material good, that comes to our hands.

And so, dear brethren, I beseech you remember that the laws of perspective are such as that a minute thing near at hand shuts out the vision of a mighty thing far off, and a hillock by my side will hide the Himalayas at a distance, and a sovereign may block out God; and ‘that which is least’ has the diabolical power of seeming greater to us than, and of obscuring our vision of, ‘that which is most.’

May I remind you that all these thoughts about the bearing of faithfulness in administering the lower of our possessions, on the attainment of higher, apply to us whatever be the amount of these outward goods that we have? I suppose there were not twelve poorer men in all Palestine that day than the twelve to whom my text was originally addressed. Three of them had left their nets and their fishing-boats, one of them we know had left his counting-house, as a publican, and all his receipts and taxes behind him. What they had we know not, but at all events they were the poor of this world. Do not any of you that happen to be modestly or poorly off think that my sermon is a sermon for rich men. It is not what we have, but how we handle it, that is in question. ‘The cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches,’ were bracketed together by Jesus Christ as the things that ‘choke the word,’ and make it unfruitful. The poor man who wants, and the rich man who uses unfaithfully, are alike hit by the words of my text.

Now, further, let me ask you to look at III. The bearing of faithfulness in this life on the fuller possession of our true riches in the life hereafter.

There lies under this whole context a striking conception of life here in its relation to the life hereafter, A father sets his son, or a master sets his apprentice, to some small task, an experiment made upon a comparatively worthless body, supplies him with material which it does not much matter whether he spoils or not, and then if by practice the hand becomes deft, he is set to better work. God sets us to try our ‘prentice hands here in the world, and if we administer that rightly, not necessarily perfectly, but so as to show that there are the makings of a good workman in us by His gracious help, then the next life comes, with its ampler margin, with its wider possibilities, with its nobler powers, and there we are set to use in loftier fashion the powers which we made our own being here. ‘Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things.’

I have said that the great use of the world and all its wealth is to make character. I have said that that character determines our capacity for the possession of God. I have said that our administration of worldly wealth is one chief factor in determining our character. Now I say that that character persists. There are great changes, changes the significance and the scope and the consequences of which we can never know here. But the man remains, in the main direction of his being, in the character which he has made for himself by his use of God’s world and of Christ’s Spirit. And so the way in which we handle the trivialities and temporalities here has eternal consequences. We sit in a low room with the telegraph instrument in front of us, and we click off our messages, and they are recorded away yonder, and we shall have to read them one day. Transient causes produce permanent effects. The seas which laid down the great sandstone deposits that make so large a portion of the framework of this world have long since evaporated. But the footprints of the seabird that stalked across the moist sand, and the little pits made by the raindrops that fell countless millenniums ago on the red ooze, are there yet, and you may see them in our museums. And so our faithfulness, or our unfaithfulness, here has made the character which is eternal, and on which will depend whether we shall, in the joys of that future life, possess God in fullness, or whether we shall lose Him, as our portion and our Friend.

Now, dear brethren, do not forget that all this that I have been saying is the second page in Christ's teaching; and the first page is an entirely different one. I have been saying that we make character, and that character determines our possession of God and His grace. But there is another thing to be said. The central thought of Christ's gospel is that God, in His sweetness, in His pardoning mercy, in His cleansing Spirit, is given to the very men whose characters do not deserve it. And the same Lord who said, 'If ye have not been faithful in that which is least, who shall give you that which is greatest?' says also from the heavens,' I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich.' My text, and the principle that is involved in it, do not contradict the great truth that we are saved by simple faith, however unworthy we are. That is the message to begin with. And unless you have received it you are not standing in the place where the message that I have been insisting upon has a personal bearing on you. But if you have taken Christ for your salvation, remember, Christian brother and sister, that it is not the same thing in regard either to your Christian life on earth, or to your heavenly glory, whether you have been living faithfully as stewards in your handling of earth's perishable good, or whether you have clung to it as your real portion, have used it selfishly, and by it have hidden God from your hearts. To Christian men is addressed the charge that we trust not in the uncertainty of riches, but in the living God, and that we be 'rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate, that we lay up in store for ourselves a good foundation against the time to come'; and so 'lay hold on the life that is life indeed.'

76) Luke 16:19-24

Luke

DIVES AND LAZARUS

Luk. 16:19 - Luk. 16:31.

This, the sternest of Christ's parables, must be closely connected with verses 13 and 14. Keeping them in view, its true purpose is plain. It is meant to rebuke, not the possession of wealth, but its heartless, selfish use. Christ never treats outward conditions as having the power of determining either character or destiny. What a man does with his conditions settles what he is and what becomes of him. Nor does the parable teach that the use of wealth is the only determining factor, but, as every parable must do, it has to isolate the lesson it teaches in order to burn it into the hearers.

There are three parts in the story-the conduct of the rich man, his fate, and the sufficiency of existing warnings to keep us from his sin and his end.

I. Properly speaking, we have here, not a parable-that is, a representation of physical facts which have to be translated into moral or religious truths-but an imaginary narrative, embodying a normal fact in a single case.

The rich man does not stand for something else, but is one of the class of which Jesus wishes to set forth the sin and fate. It is very striking that neither he nor the beggar is represented as acting, but each is simply described. The juxtaposition of the two figures carries the whole lesson.

It has sometimes been felt as a difficulty that the one is not said to have done anything bad, nor the other to have been devout or good; and some hasty readers have thought that Jesus was here teaching the communistic doctrine that wealth is sin, and that poverty is virtue. No such crude trash came from His lips. But He does teach that heartless wallowing in luxury, with naked, starving beggars at the gate, is sin which brings bitter retribution. The fact that the rich man does nothing is His condemnation. He was not damned because he had a purple robe and fine linen undergarments, nor because he had lived in abundance, and every meal had been a festival, but because, while so living, he utterly ignored Lazarus, and used his wealth only for his own gratification. Nothing more needs to be said about his character; the facts sufficiently show it.

Still less needs to be said about that of Lazarus. In this part of the narrative he comes into view simply as the means of bringing out the rich man’s heartlessness and self-indulgence. For the purposes of the narrative his disposition was immaterial; for it is not our duty to help only deserving or good people. Manhood and misery are enough to establish the right to sympathy and succour. There may be a hint of character in the name ‘Lazarus,’ which probably means ‘God is help.’ Since this is the only name in the parables, it is natural to give it significance, and it most likely suggests that the beggar clung to God as his stay. It may glance, too, at the riddle of life, which often seems to mock trust by continued trouble. Little outward sign had Lazarus of divine help, yet he did not cast away his confidence. No doubt, he sometimes got some crumbs from Dives’ table, but not from Dives. That the dogs licked his sores does not seem meant as either alleviation or aggravation, but simply as vividly describing his passive helplessness and utterly neglected condition. Neither he nor any one drove them off.

But the main point about him is that he was at Dives’ gate, and therefore thrust before Dives’ notice, and that he got no help. The rich man was not bound to go and hunt for poor people, but here was one pushed under his nose, as it were. Translate that into general expressions, and it means that we all have opportunities of beneficence laid in our paths, and that our guilt is heavy if we neglect these. ‘The poor ye have always with you.’ The guilt of selfish use of worldly possessions is equally great whatever is the amount of possessions. Doing nothing when Lazarus lies at our gate is doing great wickedness. These truths have a sharp edge for us as well as for the ‘Pharisees who were covetous’; and they are wofully forgotten by professing Christians.

II. In the second part of the narrative, our Lord follows the two, who had been so near each other and yet so separated, into the land beyond the grave.

It is to be especially noticed that, in doing so, He adopts the familiar Rabbinical teaching as to Hades. He does not thereby stamp these conceptions of the state of the dead with His assent; for the purpose of the narrative is not to reveal the secrets of that land, but to impress the truth of retribution for the sin in question. It would not be to a group of Pharisaic listeners that He would have unveiled that world.

He takes their own notions of it-angel bearers, Abraham's bosom, the two divisions in Hades, the separation, and yet communication, between them. These are Rabbis' fancies, not Christ's revelations. The truths which He wished to force home lie in the highly imaginative conversation between the rich man and Abraham, which also has its likeness in many a Rabbinical legend.

The difference between the ends of the two men has been often noticed, and lessons, perhaps not altogether warranted, drawn from it. But it seems right to suppose that the omission of any notice of the beggar's burial is meant to bring out that the neglect and pitilessness, which had let him die, left his corpse unburied. Perhaps the dogs that had licked his sores tore his flesh. A fine sight that would be from the rich man's door! The latter had to die too, for all his purple, and to be swathed in less gorgeous robes. His funeral is mentioned, not only because pomp and ostentation went as far as they could with him, but to suggest that he had to leave them all behind. 'His glory shall not descend after him.'

The terrible picture of the rich man's torments solemnly warns us of the necessary end of a selfish life such as his. The soul that lives to itself does not find satisfaction even here; but, when all externals are left behind, it cannot but be in torture. That is not drapery. Character makes destiny, and to live to self is death. Observe, too, that the relative positions of Dives and Lazarus are reversed-the beggar being now the possessor of abundance and delights, while the rich man is the sufferer and the needy.

Further note that the latter now desires to have from the former the very help which in life he had not given him, and that the retribution for refusing succour here is its denial hereafter. There had been no sharing of 'good things' in the past life, but the rich man had asserted his exclusive rights to them. They had been 'thy good things' in a very sinful sense, and Lazarus had bean left to carry his evil things alone. There shall be no communication of good now. Earth was the place for mutual help and impartation. That world affords no scope for it; for there men reap what they have sown, and each character has to bear its own burden.

Finally, the ineffaceableness of distinctions of character, and therefore of destiny, is set forth by the solemn image of the great gulf which cannot be crossed. It is indeed to be remembered that our Lord is speaking of ‘the intermediate state,’ before resurrection and final judgment, and that, as already remarked, the intention of the narrative is not to reveal the mysteries of the final state. But still the impression left by the whole is that life here determines life hereafter, and that character, once set and hardened here, cannot be cast into the melting-pot and remoulded there.

III. The last part of the narrative teaches that the fatal sin of heartless selfishness is inexcusable.

The rich man’s thought for his brethren was quite as much an excuse for himself. He thought that, if he had only known, things would have been different. He shifts blame from himself on to the insufficiency of the warnings given him. And the two answers put into Abraham’s mouth teach the sufficiency of ‘Moses and the prophets,’ little as these say about the future, and the impossibility of compelling men to listen to a divine message to which they do not wish to listen.

The fault lies, not in the deficiency of the warnings, but in the aversion of the will. No matter whether it is Moses or a spirit from Hades who speaks, if men do not wish to hear, they will not hear. They will not be persuaded-for persuasion has as much, or more, to do with the heart and inclination than with the head. We have as much witness from heaven as we need. The worst man knows more of duty than the best man does. Dives is in torments because he lived for self; and he lived for self, not because he did not know that it was wrong, but because he did not choose to do what he knew to be right.

77)Luke 16:25

DIVES AND LAZARUS

MEMORY IN ANOTHER WORLD

Luk. 16:25.

It is a very striking thought that Christ, if He be what we suppose Him to be, knew all about the unseen present which we call the future, and yet was all but silent in reference to it. Seldom is it on His lips at all. Of arguments drawn from another world He has very few. Sometimes He speaks about it, but rather by allusion than in anything like an explicit revelation. This parable out of which my text is taken, is perhaps the most definite and continuous of His words about the invisible world; and yet all the while it lay there before Him; and standing on the very verge of it, with it spread out clear before His gaze, He reads off but a word or two of what He sees, and then shuts it in in darkness, and says to us, in the spirit of a part of this parable, 'You have Moses and the prophets-hear them: if these are not enough, it will not be enough for you if all the glories of heaven and all the ghastliness of hell are flashed and flamed before you.' We, too, if we are to 'prophesy according to the proportion of faith,' must not leave out altogether references to a future life in its two departments, and such motives as may be based upon them; only, I think, we ought always to keep them in the same relative amount to the whole of our teaching in which Christ kept them.

This parable, seeing that it *is* a parable, of course cannot be trusted as if it were a piece of simple dogmatic revelation, to give us information, facts, so as to construct out of it a theory of the other world. We are always in the double danger in parables, of taking that for drapery which was meant to be essence, and taking that for essence which was meant to be drapery. And so I do not profess to read from this narrative any very definite and clear knowledge of the future; but I think that in the two words which I have ventured to take as a text, we get the basis of very impressive thoughts with regard to the functions of memory in another world.

‘Son, remember!’ It is the voice, the first voice, the perpetual voice, which meets every man when he steps across the threshold of earth into the presence chamber of eternity. All the future is so built upon and interwoven with the past, that for the saved and for the lost alike this word might almost be taken as the motto of their whole situation, as the explanation of their whole condition. Memory in another world is indispensable to the gladness of the glad, and strikes the deepest note in the sadness of the lost. There can be no need to dwell at any length on the simple introductory thought, that there must be memory in a future state. Unless there were remembrance, there could be no sense of individuality. A man cannot have any conviction that he is himself, but by constant, though often unconscious, operation of this subtle act of remembrance. There can be no sense of personal identity except in proportion as there is clearness of recollection. Then again, if that future state be a state of retribution, there must be memory. Otherwise, there might be joy, and there might be sorrow, but the why and the wherefore of either would be entirely struck out of a man’s consciousness, and the one could not be felt as reward, nor the other as punishment. If, then, we are to rise from the grave the same men that we are laid in it, and if the future life has this for its characteristic, that it is a state either of recompense and reward, or of retribution and suffering, then, for both, the clearness and constant action, of memory are certainly needed. But it is not to the simple fact of its existence that I desire to direct your attention now. I wish, rather, to suggest to you one or two modifications under which it must apparently work in another world. When men remember *there*, they will remember very differently from the way in which they remember *here*. Let us look at these changes-constituting it, on the one hand, an instrument of torture; and, on the other, a foundation of all our gladness.

I. First, in another state, memory will be so widened as to take in the whole life.

We believe that what a man is in this life, he is more in another, that tendencies here become results yonder, that his sin, that his falsehood, that his whole moral nature, be it good or bad, becomes there what it is only striving to be here. We believe that in this present life our capacities of all sorts are hedged in, thwarted, damped down, diluted, by the necessity which there is for their working through this material body of ours. We believe that death is the heightening of a man's stature-if he be bad, the intensifying of his badness; if he be good, the strengthening of his goodness. We believe that the contents of the intellectual nature, the capacities of that nature also, are all increased by the fact of having done with earth and having left the body behind. It is, I think, the teaching of common-sense, and it is the teaching of the Bible. True, that for some, that growth will only be a growth into greater power of feeling greater sorrow. Such an one grows up into a Hercules; but it is only that the Nessus shirt may wrap round him more tightly, and may gnaw him with a fiercer agony. But whether saved or lost-he that dies is greater than when yet living; and all his powers are intensified and strengthened by that awful experience of death and by what it brings with it.

Memory partakes in the common quickening. There are not wanting analogies and experiences in our present life to let us see that, in fact, when we talk about forgetting we ought to mean nothing more than the temporary cessation of conscious remembrance. Everything which you do leaves its effect with you for ever, just as long-forgotten meals are in your blood and bones to-day. Every act that a man performs is there. It has printed itself upon his soul, it has become a part of himself: and though, like a newly painted picture, after a little while the colours sink in, why is that? Only because they have entered into the very fibre of the canvas, and have left the surface because they are incorporated with the substance, and they want but a touch of varnish to flash out again! We forget *nothing*, in the sense of not being able, some time or another, to recall it; we forget much in the sense of ceasing for a time to have it in our thoughts.

For we know, in our own case, how strangely there come swimming up before us, out of the depths of the dim waters of oblivion-as one has seen some bright shell drawn from the sunless sea-caves, and gleaming white and shapeless far down before we had it on the surface-past thoughts, we know not whence or how. Some one of the million of hooks, with which all our life is furnished, has laid hold of some subtle suggestion which has been enough to bring them up into consciousness. We said we had forgotten them. What does it mean? Only that they had sunk into the deep, beneath our consciousness, and lay there to be brought up when needful. There is nothing more strange than the way in which some period of my life, that I supposed to be an entire blank-if I will think about it for a little while, begins to glimmer into form. As the developing solution brings out the image on the photographic plate, so the mind has the strange power, by fixing the attention, as we say [a short word which means a long, mysterious thing] upon that past that is half-remembered and half-forgotten, of bringing it into clear consciousness and perfect recollection. And, there are instances, too, of a still more striking kind, familiar to some of us how in what people call morbid states, men remember their childhood, which they had forgotten for long years. You may remember that old story of the dying woman beginning to speak in a tongue unknown to all that stood around her bed. When a child she had learned some northern language, in a far-off land. Long before she had learned to shape any definite remembrances of the place, she had been taken away, and not having used, had forgotten the speech. But at last there rushed up again all the old memories, and the tongue of the dumb was loosed, and she spake! People would say, 'the action of disease.' It may be, but that explains nothing. Perhaps in such states the spirit is working in a manner less limited by the body than in health, and so showing some slight prelude of its powers when it has shuffled off this mortal coil. But be that as it may, these morbid phenomena, and the other more familiar facts already referred to, unite to show us that the sphere of recollection is much wider than that occupied at any given moment by memory. Recollection is the servant of Memory, as our great poet tells us in his wise allegory, and

'does on him still attend,
To reach whenever he for ought does send.'

We cannot lay aside anything that we have ever done or been so utterly but that that servant can find it and bring it to his lord. We forget nothing so completely but that we shall be able to recall it. Of that awful power we may say, without irreverence, 'Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.'

The fragmentary remembrances which we have now, lift themselves above the ocean of forgetfulness like islands in some Archipelago, the summits of sister hills, though separated by the estranging sea that covers their converging sides and the valleys where their roots unite. The solid land is there, though hidden. Drain off the sea, and there will be no more isolated peaks, but continuous land. In this life we have but the island memories heaving themselves into sight, but in the next the Lord shall ‘cause the sea to go back by the breath of His mouth,’ and the channels of the great deep of a human heart’s experiences and actions shall be laid bare. ‘There shall be no more sea’; but the solid land of a whole life will appear when God says, ‘Son, remember!’ So much, then, for my first consideration-namely, that memory in a future state will comprehend the whole of life. Another thing is, that memory in a future state will probably be so rapid as to embrace all the past life at once. We do not know, we have no conception of, the extent to which our thinking, and feeling, and remembrance, are made tardy by the slow vehicle of this bodily organisation in which the soul rides. But we have in our own lives instances enough to make us feel that there lie in us dormant, mysterious powers by which the rapidity of all our operations of thought and feeling will be enhanced marvellously, like the difference between a broad-wheeled waggon and an express train! At some turning point of your life, when some great joy flashed, or some great shadow darkened upon you all at once; when some crisis that wanted an instantaneous decision appeared-why, what regions of thought, purpose, plan, resolution; what wilderness of desolate sorrow, and what paradises of blooming gladness, your soul has gone through in a moment. Well, then, take another illustration: A sleeper, feeling a light finger laid upon his shoulder, does not know what it is; in an instant he awakes and says, ‘Is it you?’ but between that touch and that word there may be a whole life run through, a whole series of long events dreamt and felt. As on the little retina of an eye there can be painted on a scale inconceivably minute, every tree and mountain-top in the whole wide panorama-so, in an instant, one may run through almost a whole lifetime of mental acts. Then, again, you remember that illustration, often used on this subject, about the experience of those who have been brought face to face with sudden death, and escaped it. The drowning man, when he comes to himself, tells us, that in the interval betwixt the instant when he felt he was going and the passing away of consciousness, all his life stood before him; as if some flash in a dark midnight had lighted up a whole mountain country-there it all was! Ah, brethren! we know nothing yet about the rapidity with which we may gather before us a whole series of events; so that although we have to pass from one to another, the succession may be so swift, as to produce in our own minds the effect of all being co-existent and simultaneous. As the child flashing about him a bit of burning stick, may seem to make a circle of flame, because the flame-point moves so quickly-so memory, though it does go from point to point, and dwells for some inconceivably minute instant on each part of the remembrance, may yet be gifted with such lightning speed, with such rapidity and awful quickness of glance, as that to the man himself the effect shall be that his whole life is spread out there before him in one instant, and that he, Godlike, sees the end and the beginning side by side. Yes; from the mountain of eternity we shall look down, and behold the whole plain spread before us. Down here we get lost and confused in the devious valleys that run off from the roots of the hills everywhere, and we cannot make out which way the streams are going, and what there is behind that low shoulder of hill yonder: but when we get to the summit peak, and look down, it will all shape itself into one consistent whole, and we shall see it all at once. The memory shall be perfect-perfect in the range of its grasp, and perfect in the rapidity with which it brings up all its objects before us at every instant.

Once more: it seems as if, in another world, memory would not only contain the whole life, and the whole life simultaneously; but would perpetually attend or haunt us. A constant remembrance! It does not lie in our power even in this world, to decide very much whether we shall remember or forget. It does not come within a man's will to forget or to remember. He cannot say, 'I will remember'; for if he could, he would have remembered already. He cannot say, 'I will forget'; for the very effort fixes his attention on the obnoxious thing. All that we can do, when we seek to remember, is to wander back to somewhere about that point in our life where the shy thing lurks, and hope to catch some sight of it in the leafy coverts: and all we can do, when we want to forget, is to try and fill our mind with other subjects, and in the distractions of them to lose the oppressive and burdensome thoughts. But we know that that is but a partial remedy, that we cannot succeed in doing it. There are presences that will not be put by. There are memories that *will* start up before us, whether we are willing or not. Like the leprosy in the Israelite's house, the foul spot works its way out through all the plaster and the paint; and the house is foul because it is there. Oh, my friend! you are a happy and a singular man if there is nothing in your life that you have tried to bury, and the obstinate thing *will* not be buried, but meets you again when you come away from its fancied grave. I remember an old castle where they tell us of a foul murder committed in a vaulted chamber with a narrow window, by torchlight one night; and there, they say, there are the streaks and stains of blood on the black oak floor; and they have planed, and scrubbed, and planed again, and thought they were gone-but there they always are, and continually up comes the dull reddish-black stain, as if oozing itself out through the boards to witness to the bloody crime again! The superstitious fable is a type of the way in which a foul thing, a sinful and bitter memory-gets ingrained into a man's heart. He tries to banish it, and gets rid of it for a while. He goes back again, and the spots are there, and will be there for ever; and the only way to get rid of them is to destroy the soul in which they are.

Memory is not all within the power of the will on earth: and probably, memory in another world is still more involuntary and still more constant. Why? Because I read in the Bible that there is work in another world for God's servants to do; but I do not read that there is work for anybody else but God’s servants to do. The work of an unforgiven sinner is done when he dies, and that not only because he is going into the state of retribution, but because no rebel’s work is going to be suffered in that world. The time for that is past. And so, if you will look, all the teachings of the Bible about the future state of those who are not in blessedness, give us this idea-a monotonous continuance of idleness, shutting them up to their own contemplations, the memories of the past and the agonies of the future. There are no distractions for such a man in another world. He has thought, he has conscience, he has remembrance. He has a sense of pain, of sin, of wrong, of loss. He has one ‘passive fixed endurance, all eternal and the same’; but I do not read that his pain is anodyned and his sorrow soothed by any activity that his hand finds to do. And, in a most tragic sense, we may say, ‘there is neither work, nor labour, nor device,’ in that dark world where the fruits of sin are reaped in monotonous suffering and ever-present pain. A memory, brethren, that *will* have its own way-what a field for sorrow and lamentation that is, when God says at last, ‘Now go-go apart; take thy life with thee; read it over; see what thou hast done with it!’ One old Roman tyrant had a punishment in which he bound the dead body of the murdered to the living body of the murderer, and left them there scaffolded. And when that voice comes, ‘Son, remember!’ to the living soul of the godless, unbelieving, impenitent man, there is bound to him the murdered past, the dead past, his own life; and, in Milton’s awful and profound words,

‘Which way I fly is hell-myself am hell!’

There is only one other modification of this awful faculty that I would remind you of; and that is, that in a future life memory will be associated with a perfectly accurate knowledge of the consequences and a perfectly sensitive conscience as to the criminality of the past. You will have cause and consequence put down before you, meeting each other at last. There will be no room then to say, ‘I wonder how such and such a thing will work out,’ ‘I wonder how such a thing can have come upon me’; but every one will have his whole life to look back upon, and will see the childish sin that was the parent of the full-grown vice, and the everlasting sorrow that came out of that little and apparently transitory root. The conscience, which here becomes hardened by contact with sin, and enfeebled because unheeded, will then be restored to its early sensitiveness and power, as if the labourer’s horny palm were to be endowed again with the softness of the infant’s little hand. If you will take and think about that, brother, *there* is enough-without any more talk, without any more ghastly, sensual external figures-*there* is enough to make the boldest tremble; a memory embracing all the past, a memory rapidly grasping and constantly bringing its burden, a judgment which admits of no mistakes, and a conscience which has done with palliations and excuses!

It is not difficult to see how that is an instrument of torture. It is more difficult to see how such a memory can be a source of gladness; and yet it can. The old Greeks were pressed with that difficulty: they said to themselves, If a man remembers, there can be no Elysium for him. And so they put the river of forgetfulness, the waters of Lethe, betwixt life and the happy plains. Ah, *we* do not want any river of oblivion betwixt us and everlasting blessedness. Calvary is on this side, and that is enough! Certainly it is one of the most blessed things about ‘the faith that is in Christ Jesus,’ that it makes a man remember his own sinfulness with penitence, not with pain-that it makes the memory of past transgressions full of solemn joy, because the memory of *past* transgressions but brings to mind the depth and rushing fullness of that river of love which has swept them all away as far as the east is from the west. Oh, brother, brother! you cannot forget your sins; but it lies within your own decision whether the remembrance shall be thankfulness and blessedness, or whether it shall be pain and loss for ever. Like some black rock that heaves itself above the surface of a sunlit sea, and the wave runs dashing over it, and the spray, as it falls down its sides, is all rainbowed and lightened, and there comes beauty into the mighty grimness of the black thing;-so a man’s transgressions rear themselves up, and God’s great love, coming sweeping itself against them and over them, makes out of the sin an occasion for the flashing more brightly of the beauty of His mercy, and turns the life of the pardoned penitent into a life of which even the sin is not pain to remember. So, then, lay your hand upon Christ Jesus. Put your heart into His keeping. Go to Him with your transgressions, He will forget them, and make it possible for you to remember them in such a way that the memory will become to you the very foundation of all your joy, and will make heaven’s anthem deeper and more harmonious when you say, ‘Now unto Him that hath washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God, unto

Him be glory for ever and ever!' And, on the other hand, *if not*, then, 'Son, remember!' will be the word that begins the future retribution, and shuts you up with a wasted past, with a gnawing conscience, and an upbraiding heart: to say,

'I backward cast my ee

On prospects drear!

And forward, though I canna see,

I guess and fear!'

78)Luke 16:26-31

Luke

DIVES AND LAZARUS

Luk. 16:19 - Luk. 16:31.

This, the sternest of Christ's parables, must be closely connected with verses 13 and 14. Keeping them in view, its true purpose is plain. It is meant to rebuke, not the possession of wealth, but its heartless, selfish use. Christ never treats outward conditions as having the power of determining either character or destiny. What a man does with his conditions settles what he is and what becomes of him. Nor does the parable teach that the use of wealth is the only determining factor, but, as every parable must do, it has to isolate the lesson it teaches in order to burn it into the hearers.

There are three parts in the story-the conduct of the rich man, his fate, and the sufficiency of existing warnings to keep us from his sin and his end.

I. Properly speaking, we have here, not a parable-that is, a representation of physical facts which have to be translated into moral or religious truths-but an imaginary narrative, embodying a normal fact in a single case.

The rich man does not stand for something else, but is one of the class of which Jesus wishes to set forth the sin and fate. It is very striking that neither he nor the beggar is represented as acting, but each is simply described. The juxtaposition of the two figures carries the whole lesson.

It has sometimes been felt as a difficulty that the one is not said to have done anything bad, nor the other to have been devout or good; and some hasty readers have thought that Jesus was here teaching the communistic doctrine that wealth is sin, and that poverty is virtue. No such crude trash came from His lips. But He does teach that heartless wallowing in luxury, with naked, starving beggars at the gate, is sin which brings bitter retribution. The fact that the rich man does nothing is His condemnation. He was not damned because he had a purple robe and fine linen undergarments, nor because he had lived in abundance, and every meal had been a festival, but because, while so living, he utterly ignored Lazarus, and used his wealth only for his own gratification. Nothing more needs to be said about his character; the facts sufficiently show it.

Still less needs to be said about that of Lazarus. In this part of the narrative he comes into view simply as the means of bringing out the rich man's heartlessness and self-indulgence. For the purposes of the narrative his disposition was immaterial; for it is not our duty to help only deserving or good people. Manhood and misery are enough to establish the right to sympathy and succour. There may be a hint of character in the name 'Lazarus,' which probably means 'God is help.' Since this is the only name in the parables, it is natural to give it significance, and it most likely suggests that the beggar clung to God as his stay. It may glance, too, at the riddle of life, which often seems to mock trust by continued trouble. Little outward sign had Lazarus of divine help, yet he did not cast away his confidence. No doubt, he sometimes got some crumbs from Dives' table, but not from Dives. That the dogs licked his sores does not seem meant as either alleviation or aggravation, but simply as vividly describing his passive helplessness and utterly neglected condition. Neither he nor any one drove them off.

But the main point about him is that he was at Dives' gate, and therefore thrust before Dives' notice, and that he got no help. The rich man was not bound to go and hunt for poor people, but here was one pushed under his nose, as it were. Translate that into general expressions, and it means that we all have opportunities of beneficence laid in our paths, and that our guilt is heavy if we neglect these. ‘The poor ye have always with you.’ The guilt of selfish use of worldly possessions is equally great whatever is the amount of possessions. Doing nothing when Lazarus lies at our gate is doing great wickedness. These truths have a sharp edge for us as well as for the ‘Pharisees who were covetous’; and they are wofully forgotten by professing Christians.

II. In the second part of the narrative, our Lord follows the two, who had been so near each other and yet so separated, into the land beyond the grave.

It is to be especially noticed that, in doing so, He adopts the familiar Rabbinical teaching as to Hades. He does not thereby stamp these conceptions of the state of the dead with His assent; for the purpose of the narrative is not to reveal the secrets of that land, but to impress the truth of retribution for the sin in question. It would not be to a group of Pharisaic listeners that He would have unveiled that world.

He takes their own notions of it-angel bearers, Abraham’s bosom, the two divisions in Hades, the separation, and yet communication, between them. These are Rabbis’ fancies, not Christ’s revelations. The truths which He wished to force home lie in the highly imaginative conversation between the rich man and Abraham, which also has its likeness in many a Rabbinical legend.

The difference between the ends of the two men has been often noticed, and lessons, perhaps not altogether warranted, drawn from it. But it seems right to suppose that the omission of any notice of the beggar’s burial is meant to bring out that the neglect and pitilessness, which had let him die, left his corpse unburied. Perhaps the dogs that had licked his sores tore his flesh. A fine sight that would be from the rich man’s door! The latter had to die too, for all his purple, and to be swathed in less gorgeous robes. His funeral is mentioned, not only because pomp and ostentation went as far as they could with him, but to suggest that he had to leave them all behind. ‘His glory shall not descend after him.’

The terrible picture of the rich man's torments solemnly warns us of the necessary end of a selfish life such as his. The soul that lives to itself does not find satisfaction even here; but, when all externals are left behind, it cannot but be in torture. That is not drapery. Character makes destiny, and to live to self is death. Observe, too, that the relative positions of Dives and Lazarus are reversed-the beggar being now the possessor of abundance and delights, while the rich man is the sufferer and the needy.

Further note that the latter now desires to have from the former the very help which in life he had not given him, and that the retribution for refusing succour here is its denial hereafter. There had been no sharing of 'good things' in the past life, but the rich man had asserted his exclusive rights to them. They had been 'thy good things' in a very sinful sense, and Lazarus had bean left to carry his evil things alone. There shall be no communication of good now. Earth was the place for mutual help and impartation. That world affords no scope for it; for there men reap what they have sown, and each character has to bear its own burden.

Finally, the ineffaceableness of distinctions of character, and therefore of destiny, is set forth by the solemn image of the great gulf which cannot be crossed. It is indeed to be remembered that our Lord is speaking of 'the intermediate state,' before resurrection and final judgment, and that, as already remarked, the intention of the narrative is not to reveal the mysteries of the final state. But still the impression left by the whole is that life here determines life hereafter, and that character, once set and hardened here, cannot be cast into the melting-pot and remoulded there.

III. The last part of the narrative teaches that the fatal sin of heartless selfishness is inexcusable.

The rich man's thought for his brethren was quite as much an excuse for himself. He thought that, if he had only known, things would have been different. He shifts blame from himself on to the insufficiency of the warnings given him. And the two answers put into Abraham's mouth teach the sufficiency of 'Moses and the prophets,' little as these say about the future, and the impossibility of compelling men to listen to a divine message to which they do not wish to listen.

The fault lies, not in the deficiency of the warnings, but in the aversion of the will. No matter whether it is Moses or a spirit from Hades who speaks, if men do not wish to hear, they will not hear. They will not be persuaded-for persuasion has as much, or more, to do with the heart and inclination than with the head. We have as much witness from heaven as we need. The worst man knows more of duty than the best man does. Dives is in torments because he lived for self; and he lived for self, not because he did not know that it was wrong, but because he did not choose to do what he knew to be right.

79)Luke 17:9-10

Luke

GOD'S SLAVES

Luk. 17:9 - Luk. 17:10.

There are two difficulties about these words. One is their apparent entire want of connection with what precedes-viz., the disciples' prayer, 'Lord, increase our faith,' and the other is the harshness and severity of tone which marks them, and the view of the less attractive side of man's relation to God which is thrown into prominence in them. He must be a very churlish master who never says 'Thank you,' however faithful his servant's obedience may be. And he must be a very inconsiderate master, who has only another kind of duty to lay upon the shoulders of the servant that has come in after a long day's ploughing and feeding of cattle. Perhaps, however, the one difficulty clears away the other, and if we keep firm hold of the thought that the words of my text, and those which are associated with them, are an answer to the prayer, 'Lord, increase our faith,' the stern and somewhat repelling characteristics of the words may somewhat change.

I. So I look, first, at the husk of apparent harshness and severity.

The relation between master and hired servant is not the one that is in view, but the relation between a master and the slave who is his property, who has no rights, who has no possessions, whose life and death and everything connected with him are at the absolute disposal of his master. It is a foul and wicked relation when existing between men, and it has been full of cruelty and atrocities. But Jesus Christ lays His hand upon it, and says, ‘That is the relation between men and God; that is the relation between men and Me.’

And what is involved therein? Absolute authority; so that the slave is but, as it were, an animated instrument in the hand of the master, with no will of his own, and no rights and no possessions. That is not all of our relation to God, blessed be His Name! But that is *in* our relation to Him, and the highest title that a man can have is the title which the Apostles in after days bound upon their foreheads as a crown of honour-’A slave of Jesus Christ.’

Then, if that relation is laid as being the basis of all our connection with God, whatever else there may be also involved, these two things which in the human relation are ugly and inconsiderate, and argue a very churlish and selfish nature on the part of the human master, belong essentially to our relation to God. ‘Which of you, having a servant, ploughing or feeding cattle, will say unto him . . . when he has come from the field, Go [immediately] and sit down to meat, and will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken: and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?’ You will get your supper by-and-by, but you are here to work, says the master, and when you have finished one task, that does not involve that you are to rest; it involves only that you are to take up another. And however wearisome has been the ploughing amongst the heavy clods all day long, and tramping up and down the furrows, when you come in you are to clean yourself up, and get my supper ready, ‘and afterward thou shalt eat and drink.’

As I have said, such a speech would argue a harsh human master, but is there not a truth which is not harsh in it in reference to us and God? Duty never ends. The eternal persistence through life of the obligation to service is what is taught us here, as being inherent in the very relation between the Lord and Owner of us all and us His slaves. Moralists and irreligious teachers say grand things about the eternal sweep of the great law of duty. The Christian thought is the higher one, ‘Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid Thine hand upon me,’ and wherever I am I am under obligation to serve Thee, and no past record of work absolves me from the work of the present. From the cradle to the grave I walk beneath an all-encompassing, overarching firmament of duty. As long as we draw breath we are bound to the service of Him whose slaves we are, and whose service is perfect freedom.

Such is the bearing of this apparently repulsive representation of our text, which is not so repulsive if you come to think about it. It does not in the least set aside the natural craving for recreation and relaxation and repose. It does not overlook God's obligation to keep His slave alive, and in good condition for doing His work, by bestowing upon him the things that are needful for him, but it does meet that temptation which comes to us all to take that rest which circumstances may make manifestly not God's will, and it says to us, 'Forget the things that are behind, and reach forth unto the things that are before.' You have done a long day's work with plough or sheep-crook. The reward for work is more work. Come away indoors now, and nearer the Master, prepare His table. 'Which of you, having a servant, will not do so with him?' And that is how He does with us.

Then, the next thought here, which, as I say, has a harsh exterior, and a bitter rind, is that one of the slave doing his work, and never getting so much as 'thank you' for it. But if you lift this interpretation too, into the higher region of the relation between God and His slaves down here, a great deal of the harshness drops away. For what does it come to? Just to this, that no man among us, by any amount or completeness of obedience to the will of God establishes claims on God for a reward. You have done your duty-so much the better for you, but is that any reason why you should be decorated and honoured for doing it? You have done no more than your duty. 'So, likewise, ye, when ye have done all things that are commanded you'-even if that impossible condition were to be realised-'say we are unprofitable servants'; not in the bad sense in which the word is sometimes used, but in the accurate sense of not having brought any profit or advantage, more than was His before, to the Master whom we have thus served. It is a blessed thing for a man to call *himself* an unprofitable servant; it is an awful thing for the Master to call him one. If *we* say 'we are unprofitable servants,' we shall be likely to escape the solemn words from the Lord's lips: 'Take ye away the unprofitable servant, and cast him into outer darkness.' There are two that may use the word, Christ the Judge, and man the judged, and if the man will use it, Christ will not. ‘If we judge ourselves we shall not be judged.’

Now, although, as I have said about the other part of this text, it is not meant to exhaust our relations to God, or to say the all-comprehensive word about the relation of obedience to blessedness; it is meant to say

‘Merit lives from man to man,
And not from man, O Lord! to Thee.’

No one can reasonably build upon his own obedience, or his own work, nor claim as by right, for reward, heaven or other good. So my text is the anticipation of Paul’s teaching about the impossibility of a man’s being saved by his works, and it cuts up by the root, not only the teaching as to a treasure of ‘merits of the saints,’ and ‘works of supererogation,’ and the like; but it tells us, too, that we must beware of the germs of that self-complacent way of looking at ourselves and our own obedience, as if they had anything at all to do with our buying either the favour of God, or the rewards of the faithful servant.

II. Now, all that I have been saying may sound very harsh. Let us take a second step, and try if we can find out the kernel of grace in the harsh husk.

I hold fast by the one clue that Jesus Christ is here replying to the Apostle’s prayer, ‘Lord, increase our faith.’ He had been laying down some very hard regulations for their conduct, and, naturally, when they felt how difficult it would be to come within a thousand miles of what He had been bidding them, they turned to Him with that prayer. It suggests that faith is there, in living operation, or they would not have prayed to Him for its increase. And how does He go about the work of increasing it? In two ways, one of which does not enter into my present subject. First, by showing the disciples the power of faith, in order to stimulate them to greater effort for its possession. He promised that they might say to the fig tree, ‘Be thou plucked up and planted in the sea,’ and it should obey them. The second way was by this context of which I am speaking now. How does it bear upon the Apostles’ prayer? What is there in this teaching about the slave and his master, and the slave’s work, and the incompatibility of the notion of reward with the slave’s service, to help to strengthen faith? There is this that this teaching beats down every trace of self-confidence, and if we take it in and live by it, makes us all feel that we stand before God, whatever have been our deeds of service, with no claims arising from any virtue or righteousness of our own. We come empty-handed. If the servant who has done all that is commanded has yet to say, ‘I can ask nothing from Thee, because I have done it, for it was all in the line of my duty,’ what are we to say, who have done so little that was commanded, and so much that was forbidden?

So, you see, the way to increased faith is not by any magical communication from Christ, as the Apostles thought, but by taking into our hearts, and making operative in our lives, the great truth that in us there is nothing that can make a claim upon God, and that we must cast ourselves, as deserving nothing, wholly into His merciful hands, and find ourselves held up by His great unmerited love. Get the bitter poison root of self-trust out of you, and then there is some chance of getting the wholesome emotion of absolute reliance on Him into you. Jesus Christ, if I might use a homely metaphor, in these words pricks the bladder of self-confidence which we are apt to use to keep our heads above water. And it is only when it is pricked, and we, like the Apostle, feel ourselves beginning to sink, that we fling out a hand to Him, and clutch at His outstretched hand, and cry, ‘Lord, save me, I perish!’ One way to increase our faith is to be rooted and grounded in the assurance that duty is perennial, and that our own righteousness establishes no claim whatever upon God.

III. Finally, we note the higher view into which, by faith, we come.

I have been saying, with perhaps vain repetition, that the words of our text and context do not exhaust the whole truth of man’s relation to God. They do exhaust the truth of the relation of God to any man that has not faith in his heart, because such a man is a slave in the worst sense, and any obedience that he renders to God’s will externally is the obedience of a reluctant will, and is hard and harsh, and there is no end *to* it, and no good *from* it. But if we accept the position, and recognise our own impotence, and non-desert, and humbly say, ‘Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saves us,’ then we come into a large place.

The relation of master and slave does not cover all the ground *then*. 'Henceforth, I call you not slaves, but friends,' And when the wearied slave comes into the house, the new task is not a new burden, for he is a son as well as a slave; but the work is a delight, and it is a joy to have something more to do for his Father. If our service is the service of sons, sweetened by love, then there will be abundant thanks from the Father, who is not only our owner, but our lover.

For Christian service-that is to say, service based upon faith and rendered in love-*does* minister delight to our Father in heaven, and He Himself has called it an 'odour of a sweet smell, acceptable unto God.' And if our service on earth has been thus elevated and transformed from the compulsory obedience of a slave to the joyful service of a son, then our reception when at sundown the plough is left in the furrow and we come into the house will be all changed too. 'Which of you, having a servant, will say to him, Go and sit down to meat, and will not rather say to him, Make ready whilst I eat and drink?' That is the law for earth, but for heaven it is this, 'Blessed are those servants whom the Lord, when He cometh, shall find watching. Verily, I say unto you, that He shall gird Himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.' The husk is gone now, I think, and the kernel is left. Loving service is beloved by God, and rewarded by the ministering, as a servant of servants, to us by Him who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

'Lord, increase our faith,' that we may so serve Thee on earth, and so be served by Thee in heaven.

80)Luke 17:11-19

Luke

WHERE ARE THE NINE?

Luk. 17:11 - Luk. 17:19.

The melancholy group of lepers, met with in one of the villages on the borders of Samaria and Galilee, was made up of Samaritans and Jews, in what proportion we do not know. The common misery drove them together, in spite of racial hatred, as, in a flood, wolves and sheep will huddle close on a bit of high ground. Perhaps they had met in order to appeal to Jesus, thinking to move Him by their aggregated wretchedness; or possibly they were permanently segregated from others, and united in a hideous fellowship.

I. We note the lepers’ cry and the Lord’s strange reply.

Of course they had to stand afar off, and the distance prescribed by law obliged them to cry aloud, though it must have been an effort, for one symptom of leprosy is a hoarse whisper. Sore need can momentarily give strange physical power. Their cry indicates some knowledge. They knew the Lord’s name, and had dim notions of His authority, for He is addressed as Jesus and as Master. They knew that He had power to heal, and they hoped that He had ‘mercy,’ which they might win for themselves by entreaty. There was the germ of trust in the cry forced from them by desperate need. But their conceptions of Him, and their consciousness of their own necessities, did not rise above the purely physical region, and He was nothing to them but a healer.

Still, low and rude as their notions were, they did present a point of contact for Christ’s ‘mercy,’ which is ever ready to flow into every heart that is lowly, as water will into all low levels. Jesus seems to have gone near to the lepers, for it was ‘when He saw,’ not when He heard, them that He spoke. It did not become Him to ‘cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street,’ nor would He cure as from afar, but He approaches those whom He heals, that they may see His face, and learn by it His compassion and love. His command recognised and honoured the law, but its main purpose, no doubt, was to test, and thereby to strengthen, the leper’s trust. To set out to the priest while they felt themselves full of leprosy would seem absurd, unless they believed that Jesus could and would heal them. He gives no promise to heal, but asks for reliance on an implied promise. He has not a syllable of sympathy; His tender compassion is carefully covered up. He shuts down, as it were, the lantern-slide, and not a ray gets through. But the light was behind the screen all the while. We, too, have sometimes to act on the assumption that Jesus has granted our desires, even while we are not conscious that it is so. We, too, have sometimes to set out, as it were, for the priests, while we still feel the leprosy.

II. We note the healing granted to obedient faith.

The whole ten set off at once. They had got all they wanted from the Lord, and had no more thought about Him. So they turned their backs on Him. How strange it must have been to feel, as they went along, the gradual creeping of soundness into their bones! How much more confidently they must have stepped out, as the glow of returning health asserted itself more and more! The cure is a transcendent, though veiled, manifestation of Christ's power; for it is wrought at a distance, without even a word, and with no vehicle. It is simply the silent forth-putting of His power. 'He spake, and it was done' is much, for only a word which is divine can affect matter. But 'He willed, and it was done,' is even more.

III. We note the solitary instance of thankfulness.

The nine might have said, 'We are doing what the Healer bade us do; to go back to Him would be disobedience.' But a grateful heart knows that to express its gratitude is the highest duty, and is necessary for its own relief. How like us all it is to hurry away clutching our blessings, and never cast back a thought to the giver! This leper's voice had returned to Him, and his 'loud' acknowledgments were very different from the strained croak of his petition for healing. He knew that he had two to thank-God and Jesus; he did not know that these two were one. His healing has brought him much nearer Jesus than before, and now he can fall at His feet. Thankfulness knits us to Jesus with a blessed bond. Nothing is so sweet to a loving heart as to pour itself out in thanks to Him.

'And he was a Samaritan.' That may be Luke's main reason for telling the story, for it corresponds to the universalistic tendency of his Gospel. But may we not learn the lesson that the common human virtues are often found abundantly in nations and individuals against whom we are apt to be deeply prejudiced? And may we not learn another lesson-that heretics and heathen may often teach orthodox believers lessons, not only of courtesy and gratitude, but of higher things? A heathen is not seldom more sensitive to the beauty of Christ, and more touched by the story of His sacrifice, than we who have heard of Him all our days.

IV. We note Christ's sad wonder at man's ingratitude and joyful recognition of 'this stranger's' thankfulness.

A tone of surprise as well as of sadness can be detected in the pathetic double questions. 'Were not *the* ten'-all of them, the ten who stood there but a minute since-'cleansed? but where are the nine?' Gone off with their gift, and with no spark of thankfulness in their selfish hearts. 'Were there none found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger?' The numbers of the thankless far surpass those of the thankful. The fewness of the latter surprises and saddens Jesus still. Even a dog knows and will lick the hand that feeds it, but 'Israel doth not know, My people doth not consider.' We increase the sweetness of our gifts by thankfulness for them. We taste them twice when we ruminate on them in gratitude. They live after their death when we bless God and thank Jesus for them all. We impoverish ourselves still more than we dishonour Him by the ingratitude which is so crying a fault. One sorrow hides many joys. A single crumpled rose-leaf made the fairy princess's bed uncomfortable. Some of us can see no blue in our sky if one small cloud is there. Both in regard to earthly and spiritual blessings we are all sinners by unthankfulness, and we all lose much thereby.

Jesus rejoiced over 'this stranger,' and gave him a greater gift at last than he had received when the leprosy was cleared from his flesh. Christ's raising of him up, and sending him on his way to resume his interrupted journey to the priest, was but a prelude to 'Thy faith hath made thee whole,' or, as the Revised Version margin reads, 'saved thee.' Surely we may take that word in its deepest meaning, and believe that a more fatal leprosy melted out of this man's spirit, and that the faith which had begun in a confidence that Jesus could heal, and had been increased by obedience to the command which tried it, and had become more awed and enlightened by experience of bodily healing, and been deepened by finding a tongue to express itself in thankfulness, rose at last to such apprehension of Jesus, and such clinging to Him in grateful love, as availed to save 'this stranger' with a salvation that healed his spirit, and was perfected when the once leprous body was left behind, to crumble into dust.

81) Luke 18:1-7

Luke

THREE KINDS OF PRAYING

Luk. 18:1 - Luk. 18:14.

The two parables in this passage are each prefaced by Luke's explanation of their purpose. They are also connected by being both concerned with aspects of prayer. But the second was apparently not spoken at the same time as the first, but is put here by Luke as in an appropriate place.

I. The wearisome widow and the unrighteous judge.

The similarities and dissimilarities between this parable and that in Luk. 11:5 - Luk. 11:8 are equally instructive. Both take a very unlovely character as open to the influence of persistent entreaty; both strongly underscore the unworthiness and selfishness of the motive for yielding. Both expect the hearers to use common-sense enough to take the sleepy friend and the worried judge as contrasts to, not parables, of Him to whom Christians pray. But the judge is a much worse man than the owner of the loaves, and his denial of the justice which it was his office to dispense is a crime; the widow's need is greater than the man's, and the judge's cynical soliloquy, in its unabashed avowal of caring for neither God nor man, and being guided only by regard to comfort, touches a deep depth of selfishness. The worse he was, the more emphatic is the exhortation to persistence. If the continual dropping of the widow's plea could wear away such a stone as that, its like could wear away anything. Yes, and suppose that the judge were as righteous and as full of love and wish to help as this judge was of their opposites; suppose that instead of the cry being a weariness it was a delight; suppose, in short, that, to go back to Luk. 11:1 - Luk. 11:54, we 'call on Him as Father who, without respect of persons, judgeth': then our 'continual coming' will surely not be less effectual than hers was.

But we must note the spiritual experience supposed by the parable to belong to the Christian life. That forlorn figure of the widow, with all its suggestions of helplessness and oppression, is Christ's picture of His

Church left on earth without Him. And though of course it is a very incomplete representation, it is a true presentation of one side and aspect of the devout life on earth. ‘In the world ye shall have tribulation,’ and the truer His servants are to Him, and the more their hearts are with Christ in God, the more they will feel out of touch with the world, and the more it will instinctively be their ‘adversary.’ If the widow does not feel the world’s enmity, it will generally be because she is not a ‘widow indeed.’

And another notable fact of Christian experience underlies the parable; namely that the Church’s cry for protection from the adversary is often apparently unheard. In Luk. 11:1 - Luk. 11:54 the prayer was for supply of necessities, here it is for the specific blessing of protection from the adversary. Whether that is referred to the needs of the Church or of the individual, it is true that usually the help sought is long delayed. It is not only ‘souls under the altar’ that have to cry ‘How long, O Lord, dost Thou not avenge?’ One thinks of years of persecution for whole communities, or of long, weary days of harassment and suffering for individuals, of multitudes of prayers and groans sent up into a heaven that, for all the answers sent down, might as well be empty, and one feels it hard to hold by the faith that ‘verily, there is a God that’ heareth.

We have all had times when our faith has staggered, and we have found no answer to our heart’s question: ‘Why tarry the wheels of His chariot?’ Many of us have felt what Mary and Martha felt when ‘Jesus abode still two days in the place where He was’ after He had received their message, in which they had been so sure of His coming at once when He heard that ‘he whom Thou lovest is sick,’ that they did not ask Him to come. The delays of God’s help are a constant feature in His providence, and, as Jesus says here, they are but too likely to take the life out of faith.

But over against these we have to place Jesus’ triumphant assurance here: ‘He will avenge them speedily.’ Yes, the longest delay may yet be ‘right early,’ for heaven’s clock does not beat at the same rate as our little chronometers. God is ‘the God of patience,’ and He has waited for millenniums for the establishment of His kingdom on earth; His ‘own elect’ may learn long-suffering from Him, and need to take to heart the old exhortation, ‘If the vision tarry, wait for it, for it will surely come, and will not tarry.' Yes, God's delays are not delays, but are for our profit that we may always pray and not faint, and may keep alight the flame of the sure hope that the Son of man cometh, and that in His coming all adversaries shall be destroyed, and the widow, no longer a widow, but the bride, go in to the feast and forget her foes, and 'the days of her mourning be ended.'

II. The Pharisee and the publican.

Luke's label on this parable tells us that it was spoken to a group of the very people who were personated in it by the Pharisee. One can fancy their faces as they listened, and how they would love the speaker! Their two characteristics are self-righteousness and depreciation of every one else, which is the natural result of such trust in self. The self-adulation was absolute, the contempt was all-embracing, for the Revised Version rightly renders 'set *all* others at nought.' That may sound exaggerated, but the way to judge of moral characteristics is to take them in their fullest development and to see what they lead to then. The two pictures heighten each other. The one needs many strokes to bring out the features, the other needs but one. Self-righteousness takes many shapes, penitence has but one emotion to express, one cry to utter.

Every word in the Pharisee's prayer is reeking with self-complacency. Even the expression 'prayed with himself' is significant, for it suggests that the prayer was less addressed to God than to himself, and also that his words could scarcely be spoken in the hearing of others, both because of their arrogant self-praise and of their insolent calumnies of 'all the rest.' It was not prayer to God, but soliloquy in his own praise, and it was in equal parts adulation of himself and slander of other men. So it never went higher than the inner roof of the temple court, and was, in a very fatal sense, 'to himself.'

God is complimented with being named formally at first, and in the first two words, 'I thank thee,' but that is only formal introduction, and in all the rest of his prayer there is not a trace of praying. Such a self-satisfied gentleman had no need to ask for anything, so he brought no petitions. He uses the conventional language of thanksgiving, but his real meaning is to praise himself to God, not to thank God for himself. God is named once. All the rest is I, I, I. He had no longing for communion, no aspiration, no emotion.

His conception of righteousness was mean and shallow. And as St. Bernard notes, he was not so much thankful for being righteous as for being alone in his goodness. No doubt he was warranted in disclaiming gross sins, but he was glad to be free from them, not because they were sins, but because they were vulgar. He had no right to fling mud either on 'all the rest' or on 'this publican,' and if he had been really praying or giving thanks he would have had enough to think of in God and himself without casting sidelong and depreciatory glances at his neighbours. He who truly prays 'sees no man any more,' or if he does, sees men only as subjects for intercession, not for contempt. The Pharisee's notion of righteousness was primarily negative, as consisting in abstinence from flagrant sins, and, in so far as it was positive, it dealt entirely with ceremonial acts. Such a starved and surface conception of righteousness is essential to self-righteousness, for no man who sees the law of duty in its depth and inwardness can flatter himself that he has kept it. To fast twice a week and to give tithes of all that one acquired were acts of supererogation, and are proudly recounted as if God should feel much indebted to the doer for paying Him more than was required. The Pharisee makes no petitions. He states his claims, and tacitly expects that God will meet them.

Few words are needed to paint the publican; for his estimate of himself is simple and one, and what he wants from God is one thing, and one only. His attitude expresses his emotions, for he does not venture to go near the shining example of all respectability and righteousness, nor to lift his eyes to heaven. Like the penitent psalmist, his iniquities have taken hold on him, so that he is 'not able to look up.' Keen consciousness of sin, true sorrow for sin, earnest desire to shake off the burden of sin, lowly trust in God's pardoning mercy, are all crowded into his brief petition. The arrow thus feathered goes straight up to the throne; the Pharisee's prayer cannot rise above his own lips.

Jesus does not leave His hearers to apply the 'parable,' but drives its application home to them, since He knew how keen a thrust was needed to pierce the triple breastplate of self-righteousness. The publican was ‘justified’; that is, accounted as righteous. In the judgment of heaven, which is the judgment of truth, sin forsaken is sin passed away. The Pharisee condensed his contempt into ‘*this* publican’; Jesus takes up the ‘this’ and turns it into a distinction, when He says, ‘*this man* went down to his house justified.’ God’s condemnation of the Pharisee and acceptance of the publican are no anomalous aberration of divine justice, for it is a universal law, which has abundant exemplifications, that he that exalteth himself is likely to be humbled, and he that humbles himself to be exalted. Daily life does not always yield examples thereof, but in the inner life and as concerns our relations to God, that law is absolutely and always true.

82)Luke 18:8

Mark **- Luke**

THREE KINDS OF PRAYING
THE CREDULITY OF UNBELIEF

Mar. 13:6. - Luk. 18:8.

It was the same generation that is represented in these two texts as void of faith in the Son of Man, and as credulously giving heed to impostors. Unbelief and superstition are closely allied. Religion is so vital a necessity, that if the true form of it be cast aside, some false form will be eagerly seized in order to fill the aching void. Men cannot permanently live without some sort of a faith in the Unseen, but they can determine whether it shall be a worthy recognition of a worthy conception of that Unseen, or a debasing superstition. An epoch of materialism in philosophic thought has always been followed by violent reaction, in which quacks and fanatics have reaped rich harvests. If the dark is not peopled with one loved Face, our busy imagination will fill it with a crowd of horrible ones.

Just as a sailor, looking out into the night over a solitary, islandless sea, sees shapes; intolerant of the islandless expanse, makes land out of fogbanks; and, sick of silence, hears ‘airy tongues’ in the moanings of the wind and the slow roll of the waves, so men shudderingly look into the dark unknown, and if they see not their Father there, will either shut their eyes or strain them in gazing it into shape. The sight of Him is religion, the closed eye is infidelity, the strained gaze is superstition. The second and the third are each so unsatisfying that they perpetually pass over into one another and destroy one another, as when I shut my eyes, I see slowly shaping itself a coloured image of my eye, which soon flickers and fluctuates into black nothingness again, and then rises once more, once more to fade. Men, if they believe not in God, then do service to 'them which by nature are no gods.'

But let us come to more immediately Christian thoughts. Christ does what men so urgently require to be done, that if they do not believe in Him they will be forced to shape out for themselves some fancied ways of doing it. The emotions which men cherish towards Him so irrepressibly need an object to rest on, that if not He, then some far less worthy one, will be chosen to receive them.

It is just to the illustration of these thoughts that I seek to turn now, and in such alternatives as these-

I. Reception of Christ as the Revealer is the only escape from unmanly submission to unworthy pretenders.

That function is one which the instincts of men teach them that they need.

Christ comes to satisfy the need as the visible true embodiment of the Father's love, of the Father's wisdom.

If He be rejected-what then? Why, not that the men who reject will contentedly continue in darkness-that is never possible; but that some manner or other of satisfying the clamant need will be had recourse to, and then that to it will be transferred the submission and credence that should have been His. If we have Him for our Teacher and Guide, then all other teachers and guides will take their right places. We shall not angrily repel their power, nor talk loudly about 'the right of private judgment,' and our independence of all men's thoughts. We are not so independent. We shall thankfully accept all help from all men wiser, better, more manly than ourselves, whether they give us uttered words of wisdom and beauty, having 'grace poured into their lips,' or whether they give us lives ennobled by strenuous effort, or whether they give us greater treasure than all these-the sight once more of a loving heart. All is good, all is helpful, all we shall receive; but in proportion to the felt obligations we are laid under to them will be the felt authority of that saying, ‘Call no man your master on earth, for One is your Master, even Christ.’ That command forbids our slavishly accepting any human domination over our faith, but it no less emphatically forbids our contemptuously rejecting any human helper of our joy, for it closes with ‘and all ye are brethren’-bound then to mutual observance, mutual helpfulness, mutual respect for each other’s individuality, mutual avoidance of needless division. To have Him for his Guide makes the human guide gentle and tender among his disciples ‘as a nurse among her children,’ for he remembers ‘the gentleness of Christ,’ and he dare not be other than an imitator of Him. A Christian teacher’s spirit will always be, ‘not for that we have dominion over your faith, but we are helpers of your joy’; his most earnest word, ‘I beseech you, therefore, brethren’; his constant desire, ‘He must increase. I must decrease.’ And to have Christ for our Guide makes the taught lovingly submissive to all who by largeness of gifts and graces are set by Him above them, and yet lovingly recalcitrant at any attempt to compel adhesion or force dogmas. The one freedom from undue dependence on men and men’s opinions lies in this submission to Jesus. Then we can say, when need is, ‘I have a Master. To Him I submit; if you seek to be master, I demur: of them who seemed to be somewhat, whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me.’

But the greatest danger is not that our guides shall insist on our submission, but that we shall insist on giving it. It is for all of us such a burden to have the management of our own fate, the forming of our own opinions, the fearful responsibility of our own destiny, that we are all only too ready to say to some man or other, from love or from laziness, ‘Where thou goest, I will go; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.’

Few things are more strange and tragic than the eagerness with which people who are a great deal too enlightened to render allegiance to Jesus Christ will install some teacher of their own choosing as their authoritative master, will swallow his dicta, swear by him, and glory in being called by his name. What they think it derogatory to their mental independence to give to the Teacher of Nazareth, they freely give to their chosen oracle. It is not in ‘the last times’ only that men who will not endure sound teaching ‘heap to themselves teachers after their own lusts,’ and have ‘the ears’ which are fast closed to ‘the Truth’ wide open ‘to fables.’

On the small scale we see this melancholy perversity of conduct exemplified in every little coterie and school of unbelievers.

On the great scale Mohammedanism and Buddhism, with their millions of adherents, write the same tragic truth large in the history of the world.

II. Faith in the reconciling Christ is the only sure deliverance from debasing reliance on false means of reconciliation.

In a very profound sense ignorance and sin are the same fact regarded under two different aspects. And in the depths of their natures men have the longing for some Power who shall put away sin, as they have the longing for one that will dispel ignorance. The consciousness of alienation from God lies in the human heart, dormant indeed for the most part, but like a coiled, hibernating snake, ready to wake and strike its poison into the veins. Christ by His great work, and specially by His sacrificial death, meets that universal need.

But closely as His work fits men’s needs, it sharply opposes some of their wishes, and of their interpretations of their needs. The Jew ‘demands a sign,’ the Greek craves a reasoned system of ‘wisdom,’ and both concur in finding the Cross an ‘offence.’

But the rejection of Jesus as the Reconciler does not quiet the cravings, which make themselves heard at some time or other in most consciences, for deliverance from the dominion and from the guilt of sin. And men are driven to adopt other expedients to fill up the void which their turning away from Jesus has left. Sometimes they fall back on a vague reliance on a vague assertion that ‘God is merciful’; sometimes they reason themselves into a belief-or, at any rate, an assertion-that the conception of sin is an error, and that men are not guilty. Sometimes they manage to silence the inward voice that accuses and condemns, by dint of not listening to it or drowning it by other noises.

But these expedients fail them some time or other, and then, if they have not cast the burden of their sin and their sins on the great Reconciler, they either have to weary themselves with painful and vain efforts to be their own redeemers, or they fall under the domination of a priest.

Hence the hideous penances of heathenism; and hence, too, the power of sacramentarian and sacerdotal perversions of evangelical truth.

III. Faith in Christ as the Regenerator is the only deliverance from baseless hopes for the world.

The world is today full of moaning voices crying, ‘Art thou He that should come, or do we look for another?’ and it is full of confident voices proclaiming other means of its regeneration than letting Christ ‘make all things new.’

The conviction that society needs to be reconstituted on other principles is spread everywhere, and is often associated with intense disbelief in Christ the Regenerator.

Has not the past proved that all schemes for the regeneration of society which do not grapple with the fact of sin, and which do not provide a means of infusing into human nature a new impulse and direction, will end in failure, and are only too likely to end in blood? These two requirements are met by Jesus, and by Him only, and whoever rejects Him and His gift of pardon and cleansing, and His inbreathing of a new life into the individual, will fail in his effort, however earnest and noble in many aspects, to redeem society and bring about a fair new world.

It is pitiable to see the waste of high aspiration and eager effort in so many quarters today. But that waste is sure to attend every scheme which does not start from the recognition of Christ’s work as the basis of the world’s transformation, and does not crown Him as the King, because He is the Saviour, of mankind.

83)Luke 18:9-14

THREE KINDS OF PRAYING

Luk. 18:1 - Luk. 18:14.

The two parables in this passage are each prefaced by Luke’s explanation of their purpose. They are also connected by being both concerned with aspects of prayer. But the second was apparently not spoken at the same time as the first, but is put here by Luke as in an appropriate place.

I. The wearisome widow and the unrighteous judge.

The similarities and dissimilarities between this parable and that in Luk. 11:5 - Luk. 11:8 are equally instructive. Both take a very unlovely character as open to the influence of persistent entreaty; both strongly underscore the unworthiness and selfishness of the motive for yielding. Both expect the hearers to use common-sense enough to take the sleepy friend and the worried judge as contrasts to, not parables, of Him to whom Christians pray. But the judge is a much worse man than the owner of the loaves, and his denial of the justice which it was his office to dispense is a crime; the widow’s need is greater than the man’s, and the judge’s cynical soliloquy, in its unabashed avowal of caring for neither God nor man, and being guided only by regard to comfort, touches a deep depth of selfishness. The worse he was, the more emphatic is the exhortation to persistence. If the continual dropping of the widow’s plea could wear away such a stone as that, its like could wear away anything. Yes, and suppose that the judge were as righteous and as full of love and wish to help as this judge was of their opposites; suppose that instead of the cry being a weariness it was a delight; suppose, in short, that, to go back to Luk. 11:1 - Luk. 11:54, we ‘call on Him as Father who, without respect of persons, judgeth’: then our ‘continual coming’ will surely not be less effectual than hers was.

But we must note the spiritual experience supposed by the parable to belong to the Christian life. That forlorn figure of the widow, with all its suggestions of helplessness and oppression, is Christ’s picture of His Church left on earth without Him. And though of course it is a very incomplete representation, it is a true presentation of one side and aspect of the devout life on earth. ‘In the world ye shall have tribulation,’ and the truer His servants are to Him, and the more their hearts are with Christ in

God, the more they will feel out of touch with the world, and the more it will instinctively be their ‘adversary.’ If the widow does not feel the world’s enmity, it will generally be because she is not a ‘widow indeed.’

And another notable fact of Christian experience underlies the parable; namely that the Church’s cry for protection from the adversary is often apparently unheard. In Luk. 11:1 - Luk. 11:54 the prayer was for supply of necessities, here it is for the specific blessing of protection from the adversary. Whether that is referred to the needs of the Church or of the individual, it is true that usually the help sought is long delayed. It is not only ‘souls under the altar’ that have to cry ‘How long, O Lord, dost Thou not avenge?’ One thinks of years of persecution for whole communities, or of long, weary days of harassment and suffering for individuals, of multitudes of prayers and groans sent up into a heaven that, for all the answers sent down, might as well be empty, and one feels it hard to hold by the faith that ‘verily, there is a God that’ heareth.

We have all had times when our faith has staggered, and we have found no answer to our heart’s question: ‘Why tarry the wheels of His chariot?’ Many of us have felt what Mary and Martha felt when ‘Jesus abode still two days in the place where He was’ after He had received their message, in which they had been so sure of His coming at once when He heard that ‘he whom Thou lovest is sick,’ that they did not ask Him to come. The delays of God’s help are a constant feature in His providence, and, as Jesus says here, they are but too likely to take the life out of faith.

But over against these we have to place Jesus’ triumphant assurance here: ‘He will avenge them speedily.’ Yes, the longest delay may yet be ‘right early,’ for heaven’s clock does not beat at the same rate as our little chronometers. God is ‘the God of patience,’ and He has waited for millenniums for the establishment of His kingdom on earth; His ‘own elect’ may learn long-suffering from Him, and need to take to heart the old exhortation, ‘If the vision tarry, wait for it, for it will surely come, and will not tarry.’ Yes, God’s delays are not delays, but are for our profit that we may always pray and not faint, and may keep alight the flame of the sure hope that the Son of man cometh, and that in His coming all adversaries shall be destroyed, and the widow, no longer a widow, but the bride, go in to the feast and forget her foes, and ‘the days of her mourning be ended.’

II. The Pharisee and the publican.

Luke’s label on this parable tells us that it was spoken to a group of the very people who were personated in it by the Pharisee. One can fancy their faces as they listened, and how they would love the speaker! Their two characteristics are self-righteousness and depreciation of every one else, which is the natural result of such trust in self. The self-adulation was absolute, the contempt was all-embracing, for the Revised Version rightly renders ‘set *all* others at nought.’ That may sound exaggerated, but the way to judge of moral characteristics is to take them in their fullest development and to see what they lead to then. The two pictures heighten each other. The one needs many strokes to bring out the features, the other needs but one. Self-righteousness takes many shapes, penitence has but one emotion to express, one cry to utter.

Every word in the Pharisee’s prayer is reeking with self-complacency. Even the expression ‘prayed with himself’ is significant, for it suggests that the prayer was less addressed to God than to himself, and also that his words could scarcely be spoken in the hearing of others, both because of their arrogant self-praise and of their insolent calumnies of ‘all the rest.’ It was not prayer to God, but soliloquy in his own praise, and it was in equal parts adulation of himself and slander of other men. So it never went higher than the inner roof of the temple court, and was, in a very fatal sense, ‘to himself.’

God is complimented with being named formally at first, and in the first two words, ‘I thank thee,’ but that is only formal introduction, and in all the rest of his prayer there is not a trace of praying. Such a self-satisfied gentleman had no need to ask for anything, so he brought no petitions. He uses the conventional language of thanksgiving, but his real meaning is to praise himself to God, not to thank God for himself. God is named once. All the rest is I, I, I. He had no longing for communion, no aspiration, no emotion.

His conception of righteousness was mean and shallow. And as St. Bernard notes, he was not so much thankful for being righteous as for being alone in his goodness. No doubt he was warranted in disclaiming gross sins, but he was glad to be free from them, not because they were sins, but because they were vulgar. He had no right to fling mud either on 'all the rest' or on 'this publican,' and if he had been really praying or giving thanks he would have had enough to think of in God and himself without casting sidelong and depreciatory glances at his neighbours. He who truly prays 'sees no man any more,' or if he does, sees men only as subjects for intercession, not for contempt. The Pharisee's notion of righteousness was primarily negative, as consisting in abstinence from flagrant sins, and, in so far as it was positive, it dealt entirely with ceremonial acts. Such a starved and surface conception of righteousness is essential to self-righteousness, for no man who sees the law of duty in its depth and inwardness can flatter himself that he has kept it. To fast twice a week and to give tithes of all that one acquired were acts of supererogation, and are proudly recounted as if God should feel much indebted to the doer for paying Him more than was required. The Pharisee makes no petitions. He states his claims, and tacitly expects that God will meet them.

Few words are needed to paint the publican; for his estimate of himself is simple and one, and what he wants from God is one thing, and one only. His attitude expresses his emotions, for he does not venture to go near the shining example of all respectability and righteousness, nor to lift his eyes to heaven. Like the penitent psalmist, his iniquities have taken hold on him, so that he is 'not able to look up.' Keen consciousness of sin, true sorrow for sin, earnest desire to shake off the burden of sin, lowly trust in God's pardoning mercy, are all crowded into his brief petition. The arrow thus feathered goes straight up to the throne; the Pharisee's prayer cannot rise above his own lips.

Jesus does not leave His hearers to apply the 'parable,' but drives its application home to them, since He knew how keen a thrust was needed to pierce the triple breastplate of self-righteousness. The publican was 'justified'; that is, accounted as righteous. In the judgment of heaven, which is the judgment of truth, sin forsaken is sin passed away. The Pharisee condensed his contempt into '*this* publican'; Jesus takes up the 'this' and turns it into a distinction, when He says, '*this man* went down to his house justified.' God's condemnation of the Pharisee and acceptance of the publican are no anomalous aberration of divine justice, for it is a universal law, which has abundant exemplifications, that he that exalteth himself is likely to be humbled, and he that humbles himself to be exalted. Daily life does not always yield examples thereof, but in the inner life and as concerns our relations to God, that law is absolutely and always true.

84)Luke 18:15-30

Luke

ENTERING THE KINGDOM

Luk. 18:15 - Luk. 18:30.

In this section Luke rejoins the other two Evangelists, from whom his narrative has diverged since Luk. 9:51. All three bring together these two incidents of the children in Christ's arms and the young ruler. Probably they were connected in time as well as in subject. Both set forth the conditions of entering the kingdom, which the one declares to be lowliness and trust, and the other to be self-renunciation.

I. We have the child-likeness of the subjects of the kingdom.

No doubt there was a dash of superstition in the impulse that moved the parents to bring their children to Jesus, but it was an eminently natural desire to win a good man's blessing, and one to which every parent's heart will respond. It was not the superstition, but the intrusive familiarity, that provoked the disciples' rebuke. A great man's hangers-on are always more careful of his dignity than he is, for it increases their own importance.

The tender age of the children is to be noted. They were 'babes,' and had to be brought, being too young to walk, and so having scarcely yet arrived at conscious, voluntary life. It is 'of such' that the subjects of the kingdom are composed. What, then, are the qualities which, by this comparison, Jesus requires? Certainly not innocence, which would be to contradict all his teaching and to shut out the prodigals and publicans, and clean contrary to the whole spirit of Luke’s Gospel. Besides, these scarcely conscious infants were not ‘innocent,’ for they had not come to the age of which either innocence or guilt can be predicated. What, then, had they which the children of the kingdom must have?

Perhaps the sweet and meek little Psa. 131:1 - Psa. 131:3 puts us best on the track of the answer. It may have been in our Lord’s mind; it certainly corresponds to His thought. ‘My heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty. . .. I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with his mother.’ The infant’s lowliness is not yet humility; for it is instinct rather than virtue. It makes no claims, thinks no lofty thoughts of self; in fact, has scarcely begun to know that there is a self at all. On the other hand, clinging trust is the infant’s life. It, too, is rudimentary and instinctive, but the impulse which makes the babe nestle in its mother’s bosom may well stand for a picture of the conscious trust which the children of the kingdom must have. The child’s instinct is the man’s virtue. We have

‘To travel back
And tread again that ancient track,’

regaining as the conscious temper of our spirits those excellences of humility and trust of which the first faint types may be seen in the infant in arms. The entrance gate is very low, and, if we hold our heads high, we shall not get through it. It must be on our hands and knees that we go in. There is no place in the kingdom for those who trust in themselves. We must rely wholly on God manifest in His Son.

So intent is Luke in pointing the lesson that he passes by in silence the infinitely beautiful and touching incident which the world perhaps knows better than any other in our Lord’s life-that of His taking the infants in His arms and blessing them. In many ways that incident would have been peculiarly suitable for this Gospel, which delights to bring out the manhood and universal beneficence of Jesus. But if Luke knew of it, he did not care to bring in anything which would weaken the lesson of the conditions of entering the kingdom.

II. We have self-renunciation as the condition of entering the kingdom.

The conversation with the ruler [vs. 18-23] sets forth its necessity; the sad exclamation to the bystanders [Luk. 18:24] teaches its difficulty; and the dialogue with Peter as representing the twelve [Luk. 18:28 - Luk. 18:30], its reward.

[1] The necessity of self-renunciation. The ruler's question has much blended good and evil. It expresses a true earnestness, a dissatisfaction with self, a consciousness of unattained bliss and a longing for it, a felt readiness to take any pains to secure it, a confidence in Christ's guidance-in short, much of the child spirit. But it has also a too light estimate of what good is, a mistaken notion that 'eternal life' can be won by external deeds, which implies fatal error as to its nature and his own power to do these. This superficial estimate of goodness, and this over confidence in his ability to do good acts, are the twin mistakes against which Christ's treatment of him is directed.

Adopting Luke's version of our Lord's answer, the counter-question, which begins it, lays hold of the polite address, which had slipped from the ruler's lips as mere form, and bids him widen out his conceptions of 'good.' Jesus does not deny that He has a right to the title, but questions this man's right to give it Him. The ruler thought of Jesus only as a man, and, so thinking, was too ready with his adjective. Conventional phrases of compliment may indicate much of the low notions from which they spring. He who is so liberal with his ascriptions of goodness needs to have his notions of what it is elevated. Jesus lays down the great truth which this man, in his confidence that he by his own power could do any good needed for eternal life, was perilously forgetting. God is the only good, and therefore all human goodness must come from Him; and if the ruler is to do 'good,' he must first be good, by receiving goodness from God.

But the saying has an important bearing on Christ's character. The world calls Him good. Why? There is none good but God. So we are face to face with this dilemma-Either Jesus Christ is God manifest in the flesh, or He is not good.

Having thus tried to deepen his conceptions, and awaken his consciousness of imperfection, our Lord meets the man on his own ground by referring him to the Law, which abundantly answered his inquiry. The second half of the commandments are alone quoted by Him; for they have especially to do with conduct, and the infractions of them are more easily recognised than those of the first. The ruler expected that some exceptional and brilliant deeds would be pointed out and he is relegated to the old homely duties, which it is gross crime not to do.

A shade of disappointment and impatience is in his protestation that he had done all these ever since he was a lad. No doubt he had, and his coming to Jesus confessed that though he had, the doing had not brought him 'eternal life.' Are there not many youthful hearts which would have to say the same, if they would be frank with themselves? They have some longings after a bliss and calm which they feel is not theirs. They have kept within the lines of that second half of the Decalogue, but that amount and sort of 'good thing' has not brought peace. Jesus looks on all such as He did on this young man, 'loves' them, and speaks further to them as He did to him. What was lacking? The soul of goodness, without which these other things were 'dead works.' And what is that soul? Absolute self-renunciation and following Christ. For this man the former took the shape of parting with his wealth, but that external renunciation in itself was as 'dead' and impotent to bring eternal life as all his other good acts had been. It was precious as a means to an end-the entrance into the number of Christ's disciples; and as an expression of that inward self-surrender which is essential for discipleship.

The real stress of the condition is in its second half, 'Follow me.' He who enters the company of Christ's followers enters the kingdom, and has eternal life. If he does not do that, he may give his goods to feed the poor, and it profiteth him nothing. Eternal life is not the external wages for external acts, but the outcome and consequence of yielding self to Jesus, through whom goodness, which keeps the law, flows into the soul.

The requirement pierced to the quick. The man loved the world more than eternal life, after all. But though he went away, he went sorrowful; and that was perhaps the presage that he would come back.

[2] Jesus follows him with sad yearning, and, we may be sure, still sought to draw him back. His exclamation is full of the charity which makes allowance for temptation. It speaks a universal truth, never more needed

than in our days, when wealth has flung its golden chains round so many professing Christians. How few of us believe that it gets harder for us to be disciples as we grow richer! There are multitudes in our churches who would be far nearer Christ than they are ever likely to be, if they would literally obey the injunction to get rid of their wealth.

We are too apt to take such commands as applicable only to the individuals who received them, whereas, though, no doubt, the spirit, and not the letter, is the universal element in them, there are far more of us than we are willing to confess, who need to obey the letter in order to keep the spirit. What a depth of vulgar adoration of the power of money is in the disciples' exclamation, 'If rich men cannot get into the kingdom, who can get in!' Or perhaps it rather means, If self-renunciation is the condition, who can fulfil it? The answer points us all to the only power by which we can do good, and overcome self; namely by God's help. God is 'good,' and we can be good too, if we look to Him. God will fill our souls with such sweetness that earth will not be hard to part with.

[3] The last paragraph of this passage teaches the reward of self-renunciation. Peter shoves his oar in, after his fashion. It would have been better if he had not boasted of their surrender, but yet it was true that they had given up all. Only a fishing-boat and a parcel of old nets, indeed, but these were all they had to give; and God's store, which holds His children's surrendered valuables, has many things of small value in it-cups of cold water and widows' mites lying side by side with crowns and jewels.

So Jesus does not rebuke the almost innocent self-congratulation, but recognises in it an appeal to his faithfulness. It was really a prayer, though it sounded like a vaunt, and it is answered by renewed assurances. To part with outward things for Christ's sake or for the kingdom's sake-which is the same thing-is to win them again with all their sweetness a hundred-fold sweeter. Gifts given to Him come back to the giver mended by His touch and hallowed by lying on His altar. The present world yields its full riches only to the man who surrenders all to Jesus. And the 'eternal life,' which the ruler thought was to be found by outward deeds, flows necessarily into the heart which is emptied of self, that it may be filled with Him who is the life, and will be perfected yonder.

85)Luke 18:40-41

Luke

THE MAN THAT STOPPED JESUS

Luk. 18:40 f11 - Luk. 18:41.

This story of the man that stopped Christ is told by the three 'Synoptic' Evangelists, and it derives a special value from having occurred within a week of the Crucifixion. You remember how graphically Mark tells how the blind man hears who is passing and immediately begins to cry with a loud voice to Christ to have mercy upon him; how the officious disciples-a great deal more concerned for the Master's dignity than He was Himself-tried to silence him; and how, with a sturdy persistence and independence of externals which often goes along with blindness, 'he cried the more a great deal' because they did try, and then how he won the distinction of being the man that stopped Christ. When Jesus stood still, and commanded him to be called, the crowd wheeled right round at once, and instead of hindering, encumbered him with help, and bade him to 'rise, and be of good cheer.' Then he flings away some poor rag that he had had to cover himself sitting there, and wearing his under-garment only, comes to Christ, and Jesus asks, 'What do you want?' A promise in the shape of a question. Bartimaeus knows what he wants, and answers without hesitation, and so he gets his request.

Now, I think in all this incident, and especially in its centre part, which I have read, there are great lessons for us. And the first of them is, I see here a wonderful revelation of Christ's quick sympathy at a moment when He was most absorbed.

I said that all this occurred within a week of our Lord's Crucifixion. If you will recall the way in which that last journey to Jerusalem is described in the Evangelists, you will see that there was something very extraordinary about the determination and tension of spirit which impelled Jesus along the road, all the way from Galilee. Mark says that the disciples followed and were amazed. There was something quite unlike what they had been accustomed to, in His face and bearing, and it was so strange to them that they were puzzled and frightened. We read, too, that their amazement and fright prevented them from going very near Him on the road; ‘as they *followed* they were afraid.’ Then the story goes on to tell how James and John, with their arrogant wish, did draw closer to Him, the rest of them lagging behind, conscious of a certain unaccustomed distance between Him and them, which only the ambitious two dared to diminish. Further, one of the Evangelists speaks of His face being ‘set’ to go to Jerusalem, the gentle lineaments fixed in a new expression of resolution and absorption. The Cross was flinging its shadow over Him. He was bracing Himself up for the last struggle. If ever there was a moment of His life when we might have supposed that He would be oblivious of externals, and especially of the individual sorrows of one poor blind beggar sitting by the roadside, it was that moment. But however plunged in great thoughts about the agonising suffering that He was going to front, and the grand work that He was going to do, and the great victory that He was going to win so soon, He had

‘A heart at leisure from itself
To soothe and sympathise.’

Even at that supreme hour He stood still and commanded him to be called. I wonder if it is saying too much to say that in the exercise of that power of healing and helping Bartimaeus, Jesus found some relief from the pressure of impending sorrow.

Brethren, is not that a lesson for us all? It is not spiritualising, allegorising, cramming meanings into an incident that are not in it, when we say-Think of Jesus Christ as one of ourselves, knowing that He was going to His death within a week, and then think of Him turning to this poor man. Is not that a pattern for us? We are often more selfish in our sorrows than in our joys. Many of us are inclined, when we are weighed down by personal sorrows, to say, ‘As long as I have this heavy weight lying on my heart, how can you expect me to take an interest in the affairs of others, or to do Christian work, or to rise to the calls of benevolence and the cries of need?’ We do not expect *you* to do it; but Jesus Christ did it, ‘leaving us an example that we should follow in His steps.’ Next to the blessed influences of God’s own Spirit, and the peace-bringing act of submission, there is no such comfort for sorrow, as to fling ourselves into others' griefs, and to bear others' burdens. Our Lord, with His face set like a flint, on the road to the Cross, but yet sufficiently free of heart to turn to Bartimaeus, reads a lesson that rebukes us all, and should teach us all.

Further, do we not see here a beautiful concrete instance, on the lower plane, of the power of earnest desire.

No enemy could have stopped Christ on that road; no opposition could have stopped Him, no beseeching on the part of loving and ignorant friends, repeating the temptation in the wilderness-or the foolish words of Peter, 'This shall not be unto Thee,' could have stopped Him. He would have trodden down all such flimsy obstacles, as a lion 'from the thickets of Jordan' crashes through the bulrushes, but this cry stopped Him, 'Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me, and the Cross and all else that He was hastening to, great as it was for the world, had to wait its turn, for something else had to be done first. There was noise enough on the road, the tramp of many feet, the clatter of many eager tongues, but the voice of one poor man sitting in the dust there by the roadside, found its way through all the noise to Christ's ears. 'Which things are an allegory.' There is an ocean of praise always, as I might so say breaking upon Christ's Throne, but the little stream of my petitions flows distinguishable through all that sea. As one of our poets says, we may even think of Him as 'missing my little human praise' when the voice of one poor boy was not heard. Surely amidst all the encouragements that we have to believe that our cry is not sent up into an empty heaven, nor into deaf ears, and that all the multitude of creatures that wait before that Throne do not prevent the individualising knowledge and the individualising love of Jesus Christ from coming straight to every one of us, this little incident is not the least instructive and precious. He that heard Bartimaeus will hear us.

In like manner, may I not say that here we have an illustration of how Christ, who has so much besides to do, would suspend other work, if it were needful, in order to do what we need? As I have said, the rest had to wait. Bartimaeus stopped Christ. And our hand, if it be the hand of faith, put out to the hem of the garment as Jesus of Nazareth passeth by, will so far stop Him as that He will do what we wish, if what we wish is in accordance with our highest good. There was another man in Jericho who stopped Christ, on that same journey; for not only the petition of Bartimaeus, but the curiosity-which was more than curiosity-of Zacchaeus, stopped Him, and He who stood still, though He had His face set like a flint to go to Jerusalem, because Bartimaeus cried, stood still and looked up into the sycamore tree where the publican was-the best fruit that ever it bore-and said, 'Zacchaeus; come down, I must abide at thy house.' Why *must* He abide? Because He discerned there a soul that He could help and save, and that arrested Him on His road to the Cross.

So, dear friends, amidst all the work of administering the universe which He does, and of guiding and governing and inspiring His Church, which He does, if you ask for the supply of your need He would put that work aside for a moment, if necessary, to attend to you. That is no exaggeration; it is only a strong way of putting the plain truth that Christ's love individualises each of its objects; and lavishes itself upon each one of us; as if there were no other beings in the universe but only our two selves.

And then, remember too, that what Bartimaeus got was not taken from anyone else. Nobody suffered because Jesus paused to help him. They sat down in ranks, five thousand of them, and as they began to eat, those that were first served would be looked upon with envious eye by the last 'ranks,' who would be wondering if the bits of bread and the two small fishes were enough to go round. But the first group was fed full and the last group had as much, and they took up 'of the fragments that remained, twelve baskets full.'

'Enough for all, enough for each,
Enough for evermore.'

There is one more thought rising out of this story. It teaches a wonderful lesson as to the power which Christ puts into the hand of believing prayer.

'What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee?' He had asked the same question a little while before, under very different circumstances. When James and John came and tried to beguile Him into a blind promise, because they knew that It was not likely that they would get what they asked if they said it out at first. He avoided the snare with that same question, To them the question was a refusal; they had said: ‘Master, we will that Thou wouldst do whatever we should desire’; and He said: ‘What is it that ye desire? Let Me know that first.’ But when blind Bartimaeus cried, Jesus smiled down upon him-though his sightless eyeballs could not see the smile, there would be a smile in the cadence of His words-and He said: ‘What wouldst thou that I should do for thee?’ To this suppliant that question was a promise-’I will do what you want.’ He puts the key of the royal treasure-house into the hand of faith, and says, ‘Go in and help yourself. Take what you will.’

Only, of course, we must remember that there are limitations in the very nature of the case, imposed not arbitrarily, but because the very nature of the truest gifts creates them, and these limitations to some of us sound as if they took all the blessedness out of the act of prayer. ‘We know,’ says one of the Apostles, ‘that if we ask anything according to His will He heareth us.’ Some of us think that that is a very poor kind of charter, but it sets the necessary limit to the omnipotence of faith. ‘What wouldst thou that I should do for thee?’ Unless our answer always, and at bottom, is, ‘Not my will, but Thine,’ we have not yet learnt the highest blessing, nor the truest meaning, of prayer. For to pray does not mean to insist, to press our wishes on God, but it means, first, to desire that our wills may be brought into harmony with His. The old Rabbis hit upon great truths now and then, and one of them said, ‘Make God’s will thy will, that He may make thy will His will.’ If any poor, blind Bartimaeus remembers that, and asks accordingly, he has the key to the royal treasury in his possession, and he may go in and plunge his hand up to the wrist in jewels and diamonds, and carry away bars of gold, and it will all be his.

When this man, who had no sight in his eyeballs, knew that whatever he wanted he should have, he did not need to pause long to consider what it was that he wanted most. If you and I had that Aladdin’s lamp given to us, and had only to rub it for a mighty spirit to come that would fulfil our wishes, I wonder if we should be as sure of what we wanted. If we were as conscious of our need as the blind man was of his, we should pause as little in our response to the question: ‘What wouldst thou that I should do for thee?’ ‘Lord! Dost Thou not see that mine eyes are dark? What else but sight can I want?’ Jesus still comes to us with the same question. God grant that we may all say; ‘Lord, how canst Thou ask us? Dost Thou not see that my soul is stained, my love wandering, my eyeballs dim? Give me Thyself!’ If we thus ask, then the answer will come as quickly to us as it did to this blind man: ‘Go thy way! Thy faith hath saved thee,’ and that ‘Go thy way’ will not be dismissal from the Presence of our Benefactor, but our ‘way’ will be the same as Bartimaeus’ was, when he received his sight, and ‘followed Jesus in the way.’

86)Luke 19:5

Luke

MELTED BY KINDNESS

Luk. 19:5.

It is characteristic of Luke that only he tells the story of Zacchaeus. He always dwells with special interest on incidents bringing out the character of Christ as the Friend of outcasts. His is eminently the Gospel of forgiveness. For example, we owe to Him the three supreme parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, as well as those of the Pharisee and the publican praying in the Temple; and of the good Samaritan. It is he that tells us that all the publicans and sinners came near to Jesus to hear Him; and he loses no opportunity of enforcing the lesson with which this incident closes, ‘The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.’ It is because of the light that it throws upon that great thought that he tells this fascinating story of Zacchaeus. I need not repeat it. We all remember it, and the quaintness and grotesqueness of part of it fix it in people’s memories. We know how the rich tax gatherer, pocketing his dignity, and unable to see over the heads of the crowd, scrambled up into the branches of the sycamore tree that overhung the road; and there was found by the eye of love, and surprised by the words of kindness, which melted him down, and made a new man of him on the spot. The story seems to me to be full of teaching, to which I desire to turn your attention at this time.

I. First, note the outcast, drawn by imperfect motives to Jesus Christ.

It has been supposed that this man was a Gentile, but his Jewish name establishes his origin. And, if so, the fact that he was a publican and a Jew says a good deal about his character. There are some trades which condemn, to a certain extent, the men who engage in them. You would not expect to find a man of sensitive honour acting as a professional spy; or one of earnest religious character keeping a public-house. You would not expect to find a very good Jew condescending to be the tool of the Roman Government. Zacchaeus was at the head of the revenue office in Jericho, a position of considerable importance, inasmuch as there was a large volume of trade through that city from its situation near the fords of the Jordan, and from the fertility of the plain in which it stood. He had made some money, and probably made it by very questionable means. He was the object, not undeservedly, of the execration and suspicion of his countrymen. Italians did not love Italians who took service under Austria. Irishmen did not love Irishmen who in the bad old days used to collect church cess. And so Jews had no very kind feeling towards Jews who became Caesar's servants. That a man should be in such a position indicated that he cared more for money than for patriotism, religion, or popular approval. His motto was the motto of that Roman Emperor who said, 'Money has no smell,' out of whatever cesspool it may have been fished up. But the consciousness of being encompassed by universal hatred would induce the object of it to put on an extra turn of the screw, and avenge upon individuals the general hostility. So we may take it for granted that Zacchaeus, the head of the Jericho custom-house, and rich to boot, was by no means a desirable character.

What made him want to see Jesus Christ? He said to himself, curiosity; but probably he was doing himself injustice, and there was something else working below than merely the wish to see what sort of man was this Rabbi Joshua from Galilee that everybody was talking about. Had he heard that Jesus had a soft place in His heart for his class? Or was he, perhaps, beginning to get tired of being the butt of universal hatred, and finding that money scarcely compensated for that? Or was there some reaching out towards some undefined good, and a dissatisfaction with a very defined present, though unnamed, evil? Probably so. Like some of us, he put the trivial motive uppermost because he was half ashamed of the half-conscious better one.

I wonder if there are any here now who said to themselves that they would come out of curiosity to hear the preacher, or from some such ordinary motive, and who all the while have, lying deep below that, another reason altogether, a dim feeling that it is not all right between them and God, and that here may be the place to have it put right? At all events, from whatsoever imperfect motives little Zacchaeus was perched up in the sycamore there, he went to see Christ, and he got more than he went for. Unconsciously we may be drawn, and imperfect motives may lead us to a perfect Saviour.

He sets us an example in another way. Do not be too punctilious about dignity in pursuing aims that you know to be good. It would be a sight to bring jeers and grins on the faces of the crowd to see the rich man of the custom-house sitting up amongst the leaves. But he did not mind about that if he got a good look at the Rabbi when He passed. People care nothing for ridicule if their hearts are set upon a thing. I wish there were more of us who did not mind being laughed at if only what we did helped us to see Jesus Christ. Do not be afraid of ridicule. It is not a test of truth; in nine cases out of ten it is the grimace of fools.

II. Then, further, notice the self-invited Guest.

When the little procession stopped under the sycamore tree, Zacchaeus would begin to feel uncomfortable. He may have had experience in past times of the way in which the great doctors of orthodoxy were in the habit of treating a publican, and may have begun to be afraid that this new one was going to be like all the rest, and elicit some kind of mob demonstration against him. The crowd would be waiting with intense curiosity to see what would pass between the Rabbi and the revenue collector. They would all be very much astonished. ‘Zacchaeus! make haste and come down. To-day I must abide at thy house.’ Perhaps it was the first time since he had been a child at his mother’s knee that he had heard his name pronounced in tones of kindness. There was not a ragged beggar in Jericho who would not have thought himself degraded by putting his foot across the threshold that Jesus now says He will cross.

It is the only time in which we read that Jesus volunteered to go into any house. He never offers to go where He is not wanted, any more than He ever stays away where He is. And so the very fact of His saying ‘I will abide at thy house,’ is to me an indication that, deep down below Zacchaeus’ superficial and vulgar curiosity, there was something far more noble which our Lord fosters into life and consciousness by this offer.

Many large truths are suggested by it on which we may touch. We have in Christ’s words an illustration of His individualising knowledge. ‘Zacchaeus, come down.’ There is no sign that anybody had told Christ the name, or that He knew anything about Zacchaeus before by human knowledge. But the same eye that saw Nathanael under the fig-tree saw Zacchaeus in the sycamore; and, seeing in secret, knew without being told the names of both. Christ does not name men in vain. He generally, when He uses an individual’s name in addressing him, means either to assert His knowledge of his character, or His authority over him, or in some way or other to bespeak personal adhesion and to promise personal affection. So He named some of His disciples, weaving a bond that united each single soul to Himself by the act. This individualising knowledge and drawing love and authority are all expressed, as I think, in that one word ‘Zacchaeus.’ And these are as true about us as about him. The promises of the New Testament, the words of Jesus Christ, the great, broad, universal ‘whosoevers’ of His assurance and of His commandments are as directly meant for each of us as if they were in an envelope with our names upon them and put into our hands. We, too, are spoken to by Him by our names, and for us, too, there may be a personal bond of answering love that knits us individually to the Master, as there certainly is a bond of personal regard, compassion, affection, and purpose of salvation in His heart in regard of each single soul of all the masses of humanity. I should have done something if I should have been able to gather into a point, that blessedly pierced some heart to let the life in, the broad truths of the Gospel. ‘Whosoever will, let him come.’ Say to yourself, ‘That is me.’ ‘Whosoever cometh I will in no wise cast out.’ Say to yourself, ‘That is me.’ And in like manner with all the general declarations, and especially with that chiefest of them all, ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish.’ Read it as you may-and you will never read it right until you do-’God so loved *me*’-John, Mary, or whatever be your name-’Jesus so loved *me* that if *I* believe upon Him *I* shall not perish, but have everlasting life.’

Then, note, further, how here we get the revelation, in a concrete form, of Christ’s perfect willingness and desire to make common cause, and dwell with the most degraded and outcast. I have said that this is the only instance in which He volunteered to be a guest. Pharisees asked Him, and He did not refuse. The publican’s dwelling, which was tabooed, He opened the door of by His own hand. And that is what He always does.

This little incident may be taken to be, not merely a symbol of His whole dealings, but an illustration, in small, of the same principle which has its largest embodiment and illustration in the fact of His Incarnation and Manhood. Why did Jesus Christ take flesh and dwell among us? Because He desired to seek and to save that which is lost. Why did He go into the publican’s house, and brave the sneers of the crowd, and associate Himself with the polluted? For the same reason. Microscopic crystals and gigantic ones are due to the same forces working in the same fashion. This incident is more than a symbol; it is a little instance of the operation of the law which finds its supreme and transcendent instance in the fact that the Eternal Son of God bowed the heavens and came down ‘and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.’

His example is our pattern. A Christian church which does not imitate its Master in its frank and continual willingness to associate itself with the degraded and the outcast has lost one of the truest signs of its being vitalised with the life of Christ. There is much in this day in the condition of Christian communities to make men dissatisfied and fearful. But there is one thing which, though in all its developments one cannot sympathise with it, is in its essence wholly good, and that is the new and quickened consciousness that a church which does not address itself to the outcasts has no business to live; and that Christian people who are too proud of their righteousness to go amongst the unclean and the degraded are a great deal more of Pharisees than Christians, and have need to learn which be the first principles of the religion which they profess. Self-righteousness gathers up its skirts in holy horror; perfect righteousness goes cheerily and without fear amongst the outcasts, for where should the physician go but to the sick, and where should Christ be found but in the house of the publican?

Further, the saying of our Lord suggests His recognition of the great law that ruled His life. Chronology here is of much importance. We do not generally remember that the scene with Zacchaeus was within about a week of the Crucifixion. Our Lord was on that last journey to Jerusalem to die, during the whole of which there was over His demeanour a tension of holy impatience, altogether unlike His usual manner, which astonished and amazed the disciples as they followed Him. He set His face like a flint to go to Jerusalem; and strode before them on the way as if He were eager to reach the culmination of His sufferings and of His work. Thus borne on the wings of the strong desire to be perfected on the Cross, He is arrested on His path. Nothing else was able to stop Him, but 'To-day I *must* abide in thy house.' There was a soul to be saved; and the world's sacrifice had to wait till the single soul was secured. Christ hurrying, if I may use the word, at all events steadfastly and without wavering, pressing towards the Cross, let His course be stopped by this need. The highest 'must' was obedience to the Father's will, and parallel with that need there was the other, of rescuing the Father's prodigal sons. So this elder Brother owned the obligation, and paused on the road to Calvary, to lodge in the house of Zacchaeus. Let us learn the sweet lesson, and take the large consolations that lie in such a thought.

Again, the utterance of this self-invited Guest suggests His over-abundant fulfilment of timid, half-conscious desires. I said at the beginning of my remarks that only curiosity was on the surface; but that the very fact that our Lord addressed Himself to the man seemed to imply that He descried in him something more than mere vulgar curiosity. And the glad leap with which Zacchaeus came down from his tree might have revealed to Zacchaeus himself, as no doubt it did to some of the bystanders, what it was that he had been dimly wishing. So with us all there are needs, longings, half-emerging wishes, that have scarcely come into the field of consciousness, but yet have power enough to modify our actions. Jesus Christ understands all about us, and reads us better than we do ourselves; and is ready to meet, and by meeting to bring into full relief, these vague feelings after an undefined good. Brethren, He is to us, if we will let Him be, all that we want; and He is to us all that we need, although we only half know that we need it, and never say to ourselves that we wish it.

There is a last thought deducible from these words of our Lord's; and that is, His leaving a man to decide whether he will have Him or no. 'Make haste and come down, for to-day I *must* abide at thy house. Yes! but if Zacchaeus had stuck in his tree, Christ's 'must' would not have been fulfilled. He would have gone on to Jerusalem if the publican had not scrambled down in haste. He forces Himself on no man; He withholds Himself from no man. He respects that awful prerogative of being the architects of our own evil and our own good, by our own free and unconstrained choice.

Did you ever think that it was now or never with this publican; that Jesus Christ was never to go through the streets of Jericho any more; that it was Zacchaeus' last chance; and that, if he had not made haste, he would have lost Christ for ever? And so it is yet. There may be some in this place at this moment to whom Jesus Christ is now making His last appeal. I know not; no man knows. A Rabbi said, when they asked him when a man should repent, 'Repent on the last day of your lives.' And they said, 'But we do not know when that will be.' And he said, 'Then repent *now*.' So I say, because some of you may never hear Christ's Gospel again, and because none of us know whether we shall or not; make sure work of it *now*, and do not let Jesus Christ go out of the city and up the road between the hills yonder; for if once the folds of the ravine shut Him from sight He will never be back in Jericho, or seen by Zacchaeus any more for ever.

III. And so, lastly, notice the outcast melted by kindness.

We do not know at what stage in our Lord's intercourse with the publican he 'stood and said, Half of my goods I give to the poor,' and so on. But whensoever it was, it was the sign of the entire revolution that had been wrought upon him by the touch of that loving hand, and by the new fountain of sympathy and love that he had found in Jesus Christ.

Some people have supposed, indeed, that his words do not mark a vow for the future, but express his practice in the past. But it seems to me to be altogether incongruous that Zacchaeus should advertise his past good in order to make himself out to be not quite so bad as people thought him, and, therefore, not so unworthy of being Christ's host. Christ's love kindles sense of our sin, not complacent recounting of our goodness. So Zacchaeus said, ‘Lord! Thou hast loved me, and I wonder. I yield, and fling away my black past; and, so far as I can, make restitution for it.’

The one transforming agency is the love of Christ received into the heart. I do not suppose that Zacchaeus knew as much about Jesus Christ even after the conversation as we do; nor did he see His love in that supreme death on the Cross as we do. But the love of the Lord made a deep dint in his heart, and revolutionised his whole nature. The thing that will alter the whole current and set of a man’s affections, that will upset his estimate of the relative value of material and spiritual, and that will turn him inside out and upside down, and make a new man of him, is the revelation of the supreme love that in Jesus Christ has come into the world, with an individualising regard to each of us, and has died on the Cross for the salvation of us all. Nothing else will do it. People had frowned on Zacchaeus, and it made him bitter. They had execrated and persecuted him; and his only response was setting his teeth more firmly and turning the screw a little tighter when he had the chance. You can drive a man into devilry by contempt. If you want to melt him into goodness, try love. The Ethiopian cannot change his skin, but Jesus Christ can change his heart, and that will change his skin by degrees. The one transforming power is faith in the love of Jesus Christ.

Further, the one test of a true reception of Him is the abandonment of past evil and restitution for it as far as possible. People say that our Gospel is unreal and sentimental, and a number of other ugly adjectives. Well! If it ever is so, it is the fault of the speakers, and not of the Gospel. For its demands from every man that accepts it are intensely practical, and nothing short of a complete turning of his back upon his old self, shown in the conclusive forsaking of former evil, however profitable or pleasant, and reparation for harm done to men, satisfies them.

It is useless to talk about loving Jesus Christ and trusting Him, and having the sweet assurance of forgiveness, and a glorious hope of heaven, unless these have made you break off your bad habits of whatsoever sort they may be, and cast them behind your backs. Strong emotion, sweet deep feeling, assured confidence in the sense of forgiveness and the hope of heaven, are all very well. Let us see your faith by your works; and of these works the chief is-Behold the evil that I did, I do it no more: ‘Behold! Lord! the half of my goods I give to the poor.' There was a young ruler, a chapter before this, who could not make up his mind to part with wealth in order to follow Christ. This man has so completely made up his mind to follow Christ that he does not need to be bidden to give up his worldly goods. The half given to the poor, and fourfold restoration to those whom he had wronged, would not leave much. How astonished Zacchaeus would have been if anybody had said to him that morning, 'Zacchaeus! before this night falls you will be next door to a pauper, and you will be a happier man than you are now!' So, dear friends, like him, all of us may, if we will, and if we need, make a sudden right-about-face that shall alter the complexion of our whole future. People tell us that sudden conversions are suspicious. So they may be in certain cases. But the moment when a man makes up his mind to change the direction in which his face is set will always be a moment, however long may be the hesitation, and the meditation, and the preparation that led up to it.

Jesus Christ is standing before each of us as truly as He did before that publican, and is saying to us as truly as He said to him, 'Let Me in.' 'Behold! I stand at the door and knock. If any man open . . . I will enter.' If He comes in He will teach you what needs to be turned out if He is to stop; and will make the sacrifice blessed and not painful; and you will be a happier and a richer man with Christ and nothing than with all beside and no Christ.

87)Luke 19:16

Luke

THE TRADING SERVANTS

Luk. 19:16, Luk. 19:18.

The Evangelist, contrary to his usual practice, tells us what was the occasion of this parable. It was spoken at Jericho, on our Lord's last journey to Jerusalem, Bethany was but a day's march distant; Calvary but a week ahead. An unusual tension of spirit marked our Lord's demeanour, and was noticed by the disciples with awe. It infected them, and the excitable crowd, which was more than usually excitable because on its way to the passover festival. The air was electric, and everybody felt that something was impending. They ‘thought that the kingdom of God should *immediately* appear.’ So Christ spoke this parable to damp down that expectation which might easily flash up into the flame of rebellion. He tells them His real programme. He was to go a long way off to receive the kingdom. That was a familiar experience amongst the nations tributary to Rome, and more than one of the Herodian family had passed through it. In the meantime there was to be a period of expectancy. It was to be a long time, for he had to go to a ‘far country,’ and it was to be extended enough for the servants to turn their money over many times during His absence. When He did return it was not to do what they expected. They thought that the kingdom meant Jewish lordship over subject nations. He teaches them that it meant the destruction of the rebellious citizens, and a rigid scrutiny of the servants’ faithfulness.

Now, the words of my two texts bring out in connection with this outline of the future some large lessons which I desire to draw.

I. Notice the small capital that the servants receive to trade with.

It was a pound apiece, which, numismatic authorities tell us, is somewhat about the same value as some £6 odd of English money; though, of course, the purchasing power would be considerably greater. A small amount, and an equal amount to every servant-these are the two salient points of this parable. They make the broad distinction between it and the other parable, which is often mixed up with it, the parable of the talents. There, instead of the amount being excessively small, it is exceedingly great; for a talent was worth some £400, and ten talents would be £4000, a fair capital for a man to start with. The other point of difference between the two parables, which belongs to the essence of each, is that while the gift in the one case is identical, in the other case it is graduated and different.

Now, to suppose that these are but two varying versions of the same parable, which the Evangelists have manipulated is, in my judgment, to be blind to the plainest of the lessons to be drawn from them.

There are two sorts of gifts. In one, all Christian men, the Master's servants, are alike; in another, they differ. Now, what is the thing in which all Christians are alike? What gift do they all possess equally; rich and poor, largely endowed or slenderly equipped; 'talented'-as we use the word from the parable-or not? The rich man and the poor, the wise man and the foolish, the cultured man and the ignorant, the Fijian and the Englishman, have one thing alike-the message of salvation which we call the Gospel of the blessed Lord. That is the 'pound.' We all stand upon an equal platform there, however differently we are endowed in respect of capacities and other matters. All have it; and all have the same.

Now if that is the interpretation of this parable, there are considerations that flow from that thought, and on which I would dwell for a moment.

The first of them is the apparent smallness of the gift. You may feel a difficulty in accepting that explanation, and may have been saying to yourselves that it cannot be correct, because Jesus Christ would never compare the unspeakable gift of His message of salvation through Him, to that paltry sum. But throw yourselves back to the moment of utterance, and I think you will feel the pathos and power of the metaphor. Here was that handful of disciples set in the midst of a hostile world, dead against them, with its banded superstitions, venerable idolatries, systematised philosophies, the force of the mightiest instruments of material power that the world had ever seen, in the organisation and military power of Rome. And there stood twelve Galilean men, with their simple, unlettered message; one poor 'pound,' and that was all. 'The foolishness of preaching,' the message which to 'the Jews was a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks was folly,' was all that they were equipped with. Their Master, who left them to seek a Kingdom, had so little to bestow, before He received His crown, that all that He could spare them was that small sum. They had to go into business in a very poor way. They had to be content to do a very insignificant retail trade. 'The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.' The old experience of the leather sling and the five stones out of the brook, in the hand of the stripling, that made short work of the brazen armour of the giant, and penetrated with a whizz into his thick skull, and laid him prostrate, was to be repeated. 'He called his servants, and gave them'-a pound apiece! If you and I, Christian men and women, were true to the Master’s legacy, and believed that we have in it more wealth than the treasures of wisdom and knowledge or force which the world has laid up, we should find that our mite was more than they all have in their possession.

Further, the texts suggest the purpose for which the pound is given. The servants had to live on it themselves, no doubt. So have we. They had to trade with it. So have we. Now that means two things. We get the Gospel, not as some of us lazily suppose, in order to secure that we shall not be punished for our past sins whilst we live, and go to heaven when we die. We get it, not only to enjoy its consolations and its sweetness, but to do business with.

And there are two ways in which this trading is to be done by us. The main one is the honest application of the principles and powers of the Gospel to the moulding of our own characters, and the making us better, purer, gentler, more heavenly-minded, and more Christlike. That is the first trading that we have to carry on with the Word. We get it not for an indolent assent, as so many of us misuse it. We receive it not merely to say, ‘Oh I believe it,’ and there an end, but that we may bring it to bear upon all our conduct, and that it may be the chief formative influence in our characters. Christian people! is that what you do with your Christianity? Is the Gospel moulding you, hour by hour, moment by moment? Have you brought all its great truths to bear upon your daily lives? Have you inwrought its substance into, not merely your understandings or your emotions, but your daily conduct? Is it indeed the life of your lives, and the leaven that is leavening your whole character? You have it to trade with; see that you do not wrap it in a napkin, and stow it idly away in some corner.

Then there is the other way of trading and that is, telling it to others. That is an obligation incumbent on all Christians. There may be differences in regard to other gifts, which determine the manner in which each shall use the equal gift which we all possess alike. But these are of subordinate importance. The main thing is to feel that the possession of Christian faith, which is our way of receiving the pound, carries with it indissolubly the obligation of Christian evangelism. However it may be discharged, discharged it is to be, by every true servant. I am sometimes half disposed to think that it would have been better for the Church if there had never been any men in my position, on whom the mass of unspiritual, idle because busy, and silent because little-loving, Christian professors contentedly roll the whole obligation to preach God’s Gospel. My brethren, the world is not going to be evangelised by officials. Until all Christian people wake up to the sense that they have the ‘pound’ to trade with, there will be nothing adequate done to bring the world to the obedience and the love of Jesus Christ. You say you have the Gospel; if you have it what are you doing with it?

Self-centred Christianity, if such a thing were possible, is a mistake. It is generally a sham; it is always a crime. A man that puts away his pound, and never goes out and says, ‘Come, share with me in the wealth that I have found in Jesus Christ’ will be like a miser that puts his hoardings into an old stocking, and hides it in the ground somewhere. When he goes to dig it up, he is only too likely to find that all the coins have slipped out. If you want to keep your Christianity, let the air into it. If you want it to increase, sow it. There are hosts of you who would be far happier Christian people, if you came out of your shells and traded with your pound.

II. Observe the varying profits of the trading.

The one man says, ‘Thy pound hath gained ten pounds.’ The other says, ‘Thy pound hath gained five pounds.’ And the others who are not mentioned, no doubt, had also varying results to present. Now that inequality of profits from an equal capital to start with, is but a picturesque way of saying what is, alas! too obviously true, that Christian people do not all stand on the same level in regard to the use they have made of, and the benefits they have derived from, the one equal gift which was bestowed upon them. It is the same to every one at the beginning, but differences develop as they go on. One man makes twice as much out of it as another does.

Now, let us distinctly understand what sort of differences these are which our Lord signalises here. Let me clear away a mistake which may interfere with the true lessons of this parable, that the differences in question are the superficial ones in apparent results which follow from difference of endowments, or from difference of influential position. That is the kind of meaning that is often attached to the ‘ten pounds’ or the ‘five pounds’ in the text. We think that the ten pounder is the man who has been able to do some large spiritual work for Jesus Christ, that fills the world with its greatness, the man who has been set in some most conspicuous place, and by reason of intellectual ability or other talent has been able to gather in many souls into the kingdom; but that is not Christ’s way of estimating. We should be going dead in the teeth of everything that He teaches if we thought that such as these were the differences intended. No, no! Every man that co-operates in a great work with equal diligence and devotion has an equal place in his eyes. The soldier that clapped Luther on the back as he was going into the Diet of Worms, and said, ‘You have a bigger fight to fight than we ever had; cheer up, little monk!’ stands on the same level as the great reformer, if what he did was done from the game motive and with as full consecration of himself. The old law of Israel states the true principle of Christian recompense: they that ‘abide by the stuff’ have the same share in the spoil as they ‘that go down into the battle.’ All servants who have exercised equal faithfulness and equal diligence stand on the same level and have the same success; no matter how different may be their estimation in the eyes of men; no matter how different may be the conspicuousness of the places that they fill in the eyes of the world whilst they live, or in the records of the Church when they are dead. Equal diligence will issue in equal results in the development of character, and the only reason for the diversity of results is the diversity of faithfulness and of zeal in trading with the pound.

Notice, too, before I go further, how all who trade make profits. There are no bad debts in that business. There are no investments that result in a loss. Everybody that goes into it makes something by it; which is just to say that any man who is honest and earnest in the attempt to utilise the powers of Christ’s Gospel for his own culture, or for the world’s good, will succeed in reality, however he may seem to fail in appearance. There are no commercial failures in this trading. The man with his ten pounds of profit made them because he worked hardest. The man that made the five made all that his work entitled him to. There was no one who came and said, ‘Lord! I put thy pound into my little shop, and I did my best with it, and it is all gone!’ Every Christian effort is crowned with success.

III. Lastly, we have here the final declaration of profits.

The master has come back. He is a king now, but he is the master still, and he wants to know what has become of the money that was left in the servants' hands. Now, that is but a metaphorical way of bringing to our minds that which we cannot conceive of without metaphor-viz., the retribution that lies beyond the grave for us all. Although we cannot conceive it without metaphor, we may reach, through the metaphor to some apprehension, at any rate, of the facts that lie behind it. There are two points in reference to this final declaration of profits suggested here.

The first is this, that all the profit is ascribed to the capital. Neither of the two men say: 'I, with thy pound, have gained,' but 'Thy pound hath gained.' That is accurately true. For if I accept, and live by, any great moral truth or principle, it is the principle or the truth that is the real productive cause of the change in my life and character. I, by my acceptance of it, simply put the belt on the drum that connects my loom with the engine, but it is the engine that drives the looms and the shuttle, and brings out the web at last. And so, Christian people who, with God's grace in their hearts, have utilised the 'pound,' and thereby made themselves Christlike, have to say, 'It was not I, but Christ in me. It was the Gospel, and not my faith in the Gospel, that wrought this change.' Is it your teeth or your dinner that nourishes you? Is it the Gospel or your trust in the Gospel that is the true cause of your sanctifying?

With regard to the other aspect of this trading, the same thing is true. Is it my word or Christ's Word ministered by me that helps any of my hearers who are helped? Surely! surely! there is no question about that. It is the 'pound' that gains the 'pounds.' 'Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So, then, neither is he that planteth anything nor he that watereth, but God that giveth the increase.'

The other consideration suggested by these words is the exact knowledge of the precise results of a life, which is possessed at last. Each servant knew precisely what was the net outcome of his whole activity. That is exactly what we do not know here, and never shall, and never can know. But yonder all illusions will have vanished; and there will be two sorts of disillusionising then. Men, for instance, of my profession, whose names are familiar, and who hold high places in the esteem of the Church, and may be tempted to suppose that they have done a great deal-I am afraid that many of us will find, when we get yonder, that we have not done nearly so much as our admirers in this world, and we ourselves, were sometimes tempted to think that we had done. The searching light that comes in will show a great many seamy places in the cloth that looks very sound when it is inspected in the twilight. And there will be another kind of disillusionising. Many a man has said, ‘Lord! I have laboured in vain, and spent my strength for nought,’ who will find out that he was mistaken, and that where he saw failure there were solid results; that where he thought the grain had perished in the furrows, it had sprung up and borne fruit unto life everlasting. ‘Lord! when saw we Thee in prison, and visited Thee?’ We never knew that we had done anything of the sort. ‘Behold! I was left alone,’ said the widowed Jerusalem when she was restored to her husband, ‘these’-children that have gathered round me-’where had they been?’ We shall know, for good or bad, exactly the results of our lives.

We shall have to tell them. The slothful servant, too, was under this compulsion of absolute honesty. If he had not been so, do you think he would have ventured to stand up before his master, a king now, and insult him to his face? But he had to turn himself inside out, and tell then what he had thought in his inmost heart. So ‘every one of us shall give an account of himself to God’; and like a man in the bankruptcy court, we shall have to explain our books, and go into all our transactions. We are working in the dark today. Our work will be seen as it is, in the light. The coral reef rises in the ocean, and the creatures that made it do not see it. The ocean will be drained away, and the reef will stand up sheer and distinct.

My brother! ‘I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire’-and when you have bought your pound, see that you use it; for ‘it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful.’

88)Luke 19:17

Luke

THE REWARDS OF THE TRADING SERVANTS

Luk. 19:17, Luk. 19:19.

The relation between this parable of the pounds and the other of the talents has often been misunderstood, and is very noteworthy. They are not two editions of one parable variously manipulated by the Evangelists, but they are two parables presenting two kindred and yet diverse aspects of one truth. They are neither identical, as some have supposed, nor contradictory, as others have imagined; but they are complementary. The parable of the talents represents the servants as receiving different endowments; one gets five; another two; another one. They make the same rate of profit with their different endowments. The man that turned his two talents into four did just as well as he that turned his five into ten. In either case the capital is doubled. Since the diligence is the same, the rewards are the same, and to each is given the identical same eulogium and the same entrance into the joy of his Lord. So the lesson of that parable is that, however unequal are our endowments, there may be as much diligence shown in the use of the smallest as in the greatest, and where that is the case, the man with the small endowments will stand on the same level of recompense as the man with the large.

But that is not all. This parable comes in to complete the thoughts. Here all the servants get the same gift, the one pound, but they make different profits out of it, one securing twice as much as the other. And, inasmuch as the diligence has been different, the rewards are different. So the lesson of this parable is that unequal faithfulness in the use of the same opportunities results in unequal retribution and reward. Unequal faithfulness, I say, because, of course, in both parables it is presupposed that the factor in producing the profit is not any accidental circumstance, but the earnestness and faithfulness of the servant. Christ does not pay for results; He pays for motives. And it is not because the man has made a certain number of pounds, but because in making them he has shown a certain amount of faithfulness, that he is rewarded. Christ does not say, ‘Well done! good and *successful* servant,’ but ‘Well done! good and *faithful* servant.’

So, keeping these two sides of the one truth in view, I desire now to draw out two or three of the lessons which seem to me to lie in the principle laid down in my texts, of the unequal results of the unequal diligence of these servants.

I. I would note the solemn view of this present life that underlies the whole.

‘Thou hast been faithful in a very little; have thou authority over five cities.’ Well, that rests upon the thought that all our present life here is a stewardship, which in its nature is preparatory to larger work yonder. And that is the point of view from which alone it is right to look at, and possible to understand, this else unintelligible and bewildering life on earth. Clearly enough, to anybody that has eyes in his head, moral ends are supreme in man’s relation to nature, and in man’s life. We are here for the sake of making character, and of acquiring aptitudes and capacities which shall be exercised hereafter. The whole of our earthly career is the exercise of stewardship in regard to all the gifts with which we have been entrusted, in order that by the right exercise of that stewardship we may develop ourselves and acquire powers.

Now if it is clear that the whole meaning and end of the present life are to make character, and that we have to do with the material and the transient only, in order that, like the creatures that build up the coral reefs, we may draw from the ever-varying waves of the ocean that welters around us solid substance which we can pile up into an enduring monument-is this process of making character, and developing ourselves, to be cut short by such a contemptible thing as the death of the body? One very distinguished evolutionist, who has been forced onwards from his position to a kind of theism, declares that he is driven to a belief in immortality because he must believe in the reasonableness of God’s work. And it seems to me that if indeed-as is plainly the case-moral ends are supreme in our life’s history, it brings utter intellectual bewilderment and confusion to suppose that these ends are kept in view up till the moment of death, and that then down comes the guillotine and cuts off all. God does not take the rough ore out of the mine, and deal with it, and change it to polished steel, and shape His weapons, and then take them when they are at their highest temper and their sharpest edge, and break them across His knee. No! if here we are shaped, it is because yonder there is work for the tool.

So all here is apprenticeship, and the issues of to-day are recorded in eternity. We are like men perched up in a signal-box by the side of the line; we pull over a lever here, and it lifts an arm half a mile off. The smallest wheel upon one end of a shaft may cause another ten times its diameter to revolve, at the other end of the shaft through the wall there. Here we prepare, yonder we achieve.

II. Note the consequent littleness and greatness of this present.

‘Thou hast been faithful in a very little.’ Some of you may remember a recent sermon on the previous part of this parable, in which I tried to bring out an explanation of the small sum with which these servants were entrusted-the pound apiece for their little retail businesses-and found reason to believe that the interpretation of that gift was the Gospel of Jesus Christ which, in comparison with the world’s wisdom and philosophies and material forces, seemed such a very insignificant thing. If we keep that interpretation in view in treating my present text, then there is hinted to us the contrast between the necessary limitations and incompletenesses even of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ which we have here, and the flood of glory and of light, which shall pour upon our eyes when the veil of flesh and sense has dropped away. Here we know in part; here, even with the intervention of the Eternal and Incarnate Word of God, the Revealer of the Father, we see as in a glass darkly; there face to face. The magnificences and the harmonies of that great revelation of God in Jesus Christ, which transcends all human thought and all worldly wisdom, are but a point, in comparison with the continent of illumination which shall come to us hereafter. ‘The moon that rules the night’ is the revelation that we have to-day, the reflection and echo of the sun that will rule the unsetting day of the heavens.

But I pass from that aspect of the words before us to the other, which, I suppose, is rather to be kept in view, in which the faithfulness in a very little points to the smallness of this present, as measured against that infinite future to which it conducts. Much has been said upon that subject, which is very antagonistic to the real ideas of Christianity. Life here, and this present, have been depreciated unduly, untruly, and unthankfully. And harm has been done, not only to the men who accept that estimate, but to the world that scoffs at it. There is nothing in the Bible, which is at all in sympathy with the so-called religious depreciation of the present, but there is this-'the things that are seen are temporal; the things that are unseen are eternal.' The lower hills look high when beheld from the flat plain that stretches on this side of them; but, if the mist lifts, the great white peaks come out beyond them, glittering in the sunshine, and with the untrodden snows on their inaccessible pinnacles; and nobody thinks about the green foothills, with the flowers upon them, any more. Brethren, think away the mist, for you can, and open your eyes, and see the snow-clad hills of eternity, and then you will understand how low is the elevation of the heights in the foreground. The greatness of the future makes the present little, but the little present is great, because its littleness is the parent of the great future. 'The child is father of the man'; and earth's narrow range widens out into the infinitude of eternity and of heaven. The only thing that gives real greatness and sublimity to our mortal life is its being the vestibule to another. Historically you will find that, wherever faith in a future life has become dim, as it has become dim in large sections of the educated classes to-day, there the general tone of strenuous endeavour has dropped, and the fatal feeling of 'It is not worth while' begins to creep over society. 'Is life worth living?' is the question that is asked on all sides of us to-day. And the modern recrudescence of pessimism has along with it, as one of the main thoughts which cut the nerves of effort, doubt of, and disbelief in, a future. It is because the very little opens out into the immeasurably great, and the passing moments tick us onwards into an unpassing eternity, that the moments are worth living through, and the fleeting insignificances of earth's existence become solemn and majestic as the portals of heaven.

III. Notice the future form of activity prepared for by faithful trading.

'Thou hast been faithful in a very little; have thou authority over ten cities.' Now I do not need to spend a word in dwelling on the contrast between the two pictures of the huckster with his little shop and the pound of capital to begin with, and the vizier that has control of ten of the cities of his master. That is too plain to need any enforcement. We are all here, all us Christian people especially, like men that keep a small shop, in a back street, with a few trivial things in the window, but we are heirs of a kingdom. That is what Christ wants us to lay to heart, so that the little shop shall not seem so very small, and its smoky obscurity shall be irradiated by true visions of what it will lead to.

Nor do I wish to risk any kind of fanciful and precarious speculations as to the manner and the sphere of the authority that is here set forth; only I would keep to one or two plain things. Faithfulness here prepares for participation in Christ's authority hereafter. For we are not to forget that whilst the master, the nobleman, was away seeking the kingdom, all that he could give his servants was the little stock-in-trade with which he started them, and that it is because he has won his kingdom that he is able to dispense to them the larger gifts of dominion over the ten and the five cities. The authority is delegated, but it is more than that- it is shared. For it is participation in, and not merely delegation from, the King and His rule, that is set forth in this and in other places of Scripture, for 'they shall sit down with Me on My throne, even as I also overcame and am set down with My Father on His throne.'

If, then, the rule set forth, in whatever sphere and in whatever fashion it may be exercised, is participation in Christ's authority, let us not forget that therefore it is a rule of which the manifestation is service. In heaven as on earth, and for the Lord in heaven as for the Lord on earth, and for the servants in heaven as for the servants on earth, the law stands irrefragable and eternal-'If any man will be chief among you, let him be your minister.' The authority over the ten cities is the capacity and opportunity of serving and helping every citizen in them all. What that help may be let us leave. It is better to be ignorant than to speculate about matters where there is no possibility of certainty. Ignorance is more impressive than knowledge, only be sure that no dignity can live amidst the pure light of the heavens, except after the fashion of the dignity of the Lord of all, who there, as here, is the servant of all.

But there is a thought in connection with this great though dim revelation of the future, which may well be laid to heart by us. And that is, that however close and direct the dependence on, and the communion with, Jesus Christ, the King of all His servants, in that future state is, it shall not be so close and direct as to exclude room for the exercise of brotherly sympathy and brotherly aid. We shall have Christ for our life and our light and our glory.

But there, as here, we shall help one another to have Him more fully, and to understand Him more perfectly. What further lies in these great words, I do not venture to guess. Enough to know that Christ will be all in all, and that Christ in each will help the others to know Christ more fully.

Only remember, we have to take this great conception of the future as being one that implies largely increased and ennobled activity. A great deal of very cheap ridicule has been cast upon the Christian conception of the future life as if it was an eternity of idleness and of repose. Of repose, yes; of idleness, no! For it is no sinecure to be the governor of ten cities. There will be a good deal of work to be done, in order to discharge that office properly. Only it will be work that does not disturb repose, and at one and the same moment His servants will serve in constant activity, and gaze upon His face in calm contemplation. Christ's session at the right hand of God does not interfere with Christ's continual activity here. And, in like manner, His servants shall rest from their labours, but not from their work; they shall serve Him undisturbed, and shall repose, but not idly.

IV. Lastly, our texts remind us of the variety in recompense which corresponds to diversity in faithfulness.

I need but say a word about that. The one man gets his ten cities because his faithfulness has brought in ten pounds. The other gets five, corresponding to his faithfulness. As I said, our Lord pays, not for results, except in so far as these are conditioned and secured by the diligence of His servants. And so we come to the old familiar, and yet too often forgotten, conception of degrees in dignity, degrees in nearness to Him. That thought runs all through the New Testament representations of a future life, sometimes more clearly, sometimes more obscurely, but generally present. It is in entire accordance with the whole conception of that future, because the Christian notion of it is not that it is an arbitrary reward, but that it is the natural outcome of the present; and, of course, therefore, varying according to the present, of which it is the outcome. We get what we have wrought for. We get what we are capable of receiving, and what we are capable of receiving depends upon what has been our faithfulness here.

Now, that is perfectly consistent with the other side of the truth which the twin parable sets forth-viz., that the recompenses of the future are essentially one. All the servants, who were entrusted with the Talents, received the same eulogium, and entered into the same joy of their Lord. That is one side of the truth. And the other is, that the degree in which Christian people, when they depart hence, possess the one gift of eternal life, and Christ-shared joy is conditioned by their faithfulness and diligence here. Do not let the Gospel that says 'The gift of God is eternal life' make you forget the completing truths, that the measure in which a man possesses that eternal life depends on his fitness for it, and that fitness depends on his faithfulness of service and his union with his Lord.

We obscure this great truth often by reason of the way in which we preach the deeper truth on which it rests-forgiveness and acceptance all unmerited, through faith in Jesus Christ. But the two things are not contradictory; they are complementary. No man will be faithful as a steward who is not full of faith as a penitent sinner. No man will enter into the joy of his Lord, who does not enter in through the gate of penitence and trust, but, having entered, we are ranked according to the faithfulness of our service and diligence of stewardship. 'Wherefore, giving all diligence, make your calling and election sure, for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you *abundantly* into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.'

89)Luke 19:18

Luke

THE TRADING SERVANTS

Luk. 19:16, Luk. 19:18.

The Evangelist, contrary to his usual practice, tells us what was the occasion of this parable. It was spoken at Jericho, on our Lord's last journey to Jerusalem, Bethany was but a day's march distant; Calvary but a week ahead. An unusual tension of spirit marked our Lord's demeanour, and was noticed by the disciples with awe. It infected them, and the excitable crowd, which was more than usually excitable because on its way to the passover festival. The air was electric, and everybody felt that something was impending. They 'thought that the kingdom of God should *immediately* appear.' So Christ spoke this parable to damp down that expectation which might easily flash up into the flame of rebellion. He tells them His real programme. He was to go a long way off to receive the kingdom. That was a familiar experience amongst the nations tributary to Rome, and more than one of the Herodian family had passed through it. In the meantime there was to be a period of expectancy. It was to be a long time, for he had to go to a 'far country,' and it was to be extended enough for the servants to turn their money over many times during His absence. When He did return it was not to do what they expected. They thought that the kingdom meant Jewish lordship over subject nations. He teaches them that it meant the destruction of the rebellious citizens, and a rigid scrutiny of the servants' faithfulness.

Now, the words of my two texts bring out in connection with this outline of the future some large lessons which I desire to draw.

I. Notice the small capital that the servants receive to trade with.

It was a pound apiece, which, numismatic authorities tell us, is somewhat about the same value as some £6 odd of English money; though, of course, the purchasing power would be considerably greater. A small amount, and an equal amount to every servant-these are the two salient points of this parable. They make the broad distinction between it and the other parable, which is often mixed up with it, the parable of the talents. There, instead of the amount being excessively small, it is exceedingly great; for a talent was worth some £400, and ten talents would be £4000, a fair capital for a man to start with. The other point of difference between the two parables, which belongs to the essence of each, is that while the gift in the one case is identical, in the other case it is graduated and different.

Now, to suppose that these are but two varying versions of the same parable, which the Evangelists have manipulated is, in my judgment, to be blind to the plainest of the lessons to be drawn from them.

There are two sorts of gifts. In one, all Christian men, the Master's servants, are alike; in another, they differ. Now, what is the thing in which all Christians are alike? What gift do they all possess equally; rich and poor, largely endowed or slenderly equipped; ‘talented’-as we use the word from the parable-or not? The rich man and the poor, the wise man and the foolish, the cultured man and the ignorant, the Fijian and the Englishman, have one thing alike-the message of salvation which we call the Gospel of the blessed Lord. That is the ‘pound.’ We all stand upon an equal platform there, however differently we are endowed in respect of capacities and other matters. All have it; and all have the same.

Now if that is the interpretation of this parable, there are considerations that flow from that thought, and on which I would dwell for a moment.

The first of them is the apparent smallness of the gift. You may feel a difficulty in accepting that explanation, and may have been saying to yourselves that it cannot be correct, because Jesus Christ would never compare the unspeakable gift of His message of salvation through Him, to that paltry sum. But throw yourselves back to the moment of utterance, and I think you will feel the pathos and power of the metaphor. Here was that handful of disciples set in the midst of a hostile world, dead against them, with its banded superstitions, venerable idolatries, systematised philosophies, the force of the mightiest instruments of material power that the world had ever seen, in the organisation and military power of Rome. And there stood twelve Galilean men, with their simple, unlettered message; one poor ‘pound,’ and that was all. ‘The foolishness of preaching,’ the message which to ‘the Jews was a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks was folly,’ was all that they were equipped with. Their Master, who left them to seek a Kingdom, had so little to bestow, before He received His crown, that all that He could spare them was that small sum. They had to go into business in a very poor way. They had to be content to do a very insignificant retail trade. ‘The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.’ The old experience of the leather sling and the five stones out of the brook, in the hand of the stripling, that made short work of the brazen armour of the giant, and penetrated with a whizz into his thick skull, and laid him prostrate, was to be repeated. ‘He called his servants, and gave them’-a pound apiece! If you and I, Christian men and women, were true to the Master’s legacy, and believed that we have in it more wealth than the treasures of wisdom and knowledge or force which the world has laid up, we should find that our mite was more than they all have in their possession.

Further, the texts suggest the purpose for which the pound is given. The servants had to live on it themselves, no doubt. So have we. They had to trade with it. So have we. Now that means two things. We get the Gospel, not as some of us lazily suppose, in order to secure that we shall not be punished for our past sins whilst we live, and go to heaven when we die. We get it, not only to enjoy its consolations and its sweetness, but to do business with.

And there are two ways in which this trading is to be done by us. The main one is the honest application of the principles and powers of the Gospel to the moulding of our own characters, and the making us better, purer, gentler, more heavenly-minded, and more Christlike. That is the first trading that we have to carry on with the Word. We get it not for an indolent assent, as so many of us misuse it. We receive it not merely to say, ‘Oh I believe it,’ and there an end, but that we may bring it to bear upon all our conduct, and that it may be the chief formative influence in our characters. Christian people! is that what you do with your Christianity? Is the Gospel moulding you, hour by hour, moment by moment? Have you brought all its great truths to bear upon your daily lives? Have you inwrought its substance into, not merely your understandings or your emotions, but your daily conduct? Is it indeed the life of your lives, and the leaven that is leavening your whole character? You have it to trade with; see that you do not wrap it in a napkin, and stow it idly away in some corner.

Then there is the other way of trading and that is, telling it to others. That is an obligation incumbent on all Christians. There may be differences in regard to other gifts, which determine the manner in which each shall use the equal gift which we all possess alike. But these are of subordinate importance. The main thing is to feel that the possession of Christian faith, which is our way of receiving the pound, carries with it indissolubly the obligation of Christian evangelism. However it may be discharged, discharged it is to be, by every true servant. I am sometimes half disposed to think that it would have been better for the Church if there had never been any men in my position, on whom the mass of unspiritual, idle because busy, and silent because little-loving, Christian professors contentedly roll the whole obligation to preach God's Gospel. My brethren, the world is not going to be evangelised by officials. Until all Christian people wake up to the sense that they have the 'pound' to trade with, there will be nothing adequate done to bring the world to the obedience and the love of Jesus Christ. You say you have the Gospel; if you have it what are you doing with it?

Self-centred Christianity, if such a thing were possible, is a mistake. It is generally a sham; it is always a crime. A man that puts away his pound, and never goes out and says, 'Come, share with me in the wealth that I have found in Jesus Christ' will be like a miser that puts his hoardings into an old stocking, and hides it in the ground somewhere. When he goes to dig it up, he is only too likely to find that all the coins have slipped out. If you want to keep your Christianity, let the air into it. If you want it to increase, sow it. There are hosts of you who would be far happier Christian people, if you came out of your shells and traded with your pound.

II. Observe the varying profits of the trading.

The one man says, 'Thy pound hath gained ten pounds.' The other says, 'Thy pound hath gained five pounds.' And the others who are not mentioned, no doubt, had also varying results to present. Now that inequality of profits from an equal capital to start with, is but a picturesque way of saying what is, alas! too obviously true, that Christian people do not all stand on the same level in regard to the use they have made of, and the benefits they have derived from, the one equal gift which was bestowed upon them. It is the same to every one at the beginning, but differences develop as they go on. One man makes twice as much out of it as another does.

Now, let us distinctly understand what sort of differences these are which our Lord signalises here. Let me clear away a mistake which may interfere with the true lessons of this parable, that the differences in question are the superficial ones in apparent results which follow from difference of endowments, or from difference of influential position. That is the kind of meaning that is often attached to the 'ten pounds' or the 'five pounds' in the text. We think that the ten pounder is the man who has been able to do some large spiritual work for Jesus Christ, that fills the world with its greatness, the man who has been set in some most conspicuous place, and by reason of intellectual ability or other talent has been able to gather in many souls into the kingdom; but that is not Christ's way of estimating. We should be going dead in the teeth of everything that He teaches if we thought that such as these were the differences intended. No, no! Every man that co-operates in a great work with equal diligence and devotion has an equal place in his eyes. The soldier that clapped Luther on the back as he was going into the Diet of Worms, and said, 'You have a bigger fight to fight than we ever had; cheer up, little monk!' stands on the same level as the great reformer, if what he did was done from the game motive and with as full consecration of himself. The old law of Israel states the true principle of Christian recompense: they that 'abide by the stuff' have the same share in the spoil as they 'that go down into the battle.' All servants who have exercised equal faithfulness and equal diligence stand on the same level and have the same success; no matter how different may be their estimation in the eyes of men; no matter how different may be the conspicuousness of the places that they fill in the eyes of the world whilst they live, or in the records of the Church when they are dead. Equal diligence will issue in equal results in the development of character, and the only reason for the diversity of results is the diversity of faithfulness and of zeal in trading with the pound.

Notice, too, before I go further, how all who trade make profits. There are no bad debts in that business. There are no investments that result in a loss. Everybody that goes into it makes something by it; which is just to say that any man who is honest and earnest in the attempt to utilise the powers of Christ's Gospel for his own culture, or for the world's good, will succeed in reality, however he may seem to fail in appearance. There are no commercial failures in this trading. The man with his ten pounds of profit made them because he worked hardest. The man that made the five made all that his work entitled him to. There was no one who came and said, 'Lord! I put thy pound into my little shop, and I did my best with it, and it is all gone!' Every Christian effort is crowned with success.

III. Lastly, we have here the final declaration of profits.

The master has come back. He is a king now, but he is the master still, and he wants to know what has become of the money that was left in the servants' hands. Now, that is but a metaphorical way of bringing to our minds that which we cannot conceive of without metaphor-viz., the retribution that lies beyond the grave for us all. Although we cannot conceive it without metaphor, we may reach, through the metaphor to some apprehension, at any rate, of the facts that lie behind it. There are two points in reference to this final declaration of profits suggested here.

The first is this, that all the profit is ascribed to the capital. Neither of the two men say: 'I, with thy pound, have gained,' but 'Thy pound hath gained.' That is accurately true. For if I accept, and live by, any great moral truth or principle, it is the principle or the truth that is the real productive cause of the change in my life and character. I, by my acceptance of it, simply put the belt on the drum that connects my loom with the engine, but it is the engine that drives the looms and the shuttle, and brings out the web at last. And so, Christian people who, with God's grace in their hearts, have utilised the 'pound,' and thereby made themselves Christlike, have to say, 'It was not I, but Christ in me. It was the Gospel, and not my faith in the Gospel, that wrought this change.' Is it your teeth or your dinner that nourishes you? Is it the Gospel or your trust in the Gospel that is the true cause of your sanctifying?

With regard to the other aspect of this trading, the same thing is true. Is it my word or Christ's Word ministered by me that helps any of my hearers who are helped? Surely! surely! there is no question about that. It is the 'pound' that gains the 'pounds.' 'Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So, then, neither is he that planteth anything nor he that watereth, but God that giveth the increase.'

The other consideration suggested by these words is the exact knowledge of the precise results of a life, which is possessed at last. Each servant knew precisely what was the net outcome of his whole activity. That is exactly what we do not know here, and never shall, and never can know. But yonder all illusions will have vanished; and there will be two sorts of disillusionising then. Men, for instance, of my profession, whose names are familiar, and who hold high places in the esteem of the Church, and may be tempted to suppose that they have done a great deal-I am afraid that many of us will find, when we get yonder, that we have not done nearly so much as our admirers in this world, and we ourselves, were sometimes tempted to think that we had done. The searching light that comes in will show a great many seamy places in the cloth that looks very sound when it is inspected in the twilight. And there will be another kind of disillusionising. Many a man has said, ‘Lord! I have laboured in vain, and spent my strength for nought,’ who will find out that he was mistaken, and that where he saw failure there were solid results; that where he thought the grain had perished in the furrows, it had sprung up and borne fruit unto life everlasting. ‘Lord! when saw we Thee in prison, and visited Thee?’ We never knew that we had done anything of the sort. ‘Behold! I was left alone,’ said the widowed Jerusalem when she was restored to her husband, ‘these’-children that have gathered round me-’where had they been?’ We shall know, for good or bad, exactly the results of our lives.

We shall have to tell them. The slothful servant, too, was under this compulsion of absolute honesty. If he had not been so, do you think he would have ventured to stand up before his master, a king now, and insult him to his face? But he had to turn himself inside out, and tell then what he had thought in his inmost heart. So ‘every one of us shall give an account of himself to God’; and like a man in the bankruptcy court, we shall have to explain our books, and go into all our transactions. We are working in the dark today. Our work will be seen as it is, in the light. The coral reef rises in the ocean, and the creatures that made it do not see it. The ocean will be drained away, and the reef will stand up sheer and distinct.

My brother! ‘I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire’-and when you have bought your pound, see that you use it; for ‘it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful.’

90)Luke 19:19

Luke

THE REWARDS OF THE TRADING SERVANTS

Luk. 19:17, Luk. 19:19.

The relation between this parable of the pounds and the other of the talents has often been misunderstood, and is very noteworthy. They are not two editions of one parable variously manipulated by the Evangelists, but they are two parables presenting two kindred and yet diverse aspects of one truth. They are neither identical, as some have supposed, nor contradictory, as others have imagined; but they are complementary. The parable of the talents represents the servants as receiving different endowments; one gets five; another two; another one. They make the same rate of profit with their different endowments. The man that turned his two talents into four did just as well as he that turned his five into ten. In either case the capital is doubled. Since the diligence is the same, the rewards are the same, and to each is given the identical same eulogium and the same entrance into the joy of his Lord. So the lesson of that parable is that, however unequal are our endowments, there may be as much diligence shown in the use of the smallest as in the greatest, and where that is the case, the man with the small endowments will stand on the same level of recompense as the man with the large.

But that is not all. This parable comes in to complete the thoughts. Here all the servants get the same gift, the one pound, but they make different profits out of it, one securing twice as much as the other. And, inasmuch as the diligence has been different, the rewards are different. So the lesson of this parable is that unequal faithfulness in the use of the same opportunities results in unequal retribution and reward. Unequal faithfulness, I say, because, of course, in both parables it is presupposed that the factor in producing the profit is not any accidental circumstance, but the earnestness and faithfulness of the servant. Christ does not pay for results; He pays for motives. And it is not because the man has made a certain number of pounds, but because in making them he has shown a certain amount of faithfulness, that he is rewarded. Christ does not say, ‘Well done! good and *successful* servant,’ but ‘Well done! good and *faithful* servant.’

So, keeping these two sides of the one truth in view, I desire now to draw out two or three of the lessons which seem to me to lie in the principle laid down in my texts, of the unequal results of the unequal diligence of these servants.

I. I would note the solemn view of this present life that underlies the whole.

‘Thou hast been faithful in a very little; have thou authority over five cities.’ Well, that rests upon the thought that all our present life here is a stewardship, which in its nature is preparatory to larger work yonder. And that is the point of view from which alone it is right to look at, and possible to understand, this else unintelligible and bewildering life on earth. Clearly enough, to anybody that has eyes in his head, moral ends are supreme in man’s relation to nature, and in man’s life. We are here for the sake of making character, and of acquiring aptitudes and capacities which shall be exercised hereafter. The whole of our earthly career is the exercise of stewardship in regard to all the gifts with which we have been entrusted, in order that by the right exercise of that stewardship we may develop ourselves and acquire powers.

Now if it is clear that the whole meaning and end of the present life are to make character, and that we have to do with the material and the transient only, in order that, like the creatures that build up the coral reefs, we may draw from the ever-varying waves of the ocean that welters around us solid substance which we can pile up into an enduring monument-is this process of making character, and developing ourselves, to be cut short by such a contemptible thing as the death of the body? One very distinguished evolutionist, who has been forced onwards from his position to a kind of theism, declares that he is driven to a belief in immortality because he must believe in the reasonableness of God’s work. And it seems to me that if indeed-as is plainly the case-moral ends are supreme in our life’s history, it brings utter intellectual bewilderment and confusion to suppose that these ends are kept in view up till the moment of death, and that then down comes the guillotine and cuts off all. God does not take the rough ore out of the mine, and deal with it, and change it to polished steel, and shape His weapons, and then take them when they are at their highest temper and their sharpest edge, and break them across His knee. No! if here we are shaped, it is because yonder there is work for the tool.

So all here is apprenticeship, and the issues of to-day are recorded in eternity. We are like men perched up in a signal-box by the side of the line; we pull over a lever here, and it lifts an arm half a mile off. The smallest wheel upon one end of a shaft may cause another ten times its diameter to revolve, at the other end of the shaft through the wall there. Here we prepare, yonder we achieve.

II. Note the consequent littleness and greatness of this present.

'Thou hast been faithful in a very little.' Some of you may remember a recent sermon on the previous part of this parable, in which I tried to bring out an explanation of the small sum with which these servants were entrusted-the pound apiece for their little retail businesses-and found reason to believe that the interpretation of that gift was the Gospel of Jesus Christ which, in comparison with the world's wisdom and philosophies and material forces, seemed such a very insignificant thing. If we keep that interpretation in view in treating my present text, then there is hinted to us the contrast between the necessary limitations and incompletenesses even of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ which we have here, and the flood of glory and of light, which shall pour upon our eyes when the veil of flesh and sense has dropped away. Here we know in part; here, even with the intervention of the Eternal and Incarnate Word of God, the Revealer of the Father, we see as in a glass darkly; there face to face. The magnificences and the harmonies of that great revelation of God in Jesus Christ, which transcends all human thought and all worldly wisdom, are but a point, in comparison with the continent of illumination which shall come to us hereafter. 'The moon that rules the night' is the revelation that we have to-day, the reflection and echo of the sun that will rule the unsetting day of the heavens.

But I pass from that aspect of the words before us to the other, which, I suppose, is rather to be kept in view, in which the faithfulness in a very little points to the smallness of this present, as measured against that infinite future to which it conducts. Much has been said upon that subject, which is very antagonistic to the real ideas of Christianity. Life here, and this present, have been depreciated unduly, untruly, and unthankfully. And harm has been done, not only to the men who accept that estimate, but to the world that scoffs at it. There is nothing in the Bible, which is at all in sympathy with the so-called religious depreciation of the present, but there is this-'the things that are seen are temporal; the things that are unseen are eternal.' The lower hills look high when beheld from the flat plain that stretches on this side of them; but, if the mist lifts, the great white peaks come out beyond them, glittering in the sunshine, and with the untrodden snows on their inaccessible pinnacles; and nobody thinks about the green foothills, with the flowers upon them, any more. Brethren, think away the mist, for you can, and open your eyes, and see the snow-clad hills of eternity, and then you will understand how low is the elevation of the heights in the foreground. The greatness of the future makes the present little, but the little present is great, because its littleness is the parent of the great future. 'The child is father of the man'; and earth's narrow range widens out into the infinitude of eternity and of heaven. The only thing that gives real greatness and sublimity to our mortal life is its being the vestibule to another. Historically you will find that, wherever faith in a future life has become dim, as it has become dim in large sections of the educated classes to-day, there the general tone of strenuous endeavour has dropped, and the fatal feeling of 'It is not worth while' begins to creep over society. 'Is life worth living?' is the question that is asked on all sides of us to-day. And the modern recrudescence of pessimism has along with it, as one of the main thoughts which cut the nerves of effort, doubt of, and disbelief in, a future. It is because the very little opens out into the immeasurably great, and the passing moments tick us onwards into an unpassing eternity, that the moments are worth living through, and the fleeting insignificances of earth's existence become solemn and majestic as the portals of heaven.

III. Notice the future form of activity prepared for by faithful trading.

‘Thou hast been faithful in a very little; have thou authority over ten cities.’ Now I do not need to spend a word in dwelling on the contrast between the two pictures of the huckster with his little shop and the pound of capital to begin with, and the vizier that has control of ten of the cities of his master. That is too plain to need any enforcement. We are all here, all us Christian people especially, like men that keep a small shop, in a back street, with a few trivial things in the window, but we are heirs of a kingdom. That is what Christ wants us to lay to heart, so that the little shop shall not seem so very small, and its smoky obscurity shall be irradiated by true visions of what it will lead to.

Nor do I wish to risk any kind of fanciful and precarious speculations as to the manner and the sphere of the authority that is here set forth; only I would keep to one or two plain things. Faithfulness here prepares for participation in Christ’s authority hereafter. For we are not to forget that whilst the master, the nobleman, was away seeking the kingdom, all that he could give his servants was the little stock-in-trade with which he started them, and that it is because he has won his kingdom that he is able to dispense to them the larger gifts of dominion over the ten and the five cities. The authority is delegated, but it is more than that- it is shared. For it is participation in, and not merely delegation from, the King and His rule, that is set forth in this and in other places of Scripture, for ‘they shall sit down with Me on My throne, even as I also overcame and am set down with My Father on His throne.’

If, then, the rule set forth, in whatever sphere and in whatever fashion it may be exercised, is participation in Christ’s authority, let us not forget that therefore it is a rule of which the manifestation is service. In heaven as on earth, and for the Lord in heaven as for the Lord on earth, and for the servants in heaven as for the servants on earth, the law stands irrefragable and eternal-’If any man will be chief among you, let him be your minister.’ The authority over the ten cities is the capacity and opportunity of serving and helping every citizen in them all. What that help may be let us leave. It is better to be ignorant than to speculate about matters where there is no possibility of certainty. Ignorance is more impressive than knowledge, only be sure that no dignity can live amidst the pure light of the heavens, except after the fashion of the dignity of the Lord of all, who there, as here, is the servant of all.

But there is a thought in connection with this great though dim revelation of the future, which may well be laid to heart by us. And that is, that however close and direct the dependence on, and the communion with, Jesus Christ, the King of all His servants, in that future state is, it shall not be so close and direct as to exclude room for the exercise of brotherly sympathy and brotherly aid. We shall have Christ for our life and our light and our glory. But there, as here, we shall help one another to have Him more fully, and to understand Him more perfectly. What further lies in these great words, I do not venture to guess. Enough to know that Christ will be all in all, and that Christ in each will help the others to know Christ more fully.

Only remember, we have to take this great conception of the future as being one that implies largely increased and ennobled activity. A great deal of very cheap ridicule has been cast upon the Christian conception of the future life as if it was an eternity of idleness and of repose. Of repose, yes; of idleness, no! For it is no sinecure to be the governor of ten cities. There will be a good deal of work to be done, in order to discharge that office properly. Only it will be work that does not disturb repose, and at one and the same moment His servants will serve in constant activity, and gaze upon His face in calm contemplation. Christ’s session at the right hand of God does not interfere with Christ’s continual activity here. And, in like manner, His servants shall rest from their labours, but not from their work; they shall serve Him undisturbed, and shall repose, but not idly.

IV. Lastly, our texts remind us of the variety in recompense which corresponds to diversity in faithfulness.

I need but say a word about that. The one man gets his ten cities because his faithfulness has brought in ten pounds. The other gets five, corresponding to his faithfulness. As I said, our Lord pays, not for results, except in so far as these are conditioned and secured by the diligence of His servants. And so we come to the old familiar, and yet too often forgotten, conception of degrees in dignity, degrees in nearness to Him. That thought runs all through the New Testament representations of a future life, sometimes more clearly, sometimes more obscurely, but generally present. It is in entire accordance with the whole conception of that future, because the Christian notion of it is not that it is an arbitrary reward, but that it is the natural outcome of the present; and, of course, therefore, varying according to the present, of which it is the outcome. We get what we have wrought for. We get what we are capable of receiving, and what we are capable of receiving depends upon what has been our faithfulness here.

Now, that is perfectly consistent with the other side of the truth which the twin parable sets forth-viz., that the recompenses of the future are essentially one. All the servants, who were entrusted with the Talents, received the same eulogium, and entered into the same joy of their Lord. That is one side of the truth. And the other is, that the degree in which Christian people, when they depart hence, possess the one gift of eternal life, and Christ-shared joy is conditioned by their faithfulness and diligence here. Do not let the Gospel that says ‘The gift of God is eternal life’ make you forget the completing truths, that the measure in which a man possesses that eternal life depends on his fitness for it, and that fitness depends on his faithfulness of service and his union with his Lord.

We obscure this great truth often by reason of the way in which we preach the deeper truth on which it rests-forgiveness and acceptance all unmerited, through faith in Jesus Christ. But the two things are not contradictory; they are complementary. No man will be faithful as a steward who is not full of faith as a penitent sinner. No man will enter into the joy of his Lord, who does not enter in through the gate of penitence and trust, but, having entered, we are ranked according to the faithfulness of our service and diligence of stewardship. ‘Wherefore, giving all diligence, make your calling and election sure, for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you *abundantly* into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.’

91)Luke 19:37-48

Luke

A NEW KIND OF KING

Luk. 19:37 - Luk. 19:48.

‘He went on before.’ What concentrated determination, and almost eagerness, impelled His firm and swift steps up the steep, weary road! Mark tells that the disciples followed, ‘amazed’-as they well might be-at the unusual haste, and strange preoccupation on the face, set as a flint.

Luke takes no notice of the stay at Bethany and the sweet seclusion which soothed Jesus there. He dwells only on the assertion of royalty, which stamped an altogether unique character on the remaining hours of Christ’s life.

I. The narrative brings into prominence Christ’s part in originating the triumphal entry [Luk. 19:30 - Luk. 19:34]. He sent for the colt with the obvious intention of stimulating the people to just such a demonstration as followed.

As to the particulars, we need only note that the most obvious explanation of His knowledge of the circumstances that the messengers would encounter, is that it was supernatural. Only one other explanation is possible; namely, that the owners of the animal were secret disciples, with whom our Lord had arranged to send for it, and had settled a sign and countersign, by which they would know His messengers. But that is a less natural explanation.

Note the remarkable blending of dignity and poverty in ‘The Lord hath need of him.’ It asserts sovereign authority and absolute rights, and it confesses need and penury. He is a King, but He has to borrow even a colt to make His triumphal entry on. Though He was rich, for our sakes He became poor.

Jesus then deliberately brought about His public entry. He thereby acts in a way perfectly unlike His whole previous course. And He stirs up popular feelings at a time when they were specially excitable by reason of the approaching Passover and its crowds. Formerly He had avoided the danger which He now seems to court, and had gone up to the feast ‘as it were in secret.’ But it was fitting that once, for the last time, He should assert before the gathered Israel that He was their King, and should make a last appeal.

Formerly He had sought to avoid attracting the attention of the rulers; now He knows that the end is near, and deliberately makes Himself conspicuous, though-or we might say because-He knew that thereby He precipitated His death.

The nature of His dominion is as plainly taught by the humble pomp as is its reality. A pauper King, who makes His public entrance into His city mounted on a borrowed ass, with His followers' clothes for a saddle, attended by a shouting crowd of poor peasants, for weapons or banners had but the branches plucked from other people's trees, was a new kind of king.

We do not need Matthew's quotation of the prophet's vision of the meek King coming to Zion on an ass, to understand the contrast of this kingdom with such a dominion as that of Rome, or of such princes as the Herods. Gentleness and peace, a sway that rests not on force nor wealth, are shadowed in that rustic procession and the pathetic poverty of its leader, throned on a borrowed colt, and attended, not by warriors or dignitaries, but by poor men unarmed, and saluted, not with the blare of trumpets, but with the shouts of joyful, though, alas! fickle hearts.

II. We have the humble procession with the shouting disciples and the background of hostile spies.

The disciples eagerly caught at the meaning of bringing the colt, and threw themselves with alacrity into what seemed to them preparation for the public assertion of royalty, for which they had long been impatient. Luke tells us that they lifted Jesus on to the seat which they hurriedly prepared, while some spread their garments in the way-the usual homage to a king:

'Ride on triumphantly; behold, we lay
Our lusts and proud wills in Thy way.'

How different the vision of the future in their minds and His! They dreamed of a throne; He knew it was a Cross. Round the southern shoulder of Olivet they came, and, as the long line of the Temple walls, glittering in the sunshine across the valley, burst on the view, and their approach could be seen from the city, they broke into loud acclamations, summoning, as it were, Jerusalem to welcome its King.

Luke’s version of their chant omits the Jewish colouring which it has in the other Gospels, as was natural, in view of his Gentile readers. Christ’s royalty and divine commission are proclaimed from a thousand throats, and then up swells the shout of praise, which echoes the angels’ song at Bethlehem, and ascribes to His coming, power to make peace in heaven with an else alienated world, and thus to make the divine glory blaze with new splendour even in the highest heavens.

Their song was wiser than they knew, and touched the deepest, sweetest mysteries of the unity of the Son with the Father, of reconciliation by the blood of His Cross, and of the new lustre accruing to God’s name thereby, even in the sight of principalities and powers in heavenly places. They meant none of these things, but they were unconscious prophets. Their shouts died away, and their faith was almost as short-lived. With many of them, it withered before the branches which they waved.

High-wrought emotion is a poor substitute for steady conviction. But cool, unemotional recognition of Christ as King is as unnatural. If our hearts do not glow with loyal love, nor leap up to welcome Him; if the contemplation of His work and its issues on earth and in heaven does not make our dumb tongues sing-we have need to ask ourselves if we believe at all that He is the King and Saviour of all and of us. There were cool observers there, and they make the foil to the glad enthusiasm. Note that these Pharisees, mingling in the crowd, have no title for Jesus but ‘Teacher.’ He is no king to them. To those who regard Jesus but as a human teacher, the acclamations of those to whom He is King and Lord always sound exaggerated.

People with no depth of religious life hate religious emotion, and are always seeking to repress it. A very tepid worship is warm enough for them. Formalists detest genuine feeling. Propriety is their ideal. No doubt, too, these croakers feared that this tumult might come to formidable size, and bring down Pilate’s heavy hand on them.

Christ’s answer is probably a quoted proverb. It implies His entire acceptance of the character which the crowd ascribed to Him, His pleasure in their praises, and, in a wider aspect, His vindication of outbursts of devout feeling, which shock ecclesiastical martinets and formalists.

III. We see the sorrowing King plunged in bitter grief in the very hour of His triumph.

Who can venture to speak of that infinitely pathetic scene? The fair city, smiling across the glen, brings before His vision the awful contrast of its lying compassed by armies and in ruins. He hears not the acclamation of the crowd. ‘He wept,’ or, rather, ‘wailed,’-for the word does not imply tears so much as cries. That sorrow is a sign of His real manhood, but it is also a part of His revelation of the very heart of God. The form is human, the substance divine. The man weeps because God pities. Christ’s sorrow does not hinder His judgments. The woes which wring His heart will nevertheless be inflicted by Him. Judgment is His ‘strange work,’ alien from His desires; but it is His work. The eyes which are as a flame of fire are filled with tears, but their glance burns up the evil.

Note the yearning in the unfinished sentence, ‘If thou hadst known.’ Note the decisive closing of the time of repentance. Note the minute prophetic details of the siege, which, if ever they were spoken, are a distinct proof of His all-seeing eye. And from all let us fix in our hearts the conviction of the pity of the judge, and of the judgment by the pitying Christ.

IV. We have Christ’s exercise of sovereign authority in His Father’s house.

Luke gives but a summary in verses 45-48, dwelling mainly on two points. First he tells of casting out the traders. Two things are brought out in the compressed narrative-the fact, and the Lord’s vindication of it. As to the former, it was fitting that at the end of His career, as at the beginning, He should cleanse the Temple. The two events are significant as His first and last acts. The second one, as we gather from the other Evangelists, had a greater severity about it than the first.

The need for a second purifying indicated how sadly transient had been the effect of the first, and was thus evidence of the depth of corruption and formalism to which the religion of priests and people had sunk. Christ had come to cleanse the Temple of the world’s religion, to banish from it mercenaries and self-interested attendants at the altar, and, in a higher application of the incident, to clear away all the degradations and uncleannesses which are associated with worship everywhere but in His Church, and which are ever seeking, like poisonous air, to find their way in thither also, through any unguarded chink.

The vindication of the act is in right royal style. The first cleansing was defended by Him by pointing to the sanctity of ‘My Father’s house’; the second, by claiming it as ‘My house.’ The rebuke of the hucksters is sterner the second time. The profanation, once driven out and returning, is deeper; for whereas, in the first instance, it had made the Temple ‘a house of merchandise,’ in the second it turned it into a ‘den of robbers.’ Thus evil assumes a darker tint, like old oak, by lapse of time, and swiftly becomes worse, if rebuked and chastised in vain.

The second part of this summary puts in sharp contrast three things-Christ’s calm courage in continuous teaching in the Temple, the growing bitter hatred of the authorities, who drew in their train the men of influence holding no office, and the eager hanging of the people on His words, which baffled the murderous designs of the rulers. The same intentional publicity as in the entrance is obvious. Jesus knew that His hour was come, and willingly presents Himself a sacrifice. Meekly and boldly He goes on the appointed way. He sees all the hate working round Him, and lets it work. The day’s task of winning some from impending ruin shall still be done. So should His servants live, in patient discharge of daily duty, in the face of death, if need be.

The enemies, who heard His words and found in them only food for deeper hatred, may warn us of the possibilities of antagonism to Him that lie in the heart, and of the terrible judgment which they drag down on their own heads, who hear, unmoved, His daily teaching, and see, unrepentant, His dying love. The crowd that listened, and, in less than a week yelled ‘Crucify Him,’ may teach us to take heed how we hear, and to beware of evanescent regard for His teaching, which, if it do not consolidate into resolved and thoroughgoing acceptance of His work and submission to His rule, will certainly cool into disregard, and may harden into hate.

92)Luke 20:9-19

TENANTS WHO WANTED TO BE OWNERS

Luk. 20:9 - Luk. 20:19.

As the crisis came near, Jesus increased His severity and plainness of speech. This parable, which was spoken very near the end of the protracted duel with the officials in the Temple, is transparent in its application, and hit its mark immediately. The rulers at once perceived that it was directed against them. The cap fitted too well not to be put on. But it contains prophecy as well as history, and the reference to Jesus' impending fate is almost as transparent as the indictment of the rulers, while the prediction of the transference of the vineyard to others is as easy of translation as either of the other points.

Such plain speaking was fitting for last words. The urgency of Christ's pleading love, as much as the intensity of His moral indignation, made them plain.

I. We note, first, the vineyard, its lord and its tenants.

The metaphor was familiar, for Isaiah had 'sung a song touching' Israel as God's vineyard, and other prophets had caught up the emblem, so that it had become a commonplace, known by all. The parable distinctly alludes to Isaiah's words, and almost reproduces them. Matthew's version enlarges on details of the appliances provided by the owner, which makes the parallel with Isaiah still more noticeable. But Luke summarises these into the simple 'planted.' That covers the whole ground.

God had given Israel a system of revelation, law, and worship, which was competent to produce in those who received it, the fruit of obedience and thankfulness. The husbandmen are primarily the rulers, as the scribes and chief priests perceived; but the nation which endorsed, by permitting their action, is included. The picture drawn applies to us as truly as to the Jews. The transference of the vineyard to another set of tenants, which Christ threatened at the close of the parable, has been accomplished, and so we, by our possession of the Gospel, are entrusted with the vineyard, and are responsible for rendering the fruits of holy living and love.

The owner ‘let it out, and went into another country for a long time.’ That is a picturesque way of saying that we have apparent possession, and are left free to act, God not being manifestly close to us. He stands off, as it were, from the creatures whom He has made, and gives them room to do as they will. But all our possessions, as well as the revelation of Himself in Christ, are only let to us, and we have rent to pay.

The collectors sent for the fruit are, of course, the series of prophets. Luke specifies three-a round number, indicating completeness. He says nothing about the times between their missions, but implies that the three covered the whole period till the sending of the son. Their treatment was uniform, as the history of Israel proved. The habit of rejecting the prophets was hereditary.

There is such a thing as national solidarity stretching through ages. The bold charge made by Stephen was only an echo of this parable, when he cried, ‘As your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute?’ Each generation made the ancestral sin its own, and staggered under a heavier burden of guilt, till, at last, came a generation which had to bear the penalty of all the blood of prophets shed from the beginning. Nations live, though their component atoms die, and only national repudiation of bequeathed sins can avert the crash which, sooner or later, avenges them.

The husbandmen treated the messengers with increasing contumely and cruelty. Content with beating the first, they added shameful treatment in the second case, and proceeded to wounding in the third. If God’s repeated appeals do not melt, they harden, the heart. The persistence of His messengers leads to fiercer hatred, if it does not produce yielding love. There is no bitterness equal to that of the man who has often stiffened conscience against the truth.

II. So far, no doubt could be entertained of the meaning of the scathing parable.

There was probably as little about that of the next part. We cannot but notice the broad distinction which Jesus draws between Himself and the mightiest of the prophets. They were the owner’s ‘slaves’; He was His ‘beloved Son.’ The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews begins his letter with the same contrast, which he may have learned from the parable. It is a commonplace for us, but let us ponder how it must have sounded to that hostile, eager crowd, and ask ourselves how such assumptions can be reconciled with the ‘sweet reasonableness’ of Jesus if he belonged to the same category as an Isaiah or a Micah.

The yearning of divine love for the fruit of reverence and obedience is wonderfully expressed by the bold putting of an uncertain hope into the owner’s mouth. He must have known that he was running a risk in sending his son, but he so much desires to bring the dishonest workmen back to their duty that he is willing to run it. The highly figurative expression is meant to emphasise God’s longing for men’s hearts, and His patient love which ‘hopeth all things’ and will not cease from effort to win us so long as an arrow remains in His quiver.

III. Our Lord now passes to prophecy.

Deep sadness is in His tone as He tells how the only effect of His coming had been to stir up opposition. They ‘saw Him’ and were they touched? No, they only gripped their privileges the tighter, and determined more fiercely to assert their ownership.

Nothing is more remarkable in the parable than the calmness of Jesus in announcing His impending fate. He knows it all, and His voice has no tremor, as He tells it as though He were speaking of another. The very announcement that He penetrated the murderous designs hidden in many of the hearers’ hearts would tend to precipitate their execution of these; but He is ready for the Cross, and its nearness has no terror, not because He was impassive, or free from the shrinking proper to flesh, but because He was resolved to save. Therefore He was resolved to suffer.

The husbandmen’s reasonings with one another bring into plain words thoughts which probably were not consciously held by any even of the rulers. They open the question as to how far the rulers knew the truth of

Christ's claims. They at least knew what these were, and they had fought down dawning convictions which, fairly dealt with, would have broadened into daylight. They would not have been so fiercely antagonistic if they had not been pricked by an uneasy doubt whether, after all, perhaps there was something in these claims.

Nothing steels men against admitting a truth so surely as the suspicion that, if they were to inquire a little farther, they might find themselves believing it. Knowledge and ignorance blended in these rulers as in us all. If they had not known at all, they would not have needed the Saviour's dying prayer for their forgiveness; if they had known fully, its very ground would have been taken away.

The motive put into their mouths is the wish to seize the vineyard for their own; and was not the very soul of the rulers' hostility the determination to keep hold of the prerogatives of their offices, while priests and people alike were deaf to Jesus, because they wished to be no more troubled by being reminded of their obligations to render obedience to God? The root of all rejection of Christ is the desire of self-will to reign supreme. Men resent being reminded that they are tenants, and are determined to assert ownership.

Jesus carries the hearers beyond the final crime which filled the measure of sin, and exhausted the resources of God. The sharp turn from narrative to question, in Luk. 19:15, not only is like the sudden thrust of a spear, but marks the transition from the present and immediate future to a more distant day. The slaying of the heir was the last act of the vine-dressers. The owner would act next. Luke, like Mark, puts the threatening of retribution into Christ's lips, while Matthew makes it the answer of the rulers to his question. Luke alone gives the exclamation, 'God forbid!' The ready answer in Matthew, and the pious interjection in Luke, have the same purpose,-to blunt the application of the parable to themselves by appearing to be unconcerned.

Their levity and reluctance to take home the lesson moved our Lord to sternness, which burned in His steadfast eyes as He looked on them, and must have been remembered by some disciple whose memory has preserved that look for us. It was the prelude to a still less veiled prophecy of the fall of Israel. Jesus lays His hand on the ancient prophecy of the stone rejected by the builders, and applies it to Himself. He is the sure foundation of which Isaiah had spoken. He is the stone rejected by Israel, but elevated to the summit of the building, and there joining two diverging walls.

The solemn warning closing the parable had its special meaning in regard to Israel, but its dread force extends to us. To fall on the stone while it lies lowly on the earth is to lame one's self, but to have it fall on a man when it rushes down from its elevation is ruin utter and irremediable. 'If they escaped not who refused Him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from Him that speaketh from heaven.'

93)Luke 20:24

Luke

WHOSE IMAGE AND SUPERSCRIPTION?

Luk. 20:24.

It is no unusual thing for antagonists to join forces in order to crush a third person obnoxious to both. So in this incident we have an unnatural alliance of the two parties in Jewish politics who were at daggers drawn. The representatives of the narrow conservative Judaism, which loathed a foreign yoke, in the person of the Pharisees and Scribes, and the Herodians, the partisans of a foreigner and a usurper, lay their heads together to propose a question to Christ which they think will discredit or destroy Him. They would have answered their own question in opposite ways. One would have said, 'It *is* lawful to give tribute to Caesar'; the other would have said, 'It is not.' But that is a small matter when malice prompts. They calculate, 'If He says, No! we will denounce Him to Pilate as a rebel. If He says, Yes! we will go to the people and say, Here is a pretty Messiah for you, that has no objection to the foreign yoke. Either way we shall end Him.'

Jesus Christ serenely walks through the cobwebs, and lays His hand upon the fact. 'Let Me see a silver penny!'-which, by the bye, was the amount of the tribute-'Whose head is that?' The currency of the country proclaims the monarch of the country. To stamp his image on the coin is an act of sovereignty. ‘Caesar’s head declares that you are Caesar’s subjects, whether you like it or not, and it is too late to ask questions about tribute when you pay your bills in his money.’ ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.’

Does not the other side of Christ’s answer-’to God the things that are God’s’-rest upon a similar fact? Does not the parallelism require that we should suppose that the destiny of things to be devoted to God is stamped upon them, whatever they are, at least as plainly as the right of Caesar to exact tribute was inferred from the fact that his money was the currency of the country? The thought widens out in a great many directions, but I want to confine it to one special line of contemplation, and to take it as suggesting to each of us this great truth, that the very make of men shows that they belong to God, and are bound to yield themselves to Him. If the answer to the question be plain, and the conclusion irresistible, about the penny with the image of Tiberius, the answer is no less plain, nor the conclusion less irresistible, when we turn the interrogation within, and, looking at our own being, say to ourselves, ‘Whose image and superscription hath *it*? ‘

I. First, then, note the image stamped upon man, and the consequent obligation.

We can very often tell what a thing is for by noticing its make. The instructed eye of an anatomist will, from a bone, divine the sphere in which the creature to whom it belonged was intended to live. Just as plainly as gills or lungs, fins or wings, or legs and arms, declare the element in which the creature that possesses them is intended to move, so plainly stamped upon all our natures is this, that God is our Lord since we are made in a true sense in His image, and that only in Him can we find rest.

I need not remind you, I suppose, of the old word, ‘Let us make man in our own image.’ Nor need I, I suppose, insist at any length upon the truth that though, by the fact of man’s sin, the whole glory and splendour of the divine image in which he was made is marred and defaced, there still remain such solemn, blessed, and awful resemblances between man and God that there can be no mistake as to which beings in the universe are the most kindred; nor any misunderstanding as to who it is after whose likeness we are formed, and in whose love and life alone we can be blessed.

I am not going to weary you with thoughts for which, perhaps, the pulpit is not the proper place; but let me just remind you of one or two points. Is there any other being on this earth that can say of itself 'I am'? God says '*I am that I am*'. You and I cannot say that, but we alone, in this order of things, possess that solemn and awful gift, the consciousness of our personal being. And, brethren, whoever is able to say to himself 'I am' will never know rest until he can turn to God and say 'Thou art,' and then, laying his hand in the Great Father's hand, venture to say '*We* are.' We are made in His image, in that profoundest of all senses.

But to come to something less recondite. We are like God in that we can love; we are like Him in that we can perceive the right, and that the right is supreme; we are like Him in that we have the power to say 'I will.' And these great capacities demand that the creature who thus knows himself to be, who thus knows the right, who thus can love, who thus can purpose, resolve, and act, should find his home and his refuge in fellowship with God.

But if you take a coin, and compare it with the die from which it has been struck, you will find that wherever in the die there is a relief, in the coin there is a sunken place; and conversely. So there are not only resemblances in man to the divine nature, which bear upon them the manifest marks of his destiny, but there are correspondences, wants, on our side, being met by gifts upon His; hollow emptinesses in us being filled, when we are brought into contact with Him, by the abundance of His outstanding supplies and gifts. So the poorest, narrowest, meanest life has in it a depth of desire, an ardour, and sometimes a pain and a madness of yearning and longing which nothing but God can fill. Though we often misunderstand the voice, and so make ourselves miserable by vain efforts, our 'heart and our flesh,' in every fibre of our being, 'cry out for the living God.' And what we all want is some one Pearl of great price into which all the dispersed preciousness and fragmentary brilliances that dazzle the eye shall be gathered. We want a Person, a living Person, a present Person, a sufficient Person, who shall satisfy our hearts, our whole hearts, and that at one and the same time, or else we shall never be at rest.

Because, then, we are made dependent, because we possess these wild desires, because immortal thirst attaches to our nature, because we have consciences that need illuminating, wills that are only free when they are absolutely submissive, hearts that are dissatisfied, and left yearning, after all the sweetnesses of limited, transient, and creatural affections, we bear on our very fronts the image of God; and any man that wisely looks at himself can answer the question, 'Whose image and superscription hath it?' in but one way. 'In the image of God created He him.'

Therefore by loving fellowship, by lowly trust, by ardour of love, by submissiveness of obedience, by continuity of contemplation, by the sacrifice of self, we must yield ourselves to God if we would pay the tribute manifestly owing to the Emperor by the fact that His image and superscription are upon the coin.

II. And so let me ask you to look, in the next place, at the defacement of the image and the wrong expenditure of the coin.

You sometimes get into your hands money on which there has been stamped, by mischief, or for some selfish purpose, the name of some one else than the king's or queen's which surrounds the head upon it. And in like manner our nature has gone through the stamping-press again, and another likeness has been deeply imprinted upon it. The image of God, which every man has, is in some senses and aspects ineffaceable by any course of conduct of theirs. But in another aspect it is not like the permanent similitude stamped upon the solid metal of the penny, but like the reflection, rather, that falls upon some polished plate, or that is cast upon the white sheet from a lantern. If the polished plate be rusty and stained, the image is faint and indistinct; if it be turned away from the light the image passes. And that is what some of you are doing. By living to yourselves, by living day in and day out without ever remembering God, by yielding to passions, lusts, ambitions, low desires, and the like, you are doing your very best to erase the likeness which still lingers in your nature. Is there any one here that has yielded to some lust of the flesh, some appetite, drunkenness, gluttony, impurity, or the like, and has so sold himself to it, as that that part of the divine image, the power of saying 'I will,' has pretty nearly gone? I am afraid there must be some who, by long submission to passion, have lost the control that reason and conscience and a firm steady purpose ought to give. Is there any man here who, by long course of utter neglect of the divine love, has ceased to feel that there is a heart at the centre of the universe, or that He has anything to do with it? Brethren, the awful power that is given to men of degrading themselves till, lineament by lineament, the likeness in which they are made vanishes, is the saddest and most tragical thing in the world. 'Like the beasts that perish,' says one of the psalms, the men become who, by the acids and the files of worldliness and sensuality and passion, have so rubbed away the likeness of God that it is scarcely perceptible in them. Do I speak to some such now? If there is nothing else left there is this, a hunger for absolute good and for the satisfaction of your desires. That is part of the proof that you are made for God, and that only in Him can you find rest.

All occupations of heart and mind and will and active life with other things to the exclusion of supreme devotion to God are, then, sacrilege and rebellion. The emperor's head was the token of sovereignty and carried with it the obligation to pay tribute. Every fibre in your nature protests against the prostitution of itself to anything short of God. You remember the story in the Old Testament about that saturnalia of debauchery, the night when Babylon fell, when Bel-shazzar, in the very wantonness of godless insolence, could not be satisfied with drinking his wine out of anything less sacred than the vessels that had been brought from the Temple at Jerusalem. That is what many of us are doing, taking the sacred cup which is meant to be filled with the wine of the kingdom and pouring into it the foaming but poisonous beverages which steal away our brains and make us drunk, the moment before our empire totters to its fall and we to our ruin. 'All the consecrated things of the house of the Lord they dedicated to Baal,' says one of the narratives in the Book of Chronicles. That is what some of us are doing, taking the soul that is meant to be consecrated to God and find its blessedness there, and offering it to false gods in whose service there is no blessedness.

For, dear friends, I beseech you, lay this to heart that you cannot thus use the Godlike being that you possess without bringing down upon your heads miseries and unrest. The raven, that black bird of evil omen, went out from the ark, and flew homeless over the weltering ocean. The souls that seek not

God fly thus, strangers and restless, through a drowned and lifeless world. The dove came back with an olive branch in its beak. Souls that are wise and have made their nests in the sanctuary can there fold their wings and be at peace. As the ancient saint said, ‘We are made for God, and only in God have we rest.’ ‘Oh, that thou hadst hearkened to me, then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea.’ Cannot you see the blessed, gentle gliding of the full stream through the meadows with the sunshine upon its ripples? Such is the heart that has yielded itself to God. In solemn contrast to that lovely image, the same prophet has for a repeated refrain in his book, ‘The wicked is like the troubled sea which cannot rest,’ but goes moaning round the world, and breaking in idle foam upon every shore, and still is unquiet for evermore. Brethren, only when we render to God the thing that is God’s-our hearts and ourselves-have we repose.

III. Now, lastly, notice the restoration and perfecting of the defaced image.

Because man is like God, it is possible for God to become like man. The possibility of Revelation and of Redemption by an incarnate Saviour depend upon the reality of the fact that man is made in the image of God. Thus there comes to us that divine Christ, who lays ‘His hands upon both’ and being on the one hand the express image of His person, so that He can say, ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father,’ on the other hand ‘was in all points made like unto His brethren,’ with only the exception that the defacement which had obliterated the divine image in them left it clear, untarnished, and sharply cut in Him.

Therefore, because Jesus Christ has come, our Brother, ‘bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh,’ made like unto us, and in our likeness presenting to us the very image of God and eradiation of His light, therefore no defacement that it is possible for men or devils to make on this poor humanity of ours need be irrevocable and final. All the stains may be blotted out, all the usurping superscriptions may be removed and the original imprint restored. The dints may be elevated, the too lofty points may be lowered, the tarnish and the rust may be rubbed off, and, fairer than before, the likeness of God may be stamped on every one of us, ‘after the image of Him that created us,' if only we will turn ourselves to that dear Lord, and cast our souls upon Him. Christ hath become like us that we might become like Him, and therein be partakers of the divine nature. 'We all, reflecting as a glass does the glory of the Lord, may be changed into the same image from glory to glory.'

Nor do the possibilities stop there, for we look forward to a time when, if I might pursue the metaphor of my text, the coinage shall be called in and reminted, in new forms of nobleness and of likeness. We have before us this great prospect, that 'we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is'; and in all the glories of that heaven we shall partake, for all that is Christ's is ours, and 'we that have borne the image of the earthly shall also bear the image of the heavenly.'

I come to you, then, with this old question: 'Whose image and superscription hath it?' and the old exhortation founded thereupon: 'Render therefore to God the thing that is God's'; and yield yourselves to Him. Another question I would ask, and pray that you may lay it to heart, 'To what purpose is this waste?' What are you doing with the silver penny of your own soul? Wherefore do ye 'spend it for that which is not bread?' Give yourselves to God; trust yourselves to the Christ who is like you, and like Him. And, resting upon His great love you will be saved from the prostitution of capacities, and the vain attempts to satisfy your souls with the husks of earth; and whilst you remain here will be made partakers of Christ's life, and growingly of His likeness, and when you remove yonder, your body, soul, and spirit will be conformed to His image, and transformed into the likeness of His glory, 'according to the mighty working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself.'

94)Luke 21:19

Matthew

TWO FORMS OF ONE SAYING

Mat. 24:13. - Luk. 21:19.

These two sayings, different as they sound in our Version, are probably divergent representations of one original. The reasons for so supposing are manifold and obvious on a little consideration. In the first place, the two sayings occur in the Evangelists’ reports of the same prophecy and at the same point therein. In the second place, the verbal resemblance is much greater than appears in our Authorised Version, because the word rendered ‘patience’ in Luke is derived from that translated ‘endureth’ in Matthew; and the true connection between the two versions of the saying would have been more obvious if we had had a similar word in both, reading in the one ‘he that endureth,’ and in the other ‘in your endurance.’ In the third place, the difference between these two sayings presented in our Version, in that the one is a promise and the other a command, is due to an incorrect reading of St. Luke’s words. The Revised Version substitutes for the imperative ‘possess’ the promise ‘ye shall possess,’ and with that variation the two sayings are brought a good deal nearer each other. In both endurance is laid down as the condition, which in both is followed by a promise. Then, finally, there need be no difficulty in seeing that ‘possessing,’ or, more literally, ‘gaining your souls,’ is an exact equivalent of the other expression, ‘ye shall be saved.’ One cannot but remember our Lord’s solemn antithetical phrase about a man ‘losing his own soul.’ To ‘win one’s soul’ is to be saved; to be saved is to win one’s soul.

So I think I have made out my thesis that the two sayings are substantially one. They carry a great weight of warning, of exhortation, and of encouragement to us all. Let us try now to reap some of that harvest.

I. First, then, notice the view of our condition which underlies these sayings.

It is a sad and a somewhat stern one, but it is one to which, I think, most men’s hearts will respond, if they give themselves leisure to think; and if they ‘see life steadily, and see it whole.’ For howsoever many days are bright, and howsoever all days are good, yet, on the whole, ‘man is a soldier, and life is a fight.’ For some of us it is simple endurance; for all of us it has sometimes been agony; for all of us, always, it presents resistance to every kind of high and noble career, and especially to the Christian one. Easy-going optimists try to skim over these facts, but they are not to be so lightly set aside. You have only to look at the faces that you meet in the street to be very sure that it is always a grave and sometimes a bitter thing to live. And so our two texts presuppose that life on the whole demands endurance, whatever may be included in that great word.

Think of the inward resistance and outward hindrances to every lofty life. The scholar, the man of culture, the philanthropist-all who would live for anything else than the present, the low, and the sensual-find that there is a banded conspiracy, as it were, against them, and that they have to fight their way by continual antagonism, by continual persistence, as well as by continual endurance. Within, weakness, torpor, weariness, levity, inconstant wills, bright purposes clouding over, and all the cowardice and animalism of our nature war continually against the better, higher self. And without, there is a down-dragging, as persistent as the force of gravity, coming from the whole assemblage of external things that solicit, and would fain seduce us. The old legends used to tell us how, whensoever a knight set out upon any great and lofty quest, his path was beset on either side by voices, sometimes whispering seductions, and sometimes shrieking maledictions, but always seeking to withdraw him from his resolute march onwards to his goal. And every one of us, if we have taken on us the orders of any lofty chivalry, and especially if we have sworn ourselves knights of the Cross, have to meet the same antagonism. Then, too, there are golden apples rolled upon our path, seeking to draw us away from our steadfast endurance.

Besides the hindrances in every noble path, the hindrances within and the hindrances without, the weight of self and the drawing of earth, there come to us all-in various degrees no doubt, and in various shapes-but to all of us there come the burdens of sorrows and cares, and anxieties and trials. Wherever two or three are gathered together, even if they gather for a feast, there will be some of them who carry a sorrow which they know well will never be lifted off their shoulders and their hearts, until they lay down all their burdens at the grave’s mouth; and it is weary work to plod on the path of life with a weight that cannot be shifted, with a wound that can never be stanched.

Oh, brethren, rosy-coloured optimism is all a dream. The recognition of the good that is in the evil is the devout man’s talisman, but there is always need for the resistance and endurance which my texts prescribe. And the youngest of us, the gladdest of us, the least experienced of us, the most frivolous of us, if we will question our own hearts, will hear their Amen to the stern, sad view of the facts of earthly life which underlies this text.

Though it has many other aspects, the world seems to me sometimes to be like that pool at Jerusalem in the five porches of which lay, groaning under various diseases, but none of them without an ache, a great multitude of impotent folk, halt and blind. Astronomers tell us that one, at any rate, of the planets rolls on its orbit swathed in clouds and moisture. The world moves wrapped in a mist of tears. God only knows them all, but each heart knows its own bitterness and responds to the words, 'Ye have need of patience.'

II. Now, secondly, mark the victorious temper.

That is referred to in the one saying by 'he that endureth,' and in the other 'in your endurance.' Now, it is very necessary for the understanding of many places in Scripture to remember that the notion either of patience or of endurance by no means exhausts the power of this noble Christian word. For these are passive virtues, and however excellent and needful they may be, they by no means sum up our duty in regard to the hindrances and sorrows, the burdens and weights, of which I have been trying to speak. For you know it is only 'what cannot be cured' that 'must be endured,' and even incurable things are not merely to be endured, but they ought to be utilised. It is not enough that we should build up a dam to keep the floods of sorrow and trial from overflowing our fields; we must turn the turbid waters into our sluices, and get them to drive our mills. It is not enough that we should screw ourselves up to lie unresistingly under the surgeon's knife; though God knows that it is as much as we can manage sometimes, and we have to do as convicts under the lash do, get a bit of lead or a bullet into our mouths, and bite at it to keep ourselves from crying out. But that is not all our duty in regard to our trials and difficulties. There is required something more than passive endurance.

This noble word of my texts does mean a great deal more than that. It means active persistence as well as patient submission. It is not enough that we should stand and bear the pelting of the pitiless storm, unmurmuring and unbowed by it; but we are bound to go on our course, bearing up and steering right onwards. Persistent perseverance in the path that is marked out for us is especially the virtue that our Lord here enjoins. It is well to sit still unmurmuring; it is better to march on undiverted and unchecked. And when we are able to keep straight on in the path which is marked out for us, and especially in the path that leads us to God, notwithstanding all opposing voices, and all inward hindrances and reluctances; when we are able to go to our tasks of whatever sort they are and to do them, though our hearts are beating like sledge-hammers; when we say to ourselves, 'It does not matter a bit whether I am sad or glad, fresh or wearied, helped or hindered by circumstances, this one thing I do,' then we have come to understand and to practise the grace that our Master here enjoins. The endurance which wins the soul, and leads to salvation, is no mere passive submission, excellent and hard to attain as that often is; but it is brave perseverance in the face of all difficulties, and in spite of all enemies.

Mark how emphatically our Lord here makes the space within which that virtue has to be exercised conterminous with the whole duration of our lives. I need not discuss what 'the end' was in the original application of the words; that would take us too far afield. But this I desire to insist upon, that right on to the very close of life we are to expect the necessity of putting forth the exercise of the very same persistence by which the earlier stages of any noble career must necessarily be marked. In other departments of life there may be relaxation, as a man goes on through the years; but in the culture of our characters, and in the deepening of our faith, and in the drawing near to our God, there must be no cessation or diminution of earnestness and of effort right up to the close.

There are plenty of people, and I dare say that I address some of them now, who began their Christian career full of vigour and with a heat that was too hot to last. But, alas, in a year or two all the fervency was past, and they settled down into the average, easygoing, unprogressive Christian, who is a wet blanket to the devotion and work of a Christian church. I wonder how many of us would scarcely know our own former selves if we could see them. Christian people, to how many of us should the word be rung in our ears: 'Ye did run well; what did hinder you'? The answer is-Myself.

But may I say that this emphatic 'to the end' has a special lesson for us older people, who, as natural strength abates and enthusiasm cools down, are apt to be but the shadows of our old selves in many things? But there should be fire within the mountain, though there may be snow on its crest. Many a ship has been lost on the harbour bar; and there is no excuse for the captain leaving the bridge, or the engineer coming up from the engine-room, stormy as the one position and stifling as the other may be, until the anchor is down, and the vessel is moored and quiet in the desired haven. The desert, with its wild beasts and its Bedouin, reaches right up to the city gates, and until we are within these we need to keep our hands on our sword-hilts and be ready for conflict. 'He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.'

III. Lastly, note the crown which endurance wins.

Now, I need not spend or waste your time in mere verbal criticism, but I wish to point out that that word 'soul' in one of our two texts means both the soul and the life of which it is the seat; and also to remark that the being saved and the winning of the life or the soul has distinct application, in our Lord's words, primarily to corporeal safety and preservation in the midst of dangers; and, still further, to note the emphatic 'in your patience,' as suggesting not only a future but a present acquisition of one's own soul, or life, as the result of such persevering endurance and enduring perseverance. All which things being kept in view, I may expand the great promise that lies in my text, as follows:- First, by such persevering persistence in the Christian path, we gain ourselves. Self-surrender is self-possession. We never own ourselves till we have given up owning ourselves, and yielded ourselves to that Lord who gives us back saints to ourselves. Self-control is self-possession. We do not own ourselves as long as it is possible for any weakness in flesh, sense, or spirit to gain dominion over us and hinder us from doing what we know to be right. We are not our own masters then. 'Whilst they promise them liberty, they themselves are the bond-slaves of corruption.' It is only when we have the bit well into the jaws of the brutes, and the reins tight in our hands, so that a finger-touch can check or divert the course, that we are truly lords of the chariot in which we ride and of the animals that impel it.

And such self-control which is the winning of ourselves is, as I believe, thoroughly realised only when, by self-surrender of ourselves to Jesus Christ, we get His help to govern ourselves and so become lords of ourselves. Some little petty Rajah, up in the hills, in a quasi-independent State in India, is troubled by mutineers whom he cannot subdue; what does he do? He sends a message down to Lahore or Calcutta, and up come English troops that consolidate his dominion, and he rules securely, when he has consented to become a feudatory, and recognise his overlord. And so you and I, by continual repetition, in the face of self and sin, of our acts of self-surrender, bring Christ into the field; and then, when we have said, ‘Lord, take me; I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me’; and when we daily, in spite of hindrances, stand to the surrender and repeat the consecration, then ‘in our perseverance we acquire our souls.’

Again, such persistence wins even the bodily life, whether it preserves it or loses it. I have said that the words of our texts have an application to bodily preservation in the midst of the dreadful dangers of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. But so regarded they are a paradox. For hear how the Master introduces them: ‘Some of you shall they cause to be put to death, but there shall not a hair of your heads perish. In your perseverance ye shall win your lives.’ ‘Some of you they will put to death,’ but ye ‘shall win your lives,’-a paradox which can only be solved by experience. Whether this bodily life be preserved or lost, it is gained when it is used as a means of attaining the higher life of union with God. Many a martyr had the promise, ‘Not a hair of your head shall perish,’ fulfilled at the very moment when the falling axe shore his locks in twain, and severed his head from his body.

Finally, full salvation, the true possession of himself, and the acquisition of the life which really is life, comes to a man who perseveres to the end, and thus passes to the land where he will receive the recompense of the reward. The one moment the runner, with flushed cheek and forward swaying body, hot, with panting breath, and every muscle strained, is straining to the winning-post; and the next moment, in utter calm, he is wearing the crown.

‘To the end,’ and what a contrast the next moment will be! Brethren, may it be true of you and of me that ‘we are not of them that draw back unto perdition, but of them that believe to the winning of their souls!'

95)Luke 21:20-36

Luke

WHEN SHALL THESE THINGS BE?

Luk. 21:20 - Luk. 21:36.

This discourse of our Lord's is in answer to the disciples' double question as to the time of the overthrow of the Temple and the premonitory signs of its approach. The former is answered with the indefiniteness which characterises prophetic chronology; the latter is plainly answered in Luk. 21:20.

The whole passage divides itself in four well-marked sections.

I. There is the prediction of the fall of Jerusalem [Luk. 21:20 - Luk. 21:24].

The 'sign' of her 'desolation' was to be the advance of the enemy to her walls. Armies had been many times encamped round her, and many times been scattered; but this siege was to end in capture, and no angel of the Lord would stalk by night through the sleeping host, to stiffen sleep into death, nor would any valour of the besieged avail. Their cause was to be hopeless from the first. Flight was enjoined. Usually the inhabitants of the open country took refuge in the fortified capital when invasion harrowed their fields; but this time, for 'them that are in the country' to 'enter therein' was to throw away their last chance of safety. The Christians obeyed, and fled, as we all know, across Jordan to Pella. The rest despised Jesus' warning-if they knew it,-and perished.

Mark the reason for the exhortation not to resist, but to flee: These are days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled.' That is to say, the besiegers are sent by God to execute His righteous and long-ago-pronounced judgments. Therefore it is vain to struggle against them. Behind the Roman army is the God of Israel. To dash against their cohorts is to throw one’s self on the thick bosses of the Almighty’s buckler, and none who dare do that can ‘prosper.’ Submission to His retributive hand is the only way to escape being crushed by it. Chastisement accepted is salutary, but kicking against it drives the goad deeper into the rebellious limb.

So great is the agony to be, that what should be a joy, the birth of children, will be a woe, and the sweet duties of motherhood a curse, while the childless will be happier than the fugitives burdened with helpless infancy. We should note, too, that the ‘distress’ which comes upon the land is presented in darker colours, and traced to its origin, in [God’s]’wrath’ dealt out ‘unto this people.’ Happier they who ‘fall by the edge of the sword’ than they who are led ‘captive into all the nations.’

A gleam of hope shoots through the stormy prospect, for the treading down of Jerusalem by the Gentiles has a term set to it. It is to continue ‘till the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.’ That expression is important, for it clearly implies that these ‘times’ are of considerable duration, and it thus places a period of undefined extent between the fall of Jerusalem and the subsequent prophecy. The word used for ‘times’ generally carries with it the notion of opportunity, and here seems to indicate that the break-up of the Jewish national existence would usher in a period in which the ‘Gentiles’ would have the kingdom of God offered to them. The history of the world since the city fell is the best comment on this saying.

II. Since the ‘times of the Gentiles’ are thus of indefinite duration, they make a broad line of demarcation between what precedes and what follows them.

Clearly the prophecy in Luk. 21:25 - Luk. 21:27 is separated in time from the fall of Jerusalem, and it is no objection to that view that the separation is not more emphatically pointed out by our Lord. These verses distinctly refer to His last coming to judgment. Luk. 21:27 is too grand and too distinctly cast in the mould of the other predictions of that coming to be interpreted of His ideal coming in the judgments on the city.

The ‘signs in sun and moon and stars’ may refer in accordance with a familiar symbolism, to the overthrow of royalties and dominions; the sea roaring may, in like manner, symbolise agitations among the people; but the ‘cloud’ and the ‘power and great glory’ with which the Son of man comes, can mean nothing else than what they mean in other prophetic passages; namely, His visible appearance, invested with the shekinah light, and wielding divine authority before the gaze of a world.

The city’s fall, then, was the initial stage of a process, the duration of which is undefined here, but implied to be considerable, and of which the closing stage is the personal coming of Jesus. The same conclusion is supported by Luk. 21:28, which treats that fall as the beginning of the fulfilment of the prophecy.

III. That verse forms a transition to the section containing the illustrative parable and the reiteration of the assurance that Christ’s words would certainly be fulfilled.

The disciples might naturally quake at the prospect, and wonder how they could face the reality. Jesus gives them strong words of cheer, which apply to all dreaded contingencies and to all social convulsions. What is a messenger of destruction to Christless men and institutions is a harbinger of full ‘redemption’ to His servants. Earthquakes but open their prison doors and loose their bands, they should not shake their hearts.

Historically the fall of Jerusalem was a powerful factor in the deliverance of the Church from Jewish swaddling-bands which hampered its growing limbs. For all Christians the destruction of what can perish brings fuller vision and possession of what cannot be shaken. To Christ’s friends, all things work for good. So the parable which at first sight seems strangely incongruous becomes blessedly significant and fitting. The gladsome blossoming of the trees, the herald of the glories of summer, is a strange emblem of such a tragedy, and summer itself is a still stranger one of that solemn last judgment. But the might of humble trust in Him who comes to judge makes His coming summer-like in the light and warmth with which it floods the soul, and the rich fruitage which it produces there.

Observe, too, that the parable confirms the idea of a process having stages, for the lesson of the blossoming fig-tree is not that summer has come, but that it is nigh.

The solemn assurance in Luk. 21:32, made more weighty by the ‘Verily I say,’ seems at first sight to bring the final judgment within the lifetime of the generation of the hearers. But it is noteworthy that the expression ‘till all things are fulfilled’ is almost verbally identical with that in Luk. 21:22, which refers only to the destruction of Jerusalem, and is therefore most naturally interpreted as having the same restricted application here. The difference between the two phrases is significant, since in the former the certainty of fulfilment is deduced from the fact of ‘the things’ being written-that is, they must be accomplished because they have been foretold in Scripture,-whereas in the latter Christ rests the certainty of fulfilment on His own word. That majestic assurance in Luk. 21:33 comes well from His lips, and makes claim that His word shall outlast the whole present material order, and be fulfilled in every detail. Think of a mere man saying that!

IV. Exhortations corresponding to the predictions follow.

Christ’s revelation of the future was neither meant to gratify idle curiosity nor to supply a timetable in advance, but to minister encouragement and to lead to watchfulness. Whether ‘that day’ [Luk. 21:34] is understood of the fall of Jerusalem or of the final coming of the Lord, it will come ‘as a snare’ upon men who are absorbed with the earth which they inhabit. They will be captured by it, as a covey of birds in a field busily picking up grain, are netted by one sudden fling of the fowler’s net. A wary eye would have saved them.

The exhortation is as applicable to us, for, whatever are our views about unfulfilled prophecy, death comes to us all at a time which we know not, as the Book of Ecclesiastes, using the same figure, says; ‘Man knoweth not his time . . . as the birds that are caught in the snare.’ Hearts must be kept above the grosser satisfactions of sense and the less gross cares of life, being neither stupefied with gorging earth’s good, nor preoccupied with its gnawing anxieties, both of which are destructive of the clear realisation of the certain future. We are to preserve an attitude of wakefulness and of expectancy, and, as the sure way to it, and to clearing our hearts of perishable delights and shortsighted, self-consuming cares, we are to keep them in a continual posture of supplication. If our study of unfulfilled prophecy does that for us, it will have done what Jesus means it to do; if it does not it matters little what theories about its chronology we may adopt.

The two stages which we have tried to point out in this passage are clearly marked at the close, where escaping ‘all these things that shall come to pass’ and standing ‘before the Son of man’ are distinguished. True, both stages were to be included in the experience of Christ’s hearers, but they are none the less separate stages.

Luke’s version of this great discourse gives less prominence to the final coming than does Matthew’s, and does not blend the two stages so inextricably together; but it gives no hint of the duration of the ‘times of the Gentiles,’ and might well leave the impression that these were brief. Now in this close setting together of a nearer and a much more remote future, with little prominence given to the interval between, our Lord is but bringing His prophecy into line with the constant manner of the older prophets. They and He paint the future in perspective, and the distance, seen behind the foreground, seems nearer than it really is. The spectator does not know how many weary miles have to be traversed before the distant blue hills are to be reached, nor what deep gorges lie between.

Such bringing together of events far apart in time of fulfilment rests in part on the fact that there have been many ‘days of the Lord,’ many ‘comings of Christ,’ each of which is a result on a small scale of the same retributive action of the Judge of all, as shall be manifested on the largest scale in the last and greatest day of the Lord. Therefore the true use of all these predictions is that which Christ enforces here; namely, that they should lead us to prayerful watchfulness and to living above earth, its goods and cares.

96)Luke 22:7-20

Luke

THE LORD’S SUPPER

Luk. 22:7 - Luk. 22:20.

Paul had his account of the Last Supper direct from Christ. Luke apparently had his from Paul, so that the variations from Matthew and Mark are invested with singular interest, as probably traceable to the Lord of the feast Himself. Our passage has three sections-the preparation, the revelation of Christ's heart, and the institution of the rite.

I. The Preparation.-

Peculiar to Luke are the names of the disciples entrusted with it, and the representation of the command, as preceding the disciples' question 'Where?' The selection of Peter and John indicates the confidential nature of the task, which comes out still more plainly in the singular directions given to them. Luke's order of command and question seems more precise than that of the other Gospels, as making our Lord the originator instead of merely responsive to the disciples' suggestion.

How is the designation of the place which Christ gives to be understood? Was it supernatural knowledge, or was it the result of previous arrangement with the 'goodman of the house'? Most probably the latter; for he was in so far a disciple that he recognised Jesus as 'the Master,' and was glad to have Him in his house, and the chamber on the roof was ready 'furnished' when they came. Why this mystery about the place? The verses before our passage tell the reason.

Judas was listening, too, for the answer to 'Where?' thinking that it would give him the 'opportunity' which he sought 'to betray Him in the absence of the multitude.' Jesus had much to say to His disciples, and needed the quiet hours in the upper room, and therefore sent away the two with directions which revealed nothing to the others. If He had told the group where the house was, the last supper might never have been instituted, nor the precious farewell words, the holy of holies of John's Gospel, ever been spoken. Jesus takes precautions to delay the Cross. He takes none to escape it, but rather sets Himself in these last days to bring it near. The variety in His action means no change in His mind, but both modes are equally the result of His self-forgetting love to us all. So He sends away Peter and John with sealed orders, as it were, and the greedy ears of the traitor are balked, and none know the appointed place till Jesus leads them to it. The two did not come back, but Christ guided the others to the house, when the hour was come.

II. Luk. 22:14 - Luk. 22:18 give a glimpse into Christ’s heart as He partook, for the last time, of the Passover.

He discloses His earnest desire for that last hour of calm before He went out to face the storm, and reveals His vision of the future feast in the perfect kingdom. That desire touchingly shows His brotherhood in all our shrinking from parting with dear ones, and in our treasuring of the last sweet, sad moments of being together. That was a true human heart, ‘fashioned alike’ with ours, which longed and planned for one quiet hour before the end, and found some bracing for Gethsemane and Calvary in the sanctities of the Upper Room. But the desire was not for Himself only. He wished to partake of that Passover, and then to transform it for ever, and to leave the new rite to His servants.

Our Lord evidently ate of the Passover; for we cannot suppose that His words in Luk. 22:15 relate to an ungratified wish, but, as evidently, that eating was finished before He spoke. We shall best conceive the course of events if we suppose that the earlier stages of the paschal ceremonial were duly attended to, and that the Lord’s Supper was instituted in connection with its later parts. We need not discuss what was the exact stage at which our Lord spoke and acted as in Luk. 22:15 - Luk. 22:17. It is sufficient to note that in them He gives what He does not taste, and that, in giving, His thoughts travel beyond all the sorrow and death to reunion and perfected festal joys. These anticipations solaced His heart in that supreme hour. ‘For the joy that was set before Him’ He ‘endured the Cross,’ and this was the crown of His joy, that all His friends should share it with Him, and sit at His table in His kingdom.

The prophetic aspect of the Lord’s Supper should never be left out of view. It is at once a feast of memory and of hope, and is also a symbol for the present, inasmuch as it represents the conditions of spiritual life as being participation in the body and blood of Christ. This is where Paul learned his ‘till He come’; and that hope which filled the Saviour’s heart should ever fill ours when we remember His death.

III. Verses 19 and 20 record the actual institution of the Lord’s Supper.

Note its connection with the rite which it transforms. The Passover was the memorial of deliverance, the very centre of Jewish ritual. It was a family feast, and our Lord took the place of the head of the household. That solemnly appointed and long-observed memorial of the deliverance which made a mob of slaves into a nation is transfigured by Jesus, who calls upon Jew and Gentile to forget the venerable meaning of the rite, and remember rather His work for all men. It is strange presumption thus to brush aside the Passover, and in effect to say, ‘I abrogate a divinely enjoined ceremony, and breathe a new meaning into so much of it as I retain.’ Who is He who thus tampers with God’s commandments? Surely He is either One having a co-ordinate authority, or--? But perhaps the alternative is best left unspoken.

The separation of the symbols of the body and blood plainly indicates that it is the death of Jesus, and that a violent one, which is commemorated. The double symbol carries in both its parts the same truth, but with differences. Both teach that all our hopes are rooted in the death of Jesus, and that the only true life of our spirits comes from participation in His death, and thereby in His life. But in addition to this truth common to both, the wine, which represents His blood, is the seal of the ‘new covenant.’ Again we mark the extraordinary freedom with which Christ handles the most sacred parts of the former revelation, putting them aside as He wills, to set Himself in their place. He declares, by this rite, that through His death a new ‘covenant’ comes into force as between God and man, in which all the anticipations of prophets are more than realised, and sins are remembered no more, and the knowledge of God becomes the blessing of all, and a close relationship of mutual possession is established between God and us, and His laws are written on loving hearts and softened wills.

Nor is even this all the meaning of that cup of blessing; for blood is the vehicle of life, and whoso receives Christ’s blood on his conscience, to sprinkle it from dead works, therein receives, not only cleansing for the past, but a real communication of ‘the Spirit of life’ which was ‘in Christ’ to be the life of his life, so as that he can say, ‘I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’ Nor is even this all; for, as wine is, all the world over, the emblem of festivity, so this cup declares that to partake of Christ is to have a fountain of joy in ourselves, which yet has a better source than ourselves. Nor is this all; for ‘this cup’ is prophecy as well as memorial and symbol, and shadows the new wine of the kingdom and the marriage supper of the Lamb.

‘This is My body’ could not have meant to the hearers, who saw Him sitting there in bodily form, anything but ‘this is a symbol of My body.’ It is but the common use of the word in explaining a figurative speech or act. ‘The field is the world; the tares are the children of the wicked one; the reapers are the angels,’-and so in a hundred cases.

Luke alone preserves for us the command to ‘do this,’ which at once establishes the rite as meant to be perpetual, and defines the true nature of it. It is a memorial, and, if we are to take our Lord’s own explanation, only a memorial. There is nothing here of sacramental efficacy, but simply the loving desire to be remembered and the condescending entrusting of some power to recall him to these outward symbols. Strange that, if the communion were so much more, as the sacramentarian theory makes it, the feast’s own Founder should not have said a word to hint that it was.

And how deep and yet lowly an insight into His hold on our hearts the institution of this ordinance shows Him to have had! The Greek is, literally, ‘In order to My remembrance.’ He knew that-strange and sad as it may seem, and impossible as, no doubt, it did seem to the disciples-we should be in constant danger of forgetting Him; and therefore, in this one case, He enlists sense on the side of faith, and trusts to these homely memorials the recalling, to our treacherous memories, of His dying love. He wished to live in our hearts, and that for the satisfaction of His own love and for the deepening of ours.

The Lord’s Supper is a standing evidence of Christ’s own estimate of where the centre of His work lies. We are to remember His death. Why should it be selected as the chief treasure for memory, unless it was something altogether different from the death of other wise teachers and benefactors? If it were in His case what it is in all others, the end of His activity for blessing, and no part of His message to the world, what need is there for the Lord’s Supper, and what meaning is there in it, if Christ’s death were not the sacrifice for the world’s sin? Surely no view of the significance and purpose of the Cross but that which sees in it the propitiation for the world’s sins accounts for this rite. A Christianity which strikes the atoning death of Jesus out of its theology is sorely embarrassed to find a worthy meaning for His dying command, ‘This do in remembrance of Me.’

But if the breaking of the precious alabaster box of His body was needed in order that ‘the house’ might be ‘filled with the odour of the ointment,’ and if His death was the indispensable condition of pardon and impartation of His life, then ‘wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there,’ as its vital centre, shall His death be proclaimed, and this rite shall speak of it for a memorial of Him, and ‘show the Lord’s death till He come.’

97)Luke 22:24

Luke

PARTING PROMISES AND WARNINGS

Luk. 22:24 - Luk. 22:37.

It was blameworthy, but only too natural, that, while Christ’s heart was full of His approaching sufferings, the Apostles should be squabbling about their respective dignity. They thought that the half-understood predictions pointed to a brief struggle immediately preceding the establishment of the kingdom, and they wished to have their rank settled in advance. Possibly, too, they had been disputing as to whose office was the menial task of presenting the basin for foot-washing. So little did the first partakers of the Lord’s Supper ‘discern the Lord’s body,’ and so little did His most loving friends share His sorrows.

I. Our Lord was not so absorbed in His anticipations of the near Cross as to be unobservant of the wrangling among the Apostles.

Even then His heart was enough at leisure from itself to observe, to pity, and to help. So He at once turns to deal with the false ideas of greatness betrayed by the dispute. The world’s notion is that the true use and exercise of superiority is to lord it over others. Tyrants are flattered by the title of benefactor, which they do not deserve, but the giving of which shows that, even in the world, some trace of the true conception lingers. It was sadly true, at that time, that power was used for selfish ends, and generally meant oppression. One Egyptian king, who bore the title Benefactor, was popularly known as Malefactor, and many another old-world monarch deserved a like name.

Jesus lays down the law for His followers as being the exact opposite of the world's notion. Dignity and pre-eminence carry obligations to serve. In His kingdom power is to be used to help others, not to glorify oneself. In other sayings of Christ's, service is declared to be the way to *become* great in the kingdom, but here the matter is taken up at another point, and greatness, already attained on whatever grounds, is commanded to be turned to its proper use. The way to become great is to become small, and to serve. The right use of greatness is to become a servant. That has become a familiar commonplace now, but its recognition as the law for civic and other dignity is all but entirely owing to Christianity. What conception of such a use of power has the Sultan of Turkey, or the petty tyrants of heathen lands? The worst of European rulers have to make pretence to be guided by this law; and even the Pope calls himself 'the servant of servants.'

It is a commonplace, but like many another axiom, universal acceptance and almost as universal neglect are its fate. Ingrained selfishness fights against it. Men admire it as a beautiful saying, and how many of us take it as our life's guide? We condemn the rulers of old who wrung wealth out of their people and neglected every duty; but what of our own use of the fraction of power we possess, or our own demeanour to our inferiors in world or church? Have all the occupants of royal thrones or presidential chairs, all peers, members of Parliament, senators, and congressmen, used their position for the public weal? Do we regard ours as a trust to be administered for others? Do we feel the weight of our crown, or are we taken up with its jewels, and proud of ourselves for it? Christ's pathetic words, giving Himself as the example of greatness that serves, are best understood as referring to His wonderful act of washing the disciples' feet. Luke does not record it, and probably did not know it, but how the words are lighted up if we bring them into connection with it!

II. Verses 28 to 30 naturally flow from the preceding.

They lift a corner of the veil, and show the rewards, when the heavenly form of the kingdom has come, of the right use of eminence in its earthly form. How pathetic a glimpse into Christ's heart is given in that warm utterance of gratitude for the imperfect companionship of the Twelve! It reveals His loneliness, His yearning for a loving hand to grasp, His continual conflict with temptations to choose an easier way than that of the Cross. He has known all the pain of being alone, and feeling in vain for a sympathetic heart to lean on. He has had to resist temptation, not only in the desert at the beginning, or in Gethsemane at the end, but throughout His life. He treasures in His heart, and richly repays, even a little love dashed with much selfishness, and faithfulness broken by desertion. We do not often speak of the tempted Christ, or of the lonely Christ, or of the grateful Christ, but in these great words we see Him as being all these.

The rewards promised point onwards to the perfecting of the kingdom in the future life. We notice the profound thought that the kingdom which His servants are to inherit is conferred on them, '*as* My Father hath appointed unto Me,'-that is, that it is a kingdom won by suffering and service, and wielded by gentleness and for others. 'If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him.' The characteristics of the future royalty of Christ's servants are given in highly figurative language. A state of which we have no experience can only be revealed under forms drawn from experience; but these are only far-off approximations, and cannot be pressed.

The sacred Last Supper suggested one metaphor. It was the last on earth, but its sanctity would be renewed in heaven, and sadness and separation and the following grief would not mar the perfect, perpetual, joyful feast. What dim visions of rule and delegated authority may lie in the other promise of judging the twelve tribes of Israel, we must wait till we go to that world to understand. But this is clear, that continuing with Jesus here leads to everlasting companionship hereafter, in which all desires shall be satisfied, and we shall share in His authority and be representatives of His glory.

III. But Jesus abruptly recalls Himself and the Twelve from these remoter prospects of bliss to the nearer future of trial and separation.

The solemn warning to Peter follows with startling suddenness. Why should they be fighting about precedence when they were on the verge of the sorest trial of their constancy? And as for Peter, who had, no doubt, not been the least loud-voiced in the strife, he needed most of all to be sobered. Our narrow limits forbid our doing even partial justice to the scene with him; but we note the significant use of the old name ‘Simon,’ reminding the Apostle of his human weakness, and its repetition, giving emphasis to the address.

We note, too, the partial withdrawal of the veil which hides the spirit world from us, in the distinct declaration of the agency of a personal tempter, whose power is limited, though his malice is boundless, and who had to obtain God’s permission ere he could tempt. His sieve is made to let the wheat through, and to retain the chaff. It will be hard to empty this saying of its force. Christ taught the existence and operation of Satan; but He taught, too, that He Himself was Satan’s victorious antagonist and our prevailing intercessor. He is so still. He does not seek to avert conflict from us, but prays that our faith fail not, and Himself, too, fulfils the prayer by strengthening us.

Faith, then, conquers, and withstands Satan’s sifting. If it holds out, we shall not fall, though all the winds howl round us. We are not passive between the two antagonists, but have to take our share in the struggle. Partial failures may be followed by recovery, and even tend to increase our power to strengthen other tempted ones, by the experience gained of our own weakness, which deepens humility and forbearance with others’ faults, and by the experience of Christ’s strength, which makes us able to direct them to the source of all safety.

Peter’s passionate avowal of readiness to bear anything, if only he was with Christ, is the genuine utterance of a warm impulsive heart, which took too little heed of Christ’s solemn warning, and fancied that the tide of present feeling would always run as strong as now. Emotion fluctuates. Steadfast devotion is chary of mortgaging the future by promises. He who knows himself is slow to say, ‘I will,’ for he knows that ‘Oh that I may!’ is fitter for his weakness. Very likely, if Peter had been offered fetters or the scaffold then and there, he would have accepted them bravely; but it was a different thing in the raw, cold morning, after an agitating night, and the Master away at the far end of the great hall. A flippant maid's tongue was enough to finish him then.

It is sometimes easier to bear a great load for Christ than a small one. Some of us could be martyrs at the stake more easily than confessors among sneering neighbours. Jesus had spared the Apostle in the former warning of his fall, but He spoke plainly at last, since the former had been ineffectual; and He addressed him by his new name of Peter, as if to heighten the sin of denial by recalling the privileges bestowed.

IV. The last part of the passage deals with the new conditions consequent on Christ's departure.

The Twelve had been exempt from the care of providing for themselves while He was with them, but now they are to be launched into the world alone, like fledglings from the nest. Not that His presence is not with them or with us, but that His absence throws the task of providing for wants and guarding against dangers on themselves, as had not been the case during the blessed years of companionship. Hence the injunctions in verse 36 lay down the permanent law for the Church, while verse 37 assigns as its reason the speedy fulfilment of the prophecies of Messiah's sufferings.

Substantially the meaning of the whole is: 'I am on the point of leaving you, and, when I am gone, you must use common-sense means for provision and protection. I provided for you while I was here, without your co-operation. Remember how I did so, and trust Me to provide in future, through your co-operation.'

The life of faith does not exclude ordinary prudence and the use of appropriate means. It is more in accord with Christ's mind to have a purse to keep money in, and a wallet for food-stores, than to go out, as some good people do, saying, 'The Lord will provide.' Yes, He will; but it will be by blessing your common-sense and effort. As to the difficulty felt in the injunction to buy a sword, our Lord would be contradicting His whole teaching if He was here commanding the use of arms for the defence of His servants or the promotion of His kingdom. That He did not mean literal swords is plain from His answer to the Apostles, who produced the formidable armament of two.

‘It is enough.’ A couple are plenty to fight the Roman Empire with. Yes, two too many, as was soon seen. The expression is plainly an intensely energetic metaphor, taking line with purse and scrip. The plain meaning of the whole is that we are called on to provide necessary means of provision and defence, which He will bless. The only sword permitted to His followers is the sword of the Spirit.

98)Luke 22:25-26

Luke

PARTING PROMISES AND WARNINGS

CHRIST’S IDEAL OF A MONARCH 1

Luk. 22:25 - Luk. 22:26.

There have been sovereigns of England whose death was a relief. There have been others who were mourned with a certain tepid and decorous regret. But there has never been one on whose bier have been heaped such fragrant wreaths of universal love and sorrow as have been laid upon hers whom we have not yet learned to call by another name than that which has been musical for all these years-the Queen. Why has her people’s love thus compassed her? Surely, chiefly because they felt and saw that Christ’s ideal of rule, as stated in these words of our text, was her ideal, which she had gone far to realise. Here is the secret of her hold upon her people. Here is the reason why, from almost all the world, tributes have come, and as has been well said, ‘They that loved not England loved her.’

Now it would be impossible for me to speak words remote from the thought that has been filling the nation’s mind in these days. I can add nothing to the many eloquent and just appreciations to which we have listened in this past week, but I can draw your attention to the underlying secret which moulded and shaped that life. And it becomes the pulpit to do so. We Christians ought to infuse a Christian element into everything. We should ‘not sorrow as others,’ nor should we admire as others. We all unite in praising her, but eulogiums which ignore the ground of the virtues which they extol are superficial and misleading. I ask you to turn to the revelation of the secret of the nation’s love and sorrow suggested by the words of my text.

Christ sets forth, in two sharply contrasted pictures, the world’s ideal of a king and His ideal. The upper room was a strange place, and the eve of Calvary was a still stranger time, for disciples to squabble about pre-eminence. The Master was absorbed in the thought of His Cross, the servants were quarrelling about their places in His Kingdom. Perhaps it was the foot-washing that brought about the unseemly strife that arose among them, each desiring to hand on the menial office to another. Jesus Christ did it Himself; and to that, perhaps, refer the touching words which Luke gives as following the text; ‘I am among you as he that serveth,’ with the towel round His loins, and the basin in His hand.

The world’s ideal of a King.

Now, the one picture which He draws for us here, the world’s ideal of a king, is the portrait familiar enough to all who know anything about that ancient order of society, of tyrants and despots, in Assyria, Babylonia. Pharaohs and all the little kings round about Judaea; the vile old Herod and his equally vile brood, were recent or living examples of what the Master said when He sketched ‘the kings of the Gentiles,’ They ‘lord it over them.’ Arrogant superiority, imperious masterfulness, irresponsible wills, caprices ungoverned, an absolute oblivion of duties, no thought of responsibilities- these were the features of that ancient type of monarch: and which, in spite of all constitutional hedges and limitations, there is abundant room for the repetition of, even in so-called Christian countries.

And then, side by side with that, comes another characteristic: ‘They that exercise authority upon them are called “benefactors.”‘ They demand titles which shall credit them with virtues that they never try to possess, and live in a region filled with the fumes from a thousand venal censers of a flattery which intoxicates and makes giddy. A king in Egypt, very near our Lord’s time, had borne the title ‘benefactor,’ the very word that is employed here; even as many a most ungracious sovereign has been called ‘Your Most Gracious Majesty.’

The position tempts to such a type. And although the world has outgrown it, yet, as I have said, there is ample room for the recurrence to the old and obsolete form, unless a mightier hindrance than human nature knows, come in to prevent it. An ancient prophet lamented over the shepherds of Israel ‘that do feed themselves,’ and indignantly asked, ‘should not the shepherds feed the sheep?’ He meant precisely the same contrast which is drawn out at length in these two pictures that we have before us now.

The Christian conception.

‘Ye shall not be so.’ The Christian conception is in sharp contrast to, and the Christian realisation of the conception, should be the absolute opposite of that type to which I have already referred. ‘He that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger’; that suggests modesty and meekness of demeanour in bearing the loftiest office. ‘And he that is chief as he that doth serve’; that expresses an activity, not self-regarding and self-centred, but ever used for others. The simple words of Jesus Christ are the noblest expression of, and, as I believe, have been the mightiest impulse in producing, the modern recognition which, thank God! is becoming more and more pronounced every day amongst us, that power means duty, that elevation means the obligation to stoop, that true authority expresses itself in service. We see that conviction growing in all classes in England. Those who are lifted high are learning to-day, as they never learned before, the responsibilities and obligations of their position. And those who are low are beginning to apply the principle as they never did before, and to test the worthiness of the lofty, highly-endowed, wealthy, and noble, by their discharge of the obligations of their position. And although it anticipates what I have to say subsequently, I cannot but ask here, who shall say how the Queen’s example of authority becoming service has steadied the Empire, and made a peaceful transition from the old type of authority to the new, a possibility? Although not directly stated in my text, there is implied in it another thought, namely, that whilst power obliges to service, service brings power. He that uses his influence, his authority, his capacities, his possessions, not for himself, but for his brothers, will find that by the service he has garnered in a harvest of authority, and power of command which nothing else can ever give.

Christ's ideal of a monarch.

And now I may turn, without passing beyond the bounds of the pulpit on such an occasion as the present, to look at the great illustration of the Christian ideal which the royal life now closed has given. I venture to say that, without exaggeration, and without irreverence, our Queen might have taken for her own the declaration of our Lord Himself on this occasion, 'I am among you as one that serveth.' She served her people by the diligent discharge of the duties that were laid upon her. During a strenuous reign of sixty-three years, she left no arrears, nothing neglected, nothing postponed, nothing undone. In sorrow as in joy, when life was young, and the love of husband and family joys were new, as when husband and children were taken away, and she was an old woman, lonelier because of her throne, she laboured as 'ever in the great Taskmaster's eye.' That was serving her nation by the will of God. She served her people by that swift, sincere sympathy which claimed a share alike in great national and in small private sorrows. Was there some shipwreck or some storm, that widowed humble fisherfolk in their villages? The Queen's sympathy was the first to reach them. Were the blinds drawn down in some colliery village because of an explosion? The Queen's message was there to bring a gleam of light into darkened homes. Did some great name in literature or science pass away? Who but she was first to recognise the loss, to speak gracious words of appreciation? Did some poor shepherd die, in the strath where she made her Highland home? The widowed Queen was beside the widowed peasant, to share and to solace. Knowing sorrow herself only too well, she had learned to run to the help of the wretched. Dowered doubly with a woman's gift of sympathy, she had not let the altitude of a throne freeze its flow.

She served her people yet more by letting them feel that she took them into her confidence, spreading before them in the days of her widowhood the cherished records that her happy pen had written in the vanished days of her wifehood, opening her heart to us in mute petition that we might give our hearts to her. She served her people by the simplicity of her tastes and habits in these days of senseless luxury, and fierce, sensuous excitement of living. She served her people by the purity of her life, and so far as she could by putting a barrier around her Court, across which nothing that was foul could pass. 'He that worketh iniquity shall not tarry in my house,' said an ancient king on taking his throne. And our Queen, to the utmost of her power, said the same; and frowned down-stern for once in a righteous cause-impurity in high places. Una had her lion, and this protest of a woman’s delicacy against the vices of modern society is not the least of the services for which we have to thank her.

Let me remind you that all this patient self-surrender had its root in Christian faith. She had taken her Lord for her example because her faith had knit her to Him as her Saviour.

Therefore she, as no other English sovereign, conquered the heart of the nation, and was best loved by the best men and women. Never was there a more striking confirmation of the truth that whoever in any region reigns to serve will serve to reign.

And now, before I close, let me remind you that the principles which I have been trying to express grip us in our several spheres, quite as tightly as they do those who may be more largely endowed, or more loftily placed than ourselves. There is no ideal for a Christian monarch which is not the ideal also for a Christian peasant. That which is the duty of the highest is no less the duty of the lowest. For us all it remains true that what we have we are bound to use, not for ourselves, but as recognising both our stewardship to God and the solidarity of humanity; to use for Him, that is to say, for men. This is the secret of all high, noble, blessed life for evermore.

And, brethren, whilst I for one heartily rejoice in the growing consciousness of responsibility which is being diffused through all ranks of society today, and, bless God, for one impulse to that recognition which, as I believe, came from the life now peacefully closed, I shall be no doubt charged by some of you with old-fashioned narrowness if I reiterate my own earnest conviction that we can rely on nothing to bring about a thoroughgoing, a widely-diffused, and a permanent altruism-to use the modern word-except the force that comes from the motive which Jesus Christ Himself adduced, in this very conversation, when He said, ‘I am among you as he that serveth.’ There is our example, aye! and more than our example, lodged in Him, and available for us, by our simple faith in Him. In love that seeks to copy, lies the only power that will cast out self, that ‘anarch old,’ from his usurped seat in our hearts, and will throne Jesus Christ there. It needs a mighty lever to heave a planet from its orbit, and to set it circling round another sun; and there is nothing that will deliver any man, in any rank of life, from the dominion of self, except submission to the dominion of Him who, because He died to serve, deserves, and has won, the supreme right of authority and dominion over human life.

To use anything for self is to miss its highest goodness, and to mar ourselves. To use anything for Christ and our brethren is to find its sweetest sweetness, and to bless ourselves to the very uttermost. Self-absorption is self-destruction; self-surrender is self-acquisition.

If we can truly say, ‘I am among you as he that serveth,’ if all our possessions suggest to us obligations and all our powers impose on us duties: then be we prince or peasant, rich or poor, entrusted with many talents or with but one, we shall make the best of life here, and pass to higher authority, which is nobler service hereafter. Be the servant of all, and all are yours; serve Christ, and possess yourselves-these are the lessons from that royal life of service. May we learn them! May the King walk in his mother’s steps and hearken to ‘the oracle which his mother taught him!

1 Preached on the occasion of the death of Queen Victoria.

99)Luke 22:27

Luke

PARTING PROMISES AND WARNINGS

Luk. 22:24 - Luk. 22:37.

It was blameworthy, but only too natural, that, while Christ’s heart was full of His approaching sufferings, the Apostles should be squabbling about their respective dignity. They thought that the half-understood predictions pointed to a brief struggle immediately preceding the establishment of the kingdom, and they wished to have their rank settled in advance. Possibly, too, they had been disputing as to whose office was the menial task of presenting the basin for foot-washing. So little did the first partakers of the

Lord’s Supper ‘discern the Lord’s body,’ and so little did His most loving friends share His sorrows.

I. Our Lord was not so absorbed in His anticipations of the near Cross as to be unobservant of the wrangling among the Apostles.

Even then His heart was enough at leisure from itself to observe, to pity, and to help. So He at once turns to deal with the false ideas of greatness betrayed by the dispute. The world’s notion is that the true use and exercise of superiority is to lord it over others. Tyrants are flattered by the title of benefactor, which they do not deserve, but the giving of which shows that, even in the world, some trace of the true conception lingers. It was sadly true, at that time, that power was used for selfish ends, and generally meant oppression. One Egyptian king, who bore the title Benefactor, was popularly known as Malefactor, and many another old-world monarch deserved a like name.

Jesus lays down the law for His followers as being the exact opposite of the world’s notion. Dignity and pre-eminence carry obligations to serve. In His kingdom power is to be used to help others, not to glorify oneself. In other sayings of Christ’s, service is declared to be the way to *become* great in the kingdom, but here the matter is taken up at another point, and greatness, already attained on whatever grounds, is commanded to be turned to its proper use. The way to become great is to become small, and to serve. The right use of greatness is to become a servant. That has become a familiar commonplace now, but its recognition as the law for civic and other dignity is all but entirely owing to Christianity. What conception of such a use of power has the Sultan of Turkey, or the petty tyrants of heathen lands? The worst of European rulers have to make pretence to be guided by this law; and even the Pope calls himself ‘the servant of servants.’

It is a commonplace, but like many another axiom, universal acceptance and almost as universal neglect are its fate. Ingrained selfishness fights against it. Men admire it as a beautiful saying, and how many of us take it as our life’s guide? We condemn the rulers of old who wrung wealth out of their people and neglected every duty; but what of our own use of the fraction of power we possess, or our own demeanour to our inferiors in world or church? Have all the occupants of royal thrones or presidential chairs, all peers, members of Parliament, senators, and congressmen, used their position for the public weal? Do we regard ours as a trust to be administered for others? Do we feel the weight of our crown, or are we taken up with its jewels, and proud of ourselves for it? Christ's pathetic words, giving Himself as the example of greatness that serves, are best understood as referring to His wonderful act of washing the disciples' feet. Luke does not record it, and probably did not know it, but how the words are lighted up if we bring them into connection with it!

II. Verses 28 to 30 naturally flow from the preceding.

They lift a corner of the veil, and show the rewards, when the heavenly form of the kingdom has come, of the right use of eminence in its earthly form. How pathetic a glimpse into Christ's heart is given in that warm utterance of gratitude for the imperfect companionship of the Twelve! It reveals His loneliness, His yearning for a loving hand to grasp, His continual conflict with temptations to choose an easier way than that of the Cross. He has known all the pain of being alone, and feeling in vain for a sympathetic heart to lean on. He has had to resist temptation, not only in the desert at the beginning, or in Gethsemane at the end, but throughout His life. He treasures in His heart, and richly repays, even a little love dashed with much selfishness, and faithfulness broken by desertion. We do not often speak of the tempted Christ, or of the lonely Christ, or of the grateful Christ, but in these great words we see Him as being all these.

The rewards promised point onwards to the perfecting of the kingdom in the future life. We notice the profound thought that the kingdom which His servants are to inherit is conferred on them, '*as* My Father hath appointed unto Me,'-that is, that it is a kingdom won by suffering and service, and wielded by gentleness and for others. 'If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him.' The characteristics of the future royalty of Christ's servants are given in highly figurative language. A state of which we have no experience can only be revealed under forms drawn from experience; but these are only far-off approximations, and cannot be pressed.

The sacred Last Supper suggested one metaphor. It was the last on earth, but its sanctity would be renewed in heaven, and sadness and separation and the following grief would not mar the perfect, perpetual, joyful feast. What dim visions of rule and delegated authority may lie in the other promise of judging the twelve tribes of Israel, we must wait till we go to that world to understand. But this is clear, that continuing with Jesus here leads to everlasting companionship hereafter, in which all desires shall be satisfied, and we shall share in His authority and be representatives of His glory.

III. But Jesus abruptly recalls Himself and the Twelve from these remoter prospects of bliss to the nearer future of trial and separation.

The solemn warning to Peter follows with startling suddenness. Why should they be fighting about precedence when they were on the verge of the sorest trial of their constancy? And as for Peter, who had, no doubt, not been the least loud-voiced in the strife, he needed most of all to be sobered. Our narrow limits forbid our doing even partial justice to the scene with him; but we note the significant use of the old name 'Simon,' reminding the Apostle of his human weakness, and its repetition, giving emphasis to the address.

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It is sometimes easier to bear a great load for Christ than a small one. Some of us could be martyrs at the stake more easily than confessors among sneering neighbours. Jesus had spared the Apostle in the former warning of his fall, but He spoke plainly at last, since the former had been ineffectual; and He addressed him by his new name of Peter, as if to heighten the sin of denial by recalling the privileges bestowed.

IV. The last part of the passage deals with the new conditions consequent on Christ’s departure.

The Twelve had been exempt from the care of providing for themselves while He was with them, but now they are to be launched into the world alone, like fledglings from the nest. Not that His presence is not with them or with us, but that His absence throws the task of providing for wants and guarding against dangers on themselves, as had not been the case during the blessed years of companionship. Hence the injunctions in verse 36 lay down the permanent law for the Church, while verse 37 assigns as its reason the speedy fulfilment of the prophecies of Messiah’s sufferings.

Substantially the meaning of the whole is: ‘I am on the point of leaving you, and, when I am gone, you must use common-sense means for provision and protection. I provided for you while I was here, without your co-operation. Remember how I did so, and trust Me to provide in future, through your co-operation.’

The life of faith does not exclude ordinary prudence and the use of appropriate means. It is more in accord with Christ's mind to have a purse to keep money in, and a wallet for food-stores, than to go out, as some good people do, saying, 'The Lord will provide.' Yes, He will; but it will be by blessing your common-sense and effort. As to the difficulty felt in the injunction to buy a sword, our Lord would be contradicting His whole teaching if He was here commanding the use of arms for the defence of His servants or the promotion of His kingdom. That He did not mean literal swords is plain from His answer to the Apostles, who produced the formidable armament of two.

'It is enough.' A couple are plenty to fight the Roman Empire with. Yes, two too many, as was soon seen. The expression is plainly an intensely energetic metaphor, taking line with purse and scrip. The plain meaning of the whole is that we are called on to provide necessary means of provision and defence, which He will bless. The only sword permitted to His followers is the sword of the Spirit.

100) Luke 22:28

Luke

PARTING PROMISES AND WARNINGS

THE LONELY CHRIST

Luk. 22:28.

We wonder at the disciples when we read of the unseemly strife for precedence which jars on the tender solemnities of the Last Supper. We think them strangely unsympathetic and selfish; and so they were. But do not let us be too hard on them, nor forget that there was a very natural reason for the close connection which is found in the gospels between our Lord's announcements of His sufferings and this eager dispute as to who should be the greatest in the kingdom. They dimly understood what He meant, but they did understand this much, that His 'sufferings' were immediately to precede His 'glory'-and so it is not, after all, to be so much wondered at if the apparent approach of these made the settlement of their places in the impending kingdom seem to them a very pressing question. We should probably have thought so too, if we had been among them.

Perhaps, too, the immediate occasion of this strife who should be accounted the greatest, which drew from Christ the words of our text, may have been the unwillingness of each to injure his possible claim to pre-eminence by doing the servant's tasks at the modest meal. May we not suppose that the basin and the towel were refused by one after another, with muttered words growing louder and angrier: 'It is not my place,' says Peter; 'you, Andrew, take it-and so from hand to hand it goes, till the Master ends the strife and takes it Himself to wash their feet. Then, when He had sat down again, He may have spoken the words of which our text is part-in which He tells the wrangling disciples what is the true law of honour in His kingdom, namely, *service*, and points to Himself as the great example. With what emphasis the pathetic incident of the foot-washing invests the clause before our text: 'I am among you as he that serveth.' On that disclosure of the true law of pre-eminence in His kingdom there follows in this and following verses the assurance, that, unseemly as their strife, there was reward for them, and places of dignity there, because in all their selfishness and infirmity, they had still clung to their Master.

This being the original purpose of these words, I venture to use them for another. They give us, if I mistake not, a wonderful glimpse into the heart of Christ, and a most pathetic revelation of His thoughts and experiences, all the more precious because it is quite incidental and, we may say, unconscious.

I. See then, here, the tempted Christ.

In one sense, our Lord is His own perpetual theme. He is ever speaking of Himself, inasmuch as He is ever presenting what He is to us, and what He claims of us. In another sense, He scarcely ever speaks of Himself, inasmuch as deep silence, for the most part, lies over His own inward experiences. How precious, therefore, and how profoundly significant is that word here-'in My temptations'! So He summed up all His life. To feel the full force of the expression, it should be remembered that the temptation in the wilderness was past before His first disciple attached himself to Him, and that the conflict in Gethsemane had not yet come when these words were spoken. The period to which they refer, therefore, lies altogether within these limits, including neither. After the former, ‘Satan,’ we read, ‘departed from Him for a season.’ Before the latter, we read, ‘the prince of this world cometh.’ The space between, of which people are so apt to think as free from temptation, is the time of which our Lord is speaking now. The time when His followers ‘companied with Him’ is to His consciousness the time of His ‘temptations.’

That is not the point of view from which the Gospel narratives present it, for the plain reason that they are not autobiographies, and that Jesus said little about the continuous assaults to which He was exposed. It is not the point of view from which we often think of it. We are too apt to conceive of Christ’s temptations as all gathered together-curdled and clotted, as it were, at the two ends of His life, leaving the space between free. But we cannot understand the meaning of that life, nor feel aright the love and help that breathe from it, unless we think of it as a field of continual and diversified temptations.

How remarkable is the choice of the expression! To Christ, His life, looking back on it, does not so much present itself in the aspect of sorrow, difficulty or pain, as in that of temptation. He looked upon all outward things mainly with regard to their power to help or to hinder His life’s work. So for us, sorrow or joy should matter comparatively little. The evil in the evil should be felt to be sin, and the true cross and burden of life should be to us, as to our Master, the appeals it makes to us to abandon our tasks, and fling away our filial dependence and submission.

This is not the place to plunge into the thorny questions which surround the thought of the tempted Christ. However these may be solved, the great fact remains, that His temptations were most real and unceasing. It was no sham fight which He fought. The story of the wilderness is the story of a most real conflict; and that conflict is waged all through His life. True, the traces of it are few. The battle was fought on both sides in grim silence, as sometimes men wage a mortal struggle without a sound. But if there were no other witness of the sore conflict, the Victor’s shout at the close would be enough. His last words, ‘I have overcome the world,’ sound the note of triumph, and tell how sharp had been the strife. So long and hard had it been that He cannot forget it even in heaven, and from the throne holds forth to all the churches the hope of overcoming, ‘even as I also overcame.’ As on some battlefield whence all traces of the agony and fury have passed away, and harvests wave, and larks sing where blood ran and men groaned their lives out, some grey stone raised by the victors remains, and only the trophy tells of the forgotten fight, so that monumental word, ‘I have overcome’ stands to all ages as the record of the silent, life-long conflict.

It is not for us to know how the sinless Christ was tempted. There are depths beyond our reach. This we can understand, that a sinless manhood is not above the reach of temptation; and this besides, that, to such a nature, the temptations must be suggested from without, not presented from within. The desire for food is simply a physical craving, but another personality than His own uses it to incite the Son to abandon dependence for His physical life on God. The trust in God’s protection is holy and good, and it may be truest wisdom and piety to incur danger in dependence on it, when God’s service calls, but a mocking voice without suggests, under the cloak of it, a needless rushing into peril at no call of conscience, and for no end of mercy, which is not religion but self-will. The desire to have the world for His own lay in Christ’s deepest heart, but the enemy of Christ and man, who thought the world his already, used it as giving occasion to suggest a smoother and shorter road to win all men unto Him than the ‘Via Dolorosa’ of the Cross. So the sinless Christ was tempted at the beginning, and so the sinless Christ was tempted, in various forms of these first temptations, throughout His life. The path which He had to tread was ever before Him, the shadow of the Cross was flung along His road from the first. The pain and sorrow, the shame and spitting, the contradiction of sinners against Himself, the easier path which needed but a wish to become His, the shrinking of flesh-all these made their appeal to Him, and every step of the path which He trod for us was trodden by the power of a fresh consecration of Himself to His task and a fresh victory over temptation.

Let us not seek to analyse. Let us be content to worship, as we look, Let us think of the tempted Christ, that our conceptions of His sinlessness may be increased. His was no untried and cloistered virtue, pure because never brought into contact with seducing evil, but a militant and victorious goodness, that was able to withstand in the evil day. Let us think of the tempted Christ that our thankful thoughts of what He bore for us may be warmer and more adequate, as we stand afar off and look on at the mystery of His battle with our enemies and His. Let us think of the tempted Christ to make the lighter burden of our cross, and our less terrible conflict easier to bear and to wage. So will He ‘continue with *us* in *our* temptations,’ and patience and victory flow to us from Him.

II. See here the lonely Christ.

There is no aspect of our Lord’s life more pathetic than that of His profound loneliness. I suppose the most utterly solitary man that ever lived was Jesus Christ. If we think of the facts of His life, we see how His nearest kindred stood aloof from Him, how ‘there were none to praise, and very few to love’; and how, even in the small company of His friends, there was absolutely none who either understood Him or sympathised with Him. We hear a great deal about the solitude in which men of genius live, and how all great souls are necessarily lonely. That is true, and that solitude of great men is one of the compensations which run through all life, and make the lot of the many little, more enviable than that of the few great. ‘The little hills rejoice together on every side,’ but far above their smiling companionships, the Alpine peak lifts itself into the cold air, and though it be ‘visited all night by troops of stars,’ it is lonely amid the silence and the snow. Talk of the solitude of pure character amid evil, like Lot in Sodom, or of the loneliness of uncomprehended aims and unshared thoughts-who ever experienced that as keenly as Christ did? That perfect purity must needs have been hurt by the sin of men as none else have ever been. That loving heart yearning for the solace of an answering heart must needs have felt a sharper pang of unrequited love than ever pained another. That spirit to which the things that are seen were shadows, and the Father and the Father’s house the ever-present, only realities must have felt itself parted from the men whose portion was in this life, by a gulf broader than ever opened between any other two souls that shared together human life.

The more pure and lofty a nature, the more keen its sensitiveness, the more exquisite its delights, and the sharper its pains. The more loving and unselfish a heart, the more its longing for companionship: and the more its aching in loneliness.

Very significant and pathetic are many points in the Gospel story bearing on this matter. The very choice of the Twelve had for its first purpose, 'that they should be with Him,' as one of the Evangelists tells us. We know how constantly He took the three who were nearest to Him along with Him, and that surely not merely that they might be 'eyewitnesses of His majesty' on the holy mount, or of His agony in Gethsemane, but as having a real gladness and strength even in their companionship amid the mystery of glory as amid the power of darkness. We read of His being alone but twice in all the gospels, and both times for prayer. And surely the dullest ear can hear a note of pain in that prophetic word: 'The hour cometh that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave Me alone'; while every heart must feel the pitiful pathos of the plea, 'Tarry ye here, and watch with Me.' Even in that supreme hour, He longs for human companionship, however uncomprehending, and stretches out His hands in the great darkness, to feel the touch of a hand of flesh and blood-and, alas, for poor feeble love!-He gropes for it in vain. Surely that horror of utter solitude is one of the elements of His passion grave and sorrowful enough to be named by the side of the other bitterness poured into that cup, even as it was pain enough to form a substantive feature of the great prophetic picture: 'I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none.'

So here, a deep pain in His loneliness is implied in these words of our text which put the disciples' participation in the glories of His throne as the issue of their loyal continuance with Him in the conflict of earth. These, and these only, had been by His side, and so much does He care for their companionship, that therefore they shall share His dominion.

That lonely Christ sympathises with all solitary hearts. If ever we feel ourselves misunderstood and thrown back upon ourselves; if ever our hearts' burden of love is rejected; if our outward lives be lonely and earth yields nothing to stay our longing for companionship; if our hearts have been filled with dear ones and are now empty or filled only with tears, let us think of Him and say, 'Yet I am not alone.' He lived alone, alone He died, that no heart might ever be solitary any more. 'Could ye not watch with Me?' was His gentle rebuke in Gethsemane. 'Lo, *I* am with *you* always,' is His mighty promise from the throne. In every step of life we may have Him for a companion, a friend closer than all others, nearer us than our very selves, if we may so say-and in the valley of the shadow of death we need fear no evil, for He will be with us.

III. See here the grateful Christ.

I almost hesitate to use the word, but there seems a distinct ring of thanks in the expression, and in the connection. And we need not wonder at that, if we rightly understand it. There is nothing in it inconsistent with our Lord's character and relations to His disciples. Do you remember another instance in which one seems to hear the same tone, namely, in the marked warmth with which He acknowledges the beautiful service of Mary in breaking the fragrant casket of nard upon His head?

All true love is glad when it is met, glad to give, and glad to receive. Was it not a joy to Jesus to be waited on by the ministering women? Would He not thank them because they served Him for love? I trow, yes. And if any one stumbles at the word 'grateful' as applied to Him, we do not care about the word so long as it is seen that His heart was gladdened by loving friends, and that He recognised in their society a ministry of love.

Notice, too, the loving estimate of what these disciples had done. Their companionship had been imperfect enough at the best. They had given Him but blind affection, dashed with much selfishness. In an hour or two they would all have forsaken Him and fled. He knew all that was lacking in them, and the cowardly abandonment which was so near. But He has not a word to say of all this. He does not count jealously the flaws in our work, or reject it because it is incomplete. So here is the great truth clearly set forth, that where there is a loving heart, there is acceptable service. It is possible that our poor, imperfect deeds shall be an odour of a sweet smell, acceptable, well-pleasing to Him. Which of us that is a father is not glad at his children's gifts, even though they be purchased with his own money, and be of little use? They mean love, so they are precious. And Christ, in like manner, gladly accepts what we bring, even though it be love chilled by selfishness, and faith broken by doubt,-submission crossed by self-will. The living heart of the disciples' acceptable service was their love, far less intelligent and entire than ours may be. They were joined to their Lord, though with but partial sympathy and knowledge, in His temptations. It is possible for us to be joined to Jesus Christ more closely and more truly than they were during His earthly life. Union with Him here is union with Him hereafter. If we abide in Him amid the shows and shadows of earth, He will continue with us in our temptations, and so the fellowships begun on earth will be perfected in heaven, ‘if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.’

101) Luke 22:29-31

Luke

PARTING PROMISES AND WARNINGS

Luk. 22:24 - Luk. 22:37.

It was blameworthy, but only too natural, that, while Christ’s heart was full of His approaching sufferings, the Apostles should be squabbling about their respective dignity. They thought that the half-understood predictions pointed to a brief struggle immediately preceding the establishment of the kingdom, and they wished to have their rank settled in advance. Possibly, too, they had been disputing as to whose office was the menial task of presenting the basin for foot-washing. So little did the first partakers of the Lord’s Supper ‘discern the Lord’s body,’ and so little did His most loving friends share His sorrows.

I. Our Lord was not so absorbed in His anticipations of the near Cross as to be unobservant of the wrangling among the Apostles.

Even then His heart was enough at leisure from itself to observe, to pity, and to help. So He at once turns to deal with the false ideas of greatness betrayed by the dispute. The world’s notion is that the true use and exercise of superiority is to lord it over others. Tyrants are flattered by the title of benefactor, which they do not deserve, but the giving of which shows that, even in the world, some trace of the true conception lingers. It was sadly true, at that time, that power was used for selfish ends, and generally meant oppression. One Egyptian king, who bore the title Benefactor, was popularly known as Malefactor, and many another old-world monarch deserved a like name.

Jesus lays down the law for His followers as being the exact opposite of the world's notion. Dignity and pre-eminence carry obligations to serve. In His kingdom power is to be used to help others, not to glorify oneself. In other sayings of Christ's, service is declared to be the way to *become* great in the kingdom, but here the matter is taken up at another point, and greatness, already attained on whatever grounds, is commanded to be turned to its proper use. The way to become great is to become small, and to serve. The right use of greatness is to become a servant. That has become a familiar commonplace now, but its recognition as the law for civic and other dignity is all but entirely owing to Christianity. What conception of such a use of power has the Sultan of Turkey, or the petty tyrants of heathen lands? The worst of European rulers have to make pretence to be guided by this law; and even the Pope calls himself 'the servant of servants.'

It is a commonplace, but like many another axiom, universal acceptance and almost as universal neglect are its fate. Ingrained selfishness fights against it. Men admire it as a beautiful saying, and how many of us take it as our life's guide? We condemn the rulers of old who wrung wealth out of their people and neglected every duty; but what of our own use of the fraction of power we possess, or our own demeanour to our inferiors in world or church? Have all the occupants of royal thrones or presidential chairs, all peers, members of Parliament, senators, and congressmen, used their position for the public weal? Do we regard ours as a trust to be administered for others? Do we feel the weight of our crown, or are we taken up with its jewels, and proud of ourselves for it? Christ's pathetic words, giving Himself as the example of greatness that serves, are best understood as referring to His wonderful act of washing the disciples' feet. Luke does not record it, and probably did not know it, but how the words are lighted up if we bring them into connection with it!

II. Verses 28 to 30 naturally flow from the preceding.

They lift a corner of the veil, and show the rewards, when the heavenly form of the kingdom has come, of the right use of eminence in its earthly form. How pathetic a glimpse into Christ's heart is given in that warm utterance of gratitude for the imperfect companionship of the Twelve! It reveals His loneliness, His yearning for a loving hand to grasp, His continual conflict with temptations to choose an easier way than that of the Cross. He has known all the pain of being alone, and feeling in vain for a sympathetic heart to lean on. He has had to resist temptation, not only in the desert at the beginning, or in Gethsemane at the end, but throughout His life. He treasures in His heart, and richly repays, even a little love dashed with much selfishness, and faithfulness broken by desertion. We do not often speak of the tempted Christ, or of the lonely Christ, or of the grateful Christ, but in these great words we see Him as being all these.

The rewards promised point onwards to the perfecting of the kingdom in the future life. We notice the profound thought that the kingdom which His servants are to inherit is conferred on them, '*as* My Father hath appointed unto Me,'-that is, that it is a kingdom won by suffering and service, and wielded by gentleness and for others. 'If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him.' The characteristics of the future royalty of Christ's servants are given in highly figurative language. A state of which we have no experience can only be revealed under forms drawn from experience; but these are only far-off approximations, and cannot be pressed.

The sacred Last Supper suggested one metaphor. It was the last on earth, but its sanctity would be renewed in heaven, and sadness and separation and the following grief would not mar the perfect, perpetual, joyful feast. What dim visions of rule and delegated authority may lie in the other promise of judging the twelve tribes of Israel, we must wait till we go to that world to understand. But this is clear, that continuing with Jesus here leads to everlasting companionship hereafter, in which all desires shall be satisfied, and we shall share in His authority and be representatives of His glory.

III. But Jesus abruptly recalls Himself and the Twelve from these remoter prospects of bliss to the nearer future of trial and separation.

The solemn warning to Peter follows with startling suddenness. Why should they be fighting about precedence when they were on the verge of the sorest trial of their constancy? And as for Peter, who had, no doubt, not been the least loud-voiced in the strife, he needed most of all to be sobered. Our narrow limits forbid our doing even partial justice to the scene with him; but we note the significant use of the old name 'Simon,' reminding the

Apostle of his human weakness, and its repetition, giving emphasis to the address.

We note, too, the partial withdrawal of the veil which hides the spirit world from us, in the distinct declaration of the agency of a personal tempter, whose power is limited, though his malice is boundless, and who had to obtain God's permission ere he could tempt. His sieve is made to let the wheat through, and to retain the chaff. It will be hard to empty this saying of its force. Christ taught the existence and operation of Satan; but He taught, too, that He Himself was Satan's victorious antagonist and our prevailing intercessor. He is so still. He does not seek to avert conflict from us, but prays that our faith fail not, and Himself, too, fulfils the prayer by strengthening us.

Faith, then, conquers, and withstands Satan's sifting. If it holds out, we shall not fall, though all the winds howl round us. We are not passive between the two antagonists, but have to take our share in the struggle. Partial failures may be followed by recovery, and even tend to increase our power to strengthen other tempted ones, by the experience gained of our own weakness, which deepens humility and forbearance with others' faults, and by the experience of Christ's strength, which makes us able to direct them to the source of all safety.

Peter's passionate avowal of readiness to bear anything, if only he was with Christ, is the genuine utterance of a warm impulsive heart, which took too little heed of Christ's solemn warning, and fancied that the tide of present feeling would always run as strong as now. Emotion fluctuates. Steadfast devotion is chary of mortgaging the future by promises. He who knows himself is slow to say, 'I will,' for he knows that 'Oh that I may!' is fitter for his weakness. Very likely, if Peter had been offered fetters or the scaffold then and there, he would have accepted them bravely; but it was a different thing in the raw, cold morning, after an agitating night, and the Master away at the far end of the great hall. A flippant maid's tongue was enough to finish him then.

It is sometimes easier to bear a great load for Christ than a small one. Some of us could be martyrs at the stake more easily than confessors among sneering neighbours. Jesus had spared the Apostle in the former warning of his fall, but He spoke plainly at last, since the former had been ineffectual; and He addressed him by his new name of Peter, as if to heighten the sin of denial by recalling the privileges bestowed.

IV. The last part of the passage deals with the new conditions consequent on Christ's departure.

The Twelve had been exempt from the care of providing for themselves while He was with them, but now they are to be launched into the world alone, like fledglings from the nest. Not that His presence is not with them or with us, but that His absence throws the task of providing for wants and guarding against dangers on themselves, as had not been the case during the blessed years of companionship. Hence the injunctions in verse 36 lay down the permanent law for the Church, while verse 37 assigns as its reason the speedy fulfilment of the prophecies of Messiah's sufferings.

Substantially the meaning of the whole is: 'I am on the point of leaving you, and, when I am gone, you must use common-sense means for provision and protection. I provided for you while I was here, without your co-operation. Remember how I did so, and trust Me to provide in future, through your co-operation.'

The life of faith does not exclude ordinary prudence and the use of appropriate means. It is more in accord with Christ's mind to have a purse to keep money in, and a wallet for food-stores, than to go out, as some good people do, saying, 'The Lord will provide.' Yes, He will; but it will be by blessing your common-sense and effort. As to the difficulty felt in the injunction to buy a sword, our Lord would be contradicting His whole teaching if He was here commanding the use of arms for the defence of His servants or the promotion of His kingdom. That He did not mean literal swords is plain from His answer to the Apostles, who produced the formidable armament of two.

'It is enough.' A couple are plenty to fight the Roman Empire with. Yes, two too many, as was soon seen. The expression is plainly an intensely energetic metaphor, taking line with purse and scrip. The plain meaning of the whole is that we are called on to provide necessary means of provision and defence, which He will bless. The only sword permitted to His followers is the sword of the Spirit.

102) Luke 22:32

Luke

PARTING PROMISES AND WARNINGS

A GREAT FALL AND A GREAT RECOVERY

Luk. 22:32.

Our Lord has just been speaking words of large and cordial praise of the steadfastness with which His friends had continued with Him in His temptations, and it is the very contrast between that continuance and the prevision of the cowardly desertion of the Apostle which occasioned the abrupt transition to this solemn appeal to him, which indicates how the forecast pained Christ's heart. He does not let the foresight of Peter's desertion chill His praise of Peter's past faithfulness as one of the Twelve. He does not let the remembrance of Peter's faithfulness modify His rebuke for Peter's intended and future desertion. He speaks to him, with significant and emphatic reiteration of the old name of Simon that suggests weakness, unsanctified and unhelped: 'Simon, Simon, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat.' *There* is a glimpse given, a corner of the curtain being lifted, into a dim region in which faith should not refuse to discern so much light as Christ has given, because superstition has so often fancied that it saw what it only dreamed. But passing from that, the words before us seem to me to suggest a threefold thought of the Intercessor for tempted souls; of the consequent re-illumination of eclipsed faith; and of the larger service for which the discipline of fall and recovery fits him who falls. Let me say a word or two about each of these thoughts.

I. We have the Intercessor for tempted souls.

Notice that majestic 'but' with which my text begins, 'Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat, *but* I have prayed for thee.' He presents Himself, then, as the Antagonist, the confident and victorious

Antagonist, of whatsoever mysterious, malignant might may lie beyond the confines of sense, and He says, ‘My prayer puts the hook in leviathan’s nose, and the malevolent desire to sift, in order that not the chaff but the wheat may disappear, comes all to nothing by the side of My prayer.’

Note the discrimination of the intercession. He ‘hath desired to have you’-that is plural; ‘I have prayed for thee’-that is singular. The man that was in the greatest danger was the man nearest to Christ’s heart, and chiefly the object of Christ’s intercession. So it is always-the tenderest of His words, the sweetest of His consolations, the strongest of His succours, the most pleading and urgent of His petitions, the mightiest gifts of His grace, are given to the weakest, the neediest, the men and women in most sorrow and stress and peril, and they who want Him most always have Him nearest. The thicker the darkness, the brighter His light; the drearier our lives, the richer His presence; the more solitary we are, the larger the gifts of His companionship. Our need is the measure of His prayer. ‘Satan hath desired to have you, but thou, Peter, dost stand in the very focus of the danger, and so on *thee* are focussed, too, the rays of My love and care.’ Be sure, dear friends, that it is always so for us, and that when you want Christ most, Christ is most to you.

Then, I need not touch at any length upon that great subject on which none of us can speak adequately or with full comprehension-viz. our Lord as the Intercessor for us in all our weakness and need. We believe in His continual manhood, we believe that He prayed upon earth, we believe that He prays in heaven. His prayer is no mere utterance of words: it is the presentation of a fact, the bringing ever before the Infinite Divine Mind, as it were, of His great work of sacrifice, as the condition which determines, and the channel through which flows, the gift of sustaining grace from God Himself. And so we may be sure that whensoever there come to any of us trials, difficulties, conflicts, temptations, they are known to our Brother in the skies, and the stormier the gales that threaten us, the closer He wraps His protection round us. We have an Advocate and an Intercessor before the Throne; His prayer is always heard. Oh, brethren! how different our endurance would be, if we vividly believed that Christ was praying for us! How it would take the sting out of sorrow, and blunt the edge of temptation, if we realised that! O for a faith that shall rend the heavens, and rise above the things seen and temporal, and behold the eternal order of the universe, the central Throne, and at the right hand of God, the Intercessor for all who love and trust Him!

II. Notice again the consequent re-illumination of eclipsed faith.

'I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.' Did it fail? If we look only at Peter's denial, we must answer, Yes. If we look at the whole of the future life of the Apostle, we answer, No. Eclipse is not extinction; the momentary untruthfulness to one's deepest convictions is not the annihilation of these convictions. Christ's prayer is never vain, and Christ's prayer was answered just because Peter, though he fell, did not lie in the mud, but staggered to his feet again, and with sore weeping and many an agony of shame, struggled onward, with unconquerable hope, in the path from which, for a moment, he strayed. Better one great outburst like his, the nature of which there is no possibility of mistaking, than the going on, as so many professing Christians do, from year to year, walking in a vain show of godliness, and fancying themselves to be disciples, when all the while they are recreants and apostates. There is more chance of the recovery of a good man that has fallen into some sin, 'gross as a mountain, open, palpable,' than there is of the recovery of those who let their religion trickle out of them in drops, and never know that their veins are empty until the heart ceases to beat at all.

Here, then, we have two large lessons from which we may take strength, taught us by this darkening and re-illumination of an eclipsed faith. One is that the sincerest love, the truest desire to follow Jesus, the firmest faith, may be overborne, and the whole set of a life contradicted for a time. Thank God, there is a vast difference between conduct which is inconsistent with being a Christian and conduct which is incompatible with being a Christian. It is dangerous, perhaps, to apply the difference too liberally in judging ourselves; it is imperative to apply it always in judging our fellows. But if it be true that Peter meant, down to the very bottom of his heart, all that he said when he said, 'I will lay down my life for Thee,' while yet within a few hours afterwards the sad prophecy of our Lord was fulfilled-'Thou shalt deny Me thrice!'-let us take the lesson, not, indeed, to abate our horror of the sin, but on the one hand to cut the comb of our own self-confidence, and on the other hand to judge with all charity and tenderness the faults of our brethren. ‘Be not high-minded, but fear,’ and when we look into the black gulf into which Peter fell bodily, let us cry, ‘Hold Thou me up and I shall be safe.’

The other lesson is that the deepest fall may be recovered. Our Lord in the words of our text does not definitely prophesy what He subsequently declares in plain terms, the fall of Peter, but He implies it when He says, ‘when thou art converted’-or, as the Revised Version reads it much more accurately, ‘when once thou hast turned again strengthen thy brethren.’ Then, the Apostle’s face had been turned the wrong way for a time, and he needed to turn right-about-face in order to renew the old direction of his life. He came back for two reasons-one because Christ prayed for him, and the other because he ‘turned himself.’ For the only way back is through the valley of weeping and the dark lane of penitence; and whosoever has denied with Peter, or at least grovelled with Peter, or perhaps grovelled much more than Peter, ‘denying the Lord that bought him’ by living as if He was not his Lord, will never come back to the place that Peter again won for himself, but by the road by which Peter went. ‘The Lord turned and looked upon him,’ and Christ’s face, with love and sorrow and reproach in it, taught him his sin, and bowed his heart, ‘and he went out and wept bitterly.’

Peter and Judas both ‘went out’; the one ‘went out and hanged himself,’ because his conviction of his sin was unaccompanied with a faith in his Master’s love, and his repentance was only remorse; and the other ‘went out and wept bitterly,’ and so came back with a clean heart. And on the Resurrection morning he was ready for the message: ‘Go, tell His disciples, *and Peter*, He goeth before you into Galilee.’ And the Lord appeared to him, in that conversation, the existence of which was known, though the particulars were unknown, to the rest; and when ‘He appeared unto Cephas,’ spoke his full forgiveness. There is the road back for all wanderers.

III. The last thought is, the larger service for which such an experience will fit him who falls.

‘Strengthen thy brethren when once thou hast turned again.’ I need not remind you how nobly the Apostle fulfilled this commandment. Satan desired to have him, that he might sift him as wheat; but Satan’s sifting was in order that he might get rid of the wheat and harvest the chaff. His malice worked indirectly the effect opposite to his purpose, and achieved the same result as Christ’s winnowing seeks to accomplish-namely, it got rid of the chaff and kept the wheat. Peter’s vanity was sifted out of him, his self-confidence was sifted out of him, his rash presumption was sifted out of him, his impulsive readiness to blurt out the first thought that came into his head was sifted out of him, and so his unreliableness and changeableness were largely sifted out of him, and he became what Christ said he had in him the makings of being-’Cephas, a rock,’ or, as the Apostle Paul, who was never unwilling to praise the others, said, a man ‘who looked like a pillar.’ He ‘strengthened his brethren,’ and to many generations the story of the Apostle who denied the Lord he loved has ministered comfort. To how many tempted souls, and souls that have yielded to temptation, and souls that, having yielded, are beginning to grope their way back again out of its vulgar delights and surfeiting sweetnesses, and find that there is a desert to be traversed before they can again reach the place where they stood before, has that story ministered hope, as it will minister to the very end! The bone that is broken is stronger, they tell us, at the point of junction, when it heals and grows again, than it ever was before. And it may well be that a faith that has made experience of falling and restoration has learned a depth of self-distrust, a firmness of confidence in Christ, a warmth of grateful love which it would never otherwise have experienced.

The Apostle about whom we have been speaking seems to have carried in his mind and memory an abiding impression from that bitter experience, and in his letter when he was an old man, and all that past was far away, he writes many words which sound like echoes and reminiscences of it. In the last chapter of his epistle, in which he speaks of himself as a witness of the sufferings of Christ, there are numbers of verses which seem to point to what had happened in the Upper Room. ‘Ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder.’ Jesus Christ had then said, ‘He that is the greater among you, let him be as the younger.’ Peter says, ‘Be clothed with humility’; he remembers Christ wrapping a towel around Him, girding Himself, and taking the basin. He says, ‘God resisteth the proud,’ and he remembers how proud he had been, with his boast: ‘Though all should . . . yet will not I,’ and how low he fell because he was ‘fool’ enough to ‘trust in his own heart.’ ‘Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist, steadfast in the faith.’ ‘The God of all grace stablish, strengthen, settle you.’ He thus strengthened his brethren when he reminded them of the temptation to which he himself had so shamefully succumbed, and when he referred them for all their strength to the source of it all, even God in Christ.

103) Luke 22:33-37

Luke

PARTING PROMISES AND WARNINGS

Luk. 22:24 - Luk. 22:37.

It was blameworthy, but only too natural, that, while Christ’s heart was full of His approaching sufferings, the Apostles should be squabbling about their respective dignity. They thought that the half-understood predictions pointed to a brief struggle immediately preceding the establishment of the kingdom, and they wished to have their rank settled in advance. Possibly, too, they had been disputing as to whose office was the menial task of presenting the basin for foot-washing. So little did the first partakers of the Lord’s Supper ‘discern the Lord’s body,’ and so little did His most loving friends share His sorrows.

I. Our Lord was not so absorbed in His anticipations of the near Cross as to be unobservant of the wrangling among the Apostles.

Even then His heart was enough at leisure from itself to observe, to pity, and to help. So He at once turns to deal with the false ideas of greatness betrayed by the dispute. The world’s notion is that the true use and exercise of superiority is to lord it over others. Tyrants are flattered by the title of benefactor, which they do not deserve, but the giving of which shows that, even in the world, some trace of the true conception lingers. It was sadly true, at that time, that power was used for selfish ends, and generally meant oppression. One Egyptian king, who bore the title Benefactor, was popularly known as Malefactor, and many another old-world monarch deserved a like name.

Jesus lays down the law for His followers as being the exact opposite of the world's notion. Dignity and pre-eminence carry obligations to serve. In His kingdom power is to be used to help others, not to glorify oneself. In other sayings of Christ's, service is declared to be the way to *become* great in the kingdom, but here the matter is taken up at another point, and greatness, already attained on whatever grounds, is commanded to be turned to its proper use. The way to become great is to become small, and to serve. The right use of greatness is to become a servant. That has become a familiar commonplace now, but its recognition as the law for civic and other dignity is all but entirely owing to Christianity. What conception of such a use of power has the Sultan of Turkey, or the petty tyrants of heathen lands? The worst of European rulers have to make pretence to be guided by this law; and even the Pope calls himself 'the servant of servants.'

It is a commonplace, but like many another axiom, universal acceptance and almost as universal neglect are its fate. Ingrained selfishness fights against it. Men admire it as a beautiful saying, and how many of us take it as our life's guide? We condemn the rulers of old who wrung wealth out of their people and neglected every duty; but what of our own use of the fraction of power we possess, or our own demeanour to our inferiors in world or church? Have all the occupants of royal thrones or presidential chairs, all peers, members of Parliament, senators, and congressmen, used their position for the public weal? Do we regard ours as a trust to be administered for others? Do we feel the weight of our crown, or are we taken up with its jewels, and proud of ourselves for it? Christ's pathetic words, giving Himself as the example of greatness that serves, are best understood as referring to His wonderful act of washing the disciples' feet. Luke does not record it, and probably did not know it, but how the words are lighted up if we bring them into connection with it!

II. Verses 28 to 30 naturally flow from the preceding.

They lift a corner of the veil, and show the rewards, when the heavenly form of the kingdom has come, of the right use of eminence in its earthly form. How pathetic a glimpse into Christ's heart is given in that warm utterance of gratitude for the imperfect companionship of the Twelve! It reveals His loneliness, His yearning for a loving hand to grasp, His continual conflict with temptations to choose an easier way than that of the Cross. He has known all the pain of being alone, and feeling in vain for a sympathetic heart to lean on. He has had to resist temptation, not only in the desert at the beginning, or in Gethsemane at the end, but throughout His life. He treasures in His heart, and richly repays, even a little love dashed with much selfishness, and faithfulness broken by desertion. We do not often speak of the tempted Christ, or of the lonely Christ, or of the grateful Christ, but in these great words we see Him as being all these.

The rewards promised point onwards to the perfecting of the kingdom in the future life. We notice the profound thought that the kingdom which His servants are to inherit is conferred on them, '*as* My Father hath appointed unto Me,'-that is, that it is a kingdom won by suffering and service, and wielded by gentleness and for others. 'If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him.' The characteristics of the future royalty of Christ's servants are given in highly figurative language. A state of which we have no experience can only be revealed under forms drawn from experience; but these are only far-off approximations, and cannot be pressed.

The sacred Last Supper suggested one metaphor. It was the last on earth, but its sanctity would be renewed in heaven, and sadness and separation and the following grief would not mar the perfect, perpetual, joyful feast. What dim visions of rule and delegated authority may lie in the other promise of judging the twelve tribes of Israel, we must wait till we go to that world to understand. But this is clear, that continuing with Jesus here leads to everlasting companionship hereafter, in which all desires shall be satisfied, and we shall share in His authority and be representatives of His glory.

III. But Jesus abruptly recalls Himself and the Twelve from these remoter prospects of bliss to the nearer future of trial and separation.

The solemn warning to Peter follows with startling suddenness. Why should they be fighting about precedence when they were on the verge of the sorest trial of their constancy? And as for Peter, who had, no doubt, not been the least loud-voiced in the strife, he needed most of all to be sobered. Our narrow limits forbid our doing even partial justice to the scene with him; but we note the significant use of the old name 'Simon,' reminding the Apostle of his human weakness, and its repetition, giving emphasis to the address.

We note, too, the partial withdrawal of the veil which hides the spirit world from us, in the distinct declaration of the agency of a personal tempter, whose power is limited, though his malice is boundless, and who had to obtain God's permission ere he could tempt. His sieve is made to let the wheat through, and to retain the chaff. It will be hard to empty this saying of its force. Christ taught the existence and operation of Satan; but He taught, too, that He Himself was Satan's victorious antagonist and our prevailing intercessor. He is so still. He does not seek to avert conflict from us, but prays that our faith fail not, and Himself, too, fulfils the prayer by strengthening us.

Faith, then, conquers, and withstands Satan's sifting. If it holds out, we shall not fall, though all the winds howl round us. We are not passive between the two antagonists, but have to take our share in the struggle. Partial failures may be followed by recovery, and even tend to increase our power to strengthen other tempted ones, by the experience gained of our own weakness, which deepens humility and forbearance with others' faults, and by the experience of Christ's strength, which makes us able to direct them to the source of all safety.

Peter's passionate avowal of readiness to bear anything, if only he was with Christ, is the genuine utterance of a warm impulsive heart, which took too little heed of Christ's solemn warning, and fancied that the tide of present feeling would always run as strong as now. Emotion fluctuates. Steadfast devotion is chary of mortgaging the future by promises. He who knows himself is slow to say, 'I will,' for he knows that 'Oh that I may!' is fitter for his weakness. Very likely, if Peter had been offered fetters or the scaffold then and there, he would have accepted them bravely; but it was a different thing in the raw, cold morning, after an agitating night, and the Master away at the far end of the great hall. A flippant maid's tongue was enough to finish him then.

It is sometimes easier to bear a great load for Christ than a small one. Some of us could be martyrs at the stake more easily than confessors among sneering neighbours. Jesus had spared the Apostle in the former warning of his fall, but He spoke plainly at last, since the former had been ineffectual; and He addressed him by his new name of Peter, as if to heighten the sin of denial by recalling the privileges bestowed.

IV. The last part of the passage deals with the new conditions consequent on Christ's departure.

The Twelve had been exempt from the care of providing for themselves while He was with them, but now they are to be launched into the world alone, like fledglings from the nest. Not that His presence is not with them or with us, but that His absence throws the task of providing for wants and guarding against dangers on themselves, as had not been the case during the blessed years of companionship. Hence the injunctions in verse 36 lay down the permanent law for the Church, while verse 37 assigns as its reason the speedy fulfilment of the prophecies of Messiah's sufferings.

Substantially the meaning of the whole is: 'I am on the point of leaving you, and, when I am gone, you must use common-sense means for provision and protection. I provided for you while I was here, without your co-operation. Remember how I did so, and trust Me to provide in future, through your co-operation.'

The life of faith does not exclude ordinary prudence and the use of appropriate means. It is more in accord with Christ's mind to have a purse to keep money in, and a wallet for food-stores, than to go out, as some good people do, saying, 'The Lord will provide.' Yes, He will; but it will be by blessing your common-sense and effort. As to the difficulty felt in the injunction to buy a sword, our Lord would be contradicting His whole teaching if He was here commanding the use of arms for the defence of His servants or the promotion of His kingdom. That He did not mean literal swords is plain from His answer to the Apostles, who produced the formidable armament of two.

‘It is enough.’ A couple are plenty to fight the Roman Empire with. Yes, two too many, as was soon seen. The expression is plainly an intensely energetic metaphor, taking line with purse and scrip. The plain meaning of the whole is that we are called on to provide necessary means of provision and defence, which He will bless. The only sword permitted to His followers is the sword of the Spirit.

104) Luke 22:39-52

Luke

GETHSEMANE

Luk. 22:39 - Luk. 22:53.

‘Put off thy shoes from off thy feet.’ Cold analysis is out of place here, where the deepest depth of a Saviour’s sorrows is partly disclosed, and we see Him bowing His head to the waves and billows that went over Him, for our sakes. Luke’s account is much condensed, but contains some points peculiar to itself. It falls into two parts-the solemn scene of the agony, and the circumstances of the arrest.

I. We look with reverent awe and thankfulness at that soul-subduing picture of the agonising and submissive Christ which Luke briefly draws.

Think of the contrast between the joyous revelry of the festival-keeping city and the sadness of the little company which crossed the Kedron and passed beneath the shadow of the olive-trees into the moonlit garden. Jesus needed companions there; but He needed solitude still more. So He is ‘parted from them’; but Luke alone tells us how short the distance was-’as it were a stone’s throw,’ and near enough for the disciples to see and hear something before they slept.

That clinging to and separation from His humble friends gives a wonderful glimpse into Christ's desolation then. And how beautiful is His care for them, even at that supreme hour, which leads to the injunction twice spoken, at the beginning and end of His own prayers, that they should pray, not for Him, but for themselves. He never asks for men's prayers, but He does for their love. He thinks of His sufferings as temptation for the disciples, and for the moment forgets His own burden, in pointing them the way to bear theirs. Did self-oblivious love ever shine more gloriously in the darkness of sorrow?

Luke omits the threefold withdrawal and return, but notes three things-the prayer, the angel appearance, and the physical effects of the agony. The essentials are all preserved in his account. The prayer is truly 'the Lord's prayer,' and the perfect pattern for ours. Mark the grasp of God's fatherhood, which is at once appeal and submission. So should all prayer begin, with the thought, at all events, whether with the word 'Father' or no. Mark the desire that 'this cup' should pass. The expression shows how vividly the impending sufferings were pictured before Christ's eye. The keenest pains of anticipation, which make so large a part of so many sorrows, were felt by Him. He shrank from His sufferings. Did He therefore falter in His desire and resolve to endure the Cross? A thousand times, no! His will never wavered, but maintained itself supreme over the natural recoil of His human nature from pain and death. If He had not felt the Cross to be a dread, it had been no sacrifice. If He had allowed the dread to penetrate to His will, He had been no Saviour. But now He goes before us in the path which all have, in their degree, to travel, and accepts pain that He may do His work.

That acceptance of the divine will is no mere 'If it must be so, let it be so,' much as that would have been. But He receives in His prayer the true answer-for His will completely coincides with the Father's, and 'mine' is 'thine.' Such conformity of our wills with God's is the highest blessing of prayer and the true deliverance. The cup accepted is sweet; and though flesh may shrink, the inner self consents, and in consenting to the pain, conquers it.

Luke alone tells of the ministering angel; and, according to some authorities, the forty-third and forty-fourth verses are spurious. But, accepting them as genuine, what does the angelic appearance teach us? It suggests pathetically the utter physical prostration of Jesus. Sensuous religion has dwelt on that offensively, but let us not rush to the opposite extreme, and ignore it. It teaches us that the manhood of Jesus needed the communication of divine help as truly as we do. The difficulty of harmonising that truth with His divine nature was probably the reason for the omission of this verse in some manuscripts. It teaches the true answer to His prayer, as so often to ours; namely, the strength to bear the load, not the removal of it. It is remarkable that the renewal of the solemn 'agony' and the intenser earnestness of prayer follow the strengthening by the angel.

Increased strength increased the conflict of feeling, and the renewed and intensified conflict increased the earnestness of the prayer. The calmness won was again disturbed, and a new recourse to the source of it was needed. We stand reverently afar off, and ask, not too curiously, what it is that falls so heavily to the ground, and shines red and wet in the moonlight. But the question irresistibly rises, Why all this agony of apprehension? If Jesus Christ was but facing death as it presents itself to all men, His shrinking is far beneath the temper in which many a man has fronted the scaffold and the fire. We can scarcely save His character for admiration, unless we see in the agony of Gethsemane something much more than the shrinking from a violent death, and understand how there the Lord made to meet on Him the iniquity of us all. If the burden that crushed Him thus was but the common load laid on all men's shoulders, He shows unmanly terror. If it were the black mass of the world's sins, we can understand the agony, and rejoice to think that our sins were there.

II. The arrest.

Three points are made prominent-the betrayer's token, the disciples' resistance, the reproof of the foes, and in each the centre of interest is our Lord's words. The sudden bursting in of the multitude is graphically represented. The tumult broke the stillness of the garden, but it brought deeper peace to Christ's heart; for while the anticipation agitated, the reality was met with calmness. Blessed they who can unmoved front evil, the foresight of which shook their souls! Only they who pray as Jesus did beneath the olives, can go out from their shadow, as He did, to meet the foe.

The first of the three incidents of the arrest brings into strong prominence Christ's meek patience, dignity, calmness, and effort, even at that supreme moment, to rouse dormant conscience, and save the traitor from himself. Judas probably had no intention by his kiss of anything but showing the mob their prisoner; but he must have been far gone in insensibility before he could fix on such a sign. It was the token of friendship and discipleship, and no doubt was customary among the disciples, though we never hear of any lips touching Jesus but the penitent woman's, which were laid on His feet, and the traitor's. The worst hypocrisy is that which is unconscious of its own baseness.

Every word of Christ's answer to the shameful kiss is a sharp spear, struck with a calm and not resentful hand right into the hardened conscience. There is wistful tenderness and a remembrance of former confidences in calling Him by name. The order of words in the original emphasises the kiss, as if Jesus had said, 'Is that the sign you have chosen? Could nothing else serve you? Are you so dead to all feeling that you can kiss and betray?' The Son of man flashes on Judas, for the last time, the majesty and sacredness against which he was lifting his hand. 'Betrayest thou?' which comes last in the Greek, seeks to startle by putting into plain words the guilt, and so to rend the veil of sophistications in which the traitor was hiding his deed from himself. Thus to the end Christ seeks to keep him from ruin, and with meek patience resents not indignity, but with majestic calmness sets before the miserable man the hideousness of his act. The patient Christ is the same now as then, and meets all our treason with pleading, which would fain teach us how black it is, not because He is angry, but because He would win us to turn from it. Alas that so often His remonstrances fall on hearts as wedded to their sin as was Judas's!

The rash resistance of the disciple is recorded chiefly for the sake of Christ's words and acts. The anonymous swordsman was Peter, and the anonymous victim was Malchus, as John tells us. No doubt he had brought one of the two swords from the upper room, and, in a sudden burst of anger and rashness, struck at the man nearest him, not considering the fatal consequences for them all that might follow. Peter could manage nets better than swords, and missed the head, in his flurry and in the darkness, only managing to shear off a poor slave’s ear. When the Church takes sword in hand, it usually shows that it does not know how to wield it, and as often as not has struck the wrong man. Christ tells Peter and us, in His word here, what His servants’ true weapons are, and rebukes all armed resistance of evil. ‘Suffer ye thus far’ is a command to oppose violence only by meek endurance, which wins in the long run, as surely as the patient sunshine melts the thick ice, which is ice still, when pounded with a hammer.

If ‘thus far’ as to His own seizure and crucifying was to be ‘suffered,’ where can the breaking-point of patience and non-resistance be fixed? Surely every other instance of violence and wrong lies far on this side of that one. The prisoner heals the wound. Wonderful testimony that not inability to deliver Himself, but willingness to be taken, gave Him into the hands of His captors! Blessed proof that He lavishes benefits on His foes, and that His delight is to heal all wounds and stanch every bleeding heart!

The last incident here is Christ’s piercing rebuke, addressed, not to the poor, ignorant tools, but to the prime movers of the conspiracy, who had come to gloat over its success. He asserts His own innocence, and hints at the preposterous inadequacy of ‘swords and staves’ to take Him. He is no ‘robber,’ and their weapons are powerless, unless He wills. He recalls His uninterrupted teaching in the Temple, as if to convict them of cowardice, and perchance to bring to remembrance His words there. And then, with that same sublime and strange majesty of calm submission which marks all His last hours, He unveils to these furious persecutors the true character of their deed. The sufferings of Jesus were the meeting-point of three worlds-earth, hell, and heaven. ‘This is your hour.’ But it was also Satan’s hour, and it was Christ’s ‘hour,’ and God’s. Man’s passions, inflamed from beneath, were used to work out God’s purpose; and the Cross is at once the product of human unbelief, of devilish hate, and of divine mercy. His sufferings were ‘the power of darkness.’

Mark in that expression Christ’s consciousness that He is the light, and enmity to Him darkness. Mark, too, His meek submission, as bowing His head to let the black flood flow over Him. Note that Christ brands enmity to

Him as the high-water mark of sin, the crucial instance of man’s darkness, the worst thing ever done. Mark the assurance that animated Him, that the eclipse was but for an ‘hour.’ The victory of the darkness was brief, and it led to the eternal triumph of the Light. By dying He is the death of death. This Jonah inflicts deadly wounds on the monster in whose maw He lay for three days. The power of darkness was shivered to atoms in the moment of its proudest triumph, like a wave which is beaten into spray as it rises in a towering crest and flings itself against the rock.

105) Luke 22:53

Luke

GETHSEMANE

THE CROSS THE VICTORY AND DEFEAT OF DARKNESS

Luk. 22:53.

The darkness was the right time for so dark a deed. The surface meaning of these pathetic and far-reaching words of our Lord’s in the garden to His captors is to point the correspondence between the season and the act. As He has just said, ‘He had been daily with them in the Temple,’ but in the blaze of the noontide they laid no hands upon Him. They found a congenial hour in the midnight. But the words go a great deal deeper than allusive symbolism of that sort. Looking at them as giving us a little glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of Christ, we can scarcely help tracing in them the very clear consciousness that He was the Light, and that all antagonism to Him was the work of darkness in an eminent and especial sense. But whilst this unobscured consciousness, which no mere man could venture so unqualifiedly to assert, is manifest in the words, there is also in them, to my ear, a tone of majestic resignation, as if He said, ‘There! do your worst!’ and bowed His head, as a man might do, standing breast high in the sea, that the wave might roll over Him. And there is in them, too, a shrinking as of horror from the surging upon Him of the black tide to which He bows His head.

But whilst thus pathetic and significant in their indication of the feelings of our Lord, they have a wider and a deeper meaning still, I think, if we ponder them; inasmuch as they open before us some aspects of His sufferings and eminently of His Cross, which it becomes us all to lay to heart. And it is to these that I desire to turn your attention for a few moments.

I. I see in them, then, first, this great thought, that the Cross of Jesus Christ is the centre and the meeting-point for the energies of three worlds.

‘This is your hour.’ Now our Lord habitually speaks of His sufferings, and of other points in His life, as being ‘My hour,’ by which, of course, He means the time appointed to Him by God for the doing of an appointed work. And that idea is distinctly to be attached to the use of the word here. But, on the other hand, there is emphasis laid on ‘*your*,’ and that hour is thereby designated as a time in which they could do as they would. It was their opportunity, or, as we say in our colloquialism, now was their time when, unhindered, they might carry into effect their purposes.

So there is given us the thought of His passion and death as being the most eminent and awful instance of men being left unchecked to work out whatsoever was in their evil hearts, and to carry into effect their blackest purposes.

But, on the other hand, there goes with the phrase the idea to which I have already referred; and ‘this is their hour,’ not merely in the sense that it was their opportunity, but also that it was the hour appointed by God and allotted them for their doing the thing which their unhindered evil passions impelled them to do. And so we are brought face to face with the most eminent instance of that great puzzle that runs through all life-how God works out His lofty designs by means of responsible agents, ‘making the wrath of men to praise Him,’ and girding Himself with the remainder.

Nor is that all. For the next words of my text bring in a third set of powers as in operation. ‘This is your hour’ lets us see man overarched by the abyss of the heavens, ‘and the power of darkness’ lets us see the deep and awful forces that are working beneath and surging upwards into humanity, and opens the subterranean volcanoes. I do not say that there is any reference here to a personal Antagonist of good, in whom these dark tendencies are focussed, but there is a distinct reference to ‘the darkness’ as a whole, a kind of organic whole, which operates upon men. Even when they think themselves to be freest, and are carrying out their own wicked designs, they are but the slaves of impulses that come straight from the dark kingdom. If I may turn from the immediate purpose of my sermon for a moment, I pray you to consider that solemn aspect of our life, a film between two firmaments, like the earth with the waters above and the waters beneath. On the one side it is open and pervious to heavenly influences, and moulded by the overarching and sovereign will, and on the other side it is all honeycombed beneath with, and open to, the uprisings of evil, straight from the bottomless pit.

But if we turn to the more immediate purpose of the words, think for a moment of the solemn and wonderful aspect which the Cross of Christ assumes, thus contemplated. Three worlds focus their energies upon it-heaven, earth, hell. Looked at from one side it is all radiant and glorious, as the transcendent exhibition of the divine love and sweetness and sacrifice and righteousness and tenderness. But the sunshine that plays upon it shifts and passes, and looked at from another point of view it is swathed in blackness, as the most awful display of man’s unbridled antagonism to the good. And looked at from yet another, it assumes a still more lurid aspect as the last stroke which the kingdom of darkness attempted to strike in defence of its ancient and solitary reign. So earth, heaven, hell, the God that works through man’s evil passions, and yet does not acquit them though He utilises them to a lofty issue; man that is evil and thinks himself free; and the kingdom of darkness that uses him as its slave-all hare part in that cross, which is thus the result of such diametrically opposite forces.

The divine government which reached its most beneficent ends through the unbridled antagonism of sinful men, and made even the dark counsels of the kingdom of darkness tributary to the diffusion of the light, works ever in the same fashion. Antagonism and obedience both work out its purposes. Let us learn to bow before that all-encompassing Providence in whose great scheme both are included. Let us not confuse ourselves by the attempt to make plain to our reason the harmony of the two certain facts-man’s freedom and God’s sovereignty. Enough for us to remember that the sin is none the less though the issue may coincide with the divine purpose, for sin lies in the motive, which is ours, not in the unintended result, which is God’s. Enough for us to realise the tremendous solemnity of the lives we live, with all sweet heavenly influences falling on them from above, and all sulphurous suggestions rising into them from the fires beneath, and to see to it that we keep our hearts open to the one, and fast closed against the other.

‘This is your hour’-a time in which you feel yourselves free, and yet are instruments in the hands of God, and also are tools in the claws of evil.

II. Still further, my text brings before us the thought that the Cross is the high-water mark of man’s sin.

‘This is the power of darkness’-the specimen instance of what it would and can do. Strange to think that, amidst all the black catalogue of evil deeds that have been done in this world from the beginning, there is one deed which is the worst, and that it is this one! Not that the doers were ‘sinners above all men’: for that is a question of knowledge and of motives, but that the deed in itself was the worst thing that ever man did. Of course I take for granted the belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; that He came from heaven, that He lived a life of perfect purity and beauty, and that He died on the Cross as the Gospel tells us. And taking these things for granted, is it not true that His rejection, His condemnation, and His death do throw the most awful and solemn light upon what poor humanity left to itself, and yielding to the suggestions and the impulses of the kingdom of darkness, does when it comes in contact with the Light?

It is the great crucial instance of the incapacity of the average man to behold spiritual beauty and lofty elevation of character. People lament over the blindness of embruted souls to natural beauty, to art, to high thinking, and so on; but all these, tragic as they are, are nothing as compared with this stunning fact, that perfect righteousness and perfect tenderness and ideal beauty of character walked about the world for thirty and three years, and that all the wise and religious men who came across Him thought that the best thing they could do was to crucify Him. So it has ever been from the days of Cain and Abel. As the Apostle John asks, ‘Wherefore slew be him?’ For a very good reason, ‘Because his own works were evil, and his brother’s righteous.’ That is reason enough for killing any prophets and righteous men. It was so in the past, and in modified forms it is so today. The plain fact is that humanity has in it a depth of incapacity to behold, and of angry indisposition to admire, lofty and noble lives. The power of the darkness to blind men is set forth once in the superlative degree that we may all beware of it in the lower instances, by that fact, the most tragical in the history of the world, ‘the Light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness apprehendeth it not.’

And not only does that Cross mark the high-water mark of man’s blindness, and of man’s hatred to the lofty and the true and the good, but it marks, too, the awful power that seems, by the very make of the world, to be lodged on the side of evil and against good. The dice seem to be so terribly loaded. Virtue and beauty and truth and tenderness, and all that is noble and lofty and heart-appealing, have no chance against a mere piece of savage brutality. And that fact, which has been repeated over and over again from the beginning, and so largely makes the misery of mankind, reaches its very climax, and most solemn and awful illustration, in the fact that a handful of ruffians and a detachment of Roman soldiers were able to put an end to the life of God manifest in the flesh. If we have nothing more to say about Jesus than that He lived upon earth and did works of goodness and of beauty for a few short years, and then died, and there an end, it seems to me that the story of the Death of Christ is the most despairing page in the whole history of humanity, and that it accentuates and makes still more dreadful the dreadful old puzzle of how it comes that, in a world with a God in it, evil seems to be so riotously preponderant and good seems to be ever trodden under foot. Either the Death of Christ, if He died and did not rise again, is the strongest argument in the history of mankind for rank atheism, or else it is true that He rose, the King of humanity, glorified and exalted by the vain attempts of His foes.

And now notice that this high-water mark, as I have called it, or climax of human sin, was reached through very common and ordinary transgressions. Judas betrayed Christ because he had always felt uncomfortable with his earthly tendencies beside that pure spirit, and also because he wanted to jingle the thirty pieces of silver in his pocket. The priests did Him to death because He claimed the Messiahship and to be the Son of God, and their formalism rose against Him, and their blindness to all spiritual elevation made them hate Him. Pilate sent Him to the Cross because he was a coward, and thought that the life of a Jewish peasant was a small thing to give in order to secure his position. And the mob howled at His heels, and wagged their heads as they passed by, oblivious of His miracles and His benevolence, simply because of the vulgar hatred of anything that is lofty, and because they were so absorbed in material things that they had no eyes for that radiant beauty. In the whole list of these motives there is not a sin that you and I do not commit, nor is there any one of them which may not be reproduced, and as a matter of fact, is reproduced, by hundreds and thousands in this professedly Christian land.

Oh, brethren! the actual murderers are not the worst criminals, though their deed be the worst, considered in itself. Those Roman soldiers who nailed His hands to the Cross, and went back to their barracks that night, quite comfortable and unconscious that they had been doing anything beyond their routine military duty, were innocent and white-handed compared with the men and women among us, who, with the additional evidence of the Cross, and the empty grave, and the throne in the heavens, and the Christian Church, still stand aloof and say, ‘We see no beauty in Him that we should desire Him.’ Take care lest your attitude to Jesus Christ bring the level of your criminality close up to that high-water mark, or carry it even beyond it, for it is possible to ‘crucify the Son of God afresh,’ and they who do so have the greater guilt.

III. Now, lastly, my text suggests that the temporary triumph of the darkness is the eternal victory of the light.

‘*This* is your hour’-not the next. ‘This is your *hour*.’ Sixty minutes tick, and it will be gone. When Christ was beaten He was Conqueror, and as He looked upon His Cross He said, ‘I have overcome the world.’ The eclipse which hung over the little hill and the land of Palestine, during the long hours of that slowly passing day, ended before He died. And His death was but the passing for a brief moment of the shadow of death across the bright luminary which, when the shadow has passed, shines out and ‘with new spangled beams, flames in the forehead of the morning sky.’ The darkness triumphed, and in its triumph it was overcome.

He, by dying, is the death of death. This Jonah inflicted a mortal wound on the loathly monster in whose maw He lay for three days. He, by bearing the penalty of sin, takes away the penalty of it for us all. He, in the quenching of the light of His life in the night of death, reveals God more than even He did in His life, and is never more truly the Illuminator of mankind than when He lies in the darkness of the grave and brings immortality to light. He, by His death, delivers men from the kingdom of darkness, and translates them into His own kingdom; giving them new powers for holiness, new hopes, inspiriting them to rebellion against the tyrants that have dominion over them; and thus conquering when He falls. The power of the darkness is broken like a crested wave, toppling over at its highest and dissolving in ineffectual spray.

So we have encouragement for all momentary checks and defeats, if there be such in our experience, when we are doing Christ's work. The history of the Church repeats in all ages, generation after generation, the same law to which the Master submitted: 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die it abideth alone; but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit.' We conquer when we are overcome; Christ conquered so, and His servants after Him.

And now apply all these principles which I have so imperfectly stated to your own personal lives. Men and the kingdom of darkness over-reached and outwitted themselves when they slew Jesus Christ. And so all antagonism to Him, whether it be theoretical or whether it be practical, and alienation of heart only, is suicidal folly. When it most succeeds it is nearest the breaking point of utter failure, like a man sawing off the branch on which he sits. Every man that sets himself against God in Christ, either to argue Him down and talk Him out of existence, or to 'break His bands asunder and cast away His cords,' has begun a Sisyphean task which will never come to any good. All sin is essentially irrational and opposed to the whole motion of the universe, and must necessarily be annihilated and come to nothing. The coarse title of one of our old English plays carries a great truth in it; 'The Devil is an Ass,' and for the man that obeys the kingdom of darkness the right epitaph is 'Thou fool! Oh, brothers! do not fling yourselves into that hopeless struggle. Put yourselves on the right side in this age-long conflict, of which the issue was determined before evil was, and was accomplished when Christ died. For be sure of this, that as certainly as ‘The darkness is past, and the true Light now shineth,’ so certainly all they that fight against the light-and all men fight against it who shut their eyes to it-are engaged in a conflict of which only one issue is possible, and that is defeat, bitter, complete, absolute. Rather let us all, though we be evil, and though there be a bad self in us that knows itself to be evil and hates the Light-let us all go to it. It may pain the eye, but it is the only cure for the ophthalmia. Let us go to it, spread ourselves out before it, and say, ‘Search me, O Christ, and try me, and see if there be any wicked way in me. Lead me, a blind man, into the light.’ And His answer will come: ‘I am the Light of the world; he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the Light of life.’

106) Luke 22:54-60

Luke

IN THE HIGH PRIEST’S PALACE

Luk. 22:54 - Luk. 22:71.

The present passage deals with three incidents, each of which may be regarded either as an element in our Lord’s sufferings or as a revelation of man’s sin. He is denied, mocked, and formally rejected and condemned. A trusted friend proves faithless, the underlings of the rulers brutally ridicule His prophetic claims, and their masters vote Him a blasphemer for assenting His divinity and Messiahship.

I. We have the failure of loyalty and love in Peter’s denials.

I may observe that Luke puts all Peter’s denials before the hearing by the council, from which it is clear that the latter was later than the hearing recorded by Matthew and John. The first denial probably took place in the great hall of the high priest’s official residence, at the upper end of which the prisoner was being examined, while the hangers-on huddled round the fire, idly waiting the event.

The morning air bit sharply, and Peter, exhausted, sleepy, sad, and shivering, was glad to creep near the blaze. Its glinting on his face betrayed him to a woman’s sharp eye, and her gossiping tongue could not help blurting out her discovery. Curiosity, not malice, moved her; and there is no reason to suppose that any harm would have come to Peter, if he had said, as he should have done, ‘Yes, I am His disciple.’ The day for persecuting the servants was not yet come, but for the present it was Jesus only who was aimed at.

No doubt, cowardice had a share in the denials, but there was more than that in them. Peter was worn out with fatigue, excitement, and sorrow. His susceptible nature would be strongly affected by the trying scenes of the last day, and all the springs of life would be low. He was always easily influenced by surroundings, and just as, at a later date, he was ‘carried away’ by the presence at Antioch of the Judaisers, and turned his back on the liberal principles which he had professed, so now he could not resist the current of opinion, and dreaded being unlike even the pack of menials among whom he sat. He was ashamed of his Master and hid his colours, not so much for fear of bodily harm as of ridicule. Was there not a deeper depth still in his denials, even the beginnings of doubt whether, after all, Jesus was what he had thought Him? Christ prayed that Peter’s ‘faith’ should not ‘fail’ or be totally eclipsed, and that may indicate that the assault was made on his ‘faith’ and that it wavered, though it recovered steadfastness.

If he had been as sure of Christ’s work and nature as when he made his great confession, he could not have denied Him. But the sight of Jesus bound, unresisting, and evidently at the mercy of the rulers, might well make a firmer faith stagger. We have not to steel ourselves to bear bodily harm if we confess Christ; but many of us have to run counter to a strong current flowing around us, and to be alone in the midst of unsympathising companions ready to laugh and gibe, and some of us are tempted to waver in our convictions of Christ’s divinity and redeeming power, because He still seems to stand at the bar of the wise men and leaders of opinion, and to be treated by them as a pretender. It is a wretched thing to be persecuted out of one’s Christianity in the old-fashioned fire and sword style; but it is worse to be laughed out of it or to lose it, because we breathe an atmosphere of unbelief. Let the doctors at the top of the hall and the lackeys round the fire who take their opinions from them say what they like, but let them not make us ashamed of Jesus.

Peter slipped away to the gateway, and there, apparently, was again attacked, first by the porteress and then by others, which occasioned the second denial, while the third took place in the same place, about an hour afterwards. One sin makes many. The devil’s hounds hunt in packs. Consistency requires the denier to stick to his lie. Once the tiniest wing tip is in the spider’s web, before long the whole body will be wrapped round by its filthy, sticky threads.

If Peter had been less confident, he would have been more safe. If he had said less about going to prison and death, he would have had more reserve fidelity for the time of trial. What business had he thrusting himself into the palace? Over-reliance on self leads us to put ourselves in the way of temptations which it were wiser to avoid. Had he forgotten Christ’s warnings? Apparently so. Christ predicts the fall that it may not happen, and if we listen to Him, we shall not fall.

The moment of recovery seems to have been while our Lord was passing from the earlier to the later examination before the rulers. In the very floodtide of Peter’s oaths, the shrill cock-crow is heard, and at the sound the half-finished denial sticks in his throat. At the same moment he sees Jesus led past him, and that look, so full of love, reproof, and pardon, brought him back to loyalty, and saved him from despair. The assurance of Christ’s knowledge of our sins against Him melts the heart, when the assurance of His forgiveness and tender love comes with it. Then tears, which are wholly humble but not wholly grief, flow. They do not wash away the sin, but they come from the assurance that Christ’s love, like a flood, has swept it away. They save from remorse, which has no healing in it.

II. We have the rude taunts of the servants.

The mockery here comes from Jews, and is directed against Christ’s prophetic character, while the later jeers of the Roman soldiers make a jest of His kingship. Each set lays hold of what seems to it most ludicrous in His pretensions, and these servants ape their masters on the judgment seat, in laughing to scorn this Galilean peasant who claimed to be the Teacher of them all. Rude natures have to take rude ways of expression, and the vulgar mockery meant precisely the same as more polite and covert scorn means from more polished people; namely, rooted disbelief in Him. These mockers were contented to take their opinions on trust from priests and rabbis. How often, since then, have Christ's servants been objects of popular odium at the suggestion of the same classes, and how often have the ignorant people been misled by their trust in their teachers to hate and persecute their true Master!

Jesus is silent under all the mockery, but then, as now, He knows who strikes Him. His eyes are open behind the bandage, and see the lifted hands and mocking lips. He will speak one day, and His speech will be detection and condemnation. Then He was silent, as patiently enduring shame and spitting for our sakes. Now He is silent, as long-suffering and wooing us to repentance; but He keeps count and record of men's revilings, and the day comes when He whose eyes are as a flame of fire will say to every foe, 'I know thy works.'

III. We have the formal rejection and condemnation by the council.

The hearing recorded in verses 66 to 71 took place 'as soon as it was day,' and was apparently a more formal official ratification of the proceedings of the earlier examination described by Matthew and John. The ruler's question was put simply in order to obtain material for the condemnation already resolved on. Our Lord's answer falls into two parts, in the first of which He in effect declines to recognise the *bona fides* of His judges and the competency of the tribunal, and in the second goes beyond their question, and claims participation in divine glory and power. 'If I tell you, ye will not believe'; therefore He will not tell them.

Jesus will not unfold His claims to those who only seek to hear them in order to reject, not to examine, them. Silence is His answer to ingrained prejudice masquerading as honest inquiry. It is ever so. There is small chance of truth at the goal if there be foregone conclusions or biased questions at the starting-point. 'If I ask you, ye will not answer.' They had taken refuge in judicious but self-condemning silence when He had asked them the origin of John's mission and the meaning of the One Hundred and Tenth Psalm, and thereby showed that they were not seeking light. Jesus will gladly speak with any who will be frank with Him, and let Him search their hearts; but He will not unfold His mission to such as refuse to answer His questions. But while thus He declines to submit Himself to that tribunal, and in effect accuses them of obstinate blindness and a fixed conclusion to reject the claims which they were pretending to examine, He will not leave them without once more asserting an even higher dignity than that of Messiah. As a prisoner at their bar, He has nothing to say to them; but as their King and future Judge, He has something. They desire to find materials for sentence of death, and though He will not give these in the character of a criminal before His judges, He also desires that the sentence should pass, and He will declare His divine prerogatives and fall possession of divine power in the hearing of the highest court of the nation.

It was fitting that the representatives of Israel, however prejudiced, should hear at that supreme moment the full assertion of full deity. It was fitting that Israel should condemn itself, by treating that claim as blasphemy. It was fitting that Jesus should bring about His death by His twofold claim-that made to the Sanhedrim, of being the Son of God, and that before Pilate, of being the King of the Jews.

The whole scene teaches us the voluntary character of Christ's Death, which is the direct result of this tremendous assertion. It carries our thoughts forward to the time when the criminal of that morning shall be the Judge, and the judges and we shall stand at His bar. It raises the solemn question, Did Jesus claim truly when He claimed divine power? If truly, do we worship Him? If falsely, what was He? It mirrors the principles on which He deals with men universally, answering 'him that cometh, according to the multitude of his idols,' and meeting hypocritical pretences of seeking the truth about Him with silence, but ever ready to open His heart and the witness to His claims to the honest and docile spirits who are ready to accept His words, and glad to open their inmost secrets to Him.

107) Luke 22:61

Luke

IN THE HIGH PRIEST'S PALACE

CHRIST'S LOOK

Luk. 22:61.

All four Evangelists tell the story of Peter's threefold denial and swift repentance, but we owe the knowledge of this look of Christ's to Luke only. The other Evangelists connect the sudden change in the denier with his hearing the cock crow only, but according to Luke there were two causes co-operating to bring about that sudden repentance, for, he says, 'Immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew. And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter.' And we cannot doubt that it was the Lord's look enforcing the fulfilment of His prediction of the cock-crow that broke down the denier.

Now, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to weave a consecutive whole out of the four versions of the story of Peter's triple denial. But this at least is clear from them all, that Jesus was away at the upper, probably the raised, end of the great hall, and that if any of the three instances of denial took place within that building, it was at such a distance that neither could the words be heard, nor could a look from one end of it to the other have been caught. I think that if we try to localise, and picture the whole scene ourselves, we are obliged to suppose that that look, which smote Peter into swift collapse of penitence, came as the Lord Jesus was being led bound down the hall out through the porch, past the fire, and into the gloomy archway, on His road to further suffering. As He was thus brought for a moment close to him, 'the Lord turned and looked upon Peter,' and then He passed from his sight for ever, as he would fear.

I wish, then, to deal-although it must be very imperfectly and inadequately-with that look that changed this man. And I desire to consider two things about it: what it said, and what it did.

I. What it said.-It spoke of Christ's knowledge, of Christ's pain, of Christ's love.

Of Christ's knowledge-I have already suggested that we cannot suppose that the Prisoner at one end of the hall, intensely occupied with the questionings and argumentation of the priests, and with the false witnesses, could have heard the denial, given in tones subdued by the place, at the other end. Still less could He have heard the denials in louder tones, and accompanied with execrations, which seemed to have been repeated in the porch without. But as He passed the Apostle that look said: ‘I heard them all-denials and oaths and passion; I heard them all.’ No wonder that after the Resurrection, Peter, with that remembrance in his mind, fell at the Master’s feet and said, ‘Lord! Thou knowest all things. Thou didst know what Thou didst not hear, my muttered recreancy and treason, and my blurted out oaths of denial. Thou knowest all things.’ No wonder that when he stood up amongst the Apostles after the Resurrection and the Ascension, and was the mouthpiece of their prayers, remembering this scene as well as other incidents, he began his prayer with ‘Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men.’ But let us remember that this-call it, if you like, supernatural-knowledge which Jesus Christ had of the denial, is only one of a great body of facts in His life, if we accept these Gospels, which show that, as one of the Evangelists says, at almost the beginning of his history, ‘He needed not that any man should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.’ It is precisely on the same line, as His first words to Peter, whom He greeted as he came to Him with ‘Thou art Simon; thou shalt be Cephas.’ It is entirely on the same line as the words with which He greeted another of this little group, ‘When thou wast under the fig-tree I saw thee.’ It is on the same line as the words with which He penetrated to the unspoken thoughts of His churlish entertainer when He said, ‘Simon! I have somewhat to say unto thee.’ It is on the lines on which we have to think of that Lord now as knowing us all. He looks still from the judgment-seat, where He does not stand as a criminal, but sits as the supreme and omniscient Arbiter of our fates, and Judge of our actions. And He beholds us, each of us, moment by moment, as we go about our work, and often, by our cowardice, by our faithlessness, by our inconsistencies, ‘deny the Lord that bought’ us. It is an awful thought, and therefore do men put it away from them: ‘Thou God seest me.’ But it is stripped of all its awfulness, while it retains all its purifying and quickening power, when we think, as our old hymn has it:

‘Though now ascended up on high,
He bends on earth a Brother’s eye.’

And we have not only to feel that the eye that looks upon us is cognisant of our denials, but that it is an eye that pities our infirmities, and knowing us altogether, loves us better than we know. Oh! if we believed in Christ's look, and that it was the look of infinite love, life would be less solitary, less sad, and we should feel that wherever His glance fell there His help was sure, and there were illumination and blessedness. The look spoke of Christ's knowledge.

Again, it spoke of Christ's pain. Peter had not thought that he was hurting his Master by his denials; he only thought of saving himself. And, perhaps, if it had come into his loving and impulsive nature, which yielded to the temptation the more readily because of the same impulsiveness which also led it to yield swiftly to good influences, if he had thought that he was adding another pang to the pains of his Lord whom he had loved through all his denial, even his cowardice would have plucked up courage to 'confess, and deny not but confess,' that he belonged to the Christ. But he did not remember all that. And now there came into his mind-from that look, the bitter thought, 'I have wrung His heart with yet another pang, and at this supreme moment, when there is so much to rack and pain; I have joined the tormentors.'

And so, do we not pain Jesus Christ? Mysterious as it is, yet it seems as if, since it is true that we please Him when we are obeying Him, it must be somehow true that we pain Him when we deny Him, and some kind of shadow of grief may pass even over that glorified nature when we sin against Him, and forget Him, and repay His love with indifference, and reject His counsel. We know that in His earthly life there was no bitterer pang inflicted upon Him than the one which the Psalmist prophesied, 'He that ate bread with Me hath lifted up his heel against Me.' And we know that in the measure in which human nature is purified and perfected, in that measure does it become more susceptible and sensitive to the pain of faithless friends. Chilled love, rejected endeavours to help-which are, perhaps, the deepest and the most spiritual of sorrows which men can inflict upon one another, Jesus Christ experienced in full measure, heaped up and running over. And we, even we today, may be 'grieving the Holy Spirit of God, whereby we are sealed unto the day of redemption.' Christ's knowledge of the Apostle's denials brought pain to His heart.

Again, the look spoke of Christ’s love. There was in it saddened disapprobation, but there was not in it any spark of anger; nor what, perhaps, would be worse, any ice of withdrawal or indifference. But there even at that supreme moment, lied against by false witnesses, insulted and spit upon by rude soldiers, rejected by the priests as an impostor and a blasphemer, and on His road to the Cross, when, if ever, He might have been absorbed in Himself, was His heart at leisure from itself, and in divine and calm self-oblivion could think of helping the poor denier that stood trembling there beneath His glance. That is of a piece with the majestic, yet not repelling calm, which marks the Lord in all His life, and which reaches its very climax in the Passion and on the Cross. Just as, whilst nailed there, He had leisure to think of the penitent thief, and of the weeping mother, and of the disciple whose loss of his Lord would be compensated by the gaining of her to take care of, so as He was being borne to Pilate’s judgment, He turned with a love that forgot itself, and poured itself into the denier’s heart. Is not that a divine and eternal revelation for us? We speak of the love of a brother who, sinned against seventy times seven, yet forgives. We bow in reverence before the love of a mother who cannot forget, but must have compassion on the son of her womb. We wonder at the love of a father who goes out to seek the prodigal. But all these are less than that love which beamed lambent from the eye of Christ, as it fell on the denier, and which therein, in that one transitory glance, revealed for the faith and thankfulness of all ages an eternal fact. That love is steadfast as the heavens, firm as the foundations of the earth. ‘Yea! the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but My loving kindness shall not depart, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed.’ It cannot be frozen, into indifference. It cannot be stirred into heat of anger. It cannot be provoked to withdrawal. Repelled, it returns; sinned against, it forgives; denied, it meekly beams on in self-revelation; it hopeth all things, it beareth all things. And He who, as He passed out to Pilate’s bar, cast His look of love on the denier, is looking upon each of us, if we would believe it, with the same look, pitiful and patient, reproachful, and yet forgiving, which unveils all His love, and would fain draw us in answering love, to cast ourselves at His feet, and tell Him all our sin.

And now, let us turn to the second point that I suggested.

II. What the look did.

First, it tore away the veil that hid Peter's sin from himself. He had not thought that he was doing anything wrong when he denied. He had not thought about anything but saving his own skin. If he had reflected for a moment no doubt he would have found excuses, as we all can do. But when Christ stood there, what had become of the excuses? As by a flash he saw the ugliness of the deed that he himself had done. And there came, no doubt, into his mind in aggravation of the denial, all that had passed from that very first day when he had come to Christ's presence, all the confidences that had been given to him, how his wife's mother had been healed, how he himself had been cared for and educated, how he had been honoured and distinguished, how he had boasted and vowed and hectored the day before. And so he 'went out and wept bitterly.'

Now *our* sin captures us by lying to us, by blinding our consciences. You cannot hear the shouts of the men on the bank warning you of your danger when you are in the midst of the rapids, and so our sin deafens us to the still small voice of conscience. But nothing so surely reveals to us the true moral character of any of our actions, be they right or wrong, as bringing them under Christ's eye, and thinking to ourselves. 'Durst I do that if He stood there beside me and saw it?' Peter could deny Him when He was at the far end of the hall. He could not have denied Him if he had had Him by his side. And if we will take our actions, especially any of them about which we are in doubt, into His presence, then it will be wonderful how conscience will be enlightened and quickened, how the fiend will start up in his own shape, and how poor and small the motives which tempted so strongly to do wrong will come to look, when we think of adducing them to Jesus. What did a maid-servant's flippant tongue matter to Peter then? And how wretchedly inadequate the reason for his denial looked when Christ's eye fell upon him. The most recent surgical method of treating skin diseases is to bring an electric light, ten times as strong as the brightest street lights, to bear upon the diseased patch, and fifty minutes of that search-light clears away the disease. Bring the beam from Christ's eye to bear on your lives, and you will see a great deal of leprosy, and scurf, and lupus, and all that you see will be cleared away. The look tore down the veil.

What more did it do? It melted the denier’s heart into sorrow. I can quite understand a conscience being so enlightened as to be convinced of the evil of a certain course, and yet there being none of that melting into sorrow, which, as I believe, is absolutely necessary for any permanent victory over sins. No man will ever conquer his evil as long as he only shudderingly recoils from it. He has to be broken down into the penitential mood before he will secure the victory over his sin. You remember the profound words in our Lord’s pregnant parable of the seeds, how one class which transitorily was Christian, had for its characteristic that immediately with joy they received the word. Yes; a Christianity that puts repentance into a parenthesis, and talks about faith only, will never underlie a permanent and thorough moral reformation. There is nothing that brings ‘godly sorrow,’ so surely as a glimpse of Christ’s love; and nothing that reveals the love so certainly as the ‘look.’ You may hammer at a man’s heart with law, principle, and moral duty, and all the rest of it, and you may get him to feel that he is a very poor creature, but unless the sunshine of Christ’s love shines down upon him, there will be no melting, and if there is no melting there will be no permanent bettering.

And there was another thing that the look did. It tore away the veil from the sin; it made rivers of water flow from the melted heart in sorrow of true repentance; and it kept the sorrow from turning into despair. Judas ‘went out and hanged himself.’ Peter ‘went out and wept bitterly.’ What made the one the victim of remorse, and the other the glad child of repentance? How was it that the one was stiffened into despair that had no tears, and the other was saved because he could weep? Because the one saw his sin in the lurid light of an awakened conscience, and the other saw his sin in the loving look of a pardoning Lord. And that is how you and I ought to see our sins. Be sure, dear friend, that the same long-suffering, patient love is looking down upon each of us, and that if we will, like Peter, let the look melt us into penitent self-distrust and heart-sorrow for our clinging sins, then Jesus will do for us, as He did for that penitent denier on the Resurrection morning. He will take us apart by ourselves and speak healing words of forgiveness and reconciliation, so that we, like him, will dare in spite of our faithlessness, to fall at His feet and say, ‘Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I, erst faithless and treacherous, love Thee; and all the more because Thou hast forgiven the denial and restored the denier.’

108) Luke 22:62-71

Luke

IN THE HIGH PRIEST'S PALACE

Luk. 22:54 - Luk. 22:71.

The present passage deals with three incidents, each of which may be regarded either as an element in our Lord's sufferings or as a revelation of man's sin. He is denied, mocked, and formally rejected and condemned. A trusted friend proves faithless, the underlings of the rulers brutally ridicule His prophetic claims, and their masters vote Him a blasphemer for assenting His divinity and Messiahship.

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The moment of recovery seems to have been while our Lord was passing from the earlier to the later examination before the rulers. In the very floodtide of Peter’s oaths, the shrill cock-crow is heard, and at the sound the half-finished denial sticks in his throat. At the same moment he sees Jesus led past him, and that look, so full of love, reproof, and pardon, brought him back to loyalty, and saved him from despair. The assurance of Christ’s knowledge of our sins against Him melts the heart, when the assurance of His forgiveness and tender love comes with it. Then tears, which are wholly humble but not wholly grief, flow. They do not wash away the sin, but they come from the assurance that Christ’s love, like a flood, has swept it away. They save from remorse, which has no healing in it.

II. We have the rude taunts of the servants.

The mockery here comes from Jews, and is directed against Christ’s prophetic character, while the later jeers of the Roman soldiers make a jest of His kingship. Each set lays hold of what seems to it most ludicrous in His pretensions, and these servants ape their masters on the judgment seat, in laughing to scorn this Galilean peasant who claimed to be the Teacher of them all. Rude natures have to take rude ways of expression, and the vulgar mockery meant precisely the same as more polite and covert scorn means from more polished people; namely, rooted disbelief in Him. These mockers were contented to take their opinions on trust from priests and rabbis. How often, since then, have Christ’s servants been objects of popular odium at the suggestion of the same classes, and how often have the ignorant people been misled by their trust in their teachers to hate and persecute their true Master!

Jesus is silent under all the mockery, but then, as now, He knows who strikes Him. His eyes are open behind the bandage, and see the lifted hands and mocking lips. He will speak one day, and His speech will be detection and condemnation. Then He was silent, as patiently enduring shame and spitting for our sakes. Now He is silent, as long-suffering and wooing us to repentance; but He keeps count and record of men’s revilings, and the day comes when He whose eyes are as a flame of fire will say to every foe, ‘I know thy works.’

III. We have the formal rejection and condemnation by the council.

The hearing recorded in verses 66 to 71 took place ‘as soon as it was day,’ and was apparently a more formal official ratification of the proceedings of the earlier examination described by Matthew and John. The ruler’s question was put simply in order to obtain material for the condemnation already resolved on. Our Lord’s answer falls into two parts, in the first of which He in effect declines to recognise the *bona fides* of His judges and the competency of the tribunal, and in the second goes beyond their question, and claims participation in divine glory and power. ‘If I tell you, ye will not believe’; therefore He will not tell them.

Jesus will not unfold His claims to those who only seek to hear them in order to reject, not to examine, them. Silence is His answer to ingrained prejudice masquerading as honest inquiry. It is ever so. There is small chance of truth at the goal if there be foregone conclusions or biased questions at the starting-point. ‘If I ask you, ye will not answer.’ They had taken refuge in judicious but self-condemning silence when He had asked them the origin of John’s mission and the meaning of the One Hundred and Tenth Psalm, and thereby showed that they were not seeking light. Jesus will gladly speak with any who will be frank with Him, and let Him search their hearts; but He will not unfold His mission to such as refuse to answer His questions. But while thus He declines to submit Himself to that tribunal, and in effect accuses them of obstinate blindness and a fixed conclusion to reject the claims which they were pretending to examine, He will not leave them without once more asserting an even higher dignity than that of Messiah. As a prisoner at their bar, He has nothing to say to them; but as their King and future Judge, He has something. They desire to find materials for sentence of death, and though He will not give these in the character of a criminal before His judges, He also desires that the sentence should pass, and He will declare His divine prerogatives and fall possession of divine power in the hearing of the highest court of the nation.

It was fitting that the representatives of Israel, however prejudiced, should hear at that supreme moment the full assertion of full deity. It was fitting that Israel should condemn itself, by treating that claim as blasphemy. It was fitting that Jesus should bring about His death by His twofold claim-that made to the Sanhedrim, of being the Son of God, and that before Pilate, of being the King of the Jews.

The whole scene teaches us the voluntary character of Christ’s Death, which is the direct result of this tremendous assertion. It carries our thoughts forward to the time when the criminal of that morning shall be the Judge, and the judges and we shall stand at His bar. It raises the solemn question, Did Jesus claim truly when He claimed divine power? If truly, do we worship Him? If falsely, what was He? It mirrors the principles on which He deals with men universally, answering ‘him that cometh, according to the multitude of his idols,’ and meeting hypocritical pretences of seeking the truth about Him with silence, but ever ready to open His heart and the witness to His claims to the honest and docile spirits who are ready to accept His words, and glad to open their inmost secrets to Him.

109) Luke 23:1-8

Luke

‘THE RULERS TAKE COUNSEL TOGETHER’

Luk. 23:1 - Luk. 23:12.

Luke’s canvas is all but filled by the persecutors, and gives only glimpses of the silent Sufferer. But the silence of Jesus is eloquent, and the prominence of the accusers and judges heightens the impression of His passive endurance. We have in this passage the Jewish rulers with their murderous hate; Pilate contemptuously indifferent, but perplexed and wishing to shirk responsibility; and Herod with his frivolous curiosity. They present three types of unworthy relations to Jesus Christ.

I. We see first the haters of Jesus.

So fierce is their hatred that they swallow the bitter pill of going to Pilate for the execution of their sentence. John tells us that they began by trying to get Pilate to decree the crucifixion without knowing Jesus' crime; but that was too flagrant injustice, and too blind confidence in them, for Pilate to grant. So they have to manufacture a capital charge on the spot, and they are equal to the occasion. By the help of two lies, and one truth so twisted as to be a lie, they get up an indictment, which they think will be grave enough to compel the procurator to do as they wish.

Their accusation, if it had been ever so true, would have been ludicrous on their lips; and we may be sure that, if it had been true, they would have been Jesus' partisans, not His denouncers.' The Gracchi complaining of sedition' are nothing to the Sanhedrim accusing a Jew of rebellion against Rome. Every man in that crowd was a rebel at heart, and would have liked nothing better than to see the standard of revolt lifted in a strong hand. Pilate was not so simple as to be taken in by such an accusation from such accusers, and it fails. They return to the charge, and the 'more urgent' character of the second attempt is found in its statement of the widespread extent of Christ's teaching, but chiefly in the cunning introduction of Galilee, notoriously a disaffected and troublesome district.

What a hideous and tragic picture we have here of the ferocity of the hatred, which turned the very fountains of justice and guardians of a nation into lying plotters against innocence, and sent these Jewish rulers cringing before Pilate, pretending loyalty and acknowledging his authority! They were ready for any falsehood and any humiliation, if only they could get Jesus crucified. And what had excited their hatred? Chiefly His teachings, which brushed aside the rubbish both of ceremonial observance and of Rabbinical casuistry, and placed religion in love to God and consequent love to man; then His attitude of opposition to them as an order; and finally His claim, which they never deigned to examine, to be the Son of God. That, they said, was blasphemy, as it was, unless it were true,-an alternative which they did not look at. So blinded may men be by prejudice, and so mastered by causeless hatred of Him who loves them all!

These Jewish rulers were men like ourselves. Instead of shuddering at their crime, as if it were something far outside of anything possible for us, we do better if we learn from it the terrible depths of hostility to Jesus, the tragic blindness to His character and love, and the degradation of submission to usurpers, which must accompany denial of His right to rule over us. ‘They hated Me without a cause,’ said Christ; but He pointed to that hatred as sure to be continued towards Him and His servants as long as ‘the world’ continues the world.

II. We have Pilate, indifferent and perplexed.

Luke’s very brief account should be supplemented by John’s, which shows us how important the conversation, so much abbreviated by Luke, was. Of course Pilate knew the priests and rulers too well to believe for a moment that the reason they gave for bringing Jesus to him was the real one, and his taking Jesus apart to speak with Him shows a wish to get at the bottom of the case. So far he was doing his duty, but then come the faults. These may easily be exaggerated, and we should remember that Pilate was the most ignorant, and therefore the least guilty, of all the persons mentioned in this passage. He had probably never heard the name of Jesus till that day, and saw nothing but an ordinary Jewish peasant, whom his countrymen, like the incomprehensible and troublesome people they were, wished, for some fantastic reason, to get killed.

But that dialogue with his Prisoner should have sunk deeper into his mind and heart. He was in long and close enough contact with Jesus to have seen glimpses of the light, which, if followed, would have led to clear recognition. His first sin was indifference, not unmingled with scorn, and it blinded him. Christ’s lofty and wonderful explanation of the nature of His kingdom and His mission to bear witness to the truth fell on entirely preoccupied ears, which were quick enough to catch the faintest whispers of treason, but dull towards ‘truth.’ When Jesus tried to reach his conscience by telling him that every lover of truth would listen to His voice, he only answered by the question, to which he waited not for an answer, ‘What is truth?’

That was not the question of a theoretical sceptic, but simply of a man who prided himself on being ‘practical,’ and left all talk about such abstractions to dreamers. The limitations of the Roman intellect and its characteristic over-estimate of deeds and contempt for pure thought, as well as the spirit of the governor, who would let men think what they chose, as long as they did not rebel, spoke in the question. Pilate is an instance of a man blinded to all lofty truth and to the beauty and solemn significance of Christ's words, by his absorption in outward life. He thinks of Jesus as a harmless fanatic. Little did he know that the truth, which he thought moonshine, would shatter the Empire, which he thought the one solid reality. So called practical men commit the same mistake in every generation. 'All flesh is as grass;. . . the word of the Lord endureth for ever.'

Further, Pilate sinned in prostituting his office by not setting free the prisoner when he was convinced of His innocence. 'I find no fault in this man,' should have been followed by immediate release. Every moment afterwards, in which He was kept captive, was the condemnation of the unjust judge. He was clearly anxious to keep his troublesome subjects in good humour, and thought that the judicial murder of one Jew was a small price to pay for popularity. Still he would have been glad to have escaped from what his official training had taught him to recoil from, and what some faint impression, made by his patient prisoner, gave him a strange dread of. So he grasps at the mention of Galilee, and tries to gain two good ends at once by handing Jesus over to Herod.

The relations between Antipas and him were necessarily delicate, like those between the English officials and the rajahs of native states in India; and there had been some friction, perhaps about 'the Galileans, whose blood' he 'had mingled with their sacrifices.' If there had been difficulties in connection with such a question of jurisdiction, the despatch of Jesus to Herod would be a graceful way of making the *amende honorable*, and would also shift an unpleasant decision on to Herod's shoulders. Pilate would not be displeased to get rid of embarrassment, and to let Herod be the tool of the priests' hate.

How awful the thought is of the contrast between Pilate's conceptions of what he was doing and the reality! How blind to Christ's beauty it is possible to be, when engrossed with selfish aims and outward things! How near a soul may be to the light, and yet turn away from it and plunge into darkness! How patient that silent prisoner, who lets Himself be bandied about from one tyrant to another, not because they had power, but because

He loved the world, and would bear the sins of every one of us! How terrible the change when these unjust judges and He will change places, and Pilate and Herod stand at His judgment-seat!

III. We have the wretched, frivolous Herod.

This is the murderer of John Baptist-'that fox,' a debauchee, a coward, and as cruel as sensuous. He had all the vices of his worthless race, and none of the energy of its founder. He is by far the most contemptible of the figures in this passage. Note his notion of, and his feeling to, Jesus. He thought of our Lord as of a magician or juggler, who might do some wonders to amuse the vacuous *ennui* of his sated nature. Time was when he had felt some twinge of conscience in listening to the Baptist, and had almost been lifted to nobleness by that strong arm. Time was, too, when he had trembled at hearing of Jesus, and taken Him for his victim risen from a bloody grave. But all that is past now. The sure way to stifle conscience is to neglect it. Do that long and resolutely enough, and it will cease to utter unheeded warnings. There will be a silence which may look like peace, but is really death. Herod's gladness was more awful and really sad than Herod's fear. Better to tremble at God's word than to treat it as an occasion for mirth. He who hates a prophet because he knows him to be a prophet and himself to be a sinner, is not so hopeless as he who only expects to get sport out of the messenger of God.

Then note the Lord's silence. Herod plies Jesus with a battery of questions, and gets no answer. If there had been a grain of earnestness in them all, Christ would have spoken. He never is silent to a true seeker after truth. But it is fitting that frivolous curiosity should be unanswered, and there is small likelihood of truth being found at the goal when there is nothing more noble than that temper at the starting-point. Christ's silence is the penalty of previous neglect of Christ's and His forerunner's words. Jesus guides His conduct by His own precept, 'Give not that which is holy unto the dogs'; and He knows, as we never can, who come into that terrible list of men to whom it would only add condemnation to speak of even His love. The eager hatred of the priests followed Jesus to Herod's palace, but no judicial action is recorded as taking place there. Their fierce earnestness of hate seems out of place in the frivolous atmosphere. The mockery, in which Herod is not too dignified to join his soldiers, is more in keeping. But how ghastly it sounds to us, knowing whom they ignorantly mocked! Cruelty, inane laughter, hideous pleasure in an innocent man's pain, disregard of law and justice-all these they were guilty of; and Herod, at any rate, knew enough of Jesus to give a yet darker colouring to his share in the coarse jest.

But how the loud laugh would have fallen silent if some flash had told who Jesus was! Is there any of our mirth, perhaps at some of His servants, or at some phase of His gospel, which would in like manner stick in our throats if His judgment throne blazed above us? Ridicule is a dangerous weapon. It does more harm to those who use it than to those against whom it is directed. Herod thought it an exquisite jest to dress up his prisoner as a king; but Herod has found out, by this time, whether he or the Nazarene was the sham monarch, and who is the real one. Christ was as silent under mockery as to His questioner. He bears all, and He takes account of all. He bears it because He is the world's Sacrifice and Saviour. He takes account of it, and will one day recompense it, because He is the world's King, and will be its Judge. Where shall we stand then-among the silenced mockers, or among the happy trusters in His Passion and subjects of His dominion?

110) Luke 23:9

Luke

'THE RULERS TAKE COUNSEL TOGETHER'

A SOUL'S TRAGEDY

Luk. 23:9.

Four Herods play their parts in the New Testament story. The first of them is the grim old tiger who slew the infants at Bethlehem, and soon after died. This Herod is the second-a cub of the litter, with his father's ferocity and lust, but without his force. The third is the Herod of the earlier part of the Acts of the Apostles, a grandson of the old man, who dipped his hands in the blood of one Apostle, and would fain have slain another. And the last is Herod Agrippa, a son of the third, who is only remembered because he once came across Paul’s path, and thought it such a good jest that anything should be supposed capable of making a Christian out of *him*.

There is a singular family likeness in the whole of them, and a very ugly likeness it is. This one was sensual, cruel, cunning, infirm of purpose, capricious like a child or a savage. Roman policy amused him with letting him play at being a ruler, but kept him well in hand. And I suppose he was made a worse man by the difficulties of his position as a subject-prince.

Now I wish to put together the various incidents in this man’s life recorded in the Gospels, and try to gather some lessons from them for you.

I. First, I take him as an example of half-and-half convictions, and of the inner discord that comes from these.

I do not need to remind you of the shameful story of his repudiation of his own wife, and of his disgusting alliance with the wife of his half-brother, who was herself his niece. She was the stronger spirit, a Biblical Lady Macbeth, the Jezebel to this Ahab; and, to complete the parallel, Elijah was not far away. John the Baptist’s outspoken remonstrances of course made an implacable enemy of Herodias, who did all she could to compass his death, but was unable to manage that, though she secured his imprisonment. The reason for her inability is given by the Evangelist Mark, in words which are very inadequately rendered by our Authorised Version, but may be found more correctly translated in the Revised Version. It is there said that King ‘Herod feared John’-the gaoler afraid of his prisoner!-’knowing that he was a just man and a holy’-goodness is awful. The worst men know it, and it extorts respect. ‘And kept him safe’-from Herodias, that is. ‘And when he heard him he was perplexed’-drawn this way and that way by these two magnets, alternately veering to lust and to purity, hesitating between the kisses of the beautiful temptress at his side and the words of the prophet. And yet, with strange inconsistency, in all his vacillations ‘he heard him gladly’; for his better part approved the nobler voice. And so he staggered on, having religion enough to spoil some of his sinful delights, but not enough to shake them off.

That is a picture for which in its essence many a man and woman among us might have sat. For I suppose that there is nothing more common than these half-and-half convictions which, like inefficient bullets, get part way through the armoured shell of a ship, and there stick harmless. Many of us have the clearest convictions in our understandings, which have never penetrated to that innermost chamber of all, where the will sits sovereign. It is so about little things, it is so about great ones. Nothing is more common than that a man shall know perfectly well that some possibly trivial habit stands in the way of something that it is his interest or his duty to pursue; but the knowledge lies inoperative in the outermost part of him. It is so in regard to graver things. The majority of the slaves of any vice whatsoever know perfectly well that they ought to give it up, and yet nothing comes of the conviction.

'He was much perplexed.' What a picture that is of the state of unrest and conflict into which such half-and-half impressions of duty cast a man. Such a one is like a vessel with its head now East, now West, because there is some weak or ignorant steersman at the helm. I know nothing more sure to produce inward unrest and disturbance and desolation than that a man's knowledge of duty should be clear, and his obedience to that knowledge partial. If we have John down in the dungeon, if conscience is not allowed to be master, there may be feasting and revelry going on above, but the stern voice will come up through the grating now and then, and that will spoil all the laughter. 'When he heard him, he was much perplexed.'

The reason for these imperfect convictions is generally found, as Herod shows us, in the unwillingness to get rid of something which has fastened its claws around us, and which we love too well, although we know it is a serpent, to shake off. If Herod had once been man enough to screw himself up, and say to Herodias, 'Now you pack, and go about your business!' everything else would have come right in time. But he could not make up his mind to sacrifice the honeyed poison, and so everything went wrong in time. My friend, how many of us are prevented from following out our clearest convictions because they demand a sacrifice? 'If thine eye cause thee to stumble, pluck it out, and cast it from thee. It is better for thee.'

And then, further, note that these irresolute convictions and shirking of plain duty are not atoned for by, though they are often accompanied with, a strange acquiescence in, and approval of, God's truth. Herod fancied, inconsistently enough, that he was making some kind of compensation for disobedience to the message, by liking to listen to the messenger. And there are a great many of us, all whose Christianity consists in giving ear to the words which we never think of obeying. I wonder how many of you there are who fancy that you have no more concern with this sermon of mine than approving or disapproving of it, as the case may be; and how many of us there are who, all our lives long, have substituted criticism of the Gospel as ministered by us poor preachers-be it approving or disapproving criticism-for obedience to the Christ and acceptance of His salvation.

II. We see in Herod an example of the utter powerlessness of such partial convictions and reformation.

I am not going to tell over again the ghastly story of John’s death, which no other words than the Evangelist’s can tell half so powerfully. I need only remind you of the degradation of the poor child Salome to the position of a dancing girl, the half-tipsy generosity of the excited monarch, the grim request from lips so young and still reddened by the excitement of the dance, Herod’s unavailing sorrow, his fantastic sense of honour which scrupled to break a wicked promise, but did not scruple to kill a righteous man, and the ghastly picture of the girl carrying a bleeding head-such a gift!-to her mother.

But out of that jumble of lust and blood I desire to gather one lesson. There you have-in an extreme form, it is true-a tremendous illustration of what half-and-half convictions may come to. Whether or no we ever get anything like as far on the road as this man did matters very little. The process which brought him there is the thing that I seek to point to. It was because he had so long tampered with the voice of his conscience that it was lulled into silence at that last critical moment. And this is always the case, that if a man is false to the feeblest conviction that he has in regard to the smallest duty, he is a worse man all over ever after. We cannot neglect any conviction of what we ought to do, without lowering the whole tone of our characters and laying ourselves open to assaults of evil from which we would once have turned shuddering and disgusted. A partial thaw is generally followed by intenser frost. An abortive insurrection is sure to issue in a more grinding tyranny. A soul half melted and then cooled off is less easy to melt than it was before. And so, dear brethren, remember this, that if you do not swiftly and fully carry out in life and conduct whatsoever you know you ought to be or do, you cannot set a limit to what, some time or other, if a strong and sudden temptation is sprung upon you, you may become. ‘Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?’ Yes! But he did it. No mortal reaches the extreme of evil all at once, says the wise old proverb; and the path by which a man is let down into depths that he never thought it was possible that he should traverse is by the continual neglect of the small admonitions of conscience. Neglected convictions mean, sooner or later, an outburst of evil.

John’s murder may illustrate another thing too-viz. how simple, facile weakness of character may be the parent of all enormities. Herod did not want to kill John. He very much wanted to keep him alive. But he was not man enough to put his foot down, and say, ‘There! I have said it; and there is to be no more talk about slaying this prophet of God.’ So the continual drop, drop, drop, of Herodias’ suggestions and wishes wore a hole, in the loose-textured stone at last; and he did the thing that he hated to do and had long fought against. Why? Because he was a poor weak creature.

The lesson from this is one that I would urge upon all you young people especially, that in a world like this, where there are so many more voices soliciting us to evil than inviting us to good, to be weak is, in the long run, to be wicked. So do you cultivate the wholesome habit of saying ‘No,’ and do not be afraid of anything but of hurting your conscience and sinning against God.

III. Once more, we have in Herod an example of the awakening of conscience.

When Jesus began to be talked about beyond the narrow limits of the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and especially when He began to organise the Apostolate, and His name was spread abroad, some rumours reached even the court, and there were divergent opinions about Him. One man said, It is Elias; and another said, It is a prophet, ‘and Herod said, It is John, whom I beheaded. He has risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do show forth themselves in him.’

Ah, brethren! when a man has, away back in the chambers of his memory, some wrong thing, be it great or be it little, he is at the mercy of any chance or accident to have it revived in all its vividness. It is an awful thing to walk this world with a whole magazine of combustibles in our memories, on which any spark may fall and light lurid and sulphurous flames. A chance thing may do it, a scent, a look upon a face, a sound, or any trifle may bring all at once before the wrongdoer that ancient evil. And no lapse of time makes it less dreadful when it is unveiled. The chance thrust of a boat-hook that gets tangled in the grey hairs of a corpse, brings it up grim to the surface. Press a button, by accident, upon a wall in some old castle, and a door flies open that leads away down into black depths. You and I have depths of that sort in our hearts. Then there are no more illusions about whose fault the deed was. When Herod killed John, he said, 'Oh! It is not I! It is Herodias. It is Salome. It is my oath. It is the respect I bear to the people who heard me swear. I must do it, but I am not responsible.' But when, in 'the sessions of silent thought,' the deed came back to him, Salome and Herodias, the oath, and the company were all out of sight, and he said, 'I! *I* did it.'

That is what we all shall have to do some day, in this world possibly, in the next certainly. Men sophisticate themselves with talk about palliations, and excuses, and temptations, and companions and the like. And philosophers sophisticate themselves nowadays with a great many learned explanations, which tend to show that a man is not to blame for the wrong things he does. But all that rubbish gets burned up when conscience wakes, and the doer says, 'Whom *I* beheaded.'

Brethren, unless we take refuge in the great sacrifice for the sins of the world which Jesus Christ has made, we shall, possibly in this life, and certainly hereafter, be surrounded by a company of our own evil deeds risen from the dead, and every one of them will shake its gory locks at us, and say, '*Thou* didst it.'

IV. The last lesson that I gather from this man's life is the final insensibility which these half-and-half convictions tend to produce.

Jesus Christ was sent by Pilate to Herod as a kind of peace-offering. The two had been squabbling about some question of jurisdiction; and so, partly to escape from the embarrassment of having to deal with this enigmatical Prisoner, and partly out of a piece of politic politeness, Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, because He was in his jurisdiction. Think of the Lord of men and angels being handed about from one to the other of these two scoundrels, as a piece of politeness!

When Christ stands before Herod, note that all its former convictions, partial or entire, and all its terrors superficial or deep, have faded clean away from this frivolous soul. All that he feels now is a childish delight in having this well-known Man before him, and a hope that, for his delectation, Jesus will work a miracle; much as he might expect a conjurer to do one of his tricks! That is what killing John came to-an incapacity to see anything in Jesus.

‘And he asked Him many questions, and Jesus answered him nothing.’ He locked His lips. Why? He was doing what He Himself enjoined: ‘Give not that which is holy to the dogs. Cast not your pearls before swine.’ He said nothing, because He knew it was useless to say anything. So the Incarnate Word, whose very nature and property it is to speak, was silent before the frivolous curiosity of the man that had been false to his deepest convictions.

It is a parable, brother, of what is being repeated over and over again amongst us. I dare not say that Jesus Christ is ever absolutely dumb to any man on this side of the grave; but I dare not refrain from saying that this condition of insensibility to His words is one that we may indefinitely approach, and that the surest way to approach it and to reach it is to fight down, or to neglect, the convictions that lead up to Him. John was the forerunner of Christ, and if Herod had listened to John, to him John would have said: ‘Behold the Lamb of God!’ To you I say it, and beseech you to take that Lamb of God as the Sacrifice for your sins, for the Healer and Cleanser of your memories and your consciences, for the Helper who will enable you joyfully to make all sacrifices to duty, and to carry into effect every conviction which His own merciful hand writes upon your hearts. And oh, dear friends, many of you strangers to me, to whom my voice seldom comes, let me plead with you not to be content with ‘hearing’ any of us ‘gladly,’ but to do what our words point to, and to follow Christ the Saviour. If you hear the Gospel, however imperfectly, as you are hearing it proclaimed now, and if you neglect it as-must I say?-you are doing now, you will bring another film over your eyes which may grow thick enough to shut out all the light; you will wind another fold about your hearts which may prove impenetrable to the sword of the Spirit; you will put another plug in your ears which may make them deaf to the music of Christ's voice. Do what you know you ought to do, yield yourselves to Jesus Christ. And do it now, whilst impressions are being made, lest, if you let them sleep, they may never return. Felix trembled when Paul reasoned; but he waved away the messenger and the message, and though he sent for Paul often, and communed with him, he never trembled any more.

'There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood,'

would lead us into the haven of rest in Christ; and, if allowed to pass, may leave us, stranded and shipwrecked, among the rocks.

111) Luke 23:10-12

Luke

'THE RULERS TAKE COUNSEL TOGETHER'

Luk. 23:1 - Luk. 23:12.

Luke's canvas is all but filled by the persecutors, and gives only glimpses of the silent Sufferer. But the silence of Jesus is eloquent, and the prominence of the accusers and judges heightens the impression of His passive endurance. We have in this passage the Jewish rulers with their murderous hate; Pilate contemptuously indifferent, but perplexed and wishing to shirk responsibility; and Herod with his frivolous curiosity. They present three types of unworthy relations to Jesus Christ.

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So fierce is their hatred that they swallow the bitter pill of going to Pilate for the execution of their sentence. John tells us that they began by trying to get Pilate to decree the crucifixion without knowing Jesus' crime; but that was too flagrant injustice, and too blind confidence in them, for Pilate to grant. So they have to manufacture a capital charge on the spot, and they are equal to the occasion. By the help of two lies, and one truth so twisted as to be a lie, they get up an indictment, which they think will be grave enough to compel the procurator to do as they wish.

Their accusation, if it had been ever so true, would have been ludicrous on their lips; and we may be sure that, if it had been true, they would have been Jesus' partisans, not His denouncers.' The Gracchi complaining of sedition' are nothing to the Sanhedrim accusing a Jew of rebellion against Rome. Every man in that crowd was a rebel at heart, and would have liked nothing better than to see the standard of revolt lifted in a strong hand. Pilate was not so simple as to be taken in by such an accusation from such accusers, and it fails. They return to the charge, and the 'more urgent' character of the second attempt is found in its statement of the widespread extent of Christ's teaching, but chiefly in the cunning introduction of Galilee, notoriously a disaffected and troublesome district.

What a hideous and tragic picture we have here of the ferocity of the hatred, which turned the very fountains of justice and guardians of a nation into lying plotters against innocence, and sent these Jewish rulers cringing before Pilate, pretending loyalty and acknowledging his authority! They were ready for any falsehood and any humiliation, if only they could get Jesus crucified. And what had excited their hatred? Chiefly His teachings, which brushed aside the rubbish both of ceremonial observance and of Rabbinical casuistry, and placed religion in love to God and consequent love to man; then His attitude of opposition to them as an order; and finally His claim, which they never deigned to examine, to be the Son of God. That, they said, was blasphemy, as it was, unless it were true,-an alternative which they did not look at. So blinded may men be by prejudice, and so mastered by causeless hatred of Him who loves them all!

These Jewish rulers were men like ourselves. Instead of shuddering at their crime, as if it were something far outside of anything possible for us, we do better if we learn from it the terrible depths of hostility to Jesus, the tragic blindness to His character and love, and the degradation of submission to usurpers, which must accompany denial of His right to rule over us. 'They hated Me without a cause,' said Christ; but He pointed to that hatred as sure to be continued towards Him and His servants as long as 'the world' continues the world.

II. We have Pilate, indifferent and perplexed.

Luke's very brief account should be supplemented by John's, which shows us how important the conversation, so much abbreviated by Luke, was. Of course Pilate knew the priests and rulers too well to believe for a moment that the reason they gave for bringing Jesus to him was the real one, and his taking Jesus apart to speak with Him shows a wish to get at the bottom of the case. So far he was doing his duty, but then come the faults. These may easily be exaggerated, and we should remember that Pilate was the most ignorant, and therefore the least guilty, of all the persons mentioned in this passage. He had probably never heard the name of Jesus till that day, and saw nothing but an ordinary Jewish peasant, whom his countrymen, like the incomprehensible and troublesome people they were, wished, for some fantastic reason, to get killed.

But that dialogue with his Prisoner should have sunk deeper into his mind and heart. He was in long and close enough contact with Jesus to have seen glimpses of the light, which, if followed, would have led to clear recognition. His first sin was indifference, not unmingled with scorn, and it blinded him. Christ's lofty and wonderful explanation of the nature of His kingdom and His mission to bear witness to the truth fell on entirely preoccupied ears, which were quick enough to catch the faintest whispers of treason, but dull towards 'truth.' When Jesus tried to reach his conscience by telling him that every lover of truth would listen to His voice, he only answered by the question, to which he waited not for an answer, 'What is truth?'

That was not the question of a theoretical sceptic, but simply of a man who prided himself on being 'practical,' and left all talk about such abstractions to dreamers. The limitations of the Roman intellect and its characteristic over-estimate of deeds and contempt for pure thought, as well as the spirit of the governor, who would let men think what they chose, as long as they did not rebel, spoke in the question. Pilate is an instance of a man blinded to all lofty truth and to the beauty and solemn significance of Christ's words, by his absorption in outward life. He thinks of Jesus as a harmless fanatic. Little did he know that the truth, which he thought moonshine, would shatter the Empire, which he thought the one solid reality. So called practical men commit the same mistake in every generation. 'All flesh is as grass;. . . the word of the Lord endureth for ever.'

Further, Pilate sinned in prostituting his office by not setting free the prisoner when he was convinced of His innocence. 'I find no fault in this man,' should have been followed by immediate release. Every moment afterwards, in which He was kept captive, was the condemnation of the unjust judge. He was clearly anxious to keep his troublesome subjects in good humour, and thought that the judicial murder of one Jew was a small price to pay for popularity. Still he would have been glad to have escaped from what his official training had taught him to recoil from, and what some faint impression, made by his patient prisoner, gave him a strange dread of. So he grasps at the mention of Galilee, and tries to gain two good ends at once by handing Jesus over to Herod.

The relations between Antipas and him were necessarily delicate, like those between the English officials and the rajahs of native states in India; and there had been some friction, perhaps about 'the Galileans, whose blood' he 'had mingled with their sacrifices.' If there had been difficulties in connection with such a question of jurisdiction, the despatch of Jesus to Herod would be a graceful way of making the *amende honorable*, and would also shift an unpleasant decision on to Herod's shoulders. Pilate would not be displeased to get rid of embarrassment, and to let Herod be the tool of the priests' hate.

How awful the thought is of the contrast between Pilate's conceptions of what he was doing and the reality! How blind to Christ's beauty it is possible to be, when engrossed with selfish aims and outward things! How near a soul may be to the light, and yet turn away from it and plunge into darkness! How patient that silent prisoner, who lets Himself be bandied about from one tyrant to another, not because they had power, but because He loved the world, and would bear the sins of every one of us! How terrible the change when these unjust judges and He will change places, and Pilate and Herod stand at His judgment-seat!

III. We have the wretched, frivolous Herod.

This is the murderer of John Baptist-'that fox,' a debauchee, a coward, and as cruel as sensuous. He had all the vices of his worthless race, and none of the energy of its founder. He is by far the most contemptible of the figures in this passage. Note his notion of, and his feeling to, Jesus. He thought of our Lord as of a magician or juggler, who might do some wonders to amuse the vacuous *ennui* of his sated nature. Time was when he had felt some twinge of conscience in listening to the Baptist, and had almost been lifted to nobleness by that strong arm. Time was, too, when he had trembled at hearing of Jesus, and taken Him for his victim risen from a bloody grave. But all that is past now. The sure way to stifle conscience is to neglect it. Do that long and resolutely enough, and it will cease to utter unheeded warnings. There will be a silence which may look like peace, but is really death. Herod's gladness was more awful and really sad than Herod's fear. Better to tremble at God's word than to treat it as an occasion for mirth. He who hates a prophet because he knows him to be a prophet and himself to be a sinner, is not so hopeless as he who only expects to get sport out of the messenger of God.

Then note the Lord's silence. Herod plies Jesus with a battery of questions, and gets no answer. If there had been a grain of earnestness in them all, Christ would have spoken. He never is silent to a true seeker after truth. But it is fitting that frivolous curiosity should be unanswered, and there is small likelihood of truth being found at the goal when there is nothing more noble than that temper at the starting-point. Christ's silence is the penalty of previous neglect of Christ's and His forerunner's words. Jesus guides His conduct by His own precept, 'Give not that which is holy unto the dogs'; and He knows, as we never can, who come into that terrible list of men to whom it would only add condemnation to speak of even His love. The eager hatred of the priests followed Jesus to Herod's palace, but no judicial action is recorded as taking place there. Their fierce earnestness of hate seems out of place in the frivolous atmosphere. The mockery, in which Herod is not too dignified to join his soldiers, is more in keeping. But how ghastly it sounds to us, knowing whom they ignorantly mocked! Cruelty, inane laughter, hideous pleasure in an innocent man's pain, disregard of law and justice-all these they were guilty of; and Herod, at any rate, knew enough of Jesus to give a yet darker colouring to his share in the coarse jest.

But how the loud laugh would have fallen silent if some flash had told who Jesus was! Is there any of our mirth, perhaps at some of His servants, or at some phase of His gospel, which would in like manner stick in our throats if His judgment throne blazed above us? Ridicule is a dangerous weapon. It does more harm to those who use it than to those against whom it is directed. Herod thought it an exquisite jest to dress up his prisoner as a king; but Herod has found out, by this time, whether he or the Nazarene was the sham monarch, and who is the real one. Christ was as silent under mockery as to His questioner. He bears all, and He takes account of all. He bears it because He is the world's Sacrifice and Saviour. He takes account of it, and will one day recompense it, because He is the world's King, and will be its Judge. Where shall we stand then-among the silenced mockers, or among the happy trusters in His Passion and subjects of His dominion?

112) Luke 23:13-26

Luke

JESUS AND PILATE

Luk. 23:13 - Luk. 23:26.

Luke here marks out three stages of the struggle between Pilate and the Jews. Thrice did he try to release Jesus; thrice did they yell their hatred and their demand for His blood. Then came the shameful surrender by Pilate, in which, from motives of policy, he prostituted Roman justice. Knowingly he sacrificed one poor Jew to please his turbulent subjects; unknowingly he slew the Christ of God.

I. The first weak attempt to be just.

Pilate invested it with a certain formality by convoking a representative gathering of all classes, 'chief priests and the rulers and the people.' The nation was summoned to decide solemnly whether they would or would not put their Messiah to death, and a Roman governor was their summoner. Surely the irony of fate [or, rather, of Providence] could go no further than that. Pilate's *résumé* of the proceedings up to the moment of his speaking is not without a touch of sarcasm, in the contrast between 'ye' and 'I' and 'Herod.' It is almost as if he had said, 'Why, herein is a marvellous thing, that you should have a quicker scent for rebellion than I or Herod!' He was evidently suspicious of the motives which induced the 'rulers' to take the new role of eager defenders of Roman authority, and ready to suspect something below such an extraordinary transformation. Jews delivering up a Jew because he was an insurgent against Caesar,-there must be something under that! He lays stress on their having heard his examination of the accused, as showing that he had gone into the matter thoroughly, that the charges had broken down to their knowledge. He represents his sending Jesus to Herod as done from the high motive of securing the completest possible investigation, instead of its being a despicable attempt to shirk responsibility and to pay an empty compliment to an enemy. He reiterates his conviction of Jesus' innocence, and then, after all this flourish about his own carefulness to bring judicial impartiality to bear on the case, he makes the lame and impotent conclusion of offering to 'chastise Him.'

What for? The only course for a judge convinced of a prisoner's innocence is to set him free. But this was a bribe to the accusers, offered in hope that the smaller punishment would content them. Pilate knew that he was perpetrating flagrant injustice in such a suggestion, and he tried to hide it by using a gentle word. 'Chastise' sounds almost beneficent, but it would not make the scourging less cruel, nor its infliction less lawless. Compromises are always ticklish to engineer, but a compromise between justice and injustice is least likely of all to answer. This one signally failed. The fierce accusers of Jesus were quick to see the sign of weakness, both in the proposal itself and in their being asked if it would be acceptable to them. Not so should a Roman governor have spoken. If pressure had made the iron wall yield so far, a little more and it would fall flat, and let them at their victim.

Pilate was weak, vacillating, did not know what he wished. He wished to do right, but he wished more to conciliate, for he knew that he was detested, and feared to be accused to Rome. The other side knew what they wanted, and were resolute. Encouraged by the hesitation of Pilate, they ‘cried out all together.’ One hears the strident yells from a thousand throats shrieking out the self-revealing and self-destroying choice of Barabbas. He was a popular hero for the very reason that he was a rebel. He had done what his admirers had accused Jesus of doing, and for which they pretended that they had submitted Him to Pilate’s judgment. The choice of Barabbas convicts the charges against Jesus of falsehood and unreality. The choice of Barabbas reveals the national ideal. They did not want a Messiah like Jesus, and had no eyes for the beauty of His character, nor ears for the words of grace poured into His lips. They had no horror of ‘a murderer,’ and great admiration for a rebel. Barabbas was the man after their own heart. A nation that can reject Jesus and choose Barabbas is only fit for destruction. A nation judges itself by its choice of heroes. The national ideal is potent to shape the national character. We to-day are sinking into an abyss because of our admiration for the military type of hero; and there is not such an immense difference between the mob that rejected Jesus and applauded Barabbas and the mobs that shout round a successful soldier, and scoff at the law of Christ if applied to politics.

II. The second, weaker attempt.

Pilate repeated his proposal of release, but it was all but lost in the roar of hatred. Note the contrast between ‘Pilate spoke’ [Luk. 23:20] and ‘they shouted.’ It suggests his feeble effort swept away by the rush of ferocity. And they have gathered boldness from his hesitation, and are now prescribing the mode of Christ’s punishment. Now first the terrible word ‘Crucify’ is heard. Both Matthew and Mark tell us that the priests and rulers had ‘stirred up’ the people to choose Barabbas, but apparently the mob, once roused, needed no further stimulant.

Crowds are always cruel, and they are as fickle as cruel. The very throats now hoarse with fiercely roaring ‘Crucify Him’ had been strained by shouting ‘Hosanna’ less than a week since. The branches strewed in His path had not had time to wither. ‘The voice of the people is the voice of God,’-sometimes. But sometimes it sounds very like the voice of the enemy of God, and one would have more confidence in it if it did not so often and so quickly speak, not only ‘in divers,’ but in diverse, ‘manners.’ To make it the arbiter of men’s merit, still more to trim one’s course so as to catch the breeze of the popular breath, is folly, or worse. Men admire what they resemble, or try to resemble, and Barabbas has more of his sort than has Jesus.

III. The final yielding.

It is to Pilate’s credit that he kept up his efforts so long. Luke wishes to impress us with his persistency, as well as with the fixed determination of the Jews, by his note of ‘the third time.’ Thrice was the choice offered to them, and thrice did they put away the possibility of averting their doom. But Pilate’s persistency had a weak place, for he was afraid of his subjects, and, while willing to save Jesus, was not willing to imperil himself in doing it. Self-interest takes the strength out of resolution to do right, like a crumbling stone in a sea wall, which lets in the wave that ruins the whole structure.

Pilate had come to the end of his shifts to escape pronouncing sentence. The rulers had refused to judge Jesus according to their law. Herod had sent Him back with thanks, but unsentenced. The Jews would not have Him, but Barabbas, released, nor would they accept scourging in lieu of crucifying. So he has to decide at last whether to be just and fear not, or basely to give way, and draw down on his head momentary applause at the price of everlasting horror. Luke notices in all three stages the loud cries of the Jews, and in this last one he gives special emphasis to them. ‘Their voices prevailed.’ What a condemnation for a judge! He ‘gave sentence that what they asked for should be done.’ Baseness in a judge could go no farther. The repetition of the characterisation of Barabbas brings up once more the hideousness of the people’s choice, and the tragic words ‘to their will’ sets in a ghastly light the flagrant injustice of the judge, and yet greater crime of the Jews. To deliver Jesus to their will was base; to entertain such a ‘will’ towards Jesus was more than base,-it was ‘the ruin of them, and of all Israel.’ Our whole lives here and hereafter turn on what is our ‘will’ to Him.

113) Luke 23:33-41

Luke

WORDS FROM THE CROSS

Luk. 23:33 - Luk. 23:46.

The calm tone of all the narratives of the Crucifixion is very remarkable. Each Evangelist limits himself to the bare recording of facts, without a trace of emotion. They felt too deeply to show feeling. It was fitting that the story which, till the end of time, was to move hearts to a passion of love and devotion, should be told without any colouring. Let us beware of reading it coldly! This passage is more adapted to be pondered in solitude, with the thought, ‘All this was borne for me,’ than to be commented on. But a reverent word or two is permissible.

Luke’s account is noticeably independent of the other three. The three sayings of Christ’s, round which his narrative is grouped, are preserved by him alone. We shall best grasp the dominant impression which the Evangelist unconsciously had himself received, and sought to convey, by gathering the whole round these three words from the Cross.

I. The first word sets Jesus forth as the all-merciful Intercessor and patient friend of sinners.

It is very significantly set in the centre of the paragraph [vs. 33-38] which recounts the heartless cruelty and mockery of soldiers and rulers. Surrounded by that whirlwind of abuse, contempt and ferocious glee at His sufferings, He gave back no taunt, nor uttered any cry of pain, nor was moved to the faintest anger, but let His heart go out in pity for all who took part in that wicked tragedy; and, while ‘He opened not His mouth’ in complaint or reviling, He did open it in intercession. But the wonderful prayer smote no heart with compunction, and, after it, the storm of mocking and savage triumph hurtled on as before.

Luke gathers all the details together in summary fashion, and piles them on one another without enlarging on any. The effect produced is like that of a succession of breakers beating on some lonely rock, or of blows struck by a battering-ram on a fortress.

‘They crucified Him,’-there is no need to say who ‘they’ were. Others than the soldiers, who did the work, did the deed. Contempt gave Him two malefactors for companions and hung the King of the Jews in the place of honour in the midst. Did John remember what his brother and he had asked? Matter-of-fact indifference as to a piece of military duty, and shameless greed, impelled the legionaries to cast lots for the clothes stripped from a living man. What did the crucifying of another Jew or two matter to them? Gaping curiosity, and the strange love of the horrible, so strong in the vulgar mind, led the people, who had been shouting Hosanna! less than a week ago, to stand gazing on the sight without pity but in a few hearts.

The bitter hatred of the rulers, and their inhuman glee at getting rid of a heretic, gave them bad preeminence in sin. Their scoff acknowledged that He had ‘saved others,’ and their hate had so blinded their eyes that they could not see how manifestly His refusal to use His power to save Himself proved Him the Son of God. He could not save Himself, just because He would save these scoffing Rabbis and all the world. The rough soldiers knew little about Him, but they followed suit, and thought it an excellent jest to bring the ‘vinegar,’ provided in kindness, to Jesus with a mockery of reverence as to a king. The gibe was double-barrelled, like the inscription over the Cross; for it was meant to hit both this Pretender to royalty and His alleged subjects.

And to all this Christ’s sole answer was the ever-memorable prayer. One of the women who bravely stood at the Cross must have caught the perhaps low-voiced supplication, and it breathed so much of the aspect of Christ’s character in which Luke especially delights that he could not leave it out. It opens many large questions which cannot be dealt with here. All sin has in it an element of ignorance, but it is not wholly ignorance as some modern teachers affirm. If the ignorance were complete, the sin would be nonexistent. The persons covered by the ample folds of this prayer were ignorant in very different degrees, and had had very different opportunities of changing ignorance for knowledge. The soldiers and the rulers were in different positions in that respect. But none were so entirely blind that they had no sin, and none were so entirely seeing that they were beyond the reach of Christ’s pity or the power of His intercession. In that prayer we learn, not only His infinite forgivingness for insults and unbelief levelled at Himself, but His exaltation as the Intercessor, whom the Father heareth always. The dying Christ prayed for His enemies; the glorified Christ lives to make intercession for us.

II. In the second saying Christ is revealed as having the keys of Hades, the invisible world of the dead.

How differently the same circumstances work on different natures! In the one malefactor, physical agony and despair found momentary relief in taunts, flung from lips dry with torture, at the fellow-sufferer whose very innocence provoked hatred from the guilty heart. The other had been led by his punishment to recognise in it the due reward of his deeds, and thus softened, had been moved by Christ's prayer, and by his knowledge of Christ's innocence, to hope that the same mercy which had been lavished on the inflicters of His sufferings, might stretch to enfold the partakers in it.

At that moment the dying thief had clearer faith in Christ's coming in His kingdom than any of the disciples had. Their hopes were crumbling as they watched Him hanging unresisting and gradually dying. But this man looked beyond the death so near for both Jesus and himself, and believed that, after it, He would come to reign. We may call him the only disciple that Christ then had.

How pathetic is that petition, 'Remember me'! It builds the hope of sharing in Christ's royalty on the fact of having shared in His Cross. 'Thou wilt not forget Thy companion in that black hour, which will then lie behind us.' Such trust and clinging, joined with such penitence and submission, could not go unrewarded.

From His Cross Jesus speaks in royal style, as monarch of that dim world. His promise is sealed with His own sign-manual, 'Verily, I say.' It claims to have not only the clear vision of, but the authority to determine, the future. It declares the unbroken continuance of personal existence, and the reality of a state of conscious blessedness, in which men are aware of their union with Him, the Lord of the realm and the Life of its inhabitants. It graciously accepts the penitent's petition, and assures him that the companionship, begun on the Cross, will be continued there. ‘With Me’ makes ‘Paradise’ wherever a soul is.

III. The third word from the Cross, as recorded by Luke, reveals Jesus as, in the act of dying, the Master of death, and its Transformer for all who trust Him into a peaceful surrender of themselves into the Father’s hands.

The circumstances grouped round the act of His death bring out various aspects of its significance. The darkness preceding had passed before He died, and it bore rather on His sense of desertion, expressed in the unfathomably profound and awful cry, ‘Why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ The rent veil is generally taken to symbolise the unrestricted access into the presence of God, which we have through Christ’s death; but it is worth considering whether it does not rather indicate the divine leaving of the desecrated shrine, and so is the beginning of the fulfilment of the deep word, ‘Destroy this Temple.’

But the centre-point of the section is the last cry which, in its loudness, indicated physical strength quite incompatible with the exhaustion to which death by crucifixion was generally due. It thus confirms the view which sees, both in the words of Jesus and in the Evangelist’s expression for His death, clear indications that He died, not because His physical powers were unable to live longer, but by the exercise of His own volition. He died because He chose, and He chose because He loved and would save. As St. Bernard says, ‘Who is He who thus easily falls asleep when He wills? To die is indeed great weakness, but to die thus is immeasurable power. Truly the weakness of God is stronger than men.’

Nor let us forget that, in thus dying, Jesus gave us an imitable example, as well as revealed inimitable power. For, if we trust ourselves, living and dying, to Him, we shall not be dragged reluctantly, by an overmastering grasp against which we vainly struggle, out of a world where we would fain stay, but we may yield ourselves willingly, as to a Father’s hand, which draws His children gently to His own side, and blesses them, when there, with His fuller presence.

114) Luke 23:42

Luke

WORDS FROM THE CROSS

THE DYING THIEF

Luk. 23:42.

There is an old and true division of the work of Christ into three parts-prophet, priest, and king. Such a distinction manifestly exists, though it may be overestimated, or rather, the statement of it may be exaggerated, if it be supposed that separate acts of His discharge these separate functions, and that He ceases to be the one before He becomes the other. Rather it is true that all His work is prophetic, that all His work is priestly, and that His prophetic and priestly work is the exercise of His kingly authority. But still the division is a true one, and helps to set before us, clearly and definitely, the wide range of the benefits of Christ's mission and death. It is noteworthy that these three groups round the Cross, the third of which we have to speak of now-that of the 'daughters of Jerusalem,' that of the deriding scribes and the indifferent soldiers, and this one of the two thieves-each presents us Christ in one of the three characters. The words that He spoke upon the Cross, with reference to others than Himself, may be gathered around, and arranged under, that threefold aspect of Christ's work. The *prophet* said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for Me, but weep for yourselves, for the days are coming.' The *priest* said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. 'The *king*, in His sovereignty, ruled the heart of that penitent man from His Cross, and while the crown shone athwart the smoke and the agony of the death, the king 'opened the gates of the kingdom of heaven unto all believers' when He said, 'This day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise!' We shall not attempt, in dealing with this incident, to paint pictures. I have a far more important thing to do than even to try to bring vividly before your minds the scene on that little hill of Calvary. It is the meaning that we are concerned with, and not the mere externals. I take it for granted, then, that we know the details:-the dying man in his agony, beginning to see dimly, as his soul closed upon earthly things, who this was-patient, loving, mighty there in His sufferings; and using his last breath to cry, ‘Lord, remember me!’-and the sufferer throned in the majesty of His meekness, and divinity of His endurance; calm, conscious, full of felt but silent power, accepting homage, bending to the penitence, loving the sinner, and flinging open the gates of the pale kingdoms into which He was to pass, with these His last words.

First, then, we see here an illustration of the Cross in its power of drawing men to itself. It is strange to think that, perhaps, at that moment the only human being who thoroughly believed in Christ was that dying robber. The disciples are all gone. The most faithful of them are recreant, denying, fleeing. A handful of women are standing there, not knowing what to think about it, stunned but loving; and alone [as I suppose], alone of all the sons of men, the crucified malefactor was in the sunshine of faith, and could say ‘I believe!’ As everything of the future history of the world and of the Gospel is typified in the events of the Crucifixion, it was fitting that here again and at the last there should be a prophetic fulfilment of His own saying, ‘I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.’

But mark, here we have a striking instance of the universal law of the progress of the Gospel, in the two-fold effort of the contemplation of the Cross. By its foot was to be seen the derision of the scribes and the stupor of the soldiery; and now here are the two thieves-the one chiming in with the universal reproaches; and the other beholding the same event, having the same circumstances displayed before him, and they influence him *thus*. Brethren, it is just the history of the Gospel wherever it goes. It is its history now, and among us. The Gospel is preached equally to every man. The same message comes to us all, offering us the same terms. Christ stands before each of us in the same attitude. And what is the consequence? A parting of the whole mass of us, some to one side and some to the other. So, when you take a magnet, and hold it to an indiscriminate heap of metal filings, it will gather out all the iron, and leave behind all the rest. ‘I, if I be lifted up,’ said He, ‘will draw all men unto Me.’ The attractive power will go out over the whole race of His brethren; but from some there will be no response. In some hearts there will be no yielding to the attraction. Some will remain rooted, obstinate, steadfast in their place; and to some the lightest word will be mighty enough to stir all the slumbering pulses of their sin-ridden hearts, and to bring them, broken and penitent, for mercy to His feet. To the one He is ‘a savour of life unto life, and to the other a savour of death unto death.’ The broadest doctrine of the universal adaptation, and the universal intention too, of the Gospel, as the ‘power of God unto salvation,’ contains hidden in its depths this undeniable fact, that, be the cause what it may [and as I believe, the cause lies with us, and is our fault] this separating, judging effect follows from all faithful preaching of Christ’s words. He came to judge the world, ‘that they which see not’ [as He Himself said] ‘might see, and they which see might be made blind,’ And on the Cross that process went on in two men, alike in necessity, alike in criminality, alike in this, that Death’s icy finger was just being laid upon their heart, to stop all the flow of its wild blood and passion, but different in this, that the one of them turned himself, by God’s grace, and laid hold on the Gospel that was offered to him, and the other turned himself away, and derided, and died.

And now, there is another consideration. If we look at this man, this penitent thief, and contrast him, his previous history, and his present feelings, with the people that stood around, and rejected and scoffed, we get some light as to the sort of thing that unfits men for perceiving and accepting the Gospel when it is offered to them. Remember the other classes of persons who were there. There were Roman soldiers, with very partial knowledge of what they were doing, and whose only feeling was that of entire indifference; and there were Jewish Rabbis, Pharisees, Priests, and people, who knew a little more of what they were doing, and whose feeling was derision and scorn. Now, if we mark the ordinary scriptural representation, especially as to the last class, we cannot help seeing that there comes out this principle:-The thing of all others that unfits men for the reception of Christ as a Saviour, and for the simple reliance on His atoning blood and divine mercy, is not gross, long profligacy, and outward, vehement transgression; but it is self-complacency, clean, fatal self-righteousness and self-sufficiency.

Why was it that Scribes and Pharisees turned away from Him? For three reasons. Because of their pride of wisdom. ‘We are the men who know all about Moses and the traditions of the elders; we judge this new phenomenon not by the question, How does it come to our consciences, and how does it appeal to our hearts? but we judge it by the question, How does it fit our Rabbinical learning and subtle casuistical laws? *We* are the Priests and the Scribes; and the people that know not the law, *they* may accept a thing that only appeals to the common human heart, but for us, in our intellectual superiority, living remote from the common wants of the lower class, not needing a rough outward Gospel of that sort, we can do without such a thing, and we reject it.' They turned away from the Cross, and their hatred darkened into derision, and their menaces ended in a crucifixion, not merely because of a pride of wisdom, but because of a complacent self-righteousness that knew nothing of the fact of sin, that never had learned to believe itself to be full of evil, that had got so wrapped up in ceremonies as to have lost the life; that had degraded the divine law of God, with all its lightning splendours, and awful power, into a matter of 'mint and anise and cummin.' They turned away for a third reason. Religion had become to them a mere set of traditional dogmas, to think accurately or to reason clearly about which was all that was needful. Worship having become ceremonial, and morality having become casuistry, and religion having become theology, the men were as hard as a nether millstone, and there was nothing to be done with them until these three crusts were peeled off the heart, and, close and burning, the naked heart and the naked truth of God came into contact.

Brethren, change the name, and the story is true about *us*. God forbid that I should deny that every form of gross, sensual immorality, 'hardens all within' [as one poor victim of it said], 'and petrifies the feeling.' God forbid that I should seem to be speaking slightingly of the exceeding sinfulness of such sin, or to be pouring contempt upon the laws of common morality. Do not misapprehend me so. Still it is not sin in its outward forms that makes the worst impediment between a man and the Cross, but it is sin plus self-righteousness which makes the insurmountable obstacle to all faith and repentance. And oh! in our days, when passion is tamed down by so many bonds and chains; when the power of society lies upon all of us, prescribing our path, and keeping most of us from vice, partly because we are not tempted, and partly because we have been brought up like some young trees behind a wall, within the fence of decent customs and respectable manners,-we have far more need to tell orderly, respectable moral men-'My brother, that thing that you have is worth nothing, as settling your position before

God'; than to stand up and thunder about crimes which half of us never heard of, and perhaps only an infinitesimal percentage of us have ever committed. All sin separates from God, but the thing that makes the separation permanent is not the sin, but the ignorance of the sin. Self-righteousness, aye, and pride of wisdom, they-they have perverted many a nature, many a young man's glowing spirit, and have turned him away from the Gospel. If there be a man here who is looking at the simple message of peace and pardon and purity through Christ, and is saying to himself, Yes; it may fit the common class of minds that require outward signs and symbols, and must pin their faith to forms; but for me with my culture, for me with my spiritual tendencies, for me with my new lights, *I* do not want any objective redemption; *I* do not want anything to convince *me* of a divine love, and I do not need any crucified Saviour to preach to *me* that God is merciful!-this incident before us has a very solemn lesson in it for him. And if there be a man here who is living a life of surface blamelessness, it has as solemn a lesson for him. Look at the Scribe, and look at the Pharisee-religious men in their way, wise men in their way, decent and respectable men in their way; and look at that poor thief that had been caught in the wilderness amongst the caves and dens, and had been brought red-handed with blood upon his sword, and guilt in his heart, and nailed up there in the short and summary process of a Roman jurisprudence;-and think that Scribe, and Pharisee, and Priest, saw nothing in Christ; and that the poor profligate wretch saw this in Him,-innocence that showed heavenly against his diabolical blackness; and his heart stirred, and he laid hold of Him in the stress of his mighty agony-as a drowning man catches at anything that protrudes from the bank; and he held and shook it, and the thing was fast, and he was safe! Not transgression shuts a man out from mercy. Transgression, which belongs to us all, makes us subjects for the mercy; but it is pride, self-righteousness, trust in ourselves, which 'bars the gates of mercy on mankind'; and the men that *are* condemned are condemned not only because they have transgressed the commandments of God, but '*this* is the condemnation, that light came into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.'

And then [and but a word] we see here, too, the elements of which acceptable faith consists. One does not exactly know by what steps or through what process this poor dying thief passed, which issued in faith-whether it was an impression from Christ's presence, whether it was that he had ever heard anything about Him before, or whether it was only that the wisdom which dwells with death was beginning to clear his eyes as life ebbed away. But however he *came* to the conviction, mark what it was that he believed and expressed,-I am a sinful man; all punishment that comes down upon me is richly deserved: This man is pure and righteous; 'Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom!' That is all-that is all. That is the thing that saves a man. How much he *did* know-whether he knew all the depth of what he was saying, when he said 'Lord!' is a question that we cannot answer; whether he understood what the 'kingdom' was that he was expecting, is a question that we cannot solve; but this is clear-the intellectual part of faith may be dark and doubtful, but the moral and emotional part of it is manifest and plain. There was, '*I* am nothing-*Thou* art everything: I bring myself and my emptiness unto Thy great fullness: fill it and make me blessed!' Faith has that. Faith has in it repentance-repentance has in it faith too. Faith has in it the recognition of the certainty and the justice of a judgment that is coming down crashing upon every human head; and then from the midst of these fears, and sorrows, and the tempest of that great darkness, there rises up in the night of terrors, the shining of one perhaps pale, quivering, distant, but divinely given hope, 'My Saviour! My Saviour! He is righteous: He has died-He lives! I will stay no longer; I will cast myself upon Him!' Once more-this incident reminds us not only of the attractive power of the Cross, but of the prophetic power of the Cross. We have here the Cross as pointing to and foretelling the Kingdom. Pointing out, and foretelling: that is to say, of course, and only, if we accept the scriptural statement of what these sufferings were, the Person that endured them, and the meaning of their being endured. But the only thing I would dwell upon here, is, that when we think of Christ as dying for us, we are never to separate it from that other solemn and future coming of which this poor robber catches a glimpse. They crowned Him with thorns, and they gave Him a reed for His sceptre. That mockery, so natural to the strong practical Romans in dealing with one whom they thought a harmless enthusiast, was a symbol which they who did it little dreamed of. The crown of thorns proclaims a sovereignty founded on sufferings. The sceptre of feeble reed speaks of power wielded in gentleness. The Cross leads to the crown. The brow that was pierced by the sharp acanthus wreath, therefore wears the diadem of the universe. The hand that passively held the mockery of the worthless, pithless reed, therefore rules the princes of the earth with the rod of iron. He who was lifted up to the Cross, was, by that very act, lifted up to be a Ruler and Commander to the peoples. For the death of the Cross God hath highly exalted Him to be a Prince and a Saviour. The way to glory for Him, the power by which He wields the kingdom of the world, is precisely through the suffering. And therefore, whensoever there arises before us the image of the one, oh! let there rise before us likewise the image of the other. The Cross links on to the kingdom-the kingdom lights up the Cross. My brother, the Saviour comes-the Saviour comes a King. The Saviour that comes a King is the Saviour that has been here and was crucified. The kingdom that He establishes is all full of blessing, and love, and gentleness; and to us [if we will unite the thoughts of Cross and Crown] there is opened up not only the possibility of having boldness before Him in the day of judgment, but there is opened up this likewise-the certainty that He ‘shall receive of the travail of His soul and be satisfied.’ Oh, remember that as certain as the historical fact-He died on Calvary; so certain is the prophetic fact-He shall reign, and you and I will stand there! I durst not touch that subject. Take it into your own hearts; and think about it-a kingdom, a judgment-seat, a crown, a gathered universe; separation, decision, execution of the sentence. And oh! ask yourselves, ‘When that gentle eye, with lightning in its depths, falls upon *me*, individualises *me*, summons out *me* to its bar-how shall I stand?’ ‘Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness before Him in the day of judgment,’ ‘Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.’

Finally. Here is the Cross as revealing and opening the true Paradise.-’This day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise.’ We have no concern at present with the many subtle inferences as to the state of the dead, and as to the condition of our Lord’s human spirit before the Resurrection, which have been drawn from these words. To me they do seem fairly to bear the broad and single conclusion that the spirits of the saved do enter at death into a state of conscious presence with their Saviour, and therefore of joy and felicity. But beyond this we have no firm ground for going. It is of more practical worth to note that the penitent’s vague prayer is answered, and over-answered. He asks, ‘When Thou comest’-whensoever that may be-’remember me.’ ‘I shall stand afar off; do not let me be utterly forgotten.’ Christ answers-’Remember thee! thou shalt be *with Me*, close to My side. Remember thee *when* I come!-*this day* shalt thou be with Me.’

And what a contrast that is-the conscious blessedness rushing in close upon the heels of the momentary darkness of death. At the one moment there hangs the thief writhing in mortal agony; the wild shouts of the fierce mob at his feet are growing faint upon his ear; the city spread out at his feet, and all the familiar sights of earth are growing dim to his filmy eye. The soldier’s spear comes, the legs are broken, and in an instant there hangs a relaxed corpse; and the spirit, the spirit-is where? Ah! how far away; released from all its sin and its sore agony, struggling up at once into such strange divine enlargement, a new star swimming into the firmament of heaven, a new face before the throne of God, another sinner redeemed from earth! The conscious immediate blessedness of the departed-be he what he may, be his life whatsoever it may have been-who at last, dark, sinful, standing with one foot on the verge of eternity, and poising himself for the flight, flings himself into the arms of Christ-the everlasting blessedness, the Christ-presence and the Christ-gladness, that is the message that the robber leaves to us from his cross. Paradise is opened to us again. The Cross is the true ‘tree of life.’ The flaming cherubim, and the sword that turneth every way, are gone, and the broad road into the city, the Paradise of God, with all its beauties and all its peaceful joy-a better Paradise, ‘a statelier Eden,’ than that which we have lost, is flung open to us for ever.

Do not trust a death-bed repentance, my brother. I have stood by many a death-bed, and few indeed have they been where I could have believed that the man was in a condition physically [to say nothing of anything else] clearly to see and grasp the message of the Gospel. There is no limit to the mercy. I know that God’s mercy is boundless. I know that ‘whilst there is life there is hope.’ I know that a man, going-swept down that great Niagara-if, before his little skiff tilts over into the awful rapids, he can make one great bound with all his strength, and reach the solid ground-I know he may be saved. It is an awful risk to run. A moment’s miscalculation, and skiff and voyager alike are whelming in the green chaos below, and come up mangled into nothing, far away down yonder upon the white turbulent foam. ‘*One* was saved upon the Cross,’ as the old divines used to tell us, ‘that none might despair; and only one, that none might presume.’ ‘*Now* is the accepted time, and *now* is the day of salvation!’

115) Luke 23:43-46

Luke

WORDS FROM THE CROSS

Luk. 23:33 - Luk. 23:46.

The calm tone of all the narratives of the Crucifixion is very remarkable. Each Evangelist limits himself to the bare recording of facts, without a trace of emotion. They felt too deeply to show feeling. It was fitting that the story which, till the end of time, was to move hearts to a passion of love and devotion, should be told without any colouring. Let us beware of reading it coldly! This passage is more adapted to be pondered in solitude, with the thought, ‘All this was borne for me,’ than to be commented on. But a reverent word or two is permissible.

Luke’s account is noticeably independent of the other three. The three sayings of Christ’s, round which his narrative is grouped, are preserved by him alone. We shall best grasp the dominant impression which the Evangelist unconsciously had himself received, and sought to convey, by gathering the whole round these three words from the Cross.

I. The first word sets Jesus forth as the all-merciful Intercessor and patient friend of sinners.

It is very significantly set in the centre of the paragraph [vs. 33-38] which recounts the heartless cruelty and mockery of soldiers and rulers. Surrounded by that whirlwind of abuse, contempt and ferocious glee at His sufferings, He gave back no taunt, nor uttered any cry of pain, nor was moved to the faintest anger, but let His heart go out in pity for all who took part in that wicked tragedy; and, while ‘He opened not His mouth’ in complaint or reviling, He did open it in intercession. But the wonderful prayer smote no heart with compunction, and, after it, the storm of mocking and savage triumph hurtled on as before.

Luke gathers all the details together in summary fashion, and piles them on one another without enlarging on any. The effect produced is like that of a succession of breakers beating on some lonely rock, or of blows struck by a battering-ram on a fortress.

‘They crucified Him,’-there is no need to say who ‘they’ were. Others than the soldiers, who did the work, did the deed. Contempt gave Him two malefactors for companions and hung the King of the Jews in the place of honour in the midst. Did John remember what his brother and he had asked? Matter-of-fact indifference as to a piece of military duty, and shameless greed, impelled the legionaries to cast lots for the clothes stripped from a living man. What did the crucifying of another Jew or two matter to them? Gaping curiosity, and the strange love of the horrible, so strong in the vulgar mind, led the people, who had been shouting Hosanna! less than a week ago, to stand gazing on the sight without pity but in a few hearts.

The bitter hatred of the rulers, and their inhuman glee at getting rid of a heretic, gave them bad preeminence in sin. Their scoff acknowledged that He had ‘saved others,’ and their hate had so blinded their eyes that they could not see how manifestly His refusal to use His power to save Himself proved Him the Son of God. He could not save Himself, just because He would save these scoffing Rabbis and all the world. The rough soldiers knew little about Him, but they followed suit, and thought it an excellent jest to bring the ‘vinegar,’ provided in kindness, to Jesus with a mockery of reverence as to a king. The gibe was double-barrelled, like the inscription over the Cross; for it was meant to hit both this Pretender to royalty and His alleged subjects.

And to all this Christ’s sole answer was the ever-memorable prayer. One of the women who bravely stood at the Cross must have caught the perhaps low-voiced supplication, and it breathed so much of the aspect of Christ’s character in which Luke especially delights that he could not leave it out. It opens many large questions which cannot be dealt with here. All sin has in it an element of ignorance, but it is not wholly ignorance as some modern teachers affirm. If the ignorance were complete, the sin would be nonexistent. The persons covered by the ample folds of this prayer were ignorant in very different degrees, and had had very different opportunities of changing ignorance for knowledge. The soldiers and the rulers were in different positions in that respect. But none were so entirely blind that they had no sin, and none were so entirely seeing that they were beyond the reach of Christ's pity or the power of His intercession. In that prayer we learn, not only His infinite forgivingness for insults and unbelief levelled at Himself, but His exaltation as the Intercessor, whom the Father heareth always. The dying Christ prayed for His enemies; the glorified Christ lives to make intercession for us.

II. In the second saying Christ is revealed as having the keys of Hades, the invisible world of the dead.

How differently the same circumstances work on different natures! In the one malefactor, physical agony and despair found momentary relief in taunts, flung from lips dry with torture, at the fellow-sufferer whose very innocence provoked hatred from the guilty heart. The other had been led by his punishment to recognise in it the due reward of his deeds, and thus softened, had been moved by Christ's prayer, and by his knowledge of Christ's innocence, to hope that the same mercy which had been lavished on the inflicters of His sufferings, might stretch to enfold the partakers in it.

At that moment the dying thief had clearer faith in Christ's coming in His kingdom than any of the disciples had. Their hopes were crumbling as they watched Him hanging unresisting and gradually dying. But this man looked beyond the death so near for both Jesus and himself, and believed that, after it, He would come to reign. We may call him the only disciple that Christ then had.

How pathetic is that petition, 'Remember me'! It builds the hope of sharing in Christ's royalty on the fact of having shared in His Cross. 'Thou wilt not forget Thy companion in that black hour, which will then lie behind us.' Such trust and clinging, joined with such penitence and submission, could not go unrewarded.

From His Cross Jesus speaks in royal style, as monarch of that dim world. His promise is sealed with His own sign-manual, 'Verily, I say.' It claims to have not only the clear vision of, but the authority to determine, the future.

It declares the unbroken continuance of personal existence, and the reality of a state of conscious blessedness, in which men are aware of their union with Him, the Lord of the realm and the Life of its inhabitants. It graciously accepts the penitent’s petition, and assures him that the companionship, begun on the Cross, will be continued there. ‘With Me’ makes ‘Paradise’ wherever a soul is.

III. The third word from the Cross, as recorded by Luke, reveals Jesus as, in the act of dying, the Master of death, and its Transformer for all who trust Him into a peaceful surrender of themselves into the Father’s hands.

The circumstances grouped round the act of His death bring out various aspects of its significance. The darkness preceding had passed before He died, and it bore rather on His sense of desertion, expressed in the unfathomably profound and awful cry, ‘Why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ The rent veil is generally taken to symbolise the unrestricted access into the presence of God, which we have through Christ’s death; but it is worth considering whether it does not rather indicate the divine leaving of the desecrated shrine, and so is the beginning of the fulfilment of the deep word, ‘Destroy this Temple.’

But the centre-point of the section is the last cry which, in its loudness, indicated physical strength quite incompatible with the exhaustion to which death by crucifixion was generally due. It thus confirms the view which sees, both in the words of Jesus and in the Evangelist’s expression for His death, clear indications that He died, not because His physical powers were unable to live longer, but by the exercise of His own volition. He died because He chose, and He chose because He loved and would save. As St. Bernard says, ‘Who is He who thus easily falls asleep when He wills? To die is indeed great weakness, but to die thus is immeasurable power. Truly the weakness of God is stronger than men.’

Nor let us forget that, in thus dying, Jesus gave us an imitable example, as well as revealed inimitable power. For, if we trust ourselves, living and dying, to Him, we shall not be dragged reluctantly, by an overmastering grasp against which we vainly struggle, out of a world where we would fain stay, but we may yield ourselves willingly, as to a Father’s hand, which draws His children gently to His own side, and blesses them, when there, with His fuller presence.

116) Luke 24:1-4

Luke

THE FIRST EASTER SUNRISE

Luk. 24:1 - Luk. 24:12.

No Evangelist narrates the act of Resurrection. Apocryphal Gospels cannot resist the temptation of describing it. Why did the Four preserve such singular reticence about what would have been irresistible to 'myth' makers? Because they were not myth-makers, but witnesses, and had nothing to say as to an act that no man had seen. No doubt, the Resurrection took place in the earliest hours of the first day of the week. The Sun of Righteousness rose before the Easter Day sun. It was midsummer day for Him, while it was but spring for earth's calendar. That early rising has no setting to follow.

The divergences of the Evangelists reach their maximum in the accounts of the Resurrection, as is natural if we realise the fragmentary character of all the versions, the severely condensed style of Matthew's, the incompleteness of the genuine Mark's, the evidently selective purpose in Luke's, and the supplementary design of John's. If we add the perturbed state of the disciples, their separation from each other, and the number of distinct incidents embraced in the records, we shall not wonder at the differences, but see in them confirmation of the good faith of the witnesses, and a reflection of the hurry and wonderfulness of that momentous day. Differences there are; contradictions there are not, except between the doubtful verses added to Mark and the other accounts. We cannot put all the pieces together, when we have only them to guide us. If we had a complete and independent narrative to go by, we could, no doubt, arrange our fragments. But the great certainties are unaffected by the small divergences, and the points of agreement are vital. They are, for example, that none saw the Resurrection, that the first to know of it were the women, that angels appeared to them at the tomb, that Jesus showed Himself first to Mary Magdalene, that the reports of the Resurrection were not believed. Whether the group with whom this passage has to do were the same as that whose experience Matthew records we leave undetermined. If so, they must have made two visits to the tomb, and two returns to the Apostles,-one, with only the tidings of the empty sepulchre, which Luke tells; one, with the tidings of Christ's appearance, as in Matthew. But harmonistic considerations do not need to detain us at present.

Sorrow and love are light sleepers, and early dawn found the brave women on their way. Nicodemus had bound spices in with the body, and these women's love-gift was as 'useless' and as fragrant as Mary's box of ointment. Whatever love offers, love welcomes, though Judas may ask 'To what purpose is this waste?' Angel hands had rolled away the stone, not to allow of Jesus' exit, for He had risen while it was in its place, but to permit the entrance of the 'witnesses of the Resurrection.' So little did these women dream of such a thing that the empty tomb brought no flash of joy, but only perplexity to their wistful gaze. 'What does it mean?' was their thought. They and all the disciples expected nothing less than they did a Resurrection, therefore their testimony to it is the more reliable.

Luke marks the appearance of the angels as sudden by that 'behold.' They were not seen approaching, but at one moment the bewildered women were alone, looking at each other with faces of dreary wonder, and the next, 'two men' were standing beside them, and the tomb was lighted by the sheen of their dazzling robes. Much foolish fuss has been made about the varying reports of the angels, and 'contradictions' have been found in the facts that some saw them and some did not, that some saw one and some saw two, that some saw them seated and some saw them standing, and so on. We know so little of the laws that govern angelic appearances that our opinion as to the probability or veracity of the accounts is mere guess-work. Where should a flight of angels have gathered and hovered if not there? And should they not 'sit in order serviceable' about the tomb, as around the 'stable' at Bethlehem? Their function was to prepare a way in the hearts of the women for the Lord Himself, to lessen the shock,-for sudden joy shocks and may hurt,-as well as to witness that these 'things angels desire to look into.'

Their message flooded the women’s hearts with better light than their garments had spread through the tomb. Luke’s version of it agrees with Mark and Matthew in the all-important central part, ‘He is not here, but is risen’ [though these words in Luke are not beyond doubt], but diverges from them otherwise. Surely the message was not the mere curt announcement preserved by any one of the Evangelists. We may well believe that much more was said than any or all of them have recorded. The angels’ question is half a rebuke, wholly a revelation, of the essential nature of ‘the Living One,’ who was so from all eternity, but is declared to be so by His rising, of the incongruity of supposing that He could be gathered to, and remain with, the dim company of the dead, and a blessed word, which turns sorrow into hope, and diverts sad eyes from the grave to the skies, for all the ages since and to come. The angels recall Christ’s prophecies of death and resurrection, which, like so many of His words to the disciples and to us, had been heard, and not heard, being neglected or misinterpreted. They had questioned ‘what the rising from the dead should mean,’ never supposing that it meant exactly what it said. That way of dealing with Christ’s words did not end on the Easter morning, but is still too often practised.

If we are to follow Luke’s account, we must recognise that the women in a company, as well as Mary Magdalene separately, came back first with the announcement of the empty tomb and the angels’ message, and later with the full announcement of having seen the Lord. But apart from the complexities of attempted combination of the narratives, the main point in all the Evangelists is the disbelief of the disciples, ‘Idle tales,’ said they, using a very strong word which appears only here in the New Testament, and likens the eager story of the excited women to a sick man’s senseless ramblings. That was the mood of the whole company, apostles and all. Is that mood likely to breed hallucinations? The evidential value of the disciples’ slowness to believe cannot be overrated.

Peter’s race to the sepulchre, in Luk. 24:12, is omitted by several good authorities, and is, perhaps, spurious here. If allowed to stand as Luke’s, it seems to show that the Evangelist had a less complete knowledge of the facts than John. Mark, Peter’s ‘interpreter,’ has told us of the special message to him from the risen, but as yet unseen, Lord, and we may well believe that that quickened his speed. The assurance of forgiveness and the hope of a possible future that might cover over the cowardly past, with the yearning to sob his heart out on the Lord's breast, sent him swiftly to the tomb. Luke does not say that he went in, as John, with one of his fine touches, which bring out character in a word, tells us that he did; but he agrees with John in describing the effect of what Peter saw as being only 'wonder,' and the result as being only that he went away pondering over it all, and not yet able to grasp the joy of the transcendent fact. Perhaps, if he had not had a troubled conscience, he would have had a quicker faith. He was not given to hesitation, but his sin darkened his mind. He needed that secret interview, of which many knew the fact but none the details, ere he could feel the full glow of the Risen Sun thawing his heart and scattering his doubts like morning mists on the hills.

117) Luke 24:5-6

Luke

THE FIRST EASTER SUNRISE

THE LIVING DEAD

Luk. 24:5 - Luk. 24:6.

We can never understand the utter desolation of the days that lay betwixt Christ's Death and His Resurrection. Our faith rests on centuries. We know that that grave was not even an interruption to the progress of His work, but was the straight road to His triumph and His glory. We know that it was the completion of the work of which the raising of the widow's son and of Lazarus were but the beginnings. But these disciples did not know that. To them the inferior miracles by which He had redeemed others from the power of the grave, must have made His own captivity to it all the more stunning; and the thought which such miracles ending so must have left upon them, must have been something like, 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save.' And therefore we can never think ourselves fully back to that burst of strange sudden thankfulness with which these weeping Marys found those two calm angel forms sitting with folded wings, like the

Cherubim over the Mercy-seat, but overshadowing a better propitiation, and heard the words of my text, ‘Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen.’

But yet, although the words before us, in the full depth and preciousness of their meaning, of course could only be once fulfilled, we may not only gather from them thoughts concerning that one death and resurrection, but we may likewise apply them, in a very permissible modification of meaning, to the present condition of all who have departed in His faith and fear; since for us, too, it is true that, whenever we go to an open grave, sorrowing for those whom we love, or oppressed with the burden of mortality in any shape, if our eyes are anointed, we can see there sitting the quiet angel forms; and if our ears be purged from the noise of earth, we can hear them saying to us, in regard to all that have gone away, ‘Why seek ye the living in these graves? They are not here; they are risen, as He said.’ The thoughts are very old, brethren. God be thanked that they *are* old! Perhaps to some of you they may come now with new power, because they come with new application to your own present condition. Perhaps to some of you they may sound very weak, and ‘words weaker than your grief will make grief more’;-but such as they are, let us look at them for a moment or two together now.

The first thought, then, that these words of the angel messengers, and the scene in which we find them, suggest, is this-The dead are the living.

Language, which is more accustomed and adapted to express the appearances than the realities of things, leads us astray very much when we use the phrase ‘the dead’ as if it expressed the continuance of the condition into which men pass in the act of dissolution. It misleads us no less, when we use it as if it expressed in itself the whole truth even as to that act of dissolution. ‘The dead’ and ‘the living’ are not names of two classes which exclude each other. Much rather, there are *none* who are *dead*. The dead are the living who have died. Whilst they were dying they lived, and after they were dead they lived more fully. All live unto God. ‘God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.’ Oh, how solemnly sometimes that thought comes up before us, that all those past generations which have stormed across this earth of ours, and then have fallen into still forgetfulness, live yet. Somewhere at this very instant, they now verily *are*! We say, ‘They *were*, they *have been*’. There are no have beens! Life is life for ever. *To be* is eternal being. Every man that has died is at this instant in the full possession of all his faculties, in the intensest exercise of all his capacities, standing somewhere in God’s great universe, ringed with the sense of God’s presence, and feeling in every fibre of his being that life, which comes after death, is not less real, but more real, not less great, but more great, not less full or intense, but more full and intense, than the mingled life which, lived here on earth, was a centre of life surrounded with a crust and circumference of mortality. The dead are the living. They lived whilst they died; and after they die, they live on for ever.

Such a conviction has as a matter of fact been firmly grasped as an unquestionable truth and a familiar operative belief only within the sphere of the Christian revelation. From the natural point of view the whole region of the dead is ‘a land of darkness, without any order, where the light is as darkness.’ The usual sources of human certainty fail us here. Reason is only able to stammer a peradventure. Experience and consciousness are silent. ‘The simple senses’ can only say that it looks as if Death were an end, the final Omega. Testimony there is none from any pale lips that have come back to unfold the secrets of the prison-house.

The history of Christ’s Death and Resurrection, His dying words ‘*This day* thou shalt be with Me in Paradise,’ the full identity of being with which He rose from the grave, the manhood changed and yet the same, the intercourse of the forty days before His ascension, which showed the continuance of all the old love ‘stronger than death,’ and was in all essential points like His former intercourse with His disciples, though changed in form and introductory to the times when they should see Him no more in the flesh-these teach us, not as a peradventure, nor as a dim hope, nor as a strong foreboding which may be in its nature prophetic, but as a certainty based upon a historical fact, that Death’s empire is partial in its range and transitory in its duration. But, after we are convinced of that, we can look again with new eyes even on the external accompaniments of death, and see that sense is too hasty in its conclusion that death is the final end. There is no reason from what we see passing before our eyes then to believe, that it, with all its pitifulness and all its pain, has any power at all upon the soul. True, the spirit gathers itself into itself, and, poising itself for its flight, becomes oblivious of what is passing round about it. True, the tenant that is about to depart from the house in which he has dwelt so long, closes the windows before he goes. But what is there in the cessation of the power of communication with an outer world-what is there in the fact that you clasp the nerveless hand, and it returns no pressure; that you whisper gentle words that you think might kindle a soul under the dull, cold ribs of death itself, and get no answer-that you look with weeping gaze to catch the response of affection from out of the poor filmy, closing, tearless eyes there, and look in vain-what is there in all that to lead to the conviction that *the spirit* is participant of that impotence and silence? Is not the soul only self-centring itself, retiring from, the outposts, but not touched in the citadel? Is it not only that as the long sleep of life begins to end, and the waking eye of the soul begins to open itself on realities, the sights and sounds of the dream begin to pass away? Is it not but that the man, in dying, begins to be what he fully is when he is dead, ‘dead unto sin,’ dead unto the world, that he may ‘live unto God’ that he may live with God, that he may live really? And so we can look upon that ending of life, and say, ‘It is a very small thing; it only cuts off the fringes of my life, it does not touch *me* at all’ It only plays round about the husk, and does not get at the core. It only strips off the circumferential mortality, but the soul rises up untouched by it, and shakes the bands of death from off its immortal arms, and flutters the stain of death from off its budding wings, and rises fuller of life *because of death*, and mightier in its vitality in the very act of submitting the body to the law, ‘Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.’

Touching but a part of the being, and touching that but for a moment, death is no state, it is an act. It is not a condition, it is a transition. Men speak about life as ‘a narrow neck of land, betwixt two unbounded seas’: they had better speak about death as that. It is an isthmus, narrow and almost impalpable, on which, for one brief instant, the soul poises itself; whilst behind it there lies the inland lake of past being, and before it the shoreless ocean of future life, all lighted with the glory of God, and making music as it breaks even upon these dark, rough rocks. Death is but a passage. It is not a house, it is only a vestibule. The grave has a door on its inner side. We roll the stone to its mouth and come away, thinking that we have left them there till the Resurrection. But when the outer access to earth is fast closed, the inner portal that opens on heaven is set wide, and God says to His child, ‘Come, enter into thy chambers and shut thy doors about thee . . . until the indignation be overpast!’ Death is a superficial thing, and a transitory thing-a darkness that is caused by the light, and a darkness that ends in the light-a trifle, if you measure it by duration; a trifle if you measure it by depth. The death of the mortal is the emancipation and the life of the immortal. Then, brethren, we may go with the words of my text, and look upon every green hillock below which any that are dear to us are lying, and say to ourselves, ‘Not *here*-God be thanked, no-not here: living, and not dead; *yonder*, with the Master!’ Oh, we think far too much of the grave, and far too little of the throne and the glory! We are far too much the creatures of sense; and the accompaniments of dissolution and departure fill up our hearts and our eyes. Think them all away, believe them all away, love them all away. Stand in the light of Christ’s life, and Christ’s death, and Christ’s rising, till you feel, ‘Thou art a shadow, not a substance-no real thing at all.’ Yes, a shadow; and where a shadow falls there must be sunlight above to cast it. Look up, then, above the shadow Death, above the sin and separation from God, of which it is the shadow! Look up to the unsetting light of the Eternal life on the throne of the universe, and see bathed in it the living dead in Christ!

God has taken them to Himself, and we ought not to think [if we would think as the Bible speaks] of death as being anything else than the transitory thing which breaks down the brazen walls and lets us into liberty. For, indeed, if you will examine the New Testament on this subject, I think you will be surprised to find how very seldom-scarcely ever-the word ‘death’ is employed to express the mere fact of the dissolution of the connection between soul and body. It is strange, but significant, that the Apostles, and Christ Himself, so rarely use the word to express that which we exclusively mean by it. They use all manner of other expressions as if they felt that the *fact* remains, but that all that made it death has gone away. In a real sense, and all the more real because the external fact continues, Christ ‘hath abolished death.’ Two men may go down to the grave together: of one this may be the epitaph, ‘He that believeth in Christ shall never die’; and of the other-passing through precisely the same physical experience and appearance, the dissolution of soul and body, we may say,-’There, that is death-death as God sent it, to be the punishment of man’s sin.’ The outward fact remains the same, the whole inner character of it is altered. As to them that believe, though they have passed through the experience of painful separation-slow, languishing departure, or suddenly being caught up in some chariot of fire; not only are they living now, but they never died at all! Have you understood ‘death’ in the full, pregnant sense of the expression, which means not only that *shadow*, the separation of the body from the soul; but that *reality*, the separation of the soul from life, because of the separation of the soul from God?

Then, secondly, this text, indeed the whole incident, may set before us the other consideration that since they have died, they live a better life than ours.

I am not going to enter here, at any length, or very particularly, into what seem to me to be the irrefragable scriptural grounds for holding the complete, uninterrupted, and even intensified consciousness of the soul of man, in the interval between death and the Resurrection. ‘Absent from the body, present with the Lord.’ ‘This day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise.’ These words, if there were none other, are surely enough; seeing that of all that dark region we know only what it pleases God to tell us in the Bible, and seeing that it does not please Him to give us more than hints and glimpses of any part of it. But putting aside all attempts to elaborate a full doctrine of the intermediate state from the few Scripture expressions that bear on it, I merely allege, in general terms, that the present life of departed saints is fuller and nobler than that which they possessed on earth. They are even now, whatever be the details of their condition, 'the spirits of just men made perfect.' As yet the body is not glorified-but the spirits of the perfected righteous are now parts of that lofty society whose head is Christ, whose members are the angels of God, the saints on earth and the equally conscious redeemed who 'sleep in Jesus.'

In what particulars is their life now higher than it was? First, they have close fellowship with Christ; then, they are separated from this present body of weakness, of dishonour, of corruption; then, they are withdrawn from all the trouble, and toil, and care of this present life; and then, and not least surely, they have death behind them, not having that awful figure standing on their horizon waiting for them to come up with it. These are some of the elements of the life of the sainted dead. What a wondrous advance on the life of earth they reveal if we think of them! They are closer to Christ; they are delivered from the body, as a source of weakness; as a hinderer of knowledge; as a dragger-down of all the aspiring tendencies of the soul; as a source of sin; as a source of pain. They are delivered from all the necessity of labour which is agony, of labour which is disproportionate to strength, of labour which often ends in disappointment, of labour which is wasted so often in mere keeping life in, of labour which at the best is a curse, though it be a merciful curse too. They are delivered from that 'fear of death' which, though it be stripped of its sting, is never extinguished in any soul of man that lives; and they can smile at the way in which that narrow and inevitable passage bulked so large before them all their days, and after all, when they came to it, was so slight and small! If these are parts of the life of them that 'sleep in Jesus,' if they are fuller of knowledge, fuller of wisdom, fuller of love and capacity of love, and object of love; fuller of holiness, fuller of energy, and yet full of rest from head to foot; if all the hot tumult of earthly experience is stilled and quieted, all the fever beating of this blood of ours for ever at an end; all the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' done with for ever, and if the calm face which we looked last upon, and out of which the lines of sorrow, and pain, and sickness melted away, giving it a nobler nobleness than we had ever seen upon it in life, is only an image of the restful and more blessed being into which they have passed,-if the dead are thus, then 'Blessed are the dead!'

No wonder that one aspect of that blessedness-the '*sleeping* in Jesus'-has been the one that the weary have laid hold of at all times; but do not let us forget what lies even in that figure of sleep, or distort it as if it meant to express a less vivid life than that here below. I think we sometimes misunderstand what the Bible means when it speaks about death as a sleep, by taking it to express the idea that that intermediate state is one of a kind of depressed consciousness, and of a less full vitality than the present. Not so. Sleep is rest, that is one reason for the scriptural application of the word to death. Sleep is the cessation of all connection with the external world, that is another reason. As we play with the names of those that are familiar to us, so a loving faith can venture to play, as it were, with the awful name of Him who is King of Terrors, and to minimise it down to that shadow and reflection of itself which we find in the nightly act of going to rest. That may be another reason. But sleep is not unconsciousness; sleep does not touch the spirit. Sleep sets us free from relations to the outer world but the soul works as hard, though in a different way, when we slumber as when we wake. People who know what it is to dream, ought never to fancy that when the Bible talks about death as sleep, it means to say to us that death is unconsciousness. By no means. Strip the man of the disturbance that comes from a fevered body, and he will have a calmer soul. Strip him of the hindrances that come from a body which is like an opaque tower around his spirit, with only a narrow slit here and a narrow door there-five poor senses, with which he can come into connection with an outer universe; and, then surely, the spirit will have wider avenues out to God, and larger powers of reception, because it has lost the earthly tabernacle which, just in proportion as it brought the spirit into connection with the earth to which the tabernacle belongs, severed its connection with the heavens that are above. They who have died in Christ live a fuller and a nobler life, by the very dropping away of the body; a fuller and a nobler life, by the very cessation of care, change, strife and struggle; and, above all, a fuller and nobler life, because they 'sleep *in Jesus*,' and are gathered into His bosom, and wake with Him yonder beneath the altar, clothed in white robes, and with palms in their hands, 'waiting the adoption-to wit, the redemption of the body.' For though death be a progress-a progress to the spiritual existence; though death be a birth to a higher and nobler state; though it be the gate of life, fuller and better than any which we possess; though the present state of the departed in Christ is a state of calm blessedness, a state of perfect communion, a state of rest and satisfaction;-yet it is not the final and perfect state, either.

And, therefore, in the last place, the better life, which the dead in Christ are living now, leads on to a still fuller life when they get back their glorified bodies.

The perfection of man is body, soul, and spirit. That is man, as God made him. The spirit perfected, the soul perfected, without the bodily life, is but part of the whole. For the future world, in all its glory, we have the firm basis laid that it, too, is to be in a real sense a material world, where men once more are to possess bodies as they did before, only bodies through which the spirit shall work conscious of no disproportion, bodies which shall be fit servants and adequate organs of the immortal souls within, bodies which shall never break down, bodies which shall never hem in nor refuse to obey the spirits that dwell in them, but which shall add to their power, and deepen their blessedness, and draw them closer to the God whom they serve and the Christ after the likeness of whose glorious body they are fashioned and conformed. ‘Body, soul, and spirit,’ the old combination which was on earth, is to be the perfect humanity of heaven. The spirits that are perfected, that are living in blessedness, that are dwelling in God, that are sleeping in Christ, at this moment are waiting, stretching out [I say, not longing, but] expectant hands of faith and hope; for that they would not be unclothed, but clothed upon with their house which is from heaven, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.

We have nothing to say, now and here, about what that bodily condition may be-about the differences and the identities between it and our present earthly house of this tabernacle. Only *this* we know-reverse all the weakness of flesh, and you get some faint notion of the glorious body. It is sown in corruption, dishonour, and weakness. It is raised in incorruption, glory, and power. Nay, more, it is sown a natural body, fit organ for the animal life or nature, which stands connected with this material universe; ‘it is raised a spiritual body,’ fit servant for the spirit that dwells in it, that works through it, that is perfected in its redemption.

Why, then, seek the living among the dead? ‘God giveth His beloved sleep’; and in that peaceful sleep, realities, not dreams, come round their quiet rest, and fill their conscious spirits and their happy hearts with blessedness and fellowship. And when thus lulled to sleep in the arms of Christ they have rested till it please Him to accomplish the number of His elect, then, in His own time, He will make the eternal morning to dawn, and the hand that kept them in their slumber shall touch them into waking, and shall clothe them when they arise according to the body of His own glory; and they looking into His face, and flashing back its love, its light, its beauty, shall each break forth into singing as the rising light of that unsetting day touches their transfigured and immortal heads, in the triumphant thanksgiving ‘I am satisfied, for I awake in Thy likeness.’

‘Therefore, comfort one another with these words,’ and remember that *we* are of the day, not of the night; let us not, then, sleep as do others; but let us reckon that Christ hath died for us, that whether we wake on earth or sleep in the grave, or wake in heaven, we may live together with Him!

118) Luke 24:7-12

Luke

THE FIRST EASTER SUNRISE

Luk. 24:1 - Luk. 24:12.

No Evangelist narrates the act of Resurrection. Apocryphal Gospels cannot resist the temptation of describing it. Why did the Four preserve such singular reticence about what would have been irresistible to ‘myth’ makers? Because they were not myth-makers, but witnesses, and had nothing to say as to an act that no man had seen. No doubt, the Resurrection took place in the earliest hours of the first day of the week. The Sun of Righteousness rose before the Easter Day sun. It was midsummer day for Him, while it was but spring for earth’s calendar. That early rising has no setting to follow.

The divergences of the Evangelists reach their maximum in the accounts of the Resurrection, as is natural if we realise the fragmentary character of all the versions, the severely condensed style of Matthew’s, the incompleteness of the genuine Mark’s, the evidently selective purpose in Luke’s, and the supplementary design of John’s. If we add the perturbed state of the disciples, their separation from each other, and the number of distinct incidents embraced in the records, we shall not wonder at the differences, but see in them confirmation of the good faith of the witnesses, and a reflection of the hurry and wonderfulness of that momentous day. Differences there are; contradictions there are not, except between the doubtful verses added to Mark and the other accounts. We cannot put all the pieces together, when we have only them to guide us. If we had a complete and independent narrative to go by, we could, no doubt, arrange our fragments. But the great certainties are unaffected by the small divergences, and the points of agreement are vital. They are, for example, that none saw the Resurrection, that the first to know of it were the women, that angels appeared to them at the tomb, that Jesus showed Himself first to Mary Magdalene, that the reports of the Resurrection were not believed. Whether the group with whom this passage has to do were the same as that whose experience Matthew records we leave undetermined. If so, they must have made two visits to the tomb, and two returns to the Apostles,-one, with only the tidings of the empty sepulchre, which Luke tells; one, with the tidings of Christ’s appearance, as in Matthew. But harmonistic considerations do not need to detain us at present.

Sorrow and love are light sleepers, and early dawn found the brave women on their way. Nicodemus had bound spices in with the body, and these women’s love-gift was as ‘useless’ and as fragrant as Mary’s box of ointment. Whatever love offers, love welcomes, though Judas may ask ‘To what purpose is this waste?’ Angel hands had rolled away the stone, not to allow of Jesus’ exit, for He had risen while it was in its place, but to permit the entrance of the ‘witnesses of the Resurrection.’ So little did these women dream of such a thing that the empty tomb brought no flash of joy, but only perplexity to their wistful gaze. ‘What does it mean?’ was their thought. They and all the disciples expected nothing less than they did a Resurrection, therefore their testimony to it is the more reliable.

Luke marks the appearance of the angels as sudden by that ‘behold.’ They were not seen approaching, but at one moment the bewildered women were alone, looking at each other with faces of dreary wonder, and the next, ‘two men’ were standing beside them, and the tomb was lighted by the sheen of their dazzling robes. Much foolish fuss has been made about the varying reports of the angels, and ‘contradictions’ have been found in the facts that some saw them and some did not, that some saw one and some saw two, that some saw them seated and some saw them standing, and so on. We know so little of the laws that govern angelic appearances that our opinion as to the probability or veracity of the accounts is mere guess-work. Where should a flight of angels have gathered and hovered if not there? And should they not ‘sit in order serviceable’ about the tomb, as around the ‘stable’ at Bethlehem? Their function was to prepare a way in the hearts of the women for the Lord Himself, to lessen the shock,-for sudden joy shocks and may hurt,-as well as to witness that these ‘things angels desire to look into.’

Their message flooded the women’s hearts with better light than their garments had spread through the tomb. Luke’s version of it agrees with Mark and Matthew in the all-important central part, ‘He is not here, but is risen’ [though these words in Luke are not beyond doubt], but diverges from them otherwise. Surely the message was not the mere curt announcement preserved by any one of the Evangelists. We may well believe that much more was said than any or all of them have recorded. The angels’ question is half a rebuke, wholly a revelation, of the essential nature of ‘the Living One,’ who was so from all eternity, but is declared to be so by His rising, of the incongruity of supposing that He could be gathered to, and remain with, the dim company of the dead, and a blessed word, which turns sorrow into hope, and diverts sad eyes from the grave to the skies, for all the ages since and to come. The angels recall Christ’s prophecies of death and resurrection, which, like so many of His words to the disciples and to us, had been heard, and not heard, being neglected or misinterpreted. They had questioned ‘what the rising from the dead should mean,’ never supposing that it meant exactly what it said. That way of dealing with Christ’s words did not end on the Easter morning, but is still too often practised.

If we are to follow Luke’s account, we must recognise that the women in a company, as well as Mary Magdalene separately, came back first with the announcement of the empty tomb and the angels’ message, and later with the full announcement of having seen the Lord. But apart from the complexities of attempted combination of the narratives, the main point in all the Evangelists is the disbelief of the disciples, ‘Idle tales,’ said they, using a very strong word which appears only here in the New Testament, and likens the eager story of the excited women to a sick man’s senseless ramblings. That was the mood of the whole company, apostles and all. Is that mood likely to breed hallucinations? The evidential value of the disciples’ slowness to believe cannot be overrated.

Peter’s race to the sepulchre, in Luk. 24:12, is omitted by several good authorities, and is, perhaps, spurious here. If allowed to stand as Luke’s, it seems to show that the Evangelist had a less complete knowledge of the facts than John. Mark, Peter’s ‘interpreter,’ has told us of the special message to him from the risen, but as yet unseen, Lord, and we may well believe that that quickened his speed. The assurance of forgiveness and the hope of a possible future that might cover over the cowardly past, with the yearning to sob his heart out on the Lord’s breast, sent him swiftly to the tomb. Luke does not say that he went in, as John, with one of his fine touches, which bring out character in a word, tells us that he did; but he agrees with John in describing the effect of what Peter saw as being only ‘wonder,’ and the result as being only that he went away pondering over it all, and not yet able to grasp the joy of the transcendent fact. Perhaps, if he had not had a troubled conscience, he would have had a quicker faith. He was not given to hesitation, but his sin darkened his mind. He needed that secret interview, of which many knew the fact but none the details, ere he could feel the full glow of the Risen Sun thawing his heart and scattering his doubts like morning mists on the hills.

119) Luke 24:13-27

Luke

THE RISEN LORD’S SELF-REVELATION TO WAVERING DISCIPLES

Luk. 24:13 - Luk. 24:32.

These two disciples had left their companions after Peter’s return from the sepulchre and before Mary Magdalene hurried in with her tidings that she had seen Jesus. Their coming away at such a crisis, like Thomas’s absence that day, shows that the scattering of the sheep was beginning to follow the smiting of the shepherd. The magnet withdrawn, the attracted particles fall apart. What arrested that process? Why did not the spokes fall asunder when the centre was removed? John’s disciples crumbled away after his death. When Theudas fell, all his followers ‘were dispersed’ and came to nought. The Church was knit more closely together after the death that, according to all analogy, should have scattered it. Only the fact of the Resurrection explains the anomaly. No reasonable men would have held together unless they had known that their Messianic hopes had not been buried in Christ’s grave. We see the beginnings of the Resurrection of these hopes in this sweet story.

I. We have first the two sad travellers and the third who joins them.

Probably the former had left the group of disciples on purpose to relieve the tension of anxiety and sorrow by walking, and to get a quiet time to bring their thoughts into some order. They were like men who had lived through an earthquake; they were stunned, and physical exertion, the morning quiet of the country, and the absence of other people, would help to calm their nerves, and enable them to realise their position. Their tone of mind will come out more distinctly presently. Here it is enough to note that the ‘things which had come to pass’ filled their minds and conversation. That being so, they were not left to grope in the dark. ‘Jesus Himself drew near, and went with them.’ Honest occupation of mind with the truth concerning Him, and a real desire to know it, are not left unhelped. We draw Him to our sides when we wish and try to grasp the real facts concerning Him, whether they coincide with our prepossessions or not.

It is profoundly interesting and instructive to note the characteristics of the favoured ones who first saw the risen Lord. They were Mary, whose heart was an altar of flaming and fragrant love; Peter, the penitent denier; and these two, absorbed in meditation on the facts of the death and burial. What attracts Jesus? Love, penitence, study of His truth. He comes to these with the appropriate gifts for them, as truly-yea, more closely-as of old. Perhaps the very doubting that troubled them brought Him to their help. He saw that they especially needed Him, for their faith was sorely wounded. Necessity is as potent a spell to bring Jesus as desert. He comes to reward fixed and fervent love, and He comes, too, to revive it when tremulous and cold.

‘Their eyes were holden,’ says Luke; and similarly ‘their eyes were opened’ [Luk. 24:31]. He makes the reason for His not being recognised a subjective one, and his narrative affords no support to the theory of a change in our Lord’s resurrection body. How often does Jesus still come to us, and we discern Him not! Our paths would be less lonely, and our thoughts less sad, if we realised more fully and constantly our individual share in the promise,’ I am with you always.’

II. We have next the conversation [Luk. 24:17 - Luk. 24:28].

The unknown new-comer strikes into the dialogue with a question which, on some lips, would have been intrusive curiosity, and would have provoked rude retorts. But there was something in His voice and manner which unlocked hearts. Does He not still come close to burdened souls, and with a smile of love on His face and a promise of help in His tones, ask us to tell Him all that is in our hearts? ‘Communications’ told to Him cease to sadden. Those that we cannot tell to Him we should not speak to ourselves.

Cleopas naively wonders that there should be found a single man in Jerusalem ignorant of the things which had come to pass. He forgot that the stranger might know these, and not know that they were talking about them. Like the rest of us, he fancied that what was great to him was as great to everybody. What *could* be the subject of their talk but the one theme? The stranger assumes ignorance, in order to win to a full outpouring. Jesus wishes us to put all fears and doubts and shattered hopes into plain words to Him. Speech to Christ cleanses our bosoms of much perilous stuff. Before He speaks in answer we are lightened.

Very true to nature is the eager answer of the two. The silence once broken, out flows a torrent of speech, in which love and grief, disciples’ pride in their Master, and shattered hopes, incredulous bewilderment and questioning wonder, are blended.

That long speech [Luk. 24:19 - Luk. 24:24] gives a lively conception of the two disciples' state of mind. Probably it fairly represented the thought of all. We note in it the limited conception of Jesus as but a prophet, the witness to His miracles and teaching [the former being set first, as having more impressed their minds], the assertion of His universal appreciation by the 'people,' the charging of the guilt of Christ's death on 'our rulers,' the sad contrast between the officials' condemnation of Him and their own fond Messianic hopes, and the despairing acknowledgment that these were shattered.

The reference to 'the third day' seems to imply that the two had been discussing the meaning of our Lord's frequent prophecy about it. The connection in which they introduce it looks as if they were beginning to understand the prophecy, and to cherish a germ of hope in His Resurrection, or, at all events, were tossed about with uncertainty as to whether they dared to cherish it. They are chary of allowing that the women's story was true; naively they attach more importance to its confirmation by men. 'But Him they saw not,' and, so long as He did not appear, they could not believe even angels saying 'that He was alive.'

The whole speech shows how complete was the collapse of the disciples' Messianic hopes, how slowly their minds opened to admit the possibility of Resurrection, and how exacting they were in the matter of evidence for it, even to the point of hesitating to accept angelic announcements. Such a state of mind is not the soil in which hallucinations spring up. Nothing but the actual appearance of the risen Lord could have changed these sad, cautious unbelievers to lifelong confessors. What else could have set light to these rolling smoke-clouds of doubt, and made them flame heaven-high and world-wide?

'The ingenuous disclosure of their bewilderment appealed to their Companion's heart, as it ever does. Jesus is not repelled by doubts and perplexities, if they are freely spoken to Him. To put our confused thoughts into plain words tends to clear them, and to bring Him as our Teacher. His reproach has no anger in it, and inflicts no pain, but puts us on the right track for arriving at the truth. If these two had listened to the 'prophets,' they would have understood their Master, and known that a divine 'must' wrought itself out in His Death and Resurrection. How often, like them, do we torture ourselves with problems of belief and conduct of which the solution lies close beside us, if we would use it?

Jesus claimed ‘all the prophets’ as His witnesses. He teaches us to find the highest purpose of the Old Testament in its preparation for Himself, and to look for foreshadowings of His Death and Resurrection there. What gigantic delusion of self-importance that was, if it was not the self-attestation of the Incarnate Word, to whom all the written word pointed! He will still, to docile souls, be the Interpreter of Scripture. They who see Him in it all are nearer its true appreciation than those who see in the Old Testament everything but Him.

III. We have finally the disclosure and disappearance of the Lord.

The little group must have travelled slowly, with many a pause on the road, while Jesus opened the Scriptures; for they left the city in the morning, and evening was near before they had finished their ‘threescore furlongs’ [between seven and eight miles]. His presence makes the day’s march seem short.

‘He made as though He would have gone further,’ not therein assuming the appearance of a design which He did not really entertain, but beginning a movement which He would have carried out if the disciples’ urgency had not detained Him. Jesus forces His company on no man. He ‘would have gone further’ if they had not said ‘Abide with us.’ He will leave us if we do not keep Him. But He delights to be held by beseeching hands, and our wishes ‘constrain’ Him. Happy are they who, having felt the sweetness of walking with Him on the weary road, seek Him to bless their leisure and to add a more blissful depth of repose to their rest!

The humble table where Christ is invited to sit, becomes a sacred place of revelation. He hallows common life, and turns the meals over which He presides into holy things. His disciples’ tables should be such that they dare ask their Lord to sit at them. But how often He would be driven away by luxury, gross appetite, trivial or malicious talk! We shall all be the better for asking ourselves whether we should like to invite Jesus to our tables. He is there, spectator and judge, whether invited or not.

Where Jesus is welcomed as guest He becomes host. Perhaps something in gesture or tone, as He blessed and brake the bread, recalled the loved Master to the disciples' minds, and, with a flash, the glad 'It is He!' illuminated their souls. That was enough. His bodily presence was no longer necessary when the conviction of His risen life was firmly fixed in them. Therefore He disappeared. The old unbroken companionship was not to be resumed. Occasional appearances, separated by intervals of absence, prepared the disciples gradually for doing without His visible presence.

If we are sure that He has risen and lives for ever, we have a better presence than that. He is gone from our sight that He may be seen by our faith. That 'now we see Him not' is advance on the position of His first disciples, not retrogression. Let us strive to possess the blessing of 'those who have not seen, and yet have believed.'

120) Luke 24:28-29

Luke

THE RISEN LORD'S SELF-REVELATION TO WAVERING DISCIPLES

DETAINING CHRIST

Luk. 24:28 - Luk. 24:29.

Of course, a chance companion, picked up on the road, is dropped when the journey's end is reached. When these two disciples had come to Emmaus, perhaps arriving at some humble inn or caravanserai, or perhaps at the home of one of them, it would have been an unmannerly intrusion for the Stranger who had met them on the road, and could accompany them there without rudely forcing Himself on them, to have inflicted His company further on them unless they had wished it. And so 'He made as though He would have gone further,' not pretending what He did not mean, but doing what was but natural and proper in the circumstances. But Jesus had a further motive for showing His intention of parting company at the door of the house in Emmaus. He desired to evoke the expression of the desire of His two fellow-walkers that He should tarry with them. Having evoked it, then with infinite willingness omnipotence lets itself be controlled by feebleness, and Jesus suffers Himself to be constrained by those whom, unknown to themselves, He was gently and mightily constraining. 'He *made as though,'* unfortunately suggests to an English reader the idea of acting a part, and of seeming to intend what was not really intended. But there is no such thought in Luke's mind.

The first suggestion that strikes one from this incident is just this: Jesus Christ will certainly leave us if we do not detain Him.

It is no more certain that that walk to Emmaus had its end, and that that first day of the week, day of Resurrection though it was, was destined to close in sunset and evening darkness, than that all seasons of quickened intercourse with Jesus Christ, all times when duty and grace and privilege seem to be very great and real, all times when we awake more than ordinarily to the recognition of the Presence of the Lord with us and of the glories that lie beyond, tend to end and to leave us bare and deprived of the vision, unless there be on our parts a distinct and resolute effort to make perpetual that which in its nature is transient and comes to a close, unless we avert its cessation. All motion tends to rest, and Christian feeling falls under the same law. Nay, the more thrilling the moment's experience the more exhausting is it, and the more certain to be followed by depression and collapse. 'Action and reaction are equal and contrary.' The height of the wave determines the depth of the trough. Therefore Christian people have to be specially careful towards the end of a time of special vitality and earnestness; because, unless they by desire and by discipline of their minds interpose, the natural result will be deadness in proportion to the previous excitement. 'He made as though He would have gone further,' and He certainly will unless His retreating skirts be grasped at by the outstretched hands of faith and desire, and the prayer go after Him, 'Abide with us for it is toward evening.'

That is quite true, too, in another application of the incident. Convictions, spiritual experiences of a rudimentary sort, certainly die away and leave people harder and worse than they were before, unless they be fostered and cherished and brought to maturity and invested with permanence by the honest efforts of the subjects of the same. The grace of God, in the preaching of His Gospel, is like a flying summer shower. It falls upon one land and then passes on with its treasures and pours them out somewhere else. The religious history of many countries and of long centuries is a commentary written out in great and tragic characters on the profound truth that lies in the simple incident of my text. Look at Palestine, look at Asia Minor, at the places where the Gospel first won its triumphs; look at Eastern Europe. What is the present condition of these once fair lands but an illustration of this principle, that Christ who comes to men in His grace is kept only by the earnestness and faithfulness and desire of the men to whom He comes?

And you and I, dear brethren, both as members of a Christian community and in our individual capacity, have our religious blessings on the same conditions as Ephesus and Constantinople had theirs, and may fling them away by the same negligence as has ruined large tracts of the world through long ages of time. Christ will certainly go unless you keep Him.

Then further, notice from my text this other thought, that Christ seeks by His action to stimulate our desires for Him.

‘He made as though He would have gone further.’ But while His feet were directed to the road His heart remained with His two fellow-travellers whom He was apparently leaving, and His wish was that the sight of His retiring figure might kindle in their hearts great outgoings of desire to which He would so gladly yield. It is the same action on His part, only under a slightly different form, but actuated by the same motive and the same in substance, as we find over and over again in the gospels. You remember the instances. I need only refer to them in a word.

Here is one: the dark lake, the rising moon behind the Eastern hills, a figure coming out of the gloom across the stormy sea, and when He reached the tossing fishing cobble it seemed as if He would have passed by; and He would, but that the cry flung out over the dark water stopped Him.

Here are two blind men sitting by the roadside crying ‘Thou Son of David, have mercy upon us.’ Not a word, not even a glance over His shoulder, no stopping of His resolved stride; onwards towards Jerusalem, Pilate, and Calvary. Because He did not heed their cry? Because He did not infinitely long to help them? No. The purpose of His apparent indifference was attained when ‘they cried the more earnestly, Thou Son of David, have mercy upon us.’

Here is another. A woman half mad with anguish for her demon-ridden daughter, calling after Him with the shrill shriek of Eastern sorrow and disturbing the fine nerves of the disciples, but causing no movements nor any sign that He even heard, or if He heard, heeded, the ear-piercing and heart-moving cries. Why was that ear which was always open to the call of misery closed now? Because He wished to bring her to such an agony of desire as might open her heart very wide for an amplitude of blessing; and so He let her cry, knowing that the longer she called the more she would wish, and that the more she wished the more He would bestow.

And that is what He does with us all sometimes: seeming to leave our wishes and our yearnings all unnoticed. Then the devil says to us, ‘What’s the use of crying to Him? He does not hear you.’ But faith hears the promise: ‘Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it,’ though to sense there seems to be ‘no voice nor any that answered.’

Christ has no other reason in any of the delays and trying prolongations of His answers than to make us capable of larger blessing, because delay deepens our longing. He is infinitely wishful to-day, as He was on that Resurrection evening, to draw near to every heart and pour upon it the whole sunlit cataract of the mighty fact that He lives to bless. But He cannot come to us unless we desire Him, and He cannot give to us more of Himself than we wish; and therefore He is obliged, as the first thing, to make our desires larger and fuller, and then He will answer them. ‘He could there do no mighty works because of their unbelief.’

Our faithlessness limits His power; our faith is the measure of our capacity.

Lastly, the text reminds us that Jesus Christ is glad to be forced.

‘They *constrained*’: a very strong word, kindred to the other one which our Lord Himself employs when He speaks about the ‘kingdom of heaven suffering violence, and the violent taking it by force.’ That bold expression gives emphatic utterance to the truth that there is a real power lodged in the desires of humble hearts that desire Him, so as that they can prescribe to

Him what He shall do for them and how much of Himself He shall give them. Our feebleness can in a measure set in motion and regulate the energy of Omnipotence. ‘They constrained Him.’

Do you remember who it was that was called ‘a prince with God’ and how he won the title and was able to prevail? We, too, have the charter given to us that we can-I speak it reverently-guide God’s hand and compel Omnipotence to bless us. We master Nature by yielding to it and utilising its energies. We have power with God by yielding to Him and conforming our desires to the longings of His heart and asking the things that are according to His will. ‘Concerning the work of My hands *command* ye Me.’ And what we, leaning on His promise and in unison with His mighty purpose of love, desire, *that* will as certainly come down to us as every stream must pour into the lowest levels and fill the depressions in its course.

You can make sure of Christ if two things are yours. He will always remain with us if, on the one hand, we wish for Him honestly and really to be with us all the day long, which would be extremely inconvenient for some of us; and if, on the other hand, we take care not to do the acts nor cultivate the tempers which drive Him away. For ‘How can two walk together except they be agreed?’ And how can we ask Him to come in and sit down in a house which is all full of filth and worldliness? Turn the demons out and open the door, and anything is more likely than that the door will stand gaping and the doorway be unfilled by the meek presence of the Christ that enters in.

The old prayer is susceptible of application to our community and to our individual hearts. When Israel prayed, ‘Arise, O Lord, into Thy rest; Thou and the Ark of Thy strength,’ the answer was prompt and certain. ‘This is My rest for ever; here will I dwell, for I have desired it.’ But the divine desire was not accomplished till the human desire opened the Temple gates for the entrance of the Ark.

‘He made as though He would have gone further’; but they constrained Him, and then He entered in.

121) Luke 24:30-31

THE RISEN LORD’S SELF-REVELATION TO WAVERING DISCIPLES

THE MEAL AT EMMAUS

Luk. 24:30 - Luk. 24:31.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the Gospel accounts of our Lord’s intercourse with His disciples, in the interval between the Resurrection and His Ascension, is the singular union of mystery and simplicity which they present. There is a certain air of remoteness and depth over all the intercourse, as if it meant more, and was intended to teach more, than appears on the surface, as I believe it was intended. And yet, at the same time, there is, along with that, in most singular combination, the very utmost simplicity, amounting almost sometimes to baseness and rudeness, as for instance, here. Some poor house of entertainment, possibly, at any rate, some poor man’s house, in a little country village; the company these two talkative, and yet despondent disciples; the fare and the means of manifestation a bit of barley-bread; and out of these materials are woven lessons that will live in the Church in all ages. ‘He took bread and blessed it, and brake.’ These are the words, almost verbatim, of the institution of the Lord’s Supper. They are the words, almost verbatim, with which more than one of the Evangelists describes the miraculous feeding of the four and the five thousand; and it was the old familiar act, expressed by the Evangelist by the old familiar words, that opened the disciples’ eyes, and they knew Him. How simply the process of discovery is told! It was quite natural that a casual stranger upon the road should not say who He was; it was quite as natural that when He entered into the closer relationship of sitting with the disciples at the table, and sharing their hospitality, they should expect, as indeed they did expect, that as they had been frank with Him, He would be frank with them, and they would find out now who this unknown teacher and apparent Rabbi was. And so, as it would seem, in silence, or at least with nothing of any moment, the meal went on, but all at once, at some point in the meal, the guest assumes the position of the master of the house, takes upon Himself the function and office of host, interrupts the progress of the meal by the solemn prayer of blessing; and whilst the singularity of the action drew their attention, perhaps some little peculiarity in His way of doing it, or something else, opened the door for a whole stream of associations and half-dormant remembrances to rush in, and they remembered what they had heard of the last supper,-for these two were not at it,-and they remembered what they had seen,-miraculous feedings; and they remembered no doubt how He had always done with them in the happy old days when He communed with them. At all events, by the natural action of breaking the bread and sharing it amongst them, the subjective hindrances which had stood in the way of their recognising Him dropped away like scales from their eyes, and they beheld Him, and then, without a word, He vanished out of their sight, and the wearied, hungry men girded up their loins and rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the brethren the story.

Now, I think that, taking the event as it stands before us, and especially marking the obviously intended parallelism in expression, and I hare no doubt in action, between former miracles, the institution of the Lord's Supper, and this neither sacramental nor religious meal in the little village-I think we may get some lessons worth pondering.

I confine myself quite simply to the three points of the narrative:-

The distribution of the bread;

The discovery;

And the disappearance.

'He took bread and blessed it, and brake and gave to them, and their eyes were opened, and they knew Him; and He vanished out of their sight.'

I. Look, then, for a moment or two at the thoughts which I think are intended to be conveyed to us by that first point-the action of breaking and distributing the bread.

I have said, incidentally, in my previous remarks, that there is a singular air of remoteness, removedness, mystery, reticence, about our Lord's relations to His disciples in the interval of these forty days; and I suppose that that change from the frankness of His former relations and the close contact in which the Apostles and disciples had been brought during all the previous three years-I suppose that that was intended to be the beginning of the preparation of weaning and preparing them to do without Him altogether. And along with that removedness, there is also, as I take it, and as I have already said, a great depth of significance about the whole of these events which lead people to deal with them as being symbols, types, exhibitions on a material platform of great spiritual truths; and although the habit of finding symbolical meaning in historical events, especially as applied to the Gospels, has been full of all manner of mischief, yet that there is that element is not to be denied; and whilst we have to keep it down and be very careful in our application of it, lest in finding ingenious fanciful meanings, we lose the plain prose, which is always the best and the most important, yet that element is there, and we have to take heed that we do not push the denial of it to excess, as the recognition of it has often been pushed. And so, from these two points of view. I think the thing should be looked at. The plain prose, then, of the matter is this-that at a given point in this humble road-side meal, our Lord having been guest, having been constrained to enter in by the loving importunity of these people, becomes the host, takes upon Himself the position of the head of the household, and in that position so acts as to bring to the disciples' remembrance former deeds of miracles, and the institution of the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, and that was the means of their recognition.

Well, then, if so, I think that we may say fairly that in this breaking and distribution of the bread, there is first of all this lesson-the old familiar blessed intercourse between Him and them had not been put an end to then by all that had passed during these three mysterious days; but they were as they used to be in regard to the closeness of their relationship and the reality of their intercourse. No doubt, in the former years, Christ had been in the habit of always acting as the Head of the little family. When they gathered for their frugal meals, He was the master, they the disciples; He the elder brother, and they gathered about Him. And He assumes the old position; and if we will try for a moment to throw ourselves into their position and to see with their eyes, we shall understand the pathetic beauty-I was going to say the poetic beauty, but perhaps you would not like that word to be applied to the history of our Redeemer-the pathetic beauty of the deed. They had been thinking of themselves as forsaken of Him; the grave had broken off all their sweet and blessed intercourse; they were alone now. 'We trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel.’ He is gone! Even the poor consolation of looking upon the place where He lies is denied us; for whatever may be doubtful this is certain, that the grave is open and the body is not there. And so they felt lost and scattered; and there comes to them this gleam of consolation-I take my place amongst you just as I used to do; ‘I am He that liveth and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore.’ We used to sit together at the table; let that be repeated here once more that you may learn, and all the world through you may learn, that the accident of death, which affects only the externals of society, has no power over the reality of the bond that knits even two human hearts with love together, still less a power over the reality of the bond that binds us to our Master. Death vanishes as a nothing in their intercourse; they stand where they were; the fellowship is unbroken; the society is the same; all that there used to be of love and friendship, of peaceful concord, of true association; it abides for ever!

Thus, heavy with meaning and full of immortal hope may be the simplest act wrought with the simplest materials, when the dead Christ who lives takes His old place in the midst of His disciples, and once again as He used to do, parts the bread between them. And, dear brethren, though it has nothing to do with my present purpose, may this thought not add a wider application to our text; may it not be a comfort and hope to many of us to remember that the grim shadow that stretches athwart our path, and gathers into its blackness so many of our sunny sparkling joys, and takes the light and the movement and the colour out of them, is only a shadow, and that the substance lives in the shadow as it used to live in the sunshine, and passes through the shadow and comes out on the other side, blazing in more than its former lustre, and rich with more than its former preciousness? For all whom we have loved and lost, the death which was a nothing in regard to Christ’s intercourse with His disciples, is a nothing, too, in regard to our real intercourse and sense of society and unity with them. They live in Him, and they are more worthy to be loved than ever they were before. He who has conquered Death for Himself has conquered it for us all; and every true and pure human affection rooted in Him is as immortal as the love that binds souls to Himself. Therefore, let us remember that they sit at His table, and that we shall sit there some day too.

II. Well, then, still further, another idea that I think belongs to this first part of our thoughts as to the profound significance of our Lord's here assuming the office and function of host, is this-we are thereby taught the same lesson that we are taught by His institution of the Communion, and taught by the whole details of His relation to His disciples upon earth-that the true idea of the relation which results from Him and His Presence is that of the Family.

He takes His place at the head of the table; He is the Lord of the household, though it be but a household of two men, and they belong to the family and the society which He founds. Now it seems to me that next to the great lesson which the Lord's Supper teaches us in reference to our individual dependence upon Him, His death as being all our hope and all our life, this is the most important lesson that it teaches-the simplicity of the rite, the fact that it was based upon the Jewish rite, which was a purely domestic one; the fact that our Lord steps into the place of the head of the household by His very presiding at the Passover service amongst His disciples; the fact that He parts the common materials of the common meal and uses them and it as the symbols of His death, and of our life thereby-all that teaches us the same thing which the whole strain of His teaching and the whole strain of the New Testament sets forth-that the Church of Christ is then understood when we think of it as being one family in Him, bound together by the bands of a close brotherhood, relying upon Him as the fountain of its life; having fellowship with one Father through that elder Brother; pledged, therefore, to all fraternal kindness and frankness of communion and of mutual help, and gladdened by the hope of journeying onwards to Him. We cannot, of course, apply the analogy round and round; but of all the forms of human association which Christ has honoured and glorified by laying His hand upon them, and showing that they are symbols of the society that He founds, and of which He is the centre, it is not the kingdom, but the family that is the nearest approach to the Church of the living God.

And you and I, Christian men and women, if we come and sit at that table of our Lord, let us remember that we thereby declare, not only for ourselves that we enter into individual relations of reliance upon Him, and draw our life from Him, but that we pledge ourselves to the family bond, to be true to the brotherhood, that we declare ourselves the sons of God and the brethren of all that are partakers of the like precious faith. The thing has become a word, a name amongst us. I wonder if any of you remember the bitter saying of one of our modern teachers; he says that he found out somehow or other how much less ‘brethren’ in the Church meant than ‘brothers’ out of it. Let us learn the lesson and take the rebuke, and remember that if the Lord’s Supper means anything, it means that we belong to the household of faith, and are members of the great family in heaven and in earth.

III. Well, then, still further connected with this first idea of the lesson and significance of the distribution of the bread, I think we may take another consideration, which is, in fact, only another application of the one I have already been suggesting-Where Christ is invited as a guest, He becomes the host.

They constrained Him to abide with them; they made Him welcome to their rude hospitality. It was little-a hut where poor men lay, a bit of barley-bread. But it was theirs, and they gave it Him; and He entered in and supped with them, and then, in the middle of it, the relations were inverted, and they that had been showing the hospitality became the guests, and the table that had been theirs became His. ‘And He took the bread and gave it to them.’ You have the same inversion of relation in that first miracle that He wrought at Cana of Galilee, where invited as a guest, at a point in the entertainment He provides the supplies for the further conduct of it. You remember the words which contain the spiritual application of the same thought-’Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man open the door, I will enter in and sup with him and he with Me.’ To put away the metaphor, it amounts to this-our Master never comes empty-handed. Where He is invited, He comes to bestow; where He is welcomed, He comes with His gifts; where we say, ‘Do Thou take what I offer,’ He says, ‘Do thou take Myself.’ All His requirements are veiled promises; all His commandments are assurances of His gifts. He bestows that He may receive; He seems to take that He may enrich. They that give to Christ receive back again more than all that they gave, according to the profound words, ‘There is no man that hath left father or mother, or wife or children, or houses or lands, for My sake and the Gospel’s, but shall receive a hundredfold more in this life, and in the world to come life everlasting.’ The Christ that is asked to come in order to receive, abides in order to bestow.

And then there is a second point, going on with the flow of this little narrative before us, about which a word or two may be said. The consequence of this assumption of the position of master, host, bestower is-'Their eyes were opened, and they knew Him.' The discovery of His person follows on the distribution of His gifts.

Now, there is one point to be remarked before I deal with the lessons which I think are capable of being gathered from this part of our subject, and that is, that this narrative gives no sort of support, as it seems to me, to the ordinary notion that, subsequent to the Resurrection, there had passed upon our Lord's corporeal frame any change whatsoever as the commencement of the glorification of His earthly body. If you observe, the course of the narrative takes pains to point out to us distinctly, that whatever may have been the reason why they did not recognise Him at first, that reason was entirely in them, and not at all in Him. It is not that He was changed; it is that 'their eyes were holden'; and when they did recognise Him, it is not that any change whatsoever is recorded as having passed upon Him, but 'their eyes were opened, and they knew Him.' And the same thing may be said, as I believe, about the whole of the appearances, mysterious as they were, of our Lord, in the interval between the Resurrection and the Ascension. I do not think, for my part, [although I would by no means speak with confidence about a matter that is so fragmentarily dealt with in Scripture], but I do not think, for my part, that the narrative gives any support whatsoever to the idea of any change analogous to that which takes place upon us at our resurrection, having begun to take place upon our Lord so long as He remained upon earth. The Ascension and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, in His case, are parts of one process. He was raised with the body with which He was crucified; He ascended up on high, and there the glorification, as far as Scripture teaches, is, I conceive, commenced. At all events, there is nothing in our narrative to support the idea of an incipient transformation having begun with the Resurrection.

But, passing by that, which has nothing to do with my main present purpose, I may notice just one or two considerations in reference to this discovery of our Lord. And the first and main one that I would suggest is this-Where Christ is loved and desired, the veriest trifles of common life may be the means of His discovery. We know not what was the special point which brought dormant remembrance to life again, and quickened the associations of the two, so that they knew Jesus; even as we do not know what was the hindrance, whether supernatural or whether by reason of their own fault, which prevented the earlier recognition; but this at least we see, that in all probability something in the manner of taking the bread and breaking it, the well-remembered action of the Master, brought back to mind the whole of the former relation, and a rush of associations and memories pulled away the veil and scaled off the mists from their eyes. And so, dear brethren, if we have loving, and waiting, and Christ-desiring spirits, everything in this world-the common meal, the events of every day, the most veritable trifles of our earthly relationships-they will all have hooks and barbs, as it were, which will draw after them thoughts of Him. There is nothing so small but that to it there may be attached some filament which will bring after it the whole majesty and grace of Christ and His love. Whether ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all in remembrance of Him, and do all to His glory. Oh, if we had in our inmost spirits a closer fellowship with Him, and a truer relation to Him, we should be more quick of apprehension. And, as in regard to those that we love, when they are away from us, the fold of a garment, some bit of cloth lying about the room, something upon the table, some common incident of the day that used to be done in company with them, may bring a flood of memories that sometimes is too strong for a weak heart, so with the Lord, if we loved Him-everything would be [as it is to those whose ears are purged] vocal with His name, and everything would be flushed with the light that falls from His face, and everything would suffice to remind us of our love, our hope, our joy. Especially let us remember that He has entrusted-with strange humility and with wonderful knowledge of us, and with the truest sympathy and tenderness for our weakness-He has entrusted a large portion of our most spiritual remembrance and recognition of Him to material things. Did it ever strike you what a depth of what I may call Christ’s condescension there lay in this? ‘Take this bread and this wine, and if you will not remember Me because I loved you so well, if you will not remember Me because I died for you, if earthly things and material realities will drive Me out of your thoughts, at least remember Me because and when earthly things and material realities become My agents and My memorials. If you forget the Cross, perhaps a bit of bread will remind you of Me; and I am not too proud to spurn the remembrance that roots itself even in the material things of earth and by such means as that.’ ‘He took the bread and brake it.’ They had listened to all His words upon the road, and it never occurred to them who He was; they had walked beside Him all day long, and even their burning hearts did not make them suspect that it was the Master. It must needs be so-they whom wisdom and truth and His spiritual Presence cannot teach to recognise, may be led to recognise Him by the movement of His hands with the barley loaf, and some intonation of His voice in blessing it. ‘This do in remembrance of Me’ is the word of that deep pity that knows our frame and remembers that we are dust, and is a word of the most marvellous condescension that ever was uttered in human ears.

IV. And then there is the final consideration here upon which I touch but for a moment.

The distribution and the discovery are followed by the disappearance of the Lord, ‘They knew Him, and’-and what? And He let their hearts run over in thankful words? No. ‘They knew Him,’ and so they all went back to Jerusalem happy together? No. ‘They knew Him, and-He vanished out of their sight.’ Yes, for two reasons. First, because when Christ’s Presence is recognised sense may be put aside. ‘It is expedient for you that I go away.’ You and I, dear brethren, need no visible manifestation; we have lost nothing though we have lost the bodily Presence of our Master. It is more than made up to us, as He Himself assures us, and as we shall see ourselves if we think for a moment, by the clearer knowledge of His spiritual verity and stature, by the deeper experience of the profounder aspects of His mission and message, by the indwelling Spirit, and by the knowledge of Him working evermore for us all. His going is a step in advance. ‘If I go not away the Comforter will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him unto you.’ The earthly manifestation was only the basis and the platform for that which is purer and deeper in kind, and more precious and powerful; and when the platform has been laid, then there is no need for the continuance thereof. And so, when He was manifested to the heart He disappeared from the eyes; and we, who have not beheld Him, stand upon no lower level than they who did, for the voice of our experience is, ‘Whom having not seen we love; in whom, though now we see Him not, yet believing, we rejoice with joy that is unspeakable and full of glory.’

And for another reason.-When Christ is discerned there is work to be done. ‘Their eyes were opened, and they knew Him, and He vanished out of their sight; and . . . they rose up that same hour; and returned to Jerusalem’ and said, He was known to us in breaking of bread, and He talked with us by the way. Yes, the vision of Christ binds us to work, and while the more close and intimate and silent communion has its rights and its place in life, it is never to be made a substitute for the active exercise of our Christian vocation to bear witness of Him, and to tell His name to those who need the consolation of His Resurrection, and the joyful news that He lives to bless. So then that meal by the wayside may stand as type and symbol of the way in which we, like the two pedestrians on the road and at the table, may have heart intercourse with Jesus, and may be impelled thereby to labour for Him.

There was another time, after the Resurrection, when in like manner we read that our Lord took bread, and blessed and brake and gave it to them; and that was in that mysterious meal upon the shores of the Galilean Lake, which has always been recognised as having a symbolical meaning-though the exposition and detail have often been exaggerated and made absurd. In the one case it was two travellers who met their Lord; it was in an inn that the recognition took place; it was a brief moment of vision, followed by disappearance, and the disappearance led on to work; but in the other story it was when the morning broke that the Lord was manifest; it was after the night of toil that His form appeared; His words to them were, ‘Bring of the fruits of your labours and lay them upon the beach at My feet.’ And in the light of the eternal morning, after the weary night of toil, they who on earth in their journey and pilgrimage have had Him walking with them as third in their sweet society, and sitting with them in the tents and changeful residences of earth, may expect to find Him waiting for them upon the shore; and, as one says, ‘It is the Lord!’ and another dashes through the water to reach Christ, the invitation to all of them will be, ‘Come and sit with Me at My table in My kingdom; I provide the meal, and you add to it by that which you have caught.’ ‘They rest from their labours and their works do follow them.’ And so ‘they go no more out, but are ever with the Lord.’

122) Luke 24:32

THE RISEN LORD'S SELF-REVELATION TO WAVERING DISCIPLES

Luk. 24:13 - Luk. 24:32.

These two disciples had left their companions after Peter's return from the sepulchre and before Mary Magdalene hurried in with her tidings that she had seen Jesus. Their coming away at such a crisis, like Thomas's absence that day, shows that the scattering of the sheep was beginning to follow the smiting of the shepherd. The magnet withdrawn, the attracted particles fall apart. What arrested that process? Why did not the spokes fall asunder when the centre was removed? John's disciples crumbled away after his death. When Theudas fell, all his followers 'were dispersed' and came to nought. The Church was knit more closely together after the death that, according to all analogy, should have scattered it. Only the fact of the Resurrection explains the anomaly. No reasonable men would have held together unless they had known that their Messianic hopes had not been buried in Christ's grave. We see the beginnings of the Resurrection of these hopes in this sweet story.

I. We have first the two sad travellers and the third who joins them.

Probably the former had left the group of disciples on purpose to relieve the tension of anxiety and sorrow by walking, and to get a quiet time to bring their thoughts into some order. They were like men who had lived through an earthquake; they were stunned, and physical exertion, the morning quiet of the country, and the absence of other people, would help to calm their nerves, and enable them to realise their position. Their tone of mind will come out more distinctly presently. Here it is enough to note that the 'things which had come to pass' filled their minds and conversation. That being so, they were not left to grope in the dark. 'Jesus Himself drew near, and went with them.' Honest occupation of mind with the truth concerning Him, and a real desire to know it, are not left unhelped. We draw Him to our sides when we wish and try to grasp the real facts concerning Him, whether they coincide with our prepossessions or not.

It is profoundly interesting and instructive to note the characteristics of the favoured ones who first saw the risen Lord. They were Mary, whose heart was an altar of flaming and fragrant love; Peter, the penitent denier; and these two, absorbed in meditation on the facts of the death and burial. What attracts Jesus? Love, penitence, study of His truth. He comes to these with the appropriate gifts for them, as truly-yea, more closely-as of old. Perhaps the very doubting that troubled them brought Him to their help. He saw that they especially needed Him, for their faith was sorely wounded. Necessity is as potent a spell to bring Jesus as desert. He comes to reward fixed and fervent love, and He comes, too, to revive it when tremulous and cold.

‘Their eyes were holden,’ says Luke; and similarly ‘their eyes were opened’ [Luk. 24:31]. He makes the reason for His not being recognised a subjective one, and his narrative affords no support to the theory of a change in our Lord’s resurrection body. How often does Jesus still come to us, and we discern Him not! Our paths would be less lonely, and our thoughts less sad, if we realised more fully and constantly our individual share in the promise,’ I am with you always.’

II. We have next the conversation [Luk. 24:17 - Luk. 24:28].

The unknown new-comer strikes into the dialogue with a question which, on some lips, would have been intrusive curiosity, and would have provoked rude retorts. But there was something in His voice and manner which unlocked hearts. Does He not still come close to burdened souls, and with a smile of love on His face and a promise of help in His tones, ask us to tell Him all that is in our hearts? ‘Communications’ told to Him cease to sadden. Those that we cannot tell to Him we should not speak to ourselves.

Cleopas naively wonders that there should be found a single man in Jerusalem ignorant of the things which had come to pass. He forgot that the stranger might know these, and not know that they were talking about them. Like the rest of us, he fancied that what was great to him was as great to everybody. What *could* be the subject of their talk but the one theme? The stranger assumes ignorance, in order to win to a full outpouring. Jesus wishes us to put all fears and doubts and shattered hopes into plain words to Him. Speech to Christ cleanses our bosoms of much perilous stuff. Before He speaks in answer we are lightened.

Very true to nature is the eager answer of the two. The silence once broken, out flows a torrent of speech, in which love and grief, disciples' pride in their Master, and shattered hopes, incredulous bewilderment and questioning wonder, are blended.

That long speech [Luk. 24:19 - Luk. 24:24] gives a lively conception of the two disciples' state of mind. Probably it fairly represented the thought of all. We note in it the limited conception of Jesus as but a prophet, the witness to His miracles and teaching [the former being set first, as having more impressed their minds], the assertion of His universal appreciation by the 'people,' the charging of the guilt of Christ's death on 'our rulers,' the sad contrast between the officials' condemnation of Him and their own fond Messianic hopes, and the despairing acknowledgment that these were shattered.

The reference to 'the third day' seems to imply that the two had been discussing the meaning of our Lord's frequent prophecy about it. The connection in which they introduce it looks as if they were beginning to understand the prophecy, and to cherish a germ of hope in His Resurrection, or, at all events, were tossed about with uncertainty as to whether they dared to cherish it. They are chary of allowing that the women's story was true; naively they attach more importance to its confirmation by men. 'But Him they saw not,' and, so long as He did not appear, they could not believe even angels saying 'that He was alive.'

The whole speech shows how complete was the collapse of the disciples' Messianic hopes, how slowly their minds opened to admit the possibility of Resurrection, and how exacting they were in the matter of evidence for it, even to the point of hesitating to accept angelic announcements. Such a state of mind is not the soil in which hallucinations spring up. Nothing but the actual appearance of the risen Lord could have changed these sad, cautious unbelievers to lifelong confessors. What else could have set light to these rolling smoke-clouds of doubt, and made them flame heaven-high and world-wide?

'The ingenuous disclosure of their bewilderment appealed to their Companion's heart, as it ever does. Jesus is not repelled by doubts and perplexities, if they are freely spoken to Him. To put our confused thoughts into plain words tends to clear them, and to bring Him as our Teacher. His reproach has no anger in it, and inflicts no pain, but puts us on the right track for arriving at the truth. If these two had listened to the ‘prophets,’ they would have understood their Master, and known that a divine ‘must’ wrought itself out in His Death and Resurrection. How often, like them, do we torture ourselves with problems of belief and conduct of which the solution lies close beside us, if we would use it?

Jesus claimed ‘all the prophets’ as His witnesses. He teaches us to find the highest purpose of the Old Testament in its preparation for Himself, and to look for foreshadowings of His Death and Resurrection there. What gigantic delusion of self-importance that was, if it was not the self-attestation of the Incarnate Word, to whom all the written word pointed! He will still, to docile souls, be the Interpreter of Scripture. They who see Him in it all are nearer its true appreciation than those who see in the Old Testament everything but Him.

III. We have finally the disclosure and disappearance of the Lord.

The little group must have travelled slowly, with many a pause on the road, while Jesus opened the Scriptures; for they left the city in the morning, and evening was near before they had finished their ‘threescore furlongs’ [between seven and eight miles]. His presence makes the day’s march seem short.

‘He made as though He would have gone further,’ not therein assuming the appearance of a design which He did not really entertain, but beginning a movement which He would have carried out if the disciples’ urgency had not detained Him. Jesus forces His company on no man. He ‘would have gone further’ if they had not said ‘Abide with us.’ He will leave us if we do not keep Him. But He delights to be held by beseeching hands, and our wishes ‘constrain’ Him. Happy are they who, having felt the sweetness of walking with Him on the weary road, seek Him to bless their leisure and to add a more blissful depth of repose to their rest!

The humble table where Christ is invited to sit, becomes a sacred place of revelation. He hallows common life, and turns the meals over which He presides into holy things. His disciples’ tables should be such that they dare ask their Lord to sit at them. But how often He would be driven away by luxury, gross appetite, trivial or malicious talk! We shall all be the better for asking ourselves whether we should like to invite Jesus to our tables. He is there, spectator and judge, whether invited or not.

Where Jesus is welcomed as guest He becomes host. Perhaps something in gesture or tone, as He blessed and brake the bread, recalled the loved Master to the disciples' minds, and, with a flash, the glad 'It is He!' illuminated their souls. That was enough. His bodily presence was no longer necessary when the conviction of His risen life was firmly fixed in them. Therefore He disappeared. The old unbroken companionship was not to be resumed. Occasional appearances, separated by intervals of absence, prepared the disciples gradually for doing without His visible presence.

If we are sure that He has risen and lives for ever, we have a better presence than that. He is gone from our sight that He may be seen by our faith. That 'now we see Him not' is advance on the position of His first disciples, not retrogression. Let us strive to possess the blessing of 'those who have not seen, and yet have believed.'

123) Luke 24:34

Luke

PETER ALONE WITH JESUS

Luk. 24:34.

The other appearances of the risen Lord to individuals on the day of Resurrection are narrated with much particularity, and at considerable length. John gives us the lovely account of our Lord's conversation with Mary Magdalene, Luke gives us in full detail the story of the interview with the two travellers on the road to Emmaus. Here is another appearance, known to 'the eleven, and them that were with them' on the Resurrection evening, and enumerated by Paul in his list of the appearances of the Lord, the account of which was the common gospel of himself and all the others, and yet deep silence is preserved in regard to it. No word escaped Peter's lips as to what passed in the conversation between the denier and his Lord. That is very significant.

The other appearances of the risen Lord to individuals on the day of Resurrection suggest their own reasons. He appeared first to Mary Magdalene because she loved much. The love that made a timid woman brave, and the sorrow that filled her heart, to the exclusion of everything else, drew Jesus to her. The two on the road to Emmaus were puzzled, honest, painful seekers after truth. It was worth Christ's while to spend hours of that day of Resurrection in clearing, questioning, and confirming sincere minds. Does not this other appearance explain itself? The brief spasm of cowardice and denial had changed into penitence when the Lord looked, and the bitter tears that fell were not only because of the denial, but because of the wound of that sharp arrow, the poisoned barb of which we are happy if we have not felt the thought-'He will never know how ashamed and miserable I am; and His last look was reproach, and I shall never see His face any more.' To respond to, and to satisfy, love, to clear and to steady thought, to soothe the agony of a penitent, were worthy works for the risen Lord. I venture to think that such a record of the use of such a day bears historical truth on its very face, because it is so absolutely unlike what myth-making or hallucination, or the excited imagination of enthusiasts would have produced, if these had been the sources of the story of the Resurrection. But apart from that, I wish in this sermon to try to gather the suggestions that come to us from this interview, and from the silence which is observed concerning them.

With regard to-

I. The fact of the appearance itself.

We can only come into the position rightly to understand its precious significance, if we try to represent to ourselves the state of mind of the man to whom it was granted. I have already touched upon that; let me, in the briefest possible way, recapitulate. As I have said, the momentary impulse to the cowardly crime passed, and left a melted heart, true penitence, and profound sorrow. One sad day slowly wore away. Early on the next came the message which produced an effect on Peter so great, that the gospel, which in some sense is his gospel [I mean that 'according to Mark'] alone contains the record of it-the message from the open grave: ‘Tell my disciples *and Peter* that I go before you into Galilee.’ There followed the sudden rush to the grave, when the feet made heavy by a heavy conscience were distanced by the light step of happy love, and ‘the other disciple did outrun Peter.’ The more impulsive of the two dashed into the sepulchre, just as he afterwards threw himself over the side of the boat, and floundered through the water to get to his Lord’s feet, whilst John was content with looking, just as he afterwards was content to sit in the boat and say, ‘It is the Lord.’ But John’s faith, too, outran Peter’s, and he departed ‘believing,’ whilst Peter only attained to go away ‘wondering.’ And so another day wore away, and at some unknown hour in it, Jesus stood before Peter alone.

What did that appearance say to the penitent man? Of course, it said to him what it said to all the rest, that death was conquered. It lifted his thoughts of his Master. It changed his whole atmosphere from gloom to sunshine, but it had a special message for him. It said that no fault, no denial, bars or diverts Christ’s love. Peter, no doubt, as soon as the hope of the Resurrection began to dawn upon him, felt fear contending with his hope, and asked himself, ‘If He is risen, will He ever speak to me again?’ And now here He is with a quiet look on His face that says, ‘Notwithstanding thy denial, see, I have come to thee.’

Ah, brethren! the impulsive fault of a moment, so soon repented of, so largely excusable, is far more venial than many of our denials. For a continuous life in contradiction to our profession is a blacker crime than a momentary fall, and they who, year in and year out, call themselves Christians, and deny their profession by the whole tenor of their lives, are more deeply guilty than was the Apostle, But Jesus Christ comes to us, and no sin of ours, no denial of ours, can bar out His lingering, His reproachful, and yet His restoring, love and grace. All sin is inconsistent with the Christian profession. Blessed be God; we can venture to say that no sin is incompatible with it, and none bars off wholly the love that pours upon us all. True; we may shut it out. True; so long as the smallest or the greatest transgression is unacknowledged and unrepented, it forms a non-conducting medium around us, and isolates us from the electric touch of that gracious love. But also true; it is there hovering around us, seeking an entrance. If the door be shut, still the knocking finger is upon it, and the great heart of the Knocker is waiting to enter. Though Peter had been a denier, because he was a penitent the Master came to him. No fault, no sin, cuts us off from the love of our Lord.

And then the other great lesson, closely connected with this, but yet capable of being treated separately for a moment, which we gather from the fact of the interview, is that Jesus Christ is always near the sorrowing heart that confesses its evil. He knew of Peter's penitence, if I might so say, in the grave; and, therefore, risen, His feet hasted to comfort and to soothe him. As surely as the shepherd hears the bleat of the lost sheep in the snowdrift, as surely as the mother hears the cry of her child, so surely is a penitent heart a magnet which draws Christ, in all His potent fullness and tenderness, to itself. He that heard and knew the tears of the denier, and his repentance, when in the dim regions of the dead, no less hears and knows the first faint beginnings of sorrow for sin, and bends down from His seat on the right hand of God, saying, 'I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a humble and contrite spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.' No fault bars Christ's love. Christ is ever near the penitent spirit; and whilst he is yet a great way off, He has compassion, and runs and falls on his neck and kisses him.

Now let us look at-

II. The interview of which we know nothing.

We know nothing of what did pass; we know what must have passed. There is only one way by which a burdened soul can get rid of its burden. There is only one thing that a conscience-stricken denier can say to his Saviour. And-blessed be God!-there is only one thing that a Saviour can say to a conscience-stricken denier. There must have been penitence with tears; there must have been full absolution and remission. And so we are not indulging in baseless fancies when we say that we know what passed in that conversation, of which no word ever escaped the lips of either party concerned. So then, with that knowledge, just let me dwell upon one or two considerations suggested.

One is that the consciousness of Christ's love, uninterrupted by our transgression, is the mightiest power to deepen penitence and the consciousness of unworthiness. Do you not think that when the Apostle saw in Christ’s face, and heard from His lips, the full assurance of forgiveness, he was far more ashamed of himself than he had ever been in the hours of bitterest remorse? So long as there blends with the sense of my unworthiness any doubt about the free, full, unbroken flow of the divine love to me, my sense of my own unworthiness is disturbed. So long as with the consciousness of demerit there blends that thought-which often is used to produce the consciousness, viz., the dread of consequences, the fear of punishment-my consciousness of sin is disturbed. But sweep away fear of penalty, sweep away hesitation as to the divine love, then I am left face to face with the unmingled vision of my own evil, and ten thousand times more than ever before do I recognise how black my transgression has been; as the prophet puts it with profound truth, ‘Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more, because of thy sins, when I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done.’ If you would bring a man to know how bad he is, do not brandish a whip before his face, or talk to him about an angry God. You may bray a fool in a mortar, and his foolishness will not depart from him. You may break a man down with these violent pestles, and you will do little more. But get him, if I may continue the metaphor, not into the mortar, but set him in the sunshine of the divine love, and that will do more than break, it will melt the hardest heart that no pestle would do anything but triturate. The great evangelical doctrine of full and free forgiveness through Jesus Christ produces a far more vital, vigorous, transforming recoil from transgression than anything besides. ‘Do we make void the law through faith? God forbid! Yea, we establish the law.’

Then, further, another consideration may be suggested, and that is that the acknowledgment of sin is followed by immediate forgiveness. Do you think that when Peter turned to his Lord, who had come from the grave to soothe him, and said, ‘I have sinned,’ there was any pause before He said, ‘and thou art forgiven’? The only thing that keeps the divine love from flowing into a man’s heart is the barrier of unforgiven, because unrepented, sin. So soon as the acknowledgment of sin takes away the barrier-of course, by a force as natural as gravitation-the river of God’s love flows into the heart. The consciousness of forgiveness may be gradual; the fact of forgiveness is instantaneous. And the consciousness may be as instantaneous as the fact, though it often is not. ‘I believe in the forgiveness of sins’; and I believe that a man, that you, may at one moment be held and bound by the chains of sin, and that at the next moment, as when the angel touched the limbs of this very Apostle in prison, the chains may drop from off ankles and wrists, and the prisoner may be free to follow the angel into light and liberty. Sometimes the change is instantaneous, and there is no reason why it should not be an instantaneous change, experienced at this moment, by any man or woman among us. Sometimes it is gradual. The Arctic spring comes with a leap, and one day there is thick-ribbed ice, and a few days after there are grass and flowers. A like swift transformation is within the limits of possibility for any of us, and-blessed be God! within the experience of a good many of us. There is no reason why it should not be that of each of us, as well as of this Apostle.

Then there is one other thought that I would suggest, viz., that the man who is led through consciousness of sin and experience of uninterrupted love which is forgiveness, is thereby led into a higher and a nobler life. Peter’s bitter fall, Peter’s gracious restoration, were no small part of the equipment which made him what we see him in the days after Pentecost-when the coward that had been ashamed to acknowledge his Master, and all whose impulsive and self-reliant devotion passed away before a flippant servant-girl’s tongue, stood before the rulers of Israel, and said: ‘Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye!’ The sense of sin, the assurance of pardon, shatter a man’s unwholesome self-confidence, and develop his self-reliance based upon his trust in Jesus Christ. The consciousness of sin, and the experience of pardon, deepen and make more operative in life the power of the divine love. Thus, the publicans and the harlots do go into the Kingdom of God many a time before the Pharisees. So let us all be sure that even our sins and faults may be converted into stepping stones to higher things.

III. Lastly, notice the deep silence in which this interview is shrouded.

I have already pointed to the occupations of that Resurrection day as bearing on their face the marks of veracity. It seems to me that if the story of the Resurrection is not history, the talk between the denier and the Master would have been a great deal too tempting a subject for romancers of any kind to have kept their hands off. If you read the apocryphal gospels you will see how eager they are to lay hold of any point in the true gospels, and spin a whole farrago of rubbish round about it. And do you think they could ever have let this incident alone without spoiling it by expanding it, and putting all manner of vulgarities into their story about it? But the men who told the story were telling simple facts, and when they did not know anything they said nothing.

But why did not Peter say anything about it? Because nobody had anything to do with it but himself and his Master. It was his business, and no one else's. The other scene by the lake reinstated him in his office, and it was public because it concerned others also; but what passed when he was restored to his faith was of no concern to any one but the Restorer and the restored. And so, dear friends, a religion which has a great deal to say about its individual experiences is in very slippery places. The less you think about your emotions, and eminently the less you talk about them, the sounder, the truer, and the purer they will be. Goods in a shop-window get fly-blown very quickly, and lose their lustre. All the deep secrets of a man's life, his love for his Lord, the way by which he came to Him, his penitence for his sin, like his love for his wife, had better speak in deeds than in words to others. Of course while that is true on one side, we are not to forget the other side. Reticence as to the secret things of my own personal experience is never to be extended so as to include silence as to the fact of my Christian profession. Sometimes it is needful, wise, and Christlike for a man to lift the corner of the bridal curtain, and let in the day to some extent, and to say, 'Of whom I am chief, but I obtained mercy.' Sometimes there is no such mighty power to draw others to the faith which we would fain impart, as to say, 'Whether this Man be a sinner or no, I know not; but one thing I know, that whereas I was blind now I see.' Sometimes-always-a man must use his own personal experience, cast into general forms, to emphasise his profession, and to enforce his appeals. So very touchingly, if you will turn to Peter's sermons in the Acts, you will find that he describes himself there [though he does not hint that it is himself] when he appeals to his countrymen, and says, 'Ye denied the Holy One and the Just.' The personal allusion would make his voice vibrate as he spoke, and give force to the charge. Similarly, in the letter which goes by his name-the second of the two Epistles of Peter-there is one little morsel of evidence that makes one inclined to think that it is his, notwithstanding the difficulties in the way, viz., that he sums up all the sins of the false teachers whom he is denouncing in this: ‘Denying the Lord that bought them.’ But with these limitations, and remembering that the statement is not one to be unconditionally and absolutely put, let the silence with regard to this interview teach us to guard the depths of our own Christian lives.

Now, dear brethren, have you ever gone apart with Jesus Christ, as if He and you were alone in the world? Have you ever spread out all your denials and faults before Him? Have you ever felt the swift assurance of His forgiving love, covering over the whole heap, which dwindles as His hand lies upon it? Have you ever felt the increased loathing of yourselves which comes with the certainty that He has passed by all your sins? If you have not, you know very little about Christ, or about Christianity [if I may use the abstract word] or about yourselves; and your religion, or what you call your religion, is a very shallow and superficial and inoperative thing. Do not shrink from being alone with Jesus Christ. There is no better place for a guilty man, just as there is no better place for an erring child than its mother’s bosom. When Peter had caught a dim glimpse of what Jesus Christ was, he cried: ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!’ When he knew his Saviour and himself better, he clung to Him because he was so sinful. Do the same, and He will say to you: ‘Son, thy sins be forgiven thee; Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole. Go in peace, and be whole of thy plague.’

124) Luke 24:36-47

Luke

THE TRIUMPHANT END

Luk. 24:36 - Luk. 24:53.

There are no marks of time in this passage, and, for anything that appears, the narrative is continuous, and the Ascension might have occurred on the evening of the Resurrection. But neither is there anything to forbid interpreting this close of Luke’s Gospel by the fuller details contained in the beginning of his other treatise, the Acts, where the space of forty days interposes between the Resurrection and the Ascension. It is but reasonable to suppose that an author's two books agree, when he gives no hint of change of opinion, and it is reasonable to regard the narrative in this passage as a summary of the whole period of forty days. If so, it contains three things,-the first appearance of the risen Lord to the assembled disciples [Luk. 24:36 - Luk. 24:43], a condensed summary of the teachings of the risen Lord [Luk. 24:44 - Luk. 24:49], and an equally compressed record of the Ascension [Luk. 24:50 - Luk. 24:53].

I. The proofs of the Resurrection graciously granted to incredulous love [Luk. 24:36 - Luk. 24:43].

The disciples were probably assembled in the upper room, where the Lord's Supper had been instituted, and which became their ordinary meeting-place [Act. 1:1 - Act. 1:26] up till Pentecost. What sights that room saw! There, when night had come, they were discussing the strange reports of the Resurrection, when, all suddenly, they saw Jesus, not coming or moving, but standing in the midst. Had He come in unnoticed by them in their eager talk? The doors were shut. How had this calm Presence become visible all at once?

So little were they the enthusiastic, credulous people whom modern theories which explain away the Resurrection assume them to have been, that even His familiar voice in His familiar salutation, tenfold more significant now than ever before, did not wake belief that it was verily He. They fled to the ready refuge of supposing that they saw 'a spirit.' Our Lord has no rebukes for their incredulity, but patiently resumes His old task of instruction, and condescends to let them have the evidence of two senses, not shrinking from their investigating touch. When even these proofs were seen by Him to be insufficient, He added the yet more cogent one of 'eating before them.' Then they were convinced.

Now their incredulity is important, and the acknowledgment shows the simple historical good faith of the narrator. A witness who at first disbelieved is all the more trustworthy. These hopeless mourners who had forgotten all Christ's prophecies of His Resurrection, and were so fixed in their despair that the two from Emmaus could not so far kindle a gleam of hope as to make them believe that their Lord stood before them, were not the kind of people in whom hallucination would operate, as modern deniers of the Resurrection make them out to have been. What changed their mood? A fancy? Surely nothing less than a solid fact. Hallucination may lay hold on a solitary, morbid mind, but it does not attack a company, and it scarcely reaches to fancying touch and the sight of eating.

Note Luke's explanation of the persistent incredulity, as being 'for joy.' It is like his notice that the three in Gethsemane 'slept for sorrow.' Great emotion sometimes produces effects opposite to what might have been expected. Who can wonder that the mighty fact which turned the black smoke of despair into bright flame should have seemed too good to be true? The little notice brings the disciples near to our experience and sympathy. Christ's loving forbearance and condescending affording of more than sufficient evidence show how little changed He was by Death and Resurrection. He is as little changed by sitting at the right hand of God. Still He is patient with our slow hearts. Still He meets our hesitating faith with lavish assurances. Still He lets us touch Him, if not with the hand of sense, with the truer contact of spirit, and we may have as firm personal experience of the reality of His life and Presence as had that wondering company in the upper room.

II. Luk. 24:44 - Luk. 24:49 are best taken as a summary of the forty days' teaching.

They fall into stages which are distinctly separated. First we have [ver. 44] the reiteration of Christ's earlier teaching, which had been dark when delivered, and now flashed up into light when explained by the event. 'These are my words which I spake,' and which you did not understand or note. Jesus asserts that He is the theme of all the ancient revelation. If we suppose that the present arrangement of the Old Testament existed then, its present three divisions are named; namely, Law, Prophets, and Hagiographa, as represented by its chief member. But, in any case, He lays His hand on the whole book, and declares that He, and His Death as sacrifice, are inwrought into its substance. 'The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.' Whatever views we hold as to the date and manner of origin of the Old Testament books, we miss the most pregnant fact about them if we fail to recognise that they all point onwards to Him.

Another stage is marked by that remarkable expression, ‘He opened their mind.’ His teaching was not, like ours, from without only. He gave not merely instruction, but inspiration. It was not enough to spread truth before the disciples. He did more; He made them able to receive it. He gives no lesser gifts from the throne than He gave in the upper room, and we may receive, if our minds are kept expectant and in touch with Him, the same inward eye to see wondrous things out of the Word.

Luk. 24:46, by its repetition of ‘and He said,’ seems to point to another stage, in which the teaching as to the meaning of the Old Testament passes into instructions for the future. Already Jesus had hinted at the cessation of the old close intercourse in that pathetic ‘while I was yet with you,’ and now He goes on to outline the functions and equipment of the disciples in the future period of His absence. As to the past sufferings, He indicates a double necessity for them,-one based on their having been predicted; another, deeper, based on the fitness of things. These sufferings made the preaching of repentance and forgiveness possible, and imposed on His followers the obligation of preaching His name to all the world. Without the Cross His servants would have no gospel. Having the Cross, His servants are bound to publish it everywhere.

The universal reach of His atonement is implied in the commission. The sacrifice for the world’s sin is the sole ground of remission of sin, and is to be proclaimed to every creature. Mark that here the same word is employed in connection with proclaiming Christ’s Death as in John’s version of this saying [Joh. 20:23], which is misused as a fortress of the priestly power of absolution. The plain inference is that the servant’s power of remission is exercised by preaching the Master’s death of expiation.

The ultimate reach of the message is to be to all nations; the beginning of the universal gospel is to be at Jerusalem. The whole history of the world and the Church lies between these two. By that command to begin at Jerusalem, the connection of the Old with the New is preserved, the Jewish prerogative honoured, the path made easier for the disciples, the development of the Church brought into unison with their natural sentiments and capacities.

The spirit of the commandment remains still imperative. ‘The eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth.’ A wise and Christlike beneficence will not gaze far afield, and neglect things close at our doors. The scoff at the supporters of foreign missions, as if they quixotically went abroad when they should work at home, has no point even as regards Christian practice, for it is the people who work for the distant heathen who also toil for home ones; but it has still less ground in regard to Christian conceptions of duty, for the Lord of the harvest has bidden the reapers begin with the fields nearest them.

The equipment for work is investiture with divine power. A partial bestowment of the Spirit, which is the Father’s promise, took place while Jesus spoke. ‘I send’ refers to something done at the moment; but the fuller clothing with that garment of power was to be waited for in expectancy and desire. No man can do the Christian work of witnessing for and of Christ without that clothing with power. It was granted as an abiding gift on Pentecost. It needs perpetual renewal. We may all have it. Without it, eloquence, learning, and all else, are but as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

III. Luk. 24:50 give us the transcendent miracle which closes the earthly life of Jesus.

We cannot here enter on the large questions which it raises, but must content ourselves with simply pointing to the salient features of Luke’s condensed account. The mention of the place as ‘over against Bethany’ recalls the many memories of that village where Jesus had found His nearest approach to a home, where He had exercised His stupendous life-giving power, whence He had set out to the upper room and the near Cross. His last act was to bless His followers. He is the High-priest for ever, and these uplifted hands meant a sacreder thing than the affectionate good wishes of a departing friend. He gives the blessings which He invokes. His wish is a conveyance of good.

The hands remained in the attitude of benediction while He ascended, and the last sight of Him, as the cloud wrapped Him round, showed Him shedding blessing from them. He continues that attitude and act till He comes again. Two separate motions are described in verse 51. He was parted from them,-that is, withdrew some little distance on the mountain, that all might see, and none might hinder, His departure; and 'was carried up into heaven' by a slow upward movement, as the word implies. Contrast this with Elijah's rapture. There was no need of fiery chariot or whirlwind to lift Jesus to the heavens. He went up where He was before, returning to the glory which He had with the Father before the world was. The end matches the beginning. The supernatural birth corresponds with the supernatural departure.

We have to think of that Ascension as the entrance of corporeal humanity into the divine glory, as the beginning of His heavenly activity for the world, as the token of His work being triumphantly completed, as the prophecy and pledge of immortal life like His own for all who love Him. Therefore we may share the joy which flooded the lately sorrowful disciples' hearts, and, like them, should make all life sacred, and be continually in the Temple, blessing God, and have the deep roots of our lives hid with Christ in the glory.

125) Luke 24:48-49

Luke

THE TRIUMPHANT END

CHRIST'S WITNESSES

Luk. 24:48 - Luk. 24:49.

Luke's account of the Resurrection and subsequent forty days is so constructed as to culminate in this appointment of the disciples to their high functions and equipment for it, by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Evangelist has evidently in view his second 'treatise,' and is here preparing the link of connection between it and the Gospel. Hence this very condensed summary of many conversations lays stress upon these points-the fulfilment of prophecy in Christ's life and death; the world-wide destination of the blessings to be proclaimed in His name; and the appointment and equipment of the disciples.

The same notes are again struck in the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. The same charge to the disciples, when viewed in connection with Christ’s life on earth, may be considered as its end and aim; and when viewed in connection with the history of the Church, as its foundation and beginning. So that we are following in the line plainly marked out for us by the Evangelist himself, when we take these words as containing a charge and a gift as really belonging to all Christians in this day as to the little group on the road to Bethany, to whom they were first addressed on the Ascension morning. There are, then, but two points to be looked at in the words before us; the one the function of the Church, and the other its equipment for it.

I. The task of the Church.

Now, of course, I need not remind you that there is a special sense in which the office of witness-bearing belonged only to those who had seen Christ in the flesh, and could testify to the fact of His Resurrection. I need not dwell upon that further than to remark that the fact that the designation of the first preachers of the Gospels was ‘witnesses’ is significant of a great deal. For witness implies fact, and the nature of their message, as being the simple attestation to the occurrence of things that truly happened in the earth, is wrapped up in that name. They were not speculators, philosophers, moralists, legislators. They had neither to argue nor to dissertate, nor to lay down rules for conduct, nor to ventilate their own fancies. They were witnesses, and their business was to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. All doctrine and all morality will come second. The first form of the Gospel is, ‘How that Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was raised again the third day, according to the Scriptures.’ First, a history; then a religion; then a morality; and morality and religion because it is a history of redemption.

These early Christians were witnesses in another sense. The very existence of the Church at all was a testimony to that supernatural fact without which it could not have been. We are often told in recent years that the belief in the Resurrection grew slowly up amongst the early Christians. What became of the Church whilst it was growing? What held it together? How comes it that the fate of Christ's followers was not the fate of the followers of Theudas and other people that rose up, 'boasting themselves to be somebody,' whose followers as a matter of course, 'came to nought' when the leader was slain? There is only one answer. 'He rose again from the dead.' Else there is no possibility of accounting for the fact that the Church as a distinct organisation survived Calvary. The Resurrection was no gradually evolved hardening of desire and fancy into fact, but it was the foundation upon which the Church was built. 'Ye'-by your words and by your existence as a community-'are the witnesses of these things.'

But that is somewhat apart from the main purpose of my remarks now. I desire rather to emphasise the thought that, with modifications in form, the substance of the functions of these early believers remains still the office and dignity of all Christian men. 'Ye are the witnesses of these things.'

And what is the manner of testimony that devolves upon you and me, Christian friends? Witness by your lives. Most men take their notions of what Christianity is from the average of the Christians round about them. And, if we profess to be Christ's followers, we shall be taken as tests and specimen cases of the worth of the religion that we profess. 'Ye are the Epistles of Christ,' and if the writing be blurred and blotted and often half unintelligible, the blame will be laid largely at His door. And men will say, and say rightly, 'If that is all that Christianity can do, we are just as well without it.' It is our task to 'adorn the doctrine of Christ,' marvellous as it may seem that anything in our poor lives can commend that fairest of all beautiful things-and to commend it to some hearts. Just as some poor black-and-white engraving of a masterpiece of the painter's brush may, to an eye untrained in the harmony of colour, be a better interpretation of the artist's meaning than his own proper work, so our feeble copies of the transcendent splendour and beauty may suit some purblind and untrained eyes better than the serener and loftier perfection which we humbly copy. 'We are the witnesses of these things.' And depend upon it, mightier than all direct effort, and more unusual than all utterances of lip, is the witness of the life of all professing Christians to the reality of the facts upon which they say they base their faith.

But beyond that, there is yet another department of testimony which belongs to each of us, and that is the attestation of personal experience. That is a form of Christian service which any and every Christian can put forth. You cannot all be preachers, in the technical sense. You cannot all be thinkers and strong champions, argumentative or otherwise, for God's truth. But I will tell you what you all can be. You can all say, 'Come and hear all ye; and I will declare what He hath done for my soul.' It does not take eloquence, gifts, learning, intellectual grasp of the doctrinal side of Christian truth for a man to say, as the first preacher of Christ upon earth said, 'Brother! we have found the Messias.' That was all, and that was enough. That you can say, if you *have* found Him, and after all, the witness of personal experience of what faith in Jesus Christ can make of a man, and do for a man, is the strongest and most universal weapon placed in the hands of Christian men and women. There is nothing that goes so far as that, if it be backed up by a life corresponding, which, like a sounding-board behind a man, flings his words out into the world'; 'Whether this man be a sinner or no I know not'; 'I leave all that talk about heights and depths of argument and controversy to other people, but this one thing I know'-not I *think,* not I *believe,* not I am disposed to come to the conclusion that-but 'this one thing I *know*, that whereas I was blind now I see.' There is no getting over that! 'Ye are the witnesses of these things.' And do not be ashamed of your function, nor slothful nor cowardly in its discharge.

May I say a word here about the grounds on which this obligation to witness rests for us? If Jesus Christ had never said, 'Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature,' it would not have made a bit of difference as to the imperative duty that is laid upon all Christian men; for that arises, not from that command, which only gives voice to a previous obligation, but it flows, from the very nature of things, from the message that we receive from our links with other men and from the constitution and make of our own natures.

It flows directly from the gift that we have received. There are plenty of truths which, *per se*, carry with them no obligation to impart them. But any truth in which is wrapped up the possible happiness of another man, any truth which bears upon moral or spiritual subjects, carries with it the strongest obligation to impart it. We have such large insights into God and

His love as the Gospel gives us, not that we may eat our morsel alone, or merely sun ourselves in the light, and expatiate in the warmth of the beams that come to us, but that we may share them with all around: ‘God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness hath shined into our hearts,’ that we may ‘give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.’

The obligation arises from the links that knit us all together. ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ Why, the question answers itself. If he is *your* ‘brother,’ you are certainly *his* ‘keeper.’ And you cannot shuffle off the obligation by any irrelevant pitting of one field of Christian work against another; still less by any criticism, hostile or friendly, as it may be, of the methods of Christian work, or of the parity and elevation of the character and motives of the workers. Humanity is one, linked by a mystic chain, and every link of it should thrill by a common impulse; and through all the members there should circulate a common life. That great thought is one of the gains that the Gospel has brought us, and in the presence of it and our indebtedness and obligation to every man, woman, and child that bears the form of man, all geographical limits to Christian witnessing seem supremely absurd and incongruous. You cannot get rid of your obligation by saying, ‘I do not care about foreign missions, I go in for home ones.’ And you cannot get rid of it by chiming in an ignorant second to the talk that has been going on lately, carping at or criticising methods of work. It would be a very strange thing if we had hit all at once, in the very beginning of an enterprise, upon the best of all possible methods; and it would be a very strange thing if the mission-field is the only one where there are no lazy workers and selfish motives and unworthy occupants of high places. All that is true about home as it is about other places. But grant it all, and back comes the obligation based upon the nature of the truth that we have received, upon our links with our brethren, and upon our loyalty to our Master, and it peals into the ears of every Christian man and woman: ‘Thou art a witness of these things’; and ‘to this end wert thou born again, that thou mightest bear witness to the truth.’

Ah, brethren! the issues of faithfulness to that high function are sweet and blessed and wonderful. A witnessing Christian will be a believing Christian; for there is no surer way to deepen my own convictions about any moral or spiritual truth than to constitute myself their humble servant to proclaim them. Whosoever is a believer should be an apostle, and if he is an apostle he will be tenfold a believer. There is nothing which will give a man a firmer grasp of the Gospel for his own soul than when he finds that, ministered by his humble efforts, it produces in other hearts the same effects which he finds it working upon himself. There is no page in the great book of the evidences of the truth of Christianity more conclusive than that which in the last century has been written by the experience of Christian missions. Let the objectors, Jannes and Jambres, who withstood Moses, let them do the same with their enchantments, and then we will discuss the questions of the truth of the Gospel with them.

Nor need I do more than remind you of the highest of all blessed issues which is yet to come. 'Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life.' Alas! alas! how many of us professing Christians will have to stand at last without that 'crown of rejoicing' which they wear who, by their poor work and witness, have won some souls to the Master. Do you, Christian men, contemplate entering heaven alone, or bringing your sheaves with you? It will be sad to stand with hands empty then, because they were idle in the days of the seed-basket and the reaping-hook, whilst those that sowed and those that reaped shall rejoice together. 'Ye are the witnesses of these things': see to it that you do your work.

II. And now, secondly, and briefly, note the equipment of the witnesses for their task.

Our Lord here distinguishes two stages in the endowment. Then and there they receive the gift of the Divine Spirit, as is more fully recorded in John's account of these last days, but that gift, rich and precious as it was, was not yet the full bestowment which they needed for their task. That came on the day of Pentecost. Mark the vivid and picturesque word which our Lord here employs: 'Until ye be *clothed* with power from on high.' That divine gift coming down as a vesture, wraps and covers and hides their own weakness, their own naked and poor personality.

I can only say a word or two about this matter. The same collocation of ideas-a witnessing Spirit by whose indwelling energy the Christian community becomes witnesses, is found [and has been explained at length by me in former discourses] in the farewell words of our Lord in the upper chamber. ‘The Spirit of Truth which proceedeth from the Father, He shall bear witness of Me, and ye also shall bear witness because ye have been with Me from the beginning.’

I need only remark here that the only power by which Christians can discharge their work of witnessing in the world is the power which clothes them from above. The new life which Jesus Christ brings and gives to us is the only life which will avail for discharging this office. Our self-will, the old life of nature, with all its dependence upon ourselves, is nought in reference to this task. But when that divine spark enters into men’s hearts, then natural endowments are heightened into supernatural gifts, and new forces are developed, and new powers are bestowed and the earthen vessel is filled with new treasure. Without it-and there is a great deal of so-called Christian witnessing to-day without it-noise, advertising, skill in getting up externals, and all the other unworthy methods which Christian churches sometimes stoop to adopt, are powerless, as they ought to be. You may accomplish a great deal by fussy activity which calls itself Christian earnestness, and has not God’s Spirit in it. But it is no more growth than are what the children call ‘devil’s puff-balls’ which they find in the fields in these autumn mornings; and it will go up in poisonous, brown dust like these when it is pricked.

The one condition of Christian churches doing their Christian work is that they shall be clothed and filled with God’s Spirit. Do not let us rely on machinery; do not let us rely on externals; do not let us rely on advertising tricks which might do very well for a cheap shop, but are all out of harmony with the work that we have to do; but let us rely on this, and on this alone. Holding converse with God and Christ, we shall come out of the secret place of the Most High with our faces glowing with the communion, and our lips on fire to proclaim the sweetnesses that lie within the shrine.

One word more and I have done. This clothing with the Spirit, which is the only fitness of the Church for its witnessing work, is only to be won by much solitary waiting. ‘Tarry ye,’ or as in the original it stands even more vividly, ‘*Sit ye still* in the city . . . till ye be clothed.’ It is because so many Christian workers are so seldom alone with Christ that so much of their work is nought, and comes to nought. To draw apart from outward activity into the solitary place, and sit with Him, is the only means by which we can keep up the freshness of our own spirits, and be fit for His service. Mary was being trained for Martha's work when she sat at Christ's feet; but Martha could not do hers without being 'troubled and careful,' because she was more accustomed to the work than to the communion that would have made it light.

So, Christian friends, behold your task and your equipment. I beseech you, who call yourselves Christ's servants, to lay to heart your plain and unavoidable obligations. If you have found Jesus, you are as truly and as individually bound to proclaim Him as if a definite and direct divine command sounded in your ears. Your possession of the Gospel as the food of your own souls binds you to impart it to all the famished. The call to witness comes as straight to you as it did to the young Pharisee on the road to Damascus when he heard 'Saul! Saul!' called from the sky.

May you and I answer as he did, 'Lord! what wilt Thou have *me* to do!'

126) Luke 24:50

Luke

THE TRIUMPHANT END

THE ASCENSION

Luk. 24:50 - Luk. 24:51. - Act. 1:9.

Two of the four Evangelists, viz., Matthew and John, have no record of the Ascension. But the argument which infers ignorance from silence, which is always rash, is entirely discredited in this case. It is impossible to believe that Matthew, who wrote as the last word of his gospel the great words, 'All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth . . . lo! I am with you alway. . ..' was ignorant of the fact which alone makes these words credible. And it is equally impossible to believe that the Evangelist who recorded the tender saying to Mary, 'Go to My brethren, and say unto them I ascend to My Father, and your Father,' was ignorant of its fulfilment. The explanation of the silence is to be sought in a quite different direction. It comes from the fact that to the Evangelists, rightly, the Ascension was but the prolongation and the culmination of the Resurrection. That being recorded, there was no need for the definite record of this.

There is another singular point about these records, viz., that Luke has two accounts, one in the end of his gospel, one in the beginning of Acts; and that these two accounts are obviously different. The differences have been laid hold of as a weapon with which to attack the veracity of both accounts. But there again a little consideration clears the path. The very places in which they respectively occur might have solved the difficulty, for the one is at the end of a book, and the other is at the beginning of a book; and so, naturally, the one regards the Ascension as the end of the earthly life, and the other as the beginning of the heavenly. The one is all suffused with evening light; the other is radiant with the promise of a new day. The one is the record of a tender farewell, in the other the sense of parting has almost been absorbed in the forward look to the new phase of relationship which is to begin. If Luke had been a secular biographer, the critics would have been full of admiration at the delicacy of his touch, and the fineness of keeping in the two narratives, the picture being the same in both, and the scheme of colouring being different. But as he is only an Evangelist, they fall foul of him for his 'discrepancies.' It is worth our while to take both his points of view.

But there is another thing to be remembered, that, as the appendix of his account of the Ascension in the book of the Acts, Luke tells us of the angel's message;-'This same Jesus . . . shall . . . return.' So there are three points of view which have to be combined in order to get the whole significance of that mighty fact: the Ascension as an end; the Ascension as a beginning; the Ascension as the pledge of the return. Now take these three points.

I. We have the aspect of the Ascension as an end.

The narrative in Luke's gospel, in its very brevity, does yet distinctly suggest that retrospective and valedictory tone. Note how, for instance, we are told the locality-'He led them out as far as Bethany.' The name at once strikes a chord of remembrance. What memories clustered round it, and how natural it was that the parting should take place there, not merely because the crest of the Mount of Olives hid the place from the gaze of the crowded city; but because it was within earshot almost of the home where so much of the sweet earthly fellowship, that was now to end, had passed. The same note of regarding the scene as being the termination of those blessed years of dear and familiar intercourse is struck in the fact, so human, so natural, so utterly inartificial, that He lifted His hands to bless them, moved by the same impulse with which so often we have wrung a hand at parting, and stammered, ‘God bless you!’ And the same valedictory hue is further deepened by the fact that what Luke puts first is not the Ascension, but the parting. ‘He was parted from them,’ that is the main fact; ‘and He was carried up into heaven,’ comes almost as a subordinate one. At all events it is regarded mainly as being the medium by which the parting was effected.

So the aspect of the Ascension thus presented is that of a tender farewell; the pathetic conclusion of three long, blessed years. And yet that is not all, for the Evangelist adds a very enigmatic word: ‘They returned to Jerusalem with great joy.’ Glad because He had gone? No. Glad merely because He had gone up? No. The saying is a riddle, left at the end of the book, for readers to ponder, and is a subtle link of connection with what is to be written in the next volume, when the aspect of the Ascension as an end is subordinate, and its aspect as a beginning is prominent. So regarded, it filled the disciples with joy. Thus you see, I think, that without any illegitimate straining of the expressions of the text, we do come to the point of view from which, to begin with, this great event must be looked at. We have to take the same view, and to regard that Ascension not only as the end of an epoch of sweet friendship, but as the solemn close and culmination of the whole earthly life. I have no time to dwell upon the thoughts that come crowding into one’s mind when we take that point of view. But let me suggest, in the briefest way, one or two of them.

Here is an end which circles round to, and is of a piece with, the beginning. ‘I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world; again, I leave the world, and go unto the Father.’ The Ascension corresponds with, and meets the miracle of, the Incarnation. And as the Word who became flesh, came by the natural path of human birth, and entered in through the gate by which we all enter, and yet came as none else has come, by His own will, in the miracle of His Incarnation, so at the end, He passed out from life through the gate by which we all pass, and 'was obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross,' and yet He passed likewise on a path which none but Himself has trod, and ascended up to heaven, whence He had descended to earth. He came into the world, not as leaving the Father, for He is 'the Son of Man which is in heaven,' and He ascended up on high, not as leaving us, for He is 'with us alway, even to the end of the world.' Thus the Incarnation and the Ascension support each other.

But let me remind you how, in this connection, we have the very same combination of lowliness and gentleness with majesty and power which runs through the whole of the story of the earthly life of Jesus Christ. Born in a stable, and waited on by angels, the subject of all the humiliations of humanity, and flashing forth through them all the power of divinity, He ascends on high at last, and yet with no pomp nor visible splendour to the world, but only in the presence of a handful of loving hearts, choosing some dimple of the hill where its folds hid them from the city. As He came quietly and silently into the world, so quietly and silently He passed thence. In this connection there is more than the picturesque contrast between the rapture of Elijah, with its whirlwind, and chariot of fire and horses of fire, and the calm, slow rising, by no external medium raised, of the Christ. It was fit that the mortal should be swept up into the unfamiliar heaven by the pomp of angels and the chariot of fire. It was fit that when Jesus ascended to His 'own calm home, His habitation from eternity,' there should be nothing visible but His own slowly rising form, with the hands uplifted, to shed benediction on the heads of the gazers beneath.

In like manner, regarding the Ascension as an end, may we not say that it is the seal of heaven impressed on the sacrifice of the Cross? 'Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a Name, which is above every name; that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow.' We find in that intimate connection between the Cross and the Ascension, the key to the deep saying which carries references to both in itself, when the Lord spoke of Himself as being lifted up and drawing all men unto Him. The original primary reference no doubt was to His elevation on the Cross, 'as Moses lifted up the serpent.' But the final, and at the time of its being spoken, the mysterious, reference was to the fact that in descending to the depth of humiliation He was rising to the height of glory. The zenith of the Ascension is the rebound from the nadir of the Cross. The lowliness of the stoop measures the loftiness of the elevation, and the Son of Man was glorified at the moment when the Son of Man was most profoundly abased. The Cross and the Ascension, if I might use so violent a figure, are like the twin stars, of which the heavens present some examples, one dark and lustreless, one flashing with radiancy of light, but knit together by an invisible vinculum, and revolving round a common centre. When He 'parted from them, and was carried up into heaven,' He ended the humiliation which caused the elevation.

And then, again, I might suggest that, regarded in its aspect as an end, this Ascension is also the culmination and the natural conclusion of the Resurrection. As I have said, the Scripture point of view with reference to these two is not that they are two, but that the one is the starting point of the line of which the other is the goal. The process which began when He rose from the dead, whatever view we may take of the condition of His earthly life during the forty days of parenthesis, could have no rational and intelligible ending, except the Ascension. Thus we should think of it not only as the end of a sweet friendship, but as the end of the gracious manifestation of the earthly life, the counterpart of the Incarnation and descent to earth, the end of the Cross and the culmination of the Resurrection. The Son of Man, the same that also descended into the lowest parts of the earth, ascended up where He was before.

Now let us turn to the other aspect which the Evangelist gives, when He ceases to be an Evangelist, and becomes a Church Historian. *Then* he considers

II. The Ascension as a beginning.

The place which it holds in the Acts of the Apostles explains the point of view from which it is to be regarded. It is the foundation of everything that the writer has afterwards to say. It is the basis of the Church. It is the ground of all the activity which Christ's servants put forth. Not only its place explains this aspect of it, but the very first words of the book itself do the same. 'The former treatise have I made . . . of all that Jesus began both to do and teach'-and now I am to tell you of an Ascension, and of all that Jesus continued to do and teach. So that the book is the history of the work of the Lord, who was able to do that work, just because He had ascended up on high. The same impression is produced if we ponder the conversation which precedes the account of the Ascension in the book of Acts, which, though it touches the same topics as are touched by the words that precede the account in the Gospel, yet presents them in a different aspect, and suggests the endowments with which the Christian community is to be invested, and the work which therefore it is to do, in consequence of the Ascension of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Peter had caught that thought when, on the day of Pentecost, he said, 'He, being exalted to the right hand of the Father, hath shed forth this which ye see and hear,' and throughout the whole book the same point of view is kept up. 'The work that is done upon earth He doeth it all Himself.'

So there is in *this* narrative nothing about parting, there is nothing about blessing. There is simply the ascending up and the significant addition of the reception into the cloud, which, whilst He was yet plainly visible, and not dwindled by distance into a speck, received Him out of their sight. The cloud was the symbol of the Divine Presence, which had hung over the Tabernacle, which had sat between the cherubim, which had wrapped the shepherds and the angels on the hillside, which had come down in its brightness on the Mount of Transfiguration, and which now, as the symbol of the Divine Presence, received the ascending Lord, in token to the men that stood gazing up into heaven, that He had passed to the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Thus we have to think of that Ascension as being the groundwork and foundation of all the world-wide and age-long energy which the living Christ is exercising to-day. As one of the other Evangelists, or at least, the appendix to his gospel, puts it, He ascended up on high, and 'they went everywhere preaching the word, the Lord also working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.' It is the ascended Christ who sends the Spirit upon men; it is the ascended Christ who opens men's hearts to hear; it is the ascended Christ who sends forth His messengers to the Gentiles; it is the ascended Christ who, to-day, is the energy of all the Church's powers, the whiteness of all the Church's purity, the vitality of all the Church’s life. He lives, and therefore, there is a Christian community on the face of the earth. He lives, and therefore it will never die.

So we, too, have to look to that risen Lord as being the power by which alone any of us can do either great or small work in His Church. That Ascension is symbolically put as being to ‘the right hand of God.’ What is the right hand of God? The divine omnipotence. Where is it? Everywhere. What does sitting at the right hand of God mean? Wielding the powers of omnipotence. And so He says, ‘All power is given unto Me’; and He is working a work to-day, wider in its aspects than, though it be the application and consequence of, the work upon the Cross. He cried there, ‘It is finished!’ but ‘the work of the ascended Jesus’ will never be finished until ‘the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ.’

There are other aspects of His work in heaven which space will not allow me to dwell upon, though I cannot but mention them. By the Ascension Christ begins to prepare a place for us. How could any of us stand in the presence of that eternal Light if He were not there? We should be like some savage or rustic swept up suddenly and put down in the middle of the glittering ring of courtiers round a throne, unless we could lift our eyes and recognise a known and loving face there. Where Christ is, I can be. He has taken one human nature up into the Glory, and other human natures will therefore find in it a home.

The ascended Christ, to use the symbolism which one of the New Testament writers employs for illustration of a thought far greater than the symbol-has like a High Priest passed within the veil, ‘there to appear in the presence of God for us.’ And the intercession which is far more than petition, and is the whole action of that dear Lord who identifies as with Himself, and whose mighty work is ever present before the divine mind as an element in His dealings, that intercession is being carried on for ever for us all. So, ‘set your affection on things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.’ So, expect His help in your work, and do the work which He has left you to carry on here. So, face death and the dim kingdoms beyond, without quiver and without doubt, assured that where the treasure is, there the heart will be also; and that where the Master is, there the servants who follow in His steps will be also at last.

And now there is the third aspect here of

III. The Ascension as being the pledge of the return.

The two men in white apparel that stood by gently rebuked the gazers for gazing into heaven. They would not have rebuked them for gazing, if they could have seen Him, but to look into the empty heaven was useless. And they added the reason why the heavens need not be looked at, as long as there is the earth to stand on: ‘For this same Jesus whom ye have seen go into heaven shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go.’ Note the emphatic declaration of identity; ‘this *same* Jesus.’ Note the use of the simple human name; ‘this same *Jesus*,’ and recall the thoughts that cluster round it, of the ascended humanity, and the perpetual humanity of the ascended Lord, ‘the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever,’ Note also the strong assertion, of visible, corporeal return: ‘Shall so come in *like* manner as ye have seen Him go.’ That return is no metaphor, no mere piece of rhetoric, it is not to be eviscerated of its contents by being taken as a synonym for the diffusion of His influence all over a regenerated race, but it points to the return of the Man Jesus locally, corporeally, visibly. ‘We believe that Thou shalt come to be our Judge’; we believe that Thou wilt come to take Thy servants home.

The world has not seen the last of Jesus Christ. Such an Ascension, after such a life, cannot be the end of Him. ‘As it is appointed unto all men once to die, and after death the Judgment, so Christ also, having been once offered to bear the sins of many, shall appear the second time, without sin unto salvation.’ As inevitably as for sinful human nature judgment follows death, so inevitably for the sinless Man, who is the sacrifice for the world’s sins, His judicial return will follow His atoning work, and He will come again, having received the Kingdom, to take account of His servants, and to perfect their possession of the salvation which by His Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension, He wrought for the world.

Therefore, brethren, one sweet face, and one great fact-the face of the Christ, the fact of the Cross-should fill the past. One sweet face, one great fact-the face of the Christ, the fact of His Presence with us all the days-should fill the present. One regal face, one great hope, should fill the future; the face of the King that sitteth upon the throne, the hope that He will come again, and 'so we shall be ever with the Lord.'

END OF VOL. II.

127) Luke 24:51

2 Kings **- Luke**

WAS, IS, IS TO COME

THE ASCENSION

THE TRIUMPHANT END

THE TRANSLATION OF ELIJAH AND THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST

2Ki. 2:11. - Luk. 24:51.

These two events, the translation of Elijah and the Ascension of our Lord, have sometimes been put side by side in order to show that the latter narrative is nothing but a 'variant' of the former. See, it is said, the source of your New Testament story is only the old legend shaped anew by the wistful regrets of the early disciples. But to me it seems that the simple comparison of the two narratives is sufficient to bring out such fundamental difference in the ideas which they respectively embody as amount to opposition, and make any such theory of the origin of the latter absurdly improbable, I could wish no better foil for the history of the Ascension than the history of Elijah's rapture. The comparison brings out contrasts at every step, and there is no readier way of throwing into strong relief the meaning and purpose of the former, than holding up beside it the story of the latter. The real parallel makes the divergences the more remarkable, for likeness sharpens our perception of unlikeness, and no contrast is so forcible as the contrast of things that correspond. I am much mistaken if we shall not find almost every truth of importance connected with our Lord's Ascension emphasised for us by the comparison to which we now proceed.

I. The first point which may be mentioned is the contrast between the manner of Elijah’s translation, and that of our Lord’s Ascension.

It is perhaps not without significance that the place of the one event was on the uplands or in some of the rocky gorges beyond Jordan, and that of the other, the slopes of Olivet above Bethany. The lonely prophet, who had burst like a meteor on Israel from the solitudes of Gilead, whose fervour had ever and again been rekindled by return to the wilderness, whose whole career had isolated him from men, found the fitting place for that last wonder amidst the stern silence where he had so often sought asylum and inspiration. He was close to the scenes of mighty events in the past. There, on that overhanging peak, the lawgiver whose work he was continuing, and with whom he was to be so strangely associated on the Mount of Transfiguration, had made himself ready for his lonely grave. Here at his feet, the river had parted for the victorious march of Israel. Away down on his horizon the sunshine gleamed on the waters of the Dead Sea; and thus, on his native soil, surrounded by memorials of the Law which he laboured to restore, and of the victories which he would fain have brought back, and of the judgments which he saw again impending over Israel, the stern, solitary ascetic, the prophet of righteousness, whose single arm stayed the downward course of a nation, passed from his toil and his warfare.

What a different set of associations cluster round the place of Christ’s Ascension-’Bethany,’ or, as it is more particularly specified in the Acts, ‘Olivet’! In the very heart of the land, close by and yet out of sight of the great city, in no wild solitude, but perhaps in some dimple of the hill, neither shunning nor courting spectators, with the quiet home where He had rested so often in the little village at their feet there, and Gethsemane a few furlongs off, in such scenes did the Christ ‘whose delights were with the sons of men,’ and His life lived in closest companionship with His brethren, choose the place whence He should ‘ascend to their Father and His Father.’ Nor perhaps was it without a meaning that the Mount which received the last print of His ascending footstep was that which a mysterious prophecy designated as destined to receive the first print of the footstep of the Lord coming at a future day to end the long warfare with evil.

But more important than the localities is the contrasted manner of the two ascents. The prophet's end was like the man. It was fitting that he should be swept up the skies in tempest and fire. The impetuosity of his nature, and the stormy energy of his career, had already been symbolised in the mighty and strong wind which rent the rocks, and in the fire that followed the earthquake; and similarly nothing could be more appropriate than that sudden rapture in storm and whirlwind, escorted by the flaming chivalry of heaven.

Nor is it only as appropriate to the character of the prophet and his work that this tempestuous translation is noteworthy. It also suggests very plainly that Elijah was lifted to the skies by power acting on him from without. He did not ascend; he was carried up; the earthly frame and the human nature had no power to rise. 'No man hath ascended into heaven.' The two men of whom the Old Testament speaks were alike in this, that 'God *took* them.' The tempest and the fiery chariot tell us how great was the exercise of divine power which bore the gross mortality thither, and how unfamiliar was the sphere into which it passed.

How full of the very spirit of Christ's whole life is the contrasted manner of His Ascension! The silent gentleness, which did not strive nor cry nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets, marks Him even in that hour of lofty and transcendent triumph. There is no outward sign to accompany His slow upward movement through the quiet air. No blaze of fiery chariots, nor agitation of tempest is needed to bear Him heavenwards. The outstretched hands drop the dew of His benediction on the little company, and so He floats upward, His own will and indwelling power the royal chariot which bears Him, and calmly 'leaves the world and goes unto the Father.' The slow, continuous movement of ascent is emphatically made prominent in the brief narratives, both by the phrase in Luke, 'He was carried up,' which expresses continuous leisurely motion, and by the picture in the Acts, of the disciples gazing into heaven 'as He went up,' in which latter word is brought out, not only the slowness of the movement, but its origin in His own will and its execution by His own power.

Nor is this absence of any vehicle or external agency destroyed by the fact that 'a cloud' received Him out of their sight, for its purpose was not to raise Him heavenward, but to hide Him from the gazers' eyes, that He might not seem to them to dwindle into distance, but that their last look and memory might be of His clearly discerned and loving face. Possibly, too, it may be intended to remind us of the cloud which guided Israel, the glory which dwelt between the cherubim, the cloud which overshadowed the Mount of Transfiguration, and to set forth a symbol of the Divine Presence welcoming to itself, His battle fought, the Son of His love.

Be that as it may, the manner of our Lord's Ascension by His own inherent power is brought into boldest relief when contrasted with Elijah's rapture, and is evidently the fitting expression, as it is the consequence, of His sole and singular divine nature. It accords with His own mode of reference to the Ascension, while He was on earth, which ever represents Him not as *being taken*, but as *going*: 'I leave the world and go to the Father.' 'I ascend to My Father and your Father.' The highest hope of the devoutest souls before Him had been, 'Thou wilt afterwards take me to glory.' The highest hope of devout souls since Him has been, 'We shall be caught up to meet the Lord.' But this Man ever speaks of Himself as able when He will, by His own power, to rise where no man hath ascended. His divine nature and pre-existence shine clearly forth, and as we stand gazing at Him blessing the world as He rises into the heavens, we know that we are looking on no mere mysterious elevation of a mortal to the skies, but are beholding the return of the Incarnate Lord, who willed to tarry among our earthly tabernacles for a time, to the glory where He was before, 'His own calm home, His habitation from eternity.'

II. Another striking point of contrast embraces the relation which these two events respectively bear to the life's work which had preceded them.

The falling mantle of Elijah has become a symbol known to all the world, for the transference of unfinished tasks and the appointment of successors to departed greatness. Elisha asked that he might have a double portion of his master's spirit, not meaning twice as much as his master had had, but the eldest son's share of the father's possessions, the double of the other children's portion. And, though his master had no power to bestow the gift, and had to reply as one who has nothing that he has not received, and cannot dispose of the grace that dwells in him, the prayer was answered, and the feebler nature of Elisha was fitted for the continuance of the work which Elijah left undone.

The mantle that passed from one to the other was the symbol of office and authority transferred; the functions were the same, whilst the holders had changed. The sons of the prophets bow before the new master; ‘the spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha.’

So the world goes on. Man after man serves his generation by the will of God, and is gathered to his fathers; and a new arm grasps the mantle to smite Jordan, and a new voice speaks from his empty place, and men recognise the successor, and forget the predecessor.

We turn to Christ’s Ascension, and there we meet with nothing analogous to this transference of office. No mantle falling from His shoulders lights on any of that group, none are hailed as His successors. What He has done bears and needs no repetition whilst time shall roll, whilst eternity shall last. His work is unique: ‘the help that is done on earth, He doeth it all Himself.’ His Ascension completed the witness of heaven, begun at His resurrection, that ‘He has offered one sacrifice for sins, for ever.’ He has left no unfinished work which another may perfect. He has done no work which another may do again for new generations. He has spoken all truth, and none may add to His words. He has fulfilled all righteousness, and none may better His pattern. He has borne all the world’s sin, and no time can waste the power of that sacrifice, nor any man add to its absolute sufficiency. This King of men wears a crown to which there is no heir. This Priest has a priesthood which passes to no other. This ‘Prophet’ does ‘live for ever,’ The world sees all other guides and helpers pass away, and every man’s work is caught up by other hands and carried on after he drops it, and the short memories and shorter gratitudes of men turn to the rising sun; but one Name remains undimmed by distance, and one work remains unapproached and unapproachable, and one Man remains whose office none other can hold, whose bow none but He can bend, whose mantle none can wear. Christ has ascended up on high and left a finished work for all men to trust, for no man to continue.

III. Whilst our Lord’s Ascension is thus marked as the seal of a work in which He has no successor, it is also emphatically set forth, by contrast with

Elijah’s translation, as the transition to a continuous energy for and in the world.

Clearly the other narrative derives all its pathos from the thought that Elijah’s work is done. His task is over, and nothing more is to be hoped for from him. But that same absence from the history of Christ’s Ascension, of any hint of a successor, to which we have referred in the previous remarks, has an obvious bearing on His present relation to the world as well as on the completeness of His unique past work.

When Christ ascended up on high, He relinquished nothing of His activity for us, but only cast it into a new form, which in some sense is yet higher than that which it took on earth. His work for the world is in one aspect completed on the Cross, but in another it will never be completed until all the blessings which that Cross has lodged in the midst of humanity, have reached their widest possible diffusion and their highest possible development. Long ages ago He cried, ‘It is finished,’ but we may be far yet from the time when He shall say, ‘It is done’; and for all the slow years between His own word gives us the law of His activity, ‘My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.’

Christ’s Ascension is no withdrawal of the Captain of our salvation from the field where we are left to fight, nor has He gone up to the mountain, leaving us alone to tug at the oar, and shiver in the cold night air. True, there may seem a strange contrast between the present condition of the Lord who ‘was received up into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God,’ and that of the servants wandering through the world on *His* business; but the contrast is harmonised by the next words, ‘the Lord also working with them.’ Yes, He has gone up to sit at the right hand of God. That session at God’s right hand to which the Ascension is chiefly of importance as the transition, means the repose of a perfected redemption, the communion of the Son with the Father, the exercise of all the omnipotence of God, the administration of the world’s history. He has ascended that He might fill all things, that He might pour out His Spirit upon us, that the path to God may be trodden by our lame feet, that the whole resources of the divine nature may be wielded by the hands that were nailed to the Cross, that the mighty purpose of salvation may be fulfilled.

Elijah knew not whether his spirit could descend upon his follower. But Christ, though, as we have said, He left no legacy of falling mantle to any, left His Spirit to His people. What Elisha gained, Elijah lost. What Elisha desired, Elijah could not give nor guarantee. How firm and assured beside Elijah's dubious 'Thou hast asked a hard thing,' and his 'If thou see me, it shall be so,' is Christ's 'It is expedient for you that I go away. For if I go not away the Comforter will not come, but if I depart, I will send Him unto you.'

Manifold are the forms of that new and continuous activity of Christ into which He passed when He left the earth: and as we contrast these with the utter helplessness any longer to counsel, rebuke or save, to which death reduces those who love us best, and to which even his glorious rapture into the heavens brought the strong prophet of fire, we can take up, with a new depth of meaning, the ancient words that tell of Christ's exclusive prerogative of succouring and inspiring from within the veil: 'Thou hast ascended on high; Thou hast led captivity captive; Thou hast received gifts for men.'

IV. The Ascension of Christ is still further set forth, in its very circumstances, by contrast with Elijah's translation, as bearing on the hopes of humanity for the future.

The prophet is caught up to the glory and repose for himself alone, and the sole share which the gazing follower or the sons of the prophets straining their eyes there at Jericho, had in his triumph, was a deepened conviction of his prophetic mission, and perhaps some clearer faith in a future life. Their wonder and sorrow, Elisha's immediate exercise of his new power, the prophets' immediate transference of their allegiance to their new head, show that on both sides it was felt that they had no part in the event beyond that of awe-struck beholders. No light streamed from it on their own future. The path they had to tread was still the common road into the great darkness, as solitary and unknown as before. The chariot of fire parted their master from the common experience of humanity as from their fellowship, making him an exception to the sad rule of death, which frowned the grimmer and more inexorable by contrast with his radiant translation.

The very reverse is true of Christ's Ascension. In Him our nature is taken up to the throne of God. His Resurrection assures us that 'them which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him,' His passage to the heavens assures us that 'they who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them,' and that all of both companies shall with Him live and reign, sharing His dominion, and moulded to His image.

If we would know of what our manhood is capable, if we would rise to the height of the hopes which God means that we should cherish, if we would gain a living grasp of the power that fulfils them, we have to stand there, gazing on the piled cloud that sails slowly upwards, the pure floor for our Brother's feet. As we watch it rising with a motion which is rest, we have the right to think, 'Thither the Forerunner is for us entered.' We see there what man is meant for, what men who love Him attain. True, the world is still full of death and sorrow, man's dominion seems a futile dream and a hope that mocks, but 'we see Jesus,' ascended up on high, and in Him we too are 'made to sit together in heavenly places.' The Breaker is gone up before them. Their King shall pass before them, and the Lord at the head of them.'

There is yet another aspect in which our Lord's Ascension bears on our hopes for the future, namely, as connected with His coming again. In that respect, too, the contrast of Elijah's translation may serve to emphasise the truth. Prophecy, indeed, in its latest voice, spoke of sending Elijah the prophet before the coming of the day of the Lord, and Rabbinical legends delighted to tell how he had been carried to the Garden of Eden, whence he would come again, in Israel's sorest need. But the prophecy had no thought of a personal reappearance, and the dreams are only dreams such as we find in the legendary history of many nations. As Elisha recrossed the Jordan, he bore with him only a mantle and a memory, not a hope.

'Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.' How grand is the use in these mighty words of the name Jesus, the name that speaks of His true humanity, with all its weakness, limitations, and sorrow, with all its tenderness and brotherhood! The man who died and rose again, has gone up on high. He will so come as

He has gone. ‘So’-that is to say, personally, corporeally, visibly, on clouds, perhaps to that very spot, ‘and His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives.’ Thus Scripture teaches us ever to associate together the departure and the coming of the Lord, and always when we meditate on His Ascension to prepare a place for us, to think of His real presence with us through the ages, and of His coming again to receive us to Himself.

That parting on Olivet cannot be the end. Such a leave-taking is the prophecy of happy greetings and an inseparable reunion. The King has gone to receive a kingdom, and to return. Memory and hope coalesce, as we think of Him who is passed into the heavens, and the heart of the Church has to cherish at once the glad thought that its Head and helper has entered within the veil, and the still more joyous one, which lightens the days of separation and widowhood, that the Lord will come again.

So let us take our share in the ‘great joy’ with which the disciples returned to Jerusalem, left like sheep in the midst of wolves as they were, and ‘let us set our affection on things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.’

128) Luke 24:52-53

Luke

THE TRIUMPHANT END

Luk. 24:36 - Luk. 24:53.

There are no marks of time in this passage, and, for anything that appears, the narrative is continuous, and the Ascension might have occurred on the evening of the Resurrection. But neither is there anything to forbid interpreting this close of Luke’s Gospel by the fuller details contained in the beginning of his other treatise, the Acts, where the space of forty days interposes between the Resurrection and the Ascension. It is but reasonable to suppose that an author’s two books agree, when he gives no hint of change of opinion, and it is reasonable to regard the narrative in this passage as a summary of the whole period of forty days. If so, it contains three things,-the first appearance of the risen Lord to the assembled disciples [Luk. 24:36 - Luk. 24:43], a condensed summary of the teachings of the risen Lord [Luk. 24:44 - Luk. 24:49], and an equally compressed record of the Ascension [Luk. 24:50 - Luk. 24:53].

I. The proofs of the Resurrection graciously granted to incredulous love [Luk. 24:36 - Luk. 24:43].

The disciples were probably assembled in the upper room, where the Lord's Supper had been instituted, and which became their ordinary meeting-place [Act. 1:1 - Act. 1:26] up till Pentecost. What sights that room saw! There, when night had come, they were discussing the strange reports of the Resurrection, when, all suddenly, they saw Jesus, not coming or moving, but standing in the midst. Had He come in unnoticed by them in their eager talk? The doors were shut. How had this calm Presence become visible all at once?

So little were they the enthusiastic, credulous people whom modern theories which explain away the Resurrection assume them to have been, that even His familiar voice in His familiar salutation, tenfold more significant now than ever before, did not wake belief that it was verily He. They fled to the ready refuge of supposing that they saw 'a spirit.' Our Lord has no rebukes for their incredulity, but patiently resumes His old task of instruction, and condescends to let them have the evidence of two senses, not shrinking from their investigating touch. When even these proofs were seen by Him to be insufficient, He added the yet more cogent one of 'eating before them.' Then they were convinced.

Now their incredulity is important, and the acknowledgment shows the simple historical good faith of the narrator. A witness who at first disbelieved is all the more trustworthy. These hopeless mourners who had forgotten all Christ's prophecies of His Resurrection, and were so fixed in their despair that the two from Emmaus could not so far kindle a gleam of hope as to make them believe that their Lord stood before them, were not the kind of people in whom hallucination would operate, as modern deniers of the Resurrection make them out to have been. What changed their mood? A fancy? Surely nothing less than a solid fact. Hallucination may lay hold on a solitary, morbid mind, but it does not attack a company, and it scarcely reaches to fancying touch and the sight of eating.

Note Luke’s explanation of the persistent incredulity, as being ‘for joy.’ It is like his notice that the three in Gethsemane ‘slept for sorrow.’ Great emotion sometimes produces effects opposite to what might have been expected. Who can wonder that the mighty fact which turned the black smoke of despair into bright flame should have seemed too good to be true? The little notice brings the disciples near to our experience and sympathy. Christ’s loving forbearance and condescending affording of more than sufficient evidence show how little changed He was by Death and Resurrection. He is as little changed by sitting at the right hand of God. Still He is patient with our slow hearts. Still He meets our hesitating faith with lavish assurances. Still He lets us touch Him, if not with the hand of sense, with the truer contact of spirit, and we may have as firm personal experience of the reality of His life and Presence as had that wondering company in the upper room.

II. Luk. 24:44 - Luk. 24:49 are best taken as a summary of the forty days’ teaching.

They fall into stages which are distinctly separated. First we have [ver. 44] the reiteration of Christ’s earlier teaching, which had been dark when delivered, and now flashed up into light when explained by the event. ‘These are my words which I spake,’ and which you did not understand or note. Jesus asserts that He is the theme of all the ancient revelation. If we suppose that the present arrangement of the Old Testament existed then, its present three divisions are named; namely, Law, Prophets, and Hagiographa, as represented by its chief member. But, in any case, He lays His hand on the whole book, and declares that He, and His Death as sacrifice, are inwrought into its substance. ‘The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.’ Whatever views we hold as to the date and manner of origin of the Old Testament books, we miss the most pregnant fact about them if we fail to recognise that they all point onwards to Him.

Another stage is marked by that remarkable expression, ‘He opened their mind.’ His teaching was not, like ours, from without only. He gave not merely instruction, but inspiration. It was not enough to spread truth before the disciples. He did more; He made them able to receive it. He gives no lesser gifts from the throne than He gave in the upper room, and we may receive, if our minds are kept expectant and in touch with Him, the same inward eye to see wondrous things out of the Word.

Luk. 24:46, by its repetition of ‘and He said,’ seems to point to another stage, in which the teaching as to the meaning of the Old Testament passes into instructions for the future. Already Jesus had hinted at the cessation of the old close intercourse in that pathetic ‘while I was yet with you,’ and now He goes on to outline the functions and equipment of the disciples in the future period of His absence. As to the past sufferings, He indicates a double necessity for them,-one based on their having been predicted; another, deeper, based on the fitness of things. These sufferings made the preaching of repentance and forgiveness possible, and imposed on His followers the obligation of preaching His name to all the world. Without the Cross His servants would have no gospel. Having the Cross, His servants are bound to publish it everywhere.

The universal reach of His atonement is implied in the commission. The sacrifice for the world’s sin is the sole ground of remission of sin, and is to be proclaimed to every creature. Mark that here the same word is employed in connection with proclaiming Christ’s Death as in John’s version of this saying [Joh. 20:23], which is misused as a fortress of the priestly power of absolution. The plain inference is that the servant’s power of remission is exercised by preaching the Master’s death of expiation.

The ultimate reach of the message is to be to all nations; the beginning of the universal gospel is to be at Jerusalem. The whole history of the world and the Church lies between these two. By that command to begin at Jerusalem, the connection of the Old with the New is preserved, the Jewish prerogative honoured, the path made easier for the disciples, the development of the Church brought into unison with their natural sentiments and capacities.

The spirit of the commandment remains still imperative. ‘The eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth.’ A wise and Christlike beneficence will not gaze far afield, and neglect things close at our doors. The scoff at the supporters of foreign missions, as if they quixotically went abroad when they should work at home, has no point even as regards Christian practice, for it is the people who work for the distant heathen who also toil for home ones; but it has still less ground in regard to Christian conceptions of duty, for the Lord of the harvest has bidden the reapers begin with the fields nearest them.

The equipment for work is investiture with divine power. A partial bestowment of the Spirit, which is the Father’s promise, took place while Jesus spoke. ‘I send’ refers to something done at the moment; but the fuller clothing with that garment of power was to be waited for in expectancy and desire. No man can do the Christian work of witnessing for and of Christ without that clothing with power. It was granted as an abiding gift on Pentecost. It needs perpetual renewal. We may all have it. Without it, eloquence, learning, and all else, are but as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

III. Luk. 24:50 give us the transcendent miracle which closes the earthly life of Jesus.

We cannot here enter on the large questions which it raises, but must content ourselves with simply pointing to the salient features of Luke’s condensed account. The mention of the place as ‘over against Bethany’ recalls the many memories of that village where Jesus had found His nearest approach to a home, where He had exercised His stupendous life-giving power, whence He had set out to the upper room and the near Cross. His last act was to bless His followers. He is the High-priest for ever, and these uplifted hands meant a sacreder thing than the affectionate good wishes of a departing friend. He gives the blessings which He invokes. His wish is a conveyance of good.

The hands remained in the attitude of benediction while He ascended, and the last sight of Him, as the cloud wrapped Him round, showed Him shedding blessing from them. He continues that attitude and act till He comes again. Two separate motions are described in verse 51. He was parted from them,-that is, withdrew some little distance on the mountain, that all might see, and none might hinder, His departure; and ‘was carried up into heaven’ by a slow upward movement, as the word implies. Contrast this with Elijah’s rapture. There was no need of fiery chariot or whirlwind to lift Jesus to the heavens. He went up where He was before, returning to the glory which He had with the Father before the world was. The end matches the beginning. The supernatural birth corresponds with the supernatural departure.

We have to think of that Ascension as the entrance of corporeal humanity into the divine glory, as the beginning of His heavenly activity for the world, as the token of His work being triumphantly completed, as the prophecy and pledge of immortal life like His own for all who love Him. Therefore we may share the joy which flooded the lately sorrowful disciples’ hearts, and, like them, should make all life sacred, and be continually in the Temple, blessing God, and have the deep roots of our lives hid with Christ in the glory.

John

1) JOHN 1:1-7
2) JOHN 1:8
3) JOHN 1:9-13
4) JOHN 1:14
5) JOHN 1:16
6) JOHN 1:17
7) JOHN 1:29
8) JOHN 1:37-39
9) JOHN 1:40-42
10) JOHN 1:43
11) JOHN 1:45-49
12) JOHN 1:50-51
13) JOHN 2:1-10
14) JOHN 2:11
15) JOHN 2:16
16) JOHN 2:19
17) JOHN 3:2
18) JOHN 3:8
19) JOHN 3:14

20) JOHN 3:16
21) JOHN 4:6
22) JOHN 4:7
23) JOHN 4:10
24) JOHN 4:14
25) JOHN 4:26
26) JOHN 4:32
27) JOHN 4:54
28) JOHN 5:8
29) JOHN 5:17-27
30) JOHN 5:35
31) JOHN 6:11
32) JOHN 6:12
33) JOHN 6:19-20
34) JOHN 6:28-29
35) JOHN 6:48-50
36) JOHN 7:33-34
37) JOHN 7:37-38
38) JOHN 8:12
39) JOHN 8:30-31
40) JOHN 8:33
41) JOHN 9:4
42) JOHN 9:6-7
43) JOHN 10:9
44) JOHN 10:14-15
45) JOHN 10:16
46) JOHN 11:5-6
47) JOHN 11:25-26
48) JOHN 11:27
49) JOHN 11:30-42
50) JOHN 11:43-44
51) JOHN 11:45
52) JOHN 11:49-50
53) JOHN 12:1-11
54) JOHN 12:12-25
55) JOHN 12:26
56) JOHN 12:32

57) JOHN 12:34
58) JOHN 12:35-36
59) JOHN 13:1
60) JOHN 13:3-5
61) JOHN 13:25
62) JOHN 13:27
63) JOHN 13:31-32
64) JOHN 13:33
65) JOHN 13:34-35
66) JOHN 13:37
67) JOHN 13:38
68) JOHN 14:1
69) JOHN 14:2
70) JOHN 14:3
71) JOHN 14:4-7
72) JOHN 14:8-11
73) JOHN 14:12-14
74) JOHN 14:15
75) JOHN 14:16-17
76) JOHN 14:18-19
77) JOHN 14:20-21
78) JOHN 14:22-24
79) JOHN 14:25-26
80) JOHN 14:27
81) JOHN 14:28-29
82) JOHN 14:30-31
83) JOHN 15:1-4
84) JOHN 15:5-8
85) JOHN 15:9-10
86) JOHN 15:11
87) JOHN 15:12-13
88) JOHN 15:14-17
89) JOHN 15:18-20
90) JOHN 15:21-25
91) JOHN 15:26-27
92) JOHN 16:1-6
93) JOHN 16:7-8

94) JOHN 16:9-11
95) JOHN 16:12-15
96) JOHN 16:16-19
97) JOHN 16:20-22
98) JOHN 16:23-24
99) JOHN 16:25-27
100) JOHN 16:28
101) JOHN 16:29-32
102) JOHN 16:33
103) JOHN 17:1-13
104) JOHN 17:14-16
105) JOHN 17:17-19
106) JOHN 17:20-23
107) JOHN 17:24
108) JOHN 17:25
109) JOHN 17:26
110) JOHN 18:6-9
111) JOHN 18:15-27
112) JOHN 18:28-40
113) JOHN 19:1-16
114) JOHN 19:17-18
115) JOHN 19:19
116) JOHN 19:20-21
117) JOHN 19:22
118) JOHN 19:23-29
119) JOHN 19:30
120) JOHN 19:36
121) JOHN 19:38-39
122) JOHN 19:41
123) JOHN 20:1-18
124) JOHN 20:19
125) JOHN 20:21-23
126) JOHN 20:26-28
127) JOHN 20:30-31
128) JOHN 21:2
129) JOHN 21:4
130) JOHN 21:7

131) JOHN 21:15
132) JOHN 21:18-19
133) JOHN 21:21-22

1) John 1:1-7

John

THE WORD IN ETERNITY, IN THE WORLD, AND IN THE FLESH

Joh. 1:1 - Joh. 1:14.

The other Gospels begin with Bethlehem; John begins with ‘the bosom of the Father.’ Luke dates his narrative by Roman emperors and Jewish high-priests; John dates his ‘in the beginning.’ To attempt adequate exposition of these verses in our narrow limits is absurd; we can only note the salient points of this, the profoundest page in the New Testament.

The threefold utterance in Joh. 1:1 carries us into the depths of eternity, before time or creatures were. Genesis and John both start from ‘the beginning,’ but, while Genesis works downwards from that point and tells what followed, John works upwards and tells what preceded-if we may use that term in speaking of what lies beyond time. Time and creatures came into being, and, when they began, the Word ‘was.’ Surely no form of speech could more emphatically declare absolute, uncreated being, outside the limits of time. Clearly, too, no interpretation of these words fathoms their depth, or makes worthy sense, which does not recognise that the Word is a person. The second clause of Joh. 1:1 asserts the eternal communion of the Word with God. The preposition employed means accurately ‘towards,’ and expresses the thought that in the Word there was motion or tendency towards, and not merely association with, God. It points to reciprocal, conscious communion, and the active going out of love in the direction of God. The last clause asserts the community of essence, which is not inconsistent with distinction of persons, and makes the communion of active Love possible; for none could, in the depths of eternity, dwell with and perfectly love and be loved by God, except one who Himself was God.

Joh. 1:1 stands apart as revealing the pretemporal and essential nature of the Word. In it the deep ocean of the divine nature is partially disclosed, though no created eye can either plunge to discern its depths or travel beyond our horizon to its boundless, shoreless extent. The remainder of the passage deals with the majestic march of the self-revealing Word through creation, and illumination of humanity, up to the climax in the Incarnation.

John repeats the substance of Joh. 1:1 - Joh. 1:2, apparently in order to identify the Agent of creation with the august person whom he has disclosed as filling eternity. By Him creation was effected, and, because He was what Joh. 1:1 has declared Him to be, therefore was it effected by Him. Observe the three steps marked in three consecutive verses. ‘All things were made by Him’; literally ‘became,’ where the emergence into existence of created things is strongly contrasted with the divine ‘was’ of Joh. 1:1. ‘Through Him’ declares that the Word is the agent of creation; ‘without Him’ [literally, ‘apart from Him’] declares that created things continue in existence because He communicates it to them. Man is the highest of these ‘all things,’ and Joh. 1:4 sets forth the relation of the Word to Him, declaring that ‘life,’ in all the width and height of its possible meanings, inheres in Him, and is communicated by Him, with its distinguishing accompaniment, in human nature, of light, whether of reason or of conscience.

So far, John has been speaking as from the upper or divine side, but in Joh. 1:5 he speaks from the under or human, and shows us how the self-revelation of the Word has, by some mysterious necessity, been conflict. The ‘darkness’ was not made by Him, but it is there, and the beams of the light have to contend with it. Something alien must have come in, some catastrophe have happened, that the light should have to stream into a region of darkness.

John takes ‘the Fall’ for granted, and in Joh. 1:5 describes the whole condition of things, both within and beyond the region of special revelation. The shining of the light is continuous, but the darkness is obstinate. It is the tragedy and crime of the world that the darkness will not have the light. It is the long-suffering mercy of God that the light repelled is not extinguished, but shines meekly on.

Joh. 1:6 - Joh. 1:13 deal with the historical appearance of the Word. The Forerunner is introduced, as in the other Gospels; and, significantly enough, this Evangelist calls him only 'John,'-omitting 'the Baptist,' as was very natural to him, the other John, who would feel less need for distinguishing the two than others did. The subordinate office of a witness to the light is declared positively and negatively, and the dignity of such a function is implied. To witness to the light, and to be the means of leading men to believe, was honour for any man.

The limited office of the Forerunner serves as contrast to the transcendent lustre of the true Light. The meaning of Joh. 1:9 may be doubtful, but Joh. 1:10 - Joh. 1:11 clearly refer to the historical manifestation of the Word, and probably Joh. 1:9 does so too. Possibly, however, it rather points to the inner revelation by the Word, which is the 'light of men.' In that case the phrase 'that cometh into the world' would refer to 'every man,' whereas it is more natural in this context to refer it to 'the light,' and to see in the verse a reference to the illumination of humanity consequent on the appearance of Jesus Christ. The use of 'world' and 'came' in Joh. 1:10 - Joh. 1:11 points in that direction. Joh. 1:9 represents the Word as 'coming'; Joh. 1:10 regards Him as come-'He was in the world.'

Note the three clauses, so like, and yet so unlike the august three in Joh. 1:1. Note the sad issue of the coming-'The world knew Him not.' In that 'world' there was one place where He might have looked for recognition, one set of people who might have been expected to hail Him; but not only the wide world was blind ['knew not'] , but the narrower circle of 'His own' fought against what they knew to be light ['received not'] .

But the rejection was not universal, and John proceeds to develop the blessed consequences of receiving the light. For the first time he speaks the great word 'believe.' The act of faith is the condition or means of 'receiving.' It is the opening of the mental eye for the light to pour in. We possess Jesus in the measure of our faith. The object of faith is 'His name,' which means, not this or that collocation of letters by which He is designated, but His whole self-revelation. The result of such faith is 'the right to become children of God,' for through faith in the only-begotten Son we receive the communication of a divine life which makes us, too, sons.

That new life, with its consequence of sonship, does not belong to human nature as received from parents, but is a gift of God mediated through faith in the Light who is the Word.

Joh. 1:14 is not mere repetition of the preceding, but advances beyond it in that it declares the wonder of the way by which that divine Word did enter into the world. John here, as it were, draws back the curtain, and shows us the transcendent miracle of divine love, for which he has been preparing in all the preceding. Note that he has not named ‘the Word’ since Joh. 1:1, but here he again uses the majestic expression to bring out strongly the contrast between the ante-temporal glory and the historical lowliness. These four words, ‘The Word became flesh,’ are the foundation of all our knowledge of God, of man, of the relations between them, the foundation of all our hopes, the guarantee of all our peace, the pledge of all blessedness. ‘He tabernacled among us.’ As the divine glory of old dwelt between the cherubim, so Jesus is among men the true Temple, wherein we see a truer glory than that radiant light which filled the closed chamber of the holy of holies. Rapturous remembrances rose before the Apostle as he wrote, ‘We beheld His glory’; and he has told us what he has beheld and seen with his eyes, that we also may have fellowship with him in beholding. The glory that shone from the Incarnate Word was no menacing or dazzling light. He and it were ‘full of grace and truth,’ perfect Love bending to inferiors and sinners, with hands full of gifts and a heart full of tenderness and the revelation of reality, both as regards God and man. His grace bestows all that our lowness needs, His truth teaches all that our ignorance requires. All our gifts and all our knowledge come from the Incarnate Word, in whom believing we are the children of God.

2) John 1:8

John

THE WORD IN ETERNITY, IN THE WORLD, AND IN THE FLESH

THE LIGHT AND THE LAMPS

Joh. 1:8. - Joh. 5:35.

My two texts both refer to John the Baptist. One of them is the Evangelist's account of him, the other is our Lord's eulogium upon him. The latter of my texts, as the Revised Version shows, would be more properly rendered, 'He was a lamp' rather than 'He was a light,' and the contrast between the two words, the 'light' and 'the lamps,' is my theme. I gather all that I would desire to say into three points: 'that Light' and its witnesses; the underived Light and the kindled lamps; the undying Light and the lamps that go out.

I. First of all, then, the contrast suggested to us is between 'that Light' and its witnesses.

John, in that profound prologue which is the deepest part of Scripture, and lays firm and broad in the depths the foundation-stones of a reasonable faith, draws the contrast between 'that Light' and them whose business it was to bear witness to it. As for the former, I cannot here venture to dilate upon the great, and to me absolutely satisfying and fundamental, thoughts that lie in these eighteen first verses of this Gospel. 'The Word was with God,' and that Word was the Agent of Creation, the Fountain of Life, the Source of the Light which is inseparable from all human life. John goes back, with the simplicity of a child's speech, which yet is deeper than all philosophies, to a Beginning, far anterior to 'the Beginning' of which Genesis speaks, and declares that before creation that Light shone; and he looks out over the whole world, and declares, that before and beyond the limits of the historical manifestation of the Word in the flesh, its beams spread over the whole race of man. But they are all focussed, if I may so speak, and gathered to a point which burns as well as illuminates, in the historical manifestation of Jesus Christ in the flesh. 'That was the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.'

Next, he turns to the highest honour and the most imperative duty laid, not only upon mighty men and officials, but upon all on whose happy eyeballs this Light has shone, and into whose darkened hearts the joy and peace and purity of it have flowed, and he says, 'He was sent'-and they are sent-'to bear witness of that Light.' It is the noblest function that a man can discharge. It is a function that is discharged by the very existence through the ages of a community which, generation after generation, subsists, and generation after generation manifests in varying degrees of brightness, and with various modifications of tint, the same light. There is the family character in all true Christians, with whatever diversities of idiosyncrasies, and national life or ecclesiastical distinctions. Whether it be Francis of Assisi or John Wesley, whether it be Thomas a Kempis or George Fox, the light is one that shines through these many-coloured panes of glass, and the living Church is the witness of a living Lord, not only before it, and behind it, and above it, but living in it. They are 'light' because they are irradiated by Him. They are 'light' because they are 'in the Lord.' But not only by the fact of the existence of such a community is the witness-bearing effected, but it comes as a personal obligation, with immense weight of pressure and immense possibilities of joy in the discharge of it, to every Christian man and woman.

What, then, is the witness that we all are bound to bear, and shall bear if we are true to our obligations and to our Lord? Mainly, dear brethren, the witness of experience. That a Christian man shall be able to stand up and say, 'I know this because I live it, and I testify to Jesus Christ because I for myself have found Him to be the life of my life, the Light of all my seeing, the joy of my heart, my home, and my anchorage'-that is the witness that is impregnable. And there is no better sign of the trend of Christian thought to-day than the fact that the testimony of experience is more and more coming to be recognised by thoughtful men and writers as being the sovereign attestation of the reality of the Light. 'I see'; that is the proof that light has touched my eyeballs. And when a man can contrast, as some of us can, our present vision with our erstwhile darkness, then the evidence, like that of the sturdy blind man in the Gospels, who had nothing to say in reply to the subtleties and Rabbinical traps and puzzles but only 'I was blind; now I see'-his experience is likely to have the effect that it had in another miracle of healing: 'Beholding the man which was healed standing amongst them, they could say nothing against it.' I should think they could not.

But there is one thing that will always characterise the true witnesses to that Light, and that is self-suppression. Remember the beautiful, immovable humility of the Baptist about whom these texts were spoken: 'What sayest thou of thyself?' 'I am a Voice,' that is all. 'Art thou that Prophet?' 'No!' 'Art thou the Christ?' 'No! I am nothing but a Voice.' And remember how, when John's disciples tried to light the infernal fires of jealousy in his quiet heart by saying, ‘He whom thou didst baptise, and to whom thou didst give witness’-He whom thou didst start on His career-’is baptising,’ poaching upon thy preserves, ‘and all men come unto Him,’ the only answer that he gave was, ‘The friend of the Bridegroom’-who stands by in a quiet, dark corner-’rejoices greatly because of the Bridegroom’s voice.’ Keep yourself out of sight, Christian teachers and preachers; put Christ in the front, and hide behind Him.

II. Now let me ask you to look at the other contrast that is suggested by our other text. The underived light and the kindled lamps.

It is possible to read the words of that second text thus-’He was a lamp kindled and [therefore] shining.’ But whether that be the meaning, or whether the usual rendering is correct, the emblem itself carries the same thought, for a lamp must be lit by contact with a light, and must be fed with oil, if its flame is to be sustained. And so the very metaphor-whatever the force of the ambiguous word-in its eloquent contrast between the Light and the lamp, suggests this thought, that the one is underived, self-fed, and therefore undying, and that the other owes all its flame to the touch of that uncreated Light, and burns brightly only on condition of its keeping up the contact with Him, and being fed continually from His stores of radiance.

I need not say more than a word with regard to the former member of that contrast suggested here. That unlit Light derives its brilliancy, according to the Scriptural teaching, from nothing but its divine union with the Father. So that long before there were eyes to see, there was the eradiation and outshining of the Father’s glory. I do not enter into these depths, but this I would say, that what is called the ‘originality’ of Jesus is only explained when we reverently see in that unique life the shining through a pure humanity, as through a sheet of alabaster, of that underived, divine Light. Jesus is an insoluble problem to men who will not see in Him the Eternal Light which ‘in the beginning was with God.’ You find in Him no trace of gradual acquisition of knowledge, or of arguing or feeling His way to His beliefs. You find in Him no trace of consciousness of a great horizon of darkness encompassing the region where He sees light. You find in Him no trace of a recognition of other sources from which He has drawn any portion of His light. You find in Him the distinct declaration that His relation to truth is not the relation of men who learn, and grow, and acquire, and know in part; for, says He, ‘I am the Truth.’ He stands apart from us all, and above us all, in that He owes His radiance to none, and can dispense it to every man. The question which the puzzled Jews asked about Him, ‘How knoweth this Man letters, having never learned?’ may be widened out to all the characteristics of His human life. To me the only answer is: ‘Thou art the King of glory, O Christ! Thou art the Everlasting Son of the Father.’

Dependent on Him are the little lights which He has lit, and in the midst of which He walks. Union with Jesus Christ-’that Light’-is the condition of all human light. That is true over all regions, as I believe. ‘The inspiration of the Almighty giveth understanding.’ The candle of the Lord shines in every man, and ‘that true Light lighteth every man that cometh into the world.’ Thinker, student, scientist, poet, author, practical man-all of them are lit from the uncreated Source, and all of them, if they understand their own nature, would say, ‘In Thy light do we see Light.’

But especially is this great thought true and exemplified within the limits of the Christian life. For the Christian to be touched with Christ’s Promethean finger is to flame into light. And the condition of continuing to shine is to continue the contact which first illuminated. A break in the contact, of a finger’s breadth, is as effectual as one of a mile. Let Christian men and women, if they would shine, remember, ‘Ye are light in the Lord’; and if we stray, and get without the circle of the Light, we pass into darkness, and ourselves cease to shine.

Brethren, it is threadbare truth, that the condition of Christian vitality and radiance is close and unbroken contact with Jesus Christ, the Source of all light. Threadbare; but if we lived as if we believed it, the Church would be revolutionised and the world illuminated; and many a smoking wick would flash up into a blazing torch. Let Christian people remember that the words of my text define no special privilege or duty of any official or man of special endowments, but that to all of us has been said, ‘Ye are My witnesses,’ and to all of us is offered the possibility of being ‘burning and shining lights’ if we keep ourselves close to that Light.

III. Lastly, the second of my texts suggests-the contrast between the Undying Light and the lamps that go out.

‘For a season ye were willing to rejoice in His light.’ There is nothing in the present condition of the civilised and educated world more remarkable and more difficult for some people to explain than the contrast between the relation which Jesus Christ bears to the present age, and the relation which all other great names in the past-philosophers, poets, guides of men-bear to it. There is nothing in the world the least like the vividness, the freshness, the closeness, of the personal relation which thousands and thousands of people, with common sense in their heads, bear to that Man who died nineteen hundred years ago. All others pass, sooner or later, into the darkness. Thickening mists of oblivion, fold by fold, gather round the brightest names. But here is Jesus Christ, whom all classes of thinkers and social reformers have to reckon with to-day, who is a living power amongst the trivialities of the passing moment, and in whose words and in the teaching of whose life serious men feel that there lie undeveloped yet, and certainly not yet put into practice, principles which are destined to revolutionise society and change the world. And how does that come?

I am not going to enter upon that question; I only ask you to think of the contrast between His position, in this generation, to communities and individuals, and the position of all other great names which lie in the past. Why, it does not take more than a lifetime such as mine, for instance, to remember how the great lights that shone seventy years ago in English thinking and in English literature, have for the most part gone out, and what we young men thought to be bright particular stars, this new generation pooh-poohs as mere exhalations from the marsh or twinkling and uncertain tapers, and you will find their books in the twopenny-box at the bookseller’s door. A cynical diplomatist, in one of our modern dramas, sums it up, after seeing the death of a revolutionary, ‘I have known eight leaders of revolts.’ And some of us could say, ‘We have known about as many guides of men who have been forgotten and passed away.’ ‘His Name shall endure for ever. His name shall continue as long as the sun, and men shall be blessed in Him; all generations shall call Him blessed.’ Even Shelley had the prophecy forced from him-

‘The moon of Mahomet
Arose and it shall set,
While blazoned as on heaven’s eternal noon,

The Cross leads generations on.'

We may sum up the contrast between the undying Light and the lamps that go out in the old words: 'They truly were many, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death, but this Man, because He continueth ever . . . is able to save unto the uttermost them that come unto God through Him.'

So, brethren, when lamps are quenched, let us look to the Light. When our own lives are darkened because our household light is taken from its candlestick, let us lift up our hearts and hopes to Him that abideth for ever. Do not let us fall into the folly, and commit the sin, of putting our heart's affections, our spirit's trust, upon any that can pass and that must change. We need a Person whom we can clasp, and who never will glide from our hold. We need a Light uncreated, self-fed, eternal. 'Whilst ye have the Light, believe in the Light, that ye may be the children of light.'

3) John 1:9-13

John

THE WORD IN ETERNITY, IN THE WORLD, AND IN THE FLESH

Joh. 1:1 - Joh. 1:14.

The other Gospels begin with Bethlehem; John begins with 'the bosom of the Father.' Luke dates his narrative by Roman emperors and Jewish high-priests; John dates his 'in the beginning.' To attempt adequate exposition of these verses in our narrow limits is absurd; we can only note the salient points of this, the profoundest page in the New Testament.

The threefold utterance in Joh. 1:1 carries us into the depths of eternity, before time or creatures were. Genesis and John both start from 'the beginning,' but, while Genesis works downwards from that point and tells what followed, John works upwards and tells what preceded-if we may use that term in speaking of what lies beyond time. Time and creatures came into being, and, when they began, the Word 'was.' Surely no form of speech could more emphatically declare absolute, uncreated being, outside the limits of time. Clearly, too, no interpretation of these words fathoms their depth, or makes worthy sense, which does not recognise that the Word is a person. The second clause of Joh. 1:1 asserts the eternal communion of the Word with God. The preposition employed means accurately ‘towards,’ and expresses the thought that in the Word there was motion or tendency towards, and not merely association with, God. It points to reciprocal, conscious communion, and the active going out of love in the direction of God. The last clause asserts the community of essence, which is not inconsistent with distinction of persons, and makes the communion of active Love possible; for none could, in the depths of eternity, dwell with and perfectly love and be loved by God, except one who Himself was God.

Joh. 1:1 stands apart as revealing the pretemporal and essential nature of the Word. In it the deep ocean of the divine nature is partially disclosed, though no created eye can either plunge to discern its depths or travel beyond our horizon to its boundless, shoreless extent. The remainder of the passage deals with the majestic march of the self-revealing Word through creation, and illumination of humanity, up to the climax in the Incarnation.

John repeats the substance of Joh. 1:1 - Joh. 1:2, apparently in order to identify the Agent of creation with the august person whom he has disclosed as filling eternity. By Him creation was effected, and, because He was what Joh. 1:1 has declared Him to be, therefore was it effected by Him. Observe the three steps marked in three consecutive verses. ‘All things were made by Him’; literally ‘became,’ where the emergence into existence of created things is strongly contrasted with the divine ‘was’ of Joh. 1:1. ‘Through Him’ declares that the Word is the agent of creation; ‘without Him’ [literally, ‘apart from Him’] declares that created things continue in existence because He communicates it to them. Man is the highest of these ‘all things,’ and Joh. 1:4 sets forth the relation of the Word to Him, declaring that ‘life,’ in all the width and height of its possible meanings, inheres in Him, and is communicated by Him, with its distinguishing accompaniment, in human nature, of light, whether of reason or of conscience.

So far, John has been speaking as from the upper or divine side, but in Joh. 1:5 he speaks from the under or human, and shows us how the self-revelation of the Word has, by some mysterious necessity, been conflict. The ‘darkness’ was not made by Him, but it is there, and the beams of the light have to contend with it. Something alien must have come in, some catastrophe have happened, that the light should have to stream into a region of darkness.

John takes ‘the Fall’ for granted, and in Joh. 1:5 describes the whole condition of things, both within and beyond the region of special revelation. The shining of the light is continuous, but the darkness is obstinate. It is the tragedy and crime of the world that the darkness will not have the light. It is the long-suffering mercy of God that the light repelled is not extinguished, but shines meekly on.

Joh. 1:6 - Joh. 1:13 deal with the historical appearance of the Word. The Forerunner is introduced, as in the other Gospels; and, significantly enough, this Evangelist calls him only ‘John,’-omitting ‘the Baptist,’ as was very natural to him, the other John, who would feel less need for distinguishing the two than others did. The subordinate office of a witness to the light is declared positively and negatively, and the dignity of such a function is implied. To witness to the light, and to be the means of leading men to believe, was honour for any man.

The limited office of the Forerunner serves as contrast to the transcendent lustre of the true Light. The meaning of Joh. 1:9 may be doubtful, but Joh. 1:10 - Joh. 1:11 clearly refer to the historical manifestation of the Word, and probably Joh. 1:9 does so too. Possibly, however, it rather points to the inner revelation by the Word, which is the ‘light of men.’ In that case the phrase ‘that cometh into the world’ would refer to ‘every man,’ whereas it is more natural in this context to refer it to ‘the light,’ and to see in the verse a reference to the illumination of humanity consequent on the appearance of Jesus Christ. The use of ‘world’ and ‘came’ in Joh. 1:10 - Joh. 1:11 points in that direction. Joh. 1:9 represents the Word as ‘coming’; Joh. 1:10 regards Him as come-’He was in the world.’

Note the three clauses, so like, and yet so unlike the august three in Joh. 1:1. Note the sad issue of the coming-’The world knew Him not.’ In that ‘world’ there was one place where He might have looked for recognition, one set of people who might have been expected to hail Him; but not only the wide world was blind [‘knew not’] , but the narrower circle of ‘His own’ fought against what they knew to be light [‘received not’] .

But the rejection was not universal, and John proceeds to develop the blessed consequences of receiving the light. For the first time he speaks the great word ‘believe.’ The act of faith is the condition or means of ‘receiving.’ It is the opening of the mental eye for the light to pour in. We possess Jesus in the measure of our faith. The object of faith is ‘His name,’ which means, not this or that collocation of letters by which He is designated, but His whole self-revelation. The result of such faith is ‘the right to become children of God,’ for through faith in the only-begotten Son we receive the communication of a divine life which makes us, too, sons. That new life, with its consequence of sonship, does not belong to human nature as received from parents, but is a gift of God mediated through faith in the Light who is the Word.

Joh. 1:14 is not mere repetition of the preceding, but advances beyond it in that it declares the wonder of the way by which that divine Word did enter into the world. John here, as it were, draws back the curtain, and shows us the transcendent miracle of divine love, for which he has been preparing in all the preceding. Note that he has not named ‘the Word’ since Joh. 1:1, but here he again uses the majestic expression to bring out strongly the contrast between the ante-temporal glory and the historical lowliness. These four words, ‘The Word became flesh,’ are the foundation of all our knowledge of God, of man, of the relations between them, the foundation of all our hopes, the guarantee of all our peace, the pledge of all blessedness. ‘He tabernacled among us.’ As the divine glory of old dwelt between the cherubim, so Jesus is among men the true Temple, wherein we see a truer glory than that radiant light which filled the closed chamber of the holy of holies. Rapturous remembrances rose before the Apostle as he wrote, ‘We beheld His glory’; and he has told us what he has beheld and seen with his eyes, that we also may have fellowship with him in beholding. The glory that shone from the Incarnate Word was no menacing or dazzling light. He and it were ‘full of grace and truth,’ perfect Love bending to inferiors and sinners, with hands full of gifts and a heart full of tenderness and the revelation of reality, both as regards God and man. His grace bestows all that our lowness needs, His truth teaches all that our ignorance requires. All our gifts and all our knowledge come from the Incarnate Word, in whom believing we are the children of God.

4) John 1:14

John

THE WORD IN ETERNITY, IN THE WORLD, AND IN THE FLESH

‘THREE TABERNACLES’

Joh. 1:14. - Rev. 7:15. - Rev. 21:3.

The word rendered ‘dwelt’ in these three passages, is a peculiar one. It is only found in the New Testament-in this Gospel and in the Book of Revelation. That fact constitutes one of the many subtle threads of connection between these two books, which at first sight seem so extremely unlike each other; and it is a morsel of evidence in favour of the common authorship of the Gospel and of the Apocalypse, which has often, and very vehemently in these latter days of criticism, been denied.

The force of the word, however, is the matter to which I desire especially to draw attention. It literally means ‘to dwell in a tent,’ or, if we may use such a word, ‘to tabernacle,’ and there is no doubt a reference to the Tabernacle in which the divine Presence abode in the wilderness and in the land of Israel before the erection. In all three passages, then, we may see allusion to that early symbolical dwelling of God with man. ‘The Word tabernacled among us’; so is the truth for earth and time. ‘He that sitteth upon the throne shall spread His tabernacle upon’ the multitude which no man can number, who have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb; that is the truth for the spirits of just men made perfect, the waiting Church, which expects the redemption of the body. ‘God shall tabernacle with them’; that is the truth for the highest condition of humanity, when the Tabernacle of God shall be with redeemed men in the new earth. ‘Let us build three tabernacles,’ one for the Incarnate Christ, one for the interspace between earth and heaven, and one for the culmination of all things. And it is to these three aspects of the one thought, set forth in rude symbol by the movable tent in the wilderness, that I ask you to turn now.

I. First, then, we have to think of that Tabernacle for earth. ‘The Word was made flesh, and dwelt, as in a tent, amongst us.’

The human nature, the visible, material body of Jesus Christ, in which there enshrined itself the everlasting Word, which from the beginning was the Agent of all divine revelation, that is the true Temple of God. When we begin to speak about the special presence of Omnipresence in any one place, we soon lose ourselves, and get into deep waters of glory, where there is no standing. And I do not care to deal here with theological definitions or thorny questions, but simply to set forth, as the language of my text sets before us, that one transcendent, wonderful, all-blessed thought that this poor human nature is capable of, and has really once in the history of the world received into itself, the real, actual presence of the whole fulness of the Divinity. What must be the kindred and likeness between Godhood and manhood when into the frail vehicle of our humanity that wondrous treasure can be poured; when the fire of God can burn in the bush of our human nature, and that nature not be consumed? So it has been. ‘In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.’

And when we come with our questions, How? In what manner? How can the lesser contain the greater? we have to be content with the recognition that the manner is beyond our fathoming, and to accept the fact, pressed upon our faith, that our hearts may grasp it and be at peace. God hath dwelt in humanity. The everlasting Word, who is the forthcoming of all the fulness of Deity into the realm of finite creatures, was made flesh and dwelt among us.

But the Tabernacle was not only the dwelling-place of God, it was also and, therefore, the place of Revelation of God. So in our text there follows, ‘we beheld His glory.’ As in the tent in the wilderness there hovered between the outstretched wings of the silent cherubim, above the Mercy-seat, the brightness of the symbolical cloud which was expressly named ‘the glory of God,’ and was the visible manifestation of His real presence; so John would have us think that in that lowly humanity, with its curtains and its coverings of flesh, there lay shrined in the inmost place the brightness of the light of the manifest glory of God. ‘We beheld His glory.’ The rapturous adoration of the remembrance overcomes him, and he breaks his sentence, reckless of grammatical connection, as the fulness of the blessed memory floods into his soul. ‘That glory was as of the Only Begotten of the Father.’ The manifestation of God in Christ is unique, as becomes Him who partakes of the nature of that God of whom He is the Representative and the Revealer.

And how did that glory make itself known to us? By miracle? Yes! As we read in the story of the first that Christ wrought, ‘He manifested forth His glory and His disciples believed upon Him.’ By miracle? Yes! As we read His own promise at the grave of Lazarus: ‘Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?’ But, blessed be His name, miracle is not the highest manifestation of Christ’s glory and of God’s. The uniqueness of the revelation of Christ’s glory in God does not depend upon the deeds which He wrought. For, as the context goes on to tell, the Word which tabernacled among us was ‘full of grace and truth,’ and therein is the glory most gloriously revealed.

The lambent light of stooping love that shone forth warning and attracting in His gentle life, and the clear white beam of unmingled truth that streamed from the radiant purity of Christ’s life, revealed God to hearts that pine for love and spirits that hunger for truth, as no others of God’s self-revealing works have done. And that revelation of the glory of God in the fulness of grace and truth is the highest possible revelation. For the divinest thing in God is love, and the true ‘glory of God’ is neither some symbolical flashing light nor the pomp of mere power and majesty; nor even those inconceivable and incommunicable attributes which we christen with names like Omnipotence and Omnipresence and Infinitude, and the like. These are all at the fringes of the brightness. The true central heart and lustrous light of the glory of God lie In His love, and of that glory Christ is the unique Representative and Revealer, because He is the only Begotten Son, and ‘full of grace and truth.’

Thus the Word tabernacled amongst us. And though the Tabernacle to outward seeming was covered by curtains and skins that hid all the glowing splendour within; yet in that lowly life that was lived in the body of His humiliation, and knew our limitations and our weaknesses, ‘the glory of the Lord was revealed; and all flesh hath seen it together’ and acknowledged the divine Presence there.

Still further the Tabernacle was the place of sacrifice. So in the tabernacle of His flesh Jesus offered up the one sacrifice for sins for ever. In the offering up of His human life in continuous obedience, and in the offering up of His body and blood in the bitter Passion of the Cross, He brought men nigh unto God.

Therefore, because of all these things, because the Tabernacle is the dwelling-place of God, the place of revelation, and the place of sacrifice, therefore, finally is it the meeting-place betwixt God and man. In the Old Testament it is always called by the name which our Revised Version has accurately substituted for 'tabernacle of the congregation,' namely 'tent of meeting.' The correctness of that rendering and the meaning of the name are established by several passages in the Old Testament, as for instance, 'There I will meet with you, to speak there unto thee, and there I will meet with the children of Israel.' So in Christ, who by His Incarnation lays His hand upon both, God touches man and man touches God. We who are afar off are made nigh, and in that 'true tabernacle which the Lord pitched and not man' we meet God and are glad.

'And so the word was flesh, and wrought
With human hands the creed of creeds,
In loveliness of perfect deeds.'

The temple for earth is 'the temple of His body.'

II. We have the Tabernacle for the Heavens.

In the context of our second passage we have a vision of the great multitude redeemed out of all nations and kindreds, 'standing before the Throne and before the Lamb, arrayed in white robes, and palms in their hands.' The palms in their hands give important help towards understanding the vision. As has been often remarked, there are no heathen emblems in the Book of the Apocalypse. All its metaphors move within the circle of Jewish experiences and facts. So that we are not to think of the Roman palm of victory, but of the Jewish palm which was borne at the Feast of Tabernacles. What was the Feast of Tabernacles? A festival established on purpose to recall to the minds and to the gratitude of the Jews settled in their own land the days of their wandering in the wilderness. Part of the ritual of it was that during its celebration they builded for themselves booths or tabernacles of leaves and boughs of trees, under which they dwelt, thus reminding themselves of their nomad condition.

Now what beauty and power it gives to the word of my text, if we take in this allusion to the Jewish festival! The great multitude bearing the palms are keeping the feast, memorial of past wilderness wanderings; and 'He that sitteth on the throne shall spread His tabernacle above them,' as the word might be here rendered. That is to say, He Himself shall build and be the tent in which they dwell; He Himself shall dwell with them in it. He Himself, in closer union than can be conceived of here, shall keep them company during that feast.

What a thought of that condition-the condition as I believe represented in this vision-of the spirits of the just made perfect, 'who wait for the adoption, to wit, the resurrection of the body,' is given us if we take this point of view to interpret the whole lovely symbolism. It is all a time of glad, grateful remembrance of the wilderness march. It is all a time in which festal joys shall be theirs, and the memory of the trials and the weariness and the sorrow and the solitude that are past shall deepen to a more exquisite poignancy of delight, the rest and the fellowship and the felicity of that calm Presence, and God Himself shall spread His tent above them, lodge with them, and they with Him.

And so, dear brethren, rest in that assurance, that though we know so little of that state, we know this: 'Absent from the body, present with the Lord,' and that the happy company who bear the palms shall dwell in God, and God in them.

III. And now, lastly, look at that final vision which we have in these texts, which we may call the Tabernacle for the renewed earth.

I do not pretend to interpret the scenery and the setting of these Apocalyptic visions with dogmatic confidence, but it seems to me as if the emblems of this final vision coincide with dim hints in many other portions of Scripture; to the effect that some cosmical change having passed upon this material world in which we dwell, it, in some regenerated form, shall be the final abode of a regenerated and redeemed humanity. That, I think, is the natural interpretation of a great deal of Scriptural teaching.

For that highest condition there is set forth this as the all-sufficing light upon it. ‘Behold, the Tabernacle of God is with men, and He will tabernacle with them.’ The climax and the goal of all the divine working, and the long processes of God’s love for, and discipline of, the world, are to be this, that He and men shall abide together in unity and concord. That is God’s wish from the beginning. We read in one of the profound utterances of the Book of Proverbs how from of old the ‘delights’ of the Incarnate Wisdom which foreshadowed the Incarnate Word ‘were with the sons of men.’ And, at the close of all things, when the vision of this final chapter shall be fulfilled, God will say, settling Himself in the midst of a redeemed humanity, ‘Lo! here will I dwell, for I have desired it. This is My rest for ever.’ He will tabernacle with men, and men with Him.

We know not, and never shall know until experience strips the bandages from our eyes, what new methods of participation of the divine nature, and new possibilities of intimacy and intercourse with Him may be ours when the veils of flesh and sense and time have all dropped away. New windows may be opened in our spirits, from which we shall perceive new aspects of the divine character. New doors may be opened in our souls, from out of which we may pass to touch parts of His nature, all impalpable and inconceivable to us now. And when all the veils of a discordant moral nature are taken away, and we are pure, then we shall see, then we shall draw nigh to God. The thing that chiefly separates man from God is man’s sin. When that is removed, the centrifugal force which kept our tiny orb apart from the great central sun being withdrawn, we shall, as it were, fall into the brightness and be one, not losing our sense of individuality, which would be to lose all the blessedness, but united with Him in a union far more intimate than earth can parallel. ‘The Tabernacle of God shall be with men, and He will tabernacle with them.’

Do not let us forget that this highest and ultimate hope that is held forth here, of the union and communion, perfect and perpetual, of humanity with God, does not sweep aside Jesus Christ. For through all eternity the Everlasting Word, the Christ who bears our nature in its glorified form, or, rather, whose nature in its glorified form we shall bear, is the Medium of Revelation, and the Medium of communication between man and God.

‘I saw no Temple therein,’ says this final vision of the Apocalypse, but ‘God Almighty and the Lamb,’ and these are the Temples thereof. Therefore through eternity God shall tabernacle with men, as He does tabernacle with us now through Him, in whom dwelleth as in its perennial habitation, ‘all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.’

So we have the three tabernacles, for earth, for heaven, for the renewed earth; and these three, if I may say so, are like the triple division of that ancient Tabernacle in the wilderness: the Outer Court; the Holy Place; the Holiest of all. Let us enter into that outer court, and abide and commune with that God who comes near to us, revealing, forgiving, in the person of His Son, and then we shall pass from court to court, ‘and go from strength to strength, until every one of us in Zion appear before God’; and enter into the Holiest of all, where ‘within the veil’ we shall receive splendours of revelation undreamed of here, and enjoy depths of communion to which the selectest moments of fellowship with God on earth are shallow and poor.

5) John 1:16

John

THE FULNESS OF CHRIST

Joh. 1:16.

What a remarkable claim that is which the Apostle here makes for his Master! On the one side he sets His solitary figure as the universal Giver; on the other side are gathered the whole race of men, recipients from Him. As in the wilderness the children of Israel clustered round the rock from which poured out streams, copious enough for all the thirsty camp, John, echoing his Master’s words, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink,’ here declares ‘Of *His* fulness have *all we* received.’

I. Notice, then, the one ever full Source.

The words of my text refer back to those of the Joh. 1:14 : ‘The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.’ ‘And of His fulness have all we received.’ The ‘fulness’ here seems to mean that of which the Incarnate Word was full, the ‘grace and truth’ which dwelt without measure in Him; the unlimited and absolute completeness and abundance of divine powers and glories which ‘tabernacled’ in Him. And so the language of my text, both verbally and really, is substantially equivalent to that of the Apostle Paul. ‘In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily; and ye are complete in Him.’ The whole infinite Majesty, and inexhaustible resources of the divine nature, were incorporated and insphered in that Incarnate Word from whom all men may draw.

There are involved in that thought two ideas. One is the unmistakable assertion of the whole fulness of the divine nature as being in the Incarnate Word, and the other is that the whole fulness of the divine nature dwells in the Incarnate Word in order that men may get at it.

The words of my text go back, as I said, to the previous verse; but notice what an advance upon that previous verse they present to us. There we read, ‘We beheld His glory.’ To *behold* is much, but to *possess* is more. It is much to say that Christ comes to manifest God, but that is a poor, starved account of the purpose of His coming, if that is all you have to say. He comes to manifest Him. Yes! but He comes to communicate Him, not merely to dazzle us with a vision, not merely to show us Him as from afar, not merely to make Him known to understanding or to heart; but to bestow-in no mere metaphor, but in simple, literal fact-the absolute possession of the divine nature. ‘We beheld His glory’ is a reminiscence that thrills the Evangelist, though half a century has passed since the vision gleamed upon his eyes; but ‘of His fulness have all we received’ is infinitely and unspeakably more. And the manifestation was granted that the possession might be sure, for this is the very centre and heart of Christianity, that in Him who is Christianity God is not merely made known, but given; not merely beheld, but possessed.

In order that that divine fulness might belong to us there was needed that the Word should be made flesh; and there was further needed that incarnation should be crowned by sacrifice, and that life should be perfected in death. The alabaster box had to be broken before the house could be filled with the odour of the ointment. If I may so say, the sack, the coarse-spun sack of Christ's humanity, had to be cut asunder in order that the wealth that was stored in it might be poured into our hands. God came near us in the life, but God became ours in the death, of His dear Son. Incarnation was needed for that great privilege-'we beheld His glory'; but the Crucifixion was needed in order to make possible the more wondrous prerogative: 'Of His fulness have all we received.' God gives Himself to men in the Christ whose life revealed and whose death imparted Him to the world.

And so He is the sole Source. All men, in a very real sense, draw from His fulness. 'In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.' The life of the body and the life of the spirit willing, knowing, loving, all which makes life into light, all comes to us through that everlasting Word of God. And when that Word has 'become flesh and dwelt among us,' His gifts are not only the gifts of light and life, which all men draw from Him, but the gifts of grace and truth which all those who love Him receive at His hands. His gifts, like the water from some fountain, may flow underground into many of the pastures of the wilderness; and many a man is blessed by them who knows not from whence they come. It is He from whom all the truth, all the grace which illuminates and blesses humanity, flow into all lands in all ages.

II. Consider, then, again, the many receivers from the one Source. 'Of His fulness have all we received.'

Observe, we are not told definitely what it is that we receive. If we refer back to words in a previous verse, they may put us on the right track for answering the question, What is it that we get? 'He came unto His own,' says Joh. 1:11, 'and His own received Him not; but as many as received Him, to them gave He power,' etc. That answers the question, What do we receive? Christ is more than all His gifts. All His gifts are treasured up in Him and inseparable from Him. We get Jesus Christ Himself.

The blessings that we receive may be stated in many different ways. You may say we get pardon, purity, hope, joy, the prospect of Heaven, power for service; all these and a hundred more designations by which we might describe the one gift. All these are but the consequences of our having got the Christ within our hearts. He does not give pardon and the rest, as a king might give pardon and honours, a thousand miles off, bestowing it by a mere word, upon some criminal, but He gives all that He gives because He gives Himself. The real possession that we receive is neither more nor less than a loving Saviour, to enter our spirits and abide there, and be the spirit of our spirits, and the life of our lives.

Then, notice the universality of this possession. John has said, in the previous words, '*We* beheld His glory.' He refers there, of course, to the comparatively small circle of the eye-witnesses of our Master's life; who, at the time when he wrote, must have been very, very few in number. They had had the prerogative of seeing with their eyes and handling with their hands the Word of life that 'was manifested unto us'; and with that prerogative the duty of bearing witness of Him to the rest of men. But in the 'receiving,' John associates with himself, and with the other eyewitnesses, all those who had listened to their word, and had received the truth in the love of it. '*We* beheld' refers to the narrower circle; 'we all received' to the wider sweep of the whole Church. There is no exclusive class, no special prerogative. Every Christian man, the weakest, the lowliest, the most uncultured, rude, ignorant, foolish, the most besotted in the past, who has wandered furthest away from the Master; whose spirit has been most destitute of all sparks of goodness and of God-receives from out of His fulness. 'If any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His.' And every one of us, if we will, may have dwelling in our hearts, in the greatness of His strength, in the sweetness of His love, in the clearness of His illuminating wisdom, the Incarnate Word, the Comforter, the All-in-all whom 'we all receive.'

And, as I said, that word 'all' might have even a wider extension without going beyond the limits of the truth. For on the one side there stands Christ, the universal Giver; and grouped before Him, in all attitudes of weakness and of want, is gathered the whole race of mankind. And from Him there pours out a stream copious enough to supply all the necessities of every human soul that lives to-day, of every human soul that has lived in the past, of every one that shall live in the future. There is no limit to the universality except only the limit of the human will: 'Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.'

Think of that solitary figure of the Christ reared up, as it were, before the whole race of man, as able to replenish all their emptiness with His fulness, and to satisfy all their thirst with His sufficiency. Dear brother! you have a great gaping void in your heart-an aching emptiness there, which you know better than I can tell you. Look to Him who can fill it and it shall be filled. He can supply all your wants as He can supply all the wants of every soul of man. And after generations have drawn from Him, the water will not have sunk one hairsbreadth in the great fountain, but there will be enough for all coming eternities as there has been enough for all past times. He is like His own miracle-the thousands are gathered on the grass, they do 'all eat and are filled.' As their necessities required the bread was multiplied, and at the last there was more left than there had seemed to be at the beginning. So 'of His fulness have all we received'; and after a universe has drawn from it, for an Eternity, the fulness is not turned into scantiness or emptiness.

III. And so, lastly, notice the continuous flow from the inexhaustible Source. 'Of His fulness have all we received, and grace for grace.'

The word 'for' is a little singular. Of course it means instead of, in exchange for; and the Evangelist's idea seems to be that as one supply of grace is given and used, it is, as it were, given back to the Bestower, who substitutes for it a fresh and unused vessel, filled with new grace. He might have said, grace upon grace; one supply being piled upon the other. But his notion is, rather, one supply given in substitution for the other, 'new lamps for old ones.'

Just as a careful gardener will stand over a plant that needs water, and will pour the water on the surface until the earth has drunk it up, and then add a little more; so He gives step by step, grace for grace, an uninterrupted bestowal, yet regulated according to the absorbing power of the heart that receives it. Underlying that great thought are two things: the continuous communication of grace, and the progressive communication of grace. We have here the continuous communication of grace. God is always pouring Himself out upon us in Christ. There is a perpetual out flow from Him to us: if there is not a perpetual inflow into us from Him it is our fault, and not His. He is always giving, and His intention is that our lives shall be a continual reception. Are they? How many Christian men there are whose Christian lives at the best are like some of those Australian or Siberian rivers; in the dry season, a pond here, a stretch of sand, waterless and barren there, then another place with a drop of muddy water in some hollow, and then another stretch of sand, and so on. Why should not the ponds be linked together by a flashing stream? God is always pouring Himself out; why do we not always take Him in?

There is but one answer, and the answer is, that we do not fulfil the condition, which condition is simple faith. 'As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God; even to them that believed on His name.' Faith is the condition of receiving, and wherever there is a continuous trust there will be an unbroken grace; and wherever there are interrupted gifts it is because there has been an intermitted trust in Him. Do not let your lives be like some dimly lighted road, with a lamp here, and a stretch of darkness, and then another twinkling light; let the light run all along the side of your path, because at every moment your heart is turning to Christ with trust. Make your faith continuous, and God will make His grace incessant, and out of His fulness you will draw continual supplies of needed strength.

But not only have we here the notion of continuous, but also, as it seems to me, of progressive gifts. Each measure of Christ received, if we use it aright, makes us capable of possessing more of Christ. And the measure of our capacity is the measure of His gift, and the more we can hold the more we shall get. The walls of our hearts are elastic, the vessel expands by being filled out; it throbs itself wider by desire and faith. The wider we open our mouths the larger will be the gift that God puts into them. Each measure and stage of grace utilised and honestly employed will make us capable and desirous, and, therefore, possessors, of more and more of the grace that He gives. So the ideal of the Christian life, and God's intention concerning us, is not only that we should have an uninterrupted, but a growing possession, of Christ and of His grace.

Is that the case with you, my friend? Can you hold more of God than you could twenty years ago? Is there any more capacity in your soul for more of Christ than there was long, long ago? If there is you have more of Him; if you have not more of Him it is because you cannot contain more; and you cannot contain more because you have not desired more, and because you have been so wretchedly unfaithful in your use of what you had. The ideal is, ‘they go from strength to strength,’ and the end of that is, ‘every one of them appeareth before God.’

So, dear brother, as the dash of the waves will hollow out some little indentation on the coast, and make it larger and larger until there is a great bay, with its headlands miles apart, and its deep bosom stretching far into the interior, and all the expanse full of flashing waters and leaping waves, so the giving Christ works a place for Himself in a man’s heart, and makes the spirit which receives and faithfully uses the gifts which He brings, capable of more of Himself, and fills the widened space with larger gifts and new grace.

Only remember the condition of having Him is trusting to His name and longing for His presence. ‘If any man open the door I will come in.’ We have Him if we trust Him. That trust is no mere passive reception, such as is the case with some empty jar which lies open-mouthed on the shore and lets the sea wash into it and out of it, as may happen. But the ‘receive’ of our text might be as truly rendered ‘take.’ Faith is an active taking, not a passive receiving. We must ‘lay hold on eternal life.’ Faith is the hand that grasps the offered gift, the mouth that feeds upon the bread of God, the voice that says to Christ, ‘Come in, Thou blessed of the Lord; why standest Thou without?’ Such a faith alone brings us into vital connection with Jesus. Without it, you will be none the richer for all His fulness, and may perish of famine in the midst of plenty, like a man dying of hunger outside the door of a granary. They who believe take the Saviour who is given, and they who take receive, and they who receive obtain day by day growing grace from the fulness of Christ, and so come ever nearer to the realisation of the ultimate purpose of the Father, that they should be ‘filled with all the fulness of God.’

6) John 1:17

John

GRACE AND TRUTH

Joh. 1:17.

There are scarcely any traces, in the writings of the Apostle John, of that great controversy as to the relation of the Law and the Gospel which occupied and embittered so much of the work of the Apostle Paul. We have floated into an entirely different region in John's writings. The old controversies are dead-settled, I suppose, mainly by Paul's own words, and also to a large extent by the logic of events. This verse is almost the only one in which John touches upon that extinct controversy, and here the Law is introduced simply as a foil to set off the brightness of the Gospel. All artists know the value of contrast in giving prominence. A dark background flashes up brighter colours into brilliancy. White is never so white as when it is relieved against black. And so here the special preciousness and distinctive peculiarities of what we receive in Christ are made more vivid and more distinct by contrast with what in old days 'was given by Moses.'

Every word in this verse is significant. 'Law' is set against 'grace and truth.' It was 'given'; they 'came.' Moses is contrasted with Christ. So we have a threefold antithesis as between Law and Gospel: in reference to their respective contents; in reference to the manner of their communication; and in reference to the person of their Founders. And I think, if we look at these three points, we shall get some clear apprehension of the glories of that Gospel which the Apostle would thereby commend to our affection and to our faith.

I. First of all, then, we have here the special glory of the contents of the Gospel heightened by the contrast with Law.

Law has no tenderness, no pity, no feeling. Tables of stone and a pen of iron are its fitting vehicles. Flashing lightnings and rolling thunders symbolise the fierce light which it casts upon men's duty and the terrors of its retribution. Inflexible, and with no compassion for human weakness, it tells us what we ought to be, but it does not help us to be it. It 'binds heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne,' upon men's consciences, but puts not forth 'the tip of a finger' to enable men to bear them. And this is true about law in all forms, whether it be the Mosaic Law, or whether it be the law of our own country, or whether it be the laws written upon men's consciences. These all partake of the one characteristic, that they help nothing to the fulfilment of their own behests, and that they are barbed with threatenings of retribution. Like some avenging goddess, law comes down amongst men, terrible in her purity, awful in her beauty, with a hard light in her clear grey eyes-in the one hand the tables of stone, bearing the commandments which we have broken, and in the other a sharp two-edged sword.

And this is the opposite of all that comes to us in the Gospel. The contrast divides into two portions. The 'Law' is set against 'grace and truth.' Let us look at these two in order.

What we have in Christ is not law, but grace. Law, as I said, has no heart; the meaning of the Gospel is the unveiling of the heart of God. Law commands and demands; it says: 'This shalt thou do, or else-'; and it has nothing more that it can say. What is the use of standing beside a lame man, and pointing to a shining summit, and saying to him, 'Get up there, and you will breathe a purer atmosphere'? He is lying lame at the foot of it. There is no help for any soul in law. Men are not perishing because they do not know what they ought to do. Men are not bad because they doubt as to what their duty is. The worst man in the world knows a great deal more of what he ought to do than the best man in the world practises. So it is not for want of precepts that so many of us are going to destruction, but it is for want of power to fulfil the precepts.

Grace is love giving. Law demands, grace bestows. Law comes saying 'Do this,' and our consciences respond to the imperativeness of the obligation. But grace comes and says, 'I will help thee to do it.' Law is God requiring; grace is God bestowing. 'Give what Thou commandest, and then command what Thou wilt.'

Oh, brethren! we have all of us written upon the fleshly tablets of our hearts solemn commandments which we know are binding upon us; and which we sometimes would fain keep, but cannot. Is this not a message of hope and blessedness that comes to us? Grace has drawn near in Jesus Christ, and a giving God, who bestows upon us a life that will unfold itself in accordance with the highest law, holds out the fulness of His gift in that Incarnate

Word. Law has no heart; the Gospel is the unveiling of the heart of God. Law commands; grace is God bestowing Himself.

And still further, law condemns. Grace is love that bends down to an evildoer, and deals not on the footing of strict retribution with the infirmities and the sins of us poor weaklings. And so, seeing that no man that lives but hears in his heart an accusing voice, and that every one of us knows what it is to gaze upon lofty duties that we have shrunk from, upon plain obligations from the yoke of which we have selfishly and cowardly withdrawn our necks; seeing that every man, woman, and child listening to me now has, lurking in some corner of their hearts, a memory that only needs to be quickened to be a torture, and deeds that only need to have the veil drawn away from them to terrify and shame them-oh! surely it ought to be a word of gladness for every one of us that, in front of any law that condemns us, stands forth the gentle, gracious form of the Christ that brings pardon, and 'the grace of God that bringeth salvation unto all men.' Thank God! law needed to be 'given,' but it was only the foundation on which was to be reared a better thing. 'The law was given By Moses'-'a schoolmaster,' as conscience is to-day, 'to bring us to Christ' by whom comes the grace that loves, that stoops, that gives, and that pardons.

Still further, there is another antithesis here. The Gospel which comes by Christ is not law, but truth. The object of law is to regulate conduct, and only subordinately to inform the mind or to enlighten the understanding. The Mosaic Law had for its foundation, of course, a revelation of God. But that revelation of God was less prominent, proportionately, than the prescription for man's conduct. The Gospel is the opposite of this. It has for its object the regulation of conduct; but that object is less prominent, proportionately, than the other, the manifestation and the revelation of God. The Old Testament says 'Thou shalt'; the New Testament says 'God is.' The Old was Law; the New is Truth.

And so we may draw the inference, on which I do not need to dwell, how miserably inadequate and shallow a conception of Christianity that is which sets it forth as being mainly a means of regulating conduct, and how false and foolish that loose talk is that we hear many a time.-'Never mind about theological subtleties; conduct is the main thing.' Not so. The Gospel is not law; the Gospel is truth. It is a revelation of God to the understanding and to the heart, in order that thereby the will may be subdued, and that then the conduct may be shaped and moulded. But let us begin where it begins, and let us remember that the morality of the New Testament has never long been held up high and pure, where the theology of the New Testament has been neglected and despised. ‘The law came by Moses; truth came by Jesus Christ.’

But, still further, let me remind you that, in the revelation of a God who is gracious, giving to our emptiness and forgiving our sins-that is to say, in the revelation of grace-we have a far deeper, nobler, more blessed conception of the divine nature than in law. It is great to think of a righteous God, it is great and ennobling to think of One whose pure eyes cannot look upon sin, and who wills that men should live pure and noble and Godlike lives. But it is far more and more blessed, transcending all the old teaching, when we sit at the feet of the Christ who gives, and who pardons, and look up into His deep eyes, with the tears of compassion shining in them, and say: ‘Lo! This is our God! We have waited for Him and He will save us.’ That is a better truth, a deeper truth than prophets and righteous men of old possessed; and to us there has come, borne on the wings of the mighty angel of His grace, the precious revelation of the Father-God whose heart is love. ‘The law was given by Moses,’ but brighter than the gleam of the presence between the Cherubim is the lambent light of gentle tenderness that shines from the face of Jesus Christ. Grace, and therefore truth, a deeper truth, came by Him.

And, still further, let me remind you of how this contrast is borne out by the fact that all that previous system was an adumbration, a shadow and a premonition of the perfect revelation that was to come. Temple, priest, sacrifice, law, the whole body of the Mosaic constitution of things was, as it were, a shadow thrown along the road in advance by the swiftly coming King. The shadow fell before Him, but when He came the shadow disappeared. The former was a system of types, symbols, pictures. Here is the reality that antiquates and fulfils and transcends them all. ‘The law was given by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.’

II. Now, secondly, look at the other contrast that is here, between giving and coming.

I do not know that I have quite succeeded in making clear to my own mind the precise force of this antithesis. Certainly there is a profound meaning if one can fathom it; perhaps one might put it best in something like the following fashion.

The word rendered ‘came’ might be more correctly translated ‘became,’ or ‘came into being.’ The law was given; grace and truth came to be.

Now, what do we mean when we talk about a law being given? We simply mean, I suppose, that it is promulgated, either in oral or in written words. It is, after all, no more than so many words. It is given when it is spoken or published. It is a verbal communication at the best. ‘But grace and truth came to be.’ They are realities; they are not words. They are not communicated by sentences, they are actual existences; and they spring into being as far as man’s historical possession and experience of them are concerned-they spring into being in Jesus Christ, and through Him they belong to us all. Not that there was no grace, no manifest lore of God, in the world, nor any true knowledge of Him before the Incarnation, but the earlier portions of this chapter remind us that all of grace, however restrained and partial, that all of truth, however imperfect and shadowy it may have been, which were in the world before Christ came, were owing to the operation of that Eternal Word ‘Who became flesh and dwelt among us,’ and that these, in comparison with the affluence and the fulness and the nearness of grace and truth after Christ’s coming, were so small and remote that it is not an exaggeration to say that, as far as man’s possession and experience of them are concerned, the giving love of God and the clear and true knowledge of His deep heart of tenderness and grace, sprang into being with the historical manifestation of Jesus Christ the Lord.

He comes to reveal by no words. His gift is not like the gift that Moses brought down from the mountain, merely a writing upon tables; His gift is not the letter of an outward commandment, nor the letter of an outward revelation. It is the thing itself which He reveals by being it. He does not speak about grace, He brings it; He does not show us God by His words, He shows us God by His acts. He does not preach about Him, but He lives Him, He manifests Him. His gentleness, His compassion, His miracles, His wisdom, His patience, His tears, His promises; all these are the very Deity in action before our eyes; and instead of a mere verbal revelation, which is so imperfect and so worthless, grace and truth, the living realities, are flashed upon a darkened world in the face of Jesus Christ. How cold, how hard, how superficial, in comparison with that fleshly table of the heart of Christ on which grace and truth were written, are the stony tables of law, which bore after all, for all their majesty, only words which are breath and nothing besides.

III. And so, lastly, look at the contrast that is drawn here between the persons of the Founders.

I do not suppose that we are to take into consideration the difference between the limitations of the one and the completeness of the other. I do not suppose that the Apostle was thinking about the difference between the reluctant service of the Lawgiver and the glad obedience of the Son; or between the passion and the pride that sometimes marred Moses' work, and the continual calmness and patient meekness that perfected the sacrifice of Jesus. Nor do I suppose that there flashed before his memory the difference between that strange tomb where God buried the prophet, unknown of men, in the stern solitude of the desert, true symbol of the solemn mystery and awful solitude with which the law which we have broken invests death, to our trembling consciences, and the grave in the garden with the spring flowers bursting round it, and visited by white-robed angels, who spoke comfort to weeping friends, true picture of what His death makes the grave for all His followers.

But I suppose he was mainly thinking of the contrast between the relation of Moses to his law, and of Christ to His Gospel. Moses was but a medium. His personality had nothing to do with his message. You may take away Moses, and the law stands all the same. But Christ is so interwoven with Christ's message that you cannot rend the two apart; you cannot have the figure of Christ melt away, and the gift that Christ brought remain. If you extinguish the sun you cannot keep the sunlight; if you put away Christ in the fulness of His manhood and of His divinity, in the power of His Incarnation and the omnipotence of His cross-if you put away Christ from Christianity, it collapses into dust and nothingness.

So, dear brethren, do not let any of us try that perilous experiment. You cannot melt away Jesus and keep grace and truth. You cannot tamper with His character, with His nature, with the mystery of His passion, with the atoning power of His cross, and preserve the blessings that He has brought to the world. If you want the grace which is the unveiling of the heart of God, the gift of a giving God and the pardon of a forgiving Judge; or if you want the truth, the reality of the knowledge of Him, you can only get them by accepting Christ. ‘I am the Truth, and the Way, and the Life.’ There is a ‘law given which gives life,’ and ‘righteousness is by that law.’ There is a Person who is the Truth, and our knowledge of the truth is through that Person, and through Him alone. By humble faith receive Him into your hearts, and He will come bringing to you the fulness of grace and truth.

7) John 1:29

John

THE WORLD’S SIN-BEARER

Joh. 1:29.

Our Lord, on returning from His temptation in the wilderness, came straight to John the Baptist. He was welcomed with these wonderful and rapturous words, familiarity with which has deadened our sense of their greatness. How audacious they would sound to some of their first hearers! Think of these two, one of them a young Galilean carpenter, to whom His companion witnesses and declares that He is of worldwide and infinite significance. It was the first public designation of Jesus Christ, and it throws into exclusive prominence one aspect of His work.

John the Baptist summing up the whole of former revelation which concentrated in Him, pointed a designating finger to Jesus and said, ‘That is He!’ My text is the sum of all Christian teaching ever since. My task, and that of all preachers, if we understand it aright, is but to repeat the same message, and to concentrate attention on the same fact-’The Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.’ It is the one thing needful for you, dear friend, to believe. It is the truth that we all need most of all. There is no reason for our being gathered together now, except that I may beseech you to behold for yourselves the Lamb of God which takes away the world’s sin.

I. Now let me ask you to note, first, that Jesus Christ is the world’s sin-bearer.

The significance of the first clause of my text, ‘the Lamb of God,’ is deplorably weakened if it is taken to mean only, or mainly, that Jesus Christ, in the sweetness of His human nature, is gentle and meek and patient and innocent and pure. It does mean all that, thank God! But it was no mere description of Christ’s disposition which John the Baptist conceived himself to be uttering, as is clear by the words that follow in the next clause. His reason for selecting [under divine guidance, as I believe] that image of ‘the Lamb of God,’ went a great deal deeper than anything in the temper of the Person of whom he was speaking. Many streams of ancient prophecy and ritual converge upon this emblem, and if we want to understand what is meant by the designation ‘the Lamb of God,’ we must not content ourselves with the sentimentalisms which some superficial teachers have supposed to exhaust the significance of the expression; but we must submit to be led back by John, who was the summing up of all the ancient Revelation, to the sources in that Revelation from which he drew this metaphor.

First and chiefest of these, as I take it, are the words which no Jew ever doubted referred to the Messiah, until after He had come, and the Rabbis would not believe in Him, and so were bound to hunt up another interpretation-I mean the great words in the prophecy which, I suppose, is familiar to most of us, where there are found two representations, one, ‘He was led as a Lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth’; and the other, still more germane to the purpose of my text, ‘the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. . . . By His knowledge shall He justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities.’ John the Baptist, looking back through the ages to that ancient prophetic utterance, points to the young Man standing by his side, and says, ‘There it is fulfilled.’

But the prophetic symbol of the Lamb, and the thought that He bore the iniquity of the many, had their roots in the past, and pointed back to the sacrificial lamb, the lamb of the daily sacrifice, and especially to the lamb slain at the Passover, which was an emblem and sacrament of deliverance from bondage. Thus the conceptions of vicarious suffering, and of a death which is a deliverance, and of blood which, sprinkled on the doorposts, guards the house from the destroying angel, are all gathered into these words.

Nor do these exhaust the sources of this figure, as it comes from the venerable and sacred past. For when we read 'the Lamb of God,' who is there that does not recognise, unless his eyes are blinded by obstinate prejudice, a glance backward to that sweet and pathetic story when the father went up with his son to the top of Mount Moriah, and to the boy's question, 'Where is the lamb?' answered, 'My son, God Himself will provide the lamb!' John says, 'Behold the Lamb that God has provided, the Sacrifice, on whom is laid a world's sins, and who bears them away.'

Note, too, the universality of the power of Christ's sacrificial work. John does not say 'the sins,' as the Litany, following an imperfect translation, makes him say. But he says, 'the sin of the world,' as if the whole mass of human transgression was bound together, in one black and awful bundle, and laid upon the unshrinking shoulders of this better Atlas who can bear it all, and bear it all away. Your sin, and mine, and every man's, they were all laid upon Jesus Christ.

Now remember, dear brethren, that in this wondrous representation there lie, plain and distinct, two things which to me, and I pray they may be to you, are the very foundation of the Gospel to which we have to trust. One is that on Christ Jesus, in His life and in His death, were laid the guilt and the consequences of a world's sin. I do not profess to be ready with an explanation of how that is possible. That it is a fact I believe, on the authority of Christ Himself and of Scripture; that it is inconsistent with the laws of human nature may be asserted, but never can be proved. Theories manifold have been invented in order to make it plain. I do not know that any of them have gone to the bottom of the bottomless. But Christ in His perfect manhood, wedded, as I believe it is, to true divinity, is capable of entering into-not merely by sympathy, though that has much to do with it-such closeness of relation with human kind, and with every man, as that on Him can be laid the iniquity of us all.

Oh, brethren! what was the meaning of ‘I have a baptism to be baptized with,’ unless the cold waters of the flood into which He unshrinkingly stepped, and allowed to flow over Him, were made by the gathered accumulation of the sins of the whole world? What was the meaning of the agony in Gethsemane? What was the meaning of that most awful word ever spoken by human lips, in which the consciousness of union with, and of separation from, God, were so marvellously blended, ‘My God! my God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ unless the Guiltless was then loaded with the sins of the world, which rose between Him and God?

Dear friends, it seems to me that unless this transcendent element be fairly recognised as existing in the passion and death of Jesus Christ, His demeanour when He came to die was far less heroic and noble and worthy of imitation than have been the deaths of hundreds of people who drew all their strength to die from Him. I do not venture to bring a theory, but I press upon you the fact, He bears the sins of the world, and in that awful load are yours and mine.

There is the other truth here, as clearly, and perhaps more directly, meant by the selection of the expression in my text, that the Sin-bearer not only carries, but carries away, the burden that is laid upon Him. Perhaps there may be a reference-in addition to the other sources of the figure which I have indicated as existing in ritual, and prophecy, and history-there may be a reference in the words to yet another of the eloquent symbols of that ancient system which enshrined truths that were not peculiar to any people, but were the property of humanity. You remember, no doubt, the singular ceremonial connected with the scapegoat, and many of you will recall the wonderful embodiment of it given by the Christian genius of a modern painter. The sins of the nation were symbolically laid upon its head, and it was carried out to the edge of the wilderness and driven forth to wander alone, bearing away upon itself into the darkness and solitude-far from man and far from God-the whole burden of the nation’s sins. Jesus Christ takes away the sin which He bears, and there is, as I believe, only one way by which individuals, or society, or the world at large, can thoroughly get rid of the guilt and penal consequences and of the dominion of sin, and that is, by beholding the Lamb of God that takes upon Himself, that He may carry away out of sight, the sin of the world. So much, then, for the first thought that I wish to suggest to you.

II. Now let me ask you to look with me at a second thought, that such a world's Sin-bearer is the world's deepest need.

The sacrifices of every land witness to the fact that humanity all over the world, and through all the ages, and under all varieties of culture, has been dimly conscious that its deepest need was that the fact of sin should be dealt with. I know that there are plenty of modern ingenious ways of explaining the universal prevalence of an altar and a sacrifice, and the slaying of innocent creatures, on other grounds, some of which I think it is not uncharitable to suppose are in favour mainly because they weaken this branch of the evidence for the conformity of Christian truth with human necessities. But notwithstanding these, I venture to affirm, with all proper submission to wiser men, that you cannot legitimately explain the universal prevalence of sacrifice, unless you take into account as one-I should say the main-element in it, this universally diffused sense that things are wrong between man and the higher Power, and need to be set right even by such a method.

But I do not need to appeal only to this world-wide fact as being a declaration of what man's deepest need is. I would appeal to every man's own consciousness-hard though it be to get at it; buried as it is, with some of us, under mountains of indifference and neglect; and callous as it is with many of us by reason of indulgence in habits of evil. I believe that in every one of us, if we will be honest, and give heed to the inward voice, there does echo a response and an amen to the Scripture declaration, 'God hath shut up all under sin.' I ask you about yourselves, is it not so? Do you not know that, however you may gloss over the thing, or forget it amidst a whirl of engagements and occupations, or try to divert your thoughts into more or less noble or ignoble channels of pleasures and pursuits, there does lie, in each of our hearts, the sense, dormant often, but sometimes like a snake in its hybernation, waking up enough to move, and sometimes enough to sting-there does lie, in each of us, the consciousness that we are wrong with God, and need something to put us right?

And, brethren, let modern philanthropists of all sorts take this lesson: The thing that the world wants is to have sin dealt with-dealt with in the way of conscious forgiveness; dealt with in the way of drying up its source, and delivering men from the power of it. Unless you do that, I do not say you do nothing, but you pour a bottle full of cold water into Vesuvius, and try to put the fire out with that. You may educate, you may cultivate, you may refine; you may set political and economical arrangements right in accordance with the newest notions of the century, and what then? Why! the old thing will just begin over again, and the old miseries will appear again, because the old grandmother of them all is there, the sin that has led to them.

Now do not misunderstand me, as if I were warring against good and noble men who are trying to remedy the world's evils by less thorough methods than Christ's Gospel. They will do a great deal. But you may have high education, beautiful refinement of culture and manners; you may divide out political power in accordance with the most democratic notions; you may give everybody 'a living wage,' however extravagant his notions of a living wage may be. You may carry out all these panaceas and the world will groan still, because you have not dealt with the tap-root of all the mischief. You cannot cure an internal cancer with a plaster upon the little finger, and you will never stanch the world's wounds until you go to the Physician that has balm and bandage, even Jesus Christ, that takes away the sins of the world. I profoundly distrust all these remedies for the world's misery as in themselves inadequate, even whilst I would help them all, and regard them all as then blessed and powerful, when they are consequences and secondary results of the Gospel, the first task of which is to deal by forgiveness and by cleansing with individual transgression.

And if I might venture to go a step further, I would like to say that this aspect of our Lord's work on which John the Baptist concentrated all our attention is the only one which gives Him power to sway men, and which makes the Gospel-the record of His work-the kingly power in the world that it is meant to be. Depend upon it, that in the measure in which Christian teachers fail to give supreme importance to that aspect of Christ's work they fail altogether. There are many other aspects which, as I have just said, follow in my conception from this first one; but if, as is obviously the tendency in many quarters to-day, Christianity be thought of as being mainly a means of social improvement, or if its principles of action be applied to life without that basis of them all, in the Cross which takes away the world's iniquity, then it needs no prophet to foretell that such a Christianity will only have superficial effects, and that, in losing sight of this central thought, it will have cast away all its power.

I beseech you, dear brethren, remember that Jesus Christ is something more than a social reformer, though He is the first of them, and the only one whose work will last. Jesus Christ is something more than a lovely pattern of human conduct, though He is that. Jesus Christ is something more than a great religious genius who set forth the Fatherhood of God as it had never been set forth before. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the record not only of what He said but of what He did, not only that He lived but that He died; and all His other powers, and all His other benefits and blessings to society, come as results of His dealing with the individual soul when He takes away its guilt and reconciles it to God.

III. And so, lastly, let me ask you to notice that this Sin-bearer of the world is our Sin-bearer if we 'behold' Him.

John was simply summoning ignorant eyes to look, and telling of what they would see. But his call is susceptible, without violence, of a far deeper meaning. This is really the one truth that I want to press upon you, dear friends-'Behold the Lamb of God!'

What is that beholding? Surely it is nothing else than our recognising in Him the great and blessed work which I have been trying to describe, and then resting ourselves upon that great Lord and sufficient Sacrifice. And such an exercise of simple trust is well named beholding, because they who believe do see, with a deeper and a truer vision than sense can give. You and I can see Christ more really than these men who stood round Him, and to whom His flesh was 'a veil'-as the Epistle to the Hebrews calls it-hiding His true divinity and work. They who thus behold by faith lack nothing either of the directness or of the certitude that belong to vision. 'Seeing is believing,’ says the cynical proverb. The Christian version inverts its terms, ‘Believing is seeing.’ ‘Whom having not seen ye love, in whom though now ye see Him not, yet believing ye rejoice.’

And your simple act of ‘beholding,’ by the recognition of His work and the resting of yourself upon it, makes the world’s Sin-bearer your Sin-bearer. You appropriate the general blessing, like a man taking in a little piece of a boundless prairie for his very own. Your possession does not make my possession of Him less, for every eye gets its own beam, and however many eyes wait upon Him, they all receive the light on to their happy eyeballs. You can make Christ your own, and have all that He has done for the world as your possession, and can experience in your own hearts the sense of your own forgiveness and deliverance from the power and guilt of your own sin, on the simple condition of looking unto Jesus. The serpent is lifted on the pole, the dying camp cannot go to it, but the filming eyes of the man in his last gasp may turn to the gleaming image hanging on high; and as he looks the health begins to tingle back into his veins, and he is healed.

And so, dear brethren, behold Him; for unless you do, though He has borne the world’s sin, your sin will not be there, but will remain on your back to crush you down. ‘O Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy upon me!’

8) John 1:37-39

John

THE FIRST DISCIPLES: I. JOHN AND ANDREW

Joh. 1:37 - Joh. 1:39.

In these verses we see the head waters of a great river, for we have before us nothing less than the beginnings of the Christian Church. So simply were the first disciples made. The great society of believers was born like its Master, unostentatiously and in a corner.

Jesus has come back from His conflict in the wilderness after His baptism, and has presented Himself before John the Baptist for his final attestation. It was a great historical moment when the last of the Prophets stood face to face with the Fulfilment of all prophecy. In his words, ‘Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world!’ Jewish prophecy sang its swan-song, uttered its last rejoicing, ‘Eureka! I have found Him!’ and died as it spoke.

We do not sufficiently estimate the magnificent self-suppression and unselfishness of the Baptist, in that he, with his own lips, here repeats his testimony in order to point his disciples away from himself, and to attach them to Jesus. If he could have been touched by envy he would not so gladly have recognised it as his lot to decrease while Jesus increased. Bare magnanimity that in a teacher! The two who hear John’s words are Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, and an anonymous man. The latter is probably the Evangelist. For it is remarkable that we never find the names of James and John in this Gospel [though from the other Gospels we know how closely they were associated with our Lord], and that we only find them referred to as ‘the sons of Zebedee,’ once near the close of the book. That fact points, I think, in the direction of John’s authorship of this Gospel.

These two, then, follow behind Jesus, fancying themselves unobserved, not desiring to speak to Him, and probably with some notion of tracking Him to His home, in order that they may seek an interview at a later period. But He who notices the first beginnings of return to Him, and always comes to meet men, and is better to them than their wishes, will not let them steal behind Him uncheered, nor leave them to struggle with diffidence and delay. So He turns to them, and the events ensue which I have read in the verses that follow as my text.

We have, I think, three things especially to notice here. First, the Master’s question to the whole world, ‘What seek ye?’ Second, the Master’s invitation to the whole world, ‘Come and see!’ Lastly, the personal communion which brings men’s hearts to Him, ‘They came and saw where He dwelt, and abode with Him that day.’

I. So, then, first look at this question of Christ to the whole world, ‘What seek ye?’

As it stands, on its surface, and in its primary application, it is the most natural of questions. Our Lord hears footsteps behind Him, and, as any one would do, turns about, with the question which any one would ask, ‘What is it that you want?’ That question would derive all its meaning from the look with which it was accompanied, and the tone in which it was spoken. It might mean either annoyance and rude repulsion of a request, even before it was presented, or it might mean a glad wish to draw out the petition, and more than half a pledge to bestow it. All depends on the smile with which it was asked and the intonation of voice which carried it to their ears. And if we had been there we should have felt, as these two evidently felt, that though in form a question, it was in reality a promise, and that it drew out their shy wishes, made them conscious to themselves of what they desired, and gave them confidence that their desire would be granted. Clearly it had sunk very deep into the Evangelist’s mind; and now, at the end of his life, when his course is nearly run, the never-to-be-forgotten voice sounds still in his memory, and he sees again, in sunny clearness, all the scene that had transpired on that day by the fords of the Jordan. The first words and the last words of those whom we have learned to love are cut deep on our hearts.

It was not an accident that the first words which the Master spoke in His Messianic office were this profoundly significant question, ‘What seek ye?’ He asks it of us all, He asks it of us to-day. Well for them who can answer, ‘Rabbi! where dwellest Thou?’ ‘It is Thou whom we seek!’ So, venturing to take the words in that somewhat wider application, let me just suggest to you two or three directions in which they seem to point.

First, the question suggests to us this: the need of having a clear consciousness of what is our object in life. The most of men have never answered that question. They live from hand to mouth, driven by circumstances, guided by accidents, impelled by unreflecting passions and desires, knowing what they want for the moment, but never having tried to shape the course of their lives into a consistent whole, so as to stand up before God in Christ when He puts the question to them, ‘What seek ye?’ and to answer the question.

These incoherent, instinctive, unreflective lives that so many of you are living are a shame to your manhood, to say nothing more. God has made us for something else than that we should thus be the sport of circumstances. It is a disgrace to any of us that our lives should be like some little fishing-boat, with an unskilful or feeble hand at the tiller, yawing from one point of the compass to another, and not keeping a straight and direct course. I pray you, dear brethren, to front this question: ‘After all, and at bottom, what is it I am living for? Can I formulate the aims and purposes of my life in any intelligible statement of which I should not be ashamed?’ Some of you are not ashamed to do what you would be very much ashamed to say, and you practically answer the question, ‘What are you seeking?’ by pursuits that you durst not call by their own ugly names.

There may be many of us who are living for our lusts, for our passions, for our ambitions, for avarice, who are living in all uncleanness and godlessness. I do not know. There are plenty of shabby, low aims in all of us which do not bear being dragged out into the light of day. I beseech you to try and get hold of the ugly things and bring them up to the surface, however much they may seek to hide in the congenial obscurity and twist their slimy coils round something in the dark. If you dare not put your life’s object into words, bethink yourselves whether it ought to be your life’s object at all.

Ah, brethren! if we would ask ourselves this question, and answer it with any thoroughness, we should not make so many mistakes as to the places where we look for the things for which we are seeking. If we knew what we were really seeking, we should know where to go to look for it. Let me tell you what you are seeking, whether you know it or not. You are seeking for rest for your heart, a home for your spirits; you are seeking for perfect truth for your understandings, perfect beauty for your affections, perfect goodness for your conscience. You are seeking for all these three, gathered into one white beam of light, and you are seeking for it all in a Person. Many of you do not know this, and so you go hunting in all manner of impossible places for that which you can only find in one. To the question, ‘What seek ye?’ the deepest of all answers, the only real answer, is, ‘My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.’ If you know that, you know where to look for what you need! ‘Do men gather grapes of thorns?’ If these are really the things that you are seeking after, in all your mistaken search-oh! how mistaken is the search! Do men look for pearls in cockle-shells, or for gold in coal-pits; and why should you look for rest of heart, mind, conscience, spirit, anywhere and in anything short of God? ‘What seek ye?’-the only answer is, ‘We seek Thee!’

And then, still further, let me remind you how these words are not only a question, but are really a veiled and implied promise. The question, ‘What do you want of Me?’ may either strike an intending suppliant like a blow, and drive him away with his prayer sticking in his throat unspoken, or it may sound like a merciful invitation, ‘What is thy petition, and what is thy request, and it shall be granted unto thee?’ We know which of the two it was here. Christ asks all such questions as this [and there are many of them in the New Testament], not for His information, but for our strengthening. He asks people, not because He does not know before they answer, but that, on the one hand, their own minds may be clear as to their wishes, and so they may wish the more earnestly because of the clearness; and that, on the other hand, their desires being expressed, they may be the more able to receive the gift which He is willing to bestow. So He here turns to these men, whose purpose He knew well enough, and says to them, ‘What seek ye?’ Herein He is doing the very same thing on a lower level, and in an outer sphere, as is done when He appoints that we shall pray for the blessings which He is yearning to bestow, but which He makes conditional on our supplications, only because by these supplications our hearts are opened to a capacity for receiving them.

We have, then, in the words before us, thus understood, our Lord’s gracious promise to give what is desired on the simple condition that the suppliant is conscious of his own wants, and turns to Him for the supply of them. ‘What seek ye?’ It is a blank cheque that He puts into their hands to fill up. It is the key of His treasure-house which He offers to us all, with the assured confidence that if we open it we shall find all that we need.

Who is He that thus stands up before a whole world of seeking, restless spirits, and fronts them with the question which is a pledge, conscious of His capacity to give to each of them what each of them requires? Who is this that professes to be able to give all these men and women and children bread here in the wilderness? There is only one answer-the Christ of God.

And He has done what He promises. No man or woman ever went to Him, and answered this question, and presented their petition for any real good, and was refused. No man can ask from Christ what Christ cannot bestow. No man can ask from Christ what Christ will not bestow. In the loftiest region, the region of inward and spiritual gifts, which are the best gifts, we can get everything that we want, and our only limit is, not His boundless omnipotence and willingness, but our own poor, narrow, and shrivelled desires. ‘Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find.’

Christ stands before us, if I may so say, like some of those fountains erected at some great national festival, out of which pour for all the multitude every variety of draught which they desire, and each man that goes with his empty cup gets it filled, and gets it filled with that which he wishes. ‘What seek ye?’ Wisdom? You students, you thinkers, you young men that are fighting with intellectual difficulties and perplexities, ‘What seek ye?’ Truth? He gives us that. You others, ‘What seek ye?’ Love, peace, victory, self-control, hope, anodyne for sorrow? Whatever you desire, you will find in Jesus Christ. The first words with which He broke the silence when He spake to men as the Messias, were at once a searching question, probing their aims and purposes, and a gracious promise pledging Him to a task not beyond His power, however far beyond that of all others, even the task of giving to each man his heart’s desire. ‘What seek ye?’ ‘Seek, and ye shall find.’

II. Then, still further, notice how, in a similar fashion, we may regard here the second words which our Lord speaks as being His merciful invitation to the world. ‘Come and see.’

The disciples' answer was simple and timid. They did not venture to say, 'May we talk to you?' 'Will you take us to be your disciples?' All they can muster courage to ask now is, 'Where dwellest Thou?' At another time, perhaps, we will go to this Rabbi and speak with Him. His answer is, 'Come, come now; come, and by intercourse with Me learn to know Me.' His temporary home was probably nothing more than some selected place on the river's bank, for 'He had not where to lay His head'; but such as it was, He welcomes them to it. 'Come and see!'

Take a plain, simple truth out of that. Christ is always glad when people resort to Him. When He was here in the world, no hour was inconvenient or inopportune; no moment was too much occupied; no physical wants of hunger, or thirst, or slumber were ever permitted to come between Him and seeking hearts. He was never impatient. He was never wearied of speaking, though He was often wearied in speaking. He never denied Himself to any one or said, 'I have something else to do than to attend to you.' And just as in literal fact, whilst He was here upon earth, nothing was ever permitted to hinder His drawing near to any man who wanted to draw near to Him, so nothing now hinders it; and He is glad when any of us resort to Him and ask Him to let us speak to Him and be with Him. His weariness or occupation never shut men out from Him then. His glory does not shut them out now.

Then there is another thought here. This invitation of the Master is also a very distinct call to a firsthand knowledge of Jesus Christ. Andrew and John had heard from the Baptist about Him, and now what He bids them to do is to come and hear Himself. That is what He calls you, dear brethren, to do. Do not listen to us, let the Master Himself speak to you. Many who reject Christianity reject it through not having listened to Jesus Himself teaching them, but only to theologians and other human representations of the truth. Go and ask Christ to speak to you with His own lips of truth, and take Him as the Expositor of His own system. Do not be contented with traditional talk and second-hand information. Go to Christ, and hear what He Himself has to say to you.

Then, still further, in this 'Come and see' there is a distinct call to the personal act of faith. Both of these words, 'come' and ' see,' are used in the New Testament as standing emblems of faith. Coming to Christ is trusting

Him; trusting Him is seeing Him, looking unto Him. ‘Come unto Me, and I will give you rest,’ ‘Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all ye ends of the earth.’ There are two metaphors, both of them pointing to one thing, and that one thing is the invitation from the dear lips of the loving Lord to every man, woman, and child in this congregation. ‘Come and see!’ ‘Put your trust in Me, draw near to Me by desire and penitence, draw near to Me in the fixed thought of your mind, in the devotion of your will, in the trust of your whole being. Come to Me, and see Me by faith; and then-and then-your hearts will have found what they seek, and your weary quest will be over, and, like the dove, you will fold your wings and nestle at the foot of the Cross, and rest for evermore. Come! “Come and see!”‘

III. So, lastly, we have in these words a parable of the blessed experience which binds men’s hearts to Jesus for ever. ‘They came and saw where He dwelt, and abode with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.’

‘Dwelt’ and ‘abode’ are the same words in the original. It is one of John’s favourite words, and in its deepest meaning expresses the close, still communion which the soul may have with Jesus Christ, which communion, on that never-to-be-forgotten day, when he and Andrew sat with Him in the quiet, confidential fellowship that disclosed Christ’s glory ‘full of grace and truth’ to their hearts, made them His for ever.

If the reckoning of time here is made according to the Hebrew fashion, the ‘tenth hour’ will be ten o’clock in the morning. So, one long day of talk! If it be according to the Roman legal fashion, the hour will be four o’clock in the afternoon, which would only give time for a brief conversation before the night fell. But, in any case, sacred reserve is observed as to what passed in that interview. A lesson for a great deal of blatant talk, in this present day, about conversion and the details thereof!

‘Not easily forgiven
Are those, who setting wide the doors, that bar
The secret bridal chambers of the heart.
Let in the day.’

John had nothing to say to the world about what the Master said to him and his brother in that long day of communion.

One plain conclusion from this last part of our narrative is that the impression of Christ's own personality is the strongest force to make disciples. The character of Jesus Christ is, after all, the central and standing evidence and the mightiest credential of Christianity. It bears upon its face the proof of its own truthfulness. If such a character was not lived, how did it ever come to be described, and described by such people? And if it was lived, how did it come to be so? The historical veracity of the character of Jesus Christ is guaranteed by its very uniqueness. And the divine origin of Jesus Christ is forced upon us as the only adequate explanation of His historical character. 'Truly this man was the Son of God.'

I believe that to lift Him up is the work of all Christian preachers and teachers; as far as they can to hide themselves behind Jesus Christ, or at the most to let themselves appear, just as the old painters used to let their own likenesses appear in their great altar-pieces-a little kneeling figure there, away in a dark corner of the background. Present Christ, and He will vindicate His own character; He will vindicate His own nature; He will vindicate His own gospel. 'They came and saw where He dwelt, and abode with Him,' and the end of it was that they abode with Him for evermore. And so it will always be.

Once more, personal experience of the grace and sweetness of this Saviour binds men to Him as nothing else will:

'He must be loved ere that to you
He will seem worthy of your love.'

The deepest and sweetest and most precious part of His character and of His gifts can only be known on condition of possessing Him and them, and they can be possessed only on condition of holding fellowship with Him. I do not say to any man: 'Try trust in order to be sure that Jesus Christ is worthy to be trusted,' for by its very nature faith cannot be an experiment or provisional. I do not say that my experience is evidence to you, but at the same time I do say that it is worth any man's while to reflect upon this, that none who ever trusted in Him have been put to shame. No man has looked to Jesus and has said: ‘Ah! I have found Him out! His help is vain, His promises empty.’ Many men have fallen away from Him, I know, but not because they have proved Him untruthful, but because they have become unfaithful.

And so, dear brethren, I come to you with the old message, ‘Oh! taste,’ and thus you will ‘see that the Lord is good.’ There must be the faith first, and then there will be the experience, which will make anything seem to you more credible than that He whom you have loved and trusted, and who has answered your love and your trust, should be anything else than the Son of God, the Saviour of mankind. Come to Him and you will see. The impregnable argument will be put into your mouth-’Whether this man be a sinner or no, I know not. One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see.’ Look to Him, listen to Him, and when He asks you, ‘What seek ye?’ answer, ‘Rabbi, where dwellest Thou? It is Thou whom I seek.’ He will welcome you to close blessed intercourse with Him, which will knit you to Him with cords that cannot be broken, and with His loving voice making music in memory and heart, you will be able triumphantly to confess-’Now we believe, not because of any man’s saying, for we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world.’

9) John 1:40-42

John

THE FIRST DISCIPLES: II. SIMON PETER

Joh. 1:40 f11 - Joh. 1:42.

There are many ways by which souls are brought to their Saviour. Sometimes, like the merchantman seeking goodly pearls, men seek Him earnestly and find Him. Sometimes, by the intervention of another, the knowledge of Him is kindled in dark hearts. Sometimes He Himself takes the initiative, and finds those that seek Him not. We have illustrations of all these various ways in these simple records of the gathering in of the first disciples. Andrew and his friend, with whom we were occupied in our last sermon, looked for Christ and found Him. Peter, with whom we have to do now, was brought to Christ by his brother; and the third of the group, consisting of Philip, was sought by Christ while he was not thinking of Him, and found an unsought treasure; and then Philip again, like Andrew, finds a friend, and brings him to Christ.

Each of the incidents has its own lesson, and each of them adds something to the elucidation of John’s two great subjects: the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God, and the development of that faith in Him which gives us life. It may be profitable to consider each group in succession, and mark the various aspects of these two subjects presented by each.

In this incident, then, we have two things mainly to consider: first, the witness of the disciple; second, the self-revelation of the Master.

I. The witness of the disciple.

We have seen that the unknown companion of Andrew was probably the Evangelist himself, who, in accordance with his uniform habit, suppresses his own name, and that that omission points to John’s authorship of this Gospel. Another morsel of evidence as to the date and purpose of the Gospel lies in the mention here of Andrew as ‘Simon Peter’s brother.’ We have not yet heard anything about Simon Peter. The Evangelist has never mentioned his name, and yet he takes it for granted that his hearers knew all about Peter, and knew him better than they did Andrew. That presupposes a considerable familiarity with the incidents of the Gospel story, and is in harmony with the theory that this fourth Gospel is the latest of the four, and was written for the purpose of supplementing, not of repeating, their narrative. Hence a number of the phenomena of the Gospel, which have troubled critics, are simply and sufficiently explained.

But that by the way. Passing that, notice first the illustration that we get here of how instinctive and natural the impulse is, when a man has found Jesus Christ, to tell some one else about Him. Nobody said to Andrew, ‘Go and look for your brother,’ and yet, as soon as he had fairly realised the fact that this Man standing before him was the Messiah, though the evening seems to have come, he hurries away to find his brother, and share with him the glad conviction.

Now, that is always the case. If a man has any real depth of conviction, he cannot rest till he tries to share it with somebody else. Why, even a dog that has had its leg mended, will bring other limping dogs to the man that was kind to it. Whoever really believes anything becomes a propagandist.

Look round about us to-day! and hearken to the Babel, the wholesale Babel of noises, where every sort of opinion is trying to make itself heard. It sounds like a country fair where every huckster is shouting his loudest. That shows that the men believe the things that they profess. Thank God that there is so much earnestness in the world! And now are Christians to be dumb whilst all this vociferous crowd is calling its wares, and quacks are standing on their platforms shouting out their specifics, which are mostly delusions? Have you not a medicine that will cure everything, a real heal-all, a veritable pain-killer? If you believe that you have, certainly you will never rest till you share your boon with your brethren.

If the natural effect of all earnest conviction, viz. a yearning and an absolute necessity to speak it out, is no part of your Christian experience, very grave inferences ought to be drawn from that. This man, before he was four-and-twenty hours a disciple, had made another. Some of you have been disciples for as many years, and have never even tried to make one. Whence comes that silence which is, alas, so common among us?

It is very plain that, making all allowance for changed manners, for social difficulties, for timidity, for the embarrassment that besets people when they talk to other people about religion, which is ‘such an awkward subject to introduce into mixed company,’ and the like,-making all allowance for these, there is a deplorable number of Christian people who ought to be, in their own circles, evangelists and missionaries, who are, if I may venture to quote very rude words which the Bible uses, ‘Dumb dogs lying down, and loving to slumber.’ ‘He first findeth his own brother, Simon!’

Now, take another lesson out of this witness of the disciple, as to the channel in which such effort naturally runs. ‘He first findeth his own brother’; does not that imply a second finding by the other of the two? The language of the text suggests that the Evangelist’s tendency to the suppression of himself, of which I have spoken, hides away, if I may so say, in this singular expression, the fact that he too went to look for a brother, but that Andrew found his brother before John found his. If so, each of the original pair of disciples went to look for one who was knit to him by close ties of kindred and affection, and found him and brought him to Christ; and before the day was over the Christian Church was doubled, because each member of it, by God's grace, had added another. Home, then, and those who are nearest to us, present the natural channels for Christian work. Many a very earnest and busy preacher, or Sunday-school teacher, or missionary, has brothers and sisters, husband or wife, children or parents at home to whom he has never said a word about Christ. There is an old proverb, 'The shoemaker's wife is always the worst shod.' The families of many very busy Christian teachers suffer wofully for want of remembering 'he first findeth his own brother.' It is a poor affair if all your philanthropy and Christian energy go off noisily in Sunday-schools and mission-stations, and if your own vineyard is neglected, and the people at your own fireside never hear anything from you about the Master whom you say you love. Some of you want that hint; will you take it?

But then, the principle is one that might be fairly expanded beyond the home circle. The natural relationships into which we are brought by neighbourhood and by ordinary associations prescribe the direction of our efforts. What, for instance, are we set down in this swarming population of Lancashire for? For business and personal ends? Yes, partly. But is that all? Surely, if we believe that 'there is a divinity that shapes our ends' and determines the bounds of our habitation, we must believe that other purposes affecting other people are also meant by God to be accomplished through us, and that where a man who knows and loves Christ Jesus is brought into neighbourly contact with thousands who do not, he is thereby constituted his brethren's keeper, and is as plainly called to tell them of Christ as if a voice from Heaven had bid him do it. What is to be said of the depth and vital energy of the Christianity that neither hears the call nor feels the impulse to share its blessing with the famishing Lazarus at its gate? What will be the fate of such a church? Why, if you live in luxury in your own well drained and ventilated house, and take no heed to the typhoid fever or cholera in the slums at its back, the chances are that seeds of the disease will find their way to you, and kill your wife, or child, or yourself. And if you Christian people, living in the midst of godless people, do not try to heal them, they will infect you. If you do not seek to impress your conviction that Christ is the Messiah upon an unbelieving generation, the unbelieving generation will impress upon you its doubts whether He is; and your lips will falter, and a pallor will come over the complexion of your love, and your faith will become congealed and turn into ice.

Notice again the simple word which is the most powerful means of influencing most men.

Andrew did not begin to argue with his brother. Some of us can do that and some of us cannot. Some of us are influenced by argument and some of us are not. You may pound a man's mistaken creed to atoms with sledge-hammers of reasoning, and he is not much the nearer being a Christian than he was before; just as you may pound ice to pieces and it is pounded ice after all. The mightiest argument that we can use, and the argument that we can all use, if we have got any religion in us at all, is that of Andrew, 'We have found the Messias.'

I recently read a story in some newspaper or other about a minister who preached a very elaborate course of lectures in refutation of some form of infidelity, for the special benefit of a man that attended his place of worship. Soon after, the man came and declared himself a Christian. The minister said to him, 'Which of my discourses was it that removed your doubts?' The reply was, 'Oh! it was not any of your sermons that influenced me. The thing that set me thinking was that a poor woman came out of the chapel beside me, and stumbled on the steps, and I stretched out my hand to help her, and she said "Thank you!" Then she looked at me and said, "Do you love Jesus Christ, my blessed Saviour?" And I did not, and I went home and thought about it; and now I can say I love Jesus.' The poor woman's word, and her frank confession of her experience, were all the transforming power.

If you have found Christ, you can say that you have. Never mind about the how! Any how! Only say it! A boy that is sent on an errand by his father has only one duty to perform, and that is to repeat what he was told. Whether we have any eloquence or not, whether we have any logic or not, whether we can speak persuasively and gracefully or not, if we have laid hold of Christ at all we can say that we have; and it is at our peril that we do not. We can say it to somebody. There is surely some one who will listen to you more readily than to any one else. Surely you have not lived all your life and bound nobody to you by kindness and love, so that they will gladly attend to what you say. Well, then, use the power that is given to you.

Remember the beginnings of the Christian Church-two men, each of whom found his brother. Two and two make four; and if every one of us would go, according to the old law of warfare, and each of us slay our man, or rather each of us give life by God's grace to some one, or try to do it, our congregations and our churches would grow as fast as, according to the old problem, the money grew that was paid down for the nails in the horse's shoes. Two snowflakes on the top of a mountain gather an avalanche by the time they reach the valley. 'He first findeth his brother, Simon.'

II. And now I turn to the second part of this text, the self-revelation of the Master.

The bond which knit these men to Christ at first was by no means the perfect Christian faith which they afterwards attained. They recognised Him as the Messiah, they were personally attached to Him, they were ready to accept His teaching and to obey His commandments. That was about as far as they had gone. But they were scholars. They had entered the school. The rest would come. It would be absurd to expect that Christ would begin by preaching to them faith in His divinity and atoning work. He binds them to Himself. That is lesson enough for a beginner for one day.

It was the impression which Christ Himself made on Simon which completed the work begun by his brother. What, then, was the impression? He comes all full of wonder and awe, and he is met by a look and a sentence. The look, which is described by an unusual word, was a penetrating gaze which regarded Peter with fixed attention. It must have been remarkable, to have lived in John's memory for all these years. Evidently, as I think, a more than natural insight is implied. So, also, the saying with which our Lord received Peter seems to me to be meant to show more than natural knowledge: 'Thou art Simon, the son of Jonas.' Christ may, no doubt, have learned the Apostle's name and lineage from his brother, or in some other ordinary way. But if you observe the similar incident which follows in the conversation with Nicodemus, and the emphatic declaration of the next chapter that Jesus knew both 'all men,' and 'what was in man'-both human nature as a whole, and each individual-it is more natural to see here superhuman knowledge.

So then, the first point in our Lord's self-revelation here is that He shows Himself possessed of supernatural and thorough knowledge. One remembers the many instances where our Lord read men's hearts, and the prayer addressed to Him probably, by Peter, 'Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men,' and the vision which John saw of 'eyes like a flame of fire,' and the sevenfold 'I know thy works.'

It may be a very awful thought, 'Thou, God, seest me.' It is a very unwelcome thought to a great many men, and it will be so to us unless we can give it the modification which it receives from the belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, and feel sure that the eyes which are blazing with divine omniscience are dewy with divine and human love.

Do you believe it? Do you feel that Christ is looking at you, and searching you altogether? Do you rejoice in it? Do you carry it about with you as a consolation and a strength in moments of weakness and in times of temptation? Is it as blessed to you to feel 'Thou Christ beholdest me now,' as it is for a child to feel that, when it is playing in the garden, its mother is sitting up at the window watching it, and that no harm can come? There have been men driven mad in prisons because they knew that somewhere in the wall there was a little pinhole, through which a gaoler's eye was always, or might be always, glaring down at them. And the thought of an absolute Omniscience up there, searching me to the depths of my nature, may become one from which I recoil shudderingly, and will not be altogether a blessed one unless it comes to me in this shape:-'My Christ knows me altogether and loves me better than He knows. And so I will spread myself out before Him, and though I feel that there is much in me which I dare not tell to men, I will rejoice that there is nothing which I need to tell to Him. He knows me through and through. He knew me when He died for me. He knew me when He forgave me. He knew me when He undertook to cleanse me. Like this very Peter I will say, "Lord, Thou knowest all things," and, like him, I will cling the closer to His feet, because I know, and He knows, my weakness and my sin.'

Another revelation of our Lord’s relation to His disciples is given in the fact that He changes Simon’s name. Jehovah, in the Old Testament, changes the names of Abraham and of Jacob. Babylonian kings in the Old Testament change the names of their vassal princes. Masters impose names on their slaves; and I suppose that even the marriage custom of the wife’s assuming the name of the husband rests originally upon the same idea of absolute authority. That idea is conveyed in the fact that our Lord changes Peter’s name, and so takes absolute possession of him, and asserts His mastery over him. We belong to Him altogether, because He has given Himself altogether for us. His absolute authority is the correlative of His utter self-surrender. He who can come to me and say, ‘I have spared not my life for thee,’ and He only, has the right to come to me and say, ‘yield yourself wholly to Me.’ So, Christian friends, your Master wants all your service; do you give yourselves up to Him out and out, not by half and half.

Lastly, that change of name implies Christ’s power and promise to bestow a new character and new functions and honours. Peter was by no means a ‘Peter’ then. The name no doubt mainly implies official function, but that official function was prepared for by personal character; and in so far as the name refers to character, it means firmness. At that epoch Peter was rash, impulsive, headstrong, self-confident, vain, and therefore, necessarily changeable. Like the granite, all fluid and hot, and fluid because it was hot, he needed to cool in order to solidify into rock. And not until his self-confidence had been knocked out of him, and he had learned humility by falling; not until he had been beaten from all his presumption, and tamed down, and sobered and steadied by years of difficulty and responsibilities, did he become the rock that Christ meant him to be. All that lay concealed in the future, but in the change of his name, while he stood on the very threshold of his Christian career, there was preached to him, and there is preached to us, this great truth, that if you will go to Jesus Christ He will make a new man of you. No man’s character is so obstinately rooted in evil but that Christ can change its set and direction. No man’s natural dispositions are so faulty and low but that Christ can develop counterbalancing virtues, and out of the evil and weakness make strength. He will not make a Peter into a John, or a John into a Paul, but He will deliver Peter from the ‘defects of his qualities,’ and lead them up into a higher and a nobler region. There are no outcasts in the view of the transforming Christ. He dismisses no people out of His hospital as incurable, because anybody, everybody, the blackest, the most rooted in evil, those who have longest indulged in any given form of transgression, may all come to Him; with the certainty that if they will cleave to Him, He will read all their character and all its weaknesses, and then with a glad smile of welcome and assured confidence on His face, will ensure to them a new nature and new dignities. 'Thou art Simon-thou shalt be Peter.'

The process will be long. It will be painful. There will be a great deal pared off. The sculptor makes the marble image by chipping away the superfluous marble. Ah! and when you have to chip away superfluous flesh and blood it is bitter work, and the chisel is often deeply dyed in gore, and the mallet seems to be very cruel. Simon did not know all that had to be done to make a Peter of him. We have to thank God's providence that we do not know all the sorrows and trials of the process of making us what He wills us to be. But we may be sure of this, that if only we keep near our Master, and let Him have His way with us, and work His will upon us, and if only we will not wince from the blows of the Great Artist's chisel, then out of the roughest block He will carve the fairest statue; and He will fulfil for us at last His great promise: 'I will give unto him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth save he that receiveth it.'

10)John 1:43

John

THE FIRST DISCIPLES: III. PHILIP

Joh. 1:43.

'The day following'-we have a diary in this chapter and the next, extending from the day when John the Baptist gives his official testimony to Jesus, up till our Lord's first journey to Jerusalem. The order of events is this. The deputation from the Sanhedrim to John occupied the first day. On the second Jesus comes back to John after His temptation, and receives his solemn attestation. On the third day, John repeats his testimony, and three disciples, probably four, make the nucleus of the Church. These are the two pairs of brothers, James and John, Andrew and Peter, who stand first in every catalogue of the Apostles, and were evidently nearest to Christ.

‘The day following’ of our text is the fourth day. On it our Lord determines to return to Galilee. His objects in His visit to John were accomplished-to receive his public attestation, and to gather the first little knot of His followers. Thus launched upon His course, He desired to return to His native district.

These events had occurred where John was baptising, in a place called in the English version Bethabara, which means ‘The house of crossing,’ or as we might say, Ferry-house. The traditional site for John’s baptism is near Jericho, but the next chapter [Joh. 2:1] shows that it was only a day’s journey from Cana of Galilee, and must therefore have been much further north than Jericho. A ford, still bearing the name Abarah, a few miles south of the lake of Gennesaret, has lately been discovered. Our Lord, then, and His disciples had a day’s walking to take them back to Galilee. But apparently before they set out on that morning, Philip and Nathanael were added to the little band. So these two days saw six disciples gathered round Jesus.

Andrew and John sought Christ and found Him. To them He revealed Himself as very willing to be approached, and glad to welcome any to His side. Peter, who comes next, was brought to Christ by his brother, and to him Christ revealed Himself as reading his heart, and promising and giving him higher functions and a more noble character.

Now we come to the third case, ‘Jesus findeth Philip,’ who was not seeking Jesus, and who was brought by no one. To him Christ reveals Himself as drawing near to many a heart that has not thought of Him, and laying a masterful hand of gracious authority on the springs of life and character in that autocratic word ‘Follow Me.’ So we have a gradually heightening revelation of the Master’s graciousness to all souls, to them that seek and to them that seek Him not. It is only to the working out of these simple thoughts that I ask your attention now.

I. First, then, let us deal with the revelation that is given us here of the seeking Christ.

Every one who reads this chapter with even the slightest attention must observe how ‘seeking’ and ‘finding’ are repeated over and over again. Christ turns to Andrew and John with the question, ‘What seek ye?’ Andrew, as the narrative says, ‘findeth his own brother, Simon, and saith unto him, “We have found the Messias!”‘ Then again, Jesus finds Philip; and again, Philip, as soon as he has been won to Jesus, goes off to find Nathanael; and his glad word to him is, once more, ‘We have found the Messias.’ It is a reciprocal play of finding and seeking all through these verses.

There are two kinds of finding. There is a casual stumbling upon a thing that you were not looking for, and there is a finding as the result of seeking. It is the latter which is here. Christ did not casually stumble upon Philip, upon that morning, before they departed from the fords of the Jordan on their short journey to Cana of Galilee. He went to look for this other Galilean, one who was connected with Andrew and Peter, a native of the same little village. He went and found him; and whilst Philip was all unexpectant and undesirous, the Master came to him and laid His hand upon him, and drew him to Himself.

Now that is what Christ often does. There are men like the merchantman who went all over the world seeking goodly pearls, who with some eager longing to possess light, or truth, or goodness, or rest, search up and down and find it nowhere, because they are looking for it in a hundred different places. They are expecting to find a little here and a little there, and to piece all together to make of the fragments one all-sufficing restfulness. Then when they are most eager in their search, or when, perhaps, it has all died down into despair and apathy, the veil seems to be withdrawn, and they see Him whom they have been seeking all the time and knew not that He was there beside them. All, and more than all, that they sought for in the many pearls is stored for them in the one Pearl of great price. The ancient covenant stands firm to-day as for ever. ‘Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you.’

But then there are others, like Paul on the road to Damascus or like Matthew the publican, sitting at the receipt of custom, on whom there is laid a sudden hand, to whom there comes a sudden conviction, on whose eyes, not looking to the East, there dawns the light of Christ’s presence. Such cases occur all through the ages, for He is not to be confined, bless His name! within the narrow limits of answering seeking souls, or of showing Himself to people that are brought to Him by human instrumentality; but far beyond these bounds He goes, and many a time discloses His beauty and His sweetness to hearts that wist not of Him, and who can only say, ‘Lo! God was in this place, and I knew it not.’ ‘Thou wast found of them that sought Thee not.’

As it was in His miracles upon earth, so it has been in the sweet and gracious works of His grace ever since. Sometimes He healed in response to the yearning desire that looked out of sick eyes, or that spoke from parched lips, and no man that ever came to Him and said ‘Heal me!’ was sent away beggared of His blessing. Sometimes He healed in response to the beseeching of those who, with loving hearts, carried their dear ones and laid them at His feet. But sometimes, to magnify the spontaneity and the completeness of His own love, and to show us that He is bound and limited by no human co-operation, and that He is His own motive, He reached out the blessing to a hand that was not extended to grasp it; and by His question, ‘Wilt thou be made whole?’ kindled desires that else had lain dormant for ever.

And so in this story before us; He will welcome and over-answer Andrew and John when they come seeking; He will turn round to them with a smile on His face, that converts the question, ‘What seek ye?’ into an invitation, ‘Come and see.’ And when Andrew brings his brother to Him, He will go more than halfway to meet him. But when these are won, there still remains another way by which He will have disciples brought into His Kingdom, and that is by Himself going out and laying His hand on the man and drawing him to His heart by the revelation of His love. But further, and in a deeper sense, He really seeks us all, and, unasked, bestows His love upon us.

Whether we seek Him or no, there is no heart upon earth which Christ does not desire; and no man or woman within the sound of His gospel whom He is not in a very real sense seeking that He may draw them to Himself. His own word is a wonderful one: ‘The Father seeketh such to worship Him’; as if God went all up and down the world looking for hearts to love Him and to turn to Him with reverent thankfulness. And as the Father, so the Son-who is for us the revelation of the Father: ‘The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.’ No one on earth wanted Him, or dreamed of His coming. When He bowed the heavens and gathered Himself into the narrow space of the manger in Bethlehem, and took upon Him the limitations and the burdens and the weaknesses of manhood, it was not in response to any petition, it was in reply to no seeking; but He came spontaneously, unmoved, obeying but the impulse of His own heart, and because He would have mercy. He who is the Beginning, and will be First in all things, was first in this, that before they called He answered, and came upon earth unbesought and unexpected, because His own infinite love brought Him hither. Christ’s mercy to a world does not come like water in a well that has to be pumped up, by our petitions, by our search, but like water in some fountain, rising sparkling into the sunlight by its own inward impulse. He is His own motive; and came to a forgetful and careless world, like a shepherd who goes after his flock in the wilderness, not because they bleat for him, while they crop the herbage which tempts them ever further from the fold and remember him and it no more, but because he cannot have them lost. Men are not conscious of needing Christ till He comes. The supply creates the demand. He is like the ‘dew which tarrieth not for man, nor waiteth for the sons of men.’

But not only does Christ seek us all, inasmuch as the whole conception and execution of His great work are independent of man’s desires, but He seeks us each in a thousand ways. He longs to have each of us for His disciples. He seeks each of us for His disciples, by the motion of His Spirit on our spirits, by stirring conviction in our consciences, by pricking us often with a sense of our own evil, by all our restlessness and dissatisfaction, by the disappointments and the losses, as by the brightnesses and the goodness of earthly providences, and often through such agencies as my lips and the lips of other men. The Master Himself, who seeks all mankind, has sought and is seeking you at this moment. Oh! yield to His search. The shepherd goes out on the mountain side, for all the storm and the snow, and wades knee-deep through the drifts until he finds the sheep. And your Shepherd, who is also your Brother, has come looking for you, and at this moment is putting out His hand and laying hold of some of you through my poor words, and saying to you, as He said to Philip, ‘Follow Me!’

II. And now let us next consider that word of authority which, spoken to the one man in our text, is really spoken to us all.

‘Jesus findeth Philip, and saith unto him, “Follow Me!”‘ No doubt a great deal more passed, but no doubt what more passed was less significant and less important for the development of faith in this man than what is recorded. The word of authority, the invitation which was a demand, the demand which was an invitation, and the personal impression which He produced upon Philip’s heart, were the things that bound him to Jesus Christ for ever. ‘Follow Me,’ spoken at the beginning of the journey of Christ and His disciples back to Galilee, might have meant merely, on the surface, ‘Come back with us.’ But the words have, of course, a much deeper meaning. They mean-be My disciple. Think what is implied in them, and ask yourself whether the demand that Christ makes in these words is an unreasonable one, and then ask yourselves whether you have yielded to it or not.

We lose the force of the image by much repetition. Sheep follow a shepherd. Travellers follow a guide. Here is a man upon some dangerous cornice of the Alps, with a ledge of limestone as broad as the palm of your hand, and perhaps a couple of feet of snow above that, for him to walk upon, a precipice on either side; and his guide says, as he ropes himself to him, ‘Now, tread where I tread!’ Travellers follow their guides. Soldiers follow their commanders. There is the hell of the battlefield; here a line of wavering, timid, raw recruits. Their commander rushes to the front and throws himself upon the advancing enemy with the one word, ‘Follow’ and the coward becomes a hero. Soldiers follow their captains. Your Shepherd comes to you and calls, ‘Follow Me.’ Your Captain and Commander comes to you and calls, ‘Follow Me.’ In all the dreary wilderness, in all the difficult contingencies and conjunctions, in all the conflicts of life, this Man strides in front of us and proposes Himself to us as Guide, Example, Consoler, Friend, Companion, everything; and gathers up all duty, all blessedness, in the majestic and simple words, ‘Follow Me.’

It is a call at the least to accept Him as a Teacher, but the whole gist of the context here is to show us that from the beginning Christ's disciples did not look upon Him as a Rabbi's disciples did, as being simply a teacher, but recognised Him as the Messias, the Son of God, the King of Israel. So that they were called upon by this command to accept His teaching in a very special way, not merely as Hillel or Gamaliel asked their disciples to accept theirs. Do you do that? Do you take Him as your illumination about all matters of theoretical truth, and of practical wisdom? Is His declaration of God your theology? Is His declaration of His own Person your creed? Do you think about His Cross as He did when He elected to be remembered in all the world by the broken body and the shed blood, which were the symbols of His reconciling death? Is His teaching, that the Son of Man comes to 'give His life a ransom for many,' the ground of your hope? Do you follow Him in your belief, and following Him in your belief, do you accept Him as, by His death and passion, the Saviour of your soul? That is the first step-to follow Him, to trust Him wholly for what He is, the Incarnate Son of God, the Sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and therefore for your sins and mine. This is a call to faith.

It is also a call to obedience. 'Follow Me' certainly means 'Do as I bid you,' but softens all the harshness of that command. Sedulously plant your tremulous feet in His firm footsteps. Where you see His track going across the bog be not afraid to walk after Him, though it may seem to lead you into the deepest and the blackest of it. 'Follow Him' and you will be right. 'Follow Him' and you will be blessed. Do as Christ did, or as according to the best of your judgment it seems to you that Christ would have done if He had been in your circumstances; and you will not go far wrong. 'The Imitation of Christ,' which Thomas a Kempis wrote his book about, is the sum of all practical Christianity. 'Follow Me!' makes discipleship to be something more than intellectual acceptance of His teaching, something more than even reliance for my salvation upon His work. It makes discipleship-springing out of these two-the acceptance of His teaching and the consequent reliance, by faith, upon His word-to be a practical reproduction of His character and conduct in mine.

It is a call to communion. If a man follows Christ he will walk close behind Him, and near enough to Him to hear Him speak, and to be 'guided by His eye.’ He will be separated from other people, and from other paths. In these four things, then-Faith, Obedience, Imitation, Communion-lies the essence of discipleship. No man is a Christian who has not in some measure all four. Have you got them?

What right has Jesus Christ to ask me to follow Him? Why should I? Who is He that He should set Himself up as being the perfect Example and the Guide for all the world? What has He done to bind me to Him, that I should take Him for my Master, and yield myself to Him in a subjection that I refuse to the mightiest names in literature, and thought, and practical benevolence? Who is this that assumes thus to dominate over us all? Ah! brethren, there is only one answer. ‘This is none other than the Son of God who has given Himself a ransom for me, and therefore has the right, and only therefore has the right, to say to me, “Follow Me.”‘

III. And now one last word. Think for a moment about this silently and swiftly obedient disciple.

Philip says nothing. Of course the narrative is mere sketchy outline. He is silent, but he yields. Ah, brethren, how quickly a soul may be won or lost! That moment, when Philip’s decision was trembling in the balance, was but a moment. It might have gone the other way, for Christ has no pressed men in His army; they are all volunteers. It might have gone the other way. A moment may settle for you whether you will be His disciple or not. People tell us that the belief in instantaneous conversions is unphilosophical. It seems to me that the objections to them are unphilosophical. All decisions are matters of an instant. Hesitation may be long, weighing and balancing may be a protracted process, but the decision is always a moment’s work, a knife-edge. And there is no reason whatever why any one listening to me may not now, if he or she will, do as this man Philip did on the spot, and when Christ says ‘Follow Me,’ turn to Him and answer, ‘I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest.’

There is an old church tradition which says that the disciple who at a subsequent period answered Christ, ‘Lord! suffer me first to go and bury my father,’ was this same Apostle. I do not think that at all likely, but the tradition suggests to us one last thought about the reasons why people are kept back from yielding this obedience to Christ’s invitation. Many of you are kept back, as that procrastinating follower was, because there are some other duties which you feel, or make to be, more important. ‘I will think about Christianity and turning religious when this, that, or the other thing has been got over. I have my position in life to make. I have a great many things to do that must be done at once, and really, I have not time to think about it.’

Then there are some of you that are kept from following Christ because you have never yet found out that you need a guide at all. Then there are some of you that are kept back because you like very much better to go your own way, and to follow your own inclination, and dislike the idea of following the will of another. There are a host of other reasons that I do not need to deal with now; but oh! brethren, none of them is worth pleading. They are excuses, they are not reasons. ‘They all with one consent began to make excuse’-excuses, not reasons; and manufactured excuses, in order to cover a decision which has been taken before, and on other grounds altogether, which it is not convenient to bring up to the surface. I am not going to deal with these in detail, but I beseech you, do not let what I venture to call Christ’s seeking of you once more, even by my poor words now, be in vain.

Follow Him. Trust, obey, imitate, hold fellowship with Him. You will always have a Companion, you will always have a Protector. ‘He that followeth Me,’ saith He, ‘shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.’ And if you will listen to the Shepherd’s voice and follow Him, that sweet old promise will be true, in its divinest and sweetest sense, about your life, in time; and about your life in the moment of death, the isthmus between two worlds, and about your life in eternity-’They shall not hunger nor thirst, neither shall the sun nor heat smite them; for He that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall He guide them.’ ‘Follow thou Me.’

11)John 1:45-49

John

THE FIRST DISCIPLES: IV. NATHANAEL

Joh. 1:45 - Joh. 1:49.

The words are often the least part of a conversation. The Evangelist can tell us what Nathanael said to Jesus, and what Jesus said to Nathanael, but no Evangelist can reproduce the look, the tone, the magnetic influence which streamed out from Christ, and, we may believe, more than anything He said, riveted these men to Him.

It looks as if Nathanael and his companions were very easily convinced, as if their adhesion to such tremendous claims as those of Jesus Christ was much too facile a thing to be a very deep one. But what can be put down in black and white goes a very short way to solve the secret of the power which drew them to Himself.

The incident which is before us now runs substantially on the same lines as the previous bringing of Peter to Jesus Christ. In both cases the man is brought by a friend, in both cases the friend's weapon is simply the expression of his own personal experience, 'We have found the Messias,' although Philip has a little more to say about Christ's correspondence with the prophetic word. In both cases the work is finished by our Lord Himself manifesting His own supernatural knowledge to the inquiring spirit, though in the case of Nathanael that process is a little more lengthened out than in the case of Peter, because there was a little ice of hesitation and of doubt to be melted away. And Nathanael, starting from a lower point than Peter, having questions and hesitations which the other had not, rises to a higher point of faith and certitude, and from his lips first of all comes the full articulate confession, beyond which the Apostles never went as long as our Lord was upon earth: 'Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel.' So that both in regard to the revelation that is given of the character of our Lord, and in regard to the teaching that is given of the development and process of faith in a soul, this last narrative fitly crowns the whole series. In looking at it with you now, I think I shall best bring out its force by asking you to take it as falling into these three portions: first, the preparation-a soul brought to Christ by a brother; then the conversation-a soul fastened to Christ by Himself; and then the rapturous confession-'Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel.'

I. Look, then, first of all, at the preparation-a soul brought to Christ by a brother.

‘Philip findeth Nathanael.’ Nathanael, in all probability, as commentators will tell you, is the Apostle Bartholomew; and in the catalogues of the Apostles in the Gospels, Philip and he are always associated together. So that the two men, friends before, had their friendship riveted and made more close by this sacredest of all bonds, that the one had been to the other the means of bringing him to Jesus Christ. There is nothing that ties men to each other like that. If you want to know the full sweetness of association with friends, and of human love, get some heart knit to yours by this sacred and eternal bond that it owes to you its first knowledge of the Saviour. So all human ties will be sweetened, ennobled, elevated, and made perpetual.

‘We have found Him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph.’ Philip knows nothing about Christ’s supernatural birth, nor about its having been in Bethlehem; to him He is the son of a Nazarene peasant. But, notwithstanding that, He is the great, significant, mysterious Person for whom the whole sacred literature of Israel had been one long yearning for centuries; and he has come to believe that this Man standing beside him is the Person on whom all previous divine communications for a millennium past focussed and centred.

I need not dwell upon these words, because to do so would be to repeat substantially what I said in a former sermon on these first disciples, about the value of personal conviction as a means of producing conviction in the minds of others, and about the necessity and the possibility of all who have found Christ for themselves saying so to others, and thereby becoming His missionaries and evangelists.

I do not need to repeat what I said on that occasion; therefore I pass on to the very natural hesitation and question of Nathanael: ‘Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?’ A prejudice, no doubt, but a very harmless one; a very thin ice which melted as soon as Christ’s smile beamed upon him. And a most natural prejudice. Nathanael came from Cana of Galilee, a little hill village, three or four miles from Nazareth. We all know the bitter feuds and jealousies of neighbouring villages, and how nothing is so pleasant to the inhabitants of one as a gibe about the inhabitants of another. And in Nathanael's words there simply speaks the rustic jealousy of Cana against Nazareth.

It is easy to blame him, but do you think that you or I, if we had been in his place, would have been likely to have said anything very different? Suppose you were told that a peasant out of Ross-shire was a man on whom the whole history of this nation hung. Do you think you would be likely to believe it without first saying, 'That is a strange place for such a person to be born in'? Galilee was the despised part of Palestine, and Nazareth obviously was a proverbially despised village of Galilee; and this Jesus was a carpenter's son that nobody had ever heard of. It seemed to be a strange head on which the divine dove should flutter down, passing by all the Pharisees and the Scribes, all the great people and wise people. Nathanael's prejudice was but the giving voice to a fault that is as wide as humanity, and which we have every day of our lives to fight with; not only in regard to religious matters but in regard to all others-namely, the habit of estimating people, and their work, and their wisdom, and their power to teach us, by the class to which they are supposed to belong, or even by the place from which they come.

'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?' 'Can a German teach an Englishman anything that he does not know?' 'Is a Protestant to owe anything of spiritual illumination to a Roman Catholic?' 'Are we Dissenters to receive any wisdom or example from Churchmen?' 'Will a Conservative be able to give any lessons in politics to a Liberal?' 'Is there any other bit of England that can teach Lancashire?' Take care that whilst you are holding up your hands in horror against the prejudices of our Lord's contemporaries, who stumbled at His origin, you are not doing the same thing in regard to all manner of subjects twenty times a day.

That is one very plain lesson, and not at all too secular for a sermon. Take another. This three-parts innocent prejudice of Nathanael brings into clear relief for us what a very real obstacle to the recognition of our Lord's Messianic authority His apparent lowly origin was. We have got over it, and it is no difficulty to us; but it was so then. When Jesus Christ came into this world Judaea was ruled by the most heartless of aristocracies, an aristocracy of cultured pedants. Wherever you get such a class you get people who think that there can be nobody worth looking at, or worth attending to, outside the little limits of their own supercilious superiority. Why did Jesus Christ come from ‘the men of the earth,’ as the Rabbis called all who had not learned to cover every plain precept with spiders’ webs of casuistry? Why, for one thing, in accordance with the general law that the great reformers and innovators always come from outside these classes, that the Spirit of the Lord shall come on a herdsman like Amos, and fishermen and peasants spread the Gospel through the world; and that in politics, in literature, in science, as well as in religion, it is always true that ‘not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called.’ To the cultivated classes you have to look for a great deal that is precious and good, but for fresh impulse, in unbroken fields, you have to look outside them. And so the highest of all lives is conformed to the general law.

More than that, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph,’ came thus because He was the poor man’s Christ, because He was the ignorant man’s Christ, because His word was not for any class, but as broad as the world. He came poor, obscure, unlettered, that all who, like Him, were poor and untouched by the finger of earthly culture, might in Him find their Brother, their Helper, and their Friend.

‘Philip saith unto him, Come and see.’ He is not going to argue the question. He gives the only possible answer to it-’You ask Me, can any good thing come out of Nazareth?’ ‘Come and see whether it is a good thing or no; and if it is, and if it came out of Nazareth, well then, the question has answered itself.’ The quality of a thing cannot be settled by the origin of the thing.

As it so happened, this Man did not come out of Nazareth at all, though neither Philip nor Nathanael knew it; but if He had, it would have been all the same. The right answer was ‘Come and see.’

Now although, of course, there is no kind of correspondence between the mere prejudice of this man Nathanael and the rooted intellectual doubts of other generations, yet ‘Come and see’ carries in it the essence of all Christian apologetics. By far the wisest thing that any man who has to plead the cause of Christianity can do is to put Christ well forward, and let people look at Him, and trust Him to produce His own impression. We may argue round, and round, and round about Him for evermore, and we shall never convince as surely as by simply holding Him forth. ‘I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.’ Yet we are so busy proving Christianity that we sometimes have no time to preach it; so busy demonstrating that Jesus Christ is this, that, and the other thing, or contradicting the notion that He is not this, that, and the other thing, that we forget simply to present Him for men to look at. Depend upon it, whilst argument has its function, and there are men that must be approached thereby; on the whole, and for the general, the best way of propagating Christianity is to proclaim it, and the second best way is to prove it. Our arguments do fare very often very much as did that elaborate discourse that a bishop once preached to prove the existence of a God, at the end of which a simple old woman who had not followed his reasoning very intelligently, exclaimed, ‘Well, for all he says, I can’t help thinking there is a God after all.’ The errors that are quoted to be confuted often remain more clear in the hearers’ minds than the attempted confutations. Hold forth Christ-cry aloud to men, ‘Come and see!’ and some eyes will turn and some hearts cleave to Him.

And on the other side, dear brethren, you have not done fairly by Christianity until you have complied with this invitation, and submitted your mind and heart honestly to the influence and the impression that Christ Himself would make upon it.

II. We come now to the second stage-the conversation between Christ and Nathanael, where we see a soul fastened to Christ by Himself.

In general terms, as I remarked, the method by which our Lord manifests His Messiahship to this single soul is a revelation of His supernatural knowledge of him. But a word or two may be said about the details. Mark the emphasis with which the Evangelist shows us that our Lord speaks this discriminating characterisation of Nathanael before Nathanael had come to Him: ‘He saw him coming.’ So it was not with a swift, penetrating glance of intuition that He read his character in his face. It was not that He generalised rapidly from one action which He had seen him do. It was not from any previous personal knowledge of him, for, obviously, from the words of Philip to Nathanael, the latter had never seen Jesus Christ. As

Nathanael was drawing near Him, before he had done anything to show himself, our Lord speaks the words which show that He had read his very heart: ‘Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.’

That is to say, here is a man who truly represents that which was the ideal of the whole nation. The reference is, no doubt, to the old story of the occasion on which Jacob’s name was changed to Israel. And we shall see a further reference to the same story in the subsequent verses. Jacob had wrestled with God in that mysterious scene by the brook Jabbok, and had overcome, and had received instead of the name Jacob, ‘a supplanter,’ the name of Israel, ‘for as a Prince hast thou power with God and hast prevailed.’ And, says Christ: ‘This man also is a son of Israel, one of God’s warriors, who has prevailed with Him by prayer.’ ‘In whom is no guile’-Jacob in his early life had been marked and marred by selfish craft. Subtlety and guile had been the very keynote of his character. To drive that out of him, years of discipline and pain and sorrow had been needed. And not until it had been driven out of him could his name be altered, and he become Israel. This man has had the guile driven out of him. By what process? The words are a verbal quotation from Psa. 32:1 - Psa. 32:11 : ‘Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile.’ Clear, candid openness of spirit, and the freedom of soul from all that corruption which the Psalmist calls ‘guile,’ is the property of him only who has received it, by confession, by pardon, and by cleansing, from God. Thus Nathanael, in his wrestling, had won the great gift. His transgression had been forgiven; his iniquity had been covered; to him God had not imputed his sin; and in his spirit, therefore, there was no guile. Ah, brother! if that black drop is to be cleansed out of your heart, it must be by the same means-confession to God and pardon from God. And then you too will be a prince with Him. and your spirit will be frank and free, and open and candid.

Nathanael, with astonishment, says, ‘Lord, whence knowest Thou me?’ Not that he appropriates the description to himself, or recognises the truthfulness of it, but he is surprised that Christ should have means of forming any judgment with reference to him, and so he asks Him, half expecting an answer which will show the natural origin of our Lord’s knowledge: ‘Whence knowest Thou me?’ Then comes the answer, which, to supernatural insight into Nathanael’s character, adds supernatural knowledge of Nathanael’s secret actions: ‘Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. And it is because I saw thee under the fig-tree that I knew thee to be “an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile.”‘ So then, under the fig-tree, Nathanael must have been wrestling in prayer; under the fig-tree must have been confessing his sins; under the fig-tree must have been longing and looking for the Deliverer who was to ‘turn away ungodliness from Jacob.’ So solitary had been that vigil, and so little would any human eye that had looked upon it have known what had been passing in his mind, that Christ’s knowledge of it and of its significance at once lights up in Nathanael’s heart the fire of the glad conviction, ‘Thou art the Son of God.’ If we had seen Nathanael, we should only have seen a man sitting, sunk in thought, under a fig-tree; but Jesus had seen the spiritual struggle which had no outward marks, and to have known which He must have exercised the divine prerogative of reading the heart.

I ask you to consider whether Nathanael’s conclusion was not right, and whether that woman of Samaria was not right when she hurried back to the city, leaving her water-pot, and said, ‘Come and see a man that told me all that ever I did.’ That ‘all’ was a little stretch of facts, but still it was true in spirit. And her inference was absolutely true: ‘Is not this the Christ, the Son of God?’ This is the first miracle that Jesus Christ wrought. His supernatural knowledge, which cannot be struck out from the New Testament representations of His character, is as much a mark of divinity as any of the other of His earthly manifestations. It is not the highest; it does not appeal to our sympathies as some of the others do, but it is irrefragable. Here is a man to whom all men with whom He came in contact were like those clocks with a crystal face which shows us all the works. How does He come to have this perfect and absolute knowledge?

That omniscience, as manifested here, shows us how glad Christ is when He sees anything good, anything that He can praise in any of us. ‘Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile.’ Not a word about Nathanael’s prejudice, not a word about any of his faults [though no doubt he had plenty of them], but the cordial praise that he was an honest, a sincere man, following after God and after truth. There is nothing which so gladdens Christ as to see in us any faint traces of longing for, and love towards, and likeness to, His own self. His omniscience is never so pleased as when beneath heaps and mountains of vanity and sin it discerns in a man's heart some poor germ of goodness and longing for His grace.

And then again, notice how we have here our Lord's omniscience set forth as cognisant of all our inward crises and struggles, 'When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.' I suppose all of us could look back to some place or other, under some hawthorn hedge, or some boulder by the seashore, or some mountain-top, or perhaps in some back-parlour, or in some crowded street, where some never-to-be-forgotten epoch in our soul's history passed, unseen by all eyes, and which would have shown no trace to any onlooker, except perhaps a tightly compressed lip. Let us rejoice to feel that Christ sees all these moments which no other eye can see. In our hours of crisis, and in our monotonous, uneventful moments, in the rush of the furious waters, when the stream of our lives is caught among rocks, and in the long, languid reaches of its smoothest flow, when we are fighting with our fears or yearning for His light, or even when sitting dumb and stolid, like snow men, apathetic and frozen in our indifference, He sees us, and pities, and will help the need which He beholds.

'Think not thou canst sigh a sigh,
And thy Saviour is not by;
Think not thou canst weep a tear,
And thy Saviour is not near.'

'When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee.'

III. One word more about this rapturous confession, which crowns the whole: 'Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel.'

Where had Nathanael learned these great names? He was a disciple of John the Baptist, and he had no doubt heard John's testimony as recorded in this same chapter, when he told us how the voice from Heaven had bid him recognise the Messiah by the token of the descending Dove, and how he 'saw and bare record that this is the Son of God.' John's testimony was echoed in Nathanael’s confession. Undoubtedly he attached but vague ideas to the name, far less articulate and doctrinal than we have the privilege of doing. To him ‘Son of God’ could not have meant all that it ought to mean to us, but it meant something that he saw clearly, and a great deal beyond that he saw but dimly. It meant that God had sent, and was in some special sense the Father of, this Jesus of Nazareth.

‘Thou art the King of Israel,’ John had been preaching, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.’ The Messiah was to be the theocratic King, the King, not of ‘Judah’ nor of ‘the Jews,’ but of ‘Israel,’ the nation that had entered into covenant with God. So the substance of the confession was the Messiahship of Jesus, as resting upon His special divine relationship and leading to His Kingly sway.

Notice also the enthusiasm of the confession; one’s ear hears clearly a tone of rapture in it. The joy-bells of the man’s heart are all a-ringing. It is no mere intellectual acknowledgment of Christ as Messiah. The difference between mere head-belief and heart-faith lies precisely in the presence of these elements of confidence, of enthusiastic loyalty, and absolute submission.

So the great question for each of us is, not, Do I believe as a piece of my intellectual creed that Christ is ‘the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Israel’? I suppose almost all my hearers here now do that. That will not make you a Christian, my friend. That will neither save your soul nor quiet your heart, nor bring you peace and strength in life, nor open the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven to you. A man may be miserable, wholly sunk in all manner of wickedness and evil, die the death of a dog, and go to punishment hereafter, though he believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the King of Israel. You want something more than that. You want just this element of rapturous acknowledgment, of loyal submission, absolute obedience, of unfaltering trust.

Look at these first disciples, six brave men that had all that loyalty and love to Him; though there was not a soul in the world but themselves to share their convictions. Do they not shame you? When He comes to you, as He does come, with this question, ‘Whom do ye say that I am?’ may God give you grace to answer, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,’ and not only to answer it with your lips, but to trust Him wholly with your hearts, and with enthusiastic devotion to bow your whole being in adoring wonder and glad submission at His feet. If we are 'Israelites indeed,' our hearts will crown Him as the 'King of Israel.'

12)John 1:50-51

John

THE FIRST DISCIPLES: V. BELIEVING AND SEEING

Joh. 1:50 - Joh. 1:51.

Here we have the end of the narrative of the gathering together of the first disciples, which has occupied several sermons. We have had occasion to point out how each incident in the series has thrown some fresh light upon two main subjects, namely, upon some phase or other of the character and work of Jesus Christ, or upon the various ways by which faith, which is the condition of discipleship, is kindled in men's souls. These closing words may be taken as the crowning thoughts on both these matters.

Our Lord recognises and accepts the faith of Nathanael and his fellows, but, like a wise Teacher, lets His pupils at the very beginning get a glimpse of how much lies ahead for them to learn; and in the act of accepting the faith gives just one hint of the great tract of yet uncomprehended knowledge of Him which lies before them; 'Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these.' He accepts Nathanael's confession and the confession of his fellows. Human lips have given Him many great and wonderful titles in this chapter. John called Him 'the Lamb of God'; the first disciples hailed Him as the 'Messias, which is the Christ'; Nathanael fell before Him with the rapturous exclamation, 'Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel!' All these crowns had been put on His head by human hands, but here He crowns Himself. He makes a mightier claim than any that they had dreamed of, and proclaims Himself to be the medium of all communication and intercourse between heaven and earth: 'Hereafter ye shall see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

So, then, there are two great principles that lie in these verses, and are contained in, first, our Lord’s mighty promise to His new disciples, and second, in our Lord’s witness to Himself. Let me say a word or two about each of these.

I. Our Lord’s promise to His new disciples.

Christ’s words here may be translated either as a question or as an affirmation. It makes comparatively little difference to the substantial meaning whether we read ‘believest thou?’ or ‘thou believest.’ In the former case there will be a little more vivid expression of surprise and admiration at the swiftness of Nathanael’s faith, but in neither case are we to find anything of the nature of blame or of doubt as to the reality of his belief. The question, if it be a question, is no question as to whether Nathanael’s faith was a genuine thing or not. There is no hint that he has been too quick with his confession, and has climbed too rapidly to the point that he has attained. But in either case, whether the word be a question or an affirmation, we are to see in it the solemn and glad recognition of the reality of Nathanael’s confession and belief.

Here is the first time that that word ‘belief’ came from Christ’s lips; and when we remember all the importance that has been attached to it in the subsequent history of the Church, and the revolution in human thought which followed upon our Lord’s demand of our faith, there is an interest in noticing the first appearance of the word. It was an epoch in the history of the world when Christ first claimed and accepted a man’s faith.

Of course the second part of this verse, ‘Thou shalt see greater things than these,’ has its proper fulfilment in the gradual manifestation of His person and character, which followed through the events recorded in the Gospels. His life of service, His words of wisdom, His deeds of power and of pity, His death of shame and of glory, His Resurrection and His Ascension, these are the ‘greater things’ which Nathanael is promised. They all lay unrevealed yet, and what our Lord means is simply this: ‘If you will continue to trust in Me, as you have trusted Me, and stand beside Me, you will see unrolled before your eyes and comprehended by your faith the great facts which will make the manifestation of God to the world.’ But though that be the original application of the words, yet I think we may fairly draw from them some lessons that are of importance to ourselves; and I ask you to look at the hint that they give us about three things,-faith and discipleship, faith and sight, faith and progress. ‘Believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these.’

First, here is light thrown upon the relation between faith and discipleship. It is clear that our Lord here uses the word for the first time in the full Christian sense, that He regards the exercise of faith as being practically synonymous with being a disciple, that from the very first, believers were disciples, and disciples were believers.

Then, notice still further that our Lord here employs the word ‘belief’ without any definition of what or whom it is that they were to believe. He Himself, and not certain thoughts about Him, is the true object of a man’s faith. We may believe a proposition, but faith must grasp a person. Even when the person is made known to us by a proposition which we have to believe before we can trust the person, still the essence of faith is not the intellectual process of laying hold upon a certain thought, and acquiescing in it, but the moral process of casting myself in full confidence upon the Being that is revealed to me by the thought,-of laying my hand, and leaning my weight, on the Man about whom it tells me. And so faith, which is discipleship, has in it for its very essence the personal element of trust in Jesus Christ.

Then, further, notice how widely different from our creed was Nathanael’s creed, and yet how identical with our faith, if we are Christians, was Nathanael’s faith. He knew nothing about the very heart of Christ’s work, His atoning death. He knew nothing about the highest glory of Christ’s person, His divine Sonship, in its unique and lofty sense. These lay unrevealed, and were amongst the greater things which he was yet to see; but though thus his knowledge was imperfect, and his creed incomplete as compared with ours, his faith was the very same. He laid hold upon Christ, he clave to Him with all his heart, he was ready to accept His teaching, he was willing to do His will, and as for the rest-’Thou shalt see greater things than these.’ So, dear brethren, from these words of my text here, from the unhesitating attribution of the lofty notion of faith to this man, from the way in which our Lord uses the word, are gathered these three points that I beseech you to ponder: there is no discipleship without faith; faith is the personal grasp of Christ Himself; the contents of creeds may differ whilst the element of faith remains the same. I beseech you let Christ come to you with the question of my text, and as He looks you in the eyes, hear Him say to you, ‘Believest thou?’

Secondly, notice how in this great promise to the new disciples there is light thrown upon another subject, viz. the connection between faith and sight. There is a great deal about seeing in this context. Christ said to the first two that followed Him, ‘Come and see.’ Philip met Nathanael’s thin film of prejudice with the same words, ‘Come and see.’ Christ greeted the approaching Nathanael with ‘When thou wast under the fig tree I saw thee.’ And now His promise is cast into the same metaphor: ‘Thou shalt see greater things than these.’

There is a double antithesis here. ‘I saw thee,’ ‘Thou shalt see Me.’ ‘Thou wast convinced because thou didst feel that thou wert the passive object of My vision. Thou shalt be still more convinced when illuminated by Me. Thou shalt see even as thou art seen. I saw thee, and that bound thee to Me; thou shalt see Me, and that will confirm the bond.’

There is another antithesis, namely-between believing and seeing. ‘Thou believest-that is thy present; thou shalt see, that is thy hope for the future.’ Now I have already explained that, in the proper primary meaning and application of the words, the sight which is here promised is simply the observance with the outward eye of the historical facts of our Lord’s life which were yet to be learned. But still we may gather a truth from this antithesis which will be of use to us. ‘Thou believest-thou shalt see’; that is to say, in the loftiest region of spiritual experience you must believe first, in order that you may see.

I do not mean, as is sometimes meant, by that statement that a man has to try to force his understanding into the attitude of accepting religious truth, in order that he may have an experience which will convince him that it is true. I mean a very much simpler thing than that, and a very much truer one, viz. this, that unless we trust to Christ and take our illumination from Him, we shall never behold a whole set of truths which, when once we trust Him, are all plain and clear to us. It is no mysticism to say that. What do you know about God?-I put emphasis upon the word ‘know’-What do you know about Him, however much you may argue and speculate and think probable, and fear, and hope, and question, about Him? What do you know about Him apart from Jesus Christ? What do you know about human duty, apart from Him? What do you know of all that dim region that lies beyond the grave, apart from Him? If you trust Him, if you fall at His feet and say ‘Rabbi! Thou art my Teacher and mine illumination,’ then you will see. You will see God, man, yourselves, duty; you will see light upon a thousand complications and perplexities; and you will have a brightness above that of the noonday sun, streaming into the thickest darkness of death and the grave and the awful hereafter. Christ is the Light. In that ‘Light shall we see light.’ And just as it needs the sun to rise in order that my eye may behold the outer world, so it needs that I shall have Christ shining in my heaven to illuminate the whole universe, in order that I may see clearly. ‘Believe and thou shalt see.’ For only when we trust Him do the mightiest truths that affect humanity stand plain and clear before us.

And besides that, if we trust Christ, we get a living experience of a multitude of facts and principles which are all mist and darkness to men except through their faith; an experience which is so vivid and brings such certitude as that it may well be called vision. The world says, ‘Seeing is believing.’ So it is about the coarse things that you can handle, but about everything that is higher than these invert the proverb, and you get the truth. ‘Seeing is believing.’ Yes, in regard to outward things. Believing is seeing in regard to God and spiritual truth. ‘Believest thou? thou shalt see.’

Then, thirdly, there is light here about another matter, the connection between faith and progress. ‘Thou shalt see greater things than these.’ A wise teacher stimulates his scholars from the beginning, by giving them glimpses of how much there is ahead to be learnt. That does not drive them to despair; it braces all their powers. And so Christ, as His first lesson to these men, substantially says, ‘You have learnt nothing yet, you are only beginning.’ That is true about us all. Faith at first, both in regard to its contents and its quality, is very rudimentary and infantile. A man when he is first converted-perhaps suddenly-knows after a fashion that he himself is a very sinful, wretched, poor creature, and he knows that Jesus Christ has died for him, and is his Saviour, and his heart goes out to Him, in confidence and love and obedience. But he is only standing at the door and peeping in as yet. He has only mastered the alphabet. He is but on the frontier of the promised land. His faith has brought him into contact with infinite power, and what will be the end of that? He will indefinitely grow. His faith has started him on a course to which there is no natural end. As long as it keeps alive he will be growing and growing, and getting nearer and nearer to the great centre of all.

So here is a grand possibility opened out in these simple words, a possibility which alone meets what you need, and what you are craving for, whether you know it or not, namely, something that will give you ever new powers and acquirements; something which will ensure your closer and ever closer approach to an absolute object of joy and truth; something that will ensure you against stagnation and guarantee unceasing progress. Everything else gets worn out, sooner or later; if not in this world, then in another. There is one course on which a man can enter with the certainty that there is no end to it, that it will open out, and out, and out as he advances-with the certainty that, come life, come death, it is all the same.

When the plant grows too tall for the greenhouse they lift the roof, and it grows higher still. Whether you have your growth in this lower world, or whether you have your top up in the brightness and the blue of heaven, the growth is in one direction. There is a way that secures endless progress, and here lies the secret of it: ‘Thou believest! thou shalt see greater things than these.’

Now, brethren, that is a grand possibility, and it is a solemn lesson for some of you. You professing Christian people, are you any taller than you were when you were born? Have you grown at all? Are you growing now? Have you seen any further into the depths of Jesus Christ than you did on that first day when you fell at His feet and said, ‘Thou art the Son of God, Thou art the King of Israel’? His promise to you then was, ‘Thou believest, thou shalt see greater things.’ If you have not seen greater things it is because your faith has broken down, if it has not expired.

II. Now let me turn to the second thought which lies in these great words.

We have here, as I said, our Lord crowning Himself by His own witness to His own dignity. 'Hereafter ye shall see the heavens opened.' Mark how, with superbly autocratic lips, He bases this great utterance upon nothing else but His own word. Prophets ever said, 'Thus saith the Lord.' Christ ever said: 'Verily, verily, I say unto you.' 'Because He could swear by no greater, He sware by Himself.' He puts His own assurance instead of all argument and of all support to His words.

'Hereafter.' A word which is possibly not genuine, and is omitted, as you will observe, in the Revised Version. If it is to be retained it must be translated, not 'hereafter,' as if it were pointing to some indefinite period in the future, but 'from henceforth,' as if asserting that the opening heavens and the descending angels began to be manifested from that first hour of His official work. 'Ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending.' That is an allusion from the story of Jacob at Bethel. We have found reference to Jacob's history already in the conversation with Nathanael, 'An Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.' And here is an unmistakable reference to that story, when the fugitive, with his head on the stony pillow, and the violet Syrian sky, with all its stars, rounding itself above him, beheld the ladder on which the angels of God ascended and descended. 'So,' says Christ, 'you shall see, in no vision of the night, in no transitory appearance, but in a practical waking reality, that ladder come down again, and the angels of God moving upon it in their errands of mercy.'

And who, or what, is this ladder? Christ. Do not read these words as meaning that the angels of God were to come down on Him to help, and to honour, and to succour Him as they did once or twice in His life, but as meaning that they are to ascend and descend by Him for the help and blessing of the whole world.

That is to say, to put it into plain words, Christ is the sole medium of communication between heaven and earth, the ladder with its foot upon the earth in His humanity, and its top in the heavens. 'No man hath ascended up into heaven save He which came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven.'

My time will not allow me to expand these thoughts as I would have done; let me put them in the briefest outline. Christ is the medium of all communication between heaven and earth, inasmuch as He is the medium of all revelation. I have spoken incidentally about that in the former part of this sermon, so I do not dwell on it now. Christ is the ladder between heaven and earth, inasmuch as in Him the sense of separation, and the reality of separation, are swept away. Sin has shut heaven; there comes down from it many a blessing upon unthankful heads, but between it in its purity and the earth in its muddy foulness 'there is a great gulf fixed.' It is not because God is great and I am small, or because He is Infinite and I am a mere pin-point as against a great continent, it is not because He lives for ever, and my life is but a hand-breadth, it is not because of the difference between His Omniscience and my ignorance, His strength and my weakness, that I am parted from Him. 'Your sins have separated between you and your God,' and no man, build he Babels ever so high, can reach thither. There is one means by which the separation is at an end, and by which all objective hindrances to union, and all subjective hindrances, are alike swept away. Christ has come, and in Him the heavens have bended down to touch, and touching to bless, this low earth, and man and God are at one once more.

He is the ladder, or sole medium of communication, inasmuch as by Him all divine blessings, grace, helps, and favours, come down angel-like, into our weak and needy hearts. Every strength, every mercy, every spiritual power, consolation in every sorrow, fitness for duty, illumination in darkness, all gifts that any of us can need, come to us down on that one shining way, the mediation and the work of the Divine-Human Christ, the Lord.

He is the ladder, the sole medium of communication between heaven and earth, inasmuch as by Him my poor desires and prayers and intercessions, my wishes, my sighs, my confessions rise to God. 'No man cometh to the Father but by Me.' He is the ladder, the means of all communication between heaven and earth, inasmuch as at the last, if ever we enter there at all, we shall enter through Him and through Him alone, who is 'the Way, the Truth, and the Life.'

Ah, dear brethren! men are telling us now that there is no connection between earth and heaven except such as telescopes and spectroscopes can make out. We are told that there is no ladder, that there are no angels, that possibly there is no God, or if that there be, we have nothing to do with Him nor He with us; that our prayers cannot get to His ears, if He have ears, nor His hand be stretched out to help us, if He have a hand. I do not know how this cultivated generation is to he brought back again to faith in God and delivered from that ghastly doubt which empties heaven and saddens earth to its victims, but by giving heed to the word which Christ spoke to the whole race while He addressed Nathanael, 'Ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.' If He be the Son of God, then all these heavenly messengers reach the earth by Him. If He be the Son of Man, then every man may share in the gifts which through Him are brought into the world, and His Manhood, which evermore dwelt in heaven, even while on earth, and was ever girt about by angel presences, is at once the measure of what each of us may become, and the power by which we may become it.

One thing is needful for this wonderful consummation, even our faith. And oh! how blessed it will be if in waste solitudes we can see the open heaven, and in the blackest night the blaze of the glory of a present Christ, and hear the soft rustle of angels' wings filling the air, and find in every place 'a house of God and a gate of heaven,' because He is there. All that may be yours on one condition: 'Believest thou? Thou shalt see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

13)John 2:1-10

John

JESUS THE JOY-BRINGER

Joh. 2:1 - Joh. 2:11.

The exact dating of this first miracle indicates an eye-witness. As Nazareth was some thirty miles distant from the place where John was baptizing, and Cana about four miles from Nazareth, the 'third day' is probably reckoned from the day of the calling of Philip. Jesus and His disciples seem to have been invited to the marriage feast later than the other guests, as Mary was already there. She appears to have been closely connected with the family celebrating the feast, as appears from her knowledge of the deficiency in the wine, and her direction to the servants.

The first point, which John makes all but as emphatic as the miracle itself, is the new relation between Mary and Jesus, the lesson she had to learn, and her sweet triumphant trust. Now that she sees her Son surrounded by His disciples, the secret hope which she had nourished silently for so long bursts into flame, and she turns to Him with beautiful faith in His power to help, even in the small present need. What an example her first word to Him sets us all! Like the two sad sisters at Bethany, she is sure that to tell Him of trouble is enough, for that His own heart will impel Him to share, and perchance to relieve it. Let us tell Jesus our wants and leave Him to deal with them as He knows how.

Of course, His addressing her as ‘Woman’ has not the meaning which it would have with us, for the term is one of respect and courtesy, but there is a plain intimation of a new distance in it, which is strengthened by the question, ‘What is there in common between us?’ What in common between a mother and her son! Yes, but she has to learn that the assumption of the position of Messiah in which her mother’s pride so rejoiced, carried necessarily a consequence, the first of the swords which were to pierce that mother’s heart of hers. That her Son should no more call her ‘mother,’ but ‘woman,’ told her that the old days of being subject to her were past for ever, and that the old relation was merged in the new one of Messiah and disciple-a bitter thought, which many a parent has to taste the bitterness of still, when wider outlooks and new sense of a vocation come to their children. Few mothers are able to accept the inevitable as Mary did, Jesus’ ‘hour’ is not to be prescribed to Him, but His own consciousness of the fit time must determine His action. What gave Him the signal that the hour was struck is not told us, nor how soon after that moment it came. But the saying gently but decisively declares His freedom, His infallible accuracy, and certain intervention at the right time. We may think that He delays, but He always helps, ‘and that right early.’

Mary’s sweet humility and strong trust come out wonderfully in her direction to the servants, which is the exact opposite of what might have been expected after the cold douche administered to her eagerness to prompt Jesus. Her faith had laid hold of the little spark of promise in that ‘not yet,’ and had fanned it into a flame. ‘Then He will intervene, and I can leave Him to settle when.’ How firm, though ignorant, must have been the faith which did not falter even at the bitter lesson and the apparent repulse, and how it puts to shame our feebler confidence in our better known Lord, if ever He delays our requests! Mary left all to Jesus; His commands were to be implicitly obeyed. Do we submit to Him in that absolute fashion both as to the time and the manner of His responses to our petitions?

The next point is the actual miracle. It is told with remarkable vividness and equally remarkable reserve. We do not even learn in what precisely it consisted. Was all the water in the vessels turned into wine? Did the change affect only what was drawn out? No answer is possible to these questions. Jesus spoke no word of power, nor put forth His hand. His will silently effected the change on matter. So He manifested forth His glory as Creator and Sustainer, as wielding the divine prerogative of affecting material things by His bare volition.

The reality of the miracle is certified by the jovial remark of the ‘ruler of the feast.’ As Bengel says: ‘The ignorance of the ruler proves the goodness of the wine; the knowledge of the servants, the reality of the miracle.’ His palate, at any rate, was not so dulled as to be unable to tell a good ‘brand’ when he tasted it, nor is there any reason to suppose that Jesus was supplying more wine to a company that had already had more than enough.

The ruler’s words are not meant to apply to the guests at that feast, but are quite general. But this Evangelist is fond of quoting words which have deeper meanings than the speakers dreamed, and with his mystically contemplative eye he sees hints and symbols of the spiritual in very common things. So we are not forcing higher meanings into the ruler’s jest, but catching one intention of John’s quotation of it, when we see in it an unconscious utterance of the great truth that Jesus keeps His best wine till the last. How many poor deluded souls are ever finding that the world does the very opposite, luring men on to be its slaves and victims by brilliant promises and shortlived delights, which sooner or later lose their deceitful lustre and become stale, and often positively bitter! ‘The end of that mirth is heaviness.’ The dreariest thing in all the world is a godless old age, and one of the most beautiful things in all the world is the calm sunset which so often glorifies a godly life that has been full of effort for Jesus, and of sorrows patiently borne as being sent by Him.

‘Full often clad in radiant vest
Deceitfully goes forth the morn,’

but Christ more than keeps His morning’s promises, and Christian experience is steadily progressive, if Christians cling close to Him, and Heaven will supply the transcendent confirmation of the blessed truth that was spoken unawares by the ‘ruler’ at that humble feast.

What effect the miracle produced on others is not told; probably the guests shared the ruler’s ignorance, but its effect on the disciples is that they ‘believed on Him.’ They had ‘believed’ already, or they would not have been disciples [Joh. 1:50], but their faith was deepened as well as called forth afresh. Our faith ought to be continuously and increasingly responsive to His continuous manifestations of Himself which we can all find in our own experience.

Jesus ‘manifested His glory’ in this first sign. What were the rays of that mild radiance? Surely the chief of them, in addition to the revelation of His sovereignty over matter, to which we have already referred, is that therein He hallowed the sweet sacred joys of marriage and family life, that therein He revealed Himself as looking with sympathetic eye on the ties that bind us together, and on the gladness of our common humanity, that therein He reveals Himself as able and glad to sanctify and elevate our joys and infuse into them a strange new fragrance and power. The ‘water’ of our ordinary lives is changed into ‘wine.’ Jesus became ‘acquainted with grief’ in order that He might impart to every believing and willing soul His own joy, and that by its remaining in us, our joy might be full.

14)John 2:11

JESUS THE JOY-BRINGER

THE FIRST MIRACLE IN CANA - THE WATER MADE WINE

Joh. 2:11.

The keynote of this Gospel was struck in the earlier verses of the first chapter in the great words, ‘The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, full of grace and truth.’ To these words there is an evident reference in this language. The Evangelist regards Christ’s first miracle as the first ray of that forth-flashing glory of the Incarnate Word. To this Evangelist all miracles are especially important as being signs, which is the word he generally employs to designate them. They are not mere portents, but significant revelations as well as wonders. It is not, I think, accidental that there are just seven miracles of our Lord’s, before His crucifixion, recorded by John, and one of the Risen Lord.

These signs are all set forth by the Evangelist as manifestations of various aspects of that one white light, of uncreated glory which rays from Christ. They are, if I may so say, the sevenfold colours into which the one beam is analysed. Each of them might be looked at in turn as presenting some fresh thought of what the ‘glory . . . full of grace and truth’ is.

I begin with the first of the series. What, then, is the ‘glory of the only Begotten Son’ which flashes forth upon us from the miracle? My object is simply to try to answer that question for you.

I. First, then, we see here the revelation of His creative power.

It is very noteworthy that the miraculous fact is veiled entirely in the narrative. Not a word is said of the method of operation, it is not even said that the miracle was wrought; we are only told what preceded it, and what followed it. Itself is shrouded in deep silence. The servants fill the water-pots.-’Draw out now,’ and they draw, ‘and bear it to the governor of the feast.’ Where the miraculous act comes in we do not know; what was its nature we cannot tell. How far it extended is left obscure. Was all the large quantity of water in these six great vessels of stone transformed into wine, or was the change effected in the moment when the portion that was wanted was drawn from them and on that portion only? We cannot answer the question. Probably, I think, the latter; but at all events a veil is dropped over the fact.

Only this, we see that in this miracle, even more conspicuously than in any other of our Lord’s, there are no means at all employed. Sometimes He used material vehicles, anointing a man’s eyes with clay, or moistening the ear with the spittle; sometimes sending a man to bathe in the Pool of Siloam; sometimes laying His hand on the sick; sometimes healing from a distance by the mere utterance of His word. But here there is not even a word; no means of any kind employed, but the silent forth-putting of His will, which, without token, without visible audible indication of any sort, passes with sovereign power into the midst of material things and there works according to His own purpose. Is not this the signature of divinity, that without means the mere forth-putting of the will is all that is wanted to mould matter as plastic to His command? It is not even, ‘He spake and it was done,’ but silently He willed, and ‘the conscious water knew its Lord, and blushed.’ This is the glory of the Incarnate Word.

Now that was no interruption of the order of things established in the Creation. There was no suspension of natural laws here. What happened was only this, that the power which generally works through mediating links came into immediate connection with the effect. What does it matter whether your engine transmits its powers through half a dozen cranks, or two or three less? What does it matter whether the chain be longer or shorter? Some parenthetical links are dropped here, that is all that is unusual. For in all ordinary natural operations, as we call them, the profound prologue of this Gospel teaches us to believe that Christ, the Eternal Word, works according to His will. He was the Agent of creation. He is the Agent of that preservation which is only a continual creation. In Him is life, and all living things live because of the continual presence and operation upon them of His divine power. And again I say, what is phenomenal and unusual in this miracle is but the suppression of two or three of the connecting links between the continual cause of all creatural existences, and its effect. So let us learn that whether through a long chain of so-called causes, or whether close up against the effect, without the intervention of these parenthetical and transmitting media, the divine power works. The power is one, and the reason for the effect is one, that Christ ever works in the world, and is that Eternal Word, 'without whom was not anything made that was made.' 'This beginning of miracles did Christ . . . and manifested His glory.'

II. Then, again, we see here, I think, the revelation of one great purpose of our Lord's coming, to hallow all common, and especially all family, life.

What a strange contrast there is between the simple gladness of the rustic village wedding and the tremendous scene of the Temptation in the wilderness, which preceded it only by a few days! What a strange contrast there is between the sublime heights of the first chapter and the homely incident which opens the ministry! What a contrast between the rigid asceticism of the Forerunner, 'who came neither eating nor drinking,' and the Son of Man, who enters thus freely and cheerfully into the common joys and relationships of human nature! How unlike the scene at the marriage-feast must have been to the anticipations of the half-dozen disciples that had gathered round Him, all a-tingling with expectation as to what would be the first manifestation of His Messianic power! The last thing they would have dreamed of would have been to find Him in the humble home in Cana of Galilee. Some people say 'this miracle is unworthy of Him, for it was wrought upon such a trivial occasion.' And was it a trivial occasion that prompted Him thus to commence His career, not by some high and strained and remote exhibition of more than human saintliness or power, but by entering like a Brother into the midst of common, homespun, earthly joys, and showing how His presence ennobled and sanctified these? Surely the world has gained from Him, among the many gifts that He has given to it, few that have been the fountain of more sacred sweetness and blessedness than is opened in that fact that the first manifestation of His glory had for its result the hallowing of the marriage tie.

And is it not in accordance with the whole meaning and spirit of His works that 'forasmuch as the brethren were partakers of' anything, 'He Himself likewise should take part of the same,' and sanctify every incident of life by

His sharing of it? So He protests against that faithless and wicked division of life into sacred and secular, which has wrought such harm both in the sacred and in the secular regions. So He protests against the notion that religion has to do with another world rather than with this. So He protests against the narrowing conception of His work which would remove from its influence anything that interests humanity. So He says, as it were, at the very beginning of His career, ‘I am a Man, and nothing that is human do I reckon foreign to Myself.’

Brethren! let us learn the lesson that all life is the region of His Kingdom; that the sphere of His rule is everything which a man can do or feel or think. Let us learn that where His footsteps have trod is hallowed ground. If a prince shares for a few moments in the festivities of his gathered people on some great occasion, how ennobled the feast seems! If he joins in their sports or in their occupations for a while as an act of condescension, how they return to them with renewed vigour! And so we. We have had our King in the midst of all our family life, in the midst of all our common duties; therefore are they consecrated. Let us learn that all things done with the consciousness of His presence are sacred. He has hallowed every corner of human life by His presence; and the consecration, like some pungent and perennial perfume, lingers for us yet in the else scentless air of daily life, if we follow His footsteps.

Sanctity is not singularity. There is no need to withdraw from any region of human activity and human interest in order to develop the whitest saintliness, the most Christlike purity. The saint is to be in the world, but not of it; like the Master, who went straight from the wilderness and its temptations to the homely gladness of the rustic marriage.

III. Still further, we have here a symbol of Christ’s glory as the ennobler and heightener of all earthly joys.

That may be taken with perhaps a permissible play of fancy as one meaning, at any rate, of the transformation of water into wine; the less savoury and fragrant and powerful liquid into the more so. Wine, in the Old Testament especially, is the symbol of gladness, and though it received a deeper and a sacreder meaning in the New Testament as being the emblem of His blood shed for us, it is the Old Testament point of view that prevails here. And therefore, I say, we may read in the incident the symbol of His transforming power. He comes, the Man of Sorrows, with the gift of joy in His hand. It is not an unworthy object-not unworthy, I mean, of a divine sacrifice-to make men glad. It is worth His while to come from Heaven to agonise and to die, in order that He may sprinkle some drops of incorruptible and everlasting joy over the weary and sorrowful hearts of earth. We do not always give its true importance to gladness in the economy of our lives, because we are so accustomed to draw our joys from ignoble sources that in most of our joys there is something not altogether creditable or lofty. But Christ came to bring gladness, and to transform its earthly sources into heavenly fountains; and so to change all the less sweet, satisfying, and potent draughts which we take from earth's cisterns into the wine of the Kingdom; the new wine, strong and invigorating, 'making glad the heart of man.'

Our commonest blessings, our commonest joys, if only they be not foul and filthy, are capable of this transformation. Link them with Christ; be glad in Him. Bring Him into your mirth, and it will change its character. Like a taper plunged into a jar of oxygen, it will blaze up more brightly. Earth, at its best and highest, without Him is like some fair landscape lying in the shadow; and when He comes to it, it is like the same scene when the sun blazes out upon it, flashes from every bend of the rippling river, brings beauty into many a shady corner, opens all the flowering petals and sets all the birds singing in the sky. The whole scene changes when a beam of light from Him falls upon earthly joys. He will transform them and ennoble them and make them perpetual. Do not meddle with mirth over which you cannot make the sign of the Cross and ask Him to bless it; and do not keep Him out of your gladness, or it will leave bitterness on your lips, howsoever sweet it tastes at first.

Ay! and not only can this Master transform the water at the marriage feast into the wine of gladness, but the cups that we all carry, into which our tears have dropped-upon these too He can lay His hand and change them into cups of blessing and of salvation.

'Blessed are they . . . who, passing through the valley of weeping, gather their tears into a well; the rain also covereth it with blessings.' So the old

Psalm put the thought that sorrow may be turned into a solemn joy, and may lie at the foundation of our most flowery fruitfulness. And the same lesson we may learn from this symbol. The Christ who transforms the water of earthly gladness into the wine of heavenly blessedness, can do the same thing for the bitter waters of sorrow, and can make them the occasions of solemn joy. When the leaves drop we see through the bare branches. Shivering and cold they may look, but we see the stars beyond, and that is better. 'This beginning of miracles' will Jesus repeat in every sad heart that trusts itself to Him.

IV. And last of all, we have here a token of His glory as supplying the deficiencies of earthly sources.

'His mother saith unto Him, "They have no wine."' The world's banquet runs out, Christ supplies an infinite gift. These great water-pots that stood there, if the whole contents of them were changed, as is possible, contained far more than sufficient for the modest wants of the little company. The water that flowed from each of them, in obedience to the touch of the servant's hand, if the change were effected then, as is possible, would flow on so long as any thirsted or any asked. And Christ gives to each of us, if we choose, a fountain that will spring unto life eternal. And when the world's platters are empty, and the world's cups are all drained dry, He will feed and satisfy the immortal hunger and the blessed thirst of every spirit that longs for Him.

The rude speech of the governor of the feast may lend itself to another aspect of this same thought. He said, in jesting surprise, 'Thou hast kept the good wine until now,' whereas the world gives its best first, and when the palate is dulled and the appetite diminished, then 'that which is worse.' How true that is; how tragically true in some of our lives! In the individual the early days of hope and vigour, when all things were fresh and wondrous, when everything was apparelled in the glory of a dream, contrast miserably with the bitter experiences of life that most of us have made. Habit comes, and takes the edge off everything. We drag remembrance, like a lengthening chain, through all our life; and with remembrance come remorse and regret. 'The vision splendid' no more attends men, as they plod on their way through the weariness of middle life, or pass down into the deepening shadows of advancing and solitary old age. The best comes first, for the men who have no good but this world’s. And some of you have got nothing in your cups but dregs that you scarcely care to drink.

But Jesus Christ keeps the best till the last. His gifts become sweeter every day. No time can cloy them. Advancing years make them more precious and more necessary. The end is better in this course than the beginning. And when life is over, and we pass into the heavens, the word will come to our lips, with surprise and with thankfulness, as we find how much better it all is than we had ever dreamed it should be: ‘Thou hast kept the good wine until now.’

Oh, my brother! do not touch that cup that is offered to you by the harlot world, spiced and fragrant and foaming; ‘at the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder.’ But take the pure joys which the Christ, loved, trusted, obeyed, summoned to your feast and welcomed in your heart, will bring to you; and these shall grow and greaten until the perfection of the Heavens.

15)John 2:16

John

CHRIST CLEANSING THE TEMPLE

JOHN ii. 16.

The other Evangelists do not record this cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of Christ’s ministry, but, as we all know, tell of a similar act at its very close. John, on the other hand, has no notice of the latter incident. The question, then, naturally arises, are these diverse narratives accounts of the same event? The answer seems to me to be in the negative, because John’s Gospel is evidently intended to supplement the other three, and to record incidents either unknown to, or unnoticed by, them, and, as a matter of fact, the whole of this initial visit of our Lord to Jerusalem is omitted by the three Evangelists. Then the two incidents are distinctly different in tone, in setting, and in the words with which our Lord accompanies them. They are both appropriate in the place in which they stand, the one as the initial and the other as all but the final act of His Messiahship. So we may learn from the repetition of this cleansing the solemn lesson: that outward reformation of religious corruptions is of small and transient worth. For in three years-perhaps in as many weeks-the abuse that He corrected returned in full force.

Now, this narrative has many points of interest, but I think I shall best bring out its meaning if I remind you, by way of introduction, that the Temple of Jerusalem was succeeded by the Temple of the Christian Church, and that each individual Christian man is a temple. So there are three things that I want to set before you: what Christ did in the Temple; what He does in the Church; what He will do to each of us if we will let Him.

I. First, then, what Christ did in the Temple.

Now, the scene in our narrative is not unlike that which may be witnessed in any Roman Catholic country in the cathedral place or outside the church on the saint's day, where there are long rows of stalls, fitted up with rosaries, and images of the saint, and candles, and other apparatus for worship.

The abuse had many practical grounds on which it could be defended. It was very convenient to buy sacrifices on the spot, instead of having to drag them from a distance. It was no less convenient to be able to exchange foreign money, possibly bearing upon it the head of an emperor, for the statutory half-shekel. It was profitable to the sellers, and no doubt to the priests, who were probably sleeping partners in the concern, or drew rent for the ground on which the stalls stood. And so, being convenient for all and profitable to many, the thing became a recognised institution.

Being familiar it became legitimate, and no one thought of any incongruity in it until this young Nazarene felt a flash of zeal for the sanctity of His Father's house consuming Him. Catching up some of the reeds which served as bedding for the cattle, He twisted them into the semblance of a scourge, which could hurt neither man nor beast. He did not use it. It was a symbol, not an instrument. According to the reading adopted in the Revised Version, it was the sheep and cattle, not their owners, whom He 'drove out.' And then, dropping the scourge, He turned to the money-changers, and, with the same hand, overthrew their tables. And then came the turn of the sellers of doves. He would not hurt the birds, nor rob their owners. And so

He neither overthrew nor opened the cages, but bade them 'Take these things hence'; and then came the illuminating words, 'Make not My Father's house a house of merchandise.'

Now this incident is very unlike our Lord's usual method, even if we do not exaggerate the violence which He employed. It is unlike in two respects: in the use of compulsion, and in aiming at mere outward reformation. And both of these points are intimately connected with its place in His career.

It was the first public appearance of Jesus before His nation as Messiah. He inaugurates His work by a claim-by an act of authority-to be the King of Israel and the Lord of the Temple. If we remember the words from the last prophet, in which Malachi says that 'the Messenger of the Covenant . . . shall suddenly come to His Temple, and purify the sons of Levi,' we get the significance of this incident. We have to mark in it our Lord's deliberate assumption of the role of Messiah; His shaping His conduct so as to recall to all susceptible hearts that last utterance of prophecy, and to recognise the fact that at the beginning of His career He was fully conscious of His Sonship, and inaugurated His work by the solemn appeal to the nation to recognise Him as their Lord.

And this is the reason, as I take it, why the anomalous incident is in its place at the beginning of His career no less than the repetition of it was at the close. And this is the explanation of the anomaly of the incident. It is His solemn, authoritative claiming to be God's Messenger, the Messiah long foretold.

Then, further, this incident is a singular manifestation of Christ's unique power. How did it come that all these sordid hucksters had not a word to say, and did not lift a finger in opposition, or that the Temple Guard offered no resistance, and did not try to quell the unseemly disturbance, or that the very officials, when they came to reckon with Him, had nothing harsher to say than, 'What sign showest Thou unto us, seeing that Thou doest these things'? No miracle is needed to explain that singular acquiescence. We see in lower forms many instances of a similar thing. A man ablaze with holy indignation, and having a secret ally in the hearts of those whom He rebukes, will awe a crowd even if he does not infect them. But that is not the full explanation. I see here an incident analogous to that strange event at the close of Christ's ministry, when, coming out from beneath the shadows of the olives in the garden, He said to the soldiers 'Whom seek ye?' and they fell backwards and wallowed on the ground. An overwhelming impression of His personal majesty, and perhaps some forth-putting of that hidden glory which did swim up to the surface on the mountain of Transfiguration, bowed all these men before Him, like reeds before the wind. And though there was no recognition of His claim, there was something in the Claimant that forbade resistance and silenced remonstrance.

Further, this incident is a revelation of Christ's capacity for righteous indignation. No two scenes can be more different than the two recorded in this chapter: the one that took place in the rural seclusion of Cana, nestling among the Galilean hills, the other that was done in the courts of the Temple swarming with excited festival-keepers; the one hallowing the common joys of daily life, the other rebuking the profanation of what assumed to be a great deal more sacred than a wedding festival; the one manifesting the love and sympathy of Jesus, His power to ennoble all human relationships, and His delight in ministering to need and bringing gladness, and the other setting forth the sterner aspect of His character as consumed with holy zeal for the sanctity of God's name and house. Taken together, one may say that they cover the whole ground of His character, and in some very real sense are a summary of all His work. The programme contains the whole of what is to follow hereafter.

We may well take the lesson, which no generation ever needed more than the present, both by reason of its excellences and of its defects, that there were no love worthy of a perfect spirit in which there did not lie dormant a dark capacity of wrath, and that Christ Himself would not have been the Joy-bringer, the sympathising Gladdener which He manifested Himself as being in the 'beginning of miracles in Cana of Galilee' unless, side by side, there had lain in Him the power of holy indignation and, if need be, of stern rebuke. Brethren, we must retain our conception of His anger if we are not to maim our conception of His love. There is no wrath like the wrath of the Lamb. The Temple court, with the strange figure of the Christ with a scourge in His hand, is a revelation which this generation, with its exaggerated sentimentalism, with its shrinking, by reason of its good and of its evil, from the very notion of a divine retribution based upon the eternal antagonism between good and evil, most sorely needs.

II. Now, secondly, notice what Christ does in His Church.

I need not remind you how God's method of restoration is always to restore with a difference and a progress. The ruined Temple on Zion was not to be followed by another house of stone and lime, but by 'a spiritual house,' builded together for 'a habitation of God in the Spirit.' The Christian Church takes the place of that material sanctuary, and is the dwelling-place of God.

That being so, let us take the lesson that that house, too, may be desecrated. There may be, as there were in the original Temple, the externals of worship, and yet, eating out the reality of these, there may be an inward mercenary spirit.

Note how insensibly such corruption creeps in to a community. You cannot embody an idea in a form or in an external association without immediately dragging it down, and running the risk of degradation. It is just like a drop of quicksilver which you cannot expose to the air but instantaneously its brightness is dimmed by the scum that forms on its surface. A church as an outward institution is exposed to all the dangers to which other institutions are exposed. And these creep on insensibly, as this abuse had crept on. So it is not enough that we should be at ease in our consciences in regard to our practices as Christian communities. We become familiar with any abuse, and as we become familiar we lose the power of rightly judging of it. Therefore conscience needs to be guided and enlightened quite as much as to be obeyed.

How long has it taken the Christian Church to learn the wickedness of slavery? Has the Christian Church yet learned the unchristianity of War? Are there no abuses amongst us, which subsequent generations will see to be so glaring that they will talk about us as we talk about our ancestors, and wonder whether we were Christians at all when we could tolerate such things? They creep on gradually, and they need continual watchfulness if they are not to assume the mastery.

The special type of corruption which we find in this incident is one that besets the Church always. Of course, if I were preaching to ministers, I should have a great deal to say about that. For men that are necessarily paid for preaching have a sore temptation to preach for pay. But it is not only we professionals who have need to lay to heart this incident. It is all Christian communities, established and non-established churches, Roman Catholic and Protestant. The same danger besets them all. There must be money to work the outward business of the house of God. But what about people that 'run' churches as they run mills? What about people whose test of the prosperity of a Christian community is its balance-sheet? What about the people that hang on to religious communities and services for the sake of what they can make out of them? We have heard a great deal lately about what would happen 'if Christ came to Chicago.' If Christ came to any community of professing Christians in this land, do you not think He would need to have the scourge in His hand, and to say 'Make not My Father's house a house of merchandise'? He will come; He does come; He is always coming if we would listen to Him. And at long intervals He comes in some tremendous and manifest fashion, and overthrows the money-changers' tables.

Ah, brethren! if Jesus Christ had not thus come, over and over again, to His Church, Christian men would have killed Christianity long ago. Did you ever think that Christianity is the only religion that has shown recuperative power and that has been able to fling off its peccant humours? They used to say-I do not know whether it is true or not-that Thames water was good to put on board ship because of its property of corrupting and then clearing itself, and becoming fit to drink. We and our brethren, all through the ages, have been corrupting the Water of Life. And how does it come to be sweet and powerful still? This tree has substance in it when it casts its leaves. That unique characteristic of Christianity, its power of reformation, is not self-reformation, but it is a coming of the Lord to His temple to 'purify the sons of Levi, that their offering may be pleasant as in days of yore.'

So one looks upon the spectacle of churches labouring under all manner of corruptions; and one need not lose heart. The shortest day is the day before the year turns; and when the need is sorest the help is nearest. And so I, for my part, believe that very much of the organisations of all existing churches will have to be swept away. But I believe too, with all my heart-and I hope that you do-that, though the precious wheat is riddled in the sieve, and the chaff falls to the ground, not one grain will go through the meshes. Whatever becomes of churches, the Church of Christ shall never have its strength so sapped by abuses that it must perish, or its lustre so dimmed that the Lord of the Temple must depart from His sanctuary.

III. Lastly, note what Christ will do for each of us if we will let Him.

It is not a community only which is the temple of God. For the Apostles in many places suggest, and in some distinctly say, 'ye are the temples' individually, as well as the Temple collectively, of the Most High. And so every Christian soul-by virtue of that which is the deepest truth of Christianity, the indwelling of Christ in men's hearts by faith-is a temple of God; and every human soul is meant to be and may become such. That temple can be profaned. There are many ways in which professing Christians make it a house of merchandise. There are forms of religion which are little better than chaffering with God, to give Him so much service if He will repay us with so much Heaven. There are too many temptations, to which we yield, to bring secular thoughts into our holiest things. Some of us, by reason not of wishing wealth but of dreading penury, find it hard to shut worldly cares out of our hearts. We all need to be on our guard lest the atmosphere in which we live in this great city shall penetrate even into our moments of devotion, and the noise of the market within earshot of the Holy of Holies shall disturb the chant of the worshippers. It is Manchester's temptation, and it is one that most of us need to be guarded against.

So engrossed, and, as we should say, necessarily engrossed-or, at all events, legitimately engrossed-are we in the pursuits of our daily commerce, that we have scarcely time enough or leisure of heart and mind enough to come into 'the secret place of the Most High.' The worshippers stop outside trading for beasts and doves, and they have no time to go into the Temple and present their offerings.

It is our besetting danger. Forewarned is forearmed, to some extent. Would that we could all hear, as we go about our ordinary avocations, that solemn voice, 'Make not My Father's house a house of merchandise,' and could keep the inner sanctuary still from the noises, and remote from the pollutions, of the market hard by!

We cannot cast out these or any other desecrating thoughts and desires by ourselves, except to a very small degree. And if we do, then there happens what our Lord warned us against in profound words. The house may be emptied of the evil tenant in some measure by our own resolution and self-reformation. But if it is not occupied by Him, it remains ‘empty,’ though it is ‘swept and garnished.’ Nature abhors a vacuum, and into the empty house there come the old tenant and seven brethren blacker than himself. The only way to keep the world out of my heart is to have Christ filling it. If we will ask Him He will come to us. And if He has the scourge in His hand, let Him be none the less welcome a guest for that. He will come, and when He enters, it will be like the rising of the sun, when all the beasts of the forest slink away and lay them down in their dens. It will be like the carrying of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of the whole earth into the temple of Dagon, when the fish-like image fell prone and mutilated on the threshold. If we say to Him, ‘Arise, O Lord, into Thy rest, Thou and the Ark of Thy strength,’ He will enter in, and by His entrance will ‘make the place of His feet glorious’ and pure.

16)John 2:19

John

THE DESTROYERS AND THE RESTORER

Joh. 2:19.

This is our Lord’s answer to the Jewish request for a sign which should warrant His action in cleansing the Temple. There are two such cleansings recorded in the Gospels; this one His first public act, and another, omitted by John, but recorded in the other Gospels, which was almost His last public act.

It has been suggested that these are but two versions of one incident; and although there is no objection in principle to admitting the possibility of that explanation, yet in fact it appears to me insufficient and unnecessary.

For each event is appropriate in its own place. In each there is a distinct difference in tone. The incident recorded in the present chapter has our Lord's commentary, 'Make not My Father's house a house of merchandise'; in that recorded in the Synoptic Gospels the profanation is declared as greater, and the rebuke is more severe. The 'house of merchandise' has become, by their refusal to render to Him what was His, 'a den of thieves.' In the later incident there is a reference in our Lord's quotation from the Old Testament to the entrance of the Gentiles into the Kingdom. There is no such reference here. In the other Gospels there is no record of this question which the Jews asked, nor of our Lord's significant answer, whilst yet a caricatured and mistaken version of that answer was known to the other Evangelists, and is put by them into the mouths of the false witnesses at our Lord's trial. They thus attest the accuracy of our narrative even while they seem not to have known of the incident.

All these things being taken into account, I think that we have to do with a double, of which there are several instances in the Gospels, the same event recurring under somewhat varied circumstances, and reflecting varied aspects of truth. But it is to our Lord's words in vindication of His right to cleanse the Temple rather than to the incident on which they are based that I wish to turn your attention now: 'Destroy this Temple,' said our Lord, as His sufficient and only answer to the demand for a sign, 'and in three days I will raise it up.'

Now these words, enigmatical as they are, seem to me to be very profound and significant; and I wish, on this Easter Sunday, to look at them as throwing a light upon the gladness of this day. They suggest to me three things: I find in them, first, an enigmatical forecast of our Lord's own history; second, a prophetic warning of Israel's; and last, a symbolical foreshadowing of His world-wide work as the Restorer of man's destructions. 'Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'

I. First then, I think, we see here an enigmatical forecast of our Lord's own history.

Notice, first, that marvellous and unique consciousness of our Lord's as to His own dignity and nature. 'He spake of the temple of His body.' Think that here is a man, apparently one of ourselves, walking amongst us, living the common life of humanity, who declares that in Him, in an altogether solitary and peculiar fashion, there abides the fulness of Deity. Think that there has been a Man who said, ‘In this place is One greater than the Temple.’ And people have believed Him, and do believe Him, and have found that the tremendous audacity of the words is simple verity, and that Christ is, in inmost reality, all which the Temple was but in the poorest symbol. In it there had dwelt, though there dwelt no longer at the time when He was speaking, a material and symbolical brightness, the expression of something which, for want of a better name, we call the ‘presence of God.’ But what was that flashing fire between the cherubim that brooded over the Mercy-seat, with a light that was lambent and lustrous as the light of love and of life-what was that to the glory, moulded in meekness and garbed in gentleness, the glory that shone, merciful and hospitable and inviting-a tempered flame on which the poorest, diseased, blind eyes could look, and not wince-from the face and from the character of Jesus Christ the Lord? He is greater than the Temple, for in Him, in no symbol but in reality, abode and abides the fulness of that unnameable Being whom we name Father and God. And not only does the fulness abide, but in Him that awful Remoteness becomes for us a merciful Presence; the infinite abyss and closed sea of the divine nature hath an outlet, and becomes a ‘river of water of life.’ And as the ancient name of that Temple was the ‘Tent of Meeting,’ the place where Israel and God, in symbolical and ceremonial form, met together, so, in inmost reality in Christ’s nature, Manhood and Divinity cohere and unite, and in Him all of us, the weak, the sinful, the alien, the rebellious, may meet our Father. ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.’ ‘In this place is One greater than the Temple.’

And so this Jewish Peasant, at the very beginning of His earthly career, stands up there, in the presence of the ancestral sanctities and immemorial ceremonials which had been consecrated by all these ages and commanded by God Himself, and with autocratic hand sweeps them all on one side, as one that should draw a curtain that the statue might be seen, and remains poised Himself in the vacant place, that all eyes may look upon Him, and on Him alone. ‘Destroy this Temple . . . . He spake of the temple of His body.’

Still further, notice how here we have, at the very beginning of our Lord's career, His distinct prevision of how it was all going to end. People that are willing to honour Jesus Christ, and are not willing to recognise His death as the great purpose for which He came, tell us that, like as with other reformers and heroes and martyrs, His death was the result of the failure of His purpose. And some of them talk to us very glibly, in their so-called 'Lives of Jesus Christ' about the alteration in Christ's plan which came when He saw that His message was not going to be received. I do not enter upon all the reasons why such a construction of Christ's work cannot hold water, but here is one-for any one who believes this story before us-that at the very beginning, before He had gone half a dozen steps in His public career, when the issues of the experiment, if it was a man that was making the experiment, were all untried; when, if it were merely a martyr-enthusiast that was beginning his struggle, some flickering light of hope that He would be received of His brethren must have shone, or He would never have ventured upon the path-that then, with no mistake, with no illusion, with no expectation of a welcome and a Hosanna, but with the clearest certitude of what lay before Him, our Lord beheld and accepted His Cross. Its shadow fell upon His path from the beginning, because the Cross was the purpose for which He came. 'To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world,' said He-when the reality of it was almost within arm's length of Him-'to bear witness to the Truth,' and His bearing witness to the truth was perfected and accomplished on the Cross. Here, at the very commencement of His career, we have it distinctly set forth, 'the Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for many.'

And, brethren, that fact is important, not only because it helps us to understand that His death is the centre of His work, but also because it helps us to a loving and tender thought of Him, how all His life long, with that issue distinctly before Him, He journeyed towards it of His own loving will; how every step that He took on earth's flinty roads, taken with bleeding and pure feet, He took knowing whither He was going. This Isaac climbs the mountain to the place of sacrifice, with no illusions as to what He is going up the mountain for. He knows that He goes up to be the lamb of the offering, and knowing it, He goes. Therefore let us love Him with love as persistent as was His own, who discerning the end from the beginning, willed to be born and to live because He had resolved to die, for you and me and every man.

And then, further, we have here our Lord’s claim to be Himself the Agent of His own resurrection. ‘I will raise it up in three days.’ Of course, in Scripture, we more frequently find the Resurrection treated as being the result of the power of God the Father. We more ordinarily read that Christ was raised; but sometimes we read, as here, that Christ rises, and we have solemn words of His own, ‘I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.’ Think of a man saying, ‘I am going to bring My own body from the dust of death,’ and think of the man who said that doing it. If that is true, if this prediction was uttered, and being uttered was fulfilled-what then? I do not need to answer the question. My brother, this day declares that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. ‘Destroy this Temple’-there is a challenge-’and in three days I will raise it up’; and He did it. And He is the Lord of the Temple as well as the Temple. Down on your knees before Him, with all your hearts and with all your confidence, and worship, and trust, and love for evermore ‘the Second Man,’ who ‘is the Lord from Heaven!’

II. Now let us turn to the other aspects of these words. I think we see here, in the next place, a prophetic warning of the history of the men to whom He was speaking.

There must be a connection between the interpretation of the words which our Evangelist assures us is the correct one, and the interpretation which would naturally have occurred to a listener, that by ‘this Temple’ our Lord really meant simply the literal building in which He spoke. There is such a connection, and though our Lord did not only mean the Temple, He did mean the Temple. To say so is not forcing double meanings in any fast and loose fashion upon Scripture, nor playing with ambiguities, nor indulging in any of the vices to which spiritualising interpretation of Scripture leads, but it is simply grasping the central idea of the words of my text. Rightly understood they lead us to this: ‘The death of Christ was the destruction of the Jewish Temple and polity, and the raising again of Christ from the dead on the third day was the raising again of that destroyed Theocracy and Temple in a new and nobler fashion.’ Let us then look for a moment, and it shall only be for a moment, at these two thoughts.

If any one had said to any of that howling mob that stood round Christ at the judgment-seat of the High Priest, and fancied themselves condemning Him to death, because He had blasphemed the Temple: ‘You, at this moment, are pulling down the holy and beautiful house in which your fathers praised; and what you are doing now is the destruction of your national worship and of yourselves,’ the words would have been received with incredulity; and yet they were simple truth. Christ’s death destroyed that outward Temple. The veil was ‘rent in twain from the top to the bottom’ at the moment He died; which was the declaration indeed that henceforward the Holiest of All was patent to the foot of every man, but was also the declaration that there was no more sanctity now within those courts, and that Temple, and priesthood, and sacrifice, and altar, and ceremonial and all, were antiquated. That ‘which was perfect having come,’ Christ’s death having realised all which Temple-worship symbolised, that which was the shadow was put away when the substance appeared.

And in another fashion, it is also true that the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, inflicted by Jewish hands, was the destruction of the Jewish worship, in the way of natural sequence and of divine chastisement. When the husbandmen rejected the Son who was sent ‘last of all,’ there was nothing more for it but that they should be ‘cast out of the vineyard,’ and the firebrand which the Roman soldier, forty years afterwards, tossed into the Holiest of All, and which burned the holy and beautiful house with fire, was lit on the day when Israel cried ‘Crucify Him! Crucify Him!’

Oh, brethren! What a lesson it is to us all of how blind even so-called religious zeal may be; how often it is true that men in their madness and their ignorance destroy the very institutions which they are trying to conserve! How it warns us to beware lest we, unknowing what we are about, and thinking that we are fighting for the honour of God, may really all the while be but serving ourselves and rejecting His message and His Messenger!

And then let me remind you that another thing is also true, that just as the Jewish rejection of Christ was their own rejection as the people of God, and their attempted destruction of Christ the destruction of the Jewish Temple, so the other side of the truth is also here, viz. that His rising again is the restoration of the destroyed Temple in nobler and fairer form. Of course the one real Temple is the body of Jesus Christ, as we have said, where sacrifice is offered, where God dwells, where men meet with God. But in a secondary and derivative sense, in the place of the Jewish Temple has come the Christian Church, which is, in a far deeper and more inward fashion, what that ancient system aspired to be.

Christ has builded up the Church on His Resurrection. On His Resurrection, I say, for there is nothing else on which it could rest. If men ask me what is the great evidence of Christ’s Resurrection, my answer is-the existence in the world of a Church. Where did it come from? How is it possible to conceive that without the Resurrection of Jesus Christ such a structure as the Christian society should have been built upon a dead man’s grave? It would have gone to pieces, as all similar associations would have gone. What had happened after that moment of depression which scattered them every man to his own, and led some of them to say, with pathetic use of the past tense to describe their vanished expectations, ‘We trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel’? What was the force that instead of driving them asunder drew them together? What was the power that, instead of quenching their almost dead hopes, caused them to flame up with renewed vigour heaven-high? How came it that that band of cowardly, dispirited Jewish peasants, who scattered in selfish fear and heart-sick disappointment, were in a few days found bearding all antagonism, and convinced that their hopes had only erred by being too faint and dim? The only answer is in their own message, which explained it all: ‘Him hath God raised from the dead, whereof we are all witnesses.’

The destroyed Temple disappears, and out of the dust and smoke of the vanishing ruins there rises, beautiful and serene, though incomplete and fragmentary and defaced with many a stain, the fairer reality, the Church of the living Christ. ‘Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’

III. Lastly, we have here a foreshadowing of our Lord’s world-wide work as the Restorer of man’s destructions.

Man’s folly, godlessness, worldliness, lust, sin, are ever working to the destruction of all that is sacred in humanity and in life, and to the desecrating of every shrine. We ourselves, in regard to our own hearts, which are made to be the temples of the ‘living God,’ are ever, by our sins, shortcomings, and selfishness, bringing pollution into the holiest of all; ‘breaking down the carved work thereof with axes and hammers,’ and setting up the abomination of desolation in the holy places of our hearts. We pollute them all-conscience, imagination, memory, will, intellect. How many a man listening to me now has his nature like the facade of some of our cathedrals, with the empty niches and broken statues proclaiming that wanton desecration and destruction have been busy there?

My brother! what have you done with your heart? ‘Destroy this temple.’ Christ spoke to men who did not know what they were doing; and He speaks to you. It is the inmost meaning of the life of many of you. Hour by hour, day by day, action by action, you are devastating and profaning the sanctities of your nature, and the sacred places there where God ought to live.

Listen to His confident promise. He knows that in me He is able to restore to more than pristine beauty all which I, by my sin, have destroyed; to reconsecrate all which I, by my profanity, have polluted; to cast out the evil deities that desecrate and deform the shrine; and to make my poor heart, if only I will let Him come in to the ruined chamber, a fairer temple and dwelling-place of God.

‘In three days,’ does He do it? In one sense-Yes! Thank God! the power that hallows and restores the desecrated and cast-down temple in a man’s heart, was lodged in the world in those three days of death and resurrection. The fact that He ‘died for our sins,’ the fact that He was ‘raised again for our justification,’ are the plastic and architectonic powers which will build up any character into a temple of God.

And yet more than ‘forty and six years’ will that temple have to be ‘in building.’ It is a lifelong task till the top-stone be brought forth. Only let us remember this: Christ, who is Architect and Builder, Foundation and Top-stone; ay! and Deity indwelling in the temple, and building it by His indwelling-this Christ is not one of those who ‘begin to build and are not able to finish.’ He realises all His plans. There are no ruined edifices in ‘the City’; nor any half-finished fanes of worship within the walls of that great Jerusalem whose builder and maker is Christ.

If you will put yourselves in His hands, and trust yourselves to Him, He will take away all your incompleteness, and will make you body, soul, and spirit, temples of the Lord God; as far above the loftiest beauty and whitest sanctity of any Christian character here on earth as is the building of God, ‘the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens,’ above ‘the earthly house of this tabernacle.’

He will perfect this restoring work at the last, when His Word to His servant Death, as He points him to us, shall be ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up.’

17)John 3:2

John

TEACHER OR SAVIOUR?

Joh. 3:2.

The connection in which the Evangelist introduces the story of Nicodemus throws great light on the aspect under which we are to regard it. He has just been saying that upon our Lord’s first visit to Jerusalem at the Passover there was a considerable amount of interest excited, and a kind of imperfect faith in Him drawn out, based solely on His miracles. He adds that this faith was regarded by Christ as unreliable; and he goes on to explain that our Lord exercised great reserve in His dealings with the persons who professed it, for the reason that ‘He knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.’

Now, if you note that reiteration of the word ‘man,’ you will understand the description which is given of the person who is next introduced. ‘He knew what was in man. There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.’ It would have been enough to have said, ‘There was a Pharisee.’ When John says ‘a man of the Pharisees,’ he is not merely carried away by the echo in his ears of his own last words, but it is as if he had said, ‘Now, here is one illustration of the sort of thing that I have been speaking about; one specimen of an imperfect faith built upon miracles; and one illustration of the way in which Jesus Christ dealt with it.’

Nicodemus was ‘a Pharisee.’ That tells us the school to which he belonged, and the general drift of his thought. He was ‘a ruler of the Jews.’ That tells us that he held an official position in the supreme court of the nation, to which the Romans had left some considerable shadow of power in ecclesiastical matters. And this man comes to Christ and acknowledges Him. Christ deals with him in a very suggestive fashion. His confession, and the way in which our Lord received it, are what I desire to consider briefly in this sermon.

I. Note then, first, this imperfect confession.

Everything about it, pretty nearly, is wrong. ‘He came to Jesus by night,’ half-ashamed and wholly afraid of speaking out the conviction that was working in him. He was a man in position. He could not compromise himself in the eyes of his co-Sanhedrists. ‘It would be a grave thing for a man like me to be found in converse with this new Rabbi and apparent Prophet. I must go cautiously, and have regard to my reputation and my standing in the world; and shall steal to Him by night.’ There is something wrong with any convictions about Jesus Christ which let themselves be huddled up in secret. The true apprehension of Him is like a fire in a man’s bones, that makes him ‘weary of forbearing’ when he locks his lips, and forces him to speak. If Christians can be dumb, there is something dreadfully wrong with their Christianity. If they do not regard Jesus Christ in such an aspect as to oblige them to stand out in the world and say, ‘Whatever anybody says or thinks about it, I am Christ’s man,’ then be sure that they do not yet know Him as they ought to do.

Nicodemus ‘came to Jesus by night,’ and therein condemned himself. He said, ‘Rabbi, we know.’ There is more than a soupcon of patronage in that. He is giving Jesus Christ a certificate, duly signed and sealed by Rabbinical authority. He evidently thinks that it is no small matter that he and some of his fellows should have been disposed to look with favour upon this new Teacher. And so he comes, if not patronising the young man, at all events extremely conscious of his own condescension in recognising Him with his ‘We know.’

Had he the right to speak for any of his colleagues? If so, then at that very early stage of our Lord’s ministry there was a conviction beginning to work in that body of ecclesiastics which casts a very lurid light on their subsequent proceedings. It was a good long while after, when Jesus Christ's attitude towards them had been a little more clearly made out than it was at the beginning, that they said officially, 'As for this fellow, we know not whence He is.' They 'knew' when He did not seem to be trenching on their prerogatives, or driving His Ithuriel-spear through their traditional professions of orthodoxy and punctilious casuistries. But when He trod on their toes, when He ripped up their pretensions, when He began to show His antagonism to their formalism and traditionalism, then they did not know where He came from. And there are many of us who are very polite to Jesus Christ as long as He does not interfere with us, and who begin to doubt His authority when He begins to rebuke our sins.

The man that said 'We know,' and then proceeded to tell Christ the grounds upon which He was accepted by him, was not in the position which becomes sinful men drawing near to their Saviour. 'We know that Thou art a Teacher'-contrast that, with its ring of complacency, and, if not superior, at least co-ordinate, authority, with 'Jesus! Master! have mercy on me,' or with 'Lord! save or I perish,' and you get the difference between the way in which a formalist, conceited of his knowledge, and a poor, perishing sinner, conscious of his ignorance and need, go to the Saviour.

Further, this imperfect confession was of secondary value, because it was built altogether upon miraculous evidence. Now, there has been a great deal of exaggeration about the value of the evidence of miracle. The undue elevation to which it was lifted in the apologetic literature of the eighteenth century, when it was almost made out as if there was no other proof that Jesus came from God than that He wrought miracles, has naturally led, in this generation and in the last one, to an equally exaggerated undervaluing of its worth. Jesus Christ did appeal to signs; He did also most distinctly place faith that rested merely upon miracle as second best; when He said, for instance, 'If ye believe not Me, yet believe the works.' Nicodemus says, 'We know that Thou art a Teacher sent from God, because no man can do these miracles except God be with him.' Ah! Nicodemus! did not the substance of the teaching reveal the source of the teaching even more completely than the miracles that accompanied it? Surely, if I may use an old illustration, the bell that rings in to the sermon [which is the miracles] is less conclusive as to the divine source of the teaching than is the sermon itself. Christ Himself is His own best evidence, and His words shine in their own light, and need no signs in order to authenticate their source. The signs are there, and are precious in my eyes less as credentials of His authority than as revelations of His character and His work. They are wonders; that is much. They are proofs; as I believe. But, high above both of these characteristics, they are signs of the spiritual work that He does, and manifestations of His redeeming power. And so a faith that had no ears for the ring of the divine voice in the words, and no eyes for the beauty and perfection of the character, was vulgar and low and unreliable, inasmuch as it could give no better reason for itself than that Jesus had wrought miracles,

I need not remind you of how noticeable it is that at this very early stage in our Lord's ministry there were a sufficient number of miracles done to be qualified by the Evangelist as 'many,' and to have been a very powerful factor in bringing about this real, though imperfect, faith. John has only told us of one miracle prior to this; and the other Evangelists do not touch upon these early days of our Lord's ministry at all. So that we are to think of a whole series of works of power and supernatural grace which have found no record in these short narratives. How much more Jesus Christ was, and did, and said, than any book can ever tell! These are but parts of His ways; a whisper of His power. The fulness of it remains unrevealed after all revelation.

But the central deficiency of this confession lies in the altogether inadequate conception of Jesus Christ and His work which it embodies. 'We know that Thou art a Teacher, a miracle-worker, a man sent from God, and in communion with Him.' These are large recognitions, far too large to be spoken of any but a select few of the sons of men. But they fall miserably beneath the grandeur, and do not even approach within sight of the central characteristic, of Christ and of His work. Nicodemus is the type of large numbers of men nowadays. All the people that have a kind of loose, superficial connection with Christianity re-echo substantially his words. They compliment Jesus Christ out of His divinity and out of His redeeming work, and seem to think that they are rather conferring an honour upon Christianity when they condescend to say, 'We, the learned pundits of literature; we, the arbiters of taste; we, the guides of opinion; we, the writers in newspapers and magazines and periodicals; we, the leaders in social and philanthropic movements-we recognise that Thou art a Teacher.' Yes, brethren, and the recognition is utterly inadequate to the facts of the case, and is insult, and not recognition.

II. Let me ask you to look now, in the next place, at the way in which Jesus Christ deals with this imperfect confession.

It was a great thing for a young Rabbi from Nazareth, who had no certificate from the authorities, to find an opening thus into the very centre of the Sanhedrim. There is nothing in life, to an ardent young soul, at the beginning of his career-especially if he feels that he has a burden laid upon him to deliver to his fellows-half so sweet as the early recognition by some man of wisdom and weight and influence, that he too is a messenger from God. In later years praise and acknowledgment cloy. And one might have expected some passing word from the Master that would have expressed such a feeling as that, if He had been only a young Teacher seeking for recognition. I remember that in that strange medley of beauty and absurdity, the Koran, somewhere or other, there is an outpouring of Mahomet's heart about the blessedness of his first finding a soul that would believe in him. And it is strange that Jesus Christ had no more welcome for this man than the story tells that He had. For He meets him without a word of encouragement; without a word that seemed to recognise even a growing and a groping confidence, and yet He would not 'quench the smoking flax.' Yes! sometimes the kindest way to deal with an imperfect conception is to show unsparingly why it is imperfect; and sometimes the apparent repelling of a partial faith is truly the drawing to Himself by the Christ of the man, though his faith be not approved.

So, notice how our Lord meets the imperfections of this acknowledgment. He begins by pointing out what is the deepest and universal need of men. Nicodemus had said, 'Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher come from God.' And Christ says, 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye must be born again.' What has that to do with Nicodemus's acknowledgment? Apparently nothing; really everything. For, if you will think for a moment, you will see how it meets it precisely, and forces the Rabbi to deepen his conception of the Lord. The first thing that you and I want, for our participation in the Kingdom of God, is a radical out-and-out change in our whole character and nature. ‘Ye must be born again’; now, whatever more that means, it means, at all events, this-a thorough-going renovation and metamorphosis of a man’s nature, as the sorest need that the world and all the individuals that make up the world have.

The deepest ground of that necessity lies in the fact of sin. Brother, we can only verify our Lord’s assertion by honestly searching the depths of our own hearts, and looking at ourselves in the light of God. Think what is meant when we say, ‘He is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all.’ Think of that absolute purity, that, to us, awful aversion from all that is evil, from all that is sinful. Think of what sort of men they must be who can see the Lord. And then look at yourself. Are we fit to pass that threshold? Are we fit to gaze into that Face? Is it possible that we should have fellowship with Him? Oh, brethren, if we rightly meditate upon two facts, the holiness of God and our own characters, I think we shall feel that Jesus Christ has truly stated the case when He says, ‘Ye must be born again.’ Unless you and I can get ourselves radically changed, there is no Heaven for us; there is no fellowship with God for us. We must stand before Him, and feel that a great gulf is fixed between us and Him.

And so when a man comes with his poor little ‘Thou art a Teacher,’ no words are wanted in order to set in glaring light the utter inadequacy of such a conception as that. What the world wants is not a Teacher, it is a Life-giver. What men want is not to be told the truth; they know it already. What they want is not to be told their duty; they know that too. What they want is some power that shall turn them clean round. And what each of us wants before we can see the Lord is that, if it may be, something shall lay hold of us, and utterly change our natures, and express from our hearts the black drop that lies there tainting everything.

Now, this necessity is met in Jesus Christ. For there were two ‘musts’ in His talk with Nicodemus, and both of them bore directly on the one purpose of deepening Nicodemus’s inadequate conception of what He was and what He did. He said, ‘Ye must be born again,’ in order that his hearer, and we, might lay to heart this, that we need something more than a Teacher, even a

Life-giver; and He said, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up,’ in order that we might all know that in Him the necessity is met, and that the Son of Man, who came down from Heaven, and is in Heaven, even whilst He is on earth, is the sole ladder by which men can ascend into Heaven and gaze upon God.

Thus it is Christ’s work as Redeemer, Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross, Christ’s power as bringing to the world a new and holy life, and breathing it into all that trust in Him, which make the very centre of His work. Set by the side of that this other, ‘Thou art a Teacher sent from God.’ Ah, brethren, that will not do; it will not do for you and me! We want something a great deal deeper than that. The secret of Jesus is not disclosed until we have passed into the inner shrine, where we learn that He is the Sacrifice for the world, and the Source and Fountain of a new life. I beseech you, take Christ’s way of dealing with this certificate of His character given by the Rabbi who did not know his own necessities, and ponder it.

Mark the underlying principle which is here-viz. if you want to understand Christ you must understand sin; and whoever thinks lightly of it will think meanly of Him. An underestimate of the reality, the universality, the gravity of the fact of sin lands men in the superficial and wholly impotent conception, ‘Rabbi! Thou art a Teacher sent from God.’ A true knowledge of myself as a sinful man, of my need of pardon, of my need of cleansing, of my need of a new nature, which must be given from above, and cannot be evolved from within, leads me, and I pray it may lead you, to cast yourself down before Him, with no complaisant words of intellectual recognition upon your lips, but with the old cry, ‘Lord! be merciful to me a sinner.’

III. And now, dear friends, one last word. Notice when and where this imperfect disciple was transformed into a courageous confessor.

We do not know what came immediately of this conversation. We only know that some considerable time after, Nicodemus had not screwed himself up to the point of acknowledging out and out, like a brave man, that he was Christ’s follower; but that he timidly ventured in the Sanhedrim to slip in a remonstrance ingeniously devised to conceal his own opinions, and yet to do some benefit to Christ, when he said, ‘Does our law judge any man before it hear him?’ And, of course, the timid remonstrance was swept aside, as it deserved to be, by the ferocious antagonism of his co-Sanhedrists.

But when the Cross came, and it had become more dangerous to avow discipleship, he plucked up courage, or rather courage flowed into him from that Cross, and he went boldly and ‘craved the body of Jesus,’ and got it, and buried it. No doubt when he looked at Jesus hanging on the Cross, he remembered that night in Jerusalem when the Lord had said, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up,’ and he remembered how He had spoken about the serpent lifted in the wilderness, and a great light blazed in upon him, which for ever ended all hesitation and timidity for him. And so he was ready to be a martyr, or anything else, for the sake of Him whom he now found to be far more than a ‘Teacher,’ even the Sacrifice by whose stripes he was healed.

Dear brethren, I bring that Cross to you now, and pray you to see there Christ’s real work for us, and for the world. He has taught us, but He has done more. He has not only spoken, He has died. He has not only shown us the path on which to walk, He has made it possible for us to walk in it. He is not merely one amongst the noble band that have guided and inspired and instructed humanity, but He stands alone-not a Teacher, but the Redeemer, ‘the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world.’

If He is a Teacher, take His teachings, and what are they? These, that He is the Son of God; that ‘He came from God’; that He ‘went to God’; that He ‘gives His life a ransom for many’; that He is to be the Judge of mankind; that if we trust in Him, our sins are forgiven and our nature is renewed. Do not go picking and choosing amongst His teachings, for these which I have named are as surely His as ‘Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them,’ or any other of the moral teachings which the world professes to admire. Take the whole teachings of the whole Christ, and you will confess Him to be the Redeemer of your souls, and the Life-giver by whom, and by whom alone, we enter the Kingdom of God.

18)John 3:8

WIND AND SPIRIT

Joh. 3:8.

Perhaps a gust of night wind swept round the chamber where Nicodemus sat listening to Jesus, and gave occasion for this condensed parable. But there is occasion sufficient for it in the word ‘Spirit,’ which, both in the language in which our Lord addressed the ruler of the Sanhedrim, and in that which John employed in recording the conversation, as in our own English, means both ‘spirit’ and ‘breath.’ This double signification of the word gives rise to the analogies in our text, and it also raises the question as to the precise meaning of the text. There are two alternatives, one adopted by our Authorised and Revised Version, and one which you will find relegated to the margin of the latter. We may either read ‘the wind bloweth’ or ‘the Spirit breathes.’ I must not be tempted here to enter into a discussion of the grounds upon which the one or the other of these two renderings may be preferred. Suffice it to say that I adhere to the rendering which lies before us, and find here a comparison between the salient characteristics of the physical fact and the operations of the Divine Spirit upon men’s spirits.

But then, there is another step to be taken. Our Lord has just been laying down the principle that like begets like, that flesh produces flesh, and spirit, spirit. And so, applying that principle, He says here, not as might be expected, ‘So is the work of the Divine Spirit in begetting new life in men,’ but ‘So is he that is born of the Spirit.’ There are three things brought into relation with one another: the physical fact; the operations of the Spirit of God, of which that physical fact in its various characteristics may be taken as a symbol; and the result of its operations in the new man who is made ‘after the image of Him that created him.’

It is to the last of these that I wish to turn. Here you have the ideal of the Christian life, considered as the product of the free Spirit of God, the picture of what all Christian people have the capacity of being, the obligation to be, and are, just in the measure in which that new life, which the Spirit of God bestows, is dominant in them and moulding their character. So I take these characteristics just as they arise.

I. Here you have the freedom of the new life.

'The wind bloweth where it listeth.' Of course, in these days of weather forecasts and hoisting cones, we know that the wind is subject to as rigid physical laws as any other phenomena. But Jesus Christ speaks here, as the Bible always speaks about Nature, from two points of view-one the popular, regarding the thing as it looks on the surface, and the other what I may call the poetico-devout-finding 'sermons in stones, books in the running brooks,' and hints of the spiritual world in all the phenomena of the natural. So, just as in spite of meteorological science, there has passed into common speech the proverbial simile 'as free as the wind,' so Jesus Christ says here, 'The wind bloweth where it listeth, . . . so is every one that is born of the Spirit.' He passes by the intermediate link, the Spirit that is the parent of the life, and deals with the resulting life and declares that it is self-impelled and self-directed. Is that a characteristic to be desired or admired? Is doing as we list precisely the description of the noblest life? It is the description of the purely animal one. It is the description of an entirely ignoble and base one. It may become the description of an atrociously criminal one. But we do not generally think that a man that says 'Thus I will; thus I command; let the fact that I will it stand in the place of all reason,' is speaking from a lofty point of view.

But there are two sorts of 'listing.' There is the listing which is the yielding to the mob of ignoble passions and clamant desires of the animal nature within us, and there is the 'listing' which is obeying the impulses of a higher will, that has been blended with ours. And there you come to the secret of true freedom, which does not consist in doing as I like, but in liking to do as God wishes me to do. When our Lord says 'where it listeth,' He implies that a change has passed over a man, when that new life is born within him, whereby the law, the known will of God, is written upon his heart, and, inscribed on these fleshly tables, becomes no longer an iron force external to him, but a vital impulse within him. That is freedom, to have my better will absolutely conterminous and coincident with the will of God, so far as I know it. Just as a man is not imprisoned by limits beyond which he has no desire to go, so freedom, and elevation, and nobility come by obeying, not the commands of an external authority, but the impulse of an inward life.

'Ye have not received the spirit of bondage,' because God hath given us the Spirit of power, and of love, and of self-control, which keeps down that base and inferior 'listing,' and elevates the higher and the nobler one, 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty,' because duty has become delight, and there is no desire in the new and higher nature for anything except that which God enjoins. The true freedom is when, by the direction of our will, we change 'must' into 'I delight to do Thy will.' So we are set free from the bondage and burden of a law that is external, and is not loved, and are brought into the liberty of, for dear love's sake, doing the will of the beloved.

'Myself shall to my darling be
Both law and impulse,'

says one of the poets about a far inferior matter. It is true in reference to the Christian life, and the 'liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free,'

But, then, in order freely to understand the sweep and the greatness of this perfect law of liberty, we must remember that the new life is implanted in us precisely in order that we may suppress, and, if need be, cast out and exorcise, that lower 'listing,' of which I have said that it is always ignoble and sometimes animal. For this freedom will bring with it the necessity for continual warfare against all that would limit and restrain it-namely, the passions and desires and inclinations of our baser or nobler, but godless, self. These are, as it were, deposed by the entrance of the new life. But it is a dangerous thing to keep dethroned and discrowned tyrants alive, and the best thing is to behead them, as well as to cast them from their throne. 'If ye, through the Spirit, do put to death the deeds' and inclinations and wills 'of the flesh, ye shall live'; and if you do not, they will live and will kill you. So the freedom of the new life is a militant freedom, and we have to fight to maintain it. As Burke said about the political realm, ‘the price of liberty is eternal vigilance,’ so we say about the new life of the Christian man-he is free only on condition that he keeps well under hatches the old tyrants, who are ever plotting and struggling to have dominion once again.

Still further, whilst this new life makes us free from the harshness of a law that can only proclaim duty, and also makes us free from our own baser selves, it makes us free from all human authority. The true foundation of the Christian democracy is that each individual soul has direct and immediate access to, and direct and real possession of, God, in his spirit and life. Therefore, in the measure in which we draw into ourselves the new life and the Spirit of God shall we be independent of men round us, and be able to say, ‘With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you or of man’s judgment.’ That new life ought to make men original, in the deep and true sense of the word, as drawing their conceptions of duty and their methods of life, not at second hand from other men, but straight from God Himself. If the Christian Church was fuller of that divine life than it is, it would be fuller of all varieties of Christian beauty and excellence, and all these would be the work of ‘that one and the selfsame Spirit dividing to every man severally as He will.’ If this congregation were indeed filled with the new life, there would be an exuberance of power, and a harmonious diversity of characteristics about it, and a burning up of the conventionalities of Christian profession such as we do not dream of to-day. ‘The wind bloweth where it listeth.’

II. Here we have this new life in its manifestation.

‘Thou hearest the sound,’ or, as the Word might literally be rendered, the ‘voice thereof,’ from the little whisper among the young soft leaves of the opening beeches in our woods to-day, up to the typhoon that spreads devastation over leagues of tropical ocean. That voice, now a murmur, now a roar, is the only manifestation of the unseen force that sweeps around us. And if you are a Christian man or woman your new life should be thus perceptible to others, in a variety of ways, no doubt, and in many degrees of force. You cannot show its roots; you are bound to show its fruits. You cannot lay bare your spirits, and say to the world, ‘Look! there is the presence of a divine germ in me,' but you can go about amongst men, and witness to the possession of it by the life that you live. There are a great many Christian people from whom, if you were to listen ever so intently, you would not hear a sough or a ripple. There is a dead calm; the 'rushing mighty wind' has died down; and there is nothing but a greasy swell upon the windless ocean. 'The wind bloweth,' and the 'sound' is heard. The wind ceases, and there is a hideous silence. And that is the condition of many a man and woman that has a name to live and is dead. Does anybody hear the whisper of that breath in your life, Christian man? It is not for me to answer the question; it is for you to ask it and answer it for yourselves.

And Christians should be in the world, as the very breath of life amidst stagnation. When the Christian Church first sprung into being it did come into that corrupt, pestilential march of ancient heathenism with healing on its wings, and like fresh air from the pure hills into some fever-stricken district. Wherever there has been a new outburst, in the experience of individuals and of churches, of that divine life, there has come, and the world has felt that there has come, a new force that breathes over the dry bones, and they live. Alas, alas! that so frequently the professing Christian Church has ceased to discharge its plain function, to breathe on the slain that they may live.

They are curing, or say they are curing, consumption nowadays, by taking the patient and keeping him in the open air, and letting the wind of heaven blow freely about him. That, and not shutting people in warm chambers, and coddling them with the prescriptions of social and political reformation, that is the cure for the world's diseases. Wherever the new life is vigorous in men, men will hear the sound thereof, and recognise that it comes from heaven.

III. Lastly, here we have the new life in its double secret.

I have been saying that it has a means of manifestation which all Christian people are bound to exemplify. But our Lord draws a broad distinction between that which can be manifested and that which cannot. As I said, you can show the leaves and the fruits; the roots are covered. 'Thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, nor whither it goeth.'

The origin of that new life is ‘hid with Christ in God.’ And so, since we are not dependent upon external things for the communication of the life, we should not be dependent upon them for its continuation and its nourishment, and we should realise that, if we are Christians, we are living in two regions, and, though as regards the surface life we belong to the things of time, as regards the deepest life, we belong to eternity. All the surface springs may run dry. What then? As long as there is a deep-seated fountain that comes welling up, the fields will be green, and we may laugh at famine and drought. If it be true that ‘our lives are hid with Christ in God,’ then it ought to be true that the nourishments, as well as the direction and impulse of them, are drawn from Him, and that we seek not so much for the abundance of the things that minister to the external as for the fulness of those that sustain the inward, the true life, the life of Christ in the soul.

The world does not know where that Christian life comes from. If you are a Christian, you ought to bear in your character a certain indefinable something that will suggest to the people round you that the secret power of your life is other than the power which moulds theirs. You may be naturalised, and you may speak fairly well the language of the country in which you are a sojourner, but there ought to be something in your accent which tells where you come from, and betrays the foreigner. We ought to move amongst men, having about us that which cannot be explained by what is enough to explain their lives. A Christian life should be the manifestation to the world of the supernatural.

They ‘know not whence it cometh nor whither it goeth.’ No; that new life in its feeblest infancy, and before it speaks, if I may so say, is, by its very existence, a prophet, and declares that there must be, beyond this ‘bank and shoal of time,’ a region to which it is native, and in which it may grow to maturity. You will find in your greenhouses exotics that stand there, after all your pains and coals, stunted, and seeming to sigh for the tropical heat which is their home. The earnest of our inheritance, the first-fruits of the Spirit, the Christian life which originated in, and is sustained by, the flowing of the divine life into us, demands that, somehow or other, the stunted plant should be lifted and removed into that ‘higher house where these are planted’-and what shall be the spread of its branches, and the lustre of its leaves, and what the gorgeousness of its blossoms, and what the perennial sweetness of its fruits then and there, ‘it doth not yet appear.’

They ‘know not whither it goeth.’ And even those who themselves possess it know not, nor shall know, through the ages of a progressive approximation to the ever-approached and never-attained perfection. ‘This spake He of the Holy Ghost, which they that believe on Him should receive.’ Trust Christ, and ‘the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus shall make you free from the law of sin and death.’

19)John 3:14

John

THE BRAZEN SERPENT

Joh. 3:14.

This is the second of the instances in this Gospel in which our Lord lays His hand upon an institution or incident of the Old Testament, as shadowing forth some aspect of His work. In the first of these instances, under the image of the ladder that Jacob saw, our Lord presented Himself as the sole medium of communication between heaven and earth; here He goes a step further into the heart of His work, and under the image, very eloquent to the Pharisee to whom He was speaking, of the brazen serpent lifted up on the pole in the desert, proclaims Himself as the medium of healing and of life to a poisoned world.

Now, Nicodemus has a great many followers to-day. He took up a position which many take up. He recognised Christ as a Teacher, and was willing to accord to the almost unknown young man from Galilee the coveted title of ‘Rabbi.’ He came to Him with a little touch of condescension, and evidently thought that for him, a ruler of the Jews, a member of the upper and educated classes, to be willing to speak of Jesus as a Teacher, was an endorsement that the young aspirant might be gratified to receive. ‘Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher sent from God’-but he stopped there. He is not the only one who compliments Jesus Christ, while he degrades Him from His unique position. Now, to this inadequate conception of our Lord’s

Person and work, Christ opposed the solemn insistence on the incapacity of human nature as it is, to enter into communion with, and submission to, God. And then He passes on to speak-in precise parallelism with the position that He took up when He likened Himself to the Ladder of Jacob's vision-of Himself as being the Son of Man that came down from Heaven, and therefore is able to reveal heavenly things. In my text He further unveils in symbol the mystery and dignity of His Person and of His work, whilst He speaks of a mysterious lifting up of this Son of Man who came down from heaven. These are the truths that the conception of Christ as a great Teacher needs for its completion; the contrariety of human nature with the divine will, the Incarnation of the Son of God, the Crucifixion of the Incarnate Son. And so we have here three points, to which I desire to turn, as setting forth the conception of His own work which Jesus Christ presented as completing the conception of it, to which Nicodemus had attained.

I. There is, first, the lifting up of the Son of Man.

Now, of course, the sole purpose of setting that brazen serpent on the pole was to render it conspicuous, and all that Nicodemus could then understand by the symbol was that, in some unknown way, this heaven-descended Son of Man should be set forth before Israel and the world as being the Healer of all their diseases. But we are wiser, after the event, than the ruler of the Jews could be at the threshold of Christ's ministry. We have also to remember that this is not the only occasion, though it is the first, on which our Lord used this very significant expression. For twice over in this Gospel we find it upon His lips-once when, addressing the unbelieving multitude, He says 'When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am He'; and once when in soliloquy, close on Calvary, He says, as the vision of a world flocking to Him rises before Him on occasion of the wish of a few Greek proselytes to see Him, 'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.' We do not need, though we have, the Evangelist's commentary, 'this He spake signifying what death He should die.'

So, if we accept the historical veracity of this Gospel, we here perceive Jesus Christ, at the very beginning of His career, and before the dispositions of the nation towards Him had developed themselves in action, discerning its end, and seeing, gaunt and grim before Him, the Cross that was lifted up on Calvary. Enthusiasts and philanthropists and apostles of all sorts, in the regions of science and beneficence and morals and religion, begin their career with trusting that their ‘brethren should have understood’ that God was speaking through them. But no illusion of that sort, according to these Evangelists, drew Jesus Christ out of His seclusion at Nazareth and impelled Him on His career. From the beginning He knew that the Cross was to be the end. That Cross was not to Him a necessity, accepted as the price of faithfulness in doing His work, so that His attitude was, ‘I will speak what is in Me, though I die for it,’ but it was to Him the very heart of the work which He came to do. Therefore, after He had said to the ruler of the Jews that the Son of Man, as descended from Heaven, was able to speak of heavenly things, He added the deeper necessity, He ‘must be lifted up.’ Where lay the ‘must’? In the requirement of the work which He had set Himself to do. Beneath this great saying there lies a pathetic, stern, true conception of the condition of human nature. That desert encampment, with the poisoned men dying on every hand, is the emblem under which Jesus Christ, the gentlest and the sweetest soul that ever lived, looked out upon humanity. And it was because the facts of human nature called for something far more than a teacher that He said ‘the Son of Man must be lifted up.’ For what they needed, and what He had set Himself to bring, could only be brought by One who yielded Himself up for the sins of the whole world.

But that ‘must,’ which thus arose from the requirements of the task that He had set before Him, had its source in His own heart; it was no necessity imposed upon Him from without. True, it was a necessity laid on Him by filial obedience, but also true, it was the necessity accepted by Him in pursuance of the impulse of His own heart. He must die because He must save, and He must save because He loved. So He was not nailed to the Cross by the nails and hammers of the Roman soldiers, and the taunt that was flung at Him as He hung there had a deeper meaning, as scoffs thrown at Him and His cause ordinarily have, than the scoffers understood: ‘He saved others,’ and therefore ‘Himself He cannot save.’

So here we have Christ accepting, as well as discerning, the Cross. And we have more than that. We have Christ looking at the Cross as being, not humiliation, but exaltation. ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up.’ And what does that mean? It means the same thing that He said when, near the end, He declared, ‘The hour is come that the Son of Man should be glorified.’ We are accustomed to speak-and we speak rightly-of His death as being the lowest point of the humiliation which was inherent in the very fact of His humanity. He condescended to be born; He stooped yet more to die. But whilst that is true, the other side is also true-that in the Cross Christ is lifted up, and that it is His Throne. For what see we there? The highest exhibition, the tenderest revelation, of His perfect love. And what see we there besides? The supreme manifestation of the highest power.

“Twas great to speak a world from nought,
‘Tis greater to redeem.’

To save humanity, to make it possible that men should receive that second birth, and should enter into the Kingdom of God-that was a greater work, because a work not only of creation, but of restoration, than it was to send forth the stars on their courses and to ‘preserve’ the ancient heavens ‘from wrong.’ There is a revelation of divine might when we ‘lift up our eyes on high,’ and see how, ‘because He is great in power, not one faileth.’ But there is a mightier revelation of divine power when we see how, from amidst the ruins of humanity, He can restore the divine image, and piece together, as it were, without sign of flaw or crack or one fragment wanting, the fair image that was shattered into fragments by the blow of Sin’s heavy mace. Power in its highest operation, power in its tenderest efficacy, power in its widest sweep, are set forth on the Cross of Christ, and that weak Man hanging there, dying in the dark, is ‘the power of God’ as well as ‘the wisdom of God.’ The Cross is Christ’s Throne, but it is His sovereign manifestation of love and power only if it is what, as I believe He told us it was, and what His servants from His lips caught the interpretation of it as being, the death for the sins of the sin-stricken world. Unless we can believe that, when He died, He died for us, I know not why Christ’s death should appeal to our love. But if we recognise-as I pray that we all may recognise-that our deep need for something far more than Teacher or Pattern has been met in that great ‘one Sacrifice for sins for ever,’ then the magnetism of the Cross begins to tell, and we understand what He meant when He said, ‘I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.’ Brethren, the Cross is His Throne, from which He rules the world, and if you strike His sacrifice for sins out of your conception of His work, you have robbed Him of sovereignty, and taken out of His hand the sceptre by which He governs the hearts and wills of rebellious and restored men.

II. Notice, again, how we have here the look at the uplifted Son of Man.

I do not need to paint for you what your own imaginations can sufficiently paint for yourselves-the scene in the wilderness where the dying men from the very outskirts of the camp could turn a filmy eye to the brazen serpent hanging in their midst. That look is the symbol of what we need, in order that the life-giving power of Christ should enter into our death. There is no better description of the act of Christian faith than that picture of the dying Israelite turning his languid eye to the symbol of healing and life. That trust which Jesus emphasises here in 'whosoever believeth on Him,' He opposes very emphatically to Nicodemus's confession, 'We know that Thou art a Teacher.' We know-you have to go a step further, Nicodemus! 'We know'; well and good, but are you included in 'whosoever believeth'? Faith is an advance on credence. There is an intellectual side to it, but its essence is what is the essence of trust always, the act of the will throwing itself on that which is discerned to be trustworthy. You know that a given man is reliable-that is not relying on him. You have to go a step further. And so, dear brethren, you may believe thirty-nine or thirty-nine thousand Articles with an unfaltering credence, and you may be as far away from faith as if you did not believe one of them. There may be a perfect belief and an absolute want of faith. And on the other hand, blessed be God! there may be a real and an operative trust with a very imperfect or mistaken creed. The wild flowers on the rock bloom fair and bright, though they have scarcely any soil in which to strike their roots, and the plants in the most fertile garden may fail to produce flowers and seed. So trust and credence are not always of the same magnitude.

This trust is no arbitrary condition. The Israelite was bid to turn to the brazen serpent. There was no connection between his look and his healing, except in so far as the symbol was a help to, and looking at it was a test of, his faith in the healing power of God. But it is no arbitrary appointment, as many people often think it is, which connects inseparably together the look of faith and the eternal life that Christ gives. For seeing that salvation is no mere external gift of shutting up some outward Hell and opening the door to some outward Heaven, but is a state of heart and mind, of relation to God, the only way by which that salvation can come into a man’s heart is that he, knowing his need of it, shall trust Christ, and through Him the new life will flow into his heart. Faith is trust, and trust is the stretching out of the hand to take the precious gift, the opening of the heart for the influx of the grace, the eating of the bread, the drinking of the water, of life.

It is the only possible condition. God forbid that I should even seem to depreciate other forms of healing men’s evils and redressing men’s wrongs, and diminishing the sorrows of humanity! We welcome them all; but education, art, culture, refinement, improved environment, bettered social and political conditions, whilst they do a great deal, do not go down to the bottom of the necessity. And after you have built your colleges and art museums and stately pleasure-houses, and set every man in an environment that is suited to develop him, you will find out what surely the world might have found out already, that, as in some stately palace built in the Campagna, the malaria is in the air, and steals in at the windows, and infects all the inhabitants. Thank God for all these other things! but you cannot heal a man who has poison in his veins by administering cosmetics, and you cannot put out Vesuvius with a jugful of water. If the camp is to be healed, the Christ must be lifted up.

III. And now, lastly, here we have the life that comes with a look at the lifted-up Son of Man.

Those of you who are using the Revised Version will see that there is a little change made here, partly by the exclusion of a clause and partly by changing the order of the words. The alteration is not only nearer the original text, but brings out a striking thought. It reads that ‘whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life.’ Now, it is far too late a period of my discourse to enlarge upon all that these great words would suggest to us, but let me just, in a sentence or two, mark the salient points.

‘Eternal life’; do not bring that down to the narrow and inadequate conception of unending existence. It involves that, but it means a great deal more. It means a life of such a sort as is worth calling life, which is a life in union with God, and therefore full of blessedness, full of purity, full of satisfaction, full of desire and aspiration, and all these with the stamp of unendingness deeply impressed upon them. And that is what comes to us through the look. Not only is the process of dying arrested, but there is substituted for it a new process of growing possession of a new life. You ‘must be born again,’ Christ had been saying to Nicodemus. The change that passes upon a man when once he has anchored his trust on Jesus Christ, the uplifted Son of Man, is so profound that it is nothing else than a new birth, and a new life comes into his veins untainted by the poison, and with no proclivity to death.

‘May have eternal life’-now, here, on the instant. That eternal life is no future gift to be bestowed upon mortal men when they have passed through the agony of death, but it is a gift which comes to us here, and may come to any man on the instant of his looking to Jesus Christ.

‘May in Him have eternal life’-union with Christ by faith, that profound incorporation-if I may use the word-into Him, which the New Testament sets forth in all sorts of aspects as the very foundation of the blessings of Christianity; that union is the condition of eternal life. So, dear brethren, we all need that the poison shall be cast out of our veins. We all need that the tendency downwards to a condition which can only be described as death may be arrested, and the motion reversed. We all need that our knowledge shall be vitalised into faith. We all need that the past shall be forgiven, and the power of sin upon us in the present shall be cancelled. ‘The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin,’ because it was shed for the remission of the sins of the many, and is transfused, an untainted principle of life, into our veins. What Jesus said to Nicodemus by night in that quiet chamber in Jerusalem, what He said in effect and act upon the Cross, when uplifted there, is what He says to each of us from the Throne where He is now lifted up: ‘Whosoever believeth shall in Me have eternal life.’ Take Him at His word, and you will find that it is true.

John

CHRIST’S MUSTS

Joh. 3:14.

I have chosen this text for the sake of one word in it, that solemn ‘must’ which was so often on our Lord’s lips. I have no purpose of dealing with the remainder of this clause, nor indeed with it at all, except as one instance of His use of the expression. But I have felt it might he interesting, and might set old truths in a brighter light, if we gather together the instances in which Christ speaks of the great necessity which dominated His life, and shaped even small acts.

The expression is most frequently used in reference to the Passion and Resurrection. There are many instances in the Gospels, in which He speaks of that must. The first of these is that of my text. Then there is another class, of which His word to His mother when a twelve-year-old child may be taken as a type: ‘Wist ye not that I must be about My Father’s business?’ where the mysterious consciousness of a special relation to God in the child’s heart drew Him to the Temple and to His Father’s work. Other similar instances are those in which He responded to the multitude when they wanted to keep Him to themselves: ‘I must preach in other cities also’; or as when He said, ‘I must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day.’

Yet another aspect of the same necessity is presented when, looking far beyond the earthly work and suffering, He discerned the future triumph which was to be the issue of these, and said, ‘Other sheep I have . . . them also I must bring.’

And yet another is in reference to a very small matter: His selection of a place for a few hours’ rest on His last fateful journey to Jerusalem, when He said, ‘Zaccheus, . . . to-day I must abide at thy house.’

Now, if we put these instances together, we shall get some precious glimpses into our Lord’s heart, and His view of life.

I. Here we see Christ recognising and accepting the necessity for His death.

My text, if we accept John’s Gospel, contributes an altogether new element to our conception of our Lord as announcing His death. For the other three Gospels lay emphasis on it as being part of His teaching, especially during the later stage of His ministry. But it does not follow that He began to think about it or to see it, when He began to speak about it. There are reasons for the earlier comparative reticence, and there is no ground for the conclusion that then first began to dawn upon a disappointed enthusiast the grim reality that His work was not going to prosper, and that martyrdom was necessary. That is a notion that has been frequently upheld of late years, but to me it seems altogether incongruous with the facts of the case. And, if John's Gospel is a true record, that theory is shivered against this text, which represents Him at the very beginning of His career-the time when, according to that other theory, He was full of the usual buoyant and baseless anticipations of a reformer commencing His course-as telling Nicodemus, 'Even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.' In like manner, in the previous chapter of this same Gospel, we have the significant though enigmatical utterance: 'Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up'; with the Evangelist's authoritative comment: 'He spake of the Temple of His body.' So, from the beginning of His career, the end was clear before Him.

And why must He go to the Cross? Not merely, as the other Evangelists put it, in order that 'it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the prophets.' It was not that Jesus must die because the prophets had said that Messiah should, but that the prophets had said that Messiah should because Jesus must. There was a far deeper necessity than the fulfilment of any prophetic utterance, even the necessity which shaped that utterance. The work of Jesus Christ could not be done unless He died. He could not be the Saviour of the world unless He was the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

We cannot see all the grounds of that solemn imperative, but this we can see, that it was because of the requirements of the divine righteousness, and because of the necessities of sinful men. And so Christ's was no martyr's death, who had to die as the penalty of the faithful discharge of His duty. It was not the penalty that He paid for doing His work, but it was the work itself. Not that gracious life, nor 'the loveliness of perfect deeds,' nor His words of sweet wisdom, nor His acts of transcendent power, equalled only by the pity that moved the power, completed His task, but He 'came to give His life a ransom for many.'

‘Must’ is a hard word. It may express an unwelcome necessity. Was this necessity unwelcome? When He said, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up,’ was He shrinking, or reluctantly submitting? Ah, no! He must die because He would save, and He would save because He did love. His filial obedience to God coincided with His pity for men: and not merely in obedience to the requirements of the divine righteousness, but in compassion for the necessities of sinners, necessity was laid upon Him.

Oh, brethren! nothing held Christ to the Cross but His own desire to save us. Neither priests nor Romans carried Him thither. What fastened Him to it was not the nails driven by rude hands. And the reason why He did not, as the taunters bade Him do, come down from it, was neither a physical nor a moral necessity unwelcome to Himself, but the yielding of His own will to do all which was needed for man’s salvation.

This sacrifice was bound to the altar by the cords of love. We have heard of martyrs who have refused to be tied to the stake, and have kept themselves motionless in the centre of the fierce flames by the force of their wills. Jesus Christ fastened Himself to the Cross and died because He would.

And, oh! if we think of that sweet, serene life as having clear before it from the very first steps that grim end, how infinitely it gains in pathetic beauty and in heart-touchingness! What wonderful self-abnegation! How he was at leisure from Himself, with a heart of pity for every sorrow, and loins girt for all service, though during all His life the Cross closed the vista! Think that human shrinking was felt by Him, think that it was so held back that His purpose never faltered, think that each of us may say, ‘He must die because He would save me’; and then ask, ‘What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits toward me?’

II. In a second class of these utterances, we see Christ impelled by filial obedience and the consciousness of His mission.

‘Wist ye not that I must be about My Father’s business?’ That was a strange utterance for a boy of twelve. It seems to negative the supposition that what is called the ‘Messianic consciousness’ dawned upon Jesus Christ first after His baptism and the descent of the Spirit. But however that may be, it and the similar passages to which I have already referred, bearing upon His discharge of His work prior to His death, teach that the necessity was an inward necessity springing from His consciousness of Sonship, and His recognition of the work that He had to do. And so He is our great Example of spontaneous obedience, which does violence to itself if it does not obey. It was instinct that sent the boy into the Temple. Where should a Son be but in His Father's house? How could He not be doing His Father's business?

Thus He stands before us, the pattern for the only obedience that is worth calling so, the obedience which would be pained and ill at ease unless it were doing the work of God. Religion is meant to make it a second nature, or, as I have ventured to call it, an instinct-a spontaneous, uncalculating, irrepressible desire-to be in fellowship with God, and to be doing His will. That is the meaning of our Christianity. There is no obedience in reluctant obedience; forced service is slavery, not service. Christianity is given for the specific purpose that it may bring us so into touch with Jesus Christ as that the mind which was in Him may be in us; and that we too may be able to say, with a kind of wonder that people should have expected to find us in any other place, or doing anything else, 'Wist ye not that because I am a Son, I must be about my Father's business?' As certainly as the sunflower follows the sun, so certainly will a man animated by the mind that was in Jesus Christ, like Him find his very life's breath in doing the Father's will.

So then, brethren, what about our grudging service? What about our reluctant obedience? What about the widespread mistake that religion prohibits wished-for things and enforces unwelcome duties? If my Christianity does not make me recoil from what it forbids, and spring eagerly to what it commends, my Christianity is of very little use. If when in the Temple we are like idle boys in school, always casting glances at the clock and the door, and wishing ourselves outside, we may just as well be out as in. Glad obedience is true obedience. Only he who can say, 'Thy law is within my heart, and I do Thy will because I love Thee, and cannot but do as Thou desirest,' has found the joy possible to a Christian life. It is not 'harsh and crabbed,' as those that look upon it from the outside may 'suppose,' but musical and full of sweetness. There is nothing more blessed than when 'I choose' covers exactly the same ground as 'I ought.' And when duty is delight, delight will never become disgust, nor joy pass away.

III. We see, in yet another use of this great ‘must,’ Christ anticipating His future triumph.

‘Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and there shall be one flock and one Shepherd.’ Striking as these words are in themselves, they are still more striking when we notice their connection; for they follow immediately upon His utterance about laying down His life for the sheep. So, then, this was a work beyond the Cross, and whatever it was, it was to be done after He had died.

I need not point out to you how far afield Christ’s vision goes out into the dim, waste places, where on the dark mountains the straying sheep are torn and frightened and starving. I need not dwell upon how far ahead in the future His glance travels, or how magnificent and how rebuking to our petty narrowness this great word is. ‘There shall be one flock’ [not fold]; and they shall be one, not because they are within the bounds of any visible ‘fold,’ but because they are gathered round the one Shepherd, and in their common relation to Him are knit together in unity.

But what sort of a Man is this who considers that His widest work is to be done by Him after He is dead? ‘Them also I must bring.’ Thou? how? when? Surely such words as these, side by side with a clear prevision of the death that was so soon to come, are either meaningless or the utterance of an arrogance bordering on insanity, or they anticipate what an Evangelist declares did take place-that the Lord was ‘taken up into heaven and sat at the right hand of God,’ whilst His servants ‘went everywhere preaching the Word, the Lord also working with them and confirming the Word’ with the signs He wrought.

‘Them also I must bring.’ That is not merely a necessity rooted in the nature of God and the wants of men. It is not merely a necessity springing from Christ’s filial obedience and sense of a mission; but it is a ‘must’ of destiny, a ‘must’ which recognises the sure results of His passion; a ‘must’ which implies the power of the Cross to be the reconciliation of the world. And so for all pessimistic thoughts to-day, or at any time, and when Christian men’s hearts may be trembling for the Ark of God-although, perhaps, there may be little reason for the tremor-and in the face of all blatant antagonisms and of proud Goliaths despising the ‘foolishness of preaching,’ we fall back upon

Christ's great 'must.' It is written in the councils of Heaven more unchangeably than the heavens; it is guaranteed by the power of the Cross; it is certain, by the eternal life of the crucified Saviour, that He will one day be the King of humanity, and must bring His wandering sheep to couch in peace, one flock round one Shepherd.

IV. Lastly, we have Christ applying the greatest principle to the smallest duty.

'Zaccheus! make haste and come down; to-day I must abide in thy house.' Why must He? Because Zaccheus was to be saved, and was worth saving. What was the 'must'? To stop for an hour or two on His road to the Cross. So He teaches us that in a life penetrated by the thought of the divine will, which we gladly obey, there are no things too great, and none too trivial, to be brought under the dominion of that law, and to be regulated by that divine necessity. Obedience is obedience, whether in large things or in small. There is no scale of magnitude applicable to the distinction between God's will and that which is not God's will. Gravitation rules the motes that dance in the sunshine as well as the mass of Jupiter. A triangle with its apex in the sun, and its base beyond the solar system, has the same properties and comes under the same laws as one that a schoolboy scrawls upon his slate. God's truth is not too great to rule the smallest duties. The star in the East was a guide to the humble house at Bethlehem, and there are starry truths high in the heavens that avail for our guidance in the smallest acts of life.

So, brethren, bring your doings under that all-embracing law of duty-duty, which is the heathen expression for the will of God. There are great regions of life in which lower necessities have play. Circumstances, our past, bias and temper, relationship, friendship, civic duty, and the like-all these bring their necessities; but let us think of them all as being, what indeed they are, manifestations to us of the will of our Father. There are great tracts of life in which either of two courses may be right, and we are left to the decision of choice rather than of duty; but high above all these, let us see towering that divine necessity. It is a daily struggle to bring 'I will' to coincide with 'I ought'; and there is only one adequate and always powerful way of securing that coincidence, and that is to keep close to Jesus Christ and to drink in His spirit. Then, when duty and delight are conterminous, 'the rough places will be plain, and the crooked things straight, and every mountain shall be brought low, and every valley shall be exalted,' and life will be blessed, and service will be freedom. Joy and liberty and power and peace will fill our hearts when this is the law of our being; 'All that the Lord hath spoken, that must I do.'

20)John 3:16

John

THE LAKE AND THE RIVER

Joh. 3:16.

I venture to say that my text shows us a lake, a river, a pitcher, and a draught. 'God so loved the world'-that is the lake. A lake makes a river for itself-'God so loved the world that He gave His . . . Son.' But the river does not quench any one's thirst unless he has something to lift the water with: 'God so loved the world that He gave His . . . Son, that whosoever believeth on Him.' Last comes the draught: 'shall not perish, but have everlasting life.'

I. The great lake, God's love.

Before Jesus Christ came into this world no one ever dreamt of saying 'God loves.' Some of the Old Testament psalmists had glimpses of that truth and came pretty near expressing it. But among all the 'gods many and lords many,' there were lustful gods and beautiful gods, and idle gods, and fighting gods and peaceful gods: but not one of whom worshippers said, 'He loves.' Once it was a new and almost incredible message, but we have grown accustomed to it, and it is not strange any more to us. But if we would try to think of what it means, the whole truth would flash up into fresh newness, and all the miseries and sorrows and perplexities of our lives would drift away down the wind, and we should be no more troubled with them. 'God loves' is the greatest thing that can be said by lips.

'God . . . loved the world.' Now when we speak of loving a number of individuals-the broader the stream, the shallower it is, is it not? The most intense patriot in England does not love her one ten-thousandth part as well as he loves his own little girl. When we think or feel anything about a great multitude of people, it is like looking at a forest. We do not see the trees, we see the whole wood. But that is not how God loves the world. Suppose I said that I loved the people in India, I should not mean by that that I had any feeling about any individual soul of all those dusky millions, but only that I massed them all together; or made what people call a generalisation of them. But that is not the way in which God loves. He loves all because He loves each. And when we say, 'God so loved the world,' we have to break up the mass into its atoms, and to think of each atom as being an object of His love. We all stand out in God's love just as we should do to one another's eyes, if we were on the top of a mountain-ridge with a clear sunset sky behind us. Each little black dot of the long procession would be separately visible. And we all stand out like that, every man of us isolated, and getting as much of the love of God as if there was not another creature in the whole universe but God and ourselves. Have you ever realised that when we say, 'He loved the world,' that really means, as far as each of us is concerned, He loves me? And just as the whole beams of the sun come pouring down into every eye of the crowd that is looking up to it, so the whole love of God pours down, not upon a multitude, an abstraction, a community, but upon every single soul that makes up that community. He loves us all because He loves us each. We shall never get all the good of that thought until we translate it, and lay it upon our hearts. It is all very well to say, 'Ah yes! God is love,' and it is all very well to say He loves 'the world.' But I will tell you what is a great deal better-to say-what Paul said-'Who loved me and gave Himself for me.'

Now, there is one other suggestion that I would make to you before I go on, and that is that all through the New Testament, but especially in John's Gospel, 'the world' does not only mean men, but sinful men, men separated from God. And the great and blessed truth taught here is that, however I may drag myself away from God, I cannot drive Him away from me, and that however little I may care for Him, or love Him, or think about Him, it does not make one hairs-breadth of difference as to the fact that He loves me. I know, of course, that if a man does not love Him back again, God's love has to take shapes that it would not otherwise take, which may be extremely inconvenient for the man. But though the shape may alter, must alter, the fact remains; and every sinful soul on the earth, including Judas Iscariot-who is said to head the list of crimes-has God's love resting upon him.

II. The river.

Now, to go back to my metaphor, the lake makes a river. 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.'

So then, it was not Christ's death that turned God from hating and being angry, but it was God's love that appointed Christ's death. If you will only remember that, a great many of the shallow and popular objections to the great doctrine of the Atonement disappear at once. 'God so loved . . . that He gave.' But some people say that when we preach that Jesus Christ died for our sins, that God's wrath might not fall upon men, our teaching is immoral, because it means 'Christ came, and so God loved.' It is the other way about, friend. 'God so loved . . . that He gave.'

But now let me carry you back to the Old Testament. Do you remember the story of the father taking his boy who carried the bundle of wood and the fire, and tramping over the mountains till they reached the place where the sacrifice was to be offered? Do you remember the boy's question that brings tears quickly to the reader's eyes: 'Here is the wood, and here is the fire, where is the lamb'? Do you not think it would be hard for the father to steady his voice and say, 'My son, God will provide the lamb'? And do you remember the end of that story? 'The Angel of the Lord said unto Abraham, Because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me, therefore blessing I will bless thee,' etc. Remember that one of the Apostles said, using the very same word that is used in Genesis as to Abraham's giving up his son to God, 'He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up to the death for us all.' Does not that point to a mysterious parallel? Somehow or other-we have no right to attempt to say how-somehow or other, God not only sent His Son, as it is said in the next verse to my text, but far more tenderly, wonderfully, pathetically, God gave-gave up His Son, and the sacrifice was enhanced, because it was His only begotten Son.

Ah! dear brethren, do not let us be afraid of following out all that is included in that great word, ‘God . . . loved the world.’ For there is no love which does not delight in giving, and there is no love that does not delight in depriving itself, in some fashion, of what it gives. And I, for my part, believe that Paul’s words are to be taken in all their blessed depth and wonderfulness of meaning when he says, ‘He gave up’-as well as gave-’Him to the death for us all.’

And now, do you not think that we are able in some measure to estimate the greatness of that little word ‘so’? ‘God so loved’-so deeply, so holily, so perfectly-that He ‘gave His only begotten Son’; and the gift of that Son is, as it were, the river by which the love of God comes to every soul in the world.

Now there are a great many people who would like to put the middle part of this great text of ours into a parenthesis. They say that we should bring the first words and the last words of this text together, and never mind all that lies between. People who do not like the doctrine of the Cross would say, ‘God so loved the world that He gave . . . everlasting life’; and there an end. ‘If there is a God, and if He loves the world, why cannot He save the world without more ado? There is no need for these interposed clauses. God so loved the world that everybody will go to heaven’-that is the gospel of a great many of you; and it is the gospel of a great many wise and learned people. But it is not John’s Gospel, and it is not Christ’s Gospel. The beginning and the end of the text cannot be buckled up together in that rough-and-ready fashion. They have to be linked by a chain; and there are two links in the chain: God forges the one, and we have to forge the other. ‘God so loved the world that He gave’-then He has done His work. ‘That whosoever believeth’-that is your work. And it is in vain that God forges His link, unless you will forge yours and link it up to His. ‘God so loved the world,’ that is step number one in the process; ‘that He gave,’ that is step number two; and then there comes another ‘that’-’that whosoever believeth,’ that is step number three; and they are all needed before you come to number four, which is the landing-place and not a step-’should not perish, but have everlasting life.’

III. The pitcher.

I come to what I called the pitcher, with which we draw the water for our own use-'that whosoever believeth.' You perhaps say, 'Yes, I believe. I accept every word of the Gospel, I quite believe that Jesus Christ died, as a matter of history; and I quite believe that He died for men's sins.' And what then? Is that what Jesus Christ meant by believing? To believe about Him is not to believe on Him; and unless you believe on Him you will get no good out of Him. There is the lake, and the river must flow past the shanties in the clearing in the forest, if the men there are to drink. But it may flow past their doors, as broad as the Mississippi, and as deep as the ocean; but they will perish with thirst, unless they dip in their hands, like Gideon's men, and carry the water to their own lips. Dear friend, what you have to do-and your soul's salvation, and your peace and joy and nobleness in this life and in the next depend absolutely upon it-is simply to trust in Jesus Christ and His death for your sins.

I sometimes wish we had never heard that word 'faith.' For as soon as we begin to talk about 'faith,' people begin to think that we are away up in some theological region far above everyday life. Suppose we try to bring it down a little nearer to our businesses and bosoms, and instead of using a word that is kept sacred for employment in religious matters, and saying 'faith,' we say 'trust.' That is what you give to your wives and husbands, is it not? And that is exactly what you have to give to Jesus Christ, simply to lay hold of Him as a man lays hold of the heart that loves him, and leans his whole weight upon it. Lean hard on Him, hang on Him, or, to take the other metaphor that is one of the Old Testament words for trust, 'flee for refuge' to Him. Fancy a man with the avenger of blood at his back, and the point of the pursuer's spear almost pricking his spine-don't you think he would make for the City of Refuge with some speed? That is what you have to do. He that believeth, and by trust lays hold of the Hand that holds him up, will never fall; and he that does not lay hold of that Hand will never stand, to say nothing of rising. And so by these two links God's love of the world is connected with the salvation of the world.

IV. The draught.

Finally, we have here the draught of living water. Did you ever think why our text puts 'should not perish' first? Is it not because, unless we put our trust in Him, we shall certainly perish, and because, therefore, that certainty of perishing must be averted before we can have ‘everlasting life’?

Now I am not going to enlarge on these two solemn expressions, ‘perishing’ and ‘everlasting life.’ I only say this: men do not need to wait until they die before they ‘perish.’ There are men and women here now who are dead-dead while they live, and when they come to die, the perishing, which is condemnation and ruin, will only be the making visible, in another condition of life, of what is the fact to-day. Dear brethren, you do not need to die in order to perish in your sins, and, blessed be God, you can have everlasting life before you die. You can have it now, and there is only one way to have it, and that is to lay hold of Him who is the Life. And when you have Jesus Christ in your heart, whom you will be sure to have if you trust Him, then you will have life-life eternal, here and now, and death will only make manifest the eternal life which you had while you were alive here, and will perfect it in fashions that we do not yet know anything about.

Only remember, as I have been trying to show you, the order that runs through this text. Remember the order of these last words, and that we must first of all be delivered from eternal and utter death, before we can be invested with the eternal and absolute life.

Now, dear brethren, I dare say I have never spoken to the great majority of you before; it is quite possible I may never speak to any of you again. I have asked God to help me to speak so as that souls should be drawn to the Saviour. And I beseech you now, as my last word, that you would listen, not to me, but to Him. For it is He that says to us, ‘God so loved the world, that He gave His Son, that whosoever’-’whosoever,’ a blank cheque, like the M. or N. of the Prayer-book, or the A. B. of a schedule; you can put your own name in it-’that whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish, but have’-here, now-’everlasting life.’

21)John 4:6

John

THE WEARIED CHRIST

Joh. 4:6, Joh. 4:32.

Two pictures result from these two verses, each striking in itself, and gaining additional emphasis by the contrast. It was during a long hot day's march that the tired band of pedestrians turned into the fertile valley. There, whilst the disciples went into the little hill-village to purchase, if they could, some food from the despised inhabitants, Jesus, apparently too exhausted to accompany them, 'sat thus on the well.' That little word thus seems to have a force difficult to reproduce in English. It is apparently intended to enhance the idea of utter weariness, either because the word 'wearied' is in thought to be supplied, 'sat, being thus wearied, on the well'; or because it conveys the notion which might be expressed by our 'just as He was'; as a tired man flings Himself down anywhere and anyhow, without any kind of preparation beforehand, and not much caring where it is that he rests.

Thus, utterly worn out, Jesus Christ sits on the well, whilst the western sun lengthens out the shadows on the plain. The disciples come back, and what a change they find. Hunger gone, exhaustion ended, fresh vigour in their wearied Master. What had made the difference? The woman's repentance and joy. And He unveils the secret of His reinvigoration when He says, 'I have meat to eat that ye know not of'-the hidden manna. 'My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work.'

Now, I think if we take just three points of view, we shall gain the lessons of this remarkable contrast. Note, then, the wearied Christ; the devoted Christ; the reinvigorated Christ.

I. The wearied Christ.

How precious it is to us that this Gospel, which has the loftiest things to say about the manifest divinity of our Lord, and the glory that dwelt in Him, is always careful to emphasise also the manifest limitations and weaknesses of the Manhood. John never forgets either term of his great sentence in which all the gospel is condensed, 'the Word became flesh.' Ever he shows us 'the Word'; ever 'the flesh.' Thus it is he only who records the saying on the Cross, 'I thirst.' It is he who tells us how Jesus Christ, not merely for the sake of getting a convenient opening of a conversation, or to conciliate prejudices, but because He needed what He asked, said to the woman of

Samaria, ‘Give Me to drink.’ So the weariness of the Master stands forth for us as pathetic proof that it was no shadowy investiture with an apparent Manhood to which He stooped, but a real participation in our limitations and weaknesses, so that work to Him was fatigue, even though in Him dwelt the manifest glory of that divine nature which ‘fainteth not, neither is weary.’

Not only does this pathetic incident teach us for our firmer faith, and more sympathetic and closer apprehension, the reality of the Manhood of Jesus Christ, but it supplies likewise some imperfect measure of His love, and reveals to us one condition of His power. Ah! if He had not Himself known weariness He never could have said, ‘Come unto Me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’ It was because Himself ‘took our infirmities,’ and amongst these the weakness of tired muscles and exhausted frame, that ‘He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might He increaseth strength.’ The Creator must have no share in the infirmities of the creature. It must be His unwearied power that calls them all by their names; and because He is great in might ‘not one’ of the creatures of His hand can ‘fail.’ But the Redeemer must participate in that from which He redeems; and the condition of His strength being ‘made perfect in our weakness’ is that our weakness shall have cast a shadow upon the glory of His strength. The measure of His love is seen in that, long before Calvary, He entered into the humiliation and sufferings and sorrows of humanity; a condition of His power is seen in that, forasmuch as the ‘children were partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same,’ not only that ‘through death He might deliver’ from death, but that in life He might redeem from the ills and sorrows of life.

Nor does that exhausted Figure, reclining on Jacob’s Well, preach to us only what He was. It proclaims to us likewise what we should be. For if His work was carried on to the edge of His capacity, and if He shrank not from service because it involved toil, what about the professing followers of Jesus Christ, who think that they are exempted from any form of service because they can plead that it will weary them? What about those who say that they tread in His footsteps, and have never known what it was to yield up one comfort, one moment of leisure, one thrill of enjoyment, or to encounter one sacrifice, one act of self-denial, one aching of weariness for the sake of the Lord who bore all for them? The wearied Christ proclaims His manhood, proclaims His divinity and His love, and rebukes us who consent to ‘walk in the way of His commandments’ only on condition that it can be done without dust or heat; and who are ready to run the race that is set before us, only if we can come to the goal without perspiration or turning a hair. ‘Jesus, being wearied with His journey, sat thus on the well.’

II. Still further, notice here the devoted Christ.

It is not often that He lets us have a glimpse into the innermost chambers of His heart, in so far as the impelling motives of His course are concerned. But here He lays them bare. ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work.’

Now, it is no mere piece of grammatical pedantry when I ask you to notice that the language of the original is so constructed as to give prominence to the idea that the aim of Christ’s life was the doing of the Father’s will; and that it is the aim rather than the actual performance and realisation of the aim which is pointed at by our Lord. The words would be literally rendered ‘My meat is that I may do the will of Him that sent Me and finish His work’-that is to say, the very nourishment and refreshment of Christ was found in making the accomplishment of the Father’s commandment His ever-impelling motive, His ever-pursued goal. The expression carries us into the inmost heart of Jesus, dealing, as it does, with the one all-pervading motive rather than with the resulting actions, fair and holy as these were.

Brethren, the secret of our lives, if they are at all to be worthy and noble, must be the same-the recognition, not only as they say now, that we have a mission, but that there is a Sender; which is a wholly different view of our position, and that He who sends is the loving Father, who has spoken to us in that dear Son, who Himself made it His aim thus to obey, in order that it might be possible for us to re-echo His voice, and to repeat His aim. The recognition of the Sender, the absolute submission of our wills to His, must run through all the life. You may do your daily work, whatever it be, with this for its motto, ‘the will of the Lord be done’; and they who thus can look at their trade, or profession, and see the trivialities and monotonies of their daily occupations, in the transfiguring light of that great thought, will never need to complain that life is small, ignoble, wearisome, insignificant. As with pebbles in some clear brook with the sunshine on it, the water in which they are sunk glorifies and magnifies them. If you lift them out, they are but bits of dull stone; lying beneath the sunlit ripples they are jewels. Plunge the prose of your life, and all its trivialities, into that great stream, and it will magnify and glorify the smallest and the homeliest. Absolute submission to the divine will, and the ever-present thrilling consciousness of doing it, were the secret of Christ's life, and ought to be the secret of ours.

Note the distinction between doing the will and perfecting the work. That implies that Jesus Christ, like us, reached forward, in each successive act of obedience to the successive manifestations of the Father's will, to something still undone. The work will never be perfected or finished except on condition of continual fulfilment, moment by moment, of the separate behests of that divine will. For the Lord, as for His servants, this was the manner of obedience, that He 'pressed towards the mark,' and by individual acts of conformity secured that at last the whole 'work' should have been so completely accomplished that He might be able to say upon the Cross, 'It is finished.' If we have any right to call ourselves His, we too have thus to live.

III. Lastly, notice the reinvigorated Christ.

I have already pointed out the lovely contrast between the two pictures, the beginning and the end of this incident; so I need not dwell upon that. The disciples wondered when they found that Christ desired and needed none of the homely sustenance that they had brought to Him. And when He answered their sympathy rather than their curiosity-for they did not ask Him any questions, but they said to Him, 'Master, eat'-with 'I have meat to eat that ye know not of,' they, in their blind, blundering fashion, could only imagine that some one had brought Him something. So they gave occasion for the great words upon which we have been touching.

Notice, however, that Christ here sets forth the lofty aim at conformity to the divine will and fulfilment of the divine Work as being the meat of the soul. It is the true food for us all. The spirit which feeds upon such food will grow and be nourished. And the soul which feeds upon its own will and fancies, and not upon the plain brown bread of obedience, which is wholesome, though it be often bitter, will feed upon ashes, which will grate upon the teeth and hurt the palate. Such a soul will be like those wretched infants that are discovered sometimes at ‘baby-farms,’ starved and stunted, and not grown to half their right size. If you would have your spirits strong, robust, well nourished, live by obedience, and let the will of God be the food of your souls, and all will be well.

Souls thus fed can do without a good deal that others need. Why, enthusiasm for anything lifts a man above physical necessities and lower desires, even in its poorest forms. A regiment of soldiers making a forced march, or an athlete trying to break the record, will tramp, tramp on, not needing food, or rest, or sleep, until they have achieved their purpose, poor and ignoble though it may be. In all regions of life, enthusiasm and lofty aims make the soul lord of the body and of the world.

And in the Christian life we shall be thus lords, exactly in proportion to the depth and earnestness of our desires to do the will of God. They who thus are fed can afford ‘to scorn delights and live laborious days.’ They who thus are fed can afford to do with plain living, if there be high impulses as well as high thinking. And sure I am that nothing is more certain to stamp out the enthusiasm of obedience which ought to mark the Christian life than the luxurious fashion of living which is getting so common to-day amongst professing Christians.

It is not in vain that we read the old story about the Jewish boys whose faces were radiant and whose flesh was firmer when they were fed on pulse and water than on all the wine and dainties of the Babylonish court. ‘Set a knife to thy throat if thou be a man given to appetite,’ and let us remember that the less we use, and the less we feel that we need, of outward goods, the nearer do we approach to the condition in which holy desires and lofty aims will visit our spirits.

I commend to you, brethren, the story of our text, in its most literal application, as well as in the loftier spiritual lessons that may be drawn from it. To be near Christ, and to desire to live for Him, delivers us from dependence upon earthly things; and in those who thus do live the old word shall be fulfilled, ‘Better is a little that a righteous man hath, than the abundance of many wicked.’

22)John 4:7

John

‘GIVE ME TO DRINK’

Joh. 4:7, Joh. 4:26.

This Evangelist very significantly sets side by side our Lord’s conversations with Nicodemus and with the woman of Samaria. The persons are very different: the one a learned Rabbi of reputation, influence, and large theological knowledge of the then fashionable kind; the other an alien woman, poor-for she had to do this menial task of water-drawing in the heat of the day-and of questionable character.

The diversity of persons necessitates great differences in the form of our Lord’s address to each; but the resemblances are as striking as the divergencies. In both we have His method of gradually unveiling the truth to a susceptible soul, beginning with symbol and a hint, gradually enlarging the hint and translating the symbol; and finally unveiling Himself as the Giver and the Gift. There is another resemblance; in both the characteristic gift is that of the Spirit of Life, and, perhaps, in both the symbol is the same. For we read in one of ‘water and the Spirit’; and in the other of the fountain within, springing into everlasting life. However that may be, the process of teaching is all but identical in substance in both cases, though in form so various.

The words of our Lord which I have taken for our text now are His first and last utterance in this conversation. What a gulf lies between! They are linked together by the intervening sayings, and constitute with these a great ladder, of which the foot is fast on earth, and the top fixed in heaven. On the one hand, He owns the lowest necessities; on the other, He makes the highest claims. Let us ponder on this remarkable juxtaposition, and try to gather the lessons that are plain in it.

I. First, then, I think we see here the mystery of the dependent Christ.

‘Give Me to drink’: ‘I am He.’ Try to see the thing for a moment with the woman’s eyes. She comes down from her little village, up amongst the cliffs on the hillside, across the narrow, hot valley, beneath the sweltering sunshine reflected from the bounding mountains, and she finds, in the midst of the lush vegetation round the ancient well, a solitary, weary Jew, travel-worn, evidently exhausted-for His disciples had gone away to buy food, and He was too wearied to go with them-looking into the well, but having no dipper or vessel by which to get any of its cool treasure. We lose a great deal of the meaning of Christ’s request if we suppose that it was merely a way of getting into conversation with the woman, a ‘breaking of the ice.’ It was a great deal more than that. It was the utterance of a felt and painful necessity, which He Himself could not supply without a breach of what He conceived to be His filial dependence. He could have brought water out of the well. He did not need to depend upon the pitcher that the disciples had perhaps unthinkingly carried away with them when they went to buy bread. He did not need to ask the woman to give, but He chose to do so. We lose much if we do not see in this incident far more than the woman saw, but we lose still more if we do not see what she did see. And the words which the Master spoke to her are no mere way of introducing a conversation on religious themes; but He asked for a draught which He needed, and which He had no other way of getting.

So, then, here stands, pathetically set forth before us, our Lord’s true participation in two of the distinguishing characteristics of our weak humanity-subjection to physical necessities and dependence on kindly help. We find Him weary, hungry, thirsty, sometimes slumbering. And all these instances are documents and proofs for us that He was a true man like ourselves, and that, like ourselves, He depended on ‘the woman that ministered to Him’ for the supply of His necessities, and so knew the limitations of our social and else helpless humanity.

But then a wearied and thirsty man is nothing of much importance. But here is a Man who humbled Himself to be weary and to thirst. The keynote of this Gospel, the one thought which unlocks all its treasures, and to the elucidation of which, in all its aspects, the whole book is devoted, is, ‘The Word was made flesh.’ Only when you let in the light of the last utterance of our text, ‘I that speak unto thee am He,’ do we understand the pathos, the sublimity, the depth and blessedness of meaning which lie in the first one, ‘Give Me to drink.’ When we see that He bowed Himself, and willingly stretched out His hands for the fetters, we come to understand the significance of these traces of His manhood. The woman says, with wonder, ‘How is it that Thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me?’ and that was wonderful. But, as He hints to her, if she had known more clearly who this Person was, that seemed to be a Jew, a deeper wonder would have crept over her spirit. The wonder is that the Eternal Word should need the water of the well, and should ask it of a poor human creature.

And why this humiliation? He could, as I have said, have wrought a miracle. He that fed five thousand, He that had turned water into wine at the rustic marriage-feast, would have had no difficulty in quenching His thirst if he had chosen to use His miraculous power therefore. But He here shows us that the true filial spirit will rather die than cast off its dependence on the Father, and the same motive which led Him to reject the temptation in the wilderness, and to answer with sublime confidence, ‘Man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word from the mouth of God,’ forbids Him here to use other means of securing the draught that He so needed than the appeal to the sympathy of an alien, and the swift compassion of a woman’s heart.

And then, let us remember that the motive of this willing acceptance of the limitations and weaknesses of humanity is, in the deepest analysis, simply His love to us; as the mediaeval hymn has it, ‘Seeking me, Thou satest weary.’

In that lonely Traveller, worn, exhausted, thirsty, craving for a draught of water from a stranger’s hand, is set forth ‘the glory of the Father, full of grace and truth.’ A strange manifestation of divine glory this! But if we understand that the glory of God is the lustrous light of His self-revealing love, perhaps we shall understand how, from that faint, craving voice, ‘Give Me to drink,’ that glory sounds forth more than in the thunders that rolled about the rocky peak of Sinai. Strange to think, brethren, that the voice from those lips dry with thirst, which was low and weak, was the voice that spoke to the sea, ‘Peace! be still,’ and there was a calm; that said to demons, ‘Come out of him!’ and they evacuated their fortress; that cast its command into the grave of Lazarus, and he came forth; and which one day all that are in the grave shall hear, and hearing shall obey. ‘Give Me to drink.’ ‘I that speak unto thee am He.’

II. Secondly, we may note here the self-revealing Christ.

The process by which Jesus gradually unveils His full character to this woman, so unspiritual and unsusceptible as she appeared at first sight to be, is interesting and instructive. It would occupy too much of your time for me to do more than set it before you in the barest outline. Noting the singular divergence between the two sayings which I have taken as our text, it is interesting to notice how the one gradually merges into the other. First of all, Jesus Christ, as it were, opens a finger of His hand to let the woman have a glimpse of the gift lying there, that that may kindle desire, and hints at some occult depth in His person and nature all undreamed of by her yet, and which would be the occasion of greater wonder, and of a reversal of their parts, if she knew it. Then, in answer to her, half understanding that He meant more than met the ear, and yet opposing the plain physical difficulties that were in the way, in that He had ‘nothing to draw with, and the well is deep,’ and asking whether He were greater than our father Jacob, who also had given, and given not only a draught, but the well, our Lord enlarges her vision of the blessedness of the gift, though He says but little more of its nature, except in so far as that may be gathered from the fact that the water that He will give will be a permanent source of satisfaction, forbidding the pangs of unquenched desire ever again to be felt as pangs; and from the other fact that it will be an inward possession, leaping up with a fountain’s energy, and a life within itself, towards, and into everlasting life. Next, he strongly assails conscience and demands repentance, and reveals Himself as the reader of the secrets of the heart. Then He discloses the great truths of spiritual worship. And, finally, as a prince in disguise might do, He flings aside the mantle of which He had let a fold or two be blown back in the previous conversation, and stands confessed. ‘I that speak unto thee am He.’ That is to say, the kindling of desire, the proffer of the all-satisfying gift, the quickening of conscience, the revelation of a Father to be worshipped in spirit and in truth, and the final full disclosure of His person and office as the Giver of the gift which shall slake all the thirsts of men-these are the stages of His self-revelation.

Then note, not only the process, but the substance of the revelation of Himself. The woman had a far more spiritual and lofty conception of the office of Messiah than the Jews had. It is not the first time that heretics have reached a loftier ideal of some parts of the truth than the orthodox attain. To the Jew the Messiah was a conquering king, who would help them to ride on the necks of their enemies, and pay back their persecutions and oppressions. To this Samaritan woman-speaking, I suppose, the conceptions of her race-the Messiah was One who was to ‘tell us all things.’

Jesus Christ accepts the position, endorses her anticipations, and in effect presents Himself before her and before us as the Fountain of all certitude and knowledge in regard to spiritual matters. For all that we can know, or need to know, with regard to God and man and their mutual relations; for all that we can or need know in regard to manhood, its ideal, its obligations, its possibilities, its destinies; for all that we need to know of men in their relation to one another, we have to turn to Jesus Christ, the Messiah, who ‘will tell us all things.’ He is the Fountain of light; He is the Foundation of certitude; and they who seek, not hypotheses and possibilities and conjectures and dreams, but the solid substance of a reliable knowledge, must grasp Him, and esteem the words of His mouth and the deeds of His life more than their necessary food.

He meets this woman’s conceptions as He had met those of Nicodemus. To him He had unveiled Himself as the Son of God, and the Son of Man who came down from heaven, and is in heaven, and ascends to heaven. To the woman He reveals Himself as the Messiah, who will tell us all truth, and to both as the Giver of the gift which shall communicate and sustain and refresh the better life. But I cannot help dwelling for a moment upon the remarkable, beautiful, and significant designation which our Lord employs here. ‘I that speak unto thee.’ The word in the original, translated by our version ‘speak,’ is even more sweet, because more familiar, and conveys the idea of unrestrained frank intercourse. Perhaps we might render ‘I who am talking with Thee!’ and that our Lord desired to emphasise to the woman’s heart the notion of His familiar intercourse with her, Messiah though He were, seems to me confirmed by the fact that He uses the same expression, with additional grace and tenderness about it, when He says, with such depth of meaning, to the blind man whom He had healed, ‘Thou hast both seen Him,’ with the eyes to which He gave sight and object of sight, ‘and it is He that talketh with thee.’ The familiar Christ who will come and speak to us face to face and heart to heart, ‘as a man speaketh with his friend,’ is the Christ who will tell us all things, and whom we may wholly trust.

Note too how this revelation has for its condition the docile acceptance of the earlier and imperfect teachings. If the woman had not yielded herself to our Lord’s earlier words, and, though with very dim insight, yet with a heart that sought to be taught, followed Him as He stepped from round to round of the ascending ladder, she had never stood on the top and seen this great vision. If you see nothing more in Jesus Christ than a man like yourself, compassed with our infirmities, and yet sweet and gracious and good and pure, be true to what you know, and put it into practice, and be ready to accept all the light that dawns. They that begin down at the bottom with hearing ‘Give me to drink,’ may stand at the top, and hear Him speak to them His unveiled truth and His full glory. ‘To him that hath shall be given.’ ‘If any man wills to do His will he shall know of the teaching.’

III. Lastly, we have here the universal Christ.

The woman wondered that, being a Jew, He spoke to her. As I have said, our Lord’s first utterance is simply the expression of a real physical necessity. But it is none the less what the woman felt it to be, a strange overleaping of barriers that towered very high. A Samaritan, a woman, a sinner, is the recipient of the first clear confession from Jesus Christ of His Messiahship and dignity. She was right in her instinct that something lay behind His sweeping aside of the barriers and coming so close to her with His request. These two, the prejudices of race and the contempt for woman, two of the crying evils of the old world, were overpassed by our Lord as if He never saw them. They were too high for men’s puny limbs; they made no obstacle to the march of His divine compassion. And therein lies a symbol, if you like, but none the less a prophecy that will be fulfilled, of the universal adaptation and destination of the Gospel, and its independence of all distinctions of race and sex, condition, moral character. In Jesus Christ ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, neither bond nor free’; ye ‘are all one in Christ.’ If He had been but a Jew, it was wonderful that He should talk to a Samaritan. But there is nothing in the character and life of

Christ, as recorded in Scripture, more remarkable and more plain than the entire absence of any racial peculiarities, or of characteristics owing to His position in space or time. So unlike His nation was He that the very elite of His nation snarled at Him and said, ‘Thou art a Samaritan!’ So unlike them was He that one feels that a character so palpitatingly human to its core, and so impossible to explain from its surroundings, is inexplicable, but on the New Testament theory that He is not a Jew, or man only, but the Son of Man, the divine embodiment of the ideal of humanity, whose dwelling was on earth, but His origin and home in the bosom of God. Therefore Jesus Christ is the world’s Christ, your Christ, my Christ, every man’s Christ, the Tree of Life that stands in the midst of the garden, that all men may draw near to it and gather of its fruit.

Brother, answer His proffer of the gift as this woman did: ‘Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not; neither go all the way to the world’s broken cisterns to draw’; and He will put into your hearts that indwelling fountain of life, so that you may say like this woman’s townspeople: ‘Now I have heard Him myself, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world.’

23)John 4:10

John

THE GIFT AND THE GIVER

Joh. 4:10.

This Gospel has two characteristics seldom found together: deep thought and vivid character-drawing. Nothing can be more clear-cut and dramatic than the scene in the chapter before us. There is not a word of description of this Samaritan woman. She paints herself, and it is not a beautiful picture. She is apparently of the peasant class, from a little village nestling on the hill above the plain, come down in the broiling sunshine to Jacob’s well. She is of mature age, and has had a not altogether reputable past. She is frivolous, ready to talk with strangers, with a tongue quick to turn grave things into jests; and yet she possesses, hidden beneath masses of unclean vanities, a conscience and a yearning for something better than she has, which Christ’s words awoke, and which was finally so enkindled as to make her fit to receive the full declaration of His Messiahship, which Pharisees and priests could not be trusted with.

I need scarcely do more than remind you of the way in which the conversation between this strangely assorted pair began. The solitary Jew, sitting spent with travel on the well, asks for a draught of water; not in order to get an opening for preaching, but because He needs it. She replies with an exclamation of light wonder, half a jest and half a sarcasm, and challenging a response in the same tone.

But Christ lifts her to a higher level by the words of my text, which awed levity, and prepared for a fuller revelation. ‘Thou dost wonder that I, being a Jew, ask drink of thee, a Samaritan. If thou knewest who I am, thy wonder at My asking would be more. If thou knewest what I have to give, we should change places, and thou wouldest ask, and I should bestow.’

So then, we have here gift, Giver, way of getting, and ignorance that hinders asking. Let us look at these.

I. First, the gift of God. Now it is quite clear that our Lord means the same thing, whatever it may be, by the two expressions, the ‘gift of God’ and the ‘living water.’

For, unless He does, the whole sequence of my text falls to pieces. ‘Living water’ was suggested, no doubt, by the circumstances of the moment. There, in the well, was an ever-springing source, and, says He, a like supply, ever welling up for thirsty lips and foul hands, ever sweet and ever sufficient, God is ready to give.

We may remember how, all through Scripture, we hear the tinkle of these waters as they run. The force of the expression is to be gathered largely from the Old Testament and the uses of the metaphor there. It has been supposed that by the ‘living water’ which God gives is here meant some one specific gift, such as that of the Holy Spirit, which sometimes is expressed by the metaphor. Rather I should be disposed to say the ‘living water’ is eternal life. ‘With Thee is the fountain of life.’ And so, in the last resort, the gift of God is God Himself. Nothing else will suffice for us, brethren. We need Him, and we need none but Him.

Our Lord, in the subsequent part of this conversation, again touches upon this great metaphor, and suggests one or two characteristics, blessings, and excellences of it. ‘It shall be in him,’ it is something that we may carry about with us in our hearts, inseparable from our being, free from all possibility of being filched away by violence, being rent from us by sorrows, or even being parted from us by death. What a man has outside of him he only seems to have. Our only real possessions are those which have passed into the substance of our souls. All else we shall leave behind. The only good is inward good; and this water of life slakes our thirst because it flows into the deepest place of our being, and abides there for ever.

Oh! you that are seeking your satisfaction from fountains that remain outside of you after all your efforts, learn that all of them, by reason of their externality, will sooner or later be ‘broken cisterns that can hold no water.’ And I beseech you, if you want rest for your souls and stilling for their yearnings, look for it there, where only it can be found, in Him, who not only dwells in the heavens to rule and to shower down blessings, but enters into the waiting heart and abides there, the inward, and therefore the only real, possession and riches. ‘It shall be in him a fountain of water.’

It is ‘springing up’-with an immortal energy, with ever fresh fulness, by its own inherent power, needing no pumps nor machinery, but ever welling forth its refreshment, an emblem of the joyous energy and continual freshness of vitality, which is granted to those who carry God in their hearts, and therefore can never be depressed beyond measure, nor ever feel that the burden of life is too heavy to bear, or its sorrows too sharp to endure.

It springs up ‘into eternal life,’ for water must seek its source, and rise to the level of its origin, and this fountain within a man, that reaches up ever towards the eternal life from which it came, and which it gives to its possessor, will bear him up, as some strong spring will lift the clods that choked its mouth, will bear him up towards the eternal life which is native to it, and therefore native to him.

Brethren, no man is so poor, so low, so narrow in capacity, so limited in heart and head, but that he needs a whole God to make him restful. Nothing else will. To seek for satisfaction elsewhere is like sailors who in their desperation, when the water-tanks are empty, slake their thirst with the treacherous blue that washes cruelly along the battered sides of their ship. A moment's alleviation is followed by the recurrence, in tenfold intensity, of the pangs of thirst, and by madness, and death. Do not drink the salt water that flashes and rolls by your side when you can have recourse to the fountain of life that is with God.

'Oh!' you say, 'commonplace, threadbare pulpit rhetoric.' Yes! Do you live as if it were true? It will never be too threadbare to be dinned into your head until it has passed into your lives and regulated them.

II. Now, in the next place, notice the Giver.

Jesus Christ blends in one sentence, startling in its boldness, the gift of God, and Himself as the Bestower. This Man, exhausted for want of a draught of water, speaks with parched lips a claim most singularly in contrast with the request which He had just made: 'I will give thee the living water.' No wonder that the woman was bewildered, and could only say, 'The well is deep, and Thou hast nothing to draw with.' She might have said, 'Why then dost Thou ask me?' The words were meant to create astonishment, in order that the astonishment might awaken interest, which would lead to the capacity for further illumination. Suppose you had been there, had seen the Man whom she saw, had heard the two things that she heard, and knew no more about Him than she knew, what would you have thought of Him and His words? Perhaps you would have been more contemptuous than she was. See to it that, since you know so much that explains and warrants them, you do not treat them worse than she did.

Jesus Christ claims to give God's gifts. He is able to give to that poor, frivolous, impure-hearted and impure-lifed woman, at her request, the eternal life which shall still all the thirst of her soul, that had often in the past been satiated and disgusted, but had never been satisfied by any of its draughts.

And He claims that in this giving He is something more than a channel, because, says He, ‘If thou hadst asked of Me I would give thee.’ We sometimes think of the relation between God and Christ as being typified by that of some land-locked sea amidst remote mountains, and the affluent that brings its sparkling treasures to the thirsting valley. But Jesus Christ is no mere vehicle for the conveyance of a divine gift, but His own heart, His own power, His own love are in it; and it is His gift just as much as it is God’s.

Now I do not do more than pause for one moment to ask you to think of what inference is necessarily involved in such a claim as this. If we know anything about Jesus Christ at all, we know that He spoke in this tone, not occasionally, but habitually. It will not do to pick out other bits of His character or actions and admire these and ignore the characteristic of His teachings-His claims for Himself. And I have only this one word to say, if Jesus Christ ever said anything the least like the words of my text, and if they were not true, what was He but a fanatic who had lost His head in the fancy of His inspiration? And if He said these words and they were true, what is He then? What but that which this Gospel insists from its beginning to its end that He was-the Eternal Word of God, by whom all divine revelation from the beginning has been made, and who at last ‘became flesh’ that we might ‘receive of His fulness,’ and therein ‘be filled with all the fulness of God.’ Other alternative I, for my part, see none.

But I would have you notice, too, the connection between these human needs of the Saviour and His power to give the divine gift. Why did He not simply say to this woman, ‘If thou knewest who I am?’ Why did He use this periphrasis of my text, ‘Who it is that saith unto thee, “Give Me to drink”‘? Why but because He wanted to fix her attention on the startling contradiction between His appearance and His claims-on the one hand asserting divine prerogative, on the other forcing into prominence human weakness and necessity, because these two things, the human weakness and the divine prerogative, are inseparably braided together and intertwined. Some of you will remember the great scene in Shakespeare where the weakness of Caesar is urged as a reason for rejecting his imperial authority:-

‘Ay! and that tongue of his, that bade the Romans Mark him, and write his speeches in their books, Alas! it cried, “Give me some drink, . . . Like a sick girl.”‘

And the inference that is drawn is, how can he be fit to be a ruler of men? But we listen to our Caesar and Emperor, when He asks this woman for water, and when He says on the Cross, ‘I thirst,’ and we feel that these are not the least of His titles to be crowned with many crowns. They bring Him nearer to us, and they are the means by which His love reaches its end, of bestowing upon us all, if we will have it, the cup of salvation. Unless He had said the one of these two things, He never could have said the other. Unless the dry lips had petitioned, ‘Give Me to drink,’ the gracious lips could never have said, ‘I will give thee living water.’ Unless, like Jacob of old, this Shepherd could say, ‘In the day the drought consumed Me,’ it would have been impossible that the flock ‘shall hunger no more, neither shall they thirst any more, . . . for the Lamb that is in the midst of the throne shall lead them to living fountains of water.’

III. Again, notice how to get the gift.

Christ puts together, as if they were all but contemporaneous, ‘thou wouldst have asked of Me,’ and ‘I would have given thee.’ The hand on the telegraph transmits the message, and back, swift as the lightning, flashes the response. The condition, the only condition, and the indispensable condition, of possessing that water of life-the summary expression for all the gifts of God in Jesus Christ, which at the last are essentially God Himself-is the desire to possess it turned to Jesus Christ. Is it not strange that men should not desire; is it not strange and sad that such foolish creatures are we that we do not want what we need; that our wishes and needs are often diametrically opposite? All men desire happiness, but some of us have so vitiated our tastes and our palates by fiery intoxicants that the water of life seems dreadfully tasteless and unstimulating, and so we will rather go back again to the delusive, poisoned drinks than glue our lips to the river of God’s pleasures.

But it is not enough that there should be the desire. It must be turned to Him. In fact the asking of my text, so far as you and I are concerned, is but another way of speaking the great keyword of personal religion, faith in

Jesus Christ. For they who ask, know their necessity, are convinced of the power of Him to whom they appeal to grant their requests, and rely upon His love to do so. And these three things, the sense of need, the conviction of Christ's ability to save and to satisfy, and of His infinite love that desires to make us blessed-these three things fused together make the faith which receives the gift of God.

Remember, brethren, that another of the scriptural expressions for the act of trusting in Him, is taking, not asking. You do not need to ask, as if for something that is not provided. What we all need to do is to open our eyes to see what is there. If we like to put out our hands and take it. Why should we be saying, 'Give me to drink,' when a pierced hand reaches out to us the cup of salvation, and says, 'Drink ye all of it'? 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come . . . and drink . . . without money and without price.'

There is no other condition but desire turned to Christ, and that is the necessary condition. God cannot give men salvation, as veterinary surgeons drench unwilling horses-forcing the medicine down their throats through clenched teeth. There must be the opened mouth, and wherever there is, there will be the full supply. 'Ask, and ye shall receive'; take, and ye shall possess.

IV. Lastly, mark the ignorance that prevents asking.

Jesus Christ looked at this poor woman and discerned in her, though, as I said, it was hidden beneath mountains of folly and sin, a thirsty soul that was dimly longing for something better. And He believed that, if once the mystery of His being and the mercy of God's gifts were displayed before her, she would melt into a yearning of desire that is certain to be fulfilled. In some measure the same thing is true of us all. For surely, surely, if only you saw realities, and things as they are, some of you would not be content to continue as you are-without this water of life. Blind, blind, blind, are the men who grope at noon-day as in the dark and turn away from Jesus. If you knew, not with the head only, but with the whole nature, if you knew the thirst of your soul, the sweetness of the water, the readiness of the Giver, and the dry and parched land to which you condemn yourselves by your refusal, surely you would bethink yourself and fall at His feet and ask, and get, the water of life.

But, brethren, there is a worse case than ignorance; there is the case of people that know and refuse, not by reason of imperfect knowledge, but by reason of averted will. And I beseech you to ponder whether that may not be your condition. ‘Whosoever will, let him come.’ ‘Ye will not come unto Me that ye might have life.’ I do not think I venture much when I say that I am sure there are people hearing me now, not Christians, who are as certain, deep down in their hearts, that the only rest of the soul is in God, and the only way to get it is through Christ, as any saint of God’s ever was. But the knowledge does not touch their will because they like the poison and they do not want the life.

Oh! dear friends, the instantaneousness of Christ’s answer, and the certainty of it, are as true for each of us as they were for this woman. The offer is made to us all, just as it was to her. We can gather round that Rock like the Israelites in the wilderness, and slake every thirst of our souls from its outgushing streams. Jesus Christ says to each of us, as He did to her, tenderly, warningly, invitingly, and yet rebukingly, ‘If thou knewest . . . thou wouldst ask, . . . and I would give.’

Take care lest, by continual neglect, you force Him at last to change His words, and to lament over you, as He did over the city that He loved so well, and yet destroyed. ‘If thou hadst known in thy day the things that belong to thy peace. But now they are hid from thine eyes.’

24)John 4:14

John

THE SPRINGING FOUNTAIN

Joh. 4:14.

There are two kinds of wells, one a simple reservoir, another containing the waters of a spring. It is the latter kind which is spoken about here, as is clear not only from the meaning of the word in the Greek, but also from the description of it as ‘springing up.’ That suggests at once the activity of a fountain. A fountain is the emblem of motion, not of rest. Its motion is derived from itself, not imparted to it from without. Its ‘silvery column’ rises ever heavenward, though gravitation is too strong for it, and drags it back again.

So Christ promises to this ignorant, sinful Samaritan woman that if she chose He would plant in her soul a gift which would thus well up, by its own inherent energy, and fill her spirit with music, and refreshment, and satisfaction.

What is that gift? The answer may be put in various ways which really all come to one. It is Himself, the unspeakable Gift, His own greatest gift; or it is the Spirit 'which they that believe on Him should receive,' and whereby He comes and dwells in men's hearts; or it is the resulting life, kindred with the life bestowed, a consequence of the indwelling Christ and the present Spirit.

And so the promise is that they who believe in Him and rest upon His love shall receive into their spirits a new life principle which shall rise in their hearts like a fountain, 'springing up into everlasting life.'

I think we shall best get the whole depth and magnitude of this great promise if, throwing aside all mere artificial order, we simply take the words as they stand here in the text, and think, first, of Christ's gift as a fountain within; then as a fountain springing, leaping up, by its own power; and then as a fountain 'springing into everlasting life.'

I. First, Christ's gift is represented here as a fountain within.

Most men draw their supplies from without; they are rich, happy, strong, only when externals minister to them strength, happiness, riches. For the most of us, what we have is that which determines our felicity.

Take the lowest type of life, for instance, the men of whom the majority, alas! I suppose, in every time is composed, who live altogether on the low plane of the world, and for the world alone, whether their worldliness take the form of sensuous appetite, or of desire to acquire wealth and outward possessions. The thirst of the body is the type of the experience of all such people. It is satisfied and slaked for a moment, and then back comes the tyrannous appetite again. And, alas! the things that you drink to satisfy the thirst of your souls are too often like a publican’s adulterated beer, which has got salt in it, and chemicals, and all sorts of things to stir up, instead of slaking and quenching, the thirst. So ‘he that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase.’ The appetite grows by what it feeds on, and a little lust yielded to to-day is a bigger one to-morrow, and half a glass to-day grows to a bottle in a twelvemonth. As the old classical saying has it, he ‘who begins by carrying a calf, before long is able to carry an ox’; so the thirst in the soul needs and drinks down a constantly increasing draught.

And even if we rise up into a higher region and look at the experience of the men who have in some measure learned that ‘a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things that he possesseth,’ nor in the abundance of the gratification that his animal nature gets, but that there must be an inward spring of satisfaction, if there is to be any satisfaction at all; if we take men who live for thought, and truth, and mental culture, and yield themselves up to the enthusiasm for some great cause, and are proud of saying, ‘My mind to me a kingdom is,’ though they present a far higher style of life than the former, yet even that higher type of man has so many of his roots in the external world that he is at the mercy of chances and changes, and he, too, has deep in his heart a thirst that nothing, no truth, no wisdom, no culture, nothing that addresses itself to one part of his nature, though it be the noblest and the loftiest, can ever satisfy and slake.

I am sure I have some such people in my audience, and to them this message comes. You may have, if you will, in your own hearts, a springing fountain of delight and of blessedness which will secure that no unsatisfied desires shall ever torment you. Christ in His fulness, His Spirit, the life that flows from both and is planted within our hearts, these are offered to us all; and if we have them we carry inclosed within ourselves all that is essential to our felicity; and we can say, ‘I have learned in whatsoever state I am therewith to be self-satisfying,’ not with the proud, stoical independence of a man who does not want either God or man to make him blessed, but with the humble independence of a man who can say ‘my sufficiency is of God.’

No independence of externals is possible, nor wholesome if it were possible, except that which comes from absolute dependence on Jesus

Christ.

If you have Christ in your heart then life is possible, peace is possible, joy is possible, under all circumstances and in all places. Everything which the soul can desire, it possesses. You will be like the garrison of a beleaguered castle, in the courtyard of which is a sparkling spring, fed from some source high up in the mountains, and finding its way in there by underground channels which no besiegers can ever touch. Sorrows will come, and make you sad, but though there may be much darkness round about you, there will be light in the darkness. The trees may be bare and leafless, but the sap has gone down to the roots. The world may be all wintry and white with snow, but there will be a bright little fire burning on your own hearthstone. You will carry within yourselves all the essentials to blessedness. If you have ‘Christ in the vessel’ you can smile at the storm. They that drink from earth’s fountains ‘shall thirst again’; but they who have Christ in their hearts will have a fountain within which will not freeze in the bitterest cold, nor fail in the fiercest heat. ‘The water that I shall give him shall be in him a fountain.’

II. Christ’s gift is a springing fountain.

The emblem, of course, suggests motion by its own inherent impulse. Water may be stagnant, or it may yield to the force of gravity and slide down a descending river-bed, or it may be pumped up and lifted by external force applied to it, or it may roll as it does in the sea, drawn by the moon, driven by the winds, borne along by currents that owe their origin to outward heat or cold. But a fountain rises by an energy implanted within itself, and is the very emblem of joyous, free, self-dependent and self-regulated activity.

And so, says Christ, ‘The water that I shall give him shall be in him a springing fountain’; it shall not lie there stagnant, but leap like a living thing, up into the sunshine, and flash there, turned into diamonds, when the bright rays smile upon it.

So here is the promise of two things: the promise of activity, and of an activity which is its own law.

The promise of activity. There seems small blessing, in this overworked world, in a promise of more active exertion; but what an immense part of our nature lies dormant and torpid if we are not Christians! How much of the work that is done is dreary, wearisome, collar-work, against the grain. Do not the wheels of life often go slowly? Are you not often weary of the inexpressible monotony and fatigue? And do you not go to your work sometimes, though with a fierce feeling of 'need-to-do-it,' yet also with inward repugnance? And are there not great parts of your nature that have never woke into activity at all, and are ill at ease, because there is no field of action provided for them? The mind is like millstones; if you do not put the wheat into them to grind, they will grind each other's faces. So some of us are fretting ourselves to pieces, or are sick of a vague disease, and are morbid and miserable because the highest and noblest parts of our nature have never been brought into exercise. Surely this promise of Christ's should come as a true Gospel to such, offering, as it does, if we will trust ourselves to Him, a springing fountain of activity in our hearts that shall fill our whole being with joyous energy, and make it a delight to live and to work. It will bring to us new powers, new motives; it will set all the wheels of life going at double speed. We shall be quickened by the presence of that mighty power, even as a dim taper is brightened and flames up when plunged into a jar of oxygen. And life will be delightsome in its hardest toil, when it is toil for the sake of, and by the indwelling strength of, that great Lord and Master of our work.

And there is not only a promise of activity here, but of activity which is its own law and impulse. That is a blessed promise in two ways. In the first place, law will be changed into delight. We shall not be driven by a commandment standing over us with whip and lash, or coming behind us with spur and goad, but that which we ought to do we shall rejoice to do; and inclination and duty will coincide in all our lives when our life is Christ's life in us.

That should be a blessing to some of you who have been fighting against evil and trying to do right with more or less success, more or less interruptedly and at intervals, and have felt the effort to be a burden and a wearisomeness. Here is a promise of emancipation from all that constraint and yoke of bondage which duty discerned and unloved ever lays upon a man’s shoulders. When we carry within us the gift of a life drawn from Jesus Christ, and are able to say like Him, ‘Lo, I come to do Thy will, and Thy law is within my heart,’ only then shall we have peace and joy in our lives. ‘The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus makes us free from the law of sin and death.’

And then, in the second place, that same thought of an activity which is its own impulse and its own law, suggests another aspect of this blessedness, namely, that it sets us free from the tyranny of external circumstances which absolutely shape the lives of so many of us. The lives of all must be to a large extent moulded by these, but they need not, and should not be completely determined by them. It is a miserable thing to see men and women driven before the wind like thistledown. Circumstances must influence us, but they may either influence us to base compliance and passive reception of their stamp, or to brave resistance and sturdy nonconformity to their solicitations. So used, they will influence us to a firmer possession of the good which is most opposite to them, and we shall be the more unlike our surroundings, the more they abound in evil. You can make your choice whether, if I may so say, you shall be like balloons that are at the mercy of the gale and can only shape their course according as it comes upon them and blows them along, or like steamers that have an inward power that enables them to keep their course from whatever point the wind blows, or like some sharply built sailing-ship that, with a strong hand at the helm, and canvas rightly set, can sail almost in the teeth of the wind and compel it to bear her along in all but the opposite direction to that in which it would carry her if she lay like a log on the water.

I beseech you all, and especially you young people, not to let the world take and shape you, like a bit of soft clay put into a brick-mould, but to lay a masterful hand upon it, and compel it to help you, by God’s grace, to be nobler, and truer, and purer.

It is a shame for men to live the lives that so many amongst us live, as completely at the mercy of externals to determine the direction of their lives as the long weeds in a stream that yield to the flow of the current. It is of no use to preach high and brave maxims, telling men to assert their lordship over externals, unless we can tell them how to find the inward power that will enable them to do so. But we can preach such noble exhortations to some purpose when we can point to the great gift which Christ is ready to give, and exhort them to open their hearts to receive that indwelling power which shall make them free from the dominion of these tyrant circumstances and emancipate them into the ‘liberty of the sons of God.’ ‘The water that I shall give him shall be in him a leaping fountain.’

III. The last point here is that Christ’s gift is a fountain ‘springing up into everlasting life.’

The water of a fountain rises by its own impulse, but howsoever its silver column may climb it always falls back into its marble basin. But this fountain rises higher, and at each successive jet higher, tending towards, and finally touching, its goal, which is at the same time its course. The water seeks its own level, and the fountain climbs until it reaches Him from whom it comes, and the eternal life in which He lives. We might put that thought in two ways. First, the gift is eternal in its duration. The water with which the world quenches its thirst perishes. All supplies and resources dry up like winter torrents in summer heat. All created good is but for a time. As for some, it perishes in the use; as for other, it evaporates and passes away, or is ‘as water spilt upon the ground which cannot be gathered up’; as for all, we have to leave it behind when we go hence. But this gift springs into everlasting life, and when we go it goes with us. The Christian character is identical in both worlds, and however the forms and details of pursuits may vary, the essential principle remains one. So that the life of a Christian man on earth and his life in heaven are but one stream, as it were, which may, indeed, like some of those American rivers, run for a time through a deep, dark canyon, or in an underground passage, but comes out at the further end into broader, brighter plains and summer lands; where it flows with a quieter current and with the sunshine reflected on its untroubled surface, into the calm ocean. He has one gift and one life for earth and heaven-Christ and His Spirit, and the life that is consequent upon both.

And then the other side of this great thought is that the gift tends to, is directed towards, or aims at and reaches, everlasting life. The whole of the Christian experience on earth is a prophecy and an anticipation of heaven. The whole of the Christian experience of earth evidently aims towards that as its goal, and is interpreted by that as its end. What a contrast that is to the low and transient aims which so many of us have! The lives of many men go creeping along the surface when they might spring heavenwards. My friend! which is it to be with you? Is your life to be like one of those Northern Asiatic rivers that loses itself in the sands, or that flows into, or is sluggishly lost in, a bog; or is it going to tumble over a great precipice, and fall sounding away down into the blackness; or is it going to leap up 'into everlasting life'? Which of the two aims is the wiser, is the nobler, is the better?

And a life that thus springs will reach what it springs towards. A fountain rises and falls, for the law of gravity takes it down; this fountain rises and reaches, for the law of pressure takes it up, and the water rises to the level of its source. Christ's gift mocks no man, it sets in motion no hopes that it does not fulfil; it stimulates to no work that it does not crown with success. If you desire a life that reaches its goal, a life in which all your desires are satisfied, a life that is full of joyous energy, that of a free man emancipated from circumstances and from the tyranny of unwelcome law, and victorious over externals, open your hearts to the gift that Christ offers you; the gift of Himself, of His death and passion, of His sacrifice and atonement, of His indwelling and sanctifying Spirit.

He offered all the fulness of that grace to this Samaritan woman, in her ignorance, in her profligacy, in her flippancy. He offers it to you. His offer awoke an echo in her heart, will it kindle any response in yours? Oh! when He says to you, 'The water that I shall give will be in you a fountain springing into everlasting life,' I pray you to answer as she did-'Sir!-Lord-give me this water, that I thirst not; neither come to earth's broken cisterns to draw.'

25)John 4:26

John

'GIVE ME TO DRINK'

Joh. 4:7, Joh. 4:26.

This Evangelist very significantly sets side by side our Lord's conversations with Nicodemus and with the woman of Samaria. The persons are very different: the one a learned Rabbi of reputation, influence, and large theological knowledge of the then fashionable kind; the other an alien woman, poor-for she had to do this menial task of water-drawing in the heat of the day-and of questionable character.

The diversity of persons necessitates great differences in the form of our Lord's address to each; but the resemblances are as striking as the divergencies. In both we have His method of gradually unveiling the truth to a susceptible soul, beginning with symbol and a hint, gradually enlarging the hint and translating the symbol; and finally unveiling Himself as the Giver and the Gift. There is another resemblance; in both the characteristic gift is that of the Spirit of Life, and, perhaps, in both the symbol is the same. For we read in one of 'water and the Spirit'; and in the other of the fountain within, springing into everlasting life. However that may be, the process of teaching is all but identical in substance in both cases, though in form so various.

The words of our Lord which I have taken for our text now are His first and last utterance in this conversation. What a gulf lies between! They are linked together by the intervening sayings, and constitute with these a great ladder, of which the foot is fast on earth, and the top fixed in heaven. On the one hand, He owns the lowest necessities; on the other, He makes the highest claims. Let us ponder on this remarkable juxtaposition, and try to gather the lessons that are plain in it.

I. First, then, I think we see here the mystery of the dependent Christ.

'Give Me to drink': 'I am He.' Try to see the thing for a moment with the woman's eyes. She comes down from her little village, up amongst the cliffs on the hillside, across the narrow, hot valley, beneath the sweltering sunshine reflected from the bounding mountains, and she finds, in the midst of the lush vegetation round the ancient well, a solitary, weary Jew, travel-worn, evidently exhausted-for His disciples had gone away to buy food, and He was too wearied to go with them-looking into the well, but having no dipper or vessel by which to get any of its cool treasure. We lose a great deal of the meaning of Christ's request if we suppose that it was merely a way of getting into conversation with the woman, a ‘breaking of the ice.’ It was a great deal more than that. It was the utterance of a felt and painful necessity, which He Himself could not supply without a breach of what He conceived to be His filial dependence. He could have brought water out of the well. He did not need to depend upon the pitcher that the disciples had perhaps unthinkingly carried away with them when they went to buy bread. He did not need to ask the woman to give, but He chose to do so. We lose much if we do not see in this incident far more than the woman saw, but we lose still more if we do not see what she did see. And the words which the Master spoke to her are no mere way of introducing a conversation on religious themes; but He asked for a draught which He needed, and which He had no other way of getting.

So, then, here stands, pathetically set forth before us, our Lord’s true participation in two of the distinguishing characteristics of our weak humanity-subjection to physical necessities and dependence on kindly help. We find Him weary, hungry, thirsty, sometimes slumbering. And all these instances are documents and proofs for us that He was a true man like ourselves, and that, like ourselves, He depended on ‘the woman that ministered to Him’ for the supply of His necessities, and so knew the limitations of our social and else helpless humanity.

But then a wearied and thirsty man is nothing of much importance. But here is a Man who humbled Himself to be weary and to thirst. The keynote of this Gospel, the one thought which unlocks all its treasures, and to the elucidation of which, in all its aspects, the whole book is devoted, is, ‘The Word was made flesh.’ Only when you let in the light of the last utterance of our text, ‘I that speak unto thee am He,’ do we understand the pathos, the sublimity, the depth and blessedness of meaning which lie in the first one, ‘Give Me to drink.’ When we see that He bowed Himself, and willingly stretched out His hands for the fetters, we come to understand the significance of these traces of His manhood. The woman says, with wonder, ‘How is it that Thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me?’ and that was wonderful. But, as He hints to her, if she had known more clearly who this Person was, that seemed to be a Jew, a deeper wonder would have crept over her spirit. The wonder is that the Eternal Word should need the water of the well, and should ask it of a poor human creature.

And why this humiliation? He could, as I have said, have wrought a miracle. He that fed five thousand, He that had turned water into wine at the rustic marriage-feast, would have had no difficulty in quenching His thirst if he had chosen to use His miraculous power therefore. But He here shows us that the true filial spirit will rather die than cast off its dependence on the Father, and the same motive which led Him to reject the temptation in the wilderness, and to answer with sublime confidence, ‘Man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word from the mouth of God,’ forbids Him here to use other means of securing the draught that He so needed than the appeal to the sympathy of an alien, and the swift compassion of a woman’s heart.

And then, let us remember that the motive of this willing acceptance of the limitations and weaknesses of humanity is, in the deepest analysis, simply His love to us; as the mediaeval hymn has it, ‘Seeking me, Thou satest weary.’

In that lonely Traveller, worn, exhausted, thirsty, craving for a draught of water from a stranger’s hand, is set forth ‘the glory of the Father, full of grace and truth.’ A strange manifestation of divine glory this! But if we understand that the glory of God is the lustrous light of His self-revealing love, perhaps we shall understand how, from that faint, craving voice, ‘Give Me to drink,’ that glory sounds forth more than in the thunders that rolled about the rocky peak of Sinai. Strange to think, brethren, that the voice from those lips dry with thirst, which was low and weak, was the voice that spoke to the sea, ‘Peace! be still,’ and there was a calm; that said to demons, ‘Come out of him!’ and they evacuated their fortress; that cast its command into the grave of Lazarus, and he came forth; and which one day all that are in the grave shall hear, and hearing shall obey. ‘Give Me to drink.’ ‘I that speak unto thee am He.’

II. Secondly, we may note here the self-revealing Christ.

The process by which Jesus gradually unveils His full character to this woman, so unspiritual and unsusceptible as she appeared at first sight to be, is interesting and instructive. It would occupy too much of your time for me to do more than set it before you in the barest outline. Noting the singular divergence between the two sayings which I have taken as our text, it is interesting to notice how the one gradually merges into the other. First of all, Jesus Christ, as it were, opens a finger of His hand to let the woman have a glimpse of the gift lying there, that that may kindle desire, and hints at some occult depth in His person and nature all undreamed of by her yet, and which would be the occasion of greater wonder, and of a reversal of their parts, if she knew it. Then, in answer to her, half understanding that He meant more than met the ear, and yet opposing the plain physical difficulties that were in the way, in that He had 'nothing to draw with, and the well is deep,' and asking whether He were greater than our father Jacob, who also had given, and given not only a draught, but the well, our Lord enlarges her vision of the blessedness of the gift, though He says but little more of its nature, except in so far as that may be gathered from the fact that the water that He will give will be a permanent source of satisfaction, forbidding the pangs of unquenched desire ever again to be felt as pangs; and from the other fact that it will be an inward possession, leaping up with a fountain's energy, and a life within itself, towards, and into everlasting life. Next, he strongly assails conscience and demands repentance, and reveals Himself as the reader of the secrets of the heart. Then He discloses the great truths of spiritual worship. And, finally, as a prince in disguise might do, He flings aside the mantle of which He had let a fold or two be blown back in the previous conversation, and stands confessed. 'I that speak unto thee am He.' That is to say, the kindling of desire, the proffer of the all-satisfying gift, the quickening of conscience, the revelation of a Father to be worshipped in spirit and in truth, and the final full disclosure of His person and office as the Giver of the gift which shall slake all the thirsts of men-these are the stages of His self-revelation.

Then note, not only the process, but the substance of the revelation of Himself. The woman had a far more spiritual and lofty conception of the office of Messiah than the Jews had. It is not the first time that heretics have reached a loftier ideal of some parts of the truth than the orthodox attain. To the Jew the Messiah was a conquering king, who would help them to ride on the necks of their enemies, and pay back their persecutions and oppressions. To this Samaritan woman-speaking, I suppose, the conceptions of her race-the Messiah was One who was to 'tell us all things.'

Jesus Christ accepts the position, endorses her anticipations, and in effect presents Himself before her and before us as the Fountain of all certitude and knowledge in regard to spiritual matters. For all that we can know, or need to know, with regard to God and man and their mutual relations; for all that we can or need know in regard to manhood, its ideal, its obligations, its possibilities, its destinies; for all that we need to know of men in their relation to one another, we have to turn to Jesus Christ, the Messiah, who 'will tell us all things.' He is the Fountain of light; He is the Foundation of certitude; and they who seek, not hypotheses and possibilities and conjectures and dreams, but the solid substance of a reliable knowledge, must grasp Him, and esteem the words of His mouth and the deeds of His life more than their necessary food.

He meets this woman's conceptions as He had met those of Nicodemus. To him He had unveiled Himself as the Son of God, and the Son of Man who came down from heaven, and is in heaven, and ascends to heaven. To the woman He reveals Himself as the Messiah, who will tell us all truth, and to both as the Giver of the gift which shall communicate and sustain and refresh the better life. But I cannot help dwelling for a moment upon the remarkable, beautiful, and significant designation which our Lord employs here. 'I that speak unto thee.' The word in the original, translated by our version 'speak,' is even more sweet, because more familiar, and conveys the idea of unrestrained frank intercourse. Perhaps we might render 'I who am talking with Thee!' and that our Lord desired to emphasise to the woman's heart the notion of His familiar intercourse with her, Messiah though He were, seems to me confirmed by the fact that He uses the same expression, with additional grace and tenderness about it, when He says, with such depth of meaning, to the blind man whom He had healed, 'Thou hast both seen Him,' with the eyes to which He gave sight and object of sight, 'and it is He that talketh with thee.' The familiar Christ who will come and speak to us face to face and heart to heart, 'as a man speaketh with his friend,' is the Christ who will tell us all things, and whom we may wholly trust.

Note too how this revelation has for its condition the docile acceptance of the earlier and imperfect teachings. If the woman had not yielded herself to our Lord's earlier words, and, though with very dim insight, yet with a heart that sought to be taught, followed Him as He stepped from round to round of the ascending ladder, she had never stood on the top and seen this great vision. If you see nothing more in Jesus Christ than a man like yourself, compassed with our infirmities, and yet sweet and gracious and good and pure, be true to what you know, and put it into practice, and be ready to accept all the light that dawns. They that begin down at the bottom with hearing 'Give me to drink,' may stand at the top, and hear Him speak to them His unveiled truth and His full glory. 'To him that hath shall be given.' 'If any man wills to do His will he shall know of the teaching.'

III. Lastly, we have here the universal Christ.

The woman wondered that, being a Jew, He spoke to her. As I have said, our Lord's first utterance is simply the expression of a real physical necessity. But it is none the less what the woman felt it to be, a strange overleaping of barriers that towered very high. A Samaritan, a woman, a sinner, is the recipient of the first clear confession from Jesus Christ of His Messiahship and dignity. She was right in her instinct that something lay behind His sweeping aside of the barriers and coming so close to her with His request. These two, the prejudices of race and the contempt for woman, two of the crying evils of the old world, were overpassed by our Lord as if He never saw them. They were too high for men's puny limbs; they made no obstacle to the march of His divine compassion. And therein lies a symbol, if you like, but none the less a prophecy that will be fulfilled, of the universal adaptation and destination of the Gospel, and its independence of all distinctions of race and sex, condition, moral character. In Jesus Christ 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, neither bond nor free'; ye 'are all one in Christ.' If He had been but a Jew, it was wonderful that He should talk to a Samaritan. But there is nothing in the character and life of Christ, as recorded in Scripture, more remarkable and more plain than the entire absence of any racial peculiarities, or of characteristics owing to His position in space or time. So unlike His nation was He that the very elite of His nation snarled at Him and said, 'Thou art a Samaritan!' So unlike them was He that one feels that a character so palpitatingly human to its core, and so impossible to explain from its surroundings, is inexplicable, but on the New Testament theory that He is not a Jew, or man only, but the Son of Man, the divine embodiment of the ideal of humanity, whose dwelling was on earth, but His origin and home in the bosom of God. Therefore Jesus

Christ is the world’s Christ, your Christ, my Christ, every man’s Christ, the Tree of Life that stands in the midst of the garden, that all men may draw near to it and gather of its fruit.

Brother, answer His proffer of the gift as this woman did: ‘Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not; neither go all the way to the world’s broken cisterns to draw’; and He will put into your hearts that indwelling fountain of life, so that you may say like this woman’s townspeople: ‘Now I have heard Him myself, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world.’

26)John 4:32

John

THE WEARIED CHRIST

Joh. 4:6, Joh. 4:32.

Two pictures result from these two verses, each striking in itself, and gaining additional emphasis by the contrast. It was during a long hot day’s march that the tired band of pedestrians turned into the fertile valley. There, whilst the disciples went into the little hill-village to purchase, if they could, some food from the despised inhabitants, Jesus, apparently too exhausted to accompany them, ‘sat thus on the well.’ That little word thus seems to have a force difficult to reproduce in English. It is apparently intended to enhance the idea of utter weariness, either because the word ‘wearied’ is in thought to be supplied, ‘sat, being thus wearied, on the well’; or because it conveys the notion which might be expressed by our ‘just as He was’; as a tired man flings Himself down anywhere and anyhow, without any kind of preparation beforehand, and not much caring where it is that he rests.

Thus, utterly worn out, Jesus Christ sits on the well, whilst the western sun lengthens out the shadows on the plain. The disciples come back, and what a change they find. Hunger gone, exhaustion ended, fresh vigour in their wearied Master. What had made the difference? The woman’s repentance and joy. And He unveils the secret of His reinvigoration when He says, ‘I have meat to eat that ye know not of’-the hidden manna. ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work.’

Now, I think if we take just three points of view, we shall gain the lessons of this remarkable contrast. Note, then, the weary Christ; the devoted Christ; the reinvigorated Christ.

I. The wearied Christ.

How precious it is to us that this Gospel, which has the loftiest things to say about the manifest divinity of our Lord, and the glory that dwelt in Him, is always careful to emphasise also the manifest limitations and weaknesses of the Manhood. John never forgets either term of his great sentence in which all the gospel is condensed, ‘the Word became flesh.’ Ever he shows us ‘the Word’; ever ‘the flesh.’ Thus it is he only who records the saying on the Cross, ‘I thirst.’ It is he who tells us how Jesus Christ, not merely for the sake of getting a convenient opening of a conversation, or to conciliate prejudices, but because He needed what He asked, said to the woman of Samaria, ‘Give Me to drink.’ So the weariness of the Master stands forth for us as pathetic proof that it was no shadowy investiture with an apparent Manhood to which He stooped, but a real participation in our limitations and weaknesses, so that work to Him was fatigue, even though in Him dwelt the manifest glory of that divine nature which ‘fainteth not, neither is weary.’

Not only does this pathetic incident teach us for our firmer faith, and more sympathetic and closer apprehension, the reality of the Manhood of Jesus Christ, but it supplies likewise some imperfect measure of His love, and reveals to us one condition of His power. Ah! if He had not Himself known weariness He never could have said, ‘Come unto Me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’ It was because Himself ‘took our infirmities,’ and amongst these the weakness of tired muscles and exhausted frame, that ‘He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might He increaseth strength.’ The Creator must have no share in the infirmities of the creature. It must be His unwearied power that calls them all by their names; and because He is great in might ‘not one’ of the creatures of His hand can ‘fail.’ But the Redeemer must participate in that from which He redeems; and the condition of His strength being ‘made perfect in our weakness’ is that our weakness shall have cast a shadow upon the glory of His strength. The measure of His love is seen in that, long before Calvary, He entered into the humiliation and sufferings and sorrows of humanity; a condition of His power is seen in that, forasmuch as the 'children were partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same,' not only that 'through death He might deliver' from death, but that in life He might redeem from the ills and sorrows of life.

Nor does that exhausted Figure, reclining on Jacob's Well, preach to us only what He was. It proclaims to us likewise what we should be. For if His work was carried on to the edge of His capacity, and if He shrank not from service because it involved toil, what about the professing followers of Jesus Christ, who think that they are exempted from any form of service because they can plead that it will weary them? What about those who say that they tread in His footsteps, and have never known what it was to yield up one comfort, one moment of leisure, one thrill of enjoyment, or to encounter one sacrifice, one act of self-denial, one aching of weariness for the sake of the Lord who bore all for them? The wearied Christ proclaims His manhood, proclaims His divinity and His love, and rebukes us who consent to 'walk in the way of His commandments' only on condition that it can be done without dust or heat; and who are ready to run the race that is set before us, only if we can come to the goal without perspiration or turning a hair. 'Jesus, being wearied with His journey, sat thus on the well.'

II. Still further, notice here the devoted Christ.

It is not often that He lets us have a glimpse into the innermost chambers of His heart, in so far as the impelling motives of His course are concerned. But here He lays them bare. 'My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me, and to finish His work.'

Now, it is no mere piece of grammatical pedantry when I ask you to notice that the language of the original is so constructed as to give prominence to the idea that the aim of Christ's life was the doing of the Father's will; and that it is the aim rather than the actual performance and realisation of the aim which is pointed at by our Lord. The words would be literally rendered 'My meat is that I may do the will of Him that sent Me and finish His work'-that is to say, the very nourishment and refreshment of Christ was found in making the accomplishment of the Father's commandment His ever-impelling motive, His ever-pursued goal. The expression carries us into the inmost heart of Jesus, dealing, as it does, with the one all-pervading motive rather than with the resulting actions, fair and holy as these were.

Brethren, the secret of our lives, if they are at all to be worthy and noble, must be the same-the recognition, not only as they say now, that we have a mission, but that there is a Sender; which is a wholly different view of our position, and that He who sends is the loving Father, who has spoken to us in that dear Son, who Himself made it His aim thus to obey, in order that it might be possible for us to re-echo His voice, and to repeat His aim. The recognition of the Sender, the absolute submission of our wills to His, must run through all the life. You may do your daily work, whatever it be, with this for its motto, ‘the will of the Lord be done’; and they who thus can look at their trade, or profession, and see the trivialities and monotonies of their daily occupations, in the transfiguring light of that great thought, will never need to complain that life is small, ignoble, wearisome, insignificant. As with pebbles in some clear brook with the sunshine on it, the water in which they are sunk glorifies and magnifies them. If you lift them out, they are but bits of dull stone; lying beneath the sunlit ripples they are jewels. Plunge the prose of your life, and all its trivialities, into that great stream, and it will magnify and glorify the smallest and the homeliest. Absolute submission to the divine will, and the ever-present thrilling consciousness of doing it, were the secret of Christ’s life, and ought to be the secret of ours.

Note the distinction between doing the will and perfecting the work. That implies that Jesus Christ, like us, reached forward, in each successive act of obedience to the successive manifestations of the Father’s will, to something still undone. The work will never be perfected or finished except on condition of continual fulfilment, moment by moment, of the separate behests of that divine will. For the Lord, as for His servants, this was the manner of obedience, that He ‘pressed towards the mark,’ and by individual acts of conformity secured that at last the whole ‘work’ should have been so completely accomplished that He might be able to say upon the Cross, ‘It is finished.’ If we have any right to call ourselves His, we too have thus to live.

III. Lastly, notice the reinvigorated Christ.

I have already pointed out the lovely contrast between the two pictures, the beginning and the end of this incident; so I need not dwell upon that. The disciples wondered when they found that Christ desired and needed none of the homely sustenance that they had brought to Him. And when He answered their sympathy rather than their curiosity-for they did not ask Him any questions, but they said to Him, ‘Master, eat’-with ‘I have meat to eat that ye know not of,’ they, in their blind, blundering fashion, could only imagine that some one had brought Him something. So they gave occasion for the great words upon which we have been touching.

Notice, however, that Christ here sets forth the lofty aim at conformity to the divine will and fulfilment of the divine Work as being the meat of the soul. It is the true food for us all. The spirit which feeds upon such food will grow and be nourished. And the soul which feeds upon its own will and fancies, and not upon the plain brown bread of obedience, which is wholesome, though it be often bitter, will feed upon ashes, which will grate upon the teeth and hurt the palate. Such a soul will be like those wretched infants that are discovered sometimes at ‘baby-farms,’ starved and stunted, and not grown to half their right size. If you would have your spirits strong, robust, well nourished, live by obedience, and let the will of God be the food of your souls, and all will be well.

Souls thus fed can do without a good deal that others need. Why, enthusiasm for anything lifts a man above physical necessities and lower desires, even in its poorest forms. A regiment of soldiers making a forced march, or an athlete trying to break the record, will tramp, tramp on, not needing food, or rest, or sleep, until they have achieved their purpose, poor and ignoble though it may be. In all regions of life, enthusiasm and lofty aims make the soul lord of the body and of the world.

And in the Christian life we shall be thus lords, exactly in proportion to the depth and earnestness of our desires to do the will of God. They who thus are fed can afford ‘to scorn delights and live laborious days.’ They who thus are fed can afford to do with plain living, if there be high impulses as well as high thinking. And sure I am that nothing is more certain to stamp out the enthusiasm of obedience which ought to mark the Christian life than the luxurious fashion of living which is getting so common to-day amongst professing Christians.

It is not in vain that we read the old story about the Jewish boys whose faces were radiant and whose flesh was firmer when they were fed on pulse and water than on all the wine and dainties of the Babylonish court. ‘Set a knife to thy throat if thou be a man given to appetite,’ and let us remember that the less we use, and the less we feel that we need, of outward goods, the nearer do we approach to the condition in which holy desires and lofty aims will visit our spirits.

I commend to you, brethren, the story of our text, in its most literal application, as well as in the loftier spiritual lessons that may be drawn from it. To be near Christ, and to desire to live for Him, delivers us from dependence upon earthly things; and in those who thus do live the old word shall be fulfilled, ‘Better is a little that a righteous man hath, than the abundance of many wicked.’

27)John 4:54

John

THE SECOND MIRACLE

Joh. 4:54.

The Evangelist evidently intends us to connect together the two miracles in Cana. His object may, possibly, be mainly chronological, and to mark the epochs in our Lord’s ministry. But we cannot fail to see how remarkably these two miracles are contrasted. The one takes place at a wedding, a homely scene of rural festivity and gladness. But life has deeper things in it than gladness, and a Saviour who preferred the house of feasting to the house of mourning would be no Saviour for us. The second miracle, then, turns to the darker side of human experience. The happiest home has its saddened hours; the truest marriage joy has associated with it many a care and many an anxiety. Therefore, He who began by breathing blessing over wedded joy goes on to answer the piteous pleading of parental anxiety. It was fitting that the first miracle should deal with gladness, for that is God’s purpose for His creatures, and that the second should deal with sicknesses and sorrows, which are additions to that purpose made needful by sin.

Again, the first miracle was wrought without intercession, as the outcome of Christ’s own determination that His hour for working it was come. The second miracle was drawn from Him by the imperfect faith and the agonising pleading of the father.

But the great peculiarity of this second miracle in Cana is that it is moulded throughout so as to develop and perfect a weak faith. Notice how there are three words in the narrative, each of which indicates a stage in the history. ‘Except ye see signs and wonders ye will not believe.’ . . . ‘The man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way.’ . . . ‘Himself believed and his whole house.’

We have here, then, Christ manifested as the Discerner, the Rebuker, the Answerer, and therefore the Strengthener, of a very insufficient and ignorant faith. It is a lovely example of the truth of that ancient prophecy, ‘He will not quench the smoking flax.’ So these three stages, as it seems to me, are the three points to observe. We have, first of all, Christ lamenting over an imperfect faith. Then we have Him testing, and so strengthening, a growing faith. And then we have the absent Christ rewarding and crowning a tested faith. I think if we look at these three stages in the story we shall get the main points which the Evangelist intends us to observe.

I. First, then, we have here our Lord lamenting over an ignorant and sensuous faith.

At first sight His words, in response to the hurried, eager appeal of the father, seem to be strangely unfeeling, far away from the matter in hand. Think of how breathlessly, feeling that not an instant is to be lost, the poor man casts himself at the Master’s feet, and pleads that his boy is ‘at the point of death.’ And just think how, like a dash of cold water upon this hot impatience, must have come these strange words that seem to overleap his case altogether, and to be gazing beyond him-’Except ye see signs and wonders ye will not believe.’ ‘What has that to do with me and my dying boy, and my impatient agony of petition?’ ‘It has everything to do with you.’

It is the revelation, first of all, of Christ's singular calmness and majestic leisure, which befitted Him who needed not to hurry, because He was conscious of absolute power. As when the pleading message was sent to Him: 'He whom Thou lovest is sick, He abode still two days in the same place where He was'; because He loved Lazarus and Martha and Mary; and just as when Jairus is hurrying Him to the bed where his child lies dead, He pauses on the way to attend to the petition of another sufferer; so, in like calmness of majestic leisure, He here puts aside the apparently pressing and urgent necessity in order to deal with a far deeper, more pressing one.

For in the words there is not only a revelation of our Lord's majestic leisure, but there is also an indication of what He thought of most importance in His dealing with men. It was worthy of His care to heal the boy; it was far more needful that He should train and lead the father to faith. The one can wait much better than the other.

And there is in the words, too, something like a sigh of profound sorrow. Christ is not so much rebuking as lamenting. It is His own pained heart that speaks; He sees in the man before Him more than the man's words indicated; reading his heart with that divine omniscience which pierces beyond the surface, and beholding in him the very same evil which affected all his countrymen. So He speaks to him as one of a class, and thus somewhat softens the rebuke even while the answer to the nobleman's petition seems thereby to become still less direct, and His own sorrowful gaze at the wide-reaching spirit of blindness seems thereby to become more absorbed and less conscious of the individual sufferer kneeling at His feet.

Christ had just come from Samaria, the scorn of the Jews, and there He had found people who needed no miracles, whose conception of the Messiah was not that of a mere wonder-worker, but of one who will 'tell us all things,' and who believed on Him not because of the portents which He wrought, but because they heard Him themselves, and His words touched their consciences and stirred strange longings in their hearts. On the other hand, this Evangelist has carefully pointed out in the preceding chapters how such recognition as Christ had thus far received 'in His own country' had been entirely owing to His miracles, and had been therefore regarded by Christ Himself as quite unreliable [Joh. 2:23 - Joh. 2:25], while even

Nicodemus, the Pharisee, had seen no better reason for regarding Him as a divinely sent Teacher than ‘these miracles that Thou doest.’ And now here He is no sooner across the border again than the same spirit meets Him. He hears it even in the pleading, tearful tones of the father’s voice, and that so clearly that it is for a moment more prominent even to His pity than the agony and the prayer. And over that Christ sorrows. Why? Because, to their own impoverishing, the nobleman and his fellows were blind to all the beauty of His character. The graciousness of His nature was nothing to them. They had no eyes for His tenderness and no ears for His wisdom; but if some vulgar sign had been wrought before them, then they would have run after Him with their worthless faith. And that struck a painful chord in Christ’s heart when He thought of how all the lavishing of His love, all the grace and truth which shone radiant and lambent in His life, fell upon blind eyes, incapable of beholding His beauty; and of how the manifest revelation of a Godlike character had no power to do what could be done by a mere outward wonder.

This is not to disparage the ‘miraculous evidence.’ It is only to put in its proper place the spirit, which was blind to the self-attesting glory of His character, which beheld it and did not recognise it as ‘the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father.’

That very same blindness to the divine which is in Jesus Christ, because material things alone occupy the heart and appeal to the mind, is still the disease of humanity. It still drives a knife into the loving heart of the pitying and helpful Christ. The special form which it takes in such a story as this before us is long since gone. The sense-bound people of this generation do not ask for signs. Miracles are rather a hindrance than a help to the reception of Christianity in many quarters. People are more willing to admire, after a fashion, the beauty of Christ’s character, and the exalted purity of His teaching [meaning thereby, generally, the parts of it which are not exclusively His], than to accept His miracles. So far round has the turn in the wheel gone in these days.

But although the form is entirely different the spirit still remains. Are there not plenty of us to whom sense is the only certitude? We think that the only knowledge is the knowledge that comes to us from that which we can see and touch and handle, and the inferences that we may draw from these; and to many all that world of thought and beauty, all those divine manifestations of tenderness and grace, are but mist and cloudland. Intellectually, though in a somewhat modified sense, this generation has to take the rebuke: ‘Except ye see, ye will not believe.’

And practically do not the great mass of men regard the material world as all-important, and work done or progress achieved there as alone deserving the name of ‘work’ or ‘progress,’ while all the glories of a loving Christ are dim and unreal to their sense-bound eyes? Is it not true to-day, as it was in the old time, that if a man would come among you, and bring you material good, that would be the prophet for you? True wisdom, beauty, elevating thoughts, divine revelations; all these go over your heads. But when a man comes and multiplies loaves, then you say, ‘This is of a truth the prophet that should come into the world.’ ‘Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe.’

And on the other side, is it not sadly true about those of us who have the purest and the loftiest faith, that we feel often as if it was very hard, almost impossible, to keep firm our grasp of One who never is manifested to our sense? Do we not often feel, ‘O that I could for once, for once only, hear a voice that would speak to my outward ear, or see some movement of a divine hand’? The loftiest faith still leans towards, and has an hankering after, some external and visible manifestation, and we need to subject ourselves to the illuminating rebuke of the Master who says, ‘Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe,’ and, therefore, your faith that craves the support of some outward thing, and often painfully feels that it is feeble without it, is as yet but very imperfect and rudimentary.

II. And so we have here, as the next stage of the narrative, our Lord testing, and thus strengthening, a growing faith.

The nobleman’s answer to our Lord’s strange words sounds, at first sight, as if these had passed over him, producing no effect at all. ‘Sir, come down ere my child die’; it is almost as if he had said, ‘Do not talk to me about these things at present. Come and heal my boy. That is what I want; and we will speak of other matters some other time.’ But it is not exactly that. Clearly enough, at all events, he did not read in Christ’s words a reluctance to yield to his request, still less a refusal of it. Clearly he did not misunderstand the sad rebuke which they conveyed, else he would not have ventured to reiterate his petition. He does not pretend to anything more than he has, he does not seek to disclaim the condemnation that Christ brings against him, nor to assume that he has a loftier degree or a purer kind of faith than he possesses. He holds fast by so much of Christ's character as he can apprehend; and that is the beginning of all progress. What he knows he knows. He has sore need; that is something. He has come to the Helper; that is more. He is only groping after Him, but he will not say a word beyond what he knows and feels; and, therefore, there is something in him to work upon; and faith is already beginning to bud and blossom. And so his prayer is his best answer to Christ's word: 'Sir, come down ere my child die.'

Ah! dear brethren, any true man who has ever truly gone to Christ with a sense even of some outward and temporal need, and has ever really prayed at all, has often to pass through this experience, that the first result of his agonising cry shall be only the revelation to him of the unworthiness and imperfection of his own faith, and that there shall seem to be strange delay in the coming of the blessing so longed for. And the true attitude for a man to take when there is unveiled before him, in his consciousness, in answer to his cry for help, the startling revelation of his own unworthiness and imperfection-the true answer to such dealing is simply to reiterate the cry. And then the Master bends to the petition, and because He sees that the second prayer has in it less of sensuousness than the first, and that some little germ of a higher faith is beginning to open, He yields, and yet He does not yield. 'Sir, come down ere my child die.' Jesus saith unto him, 'Go thy way, thy son liveth.'

Why did He not go with the suppliant? Why, in the act of granting, does He refuse? For the suppliant's sake. The whole force and beauty of the story come out yet more vividly if we take the contrast between it and the other narrative, which presents some points of similarity with it-that of the healing of the centurion's servant at Capernaum. There the centurion prays that Christ would but speak, and Christ says, 'I will come.' There the centurion does not feel that His presence is necessary, but that His word is enough. Here the nobleman says 'Come,' because it has never entered his mind that Christ can do anything unless He stands like a doctor by the boy's bed. And he says, too, ‘Come, ere my child die,’ because it has never entered his mind that Christ can do anything if his boy has once passed the dark threshold.

And because his faith is thus feeble, Christ refuses its request, because He knows that so to refuse is to strengthen. Asked but to ‘speak’ by a strong faith, He rewards it by more than it prays, and offers to ‘come.’ Asked to ‘come’ by a weak faith, He rewards it by less, which yet is more, than it had requested; and refuses to come, that He may heal at a distance; and thus manifests still more wondrously His power and His grace.

His gentle and wise treatment is telling; and he who was so sense-bound that ‘unless he saw signs and wonders he would not believe,’ turns and goes away, bearing the blessing, as he trusts, in his hands, while yet there is no sign whatever that he has received it.

Think of what a change had passed upon that man in the few moments of his contact with Christ. When he ran to His feet, all hot and breathless and impatient, with his eager plea, he sought only for the deliverance of his boy, and sought it at the moment, and cared for nothing else. When he goes away from Him, a little while afterwards, he has risen to this height, that he believes the bare word, and turns his back upon the Healer, and sets his face to Capernaum in the confidence that he possesses the unseen gift. So has his faith grown.

And that is what you and I have to do. We have Christ’s bare word, and no more, to trust to for everything. We must be content to go out of the presence-chamber of the King with only His promise, and to cleave to that. A feeble faith requires the support of something sensuous and visible, as some poor trailing plant needs a prop round which it may twist its tendrils. A stronger faith strides away from the Master, happy and peaceful in its assured possession of a blessing for which it has nothing to rely upon but a simple bare word. That is the faith that we have to exercise. Christ has spoken. That was enough for this man, who from the babyhood of Christian experience sprang at once to its maturity. Is it enough for you? Are you content to say, ‘Thy word, Thy naked word, is all that I need, for Thou hast spoken, and Thou wilt do it’?

‘Go thy way; thy son liveth.’ What a test! Suppose the father had not gone his way, would his son have lived? No! The son’s life and the father’s reception from Christ of what he asked were suspended upon that one moment. Will he trust Him, or will he not? Will he linger, or will he depart? He departs, and in the act of trusting he gets the blessing, and his boy is saved.

And look how the narrative hints to us of the perfect confidence of the father now. Cana was only a few miles from Capernaum. The road from the little city upon the hill down to where the waters of the lake flashed in the sunshine by the quays of Capernaum was only a matter of a few hours; but it was the next day, and well on into the next day, before he met the servants that came to him with the news of his boy’s recovery. So sure was he that his petition was answered that he did not hurry to return home, but leisurely and quietly went onwards the next day to his child. Think of the difference between the breathless rush up to Cana, and the quiet return from it. ‘He that believeth shall not make haste.’

III. And so, lastly, we have here the absent Christ crowning and rewarding the faith which has been tested.

We have the picture of the father’s return. The servants meet him. Their message, which they deliver before he has time to speak, is singularly a verbal repetition of the promise of the Master, ‘Thy son liveth.’ His faith, though it be strong, has not yet reached to the whole height of the blessing, for he inquires ‘at what hour he began to amend,’ expecting some slow and gradual recovery; and he is told ‘that at the seventh hour,’ the hour when the Master spoke, ‘the fever left him,’ and all at once and completely was he cured. So, more than his faith had expected is given to him; and Christ, when he lays His hand upon a man, does His work thoroughly, though not always at once.

Why was the miracle wrought in that strange fashion? Why did our Lord fling out His power as from a distance rather than go and stand at the boy’s bedside? We have already seen the reason in the peculiar condition of the father’s mind; but now notice what it was that he had learned by such a method of healing, not only the fact of Christ’s healing power, but also the fact that the bare utterance of His will, whether He were present or absent, had power. And so a loftier conception of Christ would begin to dawn on him.

And for us that working of Christ at a distance is prophetic. It represents to us His action to-day. Still He answers our cries that He would come down to our help by sending forth from the city on the hills, the city of the wedding feast, His healing power to descend upon the sick-beds and the sorrows and the sins that afflict the villages beneath. 'He sendeth forth His commandment upon earth, His word runneth very swiftly.'

This new experience enlarged and confirmed the man's faith. The second stage to which he had been led by Christ's treatment was simply belief in our Lord's specific promise, an immense advance on his first position of belief which needed sight as its basis.

But he had not yet come to the full belief of, and reliance upon, that Healer recognised as Messiah. But the experience which he now has had, though it be an experience based upon miracle, is the parent of a faith which is not merely the child of wonder, nor the result of beholding an outward sign. And so we read:-'So the father knew that it was at the same hour in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth. And himself believed and his whole house.'

A partial faith brings experience which confirms and enlarges faith; and they who dimly apprehend Him, and yet humbly love Him, and imperfectly trust Him, will receive into their bosoms such large gifts of His love and gracious Spirit that their faith will be strengthened, and they will grow into the full stature of peaceful confidence.

The way to increase faith is to exercise faith. And the true parent of perfect faith is the experience of the blessings that come from the crudest, rudest, narrowest, blindest, feeblest faith that a man can exercise. Trust Him as you can, do not be afraid of inadequate conceptions, or of a feeble grasp. Trust Him as you can, and He will give you so much more than you expected that you will trust Him more, and be able to say: 'Now I believe, because I have heard Him myself, and know that this is the Christ, the Saviour of the world.'

28)John 5:8

John

THE THIRD MIRACLE IN JOHN’S GOSPEL

Joh. 5:8.

This third of the miracles recorded in John’s Gospel finds a place there, as it would appear, for two reasons: first, because it marks the beginning of the angry unbelief on the part of the Jewish rulers, the development of which it is one part of the purpose of this Gospel to trace; second, because it is the occasion for that great utterance of our Lord about His Sonship and His divine working as the Father also works, which occupies the whole of the rest of the chapter, and is the foundation of much which follows in the Gospel. It is for these reasons, and not for the mere sake of adding another story of a miraculous cure to the many which the other Evangelists have given us, that John narrates for us this history.

If, then, we consider the reason for the introduction of the miracle into the Gospel, we may be saved from the necessity of dwelling, except very lightly, upon some of the preliminary details which preceded the actual cure. It does not matter much to us for our present purpose which Feast it was on which Jesus went up to Jerusalem, nor whether the pool was by the sheep-market or by the sheep-gate, nor whereabouts in Jerusalem Bethesda might happen to be. It may be of importance for us to notice that the mention of the angel who appears in the fourth verse is not a part of the original narrative. The true text only tells us of an intermittent pool which possessed, or was supposed to possess, curative energy; and round which the kindness of some forgotten benefactor had built five rude porches. There lay a crowd of wasted forms, and pale, sorrowful faces, with all varieties of pain and emaciation and impotence marked upon them, who yet were gathered in Bethesda, which being interpreted means ‘a house of mercy.’ It is the type of a world full of men suffering various sicknesses, but all sick; the type of a world that gathers with an eagerness, not far removed from despair, round anything that seems to promise, however vaguely, to help and to heal; the type of a world, blessed be God, which, amidst all its sad variety of woe and weariness, yet sits in the porches of ‘a house of mercy,’ and has in the midst a ‘fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness,’ whose energy is as mighty for the last comer of all the generations as for the first that stepped into its cleansing flood.

This poor man, sick and impotent for eight and thirty years-many of which he had spent, as it would appear, day by day, wearily dragging his paralysed limbs to the fountain with daily diminishing hope-this poor man attracts the regard of Christ when He enters, and He puts to him the strange question, ‘Wilt thou be made whole?’ Surely there was no need to ask that; but no doubt the many disappointments and the long years of waiting and of suffering had stamped apathy upon the sufferer’s face, and Christ saw that the first thing that was needed, in order that His healing power might have a point of contact in the man’s nature, was to kindle some little flicker of hope in him once more.

And so, no doubt, with a smile on His face, which converted the question into an offer, He says: ‘Wilt thou be made whole?’ meaning thereby to say, ‘I will heal thee if thou wilt.’ And there comes the weary answer, as if the man had said: ‘Will I be made whole? What have I been lying here all these years for? I have nobody to put me into the pool.’

Yes, it is a hopeful prospect to hold out to a man whose disease is inability to walk, that if he will walk to the water he will get cured, and be able to walk afterwards. Why, he could not even roll himself into the pond, and so there he had lain, a type of the hopeless efforts at self-healing which we sick men put forth, a type of the tantalising gospels which the world preaches to its subjects when it says to a paralysed man: ‘Walk that you may be healed; keep the commandments that you may enter into life.’

And so we have come at last to the main point of the narrative before us, and I fix upon these words, the actual words in which the cure was conveyed, as communicating to us some very important lessons and thoughts about Christ and our relation to Him.

I. First, I see in them Christ manifesting Himself as the Giver of power to the powerless who trust Him.

His words may seem at first hearing to partake of the very same almost cruel irony as the condition of cure which had already proved hopelessly impracticable. He, too, says, ‘Walk that you may be cured’; and He says it to a paralysed and impotent man. But the two things are very different, for before this cripple could attempt to drag his impotent limbs into an upright position, and take up the little light couch and sling it over his shoulders, he must have had some kind of trust in the person that told him to do so. A very ignorant trust, no doubt, it was; but all that was set before him about Jesus Christ he grasped and rested upon. He only knew Him as a Healer, and he trusted Him as such. The contents of a man’s faith have nothing to do with the reality of his faith; and he that, having only had the healing power of Christ revealed to him, lays hold of that Healer, cleaves to Him with as genuine a faith as the man who has the whole fulness and sublimity of Christ’s divine and human character and redeeming work laid out before him, and who cleaves to these. The hand that grasps is one, whatsoever be the thing that it grasps.

So it is no spiritualising of this story, or reading into it a deeper and more religious meaning than belongs to it, to say that what passed in that man's heart and mind before he caught up his little bed and walked away with it, was essentially the same action of mind and heart by which a sinful man, who knows that Christ is his Redeemer, grasps His Cross and trusts his soul to Him. In the one case, as in the other, there is confidence in the person; only in the one case the person was only known as a Healer, and in the other the person is known as a Saviour. But the faith is the same whatever it apprehends.

Christ comes and says to him, 'Rise, take up thy bed and walk.' There is a movement of confidence in the man's heart; he tries to obey, and in the act of obedience the power comes to him.

Ah, brother! it is always so. All Christ's commandments are gifts. When He says to you, 'Do this!' He pledges Himself to give you power to do it. Whatsoever He enjoins He strengthens for. He binds Himself, by His commandments, and every word of His lips which says to us 'Thou shalt!' contains as its kernel a word of His which says 'I will.' So when He commands, He bestows; and we get the power to keep His commandments when in humble faith we make the effort to do His will. It is only when we try to obey for the love's sake of Him that has healed us that we are able to obey. And be sure of this, whensoever we attempt to do what we know to be the Master's will, because He has given Himself for us, our power will be equal to our desire, and enough for our duty. As St. Augustine says: 'Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt.'

'Rise, take up thy bed and walk,' or as in another case, 'Stretch forth thy hand.' 'And he stretched it forth, and his hand was restored whole as the other.' Christ gives power to keep His commandments to the impotent who try to obey, because they have been healed by Him.

II. In the next place, we have in this miracle our Lord set forth as the absolute Master, because He is the Healer.

The Pharisees and their friends had no eyes for the miracle; but if they found a man carrying his light couch on the Sabbath day, that was a thing that excited their interest, and must be seen to immediately.

And so, paying no attention to the fact that it was a paralysed man who was doing this, with the true narrow instinct of the formalist, they lay hold only of the fact of the broken Rabbinical restrictions, and try to stop him with these. ‘It is the Sabbath day! It is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed.’

And they get an answer which goes a great deal deeper than the speaker knew, and puts the whole subject of Christian obedience on its right footing. ‘He answered them, He that made me whole, the same said unto me, Take up thy bed and walk.’ As if he had said: ‘He gave me the power, had He not a right to tell me what to do with it? It was His gift that I could lift my bed; was I not bound to walk when and where He that had made me able to walk at all chose to bid me?’

And if you generalise that it just comes to this: the only person that has a right to command you is the Christ who saves you. He has the absolute authority to do as He will with your restored spiritual powers, because He has bestowed them all upon you. His dominion is built upon His benefits. He is the King because He is the Saviour. He rules because He has redeemed. He begins with giving, and it is only afterwards that He commands; and He turns to each of us with that smile upon His lips, and with tenderness in His voice which will bind any man, who is not an ingrate, to Him for ever. ‘If ye love Me, keep My commandments.’

There is always something hard and distasteful to the individual will in the tone of authority assumed by any man whatsoever. We always more or less rebel and shrink from that; and there is only one thing that makes commandment sweet, and that is when it drops like honey from the honeycomb, from lips that we love. So does it in the case of Christ’s commands to us. It is joy to know and to do the will of One to whom the whole heart turns with gratitude and affection. And Christ blesses and privileges us by the communication to us of His pleasure concerning us, that we may have the gladness of yielding to His desires, and so meeting the love which commands with the happy love which obeys. ‘He that made me whole, the same said unto me . . . ‘ and what He says it must be joy to do.

So, ‘My yoke is easy and My burden is light,’ not because Christ diminishes the requirements of law; not because the standard of Christian obedience is lowered beneath any other standard of conduct and character. It is far higher. The things which make Christian duty are often very painful in themselves. There is always self-sacrifice in Christian virtue, and self-sacrifice has always a sting in it; but the ‘yoke is easy and the burden is light,’ because, if I may so say, the yoke is padded with the softest velvet of love, and lies upon our necks lightly because He has laid it there. All the rigid harshness of precept is done away when the precept comes from Christ’s lips, and His commandment ‘makes the crooked things straight and the rough places plain’; and turns duty, distasteful duty, into joyful service. The blessed basis of Christian obedience, and of Christ’s authority, is Christ’s redemption.

III. And then, still further, we have here our Lord setting Himself forth as the divine Son, whose working needs and knows no rest.

We find, in the subsequent part of the chapter, that ‘the Jews,’ as they are called, by which is meant the antagonistic portion of the nation, sought to slay Christ ‘because He had done these things on the Sabbath day.’ But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.’ Unquestionably the form which the healing took was intended by our Lord to bring into prominence the very point which these pedantic casuists laid hold of. He meant to draw attention to His sweeping aside of the Rabbinical casuistries of the law of the Sabbath. And He meant to do it in order that He might have the occasion of making this mighty claim, which is lodged in these solemn and profound words, to possess a Sonship, which, like the divine working, wrought, needing and knowing no repose.

‘My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.’ The rest, which the old story in Genesis attributed to the Creator after the Creation, was not to be construed as if it meant the rest of inactivity; but it was the rest of continuous action. God’s rest and God’s work are one. Throughout all the ages preservation is a continuous creation. The divine energy is streaming out for evermore, as the bush that burns unconsumed, as the sun that flames undiminished for ever, pouring out from the depth of that divine nature, and for ever sustaining a universe. So that there is no Sabbath, in the sense of a cessation from action, proper to the divine nature; because all His action is repose, and ‘e’en in His very motion there is rest.’ And this divine coincidence of activity and of repose belongs to the divine Son in His divine-human nature. With that arrogance which is the very audacity of blasphemy, if it be not the simplicity of a divine consciousness, He puts His own work side by side with the Father’s work, as the same in principle, the same in method, the same in purpose, the same in its majestic coincidence of repose and of energy.

‘My Father worketh hitherto, and I work. Therefore for Me, as for Him, there is no need of a Sabbath of repose.’ Human activity is dissipated by toil, human energy is exhausted by expenditure. Man works and is weary; man works and is distracted. For the recovery of the serenity of his spirit, and for the renewal of his physical strength, repose of body and gathering in of mind, such as the Sabbath brought, were needed; but neither is needed for Him who toils unwearied in the heavens; and neither is needed for the divine nature of Him who labours in labours parallel with the Father’s here upon the earth.

Now remember that this is no abolition of the Sabbatic rest for Christ’s followers. Rather the ground on which He here asserts His superiority over, and His non-dependence upon, such a repose shows, or at all events implies, that all mere human workers need such rest, and should thankfully accept it. But it is a claim on His part to a divine equality. It is a claim on His part to do works which are other than human works. It is a claim on His part to be the Lord of a divine institution, living above the need of it, and able to mould it at His will.

And so it opens up depths, into which we cannot go now, of the relations of that divine Father and that divine Son; and makes us feel that the little incident in which He turned to a paralysed man and said: ‘Rise, take up thy bed and walk,’ on the Sabbath day, like some small floating leaf of sea-weed upon the surface, has great deep tendrils that go down and down into the very abyss of things, and lays hold upon that central truth of Christianity, the divinity of the Son of God, who is One with the ever-working Father.

IV. Lastly, we have in this incident yet another lesson. We have the Healer who is also the Judge, warning the healed of the possibilities of a relapse.

‘Jesus findeth him in the Temple, and said unto him, Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.’ The man’s eight-and-thirty years of illness had apparently been brought on by dissipation. It was a sin of flesh, avenged in the flesh, that had given him that miserable life. One would have thought he had got warning enough, but we all know the old proverb about what happened when the devil was ill, and what befell his resolutions when he got better. And so Christ comes to him again with this solemn warning: ‘There is a worse thing than eight-and-thirty years of paralysis. You fell once, and sore was your punishment. If you fall twice, your punishment will be sorer.’ Why? Because the first one had done him no good. So here are lessons for us. There is always danger that we shall fall back into old sins, even if we think we have overcome them. The mystic influence of habit, enfeebled will, the familiar temptation, the imagination rebelling, the memory tempting, sometimes even, as in the case of a man that has been a drunkard, the physical effect of the odour of his temptation upon his nostrils-all these things make it extremely unlikely that a man who has once been under the condemnation of any evil shall never be tempted to fall under its sway again.

And such a fall is not only more criminal than the former, it is more deadly than the former. ‘It were better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than after they have known it to turn aside.’ ‘The last state of that man is worse than the first.’

My brother, there is no blacker condemnation; and if I may use a strong word, there is no hotter hell, than that which belongs to an apostate Christian. ‘It has happened unto them according to the true proverb. The dog is turned to his vomit again.’ Very unpolite, a very coarse metaphor? Yes; to express a far worse reality.

Christian men and women! you have been made whole. ‘Sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto you.’ And turn to that Lord and say, ‘Hold Thou me up and I shall be saved.’ Then the enemies will not be able to recapture you, and the chains which have dropped from your wrists will never enclose them any more.

29)John 5:17-27

John

THE LIFE-GIVER AND JUDGE

Joh. 5:17 - Joh. 5:27.

'The Jews' were up in arms because Jesus had delivered a man from thirty-eight years of misery. They had no human sympathies for the sufferer, whom hope deferred had made sick and hopeless, but they shuddered at the breach of the Sabbath. 'Sacrifice' was more important in their view than 'mercy.' They did not acknowledge that the miracle proved Christ's Messiahship, but they were quite sure that doing it on the Sabbath proved His wickedness. How formalism twists men's judgments of the relative magnitude of form and spirit!

Jesus' vindication of His action roused them still farther, for He put it on a ground which seemed to them nothing short of blasphemy: 'My Father worketh even until now, and I work.' They fastened on one point in that great saying, namely, that it claimed Sonship in a special sense, and vindicated His right to disregard the Sabbath law on that ground. God's rest is not inaction. 'Preservation is a continual creation.' All being subsists because God is ever working. The Son co-operates with the Father, and for Him, as for the Father, the Sabbath law does not apply. The charge of breaking the Sabbath fades into insignificance before the sin, in the objectors' eyes, of making such claims. Therefore our Lord proceeds to expand and justify them.

He makes, first, a general statement in Joh. 5:19 - Joh. 5:20, in which He sets forth the relation involved in the very idea of Fatherhood and Sonship. He, as perfect Son of God, is perfectly one with the Father in will and act, and so knit to Him in sympathy that a self-originated action is impossible, not by reason of defect of power, but by reason of unity of being. That perfect unity is expressed negatively ['can do nothing'] and then positively [‘doeth likewise’]. But it is not manifest in actions alone, but has its deep roots in the perfect love which flows ever from each to each, and in the Father’s perfect communication to the Son, and the Son’s perfect reception from the Father. Jesus claimed to stand in such a relation to the Father that He was able to do whatsoever the Father did, and ‘in like manner’ as the Father did it; that He was the unique object of the Father’s love, and capable of receiving complete communications as to ‘all things that Himself doeth’; that He lived in such complete unity with the Father that His every act was the result of it, and that no trace of self-will had ever tinged His perfect spirit. What man has ever made such claims and not been treated as insane? He makes them, and likewise says that He is ‘lowly of heart’; and the world listens, if not believing, at any rate reverent, as in the presence of the best man that ever lived. Strange goodness, to claim such divine prerogatives, unless the claim is valid!

It is expanded in Joh. 5:21 - Joh. 5:23 into two great classes of works, which Jesus says that He does. Both are distinctively divine works. To give life and to judge the world are equally beyond human power; they are equally His actions. These are the ‘greater works’ which He foretells in Joh. 5:20, and they are greater than the miracle of healing which had originated the whole conversation. To give life at first, and to give it again to the dead, and not only to revivify, but to raise them, are plainly competent to no power short of the divine; and here Jesus calmly claims them.

That tremendous claim is here made in the widest sense, including both the corporeally and the spiritually dead, who are afterwards treated of separately. The Son is the fountain of life in all the aspects of that wide-reaching word; and He ‘quickeneth whom He will,’ as He had spontaneously healed the impotent man. Does that assertion contradict the other, just before it, that He does nothing of Himself? No; for His will, while His, is ever harmonious with the Father’s, just as His love, which is ever coincident with the Father’s. Does that assertion imply His arbitrary pleasure, or make man’s will a cipher? No; for His will is guided by righteous love, and wills to quicken those who comply with His conditions. But the assertion does declare that His will to quicken is omnipotent, and that His voice can pierce ‘the dull, cold ear of death,’ and bring back the soul to the empty house of this tabernacle, or rouse the spirit ‘dead in trespasses.’

The other divine prerogative of judging is inseparable from that of revivifying, and in regard to it Christ’s claim is still higher, for He says that it is wholly vested in Him as Son. The idea of judgment here, like that of quickening, with which it is associated, is to be taken in its more general sense [‘all judgment’] , and therefore as including both the present judgment, for which Jesus said that He was come into the world, and which men pass on themselves by the very fact of their attitude to Him and His Gospel, and also the future final judgment, which manifests character and determines destiny. Both these has the Father given into the hands of the Son.

The purpose, so far as men are concerned, of the Son’s investiture, with these solemn prerogatives, is that He may receive universal divine honour. A narrower purpose was stated in Joh. 5:20, where the persons seeing His works are only His then audience, and the effect sought to be produced is merely ‘marvel.’ But wonder is meant to lead on to recognition of the meaning of His power, and of the mystery of His person, and that, again, to rendering to Him precisely the same honour as is due to the Father. No more unmistakable demand for worship, no more emphatic assertion of divinity, can be made than lie in these words. To worship Christ does not intercept the honour due to God; to worship the Son is to worship the Father; and no man honours the Father who sent Him who does not honour the Son whom He has sent.

In Joh. 5:24 - Joh. 5:27 the two related prerogatives are presented in their spiritual aspect, while in the later verses of the chapter the resurrection and quickening of the literally dead are dealt with. Mark the significant new term introduced in Joh. 5:24, ‘He that believeth.’ That spiritual resurrection from the death of sin and self is wrought on ‘whom He will,’ but He wills that it shall be wrought on them who believe. Similarly, in Joh. 5:25, it is ‘they that hear’ who ‘shall live.’ It must be so, for there is no other way by which life from Him, who is the Life, can pass into and quicken us than by our opening our hearts by faith for its inflow. The mysteries of the Son’s divinity and of His imparted life are deep, but the condition of receiving that life is plain. If we will trust Jesus, we shall live; if not, we are dead. Trusting Him is trusting the Father that sent Him, and that Father becomes accessible to our trust when we ‘hear’ Christ’s ‘word.’

The effects of faith are immediate, and the poor present may be enriched and clothed in celestial light for each of us, if we will. For Jesus does not point first to the mysteries of the resurrection of the dead, and the tremendous solemnities of the final judgment, but to what we may each enter upon at any moment. The believing man ‘hath eternal life,’ and ‘cometh not into judgment.’ That life is not reserved to be entered on in the blessed future, but is a present possession. True, it will blossom into unexampled nobleness when it is transported into its native country, like some exotic in our colder climates if it were carried back to the tropics. But it is a present possession, and heaven is not different in kind from the Christian life on earth, but differs mainly in degree and in circumstances. And he that has the life here and now is, by its moulding of his outward life, preserved from the sins which would bring him into judgment, and the merciful judgment to which he is still subject is that for which his truest self longs. And that blessed condition carries in it the pledge that, at the last great day, which is to others a ‘day of wrath, a dreadful day,’ he whom Christ has quickened by His own indwelling life shall have ‘boldness before Him.’

Obviously, in these verses the present effects of faith are in view, since Jesus emphatically declares that the ‘hour now is’ when they can be realised. Once more He states in the strongest terms, and as the reason for the assurance that faith secures to us life, His possession of the two divine prerogatives of quickening and judging. What a paradox it is to say that it is ‘given’ to Him to have ‘life in Himself’! And when was that gift given? In the depths of eternity.

He ‘sits on no precarious throne, nor borrows leave to be,’ and hence He can impart life and lose none. Inseparably connected with that given, and yet self-inherent, life, is the capacity for executing judgment which belongs to Him as ‘a Son of man.’ It has been as ‘the Son’ of the Father that it has been considered, in the previous verses, as belonging to Him; but now it is as a true man that He is fitted to bear, and actually is clothed with, that judicial power. No doubt He is Judge of all, because by His incarnation and earthly life He presents to all the offer of eternal life, by their attitude to which offer men are judged. But the connection of thought seems rather to be that Christ's Manhood, inextricably intertwined with His divinity, is equally needed with the latter to constitute Him our Judge. He 'knoweth our frame,' from the inside, as it were, and the participation in our nature which fits Him to 'be a merciful and faithful High Priest' also fits Him to be the Judge of mankind.

30)John 5:35

John

THE LIGHT AND THE LAMPS

Joh. 1:8. - Joh. 5:35.

My two texts both refer to John the Baptist. One of them is the Evangelist's account of him, the other is our Lord's eulogium upon him. The latter of my texts, as the Revised Version shows, would be more properly rendered, 'He was a lamp' rather than 'He was a light,' and the contrast between the two words, the 'light' and 'the lamps,' is my theme. I gather all that I would desire to say into three points: 'that Light' and its witnesses; the underived Light and the kindled lamps; the undying Light and the lamps that go out.

I. First of all, then, the contrast suggested to us is between 'that Light' and its witnesses.

John, in that profound prologue which is the deepest part of Scripture, and lays firm and broad in the depths the foundation-stones of a reasonable faith, draws the contrast between 'that Light' and them whose business it was to bear witness to it. As for the former, I cannot here venture to dilate upon the great, and to me absolutely satisfying and fundamental, thoughts that lie in these eighteen first verses of this Gospel. 'The Word was with God,' and that Word was the Agent of Creation, the Fountain of Life, the Source of the Light which is inseparable from all human life. John goes back, with the simplicity of a child's speech, which yet is deeper than all philosophies, to a Beginning, far anterior to 'the Beginning' of which

Genesis speaks, and declares that before creation that Light shone; and he looks out over the whole world, and declares, that before and beyond the limits of the historical manifestation of the Word in the flesh, its beams spread over the whole race of man. But they are all focussed, if I may so speak, and gathered to a point which burns as well as illuminates, in the historical manifestation of Jesus Christ in the flesh. 'That was the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.'

Next, he turns to the highest honour and the most imperative duty laid, not only upon mighty men and officials, but upon all on whose happy eyeballs this Light has shone, and into whose darkened hearts the joy and peace and purity of it have flowed, and he says, 'He was sent'-and they are sent-'to bear witness of that Light.' It is the noblest function that a man can discharge. It is a function that is discharged by the very existence through the ages of a community which, generation after generation, subsists, and generation after generation manifests in varying degrees of brightness, and with various modifications of tint, the same light. There is the family character in all true Christians, with whatever diversities of idiosyncrasies, and national life or ecclesiastical distinctions. Whether it be Francis of Assisi or John Wesley, whether it be Thomas a Kempis or George Fox, the light is one that shines through these many-coloured panes of glass, and the living Church is the witness of a living Lord, not only before it, and behind it, and above it, but living in it. They are 'light' because they are irradiated by Him. They are 'light' because they are 'in the Lord.' But not only by the fact of the existence of such a community is the witness-bearing effected, but it comes as a personal obligation, with immense weight of pressure and immense possibilities of joy in the discharge of it, to every Christian man and woman.

What, then, is the witness that we all are bound to bear, and shall bear if we are true to our obligations and to our Lord? Mainly, dear brethren, the witness of experience. That a Christian man shall be able to stand up and say, 'I know this because I live it, and I testify to Jesus Christ because I for myself have found Him to be the life of my life, the Light of all my seeing, the joy of my heart, my home, and my anchorage'-that is the witness that is impregnable. And there is no better sign of the trend of Christian thought to-day than the fact that the testimony of experience is more and more coming to be recognised by thoughtful men and writers as being the sovereign attestation of the reality of the Light. ‘I see’; that is the proof that light has touched my eyeballs. And when a man can contrast, as some of us can, our present vision with our erstwhile darkness, then the evidence, like that of the sturdy blind man in the Gospels, who had nothing to say in reply to the subtleties and Rabbinical traps and puzzles but only ‘I was blind; now I see’-his experience is likely to have the effect that it had in another miracle of healing: ‘Beholding the man which was healed standing amongst them, they could say nothing against it.’ I should think they could not.

But there is one thing that will always characterise the true witnesses to that Light, and that is self-suppression. Remember the beautiful, immovable humility of the Baptist about whom these texts were spoken: ‘What sayest thou of thyself?’ ‘I am a Voice,’ that is all. ‘Art thou that Prophet?’ ‘No!’ ‘Art thou the Christ?’ ‘No! I am nothing but a Voice.’ And remember how, when John’s disciples tried to light the infernal fires of jealousy in his quiet heart by saying, ‘He whom thou didst baptise, and to whom thou didst give witness’-He whom thou didst start on His career-’is baptising,’ poaching upon thy preserves, ‘and all men come unto Him,’ the only answer that he gave was, ‘The friend of the Bridegroom’-who stands by in a quiet, dark corner-’rejoices greatly because of the Bridegroom’s voice.’ Keep yourself out of sight, Christian teachers and preachers; put Christ in the front, and hide behind Him.

II. Now let me ask you to look at the other contrast that is suggested by our other text. The underived light and the kindled lamps.

It is possible to read the words of that second text thus-’He was a lamp kindled and [therefore] shining.’ But whether that be the meaning, or whether the usual rendering is correct, the emblem itself carries the same thought, for a lamp must be lit by contact with a light, and must be fed with oil, if its flame is to be sustained. And so the very metaphor-whatever the force of the ambiguous word-in its eloquent contrast between the Light and the lamp, suggests this thought, that the one is underived, self-fed, and therefore undying, and that the other owes all its flame to the touch of that uncreated Light, and burns brightly only on condition of its keeping up the contact with Him, and being fed continually from His stores of radiance.

I need not say more than a word with regard to the former member of that contrast suggested here. That unlit Light derives its brilliancy, according to the Scriptural teaching, from nothing but its divine union with the Father. So that long before there were eyes to see, there was the eradiation and outshining of the Father's glory. I do not enter into these depths, but this I would say, that what is called the 'originality' of Jesus is only explained when we reverently see in that unique life the shining through a pure humanity, as through a sheet of alabaster, of that underived, divine Light. Jesus is an insoluble problem to men who will not see in Him the Eternal Light which 'in the beginning was with God.' You find in Him no trace of gradual acquisition of knowledge, or of arguing or feeling His way to His beliefs. You find in Him no trace of consciousness of a great horizon of darkness encompassing the region where He sees light. You find in Him no trace of a recognition of other sources from which He has drawn any portion of His light. You find in Him the distinct declaration that His relation to truth is not the relation of men who learn, and grow, and acquire, and know in part; for, says He, 'I am the Truth.' He stands apart from us all, and above us all, in that He owes His radiance to none, and can dispense it to every man. The question which the puzzled Jews asked about Him, 'How knoweth this Man letters, having never learned?' may be widened out to all the characteristics of His human life. To me the only answer is: 'Thou art the King of glory, O Christ! Thou art the Everlasting Son of the Father.'

Dependent on Him are the little lights which He has lit, and in the midst of which He walks. Union with Jesus Christ-'that Light'-is the condition of all human light. That is true over all regions, as I believe. 'The inspiration of the Almighty giveth understanding.' The candle of the Lord shines in every man, and 'that true Light lighteth every man that cometh into the world.' Thinker, student, scientist, poet, author, practical man-all of them are lit from the uncreated Source, and all of them, if they understand their own nature, would say, 'In Thy light do we see Light.'

But especially is this great thought true and exemplified within the limits of the Christian life. For the Christian to be touched with Christ's Promethean finger is to flame into light. And the condition of continuing to shine is to continue the contact which first illuminated. A break in the contact, of a finger's breadth, is as effectual as one of a mile. Let Christian men and women, if they would shine, remember, ‘Ye are light in the Lord’; and if we stray, and get without the circle of the Light, we pass into darkness, and ourselves cease to shine.

Brethren, it is threadbare truth, that the condition of Christian vitality and radiance is close and unbroken contact with Jesus Christ, the Source of all light. Threadbare; but if we lived as if we believed it, the Church would be revolutionised and the world illuminated; and many a smoking wick would flash up into a blazing torch. Let Christian people remember that the words of my text define no special privilege or duty of any official or man of special endowments, but that to all of us has been said, ‘Ye are My witnesses,’ and to all of us is offered the possibility of being ‘burning and shining lights’ if we keep ourselves close to that Light.

III. Lastly, the second of my texts suggests-the contrast between the Undying Light and the lamps that go out.

‘For a season ye were willing to rejoice in His light.’ There is nothing in the present condition of the civilised and educated world more remarkable and more difficult for some people to explain than the contrast between the relation which Jesus Christ bears to the present age, and the relation which all other great names in the past-philosophers, poets, guides of men-bear to it. There is nothing in the world the least like the vividness, the freshness, the closeness, of the personal relation which thousands and thousands of people, with common sense in their heads, bear to that Man who died nineteen hundred years ago. All others pass, sooner or later, into the darkness. Thickening mists of oblivion, fold by fold, gather round the brightest names. But here is Jesus Christ, whom all classes of thinkers and social reformers have to reckon with to-day, who is a living power amongst the trivialities of the passing moment, and in whose words and in the teaching of whose life serious men feel that there lie undeveloped yet, and certainly not yet put into practice, principles which are destined to revolutionise society and change the world. And how does that come?

I am not going to enter upon that question; I only ask you to think of the contrast between His position, in this generation, to communities and individuals, and the position of all other great names which lie in the past. Why, it does not take more than a lifetime such as mine, for instance, to remember how the great lights that shone seventy years ago in English thinking and in English literature, have for the most part gone out, and what we young men thought to be bright particular stars, this new generation pooh-poohs as mere exhalations from the marsh or twinkling and uncertain tapers, and you will find their books in the twopenny-box at the bookseller's door. A cynical diplomatist, in one of our modern dramas, sums it up, after seeing the death of a revolutionary, 'I have known eight leaders of revolts.' And some of us could say, 'We have known about as many guides of men who have been forgotten and passed away.' 'His Name shall endure for ever. His name shall continue as long as the sun, and men shall be blessed in Him; all generations shall call Him blessed.' Even Shelley had the prophecy forced from him-

'The moon of Mahomet
Arose and it shall set,
While blazoned as on heaven's eternal noon,
The Cross leads generations on.'

We may sum up the contrast between the undying Light and the lamps that go out in the old words: 'They truly were many, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death, but this Man, because He continueth ever . . . is able to save unto the uttermost them that come unto God through Him.'

So, brethren, when lamps are quenched, let us look to the Light. When our own lives are darkened because our household light is taken from its candlestick, let us lift up our hearts and hopes to Him that abideth for ever. Do not let us fall into the folly, and commit the sin, of putting our heart's affections, our spirit's trust, upon any that can pass and that must change. We need a Person whom we can clasp, and who never will glide from our hold. We need a Light uncreated, self-fed, eternal. 'Whilst ye have the Light, believe in the Light, that ye may be the children of light.'

31)John 6:11

THE FOURTH MIRACLE IN JOHN’S GOSPEL

Joh. 6:11.

This narrative of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand is introduced into John’s Gospel with singular abruptness. We read in the first verse of the chapter: ‘After these things Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee,’ i.e. from the western to the eastern side. But the Evangelist does not tell us how or when He got to the western side. ‘These things,’ which are recorded in the previous chapter, are the healing of the impotent man at the Pool of Bethesda, the consequent outburst of Jewish hostility, and the profound and solemn discourse of our Lord, in which He claims filial relationship to the Father. So that we must insert between the chapters a journey from Jerusalem to Galilee, and a lapse at all events of some months-or, if the feast referred to in the previous chapter be, as it may be, the Passover, an interval of nearly a year. So little care for the mere framework of events has this fourth Gospel; so entirely would the Evangelist have us see that his reason for narrating this miracle is mainly its spiritual lessons and the revelation which it makes of Christ as Himself the Bread of Life.

Similarly, he has no care to tell us anything about the reasons for our Lord’s retirement with His disciples from Galilee to the eastern bank. These we have to learn from the other Evangelists. They give us several concurrent motives-the news of the death of John the Baptist; and of the desire of the bloody tyrant to see Jesus, which foreboded evil; also the return of the twelve Apostles from their trial journey, which involved the necessity of rest for them; and, perhaps, the approach of the Passover, which our Lord did not purpose to observe in Jerusalem because of the Jewish hostility, and which, therefore, suggested the withdrawal to temporary retirement.

All these reasons concurring, He and His disciples would seek for a brief space of seclusion and repose. But the hope of securing such was vain. The people followed in crowds so eagerly, so hastily, in such enormous numbers, that no natural or ordinary provision for their wants could be thought of. Hence the occasion for the miracle before us.

Now I think that this narrative, with which I wish to deal, falls mainly into two portions, both of which suggest for us some important lessons. There is, first, the preparations for the sign; and then there is the sign itself. Let us look at these two points in succession.

I. First, then, the preparations for the sign.

Now it is to be observed that this is the only incident before our Lord's last journey to Jerusalem which is recorded by all four Evangelists; therefore the variations between the narratives are of especial interest, and these variations are very considerable. We find, for instance, that in John's account the question as to how the bread was to be provided came from Christ; in the other Evangelists' accounts that question is discussed first amongst the Apostles privately. We find from John's narrative that the question was suggested even before the multitudes had come to Jesus. We find in the Synoptic Gospels that it arose at the close of a long day of teaching and of healing.

Now it is possible that this diversity of time may be the solution of the diversity of the person proposing. That is to say, it is quite legitimate to conclude that John's account takes up the incident at an earlier period than the other Evangelists do, and that the full order of events was this; that, privately, at the beginning of the day, whilst the people were yet flocking to our Lord, He, to one of the disciples alone, suggests the question, 'Whence shall we buy bread that these may eat?' and that the answer, 'Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient that every one of them may take a little,' explains for us the suggestion of the same amount at a subsequent part of the day, by the Apostles when they asked our Lord the question, 'Shall we go and buy two hundred pennyworth of bread that these may eat?'

Be that as it may, we may pause for a moment upon this question of our Lord's, 'Whence shall we buy bread that these may eat?'

Now notice what a lovely glimpse we get there into the quick-rising sympathy of the Saviour with all forms of human necessity. He had gone away to snatch a brief moment of rest. The rest is denied Him; the hurrying crowds come pressing with their vulgar curiosity-for it was nothing better-after Him. No movement of impatience passes across His mind; no reluctance as He turns away from the vanishing prospect of a quiet afternoon with His friends. He looks upon them, and the first thought is a quick, instinctive movement of a divine and yet most human sympathy. The question rises in His mind of how He was to provide for them; they were not hungry yet; they had not thought where their bread was to come from. But He cared for the careless, and His heart was prophetic of their necessities, and quick to determine 'what He should do' to supply them. So is it ever. Before we call, He answers. Thy mercy, O loving Christ! needs no more than the sight of human necessities, or even the anticipation of them, swiftly to bestir itself for their satisfaction and their supply.

But, farther, He selects for the question Philip, a man who seems to have been what is called-as if it were the highest praise-an 'intensely practical person'; who seems to have had little faith in anything that he could not get hold of by his senses, and who lived upon the low level of 'common sense.' He always lays stress upon 'seeing.' His answer to Nathanael when he said, 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?' was, 'Come and see.' A very good answer, and yet one that relies only on the external manifestation of Christ to the senses. Then, on another occasion, he breaks in upon the lofty spiritualities of our Lord's final discourse to His disciples, with the malapropos request, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us.' And so here, to the man who believed in his eyesight, and did not easily apprehend much else, Jesus puts this question, 'Where is the bread to come from for all these people? This He said to prove him.' He hoped that the question might have shaped itself in the hearer's mind into a promise, and that he might have been able to say in answer, 'Thou canst supply; we need not buy.'

So Christ does still. He puts problems before us, too, to settle; takes us, as it were, into His confidence with interrogations that try us, whether we can rise above the level of the material and visible, or whether all our conceptions of possibilities are bounded by these. And sometimes, even though the question at first sight seems to evoke only such a response as it did here, it works more deeply down below afterwards, and we are helped by the very difficulty to rise to a clear faith.

Philip's answer is very significant. 'Two hundred pennyworth of bread are not sufficient.' He casts his eye over the multitude, he makes a rough, rapid calculation, one does not exactly see the data on which it was based; and he comes to the conclusion, ‘Two hundred pennyworth’ [in our English money some L. 7 or L. 8 worth] would give them each a morsel. And no doubt he thought himself very practical. He was a man of figures; he believed in what could be put into tables and statistics. Yes; and like a great many other people of his sort, he left out one small element in his calculation, and that was Jesus Christ, and so his answer went creeping along the low levels, dragging itself like a half-wounded snake, when it might have risen on the wings of faith into the empyrean, and soared and sung.

So learn that when we have to deal with Christ’s working-and when have we not to deal with Christ’s working?-perhaps probabilities that can be tabulated are not altogether the best bases upon which to rest our calculations. Learn that the audacity of a faith that expects great things, though there be nothing visible upon which to build, is wiser and more prudent than the creeping common-sense that adheres to facts which are shadows, and forgets that the chief fact is that we have an Almighty Helper and Friend at our sides.

Still further, among these preliminaries, let us point to the exhibition of the inadequate resources which Christ, according to the fuller narrative in the other Evangelists, desired to know. ‘There is a little lad here with five barley loaves’-one per thousand-’and two small fishes’-insufficient in quantity and very, very common in quality, for barley bread was the food of the poorest. ‘But what are they among so many?’ And Christ says, ‘Bring them to Me.’

Christ’s preparation for making our poor resources adequate for anything is to drive home into our hearts the consciousness of their insufficiency. We need, first of all, to be brought to this, ‘All that I have is this wretched little stock; and what is that measured against the work that I have to do, and the claims upon me?’ Only when we are brought to that can His great power pour itself into us and fill us with rejoicing and overcoming strength. The old mystics used to say, and they said truly: ‘You must be emptied of yourself before you can be filled by God.’ And the first thing for any man to learn, in preparation for receiving a mightier power than his own into his opening heart, is to know that all his own strength is utter and absolute weakness. 'What are they among so many?' When we have once gone right down into the depths of felt impotence, and when our work has risen before us, as if it were far too great for our poor strengths which are weaknesses, then we are brought, and only then, into the position in which we may begin to hope that power equal to our desire will be poured into our souls.

And so the last of the preparations that I will touch upon is that majestic preparation for blessing by obedience. 'And Jesus said, Make the men sit down.' And there they sat themselves, as Mark puts it in his picturesque way, like so many garden plots-the rectangular oblongs in a garden in which pot-herbs are grown-on the green grass, below the blue sky, by the side of the quiet lake. Cannot you fancy how some of them seated themselves with a scoff, and some with a quiet smile of incredulity; and some half sheepishly and reluctantly; and some in mute expectancy; and some in foolish wonder; and yet all of them with a partial obedience? And says John in the true translation: 'So the men sat down, therefore Jesus took the loaves.' Sit you down where He bids you, and your mouths will not be long empty. Do the things He tells you, and you will get the food that you need. Our business is to obey and to wait, and His business is, when we are seated, to open His hand and let the mercy drop. So much for the preparations for this great miracle.

II. Now, in the next place, a word as to the sign itself.

I take two lessons, and two only, out of it. I see in it, first, a revelation of Christ, as continually through all the ages sustaining men's physical life. And I see in it, second, a symbol of Christ as Himself the Bread of Life.

As to the first, there is here, I believe, a revelation of the law of the universe, of Christ as being through all the ages the Sustainer of the physical life of men. What was done then once, with the suppression of certain links in the chain, is done always, with the introduction of those links. The miraculous moment in the narrative is not described to us. We do not know where or when there came in the supernatural power which multiplied the loaves-probably as they passed from the hand of the Master. But be that as it may, it was Christ's will that made the provision which fed all these five thousand. And I believe that the teaching of Scripture is in accordance with the deepest philosophy, that the one cause of all physical phenomena is the will of a present God; howsoever that may usually conform to the ordinary method of working which people generalise and call laws. The reason why anything is, and the reason why all things change, is the energy there and then of the indwelling God who is in all His works, and who is the only Will and Power in the physical world.

And I believe, further, that Scripture teaches us that that continuous will, which is the cause of all phenomena and the underlying subsistence on which all things repose, is all managed and mediated by Him who from of old was named the Word; ‘in whom was life, and without whom was not anything made that was made.’ Our Christ is Creator, our Christ is Sustainer, our Christ moves the stars and feeds the sparrows. He was ‘before all things, and in Him all things consist.’ He opens His hand-and there is the print of a nail in it-and ‘satisfies the desire of every living thing.’

So learn how to think of second causes, and see in this story a transient manifestation, in unusual form, of an eternal and permanent fact. Jesus took the loaves and distributed to them that were set down.

And so, secondly, the miracle is a sign-a symbol of Him as the true Bread and Food of the world. That is the explanation and commentary which He Himself appends to it in the subsequent part of the chapter, in the great discourse which is founded upon this miracle.

‘I am the Bread of Life.’ There is a triple statement by our Lord upon this subject in the remaining portion of the chapter. He says, ‘I am the Bread of Life.’ My personality is that which not only sustains life when it is given, but gives life to them that feed upon it. But more than that, ‘the bread which I will give,’ pointing to some future ‘giving’ beyond the present moment, and therefore something more than His life and example, ‘is My flesh, which’-in some as yet unexplained way-’I give for the life of the world.’ And that there may be no misunderstanding, there is a third, deeper, more mysterious statement still: ‘My flesh is meat indeed, and My blood is drink indeed.’ Repulsive and paradoxical, but in its very offensiveness and paradox, proclaiming that it covers a mighty truth, and the truth, brother, is this, the one Food that gives life to will, affections, conscience, understanding, to the whole spirit of a man, is that great Sacrifice of the

Incarnate Lord who gave upon the Cross His flesh, and on the Cross shed His blood, for the life of the world that was ‘dead in trespasses and sins.’ Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us, and we feed on the sacrifice. Let your conscience, your heart, your desires, your anticipations, your understanding, your will, your whole being feed on Him. He will be cleansing, He will be love, He will be fruition, He will be hope, He will be truth, He will be righteousness, He will be all. Feed upon Him by that faith which is the true eating of the true Bread, and your souls shall live.

And notice finally here, the result of this miracle as transferred to the region of symbol. ‘They did all eat and were filled’; men, women, children, both sexes, all ages, all classes, found the food that they needed in the bread that came from Christ’s hands. If any man wants dainties that will tickle the palates of Epicureans, let him go somewhere else. But if he wants bread, to keep the life in and to stay his hunger, let him go to this Christ who is ‘human nature’s daily food.’

The world has scoffed for nineteen centuries at the barley bread that the Gospel provides; coarse by the side of its confectionery, but it is enough to give life to all who eat it. It goes straight to the primal necessities of human nature. It does not coddle a class, or pander to unwholesome, diseased, or fastidious appetites. It is the food of the world, and not of a section. All men can relish it, all men need it. It is offered to them all.

And more than that; notice the inexhaustible abundance. ‘They did all eat, and were filled.’ And then they took up-not ‘of the fragments,’ as our Bible gives it, conveying the idea of the crumbs that littered the grass after the repast was over, but of the ‘broken pieces’-the portions that came from Christ’s hands-twelve baskets full, an immensely greater quantity than they had to start with. ‘The gift doth stretch itself as ‘tis received.’ Other goods and other possessions perish with the using, but this increases with use. The more one eats, the more there is for him to eat. And all the world may live upon it for ever, and there will be more at the end than there was at the beginning.

Brethren, why do ye ‘spend your money for that which is not bread’? There is no answer worthy of a rational soul, no answer that will stand either the light of conscience or the clearer light of the Day of Judgment. I come to you now, and although my poor words may be but like the barley bread and the two fishes-nothing amongst all this gathered audience-I come with Christ in my hands, and I say to you, ‘Eat, and your souls shall live.’ He will spread a table for you in the wilderness, and take you to sit at last at His table in His Kingdom.

32)John 6:12

John

‘FRAGMENTS’ OR ‘BROKEN PIECES’

Joh. 6:12.

The Revised Version correctly makes a very slight, but a very significant change in the words of this verse. Instead of ‘fragments’ it reads ‘broken pieces.’ The change seems very small, but the effect of it is considerable. It helps our picture of the scene by correcting a very common misapprehension as to what it was which the Apostles are bid to gather up. The general notion, I suppose, is that the ‘fragments’ are the crumbs that fell from each man’s hands, as he ate, and the picture before the imagination of the ordinary reader is that of the Apostles’ carefully collecting the debris of the meal from the grass where it had dropped. But the true notion is that the ‘broken pieces which remain over’ are the unused portions into which our Lord’s miracle-working hand had broken the bread, and the true picture is that of the Apostles carefully putting away in store for future use the abundant provision which their Lord had made, beyond the needs of the hungry thousands. And that conception of the command teaches far more beautiful and deeper lessons than the other.

For if the common translation and notion be correct, all that is taught us, or at least what is principally taught us, is the duty of thrift and careful economy; whereas the other shows more clearly that what is taught us is that Jesus Christ always gets ready for His people something over and above the exact limits of their bare need at the moment, that He prepares for His poor and hungry dependants in royal fashion, leaving ever a wide margin of difference between what would be just enough to keep the life in them, and His liberal housekeeping. Further, we are taught a lesson of wise husbandry and economy in the use of that overplus of grace which Christ ministers, and are instructed that the laws of prudent thrift have as honoured a place in the management of spiritual as of temporal wealth. ‘Gather up,’ says our Lord, ‘the pieces which I broke, the large provision which I made for possible wants. My gifts are in excess of the requirements of the moment. Take care of them till you need them.’ That is a worthier interpretation of His command than one which merely sees in it an exhortation to thrifty taking care of the crumbs that fell from the lips of the hungry eaters.

Looking at this command, then, with this slight alteration of rendering, and consequent widening of scope, we may briefly try to gather up the lessons which it obviously suggests.

I. We have that thought, to which I have already referred, as more strikingly brought out by the slight alteration of translation, which, by the use of ‘broken pieces,’ suggests the connection with Christ’s breaking the loaves and fishes.

We are taught to think of the large surplus in Christ’s gifts over and above our need. Our Lord has Himself given us a commentary upon this miracle. All Christ’s miracles are parables, for all teach us, on the level of natural and outward things, lessons that are true in regard to the spiritual world; but this one is especially symbolical, as indeed are all these recorded in John’s Gospel. And here we have Christ, on the day after the miracle, commenting upon it in His long and profound discourse upon the Bread of Life, which plainly intimates that He meant His office of feeding the hungry crowds, with bread supernaturally increased by the touch of His hand, to be but a picture and a guide which might lead to the apprehension of the higher view of Himself as the ‘bread of God which came down from heaven,’ feeding and ‘giving life to the world’ by His broken body and shed blood.

So that we are not inventing a fanciful interpretation of an incident not meant to have any meaning deeper than shows on the surface, when we say that the abundance far beyond what the eaters could make use of at the moment really represented the large surplus of inexhaustible resources and unused grace which is treasured for us all in Christ Jesus. Whom He feeds

He feasts. His gifts answer our need, and over-answer it, for He is ‘able to do exceeding abundantly above that which we ask or think,’ and neither our conceptions, nor our petitions, nor our present powers of receiving, are the real limits of the illimitable grace that is laid up for us in Christ, and which, potentially, we have each of us in our hands whenever we lay our hands on Him.

Oh, dear friends! what you and I have ever had and felt of Christ’s power, sweetness, preciousness, and love is as nothing compared with the infinite depths of all those which lie in Him. The sea fills the little creeks along its shore, but it rolls in unfathomed depths, boundless to the horizon away out there in the mid-Atlantic. And all the present experience of all Christian people, of what Christ is, is like the experience of the first settlers in some great undiscovered continent; who timidly plant a little fringe of population round its edge and grow their scanty crops there, whilst the great prairies of miles and miles, with all their wealth and fertility, are lying untrodden and unknown in the heart of the untraversed continent. The most powerful telescope leaves nebulae unresolved, which, though they seem but a dim dust of light, are all ablaze with mighty suns. The ‘goodness’ which He has ‘wrought before the sons of men for them that fear’ Him is, as the Psalmist adoringly exclaims, wondrously ‘great,’ but still greater is that which the same verse of the Psalm celebrates-the goodness which He has ‘laid up for them that fear Him.’ The gold which is actually coined and passing from hand to hand, is but a fraction, a mere scale, as it were, off the surface of the great uncoined mass of bullion that lies stored in the vaults there. Christ is a great deal more than any man, or than all men, have yet found Him to be. ‘Gather up the broken pieces’; and see that nothing of that infinite preciousness of His be lost by us.

II. Then there is another very simple lesson which I draw. This command suggests for us Christ’s thrift [if I may use the word] in the employment of His miraculous power.

Surely they might have said: ‘If thou canst multiply five loaves into all this abundance, why should we be trudging about, each with a basket on his back full of bread, when we have with us He whose word can make it for us at any moment?’ Yes, but a law which characterises all the miraculous, in both the Old and the New Testament, and which broadly distinguishes Christ’s miracles from all the false miracles of false religions is this, that the miraculous is pared down to the smallest possible amount, that not one hairsbreadth beyond the necessity shall be done by miracle; that whatever men can do they shall do; that their work shall stop as late, and begin again as soon as possible. Thus, though Christ was going to raise Lazarus, men’s hands had to roll away the stone; and when Christ had raised Lazarus, men’s hands had to loose the napkins from his face. And though Christ was able to say to the daughter of Jairus, ‘Talitha cumi!’ [damsel, arise!] His next word was: ‘Give her something to eat.’ Where the miraculous was needed it was used, and not a hairsbreadth beyond absolute necessity did it extend.

And so here Christ multiplies the bread, and yet each of the Apostles has to take a basket, probably some kind of woven wicker-work article which they would carry for holding their little necessaries in their peregrinations; each Apostle has to take his basket, and perhaps emptying it of some of his humble apparel, to fill it with these bits of bread; for Christ was not going to work miracles where men’s thrift and prudence could be employed.

Nor does He do so now. We live by faith, and our dependence on Him can never be too absolute. Only laziness sometimes dresses itself in the garb and speaks with the tongue of faith, and pretends to be truthful when it is only slothful. ‘Why criest thou unto Me?’ said God to Moses, ‘speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward.’ True faith sets us to work. It is not to be perverted into idle and false depending upon Him to work for us, when by the use of our own ten fingers and our own brains, guided and strengthened by His working in us, we can do the work that is set before us.

III. Still further, there is another lesson here. Not only does the injunction show us Christ’s thrift in the employment of the supernatural, but it teaches us our duty of thrift and care in the use of the spiritual grace bestowed upon us.

These men had given to them this miraculously made bread; but they had to exercise ordinary thrift in the preservation of the supernatural gift. Christ has been given to you by the most stupendous miracle that ever was or can be wrought, and if you are Christian people, you have the Spirit of Christ given to you, to dwell in your hearts, to make you wise and fair, gentle and strong, and altogether Christlike. But you have to take care of these gifts. You have to exercise the common virtues of economy and thrift in your use of the divine gifts as in your use of the common things of daily life. You have to use wisely and not waste the Bread of God that came down from heaven, or that Bread of God will not feed you. You have to provide the basket in which to carry the unexhausted residue of the divine gift, or you may stand hungry in the very midst of plenty, and whilst within arm's length of you there is bread enough and to spare to feed the whole world.

The lesson of my text, which is most eminently brought out if we adopt the translation which I have referred to at the beginning of these remarks, is, then, just this: Christian men, be watchful stewards of that great gift of a living Christ, the food of your souls, that has been by miracle bestowed upon you. Such gathering together for future need of the unused residue of grace may be accomplished by three ways. First, there must be a diligent use of the grace given. See that you use to the very full, in the measure of your present power of absorbing and your present need, the gift bestowed upon you. Be sure that you take in as much of Christ as you can contain before you begin to think of what to do with the overplus. If we are not careful to take what we can, and to use what we need, of Christ, there is little chance of our being faithful stewards of the surplus. The water in a mill-stream runs over the trough in great abundance when the wheel is not working, and one reason why so many Christians seem to have so much more given to them in Christ than they need is because they are doing no work to use up the gift.

A second essential to such stewardship is the careful guarding of the grace given from whatever would injure it. Let not worldliness, business, cares of the world, the sorrows of life, its joys, duties, anxieties or pleasures-let not these so come into your hearts that they will elbow Christ out of your hearts, and dull your appetite for the true Bread that came down from heaven.

And lastly, not only by use and by careful guarding, but also by earnest desire for larger gifts of the Christ who is large beyond all measure, shall we receive more and more of His sweetness and His preciousness into our hearts, and of His beauty and glory into our transfigured characters. The basket that we carry, this recipient heart of ours, is elastic. It can stretch to hold any amount that you like to put into it. The desire for more of Christ's grace will stretch its capacity, and as its capacity increases the inflowing gift greatens, and a larger Christ fills the larger room of my poor heart.

So the lesson is taught us of our prudence in the care and use of the grace bestowed on us, and we are bidden to cherish a happy confidence in the inexhaustible resources of Christ, and the continual gift in the future of even larger measures of grace, which are all ours already, given to us at the first reception of Him into our hearts, and only needing our faithfulness to be growingly ours in experience as they are ours from the first in germ.

IV. Finally, a solemn warning is implied in this command, and its reason 'that nothing be lost.'

Then there is a possibility of losing the gift that is freely given to us. We may waste the bread, and so, sometime or other when we are hungry, awake to the consciousness that it has dropped out of our slack hands. The abundance of Christ's grace may, so far as you are profited or enriched by it, be like the unclaimed millions of money which nobody asks for and that is of use to no living soul. You may be paupers while all God's riches in glory are at your disposal, and starving while baskets full of bread broken for us by Christ lie unused at our sides. Some of us have never tasted the sweetness or been fed by the nutritiousness of that Bread of God which came down from heaven. And more marvellous still, there may be some of us, who having come to Christ hungry and been fed by Him, have ceased to care for the pure nourishment and taste for the manna, and are turning again with gross appetite to the husks in the swine's trough. Negligent Christians! worldly Christians! you who care more for money and other dainties and delights which perish with the using- backsliding Christians, who once hungered and thirsted for more of Christ, and now have no longing for Him-awake to the danger in which you stand of letting all your spiritual wealth slip through your fingers; behold the treasures, yet unreached, within your grasp, and seek to garner and realise them. Gather up the broken pieces which remain over, lest everything be lost.

33)John 6:19-20

John

THE FIFTH MIRACLE IN JOHN’S GOSPEL

Joh. 6:19 - Joh. 6:20.

There are none of our Lord’s parables recorded in this Gospel, but all the miracles which it narrates are parables. Moral and religious truth is communicated by the outward event, as in the parable it is communicated by the story. The mere visible fact becomes more than semi-transparent. The analogy between the spiritual and the natural world which men instinctively apprehend, of which the poet and the orator and the religious teacher have always made abundant use, and which it has sometimes been attempted, unsuccessfully as I think, to elevate to the rank of a scientific truth, underlies the whole series of these miracles. It is the principal if not the only key to the meaning of this one before us.

The symbolism which regards life under the guise of a voyage, and its troubles and difficulties under the metaphor of storm and tempest, is especially natural to nations that take kindly to the water, like us Englishmen. I do not know that there is any instance, either in the Old or in the New Testament, of the use of that to us very familiar metaphor; but the emblem of the sea as the symbol of trouble, unrest, rebellious power, is very familiar to the writers of the Old Testament. And the picture of the divine path as in the waters, and of the divine prerogative as being to ‘tread upon the heights of the sea,’ as Job has it, is by no means unknown. So the natural symbolism, and the Old Testament use of the expressions, blend together, as I think, in suggesting the one point of view from which this miracle is to be regarded.

It is found in two of the other Evangelists, and the condensed account of it which we have in this Gospel, by its omission of Peter’s walking on the water, and of some other smaller but graphic details that the other Evangelists give us, serves to sharpen the symbolical meaning of the whole story, and to bring that as its great purpose and signification into prominence.

We shall, I think, then, best gain the lessons intended to be drawn if we simply follow the points of the narrative in their order as they stand here.

I. We have here, first of all, then, the struggling toilers.

The other Evangelists tell us that after the feeding of the five thousand our Lord ‘constrained’ His disciples to get into the ship, and to pass over to the other side. The language implies unwillingness, to some extent, on their part, and the exercise of authority upon His. Our Evangelist, who does not mention the constraint, supplies us with the reason for it. The preceding miracle had worked up the excitement of the mob to a very dangerous point. Crowds are always the same, and this crowd thought, as any other crowd anywhere and in any age would have done, that the prophet that could make bread at will was the kind of prophet whom they wanted. So they determined to take Him by force, and make Him a king; and Christ, seeing the danger, and not desiring that His Kingdom should be furthered by such unclean hands and gross motives, determined to withdraw Himself into the loneliness of the bordering hills. It was wise to divide the little group; it would distract attention; it might lead some of the people, as we know it did lead them, to follow the boat when they found it was gone. It would save the Apostles from being affected by the coarse, smoky enthusiasm of the crowd. It would save them from revealing the place of His retirement. It might enable Him to steal away more securely unobserved; so they are sent across to the other side of the lake, some five or six miles. An hour or two might have done it, but for some unknown reason they seem to have lingered. Perhaps they had no special call for haste. The Paschal moon, nearly full, would be shining down upon the waters; their hearts and minds would be busy with the miracle which they had just seen. And so they may have drifted along, not caring much when they reached their destination. But suddenly one of the gusts of wind which are frequently found upon mountain lakes, especially towards nightfall, rose and soon became a gale with which they could not battle. Our Evangelist does not tell us how long it lasted, but we get a note of time from St. Mark, who says it was ‘about the fourth watch of the night’; that is between the hours of three and six in the morning of the subsequent day. So that for some seven or eight hours at least they had been tugging at the useless oars, or sitting shivering, wet and weary, in the boat.

Is it not the history of the Church in a nutshell? Is it not the symbol of life for us all? The solemn law under which we live demands persistent effort, and imposes continual antagonism upon us; there is no reason why we should regard that as evil, or think ourselves hardly used, because we are not fair-weather sailors. The end of life is to make men; the meaning of all events is to mould character. Anything that makes me stronger is a blessing, anything that develops my morale is the highest good that can come to me. If therefore antagonism mould in me

‘The wrestling thews that throw the world,’

and give me good, strong muscles, and put tan and colour into my cheek, I need not mind the cold and the wet, nor care for the whistling of the wind in my face, nor the dash of the spray over the bows. Summer sailing in fair weather, amidst land-locked bays, in blue seas, and under calm skies, may be all very well for triflers, but

‘Blown seas and storming showers’

are better if the purpose of the voyage be to brace us and call out our powers.

And so be thankful if, when the boat is crossing the mouth of some glen that opens upon the lake, a sudden gust smites the sheets and sends you to the helm, and takes all your effort to keep you from sinking. Do not murmur, or think that God’s Providence is strange, because many and many a time when ‘it is dark, and Jesus is not yet come to us,’ the storm of wind comes down upon the lake and threatens to drive us from our course. Let us rather recognise Him as the Lord who, in love and kindness, sends all the different kinds of weather which, according to the old proverb, make up the full-summed year.

And then notice how, in this first picture of our text, the symbolism so naturally lends itself to spiritual meanings, not only in regard to the tempest that caught the unthinking voyagers, but also in regard to other points; such as the darkness amidst which they had to fight the tempest, and the absence of the Master. Once before, they had been caught in a similar storm on the lake, but it was daylight then, and Jesus was with them, and that made all the difference. This time it was night, and they looked up in vain to the green Eastern hills, and wondered where in their folds He was lurking, so far from their help. Mark gives us one sweet touch when he tells us that Christ on the hillside there saw them toiling in rowing, but they did not see Him. No doubt they felt themselves deserted, and sent many a wistful glance of longing towards the shore where He was. Hard thoughts of Him may have been in some of their minds. ‘Master, carest Thou not?’ would be springing to some of their lips with more apparent reason than in the other storm on the lake. But His calm and loving gaze looked down pitying on all their fear and toil. The darkness did not hide from Him, nor His own security on the steadfast land make Him forget, nor his communion with the Father so absorb Him as to exclude thoughts of them.

It is a parable and a prophecy of the perpetual relation between the absent Lord and the toiling Church. He is on the mountain while we are on the sea. The stable eternity of the Heavens holds Him; we are tossed on the restless mutability of time, over which we toil at His command. He is there interceding for us. Whilst He prays He beholds, and He beholds that He may help us by His prayer. The solitary crew were not so solitary as they thought. That little dancing speck on the waters, which held so much blind love and so much fear and trouble, was in His sight, as on the calm mountain-top He communed with God. No wonder that weary hearts and lonely ones, groping amidst the darkness, and fighting with the tempests and the sorrows of lift, have ever found in our story a symbol that comes to them with a prophecy of hope and an assurance of help, and have rejoiced to know that they on the sea are beheld of the Christ in the sky, and that ‘the darkness hideth not from’ His loving eye.

II. And now turn to the next stage of the story before us. We have the approaching Christ.

‘When they had rowed about five-and-twenty or thirty furlongs,’ and so were just about the middle of the lake, ‘they see Jesus walking on the sea and drawing nigh unto the ship.' They were about half-way across the lake. We do not know at what hour in the fourth watch the Master came. But probably it was towards daybreak. Toiling had endured for a night. It would be in accordance with the symbolism that joy and help should come with the morning.

If we look for a moment at the miraculous fact, apart from the symbolism, we have a revelation here of Christ as the Lord of the material universe, a kingdom wider in its range and profounder in its authority than that which that shouting crowd had sought to force upon Him. His will consolidated the yielding wave, or sustained His material body on the tossing surges. Whether we suppose the miracle as wrought on the one or the other, makes no difference to its value as a manifestation of the glory of Christ, and of His power over the physical order of things. In the latter case there would, perhaps, be a hint of a power residing in His material frame, of which we possibly have other phases, as in the Transfiguration, which may be a prophecy of what lordship over nature is possible to a sinless manhood. However that may be, we have here a wonderful picture which is true for all ages of the mighty Christ, to whose gentle footfall the unquiet surges are as a marble pavement; and who draws near in the purposes of His love, unhindered by antagonism, and using even opposing forces as the path for His triumphant progress. Two lessons may be drawn from this. One is that in His marvellous providence Christ uses all the tumults and unrest, the opposition and tempests which surround the ship that bears His followers, as the means of achieving His purposes. We stand before a mystery to which we have no key when we think of these two certain facts; first, the Omnipotent redeeming will of God in Christ; and, second, the human antagonism which is able to rear itself against that. And we stand in the presence of another mystery, most blessed, and yet which we cannot unthread, when we think, as we most assuredly may, that in some mysterious fashion He works His purposes by the very antagonism to His purposes, making even head-winds fill the sails, and planting His foot on the white crests of the angry and changeful billows. How often in the world's history has this scene repeated itself, and by a divine irony the enemies have become the helpers of Christ's cause, and what they plotted for destruction has turned out rather to the furtherance of the Gospel! 'He maketh the wrath of man to praise Him, and with the residue thereof He girdeth Himself.'

Another lesson for our individual lives is this, that Christ, in His sweetness and His gentle sustaining help, comes near to us all across the sea of sorrow and trouble. A more tender, a more gracious sense of His nearness to us is ever granted to us in the time of our darkness and our grief than is possible to us in the sunny hours of joy. It is always the stormy sea that Christ comes across, to draw near to us; and they who have never experienced the tempest have yet to learn the inmost sweetness of His presence. When it is night, and it is dark, at the hour which is the keystone of night's black arch, Christ comes to us, striding across the stormy waters. Sorrow brings Him near to us. Do you see that sorrow does not drive you away from Him!

III. Then, still further, we note in the story before us the terror and the recognition.

St. John does not tell us why they were afraid. There is no need to tell us. They see, possibly in the chill uncertain light of the grey dawn breaking over the Eastern hills, a Thing coming to them across the water there. They had fought gallantly with the storm, but this questionable shape freezes their heart's blood, and a cry, that is audible above even the howling of the wind and the dash of the waves, gives sign of the superstitious terror that crept round the hearts of those commonplace, rude men.

I do not dwell upon the fact that the average man, if he fancies that anything from out of the Unseen is near him, shrinks in fear. I do not ask you whether that is not a sign and indication of the deep conviction that lies in men's souls, of a discord between themselves and the unseen world; but I ask you if we do not often mistake the coming Master, and tremble before Him when we ought to be glad?

We are often so absorbed with our work, so busy tugging at the oar, so anxiously watching the set of current, so engaged in keeping the helm right, that we have no time and no eyes to look across the ocean and see who it is that is coming to us through all the hurly-burly. Our tears fill our eyes, and weave a veil between us and the Master. And when we do see that there is Something there, we are often afraid of it, and shrink from it. And sometimes when a gentle whisper of consolation, or some light air, as it were, of consciousness of His presence, breathes through our souls, we think that it is only a phantasm of our own making, and that the coming Christ is nothing more than the play of our thoughts and imaginations.

Oh, brethren, let no absorption in cares and duties, let no unchildlike murmurings, let no selfish abandonment to sorrow, blind you to the Lord who always comes near troubled hearts, if they will only look and see! Let no reluctance to entertain religious ideas, no fear of contact with the Unseen, no shrinking from the thought of Christ as a Kill-joy keep you from seeing Him as He draws near to you in your troubles. And let no sly, mocking Mephistopheles of doubt, nor any poisonous air, blowing off the foul and stagnant marshes of present materialism, make you fancy that the living Reality, treading on the flood there, is a dream or a fancy or the projection of your own imagination on to the void of space. He is real, whatever may be phenomenal and surface. The storm is not so real as the Christ, the waves not so substantial as He who stands upon them. They will pass and quieten, He will abide for ever. Lift up your hearts and be glad, because the Lord comes to you across the waters, and hearken to His voice: ‘It is I! Be not afraid.’

The encouragement not to fear follows the proclamation, ‘It is I!’ What a thrill of glad confidence must have poured itself into their hearts, when once they rose to the height of that wondrous fact!

‘Well roars the storm to those who hear A deeper voice across the storm.’

There is no fear in the consciousness of His presence. It is His old word: ‘Be not afraid!’ And He breathes it whithersoever He comes; for His coming is the banishment of danger and the exorcism of dread. So that if only you and I, in the midst of all storm and terror, can say ‘It is the Lord,’ then we may catch up the grand triumphant chorus of the old psalm, and say: ‘Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, and the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea, yet I will not fear.’ The Lord is with us; the everlasting Christ is our Helper, our Refuge, and our Strength.

IV. So, lastly, we have here in this story the end of the tempest and of the voyage.

Our Evangelist does not record, as the others do, that the storm ceased upon Christ’s being welcomed into the little boat. The other Evangelists do not record, as he does, the completion of the voyage. ‘Immediately the ship was at the land whither they went.’ The two things are cause and effect. I do not suppose, as many do, that a subordinate miracle is to be seen in that last clause of our text, or that the ‘immediately’ is to be taken as if it meant that without one moment’s delay, or interval, the voyage was completed; but only, which I think is all that is needful, that the falling of the tempest and the calming of the waters which followed upon the Master’s entrance into the vessel made the remainder of the voyage comparatively brief and swift.

It is not always true, it is very seldom true, that when Christ comes on board opposition ends, and the haven is reached. But it is always true that when Christ comes on board a new spirit enters into the men who have Him for their companion, and are conscious that they have. It makes their work easy, and makes them ‘more than conquerors’ over what yet remains. With what a different spirit the weary men would bend their backs to the oars once more when they had the Master on board, and with what a different spirit you and I will set ourselves to our work if we are sure of His presence. The worst of trouble is gone when Christ shares it with us. There is a wonderful charm to stay His rough wind in the assurance that in all our affliction He is afflicted. If we feel that we are following in His footsteps, we feel that He stands between us and the blast, a refuge from the storm and a covert from the tempest. And if still, as no doubt will be the case, we have our share of trouble and storm and sorrow and difficulty, yet the worst of the gale will be passed, and though a long swell may still heave, the terror and the danger will have gone with the night, and hope and courage and gladness revive as the morning’s sun breaks over the still unquiet waves, and shows us our Master with us and the white walls of the port glinting in the level beams.

Friends, life is a voyage, anyhow, with plenty of storm and danger and difficulty and weariness and exposure and anxiety and dread and sorrow, for every soul of man. But if you will take Christ on board, it will be a very different thing from what it will be if you cross the wan waters alone. Without Him you will make shipwreck of yourselves; with Him your voyage may seem perilous and be tempestuous, but He will ‘make the storm a calm,’ and will bring you to the haven of your desire.

34)John 6:28-29

John

HOW TO WORK THE WORK OF GOD

Joh. 6:28 - Joh. 6:29.

The feeding of the five thousand was the most ‘popular’ of Christ’s miracles. The Evangelist tells us, with something between a smile and a sigh, that ‘when the people saw it, they said, This is of a truth that Prophet that should come into the world,’ and they were so delighted with Him and with it, that they wanted to get up an insurrection on the spot, and make a King of Him. I wonder if there are any of that sort of people left. If two men were to come into Manchester to-morrow morning, and one of them were to offer material good, and the other wisdom and peace of heart, which of them, do you think, would have the larger following? We need not cast a stone at the unblushing, frank admiration that these men had for a Prophet who could feed them, for that is exactly the sort of prophet that a great number of us would like best if they spoke out.

So Jesus Christ had to escape from the inconvenient enthusiasm of these mistaken admirers of His; and they followed Him in their eagerness, but were met with words which lift them into another region and damp their zeal. He tries to turn away their thoughts from the miracle to a far loftier gift. He contrasts the trouble which they willingly took in order to get a meal with their indifference as to obtaining the true bread from heaven, and He bids them work for it just as they had shown themselves ready to work for the other.

They put to Him this question of my text, so strangely blending as it does right and wrong, ‘You have bid us work; tell us how to work? What must we do that we may work the works of God?’ Christ answers, in words that illuminate their confusions and clear the whole matter, ‘This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.’

I. Faith, then, is a work.

You know that the commonplace of evangelical teaching opposes faith to works; and the opposition is perfectly correct, if it be rightly understood. But I have a strong impression that a great deal of our preaching goes clean over the heads of our hearers, because we take for granted, and they fancy that they understand, the meaning of terms because the terms themselves are so familiar. And I believe that many people go to churches and chapels all their lives long, and hear this doctrine dinned into them, that they are to be saved by faith, and not by works, and never approach a definite understanding of what it means.

So let me just for a moment try to clear up the terms of this apparently paradoxical statement that faith is a work. What do we mean by faith? What do you mean by saying that you have faith in your friend, in your wife, in your husband, in your guide? You simply mean, and we mean, that you trust the person, grasping him by the act of trust. On trust the whole fabric of human society depends, as well as in another aspect of the same expression does the whole fabric of Manchester commerce. Faith, confidence, the leaning of myself on one discerned to be true, trusty, strong, sufficient for the purpose in hand, whatever it may be-that, and nothing more mysterious, nothing further away from daily life and the common emotions which knit us to one another, is, as I take it, what the New Testament means when it insists upon faith.

Ah, we all exercise it. You put it forth in certain low levels and directions. ‘The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her,’ is the short summary of the happy lives of many, I have no doubt, of my present hearers. Have you none of that confidence to spare for God? Is it all meant to be poured out upon weak, fallible, changeful creatures like ourselves, and none of it to rise to the One in whom absolute confidence may eternally be fixed?

But then, of course, as we may see by the exercise of the same emotion in regard to one Another, the under side [as I have been accustomed to say to you] of this confidence in God or Christ is diffidence of myself. There is no real exercise of confidence which does not involve, as an essential part of itself, the going out from myself in order that I may lay all the weight and the responsibility of the matter in hand upon Him in whom I trust. And so Christian faith is compounded of these two elements, or rather, it has these two sides which correspond to one another. The same figure is convex or concave according as you look at it from one side or another. If you look at faith from one side, it rises towards God; if from the other, it hollows itself out into a great emptiness. And so the under side of faith is distrust; and he that puts his confidence in God thereby goes out of himself, and declares that in himself there is nothing to rest upon.

Now that two-sided confidence and diffidence, trust and distrust, which are one, is truly a work. It is not an easy one either; it is the exercise of our own inmost nature. It is an effort of will. It has to be done by coercing ourselves. It has to be maintained in the face of many temptations and difficulties. The contrast between faith and work is between an inward act and a crowd of outward performances. But the faith which knits me to God is my act, and I am responsible for it.

But yet it is not a work, just because it is a ceasing from my own works, and going out from myself that He may enter in. Only remember, when we say, ‘Not by works of righteousness, but by the faith of Christ,’ we are but proclaiming that the inward man must exercise that act of self-abnegation and confession of its own impotence, and ceasing from all reliance on anything which it does, whereby, and whereby alone, it can be knit to God. ‘Labour not for the meat that perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto eternal life . . . . This is the work of God, that ye believe.’ You are responsible for doing that, or for not doing it.

II. Secondly, faith, and not a multitude of separate acts, is what pleases God.

Mark the difference between the form of the question and that of the answer. The people say, ‘What are we to do that we may work the works of God?’ Christ answers in the singular: ‘This is the work.’ They thought of a great variety of observances and deeds. He gathers them all up into one. They thought of a pile, and that the higher it rose the more likely they were to be accepted. He unified the requirement, and He brought it all down to this one act, in which all other acts are included, and on which alone the whole weight of a man’s salvation is to rest. ‘What shall we do that we might work the works of God?’ is a question asked in all sorts of ways, by the hearts of men all round about us; and what a babble of answers comes!

The priest says, ‘Rites and ceremonies.’ The thinker says, ‘Culture, education.’ The moralist says, ‘Do this, that, and the other thing,’ and enumerates a whole series of separate acts. Jesus Christ says, ‘One thing is needful . . . . This is the work of God.’ He brushes away the sacerdotal answer and the answer of the mere moralist, and He says, ‘No! Not do; but trust.’ In so far as that is act, it is the only act that you need.

That is evidently reasonable. The man is more than his work; motive is more important than action; character is deeper than conduct. God is pleased, not by what men do, but by what men are. We must be first, and then we shall do. And it is obviously reasonable, because we can find analogies to the requirement in all other relations of life. What would you care for a child that scrupulously obeyed, and did not love or trust? What would a prince think of a subject who was ostentatious in acts of loyalty, and all the while was plotting and nurturing treason in his heart?

If doing separate acts of righteousness be the way to work the works of God, then no man has ever done them. For it is a plain fact that every man falls below his own conscience-which conscience is less scrupulous than the divine law. The worst of us knows a great deal more than the best of us does; and our lives, universally, are, at the best, lives of partial effort after unreached attainments of obedience and of virtue.

But, even supposing that we could perform, far more completely than we do, the requirements of our own consciences, and conform to the evident duties of our position and relations, do you think that without faith we should be therein working the works of God? Suppose a man were able fully to realise his own ideal of goodness, without any confidence in God underlying all his acts; do you think that these would be acts that would please God? It seems to me that, however lovely and worthy of admiration, looked at with human eyes only, many lives are, which have nobly and resolutely fought against evil, and struggled after good, if they have lacked the crowning grace of doing this for God’s sake, they lack, I was going to say, almost everything; I will not say that, but I will say that they lack that which makes them acceptable, well-pleasing to Him. The poorest, the most imperfect realisation of our duty and ideal of conduct which has in it a love towards God and a faith in Him that would fain do better if it could, is a nobler thing, I venture to say, in the eyes of Heaven-which are the truth-seeing eyes-than the noblest achievements of an untrusting soul. It does not seem to me that to say so is bigotry or narrowness or anything else but the plain deduction from this, that a man's relation to God is the deepest thing about him, and that if that be right, other things will come right, and if that be wrong nothing is as right as it might be.

Here we have Jesus Christ laying the foundation for the doctrine which is often said to be Pauline, as if that meant something else than coming from Jesus Christ. We often hear people say, 'Oh, your evangelical teaching of justification by faith, and all that, comes out of Paul's Epistles, not out of Christ's teaching, nor out of John's Gospel.' Well, there is a difference, which it is blindness not to recognise, between the seeds of teaching in our Lord's words, and the flowers and fruit of these seeds, which we get in the more systematised and developed teaching of the Epistles. I frankly admit that, and I should expect it, with my belief as to who Christ is, and who Paul is. But in that saying, 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent,' is the germ of everything that Paul has taught us about the works of the law being of no avail, and faith being alone and unfailing in its power of uniting men to God, and bringing them into the possession of eternal life. The saying stands in John's Gospel, and so Paul and John alike received, though in different fashions, and wrought out on different lines of subsequent teaching, the germinal impulse from these words of the Master. Let us hear no more about salvation by faith being a Pauline addition to Christ's Gospel, for the lips of Christ Himself have declared 'this is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.'

III. Thirdly, this faith is the productive parent of all separate works of God.

The teaching that I have been trying to enforce has, I know, been so presented as to make a pillow for indolence, and to be closely allied to immorality. It has been so presented, but it has not been so presented half as often as its enemies would have us believe. For I know of but very few, and those by no means the most prominent and powerful of the preachers of the great doctrine of salvation by faith, who have not added, as its greatest teacher did: 'Let ours also be careful to maintain good works for necessary uses.’ But the true teaching is not that trust is a substitute for work, but that it is the foundation of work. The Gospel is, first of all, Trust; then, set yourselves to do the works of faith. It works by love, it is the opening of the heart to the entrance of the life of Christ, and, of course, when that life comes in, it will act in the man in a manner appropriate to its origin and source, and he that by faith has been joined to Jesus Christ, and has opened his heart to receive into that heart the life of Christ, will, as a matter of course, bring forth, in the measure of his faith, the fruits of righteousness.

We are surely not despising fruits and flowers when we insist upon the root from which they shall come. A man may take separate acts of partial goodness, as you see children in the springtime sticking daisies on the spikes of a thorn-twig picked from the hedges. But these will die. The basis of all righteousness is faith, and the manifestation of faith is practical righteousness. ‘Show Me thy faith by thy works’ is Christ’s teaching quite as much as it is the teaching of His sturdy servant James. And so, dear friends, we are going the shortest way to enrich lives with all the beauties of possible human perfection when we say, ‘Begin at the beginning. The longest way round is the shortest way home; trust Him with all your hearts first, and that will effloresce into “whatsoever things are lovely and whatever things are of good report.”‘ In the beautiful metaphor of the Apostle Peter, in his second Epistle, Faith is the damsel who leads in the chorus of consequent graces; and we are exhorted to ‘add to our faith virtue,’ and all the others that unfold themselves in harmonious sequence from that one central source.

If I had time I should be glad to turn for a moment to the light which such considerations cast upon subjects that are largely occupying the attention of the Christian Church to-day. I should like to insist that, before you talk much about applied Christianity, you should be very sure that in men there is a Christianity to apply. I venture to profess my own humble belief that in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, Christian ministers and churches will do no more for the social, political, and intellectual and moral advancement of men and the elevation of the people by sticking to their own work and preaching this Gospel-’This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.’

IV. Lastly, this faith secures the bread of life.

The bread of life is the starting-point of the whole conversation. In the widest possible sense it is whatsoever truly stills the hunger of the immortal soul. In a deeper sense it is the person of Jesus Christ Himself, for He not only says that He will give, but that He is the Bread of Life. And, in the deepest sense of all, it is His flesh broken for us in His sacrifice on the Cross. That bread is a gift. So the paradox results which stands in our text-work for the bread which God will give. If it be a gift, that fact determines what sort of work must be done in order to possess it. If it be a gift, then the only work is to accept it. If it be a gift, then we are out of the region of quid pro quo; and have not to bring, as Chinese do, great strings of copper cash that, all added up together, do not amount to a shilling, in order to buy what God will bestow upon us. If it be a gift, then to trust the Giver and to accept the gift is the only condition that is possible.

It is not a condition that God has invented and arbitrarily imposed. The necessity of it is lodged deep in the very nature of the case. Air cannot get to the lungs of a mouse in an air-pump. Light cannot come into a room where all the shutters are up and the keyhole stopped. If a man chooses to perch himself on some little stool of his own, with glass legs to it, and to take away his hand from the conductor, no electricity will come to him. If I choose to lock my lips, Jesus Christ does not prise open my clenched teeth to put the bread of life into my unwilling mouth. If we ask, we get; if we take, we get.

And so the paradox comes, that we work for a gift, with a work which is not work because it is a departure from myself. It is the same blessed paradox which the prophet spoke when he said, ‘Buy . . . without money and without price.’ Oh! what a burden of hopeless effort and weary toil-like that of the man that had to roll the stone up the hill, which ever slipped back again-is lifted from our shoulders by such a word as this that I have been poorly trying to speak about now! ‘Thou art careful and troubled about many things,’ poor soul! trying to be good; trying to fight yourself, and the world, and the devil. Try the other plan, and listen to Him saying, ‘Give up self-imposed effort in thine own strength. Take, eat, this is My body, which is broken for you.’

35)John 6:48-50

John

THE MANNA

Joh. 6:48 - Joh. 6:50.

‘This is of a truth that Prophet,’ said the Jews, when Christ had fed the five thousand on the five barley loaves and the two small fishes. That was the kind of Teacher for them; they were quite unaffected by the wisdom of His words and the beauty of His deeds, but a miracle that found food precisely met their wants, and so there was excited an impure enthusiasm, very unwelcome to Jesus. Therefore He withdrew Himself from it, and when the people followed Him, all full of expectation, to get some more loaves and see some more miracles, He met them with a douche of cold water that cooled their enthusiasm and flung them back into a critical, questioning mood. They pointed to the miracle of the manna, and hinted that, if He expected them to accept Him, He must do as Moses had done, or something like it. Probably there was a Jewish tradition in existence then to the effect that the Messiah was to repeat the miracle of the manna. But, at all events, Christ lays hold of the reference that they put into His hands, and He said in effect, ‘Manna? Yes; I give, and am, the true Manna.’

So this is the third of the instances in this Gospel in which our Lord pointed to Old Testament incidents and institutions as symbolising Himself. In the first of them, when He likened Himself to the ladder that Jacob saw, He claimed to be the Medium of communication between heaven and earth. In the second of them, when He likened Himself to the brazen serpent lifted in the camp, He claimed to be the Healer of a sin-stricken and poisoned world. And now, with an allusion both to the miracle and to the Jewish demand for the repetition of the manna sign, He claims to be the true Food for a starving world. So there are three things in my text: Christ’s claim, His requirements, and His promise; the bread, the eating, the issues.

I. Here is a claim of Christ’s.

As I have already said, in the whole wonderful conversation of which I have selected a portion for my text, there is a double reference to the miracle of the loaves and of the manna. What our Lord means to assert for Himself is that which is common to both of these-viz. that He supplies the great primal wants of humanity, the hunger of the heart. There may be another reference also, which I just notice without dwelling upon it. Barley loaves were the coarsest and least valuable form of bread. They were not only of little worth, but altogether inadequate to feeding the five thousand. The palates, unaccustomed to the stinging savours of the garlic and the leeks of Egypt, loathed the light bread. And so Jesus Christ comes into the world in lowly form, like the barley loaf or the light bread from which men whose tastes have been vitiated by the piquant savours of more earthly nourishment turn away as insipid. And yet He in His lowliness, He in His savourlessness, is that which meets the deepest wants of humanity, and is every man's fare because He will be any man's satisfaction.

But I wish to bring before your notice the wonderful way in which our Lord, in this great dissertation concerning Himself as the Bread of Life, gradually unfolds the depths of His meaning and of His offer. He began with saying that He, the Son of Man, will give to men the bread that 'endures to everlasting life.' And then when that saying is but dimly understood, and yet awakes some strange new desires and appetites in the hearers, and they come to Him and ask, 'Lord, evermore give us this bread,' He answers them with opening another finger of His hand, as it were, and showing them a little more of the treasure that lies in His palm. For He says, 'I am that Bread of Life.' That is an advance on the previous saying. He gives bread, and any man that was conscious of possessing some great truth or some great blessing which, believed and accepted, would refresh and nourish humanity, might have said the same thing. But now we pass into the penumbra of a greater mystery: 'I am that Bread of Life.' You cannot separate what Christ gives from what Christ is. You can take the truths that another man proclaims, altogether irrespective of him and his personality. That only disturbs, and the sooner it is got rid of, the firmer and the purer our possession of the message for which he is only the medium. You can take Plato's teaching and do as you like with Plato. But you cannot take Christ's teaching and do as you like with Christ. His personality is the centre of His gift to the world. ‘I am that Bread of Life.’ That He should give it is much; that He should be it is far more.

And notice how, when He has thus drawn us a little further into the magic circle of the light, He not only asserts the inseparableness of His gift from His Person, but also asserts, with a reference, no doubt, to the manna, ‘I am the Bread that came down from heaven.’ The listeners immediately laid hold of that one point, and neglected for the moment all the rest, and they fixed with a true instinct-although it was for the purpose of contradicting it-on this central point, ‘that came down from heaven.’ They said one to the other, ‘How can this man say that He came down from heaven? Is not this Jesus the Son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?’ So, brethren, as the manna that descended from above in the dew of the night was to the bread that was baked in a baker’s oven, so is the Christ to the manhood that has its origin in the natural processes of birth. The Incarnation of the Son of God, becoming Son of Man for us and for our salvation, is involved in this great claim. You do not get to the heart of Christ’s message unless you have accepted this as the truth concerning Him, that ‘in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,’ and that at a definite point in the long process of the ages, ‘the Word became flesh, and dwelt amongst us.’ He will never be ‘the Bread of Life’ unless He is ‘the Bread that came down from heaven.’ For humanity needs that the blue heavens that bend remote above should come down; and we cannot be lifted ‘out of the horrible pit and the miry clay’ unless a Hand from above be reached down into the depths of our degradation, and lift us from our lowness. Heaven must come to earth, if earth is to rise to heaven. The ladder must be let down from above, if ever from the lower levels men are to ascend thither where at the summit the face of God can be seen.

But that is not all. Our Lord, if I may recur to a former figure, went on to open another finger of His hand, and to show still more of the gift. For He not only said, ‘the Son of Man gives the bread,’ and ‘I am the Bread that came down from heaven,’ but He went on to say, in a subsequent stage of the conversation, ‘the Bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.’ Now, notice that ‘will give.’ Then, though the Word was made flesh, and the manna came down from heaven, the especial gift of His flesh for the life of the world was, at the time of His speaking, a future thing. And what He meant is still more clearly brought out, when we read other words which are the very climax of this conversation, when He declares that the condition of our having life in ourselves is our ‘eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man.’ The figure is made repulsive on purpose, in order that it may provoke us to penetrate to its meaning. It was even more repulsive to the Jew, with his religious horror of touching or tasting anything in which the blood was. And yet our Lord not only speaks of Himself as the Bread, but of His flesh and blood as being the Food of the world. The separation of the two clearly indicates a violent death, and I, for my part, have no manner of doubt that, in these great words in which our Lord lays bare the deepest foundations of His claim to be the Food of humanity, there is couched, in the veiled language which was necessary at the then stage of His mission, a distinct reference to His death, as being the Sacrifice on which a hunger-stricken world may feed and be satisfied.

So here we have, in three steps, the great central truth of the Gospel set forth in symbolical aspect: the Son that gives, the Son that is, the Bread of the world, and the death whereby His flesh and blood are separated and become the nourishment of all sin-stricken souls. I do not say one word to enforce these claims, but I beseech you deal fairly with these Gospel narratives, and do not go on picking out of them bits of Christ’s actions or words, which commend themselves to you, and ignoring all the rest. There is no more reason to believe that Jesus Christ ever said, ‘As ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them likewise,’ or any other part of that Sermon on the Mount which some people take as their Christianity, than there is to believe that He said, ‘The bread which I give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.’ Believe it or not, it is not dealing with the Scripture records as you deal with other historical records if, for subjective reasons, you brush aside all that department of our Lord’s teaching. And if you do accept it, what becomes of His ‘sweet reasonableness’? What becomes of His meekness and lowliness of heart? I was going to say what becomes of His sanity, that He should stand up, a youngish man from Nazareth, in the synagogue of Capernaum, and should say, ‘I, heaven-descended, and slain by men, am the Bread of Life to the whole world’?

I was going to make another observation, which I must just pass with the slightest notice, and that is that, taking this point of view and giving full weight to these three stages of our Lord's progressive revelation of Himself, we have the answer to the question, What is the connection between these discourses and the ordinance of the Lord's Supper? Our modern sacramentarian friends will have it that Jesus Christ is speaking of the Communion in this chapter. I take it, and I venture to think it the reasonable explanation, that He is not speaking about the Communion, but that this discourse and that rite are dealing with the same truths-the one in articulate words, the other in equivalent symbols. And so we have not to read into the text any allusion to the rite, but to see in the text and in the rite the proclamation of the same thing-viz. that the flesh and the blood of the Sacrifice for sins is the food on which a sinful and cleansed world may feed.

II. So, secondly, let me ask you to note our Lord's requirement here.

He carries on the metaphor. 'This is the Bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die.' The eating necessarily follows from the symbol of the bread, as the designation of the way by which we all, with our hungry hearts, may feed upon this Bread of God. I need not remind you that in many a place, and in this whole context, we find the explanation of the symbol very plainly. In another part of this conversation we read, under another metaphor which comes to the same thing, 'He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst. So the eating and the coming are diverse symbols for the one thing, the believing. When a man eats he appropriates to himself, and incorporates into his very being, the food of which he partakes. And when a man trusts Christ he appropriates to himself, and incorporates into his inmost being, the very life of Jesus Christ. You say, 'That is mysticism'; but it is the New Testament teaching, that when I trust Christ I get more than His gifts-I get Himself; that when my faith goes out to Him it not only rests me on Him, but it brings Him into me, and that food of the spirit becomes the life, as we shall see, of my spirit.

That condition is indispensable. It is useless to have food on your table or your plate or in your hand, it does not nourish you there: you must eat it, and then you gain sustenance from it. Many a hungry man has died at the door of a granary. Some of us are starving, though beside us there is 'the Bread of God that came down from heaven.' Brethren, you must eat, and I venture to put the question to you-not Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the world's Saviour? not Do you believe in an Incarnation? not Do you believe in an Atonement? but Have you claimed your portion in the Bread? Have you taken it into your own lips? Crede et manducasti, said Augustine, 'believe'-or, rather, trust-'and thou hast eaten.' Have you?

Further, let me remind you that under this eating is included not only some initial act of faith, but a continuous course of partaking. The dinner you ate this day last year is of no use for to-day's hunger. The act of faith done long ago will not bring the Bread to nourish you now. You must repeat the meal. And very strikingly and beautifully in the last part of this conversation our Lord varies the word for eating, and substitutes-as if He were speaking to those who had fulfilled the previous condition-another one which implies the ruminant action of certain animals. And that is what Christian men have to do, to feed over and over and over again on the 'Bread of God which came down from heaven.' Christ, and especially in and through His death for us, can nourish and sustain our wills, giving them the pattern of what they should desire, and the motive for which they should desire it. Christ, and especially through His death, can feed our consciences, and take away from them all the painful sense of guilt, while He sharpens them to a far keener sensitiveness to evil. Christ, and especially through His death, can feed our understandings, and unveil therein the deepest truths concerning God and man, concerning man's destiny and God's mercy. Christ, and especially in His death, can feed our affections, and minister to love and desire and submission and hope their celestial nourishment. He is 'the Bread of God,' and we have but to eat of that which is laid before us.

III. So, lastly, we have here the issues.

'Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead.' This Bread secures that if 'a man eat thereof he shall not die.' The bread that perishes feeds a life that perishes; but this Bread not only sustains but creates a life that cannot perish, and, taken into the spirits of men that are 'dead in trespasses and sins,' imparts to them a life that has no affinity to evil, and therefore no dread of extinction.

If 'a man eats thereof he shall not die,' Christ annihilates for us the mere accident of physical death. That is only a momentary jolt on the course. That may all be crammed into a parenthesis. 'He shall not die,' but live the true life which comes from the possession of union with Him who is the Life. The bread which we eat sustains life; the Bread which He gives originates it. The bread which we eat is assimilated to our bodily frame, the Bread which He gives assimilates our spiritual nature to His. And so it comes to be the only food that stills a hungry heart, the only food that satisfies and yet never cloys, which, eating, we are filled, and being filled are made capable of more, and, being capable of more, receive more. In blessed and eternal alternation, fruition and desire, satisfaction and appetite, go on.

'Why do ye spend money for that which is not bread?' You cannot answer the question with any reasonable answer. Oh, dear friends! I beseech you, listen to that Lord who is saying to each of us, 'Take, eat, this is My body, which is broken for you.'

36)John 7:33-34

John

ONE SAYING WITH TWO MEANINGS

Joh. 7:33 - Joh. 7:34. - Joh. 13:33.

No greater contrast can be conceived than that between these two groups to whom such singularly similar words were addressed. The one consists of the officers, tools of the Pharisees and of the priests, who had been sent to seize Christ, and would fain have carried out their masters' commission, but were restrained by a strange awe, inexplicable even to themselves. The other consists of the little company of His faithful, though slow, scholars, who made a great many mistakes, and sometimes all but tired out even His patience, and yet were forgiven much because they loved much. Hatred animated one group, loving sorrow the other.

Christ speaks to them both in nearly the same words, but with what a different tone, meaning, and application! To the officers the saying is an exhibition of His triumphant confidence that their malice is impotent and their arms paralysed; that when He wills He will go, not be dragged by them or any man, but go to a safe asylum, where foes can neither find nor follow. The officers do not understand what He means. They think that, bad Jew as they have always believed Him to be, He may very possibly consummate His apostasy by going over to the Gentiles altogether; but, at any rate, they feel that He is to escape their hands.

The disciples understand little more as to whither He goes, as they themselves confess a moment after; but they gather from His words His loving pity, and though the upper side of the saying seems to be menacing and full of separation, there is an under side that suggests the possibility of a reunion for them.

The words are nearly the same in both cases, but they are not absolutely identical. There are significant omissions and additions in the second form of them. ‘Little children’ is the tenderest of all the names that ever came from Christ’s lips to His disciples, and never was heard on His lips except on this one occasion, for parting words ought to be very loving words. ‘A little while I am with you,’ but He does not say, ‘And then I go to Him that sent Me.’ ‘Ye shall seek Me,’ but He does not say, ‘And shall not find Me.’ ‘As I said unto the Jews, whither I go ye cannot come, so now I say to you,’ that little word ‘now’ makes the announcement a truth for the present only. His disciples shall not seek Him in vain, but when they seek they shall find. And though for a moment they be parted from Him, it is with the prospect and the confidence of reunion. Let us, then, look at the two main thoughts here. First, the two ‘seekings,’ the seeking which is vain, and the seeking which is never vain; and the two ‘cannots,’ the inability of His enemies for evermore to come where He is, and the inability of His friends, for a little season, to come where He is.

I. The two seekings.

As I have observed, there is a very significant omission in one of the forms of the words. The enemies are told that they will never find Him, but no such dark words are spoken to the friends. So, then, hostile seeking of the

Christ is in vain, and loving seeking of Him by His friends, though they understand Him but very poorly, and therefore seek Him that they may know Him better, is always answered and over-answered.

Let me deal just for a moment or two with each of these. In their simplest use the words of my first text merely mean this: 'You cannot touch Me, I am passing into a safe asylum where your hands can never reach Me.'

We may generalise that for a moment, though it does not lie directly in our path, and preach the old blessed truth that no man with hostile intent seeking for Christ in His person, in His Gospel, or in His followers and friends, can ever find Him. All the antagonism that has stormed against Him and His cause and words, and His followers and lovers, has been impotent and vain. The pursuers are like dogs chasing a bird, sniffing along the ground after their prey, which all the while sits out of their reach on a bough, and carols to the sky. As in the days of His flesh, His foes could not touch His person till He chose, and vainly sought Him when it pleased Him to hide from them, so ever since, in regard to His cause, and in regard to all hearts that love Him, no weapon that is formed against them shall prosper. They shall be wrapped, when need be, in a cloud of protecting darkness, and stand safe within its shelter. Take good cheer, all you that are trying to do anything, however little, however secular it may appear to be, for the good and well-being of your fellows! All such service is a prolongation of Christ's work, and an effluence from His, if there be any good in it at all; and it is immortal and safe, as is His. 'Ye shall seek Me and shall not find Me.'

But then, besides that, there is another thought. It is not merely hostile seeking of Him that is hopeless vain. When the dark days came over Israel, under the growing pressure of the Roman yoke, and amidst the agonies of that last siege, and the unutterable sufferings which all but annihilated the nation, do you not think that there were many of these people who said to themselves: 'Ah! if we had only that Jesus of Nazareth back with us for a day or two; if we had only listened to Him!' Do you not think that before Israel dissolved in blood there were many of those who had stood hostile or alienated, who desired to see 'one of the days of the Son of Man,' and did not see it? They sought Him, not in anger any more; they sought Him, not in penitence, or else they would have found Him; but they sought Him simply in distress, and wishing that they could have back again what they had cared so little for when they had it.

And are there no people listening to me now, to whom these words apply?-

'He that will not, when he may,
When he will it shall be-Nay!'

Although it is [blessed be His name] always true that a seeking heart finds Him, and whensoever there is the faintest trace of penitent desire to get hold of Christ's hand it does grasp ours, it is also true that things neglected once cannot be brought back; that the sowing time allowed to pass can never return; and that they who have turned, as some of you have turned, dear friends, all your lives, a deaf ear to the Christ that asks you to love Him and trust Him, may one day wish that it had been otherwise, and go to look for Him and not find Him.

There is another kind of seeking that is vain, an intellectual seeking without the preparation of the heart. There are, no doubt, some people here to-day that would say, 'We have been seeking the truth about religion all our lives, and we have not got to it yet.' Well, I do not want to judge either your motives or your methods, but I know this, that there is many a man who goes on the quest for religious certainty, and looks at, if not for Jesus Christ, and is not really capable of discerning Him when he sees Him, because his eye is not single, or because his heart is full of worldliness or indifference, or because he begins with a foregone conclusion, and looks for facts to establish that; or because he will not cast down and put away evil things that rise up between him and his Master.

My brother! if you go to look for Jesus Christ with a heart full of the world, if you go to look for Him while you wish to hold on by all the habitudes and earthlinesses of your past, you will never find Him. The sensualist seeks for Him, the covetous man seeks for Him, the passionate, ill-tempered man seeks for Him; the woman plunged in frivolities, or steeped to the eyebrows in domestic cares,-these may in some feeble fashion go to look for Him and they will not find Him, because they have sought for Him with hearts overcharged with other things and filled with the affairs of this life, its trifles and its sins.

I turn for a moment to the seeking that is not vain. ‘Ye shall seek Me’ is not on Christ’s lips to any heart that loves Him, however imperfectly, a sentence of separation or an appointment of a sorrowful lot, but it is a blessed law, the law of the Christian life.

That life is all one great seeking after Christ. Love seeks the absent when removed from our sight. If we care anything about Him at all, our hearts will turn to Him as naturally as, when the winter begins to pinch, the migrating birds seek the sunny south, impelled by an instinct that they do not themselves understand.

The same law which sends loving thoughts out across the globe to seek for husband, child, or friend when absent, sets the really Christian heart seeking for the Christ, whom, having not seen, it loves, as surely as the ivy tendril feels out for a support. As surely as the roots of a mountain-ash growing on the top of a boulder feel down the side of the rock till they reach the soil; as surely as the stork follows the warmth to the sunny Mediterranean, so surely, if your heart loves Christ, will the very heart and motive of your action be the search for Him.

And if you do not seek Him, brother, as surely as He is parted from our sense you will lose Him, and He will be parted from you wholly, for there is no way by which a person who is not before our eyes may be kept near us except only by diligent effort on our part to keep thought and love and will all in contact with Him; thought meditating, love going out towards Him, will submitting. Unless there be this effort, you will lose your Master as surely as a little child in a crowd will lose his nurse and his guide, if his hand slips from out the protecting hand. The dark shadow of the earth on which you stand will slowly steal over His silvery brightness, as when the moon is eclipsed, and you will not know how you have lost Him, but only be sadly aware that your heaven is darkened. ‘Ye shall seek Me,’ is the condition of all happy communion between Christ and us.

And that seeking, dear brother, in the threefold form in which I have spoken of it-effort to keep Him in our thoughts, in our love, and over our will-is neither a seeking which starts from a sense that we do not possess Him, nor one which ends in disappointment. But we seek for Him because we already have Him in a measure, and we seek Him that we may possess Him more abundantly, and anything is possible rather than that such a search shall be vain. Men may go to created wells, and find no water, and return ashamed, and with their vessels empty, but every one who seeks for that Fountain of salvation shall draw from it with joy. It is as impossible that a heart which desires Jesus Christ shall not have Him, as it is that lungs dilated shall not fill with air, or as it is that an empty vessel put out in a rainfall shall not be replenished. He does not hide Himself, but He desires to be found. May I say that as a mother will sometimes pretend to her child to hide, that the child's delight may be the greater in searching and in finding, so Christ has gone away from our sight in order, for one reason, that He may stimulate our desires to feel after Him! If we seek Him hid in God, we shall find Him for the joy of our hearts.

A great thinker once said that he would rather have the search after truth than the possession of truth. It was a rash word, but it pointed to the fact that there is a search which is only one shade less blessed than the possession. And if that be so in regard to any pure and high truth, it is still more so about Christ Himself. To seek for Him is joy; to find Him is joy. What can be a happier life than the life of constant pursuit after an infinitely precious object, which is ever being sought and ever being found; sought with a profound consciousness of its preciousness, found with a widening appreciation and capacity for its enjoyment? 'Ye shall seek Me' is a word not of evil but of good cheer; for buried in the depth of the commandment to search is the promise that we shall find.

II, Secondly, let us look briefly at these two 'cannots.'

'Whither I go, ye cannot come,' says He to His enemies, with no limitation, with no condition. The 'cannot' is absolute and permanent, so long as they retain their enmity. To His friends, on the other hand, He says, 'So now I say to you,' the law for to-day, the law for this side the flood, but not the law for the beyond, as He explains more fully in the subsequent words: 'Thou canst not follow Me now, but thou shalt follow Me afterwards.'

So, then, Christ is somewhere. When He passed from life it was not into a state only, but into a place; and He took with Him a material body, howsoever changed. He is somewhere, and there friend and enemy alike cannot enter, so long as they are compassed with ‘the earthly house of this tabernacle.’ But the incapacity is deeper than that. No sinful man can pass thither. Where has He gone? The preceding words give us the answer. ‘God shall glorify Him in Himself.’ The prospect of that assumption into the inmost glory of the divine nature directly led our Lord to think of the change it would bring about in the relation of His humble friends to Him. While for Himself He triumphs in the prospect, He cannot but turn a thought to their lonesomeness, and hence come the words of our text. He has passed into the bosom and blaze of divinity. Can I walk there, can I pass into that tremendous fiery furnace? ‘Who shall dwell with the everlasting burnings?’ ‘Ye cannot follow Me now.’ No man can go thither except Christ goes thither.

There are deep mysteries lying in that word of our Lords,-’I go to prepare a place for you.’ We know not what manner of activity on His part that definitely means. It seems as if somehow or other the presence in Heaven of our Brother in His glorified humanity was necessary in order that the golden pavement should be trodden by our feet, and that our poor, feeble manhood should live and not be shrivelled up in the blaze of that central brightness.

We know not how He prepares the place, but heaven, whatever it be, is no place for a man unless the Man, Christ Jesus, be there. He is the Revealer of God, not only for earth, but for heaven; not only for time, but for eternity. ‘No man cometh unto the Father but by Me,’ is true everywhere and always, there as here. So I suppose that, but for His presence, heaven itself would be dark, and its King invisible, and if a man could enter there he would either be blasted with unbearable flashes of brightness or grope at its noonday as the blind, because his eye was not adapted to such beams. Be that as it may, ‘the Forerunner is for us entered.’ He has gone before, because He knows the great City, ‘His own calm home, His habitation from eternity.’ He has gone before to make ready a lodging for us, in whose land He has dwelt so long, and He will meet us, who would else be bewildered like some dweller in a desert if brought to the capital, when we reach the gates, and guide our unaccustomed steps to the mansion prepared for us.

But the power to enter there, even when He is there, depends on our union with Christ by faith. When we are joined to Him, the absolute ‘cannot,’ based upon flesh, and still more upon sin, which is a radical and permanent impossibility, is changed into a relative and temporary incapacity. If we have faith in Christ, and are thereby drawing a kindred life from Him, our nature will be in process of being changed into that which is capable of bearing the brilliance of the felicities of heaven. But just as these friends of Christ, though they loved Him very truly, and understood Him a little, were a long way from being ready to follow Him, and needed the schooling of the Cross, and Olivet, and Pentecost, as well as the discipline of life and toil, before they were fully ripe for the harvest, so we, for the most part, have to pass through analogous training before we are prepared for the place which Christ has prepared for us. Certainly, so soon as a heart has trusted Christ, it is capable of entering where He is, and the real reason why the disciples could not come where He went was that they did not yet clearly know Him as the divine Sacrifice for theirs and the world’s sins, and, however much they believed in Him as Messiah, had not yet, nor could have, the knowledge on which they could found their trust in Him as their Saviour.

But, while that is true, it is also true that each advance in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour will bring with it capacity to advance further into the heart of the far-off land, and to see more of the King in His beauty. So, as long as His friends were wrapped in such dark clouds of misconception and error, as long as their Christian characters were so imperfect and incomplete as they were at the time of my text being spoken, they could not go thither and follow Him. But it was a diminishing impossibility, and day by day they approximated more and more to His likeness, because they understood Him more, and trusted Him more, and loved Him more, and grew towards Him, and, therefore, day by day became more and more able to enter into that Kingdom.

Are you growing in power so to do? Is the only thing which unfits you for heaven the fact that you have a mortal body? In other respects are you fit to go into that heaven, and walk in its brightness and not be consumed? The answer to the question is found in another one-Are you joined to Jesus Christ by simple faith? The incapacity is absolute and eternal if the enmity is eternal.

State and place are determined yonder by character, and character is determined by faith. Take a bottle of some solution in which heterogeneous substances have all been melted up together, and let it stand on a shelf and gradually settle down, and its contents will settle in regular layers, the heaviest at the bottom and the lightest at the top, and stratify themselves according to gravity. And that is how the other world is arranged-stratified. When all the confusions of this present are at an end, and all the moisture is driven off, men and women will be left in layers, like drawing to like. As Peter said about Judas with equal wisdom and reticence, ‘He went to his own place.’ That is where we shall all go, to the place we are fit for.

God does not slam the door of heaven in anybody’s face; it stands wide open. But there is a mystic barrier, unseen, but most real, more repellent than cherub and flaming sword, which makes it impossible for any foot to cross that threshold except the foot of the man whose heart and nature have been made Christlike, and fitted for heaven by simple faith in Him.

Love Him and trust Him, and then your life on earth will be a blessed seeking and a blessed finding of Him whom to seek is joyous effort, whom to find is an Elysium of rest. You will walk here not parted from Him, but with your thoughts and your love, which are your truest self, going up where He is, until you drop ‘the muddy vesture of decay’ which unfits you whilst you wear it for the presence-chamber of the King, and so you will enter in and be ‘for ever with the Lord.’

37)John 7:37-38

John

THE ROCK AND THE WATER

Joh. 7:37 - Joh. 7:38.

The occasion and date of this great saying are carefully given by the Evangelist, because they throw much light on its significance and importance. It was ‘on the last day, that great day of the Feast,’ that ‘Jesus stood and cried.’ The Feast was that of Tabernacles, which was instituted in order to keep in mind the incidents of the desert wandering. On the anniversary of this day the Jews still do as they used to, and in many a foul ghetto and frowsy back street of European cities, you will find them sitting beneath the booths of green branches, commemorating the Exodus and its wonders. Part of that ceremonial was that on each morning of the seven, and possibly on the eighth, ‘the last day of the Feast,’ a procession of white-robed priests wound down the rocky footpath from the Temple to Siloam, and there in a golden vase drew water from the spring, chanting, as they ascended and re-entered the Temple gates where they poured out the water as a libation, the words of the prophet, ‘with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.’

Picture the scene to yourselves-the white-robed priests toiling up the pathway, the crowd in the court, the sparkling water poured out with choral song. And then, as the priests stood with their empty vases, there was a little stir in the crowd, and a Man who had been standing watching, lifted up a loud voice and cried, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink.’ Strange words to say, anywhere and anywhen, daring words to say there in the Temple court! For there and then they could mean nothing less than Christ’s laying His hand on that old miracle, which was pointed to by the rite, when the rock yielded the water, and asserting that all which it did and typified was repeated, fulfilled, and transcended in Himself, and that not for a handful of nomads in the wilderness, but for all the world, in all its generations.

So here is one more instance to add to those to which I have directed your attention on former occasions, in which, in this Gospel, we find Christ claiming to be the fulfilment of incidents and events in that ancient covenant, Jacob’s ladder, the brazen serpent, the manna, and now the rock that yielded the water. He says of them all that they are the shadow, and the substance is in Him.

I. So then, we have to look, first, at Christ’s view of humanity as set forth here.

You remember the story of how the people in the wilderness, distressed by that most imperative of all physical cravings, thirst, turned upon Moses and Aaron and said, ‘Why have ye brought us here to die in the wilderness, where there are neither vines nor pomegranates,’ but a land of thirst and death? Just as Christ, in the former instances to which we have already referred, selected and pointed to the poisoned and serpent-stricken camp as an emblem of humanity, and just as He pointed to the hunger of the men that were starving there, as an emblem, go here He says: ‘That is the world-a congregation of thirsty men raging in their pangs, and not knowing where to find solace or slaking for their thirst.’ I do not need to go over all the dominant desires that surge up in men’s souls, the mind craving for knowledge, the heart calling out for love, the whole nature feeling blindly and often desperately after something external to itself, which it can grasp, and in which it can feel satisfied. You know them; we all know them. Like some plant growing in a cellar, and with feeble and blanched tendrils feeling towards the light which is so far away, every man carries about within himself a whole host of longing desires, which need to find something round which they may twine, and in which they can be at rest.

‘The misery of man is great upon him,’ because, having these desires, he misreads so many of them, and stifles, ignores, atrophies to so large an extent the noblest of them. I know of no sadder tragedy than the way in which we misinterpret the meaning of these inarticulate cries that rise from the depths of our hearts, and misunderstand what it is that we are groping after, when we put out empty, and, alas! too often unclean, hands, to lay hold on our true good.

Brethren, you do not know what you want, many of you, and there is something pathetic in the endless effort to fill up the heart by a multitude of diverse and small things, when all the while the deepest meaning of aspirations, yearnings, longings, unrest, discontent is, ‘My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.’ Nothing less than infinitude will satisfy the smallest heart of the humblest and least developed man. Nothing less than to have all our treasures in one accessible, changeless Infinity will ever give rest to a human soul. You have tried a multiplicity of trifles. It takes a great many bags of coppers to make up L. 1000, and they are cumbrous to carry. Would it not be better to part with a multitude of goodly pearls, if need be, in order to have all your wealth, and the satisfaction of all your desires, in the ‘One Pearl of great price’? It is God for whom men are thirsting, and, alas! so many of us know it not. As the old prophet says, in words that never lose their pathetic power, ‘they have hewn out for themselves cisterns’-one is not enough-they need many. They are only cisterns, which hold what is put into them, and they are ‘broken cisterns,’ which cannot hold it. Yet we turn to these with a strange infatuation, which even the experience that teaches fools does not teach us to be folly. We turn to these; and we turn from the Fountain; the one, the springing, the sufficient, the unfailing, the exuberant Fountain of living waters. Some of you have cisterns on the tops of your houses, with a coating of green scum and soot on them, and do you like that foul draught better than the bright blessing that comes out of the heart of the rock, flashing and pure?

But not only are these desires misread, but the noblest of them are stifled. I have said that the condition of humanity is that of thirst. Christ speaks in my text as if that thirst was by no means universal, and, alas! it is not, ‘If any man thirst’; there are some of us that do not, for we are all so constituted that, unless by continual self-discipline, and self-suppression, and self-evolution, the lower desires will overgrow the loftier ones, and kill them, as weeds will some precious crop. And some of you are so much taken up with gratifying the lowest necessities and longings of your nature, that you leave the highest all uncared for, and the effect of that is that the unsatisfied longing avenges itself, for your neglect of it, by infusing unrest and dissatisfaction into what else would satisfy the lowest. ‘He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance with increase,’ but he that loves God will be satisfied with less than silver, and will continue satisfied when decrease comes. If you would suck the last drop of sweetness out of the luscious purple grapes that grow on earth, you must have the appetite after the best things, recognised, and ministered to, and satisfied. And when we are satisfied with God, we shall ‘have learnt in whatsoever state we are, therewith to be self-sufficing.’ But, as I say, the highest desires are neglected, and the lowest are cockered and pampered, and so the taste is depraved. Many of you have no wish for God, and no desire after high and noble things, and are perfectly contented to browse on the low levels, or to feed on ‘the husks that the swine do eat,’ whilst all the while the loftiest of your powers is starving within. Brethren, before we can come to the Rock that yields the water, there must be the sense of need. Do you know what it is that you want? Have you any desire after righteousness and purity and nobleness, and the vision of God flaming in upon the pettinesses and commonplaces of this life which is ‘sound and fury, signifying nothing,’ and is trivial in all its pretended greatness, unless you have learned that you need God most of all, and will never be at rest till you have Him?

II. Secondly, note here Christ’s consciousness of Himself.

Is there anything in human utterances more majestic and wonderful than this saying of my text, ‘If any man thirst, let him come to Me’? There He claims to be separate altogether from those whose thirst He would satisfy. There He claims to be able to meet every aspiration, every spiritual want, every true desire in this complex nature of ours. There He claims to be able to do this for one, and therefore for all. There He claims to be able to do it for all the generations of mankind, right away down to the end. Who is He who thus plants Himself in the front of the race, knows their deep thirsts, takes account of the impotence of anything created to satisfy them, assumes the divine prerogative, and says, ‘I come to satisfy every desire in every soul, to the end of time’? Yes, and from that day when He stood in the Temple and cried these words, down to this day, there have been, and there are, millions who can say, ‘We have drawn water from this fountain of salvation, and it has never failed us.’ Christ’s audacious presentation of Himself to the world as adequate to fill all its needs, and slake all its thirst, has been verified by nineteen centuries of experience, and there are many men and women all over the world to-day who would be ready to set to their seals that Christ is true, and that He, indeed, is all-sufficient for the soul.

Brethren, I do not wish to dwell upon this aspect of our Lord’s character in more than a sentence, but I beseech you to ask yourselves what is the impression that is left of the character of a man who says such things, unless He was something more than one of our race? Jesus Christ, it is as clear as day, in these words makes a claim which only divinity can warrant Him in making, or can fulfil when it is made. And I would urge you to consider what the alternative is, if you do not believe that Jesus Christ here sets Himself forth as the Incarnate Word of God, sufficient for all humanity. ‘I am meek and lowly in heart’-and His lowliness of heart is proved in a strange fashion, if He stands up before the race and says, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.’

III. Note, further, Christ’s invitation.

‘Let him come . . . and drink’-two expressions for one thing. That invitation sounds all through Scripture, and, perhaps, there was lingering in our Lord’s mind, besides the reference to the rock that yielded the water, some echo of the words of the second Isaiah: ‘Ho! every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters.’ ‘Nay!’ said Christ, ‘not to the waters, but to Me.’ And then we hear from His own lips the same invitation addressed to the woman of Samaria, with the difference that to her, an alien, He pointed only to the natural water in the well that had been Jacob’s, whereas, to these people, the descendants of the chosen race, He pointed to the miracle in the desert, and claimed to fulfil that. And on the very last page of Scripture, as it is now arranged, there stands the echo again of this saying of my text, ‘Let him that is athirst come’-there must be the sense of need, as I was saying, before there is the coming-’and whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely.’

Now, dear friends, beneath these two metaphorical expressions there lies one simple condition. I put it into three words, which, for the sake of being easily remembered, I cast into an alliterative form: approach Christ, appropriate Christ, adhere to Christ.

Approach Christ. You come by faith, you come by love, you come by communion. And you can come if you will, though He is now on the throne.

Appropriate Christ. It is vain that the water should be gushing from the rock there, unless you make it your own by drinking. It must pass your lips. It must become your personal possession. You must enclose a piece of the common, and make it your very own. ‘He loved us, and gave Himself for us’; well and good, but strike out the ‘us’ and put in ‘me.’ ‘He loved me and gave Himself for me.’ The river may be flowing right past your door, yet your lips may be cracked with thirst, even whilst you hear the tinkle of its music amongst the sedges and the pebbles. Appropriate Christ. ‘Come . . . and drink.’

Adhere to Christ. You were thirsty yesterday: you drank. That will not slake to-day’s thirst, nor prevent its recurrence. And you must keep on drinking if you are to keep from perishing of thirst. Day by day, drop by drop, draught by draught, you must drink. According to the ancient Jewish legend, which Paul in one of his letters refers to, about this very miracle, you must have the Rock following you all through your desert pilgrimage, and you must drink daily and hourly, by continual faith, love, and communion.

IV. We have here not only these points, but a fourth. Christ’s promise.

‘He that believeth on Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.’ That is one case of the universal law that a man who trusts Christ becomes like the Christ whom he trusts. Derivatively and by impartation, no doubt, but still the man who has gone to that Rock, to the springing fountain as it pushes forth, receives into himself an inward life by the communication of Christ’s divine Spirit, so that he has in him a fountain ‘springing up into life everlasting.’ The Book of Proverbs says, ‘The good man shall be satisfied from himself,’ but the good man is only satisfied from himself when he can say, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,’ and from that better self he will be satisfied.

So we may have a well in the courtyard, and may be able to bear in ourselves the fountain of water, and where the divine life of Christ by His Spirit has through faith been implanted within us, it will come out from us. There is a question for you Christian people-do any rivers of living water flow out of you? If they do not, it is to be doubted whether you have drunk of the fountain. There are many professing Christians who are like the foul little rivers that pass under the pavements in Manchester, all impure, and covered over so that nobody sees them. ‘Out of him shall flow rivers of living water’-that is Christ’s way of communicating the blessing of eternal life to the world-by the medium of those who have already received it. Christian men and women, if your faith has brought the life into you, see to it that approaching Christ, and appropriating Christ, and adhering to Christ, you are becoming assimilated to Christ, and in your daily life, God’s grace fructifying through you to all, are ‘become as rivers of water in a dry place, and the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.’

38)John 8:12

John

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Joh. 8:12.

Jesus Christ was His own great theme. Whatever be the explanation of the fact, there stands the fact that, if we know anything at all about His habitual tone of teaching, we know that it was full of Himself. We know, too, that what He said about Himself was very unlike the language becoming a wise and humble religious teacher. Both the prominence given to His own personality, and the tremendous claims He advances for Himself, are hard to reconcile with any conception of His nature and work except one,-that there we see God manifest in the flesh. Are such words as these fit to be spoken by any man conscious of his own limitations and imperfections of life and knowledge? Would they not be fatal to any one’s pretensions to be a teacher of religion or morality? They assert that the Speaker is the Source of illumination for the world; the only Source; the Source for all. They assert that ‘following’ Him, whether in belief or in deed, is the sure deliverance from all darkness, either of error or of sin; and implants in every follower a light which is life. And the world, instead of turning away from such monstrous assumptions, and drowning them in scornful laughter, or rebelling against them, has listened, and largely believed, and has not felt them to mar the beauty of meekness, which, by a strange anomaly, this Man says that He has.

Words parallel to these are frequent on our Lord’s lips. In each instance they have some special appropriateness of application, as is probably the case here. The suggestion has been reasonably made, that there is an allusion in them to part of the ceremonial connected with the Feast of Tabernacles, at which we find our Lord present in the previous chapter. Commentators tell us that on the first evening of the Feast, two huge golden lamps, which stood one on each side of the altar of burnt offering in the Temple court, were lighted as the night began to fall, and poured out a brilliant flood over Temple and city and deep gorge; while far into the midnight, troops of rejoicing worshippers clustered about them with dance and song. The possibility of this reference is strengthened by the note of place which our Evangelist gives. ‘These things spake Jesus in the treasury, as He taught in the Temple,’ for the ‘treasury’ stood in the same court, and doubtless the golden lamps were full in sight of the listening groups. It is also strengthened by the unmistakable allusion in the previous chapter to another portion of the ceremonial of the Feast, where our Lord puts forth another of His great self-revelations and demands, in singular parallelism with that of our text, in the words, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink.’ That refers to the custom during the Feast of drawing water from the fountain of Siloam, which was poured out on the altar, while the gathered multitude chanted the old strain of Isaiah’s prophecy: ‘With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.’ It is to be remembered, too, in estimating the probability of our text belonging to these Temple-sayings at the Feast, that the section which separates it from them, and contains the story about the woman taken in adultery, is judged by the best critics to be out of place here, and is not found in the most valuable manuscripts. If, then, we suppose this allusion to be fairly probable, I think it gives a special direction and meaning to these grand words, which it may be worth while to think of briefly.

The first thing to notice is-the intention of the ceremonial to which our Lord here points as a symbol of Himself. What was the meaning of these great lights that went flashing through the warm autumn nights of the festival? All the parts of that Feast were intended to recall some feature of the forty years’ wanderings in the wilderness; the lights by the altar were memorials of the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. When, then, Jesus says, ‘I am the Light of the world,’ He would declare Himself as being in reality, and to every soul of man to the end of time, what that cloud with its heart of fire was in outward seeming to one generation of desert wanderers.

Now, the main thing which it was to these, was the visible vehicle of the divine presence. ‘The Lord went before them in a pillar of a cloud.’ ‘The Lord looked through the pillar.’ ‘The Lord came down in the cloud and spake with him.’ The ‘cloud covered the Tabernacle, and the glory of the Lord appeared.’ Such is the way in which it is ever spoken of, as being the manifestation to Israel in sensible form of the presence among them of God their King. ‘The glory of the Lord’ has a very specific meaning in the Old Testament. It usually signifies that brightness, the flaming heart of the cloudy pillar, which for the most part, as it would appear, veiled by the cloud, gathered radiance as the world grew darker at set of sun, and sometimes, at great crises in the history, as at the Red Sea, or on Sinai, or in loving communion with the law-giver, or in swift judgment against the rebels, rent the veil and flamed on men’s eyes. I need not remind you how this same pillar of cloud and fire, which at once manifested and hid God, was thereby no unworthy symbol of Him who remains, after all revelation, unrevealed. Whatsoever sets forth, must also shroud, the infinite glory. Concerning all by which He makes Himself known to eye, or mind, or heart, it must be said, ‘And there was the hiding of His power.’ The fire is ever folded in the cloud. Nay, at bottom, the light which is full of glory is therefore inaccessible, and the thick darkness in which He dwells is but the ‘glorious privacy’ of perfect light.

That guiding pillar, which moved before the moving people-a cloud to shelter from the scorching heat, a fire to cheer in the blackness of night-spread itself above the sanctuary of the wilderness; and ‘the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.’ When the moving Tabernacle gave place to the fixed Temple, again ‘the cloud filled the house of the Lord’; and there-dwelling between the cherubim, the types of the whole order of creatural life, and above the mercy-seat, that spoke of pardon, and the ark that held the law, and behind the veil, in the thick darkness of the holy of holies, where no feet trod, save once a year one white-robed priest, in the garb of a penitent, and bearing the blood that made atonement-shone the light of the glory of God, the visible majesty of the present Deity.

But long centuries had passed since that light had departed. ‘The glory’ had ceased from the house that now stood on Zion, and the light from between the cherubim. Shall we not, then, see a deep meaning and reference to that awful blank, when Jesus standing there in the courts of that Temple, whose inmost shrine was, in a most sad sense, empty, pointed to the quenched lamps that commemorated a departed Shechinah, and said, ‘I am the Light of the world’?

He is the Light of the world, because in Him is the glory of God. His words are madness, and something very like blasphemy, unless they are vindicated by the visible indwelling in Him of the present God. The cloud of the humanity, ‘the veil, that is to say, His flesh,’ enfolds and tempers; and through its transparent folds reveals, even while it swathes, the Godhead. Like some fleecy vapour flitting across the sun, and irradiated by its light, it enables our weak eyes to see light, and not darkness, in the else intolerable blaze. Yes! Thou art the Light of the world, because in Thee dwelleth ‘the fulness of the Godhead bodily.’ Thy servant hath taught us the meaning of Thy words, when he said: ‘The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us; and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.’

Then, subordinate to this principal thought, is the other on which I may touch for a moment-that Christ, like that pillar of cloud and fire, guides us in our pilgrimage. You may remember how emphatically the Book of Numbers [Num. 9:1 - Num. 9:23] dwells upon the absolute control of all the marches and halts by the movements of the cloud. When it was taken up, they journeyed; when it settled down, they encamped. As long as it lay spread above the Tabernacle, there they stayed. Impatient eyes might look, and impatient spirits chafe-no matter. The camp might be pitched in a desolate place, away from wells and palm-trees, away from shade, among fiery serpents, and open to fierce foes-no matter. As long as the pillar was motionless, no man stirred. Weary slow days might pass in this compulsory inactivity; but ‘whether it were two days, or a month, or a year, that the cloud tarried upon the Tabernacle, the children of Israel journeyed not.’ And whenever It lifted itself up,-no matter how short had been the halt, how weary and footsore the people, how pleasant the resting-place-up with the tent-pegs immediately, and away. If the signal were given at midnight, when all but the watchers slept, or at midday, it was all the same. There was the true Commander of their march. It was not Moses, nor Jethro, with his quick Arab eye and knowledge of the ground, that guided them; but that stately, solemn pillar, that floated before them. How they must have watched for the gathering up of its folds as they lay softly stretched along the Tabernacle roof; and for its sinking down, and spreading itself out, like a misty hand of blessing, as it sailed in the van!

‘I am the Light of the world.’ We have in Him a better guide through worse perplexities than theirs. By His Spirit within us, by that all-sufficient and perfect example of His life, by the word of His Gospel, and by the manifold indications of His providence, Jesus Christ is our Guide. If ever we go astray, it is not His fault, but ours. How gentle and loving that guidance is, none who have not yielded to it can tell. How wise and sure, none but those who have followed it know. He does not say ‘Go,’ but ‘Come.’ When He puts forth His sheep, He goes before them. In all rough places His quick hand is put out to save us. In danger He lashes us to Himself, as Alpine guides do when there is perilous ice to get across. As one of the psalms puts it, with wonderful beauty: ‘I will guide thee with Mine eye’-a glance, not a blow-a look of directing love, that at once heartens to duty and tells duty. We must be very near Him to catch that look, and very much in sympathy with Him to understand it; and when we do, we must be swift to obey. Our eyes must be ever toward the Lord, or we shall often be marching on, unwitting that the pillar has spread itself for rest, or idly dawdling in our tents long after the cloud has gathered itself up for the march. Do not let impatience lead you to hasty interpretation of His plans before they are fairly evolved. Many men by self-will, by rashness, by precipitate hurry in drawing conclusions about what they ought to do, have ruined their lives. Take care, in the old-fashioned phrase, of ‘running before you are sent.’ There should always be a good clear space between the guiding ark and you, ‘about two thousand cubits by measure,’ that there may be no mistakes about the road. It is neither reverent nor wise to be treading on the heels of our Guide in our eager confidence that we know where He wants us to go.

Do not let the warmth by the camp-fire, or the pleasantness of the shady place where your tent is pitched, keep you there when the cloud lifts. Be ready for change, be ready for continuance, because you are in fellowship with your Leader and Commander; and let Him say, Go, and you go; Do this, and you gladly do it, until the hour when He will whisper, Come; and, as you come, the river will part, and the journey will be over, and ‘the fiery, cloudy pillar,’ that ‘guided you all your journey through,’ will spread itself out an abiding glory, in that higher home where ‘the Lamb is the light thereof.’

All true following of Christ begins with faith, or we might almost say that following is faith, for we find our Lord substituting the former expression for the latter in another passage of this Gospel parallel with the present. ‘I am come a Light into the world, that whosoever believeth on Me should not walk in darkness.’ The two ideas are not equivalent, but faith is the condition of following; and following is the outcome and test, because it is the operation, of faith. None but they who trust Him will follow Him. He who does not follow, does not trust. To follow Christ, means to long and strive after His companionship; as the Psalmist says, ‘My soul followeth hard after Thee.’ It means the submission of the will, the effort of the whole nature, the daily conflict to reproduce His example, the resolute adoption of His command as my law, His providence as my will, His fellowship as my joy. And the root and beginning of all such following is in coming to Him, conscious of mine own darkness, and trustful in His great light. We must rely on a Guide before we accept His directions; and it is absurd to pretend that we trust Him, if we do not go as He bids us. So ‘Follow thou Me’ is, in a very real sense, the sum of all Christian duty.

That thought opens out very wide fields, into which we must not even glance now; but I cannot help pausing here to repeat the remark already made, as to the gigantic and incomprehensible self-confidence that speaks here. ‘Followeth Me’; then Jesus Christ calmly proposes Himself as the aim and goal for every soul of man; sets up His own doings as an all-sufficient rule for us all, with all our varieties of temper, character, culture, and work, and quietly assumes to have a right of precedence before, and of absolute command over, the whole world. They are all to keep behind Him, He thinks, be they saints or sages, kings or beggars; and the liker they are to Himself, He thinks, the nearer they will be to perfectness and life. He puts Himself at the head of the mystic march of the generations, and, like the mysterious Angel that Joshua saw in the plain by Jericho, makes the lofty claim: ‘Nay, but as Captain of the Lord’s host am I come up.’ Do we admit His claim because we know His Name? Do we yield Him full trust because we have learned that He is the Light of men since He is the Word of God?

Do we follow Him with loyal obedience, longing love, and lowly imitation, since He has been and is to us the Saviour of our souls?

In the measure in which we do, the great promises of this wonderful saying will be verified and understood by us-'He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness.' That saying has, as one may say, a lower and a higher fulfilment. In the lower, it refers to practical life and its perplexities. Nobody who has not tried it would believe how many difficulties are cleared out of a man's road by the simple act of trying to follow Christ. No doubt there will still remain obscurities enough as to what we ought to do, to call for the best exercise of patient wisdom; but an enormous proportion of them vanish like mist when the sun breaks through, when once we honestly set ourselves to find out whither the pillared Light is guiding. It is a reluctant will, and intrusive likings and dislikings, that obscure the way for us, much oftener than real obscurity in the way itself. It is seldom impossible to discern the divine will, when we only wish to know it that we may do it. And if ever it is impossible for us, surely that impossibility is like the cloud resting on the Tabernacle-a sign that for the present His will is that we should be still, and wait, and watch.

But there is a higher meaning in the words than even this promise of practical direction. In the profound symbolism of Scripture, especially of this Gospel, 'darkness' is the name for the whole condition of the soul averted from God. So our Lord here is declaring that to follow Him is the true deliverance from that midnight of the soul. There are a darkness of ignorance, a darkness of impurity, a darkness of sorrow; and in that threefold gloom, thickening to a darkness of death, are they enwrapt who follow not the Light. That is the grim, tragical side of this saying, too sad, too awful for our lips to speak much of, and best left in the solemn impressiveness of that one word. But the hopeful, blessed side of it is, that the feeblest beginnings of trust in Jesus Christ, and the first tottering steps that try to tread in His, bring us into the light. It does not need that we have reached our goal, it is enough that our faces are turned to it, and our hearts desire to attain it, then we may be sure that the dominion of the darkness over us is broken. To follow, though it be afar off, and with unequal steps, fills our path with increasing brightness, and even though evil and ignorance and sorrow may thrust their blackness in upon our day, they are melting in the growing glory, and already we may give thanks ‘unto the Father who hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light, who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son.’

But we have not merely the promise that we shall be led by the light and brought into the light. A yet deeper and grander gift is offered here: ‘He shall have the light of life.’ I suppose that means, not, as it is often carelessly taken to mean, a light which illuminates the life, but, like the similar phrases of this Gospel, ‘bread of life,’ ‘water of life,’-light which is life. ‘In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.’ These two are one in their source, which is Jesus, the Word of God. Of Him we have to say, ‘With Thee is the fountain of life, in Thy light shall we see light.’ They are one in their deepest nature; the life is the light, and the light the life. And this one gift is bestowed upon every soul that follows Christ. Not only will our outward lives be illumined or guided from without, but our inward being will be filled with the brightness. ‘Ye were sometimes darkness, now are ye light in the Lord.’

That pillar of fire remained apart and without. But this true and better Guide of our souls enters in and dwells in us, in all the fulness of His triple gift of life, and light, and love. Within us He will chiefly prove Himself the Guide of our spirits, and will not merely cast His beams on the path of our feet, but will fill and flood us with His own brightness. All light of knowledge, of goodness, of gladness will be ours, if Christ be ours; and ours He surely will be if we follow Him. Let us take heed, lest turning away from Him we follow the will-o’-the-wisps of our own fancies, or the dancing lights, born of putrescence, that flicker above the swamps, for they will lead us into doleful lands where evil things haunt, and into outer darkness. Let us take heed how we use that light of God; for Christ, like His symbol of old, has a double aspect according to the eye which looks. ‘It came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel, and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these.’ He is either a Stone of stumbling or a sure Foundation, a savour of life or of death, and which He is depends on ourselves. Trusted, loved, followed, He is light. Neglected, turned from, He is darkness. Though He be the Light of the world, it is only the man who follows Him to whom He can give the light of life. Therefore, man’s awful prerogative of perverting the best into the worst forced Him, who came to be the light of men, to that sad and solemn utterance: ‘For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind.’

39)John 8:30-31

John

THREE ASPECTS OF FAITH

Joh. 8:30 - Joh. 8:31.

The Revised Version accurately represents the original by varying the expression in these two clauses, retaining ‘believed on Him’ in the former, and substituting the simple ‘believed Him’ in the latter. The variation in two contiguous clauses can scarcely be accidental in so careful a writer as the Apostle John. And the reason and meaning of it are obvious enough on the face of the narrative. His purpose is to distinguish between more and less perfect acceptance of Jesus Christ. The more perfect is the former, ‘they believed on Him’; the less perfect is the latter, the simple acceptance of His word on His claim of Messiahship, which is stigmatised as shallow, and proved to be transient by the context.

They were ‘Jews’ which believed, and they continued to be so whilst they were believing. Now, the word ‘Jew’ in this Gospel always connotes antagonism to Jesus Christ; and as for these persons, how slight and unreliable their adhesion to the Lord is, comes out in the course of the next few verses; and by the end of the chapter they are taking up stones to stone Him. So John would show us that there is a kind of acceptance which may be real, and may be the basis of something much better hereafter, but which, if it does not grow, rots and disappears; and he would draw a broad line of distinction between that and the other mental act, far deeper, more wholesome, more lasting and vital, which he designates as ‘believing on Him.’ I take these words, then, for consideration, not so much to deal with other thoughts suggested by them, as because they afford me a starting-point for the consideration of the various phases of the act of believing, its blessings and its nature, and its relation to its objects, which are expressed in the New Testament by the various grammatical connections and constructions of this word.

Now, the facts with which I wish to deal may be very briefly stated. There are three ways in which the New Testament represents the act of believing, and its relation to its Object, Christ. These three are, first, the simple one which appears in the text as ‘believed Him.’ Then there is a second, which appears in two forms, slightly different, but which, for our purpose, may be treated as substantially the same-’believing on Him.’ And then there is a third, which, literally and accurately translated is, ‘believing unto’ or ‘into Him.’ That phrase is John’s favourite one, and rather unfortunately, though perhaps necessarily, it has been generally rendered by our translators by the less forcible ‘believing in,’ which gives the idea of repose in, but does not give the idea of motion towards. These three, then, I think, do set forth, if we will ponder them, very large lessons as to the essence of this act of believing, as to the Object upon which it fastens, and as to the blessings which flow from it, which it will be worth our while to consider now. I may cast the whole into the shape of three exhortations: believe Him, believe on Him, believe unto Him.

I. First, then, believe Christ.

We accept a man’s words when we trust the man. Even if belief, or faith, is represented in the New Testament, as it very rarely is, as having for its object the words of revelation, behind that acceptance of the words lies confidence in the person speaking. And the beginning of all true Christian faith has in it, not merely the intellectual acceptance of certain propositions as true, but a confidence in the veracity of Him by whom they are made known to us-even Jesus Christ our Lord.

I do not need to insist upon that at any length here-it would take me away from my present purpose; but what I do wish to emphasise is, that from the very starting-point, the smallest germ of the most rudimentary and imperfect faith which knits a soul to Jesus Christ has Him for its Object, and is thus distinguished from the mere acceptance of truths which, on other grounds than the authority of the speaker, may legitimately commend themselves to a man.

Then believe Him. Now, that breaks up into two thoughts, which are all that I intend to deduce from it now, although many more might be suggested. The one is this, that the least and the lowest that Jesus Christ asks from us is the entire and unhesitating acceptance of His utterances as final, conclusive, and absolutely true. Whatever more Jesus Christ may be, He is, by His life and words, the Communicator of divine and certain truth. He is a Teacher, though He is a great deal more. And whatever more Christian faith may be-and it is a great deal more-it requires, at least, the frank and full recognition of the authority of every word that comes from His lips. A Christianity without a creed is a dream. Bones without flesh are very dry, no doubt; but what about flesh without bones? An inert, shapeless mass. You will never have a vigorous and true Christian life if it is to be moulded according to the fantastic dream of these latter days, which tells us that we may take Jesus as the Guide of our conduct and need not mind about what He says to us. ‘Believe Me’ is His requirement. The words of His mouth, and the revelations which He has made in the sweetness of His life, and in all the graciousness of His dealings, are the very unveiling to man of absolute and final and certain truth.

But then, on the other hand, let us remember that, while all this is most clear and distinct in the teaching of Scripture, it carries us but a very short way. We find, in the instance from which we take our starting-point in this sermon, the broad distinction drawn, and practically illustrated in the conduct of the persons concerned, between the simple acceptance of what Christ says, and a true faith that clings to Him for evermore. And the same kind of disparagement of the lower process of merely accepting His word is found more than once in connection with the same phrases. We find, for instance, the two which are connected in our texts used in a previous conversation between our Lord and His antagonists. When He says to them, ‘This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent,’ they reply, dragging down His claim to a lower level, ‘What sign showest Thou, that we may see, and believe Thee?’ He demanded belief on Himself; they answer, ‘We are ready to believe you, on condition that we see something that may make the rendering of our belief a logical necessity for us.’

Let us lay to heart the rudimentary and incomplete character of a faith which simply accepts the teaching of Jesus Christ, and does no more. The notion that orthodoxy is Christianity, that a man who does not contradict the teaching of the New Testament is thereby a Christian, is a very old and very perilous and very widespread one. There are many of us who have no better claim to be called Christians than this, that we never denied anything that Jesus Christ said, though we are not sufficiently interested in it, I was going to say, even to deny it. This rudimentary faith, which contents itself with the acceptance of the truth revealed, hardens into mere formalism, or liquefies into mere careless indifference as to the very truth that it professes to believe. There is nothing more impotent than creeds which lie dormant in our brains, and have no influence upon our lives. I wonder how many readers of this sermon, who fancy themselves good Christians, do with their creed as the Japanese used to do with their Emperor-keep him in a palace behind bamboo screens, and never let him do anything, whilst all the reality of power was possessed by another man, who did not profess to be a king at all. Do you think you are Christians because you would sign thirty-nine or three hundred and ninety articles of Christianity, if they were offered to you, while there is not one of them that influences either your thinking or your conduct? Do not let us have these ‘sluggish kings,’ with a mayor of the place to do the real government, but set on the throne of your hearts the principles of your religion, and see to it that all your convictions be translated into practice, and all your practice be informed by your convictions.

This belief in a set of dogmas, on the authority of Jesus Christ, about which dogmas we do not care a rush, and which make no difference upon our lives, is the faith about which James has so many hard things to say; and he ventures upon a parallel that I should not like to venture on unless I were made bold by his example: ‘Thou believest, O vain man! thou doest well: the devils also believe, and’-better than you, in that their belief does something for them, they ‘believe-and tremble!’ But what shall we say about a man who professes himself a disciple, and neither trembles, nor thrills, nor hopes, nor dreads, nor desires, nor does any single thing because of his creed? Believe Jesus, but do not stop there.

II. Believe on Christ.

Now, as I have remarked already, and as many of you know, there is a slightly different, twofold form of this phrase in Scripture. I need not trouble you with the minute distinction between the one and the other. Both forms coincide in the important point on which I wish to touch. That representation of believing on Christ carries us away at once from the mere act of acceptance of His word on His authority to the far more manifestly voluntary, moral, and personal act of reliance upon Him. The metaphor is expanded in various ways in Scripture, and instead of offering any thoughts of my own about it, I would simply ask attention to three of the forms in which it is set forth in the Old and in the New Testaments.

The first of them, and the one which we may regard as governing the others, is that found in the words of Isaiah, ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a stone, a sure Foundation’; and, as the Apostle Peter comments, ‘He that believeth on Him shall not be confounded.’ There the thoughts presented are the superposition of the building upon its Foundation, the rest of the soul, and the rearing of the life on the basis of Jesus Christ.

How much that metaphor says to us about Him as the Foundation, in all the aspects in which we can apply that term! He is the Basis of our hope, the Guarantee of our security, the Foundation-stone of our beliefs, the very Ground on which our whole life reposes, the Source of our tranquillity, the Pledge of our peace. All that I think, feel, desire, wish, and do, ought to be rested upon that dear Lord, and builded on Him by simple faith. By patient persistence of effort rearing up the fabric of my life firmly upon Him, and grafting every stone of it-if I might so use the metaphor-into the bedding-stone, which is Christ, I shall be strong, peaceful, and pure.

The storm comes, the waters rise, the winds howl, the hail and the rain ‘sweep away the refuge of lies,’ and the dwellers in these frail and foundationless houses are hurrying in wild confusion from one peak to another, before the steadily rising tide. But he that builds on that Foundation ‘shall not make haste,’ as Isaiah has it; shall not need to hurry to shift his quarters before the flood overtake him; shall look out serene upon all the hurtling fury of the wild storm, and the rise of the sullen waters. So, reliance on Christ, and the honest making of Him the Basis, not of our hopes only, but of our thinkings and of our doings, and of our whole being, is the secret of security, and the pledge of peace.

Then there is another form of the same phrase, ‘believing on,’ in which is suggested not so much the figure of building upon a foundation, as of some feeble man resting upon a strong stay, or clinging to an outstretched and mighty arm. The same metaphor is implied in the word ‘reliance.’ We lean upon Christ when, forsaking all other props, and realising His sufficiency and sweetness, we rest the whole weight of our weariness and all the impotence of our weakness upon His strong and unwearied arm, and so are saved. All other stays are like that one to which the prophet compares the King of Egypt-the papyrus reed in the Nile stream, on which, if a man leans, it will break into splinters which will go into his flesh, and make a poisoned wound. But if we lean on Christ, we lean on a brazen wall and an iron pillar, and anything is possible sooner than that that stay shall give.

There is still another form of the metaphor, in which neither building upon a foundation, nor leaning upon a support which is thought of as below what rests upon it, are suggested, but rather the hanging upon something firm and secure which is above what hangs from it. The same picture is suggested by our word ‘dependence.’ ‘As a nail fastened in a sure place,’ said one of the prophets, ‘on Him shall hang all the glory of His Father’s house.’

‘Hangs my helpless soul on Thee.’

The rope lowered over the cliffs supports the adventurous bird-nester in safety above the murmuring sea. They who clasp Christ's hand outstretched from above, may swing over the deepest, most vacuous abyss, and fear no fall.

So, brother, build on Christ, rely on Him, depend on Him, and it shall not be in vain. But if you will not build on the sure Foundation, do not wonder if the rotten one gives way. If you will not lean on the strong Stay, complain not when the weak one crumbles to dust beneath your weight. And if you choose to swing over the profound depth at the end of a piece of pack-thread, instead of holding on by an adamantine chain wrapped round God's throne, you must be prepared for its breaking and your being smashed to pieces below.

III. The last exhortation that comes out of this comparative study of these phrases is-Believe into Christ.

That is a very pregnant and remarkable expression, and it can scarcely, as you see, be rendered into our language without a certain harshness; but still it is worth while to face the harshness for the sake of getting the double signification that is involved in it. For when we speak of believing unto or into Him, we suggest two things, both of which, apparently, were in the minds of the writers of the New Testament. One is motion towards, and the other is repose in, that dear Lord.

So, then, true Christian faith is the flight of the soul towards Christ. Therein is one of the special blessednesses of the Christian life, that it has for its object and aim absolutely infinite and unattainable completeness and glory, so that unwearied freshness, inexhaustible buoyancy, endless progress, are the dower of every spirit that truly trusts in Christ. All other aims and objects are limited, transient, and will be left behind. Every other landmark will sink beneath the horizon, where so many of our landmarks have sunk already, and where they will all disappear when the last moment comes. But we may have, and if we are Christian people we shall have, bright before us, sufficiently certain of being reached to make our efforts hopeful and confident, sufficiently certain of never being reached to make our efforts blessed with endless aspirations, the great light and love of that dear Lord, to yearn after whom is better than to possess all besides, and following hard after whom, even in the very motion there is rest, and in the search there is finding. Religion is the flight of the soul, the aspiration of the whole man after the unattainable Attainable-'that I may know Him, and be found in Him.'

Oh, how such thoughts ought to shame us who call ourselves Christians! Growth, progress, getting nearer to Christ, yearning ever with a great desire after Him!-do not the words seem irony when applied to most of us? Think of the average type of sluggish contentment with present attainments that marks Christian people-tortoises in their crawling rather than eagles in their flight. And let us take our portion of shame, and remember that the faith which believes Him, and that which believes on Him, both need to be crowned and perfected by that which believes towards Him, of which the motto is, 'Forgetting the things that are behind, I reach forward to the things that are before.'

But there is another side to this last phase of faith. That true believing towards or unto Christ is the rest of the soul in Him. By faith that deep and most real union of the believing soul with Jesus Christ is effected which may be fitly described as our entrance into and abode in Him. The believer is as if incorporated into Him in whom he believes. Indeed, the Apostle ventures to use a more startling expression than incorporation when he says that 'he that is joined to the Lord is one Spirit.' If by faith we press towards, by faith we shall be in, Christ. Faith is at once motion and rest, search and finding, desire and fruition. The felicity of this last form of the phrase is its expression of both these ideas, which are united in fact as in word. A rare construction of the verb to believe, with the simple preposition in, coincides with this part of the meaning of believing unto or into, and need not be separately considered.

With this understanding of its meaning, we see how natural is John's preference for this construction. For surely, if he has anything to tell us, it is that the true Christian life is a life enclosed, as it were, in Jesus Christ. Nor need I remind you how Paul, though he starts from a different point of view, yet coincides with John in this teaching. For, to him, to be 'in Christ' is the sum of all blessedness, righteousness, peace, and power. As in an atmosphere, we may dwell in Him. He may be the strong Habitation to which we may continually resort. One of the Old Testament words for trusting means taking refuge, and such a thought is naturally suggested by this New Testament form of expression. ‘I flee unto Thee to hide me.’ In that Fortress we dwell secure.

To be in Jesus, wedded to Him by the conjunction of will and desire, wedded to Him in the oneness of a believing spirit and in the obedience of a life, to be thus in Christ is the crown and climax of faith, and the condition of all perfection. To be in Christ is life; to be out of Him is death. In Him we have redemption; in Him we have wisdom, truth, peace, righteousness, hope, confidence. To be in Him is to be in heaven. We enter by faith. Faith is not the acceptance merely of His Word, but is the reliance of the soul on Him, the flight of the soul towards Him, the dwelling of the soul in Him. ‘Come, My people, into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee . . . until the indignation be overpast.’

40)John 8:33

John

‘NEVER IN BONDAGE’

Joh. 8:33.

‘Never in bondage to any man’? Then what about Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Syria? Was there not a Roman garrison looking down from the castle into the very Temple courts where this boastful falsehood was uttered? It required some hardihood to say, ‘Never in bondage to any man,’ in the face of such a history, and such a present. But was it not just an instance of the strange power which we all have and exercise, of ignoring disagreeable facts, and by ingenious manipulation taking the wrinkles out of the photograph? The Jews were perhaps not misunderstanding Jesus Christ quite so much as these words may suggest. If He had been promising, as they chose to assume, political and external liberty, I fancy they would have risen to the bait a little more eagerly than they did to His words.

But be that as it may, this strange answer of theirs suggests that power of ignoring what we do not want to see, not only in the way in which I have suggested, but also in another. For if they had any inkling of what Jesus meant by slavery and freedom, they, by such words as these, put away from themselves the thought that they were, in any deep and inward sense, bondsmen, and that a message of liberty had any application to them. Ah, dear friends! there was a great deal of human nature in these men, who thus put up a screen between them and the penetrating words of our Lord. Were they not doing just what many of us-all of us to some extent-do: ignoring the facts of their own necessities, of their own spiritual condition, denying the plain lessons of experience? Like them, are not we too often refusing to look in the face the fact that we all, apart from Him, are really in bondage? Because we do not realise the slavery, are we not indifferent to the offer of freedom? 'We were never in bondage'; consequently we add, 'How sayest Thou, Ye shall be made free?' So then, my text brings us to think of three things: our bondage, our ignorance of our bondage, our consequent indifference to Christ's offer of liberty. Let me say a word or two about each of these.

First as to-

I. Our bondage.

Christ follows the vain boast in the text, with the calm, grave, profound explanation of what He meant: 'Whoso committeth sin is the slave of sin.' That is true in two ways. By the act of sinning a man shows that he is the slave of an alien power that has captured him; and in the act of sinning, he rivets the chains and increases the tyranny. He is a slave, or he would not obey sin. He is more a slave because he has again obeyed it. Now, do not let us run away with the idea that when Jesus speaks of sin and its bondage, He is thinking only, or mainly, of gross outrages and contradictions of the plain law of morality and decency, that He is thinking only of external acts which all men brand as being wrong, or of those which law qualifies as crimes. We have to go far deeper than that, and into a far more inward region of life than that, before we come to apprehend the inwardness and the depth of the Christian conception of what sin is. We have to bring our whole life close up against God, and then to judge its deeds thereby. Therefore, though I know I am speaking to a mass of respectable, law-abiding people, very few of you having any knowledge of the grosser and uglier forms of transgression, and I dare say none of you having any experience of what it is to sin against human law, though I do not charge you-God forbid!-with vices, and still less with crimes, I bring to each man's conscience a far more searching word than either of these two, when I say, 'We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' This declaration of the universality and reality of the bondage of sin is only the turning into plain words of a fact which is of universal experience, though it may be of a very much less universal consciousness. We may not be aware of the fact, because, as I have to show you, we do not direct our attention to it. But there it is; and the truth is that every man, however noble his aspirations sometimes, however pure and high his convictions, and however honest in the main may be his attempts to do what is right, when he deals honestly with himself, becomes more or less conscious of just that experience which a great expert in soul analysis and self-examination made: 'I find a law'-an influence working upon my heart with the inevitableness and certainty of law-'that when I would do good, evil is present with me.'

We all know that, whether we regard it as we ought or no. We all say Amen to that, when it is forced upon our attention. There is something in us that thwarts aspiration towards good, and inclines to evil.

'What will but felt the fleshly screen?'

And it is not only a screen. It not only prevents us from rising as high as we would, but it sinks us so low as to do deeds that something within us recoils from and brands as evil. Jesus teaches us that he who commits sin is the slave of sin; that is to say, that an alien power has captured and is coercing the wrongdoer. That teaching does not destroy responsibility, but it kindles hope. A foreign foe, who has invaded the land, may be driven out of the land, and all his prisoners set free, if a stronger than he comes against him. Christianity is called gloomy and stern, because it preaches the corruption of man's heart. Is it not a gospel to draw a distinction between the evil that a man does, and the self that a man may be? Is it not better, more hopeful, more of a true evangel, to say to a man, 'Sin dwelleth in you,' than to say, 'What is called sin is only the necessary action of human nature'? To believe that their present condition is not slavery makes men hopeless of ever gaining freedom, and the true gospel of the emancipation of humanity rests on the Christian doctrine of the bondage of sin.

Let me remind you that freedom consists not in the absence of external constraints, but in the animal in us being governed by the will, for when the flesh is free the man is a slave. And it means that the will should be governed by the conscience; and it means that the conscience should be governed by God. These are the stages. Men are built in three stories, so to speak. Down at the bottom, and to be kept there, are inclinations, passions, lust, desires, all which are but blind aimings after their appropriate satisfaction, without any question as to whether the satisfaction is right or wrong; and above that a dominant will which is meant to control, and above that a conscience. That is the public men are more and more abasing themselves to the degradation of ministering to the supposed wishes instead of cutting dead against the grain of the wishes, if necessary, in order to meet the true wants, of the people. Wherever some one strong man stands up to oppose the wild current of popular desires, he may make up his mind that the charge of being ‘a bad citizen, unpatriotic, a lover of the enemies of the people,’ will be flung at him. You Christian men and women have to face the same calumnies as your Master had. The rotten eggs flung at the objects of popular execration-if I might use a somewhat violent figure-turn to roses in their flight. The praises of good men and the scoffs of loose-living and godless ones are equally valuable certificates of character. The Church which does not earn the same sort of opprobrium which attended its Master has probably failed of its duty. It is good to be called ‘gloomy’ and ‘sour-visaged’ by those whose only notion of pleasure is effervescent immorality; and it is good to be called intolerant by the crowd that desires us to be tolerant of vice. So, my friends, I want you to understand that you, too, have to tread in the Master’s steps. The ‘imitation of Jesus’ does not consist merely in the sanctities and secrecies of communion, and the blessings of a meek and quiet heart, but includes standing where He stood, in avowed and active opposition to widespread evils, and, if need be, in the protesting opposition to popular error. And if you are called nicknames, never mind! Remember what the Master said, ‘They shall bring you before kings and magistrates’-the tribunal of the many-headed is a more formidable judgment-bench than that of any king-’and it shall turn to a testimony for you.’

II. Now, secondly, this name is the witness to what I venture to call, for want of a better term, the originality of Jesus Christ.

It bears witness to the dim feeling which onlookers had that in Him was a new phenomenon, not to be accounted for by birth and descent, by training and education, or by the whole of what people nowadays call environment. He did not come out of these circumstances. This is not a regulation pattern type of Jew. He is 'a Samaritan.' That is to say, He is unlike the people among whom He dwells; and betrays that other influences than those which shaped them have gone to the making of Him.

That is one of the most marked, outstanding, and important features in the teaching and in the character of Jesus Christ, that it is absolutely independent of, and incapable of being accounted for by, anything that He derived from the circumstances in which He lived. He was a Jew, and yet He was not a Jew. He was not a Samaritan, and yet He was a Samaritan. He was not a Greek, and yet He was one. He was not a Roman, nor an Englishman, nor a Hindoo, nor an Asiatic, nor an African; and yet He had all the characteristics of these races within Himself, and held them all in the ample sweep of His perfect Manhood.

If we turn to His teaching we find that, whilst no doubt to some extent it is influenced in its forms by the necessities of its adaptation to the first listeners, there is a certain element in it far beyond anything that came from Rabbis, or even from prophets and psalmists. Modern Christian scholarship has busied itself very much in these days with studying Jewish literature, so far as it is available, in order to ascertain how far it formed the teaching, or mind, of Jesus the Carpenter of Nazareth. There is a likeness, but the likeness only serves to make the unlikeness more conspicuous. And I, for my part, venture to assert that, whilst the form of our Lord's teaching may largely be traced to the influences under which He was brought up, and whilst the substance of some parts of it may have been anticipated by earlier Rabbis of His nation, the crowd that listened to Him on the mountain top had laid their fingers upon the more important fact when they 'wondered at His teaching,' and found the characteristic difference between it, and that of the men to whom they had listened, in the note of authority with which He spoke. Jesus never argues, He asserts; He claims; and in lieu of all arguments He gives you His own ‘Verily! verily! I say unto you.’

Thus not only in its form, but in its substance, in its lofty morality, in its spiritual religion, in its revelation of the Father and the Fatherhood for all men, Christ’s teaching as teaching stands absolutely alone.

If we turn to His character, the one thing that strikes us is that about it there is nothing of the limitations of time or race which stamp all other men. He is not good after the fashion of His age, or of any other age; He is simply embodied and perfect Goodness. This Tree has shot up high above the fences that enclose the grove in which it grows, and its leaf lasts for ever.

Run over, in your mind, other great names of heroes, saints, thinkers, poets; they all bear the stamp of their age and circumstances, and the type of goodness or the manner of thought which belonged to these. Jesus Christ alone stands before men absolutely free from any of the limitations which are essential in the case of every human excellence and teacher. And so He comes to us with a strange freshness, with a strange closeness; and nineteen centuries have not made Him fit less accurately to our needs than He did to those of the generation amidst which He condescended to live. Thickening mists of oblivion wrap all other great names as they recede into the past; and about the loftiest of them we have to say, ‘This man, having served his generation, fell on sleep, and saw corruption.’ But Jesus Christ lasts, because there is nothing local or temporary about His teaching or His character.

Now this peculiar originality, as I venture to call it, of Christ’s character is a very strong argument for the truthful accuracy of the picture drawn of Him in these four Gospels. Where did these four men get their Christ? Was it from imagination? Was it from myth? Was it from the accidental confluence of a multitude of traditions? There is an old story about a painter who, in despair of producing a certain effect of storm upon the sea, at last flung his wet sponge at the canvas, and to his astonishment found that it had done the very thing he wanted. But wet sponges cannot draw likenesses; and to allege that these four men drew such a picture, in such compass, without anybody sitting for it, seems to me about the most desperate hypothesis that ever was invented. If there were no Christ, or if the Christ that was, was not like what the Gospels paint Him as being, then the authors of these little booklets are consummate geniuses, and their works stand at the very top of the imaginative literature of the world. It is more difficult to account for the Gospels, if they are not histories, than it is to account for the Christ whom they tell us of if they are.

And then, further, there is only one key to the mystery of this originality. Christ is perfect man, high above limitations, and owing nothing to environment, because He is the Son of God. I would as soon believe that grass roots, which for years, in some meadow, had brought forth, season after season, nothing but humble green blades, shot up suddenly into a palm tree, as I would believe that simple natural descent brought all at once into the middle of the dull succession of commonplace and sinful men this radiant and unique Figure. Account for Christ, all you unbelievers! The question of to-day, round which all the battle is being fought, is the person of Jesus Christ. If He be what the Gospels tell us that He is, there is nothing left for the unbeliever worth a struggle. ‘What think ye of Christ? Whose Son is He?’ The Jews said, ‘Thou art a Samaritan!’ We say, ‘Thou art the Christ; the Son of the living God!’

III. Lastly, the name bears witness to Christ’s universality.

I presume that, in addition to what seemed His hostility to what was taken to be true Judaism, another set of facts underlay the name-viz. those which indicated His kindly relations with the people whom it was every good Jew’s pleasant duty to hate with all his heart. The story of the Samaritan woman in John’s Gospel, the parable of the good Samaritan, the incident of the grateful leper, who was a Samaritan, the refusal to allow the eager Apostles to bring down fire from heaven to consume inhospitable churls in a Samaritan village, were but outstanding specimens of what must have been a characteristic of His whole career not unknown to His enemies. So they argued, ‘If you love our enemies you must hate us; and you must be one of them,’ thereby distorting, but yet presenting, what is the great glory of Christ’s Gospel, and of Christ Himself, that He belongs to the world; and that His salvation, the sweep of His love, and the power of His Cross, are meant for all mankind.

That universality largely arises from the absence of the limitations of which I have already spoken sufficiently. Because He belongs to no one period as regards His character, He is available for all periods as regards His efficacy. Because His teaching is not dyed in the hues of any school or of any age or of any cast of thought, it suits for all mankind. This water comes clear from the eternal rock, and has no taint of any soil through which it has flowed. Therefore the thirsty lips of a world may be glued to it, and drink and be satisfied. His one sacrifice avails for the whole world.

But let me remind you that universality means also individuality, and that Jesus Christ is the Christ for all men because He is each man's Christ. The tree of life stands in the middle of the garden that all may have equal access to it. Is this universal Christ yours; thine? That is the question. Make Him so by putting out your hand and claiming your share in Him, by casting your soul upon Him, by trusting your all to Him, by listening to His word, by obeying His commands, by drinking in the fulness of His blessing. You can do so if you will. If you do not, the universal Christ is nothing to you. Make Him thine, and be sure that the sweep of His love and the efficacy of His sacrifice embrace and include thee. He is the universal Christ; therefore He is the only Christ; 'neither is there salvation in any other.' Through Him all men, each man, thou, must be saved. Without Him all men, every man, thou, can not be saved. Take Him for yours, and you will find that each who possesses Him, possesses Him altogether, and none hinders the other in his full enjoyment of 'the bread of God which came down from heaven.'

41)John 9:4

John

ONE METAPHOR AND TWO MEANINGS

Joh. 9:4. - Rom. 13:12.

The contrast between these two sayings will strike you at once. Using the same metaphors, they apply them in exactly opposite directions. In the one, life is the day, and the state beyond death the night; in the other, life is the night, and the state beyond death the day. Remarkable as the contrast is, it comes to be still more so if we remember the respective speakers. For each of them says what we should rather have expected the other to say. It would have been natural for Paul to have given utterance to the stimulus to diligence caused by the consciousness that the time of work was brief; and it would have been as natural for Jesus, who, as we believe, came from God, from the place of the eternal supernal glory, to have said that life here was night as compared with the illumination that He had known. But it is the divine Master who gives utterance to the common human consciousness of a brief life ending in inactivity, and it is the servant who takes the higher point of view.

So strange did the words of my first text seem as coming from our Lord's lips, that the sense of incongruity seems to have been the occasion of the remarkable variation of reading which the Revised Version has adopted when it says 'We must work the works of Him that sent Me.' But that thought seems to me to be perfectly irrelevant to our Lord's purpose in this context, where He is vindicating His own action, and not laying down the duty of His servants. He is giving here one of these glimpses, that we so rarely get, into His own inmost heart. And so we have to take the sharp contrast between the Master's thought and the servant's thought, and to combine them, if we would think rightly about the present and the future, and do rightly in the present.

I. Let me ask you to look at the Master's thought about the present and the future.

As I have already said, our Lord gives utterance here to the very common, in fact, universal human consciousness. The contrast between the intense little spot of light and the great ring of darkness round about it; between 'the warm precincts of the cheerful day' and the cold solitudes of the inactive night has been the commonplace and stock-in-trade of moralists and thoughtful men from the beginning; has given pathos to poetry, solemnity to our days; and has been the ally of base as well as of noble things. For to say to a man, 'there are twelve hours in the day of life, and then comes darkness, the blackness that swallows up all activity,' may either be made into a support of all lofty and noble thoughts, or, by the baser sort, may be, and has been, made into a philosophy of the 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die' kind; 'Gather ye roses while ye may'; 'A short life and a merry one.' The thought stimulates to diligence, but it does nothing to direct the diligence. It makes men work furiously, but it never will prevent them from working basely. 'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might,' is a conclusion from the consideration that 'there is neither wisdom nor knowledge nor device in the grave whither we go,' but what the hand should find to do must be settled from altogether different considerations.

Our Lord here takes the common human point of view, and says, 'Life is the time for activity, and it must be the more diligent because it is ringed by the darkness of the night.' What precisely does our Lord intend by His use of that metaphor of the night? No figures, we know, run upon all-fours. The point of comparison may be simply in some one feature common to the two things compared, and so all sorts of mischief may be done by trying to extend the analogy to other features. Now, there are a great many points in which day and night may respectively be taken as analogues of Life and Death and the state beyond death. There is a 'night of weeping'; there is a 'night of ignorance.' But our Lord Himself tells us what is the one point of comparison which alone is in His mind, when He says, 'The night cometh, when no man can work.' It is simply the night as a season of compulsory inactivity that suggests the comparison in our text. And so we have here the presentation of that dear Lord as influenced by the common human motive, and feeling that there was work to be done which must be crowded into a definite space, because when that space was past, there would be no more opportunity for the work to be done.

Look at how, in the words of my first text, we have, as I said, a glimpse into His inmost heart. He lets us see that all His life was under the solemn compulsion of that great must which was so often upon His lips, that He felt that He was here to do the Father's will, and that that obligation lay upon Him with a pressure which He neither could, nor would if He could, have got rid of.

There are two kinds of 'musts' in our lives. There is the unwelcome necessity which grips us with iron and sharpened fangs; the needs-be which crushes down hopes and dreams and inclinations, and forces the slave to his reluctant task. And there is the ‘must’ which has passed into the will, into the heart, and has moulded the inmost desire to conformity with the obligation which no more stands over against us as a taskmaster with whip and chain, but has passed within us and is there an inspiration and a joy. He that can say, as Jesus Christ in His humanity could, and did say: ‘My meat’-the refreshment of my nature, the necessary sustenance of my being-’is to do the will of my Father’; that man, and that man alone, feels no pressure that is pain from the incumbency of the necessity that blessedly rules His life. When ‘I will’ and ‘I choose’ coincide, like two of Euclid’s triangles atop of one another, line for line and angle for angle, then comes liberty into the life. He that can say, not with a knitted brow and an unwilling ducking of his head to the yoke, ‘I must do it,’ but can say, ‘Thy law is within my heart,’ that is the Christlike, the free, the happy man.

Further, our Lord here, in His thoughts of the present and the future, lets us see what He thought that the work of God in the world was. The disciples looked at the blind man sitting by the wayside, and what he suggested to them was a curious, half theological, half metaphysical question, in which Rabbinical subtlety delighted. ‘Who did sin, this man or his parents?’ They only thought of talking over the theological problem involved in the fact that, before he had done anything in this world to account for the calamity, he was born blind. Jesus Christ looked at the man, and He did not think about theological cobwebs. What was suggested to Him was to fight against the evil and abolish it. It is sometimes necessary to discuss the origin of an evil thing, of a sorrow or a sin, in order to understand how to deal with and get rid of it. But unless that is the case, our first business is not to say, ‘How comes this about?’ but our business is to take steps to make it cease to come about. Cure the man first and then argue to your heart’s content about what made him blind, but cure him first. And so Jesus Christ taught us that the meaning of the day of life was that we should set ourselves to abolish the works of the devil, and that the work of God was that we should fight against sin and sorrow, and in so far as it was in our power, abolish these, in all the variety of their forms, in all the vigour of their abundant growth. Sorrow and sin are God’s call to every one of His sons and daughters to set themselves to cast them out of His fair creation; and ‘the day’ is the opportunity for doing that.

Our Lord here, as I have already suggested, shows us very touchingly and beautifully, how entirely He bore our human nature, and had entered into our conditions, in that He, too, felt that common human emotion, and was spurred to unhasting and yet unresting diligence by the thought of the coming of the night. I suppose that although we have few chronological data in this Gospel of John, the hour of our Lord's death was really very near at that time. He had just escaped from a formidable attempt upon His life. 'They took up stones to stone Him, but He, passing through the midst of them, went His way,' is the statement which immediately precedes the account of His meeting with this blind man. And so under the pressure, perhaps, of that immediate experience which revealed the depths of hatred that was ready for anything against Him, He gives utterance to this expression: 'If it be the case that the time is at hand, then the more need that, Sabbath day as it is, I should pause here.' Though the multitude were armed with stones to stone Him, He stopped in His flight because there was a poor blind man there whom He felt that He needed to cure. Beautiful it is, and drawing Him very near to us,-and it should draw us very near to Him-that thus He shared in that essentially human consciousness of the limitation of the power to work, by the ring of blackness that encircled the little spot of illuminated light.

But some will say, 'How is it possible that such a consciousness as this should really have been in the mind of Jesus Christ?' 'Did He not know that His death was not to be the end of His work? Did He not know, and say over and over again, in varying forms, that when He passed from earth, it was not into inactivity? Is it not the very characteristic of His mission that it is different from that of all other helpers and benefactors and teachers of the world, in that His death stands in the very middle of His work, and that on the one side of it there is activity, and on the other side of it there is still, and in some sense loftier and greater, activity?' Yes; all that is perfectly true, and I do not for a moment believe that our Lord was forgetting that the life on the earth was but the first volume of His biography, and of the records of His deeds, and that He contemplated them, as He contemplated always, the life beyond, as working in and on and over and through His servants, even unto the end of the world.

But you have only to remember the difference between the earthly and the heavenly life of the Lord fully to understand the point of view that He takes here. The one is the basis of the other; the one is the seedtime, the other is the harvest. The one has only the limited years of the earthly life, in which it can be done; the other has the endless years of Eternity, through which it is to be continued. And if any part of that earthly life of the Lord had been void of its duty, and of its discharge of the Father's will, not even He, amidst the blaze of the heavenly glory, could have thereafter filled up the tiny gap. All the earthly years were needed to be filled with service, up to the great service and sacrifice of the Cross, in order that upon them might be reared the second stage and phase of His heavenly life. With regard to the one, He said on the Cross, 'It is finished.' But when He died He passed not into the night of inactivity, but into the day of greater service. And that higher and heavenly form of His work continues, and not until 'the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ,' and the whole benefit and effect of His earthly life are imparted to the whole race of man, will it be said, 'It is done,' and the angels of heaven proclaim the completion of His work for man. But seeing that that work has its twofold forms, Jesus, like us, had to be conscious of the limitations of life, and of the night that followed the day.

II. And now turn, in the second place, to the servant's thought.

As I have already pointed out, it is the precise reversal of the other. What to Christ is 'day' to Paul is 'night.' What to Christ is 'night' to Paul is 'day.' Now the first point that I would make is this, that the future would never have been 'day' to Paul if Jesus had not gone down into the darkness of the 'night.' I have said that there was only one point of comparison in our Lord's mind between night and death. But we may venture to extend the figure a little, and to say that the Light went into the 'valley of the shadow of Death,' and lit it up from end to end. The Life went into the palace of Death, and breathed life into all there. There is a great picture by one of the old monkish masters, on the walls of a Florentine convent, which represents the descent of Jesus to that dim region of the dead. Around Him there is a halo of light that shines into the gloomy corridor, up which the thronging patriarchs and saints of the Old Dispensation are coming, with outstretched hands of eager welcome and acceptance, to receive the blessing. Ah! it is true, ‘the people that walked in darkness have seen a great Light; and to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, unto them hath the Light shined.’ Christ the Light has gone down into the darkness, and what to Him was night He has made for us day. Just as Scripture all but confines the name of death to Christ’s experience upon the Cross, and by virtue of that experience softens it down for the rest of us into the blessed image of sleep, so the Master has turned the night of death into the dawning of the day.

Further, to the servant the brightness of that future day dimmed all earth’s garish glories into darkness. It was because Paul saw the Beyond flaming with such lustre that the nearer distance to him seemed to have sunk into gloom. Just as a man or other object between you and the western sky when the sun is there will be all dark, so earth with heaven behind it becomes a mere shadowy outline. The day that is beyond outshines all the lustres and radiances of earth, and turns them into darkness. You go into a room out of blazing tropical sunshine, and it is all gloom and obscurity. He whose eyes are fixed on the day that is to come will find that here he walks as one in the night.

And the brightness of that day, as well as the darkness of the present night, directed the servant as to what he should be diligent in. Since it is true that ‘the day is at hand,’ let us put on the armour of light, and dress ourselves in garb fitting for it. Since it is true that ‘the night is far spent’ let us put off the works of darkness.

III. And so that brings me to the last point, and that is the combination of the Master’s and the servant’s thought, and the effect that it should produce upon us.

It is not enough either for our hearts or our minds that we should say ‘the night cometh when no man can work.’ Life is day, but it is night also. Death is night but it is dawning as well. We cannot understand either the present or the future unless we link them together. That death which is the cessation of activity in one aspect, is, for Christ’s servants, as truly as for Christ, the beginning of an activity in a higher and nobler form. I do not believe in a heaven of rest, meaning by that, inaction; I still less believe in a death which puts an end to the activity of the human spirit. I believe that this world is our school, our apprenticeship, the place where we learn our trade and exercise our faculties, where we paint the picture, as it were, which we offer when we desire to be admitted to the great guild of artists, and according to the result of which, in the eye of the Judge, is our place hereafter. What the Germans call ‘proof pieces’-that is the meaning of life. And though ‘the night cometh when no man can work,’ the day cometh when the characters we have made ourselves here, the habits we have cultivated and indulged in, the capacities we have exercised, and the set and drift of all our activity upon earth, will determine the work that we get to do there.

So then, stereoscoping these two thoughts, we get the solid image that results from them both. And it teaches us not only diligence, and thus supplies stimulus, but it determines the direction of our diligence, and thus supplies guidance. We ought to be misers of our time and opportunities. Jesus Christ said, ‘I must work the work of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh.’ How much more ought you and I to say so? And some of us ought very specially to say it, and to feel it, because the hour when we shall have to lay down our tools is getting very near, and the shadows are lengthening. If you had been in the fields in these summer evenings during the last few days, you would have seen the haymakers at work with more and more diligence as the evening drew on darker and darker. Dear friends, some of us are at the eleventh hour. Let us fill it with diligent work. The night cometh.

But my texts not only stimulate to diligence, but they direct the diligence. If it be that there is a day beyond, and that Christ’s folk are ‘the children of the day,’ then ‘let us not sleep as do others, but let us watch and be sober.’ We have to cast ourselves on Him as our Saviour, to love Him as our Lord and Friend, to take Him as our Pattern and our Guide, our Help, our Light, and our Life. And then we shall neither be deceived by life’s garish splendours nor oppressed by its gloom and its sorrow; we shall neither shrink from that last moment, as a night of inaction, nor be too eager to cast off the burden of our present work, but we shall cheerfully toil at what will prepare us for ‘the day,’ and the bell at night that rings us out of mill and factory will not be unwelcome, for it will ring us in to higher work and nobler service. The transition will be like one of those summer nights in the Arctic circle, when the sun does not dip. Through a little thin film of less light we shall pass into the perfect day, where ‘the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the light thereof,’ and ‘there shall be no more night.’

42)John 9:6-7

John

THE SIXTH MIRACLE IN JOHN’S GOSPEL
THE BLIND MADE TO SEE, AND THE SEEING MADE BLIND

Joh. 9:6 - Joh. 9:7.

The proportionate length at which this miracle and its accompanying effects are recorded, indicates very clearly the Evangelist’s idea of their relative importance. Two verses are given to the story of the miracle; all the rest of the chapter to its preface and its issues. It was a great thing to heal a man that was blind from his birth, but the story of the gradual illumination of his spirit until it came to the full light of the perception of Christ as the Son of God, was far more to the Evangelist, and ought to be far more to us than giving the outward eye power to discern the outward light.

The narrative has a prologue and an epilogue, and the true point of view from which to look at it is found in the solemn words with which our Lord closes the incident. ‘For judgment am I come into this world, that they which see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind.’

So then the mere sign, important as it is, is the least thing that we have to look at in our contemplations now.

I. We have here our Lord unveiling His deepest motives for bestowing an unsought blessing.

It is remarkable, I think, that out of the eight miracles recorded in this Gospel, there is only one in which our Lord responds to a request to manifest His miraculous power; the others are all spontaneous.

In the other Gospels He heals sometimes because of the pleading of the sufferer; sometimes because of the request of compassionate friends or bystanders; sometimes unasked, because His own heart went out to those that were in pain and sickness. But in John's Gospel, predominantly we have the Son of God, who acts throughout as moved by His own deep heart. That view of Christ reaches its climax in His own profound words about His own laying down of His life: 'I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go unto the Father.' So, not so much influenced by others as deriving motive and impulse and law from Himself, He moves upon earth a fountain and not a reservoir, the Originator and the Beginner of the blessings that He bears.

And that is the point of view from which most strikingly the prologue of our narrative sets forth His action in the miracle here. 'As Jesus passed by,' says the story, 'He saw a man which was blind from his birth.' He fixes His eye upon him. No cry from the blind man's lips draws Him. He sits there unconscious of the kind eyes that were fastened upon him. The disciples stand at Christ's side, and have no share in His feelings. They ask Him to do nothing. To them the blind man is-what? A theological problem. No trace of pity touches their hearts. They do not even seem to have reckoned upon or expected Christ's miraculous intervention. And that is a very remarkable feature in the Gospels. At all events, they evidently do not expect it here; but all that the sight of this lifelong sufferer does in them is to raise a question, 'Who did sin; he or his parents?' Perhaps they do not quite see to the bottom of the alternative that they are suggesting; and we need not trouble ourselves to ask whether there was a full-blown notion of the pre-existence of the man's soul in their minds as they ask the question. Perhaps they remembered the impotent man to whom our Lord said, 'Go and sin no more lest a worse thing come unto thee.' And they may have thought that they had His sanction to the doctrine-as old as Job's friends-that wherever there was great suffering there must first have been great sin.

That is all that the sight of sorrow does for some people. It leads to censorious judgments, or to mere idle and curious speculations. Christ lets us see what it did for Him, and what it is meant to do for us. 'Neither hath this man sinned nor his parents, but he is born blind that the works of God may be made manifest in him.' That is to say, human sorrow is to be looked at by us as an opportunity for the manifestation through us of God’s mercy in relieving and stanching the wounds through which the lifeblood is ebbing away. Do not stand coldly curious or uncharitably censorious. Do not make miserable men theological problems, but see in them a call for service. See in them an opportunity for letting the light of God, so much of it as is in you, shine from you, and your hands move in works of mercy.

And then the Master goes on to state still more distinctly the law which dominated His life, and which ought to dominate ours: ‘I must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work.’ Then poor men’s misery is an occasion for the love of God manifesting itself. Yes. But the love of God manifests itself through human media, through persons; and if we adopt the reading of these words which you will find in the Revised Version, and instead of saying ‘I must work,’ read ‘We must work,’ then we have Christ extending the law which ruled over His own life to all His followers, and making it supremely obligatory and binding upon each of us. He for His part, as I have said, moves through this Gospel as the Son of God, whose mercy, and all whose doings are self-originated. But the other side of that is that He moves through this Gospel in the humble attitude of filial obedience, ever recognising that the Father’s will is supreme in His life; and that He is bound, with an obligation in which He rejoices, to do the will of Him that sent Him. The consciousness of a mission, the sense of filial obedience, the joyful surrender and harmonising of the will of the Son with the will of the Father; these things were the secret of the Master’s life.

And coupled with them, even in Him there was the consciousness that time was short; and although beyond the Cross and the grave there stretched for Him an eternity in which He would work for the blessing of the world, yet the special work which He had to do, while wearing the veil and weakness of flesh, had but few days and hours in which it could be done. Therefore, as we ought to do, He worked under the limitations of mortality, and recognised in the brevity of life another call to eager and continuous service.

These were His motives which, in common with Him, we may share. But He adds another in which we have no share; and declares the unique consciousness which ever stirred Him to His self-manifesting and God-manifesting acts: ‘As long as I am in the world I am the Light of the world.’

Thus, moved by sorrow, recognising in man’s misery the dumb cry for help, seeing in it the opportunity for the manifestation of the higher mercy of God; taking all evil to be the occasion for a brighter display of the love and the good which are divine; feeling that His one purpose upon earth was to crowd the moments with obedience to the will, and with the doing of the works of Him that sent Him; and possessing the sole and strange consciousness that from His person streams out all the light which illuminates the world-the Christ pauses before the unconscious blind man, and looking upon the poor, useless eyeballs, unaware how near light and sight stood, obeys the impulse that shapes His whole life, ‘and when He had spoken thus,’ proceeds to the strange cure.

II. So we come, in the next place, to consider Christ as veiling His power under material means.

There is only one other instance in the Gospels where a miracle is wrought in the singular fashion which is here employed, namely, the healing of the deaf-mute recorded in Mark’s Gospel, where, in like manner, our Lord makes clay of the spittle, and anoints the ears of the deaf man with the clay. The variety of method in our Lord’s miracles serves important purposes, as teaching us that the methods are nothing, and that He moved freely amongst them all, the real cause in every case being one and the same, the bare forth-putting of His will; and teaching us further that in each specific case there were reasons in the moral and religious condition of the persons operated upon for the adoption of the specific means employed, which we of course have no means of discovering. There is here, first then, healing by material means. The clay had no power of healing; the water of Siloam had no power of healing. The thing that healed was Christ’s will, but He uses these externals to help the poor blind man to believe that he is going to be healed. He condescends to drape and veil His power in order that the dim eye, unaccustomed to the light, may look upon that shadowed representation of it when it could not gaze upon the pure brightness; as an eye may look upon a shaded lamp which could not bear its brilliance unsoftened and naked.

This healing by material means in order to accommodate Himself to the weak faith which He seeks to evoke, and to strengthen thereby, is parallel, in principle, to His own Incarnation, and to His appointment of external rites and ordinances. Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, a visible Church, outward means of worship, and so on, all these come under that same category. There is no life nor power in them except His will works through them, but they are crutches and helps for a weak and sense-bound faith to climb to the apprehension of the spiritual reality. It is not the clay, it is not the water, it is not the Church, the ordinances, the outward worship, the form of prayer, the sacrament-it is none of these things that have the healing and the grace in them. They are only ladders by which we may ascend to Him. So let us neither presumptuously antedate the time when we shall be able to do without them-the Heaven in ‘which there is no Temple’-nor grovellingly and superstitiously elevate them to a place of importance and of power in the Christian life which Christ never meant them to fill. He heals through material means; the true source of healing is His own loving will.

Further, He heals at a distance. We have here a parallel with the story of the nobleman’s son at Capernaum, which we have already considered. There, too, we have the same phenomenon, the healing power sent forth from the Master, and operating far away from His corporeal personal presence. This was a test of faith, as the use of the clay had been a help to faith. Still He works His healing from afar, because to Him there is neither near nor far. In His divine ubiquity, that Son of Man, who in His glorified manhood is at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, is here and everywhere where there are weakness and suffering that turn to Him; ready to help, ready to bless and heal. ‘Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.’

Our Evangelist sees in the very name of that fountain in which the man washed, a symbol which is not to be passed by. ‘Go, wash in the Pool of Siloam,’ which, says John, ‘is by interpretation, Sent.’ We have heard already about the Pool of Siloam in this section of the Gospel. In Joh. 7:37 we read, ‘In the last day, that great day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said, “If any man thirst let him come to Me and drink.”‘ These words were probably spoken on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, on which one part of the ceremonial was the drawing, with exuberant rejoicing, of water from the Pool of Siloam, and bearing it up to the Temple. In these words

Christ pointed to that fountain which rises ‘fast by the oracles of God,’ and wells up from beneath the hill, that on which the Temple is built, as being a symbol of Himself.

And here the Evangelist would have us suppose that, in like manner, the very name which the fountain bore [whether as being an outgush from beneath the Temple rock, or whether as being the gift of God] as applicable to Himself. The lesson to be learned is that the fountain in which we have to be cleansed ‘from sin and from uncleanness,’ whose waters are the lotion that will give eyesight to the blind, the true ‘fountain of perpetual youth,’ which men have sought for in every land, is Christ Himself. In Him we have the welling forth of the heart of God, the water of life, the water of gladness, the immortal stream of which ‘whoso drinketh shall never thirst,’ and which, touching the blind eyeballs, washes away obscuration and gives new power of vision.

III. Then, still further, we have here our Lord suspending healing on obedience.

‘Go and wash.’ As He said to the impotent man: ‘Stretch forth thine hand’; as He said to the paralytic in this Gospel: ‘Take up thy bed and walk’; so here He says, ‘Go and wash.’ And some friendly hand being stretched out to the blind man, or he himself feeling his way over the familiar path, he comes to the pool and washes, and returns seeing.

There is a double lesson there, on which I have no need to dwell. There is, first, the general truth that healing is suspended by Christ on compliance with His conditions. He does not simply say to any man, Be whole. He could and did say so sometimes in regard to bodily healing. But He cannot do so as regards the cure of our blind souls. To the sin-sick and sin-blinded man He says, ‘Thou shalt be whole, if’-or ‘I will make thee whole, provided that’-what?-provided that thou goest to the fountain where He has lodged the healing power. The condition on which sight comes to the blind is compliance with Christ’s invitation, ‘Come to Me; trust in Me; and thou shalt be whole.’

Then there is a special lesson here, and that is, Obedience brings sight. ‘If any man will do His will he shall know of the doctrine.’ Are there any of you groping in darkness, compassed about with theological perplexities and religious doubts? Obey what you know. Do what you see clearly you ought to do. Bow your wills to the recognised truth. He who has turned all his knowledge into action will get more knowledge as soon as he needs it. ‘Go and wash; and he went, and came seeing.’

IV. And now, lastly, we have here our Lord shadowing His highest work as the Healer of blind souls.

It is impossible for me to enter upon that wonderfully dramatic and instructive narrative which follows the account of the miracle, and describe the controversies between the sturdy, quick-witted, candid, blind man, and the narrow, bitter Pharisees. But just notice one or two points.

The two parties are evidently represented as types of two contrasted classes. The blind man stands for an example of honest ignorance, knowing itself ignorant, and not to be coaxed or frightened or in any way provoked to pretending to knowledge which it does not possess; firmly holding by what it does know, and because conscious of its little knowledge, therefore waiting for light and willing to be led. Hence he is at once humble and sturdy, docile and independent, ready to listen to any voice which can really teach, and formidably quick to prick with wholesome sarcasm the inflated claims of mere official pretenders. The Pharisees, on the other hand, are sure that they know everything that can be known about anything in the region of religion and morality, and in their absolute confidence of their absolute possession of the truth, in their blank unconsciousness that it was more than their official property and stock-in-trade, in their complete incapacity to discern the glory of a miracle which contravened ecclesiastical proprieties and conventionalities, in their contempt for the ignorance which they were responsible for and never thought of enlightening, in their cruel taunt directed against the man’s calamity, and in their swift resort to the weapon of excommunication of one whom it was much easier to cast out than to answer, are but too plain a type of a character which is as ready to corrupt the teachers of the Church as of the synagogue.

One cannot but notice how constantly the phrase ‘We know’ occurs. The parents of the man use it thrice. The Pharisees have it on their lips in their first interview with him: ‘We know that this man is a sinner.’ He answers, declining to affirm anything about the character of the Man Jesus, because he, for his part, 'knows not,' but standing firmly by the solid reality which he 'knows,' in a very solid fashion, that his eyes have been opened. So we have the first encounter between knowledge which is ignorant, and ignorance which knows, to the manifest victory of the latter. Again, in the second round, they try to overbear the man's cool sarcasm with their vehement assertion of knowledge that God spake to Moses, but by the admission that even their knowledge did not reach to the determination of the question of the origin of Jesus' mission, lay themselves open to the sudden thrust of keen-eyed, honest humility's sharp rapier-like retort. 'Herein is a marvellous thing,' that you Know-alls, whose business it is to know where a professed miracle-worker comes from, 'know not from whence He is, and yet He hath opened mine eyes.' 'Now we know' [to use your own words] 'that God heareth not sinners, but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth His will, him He heareth.'

Then observe how, on both sides, a process is going on. The man is getting more and more light at each step. He begins with 'a Man which is called Jesus.' Then he gets to a 'prophet,' then he comes to 'a worshipper of God, and one that does His will.' Then he comes to, 'If this man were not of God,' in some very special sense, 'He could do nothing.' These are his own reflections, the working out of the impression made by the fact on an honest mind; and because he had so used the light which he had, therefore Jesus gives him more, and finds him with the question, 'Dost thou believe on the Son of God?' Then the man who had shown himself so strong in his own convictions, so independent, and hard to cajole or coerce, shows himself now all docile and submissive, and ready to accept whatever Jesus says: 'Lord, who is He, that I might believe on Him?' That was not credulity. He already knew enough of Christ to know that he ought to trust Him. And to his docility there is given the full revelation; and he hears the words which Pharisees and unrighteous men were not worthy to hear: 'Thou hast both seen it is He that talketh with thee.' Then intellectual conviction, moral reliance, and the utter prostration and devotion of the whole man bow him at Christ's feet. 'Lord, I believe; and He worshipped Him.'

There is the story of the progress of an honest, ignorant soul that knew itself blind, into the illumination of perfect vision.

And as he went upwards, so steadily and tragically, downwards went the others. For they had light and they would not look at it; and it blasted and blinded them. They had the manifestation of Christ, and they scoffed and jeered at it, and turned their backs upon it, and it became a curse to them; falling not like dew but like vitriol on their spirits, blistering, not refreshing.

Therefore Christ pronounces their fate, and sums up the story in the solemn two-edged sentence: 'For judgment am I come into the world, that they which see not might see, and that they which see might be made blind.'

The purpose of His coming is not to judge, but to save. But if men will not let Him save, the effect of His coming will be to harm. Therefore, His coming will separate men into two parts, as a magnet will draw all the iron filings out of a heap and leave the brass. He comes not to judge, but His coming does judge. He is set for the rise or for the fall of men, and is 'a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.'

Light has a twofold effect. It is torture to the diseased eye; it is gladdening to the sound one. Christ is the light, as He is also both the power of seeing and the thing seen. Therefore, it cannot but be that His shining upon men's hearts shall judge them, and shall either enlighten or darken.

We all have eyes-the organs by which we may see 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.' We have all blinded ourselves by our sin. Christ is come to show us God, to be the light by which we see God, and to strengthen and restore our faculty of seeing Him. If you welcome Him, and take Him into your hearts, He will be at once light and eyesight to you. But if you turn away from Him He will be blindness and darkness to you. He comes to pour eyesight on the blind, but He comes therefore also, most assuredly, to make still blinder those who do not know themselves to be blind, and conceit themselves to be clear-sighted. 'I thank Thee, Father, that Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.'

They who see themselves to be blind, who know themselves to be ignorant, the lowly who recognise their sinfulness and misery and helplessness, and turn in their sore need to Christ, will be led by paths of growing knowledge and blessedness to the perfect day where their strengthened vision will be able to see light in the blaze which to us now is darkness. They who say ‘I see,’ and know not that they are miserable and blind, nor hearken to His counsel to ‘anoint their eyes with eye salve that they may see,’ will have yet another film drawn over their eyes by the shining of the light which they reject, and will pass into darkness where only enough of light and of eyesight remain to make guilt. Jesus Christ is for us light and vision. Trust to Him, and your eyes will be blessed because they see God. Turn from Him and Egyptian darkness will settle on your soul. ‘To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away.’

43)John 10:9

John

THE GIFTS TO THE FLOCK

Joh. 10:9.

One does not know whether the width or the depth of this marvellous promise is the more noteworthy. Jesus Christ presents Himself before the whole race of man, and declares Himself able to deal with the needs of every individual in the tremendous whole. ‘If any man’-no matter who, where, when.

For all noble and happy life there are at least three things needed: security, sustenance, and a field for the exercise of activity. To provide these is the end of all human society and government. Jesus Christ here says that He can give all these to every one.

The imagery of the sheep and the fold is still, of course, in His mind, and colours the form of the representation. But the substance is the declaration that, to any and every soul, no matter how ringed about with danger, no matter how hampered and hindered in work, no matter how barren of all supply earth may be, He will give these, the primal requisites of life. ‘He shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.’

Now I only wish to deal with these three aspects of the blessedness of a true Christian life which our Lord holds forth here as accessible to us all: security, the unhindered exercise of activity, and sustenance or provision.

I. First, then, in and through Christ any man may be saved.

I take it that the word ‘saved’ here is rather used with reference to the imagery of the parable than in its full Christian sense of ultimate and everlasting salvation, and that its meaning in its present connection might perhaps better be set forth by the rendering ‘safe’ than ‘saved.’ At the same time, the two ideas pass into one another; and the declaration of my text is that because, step by step, conflict by conflict, in passing danger after danger, external and internal, Jesus Christ, through our union with Him, will keep us safe, at the last we shall reach eternal and everlasting salvation. ‘He will save us’ by the continual exercise of His protecting power, ‘into His everlasting kingdom.’ There is none other shelter for men’s defenceless heads and naked, soft, unarmed bodies except only the shelter that is found in Him. There are creatures of low grade in the animal world which have the instinct, because their own bodies are so undefended and impotent to resist contact with sharp and penetrating substances, that they take refuge in the abandoned shells of other creatures. You and I have to betake ourselves behind the defences of that strong love and mighty Hand if ever we are to pass through life without fatal harm.

For consider that, even in regard to outward dangers, union with Jesus Christ defends and delivers us. Suppose two men, two Manchester merchants, made bankrupt by the same commercial crisis; or two shipwrecked sailors lashed upon a raft; or two men sitting side by side in a railway carriage and smashed by the same collision. One is a Christian and the other is not. The same blow is altogether different in aspect and actual effect upon the two men. They endure the same thing externally, in body or in fortune. The outward man is similarly affected, but the man is differently affected. The one is crushed, or embittered, or driven to despair, or to drink, or to something or other to soothe the bitterness; the other bows himself with ‘It is the Lord! Let Him do what seemeth Him good.’

So the two disasters are utterly different, though in form they may be the same, and he that has entered into the fold by Jesus Christ is safe, not from outward disaster-that would be but a poor thing-but in it. For to the true heart that lives in fellowship with Jesus Christ, Sorrow, though it be dark-robed, is bright-faced, soft-handed, gentle-hearted, an angel of God. ‘By Me if any man enter in, he shall be safe.’

And further, in our union with Jesus Christ, by simple faith in Him and loyal submission and obedience, we do receive an impenetrable defence against the true evils, and the only things worth calling dangers. For the only real evil is the peril that we shall lose our confidence and be untrue to our best selves, and depart from the living God. Nothing is evil except that which tempts, and succeeds in tempting, us away from Him. And in regard to all such danger, to cleave to Christ, to realise His presence, to think of Him, to wear His name as an amulet on our hearts, to put the thought of Him between us and temptation as a filter through which the poisonous air shall pass, and be deprived of its virus, is the one secret of safety and victory.

Real gift of power from Jesus Christ, the influx of His strength into our weakness, of some portion of the Spirit of life that was in Him into our deadness, is promised, and the promise is abundantly fulfilled to all men who trust Him when their hour of temptation comes. As the dying martyr, when he looked up into heaven, saw Jesus Christ ‘standing at the right hand of God’ ready to help, and, as it were, having started from His eternal seat on the Throne in the eagerness of His desire to succour His servant, so we may all see, if we will, that dear Lord ready to succour us, and close by our sides to deliver us from the evil in the evil, its power to tempt. If we could carry that vision into our daily life, and walk in its light, when temptation rings us round, how poor all the inducements to go away from Him would look!

There is a power in the remembrance of Jesus to slay every wicked thought; and the things that tempt us most, that most directly appeal to our worst sides, to our sense, our ambition, our pride, our distrust, our self-will, all these lose their power upon us, and are discovered in their emptiness and insignificance, when once this thought flashes across the mind-Jesus Christ is my Defence, and Jesus Christ is my Pattern and my Companion.

Oh, brother! do not trust yourself out amongst the pitfalls and snares of life without Him. If you do, the real evil of all evils will seize you for its own; but keep close to that dear Lord, and then ‘there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.’ The hidden temptation thou wilt pass by without being harmed; the manifest temptation thou wilt trample under foot. ‘Thou shalt not be afraid for the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.’ Hidden known temptations will be equally powerless; and in the fold into which all pass by faith in Christ thou shalt be safe. And so, kept safe from each danger and in each moment of temptation, the aggregate and sum of the several deliverances will amount to the everlasting salvation which shall be perfected in the heavens.

Only remember the condition, ‘By Me if any man enter in.’ That is not a thing to be done once for all, but needs perpetual repetition. When we clasp anything in our hands, however tight the initial grasp, unless there is a continual effort of renewed tightening, the muscles become lax, and we have to renew the tension, if we are to keep the grasp. So in our Christian life it is only the continual repetition of the act which our Lord here calls ‘entering in by Him’ that will bring to us this continual exemption from, and immunity in, the dangers that beset us.

Keep Christ between you and the storm. Keep on the lee side of the Rock of Ages. Keep behind the breakwater, for there is a wild sea running outside; and your little boat, undecked and with a feeble hand at the helm, will soon be swamped. Keep within the fold, for wolves and lions lie in every bush. Or, in plain English, live moment by moment in the realising of Christ’s presence, power, and grace. So, and only so, shall you be safe.

II. Now, secondly, note, in Jesus Christ any man may find a field for the unrestricted exercise of his activity.

That metaphor of ‘going in and out’ is partly explained to us by the image of the flock, which passes into the fold for peaceful repose, and out again, without danger, for exercise and food; and is partly explained by the frequent use, in the Old Testament and in common conversation, of the expression ‘going out and in’ as the designation of the two-sided activity of human life. The one side is the contemplative life of interior union with

God by faith and love; the other, the active life of practical obedience in the field of work which God provides for us. These two are both capable of being raised to their highest power, and of being discharged with the most unrestricted and joyous activity, on condition of our keeping close to Christ, and living by the faith of Him.

Note, then, ‘He shall go in.’ That comes first, though it interferes with the propriety of the metaphor, since the previous words already contemplate an initial ‘entering in by Me, the Door.’ That is to say, that, given the union with Jesus Christ by faith, there must then, as the basis of all activity, follow very frequent and deep inward acts of contemplation, of faith, and aspiration, and desire. You must go into the depths of God through Christ. You must go into the depths of your own souls through Him. You must become accustomed to withdraw yourselves from spreading yourselves out over the distractions of any external activity, howsoever imperative, charitable, or necessary, and live alone with Jesus, ‘in the secret place of the Most High.’ It is through Him that we have access to the mysteries and innermost shrine of the Temple. It is through Him that we draw near to the depths of Deity. It is through Him that we learn the length and breadth and height and depth of the largest and loftiest and noblest truths that concern the spirit. It is through Him that we become familiar with the inmost secrets of our own selves. And only they who habitually live this hidden and sunken life of solitary and secret communion will ever do much in the field of outward work. Christians of this generation are far too much accustomed to live only in the front rooms of the house, that look out upon the street; and they know very little-far too little for their soul’s health, and far too little for the freshness of their work and its prosperity-of that inward life of silent contemplation and expectant adoration, by which all strength is fed. Do not keep all your goods in the shop windows, and have nothing on your shelves but dummies, as is the case with far too many of us to-day. Remember that the Lord said first, ‘He shall go in,’ and unless you do you will not be ‘saved.’

But then, further, if there have been, and continue to be, this unrestricted exercise through Christ of that sweet and silent life of solitary communion with Him, then there will follow upon that an enlargement of opportunity, and power for outward service such as nothing but emancipation by faith in

Him can ever bring. Howsoever, by external circumstances, you and I may be hampered and hindered, however often we may feel that if something outside of us were different, the development of our active powers would be far more satisfactory, and we could do a great deal more in Christ's cause, the true hindrance lies never without, but within; and it is only to be overcome by that plunging into the depths of fellowship with Him. And then, if we carry with us into the field of work, whether it be the commonplace, dusty, tedious, and often repulsive duties of our monotonous business; or whether it be the field of more distinctly unselfish and Christian service-if we carry with us into all places where we go to labour, the sweet thought of His presence, of His example, of His love, and of the smile that may come on His face as the reward of faithful service, then we shall find that external labour, drawing its pattern, its motive, its law, and the power for its discharge, from communion with Him, is no more task-work nor slavery; and even 'the rough places will be made smooth, and the crooked things will be made straight,' and distasteful work will be made at least tolerable, and hard burdens will be lightened, and the things that are 'seen and temporal' will shimmer into transparency, through which will shine out the things that are 'unseen and eternal.'

Some of us are constitutionally made to prefer the one of these forms of Christian activity; some of us to prefer the other. The tendencies of this generation are far too much to the latter, to the exclusion of the former. It is hard to reconcile the conflicting claims, and I know of no better way to hit the just medium than by trying to keep ourselves always in touch with Jesus Christ, and then outward labour of any sort, whether for the bread that perishes or for His kingdom and righteousness, will never become so absorbing but that in it we may have our hearts in heaven, and the silent hour of communion with Him will never be so prolonged as to neglect outward duties. There was a demoniac boy in the plain, and therefore it was impossible to build tabernacles on the Mount of Transfiguration. But the disciples that had not climbed the Mount were all impotent to cast out the demoniac boy. We, if we keep near to Jesus Christ, will find that through Him we can 'go in and out,' and in both be pursuing the one uniform purpose of serving and pleasing Him. So shall be fulfilled in our cases the Psalmist's prayer, that 'I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of ray life, to behold His beauty, and to inquire in His Temple.'

III. Lastly, in Jesus Christ any man may receive sustenance. 'They shall find pasture.'

The imagery of the sheep and the fold is still, of course, present to the Master's mind, and shapes the form in which this great promise is set forth.

I need only remind you, in illustration of it, of two facts, one, that in Jesus Christ Himself all the true needs of humanity are met and satisfied. He is 'the Bread of God that came down from heaven to give life to the world.' Do I want an outward object for my intellect? I have it in Him. Does my heart feel with its tendrils, which have no eyes at the ends of them, after something round which it may twine, and not fear that the prop shall ever rot or be cut down or pulled up? Jesus Christ is the home of love in which the dove may fold its wings and be at rest. Do I want [and I do if I am not a fool] an absolute and authoritative command to be laid upon my will; some one 'whose looks enjoin, whose lightest words are spells'? I find absolute authority, with no taint of tyranny, and no degradation to the subject, in that Infinite Will of His. Does my conscience need some strong detergent to be laid upon it which shall take out the stains that are most indurated, inveterate, and ingrained? I find it only in the 'blood that cleanseth from all sin.' Do my aspirations and desires seek for some solid and substantial and unquestionable and imperishable good to which, reaching out, they may be sure that they are not anchoring on cloudland? Christ is our hope. For all this complicated and craving commonwealth that I carry within my soul, there is but one satisfaction, even Jesus Christ Himself. Nothing else nourishes the whole man at once, but in Him are all the constituents that the human system requires for its nutriment and its growth in every part. So in and through Christ we find 'pasture.'

But beyond that, if we are knit to Him by simple and continual faith, love, and obedience, then what is else barrenness becomes full of nourishment, and the unsatisfying gifts of the world become rich and precious. They are nought when they are put first, they are much when they are put second.

I remember when I was in Australia seeing some wretched cattle trying to find grass on a yellow pasture where there was nothing but here and there a brown stalk that crumbled to dust in their mouths as they tried to eat it. That is the world without Jesus Christ. And I saw the same pasture six weeks after, when the rains had come, and the grass was high, rich, juicy, satisfying. That is what the world may be to you, if you will put it second, and seek first that your souls shall be fed on Jesus Christ. Then, and only then, will what is else water be turned by His touch and blessing into wine that shall fill the great jars to the brim, and be pronounced by skilled palates to be the good wine. ‘I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be. There shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel.’

44)John 10:14-15

John

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Joh. 10:14 - Joh. 10:15.

‘I am the Good Shepherd.’ Perhaps even Christ never spoke more fruitful words than these. Just think how many solitary, wearied hearts they have cheered, and what a wealth of encouragement and comfort there has been in them for all generations. The little child as it lays itself down to sleep, cries-

‘Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear me,
Bless Thy little lamb to-night,’

and the old man lays himself down to die murmuring to himself, ‘Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.’ ‘I am the Good Shepherd.’ No preaching can do anything but weaken and dilute the force of such words, and yet, though in all their sweet, homely simplicity they appeal to every heart, there are great depths in them that are worth pondering, and profound thoughts that need some elucidation.

There are three points to be noticed-First, the general force of the metaphor, and then the two specific applications of it which our Lord Himself makes.

I. First of all, then, let me say a few words as to the general application of the metaphor.

The usual notion of these words confines itself to the natural meaning, and runs out into very true, but perhaps a little sentimental, considerations, laying hold of what is so plain on the very surface that I need not spend any time in speaking about it. Christ’s pattern is my law; Christ’s providence is my guidance and defence-which in the present case means Christ’s companionship-is my safety, my sustenance-which in the present case means that Christ Himself is the bread of my soul. The Good Shepherd exercises care, which absolves the sheep from care, and in the present case means that my only duty is meek following and quiet trust. ‘I am the Good Shepherd’-here is guidance, guardianship, companionship, sustenance-all responsibility laid upon His broad shoulders, and all tenderness in His deep heart, and so for us simple obedience and quiet trust.

Another way by which we get the whole significance of this symbol is by noticing how the idea is strengthened by the word that accompanies it. Christ does not say ‘I am a Shepherd,’ but He says, ‘I am the good Shepherd.’ At first sight that word ‘good’ is interpreted, as I have said, in a kind of sentimental, poetic way, as expressing our Lord’s tenderness and love and care; but I do not think that is the full meaning here. You find up and down this Gospel of St. John phrases such as, ‘I am the true bread,’ ‘I am the true vine,’ and the meaning of the word that is here translated ‘good’ is very nearly parallel with that idea. The true bread, the true vine, the true Shepherd-which comes to this, to use modern phraseology, that Jesus Christ, in His relation to you and me, fulfils all that in figure and shadow is represented to the meditative eye by that lower relationship between the material shepherd and his sheep. That is the picture, this the reality. There is another point to be made clear, and that is, that whilst the word ‘good’ is perhaps a fair enough representation of that which is employed by our Lord, there is a special force and significance attached to the original, which is lost in our Bible. I do not know that it could have been preserved; but still it is necessary to state it. The expression here is the one that is generally rendered ‘fair,’ or ‘lovely,’ or ‘beautiful,’ and it belongs to the genius of that wonderful tongue in which the New Testament is written that it has a name for moral purity, considered as being lovely, the highest goodness, and the serenest beauty, which was what the old Greeks taught, howsoever little they may have practised it in their lives. And so here the thought is that the Shepherd stands before us, the realisation of all which that name means, set forth in such a fashion as to be infinitely lovely and perfectly fair, and to draw the admiration of any man who can appreciate that which is beautiful, and can admire that which is of good report.

There is another point still in reference to this first view of the text. Our Lord not only declares that He is the reality of which the earthly shepherd is the shadow, and that He as such is the flawless, perfect One, but that He alone is the reality. ‘I am the Good Shepherd; in Me and in Me alone is that which men need.’ And that leads me to another point which must just be mentioned, that we shall not reach the full meaning of these great words without taking into account the history of the metaphor in the Old Testament. Christ gives a second edition of the figure, and we are to remember all that went before. ‘The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want’; ‘Thou leddest Thy people like a flock, by the hand of Moses and Aaron.’ These are but specimens of a continuous series of utterances in the old Revelation in which Jehovah Himself is the Shepherd of mankind; and there is also another class of passages of which I will quote one or two. ‘He shall feed His flock like a shepherd, and carry them in His arms.’ ‘Awake, O sword, against the Man who is my fellow; smite the Shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.’ There were, we should remember, two streams of representation, according to the one of which God Himself was the Shepherd of Israel, and according to the other of which the Messiah was the Shepherd; and here, as I believe, Jesus lays His hand on both the one and the other, and says: ‘They are Mine, and they testify of Me.’ So sweet, so gracious are the words, that we lose the sense of the grandeur of them, and need to think before we are able to understand how great and immense the claim that is made here upon our faith, and that this Man stands before us and arrogates to Himself the divine prerogative witnessed from of old by psalmist and prophet, and says that for Him were meant the prophecies of ancient times that spake of a human shepherd, and asserts that all the sustenance, care, authority, command, which the emblem suggests meet in Him in perfect measure.

II. Now let us turn to the two special points which our Lord emphasises here, as being those in which His relation as the Good Shepherd is most conspicuously given.

The language of my text runs: ‘I am the Good Shepherd, and know My sheep, and am known of Mine. As the Father knoweth Me, even so know I the Father.’ Our Western ways fail to bring out the full meaning of the emblem; but all Eastern travellers tell us what a strange bond of sympathy and loving regard, and docile recognition, springs up between the shepherd and his sheep away there in the Eastern pastures and deserts; and how he knows every one, though to a stranger’s eye they are so like each other; and how even the dumb instincts and the narrow intelligence of the silly sheep recognise the shepherd, and will not be deceived by shepherd’s garments worn to deceive, and will not follow the voice of a stranger.

But we must further note that Christ lays hold of the dumb instincts of the animal, as illustrating, at the one end of the scale, the relation between Him and His followers, and lays hold of the communion between the Father and the Son at the other end of the scale, as illustrating the same thing. ‘I know My sheep.’ That is a knowledge like the knowledge of the shepherd, a bond of close intimacy. But He does not know them by reason of looking at them and thinking about them. It is something far more blessed than that. He knows me because He loves me; He knows me because He has sympathy with me, and I know Him, if I know Him at all, by my love, and I know Him by my sympathy, and I know Him by my communion. A loveless heart does not know the Shepherd, and unless the Shepherd’s heart was all love He would not know His sheep. The Shepherd’s love is an individualised love. He knows His flock as a flock because He knows the units of it, and we can rest ourselves upon the personal knowledge, which is personal love and sympathy, of Jesus Christ. ‘And My sheep know Me’-not by force of intellect, not by understanding certain truths, all-important as that may be, but by having our hearts harmonised in Him, and our spirits put into sympathy and communion with Him. ‘They know Me,’ and rest comes with the knowledge; ‘they know Me,’ and in that knowing is the best answer to all doubt and fear. They are exposed to danger, but in the fold they can go quietly to rest, for they know that He is at the door watching through all dangers.

III. Turn for a moment to the last point, 'I lay down My life for the sheep.'

I have said that our Western ways fail to bring out fully the element of the metaphor which refers to the kind of sympathy between the shepherd and the sheep; and our Western life also fails to bring out this other element also. Shepherds in England never have need to lay down their life for the sheep. Shepherds in Palestine often did, and sometimes do. You remember David with the lion and the bear, which is but an illustration of the reality which underlies this metaphor. So, then, in some profound way, the shepherd's death is the sheep's safety. First of all, look at that most unmistakable, emphatic-I was going to say vehement, at any rate, intense-expression of the absolute voluntariness of Christ's death, 'I lay down My life,' as a man might strip off a vesture. And this application of the metaphor is made all the stronger by the words which follow: 'Therefore doth My Father love Me, because I lay down My life that I might take it again. No man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.' We read, 'Smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered,' but here, somehow or other, the smiting of the Shepherd is not the scattering but the gathering of the flock. Here, somehow or other, the dead Shepherd has power to guard, to guide, to defend them. Here, somehow or other, the death of the Shepherd is the security of the sheep; and I say to you, the flock, that for every soul the entrance into the flock of God is through the door of the dying Christ, who laid down His life for the sheep, and makes them His sheep who trust in Him.

45)John 10:16

John

'OTHER SHEEP' 1

Joh. 10:16.

There were many strange and bitter lessons in this discourse for the false shepherds, the Pharisees, to whom it was first spoken. But there was not one which would jar more upon their minds, and as they fancied, on their sacredest convictions, than this, that God's flock was wider than God's fold. Our Lord distinctly recognises Judaism with its middle wall of partition as a divine institution, and then as distinctly carries His gaze beyond it. To His hearers 'this fold,' their own national polity, held all the flock. Without were dogs, a doleful land, where 'the wild beasts of the desert met with the wild beasts of the islands.' And now this new Teacher, not content with declaring them hirelings, and Himself the only true Shepherd of Israel, breaks down the hedges and speaks of Himself as the Shepherd of men. No wonder that they said, 'He hath a devil and is mad.'

During His earthly life our Lord, as we know, confined His own personal ministry for the most part to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Not exclusively so, for He made at least one journey into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, teaching and healing; a Syro-Phoenician woman held His feet, and received her request; and one of His miracles, of feeding the multitude, was wrought for hungry Gentiles. But while His work was in Israel, it was for mankind; and while 'this fold,' generally speaking, circumscribed His toils, it did not confine His love nor His thoughts. More than once world-wide declarations and promises broke from His lips, even before the final universal commission, 'Preach the Gospel to every creature.' 'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.' 'I am the Light of the world.' These and other similar sayings give us His lofty consciousness that He has received 'the heathen for His inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for His possession.' Parallel with them in substance are the words before us, which, for our present purpose, we may regard as containing lessons from our Lord Himself of how He looked and would have us look on the heathen world, on His work and ours, and on the certain issues of both.

I. We have here Christ teaching us how to think of the heathen world.

Observe that His words are not a declaration that all mankind are His sheep. The previous verses have distinctly defined a class of men as possessing the name, and the succeeding ones reiterate the definition, and with equal distinctness exclude another class. 'Ye believe not, because ye are not My sheep as I said unto you.' His sheep are they who know Him and are known of Him. Between Him and them there is a communion of love, a union of life, and a consequent reciprocal knowledge, which transcends the closest intimacies of earthly life, and finds its only analogue in that deep and mysterious oneness which subsists between the Father, who alone knoweth the Son, and the only begotten Son, who being ever in the bosom of the Father, alone knoweth Him and revealeth Him to us. ‘I know My sheep and am known of Mine; as the Father knoweth Me and I know the Father. They hear My voice and follow Me, and I give unto them eternal life.’ Such are the characteristics of that relation between Christ and men by which they become His sheep. It is such souls as these whom our Lord beholds in the wasteful wilderness. He is speaking not of a relation which all men bear to Him by virtue of their creation, but of one which they bear to Him who believe in His name.

Now this interpretation of the words does by no means contradict, but rather presupposes and rests upon the truth that all mankind come within the love of the divine heart, that He died for all, that all may be the subjects of His mediatorial kingdom, recipients of the offered mercy of God in Christ, and committed to the stewardship of the missionary Church. Resting upon these truths, the words of our text advance a step further and contemplate those who ‘shall hereafter believe on Me.’ Whether they be few or many is not the matter in hand. Whether at any future time they shall include all the dwellers upon earth is not the matter in hand. That every soul of man is included in the adaptation and intention and offer of the Gospel is not the matter in hand. But this is the matter in hand, that Jesus Christ in that moment of lofty elevation when He looked onwards to giving His life for the sheep, looked outwards also, far afield, and saw in every nation and people souls that He knew were His, and would one day know Him, and be led by Him ‘in green pastures and beside still waters.’

But where or what were they when He spoke? He does not mean that already they had heard His voice and were following His steps, and knew His love, and had received eternal life at His hand. This He cannot mean, for the plain reason that He goes on to speak of His ‘bringing’ them and of their ‘hearing,’ a work yet to be done. It can only be, then, that He speaks of them thus in the fullness of that divine knowledge which ‘calls things that are not as though they were.’ It is then a prophetic word which He speaks here.

We have only to think of the condition of the civilised heathendom of Christ’s own day in order to feel the force of our text in its primary application. While the work of salvation was being prepared for the world in the life and death of our Lord, the world was being prepared for the tidings of salvation. Everywhere men were losing their faith in their idols, and longing for some deliverer. Some had become weary of the hollowness of philosophical speculation, and, like Pilate, were asking ‘What is truth?’ whilst, unlike Him, they waited for an answer, and will believe it when it comes from the lips of the Incarnate wisdom. Such were the Magi who were led by their starry science to His cradle, and went back to the depths of the Eastern lands with a better light than had guided them thither. Such were not a few of the early Christian converts, who had long been seeking hopelessly for goodly pearls, and had so been learning to know the worth of the One when it was offered to them. There were men who had been long sickening with despair amidst the rottenness of decaying mythologies and corrupting morals, and longing for some breath from heaven to blow health to themselves and to the world, and had so been learning to welcome ‘the rushing mighty wind’ when it came in power. There were simple souls, without as well as within the chosen people, waiting for the Consolation, though they knew not whence it was to come. There were many who had already learned to believe that ‘salvation is of the Jews,’ though they had still to learn that salvation is in Jesus. Such were that Aethiopian statesman who was poring over Isaiah when Philip joined him, the Roman centurion at Caesarea whose prayers and alms came up with acceptance before God, these Greeks of the West who came to His cross as the Eastern sages to His cradle, and were in Christ’s eyes the advance guard and first scattered harbingers of the flocks who should come flying for refuge to Him lifted on the Cross, ‘like doves to their windows.’ The whole world showed that the fullness of time had come; and the history of the early years of the Church reveals in how many souls the process of preparation had been silently going on. It was like the flush of early spring, when all the buds that had been maturing and swelling in the cold, burst, and the tender flowers that had been reaching upwards to the surface in all the hard winter laugh out in beauty, and a green veil covers all the hedges at the first flash of the April sun.

Not only these were in our Lord's thoughts when He saw His sheep in heathen lands. There were many who had no such previous preparation, but were plunged in all the darkness, nor knew that it was dark. Not only those wearied of idolatry, and dissatisfied with creeds outworn, but the barbarous people of Illyricum, the profligates of Corinth, hard rude men like the jailer at Philippi, and many more were before His penetrating eye. He who sees beneath the surface, and beyond the present, beholds His sheep where men can only see wolves. He sees an Apostle in the blaspheming Saul, a teacher for all generations in the African Augustine while yet a sensualist and a Manichee, a reformer in the eager monk Luther, a poet-evangelist in the tinker Bunyan. He sees the future saint in the present sinner, the angel's wings budding on many a shoulder where the world's burdens lie heavy, and the new name written on many a forehead that as yet bears but the mark of the beast, and the number of His name.

And the sheep whom He sees while He speaks are not only the men of that generation. These mighty words are world-wide and world-lasting. The whole of the ages are in His mind. All nations are gathered before His prophetic vision, even as they shall one day be gathered before His judgment throne, and in all the countless mass His hand touches and His love clasps those who to the very end of time shall come to His call with loving faith, shall follow His steps with glad obedience.

Thus does Christ look out upon the world that lay beyond the fold. I cannot stay to do more than refer in passing to the spirit which the words of our text breathe. There is the lofty consciousness that He is the Leader and Guide, the Friend and Helper of all, that He stands solitary in His power to bless. There is the full confidence that the earth is His to its uttermost border. There is the clear vision of the sorrowful condition of these heathen people, without a shepherd and without a fold, wandering on every high mountain and dying in every thirsty land where there is no water. There are the tenderest pity and yearning love for them in their extremity. There is the clear assurance that they will come and be blessed in Him. I pass by all the other thoughts, which naturally found themselves on these words, in order to urge the one which is most appropriate to our present engagement. Let us, dear brethren, take Christ as our pattern in our contemplations of the heathen world.

He has set us the example of an outgoing look directed far beyond the limits of the existing churches, far beyond the point of present achievement. We are but too apt to circumscribe our operative thoughts and our warm sympathies within the circle of our sight, or of our own personal associations. Our selfishness and our indolence affect the objects of our contemplations quite as much as they do the character of our work. They vitiate both, by making ourselves the great object of both, and by weakening the force of both in a ratio that increases rapidly with the increasing distance from that favourite centre. It is but a subtle form of the same disease which keeps our thoughts penned within the bounds of any fold, or limited by the progress already achieved. For us the whole world is the possession of our Lord, who has died to redeem us. By us the whole ought to be contemplated with that same spirit of prophetic confidence which filled Him when He said, ‘Other sheep I have which are not of this fold.’ To press onwards, ‘forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching forth to those which are before,’ is the only fitting attitude for Christian men, either in regard to the gradual purifying of their own characters, or in regard to the gradual winning of the world for Christ. We ought to make all past successes stepping-stones to nobler things. The true use of the present is to reach up from it to a loftier future. The distance beckons; well for us if it do not beckon us in vain. We have yet to learn the first lesson of our Master’s spirit, as expressed in these words, if we have not become familiar with the pitying contemplation of the wastes beyond the fold, nor fixed deep in our minds the faith that the amplitude of its walls will have to be widened with growing years till it fills the world. The cry echoes to us from of old, ‘Lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes, for thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left.’ We take the first step to respond to the summons when we make the ‘regions beyond’ one of the standing subjects of our devout thoughts, and take heed of supposing that the Church as we know it, has the same measurement which the man with the golden rod has measured for the eternal courts of Jerusalem, that shall be the joy of the whole earth. The very genius of the Gospel is aspiring. It is content with nothing short of universality for the sweep, and eternity for the duration, and absolute completeness for the measure, of its bestowments on man. We should be like men on a voyage of discovery, whose task is felt to be incomplete until headland after headland that fades in the dim distance has been rounded and surveyed, and the flag of our country planted upon it.

After each has been passed another arises from the water, onwards we must go. There is no pause for our thoughts, none for our sympathy, none for our work, till our keels have visited, and the 'shout of a King' has been heard on every shore that fills 'the breadth of Thy land, O Emmanuel!' The limits of the visible community of Christ's Church to-day are far within the borders to which it must one day stretch. It is for us, taught by His words, to understand that we are yet as it were but encamped by Jericho, and at the beginning of the campaign. Ai and Bethhoron, and many a fight more are before us yet. The camp of the invaders, when they lay around the city of palm-trees, with the mountains in front and the Jordan behind, was not more unlike the settled order of the nation when it filled the land, than the ranks of Christ's army to-day are to the mighty multitudes that shall one day name His name, and follow His banner. Let us live in the future, and lay strongly hold on the distant; for both are our Lord's, and by so doing we shall the better do our Master's work in the present, and at hand.

He has set us the example of a penetrating gaze into heathenism, which reveals beneath its monotonous miseries, the souls that are His. We ought to look on every field of Christian effort with the assurance that in it there are some who will hear His voice. As it was when He came, so it is ever and everywhere. The world is being prepared for the Gospel. In some broad regions, faith in idolatry is dying out, and the moral condition of the people is undergoing a slow elevation. Individuals are being weaned from their gods, they know not how, and they will not know why till they hear of Christ. He sees in every land where the Gospel is being taken 'a people prepared for the Lord.' He sees the gold gleaming in the crevices of the caves, the gems, rough and unpolished, lying in the matrix. He looks not merely on the great mass of idolaters, but He sees the single souls who shall hear. It is for us to look on the same mass with confidence caught from His. Neither apathetic indifference nor faint-hearted doubt should be permitted to weaken our hands. The prospect may seem very dark, the power of the enemy very great, our resources very inadequate; but let us look with Christ's eye, we shall know that everywhere we may hope to find a response to our message. Who they may be, we know not. How many they may be, we know not. How they may be guided by Him, they know not. But He knows all. We may know that they are there. And as we cannot tell who they are but only that they are, we are bound to cherish hopes for all-the most degraded and outcast of our race. We have no right to give up any field or any man as hopeless. Christ's sheep will be found coming out of the midst of wolves and goats. Darkness may cover the earth, and gross darkness the people; but if we look upon it as Christ did, and as He would have us to look, we shall see lights flickering here and there in the obscurity, which shall burst out into a blaze. The prophetic eye, the boundlessly hopeful heart, the strong confidence that in every land where He is preached there will be those who shall hear-these are what He gives us when He says, 'Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold.'

There is one other thought connected with these words which may be briefly referred to. It is that even now, in all lands where the Gospel has been preached, there are those whom Christ has received, although they have no connection with His visible Church.

There are many goats within the fold. There are many sheep without it. Even in lands where the Gospel has long been preached, we do not venture to identify profession by Church fellowship with living union with Christ. Much more is this true of our missionary efforts, and the apparent converts whom they make. The results that appear are no measure of the results that have actually been accomplished. We often hear of men who had caught up some stray word in a Bengali market-place, or received a tract by the roadside from some passing missionary, and who, having carried away the seed in their hearts, had long been living as Christians remote from all churches and unknown by any. We can easily conceive that timidity in some cases, and distance in others, swell the ranks of these secret disciples. Though they follow not the footsteps of the flock, the Shepherd will lead them in their solitude. There will be many more names in the Lamb's book of life, depend upon it, than ever are written on the roll-calls of our churches, or in missionary statistics. The shooting-stars that yearly fill our sky are visible to us for a moment, when their orbit passes into the lighted heavens, and then they disappear in the shadow of the earth. But astronomers tell us that they are always there though to us they seem to blaze but for a moment. We cannot see them, but they move on their darkling path and have a sun round which they circle. So be sure that in many heathen lands there are believing souls, seen by us but for an instant and then lost, who yet fill their unseen place, and move obedient round the

Sun of Righteousness. Their names on earth are dark, but when the manifestation of the sons of God shall come, they shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars for ever and ever. Our work has results beyond our knowledge now. When the Church, the Lamb's wife, shall lift up her eyes at the end of the days, prophecy tells us that she shall wonder to see her thronging children, whom she had never known till then, and will say, 'Who hath begotten me these? Behold I was left alone. These, where had they been?' These were God's hidden ones, nourished and brought up beyond the pale of the outward Church, but brought at last to share her triumph, and to abide at her side. 'Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold.'

What confidence then, what tender pity, what hope should fill our minds when we look on the heathen world! We must never be contented with present achievements. We are committed to a task which cannot end till all the world hears the joyful sound and is blessed by walking in the light of His countenance. When the great Roman Catholic missionary, the Apostle of the East, was lying on his dying bed among the barbarous people whom he loved, his passing spirit was busy about his work, and, even in the article of death, while the glazing eye saw no more clearly and the ashen lips had begun to stiffen into eternal silence, visions of further conquests flashed before him, and his last word was 'Amplius'-Onward! It ought to be the motto of the missionary work of us, who boast a purer faith, to carry to the heathen and to fire our own souls. If ever we are tempted to repose, to despondency, to rest and be thankful when we number up our work and our converts, let us listen to His voice as it speaks in that supreme hour when He beheld the vision of the Cross, and beyond it that of a gathered world: 'Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold.'

We have here-

II. Christ teaching us how to think of His work and ours.

'Them also I must bring.' A necessity is laid upon Him, which springs at once from that divine work which is the law of His life, and from His own love and pity. The means for accomplishing this necessary work are implied in the context, as in other parallel Scriptural sayings, to be His propitiatory death. The instrumentality employed is not only His own personal agency on earth, nor only His throned rule on the right hand of God with power over the Spirit of holiness, but also the work of His Church, and His work through them. Of that He is mainly speaking when He says, ‘Them also I must bring.’ Here, then, are some truths which ought to underlie and shape as well as animate our efforts for heathenism.

And first, remember that the same sovereign necessity which was laid on Him presses on us.

The ‘Spirit of life’ which was in Christ had its ‘law,’ which was the will of God. That shaped all His being, and He set us the example of perfectly clear recognition of, and perfect obedience to it, from the first moment when He said, ‘I must be about My Father’s business,’ to the last, when He sighed forth, ‘Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit.’ Hence the frequent sayings setting forth His work as determined by an imperative ‘must,’ which, whether it be alleged in reference to some apparently small or to some manifestly great thing in His life, is always equally imperative, and whether it seem to be based on the need for the fulfilment of some prophetic word, or on the proprieties and congruities of sonship, reposes at last on the will of God. His final words on the Passover night, before he went out to Gethsemane in the moonlight, contain the influence which moulded His whole earthly life, ‘As the Father gave Me commandment, even so I do.’

And this divine will constitutes for Him the deepest ground of the necessity in the case before us. The eternal counsels of God had willed that ‘all the ends of the earth should see the salvation of the Lord’; therefore, whatever the toils and the pains, the loss and the death, He, whose meat and drink was to do the will of Him that sent Him, must give Himself to the task, nor rest till, one by one, the weary wanderers are brought back on His shoulders and folded in His love.

In all which, let us remember, Jesus Christ is our pattern, not in His work for the salvation of men, but in the spirit in which He did His work. The solemn law of duty before which He bowed His head is a law for us also. The authoritative imperative which He obeyed has power over us. If we would have our lives holy and strong, wise and good, we must have ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, making us free from the law of sin and death,' for the obedience to the higher law enfranchises from slavery to the lower, and all other authority ceases over us when we are Christ's men. We are bound to service directed to the same end as His-even the salvation of the world. The same voice which says to Him, 'I will give Thee for a light to the Gentiles,' says to us, 'Ye are My witnesses, and My servant whom I have chosen.' The same Will which hath constituted Him the anointed Prophet, says of us, 'Touch not Mine anointed and do My prophets no harm.' We are redeemed that we may show forth God's praises. Not for ourselves alone, nor for purposes terminating in our own personal acceptance with God, or the perfecting of our own characters, priceless as these are, but for ends which affect the world has God had mercy on us. We are bought with a price that we may be the servants of God. We have received that we may give forth,

'God doth with us, as we with torches do,
Not light them for themselves.'

'Arise, shine, for thy light is come.'

This missionary work of ours, then, is not one that can be taken up and laid down at our own pleasure. It is no excrescence, or accidental outgrowth of the Church's life. We are all too apt to think of it as an extra, a kind of work of supererogation, which those may engage in who have a liking that way, and which those who do not care about it may leave alone, and no harm done. When shall we come to feel deeply, constantly, practically, that it must be done, and that we are sinning when we neglect it? Dear brethren, have we laid on our hearts and consciences the solemn weight of that necessity which moulded His life? Have we felt the awful power of God's plainly spoken will, driving us to this task? Do we know anything of that spirit which hears ever-pealing in our ears that awful commandment, 'Go, go to all the world, preach, preach the Gospel to every creature?' God commands us to take the trumpet, and if we would not soil our souls with gross and palpable sin, we must set it to our lips and sound an alarm, that by His grace shall wake the sleepers, and make the hoary walls of the robber-city that has afflicted the earth for so many weary millenniums, rock to their fall, that the redeemed of the Lord may pass over and set the captives free.

If we felt this as we ought, surely our consecration would be more complete, and our service more worthy. A clear conviction of God’s will pointing the path for us, is, in all things, a wondrous help to vigorous action, to calmness of heart, and thus to success. In this mighty work, it would brace us for larger efforts, and fit us for larger results. It would simplify and deepen our motives, and thus evolve from them nobler deeds and purer sacrifices. To all objections from so-called prudence, to all calculations from sparse results, to all cavils of onlookers who may carp and seek to hinder, we should have one all-sufficient answer. It is not for us to bandy arguments on such points as these. We care nothing for difficulties, for discouragements, for cost. We may think about these till we lose all the manly chivalry of Christian character, like the Apostle who gazed on the white crests of the angry breakers flashing in the pale moonlight, till he forgot who stood on the storm, and began to sink in his great fear. A nobler spirit ought to be ours. The toil is sore, the sacrifices many, and the yield seems small. Be it so! To all such thoughts we have one answer-Oh! that we felt more its solemn power!-such is the will of God. We are doing as we are bid, and we mean to go on. ‘Them also must I bring,’ says the Master. ‘Necessity is laid upon me, yea, woe is me if I preach not the Gospel,’ echoes the Apostle. Let us, in the consecration of resolved hearts, and in trembling obedience to the divine will, add our choral Amen, and in the face of all the paralysing suggestions of our own selfishness, and all the tempting voices of worldly wisdom and unbelieving scornfulness that would stay our enterprise, let us fling back the grand old answer, ‘Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye, for we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.’

We must not forget, however, that it was no abhorrent toil to which Christ reluctantly consented. But in this case, as always with Him, the words of prophecy were true, ‘I delight to do Thy will.’ The schism between law and choice had no existence for Him; and when He says that He must bring the wandering sheep into the fold, He means not more because of God’s will than because of His own yearning desire to pour out the treasures of His mercy.

So it ought to be with us. Our missionary work should not be degraded beneath the level of duty indeed, but neither should it be left on that level. We ought not only to be led to it by a power without, but impelled by an energy within. If we would be like our Master, we must know the necessity arising from our own heart's promptings, which leads us to work for Him. He has very imperfectly caught the spirit of the Gospel who has never felt the word as a fire in his bones, making him weary of forbearing. If we only take to this work because we are bid, and without sympathy for men, and longing desire to bring them all to Him who has blessed us, we may almost as well leave it alone. We shall do very little good to anybody, to ourselves little, to the world less. That our own hearts may teach us this necessity, we must live near our Master, and know His grace for ourselves. In proportion as we do, we shall be eager to proclaim it, and not stand idling in a corner of the market-place, till some unmistakable order sends us into the vineyard, but go for the relief of our own feelings. 'This is a day of good tidings, and we cannot hold our peace,' said the poor lepers in the camp to one another. The same feeling that we must tell the good news just because we know it, and it will make our brethren glad, is part of the Christian character. A blessed necessity, then, is laid upon us. A blessed work is given us, which brings with it at once the joy of obedience to our Father's will, and the joy of gratifying a deep instinct of our nature. 'Them also must I bring,' said the Saviour, because He loved men. 'To me who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches,' echoes the Apostle. Let us live in the light of our Lord's eye, and drink deep of His spirit, till the talk becomes a grace and privilege, not a burden, and till silence and idleness in His cause shall be felt to be impossible, because it would be violence to our own feelings, and the loss of a great joy as well as sin against our Father's will.

Consider again, by what means the sheep are to be brought to Christ? The context distinctly answers the question. There His propitiatory death is emphatically set forth as the power by which it is to be accomplished. The verse before our text says, 'I lay down My life for the sheep'; that after our text says, 'Therefore doth My Father love Me, because I lay down My life.' It is the same connection of means and end as appears in the wonderful words with which He received the Greeks who came up to the feast, and heard the great truth, for want of which their philosophy and art came to nothing. ‘Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die it abideth alone’-’I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto Me.’

Yes, brethren! the Cross of Christ, and it alone, gathers men into a unity; for it alone draws men to Christ. His death, as our propitiation, effects such a change in the aspects of the divine government, and in the incidence of the divine justice, that ‘we who were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.’ His death, as the constraining motive of life in the hearts which receive it, draws them away from their own ways by the cords of love, and binds them to Him. His death is His purchase of the gifts of that divine Spirit for the rebellious, who now convinces the world and endows the Church, ‘till we all come unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.’ The First Begotten from the dead is therefore the prince of all the kings of the earth, and He so rides among the nations as to bring the world to Himself. The philosophy of history lies in the words, ‘Other sheep I have, them also I must bring.’

Christian missions abundantly prove that the Cross and the proclamation of the Cross have this power, and that nothing else has. It is not the ethics of Christianity, nor the abstract truths which may be deduced from its story, but it is the story of the suffering Redeemer that gives it its power over human hearts, in all conditions, and climates, and stages of culture. The magnetism of the Cross alone is mighty enough to overcome the gravitation of the soul to sin and the world. We hear much nowadays about a new reformation which is to be effected on Christianity, by purifying it of its historical facts and of its repulsive sacrificial aspect. When this is done, and the pure spiritual ideas are disengaged from their fleshly garb, then, we are told, will be the apotheosis and glorification of Christ. This will be the real lifting up from the earth; this will draw all men. Aye, and when this is done what will be left? Christianity will be purified back again into a vague Deism, which one would have thought had proved itself toothless and impotent, centuries ago. Spiritualising will turn out to be very like evaporating, the residuum will be a miserably unsatisfactory something, near akin to nothing, and certainly incapable either of firing its disciples with a desire to spread their faith, if we may call it so by courtesy, or of drawing men to itself. A Christianity without a Sacrifice on the altar will be a Christianity without worshippers in the Temple. The King of Kings who rides forth conquering is clothed in a vesture dipped in blood. The Christian Emperor saw in the heavens the Cross, with the legend: ‘In this sign thou shalt conquer!’ It is an emblem true for all time. The Cross is the power unto salvation. The races scattered on the earth have often sought to make for themselves a rallying-point, and their attempts at union have become Babels, centres of repulsion and confusion. God has given us the Centre, the Tree of life in the midst. The crucified Saviour is the Root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign for the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek, and resting beneath the shadow of the Cross be at peace. ‘I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.’

Once more our Lord teaches us here to identify the work of the Church with His own. What His servants do for Him He does, for from Him they derive the power to do it, and from Him comes the blessing which makes it effectual. He works in us, He works with us, He works for us. He works in us. We have the grace of His Spirit to touch our hearts and sanctify us for service. He puts it into the wills and desires of His Church to consecrate themselves to the task. He teaches them sympathy and self-devotion. He breathes world-wide aspirations into them. He raises up men to go forth. He works with us, helping our weakness, enlightening our ignorance, directing our steps, giving power to the student at his dry task of grammar and dictionary, being mouth and wisdom to them that speak in His name, touching the hearts of them that hear. In our basket He puts the seed-corn; the furrows of the field He makes soft with showers, and when it is sown He blesses the springing thereof. He works for us, opening doors among the nations, ordering the courses of providence, and holding His hand around His servants, so that they are immortal till their work is done; and can ever lift up thankful voices to Him who leads them joyful captives at His own triumphal car, as it rolls on its stately march, scattering the sweet odours of His name wherever the long procession sweeps through the world. We neither go a warfare at our own charges, nor in our own might. He will fight with us, and He will pay us liberally at the last. When we count up our own resources, do not we often leave Christ out of the reckoning? Do we not measure our strength against the enemies’, and forget that one weak man, plus Christ, is always in the majority? ‘It is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of My Father which speaketh in you.’ ‘I laboured, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.’ So helped, so inspired, we are wrong to despond;

we are wrong not to expect great things and attempt great things; we are wrong not to dare, we are wrong to do the work of the Lord negligently. Let us feel that Christ's work is ours, and we shall be bowed beneath the solemnity of the thought, shall accept joyfully the necessity. Let us feel that our work is Christ's, and we shall rejoice in infirmity that His power may rest upon us, shall bid adieu to faint-hearted fears, and be sure that then it must prosper. 'Arise, O Lord! plead Thine own cause.' Not unto us, O Lord! not unto us, but to Thy name give glory.

'The Lord ascended into Heaven and sat on the right hand of God, and they went everywhere preaching the word.' It seems a strange contrast between the rest of the Lord, sitting in sublime expectancy of conscious power til His enemies become His footstool, and the toils of His scattered disciples. It is like that moment which the genius of the great painter has caught in an immortal work, when Jesus in rapt communion with the mighty dead, and crowned with the accepting word from Heaven, floated transfigured above the Holy Mount, while below His disciples wrestled impotently with the demon that would not be cast out. But it is not really contrast. He has not so parted the toils as that His are over ere ours begin. He has not left His Church militant to bear the brunt of the battle while the Captain of the Lord's host only watches the current of the heady fight-like Moses from the safe mountain. The Evangelist goes on to tell us that the Lord also was working with them and sharing their toils, lightening their burdens, preparing for them successes on earth, and a rest like His when He shall gird Himself and serve them. Thus, the first time that the heavens opened again to mortal eyes after they closed on His ascending form, was to show Him to the martyr in the council chamber, not sitting careless or restful, but standing at the right hand of God, to intercede for, to strengthen, to receive and glorify His dying servant. He goes with us where we go, and through our works and gifts and prayers, through our proclamation of the Cross, He worketh His will, and shall finally accomplish that great necessity laid upon Him by the Father's counsels, and upon us by His commandment, and to be effected by His death, that He should die, not for that nation only, but also that He should gather together in one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

We have here-

III. Our Lord teaching us how to think of the certain issues of His work and ours.

‘They shall hear My voice, and there shall be one fold and one Shepherd.’ We may regard these words as embracing two things; a nearer issue, namely, the response that will always attend His call; and a more remote, namely, the completion of His work. There is, of course, a very blessed sense in which the latter words are true now, and have been ever since Paul could say to those who had been aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, ‘He hath made both one. Now, therefore, ye are no more foreigners but fellow-citizens with the saints.’ But the fold which now exists, limited in numbers, with its members but partially conscious of their unity, and surrounded by those who follow hireling shepherds, does not exhaust these great words. They shall not be accomplished till that far-off future have come.

But for the present we have the predictions of the former clause, ‘They shall hear My voice.’ What manner of expectations does it teach us to cherish? It seems to speak not of universal reception of Christ’s message, but of some as hearing and some as forbearing. It teaches us to look for divers results attending our missionary work. There will always be a Dionysius the Areopagite, the woman Lydia, the kindly barbarians, the conscience-stricken jailer. There will always be the scoffers, who mock when they hear of ‘Jesus and the resurrection’; the hesitating who compound with conscience by promising to hear again of this matter, the fierce opponents who invoke constituted authorities or mob violence to crush the message.

Again, the words seem to contemplate a long task. There is nothing about the rate at which His Kingdom shall spread, not a syllable to answer inquiries as to when the end shall come. The whole tone of the language suggests the idea that bringing back the sheep is to take a long time, and to cost many a tedious journey into the wilderness. Not a sudden outburst, but a slow kindling of the flame, is what our Lord teaches us here to expect.

But while thus calm in tone and moderate in expectation, the words breathe a hope as confident as it is calm, as clear as it is moderate. There will always be a response. His voice shall never be lifted up in the snow-storm or lonely hillsides only to be blown back into His own ears, unheard and unheeded. Be they few or many, they shall hear. Be the toil longer or shorter, more or less severe, it shall not be in vain.

And to these expectations we shall do wisely if we attune ours. Omit from your hopes what your Lord has omitted from His promises; do not ask what He has not told. Do not wonder if you encounter what He met, for the disciple is not greater than his Master, and only if they have kept My saying will they keep yours also. But, on the other hand, expect as much as He has prophesied; accept it when it comes as the fruit of His work, not of yours, and build a firm faith that your labour shall not be in vain on these calm and prescient words.

So much for the course of the kingdom. And what of the end? One by one the sheep have been brought, at last they are all gathered in, not a hoof left behind. The stars steal singly into their places in the heavens as the darkness deepens, and He 'bringeth them forth by number,' until at the noon of night the sky is crowded with their lights, and 'for that He is great in power, not one faileth.' What expectations are we here taught to cherish then of the final issue?

Mark, to begin with, that there is implied the ultimate universality of His dominion and sole supremacy of His throne. There is to be but one Shepherd, and over all the earth a great unity of obedience to Him. Here is the knell of all authority that does not own Him, and the subordination of all that does. The hirelings, the blind guides, that have misled and afflicted humanity for so many weary ages, shall be all sunk in oblivion. The false gods shall be discrowned, and lie shattered on their temple-sill, and there shall be no worshippers to care for or to try to repair their discomfiture. Bow your heads before Him, thinkers who have led men on devious paths and spoken but a partial truth and a wisdom all confused with foolishness! Lower your swords before Him, warriors who have builded your cities on blood and led men like sheep to the slaughter! He is more glorious and excellent than the mountains of prey. Cast your crowns before Him, princes and all judges of the earth, for He is King by right of the crown of thorns! This is the Lord of all-Teacher, Leader, Ruler of all men. All other names shall be forgotten but His shall abide. If they have been shepherds who would not come in by the door, a ransomed world shall rejoice over their fall with the ancient hymn, ‘Other gods beside Thee have had dominion over us; they are dead, they shall not live, Thou hast destroyed them, and made all their memory to perish.’ If they have been subject to the chief Shepherd and ensamples to the flock, they will rejoice to decrease before His increase, and having helped to bring the Bride to the Bridegroom, will gladly stand aside and be forgotten in the perfect love that enters into full fruition at the last. Then when none contest nor intercept the reverential obedience that the whole world brings to Him, shall be fulfilled the firm promise which declared long ago: ‘I will set up one Shepherd over them, and He will feed them and be their Shepherd.’

Mark again the blessed nature of the relation between Christ and all men which is here foretold. From of old, the shepherd has been in all nations the emblem of kingly power, of leadership of every sort. How often the fact has contradicted the symbol let history tell. But with Jesus the reality does not only contradict, but even transcends, the tender old comparison. He rules with a gentle sway. His sceptre is no rod of iron, but the shepherd’s crook, and the inmost meaning of its use is that it may ‘comfort’ us, as David learned to feel. There gather round the metaphor all thoughts of merciful guidance, of tender care, of a helping arm when we are weak, of a loving bosom where we are carried when we are weary. It speaks of a seeking love that roams over every high hill till it finds, and of a strong shoulder that bears us back when He has found. It tells of sweet hours of rest in the hot noontide by still waters, of ample provision for all the soul’s longings in green pastures. It speaks of footsteps that go before, in which men may follow and find them ways of pleasantness. It speaks of gentle callings by name which draw the heart. It speaks of defence when lion and bear come ravening down, and of safe couching by night when the silent stars behold the sleeping sheep and the wakeful shepherd. He Himself gives its highest significance to the emblem, in the words of this great discourse, when He fixes on His knowledge, His calling of His sheep, His going before them, His giving His life for them. Such are the gracious blessings which here He teaches us to think of as possessed in the happy days that shall be, by all the world.

And, on the other hand, the symbol speaks of confiding love in the hearts of men, of a great peacefulness of meek obedience stilling and gladdening their wills, of the consciousness of His perfect love, and the knowledge of all His gracious character, of sweet answering communion with Him, of safety from all enemies, of freedom, of familiar passage in and out to God. Thus knit together shall be the one fold and the one Shepherd. ‘They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places. They shall not hunger nor thirst, neither shall the heat nor sun smite them, for He that hath mercy on them shall feed them, even by the springs of water shall He guide them.’

Mark again what a vision is here given of the relations of men with one another.

They are to be all gathered into a peaceful unity. They are to be one because they all hearken to one voice. It is to be observed that our Lord does not say, as our English Bible makes Him say, that there is to be one fold. He drops that word of set purpose in the latter clause of our text, and substitutes for it another, which may perhaps be best rendered flock. Why this change in the expression? Because, as it would seem, he would have us learn that the unity of that blessed future time is not to be like the unity of the Jewish Church, a formal and external one. That ancient polity was a fold. It held its members together by outward bonds of uniformity. But the universal Church of the future is to be a flock. It is to be really and visibly one. But it is to be so, not because it is hemmed in by one enclosure, but because it is to be gathered round one Shepherd. The more closely they are drawn to Him, the more near will they be to each other. The centre in which all the radii meet keeps them all in their places. ‘We being many are one bread, for we are all partakers of that one bread.’ In the ritual of the Old Covenant, the great golden candlestick with its seven branches stood in the court of the Temple, emblem of the formal oneness of the people, which was meant to be the light of the Lord to a dark world. In the vision of the New Covenant, the seer in Patmos beheld not the one lamp with its branches, but the seven golden candlesticks, which were made into a holier and a freer unity because the Son of Man walked in their midst-emblem of the oneness in diversity of the peoples, who were sometimes darkness, but shall one day be light in the Lord. There may continue to be national distinctions. There may or there may not be any external unity. But at all events our Lord turns away our thoughts from the outward to the inward, and bids us be sure that though the folds be many the flock shall be one, because they shall all hear and follow Him.

The words, however, suggest for us the blessed thought of the peaceful relations that shall then subsist among men. The tribes of the earth shall couch beside each other like the quiet sheep in the fold, and having learned of His great meekness, they shall no more bite nor devour one another. Alas! alas! the words seem too good to be true. They seem long, long of coming to pass. Ever since they were spoken the old bloody work has been going on, and the old lusts of the human heart have been busy sowing the dragon’s teeth that shall spring up in wars and fightings. In savage lands warfare rages on, ceaseless, ignoble, unrecorded, and seemingly purposeless as that of animalcules in a drop of water. On civilised soil, men, who love the same Christ and worship Him in the same tongue, are fronting each other at this hour. The war of actual swords, and the war of conflicting creeds, and the jostling of human selfishness in the rough road of life, are all around us, and their seeds are within ourselves. The race of men do not live like folded sheep, rather like a flock of wolves, who first run over and then devour their weaker fellows.

But here is a fairer hope, and it will be fulfilled when all evil thoughts, and all selfish desires, and all jealous grudgings shall vanish from men’s hearts, as unclean spirits at cockcrow, and shall leave them, self-forgetful, yielding of their own prerogatives, desirous of no other man’s, abhorrent of inflicting, and patient of receiving wrong. There will be no fuel then to blow into sulphurous flame, though all the blasts from hell were to fan the embers. But peace and concord shall be in all men, for Christ shall be in all. National distinctions may abide, but national enmities-the oldest and deepest, shall disappear. There shall still be Assyria, and Egypt, and Israel, but their former relation will be replaced by a bond of amity in their common possession of Him who is our peace. ‘In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt, and with Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land, whom the Lord shall bless, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance.’ God be thanked! that though we see, and our fathers have seen, so much that seems to contradict our hopes of a peaceful world, and though to-day the hell-hounds of war are baying over the earth, and though nowhere can we see signs even of the approach of the halcyon time, yet we can wait for the vision, knowing that it will come at the appointed time, when

'No war or battle's sound
Is heard the world around,
The idle spear and shield are high uphung;
The trumpet speaks not to the armed throng,
And Kings sit still, with awful eye,
As if they surely knew their Sovereign Lord was by.'

Such are the thoughts which our Lord would teach us as to the present and as to the future of our missionary work. For the one, moderate expectations of success, not unchequered by disappointment, and a brave patience in long toil. For the other, hopes which cannot be too glowing, and a faith which cannot be too obstinate. The one is being fulfilled in our own and our brethren's experience even now; we may be therefore all the more sure that the other will be so in due time. If we look with Christ's eyes, we shall not be depressed by the apparent unbroken surface of heathenism but see, as He did, everywhere souls that belong to Him, who may and must be won; we shall joyfully embrace the work which He has given us to do; we shall arm ourselves against the discouragements of the present, by living much in the past at the foot of the Cross, till we catch the true image of the Saviour's love, and much in the future in the midst of the ransomed flock, till we too behold the roses blossoming in the wilderness, the bright waters covering all the dry places in the desert, and the families of men sitting, clothed and in their right mind, at the feet of Jesus.

Our missionary work is the pure and inevitable result of a belief in these words of my text. Can a man believe that Christ has other sheep for whom He died because He must bring them in, whom He will bring in because He died, and not work according to his power in the line of the divine purposes? The missionary spirit is but the Christian spirit working in one particular direction. Missionary societies are but one of the authentic outcomes of Christian principles, as natural as holiness of life, or the act of prayer.

To secure, then, a more vigorous energy in such work, we need chiefly what we need for all Christian growth-namely, more and deeper communion with Christ, a more vivid realisation of His grace and love for ourselves. And then we need that, under the double stimulus of His love and of His commandment-which at bottom are one-our minds should be more frequently occupied with this subject of Christian missions. Most of us know too little about the matter to feel very much. And then we need that we should more seriously reflect upon the facts in relation to our own personal responsibility and duty. You complain of the triteness of such appeals as this sermon. Brethren, have you ever tried that recipe for freshening up well-worn truths, namely, thinking about them in connection with the simplest, most important of all questions-what, then, ought I to do in view of these truths? Am I exaggerating when I say, that not one-half of the professing Christians of our day give an hour in the year to pondering that question, with reference to missionary work? Oh! dear friends, see to it that you live in Christ for yourselves, and then see to it that you think His thoughts about the heathen world, till your pity is stirred and your mind braced to the firm resolve that you too will work the works of Christ and bring in the wanderers.

We have had as large results as Christ has led us to expect, and far larger than we deserved. Christian missions are yet in their infancy-alas! that it should be so. But in these seventy years since they may be said to have begun, what wonderful successes have been achieved. We are often told that we have done nothing. Is it so? The plant has been got together, methods of working have been systematised, mistakes in some measure corrected. We have spent much of our time in learning how to work, and that process is by no means over yet. But with all these deductions, which ought fairly to be made, how much has been accomplished? The Bible has been put into the languages of seven hundred millions of men. The beginnings of a Christian literature have been supplied for five-sixths of the world. Half a million of professed converts have been gathered in, or as many as there were at the end of the first century, after about the same number of years of labour, and with apostles for missionaries and miracles for proof. And if these still bear on their ankles the marks of the fetters, and limp as they walk, or cannot see very clearly at first, it is no more than might be expected from their long darkness in the prison-house, and it is no more than Paul had to contend with at Ephesus and Corinth.

Every church that has engaged in the toil has shared in the blessing, and has its own instances of special prosperity. We have had Jamaica; the London Missionary Society, Madagascar, and the South Seas; the Wesleyans, Fiji; the Episcopal Societies, Tinnevelly; the American brethren, Burmah, and the Karens. Some of the ruder mythologies have been so utterly extirpated that the children of idolaters have seen the gods whom their fathers worshipped for the first time in the British Museum. While over those more compact and scientific systems which lie like an incubus on mighty peoples, there has crept a sickening consciousness of a coming doom, and they already half own their conqueror in the Stronger One than they.

'They feel from Judah's land
The dreaded Infant's hand.'

'Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth, the idols are upon the beasts.' Surely God has granted us success enough for our thankful confidence, more than enough for our deserts. I repeat it, it is as much as He promised, as much as we had any right to expect, and it is a vast deal more than any other system of belief or of no belief, any of your spiritualised Christianities, or still more intangible creeds has ever managed, or ever thought of trying. To those who taunt us with no success, and who perhaps would not dislike Christian missions so much if they disliked Christian truth a little less, we may very fairly and calmly answer-This rod has budded at all events; do you the same with your enchantments.

But the past is no measure of the future. From the very nature of the undertaking the ratio of progress increases at a rapid rate. The first ten years of labour in India showed twenty-seven converts, the seventh ten showed more than twenty-seven thousand. The preparation may be as slow as the solemn gathering of the thunder-clouds, as they noiselessly steal into their places, and slowly upheave their grey billowing crests; the final success may be as swift as the lightning which flashes in an instant from one side of the heavens to the other. It takes long years to hew the tunnel, to 'make the crooked straight, and the rough places plain,' and then smooth and fleet the great power rushes along the rails. To us the cry comes, ‘Prepare ye in the desert an highway for our God.’ The toil is sore and long, but ‘the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.’ The Alpine summits lie white and ghastly in the spring sunshine, and it seems to pour ineffectual beams on their piled cold; but by slow degrees it is silently loosening the bands of the snow, and after a while a goat’s step, as it passes along a rocky ledge, or a breath of wind will move a tiny particle, and in an instant its motion spreads over a mile of mountain side, and the avalanche is rushing swifter and mightier at every foot down to the valley below, where it will all turn into sweet water, and ripple glancing in the sunshine. Such is our work. It may seem very hopeless, and be mostly unobservable in surface results, but it is very real for all that. The conquering impulse, for which our task may have been to prepare the way, will be given, and then we shall wonder to see how surely the kingdom was coming, even when we observed it not.

Ye have need of patience, and to feed your patience, ye have need of fellowship with Christ, of faith in His promises, of sympathy with His mind. God has given us, dear brethren, special reason for renewed consecration to this service in the blessings which have during the year terminated our anxieties and crowned our work for our own Society. But let us not dwell upon what has been done. These successes are brooks by the way at which we may drink-nothing more. We ought to be like shepherds in the lonely mountain glens, who see in the fast-falling snow and the bitter blast a summons to the hillside, and there all the night long wherever the drift lies deepest and the wind bites the most sharply, search the most eagerly for the poor half-dead creatures, and as they find each, bear it back to the safe shelter, nor stay behind to count the rescued, nor to rest their weariness, for all the bright light in the cottage and the blackness without, but forth again on the same quest, till all the Master’s sheep have been rescued from the white death that lay treacherous around, and are sleeping at peace in His folds. A mighty Voice ought ever to be sounding in our ears, ‘Other sheep I have,’ and the answer of our hearts and of our lives should be, ‘Them also, O Lord! will I try to bring.’ Not till the far-off issue is accomplished shall we have a right to rest, and then we, with all those He has helped us to gather to His side, shall be among that flock, whom He who is at once Lamb and Shepherd, our Brother and our Lord, our Sacrifice and King, ‘shall feed and lead by living fountains of waters,’ in the sweet pastures of the upper world, where there are no ravening wolves, nor false guides to terrify and bewilder His flock any more at all for ever.

1 Preached before the Baptist Missionary Society.

46)John 11:5-6

John

THE DELAYS OF LOVE

Joh. 11:5 - Joh. 11:6.

We learn from a later verse of this chapter that Lazarus had been dead four days when Christ reached Bethany. The distance from that village to the probable place of Christ’s abode, when He received the message, was about a day’s journey. If, therefore, to the two days on which He abode still after the receipt of the news, we add the day which the messengers took to reach Him and the day which He occupied in travelling, we get the four days since which Lazarus had been laid in his grave. Consequently the probability is that, when our Lord had the message, the man was dead. Christ did not remain still, therefore, in order to work a greater miracle by raising Lazarus from the dead than He would have done by healing, but He stayed-strange as it would appear-for reasons closely connected with the highest well-being of all the beloved three, and because He loved them.

John is always very particular in his use of that word ‘therefore,’ and he points out many a subtle and beautiful connection of cause and effect by his employment of it. I do not know that any of them are more significant and more full of illumination with regard to the ways of divine providence than the instance before us. How these two sisters must have looked down the rocky road that led up from Jericho during those four weary days, to see if there were any signs of His coming. How strange it must have appeared to the disciples themselves that He made no sign of movement, notwithstanding the message. Perhaps John’s scrupulous carefulness in pointing out that His love was Christ’s reason for His quiescence may reflect a remembrance of the doubts that had crept over the minds of himself and his brethren during these two days of strange inaction. The Evangelist will have us learn a lesson, which reaches far beyond the instance in hand, and casts light on many dark places.

I. Christ’s delays are the delays of love.

We have all of us, I suppose, had experience of desires for the removal of bitterness or sorrows, or for the fulfilment of expectations and wishes, which we believed, on the best evidence that we could find, to be in accordance with His will, and which we have been able to make prayers out of, in true faith and submission, which prayers have had to be offered over and over and over again, and no answer has come, It is part of the method of Providence that the lifting away of the burden and the coming of the desires should be a hope deferred. And instead of stumbling at the mystery, or feeling as if it made a great demand upon our faith, would it not be wiser for us to lay hold of that little word of the Apostle’s here, and to see in it a small window that opens out on to a boundless prospect, and a glimpse into the very heart of the divine motives in His dealings with us?

If we could once get that conviction into our hearts, how quietly we should go about our work! What a beautiful and brave patience there would be in us, if we habitually felt that the only reason which actuates God’s providence in its choice of times of fulfilling our desires and lifting away our bitterness is our own good! Nothing but the purest and simplest love, transparent and without a fold in it, sways Him in all that He does. Why should it be so difficult for us to believe this? If we were more in the way of looking at life, with all its often unwelcome duty, and its arrows of pain and sorrow, and all the disappointments and other ills that it is heir to, as a discipline, and were to think less about the unpleasantness, and more about the purpose, of what befalls us, we should find far less difficulty in understanding that His delay is born of love, and is a token of His tender care.

Sorrow is prolonged for the same reason as it was sent. It is of little use to send it for a little while. In the majority of cases, time is an element in its working its right effect upon us. If the weight is lifted, the elastic substance beneath springs up again. As soon as the wind passes over the cornfield, the bowing ears raise themselves. You have to steep foul things in water for a good while before the pure liquid washes out the stains. And so time is an element in all the good that we get out of the discipline of life. Therefore, the same love which sends must necessarily protract, beyond our desires, the discipline under which we are put. If we thought of it, as I have said, more frequently as discipline and schooling, and less frequently as pain and a burden, we should understand the meaning of things a great deal better than we do, and should be able to face them with braver hearts, and with a patient, almost joyous, endurance.

If we think of some of the purposes of our sorrows and burdens, we shall discern still more clearly that time is needed for accomplishing them, and that, therefore, love must delay its coming to take them away. For example, the object of them all, and the highest blessing that any of us can obtain, is that our wills should be bent until they coincide with God's, and that takes time. The shipwright, when he gets a bit of timber that he wants to make a 'knee' out of, knows that to mould it into the right form is not the work of a day. A will may be broken at a blow, but it will take a while to bend it. And just because swiftly passing disasters have little permanent effect in moulding our wills, it is a blessing, and not an evil, to have some standing fact in our lives, which will make a continual demand upon us for continually repeated acts of bowing ourselves beneath His sweet, though it may seem severe, will. God's love in Jesus Christ can give us nothing better than the opportunity of bowing our wills to His, and saying, 'Not mine, but Thine be done.' If that is why He stops on the other side of Jordan, and does not come even to the loving messages of beloved hearts, then He shows His love in the sweetest and the loftiest form. So, dear friends, if you carry a lifelong sorrow, do not think that it is a mystery why it should lie upon your shoulders when there are omnipotence and an infinite heart in the heavens. If it has the effect of bending you to His purpose, it is the truest token of His loving care that He can send. In like manner, is it not worth carrying a weight of unfulfilled wishes, and a weariness of unalleviated sorrows, if these do teach us three things, which are one thing-faith, endurance, prayerfulness, and so knit us by a threefold cord that cannot be broken, to the very heart of God Himself?

II. This delayed help always comes at the right time.

Do not let us forget that Heaven’s clock is different from ours. In our day there are twelve hours, and in God’s a thousand years. What seems long to us is to Him ‘a little while.’ Let us not imitate the shortsighted impatience of His disciples, who said, ‘What is this that He saith, A little while? We cannot tell what He saith.’ The time of separation looked so long in anticipation to them, and to Him it had dwindled to a moment. For two days, eight-and-forty hours, He delayed His answer to Mary and Martha, and they thought it an eternity, while the heavy hours crept by, and they only said, ‘It’s very weary, He cometh not, they said.’ How long did it look to them when they had got Lazarus back?

The longest protraction of the fulfilment of the most yearning expectation and fulfilled desire will seem but as the winking of an eyelid when we get to estimate duration by the same scale by which He estimates it, the scale of Eternity. The ephemeral insect, born in the morning and dead when the day fades, has a still minuter scale than ours, but we should not think of regulating our estimate of long and short by it. Do not let us commit the equal absurdity of regulating the march of His providence by the swift beating of our timepieces. God works leisurely because God has eternity to work in.

The answer always comes at the right time, and is punctual though delayed. For instance, Peter is in prison. The Church keeps praying for him; prays on, day after day. No answer. The week of the feast comes. Prayer is made intensely and fervently and continuously. No answer. The slow hours pass away. The last day of his life, as it would appear, comes and goes. No answer. The night gathers; prayer rises to heaven. The last hour of the last watch of the last night that he had to live has come, and as the veil of darkness is thinning, and the day is beginning to break, ‘the angel of the Lord shone round about him.’ But there is no haste in his deliverance. All is done leisurely, as in the confidence of ample time to spare, and perfect security. He is bidden to arise quickly, but there is no hurry in the stages of his liberation. ‘Gird thyself and bind on thy sandals.’ He is to take time to lace them. There is no fear of the quaternion of soldiers waking, or of there not being time to do all. We can fancy the half-sleeping and wholly-bewildered Apostle fumbling at the sandal-strings, in dread of some movement rousing his guards, and the calm angel face looking on. The sandals fastened, he is bidden to put on his garments and follow. With equal leisure and orderliness he is conducted through the first and the second guard of sleeping soldiers, and then through the prison gate. He might have been lifted at once clean out of his dungeon, and set down in the house many were gathered praying for him. But more signal was the demonstration of power which a deliverance so gradual gave, when it led him slowly past all obstacles and paralysed their power. God is never in haste. He never comes too soon nor too late. ‘The Lord shall help them, and that right early.’ Sennacherib’s army is round the city, famine is within the walls. To-morrow will be too late. But to-night the angel strikes, and the enemies are all dead men. So God’s delay makes the deliverance the more signal and joyous when it is granted. And though hope deferred may sometimes make the heart sick, the desire, when it comes, is a tree of life.

III. The best help is not delayed.

The principle which we have been illustrating applies only to one half-and that the less important half-of our prayers and of Christ’s answers. For in regard to spiritual blessings, and our petitions for fuller, purer, and diviner life, there is no delay. In that region the law is not ‘He abode still two days in the same place,’ but ‘Before they call I will answer, and while they are yet speaking I will hear.’ If you have been praying for deeper knowledge of God, for lives liker His, for hearts more filled with the Spirit, and have not had the answer, do not fall back upon the misapplication of such a principle as this of my text, which has nothing to do with that region; but remember that the only reason why good people do not immediately get the blessings of the Christian life for which they ask lies in themselves, and not at all in God. ‘Ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask and have not, because’-not because He delays, but because-’ye ask amiss,’ or because, having asked, you get up from your knees and go away, not looking to see whether the blessing is coming down or not.

Ah! there is a sad amount of lying and hypocrisy in prayers for spiritual blessings. Many petitioners do not want to have them. They would not know what to do with them if they got them. They make the requests because their fathers did so before them, and because these are the right kind of things to say in a prayer. Such prayers get no answers. If a man prays for some spiritual enlargement, and then goes out into the world and lives clean contrary to his prayers, what right has he to say that God delays His answers? No, He does not delay His answers, but we push back His answers, and the gift that is given we will not take. Let us remember that the two halves of the divine dealings are not regulated by the same principle, though they be regulated by the same motive; and that the love which often delays for our good, in regard to the desires that have reference to outward things, is swift as the lightning to answer every petition which moves within the circle of our spiritual life.

'Whatsoever things ye desire, when ye stand praying, believe that' then and there 'ye receive them'; and the undelaying God will take care that 'you shall have them.'

47)John 11:25-26

John **- Job**

CHRIST'S QUESTION TO EACH
JOB'S QUESTION, JESUS' ANSWER

Job. 14:14. - Joh. 11:25 - Joh. 11:26.

Job's question waited long for an answer. Weary centuries rolled away; but at last the doubting, almost despairing, cry put into the mouth of the man of sorrows of the Old Testament is answered by the Man of Sorrows of the New. The answer in words is this second text which may almost be supposed to allude to the ancient question. The answer, in fact, is the resurrection of Christ. Apart from this answer there is none.

So we may take these two texts to help us to grasp more clearly and feel more profoundly what the world owes to that great fact which we are naturally led to think of to-day.

I. The ancient and ever returning question.

The Book of Job is probably a late part of the Old Testament. It deals with problems which indicate some advance in religious thought. Solemn and magnificent, and for the most part sad; it is like a Titan struggling with large problems, and seldom attaining to positive conclusions in which the heart or the head can rest in peace. Here all Job's mind is clouded with a doubt. He has just given utterance to an intense longing for a life beyond the grave. His abode in Sheol is thought of as in some sense a breach in the continuity of his consciousness, but even that would be tolerable, if only he could be sure that, after many days, God would remember him. Then that longing gives way before the torturing question of the text, which dashes aside the tremulous hope with its insistent interrogation. It is not denial, but it is a doubt which palsies hope. But though he has no certainty, he cannot part with the possibility, and so goes on to imagine how blessed it would be if his longing were fulfilled. He thinks that such a renewed life would be like the 'release' of a sentry who had long stood on guard; he thinks of it as his swift, joyous 'answer' to God's summons, which would draw him out from the sad crowd of pale shadows and bring him back to warmth and reality. His hope takes a more daring flight still, and he thinks of God as yearning for His creature, as His creature yearns for Him, and having 'a desire to the work of His hands,' as if His heaven would be incomplete without His servant. But the rapture and the vision pass, and the rest of the chapter is all clouded over, and the devout hope loses its light. Once again it gathers brightness in the twenty-first chapter, where the possibility flashes out starlike, that 'after my skin hath been thus destroyed, yet from my flesh shall I see God.'

These fluctuations of hope and doubt reveal to us the attitude of devout souls in Israel at a late era of the national life. And if they show us their high-water mark, we need not suppose that similar souls outside the Old Testament circle had solid certainty where these had but a variable hope. We know how large a development the doctrine of a future life had in Assyria and in Egypt, and I suppose we are entitled to say that men have always had the idea of a future. They have always had the thought, sometimes as a fear, sometimes as a hope, but never as a certainty. It has lacked not only certainty but distinctness. It has lacked solidity also, the power to hold its own and sustain itself against the weighty pressure of intrusive things seen and temporal.

But we need not go to the ends of the earth or to past generations for examples of a doubting, superficial hold of the truth that man lives through death and after it. We have only to look around us, and, alas! we have only to look within us. This age is asking the question again, and answering it in many tones, sometimes of indifferent disregard, sometimes flaunting a stark negative without reasoned foundation, sometimes with affirmatives with as little reason as these negatives. The modern world is caught in the rush and whirl of life, has its own sorrows to front, its own battles to fight, and large sections of it have never come as near an answer to Job's question as Job did.

II. Christ's all-sufficing answer.

He gave it there, by the grave of Lazarus, to that weeping sister, but He spoke these great words of calm assurance to all the world. One cannot but note the difference between His attitude in the presence of the great Mystery and that of all other teachers. How calmly, certainly, and confidently He speaks!

Mark that Jesus, even at that hour of agony, turns Martha's thoughts to Himself. What He is is the all-important thing for her to know. If she understands Him, life and death will have no insoluble problems nor any hopelessness for her. 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.' She had risen in her grief to a lofty height in believing that 'even now'-at this moment when help is vain and hope is dead-'whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee,' but Jesus offers to her a loftier conception of Him when He lays a sovereign hand on resurrection and life, and discloses that both inhere in Him, and from Him flow to all who shall possess them. He claims to have in Himself the fountain of life, in all possible senses of the word, as well as in the special sense relevant at that sad hour. Further, He tells Martha that by faith in Him any and all may possess that life. And then He majestically goes on to declare that the life which He gives is immune from, and untouched by, death. The believer shall live though he dies, the living believer shall never die. It is clear that, in these two great statements, to die is used in two different meanings, referring in the former case to the physical fact, and in the latter carrying a heavier weight of significance, namely the pregnant sense which it usually has in this Gospel, of separation from God and consequently from the true life of the soul. Physical death is not the termination of human life. The grim fact touches only the surface life, and has nothing to do with the essential, personal being. He that believes on Jesus, and he only, truly lives, and his union with Jesus secures his possession of that eternal life, which victoriously persists through the apparent, superficial change which men call death. Nothing dies but the death which surrounds the faithful soul. For it to die is to live more fully, more triumphantly, more blessedly. So though the act of physical death remains, its whole character is changed. Hence the New Testament euphemisms for death are much more than euphemisms. Men christen it by names which drape its ugliness, because they fear it so much, but Faith can play with Leviathan, because it fears it not at all. Hence such names as ‘sleep,’ ‘exodus,’ are tokens of the victory won for all believers by Jesus. He will show Martha the hope for all His followers which begins to dawn even in the calling of her brother back from the grip of death. And He shows us the great truth that His being the ‘Life’ necessarily involved His being also the ‘Resurrection,’ for His life-communicating work could not be accomplished till His all-quickening vitality had flowed over into, and flooded with its own conquering tides, not only the spirit which believes but its humble companion, the soul, and its yet humbler, the body. A bodily life is essential to perfect manhood, and Jesus will not stay His hand till every believer is full-summed in all his powers, and is perfect in body, soul, and spirit, after the image of Him who redeemed Him.

III. The pledge for the truth of the answer.

The words of Jesus are only words. These precious words, spoken to that one weeping sister in a little Jewish village, and which have brought hope to millions ever since, are as baseless as all the other dreams and longings of the heart, unless Jesus confirms them by fact. If He did not rise from the dead, they are but another of the noble, exalted, but futile delusions of which the world has many others. If Christ be not risen, His words of consolation are swelling words of emptiness; His whole claims are ended, and the age-old question which Job asked is unanswered still, and will always remain unanswered. If Christ be not risen, the hopeless colloquy between Jehovah and the prophet sums up all that can be said of the future life: ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ And I answered, ‘O Lord God, Thou knowest!’

But Christ’s resurrection is a fact which, taken in connection with His words while on earth, endorses these and establishes His claims to be the Declarer of the name of God, the Saviour of the world. It gives us demonstration of the continuity of life through and after death. Taken along with His ascension, which is but, so to speak, the prolongation of the point into a line, it declares that a glorified body and an abode in a heavenly home are waiting for all who by faith become here partakers in Jesus and are quickened by sharing in His life.

So in despite of sense and doubt and fear, notwithstanding teachers who, like the supercilious philosophers on Mars Hill, mock when they hear of a resurrection from the dead, we should rejoice in the great light which has shined into the region of the shadow of death, we should clasp His divine and most faithful answer to that old, despairing question, as the anchor of our souls, and lift up our hearts in thanksgiving in the triumphant challenge, ‘O death! where is thy sting? O grave! where is thy victory?’

48)John 11:27

John

CHRIST’S QUESTION TO EACH

For the Young

***Joh. 11:26* - *Joh. 11:27*.**

As each of these annual sermons which I have preached for so long comes round, I feel more solemnly the growing probability that it may be the last. Like a man nearing the end of his day’s work, I want to make the most of the remaining moments. Whether this is the last sermon of the sort that I shall preach or not, it is certainly the last of the kind that some of you will hear from me, or possibly from any one.

So, dear friends, I have felt that neither you nor I can afford to waste this hour in considering subjects of secondary interest, appropriate as some of them might be. I wish to come to the main point at once, and to press upon you all, and especially on the younger portion of this audience, the question of your own personal religion.

The words of my text, as you will probably remember, were addressed by our Lord to Martha, as she was writhing in agony over her dead brother. Christ proclaims, with singular calmness and majesty, His character and work as the Resurrection and the Life, and then seeks to draw her from her absorbing sorrow to an effort of faith which shall grasp the truths He proclaims. He flashes out this sudden question, like the swift thrust of a gleaming dagger. It is a demand for credence to His assertion-on His bare word-tremendous as that assertion is. And nobly was the demand met by the as swift, unfaltering answer, ‘Yea, Lord,’ I believe in Thee, and so I believe in Thy word.

Now, friends, Jesus Christ is putting the same question to each of us. And I pray that our answers may be Martha’s.

I. Note, first, the significance of the question.

‘This.’ What is this? The answer will tell us what are the central essential facts, faith in which makes a Christian. Of course the form in which our Lord’s previous utterance was cast was coloured by the circumstances under which He spoke, and was so shaped as to meet the momentary exigency. But whilst thus the form is determined by the fact that He was speaking to a heart wrung by separation, and as a preliminary to a mighty act of resurrection, the essential truths which are so expressed are those which, as I believe, constitute the fundamental truths of Christianity-the very core and heart of the Gospel.

Turn, then, but for a moment, to what immediately precedes my text. Our Lord says three things. First, He asserts His supernatural character and divine relation to life: ‘I am the Resurrection and the Life.’ Next, He declares that it is possible for Him to communicate to dying and to dead men a life which triumphs over death, and laughs at change, and persists through the superficial experience which we christen by the name of Death, unaffected, undiminished, as some sweet spring might gush up in the heart of a salt, solitary sea. And then He declares that the condition on which He, the Life-giver, gives of His immortal life to dying men, is their trust in Him. These three-His character and work, the gifts of which His hands are full, and the way by which the gifts may be appropriated by us men-these three are, as I take it, the central facts of Christianity. ‘Believest thou this?’

The question comes to us all; and in these days of unsettlement it is well to have some clear understanding of what is the ‘irreducible minimum’ of Christian teaching. I take it that it lies here. There are two opposite errors which, like all opposite errors, are bolted together, and revolve round a common centre. The one of them is the extreme conservative tendency which regards every pin and bolt of the tabernacle as if it were equally sacred with the altar and the ark. And the other is the tendency which christens itself ‘liberal and progressive,’ and which is always ready to exchange old lamps, though they have burnt brightly in the past, for new ones that are as yet only glittering metal and untried. In these days, when it is a presumption against any opinion, that our fathers believed it [an error into which young people are most prone to fall], and when, by the energy of contradiction, that error has evoked, and is evoking, the opposite exaggeration that adheres to all that is traditional, to all that has been regarded as belonging to the essentials of the Christian faith, and so is fearful, trembling for the Ark of God when there is no need, let us fall back upon these great words of the Master, and see that the things which constitute the living heart of His message and gift to the world are neither more nor less than these three: the supernatural Christ, the life which He imparts, and the condition on which He bestows it. ‘Believest thou this?’ If you do, you need take very little heed of the fluctuations of contemporary opinion as to other matters, valuable and important as these may be in their place; and may let men say what they will about disputed questions-about the method by which the vehicle of revelation has been created and preserved, about the regulation of the external forms of the Church, about a hundred other things that men often lose their tempers and spoil their Christianity by fighting for, and fall back upon the great central verity, a Christ from above, the Giver of Life to all that put their trust in Him.

Let me expand this question for you. ‘We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God’-’believest thou this?’ ‘We must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ’-’believest thou this?’ ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish’-’believest thou this?’ ‘The Son of Man came . . . to give His life a ransom for many’-’believest thou this?’ ‘Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’-’believest thou this?’ ‘Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept’-’believest thou this?’ ‘I go to prepare a place for you’-’believest thou this?’ ‘Where I am there shall also My servant be’-’believest thou this?’ ‘So shall we ever be with the Lord’-’believest thou this?’ That is Christianity; and not theories about inspiration, and priesthood, and sacramental efficacy, or any of the other thorny questions which have, in the course of ages, started up. Here is the living centre; hold fast, I beseech you, by it.

Then, again, the significance of this question is in the direction of making clear for us the way by which men lay hold of these great truths. The truths are of such a sort as that merely to say, ‘Oh yes, I believe it; it is quite true!’ is by no means sufficient. If a man tells me that two parallel lines produced ever so far will never meet, I say, ‘Yes, I believe it’; and there is nothing more to be done or said. If a man says to me, ‘Two and two make four,’ I say, ‘Yes’; and there my assent ends. If a man says, ‘It is right to do right,’ it is quite clear that the attitude of intellectual assent, which was quite enough for the other order of statements, is not enough for this one; and to merely say, ‘Oh yes, it is right to do right,’ is by no means the only attitude which we ought to take in regard to such a truth. And if God comes to me and says, ‘Thou art a sinful man, and Jesus Christ has died for thee; and if thou takest Him for thy Saviour thou shalt be saved in this life, and saved for ever,’ it is just as clear that no mere acceptance of the saying as a verity exhausts my proper attitude in reference to it. Or to come to plainer words, no man will really, and out and out, and adequately, believe this gospel unless he does a great deal more than assent to it or refrain from contradicting it.

So I desire to urge this form of the question on you now. Dear brethren, do you trust in ‘this,’ which you say you believe? There is no greater enemy of the Christian faith than the ordinary lazy-what the philosophers call otiose, which is only a grand word for lazy-assent of the understanding, because men will not take the trouble to contradict it or think about it.

That is the sort of Christianity which is the Christianity of a good many church and chapel-goers. They do not care enough about the subject to contradict the ordinary run of belief. Of all impotent things there is nothing more impotent than a creed which lies idly in a man's head, and never has touched his heart or his will. Why, I should get on a great deal better if I were talking to people that had never heard anything about the gospel than I have any chance of getting on with you, who have been drenched with it all your days, till it goes over you and runs off like water off a duck's back. The shells that were hurled against the earthworks of Sebastopol broke away the front surface of the mounds, and then the rubbish protected the fortifications; and that is what happens with many of my hearers. You have heard the gospel so often that the debris of your old hearings is raised between you and me, and my words cannot get at you. 'Believest thou this?'-not in the fashion in which people stand up in church or chapel and look about them and rattle off the Creed every Sunday of their lives, and attach not the ghost of an idea to a single clause of it; but in the sense that the conviction of these truths is so deep in your hearts that it moves your whole nature to cast yourselves on Jesus Christ as your Saviour and your all. That is the belief to which alone the life that is promised here will come. Oh! brethren, I have no business to ask you the question, and you have no need to answer it to me! Sometimes good, well-meaning people do a mint of harm by pushing such questions into the faces of people unprepared. But take the question into your own hearts, and remember what belief is, and what it is that you have to believe, and answer according to its true significance, and in the light of conscience, the solemn question that I press upon you.

II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to think of what depends upon the answer.

In the case before us-if I may look back to it for an instant-there is a very illuminative instance of what did depend upon it. Martha had to believe that Christ was the Resurrection and the Life as a condition precedent to her seeing that He was so. For, as He said Himself before He spoke the mighty word which raised Lazarus, ‘Said I not unto thee that if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?’ and so her faith was the condition of her being able to verify the facts which her faith grasped. Well, let me put that into plainer words. It is just this-a man gets from Christ what he trusts Christ to give him, and there is no other way of proving the truth of His promises than by accepting His promises, and then they fulfil themselves. You cannot know that a medicine will cure you till you swallow it. You must first ‘taste’ before you ‘see that God is good.’ Faith verifies itself by the experience it brings.

And what does it bring? I said, all for which a man trusts Christ. All is summed up in that one favourite word of our Lord as revealed in this fourth Gospel, which includes in itself everything of blessedness and of righteousness-life, life eternal. Dear brethren, you and I, apart from Jesus Christ, are dead in trespasses and sins. The life that we live in the flesh is an apparent life, which covers over the true death of separation from God. And you young people, fix this in your minds at the beginning, it will save you many a heartache, and many an error-there is nothing worth calling life, except that which comes to a quiet heart submissive and enfranchised through faith in Jesus Christ. And if you will trust yourselves to Him, and answer this question with your ringing ‘Yea, Lord!’ then you will get a life which will quicken you out of your deadness; a life which will mould you day by day into more entire beauty of character and conformity with Himself; a life which will shed sweetness and charm over dusty commonplaces, and make sudden verdure spring in dreary, herbless deserts; a life which will bring a solemn joy into sorrow, a strength for every duty; which will bring manna in the wilderness, honey from the rock, light in darkness, and a present God for your sufficient portion; a life which will run on into the dim glories of eternity, and know no change but advancement, through the millenniums of ages.

But, dear brethren, whilst thus, on condition of their faith, the door into all divine and endless blessedness and progress is flung wide open for men, do not forget the other side of the issues which depend on this question. For if it is true that Jesus Christ is Life, and the Source of it, and that faith in Him is the way by which you and I get it, then there is no escape from the solemn conclusion that to be out of Christ, and not to be exercising faith in

Him, is to be infected with death, and to be shut up in a charnel-house. I dare not suppress the plain teaching of Jesus Christ Himself: ‘He that hath the Son hath life; he that hath not the Son hath not life.’ The issues that depend upon the answer to this question of my text may be summed up, if I may venture to say so, by taking the words of our Lord Himself and converting them into their opposite. He said, ‘He that believeth . . . though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on Me shall never die.’ That implies, He that believeth not in Christ, though he were living, yet shall he die, and whosoever liveth and believeth not shall never live. These are the issues-the alternative issues-that depend on your answer to this question.

III. And now, lastly, let me ask you to think of the direct personal appeal to every soul that lies in this question.

I have dwelt upon two out of the three words of which the question is composed-’believest thou this?’ Let me dwell for a moment on the third of them-’believest thou?’

Now that suggests the thought on which I do not need to dwell, but which I seek briefly to lay upon your hearts and consciences-viz., the intensely personal act of your own faith, by which alone Jesus Christ can be of any use to you. Do not be led away by any vague notions which people have about the benefits of a Church or its ordinances. Do not suppose that any sacraments or any priest can do for you what you have to do in the awful solitude of your own determining will-put out your hand and grasp Jesus Christ. Can any person or thing be the condition or channel of spiritual blessing to you, except in so far as your own individual act of trust comes into play? You must take the bread with your own hands, you must masticate it with your own teeth, you must digest it with your own organs, before it can minister nourishment to your blood and force to your life. And there is only one way by which any man can come into any vital and life-giving connection with Jesus Christ, and that is, by the exercise of his own personal faith.

And remember, too, that as the exercise of uniting trust in Jesus Christ is exclusively your own affair, so exclusively your own affair is the responsibility of answering this question. To you alone is it addressed. You, and only you, have to answer it.

There was once a poor woman who went after Jesus Christ, and put out a pale, wasted, tremulous finger to touch the hem of His garment. His fine sensitiveness detected the light pressure of that petitioning finger, and allowed virtue to go out, though the crowd surged about Him and thronged Him. No crowds come between you and Jesus Christ. You and He, the two of you, have, so to speak, the world to yourselves, and straight to you comes this question, ‘Believest thou?’

Ah! brethren, that habit of skulking into the middle of the multitude, and letting the most earnest appeal from the pulpit go diffused over the audience is the reason why you sit there quiet, complacent, perhaps wholly unaffected by what I am trying to make a pointed, individual address. Suppose all the other people in this place of worship were away but you and I, would not the word that I am trying to speak come with more force to your hearts than it does now? Well, think away the world and all its millions, and realise the fact that you stand in Christ’s presence, with all His regard concentrated upon you, and that to thee individually this question comes from a gracious, loving heart, which longs that you answer, ‘Yea, Lord, I believe!’

Why should you not? Suppose you said to Him, ‘No, Lord, I do not’; and suppose He said, ‘Why do you not?’ what do you think you would say then? You will have to answer it one day, in very solemn circumstances, when all the crowds will fall away, as they do from a soldier called out of the ranks to go up and answer for mutiny to his commanding officer. ‘Every one of us shall give an account of himself,’ and the lips that said so lovingly at the grave of Lazarus, ‘Believest thou this?’ and are saying it again, dear friend, to you, even through my poor words, will ask it once more. For this is the question the answer to which settles whether we shall stand at His right hand or at His left. Say now, with humble faith, ‘Yea, Lord!’ and you will have the blessing of them who have not seen, and yet have believed.

49)John 11:30-42

THE OPEN GRAVE AT BETHANY

Joh. 11:30 - Joh. 11:45.

Why did Jesus stay outside Bethany and summon Martha and Mary to come to Him? Apparently that He might keep Himself apart from the noisy crowd of conventional mourners whose presence affronted the majesty and sanctity of sorrow, and that He might speak to the hearts of the two real mourners. A divine decorum forbade Him to go to the house. The Life-bringer keeps apart. His comforts are spoken in solitude. He reverenced grief. How beautifully His sympathetic delicacy contrasts with the heartless rush of those who ‘were comforting’ Mary when they thought that she was driven to go suddenly to the grave by a fresh burst of sorrow! If they had had any real sympathy or perception, they would have stayed where they were, and let the poor burdened heart find ease in lonely weeping. But, like all vulgar souls, they had one idea-never to leave mourners alone or let them weep.

Three stages seem discernible in the self-revelation of Jesus in this crowning miracle: His agitation and tears, His majestic confidence in His life-giving power now to be manifested, and His actual exercise of that power.

I. The repetition by Mary of Martha’s words, as her first salutation, tells a pathetic story of the one thought that had filled both sisters’ hearts in these four dreary days.

Why had He not come? How easily He could have come! How surely He could have prevented all this misery! Confidence in His power blends strangely with doubt as to His care. A hint of reproach is in the words, but more than a hint of faith in His might. He does not rebuke the rash judgment implied, for He knew the true love underlying it; but He does not directly answer Mary, as He had done Martha, for the two sisters needed different treatment.

We note that Mary has no such hope as Martha had expressed. Her more passive, meditative disposition had bowed itself, and let the grief overwhelm her. So in her we see a specimen of the excess of sorrow which indulges in the monotonous repetition of what would have happened if something else that did not happen had happened, and which is too deeply dark to let a gleam of hope shine in. Words will do little to comfort such grief. Silent sharing of its weeping and helpful deeds will do most.

So a great wave of emotion swept across the usually calm soul of Jesus, which John bids us trace to its cause by ‘therefore’ [Joh. 11:33]. The sight of Mary’s real, and the mourners’ half-real, tears, and the sound of their loud ‘keening,’ shook His spirit, and He yielded to, and even encouraged, the rush of feeling [‘troubled Himself’] . But not only sympathy and sorrow ruffled the clear mirror of His spirit; another disturbing element was present. He ‘was moved with indignation’ [Rev. Ver. marg.]. Anger at Providence often mingles with our grief, but that was not Christ’s indignation. The only worthy explanation of that strange ingredient in Christ’s agitation is that it was directed against the source of death,-namely, sin. He saw the cause manifested in the effects. He wept for the one, He was wroth at the other. The tears witnessed to the perfect love of the man, and of the God revealed in the man; the indignation witnessed to the recoil and aversion from sin of the perfectly righteous Man, and of the holy God manifested in Him. We get one glimpse into His heart, as on to some ocean heaving and mist-covered. The momentary sight proclaims the union in Him, as the Incarnate Word, of pity for our woes and of aversion from our sins.

His question as to the place of the tomb is not what we should have expected; but its very abruptness indicates effort to suppress emotion, and resolve to lose no time in redressing the grief. Most sweetly human are the tears that start afresh after the moment's repression, as the little company begin to move towards the grave. And most sadly human are the unsympathetic criticisms of His sacred sorrow. Even the best affected of the bystanders are cool enough to note them as tokens of His love, at which perhaps there is a trace of wonder; while others snarl out a sarcasm which is double-barrelled, as casting doubt on the reality either of the love or of the power. 'It is easy to weep, but if He had cared for him, and could work miracles, He might surely have kept him alive.' How blind men are! 'Jesus wept,' and all that the lookers-on felt was astonishment that He should have cared so much for a dead man of no importance, or carping doubt as to the genuineness of His grief and the reality of His power. He shows us His pity and sorrow still-to no more effect with many.

II. The passage to the tomb was marked by his continued agitation.

But his arrival there brought calm and majesty. Now the time has come which He had in view when He left his refuge beyond Jordan; and, as is often the case with ourselves, suddenly tremor and tumult leave the spirit when face to face with a moment of crisis. There is nothing more remarkable in this narrative than the contrast between Jesus weeping and indignant, and Jesus serene and authoritative as He stands fronting the cave-sepulchre. The sudden transformation must have awed the gazers.

He points to the stone, which, probably like that of many a grave discovered in Palestine, rolled in a groove cut in the rocky floor in front of the tomb. The command accords with His continual habit of confining the miraculous within the narrowest limits. He will do nothing by miracle which can be done without it. Lazarus could have heard and emerged, though the stone had remained. If the story had been a myth, he very likely would have done so. Like 'loose him, and let him go,' this is a little touch that cannot have been invented, and helps to confirm the simple, historical character of the account.

Not less natural, though certainly as unlikely to have been told unless it had happened, is Martha's interruption. She must have heard what was going on, and, with her usual activity, have joined the procession, though we left her in the house. She thinks that Jesus is going into the grave; and a certain reverence for the poor remains, as well as for Him, makes her shrink from the thought of even His loving eyes seeing them now. Clearly she has forgotten the dim hopes which had begun in her when she talked with Jesus. Therefore He gently reminds her of these; for His words [Joh. 11:40] can scarcely refer to anything but that interview, though the precise form of expression now used is not found in the report of it [Joh. 11:25 - Joh. 11:27].

We mark Christ's calm confidence in His own power. His identification of its effect with the outflashing of the glory of God, and His encouragement to her to exercise faith by suspending her sight of that glory upon her faith. Does that mean that He would not raise her brother unless she believed? No; for He had determined to 'awake him out of sleep' before He left Peraea. But Martha's faith was the condition of her seeing the glory of God in the miracle. We may see a thousand emanations of that glory, and see none of it. We shall see it if we exercise faith. In the natural world, 'seeing is believing'; in the spiritual, believing is seeing.

Equally remarkable, as breathing serenest confidence, is the wonderful filial prayer. Our Lord speaks as if the miracle were already accomplished, so sure is He: 'Thou heardest Me.' Does this thanksgiving bring Him down to the level of other servants of God who have wrought miracles by divine power granted them? Certainly not; for it is in full accord with the teaching of all this Gospel, according to which 'the Son can do nothing of Himself,' but yet, whatsoever things the Father doeth, 'these also doeth the Son likewise.' Both sides of the truth must be kept in view. The Son is not independent of the Father, but the Son is so constantly and perfectly one with the Father that He is conscious of unbroken communion, of continual wielding of the whole divine power.

But the practical purpose of the thanksgiving is to be specially noted. It suspends His whole claims on the single issue about to be decided. It summons the people to mark the event. Never before had He thus heralded a miracle. Never had He deigned to say thus solemnly, ‘If God does not work through Me now, reject Me as an impostor; if He does, yield to Me as Messiah.’ The moment stands alone in His life. What a scene! There is the open tomb, with its dead occupant; there are the eager, sceptical crowd, the sisters pausing in their weeping to gaze, with some strange hopes beginning to creep into their hearts, the silent disciples, and, in front of them all, Jesus, with the radiance of power in the eyes that had just been swimming in tears, and a new elevation in His tones. How all would be hushed in expectance of the next moment’s act!

III. The miracle itself is told in the fewest words. What more was there to tell?

The two ends, as it were, of a buried chain, appear above ground. Cause and effect were brought together. Rather, here was no chain of many links, as in physical phenomena, but here was the life-giving word, and there was the dead man living again. The ‘loud voice’ was as needless as the rolling away of the stone. It was but the sign of Christ’s will acting. And the acting of His will, without any other cause, produces physical effects.

Lazarus was far away from that rock cave. But, wherever he was, he could hear, and he must obey. So, with graveclothes entangling his feet, and a napkin about his livid face, he came stumbling out into the light that dazed his eyes, closed for four dark days, and stood silent and motionless in that awestruck crowd. One Person there was not awestruck. Christ’s calm voice, that had just reverberated through the regions of the dead, spoke the simple command, ‘Loose him, and let him go.’ To Him it was no wonder that He should give back a life. For the Christ who wept is the Christ whose voice all that are in the graves shall hear, and shall come forth.

50)John 11:43-44

John

THE OPEN GRAVE AT BETHANY

THE SEVENTH MIRACLE IN JOHN’S GOSPEL

THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

Joh. 11:43 - Joh. 11:44.

The series of our Lord's miracles before the Passion, as recorded in this Gospel, is fitly closed with the raising of Lazarus. It crowns the whole, whether we regard the greatness of the fact, the manner of our Lord's working, the minuteness and richness of the accompanying details, the revelation of our Lord's heart, the consolations which it suggests to sorrowing spirits, or the immortal hopes which it kindles.

And besides all this, the miracle is of importance for the development of the Evangelist's purpose, in that it makes the immediate occasion of the embittered hostility which finally precipitates the catastrophe of the Cross. Therefore the great length to which the narrative extends.

Of course it is impossible for us to attempt, even in the most cursory manner, to go over the whole. We must content ourselves with dealing with one or two of the salient points. And there are three things in this narrative which I think well worthy of our notice. There is the revelation of Christ as our Brother, by emotion and sorrow. There is the revelation of Christ as our Lord by His consciousness of divine power. There is the revelation of Christ as our Life by His mighty life-giving word. And to these three points I ask you to turn briefly.

I. First, then, we have here a revelation of Christ as our Brother, by emotion and sorrow.

This miracle stands alone in the whole majestic series of His mighty works by the fact that it is preceded by a storm of emotion, which shakes the frame of the Master, which He is represented by the Evangelist not so much as suppressing as fostering, and which diverges and parts itself into the two feelings expressed by His groans and by His tears. The word which is rendered in our version 'He groaned in the spirit,' and which is twice repeated in the narrative, is, according to the investigations of the most careful philological commentators, expressive not only of the outward sign of an emotion, but of the nature of it. And the nature of the emotion is not merely the grief and the sympathy which distilled in tears, but it is something deeper and other than that. The word contains in it at least a tinge of the passion of ‘indignation’ [as it is expressed in the margin of the Revised Version]. What caused the indignation? Cannot we fancy how there rose up, as in pale, spectral procession before His vision, the whole long series of human sorrows and losses, of which one was visible there before Him? He saw, in the one individual case, the whole genus. He saw the whole mass represented there, the ocean in the drop, and He looked beyond the fact and linked it with its cause. And as there rose before Him the reality of man’s desolation through sin, and the thought that all this misery, loss, pain, parting, death, was a contradiction of the divine purpose, and an interruption of God’s order, and that it had all been pulled down upon men’s desperate heads by their own evil and their own folly, there rose in His heart the anger which is part of the perfectness of humanity when it looks upon sorrow linked by adamantine chains with sin.

But the lightning of the wrath dissolved soon into the rain of pity and of sorrow, and, as we read, ‘Jesus wept.’ Looking upon the weeping Mary and the lamenting crowd, and Himself feeling the pain of the parting from the friend whom He loved, the tears, which are the confession of human nature that it is passing through an emotion too deep for words, came to His all-seeing eyes.

Oh! brethren, surely-surely in this manifestation, or call it better, this revelation of Christ the Lord, expressed in these two emotions-surely there are large and blessed lessons for us! On them I can only touch in the lightest manner. Here, for one thing, is the blessed sign and proof of His true brotherhood with us. This Evangelist, to whom it was given to tell the Church and the world more than any of the others had imparted to them of the divine uniqueness of the Master’s person, had also given to him in charge the corresponding and complementary message-to insist upon the reality and the verity of His manhood. His proclamation was ‘the Word was made flesh,’ and he had to dwell on both parts of that message, showing Him as the Word and showing Him as flesh. So he insists upon all the points which emerge in the course of his narrative that show the reality of Christ’s corporeal manhood.

He joins with the others, who had no such lofty proclamation entrusted to them, in telling us how He was ‘bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh,’ in that He hungered and thirsted and slept, and was wearied; how He was man, reasonable soul and human spirit, in that He grieved and rejoiced, and wondered and desired, and mourned and wept. And so we can look upon Him, and feel that this in very deed is One of ourselves, with a spirit participant of all human experiences, and a heart tremulously vibrating with every emotion that belongs to man.

Here we are also taught the sanction and the limits of sorrow. Christianity has nothing to do with the false Stoicism and the false religion which is partly pride and partly insincerity, that proclaims it wrong to weep when God smites. But just as clearly and distinctly as the story before us says to us, ‘Weep for yourselves and for the loved ones that are gone,’ so distinctly does it draw the limits within which sorrow is sacred and hallowing, and beyond which it is harmful and weakening. Set side by side the grief of these two poor weeping sisters, and the grief of the weeping Christ, and we get a large lesson. They could only repine that something else had not happened differently which would have made all different. ‘If Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.’ One of the two sits with folded arms in the house, letting her sorrow flow over her pained head. Martha is unable, by reason of her grief, to grasp the consolation that is held out to her; her sorrow has made the hopes of the future seem to her very dim and of small account, and she puts away ‘Thy brother shall rise again’ with almost an impatient sweep of her hand. ‘I know that he will rise in the resurrection at the last day. But oh! that is so far away, and what I want is present comfort.’ Thus oblivious of duty, murmuring with regard to the accidents which might have been different, and unfitted to grasp the hopes that fill the future, these two have been hurt by their grief, and have let it overflow its banks and lay waste the land. But this Christ in His sorrow checks His sorrow that He may do His work; in His sorrow is confident that the Father hears; in His sorrow thinks of the bystanders, and would bring comfort and cheer to them. A sorrow which makes us more conscious of communion with the Father who is always listening, which makes us more conscious of power to do that which He has put it into our hand to do, which makes us more tender in our sympathies with all that mourn, and swifter and readier for our work-such a sorrow is doing what God meant for us; and is a blessing in so thin a disguise that we can scarcely call it veiled at all.

And then, still further, there are here other lessons on which I cannot touch. Such, for instance, is the revelation in this emotion of the Master's, of a personal love that takes individuals to His heart, and feels all the sweetness and the power of friendship. That personal love is open to every one of us, and into the grace and the tenderness of it we may all penetrate. 'The disciple whom Jesus loved' is the Evangelist who, without jealousy, is glad to tell us that the same loving Lord took into the same sanctuary of His pure heart, Mary and Martha, and her brother. That which was given to them was not taken from him, and they each possessed the whole of the Master's love. So for every one of us that heart is wide open, and you and I, brethren, may contract such personal relations to the Master that we shall live with Christ as a man with his friend, and may feel that His heart is all ours.

So much for the lessons of the emotions whereby Christ is manifested to us as our Brother.

II. And now turn, in the next place, and that very briefly, to what lies side by side with this in the story, and at first sight may seem strangely contradictory of it, but in fact only completes the idea, viz. the majesties, calm consciousness of divine power by which He is revealed as our Lord.

At one step from the agitation and the storm of feeling there comes, 'Take ye away the stone.' And in answer to the lamentations of the sister are spoken the great and wonderful words, 'Said I not unto thee that if thou wouldst believe, thou shouldst see the glory of God?' And He looks back there to the message that had been sent to the sisters in response to their unspoken hope that He would come, 'This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified thereby.' And He shows us that from the first moment, with the spontaneousness which, as I have already remarked in previous sermons on these 'signs,' characterises all the miracles of John's Gospel, 'He Himself knew what He would do,' and in the consciousness of His divine power had resolved that the dead Lazarus should be the occasion for the manifestation, the flashing out to the world, of the glory of God in the life-giving Son.

And then, in the same tone of majestic consciousness, there follows that thanksgiving prior to the miracle as for the accomplished miracle. ‘I thank Thee that Thou hast heard Me, and I knew that Thou hearest Me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that Thou hast sent Me.’ The best commentary upon these words, the deepest and the fullest exposition of the large truths that lie in them concerning the co-operation of the Father and the Son, is to be found in the passage from the fifth chapter of this Gospel, wherein there is set forth, drawn with the firmest hand, the clearest lines of truth upon this great and profound subject. ‘The Son does nothing of Himself,’ but ‘whatsoever the Father doeth, that doeth the Son likewise.’ A consciousness of continual co-operation with the Almighty Father, a consciousness that His will continually coincides with the Father’s will, that unto Him there comes the power ever to do all that Omnipotence can do, and that though we may speak of a gift given and a power derived, the relation between the giving Father and the recipient Son is altogether different from, and other than the relation between, the man that asks and the God that bestows. Poor Martha said, ‘I know that even now, whatsoever Thou askest of God He will give Thee.’ She thought of Him as a good Man whose prayers had power with Heaven. But up into an altogether other region soars the consciousness expressed in these words as of a divine Son whose work is wholly parallel with the Father’s work, and of whom the two things that sound contradictory can both be said. His omnipotence is His own; His omnipotence is the Father’s: ‘As the Father hath life’ and therefore power in Himself, ‘so hath He given’-there is the one half of the paradox-’so hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself’; there is the other. And unless you put them both together you do not think of Christ as Christ has taught us to think.

III. Lastly, we have here the revelation of Christ as our Life in His mighty, life-giving word.

The miracle, as I have said, stands high in the scale, not only by reason of what to us seems the greatness of the fact, though of course, properly speaking, in miracles there is no distinction as to the greatness of the fact, but also by reason of the manner of the working. The voice thrown into the cave reaches the ears of the sheeted dead: ‘Lazarus, come forth!’ And then, in words which convey the profound impression of awfulness and solemnity which had been made upon the Evangelist, we have the picture of the man with the graveclothes wrapped about his limbs, stumbling forth; and loving hands are bidden to take away the napkin which covered his face. Perhaps the hand trembled as it was put forth, not knowing what awful sight the veil might cover.

With tenderest reticence, no word is spoken as to what followed. No hint escapes of the joy, no gleam of the experiences which the traveller brought back with him from that ‘bourne’ whence he had come. Surely some draught of Lethe must have been given him, that his spirit might be lulled into a wholesome forgetfulness, else life must have been a torment to him.

But be that as it may, what we have to notice is the fact here, and what it teaches us as a fact. Is it not a revelation of Jesus Christ as the absolute Lord of Life and Death, giving the one, putting back the other? Death has caught hold of his prey. ‘Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, and the lawful captive delivered? Yea, the prey shall be taken from the mighty.’ His bare word is divinely operative. He says to that grisly shadow ‘Come!’ and he cometh; He says to him ‘Go!’ and he goeth. And as a shepherd will drive away the bear that has a lamb between his bloody fangs, and the brute retreats, snarling and growling, but dropping his prey, so at the Lord’s voice Lazarus comes back to life, and disappointed Death skulks away to the darkness.

The miracle shows Him as Lord of Death and Giver of Life. And it teaches another lesson, namely, the continuous persistency of the bond between Christ and His friend, unbroken and untouched by the superficial accident of life or death. Wheresoever Lazarus was he heard the voice, and wheresoever Lazarus was he knew the voice, and wheresoever Lazarus was he obeyed the voice. And so we are taught that the relationship between Christ our life, and all them that love and trust Him, is one on which the tooth of death that gnaws all other bonds in twain hath no power at all. Christ is the Life, and, therefore, Christ is the Resurrection, and the thing that we call death is but a film which spreads on the surface, but has no power to penetrate into the depths of the relationship between us and Him.

Such, in briefest words, are the lessons of the miracle as a fact, but before I close I must remind you that it is to be looked at not only as a fact, but as a prophecy and as a parable.

It is a prophecy in a modified sense, telling us at all events that He has the power to bid men back from the dust and darkness, and giving us the assurance which His own words convey to us yet more distinctly: ‘The hour is coming when all that are in the graves shall hear His voice and shall come forth.’ My brother! there be two resurrections in that one promise: the resurrection of Christ’s friends and the resurrection of Christ’s foes. And though to both His voice will be the awakening, some shall rise to joy and immortality and ‘some to shame and everlasting contempt.’ You will hear the voice; settle it for yourselves whether when He calls and thou answerest thou wilt say, ‘Lo! here am I,’ joyful to look upon Him; or whether thou wilt rise reluctant, and ‘call upon the rocks and the hills to cover thee, and to hide thee from the face of Him that sitteth upon the Throne.’

And this raising is a parable as well as a prophecy; for even as Christ was the life of this Lazarus, so, in a deeper and more real sense, and not in any shadowy, metaphorical, mystical sense, is Jesus Christ the life of every spirit that truly lives at all. We are ‘dead in trespasses and sins.’ For separation from God is death in all regions, death for the body in its kind, death for the mind, for the soul, for the spirit in their kinds; and only they who receive Christ into their hearts do live. Every Christian man is a miracle. There has been a true coming into the human of the divine, a true supernatural work, the infusion into a dead soul of the God-life which is the Christ-life.

And you and I may have that life. What is the condition? ‘They that hear shall live.’ Do you hear? Do you welcome? Do you take that Christ into your hearts? Is He your Life, my brother?

It is possible to resist that voice, to stuff your ears so full of clay, and worldliness, and sin, and self-reliance as that it shall not echo in your hearts. ‘The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of Man, and they that hear shall live,’ and obtain to-day ‘a better resurrection’ than the resurrection of the body. If you do not hear that voice, then you will ‘remain in the congregation of the dead.’

51)John 11:45

John

THE OPEN GRAVE AT BETHANY

Joh. 11:30 - Joh. 11:45.

Why did Jesus stay outside Bethany and summon Martha and Mary to come to Him? Apparently that He might keep Himself apart from the noisy crowd of conventional mourners whose presence affronted the majesty and sanctity of sorrow, and that He might speak to the hearts of the two real mourners. A divine decorum forbade Him to go to the house. The Life-bringer keeps apart. His comforts are spoken in solitude. He reverenced grief. How beautifully His sympathetic delicacy contrasts with the heartless rush of those who 'were comforting' Mary when they thought that she was driven to go suddenly to the grave by a fresh burst of sorrow! If they had had any real sympathy or perception, they would have stayed where they were, and let the poor burdened heart find ease in lonely weeping. But, like all vulgar souls, they had one idea-never to leave mourners alone or let them weep.

Three stages seem discernible in the self-revelation of Jesus in this crowning miracle: His agitation and tears, His majestic confidence in His life-giving power now to be manifested, and His actual exercise of that power.

I. The repetition by Mary of Martha's words, as her first salutation, tells a pathetic story of the one thought that had filled both sisters' hearts in these four dreary days.

Why had He not come? How easily He could have come! How surely He could have prevented all this misery! Confidence in His power blends strangely with doubt as to His care. A hint of reproach is in the words, but more than a hint of faith in His might. He does not rebuke the rash judgment implied, for He knew the true love underlying it; but He does not directly answer Mary, as He had done Martha, for the two sisters needed different treatment.

We note that Mary has no such hope as Martha had expressed. Her more passive, meditative disposition had bowed itself, and let the grief overwhelm her. So in her we see a specimen of the excess of sorrow which indulges in the monotonous repetition of what would have happened if something else that did not happen had happened, and which is too deeply dark to let a gleam of hope shine in. Words will do little to comfort such grief. Silent sharing of its weeping and helpful deeds will do most.

So a great wave of emotion swept across the usually calm soul of Jesus, which John bids us trace to its cause by 'therefore' [Joh. 11:33]. The sight of Mary's real, and the mourners' half-real, tears, and the sound of their loud 'keening,' shook His spirit, and He yielded to, and even encouraged, the rush of feeling ['troubled Himself'] . But not only sympathy and sorrow ruffled the clear mirror of His spirit; another disturbing element was present. He 'was moved with indignation' [Rev. Ver. marg.]. Anger at Providence often mingles with our grief, but that was not Christ's indignation. The only worthy explanation of that strange ingredient in Christ's agitation is that it was directed against the source of death,-namely, sin. He saw the cause manifested in the effects. He wept for the one, He was wroth at the other. The tears witnessed to the perfect love of the man, and of the God revealed in the man; the indignation witnessed to the recoil and aversion from sin of the perfectly righteous Man, and of the holy God manifested in Him. We get one glimpse into His heart, as on to some ocean heaving and mist-covered. The momentary sight proclaims the union in Him, as the Incarnate Word, of pity for our woes and of aversion from our sins.

His question as to the place of the tomb is not what we should have expected; but its very abruptness indicates effort to suppress emotion, and resolve to lose no time in redressing the grief. Most sweetly human are the tears that start afresh after the moment's repression, as the little company begin to move towards the grave. And most sadly human are the unsympathetic criticisms of His sacred sorrow. Even the best affected of the bystanders are cool enough to note them as tokens of His love, at which perhaps there is a trace of wonder; while others snarl out a sarcasm which is double-barrelled, as casting doubt on the reality either of the love or of the power. 'It is easy to weep, but if He had cared for him, and could work miracles, He might surely have kept him alive.’ How blind men are! ‘Jesus wept,’ and all that the lookers-on felt was astonishment that He should have cared so much for a dead man of no importance, or carping doubt as to the genuineness of His grief and the reality of His power. He shows us His pity and sorrow still-to no more effect with many.

II. The passage to the tomb was marked by his continued agitation.

But his arrival there brought calm and majesty. Now the time has come which He had in view when He left his refuge beyond Jordan; and, as is often the case with ourselves, suddenly tremor and tumult leave the spirit when face to face with a moment of crisis. There is nothing more remarkable in this narrative than the contrast between Jesus weeping and indignant, and Jesus serene and authoritative as He stands fronting the cave-sepulchre. The sudden transformation must have awed the gazers.

He points to the stone, which, probably like that of many a grave discovered in Palestine, rolled in a groove cut in the rocky floor in front of the tomb. The command accords with His continual habit of confining the miraculous within the narrowest limits. He will do nothing by miracle which can be done without it. Lazarus could have heard and emerged, though the stone had remained. If the story had been a myth, he very likely would have done so. Like ‘loose him, and let him go,’ this is a little touch that cannot have been invented, and helps to confirm the simple, historical character of the account.

Not less natural, though certainly as unlikely to have been told unless it had happened, is Martha’s interruption. She must have heard what was going on, and, with her usual activity, have joined the procession, though we left her in the house. She thinks that Jesus is going into the grave; and a certain reverence for the poor remains, as well as for Him, makes her shrink from the thought of even His loving eyes seeing them now. Clearly she has forgotten the dim hopes which had begun in her when she talked with Jesus. Therefore He gently reminds her of these; for His words [Joh. 11:40] can scarcely refer to anything but that interview, though the precise form of expression now used is not found in the report of it [Joh. 11:25 - Joh. 11:27].

We mark Christ's calm confidence in His own power. His identification of its effect with the outflashing of the glory of God, and His encouragement to her to exercise faith by suspending her sight of that glory upon her faith. Does that mean that He would not raise her brother unless she believed? No; for He had determined to 'awake him out of sleep' before He left Peraea. But Martha's faith was the condition of her seeing the glory of God in the miracle. We may see a thousand emanations of that glory, and see none of it. We shall see it if we exercise faith. In the natural world, 'seeing is believing'; in the spiritual, believing is seeing.

Equally remarkable, as breathing serenest confidence, is the wonderful filial prayer. Our Lord speaks as if the miracle were already accomplished, so sure is He: 'Thou heardest Me.' Does this thanksgiving bring Him down to the level of other servants of God who have wrought miracles by divine power granted them? Certainly not; for it is in full accord with the teaching of all this Gospel, according to which 'the Son can do nothing of Himself,' but yet, whatsoever things the Father doeth, 'these also doeth the Son likewise.' Both sides of the truth must be kept in view. The Son is not independent of the Father, but the Son is so constantly and perfectly one with the Father that He is conscious of unbroken communion, of continual wielding of the whole divine power.

But the practical purpose of the thanksgiving is to be specially noted. It suspends His whole claims on the single issue about to be decided. It summons the people to mark the event. Never before had He thus heralded a miracle. Never had He deigned to say thus solemnly, 'If God does not work through Me now, reject Me as an impostor; if He does, yield to Me as Messiah.' The moment stands alone in His life. What a scene! There is the open tomb, with its dead occupant; there are the eager, sceptical crowd, the sisters pausing in their weeping to gaze, with some strange hopes beginning to creep into their hearts, the silent disciples, and, in front of them all, Jesus, with the radiance of power in the eyes that had just been swimming in tears, and a new elevation in His tones. How all would be hushed in expectance of the next moment's act!

III. The miracle itself is told in the fewest words. What more was there to tell?

The two ends, as it were, of a buried chain, appear above ground. Cause and effect were brought together. Rather, here was no chain of many links, as in physical phenomena, but here was the life-giving word, and there was the dead man living again. The ‘loud voice’ was as needless as the rolling away of the stone. It was but the sign of Christ’s will acting. And the acting of His will, without any other cause, produces physical effects.

Lazarus was far away from that rock cave. But, wherever he was, he could hear, and he must obey. So, with graveclothes entangling his feet, and a napkin about his livid face, he came stumbling out into the light that dazed his eyes, closed for four dark days, and stood silent and motionless in that awestruck crowd. One Person there was not awestruck. Christ’s calm voice, that had just reverberated through the regions of the dead, spoke the simple command, ‘Loose him, and let him go.’ To Him it was no wonder that He should give back a life. For the Christ who wept is the Christ whose voice all that are in the graves shall hear, and shall come forth.

52)John 11:49-50

John

CAIAPHAS

Joh. 11:49 - Joh. 11:50.

The resurrection of Lazarus had raised a wave of popular excitement. Any stir amongst the people was dangerous, especially at the Passover time, which was nigh at hand, when Jerusalem would be filled with crowds of men, ready to take fire from any spark that might fall amongst them. So a hasty meeting of the principal ecclesiastical council of the Jews was summoned, in order to dismiss the situation, and concert measures for repressing the nascent enthusiasm. One might have expected to find there some disposition to inquire honestly into the claims of a Teacher who had such a witness to His claims as a man alive that had been dead. But nothing of the sort appears in their ignoble calculations. Like all weak men, they feel that ‘something must be done’ and are perfectly unable to say what. They admit Christ’s miracles: ‘This man doeth many miracles,’ but they are not a bit the nearer to recognising His mission, being therein disobedient to their law and untrue to their office. They fear that any disturbance will bring Rome's heavy hand down on them, and lead to the loss of what national life they still possess. But even that fear is not patriotism nor religion. It is pure self-interest. 'They will take away our place'-the Temple, probably-'and our nation.' The holy things were, in their eyes, their special property. And so, at this supreme moment, big with the fate of themselves and of their nation, their whole anxiety is about personal interests. They hesitate, and are at a loss what to do.

But however they may hesitate, there is one man who knows his own mind-Caiaphas, the high priest. He has no doubt as to what is the right thing to do. He has the advantage of a perfectly clear and single purpose, and no sort of restraint of conscience or delicacy keeps him from speaking it out. He is impatient at their vacillation, and he brushes it all aside with the brusque and contemptuous speech: 'Ye know nothing at all!' 'The one point of view for us to take is that of our own interests. Let us have that clearly understood; when we once ask what is "expedient for us," there will be no doubt about the answer. This man must die. Never mind about His miracles, or His teaching, or the beauty of His character. His life is a perpetual danger to our prerogatives. I vote for death!' And so he clashes his advice down into the middle of their waverings, like a piece of iron into yielding water; and the strong man, restrained by no conscience, and speaking out cynically the thought that is floating in all their minds, but which they dare not utter, is master of the situation, and the resolve is taken. 'From that day forth' they determined to put Him to death.

But John regards this selfish, cruel advice as a prophecy. Caiaphas spoke wiser things than he knew. The Divine Spirit breathed in strange fashion through even such lips as his, and moulded his savage utterance into such a form as that it became a fit expression for the very deepest thought about the nature and the power of Christ's death. He did indeed die for that people-thinks the Evangelist-even though they have rejected Him, and the dreaded Romans have come and taken away our place and nation-but His death had a wider purpose, and was not for that nation only, but that also 'He should gather together in one the children of God that are scattered abroad.'

Let us, then, take these two aspects of the man and his counsel: the unscrupulous priest and his savage advice; the unconscious prophet and his great prediction.

I. First, then, let us take the former point of view, and think of this unscrupulous priest and his savage advice. 'It is expedient for us that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.'

Remember who he was, the high priest of the nation, with Aaron's mitre on his brow, and centuries of illustrious traditions embodied in his person; set by his very office to tend the sacred flame of their Messianic hopes, and with pure hands and heart to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people; the head and crown of the national religion, in whose heart justice and mercy should have found a sanctuary if they had fled from all others; whose ears ought to have been opened to the faintest whisper of the voice of God; whose lips should ever have been ready to witness for the truth.

And see what he is! A crafty schemer, as blind as a mole to the beauty of Christ's character and the greatness of His words; utterly unspiritual; undisguisedly selfish; rude as a boor; cruel as a cut-throat; and having reached that supreme height of wickedness in which he can dress his ugliest thought in the plainest words, and send them into the world unabashed. What a lesson this speech of Caiaphas, and the character disclosed by it, read to all persons who have a professional connection with religion!

He can take one point of view only, in regard to the mightiest spiritual revelation that the world ever saw; and that is, its bearing upon his own miserable personal interests, and the interests of the order to which he belongs. And so, whatever may be the wisdom, or miracles, or goodness of Jesus, because He threatens the prerogatives of the priesthood, He must die and be got out of the way.

This is only an extreme case of a temper and a tendency which is perennial. Popes and inquisitors and priests of all Churches have done the same, in their degree, in all ages. They have always been tempted to look upon religion and religious truth and religious organisations as existing somehow for their personal advantage. And so 'the Church is in danger!' generally means 'my position is threatened,' and heretics are got rid of, because their teaching is inconvenient for the prerogatives of a priesthood, and new truth is fought against, because officials do not see how it harmonises with their pre-eminence.

It is not popes and priests and inquisitors only that are examples of the tendency. The warning is needed by every man who stands in such a position as mine, whose business it is professionally to handle sacred things, and to administer Christian institutions and Christian ritual. All such men are tempted to look upon the truth as their stock-in-trade, and to fight against innovations, and to array themselves instinctively against progress, and frown down new aspects and new teachers of truth, simply because they threaten, or appear to threaten, the position and prerogatives of the teachers that be. Caiaphas's sin is possible, and Caiaphas's temptation is actual, for every man whose profession it is to handle the oracles of God.

But the lessons of this speech and character are for us all. Caiaphas's sentence is an undisguised, unblushing avowal of a purely selfish standpoint. It is not a common depth of degradation to stand up, and without a blush to say: 'I look at all claims of revelation, at all professedly spiritual truth, and at everything else, from one delightfully simple point of view-I ask myself, how does it bear upon what I think to be to my advantage?' What a deal of perplexity a man is saved if he takes up that position! Yes! and how he has damned himself in the very act of doing it! For, look what this absorbing and exclusive self-regard does in the illustration before us, and let us learn what it will do to ourselves.

This selfish consideration of our own interests will make us as blind as bats to the most radiant beauty of truth; aye, and to Christ Himself, if the recognition of Him and of His message seems to threaten any of these. They tell us that fishes which live in the water of caverns come to lose their eyesight; and men that are always living in the dark holes of their own selfishly absorbed natures, they, too, lose their spiritual sight; and the fairest, loftiest, truest, and most radiant visions [which are realities] pass before their eyes, and they see them not. When you put on regard for yourselves as they do blinkers upon horses, you have no longer the power of wide, comprehensive vision, but only see straight forward upon the narrow line which you fancy to be marked out by your own interests. If ever there comes into the selfish man’s mind a truth, or an aspect of Christ’s mission, which may seem to cut against some of his practices or interests, how blind he is to it! When Lord Nelson was at Copenhagen, and they hoisted the signal of recall, he put his telescope up to his blind eye and said, ‘I do not see it!’ And that is exactly what this self-absorbed regard to our own interests does with hundreds of men who do not in the least degree know it. It blinds them to the plain will of the Commander-in-chief flying there at the masthead. ‘There are none so blind as those who will not see’; and there are none who so certainly will not see as those who have an uneasy suspicion that if they do see they will have to change their tack. So I say, look at the instance before us, and learn the lesson of the blindness to truth and beauty which are Christ Himself, which comes of a regard to one’s own interests.

Then again, this same self-regard may bring a man down to any kind and degree of wrongdoing. Caiaphas was brought down by it, being the supreme judge of his nation, to be an assassin and an accomplice of murderers. And it is only a question of accident and of circumstances how far that man will descend who once yields himself up to the guidance of such a disposition and tendency. We have all of us to fight against the developed selfishness which takes the form of this, that, and the other sin; and we have all of us, if we are wise, to fight against the undeveloped sin which lies in all selfishness. Remember that if you begin with laying down as the canon of your conduct, ‘It is expedient for me,’ you have got upon an inclined plane that tilts at a very sharp angle, and is very sufficiently greased, and ends away down yonder in the depths of darkness and of death, and it is only a question of time how far and how fast, how deep and irrevocable, will be your descent.

And lastly, this same way of looking at things which takes ‘It is expedient’ as the determining consideration, has in it an awful power of so twisting and searing a man’s conscience as that he comes to look at evil and never to know that there is anything wrong in it. This cynical high priest in our text had no conception that he was doing anything but obeying the plainest dictates of the most natural self-preservation when he gave his opinion that they had better kill Christ than have any danger to their priesthood. The crime of the actual crucifixion was diminished because the doers were so unconscious that it was a crime; but the crime of the process by which they had come to be unconscious-Oh how that was increased and deepened! So, if we fix our eyes sharply and exclusively on what makes for our own advantage, and take that as the point of view from which we determine our conduct, we may, and we shall, bring ourselves into such a condition as that our consciences will cease to be sensitive to right and wrong; and we shall do all manner of bad things, and never know it. We shall 'wipe our mouths and say: "I have done no harm."' So, I beseech you, remember this, that to live for self is hell, and that the only antagonist of such selfishness, which leads to blindness, crime, and a seared conscience, is to yield ourselves to the love of God in Jesus Christ and to say: 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.'

II. And now turn briefly to the second aspect of this saying, into which the former, if I may so say, melts away. We have the unconscious prophet and his great prediction.

The Evangelist conceives that the man who filled the office of high priest, being the head of the theocratic community, was naturally the medium of a divine oracle. When he says, 'being the high priest that year, Caiaphas prophesied,' he does not imply that the high priestly office was annual, but simply desires to mark the fateful importance of that year for the history of the world and the priesthood. 'In that year' the great 'High Priest for ever' came and stood for a moment by the side of the earthly high priest-the Substance by the shadow-and by His offering of Himself as the one Sacrifice for sin for ever, deprived priesthood and sacrifice henceforward of all their validity. So that Caiaphas was in reality the last of the high priests, and those that succeeded him for something less than half a century were but like ghosts that walked after cock-crow. And what the Evangelist would mark is the importance of 'that year,' as making Caiaphas ever memorable to us. Solemn and strange that the long line of Aaron's priesthood ended in such a man-the river in a putrid morass-and that of all the years in the history of the nation, 'in that year' should such a person fill such an office!

'Being high priest he prophesied.' And was there anything strange in a bad man's prophesying? Did not the Spirit of God breathe through Balaam of old? Is there anything incredible in a man's prophesying unconsciously?

Did not Pilate do so, when he nailed over the Cross, ‘This is the King of the Jews,’ and wrote it in Hebrew, and in Greek, and in Latin, conceiving himself to be perpetrating a rude jest, while he was proclaiming an everlasting truth? When the Pharisees stood at the foot of the Cross and taunted Him, ‘He saved others, Himself He cannot save,’ did they not, too, speak deeper things than they knew? And were not the lips of this unworthy, selfish, unspiritual, unscrupulous, cruel priest so used as that, all unconsciously, his words lent themselves to the proclamation of the glorious central truth of Christianity, that Christ died for the nation that slew Him and rejected Him, nor for them alone, but for all the world? Look, though but for a moment, at the thoughts that come from this new view of the words which we have been considering.

They suggest to us, first of all, the twofold aspect of Christ’s death. From the human point of view it was a savage murder by forms of law for political ends: Caiaphas and the priests slaying Him to avoid a popular tumult that might threaten their prerogatives, Pilate consenting to His death to avoid the unpopularity that might follow a refusal. From the divine point of view it is God’s great sacrifice for the sin of the world. It is the most signal instance of that solemn law of Providence which runs all through the history of the world, whereby bad men’s bad deeds, strained through the fine network, as it were, of the divine providence, lose their poison and become nutritious and fertilising. ‘Thou makest the wrath of men to praise Thee; with the residue thereof Thou girdest Thyself.’ The greatest crime ever done in the world is the greatest blessing ever given to the world. Man’s sin works out the loftiest divine purpose, even as the coral insects blindly build up the reef that keeps back the waters, or as the sea in its wild, impotent rage, seeking to overwhelm the land, only throws upon the beach a barrier that confines its waves and curbs their fury.

Then, again, this second aspect of the counsel of Caiaphas suggests for us the twofold consequences of that death on the nation itself. This Gospel of John was probably written after the destruction of Jerusalem. By the time that our Evangelist penned these words, the Romans had come and taken away their place and their nation. The catastrophe that Caiaphas and his party had, by their short-sighted policy, tried to prevent, had been brought about by the very deed itself. For Christ’s death was practically the reason for the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth. When ‘the husbandmen said, Come! let us kill Him, and seize on the inheritance,’ which is simply putting Caiaphas’s counsel into other language, they thereby deprived themselves of the inheritance. And so Christ’s death was the destruction and not the salvation of the nation.

And yet, it was true that He died for that people, for every man of them, for Caiaphas as truly as for John, for Judas as truly as for Peter, for all the Scribes and the Pharisees that mocked round His Cross, as truly as for the women that stood silently weeping there. He died for them all, and John, looking back upon the destruction of his nation, can yet say, ‘He died for that people.’ Yes! and just because He did, and because they rejected Him, His death, which they would not let be their salvation, became their destruction and their ruin. Oh! brethren, it is always so! He is either ‘a savour of life unto life, or a savour of death unto death!’ ‘Behold! I lay in Zion for a foundation, a tried Stone.’ Build upon it and you are safe. If you do not build upon it, that Stone becomes ‘a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.’ You must either build upon Christ or fall over Him; you must either build upon Christ, or be crushed to powder under Him. Make your choice! The twofold effect is wrought ever, but we can choose which of the two shall be wrought upon us.

Lastly, we have here the twofold sphere in which our Lord’s mighty death works its effects.

I have already said that this Gospel was written after the fall of Jerusalem. The whole tone of it shows that the conception of the Church as quite separate from Judaism was firmly established. The narrower national system had been shivered, and from out of the dust and hideous ruin of its crushing fall had emerged the fairer reality of a Church as wide as the world. The Temple on Zion-which was but a small building after all-had been burned with fire. It was their place, as Caiaphas called it. But the clearing away of the narrower edifice had revealed the rising walls of the great temple, the Christian Church, whose roof overarches every land, and in whose courts all men may stand and praise the Lord. So John, in his home in Ephesus, surrounded by flourishing churches in which Jews formed a small and ever-decreasing element, recognised how far the dove with the olive-branch In its mouth flew, and how certainly that nation was only a little fragment of the many for whom Christ died.

‘The children of God that were scattered abroad’ were all to be united round that Cross. Yes! the only thing that unites men together is their common relation to a Divine Redeemer. That bond is deeper than all national bonds, than all blood-bonds, than community of race, than family, than friendship, than social ties, than community of opinion, than community of purpose and action. It is destined to absorb them all. All these are transitory and they are imperfect; men wander isolated notwithstanding them all. But if we are knit to Christ, we are knit to all who are also knit to Him. One life animates all the limbs, and one life’s blood circulates through all the veins. ‘So also is Christ.’ We are one in Him, in whom all the body fitly joined together maketh increase, and in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth. If we have yielded to the power of that Cross which draws us to itself, we shall have been more utterly alone, in our penitence and in our conscious surrender to Christ, than ever we were before. But He sets the solitary in families, and that solemn experience of being alone with our Judge and our Saviour will be followed by the blessed sense that we are no more solitary, but ‘fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God.’

That death brings men into the family of God. He will ‘gather into one the scattered children of God.’ They are called children by anticipation. For surely nothing can be clearer than that the doctrine of all John’s writings is that men are not children of God by virtue of their humanity, except in the inferior sense of being made by Him, and in His image as creatures with spirit and will, but become children of God through faith in the Son of God, which brings about that new birth, whereby we become partakers of the Divine nature. ‘To as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.’

So I beseech you, turn yourselves to that dear Christ who has died for us all, for us each, for me and for thee, and put your confidence in His great sacrifice. You will find that you pass from isolation into society, from death into life, from the death of selfishness into the life of God. Listen to Him, who says: ‘Other sheep I have which are not of this fold, them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice: and there shall be one flock' because there is 'one Shepherd.'

53)John 12:1-11

John

LOVE'S PRODIGALITY CENSURED AND VINDICATED

Joh. 12:1 - Joh. 12:11.

Jesus came from Jericho, where He had left Zacchaeus rejoicing in the salvation that had come to his house, and whence Bartimaeus, rejoicing in His new power of vision, seems to have followed Him. A few hours brought Him to Bethany, and we know from other Evangelists what a tension of purpose marked Him, and awed the disciples, as He pressed on before them up the rocky way. His mind was full of the struggle and death which were so near. The modest village feast in the house of Simon the leper comes in strangely amid the gathering gloom; but, no doubt, Jesus accepted it, as He did everything, and entered into the spirit of the hour. He would not pain His hosts by self-absorbed aloofness at the table. The reason for the feast is obviously the raising of Lazarus, as is suggested by his being twice mentioned in Joh. 12:1 - Joh. 12:2.

Our Lord had withdrawn to Ephraim so immediately after the miracle that the opportunity of honouring Him had not occurred. It was a brave tribute to pay Him in the face of the Sanhedrim's commandment [Joh. 11:57]. This incident sets in sharpest contrast the two figures of Mary, the type of love which delights to give its best, and Judas, the type of selfishness which is only eager to get; and it shows us Jesus casting His shield over the uncalculating giver, and putting meaning into her deed.

I. In Eastern fashion, the guests seem to have all been males, no doubt the magnates of the village, and Jesus with His disciples.

The former would have become accustomed to seeing Lazarus, but Christ's immediate followers would gaze curiously on him. And how he would gaze on Jesus, whom he had probably not seen since the napkin had been taken from his face. The two sisters were true to their respective characters. The bustling, practical Martha had perhaps not very fine or quickly moved emotions. She could not say graceful things to their benefactor, and probably she did not care to sit at His feet and drink in His teaching; but she loved Him with all her heart all the same, and showed it by serving. No doubt, she took care that the best dishes were carried to Jesus first, and, no doubt, as is the custom in those lands, she plied Him with invitations to partake. We do Martha less than justice if we do not honour her, and recognise that her kind of service is true service. She has many successors among Christ's true followers, who cannot 'gush' nor rise to the heights of His loftiest teaching, but who have taken Him for their Lord, and can, at any rate, do humble, practical service in kitchen or workshop. Their more 'intellectual' or poetically emotional brethren are tempted to look down on them, but Jesus is as ready to defend Martha against Mary, if she depreciates her, as He is to vindicate Mary's right to her kind of expression of love, if Martha should seek to force her own kind on her sister. 'There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord.'

Mary was one of the unpractical sort, whom Martha is very apt to consider supremely useless, and often to lose patience with. Could she not find something useful to do in all the bustle of the feast? Had she no hands that could carry a dish, and no common sense that could help things on? Apparently not. Every one else was occupied, and how should she show the love that welled up in her heart as she looked at Lazarus sitting there beside Jesus? She had one costly possession, the pound of perfume. Clearly it was her own, for she would not have taken it if Lazarus and Mary had been joint owners. So, without thinking of anything but the great burden of love which she blessedly bore, she 'poured it on His head' [Mark] and on His feet, which the fashion of reclining at meals made accessible to her, standing behind Him, True love is profuse, not to say prodigal. It knows no better use for its best than to lavish it on the beloved, and can have no higher joy than that. It does not stay to calculate utility as seen by colder eyes. It has even a subtle delight in the very absence of practical results, for the expression of itself is the purer thereby. A basin of water and a towel would have done as well or better for washing Christ's feet, but not for relieving Mary's full heart. Do we know anything of that omnipotent impulse? Can we complacently set our givings beside Mary's?

II. Judas is the foil to Mary.

His sullen, black selfishness, stretching out hands like talons in eagerness to get, makes more radiant, and is itself made darker by, her shining deed of love. Goodness always rouses evil to self-assertion, and the other Evangelists connect Mary's action with Judas's final treachery as part of its impelling cause. They also show that his specious objection, by its apparent common sense and charitableness, found assent in the disciples. Three hundred pence worth of good ointment wasted which might have helped so many poor! Yes, and how much poorer the world would have been if it had not had this story! Mary was more utilitarian than her censors. She served the highest good of all generations by her uncalculating profusion, by which the poor have gained more than some few of them might have lost.

Judas's criticism is still repeated. The world does not understand Christian self-sacrifice, for ends which seem to it shadowy as compared with the solid realities of helping material progress or satisfying material wants. A hundred critics, who do not do much for the poor themselves, will descant on the waste of money in religious enterprises, and smile condescendingly at the enthusiasts who are so unpractical. But love knows its own meaning, and need not be abashed by the censure of the unloving.

John flashes out into a moment's indignation at the greed of Judas, which was masquerading as benevolence. His scathing laying bare of Judas's mean and thievish motive is no mere suspicion, but he must have known instances of dishonesty. When a man has gone so far in selfish greed that he has left common honesty behind him, no wonder if the sight of utterly self-surrendering love looks to him folly. The world has no instruments by which it can measure the elevation of the godly life. Mary would not be Mary if Judas approved of her or understood her.

III. Jesus vindicates the act of His censured servant.

His words fall into two parts, of which the former puts a meaning into Mary's act, of which she probably had not been aware, while the latter meets the carping criticism of Judas. That Jesus should see in the anointing a reference to His burying, pathetically indicates how that near end filled His thoughts, even while sharing in the simple feast. The clear vision of the

Cross so close did not so absorb Him as to make Him indifferent either to Mary's love or to the villagers' humble festivity. However weighed upon, His heart was always sufficiently at leisure from itself to care for His friends and to defend them. He accepts every offering that love brings, and, in accepting, gives it a significance beyond the offerer's thought. We know not what use He may make of our poor service; but we may be sure that, if that which we can see to is right-namely, its motive,-He will take care of what we cannot see to-namely, its effect,-and will find noble use for the sacrifices which unloving critics pronounce useless waste.

'The poor always ye have with you.' Opportunities for the exercise of brotherly liberality are ever present, and therefore the obligation to it is constant. But these permanent duties do not preclude the opportunities for such special forms of expressing special love to Jesus as Mary had shown, and as must soon end. The same sense of approaching separation as in the former clause gives pathos to that restrained 'not always.' The fact of His being just about to leave them warranted extraordinary tokens of love, as all loving hearts know but too well. But, over and above the immediate reference of the words, they carry the wider lesson that, besides the customary duties of generous giving laid on us by the presence of ordinary poverty and distresses, there is room in Christian experience for extraordinary outflows from the fountain of a heart filled with love to Christ. The world may mock at it as useless prodigality, but Jesus sees that it is done for Him, and therefore He accepts it, and breathes meaning into it.

'Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.' The Evangelist who records that promise does not mention Mary's name; John, who does mention the name, does not record the promise. It matters little whether our names are remembered, so long as Jesus beam them graven on His heart.

54)John 12:12-25

John

A NEW KIND OF KING

Joh. 12:12 - Joh. 12:26.

The difference between John’s account of the entry into Jerusalem and those of the Synoptic Gospels is very characteristic. His is much briefer, but it brings the essentials out clearly, and is particular in showing its place as a link in the chain that drew on the final catastrophe, and in noting its effect on various classes.

‘The next day’ in Joh. 12:12 was probably the Sunday before the crucifixion. To understand the events of that day we must try to realise how rapidly, and, as the rulers thought, dangerously, excitement was rising among the crowds who had come up for the Passover, and who had heard of the raising of Lazarus. The Passover was always a time when national feeling was ready to blaze up, and any spark might light the fire. It looked as if Lazarus were going to be the match this time, and so, on the Saturday, the rulers had made up their minds to have him put out of the way in order to stop the current that was setting in, of acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah.

They had already made up their minds to dispose of Jesus, and now, with cynical contempt for justice, they determined to ‘put Lazarus also to death.’ So there were to be two men who were to ‘die for the people.’ Keeping all this wave of popular feeling in view, it might have been expected that Jesus would, as hitherto, have escaped into privacy, or discouraged the offered homage of a crowd whose Messianic ideal was so different from His.

John is mainly concerned in bringing out two points in his version of the incident. First, he tells us what we should not have gathered from the other Evangelists, that the triumphal procession began in Jerusalem, not in Bethany. It was the direct result of the ebullition of enthusiasm occasioned by the raising of Lazarus. The course of events seems to have been that ‘the common people of the Jews’ came streaming out to Bethany on the Sunday to gape and gaze at the risen man and Him who had raised him, that they and some of those who had been present at the raising went back to the city and carried thither the intelligence that Jesus was coming in from Bethany next day, and that then the procession to meet Him was organised.

The meaning of the popular demonstration was plain, both from the palm branches, signs of victory and rejoicing, and from the chant, which is in part taken from Psa. 118:1 - Psa. 118:29 The Messianic application of that quotation is made unmistakable by the addition, ‘even the King of Israel.’ In the Psalm, ‘he that cometh in the name of Jehovah,’ means the worshipper drawing near to the Temple, but the added words divert the expression to Jesus, hail Him as the King, and invoke Him as ‘Saviour.’ Little did that shouting crowd understand what sort of a Saviour He was. Deliverance from Rome was what they were thinking of.

We must remember what gross, unspiritual notions of the Messiah they had, and then we are prepared to feel how strangely unlike His whole past conduct Jesus’ action now was. He had shrunk from crowds and their impure enthusiasm; He had slipped away into solitude when they wished to come by force to make Him a King, and had in every possible way sought to avoid publicity and the rousing of popular excitement. Now He deliberately sets Himself to intensify it. His choice of an ass on which to ride into Jerusalem was, and would be seen by many to be, a plain appropriation to Himself of a very distinct Messianic prophecy, and must have raised the heat of the crowd by many degrees. One can fancy the roar of acclaim which hailed Him when He met the multitude, and the wild emotion with which they strewed His path with garments hastily drawn off and cast before Him.

Why did He thus contradict all His past, and court the smoky enthusiasm which He had hitherto damped? Because He knew that ‘His hour’ had come, and that the Cross was at hand, and He desired to bring it as speedily as might be, and thus to shorten the suffering that He would not avoid, and to finish the work which He was eager to complete. The impatience, as we might almost call it, which had marked Him on all that last journey, reached its height now, and may indicate to us for our sympathy and gratitude both His human longing to get the dark hour over and His fixed willingness to die for us.

But even while Jesus accepted the acclamations and deliberately set Himself to stir up enthusiasm, He sought to purify the gross ideas of the crowd. What more striking way could He have chosen of declaring that all the turbulent passions and eagerness for a foot-to-foot conflict with Rome which were boiling in their breasts were alien to His purposes and to the true Messianic ideal, than that choosing of the meek, slow-pacing ass to bear Him? A conquering king would have made his triumphal entry in a chariot or on a battle-horse. This strange type of monarch is throned on an ass. It was not only for a verbal fulfilment of the prophecy, but for a demonstration of the essential nature of His kingdom, that He thus entered the city.

John characteristically takes note of the effects of the entry on two classes, the disciples and the rulers. The former remembered with a sudden flash of enlightenment the meaning of the entry when the Cross and the Resurrection had taught them it. The rulers marked the popular feeling running high with bewilderment, and were, as Jesus meant them to be, made more determined to take vigorous measures to stop this madness of the mob.

The second incident in this passage contrasts remarkably with the first, and yet is, in one aspect, a continuation of it. In the former, Jesus brought into prominence the true nature of His rule by His choosing the ass to carry Him, so declaring that His dominion rested, not on conquest, but on meekness. In the latter, He reveals a yet deeper aspect of His work, and teaches that His influence over men is won by utter self-sacrifice, and that His subjects must tread the same path of losing their lives by which He passes to His glory. The details of the incident are of small importance as compared with that great and solemn lesson; but we may note them in a few words. The desire of a few Greeks to see Him was probably only a reflection of the popular enthusiasm, and was prompted mainly by curiosity and the characteristic Greek eagerness to see any ‘new thing.’ The addressing of the request to Philip is perhaps explained by the fact that he ‘was of Bethsaida of Galilee,’ and had probably come into contact with these Greeks in the neighbouring Decapolis, on the other side of the lake. Philip’s consultation of his fellow-townsman, Andrew, who is associated with him in other places, probably implies hesitation in granting so unprecedented a request. They did not know what Jesus might say to it. And what He did say was very unlike anything that they could have anticipated.

The trivial request was as a narrow window through which Jesus' yearning spirit saw a great expanse-nothing less than the coming to Him of myriads of Gentiles, the 'much fruit' of which He immediately speaks, the 'other sheep' whom He 'must bring.' The thought must have been ever present to Him, or it would never have leaped to utterance on such an occasion. The little window shows us, too, what was habitually in His mind and heart. He, as it were, hears the striking of the hour of His glorification; in which expression the ideas of His being glorified by drawing men to the knowledge of His love, and of the Cross being not the lowest depth of His humiliation, but the highest apex of His glory-as it is always represented in this Gospel-seemed to be fused together.

The seed must die if a harvest is to spring from it. That is the law for all moral and spiritual reformations. Every cause must have its martyrs. No man can be fruit-bearing unless he sacrifices himself. We shall not 'quicken' our fellows unless we 'die,' either literally or by the not less real martyrdom of rigid self-crucifixion and suppression.

But that necessity is not only for Apostles or missionaries of great causes; it is the condition of all true, noble life, and prescribes the path not only for those who would live for others, but for all who would truly live their own lives. Self-renunciation guards the way to the 'tree of life.' That lesson was specially needed by 'Greeks,' for ignorance of it was the worm that gnawed the blossoms of their trees, whether of art or of literature. It is no less needed by our sensuously luxurious and eagerly acquisitive generation. The world's war-cries to-day are two-'Get!' 'Enjoy!' Christ's command is, 'Renounce!' And in renouncing we shall realise both of these other aims, which they who pursue them only, never attain.

Christ's servant must be Christ's follower: indeed service is following. The Cross has aspects in which it stands alone, and is incapable of being reproduced and makes all repetition needless. But it has also an aspect in which it not only may, but must, be reproduced in every disciple. And he who takes it for the ground of his trust only, and not as the pattern of his life, has need to ask himself whether his trust in it is genuine or worth anything. Of course they who follow a leader will arrive where the leader has gone, and though our feet are feeble and our progress devious and slow, we have here His promise that we shall not be lost in the desert, but, sustained by Him, will reach His side, and at last be where He is.

55)John 12:26

John

A NEW KIND OF KING

AFTER CHRIST: WITH CHRIST

Joh. 12:26.

Our Lord was strangely moved by the apparently trivial incident of certain Greeks desiring to see Him. He recognised and hailed in them the first-fruits of the Gentiles. The Eastern sages at His cradle, and these representatives of Western culture within a few hours of the Cross, were alike prophets. So, in His answer to their request, our Lord passes beyond the immediate bearing of the request, and contemplates it in its relation to the future developments of His work. And the thought that the Son of Man is now about to begin to be glorified, at once brings Him face to face with the fact which must precede the glory, viz., His death.

That great law that a higher life can only be reached by the decay of the lower, of which the Cross is the great instance, He illustrates, first, by an example from Nature, the corn of wheat which must die ere it brings forth fruit. Then He declares that this is a universal law, ‘He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.’ And then He declares that this universal law, which has its adumbration in Nature, and applies to all mankind, and is manifested in its highest form on the Cross, is the law of the Christian discipleship. ‘If any man serve Me, let him follow Me,’ and, as a consequence, ‘where I am, there shall also My servant be.’

In two clauses He covers the whole ground of the present and the future. Many thinkers and teachers have tried to crystallise their systems into some brief formula which may stick in the memory and be capable of a handy application. ‘Follow Nature,’ said ancient sages, attaching a nobler meaning to the condensed commandment than its modern repeaters often do; ‘Follow duty,’ say others; ‘Follow Me’ says Christ. That is enough for life. And for all the dim regions beyond, this prospect is sufficient, ‘Where I am, there shall also My servant be.’ One Form towers above the present and the future, and they both derive their colouring and their worth from Him and our relation to Him. ‘To follow’-that is the condensed summary of life’s duty. ‘To be with’-that is the crystallising of all our hopes.

I. The all-sufficient law for life.

‘If any man serve Me, let him follow Me.’ Everything is smelted down into that; and there you have a sufficient directory for every man’s every action.

Now although it has nothing to do with my present purpose, I can scarcely avoid pausing, just for a moment, to ask you to consider the perfect uniqueness of such an utterance as that. Think of one Man standing up before all mankind, and coolly and deliberately saying to them, ‘I am the realised Ideal of human conduct; I am Incarnate Perfection; and all of you, in all the infinite variety of condition, culture, and character, are to take Me for your pattern and your guide.’ The world has listened, and the world has not laughed nor been angry. Neither indignation nor mockery, which one might have expected would have extinguished such absurdity, has waited upon Christ’s utterance. I have no time to dwell on this; it is apart from my purpose, but I would ask you fairly to consider how strange it is, and to ask how it is to be accounted for, that a Man said that, and that the wisest part of the world has consented to take Him at His own valuation; and after such an utterance as that, yet calls Him ‘meek and lowly of heart.’

But I pass away from that. What does He mean by this commandment, ‘Follow Me’? Of course I need not remind you that it brings all duty down to the imitation of Jesus Christ. That is a commonplace that I do not need to dwell upon, nor to follow out into the many regions into which it would lead us, and where we might find fruitful subjects of contemplation; because I desire, in a sentence or two, to insist upon the special form of following which is here enjoined. It is a very grand thing to talk about the imitation of Christ, and even in its most superficial acceptation it is a good guide for all men. But no man has penetrated to the depths of that stringent and all-comprehensive commandment who has not recognised that there is one special thing in which Christ is to be our Pattern, and that is in regard to the very thing in which we think that He is most unique and inimitable. It is His Cross, and not His life; it is His death, and not His virtues, which He is here thinking about, and laying it upon all of us as the encyclopaedia and sum of all morality that we should be conformed to it. I have already pointed out to you in my introductory remarks the force of the present context. And so I need not further enlarge upon that, nor vindicate my declaration that Christ's death is the pattern which is here set before us. Of course we cannot imitate that in its effects, except in a very secondary and figurative fashion. But the spirit that underlay it, as the supreme Example of self-sacrifice, is commended to us all as the royal law for our lives, and unless we are conformed thereto we have no right to call ourselves Christ's disciples. To die for the sake of higher life, to give up our own will utterly in obedience to God, and in the unselfish desire to help and bless others, that is the Alpha and the Omega of discipleship. It always has been so and always will be so. And so, dear brethren, let us lay it to our own hearts, and make very stringent inquiry into our own conduct, whether we have ever come within sight of what makes a true disciple-viz., that we should be 'conformable unto His death.'

Now our modern theology has far too much obscured this plain teaching of the New Testament, because it has been concerned-I do not say too much, but too exclusively, concerned-in setting forth the other aspect of Christ's death, by which it is what none of ours can ever even begin to be, the sacrifice for a world's sin. But, mind, there are two ways of looking at Christ's Cross. You must begin with recognising it as the basis of all your hope, the power by which you are delivered from sin as guilt, habit, and condemnation. And then you must take it, if it is to be the sacrifice and atonement for your sins, for the example of your lives, and mould yourselves after it. 'If any man serve Me, let him follow Me,' and here is the special region in which the following is to be realised: 'He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that hateth his life shall keep it unto life eternal.'

Now, further, let me remind you that this brief, crystallised commandment, the essence of all practical godliness and Christianity, makes the blessed peculiarity of Christian morality. People ask what it is that distinguishes the teaching of the New Testament in regard to duty, from the teaching of lofty moralists and sages of old. Not the specific precepts, though these are, in many cases, deeper. Not the individual commandments, though the perspective of human excellences and virtues has been changed in Christianity, and the gentler and sweeter graces have been enthroned in the place where the world's morality has generally set the more ostentatious ones; the hero is, roughly speaking, the world's type, the saint is the New Testament's. But the true characteristic of Christian teaching as to conduct lies in this, that the law is in a Person, and that the power to obey the law comes from the love of the Person. All things are different; unwelcome duties are made less repulsive, and hard tasks are lightened, and sorrows are made tolerable, if only we are following Him. You remember the old story in Scottish history of the knight to whom was entrusted the king's heart; how, beset by the bands of the infidels, he tossed the golden casket into the thickest of their ranks and said, 'Go on, I follow thee'; and death itself was light when that thought spurred his steed forward.

And so, brethren, it is far too hard a task to tread the road of duty which our consciences command us, unless we are drawn by Him Who is before us there on the road, and see the shining of His garments as He sets His face forward, and draws us after Him. It is easy to climb a glacier when the guide has cut with his ice-axe the steps in which he sets his feet, and we may set ours. The sternness of duty, and the rigidity of law, and the coldness of 'I ought,' are all changed when duty consists in following Christ, and He is before us on the rocky and narrow road.

This precept is all-sufficient. Of course it will be a task of wisdom, of common sense, of daily culture in prudence and other graces; to apply the generalised precept to the specific cases that emerge in our lives. But whilst the application may require a great many subordinate by-laws, the royal statute is one, and simple, and enough. 'Follow Me.' Is it not a strange thing-it seems to me to be a perfectly unique thing, inexplicable except upon one hypothesis-that a life so brief, of which the records are so fragmentary, in which some of the relationships in which we stand had no place, and which was lived out in a world so utterly different from our own, should yet avail to be a guide to men, not in regard to specific points, so much as in regard to the imperial supremacy in it of these motives-Even Christ pleased not Himself; 'My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me.'

And so, brethren, take this sharp test and apply it honestly to your own lives, day by day, in all their minutiae as well as in their great things. ‘If any man serve Me,’ how miserably that Christian ‘service’ has been evacuated of its deepest meaning, and superficialised and narrowed! ‘Service’-that means people getting into a building and singing and praying. Service-that means acts of beneficence, teaching and preaching and giving material or spiritual helps of various kinds. These things have almost monopolised the word. But Christ enlarges its shrivelled contents once more, and teaches us that, far above all specifically so-called acts of religious worship, and more indispensable than so-called acts of Christian activity and service, lies the self-sacrificing conformity of character to Him. ‘If any man serve Me,’ let him sing and praise and pray? Yes; ‘If any man serve Me,’ let him try to help other people, and in the service of man do service to Me? Yes; but deeper than all, and fundamental to the others, ‘If any man serve Me, let him follow Me’-Is that my discipleship? Let each one of us professing Christians ask himself.

II. We have here the all-sufficient hope for the future.

I know few things more beautiful than the perfectly naive way in which the greatest of thoughts is here set forth by the simplest of figures. If two men are walking on the same road to a place, the one that is in front will get there first, and his friend that is coming up after him will get there second, if he keeps on; and they will be united at the end, because, one after the other, they travel the road. And so says Christ: ‘Of course, if you follow Me, you will join Me; and where I am, there shall also My servant be.’ The implications of a Christian life, which is true following of Christ here, necessarily led to the confidence that in that future there will be union with Him. That is a deep thought, which might afford material for much to be said, but on which I cannot dwell now.

I remarked at an early stage of this sermon how singular it was that our Lord should present Himself as the Pattern for all human excellence. Is it not even more singular that He should venture to present His own companionship as the sufficient recompense for every sorrow, for every effort, for all pain, for all pilgrimage? To be with Him, He thinks, is enough for any man and enough for all men. Who did He think Himself to be?

What did He suppose His relation to the rest of us to be, who could thus calmly suggest to the world that the only thing that a heart needed for blessedness was to be beside Him? And we believe it, too little as it influences our lives. ‘To be with Christ’ is ‘very much better’; better than all beneath the stars; better than all on this side eternity.

What does our Lord mean by this all-sufficient hope? We know very little of that dim region beyond, but we know that until He comes again His departed servants are absent from the body. And, in our sense of the word, there can be no place for spirits thus free from corporeal environment. And so place, to-day at all events for the departed saints, and in a subordinate degree all through eternity, even when they are clothed with a glorified body, must be but a symbol of state, of condition, of spiritual character. ‘Where I am there shall My servant be,’ means specially ‘What I am, that shall My servant be.’ This perfect conformity to that dear Lord, whose footsteps we have followed; assimilation there, which is the issue of imitation here, though broken and imperfect, this is the hope that may gladden and animate every Christian heart.

To be with Him is to be like Him, and therefore to be conscious of His presence in some fashion so intimate, so certain, as that all our earthly notions of presence, derived from the juxtaposition of corporeal frames, are infinite distance as compared with it. That is what my text dimly shadows for us. We know not how that union, which is to be as close as is possible while the distinction of personality is retained, may be accomplished. But this we know, that the coalescence of two drops of mercury, the running together of two drops of water, the blending of heart with heart here in love, are distance in comparison with the complete union of Christ and of the happy soul that rests in Him, as in an atmosphere and an ocean. Oh, brethren! it is not a thing to talk about; it is a thing to take to our hearts, and in silence to be thankful for; ‘absent from the body; present with the Lord.’

And is that not enough? The ground of it is enough. ‘If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him.’ That future companionship is guaranteed to the Christian man by the words of Incarnate Truth, and by the resurrection of his Lord. The ground of it is enough, and the contents are enough-enough for faith;

enough for hope; enough for peace; enough for work; and eminently enough for comfort.

Ah! there are many other questions that we would fain ask, but to which there is no reply; but as the good old rough music of one of the eighteenth-century worthies has it, we have sufficient.

'My knowledge of that life is small,
The eye of faith is dim;
But 'tis enough that Christ knows all,
And I shall be with Him.'

'It is enough for the disciple that he be as' [that is, with] 'his Master.' So let us take that thought to our hearts and animate ourselves with it, for it is legitimate for us to do so. That one hope is sufficient for us all.

Only let us remember that, according to the teaching of my text, the companionship that blesses the future is the issue of following Him now. I know of no magic in death that is able to change the direction in which a man's face is turned. As he is travelling and has travelled, so he will travel when he comes through the tunnel, and out into the brighter light yonder. The line of a railway marked upon a map may stop at the boundaries of the country with which the map is concerned, but it is clearly going somewhere, and in the same direction. You want the other sheet of the map in order to see whither it is going. That is like your life. The map stops very abruptly, but the line does not stop. Take an unfinished row of tenements. On the last house there stick out bricks preparatory to the continuation of the row. And so our lives are, as it were, studded over with protuberances and preparations for the attachment thereto of a 'house not made with hands,' and yet conformed in its architecture to the row that we have built. The man that follows will attain. For life, the all-sufficient law is, after Christ; for hope, the all-sufficient assurance is, with Christ.

56)John 12:32

John

THE UNIVERSAL MAGNET

Joh. 12:32.

‘Never man spake like this Man,’ said the wondering Temple officials who were sent to apprehend Jesus. There are many aspects of our Lord’s teaching in which it strikes one as unique; but perhaps none is more singular than the boundless boldness of His assertions of His importance to the world. Just think of such sayings as these: ‘I am the Light of the world’; ‘I am the Bread of Life’; ‘I am the Door’; ‘A greater than Solomon is here’; ‘In this place is One greater than the Temple.’ We do not usually attach much importance to men’s estimate of themselves; and gigantic claims such as these are generally met by incredulity or scorn. But the strange thing about Christ’s loftiest assertions of His world-wide worth and personal sinlessness is that they provoke no contradiction, and that the world takes Him at His own valuation. So profound is the impression that He has made, that men assent when He says, ‘I am meek and lowly in heart,’ and do not answer as they would to anybody else, ‘If you were, you would never have said so.’

Now there is no more startling utterance of this extraordinary self-consciousness of Jesus Christ than the words that I have used for my text. They go deep down into the secret of His power. They open a glimpse into His inmost thoughts about Himself which He very seldom shows us. And they come to each of us with a very touching and strong personal appeal as to what we are doing with, and how we individually are responding to, that universal appeal on which He says that He is exercising.

I. So I wish to dwell on these words now, and ask you first to notice here our Lord’s forecasting of the Cross.

A handful of Greeks had come up to Jerusalem to the Passover, and they desired to see Jesus, perhaps only because they had heard about Him, and to gratify some fleeting curiosity; perhaps for some deeper and more sacred reason. But in that tiny incident our Lord sees the first green blade coming up above the ground which was the prophet of an abundant harvest; the first drop of a great abundance of rain. He recognises that He is beginning to pass out from Israel into the world. But the thought of His world-wide influence thus indicated and prophesied immediately brings along with it the thought of what must be gone through before that influence can be established. And he discerns that, like the corn of wheat that falls into the ground, the condition of fruitfulness for Him is death.

Now we are to remember that our Lord here is within a few hours of Gethsemane, and a few days of the Cross, and that events had so unfolded themselves that it needed no prophet to see that there could only be one end to the duel which he had deliberately brought about between Himself and the rulers of Israel. So that I build nothing upon the anticipation of the Cross, which comes out at this stage in our Lord's history, for any man in His position might have seen, as clearly as He did, that His path was blocked, and that very near at hand, by the grim instrument of death. But then remember that this same expression of my text occurs at a very much earlier period of our Lord's career, and that if we accept this Gospel of John, at the very beginning of it He said, 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up'; and that that was no mere passing thought is obvious from the fact that midway in His career, if we accept the testimony of the same Gospel, He used the same expression to cavilling opponents when He said: 'When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then shall ye know that I am He.' And so at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of His career the same idea is cast into the same words, a witness of the hold that it had upon Him, and the continual presence of it to His consciousness.

I do not need to refer here to other illustrations and proofs of the same thing, only I desire to say, as plainly and strongly as I can, that modern ideas that Jesus Christ only recognised the necessity of His death at a late stage of His work, and that like other reformers, He began with buoyant hope, and thought that He had but to speak and the world would hear, and, like other reformers, was disenchanted by degrees, are, in my poor judgment, utterly baseless, and bluntly contradicted by the Gospel narratives. And so, dear brethren, this is the image that rises before us, and that ought to appeal to us all very plainly; a Christ who, from the first moment of His consciousness of Messiahship-and how early that consciousness was I am not here to inquire-was conscious likewise of the death that was to close it. 'He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister,' and likewise for this end, 'to give His life a ransom for the many.' That gracious, gentle life, full of all charities, and long-suffering, and sweet goodness, and patience, was not the life of a Man whose heart was at leisure from all anxiety about Himself, but the life of a Man before whom there stood, ever grim and distinct away on the horizon, the Cross and Himself upon it. You all remember a well-known picture that suggests the 'Shadow of Death,' the shadow of the Cross falling, unseen by Him, but seen with open eyes of horror by His mother. But the reality is a far more pathetic one than that; it is this, that He came on purpose to die.

But now there is another point suggested by these remarkable words, and that is that our Lord regarded the Cross of shame as exaltation or 'lifting up.' I do not believe that the use of this remarkable phrase in our text finds its explanation in the few inches of elevation above the surface of the ground to which the crucified victims were usually raised. That is there, of course, but there is something far deeper and more wonderful than that in the background, and it is this in part, that that Cross, to Christ's eyes, bore a double aspect. So far as the inflicters or the externals of it were concerned, it was ignominy, shame, agony, the very lowest point of humiliation. But there was another side to it. What in one aspect is the nadir, the lowest point beneath men's feet, is in another aspect the zenith, the very highest point in the bending heaven above us. So throughout this Gospel, and very emphatically in the text, we find that we have the complement of the Pauline view of the Cross, which is, that it was shame and agony. For our Lord says, 'Now the hour is come when the Son of Man shall be glorified.' Whether it is glory or shame depends on what it was that bound Him there. The reason for His enduring it makes it the very climax and flaming summit of His flaming love. And, therefore, He is lifted up not merely because the Cross is elevated above the ground on the little elevation of Calvary, but that Cross is His throne, because there, in highest and sovereign fashion, are set forth His glories, the glories of His love, and of the 'grace and truth' of which He was 'full.'

So let us not forget this double aspect, and whilst we bow before Him who 'endured the Cross, despising the shame,' let us also try to understand and to feel what He means when, in the vision of it, He said, 'the hour is come that the Son of Man shall be glorified.' It was meant for mockery, but mockery veiled unsuspected truth when they twined round His pale brows the crown of thorns, thereby setting forth unconsciously the everlasting truth that sovereignty is won by suffering; and placed in His unresisting hand the sceptre of reed, thereby setting forth the deep truth of His kingdom, that dominion is exercised in gentleness. Mightier than all rods of iron, or sharp swords which conquerors wield, and more lustrous and splendid than tiaras of gold glistening with diamonds, are the sceptre of reed in the hands, and the crown of thorns on the head, of the exalted, because crucified, Man of Sorrows.

But there is still another aspect of Christ's vision of His Cross, for the 'lifting up' on it necessarily draws after it the lifting up to the dominion of the heavens. And so the Apostle, using a word kindred with that of my text, but intensifying it by addition, says, 'He became obedient even unto the death of the Cross, wherefore God also hath highly lifted Him up.'

So here we have Christ's own conception of His death, that it was inevitable, that it was exaltation even in the act of dying, and that it drew after it, of inevitable necessity, dominion exercised from the heavens over all the earth. He was lifted up on Calvary, and because He was lifted up He has carried our manhood into the place of glory, and sitteth at the right hand of the Majesty on high. So much for the first point to which I would desire to turn your attention.

II. Now we have here our Lord disclosing the secret of His attractive power.

'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.' That 'if' expresses no doubt, it only sets forth the condition. The Christ lifted up on the Cross is the Christ that draws men. Now I would have you notice the fact that our Lord thus unveils, as it were, where His power to influence individuals and humanity chiefly resides. He speaks about His death in altogether a different fashion from that of other men, for He does not merely say, 'If I be lifted up from the earth, this story of the Cross will draw men,' but He says, 'I will' do it; and thus contemplates, as I shall have to say in a moment, continuous personal influence all through the ages.

Now that is not how other people have to speak about their deaths, for all other men who have influenced the world for good or for evil, thinkers and benefactors, and reformers, social and religious, all of them come under the one law that their death is no part of their activity, but terminates their work, and that thereafter, with few exceptions, and for brief periods, their influence is a diminishing quantity. So one Apostle had to say, ‘To abide in the flesh is more needful for you,’ and another had to say, ‘I will endeavour that after my decease ye may keep in mind the things that I have told you’; and all thinkers and teachers and helpers glide away further and further, and are wrapped about with thicker and thicker mists of oblivion, and their influence becomes less and less.

The best that history can say about any of them is, ‘This man, having served his generation by the will of God, fell on sleep.’ But that other Man who was lifted on the Cross saw no corruption, and the death which puts a period to all other men’s work was planted right in the centre of His, and was itself part of that work, and was followed by a new form of it which is to endure for ever.

The Cross is the magnet of Christianity. Jesus Christ draws men, but it is by His Cross mainly, and that He felt this profoundly is plain enough, not only from such utterances as this of my text, but, to go no further, from the fact that He has asked us to remember only one thing about Him, and has established that ordinance of the Communion or the Lord’s Supper, which is to remind us always, and to bear witness to the world, of where is the centre of His work, and the fact which He most desires that men should keep in mind, not the graciousness of His words, not their wisdom, not the good deeds that He did, but ‘This is My body broken for you . . . this cup is the New Testament in My blood.’ A religion which has for its chief rite the symbol of a death, must enshrine that death in the very heart of the forces to which it trusts to renew the world, and to bless individual souls.

If, then, that is true, if Jesus Christ was not all wrong when He spoke as He did in my text, then the question arises, what is it about His death that makes it the magnet that will draw all men? Men are drawn by cords of love. They may be driven by other means, but they are drawn only by love. And what is it that makes Christ’s death the highest and noblest and most wonderful and transcendent manifestation of love that the world has ever seen, or ever can see? No doubt you will think me very narrow and old-fashioned when I answer the question, with the profoundest conviction of my own mind, and, I hope, the trust of my own heart. The one thing that entitles men to interpret Christ's death as the supreme manifestation of love is that it was a death voluntarily undertaken for a world's sins.

If you do not believe that, will you tell me what claim on your heart Christ has because He died? Has Socrates any claim on your heart? And are there not hundreds and thousands of martyrs who have just as much right to be regarded with reverence and affection as this Galilean carpenter's Son has, unless, when He died, He died as the Sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, and for yours and mine? I know all the pathetic beauty of the story. I know how many men's hearts are moved in some degree by the life and death of our Lord, who yet would hesitate to adopt the full-toned utterance which I have now been giving. But I would beseech you, dear friends, to lay this question seriously to heart, whether there is any legitimate reason for the reverence, the love, the worship, which the world is giving to this Galilean young man, if you strike out the thought that it was because He loved the world that He chose to die to loose it from the bands of its sin. It may be, it is, a most pathetic and lovely story, but it has not power to draw all men, unless it deals with that which all men need, and unless it is the self-surrender of the Son of God for the whole world.

III. And now, lastly, we have here our Lord anticipating continuous and universal influence.

I have already drawn attention to the peculiar fullness of the form of expression in my text, which, fairly interpreted, does certainly imply that our Lord at that supreme moment looked forward, as I have already said, to His death, not as putting a period to His work, but as being the transition from one form of influence operating upon a very narrow circle, to another form of influence which would one day flood the world. I do not need to dwell upon that thought, beyond seeking to emphasise this truth, that one ought to feel that Jesus Christ has a living connection now with each of us. It is not merely that the story of the Cross is left to work its results, but, as I for my part believe, that the dear Lord, who, before He became Man, was the Light of the World, and enlightened every man that came into it, after His death is yet more the Light of the World, and is exercising influence all over the earth, not only by conscience and the light that is within us, nor only through the effects of the record of His past, but by the continuous operations of His Spirit. I do not dwell upon that thought further than to say that I beseech you to think of Jesus Christ, not as One who died for our sins only, but as one who lives to-day, and to-day, in no rhetorical exaggeration but in simple and profound truth, is ready to help and to bless and to be with every one of us. ‘It is Christ that died, yea, rather that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.’

But, beyond that, mark His confidence of universal influence: ‘I will draw all men.’ I need not dwell upon the distinct adaptation of Christian truth, and of that sacrifice on the Cross, to the needs of all men. It is the universal remedy, for it goes direct to the universal epidemic. The thing that men and women want most, the thing that you want most, is that your relation with God shall be set right, and that you shall be delivered from the guilt of past sin, from the exposure to its power in the present and in the future. Whatever diversities of climate, civilisation, culture, character the world holds, every man is like every other man in this, that he has ‘sinned and come short of the glory of God.’ And it is because Christ’s Cross goes direct to deal with that condition of things that the preaching of it is a gospel, not for this phase of society or that type of men or the other stage of culture, but that it is meant for, and is able to deliver and to bless, every man.

So, brethren, a universal attraction is raying out from Christ’s Cross, and from Himself to each of us. But that universal attraction can be resisted. If a man plants his feet firmly and wide apart, and holds on with both hands to some staple or holdfast, then the drawing cannot draw. There is the attraction, but he is not attracted. You demagnetise Christianity, as all history shows, if you strike out the death on the Cross for a world’s sin. What is left is not a magnet, but a bit of scrap iron. And you can take yourself away from the influence of the attraction if you will, some of us by active resistance, some of us by mere negligence, as a cord cast over some slippery body with the purpose of drawing it, may slip off, and the thing lie there unmoved.

And so I come to you now, dear friends, with the plain question, What are you doing in response to Christ's drawing of you? He has died for you on the Cross; does that not draw? He lives to bless you; does that not draw? He loves you with love changeless as a God, with love warm and emotional as a man; does that not draw? He speaks to you, I venture to say, through my poor words, and says, 'Come unto Me, and I will give you rest'; does that not draw? We are all in the bog. He stands on firm ground, and puts out a hand. If you like to clutch it, by the pledge of the nail-prints on the palm, He will lift you from 'the horrible pit and the miry clay, and set your feet upon a rock.' God grant that all of us may say, 'Draw us, and we will run after Thee'!

57)John 12:34

John

THE SON OF MAN

Joh. 12:34.

I have thought that a useful sermon may be devoted to the consideration of the remarkable name which our Lord gives to Himself-'the Son of Man.' And I have selected this instance of its occurrence, rather than any other, because it brings out a point which is too frequently overlooked, viz. that the name was an entirely strange and enigmatical one to the people who heard it. This question of utter bewilderment distinctly shows us that, and negatives, as it seems to me, the supposition which is often made, that the name 'Son of Man,' upon the lips of Jesus Christ, was equivalent to Messiah. Obviously there is no such significance attached to it by those who put this question. As obviously, for another reason, the two names do not cover the same ground; for our Lord sedulously avoided calling Himself the Christ, and habitually called Himself the Son of Man.

Now one thing to observe about this name is that it is never found upon the lips of any but Jesus Christ. No man ever called him the Son of Man whilst He was upon earth, and only once do we find it applied to Him in the rest of Scripture, and that is on the occasion on which the first martyr, Stephen, dying at the foot of the old wall, saw ‘the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ Two other apparent instances of the use of the expression occur, both of them in the Book of Revelation, both of them quotations from the Old Testament, and in both the more probable reading gives ‘a Son of Man,’ not ‘the Son of Man.’

One more preliminary remark and I will pass to the title itself. The name has been often supposed to be taken from the remarkable prophecy in the Book of Daniel, of one ‘like a son of man,’ who receives from the Ancient of Days an everlasting kingdom which triumphs over those kingdoms of brute force which the prophet had seen. No doubt there is a connection between the prophecy and our Lord’s use of the name, but it is to be observed that what the prophet speaks of is not ‘the Son,’ but ‘one like a son of man’; or in other words, that what the prophecy dwells upon is simply the manhood of the future King in contradistinction to the bestial forms of Lion and Leopard and Bear, whose kingdoms go down before him. Of course Christ fulfils that prediction, and is the ‘One like a son of man,’ but we cannot say that the title is derived from the prophecy, in which, strictly speaking, it does not occur.

What, then, is the force of this name, as applied to Himself by our Lord?

First, we have in it Christ putting out His hand, if I may say so, to draw us to Himself-identifying Himself with us. Then we have, just as distinctly, Christ, by the use of this name, in a very real sense distinguishing Himself from us, and claiming to hold a unique and solitary relation to mankind. And then we have Christ, by the use of this name in its connection with the ancient prophecy, pointing us onward to a wonderful future.

I. First then, Christ thereby identifies Himself with us.

The name Son of Man, whatever more it means, declares the historical fact of His Incarnation, and the reality and genuineness, the completeness and fullness, of His assumption of humanity. And so it is significant to notice that the name is employed continually in the places in the Gospels where especial emphasis is to be placed, for some reason or other, upon our Lord’s manhood, as, for instance, when He would bring into view the depth of His humiliation. It is this name that He uses when He says: ‘Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head.' The use of the term there is very significant and profound; He contrasts His homelessness, not with the homes of men that dwell in palaces, but with the homes of the inferior creatures. As if He would say, 'Not merely am I individually homeless and shelterless, but I am so because I am truly a man, the only creature that builds houses, and the only creature that has not a home. Foxes have holes, anywhere they can rest, the birds of the air have,' not as our Bible gives it, 'nests,' but 'roosting-places, any bough will do for them. All living creatures are at home in this material universe; I, as a Representative of humanity, wander a pilgrim and a sojourner.' We are all restless and homeless; the creatures correspond to their environment. We have desires and longings, wild yearnings, and deep-seated needs, that 'wander through eternity'; the Son of Man, the representative of manhood, 'hath not where to lay His head.'

Then the same expression is employed on occasions when our Lord desires to emphasise the completeness of His participation in all our conditions. As, for instance, 'the Son of Man came eating and drinking,' knowing the ordinary limitations and necessities of corporeal humanity; having the ordinary dependence upon external things; nor unwilling to taste, with pure and thankful lip, whatever gladness may be found in man's path through the supply of natural appetites.

And the name is employed habitually on occasions when He desires to emphasise His manhood as having truly taken upon itself the whole weight and weariness of man's sin, and the whole burden of man's guilt, and the whole tragicalness of the penalties thereof, as in the familiar passages, so numerous that I need only refer to them and need not attempt to quote them, in which we read of the Son of Man being 'betrayed into the hands of sinners'; or in those words, for instance, which so marvellously blend the lowliness of the Man and the lofty consciousness of the mysterious relation which He bears to the whole world; 'The Son of Man came, not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for the many.'

Now if we gather all these instances together [and they are only specimens culled almost at random], and meditate for a moment on the Name as illuminated by such words as these, they suggest to us, first, how truly and how blessedly He is ‘bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh.’ All our human joys were His. He knew all human sorrow. The ordinary wants of human nature belonged to Him; He hungered, He thirsted, and was weary; He ate and drank and slept. The ordinary wants of the human heart He knew; He was hurt by hatred, stung by ingratitude, yearned for love; His spirit expanded amongst friends, and was pained when they fell away. He fought and toiled, and sorrowed and enjoyed. He had to pray, to trust, and to weep. He was a Son of Man, a true man among men. His life was brief; we have but fragmentary records of it for three short years. In outward form it covers but a narrow area of human experience, and large tracts of human life seem to be unrepresented in it. Yet all ages and classes of men, in all circumstances, however unlike those of the peasant Rabbi who died when he was just entering mature manhood, may feel that this man comes closer to them than all beside. Whether for stimulus for duty, or for grace and patience in sorrow, or for restraint in enjoyment, or for the hallowing of all circumstances and all tasks, the presence and example of the Son of Man are sufficient. Wherever we go, we may track His footsteps by the drops of His blood upon the sharp flints that we have to tread. In all narrow passes, where the briars tear the wool of the flock, we may see, left there on the thorns, what they rent from the pure fleece of the Lamb of God that went before. The Son of Man is our Brother and our Example.

And is it not beautiful, and does it not speak to us touchingly and sweetly of our Lord’s earnest desire to get very near us and to bring us very near to Him, that this name, which emphasises humiliation and weakness and the likeness to ourselves, should be the name that is always upon His lips? Just as, if I may compare great things with small, some teacher or philanthropist, that went away from civilised into savage life, might leave behind him the name by which he was known in Europe, and adopt some barbarous designation that was significant in the language of the savage tribe to whom he was sent, and say to them: ‘That is my name now, call me by that,’ so this great Leader of our souls, who has landed upon our coasts with His hands full of blessings, His heart full of love, has taken a name that makes Him one of ourselves, and is never wearied of speaking to our hearts, and telling us that it is that by which He chooses to be known. It is a touch of the same infinite condescension which prompted His coming, that makes

Him choose as His favourite and habitual designation the name of weakness and identification, the name ‘Son of Man.’

II. But now turn to what is equally distinct and clear in this title. Here we have our Lord distinguishing Himself from us, and plainly claiming a unique relationship to the whole world.

Just fancy how absurd it would be for one of us to be perpetually insisting on the fact that he was a man, to be taking that as his continual description of himself, and pressing it upon people’s attention as if there was something strange about it. The idea is preposterous; and the very frequency and emphasis with which the name comes from our Lord’s lips, lead one to suspect that there is something lying behind it more than appears on the surface. That impression is confirmed and made a conviction, if you mark the article which is prefixed, the Son of Man. A Son of man is a very different idea. When He says ‘the Son of Man’ He seems to declare that in Himself there are gathered up all the qualities that constitute humanity; that He is, to use modern language, the realised Ideal of manhood, the typical Man, in whom is everything that belongs to manhood, and who stands forth as complete and perfect. Appropriately, then, the name is continually used with suggestions of authority and dignity contrasting with those of humiliation. ‘The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath,’ ‘The Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins’ and the like. So that you cannot get away from this, that this Man whom the whole world has conspired to profess to admire for His gentleness, and His meekness, and His lowliness, and His religious sanity, stood forward and said: ‘I am complete and perfect, and everything that belongs to manhood you will find in Me.’

And it is very significant in this connection that the designation occurs more frequently in the first three Gospels than in the fourth; which is alleged to present higher notions of the nature and personality of Jesus Christ than are found in the other three. There are more instances in Matthew’s Gospel in which our Lord calls Himself the Son of Man, with all the implication of uniqueness and completeness which that name carries; there are more even in the Gospel of the Servant, the Gospel according to Mark, than in the Gospel of the Word of God, the Gospel according to John. And so I think we are entitled to say that by this name, which the testimony of all our four Gospels makes it certain, even to the most suspicious reader, that Christ applied to Himself, He declared His humanity, His absolutely perfect and complete humanity.

In substance He is claiming the same thing for Himself that Paul claimed for Him when he called Him 'the second Adam.' There have been two men in the world, says Paul, the fallen Adam, with his infantile and undeveloped perfections, and the Christ, with His full and complete humanity. All other men are fragments, He is the 'entire and perfect chrysolite.' As one of our epigrammatic seventeenth-century divines has it, 'Aristotle is but the rubbish of an Adam,' and Adam is but the dim outline sketch of a Jesus. Between these two there has been none. The one Man as God meant him, the type of man, the perfect humanity, the realised ideal, the home of all the powers of manhood, is He who Himself claimed that place for Himself, and stepped into it with the strange words upon His lips, 'I am meek and lowly of heart.'

'Who is this Son of Man?' Ah, brethren! 'who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one.' A perfect Son of Man, born of a woman, 'bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh,' must be more than a Son of Man. And that moral completeness and that ideal perfection in all the faculties and parts of His nature which drove the betrayer to clash down the thirty pieces of silver in the sanctuary in despair that 'he had betrayed innocent blood'; which made Pilate wash his hands 'of the blood of this just person'; which stopped the mouths of the adversaries when He challenged them to convince Him of sin, and which all the world ever since has recognised and honoured, ought surely to lead us to ask the question, 'Who is this Son of Man?' and to answer it, as I pray we all may answer it, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!'

This fact of His absolute completeness invests His work with an altogether unique relationship to the rest of mankind. And so we find the name employed upon His own lips in connections in which He desires to set Himself forth as the single and solitary medium of all blessing and salvation to the world-as, for instance, 'The Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for the many'; 'Ye shall see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.' He is what the ladder was in the vision to the patriarch, with his head upon the stone and the Syrian sky over him-the Medium of all communication between earth and heaven. And that ladder which joins heaven to earth, and brings all angels down on the solitary watchers, comes straight down, as the sunbeams do, to every man wherever he is. Each of us sees the shortest line from his own standing-place to the central light, and its beams come straight to the apple of each man’s eye. So because Christ is more than a man, because He is the Man, His blessings come to each of us direct and straight, as if they had been launched from the throne with a purpose and a message to us alone. Thus He who is in Himself perfect manhood touches all men, and all men touch Him, and the Son of Man, whom God hath sealed, will give to every one of us the bread from heaven. The unique relationship which brings Him into connection with every soul of man upon earth, and makes Him the Saviour, Helper, and Friend of us all, is expressed when He calls Himself the Son of Man.

III. And now one last word in regard to the predictive character of this designation.

Even if we cannot regard it as being actually a quotation of the prophecy in the Book of Daniel, there is an evident allusion to that prophecy, and to the whole circle of ideas presented by it, of an everlasting dominion, which shall destroy all antagonistic power, and of a solemn coming for judgment of One like a Son of Man.

We find, then, the name occurring on our Lord’s lips very frequently in that class of passages with which we are so familiar, and which are so numerous that I need not quote them to you; in which He speaks of the second coming of the Son of Man; as, for instance, that one which connects itself most distinctly with the Book of Daniel, the words of high solemn import before the tribunal of the High Priest. ‘Hereafter shall ye see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming in the glories of heaven’; or as when He says, ‘He hath given Him authority to execute judgment also because He is the Son of Man’; or as when the proto-martyr, with his last words, declared in sudden burst of surprise and thrill of gladness, ‘I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’

Two thoughts are all that I can touch on here. The name carries with it a blessed message of the present activity and perpetual manhood of the risen Lord. Stephen does not see Him as all the rest of Scripture paints Him, sitting at the right hand of God, but standing there. The emblem of His sitting at the right hand of God represents triumphant calmness in the undisturbed confidence of victory. It declares the completeness of the work that He has done upon earth, and that all the history of the future is but the unfolding of the consequences of that work which by His own testimony waa finished when He bowed His head and died. But the dying martyr sees him standing, as if He had sprung to His feet in response to the cry of faith from the first of the long train of sufferers. It is as if the Emperor upon His seat, looking down upon the arena where the gladiators are contending to the death, could not sit quiet amongst the flashing axes of the lictors and the purple curtains of His throne, and see their death-struggles, but must spring to His feet to help them, or at least bend down with the look and with the reality of sympathy. So Christ, the Son of Man, bearing His manhood with Him,

'Still bends on earth a Brother's eye,'

and is the ever-present Helper of all struggling souls that put their trust in Him.

Then as to the other and main thought here in view-the second coming of that perfect Manhood to be our Judge. It is too solemn a subject for human lips to say much about. It has been vulgarised, and the power taken out of it by many well-meant attempts to impress it upon men's hearts. But that coming is certain. That manhood could not end its relationship to us with the Cross, nor yet with the slow, solemn, upward progress which bore Him, pouring down blessings, up into the same bright cloud that had dwelt between the cherubim and had received Him into its mysterious recesses at the Transfiguration. That He should come again is the only possible completion of His work.

That Judge is our Brother. So in the deepest sense we are tried by our Peer. Man's knowledge at its highest cannot tell the moral desert of anything that any man does. You may judge action, you may sentence for breaches of law, you may declare a man clear of any blame for such, but for any one to read the secrets of another heart is beyond human power; and if He that is the Judge were only a man there would be wild work, and many a blunder in the sentences that were given. But when we think that it is the Son of Man that is our Judge, then we know that the Omniscience of divinity, that ponders the hearts and reads the motives, will be all blended with the tenderness and sympathy of humanity; that we shall be judged by One who knows all our frame, not only with the knowledge of a Maker, if I may so say, as from outside, but with the knowledge of a possessor, as from within; that we shall be judged by One who has fought and conquered in all temptations; and most blessed of all, that we shall be judged by One with whom we have only to plead His own work and His own love and His Cross that we may stand acquitted before His throne.

So, brethren, in that one mighty Name all the past, present, and future are gathered and blended together. In the past His Cross fills the retrospect: for the future there rises up, white and solemn, His judgment throne. 'The Son of Man is come to give His life a ransom for the many'; that is the centre point of all history. The Son of Man shall come to judge the world; that is the one thought that fills the future. Let us lay hold by true faith on the mighty work which He has done on the Cross, then we shall rejoice to see our Brother on the throne, when the 'judgment is set and the books are opened.' Oh, friends, cleave to Him ever in trust and love, in communion and imitation, in obedience and confession, that ye may be accounted worthy 'to stand before the Son of Man' in that day!

58)John 12:35-36

John

A PARTING WARNING

Joh. 12:35 - Joh. 12:36.

These are the last words of our Lord's public ministry. He afterwards spoke only to His followers in the sweet seclusion of the sympathetic home at Bethany, and amid the sanctities of the upper chamber. 'Yet a little while am I with you'; -the sun had all but set. Two days more, and the Cross was reared on Calvary, but there was yet time to turn to the light. And so His divine charity 'hoped all things,' and continued to plead with those who had so long rejected Him. As befits a last appeal, the words unveil the heart of Christ. They are solemn with warning, radiant with promise, almost beseeching in their earnestness. He loves too well not to warn, but He will not leave the bitterness of threatening as a last savour on the palate, and so the lips, into which grace is poured, bade farewell to His enemies with the promise and the hope that even they may become 'the sons of light.'

The solemnity of the occasion, then, gives great force to the words; and the remembrance of it sets us on the right track for estimating their significance. Let us see what lessons for us there may be in Christ's last words to the world.

I. There is, first, a self-revelation.

It is no mere grammatical pedantry that draws attention to the fact that four times in this text does our Lord employ the definite article, and speak of 'the light.' And that that is no mere accident is obvious from the fact that, in the last clause of our text, where the general idea of light is all that is meant to be emphatic, the article is omitted. 'Yet a little while is the light with you; walk while ye have the light . . . . While ye have the light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light.'

So then, most distinctly here, in His final appeal to the world, He draws back the curtain, as it were, takes away the shade that had covered the lamp, and lets one full beam stream out for the last impression that He leaves. Is it not profoundly significant and impressive that then, of all times, over and over again, in the compass of these short verses, this Galilean peasant makes the tremendous assertion that He is what none other can be, in a solitary and transcendent sense, the Light of Mankind? Undismayed by universal rejection, unfaltering in spite of the curling lips of incredulity and scorn, unbroken by the near approach of certain martyrdom, He presents Himself before the world as its Light. Nothing in the history of mad, fanatical claims to inspiration and divine authority is to be compared with these assertions of our Lord. He is the fontal Source, He says, of all illumination; He stands before the whole race, and claims to be 'the Master-Light of all our seeing.' Whatsoever ideas of clearness of knowledge, of rapture of joy, of whiteness of purity, are symbolised by that great emblem, He declares that He manifests them all to men. Others may shine; but they are, as He said, ‘lights kindled,’ and therefore ‘burning.’ Others may shine, but they have caught their radiance from Him. All teachers, all helpers, all thinkers draw their inspiration, if they have any, from Him, in whom was life, and the Life was the Light of men.

There has been blazing in the heavens of late a new star, that burst upon astonished astronomers in a void spot; but its brilliancy, though far transcending that of our sun, soon began to wane, and before long, apparently, there will be blackness again where there was blackness before. So all lights but His are temporary as well as derived, and men ‘willing for a season to rejoice’ in the fleeting splendours, and to listen to the teacher of a day, lose the illumination of his presence and guidance of his thoughts as the ages roll on. But the Light is ‘not for an age, but for all time.’

Now, brethren, this is Christ’s estimate of Himself. I dwell not on it for the purpose of seeking to exhaust its depth of significance. In it there lies the assertion that He, and He only, is the source of all valid knowledge of the deepest sort concerning God and men, and their mutual relations. In it lie the assertion that He, and He only, is the source of all true gladness that may blend with our else darkened lives, and the further assertion that from Him, and from Him alone, can flow to us the purity that shall make us pure. We have to turn to that Man close by His Cross, on whom while He spoke the penumbra of the eclipse of death was beginning to show itself, and to say to Him what the Psalmist said of old to the Jehovah whom he knew, and whom we recognise as indwelling in Jesus: ‘With Thee is the fountain of life. Thou makest us to drink of the river of Thy pleasures. In Thy light shall we see light.’

So Christ thought of Himself; so Christ would have as to think of Him. And it becomes a question for us how, if we refuse to accept that claim of a solitary, underived, eternal, and universal power of illuminating mankind, we can save His character for the veneration of the world. We cannot go picking and choosing amongst the Master’s words, and say ‘This is historical, and that mythical.’ We cannot select some of them, and leave others on one side. You must take the whole Christ if you take any Christ.

And the whole Christ is He who, within sight of Calvary, and in the face of all but universal rejection, lifted up His voice, and, as His valediction to the world, declared, ‘I am the Light of the world.’ So He says to us. Oh that we all might cast ourselves before Him, with the cry, ‘Lighten our darkness, O Lord, we beseech Thee!’

II. Secondly, we have here a double exhortation.

‘Walk in the light; believe in the light.’ These two sum up all our duties; or rather, unveil for us the whole fullness of the possible privileges and blessings of which our relation to that light is capable. It is obvious that the latter of them is the deeper in idea, and the prior in order of sequence. There must be the ‘belief’ in the light before there is the ‘walk’ in the light. Walking includes the ideas of external activity and of progress. And so, putting these two exhortations together, we get the whole of Christianity considered as subjective. ‘Believe in the light; trust in the light,’ and then ‘walk’ in it. A word, then, about each of these branches of this double exhortation.

‘Trust in the light.’ The figure seems to be dropped at first sight; for it wants little faith to believe in the sunshine at midday; and when the light is pouring out, how can a man but see it? But the apparent incongruity of the metaphor points to something very deep in regard to the spiritual side. We cannot but believe in the light that meets the eye when it meets it, but it is possible for a man to blind himself to the shining of this light. Therefore the exhortation is needed-’Believe in the light,’ for only by believing it can you see it. Just as the eye is the organ of sight, just as its nerves are sensitive to the mysterious finger of the beam, just as on its mirroring surface impinges the gentle but mighty force that has winged its way across all the space between us and the sun, and yet falls without hurting, so faith, the ‘inward eye which makes the bliss’ of the solitary soul, is the one organ by which you and I can see the light. ‘Seeing is believing,’ says the old proverb. That is true in regard to the physical. Believing is seeing, is much rather the way to put it in regard to the spiritual and divine.

Only as we trust the light do we see the light. Unless you and I put our confidence in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, we have no adequate knowledge of Him and no clear vision of Him. We must know that we may love; but we must love that we may know. We must believe that we may see. True, we must see that we may believe, but the preliminary vision which precedes belief is slight and dim as compared with the solidity and the depth of assurance with which we apprehend the reality and know the lustre of Him whom our faith has grasped. You will never know the glory of the light, nor the sweetness with which it falls upon the gazing eye, until you turn your face to that Master, and so receive on your susceptible and waiting heart the warmth and the radiance which He only can bestow. ‘Believe in the light.’ Trust it; or rather, trust Him who is it. He cannot deceive. This light from heaven can never lead astray. Absolutely we may rely upon it; unconditionally we must follow it. Lean upon Him-to take another metaphor-with all your weight. His arm is strong to bear the burden of our weaknesses, sorrows, and, above all, our sins. ‘While ye have light, trust the light.’

But then that is not enough. Man, with his double relations, must have an active and external as well as an inward and contemplative life. And so our Lord, side by side with the exhortation on which I have been touching, puts the other one, ‘Walk in the light.’ Our inward emotions, however deep and precious, however real the affiance, however whole-hearted the love, are maimed and stunted, and not what the light requires, unless there follows upon them the activity of the walk. What do we get the daylight for? To sit and gaze at it? By no means; but that it may guide us upon our path and help us in all our work. And so all Christian people need ever to remember that Jesus Christ has indissolubly bound together these two phases of our relation to Him as the light of life-inward and blessed contemplation by faith and outward practical activity. To walk is, of course, the familiar metaphor for the external life of man, and all our deeds are to be in conformity with the Light, and in communion with Him. This is the deepest designation, perhaps, of the true character of a Christian life in its external aspect-that it walks in Christ, doing nothing but as His light shines, and ever bearing along with it conscious fellowship with Him who is thus the guiding and irradiating and gladdening and sanctifying life of our lives, ‘Walk in the light as He is in the light.’ Our days fleet and change; His are stable and the same. For, although these words which I have quoted, in their original application refer to God the Father, they are no less true about Him who rests at the right hand of God, and is one light with Him. He is in the light. We may approximate to that stable and calm radiance, even though our lives are passed through changing scenes, and effort and struggle are their characteristics. And oh! how blessed, brother, such a life will be, all gladdened by the unsetting and unclouded sunshine that even in the shadiest places shines, and turns the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death into solemn light; teaching gloom to glow with a hidden sun!

But there is not only the idea of activity here, there is the further notion of progress. Unless Christian people to their faith add work, and have both their faith and their consequent work in a continual condition of progress and growth, there is little reason to believe that they apprehend the light at all. If you trust the light you will walk in it; and if your days are not in conformity nor in communion with Him, and are not advancing nearer and nearer to the central blaze, then it becomes you to ask yourselves whether you have verily seen at all, or trusted at all, 'the Light of life.'

III. Thirdly, there is here a warning.

'Walk whilst ye have the light, lest the darkness come upon you.' That is the summing up of the whole history of that stiff-necked and marvellous people. For what has all the history of Israel been since that day but groping in the wilderness without any pillar of fire? But there is more than that in it. Christ gives us this one solemn warning of what falls on us if we turn away from Him. Rejected light is the parent of the densest darkness, and the man who, having the light, does not trust it, piles around himself thick clouds of obscurity and gloom, far more doleful and impenetrable than the twilight that glimmers round the men who have never known the daylight of revelation. The history of un-Christian and anti-Christian Christendom is a terrible commentary upon these words of the Master, and the cries that we hear all round us to-day from men who will not follow the light of Christ, and moan or boast that they dwell in agnostic darkness, tell us that, of all the eclipses that can fall upon heart and mind, there is none so dismal or thunderously dark as that of the men who, having seen the light of Christ in the sky, have turned from it and said, 'It is no light, it is only a mock sun.' Brethren, tempt not that fate.

And if Christian men and women do not advance in their knowledge and their conformity, like clouds of darkness will fall upon them. None is so hopeless as the unprogressive Christian, none so far away as those who have been brought nigh and have never come any nigher. If you believe the light, see that you growingly trust and walk in it, else darkness will come upon you, and you will not know whither you go.

IV. And lastly, there is here a hope and a promise.

'That ye may be the sons of light.'

Faith and obedience turn a man into the likeness of that in which he trusts. If we trust Jesus we open our hearts to Him; and if we open our hearts to Him He will come in. If you are in a darkened room, what have you to do in order to have it filled with glad sunshine? Open the shutters and pull up the blinds, and the light will do all the rest. If you trust the light, it will rush in and fill every crevice and cranny of your hearts. Faith and obedience will mould us, by their natural effect, into the resemblance of that on which we lean. As one of the old German mystics said, 'What thou lovest, that thou dost become.' And it is blessedly true. The same principle makes Christians like Christ, and makes idolaters like their gods. 'They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them,' says one of the Psalms. 'They followed after vanity and are become vain,' says the chronicler of Israel's defections. 'We with unveiled faces beholding'-or mirroring-'the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image.' Trust the light and you become 'sons of the light.'

And so, dear friends, all of us may hope that by degrees, as the reward of faith and of walking, we still may bear the image of the heavenly, even here on earth. While as yet we only believe in the light, we may participate in its transforming power, like some far-off planet on the utmost bounds of some solar system, that receives faint and small supplies of light and warmth, through a thick atmosphere of vapour, and across immeasurable spaces. But we have the assurance that we shall be carried nearer our centre, and then, like the planets that are closer to the sun than our earth is, we shall feel the fuller power of the heat, and be saturated with the glory of the light. 'We shall see Him as He is'; and then we too 'shall blaze forth like the sun in the kingdom of our Father.'

59)John 13:1

THE LOVE OF THE DEPARTING CHRIST

Joh. 13:1.

The latter half of St. John’s Gospel, which begins with these words, is the Holy of Holies of the New Testament. Nowhere else do the blended lights of our Lord’s superhuman dignity and human tenderness shine with such lambent brightness. Nowhere else is His speech at once so simple and so deep. Nowhere else have we the heart of God so unveiled to us. On no other page, even of the Bible, have so many eyes, glistening with tears, looked and had the tears dried. The immortal words which Christ spoke in that upper chamber are His highest self-revelation in speech, even as the Cross to which they led up is His most perfect self-revelation in act.

To this most sacred part of the New Testament my text is the introduction. It unveils to us gleams of Christ’s heart, and does what the Evangelists very seldom venture to do, viz. gives us some sort of analysis of the influences which then determined the flow and the shape of our Lord’s love.

Many good commentators prefer to read the last words of my text, ‘He loved them unto the uttermost’ rather than ‘unto the end’-so taking them to express the depth and degree rather than the permanence and perpetuity of our Lord’s love. And that seems to me to be by far the worthier and the nobler meaning, as well as the one which is borne out by the usual signification of the expression in other Greek authors. It is much to know that the emotions of these last moments did not interrupt Christ’s love. It is even more to know that in some sense they perfected it, giving even a greater vitality to its tenderness, and a more precious sweetness to its manifestations. So understood, the words explain for us why it was that in the sanctity of the upper chamber there ensued the marvellous act of the foot-washing, the marvellous discourses which follow, and the climax of all, that High-priestly prayer. They give utterance to a love which Christ’s consciousness at that solemn hour tended to shapen and to deepen.

So, under the Evangelist’s guidance, we may venture to gaze at least a little way into these depths, and with all reverence to try and see something at all events of the fringe and surface of the love 'which passeth knowledge.' 'Jesus, knowing that His hour was come, that He should depart out of the world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, loved them then unto the uttermost.'

My object will be best accomplished by simply following the guidance of the words before us, and asking you to look first at that love as a love which was not interrupted, but perfected by the prospect of separation.

I. It would take us much too far away, however interesting the contemplation might be, to dwell with any particularity upon our Lord's consciousness as it is here set forth in that 'He knew that His hour was come, that He should depart out of the world unto the Father.'

But I can scarcely avoid noticing, though only in a few sentences, the salient points of that Christ-consciousness as it is set forth here.

'He knew that His hour was come.' All His life was passed under the consciousness of a divine necessity laid upon Him, to which He lovingly and cheerfully yielded Himself. On His lips there are no words more significant, and few more frequent, than that divine 'I must!' 'It behoves the Son of Man' to do this, that, and the other-yielding to the necessity imposed by the Father's will, and sealed by His own loving resolve to be the Saviour of the world. And in like manner, all through His life He declares Himself conscious of the hours which mark the several crises and stages of His mission. They come to Him and He discerns them. No external power can coerce Him to any act till the hour come. No external power can hinder Him from the act when it comes. When the hour strikes He hears the phantom sound of the bell; and, hearing, He obeys. And thus, at the last and supreme moment, to Him it dawned unquestionable and irrevocable. How did He meet it? Whilst on the one hand there was the shrinking of which we have such pathetic testimony in the broken prayer that He Himself amended-'Father! save Me from this hour . . . . Yet for this cause came I unto this hour,'-there is a strange, triumphant joy, blending with the shrinking, that the decisive hour is at last come.

Mark, too, the form which the consciousness took-not that now the hour had come for suffering or death or bearing the sins of the world-all which aspects of it were nevertheless present to Him, as we know; but that now He was soon to leave all the world beneath Him and to return to the Father.

The terror, the agony, the shame, the mysterious burden of a world's sins were now to be laid upon Him-all these elements are submerged, as it were, and become less conspicuous than the one thought of leaving behind all the limitations, and the humiliations, and the compelled association with evil which, like a burning brand laid upon a tender skin, was an hourly and momentary agony to Him, and soaring above them all, unto His own calm home, His habitation from eternity with the Father, as He had been before the world was. How strange this blending of shrinking and of eagerness, of sorrow and of joy, of human trembling consciousness of impending death, and of triumphant consciousness of the approach of the hour when the Son of Man, even in His bitterest agony and deepest humiliation, should, paradoxically, be glorified, and should 'leave the world to go unto the Father'!

We cannot enter with any particularity or depth into this marvellous and unique consciousness, but it is set forth here-and that is the point to which especially I desire to turn your attention-as the basis and the reason for a special tenderness softening His voice, and taking possession of His heart, as He thought of the impending separation.

And is that not beautiful? And does it not help us to realise how truly 'bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh,' and bearing a heart thrilling with all innocent human emotions that divine Saviour was? We, too, have known what it is to feel, because of approaching separation from dear ones, the need for a tenderer tenderness. At such moments the masks of use and wont drop away, and we are eager to find some word, to put our whole souls into some look, our whole strength into one clinging embrace that may express all our love, and may be a joy to two hearts for ever after to remember. The Master knew that longing, and felt the pain of separation; and He, too, yielded to the human impulse which makes the thought of parting the key to unlock the hidden chambers of the most jealously guarded heart, and let the shyest of its emotions come out for once into the daylight. So, ‘knowing that His hour was come, He loved them unto the uttermost.’

But there is not only in this a wonderful expression of the true humanity of the Christ, but along with that a suggestion of something more sacred and deeper still. For surely amidst all the parting scenes that the world’s literature has enshrined, amidst all the examples of self-oblivion at the last moment, when a martyr has been the comforter of his weeping friends, there are none that without degradation to this can be set by the side of this supreme and unique instance of self-oblivion. Did not Christ, for the sake of that handful of poor people, first and directly, and for the rest of us afterwards, of course, secondarily and indirectly, so suppress all the natural emotions of these last moments as that their absolute absence is unique and singular, and points onwards to something more, viz. that this Man who was susceptible of all human affections, and loved us with a love which is not merely high above our grasp, absolute, perfect, changeless and divine, but with a love like our own human affection, had also more than a man’s heart to give us, and gave us more, when, that He might comfort and sustain, He crushed down Himself and went to the Cross with words of tenderness and consolation and encouragement for others upon His lips? Knowing all that was lying before Him, He was neither absorbed nor confounded, but carried a heart at leisure to love even then ‘unto the uttermost.’

And if the prospect only sharpened and perfected, nor interrupted for one instant the flow of His love, the reality has no power to do aught else. In the glory, when He reached it, He poured out the same loving heart; and to-day He looks down upon us with the same Face that bent over the table in the upper room, and the same tenderness flows to us. When John saw his Master next, after His Ascension, amidst the glories of the vision in his rocky Patmos, though His face was as the sun shineth in his strength, it was the old face. Though His hand bore the stars in a cluster, it was the hand that had been pierced with the nails. Though the breast was girded with the golden girdle of sovereignty and of priesthood, it was the breast on which John’s happy head had lain; and though the ‘Voice was as the sound of many waters,’ it soothed itself to a murmur, gentle as that with which the tideless sea about him rippled upon the silvery sand when He said, ‘Fear not

. . . I am the First and the Last.’ Knowing that He goes to the Father, He loves to the uttermost, and being with the Father, He still so loves.

II. And now I must, with somewhat less of detail, dwell upon the other points which this text brings out for us. It suggests to us next that we have in the love of Jesus Christ a love which is faithful to the obligations of its own past.

Having loved, He loves. Because He had been a certain thing, therefore He is and He shall be that same. That is an argument that implies divinity. About nothing human can we say that because it has been therefore it shall be. Alas! about much that is human we have to say the converse, that because it has been, therefore it will cease to be. And though, blessed be God! they are few and they are poor who have had no experience in their lives of human hearts whose love in the past has been such that it manifestly is for ever, yet we cannot with the same absolute confidence say about one another, even about the dearest, ‘Having loved, he loves.’ But we can say so about Christ. There is no exhaustion in that great stream that pours out from His heart; no diminution in its flow.

They tell us that the central light of our system, that great sun itself, pouring out its rays exhausts its warmth, and were it not continually replenished, must gradually, and even though continually replenished, will ultimately cease to blaze, and be a dead, cold mass of ashes. But this central Light, this heart of Christ, which is the Sun of the World, will endure like the sun, and after the sun is cold, His love will last for ever. He pours it out and has none the less to give. There is no bankruptcy in His expenditure, no exhaustion in His effort, no diminution in His stores. ‘Thy mercy endureth for ever’; ‘Thou hast loved, therefore Thou wilt love’ is an inference for time and for eternity, on which we may build and rest secure.

III. Then, still further, we have here this love suggested as being a love which has special tenderness towards its own. ‘Having loved His own, He loved them to the uttermost.’

These poor men who, with all their errors, did cleave to Him; who, in some dim way, understood somewhat of His greatness and His sweetness-and do you and I do more?-who, with all their sins, yet were true to Him in the main; who had surrendered very much to follow Him, and had identified themselves with Him, were they to have no special place in His heart because in that heart the whole world lay? Is there any reason why we should be afraid of saying that the universal love of Jesus Christ, which gathers into His bosom all mankind, does fall with special tenderness and sweetness upon those who have made Him theirs and have surrendered themselves to be His? Surely it must be that He has special nearness to those who love Him; surely it is reasonable that He should have special delight in those who try to resemble Him; surely it is only what one might expect of Him that He should in a special manner honour the drafts, so to speak, of those who have confidence in Him, and are building their whole lives upon Him. Surely, because the sun shines down upon dunghills and all impurities, that is no reason why it should not lie with special brightness on the polished mirror that reflects its lustre. Surely, because Jesus Christ loves-Blessed be His name!-the publicans and the harlots and the outcasts and the sinners, that is no reason why He should not bend with special tenderness over those who, loving Him, try to serve Him, and have set their whole hopes upon Him. The rainbow strides across the sky, but there is a rainbow in every little dewdrop that hangs glistening on the blades of grass. There is nothing limited, nothing sectional, nothing narrow in the proclamation of a special tenderness of Christ towards His own, when you accompany with that truth this other, that all men are besought by Him to come into that circle of ‘His own,’ and that only they themselves shut any out therefrom. Blessed be His name! the whole world dwells in His love, but there is an inner chamber in which He discovers all His heart to those who find in that heart their Heaven and their all. ‘He came to His own,’ in the wider sense of the word, and ‘His own received Him not’; but also, ‘having loved His own He loved them unto the end.’ There are textures and lives which can only absorb some of the rays of light in the spectrum; some that are only capable of taking, so to speak, the violet rays of judgment and of wrath, and some who open their hearts for the ruddy brightness at the other end of the line. Do you see to it, brethren, that you are of that inner circle who receive the whole Christ into their hearts, and to whom He can unfold the fullness of His love.

IV. And, lastly, my text suggests that love of Christ as being made specially tender by the necessities and the dangers of His friends. ‘He

loved His own which were in the world,' and so loving them, 'loved them to the uttermost.'

We have, running through these precious discourses which follow my text, many allusions to the separation which was to ensue, and to His leaving His followers in circumstances of peculiar peril, defenceless and solitary. 'I come unto Thee, and am no more in the world,' says He in the final High-priestly prayer, 'but these are in the world. Holy Father, keep them through Thine own name.' The same contrast between the certain security of the Shepherd and the troubled perils of the scattered flock seems to be in the words of my text, and suggests a sweet and blessed reason for the special tenderness with which He looked upon them. As a dying father on his deathbed may yearn over orphans that he is leaving defenceless, so Christ is here represented as conscious of an accession even to the tender longings of His heart, when He thought of the loneliness and the dangers to which His followers were to be exposed.

Ah! It seems a harsh contrast between the Emperor, sitting throned there between the purple curtains, and the poor athletes wrestling in the arena below. It seems strange to think that a loving Master has gone up into the mountain, and has left His disciples to toil in rowing on the stormy sea of life; but the contrast is only apparent. For you and I, if we love and trust Him, are with Him 'in the heavenly places' even whilst we toil here, and He is with us, working with us, even whilst He 'sitteth at the right hand of God.'

We may be sure of this, brethren, that that love ever increases its manifestations according to our deepening necessities. The darker the night the more lustrous the stars. The deeper, the narrower, the savager, the Alpine gorge, usually the fuller and the swifter the stream that runs through it. And the more that enemies and fears gather round about us, the sweeter will be the accents of our Comforter's voice, and the fuller will be the gifts of tenderness and grace with which He draws near to us. Our sorrows, dangers, necessities, are doors through which His love can come nigh.

So, dear friends, we have had experience of sweet and transient human love; we have had experience of changeful and ineffectual love; turn away from them all to this immortal, deep heart of Christ's, welling over with a love which no change can affect, which no separation can diminish, which no sin can provoke, which becomes greater and tenderer as our necessities increase, and ask Him to fill your hearts with that, that you may ‘know the length and breadth and depth and height of that love which passeth knowledge,’ and so ‘be filled with all the fullness of God.’

60)John 13:3-5

John

THE SERVANT-MASTER

Joh. 13:3 - Joh. 13:5.

It has been suggested that the dispute as to ‘which was the greatest,’ which broke the sanctities of the upper chamber, was connected with the unwillingness of each of the Apostles to perform the menial office of washing the feet of his companions. They had come in from Bethany, and needed the service. But apparently it was omitted, and although we can scarcely suppose that the transcendent act which is recorded in my text was performed at the beginning of the meal, yet I think we shall not be wrong if we see in it a reference to the neglected service.

The Evangelist who tells us of the dispute, and does not tell us of the foot-washing, preserves a sentence which finds its true meaning only in this incident, ‘I am among you as He that serveth.’ And although John is the only recorder of this pathetic incident, there are allusions in other parts of Scripture which seem to hint at it. As, for instance, when Paul speaks of ‘taking upon Him the form of a servant’; and still more strikingly when Peter employs the remarkable word, which he does employ in his exhortation, ‘Be ye clothed with humility.’ For the word rendered there ‘clothed’ occurs only in that one place in Scripture, and means literally the putting on of a slave’s costume. One can scarcely help, then, seeing in these three passages to which I have referred echoes of this incident which John alone preserves to us. And so we get at once a hint of the harmony and of the incompleteness of the Gospel records.

I. Consider the motives of this act.

Now that is ground upon which the Evangelists very seldom enter. They tell us what Christ did, but very rarely do they give us any glimpses into why He did it. But this section of the Gospel is remarkable for its full and careful analysis of what Christ's impelling motives were in the final acts of His life. How did John find out why Christ did this deed? Perhaps he who had 'leaned upon His bosom at supper,' and was evidently very closely associated with Him, may, in some unrecorded hour of intimate communion during the forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension, have heard from the Master the exposition of His motives. But more probably, I think, the long years of growing likeness to his Lord, and of meditation upon the depth of meaning in the smallest events that his faithful memory recalled, taught him to understand Christ's purpose and motives. 'The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him,' and the liker we get to our Master and the more we are filled with His Spirit, the more easy will it be for us to divine the purpose and the motives of His actions, whether as they are recorded in the Scripture or as they come to us in the experience of daily life.

But, passing that point, I desire for a moment to fix your attention on the twofold key to our Lord's action which is given in this context. There is, first of all, in the first verse of the chapter, a general exposition of what was uppermost in His mind and heart during the whole of the period in the upper room. The act in our text, and the wonderful words which follow in the subsequent chapters, crowned by that great intercessory prayer, seem to me to be all explained for us by this first unveiling of His motives. 'When Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.'

And then the words of my text, which apply more specifically to the single incident with which they are brought into connection, tell us in addition why this one manifestation of Christ's love was given. 'Knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He was come from God, and went to God.' There, then, are two explanations of motive, the one covering a wider area than the other, but both converging on the incident before us.

The first of these is just this-the consciousness of impending separation moved Christ to a more than ordinarily tender manifestation of His love. For the rendering which you will find in the margin of the Revised Version, ‘He loved them to the uttermost,’ seems to me to be truer to the Evangelist’s meaning than the other, ‘He loved them unto the end.’ For it was more to John’s purpose to tell us that the shadow of the Cross only brought to the surface in more blessed and wonderful representation the deep love of His heart, than simply to tell us that that shadow did not stop its flow. It is much to know that all through His sorrow He continued to love; it is far more to know that the sorrow sharpened its poignancy, and deepened its depth, and made more tender its tenderness.

How near to the man Christ that thought brings us! Do we not all know the impulse to make parting moments tender moments? The masks of use and wont drop off; the reticence which we, perhaps wisely, ordinarily cultivate in regard to our deepest feelings melts away. We yearn to condense all our unspoken love into some one word, act, look, or embrace, which it may afterwards be life to two hearts to remember. And Jesus Christ felt this. Because He was going away He could not but pour out Himself yet more completely than in the ordinary tenor of His life. The earthquake lays bare hidden veins of gold, and the heart opens itself out when separation impends. We shall never understand the works of Jesus Christ if we do as we are all apt to do, think of them as having only a didactic and doctrinal purpose. We must remember that there is in Him the true play of a human heart, and that it was to relieve His own love, as well as to teach these men their duty, that he rose from the supper, and prepared Himself to wash the disciples’ feet.

Then, on the other hand, the other motive which is brought by the Evangelists more immediately into connection with this incident is, ‘knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He was come from God, and went to God.’

The consciousness of the highest dignity impels to the lowliest submission. ‘All things given into His hands,’ means universal and absolute dominion. ‘That He was come from God,’ means pre-existence, voluntary incarnation, an eternal divine nature, and unbroken communion with the Father. ‘That

He went to God,' means a voluntary departure from this low world, and a return to 'His own calm home, His habitation from eternity.'

And, gathered all together, the phrases imply His absolute consciousness of His divine nature. It was that that sent Him with the towel round His loins to wash the foul feet of the pedestrians who had come by the dusty and hot way from Bethany, and through all the abominations of an Eastern city, into the upper chamber.

This was He who from the beginning 'was with God, and was God.' This was He who was the Lord of Death, Victor over the grave. This was He who by His own power ascended up on high, and reigns on the throne of the universe to-day. This was He whose breast the same Evangelist had seen before he wrote his Gospel, 'girded with the golden girdle' of priesthood and of sovereignty; and holding, in the hands that had laid the towel on the disciples' feet, the seven stars.

Oh, brethren! if we believed our creeds, how our hearts would melt with wonder and awe that He who was so high stooped so low! 'Knowing that He came from God, and went to God,' and that even when He was kneeling there before these men, 'the Father had given all things into His hands,' what did He do? Triumph? Show His majesty? Flash His power? Demand service? 'Girded Himself with a towel and washed His disciples' feet'!

The consciousness of loftiness does not alone avail to explain the transcendent lowliness. You need the former motive to be joined with it, because it is only love which bends loftiness to service, and turns the consciousness of superiority into yearning to divest oneself of the superiorities that separate, and to emphasise the emotions which unite.

II. The detailed completeness of the act.

The remarkable particularity of the account of the stages of the humiliation suggests the eye-witness. John carried them all in his mind ineffaceably, and long, long years after that memorable hour we hear him recalling each detail of the scene. We can see the little group startled by the disturbance of the order of the meal as He rose from the table, and the hushed wonder and the open-lipped expectation with which they watched to see what the next step would be. He rises from the table and divests Himself of the upper garments which impeded movement. ‘What will He do next?’ He takes the basin, standing there to be ready for washing the apostles’ feet, but unused, and not even filled with water. He fills it Himself, asking none to help Him. He girds the towel round Him; and then, perhaps, begins with the betrayer; at any rate, not with Peter.

Cannot you see them, as they look? Do not you feel the solemnity of the detailed particular account of each step?

And may we not also say that all is a parable, or illustration, on a lower level, of the very same principles which were at work in the mightier fact of the greater condescension of His ‘becoming flesh and dwelling among us’? He ‘rose from the table,’ as He rose from His place in ‘the bosom of the Father.’ He disturbed the meal as He broke the festivities of the heavens. He divested Himself of His garments, as ‘He thought not equality with God a thing to be worn eagerly’; and ‘He girded Himself with the towel,’ as He put on the weakness of flesh. Himself He filled the basin, by His own work providing the means of cleansing; and Himself applied the cleansing to the feet of those who were with Him. It is all a working out of the same double motive which drew Him downwards to our earth. The reason why He stooped, with His hands to wash the disciples’ feet, is the same as the reason why He had hands to wash with-viz., that knowing Himself to be high over all, and loving all, He chose to become one with us, that we might become like unto Him. So the details of the act are a parable of His incarnation and death.

III. And then, still further, note the purpose of the deed.

Now although I have said that we never rightly understand our Lord’s actions if we are always looking for dogmatic or doctrinal purposes, and thinking of them rather as being lectures, and sometimes rebukes in act, than as being the outgush of His emotions and His human-divine nature, yet we have also to take into account their moral and spiritual lessons. His acts are words and His words are acts. And although the main and primary purpose of this incident, in so far as it had any other purpose than to relieve Christ’s own love by manifesting itself, and to comfort the disciples’ hearts by the tender manifestation, was to teach them their duty, as we shall presently see, yet the special aspect of cleansing, which comes out so emphatically and prominently in the episode of Peter's refusal, is to be carried all along through the interpretation of the incident. This was the reason why Jesus Christ came from heaven and assumed flesh, and this was the reason why Jesus Christ, assuming flesh, bowed Himself to this menial office-to make men clean.

I venture to say that we never understand Jesus Christ and His work until we recognise this as its prominent purpose, to cleanse us from sin. An inadequate conception of what we need, shallow, superficial views of the gravity and universality and obstinacy of the fact of sin, are an impenetrable veil between us and all real understanding of Jesus Christ. There is no adequate motive for such an astounding fact as the incarnation and sacrifice of the Son of God, except the purpose of redeeming the world. If you do not believe that you-you individually, and all of us your brethren-need to be cleansed, you will find it hard to believe in the divinity and atonement of Jesus Christ. If you have been down into the depths of your own heart, and found out what tremendous, diabolic power your own evil nature and sin have upon you, then you will not be content with anything less than the incarnate God who stoops from heaven to bear the burden of your sin, and to take it all away. If you want to understand why He laid aside His garments and took the servile form of our manhood, the appeal of man's sin to His love and the answer of His Divine condescension are the only explanation.

Again, let me remind you that there is no cleansing without Christ. Can you do it for yourselves, do you think? There is an old proverb, 'One hand washes the other.' That is true about stains on the flesh. It is not true about stains on our spirits. Nobody can do it for us but Jesus Christ alone. He kneels before us, having the right and the power to wash us because He has died for us. Kings of England used to touch for 'the king's evil,' and lay their pure fingers upon feculent masses of corruption. Our King's touch is sovereign for the corruption and incipient putrefaction of our sin; and there is no power in heaven or earth that will make a man clean except the power of Jesus Christ. It is either Jesus Christ or filthiness.

If I might pass from my text for one moment, I would remind you of the episode which immediately follows, and suggest that if Jesus Christ is not cleansing us He is nothing to us. ‘If I wash thee not, thou hast no part in Me.’ I know, of course, that it is possible to have partial, rudimentary, and sometimes reverent conceptions of that Lord without recognising in Him the great ‘Fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness.’ But I am sure of this, that there is no real, living possession of Jesus Christ such as men’s souls need, and such as will outlast the disintegrating influences of death, unless it be such a possession of Him as appropriates for its own, primarily, His cleansing power. First of all He must cleanse, and then all other aspects of His glory, and gifts of His grace, will pour into our hearts.

No understanding of Christ, then, without the recognition that cleansing is the purpose and the vindication of His incarnation and sacrifice; no cleansing without Christ; no Christ worth calling by the name without cleansing.

IV. And so, lastly, note the pattern in this act.

You will remember that it is followed by solemn words spoken after He had taken His garments and resumed His place at the table, in which there blended, in the most wonderful fashion, the consciousness of authority, both as Teacher of truth and as Guide of life, and the sweetest and most loving lowliness. In them Jesus prescribed the wonderful act of His condescending love and cleansing power as the law of the Christian life. There are too many of us who profess to be quite willing to trust to Jesus Christ as the Cleanser of our souls who are not nearly so willing to accept His Example as the pattern for our lives; and I would have you note, as an extremely remarkable point, that all the New Testament references to our Lord as being our Example are given in immediate connection with His passion. The very part of His life which we generally regard as being most absolutely unique and inimitable is the fact in His life which Apostles and Evangelists select as the one to set before us for our example.

Do you ask if any man can copy the sufferings of Jesus Christ? In regard to their virtue and efficacy, No. In regard to their motive-in one aspect, No; in another aspect, Yes. In regard to the spirit that impelled Him we may copy Him. The smallest trickle of water down a city gutter will carve out of the mud at its side little banks and cliffs, and exhibit all the phenomena of erosion on the largest scale, as the Mississippi does over half a continent, and the tiniest little wave in a basin will fall into the same curves as the billows of mid-ocean. You and I, in our little lives, may even aspire to ‘do as I have done to you.’

The true use of superiority is service. Noblesse oblige! Bank, wealth, capacity, talents, all things are given to us that we may use them to the last particle for our fellows. Only when the world and society have awakened to that great truth which the towel-girded, kneeling Christ has taught us, will society be organised on the principles that God meant.

But, further, the highest form of service is to cleanse. Cleansing is always dirty work for the cleaners, as every housemaid knows. You cannot make people clean by scolding them, by lecturing them, by patronising them. You have to go down into the filth if you mean to lift them out of it; and leave your smelling-bottles behind; and think nothing repulsive if your stooping to it may save a brother.

The only way by which we can imitate that example is by, first of all, participating in it for ourselves. We must, first of all, have the Cross as our trust, before it can become our pattern and our law. We must first say, ‘Lord! not my feet only, but also my hands and my head,’ and then, in the measure in which we ourselves have received the cleansing benediction, we shall be impelled and able to lay our gentle hands on foulness and leprosy; and to say to all the impure, ‘Jesus Christ, who hath cleansed me, makes thee clean.’

61)John 13:25

Matthew

‘IS IT I?’

Mat. 26:22, Mat. 26:25. - Joh. 13:25.

The genius of many great painters has portrayed the Lord’s Supper, but the reality of it was very different from their imaginings. We have to picture to ourselves some low table, probably a mere tray spread upon the ground, round which our Lord and the twelve reclined, in such a fashion as that the head of each guest came against the bosom of him that reclined above him; the place of honour being at the Lord’s left hand, or higher up the table than Himself, and the second place being at His right, or below Himself.

So there would be no eager gesticulations of disciples starting to their feet when our Lord uttered the sad announcement, ‘One of you shall betray Me!’ but only horror-struck amazement settled down upon the group. These verses, which we have put together, show us three stages in the conversation which followed the sad announcement. The three evangelists give us two of these; John alone omits these two, and only gives us the third.

First, we have their question, born of a glimpse into the possibilities of evil in their hearts, ‘Lord, is it I?’ The form of that question in the original suggests that they expected a negative answer, and might be reproduced in English: ‘Surely it is not I?’ None of them could think that he was the traitor, yet none of them could be sure that he was not. Their Master knew better than they did; and so, from a humble knowledge of what lay in them, coiled and slumbering, but there, they would not meet His words with a contradiction, but with a question. His answer spares the betrayer, and lets the dread work in their consciences for a little longer, for their good. For many hands dipped in the dish together, to moisten their morsels; and to say, ‘He that dippeth with Me in the dish, the same shall betray Me,’ was to say nothing more than ‘One of you at the table.’

Then comes the second stage. Judas, reassured that he has escaped detection for the moment, and perhaps doubting whether the Master had anything more than a vague suspicion of treachery, or knew who was the traitor, shapes his lying lips with loathsome audacity into the same question, but yet not quite the same, The others had said, ‘Is it I, Lord?’ he falters when he comes to that name, and dare not say ‘Lord!’ That sticks in his throat. ‘Rabbi!’ is as far as he can get. ‘Is it I, Rabbi?’ Christ’s answer to him, ‘Thou hast said,’ is another instance of patient longsuffering. It was evidently a whisper that did not reach the ears of any of the others, for he leaves the room without suspicion. Our Lord still tries to save him from himself by showing Judas that his purpose is known, and by still concealing his name.

Then comes the third stage, which we owe to John’s Gospel. Here again he is true to his task of supplementing the narrative of the three synoptic Gospels. Remembering what I have said about the attitude of the disciples at the table, we can understand that Peter, if he occupied the principal place at the Lord’s left, was less favourably situated for speaking to Christ than John, who reclined in the second seat at His right, and so he beckoned over the Master’s head to John. The Revised Version gives the force of the original more vividly than the Authorised does: ‘He, leaning back, as he was, on Jesus' breast, saith unto Him, Lord! who is it?' John, with a natural movement, bends back his head on his Master's breast, so as to ask and be answered, in a whisper. His question is not, 'Is it I?' He that leaned on Christ's bosom, and was compassed about by Christ's love, did not need to ask that. The question now is, 'Who is it?' Not a question of presumption, nor of curiosity, but of affection; and therefore answered: 'He it is to whom I shall give the sop, when I have dipped it.'

The morsel dipped in the dish and passed by the host's hand to a guest, was a token of favour, of unity and confidence. It was one more attempt to save Judas, one more token of all-forgiving patience. No wonder that that last sign of friendship embittered his hatred and sharpened his purpose to an unalterable decision, or, as John says: 'After the sop, Satan entered into him.' For then, as ever, the heart which is not melted by Christ's offered love is hardened by it.

Now, if we take these three stages of this conversation we may learn some valuable lessons from them. I take the first form of the question as an example of that wholesome self-distrust which a glimpse into the slumbering possibilities of evil in our hearts ought to give us all. I take the second on the lips of Judas, as an example of the very opposite of that self-distrust, the fixed determination to do a wrong thing, however clearly we know it to be wrong. And I take the last form of the question, as asked by John, as an illustration of the peaceful confidence which comes from the consciousness of Christ's love, and of communion with Him. Now a word or two about each of these.

I. First, we have an example of that wholesome self-distrust, which a glimpse into the possibilities of evil that lie slumbering in all our hearts ought to teach every one of us.

Every man is a mystery to himself. In every soul there lie, coiled and dormant, like hibernating snakes, evils that a very slight rise in the temperature will wake up into poisonous activity. And let no man say, in foolish self-confidence, that any form of sin which his brother has ever committed is impossible for him. Temperament shields us from much, no doubt. There are sins that 'we are inclined to,' and there are sins that 'we have no mind to.' But the identity of human nature is deeper than the diversity of temperament, and there are two or three considerations that should abate a man's confidence that anything which one man has done it is impossible that he should do. Let me enumerate them very briefly. Remember, to begin with, that all sins are at bottom but varying forms of one root. The essence of every evil is selfishness, and when you have that, it is exactly as with cooks who have the 'stock' by the fireside. They can make any kind of soup out of it, with the right flavouring. We have got the mother tincture of all wickedness in each of our hearts; and therefore do not let us be so sure that it cannot be manipulated and flavoured into any form of sin. All sin is one at bottom, and this is the definition of it-living to myself instead of living to God. So it may easily pass from one form of evil into another, just as light and heat, motion and electricity, are all-they tell us-various forms and phases of one force. Just as doctors will tell you that there are types of disease which slip from one form of sickness into another, so if we have got the infection about us it is a matter very much of accidental circumstances what shape it takes. And no man with a human heart is safe in pointing to any sin, and saying, 'That form of transgression I reckon alien to myself.'

And then let me remind you, too, that the same consideration is reinforced by this other fact, that all sin is, if I may so say, gregarious; is apt not only to slip from one form into another, but that any evil is apt to draw another after it. The tangled mass of sin is like one of those great fields of seaweed that you some times come across upon the ocean, all hanging together by a thousand slimy growths; which, if lifted from the wave at any point, drags up yards of it inextricably grown together. No man commits only one kind of transgression. All sins hunt in couples. According to the grim picture of the Old Testament, about another matter, 'None of them shall want his mate. The wild beasts of the desert shall meet with the wild beasts of the islands.' One sin opens the door for another, 'and seven other spirits worse than himself' come and make holiday in the man's heart.

Again, any evil is possible to us, seeing that all sin is but yielding to tendencies common to us all. The greatest transgressions have resulted from yielding to such tendencies. Cain killed his brother from jealousy; David besmirched his name and his reign by animal passion; Judas betrayed Christ because he was fond of money. Many a man has murdered another one simply because he had a hot temper. And you have got a temper, and you have got the love of money, and you have got animal passions, and you have got that which may stir you up into jealousy. Your neighbour’s house has caught fire and been blown up. Your house, too, is built of wood, and thatched with straw, and you have as much dynamite in your cellars as he had in his. Do not be too sure that you are safe from the danger of explosion.

And, again, remember that this same wholesome self-distrust is needful for us all, because all transgression is yielding to temptations that assail all men. Here are one hundred men in a plague-stricken city; they have all got to draw their water from the same well. If five or six of them died of cholera it would be very foolish of the other ninety-five to say, ‘There is no chance of our being touched.’ We all live in the same atmosphere; and the temptations that have overcome the men that have headed the count of crimes appeal to you. So the lesson is, ‘Be not high-minded, but fear.’

And remember, still further, that the same solemn consideration is enforced upon us by the thought that men will gradually drop down to the level which, before they began the descent, seemed to be impossible to them. ‘Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?’ said Hazael when the crime of murdering his master first floated before him. Yes, but he did it. By degrees he came down to the level to which he thought that he would never sink. First the imagination is inflamed, then the wish begins to draw the soul to the sin, then conscience pulls it back, then the fatal decision is made, and the deed is done. Sometimes all the stages are hurried quickly through, and a man spins downhill as cheerily and fast as a diligence down the Alps. Sometimes, as the coast of a country may sink an inch in a century until long miles of the flat seabeach are under water, and towers and cities are buried beneath the barren waves, so our lives may be gradually lowered, with a motion imperceptible but most real, bringing us down within high-water mark, and at last the tide may wash over what was solid land.

So, dear friends, there is nothing more foolish than for any man to stand, self-confident that any form of evil that has conquered his brother has no temptation for him. It may not have for you, under present circumstances; it may not have for you to-day; but, oh! we have all of us one human heart, and ‘he that trusteth in his own heart is a fool.’ ‘Blessed is the man that feareth always.’ Humble self-distrust, consciousness of sleeping sin in my heart that may very quickly be stirred into stinging and striking; rigid self-control over all these possibilities of evil, are duties dictated by the plainest common-sense.

Do not say, ‘I know when to stop.’ Do not say, ‘I can go so far; it will not do me any harm.’ Many a man has said that, and many a man has been ruined by it. Do not say, ‘It is natural to me to have these inclinations and tastes, and there can be no harm in yielding to them.’ It is perfectly natural for a man to stoop down over the edge of a precipice to gather the flowers that are growing in some cranny in the cliff; and it is as natural for him to topple over, and be smashed to a mummy at the bottom. God gave you your dispositions and your whole nature ‘under lock and key,’-keep them so. And when you hear of, or see, great criminals and great crimes, say to yourself, as the good old Puritan divine said, looking at a man going to the scaffold, ‘But for the grace of God there go I!’ And in the contemplation of sins and apostasies, let us each look humbly at our own weakness, and pray Him to keep us from our brother’s evils which may easily become ours.

II. Secondly, we have here an example of precisely the opposite sort, namely, of that fixed determination to do evil which is unshaken by the clearest knowledge that it is evil.

Judas heard his crime described in its own ugly reality. He heard his fate proclaimed by lips of absolute love and truth; and notwithstanding both, he comes unmoved and unshaken with his question. The dogged determination in his heart, that dares to see his evil stripped naked and is ‘not ashamed,’ is even more dreadful than the hypocrisy and sleek simulation of friendship in his face.

Now most men turn away with horror from even the sins that they are willing to do, when they are put plainly and bluntly before them. As an old mediaeval preacher once said, ‘There is nothing that is weaker than the devil stripped naked.’ By which he meant exactly this-that we have to dress wrong in some fantastic costume or other, so as to hide its native ugliness, in order to tempt men to do it. So we have two sets of names for wrong things, one of which we apply to our brethren’s sins, and the other to the same sins in ourselves. What I do is ‘prudence,’ what you do of the same sort is ‘covetousness’; what I do is ‘sowing my wild oats,’ what you do is ‘immorality’ and ‘dissipation’; what I do is ‘generous living,’ what you do is ‘drunkenness’ and ‘gluttony’; what I do is ‘righteous indignation,’ what you do is ‘passionate anger.’ And so you may go the whole round of evil. Very bad are the men who can look at their deed, described in Its own inherent deformity, and yet say, ‘Yes; that is it, and I am going to do it.’ ‘One of you shall betray Me.’ ‘Yes; I will betray you!’ It must have taken something to look into the Master’s face, and keep the fixed purpose steady.

Now I ask you to think, dear friends, of this, that that obstinate condition of dogged determination to do a wrong thing, knowing it to be a wrong thing, is a condition to which all evil steadily tends. We may not come to it in this world-I do not know that men ever do so wholly; but we are all getting towards it in regard to the special wrong deeds and desires which we cherish and commit. And when a man has once reached the point of saying to evil, ‘Be thou my good,’ then he is a ‘devil’ in the true meaning of the word; and wherever he is, he is in hell! And the one unpardonable sin is the sin of clear recognition that a given thing is contrary to God’s will, and unfaltering determination, notwithstanding, to do it. That is the only sin that cannot be pardoned, ‘either in this world or in the world to come.’

And so, my brother, seeing that such a condition is possible, and that all the paths of evil, however tentative and timorous they may be at first, and however much the sin may be wrapped up with excuses and forms and masks, tend to that condition, let us take that old prayer upon our lips, which befits both those who distrust themselves because of slumbering sins, and those who dread being conquered by manifest iniquity:-’Who can understand his errors? Cleanse Thou me from secret faults. Keep back Thy servant also from presumptuous sins. Let them not have dominion over me.’

III. Now, lastly, we have in the last question an example of the peaceful confidence that comes from communion with Jesus Christ.

John leaned on the Master’s bosom. ‘He was the disciple whom Jesus loved.’ And so compassed with that great love, and feeling absolute security within the enclosure of that strong hand, his question is not, ‘Is it I?’ but ‘Who is it?’ From which I think we may fairly draw the conclusion that to feel that Christ loves me, and that I am compassed about by Him, is the true security against my falling into any sin.

It was not John's love to Christ, but Christ's to John that made his safety. He did not say: 'I love Thee so much that I cannot betray Thee.' For all our feelings and emotions are but variable, and to build confidence upon them is to build a heavy building upon quicksand; the very weight of it drives out the foundations. But he thought to himself-or he felt rather than he thought-that all about him lay the sweet, warm, rich atmosphere of his Master's love; and to a man who was encompassed by that, treachery was impossible.

Sin has no temptation so long as we actually enjoy the greater sweetness of Christ's felt love. Would thirty pieces of silver have been a bribe to John? Would anything that could have terrified others have frightened him from his Master's side whilst he felt His love? Will a handful of imitation jewellery, made out of coloured glass and paste, be any temptation to a man who bears a rich diamond on his finger? And will any of earth's sweetness be a temptation to a man who lives in the continual consciousness of the great rich love of Christ wrapping him round about? Brethren, not ourselves, not our faith, not our emotion, not our religious experience; nothing that is in us, is any security that we may not be tempted, and yield to the temptation, and deny or betray our Lord. There is only one thing that is a security, and that is that we be folded to the heart, and held by the hand, of that loving Lord. Then-then we may be confident that we shall not fall; for 'the Lord is able to make us stand.'

Such confidence is but the other side of our self-distrust; is the constant accompaniment of it, must have that self-distrust for its condition and prerequisite, and leads to a yet deeper and more blessed form of that self-distrust. Faith in Him and 'no confidence in the flesh' are but the two sides of the same coin, the obverse and the reverse. The seed, planted in the ground, sends a little rootlet down, and a little spikelet up, by the same vital act. And so in our hearts, as it were, the downward rootlet is self-despair, and the upward shoot is faith in Christ. The two emotions go together-the more we distrust ourselves the more we shall rest upon Him, and the more we rest upon Him, and feel that all our strength comes, not from our foot, but from the Rock on which it stands, the more we shall distrust our own ability and our own faithfulness.

Therefore, dear brethren, looking upon all the evil that is around us, and conscious in some measure of the weakness of our own hearts, let us do as a man would do who stands upon the narrow ledge of a cliff, and look sheer down into the depth below, and feels his head begin to reel and turn giddy; let us lay hold of the Guide's hand, and if we cleave by Him, He will hold up our goings that our footsteps slip not. Nothing else will. No length of obedient service is any guarantee against treachery and rebellion. As John Bunyan saw, there was a backdoor to hell from the gate of the Celestial City. Men have lived for years consistent professing Christians, and have fallen at last. Many a ship has come across half the world, and gone to pieces on the harbour bar. Many an army, victorious in a hundred fights, has been annihilated at last. No depths of religious experience, no heights of religious blessedness, no attainments of past virtue and self-sacrifice, are any guarantees for to-morrow. Trust in nothing and in nobody, least of all in yourselves and your own past. Trust only in Jesus Christ.

'Now unto Him that is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy; to the only wise God our Saviour be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and for ever.' Amen.

62)John 13:27

John

THE DISMISSAL OF JUDAS

Joh. 13:27.

When our Lord gave the morsel, dipped in the dish, to Judas, only John knew the significance of the act. But if we supplement the narrative here with that given by Matthew, we shall find that, accompanying the gift of the sop, was a brief dialogue in which the betrayer, with unabashed front, hypocritically said, 'Lord! Is it I?' and heard the solemn, sad answer, 'Thou sayest!' Two things, then, appealed to him at the moment: one, the conviction that he was discovered; the other, the wonderful assurance that he was still loved, for the gift of the morsel was a token of friendliness. He shut his heart against them both; and as he shut his heart against Christ he opened it to the devil. So ‘after the sop Satan entered into him.’ At that moment a soul committed suicide; and none of those that sat by, with the exception of Christ and the ‘disciple whom He loved,’ so much as dreamed of the tragedy going on before their eyes.

I know not that there are anywhere words more weighty and wonderful than those of our text. And I desire to try if I can at all make you feel as I feel, their solemn signification and force. ‘That thou doest, do quickly.’

I. I hear in them, first, the voice of despairing love abandoning the conflict.

If I have rightly construed the meaning of the incident, this is the plain meaning of it. And you will observe that the Revised Version, more accurately and closely rendering the words of our text, begins with a ‘Therefore.’ ‘Therefore said Jesus unto him,’ because the die was cast; because the will of Judas had conclusively welcomed Satan, and conclusively rejected Christ; therefore, knowing that remonstrance was vain, knowing that the deed was, in effect, done, Jesus Christ, that Incarnate Charity which ‘believeth all things, and hopeth all things,’ abandoned the man to himself, and said, ‘There, then, if thou wilt thou must. I have done all I can; my last arrow is shot, and it has missed the target. That then doest, do quickly.’

There is a world of solemn meaning in that one little word ‘doest.’ It teaches us the old lesson, which sense is so apt to forget, that the true actor in man’s deeds is ‘the hidden man of the heart,’ and that when it has acted, it matters comparatively little whether the mere tool and instrument of the hands or of the other organs have carried out the behest. The thing is done before it is done when the man has resolved, with a fixed will, to do it. The betrayal was as good as in process, though no step beyond the introductory ones, which could easily have been cancelled, had yet been accomplished. Because there was a fixed purpose which could not be altered by anything now, therefore Jesus Christ regards the act as completed. It is what we think in our hearts that we are; and our fixed determinations, our inclinations of will, are far more truly our doings than the mere consequences of these, embodied in actuality. It is but a poor estimate of a man that judges him by the test of what he has done. What he has wanted to do is the true man; what he has attempted to do. 'It was well that it was in thine heart!' saith God to the king who thought of building the Temple which he was never allowed to rear. 'It is ill that is in thine heart,' says He by whom actions are weighed, to the sinner in purpose, though his clean hands lie idly in his lap. These hidden movements of desire and will that never come to the surface are our true selves. Look after them, and the deeds will take care of themselves. Serpent's eggs have serpents in them. And he that has determined upon a sin has done the sin, whether his hands have been put to it or no.

But, then, turn for a moment to the other thought that is suggested here-that solemn picture of a soul left to do as it will, because divine love has no other restraints which it can impose, and is bankrupt of motives that it can adduce to prevent it from its madness. Now I do not believe, for my part, that any man in this world is so all-round 'sold unto sin' as that the seeking love of God gives him up as irreclaimable. I do not believe that there are any people concerning whom it is true that it is impossible for the grace of God to find some chink and cranny in their souls through which it can enter and change them. There are no hopeless cases as long as men are here. But, then, though there may not be so, in regard to the whole sweep of the man's nature, yet every one of us, over and over again, has known what it is to come exactly into that position in regard to some single evil or other, concerning which we have so set our teeth and planted our feet at such an angle of resistance as that God gives up dealing with us and leaves us, as He did with Balaam when He opposed his covetous inclinations to all the remonstrances of Heaven. God said at last to him 'Go!' because it was the best way to teach him what a fool he had been in wanting to go. Thus, when we determine to set ourselves against the pleadings and the beseechings of divine love, the truest kindness is to fling the reins upon our necks, and let us gallop ourselves into a sweat and weariness, and then we shall be more amenable to the touch of the rein thereafter.

Are there any people whom God is teaching obedience to His light touch, by letting them run their course after some one specific sin? Perhaps there are. At all events, let us remember that that position of being allowed to do as we like is one to which we all tend, in the measure in which we indulge our inclinations, and shut our hearts against God’s pleadings. There is such a thing as a conscience seared as with a hot iron. They used to say that there were witches’ marks on the body, places where, if you stuck a pin in, there was no feeling. Men cover themselves all over with marks of that sort, which are not sensitive even to the prick of a divine remonstrance, rebuke, or retribution. They ‘wipe their mouths and say I have done no harm.’ You can tie up the clapper of the bell that swings on the black rock, on which, if you drift, you go to pieces. You can silence the Voice by the simple process of neglecting it. Judas set his teeth against two things, the solemn conviction that Jesus Christ knew his sin, and the saving assurance that Jesus Christ loved him still. And whosoever resists either of these two is getting perilously near to the point where, not in petulance but in pity, God will say, ‘Very well, I have called and ye have refused. Now go, and do what you want to do, and see how you like it when it is done. What thou doest, do quickly.’ Do you remember the other word, ‘If ‘twere done when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well it were done quickly’? But since consequences last when deeds are past, perhaps you had better halt before you determine to do them.

II. Now, secondly, I hear in these words the voice of strangely blended majesty and humiliation.

‘What thou doest, do!’ Judas thought he had got possession of Christ’s person, and was His master in a very real sense. When lo! all at once the victim assumes the position of the Lord and commands, showing the traitor that instead of thwarting and counterworking, he was but carrying out the designs of his fancied victim; and that he was an instrument in Christ’s hands for the execution of His will. And these two thoughts, how, in effect, all antagonism, all malicious hatred, all violent opposition of every sort but work in with Christ’s purpose, and carry out His intention; and how, at the moments of deepest apparent degradation, He towers, in manifest Majesty and Masterhood, seem to me to be plainly taught in the word before us.

He uses his foes for the furtherance of His purpose. That has been the history of the world ever since. ‘The floods, O Lord, have lifted up their voice.’ And what have they done? Smashing against the breakwater, they but consolidate its mighty blocks, and prove that ‘the Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters.’ It has been so in the past, it is so to-day; it will be so till the end. Every Judas is unconsciously the servant of Him whom he seeks to betray; and finds out to his bewilderment that what he meant for a death-blow is fulfilling the very purpose and will of the Lord against whom he has turned.

Again, the combination here, in such remarkable juxtaposition, of the two things, a willing submission to the utmost extremity of shame, which the treasonous heart can froth out in its malice and, at the same time, a rising up in conscious majesty and lordship, are suggested to us by the words before us. That combination of utter lowliness and transcendent loftiness runs through the whole life and history of our Lord. Did you ever think how strong an argument that strange combination, brought out so inartificially throughout the whole of the Gospels, is for their historical veracity? Suppose the problem had been given to poets to create and to set in a series of appropriate scenes a character with these two opposites stamped equally upon it, neither of them impinging upon the domain of the other-viz., utter humility and humiliation in circumstance, and majestic sovereignty and elevation above all circumstances-do you think that any of them could have solved the problem, though- Aeschylus and Shakespeare had been amongst them, as these four men that wrote these four little tracts that we call Gospels have done? How comes it that this most difficult of literary problems has been so triumphantly solved by these men? I think there is only one answer, ‘Because they were reporters, and imagined nothing, but observed everything, and repeated what had happened.’ He reconciled these opposites who was the Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief, and yet the Eternal Son of the Father; and the Gospels have solved the problem only because they are simple records of its solution by Him.

Wherever in His history there is some trait of lowliness there is by the side of it a flash of majesty. Wherever in His history there is some gleaming out from the veil of flesh of the hidden glory of divinity, there is immediately some drawing of the veil across the glory. And the two things do not contradict nor confuse, but we stand before that double picture of a Christ betrayed and of a Christ commanding His betrayer, and using his treason, and we say, ‘The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.’

III. Again, I hear the voice of instinctive human weakness.

‘That thou doest, do quickly.’ It may be doubtful, and some of you perhaps may not be disposed to follow me in my remark, but to my ear that sounds just like the utterance of that instinctive dislike of suspense and of the long hanging over us of the sword by a hair, which we all know so well. Better to suffer than to wait for suffering. The loudest thunder-crash is not so awe-inspiring as the dread silence of nature when the sky is black before the peal rolls through the clouds. Many a martyr has prayed for a swift ending of his troubles. Many a sorrowing heart, that has been sitting cowering under the anticipation of coming evils, has wished that the string could be pulled, as it were, and they could all come down in one cold flood, and be done with, rather than trickle drop by drop. They tell us that the bravest soldiers dislike the five minutes when they stand in rank before the first shot is fired. And with all reverence I venture to think that He who knew all our weaknesses in so far as weakness was not sin, is here letting us see how He, too, desired that the evil which was coming might come quickly, and that the painful tension of expectation might be as brief as possible. That may be doubtful; I do not dwell upon it, but I suggest it for your consideration.

IV. And then I pass on to the last of the tones that I hear in these utterances-the voice of the willing Sacrifice for the sins of the world.

‘That thou doest, do quickly.’ There is nothing more obvious throughout the whole of the latter portion of the Gospel narrative than the way in which, increasingly towards its close, Jesus seemed to hasten to the Cross. You remember His own sayings: ‘I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished. I am come to cast fire on the earth; would it were already kindled!’ You remember with what a strange air-I was going to use an inappropriate word, and say, of alacrity; but, at all events, of fixed resolve-He journeyed from Galilee, in that last solemn march to Jerusalem, and how the disciples followed, astonished at the unwonted look of decision and absorption that was printed upon His countenance. If we consider His doings in that last week in Jerusalem, how he courted publicity, how He avoided no encounter with His official enemies, how He sharpened His tones, not exactly so as to provoke, but certainly so as by no means to conciliate, we shall see, I think, in it all, His consciousness that the hour had come, and His absolute readiness and willingness to be offered for the world's sin. He stretches out His hands, as it were, to draw the Cross nearer to Himself, not with any share in the weakness of a fanatical aspiration after martyrdom, but under a far deeper and more wonderful impulse.

Why was Christ so willing, so eager, if I may use the word, that His death should be accomplished? Two reasons, which at the bottom are one, answer the question. He thus hastened to His Cross because He would obey the Father's will, and because He loved the whole world-you and me and all our fellows. We were each in His heart. It was because He wanted to save thee that He said to Judas, 'Do it quickly, that the world's salvation and that man's salvation may be accomplished.' These were the cords that bound Him to the altar. Let us never forget that Judas with his treachery, and rulers with their hostility, and Pilate with his authority, and the soldiers with their nails, and centurions with their lances, and the grim figure of Death itself with its shaft, would have been all equally powerless against Christ if it had not been his loving will to die on the Cross for each of us.

Therefore, brethren, as we hear this voice, let us discern in it the tones which warn us of the danger of yielding to inclination and stifling His rebukes, till He abandons us for the moment in despair; let us hear in it the pathetic voice of a Brother, who knows all our weaknesses and has felt our emotions; let us hear the voice of Sovereign Authority which uses its enemies for its purposes, and is never loftier than when it is most lowly, whose Cross is His throne of glory, whose exaltation is His deepest humiliation, and let us hear a love which, discerning each of us through all the ages and the crowds, went willingly to the Cross because He willed that He should be our Saviour.

And seeing that time is short, and the future precarious, and delay may darken into loss and rejection, let us take these words as spoken to us in another sense, and hear in them the warning that 'to-day, if we will hear His voice, we harden not our hearts,' and when He says to us, in regard to repentance and faith, and Christian consecration and service, 'That thou doest, do quickly,' let us answer, 'I made haste and delayed not, but made haste to keep Thy commandments.'

63)John 13:31-32

John

THE GLORY OF THE CROSS

Joh. 13:31 - Joh. 13:32.

There is something very weird and awful in the brief note of time with which the Evangelist sends Judas on his dark errand. 'He . . . went immediately out, and it was night.' Into the darkness that dark soul went. That hour was 'the power of darkness,' the very keystone of the black arch of man's sin, and some shadow of it fell upon the soul of Christ Himself.

In immediate connection with the departure of the traitor comes this singular burst of triumph in our text. The Evangelist emphasises the connection by that: 'Therefore, when he was gone out, Jesus said.' There is a wonderful touch of truth and naturalness in that connection. The traitor was gone. His presence had been a restraint; and now that that 'spot in their feast of charity' had disappeared, the Master felt at ease; and like some stream, out of the bed of which a black rock has been taken, His words flow more freely. How intensely real and human the narrative becomes when we see that Christ, too, felt the oppression of an uncongenial presence, and was relieved and glad at its removal! The departure of the traitor evoked these words of triumph in another way, too. At his going away, we may say, the match was lit that was to be applied to the train. He had gone out on his dark errand, and that brought the Cross within measurable distance of our Lord. Out of a new sense of its nearness He speaks here. So the note of time not only explains to us why our Lord spoke, but puts us on the right track for understanding His words, and makes any other interpretation of them than one impossible. What Judas went to do was the beginning of Christ's glorifying. We have here, then, a triple glorification-the Son of Man glorified in His Cross; God glorified in the Son of Man; and the Son of Man glorified in God. Let us look at these three thoughts for a few moments now.

I. First, we have here the Son of Man glorified in His Cross.

The words are a paradox. Strange, that at such a moment, when there rose up before Christ all the vision of the shame and the suffering, the pain and the death, and the mysterious sense of abandonment, which was worse than them all, He should seem to stretch out His hands to bring the Cross nearer to Himself, and that His soul should fill with triumph!

There is a double aspect under which our Lord regarded His sufferings. On the one hand we mark in Him an unmistakable shrinking from the Cross, the innocent shrinking of His manhood expressed in such words as ‘I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished’; and in such incidents as the agony in Gethsemane. And yet, side by side with that, not overcome by it, but not overcoming it, there is the opposite feeling, the reaching out almost with eagerness to bring the Cross nearer to Himself. These two lie close by each other in His heart. Like the pellucid waters of the Rhine and the turbid stream of the Moselle, that flow side by side over a long space, neither of them blending discernibly with the other, so the shrinking and the desire were contemporaneous in Christ’s mind. Here we have the triumphant anticipation rising to the surface, and conquering for a time the shrinking.

Why did Christ think of His Cross as a glorifying? The New Testament generally represents it as the very lowest point of His degradation; John’s Gospel always represents it as the very highest point of His glory. And the two things are both true; just as the zenith of our sky is the nadir of the sky for those on the other side of the world. The same fact which in one aspect sounds the very lowest depth of Christ’s humiliation, in another aspect is the very highest culminating point of His glory.

How did the Cross glorify Christ? In two ways. It was the revelation of His heart; it was the throne of His sovereign power.

It was the revelation of His heart. All his life long He had been trying to tell the world how much He loved it. His love had been, as it were, filtered by drops through His words, through His deeds, through His whole demeanour and bearing; but in His death it comes in a flood, and pours itself upon the world. All His life long he had been revealing His heart, through the narrow rifts of His deeds, like some slender lancet windows; but in His death all the barriers are thrown down, and the brightness blazes out upon men. All through His life He had been trying to communicate His love to the world, and the fragrance came from the box of ointment exceeding precious, but when the box was broken the house was filled with the odour.

For Him to be known was to be glorified. So pure and perfect was He, that revelation of His character and glorification of Himself were one and the same thing. Because His Cross reveals to the world for all time, and for eternity, too, a love which shrinks from no sacrifice, a love which is capable of the most entire abandonment, a love which is diffused over the whole surface of humanity and through all the ages, a love which comes laden with the richest and the highest gifts, even the turning of selfish and sinful hearts into its own pure and perfect likeness, therefore does He say, in contemplation of that Cross which was to reveal Him for what He was to the world, and to bring His love to every one of us, ‘Now is the Son of Man glorified.’

We can fancy a mother, for instance, in the anticipation of shame, and ignominy, and suffering, and sorrow, and death which she encounters for the sake of some prodigal child, forgetting all the ignominy, and the shame, and the suffering, and the sorrow, and the death, because all these are absorbed in the one thought: ‘If I bear them, my poor, wandering, rebellious child will know at last how much I loved him.’ So Christ yearns to impart the knowledge of Himself to us, because by that knowledge we may be won to His love and service; and hence when He looks forward to the agony, and contumely, and sorrow of the close, every other thought is swallowed up in this one: ‘They will be the means by which the whole world will find out how deep my heart of love to it was.’ Therefore does He triumph and say, ‘Now is the Son of Man glorified.’

Still further, He regards His Cross as the means of His glorifying, because it is His throne of saving power. The paradoxical words of our text rest upon His profound conviction that in His death He was about to put forth a mightier and diviner power than ever He had manifested in His life. They are the same in effect and in tone as the great words: ‘I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.’ Now I want you to ask yourselves one question: In what sense is Christ’s Cross Christ’s glorifying, unless His Cross bears an altogether different relation to His life from what the death of a great teacher or benefactor ordinarily bears to his? It is impossible that Christ could have spoken such words as these of my text if He had simply thought of His death as a Plato or a John Howard might have thought of his, as being the close of his activity for the welfare of his fellows. Unless Christ’s death has in it some substantive value, unless it is something more than the mere termination of His work for the world, I see not how the words before us can be interpreted. If His death is His glorifying, it must be because in that death something is done which was not completed by the life, however fair; by the words, however wise and tender; by the works of power, however restorative and healing. Here is something more than these present. What more? This more, that His Cross is the ‘propitiation for the sins of the whole world.’ He is glorified therein, not as a Socrates might be glorified by his calm and noble death; not because nothing in His life became Him better than the leaving of it; not because the page that tells the story of His passion is turned to by us as the tenderest and most sacred in the world’s records; but because in that death He wrestled with and overcame our foes, and because, like the Jewish hero of old, dying, He pulled down the house which our tyrants had built, and overwhelmed them in its ruins. ‘Now is the Son of Man glorified.’

And so, brethren, there blend, in that last act of our Lord’s-for His death was His act-in strange fashion, the two contradictory ideas of glory and shame; like some sky, all full of dark thunderclouds, and yet between them the brightest blue and the blazing sunshine. In the Cross, Death crowns Him the Prince of Life, and His Cross is His throne. All His life long He was the Light of the World, but the very noontide hour of His glory was that hour when the shadow of eclipse lay over all the land, and He hung on the Cross dying in the dark. At His ‘eventide it was light.’ ‘He endured the Cross, despising the shame’; and lo! the shame flashed up into the very brightness of glory, and the ignominy and the suffering became the jewels of His crown. ‘Now is the Son of Man glorified.’

II. Now let us turn for a moment to the second of the threefold glorifications that are set forth here: God glorified in the Son of Man.

The mystery deepens as we advance. That God should be glorified in a man is not strange, but that He should be so glorified in the eminent and special fashion which Jesus contemplates here, is strange; and stranger still when we think that the act in which He was to be glorified was the death of an innocent Man. If God, in any special and eminent manner, is glorified in the Cross of Jesus Christ, that implies, as it seems to me, two things at all events-many more which I have not time to touch upon, but two things very plainly. One is that ‘God was in Christ,’ in some singular and eminent manner. If all His life was a continual manifestation of the divine character, if Christ’s words were the divine wisdom, if Christ’s compassion was the divine pity, if Christ’s lowliness was the divine gentleness, if His whole human life and nature were the brightest and clearest manifestation to the world of what God is, we can understand that the Cross was the highest point of the revelation of the divine nature to the world, and so was the glorifying of God in Him. But if we take any lower view of the relation between God and Christ, I know not how we can acquit these words of our Master of the charge of being a world too wide for the facts of the case.

The words involve, as it seems to me, not only that idea of a close, unique union and indwelling of God in Christ, but they involve also this other: that these sufferings bore no relation to the deserts of the person who endured them. If Christ, with His pure and perfect character-the innocency and nobleness of which all that read the Gospels admit-if Christ suffered so; if the highest virtue that was ever seen in this world brought no better wages than shame and spitting and the Cross; if Christ’s life and Christ’s death are simply a typical example of the world’s treatment of its greatest benefactors; then, if they have any bearing at all on the character of God, they cast a shadow rather than a light upon the divine government, and become not the least formidable of the difficulties and knots that will have to be untied hereafter before it shall be clear that God did everything well. But if we can say, ‘He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows’; if we can say, ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself’; if we can say, that His death was the death of Him whom God had appointed to live and die for us, and ‘to bear our sins in His own body on the tree,’ then, though deep mysteries come with the thought, still we can see that, in a very unique manner, God is glorified and exalted in His death.

For if the dying Christ be the Son of God dying for us, then the Cross glorifies God, because it teaches us that the glory of the divine character is the divine love. Of wisdom, or of power, or of any of the more ‘majestic’ attributes of the divine nature, that weak Man, hanging dying on the Cross, was a strange embodiment; but if the very heart of the divine brightness be the pure white fire of love; if there be nothing diviner in God than His giving of Himself to His creatures; if the highest glory of the divine nature be to pity and to bestow, then the Cross upon which Christ died towers above all other revelations as the most awful, the most sacred, the most tender, the most complete, the most heart-touching, the most soul-subduing manifestation of the divine nature; and stars and worlds, and angels and mighty creatures, and things in the heights and things in the depths, to each of which have been entrusted some broken syllables of the divine character to make known to the world, dwindle and fade before the brightness, the lambent, gentle brightness that beams out from the Cross of Christ, which proclaims-God is love, is pity, is pardon.

And is it not so-is it not so? Is not the thought that has flowed from Christ’s Cross through Christendom of what our Father in Heaven is, the highest and the most blessed that the world has ever had? Has it not scattered doubts that lay like mountains of ice upon man’s heart? Has it not swept the heavens clear of clouds that wrapped it in darkness? Has it not delivered men from the dreams of gods angry, gods capricious, gods vengeful, gods indifferent, gods simply mighty and vast and awful and unspeakable? Has it not taught us that love is God, and God is love; and so brought to the whole world the true Gospel, the Gospel of the grace of God? In that Cross the Father is glorified.

III. Now, lastly, we have here the Son of Man glorified in the Father.

The mysteries and the paradoxes seem to deepen as we advance. ‘If God be glorified in Him, God shall also glorify Him in Himself, and shall straightway glorify Him.’ Do these words sound to you as if they expressed no more than the confidence of a good man, who, when he was dying, believed that he would be accepted of a loving Father, and would be at rest from his sufferings? To me they seem to say infinitely more than that. ‘He shall also glorify Him in Himself.’ Mark that ‘in Himself.’ That is the obvious antithesis to what has been spoken about in the previous clause, a glorifying which consisted in a manifestation to the external universe, whereas this is a glorifying within the depths of the divine nature. And the best commentary upon it is our Lord’s own words: ‘Father! glorify Thou Me with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was.’ We get a glimpse, as it were, into the very centre of the brightness of God; and there, walking in that beneficent furnace, we see ‘One like unto the Son of Man.’ Christ anticipates that, in some profound and unspeakable sense, He shall, as it were, be caught up into the divinity, and shall dwell, as indeed He did dwell from the beginning, ‘in the bosom of the Father.’ ‘He shall glorify Him in Himself.’

But then mark, still further, that this reception into the bosom of the Father is given to the Son of Man. That is to say, the Man Christ Jesus, the Son of Mary, the Brother of us all, ‘bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh,’ the very Person that walked upon earth and dwelt amongst us is taken up into the heart of God, and in His manhood enters into that same glory, which, from the beginning, the Eternal Word had with God.

And still further, not only have we here set forth, in most wondrous language, the reception and incorporation, if we may use such words, into the very centre of divinity, as granted to the Son of Man, but we have that glorifying set forth as commencing immediately upon the completion of God’s glorifying by Christ upon the Cross. ‘He shall straightway glorify Him.’ At the instant then, that He said, ‘It is finished,’ and all that the Cross could do to glorify God was done, at that instant there began, with not a pin-point of interval between them, God’s glorifying of the Son in Himself. It began in that Paradise into which we know that upon that day He entered. It was manifested to the world when He ‘raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory.’ It reached a still higher point when ‘they brought Him near unto the Ancient of Days,’ and ascending up on high, a dominion and a throne and a glory were given to Him which last now, whilst the Son of Man sits in the heavens on the throne of His glory, wielding the attributes of divinity, and administering the laws of the universe and the mysteries of providence. It shall rise to its highest manifestation before an assembled world, when He ‘shall come in His glory, and before Him shall be gathered all nations.’

This, then, was the vision that lay before the Christ in that upper room, the vision of Himself glorified in His extreme shame, because His Cross manifested His love and His saving power; of God glorified in Him above all other of His acts of manifestation when He died on the Cross, and revealed the very heart of God; and of Himself glorified in the Father when, exalted high above all creatures, He sitteth upon the Father’s throne and rules the Father’s realm.

And yet from that high, and, to us, inaccessible and all but inconceivable summit of His elevation, He looks down ready to bless each poor creature here, toiling and moiling amidst sufferings, and meannesses, and commonplaces, and monotony, if we will only put our trust in Him, and love Him, and see the brightness of the Father’s face in Him. He cares for us all; and if we will but take Him as our Saviour, His all-prevalent prayer, presented within the veil for us, will certainly be fulfilled at last: ‘Father, I will that they also whom Thou hast given Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory.’

64)John 13:33

John

ONE SAYING WITH TWO MEANINGS

SEEKING JESUS

CANNOT AND CAN

Joh. 13:33.

The preceding context shows how large and black the Cross loomed before Jesus now, and how radiant the glory beyond shone out to Him. But it was only for a moment that either of these two absorbed His thoughts; and with wonderful self-forgetfulness and self-command, He turned away at once from the consideration of how the near future was to affect Him, to the thought of how it was to affect the handful of helpless disciples who had to be left alone. Impending separation breaks up the fountains of the heart, and we all know the instinct that desires to crowd all the often hidden love into some one last token. So here our Lord addresses His disciples by a name that is never used except this once, ‘little children,’ a fond diminutive that not only reveals an unusual depth of tender emotion, but also breathes a pitying sense of their defencelessness when they are to be left alone. So might a dying mother look at her little ones.

But the words that follow, at first sight, are dark with the sense of a final and complete separation. ‘Ye shall seek Me’-and not only so, but He seems to put back His humble friends into the same place as had been occupied by His bitter foes-’as I said to the Jews, whither I go ye cannot come; so now I say to you.’ There was something that prevented both classes alike from keeping Him company; and He had to walk His path both into the darkness and into the glory, alone.

The words apply in their fullness only to the parenthesis of time whilst He lay in the grave, and the disciples despairingly thought that all was ended. It was a brief period: it was a revolutionary moment; and though it was soon to end, they needed to be guarded against it. But though the words do not apply to the permanent relation between the glorified Christ and us, His disciples, yet partly by similarity, and still more by contrast, they do suggest great Christian blessedness and imperative Christian duties. These gather themselves mainly round two contrasts, a transitory ‘cannot’ soon to be changed into a permanent ‘can’; and a momentary seeking, soon to be converted into a blessed seeking which finds. I now deal only with the former.

We have here a transitory ‘cannot’ soon to be changed into a permanent ‘can.’

‘Whither I go ye cannot come.’ Does not one hear a tone of personal sorrow in that saying? Jesus had always hungered for understanding and sympathetic companions, and one of His lifelong sorrows had been His utter loneliness; but He had never, in all the time that He had been with them, so put out His hand, feeling for some warm clasp of a human hand to help Him in His struggle, as He did during the hours terminating with

Gethsemane. And perhaps we may venture to say that we hear in this utterance an expression of Christ's sorrow for Himself that He had to tread the dark way, and to pass into the brightness beyond, all alone. He yearned for the impossible human companionship, as well as sorrowed for the imperfections which made it impossible.

Why was it that they could not 'follow Him now'? The answer to that question is found in the consideration of whither it was that He went. When that bright Shekinah-cloud at the Ascension received Him into its radiant folds, it showed why they could not follow Him, because it revealed that He went unto the Father, when He left the world. So we are brought face to face with the old, solemn thought that character makes capacity for heaven. 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in His holy place?' asked the Psalmist; and a prophet put the question in a still sharper form, and by the very form of the question suggested a negative answer-'Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire; who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?' Who can pass into that Presence, and stand near God, without being, like the maiden in the old legend, shrivelled into ashes by the contact of the celestial fire? 'Holiness' is that 'without which no man shall see the Lord.' And we, all of us, in the depths of our own hearts, if we rightly understand the voices that ever echo there, must feel that the condition which is, obviously and without any need for arguing it, required for abiding with God, and so going into the glory where Christ is, is a condition which none of us can fulfil. In that respect the imperfect and immature friends, the little children, the babes who loved and yet knew not Him whom they loved, and the scowling enemies, were at one. For they had all of them the one human heart, and in that heart the deep-lying alienation and contrariety to God. Therefore Christ trod the winepress alone, and alone 'ascended up where He was before.'

But let us remember that this 'cannot' was only a transitory cannot. For we must underscore very deeply that word in my text 'so now I say to you,' and a moment afterwards, when one of the Apostles puts the question: 'Why cannot I follow Thee now?' the answer is: 'Thou canst not follow Me now; but thou shalt follow Me afterwards.' The text, too, is succeeded immediately by the wonderful parting consolations and counsels spoken to the disciples, through all of which there gleams the promise that they will be with Him where He is, and behold His glory. Set side by side with these sad words of our Lord in the text, by which He unloosed their clasping hands from Him, and turned His face to His solitary path, the triumphant language in which habitually the rest of the New Testament speaks of the Christian man’s relation to Christ. Think of that great passage: ‘Ye are come unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, . . . and to God the Judge of all, . . . and to Jesus the Mediator of the new Covenant.’ What has become of the impossibility? Vanished. Where is the ‘cannot’? Turned into a blessed ‘can.’ And so Apostles have no scruple in saying, ‘Our citizenship is in Heaven,’ nor in saying, ‘We sit together with Him in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.’ The path that was blocked is open. The impossibility that towered up like a great black wall has melted away; and the path into the Holiest of all is made patent by the blood of Christ. For in that death there lies the power that sweeps away all the impediments of man’s sin, and in that life of the risen, glorified, indwelling Christ there lies the power which cleanses the inmost heart from ‘all filthiness of flesh and spirit,’ and makes it possible for our mortal feet to walk on the immortal path, and for us, with all our unworthiness, with all our shrinking, to stand in His presence and not be ashamed or consumed. ‘Ye cannot come’ was true for a few days. ‘Ye can come’ is true for ever; and for all Christian men.

But let us not forget that the one attitude of heart and mind, by which a poor, sinful man, who dare not draw near to God, receives into himself the merit and power of the death, and the indwelling power of the life, of Jesus Christ, is personal faith in Jesus Christ. To trust Him is to come to Him, and it is represented in Scripture as conferring an instantaneous fitness for access to God. People pray sometimes that they may be made ‘meet for the inheritance of the saints in light,’ and the prayer is, in a sense, wise and true. But they too often forget that the Apostle says, in the original connection of the words which they so quote: ‘He hath translated us from the tyranny of the darkness, and hath made us meet for the inheritance of the saints in light.’ That is to say, whenever a poor soul, compassed and laden with its infirmity and sin, turns itself to that Lord whose Cross conquers sin, and whose blood infused into our veins-the Spirit of whose life granted to us-gives us to partake of His own righteousness, that moment that soul can tread the path that brings into the presence of God, and ‘has access with confidence by the faith of Him.’ So, brethren, seeing that thus the incapacity may all be swept away, and that instead of a ‘cannot,’ which relegates us to darkness, we may receive a ‘can’ which leads us into the light, let us see to it that this communion, which is possible for all Christian men, is real in our cases, and that we use the access which is given to us, and dwell for ever in, and with, the Lord.

I have said that the act of faith, by associating a man with Jesus Christ in the power of His death and of His life, makes any who exercise it capable of passing into the presence of God. But I would remind you, too, that to make us more fit for more full and habitual communion is the very purpose for which all the discipline of our earthly life, its sorrows and its joys, its tasks and its repose, is exercised upon us-’He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness.’ Surely if we habitually took that point of view in reference to our work, in reference to our joys, in reference to our trials, everything would be different. We are being prepared with sedulous love, with patient reiteration of ‘line upon line, precept upon precept,’ with singularly varied methods but a uniform purpose, by all that meets us in life, to be more capable of treading the eternal path into the eternal light. Is that how we daily think of our own circumstances? Do we bring that great thought to bear upon all that we, sometimes faithlessly, call mysterious or murmuringly think of-if we dare not speak our thought-as being cruel and hard? What does it matter if some precious things be lifted off our shoulders, and out of our hearts, if their being taken away makes it more possible for us to tread with a lighter step the path of peace? What matters it though many things that we would fain keep are withdrawn from us, if by the withdrawal we are sent a little further forward on the road that leads to God? As George Herbert says, sorrows and joys are like battledores that drive a shuttlecock, and they may all ‘toss us to His breast.’ In faith, however infantile it may be, there is an undeveloped capacity, a germ of fitness, for dwelling with God. But that capacity is meant to be increased, and the little children are meant to be helped to grow up into full-grown men, ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,’ by all that comes here to them on earth. Do you not think we should understand life better, do you not think it would all be flashed up into new radiance, do you not think we should more seldom stand bewildered at what we choose to call the inscrutable dispensations of Providence, if this were the point of view from which we looked at them all-that they were fitting us for perpetual abiding with our Father God?

Nor let us forget that there was a transient ‘cannot’ of another sort. For ‘flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.’ So, as life is changed when we think of it as helping us toward Him, death is changed when we think of it as being, if I may so say, the usher in attendance on the Presence-chamber, who draws back the thin curtain that separates us from the throne, and takes us by the hands and leads us into the Presence. Surely if we habitually thought thus of that otherwise grim chamberlain, we should be willing to put our hands into His, as a little child will, when straying, into the hands of a stranger who says, ‘Come with me and I will take you home to your father.’ ‘As I said unto the Jews . . . so now I say to you, whither I go, ye cannot come.’

Let us press on you and on myself the one thought that comes out of all that I have been saying, the blessed possibility, which, because it is a possibility, is an obligation, to use far more than most of us do, the right of access to the King who is our Father. There are nobles and corporate bodies, who regard it as one of their chief distinctions that they have always the right of entree to the court of the sovereign. Every Christian man has that. And in old days, when a baron did not show himself at court, suspicion naturally arose, and he was in danger of being thought disaffected, if not traitorous. Ah! if you and I were judged according to that law, what would become of us? We can go when we like. How seldom we do go! We can live in the heavens whilst our work lies down here. We prefer the low earth to the lofty sky. ‘We are come’-ideally, and in the depths of our nature, our affinities are there-’unto God, the Judge of all, and to Jesus the Mediator of the new Covenant.’ Are we come? Are we day by day, in all the pettiness of our ordinary lives, when compassed by hard duties, weighed upon by sore distress-still keeping our hearts in heaven, and our feet familiar with the path that leads us to God? ‘Set your affection on things above, where Jesus is, sitting at the right hand of God.’ For there is no ‘cannot’ for His servants in regard to their access to any place where He is.

John

SEEKING JESUS

Joh. 13:33.

In the former sermon on this verse I pointed out that it, in its fullness, applies only to the brief period between the crucifixion and the resurrection, but that, partly by contrast and partly by analogy, it suggests permanent relations between Christ and His disciples. These relations were mainly-as I pointed out then-two: there was that one expressed by the subsequent words of the verse, ‘Whither I go, ye cannot come’-a brief ‘cannot,’ soon to be changed into a permanent ‘can’; and there was a second, a brief, sad, and vain seeking, soon to be changed into a seeking which finds. It is to the latter that I wish to turn now.

‘Ye shall seek Me’ fell, like the clods on a coffin-lid, with a hollow sound on the hearts of the Apostles. It comes to us as a permission and a command and a promise. I do not dwell on that sad seeking, which was so brief but so bitter. We all know what it is to put out an empty hand into the darkness and the void, and to grope for a touch which we know, whilst we grope, that we shall not find. And these poor, helpless disciples, by their forlorn sense of separation, by their yearning that brought no satisfaction, by their very listless despair, were saying, during these hours of agony into which an eternity of pain was condensed, ‘Oh! that He were beside us again!’

That sad seeking ended when He came to them, and ‘then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord.’ But another kind of seeking began, when ‘the cloud received Him out of their sight’; as joyful as the other was laden with sorrow, as sure to find the object of its quest as the other was certain to be disappointed. What He said in the darkness to them, He says in the light to us: What ‘I say unto you I say unto all,’ Seek! So now we have to deal with that joyful search which is sure of finding its object, and is only a little, if at all, less blessed than the finding itself.

I. Every Christian is, by his very name, a seeker after Christ.

There are two kinds of seeking, one like that of a bird whose young have been stolen away, which flutters here and there, because it knows not where that is which it seeks; another, like the flight of the same bird, when the migrating instinct rises in its little breast, and straight as an arrow it goes, not because it knows not its goal, but because it knows it, yonder where the sun is warm and the sky is blue, and winter is left behind in the cold north. ‘Ye shall seek Me’ is the word of promise, which changes the vain search that is ignorant of where the object of its quest is, into a blessed going out of the heart towards that which it knows to be the home of its homelessness. Thus the text brings out the very central blessedness and peculiarity of the Christian life, that it has no uncertainty in its aims, and that, instead of seeking for things which may or may not be found, or if found may or may not prove to be what we dreamt them to be. It seeks for a Person whom it knows where to find, and of whom it knows that all its desires will be met in Him. We have, then, on the one side the multifarious, divergent searchings of man; and on the other side the one quest in which all these others are gathered up, and translated into blessedness-the seeking after Jesus Christ.

Men know that they need, if I may so put it, four things: truth for the understanding, love round which the heart may coil, authority for the will which may direct and restrain, and energy for the practical life. But, apart from the quest after Christ, men for the most part seek these necessary goods in divers objects, and fragmentarily look for the completion of their desires. But fragments will never satisfy a man’s soul, and they who have to go to one place for truth, and to another for love, and to another for authority, and to another for energy, are wofully likely never to find what they search for. They are seeking in the manifold what can be found only in the One. It is as if some vessel, full of precious stones, were thrown down before men, and whilst they are racing after the diamonds, they lose the emeralds and the sapphires. But the wise concentrate their seekings on the ‘one Pearl of great price,’ in whom is truth for the brain, love for the heart, authority for the will, power for the life, and all summed in that which is more blessed than all, the Person of the Brother who died for us, the Christ who lives to fill our hearts for ever. One sun dims all the stars; and the ‘one entire and perfect Chrysolite’ beggars and reduces to fragments ‘all the precious things that thou canst desire.’

To seek Him is the very hall-mark of a Christian, and that seeking comes to be an earnest desire and effort after more conscious communion with Him, and a more entire possession of His imparted life which is righteousness and peace and joy and power. According to the Rabbis, the manna tasted to each man what each man most desired. The manifoldness of the one Christ is far more manifold than the manifoldness of the multiplicity of fragmentary and partial aims which foolish men perceive.

The ways of seeking are very plain. First of all, we seek if, and in proportion as, we make the effort to occupy our thoughts and minds, not with theological dogmas, but with the living Christ Himself. Ah! brethren, it is hard to do, and I daresay a great many of you are thinking that it is far harder for you, in the distractions and rush and conflict of business and daily life, than it is for people like me, whom you imagine as sitting in a study, with nothing to distract us. I do not know about that; I fancy it is about equally hard for us all; but it is possible. I have been in Alpine villages where, at the end of every squalid alley, there towered up a great, pure, silent, white peak. That is what our lives may be; however noisome, crowded, petty the little lane in which we live, the Alp is at the end of it there, if we only choose to lift our eyes and look. It is possible that not only 'into the sessions of sweet silent thought,' but into the rush and bustle of the workshop or the exchange, there may come, like 'some sweet, beguiling melody, so sweet we know not we are listening to it,' the thought that changes pettiness into greatness, that makes all things go smoothly and easily, that is a test and a charm to discover and to destroy temptation, the thought of a present Christ, the Lover of my soul, and the Helper of my life.

Again, we seek Him when, by aspiration and desire, we bring Him-as He is always brought thereby-into our hearts and into our lives. The measure of our desire is the measure of our possession. Wishing is the opening of our hearts, but, alas, often we wish and desire, and the heart opens and nothing enters. Wishes are like the tentacles of some marine organism waving about in a waste ocean, feeling for the food that they do not find. But if we open our hearts for Him, that is simultaneous with the coming of Him to us. 'Ye have not, because ye ask not.' Do not forget, dear friends, that desire, if it is genuine, will take a very concrete form and will be prayer. And it is prayer-by which I do not mean the utterance of words without desire, any more than I mean desire without the direct casting of it into the form of supplication-it is prayer that brings Christ into any, and it is prayer that will bring Him into every, life.

Nor let us forget that there is another way of seeking besides these two, of looking up to Him through, and in the midst of, all the shows and trifles of this low life, and the reaching out of our desires towards Him, as the roots of a tree beneath the soil go straight for the river. That other way is imitation and obedience. It is vain to think of Him, and it is unreal to pretend to desire Him, if we are not seeking Him by treading in the path that He has trod, and which leads to Him. Imitation and obedience-these are the steps by which we go straight through all the trivialities of life into the presence of the Lord Himself. The smallest deflection from the path that leads to Him will carry us away into doleful wastes. The least invisible cloud that steals across the sky will blot out half a hemisphere of stars; and we seek not Christ unless, thinking of Him, and desiring Him, we also walk in the path in which He has walked, and so come where He is. He Himself has said that if His servant follows Him, where He is there shall also His servant be. These things make up the seeking which ought to mark us all.

I note that-

II. The Christian seeker always finds.

I pointed out in my last sermon the strange identity of our Lord's words to His humble friends, with those which on another occasion He used to His bitter enemies. He reminds the disciples of that identity in the verse from which my text comes: 'As I said to the Jews . . . so now I say to you.' But there was one thing that He said to the Jews that He did not say to them. To the former He said, 'Ye shall seek Me, and shall not find Me'; and He did not say that-even for the sad hours it was not quite true-He did not say that to His followers, and He does not say it to us.

If we seek we shall find. There is no disappointment in the Christian life. Anything is possible rather than that a man should desire Christ and not have Him. That has never been the experience of any seeking soul. And so I urge upon you what has already been suggested, that inasmuch as, by reason of His infinite longing to give truth and love and guidance and energy and His whole Self, to all of us, the amount of our possession of the power and life of Jesus Christ depends on ourselves. If you take to the fountain a tiny cup, you will only bring away a tiny cupful. If you take a great vessel you will bring it away full. As long as the woman in the old story held out her vessels to the miraculous flow of the oil, the flow continued. When she had no more vessels to take, the flow stopped. If a man holds a flagon beneath a spigot with an unsteady hand, half of the precious liquor will be spilt on the ground. Those who fulfil the conditions, of which I have already been speaking, may make quite sure that according to their faith will it be unto them. And if you, dear friend, have not in your experience the conscious presence of a Christ who is all that you need, there is no one in heaven or earth or hell to blame for it but only your own self. ‘I have never said to any of the seed of Jacob, Seek ye My face in vain’; and when the Lord said, ‘Ye shall seek Me,’ He was implicitly binding Himself to meet the seeking soul, and give Himself to the desiring heart.

Remember, too, that this seeking, which is always crowned with finding, is the only search in which failure is impossible. There is only one course of life that has no disappointments. We all know how frequently we are foiled in our quests; we all know how often a prize won is a bitterer disappointment than a prize unattained. Like a jelly-fish in the water, as long as it is there its tenuous substance is lovely, expanded, tinged with delicate violets and blues, and its long filaments float in lines of beauty. Lay it on the beach, and it is a shapeless lump, and it poisons and stings. You fish your prize out of the great ocean, and when you have it, does it disappoint, or does it fulfil, the raised expectations of the quest? There is One who does not disappoint. There is one gold mine that comes up to the prospectus. There is one spring that never runs dry. The more deep our Christian experience is, the more we shall take the rapturous exclamation of the Arabian queen to ourselves: ‘The half was not told us!’

And so, lastly, I suggest that-

III. The finding impels to fresh seeking.

The object of the Christian man’s quest is Jesus Christ. He is Incarnate Infinitude; and that cannot be exhausted. The seeker after Jesus Christ is the Christian soul. That soul is the incarnate possibility of indefinite expansion and approximation and assimilation; and that cannot be exhausted. And so, with a Christ who is infinite, and a seeker whose capacities may be indefinitely expanded, there can be no satiety, there can be no limit, there can be no end to the process. This wine-skin will not burst when the new wine is put into it. Rather like some elastic vessel, as you pour it will fill out and expand. Possession enlarges, and the more of Christ's fullness is poured into a human heart, the more is that heart widened out to receive a greater blessing.

Dear brethren, there is one course of life, and I believe but one, on which we may all enter with the sure confidence that in the nature of things, in the nature of Christ, and in the nature of ourselves, there is no end to growth and progress. Think of the freshness and blessedness and energy that puts into a life. To have an unattained and unattainable object, a goal to which we can never come, but to which we may ever be approximating, seems to me to be the secret of perpetual joy and of perpetual youthfulness. To say, 'forgetting the things that are behind, I reach forward unto the things that are before,' is a charm and an amulet that repels monotony and weariness, and goes with a man to the very end, and when all other aims and objects have died down into grey ashes, that flame, like the fabled lamp in Virgil's tomb, burns clear in the grave, and lights us to the eternity beyond.

For certainly, if there be neither satiety nor limit to Christian progress here, there can be no better and stronger evidence that Christian progress here is but the first 'lap' of the race, the first stadium of the course, and that beyond that narrow, dark line which lies across the path, it runs on, rising higher, and will run on for ever.

'On earth the broken arc; in heaven the perfect round.'

Seek for what you are sure to find; seek for what will never disappoint you; seek for what will abide with you for ever. The very first word of Christ's recorded in Scripture is a question which He puts to us all: 'What seek ye?' Well for us, if like the two to whom it was originally addressed, we answer, 'We are not seeking a What; we are seeking a Whom.-Master, where dwellest Thou?' And if we have that answer in our hearts, we shall receive the invitation which they received, 'Come and see,'-come and seek. 'Ye shall seek Me' is a gracious invitation, an imperative command, and a faithful promise that if we seek we shall find. 'Whoso findeth Him findeth life; whoso misseth Him'-whatever else he has sought and found-'wrongeth his own soul.'

65)John 13:34-35

John

‘AS I HAVE LOVED’

Joh. 13:34 - Joh. 13:35.

Wishes from dying lips are sacred. They sink deep into memories and mould faithful lives. The sense of impending separation had added an unwonted tenderness to our Lord’s address, and He had designated His disciples by the fond name of ‘little children.’ The same sense here gives authority to His words, and moulds them into the shape of a command. The disciples had held together because He was in their midst. Will the arch stand when the keystone is struck out? Will not the spokes fall asunder when the nave of the wheel is taken away? He would guard them from the disintegrating tendencies that were sure to set in when He was gone; and He would point them to a solace for His absence, and to a kind of substitute for His presence. For to love the brethren whom they see would be, in some sense, a continuing to love the Christ whom they had ceased to see. And so, immediately after He said: ‘Whither I go ye cannot come,’ He goes on to say: ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’

He called this a ‘new commandment,’ though to love one’s neighbour as one’s self was a familiar commonplace amongst the Jews, and had a recognised position in Rabbinical teaching. But His commandment proposed a new object of love, it set forth a new measure of love, so greatly different from all that had preceded it as to become almost a new kind of love, and it suggested and supplied a new motive power for love. This commandment ‘could give life’ and fulfil itself. Therefore it comes to us as a ‘new commandment’-even to us-and, unlike the words which preceded it, which we were considering in former sermons, it is wholly and freshly applicable to-day as in the ages that are passed. I ask you, first, to consider-

I. The new scope of the new commandment.

‘Love one another.’ The newness of the precept is realised, if we think for a moment of the new phenomenon which obedience to it produced. When the words were spoken, the then-known civilised Western world was cleft by great, deep gulfs of separation, like the crevasses in a glacier, by the side of which our racial animosities and class differences are merely superficial cracks on the surface. Language, religion, national animosities, differences of condition, and saddest of all, difference of sex, split the world up into alien fragments. A ‘stranger’ and an ‘enemy’ were expressed in one language, by the same word. The learned and the unlearned, the slave and his master, the barbarian and the Greek, the man and the woman, stood on opposite sides of the gulfs, flinging hostility across. A Jewish peasant wandered up and down for three years in His own little country, which was the very focus of narrowness and separation and hostility, as the Roman historian felt when he called the Jews the ‘haters of the human race’; He gathered a few disciples, and He was crucified by a contemptuous Roman governor, who thought that the life of one fanatical Jew was a small price to pay for popularity with his troublesome subjects, and in a generation after, the clefts were being bridged and all over the Empire a strange new sense of unity was being breathed, and ‘Barbarian, Scythian, bond and free,’ male and female, Jew and Greek, learned and ignorant, clasped hands and sat down at one table, and felt themselves ‘all one in Christ Jesus.’ They were ready to break all other bonds, and to yield to the uniting forces that streamed out from His Cross. There never had been anything like it. No wonder that the world began to babble about sorcery, and conspiracies, and complicity in unnameable vices. It was only that the disciples were obeying the ‘new commandment,’ and a new thing had come into the world-a community held together by love and not by geographical accidents or linguistic affinities, or the iron fetters of the conqueror. You sow the seed in furrows separated by ridges, and the ground is seamed, but when the seed springs the ridges are hidden, no division appears, and as far as the eye can reach, the cornfield stretches, rippling in unbroken waves of gold. The new commandment made a new thing, and the world wondered.

Now then, brethren, do not let us forget that, although to obey this commandment is in some respects a great deal harder to-day than it was then, the diverse circumstances in which Christian individuals and Christian communities are this day placed may modify the form of our obedience, but do not in the smallest degree weaken the obligation, for the individual Christian and for societies of Christians, to follow this commandment. The multiplication of numbers, the cessation of the armed hostility of the world, the great varieties in intellectual position in regard to the truths of Christianity, divergencies of culture, and many other things, are separating forces, But our Christianity is worth very little, if it cannot master these separating tendencies, even as in the early days of freshness, the Christianity that sprang in these new converts' minds mastered the far more powerful separating tendencies with which they had to contend.

Every Christian man is under the obligation to recognise his kindred with every other Christian man-his kindred in the deep foundations of his spiritual being, which are far deeper, and ought to be far more operative in drawing together, than the superficial differences of culture or opinion or the like, which may part us. The bond that holds Christian men together is their common relation to the one Lord, and that ought to influence their attitude to one another. You say I am talking commonplaces. Yes; and the condition of Christianity this day is the sad and tragical sign that the commonplaces need to be talked about, till they are rubbed into the conscience of the Church as they never have been before.

Do not let us suppose that Christian love is mere sentiment. I shall have to speak a word or two about that presently, but I would fain lift the whole subject, if I can, out of the region of mere unctuous words and gush of half-feigned emotion, which mean nothing, and would make you feel that it is a very practical commandment, gripping us hard, when our Lord says to us, 'Love one another.'

I have spoken about the accidental conditions which make obedience to this commandment difficult. The real reason which makes the obedience to it difficult is the slackness of our own hold on the Centre. In the measure in which we are filled with Jesus Christ, in that measure will that expression of His spirit and His life become natural to us. Every Christian has affinities with every other Christian, in the depths of his being, so as that he is a great deal more like his brother, who is possessor of 'like precious faith,' however unlike the two may be in outlook, in idiosyncrasy, and culture and in creed, than he is to another man with whom he may have a far closer sympathy in all these matters than he has with the brother in question, but from whom he is parted by this, that the one trusts and loves and obeys

Jesus Christ, and the other does not. So, for individuals and for churches, the commandment takes this shape-Go down to the depths and you will find that you are closer to the Christian man or community which seems furthest from you, than you are to the non-Christian who seems nearest to you. Therefore, let your love follow your kinship, and your heart recognise the oneness that knits you together. That is a revolutionary commandment; what would become of our present organisations of Christianity if it were obeyed? That is a revolutionary commandment; what would become of our individual relations to the whole family who, in every place, and in many tongues, and with many creeds, call on Jesus as on their Lord, their Lord and ours, if it were obeyed? I leave you to answer the question. Only I say the commandment has for its first scope all who, in every place, love the Lord Jesus Christ.

But there is more than that involved in it. The very same principle which makes this love to one another imperative upon all disciples, makes it equally imperative upon every follower of Jesus Christ to embrace in a real affection all whom Jesus so loved as to die for them. If I am to love a Christian man because he and I love Christ, I am to love everybody, because Christ loves me and everybody, and because He died on the Cross for me and for all men. And so one of the other Apostles, or, at least, the letter which goes by his name, laid hold on the true connection when, instead of concentrating Christian affection on the Church, and letting the world go to the devil as an alien thing, he said: ‘Add to your faith,’ this, that, and the other, and ‘brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness, charity.’ The particular does not exclude the general, it leads to the general. The fire kindled upon the hearth gives warmth to all the chamber. The circles are concentric, and the widest sweep is struck from the same middle point as the narrow. So the new commandment does not cut humanity into two halves, but gathers all diversity into one, and spreads the great reconciling of Christian love over all the antagonisms and oppositions of earth. Let me ask you to notice-

II. The example of the new commandment, ‘As I have loved you.’

That solemn ‘as’ lifts itself up before us, shines far ahead of us, ought to draw us to itself in hope, and not to repel us from itself in despair. ‘As I have loved'-what a tremendous thing for a man to stand up before his fellows, and say, 'Take Me as the perfect example of perfect love; and let My example-un-dimmed by the mists of gathering centuries, and un-weakened by the change of condition, and circumstance, fresh as ever after ages have passed, and closely-fitting as ever all varieties of human character and condition-stand before you; the ideal that I have realised, and you will be blessed in the proportion in which you seek, though you fail, to realise it!' There is, I venture to believe, only one aspect of Jesus Christ in which such a setting forth of Himself as the perfect Incarnation of perfect love is warrantable; and that is found in the old belief that His very birth was the result of His love, and that His death was the climax of that love. And if so, we have to turn to Bethlehem, and the whole life, and the Cross at its end, as being the Christ-given example and model for our love to our brethren.

What do we see there? I have said that there is too much of mere sickly sentimentality about the ordinary treatment of this great commandment, and that I desired to lift it out of that region into a far nobler, more strenuous, and difficult one. This is what we see in that life and in that death:-First of all-the activity of love-'Let us not love in words, but in deed and in truth'; then we see the self-forgetfulness of love-'Even Christ pleased not Himself'; then we see the self-sacrifice of love-'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' And in these three points, on which I would fain enlarge if I might, active love, self-oblivious love, self-sacrificing love, you have the pattern set for us all. Christian love is no mere sickly maiden, full of sentimental emotions and honeyed words. She is a strenuous virgin, girt for service, a heroine ready for dangers, and prepared to be a martyr if it be needful. Love's language is sacrifice. 'I give thee myself,' is its motto. And that is the pattern that is set before us all-'as I have loved you.'

I have tried to show you how the commandment was new in many particulars, and it is for ever new in this particular, that it is for ever before us, unattained, and drawing faithful hearts to itself, and ever opening out into new heroisms and, therefore, blessedness, of self-sacrifice, and ever leading us to confess the differences, deep, tragic, sinful, between us and

Him who-we sometimes think too presumptuously-we venture to say is our Lord and Master.

Did you ever see in some great picture gallery a copyist sitting in front of a Raffaelle, and comparing his poor feeble daub, all out of drawing, and with little of the divine beauty that the master had breathed over his canvas, even if it preserved the mere mechanical outline? That is what you and I should do with our lives: take them and put them down side by side with the original. We shall have to do it some day. Had we better not do it now, and try to bring the copy a little nearer to the masterpiece; and let that ‘as I have loved you’ shine before us and draw us on to unattainable heights?

And now, lastly, we have here-

III. The motive power for obedience to the commandment.

That is as new as all the rest. That ‘as’ expresses the manner of the love, but it also expresses the motive and the power. It might be translated into the equivalent ‘in the fashion in which,’ or it might be translated into the equivalent ‘since-’ ‘I have loved you.’ The original might bear the rendering, ‘that ye also may love one another.’ That is to say, what keeps men from obeying this commandment is the instinctive self-regard which is natural to us all. There are muscles in the body which are so constructed that they close tightly; and the heart is something like one of these sphincter muscles-it shuts by nature, especially if there has been anything put inside it over which it can shut and keep it all to itself. But there is one thing that dethrones Self, and enthrones the angel Love in a heart, and that is, that into that heart there shall come surging the sense of the great love ‘wherewith I have loved you.’ That melts the iceberg; nothing else will.

That love of Christ to us, received into our hearts, and there producing an answering love to Him, will make us, in the measure in which we live in it and let it rule us, love everything and every person that He loves. That love of Jesus Christ, stealing into our hearts and there sweetening the ever-springing ‘issues of life,’ will make them flow out in glad obedience to any commandment of His. That love of Jesus Christ, received into our hearts, and responded to by our answering love, will work, as love always does, a magical transformation. A great monastic teacher wrote his precious book about The Imitation of Christ. ‘Imitation’ is a great word, ‘Transformation’ is a greater. ‘We all,’ receiving on the mirror of our loving hearts the love of Jesus Christ, ‘are changed into the same likeness.’ Thus, then, the love, which is our pattern, is also our motive and our power for obedience, and the more we bring ourselves under its influences, the more we shall love all those who are beloved by, and lovers of, Jesus.

That is the one foundation for a world knit together in the bonds of amity and concord. There have been attempts at brotherhood, and the guillotine has ended what was begun in the name of ‘fraternity.’ Men build towers, but there is no cement between the bricks, unless the love of Christ holds them together, and therefore Babel after Babel comes down about the ears of its builders. But notwithstanding all that is dark to-day, and though the war-clouds are lowering, and the hearts of men are inflamed with fierce passions, Christ’s commandment is Christ’s promise; and though the vision tarry, it will surely come. So even to-day Christian men ought to stand for Christ’s peace, and for Christ’s love. The old commandment which we have had from the beginning, is the new commandment that fits to-day as it fits all the ages. It is a dream, say some. Yes, a dream; but a morning dream which comes true. Let us do the little we can to make it true, and to bring about the day when the flock of men will gather round the one Shepherd, who loved them to the death, and who has bid them and helped them to ‘love one another as’-and since-’He has loved them.’

66)John 13:37

John

QUO VADIS?

Joh. 13:37 - Joh. 13:38.

Peter’s main characteristics are all in operation here; his eagerness to be in the front, his habit of blurting out his thoughts and feelings, his passionate love for his Master, and withal his inability to understand Him, and his self-confident arrogance. He has broken in upon Christ’s solemn words, entirely deaf to their deep meaning, but blindly and blunderingly laying hold of one thought only, that Jesus is departing, and that he is to be left alone. So he asks the question, ‘Lord! thither goest Thou?’-not so much caring about that, as meaning by his question-’tell me where, and then I will come too’; pledging himself to follow faithfully, as a dog behind his master, wherever He went.

Our Lord answered the underlying meaning of the words, repeating with a personal application what He had just before said as a general principle-’Whither I go thou canst not follow Me now, but thou shall follow Me afterwards.’ Then followed this noteworthy dialogue.

The whole significance of the incident is preserved for us in the beautiful legend which tells us how, near the city of Rome, on the Appian Way, as Peter was flying for his life, he met the Lord, and again said to Him: ‘Lord, whither goest Thou?’ The words of the question, as given in the Vulgate, are the name of the site of the supposed interview, and of the little church which stands on it. The Master answered: ‘I go to Rome, to be crucified again.’ The answer smote the heart of the Apostle, and turned the cowardly fugitive into a hero; and he followed his Lord, and went gladly to his death. For it was that death which had to be accomplished before Peter was able to follow his Lord.

Now, as to the words before us, I think we shall best gather their significance, and lay it upon our own hearts, if we simply follow the windings of the dialogue. There are three points: the audacious question, the rash vow, and the sad forecast.

I. The audacious question.

As Peter’s first question, ‘Lord, whither goest Thou?’ meant not so much what it said, as ‘I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest; tell me, that I may’; so the second question, in like manner, is really not so much a question, ‘Why cannot I follow Thee now?’ as the nearest possible approach to a flat contradiction of our Lord. Peter puts his words into the shape of an interrogation; what he means is, ‘Yes, I can follow Thee; and in proof thereof, I will lay down my life for Thy sake.’ The man’s persistence, the man’s love leading him to lack of reverence, came out in this [as I have ventured to call it] audacious question. Its underlying meaning was a refusal to believe the Master’s word. But yet there was in it a nobility of resolution-broken afterwards, but never mind about that-to endure anything rather than to be separate from the Lord. Yet, though it was noble in its motive, but lacking in reverence in its form, there was a deeper error than that in it. Peter did not know what ‘following’ meant, and he had to be taught that first. One of the main reasons why he could not follow was because he did not understand what was involved. It was something more than marching behind his Master, even to a Cross. There was a deeper discipline and a more strenuous effort needed than would have availed for such a kind of following.

Let us look a little onwards into his life. Recall that scene on the morning of the day by the banks of the lake, when he waded through the shallow water, and cast himself, dripping, at his Master’s feet, and, having by his threefold confession obliterated his threefold denial, was taken back to his Lord’s love, and received the permission for which he had hungered, and which he had been told, in the upper room, could not ‘now’ be given: ‘Jesus said to him, Follow thou Me.’ What a flood of remembrances must then have rushed over the penitent Peter! how he must have thought to himself, ‘So soon, so soon is the “canst not” changed into a canst! So soon has the “afterwards” come to be the present!’

And long years after that, when he was an old man, and experience had taught him what following meant, he shared his privilege with all the dispersed strangers to whom he wrote, and said to them, with a definite reference to this incident, and to the other after the Resurrection, ‘leaving us an example, that we [not only, as I used to think, in my exuberant days of ignorance] should follow in His steps.’

So, brethren, this blundering, loving, audacious question suggests to us that to follow Jesus Christ is the supreme direction for all conduct. Men of all creeds, men of no creed, admit that. The

‘Loveliness of perfect deeds,
More strong than all poetic thought,’

which is set forth in that life constitutes the living law to which all conduct is to be conformed, and will be noble in proportion as it is conformed.

There is the great blessing, and solemn obligation, and lofty prerogative of Christian morality, that for obedience to a precept it substitutes following a Person, and instead of saying to men ‘Be good’ it says to them ‘Be Christlike.’ It brings the conception of duty out of the region of abstractions into the region of living realities. For the cold statuesque ideal of perfection it substitutes a living Man, with a heart to love, and a hand to help us. Thereby the whole aspect of striving after the right is changed; for the work is made easier, and companionship comes in to aid morality, when Jesus Christ says to us, ‘Be like Me; and then you will be good and blessed.’ Effort will be all but as blessed as attainment, and the sense of pressing hard after Him will be only less restful than the consciousness of having attained. To follow Him is bliss, to reach Him is heaven.

But in order that this following should be possible, there must be something done that had not been done when Peter asked, ‘Why cannot I follow Thee now?’ One reason why he could not was, as I said, because he did not know yet what ‘following’ meant, and because he was yet unfit for this assimilation of his character and of his conduct to the likeness of his Lord. And another reason was because the Cross still lay before the Lord, and until that death of infinite love and utter self-sacrifice for others had been accomplished, the pattern was not yet complete, nor the highest ideal of human life realised in life. Therefore the ‘following’ was impossible. Christ must die before He has completed the example that we are to follow, and Christ must die before the impulse shall be given to us, which shall make us able to tread, however falteringly and far behind, in His footsteps.

The essence of His life and of His death lies in the two things, entire suppression of personal will in obedience to the will of the Father, and entire self-sacrifice for the sake of humanity. And however there is-and God forbid that I should ever forget in my preaching that there is-a uniqueness in that sacrifice, in that life, and in that death, which beggars all imitation, and needs and tolerates no repetition whilst the world lasts, still along with this, there is that which is imitable in the life and imitable in the death of the Master. To follow Jesus is to live denying self for God, and to live sacrificing self for men. Nothing less than these are included in the solemn words, ‘leaving us’-even in the act and article of death when He ‘suffered for us’-’an example that we should follow His steps.’

The word rendered ‘example’ refers to the headline which the writing-master gives his pupils to copy, line by line. We all know how clumsy the pothooks and hangers are, how blurred the page with many a blot. And yet there, at the top of it, stands the Master’s fair writing, and though even the last line on the page will be blotted and blurred, when we turn it over and begin on the new leaf, the copy will be like the original, ‘and we shall he like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ ‘Thou shalt follow Me afterwards’ is a commandment; blessed be God, it is also a promise. For let us not forget that the ‘following’ ends in an attaining; even as the Lord Himself has said in another connection, when He spake: ‘If any man serve Me, let him follow Me, and where I am, there shall also My servant be.’ Of course, if we follow, we shall come to the same place one day. And so the great promise will be fulfilled; ‘they shall follow the Lamb,’ in that higher life, ‘whithersoever He goeth’; and not as here imperfectly, and far behind, but close beside Him, and keeping step for step, being with Him first, and following Him afterwards.

But let us remember that with regard to that future following and its completeness, the same present incapacity applies, as clogs and mars the ‘following,’ which is conforming our lives to His. For, as He Himself has said to us, ‘I go to prepare a place for you,’ and until He had passed through death and into His glory, there was no standing-ground for human feet on the golden pavements, and heaven was inaccessible to man until Christ had died. Thus, as all life is changed when it is looked upon as being a following of Jesus, so death becomes altogether other when it is so regarded. The first martyr outside the city wall, bruised and battered by the cruel stones, remembered his Master’s death, and shaped his own to be like it. As Jesus, when He died, had said: ‘Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit,’ Stephen, dying, said: ‘Lord Jesus, receive My spirit.’ As the Master had given His last breath to the prayer, ‘Father, forgive them; they know not what they do,’ so Stephen shaped his last utterance to a conformity with his Lord’s, in which the difference is as significant as the likeness, and said, ‘Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.’ And then, as the record beautifully says, amidst all that wild hubbub and cruel assault, ‘he fell on sleep,’ as a child on its mother’s breast. Death is changed when it becomes the following of Christ.

II. We have here a rash vow.

‘I will lay down my life for Thy sake.’ What a strange inversion of parts is here! ‘Lay down thy life for My sake’-with Calvary less than four-and-twenty hours off, when Christ laid down His life for Peter’s sake. Peter was guilty of an anachronism in the words, for the time did not come for the disciple to die for his Lord till after the Lord had died for His disciple. But he was right in feeling, though he felt it only in regard to an external and physical act, that to follow Jesus, it was necessary to be ready to die for Him. And that is the great truth which underlies and half redeems the rashness of this vow, and needs to be laid upon our hearts, if we are ever to be the true followers of the Master. Death for Christ is necessary if we are to follow Him. There is nothing that a man can do deeply and truly, in a manner worthy of a Christian, which has not underlying it, either the death of self-will and all the godless nature, or if need be the actual physical death, which is a much smaller matter. You cannot follow Christ except you die daily. No man has ever yet trodden in His footsteps except on condition of, moment by moment, slaying self, suppressing self, abjuring self, breaking the connection of self with the material world, and yielding up himself as a living sacrifice, in a living death, to the Lord of life and death. Do not think that ‘following Christ’ is a mere sentimental expression for so much morality as we can conveniently get into our daily life. But remember that here, with all his rashness, with all his ignorance, with all his superficiality, the Apostle has laid hold upon the great permanent, but alas! much-forgotten principle, that to die is essential to following Jesus.

This daily dying, which is a far harder thing to do than to go to a cross once, and have done with it-was impossible for Peter then, though he did not know it. His vow was a rash one, because the laying down of Christ’s life, for Peter’s sake and for ours, had not yet been accomplished. There is the motive-power by which, and by which alone, drawn in gratitude, and melted down from all our selfishness, we, too, in our measure and our turn, are able to yield ourselves, in daily crucifixion of our evil, and daily abnegation of self-trust, and self-pleasing, and self-will, to the Lord that has died for us. He must lay down His life for our sakes, and we must know He has done it, and rest upon Him as our great Sacrifice and our atoning Priest, or else we shall never be so loosed from the tyranny of self as to be ready to live by dying, and to die that we may live for His sake. ‘I go to Rome to be crucified again’ were the words in which the old legend braced the fugitive and made a hero of him, and sent him back to be crucified like his Lord and to offer up his physical life, as he had long since offered up his self-will and his arrogance to the Lord that had died for him.

O Lord our Father! help us, we beseech Thee, that we may be of the sheep that hear the Shepherd’s voice and follow Him. Strengthen our faith in that dear Lord who has laid down His life for us, that we may daily, by self-denial and self-sacrifice, lay down our lives for Him, and follow Him here in all the footsteps of His love.

67)John 13:38

John

QUO VADIS?

A RASH VOW

Joh. 13:38.

In the last sermon I partly considered the dialogue of which this is the concluding portion, and found that it consisted of an audacious question: ‘Why cannot I follow Thee now?’ which really meant a contradiction of our Lord; of a rash vow; ‘I will lay down my life for Thy sake’-and of a sad forecast: ‘The cock shall not crow till thou hast denied Me thrice.’ I paused in the middle of considering the second of these three stages, the rash vow. I then pointed out that, however ignorant the Apostle was of what ‘following Christ’ meant, he had hit the mark, and stumbled unknowingly upon the very essence of the Christian life, and an eternal truth, when he recognised that, somehow or other, to ‘follow Christ’ meant to die for Him. That is so, and is so always, for there is no following Christ which is not a ‘dying daily,’ by self-immolation and detachment from the world, and from the life of sense and self. But this rash vow has to be looked at from a somewhat different point of view, and we have to consider not only the strangely blended right and wrong, error and deep truth, that lie in its substance, but the strangely blended right and wrong in the state of feeling and thought, on the part of the Apostle, which it represents. And taking up the dropped thread, I first deal with that, and then with the sad forecast which follows.

So then, looking at these words as being like all our words, even the best of them, strangely mingled of right and wrong, good and evil, I find in them-

I. A noble, sincere, but transient emotion and impulse.

‘I will lay down my life for Thy sake.’ Peter meant it, every word of it; and he would have done it too, if only a gibbet or cross could have been set up then and there in the upper room. But unfortunately the moments of elevation and high-wrought enthusiasm, and the calls to martyrdom, do not always coincide. In the upper room, with its sacred atmosphere, it was easy to feel, and would have been easy to do, nobly. But it was not so easy, lying drowsily in Gethsemane, in the cold spring night, waiting for the Master’s coming out from beneath the trembling shadows of the olive trees, or huddled up by the fire at the lower end of the hall in the grey morning, when vitality is at its lowest.

So the sincere, noble utterance was but the expression of impulse and emotion which lifted Peter for a moment, and did him good, but which likewise, running through him, left him dry, and all the weaker because of the gush of feeling which had foamed itself away in empty words. For let us never forget that however high, noble, or divinely inspired emotion may be, in its nature it is transient and is sure to be followed by reaction. Like the winter torrents in some parched land, the more they foam, the more speedily does the bed of them dry up again, and the more they carry down the very soil in which growth and fertility would be possible. A rush of feeling is apt to leave behind hard, insensitive rock. There is a close connection between a predominantly emotional Christianity and a very imperfect life. Feeling is apt to be a substitute for action. Is it not a very remarkable thing that the word ‘benevolence,’ which means ‘kindly feeling,’ has come to take on the meaning rightly belonging to ‘beneficence,’ which means ‘kindly doing’? The emotional man blinds and hoodwinks himself, by thinking that his quick sensibility and lofty enthusiasm and warmth of emotion are action or as good as action. ‘Be thou warmed and filled,’ he says to his brother, and, in a lazy expansion of heart, forgets that he has never lifted a finger to help.

God forbid that I should seem to deprecate emotional religion or religious emotion! that is the last thing that needs to be done in this generation. If the Churches want one thing more than another, it is that their Christianity should become far more emotional than it is, and their impulses stronger, swifter, more spontaneous, more overmastering, and that they should be urged by these, and not merely by the reluctant recognition that such and such a piece of sacrifice or effort is a debt that they are obliged to clear off. Their service will be glad service, only when it is impulsive service and emotional service. Dear brethren, a Christian man whose life is not influenced by the deepest and most fervid emotion of love to the great Love that died for him, is a monster. ‘The Lord’s fire is in Jerusalem, and His furnace in Zion’-is that a description of the fervour of this Church, or of any Church in Christendom? A furnace? An ice-house! Think of some deserted cottage, with the roof fallen in, and in the cold chimney-place a rusty grate with some dead embers in it, and the snow lying upon the top of it-that is a truer description of a great many of our churches than ‘the Lord’s furnace.’

But the lesson to be taken from this incident before us is not the danger of emotion; it is rather the necessity of emotion, but with two provisoes, that it shall be emotion based upon a clear recognition of the great truth that He has laid down His life for me; and that it shall be emotion harnessed to work, and not wasted in words. The mightier the plunge of the fall, the more electrical energy you can get out of it, and set that to work to drive the wheels of life. Do not be afraid of emotion; you will make little of your Christianity unless you have it. But be sure that it is under the guidance of a clear perception of the truth that evokes it, and that it is all used to turn the wheels of life. ‘Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.’ Better is it that emotion should be reticent and active than that it should be voluble and idle. It is a good servant, but a bad master. A man that trusts to impulse and emotion to further his Christian course, is like a ship in that belt of variable winds that lies near the Equator, where there will be a fine ten-knot breeze for an hour or two, and then a sickly, stagnating calm. Push further south, and get into the steady 'trades,' where the wind blows with equable and persistent force all the year round in the same direction. Convert impulses and emotions into steadfast principle, warmed by emotion and borne on by impulse.

II. Again, this rash vow is an illustration of a confidence, also strangely blended of good and evil.

'I will lay down my life for Thy sake.' As I have said, Peter meant it. His words are paralleled by other words, in which two of the Lord's disciples answered His solemn question: 'Are ye able to drink of the cup that I drink of?' with the unhesitating answer, 'We are able.' A great teacher has regarded that saying as one of 'the ventures of faith.' Perhaps it was. Perhaps there was as much self-confidence as faith in it. Certainly there was more self-confidence than faith in Peter's answer, and his self-confidence collapsed when the trial came.

The world and the Church hold entirely antagonistic notions about the value of self-reliance. The world says that it is a condition of power. The Church says that it is the root of weakness. Self-confidence shuts a man out from the help of God, and so shuts him out from the source of power. For if you will think for a moment, you will see that the faith which the New Testament, in conformity with all wise knowledge of one's self, preaches as the one secret of power, has for its obverse-its other side-diffidence and self-distrust. No man trusts God as God ought to be trusted, who does not distrust himself as himself ought to be distrusted. To level a mountain is the only way to carry the water across where it stood. You can, by mechanism and locks, take a canal up to the top of a hill, but you cannot take a river up to the top, and the river of God's help flows through the valley and seeks the lowest levels. Faith and self-despair are the upper and the under sides of the same thing, like some cunningly-woven cloth, the one side bearing a different pattern from the other, and yet made of the same yarn, and the same threads passing from the upper to the under sides. So faith and self-distrust are but two names for one composite whole.

I was once shown an old Jewish coin which had on the one side the words 'sackcloth and ashes,' and on the other side the words 'a crown of gold.' The coin meant to contrast what Israel had been with what Israel then was.

The crown had come first; the sackcloth and ashes last. But we may use it for illustrating this point, on which I am now dwelling. Wherever, and only where, there are the sackcloth and ashes of self-despair there will be the crown of gold of an answering faith. When thus, as Wesley has it, in his great hymn: 'Confident in self-despair,' we cling to God, then we can say: 'When I am weak then am I strong,' 'Behold! we have no might, but our eyes are upon Thee.' If Peter had only said, 'By Thy help I will lay down my life for Thy sake,' his confidence would have been reasonable and blessed self-confidence, because it would have been confidence in a self inspired by divine power.

And so, brethren, whilst utter diffidence is right for us, and is the condition of all our reception of energy according to our need, the most absolute confidence-a confidence which, to the eye of the man that measures only visible things, will seem sheer insanity-is sobriety for a Christian. The world is perfectly right when it says: 'If you believe you can do a thing, you have gone a long way towards doing it.' The expectation of success has often the knack of fulfilling itself. But the world does not know our secret, and our secret is that our humble faith brings into the field the reserves with the Captain of our salvation at their head. Therefore a self-distrusting Christian can say, and say without exaggeration or presumption, 'I can do all things in Christ, strengthening me from within.'

The Church's ideals are possibilities, when you bring God into the account, and they look like insanity when you do not. Take, for instance, missions. What an absurdity to talk about a handful of Christian people-for we are only a handful as compared with the whole world-carrying their Gospel into every corner of the earth, and finding everywhere a response to it. Yes; it is absurd; but, wise Mr. Calculator, counter of heads, you have forgotten God in your estimate of whether it is reasonable or unreasonable. Again, take the Christian ideal of absolute perfection of character. 'What nonsense to talk as if any man could ever come to that.' Yes!-as if any man could come to that, I grant you. But if God is with him, the nonsense is to suppose that he will not come to it. Here is a row of cyphers as long as your arm. They mean nothing. Put a 1 at the left-hand end of the row; and what does it mean then? So the faith that brings Christ into the life, and into the Church, makes ‘nobodies’ into mighty men-’laughs at impossibilities, and cries, It shall be done!’

Still further, here, in this rash vow, we have an underestimate of difficulties. There was another incident in the life of the Apostle, a strange replica of this one, into which he pushed himself, just as he did into the high priest’s hall, partly out of curiosity and a wish to be prominent; partly out of love to his Master. Without a moment’s consideration of the peril into which he was thrusting himself, he sat in the boat, and said, ‘Bid me come to Thee on the water.’ He forgot that He was heavy, and that water was not solid, and that the wind was high and the lake rough, and when he put his foot over the side and felt the cold waves creeping up his knees, his courage ebbed out with his faith, and he began to sink. Then he cried, ‘Lord! help me!’ If he had thought for a moment of the reality of the case, he would have sat still in the boat. If he had thought of what would be in his way in following Jesus to death, he would have hesitated to vow. But it is so much easier to resolve heroisms in a quiet corner than to do them when the strain comes, and it is so much easier to do some one great thing that has in it enthusiasm and nobility, and conspicuousness of sacrifice, especially if it can be got over in a moment, like having one’s head cut off with an axe, than it is to ‘die daily.’ Ah! brethren, it is the little difficulties that make the difficulty. You read in the newspapers in the autumn, every now and then, of trains, in that wonderful country across the water, being stopped by caterpillars. The Christian train is stopped by an army of caterpillars, far oftener than it is by some solid and towering barrier. Our Christian lives are a great deal likelier to come to failure, because we do not take into account the multiplied small antagonisms than because we are not ready to face the greater ones. What would you think of a bridge builder, who built a bridge across some mountain torrent and made no allowance for freshets and floods when the ice melted? His bridge and his piers would be gone the first winter. You remember who it was that said that he went into the Franco-German War ‘with a light heart,’ and in seven weeks came Sedan and the dethronement of an Emperor, and the surrender of an army. ‘Blessed is he that feareth always.’ There is no more fatal error than an underestimate of our difficulties.

III. Let me say a word about the sad forecast here.

'Thou shalt deny me thrice.'

We cannot say that poor Peter's fall was at all an anomalous or uncommon thing. He did exactly what a great many of us are doing. He could-and I have no doubt he would-have gone to the death for Jesus Christ; but he could not stand being laughed at for Him. He would have been ready to meet the executioner's sharp sword, but the servant-girl's sharp tongue was more than he could bear. And so he denied Jesus, not because he was afraid of his skin-for I do not suppose that the servants had any notion of doing anything more than amusing themselves with a few clumsy gibes at his expense-but because he could not bear to be made sport of.

Now, dear brethren, I suppose we are all of us more or less movers in circles in which it sometimes is not considered 'good form' to show that we are Christian people. You young men in your warehouses, you students at the University, where it is a sign of being 'fossils' and 'behind the times' and 'not up to date' to say 'I am a Christian,' and all of us in our several places have sometimes to gather our courage together, and not be afraid to declare whose we are. No doubt life is a better witness than words, but no doubt also life is not so good a witness as it might be, unless it sometimes has the commentary of words as well. Thus, to confess Christ means two things; to say sometimes-in the face of a smile of scorn, which is often harder to bear than something much more dangerous-'I am His,' and to live Christ, and to say by conduct 'I am His,' 'Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him will I also confess before My Father, and whosoever shall deny Me, him will I also deny.' Do not button your coats over your uniform. Do not take the cockade out of your hats when you go amongst 'the other side.' Live Jesus, and, when advisable, preach Jesus.

But Peter's fall, which is typical of what we are all tempted to do, has in it a gracious message; for it proclaims the possibility of recovery from any depth of descent, and of coming back again from any distance of wandering. Did you ever notice how Peter's fall was burnt in upon his memory, so as that when he began to preach after Pentecost, the shape that his indictment of his hearers takes is, 'Ye denied the Holy One and the Just,' and how, long after-if the second Epistle which goes by his name is his-in summing up the crimes of the heretics whom he is branding, he speaks of their ‘denying the Lord that bought them.’ He never forgot his denial, and it remained with him as the expression for all that was wrong in a man’s relation to Jesus Christ. And I suppose not only was it burnt in upon his memory, but it burnt out all his self-confidence.

It is beautiful to see how, in his letter, he speaks over and over again of ‘fear’ as being a wise temper of mind for a Christian. As George Herbert has it, ‘A sad, wise valour is the true complexion.’ Thus the man that had been so confident in himself learned to say ‘Be ready to give to every man that asketh you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.’

And do you not think that his fall drew him closer to Jesus Christ than ever he had been before, as he learned more of His pardoning love and mercy? Was he not nearer the Lord on that morning when the two together, alone, talked after the Resurrection? Was he not nearer Him when he struggled to his feet from the boat on the lake, on that morning when he was received back into his office as Christ’s Apostle? Did he ever forget how he had sinned? Did he ever forget how Christ had pardoned? Did he ever forget how Christ loved and would keep him? Ah, no! The rope that is broken is strongest where it is spliced, not because it was broken, but because a cunning hand has strengthened it. We may be the stronger for our sins, not because sin strengthens, for it weakens, but because God restores. It is possible that we may build a fairer structure on the ruins of our old selves. It is possible that we may turn every field of defeat into a field of victory. It is possible that we may

‘Fall to rise; be beaten, to fight better.’

If only we cling to the Lord our Strength, the promise shall be ours- whatever our failures, denials, backslidings, inconsistencies- ‘though he fall he shall not be utterly cast down, for the Lord upholdeth him with His hand.’

68)John 14:1

John

FAITH IN GOD AND CHRIST

Joh. 14:1.

The twelve were sitting in the upper chamber, stupefied with the dreary, half-understood prospect of Christ's departure. He, forgetting His own burden, turns to comfort and encourage them. These sweet and great words most singularly blend gentleness and dignity. Who can reproduce the cadence of soothing tenderness, soft as a mother's hand, in that 'Let not your heart be troubled'? And who can fail to feel the tone of majesty in that 'Believe in God, believe also in Me'?

The Greek presents an ambiguity in the latter half of the verse, for the verb may be either indicative or imperative, and so we may read four different ways, according as we render each of the two 'believes' in either of these two fashions. Our Authorised and Revised Versions concur in adopting the indicative 'Ye believe' in the former clause and the imperative in the latter. But I venture to think that we get a more true and appropriate meaning if we keep both clauses in the same mood, and read them both as imperatives: 'Believe in God, believe also in Me.' It would be harsh, I think, to take one as an affirmation and the other as a command. It would be irrelevant, I think, to remind the disciples of their belief in God. It would break the unity of the verse and destroy the relation of the latter half to the former, the former being a negative precept: 'Let not your heart be troubled'; and the latter being a positive one: 'Instead of being troubled, believe in God, and believe in Me.' So, for all these reasons, I venture to adopt the reading I have indicated.

I. Now in these words the first thing that strikes me is that Christ here points to Himself as the object of precisely the same religious trust which is to be given to God.

It is only our familiarity with these words that blinds us to their wonderfulness and their greatness. Try to hear them for the first time, and to bring into remembrance the circumstances in which they were spoken. Here is a man sitting among a handful of His friends, who is within four-and-twenty hours of a shameful death, which to all appearance was the utter annihilation of all His claims and hopes, and He says, 'Trust in God, and trust in Me'! I think that if we had heard that for the first time, we should have understood a little better than some of us do the depth of its meaning.

What is it that Christ asks for here? Or rather let me say, What is it that Christ offers to us here? For we must not look at the words as a demand or as a command, but rather as a merciful invitation to do what it is life and blessing to do. It is a very low and inadequate interpretation of these words which takes them as meaning little more than 'Believe in God, believe that He is; believe in Me, believe that I am.' But it is scarcely less so to suppose that the mere assent of the understanding to His teaching is all that Christ is asking for here. By no means; what He invites us to goes a great deal deeper than that. The essence of it is an act of the will and of the heart, not of the understanding at all. A man may believe in Him as a historical person, may accept all that is said about Him here, and yet not be within sight of the trust in Him of which He here speaks. For the essence of the whole is not the intellectual process of assent to a proposition, but the intensely personal act of yielding up will and heart to a living person. Faith does not grasp a doctrine, but a heart. The trust which Christ requires is the bond that unites souls with Him; and the very life of it is entire committal of myself to Him in all my relations and for all my needs, and absolute utter confidence in Him as all-sufficient for everything that I can require. Let us get away from the cold intellectualism of 'belief' into the warm atmosphere of 'trust,' and we shall understand better than by many volumes what Christ here means and the sphere and the power and the blessedness of that faith which Christ requires.

Further, note that, whatever may be this believing in Him which He asks from us or invites us to render, it is precisely the same thing which He bids us render to God. The two clauses in the original bring out that idea even more vividly than in our version, because the order of the words in the latter clause is inverted; and they read literally thus: 'Believe in God, in Me also believe.' The purpose of the inversion is to put these two, God and Christ, as close together as possible; and to put the two identical emotions at the beginning and at the end, at the two extremes and outsides of the whole sentence. Could language be more deliberately adopted and moulded, even in its consecution and arrangement, to enforce this thought, that whatever it is that we give to Christ, it is the very same thing that we give to God? And so He here proposes Himself as the worthy and adequate recipient of all these emotions of confidence, submission, resignation, which make up religion in its deepest sense.

That tone is by no means singular in this place. It is the uniform tone and characteristic of our Lord's teaching. Let me remind you just in a sentence of one or two instances. What did He think of Himself who stood up before the world and, with arms outstretched, like that great white Christ in Thorwaldsen's lovely statue, said to all the troop of languid and burdened and fatigued ones crowding at His feet: 'Come unto Me all ye that are weary and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'? That surely is a divine prerogative. What did He think of Himself who said, 'All men should honour the Son even as they honour the Father'? What did He think of Himself who, in that very Sermon on the Mount [to which the advocates of a maimed and mutilated Christianity tell us they pin their faith, instead of to mystical doctrines] declared that He Himself was the Judge of humanity, and that all men should stand at His bar and receive from Him 'according to the deeds done in their body'? Upon any honest principle of interpreting these Gospels, and unless you avowedly go picking and choosing amongst His words, accepting this and rejecting that, you cannot eliminate from the scriptural representation of Jesus Christ the fact that He claimed as His own the emotions of the heart to which only God has a right and only God can satisfy.

I do not dwell upon that point, but I say, in one sentence, we have to take that into account if we would estimate the character of Jesus Christ as a Teacher and as a Man. I would not turn away from Him any imperfect conceptions, as they seem to me, of His nature and His work-rather would I foster them, and lead them on to a fuller recognition of the full Christ-but this I am bound to say, that for my part I believe that nothing but the wildest caprice, dealing with the Gospels according to one's own subjective fancies, irrespective altogether of the evidence, can strike out from the teaching of Christ this its characteristic difference. What signalises Him, and separates Him from all other religious teachers, is not the clearness or the tenderness with which He reiterated the truths about the divine Father's love, or about morality, and justice, and truth, and goodness; but the peculiarity of His call to the world is, 'Believe in Me.' And if He said that, or anything like it, and if the representations of His teaching in these four Gospels, which are the only source from which we get any notion of Him at all, are to be accepted, why, then, one of two things follows. Either He was wrong, and then He was a crazy enthusiast, only acquitted of blasphemy because convicted of insanity; or else-or else-He was 'God, manifest in the flesh.' It is vain to bow down before a fancy portrait of a bit of Christ, and to exalt the humble sage of Nazareth, and to leave out the very thing that makes the difference between Him and all others, namely, these either audacious or most true claims to be the Son of God, the worthy Recipient and the adequate Object of man's religious emotions. 'Believe in God, in Me also believe.'

II. Now, secondly, notice that faith in Christ and faith in God are not two, but one.

These two clauses on the surface present juxtaposition. Looked at more closely they present interpenetration and identity. Jesus Christ does not merely set Himself up by the side of God, nor are we worshippers of two Gods when we bow before Jesus and bow before the Father; but faith in Christ is faith in God, and faith in God which is not faith in Christ is imperfect, incomplete, and will not long last. To trust in Him is to trust in the Father; to trust in the Father is to trust in Him.

What is the underlying truth that is here? How comes it that these two objects blend into one, like two figures in a stereoscope; and that the faith which flows to Jesus Christ rests upon God? This is the underlying truth, that Jesus Christ, Himself divine, is the divine Revealer of God. I need not dwell upon the latter of these two thoughts: how there is no real knowledge of the real God in the depth of His love, the tenderness of His nature or the lustrousness of His holiness; how there is no certitude; how the God that we see outside of Jesus Christ is sometimes doubt, sometimes hope, sometimes fear, always far-off and vague, an abstraction rather than a person, 'a stream of tendency' without us, that which is unnameable, and the like. I need not dwell upon the thought that Jesus Christ has showed us a Father, has brought a God to our hearts whom we can love, whom we can know really though not fully, of whom we can be sure with a certitude which is as deep as the certitude of our own personal being; that He has brought to us a God before whom we do not need to crouch far off, that He has brought to us a

God whom we can trust. Very significant is it that Christianity alone puts the very heart of religion in the act of trust. Other religions put it in dread, worship, service, and the like. Jesus Christ alone says, the bond between men and God is that blessed one of trust. And He says so because He alone brings us a God whom it is not ridiculous to tell men to trust.

And, on the other hand, the truth that underlies this is not only that Jesus Christ is the Revealer of God, but that He Himself is divine. Light shines through a window, but the light and the glass that makes it visible have nothing in common with one another. The Godhead shines through Christ, but He is not a mere transparent medium. It is Himself that He is showing us when He is showing us God. ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen’-not the light that streams through Me-but ‘hath seen,’ in Me, ‘the Father.’ And because He is Himself divine and the divine Revealer, therefore the faith that grasps Him is inseparably one with the faith that grasps God. Men could look upon a Moses, an Isaiah, or a Paul, and in them recognise the eradiation of the divinity that imparted itself through them, but the medium was forgotten in proportion as that which it revealed was beheld. You cannot forget Christ in order to see God more clearly, but to behold Him is to behold God.

And if that be true, these two things follow. One is that all imperfect revelation of God is prophetic of, and leads up towards, the perfect revelation in Jesus Christ. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives that truth in a very striking fashion. He compares all other means of knowing God to fragmentary syllables of a great word, of which one was given to one man and another to another. God ‘spoke at sundry times and in manifold portions to the fathers by the prophets’; but the whole word is articulately uttered by the Son, in whom He has ‘spoken unto us in these last times.’ The imperfect revelation, by means of those who were merely mediums for the revelation leads up to Him who is Himself the Revelation, the Revealer, and the Revealed.

And in like manner, all the imperfect faith that, laying hold of other fragmentary means of knowing God, has tremulously tried to trust Him, finds its climax and consummate flower in the full-blossomed faith that lays hold upon Jesus Christ. The unconscious prophecies of heathendom; the trust that select souls up and down the world have put in One whom they dimly apprehended; the faith of the Old Testament saints; the rudimentary beginnings of a knowledge of God and of a trust in Him which are found in men to-day, and amongst us, outside of the circle of Christianity-all these things are as manifestly incomplete as a building reared half its height, and waiting for the corner-stone to be brought forth, the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and the intelligent and full acceptance of Him and faith in Him.

And another thing is true, that without faith in Christ such faith in God as is possible is feeble, incomplete, and will not long last. Historically a pure theism is all but impotent. There is only one example of it on a large scale in the world, and that is a kind of bastard Christianity-Mohammedanism; and we all know what good that is as a religion. There are plenty of people amongst us nowadays who claim to be very advanced thinkers, and who call themselves Theists, and not Christians. Well, I venture to say that that is a phase that will not last. There is little substance in it. The God whom men know outside of Jesus Christ is a poor, nebulous thing; an idea, not a reality. He, or rather It, is a film of cloud shaped into a vague form, through which you can see the stars. It has little power to restrain. It has less to inspire and impel. It has still less to comfort; it has least of all to satisfy the heart. You will have to get something more substantial than the far-off god of an unchristian Theism if you mean to sway the world and to satisfy men’s hearts.

And so, dear brethren, I come to this-perhaps the word may be fitting for some that listen to me-’Believe in God,’ and that you may, ‘believe also in Christ.’ For sure I am that when the stress comes, and you want a god, unless your god is the God revealed in Jesus Christ, he will be a powerless deity. If you have not faith in Christ, you will not long have faith in God that is vital and worth anything.

III. Lastly, this trust in Christ is the secret of a quiet heart.

It is of no use to say to men, ‘Let not your hearts be troubled,’ unless you finish the verse and say, ‘Believe in God, believe also in Christ.’ For unless we trust we shall certainly be troubled. The state of man in this world is like that of some of those sunny islands in southern seas, around which there often rave the wildest cyclones, and which carry in their bosoms, beneath all their riotous luxuriance of verdant beauty, hidden fires, which ever and anon shake the solid earth and spread destruction. Storms without and earthquakes within-that is the condition of humanity. And where is the 'rest' to come from? All other defences are weak and poor. We have heard about 'pills against earthquakes.' That is what the comforts and tranquillising which the world supplies may fairly be likened to. Unless we trust we are, and we shall be, and should be, 'troubled.'

If we trust we may be quiet. Trust is always tranquillity. To cast a burden off myself on others' shoulders is always a rest. But trust in Jesus Christ brings infinitude on my side. Submission is repose. When we cease to kick against the pricks they cease to prick and wound us. Trust opens the heart, like the windows of the Ark tossing upon the black and fatal flood, for the entrance of the peaceful dove with the olive branch in its mouth. Trust brings Christ to my side in all His tenderness and greatness and sweetness. If I trust, 'all is right that seems most wrong.' If I trust, conscience is quiet. If I trust, life becomes 'a solemn scorn of ills.' If I trust, inward unrest is changed into tranquillity, and mad passions are cast out from him that sits 'clothed and in his right mind' at the feet of Jesus.

'The wicked is like the troubled sea which cannot rest.' But if I trust, my soul will become like the glassy ocean when all the storms sleep, and 'birds of peace sit brooding on the charmed wave.' 'Peace I leave with you.' 'Let not your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me.'

Help us, O Lord! to yield our hearts to Thy dear Son, and in Him to find Thyself and eternal rest.

69)John 14:2

John

THE FORERUNNER

'MANY MANSIONS'

Joh. 14:2.

Sorrow needs simple words for its consolation; and simple words are the best clothing for the largest truths. These eleven poor men were crushed and desolate at the thought of Christ's going; they fancied that if He left them they lost Him. And so, in simple, childlike words, which the weakest could grasp, and in which the most troubled could find peace, He said to them, after having encouraged their trust in Him, 'There is plenty of room for you as well as for Me where I am going; and the frankness of our intercourse in the past might make you sure that if I were going to leave you I would have told you all about it. Did I ever hide from you anything that was painful? Did I ever allure you to follow Me by false promises? Should I have kept silence about it if our separation was to be eternal?' So, simply, as a mother might hush her babe upon her breast, He soothes their sorrow. And yet, in the quiet words, so level to the lowest apprehension, there lie great truths, far deeper than we yet have appreciated, and which will enfold themselves in their majesty and their greatness through eternity. 'In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you.'

I. Now note in these words, first, the 'Father's house,' and its ample room.

There is only one other occasion recorded in which our Lord used this expression, and it occurs in this same Gospel near the beginning; where in the narrative of the first cleansing of the Temple we read that He said, 'Make not My Father's house a house of merchandise.' The earlier use of the words may help to throw light upon one aspect of this latter employment of it, for there blend in the image the two ideas of what I may call domestic familiarity, and of that great future as being the reality of which the earthly Temple was intended to be the dim prophecy and shadow. Its courts, its many chambers, its ample porches with room for thronging worshippers, represented in some poor way the wide sweep and space of that higher house; and the sense of Sonship, which drew the Boy to His Father's house in the earliest hours of conscious childhood, speaks here.

Think for a moment of how sweet and familiar the conception of heaven as the Father's house makes it to us. There is something awful, even to the best and holiest souls, in the thought of even the glories beyond. The circumstances of death, which is its portal, our utter unacquaintance with all that lies behind the veil, the terrible silence and distance which falls upon our dearest ones as they are sucked into the cloud, all tend to make us feel that there is much that is solemn and awful even in the thought of eternal future blessedness. But how it is all softened when we say, ‘My Father’s house.’ Most of us have long since left behind us the sweet security, the sense of the absence of all responsibility, the assurance of defence and provision, which used to be ours when we lived as children in a father’s house here. But we may all look forward to the renewal, in far nobler form, of these early days, when the father’s house meant the inexpugnable fortress where no evil could befall us, the abundant home where all wants were supplied, and where the shyest and timidest child could feel at ease and secure. It is all coming again, brother, and amidst the august and unimaginable glories of that future the old feeling of being little children, nestling safe in the Father’s house, will fill our quiet hearts once more.

And then consider how the conception of that Future as the Father’s house suggests answers to so many of our questions about the relationship of the inmates to one another. Are they to dwell isolated in their several mansions? Is that the way in which children in a home dwell with each other? Surely if He be the Father, and heaven be His house, the relation of the redeemed to one another must have in it more than all the sweet familiarity and unrestrained frankness which subsists in the families of earth. A solitary heaven would be but half a heaven, and would ill correspond with the hopes that inevitably spring from the representation of it as ‘my Father’s house.’

But consider further that this great and tender name for heaven has its deepest meaning in the conception of it as a spiritual state of which the essential elements are the loving manifestation and presence of God as Father, the perfect consciousness of sonship, the happy union of all the children in one great family, and the derivation of all their blessedness from their Elder Brother.

The earthly Temple, to which there is some allusion in this great metaphor, was the place in which the divine glory was manifested to seeking souls, though in symbol, yet also in reality, and the representation of our text blends the two ideas of the free, frank intercourse of the home and of the magnificent revelations of the Holy of holies. Under either aspect of the phrase, whether we think of ‘my Father’s house’ as temple or as home, it sets before us, as the main blessedness and glory of heaven, the vision of the Father, the consciousness of sonship, and the complete union with Him. There are many subsidiary and more outward blessednesses and glories which shine dimly through the haze of metaphors and negations, by which alone a state of which we have no experience can be revealed to us; but these are secondary. The heaven of heaven is the possession of God the Father through the Son in the expanding spirits of His sons. The sovereign and filial position which Jesus Christ in His manhood occupies in that higher house, and which He shares with all those who by Him have received the adoption of sons, is the very heart and nerve of this great metaphor.

But I think we must go a step further than that, and recognise that in the image there is inherent the teaching that that glorious future is not merely a state, but also a place. Local associations are not to be divorced from the words; and although we can say but little about such a matter, yet everything in the teaching of Scripture points to the thought that howsoever true it may be that the essence of heaven is condition, yet that also heaven has a local habitation, and is a place in the great universe of God. Jesus Christ has at this moment a human body, glorified. That body, as Scripture teaches us, is somewhere, and where He is there shall also His servant be. In the context He goes on to tell us that ‘He goes to prepare a place for us,’ and though I would not insist upon the literal interpretation of such words, yet distinctly the drift of the representation is in the direction of localising, though not of materialising, the abode of the blessed. So I think we can say, not merely that what He is that shall also His servants be, but that where He is there shall also His servants be. And from the representation of my text, though we cannot fathom all its depths, we can at least grasp this, which gives solidity and reality to our contemplations of the future, that heaven is a place, full of all sweet security and homelike repose, where God is made known in every heart and to every consciousness as a loving Father, and of which all the inhabitants are knit together in the frankest fraternal intercourse, conscious of the Father’s love, and rejoicing in the abundant provisions of His royal House.

And then there is a second thought to be suggested from these words, and that is of the ample room in this great house. The original purpose of the words of my text, as I have already reminded you, was simply to soothe the fears of a handful of disciples.

There was room where Christ went for eleven poor men. Yes, room enough for them! but Christ's prescient eye looked down the ages, and saw all the unborn millions that would yet be drawn to Him uplifted on the Cross, and some glow of satisfaction flitted across His sorrow, as He saw from afar the result of the impending travail of His soul in the multitudes by whom God's heavenly house should yet be filled. 'Many mansions!' the thought widens out far beyond our grasp. Perhaps that upper room, like most of the roof-chambers in Jewish houses, was open to the skies, and whilst He spoke, the innumerable lights that blaze in that clear heaven shone down upon them, and He may have pointed to these. The better Abraham perhaps looked forth, like His prototype, on the starry heavens, and saw in the vision of the future those who through Him should receive the 'adoption of sons' and dwell for ever in the house of the Lord, 'so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the seashore innumerable.'

Ah! brethren, if we could only widen our measurement of the walls of the New Jerusalem to the measurement of that 'golden rod which the man, that is the angel,' as John says, applied to it, we should understand how much bigger it is than any of these poor sects and communities of ours here on earth. If we would lay to heart, as we ought to do, the deep meaning of that indefinite 'many' in my text, it would rebuke our narrowness. There will be a great many occupants of the mansions in heaven that Christian men here on earth-the most Catholic of them-will be very much surprised to see there, and thousands will find their entrance there that never found their entrance into any communities of so-called Christians here on earth.

That one word 'many' should deepen our confidence in the triumphs of Christ's Cross, and it may be used to heighten our own confidence as to our own poor selves. A chamber in the great Temple waits for each of us, and the question is, Shall we occupy it, or shall we not? The old Rabbis had a tradition which, like a great many of their apparently foolish sayings, covers in picturesque guise a very deep truth. They said that, however many the throngs of worshippers who came up to Jerusalem at the passover, the streets of the city and the courts of the sanctuary were never crowded. And so it is with that great city. There is room for all. There are throngs, but no crowds. Each finds a place in the ample sweep of the Father's house, like some of the great palaces that barbaric Eastern kings used to build, in whose courts armies might encamp, and the chambers of which were counted by the thousand. And surely in all that ample accommodation, you and I may find some corner where we, if we will, may lodge for evermore.

I do not dwell upon subsidiary ideas that may be drawn from the expressions. 'Mansions' means places of permanent abode, and suggests the two thoughts, so sweet to travellers and toilers in this fleeting, labouring life, of unchangeableness and of repose. Some have supposed that the variety in the attainments of the redeemed, which is reasonable and scriptural, might be deduced from our text, but that does not seem to be relevant to our Lord's purpose.

One other suggestion may be made without enlarging upon it. There is only one other occasion in this Gospel in which the word here translated 'mansions' is employed, and it is this: 'We will come and make our abode with him.' Our mansion is in God; God's dwelling-place is in us. So ask yourselves, Have you a place in that heavenly home? When prodigal children go away from the father's house, sometimes a broken-hearted parent will keep the boy's room just as it used to be when he was young and pure, and will hope and weary through long days for him to come back and occupy it again. God is keeping a room for you in His house; do you see that you fill it.

II. In the next place, note here the sufficiency of Christ's revelation for our needs.

'If it were not so I would have told you.' He sets Himself forward in very august fashion as being the Revealer and Opener of that house for us. There is a singular tone about all our Lord's few references to the future-a tone of decisiveness; not as if He were speaking, as a man might do, that which he had thought out, or which had come to him, but as if He was speaking of what he had Himself beheld, 'We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen.' He stands like one on a mountain top, looking down into the valleys beyond, and telling His comrades in the plain behind Him what He sees. He speaks of that unseen world always as One who had been in it, and who was reporting experiences, and not giving forth opinions. His knowledge was the knowledge of One who dwelt with the Father, and left the house in order to find and bring back His wandering brethren. It was 'His own calm home, His habitation from eternity,' and therefore He could tell us with decisiveness, with simplicity, with assurance, all which we need to know about the geography of that unknown land-the plan of that, by us unvisited, house. Very remarkable, therefore, is it, that with this tone there should be such reticence in Christ's references to the future. The text implies the rationale of such reticence. 'If it were not so I would have told you.' I tell you all that you need, though I tell you a great deal less than you sometimes wish.

The gaps in our knowledge of the future, seeing that we have such a Revealer as we have in Christ, are remarkable. But my text suggests this to us-we have as much as we need. I know, and many of you know, by bitter experience, how many questions, the answers to which would seem to us to be such a lightening of our burdens, our desolated and troubled hearts suggest about that future, and how vainly we ply heaven with questions and interrogate the unreplying Oracle. But we know as much as we need. We know that God is there. We know that it is the Father's house. We know that Christ is in it. We know that the dwellers there are a family. We know that sweet security and ample provision are there; and, for the rest, if we I needed to have heard more, He would have told us.

'My knowledge of that life is small,

The eye of faith is dim;

But 'tis enough that Christ knows all;

And I shall be with Him.'

Let the gaps remain. The gaps are part of the revelation, and we know enough for faith and hope.

May we not widen the application of that thought to other matters than to our bounded and fragmentary conceptions of a future life? In times like the present, of doubt and unrest, it is a great piece of Christian wisdom to recognise the limitations of our knowledge and the sufficiency of the fragments that we have. What do we get a revelation for? To solve theological puzzles and dogmatic difficulties? to inflate us with the pride of quasi-omniscience? or to present to us God in Christ for faith, for love, for obedience, for imitation? Surely the latter, and for such purposes we have enough.

So let us recognise that our knowledge is very partial. A great stretch of wall is blank, and there is not a window in it. If there had been need for one, it would have been struck out. He has been pleased to leave many things obscure, not arbitrarily, so as to try our faith-for the implication of the words before us is that the relation between Him and us binds Him to the utmost possible frankness, and that all which we need and He can tell us He does tell-but for high reasons, and because of the very conditions of our present environment, which forbid the more complete and all-round knowledge.

So let us recognise our limitations. We know in part, and we are wise if we affirm in part. Hold by the Central Light, which is Jesus Christ. ‘Many things did Jesus which are not written in this book,’ and many gaps and deficiencies from a human point of view exist in the contexture of revelation. ‘But these are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ,’ for which enough has been told us, ‘and that, believing, ye may have life in His name.’ If that purpose be accomplished in us, God will not have spoken, nor we have heard, in vain. Let us hold by the Central Light, and then the circumference of darkness will gradually retreat, and a wider sphere of illumination be ours, until the day when we enter our mansion in the Father’s house, and then ‘in Thy Light shall we see light’; and we shall ‘know even as we are known.’

Let your Elder Brother lead you back, dear friend, to the Father’s bosom, and be sure that if you trust Him and listen to Him, you will know enough on earth to turn earth into a foretaste of Heaven, and will find at last your place in the Father’s house beside the Brother who has prepared it for you.

70)John 14:3

THE FORERUNNER

Joh. 14:2 - Joh. 14:3.

What divine simplicity and depth are in these words! They carry us up into the unseen world, and beyond time; and yet a little child can lay hold on them, and mourning hearts and dying men find peace and sweetness in them. A very familiar image underlies them. It was customary for travellers in those old days to send some of their party on in advance, to find lodging and make arrangements for them in some great city. Many a time one or other of the disciples had been 'sent before His face into every place where He Himself should come.' On that very morning two of them had gone in, at His bidding, from Bethany to make ready the table at which they were sitting. Christ here takes that office upon Himself. The emblem is homely, the thing meant is transcendent.

Not less wonderful is the blending of majesty and lowliness. The office which He takes upon Himself is that of an inferior and a servant. And yet the discharge of it, in the present case, implies His authority over every corner of the universe, His immortal life, and the sufficiency of His presence to make a heaven. Nor can we fail to notice the blending of another pair of opposites: His certainty of His impending death, and His certainty, notwithstanding and thereby, of His continual work and His final return, are inseparably interlaced here. How comes it that, in all His premonitions of His death, Jesus Christ never spoke about it as failure or as the interruption or end of His activity, but always as the transition to, and the condition of, His wider work? 'I go, and if I go I return, and take you to Myself.'

So, then, there are three things here, the departure with its purpose, the return, and the perfected union.

I. The Departure.

Our Lord's going away from that little group was a journey in two stages. Calvary was the first; Olivet was the second. He means by the phrase the whole continuous process which begins with His death and ends in His ascension. Both are embraced in His words, and each co-operates to the attainment of the great purpose.

He prepares a place for us by His death. The High Priest, in the ancient ritual, once a year was privileged to lift the heavy veil and pass into the darkened chamber, where only the light between the cherubim was visible, because he bore in his hand the blood of the sacrifice. But in our New Testament system the path into ‘the holiest of all,’ the realisation of the most intimate fellowship with heavenly things and communion with God Himself, are made possible, and the way patent for every foot, because Jesus has died. And as the communion upon earth, so the perfecting of the communion in the heavens. Who of us could step within those awful sanctities, or stand serene amidst the region of eternal light and stainless purity, unless, in His death, He had borne the sins of the world, and, having ‘overcome’ its ‘sharpness’ by enduring its blow, had ‘opened the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers’?

Old legends tell us of magic gates that resisted all attempts to force them, but upon which, if one drop of a certain blood fell, they flew open. And so, by His death, Christ has opened the gates and made the heaven of perfect purity a dwelling-place for sinful men.

But the second stage of His departure is that which more eminently is in Christ’s mind here. He prepares a place for us by His entrance into and His dwelling in the heavenly places. The words are obscure because we have but few others with which to compare them, and no experience by which to interpret them. We know so little about the matter that it is not wise to say much; but though there be vast tracts of darkness round the little spot of light, this should only make the spot of light more vivid and more precious. We know little, but we know enough for mind and heart to rest upon. Our ignorance of the ways in which Christ by His ascension prepares a heaven for His followers should neither breed doubt nor disregard of His assurance that He does.

If Christ had not ascended, would there have been ‘a place’ at all? He has gone with a human body, which, glorified as it is, still has relations to space, and must be somewhere. And we may even say that His ascending up on high has made a place where His servants are. But apart from that suggestion, which, perhaps, is going beyond our limits, we may see that Christ’s presence in heaven is needful to make it a heaven for poor human souls. There, as here [Scripture assures us], and throughout eternity as to-day, Jesus Christ is the Mediator of all human knowledge and possession of God. It is from Him and through Him that there come to men, whether they be men on earth or men in the heavens, all that they know, all that they hope, all that they enjoy, of the wisdom, love, beauty, peace, power, which flow from God. Take away from the heaven of the Christian expectation that which comes to the spirit through Jesus Christ, and you have nothing left. He and His mediation and ministration alone make the brightness and the blessedness of that high state. The very glories of all that lies beyond the veil would have an aspect appalling and bewildering to us, unless our Brother were there. Like some poor savages brought into a great city, or rustics into the presence of a king and his court, we should be ill at ease amidst the glories and solemnities of that future life unless we saw standing there our Kinsman, to whom we can turn, and who makes it possible for us to feel that it is home. Christ’s presence makes heaven the home of our hearts.

Not only did He go to prepare a place, but He is continuously preparing it for us all through the ages. We have to think of a double form of the work of Christ, His past work in His earthly life, and His present in His exaltation. We have to think of a double form of His present activity-His work with and in us here on earth, and His work for us there in the heavens. We have to think of a double form of His work in the heavens-that which the Scripture represents in a metaphor, the full comprehension of which surpasses our present powers and experiences, as being His priestly intercession; and that which my text represents in a metaphor, perhaps a little more level to our apprehension, as being His preparing a place for us. Behind the veil there is a working Christ, who, in the heavens, is preparing a place for all that love Him.

II. In the next place, note the Return.

The purpose of our Lord’s departure, as set forth by Himself here, guarantees for us His coming back again. That is the force of the simple argumentation of my text, and of the pathetic and soothing repetition of the sweet words, ‘I go to prepare a place for you; and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself.’ Because the departure had for its purpose the preparing of the place, therefore it is necessarily followed by a return. He who went away as the Forerunner has not done His work until He comes back, and, as Guide, leads those for whom He had prepared the place to the place which He had prepared for them.

Now that return of our Lord, like His departure, may be considered as having two stages. Unquestionably the main meaning and application of the words is to that final and personal coming which stands at the end of history, and to which the hopes of every Christian soul ought to be steadfastly directed. He will ‘so come in like manner as’ He has gone. We are not to water down such words as these into anything short of a return precisely corresponding in its method to the departure; and as the departure was visible, corporeal, literal, personal, and local, so the return is to be visible, corporeal, literal, personal, local too. He is to come as He went, a visible Manhood, only throned amongst the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. This is the aim that He sets before Him in His departure. He leaves in order that He may come back again.

And, oh, dear friends! remember-and let us live in the strength of the remembrance-that this return ought to be the prominent subject of Christian aspiration and desire. There is much about the conception of that solemn return, with all the convulsions that attend it, and the judgment of which it is preliminary, that may well make men’s hearts chill within them. But for you and me, if we have any love in our hearts and loyalty in our spirits to that King, ‘His coming’ should be ‘prepared as the morning,’ and we should join in the great burst of rapture of many a psalm, which calls upon rocks and hills to break forth into singing, and trees of the field to clap their hands, because He cometh as the King to judge the earth. His own parable tells us how we ought to regard His coming. When the fig-tree’s branch begins to supple, and the little leaves to push their way through the polished stem, then we know that summer is at hand. His coming should be as the approach of that glorious, fervid time, in which the sunshine has tenfold brilliancy and power, the time of ripened harvests and matured fruits, the time of joy for all creatures that love the sun. It should be the glad hope of all His servants.

We have a double witness to bear in the midst of this as of every generation. One half of the witness stretches backwards to the Cross, and proclaims ‘Christ has come’; the other reaches onwards to the Throne, and proclaims ‘Christ will come.’ Between these two high uplifted piers swings the chain of the world’s history, which closes with the return, to judge and to save, of the Lord who came to die and has gone to prepare a place for us.

But do not let us forget that we may well take another point of view than this. Scripture knows of many comings of the Lord preliminary to, and in principle one with, His last coming. For nations all great crises of their history are ‘comings of the Lord,’ the Judge, and we are strictly in the line of Scripture analogy when, in reference to individuals, we see in each single death a true coming of the Lord.

That is the point of view in which we ought to look upon a Christian’s death-bed. ‘The Master is come, and calleth for thee.’ Beyond all secondary causes, deeper than disease or accident, lies the loving will of Him who is the Lord of life and of death. Death is Christ’s minister, ‘mighty and beauteous, though his face be dark,’ and he, too, stands amidst the ranks of the ‘ministering spirits sent forth to minister to them that shall be heirs of salvation.’ It is Christ that says of one, ‘I will that this man tarry,’ and to another, ‘Go!’ and he goeth. But whensoever a Christian man lies down to die, Christ says, ‘Come!’ and he comes. How that thought should hallow the death-chamber as with the print of the Master’s feet! How it should quiet our hearts and dry our tears! How it should change the whole aspect of that ‘shadow feared of man’! With Him for our companion, the lonely road will not be dreary; and though in its anticipation, our timid hearts may often be ready to say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me,’ if we have Him by our sides, ‘even the night shall be light about us.’ The dying martyr beneath the city wall lifted up his face to the heavens, and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ It was the echo of the Master’s promise, ‘I will come again, and receive you to Myself.’

III. Lastly, notice the Perfected Union.

The departure for such a purpose necessarily involved the return again. Both are stages in the process, which is perfected by complete union-'That where I am there ye may be also.'

Christ, as I have been saying, is Heaven. His presence is all that we need for peace, for joy, for purity, for rest, for love, for growth. To be 'with Him,' as He tells us in another part of these wonderful last words in the upper chamber, is to 'behold His glory.' And to behold His glory, as John tells us in his Epistle, is to be like Him. So Christ's presence means the communication to us of all the lustre of His radiance, of all the whiteness of His purity, of all the depth of His blessedness, and of a share in His wondrous dominion. His glorified manhood will pass into ours, and they that are with Him where He is will rest as in the centre and home of their spirits, and find Him all-sufficient. His presence is my Heaven.

That is almost all we know. Oh! it is more than all we need to know. The curtain is the picture. It is because what is there transcends in glory all our present experience that Scripture can only hint at it and describe it by negations-such as 'no night,' 'no sorrow,' 'no tears,' 'former things passed away'; and by symbols of glory and lustre gathered from all that is loftiest and noblest in human buildings and society. But all these are but secondary and poor. The living heart of the hope, and the lambent centre of the brightness, is, 'So shall we ever be with the Lord.'

And it is enough. It is enough to make the bond of union between us in the outer court and them in the holy place. Parted friends will fix to look at the same star at the same moment of the night and feel some union; and if we from amidst the clouds of earth, and they from amidst the pure radiance of their heaven, turn our eyes to the same Christ, we are not far apart. If He be the companion of each of us, He reaches a hand to each, and, clasping it, the parted ones are united; and 'whether we wake or sleep we live together,' because we both live with Him.

Brother! Is Jesus Christ so much to you that a heaven which consists in nearness and likeness to Him has any attraction for you? Let Him be your Saviour, your Sacrifice, your Helper, your Companion. Obey Him as your King, love Him as your Friend, trust Him as your All. And be sure that then the darkness will be but the shadow of His hand, and instead of dreading death as that which separates you from life and love and action and joy, you will be able to meet it peacefully, as that which rends the thin veil, and unites you with Him who is the Heaven of heavens.

He has gone to prepare a place for us. And if we will let Him, He will prepare us for the place, and then come and lead us thither. ‘Thou wilt show me the path of life’ which leads through death. ‘In Thy presence is fullness of joy, and at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.’

71)John 14:4-7

John

THE WAY

Joh. 14:4 - Joh. 14:7.

Our Lord has been speaking of His departure, of its purpose, of His return as guaranteed by that purpose, and of His servants’ eternal and perfect reunion with Him. But even these cheering and calming thoughts do not exhaust His consolations, as they did not satisfy all the disciples’ needs. They might still have said, ‘Yes; we believe that You will come back again, and we believe that we shall be together; but what about the parenthesis of absence?’ And here is the answer, or at least part of it: ‘Whither I go ye know, and the way ye know’; or, if we adopt the shortened form which the Revised Version gives us, ‘Whither I go ye know the way.’

When you say to a man, ‘You know the way,’ you mean ‘Come.’ And in these words there lie, as it seems to me, a veiled invitation to the disciples to come to Him before He came back for them, and the assurance that they, though separated, might still find and tread the road to the Father’s house, and so be with Him still. They are not left desolate. The Christ who is absent is present as the path to Himself. And so the parenthesis is bridged across. Now in these verses we have several large and important lessons which I think may best be drawn by simply seeking to follow their course.

I. Observe the disciples’ unconscious knowledge.

Jesus Christ says: ‘Ye know the way and ye know the goal.’ One of them ventures flatly to contradict Him, and to traverse both assertions with a brusque and thorough-going negative. ‘We do not know whither Thou goest,’ says Thomas; ‘how can we know the way?’ He is the same man in this conversation that we find him in the interview before our Lord’s journey to raise Lazarus, and in the interview after our Lord’s resurrection. In all three cases he appears as mainly under the dominion of sense, as slow to apprehend anything beyond its limits, as morbidly melancholy and disposed to take the blackest possible view of things-a practical pessimist-and yet with a certain kind of frank outspokenness which half redeems the other characteristics from blame. He could not understand all the Lord’s deep words just spoken. His mind was befogged and dimmed, and he blurts out his ignorance, knowing that the best place to carry it to is to the Illuminator who can make it light.

‘We know not whither Thou goest, and how can we know the way?’ Was Jesus right? was Thomas right? or were they both right? The fact is that Thomas and all his fellows knew, after a fashion, but they did not know that they knew. They had heard much in the past as to where Christ was going. Plainly enough it had been rung in their ears over and over again. It had made some kind of lodgment in their heads, and, in that sense, they did know. It is this unused and unconscious knowledge of theirs to which Christ appeals, and which He tries to draw out into consciousness and power when He says, ‘You know whither I am going, and you know the road.’ Is not that exactly what a patient teacher will do with some flustered child when he says to it: ‘Take time! You know it well enough if you will only think’? So the Master says here: ‘Do not be agitated and troubled in heart. Reflect, remember, overhaul your stores, and think what I have told you over and over again, and you will find that you do know whither I am going, and that you do know the way.’

The patient gentleness of the Master with the slowness of the scholars is beautifully exemplified here, as is also the method, which He lovingly and patiently adopts, of sending men back to consult their own consciousness as illuminated by His teaching, and to see whether there is not lying somewhere, unrecked of and unemployed in some dusty corner of their mind, a truth that only needs to be dragged out and cleaned in order to show itself for what it is, the all-sufficient light and strength for the moment’s need.

The dialogue is an instance of what is true about us all, that we have in our possession truths given to us by Jesus Christ, the whole sweep and bearing of which, the whole majesty and power and illuminating capacity of which, we do not dream of yet. How much in our creeds lies dim and undeveloped! Time and circumstances and some sore agony of spirit are needed in order to make us realise the riches that we possess, and the certitudes to which our troubled spirits may cling; and the practice of far more patient, honest, profound meditation and reflection than finds favour with the average Christian man is needed, too, in order that the truths possessed may be possessed, and that we may know what we know, and understand ‘the things that are given to us of God.’

In all your creeds, there are large tracts that you, in some kind of a fashion, do believe; and yet they have no vitality in your consciousness nor power in your lives. And the Master here does with these disciples exactly what He is trying to do day by day with us, namely, fling us back on ourselves, or rather upon His revelation in us, and get us to fathom its depths and to walk round about its magnitudes, and so to understand the things that we say we believe.

All our knowledge is ignorance. Ignorance that confesses itself to Him is in the way of becoming knowledge. His light will touch the smoke and change it into red spires of flame. If you do not know, go to Him and say, ‘Lord! I do not.’ An accurate understanding of where the darkness lies is the first step to the light. We are meant to carry all our inadequate and superficial realisations of His truth into His presence, that, from Him, we may gain deeper knowledge, a firmer faith, and a more joyous certitude in His inexhaustible lessons. In every article and item of the Christian faith there is a transcendent element which surpasses our present comprehension. Let us be confident that the light will break; and let us welcome the new illumination when it comes, sure that it comes from God. Be not puffed up with the conceit that you know all. Be sure of this, that, according to the good old metaphor, we are but as children on the shore of the great ocean, gathering a few of the shells that it has washed to our feet, itself stretching boundless, and, thank God, sunlit, before us. ‘Ye know the way.’ ‘Master, we know not the way.’

II. Observe here, in the second place, our Lord's great self-revelation which meets this unconscious knowledge.

'Jesus saith unto him: I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man cometh unto the Father but by Me.' Now it is quite plain, I think, from the whole strain of the context and the purpose of these words that the main idea in them is the first-'I am the Way.' And that is made more certain because of the last words of the verse, which, summing up the force of the three preceding assertions, dwell only upon the metaphor of the Way; 'No man cometh unto the Father but by Me.' So that of these three great words, the Way, the Truth, the Life, we are to regard the second and the third as explanatory of the first. They are not co-ordinate, but the first is the more general, and the other two show how the first comes to be true. 'I am the Way' because 'I am the Truth and the Life.'

There are no words of the Master, perhaps, to which my previous remarks are more necessary to be applied than these. We know; and yet oh! what an overplus of glory and of depth is here that we do not know and never can know. The most fragmentary and inadequate grasp of them with heart and mind will bring light to the mind and quietness and peace to the heart; but the whole meaning of them goes beyond men and angels. We can only skim the surface and seek to shift back the boundaries of our knowledge a little further, and to embrace within its limits a little more of the broad land into which the words bring us. So just take a thought or two which may tend in that direction.

Note, then, as belonging to all three of these clauses that remarkable 'I am.' We show a way, Christ is it. We speak truth, Christ is it. Parents impart life, which they have received, Christ is Life. He separates Himself from all men by that representation that He is not merely the communicator or the teacher or the guide, but that He Himself is, in His own personal Being, Way, Truth, Life. He said that, when Calvary was within arm's-length. What did He think about Himself, and what should we think of Him?

And then note, further, that He sets forth His unique relation to the truth as being one ground on which He is the Way to God. He is the Truth in reference to the divine nature. That Truth, then, is not a mere matter of words. It is not only His speech that teaches us, but Himself that shows us God. His whole life and character, His personality, are the true representation within human conditions of the Invisible God; and when He says, ‘I am the Way and the Truth,’ He is saying substantially the same thing as the great prologue of this Gospel says when it calls Him the Word and the Light of men, and as Paul says when he names Him ‘the Image of the Invisible God.’ There is all the difference between talking about God and showing Him. Men reveal God by their words; Christ reveals Him by Himself and the facts of His life. The truest and highest representation of the divine nature that men can ever have is in the face of Jesus Christ.

I need only remind you in a sentence about other and lower applications of this great saying, which do not, as I think, enter into the purpose of the context. He is the Truth, inasmuch as, in the life and historical manifestation of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Scriptures, men find foundation truths of a moral and spiritual sort. ‘Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are noble, whatsoever things are lovely and of good report,’ He is these, and all true ethics is but the formulating into principles of all the facts of the life and character of Jesus Christ.

Further, my text says He is the Way because He is the Life. On the one side God is brought to all hearts, and in some real sense to our comprehension, by the life of Jesus Christ, and so He is the Way. But that is not enough. There must be an action upon us as well as an action having reference to the divine nature. God is brought to men by the manifestation in Christ; and we, the dead, are quickened by the communication of the Life. The one phrase points to all His work as a Revealer, the other points to all His work upon us as life-giving Spirit, a Quickener and an Inspirer. Dead men cannot walk a road. It is of no use to make a path if it starts from a cemetery. Christ taught that men apart from Him are dead, and that the only life that they can have by which they can be knit to God is the divine life which was in Himself, and of which He is the source and the principle for the whole world. He does not tell us here what yet is true, and what He abundantly tells in other parts of this great conversation, that the only way by which the life which He brings can be diffused and communicated is by His death. ‘Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone.’ He is the Life, and-paradox of mystery and yet fact which is the very heart and centre of His Gospel-His only way of giving His life to us is by giving up His physical life for us. He must die that He may be the life-spring for the world. The alabaster box must be broken if the ointment and its fragrance are to be poured out; and ‘death is the gate of life’ in a deeper than the ordinary sense of the saying, inasmuch as the death of the Life which is Christ is the life of the death which we are.

And so, because, on the one hand, He brings a God to our hearts that we can love and trust, and because, on the other, He communicates to our spirits, dead in the only true death which is the separation from God by sin, the life by which we are knit to God, He is the Way to the Father.

And what about people that never heard of Him, to whom that Way has been closed, to whom that Truth has never been manifested, to whom that Life has never been brought? Ah! Christ has other ways of working than through His historical manifestation, for there is no truth more plainly taught in this great fourth Gospel than this, that that Light ‘lighteth every man that cometh into the world.’ The eternal Word works through all the earth, in ways beyond our ken, and wherever any man has, however imperfectly, felt after and grasped the thought of a Father in the heavens, there the Word, which is the Light of men, has wrought.

But for us to whom this Book has come, for what people call in bitter irony ‘Christendom,’ the law of my text rigidly applies, and it is being worked out all round us to-day. ‘No man cometh unto the Father but by Me.’ And here we are, in this England of ours, and in our sister nations on the continent of Europe and in America, face to face as I believe with this alternative-either Jesus Christ the Revealer of God and the Life of men, or an empty Heaven. And for you, individually, it is either-take Christ for the Way, or wander in the wilderness and forget your Father. It is either-take Christ for the Truth, or be given over to the insufficiencies of mere natural, political, and intellectual truths, and the shows and illusions of time and sense. It is either-take Christ for your Life, or remain in your deadness, separate from God.

III. Lastly, we have here the disciples’ ignorance and the new vision which dispels it.

‘If ye had known Me, ye should have known My Father also, and from henceforth ye know Him, and have seen Him.’ Our Lord accepts for the moment Thomas’s standpoint. He supplements His former allegation of the disciples’ knowledge with the admission of the ignorance which went with it as its shadow, and was only too sadly and plainly shown by their failure to discern in Him the manifestation of the Father. He has just told them that they did know what they thought they knew not; He now tells them that they did not know what they thought they knew so well, after so many years of companionship-even Himself. The proof that they did not is that they did not know the Father as revealed in Him, nor Him as revealing the Father. If they missed that, they missed everything; and for all they had known of His graciousness, were strangers to His truest Self. Their ignorance would turn out knowledge, if they would think, and their supposed knowledge would turn out ignorance.

The lesson for us is that the true test of the completeness and worth of our knowledge of Christ lies in its being knowledge of God the Father, brought near to us by Him. This saying puts a finger on the radical deficiency of all merely humanitarian views of Christ’s person, however clearly they may see and admiringly extol the beauty of His character and the ‘sweet reasonableness’ of His wisdom. They all break down here, and are arraigned as so shallow and incomplete that they do not deserve to be called knowledge of Him at all. If you know anything about Jesus Christ rightly, this is what you know about Him, that in Him you see God. If you have not seen God in Him, you have not got to the heart of the mystery. The knowledge of Christ which stops with the Man and the Martyr, and the Teacher and the beautiful, gentle Brother, is knowledge so partial that even He cannot venture to call it other than ignorance. Oh! brethren, do our conceptions of Him meet this test which He Himself has laid down, and can we say that, seeing Him, we see in Him God?

And then our Lord passes on to another thought, the new vision which at the moment was being granted to this unconscious ignorance that was passing into conscious knowledge. ‘From henceforth ye know Him and have seen Him.’ We must give that ‘from henceforth,’ as a note of time, a somewhat liberal interpretation, and apply it to the whole series of utterances and deeds of which the words of our text are but a portion. And, if so, we come to this-it was in the wisdom, and the gentleness, and the deep truths of that upper chamber; it was in the agony and submission of Gethsemane; it was in the meek patience before the judges, and the silent acceptance of ignominy and shame; it was in the willing, loving endurance of the long hours upon the Cross, that Christ inaugurated the new stage in His revelation of God and in His life-giving to the world. And it is from thenceforth and thereby that in the man Jesus, men know and see 'the Father' as they never did before. The Cross and the Passion of Christ are the unveiling to the world of the heart of God; and by the side of that new vision the fairest and the loftiest and the sweetest of Christ's former manifestations and utterances sink into comparative insignificance. It is the dying Christ that reveals the living God.

So, dear friends, He is your way to God. See that ye seek the Father by Him alone. He is your Truth; grapple Him to your hearts, and by patient meditation and continual faithfulness enrich yourselves with all the communicated treasures that you have already received in Him. He is your Life; cleave to Him, that the quick Spirit that was in Him may pass into you and make you victors over all deaths, temporal and eternal. Know Him as a Friend, not as a mere historical person, or with mere head-knowledge, for to know a friend is something far deeper than to know a truth. 'Acquaint thyself with Him and be at peace.' 'This is life eternal, to know,' with the knowledge which is life and possession, 'Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.'

72)John 14:8-11

John

THE TRUE VISION OF GOD

Joh. 14:8 - Joh. 14:11.

The vehement burst with which Philip interrupts the calm flow of our Lord's discourse is not the product of mere frivolity or curiosity. One hears the ring of earnestness in it, and the yearnings of many years find voice. Philip had felt out of his depth, no doubt, in the profound teachings which our Lord had been giving, but His last words about seeing God set a familiar chord vibrating. As an Old Testament believer he knew that Moses had once led the elders of Israel up to the mount where ‘they saw the God of Israel,’ and that to many others had been granted sensible manifestations of the divine presence. As a disciple he longed for some similar sign to confirm his faith. As a man he was conscious of the deep need which all of us have, whether we are conscious of it or not, for something more real and tangible than an unseeable and unknowable God. The peculiarities of Philip’s temperament strengthened the desire. The first appearance that he makes in the Gospels is characteristically like this his last. To all Nathanael’s objections he had only the reply, ‘Come and see.’ And here he says: ‘Oh! if we could see the Father it would be enough.’ He was one of the men to whom seeing is believing, and so he speaks.

His petition is childlike in its simplicity, beautiful in its trust, noble and true in its estimate of what men need. He longs to see God. He believes that Christ can show God; he is sure that the sight of God will satisfy the heart. These are errors, or truths, according to what is meant by ‘seeing.’ Philip meant a palpable manifestation, and so far he was wrong. Give the word its highest and its truest meaning, and Philip’s error becomes grand truth. Our Lord gently, lovingly, and with only a hint of rebuke, answers the request, and seeks to disengage the error from the truth. His answer lies in the verses that we have read. Let us try to follow them, and, as we may, to skim their surface, for their depths are beyond us.

First of all, then, we have the sight of God in Christ as enough to answer men’s longings. There is a world of sadness and tenderness, of suppressed pain and of grieved affection, in the first words of our Lord’s reply. ‘Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me, Philip?’ He seldom names His disciples. When He does, there is a deep cadence of affection in the designation. This man was one of the first disciples, the little original band called by Christ Himself, and thus had been with Him all the time of His ministry, and the Master wonders with a gentle wonder that, before eyes that loved Him as much as Philip’s did, His continual self-revelation had been made to so little purpose. In the answer, in its first portion, there lies the reiteration of the thoughts that I was trying to dwell upon in the last sermon, which, therefore, I may lightly touch now-viz., that the sight of Christ is the sight of God-’He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father’-and that not to know Christ as thus showing God is not to know Him at all-’Thou hast not known Me, Philip.’ Further, there is the thought that the sight of God in Christ is sufficient, ‘How sayest thou, Shew us the Father?’ From all this we may gather some thoughts on which I lightly touch.

I. The first is, that we all do need to have God made visible to us.

The history of heathendom shows us that, in every land men have said, ‘The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men.’ And the highest cultivation of this highly cultivated and self-conscious twentieth century has not removed us from the same necessity that the rudest savage has, to have some kind of manifestation of the divine nature other than the dim and vague ones which are possible apart from the revelation of God in Christ. A God who is only the product of inferences from creation, or providence, or the mysteries of history, or the wonders of my own inner life, the creature of logic or of reflection, is very powerless to sway and influence men. The limitations of our faculties and the boundlessness of our hearts both cry out for a God who is nearer to us than that, and whom we can see and love and be sure of. The whole world wants the making visible of divinity as its deepest want. And your heart and mind require it. Nothing else will ever stay our hunger, will ever answer our questioning minds.

Christ meets this need. How can you make wisdom visible? How can a man see love or purity? How do I see your spirit? By the deeds of your body. And the only way by which God can ever come near enough to men to be a constant power and a constant motive in their lives is by their seeing Him at work in a Man, who amongst them is His image and revelation. Christ’s whole life is the making visible of the invisible God. He is the manifestation to the world of the unseen Father.

That vision is enough-enough for mind, enough for heart, enough for will. There is none else that is sufficient, but this is. ‘How sayest thou, Shew us the Father?’ If we can see God it suffices us. Then the mind settles down upon the thought of Him as the basis of all being, and of all change, and the heart can twine itself round Him, and the seeking soul folds its wings and is at rest, and the troubled spirit is quiet, and the accusing conscience is silent, and the rebellious will is subdued, and the stormy passions are quieted, and in the inner kingdom is a great peace. The sight of God in Christ brings rest to every heart, and, Oh! the absence of the vision is the true secret of all disquiet. We are troubled and careful, and tossed from one stormy billow to another, and swept over by all the winds that blow, because we see not God, our Father, in the face of Jesus. ‘Show us the Father, and it sufficeth us,’ is either a puerile petition, or the deepest and noblest prayer of the human heart. Blessed are they who have learned what it is to see, and know where that great sight is to be seen!

Our present knowledge and vision are far higher than that mere external symbol of God which this man wanted. The elders of Israel saw the God of Israel, but what they saw was but some symbolical manifestation of that which in itself is unseen and unattainable. But we who see God in Christ see no symbol but the Reality, and there is nothing more possible or to be hoped for here. Our present manifestation and sight of God in Christ does fall, in some ways unknown to us, beneath the bright hopes that we are entitled to cherish. But howsoever imperfect it may be, as measured against the perfection of the vision when we shall see face to face, and know even as we are known, it is enough, and more than enough, for all the questionings and desires of our hungering spirits.

II. Our Lord goes on to a further answer, and points to the divine and mutual indwelling by which this sight is made possible.

‘Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak unto you, I speak not of Myself, but the Father that dwelleth in Me, He doeth the works.’ There are here, mainly, two things, Christ’s claim to the oneness of unbroken communion, and Christ’s claim, consequently, to the oneness of complete co-operation. ‘I am in the Father’ indicates the suppression of all independent and therefore rebellious will, consciousness, thought and action; ‘And the Father in Me’ indicates the influx into that perfectly filial Manhood of the whole fullness of God in unbroken, continuous, gentle, deep flow. These are the two sides of this great mystery on which neither wisdom nor reverence lead us to dilate; and they combine to express the closest and most uninterrupted blending, interpenetration, and communion.

And then follows the other claim, that because of this continuous mutual indwelling there is perfect cooperation. This is also stated in terms corresponding to the preceding double representation. ‘The words that I speak unto you, I speak not of Myself,’ corresponds to, ‘I am in the Father.’ ‘The Father that dwelleth in Me, He doeth the works,’ corresponds to ‘The Father in Me.’ The two put together teach us this, that by reason of that mysterious and ineffable union of communion, Jesus Christ in all His words and in all His works is the perfect instrument of the divine will, so that His words are God’s words, and His works are God’s works; so that, when He speaks, His gentle wisdom, His loving sympathy, His melting tenderness, His authoritative commands, His prophetic threatenings, are the speech of God, and that when He acts, whether it be by miracle or in the ordinary deeds of His life, what we see is God working before our eyes as we never see Him in any human being.

And from all this follow just two or three considerations which I name. Note the absolute absence of any consciousness on Christ’s part of the smallest deflection or disharmony between Himself and the Father. Two triangles laid on each other are in every line, point, and angle absolutely coincident. That humanity is capable of receiving the whole inflow of God, and that indwelling God is perfectly expressed in the humanity. There is no trace of a consciousness of sin. Everything that Jesus Christ said He knew to be God’s speaking; everything that He did He knew to be God’s acting. There were no barriers between the two. Jesus Christ was conscious of no separation-not the thinnest film of air between these Two who adhered and inhered so closely and so continuously. It is an awful assertion.

Now I pray you to ask yourselves the question: If this was what Christ said, what did He think of Himself? And is this a Man, like the rest of us, with blotches and sins, with failures to embody His own ideas, and still more to carry out in life the will that He knows to be God’s will? Is this a man like other men who thus speaks to us? If Jesus had this consciousness, either He was ludicrously, tragically, blasphemously, utterly mistaken and untrustworthy, or He is what the Church in all ages has confessed Him to be, ‘the Everlasting Son of the Father.’

III. Lastly, our Lord further sets before us the faith to which He invites us on the ground of His union with, and revelation of, God.

‘Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the very works’ sake.’ Observe that the verb at the beginning of this last verse of our text passes into a plural form. Our Lord has done with Philip especially, and speaks now to all who hear Him, and to us amongst the rest of His auditors. He bids us believe Him, and believe something about Him on the strength of His own testimony, or, in default of that, and as second best, believe Him on the testimony of His works. I gather together what I have to say about this point into three remarks.

The true bond of union between men and Jesus Christ is faith. We have to trust, and that is better than sight. We have to trust Him. He is the personal Object of our faith. In all faith there is what I may call a moral and a voluntary element. A man believes a proposition because it is forced upon him, and his intelligence is obliged to accept it. A man trusts Christ because he will trust Him, and the moral and voluntary element carries us far beyond the mere intellectual conception of faith as the assent to a set of theological propositions. Faith really is the outgoing of the whole man-heart, will, intellect, and all-to a person whom it grasps. But the Christ that you and I have to trust is the Christ as He Himself has declared Himself to us. ‘Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me.’ There is a bastard, mutilated kind of thing that calls itself Christian faith, that goes about the world in this generation, which believes in Jesus Christ in all sorts of beautiful ways, but it will not believe in Him as the Personal Revelation and making visible of the unseen God. Jesus Christ Himself tells us here that that is not the kind of faith which He invites us to put forth. If we put forth that only, we have not yet come to understand Him. Oh, dear friends! Christ as here declared to us by Himself is the only Christ to whom it is right to give our trust. If He be not God manifest in the flesh, I ought not to trust Him. I may admire Him as a historical personage; I may reverence Him for His wisdom and beauty; I may even in some vague way have a kind of love to Him. But what in the name of common sense shall I trust Him for? And why should He call upon me to exercise faith in Him unless He stand before me as the adequate Object of a man’s trust-namely, the manifest God?

And then, further, note that believing in the sense of trusting is seeing and knowing. Philip said, ‘Shew us the Father.’ Christ answers, ‘Believe, and thou dost see.’ If you look back upon the previous verses of this chapter, you will find that in the earlier portion of them the key-word is ‘know’; that in the second portion of them the key-word is ‘see’; that in this portion of them the key-word is ‘believe.’ The world says, ‘Ah! seeing is believing.’ The Gospel says, ‘Believing is seeing.’ The true way to knowledge, and to a better vision than the uncertain vision of the eye, is faith. In certitude and in directness, the knowledge of God that we have through faith in the Christ whom our eyes have never seen is far ahead of the certitude and the directness that attach to our mere bodily sight; and so the key to all divine knowledge, and the sure road to the truest vision of God, is faith.

Further, faith, even if based upon lower than the highest grounds, is still faith, and acceptable to Him: ‘Or else believe Me for the very works’ sake.’ The ‘works’ are mainly, I suppose, though not exclusively, His miracles. And if so, we are here taught that, if a man has not come to that point of spiritual susceptibility in which the image of Jesus Christ lays hold upon His heart and obliges him to trust Him and to love Him, there are yet the miracles to look at; and the faith that grasps them, and by help of that ladder climbs to Him, though it be second best, is yet real. The evidence of miracles is subordinate, and yet it is valid and true. So our Lord contradicts both the exaggerations of past generations and the exaggerations of this, and neither asserts that the great reason for faith is miracles, nor that miracles are of no use at all. Former centuries in the Christian Church reiterated the former exaggeration, and thus partly provoked the exaggeration of this day. Let us keep the middle course: there is a better way of coming to Christ than through the gate of miracles, and that is that He should stamp His own divine sweetness and elevation upon our minds and hearts. But if we have not reached that point, do not let us kick away the ladder that may help us to it. ‘Believe Him for the very works’ sake.’ Imperfect faith may be the highway to perfection. Let us follow the light, if it be but a far-off glimmer, sure that it will bring us into noontide day if we are faithful to its leading.

On the other hand, dear friends, let us remember that no faith avails itself of all the treasures laid up for it, which does not lay hold upon Christ in the character in which He presents Himself. The only adequate, worthy trust in Him is the trust which grasps Him as the Incarnate God and Saviour. Only such a faith does justice to His own claim. Only such a faith is the sure path to vision and to knowledge. Only such a faith draws down the blessing of a questioning intellect answered, a hungry heart satisfied, a conscience, accusing and prophetic of a judgment to come, cleansed and purified.

To each of us Christ addresses His merciful invitation, ‘Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me.’ May we all answer, ‘We believe that Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!’

73)John 14:12-14

John

CHRIST’S WORKS AND OURS

Joh. 14:12 - Joh. 14:14.

I have already pointed out in a previous sermon that the key-word of this context is ‘Believe!’ In three successive verses we find it, each time widening in its application. We have first the question to the single disciple: ‘Philip! believest thou not?’ We have then the invitation addressed to the whole group: ‘Believe Me!’ And here we have a wholly general expression referring to all who, in every generation and corner of the world, put their trust in Christ, and extending the sunshine of this great promise to whosoever believeth in Him. Our Lord has pointed to believing as the great antidote to a troubled heart, as the sure way of knowing the Father, as the better substitute for sight; and now here He opens before us still more wonderful prerogatives and effects of faith. His words carry us up into lofty and misty regions, where we can neither breathe freely nor see clearly, except as we hold to His words. Therefore He prefaces them with His ‘Verily, verily!’ bidding us listen to them with sharpened attention as the disclosure of something wonderful, and receive them with unfaltering confidence, on His authority, however marvellous and otherwise undiscoverable they may be.

What is it, then, that He thus commends to our acceptance? If I may venture a paraphrase which may at least have the advantage of being cast into less familiar words, it is just this, that because of, and after, Christ's departure from earth, He will, in response to prayer, work upon faithful souls in such a fashion as that they will do what He did, and in some sense will do even more.

I. We have here the continuous work of the exalted Lord for and through His servants.

These disciples, of course, were trembling and oppressed with the thought that the departure of Jesus would be the end of His ceaseless activity for them, on which they had depended implicitly for so long. Henceforward, whatever distress or need might come, that Voice would be silent, and that Hand motionless, and they would be left to face every storm, uncompanioned and uncounselled. Some of us know how dreary such experience makes life, and we can understand how these men shrank from the prospect. Christ's words give strength to meet that trial, and not only tell them that after He is gone they will be able to do what they cannot do now, and what He used to do for them, but that in them He will work as well as for them, and be the power of their action, after He has departed.

For, notice the remarkable connection of the words with which we are dealing. 'He that believeth on Me, the works that I do shall he do,' and the ground of that is 'because I go to My Father,' and whatsoever the believer 'shall ask, I will do.'

So, then, there are here two very distinct paths on which Christ represents to us that His future activity will travel; the one, that of doing for us, in response to our prayers; the other that of working on us and in us, so that our acts are His and His acts are ours. We may look at these two for a moment separately.

Here, then, there is clearly stated this great thought, that Christ's removal from the world is not the end of His activity in the world and on material things, but that, absent, He still is a present power, and having passed through death, and been removed from sense, He can still operate upon the things round us, and move these according to His will. We are not to water down such words as these into any such thought as that the continuous influence of the memory and history of His past will be a present power in all ages.

That is true, gloriously and uniquely true, but that is not the truth which He speaks here. Over and above that perpetual influence of past recorded work, there is the present influence of His present work, and to-day He is working as truly as He wrought when on earth. One form of His work was finished on Calvary, as His dying breath proclaimed; but there is another work of Christ in the midst of the ages, moving the pawns on the chessboard of the world, and presiding over the fortunes of the solemn conflict, which will not be ended until that day when the angel voices shall chant, ‘It is done! The kingdoms of the world are the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ.’ The living Christ works by a true forth-putting of His own present power upon material things, and amidst the providences of life. And therefore these disciples were not to be cast down as if His work for them were ended.

Now it is clear, of course, that such words as these do demand for their vindication something perfectly unique and solitary in the nature and person of Jesus Christ. All other men’s work is cut in twain by death. ‘This man, having served his generation by the will of God, fell on sleep and was gathered to his fathers, and saw corruption,’ that is the epitaph over the greatest thinkers, statesmen, heroes, poets, the epitaph for the tenderest and most hopeful. Father, mother, husband, wife, child, friend, all cease to act when they die, and though thunders should break, they are silent and can help no more. But Christ is living to-day, and working all around us.

Now, brethren, it is of the last importance for the joyousness of our Christian lives, and for the courage of our conflict with sorrow and sin, that we should give a very prominent place in our creeds, and our hearts, to this great truth of a living Christ. What a joyful sense of companionship it brings to the solitary, what calmness of vision in contemplating the complications and calamities of the world’s history, if we grasp firmly the assurance that the living Christ is actually working by the present forth-putting of His power in the world to-day!

But that is not all. There is another path on which our Lord shows us here a glimpse of His working, not only for us, but on and in and therefore through us, so that the deeds that we do in faith that rests upon Him are in one aspect His, and in another ours.

‘The works that I do shall He do also’; because ‘whatsoever ye shall ask I will do it.’

We have not to think only of a Lord whose activity for us, beneficent and marvellous as it is, was finished in the misty past upon the Cross, nor have we only to think of a Lord whose activity for us, mighty and comforting as it is to all the solitary and struggling, is wrought as from the heights of the heavens, but we have to think of One who is beside us and in us and knows the hidden paths that no eye sees, and no foot but His can tread, into the inmost recesses of our souls, and there can enter as King and righteousness, as life and strength. This is the deepest of the lessons that He would teach us here. ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,’ and through me, if I keep close to Him, will work mightily in forms that my poor manhood could never have reached. The emblem of the vine and the branches, and the other emblem of the house and its inhabitants, and the other of the head and the members, all point to this one same thing which shallow and unspiritual men call ‘mystical,’ but which is the very heart of the Christian prerogative and the anchor of the Christian hope. Christ in us is our present righteousness and our hope of a future glory.

And now mark that a still more solemn and mysterious aspect of this union of Jesus Christ and the believer is given, since it is set forth as resulting in our doing Christ’s works, and Christ doing ours; and therein is paralleled with the yet more wonderful and ineffable union between the Father and the Son. It is no accident that in one clause He says, ‘I am in the Father, and the Father in Me. The words that I speak unto you I speak not of Myself, but the Father that dwelleth in Me, He doeth the works’; and that in the next He says, ‘The works that I do shall he do also’; and so bids us see in that union between the Father and the Son, and in that consequent union of co-operation between Him and His Father, a pattern after which our union with Him is to be moulded, both as regards the closeness of its intimacy and as regards the resulting manifestations in life. Christ is in us and we in Christ in some measure as the Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son. And the works that we do He does in some fashion that faintly echoes and shadows the perfect co-operation of the Father and the Son in the works that the Christ did upon the earth.

All the doings of a Christian man, if done in faith, and holding by Christ, are Christ's doings, inasmuch as He is the life and the power which does them all. And Christ's deeds are reproduced and perpetuated in His humble follower, inasmuch as the life which is imparted will unfold itself according to its own kind; and he that loves Christ will be changed into His likeness, and become a partaker of His Spirit. So let us curb all self-dependence and self-will, that that mighty tide may flow into us; and let us cast from us all timidity, distrust, and gloom, and be strong in the assurance that we have a Christ living in the heavens to work for us, and living within us to work through us.

There is no record of the Ascension in John's Gospel, but these words of my text unveil to us the inmost meaning of that Ascension, and are in full accord with the great picture which one of the Evangelists has drawn-a picture in two halves, which yet are knit together into one. 'So then, after He had spoken unto them, He was received up into heaven, and sat at the right hand of God; and they went forth and preached everywhere.' What a contrast between the two-the repose above, the toil below! Yes! But the next words knit them together-'The Lord also working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.'

II. Note, in the next place, the greater work of the servants on and for whom the Lord works.

'Greater works than these shall he do.' Is, then, the servant greater than his Lord, and he that is sent greater than He that sent him? Not so, for whatsoever the servant does is done because the Lord is with and in him, and the contrast that is drawn between the works that Christ does on earth and the greater works that the servant is to do hereafter is, properly and at bottom, the contrast between Christ's manifestations in the time of His earthly limitation and humiliation, and His manifestations in the time of His Ascension and celestial glory.

We need not be afraid that such great words as these in any measure trench on the unique and unapproachable character of the earthly work of Christ in its two aspects, which are one-of Revelation and Redemption. These are finished, and need no copy, no repetition, no perpetuation, until the end of time. But the work of objective Revelation, which was completed when He ascended, and the work of Redemption which was finished when He rose-these require to be applied through the ages. And it is in regard to the application of the finished work of Christ to the actual accomplishment of its contemplated consequences, that the comparison is drawn between the limited sphere and the small results of Christ's work upon earth, and the worldwide sweep and majestic magnitude of the results of the application of that work by His servants' witnessing work. The wider and more complete spiritual results achieved by the ministration of the servants than by the ministration of the Lord is the point of comparison here. And I need only remind you that the poorest Christian who can go to a brother soul, and by word or life can draw that soul to a Christ whom it apprehends as dying for its sins and raised for its glorifying, does a mightier thing than it was possible for the Master to do by life or lip whilst He was here upon earth. For the Redemption had to be completed in act before it could be proclaimed in word; and Christ had no such weapon in His hands with which to draw men's souls, and cast down the high places of evil, as we have when we can say, 'We testify unto you that the Son of God hath died for our sins, and is raised again according to the Scriptures.' Nor need I do more than remind you of the comparison, so exalting for His humility and so humbling for our self-exaltation, between the narrow sphere in which His earthly ministrations had to operate and the worldwide scope which is given to His servants. 'He laid His hands on a few sick folk, and healed them'; and at the end of His life there were one hundred and twenty disciples in Jerusalem and five hundred in Galilee, and you might have put them all into this chapel and had ample room to spare. That was all that Jesus Christ had done; while to-day and now the world is being leavened and the kingdoms of the earth are beginning to recognise His name. 'Greater works than these shall he do' who lets Christ in him do all His works.

III. Lastly, notice the conditions on which the exalted Lord works for and on His servants.

These are two, faith and prayer.

‘He that believeth on Me, the works that I do shall he do also.’ Faith, the simple act of loving trust in Jesus Christ, opens the door of our hearts and natures for the entrance of all His solemn Omnipotence, and makes us possessors of it. It is the condition, and the only condition, and plainly the indispensable condition, of possessing this divine Christ’s power, that we should trust ourselves to Him that gives it. And if we do, then we shall not trust in vain, but to us there will come power that will surpass our desire, and fill us with its own rejoicing and pure energy. Faith will make us like Christ. Faith is intensely practical. ‘He that believeth shall do.’ It is no mere cold assent to a creed which is utterly impotent to operate upon men’s acts, no mere hysterical emotion which is utterly impotent to energise into nobilities of service and miracles of consecration, but it is the affiance of the whole nature which spreads itself before Him and prays, ‘Fill my emptiness and vitalise me with Thine own Spirit.’ That is the faith which is ever answered by the inrush of the divine power, and the measure of our capacity of receiving is the measure of His gift to us.

So if Christian individuals and Christian communities are impotent, or all but impotent, there is no difficulty in understanding why. They have cut the connection, they have shut the tap. They lack faith; and so their power is weakness. ‘Why could we not cast him out?’ said they, perplexed when they had no need to be. ‘Why could you not cast him out? Because you do not believe that I, working in you, can cast him out. That is why; and the only why.’ Let us learn that the secret of Christians’ weakness is the weakness of their Christian faith.

And the other condition is prayer. ‘Whatsoever ye shall ask in My name I will do it,’ and He repeats it, for confirmation and for greater emphasis. ‘If ye shall ask anything in My name,’ or, as perhaps that clause ought to be read with some versions, ‘If ye shall ask Me anything in My name I will do it.’

Three points may be named here. Our power depends upon our prayer. God’s and Christ’s fullness and willingness to communicate do not depend upon our prayer. But our capacity to receive of that fullness, and so the possibility of its communication to us, do depend upon our prayer. ‘We have not because we ask not.’

The power of our prayer depends upon our conscious oneness with the revealed Christ. ‘If ye shall ask in My name,’ says He. And people think they have fulfilled the condition when, in a mechanical and external manner, they say, as a formula at the end of petitions that have been all stuffed full of self-will and selfishness, ‘for Christ’s sake. Amen!’ and then they wonder they do not get them answered! Is that asking in Christ’s name?

Christ’s name is the revelation of Christ’s character, and to do a thing in the name of another person is to do it as His representative, and as realising that in some deep and real sense-for the present purpose at all events-we are one with Him. And it is when we know ourselves to be united to Christ and one with Him, and representative in a true fashion of Himself, as well as when, in humble reliance on His work for us and His loving heart, we draw near, that our prayer has power, as the old divines used to say, ‘to move the Hand that moves the world,’ and to bring down a rush of blessing upon our heads. Prayer in the name of Christ is hard to offer. It needs much discipline and watchfulness; it excludes all self-will and selfishness. And if, as my text tells us, the end of the Son’s working is the glory of the Father, that same end, and not our own ease or comfort, must be the end and object of all prayer which is offered in His name. When we so pray we get an answer. And the reason why such multitudes of prayers never travel higher than the roof, and bring no blessings to him who prays, is because they are not prayers in Christ’s name.

Prayer in His name will pass into prayer to Him. As He not obscurely teaches us here [if we adopt the reading to which I have already referred], He has an ear to hear such requests, and He wields divine power to answer. Surely it was not blasphemy nor any diversion of the worship due to God alone, when the dying martyr outside the city wall cried and said, ‘Lord Jesus! receive my spirit.’ Nor is it any departure from the solemnest obligations laid upon us by the unity of the divine nature, nor are we bringing idolatrous petitions to another than the Father, when we draw near to Christ and ask Him to give us that which He gives as the Father’s gift, and to work on us that which the Father that dwelleth in Him works through Him for us.

Trust yourselves to Christ, and let your desires be stilled, to listen to His voice in you, and let that voice speak. And then, dear brethren, we shall be lifted above ourselves, and strength will flow into us, and we shall be able to say, ‘I can do all things, through the Christ that dwells in me and makes me strong.’ And just as the glad, sunny waters of the incoming tide fill the empty places of some oozy harbour, where all the ships are lying as if dead, and the mud is festering in the sunshine, so into the slimy emptiness of our corrupt hearts there will pour the flashing sunlit wave, the ever fresh rush of His power; and ‘everything will live whithersoever it cometh,’ and we shall be able to say in all humility, and yet in glad recognition of Christ’s faithfulness to this, His transcendent promise, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,’ ‘because the life which I live in the flesh I live by faith of the Son of God.’

74)John 14:15

John

LOVE AND OBEDIENCE

Joh. 14:15.

As we have seen in former sermons, the keyword of the preceding context is ‘Believe!’ and that word passes now into ‘Love.’ The order here is the order of experience. There is first the believing gaze upon the Christ as He is revealed-the image of the invisible God. That kindles love, and prompts to obedience.

There is another very beautiful and subtle link of connection between these words and the preceding. Our Lord has just been saying, ‘Whatsoever ye shall ask in My name, that will I do.’ Is the parallel wholly accidental or fanciful between the Lord who does as the servant asks and the servant who is to do as the Lord commands? On both sides there is love delighting to be set in motion by a message from the other side. On the one part there is love supreme which commands and delights to be asked, on the other part there is love dependent, which asks and delights to be commanded; and though the gulf between the two is great, and the difference between Christ's law and our petitions is infinite, yet there is an analogy.

I pause on these words, though they are introduced here only as the basis of the great promise which follows, because they open out into such wide fields. They contain the all-sufficient law of Christian conduct. They contain the one motive adequate to bring that law into realisation. They disclose the very roots of Christian morality, and part of the secret of Christ's unique power and influence amongst men. They come with a message of encouragement to all souls despairing of being able to do that which they would, and of freedom to all men burdened with a crowd of minute and external regulations. 'If ye love Me, keep My commandments'-there are three points to be dwelt upon here-namely, the all-sufficient ideal or guide of life, the all-powerful motive which Christ brings to bear, and the all-subduing gaze of faith by which that motive is brought into action.

I. We have here the all-sufficient ideal or guide for life.

Jesus Christ is not speaking merely to that little handful of men in the upper chamber, but to all generations and to all lands, to the end of time and round the world. The authoritative tone which He assumes here is very noteworthy. He speaks as Jehovah spoke from Sinai, and quotes the very words of the old law when He speaks of 'keeping My commandments.' There are distinctly involved in this quite incidental utterance of Christ's two startling things-one the assumption of His right to impose His will upon every human being, and the other His assumption that His will contains the all-sufficient directory for human conduct.

What, then, are His commandments? Those which He spoke are plain and simple; and people who wish to pick holes in the greatness of Christ's work in the world tell us that you can match almost all His precepts up and down amongst moralists and philosophers, and they crow very loud if, scratching amongst Rabbinical dust-heaps, they find something that looks like anything that He once said. Be it so! What does that matter? Christ's 'commandments' are Christ Himself. This is the originality and uniqueness of Christ as a moral Teacher, that He says, not 'Do this, that, and the other thing,' but 'Copy Me.' 'Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart.' His commandments are Himself; and the sum of them all is this-a character perfectly self-oblivious, and wholly penetrated and saturated with joyful, filial submission to the Father, and uttermost and entire giving Himself away to His brethren. That is Christ's commandment which He bids us keep, and His law is to be found in His life.

And then, if that be so, what a change passes on the aspect of law, when we take Christ as being our living embodiment of it! Everything that was hard, repellent, far-off, cold, vanishes. We have no longer 'tables of stone,' but 'fleshy tables of the heart'; and the Law stands before us, a Being to be loved, to be clung to, to be trusted, and whom it is blessedness to know and perfection to resemble. The rails upon which the train travels may be rigid, but they mean safety, and they carry men smoothly into otherwise inaccessible lands. So the life of Jesus Christ brought to us is the firm and plain track along which we are to travel; and all that was difficult and hard in the cold thought of duty becomes changed into the attraction of a living Pattern and Example. This living and breathing and loving commandment is all-sufficient for every detail and complexity of human life. It is so by the confession of believers and of unbelievers, by the joyful confession of the one, and by the frank acknowledgment of many of the others. Listen to one of them. 'Whatever else may be taken away from us by rational criticism, Christ is still left, a unique Figure, not more unlike all His predecessors than all His followers . . . . Religion cannot be said to have made a bad choice in selecting this Man as the ideal Representative and Guide of humanity; nor even now would it be easy, even for an unbeliever, to find a better translation of the rule of virtue from the abstract into the concrete than to endeavour so to live that Christ would approve our life.'

It is enough for conduct, it is enough for character, it is enough in all perplexities of conflicting duties, that we listen to and obey the voice that says, 'Keep My commandments.'

II. Now note, secondly, the all-powerful motive.

Probably my text is best understood as the Revised Version understands it, which reads, 'If ye love Me, ye will keep My commandments,' making it an assurance and not an injunction. Christ speaks with the calm confidence that love to Him will have power enough to sway the life. His utterance here is not the addition of another commandment to the list, but rather the pointing out of how they may all be kept.

The principle that underlies these words, then, is this, that love is the foundation of obedience, and obedience is the sure outcome and result of love. That is true in regard to those lower forms of love, which may teach us something of the operation of the higher. We all know that love which is real, and not simply passion and selfishness with a mask on, delights most chiefly in knowing and conforming to the will of the beloved, and that there is nothing sweeter than to be commanded by the dear voice and to obey for dear love's sake. And you have only to take that which is the experience of every true heart, in a thousand sweet ways in daily life, and to lift it into the higher region, and to transfer it to the bond that unites us with Jesus Christ, to see that He has invoked no illusory, but an omnipotent power when He has rested the whole force of His transforming and sanctifying energy upon this one principle, 'If ye love Me, the Lawgiver, ye will keep the commandments of My Law.'

That is exactly what distinguishes and lifts the morality of the Gospel above all other systems. The worst man in the world knows a great deal more of his duty than the best man does. It is not for want of knowledge that men go to the devil, but it is for want of power or will to live their knowledge. And what morality fails to do, with its clearest utterances of human duty, Christ comes and does. The one law is like the useless proclamations posted up in some rebellious district, where there is no army to back them, and the king's authority from whom they come is flouted. The other law gets itself obeyed. Such is the difference between the powerless morality of the world and the commandment of Jesus Christ. Here is the road plain and straight. What matters that, if there is no force to draw the cart along it? There might as well be no road at all. Here stand all your looms, polished and in perfect order, but there is no steam in the boilers; and so there is no motion, and nothing is woven. What we want is not law, but power, and what the Gospel gives us, and stands alone in giving us, is not merely the knowledge of the will of God, and the clear revelation of what we ought to be, but the power to become it.

Love does that, and love alone. That strong force brought into action in our hearts will drive out from thence all rivals, all false and low things. The true way to cleanse the Augean stables, as the old myth has it, was to turn the river into them. It would have been endless work to wheel out the filth in wheelbarrows loaded by spades: turn the stream in, and it will sweep away all the foulness. When the Ark comes into the Temple, Dagon lies, a mutilated stump, upon the threshold. When Christ comes into my heart, then all the obscene and twilight-loving shapes that lurked there, and defiled it, will vanish like ghosts at cock-crowing before His calm and pure Presence. He, and He alone, entering my heart by the portals of my love, will coerce my evil and stimulate my good. And if I love Him, I shall keep His commandments.

Now, brethren, here is a plain test and a double-barrelled one, which tries both our love and our obedience with a sharp touchstone. ‘If ye love Me, ye will keep My commandments.’ That implies, first, that there is no love worth calling so which does not keep the commandment. All the emotional and the mystic, and the so-called higher parts of Christian experience, have to be content to submit to this plain test-do they help us to live as Christ would have us, and that because He would have us? Love to Him that does not keep His commandments is either spurious or dangerously feeble. The true sign of its presence in the heart and the noblest of its operations is not to be found in high-pitched expressions of fervid emotion, nor even in the sacred joys of solitary communion, but in its making us, while in the rough struggle of daily life, and surrounded by trivial tasks, live near Him, and by Him, and for Him, and like Him. If I live so, I love Him; if not, not. Not that I mean to say that in regard to each individual action of a Christian man’s life there must be the conscious presence of reference to the supreme love, but that each individual action of the life ought to come from a character of which that reference to the supreme love is the very formative principle and foundation. The colouring matter put in at the fountain will dye every drop of the stream; and they whose inmost hearts are tinged and tinctured with the sweet love of Jesus Christ, from their hearts will go forth issues of life all coloured and moulded thereby. Test your Christian love by your practical obedience.

And, on the other hand, there is no obedience worth calling so which is not the child of love; and all the multitude of right things which Christians do without that motive are made short work of by that consideration. Obedience which is formal, mechanical, matter-of-course, without the presence in it of a loving submission of the will; obedience which is reluctant, calculated, forced upon us by dread, imitated from others-all that is nothing; and Jesus Christ does not count it as obedience at all. This is a sieve with very small meshes, and there will be a great deal of rubbish left in it after the shaking. ‘If ye love Me, keep My commandments.’ The ‘keeping of My commandments’ which has not ‘love to Me’ underlying it is no keeping at all.

III. And so, lastly, notice the all-subduing gaze.

That is not included in my text, but it is necessary in order to complete the view of the forces to which Jesus Christ here entrusts the hallowing of life and the sanctifying of our nature; and we are led to refer to it by what I have already pointed out; the connection between the ‘love’ of my text and the ‘believe’ of the preceding verses. I can fancy a man saying, ‘Keep His commandments? Woe is me! How am I to keep?’ The answer is ‘Love.’ And I can fancy him saying ‘Love?’ Yes! ‘And how am I to love? I cannot get up love at the word of command, or by any voluntary effort.’ And the answer comes again, ‘Believe!’ Trust Christ, and you will love Him. Love Him and you will do His will. And then the question comes again, ‘Believe what?’ And the answer comes, ‘Believe that He is the Son of God who died for you.’

Nothing else will kindle a man’s love than the faithful contemplation and grasp of Christ in that character and aspect. Only the redeeming Christ affords a reasonable ground for our love to Him. Here is a dead man, dead for nineteen centuries, expecting you and me to have towards Him a vivid personal affection which will influence our conduct and our character. What right has He to expect that? There is only one reasonable ground upon which I may be called to love Jesus Christ, and that is that He died for me, and such a love towards such a Christ is the only thing which will wield power sufficient to guide, to coerce, to restrain, to constrain, and to sustain my weak, wayward, rebellious, and sluggish will. All other emotions of so-called admiration and worship and reverence and affection for Jesus Christ are apt to be tepid; but this one has power and warmth in it.

Here is a unique fact in the history of the world, that not only did He make this astounding claim upon all subsequent generations; but that all subsequent generations have responded to it, and that to-day there are millions of men who love Jesus Christ with a love warm, personal, deep, powerful-the spring of all their goodness and the Lord of their lives. Why do they? For one reason only. Because they believe that He died for them individually, and that He lives an ascended yet ever-present Helper and Lover of their souls.

My brethren, that conviction, and that conviction only, as I venture to affirm, has power to send a glow of love into the heart which will move all the limbs in swift and happy obedience. That conviction, and that conviction alone, will melt the thick-ribbed ice of our spirits and will make it flow down in sweet waters. The love that has looked upon the Cross will be the fulfilling of the law of Him that speaks from the Throne. When our faith has grasped Him, as enduring that cross for us, then our love will be awakened to hear and to do His commandments.

‘We love Him because He first loved us,’ and such love will flower and fruit in obedience. I shall keep His commandments when I love Him. I shall love Him with a love that makes my will plastic and my life a glad service, when by faith I grasp Him as the Incarnate Lord, ‘who loved me and gave Himself for me.’

75)John 14:16-17

John

THE COMFORTER GIVEN

Joh. 14:16 - Joh. 14:17.

The ‘and’ at the beginning of these words shows us that they are continuous with and the consequence of what precedes. ‘If ye love Me, ye will keep My commandments, and I will pray . . . and He will send.’ Such is the series; but we must also remember that, as we have seen in previous sermons, the obedience spoken of in the clause before my text is itself treated as a consequence of some preceding steps. The ladder that is fixed upon earth and has its summit in heaven has for its rungs, first and lowest, ‘believe’; second, ‘love’; third, ‘obey.’ And thus the context carries us from the very basis of the Christian life up into its highest reward, even the larger gift to an obedient spirit of that Great Spirit, who is the Comforter and the Teacher.

And there is another very striking link of connection between these words and the preceding. There are, if I may so say, two telephones across the abyss that separates the ascended Christ and us. One of them is contained in His words, ‘If ye ask anything in My name I will do it’; the other is contained in these words, ‘If ye keep My commandments I will ask.’ Love on this side of the great cleft sets love on the other side of it in motion in a twofold fashion. If we ask, He does; if we do, He asks. His action is the answer to our prayers, and His prayers are the answer to our obedient action. So we have here these points-the praying Christ and the giving Father; the abiding Gift; the blind world and the recipient disciples.

I. Note, then, first, the praying Christ and the giving Father.

‘I will ask and He will give’ seems a strange drop from the lofty claims with which we have become familiar in the earlier verses of this chapter. ‘Believe in God, believe also in Me’; ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father’; ‘If ye shall ask anything in My name I will do it’; ‘Keep My commandments.’ All these distinctly express, or necessarily imply, divine nature, prerogatives, and authority. But here the voice that spake the perfect revelation of God, and gave utterance authoritatively to the perfect law of life, softens and lowers its tones in petition; and Jesus Christ joins the rank of the suppliants. Now common sense tells us that apparently diverse views lying so close together in one continuous stream of speech cannot have seemed to the utterer of them to be contradictory; and I venture to affirm that there is no explanation which does justice to these two sides of Christ’s consciousness-the one all divine and authoritative and lofty, and the other all lowly and identifying Himself with petitioners and suppliants everywhere-except the old-fashioned and to-day discredited belief that He is ‘God manifest in the flesh,’ who prays in His Manhood and hears prayer in His Divinity. The bare humanistic view which emphasises such utterances as these of my text does not, for the life of it, know what to do with the other ones, and cannot manage to unite these two images into a stereoscopic solid. That is reserved for the faith which believes in the Manhood and in the Deity of our Lord and Saviour.

His intercession is the great hope of the Christian heart. His intercession is the great activity of His present exalted and glorious state. His intercession is no mere verbal utterance, nor the representation to the Father of an alien or a diverse will, but His intercession, mysterious as it is, and unfathomable to our poor, short lines and light plummets, must mean this at all events-His continual activity in presenting before the divine Father, as the motive and condition of His petition being granted, His own great work upon the Cross. The High Priest passes within the veil, bearing in His hand the offering which He has made, and by reason of that offering, and of His powerful presence before the mercy-seat, all the spiritual gifts which redeem and regenerate and sanctify humanity are for ever coming forth. ‘I will pray, and He will give,’ is but one way of saying, ‘Seeing then, that we have a great High Priest over the House of God who is entered within the veil, let us draw near.’

But I would have you notice how, as is always the case in all utterances of Jesus Christ which express the lowest humiliation and completest identification of Himself with humanity, there is ever present some touch of obscured glory, some all but suppressed flash of brightness which will not be wholly concealed. Note two things in this great utterance; one, Christ’s quiet assumption that all through the ages, and today, nineteen centuries after He died, He knows, at the moment of their being done, His servants’ deeds. ‘Keep my commandments, and, knowing that you keep them, I will then and there pray for you.’ He claims in the lowly words an altogether supernatural, abnormal, divine cognisance of all the acts of men down the ages and across the gulf between earth and heaven.

And the other signature of divinity stamped on the prayer of Christ is His certitude of the answer. ‘I will ask and He will give’: He puts, as it were, the Father’s act in pledge to us, and assures us, in a tone of certainty, which is not merely the assurance of faith, but the certitude of One who is ‘one with the Father,’ that His prayer brings ever its answer. ‘Father! I will that they whom Thou hast given Me be with Me.’ How strange! How far beyond the warrantable language of man! And how impossible for a fisherman of Bethsaida to imagine, if he had not heard, that strange blending of submission and of authority which speaks in such words!

Then, remember what I have already said, that, according to the teaching of this verse, taken in connection with its context, that which put in motion Christ’s Intercessory activity, as represented in my text, is the obedience of a Christian man. If you obey He will pray, and the Father will send. So the reward of imperfect obedience is the larger measure given to us of that divine Spirit by whose indwelling obedience becomes possible, and self-surrender a joy and a power. And that is not merely because of the natural operation by which any kind of conduct tends to repeat itself in more complete measure, nor is it merely a case of ‘to him that hath shall be given’; as a man’s arm is strengthened by exercise, and any faculty becomes more assured, and swift, and at the command of its owner, by use. But there is a distinct supernatural impartation to every obedient heart of divine gifts which come straight through Jesus Christ to it. He Himself, in this immediate context, says, ‘If I depart I will send Him unto you,’ and the true conception is that in that Spirit’s gift, which is a reality waiting as its crown and reward upon our poor stained obedience, the whole Godhead is present; the Father the Source, the Son the Channel, the Spirit the Gift.

II. And so, secondly, note what our text tells us of that abiding gift.

‘He will send another Comforter,’ ‘that He may abide with you for ever, even the Spirit of Truth.’ I suppose I may take it for granted that most of my audience know all that need be said as to the meaning of this word ‘Comforter.’ In our present modern English it has a very much narrower range of meaning than its etymology would give it, and than probably it had when it was first used in an English translation. ‘Comforter’ means a great deal more than ‘consoler,’ though we have narrowed it to that signification almost exclusively. It means not only one who administers sweet whispers of consolation in sorrow, but one who, in any circumstances, by his presence makes strong. And the original Greek word, of which it is the translation here, has a precisely analogous meaning; its original signification being that of ‘one who is called to the aid of another,’ primarily as an advocate in a court of law, but more widely as a helper in any form whatsoever. And that is the idea which is to be attached to the word here:-a Comforter who makes strong by His presence; the Paraclete, who is our Advocate, Helper, Guide, and Instructor. Need I dwell upon the great thoughts that spring from that metaphor; how we have to look for a Person, and not merely a vague influence; a divine Person who will be by our sides on condition of our faith, love, and obedience, to be our Strength in all weakness, our Peace in all trouble, our Wisdom in all darkness, our Guide in every perplexity, our Comforter and Cherisher, our Righteousness when sin is strong, the Victor over our temptations, and the Companion and Sweetener of our solitude? The metaphors with which Scripture represents this great personal Influence are full of instruction and beauty. He comes as ‘the Fire,’ which melts, which warms, which cleanses, which quickens. He comes as the ‘rushing, mighty Wind,’ which bears health upon its wings, and sometimes breathes softly as an infant’s breath, and sometimes sweeps with irresistible power. He comes as the ‘Oil,’ gently flowing, lubricating, making every joint supple, nourishing. He comes as the ‘Water of Life,’ refreshing, vitalising, quickening all growth. He comes fluttering down as the Dove of God, the bird of peace that will brood upon our hearts. The predicates which Scripture attaches to that great Name are equally various, and are full of teaching as to the manner in which He is the Comforter and the Advocate. He is the Spirit of Holiness, the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit of Wisdom, the Spirit of Power, the Spirit of Love, the Spirit of a sound Mind, the Spirit of Sonship, the Spirit of Supplication, and of many great things besides. And this sweet, strong, all-sufficient Person is offered to each of us, and waits to enter our hearts.

And, says Christ, this Strengthener and Advocate is to replace Me and to carry on My work. ‘He will send another Comforter.’ Who was the other but the Master who was speaking? So all that that handful of men had found of sweetness and shelter and assured guidance, and stay for their weakness, and enlightenment for their darkness, and companionship for their solitude, and a breast on which to rest their heads, and love in which to bathe their hearts, all these this divine Spirit will bring to each of us if we will.

And further, our Lord tells us that this strong continuer of His presence will be a permanent Companion. ‘He will abide with you for ever.’ He was comforting the disciples who were trembling at the thought of His departure, and knowing that all the sweetness of these three short years had come to an end; and He says to them, and through them to all the ages to the end of time: ‘Here is the abiding Guest, that nothing but your own sin will ever cast out from your hearts.’

And Christ tells us how this great Spirit will do His work. He is the ‘Spirit of Truth,’ not as if He brought new truth. To suppose that He does so, opens the door to all manner of fanaticism, but the truth, the revelation of which is all summed and finished in the person and work of Jesus Christ, is the weapon by which the divine Spirit works all His conquests, the staff on which He makes us lean and be strong. He is the Spirit by whom the truth passes into our personal possession, by no mere imperfect form of outward teaching which is always confused and insufficient, but by the inward teaching that deals with our hearts and our spirits.

But Christ speaks, too, of the blind world. There is a tone of deep sadness in His words. The thought of the immense multitude of men who were incapacitated to receive this Strengthener steals across and casts a momentary shadow upon even the brightness and greatness of His promise. ‘The world cannot receive because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him.’ The ‘world’ is the mass of man, considered as godless and separate from Him, and there is a bit of the world in us all; but there are men who are wholly under its influence and dominion. And these men, says Christ, are perfectly incapable of receiving the teaching of this divine Comforter. Of course there are other operations of that Great Spirit of which we shall have to hear as we go on further in this context, in which His work ‘convicts the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment.’ But what our Lord is speaking of here is the work of that Spirit who comes in response to His prayer which rises in consequence of our obedience, and who, coming, brings with Him strength and purity and peace and wisdom; and that aspect of His operations a heart that is all full and seething with the world is unfit to receive. It cannot see Him. Embruted natures are altogether incapacitated for high thoughts, for the perception of natural beauty, for the appreciation of art; and worldly men, by the very same law, are incapable of receiving this divine Spirit. A savage stares at the sunshine and sees nothing but a glare. And worldly men-that is to say, men whose tastes, inclinations, desires, hopes, purposes, strivings, are all bound by this visible diurnal round-lack the organ that enables them to see that divine Spirit moving round about them. Whether you have put your eyes out by fleshly lusts, or, as many men in this generation have done, by intellectual self-sufficiency and conceit, if the world, in its grosser or in its most refined forms, is your master, you are stone blind to all the best realities of the universe, and you cannot see the things that are. If you look out upon the history of the Church, or upon the present condition of Christendom, and say, ‘I see no divine Spirit working there’; well, then, the only thing that is to be said to you is, ‘Go to an oculist; your sight is bad. Perhaps there is solid land, as some of us see it, where you see only mist.’ This generation needs the preaching of a supernatural power at work beside us, and among us, and until we come to believe that, we do not understand the fullness of Christ’s gift.

III. Then, lastly, note the recipient disciples.

Observe that the order of clauses is reversed in the last part of the text. The world cannot receive, because it does not know. The disciple knows, because he receives. Possession and knowledge reciprocally interchange places, and may be regarded as cause and effect of one another. That is to say, at bottom they are one and the same thing. Knowledge is possession, and possession is the only knowledge. These disciples knew Christ in a fashion. He had just been telling them that they did not know Him; but so far as they did dimly grasp Him, they saw the Spirit-in another form, indeed, than they would hereafter see-but still truly, though imperfectly. Beholding the Spirit, though ‘through a glass darkly,’ and cherishing their partial possession of Him, they will come to more, and steadfastly increase from the morning’s twilight to the midday glory. So He says: ‘He dwelleth with you’ now, and ‘He shall be in you’ hereafter. There is a better form of possession opening before them, which came at Pentecost, and has lasted ever since. From thenceforward we have a Spirit that not only stands by our sides and holds fellowship with us [for the two ‘withs’ of our text are two different words, expressing respectively proximity and communion], but who actually dwells in the central depths of our natures, and whom we thus possess more perfectly and blessedly than is possible to even the closest outward proximity, and the sweetest outward fellowship.

That possession of an abiding and indwelling Spirit is the gift of Christ to every Christian soul, and is to be found by us all upon the path so plainly marked out in our text and its connections-'believe,' 'love,' 'obey.' Then the Dove of God will flutter down upon our heads and nestle in our hearts, and brooding over the solemn and solitary sea of our chaotic spirits, will bring up from it a new world glistening in fresh order and beauty, and 'very good' in its Maker's eyes.

76)John 14:18-19

John

THE ABSENT PRESENT CHRIST

Joh. 14:18 - Joh. 14:19.

The sweet and gracious comfortings with which Christ had been soothing the disciples' fears went very deep, but hitherto they had not gone deep enough. It was much that they should know the purpose of His going, whither He went, and that they had an interest in His departure. It was much that they should have before them the prospect of reunion; much that they should know that all through His absence He would be working in them, and that they should be assured that, absent, He would send them a great gift. But reunion, influence from afar, and gifts from the other side of the gulf were not all that their hearts needed. And so here our Lord gives yet more, in the paradoxes that, absent He will be present, unseen visible, and dying will be for them for ever, living and life-giving. These great thoughts go to the centre of their needs and of ours; and on them I now touch briefly.

There are then in the words I have read, though they be but a fragment of a closely-linked-together context, these three great thoughts: the absent Christ the present Christ; the unseen Christ the seen Christ; the Christ who dies the living and life-giving Christ. Let us look at these as they stand.

I. First, then, the absent Christ is the present Christ.

‘I will not leave you comfortless,’ or, as the Revised Version has it, ‘desolate-I come to you.’ Now, most of us know, I suppose, that the literal meaning of the word rendered ‘comfortless,’ or ‘desolate,’ is ‘orphans.’ But that is rather an unusual form in which to represent the relation between our Lord and His disciples, and so, possibly, our versions are accurate in giving the general idea of desolation rather than the specific idea conveyed directly by the word. But still it is to be remembered that this whole conversation begins with ‘Little children’; and there seems to be no strong reason for suppressing the literal meaning of the word, if only it be remembered that it is employed not so much to define Christ’s relation to his brethren as to describe the comfortless and helpless condition of that little group when left by Him. They would be like fatherless and motherless children in a cold world. And what is to hinder that? One thing only. ‘I come to you.’ ‘Then, and only then, will you cease to be desolate and orphans. My presence will change everything and turn winter into glorious summer.’

Now, what is this ‘coming’? It is to be observed that our Lord says, not ‘I will,’ as a future, but ‘I come,’ or ‘I am coming,’ as an immediately impending, and, we may almost say, present, thing. There can be no reference in the word to that final coming to judgment which lies so far ahead; because, if there were, then there would follow from the text, that, until that period, all that love Him here upon earth are to wander about as orphans, desolate and forsaken; and that certainly can never be. So that we have to recognise here the promise of a coming which is contemporaneous with His absence, and which is, in fact, but the reverse side of His bodily absence.

It is true about Him that He ‘departs from’ His people in bodily form ‘for a season, that they may receive Him’ in a better form ‘for ever.’ This, then, is the heart and centre of the consolation here, that howsoever the external presence may be withdrawn, and the ‘foolish senses’ may have to speak of an absent Christ, we may rejoice in the certainty that He is with all those that love Him, and all the more with them because of the very withdrawal of the earthly manifestation which has served its purpose, and now is laid aside as an impediment rather than as a help to the full communion. We confound bodily with real. The bodily presence is at an end; the real presence lasts for ever.

I do not need to insist, I suppose, upon the manifest implication of absolute divinity which lies in such words as these. ‘I come.’ ‘Being absent, I am present in all generations. I am present with every single heart.’ That is equivalent to the Omnipresence of deity; that is equivalent to or implies the undying existence of the divine nature, and He that says, when He is leaving earth and withdrawing the sweetness of His visible form from the eyes of men, ‘I come,’ in the very act of going, ‘and I am with you always, with all of you to the end of the ages,’ can be no less than God, manifest in the flesh for a time, and present in the Spirit with His children for ever.

I cannot but think that the average Christian life of this day wofully fails in the simple, conscious realisation of this great truth, and that we are all far too little living in the calm, happy, strengthening assurance that we are never alone, but have Jesus Christ with each of us more closely, more truly, in a more available fashion, and with more omnipotence of influence, than they had who were nearest Him during the days that He lived upon earth.

Oh, brethren! if we really believed, not as an article of our creed which has become so familiar to us that it produces little impression upon us, but as a vital and ever-present conviction of our souls, that with us there was ever the real presence of the real Christ, how all burdens and cares would be lightened, how all perplexities would begin to smooth themselves out and be straightened, how all the force would be sucked out of temptations, and how sorrows and joys and all things would be changed in their aspect by that one conviction intensely realised and constantly with us! A present Christ is the Strength, the Righteousness, the Peace, the Joy, and as we shall see, in the most literal sense, the Life of every Christian soul.

Then, note, further, that this coming of our Lord is identified with that of His divine Spirit. He has been speaking of sending that ‘other Comforter,’ but though He be Another, He is yet so indissolubly united with Him who sends as that the coming of the Spirit is the coming of Jesus. He is no gift wafted to us as from the other side of a gulf, but by reason of the unity of the Godhead and the divinity of the sent Spirit, Jesus Christ and the Spirit whom He sends are inseparable though separate, and so indissolubly united that where the Spirit is, there is Christ, and where Christ is, there is the Spirit. These are amongst the deep things which the disciples were ‘not able to carry' at that stage of their development, and which waited for a further explanation. Enough for them and enough for us, to know that we have Christ in the Spirit and the Spirit in Christ; and to remember 'that if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.'

We stand here on the margin of a shoreless and fathomless sea; and for my part I venture to think that the men who talk about the incredibilities and the contradictions of the orthodox faith would show themselves a little wiser if they were more conscious of the limitation of human faculty, and remembered that to pronounce upon contradictions in the doctrine of the divine Nature implies that the pronouncer stands above and goes round about the whole of that nature. So, for my part, abjuring omniscience and the comprehension of Deity, I accept the statement that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit come together and dwell in the heart.

Then, note, further, that this present Christ is the only Remedy for the orphanhood of the world. The words had a tender and pathetic reference to that little, bewildered group of followers, deprived of their Guide, their Teacher, and their Companion. He who had been as eyes to their weak vision, and Counsellor and Inspirer and everything for three blessed years, was going away to leave them unsheltered to the storm, and we can understand how forlorn and terrified they were, when they looked forward to fronting the things that must come to them, without His presence. Therefore He cheers them with the assurance that they will not be left without Him, but that, present still, just because He is absent, He will be all that He ever had been to them.

And the promise was fulfilled. How did that dis-spirited group of cowardly men ever pluck up courage to hold together at all after the Crucifixion? Why was it that they did not follow the example of John's disciples, and dissolve and disappear; and say, 'The game is up. It is no use holding together any longer'? The process of separation began on the very day of the Crucifixion. Only one thing could have stopped it, and that is the Resurrection and the presence with His Church of the risen Christ in His power and in all the fullness of His gifts. If it had not been that He came to them, they would have disappeared, and Christianity would have been one more of the abortive sects forgotten in Judaism. But, as it is, the whole of the New Testament after Pentecost is aflame with the consciousness of a present Christ, working amongst His people. And although it be true that, in one aspect, we are absent from the Lord when we are present with the body, in another aspect, and an infinitely higher one, it is true that the strength of the Christian life of Apostles and martyrs was this, the assurance that Christ Himself-no mere rhetorical metaphor for His influence or His example, or His memory lingering in their imaginations, but the veritable Christ Himself-was present with them, to strengthen and to bless.

That same conviction you and I must have, if the world is not to be a desert and a dreary place for us. In a very profound sense it is true that if you take away Jesus Christ, the elder Brother, who alone reveals to men the Father, we are all orphans, fatherless children, who look up into an empty heaven and see nothing there. It is only Christ who reveals to us the Father and makes our happy hearts feel that we are of His children. And in the wider sense of the word ‘orphans,’ is not life a desolation without Him? Hollow joys, fleeting blessednesses, roses whose thorns last long after the petals have dropped, real sorrows, shows and shams, bitternesses and disappointments-are not these our life, in so far as Christ has been driven out of it? Oh! there is only one thing that saves us from being as desolate, fatherless children, groping in the dark for the lost Father’s hand, and dying for want of it, and that is that the Christ Himself shall come to us and be with us.

II. The unseen Christ is a seen Christ.

It is clear that the period referred to in the second clause of our text is the same as that referred to in the first, that ‘yet a little while’ covers the whole space up to His Ascension; and that if there be any reference at all to the forty days of His earthly life, during which literally, the work ‘saw Him no more,’ but the Apostles ‘saw Him,’ that reference is only secondary. These transitory appearances are not of sufficient moment or duration to bear the weight of so great a promise as this. The vision, which is the consequence of the coming, has the same extension in time as the coming-that is to say, it is continuous and permanent. We must read here the great promise of a perpetual vision of the present Christ.

It is clear, too, that the word ‘see’ is employed in these two clauses in two different senses. In the former it refers only to bodily sight, in the latter to spiritual perception. For a few short hours still, the ungodly mass of men were to have that outward vision which might have been so much to them, but which they had used so badly that ‘they seeing saw not.’ It was to cease, and they who loved Him would not miss it when it did; but the withdrawal which hid Him from sense and sense-bound souls would reveal Him more clearly to His friends. They, too, had but dimly seen Him while He stood by them; they would gaze on Him with truer insight when He was present though absent.

So this is what every Christian life may and should be-the continual sight of a continually-present Christ. It is His part to come. It is ours to see, to be conscious of Him who does come.

Faith is the sight of the soul, and it is far better than the sight of the senses. It is more direct. My eye does not touch what I look at. Gulfs of millions of miles may lie between me and it. But my faith is not only eye, but hand, and not only beholds, but grasps, and comes into contact with that to which it is directed. It is far more clear. Sense may deceive; faith, built upon His Word, cannot deceive. Its information is far more certain, far more valid. I have better reason for believing in Jesus Christ than I have for believing in the things that I touch and handle. So that there is no need for men to say, ‘Oh, if we had only seen Him with our eyes!’ You would very likely not have known Him if you had. There is no reason for thinking that the Church has retrograded in its privileges, because it has to love instead of beholding, and to believe instead of touching. That is advance, and we are better than they, inasmuch as the blessing of those ‘who have not seen, and yet have believed,’ comes down upon our heads. The vision of Christ which is granted to the faithful soul is better and not worse, more and not less, other in kind indeed, but loftier in degree too, than that which was granted to the men who saw Him upon earth. Sense disturbs, faith alone beholds.

‘The world seeth Me no more.’ Why? Because it is a world. ‘Ye see Me.’ Why? Because, and in the measure in which you have turned away your eyes from seeing vanity. If you want the eye of the soul to be opened, you must shut the eye of sense. And the more we turn away from looking at the dazzling lies with which time and the material universe befool and bewilder us, the more shall we see Him whom to see is to live for ever.

Oh, brethren! does that strong word ‘see’ in any measure express the vividness, the directness, the certainty of our realisation of our Master’s presence? Is Jesus Christ as clear, as perceptible, as sure to us as the men round us are? Which are the shadows and which are the realities to us? The things which are seen, which the senses crown as ‘real,’ or the things which cannot be seen because they are so great, and tower above us, invisible in their eternity? Which world are our eyes most open to, the world where Christ is, or the world here? Our happy eyes may behold and our blessed hands may handle the Word of Life which was manifested to us. Let us beware that we turn not away from the one thing worthy to be looked at, to gaze upon a desolate and dreary world.

III. Lastly, the present and seen Christ is living and life-giving.

The last words of my text may be connected with the preceding, as the marginal rendering of the Revised Version shows. But it is probably better to take them as standing independently, and presenting another and co-ordinate element of the blessedness arising from the coming of the Christ. Because He comes, His life passes into the hearts of the men to whom He comes, and who gaze upon Him.

Time forbids me to dwell upon that majestic proclamation of His own absolute and divine life, from lips that were so soon to be paled with death. Mark the grand ‘I live’-the timeless present tense, which expresses unbroken, underived, undying, and, as I believe, divine life. It is all but a quotation of the great Old Testament name ‘Jehovah.’ The depth and sweep of its meaning are given to us in this Apostle’s Apocalypse, where Christ is called ‘the living One,’ who lived whilst He died, and having died ‘is alive for evermore.’

And this Christ, coming to all His friends, possessor of the fullness of life in Himself, and proclaiming His absolute possession of that life, even whilst He stands within arm’s-length of Calvary, is Life-giver to all that love Him and trust Him.

We live because He lives. In all senses of the word 'life,' as I believe, the life of men is derived from the Christ who is the Agent of creation, the channel from whom life passes from the Godhead into the creatures, and who is also the one means by whom any of us can ever hope to live the better life which is the only true one, and consists in fellowship with God and union to Him.

We shall live as long as He lives, and His being is the pledge and the guarantee of the immortal being of all who love Him. Anything is possible, rather than that it should be credible that a soul, which has drawn spiritual life from Jesus Christ here upon earth, should ever be rent apart from Him by such a miserable and external trifle as the mere dissolution of the bodily frame. As long as Christ lives our life is secure. If the Head has life, the members 'cannot see corruption,' 'Take me not away in the midst of my days: Thy years are throughout all generations' was the prayer of a saint of old, deeply feeling the contrast of the worshipper's transiency and God's eternity, and dimly hoping that the contrast might be changed into likeness. The great promise of our text answers the prayer, and assures us that the worshipper is to live as long as does He whom He adores.

We shall live as He lives, nor ever cease the appropriation of His being until all His life we know, and all its fullness has expanded our natures-and that will be never. Therefore we shall not die.

Men's lives have been prolonged by the transfusion of blood from vigorous frames. Jesus Christ passes His own blood into our veins and makes us immortal. The Church chose for one of its ancient emblems of the Saviour the pelican, which fed its young, according to the fable, with blood from its own breast. So Christ vitalises us. He in us is our Life.

Brethren, without Jesus Christ we are orphans in a fatherless world. Without Him, our wearied and yet unsatisfied eyes have only trifles and trials and trash to look at. Without Him, we are 'dead whilst we live.' He and He only can give us back a Father, and renew in us the spirit of sons. He and only He can satisfy our eyes with the sight which is purity and restfulness and joy. He and He only can breathe life into our death. Oh! let Him do it for you. He comes to us with all these gifts in His hands, for He comes to give us Himself, and in Himself, as 'in a box where sweets compacted lie,' are all that lonely hearts and wearied eyes and dead souls can ever need. All are yours if you are Christ's. All are yours if He is yours. And He is yours if by faith and love you make yourself His and Him your own.

77)John 14:20-21

John

THE GIFTS OF THE PRESENT CHRIST

Joh. 14:20 - Joh. 14:21.

We have heard our Lord in the previous verse unveiling His deepest and strongest encouragements to His downcast followers. These were: His presence with them, their true sight of Him, and their participation in His life. The first part of our present text is closely connected with these, for it gives us their upshot and consequence. Because Christ's true disciple is conscious of Christ's presence, sees Him with the eyes of his spirit, and draws life from Him, therefore he will know by experience the deep truths of Christ's indwelling at once in the Father and in His servant, and of His servant's indwelling in Him. Our Lord had just previously been exhorting His disciples to believe that He was in the Father and the Father in Him; and had been gently wondering at the slowness of their faith. Now He tells them that, when He is gone, their spiritual stature will be so increased as that they shall know the thing which, with Him by their side, they found it so hard to believe.

The second part of our present text is the close of this whole section of our Lord's discourse, and in it He urges the requirement of practical obedience, as the sign and test of love, and as the condition of receiving these high and wonderful things of which He has been speaking. He has been unveiling spiritual blessings, which may seem recondite and up in the clouds, and which, as a matter of fact, have often been perverted into dreamy mysticisms of a most immoral and unpractical kind. And so He brings us sharp back again here to very plain truths, and would teach us that all these lofty and ineffable gifts of which He has been dimly speaking are to be reached only by the commonplace road of honest obedience and simple conformity to His commandments. In these last words of my text, He administers the antidote and the check to the possible abuses of the great things which He has been saying.

I. Note, then, first, the knowledge that comes with the Christ who comes.

'At that day' covers the whole period of which He has been speaking, between His withdrawal from the disciples and His final corporeal coming to judgment-that great day of which generations are but the moments. In it the men who love Him are to have His presence, His vision, His life, and because they have, 'Ye shall know that I am in My Father, and ye in Me, and I in you,' The principle that underlies these wonderful words is that Christian experience is the best teacher of fundamental Christian truth. Observe with what decision, and with what strange boldness, our Lord carries that principle into regions where we might suppose at first sight that it was altogether inapplicable. 'Ye shall know that I am in My Father.' How can such a thing as the relation between Christ and God ever be a matter of consciousness to us here upon earth? Must it not always be a truth that we must take on trust and believe because we have been told it, without having any verification in ourselves? Not so; remember what has gone before. If a man has the consciousness of Christ's presence with Him, sees Him with the true inward eye, which is the only real organ of real vision, and is drawing from Him, moment by moment, His own high and immortal life, then is it not true that this man's experiences are of such a sort as to be utterly inexplicable, except on the ground that they come from a divine source? If I have these experiences I know that it is Jesus Christ who gives them, and I know that He could not give them, if He did not dwell in God and were not divine. These new influences, this revolution in my being, this healing, constraining, cleansing touch, these calming, gladdening, elevating powers, these new hopes, these reversed desires, loving all to which I was formerly indifferent, and growing dead to all that formerly appealed most strongly to me; all these things bear upon their very front the signature that they are wrought by a divine hand, and as sure as I am of my own Christian consciousness, so sure am I that all its experiences proclaim their Author, and that Christ who gives me them is in God. 'Ye shall know that I am in My Father.'

The New Testament, as I read it, is full at every point of the divinity of Jesus Christ; and many profound and learned arguments on that subject have been urged by theologians, and these are all well and needful in their places, but the true way to be sure of it is to have Him dwelling with us and working in us; and then what was an article of belief becomes an article of knowledge, and we know Him to be our Saviour and the Son of God.

In like manner, and yet more obviously, the other elements of this knowledge which Christ promises here may be shown to flow naturally and necessarily from Christian experiences. ‘That ye are in Me, and I in you,’-if a Christian man carries the consciousness of Christ’s presence, and has Him as a Sun in his darkness, and as a Life-source feeding his deadness with life, then he knows with a consciousness which is irrefragable that Jesus Christ is in him, for he feels His touch; and he knows that he is in Christ, for he is aware of the power that girdles him, and in which he has peace and righteousness and all.

So, dear brethren, let us learn what the Christian man’s experience ought to be and to do for him. It should change the articles of our creed into elements of our consciousness. It should make all the fundamentals of the Gospel vitally and vividly true; and certified by what has passed within our own spirits We should be able to say: ‘We have the witness in ourselves.’ And though there will remain much that is uncertain, much in Christian doctrine which is not capable of that clear and all-sufficing verification; much about which we must still depend on the mere teaching of others, or on our own study, the central facts which make the Gospel may all become, by this plain and short path, elements of our very consciousness which stand undeniable to us, whosoever denies them.

Such a direct way to knowledge is reasonable, is in full analogy with the manner by which we attain to the knowledge of everything except the mere external facts, the knowledge of which has arrogated to itself the exclusive name of ‘science,’ How do you know anything about love? You may read poems and tragedies to the end of time, and you will not understand it until you come under its spell for yourself; and then all the things that men said about it cease to be mere words, because you yourself have experienced the emotion.

'He must be loved, ere that to you
He will seem worthy of your love,'

and the only way to be sure, with a vital certitude, of Christ, is to take Christ for your very own, and then He comes into your very being, and dwells there quickening, the Sun and the Life.

So, dear brethren, though such certitude arising from experience, which in its nature is the very highest, is not available for other people, the fact that so many millions of men allege that in varying degrees they possess this certitude is available for other people, and there is nothing to be said by the unbeliever to this, the attestation of the Christian consciousness to the truth of the truths which it has tried. 'Whether this man be a sinner or no, I know not.' You may jangle as much as you like about the questionable and controversial points that surround the Christian revelation, I do not care in the present connection what answer you give to them. 'Whether this man be a sinner or no, I know not. One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see.' And we may push the war into the enemy's quarters, and say: 'Why! herein is a marvellous thing, that you that know everything do not know whence this man is, and yet He has opened mine eyes. You want facts; there are some. You want verification; we have verified by experience, and we set to our seals that God is true.'

'Oh but,' you say, 'this is not a fair account of the way in which Christian men and women generally feel about this matter.' Well, all that I can say about that is, so much the worse for the so-called Christian men and women. And if they are Christians, and do not know by this inward experience that Christ is divine and their Saviour, then there is only one of two reasons to be given for it; either their experience is so wretchedly superficial and fragmentary, so rudimentary as to be scarcely worth calling by the name or, having the facts, they have failed to appreciate their significance, and to make their own by reflection the certitudes which are their own.

Brethren, it becomes every Christian man and woman to be able to say, 'Because I have Christ with me, and see Him, and derive my life from Him, I know that He is in the Father, and I in Him, and He in me.' And if you cannot say that, it is your own grasp of Him, or your meditation upon what you have got by your grasp, that is painfully and sinfully defective.

II. My text speaks of the obedience which is the sign and test of love.

The words here are substantially equivalent to former words in the chapter which we have already considered, where our Lord says: ‘If ye love Me, ye will keep My commandments.’

There is, however, a slight difference in the point of view in the two sayings; the former begins with the root and traces it upwards and outwards to its fruits, love blossoming into obedience. Our text reverses the process, and takes the thing by the other end; begins with the fruits and traces them downwards and inwards to the root. ‘He that hath and keepeth My commandments, he it is that loveth Me.’ The two sayings substantially mean the same thing; but in the one love is put first as the cause of obedience, and in the other obedience is put first, as the certain fruit and sure sign of love. The connection between these and the preceding words is, as I have already pointed out, that our Lord here brings all His lofty promises down to the sharp, practical requirement of obedience, as the only condition on which they can be fulfilled.

So note, and very briefly about this matter, how remarkably our Lord here declares the possession of His commandments to be a sign of love to Him. ‘He that hath,’ a word which is generally passed over in our reading-’He that hath My commandments, He it is that loveth Me.’ Of course there are two ways of having His commandments; there is having them in the Bible, and there is having them in the heart;-present before my eye, as a law that I ought to obey, or present within my will, as a power that shapes it. And the latter is the only kind of ‘having’ that Christ regards as real and valid. The rest is only preparatory and superficial. Love possesses the knowledge of the loved one’s will. Is not that true? Do we not all know how strange is the power of divining desires that goes along with true affection, and how the power, not only of divining, but of treasuring, these desires is the test and the thermometer of our true love? Some of us, perhaps, keep laid away in sacred, secret places tattered, yellow, old bits of paper with the words of a dear one on them, that we would not part with. ‘He that hath My commandments' laid up in lavender in the deepest recesses of his faithful heart, he it is 'that loveth Me.'

In like manner, our Lord says, the practical obedience to His commandments is the sure sign and test of love. I need not dwell upon that. There are two motives for keeping commandments-one because they are commanded, and one because we love Him that commands. The one is slavery, the other is liberty. The one is like the Arctic regions, cold and barren, the other is like tropical lands, full of warmth and sunshine, glorious and glad fertility.

The form of the sentence suggests how easy it is for people to delude themselves about their love to Jesus Christ. That emphatic 'he,' and the putting first of the character before its root is pointed out, are directed against false pretensions to love. The love that Christ stamps with His hall-mark, and passes as genuine, is no mere emotion, however passionate, however sweet; no mere sentiment, however pure, however deep. The tiniest little rivulet that drives a mill is better than a Niagara that rushes and foams and tumbles idly. And there is much so-called love to Jesus Christ that goes masquerading up and down the world, from which the paint is stripped by the sharp application of the words of my text. Character and conduct are the true demonstrations of Christian love, and it is only love so attested that He accepts.

III. Lastly, notice the further and sweeter gifts of divine love and manifestation which reward our love and obedience.

'He that loveth Me shall be loved of My Father, and I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him.' Two things, then, He tells us, are the rich rewards and sparkling crowns with which He crowns our poor love to Him-the love of the Father and the love of the Christ, separate and yet united, and the further manifestation of Christ's sweetness to the waiting heart.

Note, as to the first, the extraordinary boldness of that majestic saying: 'If a man loves Me, My Father will love him.' God regards our love to Jesus Christ as the fulfilling of the law, as equivalent to our supreme love to Himself, as containing in it the germ of all that is pleasing in His sight. And so, upon our hearts, if we love Christ, there falls the benediction of the

Father’s love. Of course I need not remind you that our Lord here is not beginning at the very beginning of everything; for prior to all men’s love to Christ is Christ’s love to men, and ours to Him is but the reflection and the echo called forth by His to us. ‘We love Him because He first loved us’ digs a story deeper down in the building than the words of my text, which is speaking, not of the process by which a man comes to receive the love of God for the first time, but of the process by which a Christian man grows in his possession of it. That being understood, here is a great lesson. It is not all the same to God whether a man is a scoundrel or a saint. The divine love is over all its works, and embraces every variety of humanity, the most degraded, alien, hostile. But in this generation, as it seems to me, there is great need for preaching that whilst that is gloriously and blessedly true, the other thing is just as true, that to know the deepest depth and to taste the sweetest sweetness of the love of our Father God, there must be in our hearts love to Him whom He has sent, which manifests itself by our obedience. God’s love is a moral love; and whilst the sunbeams play upon the ice and melt it sometimes, they flash back from, and rest most graciously and fully on, the rippling stream into which the ice has turned. God loves them that love Him not, but the depths of His heart and the secret, sacred favours of His grace can only be bestowed upon those who in some measure are conformed, and are growingly being conformed, to His likeness in Jesus Christ, and who love Him and obey Him.

And, in like manner, my text tells us that if we wish to know all that it is possible for us here, amidst the clouds, and shadows, and darknesses, to know of that dear Lord, the path to such knowledge is plain. Walk in the way of obedience, and Christ will meet you with the unveiling of more and more of His love. To live what we believe is the sure way to increase its amount. To be faithful to the little is the certain way to inherit the much. And Christ manifests Himself, in all deep and recondite sweetness, gentleness, constraining power, to the men who treasure the partial knowledge as yet possessed, in their loving hearts and obedient wills, and who make a conscience of translating all their knowledge into conduct, and of basing all their conduct on knowledge of Him. He gives us His whole self at the first, but we traverse the breadth of the gift by degrees. He puts Himself into our hands and into our hearts when we humbly trust Him and imperfectly try to love Him. But the flower is but a bud when we get it, and, as we hold it, it opens its petals to the light.

So, if ‘any man wills to do His will, he shall know of the doctrine’; and if, touched by His divine love and infinite sacrifice for me, I cast my poor self upon Him, and try to love Him back again, and to keep His commandments because I love, then day by day I shall realise more and more of His strong, immortal, all-satisfying love, and see more and more deeply into that Saviour, whose infinite beauties remain unrevealed after all revelation, and to know more and more of whom shall be the Heaven of Heavens yonder, as it is the joy and life of the soul here.

78)John 14:22-24

John

WHO BRING CHRIST

Joh. 14:22 - Joh. 14:24.

This Judas held but a low place amongst the Apostles. In all the lists he is one of the last of the groups of fours, into which they are divided, and which were evidently arranged according to their spiritual nearness to the Master. His question is exactly that which a listener, with some dim, confused glimmer of Christ’s meaning, might be expected to ask. He grasps at His last words about manifesting Himself to certain persons; he rightly feels that he and his brethren possess the qualification of love. He rightly understands that our Lord contemplates no public showing of Himself, and that disappoints him. It was only a day or two ago that Jesus seemed to them to have begun to do what they had always wanted Him to do, manifest Himself to the world. And now, as he thinks, something unknown to them must have happened in order to make Him change His course, and go back to the old plan of a secret communication. And so he says, ‘Lord! what has come to pass to induce you to abandon and falter upon the course on which we entered, when you rode into Jerusalem with the shouting crowd?’

His question is no better in intelligence, though it is a great deal better in spirit, than the taunt of Christ’s brethren, ‘If Thou do these things, show

Thyself to the world.' Judas, too, thought of the simple flashing of His Messianic glory, in some visible, vulgar form, before else blind eyes.

How sad and chilling such a question must have been to Jesus! Slow scholars we all are; and with what wonderful patience, without a word of pain, or of rebuke, He reiterates His lesson, here a little and there a little, and once more unfolds the conditions of His self-revelation, and the fullness of the blessings that He brings. He moulds His words so as to meet both the clauses of Judas's foolish question-'To us, not to the world'; and quietly tells them the positive conditions and the negative disqualifications for His self-revelation. So my text deals with two things, the crown of loving obedience in the possession of a fuller Christ, and the impassable barrier to His manifestation which unloving disobedience makes. Or to put it into briefer words, we have in one of the verses-first, what brings Christ and what Christ brings; and, in the other, second, what keeps away Christ and all His gifts. Now let us look at these two things.

I. We have what brings Christ and what Christ brings.

'If a man love Me, He will keep My word' [not 'words,' as our Authorised Version has it], 'and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him.' Now notice how here, in the first part of this verse, our Lord subtly and significantly alters the form of the statement which He has already made. He had formerly said, 'If ye love Me, ye will keep My commandments,' but now He casts it into a purely impersonal form, and says, 'If a man,' anybody, not 'you' only, but anybody-'If a man love Me, he,' anybody, 'will keep My word.' And why the change? Why, I suppose, in order to strike full and square against that complacent assumption of Judas that it was 'to us and not to the world' that the showing was to take place. Our Lord, by the studiously impersonal form into which He casts the promise, proclaims its universality, and says this to His ignorant questioner, 'Do not suppose that you Apostles have the monopoly. You may not even have a share in My self-manifestation. Anybody may have it. And there is no "world," as you suppose, to which I do not show Myself. Anybody may have the vision if he observes the conditions.'

Now I need not dwell at any length upon the earlier words of this text, because we have had to consider them in previous sermons on the former verses of this chapter. I need only remark that here, as there, our Lord brings out the thought that the very life-blood of love is the treasuring of the word of the beloved One; and that there is no joy comparable to the joy of the loving heart that yields itself to the Beloved's will. That is true about earth, and it makes the sweetest and selectest blessedness of our ordinary existence. And it is true about heaven, and it makes the liberty and the gladness of the bond that knits us to Him.

But I would like just to notice, before I come to the more immediate subject of my discourse, that remarkable expression, 'He will keep My word.' That is more than a 'commandment' is it not? Christ's 'word' is wider than precept. It includes all His sayings, and it includes them all as in one vital unity and organic whole. We are not to go picking and choosing among them; they are one. And it includes this other thought, that every word of Christ, be it revelation of the deep things of God, or be it a promise of the great shower of blessings which, out of His full hand, He will drop upon our heads, enshrines within itself a commandment. He utters no revelations, simply that we may know. He utters no comforting words, simply that our sore hearts may be healed, but in all His utterances there is a practical bearing; and every word of His teaching, every word of His sweet, whispered assurances of love and favour to the waiting heart, has in it the imperativeness of His manifested will, and has a direct bearing upon duty. All His words are gathered into one word, and all the variety of His sayings is, in their unity, the law of our lives. So much by way of observation on the mere language of my text. And now let us look at what, as He says to us here, are the rewards and crown of loving obedience.

Christ will show Himself to the loving heart. That is true on the very lowest level. Every act of obedience to any moral truth is rewarded by additional insight. Every act of submission to His will cleanses the lenses of the telescope from some film that has gathered upon them, and so the stars look brighter and larger and nearer. All duty done opens out into a loftier conception of duty, and a clearer vision of Him. 'To him that hath shall be given.' As we climb the hill we get a wider view. Obedience is in all things the parent of insight.

But in reference to our relation to Him, we have to do not with truths only, but with a Person. How do we learn to know people? There is only one way-that is, by loving them. Sympathy is the parent of all true knowledge of one another. They tell us in the foolish old proverb that ‘love is blind.’ No! There is not such a pair of clear eyes anywhere as the eyes of love; and if we want to see into a man, the first condition is that we feel kindly towards him. Sympathy is the parent of insight into persons, as Obedience is the parent of insight into duty.

But both of these illustrations are only imperfect preparations for the great truth here, which is that our loving obedience to the discerned will of Jesus Christ has not only an operation inwards upon us, but has an effect outwards upon Him. I am afraid that Christian people in this generation have but a very imperfect belief in the actual, supernatural, and, if you like to call it so, miraculous manifestation of Jesus Christ, His very Self, to men that love Him and cleave to Him. Do you believe as a simple revealed truth, plain as a sunbeam in such words as these, that Jesus Christ Himself will do something on you, and in you, and for you, if you love Him and trust Him; that His hand will be laid on your eyes as it was laid of old; that He will indeed, in no metaphor, but in reality, show Himself to you? I may be mistaken, but I think that too commonly it is the case, that even good Christian people have a far more vivid and realising and real faith in the past work of Christ on earth than in the present work of Christ in themselves. They think the one a plain truth, and the other something like a metaphor, whereas the New Testament teaches us, as plainly as it can teach us anything, that, far above all the natural operations of truth upon our understandings, hearts, and wills, there is an actual, supernatural, continuous communication of Christ to hearts that love Him, which leads day by day, if they be faithful, to a fuller knowledge, a sweeter love, a larger possession, of a fuller Christ. And it is this that He tells us of, to fire our ambition to attain, in such words as these.

Brethren, one piece of honest, loving obedience is worth all the study and speculation of an unloving heart when the question is, ‘How are we to see Christ?’

Again, Jesus shows Himself to the obedient heart in indissoluble union with the Father. Look at the majesty, and, except upon one hypothesis, the insane presumption, of such words as these: ‘If a man love Me, My Father will love him’; as if identifying love to Christ with love to Himself. And look at that wondrous union, the consciousness of which speaks in ‘We will come.’ Think of a man saying that. It is blasphemous insanity; or else the speech of Him who is conscious of union with the Father, close and indissoluble and transcending all analogies. ‘We will come,’ together, hand-in-hand, if I may so say; or rather, His coming is the Father’s coming. Just as in heaven so closely are they represented as united, that there is but one throne ‘for God and the Lamb,’ so on earth so closely are they represented as united, that there is but one coming of the Father in the Son.

And this is the only belief, as it seems to me, that will keep this generation from despair and moral suicide. The question for this generation is, Is it possible for men to know God? Science, both of material things and of inward experiences, is more and more unanimous in its proclamation; ‘Behold! we know not anything’; and the only attitude to take before that great black vault above us is to say, ‘We know nothing.’ The world has learned half of a great verse of the Gospel: ‘No man hath seen God at any time, nor can see Him.’ If the world is not to go mad, if hearts are not to be tortured into despair, if morality and enthusiasm and poetry and everything higher and nobler than the knowledge of material phenomena and their sequences is not to perish from the earth, the world must learn the next half of the verse, and say, ‘The only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.’ Christ shows Himself in indissoluble union with the Father.

Lastly about this matter, Christ shows Himself to obedient love by a true coming. ‘We will come and make our mansion with him.’ And that coming is a fact of a higher order, and not to be confounded either with the mere divine Omnipresence, by which God is everywhere, nor to be reduced to a figment of our own imaginations, or a strong way of promising increased perception on our part of Christ’s fullness. That great central Sun, if I might use so violent a figure, draws nearer and nearer and nearer to the planets that move about it, and having once been far off on an almost infinitely distant horizon, approaches until planet and Sun unite.

Dear brethren, if we could only get to the attitude of simple acceptance of this as a literal truth, and believe that, in prose reality, Christ comes to every heart that loves Him, would not all the world be different to us?

That coming is a permanent residence: ‘We will make our abode with him.’ Very beautiful is it to notice that our Lord here employs that same sweet and significant word, with which He began this wonderful series of encouragements, when He said, ‘In My Father’s house are many mansions.’ Yonder they dwell for ever with God; here God in Christ for ever dwells with the loving heart. It is a permanent abode so long as the conditions are fulfilled, but only so long. If self-will, rising in the Christian heart from its torpor and apparent death, reasserts itself and shakes off Christ’s yoke, Christ’s presence vanishes. In the last hours of the Holy City there was heard by the trembling priests amidst the midnight darkness the motion of departing Deity, and a great voice said: ‘Let us depart hence’; and to-morrow the shrine was empty, and the day after it was in flames. Brethren, if you would keep the Christ in whom is God, remember that He cannot be kept but by the act of loving obedience.

II. Now, in the next place, my text gives us the negative side, and shows us what keeps away Christ and all His blessings.

An unloving disobedience closes the eyes to the vision, and the heart against the entrance, of that dear Lord. Our Master lays down for us two principles, and leaves us to draw the conclusion for ourselves.

The first is, ‘He that loveth Me not, keepeth not My sayings.’ No love, no obedience. That is plainly true, because the heart of all the commandments is love, and where that is not, disobedience to their very spirit is. It is plainly true, because there is no power that will lead men to true obedience to Christ’s yoke except the power of love. His commandments are too alien from our nature ever to be kept, unless by the might of love. It was only the rising sunbeam that could draw music from the stony lips of Memnon, as he gazed out across the desert, and it is only when Christ’s love shines on our faces that we open our lips in praise, and move our hands in service. Those great rocking-stones down in Cornwall stand unmoved by any tempest, but a child’s finger, laid on the right place, will set them vibrating. And so the heavy, hard, stony bulk of our hearts lies torpid and immovable, until He lays His loving finger upon them, and then they rock at His will. There is no keeping of Christ's commandments without love. That makes short work of a great deal that calls itself Christianity, does it not? Reluctant obedience is no obedience; self-interested obedience is no obedience; constrained obedience is no obedience; outward acts of service, if the heart be wanting, are rubbish and dung. Morality without religion is nought. The one thing that makes a good man is love to Jesus Christ; and where that is, there, and only there, is obedience.

'Talk they of morals? O Thou Bleeding Lamb!
The grand morality is love of Thee.'

'If a man love Me not, he will not keep My words.'

Then the second principle is, disobedience to Christ is disobedience to God. 'The Word which ye hear is not Mine, but the Father's.' Christ's consciousness of union so speaks out here as that He is quite sure that all His words are God's words, and that all God's words are spoken by Him. Paul has to say, 'So speak I, not the Lord.' And you would not think a man a very sound or safe religious teacher who said to you, to begin with, 'Now, mind, everything that I say, God says.' There are no errors then, no deterioration of the treasure by the vessel in which it lies. The water does not taste of the vase in which it is carried. The personality of Jesus Christ is never, through all His utterances, so separated from God but that God speaks in Him; and, listening to His voice, we hear the absolute utterance of the uncreated and eternal Wisdom.

Therefore follows the conclusion, which our Lord does not state, but leaves us to supply. If it be true that the absence of love of Him is disobedience to Him, and if it be true that disobedience to Him is disobedience to God, then it plainly follows that what keeps away Christ and all His gifts, and God in Him, is unloving obedience. What brings Him is the obedience of love; what repels Him is alienation and rebellion. If the heart be full of confusion, of the world, of self, of unbridled inclinations, of careless indifference to His bleeding love, He 'can but listen at the gate and hear the household jar within.'

And so, dear friends, from all this there follow one or two points, which I touch very briefly. One is, that it is possible for men not to see Christ, though He stands there close before them. It is possible to grope at noonday as at midnight, to see only ‘bracken green and cold grey stone’ on the hillside, where another man sees the chariots of fire and the horses of fire. It is possible for you-and, alas! it is the condition of some of my hearers-to look upon Christ and to turn away and say, ‘I see no beauty in Him that I should desire Him,’ whilst the man beside yon, looking at the same facts and the same face, can see in Him the ‘Chief among ten thousand, and the altogether lovely.’

Another thought is, that Christ’s showing of Himself to men is in no sense arbitrary. It is you that determine what you shall see. You can hermetically seal your heart against Him, you can blind yourself to all His beauty. The door of your hearts is hinged to open from within, and if you do not open it, it remains shut, and Christ remains outside.

Another thought is, that you do not need to do anything to blind yourselves. Simple negation is fatal. ‘If a man love not’; that is all. The absence of love is your ruin.

And the last thought is this, that my text does not begin at the beginning. Jesus Christ has been speaking about manifestations of Himself to the loving and obedient; but there are manifestations of Himself made that we may become loving and obedient. You can build a barrier over which these sweeter revelations, of which loyal love and docile submission are the conditions, cannot rise. But you cannot build a barrier over which the prior revelations to the unthankful and disobedient cannot rise. No mountains of sin and neglect and alienation can be piled so high but that the flood of pardoning grace will rise above their crests, and pour itself into your hearts. You ask, How can I get the love and obedience of which you have been singing the praises now? There is only one answer, brethren. We know that we love Him when we know that He loves us; and we know that He loves us when we see Him dying on His Cross. So here is the ladder, that is planted in the miry clay of the horrible pit, and fastens its golden hooks on His throne. The first round is, Behold the dying Christ and His love to me. The second is, Let that love melt my heart into sweet responsive love. The third is, Let my love mould my life into obedience. And then Christ, and God in Him, will come to me and show Himself to me; and give me a fuller knowledge and a deeper love, and make His dwelling with me. And then there is only one round still to roach, and that will land us by the Throne of God, in the many mansions of the Father's house, where we shall make our abode with Him for evermore.

79)John 14:25-26

John

THE TEACHER SPIRIT

Joh. 14:25 - Joh. 14:26.

This wonderful outpouring of consolation and instruction with which our Lord sought to soothe the pain of parting is nearing its end. We have to conceive of a slight pause here, whilst He looks back upon what He has been saying and contrasts His teaching with that of the Comforter, whom He has once already, though in a different connection, promised to His followers. He speaks of His earthly residence with them as being 'an abiding,' distinctly therein referring to what He has just said, that the Father and He will, in the future, 'make their abode' with His disciples. He contrasts the outward and transitory presence which was now nearing its end, with the inward and continuous presence, which its end was to inaugurate.

And, in like manner, with, at first sight, startling humility, He contrasts 'these things,' the partial and to a large extent unintelligible utterances which He had given with His human lips, with the complete, universal teaching of that divine Spirit, who was to instruct in 'all things' pertaining to man's salvation. We have then, here, sketched in broad outline, the great truths concerning the ever-present, inward Teacher of God's Church who is to come, now that the earthly manifestation of Christ, whom the twelve called their 'Teacher,' had reached a close. I think we may best gain the deep instruction which lies in the words before us, if we look at three points of view which they bring into prominence: the Teacher, His lesson, and His scholars.

I. Now, as to the first, the promised Teacher.

I need not repeat what I have said in former sermons as to the wide sweep of that word ‘the Comforter,’ beyond just reminding you that it means literally one who is called to the side of another, primarily for the purpose of being his representative in some legal process; and, more widely, for any purpose of help, encouragement, and strength. That being so, ‘Comforter,’ in its modern sense of Consoler, is far too narrow for the full force of the word, which means much rather ‘Comforter,’ in its ancient and etymological sense of one who, in company with another, makes Him strong and brave.

But the point to which I desire to turn attention now is this, that this comforting and strengthening office of the divine Spirit is brought into immediate connection here with the conception of Him as a Teacher. That is to say, the best strength that God, by His Spirit, can give us is by our firm grasp and growing clearness of understanding of the truths which are wrapped up in Jesus Christ. All power for endurance, for service, is there, and when the Spirit of God teaches a man what God reveals in Christ, He therein and thereby most fully discharges His office of Strengthener.

Then note still further the other designation of this divine Teacher which is here given: ‘The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost.’ We might have expected, as indeed we find in another context in this great final discourse, the ‘Spirit of Truth’ as appropriate in connection with the office of teaching. But is there not a profound lesson for us here in this, that, side by side with the thought of illumination, there lies the thought of purity built upon consecration, which is the Scripture definition of holiness? That suggests that there is an indissoluble connection between the real knowledge of God’s truth and practical holiness of life. That connection is of a double sort. There is no holiness without such knowledge, and there is no such knowledge without holiness.

There is no real knowledge of Christ and His truth without purity of heart. The man who has no music in his soul can never be brought to understand the deep harmonies of the great masters and magicians of sound. The man who has no eye for beauty can never be brought to bow his spirit before some of those embodiments of loveliness and sublimity which the painter's brush has cast upon the canvas. And the man who has no longings after purity, nor has attained to any degree of moral conformity with the divine image, is not in possession of the sense which is needed in order that he should understand the 'deep things of God.'

The scholars in this school have to wash their hands before they go to school, and come there with clean hands and clean hearts. Foulness and the love of it are bars to all understanding of God's truth. And, on the other hand, the truest inducements, motives, and powers for purity are found in that great word which is all 'according to godliness,' and is meant much rather to make us good than to make us wise.

So, in this designation of the teaching Spirit as holy, there lie lessons for two classes of people. All fanatical professions of possessing divine illumination, which are not warranted and sealed by purity of life, are lies or self-delusion. And, on the other hand, coldblooded intellectualism will never force the locks of the palace of divine truth, but they that come there must have clean hands and a pure heart; and only those who have the love and the longing for goodness will be wise scholars in Christ's school. Your theology is nothing unless its distinct outcome is morality, and you must be prepared to accept the painful, the punitive, the purifying influences of that divine Spirit on your moral natures if you want to have His enlightening influences shining on the 'truth as it is in Jesus.' 'If any man wills to do His will, he,' and only he, 'shall know of the doctrine.' Knowledge and holiness are as inseparable in divine things as light and heat.

And still further note that this great Teacher is 'sent by God' in Christ's name. That pregnant phrase, 'In My name,' cannot be represented by any one form of expression into which we may translate it, but covers a larger space. God in Christ's name sends the Spirit. That is to say, in some deep sense God acts as Christ's representative; just as Christ comes in the Father's name and acts as His representative. And, again, God sends in Christ's name; that is, the historical manifestation of Christ is the basis on which the sending of the Spirit is possible and rests. The revelation had to be complete before He who came to unfold the meaning of the revelation had material to work upon. The Spirit, which is sent in Christ's name, has, for the basis of His mission, and the means by which He acts, the recorded facts of Christ's life and death, these and none other.

And then note finally about this matter, the strong and unmistakable declaration here, that that divine Spirit is a person: 'He shall teach you all things.' They tell us that the doctrine of the Trinity is not in the New Testament. The word is not, but the thing is. In this verse we have the Father, the Son, and the Spirit brought into such close and indissoluble union as is only vindicated from the charge of blasphemy by the belief in the divinity of each. Just as the Apostolic benediction, 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit' necessarily involves the divinity of all who are thus invoked, so we stand here in the presence of a truth which pierces into the deeps of Deity. That divine Spirit is more than an influence. 'He shall teach,' and He can be grieved by evil and sin. I do not enlarge upon these thoughts. My purpose is mainly to bring them out clearly before you.

II. I pass in the second place to the consideration of the Lesson which this promised Teacher gives.

Mark the words, 'He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.' Now as we have seen in the exposition of the words 'in My name,' the whole subject-matter of the divine Spirit's teaching is the life and work and death and person of Jesus Christ. 'He shall teach you all things' is wider than 'He shall bring all things which I have said to you to your remembrance.' But whilst that is so, the clear implication of the words before us is that Christ is the lesson book, of which the divine Spirit is the Teacher. His weapon, to take another metaphor, with which He plies men's hearts and minds and wills, convincing the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment, and leading those who are convinced into deeper knowledge and larger wisdom, is the recorded facts concerning the life and manifestation of Jesus Christ. The significance of this lesson book, the history of our Lord, cannot be unfolded all at once. There is something altogether unique in the incorruption and germinant power of all His deeds and of all His words.

This Carpenter of Nazareth has reached the heights which the greatest thinkers and poets of the past have never reached, or only in little snatches and fragments of their words. His words open out, generation after generation, into undreamed-of wisdom, and there are found to be hived in them stores of sweetness that were never suspected until the occasion came that drew them forth. The world and the Church received Christ, as it were, in the dark; and, as with some man receiving a precious gift as the morning was dawning, each fresh moment revealed, as the light grew, new beauties and new preciousness in the thing possessed. So Christ, in His infinite significance, fresh and new for all generations, was given at first, and ever since the Church and the world have been learning the meaning of the gift which they received. Christ's words are inexhaustible, and the Spirit's teaching is to unveil more and more of the infinite significance that lies in the apparently least significant of them.

Now, then, note that if this be our Lord's meaning here, Jesus Christ plainly anticipated that, after His departure from earth, there should be a development of Christian doctrine. We are often taunted with the fact, which is exaggerated for the purpose of controversy, that a clear and full statement of the central truths which orthodox Christianity holds, is found rather in the Apostolic epistles than in the Master's words, and the shallow axiom is often quoted with great approbation: 'Jesus Christ is our Master, and not Paul.' I do not grant that the germs and the central truths of the Gospel are not to be found in Christ's words, but I admit that the full, articulate statement of them is to be found rather in the servant's letters, and I say that that is exactly what Jesus Christ told us to expect, that after He was gone, words that had been all obscure, and thoughts that had been only fragmentarily intelligible, would come to be seen clearly, and would be discerned for what they were. The earlier disciples had only a very partial grasp of Christ's nature. They knew next to nothing of the great doctrine of sacrifice; they knew nothing about His resurrection; they did not in the least understand that He was going back to heaven; they had but glimmering conceptions of the spirituality or universality of His Kingdom. Whilst they were listening to Him at that table they did not believe in the atonement; but they dimly believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ; they did not believe in His resurrection; they did not believe in His ascension; they did not believe that He was founding a spiritual kingdom, a kingdom was to rule over all the world till the end of time. None of these truths were in their mind. They had all been in germ in His words. And after He was gone, there came over them a breath of the teaching Spirit, and the unintelligible flashed up into significance. The history of the Church is the proof of the truth of this promise, and if anybody says to me, ‘Where is the fulfilment of the promise of a Spirit that will bring all things to your remembrance?’ I say-here in this Book! These four Gospels, these Apostolic Epistles, show that the word which our Lord here speaks has been gloriously fulfilled. Christ anticipated a development of doctrine, and it casts no slur or suspicion on the truthfulness of the apostolic representation of the Christian truths, that they are only sparsely and fragmentarily to be found in the records of Christ’s life,

Then there is another practical conclusion from the words before us, on which I touch for a moment, and that is, that if Jesus Christ and the deep understanding of Him be the true lesson of the divine, teaching Spirit, then real progress consists, not in getting beyond Christ, but in getting more fully into Him. We hear a great deal in these days about advanced thought and progressive Christianity. I hope I believe in the continuous advance of Christian thought as joyfully as any man, but my notion of it-and I humbly venture to say Christ’s notion of it-is to get more and more into His heart, and to find within Him, and not away from Him, ‘all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.’ We leave all other great men behind. All other teachers’ words become feeble by age, as their persons become ghostly, wrapped in thickening folds of oblivion; but the progress of the Church consists in absorbing more and more of Christ, in understanding Him better, and becoming more and more moulded by His influence. The Spirit’s teaching brings out the ever fresh significance of the ancient and perpetual revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

III. And now, lastly, note the Scholars.

Primarily, of course, these are the Apostolic group but the Apostles, in all these discourses, stand as the representatives of the Church, and not as separated from it. And whilst the teaching Spirit could ‘bring to the remembrance’ of those only who first heard them ‘the words that He said unto them,’ that Spirit’s teaching function is not limited to those who listened to the Lord Jesus. The fire that was kindled on Pentecost has not died down into grey ashes, nor the river that then broke forth been sucked up by thirsty sands of successive generations, but the fire is still with us, and the river still flows near our lips, and we, too, may be taught by that divine Spirit. For this very Evangelist, in writing his Epistle, has at least two distinct references to, and almost verbal quotations of, this promise, when he says, addressing all his Asiatic brethren, ‘Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and know all things.’ And again, ‘The unction which ye have of Him abideth with you, and ye need not that any man should teach you.’

So, then, Christian men and women, every believing soul has this divine Spirit for His Teacher, and the humblest of us may, if we will, learn of Him and be led by Him into profounder knowledge of that great Lord.

Oh! dear brethren, the belief in the actual presence with the Church of a Spirit that teaches all faithful members thereof, is far too much hesitatingly held by the common Christianity of this day. We ought to be the standing witnesses in the world of the reality of a supernatural influence, and how can we be, if we do not believe it ourselves, and never feel that we are under it?

But whilst a continuous inspiration from that self-same Spirit is the prerogative of all believing souls, let us not forget that the early teaching is the standard by which all such must be tried. As to the first disciples the office of the divine Spirit was to bring before them the deep significance of their Master’s life and words, so to us the office of the teaching Spirit is to bring to our minds the deep significance of the record by these earliest scholars of what they learned from Him. The authority of the New Testament over our faith is based upon these words, and Paul’s warning applies especially to this generation, with its thoughts about a continuous inspiration and outgrowing of the New Testament teaching: ‘If a man think himself to be spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.’

Now from all this take three counsels. Let this great promise fill us with shame. Look at Christendom. Does it not contradict such words as these? Disputatious sects, Christians scarcely agreed upon any one of the great central doctrines, seem a strange fulfilment. The present condition of

Christendom does not prove that Jesus Christ did not send the Spirit, but it does prove that Christ's followers have been wofully remiss and negligent in their acceptance and use of the Spirit. What slow scholars we are! How little we have learnt! How we have let passion, prejudice, human voices, the babble of men's tongues, anybody and everybody, take the office of teaching us God's truth, instead of waiting before Him and letting His Spirit teach us! It is the shame of us Christians that, with such a Teacher, we, 'when for the time we ought to be teachers, have need that one teach us again which be the first principles of the oracles of Christ!'

Let it fill us with desire and with diligence. Let it fill us with calm hope. They tell us that Christianity is effete. Have we got all out of Jesus Christ that is in Him? Is the process that has been going on for all these centuries to stop now? No! Depend upon it that the new problems of this generation will find their solution where the old problems of past generations have found theirs, and the old commandment of the old Christ will be the new commandment of the new Christ.

Foolish men, both on the Christian and on the anti-Christian side, stand and point to the western sky and say, 'The Sun is setting.' But there is a flush in the opposite horizon in an hour, as at midsummer; and that which sank in the west rises fresh and bright in the east for a new day. Jesus Christ is the Christ for all the ages and for every soul, and the world will only learn more and more of His inexhaustible fullness. So let us be ever quiet, patient, hopeful amidst the babble of tongues and the surges of controversy, assured that all change will but make more plain the inexhaustible significance of the infinite Christ, and that humble and obedient hearts will ever possess the promised Teacher, nor ever cry in vain, 'Teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art my God. Thy Spirit is good, lead me into the land of uprightness.'

80)John 14:27

John

CHRIST'S PEACE

Joh. 14:27.

‘Peace be unto you!’ was, and is, the common Eastern salutation, both in meeting and in parting. It carries us back to a state of society in which every stranger might be an enemy. It is a confession of the deep unrest of the human heart. Christ was about closing His discourse, and the common word of leave-taking came naturally to His lips; just as when He first met His followers after the Resurrection, He soothed their fears by the calm and familiar greeting, ‘Peace be unto you!’ But common words deepen their force and meaning when He uses them. In Him ‘all things become new,’ and on His lips the conventional threadbare salutation changes into a tender and mysterious communication of a real gift. His words are deeds, and His wishes for His disciples fulfil themselves.

I. So we have here, first, the greeting, which is a gift.

‘Peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you.’ We have seen, in former discourses on this chapter, how prominently and repeatedly our Lord insists on the great truth of His dwelling with and in His disciples. He gives His peace because He gives Himself; and in the bestowal of His life He bestows, in so far as we possess the gift, the qualities and attributes of that life. His peace is inseparable from His presence. It comes with Him, like an atmosphere; it is never where He is not. It was His peace inasmuch as, in His own experience, He possessed it. His manhood was untroubled by perturbation or tumult, by passions or contending desires, and no outward things could break His calm. If we open our hearts by lowly faith, love, and aspiration for His entrance, we too may be at rest; for His peace, like all which He is and has, is His that it may be ours.

The first requisite for peace is consciousness of harmonious and loving relations between me and God. The deepest secret of Christ’s peace was His unbroken consciousness of unbroken communion with the Father, in which His will submitted and the whole being of the man hung in filial dependence upon God. And the centre and foundation of all the peace-giving power of Jesus Christ is this, that in His death, by His one offering for sin for ever, He has swept away the occasion of antagonism, and so made peace between the twain, the Father in the heavens and the child, rebellious and prodigal, here below. Little as these disciples dreamed of it, the death impending, which was already beginning to cast its shadow over their souls, was the condition of securing to them and to us the true beginning of all real peace, the rectifying of our antagonistic relation to God, and the bringing Him and us into perfect concord.

My brother, no man can be at rest down to the very roots of His being, in the absence of the consciousness that he is at peace with God. There may be tumults of gladness, there may be much of stormy brightness in the life, but there cannot be the calm, still, impregnable, all-pervading, and central tranquillity that our souls hunger for, unless we know and feel that we are right with God, and that there is nothing between us and Him. And it is because Jesus Christ, dying on the Cross, has made it possible for you and me to feel this, that He Is our peace, and that He can say, 'Peace I leave with you.'

Another requisite is that we must be at peace with ourselves. There must be no stinging conscience, there must be no unsatisfied desires, there must be no inner schism between inclination and duty, reason and will, passion and judgment. There must be the quiet of a harmonised nature which has one object, one aim, one love; which-to use a very vulgar phrase-has 'all its eggs in one basket,' and has no contradictions running through its inmost self. There is only one way to get that peace-cleaving to Jesus Christ and making Him our Lord, our righteousness, our aim, our all. Your consciences will sting, and that destroys peace; or if they do not sting, they will be torpid, and that destroys peace, for death is not peace. Unless we take Christ for our love, for the light of our minds, for the Sovereign Arbiter and Lord of our will, for the home of our desires, for the aim of our efforts, we shall never know what it is to be at rest. Unsatisfied and hungry we shall go through life, seeking what nothing short of an Infinite Humanity can ever give us, and that is a heart to lean our heads upon, an adequate object for all our faculties, and so a quiet satisfaction of all our desires. 'Wherefore do ye spend your money for that which is not bread?' A question that no man can answer without convicting himself of folly! There is One, and only One, who is enough for me, poor and weak and lowly and fleeting as I am, and as my earthly life is. Take that One for your Treasure, and you are rich indeed. The world without Christ is nought. Christ without the world is enough.

Nor is there any other way of healing the inner discord, schism, and contradiction of our anarchic nature, except in bringing it all into submission to His merciful rule. Look at that troubled kingdom that each of us carries about within himself, passion dragging this way, conscience that, a hundred desires all arrayed against one another, inclination here, duty there, till we are torn in pieces like a man drawn asunder by wild horses. And what is to be done with all that rebellious self, over which the poor soul rules as it may, and rules so poorly? Oh! there is an inner unrest, the necessary fate of every man who does not take Christ for his King. But when He enters the heart with His silken leash, the old fable comes true, and He binds the lions and the ravenous beasts there with its slender tie and leads them along, tamed, by the cord of love, and all harnessed to pull together in the chariot that He guides. There is only one way for a man to be at peace with himself through and through, and that is that he should put the guidance of his life into the hands of Jesus Christ, and let Him do with it as He will. There is one power, and only one, that can draw after it all the multitudinous heaped waters of the weltering ocean, and that is the quiet, silver moon in the heavens that pulls the tidal wave, into which melt and merge all currents and small breakers, and rolls it round the whole earth. And so Christ, shining down lambent, and gentle, but changeless, from the darkest of our skies, will draw, in one great surge of harmonised motion, all the else contradictory currents of our stormy souls. ‘My peace I give unto you.’

Another element in true tranquillity, which again is supplied only by Jesus Christ, is peace with men. ‘Whence come wars and fightings amongst you? From your lusts.’ Or to translate the old-fashioned phraseology into modern English, the reason why men are in antagonism with one another is the central selfishness of each, and there is only one way by which men’s relations can be thoroughly sweetened, and that is, by the divine love of Jesus Christ pouring into their hearts, and casting out the devil of selfishness, and so blending them all into one harmonious whole.

The one basis of true, happy relations between man and man, without which there is not the all-round tranquillity that we require, lies in the common relation of all, if it may be, but certainly in the individual relation of myself, to Him who is the Lover and the Friend of all. And in the measure in which the law of the Spirit of life which was in Jesus Christ is in me, in that measure do I find it possible to reproduce His gentleness, sympathy, compassion, insight into men's sorrows, patience with men's offences, and all which makes, in our relations to one another, the harmony and the happiness of humanity.

Another of the elements or aspects of peace is peace with the outer world. 'It is hard to kick against the pricks,' but if you do not kick against them, they will not prick you. We beat ourselves all bruised and bleeding against the bars of the prison-house in trying to escape from it, but if we do not beat ourselves against them, they will not hurt us. If we do not want to get out of prison, it does not matter though we are locked in. And so it is not external calamities, but the resistance of the will to these, that makes the disturbances of life. Submission is peace, and when a man with Christ in his heart can say what Christ said, 'Not My will, but Thine be done,' Oh! then, some faint beginnings, at least, of tranquillity come to the most agitated and buffeted; and even in the depths of our sorrow we may have a deeper depth of calm. If we have yielded ourselves to the Father's will, through that dear Son who has set the example and communicates the power of filial obedience, then all winds blow us to our haven, and all 'things work together for good,' and nothing 'that is at enmity with joy' can shake our settled peace. Storms may break upon the rocky shore of our islanded lives, but deep in the centre there will be a secluded, inland dell 'which heareth not the loud winds when they call,' and where no tempest can ever reach. Peace may be ours in the midst of warfare and of storms, for Christ with us reconciles us to God, harmonises us with ourselves, brings us into amity with men, and makes the world all good.

II. So, secondly, note here the world's gift, which is an illusion.

'Not as the world giveth, give I unto you.' Our Lord contrasts, as it seems to me, primarily the manner of the world's bestowment, and then passes insensibly into a contrast between the character of the world's gifts and His own. That phrase 'the world' may have a double sense. It may mean either mankind in general or the whole external and material frame of things. I think we may use both significations in elucidating the words before us.

Regarding it in the former of them, the thought is suggested-Christ gives; men can only wish. ‘Peace be unto you’ comes from many a lip, and is addressed to many an ear, unfulfilled. Christ says ‘peace,’ and His word is a conveyance. How little we can do for one another’s tranquillity, how soon we come to the limits of human love and human help! How awful and impassable is the isolation in which each human soul lives! After all love and fellowship we dwell alone on our little island in the deep, separated by ‘the salt, unplumbed, estranging sea,’ and we can do little more than hoist signals of goodwill, and now and then for a moment stretch our hands across the ‘echoing straits between.’ But it is little after all that husband or wife can do for one another’s central peace, little that the dearest friend can give. We have to depend upon ourselves and upon Christ for peace. That which the world wishes Christ gives.

And then, if we take the other signification of the ‘world,’ and the other application of the whole promise, we may say-Outward things can give a man no real peace. The world is for excitement; Christ alone has the secret of tranquillity. It is as if to a man in a fever a physician should come and say: ‘I cannot give you anything to soothe you; here is a glass of brandy for you.’ That would not help the fever, would it? The world comes to us and says: ‘I cannot give you rest: here is a sharp excitement for you, more highly spiced and titillating for your tongue than the last one, which has turned flat and stale.’ That is about the best that it can do.

Oh! what a confession of unrest are the rush and recklessness, the fever and the fret of our modern life with its ever renewed and ever disappointed quest after good! You go about our streets and look men in the face, and you see how all manner of hungry desires and eager wishes have imprinted themselves there. And now and then-how seldom!-you come across a face out of which beams a deep and settled peace. How many of you are there who dare not be quiet because then you are most troubled? How many of you are there who dare not reflect because then you are wretched? How many of you are uncomfortable when alone, either because you are utterly vacuous, or because then you are surrounded by the ghosts of ugly thoughts that murder sleep and stuff every pillow with thorns? The world will bring you excitement; Christ, and Christ alone will bring you rest.

The peace that earth gives is a poor affair at best. It is shallow; a very thin plating over a depth of restlessness, like some skin of turf on a volcano, where a foot below the surface sulphurous fumes roll, and hellish turbulence seethes. That is the kind of rest that the world brings.

Oh! dear friends, there is nothing in this world that will fill and satisfy your hearts except only Jesus Christ. The world is for excitement; and Christ is the only real Giver of real peace.

III. Lastly, note the duty of the recipients of that peace of Christ's: 'Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.'

The words that introduced this great discourse return again at its close, somewhat enlarged and with a deepened soothing and tenderness. There are two things referred to as the source of restlessness, troubled agitation or disturbance of heart; and that mainly, I suppose, because of terror in the outlook towards a dim and unknown future. The disciples are warned to fight against these if they would keep the gift of peace.

That is to say, casting the exhortation into a more general expression, Christ's gift of peace does not dispense with the necessity for our own effort after tranquillity. There is much in the outer world that will disturb us to the very end, and there is much within ourselves that will surge up and seek to shake our repose and break our peace; and we have to coerce and keep down the temptations to anxiety, the temptations to undue agitation of desire, the temptations to tumults of sorrow, the temptations to cowardly fears of the unknown future. All these will continue, even though we have Christ's peace in our hearts, and it is for us to see to it that we treasure the peace, 'and in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let our requests be made known unto God,' that nothing may break the calm which we possess.

So, then, another thought arises from this final exhortation, and that is, that it is useless to tell a man, 'Do not be troubled, and do not be afraid,' unless he first has Christ's peace as his. Is that peace yours, my brother, because Jesus Christ is yours? If so, then there is no reason for your being troubled or dreading any future. If it is not, you are mad not to be troubled, and you are insane if you are not afraid. The word for you is, 'Be troubled, ye careless ones,' for there is reason for it, and be afraid of that which is certainly coming. The one thing that gives security and makes it possible to possess a calm heart is the possession of Jesus Christ by faith. Without Him it is a waste of breath to say to people, 'Do not be frightened,' and it is wicked counsel to say to men, 'Be at ease.' They ought to be terrified, and they ought to be troubled, and they will be some day, whether they think so or not.

But then the last thought from this exhortation is-and now I speak to Christian people-your imperfect possession of this peace is all your own fault. Why, there are hundreds of professing Christian people who have some kind of faint, rudimentary faith, and there are many of them, I dare say, listening to me now, who have no assured possession of any of those elements, of which I have been speaking, as the constituent parts of Christ's peace. You are not sure that you are right with God. You do not know what it is to possess satisfied desires. You do know what it is to have conflicting inclinations and impulses; you have envy and malice and hostility against men; and the world's storms and disasters do strike and disturb you. Why? Because you have not a firm grasp of Jesus Christ. 'I have set the Lord always at my right hand, therefore I shall not be be moved'; there is the secret. Keep near Him, my brother; and then all things are fair, and your heart is at peace.

I remember once standing by the side of a little Highland loch on a calm autumn day, when all the winds were still, and every birch-tree stood unmoved, and every twig was reflected on the steadfast mirror, into the depths of which Heaven's own blue seemed to have found its way. That is what our hearts may be, if we let Christ put His guarding hand round them to keep the storms off, and have Him within us for our rest. But the man who does not trust Jesus 'is like the troubled sea which cannot rest,' but goes moaning round half the world, homeless and hungry, rolling and heaving, monotonous and yet changeful, salt and barren-the true emblem of every soul that has not listened to the merciful call, 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'

81)John 14:28-29

JOY AND FAITH, THE FRUITS OF CHRIST'S DEPARTURE

Joh. 14:28 - Joh. 14:29.

Our Lord here casts a glance backward on the course of His previous words, and gathers together the substance and purpose of these. He brings out the intention of His warnings and the true effect of the departure, concerning which He had given them notice, as being twofold. In the first verse of my text His words about that going away, and the going away itself, are represented as the source of joy, which is an advance on the peace that He had just previously been promising. In the second of our verses these two things-His words, and the facts which they revealed-are represented as being the very ground and nourishment of faith.

So, then, we have these two thoughts to look at now, the departed Lord, the fountain of joy to all who love Him; the departed Lord, the ground and food of faith.

I. The departure of the Lord is a fountain of joy to those who love Him.

In the first part of our text the going away of Jesus is contemplated in two aspects.

The first is that with which we have already become familiar in previous sermons on this chapter-viz., its bearing upon the disciples; and in that respect it is declared that Christ's going is Christ's coming.

But then we have a new aspect, one on which, in His sublime self-repression, He very seldom touches-viz., its bearing upon Himself; and in that aspect we are taught here to regard our Lord's going as ministering to His exaltation and joy, and therefore as being a source of joy to all His lovers.

So, then, we have these thoughts, Christ's going is Christ's coming, and Christ's going is Christ's exaltation, and for both reasons that departure ought to minister to His friends' gladness. Let us look at these three things for a little while.

First of all, there comes a renewed utterance of that great thought which runs through the whole chapter, that the departure of Jesus Christ is in reality the coming of Christ. The word 'again' is a supplement, and somewhat restricts and destroys the true flow of thought and meaning of the words. For if we read, as our Authorised Version does, 'I go away and come again unto you,' we are inevitably led to think of a coming, separated by a considerable distance of time from the departure, and for most of us that which is suggested is the final coming and return, in bodily form, of the Lord Jesus.

Now great and glorious as that hope is, it is too far away to be in itself a sufficient comfort to the mourning disciples, and too remote to be for us, if taken alone, a sufficient ground of joy and of rest. But if you strike out the intrusive word 'again,' and read the sentence as being what it is, a description of one continuous process, of which the parts are so closely connected as to be all but contemporaneous, you get the true idea. 'I go away, and I come to you.' There is no gap, the thing runs on without a break. There is no moment of absolute absence; there are not two motions, one from us and the other back again towards us, but all is one. The 'going' is the 'coming'; the solemn series of events which began on Calvary, and ended on Olivet, to the eye of sense were successive stages in the departure of Jesus Christ. But looked at with a deeper understanding of their true meaning, they are successive stages in His approach towards us. His death, His resurrection, His ascension, were not steps in the cessation of His presence, but they were simply steps in the transition from a lower to a higher kind of that presence. He changed the limitations and externalities of a mere bodily, local nearness for the realities of a spiritual presence. To the eye of sense, the 'going away' was the reality, and the 'coming' a metaphor. To the eye enlightened to see things as they are, the dropping away of the visible corporeal was but the inauguration of the higher and the more real. And we need to reverse our notions of what is real and what is figurative in Christ's presence, and to feel that that form of His presence which we may all have to-day is far more real than the form which ceased when the Shekinah cloud 'received Him out of their sight,' before we can penetrate to the depth of His words, or grasp the whole fullness of blessing and of consolation which lie in them here. In a very deep and real sense, ‘He therefore departed from us for a season that we might receive Him for ever.’

The real presence of Jesus Christ to-day, and through the long ages with every waiting heart, is the very keynote to the solemn music of these chapters. And again I press upon you, and upon myself, the question, Do we believe it? Do we live in the faith of it? Does it fill the same place in the perspective of our Christian creed as it does in the revelation of the Scripture, or have we refined it and watered it down, until it comes to be little more than merely the continuous influence of the record of His past, just as any great and sovereign spirit that has influenced mankind may still ‘rule the nations from his urn’? Or do we take Him at His word, and believe that He meant what He said, in something far other than a violent figure for the continuance of His influence and of the inspiration drawn from Him, ‘Lo! I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world’? ‘Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend up into heaven? that is, to bring Christ down from above, the Word,’ the Incarnate Word, ‘is nigh thee, in thy heart,’ if thou lovest and trustest Him.

Then, again, the other aspect of our Lord’s coming, which is emphasised here, is that in which it is regarded as affecting Himself. Christ’s going is Christ’s exaltation.

Now observe that, in the first clause of our verse, there is simply specified the fact of departure, without any reference to the ‘whither’; because all that was wanted was to contrast the going and the coming. But, in the second clause, in which the emphasis rests not so much upon the fact of departure as upon the goal to which He went, we read: ‘I go to the Father.’ Hitherto we have been contemplating Christ’s departure simply in its bearing upon us, but here, with exquisite tenderness, He unveils another aspect of it, and that in order that He may change His disciples’ sadness into joy; and says to them, ‘If ye were not so absorbed in yourselves, you would have a thought to spare about Me, and you would feel that you should be glad because I am about to be exalted.’

Very, very seldom does He open such a glimpse into His heart, and it is all the more tender and impressive when He does. What a hint of the continual self-sacrifice of the human life of Jesus Christ lies in this thought, that He bids His disciples rejoice with Him, because the time is getting nearer its end, and He goes back to the Father! And what shall we say of the nature of Him to whom it was martyrdom to live, and a supreme instance of self-sacrificing humiliation to be ‘found in fashion as a man’?

He tells His followers here that a reason for their joy in His departure is to be found in this fact, that He goes to the Father, who is greater than Himself.

Now mark, with regard to that remarkable utterance, that the whole course of thought in the context requires, as it seems to me, that we should suppose that for Christ to ‘go to the Father’ was to share in the Father’s greatness. Why else should the disciples be bidden to rejoice in it? or why should He say anything at all about the greatness of the Father? If so, then this follows, that the greatness to which He here alludes is such as He enters by His ascension. Or, in other words, that the inferiority, of whatever nature it may be, to which He here alludes, falls away when He passes hence.

Now these words are often quoted triumphantly, as if they were dead against what I venture to call the orthodox and Scriptural doctrine of the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it may be worth while to remark that that doctrine accepts this saying as fully as it does Christ’s other word, ‘I and My Father are one,’ I venture to think that it is the only construction of Scripture phraseology which does full justice to all the elements. But be that as it may, I wish to remind you that the creed which confesses the unity of the Godhead and the divinity of Jesus Christ is not to be overthrown by pelting this verse at it; for this verse is part of that creed, which as fully declares that the Father is greater than the Son, as it declares that the Son is One with the Father. You may be satisfied with it or no, but as a matter of simple honesty it must be recognised that the creed of the Catholic Church does combine both the elements of these representations.

Now we can only speak in this matter as Scripture guides us. The depths of Deity are far too deep to be sounded by our plummets, and he is a bold man who ventures to say that he knows what is impossible in reference to the divine nature. He needs to have gone all round God, and down to the depths, and up to the heights of a bottomless and summitless infinitude, before he has a right to say that. But let me remind you that we can dimly see that the very names 'Father' and 'Son' do imply some sort of subordination, but that that subordination, inasmuch as it is in the timeless and inward relations of divinity, must be supposed to exist after the ascension, as it existed before the incarnation; and, therefore, any such mysterious difference is not that which is referred to here. What is referred to is what dropped away from the Man Jesus Christ, when He ascended up on high. As Luther has it, in his strong, simple way, in one of his sermons, 'Here He was a poor, sad, suffering Christ'; and that garb of lowliness falls from Him, like the mantle that fell from the prophet as he went up in the chariot of fire, when He passes behind the brightness of the Shekinah cloud that hides Him from our sight. That in which the Father was greater than He, in so far as our present purpose is concerned, was that which He left behind when He ascended, even the pain, the suffering, the sorrow, the restrictions, the humiliation, that made so much of the burden of His life. Therefore we, as His followers, have to rejoice in an ascended Christ, beneath whose feet are foes, and far away from whose human personality are all the ills that flesh is heir to. 'If ye loved Me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father; for My Father is greater than I.'

So then the third thought, in this first part of our subject, is that on both these grounds Christ's ascension and departure are a source of joy. The two aspects of His departure, as affecting Him and as affecting us, are inseparably welded together. There can be no presence with us, man by man, through all the ages, and in every land, unless He, whose presence it is, participates in the absolute glory of divinity. For to be with you and me and all our suffering brethren, through the centuries and over the world, involves something more than belongs to mere humanity. Therefore, the two sources of gladness are confluent-Christ's ascension as affecting us is inseparably woven in with Christ's ascension as affecting Himself.

Love will delight to dwell upon that thought of its exalted Lover. We may fairly apply the simplicity of human relationships and affections to the elucidation of what ought to be our affection to Him, our Lord. And surely if our dearest one were far away from us, in some lofty position, our hearts and our thoughts would ever be going thither, and we should live more there than here, where we are 'cribbed, cabined, and confined.' And if we love Jesus Christ with any depth of earnestness and fervour of affection, there will be no thought more sweet to us, and none which will more naturally flow into our hearts, whenever they are for a moment at leisure, than this, the thought of Him, our Brother and Forerunner, who has ascended up on high; and in the midst of the glory of the throne bears us in His heart, and uses His glory for our blessing. Love will spring to where the beloved is; and if we be Christians in any deep and real sense, our hearts will have risen with Christ, and we shall be sitting with Him at the right hand of God. My brother, measure your Christianity, and the reality of your love to Jesus Christ, by this-is it to you natural, and a joy, to turn to Him, and ever to make present to your mind the glories in which He loves and lives, and intercedes, and reigns, for you? 'If ye love Me, ye will rejoice, because I go unto the Father.'

II. And now I can deal with the second verse of our text very briefly. For our purpose it is less important than the former one. In it we find our Lord setting forth, secondly, His departure and His announcement of His departure as the ground and food of faith.

He knew what a crash was coming, and with exquisite tenderness, gentleness, knowledge of their necessities, and suppression of all His own feelings and emotions, He gave Himself to prepare the disciples for the storm, that, forewarned, they might be forearmed, and that when it did burst upon them, it might not take them by surprise.

So He does still, about a great many other things, and tells us beforehand of what is sure to come to us, that when we are caught in the midst of the tempest we may not bate one jot of heart or hope.

Why should I complain Of want or distress, Temptation or pain? He told me no less.'

And when my sorrows come to me, I may say about them what He says about His departure-He has told us before, that when it comes we may believe.

But note how, in these final words of my text, Christ avows that the great aim of His utterances and of His departure is to evoke our faith. And what does He mean by faith? He means, first of all, a grasp of the historic facts-His death, His resurrection, His ascension. He means, next, the understanding of these as He Himself has explained them-a death of sacrifice, a resurrection of victory over death and the grave, and an ascension to rule and guide His Church and the world, and to send His divine Spirit into men's hearts if they will receive it. And He means, therefore, as the essence of the faith that He would produce in all our hearts-a reliance upon Himself as thus revealed, Sacrifice by His death, Victor by His resurrection, King and interceding Priest by His ascension-a reliance upon Himself as absolute as the facts are sure, as unfaltering as is His eternal sameness. The faith that grasps the Christ, dead, risen, ascended, as its all in all, for time and for eternity, is the faith which by all His work, and by all His words about His work, He desires to kindle in our hearts. Has He kindled it in yours?

Then there is a second thought-viz., that these facts, as interpreted by Himself, are the ground and the nourishment of our faith. How differently they looked when seen from the further side and when seen from the hither side! Anticipated and dimly anticipated, they were all doleful and full of dismay; remembered and looked back upon, they were radiant and bright. The disciples felt, with shrinking hearts and fainting spirits, that their whole reliance upon Jesus Christ was on the point of being shattered, and that everything was going when He died. ‘We trusted,’ said two of them, with such a sad use of the past tense, ‘we trusted that this had been He which should have redeemed Israel. But we do not trust it any more, nor do we expect Him to be Israel’s Redeemer now.’ But after the facts were all unveiled, there came back the memory of His words, and they said to one another, ‘Did He not tell us that it was all to be so? How blind we were not to understand Him!’

And so ‘the Cross, the grave, the skies,’ are the foundations of our faith; and they who see Him dying, rising, ascended, henceforth will find it impossible to doubt. Feed your faith upon these great facts, and take Christ’s own explanation of them, and your faith will be strong.

Again, we learn here that faith is the condition of the true presence of our absent Lord. Faith is that on our side which corresponds to His spiritual coming to us. Whosoever trusts Him possesses Him, and He is with and in every soul that, loving Him, relies upon Him, in a closeness so close and a presence so real that heaven itself does not bring the spirit of the believer and the Spirit of the Lord nearer one another, though it takes away the bodily film that sometimes seems to part their lives.

We, too, may and should be glad when we lift our eyes to that Throne where our Brother reigns. We too, may be glad that He is there, because His being there is the reason why He can be here; and we, too, may feed our faith upon Him, and so bring Him in very deed to dwell in our hearts. If we would have Christ within us, let us trust Him dying, rising, living in the heavens; and then we shall learn how, by all three apparent departures, He is drawing the closer to the souls that love and trust.

82)John 14:30-31

John

CHRIST FORESEEING HIS PASSION

Joh. 14:30 - Joh. 14:31.

The summons to departure which closes these verses shows that we have now reached the end of that sacred hour in the upper room. In obedience to the summons, we have to fancy the little group leaving its safe shelter, as sailors might put out from behind a breakwater into a stormy sea. They pass from its seclusion and peace into the joyous stir of the crowded streets, filled with feast-keeping multitudes, on whom the full paschal moon looked down, pure and calming. Somewhere between the upper chamber and the crossing of the brook Kedron, the divine words of the following chapters were spoken, but this discourse, closely connected as it is with them, reaches its fitting close in these penetrating, solemn words of outlook into the near future, so calm, so weighty, so resolute, so almost triumphant, with which Christ seeks finally to impart to His timorous friends some of His own peace and assurance of victory.

They lead us into a region seldom opened to our view, and never to be looked upon but with reverent awe. For they tell us what Christ thought about His sufferings, and how He felt as He went down to that cold, black river, in which He was to be baptized. ‘Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place where thou standest is holy ground.’ So, reverently listening to the words, sacred because of the Speaker, the theme, and the circumstances, we note in them these things: His calm anticipation of the assailant, His unveiling of the secret and motive of His apparent defeat, and His resolute advance to the conflict. Let us look at these three points.

I. First, we have here our Lord’s calm anticipation of the assailant.

‘Hereafter I will not talk much with you: for the Prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me.’ One of the other Gospels tells us, in finishing its account of our Lord’s temptation in the wilderness, that when Satan had ended all these temptations ‘he departed from Him for a season.’

And now we have the second and the intenser form of that assault. The first was addressed to desires, and sought to stimulate ambition and ostentation and the animal appetites, and so, through the cravings of human nature, to shake the Master's fixed faith. The second used sharper and more fatal weapons, and appealed, not to desire of enjoyment, or ease, or good, but to the natural human shrinking from pain and suffering and shame and death. He that was impervious on the side of natural necessities and more subtle spiritual desires might yet be reached through terror. And so the second form of the assault, instead of tempting the traveller by the sunshine to cast aside his cloak, tempted him by storm and tempest to fling it aside; and the one, as the other, was doomed to failure.

Note how the Master, with that clear eye which saw to the depths as well as the heights, and before which men and things were but, as it were, transparent media through which unseen spiritual powers wrought, just as He discerns the Father's will as supreme and sovereign, sees here-beneath Judas's treachery, and Pharisees' and priests' envy, and the people's stolid indifference, and the Roman soldiers' impartial scorn-the workings of a personal source and centre of all. The 'Prince of this world,' who rules men and things when they are severed from God, 'cometh.' Christ's sensitive nature apprehends the approach of the evil thing, as some organisations can tell when a thunderstorm is about to burst. His divine Omniscience, working as it did, even within the limits of humanity, knows not only when the storm is about to burst upon Him, but knows who it is that has raised the tempest. And so He says, 'The Prince of this world cometh.'

But note, as yet more important, that tremendous and unique consciousness of absolute invulnerability against the assaults. 'He hath nothing in Me.' He is 'the Prince of the world,' but His dominion stops outside My breast. He has no rule or authority there. His writs do not run, nor is His dominion recognised, within that sacred realm.

Was there ever a man who could say that? Are there any of us, the purest and the noblest, who, standing single-handed in front of the antagonistic power of evil, and believing it to be consolidated and consecrated in a person, dare to profess that there is not a thing in us on which he can lay his black claw and say-'That is mine?' Is there nothing inflammable within us which the ‘fiery darts of the wicked’ can kindle? Are there any of us who bar our doors so tightly as that we can say that none of his seductions will find their way therein, and that nothing there will respond to them? Christ sets Himself here against the whole embattled and embodied power of evil, and puts Himself in contrast to the universal human experience, when He calmly declares ‘He hath nothing in Me.’ It is an assertion of His absolute freedom from sinfulness, and it involves, as I take it, the other assertion-that as He is free from sin, so He is not subject to that consequence of sin, which is death, as we know it. Another part of Scripture speaks to us in strange language, which yet has in it a deep truth, of ‘him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.’ Men fall under the rightful dominion of the king of evil when they sin, and part of the proof of his dominion is the fact of physical death, with its present accompaniments. Thus, in His calm anticipation, Jesus stands waiting for the enemy’s charge, knowing that all its forces will be broken against the serried ranks of His immaculate purity, and that He will come from the dreadful close unwounded all, and triumphant for evermore.

But do not let us suppose that because Christ, in His anticipation of suffering and death, knew Himself invulnerable, with not even a spot on His heel into which the arrow could go, therefore the conflict was an unreal or shadowy one. It was a true fight, and it was a real struggle that He was anticipating, thus calmly in these solemn words, as knowing Himself the Victor ere He entered on the dreadful field.

II. So note, secondly, in these words, our Lord’s unveiling of the motive and aim of His apparent defeat.

‘But that the world might know that I love the Father, and, as the Father gave Me commandment, even so I do.’ There may be some uncertainty about the exact grammatical relation of these clauses to one another, with which I need not trouble you, because it does not affect their substantial meaning. However we solve the mere grammatical questions, the fundamental significance of the whole remains unaffected, and it is this: that Christ’s sufferings and death were, in one aspect, for the purpose that the world might know His love to the Father, and, in another aspect, were obedience to the Father’s commandment. And if we consider these two aspects, I think we shall get some thoughts worth considering as to the way in which the Master Himself looks upon these sufferings and that death.

The first point I note in this division of my discourse is that Christ would have us regard His sufferings and His death as His own act. Note that remarkable phrase, ‘thus I do.’ A strange word to be used in such a connection, but full of profound meaning. We speak, and rightly, of the solemn events of these coming days as the passion of our Lord, but they were His action quite as much as His passion. He was no mere passive sufferer. In them all He acted, or, as He says here, we may look upon them all, not as things inflicted upon Him from without by any power, however it might seem to have the absolute control of His fate, but as things which He did Himself.

There is one Man who died, not of physical necessity, but because of free choice. There is one Man who chose to be born, and who chose to die; who, in His choosing to be born, chose humiliation, and who, in choosing to die, chose yet deeper humiliation. This sacrifice was a voluntary sacrifice, or, to speak more accurately, He was both Priest and Sacrifice, when ‘through the Eternal Spirit He offered Himself without spot unto God.’ The living Christ is the Lord of Life, and lives because He will; the dying Christ is the Lord of Death, and dies because He chose. He would have us learn that all His bitter sufferings, inflicted from without as they were, and traceable to a deeper source than merely human antagonism, were also self-inflicted and self-chosen, and further traceable to the Father’s will in harmony with His own. ‘Thus I do,’ and thus He did when He died.

Then, further, our Lord would have us regard these sufferings and that death as being His crowning act of obedience to His Father’s will. That is in accordance with the whole tone of His self-consciousness, especially as set before us in this precious Gospel of John, which traces up everything to the submission of the divine Son to the divine Father, a submission which is no mere external act, but results from, and is the expression of, the absolute unity of will and the perfect oneness of mutual love. And so, because He loved the Father, therefore He came to do the Father’s will, and the crowning act of His obedience was this, that He was ‘obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.’ It was a voluntary sacrifice, but that voluntariness was not self-will. It was a sacrifice in obedience to the Father's will, but that obedience was not reluctant. Christ was the embodiment of the divine purpose, formed before the ages and realised in time, when He bowed His head and yielded up the ghost. The highest proof of His filial obedience was the Cross. And to it He points us, if we would know what it is to love and obey the Father.

Now it is to be noticed that this motive of our Lord's death is not the usual one given in Scripture. And I can suppose the question being put, 'Why did not Jesus Christ say, in that supreme moment, that He went to the Cross because of His love to us rather than because of His love to the Father?' But I think the answer is not far to seek. There are several satisfactory ones which may be given. One is that this making prominent of His love to God rather than to us, as the motive for His death, is in accordance with that comparative reticence on the part of Jesus as to the atoning aspect of His death, which I have had frequent occasion to point out, and which does not carry in it the implication that that doctrine was a new thing in the Christian preaching after Pentecost. Another reason may be drawn from the whole strain and tone of this chapter, which, as I have already said, traces up everything to the loving relations of obedience between the Father and Son. And yet another reason may be given in that the very statement of Christ's love to God, and loving obedience to the Father's commandment as the motive of His death, includes in it necessarily the other thing-love to us. For what was the Father's commandment which Christ with all His heart accepted, and with His glad will obeyed unto death? It was that the Son should come as the Ransom for the world. The Son of man was sent, 'not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a Ransom for many.' Or, as He Himself said, in one of His earliest discourses, 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish.' And for what He gave that Son is clearly stated in the context itself of that passage-'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.'

To speak of Christ's acceptance of the Father's commandment, then, is but another way of saying that Christ, in all the fullness of His self-surrender, entered into and took as His own the great, eternal divine purpose, that the world should be redeemed by His death upon the Cross. The heavenward side of His love to man is His love to the Father, God.

Now there is another aspect still in which our Lord would here have us regard His sufferings and death, and that is that they are of worldwide significance.

Think for a moment of the obscurity of the speaker, a Jewish peasant in an upper room, with a handful of poor men around Him, all of them ready to forsake Him, within a few hours of His ignominious death; and yet He says, ‘I am about to die, that the echo of it may reverberate through the whole world.’ He puts Himself forth as of worldwide significance, and His death as adapted to move mankind, and as one day to be known all over the world. There is nothing in history to approach to the gigantic arrogance of Jesus Christ, and it is only explicable on the ground of His divinity.

‘This I do that the world may know.’ And what did it matter to the world? Why should it be of any importance that the world should know? For one plain reason, because true knowledge of the true nature and motive of that death breaks the dominion of the Prince of this world, and sets men free from his tyranny. Emancipation, hope, victory, purity, the passing from the tyranny of the darkness into the blessed kingdom of the light-all depend on the world’s knowing that Christ’s death was His own voluntary act of submission to the infinite love and will of the Father, which will and love He made His own, and therefore died, the sacrifice for the world’s sin.

The enemy was approaching. He was to be hoist with his own petard. ‘He digged a pit; he digged it deep,’ and into the pit which he had digged he himself fell. ‘Oh, death! I will be thy plague’ by entering into thy realm. ‘Oh, grave! I will be thy destruction’ by dwelling for a moment within thy dark portals and rending them irreparably as I pass from them. The Prince of this world was defeated when he seemed to triumph, and Christ’s mighty words came true: ‘Now shall the Prince of this world be cast out.’ He would have the world know-with the knowledge which is of the heart as well as the head, which is life as well as understanding, which is possession and appropriation-the mystery, the meaning, the motive of His death, because the world thereby ceases to be a world, and becomes the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

III. Lastly, notice here the resolute advance to the conflict.

‘Arise, let us go hence’-a word of swift alacrity. Evidently He rose to His feet whilst they lay round the table. He bids them rise with Him and follow Him on the path.

But there is more in the words than the mere close of a conversation, and a summons to change of place. They indicate a kind of divine impatience to be in the fight, and to have it over. The same emotion is plainly revealed in the whole of the latter days of our Lord’s life. You remember how His disciples followed amazed, as He strode up the road from Jericho, hastening to His Cross. You remember His deliberate purpose to draw upon Himself public notice during that dangerous and explosive week before the Passover, as shown in the publicity of His entry into Jerusalem, His sharp rebukes of the rulers in the Temple, and in every other incident of those days. You remember His words to the betrayer: ‘That thou doest, do quickly.’ These latter hours of the Lord were strongly marked by the emotion to which He gave utterance in His earlier words: ‘I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!’ Perhaps that feeling indicated His human shrinking; for we all know how we sometimes are glad to precipitate an unwelcome thing, and how the more we dread it, the more we are anxious to get it over. But there is far more than that in it. There is the resolved determination to carry out the Father’s purpose for the world’s salvation, which was His own purpose, and was none the less His though He knew all the suffering which it involved.

Let us adore the steadfast will, which never faltered, though the natural human weakness was there too, and which, as impelled by some strong spring, kept persistently pressing towards the Cross that on it He might die, the world’s Redeemer.

And do not let us forget that He summoned His lovers and disciples to follow Him on the road. ‘Let us go hence.’ It is ours to take up our cross daily and follow the Master, to do with persistent resolve our duty, whether it be welcome or unwelcome, and to see to it that we plant no faltering and reluctant foot in our Master’s footsteps. For us, too, if we have learned to flee to the Cross for our redemption and salvation, the resolve of our Redeemer and the very passion of the Saviour itself become the pattern and law of our lives. We, too, have to cast ourselves into the fight, and to take up our cross, ‘that the world may know that we love the Father, and as the Father hath given us commandment.’ And if we so live, then our death, too, in some humble measure, may be like His-the crowning act of obedience to the Father’s will; in which we are neither passively nor resistingly dragged under by a force that we cannot effectually resist, but in which we go down willingly into the dark valley where death ‘makes our sacrifice complete.’

83)John 15:1-4

John

CHRIST’S FRIENDS

THE TRUE VINE

Joh. 15:1 - Joh. 15:4.

WHAT suggested this lovely parable of the vine and the branches is equally unimportant and undiscoverable. Many guesses have been made, and, no doubt, as was the case with almost all our Lord’s parables, some external object gave occasion for it. It is a significant token of our Lord’s calm collectedness, even at that supreme and heart-shaking moment, that He should have been at leisure to observe, and to use for His purposes of teaching, something that was present at the instant. The deep and solemn lessons which He draws, perhaps from some vine by the wayside, are the richest and sweetest clusters that the vine has ever grown. The great truth in this chapter, applied in manifold directions, and viewed in many aspects, is that of the living union between Christ and those who believe on Him, and the parable of the vine and the branches affords the foundation for all which follows.

We take the first half of that parable now. It is somewhat difficult to trace the course of thought in it, but there seems to be, first of all, the similitude set forth, without explanation or interpretation, in its most general terms, and then various aspects in which its applications to Christian duty are taken up and reiterated, I simply follow the words which I have read for my text.

I. We have then, first, the Vine in the vital unity of all its parts.

‘I am the True Vine,’ of which the material one to which He perhaps points, is but a shadow and an emblem. The reality lies in Him. We shall best understand the deep significance and beauty of this thought if we recur in imagination to some of those great vines which we sometimes see in royal conservatories, where for hundred of yards the pliant branches stretch along the espaliers, and yet one life pervades the whole, from the root, through the crooked stem, right away to the last leaf at the top of the farthest branch, and reddens and mellows every cluster, ‘So,’ says Christ, ‘between Me and the totality of them that hold by Me in faith there is one life, passing ever from root through branches, and ever bearing fruit.’

Let me remind you that this great thought of the unity of life between Jesus Christ and all that believe upon Him is the familiar teaching of Scripture, and is set forth by other emblems besides that of the vine, the queen of the vegetable world; for we have it in the metaphor of the body and its members, where not only are the many members declared to be parts of one body, but the name of the collective body, made up of many members, is Christ. ‘So also is’-not as we might expect, ‘the Church,’ but-’Christ,’ the whole bearing the name of Him who is the Source of life to every part. Personality remains, individuality remains: I am I, and He is He, and thou art thou; but across the awful gulf of individual consciousness which parts us from one another, Jesus Christ assumes the Divine prerogative of passing and joining Himself to each of us, if we love Him and trust Him, in a union so close, and with a communication of life so real, that every other union which we know is but a faint and far-off adumbration of it. A oneness of life from root to branch, which is the sole cause of fruitfulness and growth, is taught us here.

And then let me remind you that that living unity between Jesus Christ and all who love Him is a oneness which necessarily results in oneness of relation to God and men, in oneness of character, and in oneness of destiny. In relation to God, He is the Son, and we in Him receive the standing of sons. He has access ever into the Father’s presence, and we through Him and in Him have access with confidence and are accepted in the Beloved. In relation to men, since He is Light, we, touched with His light, are also, in our measure and degree, the lights of the world; and in the proportion in which we receive into our souls, by patient abiding in Jesus Christ, the very power of His Spirit, we, too, become God’s anointed, subordinately but truly His messiahs, for He Himself says: ‘As the Father hath sent Me, even so I send you.’

In regard to character, the living union between Christ and His members results in a similarity if not identity of character, and with His righteousness we are clothed, and by that righteousness we are justified, and by that righteousness we are sanctified. The oneness between Christ and His children is the ground at once of their forgiveness and acceptance, and of all virtue and nobleness of life and conduct that can ever be theirs.

And, in like manner, we can look forward and be sure that we are so closely joined with Him, if we love Him and trust Him, that it is impossible but that where He is there shall also His servants be; and that what He is that shall also His servants be. For the oneness of life, by which we are delivered from the bondage of corruption and the law of sin and death here, will never halt nor cease until it brings us into the unity of His glory, ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.’ And as He sits on the Father’s throne, His children must needs sit with Him, on His throne.

Therefore the name of the collective whole, of which the individual Christian is part, is Christ. And as in the great Old Testament prophecy of the Servant of the Lord, the figure that rises before Isaiah’s vision fluctuates between that which is clearly the collective Israel and that which is, as clearly, the personal Messiah; so the ‘Christ’ is not only the individual Redeemer who bears the body of the flesh literally here upon earth, but the whole of that redeemed Church, of which it is said, ‘It is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.’

II. Now note, secondly, the Husbandman, and the dressing of the vine.

The one tool that a vinedresser needs is a knife. The chief secret of culture is merciless pruning. And so says my text, ‘The Father is the Husbandman.’ Our Lord assumes that office in other of His parables. But here the exigencies of the parabolic form require that the office of Cultivator should be assigned only to the Father; although we are not to forget that the Father, in that office, works through and in His Son.

But we should note that the one kind of husbandry spoken of here is pruning-not manuring, not digging, but simply the hacking away of all that is rank and all that is dead.

Were you ever in a greenhouse or in a vineyard at the season of cutting back the vines? What flagitious waste it would seem to an ignorant person to see scattered on the floor the bright green leaves and the incipient clusters, and to look up at the bare stem, bleeding at a hundred points from the sharp steel. Yes! But there was not a random stroke in it all, and there was nothing cut away which it was not loss to keep and gain to lose; and it was all done artistically, scientifically, for a set purpose-that the plant might bring forth more fruit.

Thus, says Christ, the main thing that is needed-not, indeed, to improve the life in the branches, but to improve the branches in which the life is-is excision. There are two forms of it given here-absolutely dead wood has to be cut out; wood that has life in it, but which has also rank shoots, that do not come from the all-pervading and hallowed life, has to be pruned back and deprived of its shoots.

It seems to me that the very language of the metaphor before us requires us to interpret the fruitless branches as meaning all those who have a mere superficial, external adherence to the True Vine. For, according to the whole teaching of the parable, if there be any real union, there will be some life, and if there be any life, there will be some fruit, and, therefore, the branch that has no fruit has no life, because it has no real union. And so the application, as I take it, is necessarily to those professing Christians, nominal adherents to Christianity or to Christ’s Church, people that come to church and chapel, and if you ask them to put down in the census paper what they are, will say that they are Christians-Churchmen or Dissenters, as the case may be-but who have no real hold upon Jesus Christ, and no real reception of anything from Him; and the ‘taking away’ is simply that, somehow or other, God makes visible, what is a fact, that they do not belong to Him with whom they have this nominal connection.

The longer Christianity continues in any country, the more does the Church get weighted and lowered in its temperature by the aggregation round about it of people of that sort. And one sometimes longs and prays for a storm to come, of some sort or other, to blow the dead wood out of the tree, and to get rid of all this oppressive and stifling weight of sham Christians that has come round every one of our churches. ‘His fan is in His hand, and He will throughly purge His floor,’ and every man that has any reality of Christian life in him should pray that this pruning and cutting out of the dead wood may be done, and that He would ‘come as a refiner’s fire and purify’ His priesthood.

Then there is the other side, the pruning of the fruitful branches. We all, in our Christian life, carry with us the two natures-our own poor miserable selves, and the better life of Jesus Christ within us. The one flourishes at the expense of the other; and it is the Husbandman’s merciful, though painful work, to cut back unsparingly the rank shoots that come from self, in order that all the force of our lives may be flung into the growing of the cluster which is acceptable to Him.

So, dear friends, let us understand the meaning of all that comes to us. The knife is sharp and the tendrils bleed, and things that seem very beautiful and very precious are unsparingly shorn away, and we are left bare, and, as it seems to ourselves, impoverished. But Oh! it is all sent that we may fling our force into the production of fruit unto God. And no stroke will be a stroke too many or too deep if it helps us to that. Only let us take care that we do not let regrets for the vanished good harm us just as much as joy in the present good did, and let us rather, in humble submission of will to His merciful knife, say to Him, ‘Cut to the quick, Lord, if only thereby my fruit unto Thee may increase.’

III. Lastly, we have here the branches abiding in the Vine, and therefore fruitful.

Our Lord deals with the little group of His disciples as incipiently and imperfectly, but really, cleansed through ‘the word which He has spoken to them,’ and gives them His exhortation towards that conduct through which the cleansing and the union and the fruitfulness will all be secured. ‘Now ye are clean: abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except it abide in the vine, no more can ye except ye abide in Me.'

Union with Christ is the condition of all fruitfulness. There may be plenty of activity and yet barrenness. Works are not fruit. We can bring forth a great deal 'of ourselves,' and because it is of ourselves it is nought. Fruit is possible only on condition of union with Him. He is the productive source of it all.

There is the great glory and distinctive blessedness of the Gospel. Other teachers come to us and tell us how we ought to live, and give us laws, patterns and examples, reasons and motives for pure and noble lives. The Gospel comes and gives us life, if we will take it, and unfolds itself in us into all the virtues that we have to possess. What is the use of giving a man a copy if he cannot copy it? Morality comes and stands over the cripple, and says to him, 'Look here! This is how you ought to walk,' and he lies there, paralysed and crippled, after as before the exhibition of what graceful progression is. But Christianity comes and bends over him, and lays hold of his hand, and says, 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk,' and his feet and ankle bones receive strength, and 'he leaps, and walks, and praises God.' Christ gives more than commandments, patterns, motives; He gives the power to live soberly, righteously, and godly, and in Him alone is that power to be found.

Then note that our reception of that power depends upon our own efforts. 'Abide in Me and I in you.' Is that last clause a commandment as well as the first? How can His abiding in us be a duty incumbent upon us? But it is. And we might paraphrase the intention of this imperative in its two halves, by-Do you take care that you abide in Christ, and that Christ abides in you. The two ideas are but two sides of the one great sphere; they complement and do not contradict each other. We dwell in Him as the part does in the whole, as the branch does in the vine, recipient of its life and fruit-bearing energy. He dwells in us as the whole does in the part, as the vine dwells in the branch, communicating its energy to every part; or as the soul does in the body, being alive equally in every part, though it be sight in the eyeball, and hearing in the ear, and colour in the cheek, and strength in the hand, and swiftness in the foot.

‘Abide in Me and I in you.’ So we come down to very plain, practical exhortations. Dear brethren, suppress yourselves, and empty your lives of self, that the life of Christ may come in. A lock upon a canal, if it is empty, will have its gates pressed open by the water in the canal and will be filled. Empty the heart and Christ will come in. ‘Abide in Him’ by continual direction of thought, love, desire to Him; by continual and reiterated submission of the will to Him, as commanding and as appointing; by the honest reference to Him of daily life and all petty duties which otherwise distract us and draw us away from Him. Then, dwelling in Him we shall share in His life, and shall bring forth fruit to His praise.

Here is encouragement for us all. To all of us, sometimes, our lives seem barren and poor; and we feel as if we had brought forth no fruit to perfection. Let us get nearer to Him and He will see to the fruit. Some poor stranded sea-creature on the beach, vainly floundering in the pools, is at the point of death; but the great tide comes, leaping and rushing over the sands, and bears it away out into the middle deeps for renewed activity and joyous life. Let the flood of Christ’s life bear you on its bosom, and you will rejoice and expatiate therein.

Here is a lesson of solemn warning to professing Christians. The lofty mysticism and inward life in Jesus Christ all terminate at last in simple, practical obedience; and the fruit is the test of the life. ‘Depart from Me, I never knew you, ye that work iniquity.’

And here is a lesson of solemn appeal to us all. Our only opportunity of bearing any fruit worthy of our natures and of God’s purpose concerning us is by vital union with Jesus Christ. If we have not that, there may be plenty of activity and mountains of work in our lives, but there will be no fruit. Only that is fruit which pleases God and is conformed to His purpose concerning us, and all the rest of our busy doings is no more the fruit a man should bear than cankers are roses, or than oak-galls are acorns. They are but the work of a creeping grub, and diseased excrescences that suck into themselves the juices that should swell the fruit. Open your hearts to Christ and let His life and His Spirit come into you, and then you will have ‘your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.’

84)John 15:5-8

John

THE TRUE BRANCHES OF THE TRUE VINE

Joh. 15:5 - Joh. 15:8.

No wise teacher is ever afraid of repeating himself. The average mind requires the reiteration of truth before it can make that truth its own. One coat of paint is not enough, it soon rubs off. Especially is this true in regard to lofty spiritual and religious truth, remote from men's ordinary thinkings, and in some senses unwelcome to them. So our Lord, the great Teacher, never shrank from repeating His lessons when He saw that they were but partially apprehended. It was not grievous to Him to 'say the same things,' because for them it was safe. He broke the bread of life into small pieces, and fed them little and often.

So here, in the verses that we have to consider now, we have the repetition, and yet not the mere repetition, of the great parable of the vine, as teaching the union of Christians with Christ, and their consequent fruitfulness. He saw, no doubt, that the truth was but partially dawning upon His disciples' minds. Therefore He said it all over again, with deepened meaning, following it out into new applications, presenting further consequences, and, above all, giving it a more sharp and definite personal application.

Are we any swifter scholars than these first ones were? Have we absorbed into our own thinking this truth so thoroughly and constantly, and wrought it out in our lives so completely, that we do not need to be reminded of it any more? Shall we not be wise if we faithfully listen to His repeated teachings?

The verses which I have read give us four aspects of this great truth of union with Jesus Christ; or of its converse, separation from Him. There is, first, the fruitfulness of union; second, the withering and destruction of separation; third, the satisfaction of desire which comes from abiding in Christ; and, lastly, the great, noble issue of fruitfulness, in God's glory, and our own increasing discipleship. Now let me touch upon these briefly.

I. First, then, our Lord sets forth, with no mere repetition, the same broad idea which He has already been insisting upon-viz., that union with Him is sure to issue in fruitfulness.

He repeats the theme, ‘I am the Vine’; but He points its application by the next clause, ‘Ye are the branches.’ That had been implied before, but it needed to be said more definitely. For are we not all too apt to think of religious truth as swinging *in vacuo* as it were, with no personal application to ourselves, and is not the one thing needful in regard to the truths which are most familiar to us, to bring them into close connection with our own personal life and experience?

‘I am the Vine’ is a general truth, with no clear personal application. ‘Ye are the branches’ brings each individual listener into connection with it. How many of us there are, as there are in every so-called Christian communion, that listen pleasedly, and, in a fitful sort of languid way, interestedly, to the most glorious and most solemn words that come from a preacher’s lips, and never dream that what he has been saying has any bearing upon themselves! And the one thing that is most of all needed with people like some of you, who have been listening to the truth all your days, is that it should be sharpened to a point, and the conviction driven into you, that *you* have some personal concern in this great message. ‘Ye are the branches’ is the one side of that sharpening and making definite of the truth in its personal application, and the other side is, ‘Thou art the man.’ All preaching and religious teaching is toothless generality, utterly useless, unless we can manage somehow or other to force it through the wall of indifference and vague assent to a general proposition, with which ‘Gospel-hardened hearers’ surround themselves, and make them feel that the thing has got a point, and that the point is touching their own consciousness. ‘*Ye* are the branches.’

Note next the great promise of fruitfulness. ‘He that abideth in Me, and I in Him, the same bringeth forth much fruit.’

I need not repeat what I have said in former sermons as to the plain, practical duties which are included in that abiding in Christ, and Christ’s consequent abiding in us. It means, on the part of professedly Christian people, a temper and tone of mind very far remote from the noisy, bustling distractions too common in our present Christianity. We want quiet, patient waiting within the veil. We want stillness of heart, brought about by our own distinct effort to put away from ourselves the strife of tongues and the pride of life. We want activity, no doubt, but we want a wise passiveness as its foundation.

'Think you, midst all this mighty sum
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?'

Get away into the 'secret place of the Most High,' and rise into a higher altitude and atmosphere than the region of work and effort; and sitting still with Christ, let His love and His power pour themselves into your hearts. 'Come, My people, enter thou into thy chambers and shut thy doors about thee.' Get away from the jangling of politics, and empty controversies and busy distractions of daily duty. The harder our toil necessarily is, the more let us see to it that we keep a little cell within the central life where in silence we hold communion with the Master. 'Abide in Me and I in you.'

That is the way to be fruitful, rather than by efforts after individual acts of conformity and obedience, howsoever needful and precious these are. There is a deeper thing wanted than these. The best way to secure Christian conduct is to cultivate communion with Christ. It is better to work at the increase of the central force than at the improvement of the circumferential manifestations of it. Get more of the sap into the branch, and there will be more fruit. Have more of the life of Christ in the soul, and the conduct and the speech will be more Christlike. We may cultivate individual graces at the expense of the harmony and beauty of the whole character. We may grow them artificially and they will be of little worth-by imitation of others, by special efforts after special excellence, rather than by general effort after the central improvement of our nature and therefore of our life. But the true way to influence conduct is to influence the springs of conduct; and to make a man's life better, the true way is to make the man better. First of all be, and then do; first of all receive, and then give forth; first of all draw near to Christ, and then there will be fruit to His praise. That is the Christian way of mending men, not tinkering at this, that, and the other individual excellence, but grasping the secret of total excellence in communion with Him.

Our Lord is here not merely laying down a law, but giving a promise, and putting his veracity into pawn for the fulfilment of it. ‘If a man will keep near Me,’ He says, ‘he shall bear fruit.’

Notice that little word which now appears for the first time. ‘He shall bear *much* fruit.’ We are not to be content with a little fruit; a poor shrivelled bunch of grapes that are more like marbles than grapes, here and there, upon the half-nourished stem. The abiding in Him will produce a character rich in manifold graces. ‘A little fruit’ is not contemplated by Christ at all. God forbid that I should say that there is no possibility of union with Christ and a little fruit. Little union will have little fruit; but I would have you notice that the only two alternatives which come into Christ’s view here are, on the one hand, ‘no fruit,’ and on the other hand, ‘much fruit.’ And I would ask why it is that the average Christian man of this generation bears only a berry or two here and there, like such as are left upon the vines after the vintage, when the promise is that if he will abide in Christ, he will bear much fruit?

This verse, setting forth the fruitfulness of union with Jesus, ends with the brief, solemn statement of the converse-the barrenness of separation-’Apart from Me’ [not merely ‘without,’ as the Authorised Version has it] ‘ye can do nothing.’ *There* is the condemnation of all the busy life of men which is not lived in union with Jesus Christ. It is a long row of figures which, like some other long rows of algebraic symbols added up, amount just to *zero*. ‘Without me, nothing.’ All your busy life, when you come to sum it up, is made up of plus and minus quantities, which precisely balance each other, and the net result, unless you are in Christ, is just nothing; and on your gravestones the only right epitaph is a great round cypher. ‘He did not do anything. There is nothing left of his toil; the whole thing has evaporated and disappeared.’ That is life apart from Jesus Christ.

II. And so note, secondly, the withering and destruction following separation from Him.

Commentators tell us, I think a little prosaically, that when our Lord spoke, it was the time of pruning the vine in Palestine, and that, perhaps, as they went from the upper room to the garden, they might see in the valley, here and there, the fires that the labourers had kindled in the vineyards to burn the loppings of the vines. That does not matter. It is of more consequence to notice how the solemn thought of withering and destruction forces itself, so to speak, into these gracious words; and how, even at that moment, our Lord, in all His tenderness and pity, could not but let words of warning-grave, solemn, tragical-drop from His lips.

This generation does not like to hear them, for its conception of the Gospel is a thing with no minor notes in it, with no threatenings, a proclamation of a deliverance, and no proclamation of anything from which deliverance is needed-which is a strange kind of Gospel! But Jesus Christ could not speak about the blessedness of fruitfulness and the joy of life in Himself without speaking about its necessary converse, the awfulness of separation from Him, of barrenness, of withering, and of destruction.

Separation is withering. Did you ever see a hawthorn bough that children bring home from the woods, and stick in the grate; how in a day or two the little fresh green leaves all shrivel up and the white blossoms become brown and smell foul, and the only thing to be done with it is to fling it into the fire and get rid of it? ‘And so,’ says Jesus Christ, ‘as long as a man holds on to Me and the sap comes into him, he will flourish, and as soon as the connection is broken, all that was so fair will begin to shrivel, and all that was green will grow brown and turn to dust, and all that was blossom will droop, and there will be no more fruit any more for ever.’ Separate from Christ, the individual shrivels, and the possibilities of fair buds wither and set into no fruit, and no man is the man he might have been unless he holds by Jesus Christ and lets His life come into him.

And as for individuals, so for communities. The Church or the body of professing Christians that is separate from Jesus Christ dies to all noble life, to all high activity, to all Christlike conduct, and, being dead, rots.

Withering means destruction. The language of our text is a description of what befalls the actual branches of the literal vine; but it is made a representation of what befalls the individuals whom these branches represent, by that added clause, ‘like a branch.’ Look at the mysteriousness of the language. ‘They gather them.’ Who? ‘They cast them into the fire.’ Who have the tragic task of flinging the withered branches into some mysterious fire? All is left vague with unexplained awfulness. The solemn fact that the withering of manhood by separation from Jesus Christ requires, and ends in, the consuming of the withered, is all that we have here. We have to speak of it pityingly, with reticence, with terror, with tenderness, with awe lest it should be our fate.

But O, dear brethren! be on your guard against the tendency of the thinking of this generation, to paste a bit of blank paper over all the threatenings of the Bible, and to blot out from its consciousness the grave issues that it holds forth. One of two things must befall the branch, either it is in the Vine or it gets into the fire. If we would avoid the fire let us see to it that we are in the Vine.

III. Thirdly, we have here the union with Christ as the condition of satisfied desires.

‘If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.’ Notice how our Lord varies His phraseology here, and instead of saying ‘I in you,’ says ‘My words in you.’ He is speaking about prayers, consequently the variation is natural. In fact, His abiding in us is largely the abiding of His words in us; or, to speak more accurately, the abiding of His words in us is largely the means of His abiding in us.

What is meant by Christ’s words abiding in us? Something a great deal more than the mere intellectual acceptance of them. Something very different from reading a verse of the Gospels of a morning before we go to our work, and forgetting all about it all the day long; something very different from coming in contact with Christian truth on a Sunday, when somebody else preaches to us what he has found in the Bible, and we take in a little of it. It means the whole of the conscious nature of a man being, so to speak, saturated with Christ’s words; his desires, his understanding, his affections, his will, all being steeped in these great truths which the Master spoke. Put a little bit of colouring matter into the fountain at its source, and you will have the stream dyed down its course for ever so far.

See that Christ’s words be lodged in your inmost selves, by patient meditation upon them, by continual recurrence to them, and all your life will be glorified and flash into richness of colouring and beauty by their presence.

The main effect of such abiding of the Lord’s words in us which our Lord touches upon here is, that in such a case, if our whole inward nature is influenced by the continual operation upon it of the words of the Lord, then our desires will be granted. Do not so vulgarise and lower the nobleness and the loftiness of this great promise as to suppose that it only means-If you remember His words you will get anything you like. It means something a great deal better than that. It means that if Christ’s words are the substratum, so to speak, of your wishes, then your wishes will harmonise with His will, and so ‘ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.’

Christ loves us a great deal too well to give to our own foolish and selfish wills the keys of His treasure-house. The condition of our getting what we will is our willing what He desires; and unless our prayers are a great deal more the utterance of the submission of our wills to His than they are the attempt to impose ours upon Him, they will not be answered. We get our wishes when our wishes are moulded by His word.

IV. The last thought that is here is that this union and fruitfulness lead to the noble ends of glorifying God and increasing discipleship.

‘Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit.’ Christ’s life was all for the glorifying of God. The lives which are ours in name-but being drawn from Him, in their depths are much rather the life of Christ in us than our lives-will have the same end and the same issue.

Ah, dear brethren, we come here to a very sharp test for us all. I wonder how many of us there are, on whom men looking think more loftily of God and love Him better, and are drawn to Him by strange longings. How many of us are there about whom people will say, ‘There must be something in the religion that makes a man like that’? How many of us are there, to look upon whom suggests to men that God, who can make such a man, must be infinitely sweet and lovely? And yet that is what we should all be-mirrors of the divine radiance, on which some eyes, that are too dim and sore to bear the light as it streams from the Sun, may look, and, beholding the reflection, may learn to love. Does God so shine in me that I lead men to magnify His name? If I am dwelling with Christ it will be so.

I shall not know it. ‘Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone’; but, in meek unconsciousness of the glory that rays from us, we may walk the earth, reflecting the light and making God known to our fellows.

And if thus we abide in Him and bear fruit we shall ‘be’ or [as the word might more accurately be rendered], we shall ‘*become* His disciples.’ The end of our discipleship is never reached on earth: we never so much *are* as we are in the process of *becoming*, His true followers and servants.

If we bear fruit because we are knit to Him, the fruit itself will help us to get nearer Him, and so to be more His disciples and more fruitful. Character produces conduct, but conduct rests on character, and strengthens the impulses from which it springs. And thus our action as Christian men and women will tell upon our inward lives as Christians, and the more our outward conduct is conformed to the pattern of Jesus Christ, the more shall we love Him in our inmost hearts. We ourselves shall eat of the fruit which we ourselves have borne to Him.

The alternatives are before us-in Christ, living and fruitful; out of Christ, barren, and destined to be burned. As the prophet says, ‘Will men take of the wood of the vine for any work?’ Vine-wood is worthless, its only use is to bear fruit; and if it does not do that, there is only one thing to be done with it, and that is, ‘They cast it into the fire, and it is burned.’

85)John 15:9-10

John

ABIDING IN LOVE

Joh. 15:9 - Joh. 15:11.

The last of these verses shows that they are to be taken as a kind of conclusion of the great parable of the Vine and the branches, for it looks back and declares Christ's purpose in His preceding utterances. The parable proper is ended, but the thoughts of it still linger in our Lord's mind, and echo through His words, as the vibration of some great bell after the stroke has ceased. The main thoughts of the parable were these two, that participation in Christ's life was the source of all good, and that abiding in Him was the means of participation in His life. And these same thoughts, though modified in their form, and free from the parabolical element, appear in the words that we have to consider on this occasion. The parable spoke about abiding in Christ; our text defines that abiding, and makes it still more tender and gracious by substituting for it, 'abiding in His love.' The parable spoke of conduct as 'fruit,' the effortless result of communion with Jesus. Our text speaks of it with more emphasis laid on the human side, as 'keeping the commandments.' The parable told us that abiding in Christ was the condition of bearing fruit. Our text tells us the converse, which is also true, that bearing fruit, or keeping the commandments, is the condition of abiding in Christ. So our Lord takes His thought, as it were, and turns it round before us, letting us see both sides of it, and then tells us that He does all this for one purpose, which in itself is a token of His love, namely, that our hearts may be filled with perfect and perennial joy, a drop from the fountain of His own.

These three verses have three words which may be taken as their key-notes-love, obedience, joy. We shall look at them in that order.

I. First, then, we have here the love in which it is our sweet duty to abide. 'As the Father hath loved Me, so have I loved you. Abide ye in My love.'

What shall we say about these mysterious and profound first words of this verse? They carry us into the very depths of divinity, and suggest for us that wonderful analogy between the relation of the Father to the Son, and that of the Son to His disciples, which appears over and over again in the solemnities of these last hours and words of Jesus. Christ here claims to be, in a unique and solitary fashion, the Object of the Father's love, and He claims to be able to love like God. 'As the Father hath loved Me, so have I loved you'; as deeply, as purely, as fully, as eternally, and with all the unnameable perfectnesses which must belong to the divine affection, does Christ declare that He loves us.

I know not whether the majesty and uniqueness of His nature stand out more clearly in the one or in the other of these two assertions. As beloved of God, and as loving like God, He equally claims for Himself a place which none other can fill, and declares that the love which falls on us from His pierced and bleeding heart is really the love of God.

In this mysterious, awful, tender, perfect affection He exhorts us to abide. That comes yet closer to our hearts than the other phrase of which it is the modification, and in some sense the explanation. The command to abide in Him suggests much that is blessed, but to have all that mysterious abiding in Him resolved into abiding in His love is infinitely tenderer, and draws us still closer to Himself. Obviously, what is meant is not our continuance in the attitude of love to Him, but rather our continuance in the sweet and sacred atmosphere of His love to us. For the connection between the two halves of the verse necessarily requires that the love in which we are to abide should be identical with the love which had been previously spoken of, and *that* is clearly His love to us, and not ours to Him. But then, on the other hand, whosoever thus abides in Christ's love to Him will echo it back again, in an equally continuous love to Him. So that the two things flow together, and to abide in the conscious possession of Christ's love to me is the certain and inseparable cause of its effect, my abiding in the continual exercise and outgoing of my love to Him.

Now note that this continuance in Christ's love is a thing in our power, since it is commanded. Although it is His affection to us of which my text primarily speaks, I can so modify and regulate the flow of that divine love to my heart that it becomes my duty to continue in Christ's love to me.

What a quiet, blessed home that is for us! The image, I suppose, that underlies all this sweet speech in these last hours, about dwelling in Christ, in His joy, in His words, in His peace, and the like, is that of some safe house, into which going, we may be secure. And what sorrow or care or trouble or temptation would be able to reach us if we were folded in the protection of that strong love, and always felt that it was the fortress into which we might continually resort? They who make their abode there, and dwell behind those firm bastions, need fear no foes, but are lifted high above them all. ‘Abide in My love,’ for they who dwell within the clefts of that Rock need none other defence; and they to whom the riven heart of Christ is the place of their abode are safe, whatsoever befalls. ‘As the Father hath loved Me, so have I loved you. Abide ye in My love.’

II. Now note, secondly, the obedience by which we continue in Christ’s love.

The analogy, on which He has already touched, is still continued. ‘If ye keep My commandments, ye shall abide in My love; even as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.’ Note that Christ here claims for Himself absolute and unbroken conformity with the Father’s will, and consequent uninterrupted and complete communion with the Father’s love. It is the utterance of a nature conscious of no sin, of a humanity that never knew one instant’s film of separation, howsoever thin, howsoever brief, between Him and the Father. No more tremendous words were ever spoken than these quiet ones in which Jesus Christ declares that never, all His life long, had there been the smallest deflection or want of conformity between the Father’s will and *His* desires and doings, and that never had there been one grain of dust, as it were, between the two polished plates which adhered so closely in inseparable union of harmony and love.

And then notice, still further, how Christ here, with His consciousness of perfect obedience and communion, intercepts *our* obedience and diverts it to Himself. He does not say, ‘Obey God as I have done, and He will love you’; but He says, ‘Obey *Me* as I obey God, and *I* will love you.’ Who is this that thus comes between the child’s heart and the Father’s? Does He come *between* when He stands thus? or does He rather lead us up to the Father, and to a share in His own filial obedience?

He further assures us that, by keeping His commandments, we shall continue in that sweet home and safe stronghold of His love. Of course the keeping of the commandments is something more than mere outward conformity by action. It is the inward harmony of will, and the bowing of the whole nature. It is, in fact, the same thing [though considered under a different aspect, and from a somewhat different point of view], as He has already been speaking about as the ‘fruit’ of the vine, by the bearing of which the Father is glorified. And this obedience, the obedience of the hands because the heart obeys, and does so because it loves, the bowing of the will in glad submission to the loved and holy will of the heavens-this obedience is the condition of our continuing in Christ’s love.

He will love us better, the more we obey His commandments, for although His tender heart is charged towards all, even the disobedient, with the love of pity and of desire to help, He cannot but feel a growing thrill of satisfied and gratified affection towards us, in the measure in which we become like Himself. The love that wept over us, when we were enemies, will ‘rejoice over us with singing,’ when we are friends. The love that sought the sheep when it was wandering will pour itself yet more tenderly and with selector gifts upon it when it follows in the footsteps of the flock, and keeps close at the heels of the Good Shepherd. ‘If ye keep My commandments, ye shall abide in My love,’ so we will put nothing between us and Him which will make it impossible for the tenderest tenderness of that holy love to come to your hearts.

The obedience which we render for love’s sake will make us more capable of receiving, and more blessedly conscious of possessing, the love of Jesus Christ. The lightest cloud before the sun will prevent it from focussing its rays to a burning point on the convex glass. And the small, thin, fleeting, scarcely visible acts of self-will that sometimes pass across our skies will prevent our feeling the warmth of that love upon our shrouded hearts. Every known piece of rebellion against Christ will shatter all true enjoyment of His favour, unless we are hopeless hypocrites or self-deceived. The condition of knowing and feeling the warmth and blessedness of Christ’s love to me is the honest submission of my nature to His commandments. You cannot rejoice in Jesus Christ unless you do His will. You will have no real comfort and blessedness in your religion unless it works itself out in your daily lives. That is why so many of you know nothing, or next to nothing, about the joy of Christ’s felt presence, because you do not, for all your professions, hourly and momentarily regulate and submit your wills to His commandments. Do what He wants, and do it because He wants it, if you wish that His love should fill your hearts.

And, further, we shall continue in His love by obedience, inasmuch as every emotion which finds expression in our daily life is strengthened by the fact that it is expressed. The love which works is love which grows, and the tree that bears fruit is the tree that is healthy and increases. So note how all these deepest things of Christian teaching come at last to a plain piece of practical duty. We talk about the mysticism of John's Gospel, about the depth of these last sayings of Jesus Christ. Yes! they are mystical, they are deep-unfathomably deep, thank God!-but connected by the shortest possible road with the plainest possible duties. 'Let no man deceive you. He that doeth righteousness is righteous.' It is of no use to talk about communion with Jesus Christ, and abiding in Him, in possession of His love, and all those other properly mystical sides of Christian experience, unless you verify them for yourselves by the plain way of practice. Doing as Christ bids us, and doing that habitually, and doing it gladly, then, and only then, are we in no danger of losing ourselves on the heights, or of forgetting that Christ's mission has for its last result the influencing of character and of conduct. 'If ye keep My commandments, ye shall abide in My love, even as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love.'

III. Lastly, note the joy which follows on this practical obedience. 'These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain,' [or 'might *be*'] 'in you, and that your joy might be full.'

'My joy might be in you'-a strange time to talk of His 'joy.' In half an hour he would be in Gethsemane, and we know what happened there. Was Christ a joyful man? He was a 'Man of sorrows' but one of the old Psalms says, 'Thou hast loved righteousness . . . therefore God hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows.' The deep truth that lies there is the same that He here claims as being fulfilled in His own experience, that absolute surrender and submission in love to the beloved commands of a loving Father made Him-in spite of sorrows, in spite of the baptism with which He was baptized, in spite of all the burden and the weight of our sins-the most joyful of men.

This joy He offers to us, a joy coming from perfect obedience, a joy coming from a surrender of self at the bidding of love, to a love that to us seems absolutely good and sweet. There is no joy that humanity is capable of to compare for a moment with that bright, warm, continuous sunshine which floods the soul, that is freed from all the clouds and mists of self and the darkness of sin. Self-sacrifice at the bidding of Jesus Christ is the recipe for the highest, the most exquisite, the most godlike gladnesses of which the human heart is capable. Our joy will remain if His joy is ours. Then our joy will be, up to the measure of its capacity, ennobled, and filled, and progressive, advancing ever towards a fuller possession of His joy, and a deeper calm of that pure and perennial rapture, which makes the settled and celestial bliss of those who have ‘entered into the joy of their Lord.’

Brother! there is only one gladness that is worth calling so-and that is, that which comes to us, when we give ourselves utterly away to Jesus Christ, and let Him do with us as He will. It is better to have a joy that is central and perennial-though there may be, as there will be, a surface of sorrow and care-than to have the converse, a surface of joy, and a black, unsympathetic kernel of aching unrest and sadness. In one or other of these two states we all live. Either we have to say, ‘as sorrowful yet always rejoicing’ or we have to feel that ‘even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness.’ Let us choose for ourselves, and let us choose aright, the gladness which coils round the heart, and endures for ever, and is found in submission to Jesus Christ, rather than the superficial, fleeting joys which are rooted on earth and perish with time.

86)John 15:11

Proverbs **- John**

ABIDING IN LOVE

HOLLOW LAUGHTER, SOLID JOY

Pro. 14:13. - Joh. 15:11.

A poet, who used to be more fashionable than he is now, pronounces ‘happiness’ to be our being’s end and aim. That is not true, except under great limitations and with many explanations. It may be regarded as God’s end, but it is ruinous to make it man’s aim. It is by no means the highest conception of the Gospel to say that it makes men happy, however true it may be. The highest is that it makes them good. I put these two texts together, not only because they bring out the contrast between the laughter which is hollow and fleeting and the joy which is perfect and perpetual, but also because they suggest to us the difference in kind and object between earthly and heavenly joys; which difference underlies the other between the boisterous laughter in which is no mirth and no continuance and the joy which is deep and abiding.

In the comparison which I desire to make between these two texts we must begin with that which is deepest, and consider-

I. The respective objects of earthly and heavenly joy.

Our Lord’s wonderful words suggest that they who accept His sayings, that they who have His word abiding in them, have in a very deep sense His joy implanted in their hearts, to brighten and elevate their joys as the sunshine flashes into silver the ripples of the lake. What then were the sources of the calm joys of ‘the Man of Sorrows’? Surely His was the perfect instance of ‘rejoicing in the Lord always’-an unbroken communion with the Father. The consciousness that the divine pleasure ever rested on Him, and that all His thoughts, emotions, purposes, and acts were in perfect harmony with the perfect will of the perfect God, filled His humanity up to the very brim with gladness which the world could not take away, and which remains for us for ever as a type to which all our gladness must be conformed if it is to be worthy of Him and of us. As one of the Psalmists says, God is to be ‘the gladness of our joy.’ It is in Him, gazed upon by the faith and love of an obedient spirit, sought after by aspiration and possessed inwardly in peaceful communion, confirmed by union with Him in the acts of daily obedience, that the true joy of every human life is to be realised. They who have drunk of this deep fountain of gladness will not express their joy in boisterous laughter, which is the hollower the louder it is, and the less lasting the more noisy, but will manifest itself ‘in the depth and not the tumult of the soul.’

Nor must we forget that ‘My joy’ co-existed with a profound experience of sorrow to which no human sorrow was ever like. Let us not forget that, while His joy filled His soul to the brim, He was ‘acquainted with grief’; and let us not wonder if the strange surface contradiction is repeated in ourselves. It is more Christlike to have inexpressibly deep joy with surface sorrow, than to have a shallow laughter masking a hurtful sorrow.

We have to set the sources of earthly gladness side by side with those of Christ's joy to be aware of a contrast. His sprang from within, the world's is drawn from without. His came from union with the Father, the world's largely depends on ignoring God. His needed no supplies from the gratifications ministered by sense, and so independent of the presence or absence of such; the world's need the constant contributions of outward good, and when these are cut off they droop and die. He who depends on outward circumstances for his joy is the slave of externals and the sport of time and chance.

II. The Christian's joy is full, the world's partial.

All human joys touch but part of our nature, the divine fills and satisfies all. In the former there is always some portion of us unsatisfied, like the deep pits on the moon's surface into which no light shines, and which show black on the silver face. No human joys wait to still conscience, which sits at the banquet like the skeleton that Egyptian feasters set at their tables. The old story told of a magician's palace blazing with lighted windows, but there was always one dark;-what shrouded figure sat behind it? Is there not always a surly 'elder brother' who will not come in however the musicians may pipe and the servants dance? Appetite may be satisfied, but what of conscience, and reason, and the higher aspirations of the soul? The laughter that echoes through the soul is the hollower the louder it is, and reverberates most through empty spaces.

But when Christ's joy remains in us our joy will be full. Its flowing tide will rush into and placidly occupy all the else oozy shallows of our hearts, even into the narrowest crannies its penetrating waters will pass, and everywhere will bring a flashing surface that will reflect in our hearts the calm blue above. We need nothing else if we have Christ and His joy within us. If we have everything else, we need His joy within us, else ours will never be full.

III. The heavenly joys are perpetual, the earthly joys transient.

Many of our earthly joys die in the very act of being enjoyed. Those which depend on the gratification of some appetite expire in fruition, and at each recurrence are less and less complete. The influence of habit works in two ways to rob all such joys of their power to minister to us-it increases the appetite and decreases the power of the object to satisfy. Some are followed by swift revulsion and remorse; all soon become stale; some are followed by quick remorse; some are necessarily left behind as we go on in life. To the old man the pleasures of youth are but like children's toys long since outgrown and left behind. All are at the mercy of externals. Those which we have not left we have to leave. The saddest lives are those of pleasure-seekers, and the saddest deaths are those of the men who sought for joy where it was not to be found, and sought for their gratification in a world which leaves them, and which they have to leave.

There is a realm where abide 'fullness of joy and pleasures for ever more.' Surely they order their lives most wisely who look for their joys to nothing that earth holds, and have taken for their own the ancient vow: 'Though the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vine. . .. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.' If 'My joy' abides in us in its calm and changeless depth, our joy will be 'full' whatever our circumstances may be; and we shall hear at last the welcome: 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.'

87)John 15:12-13

John

THE ONENESS OF THE BRANCHES

Joh. 15:12 - Joh. 15:13.

The union between Christ and His disciples has been tenderly set forth in the parable of the Vine and the branches. We now turn to the union between the disciples, which is the consequence of their common union to the Lord. The branches are parts of one whole, and necessarily bear a relation to each other. We may modify for our present purpose the analogous statement of the Apostle in reference to the Lord's Supper, and as He says, 'We being many, are one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread,' so we may say-The branches, being many, are one Vine, for they are all partakers of that one Vine. Of this union amongst the branches, which results from their common inherence in the Vine, the natural expression and manifestation is the mutual love, which Christ here gives as *the* commandment, and commends to us all by His own solemn example.

There are four things suggested to me by the words of our text-the Obligation, the Sufficiency, the Pattern, and the Motive, of Christian love.

I. First, the Obligation of love.

The two ideas of commandment and love do not go well together. You cannot pump up love to order, and if you try you generally produce, what we see in abundance in the world and in the Church, sentimental hypocrisy, hollow and unreal. But whilst that is true, and whilst it seems strange to say that we are commanded to love, still we can do a great deal, directly and indirectly, for the cultivation and strengthening of any emotion. We can either cast ourselves into the attitude which is favourable or unfavourable to it. We can either look at the facts which will create it or at those who will check it. We can go about with a sharp eye for the lovable or for the unlovable in man. We can either consciously war against or lazily acquiesce in our own predominant self-absorption and selfishness. And in these and in a number of other ways, our feelings towards other Christian people are very largely under our own control, and therefore are fitting subjects for commandment.

Our Lord lays down the obligation which devolves upon all Christian people, of cherishing a kindly and loving regard to all others who find their place within the charmed circle of His Church. It is an obligation because He commands it. He puts Himself here in the position of the absolute Lawgiver, who has the right of entire and authoritative control over men's affections and hearts. And it is further obligatory because such an attitude is the only fitting expression of the mutual relation of Christian men, through their common relation to the Vine. If there be the one life-sap circling through all parts of the mighty whole, how anomalous and how contradictory it is that these parts should not be harmoniously concordant among themselves! However unlike any two Christian people are to each other in character, in culture, in circumstances, the bond that knits those who have the same relations to Jesus Christ one to another is far deeper, far more real, and ought to be far closer, than the bond that knits either of them to the men or women to whom they are likest in all these other respects, and to whom they are unlike in this central one. Christian men! you are closer to every other Christian man, down in the depths of your being, however he may be differenced from you by things that are very hard to get over, than you are to the people that you like best, and love most, if they do not participate with you in this common love to Jesus Christ.

I dread talking mere sentiment about this matter, for there is perhaps no part of Christian duty which has been so vulgarised and pawed over by mere unctuous talk, as that of the fellowship that should subsist between all Christians. But I have one plain question to put,-Does anybody believe that the present condition of Christendom, and the relations to one another even of good Christian people in the various churches and communions of our own and of other lands, is the sort of thing that Jesus Christ meant, or is anything like a fair and adequate representation of the deep, essential unity that knits us all together?

We need far more to realise the fact that our emotions towards our brother Christians are not matters in which our own inclinations may have their way, but that there is a simple commandment given to us, and that we are bound to cherish love to every man who loves Jesus Christ. Never mind though he does not hold your theology; never mind though he be very ignorant and narrow as compared with you; never mind though your outlook on the world may be entirely unlike his. Never mind though you be a rich man and he a poor one, or you a poor one and he rich, which is just as hard to get over. Let all these secondary grounds of union and of separation be relegated to their proper subordinate place; and let us recognise this, that the children of one Father are brethren. And do not let it be possible that it shall be said, as so often has been said, and said truly, that ‘brethren’ in the Church means a great deal less than *brothers* in the world. Lift your eyes beyond the walls of the little sheepfold in which you live, and hearken to the bleating of the flocks away out yonder, and feel-’Other sheep He has which are not of this fold’; and recognise the solemn obligation of the commandment of love.

II. Note, secondly, the Sufficiency of love.

Our Lord has been speaking in a former verse about the keeping of His commandments. Now He gathers them all up into one. ‘This is my commandment, that ye love one another’ All duties to our fellows, and all duties to our brethren, are summed up in, or resolved into, this one germinal, encyclopaediacal, all-comprehensive simplification of duty, into the one word ‘love.’

Where the heart is right the conduct will be right. Love will soften the tones, will instinctively teach what we ought to be and do; will take the bitterness out of opposition and diversity, will make even rebuke, when needful, only a form of expressing itself. If the heart be right all else will be right; and if there be a deficiency of love nothing will be right. You cannot help anybody except on condition of having an honest, beneficent, and benevolent regard towards him. You cannot do any man in the world any good unless there is a shoot of love in your heart towards him. You may pitch him benefits, and you will neither get nor deserve thanks for them; you may try to teach him, and your words will be hopeless and profitless. The one thing that is required to bind Christian men together is this common affection. That being there, everything will come. It is the germ out of which all is developed. As we read in that great chapter to the Corinthians-the lyric praise of Charity,-all kinds of blessing and sweetness and gladness come out of this, It is the central force which, being present, secures that all shall be right, which, being absent, ensures that all shall be wrong.

And is it not beautiful to see how Jesus Christ, leaving the little flock of His followers in the world, gave them no other instruction for their mutual relationship? He did not instruct them about institutions and organisations, about orders of the ministry and sacraments, or Church polity and the like. He knew that all these would come. His one commandment was, ‘Love one another,’ and that will make you wise. Love one another, and you will shape yourselves into the right forms. He knew that they needed no exhortations such as ecclesiastics would have put in the foreground. It was not worth while to talk to them about organisations and officers. These would come to them at the right time and in the right way. The ‘one thing needful’ was that they should be knit together as true participators of His life. Love was sufficient as their law and as their guide.

III. Note, further, the Pattern of love.

‘As I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’ Christ sets Himself forward then, here and in this aspect, as He does in all aspects of human conduct and character, as being the realised Ideal of them all. And although the thought is a digression from my present purpose, I cannot but pause for a moment to reflect upon the strangeness of a man thus calmly saying to the whole world, ‘I am the embodiment of all that love ought to be. You cannot get beyond Me, nor have anything more pure, more deep, more self-sacrificing, more perfect, than the love which I have borne to you.’

But passing that, the pattern that He proposes for us is even more august than appears at first sight. For, if you remember, a verse or two before our Lord had said, ‘As the Father hath loved Me so I have loved you.’ Now He says, ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’ There stand the three, as it were, the Father, the Son, the disciple. The Son in the midst receives and transmits the Father’s love to the disciple, and the disciple is to love his fellows, in some deep and august sense, as the Father loved the Son. The divinest thing in God, and that in which men can be like God, is love. In all our other attitudes to Him we rather correspond than copy. His fullness is met by our emptiness, His giving by our recipiency, His faithfulness by our faith, His command by our obedience, His light by our eye. But here it is not a case of correspondence only, but of similarity. My faith *answers* God’s gift to me, but my love is *like* God’s love. ‘Be ye, therefore, imitators of God as beloved children’; and having received that love into your hearts, ray it out, ‘and walk in love as God also hath loved us.’

But then our Lord here, in a very wonderful manner, sets forth the very central point of His work, even His death upon the Cross for us, as being the pattern to which our poor affection ought to aspire, and after which it must tend to be conformed. I need not remind you, I suppose, that our Lord here is not speaking of the propitiatory character of His death, nor of the issues which depend upon it, and upon it alone, viz., the redemption and salvation of the world. He is not speaking, either, of the peculiar and unique sense in which He lays down His life for us, His friends and brethren, as none other can do. He is speaking about it simply in its aspect of being a voluntary surrender, at the bidding of love, for the good of those whom He loved, and that, He tells us-that, and nothing else-is the true pattern and model towards which all our love is bound to tend and to aspire. That is to say, the heart of the love which He commands is self-sacrifice, reaching to death if death be needful. And no man loves as Christ would have him love who does not bear in his heart affection which has so conquered selfishness that, if need be, he is ready to die.

The expression of Christian life is not to be found in honeyed words, or the indolent indulgence in benevolent emotion, but in self-sacrifice, modelled after that of Christ's sacrificial death, which is imitable by us.

Brethren, it is a solemn obligation, which may well make us tremble, that is laid on us in these words, 'As I have loved you.' Calvary was less than twenty-four hours off, and He says to us, '*That* is your pattern!' Contrast our love at its height with His-a drop to an ocean, a poor little flickering rushlight held up beside the sun. My love, at its best, has so far conquered my selfishness that now and then I am ready to suffer a little inconvenience, to sacrifice a little leisure, to give away a little money, to spend a little dribble of sympathy upon the people who are its objects. Christ's love nailed Him to the Cross, and led Him down from the throne, and shut for a time the gates of the glory behind Him. And He says, 'That is your pattern!'

Oh, let us bow down and confess how His word, which commands us, puts us to shame, when we think of how miserably we have obeyed.

Remember, too, that the restriction which here seems to be cast around the flow of His love is not a restriction in reality, but rather a deepening of it. He says, 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.' But evidently He calls them so from His point of view, and as He sees them, not from their point of view, as they see Him-that is to say, He means by 'friends' not those who love Him, but those whom He loves. The 'friends' for whom He dies are the same persons as the Apostle, in his sweet variation upon the words of my text, has called by the opposite name, when He says that He died for His 'enemies.'

There is an old, wild ballad that tells of how a knight found, coiling round a tree in a dismal forest, a loathly dragon breathing out poison; and how, undeterred by its hideousness and foulness, he cast his arms round it and kissed it on the mouth. Three times he did it undisgusted, and at the third the shape changed into a fair lady, and he won his bride. Christ 'kisses with the kisses of His mouth' His enemies, and makes them His friends because He loves them. 'If He had never died for His enemies' says one of the old fathers, 'He would never have possessed His friends.' And so He teaches us here in what seems to be a restriction of the purpose of His death and the sweep of His love, that the way by which we are to meet even alienation and hostility is by pouring upon it the treasures of an unselfish, self-sacrificing affection which will conquer at the last.

Christ's death is the pattern for our lives as well as the hope of our hearts.

IV. Lastly, we have here by implication, though not by direct statement, the Motive of the love.

Surely that, too, is contained in the words, 'As I have loved you.' Christ's commandment of love is a new commandment, not so much because it is a revelation of a new duty, though it is the casting of an old duty into new prominence, as because it is not merely a revelation of an obligation, but the communication of power to fulfil it. The novelty of Christian morality lies here, that in its law there is a self-fulfilling force. We have not to look to one place for the knowledge of our duty, and somewhere else for the strength to do it, but both are given to us in the one thing, the gift of the dying Christ and His immortal love.

That love, received into our hearts, will conquer, and it alone will conquer, our selfishness. That love, received into our hearts, will mould, and it alone will mould, them into its own likeness. That love, received into our hearts, will knit, and it alone will knit, all those who participate in it into a common bond, sweet, deep, sacred, and all-victorious.

And so, brethren, if we would know the blessedness and the sweetness of victory over these miserable, selfish hearts of ours, and to walk in the liberty of love, we can only get it by keeping close to Jesus Christ. In any circle, the nearer the points of the circumference are to the centre, the closer they will necessarily be to one another. As we draw nearer, each for himself, to our Centre, we shall feel that we have approximated to all those who stand round the same centre, and draw from it the same life. In the early spring, when the wheat is green and young, and scarcely appears above the ground, it comes up in the lines in which it was sown, parted from one another and distinctly showing their separation and the furrows. But when the full corn in the ear waves on the autumn plain, all the lines and separations have disappeared, and there is one unbroken tract of sunny fruitfulness. And so when the life in Christ is low and feeble, His servants may be separated and drawn up in rigid lines of denominations, and churches, and sects; but as they grow the lines disappear. If to the churches of England to-day there came a sudden accession of knowledge of Christ, and of union with Him, the first thing that would go would be the wretched barriers that separate us from one another. For if we have the life of Christ in any adequate measure in ourselves, we shall certainly have grown up above the fences behind which we began to grow, and shall be able to reach out to all that love the Lord Jesus Christ, and feel with thankfulness that we are one in Him.

88)John 15:14-17

John

CHRIST'S FRIENDS

Joh. 15:14 - Joh. 15:17.

A wonderful word has just dropped from the Master's lips, when He spoke of laying down His life for His friends. He lingers on it as if the idea conveyed was too great and sweet to be taken in at once, and with soothing reiteration He assures the little group that they, even they, are His friends.

I have ventured to take these four verses for consideration now, although each of them, and each clause of them, might afford ample material for a discourse, because they have one common theme. They are a description of what Christ's friends are to Him, of what He is to them, and of what they should be to one another. So they are a little picture, in the sweetest form, of the reality, the blessedness, the obligations, of friendship with Christ.

I. Notice what Christ's friends do for Him.

'Ye are My friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.' In the former verse, 'friends' means chiefly those whom He loved. Here it means mainly those who love Him. They love Him because He loves them, of course; and the two sides of the one thought cannot be parted. But still in this verse the idea of friendship to Christ is looked at from the human side, and He tells His disciples that they are His lovers as well as beloved of Him, on condition of their doing whatsoever He commands them.

He lingers, as I said, on the idea itself. As if He would meet the doubts arising from the sense of unworthiness, and from some dim perception of how He towers above them, and their limitations, He reiterates, 'Wonderful as it is, you poor men, half-intelligent lovers of Mine, *you* are My friends, beloved of Me, and loving Me, if ye do whatsoever I command you.'

How wonderful that stooping love of His is, which condescends to array itself in the garments of ours! Every form of human love Christ lays His hand upon, and claims that He Himself exercises it in a transcendent degree. 'He that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven, the same is My brother and sister and mother.' That which is even sacreder, the purest and most complete union that humanity is capable of-that, too, He consecrates; for even it, sacred as it is, is capable of a higher consecration, and, sweet as it is, receives a new sweetness when we think of 'the Bride, the Lamb's wife,' and remember the parables in which He speaks of the Marriage Supper of the Great King, and sets forth Himself as the Husband of humanity. And passing from that Holy of Holies out into this outer court, He lays His hand, too, on that more common and familiar, and yet precious and sacred, thing-the bond of friendship. The Prince makes a friend of the beggar.

Even if we do not think more loftily of Jesus Christ than do those who regard Him simply as the perfection of humanity, is it not beautiful and wonderful that He should look with such eyes of beaming love on that handful of poor, ignorant fishermen, who knew Him so dimly, and say: 'I pass by all the wise and the mighty, all the lofty and noble, and My heart clings to you poor, insignificant people?' He stoops to make them His friends, and there are none so low but that they may be His.

This friendship lasts to-day. A peculiarity of Christianity is the strong personal tie of real love and intimacy which will bind men, to the end of time, to this Man that died nineteen hundred years ago. We look back into the wastes of antiquity: mighty names rise there that we reverence; there are great teachers from whom we have learned, and to whom, after a fashion, we are grateful. But what a gulf there is between us and the best and noblest of them! But here is a dead Man, who to-day is the Object of passionate attachment and a love deeper than life to millions of people, and will be till the end of time. There is nothing in the whole history of the world in the least like that strange bond which ties you and me to the Saviour, and the paradox of the Apostle remains a unique fact in the experience of humanity: 'Jesus Christ, whom, having not seen, ye love.' We stretch out our hands across the waste, silent centuries, and there, amidst the mists of oblivion, thickening round all other figures in the past, we touch the warm, throbbing heart of our Friend, who lives for ever, and for ever is near us. We here, nearly two millenniums after the words fell on the nightly air on the road to Gethsemane, have them coming direct to our hearts. A perpetual bond unites men with Christ to-day; and for us, as really as in that long-past Paschal night, is it true, 'Ye are My friends.'

There are no limitations in that friendship, no misconstructions in that heart, no alienation possible, no change to be feared. There is absolute rest for us there. Why should I be solitary if Jesus Christ is my Friend? Why should I fear if He walks by my side? Why should anything be burdensome if He lays it upon me and helps me to bear it? What is there in life that cannot be faced and borne-aye, and conquered,-if we have Him, as we all may have Him, for the Friend and the Home of our hearts?

But notice the condition, 'If ye do what I command you.' Note the singular blending of friendship and command, involving on our parts the cultivation of the two things which are not incompatible, absolute submission and closest friendship. He commands though He is Friend; though He commands He is Friend. The conditions that He lays down are the same which have already occupied our attention in former sermons of this series, and so may be touched very lightly. ‘Ye are My friends if ye do the things which I command you,’ may either correspond with His former saying, ‘If a Man love Me he will keep My commandments,’ or with His later one, which immediately precedes our text, ‘If ye keep My commandments ye shall abide in My love.’ For this is the relationship between love and obedience, in regard to Jesus Christ, that the love is the parent of the obedience, and the obedience is the guard and guarantee of the love. They who love will obey, they who obey will strengthen love by acting according to its dictates, and will be in a condition to feel and realise more the warmth of the rays that stream down upon them, and to send back more fully answering obedience from their hearts. Not in mere emotion, not in mere verbal expression, not in mere selfish realising of the blessings of His friendship, and not in mere mechanical, external acts of conformity, but in the flowing down and melting of the hard and obstinate iron will, at the warmth of His great love, is our love made perfect. The obedience, which is the child and the preserver of love, is something far deeper than the mere outward conformity with externally apprehended commandments. To submit is the expression of love, and love is deepened by submission.

II. Secondly, note what Christ does for His friends.

‘Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth.’ The slave may see what his lord does, but he does not know his purpose in his acts-’Theirs not to reason why.’ In so far as the relation of master and servant goes, and still more in that of owner and slave, there is simple command on the one side and unintelligent obedience on the other. The command needs no explanation, and if the servant is in his master’s confidence he is more than a servant. But, says Christ, ‘I have called you friends’; and He had called them so before He now named them so. He had called them so in act, and He points to all His past relationship, and especially to the heart-outpourings of the Upper Room, as the proof that He had called them His friends, in the fact that whatsoever He had heard of the Father He had made known to them.

Jesus Christ, then, recognises the obligation of absolute frankness, and He will tell His friends everything that He can. When He tells them what He can, the voice of the Father speaks through the Son. Every one of Christ's friends stands nearer to God than did Moses at the door of the Tabernacle, when the wondering camp beheld him face to face with the blaze of the Shekinah glory, and dimly heard the thunderous utterances of God as He spake to him 'as a man speaks to his friend.' That was surface-speech compared with the divine depth and fullness of the communications which Jesus Christ deems Himself bound, and assumes Himself able, to make to them who love Him and whom He loves.

Of course to Christ's frankness there are limits. He will not pour out His treasures into vessels that will spill them; and as He Himself says in the subsequent part of this great discourse, 'I have many things to say unto you, but you are not able to carry them now.' His last word was, 'I have declared Thy name unto My brethren, and *will declare* it.' And though here He speaks as if His communication was perfect, we are to remember that it was necessarily conditioned by the power of reception on the part of the hearers, and that there was much yet to be revealed of what God had whispered to Him, ere these men, that clustered round Him, could understand the message.

That frank speech is continued to-day. Jesus Christ recognises the obligation that binds Him to impart to each of us all that each of us is in our inmost spirits capable of receiving. By the light which He sheds on the Word, by many a suggestion through human lips, by many a blessed thought rising quietly within our hearts, and bearing the token that it comes from a sacreder source than our poor, blundering minds, He still speaks to us, His friends.

Ought not that thought of the utter frankness of Jesus make us, for one thing, very patient, intellectually and spiritually, of the gaps that are left in His communications and in our knowledge? There are so many things that we sometimes think we should like to know, things about that dark future where some of our hearts live so constantly, things about the depths of His nature and the divine character, things about the relation between God's love and God's righteousness, things about the meaning of all this dreadful mystery in which we grope our way. These and a hundred other questionings suggest to us that it would have been so easy for Him to have lifted a little corner of the veil, and let a little more of the light shine out. He holds all in His hand. Why does He thus open one finger instead of the whole palm? Because He loves. A friend exercises the right of reticence as well as the prerogative of speech. And for all the gaps that are left, let us bow quietly and believe that if it had been better for us He would have spoken. 'If it were not so I would have told you.' 'Trust Me! I tell you all that it is good for you to receive.'

And that frankness may well teach us another lesson, viz., the obligation of keeping our ears open and our hearts prepared to receive the speech that does come from Him. Ah, brother! many a message from your Lord flits past you, like the idle wind through an archway, because you are not listening for His voice. If we kept down the noise of that 'household jar within'; if we silenced passion, ambition, selfishness, worldliness; if we withdrew ourselves, as we ought to do, from the Babel of this world, and 'hid ourselves in His pavilion from the strife of tongues'; if we took less of our religion out of books and from other people, and were more accustomed to 'dwell in the secret place of the Most High,' and to say, 'Speak, Friend! for Thy friend heareth,' we should more often understand how real to-day is the voice of Christ to them that love Him.

'Such rebounds the inward ear
Catches often from afar;
Listen, prize them, hold them dear,
For of God-of God-they are.'

III. Thirdly, notice how Christ's friends come to be so, and why they are so.

'Ye have not chosen,' etc. [Joh. 15:16].

Our Lord refers here, no doubt, primarily to the little group of the Apostles; the choice and ordaining as well as 'the fruit that abides,' point, in the first place, to their apostolic office, and to the results of their apostolic labours. But we must widen out the words a great deal beyond that reference.

In all the cases of friendship between Christ and men, the origination and initiation come from Him. 'We love Him because He first loved us.' He has told us how, in His divine alchemy, He changes by the shedding of His blood our enmity into friendship. In the previous verse He has said, ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.’ And as I remarked in my last sermon, the friends here are the same as ‘the enemies’ for whom, the Apostle tells us that Christ laid down His life. Since He has thus by the blood of the Cross changed men’s enmity into friendship, it is true universally that the amity between us and Christ comes entirely from Him.

But there is more than that in the words. I do not suppose that any man, whatever his theological notions and standpoint may be, who has felt the love of Christ in his own heart in however feeble a measure, but will say, as the Apostle said, ‘I was apprehended of Christ.’ It is because He lays His seeking and drawing hand upon us that we ever come to love Him, and it is true that His choice of us precedes our choice of Him, and that the Shepherd always comes to seek the sheep that is lost in the wilderness.

This, then, is how we come to be His friends; because, when we were enemies, He loved us, and gave Himself for us, and ever since has been sending out the ambassadors and the messengers of His love-or, rather, the rays and beams of it, which are parts of Himself-to draw us to His heart. And the purpose which all this forthgoing of Christ’s initial and originating friendship has had in view, is set forth in words which I can only touch in the lightest possible manner. The intention is twofold. First, it respects service or fruit. ‘That ye may *go*’; there is deep pathos and meaning in that word. He had been telling them that He was going; now He says to them, ‘You are to go. We part here. My road lies upward; yours runs onward. Go into all the world.’ He gives them a *quasi*-independent position; He declares the necessity of separation; He declares also the reality of union in the midst of the separation; He sends *them* out on their course with His benediction, as He does *us*. Wheresoever we go in obedience to His will, we carry the consciousness of His friendship.

‘That ye may bring forth fruit’-He goes back for a moment to the sweet emblem with which this chapter begins, and recurs to the imagery of the vine and the fruit. ‘Keeping His commandments’ does not explain the whole process by which we do the things that are pleasing in His sight. We must also take this other metaphor of the bearing of fruit. Neither an effortless, instinctive bringing forth from the renewed nature and the Christlike disposition, nor a painful and strenuous effort at obedience to His law, describe the whole realities of Christian service. There must be the effort, for men do not grow Christlike in character as the vine grows its grapes; but there must also be, regulated and disciplined by the effort, the inward life, for no mere outward obedience and tinkering at duties and commandments will produce the fruit that Christ desires and rejoices to have. First comes unity of life with Him; and then effort. Take care of modern teachings that do not recognise these two as both essential to the complete ideal of Christian service-the spontaneous fruit-bearing, and the strenuous effort after obedience.

‘That your fruit should remain’; nothing corrupts faster than fruit. There is only one kind of fruit that is permanent, incorruptible. The only life’s activity that outlasts life and the world is the activity of the men who obey Christ.

The other half of the issues of this friendship is the satisfying of our desires, ‘That whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My name He may give it you.’ We have already had substantially the same promise in previous parts of this discourse, and therefore I may deal with it very lightly. How comes it that it is certain that Christ’s friends, living close to Him and bearing fruit, will get what they want? Because what they want will be ‘in His name’-that is to say, in accordance with His disposition and will. Make your desires Christ’s, and Christ’s yours, and you will be satisfied.

IV. And now, lastly, for one moment, note the mutual friendship of Christ’s friends.

We have frequently had to consider that point-the relation of the friends of Christ to each other. ‘These things I command you, that ye love one another.’ This whole context is, as it were, enclosed within a golden circlet by that commandment which appeared in a former verse, at the beginning of it, ‘This is My commandment, that ye love one another,’ and reappears here at the close, thus shutting off this portion from the rest of the discourse. Friends of a friend should themselves be friends. We care for the lifeless things that a dear friend has cared for; books, articles of use of various sorts. If these have been of interest to him, they are treasures and precious evermore to us. And here are living men and women, in all diversities of character and circumstances, but with this stamped upon them all-Christ's friends, lovers of and loved by Him. And how can we be indifferent to those to whom Christ is not indifferent? We are knit together by that bond. We are but poor friends of that Master unless we feel that all which is dear to Him is dear to us. Let us feel the electric thrill which ought to pass through the whole linked circle, and let us beware that we slip not our hands from the grasp of the neighbour on either side, lest, parted from them, we should be isolated from Him, and lose some of the love which we fail to transmit.

89)John 15:18-20

John

SHEEP AMONG WOLVES

Joh. 15:18 - Joh. 15:20.

These words strike a discord in the midst of the sweet music to which we have been listening. The key-note of all that has preceded has been love-the love of Christ's friends to one another, and of all to Him, as an answer to His love to all. That love, which is one, whether it rise to Him or is diffused on the level of earth, is the result of that unity of life between the Vine and the branches, of which our Lord has been speaking such great and wonderful things. But that unity of life between Christians and Christ has another consequence than the spread of love. Just because it binds them to Him in a sacred community, it separates them from those who do not share in His life, and hence the 'hate' of our context is the shadow of 'love'; and there result two communities-to use the much-abused words that designate them-the Church and 'the World'; and the antagonism between these is deep, fundamental, and perpetual.

Unquestionably, our Lord is here speaking with special reference to the Apostles, who, in a very tragic sense, were 'sent forth as sheep in the midst of wolves.' If we may trust tradition, every one of that little company, Speaker as well as hearers, died a martyr's death, with the exception of

John himself, who was preserved from it by a miracle. But, be that as it may, our Lord is here laying down a universal statement of the permanent condition of things; and there is no more reason for restricting the force of these words to the original hearers of them than there is for restricting the force of any of the rest of this wonderful discourse. ‘The world’ will be in antagonism to the Church until the world ceases to be a world, because it obeys the King; and then, and not till then, will it cease to be hostile to His subjects.

I. What makes this hostility inevitable?

Our Lord here prepares His hearers for what is coming by putting it in the gentle form of an hypothesis. The frequency with which ‘If’ occurs in this section is very remarkable. He will not startle them by the bare, naked statement which they, in that hour of depression and agitation, were so little able to endure, but He puts it in the shape of a ‘suppose that,’ not because there is any doubt, but in order to alleviate the pain of the impression which He desires to make. He says, ‘If the world hates,’ not ‘if the world hate’; and the tense of the original shows that, whilst the form of the statement is hypothetical, the substance of it is prophetic.

Jesus points to two things, as you will observe, which make this hostility inevitable. ‘If the world hate you, ye know that it hated Me before it hated you.’ And again, ‘If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.’ The very language carries with it the implication of necessary and continual antagonism. For what is ‘the world,’ in this context, but the aggregate of men, who have no share in the love and life that flow from Jesus Christ? Necessarily they constitute a unity, whatever diversities there may be amongst them, and necessarily, that unity in its banded phalanx is in antagonism, in some measure, to those who constitute the other unity, which holds by Christ, and has been drawn by Him from ‘out of the world.’

If we share Christ’s life, we must, necessarily, in some measure, share His fate. It is the typical example of what the world thinks of, and does to, goodness. And all who have ‘the Spirit of life which was in Jesus Christ’ for the animating principle of their lives, will, just in the measure in which they possess it, come under the same influences which carried Him to the Cross. In a world like this, it is impossible for a man to 'love righteousness and hate iniquity,' and to order his life accordingly, without treading on somebody's corns; being a rebuke to the opposite course of conduct, either interfering with men's self-complacency or with their interests. From the beginning the blind world has repaid goodness by antagonism and contempt.

And then our Lord touches another, and yet closely-connected, cause when He speaks of His selecting the Apostles, and drawing them out of the world, as a reason for the world's hostility. There are two groups, and the fundamental principles that underlie each are in deadly antagonism. In the measure in which you and I are Christians we are in direct opposition to all the maxims which rule the world and make it a world. What we believe to be precious it regards as of no account. What we believe to be fundamental truth it passes by as of little importance. Much which we feel to be wrong it regards as good. Our jewels are its tinsel, and its jewels are our tinsel. We and it stand in diametrical opposition of thought about God, about self, about duty, about life, about death, about the future; and that opposition goes right down to the bottom of things. However it may be covered over, there is a gulf, as in some of those American canons: the towering cliffs may be very near-only a yard or two seems to separate them; but they go down for thousands and thousands of feet, and never are any nearer each other, and between them at the bottom a black, sullen river flows. 'If ye were of the world, the world would love its own.' If it loves you, it is because ye are of it.

II. And so note, secondly, how this hostility is masked and modified.

There are a great many other bonds that unite men together besides the bonds of religious life or their absence. There are the domestic ties, there are the associations of commerce and neighbourhood, there are surface identities of opinion about many important things. The greater portion of our lives moves on this surface, whore all men are alike. 'If you tickle us, do we not laugh; if you wound us, do we not bleed?' We have all the same affections and needs, pursue the same avocations, do the same sort of things, and a large portion of every one's life is under the dominion of habit and custom, and determined by external circumstances. So there is a film of roofing thrown over the gulf. You can make up a crack in a wall with plaster after a fashion, and it will hide the solution of continuity that lies beneath. But let bad weather come, and soon the bricks gape apart as before. And so, as soon as we get down below the surface of things and grapple with the real, deep-lying, and formative principles of a life, we come to antagonism, just as they used to come to it long ago, though the form of it has become quite different.

Then there are other causes modifying this hostility. The world has got a dash of Christianity into it since Jesus Christ spoke. We cannot say that it is half Christianised, but some of the issues and remoter consequences of Christianity have permeated the general conscience, and the ethics of the Gospel are largely diffused in such a land as this. Thus Christian men and others have, to a large extent, a common code of morality, as long as they keep on the surface; and they not only do a good many things exactly alike, but do a great many things from substantially the same motives, and have the same way of looking at much. Thus the gulf is partly bridged over; and the hostility takes another form. We do not wrap Christians in pitch and stick them up for candles in the Emperor’s garden nowadays, but the same thing can be done in different ways. Newspaper articles, the light laugh of scorn, the whoop of exultation over the failures or faults of any prominent man that has stood out boldly on Christ’s side; all these indicate what lies below the surface, and sometimes not so very far below. Many a young man in a Manchester warehouse, trying to live a godly life, many a workman at his bench, many a commercial traveller in the inn or on the road, many a student on the college benches, has to find out that there is a great gulf between him and the man who sits next to him, and that he cannot be faithful to his Lord, and at the same time, down to the depths of his being, a friend of one who has no friendship to his Master.

Still another fact masks the antagonism, and that is, that after all, the world, meaning thereby the aggregate of godless men, has a conscience that responds to goodness, though grumblingly and reluctantly. After all, men do know that it is better to be good, that it is better and wiser to be like Christ, that it is nobler to live for Him than for self, and that consciousness cannot but modify to some extent the manifestations of the hostility, but it is there all the same, and whosoever will be a Christian after Christ’s pattern will find out that it is there.

Let a man for Christ’s sake avow unpopular beliefs, let him try honestly to act out the New Testament, let him boldly seek to apply Christian principles to the fashionable and popular sins of his class or of his country, let him in any way be ahead of the conscience of the majority, and what a chorus will be yelping at his heels! Dear brethren, the law still remains, ‘If any man will be a friend of the world he is at enmity with God.’

III. Thirdly, note how you may escape the hostility.

A half-Christianised world and a more than half-secularised Church get on well together. ‘When they do agree, their agreement is wonderful.’ And it is a miserable thing to reflect that about the average Christianity of this generation there is so very little that does deserve the antagonism of the world. Why should the world care to hate or trouble itself about a professing Church, large parts of which are only a bit of the world under another name? There is no need whatever that there should be any antagonism at all between a godless world and hosts of professing Christians. If you want to escape the hostility drop your flag, button your coat over the badge that shows that you belong to Christ, and do the things that the people round about you do, and you will have a perfectly easy and undisturbed life.

Of course, in the bad old slavery days, a Christianity that had not a word to say about the sin of slave-holding ran no risk of being tarred and feathered. Of course a Christianity in Manchester that winks hard at commercial immoralities is very welcome on the Exchange. Of course a Christianity that lets beer barrels alone may reckon upon having publicans for its adherents. Of course a Christianity that blesses flags and sings *Te Deums* over victories will get its share of the spoil. Why should the world hate, or persecute, or do anything but despise a Christianity like that, any more than a man need to care for a tame tiger that has had its claws pared? If the world can put a hook in the nostrils of leviathan, and make him play with its maidens, it will substitute good-nature, half contemptuous, for the hostility which our Master here predicts. It was out-and-out Christians that He said the world would hate; the world likes Christians that are like itself.

Christian men and women! be you sure that you deserve the hostility which my text predicts.

IV. And now, lastly, note how to meet this antagonism.

Reckon it as a sign and test of true union with Jesus Christ. And so, if ever, by reason of our passing at the call of duty or benevolence outside the circle of those who sympathise with our faith and fundamental ideas, we encounter it more manifestly than when we 'dwell among our own people,' let us count the 'reproach of Christ' as a treasure to be proud of, and to be guarded.

Be sure that it is your goodness and not your evils or your weakness, that men dislike. The world has a very keen eye for the inconsistencies and the faults of professing Christians, and it is a good thing that it has. The loftier your profession the sharper the judgment that is applied to you. Many well-meaning Christian people, by an injudicious use of Christian phraseology in the wrong place, and by the glaring contradiction between their prayers and their talks and their daily life, bring down a great deal of deserved hostility upon themselves and of discredit upon Christianity; and then they comfort themselves and say they are bearing the 'reproach of the Cross.' Not a bit of it! They are bearing the natural results of their own failings and faults. And it is for us to see to it that what provokes, if it does provoke, hostile judgments and uncharitable criticisms, insulting speeches and sarcasms, and the sense of our belonging to another regiment and having other objects, is our cleaving to Jesus Christ, and not the imperfections and the sins with which we so often spoil that cleaving. Be you careful for this, that it is Christ in you that men turn from, and not you yourself and your weakness and sin.

Meet this antagonism by not dropping your standard one inch. Keep the flag right at the masthead. If you begin to haul it down, where are you going to stop? Nowhere, until you have got it draggling in the mud at the foot. It is of no use to try to conciliate by compromise. All that we shall gain by that will be, as I have said, indifference and contempt; all that we shall gain will be a loss to the cause. A great deal is said in this day, and many efforts are being made-I cannot but think mistaken efforts-by Christian people to bridge over this gulf in the wrong way-that is, by trying to make out that

Christianity in its fundamental principles does approximate a great deal more closely to the things that the world goes by than it really does. It is all vain, and the only issue of it will be that we shall have a decaying Christianity and a dying spiritual life. Keep the flag up; emphasise and accentuate the things that the world disbelieves and denies, not pushing them to the 'falsehood of extremes,' but not by one jot diminishing the clearness of our testimony by reason of the world's unwillingness to receive it. Our victory is to be won only through absolute faithfulness to Christ's ideal.

And, lastly, meet hostility with unmoved, patient, Christlike, and Christ-derived love and sympathy. The patient sunshine pours upon the glaciers and melts the thick-ribbed ice at last into sweet water. The patient sunshine beats upon the mist-cloud and breaks up its edges and scatters it at the last. And our Lord here tells us that our experience, if we are faithful to Him, will be like His experience, in that some will hearken to our word though others will persecute, and to some our testimony will come as a message from God that draws them to the Lord Himself. These are our only weapons, brethren! The only conqueror of the world is the love that was in Christ breathed through us; the only victory over suspicion, contempt, alienation, is pleading, persistent, long-suffering, self-denying love. The only way to overcome the world's hostility is by turning the world into a church, and that can only be done when Christ's servants oppose pity to wrath, love to hate, and in the strength of His life who has won us all by the same process, seek to win the world for Him by the manifestation of His victorious love in our patient love.

Dear brethren, to which army do you belong? Which community is yours? Are you in Christ's ranks, or are you in the world's? Do you love Him back again, or do you meet His open heart with a closed one, and His hand, laden with blessings, with hands clenched in refusal? To which class do I belong? -it is the question of questions for us all; and I pray that you and I, won from our hatred by His love, and wooed out of our death by His life, and made partakers of His life by His death, may yield our hearts to Him, and so pass from out of the hostility and mistrust of a godless world into the friendships and peace of the sheltering Vine. And then we 'shall esteem the reproach of Christ' if it fall upon our heads, in however modified and mild a form, ‘greater riches than the treasures of Egypt,’ and ‘have respect unto the recompense of the reward.’

May it be so with us all!

90)John 15:21-25

John

THE WORLD’S HATRED, AS CHRIST SAW IT

Joh. 15:21 - Joh. 15:25.

Our Lord has been speaking of the world’s hostility to His followers, and tracing that to its hostility to Himself. In these solemn words of our text He goes still deeper, and parallels the relation which His disciples bear to Him and the consequent hostility that falls on them, with the relation which He bears to the Father and the consequent hostility that falls on Him: ‘They hate you because they hate Me.’ And then His words become sadder and pierce deeper, and with a tone of wounded love and disappointed effort and almost surprise at the world’s requital to Him, He goes on to say, ‘They hate Me, because they hate the Father.’

So, then, here we have, in very pathetic and solemn words, Christ’s view of the relation of the world to Him and to God.

I. The first point that He signalises is the world’s ignorance.

‘These things they will do unto you,’ and they will do them ‘for My name’s sake’; they will do them ‘because they know not Him that sent Me.’

‘The world,’ in Christ’s language, is the aggregate of godless men. Or, to put it a little more sharply, our Lord, in this context, gives in His full adhesion to that narrow view which divides those who have come under the influence of His truth into two portions. There is no mincing of the matter in the antithesis which Christ here draws; no hesitation, as if there were a great central mass, too bad for a blessing perhaps, but too good for a curse; which was neither black nor white, but neutral grey. No! however it may be with the masses beyond the reach of the dividing and revealing power of His truth, the men that come into contact with Him, like a heap of metal filings brought into contact with a magnet, mass themselves into two bunches, the one those who yield to the attraction, and the other those who do not. The one is ‘My disciples,’ and the other is ‘the world.’ And now, says Jesus Christ, all that mass that stands apart from Him, and, having looked upon Him with the superficial eye of those men round about Him at that day, or of the men who hear of Him now, have no real love to Him-have, as the underlying motive of their conduct and their feelings, a real ignorance of God, ‘They know not Him that sent Me.’

Our Lord assumes that He is so completely the Copy and Revealer of the divine nature as that any man that looks upon Him has had the opportunity of becoming acquainted with God, and that any man who turns away from Him has lost that opportunity. The God that the men who do not love Jesus Christ believe in, is not the Father that sent Him. It is a fragment, a distorted image tinted by the lens. The world has its conception of God; but outside of Jesus Christ and His manifestation of the whole divine nature, the world’s God is but a syllable, a fragment, a broken part of the perfect completeness. ‘The Father of an infinite majesty,’ and of as infinite a tenderness, the stooping God, the pitying God, the forgiving God, the loving God is known only where Christ is accepted. In other hearts He may be dimly hoped for, in other hearts He may be half believed in, in other hearts He may be thought possible; but hopes and anticipations and fears and doubts are not knowledge, and they who see not the light in Christ see but the darkness. Out of Him God is not known, and they that turn away from His beneficent manifestation turn their faces to the black north, from which no sun can shine. Brother, do you know God in Christ? Unless you do, you do not know the God who is.

But there is a deeper meaning in that word than simply the possession of true thoughts concerning the divine nature. We know God as we know one another; because God is a Person, as we are persons, and the only way to know persons is through familiar acquaintance and sympathy. So the world which turns away from Christ has no acquaintance with God.

This is a surface fact. Our Lord goes on to show what lies below it.

II. His second thought here is-the world’s ignorance in the face of Christ’s light is worse than ignorance; it is sin.

Mark how He speaks: ‘If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin.’ And then again: ‘If I had not done amongst them the works which none other men did, they had not had sin.’ So then He puts before us two forms of His manifestation of the divine nature, by His words and His works. Of these two He puts His words foremost, as being a deeper and more precious and brilliant revelation of what God is than are His miracles. The latter are subordinate, they come as a second source of illumination. Men who will not see the beauty and listen to the truth that lie in His word may perchance be led by His deed. But the word towers in its nature high above the work, and the miracle to the word is but like the picture in the child’s book to the text, fit for feeble eyes and infantile judgments, but containing far less of the revelation of God than the sacred words which He speaks. First the words, next the miracles.

But notice, too, how decisively, and yet simply and humbly and sorrowfully, our Lord here makes a claim which, on the lips of any but Himself, would have been mere madness of presumption. Think of any of us saying that our words made all the difference between innocent ignorance and criminality! Think of any of us saying that to listen to us, and not be persuaded, was the sin of sins! Think of any of us pointing to our actions and saying, In these God is so manifest that not to see Him augurs wickedness, and is condemnation! And yet Jesus Christ says all this. And, what is more wonderful, nobody wonders that He says it, and the world believes that He is saying the truth when He says it.

How does that come? There is only one answer; only one. His words were the illuminating manifestation of God, and His deeds were the plain and unambiguous operation of the divine hand then and there, only because He Himself was divine, and in Him ‘God was manifested in the flesh.’

But passing from that, notice how our Lord here declares that in comparison with the sin of not listening to His words, and being taught by His manifestation, all other sins dwindle into nothing. ‘If I had not spoken, they had not had sin.’ That does not mean, of course, that these men would have been clear of all moral delinquency; it does not mean that there would not have been amongst them crimes against their own consciences, crimes against the law written on their own hearts, crimes against the law of revelation. There were liars, impure men, selfish men, and men committing all the ordinary forms of human transgression amongst them. And yet, says Christ, black and bespattered as these natures are, they are white in comparison with the blackness of the man who, looking into His face, sees nothing there that he should desire. Beside the mountain belching out its sulphurous flame the little pimple of a molehill is nought. And so, says Christ, heaven heads the count of sins with this-unbelief in Me.

Ah, brother, as light grows responsibility grows, and this is the misery of all illumination that comes through Jesus Christ, that where it does not draw a man into His sweet love, and fill him with the knowledge of God which is eternal life, it darkens his nature and aggravates his condemnation, and lays a heavier burden upon his soul. The truth that the measure of light is the measure of guilt has many aspects. It turns a face of alleviation to the dark places of the earth; but just in the measure that it lightens the condemnation of the heathen, it adds weight to the condemnation of you men and women who are bathed in the light of Christianity, and all your days have had it streaming in upon you. The measure of the guilt is the brightness of the light. No shadows are so black as those which the intense sunshine of the tropics casts. And you and I live in the very tropical regions of divine revelation, and ‘if we turn away from Him that spoke on earth and speaketh from heaven, of how much sorer punishment, think you, shall we be thought worthy’ than those who live away out in the glimmering twilight of an unevangelised paganism, or who stood by the side of Jesus Christ when they had only His earthly life to teach them?

III. The ignorance which is sin is the manifestation of hatred.

Our Lord has sorrowfully contemplated the not knowing God, which in the blaze of His light can only come from wilful closing of the eyes, and is therefore the very sin of sins. But that, sad as it is, is not all which has to be said about that blindness of unbelief in Him. It indicates a rooted alienation of heart and mind and will from God, and is, in fact, the manifestation of an unconscious but real hatred. It is an awful saying, and one which the lips 'into which grace was poured' could not pronounce without a sigh. But it is our wisdom to listen to what it was His mercy to say.

Observe our Lord's identification of Himself with the Father, so as that the feelings with which men regard Him are, *ipso facto*, the feelings with which they regard the Father God. 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.' 'He that hath loved Me hath loved the Father.' 'He that hath hated Me hath hated the Father.' An ugly word-a word that a great many of us think far too severe and harsh to be applied to men who simply are indifferent to the divine love. Some say, 'I am conscious of no hatred. I do not pretend to be a Christian, but I do not hate God. Take the ordinary run of people round about us in the world; if you say God is not in all their thoughts, I agree with you; but if you say that they *hate* God, I do not believe it.'

Well, what do you think the fact that men go through their days and weeks and months and years, and have not God in all their thoughts, indicates as to the central feeling of their hearts towards God? Granted that there is not actual antagonism, because there is no thought at all, do you think it would be possible for a man who loved God to go on for a twelvemonth and never think of, or care to please, or desire to be near, the object that he loved? And inasmuch as, deep down at the bottom of our moral being, there is no such thing possible as indifference and a perfect equipoise in reference to God, it is clear enough, I think, that-although the word must not be pressed as if it meant conscious and active antagonism,-where there is no love there is hate.

If a man does not love God as He is revealed to him in Jesus Christ, he neither cares to please Him nor to think about Him, nor does he order his life in obedience to His commands. And if it be true that obedience is the very life-breath of love, disobedience or non-obedience is the manifestation of antagonism, and antagonism towards God is the same thing as hate.

Dear friends, I want some of my hearers to-day who have never honestly asked themselves the question of what their relation to God is, to go down into the deep places of their hearts and test themselves by this simple inquiry: 'Do I do anything to please Him? Do I try to serve Him? Is it a joy to me to be near Him? Is the thought of Him a delight, like a fountain in the desert or the cool shadow of a great rock in the blazing wilderness? Do I turn to Him as my Home, my Friend, my All? If I do not, am I not deceiving myself by fancying that I stand neutral?' There is no neutrality in a man's relation to God. It is one thing or other. 'Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.' 'The friendship of the world is enmity against God.'

IV. And now, lastly, note how our Lord here touches the deep thought that this ignorance, which is sin, and is more properly named hatred, is utterly irrational and causeless.

'All this will they do that it might be fulfilled which is written in their law, They hated Me without a cause.' One hears sighing through these words the Master's meek wonder that His love should be so met, and that the requital which He receives at men's hands, for such an unexampled and lavish outpouring of it, should be such a carelessness, reposing upon a hidden basis of such a rooted alienation.

'Without a cause'; yes! that suggests the deep thought that the most mysterious and irrational thing in men's whole history and experience is the way in which they recompense God in Christ for what He has done for them. 'Be astonished, O ye heavens! and wonder, O ye earth!' said one of the old prophets; the mystery of mysteries, which can give no account of itself to satisfy reason, which has no apology, excuse, or vindication, is just that when God loves me I do not love Him back again; and that when Christ pours out the whole fullness of His heart upon me, nay dull and obstinate heart gives back so little to Him who has given me so much.

'Without a cause.' Think of that Cross; think, as every poor creature on earth has a right to think, that he and she individually were in the mind and heart of the Saviour when He suffered and died, and then think of what we have brought Him for it. Do we not stand ashamed at-if I might use so trivial a word,-the absurdity as well as at the criminality of our requital? Causeless love on the one side, occasioned by nothing but itself, and causeless indifference on the other, occasioned by nothing but itself, are the two powers that meet in this mystery-men's rejection of the infinite love of God.

My friend, come away from the unreasonable people, come away from the men who can give no account of their attitude. Come away from those who pay benefits by carelessness, and a Love that died by an indifference that will not cast an eye upon that miracle of mercy, and let His love kindle the answering flame in your hearts. Then you will know God as only they who love Christ know Him, and in the sweetness of a mutual bond will lose the misery of self, and escape the deepening condemnation of those who see Christ on the Cross and do not care for the sight, nor learn by it to know the infinite tenderness and holiness of the Father that sent Him.

91)John 15:26-27

John

OUR ALLY

Joh. 15:26 - Joh. 15:27.

Our Lord has been speaking of a world hostile to His followers and to Him. He proceeds, in the words which immediately follow our text, to paint that hostility as aggravated even to the pitch of religious murder. But here He lets a beam of light in upon the darkness. These forlorn Twelve, listening to Him, might well have said, ‘Thou art about to leave us; how can we alone face this world in arms, with which Thou dost terrify us?’ And here He lets them see that they will not be left alone, but have a great Champion, clad in celestial armour, who, coming straight from God, will be with them and put into their hands a weapon, with which they may conquer the world, and turn it into a friend, and with which alone they must meet the world’s hate.

So, then, we have three things in this text; the great promise of an Ally in the conflict with the world; the witness which that Ally bears, to fortify against the world; and the consequent witness with which Christians may win the world.

I. Now consider briefly the first of these points, the great promise of an Ally in the conflict with the world.

I may touch, very lightly, upon the wonderful designation of this Champion-Friend whom Christ sends, because on former occasions in this course of sermons we have had to deal with the same thoughts, and there will be subsequent opportunities of recurring to them. But I may just emphasise in a few sentences the points which our Lord here signalises in regard to the Champion whom He sends. There is a double designation of that Spirit, ‘the Comforter’ and ‘the Spirit of truth.’ There is a double description of His mission, as being ‘sent’ by Jesus, and as ‘proceeding from the Father,’ and there is a single statement as to the position from which He comes to us. A word about each of these things.

I have already explained in former sermons that the notion of ‘Comforter,’ as it is understood in modern English, is a great deal too restricted and narrow to cover the whole ground of this great and blessed promise. The Comforter whom Christ sends is no mere drier of men’s tears and gentle Consoler of human sorrows, but He is a mightier Spirit than that, and the word by which He is described in our text, which means ‘one who is summoned to the side of another,’ conveys the idea of a helper who is brought to the man to be helped, in order to render whatever aid and succour that man’s weakness and circumstances may require. The verses before our text suggest what sort of aid and succour the disciples will need. They are to be as sheep in the midst of wolves. Their defenceless purity will need a Protector, a strong Shepherd. They stand alone amongst enemies. There must be some one beside them to fight for them, to shield and to encourage them, to be their Safety and their Peace. And that Paraclete, who is called to our side, comes for the special help which these special circumstances require, and is a strong Spirit who will be our Champion and our Ally, whatever antagonism may storm against us, and however strong and well-armed may be the assaulting legions of the world’s hate.

Then, still further, the other designation here of this strong Succourer and Friend is ‘the Spirit of truth,’ by which is designated, not so much His characteristic attribute, as rather the weapon which He wields, or the material with which He works. The ‘truth’ is His instrument; that is to say, the Spirit of God sent by Jesus Christ is the Strengthener, the Encourager, the Comforter, the Fighter for us and with us, because He wields that great body of truth, the perfect revelation of God, and man, and duty, and salvation, which is embodied in the incarnation and work of Jesus Christ our Lord. The truth is His weapon, and it is by it that He makes us strong.

Then, still further, there is a twofold description here of the mission of this divine Champion, as ‘sent’ by Christ, and ‘proceeding from the Father.’

In regard to the former, I need only remind you that, in a previous part of this wonderful discourse, our Lord speaks of that divine Spirit as being sent by the Father in His name and in answer to His prayer. The representation here is by no means antagonistic to, or diverse from, that other representation, but rather the fact that the Father and the Son, according to the deep teaching of Scripture, are in so far one as that ‘whatsoever the Son seeth the Father do that also the Son doeth likewise,’ makes it possible to attribute to Him the work which, in another place, is ascribed to the Father. In speaking of the *Persons* of the Deity, let us never forget that that word is only partially applicable to that ineffable Being, and that whilst with us it implies absolute separation of individuals, it does not mean such separation in the case of its imperfect transference to the mysteries of the divine nature; but rather, the Son doeth what the Father doeth, and therefore the Spirit is sent forth by the Father, and also the Son sends the Spirit.

But, on the other hand, we are not to regard that divine Spirit as merely a Messenger sent by another. He ‘proceeds from the Father.’ That word has been the battlefield of theological controversy, with which I do not purpose to trouble you now. For I do not suppose that in its use here it refers at all to the subject to which it has been sometimes applied, nor contains any kind of revelation of the eternal depths of the divine Nature and its relations to itself. What is meant here is the historical coming forth into human life of that divine Spirit. And, possibly, the word ‘proceeds’ is chosen in order to contrast with the word ‘sent,’ and to give the idea of a voluntary and personal action of the Messenger, who not only is *sent* by the Father, but of Himself *proceeds* on the mighty work to which He is destined.

Be that as it may, mark only, for the last thought here about the details of this great promise, that wonderful phrase, twice repeated in our Lord’s words, and emphasised by its verbal repetition in the two clauses, which in all other respects are so different-’from the Father.’ The word translated ‘ *from*’ is not the ordinary word so rendered, but rather designates *a position at the side of* than an *origin from*, and suggests much rather the intimate and ineffable union between Father, Son, and Spirit, than the source from which the Spirit comes. I touch upon these things very lightly, and gather them up into one sentence. Here, then, are the points. A Person who is spoken of as ‘He’-a divine Person whose home from of old has been close by the Father’s side-a Person whose instrument is the revealed truth ensphered and in germ in the facts of Christ’s incarnation and life-a divine Person, wielding the truth, who is sent by Christ as His Representative, and in some sense a continuance of His personal Presence-a divine, personal Spirit coming from the Father, wielding the truth, sent by Christ, and at the side of all the persecuted and the weak, all world-hated and Christian men, as their Champion, their Combatant, their Ally, their Inspiration, and their Power. Is not that enough to make the weakest strong? Is not that enough to make us ‘more than conquerors through Him that loved us’? All nations have legends of the gods fighting at the head of their armies, and through the dust of battle the white horses and the shining armour of the celestial champions have been seen. The childish dream is a historical reality. It is not we that fight, it is the Spirit of God that fighteth in us.

II. And so note, secondly, the witness of the Spirit which fortifies against the world.

‘He shall bear witness of Me.’ Now we must especially observe here that little phrase, ‘unto you.’ For that tells us at once that the witness which our Lord has in mind here is something which is done within the circle of the Christian believers, and not in the wide field of the world’s history or in nature. Of course it is a great truth that long before Jesus Christ, and to-day far beyond the limits of His name and knowledge, to say nothing of His faith and obedience, the Spirit of God is working. As of old He brooded over the chaotic darkness, ever labouring to turn chaos into order, and darkness into light, and deformity into beauty; so today, all over the field of humanity, He is operating. Grand as that truth is, it is not the truth here. What is spoken of here is something that is done in and on Christian men, and not even through them on the world, but in them for themselves. ‘He shall testify of Me’ to you.

Now it is to be noted, also, that the first and special application of these words is to the little group listening to Him. Never were men more desolate and beaten down than these were, in the prospect of Christ’s departure.

Never were men more utterly bewildered and dispirited than these were, in the days between His crucifixion and His resurrection. Think of them during His earthly life, their narrow understandings, their manifold faults, moral as well as intellectual. How little perception they had of anything that He said to them, as their own foolish questions abundantly show! How little they had drunk in His spirit, as their selfish and ambitious janglings amongst themselves abundantly show! They were but Jews like their brethren, believing, indeed, that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, but not knowing what it was that they believed, or of what kind the Messiah was in whom they were thus partially trusting. But they loved Him and were led by Him, and so they were brought into a larger place by the Spirit whom Christ sent.

What was it that made these dwarfs into giants in six weeks? What was it that turned their narrowness into breadth; that made them start up all at once as heroes, and that so swiftly matured them, as the fruits and flowers are ripened under tropical sunshine? The resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ had a great deal to do with the change; but they were not its whole cause. There is no explanation of the extraordinary transformation of these men as we see them in the pages of the Gospels, and as we find them on the pages of the Acts of the Apostles, except this-the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ as facts, and the Spirit on Pentecost as an indwelling Interpreter of the facts. He came, and the weak became strong, and the foolish wise, and the blind enlightened, and they began to understand-though it needed all their lives to perfect the teaching,-what it was that their ignorant hands had grasped and their dim perceptions had seen, when they touched the hands and looked upon the face of Jesus Christ. The witness of the Spirit of God working within them, working upon what they knew of the historical facts of Christ’s life, and interpreting these to them, was the explanation of their change and growth. And the New Testament is the product of that change. Christ’s life was the truth which the Spirit used, and a product of His teaching was these Epistles which we have, and which for us step into the place which the historical facts held for them, and become the instrument with which the Spirit of God will deepen our understanding of Christ and enlarge our knowledge of what He is to us.

So, dear friends, whilst here we have a promise which specially applies, no doubt, to these twelve Apostles, and the result of which in them was different from its result in us, inasmuch as the Spirit's teaching, recorded in the New Testament, becomes for us the authoritative rule of faith and practice, the promise still applies to each of us in a secondary and modified sense. For there is nothing in these great valedictory words of our Lord's which has not a universal bearing, and is not the revelation of a permanent truth in regard to the Christian Church. And, therefore, here we have the promise of a universal gift to all Christian men and women, of an actual divine Spirit to dwell with each of us, to speak in our hearts.

And what will He speak there? He will teach us a deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ. He will help us to understand better what He is. He will show us more and more of the whole sweep of His work, of the whole infinite truth for morals and religion, for politics and society, for time and for eternity, about men and about God, which is wrapped up in that great saying which we first of all, perhaps under the pressure of our own sense of sin, grasp as our deliverance from sin: 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' That is the sum of truth which the Spirit of God interprets to every faithful heart. And as the days roll on, and new problems rise, and new difficulties present themselves, and new circumstances emerge in our personal life, we find the truth, which we at first dimly grasped as life and salvation, opening out into wisdom and depth and meaning that we never dreamed of in the early hours. A Spirit that bears witness of Christ and will make us understand Him better every day we live, if we choose, is the promise that is given here, for all Christian men and women.

Then note that this inward witness of Christ's depth and preciousness is our true weapon and stay against a hostile world. A little candle in a room will make the lightning outside almost invisible; and if I have burning in my heart the inward experience and conviction of what Jesus Christ is and what He has done and will do for me-Oh! then, all the storm without may rage, and it will not trouble me.

If you take an empty vessel and bring pressure to bear upon it, in go the sides. Fill it, and they will resist the pressure. So with growing knowledge of Christ, and growing personal experience of His sweetness in our souls, we shall be able, untouched and undinted, to throw off the pressure which would otherwise have crushed us.

Therefore, dear friends, here is the true secret of tranquillity, in an age of questioning and doubt. Let me have that divine Voice speaking in my heart, as I may have, and no matter what questions may be doubtful, this is sure-'We know in whom we have believed'; and we can say, 'Settle all your controversies any way you like: one thing I know, and that divine Voice is ever saying it to me in my deepest consciousness-the Son of God is come and hath given us an understanding that we may know Him that is true; and we are in Him that is true.' Labour for more of this inward, personal conviction of the preciousness of Jesus Christ to strengthen you against a hostile world.

And remember that there are conditions under which this Voice speaks in our souls. One is that we attend to the instrument which the Spirit of God uses, and that is 'the truth.' If Christians will not read their Bibles, they need not expect to have the words of these Bibles interpreted and made real to them by any inward experience. If you want to have a faith which is vindicated and warranted by your daily experience, there is only one way to get it, and that is, to use the truth which the Spirit uses, and to bring yourself into contact, continual and reverent and intelligent, with the great body of divine truth that is conveyed in these authoritative words of the Spirit of God speaking through the first witnesses.

And there must be moral discipline too. Laziness, worldliness, the absorption of attention with other things, self-conceit, prejudice, and, I was going to say, almost above all, the taking of our religion and religious opinions at secondhand from men and teachers and books-all these stand in the way of our hearing the Spirit of God when He speaks. Come away from the babble and go by yourself, and take your Bibles with you, and read them, and meditate upon them, and get near the Master of whom they speak, and the Spirit which uses the truth will use it to fortify you.

III. And, lastly, note the consequent witness with which the Christian may win the world.

‘And ye also shall bear witness of Me, because ye have been with Me from the beginning.’ That ‘also’ has, of course, direct reference to the Apostles’ witness to the facts of our Lord’s historical appearance, His life, His death, His resurrection, and His ascension; and therefore their qualification was simply the companionship with Him which enabled them to say, ‘We saw what we tell you; we were witnesses from the beginning.’

But then, again, I say that there is no word here that belongs only to the Apostles; it belongs to us all, and so here is the task of the Christian Church in all its members. They receive the witness of the Spirit, and they are Christ’s witnesses in the world.

Note what we have to do-to bear witness; not to argue, not to adorn, but simply to attest. Note what we have to attest-the fact, not of the historical life of Jesus Christ, because we are not in a position to be witnesses of that, but the fact of His preciousness and power, and the fact of our own experience of what He has done for us. Note, that that is by far the most powerful agency for winning the world. You can never make men angry by saying to them, ‘We have found the Messias.’ You cannot irritate people, or provoke them into a controversial opposition when you say, ‘Brother, let me tell you my experience. I was dark, sad, sinful, weak, solitary, miserable; and I got light, gladness, pardon, strength, companionship, and a joyful hope. I was blind-you remember me when my eyes were dark, and I sat begging outside the Temple; I was blind, now I see-look at my eyeballs.’ We can all say that. This is the witness that needs no eloquence, no genius, no anything except honesty and experience; and whosoever has tasted and felt and handled of the Word of Life may surely go to a brother and say, ‘Brother, I have eaten and am satisfied. Will you not help yourselves?’ We can all do it, and we ought to do it. The Christian privilege of being witnessed to by the Spirit of God in our hearts brings with it the Christian duty of being witnesses in our turn to the world. That is our only weapon against the hostility which godless humanity bears to ourselves and to our Master. We may win men by that; we can win them by nothing else. ‘Ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord, and My servants whom I have chosen.’

Christian friend, listen to the Master, who says, ‘Him that confesseth Me before men, him will I also confess before My Father in heaven.’

92)John 16:1-6

John

WHY CHRIST SPEAKS

Joh. 16:1 - Joh. 16:6.

The unbroken flow of thought, and the many subtle links of connection between the parts, of these inexhaustible last words of our Lord make any attempt at grouping them into sections more or less unsatisfactory and artificial. But I have ventured to throw these, perhaps too many, verses together for our consideration now, because a phrase of frequent recurrence in them manifestly affords a key to their main subject. Notice how our Lord four times repeats the expression, 'These things have I spoken unto you.' He is not so much adding anything new to His words, as rather contemplating the reasons for His speech now, the reasons for His silence before, and the imperfect apprehension of the things spoken which His disciples had, and which led to their making His announcement, thus imperfectly understood, an occasion for sorrow rather than for joy. There is a kind of landing place or pause here in the ascending staircase. Our Lord meditates for Himself, and invites us to meditate with Him, rather upon His past utterances than upon anything additional to them. So, then, whilst it is true that we have in two of these verses a repetition, in a somewhat more intense and detailed form, of the previous warnings of the hostility of the world, in the main the subject of the present section is that which I have indicated. And I take the fourfold recurrence of that clause to which I have pointed as marking out for us the leading ideas that we are to gather from these words.

I. There is, first, our Lord's loving reason for His speech.

This is given in a double form. 'These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended.' And, again, 'These things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them.' These two statements substantially coalesce and point to the same idea.

They are separated, as I have said, by a reiteration, in more emphatic form, of the dark prospect which He has been holding out to His disciples. He tells them that the world which hates them is to be fully identified with the apostate Jewish Church. 'The synagogue' is for them 'the world.' There is a solemn lesson in that. The organised body that calls itself God's Church and House may become the most rampant enemy of Christ's people, and be the truest embodiment on the face of the earth of all that He means by 'the world.' A formal church is the true world always; and to-day as then. And such a body will do the cruellest things and believe that it is offering up Christ's witnesses as sacrifices to God. That is partly an aggravation and partly an alleviation of the sin. It is possible that the inquisitor and the man in the *San Benito*, whom he ties to the stake, may shake hands yet at His side up yonder. But a church which has become, the world will do its persecution and think that it is worship, and call the burning of God's people an *auto-da-fe* [act of faith]; and the bottom of it all is that, in the blaze of light, and calling themselves God's, 'they do not know' either God or Christ. They do not know the one because they will not know the other.

But that is all parenthetical in the present section, and so I say nothing more about it; and ask you, rather, just to look at the loving reasons which Christ here suggests for His present speech-'that ye should not be offended,' or stumble. He warns them of the storm before it bursts, lest, when it bursts, it should sweep them away from their moorings. Of course, there could be nothing more productive of intellectual bewilderment, and more likely to lead to doubt as to one's own convictions, than to find oneself at odds with the synagogue about the question of the Messiah. A modest man might naturally say, 'Perhaps I am wrong and they are right.' A coward would be sure to say, 'I will sink my convictions and fall in with the majority.' The stumbling-block for these first Jewish converts, in the attitude of the whole mass of the nation towards Christ and His pretensions, is one of such a magnitude as we cannot, by any exercise of our imagination, realise. 'And,' says Christ, 'the only way by which you will ever get over the temptation to intellectual doubt or to cowardly apostasy that arises from your being thrown out of sympathy with the whole mass of your people, and the traditions of the generations, is to reflect that I told you it would be so, before it came to pass.'

Of course all that has a special bearing upon those to whom it was originally addressed, and then it has a secondary bearing upon Christians, whose lot it is to live in a time of actual persecution. But that does not in the slightest degree destroy the fact that it also has a bearing upon every one of us. For if you and I are Christian people, and trying to live like our Master, and to do as He would have us to do, we too shall often have to stand in such a very small minority, and be surrounded by people who take such an entirely opposite view of duty and of truth, as that we shall be only too much disposed to give up and falter in the clearness, fullness, and braveness of our utterance, and think, ‘Well, perhaps after all it is better for me to hold my tongue.’

And then, besides this, there are all the cares and griefs which befall each of us, with regard to which also, as well as with regard to the difficulties and dangers and oppositions which we may meet with in a faithful Christian life, the principles of my text have a distinct and direct application. He has told us in order that we might not stumble, because when the hour comes and the sorrow comes with it, we remember that He told us all about it before.

It is one of the characteristics of Christianity that Jesus Christ does not try to enlist recruits by highly-coloured, rosy pictures of the blessing and joy of serving Him, keeping His hand all the while upon the weary marches and the wounds and pains. He tells us plainly at the beginning, ‘If you take My yoke upon you, you will have to carry a heavy burden. You will have to abstain from a great many things that you would like to do. You will have to do a great many things that your flesh will not like. The road is rough, and a high wall on each side. There are lovely flowers and green pastures on the other side of the hedge, where it is a great deal easier walking upon the short grass than it is upon the stony path. The roadway is narrow, and the gateway is very strait, but the track goes steadily up. Will you accept the terms and come in and walk upon it?’

It is far better and nobler, and more attractive also, to tell us frankly and fully the difficulties and dangers than to try and coax us by dwelling on pleasures and ease. Jesus Christ will have no service on false pretences, but will let us understand at the beginning that if we serve under His flag we have to make up our minds to hardships which otherwise we may escape, to antagonisms which otherwise will not be provoked, and to more than an ordinary share of sorrow and suffering and pain. ‘Through much tribulation we must enter the Kingdom.’

And the way by which all these troubles and cares, whether they be those incident and peculiar to Christian life, or those common to humanity, can best be met and overcome, is precisely by this thought, ‘The Master has told us before.’ Sorrows anticipated are more easily met. It is when the vessel is caught with all its sails set that it is almost sure to go down, and, at all events, sure to be badly damaged in the typhoon. But when the barometer has been watched, and its fall has given warning, and everything movable has been made fast, and every spare yard has been sent below, and all tightened up and ship-shape-then she can ride out the storm. Forewarned is forearmed. Savages think, when an eclipse comes, that a wolf has swallowed the sun, and it will never come out again. We know that it has all been calculated beforehand, and since we know that it is coming to-morrow, when it does come, it is only a passing darkness. Sorrow anticipated is sorrow half overcome; and when it falls on us, the bewilderment, as if ‘some strange thing had happened,’ will be escaped when we can remember that the Master has told us it all beforehand.

And again, sorrow foretold gives us confidence in our Guide. We have the chart, and as we look upon it we see marked ‘waterless country,’ ‘pathless rocks,’ ‘desert and sand,’ ‘wells and palm-trees.’ Well, when we come to the first of these, and find ourselves, as the map says, in the waterless country; and when, as we go on step by step, and mile after mile, we find it is all down there, we say to ourselves, ‘The remainder will be accurate, too,’ and if we are in ‘Marah’ to-day, where ‘the water is bitter,’ and nothing but the wood of the tree that grows there can ever sweeten it, we shall be at ‘Elim’ to-morrow, where there are ‘the twelve wells and the seventy palm trees.’ The chart is right, and the chart says that the end of it all is ‘the land that flows with milk and honey.’ He *has* told us *this*; if there had been anything worse than this, He would have told us *that*. ‘If it were not so I would have told you.’ The sorrow foretold deepens our confidence in our Guide.

Sorrow that comes punctually in accordance with His word plainly comes in obedience to His will. Our Lord uses a little word in this context which is very significant. He says, ‘When *their hour* is come.’

‘Their hour’-the time allotted to them. Allotted by whom? Allotted by Him. He could tell that they would come, because it was as His instruments that they came. ‘Their time’ was His appointment. It was only an ‘hour,’ a definite, appointed, and brief period in accordance with His loving purpose.

It takes all sorts of weathers to make a year; and after all the sorts of weathers are run out, the year's results are realised and the calm comes. And so the good old hymn, with its rhythm that speaks at once of fear and triumph, has caught the true meaning of these words of our Lord's-

'Why should I complain
Of want or distress,
Temptation or pain?
He told me no less.'

'These things have I spoken unto you that ye might not be offended.'

II. Still further, note our Lord's loving reasons for past silence. 'These things I said not unto you from the beginning, because I was with you.'

Of course there had been in His early ministry hints, and very plain references, to persecutions and trials, but we must not restrict the 'these things' of my text to that only, but rather include the whole of the previous chapter, in which He sets the sorrow and the hostility which His servants have to endure in their true light, as being the consequences of their union with Him and of the closeness and the identity of life and fate between the Vine and the branches. In so systematic and detailed fashion, and with such an exhibition of the grounds of its necessity, our Lord had not spoken of the world's hostility in His earlier ministry, but had reserved it to these last moments, and the reason why He had given but passing hints before was because He was there. What a superb confidence that expresses in His ability to shield His poor followers from all that might hurt and harm them! He spreads the ample robe of His protection over them, or rather, to go back to His own metaphor, 'as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings' so He gathers them to His own breast, and stretches over them that which is at once protection and warmth, and keeps them safe. As long as He is there, no harm can come to them. But He is going away, and so it is time to speak, and to speak more plainly.

That, too, yields for us, dear brethren, truths that apply to us quite as much as to that little group of silent listeners. For us, too, difficulties and sorrows, though foretold in general terms, are largely hidden till they are near. It would have been of little use for Christ to have spoken more plainly in those early days of His ministry. The disciples managed to forget and to misunderstand His plain utterances, for instance, about His own death and resurrection. There needs to be an adaptation between the hearing ear and the spoken word, in order that the word spoken should be of use, and there are great tracts of Scripture dealing with the sorrows of life, which lie perfectly dark and dead to us, until experience vitalises them. The old Greeks used to send messages from one army to another by means of a roll of parchment twisted spirally round a baton, and then written on. It was perfectly unintelligible when it fell into a man's hands that had not a corresponding baton to twist it upon. Many of Christ's messages to us are like that. You can only understand the utterances when life gives you the frame round which to wrap them, and then they flash up into meaning, and we say at once, 'He told us it all before, and I scarcely knew that He had told me, until this moment when I need it.'

Oh, it is merciful that there should be a gradual unveiling of what is to come to us, that the road should wind, and that we should see so short a way before us. Did you never say to yourselves, 'If I had known all this before, I do not think I could have lived to face it'? And did you not feel how good and kind and loving it was, that in the revelation there had been concealment, and that while Jesus Christ had told us in general terms that we must expect sorrows and trials, this specific form of sorrow and trial had not been foreseen by us until we came close to it? Thank God for the loving reticence, and for the as loving eloquence of His speech and of His silence, with regard to sorrow.

And take this further lesson, that there ought to be in all our lives times of close and blessed communion with that Master, when the sense of His presence with us makes all thought of sorrows and trials in the future out of place and needlessly disturbing. If these disciples had drunk in the spirit of Jesus Christ when they were with Him, then they would not have been so bewildered when He left them. When He was near them there was something better for them to do than to be 'over exquisite to cast the fashion of uncertain evils' in the future-namely, to grow into His life, to drink in the sweetness of His presence, to be moulded into the likeness of His character, to understand Him better, and to realise His nearness more fully. And, dear brethren, for us all there are times-and it is our own fault if these are not very frequent and blessed-when thus, in such an hour of sweet communion with the present Christ, the future will be all radiant and calm, if we look into it, or, better, the present will be so blessed that there will be no need to think of the future. These men in the upper chamber, if they had learnt all the lessons that He was teaching them then, would not have gone out, to sleep in Gethsemane, and to tell lies in the high priest's hall, and to fly like frightened sheep from the Cross, and to despair at the tomb. And you and I, if we sit at His table, and keep our hearts near Him, eating and drinking of that heavenly manna, shall 'go in the strength of that meat forty days into the wilderness,' and say-

'E'en let the unknown to-morrow
Bring with it what it may.'

III. Lastly, I must touch, for the sake of completeness, upon the final thought in these pregnant verses, and that is, the imperfect apprehension of our Lord's words, which leads to sorrow instead of joy.

'Now I go My way to Him that sent Me; and none of you asketh Me, Whither goest Thou? But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart.' He had been telling them-and it was the one definite idea that they gathered from His words-that He was going. And what did they say? They said, 'Going! What is to become of *us*?' If there had been a little less selfishness and a little more love, and if they had put their question, 'Going! What is to become of *Him*?' then it would not have been sorrow that would have filled their hearts, but a joy that would have flooded out all the sorrow, 'and the winter of their discontent' would have been changed into 'glorious summer,' because He was going to Him that sent Him; that is to say, He was going with His work done and His message accomplished. And therefore, if they could only have overlooked their own selves, and the bearing of His departure, as it seemed to them, on themselves, and have thought of it a little as it affected Him, they would have found that all the oppressive and the dark in it would have disappeared, and they would have been glad.

Ah, dear brethren, that gives us a thought on which I can but touch now, that the steadfast contemplation of the ascended Christ, who has gone to the

Father, having finished His work, is the sovereign antidote against all sense of separation and solitude, the sovereign power by which we may face a hostile world, the sovereign cure for every sorrow. If we could live in the light of the great triumphant, ascended Lord, then, Oh, how small would the babble of the world be. If the great White Throne, and He that sits upon it, were more distinctly before us, then we could face anything, and sorrow would 'become a solemn scorn of ills,' and all the transitory would be reduced to its proper insignificance, and we should be emancipated from fear and every temptation to unfaithfulness and apostasy. Look up to the Master who has gone, and as the dying martyr outside the city wall 'saw the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing'-having sprung to His feet to help His poor servant-'at the right hand of God,' so with that vision in our eyes and the light of that Face flashing upon our faces, and making them like the angels', we shall be masters of grief and care, and pain and trial, and enmity and disappointment, and sorrow and sin, and feel that the absent Christ is the present Christ, and that the present Christ is the conquering power in us.

Dear brethren, there is nothing else that will make us victors over the world and ourselves. If we can grasp Him by our faith and keep ourselves near Him, then union with Him as of the Vine and the branches, which will result inevitably in suffering here, will result as inevitably in joy hereafter. For He will never relax the adamantine grasp of His strong hand until He raises us to Himself, and 'if so be that we suffer with Him we shall also be glorified together.'

93)John 16:7-8

John

THE DEPARTING CHRIST AND THE COMING SPIRIT

Joh. 16:7 - Joh. 16:8.

We read these words in the light of all that has gone after, and to us they are familiar and almost thread-bare. But if we would appreciate their sublimity, we must think away nineteen centuries, and all Christendom, and recall these eleven poor men and their peasant Leader in the upper room. They were not very wise, nor very strong, and outside these four walls there was scarcely a creature in the whole world that had the least belief either in Him or in them. They had everything against them, and most of all their own hearts. They had nothing for them but their Master's promise. Their eyes had been dimmed by their sorrowful hearts, so that they could not see the truth which He had been trying to reveal to them; and His departure had presented itself to them only as it affected themselves, and therefore had brought a sense of loss and desolation.

And now He bids them think of that departure, as it affects themselves, as pure gain. 'It is for your profit that I go away.' He explains that staggering statement by the thought which He has already presented to them, in varying aspects, of His departure as the occasion for the coming of that Great Comforter, who, when He is come, will through them work upon the world, which knows neither them nor Him. They are to go forth 'as sheep in the midst of wolves,' but in this promise He tells them that they will become the judges and accusers of the world, which, by the Spirit dwelling in them, they will be able to overcome, and convict of error and of fault.

We must remember that the whole purpose of the words which we are considering now is the strengthening of the disciples in their conflict with the world, and that, therefore, the operations of that divine Spirit which are here spoken of are operations carried on by their instrumentality and through the word which they spake. With that explanation we can consider the great words before us.

I. The first thing that strikes me about them is that wonderful thought of the gain to Christ's servants from Christ's departure. 'It is expedient for you that I go away.'

I need not enlarge here upon what we have had frequent occasion to remark, the manner in which our Lord here represents the complex whole of His death and ascension as being His own voluntary act. He 'goes.' He is neither taken away by death nor rapt up to heaven in a whirlwind, but of His own exuberant power and by His own will He goes into the region of the grave and thence to the throne. Contrast the story of His ascension with that Old Testament story of the ascension of Elijah. One needed the chariot of fire and the horses of fire to bear him up into the sphere, all foreign to his mortal and earthly manhood; the Other needed no outward power to lift Him, nor any vehicle to carry Him from this dim spot which men call earth, but slowly, serenely, upborne by His own indwelling energy, and rising as to His native home, He ascended up on high, and went where the very manner of His going proclaimed that He had been before. ‘If *I go* away, I will send Him.’

But that is a digression. What we are concerned with now is the thought of Christ’s departure as being a step in advance, and a positive gain, even to those poor, bewildered men who were clustering round Him, depending absolutely upon Himself, and feeling themselves orphaned and helpless without Him.

Now if we would feel the full force and singularity of this saying of our Lord’s, let us put side by side with it that other one, ‘I have a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless, to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.’ Why is it that the Apostle says, ‘Though I want to go I am bound to stay?’ and why is it that the Master says, ‘It is for your good that I am going,’ but because of the essential difference in the relation of the two to the people who are to be left, and in the continuance of the work of the two after they had departed? Paul knew that when he went, whatever befell those whom he loved and would fain help, he could not stretch a hand to do anything for them. He knew that death dropped the portcullis between him and them, and, whatever their sore need on the one side of the iron gate, he on the other could not succour or save. Jesus Christ said, ‘It is better for you that I should go,’ because He knew that all His influences would flow through the grated door unchecked, and that, departed, He would still be the life of them that trusted in Him; and, having left them, would come near them, by the very act of leaving them.

And so there is here indicated for us-as we shall have occasion to see more fully, presently,-in that one singular and anomalous fact of Christ’s departure being a positive gain to those that trust in Him, the singularity and uniqueness of His work for them and His relation to them.

The words mean a great deal more than the analogies of our relation to dear ones or great ones, loves or teachers, who have departed, might suggest. Of course we all know that it is quite true that death reveals to the heart the sweetness and the preciousness of the departed ones, and that its refining touch manifests to our blind eyes what we did not see so clearly when they were beside us. We all know that it needs distance to measure men, and the dropping away of the commonplace and the familiar ere we can see ‘the likeness’ of our contemporaries ‘to the great of old.’ We have to travel across the plains before we can measure the relative height of the clustered mountains, and discern which is manifestly the loftiest. And all *this* is true in reference to Jesus Christ and His relation to us. But that does not go half-way towards the understanding of such words as these of my text, which tell us that so singular and solitary is His relation to us that the thing which ends the work of all other men, and begins the decay of their influence, begins for Him a higher form of work and a wider sweep of sway. He is nearer us when He leaves us, and works with us and in us more mightily from the throne than He did upon the earth. Who is He of whom this is true? And what kind of work is it of which it is true that death continues and perfects it?

So let me note, before I pass on, that there is a great truth here for us. We are accustomed to look back to our Lord’s earthly ministry, and to fancy that those who gathered round Him, and heard Him speak, and saw His deeds, were in a better position for loving Him and trusting Him than you and I are. It is all a mistake. We have lost nothing that they had which was worth the keeping; and we have gained a great deal which they had not. We have not to compare our relation to Christ with theirs, as we might do our relation to some great thinker or poet, with that of his contemporaries, but we have Christ in a better form, if I may so speak; and we, on whom the ends of the world are come, may have a deeper and a fuller and a closer intimacy with Him than was possible for men whose perceptions were disturbed by sense, and who had to pierce through ‘the veil, that is to say, His flesh,’ before they reached the Holy of Holies of His spirit.

II. Note, secondly, the coming for which Christ’s going was needful, and which makes that going a gain.

‘If I go not away the Comforter will not come unto you, but if I depart I will send Him unto you.’ Now we have already, in former sermons, touched upon many of the themes which would naturally be suggested by these words, and therefore I do not propose to dwell upon them at any length. There is only one point to which I desire to refer briefly here, and that is the necessity which here seems to be laid down by our Lord for His departure, in order that that divine Spirit may come and dwell with men. That necessity goes down deeper into the mysteries of the divinity and of the processes and order of divine revelation than it is given to us to follow. But though we can only speak superficially and fragmentarily about such a matter, let me just remind you, in the briefest possible words, of what Scripture plainly declares to us with regard to this high and, in its fullness, ineffable matter. It tells us that the complete work of Jesus Christ-not merely His coming upon earth, or His life amongst men, but also His sacrificial death upon the Cross-was the necessary preliminary, and in some sense procuring cause, of the gift of that divine Spirit. It tells us-and there we are upon ground on which we can more fully verify the statement-that His work must be completed ere that Spirit can be sent, because the word is the Spirit's weapon for the world, and the revelation of God in Jesus must be ended, ere the application of that revelation, which is the Spirit's work, can be begun in its full energy.

It tells us, further, [and there our eyesight fails, and we have to accept what we are told], that Jesus Christ must ascend on high and be at the right hand of God, ere He can pour down upon men the fullness of the Spirit which dwelt uncommunicated in Him in the time of His earthly humiliation. 'Thou hast ascended up on high,' and therefore 'Thou hast given gifts to men.' We accept the declaration, not knowing all the deep necessity in the divine Nature on which it rests, but believing it, because He in whom we have confidence has declared it to us.

And we are further told-and there our experience may, in some degree, verify the statement,-that only those, in whose hearts there is union to Jesus Christ by faith in His completed work and ascended glory, are capable of receiving that divine gift. So every way, both as regards the depths of Deity and the processes of revelation, and as regards the power of the humanity of Christ to impart His Spirit, and as regards the capacity of us poor recipients to receive it, the words of my text seem to be confirmed, and we can, though not with full insight, at any rate with full faith, accept the statement, ‘If I go not away, the Comforter will not come to you.’

That coming is gain. It teaches a deeper knowledge of Him. It teaches and gives a fuller possession of the life of righteousness which is like His own. It draws us into the fellowship of the Son.

III. Lastly, note here the threefold conflict of the Spirit through the Church with the world.

‘When He is come He will convict the world’ in respect ‘of sin and of righteousness and of judgment.’ By the ‘reproof,’ or rather ‘conviction,’ which is spoken about here, is meant the process by which certain facts are borne in upon men’s understanding and consciences, and, along with these facts, the conviction of error and fault in reference to them. It is no mere process of demonstration of an intellectual truth, but it is a process of conviction of error in respect to great moral and religious truth, and of manifestation of the truths in regard to which the error and the sin have been committed. So we have here the triple division of the great work which the divine Spirit does, through Christian men and women, in the world.

‘He shall convict the world of sin.’ The outstanding first characteristic of the whole Gospel message is the new gravity which it attaches to the fact of sin, the deeper meaning which it gives to the word, and the larger scope which it shows its blighting influences to have had in humanity. Apart from the conviction of sin by the Spirit using the word proclaimed by disciples, the world has scarcely a notion of what sin is, its inwardness, its universality, the awfulness of it as a fact affecting man’s whole being and all his relations to God. All these conceptions are especially the product of Christian truth. Without it, what does the world know about the poison of sin? And what does it care about the poison until the conviction has been driven home to the reluctant consciousness of mankind by the Spirit wielding the word? This conviction comes first in the divine order. I do not say that the process of turning a man of the world into a member of Christ’s Church always begins, as a matter of fact, with the conviction of sin. I believe it most generally does so; but without insisting upon a pedantic adherence to a sequence, and without saying a word about the depth and intensity of such a conviction, I am here to assert that a Christianity which is not based upon the conviction of sin is an impotent Christianity, and will be of very little use to the men who profess it, and will have no power to propagate itself in the world. Everything in our conception of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and of His work for us depends upon what we think about this primary fact of man's condition, that he is a sinful man. The root of all heresy lies there. Every error that has led away men from Jesus Christ and His Cross may be traced up to defective notions of sin and a defective realisation of it. If I do not feel as the Bible would have me feel, that I am a sinful man, I shall think differently of Jesus Christ and of my need of Him, and of what He is to me. Christianity may be to me a system of beautiful ethics, a guide for life, a revelation of much precious truth, but it will not be the redemptive power without which I am lost. And Jesus Christ will be shorn of His brightest beams, unless I see Him as the Redeemer of my soul from sin, which else would destroy and is destroying it. Is Christianity merely a better morality? Is it merely a higher revelation of the divine Nature? Or does it *do* something as well as *say* something, and what does it do? Is Jesus Christ only a Teacher, a Wise Man, an Example, a Prophet, or is He the Sacrifice for the sins of the world? Oh, brethren, we must begin where this text begins; and our whole conception of Him and of His work for us must be based upon this fact, that we are sinful and lost, and that Jesus Christ, by His sweet and infinite love and all-powerful sacrifice, is our soul's Redeemer and our only Hope. The world has to be convicted and convinced of sin as the first step to its becoming a Church.

The next step of this divine Spirit's conviction is that which corresponds to the consciousness of sin, the dawning upon the darkened soul of the blessed sunrise of righteousness. The triple subjects of conviction must necessarily belong to the world of which our Lord is speaking. It must be the world that is convinced, and it must be the world's sin and the world's righteousness and the world's judgment of which my text speaks. How, then, can there follow on the conviction of sin as mine a conviction of righteousness as mine? I know but one way, 'Not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is of God through faith.' When a man is convinced of sin, there will dawn upon the heart the wondrous thought that a righteousness may be his, given to him from above, which will sweep away all his sin and make him righteous as Christ is righteous. That conviction will never awake in its blessed and hope-giving power unless it be preceded by the other. It is of no use to exhibit medicine to a man who does not know himself diseased. It is of no use to talk about righteousness to a man who has not found himself to be a sinner. And it is of as little use to talk to a man of sin unless you are ready to tell him of a righteousness that will cover all his sin. The one conviction without the other is misery, the second without the first is irrelevant and far away.

The world as a world has but dim and inadequate conceptions of what righteousness is. A Pharisee is its type, or a man that keeps a clean life in regard to great transgressions; a whited sepulchre of some sort or other. The world apart from Christ has but languid desires after even the poor righteousness that it understands, and the world apart from Christ is afflicted by a despairing scepticism as to the possibility of ever being righteous at all. And there are men listening to me now in every one of these three conditions-not caring to be righteous, not understanding what it is to be righteous, and cynically disbelieving that it is possible to be so. My brother, here comes the message to you-first, Thou art sinful; second, God’s righteousness lies at thy side to take and wear if thou wilt.

The last of these triple convictions is ‘judgment.’ If there be in the world these two things both operating, sin and righteousness, and if the two come together, what then? If there is to be a collision, as there must be, which will go down? Christ tells us that this divine Spirit will teach us that righteousness will triumph over sin, and that there will be a judgment which will destroy that which is the weaker, though it seems the stronger. Now I take it that the judgment which is spoken about here is not merely a future retribution beyond the grave, but that, whilst that is included, and is the principal part of the idea, we are always to regard the judgment of the hereafter as being prepared for by the continual judgment here.

And so there are two thoughts, a blessed one and a terrible one, wrapped up in that word-a blessed thought for us sinful men, inasmuch as we may be sure that the divine righteousness, which is given to us, will judge us and separate us day by day from our sins; and a terrible thought, inasmuch as if I, a sinful man, do not make friends with and ally myself to the divine righteousness which is proffered to me, I shall one day have to front it on the other side of the flood, when the contact must necessarily be to me destruction.

Time does not allow me to dwell upon these solemn matters as I fain would, but let me gather all I have been feebly trying to say to you now into one sentence. This threefold conviction, in conscience, understanding, and heart, of sin which is mine, of righteousness which may be mine, and of judgment which must be mine-this threefold conviction is that which makes the world into a Church. It is the message of Christianity to each of us. How do you stand to it? Do you hearken to the Spirit who is striving to convince you of these? Or do you gather yourselves together into an obstinate, close-knit unbelief, or a loose-knit indifference which is as impenetrable? Beware that you resist not the Spirit of God!

94)John 16:9-11

John

THE CONVICTING FACTS

Joh. 16:9 - Joh. 16:11.

Our Lord has just been telling His disciples how He will equip them, as His champions, for their conflict with the world. A divine Spirit is coming to them who will work in them and through them; and by their simple and unlettered testimony will ‘convict,’ or convince, the mass of ungodly men of error and crime in regard to these three things-sin, righteousness, and judgment.

He now advances to tell them that this threefold conviction which they, as counsel for the prosecution, will establish as against the world at the bar, will be based upon three facts: first, a truth of experience; second, a truth of history; third, a truth of revelation, all three facts having reference to Jesus Christ and His relation to men.

Now these three facts are-the world’s unbelief; Christ’s ascension and session at the right hand of God; and the ‘judgment of the prince of this world.’ If we remember that what our Lord is here speaking about is the work of a divine Spirit through the ministration of believing men, then Pentecost with its thousands ‘pricked to the heart,’ and the Roman ruler who trembled, as the prisoner ‘reasoned of righteousness and judgment to come,’ are illustrations of the way in which the humble disciples towered above the pride and strength of the world, and from criminals at its bar became its accusers.

These three facts are the staple and the strength of the Christian ministry. These three facts are misapprehended, and have failed to produce their right impression, unless they have driven home to our consciences and understandings the triple conviction of my text. And so I come to you with the simple questions which are all-important for each of us: Have you looked these three facts in the face-unbelief, the ascended Christ, a judged prince of the world, and have you learned their meaning as it bears on your own character and religious life?

I. The first point here is the rejection of Jesus Christ as the climax of the world’s sin.

Strange words! They are in some respects the most striking instance of that gigantic self-assertion of our Lord, of which we have had occasion to see so many examples in these valedictory discourses. The world is full of all unrighteousness and wickedness, lust and immorality, intemperance, cruelty, hatred; all manner of buzzing evils that stink and sting around us. But Jesus Christ passes them all by and points to a mere negative thing, to an inward thing, to the attitude of men towards Himself; and He says, ‘If you want to know what sin is, look at that!’ *There* is the worst of all sins. There is a typical instance of what sin is, in which, as in some anatomical preparation, you may see all its fibres straightened out and made visible. Look at that if you want to know what the world is, and what the world’s sin is.

Some of us do not think that it is sin at all; and tell us that man is no more responsible for his belief than he is for the colour of his hair, and suchlike talk. Well, let me put a very plain question: What is it that a man turns away from when he turns away from Jesus Christ? The plainest, the loveliest, the loftiest, the perfectest revelation of God in His beauty and completeness that ever dawned, or ever will dawn upon creation. He rejects that.

Anything more? Yes! He turns away from the loveliest human life that ever was, or will be, lived. Anything more? Yes! He turns away from a miracle of self-sacrificing love, which endured the Cross for enemies, and willingly embraced agony and shame and death for the sake of those who inflicted them upon Him. Anything more? Yes! He turns away from hands laden with, and offering him, the most precious and needful blessings that a poor soul on earth can desire or expect.

And if this be true, if unbelief in Jesus Christ be indeed all this that I have sketched out, another question arises, What does such an attitude and act indicate as to the rejector? He stands in the presence of the loveliest revelation of the divine nature and heart, and he sees no light in it. Why, but because he has blinded his eyes and cannot behold? He is incapable of seeing 'God manifest in the flesh,' because he 'loves the darkness rather than the light.' He turns away from the revelation of the loveliest and most self-sacrificing love. Why, but because he bears in himself a heart cased with brass and triple steel of selfishness, against the manifestation of love? He turns away from the offered hands heaped with the blessings that he needs. Why, but because he does not care for the gifts that are offered? Forgiveness, cleansing, purity a heaven which consists in the perfecting of all these, have no attractions for him. The fugitive Israelites in the wilderness said, 'We do not want your light, tasteless manna. It may do very well for angels, but we have been accustomed to garlic and onions down in Egypt. They smell strong, and there is some taste in *them*. Give us *them*.' And so some of you say, 'The offer of pardon is of no use to me, for I am not troubled with my sin. The offer of purity has no attraction to me, for I rather like the dirt and wallowing in it. The offer of a heaven of your sort is but a dreary prospect to me. And so I turn away from the hands that offer precious things.' The man who is blind to the God that beams, lambent and loving, upon him in the face of Jesus Christ-the man who has no stirrings of responsive gratitude for the great outpouring of love upon the Cross-the man who does not care for anything that Jesus Christ can give him, surely, in turning away, commits a real sin.

I do not deny, of course, that there may be intellectual difficulties cropping up in connection with the acceptance of the message of salvation in Jesus Christ, but as, on the one hand, I am free to admit that many a man may be putting a true trust in Christ which is joined with a very hesitant grasp of some of the things which, to me, are the very essence and heart of the Gospel; so, on the other side, I would have you remember that there is necessarily a moral quality in our attitude to all moral and religious truth; and that sin does not cease to be sin because its doer is a thinker or has systematised his rejection into a creed. Though it is not for us to measure motives and to peer into hearts, at the bottom there lies what Christ Himself put His finger on: 'Ye *will* not come to me that ye might have life.'

Then, still further, let me remind you that our Lord here presents this fact of man's unbelief as being an instance in which we may see what the real nature of sin is. To use learned language, it is a 'typical' sin. In all other acts of sin you get the poison manipulated into various forms, associated with other elements, disguised more or less. But here, because it is purely an inward act having relation to Jesus Christ, and to God manifested in Him, and not done at the bidding of the animal nature, or of any of the other strong temptations and impulses which hurry men into gross and coarse forms of manifest transgression, you get sin in its essence. Belief in Christ is the surrender of myself. Sin is living to myself rather than to God. And there you touch the bottom. All those different kinds of sin, however unlike they may be to one another-the lust of the sensualist, the craft of the cheat, the lie of the deceitful, the passion of the unregulated man, the avarice of the miser-all of them have this one common root, a diseased and bloated regard to self. The definition of sin is,-living to myself and making myself my own centre. The definition of faith is,-making Christ my centre and living for Him. Therefore, if you want to know what is the sinfulness of sin, there it is. And if I may use such a word in such a connection, it is all packed away in its *purest* form in the act of rejecting that Lord.

Brother, it is no exaggeration to say that, when you have summoned up before you the ugliest forms of man's sins that you can fancy, this one overtops them all, because it presents in the simplest form the mother-tincture of all sins, which, variously coloured and perfumed and combined, makes the evil of them all. A heap of rotting, poisonous matter is offensive to many senses, but the colourless, scentless, tasteless drop has the poison in its most virulent form, and is not a bit less virulent, though it has been learnedly distilled and christened with a scientific name, and put into a dainty jewelled flask. ‘This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil.’ I lay that upon the hearts and consciences of some of my present hearers as the key to their rejection or disregard of Christ and His salvation.

II. Now, secondly, notice the ascension of Jesus Christ as the pledge and the channel of the world’s righteousness-’Because I go to the Father, and ye see Me no more.’

He speaks as if the process of departure were already commenced. It had three stages-death, resurrection, ascension; but these three are all parts of the one departure. And so He says: ‘Because, in the future, when ye go forth to preach in My name, I shall be there with the Father, having finished the work for which He sent Me; therefore you will convince the world of righteousness.’

Now let me put that briefly in two forms. First of all, the fact of an ascended Christ is the guarantee and proof of His own complete fulfilment of the ideal of a righteous man. Or to put it into simpler words, suppose Jesus Christ is dead; suppose that He never rose from the grave; suppose that His bones mouldered in some sepulchre; suppose that there had been no ascension-would it be possible to believe that He was other than an ordinary man? And would it be possible to believe that, however beautiful these familiar records of His life, and however lovely the character which they reveal, there was really in Him no sin at all? A dead Christ means a Christ who, like the rest of us, had His limitations and His faults. But, on the other hand, if it be true that He sprang from the grave because ‘it was not possible that He should be holden of it,’ and because in His nature there was no proclivity to death, since there had been no indulgence in sin; and if it be true that He ascended up on high because that was His native sphere, and He rose to it as naturally as the water in the valley will rise to the height of the hill from which it has descended, then we can see that God has set His seal upon that life by that resurrection and ascension; and as we gaze on Him swept up heavenward by His own calm power, a light falls backward upon all His earthly life, upon His claims to purity, and to union with the Father, and we say, ‘Surely this was a perfectly righteous Man.’

And further let me remind you that with the supernatural facts of our Lord’s resurrection and ascension stands or falls the possibility of His communicating any of His righteousness to us sinful men. If there be no such possibility, what does Jesus Christ’s beauty of character matter to me? Nothing! I shall have to stumble on as best I can, sometimes ashamed and rebuked, sometimes stimulated and sometimes reduced to despair, by looking at the record of His life. If He be lying dead in a forgotten grave, and hath not ‘ascended up on high,’ then there can come from His history and past nothing other in kind, though, perhaps, a little more in degree, than comes from the history and the past of the beautiful and white souls that have sometimes lived in the world. He is a saint like them, He is a teacher like them, He is a prophet like some of them, and we have but to try our best to copy that marble purity and white righteousness. But if He hath ascended up on high, and sits there, wielding the forces of the universe, as we believe He does, then to Him belongs the divine prerogative of imparting His nature and His character to them that love Him. Then His righteousness is not a solitary, uncommunicative perfectness for Himself, but like a sun in the heavens, which streams out vivifying and enlightening rays to all that seek His face. If it be true that Christ has risen, then it is also true that you and I, convicted of sin, and learning our weakness and our faults, may come to Him, and by the exercise of that simple and yet omnipotent act of faith, may ally our incompleteness with His perfectness, our sin with His righteousness, our emptiness with His fullness, and may have all the grace and the beauty of Jesus Christ passing over into us to be the Spirit of life in us, ‘making us free from the law of sin and death.’ If Christ be risen, His righteousness may be the world’s; if Christ be not risen, His righteousness is useless to any but to Himself.

My brother, wed yourself to that dear Lord by faith in Him, and His righteousness will become yours, and you will be ‘found in Him without spot and blameless,’ clothed with white raiment like His own, and sharing in the Throne which belongs to the righteous Christ.

III. Lastly, notice the judgment of the world’s prince as the prophecy of the judgment of the world.

We are here upon ground which is only made known to us by the revelation of Scripture. We began with a fact of man's experience; we passed on to a fact of history; now we have a fact certified to us only on Christ's authority.

The world *has* a prince. That ill-omened and chaotic agglomeration of diverse forms of evil has yet a kind of anarchic order in it, and, like the fabled serpent's locks on the Gorgon head, they intertwine and sting one another, and yet they are a unity. We hear very little about 'the prince of the world' in Scripture. Mercifully the existence of such a being is not plainly revealed until the fact of Christ's victory over him is revealed. But however ludicrous mediaeval and vulgar superstitions may have made the notion, and however incredible the tremendous figure painted by the great Puritan poet has proved to be, there is nothing ridiculous, and nothing that we have the right to say is incredible, in the plain declarations that came from Christ's lips over and over again, that the world, the aggregate of ungodly men, *has* a prince.

And then my text tells us that that prince is 'judged.' The Cross did that, as Jesus Christ over and over again indicates, sometimes in plain words, as 'Now is the judgment of this world,' 'Now is the prince of this world cast out'; sometimes in metaphor, as 'I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven,' 'First bind the strong man and then spoil his house.' We do not know how far-reaching the influences of the Cross may be, and what they may have done in those dark regions, but we know that since that Cross, the power of evil in the world has been broken in its centre, that God has been disclosed, that new forces have been lodged in the heart of humanity, which only need to be developed in order to overcome the evil. We know that since that auspicious day when 'He spoiled principalities and powers, making a show of them openly and leading them in triumph,' even when He was nailed upon the Cross, the history of the world has been the judgment of the world. Hoary iniquities have toppled into the ceaseless washing sea of divine love which has struck against their bases. Ancient evils have vanished, and more are on the point of vanishing. A loftier morality, a higher notion of righteousness, a deeper conception of sin, new hopes for the world and for men, have dawned upon mankind; and the prince of the world is led bound, as it were, at the victorious chariot wheels. The central fortress has been captured, and the rest is an affair of outposts.

My text has for its last word this-the prince’s judgment prophesies the world’s future judgment. The process which began when Jesus Christ died has for its consummation the divine condemnation of all the evil that still afflicts humanity, and its deprivation of authority and power to injure. A final judgment will come, and that it will is manifested by the fact that Christ, when He came in the form of a servant and died upon the Cross, judged the prince. When He comes in the form of a King on the great White Throne He will judge the world which He has delivered from its prince.

That thought, my brother, ought to be a hope to us all. Are you glad when you think that there is a day of judgment coming? Does your heart leap up when you realise the fact that the righteousness, which is in the heavens, is sure to conquer and coerce and secure under the hatches the sin that is riding rampant through the world? It was a joy and a hope to men who did not know half as much of the divine love and the divine righteousness as we do. They called upon the rocks and the hills to rejoice, and the trees of the forest to clap their hands before the Lord, ‘for He cometh to judge the world.’ Does your heart throb a glad Amen to that?

It ought to be a hope; it is a fear; and there are some of us who do not like to have the conviction driven home to us, that the end of the strife between sin and righteousness is that Jesus Christ shall judge the world and take unto Himself His eternal kingdom.

But, my friends, hope or fear, it is a fact, as certain in the future, as the Cross is sure in the past, or the Throne in the present. Let me ask you this question, the question which Christ has sent all His servants to ask-Have you loathed your sin? have you opened your heart to Christ’s righteousness? If you have, when men’s hearts are failing them for fear, and they ‘call on the rocks and the hills to cover them from the face of Him that sitteth upon the Throne,’ you will ‘have a song as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept,’ and lift up your heads, ‘for your redemption draweth nigh.’ ‘Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness before Him in the day of judgment.’

95)John 16:12-15

THE GUIDE INTO ALL TRUTH

Joh. 16:12 - Joh. 16:15.

This is our Lord’s last expansion, in these discourses, of the great promise of the Comforter which has appeared so often in them. First, He was spoken of simply as dwelling in Christ’s servants, without any more special designation of His work than was involved in the name. Then, His aid was promised, to remind the Apostles of the facts of Christ’s life, especially of His words; and so the inspiration and authority of the four Gospels were certified for us. Then He was further promised as the witness in the disciples to Jesus Christ. And, finally, in the immediately preceding context, we have His office of ‘convincing,’ or convicting, ‘the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.’ And now we come to that gracious and gentle work which that divine Spirit is declared by Christ to do, not only for that little group gathered round Him then, but for all those who trust themselves to His guidance. He is to be the ‘Spirit of truth’ to all the ages, who in simple verity will help true hearts to know and love the truth. There are three things in the words before us-first, the avowed incompleteness of Christ’s own teaching; second, the completeness of the truth into which the Spirit of truth guides; and, last, the unity of these two.

I. First, then, we have here the avowed incompleteness of Christ’s own teaching.

‘I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now.’ Now in an earlier portion of these great discourses, we have our Lord asserting that ‘*all* things whatsoever He had heard of the Father He had made known’ unto His servants. How do these two representations harmonise? Is it possible to make them agree? Surely, yes. There is a difference between the germ and the unfolded flower. There is a difference between principles and the complete development of these. I suppose you may say that all Euclid is in the axioms and definitions. I suppose you may also say that when you have learned the axioms and definitions, there are many things yet to be said, of which you have not grown to the apprehension. And so our Lord, as far as His frankness was concerned, and as far as the fundamental and seminal principles of all religious truth were concerned, had even then declared all that He had heard of the Father. But yet, in so far as the unfolding of these was concerned, the tracing of their consequences, the exhibition of their harmonies, the weaving of them into an ordered whole in which a man's understanding could lodge, there were many things yet to be said, which that handful of men were not able to bear. And so our Lord Himself here declares that His words spoken on earth are not His completed revelation.

Of course we find in them, as I believe, hints profound and pregnant, which only need to be unfolded and smoothed out, as it were, and their depths fathomed, in order to lead to all that is worthy of being called Christian truth. But upon many points we cannot but contrast the desultory, brief, obscure references which came from the Master's lips with the more systematised, full, and accurate teaching which came from the servants. The great crucial instance of all is the comparative reticence which our Lord observed in reference to His sacrificial death, and the atoning character of His sufferings for the world. I do not admit that the silence of the Gospels upon that subject is fairly represented when it is said to be absolute. I believe that that silence has been exaggerated by those who have no desire to accept that teaching. But the distinction is plain and obvious, not to be ignored, rather to be marked as being fruitful of blessed teaching, between the way in which Christ speaks about His Cross, and the way in which the Apostles speak about it after Pentecost.

What then? My text gives us the reason. 'You cannot bear them now.' Now the word rendered 'bear' here does not mean 'bear' in the sense of endure, or tolerate, or suffer, but 'bear' in the sense of carry. And the metaphor is that of some weight-it may be gold, but still it is a weight-laid upon a man whose muscles are not strong enough to sustain it. It crushes rather than gladdens. So because they had not strength enough to carry, had not capacity to receive, our Lord was lovingly reticent.

There is a great principle involved in this saying-that revelation is measured by the moral and spiritual capacities of the men who receive it. The light is graduated for the diseased eye. A wise oculist does not flood that eye with full sunshine, but he puts on veils and bandages, and closes the shutters, and lets a stray beam, ever growing as the curve is perfected, fall upon it. So from the beginning until the end of the process of revelation there was a correspondence between men's capacity to receive the light and the light that was granted; and the faithful use of the less made them capable of receiving the greater, and as soon as they were capable of receiving it, it came. 'To him that hath shall be given.' In His love, then, Christ did not load these men with principles that they could not carry, nor feed them with 'strong meat' instead of 'milk,' until they were able to bear it. Revelation is progressive, and Christ is reticent, from regard to the feebleness of His listeners.

Now that same principle is true in a modified form about us. How many things there are which we sometimes feel we should like to know, that God has not told us, because we have not yet grown up to the point at which we could apprehend them! Compassed with these veils of flesh and weakness, groping amidst the shadows of time, bewildered by the cross-lights that fall upon us from so many surrounding objects, we have not yet eyes able to behold the ineffable glory. He has many things to say to us about that blessed future, and that strange and awful life into which we are to step when we leave this poor world, but 'ye cannot bear them now.' Let us wait with patience until we are ready for the illumination. For two things go to make revelation, the light that reveals and the eye that beholds.

Now one remark before I go further. People tell us, 'Your modern theology is not in the Gospels.' And they say to us, as if they had administered a knockdown blow, 'We stick by Jesus, not Paul.' Well, as I said, I do not admit that there is no 'Pauline' teaching in the Gospels, but I do confess there is not much. And I say, 'What then?' Why, this, then-it is exactly what we were to expect; and people who reject the apostolic form of Christian teaching because it is not found in the Gospels are flying in the face of Christ's own teaching. You say you will take His words as the only source of religious truth. You are going clean contrary to His own words in saying so. Remember that He proclaimed their incompleteness, and referred us, for the fuller knowledge of the truth of God, to a subsequent Teacher.

II. So, secondly, mark here the completeness of the truth into which the Spirit guides.

I must trouble you with just a word or two of remark as to the language of our text. Note the personality, designation, and office of this new Teacher. ‘He,’ not ‘*it*,’ He, is the Spirit of truth whose characteristic and weapon is truth. ‘He will guide you’-suggesting a loving hand put out to lead; suggesting the graciousness, the gentleness, the gradualness of the teaching. ‘Into all truth ‘-that is no promise of omniscience, but it is the assurance of gradual and growing acquaintance with the spiritual and moral truth which is revealed, such as may be fitly paralleled by the metaphor of men passing into some broad land, of which there is much still to be possessed and explored. Not to-day, nor to-morrow, will all the truth belong to those whom the Spirit guides; but if they are true to His guidance, ‘to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant,’ and the land will all be traversed at the last. ‘He shall not speak of Himself, but whatsoever He shall hear that shall He speak.’ Mark the parallel between the relation of the Spirit-Teacher to Jesus, and the relation of Jesus to the Father. Of Him, too, it is said by Himself, ‘All things whatsoever I have heard of the Father I have declared unto you.’ The mark of Satan is, ‘He speaketh of his own’; the mark of the divine Teacher is, ‘He speaketh not of Himself, but whatsoever things,’ in all their variety, in their continuity, in their completeness, ‘He shall hear,’-where? yonder in the depths of the Godhead-’whatsoever things He shall hear there,’ He shall show to you, and especially, ‘He will show you the things that are to come.’ These Apostles were living in a revolutionary time. Men’s hearts were ‘failing them for fear of the things that were coming on the earth.’ Step by step they would be taught the evolving glory of that kingdom which they were to be the instruments in founding; and step by step there would be spread out before them the vision of the future and all the wonder that should be, the world that was to come, the new constitution which Christ was to establish.

Now, if that be the interpretation, however inadequate, of these great and wonderful words, there are but two things needful to say about them. One is that this promise of a complete guidance into truth applies in a peculiar and unique fashion to the original hearers of it. I ventured to say that one of the other promises of the Spirit, which I quoted in my introductory remarks, was the certificate to us of the inspiration and reliableness of these Four Gospels. And I now remark that in these words, in their plain and unmistakable meaning, there lie involved the inspiration and authority of the Apostles as teachers of religious truth. Here we have the guarantee for the authority over our faith, of the words which came from these men, and from the other who was added to their number on the Damascus road. They were guided 'into *all* the truth,' and so our task is to receive the truth into which they were guided.

The Acts of the Apostles is the best commentary on these words of my text. There you see how these men rose at once into a new region; how the truths about their Master which had been bewildering puzzles to them flashed into light; how the Cross, which had baffled and dispersed them, became at once the centre of union for themselves and for the world; how the obscure became lucid, and Christ's death and the resurrection stood forth to them as the great central facts of the world's salvation. In the book of the Apocalypse we have part of the fulfilment of this closing promise: 'He will show you things to come'; when the Seer was 'in the Spirit on the Lord's Day,' and the heavens were opened, and the history of the Church [whether in chronological order, or in the exhibition of symbols of the great forces which shall be arrayed for and against it, over and over again, to the end of time, does not at present matter], was spread before Him as a scroll.

Now, dear friends, this great principle of my text has a modified application also to us all. For that divine Spirit is given to each of us if we will use Him, is given to any and every man who desires Him, does dwell in Christian hearts, though, alas! so many of us are so little conscious of Him, and does teach us the truth which Christ Himself left incomplete.

Only let me make one remark here. We do not stand on the same level as these men who clustered round Christ on His road to Gethsemane, and received the first fruits of the promise-the Spirit. They, taught by that divine Guide and by experience, were led into the deeper apprehension of the words and the deeds, of the life and the death, of Jesus Christ our Lord. We, taught by that same Spirit, are led into a deeper apprehension of the words which they spake, both in recording and interpreting the facts of Christ's life and death.

And so we come sharp up to this, 'If any man thinketh himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I speak unto him are the commandments of the Lord.' That is how an Apostle put his relation to the other possessors of the divine Spirit. And you and I have to take this as the criterion of all true possession of the Spirit of God, that it bows in humble submission to the authoritative teaching of this book.

III. Lastly, we have here our Lord pointing out the unity of these two.

In the verse on which I have just been commenting He says nothing about Himself, and it might easily appear to the listeners as if these two sources of truth, His own incomplete teaching, and the full teaching of the divine Spirit, were independent of, if not opposed to, one another. So in the last words of our text He shows us the blending of the two streams, the union of the two beams.

‘He shall glorify Me.’ Think of a *man* saying that! The Spirit who will come from God and ‘guide men into all truth’ has for His distinctive office the glorifying of Jesus Christ. So fair is He, so good, so radiant, that to make Him known *is* to glorify Him. The glorifying of Christ is the ultimate and adequate purpose of everything that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has done, because the glorifying of Christ is the glorifying of God, and the blessing of the eyes that behold His glory.

‘For He shall take of Mine, and show it unto you.’ All which that divine Spirit brings is Christ’s. So, then, there is no new revelation, only the interpretation of the revelation. The text is given, and its last word was spoken, when ‘the cloud received Him out of their sight,’ and henceforward all is commentary. The Spirit takes of Christ’s; applies the principles, unfolds the deep meaning of words and deeds, and especially the meaning of the mystery of the Cradle, and the tragedy of the Cross, and the mystery of the Ascension, as declaring that Christ is the Son of God, the Sacrifice for the world. Christ said, ‘I am the Truth.’ Therefore, when He promises, ‘He will guide you into all the truth,’ we may fairly conclude that ‘the truth’ into which the Spirit guides is the personal Christ. It is the whole Christ, the whole truth, that we are to receive from that divine Teacher; growing up day by day into the capacity to grasp Christ more firmly, to understand Him better, and by love and trust and obedience to make Him more entirely our own. We are like the first settlers upon some great island-continent. There is a little fringe of population round the coast, but away in the interior are leagues of virgin forests and fertile plains stretching to the horizon, and snow-capped summits piercing the clouds, on which no foot has ever trod. ‘He will guide you into all truth’; through the length and breadth of the boundless land, the person and the work of Jesus Christ our Lord.

‘All things that the Father hath are Mine, therefore said I that He shall take of Mine and show it unto you.’ What awful words! A divine, teaching Spirit can only teach concerning God. Christ here explains the paradox of His words preceding, in which, if He were but human, He seems to have given that teaching Spirit an unworthy office, by explaining that whatsoever is His is God’s, and whatsoever is God’s is His.

My brother! do you believe that? Is that what you think about Jesus Christ? He puts out here an unpresumptuous hand, and grasps all the constellated glories of the divine Nature, and says, ‘They are Mine’; and the Father looks down from heaven and says, ‘Son! Thou art ever with Me, and all that I have is Thine.’ Do you answer, ‘Amen! I believe it?’

Here are three lessons from these great words which I leave with you without attempting to unfold them. One is, Believe a great deal more definitely in, and seek a great deal more consciously and earnestly, and use a great deal more diligently and honestly, that divine Spirit who is given to us all. I fear me that over very large tracts of professing Christendom to-day men stand up with very faltering lips and confess, ‘I believe in the Holy Ghost.’ Hence comes much of the weakness of our modern Christianity, of the worldliness of professing Christians, ‘and when for the time they ought to be teachers, they have need that one teach them again which be the first principles of the oracles of God.’ ‘Quench not, grieve not, despise not the Holy Spirit.’

Another lesson is, Use the Book that He uses-else you will not grow, and He will have no means of contact with you.

And the last is, Try the spirits. If anything calling itself Christian teaching comes to you and does not glorify Christ, it is self-condemned. For none can exalt Him highly enough, and no teaching can present Him too exclusively and urgently as the sole Salvation and Life of the whole earth, And if it be, as my text tells us, that the great teaching Spirit is to come, who is to ‘guide us into all truth,’ and therein is to glorify Christ, and to show us the things that are His, then it is also true, ‘Hereby know we the Spirit of God. Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of Antichrist.’

96)John 16:16-19

John

CHRIST’S ‘LITTLE WHILES’

Joh. 16:16 - Joh. 16:19.

A superficial glance at the former part of these verses may fail to detect their connection with the great preceding promise of the Spirit who is to guide the disciples ‘into all truth.’ They appear to stand quite isolated and apart from that. But a little thought will bring out an obvious connection. The first words of our text are really the climax and crown of the promise of the Spirit; for that Spirit is to ‘guide into all the truth’ by declaring to the disciples the things that are Christ’s, and in consequence of that ministration, they are to be able to see their unseen Lord. So this is the loftiest thought of what the divine Spirit does for the Christian heart, that it shows Him a visible though absent Christ.

Then we have in the subsequent part of our text the blundering of the bewildered disciples and the patient answer of the long-suffering Teacher. So that there are these three points to take up: the times of disappearance and of sight; the bewildered disciples; and the patient Teacher.

I. First of all, then, note the deep teaching of our Lord here, about the times of disappearance and of Sight.

The words are plain enough; the difficulty lies in the determination of the periods to which they refer. He tells us that, after a brief interval from the time at which He was speaking, there would come a short parenthesis during which He was not to be seen; and that upon that would follow a period of which no end is hinted at, during which He is to be seen. The two words employed in the two consecutive clauses, for ‘sight,’ are not the same, and so they naturally suggest some difference in the manner of vision.

But the question arises, Where are the limits of these times of which the Lord speaks? Now it is quite clear, I suppose, that the first of the ‘little whiles’ is the few hours that intervened between His speaking and the Cross. And it is equally clear that His death and burial began, at all events, the period during which they were not to see Him. But where does the second period begin, during which they are to see Him? Is it at His resurrection or at His ascension, when the process of ‘going to the Father’ was completed in all its stages; or at Pentecost, when the Spirit, by whose ministration He was to be made visible, was poured out? The answer is, perhaps, not to be restricted to any one of these periods; but I think if we consider that all disciples, in all ages, have a portion in all the rest of these great discourses, and if we note the absence of any hint that the promised seeing of Christ was ever to terminate, and if we mark the diversity of words under which the two manners of vision are described, and, above all, if we note the close connection of these words with those which precede, we shall come to the conclusion that the full realisation of this great promise of a visible Christ did not begin until that time when the Spirit, poured out, opened the eyes of His servants, and ‘they saw His glory.’ But however we settle the minor question of the chronology of these periods, the great truth shines out here that, through all the stretch of the ages, true hearts may truly see the true Christ.

If we might venture to suppose that in our text the second of the periods to which He refers, when they did not see Him, was not coterminous with, but preceded, the second ‘little while,’ all would be clear. Then the first ‘little while’ would be the few hours before the Cross. ‘Ye shall not see Me’ would refer to the days in which He lay in the tomb. ‘Again, a little while’ would point to that strange transitional period between His death and His ascension, in which the disciples had neither the close intercourse of earlier days nor the spiritual communion of later ones. And the final period, ‘Ye shall see Me,’ would cover the whole course of the centuries till He comes again.

However that may be, and I only offer it as a possible suggestion, the thing that we want to fasten upon for ourselves is this-we all, if we will, may have a vision of Christ as close, as real, as firmly certifying us of His reality, and making as vivid an impression upon us, as if He stood there, visible to our senses. And so, 'by this vision splendid' we may 'be everywhere attended,' and whithersoever we go, have burning before us the light of His countenance, in the sunshine of which we shall walk.

Brother! that is personal Christianity-to see Jesus Christ, and to live with the thrilling consciousness, printed deep and abiding upon our spirits, that, in very deed, He is by our sides. O how that conviction would make life strong and calm and noble and blessed! How it would lift us up above temptation! 'He endured as seeing Him who is Invisible.' What should terrify us if Christ stood before us? What should charm us if we saw Him? Competing glories and attractions would fade before His presence, as a dim candle dies at noon. It would make all life full of a blessed companionship. Who could be solitary if he saw Christ? or feel that life was dreary if that Friend was by his side? It would fill our hearts with joy and strength, and make us evermore blessed by the light of His countenance.

And how are we to get that vision? Remember the connection of my text. It is because there is a divine Spirit to show men the things that are Christ's that therefore, unseen, He is visible to the eye of faith. And therefore the shortest and directest road to the vision of Jesus is the submitting of heart and mind and spirit to the teaching of that divine Spirit, who uses the record of the Scriptures as the means by which He makes Jesus Christ known to us.

But besides this waiting upon that divine Teacher, let me remind you that there are conditions of discipline which must be fulfilled upon our parts, if any clear vision of Jesus Christ is to bless us pilgrims in this lonely world. And the first of these conditions is-If you want to see Jesus Christ, think about Him. Occupy your minds with Him. If men in the city walk the pavements with their eyes fixed upon the gutters, what does it matter though all the glories of a sunset are dyeing the western sky? They will see none of them; and if Christ stood beside you, closer to you than any other, if your eyes were fixed upon the trivialities of this poor present, you would not see Him. If you honestly want to see Christ, meditate upon Him.

And if you want to see Him, shut out competing objects, and the dazzling cross-lights that come in and hide Him from us. There must be a 'looking *off* unto Jesus.' There must be a rigid limitation, if not excision, of other objects, if we are to grasp Him. If we would see, and have our hearts filled with, the calm sublimity of the solemn, white wedge that lifts itself into the far-off blue, we must not let our gaze stop on the busy life of the valleys or the green slopes of the lower Alps, but must lift it and keep it fixed aloft. Meditate upon Him, and shut out other things.

If you want to see Christ, do His will. One act of obedience has more power to clear a man's eyes than hours of idle contemplation; and one act of disobedience has more power to dim his eyes than anything besides. It is in the dusty common road that He draws near to us, and the experience of those disciples that journeyed to Emmaus may be ours. He meets us in the way, and makes 'our hearts burn within us.' The experience of the dying martyr outside the city gate may be ours. Sorrows and trials will rend the heavens if they be rightly borne, and so we shall see Christ 'standing at the right hand of God.' Rebellious tears blind our eyes, as Mary's did, so that she did not know the Master and took Him for 'the gardener.' Submissive tears purge the eyes and wash them clean to see His face. To do His will is the sovereign method for beholding His countenance.

Brethren, is this our experience? You professing Christians, do you see Christ? Are your eyes fixed upon Him? Do you go through life with Him consciously nearer to you than any beside? Is He closer than the intrusive insignificances of this fleeting present? Have you Him as your continual Companion? Oh! when we contrast the difference between the largeness of this promise-a promise of a thrilling consciousness of His presence, of a vivid perception of His character, of an unwavering certitude of His reality-and the fly-away glimpses and wandering sight, and faint, far-off views, as of a planet weltering amid clouds, which the most of Christian men have of Christ, what shame should cover our faces, and how we should feel that if we have not the fulfilment, it is our own fault! Blessed they of whom it is true that they see 'no man any more save Jesus only'! and to whom all sorrow, joy, care, anxiety, work, and repose are but the means of revealing that sweet and all-sufficient Presence! ‘I have set the Lord always before me, therefore I shall not be moved.’

II. Now notice, secondly, these bewildered disciples.

We find, in the early portion of these discourses, that twice they ventured to interrupt our Lord with more or less relevant questions, but as the wonderful words flowed on, they seem to have been awed into silence; and our Lord Himself almost complains of them that ‘None of you asketh Me, Whither goest Thou?’ The inexhaustible truths that He had spoken seem to have gone clear over their heads, but the verbal repetition of the ‘little whiles,’ and the recurring ring of the sentences, seem to have struck upon their ears. So passing by all the great words, they fasten upon this minor thing, and whisper among themselves, perhaps lagging behind on the road, as to what He means by these ‘little whiles.’ The Revised Version is probably correct, or at least it has strong manuscript authority in its favour, in omitting the clause in our Lord’s words, ‘Because I go to the Father.’ The disciples seem to have quoted, not from the preceding verse, but from a verse a little before that in the context, where He said that ‘the Spirit will convince the world of righteousness because I go to My Father, and ye see Me no more.’ The contradiction seems to strike them.

These disciples in their bewilderment seem to me to represent some very common faults which we all commit in our dealing with the Lord’s words, and to one or two of these I turn for a moment.

Note this to begin with, how they pass by the greater truths in order to fasten upon a smaller outstanding difficulty. They have no questions to ask about the gifts of the Spirit, nor about the unity of Christ and His disciples as represented in the vine and the branches, nor about what He tells them of the love that ‘lays down its life for its friends.’ But when He comes into the region of chronology, they are all agog to know the ‘when’ about which He is so enigmatically speaking.

Now is not that exactly like us, and does not the Christianity of this day very much want the hint to pay most attention to the greatest truths, and let the little difficulties fall into their subordinate place? The central truths of

Christianity are the incarnation and atonement of Jesus Christ. And yet outside questions, altogether subordinate and, in comparison with this, unimportant, are filling the attention and the thoughts of people at present to such an extent that there is great danger of the central truth of all being either passed by, or the reception of it being suspended on the clearing up of smaller questions.

The truth that Christ is the Son of God, who has died for our salvation, is the heart of the Gospel. And why should we make our faith in that, and our living by it, contingent on the clearing up of certain external and secondary questions; chronological, historical, critical, philological, scientific, and the like? And why should men be so occupied in jangling about the latter as that the towering supremacy, the absolute independence, of the former should be lost sight of? What would you think of a man in a fire who, when they brought the fire-escape to him, said, 'I decline to trust myself to it, until you first of all explain to me the principles of its construction; and, secondly, tell me all about who made it; and, thirdly, inform me where all the materials of which it is made came from?' But that is very much what a number of people are doing to-day in reference to 'the Gospel of our salvation,' when they demand that the small questions-on which the central verity does not at all depend-shall be answered and settled before they cast themselves upon that.

Another of the blunders of these disciples, in which they show themselves as our brethren, is that they fling up the attempt to apprehend the obscurity in a very swift despair. 'We cannot tell what He saith, and we are not going to try any more. It is all cloud-land and chaos together.'

Intellectual indolence, spiritual carelessness, deal thus with outstanding difficulties, abandoning precipitately the attempt to grasp them or that which lies behind them. And yet although there are no gratuitous obscurities in Christ's teaching, He said a great many things which could not possibly be understood at the time, in order that the disciples might stretch up towards what was above them, and, by stretching up, might grow. I do not think that it is good to break down the children's bread too small. A wise teacher will now and then blend with the utmost simplicity something that is just a little in advance of the capacity of the listener, and so encourage a little hand to stretch itself out, and the arm to grow because it is stretched. If there are no difficulties there is no effort, and if there is no effort there is no growth. Difficulties are there in order that we may grapple with them, and truth is sometimes hidden in a well in order that we may have the blessing of the search, and that the truth found after the search may be more precious. The tropics, with their easy, luxuriant growth, where the footfall turns up the warm soil, grow languid men, and our less smiling latitude grows strenuous ones. Thank God that everything is not easy, even in that which is meant for the revelation of all truth to all men! Instead of turning tail at the first fence, let us learn that it will do us good to climb, and that the fence is there in order to draw forth our effort.

There is another point in which these bewildered disciples are uncommonly like the rest of us; and that is that they have no patience to wait for time and growth to solve the difficulty. They want to know all about it now, or not at all. If they would wait for six weeks they would understand, as they did. Pentecost explained it all. We, too, are often in a hurry. There is nothing that the ordinary mind, and often the educated mind, detests so much as uncertainty, and being consciously baffled by some outstanding difficulty. And in order to escape that uneasiness, men are dogmatical when they should be doubtful, and positively asserting when it would be a great deal more for the health of their souls and of their listeners to say, ‘Well, really I do not know, and I am content to wait.’ So, on both sides of great controversies, you get men who will not be content to let things wait, for all must be made clear and plain to-day.

Ah, brethren! for ourselves, for our own intellectual difficulties, and for the difficulties of the world, there is nothing like time and patience. The mysteries that used to plague us when we were boys melted away when we grew up. And many questions which trouble me to-day, and through which I cannot find my way, if I lay them aside, and go about my ordinary duties, and come back to them to-morrow with a fresh eye and an unwearied brain, will have straightened themselves out and become clear. We grow into our best and deepest convictions, we are not dragged into them by any force of logic. So for our own sorrows, questions, pains, griefs, and for all the riddle of this painful world,

'Take it on trust a little while,
Thou soon shalt read the mystery right,
In the full sunshine of His smile.'

III. Lastly, and very briefly, a word about the patient Teacher.

'Jesus knew that they were desirous to ask Him.' He knows all our difficulties and perplexities. Perhaps it is His supernatural knowledge that is indicated in the words before us, or perhaps it is merely that He saw them whispering amongst themselves and so inferred their wish. Be that as it may, we may take the comfort that we have to do with a Teacher who accurately understands how much we understand and where we grope, and will shape His teaching according to our necessities.

He had not a word of rebuke for the slowness of their apprehension. He might well have said to them, 'O fools and slow of heart to believe!' But that word was not addressed to them then, though two of them deserved it and got it, after events had thrown light on His teaching. He never rebukes us for either our stupidity or for our carelessness, but 'has long patience' with us.

He does give them a kind of rebuke. 'Do ye inquire *among yourselves*?' That is a hopeful source to go to for knowledge. Why did they not ask Him, instead of whispering and muttering there behind Him, as if two people equally ignorant could help each other to knowledge? Inquiry 'among yourselves' is folly; to ask Him is wisdom. We can do much for one another, but the deepest riddles and mysteries can only be wisely dealt with in one way. Take them to Him, tell Him about them. Told to Him, they often dwindle. They become smaller when they are looked at beside Him, and He will help us to understand as much as may be understood, and patiently to wait and leave the residue unsolved, until the time shall come when 'we shall know even as we are known.'

In the context here, Jesus Christ does not explain to the disciples the precise point that troubled them. Olivet and Pentecost were to do that; but He gives them what will tide them over the time until the explanation shall come, in triumphant hopes of a joy and peace that are drawing near.

And so there is a great deal in all our lives, in His dealings with us, in His revelation of Himself to us, that must remain mysterious and unintelligible. But if we will keep close to Him, and speak plainly to Him in prayer and communion about our difficulties, He will send us triumphant hope and large confidence of a coming joy, that will float us over the bar and make us feel that the burden is no longer painful to carry. Much that must remain dark through life will be lightened when we get yonder; for the vision here is not perfect, and the knowledge here is as imperfect as the vision.

Dear friends! the one question for us all is, Do our eyes fix and fasten on that dear Lord, and is it the description of our own whole lives, that we see Him and walk with Him? Oh! if so, then life will be blessed, and death itself will be but as ‘a little while’ when we ‘shall not see Him,’ and then we shall open our eyes and behold Him close at hand, whom we saw from afar, and with wandering eyes, amidst the mists and illusions of earth. To see Him as He became for our sakes is heaven on earth. To see Him as He is will be the heaven of heaven, and before that Face, ‘as the sun shining in His strength,’ all sorrows, difficulties, and mysteries will melt as morning mists.

97)John 16:20-22

John

SORROW TURNED INTO JOY

Joh. 16:20 - Joh. 16:22.

These words, to which we have come in the ordinary course of our exposition, make an appropriate text for Easter Sunday. For their one theme is the joy which began upon that day, and was continued in increasing measure as the possession of Christ’s servants after Pentecost. Our Lord promises that the momentary sadness and pain shall be turned into a swift and continual joy. He pledges His word for that, and bids us believe it on His bare word. He illustrates it by that tender and beautiful image which, in the pains and bliss of motherhood, finds an analogy for the pains and bliss of the disciples, inasmuch as, in both cases, pain leads directly to blessedness in which it is forgotten. And He crowns His great promises by explaining to us what is the deepest foundation of our truest gladness, ‘I will see you again,’ and by declaring that such a joy is independent of all foes and all externals, ‘and your joy no man taketh from you.’

There are, then, two or three aspects of the Christian life as a glad life which are set before us in these words, and to which I ask your attention.

I. There is, first, the promise of a joy which is a transformed sorrow.

‘Your sorrow shall be turned into joy,’ not merely that the one emotion is substituted for the other, but that the one emotion, as it were, becomes the other. This can only mean that *that*, which was the cause of the one, reverses its action and becomes the cause of the opposite. Of course the historical and immediate fulfilment of these words lies in the double result of Christ’s Cross upon His servants. For part of three dreary days it was the occasion of their sorrow, their panic, their despair; and then, all at once, when with a bound the mighty fact of the resurrection dawned upon them, that which had been the occasion for their deep grief, for their apparently hopeless despair, suddenly became the occasion for a rapture beyond their dreams, and a joy which would never pass. The Cross of Christ, which for some few hours was pain, and all but ruin, has ever since been the centre of the deepest gladness and confidence of a thousand generations.

I do not need to remind you, I suppose, of the value, as a piece of evidence of the historical veracity of the Gospel story, of this sudden change and complete revolution in the sentiments and emotions of that handful of disciples. What was it that lifted them out of the pit? What was it that revolutionised in a moment their notions of the Cross and of its bearing upon them? What was it that changed downhearted, despondent, and all but apostate, disciples into heroes and martyrs? It was the one fact which Christendom commemorates to-day: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That was the element, added to the dark potion, which changed it all in a moment into golden flashing light. The resurrection was what made the death of Christ no longer the occasion for the dispersion of His disciples, but bound them to Him with a closer bond. And I venture to say that, unless the first disciples were lunatics, there is no explanation of the changes through which they passed in some eight-and-forty hours, except the supernatural and miraculous fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That set a light to the thick column of smoke, and made it blaze up a ‘pillar of fire.’ That changed sorrow into joy. The same death which, before the resurrection, drew a pall of darkness over the heavens, and draped the earth in mourning, by reason of that resurrection which swept away the cloud and brought out the sunshine, became the source of joy. A dead Christ was the Church’s despair; a dead and risen Christ is the Church’s triumph, because He is ‘the Christ that died. . . and is alive for evermore.’

But, more generally, let me remind you how this very same principle, which applies directly and historically to the resurrection of our Lord, may be legitimately expanded so as to cover the whole ground of devout men’s sorrows and calamities. Sorrow is the first stage, of which the second and completed stage is transformation into joy. Every thundercloud has a rainbow lying in its depths when the sun smites upon it. Our purest and noblest joys are transformed sorrows. The sorrow of contrite hearts becomes the gladness of pardoned children; the sorrow of bereaved, empty hearts may become the gladness of hearts filled with God; and every grief that stoops upon our path may be, and will be, if we keep near that dear Lord, changed into its own opposite, and become the source of blessedness else unattainable. Every stroke of the bright, sharp ploughshare that goes through the fallow ground, and every dark winter’s day of pulverising frost and lashing tempest and howling wind, are represented in the broad acres, waving with the golden grain. All your griefs and mine, brother, if we carry them to the Master, will flash up into gladness and be “turned into joy.”

II. Still further, another aspect here of the glad life of the true Christian is, that it is a joy founded upon the consciousness that Christ’s eye is upon us.

‘I will see you again and your heart shall rejoice.’ In other parts of these closing discourses the form of the promise is the converse of this, as for instance-’Yet a little while, and ye shall see *Me*.’ Here Christ lays hold of the thought by the other handle, and says, ‘*I* will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice.’ Now these two forms of putting the same mutual relationship, of course, agree, in that they both of them suggest, as the true foundation of the blessedness which they promise, the fact of communion with a present Lord. But they differ from one another in colouring, and in the emphasis which they place upon the two parts of that communion. '*Ye* shall see *Me*' fixes attention upon us and our perception of Him. '*I* will see you' fixes attention rather upon Him and His beholding of us. 'Ye shall see Me' speaks of our going out after Him and being satisfied in Him. 'I will see you' speaks of His perfect knowledge, of His loving care, of His tender, compassionate, complacent, ever-watchful eye resting upon us, in order that He may communicate to us all needful good.

And so it requires a loving heart on our part, in order to find joy in such a promise. 'His eyes are as a flame of fire,' and He sees all men; but unless our hearts cleave to Him and we know ourselves to be knit to Him by the tender bond of love from Him, accepted and treasured in our souls, then 'I will see you again' is a threat and not a promise. It depends upon the relation which we bear to Him, whether it is blessedness or misery to think that He whose flaming eye reads all men's sins and pierces through all hypocrisies and veils has it fixed upon us. The sevenfold utterance of His words to the Asiatic churches-the last recorded words of Jesus Christ-begins with 'I know thy works.' It was no joy to the lukewarm professors at Laodicea, nor to the church at Ephesus which had lost the freshness of its early love, that the Master knew them; but to the faithful souls in Philadelphia, and to the few in Sardis, who 'had not defiled their garments,' it was blessedness and life to feel that they walked in the sunshine of His face.

Is there any joy to us in the thought that the Lord Christ sees us? Oh! if our hearts are really His, if our lives are as truly built on Him as our profession of being Christians alleges that they are, then all that we need for the satisfaction of our nature, for the supply of our various necessities, or as an armour against temptation, and an amulet against sorrow, will be given to us, in the belief that His eye is fixed upon us. *There* is the foundation of the truest joy for men. 'There be many that say, Who will show us any good? Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us. Thou hast put gladness in my heart more than in the time when their corn and their wine abound.' One look *towards* Christ will more than repay and abolish earth's sorrow. One look *from* Christ will fill our hearts with sunshine. All tears are dried on eyes that meet His. Loving hearts find their heaven in looking into one another’s faces, and if Christ be our love, our deepest and purest joys will be found in His glance and our answering gaze.

If one could anyhow take a bit of the Arctic world and float it down into the tropics, the ice would all melt, and the white dreariness would disappear, and a new splendour of colour and of light would clothe the ground, and an unwonted vegetation would spring up where barrenness had been. And if you and I will only float our lives southward beneath the direct vertical rays of that great ‘Sun of Righteousness,’ then all the dreary winter and ice of our sorrows will melt, and joy will spring. Brother! the Christian life is a glad life, because Christ, the infinite and incarnate Lover of our souls, looks upon the heart that loves and trusts Him.

III. Still further, note how our Lord here sets forth His disciples’ joy as beyond the reach of violence and independent of externals.

‘No man taketh it from you.’ Of course, that refers primarily to the opposition and actual hostility of the persecuting world, which that handful of frightened men were very soon to face; and our Lord assures them here that, whatsoever the power of the devil working through the world may be able to filch away from them, it cannot filch away the joy that He gives. But we may extend the meaning beyond that reference.

Much of our joy, of course, depends upon our fellows, and disappears when they fade away from our sight and we struggle along in a solitude, made the more dreary because of remembered companionship. And much of our joy depends upon the goodwill and help of our fellows, and they can snatch away all that so depends. They can hedge up our road and make it uncomfortable and sad for us in many ways, but no man but myself can put a roof over my head to shut me out from God and Christ; and as long as I have a clear sky overhead, it matters very little how high may be the walls that foes or hostile circumstances pile around me, and how close they may press upon me. And much of our joy necessarily depends upon and fluctuates with external circumstances of a hundred different kinds, as we all only too well know. But we do not need to have all our joy fed from these surface springs. We may dig deeper down if we like. If we are Christians, we have, like some beleaguered garrison in a fortress, a well in the courtyard that nobody can get at, and which never can run dry. ‘Your joy no man taketh from you.’

As long as we have Christ, we cannot be desolate. If He and I were alone in the universe, or, paradoxical as it may sound, if He and I were alone, and the universe were not, I should have all that I needed and my joy would be full, if I loved Him as I ought to do.

So, my brother! let us see to it that we dig deep enough for the foundation of our blessedness, and that it is on Christ and nothing less infinite, less eternal, less unchangeable, that we repose for the inward blessedness which nothing outside of us can touch. That is the blessedness which we may all possess, ‘For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us’ from the eye and the heart of the risen Christ who lives for us. But remember, though externals have no power to rob us of our joy, they have a very formidable power to interfere with the cultivation of that faith, which is the essential condition of our joy. They cannot force us away from Christ, but they may tempt us away. The sunshine did for the traveller in the old fable what the storm could not do; and the world may cause you to think so much about it that you forget your Master. Its joys may compel Him to hide His face, and may so fill your eyes that you do not care to look at His face; and so the sweet bond may be broken, and the consciousness of a living, loving Jesus may fade, and become filmy and unsubstantial, and occasional and interrupted. Do you see to it that what the world cannot do by violence and directly, it does not do by its harlot kisses and its false promises, tempting you away from the paths where alone you can meet your Master.

IV. Lastly, note that this life of joy, which our Lord here speaks of, is made certain by the promise of a faithful Christ.

‘Verily, verily, I say unto you,’-He was accustomed to use that impressive and solemn formula, when He was about to speak words beyond the reach of human wisdom to discover, or of prime importance for men to accept and believe. He tells these men, who had nothing but His bare word to rely upon, that the astonishing thing which He is going to promise them will certainly come to pass. He would encourage them to rest an unfaltering confidence, for the brief parenthesis of sorrow, upon His faithful promise of joy. He puts His own character, so to speak, in pawn. His words are precisely equivalent in meaning to the solemn Old Testament words which are represented as being the oath of God, ‘As I live saith the Lord,’ ‘You may be as sure of this thing as you are of My divine existence, for all My divine Being is pledged to you to bring it about.’ ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you,’ ‘You may be as sure of this thing as you are of Me, for all that I am is pledged to fulfil the words of My lips.’

So Christ puts His whole truthfulness at stake, as it were; and if any man who has ever loved Jesus Christ and trusted Him aright has not found this ‘joy unspeakable and full of glory,’ then Jesus Christ has said the thing that is not.

Then why is it that so many professing Christians have such joyless lives as they have? Simply because they do not keep the conditions. If we will love Him so as to set our hearts upon Him, if we will desire Him as our chief good, if we will keep our eyes fixed upon Him, then, as sure as He is living and is the Truth, He will flood our hearts with blessedness, and His joy will pour into our souls as the flashing tide rushes into some muddy and melancholy harbour, and sets everything dancing that was lying stranded on the slime. If, my brother, you, a professing Christian, know but little of this joy, why, then, it is *your* fault, and not *His*. The joyless lives of so many who say that they are His disciples cast no shadow of suspicion upon His veracity, but they do cast a very deep shadow of doubt upon their profession of faith in Him.

Is your religion joyful? Is your joy religious? The two questions go together. And if we cannot answer these questions in the light of God’s eye as we ought to do, let these great promises and my text prick us into holier living, into more consistent Christian character, and a closer walk with our Master and Lord.

The out-and-out Christian is a joyful Christian. The half-and-half Christian is the kind of Christian that a great many of you are-little acquainted with ‘the joy of the Lord.’ Why should we live half way up the hill and swathed in mists, when we might have an unclouded sky and a visible sun over our heads, if we would only climb higher and walk in the light of His face?

98)John 16:23-24

John

‘IN THAT DAY’

Joh. 16:23 - Joh. 16:24.

Our Lord here sums up the prerogatives and privileges of His servants in the day that was about to dawn and to last till He came again. There is nothing absolutely new in the words; substantially the promises contained in them have appeared in former parts of these discourses under somewhat different aspects and connections. But our Lord brings them together here, in this condensed repetition, in order that the scattered rays, being thus focussed, may have more power to illuminate with certitude, and to warm into hope. ‘Ye shall ask Me nothing. . .. Ask and ye shall receive. . .. Your joy shall be full.’ These are the jewels which He sets in a cluster, the juxtaposition making each brighter, and gives to us for a parting keepsake.

Now it is to be noticed that the two askings which are spoken of here are expressed by different words in the Greek. Our English word ‘ask’ means two things, either to question or to request; to ask in the sense of interrogating, in order to get information and teaching, or in the sense of beseeching, in order to get gifts. In the former sense the word is employed in the first clause of my text, with distinct reference to the disciples’ desire, a moment or two before, to ask Him a very foolish question; and in the second sense it is employed in the central portion of my text.

So, then, there are three things here as the marks of the Christian life all through the ages: the cessation of the ignorant questions addressed to a present Christ; the satisfaction of desires; and the perfecting of joy. These are the characteristics of a true Christian life. My brother, are they in any degree the characteristics of yours?

I. Note then, first, the end of questionings.

‘In that day ye shall ask Me nothing,’ and do not you think that when the disciples heard that, they would be tempted to say, ‘Then what in all the world are we to do?' To them the thought that He was not to be at their sides any longer, for them to go to with their difficulties, must have seemed despair rather than advance; but in Christ's eyes it was progress. He tells them and us that we gain by losing Him, and are better off than they were, precisely because He does not any longer stand at our sides for us to question. It is better for a boy to puzzle out the meaning of a Latin book by his own brains and the help of a dictionary than it is lazily to use an interlinear translation. And, though we do not always feel it, and are often tempted to think how blessed it would be if we had an infallible Teacher visible here at our sides, it is a great deal better for us that we have not, and it is a step in advance that He has gone away. Many eager and honest Christian souls, hungering after certainty and rest, have cast themselves in these latter days into the arms of an infallible Church. I doubt whether any such questioning mind has found what it sought; and I am sure that it has taken a step downwards, in passing from the spiritual guidance realised by our own honest industry and earnest use of the materials supplied to us in Christ's word, to any external authority which comes to us to save us the trouble of thinking, and to confirm to us truth which we have not made our own by search and effort. We gain by losing the visible Christ; and He was proclaiming progress and not retrogression, when He said: 'In that day ye shall ask Me no more questions.'

For what have we instead? We have two things: a completed revelation, and an inward Teacher.

We have a completed revelation. Great and wonderful and unspeakably precious as were and are the words of Jesus Christ, His deeds are far more. The death of Christ has told us things that Christ before His death could not tell. The resurrection of Christ has cast light upon all the darkest places of man's destiny which Christ, before His resurrection, could not by any words so illuminate. The ascension of Christ has opened doors for thought, for faith, for hope, which were fast closed, notwithstanding all His teachings, until He had burst them asunder and passed to His throne. And the facts which are substituted for the bodily presence of Jesus with His disciples tell us a great deal more than they could ever have drawn from Him by questionings, however persistent and however wisely directed. We have a completed revelation, and therefore we need 'ask Him nothing.'

And we have a divine Spirit that will come to us if we will, and teach us by means of blessing the exercise of our own faculties, and guiding us, not, indeed, into the uniform perception of the intellectual aspects of Christian truth, but into the apprehension and the loving possession, as a power in our lives, of all the truth that we need to mould our characters and to raise us to the likeness of Himself.

Only, brother! let us remember what such a method of teaching demands from us. It needs that we honestly use the revelation that is given us; it needs that we loyally, lovingly, trustfully, submit ourselves to the teaching of that Spirit who will dwell in us; it needs that we bring our lives up to the height of our present knowledge, and make everything that we know a factor in shaping what we do and what we are. If thus we will to do His will, 'we shall know of the doctrine'; if thus we yield ourselves to the divine Spirit, we shall be taught the practical bearings of all essential truth; and if thus we ponder the facts and principles that are enshrined in Christ's life, and the Apostolic commentary on them, as preserved for us in the Scripture, we shall not need to envy those that could go to Him with their questions, for *He* will come to us with His all-satisfying answers.

Ah! but you say experience does not verify these promises. Look at a divided Christendom; look at my own difficulties of knowing what I am to believe and to think. Well, as for a divided Christendom, saintly souls are all of one Church, and however they may formulate the intellectual aspects of their creed, when they come to pray, they say the same things. Roman Catholic and Protestant, and Quaker and Churchman, and Calvinist and Arminian, and Greek and Latin Christians-all contribute to the hymn-book of every sect; and we all sing their songs. So the divisions are like the surface cracks on a dry field, and a few inches down there is continuity. As for the difficulty of knowing what I am to believe and think about controverted questions, no doubt there will remain many gaps in the circle of our knowledge; no doubt there will be much left obscure and unanswered; but if we will keep ourselves near the Master, and use honestly and diligently the helps that He gives us-the outward help in the Word, and the inward help in His teaching Spirit-we shall not 'walk in darkness,' but shall have light enough given to be to us 'the Light of Life.'

Brother, keep close to Christ, and Christ-present though absent- will teach you.

II. Secondly, satisfied desires.

This second great promise of my text, introduced again by the solemn affirmation, ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you,’ substantially appeared in a former part of these discourses with a very significant difference. ‘Whatsoever ye shall ask in My name that will I do.’ ‘If ye shall ask anything in My name I will do it.’ There Christ presented Himself as the Answerer of the petitions, because His more immediate purpose was to set forth His going to the Father as His elevation to a yet loftier position. Here, on the other hand, He sets forth the Father as the Answerer of the petitions, because His purpose is to point away from undue dependence on His own corporeal presence. But the fact that He thus, as occasion requires, substitutes the one form of speech for the other, and indifferently represents the same actions as being done by Himself and by the Father in heaven, carries with it large teachings which I do not dwell upon now. Only I would ask you to consider how much is involved in that fact, that, as a matter of course, and without explanation of the difference, our Lord alternates the two forms, and sometimes says, ‘I will do it,’ and sometimes says, ‘The Father will do it.’ Does it not point to that great and blessed truth, ‘Whatsoever thing the Father doeth, that also doeth the Son likewise?’

But passing from that, let me ask you to note very carefully the limitation, which is here given to the broad universality of the declaration that desires shall be satisfied. ‘If ye shall ask anything in My name’; there is the definition of Christian prayer. And what does it mean? Is a prayer, which from the beginning to the end is reeking with self-will, hallowed because we say, as a kind of charm at the end of it, ‘For Christ’s sake. Amen’? Is *that* praying in Christ’s name? Surely not! What is the ‘name’ of Christ? His whole revealed character. So these disciples could not pray in His name ‘hitherto,’ because His character was not all revealed. Therefore, to pray in His name is to pray, recognising what He is, as revealed in His life and death and resurrection and ascension, and to base all our dependence of acceptance of our prayers upon that revealed character. Is that all? Are any kind of wishes, which are presented in dependence upon Christ as our only

Hope and Channel of divine blessing, certain to be fulfilled? Certainly not. To pray ‘in My name’ means yet more than that. It means not only to pray in dependence upon Christ as our only Ground of hope and Source of acceptance and God’s only Channel of blessing, but it means exactly what the same phrase means when it is applied to us. If I say that I am doing something in your name, that means on your behalf, as your representative, as your organ, and to express your mind and will. And if we pray in Christ’s name, that implies, not only our dependence upon His merit and work, but also the harmony of our wills with His will, and that our requests are not merely the hot products of our own selfishness, but are the calm issues of communion with Him. *Thus* to pray requires the suppression of self. Heathen prayer, if there be such a thing, is the violent effort to make God will what I wish. Christian prayer is the submissive effort to make my wish what God wills, and that is to pray in Christ’s name.

My brother! do we construct our prayers thus? Do we try to bring our desires into harmony with Him, before we venture to express them? Do we go to His footstool to pour out petulant, blind, passionate, un-sanctified wishes after questionable and contingent good, or do we wait until He fills our spirits with longings after what it must be His desire to give, and then breathe out those desires caught from His own heart, and echoing His own will? Ah! The discipline that is wanted to make men pray in Christ’s name is little understood by multitudes amongst us.

Notice how certain such prayer is of being answered. Of course, if it is in harmony with the will of God, it is sure not to be offered in vain. Our Revised Version makes a slight alteration in the order of the words in the first clause of this promise by reading, ‘If ye ask anything of the Father He will give it you *in My name*.’ God’s gifts come down through the same channel through which our prayer goes up. We ask in the name of Christ, and get our answers in the name of Christ.

But, whether that be the true collocation of ideas or not, mark the plain principle here, that only desires which are in harmony with the divine will are sure of being satisfied. What is a bad thing for a child cannot be a good thing for a man. What is a foolish and wicked thing for a father down here to do cannot be a kind and a wise thing for the Father in the heavens to do.

If you wish to spoil your child you say, ‘What do you want, my dear? tell me and you shall have it.’ And if God were saying anything like that to us, through the lips of Jesus Christ His Son, in the text, it would be no blessing, but a curse. He knows a great deal better what is good for us; and so He says: ‘Bring your wishes into line with My purpose, and then you will get them’; ‘Delight thyself in the Lord, and He will give thee the desires of thine heart.’ If you want God most you will be sure to get Him; if your heart’s desires are after Him, your heart’s desires will be satisfied. ‘The young lions do roar and suffer hunger.’ That is the world’s way of getting good; fighting and striving and snarling, and forcibly seeking to grasp, and there is hunger after all. There is a better way than that. Instead of striving and struggling to snatch and to keep a perishable and questionable portion, let us wait upon God and quiet our hearts, stilling them into the temper of communion and conformity with Him, and we shall not ask in vain.

He who prays in Christ’s name must pray Christ’s prayer, ‘Not My will, but Thine be done.’ And then, though many wishes may be unanswered, and many weak petitions unfulfilled, and many desires unsatisfied, the essential spirit of the prayer will be answered, and, His will being done in us and on us, our wishes will acquiesce in it and desire nothing besides. To him who can thus pray in Christ’s name in the deepest sense, and after Christ’s pattern, every door in God’s treasure-house flies open, and he may take as much of the treasure as he desires. The Master bends lovingly over such a soul, and looks him in the eyes, and with outstretched hand says, ‘What wilt thou that I should do unto thee? Be it unto thee even as thou wilt.’

III. Lastly, the perfect joy which follows upon these two.

‘That your joy may be fulfilled.’ Again we have a recurrence of a promise that has appeared in another connection in an earlier part of this discourse; but the connection here is worthy of notice. The promise is of joy that comes from the satisfaction of meek desires in unison with Christ’s will. Is it possible then, that, amidst all the ups and downs, the changes and the sorrows of this fluctuating, tempest-tossed life of ours we may have a deep and stable joy? ‘That your joy may be full,’ says my text, or ‘fulfilled,’ like some jewelled, golden cup charged to the very brim with rich and quickening wine, so that there is no room for a drop more. Can it be that ever, in this world, men shall be happy up to the very limits of their capacity? Was anybody ever so blessed that he could not be more so? Was your cup ever so full that there was no room for another drop in it? Jesus Christ says that it may be so, and He tells us how it may be so. Bring your desires into harmony with God's, and you will have none unsatisfied amongst them; and so you will be blessed to the full; and though sorrow comes, as of course it will come, still you may be blessed. There is no contradiction between the presence of this deep, central joy and a surface and circumference of sorrow. Rather we need the surrounding sorrow, to concentrate, and so to intensify, the central joy in God. There are some flowers which only blow in the night; and white blossoms are visible with startling plainness in the twilight, when all the flaunting purples and reds are hid. We do not know the depth, the preciousness, the power of the 'joy of the Lord,' until we have felt it shining in our hearts in the midst of the thick darkness of earthly sorrow, and bringing life into the very death of our human delights. It may be ours on the conditions that my text describes.

My dear friends! there are only two courses before us. Either we must have a life with superficial, transitory, incomplete gladness, and an aching centre of vacuity and pain, or we may have a life which, in its outward aspects and superficial appearance, has much about it that is sad and trying, but down in the heart of it is calm and joyful. Which of the two do you deem best, a superficial gladness and a rooted sorrow, or a superficial sorrow and a central joy? 'Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness.' But, on the other hand, the 'ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads. They shall obtain joy and gladness; and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.'

99)John 16:25-27

John

THE JOYS OF 'THAT DAY'

Joh. 16:25 - Joh. 16:27.

The stream which we have been tracking for so long in these discourses has now nearly reached its close. Our Lord, in these all but final words, sums up the great salient features which He has already more than once specified, of the time when His followers shall live with an absent and yet present Christ. He reiterates here substantially just what He has been saying before, but in somewhat different connection, and with some slight expansion. And this reiteration of the glad features of the day which was about to dawn suggests how much the disciples needed, and how much we need, to have repeated over and over again the blessed and profound lessons of these words.

What a sublime self-repression there was in the Master! Not one word escapes from His lips of the personal pain and agony into which He had to plunge and be baptized, before that day could dawn. All that was crushed down and kept back, and He only speaks to the disciples and to us of the joy that comes to them, and not at all of the bitter sorrow by which it is bought. There are set forth in these words, as it seems to me, especially three characteristics which belong to the whole period between the ascension of Jesus Christ and His coming again for judgment. It is a day of continual and clearer teaching by Him. It is a day of desires in His name. It is a day of filial experience of a Father’s love. These are the characteristics of the Christian period, and they ought to be the characteristics of our individual Christian life. My brother! are they the characteristics of yours?

Let us note them in order.

I. First, our Lord tells us that the whole period of the Christian life upon earth is to be a period of continuous and clearer teaching by Himself.

‘Hitherto I have spoken to you in proverbs,’ or parables. The word means, not only a comparison or parable, but also, and perhaps primarily, a mysterious and enigmatical saying. The reference is, of course, directly to the immediately preceding thoughts, in which His departure and the sorrow that accompanied it and was to merge into joy, were described under that touching figure of the woman in travail. But the reference must be extended very much farther than that. It includes not only this discourse, but the whole of His teaching by word whilst He was here upon earth.

Now the first thing that strikes me here is this strange fact. Here is a man who knew Himself to be within four-and-twenty hours of His death, and knew that scarcely another word of instruction was to come from His lips upon earth, calmly asserting that, for all the subsequent ages of the world's history, He is to continue its Teacher. We know how the wisest and profoundest of earthly teachers have their lips sealed by death, so as that no counsel can come from them any more, and their disciples long in vain for responses from the silenced oracle, which is dumb whatever new problems may arise. But Jesus Christ calmly poses before the world as not having His teaching activity in the slightest degree suspended by that fact which puts a conclusive and complete close to all other teachers' words. Rather He says that after death He will, more clearly than in life, be the Teacher of the world.

What does He mean by that? Well, remember first of all the facts which followed this saying-the Cross, the Grave, Olivet, the Heavens, the Throne. These were still in the future when He spoke. And have not these-the bitter passion, the supernatural resurrection, the triumphant ascension, and the everlasting session of the Son at the right hand of God-taught the whole world the meaning of the Father's name, and the love of the Father's heart, and the power of the Father's Son, as nothing else, not even the sweetest and tenderest of His utterances, could have taught them? When, then, He declares the continuance of His teaching functions unbroken through death and beyond it, He refers partly to the future facts of His earthly manifestation, and still more does He refer to that continuous teaching which, by that divine Spirit whom He sends, is granted to every believing soul all through the ages.

This great truth, which recurs over and over again in these discourses of our Lord, is far too much dropped out of the consciousness and creeds of the modern Christian Church. We call ourselves Christ's disciples. If there be disciples, there must be a Master. His teaching is by no means merely the effect of the recorded facts and utterances of the Lord, preserved here in the Book for us, and to be pondered upon by ourselves, but it is also the hourly communication, to waiting hearts and souls that keep themselves near the Lord, of deeper insight into His will, of larger views of His purposes, of a firmer grasp of the contents of Scripture, and a more complete subjection of the whole nature to the truth as it is in Jesus. Christian men and women! do you know anything about what it is to learn of Christ in the sense that He Himself, and no poor human voice like mine, nor even merely the records of His past words and deeds as garnered in these Gospels and expounded by His Apostles, is the source of your growing knowledge of Him? If we would keep our hearts and minds clearer than we do of the babble of earthly voices, and be more loyal and humble and constant and patient in our sitting on the benches in Christ's school till the Master Himself came to give us His lessons, these great words of my text would not, as they so often do in the mass of professing Christians, lack the verification of experience and the assurance that it is so with us. Have you sat in Christ's school, and do you know the secret and illuminative whispers of His teaching? If not, there is something wrong in your Christian character, and something insincere in your Christian profession.

Notice, still further, that our Lord here ranks that subsequent teaching before all that He said upon earth, great and precious as it was. Now I do not mean for one moment to allege that fresh communications of truth, uncontained in Scripture, are given to us in the age-long and continuous teaching of Jesus Christ. That I do not suppose to be the meaning of the great promises before us, for the facts of revelation were finished when He ascended, and the inspired commentary upon the facts of revelation was completed with these writings which follow the Gospels in our New Testament. But Christ's teaching brings us up to the understanding of the facts and of the commentary upon them which Scripture contains, so that what was parable or proverb, dimly apprehended, mysterious and enigmatical when it was spoken, and what remains mysterious and enigmatical to us until we grow up to it, gradually becomes full of significance and weighty with a plain and certain meaning. This is the teaching which goes on through the ages-the lifting of His children to the level of apprehending more and more of the inexhaustible and manifold wisdom which is stored for us in this Book. The mine has been worked on the surface, but the deeper it goes the richer is the lode; and no ages will exhaust the treasures that are hid in Christ Jesus our Lord.

He uses the new problems, the new difficulties, the new circumstances of each successive age, and of each individual Christian, in order to evolve from His word larger lessons, and to make the earlier lessons more fully and deeply understood. And this generation, with all its new problems, with all its uneasiness about social questions, with all its new attitude to many ancient truths, will find that Jesus Christ is, as He has been to all past generations,-the answer to all its doubts, using even these doubts as a means of evolving the deeper harmonies of His Word, and of unveiling in the ancient truth more than former generations have seen in it. 'Brethren, I write unto you no new commandment. Again, a new commandment I write unto you.' The inexhaustible freshness of the old word taught us anew, with deeper significance and larger applications, by the everlasting Teacher of the Church, is the hope that shines through these words. I commend to you, dear brethren, the one simple, personal question, Have I submitted myself to that Teacher, and said to men and systems and preachers and books and magazines, and all the rest of the noisy and clamorous tongues that bewilder under pretence of enlightening this generation-have I said to them all, 'Hold your peace! and let me, in the silence of my waiting soul, hear the Teacher Himself speak to me. Speak, Lord! for Thy servant heareth. Teach me Thy way and lead me, for Thou art my Master, and I the humblest of Thy scholars'?

II. In the next place, another of the glad features of this dawning day is that it is to be a day of desires based upon Christ, and Christlike.

'In that day ye shall ask in My name.' Our translators have wisely put a colon at the end of that clause, in order that we may not hurry over it too quickly in haste to get to the next one. For there is a substantial blessing and privilege wrapped up in it. Our Lord has just been saying the same thing in the previous verses, but He repeats it here in order to emphasise it, and to set it by the subsequent words in a somewhat different light. But I dwell upon it for a very simple, practical purpose. I have already explained in former sermons the full, deep meaning of that phrase, 'asking in Christ's name,' and have suggested to you that it implies two things-the one, that our desires should all be based upon His great work as the only ground of our acceptance with God; and the other, that our desires should all be such as represent His heart and His mind. When we 'ask in His name' we ask, first, for His sake, and, second, as in His person. And such desires, resting their hopes of answer solely upon His mighty sacrifice and all-sufficient merit, and shaped accurately and fully after the pattern of the wishes that are dear to His heart, are to be the prerogative and the joy of His servants, in the new ‘day’ that is about to dawn.

Note how beautifully this thought, of wishes moulded into conformity with Jesus Christ, and offered in reliance upon His great sacrifice, follows upon that other thought, ‘I will tell you plainly of the Father.’ The Master’s voice speaks, revealing the paternal heart, the scholar’s voice answers with desires kindled by the revelation. Longings and aspirations humbly offered for His sake, and after the pattern of His own, are our true response to His teaching voice. As the astronomer, the more powerful his telescope, though it may resolve some of the nebulae that resisted feebler instruments, only has his bounds of vision enlarged as he looks through it, and sees yet other and mightier star-clouds lying mysterious beyond its ken-so each new influx and tidal wave of knowledge of the Father, which Christ gives to His waiting child, leads on to enlarged desires, to longings to press still further into the unexplored mysteries of that magnificent and boundless land, and to nestle still closer into the infinite heart of God. He declares to us the Father, and the answer of the child to the declaration of the Father is the cry, ‘Abba! Father! show me yet more of Thy heart.’ Thus aspiration and fruition, longing and satisfaction in unsatiated and inexhaustible and unwearying alternation, are the two blessed poles between which the life of a Christian may revolve in smoothness and music.

My friend! is that anything like the transcript of our experience, that the more we know of God, the more we long to know of, and to possess, Him? and the more we long to know of, and to possess, Him, the more full, gracious, confidential, tender, and continuous are the teachings of our Master? Is not this a far higher level of Christian life than that we live upon? And why so? Is Christ’s word faithless? Hath He forgotten to be gracious? Was this promise of His idle wind? Or is it that you and I have never grasped the fulness of privileges that He bestows upon us?

III. Note, lastly, that that day is to be a day of filial experience of a Father’s love.

‘I say not unto you that I will pray the Father for you, for the Father Himself loveth you because ye have loved Me, and have believed that I came out from God.’ Jesus Christ does not deny His intercession. He simply does not bring it into evidence here. To deny it would have been impossible, for soon afterwards we find Him saying, ‘I pray for them which Thou hast given Me, for they are Thine.’ But He does not emphasise it here, in order that He may emphasise another blessed source of solace-viz., that to those who listen to the Master’s teaching, and have their desires moulded into harmony with His, and their wishes and hopes all based upon His sacrifice and work, the divine Father’s love directly flows. There is no need of any intercession to turn Him to be merciful. Men sometimes caricature the thought of the intercession of Christ, as if it meant that He, by His prayer, bent the reluctant will of the Father in heaven. All such horrible misconceptions Christ sweeps out of the field here, even whilst there remains, in the fact that the prayers of which He is speaking are offered in His name, the substance and reality of all that we mean by the intercession of Jesus Christ.

And now note that God loves the men who love Jesus Christ. So completely does the Father identify Himself with the Son, that love to Christ is love to Him, and brings the blessed answer of His love to us. Whosoever loves Christ loves God.

Whosoever loves Christ must do so, believing that He ‘came forth from God.’ There are the two characteristics of a Christian disciple,-faith in the divine mission of the Son, and love that flows from faith. Now, of course, it does not follow from the words before us, that this divine love which comes down upon the heart which loves Christ is the original and first flow of that love towards that heart. ‘We love Him because He first loved us.’ Christ is not here tracking the stream to its source, but is pointing to it midway in its flow. If you want to go up to the fountain-head you have to go up to the divine Father’s heart, who loved when there was no love in us; and, because He loved, sent the Son. First comes the unmotived, spontaneous, self-originated, undeserved, infinite love of God to sinners and aliens and enemies; then the Cross and the mission of Jesus Christ; then the faith in His divine mission; then the love which is the child of faith, as it grasps the Cross and recognises the love that lies behind it; and then, after that, the special, tender, and paternal love of God falling upon the hearts that love Him in His Son. There is nothing here in the slightest degree to conflict with the grand universal truth that God loves enemies and sinners and aliens. But there is the truth, as precious as the other, that they who have 'known and believed the love that God hath to us' live under the selectest influences of His loving heart, and have a place in its tenderness which it is impossible that any should have who do not so love. And that sweet commerce of a divine love answering a human, which itself is the answer to a prior divine love, brings with it the firm confidence that prayers in His name shall not be prayers in vain.

So, dear friends, growing knowledge, an ever-present Teacher, the peace of calm desires built upon Christ's Cross and fashioned after Christ's Spirit, and the assurance in my quiet and filial heart that my Father in the heavens loves me, and will neither give me 'serpents' when I ask for them, thinking them to be 'fishes,' nor refuse 'bread' when I ask for it-these things ought to mark the lives of all professing Christians. Are they our experience? If not, why are they not, but because we do not believe that 'Thou art come forth from God,' nor love Thee as we ought?

100) John 16:28

John

'FROM' AND 'TO'

Joh. 16:28.

These majestic and strange words are the proper close of our Lord's discourse, what follows being rather a reply to the disciples' exclamation. There is nothing absolutely new in them, but what is new is the completeness and the brevity with which they cover the whole ground of His being, work, and glory. They fall into two halves, each consisting of two clauses; the former half describing our Lord's *descent*, the latter His *ascent*. In each half the two clauses deal with the same fact, considered from the two opposite ends as it were-the point of departure and the point of arrival. 'I came forth *from* the Father, and am come *into* the world: again I leave the world and go to the Father.' But the first point of departure is the last point of arrival, and the end comes round to the beginning. Our Lord's earthly life is, as it were, a jewel enclosed within the flashing gold of His eternal dwelling with God.

So I think we shall best apprehend the scope, and appropriate to ourselves the blessing and power of these words, if we deal with the four points to which they call our attention-the dwelling with the Father; the voluntary coming to the earth; the voluntary departure from the earth; and, once more, the dwelling with the Father. We must grasp them all if we would know the whole Christ and all that He is able to do and to be to us and to the world. So, then, I deal simply with these four points.

I. Note then, first, the dwelling with the Father.

If we adopt the most probable reading of the first clause of my text, it is even more forcible than in our version: ‘I came forth out of the Father.’ Such an egress implies a being in the Father in a sense ineffable for our words, and transcending our thoughts. It implies a far deeper and closer relation than even that of juxtaposition, companionship, or outward presence.

Now, in these great words there is involved obviously, to begin with, that, during His earthly life, our Lord bore about with Him the remembrance and consciousness of an individual existence prior to His life on earth. I need not remind you how frequently such hints drop from His lips-’Before Abraham was, I am,’ and the like. But beyond that solemn thought of a remembered previous existence there is this other one-that the words are the assertion by Christ Himself of a previous, deep, mysterious, ineffable union with the Father. On such a subject wisdom and reverence bid us speak only as we hear; but I cannot refrain from emphasising the fact that, if this fourth Gospel be a genuine record of the teaching of Jesus Christ-and, if it is not, what genius was he who wrote it?-if it be a genuine record of the teaching of Jesus Christ, then nothing is more plain than that over and over again, in all sorts of ways, by implication and by direct statement, to all sorts of audiences, friends and foes, He reiterated this tremendous claim to have ‘dwelt in the bosom of the Father,’ long before He lay on the breast of Mary. What did He mean when He said, ‘No man hath ascended up into heaven save He which came down from heaven’? What did He mean when He said, ‘What and if ye shall see the Son of Man ascend up where He was before'? What did He mean when He said, 'I came down from heaven, not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me'? And what did He mean when, in the midst of the solemnities of that last prayer, He said, 'Glorify Thou Me with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was'?

Dear friends! it seems to me that if we know anything about Jesus Christ, we know that. If we cannot believe that He thus spoke, we know nothing about Him on which we can rely. And so, without venturing to enlarge at all upon these solemn words, I leave this with you as a plain fact, that the meekest, lowliest, and most sane and wise of religious teachers made deliberately over and over again this claim, which is either absolutely true, and lifts Him into the region of the Deity, or else is fatal to His pretensions to be either meek or modest, or wise or sane, or a religious teacher to whom it is worth our while to listen.

II. Note, secondly, the voluntary coming into the world.

'I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world.' We all talk in a loose way about men coming into the world when they are born; but the weight of these words and the solemnity of the occasion on which they were spoken, and the purpose for which they were spoken-viz., to comfort and to illuminate these disciples-forbid us to see such a mere platitude as that in them. There would have been no consolation in them unless they meant something a great deal more than the undeniable fact that Jesus Christ was born, and the melancholy fact that Jesus Christ was about to die.

'I am come into the world.' There has been a Man who chose to be born. There has been a Man who appeared here, not 'of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man,' but by His own free choice. He willed to take upon Him the form of humanity. Now the voluntariness of the entrance of Jesus Christ into the conditions of our human life is all-important for us, for it underlies the whole value of that life and its whole power to be blessing and good to us. It underlies, for instance, the personal sinlessness of Jesus Christ, and hence His power to bring a new beginning of pure and perfect life into the midst of humanity. All the rest of mankind, knit together by that mysterious bond of natural descent which only now for the first time is beginning to receive its due attention on the part of men of science, by heredity have the taint upon them. And if Jesus Christ is only one of the series, then there is no deliverance in Him, for there is no sinlessness in that life. However fair its record may seem on the surface, there is beneath, somewhere or other, the leprosy that infects us all. Unless He came in another fashion from all the rest of us, He came with the same sin as all the rest of us, and He is no deliverer from sin. Rather He is one of the series who, like the melancholy captives on the road to Siberia, each carries a link of the hopeless chain that binds them all together. But, if it be true that of His own will He took to Himself humanity, and was born as the Scripture tells us He was born, His birth being His 'coming' and not His being brought, then, being free from taint, He can deliver us from taint, and, Himself unbound by the chain, He can break it from off our necks. The stream is fouled from its source downwards, and flows on, every successive drop participant of the primeval pollution. But, down from the white snows of the eternal hills of God, there comes into it an affluent which has no stain on its pure waters, and so can purge that into which it enters. Jesus Christ willed to be born, and to plant a new beginning of holy life in the very heart of humanity which henceforth should work as leaven.

Let me remind you, too, that this voluntary assumption of our nature is all-important to us, for unless we preserve it clear to our minds and hearts, the power to sway our affections is struck away from Jesus Christ. Unless He voluntarily took upon Himself the nature which He meant to redeem, why should I be thankful to Him for what He did, and what right has He to claim my love? But if He willingly came down amongst us, and 'to this end was born, and for this cause,' of His own loving heart, 'came into the world,' then I am knit to Him by cords that cannot be broken. One thing only saves for Jesus Christ the unbounded and perpetual love of mankind, and that is, that from His own infinite and perpetual love He came into the world. We talk about kings leaving their palaces and putting on the rags of the beggar, and learning 'love in huts where poor men lie,' and making experience of the conditions of their lowliest subjects. But here is a fact, infinitely beyond all these legends. It is set forth for us in a touching fashion, in the incident that almost immediately preceded these parting words of our Lord, when 'Jesus, knowing that He came forth from God, laid aside His garments and took a towel, and girded Himself,' and washed the foul feet of these travel-stained men. That was a parable of the Incarnation. The consciousness of

His divine origin was ever with Him, and that consciousness led Him to lay aside the garments of His majesty, and to gird Himself with the towel of service. That He had a body round which to wrap it was more humiliation than that He wrapped it round the body which He took. And we may learn there what it is that gives Him His supreme right to our devotion and our surrender-viz., that, 'being in the form of God, He thought not equality with God a thing to be covetously retained, but made Himself of no reputation, and was found in fashion as a Man.'

III. Note the voluntary leaving the world.

The stages of that departure are not distinguished. They are threefold in fact-the death, the resurrection, the ascension, and in all three we have the majestic, spontaneous energy of Christ as their cause.

There was a voluntary death, I have so often had occasion to insist upon that, in the course of these sermons, that I do not need to dwell upon it now. Let me remind you only how distinctly and in what various forms that thought is presented to us in the Scriptures. We have our Lord's own words about His having 'power to lay down His life.' We have in the story of the Passion hints that seem to suggest that His relation to death, to which He is about to bow His head, was altogether different from that of ours. For instance, we read: 'Into Thy hands I commend My Spirit'; and 'He gave up the Spirit.' We have hints of a similar nature in the very swiftness of His death and unexpected brevity of His suffering, to be accounted for by no natural result of the physical process of crucifixion. The fact is that Jesus Christ is the Lord of death, and was so even when He seemed to be its Servant, and that He never showed Himself more completely the Prince of Life and the Conqueror of Death than when He gave up His life and died, not because He must, but because He would. There is a scene in a modern book of fiction of a man sitting on a rock and the ocean stretching round him. It reaches high upon his breast, but it threatens not his life, till he, sitting there in his calm, bows his head beneath the wave and lets it roll over him. So Christ willed to die, and died because He willed.

There was also a voluntary resurrection by His own power; for although Scripture sometimes represents His rising again from the dead as being the Father's attestation of the Son's finished work, it also represents it as being, in accordance with His own claim of ‘power to lay down My life, and to take it again,’ the Son’s triumphant egress from the prison into which, for the moment, He willed to pass. Jesus ‘was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,’ but also Jesus rose from the dead by His own power.

There was also a voluntary ascension to the heavens. There was no need for Elijah’s chariot of fire. There was no need for a whirlwind to sweep a mortal to the sky. There was no need for any external vehicle or agency whatsoever. No angels bore Him up upon their wings. But, the cords of duty which bound Him to earth being cut, He rose to His own native sphere; and, if one might so say, the natural forces of His supernatural life bore Him, by inverted gravitation, upward to the place which was His own. He ascended by His own inherent power.

Thus, by a voluntary death, He became the Sacrifice for our sins; by the might of His self-effected resurrection He proclaimed Himself the Lord of death and the resurrection for all that trust Him; and by ascending up on high He draws our hearts’ desires after Him, so that we, too, as we see Him lost from our sight, behind the bright Shekinah cloud that stooped to conceal the last stages of His ascension from our view, may return to our lowly work ‘with great joy,’ and ‘set our affection on things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.’

IV. So, lastly, we have here the dwelling again with the Father.

But that final dwelling with God is not wholly identical with the initial one. The earthly life was no mere parenthesis, and He who returned to the Throne carried with Him the manhood which He had assumed, and bore it thither into the glory in which the Word had dwelt from the beginning. And this is the true consolation which Christ offered to these His weeping servants, and which He still offers to us His waiting children, that now the manhood of Jesus Christ is exalted to participation in the divine glory, and dwells there in the calm, invisible sweetness and solemnity of fellowship with the Father.

If that be so, it is no mere abstract dogma of theology, but it touches our daily life at all points, and is essential to the fullness of our satisfaction and our rest in Christ.

‘We see not all things put under Him, but we see Jesus.’ Our Brother is elevated to the Throne, and, if I might so say, He makes the fortunes of the family, and none of them will be poor as long as He is so rich. He sends us from the far-off land where He is gone precious gifts of its produce, and He will send for us to share His throne one day.

Christ’s ascension to the Father is the elevation of our best and dearest Friend to the Throne of the Universe, and the hands that were pierced for us on the Cross hold the helm and sway the sceptre of Creation, and therefore we may calmly meet all events.

The elevation of Jesus Christ to the Throne fills Heaven for our faith, our imagination, and our hearts. How different it is to look up into those awful abysses, and to wonder where, amidst their crushing infinitude, the spirits of dear ones that are gone are wandering, if they are at all; and to look up and to think ‘My Christ hath passed through the Heavens,’ and is somewhere with a true Body, and with Him all that loved Him. Without an ascended Christ we recoil from the cold splendours of an unknown Heaven, as a rustic might from the unintelligible magnificence of a palace. But if we believe that He is ‘at the right hand of God,’ then the far-off becomes near, and the vague becomes definite, and the unsubstantial becomes solid, and what was a fear becomes a joy, and we can trust ourselves and the dear dead in His hands, knowing that where He is they are, and that in Him they and we have all that we need.

So, dear friends! it all comes to this-make sure that you have hold of the whole Christ for yourselves. His earthly life is little without the celestial halo that rings it round. His life is nothing without His death. His death without His resurrection and ascension maybe a little more pathetic than millions of other deaths, but is nothing, really, to us. And the life and death and resurrection are not apprehended in their fullest power until they are set between the eternal glory before and the eternal glory after.

These four facts-the dwelling in the Father; the voluntary coming to earth; the voluntary leaving earth; and, again, the dwelling with the Father-are the walls of the strong fortress into which we may flee and be safe. With them it ‘stands four square to every wind that blows.’ Strike away one of them, and it totters into ruin. Make the whole Christ your Christ; for nothing less than the whole Christ, ‘conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, . . . crucified, dead, and buried, . . . ascended into Heaven, and sitting at the right hand of God,’ is strong enough to help your infirmities, vast enough to satisfy your desires, loving enough to love you as you need, or able to deliver you from your sins, and to lift you to the glories of His own Throne.

101) John 16:29-32

John

GLAD CONFESSION AND SAD WARNING

Joh. 16:29 - Joh. 16:32.

The first words of these wonderful discourses were, ‘Let not your heart be troubled.’ They struck the key-note of the whole. The aim of all was to bring peace and confidence unto the disciples’ spirits. And this joyful burst of confession which wells up so spontaneously and irrepressibly from their hearts, shows that the aim has been reached. For a moment sorrow, bewilderment, dullness of apprehension, had all passed away, and the foolish questioners and non-receptive listeners had been lifted into a higher region, and possessed insight, courage, confidence. The last sublime utterance of our Lord had gathered all the scattered rays into a beam so bright that the blindest could not but see, and the coldest could not but be warmed.

But yet the calm, clear eye of Christ sees something not wholly satisfactory in this outpouring of the disciples’ confidence. He does not reject their imperfect faith, but He warns them, as if seeing the impending hour of denial which was so terribly to contradict the rapture of that moment. And then, with most pathetic suddenness, He passes from them to Himself; and in a singularly blended utterance lets us get a glimpse into His deep solitude and the companions that shared it.

My words now make no attempt at anything more than is involved in following the course of thought in the words before us.

I. Note the disciples' joyful confession.

Their words are permeated throughout with allusions to the previous promises and sayings of our Lord, and the very allusions show how shallow was their understanding of what they thought so plain. He had said to them that, in that coming day which was so near its dawn, He would speak to them 'no more in proverbs, but show them plainly of the Father'; and they answer, with a kind of rapture of astonishment, that the promised day has come already, and that even now He is speaking to them 'plainly,' and without mysterious sayings. Did they understand His words when they thought them so plain? 'I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world? Again I leave the world and go unto the Father,' that summary statement of the central mysteries of Christianity, which the generations have found to be inexhaustible, and which to so many minds has been absolutely incredible, seemed to the shallow apprehension of these disciples to be sun-clear. If they had understood what He meant, could they have spoken thus, or have left Him so soon?

They begin with what they believed to be a fact, His clear utterance. Then follows a conviction which has allusion to His previous words. 'Now', say they, 'we know that Thou knowest all things, and needest not that any man should ask Thee.' He had said to them, 'In that day ye shall ask Me nothing'; and from the fact that he had interpreted their unspoken words, and had anticipated their desire to ask what they durst not ask, they draw, and rightly draw, the conclusion of His divine Omniscience. They think that therein, in His answer to their question before it is asked, is the fulfilment of that great promise. Was that all that He meant? Certainly not. Did He merely mean to say, 'You will ask Me nothing, because I shall know what you want to know, without your asking'? No! But He meant, 'Ye shall ask Me nothing, because in that day you will have with you an illuminating Spirit who will solve all your difficulties.' So, again, a shallow interpretation empties the words which they accept of their deepest and most precious meaning.

And then they take yet a further step. First, they begin with a fact; then from that they infer a conviction; and now, upon the basis of the inferred conviction, they rear a faith, 'We believe that Thou camest forth from God.'

But what they meant by ‘coming forth from God’ fell far short of the greatness of what He meant by the declaration, and they stand, in this final, articulate confession of their faith, but a little in advance of Nicodemus the Rabbi, and behind Peter the Apostle when he said: ‘Thou art the Son of the living God.’

So their confession is a strangely mingled warp and woof of insight and of ignorance. And they may stand for us both as examples to teach us what we ought to be, and as beacons teaching us what we should not be.

Let me note just one or two lessons drawn from the disciples’ demeanour and confession.

The first remark that I would make is that here we learn what it is that gives life to a creed-experience. These men had, over and over again, in our Lord’s earlier utterances, heard the declaration that ‘He came forth from God’; and in a sort of fashion they believed it. But, as so many of our convictions do, it lay dormant and half dead in their souls. But now, rightly or wrongly, experience had brought them into contact, as they thought, with a manifest proof of His divine Omniscience, and the torpid conviction flashed all up at once into vitality. The smouldering fire of a mere piece of abstract belief was kindled at once into a glow that shed warmth through their whole hearts; and although they had professed to believe long ago that He came from God, now, for the first time, they grasp it as a living reality. Why? Because experience had taught it to them. It is the only teacher that teaches us the articles of our creed in a way worth learning them. Every one of us carries professed beliefs, which lie there inoperative, bedridden, in the hospital and dormitory of our souls, until some great necessity or sudden circumstance comes that flings a beam of light upon them, and then they start and waken. We do not know the use of the sword until we are in battle. Until the shipwreck comes, no man puts on the lifebelt in his cabin. Every one of as has large tracts of Christian truth which we think we most surely believe, but which need experience to quicken them, and need us to grow up into the possession of them. Of all our teachers who turn beliefs assented to into beliefs really believed none is so mighty as Sorrow; for that makes a man lay a firm hold on the deep things of God’s Word.

Then another lesson that I draw from this glad confession is-the bold avowal that always accompanies certitude. These men’s stammering tongues are loosed. They have a fact to base themselves upon. They have a piece of assured knowledge inferred from the fact. They have a faith built upon the certitude of what they know. Having this, out it all comes in a gush. No man that believes with all his heart can help speaking. You silent Christians are so, because you do not more than half grasp the truth that you say you hold. ‘Thy word, when shut up in my bones, was like a fire’; and it ate its way through all the dead matter that enclosed it, until at last it flamed out heaven high. Can you say, ‘We know and we believe,’ with unfaltering confidence? Not ‘we argue’; not ‘we humbly venture to think that on the whole’; not ‘we are inclined rather to believe’; but ‘we know-that Thou knowest all things, and that Thou hast come from God.’ Seek for that blessed certitude of knowledge, based upon the facts of individual experience, which ‘makes the tongue of the dumb sing,’ and changes all the deadness of an outward profession of Christianity into a living, rejoicing power.

Then, further, I draw this lesson. Take care of indolently supposing that you understand the depths of God’s truth. These Apostles fancied that they had grasped the whole meaning of the Master’s words, and were glad in them. They fed on them, and got something out of them; but how far they were from the true perception of their meaning! This generation abhors mystery, and demands that the deepest truths of the highest subject, which is religion, shall be so broken down into mincemeat that the ‘man in the street’ can understand them in the intervals of reading the newspaper. There are only too many of us who are disposed to grasp at the most superficial interpretation of Christian truth, and lazily to rest ourselves in that. A creed which has no depth in it is like a picture which has no distance. It is flat and unnatural, and self-condemned by the very fact. It is better that we should feel that the smallest word that comes from God is like some little leaf of a water plant on the surface of a pond; if you lift that you draw a whole trail after it, and nobody knows how far off and how deep down are the roots. It is better that we should feel how Infinity and Eternity press in upon us on all sides, and should take as ours the temper that recognises that till the end we are but learners, seeing ‘in a glass, in a riddle,’ and therefore patiently waiting for light and strenuously striving to stretch our souls to the width of the infinite truth of God.

II. So, then, look, in the second place, at the sad questions and forebodings of the Master.

‘Do ye now believe?’ That does not cast doubt on the reality of their faith so much as on its permanence and power. ‘Behold the hour cometh that ye shall be scattered’-as He had told them a little while before in the upper room, like a flock when the shepherd is stricken down-’every man to his own.’ He does not reject their imperfect homage, though He discerns so clearly its imperfection and its transiency, but sadly warns them to beware of the fleeting nature of their present emotion; and would seek to prepare them, by the knowledge, for the terrible storm that is going to break upon them.

So let us learn two or three simple lessons. One is that the dear Lord accepts imperfect surrender, ignorant faith and love, of which He knows that it will soon turn to denial. Oh! if He did not, what would become of us all? We reject half hearts; we will not have a friendship on which we cannot rely. The sweetness of vows is all sucked out of them to our apprehension, if we have reason to believe that they will be falsified in an hour. But the patient Master was willing to put up with what you and I will not put up with; and to accept what we reject; and be pleased that they gave Him even that. His ‘charity suffereth long, and is kind.’ Let us not be afraid to bring even imperfect consecration-

‘A little faith all undisproved’-

to His merciful feet.

Then another lesson is the need for Christian men sedulously to search and make sure that their inward life corresponds with their words and professions. I wonder how many thousands of people will stand up this day and say, ‘I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ His only Son,’ whose words would stick in their throats if that question of the Master’s was put to them, ‘Do ye now believe?’ And I wonder how many of us are the fools of our own verbal acknowledgments of Christ. Self-examination is not altogether a wholesome exercise, and it may easily be carried too far, to the destruction of the spontaneity and the gladness of the Christian life. A man may set his pulse going irregularly by simply concentrating his attention upon it, and there may be self-examination of the wrong sort, which does harm rather than good. But, on the other hand, we all need to verify our position, lest our outward life should fatally slip away from correspondence with our inward. Our words and acts of Christian profession and service are like bank notes. What will be the end if there is a whole ream of such going up and down the world, and no balance of bullion in the cellars to meet them? Nothing but bankruptcy. Do you see to it that your reserve of gold, deep down in your hearts, always leaves a margin beyond the notes in circulation issued by you. And in the midst of your professions hear the Master saying, ‘Do ye now believe?’

Another lesson that I draw is, trust no emotions, no religious experiences, but only Him to whom they turn.

These men were perfectly sincere, and there was a glow of gladness in their hearts, and a real though imperfect faith when they spoke. In an hours time where were they?

We often deal far too hard measure to these poor disciples, in our estimate of their conduct at that critical moment. We talk about them as cowards. Well, they were better and they were worse than cowards; for their courage failed second, but their faith had failed first. The Cross made them dastards because it destroyed their confidence in Jesus Christ.

‘We trusted.’ Ah! what a world of sorrow there is in those two final letters of that word! ‘We trusted that it had been He who should have redeemed Israel.’ But they do not trust it any more, and so why should they put themselves in peril for One on whom their faith can no longer build?

Would we have been any better if we had been there? Suppose you had stood afar off and seen Jesus die on the cross, would your faith have lived? Do we not know what it is to be a great deal more exuberant in our professions of faith-and real faith it is, no doubt-in some quiet hour when we are with Him by ourselves, than when swords are flashing and we are in the presence of His antagonists? Do we not know what it is to grasp conviction at one moment, and the next to find it gone like a handful of mist from our clutch? Is our Christian life always lived upon one high uniform level? Have we no experience of hours of exhaustion coming after deep religious emotion? ‘Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone’; there will not be many stones flung if that law be applied. Let us all, recognising our own weakness, trust to nothing, either in our convictions or our emotions, but only to Him, and cry, ‘Hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe!’

III. Lastly, note the lonely Christ and His companion.

‘Ye shall leave Me alone’; there is sadness, though it be calm, in that clause, and then, I suppose, there was a moment’s pause before the quiet voice began again: ‘And yet I am not alone, for the Father is with Me.’ There are two currents there, both calm; but the one bright and the other dark.

Jesus was the loneliest man that ever lived. All other forms of human solitude were concentrated in His. He knew the pain of unappreciated aims, unaccepted love, unbelieved teachings, a heart thrown back upon itself. No man understood Him, no man knew Him, no man deeply and thoroughly loved Him or sympathised with Him, and He dwelt apart. He felt the pain of solitude more sharply than sinful men do. Perfect purity is keenly susceptible; a heart fully charged with love is wounded sore when the love is thrown back, and all the more sorely the more unselfish it is.

Solitude was no small part of the pain of Christ’s passion. Remember the pitiful appeal in Gethsemane, ‘Tarry ye here and watch with Me!’ Remember the threefold vain return to the sleepers in the hope of finding some sympathy from them. Remember the emphasis with which, more than once in His life, He foretold the loneliness of His death. And then let us understand how the bitterness of the cup that He drank had for not the least bitter of its ingredients the sense that He drank it alone.

Now, dear friends! some of us, no doubt, have to live outwardly solitary lives. We all of us live alone after all fellowship and communion. Physicists tell us that in the most solid bodies the atoms do not touch. Hearts come closer than atoms, but yet, after all, we die alone, and in the depths of our souls we all live alone. So let us be thankful that the Master knows the bitterness of solitude, and has Himself trod that path.

Then we have here the calm consciousness of unbroken communion. Jesus Christ’s sense of union with the Father was deep, close, constant, in manner and measure altogether transcending any experience of ours. But still He sets before us a pattern of what we should aim at in these great words. They show the path of comfort for every lonely heart. ‘I am not alone, for the Father is with Me.’ If earth be dark, let us look to Heaven. If the world with its millions seems to have no friend in it for us, let us turn to Him who never leaves us. If dear ones are torn from our grasp, let us grasp God. Solitude is bitter; but, like other bitters, it is a tonic. It is not all loss if the trees which with their leafy beauty shut out the sky from us are felled, and so we see the blue.

Christ’s company is to us what the Father’s fellowship was to Christ. He has borne solitude that He might be the companion of all the lonely, and the same voice which said, ‘Ye shall leave Me alone,’ said also, ‘I am with you always, even to the end of the world.’

But that communion of Christ with the Father was broken, in that awful hour when He cried: ‘My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ We tread there on the verge of mysteries, beyond our comprehension; but this we know-that it was our sin and the world’s, made His by His willing identifying of Himself with us, which built up that black wall of separation. That hour of utter desolation, forsaken by God, deserted by men, was the hour of the world’s redemption. And Jesus Christ was forsaken by God and deserted by men, that you and I might never be either the one or the other, but might find in His sweet and constant companionship at once the society of man and the presence of God.

102) John 16:33

John

PEACE AND VICTORY

Joh. 16:33.

So end these wonderful discourses, and so ends our Lord’s teaching before His passion. He gathers up in one mighty word the total intention of these sweet and deep sayings which we have so long been pondering together. He sketches in broad outline the continual characteristics of the disciples’ life, and closes all with the strangest shout of victory, even at the moment when He seems most utterly defeated.

We shall, I think, best lay on our hearts and minds the spirit and purpose of these words if we simply follow their course, and look at the three things which Christ emphasises here: the inward peace which is His purpose for us; the outward tribulation which is our certain fate; and the courageous confidence which Christ’s victory for us gives.

I. Note, then, first, the inward peace.

‘These things have I spoken unto you that in Me ye might have peace.’ Peace is not lethargy; and it is very remarkable to notice how, in immediate connection with this great promise, there occur words which suggest its opposite-tribulation and battle. ‘In the world ye have tribulation.’ ‘I have overcome’-that means a fight. These are to go side by side with the peace that He promises. The two conditions belong to two different spheres. The Christian life bifurcates, as it were, into a double root, and moves in two realms-’in Me’ and ‘in the world’ And the predicates and characteristics of these two lives are, in a large measure, diametrically opposite. So here, without any contradiction, our Lord brackets together these two opposite conditions as both pertaining to the life of a devout soul. He promises a peace which co-exists with tribulation and disturbance, a peace which is realised in and through conflict and struggle. The tree will stand, with its deep roots and its firm bole, unmoved, though wildest winds may toss its branches and scatter its leaves. In the fortress, beleaguered by the sternest foes, there may be, right in the very centre of the citadel, a quiet oratory through whose thick walls the noise of battle and the shout of victory or defeat can never penetrate. So we may live in a centre of rest, however wild may be the uproar in the circumference. ‘In Me. . . peace,’ that is the innermost life. ‘In the world. . . tribulation,’ that is only the surface.

But, then, note that this peace, which exists with, and is realised through, tribulation and strife, depends upon certain conditions. Our Lord does not say, ‘Ye have peace,’ but ‘These things I have spoken that you may have it.’ It is a possibility; and He lays down distinctly and plainly here the twofold set of conditions, in fulfilment of which a Christian disciple may dwell secure and still, in the midst of all confusion. Note, then, these two.

It is peace, if we have it at all, in Him. Now you remember how emphatically and loftily, as one of the very key-notes of these discourses, our Lord has spoken to us, in them, of ‘dwelling in Him’ as the prerogative and the duty of every Christian. We are in Him as in an atmosphere. In Him our true lives are rooted as a tree in the soil. We are in Him as a branch in the vine, in Him as the members in a body, in Him as the residents in a house. We are in Him by simple faith, by the trust that rests all upon Him, by the love that finds all in Him, by the obedience that does all for Him. And it is only when we are ‘in Christ’ that we rest, and realise peace. All else brings distraction. Even delights trouble. The world may give excitement, the world may give vulgar and fleeting joys, the world may give stimulus to much that is good and true in us, but there is only one thing that gives peace, and that is that our hearts should dwell in the Fortress, and should ever be surrounded by Jesus Christ. Brother! let nothing tempt us down from the heights, and out from the citadel where alone we are at rest; but in the midst of all the pressing duties, the absorbing cares, the carking anxieties, the seducing temptations of the world, and in the presence of all the necessity for noble conflict which the world brings to every man that is not its slave, let us try to keep the roots of our lives in contact with that soil from which they draw all their nourishment, and to wrap ourselves round with the life of Jesus Christ, which shall make an impenetrable shield between us and ‘the fiery darts of the wicked.’ Keep on the lee side of the breakwater and your little cock-boat will ride out the gale. Keep Christ between you and the hurtling storm, and there will be a quiet place below the wall where you may rest, hearing not the loud winds when they call. ‘These things have I spoken that in Me ye might have peace.’

But there is another condition. Christ speaks the great words which have been occupying us so long, that they may bring to us peace. I need not do more than remind you, in a sentence, of the contents of these wonderful discourses. Think of how they have spoken to us of our Brother’s ascension to Heaven to prepare a place for us; of His coming again to receive us to Himself; of His presence with us in His absence; of His indwelling in us and ours in Him; of His gift to us of a divine Spirit. If we believed all these things; if we realised them and lived in the faith of them; if we meditated upon them in the midst of our daily duties; and if they were real to us, and not mere words written down in a Book, how should anything be able to disturb us, or to shake our settled confidence? Cleave to the words of the Master, and let them pour into your hearts the quietness and confidence which nothing else can give. And then, whatsoever storms may be around, the heart will be at rest. We find peace nowhere else but where Mary found her repose, and could shake off care and 'trouble about many things,' sitting at the feet of Jesus, wrapt in His love and listening to His word.

II. Then note, secondly, the outward tribulation which is the certain fate of His followers.

Of course there is a very sad and true sense in which the warning, 'In the world ye shall have tribulation,' applies to all men. Pain and sickness, loss and death, the monotony of hard, continuous, unwelcome toil, hopes blighted or disappointed even in their fruition, and all the other 'ills that flesh is heir to,' afflict us all. But our Lord is not speaking here about the troubles that befall men as men, nor about the chastisement that befalls them as sinners, nor about the evils which dog them because they are mortal or because they are bad, but of the yet more mysterious sorrows which fall upon them because they are good, 'In the world ye have tribulation,' is the proper rendering and reading. It had already begun, and it was to be the standing condition and certain fate of all that followed Him.

I have already said that the Christian life moves in two spheres, and hence there must necessarily be antagonism and conflict. Whoever realises the inward life in Christ will more or less, and sooner or later, find himself coming into hostile collision with lives which only move on the surface and belong to the world. If you and I are Christians after the pattern of Jesus Christ, then we dwell in the midst of an order of things which is not constituted on or for the principles that regulate our lives and the objects at which we aim. And hence, in that fundamental discordance between the Christian life and society as it is constituted, there must always be, if there be honesty and consistency on the side of the Christian man, more or less of collision between him and it. All that you regard as axiomatic the world regards as folly, if you take Christ for your Teacher. All that you labour to secure the world does not care to possess, if you have Him for your aim. All that you live to seek it has abandoned; all that you desire to obey it will not even consult, if you are taking Christ and His law for your rule. And therefore there must come, sooner or later, and more or less intensely in all Christian lives, opposition and tribulation. You cannot get away from the necessity, so it is as well to face it.

No doubt the form of antagonism varies. No doubt the more the world is penetrated by Christian principles divorced from their root and source, the less vehement and painful will the collision be. But there is the gulf, and there it will remain, until the world is a Church. No doubt some portion of the battlements of organised Christianity has tumbled into the ditch, and made it a little less deep. Christians have dropped their standard far too much, and so the antagonism is not so plain as it ought to be, and as it used to be, and as, some day, it will be. But there it is, and if you are going to live out and out like a Christian man, you will get the old sneers flung at you. You will be 'crotchety,' 'impracticable,' 'spoiling sport,' 'not to be dealt with,' 'a wet blanket,' 'pharisaical,' 'bigoted,' and all the rest of the pretty words which have been so frequently used about the men that try to live like Jesus Christ. Never mind! 'In the world ye have tribulation.' 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus,' the branding-iron which tells to whom the slave belongs. And if it is His initials that I carry I may be proud of the marks.

But at any rate there will be antagonism. You young men in your warehouses, you men that go on 'Change', we people that live by our pens or our tongues, and find ourselves in opposition to much of the tendencies of the present day-we have all, in our several ways, to bear the cross. Do not let us be ashamed of it, and, above all, do not let us, for the sake of easing our shoulders, be unfaithful to our Master. 'In the world ye have tribulation'; and the Christian man's peace has to be like the rainbow that lives above the cataract-still and radiant, whilst it shines above the hell of white waters that are tortured below.

III. Lastly, notice the courageous confidence which comes from the Lord's victory.

'Be of good cheer!' It is the old commandment that rang out to Joshua when, on the departure of Moses, the conduct of the war fell into his less experienced hands: 'Be strong, and of a good courage; only be thou strong and very courageous.' So says the Captain of salvation, leaving His soldiers to face the current of the heady fight in the field. Like some leader who has climbed the ramparts, or hewed his way through the broken ranks of the enemies, and rings out the voice of encouragement and call to his followers, our Captain sets before us His own example: 'I have overcome the world,' He said that the day before Calvary. If that was victory, what would defeat have been?

Notice, then, how our Lord's life was a true battle. The world tried to draw Him away from God by appealing to things desirable to sense, as in the wilderness; or to things dreadful to sense, as on the cross; and both the one and the other form of temptation He faced and conquered. It was no shadow fight which evoked this paean of victory from His lips. The reality of His conflict is somewhat concealed from us by reason of its calm and the completeness of His conquest. We do not appreciate the force that drives a planet upon its path because it is calm and continuous and silent, but the power that kept Jesus Christ continually faithful to His Father, continually sure of that Father's presence, continually averse to all self-will and selfish living, was a power mightier then all others that have been manifested in the history of humanity. The Captain of our salvation has really fought the fight before us.

But mark, again, that our Lord's life is the type of all victorious life. The world conquers me when it draws me away from God, when it makes me its slave, when it coaxes me to trust it, and urges to despair if I lose it. The world conquers me when it comes between me and God, when it fills my desires, when it absorbs my energies, when it blinds my eyes to the things unseen and eternal. I conquer the world when I put my foot upon its temptations, when I crush it down, when I shake off its bonds, and when nothing that time and sense, with their delights or their dreadfulnesses, can bring, prevents me from cleaving to my Father with all my heart, and from living as His child here. Whoso thus coerces Time and Sense to be the servants of his filial love has conquered them both, and whoso lets them draw him away from God is beaten, however successful he may dream himself to be and men may call him.

My friends! there is a lesson for Manchester people. Jesus Christ was not a very successful man according to the standard of Market Street and the Exchange. He made but a poor thing of the world, and He was going to be martyred on the cross the day after He said these words. And yet that was victory. Ay! Many a man beaten down in the struggle of daily life, and making very little of it, according to our vulgar estimate, is the true conqueror. Success means making the world a stepping-stone to God.

Still further, note our share in the Master's victory-'I have overcome the world. Be ye of good cheer.' That seems an irrelevant way of arguing. What does it matter to me though He has overcome? So much the better for Him; but what good is it to me?

It may aid us somewhat to more strenuous fighting, if we know that a brother has fought and conquered, and I do not under-estimate the blessing and the benefit of the life of Jesus Christ, as recorded in these Scriptures, even from that, as I conceive it, miserably inadequate and imperfect point of view. But the victory of Jesus Christ is of extremely little practical use to me, if all the use of it is to show me how to fight. Ah! you must go a deal deeper than that. 'I have overcome the world, and I will come and put My overcoming Spirit into your weakness, and fill you with My own victorious life, and make your hands strong to war and your fingers to fight; and be in you the conquering and omnipotent Power.'

My friends! Jesus Christ's victory is ours, and we are victors in it, because He is more than the pattern of brave warfare, He is even the Son of God, who gave Himself for us, and gives Himself to us, and dwells in us our Strength and our Righteousness.

Lastly, remember that the condition of that victory's being ours is the simple act of reliance upon Him and upon it. The man who goes into the battle as that little army of the Hebrews did against the wide-stretching hosts of the enemy, saying, 'O Lord! we know not what to do, but our eyes are up unto Thee,' will come out 'more than conqueror through Him that loved him.' For 'this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.'

103) John 17:1-13

John

THE INTERCESSOR

Joh. 17:1 - Joh. 17:19.

We may well despair of doing justice to the deep thoughts of this prayer, which volumes would not exhaust. Who is worthy to speak or to write about such sacred words? Perhaps we may best gain some glimpses of their great and holy sublimity by trying to gather their teaching round the centres of the three petitions, ‘glorify’ [Joh. 17:1, Joh. 17:5], ‘keep’ [Joh. 17:11], and ‘sanctify’ [Joh. 17:17].

I. In Joh. 17:1 - Joh. 17:5, Jesus prays for Himself, that He may be restored to His pre-incarnate glory; but yet the prayer desires not so much that glory as affecting Himself, as His being fitted thereby for completing His work of manifesting the Father. There are three main points in these verses-the petition, its purpose, and its grounds.

As to the first, the repetition of the request in Joh. 17:1 - Joh. 17:5 is significant, especially if we note that in the former the language is impersonal, ‘Thy Son,’ and continues so till Joh. 17:4, where ‘I’ and ‘Me’ appear. In Joh. 17:1 - Joh. 17:3, then, the prayer rests upon the ideal relations of Father and Son, realised in Jesus, while in Joh. 17:4 - Joh. 17:5 the personal element is emphatically presented. The two petitions are in their scope identical. The ‘glorifying’ in the former is more fully explained in the latter as being that which He possessed in that ineffable fellowship with the Father, not merely before incarnation, but before creation. In His manhood He possessed and manifested the ‘glory as of the Only-Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth’; but that glory, lustrous though it was, was pale, and humiliation compared with the light inaccessible, which shone around the Eternal Word in the bosom of the Father. Yet He who prayed was the same Person who had walked in that light before time was, and now in human flesh asked for what no mere manhood could bear. The first form of the petition implies that such a partaking in the uncreated glory of the Father is the natural prerogative of One who is ‘the Son,’ while the second implies that it is the appropriate recompense of the earthly life and character of the man Jesus. Joh. 17:4, where

The petition not only reveals the conscious divinity of the Son, but also His willing acceptance of the Cross; for the glorifying sought is that reached through death, resurrection, and ascension, and that introductory clause, ‘the hour is come,’ points to the impending sufferings as the first step in the answer to the petition. The Crucifixion is always thus treated in this Gospel, as being both the lowest humiliation and the ‘lifting up’ of the Son; and here He is reaching out His hand, as it were, to draw His sufferings nearer. So willingly and desiringly did this Isaac climb the mount of sacrifice. Both elements of the great saying in the Epistle to the Hebrews are here: ‘For the joy that was set before Him, [He] endured the Cross.’

The purpose of the petition is to be noted; namely, the Son’s glorifying of the Father. No taint of selfishness corrupted His prayer. Not for Himself, but for men, did He desire His glory. He sought return to that serene and lofty seat, and the elevation of His limited manhood to the throne, not because He was wearied of earth or impatient of weakness, sorrows, or limitations, but that He might more fully manifest by that Glory, the Father’s name. To make the Father known is to make the Father glorious; for He is all fair and lovely. That revelation of divine perfection, majesty, and sweetness was the end of Christ’s earthly life, and is the end of His heavenly divine activity. He needs to reassume the prerogatives of which He needed to divest Himself, and both necessities have one end. He had to lay aside His garments and assume the form of a servant, that He might make God known; but, that revelation being complete, He must take His garments and sit down again, before He can go on to tell all the meaning of what He has ‘done unto us.’

The ground of the petition is twofold. Joh. 17:2 represent the glory sought for, as the completion of the Son’s mission and task. Already He had been endowed with ‘authority over all flesh,’ for the purpose of bestowing eternal life; and that eternal life stands in the knowledge of God, which is the same as the knowledge of Christ. The present gift to the Son and its purpose are thus precisely parallel with the further gift desired, and that is the necessary carrying out of this. The authority and office of the incarnate Christ demand the glory of, and consequent further manifestation by, the glorified Christ. The life which He comes to give is a life which flows from the revelation that He makes of the Father, received, not as mere intellectual knowledge, but as loving acquaintance.

The second ground for the petition is in Joh. 17:4, the actual perfect fulfilment by the Son of that mission. What untroubled consciousness of sinless obedience and transparent shining through His life of the Father's likeness and will He must have had, who could thus assert His complete realisation of that Father's revealing purpose, as the ground of His deserving and desiring participation in the divine glory! Surely such words are either the acme of self-righteousness or the self-revealing speech of the Son of God.

II. With Joh. 17:6 we pass to the more immediate reference to the disciples, and the context from thence to Joh. 17:15 may be regarded as all clustered round the second petition 'keep' [Joh. 17:11].

That central request is preceded and followed by considerations of the disciples' relation to Christ and to the world, which may be regarded as its grounds. The whole context preceding the petition may be summed up in two grounds for the prayer-the former set forth at length, and the latter summarily; the one being the genuine, though incomplete discipleship of the men for whom Christ prays [Joh. 17:6 - Joh. 17:10], and the latter their desolate condition without Jesus [Joh. 17:11].

It is beautiful to see how our Lord here credits the disciples with genuine grasp, both in heart and head, of His teaching. He had shortly before had to say, 'Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me?' and soon 'they all forsook Him and fled.' But beneath misconception and inadequate apprehension there lived faith and love; and He saw 'the full corn in the ear,' when only the green 'blade' was visible, pushing itself above the surface. We may take comfort from this generous estimate of imperfect disciples. If He did not tend, instead of quenching, 'dimly burning wicks,' where would He have 'lights in the world?'

Joh. 17:6 lays down the beginning of discipleship as threefold: Christ's act in revealing; the Father's, in giving men to Jesus; and men's, in keeping the Father's word. 'Thy word' is the whole revelation by Christ, which is, as this Gospel so often repeats, not His own, but the Father's. These three facts underlying discipleship are pleas for the petition to follow; for unless the feeble disciples are 'kept' in the name, as in a fortress, Christ's work of revelation is neutralised, the Father's gift to Him made of none effect, and the incipient disciples will not 'keep' His word. The plea is, in effect, 'Forsake not the works of thine own hands'; and, like all Christ's prayers, it has a promise in its depths, since God does not begin what He will not finish; and it has a warning, too, that we cannot keep ourselves unless a stronger Hand keeps us.

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Observe the issue of this keeping; namely, the unity of believers. The depths of that saying are beyond us, but we can at least see thus far-that the true bond of unity is the name in which all who are one are kept; that the pattern of the true unity of believers is the ineffable union of Father and Son, which is oneness of will and nature, along with distinctness of persons; and that therefore this purpose goes far deeper than outward unity of organisation.

Then follow other pleas, which are principally drawn from Christ's relation to the disciples, now ending; whereas the former ones were chiefly deduced from the disciples' relation to Him. He can no more do what He has done, and commits it to the Father. Happy we if we can leave our unfinished tasks to be taken up by God, and trust those whom we leave undefended to be shielded by Him! 'I kept' is, in the Greek, expressive of continuous, repeated action, while 'I guarded' gives the single issue of the many acts of keeping. Jesus keeps His disciples now as He did then, by sedulous, patient, reiterated acts, so that they are safe from evil. But note where He kept them-'in Thy name.' That is our place of safety, a sure defence and inexpugnable fortress. One, indeed, was lost; but that was not any slur on Christ's keeping, but resulted from his own evil nature, as being 'a son of loss' [if we may so preserve the affinity of the words in the Greek], and from the divine decree from of old. Sharply defined and closely united are the two apparent contradictories of man's free choice of destruction and God's foreknowledge. Christ saw them in harmony, and we shall do so one day.

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Then follows a final glance at the disciples' relation to the world, to which they are alien because they are of kindred to Him. This is the ground for the repetition of the prayer 'keep', with the difference that formerly it was 'keep in Thy name,' and now it is 'from the evil.' It is good to gaze first on our defence, the 'munitions of rocks' where we lie safely, and then we can venture to face the thought of ‘the evil,’ from which that keeps us, whether it be personal or abstract.

III. Joh. 17:16 - Joh. 17:19 give the final petition for the immediate circle of disciples, with its grounds.

The position of alienation from the world, in which the disciples stand by reason of their assimilation to Jesus, is repeated here. It was the reason for the former prayer, ‘keep’; it is the reason for the new petition, ‘sanctify.’ Keeping comes first, and then sanctifying, or consecration. Security from evil is given that we may be wholly devoted to the service of God. The evil in the world is the great hindrance to that. The likeness to Jesus is the great ground of hope that we shall be truly consecrated. We are kept ‘in the name’; we are consecrated ‘in the truth,’ which is the revelation made by Jesus, and in a very deep sense is Himself. That truth is, as it were, the element in which the believer lives, and by abiding in which his real consecration is possible.

Christ’s prayer for us should be our aim and deepest desire for ourselves, and His declaration of the condition of its fulfilment should prescribe our firm adhesion to, and constant abiding in, the truth as revealed and embodied in Him, as the only means by which we can attain the consecration which is at once, as the closing verses of the passage tell us, the means by which we may fulfil the purpose for which we are sent into the world, and the path on which we reach complete assimilation to His perfect self-surrender. All Christians are sent into the world by Jesus, as Jesus was sent by the Father. We have the charge to glorify Him. We have the presence of the Sender with us, the sent. We are inspired with His Spirit. We cannot do His work without that entire consecration which shall copy His devotion to the Father and eager swiftness to do His will. How can such ennobling and exalted consecration be ours? There is but one way. He has ‘consecrated Himself,’ and by union with Him through faith, our selfishness may be subdued, and the Spirit of Christ may dwell in our hearts, to make us ‘living sacrifices, consecrated and acceptable to God.’ Then shall we be truly ‘consecrated,’ and then only, when we can say, ‘I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’ That is the end of Christ’s consecration of Himself-the prayer which He prayed for His disciples-and should be the aim which every disciple earnestly pursues.

104) John 17:14-16

John

THE INTERCESSOR

‘THE LORD THEE KEEPS’

Joh. 17:14 - Joh. 17:16.

We have here a petition imbedded in a reiterated statement of the disciples’ isolated position when left in a hostile world without Christ’s sheltering presence. We cannot fathom the depth of the mystery of the praying Christ, but we may be sure of this, that His prayers were always in harmony with the Father’s will, were, in fact, the expression of that will, and were therefore promises and prophecies. What He prays the Father for His disciples He gives to His disciples. Once only had He to say, ‘If it be possible’; at all other times He prayed as sure that ‘Thou hearest Me always,’ and in this very prayer He speaks in a tone of strange authority, when He prays for all believers in future ages, and says: ‘I will that, where I am, they also may be with Me.’ In this High-priestly prayer, offered when Gethsemane was almost in sight, and the Judgment Hall and Calvary were near, our Lord’s tender interest in His disciples fills His mind, and even in its earlier portion, which is in form a series of petitions for Himself, it is in essence a prayer for them, whilst this central section which concerns the Apostles, and the closing section which casts the mantle of His love and care over all who hereafter shall ‘believe on Me through their word,’ witnesses to the sublime completeness of His self-oblivion. Gethsemane heard His prayer for Himself; here He prays for His people, and the calm serenity and confident assurance of this prayer, set against the agitation of that other, receives and gives emphasis by the contrast.

Our text falls into two parts, the enclosing circle of the repeated statement of the disciples’ isolation in an alien world, and the enclosed jewel of the all-sufficient prayer which guarantees their protection. We shall best make its comfort and cheer our own by dealing with these two successively.

I. The disciples’ isolation.

Of course we are to interpret the ‘world’ here in accordance with the ethical usage of that term in this Gospel, according to which it means the aggregate of mankind considered as apart from and alien to God. It is roughly equivalent to the modern phrase, ‘society.’

With that order of things Christ’s real followers are not in accord.

That want of accord depends upon their accord with Jesus.

Every Christian has the ‘mind of Christ’ in him, in the measure of his Christianity. ‘It is enough for the disciple that he be as his Master’ But Christian discipleship has a better guarantee for the assimilation of the disciple to his Lord than the ordinary forms of the relation of teacher and taught ever present. There is a participation in the Master’s life, an implantation in the scholar’s spirit of the Teacher’s Spirit. ‘Christ in us’ is not only ‘the hope of glory,’ but the power which makes possible and actual the present possession of a life kindred with, because derived from, and essentially one with, His life.

They whose spirits are touched by the indwelling Christ to the ‘fine issues’ of sympathy with the law of His earthly life cannot but live in the world as aliens, and wander amid its pitfalls with ‘blank misgivings’ and a chill sense that this is not their rest. They are knit to One whose ‘meat and drink’ was to do the will of the Father in heaven, who ‘pleased not Himself,’ whose life was all one long service and sacrifice for men, whose joys were not fed by earthly possessions or delights. How should they have a sense of community of aims with grovelling hearts that cling to wealth or ambition, that are not at peace with God, and have no holdfasts beyond this ‘bank and shoal of time’? A man who has drunk into the spirit of Christ’s life is thereby necessarily thrown out of gear with the world.

Happy is he if his union with Jesus is so deep and close that it is but deepened by his experience of the lack of sympathy between the world and himself! Happy if his consciousness of not being ‘of the world’ but quickens his desire to help the world and glorify his Lord, by bringing His all-sufficiency into its emptiness, and leading it, too, to discern His sweetness and beauty!

But how little the life of the average Christian corresponds to this reiterated utterance of our Lord! Who of us dare venture to take it on our lips and to say that we are ‘not of the world even as He is not of the world’? Is not our relation to that world of which Jesus here speaks a contrast rather than a parallel to His? The ‘prince of this world’ had nothing in Christ, as He himself declared, but He has much in each of us. There are stored up heaps of combustibles in every one of us which catch fire only too swiftly, and burn but too fiercely, when the ‘fiery darts of the wicked’ fall among them. Instead of an instinctive recoil from the view of life characteristic of ‘the world,’ we must confess, if we are honest, that it draws us strongly, and many of us are quite at home with it. Why is this but because we do not habitually live near enough to our Lord to drink in His Spirit? The measure of our discord with the world is the measure of our accord with our Saviour. It is in the degree in which we possess His life that we come to be aliens here, and it is in the degree in which we keep in touch with Jesus, and keep our hearts wide open for the entrance of His Spirit, that we possess His life. A worldly Christian-no uncommon character-is a Christian who has all but shut himself off from the life which Christ breathes into the expectant soul.

II. The disciples’ guarded security.

Jesus encloses His prayer between the two parts of that repeated statement of the disciples’ isolation. It is like some lovely, peaceful plain circled by grim mountains. The isolation is a necessary consequence of the disciples’ previous union with Him. It involves much that is painful to the unrenewed part of their natures, but their Lord’s prayer is more than enough for their security and peace.

‘I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world.’ They are in it by God’s appointment for great purposes, affecting their own characters and affecting the world, with which Christ will not interfere. It is their training ground, their school. The sense of belonging to another order is to be intensified by their experiences in it, and these are to make more vivid the hopes that yearn towards the true home, and to develop the ‘wrestling thews that throw the world.’ The discipline of life is too precious to be tampered with even by a Saviour’s prayer, and He loves His people too wisely to seek to shelter them from its roughness, and to procure for them exemption which would impoverish their characters.

So let us learn the lesson and shape our desires after the pattern of our Lord’s prayer for us, nor blindly seek for that ease which He would not ask for us. False asceticism that shrinks from contact with an alien world, weak running from trials and temptations, selfish desires for exemption from sorrows, are all rebuked by this prayer. Christ’s relation to the world is our pattern, and we are not to seek for pillows in an order of things where He ‘had not where to lay His head.’

But He does ask for His people that they may be kept ‘from evil,’ or from ‘the evil One.’ That prayer is, as we have said, a promise and a prophecy. But the fulfilment of it in each individual disciple hinges on the disciple’s keeping himself in touch with Jesus, whereby the ‘much virtue’ of His prayer will encompass him and keep him safe. We do not discuss the alternative renderings, according to one of which ‘the evil’ is impersonal, and according to the other of which it is concentrated in the personal ‘prince of this world.’ In either case, it is ‘the evil’ against which the disciples are to be guarded, whether it has a personal source or not.

Here, in Christ’s intercession, is the firm ground of our confidence that we may be ‘more than conquerors’ in the life-long fight which we have to wage. The sweet strong old psalm is valid in its assurances to-day for every soul which puts itself under the shadow of Christ’s protecting intercession: ‘The Lord shall keep thee from all evil, He shall keep thy soul.’ We have not ‘to lift up our eyes unto the hills,’ for ‘vainly is help hoped for from the multitude of the mountains,’ but ‘Our help cometh from the Lord which made heaven and earth.’ Therefore we may dwell at peace in the midst of an alien world, having the Father for our Keeper, and the Son, who overcame the world, for our Intercessor, our Pattern and our Hope.

The parallel between Christ and His people applies to their relations to the present order of things: ‘They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.’ It applies to their mission here: ‘As Thou didst send Me into the world, even so sent I them into the world.’ It applies to the future: ‘I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to Thee,’ and in that ‘coming’ lies the guarantee that His servants will, each in his due time, come out from this alien world and pass into the state which is home, because He is there. The prayer that they might be kept from the evil, while remaining in the scene where evil is rampant, is crowned by the prayer: ‘I will that, where I am, they also may be with Me, that they may behold My glory.’

105) John 17:17-19

John

THE INTERCESSOR

Joh. 17:1 - Joh. 17:19.

We may well despair of doing justice to the deep thoughts of this prayer, which volumes would not exhaust. Who is worthy to speak or to write about such sacred words? Perhaps we may best gain some glimpses of their great and holy sublimity by trying to gather their teaching round the centres of the three petitions, ‘glorify’ [Joh. 17:1, Joh. 17:5], ‘keep’ [Joh. 17:11], and ‘sanctify’ [Joh. 17:17].

I. In Joh. 17:1 - Joh. 17:5, Jesus prays for Himself, that He may be restored to His pre-incarnate glory; but yet the prayer desires not so much that glory as affecting Himself, as His being fitted thereby for completing His work of manifesting the Father. There are three main points in these verses-the petition, its purpose, and its grounds.

As to the first, the repetition of the request in Joh. 17:1 - Joh. 17:5 is significant, especially if we note that in the former the language is impersonal, ‘Thy Son,’ and continues so till Joh. 17:4, where ‘I’ and ‘Me’ appear. In Joh. 17:1 - Joh. 17:3, then, the prayer rests upon the ideal relations of Father and Son, realised in Jesus, while in Joh. 17:4 - Joh. 17:5 the personal element is emphatically presented. The two petitions are in their scope identical. The ‘glorifying’ in the former is more fully explained in the latter as being that which He possessed in that ineffable fellowship with the Father, not merely before incarnation, but before creation. In His manhood He possessed and manifested the ‘glory as of the Only-Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth’; but that glory, lustrous though it was, was pale, and humiliation compared with the light inaccessible, which shone around the Eternal Word in the bosom of the Father. Yet He who prayed was the same Person who had walked in that light before time was, and now in human flesh asked for what no mere manhood could bear. The first form of the petition implies that such a partaking in the uncreated glory of the Father is the natural prerogative of One who is ‘the Son,’ while the second implies that it is the appropriate recompense of the earthly life and character of the man Jesus.

The petition not only reveals the conscious divinity of the Son, but also His willing acceptance of the Cross; for the glorifying sought is that reached through death, resurrection, and ascension, and that introductory clause, ‘the hour is come,’ points to the impending sufferings as the first step in the answer to the petition. The Crucifixion is always thus treated in this Gospel, as being both the lowest humiliation and the ‘lifting up’ of the Son; and here He is reaching out His hand, as it were, to draw His sufferings nearer. So willingly and desiringly did this Isaac climb the mount of sacrifice. Both elements of the great saying in the Epistle to the Hebrews are here: ‘For the joy that was set before Him, [He] endured the Cross.’

The purpose of the petition is to be noted; namely, the Son’s glorifying of the Father. No taint of selfishness corrupted His prayer. Not for Himself, but for men, did He desire His glory. He sought return to that serene and lofty seat, and the elevation of His limited manhood to the throne, not because He was wearied of earth or impatient of weakness, sorrows, or limitations, but that He might more fully manifest by that Glory, the Father’s name. To make the Father known is to make the Father glorious; for He is all fair and lovely. That revelation of divine perfection, majesty, and sweetness was the end of Christ’s earthly life, and is the end of His heavenly divine activity. He needs to reassume the prerogatives of which He needed to divest Himself, and both necessities have one end. He had to lay aside His garments and assume the form of a servant, that He might make God known; but, that revelation being complete, He must take His garments and sit down again, before He can go on to tell all the meaning of what He has ‘done unto us.’

The ground of the petition is twofold. Joh. 17:2 represent the glory sought for, as the completion of the Son’s mission and task. Already He had been endowed with ‘authority over all flesh,’ for the purpose of bestowing eternal life; and that eternal life stands in the knowledge of God, which is the same as the knowledge of Christ. The present gift to the Son and its purpose are thus precisely parallel with the further gift desired, and that is the necessary carrying out of this. The authority and office of the incarnate Christ demand the glory of, and consequent further manifestation by, the glorified Christ. The life which He comes to give is a life which flows from the revelation that He makes of the Father, received, not as mere intellectual knowledge, but as loving acquaintance.

The second ground for the petition is in Joh. 17:4, the actual perfect fulfilment by the Son of that mission. What untroubled consciousness of sinless obedience and transparent shining through His life of the Father’s likeness and will He must have had, who could thus assert His complete realisation of that Father’s revealing purpose, as the ground of His deserving and desiring participation in the divine glory! Surely such words are either the acme of self-righteousness or the self-revealing speech of the Son of God.

II. With Joh. 17:6 we pass to the more immediate reference to the disciples, and the context from thence to Joh. 17:15 may be regarded as all clustered round the second petition ‘keep’ [Joh. 17:11].

That central request is preceded and followed by considerations of the disciples’ relation to Christ and to the world, which may be regarded as its grounds. The whole context preceding the petition may be summed up in two grounds for the prayer-the former set forth at length, and the latter summarily; the one being the genuine, though incomplete discipleship of the men for whom Christ prays [Joh. 17:6 - Joh. 17:10], and the latter their desolate condition without Jesus [Joh. 17:11].

It is beautiful to see how our Lord here credits the disciples with genuine grasp, both in heart and head, of His teaching. He had shortly before had to say, ‘Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known Me?’ and soon ‘they all forsook Him and fled.’ But beneath misconception and inadequate apprehension there lived faith and love; and He saw ‘the full corn in the ear,’ when only the green ‘blade’ was visible, pushing itself above the surface. We may take comfort from this generous estimate of imperfect disciples. If He did not tend, instead of quenching, ‘dimly burning wicks,’ where would He have ‘lights in the world?’

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III. Joh. 17:16 - Joh. 17:19 give the final petition for the immediate circle of disciples, with its grounds.

The position of alienation from the world, in which the disciples stand by reason of their assimilation to Jesus, is repeated here. It was the reason for the former prayer, ‘keep’; it is the reason for the new petition, ‘sanctify.’ Keeping comes first, and then sanctifying, or consecration. Security from evil is given that we may be wholly devoted to the service of God. The evil in the world is the great hindrance to that. The likeness to Jesus is the great ground of hope that we shall be truly consecrated. We are kept ‘in the name’; we are consecrated ‘in the truth,’ which is the revelation made by Jesus, and in a very deep sense is Himself. That truth is, as it were, the element in which the believer lives, and by abiding in which his real consecration is possible.

Christ’s prayer for us should be our aim and deepest desire for ourselves, and His declaration of the condition of its fulfilment should prescribe our firm adhesion to, and constant abiding in, the truth as revealed and embodied in Him, as the only means by which we can attain the consecration which is at once, as the closing verses of the passage tell us, the means by which we may fulfil the purpose for which we are sent into the world, and the path on which we reach complete assimilation to His perfect self-surrender. All Christians are sent into the world by Jesus, as Jesus was sent by the Father. We have the charge to glorify Him. We have the presence of the Sender with us, the sent. We are inspired with His Spirit. We cannot do His work without that entire consecration which shall copy His devotion to the Father and eager swiftness to do His will. How can such ennobling and exalted consecration be ours? There is but one way. He has ‘consecrated Himself,’ and by union with Him through faith, our selfishness may be subdued, and the Spirit of Christ may dwell in our hearts, to make us ‘living sacrifices, consecrated and acceptable to God.’ Then shall we be truly ‘consecrated,’ and then only, when we can say, ‘I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’ That is the end of Christ’s consecration of Himself-the prayer which He prayed for His disciples-and should be the aim which every disciple earnestly pursues.

106) John 17:20-23

John

THE HIGH PRIEST’S PRAYER

Joh. 17:20 - Joh. 17:26.

The remainder of this prayer reaches out to all generations of believers to the end. We may incidentally note that it shows that Jesus did not anticipate a speedy end of the history of the world or the Church; and also that it breathes but one desire, that for the Church’s unity, as though He saw what would be its greatest peril. Characteristic, too, of the idealism of this Gospel is it that there is no name for that future community. It is not called ‘church,’ or ‘congregation,’ or the like-it is ‘them also that believe on Me through their word,’ a great spiritual community, held together by common faith in Him whom the Apostles preached. Is not that still the best definition of Christians, and does not such a conception of it correspond better to its true nature than the formal abstraction, ‘the Church’?

We can but touch in the most inadequate fashion the profound words of this section of the prayer which would take volumes to expound fitly. We note that it contains four periods, in each of which something is asked or stated, and then a purpose to be attained by the petition or statement is set forth.

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The petitions for what would be given to believers passes for a moment into a statement of what Jesus had already given to them. He had begun the unifying gift, and that made a plea for its perfecting. The ‘glory’ which He had given to these poor bewildered Galilaeans was but in a rudimentary stage; but still, wherever there is faith in Him, there is some communication of His life and Spirit, and some of that veiled and yet radiant glory, ‘full of grace and truth,’ which shone through the covering when the Incarnate Word ‘became flesh.’ It is the Christ-given Christ-likeness in each which knits believers into one. It is Christ in us and we in Christ that fuses us into one, and thereby makes each perfect. And such flashing back of the light of Jesus from a million separate crystals, all glowing with one light and made one in the light, would flash on darkest eyes the lustre of the conviction that God sent Christ, and that God’s love enfolded those Christlike souls even as it enfolded Him.

Again [Joh. 17:24] comes a petition with its result. And here there is no mention of the effect of the answer on the world. For the moment the thoughts of isolation in, and a message to, the world fade away. The partially-possessed ‘glory’ seems to have led on Christ’s thoughts to the calm home of perfection waiting for Him who was ‘not of the world’ and was sent into it, and for the humble ones who had taken Him for Lord. ‘I will that’-that is a strange tone for a prayer. What consciousness on Christ’s part does it involve? The disciples are not now called ‘them that should believe on Me,’ but ‘that which Thou hast given Me,’ the individuals melt into the great whole. They are Christ’s, not merely by their faith or man’s preaching, but by the Father’s gift. And the fact of that gift is used as a plea with Him, to 'perfect that which concerneth' them, and to complete the unity of believers with Jesus by bringing them to be 'with Him' in His triumphant session at the right hand. To 'behold' will be the same as to share His glory, not only that which we beheld when He tabernacled among us, but that which He had in the pouring out on Him of God's love 'before the foundation of the world.' Our dim eyes cannot follow the happy souls as they are lost in the blaze, but we know that they walk in light and are like Him, for they 'see Him as He is.'

The last statement [Joh. 17:25 - Joh. 17:26] is not petition but vow, and, to our ears, promise. The contrast of the world and believers appears for the last time. What made the world a 'world' was its not knowing God; what made believers isolated in, and having an errand to, the world, was that they 'knew' [not merely 'believed,' but knew by experience] that Jesus had been sent from God to make known His name. All our knowledge of God comes through Him; it is for us to recognise His divine mission, and then He will unveil, more and more, with blessed continuity of increasing knowledge, the Name, and with growing knowledge of it growing measures of God's love will be in us, and Jesus Himself will 'dwell in our hearts by faith' more completely and more blessedly through an eternity of wider knowledge and more fervent love.

107) John 17:24

John

THE HIGH PRIEST'S PRAYER

THE FOLDED FLOCK

Joh. 17:24.

This wonderful prayer is [a] for Jesus Himself, [b] for the Apostles, [c] for the whole Church on earth and in heaven.

I. The prayer.

‘I will’ has a strange ring of authority. It is the expression of His love to men, and of His longing for their presence with Him in His glory. Not till they are with Him there, shall He ‘see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied.’

We have here a glimpse of the blessed state of the dead in Christ.

[a] Local presence with Christ. His glorified body is somewhere. The value of this thought is that it gives solidity to our ideas of a future life. There they are. We need not dwell on the metaphysical difficulties about locality for disembodied spirits.

If a spirit can be localised in a body, I suppose it can be localised without a body; but passing by all that, we have the hope held out here of a real local presence with the glorified humanity of our Lord. We speak of the dead as gone from us, and we have that idea far more vividly in our minds than that of their having gone to Him. We speak of the ‘departed,’ but we do not think of them as ‘arrived.’ We look down to the narrow grave, but we forget ‘He is not here, He is risen. Why seek ye the living among the dead?’ Ah! if we could only bring home to our hearts the solid prose of the conviction that where Christ is there His servants are, and that not in the diffused ubiquity of His Divine Omnipresence, it would go far to remove the darkness and vague mist which wrap the future, and to set it as it really is before us, as a solid definite reality. We see the sails glide away out into the west as the sun goes down, and we think of them as tossing on a midnight sea, an unfathomable waste. Try to think of them more truly. As in that old miracle, He comes to them walking on the water in the night watch, and if at first they are terrified, His voice brings back hope to the heart that is beginning to stand still, and immediately they are at the land whither they go. Now, as they sink from our sight, they are in port, sails furled and anchor dropped, and green fields round them, even while we watch the sinking masts, and cannot yet rightly tell whether the fading sail has faded wholly.

[b] Communion with Christ.

Our Lord says not only ‘that where I am, they also may be,’ but adds ‘with Me.’ That is not a superfluous addition, but emphasises the thought of a communion which is more intimate and blessed than local presence alone would be.

The communion here is real but imperfect. It is perfected there on our part by the dropping away of flesh and sin, by change of circumstances, by emancipation from cares and toils necessary here, by the development of new powers and surroundings, and on His side by new manifestations.

[c] Vision of His glory.

The crown of this utterance of Christ’s will is ‘that they may behold My glory.’ In an earlier part of this prayer our Lord had spoken of the ‘glory which I had with Thee before the world was.’ But probably the glory ‘given’ is not that of essential Divinity, but that of His mediatorial work. To His people ‘with Him where He is,’ are imparted fuller views of Christ as Saviour, deeper notions of His work, clearer perception of His rule in providence and nature. This is the loftiest employment of the spirits who are perfected and lapped in ‘pleasures for evermore’ by their union with the glorified Jesus.

Surely this is grander than all metaphorical pictures of heaven.

II. The incipient fulfilment now going on.

The prayer has been in process of fulfilment ever since. The dead in Christ have entered on its answer now.

We need not discuss difficulties about the ‘intermediate state,’ for this at all events is true, that to be ‘absent from the body’ is to be ‘present with the Lord.’

A Christian death is an answer to this prayer. True, for Christians as for all, the physical necessity is an imperative law. True, the punitive aspect of death is retained for them. But yet the law is wielded by Christ, and while death remains, its whole aspect is changed. So we may think of those who have departed in His faith and fear as gone in answer to this prayer.

How beautiful that is! Slowly, one by one, they are gathered in, as the stars one by one light up. Place after place is filled.

Thus through the ages the prayer works on, and our dear ones have gone from us, but they have gone to Him. We weep, but they rejoice. To us their departure is the result of an iron law, of a penal necessity, of some secondary cause; but to them it is seen to be the answer to His mighty prayer. They hear His voice and follow Him when He says, ‘Come up hither.’

III. The final fulfilment still future.

The prayer looks forward to a perfect fulfilment. His prayer cannot be vain.

[a] Perfect in degree.

[b] Perfect in extent, when all shall be gathered together and the ‘whole family’ shall be ‘in heaven,’ and Christ’s own word receives its crowning realisation, that ‘of all whom the Father hath given Him He has lost nothing.’

And these are not some handful picked out by a decree which we can neither fathom nor alter, but Christ is given to us all, and if we choose to take Him, then for us He has ascended; and as we watch Him going up the voice comes to us: ‘I go to prepare a place for you. I will come again and receive you unto Myself, that where I am, there ye may be also.’

108) John 17:25

John

THE HIGH PRIEST’S PRAYER

Joh. 17:20 - Joh. 17:26.

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109) John 17:26

John

THE HIGH PRIEST'S PRAYER

CHRIST'S SUMMARY OF HIS WORK

Joh. 17:26.

This is the solemn and calm close of Christ's great High-priestly prayer; the very last words that He spoke before Gethsemane and His passion. In it He sums up both the purpose of His life and the petitions of His prayer, and presents the perfect fulfilment of the former as the ground on which He asks the fulfilment of the latter. There is a singular correspondence and contrast between these last words to God and the last words to the disciples, which immediately preceded them. These were, 'In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.' In both He sums up His life, in both He is unconscious of flaw, imperfection, or limitation; in both He shares His own possessions among His followers. But His words to men carry a trace of His own conflict and a foreboding of theirs. For Him life had been, and for them it was to be, tribulation and a battle, and the highest thing that He could promise them was victory won by conflict. But from the serene elevation of the prayer all such thoughts disappear. Unbroken calm lies over it. His life has been one continual manifestation of the name of God; and the portion that He promises to His followers is not victory won by strife, but the participation with Himself in the love of God.

Both views are true-true to His experience, true to ours. The difference between them lies in the elevation of the beholder's eye. Looked at on the outward side, His life and ours must be always a battle and often a sorrow. Looked at from within, His life was an unbroken abiding in the love of

God, and a continual impartation of the name of God, and our lives may be an ever growing knowledge of God, leading to and being a fuller and fuller possession of His love, and of a present Christ. So let us ponder these deep words: our Lord's own summing up of His work and aims; His statement of what we may hope to attain; and the path by which we may attain it. I shall best bring out the whole fullness of their meaning if I simply follow them word by word.

I. Note, first, the backward look of the revealing Son.

'I have declared Thy name.'

The first thing that strikes one about these words is their boldness. Remember that they are spoken to God, at the close of a life the heights and depths of which they sum up. They are an appeal to God's righteous judgment of the whole character of the career. Do they breathe the tone that we might expect? Surely the prophet or teacher who has most earnestly tried to make himself a mirror, without spot to darken and without dint to distort the divine ray, will be the first to feel, as he looks back, the imperfections of his repetition of his message. But Jesus Christ, when He looks back over His life, has no flaw, limitation, incompleteness, to record or to confess. As always so here, He is absolutely unconscious of anything in the nature of weakness, error, or sin. As when He looked back upon His life as a conflict, He had no defeats to remember with shame, so here, when He looks upon it as the revelation of God He feels that everything which He has received of the Father He has made known unto men.

And the strange thing is that we admit the claim, and have become so accustomed to regard it as being perfectly legitimate that we forget how enormous it is. He takes an attitude here which in any other man would be repulsive, but in Him is supremely natural. We criticise other people, we outgrow their teachings, we see where their doctrines have deviated from truth by excess or defect, or disproportion; but when He says 'I have declared Thy name,' we feel that He says nothing more than the simple facts of His life vindicate and confirm.

Not less remarkable is the implication in these words, not only of the completeness of His message, but of the fullness of His knowledge of God, and its entirely underived nature. So He claims for Himself an altogether special and unique position here: He has learned God from none; He teaches God to all. ‘That was the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.’

Looking a little more closely at these words before us, we have here Christ’s own account of His whole life. The meaning of it all is the revelation of the heart of God. Not by words, of course; not by words only, but far more by deeds. And I would have you ask yourselves this question- If the deeds of a man are a declaration of the name of God, what sort of a man is He who thus declares Him? Must we not feel that if these words, or anything like them, really came from the lips of Jesus Christ, we are here in the presence of something other than a holy life of a simple humanity, which might help men to climb to the apprehension of a God who was perfect love; and that when He says ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father,’ we stand before ‘God manifest in the flesh.’

What is that name of God which the revealing Son declares? Not the mere syllables by which we call Him, but the manifested character of the Father. That one name, in the narrower sense of the word, carries the whole revelation that Jesus Christ has to make; for it speaks of tenderness, of kindred, of paternal care, of the transmission of a nature, of the embrace of a divine love. And it delivers men from all their creeping dreads, from all their dark peradventures, from all their stinging fears, from all the paralysing uncertainties which, like clouds, always misty and often thunder-bearing, have shut out the sight of the divine face. If this Christ, in His weakness and humanity, with pity welling from His eyes, and making music of His voice, with the swift help streaming from His fingers-tips to every pain and weariness, and the gracious righteousness that drew little children and did not repel publicans and harlots, is our best image of God, then love is the centre of divinity, and all the rest that we call God is but circumference and fringe of that central brightness.

‘So through the thunder comes a human voice Saying, “O heart I made! a heart beats here.”‘

He has declared God’s name, His last best name of Love.

Need I dwell for one moment on the fact that that name is only declared by this Son? There is no need to deny the presence of manifold other precious sources in men’s experience and lives from which something may be inferred of what God truly is. But all these, rich and manifold as they are, fall into nothingness before the life of Jesus Christ, considered as the making visible of God. For all the rest are partial and incomplete. ‘At sundry times and in divers manners’ God flung forth syllables of the name, and ‘fragments of that mighty voice came rolling down the wind.’ But in Jesus Christ the whole name, in all its syllables, is spoken. Other sources of knowledge are ambiguous, and need the interpretation of Christ’s life and Cross ere they can be construed into a harmonious whole. Life, nature, our inmost being, history, all these sources speak with two voices; and it is only when we hear the deep note that underlies them in the word of Christ that their discord becomes a harmony. Other sources lack authority. They come at the most with a ‘may be.’ He comes with a ‘Verily, verily.’ Other sources speak to the understanding, or the conscience, or to fear. Christ speaks to the heart. Other sources leave the man who accepts them unaffected. Christ’s message penetrates to the transforming and assimilation of the whole being.

So, dear brethren! for all generations, and for this generation most of all, the plain alternative lies between the declaration of the name of God in Jesus Christ and a godless and orphan world. Modern thought will make short work of all other sources of certitude about the character of God, and will leave men alone in the dark. Christ, the historical fact of the life and death of Jesus Christ, is the sole surviving source of certitude, which is blessedness, as to whether there is a God, and what sort of a God He is.

II. Secondly, note here that strange forward look of the dying Man: ‘I have declared Thy name and will declare it.’

And that was said within eight and forty hours of the Cross, which, if He had been a simple human teacher and martyr, would have ended all His activity in the world. But here He is not merely summing up His life, and laying it aside, writing the last sentence, as it were, which gathers up the whole of the completed book, but He is closing the first volume, and in the act of doing so He stretches out His hand to open the second. ‘I will declare it.’ When? How? Did not earthly life, then, put a stop to this Teacher’s activity? Was there still prophetic function to be done after death had sealed His lips? Certainly.

That anticipation, which at once differentiates Him from all the brood of merely human teachers and prophets, even the highest, does indeed include as future, at the moment when He speaks, the swiftly coming and close Cross; but it goes beyond it. How much of Christendom’s knowledge of God depended upon the Passion, on the threshold of which Christ was standing? He, hanging on the Cross in weakness, and dying there amidst the darkness that overspread the land, is a strange Revealer of the omnipotent, infinite, ever-blessed God. But Oh! if we strike Gethsemane and Calvary out of Christ’s manifestation of the Father, how infinitely poorer are we and the world! ‘God commendeth,’ [rather ‘establisheth,’] ‘His love toward us in that whilst we were yet sinners Christ died for us.’ And so as we turn ourselves to the little knoll outside the gate, where the Nazarene carpenter hangs faint and dying, we-wonder of Wonders, and yet certainty of certainties!-have to say, ‘Lo! this is our God; we have waited for Him.’

But that future revelation extends beyond the Cross, and includes resurrection, ascension, Pentecost, and the whole history of the Church right onwards through the ages. The difference between the two volumes of revelation-that which includes the work of Christ upon earth, and that which includes His revelation from the heavens-is this, that the first volume contains all the facts, and the second volume contains His interpretation and application of the facts in the understandings and hearts of His people. We have no more facts from which to construe God than these which belong to the earthly life of Jesus Christ, and we never shall have, here at all events. But whilst the first volume to the bottom of the last page is finished and tolerates and needs no additions, day by day, moment by moment, epoch by epoch Christ is bringing His people to a fuller understanding of the significance of the first volume, and writing the second more and more upon their hearts.

So we have an ever-living Christ, still the active Teacher of His Church. Times of unsettlement and revolutionary change and the ‘shaking of the things that are made,’ like the times in which we live, are but times in which the great Teacher is setting some new lesson from the old Book to His slow scholars. There is always a little confusion in the schoolroom when the classes are being rearranged and new books are being put into old hands. The tributary stream, as it rushes in, makes broken water for a moment. Do not let us be afraid when ‘the things that can be shaken’ shake, but let us see in the shaking the attendant of a new curriculum on which the great Teacher is launching His scholars, and let us learn the new lessons of the old Gospel which He is then teaching.

III. Thirdly, note the participation in the Father’s love which is the issue of the knowledge of the Father’s name.

Christ says that His end, an end which is surely attained in the declaration of the divine name, is that ‘the love wherewith Thou hast loved Me may be in them.’ We are here touching upon heights too dizzy for free and safe walking, on glories too bright for close and steady gaze. But where Christ has spoken we may reverently follow. Mark, then, that marvellous thought of the identity between the love which was His and the love which is ours. ‘From everlasting’ that divine love lay on the Eternal Word which in the hoary beginning, before the beginning of creatures, ‘was with God, and was God.’ The deepest conception that we can form of the divine nature is of a Being who in Himself carries the Subject and the Object of an eternal love, which we speak of in the deep emblem of ‘the Word,’ and the God with whom He eternally ‘was.’ That love lay upon Christ, without limitation, without reservation, without interruption, finding nothing there from which it recoiled, and nothing there which did not respond to it. No mist, no thunderstorm, ever broke that sunshine, no tempest ever swept across that calm. Continuous, full, perfect was the love that knit the Father to the Son, and continuous, full, and perfect was the consciousness of abiding in that love, which lay like light upon the spirit of Him that said ‘I delight to do Thy will.’ ‘The Father hath not left Me alone.’

And all that love Christ gives to us as deep, as continuous, as unreserved. Our consciousness of God’s love is meant by Christ to be like His own. Alas! alas! is that our experience, Christian people? The sun always shines on the rainless land of Egypt, except for a month or two in the year. The contrast between the unclouded blue and continuous light and heat there, and our murky skies and humid atmosphere, is like the contrast between our broken and feeble consciousness of the shining of the divine love and the uninterrupted glory of light and joy of communion which poured on Christ’s heart. But it is possible for us indefinitely to approximate to such an experience; and the way by which we reach it is that plain and simple one of accepting Christ’s declaration of the Father’s name.

IV. And so, lastly, notice the indwelling Christ who makes our participation in the divine love possible: ‘And I in them.’

One may well say, ‘How can it be that love should be transferred? How can it be that the love of God to me shall be identical with the love of God to Christ?’ There is only one answer. If Christ dwells in me, then God’s love to Him falls upon me by no transference, but by my incorporation into Him. And I would urge that this great truth of the actual indwelling of Christ in the soul is no mere piece of rhetorical exaggeration, nor a wild and enthusiastic way of putting the fact that the influence of His teaching and the beauty of His example can sway us; but it is a plain and absolute truth that the divine Christ can come into and abide in the narrow room of our poor hearts. And if He does this, then ‘he that is joined to the Lord is one Spirit’; and the Christ in me receives the sunshine of the divine love. That does not destroy, but heightens, my individuality. I am more and not less myself because ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’

So, dear brethren! it all comes to this-we may each of us, if we will, have Jesus Christ for Guest and Inhabitant in our hearts. If we have, then, since God loves Him, He must love me who have Him within me, and as long as God loves Christ He cannot cease to love me, nor can I cease to be conscious of His love to me, and whatsoever gifts His love bestows upon Jesus, pass over in measure, and partially, to myself. Thus immortality, heaven, glory, all blessedness in heaven and earth, are the fruit and crystallisation, so to speak, of that oneness with Christ which is possible for us. And the conditions are simply that we shall with joyful trust accept His declaration of the Father’s name, and see God manifest in Him; and welcome in our inmost hearts that great Gospel. Then His prayer, and the travail of His soul, will reach their end even in me, and ‘the love wherewith the Father loved the Son shall be in me,’ and the Son Himself shall dwell in my heart.

110) John 18:6-9

John

CHRIST AND HIS CAPTORS

Joh. 18:6 - Joh. 18:9.

This remarkable incident is narrated by John only. It fits in with the purpose which he himself tells us governed his selection of the incidents which he records. ‘These things are written,’ says he, near the end of the Gospel, ‘that ye might believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that, believing, ye might have life in His name.’ The whole of the peculiarities of the substance of John’s Gospel are to be explained on the two grounds that he was writing a supplement to, and not a substitute for, or a correction of, the Gospels already in existence; and that his special business was to narrate such facts and words as set forth the glory of Christ as ‘the Only Begotten of the Father.’

The incident before us is, as I think, one of these. The Evangelist would have us see in it, as I gather from his manner of narrating it, mainly three things. He emphasises that strange recoil of the would-be captors before Christ’s majestic, calm ‘I am He’; that was a manifestation of Christ’s glory. He emphasises our Lord’s patient standing there, in the midst of the awe-struck crowd, and even inciting them, as it would seem, to do the work for which they had come out; that was a manifestation of the voluntariness of Christ’s sufferings. And He emphasises the self-forgetting care with which at that supreme moment He steps between His faithless, weak friends and danger, with the wonderful words, ‘If ye seek Me, let these go their way’; to the Evangelist that little incident is an illustration, on a very low level, and in regard to a comparatively trivial matter, of the very same principle by which salvation from all evil in time and in eternity, is guaranteed to all that believe on Him:-

I. First, then, consider this remarkable, momentary manifestation of our Lord’s glory.

‘I am He!’ When the Band were thus doubly assured by the traitor’s kiss and by His own confession, why did they not lay hands upon Him? There He stood in the midst of them, alone, defenceless; there was nothing to hinder their binding Him on the spot. Instead of that they recoil, and fall in a huddled heap before Him. Some strange awe and terror, of which they themselves could have given no account, was upon their spirits. How came it about? Many things may have conspired to produce it. I am by no means anxious to insist that this was a miracle. Things of the same sort, though much less in degree, have been often enough seen; when some innocent and illustrious victim has for a moment paralysed the hands of his would-be captors and made them feel, though it were but transiently, ‘how awful goodness is.’ There must have been many in that band who had heard Him, though, in the uncertain light of quivering moonbeams and smoking torches, they failed to recognise Him till He spoke. There must have been many more who had heard of Him, and many who suspected that they were about to lay hands on a holy man, perhaps on a prophet. There must have been reluctant tools among the inferiors, and no doubt some among the leaders whoso consciences needed but a touch to be roused to action. To all, His calmness and dignity would appeal, and the manifest freedom from fear or desire to flee would tend to deepen the strange thoughts which began to stir in their hearts.

But the impression which the narrative seems intended to leave, appears to me to be of something more than this. It looks as if there were something more than human in Christ’s look and tone. It may have been the same in kind as the ascendency which a pure and calm nature has over rude and inferior ones. It may have been the same in kind as has sometimes made the headsman on the scaffold pause before he struck, and has bowed rude gaolers into converts before some grey-haired saint or virgin martyr; yet the difference is so great in degree as practically to become quite another thing. Though I do not want to insist upon any ‘miraculous’ explanation of the cause of this incident, yet I would ask, May it not be that here we see, perhaps apart from Christ’s will altogether, rising up for one moment to the surface, the indwelling majesty which was always there?

We do not know the laws that regulated the dwelling of the Godhead, bodily, within that human frame, but we do know that at one other time there came upon His features a transfiguration, and over His very garments a lustre which was not thrown upon them from without, but rose up from within. And I am inclined to think that here, as there, though under such widely different circumstances and to such various issues, there was for a moment a little rending of the veil of His flesh, and an emission of some flash of the brightness that always tabernacled within Him; and that, therefore, just as Isaiah, when He saw the King in His glory, said, 'Woe is me, for I am undone!' and just as Moses could not look upon the Face, but could only see the back parts, so here the one stray beam of manifest divinity that shot through the crevice, as it were, for an instant, was enough to prostrate with a strange awe even those rude and insensitive men. When He had said 'I am He,' there was something that made them feel, 'This is One before whom violence cowers abashed, and in whose presence impurity has to hide its face.' I do not assert that this is the explanation of that panic terror. I only ask, May it not be?

But whatever we may think was the reason, at all events the incident brings out very strikingly the elevation and dignity of Christ, and the powerful impressions made by His personality, even at such a time of humiliation. This Evangelist is always careful to bring out the glory of Christ, especially when that glory lies side by side with His lowliness. The blending of these two is one of the remarkable features in the New Testament portraiture of Jesus Christ. Wherever in our Lord's life any incident indicates more emphatically than usual the lowliness of His humiliation, there, by the side of it, you get something that indicates the majesty of His glory. For instance, He is born a weak infant, but angels herald His birth; He lies in a manger, but a star hangs trembling above it, and leads sages from afar, with their myrrh, and incense, and gold. He submits Himself to the baptism of repentance, but the heavens open and a voice proclaims, 'This is My beloved Son!' He sits wearied, on the stone coping of the well, and craves for water from a peasant woman; but He gives her the Water of Life. He lies down and sleeps, from pure exhaustion, in the stern of the little fishing-boat, but He wakes to command the storm, and it is still. He weeps beside the grave, but He flings His voice into its inmost recesses, and the sheeted dead comes forth. He well-nigh faints under the agony in the garden, but an angel from Heaven strengthens Him. He stands a prisoner at a human bar, but He judges and condemns His judges. He dies, and that hour of defeat is His hour of triumph, and the union of shame and glory is most conspicuous in that hour when on the Cross the ‘Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him.’

This strange blending of opposites-the glory in the lowliness, and the abasement in the glory-is the keynote of this singular event. He will be ‘delivered into the hands of men.’ Yes; but ere He is delivered He pauses for an instant, and in that instant comes a flash ‘above the brightness of the noonday sun’ to tell of the hidden glory.

Do not forget that we may well look upon that incident as a prophecy of what shall be. As one of the suggestive, old commentators on this verse says: ‘He will say “I am He,” again, a third time. What will He do coming to reign, when He did this coming to die? And what will His manifestation be as a Judge when this was the effect of the manifestation as He went to be judged?’ ‘Every eye shall see Him’; and they that loved not His appearing shall fall before Him when He cometh to be our Judge; and shall call on the rocks and the hills to cover them.

II. There is here, secondly, a manifestation of the voluntariness of our Lord’s suffering.

When that terrified mob recoiled from Him, why did He stand there so patiently? The time was propitious for flight, if He had cared to flee. He might have ‘passed through the midst of them and gone His way.’ as He did once before, if He had chosen. He comes from the garden; there shall be no difficulty in finding Him. He tells who He is; there shall be no need for the traitor’s kiss. He lays them low for a moment, but He will not flee. When Peter draws his sword He rebukes his ill-advised appeal to force, and then He holds out His hands and lets them bind Him. It was not their fetters, but the ‘cords of love’ which held Him prisoner. It was not their power, but His own pity which drew Him to the judgment hall and the Cross.

Let us dwell upon that thought for a moment. The whole story of the Gospels is constructed upon the principle, and illustrates the fact, that our Lord’s life, as our Lord’s death, was a voluntary surrender of Himself for man’s sin, and that nothing led Him to, and fastened Him on, the Cross but His own will. He willed to be born. He ‘came into the world’ by His own choice. He ‘took upon Him the form of a servant.’ He ‘took part’ of the children’s ‘flesh and blood.’ His birth was His own act, the first of the long series of the acts, by which for the sake of the love which He bore us, He ‘humbled Himself.’ Step by step He voluntarily journeyed towards the Cross, which stood clear before Him from the very beginning as the necessary end, made necessary by His love.

As we get nearer and nearer to the close of the history, we see more and more distinctly that He willingly went towards the Cross, Take; for instance, the account of the last portion of our Lord’s life, and you see in the whole of it a deliberate intention to precipitate the final conflict. Hence the last journey to Jerusalem when ‘His face was set,’ and His disciples followed Him amazed. Hence the studied publicity of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Hence the studied, growing severity of His rebukes to the priests and rulers. The same impression is given, though in a somewhat different way, by His momentary retreat from the city and by the precautions taken against premature arrest, that He might not die before the Passover. In both the hastening toward the city and in the retreating from it, there is apparent the same design: that He Himself shall lay down His life, and shall determine the how, and the when, and the where as seems good to Him.

If we look at the act of death itself, Jesus did not die because He must. It was not the nails of the Cross, the physical exhaustion, the nervous shock of crucifixion that killed Him. He died because He would. ‘I have power to lay down My life,’ He said, ‘and I have power’-of course-’to take it again.’ At that last moment, He was Lord and Master of death when He bowed His head to death, and, if I might so say, He summoned that grim servant with a ‘Come!’ and he came, and He set him his task with a ‘Do this!’ and he did it. He was manifested as the Lord of death, having its ‘keys’ in His hands, when He died upon the Cross.

Now I pray you to ask yourselves the question, if it be true that Christ died because He would, why was it that He would die? If because He chose, what was it that determined His choice? And there are but two answers, which two are one. The divine motive that ruled His life is doubly expressed: ‘I must do the will of My Father,’ and ‘I must save the world.’

The taunt that those Jewish rulers threw at Him had a deeper truth than they dreamed, and was an encomium, and not a taunt. ‘He saved others’-yes, and therefore, ‘Himself He cannot save.’ He cannot, because His choice and will to die are determined by His free love to us and to all the world. His fixed will ‘bore His body to the tree,’ and His love was the strong spring which kept His will fixed.

You and I have our share in these voluntary sufferings, and our place in that loving heart which underwent them for us. Oh! should not that thought speak to all our hearts, and bind us in grateful service and lifelong surrender to Him who gave Himself for us; and must die because He loved us all so much that He could not leave us unsaved?

III. We have, lastly, here, a symbol, or, perhaps, more accurately, an instance, on a small scale, of Christ’s self-sacrificing care for us.

His words: ‘If ye seek Me, let these go their way,’ sound more like the command of a prince than the intercession of a prisoner. The calm dignity of them strikes one just as much as the perfect self-forgetfulness of them.

It was a very small matter which He was securing thereby. The Apostles would have to die for Him some day, but they were not ready for it yet, and so He casts the shield of His protection round them for a moment, and interposes Himself between them and the band of soldiers in order that their weakness may have a little more time to grow strong. And though it was wrong and cowardly for them to forsake Him and flee, yet these words of my text more than half gave them permission and warrant for their departure: ‘Let these go their way.’

Now John did not think that this small deliverance was all that Christ meant by these great words: ‘Of them which Thou gavest Me have I lost none!’ He saw that it was one case, a very trifling one, a merely transitory one, yet ruled by the same principles which are at work in the immensely higher region to which the words properly refer. Of course they have their proper fulfilment in the spiritual realm, and are not fulfilled, in the highest sense, till all who have loved and followed Christ are presented faultless before the Father in the home above. But the little incident may be a result of the same cause as the final deliverance is. A dew-drop is shaped by the same laws which mould the mightiest of the planets. The old divines used to say that God was greatest in the smallest things, and the self-sacrificing care of Jesus Christ, as He gives Himself a prisoner that His disciples may go free, comes from the same deep heart of pitying love, which led Him to die, the 'just for the unjust.' It may then well stand for a partial fulfilment of His mighty words, even though these wait for their complete accomplishment till the hour when all the sheep are gathered into the one fold, and no evil beasts, nor weary journeys, nor barren pastures can harass them any more.

This trivial incident, then, becomes an exposition of highest truth. Let us learn from such an use of such an event to look upon all common and transitory circumstances as governed by the same loving hands, and working to the same ends, as the most purely spiritual. The visible is the veil which drapes the invisible, and clings so closely to it as to reveal its outline. The common events of life are all parables to the devout heart, which is the wise heart. They speak mystic meanings to ears that can hear. The redeeming love of Jesus is proclaimed by every mercy which perishes in the using; and all things should tell us of His self-forgetting, self-sacrificing care.

Thus, then, we may see in that picture of our Lord's surrendering Himself that His trembling disciples might go free, an emblem of what He does for us, in regard to all our foes. He stands between us and them, receives their arrows into His own bosom, and says, 'Let these go their way.' God's law comes with its terrors, with its penalties, to us who have broken it a thousand times. The consciousness of guilt and sin threatens us all more or less, and with varying intensity in different minds. The weariness of the world, 'the ills that flesh is heir to,' the last grim enemy, Death, and that which lies beyond them all, ring you round. My friends! what are you going to do in order to escape from them? You are a sinful man, you have broken God's law. That law goes on crashing its way and crushing down all that is opposed to it. You have a weary life before you, however joyful it may sometimes be. Cares, and troubles, and sorrows, and tears, and losses, and disappointments, and hard duties that you will not be able to perform, and dark days in which you will be able to see but very little light, are all certain to come sooner or later; and the last moment will draw near when the King of Terrors will be at your side; and beyond death there is a life of retribution in which men reap the things that they have sown here. All that is true, much of it is true about you at this moment, and it will all be true some day. In view of that, what are you going to do?

I preach to you a Saviour who has endured all for us. As a mother might fling herself out of the sledge that her child might escape the wolves in full chase, here is One that comes and fronts all your foes, and says to them, ‘Let these go their way. Take Me.’ ‘By His stripes we are healed.’ ‘On Him was laid the iniquity of us all.’

He died because He chose; He chose because He loved. His love had to die in order that His death might be our life, and that in it we should find our forgiveness and peace. He stands between our foes and us. No evil can strike us unless it strike Him first. He takes into His own heart the sharpest of all the darts which can pierce ours. He has borne the guilt and punishment of a world’s sin. These solemn penalties have fallen upon Him that we, trusting in Him, ‘may go our way,’ and that there may be ‘no condemnation’ to us if we are in Christ Jesus. And if there be no condemnation, we can stand whatever other blows may fall upon us. They are easier to bear, and their whole character is different, when we know that Christ has borne them already. Two of the three whom Christ protected in the garden died a martyr’s death; but do you not think that James bowed his neck to Herod’s sword, and Peter let them gird him and lead him to his cross, more joyfully and with a different heart, when they thought of Him that had died before them? The darkest prison cell will not be so very dark if we remember that Christ has been there before us, and death itself will be softened into sleep because our Lord has died. ‘If therefore,’ says He, to the whole pack of evils baying round us, with their cruel eyes and their hungry mouths, ‘ye seek Me, let these go their way.’ So, brother, if you will fix your trust, as a poor, sinful soul, on that dear Christ, and get behind Him, and put Him between you and your enemies, then, in time and in eternity, that saying will be fulfilled in you which He spake, ‘Of them which Thou gavest Me, have I lost none.’

111) John 18:15-27

John

JESUS BEFORE CAIAPHAS

Joh. 18:15 - Joh. 18:27.

The last verses of the preceding passage belong properly to this one, for they tell us that Jesus was ‘first’ brought before Annas, a fact which we owe to John only. Annas himself and his five sons held the high-priesthood in succession. To the sons has to be added Caiaphas, who, as we learn from John only, was Annas’ son-in-law, and so one of the family party. That Jesus should have been taken to him, though he held no office at the time, shows who pulled the strings in the Sanhedrim. The reference to Caiaphas in Joh. 18:14 seems intended to suggest what sort of a trial might be expected, presided over by such a man. But Joh. 18:15 tells us that Jesus entered in, accompanied by ‘another disciple,’ ‘to the court,’ not, as we should have expected, of Annas, but ‘of the high priest,’ who, by the testimony of Joh. 18:13, can be no one but Caiaphas. How came that about? Apparently, because Annas had apartments in the high-priest’s official residence. As he obviously exercised the influence through his sons and son-in-law, who successively held the office, it was very natural that he should be a fixture in the palace.

What John’s connection was with this veteran intriguer [assuming that John was that ‘other disciple’] we do not know. Probably it was some family bond that united two such antipathetic natures. At all events, the Apostle’s acquaintance with the judge so far condoned his discipleship to the criminal, that the doors of the audience chamber were open to him, though he was known as ‘one of them.’

So he and poor Peter were parted, and the latter left shivering outside in the grey of the morning. John had not missed him at first, for he would be too much absorbed in watching Jesus to have thoughts to spare for Peter, and would conclude that he was following him; but, when he did miss him, like a brave man he ran the risk of being observed, and went for him. The sharpwitted porteress, whose business it was to judge applicants for entrance by a quick glance, at once inferred that Peter ‘also’ was one of this man’s disciples. Her ‘also’ shows that she knew John to be one; and her ‘this man’ shows that either she did not know Jesus’ name, or thought Him too far beneath her to be named by her! The time during which Peter had been left outside alone, repenting now of, and alarmed for what might happen to him on account of, his ill-aimed blow at Malchus, and feeling the nipping cold, had taken all his courage out of him. The one thing he wished was to slip in unnoticed, and so the first denial came to his lips as rashly as many another word had come in old days. He does not seem to have remained with John, who probably went up to the upper end of the hall, where the examination was going on, while Peter, not having the entree and very much terrified as well as miserable, stayed at the lower end, where the understrappers were making themselves comfortable round a charcoal fire, and paying no attention to the proceedings at the other end. He seemed to be as indifferent as they were, and to be intent only on getting himself warmed. But what surges of emotion would be tossing in his heart, which yet he was trying to hide under the mask of being an unconcerned spectator, like the others!

The examination of our Lord was conducted by ‘the high priest,’ by which title John must mean Caiaphas, as he has just emphatically noted that he then filled the office. But how is that to be reconciled with the statement that Jesus was taken to Annas? Apparently by supposing that, though Annas was present, Caiaphas was spokesman. But did not a formal trial before Caiaphas follow, and does not John tell us [Joh. 18:24] that, after the first examination, Annas sent Jesus bound to Caiaphas? Yes. And are these things compatible with this account of an examination conducted by the latter? Yes, if we remember that flagrant wresting of justice marked the whole proceedings. The condemnation of Jesus was a judicial murder, in which the highest court of the Jews ‘decreed iniquity by a law’; and it was of a piece with all the rest that he, who was to pose as an impartial judge presently, should, in the spirit of a partisan, conduct this preliminary inquiry. Observe that no sentence was pronounced in the case at this stage. This was not a court at all. What was it? An attempt to entrap the prisoner into admissions which might be used against Him in the court to be held presently. The rulers had Jesus in their hands, and they did not know what to do with Him now that they had Him. They were at a loss to know what

His indictment was to be. To kill Him was the only thing on which they had made up their minds; the pretext had yet to be found, and so they tried to get Him to say something which would serve their purpose.

‘The high priest therefore asked Jesus of His disciples, and of His teaching’! If they did not know about either, why had they arrested Him? Cunning outwits itself, and falls into the pit it digs for the innocent. Jesus passed by the question as to His disciples unnoticed, and by His calm answer as to His teaching showed that He saw the snare. He reduced Caiaphas and Annas to perpetrating plain injustice, or to letting Him go free. Elementary fair play to a prisoner prescribes that he should be accused of some crime by some one, and not that he should furnish his judges with materials for his own indictment. ‘Why askest thou Me? ask them that have heard Me,’ is unanswerable, except by such an answer as the officious ‘servant’ gave-a blow and a violent speech. But Christ’s words reach far beyond the momentary purpose; they contain a wide truth. His teaching loves the daylight. There are no muttered oracles, no whispered secrets for the initiated, no double voice, one for the multitude, and another for the adepts. All is above-board, and all is spoken ‘openly to the world.’ Christianity has no cliques or coteries, nothing sectional, nothing reserved. It is for mankind, for all mankind, all for mankind. True, there are depths in it; true, the secrets which Jesus can only speak to loving ears in secret are His sweetest words, but they are ‘spoken in the ear’ that they may be ‘proclaimed on the housetops.’

The high-priest is silent, for there was nothing that he could say to so undeniable a demand, and he had no witnesses ready. How many since his day have treated Jesus as he treated Him-condemned Him or rejected Him without reason, and then looked about for reasons to justify their attitude, or even sought to make Him condemn Himself!

An unjust judge breeds insolent underlings, and if everything else fails, blows and foul words cover defeat, and treat calm assertion of right as impertinence to high-placed officials. Caiaphas degraded his own dignity more than any words of a prisoner could degrade it.

Our Lord’s answer ‘reviled not again.’ It is meek in majesty and majestic in meekness. Patient endurance is not forbidden to remonstrate with insolent injustice, if only its remonstrance bears no heat of personal anger in it. But Jesus was not so much vindicating His words to Caiaphas in saying, ‘If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil,’ as reiterating the challenge for ‘witnesses.’ He brands the injustice of Caiaphas, while meekly rebuking the brutality of his servant. Master and man were alike in smiting Him for words of which they could not prove the evil.

There was obviously nothing to be gained by further examination. No crime had been alleged, much less established; therefore Jesus ought to have been let go. But Annas treated Him as a criminal, and handed Him over ‘bound,’ to be formally tried before the man who had just been foiled in his attempt to play the inquisitor. What a hideous mockery of legal procedure! How well the pair, father-in-law and son-in-law, understood each other! What a confession of a foregone conclusion, evidence or no evidence, in shackling Jesus as a malefactor! And it was all done in the name of religion! and perhaps the couple of priests did not know that they were hypocrites, but really thought that they were ‘doing God service.’

John’s account of Peter’s denials rises to a climax of peril and of keenness of suspicion. The unnamed persons who put the second question must have had their suspicions roused by something in his manner as he stood by the glinting fire, perhaps by agitation too great to be concealed. The third question was put by a more dangerous person still, who not only recognised Peter’s features as the firelight fitfully showed them, but had a personal ground of hostility in his relationship to Malchus.

John lovingly spares telling of the oaths and curses accompanying the denials, but dares not spare the narration of the fact. It has too precious lessons of humility, of self-distrust, of the possibility of genuine love being overborne by sudden and strong temptation, to be omitted. And the sequel of the denials has yet more precious teaching, which has brought balm to many a contrite heart, conscious of having been untrue to its deepest love. For the sound of the cock-crow, and the look from the Lord as He was led away bound past the place where Peter stood, brought him back to himself, and brought tears to his eyes, which were sweet as well as bitter. On the resurrection morning the risen Lord sent the message of forgiveness and special love to the broken-hearted Apostle, when He said, ‘Go, tell My disciples and Peter,' and on that day there was an interview of which Paul knew [1Co. 15:5], but the details of which were apparently communicated by the Apostle to none of his brethren. The denier who weeps is taken to Christ's heart, and in sacred secrecy has His forgiveness freely given, though, before he can be restored to his public office, he must, by his threefold public avowal of love, efface his threefold denial. We may say, 'Thou knowest that I love thee,' even if we have said, 'I know Him not,' and come nearer to Jesus, by reason of the experience of His pardoning love, than we were before we fell.

112) John 18:28-40

John

ART THOU A KING?

Joh. 18:28 - Joh. 18:40.

John evidently intends to supplement the synoptic Gospels' account. He tells of Christ's appearance before Annas, but passes by that before Caiaphas, though he shows his knowledge of it. Similarly he touches lightly on the public hearing before Pilate, but gives us in detail the private conversation in this section, which he alone records. We may suppose that he was present at both the hearing before Annas and the interview within the palace between Jesus and Herod, for he would not be deterred from entering, as the Jews were, and there seems to have been no other impediment in the way. The passage has three stages-the fencing between the Sanhedrists and Pilate, the 'good confession before Pontius Pilate,' and the preference of Barabbas to Jesus.

I. The passage of arms between the priests and the governor.

'It was early,' probably before 6 A.M. A hurried meeting of the Sanhedrim had condemned Jesus to death, and the next thing was to get the Roman authority to carry out the sentence. The necessity of appeal to it was a bitter pill, but it had to be swallowed, for the right of capital punishment had been withdrawn. A 'religious' scruple, too, stood in the way-very characteristic of such formalists. Killing an innocent man would not in the least defile them, or unfit for eating the passover, but to go into a house that had not been purged of ‘leaven,’ and was further unclean as the residence of a Gentile, though he was the governor, that would stain their consciences-a singular scale of magnitude, which saw no sin in condemning Jesus, and great sin in going into Pilate’s palace! Perhaps some of our conventional sins are of a like sort.

Pilate was, probably, not over-pleased at being roused so early, nor at having to defer to a scruple which would to him look like insolence; and through all his bearing to the Sanhedrim a certain irritation shows itself, which sometimes flashes out in sarcasm, but is for the most part kept down. His first question is, perhaps, not so simple as it looks, for he must have had some previous knowledge of the case, since Roman soldiers had been used for the arrest. But, clearly, those who brought him a prisoner were bound to be the prosecutors.

Whether or not Pilate knew that his question was embarrassing, the rulers felt it so. Why did they not wish to formulate a charge? Partly from pride. They hugged the delusion that their court was competent to condemn, and wanted, as we all often do, to shut their eyes to a plain fact, as if ignoring it annihilated it. Partly because the charge on which they had condemned Jesus-that of blasphemy in calling Himself ‘the Son of God’-was not a crime known to Roman law, and to allege it would probably have ended in the whole matter being scornfully dismissed. So they stood on their dignity and tried to bluster. ‘We have condemned Him; that is enough. We look to you to carry out the sentence at our bidding.’ So the ‘ecclesiastical authority’ has often said to the ‘secular arm’ since then, and unfortunately the civil authority has not always been as wise as Pilate was.

He saw an opening to get rid of the whole matter, and with just a faint flavour of irony suggests that, as they have ‘a law’-which he, no doubt, thought of as a very barbarous code-they had better go by it, and punish as well as condemn. That sarcastic proposal compelled them to acknowledge their subjection. Pilate had given the reins the least touch, but enough to make them feel the bit; and though it went sore against the grain, they will own their master rather than lose their victim. So their reluctant lips say, ‘It is not lawful for us.’ Pilate has brought them on their knees at last, and they forget their dignity, and own the truth. Malicious hatred will eat any amount of dirt and humiliation to gain its ends, especially if it calls itself religious zeal.

John sees in the issue of this first round in the duel between Pilate and the rulers the sequence of events which brought about the fulfilment of our Lord's prediction of His crucifixion, since that was not a Jewish mode of execution. This encounter of keen wits becomes tragical and awful when we remember Who it was that these men were wrangling about.

II. We have Jesus and Pilate; the 'good confession,' and the indifferent answer.

We must suppose that, unwillingly, the rulers had brought the accusation that Jesus had attempted rebellion against Rome. John omits that, because he takes it for granted that it is known. It is implied in the conversation which now ensued. We must note as remarkable that Pilate does not conduct his first examination in the presence of the rulers, but has Jesus brought to him in the palace. Perhaps he simply wished to annoy the accusers, but more probably his Roman sense of justice combined with his wish to assert his authority, and perhaps with a suspicion that there was something strange about the whole matter-and not least strange that the Sanhedrim, who were not enthusiastic supporters of Rome, should all at once display such loyalty-to make him wish to have the prisoner by himself, and try to fathom the business. With Roman directness he went straight to the point: 'Art Thou the King of the Jews, as they have been saying?' There is emphasis on 'Thou'-the emphasis which a practical Roman official would be likely to put as he looked at the weak, wearied, evidently poor and helpless man bound before him. There is almost a touch of pity in the question, and certainly the beginning of the conviction that this was not a very formidable rival to Caesar.

The answer to be given depended on the sense in which Pilate asked the question, to bring out which is the object of Christ's question in reply. If Pilate was asking of himself, then what he meant by 'a king' was one of earth's monarchs after the emperor's pattern, and the answer would be 'No.' If he was repeating a Jewish charge, then, 'a king' might mean the prophetic King of Israel, who was no rival of earthly monarchs, and the answer would be ‘Yes,’ but that ‘Yes’ would give Pilate no more reason to crucify Him than the ‘No’ would have given.

Pilate is getting tired of fencing, and impatiently answers, with true Roman contempt for subject-people’s thoughts as well as their weapons. ‘I . . . a Jew?’ is said with a curl of the firm lips. He points to his informants, ‘Thine own nation and the chief priests,’ and does not say that their surrender of a would-be leader in a war of independence struck him as suspicious. But he brushes aside the cobwebs which he felt were being spun round him, and comes to the point, ‘What hast Thou done?’ He is supremely indifferent to ideas and vagaries of enthusiasts. This poor man before him may call Himself anything He chooses, but his only concern is with overt acts. Strange to ask the Prisoner what He had done! It had been well for Pilate if he had held fast by that question, and based his judgment resolutely on its answer! He kept asking it all through the case, he never succeeded in getting an answer; he was convinced that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death, and yet fear, and a wish to curry favour with the rulers, drove him to stain the judge’s robe with innocent blood, from which he vainly sought to cleanse his hands.

Our Lord’s double answer claims a kingdom, but first shows what it is not, and then what it is. It is ‘not of this world,’ though it is in this world, being established and developed here, but having nothing in common with earthly dominions, nor being advanced by their weapons or methods. Pilate could convince himself that this ‘kingdom’ bore no menace to Rome, from the fact that no resistance had been offered to Christ’s capture. But the principle involved in these great words goes far beyond their immediate application. It forbids Christ’s ‘servants’ to assimilate His kingdom to the world, or to use worldly powers as the means for the kingdom’s advancement. The history of the Church has sadly proved how hard it is for Christian men to learn the lesson, and how fatal to the energy and purity of the Church the forgetfulness of it has been. The temptation to such assimilation besets all organised Christianity, and is as strong to-day as when Constantine gave the Church the paralysing gift of ‘establishing’ it as a kingdom ‘of this world.’

Pilate did pick out of this saying an increased certainty that he had nothing to fear from this strange ‘King’; and half-amused contempt for a dreamer, and half-pitying wonder at such lofty claims from such a helpless enthusiast, prompted his question, ‘Art Thou a king then?’ One can fancy the scornful emphasis on that ‘Thou.’ and can understand how grotesquely absurd the notion of his prisoner’s being a king must have seemed.

Having made clear part of the sense in which the avowal was to be taken, our Lord answered plainly ‘Yes.’ Thus before the high-priest, He declared Himself to be the Son of God, and before Pilate He claimed to be King, at each tribunal putting forward the claim which each was competent to examine-and, alas! at each meeting similar levity and refusal to inquire seriously into the validity of the claim. The solemn revelation to Pilate of the true nature of His kingdom and of Himself the King fell on careless ears. A deeper mystery than Pilate dreamed of lay beneath the double designation of His origin; for He not only had been ‘born’ like other men, but had ‘come into the world,’ having ‘come forth from the Father,’ and having been before He was born. It was scarcely possible that Pilate should apprehend the meaning of that duplication, but some vague impression of a mysterious personality might reach him, and Jesus would not have fully expressed His own consciousness if He had simply said, ‘I was born.’ Let us see that we keep firm hold of all which that utterance implies and declares.

The end of the Incarnation is to ‘bear witness to the truth.’ That witness is the one weapon by which Christ’s kingdom is established. That witness is not given by words only, precious as these are, but by deeds which are more than words. These witnessing deeds are not complete till Calvary and the empty grave and Olivet have witnessed at once to the perfect incarnation of divine love, to the perfect Sacrifice for the world’s sin, to the Victor over death, and to the opening of heaven to all believers. Jesus is ‘the faithful and true Witness,’ as John calls Him, not without reminiscences of this passage, just because He is ‘the First-begotten of the dead.’ As here He told Pilate that He was a ‘king,’ because a ‘witness,’ so John, in the passage referred to, bases His being ‘Prince of the kings of the earth’ on the same fact.

How little Pilate knew that he was standing at the very crisis of his fate! A yielding to the impression that was slightly touching his heart and conscience, and he, too, might have ‘heard’ Christ’s voice. But he was not ‘of the truth,’ though he might have been if he had willed, and so the words were wind to him, and he brushed aside all the mist, as he thought it, with the light question, which summed up a Roman man of the world’s indifference to ideas, and belief in solid facts like legions and swords. ‘What is truth?’ may be the cry of a seeking soul, or the sneer of a confirmed sceptic, or the shrug of indifference of the ‘practical man.’

It was the last in Pilate’s case, as is shown by his not waiting for an answer, but ending the conversation with it as a last shot. It meant, too, that he felt quite certain that this man, with his high-strained, unpractical talk about a kingdom resting on such a filmy nothing, was absolutely harmless. Therefore the only just thing for him to have done was to have gone out to the impatient crowd and said so, and flatly refused to do the dirty work of the priests for them, by killing an innocent man. But he was too cowardly for that, and, no doubt, thought that the murder of one poor Jew was a small price to pay for popularity with his troublesome subjects. Still, like all weak men, he was not easy in his conscience, and made a futile attempt to get the right thing done, and yet not to suffer for doing it. The rejection of Barabbas is touched very lightly by John, and must be left unnoticed here. The great contribution to our knowledge which John makes is this private interview between the King who reigns by the truth, and the representative of earthly rule, based on arms and worldly forces.

113) John 19:1-16

John

JESUS SENTENCED

Joh. 19:1 - Joh. 19:16.

The struggle between the vacillation of Pilate and the fixed malignity of the rulers is the principal theme of this fragment of Christ’s judicial trial. He Himself is passive and all but silent, speaking only one sentence of calm rebuke. The frequent changes of scene from within to without the praetorium indicate the steps in the struggle, and vividly reflect the irresolution of Pilate. These changes may help to mark the stages in the narrative.

I. The cruelties and indignities in Joh. 19:1 - Joh. 19:3 were inflicted within the ‘palace,’ to which Pilate, with his prisoner, had returned after the popular vote for Barabbas.

John makes that choice of the robber the reason for the scourging of Jesus. His thought seems to be that Pilate, having failed in his attempt to get rid of the whole difficulty by releasing Jesus, according to the ‘custom,’ ordered the scourging, in hope that the lighter punishment might satisfy the turbulent crowd, whom he wished to humour, while, if possible, saving their victim. It was the expedient of a weak and cynical nature, and, like all weak attempts at compromise between right and wrong, only emboldened the hatred which it was meant to appease. If by clamour the rulers had succeeded in getting Pilate to scourge a man whom he thought innocent, they might well hope to get him to crucify, if they clamoured loudly and long enough.

One attitude only befitted Pilate, since he did not in the least believe that Jesus threatened the Roman supremacy; namely, to set Him at liberty, and let the disappointed rulers growl like wild beasts robbed of their prey. But he did not care enough about a single half-crazy Jewish peasant to imperil his standing well with his awkward subjects, for the sake of righteousness. The one good which Rome could give to its vassal nations was inflexible justice and a sovereign law; but in Pilate’s action there was not even the pretence of legality. Tricks and expedients run through it all, and never once does he say, This is the law, this is justice, and by it I stand or fall.

The cruel scourging, which, in Roman hands, was a much more severe punishment than the Jewish ‘beating with rods’ and often ended in death, was inflicted on the silent, unresisting Christ, not because His judge thought that it was deserved, but to please accusers whose charge he knew to be absurd. The underlings naturally followed their betters’ example, and after they had executed Pilate’s orders to scourge, covered the bleeding wounds with some robe, perhaps ragged, but of the royal colour, and crushed the twisted wreath of thorn-branch down on the brows, to make fresh wounds there. The jest of crowning such a poor, helpless creature as Jesus seemed to them, was exactly on the level of such rude natures, and would be the more exquisite to them because it was double-barrelled, and insulted the nation as well as the ‘King.’ They came in a string, as the tense of the original word suggests, and offered their mock reverence. But that sport became tame after a little, and mockery passed into violence, as it always does in such natures. These rough legionaries were cruel and brutal, and they were unconscious witnesses to His Kingship as founded on suffering; but they were innocent as compared with the polished gentleman on the judgment-seat who prostituted justice, and the learned Pharisees outside who were howling for blood.

II. In Joh. 19:4 - Joh. 19:8 the scene changes again to without the palace, and shows us Pilate trying another expedient, equally in vain.

The hesitating governor has no chance with the resolute, rooted hate of the rulers. Jesus silently and unresistingly follows Pilate from the hall, still wearing the mockery of royal pomp. Pilate had calculated that the sight of Him in such guise, and bleeding from the lash, might turn hate into contempt, and perhaps give a touch of pity. ‘Behold the man!’ as he meant it, was as if he had said, ‘Is this poor, bruised, spiritless sufferer worth hate or fear? Does He look like a King or a dangerous enemy?’ Pilate for once drops the scoff of calling Him their King, and seeks to conciliate and move to pity. The profound meanings which later ages have delighted to find in his words, however warrantable, are no part of their design as spoken, and we gain a better lesson from the scene by keeping close to the thoughts of the actors. What a contrast between the vacillation of the governor, on the one hand, afraid to do right and reluctant to do wrong, and the dogged malignity of the rulers and their tools on the other, and the calm, meek endurance of the silent Christ, knowing all their thoughts, pitying all, and fixed in loving resolve, even firmer than the rulers’ hate, to bear the utmost, that He might save a world!

Some pity may have stirred in the crowd, but the priests and their immediate dependants silenced it by their yell of fresh hate at the sight of the prisoner. Note how John gives the very impression of the fierce, brief roar, like that of wild beasts for their prey, by his ‘Crucify, crucify!’ without addition of the person. Pilate lost patience at last, and angrily and half seriously gives permission to them to take the law into their own hands. He really means, ‘I will not be your tool, and if my conviction of “the Man’s” innocence is to be of no account, you must punish Him; for I will not.’ How far he meant to abdicate authority, and how far he was launching sarcasms, it is difficult to say. Throughout he is sarcastic, and thereby indicates his weakness, indemnifying himself for being thwarted by sneers which sit so ill on authority.

But the offer, or sarcasm, whichever it was, missed fire, as the appeal to pity had done, and only led to the production of a new weapon. In their frantic determination to compass Jesus’ death, the rulers hesitate at no degradation; and now they adduced the charge of blasphemy, and were ready to make a heathen the judge. To ask a Roman governor to execute their law on a religious offender, was to drag their national prerogative in the mud. But formal religionists, inflamed by religious animosity, are often the degraders of religion for the gratification of their hatred. They are poor preservers of the Church who call on the secular arm to execute their ‘laws.’ Rome went a long way in letting subject peoples keep their institutions; but it was too much to expect Pilate to be the hangman for these furious priests, on a charge scarcely intelligible to him.

What was Jesus doing while all this hell of wickedness and fury boiled round Him? Standing there, passive and dumb, ‘as a sheep before her shearers,’ Himself is the least conspicuous figure in the history of His own trial. In silent communion with the Father, in silent submission to His murderers, in silent pity for us, in silent contemplation of ‘the joy that was set before Him,’ He waits on their will.

III. Once more the scene changes to the interior of the praetorium [Joh. 19:9 - Joh. 19:11].

The rulers’ words stirred a deepened awe in Pilate. He ‘was the more afraid’; then he had been already afraid. His wife’s dream, the impression already produced by the person of Jesus, had touched him more deeply than probably he himself was aware of; and now this charge that Jesus had ‘made Himself the Son of God’ shook him. What if this strange man were in some sense a messenger of the gods? Had he been scourging one sent from them? Sceptical he probably was, and therefore superstitious; and half-forgotten and disbelieved stories of gods who had ‘come down in the likeness of men’ would swim up in his memory. If this Man were such, His strange demeanour would be explained. Therefore he carried Jesus in again, and, not now as judge, sought to hear from His own lips His version of the alleged claim.

Why did not Jesus answer such a question? His silence was answer; but, besides that, Pilate had not received as he ought what Jesus had already declared to him as to His kingdom and His relation to ‘the truth,’ and careless turning away from Christ’s earlier words is righteously and necessarily punished by subsequent silence, if the same disposition remains. That it did remain, Christ’s silence is proof. Had there been any use in answering, Pilate would not have asked in vain. If Jesus was silent, we may be sure that He who sees all hearts and responds to all true desires was so, because He knew that it was best to say nothing. The question of His origin had nothing to do with Pilate’s duty then, which turned, not on whence Jesus had come, but on what Pilate believed Him to have done, or not to have done. He who will not do the plain duty of the moment has little chance of an answer to his questions about such high matters.

The shallow character of the governor’s awe and interest is clearly seen from the immediate change of tone to arrogant reminder of his absolute authority. ‘To me dost Thou not speak?’ The pride of offended dignity peeps out there. He has forgotten that a moment since he half suspected that the prisoner, whom he now seeks to terrify with the cross, and to allure with deliverance, was perhaps come from some misty heaven. Was that a temper which would have received Christ’s answer to his question?

But one thing he might be made to perceive, and therefore Jesus broke silence for the only time in this section, and almost the only time before Pilate. He reads the arrogant Roman the lesson which he and all his tribe in all lands and ages need-that their power is derived from God, therefore in its foundation legitimate, and in its exercise to be guided by His will and used for His purposes. It was God who had brought the Roman eagles, with their ravening beaks and strong claws, to the Holy City. Pilate was right in exercising jurisdiction over Jesus. Let him see that he exercised justice, and let him remember that the power which he boasted that he ‘had’ was ‘given.’ The truth as to the source of power made the guilt of Caiaphas or of the rulers the greater, inasmuch as they had neglected the duties to which they had been appointed, and by handing over Jesus on a charge which they themselves should have searched out, had been guilty of ‘theocratic felony.’ This sudden flash of bold rebuke, reminding Pilate of his dependence, and charging him with the lesser but yet real ‘sin,’ went deeper than any answer to his question would have done, and spurred him to more earnest effort, as John points out. He ‘sought to release Him,’ as if formerly he had been rather simply unwilling to condemn than anxious to deliver.

IV. So the scene changes again to outside.

Pilate went out alone, leaving Jesus within, and was met before he had time, as would appear, to speak, by the final irresistible weapon which the rulers had kept in reserve. An accusation of treason was only too certain to be listened to by the suspicious tyrant who was then Emperor, especially if brought by the authorities of a subject nation. Many a provincial governor had had but a short shrift in such a case, and Pilate knew that he was a ruined man if these implacable zealots howling before him went to Tiberius with such a charge. So the die was cast. With rage in his heart, no doubt, and knowing that he was sacrificing ‘innocent blood’ to save himself, he turned away from the victorious mob, apparently in silence, and brought Jesus out once more. He had no more words to say to his prisoner. Nothing remained but the formal act of sentence, for which he seated himself, with a poor assumption of dignity, yet feeling all the while, no doubt, what a contemptible surrender he was making.

Judgment-seats and mosaic pavements do not go far to secure reverence for a judge who is no better than an assassin, killing an innocent man to secure his own ends. Pilate’s sentence fell most heavily on himself. If ‘the judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted,’ he is tenfold condemned when the innocent is sentenced.

Pilate returned to his sarcastic mood when he returned to his injustice, and found some satisfaction in his old jeer, ‘your King.’ But the passion of hatred was too much in earnest to be turned or even affected by such poor scoffs, and the only answer was the renewed roar of the mob, which had murder in its tone. The repetition of the governor’s taunt, ‘Shall I crucify your King?' brought out the answer in which the rulers of the nation in their fury blindly flung away their prerogative. It is no accident that it was 'the chief priests' who answered, 'We have no king but Caesar.' Driven by hate, they deliberately disown their Messianic hope, and repudiate their national glory. They who will not have Christ have to bow to a tyrant. Rebellion against Him brings slavery.

114) John 19:17-18

John

AN EYE-WITNESS'S ACCOUNT OF THE CRUCIFIXION

Joh. 19:17 - Joh. 19:30.

In great and small matters John's account adds much to the narrative of the crucifixion. He alone tells of the attempt to have the title on the Cross altered, of the tender entrusting of the Virgin to his care, and of the two 'words' 'I thirst' and 'It is finished.' He gives details which had been burned into his memory, such as Christ's position 'in the midst' of the two robbers, and the jar of 'vinegar' standing by the crosses. He says little about the act of fixing Jesus to the Cross, but enlarges what the other Evangelists tell as to the soldiers 'casting lots.' He had heard what they said to one another. He alone distinctly tells that when He went forth, Jesus was bearing the Cross which afterwards Simon of Cyrene had to carry, probably because our Lord's strength failed.

Who appointed the two robbers to be crucified at the same time? Not the rulers, who had no such power but probably Pilate, as one more shaft of sarcasm which was all the sharper both because it seemed to put Jesus in the same class as they, and because they were of the same class as the man of the Jews' choice, Barabbas, and possibly were two of his gang. Jesus was 'in the midst,' where He always is, completely identified with the transgressors, but central to all things and all men. As He was in the midst on the Cross, with a penitent on one hand and a rejecter on the other, He is still in the midst of humanity, and His judgment-seat will be as central as His Cross was.

All the Evangelists give the title written over the Cross, but John alone tells that it was Pilate’s malicious invention. He thought that he was having a final fling at the priests, and little knew how truly his title, which was meant as a bitter jest, was a fact. He had it put into the three tongues in use-’Hebrew,’ the national tongue; ‘Greek,’ the common medium of intercourse between varying nationalities; and ‘Latin’ the official language. He did not know that he was proclaiming the universal dominion of Jesus, and prophesying that wisdom as represented by Greece, law and imperial power as represented by Rome, and all previous revelation as represented by Israel, would yet bow before the Crucified, and recognise that His Cross was His throne.

The ‘high-priests’ winced, and would fain have had the title altered. Their wish once more denied Jesus, and added to their condemnation, but it did not move Pilate. It would have been well for him if he had been as firm in carrying out his convictions of justice as in abiding by his bitter jest. He was obstinate in the wrong place, partly because he was angry with the rulers, and partly to recover his self-respect, which had been damaged by his vacillation. But his stiff-necked speech had a more tragic meaning than he knew, for ‘what he had written’ on his own life-page on that day could never be erased, and will confront him. We are all writing an imperishable record, and we shall have to read it out hereafter, and acknowledge our handwriting.

John next sets in strong contrast the two groups round the Cross-the stolid soldiers and the sad friends. The four legionaries went through their work as a very ordinary piece of military duty. They were well accustomed to crucify rebel Jews, and saw no difference between these three and former prisoners. They watched the pangs without a touch of pity, and only wished that death might come soon, and let them get back to their barracks. How blind men may be to what they are gazing at! If knowledge measures guilt, how slight the culpability of the soldiers! They were scarcely more guilty than the mallet and nails which they used. The Sufferer’s clothes were their perquisite, and their division was conducted on cool business principles, and with utter disregard of the solemn nearness of death. Could callous indifference go further than to cast lots for the robe at the very foot of the Cross?

But the thing that most concerns us here is that Jesus submitted to that extremity of shame and humiliation, and hung there naked for all these hours, gazed on, while the light lasted, by a mocking crowd. He had set the perfect Pattern of lowly self-abnegation when, amid the disciples in the upper room, He had 'laid aside His garments,' but now He humbles Himself yet more, being clothed only 'with shame.' Therefore should we clothe Him with hearts' love. Therefore God has clothed Him with the robes of imperial majesty.

Another point emphasised by John is the fulfilment of prophecy in this act. The seamless robe, probably woven by loving hands, perhaps by some of the weeping women who stood there, was too valuable to divide, and it would be a moment's pastime to cast lots for it. John saw, in the expedient naturally suggested to four rough men, who all wanted the robe but did not want to quarrel over it, a fulfilment of the cry of the ancient sufferer, who had lamented that his enemies made so sure of his death that they divided his garments and cast lots for his vesture. But he was 'wiser than he knew,' and, while his words were to his own apprehension but a vivid metaphor expressing his desperate condition, 'the Spirit which was in' him 'did signify' by them 'the sufferings of Christ.' Theories of prophecy or sacrifice which deny the correctness of John's interpretation have the New Testament against them, and assume to know more about the workings of inspiration than is either modest or scientific.

What a contrast the other group presents! John's enumeration of the women may be read so as to mention four or three, according as 'His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas,' is taken to mean one woman or two. The latter is the more probable supposition, and it is also probable that the unnamed sister of our Lord's mother was no other than Salome, John's own mother. If so, entrusting Mary to John's care would be the more natural. Tender care, joined with consciousness that henceforth the relation of son and mother was to be supplanted, not merely by Death's separating fingers, but by faith's uniting bond, breathed through the word, so loving yet so removing, 'Woman, behold thy son!' Dying trust in the humble friend, which would go far to make the friend worthy of it, breathed in the charge, to which no form of address corresponding to 'Woman' is prefixed. Jesus had nothing else to give as a parting gift, but He gave these two to each other, and enriched both. He showed His own loving heart, and implied His faithful discharge of all filial duties hitherto. And He taught us the lesson, which many of us have proved to be true, that losses are best made up when we hear Him pointing us by them to new offices of help to others, and that, if we will let Him, He will point us too to what will fill empty places in our hearts and homes.

The second of the words on the Cross which we owe to John is that pathetic expression, 'I thirst.' Most significant is the insight into our Lord's consciousness which John, here as elsewhere, ventures to give. Not till He knew 'that all things were accomplished' did He give heed to the pangs of thirst, which made so terrible a part of the torture of crucifixion. The strong will kept back the bodily cravings so long as any unfulfilled duty remained. Now Jesus had nothing to do but to die, and before He died He let flesh have one little alleviation. He had refused the stupefying draught which would have lessened suffering by dulling consciousness, but He asked for the draught which would momentarily slake the agony of parched lips and burning throat.

The words of Joh. 19:28 are not to be taken as meaning that Jesus said 'I thirst' with the mere intention of fulfilling the Scripture. His utterance was the plaint of a real need, not a performance to fill a part. But it is John who sees in that wholly natural cry the fulfilment of the psalm [Psa. 69:21]. All Christ's bodily sufferings may be said to be summed up in this one word, the only one in which they found utterance. The same lips that said, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink,' said this. Infinitely pathetic in itself, that cry becomes almost awful in its appeal to us when we remember who uttered it, and why He bore these pangs. The very 'Fountain of living water' knew the pang of thirst that every one that thirsteth might come to the waters, and might drink, not water only, but 'wine and milk, without money or price.'

John's last contribution to our knowledge of our Lord's words on the Cross is that triumphant 'It is finished,' wherein there spoke, not only the common dying consciousness of life being ended, but the certitude, which He alone of all who have died, or will die, had the right to feel and utter, that every task was completed, that all God's will was accomplished, all Messiah's work done, all prophecy fulfilled, redemption secured, God and man reconciled. He looked back over all His life and saw no failure, no falling below the demands of the occasion, nothing that could have been bettered, nothing that should not have been there. He looked upwards, and even at that moment He heard in His soul the voice of the Father saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!'

Christ's work is finished. It needs no supplement. It can never be repeated or imitated while the world lasts, and will not lose its power through the ages. Let us trust to it as complete for all our needs, and not seek to strengthen 'the sure foundation' which it has laid by any shifting, uncertain additions of our own. But we may remember, too, that while Christ's work is, in one aspect, finished, when He bowed His head, and by His own will 'gave up the ghost,' in another aspect His work is not finished, nor will be, until the whole benefits of His incarnation and death are diffused through, and appropriated by, the world. He is working to-day, and long ages have yet to pass, in all probability, before the voice of Him that sitteth on the throne shall say 'It is done!'

115) John 19:19

John

AN EYE-WITNESS'S ACCOUNT OF THE CRUCIFIXION

THE TITLE ON THE CROSS

Joh. 19:19.

This title is recorded by all four Evangelists, in words varying in form but alike in substance. It strikes them all as significant that, meaning only to fling a jeer at his unruly subjects, Pilate should have written it, and proclaimed this Nazarene visionary to be He for whom Israel had longed through weary ages. John's account is the fullest, as indeed his narrative of all Pilate's shufflings is the most complete. He alone records that the title was tri-lingual [for the similar statement in the Authorised Version of Luke is not part of the original text]. He alone gives the Jews' request for an alteration of the title, and Pilate's bitter answer. That angry reply betrays his motive in setting up such words over a crucified prisoner’s head. They were meant as a savage taunt of the Jews, not as an insult to Jesus, which would have been welcome to them. He seems to have regarded our Lord as a harmless enthusiast, to have had a certain liking for Him, and a languid curiosity as to Him, which came by degrees to be just tinged with awe as he felt that he could not quite make Him out. Throughout, he was convinced that His claim to be a king contained no menace for Caesar, and he would have let Jesus go but for fear of being misrepresented at Rome. He felt that the sacrifice of one more Jew was a small price to pay to avert his accusation to Caesar; he would have sacrificed a dozen such to keep his place. But he felt that he was being coerced to do injustice, and his anger and sense of humiliation find vent in that written taunt. It was a spurt of bad temper and a measure of his reluctance.

Besides the interest attaching to it as Pilate’s work, it seems to John significant of much that it should have been fastened on the Cross, and that it should have been in the three languages, Hebrew [Aramaic], Greek, and Latin.

Let us deal with three points in succession.

I. The title as throwing light on the actors in the tragedy.

We may consider it, first, in its bearing on Jesus’ claims. He was condemned by the priests on the theocratic charge of blasphemy, because He made Himself the Son of God. He was sentenced by Pilate on the civil charge of rebellion, which the priests brought against Him as an inference necessarily resulting from His claim to be the Son of God. They drew the same conclusion as Nathanael did long before: ‘Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God,’ and therefore ‘Thou art the King of Israel.’ And they were so far right that if the former designation is correct, the latter inevitably follows.

Both charges, then, turned on His personal claims. To Pilate He explained the nature of His kingdom, so as to remove any suspicion that it would bring Him and His subjects into collision with Rome, but He asserted His kingship, and it was His own claim that gave Pilate the material for His gibe. It is worth notice, then, that these two claims from His own lips, made to the authorities who respectively took cognisance of the theocratic and of the civic life of the nation, and at the time when His life hung on the decision of the two, were the causes of His judicial sentence. The people who allege that Jesus never made the preposterous claims for Himself which Christians have made for Him, but was a simple Teacher of morality and lofty religion, have never fairly faced the simple question: ‘For what, then, was He crucified?’ It is easy for them to dilate on the hatred of the Jewish officials and the gross earthliness of the masses, as explaining the attitude of both, but it is not so easy to explain how material was found for judicial process. One can understand how Jesus was detested by rulers, and how they succeeded in stirring up popular feeling against Him, but not how an indictment that would hold water was framed against Him. Nor would even Pilate’s complaisance have gone so far as to have condemned a prisoner against whom all that could be said was that he was disliked because he taught wisely and well and was too good for his critics. The question is, not what made Jesus disliked, but what set the Law in motion against Him? And no plausible answer has ever been given except the one that was nailed above His head on the Cross. It was not His virtues or the sublimity of His teaching, but His twofold claim to be Son of God and King of Israel that haled Him to His death.

We may further ask why Jesus did not clear up the mistakes, if they were mistakes, that led to His condemnation. Surely He owed it to the two tribunals before which He stood, no less than to Himself and His followers, to disown the erroneous interpretations on which the charges against Him were based. Even a Caiaphas was entitled to be told, if it were so, that He meant no blasphemy and was not claiming anything too high for a reverent Israelite, when He claimed to be the Son of God. If Jesus let the Sanhedrim sentence Him under a mistake of what His words meant, He was guilty of His own death.

We note, further, the light thrown by the Title on Pilate’s action. It shows his sense of the unreality of the charge which he basely allowed himself to be forced into entertaining as a ground of condemning Jesus. If this enigmatical prisoner had had a sword, there would have been some substance in the charge against Him, but He was plainly an idea-monger, and therefore quite harmless, and His kingship only fit to be made a jest of and a means of girding at the rulers. ‘Practical men’ always under-estimate the power of ideas. The Title shows the same contempt for ‘mere theorisers’ as animated his question, ‘What is truth?’ How little he knew that this ‘King,’ at whom he thought that he could launch clumsy jests, had lodged in the heart of the Empire a power which would shatter and remould it!

In his blindness to the radiant truth that stood before him, in the tragedy of his condemnation of that to which he should have yielded himself, Pilate stands out as a beacon for all time, warning the world against looking for the forces that move the world among the powers that the world recognises and honours. If we would not commit Pilate’s fault over again, we must turn to ‘the base things of this world’ and the ‘things that are not’ and find in them the transforming powers destined to ‘bring to nought things that are.’

Pilate’s gibe was an unconscious prophecy. He thought it an exquisite jest, for it hurt. He was an instance of that strange irony that runs through history, and makes, at some crisis, men utter fateful words that seem put into their lips by some higher power. Caiaphas and he, the Jewish chief of the Sanhedrim and the Roman procurator, were foremost in Christ’s condemnation, and each of them spoke such words, profoundly true and far beyond the speaker’s thoughts. Was the Evangelist wrong in saying: ‘This spake he not of himself?’

II. The Title on the Cross as unveiling the ground of Christ’s dominion.

It seemed a ludicrous travesty of royalty that a criminal dying there, with a crowd of his ‘subjects’ gloating on his agonies and shooting arrowy words of scorn at him, should be a King. But His cross is His throne. It is so because His death is His great work for the world. It is so because in it we see, with melted hearts, the sublimest revelation of His love. Absolute authority belongs to utter self-sacrifice. He, and only He, who gives Himself wholly to and for me, thereby acquires the right of absolute command over me. He is the ‘Prince of all the kings of the earth,’ because He has died and become the ‘First-begotten from the dead.’ From the hour when He said, ‘I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me,’ down to the hour when the seer heard the storm of praise from ‘ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands’ breaking round the throne, every New Testament reference to Christ’s dominion is accompanied with a reference to His cross, and every reference to His cross merges in a reference to His throne. The crown of thorns was a revelation of the inmost nature of Christ’s rule. The famous Iron Crown of Milan is a hard, cold circlet within a golden covering blazing with jewels. Christ’s right to sway men, like His power to do so, rests on His sacrifice for men. A Christianity without a Cross is a Christianity without authority, as has been seen over and over again in the history of the Church, and as is being seen again today, if men would only look. A Christ without a Cross is a Christ without a Kingdom. The dominion of the world belongs to Him who can sway men’s inmost motives. Hearts are His who has bought them with His own.

III. The Title as prophesying Christ’s universal dominion.

The three tongues in which it was written were chosen simply to make it easy to read by the crowd from every part of the Empire assembled at the Passover. There were Palestinian Jews there who probably read Aramaic only, and representatives from the widely diffused Jewish emigration in Greek-speaking lands, as well as Roman officials and Jews from Italy who would be most familiar with Latin. Pilate wanted his shaft to reach them all. It was, in its tri-lingual character, a sign of Israel’s degradation and a flourishing of the whip in their faces, as a government order in English placarded in a Bengalee village might be, or a Russian ukase in Warsaw. Its very wording betrayed a foreign hand, for a Jew would have written ‘King of Israel,’ not ‘of the Jews.’

But John divined a deeper meaning in this Title, just as he found a similar prophecy of the universality of Christ’s death in the analogous word of Caiaphas. As in that saying he heard a faint prediction that Jesus should die ‘not for that people only, but that He might also gather into one the scattered children of God,’ so he feels that Pilate was wiser than he knew, and that his written words in their threefold garb symbolised the relation of Christ and His work to the three great types of civilisation which it found possessed of the field. It bent them all to its own purposes, absorbed them into itself, used their witness and was propagated by means of them, and finally sucked the life out of them and disintegrated them. The Jew contributed the morality and monotheism of the Old Testament; the Greek, culture and the perfected language that should contain the treasure, the fresh wine-skin for the new wine; the Roman made the diffusion of the kingdom possible by the pax Romana, and at first sheltered the young plant. All three, no doubt, marred as well as helped the development of Christianity, and infused into it deleterious elements, which cling to it to-day, but the prophecy of the Title was fulfilled and these three tongues became heralds of the Cross and with 'loud, uplifted trumpets blew' glad tidings to the ends of the world.

That Title thus became an unconscious prophecy of Christ's universal dominion. The Psalmist that sang of Messiah's world-wide rule was sure that 'all nations shall serve Him,' and the reason why he was certain of it was 'for He shall deliver the needy when he crieth.' We may be certain of it for the same reason. He who can deal with man's primal needs, and is ready and able to meet every cry of the heart, will never want suppliants and subjects. He who can respond to our consciousness of sin and weakness, and can satisfy hungry hearts, will build His sway over the hearts whom He satisfies on foundations deep as life itself. The history of the past becomes a prophecy of the future. Jesus has drawn men of all sorts, of every stage of culture and layer of civilisation, and of every type of character to Him, and the power which has carried a peasant of Nazareth to be the acknowledged King of the civilised world is not exhausted, and will not be till He is throned as Saviour and Ruler of the whole earth. There is only one religion in the world that is obviously growing. The gods of Greece and Rome are only subjects for studies in Comparative Mythology, the labyrinthine pantheon of India makes no conquests, Buddhism is moribund. All other religions than Christianity are shut up within definite and comparatively narrow geographical and chronological limits. But in spite of premature jubilations of enemies and much hasty talk about the need for a re-statement [which generally means a negation] of Christian truth, we have a clear right to look forward with quiet confidence. Often in the past has the religion of Jesus seemed to be wearing or worn out, but it has a strange recuperative power, and is wont to startle its enemies' paeans over its grave by rising again and winning renewed victories. The Title on the Cross is for ever true, and is written again in nobler fashion 'on the vesture and on the thigh' of Him who rides forth at last to rule the nations, 'KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.'

116) John 19:20-21

AN EYE-WITNESS'S ACCOUNT OF THE CRUCIFIXION

Joh. 19:17 - Joh. 19:30.

In great and small matters John's account adds much to the narrative of the crucifixion. He alone tells of the attempt to have the title on the Cross altered, of the tender entrusting of the Virgin to his care, and of the two 'words' 'I thirst' and 'It is finished.' He gives details which had been burned into his memory, such as Christ's position 'in the midst' of the two robbers, and the jar of 'vinegar' standing by the crosses. He says little about the act of fixing Jesus to the Cross, but enlarges what the other Evangelists tell as to the soldiers 'casting lots.' He had heard what they said to one another. He alone distinctly tells that when He went forth, Jesus was bearing the Cross which afterwards Simon of Cyrene had to carry, probably because our Lord's strength failed.

Who appointed the two robbers to be crucified at the same time? Not the rulers, who had no such power but probably Pilate, as one more shaft of sarcasm which was all the sharper both because it seemed to put Jesus in the same class as they, and because they were of the same class as the man of the Jews' choice, Barabbas, and possibly were two of his gang. Jesus was 'in the midst,' where He always is, completely identified with the transgressors, but central to all things and all men. As He was in the midst on the Cross, with a penitent on one hand and a rejecter on the other, He is still in the midst of humanity, and His judgment-seat will be as central as His Cross was.

All the Evangelists give the title written over the Cross, but John alone tells that it was Pilate's malicious invention. He thought that he was having a final fling at the priests, and little knew how truly his title, which was meant as a bitter jest, was a fact. He had it put into the three tongues in use-'Hebrew,' the national tongue; 'Greek,' the common medium of intercourse between varying nationalities; and 'Latin' the official language. He did not know that he was proclaiming the universal dominion of Jesus, and prophesying that wisdom as represented by Greece, law and imperial power as represented by Rome, and all previous revelation as represented by Israel, would yet bow before the Crucified, and recognise that His Cross was His throne.

The ‘high-priests’ winced, and would fain have had the title altered. Their wish once more denied Jesus, and added to their condemnation, but it did not move Pilate. It would have been well for him if he had been as firm in carrying out his convictions of justice as in abiding by his bitter jest. He was obstinate in the wrong place, partly because he was angry with the rulers, and partly to recover his self-respect, which had been damaged by his vacillation. But his stiff-necked speech had a more tragic meaning than he knew, for ‘what he had written’ on his own life-page on that day could never be erased, and will confront him. We are all writing an imperishable record, and we shall have to read it out hereafter, and acknowledge our handwriting.

John next sets in strong contrast the two groups round the Cross-the stolid soldiers and the sad friends. The four legionaries went through their work as a very ordinary piece of military duty. They were well accustomed to crucify rebel Jews, and saw no difference between these three and former prisoners. They watched the pangs without a touch of pity, and only wished that death might come soon, and let them get back to their barracks. How blind men may be to what they are gazing at! If knowledge measures guilt, how slight the culpability of the soldiers! They were scarcely more guilty than the mallet and nails which they used. The Sufferer’s clothes were their perquisite, and their division was conducted on cool business principles, and with utter disregard of the solemn nearness of death. Could callous indifference go further than to cast lots for the robe at the very foot of the Cross?

But the thing that most concerns us here is that Jesus submitted to that extremity of shame and humiliation, and hung there naked for all these hours, gazed on, while the light lasted, by a mocking crowd. He had set the perfect Pattern of lowly self-abnegation when, amid the disciples in the upper room, He had ‘laid aside His garments,’ but now He humbles Himself yet more, being clothed only ‘with shame.’ Therefore should we clothe Him with hearts’ love. Therefore God has clothed Him with the robes of imperial majesty.

Another point emphasised by John is the fulfilment of prophecy in this act. The seamless robe, probably woven by loving hands, perhaps by some of the weeping women who stood there, was too valuable to divide, and it would be a moment's pastime to cast lots for it. John saw, in the expedient naturally suggested to four rough men, who all wanted the robe but did not want to quarrel over it, a fulfilment of the cry of the ancient sufferer, who had lamented that his enemies made so sure of his death that they divided his garments and cast lots for his vesture. But he was 'wiser than he knew,' and, while his words were to his own apprehension but a vivid metaphor expressing his desperate condition, 'the Spirit which was in' him 'did signify' by them 'the sufferings of Christ.' Theories of prophecy or sacrifice which deny the correctness of John's interpretation have the New Testament against them, and assume to know more about the workings of inspiration than is either modest or scientific.

What a contrast the other group presents! John's enumeration of the women may be read so as to mention four or three, according as 'His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas,' is taken to mean one woman or two. The latter is the more probable supposition, and it is also probable that the unnamed sister of our Lord's mother was no other than Salome, John's own mother. If so, entrusting Mary to John's care would be the more natural. Tender care, joined with consciousness that henceforth the relation of son and mother was to be supplanted, not merely by Death's separating fingers, but by faith's uniting bond, breathed through the word, so loving yet so removing, 'Woman, behold thy son!' Dying trust in the humble friend, which would go far to make the friend worthy of it, breathed in the charge, to which no form of address corresponding to 'Woman' is prefixed. Jesus had nothing else to give as a parting gift, but He gave these two to each other, and enriched both. He showed His own loving heart, and implied His faithful discharge of all filial duties hitherto. And He taught us the lesson, which many of us have proved to be true, that losses are best made up when we hear Him pointing us by them to new offices of help to others, and that, if we will let Him, He will point us too to what will fill empty places in our hearts and homes.

The second of the words on the Cross which we owe to John is that pathetic expression, 'I thirst.' Most significant is the insight into our Lord's consciousness which John, here as elsewhere, ventures to give. Not till He knew 'that all things were accomplished' did He give heed to the pangs of thirst, which made so terrible a part of the torture of crucifixion. The strong will kept back the bodily cravings so long as any unfulfilled duty remained. Now Jesus had nothing to do but to die, and before He died He let flesh have one little alleviation. He had refused the stupefying draught which would have lessened suffering by dulling consciousness, but He asked for the draught which would momentarily slake the agony of parched lips and burning throat.

The words of Joh. 19:28 are not to be taken as meaning that Jesus said 'I thirst' with the mere intention of fulfilling the Scripture. His utterance was the plaint of a real need, not a performance to fill a part. But it is John who sees in that wholly natural cry the fulfilment of the psalm [Psa. 69:21]. All

Christ’s bodily sufferings may be said to be summed up in this one word, the only one in which they found utterance. The same lips that said, ‘If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink,’ said this. Infinitely pathetic in itself, that cry becomes almost awful in its appeal to us when we remember who uttered it, and why He bore these pangs. The very ‘Fountain of living water’ knew the pang of thirst that every one that thirsteth might come to the waters, and might drink, not water only, but ‘wine and milk, without money or price.’

John’s last contribution to our knowledge of our Lord’s words on the Cross is that triumphant ‘It is finished,’ wherein there spoke, not only the common dying consciousness of life being ended, but the certitude, which He alone of all who have died, or will die, had the right to feel and utter, that every task was completed, that all God’s will was accomplished, all Messiah’s work done, all prophecy fulfilled, redemption secured, God and man reconciled. He looked back over all His life and saw no failure, no falling below the demands of the occasion, nothing that could have been bettered, nothing that should not have been there. He looked upwards, and even at that moment He heard in His soul the voice of the Father saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!’

Christ’s work is finished. It needs no supplement. It can never be repeated or imitated while the world lasts, and will not lose its power through the ages. Let us trust to it as complete for all our needs, and not seek to strengthen ‘the sure foundation’ which it has laid by any shifting, uncertain additions of our own. But we may remember, too, that while Christ’s work is, in one aspect, finished, when He bowed His head, and by His own will ‘gave up the ghost,’ in another aspect His work is not finished, nor will be, until the whole benefits of His incarnation and death are diffused through, and appropriated by, the world. He is working to-day, and long ages have yet to pass, in all probability, before the voice of Him that sitteth on the throne shall say ‘It is done!’

117) John 19:22

John

THE IRREVOCABLE PAST

Joh. 19:22.

This was a mere piece of obstinacy. Pilate knew that he had prostituted his office in condemning Jesus, and he revenged himself for weak compliance by ill-timed mulishness. A cool-headed governor would have humoured his difficult subjects in such a trifle, as a just one would have been inflexible in a matter of life and death. But this man's facile yielding and his stiff-necked obstinacy were both misplaced. 'So I will, so I command. Let my will suffice for a reason,' was what he meant. He had written his gibe, and not all the Jews in Jewry should make him change.

But his petulant answer to the rulers' request for the removal of the offensive placard carried in it a deeper meaning, as the Title also did, and as the people's fierce yell, 'His blood be on us and on our children,' did. Possibly the Evangelist had some thought of that sort in recording this saying; but, at all events, I venture to take a liberty with it which I should not do if it were a word of God's, or if it were given for our instruction. So I take it now as expressing in a vivid way, and irrespective of Pilate's intention, the thought of the irrevocable past.

I. Every man is perpetually writing a permanent record of himself.

It is almost impossible to get the average man to think of his life as a whole, or to realise that the fleeting present leaves indelible traces. They seem to fade away wholly. The record appears to be written in water. It is written in ink which is invisible, but as indelible as invisible. Grammarians define the perfect tense as that which expresses an action completed in the past and of which the consequences remain in the present. That is true of all our actions. Our characters, our circumstances, our remembrances, are all permanent. Every day we make entries in our diary.

II. That record, once written, is irrevocable.

We all know what it is to long that some one action should have been otherwise, to have taken some one step which perhaps has coloured years, and which we would give the world not to have taken. But it cannot be. Remorse cannot alter it. Wishes are vain. Repentance is vain. A new line of conduct is vain.

What an awful contrast in this respect between time future and time past! Think of the indefinite possibilities in the one, the rigid fixity of the other. Our present actions are like cements that dry quickly and set hard on exposure to the air-the dirt of the trowel abides on the soft brick for ever. Many cuneiform inscriptions were impressed with a piece of wood on clay, and are legible millenniums after.

We have to write currente calamo, and as soon as written, the MS. is printed and stereotyped, and no revising proofs nor erasures are possible. An action, once done, escapes from us wholly.

How needful, then, to have lofty principles ready at hand! The fresco painter must have a sure touch, and a quick hand, and a full mind.

What a boundless field the future offers us! How much it may be! How much, perhaps, we resolve it shall be! What a shrunken heap the harvest is! Are you satisfied with what you have written?

III. This record, written here, is read yonder.

Our actions carry eternal consequences. These will be read by ourselves. Character remains. Memory remains.

We shall read with all illusions stripped away.

Others will read-God and a universe.

‘We shall all be manifested before the judgment-seat of Christ.’

IV. This record may be blotted out by the blood of Christ.

It cannot be made not to have been, but God’s pardon will be given, and in respect to all personal consequences it is made non-existent. Circumstances may remain, but their pressure is different. Character may be renewed and sanctified, and even made loftier by the evil past. Our dead selves may become ‘stepping-stones to higher things.’

Memory may remain, but its sting is gone, and new hopes, and joys, and work may fill the pages of our record.

‘He took away the handwriting that was against us, nailing it to His Cross.’

Our lives and characters may become a palimpsest. ‘I will write upon him My new name.’ ‘Ye are an epistle of Christ ministered by us.’

118) John 19:23-29

John

AN EYE-WITNESS’S ACCOUNT OF THE CRUCIFIXION

Joh. 19:17 - Joh. 19:30.

In great and small matters John’s account adds much to the narrative of the crucifixion. He alone tells of the attempt to have the title on the Cross altered, of the tender entrusting of the Virgin to his care, and of the two ‘words’ ‘I thirst’ and ‘It is finished.’ He gives details which had been burned into his memory, such as Christ’s position ‘in the midst’ of the two robbers, and the jar of ‘vinegar’ standing by the crosses. He says little about the act of fixing Jesus to the Cross, but enlarges what the other Evangelists tell as to the soldiers ‘casting lots.’ He had heard what they said to one another. He alone distinctly tells that when He went forth, Jesus was bearing the Cross which afterwards Simon of Cyrene had to carry, probably because our Lord’s strength failed.

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119) John 19:30

John

AN EYE-WITNESS'S ACCOUNT OF THE CRUCIFIXION

CHRIST'S FINISHED AND UNFINISHED WORK

Joh. 19:30. - Rev. 21:6.

One of these sayings was spoken from the Cross, the other from the Throne. The Speaker of both is the same. In the one, His voice 'then shook the earth,' as the rending rocks testified; in the other, His voice 'will shake not the earth only but also heaven'; for 'new heavens and a new earth' accompanied the proclamation. In the one, like some traveller ready to depart, who casts a final glance over his preparations, and, satisfied that nothing is omitted, gives his charioteer the signal and rolls away, Jesus Christ looked back over His life's work, and, knowing that it was accomplished, summoned His servant Death, and departed. In the other, He sets His seal to the closed book of the world's history, and ushers in a renovated universe. The one masks the completion of the work on which the world's redemption rests, the other marks the completion of the age-long process by which the world's redemption is actually realised. The one proclaims that the foundation is laid, the other that the headstone is set on the finished building. The one bids us trust in a past perfected work; the other bids us hope in the perfect accomplishment of the results of that work. Taken singly, these sayings are grand; united, they suggest thoughts needed always, never more needful than to-day.

I. We see here the work which was finished on the Cross.

The Evangelist gives great significance to the words of my first text, as is shown by his statement in a previous verse: 'Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, said, I thirst,' and then-'It is finished.' That is to say, there is something in that dying voice a great deal deeper and more wonderful than the ordinary human utterance with which a dying man might say, 'It is all over now. I have done,' for this utterance came from the consciousness that all things had been accomplished by Him, and that He had done His life's work.

Now, there, taking the words even in their most superficial sense, we come upon the strange peculiarity which marks off the life of Jesus Christ from every other life that was ever lived. There are no loose ends left, no unfinished tasks drop from His nerveless hands, to be taken up and carried on by others. His life is a rounded whole, with everything accomplished that had been endeavoured, and everything done that had been commanded. 'His hands have laid the foundation; His hands shall also finish.' He alone of the sons of men, in the deepest sense, completed His task, and left nothing for successors. The rest of us are taken away when we have reared a course or two of the structure, the dream of building which brightened our youth. The pen drops from paralysed hands in the middle of a sentence, and a fragment of a book is left. The painter’s brush falls with his palette at the foot of his easel, and but the outline of what he conceived is on the canvas. All of us leave tasks half done, and have to go away before the work is completed. The half-polished columns that lie at Baalbec are but a symbol of the imperfection of every human life. But this Man said, ‘It is finished,’ and ‘gave up the ghost.’ Now, if we ponder on what lies in that consciousness of completion, I think we find, mainly, three things.

Christ rendered a complete obedience. All through His life we see Him, hearing with the inward ear the solemn voice of the Father, and responding to it with that ‘I must’ which runs through all His days, from the earliest dawning of consciousness, when He startled His mother with ‘I must be about My Father’s business,’ until the very last moments. In that obedience to the all-present necessity which He cheerfully embraced and perfectly discharged, there was no flaw. He alone of men looks back upon a life in which His clear consciousness detected neither transgression nor imperfection. In the midst of His career He could front His enemies with ‘Which of you convinceth Me of sin?’ and no man then, and no man in all the generations that have elapsed since-though some have been blind enough to try it, and malicious enough to utter their attempts,-has been able to answer the challenge. In the midst of His career He said, ‘I do always the things that please Him’; and nobody then or since has been able to lay his finger upon an act of His in which, either by excess or defect, or contrariety, the will of God has not been fully represented. At the beginning of His career He said, in answer to the Baptist’s remonstrance, ‘It becometh us to fulfil all righteousness,’ and at the end of His career He looked back, and knowing that He had thus done what became Him-namely, fulfilled it all-He said, ‘It is finished!’

The utterance further expresses Christ’s consciousness of having completed the revelation of God. Jesus Christ has made known the Father, and the generations since have added nothing to His revelation. The very people, to-day, that turn away from Christianity, in the name of higher conceptions of the divine nature, owe their conceptions of it to the Christ from whom they turn. Not in broken syllables; not ‘at sundry times and in divers manners,’ but with the one perfect, full-toned name of God on His lips, and vocal in His life, He has declared the Father unto us. In the course of His career He said, ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father’; and, looking back on His life of manifestation of God, He proclaimed, ‘It is finished!’ And the world has since, with all its thinking, added nothing to the name which Christ has declared.

The utterance farther expresses His consciousness of having made a completed, atoning Sacrifice. Remember that the words of my first text followed that awful cry that came from the darkness, and as by one lightning flash, show us the waves and billows rolling over His head. ‘My God! My God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ In that infinitely pathetic and profound utterance, to the interpretation of which our powers go but a little way, Jesus Christ blends together, in the most marvellous fashion, desolation and trust, the consciousness that God is His God, and the consciousness that He is bereft of the light of His presence. Brethren! I know of no explanation of these words which does justice to both the elements that are intertwined so intimately in them, except the old one, which listens to Him as they come from His quivering lip, and says, ‘The Lord hath made to meet on Him the iniquity of us all.’

Ah, brethren! unless there was something a great deal more than the physical shrinking from physical death in that piteous cry, Jesus Christ did not die nearly as bravely as many a poor, trembling woman who, at the stake or the block, has owed her fortitude to Him. Many a blood-stained criminal has gone out of life with less tremor than that which, unless you take the explanation that Scripture suggests of the cry, marred the last hours of Jesus Christ. Having drained the cup, He held it up inverted when He said ‘It is finished!’ and not a drop trickled down the edge. He drank it that we might never need to drink it; and so His dying voice proclaimed that ‘by one offering for sin for ever,’ He ‘obtained eternal redemption’ for us.

II. Now, secondly, note the work which began from the Cross.

Between my two texts lie untold centuries, and the whole development of the consequences of Christ’s death, like some great valley stretching between twin mountain-peaks on either side, which from some points of view will be foreshortened and invisible, but when gazed down upon, is seen to stretch widely leagues broad, from mountain ridge to mountain ridge. So my two texts, by the fact that millenniums have to interpose between the time when ‘It is finished!’ is spoken, and the time when ‘It is done!’ can be proclaimed from the Throne, imply that the interval is filled by a continuous work of our Lord’s, which began at the moment when the work on the Cross ended.

Now it has very often been the case, as I take leave to think, that the interpretation of the former of these two texts has been of such a kind as to distort the perspective of Christian truth, and to obscure the fact of that continuous work of our Lord’s. Therefore it may not be out of place if, in a sentence or two, I recall to you the plain teaching of the New Testament upon this matter. ‘It is finished!’ Yes; and as the lower course of some great building is but the foundation for the higher, when ‘finished’ it is but begun. The work which, in one aspect, is the close, in another aspect is the commencement of Christ’s further activity. What did He say Himself, when He was here with His disciples? ‘I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you.’ What was the last word that came fluttering down, like an olive leaf, into the bosoms of the men as they stood with uplifted faces gazing upon Him as He disappeared? ‘Lo! I am with you alway, even to the end of the ages.’ What is the keynote of the book which carries on the story of the Gospels in the history of the militant Church? ‘The former treatise have I made. . . of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach, until the day in which He was taken up’-and, being taken up, continued, in a new form, both the doing and the teaching. Thus that book, misnamed the Acts of the Apostles, sets Him forth as the Worker of all the progress of the Church. Who is it that ‘adds to the Church daily such as were being saved?’ The Lord. Who is it that opened the hearts of the hearers to the message? The Lord. Who is it that flings wide the prison-gates when His persecuted servants are in chains? The Lord. Who is it that bids one man attach himself to the chariot of the eunuch of Ethiopia, and another man go and bear witness in Rome? The Lord. Through the whole of that book there runs the keynote, as its dominant thought, that men are but the instruments, and the hand that wields them is Christ’s, and that He who wrought the finished work that culminated on Calvary is operating a continuous work through the ages from His Throne.

Take that last book of Scripture, which opens with a view of the ascended Christ ‘walking in the midst of the seven candlesticks, and holding the stars in His right hand;' which further draws aside the curtains of the heavenly sanctuary, and lets us see 'the Lamb in the midst of the Throne,' opening the seven seals-that is to say, setting loose for their progress through the world the forces that make the history of humanity, and which culminates in the vision of the final battle in which the Incarnate Word of God goes forth to victory, with all the armies of heaven following Him. Are not its whole spirit and message that Jesus Christ, the Lamb who is the Antagonist of the Beast, is working through all the history of the world, and will work till its kingdoms are 'become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ?'

Now, that continuous operation of Jesus Christ in the midst of men is not to be weakened down to the mere continued influence of the truths which He proclaimed, or the Gospel which He brought. There is something a great deal more than the diminishing vibrations of a force long since set in operation, and slowly ceasing to act. Dead teachers do still 'rule our spirits from their urns'; but it is no dead Christ who, by the influence of what He did when He was living, sways the world and comforts His Church; it is a living Christ who to-day is working in His people, by His Spirit. Further, He works on the world through His people by the Word; they plant and water, He 'gives the increase.' And He is working in the world, for His Church and for the world, by His wielding of all power that is given to Him, in heaven and on earth. So that the work that is done upon earth He doeth it all Himself; and Christian people unduly limit the sphere of Christ's operations when they look back only to the Cross, and talk about a 'finished work' there, and forget that that finished work there is but the vestibule of the continuous work that is being done to-day.

Christian people! The present work of Christ needs working servants. We are here in order to carry on His work. The Apostle ventured to say that he was appointed 'to fill up that which is behind of the sufferings of Christ'; we may well venture to say that we are here mainly to apply to the world the benefits resulting from the finished work upon the Cross. The accomplishment of redemption, and the realisation of the accomplished redemption, are two wholly different things. Christ has done the one. He says to us, 'You are honoured to help Me to do the other.' According to the accurate rendering of a great saying of the Old Testament, 'Take no rest, and give Him no rest, till He establish and make Jerusalem a praise in the earth, Christ’s work is finished; there is nothing for us to do with it but trust it. Christ’s work is going on; come to His help. Ye are fellow-labourers with and to the Incarnate Truth.

III. I need not say more than a word about the third thought, suggested by these texts-viz., the completion of the work which began on the Cross.

‘It is done!’ That lies, no man knows how far, ahead of us. As surely as astronomers tell us that all this universe is hastening towards a central point, so surely ‘that far-off divine event’ is that ‘to which the whole creation moves.’ It is the blaze of light which fills the distant end of the dim vista of human history. Its elements are in part summed up in the context-the tabernacle of God with men, the perfected fellowship of the human with the divine, the housing of men in the very home and heart of God; ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ a renovated universe; the removal of all evil, suffering, sorrow, sin, and tears. These things are to be, and shall be, when He says ‘It is done!’

Brethren! nothing else than such an issue can be the end of Creation, for nothing else than such is the purpose of God for man, and God is not going to be beaten by the world and the devil. Nothing else than such can be the issue of the Cross; for ‘He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied,’ and Christ is not going to labour in vain, and spend His life, and give His breath and His blood for nought.

Nothing but the work finished on the Cross guarantees the coming of that perfected issue. I know not where else there is hope for mankind, looking on the history of humanity, except in that great message, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come, has died, lives for ever, and is the world’s King and Lord.

So for ourselves, in regard to the one part of the work, let us listen to Him saying ‘It is finished!’ abandon all attempts to eke it out by additions of our own, and cast ourselves on the finished Revelation, the finished Obedience, the finished Atonement, made once for all on the Cross. But as for the continuous work going on through the ages, let us cast ourselves into it with earnestness, self-sacrifice, consecration, and continuity, for we are fellow-workers with Christ, and Christ will work in, with, and for us if we will work for Him.

120) John 19:36

John

CHRIST OUR PASSOVER

Joh. 19:36.

The Evangelist, in the words of this text, points to the great Feast of the Passover and to the Paschal Lamb, as finding their highest fulfilment, as he calls it, in Jesus Christ. For this purpose of bringing out the correspondence between the shadow and the substance he avails himself of a singular coincidence concerning a perfectly unimportant matter-viz., the abnormally rapid sinking of Christ's physical strength in the crucifixion, by which the final indignity of breaking the bones of the sufferers was avoided in His case. John sees, in that entirely insignificant thing, a kind of fingerpost pointing to far more important, deeper, and real correspondences. We are not to suppose that he was so purblind, and attached so much importance to externals, as that this outward coincidence exhausted in his conception the correspondence between the two. But It was a trifle that suggested a greater matter. It was a help aiding gross conceptions and common minds to grasp the inward relation between Jesus and that Passover rite. But just as our Lord would have fulfilled the prophecy about the King coming 'meek, and having salvation,' though He had never ridden on a literal ass into the literal Jerusalem, so our Lord would have 'fulfilled' the shadow of the Passover with the substance of His own sacrifice if there had never been this insignificant correspondence, in outward things, between the two.

But whilst my text is the Evangelist's commentary, the question arises, How did he come to recognise that our Lord was all which that Passover signified? And the answer is, he recognised it through Christ's own teaching. He does not record the institution of the Lord's Supper. It did not fall into his scheme to deal with external events of that sort, and he knew that it had been sufficiently taught by the three earlier Gospels, to which his is a supplement. But though he did not narrate the institution, he takes it for granted in the words of my text, and his vindication of his seeing the fulfilment of ‘A bone of Him shall not be broken’ in the incident to which I have referred, lies in this, that Jesus Christ Himself swept away the Passover and substituted the memorial feast of the Lord’s Supper. ‘This do in remembrance of Me,’ said at the table where the Paschal lamb had been eaten, sufficiently warrants John’s allusion here.

So then, marking the fact that our Evangelist is but carrying out the lesson that he had learned in the upper room, we may fairly take the identification of the Paschal lamb with the crucified Christ as being the last instance in which our Lord Himself laid His hand upon Old Testament incidents and said, ‘They all mean Me.’ And it is from that point of view, and not merely for the purpose of dealing with the words that I have read as our starting-point, that I wish to speak now.

I. Now then, the first thing that strikes me is that in this substitution of Himself for the Passover we have a strange instance of Christ’s supreme authority.

Try to fling yourself back in imagination to that upper room, where Jesus and a handful of Galileans were sitting, and remember the sanctity which immemorial usage had cast round that centre and apex of the Jewish ritual, established at the Exodus by a solemn divine appointment, intended to commemorate the birth of the nation, venerable by antiquity and association with the most vehement pulsations of national feeling, the centre point of Jewish religion. Christ said: ‘Put it all away; do not think about the Exodus; do not think about the destroying Angel; do not think about the deliverance. Forget all the past; do this in remembrance of Me.’ Take into account that the Passover had a double sacredness, as a religious festival, and also as commemorating the birthday of the nation, and then estimate what a strange sense of His own importance the Man must have had who said: ‘That past is done with, and it is Me that you have to think of now.’ If I might venture to take a very modern illustration without vulgarising a great thing, suppose that on the other side of the Atlantic somebody were to stand up and say, ‘I abrogate the Fourth of July and Independence Day. Do not think about Washington and the establishment of the United States any more. Think about me!' That is exactly what Jesus Christ did. Only instead of a century there were millenniums of observance which He thus laid aside. So I say that is a strange exercise of authority.

What does it imply? It implies two things, and I must say a word about each of them. It implies that Christ regarded the whole of the ancient system of Judaism, its history, its law, its rites of worship, as pointing onwards to Himself, that He recognised in it a system the whole raison d'etre of which was anticipatory and preparatory of Himself. For Him the Decalogue was given, for Him priests were consecrated, for Him kings were anointed, for Him prophets spake, for Him sacrifices smoked, for Him festivals were appointed, and the nation and its history were all one long proclamation: 'The King cometh! go ye forth to meet Him.' You cannot get less than that out of the way in which He handled, as is told in this Gospel, Jacob's ladder, the Serpent in the wilderness, the Manna that fell from Heaven, the Pillar of Cloud that led the people, the Rock that gushed forth water, and now, last of all, the Passover, which was the very shining apex of the whole sacrificial and ritual system.

And remember, too, that this way of dealing with all the institutions of the nation as meaning, in their inmost purpose, Himself, is exactly parallel to His way of dealing with the sacred words of Mosaic commandment and prohibition in the Sermon on the Mount, where He set side by side as of equal-I was going to say, and I should have been right in saying, identical-authority what was 'said to them of old time' and what 'I say unto you.' Amidst the dust of our present controversies as to the processes by which, and the times at which, the Old Testament books assumed their present form, there is grave danger that the essential thing about the whole matter should be obscured. The way in which what is called Higher Criticism may finally locate the origins and dates of the various parts of that ancient record and that ancient system does not in the slightest degree affect the outstanding characteristic of the whole, that it is the product of the divine hand, working [if you will] through men who had more freedom of action whilst they were its organs than our grandfathers thought. Be it so; but still that divine Hand shaped the whole in order that, besides its educational effects upon the generations that received it, there should shine through it all the expectation of the coming King. And I venture to say that, however grateful we may be to modern investigation for light upon these other points to which I have referred, the ignorant reader that reads Jesus Christ into all the Old Testament may be very uncritical and mistaken in regard to details, but he has got hold of the root of the matter, and is nearer to the apprehension of the essence and spirit and purpose of the ancient Revelation than the most learned critic who does not see that it is the preparation for, and the prophecy of, Jesus Christ Himself. And the vindication of such a position lies in this, among other facts, that He in the upper room, in harmony with, and in completion of, all that He had previously spoken about His relation to the Old Testament, claimed the Passover as the prophecy of Himself, and said, ‘I am the Lamb of God.’

I need not dwell, I suppose, on the other consideration that is involved in this strange exercise of authority-viz., the naturalness, as without any sense of doing anything presumptuous or extraordinary, with which Christ assumes His right to handle divine appointments with the most perfect freedom, to modify them, to reshape them, to divert them from their first purpose, and to enjoin them with an authority equal to that with which the Lord said unto Moses, ‘Keep ye this day through your generations.’ There is only one supposition on which I, for my part, can understand that conduct-that He was the possessor of authority the same as the Authority that had originally instituted the rite.

And so, dear brethren! when our Lord said, ‘Do this in remembrance of Me,’ I pray you to ask yourselves, What did that involve in regard to His nature and the source of His authority over us? And what did it involve in regard to His relation to that ancient Revelation?

II. And now another point that I would suggest is-we have, in this substitution of the new rite for the old, our Lord’s clear declaration of what was the very heart of His work in the world.

‘This do in remembrance of Me.’ What is it, then, to which He points? Is it to the wisdom, the tenderness, the deep beauty, the flashing moral purity that gleamed and shone lambent in His words? No! Is it to the gracious self-oblivion, the gentle accessibility, the loving pity, the leisurely heart always ready to help, the eye ready to fill with tears, the hand ever outstretched and ever laden with blessings? No! It is the death on the Cross which He, if I might so say, isolates, at least which He underscores with red lines, and which He would have us remember, as we remember nothing else. Brethren, rites are insignificant in many aspects, but are often of enormous importance as witnesses to truths. And I point to the Lord's Supper, the one rite of the Christian Church, which is to be repeated over and over and over again, and see in it the great barrier which has rendered it impossible, and will render it impossible, as I believe, for evermore, that a Christianity, which obscures the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, should ever pose as the full representation of the Master's mind, or as the full expression of the Saviour's word.

What do men and churches that falter in their allegiance to the truth of Christ's redemptive death do with the Lord's Supper? Nothing! For the most part they ignore it, or if they retain it, do not, for the life of them, know how to explain it, or why it should be there. The explanation of why it is there is the great truth, of which it is the clear utterance and the strong defence, the truth that 'Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,' and that 'the Son of Man came. . . to give His life a ransom for the many.'

What did that Passover say? Two things it said, the blood that was sprinkled on the lintels and on the door-posts was the token to the destroying Angel, as with his broad, silent pinions he swept through the land, bringing a blacker night into Egyptian darkness, and leaving behind him no house 'in which there was not one dead.' All the houses of which the occupants had put the ruddy mark on the lintels and on the doorposts, and were wise enough not to go forth from behind the shelter of that mark on the door, were safe when the morning dawned. And so to us all who, by our sinfulness, have brought down upon our heads exposedness to that retribution, which, in a righteously governed universe, must needs follow sin, and to that death which the separation from God-the necessary result of sin-most surely is, there is proffered in that great Sacrifice shelter from the destroying sword.

But that is not all. Whilst the blood on the posts meant security, the Lamb on the table meant emancipation. So they who find in the dying Christ their exemption from the last consequences of transgression, find, in partaking of the Christ whose sacrifice is their pardon, the communication of a new power, which sets them free from a worse than Egyptian bondage, and enables them to shake from their emancipated limbs the fetters of the grimmest of the Pharaohs that have wielded a tyrannous dominion over them. Pardon and freedom, the creation of a nation subject only to the law of Jehovah Himself-these were the facts that the Passover festival and the Passover lamb signified, and these are the facts which, in nobler fashion, are brought to us by Jesus Christ. So, I beseech you, let Him teach you what His work in the world is, as He lays His own hand on that highest of the ancient festivals, and endorses the Baptist's declaration, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!'

III. Now, lastly, let me ask you to notice how, in this regal and authoritative dealing by our Lord with that ancient festival, there lies a loving provision for our weakness.

Surely we may venture to say that Jesus Christ desired to be remembered, even by that handful of poor people, and by us, not only for our sakes, but because His heart, too, craved that He should not be forgotten by those whom He was leaving. As you may remember, the dying king turned to the bishop standing by him, with the enigmatical word which no one understood but the receiver of it-'Remember!' so did Jesus Christ. He appeals to our thankfulness, He appeals to our affections, He lets us see that He wishes to live in our memories, because He delights in it, as well as because it is for our profit.

The Passover was purely and simply a rite of remembrance. I venture to believe that the Lord's Supper is nothing more. I know how people talk about the bare, bald, Zwinglian ideas of the Communion. They do look very bald and bare by the side of modern notions and mediaeval notions resuscitated. Well, I had rather have the bareness than I would have it overlaid by coverings under which there is room for abundance of vermin to lurk. Christ puts the Lord's Supper in the place of the Passover. The Passover was a purely memorial rite. You Christian people will understand the spirituality of the whole Gospel system, and the nature of the only bond which unites men to Jesus and brings spiritual blessings to them-viz. faith-all the better, the more you cling, in spite of all that is going on round us to-day, to that simple, intelligible, Scriptural notion that we commemorate the Sacrifice, not offer the Sacrifice. Jesus Christ said that the Lord's Supper was to be observed 'in remembrance of Me.' That was His explanation of its purpose, and I for one am content to take as the expounder of the laws of the feast, the feast's own Founder.

Now one more word. In the Passover men fed on the Sacrifice. Jesus Christ presents Himself to each of us as at once the Sacrifice for our sins and the Food of our souls. If you will keep your minds in touch with the truth about Him, and with Him whom the truth about Him reveals to you, if you will keep your hearts in touch with that great and unspeakable sign of God's love, if you will keep your wills in submission to His authority, if you will let His blood, 'which is the life,' or as you may otherwise word it, His Spirit, come into your lives, and be your spirit, your motive, then you will go out from the table, not like the disciples to flee, and deny, and forget, nor like the Israelites to wander in a wilderness, but strengthened for many a day of joyous service and true communion, and will come at last to what He has promised us: 'Ye shall sit with Me at My table in My Kingdom,' whence we shall go 'no more out.'

121) John 19:38-39

John

JOSEPH AND NICODEMUS

Joh. 19:38 - Joh. 19:39.

While Christ lived, these two men had been unfaithful to their convictions; but His death, which terrified and paralysed and scattered His avowed disciples, seems to have shamed and stung them into courage. They came now, when they must have known that it was too late, to lavish honour and tears on the corpse of the Master whom they had been too cowardly to acknowledge, whilst acknowledgment might yet have availed. How keen an arrow of self-condemnation must have pierced their hearts as they moved in their offices of love, which they thought that He could never know, round His dead corpse!

They were both members of the Sanhedrim; the same motives, no doubt, had withheld each of them from confessing Christ; the same impulses united them in this too late confession of discipleship. Nicodemus had had the conviction, at the beginning of Christ's ministry, that He was at least a miraculously attested and God-sent Teacher. But the fear which made him steal to Jesus by night-the unenviable distinction which the Evangelist pitilessly reiterates at each mention of him-arrested his growth and kept him dumb when silence was treason. Joseph of Arimathea is described by two of the Evangelists as 'a disciple'; by the other two as a devout Israelite, like Simeon and Anna, 'waiting for the Kingdom of God.' Luke informs us that he had not concurred in the condemnation of Jesus, but leads us to believe that his dissent had been merely silent. Perhaps he was more fully convinced than Nicodemus, and at the same time even more timid in avowing his convictions.

We may take these two contrite cowards as they try to atone for their unfaithfulness to their living Master by their ministrations to Him dead, as examples of secret disciples, and see here the causes, the misery, and the cure of such.

I. Let us look at them as illustrations of secret discipleship and its causes.

They were restrained from the avowal of the Messiahship of Jesus by fear. There is nothing in the organisation of society at this day to make any man afraid of avowing the ordinary kind of Christianity which satisfies the most of us; rather it is the proper thing with the bulk of us middle-class people, to say that in some sense or other we are Christians. But when it comes to a real avowal, a real carrying out of a true discipleship, there are as many and as formidable, though very different, impediments in the way to-day, from those which blocked the path of these two cowards in our text. In all regions of life it is hard to work out into practice any moral conviction whatever. How many of us are there who have beliefs about social and moral questions which we are ashamed to avow in certain companies for fear of the finger of ridicule being pointed at us? It is not only in the Church, and in reference to purely religious belief, that we find the curse of secret discipleship, but it is everywhere. Wherever there are moral questions which are yet the subject of controversy, and have not been enthroned with the hallelujahs of all men, you get people that carry their convictions shut up in their own breasts, and lock their lips in silence, when there is most need of frank avowal. The political, social, and moral conflicts of this day have their 'secret disciples,' who will only come out of their holes when the battle is over, and will then shout with the loudest.

But to turn to the more immediate subject before us, how many men and women, I wonder, are there who ought to be and are not, distinctly and openly united with the Christian community?

I do not mean to say-God forbid that I should-that connection with any existing church is the same as a connection with Jesus Christ, or that the neglect to be so associated is tantamount to secret discipleship; I know there are plenty of other ways of acknowledging Him than that, but I am quite sure that this is one department in which a large number of men, in all our congregations-and there are not a few in this congregation-need a very plain word of earnest remonstrance. It is one way of manifesting whose you are, that you should unite yourselves openly with those who belong to Him, and who try to serve Him. I do not dwell upon this matter, because I do not wish to be misunderstood, as if I supposed that union to a church is equivalent to union with Him; or that a connection with a church is the only, or even the principal way of making an open avowal of Christian principle; but I am certain that amongst us in this day there is a laxity in this matter which is doing harm both to the Church and to some of you. Therefore I say to you, dear friends, suffer the word of exhortation as to the duty of openly uniting yourselves with the Christian community.

But far higher and more important than that-do you ever say anyhow that you belong to Jesus Christ? In a society like ours, in which the influence of Christian morality affects a great many people who have no personal connection with Him, it is not always enough that the life should preach, because over a very large field of ordinary daily life the underground influence, so to speak, of Christian ethics has infiltrated and penetrated, so that many a tree bears a greener leaf because of the water that has found its way to it from the river, though it be planted far from its banks. Even those who are not Christians live outward lives largely regulated by Christian principle. The whole level of morality has been heaved up, as the coastline has sometimes been by hidden fires slowly working, by the imperceptible, gradual influence of the gospel.

So it needs sometimes that you should say ‘I am a Christian,’ as well as that you should live like one. Ask yourselves, dear friends! whether you have buttoned your greatcoat over your uniform that nobody may know whose soldier you are. Ask yourselves whether you have sometimes held your tongues because you knew that if you spoke people would find out where you came from and what country you belonged to. Ask yourselves, Have you ever accompanied the witness of your lives with the commentary of your confession? Did you ever, anywhere but in a church, stand up and say, ‘I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, my Lord’?

And then ask yourselves another question: Have you ever dared to be singular? We are all of us in this world often thrust into circumstances in which it is needful that we should say, ‘So do not I because of the fear of the Lord.’ Boys go to school; they used always to kneel down at their bedsides and say their prayers when they were at home. They do not like to do it with all those critical and cruel eyes-and there are no eyes more critical and more cruel than young eyes-fixed upon them, and so they give up prayer. A young man comes to Manchester, goes into a warehouse, pure of life, and with a tongue that has not blossomed into rank fruit of obscenity and blasphemy. And he hears, at the next desk there, words that first of all bring a blush to his cheek, and he is tempted into conduct that he knows to be a denial of his Master. And he covers up his principles, and goes with the tempters into the evil. I might sketch a dozen other cases, but I need not. In one form or other, we have all to go through the same ordeal. We have sometimes to dare to be in a minority of one, if we will not be untrue to our Master and to ourselves.

Now the reasons for this unfaithfulness to conviction and to Christ, are put by the Apostle here in a very blunt fashion-’For fear of the Jews.’ That is not what we say to ourselves; some of us say, ‘Oh! I have got beyond outward organisations. I find it enough to be united to Christ. The Christian communities are very imperfect. There is not any of them that I quite see eye to eye with. So I stand apart, contemplating all, and happy in my unsectarianism.' Yes, I quite admit the faults, and suppose that as long as men think at all they will not find any Church which is entirely to their mind; and I rejoice to think that some day we shall all outgrow visible organisations-when we get there where the seer 'saw no temple therein.' Admitting all that, I also know that isolation is always weakness, and that if a man stand apart from the wholesome friction of his brethren, he will get to be a great diseased mass of oddities, of very little use either to himself, or to men, or to God. It is not a good thing, on the whole, that people should fight for their own hands, and the wisest thing any of us can do is, preserving our freedom of opinion, to link ourselves with some body of Christian people, and to find in them our shelter and our home.

But these two in our text were moved by 'fear.' They dreaded ridicule, the loss of position, the expulsion from Sanhedrim and synagogue, social ostracism, and all the armoury of offensive weapons which would have been used against them by their colleagues. So, ignobly they kept their thumb on their convictions, and the two of them sat dumb in the council when the scornful question was asked, 'Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on Him?' when they ought to have started to their feet and said 'Yes, we have!' And when Nicodemus ventured a feeble remonstrance, which he carefully divested of all appearance of personal sympathy, and put upon the mere abstract ground of fair play-'Doth our law judge any man before it hear him?'-one contemptuous question was enough to reduce him to silence. 'Art thou also of Galilee?' was enough to cow him into dropping his timid plea for Him whom in his heart he believed to be the Messiah.

So with us, the fear of loss of position comes into play. I have heard of people who settled the congregation which they should honour by their presence from the consideration of the social advantages which it offered. I have heard of their saying, 'Oh! we cannot attach ourselves to such and such a community; there is no society for the children.' Then many of us are very much afraid of being laughed at. Ridicule, I think, to sensitive people in a generation like ours, is pretty nearly as bad as the old rack and the physical torments of martyrdom. We have all got so nervous and high-strung nowadays, and depend so much upon other people's good opinion, that it is a dreadful thing to be ridiculed. Timid people do not come to the front and say what they believe, and take up unpopular causes, because they cannot bear to be pointed at and pelted with the abundant epithets of disparagement, which are always flung at earnest people who will not worship at the appointed shrines, and have sturdy convictions of their own.

Ridicule breaks no bones. It has no power if you make up your mind that it shall not have. Face it, and it will only be unpleasant for a moment at first. When a child goes into the sea to bathe, he is uncomfortable till his head has been fairly under water, and then after that he is all right. So it is with the ridicule which out-and-out Christian faithfulness may bring on us. It only hurts at the beginning, and people very soon get tired. Face your fears and they will pass away. It is not perhaps a good advice to give unconditionally, but it is a very good one in regard of all moral questions-always do what you are afraid to do. In nine cases out of ten it will be the right thing to do. If people would only discount ‘the fear of men which bringeth a snare’ by making up their minds to neglect it, there would be fewer ‘dumb dogs’ and ‘secret disciples’ haunting and weakening the Church of Christ.

II. I have spent too much time upon this part of my subject, and I must deal briefly with the following. Let me say a word about the illustrations that we have in this text of the miseries of this secret discipleship.

How much these two men lost-all those three years of communion with the Master; all His teaching, all the stimulus of His example, all the joy of fellowship with Him! They might have had a treasure in their memories that would have enriched them for all their days, and they had flung it all away because they were afraid of the curled lip of a long-bearded Pharisee or two.

And so it always is; the secret disciple diminishes his communion with his Master. It is the valleys which lay their bosoms open to the sun that rejoice in the light and warmth; the narrow clefts in the rocks that shut themselves grudgingly up against the light, are all dank and dark and dismal. And it is the men that come and avow their discipleship that will have the truest communion with their Lord. Any neglected duty puts a film between a man and his Saviour; any conscious neglect of duty piles up a wall between you and Christ. Be sure of this, that if from cowardly or from selfish regard to position and advantages, or any other motive, we stand apart from Him, and have our lips locked when we ought to speak, there will steal over our hearts a coldness, His face will be averted from us, and our eyes will not dare to seek, with the same confidence and joy, the light of His countenance.

What you lose by unfaithful wrapping of your convictions in a napkin and burying them in the ground is the joyful use of the convictions, the deeper hold of the truth by which you live, and before which you bow, and the true fellowship with the Master whom you acknowledge and confess. And when these men came for Christ's corpse and bore it away, what a sharp pang went through their hearts! They woke at last to know what cowardly traitors they had been. If you are a disciple at all, and a secret one, you will awake to know what you have been doing, and the pang will be a sharp one. If you do not awake in this life, then the distance between you and your Lord will become greater and greater; if you do, then it will be a sad reflection that there are years of treason lying behind you. Nicodemus and Joseph had the veil torn away by the contemplation of their dead Master. You may have the veil torn away from your eyes by the sight of the throned Lord; and when you pass into the heavens may even there have some sharp pang of condemnation when you reflect how unfaithful you have been.

Blessed be His name! The assurance is firm that if a man be a disciple he shall be saved; but the warning is sure that if he be an unfaithful and a secret disciple there will be a life-long unfaithfulness to a beloved Master to be purged away 'so as by fire.'

III. And so, lastly, let me point you to the cure.

These men learned to be ashamed of their cowardice, and their dumb lips learned to speak, and their shy, hidden love forced for itself a channel by which it could flow out into the light; because of Christ's death. And in another fashion that same death and Cross are for us, too, the cure of all cowardice and selfish silence. The sight of Christ's Cross makes the coward brave. It was no small piece of courage for Joseph to go to Pilate and avow his sympathy with a condemned criminal. The love must have been very true which was forced to speak by disaster and death. And to us the strongest motive for stiffening our vacillating timidity into an iron fortitude, and fortifying us strongly against the fear of what man can do to us, is to be found in gazing upon His dying love who met and conquered all evils and terrors for our sakes.

That Cross will kindle a love which will not rest concealed, but will be ‘like the ointment of the right hand which bewrayeth itself.’ I can fancy men to whom Christ is only what He was to Nicodemus at first, ‘a Teacher sent from God,’ occupying Nicodemus’ position of hidden belief in His teaching without feeling any need to avow themselves His followers; but if once into our souls there has come the constraining and the melting influence of that great and wondrous love which died for us, then, dear brethren, it is unnatural that we should be silent. If those ‘for whom Christ has died’ should hold their peace, ‘the stones would immediately cry out.’ That death, wondrous, mysterious, terrible, but radiant, and glorious with hope, with pardon, with holiness for us and for all the world-that death smites on the chords of our hearts, if I may so speak, and brings out music from them all. The love that died for me will force me to express my love, ‘Then shall the tongue of the dumb sing,’ and silence will be impossible.

The sight of the Cross not only leads to courage, and kindles a love which demands expression, but it impels to joyful surrender. Joseph gave a place in his own new tomb, where he hoped that one day his bones should be laid by the side of the Master against whom he had sinned-for he had no thought of a resurrection. Nicodemus brought a lavish, almost an extravagant, amount of costly spices, as if by honour to the dead he could atone for treason to the living. And both the one and the other teach us that if once we gain the true vision of that great and wondrous love that died on the Cross for us, then the natural language of the loving heart is-

‘Here, Lord! I give myself away; ‘Tis all that I can do.’

If following Him openly involves sacrifices, the sacrifices will be sweet, so long as our hearts look to His dying love. All love delights in expression, and most of all in expression by surrender of precious things, which are most precious because they give love materials which it may lay at the beloved’s feet. What are position, possessions, reputation, capacities, perils, losses, self, but the ‘sweet spices’ which we are blessed enough to be able to lay upon the altar which glorifies the Giver and the gift? The contemplation of Christ's sacrifice-and that alone-will so overcome our natural selfishness as to make sacrifice for His dear sake most blessed.

I beseech you, then, look ever to Him dying on the Cross for each of us. It will kindle our courage, it will make our hearts glow with love, it will turn our silence into melody and music of praise; it will lead us to heights of consecration and joys of confession; and so it will bring us at last into the possession of that wondrous honour which He promised when He said, 'He that confesseth Me before men, him will I also confess; and he that denieth Me before men, him will I also deny.'

122) John 19:41

John

THE GRAVE IN A GARDEN

Joh. 19:41.

This is possibly no more than a topographical note introduced merely for the sake of accuracy. But it is quite in John's manner to attach importance to these apparent trifles and to give no express statement that he is doing so. There are several other instances in the Gospel where similar details are given which appear to have had in his eyes a symbolical meaning-e.g. 'And it was night.' There may have been such a thought in his mind, for all men in high excitement love and seize symbols, and I can scarcely doubt that the reason which induced Joseph to make his grave in a garden was the reason which induced John to mention so particularly its situation, and that they both discerned in that garden round the sepulchre, the expression of what was to the one a dim desire, to the other 'a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead'-that they who are laid to rest in the grave shall come forth again in new and fairer life, as 'the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to bud.'

To us at all events on Easter morning, with nature rising on every hand from her winter death, and 'life re-orient out of dust,' that new sepulchre in the garden may well serve for the starting-point of the familiar but ever-precious lessons of the day.

I. A symbol of death and decay as interwoven with all nature and every joy.

We think of Eden and the first coming of death.

The grave was fittingly in the garden, because nature too is subject to the law of decay and death. The flowers fade and men die. Meditative souls have ever gathered lessons of mortality there, and invested death with an alien softness by likening it to falling leaves and withered blooms. But the contrast is greater than the resemblance, and painless dropping of petals is not a parallel to the rending of soul and body.

The garden's careless wealth of beauty and joy continues unconcerned whatever befalls us. 'One generation cometh and another goeth, but the earth abideth for ever.'

The grave is in the garden because all our joys and works have sooner or later death associated with them.

Every relationship.

Every occupation.

Every joy.

The grave in the garden bids us bring the wholesome contemplation of death into all life.

It may be a harm and weakening to think of it, but should be a strength.

II. The dim hopes with which men have fought against death.

To lay the dead amid blooming nature and fair flowers has been and is natural to men. The symbolism is most natural, deep, and beautiful, expressing the possibility of life and even of advance in the life after apparent decay. There is something very pathetic in so eager a grasping after some stay for hope.

All these natural symbols are insufficient. They are not proofs, they are only pretty analogies. But they are all that men have on which to build their hopes as to a future life apart from Christ. That future was vague, a region for hopes and wishes or fears, not for certainty, a region for poetic fancies. The thoughts of it were very faintly operative. Men asked, Shall we live again? Conscience seemed to answer, Yes! The instinct of immortality in men's souls grasped at these things as proofs of what it believed without them, but there was no clear light.

III. The clear light of certain hope which Christ's resurrection brings.

The grave in the garden reversed Adam's bringing of death into Eden.

Christ's resurrection as a fact bears on the belief in a future state as nothing else can.

It changes hope into certainty. It shows by actual example that death has nothing to do with the soul; that life is independent of the body; that a man after death is the same as before it. The risen Lord was the same in His relations to His disciples, the same in His love, in His memory, and in all else.

It changes shadowy hopes of continuous life into a solid certainty of resurrection life. The former is vague and powerless. It is impossible to conceive of the future with vividness unless as a bodily life. And this is the strength of the Christian conception of the future life, that corporeity is the end and goal of the redeemed man.

It changes terror and awe into joy, and opens up a future in which He is.

We shall be with Him.

We shall be like Him.

Now we can go back to all these incomplete analogies and use them confidently. Our faith does not rest upon them but upon what has actually been done on this earth.

Christ is ‘the First fruits of them that slept.’ What will the harvest be!

As the single little seed is poor and small by the side of the gorgeous flower that comes from it; so will be the change. ‘God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him.’

How then to think of death for ourselves and for those who are gone? Thankfully and hopefully.

123) **John 20:1-18**

John

THE RESURRECTION MORNING

Joh. 20:1 - Joh. 20:18.

John’s purpose in his narrative of the resurrection is not only to establish the fact, but also to depict the gradual growth of faith in it, among the disciples. The two main incidents in this passage, the visit of Peter and John to the tomb and the appearance of our Lord to Mary, give the dawning of faith before sight and the rapturous faith born of sight. In the remainder of the chapter are two more instances of faith following vision, and the teaching of the whole is summed up in Christ’s words to the doubter, ‘Because thou hast seen Me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed!’

I. The open sepulchre and the bewildered alarm it excited.

The act of resurrection took place before sunrise. ‘At midnight,’ probably, ‘the Bridegroom came.’ It was fitting that He who was to scatter the darkness of the grave should rise while darkness covered the earth, and that no eye should behold ‘how’ that dead was ‘raised up.’ The earthquake and the descent of angels and the rolling away of the stone were after the tomb was empty.

John’s note of time seems somewhat earlier than that of the other Gospels, but is not so much so as to require the supposition that Mary preceded the other women. She appears alone here, because the reason for mentioning her at all is to explain how Peter and John knew of the empty tomb, and she alone had been the informant. In these Eastern lands, ‘as it began to dawn,’ ‘very early at the rising of the sun,’ and ‘while it was yet dark,’ are times very near each other, and Mary may have reached the sepulchre a little before the others. Her own words, ‘We know not,’ show that she had spoken with others who had seen the empty grave. We must therefore suppose that she had with the others come to it, seen that the sacred corpse was gone and their spices useless, exchanged hurried words of alarm and bewilderment, and then had hastened away before the appearance of the angels.

The impulse to tell the leaders of the forlorn band the news, which she thinks to be so bad, was womanly and natural. It was not hope, but wonder and sorrow that quickened her steps as she ran through the still morning to find them. Whether they were in one house or not is uncertain; but, at all events, Peter’s denial had not cut him off from his brethren, and the two who were so constantly associated before and afterwards were not far apart that morning. The disciple who had stood by the Cross to almost the last had an open heart, and probably an open house for the denier. ‘Restore such an one, . . . considering thyself.’

Mary had seen the tomb empty, and springs to the conclusion that ‘they’-some unknown persons-have taken away the dead body, which, with clinging love that tries to ignore death, she still calls ‘the Lord.’ Possibly she may have thought that the resting-place in Joseph’s new sepulchre was only meant for temporary shelter [ver. 15]. At all events the corpse was gone, and the fact suggested no hope to her. How often do we, in like manner, misinterpret as dark what is really pregnant with light, and blindly attribute to ‘them’ what Jesus does! A tone of mind thus remote from anticipation of the great fact is a precious proof of the historical truth of the resurrection; for here was no soil in which hallucinations would spring, and such people would not have believed Him risen unless they had seen Him living.

II. Peter and John at the tomb, the dawning of faith, and the continuance of bewildered wonder.

In the account, we may observe, first, the characteristic conduct of each of the two. Peter is first to set out, and John follows, both men doing according to their kind. The younger runs faster than his companion. He looked into the tomb, and saw the wrappings lying; but the reverent awe which holds back finer natures kept him from venturing in. Peter is not said to have looked before entering. He loved with all his heart, but his love was impetuous and practical, and he went straight in, and felt no reason why he should pause. His boldness encouraged his friend, as the example of strong natures does. Some of my readers will recall Bushnell's noble sermon on 'Unconscious Influence' from this incident, and I need say no more about it.

Observe, too, the further witness of the folded grave-clothes. John from outside had not seen the napkin, lying carefully rolled up apart from the other cloths. It was probably laid in a part of the tomb invisible from without. But the careful disposal of these came to him, when he saw them, with a great flash of illumination. There had been no hurried removal.

Here had been no hostile hands, or there would not have been this deliberation; nor friendly hands, or there would not have been such dishonour to the sacred dead as to carry away the body nude. What did it mean? Could He Himself have done for Himself what He had bade them do for Lazarus? Could He have laid aside the garments of the grave as needing them no more? 'They have taken away'-what if it were not 'they' but He? No trace of hurry or struggle was there. He did 'not go out with haste, nor go by flight,' but calmly, deliberately, in the majesty of His lordship over death, He rose from His slumber and left order in the land of confusion.

Observe, too, the birth of the Apostle's faith. John connects it with the sight of the folded garments. 'Believed' here must mean more than recognition of the fact that the grave was empty. The next clause seems to imply that it means belief in the resurrection. The scripture, which they 'knew' as scripture, was for John suddenly interpreted, and he was lifted out of the ignorance of its meaning, which till that moment he had shared with his fellow-disciples. Their failure to understand Christ's frequent distinct prophecies that He would rise again the third day has been thought incredible, but is surely intelligible enough if we remember how unexampled such a thing was, and how marvellous is our power of hearing and yet not hearing the plainest truth. We all in the course of our lives are lost in astonishment when things befall us which we have been plainly told will befall. The fulfilment of all divine promises [and threatenings] is a surprise, and no warnings beforehand teach one tithe so clearly as experience.

John believed, but Peter still was in the dark. Again the former had outrun his friend. His more sensitive nature, not to say his deeper love-for that would be unjust, since their love differed in quality more than in degree-had gifted him with a more subtle and swifter-working perception. Perhaps if Peter's heart had not been oppressed by his sin, he would have been readier to feel the sunshine of the wonderful hope. We condemn ourselves to the shade when we deny our Lord by deed or word.

III. The first appearance of the Lord, and revelation of the new form of intercourse.

Nothing had been said of Mary's return to the tomb; but how could she stay away? The disciples might go, but she lingered, woman-like, to indulge in the bitter-sweet of tears. Eyes so filled are more apt to see angels. No wonder that these calm watchers, in their garb of purity and joy, had not been seen by the two men. The laws of such appearance are not those of ordinary optics. Spiritual susceptibility and need determine who shall see angels, and who shall see but the empty place. Wonder and adoration held these bright forms there. They had hovered over the cradle and stood by the shepherds at Bethlehem, but they bowed in yet more awestruck reverence at the grave, and death revealed to them a deeper depth of divine love.

The presence of angels was a trifle to Mary, who had only one thought-the absence of her Lord. Surely that touch in her unmoved answer, as if speaking to men, is beyond the reach of art. She says 'My Lord' now, and 'I know not,' but otherwise repeats her former words, unmoved by any hope caught from John. Her clinging love needed more than an empty grave and folded clothes arid waiting angels to stay its tears, and she turned indifferently and wearily away from the interruption of the question to plunge again into her sorrow. Chrysostom suggests that she ‘turned herself’ because she saw in the angels’ looks that they saw Christ suddenly appearing behind her; but the preceding explanation seems better. Her not knowing Jesus might be accounted for by her absorbing grief. One who looked at white-robed angels, and saw nothing extraordinary, would give but a careless glance at the approaching figure, and might well fail to recognise Him. But probably, as in the case of the two travellers to Emmaus, her ‘eyes were holden,’ and the cause of non-recognition was not so much a change in Jesus as an operation on her.

Be that as it may, it is noteworthy that His voice, which was immediately to reveal Him, at first suggested nothing to her; and even His gentle question, with the significant addition to the angels’ words, in ‘Whom seekest thou?’ which indicated His knowledge that her tears fell for some person dear and lost, only made her think of Him as being ‘the gardener,’ and therefore probably concerned in the removal of the body. If He were so, He would be friendly; and so she ventured her pathetic petition, which does not name Jesus [so full is her mind of the One, that she thinks everybody must know whom she means], and which so overrated her own strength in saying, ‘I will take Him away,’ The first words of the risen Christ are on His lips yet to all sad hearts. He seeks our confidences, and would have us tell Him the occasions of our tears. He would have us recognise that all our griefs and all our desires point to one Person-Himself-as the one real Object of our ‘seeking,’ whom finding, we need weep no more.

Verse 16 tells us that Mary turned herself to see Him when He next spoke, so that, at the close of her first answer to Him, she must have once more resumed her gaze into the tomb, as if she despaired of the newcomer giving the help she had asked.

Who can say anything about that transcendent recognition, in which all the stooping love of the risen Lord is smelted into one word, and the burst of rapture, awe, astonishment, and devotion pours itself through the narrow channel of one other? If this narrative is the work of some anonymous author late in the second century, he is indeed a ‘Great Unknown,’ and has managed to imagine one of the two or three most pathetic ‘situations’ in literature. Surely it is more reasonable to suppose him no obscure genius, but a well-known recorder of what he had seen, and knew for fact. Christ’s calling by name ever reveals His loving presence. We may be sure that He knows us by name, and we should reply by the same swift cry of absolute submission as sprung to Mary’s lips. ‘Rabboni! Master!’ is the fit answer to His call.

But Mary’s exclamation was imperfect in that it expressed the resumption of no more than the old bond, and her gladness needed enlightenment. Things were not to be as they had been. Christ’s ‘Mary!’ had indeed assured her of His faithful remembrance and of her present place in His love; but when she clung to His feet she was seeking to keep what she had to learn to give up. Therefore Jesus, who invited the touch which was to establish faith and banish doubt [Luk. 24:39; Joh. 20:27], bids her unclasp her hands, and gently instils the ending of the blessed past by opening to her the superior joys of the begun future. His words contain for us all the very heart of our possible relation to Him, and teach us that we need envy none who companied with Him here. His ascension to the Father is the condition of our truest approach to Him. His prohibition encloses a permission. ‘Touch Me not! for I am not yet ascended,’ implies ‘When I am, you may.’

Further, the ascended Christ is still our Brother. Neither the mystery of death nor the impending mystery of dominion broke the tie. Again, the Resurrection is the beginning of Ascension, and is only then rightly understood when it is considered as the first upward step to the throne. ‘I ascend,’ not ‘I have risen, and will soon leave you,’ as if the Ascension only began forty days after on Olivet. It is already in process. Once more the ascended Christ, our Brother still, and capable of the touch of reverent love, is yet separated from us by the character, even while united to us by the fact, of His filial and dependent relation to God. He cannot say ‘Our Father’ as if standing on the common human ground. He is ‘Son’ as we are not, and we are ‘sons’ through Him, and can only call God our Father because He is Christ’s.

Such were the immortal hopes and new thoughts which Mary hastened from the presence of her recovered Lord to bring to the disciples. Fragrant though but partially understood, they were like half-opened blossoms from the tree of life planted in the midst of that garden, to bloom unfading, and ever disclosing new beauty in believing hearts till the end of time.

124) John 20:19

Matthew

THE RISEN LORD'S GREETINGS AND GIFTS

Mat. 28:9. - Joh. 20:19.

So did our Lord greet His sad followers. The first of these salutations was addressed to the women as they hurried in the morning from the empty tomb bewildered; the second to the disciples assembled in the upper room in the evening of the same day. Both are ordinary greetings. The first is that usual in Greek, and literally means 'Rejoice'; the second is that common in Hebrew. The divergence between the two may be owing to the Evangelist Matthew having rendered the words which our Lord actually did speak, in the tongue familiar to His time, into their equivalent Greek. But whatever account may be given of the divergence does not materially affect the significance which I find in the salutations. And I desire to turn to them for a few moments now, because I think that, if we ponder them, we may gain some precious lessons from these Easter greetings of the Lord Himself.

I. First, then, notice their strange and majestic simplicity.

He meets His followers after Calvary and the Tomb and the Resurrection, with the same words with which two casual acquaintances, after some slight absence, might salute one another by the way. Their very simplicity is their sublimity here. For think of what tremendous experiences He had passed through since they saw Him last, and of what a rush of rapture and disturbance of joy shook the minds of the disciples, and then estimate the calm and calming power of that matter-of-fact and simple greeting. It bears upon its very front the mark of truth. Would anybody have imagined the scene so? There have been one or two great poets who might conceivably have risen to the height of putting such words under such circumstances into the mouths of creatures of their own imagination. Analogous instances of the utmost simplicity of expression in moments of intense feeling may be quoted from Æ³chylus or Shakespeare, and are regarded as the high-water marks of genius. But does any one suppose that these evangelists were exceptionally gifted souls of that sort, or that they could have imagined anything like this-so strange in its calm, so unnatural at first sight, and yet vindicating itself as so profoundly natural and sublime-unless for the simple reason that they had heard it themselves, or been told it by credible witnesses? Neither the delicate pencil of the great dramatic genius nor the coarser brush of legend can have drawn such an incident as this, and it seems to me that the only reasonable explanation of it is that these greetings are what He really did say.

For, as I have remarked, unnatural as it seems at first sight, if we think for a moment, the very simplicity and calm, and, I was going to say, the matter-of-factness, of such a greeting, as the first that escaped from lips that had passed through death and yet were red and vocal, is congruous with the deepest truths of His nature. He has come from that tremendous conflict, and He reappears, not flushed with triumph, nor bearing any trace of effort, but surrounded as by a nimbus with that strange tranquillity which evermore enwrapped Him. So small does the awful scene which He has passed through seem to this divine-human Man, and so utterly are the old ties and bonds unaffected by it, that when He meets His followers, all He has to say to them as His first greeting is, ‘Peace be unto you!’-the well-worn salutation that was bandied to and fro in every market-place and scene where men were wont to meet. Thus He indicates the divine tranquillity of His nature; thus He minimises the fact of death; thus He reduces it to its true insignificance as a parenthesis across which may pass unaffected all sweet familiarities and loving friendships; thus He reknits the broken ties, and, though the form of their intercourse is hereafter to be profoundly modified, the substance of it remains, whereof He giveth assurance unto them in these His first words from the dead. So, as to a man standing on some mountain plateau, the deep gorges which seam it become invisible, and the unbroken level runs right on. So, there are a marvellous proof of the majesty and tranquillity of the divine Man, a glorious manifestation of His superiority over death; a blessed assurance of the reknitting of all ancient ties, after it as before it, coming to us from pondering on the trivial words-trivial from other lips, but profoundly significant on His-wherewith He greeted His servants when He rose again from the dead.

II. Then note, secondly, the universal destination of the greetings of the risen Lord.

I have said that it is possibly a mere accident that we should have the two forms of salutation preserved for us here; and that it is quite conceivable that our Lord really spoke but one, which has been preserved unaltered from its Hebrew or Aramaic original in John, and rendered by its Greek equivalent by the Evangelist Matthew.

But be that as it may, I cannot help feeling that in this fact, that the one salutation is the common greeting among Greek-speaking peoples, and the other the common greeting amongst Easterns, we may permissibly find the thought of the universal aspect of the gifts and greetings of the risen Christ. He comes to all men, and each man hears Him, ‘in his own tongue wherein he was born,’ breathing forth to him greetings which are promises, and promises which are gifts. Just as the mocking inscription on the Cross proclaimed, in ‘Hebrew and Greek and Latin,’ the three tongues known to its readers, the one kingdom of the crucified King-so in the greetings from the grave, the one declares that, to all the desires of eager, ardent, sensuous, joy-loving Westerns, and all the aspirations of repose-loving Easterns, who had had bitter experience of the pangs and pains of a state of warfare, Jesus Christ is ready to respond and to bring answering gifts. Whatsoever any community or individual has conceived as its highest ideal of blessedness and of good, that the risen Christ hath in His hands to bestow. He takes men’s ideals of blessedness, and deepens and purifies and refines them.

The Greek notion of joy as being the good to be most wished for those dear to us, is but a shallow one. They had to learn, and their philosophy and their poetry and their art came to corruption because they would not learn, that the corn of wheat must be cast into the ground and die before it bring forth fruit. They knew little of the blessing and meaning of sorrow, and therefore the false glitter passed away, and the pursuit of the ideal became gross and foul and sensuous. And, on the other hand, the Jew, with his longing for peace, had an equally shallow and unworthy conception of what it meant, and what was needed to produce it. If he had only external concord with men, and a competency of outward good within his reach without too much trouble, he thought that because he ‘had much goods laid up for many years’ he might ‘take his ease; and eat, and drink, and be merry.’ But Jesus Christ comes to satisfy both aspirations by contradicting both, and to reveal to Greek and Jew how much deeper and diviner was his desire than he dreamed it to be; and, therefore, how impossible it was to find the joy that would last, in the dancing fireflies of external satisfactions or the delights of art and beauty; and how impossible it was to find the repose that ennobled and was wedded to action, in anything short of union with God.

The Lord Christ comes out of the grave in which He lay for every man, and brings to each man’s door, in a dialect intelligible to the man himself, the satisfaction of the single soul’s aspirations and ideals, as well as of the national desires. His gifts and greetings are of universal destination, meant for us all and adapted for us each.

III. Then, thirdly, notice the unfailing efficacy of the Lord’s greetings.

Look at these people to whom He spoke. Remember what they were between the Friday and the Sunday morning; utterly cowed and beaten, the women, in accordance with the feminine nature, apparently more deeply touched by the personal loss of the Friend and Comforter; and the men apparently, whilst sharing that sorrow, also touched by despair at the going to water of all the hopes that they had been building upon His official character and position. ‘We trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel,’ they said, ‘as they walked and were sad.’ They were on the point of parting. The Keystone withdrawn, the stones were ready to fall apart. Then came something-let us leave a blank for a moment-then came something; and those who had been cowards, dissolved in sorrow and relaxed by despair, in eight-and-forty hours became heroes. From that time, when, by all reasonable logic and common sense applied to men’s motives, the Crucifixion should have crushed their dreams and dissolved their society, a precisely opposite effect ensues, and not only did the Church continue, but the men changed their characters, and became, somehow or other, full of these very two things which Christ wished for them-namely, joy and peace.

Now I want to know-what bridges that gulf? How do you get the Peter of the Acts of the Apostles out of the Peter of the Gospels? Is there any way of explaining that revolution of character, whilst yet its broad outlines remain identical, which befell him and all of them, except the old-fashioned one that the something which came in between was the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the consequent gift of joy and peace in Him, a joy that no troubles or persecutions could shake, a peace that no conflicts could for a moment disturb? It seems to me that every theory of Christianity which boggles at accepting the Resurrection of Jesus Christ as a plain fact, is shattered to pieces on the sharp-pointed rock of this one demand-'Very well! If it is not a fact, account for the existence of the Church, and for the change in the characters of its members.' You may wriggle as you like, but you will never get a reasonable theory of these two undeniable facts until you believe that He rose from the dead. In His right hand He carried peace, and in His left joy. He gave these to them, and therefore 'out of weakness they were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens,' and when the time came, 'were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection.' There is omnipotent efficacy in Christ's greetings.

The one instance opens up the general law, that His wishes are gifts, that all His words are acts, that He speaks and it is done, and that when He desires for us joy, it is a deed of conveyance and gift, and invests us with the joy that He desires if we observe the conditions.

Christ's wishes are omnipotent, ours are powerless. We wish for our friends many good things, and the event turns wishes to mockery, and the garlands which we prepared for their birthdays have sometimes to be hung on their tombs. The limitations of human friendship and of our deepest and sincerest wishes, like a dark background, enhance the boundless efficacy of the greetings of the Master, which are not only wishes but bestowments of the thing wished, and therein given, by Him.

IV. So, lastly, notice our share in this twofold greeting.

When it was first heard, I suppose that the disciples and the women apprehended the salutation only in its most outward form, and that all other thoughts were lost in the mere rapture of the sudden change from the desolate sense of loss to the glad consciousness of renewed possession. When the women clung to His feet on that Easter morning, they had no thought of anything but-'we clasp Thee again, O Soul of our souls.' But then, as time went on, the meaning and blessedness and far-reaching issues of the Resurrection became more plain to them. And I think we can see traces of the process, in the development of Christian teaching as presented in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Epistles. Peter in his early sermons dwells on the Resurrection all but exclusively from one point of view-viz., as being the great proof of Christ's Messiahship. Then there came by degrees, as is represented in the same Peter's letter, and abundantly in the Apostle Paul's, the recognition of the light which the Resurrection of Jesus Christ threw upon immortality; as a prophecy and a pattern thereof. Then, when the historical fact had become fully accepted and universally diffused, and its bearings upon men's future had been as fully apprehended as is possible here, there came, finally, the thought that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was the symbol of the new life, which from that risen Lord passed into all those who loved and trusted Him.

Now, in all these three aspects-as proof of Messiahship, as the pattern and prophecy of immortality, and as the symbol of the better life which is accessible for us, here and now-the Resurrection of Jesus Christ stands for us even more truly than for the rapturous women who caught His feet, or for the thankful men who looked upon Him in the upper chamber, as the source of peace and of joy.

For, dear brethren, therein is set forth for us the Christ whose work is thereby declared to be finished and acceptable to God, and all sorrow of sin, all guilt, all disturbance of heart and mind by reason of evil passions and burning memories of former iniquity, and all disturbance of our concord with God, are at once and for ever swept away. If Jesus Christ was 'declared to be the Son of God with power by His Resurrection from the dead,' and if in that Resurrection, as is most surely the case, the broad seal of the divine acceptance is set to the charter of our forgiveness and sonship by the blood of the Cross, then joy and peace come to us from Him and from it.

Again, the resurrection of Jesus Christ sets Him forth before us as the pattern and the prophecy of immortal life. This Samson has taken the gates of the prison-house on His broad shoulders and carried them away, and now no man is kept imprisoned evermore in that darkness. The earthquake has opened the doors and loosened every man's bonds. Jesus Christ hath risen from the dead, and therein not only demonstrated the certainty that life subsists through death, and that a bodily life is possible thereafter, but hath set before all those who give the keeping of their souls into His hands the glorious belief that 'the body of their humiliation shall be' 'changed into the likeness of the body of His glory, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself.' Therefore the sorrows of death, for ourselves and for our dear ones, the agitation which it causes, and all its darkness into which we shrink from passing, are swept away when He comes forth from the grave, serene, radiant, and victorious, to die no more, but to dispense amongst us His peace and His joy.

And, again, the risen Christ is the source of a new life drawn from Him and received into the heart by faith in His sacrifice and Resurrection and glory. And if I have, deep-seated in my soul, though it may be in imperfect maturity, that life which is hid with Christ in God, an inward fountain of gladness, far better than the effervescent, and therefore soon flat, waters of Greek or earthly joy, is mine; and in my inmost being dwells a depth of calm peace which no outward disturbance can touch, any more than the winds that rave along the surface of the ocean affect its unmoved and unsounded abysses. Jesus Christ comes to thee, my brother, weary, distracted, care-laden, sin-laden, sorrowful and fearful. And He says to each of us from the throne what He said in the upper room before the Cross, and on leaving the grave after it, 'My joy will remain in you, and your joy shall be full. My peace I leave to you, My peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you.'

125) John 20:21-23

John

THE RISEN LORD'S CHARGE AND GIFT

Joh. 20:21 - Joh. 20:23.

The day of the Resurrection had been full of strange rumours, and of growing excitement. As evening fell, some of the disciples, at any rate, gathered together, probably in the upper room. They were brave, for in spite of the Jews they dared to assemble; they were timid, for they barred themselves in 'for fear of the Jews.' No doubt in little groups they were eagerly discussing what had happened that day. Fuel was added to the fire by the return of the two from Emmaus. And then, at once, the buzz of conversation ceased, for 'He Himself, with His human air,' stood there in the midst, with the quiet greeting on His lips, which might have come from any casual stranger, and minimised the separation that was now ending: 'Peace be unto you!'

We have two accounts of that evening's interview which remarkably supplement each other. They deal with two different parts of it. John begins where Luke ends. The latter Evangelist dwells mainly on the disciples' fears that it was some ghostly appearance that they saw, and on the removal of these by the sight, and perhaps the touch, of the hands and the feet. John says nothing of the terror, but Luke's account explains John's statement that 'He showed them His hands and His side,' and that, 'Then were the disciples glad,' the joy expelling the fear. Luke's account also, by dwelling on the first part of the interview, explains what else is unexplained in John's narrative, viz. the repetition of the salutation, 'Peace be unto you!' Our Lord thereby marked off the previous portion of the conversation as being separate, and a whole in itself. Their doubts were dissipated, and now something else was to begin. They who were sure of the risen Lord, and had had communion with Him, were capable of receiving a deeper peace, and so 'Jesus said to them again, Peace be unto you!' and thereby inaugurated the second part of the interview.

Luke's account also helps us in another and very important way. John simply says that 'the disciples were gathered together,' and that might mean the Eleven only. Luke is more specific, and tells us what is of prime importance for understanding the whole incident, that 'the Eleven. . . and they that were with them' were assembled. This interview, the crown of the appearances on Easter Day, is marked as being an interview with the assembled body of disciples, whom the Lord, having scattered their doubts, and laid the deep benediction of His peace upon their hearts, then goes on to invest with a sacred mission, ‘As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you’; to equip them with the needed power, ‘Receive ye the Holy Ghost’; and to unfold to them the solemn issues of their work, ‘Whose sins ye remit they are remitted; and whose sins ye retain they are retained.’ The message of that Easter evening is for us all; and so I ask you to look at these three points.

I. The Christian Mission.

I have already said that the clear understanding of the persons to whom the words were spoken, goes far to interpret the significance of the words. Here we have at the very beginning, the great thought that every Christian man and woman is sent by Jesus. The possession of what preceded this charge is the thing, and the only thing, that fits a man to receive it, and whoever possesses these is thereby despatched into the world as being Christ’s envoy and representative. And what are these preceding experiences? The vision of the risen Christ, the touch of His hands, the peace that He breathed over believing souls, the gladness that sprang like a sunny fountain in the hearts that had been so dry and dark. Those things constituted the disciples’ qualification for being sent, and these things were themselves-even apart from the Master’s words-their sending out on their future life’s-work. Thus, whoever-and thank God I am addressing many who come under the category!-whoever has seen the Lord, has been in touch with Him, and has felt his heart filled with gladness, is the recipient of this great commission. There is no question here of the prerogative of a class, nor of the functions of an order; it is a question of the universal aspect of the Christian life in its relation to the Master who sends, and the world into which it is sent.

We Nonconformists pride ourselves upon our freedom from what we call ‘sacerdotalism.’ Ay! and we Nonconformists are quite willing to assert our priesthood in opposition to the claims of a class, and are as willing to forget it, should the question of the duties of the priest come into view. You do not believe in priests, but a great many of you believe that it is ministers that are ‘sent,’ and that you have no charge. Officialism is the dry-rot of all the Churches, and is found as rampant amongst democratic Nonconformists as amongst the more hierarchical communities. Brethren! you are included in Christ’s words of sending on this errand, if you are included in this greeting of ‘Peace be unto you!’ ‘I send,’ not the clerical order, not the priest, but ‘you,’ because you have seen the Lord, and been glad, and heard the low whisper of His benediction creeping into your hearts.

Mark, too, how our Lord reveals much of Himself, as well as of our position, when He thus speaks. For He assumes here the royal tone, and claims to possess as absolute authority over the lives and work of all Christian people as the Father exercised when He sent the Son. But we must further ask ourselves the question, what is the parallel that our Lord here draws, not only between His action in sending us, and the Father’s action in sending Him, but also between the attitude of the Son who was sent, and of the disciples whom He sends? And the answer is this-the work of Jesus Christ is continued by, prolonged in, and carried on henceforward through, the work that He lays upon His servants. Mark the exact expression that our Lord here uses. ‘As My Father hath sent,’ that is a past action, continuing its consequences in the present. It is not ‘as My Father did send once,’ but as ‘My Father hath sent,’ which means ‘is also at present sending,’ and continues to send. Which being translated into less technical phraseology is just this, that we here have our Lord presenting to us the thought that, though in a new form, His work continues during the ages, and is now being wrought through His servants. What He does by another, He does by Himself. We Christian men and women do not understand our function in the world, unless we have realised this: ‘Now, then, we are ambassadors for Christ’ and His interests and His work are entrusted to our hands.

How shall the servants continue and carry on the work of the Master? The chief way to do it is by proclaiming everywhere that finished work on which the world’s hopes depend. But note,-’as My Father hath sent Me, so send I you,’-then we are not only to carry on His work in the world, but if one might venture to say so, we are to reproduce His attitude towards God and the world. He was sent to be ‘the Light of the world’; and so are we. He was sent to ‘seek and to save that which was lost’; so are we. He was sent not to do His own will, but the will of the Father that sent Him; so are we. He took upon Himself with all cheerfulness the office to which He was appointed, and said, ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me,-and to finish His work’; and that must be our voice too. He was sent to pity, to look upon the multitudes with compassion, to carry to them the healing of

His touch, and the sympathy of His heart; so must we. We are the representatives of Jesus Christ, and if I might dare to use such a phrase, He is to be incarnated again in the hearts, and manifested again in the lives, of His servants. Many weak eyes, that would be dazzled and hurt if they were to gaze on the sun, may look at the clouds cradled by its side, and dyed with its lustre, and learn something of the radiance and the glory of the illuminating light from the illuminated vapour. And thus, ‘as My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.’

Now let us turn to

II. The Christian Equipment.

‘He breathed on them, and said, Receive ye the Holy Ghost!’ The symbolical action reminds us of the Creation story, when into the nostrils was breathed ‘the breath of life, and man became a living soul.’ The symbol is but a symbol, but what it teaches us is that every Christian man who has passed through the experiences which make him Christ’s envoy, receives the equipment of a new life, and that that life is the gift of the risen Lord. This Prometheus came from the dead with the spark of life guarded in His pierced hands, and He bestowed it upon us; for the Spirit of life, which is the Spirit of Christ, is granted to all Christian men. Dear brethren! we have not lived up to the realities of our Christian confession, unless into our death has come, and there abides, this life derived from Jesus Himself, the communication of which goes along with all faith in Him.

But the gift which Jesus brought to that group of timid disciples in the upper room did not make superfluous the further gift on the day of Pentecost. The communication of the divine Spirit to men runs parallel with, depends on, and follows, the revelation of divine truth, so the ascended Lord gave more of that life to the disciples, who had been made capable of more of it by the fact of beholding His ascension, than the risen Lord could give on that Easter Day. But whilst thus there are measures and degrees, the life is given to every believer in correspondence with the clearness and the contents of his faith.

It is the power that will fit any of us for the work for which we are sent into the world. If we are here to represent Jesus Christ, and if it is true of us that ‘as He is, so are we, in this world,’ that likeness can only come about by our receiving into our spirits a kindred life which will effloresce and manifest itself to men in kindred beauty of foliage and of fruit. If we are to be ‘the lights of the world,’ our lamps must be fed with oil. If we are to be Christ’s representatives, we must have Christ’s life in us. Here, too, is the only source of strength and life to us Christian people, when we look at the difficulties of our task and measure our own feebleness against the work that lies before us. I suppose no man has ever tried honestly to be what Christ wished him to be amidst his fellows, whether as preacher or teacher or guide in any fashion, who has not hundreds of times clasped his hands in all but despair, and said, ‘Who is sufficient for these things?’ That is the temper into which the power will come. The rivers run in the valleys, and it is the lowly sense of our own unfitness for the task which yet presses upon us, and imperatively demands to be done, that makes us capable of receiving that divine gift.

It is for lack of it that so much of so-called ‘Christian effort’ comes to nothing. The priests may pile the wood upon the altar, and compass it all day long with vain cries, and nothing happens. It is not till the fire comes down from heaven that sacrifice and altar and wood and water in the trench, are licked up and converted into fiery light. So, dear brethren! it is because the Christian Church as a whole, and we as individual members of it, so imperfectly realise the A B C of our faith, our absolute dependence on the inbreathed life of Jesus Christ, to fit us for any of our work, that so much of our work is ploughing the sands, and so often we labour for vanity and spend our strength for nought. What is the use of a mill full of spindles and looms until the fire-born impulse comes rushing through the pipes? Then they begin to move.

Let me remind you, too, that the words which our Lord here employs about these great gifts, when accurately examined, do lead us to the thought that we, even we, are not altogether passive in the reception of that gift. For the expression, ‘Receive ye the Holy Ghost’ might, with more completeness of signification, be rendered, ‘take ye the Holy Ghost.’ True, the outstretched hand is nothing, unless the giving hand is stretched out too. True, the open palm and the clutching fingers remain empty, unless the open palm above drops the gift. But also true, things in the spiritual realm that are given have to be asked for, because asking opens the heart for their entrance. True, that gift was given once for all, and continuously, but the appropriation and the continual possession of it largely depend upon ourselves. There must be desire before there can be possession. If a man does not take his pitcher to the fountain the pitcher remains empty, though the fountain never ceases to spring. There must be taking by patient waiting. The old Friends had a lovely phrase when they spoke about 'waiting for the springing of the life.' If we hold out a tremulous hand, and our cup is not kept steady, the falling water will not enter it, and much will be spilt upon the ground. Wait on the Lord, and the life will rise like a tide in the heart. There must be a taking by the faithful use of what we possess. 'To him that hath shall be given.' There must be a taking by careful avoidance of what would hinder. In the winter weather the water supply sometimes fails in a house. Why? Because there is a plug of ice in the service-pipe. Some of us have a plug of ice, and so the water has not come,

'Take the Holy Spirit!'

Now, lastly, we have here

III. The Christian power over sin.

I am not going to enter upon controversy. The words which close our Lord's great charge here have been much misunderstood by being restricted. It is eminently necessary to remember here that they were spoken to the whole community of Christian souls. The harm that has been done by their restriction to the so-called priestly function of absolution has been, not only the monstrous claims which have been thereon founded, but quite as much the obscuration of the large effects that follow from the Christian discharge by all believers of the office of representing Jesus Christ.

We must interpret these words in harmony with the two preceding points, the Christian mission and the Christian equipment. So interpreted, they lead us to a very plain thought which I may put thus. This same Apostle tells us in his letter that 'Jesus Christ was manifested to take away sin.' His work in this world, which we are to continue, was 'to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.' We continue that work when,-as we have all, if Christians, the right to do-we lift up our voices with triumphant confidence, and call upon our brethren to ‘behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world!’ The proclamation has a twofold effect, according as it is received or rejected; to him who receives it his sins melt away, and the preacher of forgiveness through Christ has the right to say to his brother, ‘Thy sins are forgiven because thou believest on Him.’ The rejecter or the neglecter binds his sin upon himself by his rejection or neglect. The same message is, as the Apostle puts it, ‘a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death.’ These words are the best commentary on this part of my text. The same heat, as the old Fathers used to say, ‘softens wax and hardens clay.’ The message of the word will either couch a blind eye, and let in the light, or draw another film of obscuration over the visual orb.

And so, Christian men and women have to feel that to them is entrusted a solemn message, that they walk in the world charged with a mighty power, that by the preaching of the Word, and by their own utterance of the forgiving mercy of the Lord Jesus, they may ‘remit’ or ‘retain’ not only the punishment of sin, but sin itself. How tender, how diligent, how reverent, how-not bowed down, but-erect under the weight of our obligations, we should be, if we realised that solemn thought!

126) **John 20:26-28**

John

THOMAS AND JESUS

Joh. 20:26 - Joh. 20:28.

There is nothing more remarkable about the narrative of the resurrection, taken as a whole, than the completeness with which our Lord’s appearances met all varieties of temperament, condition, and spiritual standing. Mary, the lover; Peter, the penitent; the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, the thinkers; Thomas, the stiff unbeliever-the presence of the Christ is enough for them all; it cures those that need cure, and gladdens those that need gladdening. I am not going to do anything so foolish as to try to tell over again, less vividly, this well-known story. We all remember its outlines, I suppose: the absence of Thomas from Christ’s first meeting with the assembled disciples on Easter evening; the dogged disbelief with which he met their testimony; his arrogant assumption of the right to lay down the conditions on which he should believe, and Christ’s gracious acceptance of the conditions; the discovery when they were offered that they were not needful; the burst of glad conviction which lifted him to the loftiest height reached while Christ was on earth, and then the summing up of all in our Lord’s words-’Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed!’-the last Beatitude, that links us and all the generations yet to come with the story, and is like a finger pointing to it, as containing very special lessons for them all.

I simply seek to try to bring out the force and instructiveness of the story. The first point is-

I. The isolation that misses the sight of the Christ.

‘Thomas, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.’ No reason is assigned. The absence may have been purely accidental, but the specification of Thomas as ‘one of the Twelve,’ seems to suggest that his absence was regarded by the Evangelist as a dereliction of apostolic duty; and the cause of it may be found, I think, with reasonable probability, if we take into account the two other facts that the same Evangelist records concerning this Apostle. One is his exclamation, in which a constitutional tendency to accept the blackest possibilities as certainties, blends very strangely and beautifully with an intense and brave devotion to his Master. ‘Let us also go,’ said Thomas, when Christ announced His intention, but a few days before the Passion, of returning to the grave of Lazarus, ‘that we may die with Him.’ ‘He is going to His death, that I am sure of, and I am going to be beside Him even in His death.’ A constitutional pessimist! The only other notice that we have of him is that he broke in-with apparent irreverence which was not real,-with a brusque contradiction of Christ’s saying that they knew the way, and they knew His goal. ‘Lord! we know not whither Thou goest’-there spoke pained love fronting the black prospect of eternal separation,-’and how can we know the way?’-there spoke almost impatient despair.

So is not that the kind of man who on the Resurrection day would have been saying to himself, even more decidedly and more bitterly than the two questioning thinkers on the road to Emmaus had said it, ‘We trusted that this had been He, but it is all over now’? The keystone was struck out of the arch, and this brick tumbled away of itself. The hub was taken out of the wheel, and the spokes fell apart. The divisive tendency was begun, as I have had occasion to remark in other sermons. Thomas did the very worst thing that a melancholy man can do, went away to brood in a corner by himself, and so to exaggerate all his idiosyncrasies, to distort the proportion of truth, to hug his despair, by separating himself from his fellows. Therefore he lost what they got, the sight of the Lord. He ‘was not with them when Jesus came.’ Would he not have been better in the upper room than gloomily turning over in his mind the dissolution of the fair company and the shipwreck of all his hopes?

May we not learn a lesson? I venture to apply these words, dear friends, to our gatherings for worship. The worst thing that a man can do when disbelief, or doubt, or coldness shrouds his sky, and blots out the stars, is to go away alone and shut himself up with his own, perhaps morbid, or, at all events, disturbing thoughts. The best thing that he can do is to go amongst his fellows. If the sermon does not do him any good, the prayers and the praises and the sense of brotherhood will help him. If a fire is going out, draw the dying coals close together, and they will make each other break into a flame. One great reason for some of the less favourable features that modern Christianity presents, is that men are beginning to think less than they ought to do, and less than they used to do, of the obligation and the blessing, whatever their spiritual condition, of gathering together for the worship of God. But, further, there is a far wider thought than that here, which I have already referred to, and which I do not need to dwell upon, namely, that, although, of course, there are very plain limits to be put to the principle, yet it is a principle, that solitude is not the best medicine for any disturbed or saddened soul. It is true that ‘solitude is the mother-country of the strong,’ and that unless we are accustomed to live very much alone, we shall not live very much with God. But on the other hand, if you cut yourself off from the limiting, and therefore developing, society of your fellows, you will rust, you will become what they call eccentric. Your idiosyncrasies will swell into monstrosities, your peculiarities will not be subjected to the gracious process of pruning which society with your fellows, and especially with Christian hearts, will bring to them. And in every way you will be more likely to miss the Christ than if you were kindly with your kind, and went up to the house of God in company.

Take the next point that is here:

II. The stiff incredulity that prescribed terms.

When Thomas came back to his brethren, they met him with the witness that they had seen the Lord, and he met them as they had met the witnesses that brought the same message to them. They had thought the women’s words ‘idle tales.’ Thomas gives them back their own incredulity. I need not remind you of what I have already had occasion to say, how much this frank acknowledgment that none of these, who were afterwards to be witnesses of the Resurrection to the world, accepted testimony to the Resurrection as enough to convince them, enhances the worth of their testimony, and how entirely it shatters the conception that the belief in the Resurrection was a mist that rose from the undrained swamps of their own heated imaginations.

But notice how Thomas exaggerated their position, and took up a far more defiant tone than any of them had done. He is called ‘doubting Thomas.’ He was no doubter. Flat, frank, dogged disbelief, and not hesitation or doubt, was his attitude. The very form in which he puts his requirement shows how he was hugging his unbelief, and how he had no idea that what he asked would ever be granted. ‘Unless I have so-and-so I will not,’ indicates an altogether spiritual attitude from what ‘If I have so-and-so, I will,’ would have indicated. The one is the language of willingness to be persuaded, the other is a token of a determination to be obstinate. What right had he-what right has any man-to say, ‘So-and-so must be made plain to me, or I will not accept a certain truth’? You have a right to ask for satisfactory evidence; you have no right to make up your minds beforehand what that must necessarily be. Thomas showed his hand not only in the form of his expression, not only in his going beyond his province and prescribing the terms of surrender, but also in the terms which he prescribed. True, he is only saying to the other Apostles, ‘I will give in if I have what you had,’ for Jesus Christ had said to them, ‘Handle Me and see!’ But although thus they could say nothing in opposition, it is clear that he was asking more than was needful, and more than he had any right to ask. And he shows his hand, too, in another way. ‘I will not believe!’-what business had he, what business have you, to bring any question of will into the act of belief or credence? Thus, in all these four points, the form of the demand, the fact of the demand, the substance of the demand, and the implication in it that to give or withhold assent was a matter to be determined by inclination, this man stands not as an example of a doubter, but as an example, of which there are too many copies amongst us always, of a determined disbeliever and rejecter.

So I come to the third point, and that is:

III. The revelation that turned the denier into a rapturous confessor.

What a strange week that must have been between the two Sundays-that of the Resurrection and the next! Surely it would have been kinder if the Christ had not left the disciples, with their new-found, tremulous, raw conviction. It would have been less kind if He had been with them, for there is nothing that is worse for the solidity of a man's spiritual development than that it should be precipitated, and new thoughts must have time to take the shape of the mind into which they come, and to mould the shape of the mind into which they come. So they were left to quiet reflection, to meditation, to adjust their thoughts, to get to understand the bearings of the transcendent fact. And as a mother will go a little way off from her little child, in order to encourage it to try to walk, they were left alone to make experiments of that self-reliance which was also reliance on Him, and which was to be their future and their permanent condition. So the week passed, and they became steadier and quieter, and began to be familiar with the thought, and to see some glimpses of what was involved in the mighty fact, of a risen Saviour. Then He comes back again, and when He comes He singles out the unbeliever, leaving the others alone for the moment, and He gives him back, granted, his arrogant conditions. How much ashamed of them Thomas must have been when he heard them quoted by the Lord's own lips! How different they would sound from what they had sounded when, in the self-sufficiency of his obstinate determination, he had blurted them out in answer to his brethren's testimony! There is no surer way of making a good man ashamed of his wild words than just to say them over again to him when he is calm and cool. Christ's granting the request was Christ's sharpest rebuke of the request. But there was not only the gracious and yet chastising granting of the foolish desire, but there was a penetrating warning: ‘Be not faithless, but believing.’ What did that mean? Well, it meant this: ‘It is not a question of evidence, Thomas; it is a question of disposition. Your incredulity is not due to your not having enough to warrant your belief, but to your tendency and attitude of mind and heart.’ There is light enough in the sun; it is our eyes that are wrong, and deep below most questions, even of intellectual credence, lies the disposition of the man. The ultimate truths of religion cannot be matters of demonstration any more than the fundamental truths of any science can be proved; any more than Euclid’s axioms can be demonstrated; any more than the sense of beauty or the ear for music depend on the understanding. ‘Be not faithless, but believing.’ The eye that is sound will see the light.

And there is another lesson here. The words of our Lord, literally rendered, are, ‘become not faithless, but believing.’ There are two tendencies at work with us, and the one or the other will progressively lay hold upon us, and we shall increasingly yield to it. You can cultivate the habit of incredulity until you descend into the class of the faithless; or you can cultivate the opposite habit and disposition until you rise to the high level of a settled and sovereign belief.

It is clear that Thomas did not reach forth his hand and touch. The rush of instantaneous conviction swept him along and bore him far away from the state of mind which had asked for such evidence. Our Lord’s words must have pierced his heart, as he thought: ‘Then He was here all the while; He heard my wild words; He loves me still.’ As Nathanael, when he knew that Jesus had seen him under the fig-tree, broke out with the exclamation, ‘Rabbi! Thou art the Son of God,’ so Thomas, smitten as by a lightning flash with the sense of Jesus’ all-embracing knowledge and all-forgiving love, forgets his incredulity and breaks into the rapturous confession, the highest ever spoken while He was on earth: ‘My Lord and my God!’ So swiftly did his whole attitude change. It was as when the eddying volumes of smoke in some great conflagration break into sudden flame, the ruddier and hotter, the blacker they were. Sight may have made Thomas believe that Jesus was risen, but it was something other and more inward than sight that opened his lips to cry, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Finally, we note-

IV. A last Beatitude that extends to all generations.

‘Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed.’ I need not do more than just in a sentence remind you that we shall very poorly understand either this saying or this Gospel or the greater part of the New Testament, if we do not make it very clear to our minds that ‘believing’ is not credence only but trust. The object of the Christian’s faith is not a proposition; it is not a dogma nor a truth, but a Person. And the act of faith is not an acceptance of a given fact, a Resurrection or any other, as true, but it is a reaching out of the whole nature to Him and a resting upon Him. I have said that Thomas had no right to bring his will to bear on the act of belief, considered as the intellectual act of accepting a thing as true. But Christian faith, being more than intellectual belief, does involve the activity of the will. Credence is the starting-point, but it is no more. There may be belief in the truth of the gospel and not a spark of faith in the Christ revealed by the gospel.

Even in regard to that lower kind of belief, the assent which does not rest on sense has its own blessing. We sometimes are ready to think that it would have been easier to believe if ‘we had seen with our eyes, and our hands had handled the [incarnate] Word of Life’ but that is a mistake.

This generation, and all generations that have not seen Him, are not in a less advantageous position in regard either to credence or to trust, than were those that companied with Him on earth, and the blessing Which He breathed out in that upper room comes floating down the ages like a perfume diffused through the atmosphere, and is with us fragrant as it was in the ‘days of His flesh.’ There is nothing in the world’s history comparable to the warmth and closeness of conscious contact with that Christ, dead for nearly nineteen centuries now, which is the experience today of thousands of Christian men and women. All other names pass, and as they recede through the ages, thickening veils of oblivion, mists of forgetfulness, gather round them. They melt away into the fog and are forgotten. Why is it that one Person, and one Person only, triumphs even in this respect over space and time, and is the same close Friend with whom millions of hearts are in loving touch, as He was to those that gathered around Him upon earth?

What is the blessing of this faith that does not rest on sense, and only in a small measure on testimony or credence? Part of its blessing is that it delivers us from the tyranny of sense, sets us free from the crowding oppression of 'things seen and temporal'; draws back the veil and lets us behold 'the things that are unseen and eternal.' Faith is sight, the sight of the inward eye. It is the direct perception of the unseen. It sees Him who is invisible. The vision which is given to the eye of faith is more real in the true sense of that word, more substantial in the true sense of that word, more reliable and more near than that sight by which the bodily eye beholds external things. We see, when we trust, greater things than when we look. The blessing of blessings is that the faith which triumphs over the things seen and temporal, brings into every life the presence of the unseen Lord.

Brethren! do not confound credence with trust. Remember that trust does involve an element of will. Ask yourselves if the things seen and temporal are great enough, lasting enough, real enough to satisfy you, and then remember whose lips said, 'Become not faithless but believing,' and breathed His last Beatitude upon those 'who have not seen and yet have believed.' We may all have that blessing lying like dew upon us, amidst the dust and scorching heat of the things seen and temporal. We shall have it, if our heart's trust is set on Him, whom one of the listeners on that Sunday spoke of long after, in words which seem to echo that promise, as 'Jesus in whom though now ye see Him not, yet believing ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.'

127) John 20:30-31

John

THE SILENCE OF SCRIPTURE

Joh. 20:30 - Joh. 20:31.

It is evident that these words were originally the close of this Gospel, the following chapter being an appendix, subsequently added by the writer himself. In them we have the Evangelist's own acknowledgment of the incompleteness of his Gospel, and his own statement of the purpose which he had in view in composing it. That purpose was first of all a doctrinal one, and he tells us that in carrying it out he omitted many things that he could have put in if he had chosen. But that doctrinal purpose was subordinate to a still further aim. His object was not only to present the truth that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, but to present it in such a way as to induce his readers to believe in that Christ. And he desired that they might have faith in order that they might have life.

Now, it is a very good old canon in judging of a book that 'in every work' we are to 'regard the writer's end,' and if that simple principle had been applied to this Gospel, a great many of the features in it which have led to some difficulty would have been seen to be naturally explained by the purpose which the Evangelist had in view.

But this text may be applied very much more widely than to John's Gospel. We may use it to point our thoughts to the strange silences and incompletenesses of the whole of Revelation, and to the explanation of these incompletenesses by the consideration of the purpose which it all had in view. In that sense I desire to look at these words before us.

I. First, then, we have here set forth the incompleteness of Scripture.

Take this Gospel first. Anybody who looks at it can see that it is a fragment. It is not meant to be a biography; it is avowedly a selection, and a selection under the influence, as I shall have to show you presently, of a distinct dogmatic purpose. There is nothing in it about Christ's birth, nothing in it about His baptism, nor about His selection of His Apostles. There is scarcely anything about the facts of His outward life at all. There is scarcely a word about the whole of His ministry in Galilee. There is not one of His parables, there are only seven of His miracles before the Resurrection, and two of these occur also in the other Evangelists. There is scarcely any of His ethical teaching; there is not a word about the Lord's Supper.

And so I might go on enumerating many remarkable gaps in this Gospel. Nearly half of it is taken up with the incidents of one week at the end of His life, and the incidents of and after the Resurrection. Of the remainder-by far the larger portion consists of several conversations which are hung upon miracles that seem to be related principally for the sake of these. The whole of the phenomena show us at once the fragmentary character of this Gospel as stamped upon the very surface.

And when we turn to the other three, the same thing is true, though less strikingly so. Why was it that in the Church, after the completion of the Scriptural canon, there sprang up a whole host of Apocryphal Gospels, full of childish stories of events which people felt had been passed over with strange silence, in the teachings of the four Evangelists: stories of His childhood, for instance, and stories about what happened between His death and His resurrection? A great many miracles were added to those that have been told us in Scripture. The condensed hints of the canonical Gospels received a great expansion, which indicated how much their silence about certain points had been felt. What a tiny pamphlet they make! Is it not strange that the greatest event in the world’s history should be told in such brief outline, and that here, too, the mustard seed, ‘less than the least of all seeds,’ should have become such a great tree? Put the four Gospels down by the side of the two thick octavo volumes, which it is the regulation thing to write nowadays, as the biography of any man that has a name at all, and you will feel their incompleteness as biographies. They are but a pen-and-ink drawing of the Sun! And yet, although they be so tiny that you might sit down and read them all in an evening over the fire, is it not strange that they have stamped on the mind of the world an image so deep and so sharp, of such a character as the world never saw elsewhere? They are fragments, but they have left a symmetrical and an unique impression on the consciousness of the whole world.

And then, if you turn to the whole Book, the same thing is true, though in a modified sense there. I have no time to dwell upon that fruitful field, but the silence of Scripture is quite as eloquent as its speech. Think, for instance, of how many things in the Bible are taken for granted which one would not expect to be taken for granted in a book of religious instruction. It takes for granted the being of a God. It takes for granted our relations to Him. It takes for granted our moral nature. In its later portions, at all events, it takes for granted the future life. Look at how the Bible, as a whole, passes by, without one word of explanation or alleviation, a great many of the difficulties which gather round some of its teaching. For instance, we find no attempt to explain the divine nature of our Lord; or the existence of the three Persons in the Godhead. It has not a word to say in explanation of the mystery of prayer; or of the difficulty of reconciling the Omnipotent will of God on the one hand, with our own free will on the other. It has not a word to explain, though many a word to proclaim and enforce, the fact of Christ’s death as the atonement for the sins of the whole world. Observe, too, how scanty the information on points on which the heart craves for more light. How closely, for instance, the veil is kept over the future life! How many questions which are not prompted by mere curiosity, our sorrow and our love ask in vain!

Nor is the incompleteness of Scripture as a historical book less marked. Nations and men appear on its pages abruptly, rending the curtain of oblivion, and striding to the front of the stage for a moment, and then they disappear, swallowed up of night. It has no care to tell the stories of any of its heroes, except for so long as they were the organs of that divine breath, which, breathed through the weakest reed, makes music. The self-revelation of God, not the acts and fortunes of even His noblest servants, is the theme of the Book. It is full of gaps about matters that any sciolist or philosopher or theologian would have filled up for it. There it stands, a Book unique in the world’s history, unique in what it says, and no less unique in what it does not say.

‘Many other things truly did’ that divine Spirit in His march through the ages, ‘which are not written in this book; but these are written that ye might believe.’

II. And so that brings me next to say a word or two about the more immediate purpose which explains all these gaps and incompletenesses.

John’s Gospel, and the other three Gospels, and the whole Bible, New Testament and Old, have this for their purpose, to produce in men’s hearts the faith in Jesus as ‘the Christ’ and as ‘the Son of God.’

I need not speak at length about this one Gospel with any special regard to that thought. I have already said that the Evangelist avows that his work is a selection, that he declares that the purpose that determined his selection was doctrinal, and that he picked out facts which would tend to represent Jesus

Christ to us in the twofold capacity,-as the Christ, the Fulfiller of all the expectations and promises of the Old Covenant, and as the Son of God. The one of these titles is a name of office, the other a name of nature; the one declares that He had come to be, and to do, all to which types and prophecies and promises had dimly pointed, and the other declares that He was 'the Eternal Word,' which 'in the beginning was with God and was God,' and was manifest here upon earth to us.

This was his purpose, and this representation of Jesus Christ is that which shapes all the facts and all the phenomena of this Gospel, from the very first words of it to its close.

And so, although it is wide from my present subject, I may just make one parenthetical remark, to the effect that it is ridiculous in the face of this statement for 'critics' to say, as some of them do: 'The author of the fourth Gospel has not told us this, that, and the other incident in Christ's life, therefore, he did not know it.' Then some of them will draw the conclusion that John's Gospel is not to be trusted in the given case, because he does not give us a certain incident, and others might draw the conclusion that the other three Evangelists are not to be trusted because they do give it us. And the whole fabric is built up upon a blunder, and would have been avoided if people had listened when John said to them: 'I knew a great many things about Jesus Christ, but I did not put them down here because I was not writing a biography, but preaching a gospel; and what I wanted to proclaim was that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.'

But now we may extend that a great deal further. It is just as true about the whole New Testament. The four Gospels are written to tell us these two facts about Christ. They are none of them merely biographies; as such they are singularly deficient, as we have seen. But they are biographies plus a doctrine; and the biography is told mainly for the sake of carrying this twofold truth into men's understandings and hearts, that Jesus is, first of all, the Christ, and second, the Son of God.

And then comes the rest of the New Testament, which is nothing more than the working out of the theoretical and practical consequence of these great truths. All the Epistles, the Book of Revelation, and the history of the Church, as embodied in the Acts of the Apostles,-all these are but the consequences of that fundamental truth; and the whole of Scripture in its later portions is but the drawing of the inferences and the presenting of the duties that flow from the facts that ‘Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.’

And what about the Old Testament? Why, this about it: that whatever may be the conclusion as to the date and authorship of any of the books in it,-and I am not careful to contend about these at present;-and whatever a man may believe about the verbal prophecies which most of us recognise there,-there is stamped unmistakably upon the whole system, of which the Old Testament is the record, an onward-looking attitude. It is all anticipatory of ‘good things to come,’ and of a Person who will bring them. Sacrifice, sacred offices, such as priesthood and kingship, and the whole history of Israel, have their faces turned to the future. ‘They that went before, and they that followed after, cried “Hosanna! Blessed be He that cometh in the name of the Lord!”‘ This Christ towers up above the history of the world and the process of revelation, like Mount Everest among the Himalayas. To that great peak all the country on the one side runs upwards, and from it all the valleys on the other descend; and the springs are born there which carry verdure and life over the world.

Christ, the Son of God, is the centre of Scripture; and the Book- whatever be the historical facts about its origin, its authorship, and the date of the several portions of which it is composed-the Book is a unity, because there is driven right through it, like a core of gold, either in the way of prophecy and onward-looking anticipation, or in the way of history and grateful retrospect, the reference to the one ‘Name that is above every name,’ the name of the Christ, the Son of God.

And all its incompleteness, its fragmentariness, its carelessness about persons, are intended, as are the slight parts in a skilful artist’s handiwork, to emphasise the beauty and the sovereignty of that one central Figure on which all lights are concentrated, and on which the painter has lavished all the resources of his art. So God-for God is the Author of the Bible-on this great canvas has painted much in sketchy outline, and left much unfilled in, that every eye may be fixed on the central Figure, the Christ of God, on whose head comes down the Dove, and round whom echoes the divine declaration: ‘This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’

But it is not merely in order to represent Jesus as the Christ of God that these things are written, but it is that that representation may become the object of our faith. If the intention of Scripture had been simply to establish the fact that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God, it might have been done in a very different fashion. A theological treatise would have been enough to do that. But if the object be that men should not only accept with their understandings the truth concerning Christ's office and nature, but that their hearts should go out to Him, and that they should rest their sinful souls upon Him as the Son of God and the Christ, then there is no other way to accomplish that, but by the history of His life and the manifestation of His heart. If the object were simply to make us know about Christ, we do not need a Book like this; but if the object is to lead us to put our faith in Him, then we must have what we have here, the infinitely touching and tender Figure of Jesus Christ Himself, set before us in all its sweetness and beauty as He lived and moved and died for us.

And so, dear friends, let me put one last word here about this part of my subject. If this be the purpose of Scripture, then let us learn on the one hand the wretched insufficiency of a mere orthodox creed, and let us learn on the other hand the equal insufficiency of a mere creedless emotion.

If the purpose of Scripture, in these Gospels, and all its parts, is that we should believe 'that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,' that purpose is not accomplished when we simply yield our understanding to that truth and accept it as a great many people do. That was much more the fault of the last generation than of this, though many of us may still make the mistake of supposing that we are Christians because we idly assent to-or, at least, do not deny, and so fancy that we accept-Christian truth. But, as Luther says in one of his rough figures, 'Human nature is like a drunken peasant; if you put him up on the horse on the one side, he is sure to tumble down on the other.' And so the reaction from the heartless, unpractical orthodoxy of half a century ago has come with a vengeance to-day, when everybody is saying, 'Oh! give me a Christianity without dogma!' Well, I say that too, about a great many of the metaphysical subtleties which have been called Doctrinal Christianity. But this doctrine of the nature and office of Jesus Christ cannot be given up, and the Christianity which Christ and His Apostles taught be retained. Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God? Do you trust your soul to Him in these characters? If you do, I think we can shake hands. If you do not, Scripture has failed to do its work on you, and you have not reached the point which all God’s lavish revelation has been expended on the world that you and all men might attain.

III. Now, lastly, notice the ultimate purpose of the whole.

Scripture is not given to us merely to make us know something about God in Christ, nor only in order that we may have faith in the Christ thus revealed to us, but for a further end-great, glorious, but, blessed be His Name! not distant-namely, that we may ‘have life in His name.’ ‘Life’ is deep, mystical, inexplicable by any other words than itself. It includes pardon, holiness, well-being, immortality, Heaven; but it is more than they all.

This life comes into our dead hearts and quickens them by union with God. That which is joined to God lives. Each being according to its nature, is, on condition of the divine power acting upon it. This bit of wood upon which I put my hand, and the hand which I put upon it, would equally crumble into nothingness if they were separated from God.

You can separate your wills and your spiritual nature from Him, and thus separated you are ‘dead in trespasses and in sins.’ And, O brother! the message comes to you: there is life in that great Christ, ‘in His name’; that is to say, in that revealed character of His by which He is made known to us as the Christ and the Son of God.

Union with Him in His Sonship will bring life into dead hearts. He is the true ‘Prometheus’ who has come from Heaven with ‘fire,’ the fire of the divine Life in the ‘reed’ of His humanity, and He imparts it to us all if we will. He lays Himself upon us, as the prophet laid himself on the little child in the upper chamber; and lip to lip, and beating heart to dead heart, He touches our death, and it is quickened into life.

The condition on which that great Name will bring to us life is simply our faith. Do you believe in Him, and trust yourself to Him, as He who came to fulfil all that prophet, priest, and king, sacrifice, altar, and Temple of old times prophesied and looked for? Do you trust in Him as the Son of God who comes down to earth that we in Him might find the immortal life which He is ready to give? If you do, then, dear brethren! the end that God has in view in all His revelation, that Christ had in view in His bitter Passion, has been accomplished for you. If you do not it has not. You may admire Him, you may think loftily of Him, you may be ready to call Him by many great and appreciative names, but Oh! unless you have learned to see in Him the divine Saviour of your souls, you have not seen what God means you to see.

But if you have, then all other questions about this Book, important as they are in their places, may settle themselves as they will; you have got the kernel, the thing that it was meant to bring you. Many an erudite scholar, who has studied the Bible all his life, has missed the purpose for which it was given; and many a poor old woman in her garret has found it. It is not meant to wrangle over, it is not meant to be read as an interesting product of the religious consciousness, it is not to be admired as all that remains of the literature of a nation that had a genius for religion; but it is to be taken as being God's great Word to the world, the record of the revelation that He has given us in His Son. The Eternal Word is the theme of all the written word. Have you made the jewel which is brought us in that casket your own? Is Jesus to you the Son of the living God, believing on whom you share His life, and become 'sons of God' by Him? Can you take on to your thankful lips that triumphant and rapturous confession of the doubting Thomas,-the flag flying on the completed roof-tree of this Gospel-'My Lord and my God'? If you can, you will receive the blessing which Christ then promised to all of us standing beyond the limits of that little group, 'who have not seen and yet have believed'-even that eternal life which flows into our dead spirits from the Christ, the Son of God, who is the Light of the world, and the Life of men.

128) John 21:2

John

AN ELOQUENT CATALOGUE

Joh. 21:2.

This chapter, containing the infinitely significant and pathetic account of our Lord’s appearance to these disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, is evidently an appendix to the Gospel of John. The design of that Gospel is complete with the previous chapter, and there is a formal close, as of the whole book, at the end thereof. But whilst obviously an appendix, this chapter is as obviously the work of the same hand as wrote the Gospel. There are many minute points of identity between the style of it and of the rest of the work, so that there can be no difficulty or doubt as to whence it came. This enumeration of these seven disciples, regarded as being the work of John himself, seems to me to be significant, and to contain a good many lessons. And I desire to turn to these now.

I. First of all, the fact that they were together is significant.

How did they come to hold together? How had they not yielded to the temptation to seek safety by flight, which would have been the natural course after the death of their Leader on a charge of treason against the Roman power? The process of disintegration had begun, and we see it going on in the conduct of the disciples before the Resurrection. The ‘Shepherd was smitten,’ and, as a matter of course, ‘the sheep’ began to ‘scatter.’ And yet here we find them back in Galilee, in their old haunts, and not trying to escape by separation, which would have been the first step suggested to ordinary men in an ordinary state of things. But where everybody knew them, and they knew everybody, and everybody knew them to be disciples of Jesus Christ, thither they go, and hold together as if they had still a living centre and a uniting bond. How did that come about? The fact that after Christ’s death there was a group of men united together simply and solely as disciples, and exhibiting their unity as disciples conspicuously, in the face of the men that knew them best, this forms a strange phenomenon that needs an explanation. And there is only one explanation of it, that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead. That drew them together once more. You cannot build a Church on a dead Christ; and of all the proofs of the Resurrection, I take it that there is none that it is harder for an unbeliever to account for, in harmony with his hypothesis, than the simple fact that Christ’s disciples held together after He was dead, and presented a united front to the world.

So, then, the fact of the group is itself significant, and we may claim it as being a morsel of evidence for the historical veracity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

II. Then the composition of this group is significant.

Taken in comparison with the original nucleus of the Church, the calling of which we find recorded in the first chapter of this Gospel, it is to be noticed that of the five men who made the Primitive Church, there are three who reappear here by name-viz. Simon Peter, John and Nathanael, and Nathanael never appears anywhere else except in these two places. Then, note that there are two unnamed men here, ‘two other of His disciples’; who, I think, in all probability are the two of the original five that we do not find named here-viz. ‘Philip and Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother’-both of them connected with Bethsaida, the place where probably this appearance of the risen Lord took place.

So, then, I think, the fair inference from the list before us is that we have here the original nucleus again, the first five, with a couple more, and the couple more are ‘Thomas, who is called Didymus’-and we shall see the reason for his presence in a moment-and the brother of John, one of the first pair.

Thus, then, to the original little group that had gathered round Him at the first, and to whom He had been so often manifested in this very scene where they were standing now, He is revealed again. There, along the beach, is the place where James and John and Simon and Andrew were called from their nets three short years ago. Across yonder, on the other side of the lake, is the bit of green grass where the thousands were fed. Behind it is the steep slope down which the devil-possessed herd rushed. There, over the shoulder of the hill, is the road that leads up to Cana of Galilee, which they had trod together on that never-to-be-forgotten first morning, and from which little village one of the group came. They who had companied with Him all the time of His too short fellowship, and had seen all His manifestations, were fittingly chosen to be the recipients of this last appearance, which was to be full of instruction as to the work of the Church, its difficulties, its discouragements, its rewards, its final success, and His benediction of it until the very end of time. It was not for nothing that they who were gathered together were that first nucleus of the Church, who received again from their Master the charge to be ‘fishers of men.’

And then, if we look at the list, having regard to the history of those that make it up, it seems to me that that also brings us some valuable considerations. Foremost stand, as receiving this great manifestation of Jesus Christ, the two greatest sinners of the whole band, ‘Simon Peter, and Thomas, which is called Didymus,’ the denier and the doubter. Singularly contrasted these two men were in much of their disposition; and yet alike in the fact that the Crucifixion had been too much for their faith. The one of them was impetuous, the other of them slow. The one was always ready to say more than he meant; the other always ready to do more than he said. The one was naturally despondent, disposed to look ahead and to see the gloomiest side of everything-’Let us also go that we may die with Him’-the other never looking an inch beyond his nose, and always yielding himself up to the impulse of the moment. And yet both of them were united in this, that the one, from a sudden wave of cowardice which swept him away from his deepest convictions and made him for an hour untrue to his warmest love, and the other, from giving way to his constitutional tendency to despondency, and to taking the blackest possible view of everything-they had both of them failed in their faith, the one turning out a denier and the other turning out a doubter. And yet here they are, foremost upon the list of those who saw the Risen Christ.

Well, there are two lessons there, and the one is this-let us Christian people learn with what open hearts and hands we should welcome a penitent when he comes back. The other is,-let us learn who they are to whom Jesus Christ deigns to manifest Himself-not immaculate monsters, but men that, having fallen, have learned humility and caution, and by penitence have risen to a securer standing, and have turned even their transgressions into steps in the ladder that lifts them to Christ. It was something that the first to whom the risen Saviour appeared when He came victorious and calm from the grave, was the woman ‘out of whom He had cast seven devils,’ and the blessed truth which that teaches is the same as that which is to be drawn from this list of those whom He regarded, and whom we regard, as then constituting the true nucleus of His Church-a list which is headed by the blackest denier and the most obstinate and captious sceptic in the whole company. ‘There were together Simon Peter and Thomas, which is called Didymus,’ and the little group was glad to have them, and welcomed them, as it becomes us to welcome brethren who have fallen, and who come again saying, ‘I repent.’

Well, then, take the next: he was ‘Nathanael, of Cana in Galilee’; a guileless ‘Israelite indeed,’ so swift to believe, so ready with his confession, so childlike in his wonder, so ardent in his love and faith. The only thing that Christ is recorded as having said to him is this: ‘Because I said. . . believest thou? Thou shalt see greater things than these.’ A promise of growing clearness of vision and growing fullness of manifestation was made to this man, who never appears anywhere else in Scripture but in these two scenes, and so may stand to us as the type of the opposite kind of Christian experience from that stormy one of the doubter and the denier-viz. that of persistent, quiet, continuous growth, which is marked by faithful use of the present amount of illumination, and is rewarded by a continual increase of the same. If the keynote to the two former lives is, that sin confessed helps a man to climb, the keynote to this man’s is the other truth, that they are still more blessed who, with no interruptions, backslidings, inconsistencies, or denials, by patient continuousness in well-doing, widen the horizon of their Christian vision and purge their eyesight for daily larger knowledge. To these, as to the others, there is granted the vision of the risen Lord, and to them also is entrusted the care of His sheep and His lambs. We do not need to go away into the depths and the darkness in order to realise the warmth and the blessedness of the light. There is no necessity that any Christian man’s career should be broken by denials like Peter’s or by doubts like Thomas’s, but we may ‘grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour.’ ‘So is the kingdom of heaven, first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.’

Then, still further, there were here ‘the two sons of Zebedee.’ These were the men of whom the Master said that they were ‘sons of thunder,’ who, by natural disposition, in so far as they resembled one another [which they seem to have done], were eager, energetic, somewhat bigoted, ready with passionate rebukes, and not unwilling to invoke destructive vengeance, all for the love of Him. They were also touched with some human ambition which led them to desire a place at His right hand and His left, but the ambition, too, was touched with love towards Him, which half redeemed it. But by dwelling with Him one of them, at least, had become of all the group the likest his Master. And the old monastic painters taught a very deep truth when, in their pictures of the apostles, they made John's almost a copy of the Master's face. To him, too, there was granted in like manner a place amongst this blessed company, and it is surely a trace of his hand that his place should seem so humble. Any other but himself would certainly have put James and John in their natural place beside Peter. It must have been himself who slipped himself and his brother into so inconspicuous a position in the list, and further veiled his personality under the patronymic, 'the sons of Zebedee.'

Last of all come 'two other of His disciples,' not worth naming. Probably, as I have said, they were the missing two out of the five of the first chapter; but possibly they were only 'disciples' in the wider sense, and not of the Apostolic group at all. Nobody can tell. What does it matter? The lesson to be gathered from their presence in this group is one that most of us may very well take to heart. There is a place for commonplace, undistinguished people, whose names are not worth repeating in any record; there is a place for us one-talented folk, in Christ's Church, and we, too, have a share in the manifestation of His love. We do not need to be brilliant, we do not need to be clever, we do not need to be influential, we do not need to be energetic, we do not need to be anything but quiet, waiting souls, in order to have Christ showing Himself to us, as we toil wearily through the darkness of the night. Undistinguished disciples have a place in His heart, a sphere and a function in His Church, and a share in His revelation of Himself.

III. The last point that I touch is this, that the purpose of this group is significant.

What did they thus get together for? 'Simon Peter saith, I go a fishing. They say, We also go with thee.' So they went back again to their old trade, and they had not left the nets and the boats and the hired servants for ever, as they once thought they had.

What sent them back? Not doubt or despair; because they had seen Jesus Christ up in Jerusalem, and had come down to Galilee at His command on purpose to meet Him. 'There shall ye see Him, lo! I have told you,' was ringing in their ears, and they went back in full confidence of His appearance there. It is very like Peter that he should have been the one to suggest filling an hour of the waiting time with manual labour. The time would be hanging heavily on his hands. John could have ‘sat still in the house,’ like Mary, the heart all the busier, because the hands lay quietly in the lap. But that was not Peter’s way, and John was ready to keep him company. Peter thought that the best thing they could do, till Jesus chose to come, was to get back to their work, and he was sensible and right. The best preparation for Christ’s appearance, and the best attitude to be found in by Him, is doing our daily work, however secular and small it may be. A dirty, wet fishing boat, all slimy with scales, was a strange place in which to wait for the manifestation of a risen Saviour. But it was the right place, righter than if they had been wandering about amongst the fancied sanctities of the synagogues.

They went out to do their work; and to them was fulfilled the old saying, ‘I, being in the way, the Lord met me.’ Jesus Christ will come to you and me in the street if we carry the waiting heart there, and in the shop, and the factory, and the counting-house, and the kitchen, and the nursery, and the study, or wherever we may be. For all things are sacred when done with a hallowed heart, and He chooses to make Himself known to us amidst the dusty commonplaces of daily life.

He had said to them before the Crucifixion: ‘When I sent you forth without purse or scrip, lacked ye anything? And they said, Nothing.’ And then He said, as changing the conditions: ‘But now he that hath a purse or scrip, let him take it.’ As long as He was with them they were absolved from these common tasks. Now that He had left them the obligation recurred. And the order of things for His servants in all time coming was therein declared to be: no shirking of daily tasks on the plea of wanting divine communications; keep at your work, and if it last all night, stick to it; and if there are no fish in the net, never mind; out with it again. And be sure that sooner or later you will see Him standing on the beach, and hear His voice, and be blessed by His smile.

129) **John 21:4**

John

THE BEACH AND THE SEA

Joh. 21:4.

The incident recorded in this appendix to John’s Gospel is separated from the other appearances of our risen Lord in respect of place, time, and purpose. They all occurred in and about Jerusalem; this took place in Galilee. The bulk of them happened on the day of the Resurrection, one of them a week after. This, of course, to allow time for the journey, must have been at a considerably later date. Their object was, mainly, to establish the reality of the Resurrection, the identity of Christ’s physical body, and to confirm the faith of the disciples therein. Here, these purposes retreat into the background; the object of this incident is to reveal the permanent relations between the risen Lord and His struggling Church.

The narrative is rich in details which might profitably occupy us, but the whole may be gathered up in two general points of view in considering the revelation which we have here in the participation of Christ in His servants’ work, and also the revelation which we have in the preparation by Christ of a meal for His toiling servants. We take this whole narrative thus regarded as our subject on this Easter morning.

I. First we have here a revelation of the permanent relation of Jesus Christ to His Church and to the individuals who compose it, in this, that the risen Lord on the shore shares in the toil of His servants on the restless sea.

The little group of whom we read in this narrative reminds us of the other group of the first disciples in the first chapter of this Gospel. Four out of the five persons named in our text appear there: Simon Peter, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, James and John. And a very natural inference is that the ‘two others’ unnamed here are the two others of that chapter, viz. Andrew and Philip. If so, we have at the end, the original little group gathered together again; with the addition of the doubting Thomas.

Be that as it may, there they are on the shore of the sea, and Peter characteristically takes the lead and suggests a course that they all accept: ‘I go a fishing.’ ‘We also go with thee.’

Now we must not read that as if it meant: ‘It is all over! Our hopes are vain! We dreamed that we were going to be princes in the Messiah’s Kingdom, we have woke up to find that we are only fishermen. Let us go back to our nets and our boats!’ No! all these men had seen the risen Lord, and had received from His breath the gift of the Holy Spirit. They had all gone from Jerusalem to Galilee, in obedience to His command, and were now waiting for His promised appearance. Very noble and beautiful is the calm patience with which they fill the time of expectation with doing common and long-abandoned tasks. They go back to the nets and the boats long since forsaken at the Master’s bidding. That is not like fanatics. That is not like people who would be liable to the excesses of excitement that would lead to the ‘hallucination,’ which is the modern explanation of the resurrection faith, on the part of the disciples.

And it is a precious lesson for us, dear brethren! that whatever may be our memories, and whatever may be our hopes, the very wisest thing we can do is to stick to the common drudgery, and even to go back to abandoned tasks. It stills the pulses. ‘Study to be quiet; and to do our own business’ is the best remedy for all excitement, whether it be of sorrow or of hope. And not seldom to us, if we will learn and practise that lesson, as to these poor men in the tossing fisherman’s boat, the accustomed and daily duties will be the channel through which the presence of the Master will be manifested to us.

So they go, and there follow the incidents which I need not repeat, because we all know them well enough. Only I wish to mark the distinct allusion throughout the whole narrative to the earlier story of the first miraculous draught of fishes which was connected with their call to the Apostleship, and was there by Christ declared to have a symbolical meaning. The correspondences and the contrasts are obvious. The scene is the same; the same green mountains look down upon the same blue waters. It was the same people that were concerned. They were, probably enough, in the same fishing-boat. In both there had been a night of fruitless toil; in both there was the command to let down the net once more; in both obedience was followed by instantaneous and large success.

So much for the likenesses; the contrasts are these. In the one case the Master is in the boat with them, in the other He is on the shore; in the one the net is breaking; in the other, ‘though there were so many, yet did it not break.’ In the one Peter, smitten by a sense of his own sinfulness, says, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!’ In the other, Peter, with a deeper knowledge of his own sinfulness, but also with the sweet knowledge of forgiveness, casts himself into the sea, and flounders through the shallows to reach the Lord. The one is followed by the call to higher duty and to the abandonment of possessions; the other is followed by rest and the mysterious meal on the shore.

That is to say, whilst both of the stories point the lesson of service to the Master, the one of them exhibits the principles of service to Him whilst He was still with them, and the other exhibits the principles of service to Him when He is removed from struggling and toiling on the billows to the calm of the peaceful shore in the morning light.

So we may take that night of toil as full of meaning. Think of them as the darkness fell, and the solemn bulk of the girdling hills lay blacker upon the waters, and the Syrian sky was mirrored with all its stars sparkling in the still lake. All the night long cast after cast was made, and time after time the net was drawn in and nothing in it but tangle and mud. And when the first streak of the morning breaks pale over the Eastern hills they are still so absorbed in their tasks that they do not recognise the voice that hails them from the nearer shore: ‘Lads, have ye any meat?’ And they answer it with a half surly and wholly disappointed monosyllabic ‘No!’ It is an emblem for us all; weary and wet, tugging at the oar in the dark, and often seeming to fail. What then? If the last cast has brought nothing, try another. Out with the nets once more! Never mind the darkness, and the cold, and the wetting spray, and the weariness. You cannot expect to be as comfortable in a fishing-boat as in your drawing-room. You cannot expect that your nets will be always full. Failure and disappointment mingle in the most successful lives. Christian work has often to be done with no results at all apparent to the doer, but be sure of this, that they who learn and practise the homely, wholesome virtue of persistent adherence to the task that God sets them, will catch some gleams of a Presence most real and most blessed, and before they die will know that ‘their labour has not been in vain in the Lord.’ ‘They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.’

And so, finally, about this first part of my subject, there stands out before us here the blessed picture of the Lord Himself, the Risen Lord, with the halo of death and resurrection round about Him; there, on the firm beach, in the increasing light of the morning, interested in, caring about, directing and crowning with His own blessing, the obedient work of His servants.

The simple prose fact of the story, in its plain meaning, is more precious than any ‘spiritualising’ of it. Take the fact. Jesus Christ, fresh from the grave, who had been down into those dark regions of mystery where the dead sleep and wait, and had come back into this world, and was on the eve of ascending to the Father-this Christ, the possessor of such experience, takes an interest in seven poor men’s fishing, and cares to know whether their ragged old net is full or is empty. There never was a more sublime and wonderful binding together of the loftiest and the lowliest than in that question in the mouth of the Risen Lord. If men had been going to dream about what would be fitting language for a risen Saviour, if we had to do here with a legend, and not with a piece of plain, prosaic fact, do you think that the imagination would ever have entered the mind of the legend-maker to put such a question as that into such lips at such a time? ‘Lads, have ye any meat?’

It teaches us that anything that interests us is not without interest to Christ. Anything that is big enough to occupy our thoughts and our efforts is large enough to be taken into His. All our ignoble toils, and all our petty anxieties, touch a chord that vibrates in that deep and tender heart. Though other sympathy may be unable to come down to the minutenesses of our little lives, and to wind itself into the narrow room in which our histories are prisoned, Christ’s sympathy can steal into the narrowest cranny. The risen Lord is interested in our poor fishing and our disappointments.

And not only that, here is a promise for us, a prophecy for us, of certain guidance and direction, if only we will come to Him and acknowledge our dependence upon Him. The question that was put to them, ‘Lads, have ye any meat?’ was meant to evoke the answer, ‘No!’ The consciousness of my failure is the pre-requisite to my appeal to Him to prosper my work. And just as before He would, on the other margin of that same shore, multiply the loaves and the fishes, He put to them the question, ‘How many have ye?’ that they might know clearly the inadequacy of their own resources for the hungry crowd, so here, in order to prepare their hearts for the reception of His guidance and His blessing, He provides that they be brought to catalogue and confess their failures. So He does with us all, beats the self-confidence out of us, blessed be His name! and makes us know ourselves to be empty in order that He may pour Himself into us, and flood us with the joy of His presence.

Then comes the guidance given. We may be sure that it is given to us all to-day, if we wait upon Him and ask Him. ‘Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and ye shall find.’ His command is followed by swift, unanswering, unquestioning obedience, which in its turn is immediately succeeded by the large blessing which the Master then gave on the instant, which He gives still, though often, in equal love and unquestioned wisdom, it comes long after faith has discerned His presence and obedience has bowed to His command.

It may be that we shall not see the results of our toil till the morning dawns and the great net is drawn to land by angel hands. But we may be sure that while we are toiling on the tossing sea, He watches from the shore, is interested in all our weary efforts, will guide us if we own to Him our weakness, and will give us to see at last issues greater than we had dared to hope from our poor service. The dying martyr looked up and saw Him ‘standing at the right hand of God,’ in the attitude of interested watchfulness and ready help. This Easter morning bids us lift our eyes to a risen Lord who ‘has not left us to serve alone,’ nor gone up on high, like some careless general to a safe height, while his forsaken soldiers have to stand the shock of onset without him. From this height He bends down and ‘covers our heads in the day of battle.’ ‘He was received up,’ says the Evangelist, ‘and sat on the right hand of God, and they went forth and preached everywhere.’ Strange contrast between His throned rest and their wandering toils for Him! But the contrast gives place to a deeper identity of work and condition, as the Gospel goes on to say, ‘The Lord also working with them and confirming the word with signs following.’

Though we be on the tossing sea and He on the quiet shore, between us there is a true union and communion, His heart is with us, if our hearts be with Him, and from Him will pass over all strength, grace, and blessing to us, if only we know His presence, and owning our weakness, obey His command and expect His blessing.

II. Look at the other half of this incident before us.

I pass over the episode of the recognition of Jesus by John, and of Peter struggling to His feet, interesting as it is, in order to fix upon the central thought of the second part of the narrative, viz. the risen Lord on the shore, in the increasing light of the morning, ‘preparing a table’ for His toiling servants. That ‘fire of coals’ and the simple refreshment that was being dressed upon it had been prepared there by Christ’s own hand. We are not told that there was anything miraculous about it. He had gathered the charcoal; He had procured the fish; He had dressed it and prepared it. They are bidden to ‘bring of the fish they had caught’; He accepts their service, and adds the result of their toil, as it would seem, to the provision which His own hand has prepared. He summons them to a meal, not the midday repast, for it was still early morning. They seat themselves, smitten by a great awe. The meal goes on in silence. No word is spoken on either side. Their hearts know Him. He waits on them, making Himself their Servant as well as their Host. He ‘taketh bread and giveth them and fish likewise,’ as He had done in the miracles by the same shore and on that sad night in the upper room that seemed so far away now, and in the roadside inn at Emmaus, when something in His manner or action disclosed Him to the wondering two at the table.

Now what does all that teach us? Two things; and first-neglecting for a moment the difference between shore and sea-here we have the fact of Christ’s providing, even by doing menial offices, for His servants.

These seven men were wet and weary, cold and hungry. The first thing they wanted when they came out of the fishing-boat was their breakfast. If they had been at home, their wives and children would have got it ready for them. Jesus had a great deal to say to them that day, a great deal to teach them, much to do for them, and for the whole world, by the words that followed; but the first thing that He thinks about is to feed them. And so, cherishing no overstrained contempt for material necessities and temporal mercies, let us remember that it is His hand that feeds us still, and let us be glad to think that this Christ, risen from the dead and with His heart full of the large blessings that He was going to bestow, yet paused to consider: ‘They are coming on shore after a night’s hard toil, they will be faint and weary; let Me feed their bodies before I begin to deal with their hearts and spirits.’

And He will take care of you, brother! and of us all. The ‘bread will be given’ us, at any rate, and ‘the water made sure.’ It was a modest meal that He with His infinite resources thought enough for toiling fishermen. ‘One fish,’ as the original shows us, ‘one loaf of bread.’ No more! He could as easily have spread a sumptuous table for them. There is no covenant for superfluities, necessaries will be given. Let us bring down our wishes to His gifts and promises, and recognise the fact that ‘he who needs least is the nearest the gods,’ and he that needs least is surest of getting from Christ what he needs.

But then, besides that, the supply of all other deeper and loftier necessities is here guaranteed. The symbolism of our text divides, necessarily, the two things which in fact are not divided. It is not all toiling on the restless sea here, any more than it is all rest and fruition yonder; but all that your spirit needs, for wisdom, patience, heroism, righteousness, growth, Christ will give you in your work; and that is better than giving it to you after your work, and the very work which is blessed by Him, and furthered and prospered by Him, the very work itself will come to be moat and nourishment. ‘Out of the eater will come forth meat,’ and the slain ‘lions’ of past struggles and sorrows, the next time we come to them, will be ‘full of honey.’

Finally, there is a great symbolical prophecy here if we emphasise the distinction between the night and the morning, between the shore and the sea. We can scarcely fail to catch this meaning in the incident which sets forth the old blessed assurance that the risen Lord is preparing a feast on the shore while His servants are toiling on the darkling sea.

All the details, such as the solid shore in contrast with the changeful sea, the increasing morning in contrast with the toilsome night, the feast prepared, have been from of old consecrated to shadow forth the differences between earth and heaven. It would be blindness not to see here a prophecy of the glad hour when Christ shall welcome to their stable home, amid the brightness of unsetting day, the souls that have served Him amidst the fluctuations and storms of life, and seen Him in its darkness, and shall satisfy all their desires with the 'bread of heaven.'

Our poor work which He deigns to accept forms part of the feast which is spread at the end of our toil, when 'there shall be no more sea.' He adds the results of our toil to the feast which He has prepared. The consequences of what we have done here on earth make no small part of the blessedness of heaven.

'Their works and alms and all their good endeavour Stayed not behind, nor in the grave were trod.'

The souls which a Paul or a John has won for the Master, in their vocation as 'fishers of men,' are their 'hope and joy and crown of rejoicing, in the presence of our Lord Jesus.' The great benediction which the Spirit bade the Apocalyptic seer write over 'the dead which die in the Lord,' is anticipated in both its parts by this mysterious meal on the beach. 'They rest from their labours' inasmuch as they find the food prepared for them, and sit down to partake; 'Their works do follow them' inasmuch as they 'bring of the fish which they have caught.'

Finally, Christ Himself waits on them, therein fulfilling in symbol what He has told us in great words that dimly shadow wonders unintelligible until experienced: 'Verily I say unto you, He shall gird Himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth, and serve them.'

So here is a vision to cheer us all. Life must be full of toil and of failure. We are on the midnight sea, and have to tug, weary and wet, at a heavy oar, and to haul an often empty net. But we do not labour alone. He comes to us across the storm, and is with us in the night, a most real, because unseen Presence. If we accept the guidance of His directing word, His indwelling Spirit, and His all-sufficient example, and seek to ascertain His will in outward Providences, we shall not be left to waste our strength in blunders, nor shall our labour be in vain. In the morning light we shall see Him standing serene on the steadfast shore. The 'Pilot of the Galilean lake' will guide our frail boat through the wild surf that marks the breaking of the sea of life on the shore of eternity; and when the sun rises over the Eastern hills we shall land on the solid beach, bringing our 'few small fishes' with us, which He will accept. And there we shall rest, nor need to ask who He is that serves us, for we shall know that 'It is the Lord!'

130) **John 21:7**

John **- Luke**

FEAR AND FAITH
'IT IS THE LORD!'

Joh. 21:7.

It seems a very strange thing that these disciples had not, at an earlier period of this incident, discovered the presence of Christ, inasmuch as the whole was so manifestly a repetition of that former event by which the commencement of their ministry had been signalised, when He called them to become 'fishers of men.' We are apt to suppose that when once again they embarked on the lake, and went back to their old trade, it must have been with many a thought of Him busy at their hearts. Yonder-perhaps we fancy them thinking-is the very point where we saw Him coming out of the shadows of the mountains, that night when He walked on the water; yonder is the little patch of grass where He made them all sit down whilst we bore the bread to them: there is the very spot where we were mending our nets when He came up to us and called us to Himself; and now it is all over. We have loved and lost Him; He has been with us, and has left us. 'We trusted that it had been He who should have redeemed Israel,' and the Cross has ended it all! So, we are apt to think, they must have spoken; but there does not seem to have been about them any such sentimental remembrance. John takes pains in this narrative, I think, to show them to us as plain, rough men, busy about their night's work, and thinking a great deal more of their want of success in fishing, than about the old associations which we are apt to put into their minds. Then through the darkness He comes, as they had seen Him come once before, when they know Him not; and He speaks to them as

He had spoken before, and they do not detect His voice yet; and He repeats the old miracle, and their eyes are all holden, excepting the eyes of him who loved, and he first says, ‘It is the Lord!’ Now, besides all the other features of this incident by which it becomes the revelation of the Lord’s presence with His Church, and the exhibition of the work of the Church during all the course of the world’s history, it contains valuable lessons on other points, such as these which I shall try to bring before you.

Now and always, as in that morning twilight on the Galilean lake, Christ comes to men. Everywhere He is present, everywhere revealing Himself. Now, as then, our eyes are ‘holden’ by our own fault, so that we recognise not the merciful Presence which is all around us. Now, as then, it is they who are nearest to Christ by love who see Him first. Now, as then, they who are nearest to Him by love, are so because He loves them, and because they know and believe the love which He has to them. I find, then, in this part of the story three thoughts,-First, they only see aright who see Christ in everything. Secondly, they only see Christ who love Him. Lastly, they only love Him who know that He loves them,

I. First then, they only see aright who see Christ in everything.

This word of John’s, ‘It is the Lord!’-ought to be the conviction with the light of which we go out to the examination of all events, and to the consideration of all the circumstances of our daily life. We believe that unto Christ is given ‘all power in heaven and upon earth.’ We believe that to Him belongs creative power-that ‘without Him was not anything made which was made.’ We believe that from Him came all life at first. In Him life was, as in its deep source. He is the Fountain of life. We believe that as no being comes into existence without His creative power, so none continues to exist without His sustaining energy. We believe that He allots to all men their natural characters and their circumstances. We believe that the history of the world is but the history of His influence, and that the centre of the whole universe is the cross of Calvary. In the light of such convictions, I take it, every man that calls himself a Christian ought to go out to meet life and to study all events. Let me try, then, to put before you, very briefly, one or two of the provinces in which we are to take this conviction as the keynote to all our knowledge.

No man will understand the world aright, to begin with, who cannot say about all creation, ‘It is the Lord!’ Nature is but the veil of the invisible and ascended Lord: and if we would pierce to the deepest foundations of all being, we cannot stop until we get down to the living power of Christ our Saviour and the Creator of the world, by whom all things were made, and whose will pouring out into this great universe, is the sustaining principle and the true force which keeps it from nothingness and from quick decay.

Why, what did Christ work all His miracles upon earth for? Not solely to give us a testimony that the Father had sent Him; not solely to make us listen to His words as a Teacher sent from God; not solely as proof of His Messiahship,-but besides all these purposes there was surely this other, that for once He would unveil to us the true Author of all things, and the true Foundation of all being. Christ’s miracles interrupted the order of the world, because they made visible to men for once the true and constant Orderer of the order. They interrupted the order in so far as they struck out the intervening links by which the creative and sustaining word of God acts in nature, and suspended each event directly from the firm staple of His will. They revealed the eternal Orderer of that order in that they showed the Incarnate Word wielding the forces of nature, which He has done from of old and still does. We are then to take all these signs and wonders that He wrought, as a perennial revelation of the real state of things with regard to this natural world, and to see in them all, signs and tokens that into every corner and far-off region of the universe His loving hand reaches, and His sustaining power goes forth. Into what province of nature did He not go? He claimed to be the Lord of life by the side of the boy’s bier at the gate of Nain, in the chamber of the daughter of Jairus, by the grave of Lazarus. He asserted for Himself authority over all the powers and functions of our bodily life, when He gave eyes to the blind, hearing to the deaf, feet to the lame. He showed that He was Lord over the fowl of the air, the beasts of the earth, the fish of the sea. And He asserted His dominion over inanimate nature, when the fig-tree, cursed by Him, withered away to its roots, and the winds and waves sunk into silence at His gentle voice. He let us get a glimpse into the dark regions of His rule over the unseen, when ‘with authority He commanded the unclean spirits, and they came out.’ And all these things He did, in order that we, walking in this fair world, encompassed by the glories of this wonderful universe, should be delivered from the temptation of thinking that it is separated from Him, or independent of His creative and sustaining power; and in order that we should feel that the continuance of all which surrounds us, the glories of heaven and the loveliness of earth, are as truly owing to the constant intervention of His present will, and the interposition beneath them of His sustaining hand, as when first, by the 'Word of God' who 'was with God and who was God,' speaking forth His fiat, there came light and beauty out of darkness and chaos.

O Christian men! we shall never understand the Christian thought about God's universe, until we are able to say, Preservation is a continual creation; and beneath all the ordinary workings of Nature, as we faithlessly call it, and the apparently dead play of secondary causes, there are welling forth, and energising, the living love and the blessed power of Christ, the Maker, and Monarch, and Sustainer of all. 'It is the Lord!' is the highest teaching of all science. The mystery of the universe, and the meaning of God's world, are shrouded in hopeless obscurity, until we learn to feel that all laws suppose a Lawgiver, and that all working involves a divine energy; and that beneath all which appears there lies for ever rising up through it and giving it its life and power, the one true living Being, the Father in heaven, the Son by whom He works, and the Holy Ghost the Spirit. Darkness lies on Nature, except to those who in

'the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky,'

see that Form which these disciples saw in the morning twilight. Let 'It is the Lord!' be the word on our lips as we gaze on them all, and nature will then be indeed to us the open secret, the secret of the Lord which 'He will show to them that fear Him.'

Then again, the same conviction is the only one that is adequate either to explain or to make tolerable the circumstances of our earthly condition. To most men-ah! to all of us in our faithless times-the events that befall ourselves, seem to be one of two things equally horrible, the play of a blind Chance, or the work of an iron Fate. I know not which of these two ghastly thoughts about the circumstances of life is the more depressing, ruining all our energy, depriving us of all our joy, and dragging us down with its weight. But brethren, and friends, there are but these three ways for it-either our life is the subject of a mere chaotic chance; or else it is put into the mill of an iron destiny, which goes grinding on and crushing with its remorseless wheels, regardless of what it grinds up; or else, through it all, in it all, beneath it and above it all, there is the Will which is Love, and the Love which is Christ! Which of these thoughts is the one that commends itself to your own hearts and consciences, and which is the one under which you would fain live if you could? I understand not how a man can front the awful possibilities of a future on earth, knowing all the points at which he is vulnerable, and all the ways by which disaster may come down upon him, and retain his sanity, unless he believes that all is ruled, not merely by a God far above him, who may be as unsympathising as He is omnipotent, but by his Elder Brother, the Son of God, who showed His heart by all His dealings with us here below, and who loves as tenderly, and sympathises as closely with us as ever He did when on earth He gathered the weary and the sick around Him. Is it not a thing, men and women, worth having, to have this for the settled conviction of your hearts, that Christ is moving all the pulses of your life, and that nothing falls out without the intervention of His presence and the power of His will working through it? Do you not think such a belief would nerve you for difficulty, would lift you buoyantly over trials and depressions, and would set you upon a vantage ground high above all the petty annoyances of life? Tell me, is there any other place where a man can plant his foot and say, ‘Now I am on a rock and I care not what comes’? The riddle of Providence is solved, and the discipline of Providence is being accomplished when we have grasped this conviction-All events do serve me, for all circumstances come from His will and pleasure, which is love; and everywhere I go-be it in the darkness of disaster or in the sunshine of prosperity-I shall see standing before me that familiar and beloved Shape, and shall be able to say, ‘It is the Lord!’ Friends and brethren, that is the faith to live by, that is the faith to die by; and without it life is a mockery and a misery.

Once more this same conviction, ‘It is the Lord! should guide us in all our thoughts about the history and destinies of mankind and of Christ’s Church. The Cross is the centre of the world’s history, the incarnation and the crucifixion of our Lord are the pivot round which all the events of the ages revolve. ‘The testimony of Jesus was the spirit of prophecy,’ and the growing power of Jesus is the spirit of history, and in every book that calls itself the history of a nation, unless there be written, whether literally or in spirit, this for its motto, ‘It is the Lord!’ all will be shallow and incomplete.

‘They that went before and they that came after,’ when He entered into the holy city in His brief moment of acceptance and pomp, surrounded Him with hosannas and jubilant gladness. It is a deep and true symbol of the whole history of the world. All the generations that went before Him, though they knew it not, were preparing the way of the Lord, and heralding the advent of Him who was ‘the desire of all nations’ and ‘the light of men’; and all the generations that come after, though they know it not, are swelling the pomp of His triumph and hastening the time of His crowning and dominion. ‘It is the Lord!’ is the secret of all national existence. It is the secret of all the events of the world. The tangled web of human history is only then intelligible when that is taken as its clue, ‘From Him are all things, and to Him are all things.’ The ocean from which the stream of history flows, and that into which it empties itself, are one. He began it, He sustains it. ‘The help that is done upon earth He doeth it Himself,’ and when all is finished, it will be found that all things have indeed come from Christ, been sustained and directed by Christ, and have tended to the glory and exaltation of that Redeemer, who is King of kings and Lord of lords, Maker of the worlds, and before whose throne are for ever gathered for service, whether they know it or not, the forces of the Gentiles, the riches of the nations, the events of history, the fates and destinies of every man.

I need not dwell upon the way in which such a conviction as this, my friends, living and working in our hearts, would change for us the whole aspect of life, and make everything bright and beautiful, blessed and calm, strengthening us for all which we might have to do, nerving us for duty, and sustaining us against every trial, leading us on, triumphant and glad, through regions all sparkling with tokens of His presence and signs of His love, unto His throne at last, to lay down our praises and our crowns before Him. Only let me leave with you this one word of earnest entreaty, that you will lay to heart the solemn alternative-either see Christ in everything, and be blessed; or miss Him, and be miserable. Oh! it is a waste, weary world, unless it is filled with signs of His presence. It is a dreary seventy years, brother, of pilgrimage and strife, unless, as you travel along the road, you see the marks that He who went before you has left by the wayside for your guidance and your sustenance. If you want your days to be true, noble, holy, happy, manly, and Godlike, believe us, it is only when they all have flowing through them this conviction, ‘It is the Lord!’ that they all become so.

II. Then, secondly, only they who love, see Christ.

John, the Apostle of Love, knew Him first. In religious matters, love is the foundation of knowledge. There is no way of knowing a Person except love. The knowledge of God and the knowledge of Christ are not to be won by the exercise of the understanding. A man cannot argue his way into knowing Christ. No skill in drawing inferences will avail him there. The treasures of wisdom-earthly wisdom-are all powerless in that region. Man’s understanding and natural capacity- let it keep itself within its own limits and region, and it is strong and good; but in the region of acquaintance with God and Christ, the wisdom of this world is foolishness, and man’s understanding is not the organ by which he can know Christ. Oh no! there is a better way than that: ‘He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love.’ As it is, in feebler measure, with regard to our personal acquaintance with one another, where it is not so much the power of the understanding, or the quickness of the perception, or the talent and genius of a man, that make the foundation of his knowledge of his friend, as the force of his sympathy and the depth of his affection; so-with the necessary modification arising from the transference from earthly acquaintances to the great Friend and Lover of our souls in heaven-so is it with regard to our knowledge of Christ. Love will trace Him everywhere, as dear friends can detect each other in little marks which are meaningless to others. Love’s quick eye pierces through disguises impenetrable to a colder scrutiny. Love has in it a longing for His presence which makes us eager and quick to mark the lightest sign that He for whom it longs is near, as the footstep of some dear one is heard by the sharp ear of affection long before any sound breaks the silence to those around. Love leads to likeness to the Lord, and that likeness makes the clearer vision of the Lord possible. Love to Him strips from our eyes the film that self and sin, sense and custom, have drawn over them. It is these which hide Him from us. It is because men are so indifferent to, so forgetful of, their best Friend that they fail to behold Him, ‘It is the Lord!’ is written large and plain on all things, but like the great letters on a map, they are so obvious and fill so wide a space, that they are not seen. They who love Him know Him, and they who know Him love Him. The true eye-salve for our blinded eyes is applied when we have turned with our hearts to Christ. The simple might of faithful love opens them to behold a more glorious vision than the mountain ‘full of chariots of fire,’ which once flamed before the prophet’s servant of old-even the august and ever-present form of the Lord of life, the Lord of history, the Lord of providence. When they who love Jesus turn to see ‘the Voice that speaks with them,’ they ever behold the Son of Man in His glory; and where others see but the dim beach and a mysterious stranger, it is to their lips that the glad cry first comes, ‘It is the Lord!’

And is it not a blessed thing, brethren! that thus this high and glorious prerogative of recognising the marks of Christ’s presence everywhere, of going through life gladdened by the assurance of His nearness, does not depend on what belongs to few men only, but on what may belong to all? When we say that ‘not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called’-when we say that love is the means of knowledge-we are but in other words saying that the way is open to all, and that no characteristics belonging to classes, no powers that must obviously always belong to but a handful, are necessary for the full apprehension of the power and blessedness of Christ’s Gospel. The freeness and the fullness of that divine message, the glorious truth that it is for all men, and is offered to all, are couched in that grand principle, Love that thou mayest know; love, and thou art filled with the fullness of God, Not for the handful, not for the elite of the world; not for the few, but for the many; not for the wise, but for all; not for classes, but for humanity-for all that are weak, and sinful, and needy, and foolish, and darkened He comes, who only needs that the heart that looks should love, and then it shall behold!

But if that were the whole that I have to say, I should have said but little to the purpose. It very little avails to tell men to love. We cannot love to order, or because we think it duty. There is but one way of loving, and that is to see the lovely. The disciple who loved Jesus was ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved.’ Generalise that, and it teaches us this, that

III. They love who know that Christ loves them.

His divine and eternal mercy is the foundation of the whole. Our love, brethren, can never be any thing else than our echo to His voice of tenderness than the reflected light upon our hearts of the full glory of His affection. No man loveth God except the man who has first learned that God loves him. ‘We love Him, because He first loved us.’ And when we say, ‘Love Christ,’ if we could not go on to say, ‘Nay, rather let Christ’s love come down upon you’-we had said worse than nothing. The fountain that rises in my heart can only spring up heavenward, because the water of it has flowed down into my heart from the higher level. All love must descend first, before it can ascend. We have, then, no Gospel to preach, if we have only this to preach, ‘Love, and thou art saved.’ But we have a Gospel that is worth the preaching, when we can come to men who have no love in their hearts, and say, ‘Brethren! listen to this-you have to bring nothing, you are called upon to originate no affection; you have nothing to do but simply to receive the everlasting love of God in Christ His Son, which was without us, which began before us, which flows forth independent of us, which is unchecked by all our sins, which triumphs over all our transgressions, and which will make us-loveless, selfish, hardened, sinful men-soft, and tender, and full of divine affection, by the communication of its own self.

Oh, then, look to Christ, that you may love Him! Think, brethren, of that full, and free, and boundless mercy which, from eternity, has been pouring itself out in floods of grace and loving-kindness over all creatures. Think of that everlasting love which presided at the foundation of the earth, and has sustained it ever since. Think of that Saviour who has died for us, and lives for us. Think of Christ, the heart of God, and the fullness of the Father’s mercy; and do not think of yourselves at all. Do not ask yourselves, to begin with, the question, Do I love Him or do I not? You will never love by that means. If a man is cold, let him go to the fire and warm himself. If he is dark, let him stand in the sunshine, and he will be light. If his heart is all clogged and clotted with sin and selfishness, let him get under the influence of the love of Christ, and look away from himself and his own feelings, towards that Saviour whose love shed abroad is the sole means of kindling ours. You have to go down deeper than your feelings, your affections, your desires, your character. There you will find no resting-place, no consolation, no power. Dig down to the living Rock, Christ and His infinite love to you, and let it be the strong foundation, built into which you and your love may become living stones, a holy temple, partaking of the firmness and nature of that on which it rests. They that love do so because they know that Christ loves them; and they that love see Him everywhere; and they that see Him everywhere are blessed for evermore. And let no man here torture himself, or limit the fullness of this message that we preach, by questionings whether Christ loves Him or not. Are you a man? are you sinful? have you broken God’s law? do you need a Saviour? Then put away all these questions, and believe that Christ’s personal love is streaming out for the whole world, and that there is a share for you if you like to take it and be blessed!

There is one last thought arising from the whole subject before us, that may be worth mention before I close. Did you ever notice how this whole incident might be turned, by a symbolical application, to the hour of death, and the vision which may meet us when we come thither? It admits of the application, and perhaps was intended to receive the application, of such a symbolic reference. The morning is dawning, the grey of night going away, the lake is still; and yonder, standing on the shore, in the uncertain light, there is one dim Figure, and one disciple catches a sight of Him, and another casts himself into the water, and they find ‘a fire of coals, and fish laid thereon, and bread,’ and Christ gathers them around His table, and they all know that ‘It is the Lord!’ It is what the death of the Christian man, who has gone through life recognising Christ everywhere, may well become:-the morning breaking, and the finished work, and the Figure standing on the quiet beach, so that the last plunge into the cold flood that yet separates us, will not be taken with trembling reluctance; but, drawn to Him by the love beaming out of His face, and upheld by the power of His beckoning presence, we shall struggle through the latest wave that parts us, and scarcely feel its chill, nor know that we have crossed it; till falling blessed at His feet, we see, by the nearer and clearer vision of His face, that this is indeed heaven. And looking back upon ‘the sea that brought us thither,’ we shall behold its waters flashing in the light of that everlasting morning, and hear them breaking in music upon the eternal shore. And then, brethren, when all the weary night-watchers on the stormy ocean of life are gathered together around Him who watched with them from His throne on the bordering mountains of eternity, where the day shines for ever-then He will seat them at His table in His kingdom, and none will need to ask, ‘Who art Thou?’ or ‘Where am I?’ for all shall know that ‘It is the Lord!’ and the full, perfect, unchangeable vision of His blessed face will be heaven!

131) **John 21:15**

John

‘LOVEST THOU ME?’

Joh. 21:15.

Peter had already seen the risen Lord. There had been that interview on Easter morning, on which the seal of sacred secrecy was impressed; when, alone, the denier poured out his heart to his Lord, and was taken to the heart that he had wounded. Then there had been two interviews on the two successive Sundays in which the Apostle, in common with his brethren, had received, as one of the group, the Lord’s benediction, the Lord’s gift of the Spirit, and the Lord’s commission. But something more was needed; there had been public denial, there must be public confession. If he had slipped again into the circle of the disciples, with no special treatment or reference to his fall, it might have seemed a trivial fault to others, and even to himself. And so, after that strange meal on the beach, we have this exquisitely beautiful and deeply instructive incident of the special treatment needed by the denier before he could be publicly reinstated in his office.

The meal seems to have passed in silence. That awe which hung over the disciples in all their intercourse with Jesus during the forty days, lay heavy on them, and they sat there, huddled round the fire, eating silently the meal which Christ had provided, and no doubt gazing silently at the silent Lord. What a tension of expectation there must have been as to how the oppressive silence was to be broken! and how Peter’s heart must have throbbed, and the others’ ears been pricked up, when it was broken by ‘Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?’ We may listen with pricked-up ears too. For we have here, in Christ’s treatment of the Apostle, a revelation of how He behaves to a soul conscious of its fault; and in Peter's demeanour an illustration of how a soul, conscious of its fault, should behave to Him.

There are three stages here: the threefold question, the threefold answer, and the threefold charge. Let us look at these.

I. The threefold question.

The reiteration in the interrogation did not express doubt as to the veracity of the answer, nor dissatisfaction with its terms; but it did express, and was meant, I suppose, to suggest to Peter and to the others, that the threefold denial needed to be obliterated by the threefold confession; and that every black mark that had been scored deep on the page by that denial needed to be covered over with the gilding or bright colouring of the triple acknowledgment. And so Peter thrice having said, 'I know Him not!' Jesus with a gracious violence forced him to say thrice, 'Thou knowest that I love Thee.' The same intention to compel Peter to go back upon his past comes out in two things besides the triple form of the question. The one is the designation by which he is addressed, 'Simon, son of Jonas,' which travels back, as it were, to the time before he was a disciple, and points a finger to his weak humanity before it had come under the influence of Jesus Christ. 'Simon, son of Jonas,' was the name that he bore in the days before his discipleship. It was the name by which Jesus had addressed him, therefore, on that never-to-be-forgotten turning-point of his life, when he was first brought to Him by his brother Andrew. It was the name by which Jesus had addressed him at the very climax of his past life when, high up, he had been able to see far, and in answer to the Lord's question, had rung out the confession: 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!' So the name by which Jesus addresses him now says to him in effect: 'Remember thy human weakness; remember how thou wert drawn to Me; remember the high-water mark of thy discipleship, when I was plain before thee as the Son of God, and remembering all these, answer Me-lovest thou Me?'

The same intention to drive Peter back to the wholesome remembrance of a stained past is obvious in the first form of the question. Our Lord mercifully does not persist in giving to it that form in the second and third instances: 'Lovest thou Me more than these?' More than these, what? I cannot for a moment believe that that question means something so trivial and irrelevant as ‘Lovest thou Me more than these nets, and boats, and the fishing?’ No; in accordance with the purpose that runs through the whole, of compelling Peter to retrospect, it says to him, ‘Do you remember what you said a dozen hours before you denied Me, “Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I”? Are you going to take that stand again? Lovest thou Me more than these that never discredited their boasting so shamefully?’

So, dear brethren! here we have Jesus Christ, in His treatment of this penitent and half-restored soul, forcing a man, with merciful compulsion, to look steadfastly and long at his past sin, and to retrace step by step, shameful stage by shameful stage, the road by which he had departed so far. Every foul place he is to stop and look at, and think about. Each detail he has to bring up before his mind. Was it not cruel of Jesus thus to take Peter by the neck, as it were, and hold him right down, close to the foul things that he had done, and say to him, ‘Look! look! look ever! and answer, Lovest thou Me?’ No; it was not cruel; it was true kindness. Peter had never been so abundantly and permanently penetrated by the sense of the sinfulness of his sin, as after he was sure, as he had been made sure in that great interview, that it was all forgiven. So long as a man is disturbed by the dread of consequences, so long as he is doubtful as to his relation to the forgiving Love, he is not in a position beneficially and sanely to consider his evil in its moral quality only. But when the conviction comes to a man, ‘God is pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done’; and when he can look at his own evil without the smallest disturbance rising from slavish fear of issues, then lie is in a position rightly to estimate its darkness and its depth. And there can be no better discipline for us all than to remember our faults, and penitently to travel back over the road of our sins, just because we are sure that God in Christ has forgotten them. The beginning of Christ’s merciful treatment of the forgiven man is to compel him to remember, that he may learn and be ashamed.

And then there is another point here, in this triple question. How significant and beautiful it is that the only thing that Jesus Christ cares to ask about is the sinner’s love! We might have expected: ‘Simon, son of Jonas, are you sorry for what you did? Simon, son of Jonas, will you promise never to do the like any more?’ No! These things will come if the other thing is there. ‘Lovest thou Me?’ Jesus Christ sues each of us, not for obedience primarily, not for repentance, not for vows, not for conduct, but for a heart; and that being given, all the rest will follow. That is the distinguishing characteristic of Christian morality, that Jesus seeks first for the surrender of the affections, and believes, and is warranted in the belief, that if these are surrendered, all else will follow; and love being given, loyalty and service and repentance and hatred of self-will and of self-seeking will follow in her train. All the graces of human character which Christ seeks, and is ready to impart, are, as it were, but the pages and ministers of the regal Love, who follow behind and swell the cortege of her servants.

Christ asks for love. Surely that indicates the depth of His own! In this commerce He is satisfied with nothing less, and can ask for nothing more; and He seeks for love because He is love, and has given love. Oh! to all hearts burdened, as all our hearts ought to be-unless the burden has been cast off in one way-by the consciousness of our own weakness and imperfection, surely, surely, it is a gospel that is contained in that one question addressed to a man who had gone far astray, ‘Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou?’

Here, again, we have Jesus Christ, in His dealing with the penitent, willing to trust discredited professions. We think that one of the signs of our being wise people is that experience shall have taught us ‘once’ being ‘bit, twice’ to be ‘shy,’ and if a man has once deceived us by flaming professions and ice-cold acts, never to trust him any more. And we think that is ‘worldly wisdom,’ and ‘the bitter fruit of earthly experience,’ and ‘sharpness,’ and ‘shrewdness,’ and so forth. Jesus Christ, even whilst reminding Peter, by that ‘more than these,’ of his utterly hollow and unreliable boasting, shows Himself ready to accept once again the words of one whose unveracity He had proved. ‘Charity hopeth all things, believeth all things,’ and Jesus Christ is ready to trust us when we say, ‘I love Thee,’ even though often in the past our professed love has been all disproved.

We have here, in this question, our Lord revealing Himself as willing to accept the imperfect love which a disciple can offer Him. Of course, many of you well know that there is a very remarkable play of expression here. In the two first questions the word which our Lord employs for ‘love’ is not the same as that which appears in Peter’s two first answers. Christ asks for one kind of love; Peter proffers another. I do not enter upon discussion as to the distinction between these two apparent synonyms. The kind of love which Christ asks for is higher, nobler, less emotional, and more associated with the whole mind and will. It is the inferior kind, the more warm, more sensuous, more passionate and emotional, which Peter brings. And then, in the third question, our Lord, as it were, surrenders and takes Peter's own word, as if He had said, 'Be it so! You shrink from professing the higher kind; I will take the lower; and I will educate and bring that up to the height that I desire you to stand at.' Ah, brother! however stained and imperfect, however disproved by denials, however tainted by earthly associations, Jesus Christ will accept the poor stream of love, though it be but a trickle when it ought to be a torrent, which we can bring Him.

These are the lessons which it seems to me lie in this triple question. I have dealt with them at the greater length, because those which follow are largely dependent upon them. But let me turn now briefly, in the second place, to-

II. The triple answer.

'Yea, Lord! Thou knowest that I love Thee.' Is not that beautiful, that the man who by Christ's Resurrection, as the last of the answers shows, had been led to the loftiest conception of Christ's omniscience, and regarded Him as knowing the hearts of all men, should, in the face of all that Jesus Christ knew about his denial and his sin, have dared to appeal to Christ's own knowledge? What a superb and all-conquering confidence in Christ's depth of knowledge and forgivingness of knowledge that answer showed! He felt that Jesus could look beneath the surface of his sin, and see that below it there was, even in the midst of the denial, a heart that in its depths was true. It is a tremendous piece of confident appeal to the deeper knowledge, and therefore the larger love and more abundant forgiveness, of the righteous Lord-'Thou knowest that I love Thee.'

Brethren! a Christian man ought to be sure of his love to Jesus Christ. You do not study your conduct in order to infer from it your love to others. You do not study your conduct in order to infer from it your love to your wife, or your husband, or your parents, or your children, or your friend. Love is not a matter of inference; it is a matter of consciousness and intuition. And whilst self-examination is needful for us all for many reasons, a Christian man ought to be as sure that he loves Jesus Christ as he is sure that he loves his dearest upon earth.

It used to be the fashion long ago-this generation has not depth enough to keep up the fashion-for Christian people to talk as if it were a point they longed to know, whether they loved Jesus Christ or not. There is no reason why it should be a point we long to know. You know all about your love to one another, and you are sure about that. Why are you not sure about your love to Jesus Christ? ‘Oh! but,’ you say, ‘look at my sins and failures’; and if Peter had looked only at his sins, do you not think that his words would have stuck in his throat? He did look, but he looked in a very different way from that of trying to ascertain from his conduct whether he loved Jesus Christ or not. Brethren, any sin is inconsistent with Christian love to Christ. Thank God, we have no right to say of any sin that it is incompatible with that love! More than that; a great, gross, flagrant, sudden fall like Peter’s is a great deal less inconsistent with love to Christ than are the continuously unworthy, worldly, selfish, Christ-forgetting lives of hosts of complacent professing Christians to-day. White ants will eat up the carcase of a dead buffalo quicker than a lion will. And to have denied Christ once, twice, thrice, in the space of an hour, and under strong temptation, is not half so bad as to call Him ‘Master’ and ‘Lord,’ and day by day, week in, week out, in works to deny Him. The triple answer declares to us that in spite of a man’s sins he ought to be conscious of his love, and be ready to profess it when need is.

III. Lastly, we have here the triple commission.

I do not dwell upon it at any length, because in its original form it applies especially to the Apostolic office. But the general principles which underlie this threefold charge, to feed and to tend both ‘the sheep’ and ‘the lambs,’ may be put in a form that applies to each of us, and it is this-the best token of a Christian’s love to Jesus Christ is his service of man for Christ’s sake. ‘Lovest thou Me?’ ‘Yea! Lord.’ Thou hast said; go and do, ‘Feed My lambs; feed My sheep.’ We need the profession of words; we need, as Peter himself enjoined at a subsequent time, to be ready to ‘give to every man that asketh us a reason of the hope,’ and an acknowledgment of the love, that are in us. But if you want men to believe in your love, however Jesus Christ may know it, go and work in the Master's vineyard. The service of man is the garb of the love of God. 'He that loveth God will love his brother also.' Do not confine that thought of service, and feeding, and tending, to what we call evangelistic and religious work. That is one of its forms, but it is only one of them. Everything in which Christian men can serve their fellows is to be taken by them as their worship of their Lord, and is taken by the world as the convincing proof of the reality of their love.

Love to Jesus Christ is the qualification for all such service. If we are knit to Him by true affection, which is based upon our consciousness of our own falls and evils, and our reception of His forgiving mercy, then we shall have the qualities that fit us, and the impulse that drives us, to serve and help our fellows. I do not say-God forbid!-that there is no philanthropy apart from Christian faith, but I do say that, on the wide scale, and in the long run, they who are knit to Jesus Christ by love will be those who render the greatest help to all that are 'afflicted in mind, body, or estate'; and that the true basis and qualification for efficient service of our fellows is the utter surrender of our hearts to Him who is the Fountain of love, and from whom comes all our power to live in the world, as the images and embodiments of the love which has saved us that we might help to save others.

Brethren! let us all ask ourselves Christ's question to the denier. Let us look our past evils full in the face, that we may learn to hate them, and that we may learn more the width and the sweep of the power of His pardoning mercy. God grant that we may all be able to say, 'Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee!'

132) John 21:18-19

John

YOUTH AND AGE, AND THE COMMAND FOR BOTH

Annual Sermon to the Young

Joh. 21:18 - Joh. 21:19.

The immediate reference of these words is, of course, to the martyrdom of the Apostle Peter. Our Lord contrasts the vigorous and somewhat self-willed youth and the mellowed old age of His servant, and shadows forth his death, in bonds, by violence. And then He bids him, notwithstanding this prospect of the issue of his faithfulness, ‘Follow Me.’

Now I venture, though with some hesitation, to give these words a slightly different application. I see in them two pictures of youth and of old age, and a commandment based upon both. You young people are often exhorted to a Christian life on the ground of the possible approach of death. I would not undervalue that motive, but I seek now to urge the same thing upon you from a directly opposite consideration, the probability that many of you will live to be old. All the chief reasons for our being Christians are of the same force, whether we are to die to-night, or to live for a century. So in my text I wish you to note what you are now; what, if you live, you are sure to become; and what, in the view of both stages, you will be wise to do. ‘When thou wast young thou girdedst thyself, and wentest whither thou wouldest. When thou shalt be old another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.’ Therefore, ‘Follow Me.’

I. So, then, note the picture here of what you are.

Most of you young people are but little accustomed to reflect upon yourselves, or upon the special characteristics and prerogatives of your time of life. But it will do you no harm to think for a minute or two of what these characteristics are, that you may know your blessings, and that you may shun the dangers which attach to them.

‘When thou wast young thou girdedst thyself.’ There is a picture easily translated, and significant of much. The act of girding implies preparation for action, and may be widened out to express that most blessed prerogative of youth, the cherishing of bright imaginations of its future activity and course. The dreams of youth are often laughed at, but if a young man or woman be faithful to them they are the prophecies of the future, and are given in order that at the opening of the flower nature may put forth her power; and so we may be able to live through many a dreary hour in the future. Only, seeing that you do live so much in rich foreshadowings and fair anticipations of the times that are to come, take care that you do not waste that divine faculty, the freshness of which is granted to you as a morning gift, the ‘dew of your youth.’ See that you do not waste it in anticipations which cling like mist to the low levels of life, but that you lift it higher and embrace worthy objects. It is good that you should anticipate, that you should live by hope. It is good that you should be drawn onwards by bright visions, whether they be ever fulfilled or no. But there are dangers in the exercise, and dreaming with some of you takes the place of realising your dreams, and you build for yourselves fair fabrics in imagination which you never take one step to accomplish and make real. Be not the slaves and fools of your imaginations, but cultivate the faculty of hoping largely; for the possibilities of human life are elastic, and no man or woman, in their most sanguine, early anticipations, if only these be directed to the one real good, has ever exhausted or attained the possibilities open to every soul.

Again, girding one’s self implies independent self-reliance, and that is a gift and a stewardship given [as all gifts are stewardships] to the young. We all fancy, in our early days, that we are going to build ‘towers that will reach to heaven.’ Now we have come, and we will show people how to do it! The past generations have failed, but ours is full of brighter promise. There is something very touching, to us older men almost tragical, in the unbounded self-confidence of the young life that we see rushing to the front all round us. We know so well the disillusion that is sure to come, the disappointments that will cloud the morning sky. We would not carry one shadow from the darkened experience of middle life into the roseate tints of the morning. The ‘vision splendid’

Will fade away Into the light of common day,’

soon enough. But for the present this self-reliant confidence is one of the blessings of your early days.

Only remember, it is dangerous, too. It may become want of reverence, which is ruinous, or presumption and rashness. Remember what a cynical head of a college said, ‘None of us is infallible, not even the youngest,’ and blend modesty with confidence, and yet be buoyant and strong, and trust in the power that may make you strong. And then your self-confidence will not be rashness.

‘Thou wentest whither thou wouldest.’ That is another characteristic of youth, after it has got beyond the schoolboy stage. Your own will tends to become your guide. For one thing, at your time of life, most other inward guides are comparatively weak. You have but little experience. Most of you have not cultivated largely the habit of patient reflection, and thinking twice before you act once. That comes: it would not be good that it should be over-predominant in you. ‘Old heads on young shoulders’ are always monstrosities, and it is all right that, in your early days, you should largely live by impulse, if only, as well as a will, there be a conscience at work which will do instead of the bitter experience which comes to guide some of the older of us.

Again, yours is the age when passion is strong. I speak now especially to young men. Restraints are removed for many of you. There are dozens of young men listening to me now, away from their father’s home, separated from the purifying influence of sisters and of family life, living in solitary lodgings, at liberty to spend their evenings where they choose, and nobody be a bit the wiser. Ah, my dear young friend! ‘thou wentest whither thou wouldest’ and thou wouldest whither thou oughtest not to go.

There is nothing more dangerous than getting into the habit of saying, ‘I do as I like,’ however you cover it over. Some of you say, ‘I indulge natural inclinations; I am young; a man must have his fling. Let me sow my wild oats in a quiet corner, where nobody will see the crop coming up; and when I get to be as old as you are, I will do as you do; young men will be young men,’ etc., etc. You know all that sort of talk. Take this for a certain fact: that whoever puts the reins into the charge of his own will when he is young, has put the reins and the whip into hands which will drive over the precipice.

My friend! ‘I will’ is no word for you. There is a far diviner and better one than that-’I ought.’ Have you learnt that? Do you yield to that sovereign imperative, and say, ‘I must, because I ought and, therefore, I will’? Bow passion to reason, reason to conscience, conscience to God-and then, be as strong in the will and as stiff in the neck as ever you choose; but only then. So much, then, for my first picture.

II. Now let me ask you to turn with me for a moment to the second one-What you will certainly become if you live.

I have already explained that putting this meaning on the latter portion of our first verse is somewhat forcing it from its original signification. And yet it is so little of violence that the whole of the language naturally lends itself to make a picture of the difference between the two stages of life.

All the bright visions that dance before your youthful mind will fade away. We begin by thinking that we are going to build temples, or ‘towers that shall reach to heaven,’ and when we get into middle life we have to say to ourselves: ‘Well! I have scarcely material enough to carry out the large design that I had. I think that I will content myself with building a little hovel, that I may live in, and perhaps it will keep the weather off me.’ Hopes diminish; dreams vanish; limited realities take their place, and we are willing to hold out our hands and let some one else take the responsibilities that we were so eager to lay upon ourselves at the first. Strength will fade away. ‘Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fail.’ Physical weariness, weakness, the longing for rest, the consciousness of ever-narrowed and narrowing powers, will come to you, and if you grow up to be old men, which it is probable that many of you will do, you will have to sit and watch the tide of your life ebb, ebb, ebbing away moment by moment.

Self-will will be wonderfully broken, for there are far stronger forces that determine a man’s life than his own wishes and will. We are like swimmers in the surf of the Indian Ocean, powerless against the battering of the wave which pitches us, for all our science, and for all our muscle, where it will. Call it environment, call it fate, call it circumstances, call it providence, call it God-there is something outside of us bigger than we are, and the man who begins life, thinking ‘Thus I will, thus I command, let my determination stand instead of all other reason’; has to say at last, ‘I could not do what I wanted. I had to be content to do what I could.’ Thus our self-will gets largely broken down; and patient acceptance of the inevitable comes to be the wisdom and peace of the old man.

And, last of all, the picture shows us an irresistible approximation to an unwelcome goal: ‘Another shall carry thee whither thou wouldest not.’

Life to the old seems to you to be so empty and ashen grey that you wonder they care to live. But life to them, for all its disappointments, its weariness, its foiled efforts, its vanished hopes, its departed companions, is yet life, and most of them cling to it like a miser to his gold. But yet, like a man sucked into Niagara above the falls, they are borne on the irresistible, smooth flood, nearer and nearer to the edge of the rock, and they hear the mighty sound in their ears long before they reach the place where the plunge is to be taken from sunshine into darkness and foam.

So ‘when thou shalt be old’ your fancy will be gone, your physical strength will be gone, your freshness will be gone, your faculty of hoping will work feebly and have little to work on; on earth your sense of power will be humbled, and yet you will not want to be borne to the place whither you must be borne.

Fancy two portraits, one of a little chubby boy in child’s dress, with a round face and clustering curls and smooth cheeks and red lips, and another of an old man, with wearied eyes, and thin locks, and wrinkled cheeks, and a bowed frame. The difference between the two is but the symbol of the profounder differences that separate the two selves, which yet are the one self-the impetuous, self-reliant, self-willed, hopeful, buoyant youth, and the weary, feeble, broken, old man. And that is what you will come to, if you live, as sure as I am speaking to you, and you are listening to me.

III. And now, lastly, what in the view of both these stages it is wise for you to do.

‘When He had spoken thus, He saith unto him, Follow Me.’ What do we mean by following Christ? We mean submission to His authority. ‘Follow Me’ as Captain, Commander, absolute Lawgiver, and Lord. We mean imitation of His example. These two words include all human duty, and promise to every man perfection if he obeys. ‘Follow Me’-it is enough, more than enough, to make a man complete and blessed. We mean choosing and keeping close to Him, as Companion as well as Leader and Lord. No man or woman will ever be solitary, though friends may go, and associates may change, and companions may leave them, and life may become empty and dreary as far as human sympathy is concerned-no man or woman will ever be solitary if stepping in Christ’s footsteps, close at His heels, and realising His presence.

But you cannot follow Him, and He has no right to tell you to follow Him, unless He is something more and other to you than Example, and Commander, and Companion. What business has Jesus Christ to demand that a man should go after Him to the death? Only this business, that He has gone to the death for the man. You must follow Christ first, my friend, by coming to Him as a sinful creature, and finding your whole salvation and all your hope in humble reliance on the merit of His death. Then you may follow Him in obedience, and imitation, and glad communion.

That being understood, I would press upon you this thought, that such a following of Jesus Christ will preserve for you all that is blessed in the characteristics of your youth, and will prevent them from becoming evil. He will give you a basis for your hopes and fulfil your most sanguine dreams, if these are based on His promises, and their realisation sought in the path of His feet. As Isaiah prophesies, ‘the mirage shall become a pool.’ That which else is an illusion, dancing ahead and deceiving thirsty travellers into the belief that sand is water, shall become to you really ‘pools of water,’ if your hopes are fixed on Jesus Christ. If you follow Him, your strength will not ebb away with shrunken sinews and enfeebled muscles. If you trust Christ, your self-will will be elevated by submission, and become strong to control your rebellious nature, because it is humble to submit to His supreme command. And if you trust and follow Jesus Christ, your hope will be buoyant, and bright, and blessed, and prolong its buoyancy, and brightness, and blessedness into ‘old age, when others fade.’ If you will follow Christ your old age will, if you reach it, be saved from the bitterest pangs that afflict the aged, and will be brightened by future possibilities. There will be no need for lingering laments over past blessings, no need for shrinking reluctance to take the inevitable step. An old age of peaceful, serene brightness caught from the nearer gleam of the approaching heaven, and quiet as the evenings in the late autumn, not without a touch of frost, perhaps, but yet kindly and fruitful, may be ours. And instead of shrinking from the end, if we follow Jesus, we shall put our hands quietly and trustfully into His, as a little child does into its mother’s soft, warm palm, and shall not ask whither He leads, assured that since it is He who leads we shall be led aright.

Dear young friends! ‘Follow Me!’ is Christ’s merciful invitation to you. You will never again be so likely to obey it as you are now. Well begun is half ended. ‘I would have you innocent of much transgression.’ You need Him to keep you in the slippery ways of youth. You could not go into some of those haunts, where some of you have been, if you thought to yourselves, ‘Am I following Jesus as I cross this wicked threshold?’ You may never have another message of mercy brought to your ears. If you do become a religious man in later life, you will be laying up for yourselves seeds of remorse and sorrow, and in some cases memories of pollution and filth, that will trouble you all your days. ‘To-day, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.’

133) John 21:21-22

John

‘THEY ALSO SERVE WHO ONLY STAND AND WAIT’

Joh. 21:21 - Joh. 21:22.

We have seen in a former sermon that the charge of the risen Christ to Peter, which immediately precedes these verses, allotted to him service and suffering. The closing words of that charge ‘Follow Me!’ had a deep significance, as uniting both parts of his task in the one supreme command of imitation of his Master.

But the same words had also a simpler meaning, as inviting the Apostle to come apart with Christ at the moment, for some further token of His love or indication of His will. Peter follows; but in following, naturally turns to see what the little group, sitting silent there by the coal fire on the beach, may be doing, and he notices John coming towards them, with intent to join them.

What emboldened John to thrust himself, uncalled for, into so secret an interview? The words in which he is described in the context answer the question. ‘He was the disciple whom Jesus loved, which also leaned on His breast at Supper, and said, Lord! which is he that betrayeth Thee?’ He was also bound by close ties to Peter. So with the familiarity of ‘perfect love which casteth out fear,’ he felt that the Master could have no secrets from him, and no charge to give to his friend which he might not share.

Peter’s swift question, ‘Lord! and what shall this man do?’ though it has been often blamed, does not seem very blameworthy. There was perhaps a little touch of his old vivacity in it, indicating that he had not been sufficiently subdued and sobered by the prospect which Christ had held out to him; but far more than that there was a natural interest in his friend’s fate, and something of a wish to have his company on the path which he was to tread. Christ’s answer, ‘If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou Me!’ gently rebukes any leaven of evil that there may have been in the question; warns him against trying to force other people into his groove; with solemn emphasis reiterates his own duty; and, in effect, bids him let his brother alone, and see that he himself discharges the ministry which he has received of the Lord.

The enigmatical words of Christ, and the long life of the Apostle, which seemed to explain them, naturally bred an interpretation of them in the Early Church which is recorded here, as I believe, by the Evangelist himself, to the effect that John, like another Enoch at the beginning of a new world, was to escape the common lot. And very beautiful is the quiet way in which the Evangelist put that error on one side, by the simple repetition of his Master’s words, emphasising their hypothetical form and their enigmatical character: ‘Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but if I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?’

Now all this, I think, is full of lessons. Let me try to draw one or two of them briefly now.

I. First, then, we have in that majestic ‘If I will!’ the revelation of the risen Christ as the Lord of life and death.

In His charge to Peter, Christ had asserted His right absolutely to control His servant’s conduct and fix his place in the world, and His power to foresee and forecast his destiny and his end. But in these words He goes a step further. ‘I will that he tarry’; to communicate life and to sustain life is a divine prerogative; to act by the bare utterance of His will upon physical nature is a divine prerogative. Jesus Christ here claims that His will goes out with sovereign power amongst the perplexities of human history and into the depths of that mystery of life; and that He, the Son of Man, ‘quickens whom He will,’ and has power ‘to kill and to make alive.’ The words would be absurd, if not something worse, upon any but divine lips, that opened with conscious authority, and whose Utterer knew that His hand was laid upon the innermost springs of being.

So, in this entirely incidental fashion, you have one of the strongest and plainest instances of the quiet, unostentatious and habitual manner in which Jesus Christ claimed for Himself properly divine prerogatives.

Remember that He who thus spoke was standing before these seven men there, in the morning light, on the beach, fresh from the grave. His resurrection had proved Him to be the Lord of death. He had bound it to His chariot-wheels as a Conqueror. He had risen and He stood there before them with no more mark of the corruption of the grave upon Him than there are traces of the foul water in which a sea bird may have floated, on its white wing that flashes in the sunshine as it soars. And surely as these men looked to Christ, ‘declared to be the Son of God with power, by His resurrection from the dead, ‘they may have begun, however ‘foolish and slow of heart’ they were ‘to believe,’ to understand that ‘to this end Christ both died and rose and revived, that He might be the Lord both of the dead and of the living,’ both of death and of life.

These two Apostles’ later history was full of proofs that Christ’s claim was valid. Peter is shut up in prison and delivered once, at the very last moment, when hope was almost dead, in order that he might understand that when he was put into another prison and not delivered, the blow of martyrdom fell upon him, not because of the strength of his persecutors, but because of the will of his Lord. And John had to see his brother James, to whom he had been so closely knit, with whom he had pledged himself to drink the cup that Christ drank of, whom he had desired to have associated with himself in the special honours in the Messianic Kingdom-he had to see him slain, first of the Apostles, while he himself lingered here long after all his early associates were gone. He had, no doubt, many a longing to depart. Solitary, surrounded by a new world, pressed by many cares, he must often have felt that the cross which he had to carry was no lighter than that laid on those who had passed to their rest by martyrdom. To him it would often be martyrdom to live. His personal longing is heard for a moment in the last words of the Apocalypse, ‘Amen! even so, come, Lord Jesus!’-but undoubtedly for the most part he stayed his heart on his Lord’s will, and waited in meek patience till he heard the welcome announcement, ‘The Master is come and calleth for thee.’

And, dear friends! that same belief that the risen Christ is the Lord of life and death, is the only one that can stay our hearts, or make us bow with submission to His divine will. He who has conquered death by undergoing it is death’s Lord as well as ours, and when He wills to bring His friends home to Himself, saith to that black-robed servant, ‘Go, and he goeth; do this and he doeth it.’ The vision which John saw long after this on another shore, washed by a stormier sea, spoke the same truth as does this majestic ‘I will’-’He that liveth and became dead and is alive for evermore,’ is by virtue of His divine eternal life, and has become in His humanity by virtue of His death and resurrection the Lord of life and death. The hands that were nailed to the Cross turn the keys of death and Hades. ‘He openeth and no man shutteth; He shutteth and no man openeth.’

II. We have here before us, in this incident, the service of patient waiting.

‘If I will that he tarry, what is that to thee? Follow thou Me.’ Peter is the man of action, not great at reflection; full of impulse, restless until his hands can do something to express his thoughts and his emotions. On the very Mount of Transfiguration he wanted to set to work and build ‘three tabernacles,’ instead of listening awed to the divine colloquy. In Galilee he cannot wait quietly for his Master to come, but must propose to his friends to ‘go a fishing.’ In the fishing-boat, as soon as he sees the Lord he must struggle through the sea to get at Him; whilst John sits quiet in the boat, blessed in the consciousness of his Master’s presence and in silently gazing at Him verily there. All through the first part of the Acts of the Apostles his bold energy goes flashing and flaming. It is always his voice that rings out in the front, whether preaching on the Pentecost Day, bringing healing to the sick, or fronting the Sanhedrim. His element is in the shock of conflict and the strain of work.

John, on the other hand, seldom appears in the narrative. When he does so he stands a silent figure by the side of Peter, and disappears from it altogether before very long. We do not hear that he did anything. He seems to have had no part in the missionary work of the Church.

He 'tarried,' that was all. The word is the same-'abide'-which is so often upon his lips in his Gospel and in his Epistles, as expressive of the innermost experience of the Christian soul, the condition of all fruitfulness, blessedness, knowledge and Christ-likeness. Christ's charge to John to 'tarry' did not only, as his brethren misinterpreted it, mean that his life was to be continued, but it prescribed the manner of his life. It was to be patient contemplation, a 'dwelling in the house of the Lord,' a keeping of his heart still, like some little tarn up amongst the silent hills, for heaven with all its blue to mirror itself in.

And that quiet life of contemplation bore its fruit. In his meditation the deeds and words of his Master slowly grew ever more and more luminous to him. Deeper meanings came out, revealing new constellations, as he gazed into that opening heaven of memory. He reaped 'the harvest of a quiet eye' and garnered the sheaves of it in his Gospel, the holy of holies of the New Testament; and in his Epistles, in which he proclaims the first and last word of revelation, 'God is love'-the pure diamond that hangs at the end of the golden chain let down from Heaven. Often, no doubt, his brethren thought him 'but an idler in the land,' but at last his 'tarrying' was vindicated.

Now, dear brethren! in all times of the world's history that form of Christian service needs to be pressed upon busy people. And there never was a time in the world's history, or in the Church's history, when it more needed to be pressed upon the ordinary Christian man than at this day. The good and the bad of our present Christianity, and of our present social life, conspire to make people think that those who are not at work in some external form of Christian service for the good of their fellows are necessarily idlers. Many of them are so, but by no means all, and there is always the danger that the external work which good, earnest people do shall become greater than can be wholesomely and safely done by them without their constant recourse to this solitary meditation, and to tarrying before God.

The stress and bustle of our everyday life; the feverish desire for immediate results; the awakened conviction that Christianity is nothing if not practical; the new sense of responsibility for the condition of our fellows; the large increase of all sorts of domestic, evangelistic, and missionary work among all churches in this day-things to be profoundly thankful for, like all other good things have their possible dangers; and it is laid on my heart to warn you of these now. For the sake of our own personal hold on Jesus Christ, for the sake of our progress in the knowledge of His truth, and for the sake of the very work which some of us count so precious, there is need that we shall betake ourselves to that still communion. The stream that is to water half a continent must rise high in the lonely hills, and be fed by many a mountain rill in the solitude, and the men who are to keep the freshness of their Christian zeal, and of the consecration which they will ever feel is being worn away by the attrition even of faithful service, can only renew and refresh it by resorting again to the Master, and imitating Him who prepared Himself for a day of teaching in the Temple by a night of communion on the Mount of Olives.

Further, there is here a lesson of tolerance for us all. Practical men are always disposed, as I said, to force everybody else into their groove. Martha is always disposed to think that Mary is idle when she is ‘sitting at Christ’s feet,’ and wants to have her come into the kitchen and help her there. The eye which sees must not say to the hand which toils, nor the hand to the eye, ‘I have no need of thee.’ There are men who cannot think much; there are men who cannot work much. There are men whom God has chosen for diligent external service; there are men whom God has chosen for solitary retired musing; and we cannot dispense with either the one or the other. Did not John Bunyan do more for the world when he was shut up in Bedford Gaol and dreamed his dream than by all his tramping about Bedfordshire, preaching to a handful of cottagers? And has not the Christian literature of the prison, which includes three at least of Paul’s Epistles, proved of the greatest service and most precious value to the Church?

We need all to listen to the voice which says, ‘Come ye apart by yourselves into a solitary place, and rest awhile.’ Work is good, but the foundation of work is better. Activity is good, but the life which is the basis of activity is even more. There is plenty of so-called Christian work to-day which I fear me is not life but mechanism; has slipped off its original foundations, and is, therefore, powerless. Let us tolerate the forms of service least like our own, not seek to force other men into our paths nor seek to imitate them. Let Peter flame in the van, and beard high priests, and stir and fight; and let John sit in his quiet horns, caring for his Lord’s mother, and holding fellowship with his Lord’s Spirit.

III. Lastly, we have here the lesson of patient acquiescence in Christ’s undisclosed will.

The error into which the brethren of the Apostle fell as to the meaning of the Lord’s words was a very natural one, especially when taken with the commentary which John’s unusually protracted life seemed to append to it. We know that that belief lingered long after the death of the Apostle; and that legends, like the stories that are found in many nations of heroes that have disappeared, but are sleeping in some mountain recess, clustered round John’s grave; over which the earth was for many a century believed to heave and fall with his gentle breathing.

John did not know exactly what his Master meant. He would not venture upon a counter-interpretation. Perhaps his brethren were right, he does not know; perhaps they were wrong, he does not know. One thing he is quite sure of, that what his Master said was: ‘If I will that he tarry.’ And he acquiesces quietly in the certainty that it shall be as his Master wills; and, in the uncertainty what that will is, he says in effect: ‘I do not know, and it does not much matter. If I am to go to find Him, well! If He is to come to find me, well again! Whichever way it be, I know that the patient tarrying here will lead to a closer communion hereafter, and so I leave it all in His hands.’

Dear brethren! that is a blessed state that you and I may come to; a state of quiet submission, not of indifference but of acquiescence in the undisclosed will of our loving Christ about all matters, and about this alternative of life or death amongst the rest. The soul that has had communion with Jesus

Christ amidst the imperfections here will be able to refer all the mysteries and problems of its future to Him with unshaken confidence. For union with Him carries with it the assurance of its own perpetuity, and ‘in its sweetness yieldeth proof that it was born for immortality.’ The Psalmist learned to say, ‘Thou shalt afterward receive me to glory,’ because he could say, ‘I am continually with Thee.’ And in like manner we may all rise from the experience of the present to confidence in that immortal future. Death with his ‘abhorred shears’ cuts other close ties, but their edge turns on the knot that binds the soul to its Saviour. He who has felt the power of communion with the ever-living Christ cannot but feel that such union must be for ever, and that because Christ lives, and as long as Christ lives, he will live also.

Therefore, to the soul thus abiding in Christ that alternative of life or death which looms so large to us when we have not Christ with us, will dwindle down into very small dimensions. If I live there will be work for me to do here, and His love to possess; if I die there will be work for me to do there too, and His love to possess in still more abundant measure. So it will not be difficult for such a soul to leave the decision of this as of all other things with the Lord of life and death, and to lie acquiescent in His gracious hands. That calm acceptance of His will and patience with Christ’s ‘If’ is the reward of tarrying in silent communion with Him.

My dear friend! has death to you dwindled to a very little thing? Can you say that you are quite sure that it will not touch your truest self? Are you able to leave the alternative in His hands, content with His decision and content with the uncertainty that wraps His decision? Can you say,

‘Lord! It belongs not to my care,
Whether I die or live’?

The answer to these questions is involved in the answer to the other:-Have you trusted your sinful soul for salvation to Jesus Christ, and are you drawing from Him a life which bears fruit in glad service and in patient communion? Then it will not much matter whether you are in heaven or on earth, for in both places and states the essence of your life will be the same, your Companion one, and your work identical. If it be ‘Christ’ for me to live it will be ‘gain’ for me to die.

END OF VOL. III.

Acts

1) ACTS 1:1-2
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3) ACTS 1:4-6
4) ACTS 1:7
5) ACTS 1:8-10
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1) Acts 1:1-2

Acts

THE ASCENSION

THE THEME OF ACTS

Act. 1:1 - Act. 1:2. - Act. 28:30 - Act. 28:31.

So begins and so ends this Book. I connect the commencement and the close, because I think that the juxtaposition throws great light upon the purpose of the writer, and suggests some very important lessons. The reference to 'the former treatise' [which is, of course, the Gospel according to Luke] implies that this Book is to be regarded as its sequel, and the terms of the reference show the writer's own conception of what he was going to do in his second volume. 'The former treatise have I made . . . of all that Jesus *began* both to do and teach until the day in which He was taken up.' Is not the natural inference that the latter treatise will tell us what Jesus *continued* 'to do and teach' *after* He was taken up? I think so. And thus the writer sets forth at once, for those that have eyes to see, what he means to do, and what he thinks his book is going to be about.

So, then, the name 'The Acts of the Apostles,' which is not coeval with the book itself, is somewhat of a misnomer. Most of the Apostles are never heard of in it. There are, at the most, only three or four of them concerning whom anything in the book is recorded. But our first text supplies a deeper reason for regarding that title as inadequate, and even misleading. For, if the theme of the story be what Christ did, then the book is, not the ‘Acts of the *Apostles*,’ but the ‘Acts of *Jesus Christ*’ through His servants. He, and He alone, is the Actor; and the men who appear in it are but instruments in His hands, He alone being the mover of the pawns on the board.

That conception of the purpose of the book seems to me to have light cast upon it by, and to explain, the singular abruptness of its conclusion, which must strike every reader. No doubt it is quite possible that the reason why the book ends in such a singular fashion, planting Paul in Rome, and leaving him there, may be that the date of its composition was that imprisonment of Paul in the Imperial City, in a part of which, at all events, we know that Luke was his companion. But, whilst that consideration may explain the point at which the book stops, it does not explain the way in which it stops. The historian lays down his pen, possibly because he had brought his narrative up to date. But a word of conclusion explaining that it was so would have been very natural, and its absence must have had some reason. It is also possible that the arrival of the Apostle in the Imperial City, and his unhindered liberty of preaching there, in the very centre of power, the focus of intellectual life, and the hot-bed of corruption for the known world, may have seemed to the writer an epoch which rounded off his story. But I think that the reason for the abruptness of the record’s close is to be found in the continuity of the work of which it tells a part. It is the unfinished record of an incomplete work. The theme is the work of Christ through the ages, of which each successive depository of His energies can do but a small portion, and must leave that portion unfinished; the book does not so much end as stop. It is a fragment, because the work of which it tells is not yet a whole.

If, then, we put these two things-the beginning and the ending of the Acts-together, I think we get some thoughts about what Christ began to do and teach on earth; what He continues to do and teach in heaven; and how small and fragmentary a share in that work each individual servant of His has. Let us look at these points briefly.

I. First, then, we have here the suggestion of what Christ began to do and teach on earth.

Now, at first sight, the words of our text seem to be in strange and startling contradiction to the solemn cry which rang out of the darkness upon Calvary. Jesus said, ‘It is finished!’ and ‘gave up the ghost.’ Luke says He ‘began to do and teach.’ Is there any contradiction between the two? Certainly not. It is one thing to lay a foundation; it is another thing to build a house. And the work of laying the foundation must be finished before the work of building the structure upon it can be begun. It is one thing to create a force; it is another thing to apply it. It is one thing to compound a medicine; it is another thing to administer it. It is one thing to unveil a truth; it is another to unfold its successive applications, and to work it into a belief and practice in the world. The former is the work of Christ which was finished on earth; the latter is the work which is continuous throughout the ages.

‘He began to do and teach,’ not in the sense that any should come after Him and do, as the disciples of most great discoverers and thinkers have had to do: namely, systematise, rectify, and complete the first glimpses of truth which the master had given. ‘He began to do and teach,’ not in the sense that after He had ‘passed into the heavens’ any new truth or force can for evermore be imparted to humanity in regard of the subjects which He taught and the energies which He brought. But whilst thus His work is complete, His earthly work is also initial. And we must remember that whatever distinction my text may mean to draw between the work of Christ in the past and that in the present and the future, it does not mean to imply that when He ‘ascended up on high’ He had not completed the task for which He came, or that the world had to wait for anything more, either from Him or from others, to eke out the imperfections of His doctrine or the insufficiencies of His work.

Let us ever remember that the initial work of Christ on earth is complete in so far as the revelation of God to men is concerned. There will be no other. There is needed no other. Nothing more is possible than what He, by His words and by His life, by His gentleness and His grace, by His patience and His Passion, has unveiled to all men, of the heart and character of God. The revelation is complete, and he that professes to add anything to, or to substitute anything for, the finished teaching of Jesus Christ concerning God, and man’s relation to God, and man’s duty, destiny, and hopes, is a false teacher, and to follow him is fatal. All that ever come after Him and say, ‘Here is something that Christ has not told you,’ are thieves and robbers, ‘and the sheep will not hear them.’

In like manner that work of Christ, which in some sense is initial, is complete as Redemption. ‘This Man has offered up one sacrifice for sins for ever.’ And nothing more can He do than He has done; and nothing more can any man or all men do than was accomplished on the Cross of Calvary as giving a revelation, as effecting a redemption, as lodging in the heart of humanity, and in the midst of the stream of human history, a purifying energy, sufficient to cleanse the whole black stream. The past work which culminated on the Cross, and was sealed as adequate and accepted of God in the Resurrection and Ascension, needs no supplement, and can have no continuation, world without end. And so, whatever may be the meaning of that singular phrase, ‘began to do and teach,’ it does not, in the smallest degree, conflict with the assurance that He hath ascended up on high, ‘having obtained eternal redemption for us,’ and ‘having finished the work which the Father gave Him to do.’

II. But then, secondly, we have to notice what Christ continues to do and to teach after His Ascension.

I have already suggested that the phraseology of the first of my texts naturally leads to the conclusion that the theme of this Book of the Acts is the continuous work of the ascended Saviour, and that the language is not forced by being thus interpreted is very plain to any one who will glance even cursorily over the contents of the book itself. For there is nothing in it more obvious and remarkable than the way in which, at every turn in the narrative, all is referred to Jesus Christ Himself.

For instance, to cull one or two cases in order to bring the matter more plainly before you-When the Apostles determined to select another Apostle to fill Judas’ place, they asked Jesus Christ to show which ‘of these two Thou hast chosen.’ When Peter is called upon to explain the tongues at Pentecost he says, ‘Jesus hath shed forth this which ye now see and hear.’ When the writer would tell the reason of the large first increase to the Church, he says, ‘The Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved.’ Peter and John go into the Temple to heal the lame man, and their words to him are, ‘Do not think that our power or holiness is any factor in your cure. The Name hath made this man whole.’ It is the Lord that appears to Paul and to Ananias, to the one on the road to Damascus and to the other in the city. It is the Lord to whom Peter refers Aeneas when he says, ‘Jesus Christ maketh thee whole.’ It was the Lord that ‘opened the heart of Lydia.’ It was the Lord that appeared to Paul in Corinth, and said to him, ‘I have much people in this city’; and again, when in the prison at Jerusalem, He assured the Apostle that he would be carried to Rome. And so, at every turn in the narrative, we find that Christ is presented as influencing men’s hearts, operating upon outward events, working miracles, confirming His word, leading His servants, and prescribing for them their paths, and all which they do is done by the hand of the Lord with them confirming the word which they spoke. Jesus Christ is the Actor, and He only is the Actor; men are His implements and instruments.

The same point of view is suggested by another of the characteristics of this book, which it shares in common with all Scripture narratives, and that is the stolid indifference with which it picks up and drops men, according to the degree in which, for the moment, they are the instruments of Christ’s power. Supposing a man had been writing Acts of the Apostles, do you think it would have been possible that of the greater number of them he should not say a word, that concerning those of whom he does speak he should deal with them as this book does, barely mentioning the martyrdom of James, one of the four chief Apostles; allowing Peter to slip out of the narrative after the great meeting of the Church at Jerusalem; letting Philip disappear without a hint of what he did thereafter; lodging Paul in Rome and leaving him there, with no account of his subsequent work or martyrdom? Such phenomena-and they might be largely multiplied-are only explicable upon one hypothesis. As long as electricity streams on the carbon point it glows and is visible, but when the current is turned to another lamp we see no more of the bit of carbon. As long as God uses a man the man is of interest to the writers of the Scriptures. When God uses another one, they drop the first, and have no more care about him, because their theme is not men and their doings, but God’s doings through men.

On us, and in us, and by us, and for us, if we are His servants, Jesus Christ is working all through the ages. He is the Lord of Providence, He is the

King of history, in His hand is the book with the seven seals; He sends His Spirit, and where His Spirit is He is; and what His Spirit does He does. And thus He continues to teach and to work from His throne in the heavens.

He continues to teach, not by the communication of new truth. That is finished. The volume of Revelation is complete. The last word of the divine utterances hath been spoken until that final word which shall end Time and crumble the earth. But the application of the completed Revelation, the unfolding of all that is wrapped in germ in it; the growing of the seed into a tree, the realisation more completely by individuals and communities of the principles and truths which Jesus Christ has brought us by His life and His death-that is the work that is going on to-day, and that will go on till the end of the world. For the old Puritan belief is true, though the modern rationalistic mutilations of it are false, ‘God hath more light yet to break forth’-and our modern men stop there. But what the sturdy old Puritan said was, ‘more light yet to break forth from His holy Word.’ Jesus Christ teaches the ages-through the lessons of providence and the communication of His Spirit to His Church-to understand what He gave the world when He was here.

In like manner He works. The foundation is laid, the healing medicine is prepared, the cleansing element is cast into the mass of humanity; what remains is the application and appropriation, and incorporation in conduct, of the redeeming powers that Jesus Christ has brought. And that work is going on, and will go on, till the end.

Now these truths of our Lord’s continuous activity in teaching and working from heaven may yield us some not unimportant lessons. What a depth and warmth and reality the thoughts give to the Christian’s relation to Jesus Christ! We have to look back to that Cross as the foundation of all our hope. Yes! But we have to think, not only of a Christ who did something for us long ago in the past, and there an end, but of a Christ who to-day lives and reigns, ‘to do and to teach’ according to our necessities. What a sweetness and sacredness such thoughts impart to all external events, which we may regard as being the operation of His love, and as moved by the hands that were nailed to the Cross for us, and now hold the sceptre of the universe for the blessing of mankind! What a fountain of hope they open in estimating future probabilities of victory for truth and goodness! The forces of good and evil in the world seem very disproportionate, but we forget too often to take Christ into account. It is not *we* that have to fight against evil; at the best we are but the sword which Christ wields, and all the power is in the hand that wields it. Great men die, good men die; Jesus Christ is not dead. Paul was martyred: Jesus lives; He is the anchor of our hope. We see miseries and mysteries enough, God knows. The prospects of all good causes seem often clouded and dark. The world has an awful power of putting drags upon all chariots that bear blessings, and of turning to evil every good. You cannot diffuse education, but you diffuse the taste for rubbish and something worse, in the shape of books. No good thing but has its shadow of evil attendant upon it. And if we had only to estimate by visible or human forces, we might well sit down and wrap ourselves in the sackcloth of pessimism. 'We see not yet all things put under Him'; but 'we see Jesus crowned with glory and honour,' and the vision that cheered the first martyr-of Christ 'standing at the right hand of God'-is the rebuke of every fear and every gloomy anticipation for ourselves or for the world.

What a lesson of lowliness and of diligence it gives us! The jangling church at Corinth fought about whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas was the man to lead the Church, and the experience has been repeated over and over again. 'Who is Paul? Who is Apollos? but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man. Be not puffed up one against another. Be not wise in your own conceits.' You are only a tool, only a pawn in the hand of the Great Player. If you have anything, it is because you get it from Him. See that you use it, and do not boast about it. Jesus Christ is the Worker, the only Worker; the Teacher, the only Teacher. All our wisdom is derived, all our light is enkindled. We are but the reeds through which His breath makes music. And 'shall the axe boast itself,' either 'against' or apart from 'Him that heweth therewith'?

III. Lastly, we note the incompleteness of each man's share in the great work.

As I said, the book which is to tell the story of Christ's continuous unfinished work must stop abruptly. There is no help for it. If it was a history of Paul it would need to be wound up to an end and a selvage put to it, but as it is the history of Christ’s working, the web is not half finished, and the shuttle stops in the middle of a cast. The book must be incomplete, because the work of which it is the record does not end until ‘He shall have delivered up the Kingdom to the Father, and God shall be all in all.’

So the work of each man is but a fragment of that great work. Every man inherits unfinished tasks from his predecessors, and leaves unfinished tasks to his successors. It is, as it used to be in the Middle Ages, when the hands that dug the foundations, or laid the first courses, of some great cathedral, were dead long generations before the gilded cross was set on the apex of the needlespire, and the glowing glass filled in to the painted windows. Enough for us, if we lay a stone, though it be but one stone in one of the courses of the great building.

Luke has left plenty of blank paper at the end of his second ‘treatise,’ on which he meant that succeeding generations should write their partial contributions to the completed work. Dear friends, let us see that we write our little line, as monks in their monasteries used to keep the chronicle of the house, on which scribe after scribe toiled at its illuminated letters with loving patience for a little while, and then handed the pen from his dying hand to another. What does it matter though we drop, having done but a fragment? He gathers up the fragments into His completed work, and the imperfect services which He enabled any of us to do will all be represented in the perfect circle of His finished work. The Lord help us to be faithful to the power that works in us, and to leave Him to incorporate our fragments in His mighty whole!

2) Acts 1:3

Acts

THE ASCENSION

THE FORTY DAYS

Act. 1:3.

The forty days between the Resurrection and the Ascension have distinctly marked characteristics. They are unlike to the period before them in many respects, but completely similar in others; they have a preparatory character throughout; they all bear on the future work of the disciples, and hearten them for the time when they should be left alone.

The words of the text give us their leading features. They bring out-

I. Their evidential value, as confirming the fact of the Resurrection.

‘He showed Himself alive after His passion by . . . proofs.’

By sight, repeated, to individuals, to companies, to Mary in her solitary sadness, to Peter the penitent, to the two on the road to Emmaus. At all hours: in the evening when the doors were shut; in the morning; in grey twilight; in daytime on the road. At many places-in houses, out of doors.

The signs of true corporeity-the sight, the eating.

The signs of bodily identity,-’Reach hither thy hand.’ ‘He showed them His hands and His side.’

Was this the glorified body?

The affirmative answer is usually rested on the facts that He was not known by Mary or the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and that He came into the upper room when the doors were shut. But the force of these facts is broken by remembering that Mary saw nothing about Him unlike other men, but supposed Him to be the gardener-which puts the idea of a glorified body out of the question, and leaves us to suppose that she was full of weeping indifference to any one.

Then as to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke carefully tells us that the reason why they did not know Him was *in them* and not in Him-that it was ‘because their eyes were holden,’ not because His body was changed.

And as to His coming when the doors were shut, why should not that be like the other miracles, when ‘He conveyed Himself away, a multitude being in the place,' and when He walked on the waters?

There cannot then be anything decidedly built on these facts, and the considerations on the other side are very strong. Surely the whole drift of the narrative goes in the direction of representing Christ's 'glory' as beginning with His Ascension, and consequently the 'body of His glory' as being then assumed. Further, the argument of 1Co. 15:1 - 1Co. 15:58 goes on the assumption that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,' that is, that the material corporeity is incongruous with, and incapable of entrance into, the conditions of that future life, and, by parity of reasoning, that the spiritual body, which is to be conformed to the body of Christ's glory, is incongruous with, and incapable of entrance into, the conditions of this earthly life. As is the environment, so must be the 'body' that is at home in it.

Further, the facts of our Lord's eating and drinking after His Resurrection are not easily reconcilable with the contention that He was then invested with the glorified body.

We must, then, think of transfiguration, rather than of resurrection only, as the way by which He passed into the heavens. He 'slept' but woke, and, as He ascended, was 'changed.'

II. The renewal of the old bond by the tokens of His unchanged disposition.

Recall the many beautiful links with the past: the message to Peter; that to Mary; 'Tell My brethren,' 'He was known in breaking of bread,' 'Peace be with you!' [repetition from Joh. 17:1 - Joh. 17:26], the miraculous draught of fishes, and the meal and conversation afterwards, recalling the miracle at the beginning of the closer association of the four Apostles of the first rank with their Lord. The forty days revealed the old heart, the old tenderness. He remembers all the past. He sends a message to the penitent; He renews to the faithful the former gift of 'peace.'

How precious all this is as a revelation of the impotence of death in regard to Him and us! It assures us of the perpetuity of His love. He showed Himself after His passion as the same old Self, the same old tender Lover.

His appearances then prepare us for the last vision of Him in the Apocalypse, in which we see His perpetual humanity, His perpetual tenderness, and hear Him saying: ‘I am . . . the Living One, and I became dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore.’

These forty days assure us of the narrow limits of the power of death. Love lives through death, memory lives through it. Christ has lived through it and comes up from the grave, serene and tender, with unruffled peace, with all the old tones of tenderness in the voice that said ‘Mary!’ So may we be sure that through death and after it we shall live and be ourselves. We, too, shall show ourselves alive after we have experienced the superficial change of death.

III. The change in Christ’s relations to the disciples and to the world. ‘Appearing unto them by the space of forty days.’

The words mark a contrast to Christ’s former constant intercourse with the disciples. This is occasional; He appears at intervals during the forty days. He comes amongst them and disappears. He is seen again in the morning light by the lake-side and goes away. He tells them to come and meet Him in Galilee. That intermittent presence prepared the disciples for His departure. It was painful and educative. It carried out His own word, ‘And now I am no more in the world.’

We observe in the disciples traces of a deeper awe. They say little. ‘Master!’ ‘My Lord and my God!’ ‘None durst ask Him, Who art Thou?’ Even Peter ventures only on ‘Lord, Thou knowest all things,’ and on one flash of the old familiarity: ‘What shall this man do?’ John, who recalls very touchingly, in that appendix to his Gospel, the blessed time when he leaned on Jesus’ breast at supper, now only humbly follows, while the others sit still and awed, by that strange fire on the banks of the lonely lake.

A clearer vision of the Lord on their parts, a deeper sense of who He is, make them assume more of the attitude of worshippers, though not less that of friends. And He can no more dwell with them, and go in and out among them.

As for the world-'It seeth Me no more, but ye see Me.' He was 'seen of *them*,' not of others. There is no more appeal to the people, no more teaching, no more standing in the Temple. Why is this? Is it not the commentary on His own word on the Cross, 'It is finished!' marking most distinctly that His work on earth was ended when He died, and so confirming that conception of His earthly mission which sees its culmination and centre of power in the Cross?

IV. Instruction and prophecy for the future.

The preparation of the disciples for their future work and condition was a chief purpose of the forty days. Jesus spoke 'of the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.' He also 'gave commandments to the Apostles.'

Note how much there is, in His conversations with them-

1. Of opening to them the Scriptures. 'Christ must needs suffer,' etc.

2. Of lessons for their future, thus fitting them for their task.

3. Mark how this transitional period taught them that His going away was not to be sorrow and loss, but joy and gain, 'Touch Me not, for I have not yet ascended.'

Our present relation to the ascended Lord is as much an advance on that of the disciples to the risen Lord, as that was on their relation to Him during His earthly life. They had more real communion with Him when, with opened hearts, they heard Him interpret the Scriptures concerning Himself, and fell at His feet crying 'My Lord and my God!' though they saw Him but for short seasons and at intervals, than when day by day they were with Him and knew Him not. As they grew in love and ripened in knowledge, they knew Him better and better.

For us, too, these forty days are full of blessed lessons, teaching us that real communion with Jesus is attained by faith in Him, and that He is still working in and for us, and is still present with us. The joy with which the disciples saw Him ascend should live on in us as we think of Him enthroned. The hope that the angels' message lit up in their hearts should burn in ours. The benediction which the Risen Lord uttered on those who have not seen and yet have believed falls in double measure on those who, though now they see Him not, yet believing rejoice in Jesus with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

3) Acts 1:4-6

Acts

THE ASCENSION

Act. 1:1 - Act. 1:14.

The Ascension is twice narrated by Luke. The life begun by the supernatural birth ends with the supernatural Ascension, which sets the seal of Heaven on Christ's claims and work. Therefore the Gospel ends with it. But it is also the starting-point of the Christ's heavenly activity, of which the growth of His Church, as recorded in the Acts, is the issue. Therefore the Book of the Acts of the Apostles begins with it.

The keynote of the 'treatise' lies in the first words, which describe the Gospel as the record of what 'Jesus *began* to do and teach,' Luke would have gone on to say that this second book of his contained the story of what Jesus went on to do and teach after He was 'taken up,' if he had been strictly accurate, or had carried out his first intention, as shown by the mould of his introductory sentence; but he is swept on into the full stream of his narrative, and we have to infer the contrast between his two volumes from his statement of the contents of his first.

The book, then, is misnamed Acts of the Apostles, both because the greater number of the Apostles do nothing in it, and because, in accordance with the hint of the first verse, Christ Himself is the doer of all, as comes out distinctly in many places where the critical events of the Church's progress and extension are attributed to 'the Lord.' In one aspect, Christ's work on earth was finished on the Cross; in another, that finished work is but the beginning both of His doing and teaching. Therefore we are not to regard His teaching while on earth as the completion of Christian revelation. To set aside the Epistles on the plea that the Gospels contain Christ's own teaching, while the Epistles are only Paul’s or John’s, is to misconceive the relation between the earthly and the heavenly activity of Jesus.

The statement of the theme of the book is followed by a brief summary of the events between the Resurrection and Ascension. Luke had spoken of these in the end of his Gospel, but given no note of time, and run together the events of the day of the Resurrection and of the following weeks, so that it might appear, as has been actually contended that he meant, that the Ascension took place on the very day of Resurrection. The fact that in this place he gives more detailed statements, and tells how long elapsed between the Resurrection Sunday and the Ascension, might have taught hasty critics that an author need not be ignorant of what he does not mention, and that a detailed account does not contradict a summary one,- truths which do not seem very recondite, but have often been forgotten by very learned commentators.

Three points are signalised as occupying the forty days: commandments were given, Christ’s actual living presence was demonstrated [by sight, touch, hearing, etc.], and instructions concerning the kingdom were imparted. The old blessed closeness and continuity of companionship had ceased. Our Lord’s appearances were now occasional. He came to the disciples, they knew not whence; He withdrew from them, they knew not whither. Apparently a sacred awe restrained them from seeking to detain Him or to follow Him. Their hearts would be full of strangely mingled feelings, and they were being taught by gentle degrees to do without Him. Not only a divine decorum, but a most gracious tenderness, dictated the alternation of presence and absence during these days.

The instructions then given are again referred to in Luke’s Gospel, and are there represented as principally directed to opening their minds ‘that they might understand the Scriptures.’ The main thing about the kingdom which they had then to learn, was that it was founded on the death of Christ, who had fulfilled all the Old Testament predictions. Much remained untaught, which after years were to bring to clear knowledge; but from the illumination shed during these fruitful days flowed the remarkable vigour and confidence of the Apostolic appeal to the prophets, in the first conflicts of the Church with the rulers. Christ is the King of the kingdom, and His

Cross is His throne,-these truths being grasped revolutionised the Apostles' conceptions. They are as needful for us.

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The prohibition against leaving Jerusalem implies that they would have done so if left to themselves; and it would have been small wonder if they had been eager to hurry back to quiet Galilee, their home, and to shake from their feet the dust of the city where their Lord had been slain. Truly they would feel like sheep in the midst of wolves when He had gone, and Pharisees and priests and Roman officers ringed them round. No wonder if, like a shepherdless flock, they had broken and scattered! But the theocratic importance of Jerusalem, and the fact that nowhere else could the Apostles secure such an audience for their witness, made their 'beginning at Jerusalem' necessary. So they were to crush their natural longing to get back to Galilee, and to stay in their dangerous position. We have all to ask, not where we should be most at ease, but where we shall be most efficient as witnesses for Christ, and to remember that very often the presence of adversaries makes the door 'great and effectual.'

These eleven poor men were not left by their Master with a hard task and no help. He bade them 'wait' for the promised Holy Spirit, the coming of whom they had heard from Him when in the upper room He spoke to them of 'the Comforter.' They were too feeble to act alone, and silence and retirement were all that He enjoined till they had been plunged into the fiery baptism which should quicken, strengthen, and transform them.

The order in which promise and command occur here shows how graciously Jesus considered the Apostles' weakness. Not a word does He say of their task of witnessing, till He has filled their hearts with the promise of the Spirit. He shows them the armour of power in which they are to be clothed, before He points them to the battlefield. Waiting times are not wasted times. Over-eagerness to rush into work, especially into conspicuous and perilous work, is sure to end in defeat. Till we feel the power coming into us, we had better be still.

The promise of this great gift, the nature of which they but dimly knew, set the Apostles' expectations on tiptoe, and they seem to have thought that their reception of it was in some way the herald of the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. So it was, but in a very different fashion from their dream. They had not learned so much from the forty days' instructions concerning the kingdom as to be free from their old Jewish notions, which colour their question, 'Wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?' They believed that Jesus could establish His kingdom when He would. They were right, and also wrong,-right, for He is King; wrong, for its establishment is not to be effected by a single act of power, but by the slow process of preaching the gospel.

Our Lord does not deal with their misconceptions which could only be cured by time and events; but He lays down great principles, which we need as much as the Eleven did. The 'times and seasons,' the long stretches of days, and the critical epoch-making moments, are known to God only; our business is, not to speculate curiously about these, but to do the plain duty which is incumbent on the Church at all times. The perpetual office of Christ's people to be His witnesses, their equipment for that function [namely, the power of the Holy Spirit coming on them], and the sphere of their work [namely, in ever-widening circles, Jerusalem, Samaria, and the whole world], are laid down, not for the first hearers only, but for all ages and for each individual, in these last words of the Lord as He stood on Olivet, ready to depart.

The calm simplicity of the account of the Ascension is remarkable. So great an event told in such few, unimpassioned words! Luke's Gospel gives the further detail that it was in the act of blessing with uplifted hands that our Lord was parted from the Eleven. Two expressions are here used to describe the Ascension, one of which ['was taken up'] implies that He was passive, the other of which ['He went'] implies that He was active. Both are true. As in the accounts of the Resurrection He is sometimes said to have been raised, and sometimes to have risen, so here. The Father took the Son back to the glory, the Son left the world and went to the Father. No chariot of fire, no whirlwind, was needed to lift Him to the throne. Elijah was carried by such agency into a sphere new to him; Jesus ascended up where He was before.

No other mode of departure from earth would have corresponded to His voluntary, supernatural birth. He carried manhood up to the throne of God. The cloud which received Him while yet He was well within sight of the gazers was probably that same bright cloud, the symbol of the Divine Presence, which of old dwelt between the cherubim. His entrance into it visibly symbolised the permanent participation, then begun, of His glorified manhood in the divine glory.

Most true to human nature is that continued gaze upwards after He had passed into the hiding brightness of the glory-cloud. How many of us know what it is to look long at the spot on the horizon where the last glint of sunshine struck the sails of the ship that bore dear ones away from us! It was fitting that angels, who had heralded His birth and watched His grave, should proclaim His Second Coming to earth.

It was gracious that, in the moment of keenest sense of desolation and loss, the great hope of reunion should be poured into the hearts of the Apostles. Nothing can be more distinct and assured than the terms of that angel message. It gives for the faith and hope of all ages the assurance that He will come; that He who comes will be the very Jesus who went; that His coming will be, like His departure, visible, corporeal, local. He will bring again all His tenderness, all His brother’s heart, all His divine power, and will gather His servants to Himself.

No wonder that, with such hopes flowing over the top of their sorrow, like oil on troubled waters, the little group went back to the upper room, hallowed by memories of the Last Supper, and there waited in prayer and supplication during the ten days which elapsed till Pentecost. So should we use the interval between any promise and its fulfilment. Patient expectation, believing prayer, harmonious association with our brethren, will prepare us for receiving the gift of the Spirit, and will help to equip us as witnesses for Jesus.

4) **Acts 1:7**

Acts

THE ASCENSION

THE UNKNOWN TO-MORROW
A New Year's Sermon

***Act. 1:7*.**

The New Testament gives little encouragement to a sentimental view of life. Its writers had too much to do, and too much besides to think about, for undue occupation with pensive remembrances or imaginative forecastings. They bid us remember as a stimulus to thanksgiving and a ground of hope. They bid us look forward, but not along the low levels of earth and its changes. One great future is to draw all our longings and to fix our eyes, as the tender hues of the dawn kindle infinite yearnings in the soul of the gazer. What may come is all hidden; we can make vague guesses, but reach nothing more certain. Mist and cloud conceal the path in front of the portion which we are actually traversing, but when it climbs, it comes out clear from the fogs that hang about the flats. We can track it winding up to the throne of Christ. Nothing is certain, but the coming of the Lord and 'our gathering together to Him.'

The words of this text in their original meaning point only to the ignorance of the time of the end which Christ had been foretelling. But they may allow of a much wider application, and their lessons are in entire consonance with the whole tone of Scripture in regard to the future. We are standing now at the beginning of a New Year, and the influence of the season is felt in some degree by us all. Not for the sake of repressing any wise forecasting which has for its object our preparation for probable duties and exigencies; not for the purpose of repressing that trustful anticipation which, building on our past time and on God's eternity, fronts the future with calm confidence; not for the sake of discouraging that pensive and softened mood which if it does nothing more, at least delivers us for a moment from the tyrannous power of the present, do we turn to these words now; but that we may together consider how much they contain of cheer and encouragement, of stimulus to our duty, and of calming for our hearts in the prospect of a New Year. They teach us the limits of our care for the future, as they give us the limits of our knowledge of it. They teach us the best remedies for all anxiety, the great thoughts that tranquillise us in our ignorance, viz. that all is in God's merciful hand, and that whatever may come, we have a divine power which will fit us for it; and they bid us anticipate our work and do it, as the best counterpoise for all vain curiosity about what may be coming on the earth.

I. The narrow limits of our knowledge of the future.

We are quite sure that we shall die. We are sure that a mingled web of joy and sorrow, light shot with dark, will be unrolled before us- but of anything more we are really ignorant. We know that certainly the great majority of us will be alive at the close of this New Year; but who will be the exceptions? A great many of us, especially those of us who are in the monotonous stretch of middle life, will go on substantially as we have been going on for years past, with our ordinary duties, joys, sorrows, cares; but to some of us, in all probability, this year holds some great change which may darken all our days or brighten them. In all our forward-looking there ever remains an element of uncertainty. The future fronts us like some statue beneath its canvas covering. Rolling mists hide it all, except here and there a peak.

I need not remind you how merciful and good it is that it is so. Therefore coming sorrows do not diffuse anticipatory bitterness as of tainted water percolating through gravel, and coming joys are not discounted, and the present has a reality of its own, and is not coloured by what is to come.

Then this being so-what is the wise course of conduct? Not a confident reckoning on to-morrow. There is nothing elevating in anticipation which paints the blank surface of the future with the same earthly colours as dye the present. There is no more complete waste of time than that. Nor is proud self-confidence any wiser, which jauntily takes for granted that 'tomorrow will be as this day.' The conceit that things are to go on as they have been fools men into a dream of permanence which has no basis. Nor is the fearful apprehension of evil any wiser. How many people spoil the present gladness with thoughts of future sorrow, and cannot enjoy the blessedness of united love for thinking of separation!

In brief, it is wise to be but little concerned with the future, except-

1. In the way of taking reasonable precautions to prepare for its probabilities.

2. To fit ourselves for its duties.

One future we may contemplate. Our fault is not that we look forward, but that we do not look far enough forward. Why trouble with the world when we have heaven? Why look along the low level among the mists of earth and forests and swamps, when we can see the road climbing to the heights? Why be anxious about what three hundred and sixty-five days may bring, when we know what Eternity will bring? Why divert our God-given faculty of hope from its true object? Why torment ourselves with casting the fashion of uncertain evils, when we can enter into the great peace of looking for 'that blessed Hope'?

II. The safe Hands which keep the future.

'The Father hath put in His own power.' We have not to depend upon an impersonal Fate; nor upon a wild whirl of Chance; nor upon 'laws of averages,' 'natural laws,' 'tendencies' and 'spirit of the age'; nor even on a theistic Providence, but upon a Father who holds all things 'in His own power,' and wields all for us. So will not our way be made right?

Whatever the future may bring, it will be loving, paternal discipline. He shapes it all and keeps it in His hands. Why should we be anxious? That great name of 'Father' binds Him to tender, wise, disciplinary dealing, and should move us to calm and happy trust.

III. The sufficient strength to face the future.

'The power of the Holy Ghost coming upon you' is promised here to the disciples for a specific purpose; but it is promised and given to us all through Christ, if we will only take it. And in Him we shall be ready for all the future.

The Spirit of God is the true Interpreter of Providence. He calms our nature, and enlightens our understanding to grasp the meaning of all our experiences. The Spirit makes joy more blessed, by keeping us from undue absorption in it. The Spirit is the Comforter. The Spirit fits us for duty.

So be quite sure that nothing will come to you in your earthly future, which He does not Himself accompany to interpret it, and to make it pure blessing.

IV. The practical duty in view of the future.

[a] The great thing we ought to look to in the future is our work,- not what we shall enjoy or what we shall endure, but what we shall do. This is healthful and calming.

[b] The great remedy for morbid anticipation lies in regarding life as the opportunity for service. Never mind about the future, let it take care of itself. Work! That clears away cobwebs from our brains, as when a man wakes from troubled dreams, to hear ‘the sweep of scythe in morning dew,’ and the shout of the peasant as he trudges to his task, and the lowing of the cattle, and the clink of the hammer.

[c] The great work we have to do in the future is to be witnesses for Christ. This is the meaning of all life; we can do it in joy and in sorrow, and we shall bear a charmed life till it be done. So the words of the text are a promise of preservation.

Then, dear brethren, how do you stand fronting that Unknown? How can you face it without going mad, unless you know God and trust Him as your Father through Christ? If you do, you need have no fear. To-morrow lies all dim and strange before you, but His gentle and strong hand is working in the darkness and He will shape it right. He will fit you to bear it all. If you regard it as your supreme duty and highest honour to be Christ’s witness, you will be kept safe, ‘delivered out of the mouth of the lion,’ that by you ‘the preaching may be fully known.’

If not, how dreary is that future to you, ‘all dim and cheerless, like a rainy sea,’ from which wild shapes may come up and devour you! Love and friendship will pass, honour and strength will fail, life will ebb away, and of all that once stretched before you, nothing will be left but one little strip of sand, fast jellying with the tide beneath your feet, and before you a wild unlighted ocean!

5) Acts 1:8-10

Acts

THE ASCENSION

Act. 1:1 - Act. 1:14.

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6) **Acts 1:11**

Luke **- Acts**

THE ASCENSION
WAS, IS, IS TO COME

Luk. 2:16. - Luk. 24:51. - Act. 1:11.

These three fragments, which I have ventured to isolate and bring together, are all found in one author’s writings. Luke’s biography of Jesus stretches from the cradle in Bethlehem to the Ascension from Olivet. He narrates the Ascension twice, because it has two aspects. In one it looks backward, and is necessary as the completion of what was begun in the birth. In one it looks forward, and makes necessary, as its completion, that coming which still lies in the future. These three stand up, like linked summits in a mountain. We can understand none of them unless we embrace them all. If the story of the birth is true, a life so begun cannot end in an undistinguished death like that of all men. And if the Ascension from Olivet is true, that cannot close the history of His relations to men. The creed which proclaims He was ‘born of the Virgin Mary’ must go on to say ‘. . . He ascended up into heaven’; and cannot pause till it adds ‘. . . From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.’ So we have then three points to consider in this sermon.

I. Note first, the three great moments.

The thing that befell at Bethlehem, in the stable of the inn, was a commonplace and insignificant enough event looked at from the outside: the birth of a child to a young mother. It had its elements of pathos in its occurring at a distance from home, among the publicity and discomforts of an inn stable, and with some cloud of suspicion over the mother’s fair fame. But the outside of a fact is the least part of it. A little film of sea-weed floats upon the surface, but there are fathoms of it below the water. Men said, ‘A child is born.' Angels said, and bowed their faces in adoration, 'The Word has become flesh'. The eternal, self-communicating personality in the Godhead, passed voluntarily into the condition of humanity. Jesus was born, the Son of God came. Only when we hold fast by that great truth do we pierce to the centre of what was done in that poor stable, and possess the key to all the wonders of His life and death.

From the manger we pass to the mountain. A life begun by such a birth cannot be ended, as I have said, by a mere ordinary death. The Alpha and the Omega of that alphabet must belong to the same fount of type. A divine conformity forbids that He who was born of the Virgin Mary should have His body laid to rest in an undistinguished grave. And so what Bethlehem began, Olivet carries on.

Note the circumstances of this second of these great moments. The place is significant. Almost within sight of the city, a stone's throw probably from the home where He had lodged, and where He had conquered death in the person of Lazarus; not far from the turn of the road where the tears had come into His eyes amidst the shouting of the rustic procession, as He had looked across the valley; just above Gethsemane, where He had agonised on that bare hillside to which He had often gone for communion with the Father in heaven. There, in some dimple of the hill, and unseen but by the little group that surrounded Him, He passed from their midst. The manner of the departure is yet more significant than the place. Here were no whirlwind, no chariots and horses of fire, no sudden rapture; but, as the narrative makes emphatic, a slow, leisurely, self-originated floating upwards. He was borne up from them, and no outward vehicle or help was needed; but by His own volition and power He rose towards the heavens. 'And a cloud received Him out of their sight'-the Shechinah cloud, the bright symbol of the Divine Presence which had shone round the shepherds on the pastures of Bethlehem, and enwrapped Him and the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. It came not to lift Him on its soft folds to the heavens, but in order that, first, He might be plainly seen till the moment that He ceased to be seen, and might not dwindle into a speck by reason of distance; and secondly, that it might teach the truth, that, as His body was received into the cloud, so He entered into the glory which He ‘had with the Father before the world was.’ Such was the second of these moments.

The third great moment corresponds to these, is required by them, and crowns them. The Ascension was not only the close of Christ’s earthly life which would preserve congruity with its beginning, but it was also the clear manifestation that, as He came of His own will, so He departed by His own volition. ‘I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go unto the Father.’ Thus the earthly life is, as it were, islanded in a sea of glory, and that which stretches away beyond the last moment of visibility, is like that which stretched away beyond the first moment of corporeity; the eternal union with the eternal Father. But such an entrance on and departure from earth, and such a career on earth, can only end in that coming again of which the angels spoke to the gazing eleven.

Mark the emphasis of their words. ‘This same Jesus,’ the same in His manhood, ‘shall so come, in like manner, as ye have seen Him go.’ How much the ‘in like manner’ may mean we can scarcely dogmatically affirm. But this, at least, is clear, that it cannot mean less than corporeally visible, locally surrounded by angel-guards, and perhaps, according to a mysterious prophecy, to the same spot from which He ascended. But, at all events, there are the three moments in the manifestation of the Son of God.

II. Look, in the second place, at the threefold phases of our Lord’s activity which are thus suggested.

I need not dwell, in more than a sentence or two, on the first of these. Each of these three moments is the inauguration of a form of activity which lasts till the emergence of the next of the triad.

The birth at Bethlehem had, for its consequence and purpose, a threefold end: the revelation of God in humanity, the manifestation of perfect manhood to men, and the rendering of the great sacrifice for the sins of the world. These three-showing us God; showing ourselves as we are and as we may be; as we ought to be, and, blessed be His name, as we shall be, if we observe the conditions; and the making reconciliation for the sins of the whole world-these are the things for which the Babe lying in the manger was born and came under the limitations of humanity.

Turn to the second of the three, and what shall we say of it? That Ascension has for its great purpose the application to men of the results of the Incarnation. He was born that He might show us God and ourselves, and that He might die for us. He ascended up on high in order that the benefits of that Revelation and Atonement might be extended through, and appropriated by, the whole world.

One chief thought which is enforced by the narrative of the Ascension is the permanence, the eternity of the humanity of Jesus Christ. He ascended up where He was before, but He who ascended is not altogether the same as He who had been there before, for He has taken up with Him our nature to the centre of the universe and the throne of God, and there, 'bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh,' a true man in body, soul, and spirit, He lives and reigns. The cradle at Bethlehem assumes even greater solemnity when we think of it as the beginning of a humanity that is never laid aside. So we can look confidently to all that blaze of light where He sits, and feel that, howsoever the body of His humiliation may have been changed into the body of His glory, He still remains corporeally and spiritually a true Son of man. Thus the face that looks down from amidst the blaze, though it be 'as the sun shineth in his strength,' is the old face; and the breast which is girded with the golden girdle is the same breast on which the seer had leaned his happy head; and the hand that holds the sceptre is the hand that was pierced with the nails; and the Christ that is ascended up on high is the Christ that loved and pitied adulteresses and publicans, and took the little child in His gracious arms-'The same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.'

Christ's Ascension is as the broad seal of heaven attesting the completeness of His work on earth. It inaugurates His repose which is not the sign of His weariness, but of His having finished all which He was born to do. But that repose is not idleness. Rather it is full of activity.

On the Cross He shouted with a great voice ere He died, 'It is finished.' But centuries, perhaps millenniums, yet will have to elapse before the choirs of angels shall be able to chant, 'It is done: the kingdoms of the world are the kingdoms of God and of His Christ.' All the interval is filled by the working of that ascended Lord whose session at the right hand of God is not only symbolical of perfect repose and a completed sacrifice, but also of perfect activity in and with His servants.

He has gone-to rest, to reign, to work, to intercede, and to prepare a place for us. For if our Brother be indeed at the right hand of God, then our faltering feet may travel to the Throne, and our sinful selves may be at home there. The living Christ, working to-day, is that of which the Ascension from Olivet gives us the guarantee.

The third great moment will inaugurate yet another form of activity as necessary and certain as either of the two preceding. For if His cradle was what we believe it to have been, and if His sacrifice was what Scripture tells us it is, and if through all the ages He, crowned and regnant, is working for the diffusion of the powers of His Cross and the benefits of His Incarnation, there can be no end to that course except the one which is expressed for us by the angels' message to the gazing disciples: He shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go. He will come to manifest Himself as the King of the world and its Lord and Redeemer. He will come to inaugurate the great act of Judgment, which His great act of Redemption necessarily draws after it, and Himself be the Arbiter of the fates of men, the determining factor in whose fates has been their relation to Him. No doubt many who never heard His name upon earth will, in that day be, by His clear eye and perfect judgment, discerned to have visited the sick and the imprisoned, and to have done many acts for His sake. And for us who know Him, and have heard His name, the way in which we stand affected in heart and will to Christ reveals and settles our whole character, shapes our whole being, and will determine our whole destiny. He comes, not only to manifest Himself so as that 'every eye shall see Him,' and to divide the sheep from the goats, but also in order that He may reign for ever and gather into the fellowship of His love and the community of His joys all who love and trust Him here. These are the triple phases of our Lord's activity suggested by the three great moments.

III. Lastly, notice the triple attitude which we should assume to Him and to them.

For the first, the cradle, with its consequence of the Cross, our response is clinging faith, grateful memory, earnest following, and close conformity.

For the second, the Ascension, with its consequence of a Christ that lives and labours for us, and is with us, our attitude ought to be an intense realisation of the fact of His present working and of His present abode with us. The centre of Christian doctrine has, amongst average Christians, been far too exclusively fixed within the limits of the earthly life, and in the interests of a true and comprehensive grasp of all the blessedness that Christianity is capable of bringing to men, I would protest against that type of thought, earnest and true as it may be within its narrow limits, which is always pointing men to the past fact of a Cross, and slurs over and obscures the present fact of a living Christ who is with us, and in us. One difference between Him and all other benefactors and teachers and helpers is this, that, as ages go on, thicker and ever-thickening folds of misty oblivion wrap them, and their influence diminishes as new circumstances emerge, but this Christ's power laughs at the centuries, and is untinged by oblivion, and is never out of date. For all others we have to say-'having served his generation,' or a generation or two more, 'according to the will of God, he fell on sleep.' But Christ knows no corruption, and is for ever more the Leader, and the Companion, and the Friend, of each new age.

Brethren! the Cross is incomplete without the throne. We are told to go back to the historical Christ. Yes, Amen, I say! But do not let that make us lose our grasp of the living Christ who is with us to-day. Whilst we rejoice over the 'Christ that died,' let us go on with Paul to say, 'Yea! rather, that is risen again, and is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.'

For that future, discredited as the thought of the second corporeal coming of the Lord Jesus in visible fashion and to a locality has been by the fancies and the vagaries of so-called Apocalyptic expositors, let us not forget that it is the hope of Christ's Church, and that 'they who love His appearing' is, by the Apostle, used as the description and definition of the Christian character. We have to look forwards as well as backwards and upwards, and to rejoice in the sure and certain confidence that the Christ who has come is the Christ who will come.

For us the past should be full of Him, and memory and faith should cling to His Incarnation and His Cross. The present should be full of Him, and our hearts should commune with Him amidst the toils of earth. The future should be full of Him, and our hopes should be based upon no vague anticipations of a perfectibility of humanity, nor upon any dim dreams of what may lie beyond the grave; but upon the concrete fact that Jesus Christ has risen, and that Jesus Christ is glorified. Does my faith grasp the Christ that was-who died for me? Does my heart cling to the Christ who is-who lives and reigns, and with whom my life is hid in God? Do my hopes crystallise round, and anchor upon, the Christ that is to come, and pierce the dimness of the future and the gloom of the grave, looking onwards to that day of days when He, who is our life, shall appear, and we shall appear also with Him in glory?

7) Acts 1:12-14

Acts

THE ASCENSION

Act. 1:1 - Act. 1:14.

The Ascension is twice narrated by Luke. The life begun by the supernatural birth ends with the supernatural Ascension, which sets the seal of Heaven on Christ's claims and work. Therefore the Gospel ends with it. But it is also the starting-point of the Christ's heavenly activity, of which the growth of His Church, as recorded in the Acts, is the issue. Therefore the Book of the Acts of the Apostles begins with it.

The keynote of the 'treatise' lies in the first words, which describe the Gospel as the record of what 'Jesus *began* to do and teach,' Luke would have gone on to say that this second book of his contained the story of what Jesus went on to do and teach after He was 'taken up,' if he had been strictly accurate, or had carried out his first intention, as shown by the mould of his introductory sentence; but he is swept on into the full stream of his narrative, and we have to infer the contrast between his two volumes from his statement of the contents of his first.

The book, then, is misnamed Acts of the Apostles, both because the greater number of the Apostles do nothing in it, and because, in accordance with the hint of the first verse, Christ Himself is the doer of all, as comes out distinctly in many places where the critical events of the Church's progress and extension are attributed to 'the Lord.' In one aspect, Christ's work on earth was finished on the Cross; in another, that finished work is but the beginning both of His doing and teaching. Therefore we are not to regard His teaching while on earth as the completion of Christian revelation. To set aside the Epistles on the plea that the Gospels contain Christ's own teaching, while the Epistles are only Paul's or John's, is to misconceive the relation between the earthly and the heavenly activity of Jesus.

The statement of the theme of the book is followed by a brief summary of the events between the Resurrection and Ascension. Luke had spoken of these in the end of his Gospel, but given no note of time, and run together the events of the day of the Resurrection and of the following weeks, so that it might appear, as has been actually contended that he meant, that the Ascension took place on the very day of Resurrection. The fact that in this place he gives more detailed statements, and tells how long elapsed between the Resurrection Sunday and the Ascension, might have taught hasty critics that an author need not be ignorant of what he does not mention, and that a detailed account does not contradict a summary one,-truths which do not seem very recondite, but have often been forgotten by very learned commentators.

Three points are signalised as occupying the forty days: commandments were given, Christ's actual living presence was demonstrated [by sight, touch, hearing, etc.], and instructions concerning the kingdom were imparted. The old blessed closeness and continuity of companionship had ceased. Our Lord's appearances were now occasional. He came to the disciples, they knew not whence; He withdrew from them, they knew not whither. Apparently a sacred awe restrained them from seeking to detain Him or to follow Him. Their hearts would be full of strangely mingled feelings, and they were being taught by gentle degrees to do without Him. Not only a divine decorum, but a most gracious tenderness, dictated the alternation of presence and absence during these days.

The instructions then given are again referred to in Luke's Gospel, and are there represented as principally directed to opening their minds 'that they might understand the Scriptures.' The main thing about the kingdom which they had then to learn, was that it was founded on the death of Christ, who had fulfilled all the Old Testament predictions. Much remained untaught, which after years were to bring to clear knowledge; but from the illumination shed during these fruitful days flowed the remarkable vigour and confidence of the Apostolic appeal to the prophets, in the first conflicts of the Church with the rulers. Christ is the King of the kingdom, and His Cross is His throne,-these truths being grasped revolutionised the Apostles' conceptions. They are as needful for us.

From Act. 1:4 onwards the last interview seems to be narrated. Probably it began in the city, and ended on the slopes of Olivet. There was a solemn summoning together of the Eleven, which is twice referred to [Act. 1:4, Act. 1:6]. What awe of expectancy would rest on the group as they gathered round Him, perhaps half suspecting that it was for the last time! His words would change the suspicion into certainty, for He proceeded to tell them what they were not to do and to do, when left alone. The tone of leave-taking is unmistakable.

The prohibition against leaving Jerusalem implies that they would have done so if left to themselves; and it would have been small wonder if they had been eager to hurry back to quiet Galilee, their home, and to shake from their feet the dust of the city where their Lord had been slain. Truly they would feel like sheep in the midst of wolves when He had gone, and Pharisees and priests and Roman officers ringed them round. No wonder if, like a shepherdless flock, they had broken and scattered! But the theocratic importance of Jerusalem, and the fact that nowhere else could the Apostles secure such an audience for their witness, made their 'beginning at Jerusalem' necessary. So they were to crush their natural longing to get back to Galilee, and to stay in their dangerous position. We have all to ask, not where we should be most at ease, but where we shall be most efficient as witnesses for Christ, and to remember that very often the presence of adversaries makes the door 'great and effectual.'

These eleven poor men were not left by their Master with a hard task and no help. He bade them 'wait' for the promised Holy Spirit, the coming of whom they had heard from Him when in the upper room He spoke to them of ‘the Comforter.’ They were too feeble to act alone, and silence and retirement were all that He enjoined till they had been plunged into the fiery baptism which should quicken, strengthen, and transform them.

The order in which promise and command occur here shows how graciously Jesus considered the Apostles’ weakness. Not a word does He say of their task of witnessing, till He has filled their hearts with the promise of the Spirit. He shows them the armour of power in which they are to be clothed, before He points them to the battlefield. Waiting times are not wasted times. Over-eagerness to rush into work, especially into conspicuous and perilous work, is sure to end in defeat. Till we feel the power coming into us, we had better be still.

The promise of this great gift, the nature of which they but dimly knew, set the Apostles’ expectations on tiptoe, and they seem to have thought that their reception of it was in some way the herald of the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. So it was, but in a very different fashion from their dream. They had not learned so much from the forty days’ instructions concerning the kingdom as to be free from their old Jewish notions, which colour their question, ‘Wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?’ They believed that Jesus could establish His kingdom when He would. They were right, and also wrong,-right, for He is King; wrong, for its establishment is not to be effected by a single act of power, but by the slow process of preaching the gospel.

Our Lord does not deal with their misconceptions which could only be cured by time and events; but He lays down great principles, which we need as much as the Eleven did. The ‘times and seasons,’ the long stretches of days, and the critical epoch-making moments, are known to God only; our business is, not to speculate curiously about these, but to do the plain duty which is incumbent on the Church at all times. The perpetual office of Christ’s people to be His witnesses, their equipment for that function [namely, the power of the Holy Spirit coming on them], and the sphere of their work [namely, in ever-widening circles, Jerusalem, Samaria, and the whole world], are laid down, not for the first hearers only, but for all ages and for each individual, in these last words of the Lord as He stood on Olivet, ready to depart.

The calm simplicity of the account of the Ascension is remarkable. So great an event told in such few, unimpassioned words! Luke’s Gospel gives the further detail that it was in the act of blessing with uplifted hands that our Lord was parted from the Eleven. Two expressions are here used to describe the Ascension, one of which [‘was taken up’] implies that He was passive, the other of which [‘He went’] implies that He was active. Both are true. As in the accounts of the Resurrection He is sometimes said to have been raised, and sometimes to have risen, so here. The Father took the Son back to the glory, the Son left the world and went to the Father. No chariot of fire, no whirlwind, was needed to lift Him to the throne. Elijah was carried by such agency into a sphere new to him; Jesus ascended up where He was before.

No other mode of departure from earth would have corresponded to His voluntary, supernatural birth. He carried manhood up to the throne of God. The cloud which received Him while yet He was well within sight of the gazers was probably that same bright cloud, the symbol of the Divine Presence, which of old dwelt between the cherubim. His entrance into it visibly symbolised the permanent participation, then begun, of His glorified manhood in the divine glory.

Most true to human nature is that continued gaze upwards after He had passed into the hiding brightness of the glory-cloud. How many of us know what it is to look long at the spot on the horizon where the last glint of sunshine struck the sails of the ship that bore dear ones away from us! It was fitting that angels, who had heralded His birth and watched His grave, should proclaim His Second Coming to earth.

It was gracious that, in the moment of keenest sense of desolation and loss, the great hope of reunion should be poured into the hearts of the Apostles. Nothing can be more distinct and assured than the terms of that angel message. It gives for the faith and hope of all ages the assurance that He will come; that He who comes will be the very Jesus who went; that His coming will be, like His departure, visible, corporeal, local. He will bring again all His tenderness, all His brother’s heart, all His divine power, and will gather His servants to Himself.

No wonder that, with such hopes flowing over the top of their sorrow, like oil on troubled waters, the little group went back to the upper room, hallowed by memories of the Last Supper, and there waited in prayer and supplication during the ten days which elapsed till Pentecost. So should we use the interval between any promise and its fulfilment. Patient expectation, believing prayer, harmonious association with our brethren, will prepare us for receiving the gift of the Spirit, and will help to equip us as witnesses for Jesus.

8) Acts 1:21-22

Acts

THE APOSTOLIC WITNESSES

Act. 1:21 - Act. 1:22.

The fact of Christ's Resurrection was the staple of the first Christian sermon recorded in this Book of the Acts of the Apostles. They did not deal so much in doctrine; they did not dwell very distinctly upon what we call, and rightly call, the atoning death of Christ; out they proclaimed what they had seen with their eyes-that He died and rose again.

And not only was the main subject of their teaching the Resurrection, but it was the Resurrection in one of its aspects and for one specific purpose. There are, speaking roughly, three main connections in which the fact of Christ's rising from the dead is viewed in Scripture, and these three successively emerge in the consciousness of the Early Church.

It was, first, a fact affecting Him, a testimony concerning Him, carrying with it necessarily some great truths with regard to Him, His character, His nature, and His work. And it was in that aspect mainly that the earliest preachers dealt with it. Then, as reflection and the guidance of God's good Spirit led them to understand more and more of the treasure which lay in the fact, it came to be to them, next, a pattern, and a pledge, and a prophecy of their own resurrection. The doctrine of man's immortality and the future life was evolved from it, and was felt to be implied in it. And then it came to be, thirdly and lastly, a symbol or figure of the spiritual resurrection and newness of life into which all they were born who participated in His death. They knew Him first by His Resurrection; they then knew ‘the power of His Resurrection’ as a pledge of their own; and lastly, they knew it as being the pattern to which they were to be conformed even whilst here on earth.

The words which I have read for my text are the Apostle Peter’s own description of what was the office of an Apostle-’to be a witness with us of Christ’s Resurrection.’ And the statement branches out, I think, into three considerations, to which I ask your attention now. First, we have here the witnesses; secondly, we have the sufficiency of their testimony; and thirdly, we have the importance of the fact to which they bear their witness. The Apostles are testimony-bearers. Their witness is enough to establish the fact. The fact to which they witness is all-important for the religion and the hopes of the world.

I. First, then, the Witnesses.

Here we have the ‘head of the Apostolic College,’ the ‘primate’ of the Twelve, on whose supposed primacy-which is certainly not a ‘rock’-such tremendous claims have been built, laying down the qualifications and the functions of an Apostle. How simply they present themselves to his mind! The qualification is only personal knowledge of Jesus Christ in His earthly history, because the function is only to attest His Resurrection. Their work was to bear witness to what they had seen with their eyes; and what was needed, therefore, was nothing more than such familiarity with Christ as should make them competent witnesses to the fact that He died, and to the fact that the same Jesus who had died, and whom they knew so well, rose again and went up to heaven.

The same conception of an Apostle’s work lies in Christ’s last solemn designation of them for their office, where their whole commission is included in the simple words, ‘Ye shall be witnesses unto Me.’ It appears again and again in the earlier addresses reported in this book. ‘This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.’ ‘Whom God hath raised from the dead, whereof we are witnesses.’ ‘With great power gave the Apostles witness of the Resurrection.’ ‘We are His witnesses of these things.’ To Cornelius, Peter speaks of the Apostles as ‘witnesses chosen before of God, who did eat and drink with Him after He rose from the dead'-and whose charge, received from Christ, was 'to testify that it is He which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead.' Paul at Antioch speaks of the Twelve, from whom he distinguishes himself, as being 'Christ's witnesses to *the people*'-and seems to regard them as specially commissioned to the Jewish nation, while he was sent to 'declare unto you'-Gentiles-the same 'glad tidings,' in that 'God had raised up Jesus again.' So we might go on accumulating passages, but these will suffice.

I need not spend time in elaborating or emphasising the contrast which the idea of the Apostolic office contained in these simple words presents to the portentous theories of later times. I need only remind you that, according to the Gospels, the work of the Apostles in Christ's lifetime embraced three elements, none of which were peculiar to them-to be with Christ, to preach, and to work miracles; that their characteristic work after His Ascension was this of witness-bearing; that the Church did not owe to them as a body its extension, nor Christian doctrine its form; that whilst Peter and James and John appear in the history, and Matthew perhaps wrote a Gospel, and the other James and Jude are probably the authors of the brief Epistles which bear their names-the rest of the Twelve never appear in the subsequent history. The Acts of the Apostles is a misnomer for Luke's second 'treatise.' It tells the work of Peter alone among the Twelve. The Hellenists Stephen and Philip, the Cypriote Barnabas, and the man of Tarsus-greater than them all- these spread the name of Christ beyond the limits of the Holy City and the chosen people. The solemn power of 'binding and loosing' was not a prerogative of the Twelve, for we read that Jesus came where 'the *disciples* were assembled,' and that 'the *disciples* were glad when they saw the Lord'; and 'He breathed on *them*, and said, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted."'

Where in all this is there a trace of the special Apostolic powers which have been alleged to be transmitted from them? Nowhere. Who was it that came and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord hath sent me that thou mightest be filled with the Holy Ghost'? A simple 'layman'! Who was it that stood by, a passive and astonished spectator of the communication of spiritual gifts to Gentile converts, and could only say, 'Forasmuch, then, as God gave them the like gift, as He did unto us, what was I that I could withstand God?' Peter, the leader of the Twelve!

Their task was apparently a humbler, really a far more important one. Their place was apparently a lowlier, really a loftier one. They had to lay broad and deep the basis for all the growth and grace of the Church, in the facts which they witnessed. Their work abides; and when the Celestial City is revealed to our longing hearts, in its foundations will be read ‘the names of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb.’ Their office was testimony; and their testimony was to this effect-’Hearken, we eleven men knew this Jesus. Some of us knew Him when He was a boy, and lived beside that little village where He was brought up. We were with Him for three whole years in close contact day and night. We all of us, though we were cowards, stood afar off with a handful of women when He was crucified. We saw Him dead. We saw His grave. We saw Him living, and we touched Him, and handled Him, and He ate and drank with us; and we, sinners that we are that tell it you, we went out with Him to the top of Olivet, and we saw Him go up into the skies. Do you believe us or do you not? We do not come in the first place to preach doctrines. We are not thinkers or moralists. We are plain men, telling a plain story, to the truth of which we pledge our senses. We do not want compliments about our spiritual elevation, or our pure morality. We do not want reverence as possessors of mysterious and exclusive powers. We want you to believe us as honest men, relating what we have seen. There are eleven of us, and there are five hundred at our back, and we have all got the one simple story to tell. It is, indeed, a gospel, a philosophy, a theology, the reconciliation of earth and heaven, the revelation of God to man, and of man to himself, the unveiling of the future world, the basis of hope; but we bring it to you first as a thing that happened upon this earth of ours, which we saw with our eyes, and of which we are the witnesses.’

To that work there can be no successors. Some of the Apostles were inspired to be the writers of the authoritative fountains of religious truth; but that gift did not belong to them all, and was not the distinctive possession of the Twelve. The power of working miracles, and of communicating supernatural gifts, was not confined to them, but is found exercised by other believers, as well as by a whole ‘presbytery.’ And as for what was properly their task, and their qualifications, there can be no succession, for there is nothing to succeed to, but what cannot be transmitted-the sight of the risen Saviour, and the witness to His Resurrection as a fact certified by their senses.

II. The sufficiency of the testimony.

Peter regards [as does the whole New Testament, and as did Peter's Master, when He appointed these men] the witness which he and his fellows bore as enough to lay firm and deep the historical fact of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The first point that I would suggest here is this: if we think of Christianity as being mainly a set of truths-spiritual, moral, intellectual-then, of course, the way to prove Christianity is to show the consistency of that body of truths with one another, their consistency with other truths, their derivation from admitted principles, their reasonableness, their adaptation to men's nature, the refining and elevating effects of their adoption, and so on. If we think of Christianity, on the other hand, as being first a set of historical facts which carry the doctrines, then the way to prove Christianity is not to show how reasonable it is, not to show how it has been anticipated and expected and desired, not to show how it corresponds with men's needs and men's longings, not to show what large and blessed results follow from its acceptance. All these are legitimate ways of establishing principles; but the way to establish a fact is only one-that is, to find somebody that can say, 'I know it, for I saw it.'

And my belief is that the course of modern 'apologetics,' as they are called-methods of defending Christianity-has followed too slavishly the devious course of modern antagonism, and has departed from its real stronghold when it has consented to argue the question on these [as I take them to be] lower and less sufficing grounds. I am thankful to adopt all that wise Christian apologists may have said in regard to the reasonableness of Christianity; its correspondence with men's wants, the blessings that follow from it, and so forth; but the Gospel is first and foremost a history, and you cannot prove that a thing has happened by showing how very desirable it is that it should happen, how reasonable it is to expect that it should happen, what good results would follow from believing that it has happened-all that is irrelevant. Think of it as first a history, and then you are shut up to the old-fashioned line of evidence, irrefragable as I take it to be, to which all these others may afterwards be appended as confirmatory. It is true, because sufficient eye-witnesses assert it. It did happen, because it is commended to us by the ordinary canons of evidence which we accept in regard to all other matters of fact.

With regard to the sufficiency of the specific evidence here, I wish to make only one or two observations.

Suppose you yield up everything that the most craving and unreasonable modern scepticism can demand as to the date and authorship of these tracts that make the New Testament, we have still left four letters of the Apostle Paul, which no one has ever denied, which the very extremest professors of the 'higher criticism' themselves accept. These four are the Epistles to the Romans, the first and second to the Corinthians, and that to the Galatians. The dates which are assigned to these four letters by any one, believer or unbeliever, bring them within five-and-twenty years of the alleged date of Christ's resurrection.

Then what do we find in these undeniably and admittedly genuine letters, written a quarter of a century after the supposed fact? We find in all of them reference to it-the distinct allegation of it. We find in one of them that the Apostle states it as being the substance of his preaching and of his brethren's preaching, that 'Christ died and rose again according to the Scriptures,' and that He was seen by individuals, by multitudes, by a whole five hundred, the greater portion of whom were living and available as witnesses when he wrote.

And we find that side by side with this statement, there is the reference to his own vision of the risen Saviour, which carries us up within ten years of the alleged fact. So, then, by the evidence of admittedly genuine documents, which are dealing with a state of things ten years after the supposed resurrection, there was a unanimous concurrence of belief on the part of the whole primitive Church, so that even the heretics who said that there was no resurrection of the dead could be argued with on the ground of their belief in Christ's Resurrection. The whole Church with one voice asserted it. And there were hundreds of living men ready to attest it. It was not a handful of women who fancied they had seen Him once, very early in the dim twilight of a spring morning-but it was half a thousand that had beheld

Him. He had been seen by them not once, but often; not far off, but close at hand; not in one place, but in Galilee and Jerusalem; not under one set of circumstances, but at all hours of the day, abroad and in the house, walking and sitting, speaking and eating, by them singly and in numbers. He had not been seen only by excited expectants of His appearance, but by incredulous eyes and surprised hearts, who doubted ere they worshipped, and paused before they said, 'My Lord and my God!' They neither hoped that He would rise, nor believed that He had risen; and the world may be thankful that they were 'slow of heart to believe.'

Would not the testimony which can be alleged for Christ's Resurrection be enough to guarantee any event but this? And if so, why is it not enough to guarantee this too? If, as nobody denies, the Early Church, within ten years of Christ's Resurrection, believed in His Resurrection, and were ready to go, and did, many of them, go to the death in assertion of their veracity in declaring it, then one of two things-Either they were right or they were wrong; and if the latter, one of two things-If the Resurrection be not a fact, then that belief was either a delusion or a deceit.

It was not a delusion, for such an illusion is altogether unexampled; and it is absurd to think of it as being shared by a multitude like the Early Church. Nations have said, 'Our King is not dead-he is gone away and he will come back.' Loving disciples have said, 'Our Teacher lives in solitude and will return to us.' But this is no parallel to these. This is not a fond imagination giving an apparent substance to its own creation, but sense recognising first the fact, 'He *is* dead,' and then, in opposition to expectation, and when hope had sickened to despair, recognising the astounding fact, 'He liveth that was dead'; and to suppose that that should have been the rooted conviction of hundreds of men who were not idiots, finds no parallel in the history of human illusions, and no analogy in such legends as those to which I have referred.

It was not a myth, for a myth does not grow in ten years. And there was no motive to frame one, if Christ was dead and all was over. It was not a deceit, for the character of the men, and the character of the associated morality, and the obvious absence of all self-interest, and the persecutions and sorrows which they endured, make it inconceivable that the fairest building that ever hath been reared in the world, and which is cemented by men's blood, should be built upon the mud and slime of a conscious deceit!

And all this we are asked to put aside at the bidding of a glaring begging of the whole question, and an outrageous assertion which no man that believes in a God at all can logically maintain, viz. that no testimony can reach to the miraculous, or that miracles are impossible.

No testimony reach to the miraculous! Well, put it into a concrete form. Can testimony not reach to this: 'I know, because I saw, that a man was dead; I know, because I saw, a dead man live again'? If testimony can do that, I think we may safely leave the verbal sophism that it cannot reach to the miraculous to take care of itself.

And, then, with regard to the other assumption-miracle is impossible. That is an illogical begging of the whole question in dispute. It cannot avail to brush aside testimony. You cannot smother facts by theories in that fashion. Again, one would like to know how it comes that our modern men of science, who protest so much against science being corrupted by metaphysics, should commit themselves to an assertion like that? Surely that is stark, staring metaphysics. It seems as if they thought that the 'metaphysics' which said that there was anything behind the physical universe was unscientific; but that the metaphysics which said that there was nothing behind physics was quite legitimate, and ought to be allowed to pass muster. What have the votaries of pure physical science, who hold the barren word-contests of theology and the proud pretensions of philosophy in such contempt, to do out-Heroding Herod in that fashion, and venturing on metaphysical assertions of such a sort? Let them keep to their own line, and tell us all that crucibles and scalpels can reveal, and we will listen as becomes us. But when they contradict their own principles in order to deny the possibility of miracle, we need only give them back their own words, and ask that the investigation of facts shall not be hampered and clogged with metaphysical prejudices. No! no! Christ made no mistake when He built His Church upon that rock-the historical evidence of a resurrection from the dead, though all the wise men of Areopagus hill may make its cliffs ring with mocking laughter when we say, upon Easter morning, 'The Lord is risen indeed!'

III. There is a final consideration connected with these words, which I must deal with very briefly-the importance of the fact which is thus borne witness to.

I have already pointed out that the Resurrection of Christ is viewed in Scripture in three aspects: in its bearing upon His nature and work, as a pattern for our future, and as a symbol of our present newness of life. The importance to which I refer now applies only to that first aspect.

With the Resurrection of Jesus Christ stands or falls the Divinity of Christ. As Paul said, in that letter to which I have referred, ‘Declared to be the Son of God, with power by the resurrection from the dead.’ As Peter said in the sermon that follows this one of our text, ‘God hath made this same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.’ As Paul said, on Mars Hill, ‘He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained, whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He hath raised Him from the dead.’

The case is this. Jesus lived as we know, and in the course of that life claimed to be the Son of God. He made such broad and strange assertions as these-’I and My Father are One.’ ‘I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.’ ‘I am the Resurrection and the Life.’ ‘He that believeth on Me shall never die.’ ‘The Son of Man must suffer many things, and the third day He shall rise again.’ Thus speaking He dies, and rises again and passes into the heavens. That is the last mightiest utterance of the same testimony, which spake from heaven at His baptism, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!’ If He be risen from the dead, then His loftiest claims are confirmed from the throne, and we can see in Him, the Son of God. But if death holds Him still, and ‘the Syrian stars look down upon His grave,’ as a modern poet tells us in his dainty English that they do, then what becomes of these words of His, and of our estimate of the character of Him, the speaker? Let us hear no more about the pure morality of Jesus Christ, and the beauty of His calm and lofty teaching, and the rest of it. Take away His resurrection from the dead, and we have left beautiful precepts, and fair wisdom, deformed with a monstrous self-assertion and the constant reiteration of claims which the event proves to have been baseless. Either He has risen from the dead or His words were blasphemy. Men nowadays talk very lightly of throwing aside the supernatural portions of the Gospel history, and retaining reverence for the great Teacher, the pure moralist of Nazareth. The Pharisees put the issue more coarsely and truly when they said, ‘That deceiver said, while He was yet alive, after three days I will rise again.’ Yes! one or the other. ‘Declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead,’ or-that which our lips refuse to say even as a hypothesis!

Still further, with the Resurrection stands or falls Christ’s whole work for our redemption. If He died, like other men-if that awful bony hand has got its grip upon Him too, then we have no proof that the cross was anything but a martyr’s cross. His Resurrection is the proof of His completed work of redemption. It is the proof-followed as it is by His Ascension-that His death was not the tribute which for Himself He had to pay, but the ransom for us. His Resurrection is the condition of His present activity. If He has not risen, He has not put away sin; and if He has not put it away by the sacrifice of Himself, none has, and it remains. We come back to the old dreary alternative: ‘if Christ be not risen, your faith is vain, and our preaching is vain. Ye are yet in your sins, and they which have fallen asleep in Christ’ with unfulfilled hopes fixed upon a baseless vision-they of whom we hoped, through our tears, that they live with Him-they ‘are perished.’ For, if He be not risen, there is no resurrection; and, if He be not risen, there is no forgiveness; and, if He be not risen, there is no Son of God; and the world is desolate, and the heaven is empty, and the grave is dark, and sin abides, and death is eternal. If Christ be dead, then that awful vision is true, ‘As I looked up into the immeasurable heavens for the Divine Eye, it froze me with an empty, bottomless eye-socket.’

There is nothing between us and darkness, despair, death, but that ancient message, ‘I declare unto you the Gospel which I preach, by which ye are saved if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was raised the third day according to the Scriptures.’

Well, then, may we take up the ancient glad salutation, ‘The Lord is risen!’ and, turning from these thoughts of the disaster and despair that that awful supposition drags after it, fall back upon sober certainty, and with the

Apostle break forth in triumph, ‘Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept’!

9) Acts 2:1

Acts

THE ABIDING GIFT AND ITS TRANSITORY ACCOMPANIMENTS

Act. 2:1 - Act. 2:13.

Only ten days elapsed between the Ascension and Pentecost. The attitude of the Church during that time should be carefully noted. They obeyed implicitly Christ’s command to wait for the ‘power from on high.’ The only act recorded is the election of Matthias to fill Judas’s place, and it is at least questionable whether that was not a mistake, and shown to be such by Christ’s subsequent choice of Paul as an Apostle. But, with the exception of that one flash of doubtful activity, prayer, supplication, patient waiting, and clinging together in harmonious expectancy, characterised the hundred and twenty brethren.

They must have been wrought to an intense pitch of anticipation, for they knew that their waiting was to be short, and they knew, at least partially, what they were to receive, namely, ‘power from on high,’ or ‘the promise of the Father.’ Probably, too, the great Feast, so near at hand, would appear to them a likely time for the fulfilment of the promise.

So, very early on that day of Pentecost, they betook themselves to their usual place of assembling, probably the ‘large upper room,’ already hallowed to their memories; and in each heart the eager question would spring, ‘Will it be to-day?’ It is as true now as it was then, that the spirits into whom the Holy Spirit breathes His power must keep themselves still, expectant, prayerful. Perpetual occupation may be more loss of time than devout waiting, with hands folded, because the heart is wide open to receive the power which will fit the hands for better work.

It was but ‘the third hour of the day’ when Peter stood up to speak; it must have been little after dawn when the brethren came together. How long they had been assembled we do not know, but we cannot doubt how they had been occupied. Many a prayer had gone up through the morning air, and, no doubt, some voice was breathing the united desires, when a deep, strange sound was heard at a distance, and rapidly gained volume, and was heard to draw near. Like the roaring of a tempest hurrying towards them, it hushed human voices, and each man would feel, ‘Surely now the Gift comes!’ Nearer and nearer it approached, and at last burst into the chamber where they sat silent and unmoving.

But if we look carefully at Luke’s words, we see that what filled the house was not agitated air, or wind, but ‘a sound as of wind.’ The language implies that there was no rush of atmosphere that lifted a hair on any cheek, or blew on any face, but only such a sound as is made by tempest. It suggested wind, but it was not wind. By that first symbolic preparation for the communication of the promised gift, the old symbolism which lies in the very word ‘Spirit,’ and had been brought anew to the disciples’ remembrance by Christ’s words to Nicodemus, and by His breathing on them when He gave them an anticipatory and partial bestowment of the Spirit, is brought to view, with its associations of life-giving power and liberty. ‘Thou hearest the sound thereof,’ could scarcely fail to be remembered by some in that chamber.

But it is not to be supposed that the audible symbol continued when the second preparatory one, addressed to the eye, appeared. As the former had been not wind, but like it, the latter was not fire, but ‘as of fire.’ The language does not answer the question whether what was seen was a mass from which the tongues detached themselves, or whether only the separate tongues were visible as they moved overhead. But the final result was that ‘it sat on each.’ The verb has no expressed subject, and ‘fire’ cannot be the subject, for it is only introduced as a comparison. Probably, therefore, we are to understand ‘a tongue’ as the unexpressed subject of the verb.

Clearly, the point of the symbol is the same as that presented in the Baptist’s promise of a baptism ‘with the Holy Ghost and fire.’ The Spirit was to be in them as a Spirit of burning, thawing natural coldness and melting hearts with a genial warmth, which should beget flaming enthusiasm, fervent love, burning zeal, and should work transformation into its own fiery substance.

The rejoicing power, the quick energy, the consuming force, the assimilating action of fire, are all included in the symbol, and should all be possessed by Christ’s disciples.

But were the tongue-like shapes of the flames significant too? It is doubtful, for, natural as is the supposition that they were, it is to be remembered that ‘tongues of fire’ is a usual expression, and may mean nothing more than the flickering shoots of flame into which a fire necessarily parts.

But these two symbols are only symbols. The true fulfilment of the great promise follows. Mark the brief simplicity of the quiet words in which the greatest bestowment ever made on humanity, the beginning of an altogether new era, the equipment of the Church for her age-long conflict, is told. There was an actual impartation to men of a divine life, to dwell in them and actuate them; to bring all good to victory in them; to illuminate, sustain, direct, and elevate; to cleanse and quicken. The gift was complete. They were ‘filled.’ No doubt they had much more to receive, and they received it, as their natures became, by faithful obedience to the indwelling Spirit, capable of more. But up to the measure of their then capacities they were filled; and, since their spirits were expansible, and the gift was infinite, they were in a position to grow steadily in possession of it, till they were ‘filled with all the fulness of God.’

Further, ‘they were *all* filled,’-not the Apostles only, but the whole hundred and twenty. Peter’s quotation from Joel distinctly implies the universality of the gift, which the ‘servants and handmaidens,’ the brethren and the women, now received. Herein is the true democracy of Christianity. There are still diversities of operations and degrees of possession, but all Christians have the Spirit. All ‘they that believe on Him,’ and only they, have received it. Of old the light shone only on the highest peaks,-prophets, and kings, and psalmists; now the lowest depths of the valleys are flooded with it. Would that Christians generally believed more fully in, and set more store by, that great gift!

As symbols preceded, tokens followed. The essential fact of Pentecost is neither the sound and fire, nor the speaking with other tongues, but the communication of the Holy Spirit. The sign and result of that was the gift of utterance in various languages, not their own, nor learned by ordinary ways.

No twisting of the narrative can weaken the plain meaning of it, that these unlearned Galileans spake in tongues which their users recognised to be their own. The significance of the fact will appear presently, but first note the attestation of it by the multitude.

Of course, the foreign-born Jews, who, from motives of piety, however mistaken, had come to dwell in Jerusalem, are said to have been ‘from every nation under heaven,’ by an obvious and ordinary license. It is enough that, as the subsequent catalogue shows, they came from all corners of the then known world, though the extremes of territory mentioned cover but a small space on a terrestrial globe.

The ‘sound’ of the rushing wind had been heard hurtling through the city in the early morning hours, and had served as guide to the spot. A curious crowd came hurrying to ascertain what this noise of tempest in a calm meant, and they were met by something more extraordinary still. Try to imagine the spectacle. As would appear from Act. 2:33, the tongues of fire remained lambently glowing on each head [‘which ye see’], and the whole hundred and twenty, thus strangely crowned, were pouring out rapturous praises, each in some strange tongue. When the astonished ears had become accustomed to the apparent tumult, every man in the crowd heard some one or more speaking in his own tongue, language, or dialect, and all were declaring the mighty works of God; that is, probably, the story of the crucified, ascended Jesus.

We need not dwell on subordinate questions, as to the number of languages represented there, or as to the catalogue in Act. 2:9 - Act. 2:10. But we would emphasise two thoughts. First, the natural result of being filled with God’s Spirit is utterance of the great truths of Christ’s Gospel. As surely as light radiates, as surely as any deep emotion demands expression, so certainly will a soul filled with the Spirit be forced to break into speech. If professing Christians have never known the impulse to tell of the Christ whom they have found, their religion must be very shallow and imperfect. If their spirits are full, they will overflow in speech.

Second, Pentecost is a prophecy of the universal proclamation of the Gospel, and of the universal praise which shall one day rise to Him that was slain. ‘This company of brethren praising God in the tongues of the whole world represented the whole world which shall one day praise God in its various tongues' [Bengel]. Pentecost reversed Babel, not by bringing about a featureless monopoly, but by consecrating diversity, and showing that each language could be hallowed, and that each lent some new strain of music to the chorus.

It prophesied of the time when 'men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation' should lift up their voices to Him who has purchased them unto God with His blood. It began a communication of the Spirit to all believers which is never to cease while the world stands. The mighty rushing sound has died into silence, the fiery tongues rest on no heads now, the miraculous results of the gifts of the Spirit have passed away also, but the gift remains, and the Spirit of God abides for ever with the Church of Christ.

10)Acts 2:2-3

Acts

THE ABIDING GIFT AND ITS TRANSITORY ACCOMPANIMENTS

THE FOURFOLD SYMBOLS OF THE SPIRIT

Act. 2:2 - Act. 2:3, Act. 2:17. - 1Jn. 2:20.

Wind, fire, water, oil,-these four are constant Scriptural symbols for the Spirit of God. We have them all in these fragments of verses which I have taken for my text now, and which I have isolated from their context for the purpose of bringing out simply these symbolical references. I think that perhaps we may get some force and freshness to the thoughts proper to this day [Footnote: Whit Sunday.] by looking at these rather than by treating the subject in some more abstract form. We have then the Breath of the Spirit, the Fire of the Spirit, the Water of the Spirit, and the Anointing Oil of the Spirit. And the consideration of these four will bring out a great many of the principal Scriptural ideas about the gift of the Spirit of God which belongs to all Christian souls.

I. First, 'a rushing mighty wind.'

Of course, the symbol is but the putting into picturesque form of the idea that lies in the name. ‘Spirit’ is ‘breath.’ Wind is but air in motion. Breath is the synonym for life. ‘Spirit’ and ‘life’ are two words for one thing. So then, in the symbol, the ‘rushing mighty wind,’ we have set forth the highest work of the Spirit-the communication of a new and supernatural life.

We are carried hack to that grand vision of the prophet who saw the bones lying, very many and very dry, sapless and disintegrated, a heap dead and ready to rot. The question comes to him: ‘Son of man! Can these bones live?’ The only possible answer, if he consult experience, is, ‘O Lord God! Thou knowest.’ Then follows the great invocation: ‘Come from the four winds, O Breath! and breathe upon these slain that they may live.’ And the Breath comes and ‘they stand up, an exceeding great army.’ ‘It is the Spirit that quickeneth.’ The Scripture treats us all as dead, being separated from God, unless we are united to Him by faith in Jesus Christ. According to the saying of the Evangelist, ‘They which believe on Him receive’ the Spirit, and thereby receive the life which He gives, or, as our Lord Himself speaks, are ‘born of the Spirit.’ The highest and most characteristic office of the Spirit of God is to enkindle this new life, and hence His noblest name, among the many by which He is called, is the Spirit of life.

Again, remember, ‘that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’ If there be life given it must be kindred with the life which is its source. Reflect upon those profound words of our Lord: ‘The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh nor whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit.’ They describe first the operation of the life-giving Spirit, but they describe also the characteristics of the resulting life.

‘The wind bloweth where it listeth.’ That spiritual life, both in the divine source and in the human recipient, is its own law. Of course the wind has its laws, as every physical agent has; but these are so complicated and undiscovered that it has always been the very symbol of freedom, and poets have spoken of these ‘chartered libertines,’ the winds, and ‘free as the air’ has become a proverb. So that Divine Spirit is limited by no human conditions or laws, but dispenses His gifts in superb disregard of conventionalities and externalisms. Just as the lower gift of what we call ‘genius’ is above all limits of culture or education or position, and falls on a wool-stapler in Stratford-on-Avon, or on a ploughman in Ayrshire, so, in a similar manner, the altogether different gift of the divine, life-giving Spirit follows no lines that Churches or institutions draw. It falls upon an Augustinian monk in a convent, and he shakes Europe. It falls upon a tinker in Bedford gaol, and he writes *Pilgrim’s Progress*. It falls upon a cobbler in Kettering, and he founds modern Christian missions. It blows ‘where it listeth,’ sovereignly indifferent to the expectations and limitations and the externalisms, even of organised Christianity, and touching this man and that man, not arbitrarily but according to ‘the good pleasure’ that is a law to itself, because it is perfect in wisdom and in goodness.

And as thus the life-giving Spirit imparts Himself according to higher laws than we can grasp, so in like manner the life that is derived from it is a life which is its own law. The Christian conscience, touched by the Spirit of God, owes allegiance to no regulations or external commandments laid down by man. The Christian conscience, enlightened by the Spirit of God, at its peril will take its beliefs from any other than from that Divine Spirit. All authority over conduct, all authority over belief is burnt up and disappears in the presence of the grand democracy of the true Christian principle: ‘Ye are all the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ’; and every one of you possesses the Spirit which teaches, the Spirit which inspires, the Spirit which enlightens, the Spirit which is the guide to all truth. So ‘the wind bloweth where it listeth,’ and the voice of that Divine Quickener is,

‘Myself shall to My darling be
Both law and impulse.’

Under the impulse derived from the Divine Spirit, the human spirit ‘listeth’ what is right, and is bound to follow the promptings of its highest desires. Those men only are free as the air we breathe, who are vitalised by the Spirit of the Lord, for ‘where the Spirit of the Lord is, there,’ and there alone, ‘is liberty.’

In this symbol there lies not only the thought of a life derived, kindred with the life bestowed, and free like the life which is given, but there lies also the idea of power. The wind which filled the house was not only mighty but ‘borne onward’-fitting type of the strong impulse by which in olden times ‘holy men spake as they were “borne onward”‘ [the word is the same] ‘by the Holy Ghost.’ There are diversities of operations, but it is the same breath of God, which sometimes blows in the softest *pianissimo* that scarcely rustles the summer woods in the leafy month of June, and sometimes storms in wild tempest that dashes the seas against the rocks. So this mighty lif-giving Agent moves in gentleness and yet in power, and sometimes swells and rises almost to tempest, but is ever the impelling force of all that is strong and true and fair in Christian hearts and lives.

The history of the world, since that day of Pentecost, has been a commentary upon the words of my text. With viewless, impalpable energy, the mighty breath of God swept across the ancient world and ‘laid the lofty city’ of paganism ‘low; even to the ground, and brought it even to the dust.’ A breath passed over the whole civilised world, like the breath of the west wind upon the glaciers in the spring, melting the thick-ribbed ice, and wooing forth the flowers, and the world was made over again. In our own hearts and lives this is the one Power that will make us strong and good. The question is all-important for each of us, ‘Have I this life, and does it move me, as the ships are borne along by the wind?’ ‘As many as are impelled by the Spirit of God, they’-*they*-’are the sons of God.’ Is that the breath that swells all the sails of your lives, and drives you upon your course? If it be, you are Christians; if it be not, you are not.

II. And now a word as to the second of these symbols-’Cloven tongues as of fire’-the fire of the Spirit.

I need not do more than remind you how frequently that emblem is employed both in the Old and in the New Testament. John the Baptist contrasted the cold negative efficiency of his baptism, which at its best, was but a baptism of repentance, with the quickening power of the baptism of Him who was to follow him; when he said, ‘I indeed baptise you with water, but He that cometh after me is mightier than I. He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.’ The two words mean but one thing, the fire being the emblem of the Spirit.

You will remember, too, how our Lord Himself employs the same metaphor when He speaks about His coming to bring fire on the earth, and His longing to see it kindled into a beneficent blaze. In this connection the fire is a symbol of a quick, triumphant energy, which will transform us into its own likeness. There are two sides to that emblem: one destructive, one creative; one wrathful, one loving. There are the fire of love, and the fire of anger. There is the fire of the sunshine which is the condition of life, as well as the fire of the lightning which burns and consumes. The emblem of fire is selected to express the work of the Spirit of God, by reason of its leaping, triumphant, transforming energy. See, for instance, how, when you kindle a pile of dead green-wood, the tongues of fire spring from point to point until they have conquered the whole mass, and turned it all into a ruddy likeness of the parent flame. And so here, this fire of God, if it fall upon you, will burn up all your coldness, and will make you glow with enthusiasm, working your intellectual convictions in fire not in frost, making your creed a living power in your lives, and kindling you into a flame of earnest consecration.

The same idea is expressed by the common phrases of every language. We speak of the fervour of love, the warmth of affection, the blaze of enthusiasm, the fire of emotion, the coldness of indifference. Christians are to be set on fire of God. If the Spirit dwell in us, He will make us fiery like Himself, even as fire turns the wettest green-wood into fire. We have more than enough of cold Christians who are afraid of nothing so much as of being betrayed into warm emotion.

I believe, dear brethren, and I am bound to express the belief, that one of the chief wants of the Christian Church of this generation, the Christian Church of this city, the Christian Church of this chapel, is more of the fire of God! We are all icebergs compared with what we ought to be. Look at yourselves; never mind about your brethren. Let each of us look at his own heart, and say whether there is any trace in his Christianity of the power of that Spirit who is fire. Is our religion flame or ice? Where among us are to be found lives blazing with enthusiastic devotion and earnest love? Do not such words sound like mockery when applied to us? Have we not to listen to that solemn old warning that never loses its power, and, alas! seems never to lose its appropriateness: ‘Because thou art neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of My mouth.’ We ought to be like the burning beings before God’s throne, the seraphim, the spirits that blaze and serve. We ought to be like God Himself, all aflame with love. Let us seek penitently for that Spirit of fire who will dwell in us all if we will.

The metaphor of fire suggests also-purifying. 'The Spirit of burning' will burn the filth out of us. That is the only way by which a man can ever be made clean. You may wash and wash and wash with the cold water of moral reformation, you will never get the dirt out with it. No washing and no rubbing will ever cleanse sin. The way to purge a soul is to do with it as they do with foul clay-thrust it into the fire and that will burn all the blackness out of it. Get the love of God into your hearts, and the fire of His Divine Spirit into your spirits to melt you down, as it were, and then the scum and the dross will come to the top, and you can skim them off. Two powers conquer my sin: the one is the blood of Jesus Christ, which washes me from all the guilt of the past; the other is the fiery influence of that Divine Spirit which makes me pure and clean for all the time to come. Pray to be kindled with the fire of God.

III. Then once more, take that other metaphor, 'I will pour out of My Spirit.'

That implies an emblem which is very frequently used, both in the Old and in the New Testament, viz., the Spirit as water. As our Lord said to Nicodemus: 'Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.' The 'water' stands in the same relation to the 'Spirit' as the 'fire' does in the saying of John the Baptist already referred to-that is to say, it is simply a symbol or material emblem of the Spirit. I suppose nobody would say that there were two baptisms spoken of by John, one of the Holy Ghost and one of fire,-and I suppose that just in the same way, there are not two agents of regeneration pointed at in our Lord's words, nor even two conditions, but that the Spirit is the sole agent, and 'water' is but a figure to express some aspect of His operations. So that there is no reference to the water of baptism in the words, and to see such a reference is to be led astray by sound, and out of a metaphor to manufacture a miracle.

There are other passages where, in like manner, the Spirit is compared to a flowing stream, such as, for instance, when our Lord said, 'He that believeth on Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water,' and when

John saw a ‘river of water of life proceeding from the throne.’ The expressions, too, of ‘pouring out’ and ‘shedding forth’ the Spirit, point in the same direction, and are drawn from more than one passage of Old Testament prophecy. What, then, is the significance of comparing that Divine Spirit with a river of water? First, cleansing, of which I need not say any more, because I have dealt with It in the previous part of my sermon. Then, further, refreshing, and satisfying. Ah! dear brethren, there is only one thing that will slake the immortal thirst in your souls. The world will never do it; love or ambition gratified and wealth possessed, will never do it. You will be as thirsty after you have drunk of these streams as ever you were before. There is one spring ‘of which if a man drink, he shall never thirst’ with unsatisfied, painful longings, but shall never cease to thirst with the longing which is blessedness, because it is fruition. Our thirst can be slaked by the deep draught of ‘the river of the Water of Life, which proceeds from the Throne of God and the Lamb.’ The Spirit of God, drunk in by my spirit, will still and satisfy my whole nature, and with it I shall be glad. Drink of this. ‘Ho! every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters!’

The Spirit is not only refreshing and satisfying, but also productive and fertilising. In Eastern lands a rill of water is all that is needed to make the wilderness rejoice. Turn that stream on to the barrenness of your hearts, and fair flowers will grow that would never grow without it. The one means of lofty and fruitful Christian living is a deep, inward possession of the Spirit of God. The one way to fertilise barren souls is to let that stream flood them all over, and then the flush of green will soon come, and that which is else a desert will ‘rejoice and blossom as the rose.’

So this water will cleanse, it will satisfy and refresh, it will be productive and will fertilise, and ‘everything shall live whithersoever that river cometh.’

IV. Then, lastly, we have the oil of the Spirit.

‘Ye have an unction,’ says St. John in our last text, ‘from the Holy One.’ I need not remind you, I suppose, of how in the old system, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with consecrating oil, as a symbol of their calling, and of their fitness for their special offices. The reason for the use of such a symbol, I presume, would lie in the invigorating and in the supposed, and possibly real, health-giving effect of the use of oil in those climates. Whatever may have been the reason for the use of oil in official anointings, the meaning of the act was plain. It was a preparation for a specific and distinct service. And so, when we read of the oil of the Spirit, we are to think that it is that which fits us for being prophets, priests, and kings, and which calls us to, because it fits us for, these functions.

You are anointed to be prophets that you may make known Him who has loved and saved you, and may go about the world evidently inspired to show forth His praise, and make His name glorious. That anointing calls and fits you to be priests, mediators between God and man, bringing God to men, and by pleading and persuasion, and the presentation of the truth, drawing men to God. That unction calls and fits you to be kings, exercising authority over the little monarchy of your own natures, and over the men round you, who will bow in submission whenever they come in contact with a man all evidently aflame with the love of Jesus Christ, and filled with His Spirit. The world is hard and rude; the world is blind and stupid; the world often fails to know its best friends and its truest benefactors; but there is no crust of stupidity so crass and dense but that through it there will pass the penetrating shafts of light that ray from the face of a man who walks in fellowship with Jesus. The whole nation of old was honoured with these sacred names. They were a kingdom of priests; and the divine Voice said of the nation, ‘Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm!’ How much more are all Christian men, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, made prophets, priests, and kings to God! Alas for the difference between what they ought to be and what they are!

And then, do not forget also that when the Scriptures speak of Christian men as being anointed, it really speaks of them as being Messiahs. ‘Christ’ means *anointed*, does it not? ‘Messiah’ means *anointed*. And when we read in such a passage as that of my text, ‘Ye have an unction from the Holy One,’ we cannot but feel that the words point in the same direction as the great words of our Master Himself, ‘As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.’ By authority derived, no doubt, and in a subordinate and secondary sense, of course, we are Messiahs, anointed with that Spirit which was given to Him, not by measure, and which has passed from Him to us. ‘If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.’

So, dear brethren, all these things being certainly so, what are we to say about the present state of Christendom? What are we to say about the present state of English Christianity, Church and Dissent alike? Is Pentecost a vanished glory, then? Has that 'rushing mighty wind' blown itself out, and a dead calm followed? Has that leaping fire died down into grey ashes? Has the great river that burst out then, like the stream from the foot of the glaciers of Mont Blanc, full-grown in its birth, been all swallowed up in the sand, like some of those rivers in the East? Has the oil dried in the cruse? People tell us that Christianity is on its death-bed; and the aspect of a great many professing Christians seems to confirm the statement. But let us thankfully recognise that 'we are not straitened in God, but in ourselves.' To how many of us the question might be put: 'Did you receive the Holy Ghost when you believed?' And how many of us by our lives answer: 'We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.' Let us go where we can receive Him; and remember the blessed words: 'If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him'!

11)Acts 2:4-13

Acts

THE ABIDING GIFT AND ITS TRANSITORY ACCOMPANIMENTS

Act. 2:1 - Act. 2:13.

Only ten days elapsed between the Ascension and Pentecost. The attitude of the Church during that time should be carefully noted. They obeyed implicitly Christ's command to wait for the 'power from on high.' The only act recorded is the election of Matthias to fill Judas's place, and it is at least questionable whether that was not a mistake, and shown to be such by Christ's subsequent choice of Paul as an Apostle. But, with the exception of that one flash of doubtful activity, prayer, supplication, patient waiting, and clinging together in harmonious expectancy, characterised the hundred and twenty brethren.

They must have been wrought to an intense pitch of anticipation, for they knew that their waiting was to be short, and they knew, at least partially, what they were to receive, namely, ‘power from on high,’ or ‘the promise of the Father.’ Probably, too, the great Feast, so near at hand, would appear to them a likely time for the fulfilment of the promise.

So, very early on that day of Pentecost, they betook themselves to their usual place of assembling, probably the ‘large upper room,’ already hallowed to their memories; and in each heart the eager question would spring, ‘Will it be to-day?’ It is as true now as it was then, that the spirits into whom the Holy Spirit breathes His power must keep themselves still, expectant, prayerful. Perpetual occupation may be more loss of time than devout waiting, with hands folded, because the heart is wide open to receive the power which will fit the hands for better work.

It was but ‘the third hour of the day’ when Peter stood up to speak; it must have been little after dawn when the brethren came together. How long they had been assembled we do not know, but we cannot doubt how they had been occupied. Many a prayer had gone up through the morning air, and, no doubt, some voice was breathing the united desires, when a deep, strange sound was heard at a distance, and rapidly gained volume, and was heard to draw near. Like the roaring of a tempest hurrying towards them, it hushed human voices, and each man would feel, ‘Surely now the Gift comes!’ Nearer and nearer it approached, and at last burst into the chamber where they sat silent and unmoving.

But if we look carefully at Luke’s words, we see that what filled the house was not agitated air, or wind, but ‘a sound as of wind.’ The language implies that there was no rush of atmosphere that lifted a hair on any cheek, or blew on any face, but only such a sound as is made by tempest. It suggested wind, but it was not wind. By that first symbolic preparation for the communication of the promised gift, the old symbolism which lies in the very word ‘Spirit,’ and had been brought anew to the disciples’ remembrance by Christ’s words to Nicodemus, and by His breathing on them when He gave them an anticipatory and partial bestowment of the Spirit, is brought to view, with its associations of life-giving power and liberty. ‘Thou hearest the sound thereof,’ could scarcely fail to be remembered by some in that chamber.

But it is not to be supposed that the audible symbol continued when the second preparatory one, addressed to the eye, appeared. As the former had been not wind, but like it, the latter was not fire, but ‘as of fire.’ The language does not answer the question whether what was seen was a mass from which the tongues detached themselves, or whether only the separate tongues were visible as they moved overhead. But the final result was that ‘it sat on each.’ The verb has no expressed subject, and ‘fire’ cannot be the subject, for it is only introduced as a comparison. Probably, therefore, we are to understand ‘a tongue’ as the unexpressed subject of the verb.

Clearly, the point of the symbol is the same as that presented in the Baptist’s promise of a baptism ‘with the Holy Ghost and fire.’ The Spirit was to be in them as a Spirit of burning, thawing natural coldness and melting hearts with a genial warmth, which should beget flaming enthusiasm, fervent love, burning zeal, and should work transformation into its own fiery substance. The rejoicing power, the quick energy, the consuming force, the assimilating action of fire, are all included in the symbol, and should all be possessed by Christ’s disciples.

But were the tongue-like shapes of the flames significant too? It is doubtful, for, natural as is the supposition that they were, it is to be remembered that ‘tongues of fire’ is a usual expression, and may mean nothing more than the flickering shoots of flame into which a fire necessarily parts.

But these two symbols are only symbols. The true fulfilment of the great promise follows. Mark the brief simplicity of the quiet words in which the greatest bestowment ever made on humanity, the beginning of an altogether new era, the equipment of the Church for her age-long conflict, is told. There was an actual impartation to men of a divine life, to dwell in them and actuate them; to bring all good to victory in them; to illuminate, sustain, direct, and elevate; to cleanse and quicken. The gift was complete. They were ‘filled.’ No doubt they had much more to receive, and they received it, as their natures became, by faithful obedience to the indwelling Spirit, capable of more. But up to the measure of their then capacities they were filled; and, since their spirits were expansible, and the gift was infinite, they were in a position to grow steadily in possession of it, till they were ‘filled with all the fulness of God.’

Further, ‘they were *all* filled,’-not the Apostles only, but the whole hundred and twenty. Peter’s quotation from Joel distinctly implies the universality of the gift, which the ‘servants and handmaidens,’ the brethren and the women, now received. Herein is the true democracy of Christianity. There are still diversities of operations and degrees of possession, but all Christians have the Spirit. All ‘they that believe on Him,’ and only they, have received it. Of old the light shone only on the highest peaks,-prophets, and kings, and psalmists; now the lowest depths of the valleys are flooded with it. Would that Christians generally believed more fully in, and set more store by, that great gift!

As symbols preceded, tokens followed. The essential fact of Pentecost is neither the sound and fire, nor the speaking with other tongues, but the communication of the Holy Spirit. The sign and result of that was the gift of utterance in various languages, not their own, nor learned by ordinary ways. No twisting of the narrative can weaken the plain meaning of it, that these unlearned Galileans spake in tongues which their users recognised to be their own. The significance of the fact will appear presently, but first note the attestation of it by the multitude.

Of course, the foreign-born Jews, who, from motives of piety, however mistaken, had come to dwell in Jerusalem, are said to have been ‘from every nation under heaven,’ by an obvious and ordinary license. It is enough that, as the subsequent catalogue shows, they came from all corners of the then known world, though the extremes of territory mentioned cover but a small space on a terrestrial globe.

The ‘sound’ of the rushing wind had been heard hurtling through the city in the early morning hours, and had served as guide to the spot. A curious crowd came hurrying to ascertain what this noise of tempest in a calm meant, and they were met by something more extraordinary still. Try to imagine the spectacle. As would appear from Act. 2:33, the tongues of fire remained lambently glowing on each head [‘which ye see’], and the whole hundred and twenty, thus strangely crowned, were pouring out rapturous praises, each in some strange tongue. When the astonished ears had become accustomed to the apparent tumult, every man in the crowd heard some one or more speaking in his own tongue, language, or dialect, and all were declaring the mighty works of God; that is, probably, the story of the crucified, ascended Jesus.

We need not dwell on subordinate questions, as to the number of languages represented there, or as to the catalogue in Act. 2:9 - Act. 2:10. But we would emphasise two thoughts. First, the natural result of being filled with God's Spirit is utterance of the great truths of Christ's Gospel. As surely as light radiates, as surely as any deep emotion demands expression, so certainly will a soul filled with the Spirit be forced to break into speech. If professing Christians have never known the impulse to tell of the Christ whom they have found, their religion must be very shallow and imperfect. If their spirits are full, they will overflow in speech.

Second, Pentecost is a prophecy of the universal proclamation of the Gospel, and of the universal praise which shall one day rise to Him that was slain. 'This company of brethren praising God in the tongues of the whole world represented the whole world which shall one day praise God in its various tongues' [Bengel]. Pentecost reversed Babel, not by bringing about a featureless monopoly, but by consecrating diversity, and showing that each language could be hallowed, and that each lent some new strain of music to the chorus.

It prophesied of the time when ‘men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation’ should lift up their voices to Him who has purchased them unto God with His blood. It began a communication of the Spirit to all believers which is never to cease while the world stands. The mighty rushing sound has died into silence, the fiery tongues rest on no heads now, the miraculous results of the gifts of the Spirit have passed away also, but the gift remains, and the Spirit of God abides for ever with the Church of Christ.

12)Acts 2:17

Acts

THE FOURFOLD SYMBOLS OF THE SPIRIT

Act. 2:2 - Act. 2:3, Act. 2:17. - 1Jn. 2:20.

Wind, fire, water, oil,-these four are constant Scriptural symbols for the Spirit of God. We have them all in these fragments of verses which I have taken for my text now, and which I have isolated from their context for the purpose of bringing out simply these symbolical references. I think that perhaps we may get some force and freshness to the thoughts proper to this day [Footnote: Whit Sunday.] by looking at these rather than by treating the subject in some more abstract form. We have then the Breath of the Spirit, the Fire of the Spirit, the Water of the Spirit, and the Anointing Oil of the Spirit. And the consideration of these four will bring out a great many of the principal Scriptural ideas about the gift of the Spirit of God which belongs to all Christian souls.

I. First, ‘a rushing mighty wind.’

Of course, the symbol is but the putting into picturesque form of the idea that lies in the name. ‘Spirit’ is ‘breath.’ Wind is but air in motion. Breath is the synonym for life. ‘Spirit’ and ‘life’ are two words for one thing. So then, in the symbol, the ‘rushing mighty wind,’ we have set forth the highest work of the Spirit-the communication of a new and supernatural life.

We are carried hack to that grand vision of the prophet who saw the bones lying, very many and very dry, sapless and disintegrated, a heap dead and ready to rot. The question comes to him: ‘Son of man! Can these bones live?’ The only possible answer, if he consult experience, is, ‘O Lord God! Thou knowest.’ Then follows the great invocation: ‘Come from the four winds, O Breath! and breathe upon these slain that they may live.’ And the Breath comes and ‘they stand up, an exceeding great army.’ ‘It is the Spirit that quickeneth.’ The Scripture treats us all as dead, being separated from God, unless we are united to Him by faith in Jesus Christ. According to the saying of the Evangelist, ‘They which believe on Him receive’ the Spirit, and thereby receive the life which He gives, or, as our Lord Himself speaks, are ‘born of the Spirit.’ The highest and most characteristic office of the Spirit of God is to enkindle this new life, and hence His noblest name, among the many by which He is called, is the Spirit of life.

Again, remember, ‘that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’ If there be life given it must be kindred with the life which is its source. Reflect upon those profound words of our Lord: ‘The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh nor whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit.’ They describe first the operation of the life-giving Spirit, but they describe also the characteristics of the resulting life.

‘The wind bloweth where it listeth.’ That spiritual life, both in the divine source and in the human recipient, is its own law. Of course the wind has its laws, as every physical agent has; but these are so complicated and undiscovered that it has always been the very symbol of freedom, and poets have spoken of these ‘chartered libertines,’ the winds, and ‘free as the air’ has become a proverb. So that Divine Spirit is limited by no human conditions or laws, but dispenses His gifts in superb disregard of conventionalities and externalisms. Just as the lower gift of what we call ‘genius’ is above all limits of culture or education or position, and falls on a wool-stapler in Stratford-on-Avon, or on a ploughman in Ayrshire, so, in a similar manner, the altogether different gift of the divine, life-giving Spirit follows no lines that Churches or institutions draw. It falls upon an Augustinian monk in a convent, and he shakes Europe. It falls upon a tinker in Bedford gaol, and he writes *Pilgrim’s Progress*. It falls upon a cobbler in

Kettering, and he founds modern Christian missions. It blows ‘where it listeth,’ sovereignly indifferent to the expectations and limitations and the externalisms, even of organised Christianity, and touching this man and that man, not arbitrarily but according to ‘the good pleasure’ that is a law to itself, because it is perfect in wisdom and in goodness.

And as thus the life-giving Spirit imparts Himself according to higher laws than we can grasp, so in like manner the life that is derived from it is a life which is its own law. The Christian conscience, touched by the Spirit of God, owes allegiance to no regulations or external commandments laid down by man. The Christian conscience, enlightened by the Spirit of God, at its peril will take its beliefs from any other than from that Divine Spirit. All authority over conduct, all authority over belief is burnt up and disappears in the presence of the grand democracy of the true Christian principle: ‘Ye are all the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ’; and every one of you possesses the Spirit which teaches, the Spirit which inspires, the Spirit which enlightens, the Spirit which is the guide to all truth. So ‘the wind bloweth where it listeth,’ and the voice of that Divine Quickener is,

‘Myself shall to My darling be
Both law and impulse.’

Under the impulse derived from the Divine Spirit, the human spirit ‘listeth’ what is right, and is bound to follow the promptings of its highest desires. Those men only are free as the air we breathe, who are vitalised by the Spirit of the Lord, for ‘where the Spirit of the Lord is, there,’ and there alone, ‘is liberty.’

In this symbol there lies not only the thought of a life derived, kindred with the life bestowed, and free like the life which is given, but there lies also the idea of power. The wind which filled the house was not only mighty but ‘borne onward’-fitting type of the strong impulse by which in olden times ‘holy men spake as they were “borne onward”‘ [the word is the same] ‘by the Holy Ghost.’ There are diversities of operations, but it is the same breath of God, which sometimes blows in the softest *pianissimo* that scarcely rustles the summer woods in the leafy month of June, and sometimes storms in wild tempest that dashes the seas against the rocks. So this mighty lif-giving Agent moves in gentleness and yet in power, and sometimes swells and rises almost to tempest, but is ever the impelling force of all that is strong and true and fair in Christian hearts and lives.

The history of the world, since that day of Pentecost, has been a commentary upon the words of my text. With viewless, impalpable energy, the mighty breath of God swept across the ancient world and 'laid the lofty city' of paganism 'low; even to the ground, and brought it even to the dust.' A breath passed over the whole civilised world, like the breath of the west wind upon the glaciers in the spring, melting the thick-ribbed ice, and wooing forth the flowers, and the world was made over again. In our own hearts and lives this is the one Power that will make us strong and good. The question is all-important for each of us, 'Have I this life, and does it move me, as the ships are borne along by the wind?' 'As many as are impelled by the Spirit of God, they'-*they*-'are the sons of God.' Is that the breath that swells all the sails of your lives, and drives you upon your course? If it be, you are Christians; if it be not, you are not.

II. And now a word as to the second of these symbols-'Cloven tongues as of fire'-the fire of the Spirit.

I need not do more than remind you how frequently that emblem is employed both in the Old and in the New Testament. John the Baptist contrasted the cold negative efficiency of his baptism, which at its best, was but a baptism of repentance, with the quickening power of the baptism of Him who was to follow him; when he said, 'I indeed baptise you with water, but He that cometh after me is mightier than I. He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.' The two words mean but one thing, the fire being the emblem of the Spirit.

You will remember, too, how our Lord Himself employs the same metaphor when He speaks about His coming to bring fire on the earth, and His longing to see it kindled into a beneficent blaze. In this connection the fire is a symbol of a quick, triumphant energy, which will transform us into its own likeness. There are two sides to that emblem: one destructive, one creative; one wrathful, one loving. There are the fire of love, and the fire of anger. There is the fire of the sunshine which is the condition of life, as well as the fire of the lightning which burns and consumes. The emblem of fire is selected to express the work of the Spirit of God, by reason of its leaping, triumphant, transforming energy. See, for instance, how, when you kindle a pile of dead green-wood, the tongues of fire spring from point to point until they have conquered the whole mass, and turned it all into a ruddy likeness of the parent flame. And so here, this fire of God, if it fall upon you, will burn up all your coldness, and will make you glow with enthusiasm, working your intellectual convictions in fire not in frost, making your creed a living power in your lives, and kindling you into a flame of earnest consecration.

The same idea is expressed by the common phrases of every language. We speak of the fervour of love, the warmth of affection, the blaze of enthusiasm, the fire of emotion, the coldness of indifference. Christians are to be set on fire of God. If the Spirit dwell in us, He will make us fiery like Himself, even as fire turns the wettest green-wood into fire. We have more than enough of cold Christians who are afraid of nothing so much as of being betrayed into warm emotion.

I believe, dear brethren, and I am bound to express the belief, that one of the chief wants of the Christian Church of this generation, the Christian Church of this city, the Christian Church of this chapel, is more of the fire of God! We are all icebergs compared with what we ought to be. Look at yourselves; never mind about your brethren. Let each of us look at his own heart, and say whether there is any trace in his Christianity of the power of that Spirit who is fire. Is our religion flame or ice? Where among us are to be found lives blazing with enthusiastic devotion and earnest love? Do not such words sound like mockery when applied to us? Have we not to listen to that solemn old warning that never loses its power, and, alas! seems never to lose its appropriateness: ‘Because thou art neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of My mouth.’ We ought to be like the burning beings before God’s throne, the seraphim, the spirits that blaze and serve. We ought to be like God Himself, all aflame with love. Let us seek penitently for that Spirit of fire who will dwell in us all if we will.

The metaphor of fire suggests also-purifying. ‘The Spirit of burning’ will burn the filth out of us. That is the only way by which a man can ever be made clean. You may wash and wash and wash with the cold water of moral reformation, you will never get the dirt out with it. No washing and no rubbing will ever cleanse sin. The way to purge a soul is to do with it as they do with foul clay-thrust it into the fire and that will burn all the blackness out of it. Get the love of God into your hearts, and the fire of His Divine Spirit into your spirits to melt you down, as it were, and then the scum and the dross will come to the top, and you can skim them off. Two powers conquer my sin: the one is the blood of Jesus Christ, which washes me from all the guilt of the past; the other is the fiery influence of that Divine Spirit which makes me pure and clean for all the time to come. Pray to be kindled with the fire of God.

III. Then once more, take that other metaphor, 'I will pour out of My Spirit.'

That implies an emblem which is very frequently used, both in the Old and in the New Testament, viz., the Spirit as water. As our Lord said to Nicodemus: 'Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.' The 'water' stands in the same relation to the 'Spirit' as the 'fire' does in the saying of John the Baptist already referred to-that is to say, it is simply a symbol or material emblem of the Spirit. I suppose nobody would say that there were two baptisms spoken of by John, one of the Holy Ghost and one of fire,-and I suppose that just in the same way, there are not two agents of regeneration pointed at in our Lord's words, nor even two conditions, but that the Spirit is the sole agent, and 'water' is but a figure to express some aspect of His operations. So that there is no reference to the water of baptism in the words, and to see such a reference is to be led astray by sound, and out of a metaphor to manufacture a miracle.

There are other passages where, in like manner, the Spirit is compared to a flowing stream, such as, for instance, when our Lord said, 'He that believeth on Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water,' and when John saw a 'river of water of life proceeding from the throne.' The expressions, too, of 'pouring out' and 'shedding forth' the Spirit, point in the same direction, and are drawn from more than one passage of Old Testament prophecy. What, then, is the significance of comparing that Divine Spirit with a river of water? First, cleansing, of which I need not say any more, because I have dealt with It in the previous part of my sermon. Then, further, refreshing, and satisfying. Ah! dear brethren, there is only one thing that will slake the immortal thirst in your souls. The world will never do it; love or ambition gratified and wealth possessed, will never do it. You will be as thirsty after you have drunk of these streams as ever you were before. There is one spring 'of which if a man drink, he shall never thirst' with unsatisfied, painful longings, but shall never cease to thirst with the longing which is blessedness, because it is fruition. Our thirst can be slaked by the deep draught of 'the river of the Water of Life, which proceeds from the Throne of God and the Lamb.' The Spirit of God, drunk in by my spirit, will still and satisfy my whole nature, and with it I shall be glad. Drink of this. 'Ho! every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters!'

The Spirit is not only refreshing and satisfying, but also productive and fertilising. In Eastern lands a rill of water is all that is needed to make the wilderness rejoice. Turn that stream on to the barrenness of your hearts, and fair flowers will grow that would never grow without it. The one means of lofty and fruitful Christian living is a deep, inward possession of the Spirit of God. The one way to fertilise barren souls is to let that stream flood them all over, and then the flush of green will soon come, and that which is else a desert will 'rejoice and blossom as the rose.'

So this water will cleanse, it will satisfy and refresh, it will be productive and will fertilise, and 'everything shall live whithersoever that river cometh.'

IV. Then, lastly, we have the oil of the Spirit.

'Ye have an unction,' says St. John in our last text, 'from the Holy One.' I need not remind you, I suppose, of how in the old system, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with consecrating oil, as a symbol of their calling, and of their fitness for their special offices. The reason for the use of such a symbol, I presume, would lie in the invigorating and in the supposed, and possibly real, health-giving effect of the use of oil in those climates. Whatever may have been the reason for the use of oil in official anointings, the meaning of the act was plain. It was a preparation for a specific and distinct service. And so, when we read of the oil of the Spirit, we are to think that it is that which fits us for being prophets, priests, and kings, and which calls us to, because it fits us for, these functions.

You are anointed to be prophets that you may make known Him who has loved and saved you, and may go about the world evidently inspired to show forth His praise, and make His name glorious. That anointing calls and fits you to be priests, mediators between God and man, bringing God to men, and by pleading and persuasion, and the presentation of the truth, drawing men to God. That unction calls and fits you to be kings, exercising authority over the little monarchy of your own natures, and over the men round you, who will bow in submission whenever they come in contact with a man all evidently aflame with the love of Jesus Christ, and filled with His Spirit. The world is hard and rude; the world is blind and stupid; the world often fails to know its best friends and its truest benefactors; but there is no crust of stupidity so crass and dense but that through it there will pass the penetrating shafts of light that ray from the face of a man who walks in fellowship with Jesus. The whole nation of old was honoured with these sacred names. They were a kingdom of priests; and the divine Voice said of the nation, ‘Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm!’ How much more are all Christian men, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, made prophets, priests, and kings to God! Alas for the difference between what they ought to be and what they are!

And then, do not forget also that when the Scriptures speak of Christian men as being anointed, it really speaks of them as being Messiahs. ‘Christ’ means *anointed*, does it not? ‘Messiah’ means *anointed*. And when we read in such a passage as that of my text, ‘Ye have an unction from the Holy One,’ we cannot but feel that the words point in the same direction as the great words of our Master Himself, ‘As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.’ By authority derived, no doubt, and in a subordinate and secondary sense, of course, we are Messiahs, anointed with that Spirit which was given to Him, not by measure, and which has passed from Him to us. ‘If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.’

So, dear brethren, all these things being certainly so, what are we to say about the present state of Christendom? What are we to say about the present state of English Christianity, Church and Dissent alike? Is Pentecost a vanished glory, then? Has that 'rushing mighty wind' blown itself out, and a dead calm followed? Has that leaping fire died down into grey ashes? Has the great river that burst out then, like the stream from the foot of the glaciers of Mont Blanc, full-grown in its birth, been all swallowed up in the sand, like some of those rivers in the East? Has the oil dried in the cruse? People tell us that Christianity is on its death-bed; and the aspect of a great many professing Christians seems to confirm the statement. But let us thankfully recognise that 'we are not straitened in God, but in ourselves.' To how many of us the question might be put: 'Did you receive the Holy Ghost when you believed?' And how many of us by our lives answer: 'We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.' Let us go where we can receive Him; and remember the blessed words: 'If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him'!

13)Acts 2:32-35

Acts

PETER'S FIRST SERMON

Act. 2:32 - Act. 2:47.

This passage may best be dealt with as divided into three parts: the sharp spear-thrust of Peter's closing words [Act. 2:32 - Act. 2:36], the wounded and healed hearers [Act. 2:37 - Act. 2:41], and the fair morning dawn of the Church [Act. 2:42 - Act. 2:47].

I. Peter's address begins with pointing out the fulfilment of prophecy in the gift of the Spirit [Act. 2:14 - Act. 2:21].

It then declares the Resurrection of Jesus as foretold by prophecy, and witnessed to by the whole body of believers [Act. 2:22 - Act. 2:32], and it ends by bringing together these two facts, the gift of the Spirit and the Resurrection and Ascension, as effect and cause, and as establishing beyond all doubt that Jesus is the Christ of prophecy, and the Lord on whom Joel had declared that whoever called should be saved. We now begin with the last verse of the second part of the address.

Observe the significant alternation of the names of ‘Christ’ and ‘Jesus’ in Act. 2:31 - Act. 2:32. The former verse establishes that prophecy had foretold the Resurrection of the Messiah, whoever he might be; the latter asserts that ‘this Jesus’ has fulfilled the prophetic conditions. That is not a thing to be argued about, but to be attested by competent witnesses. It was presented to the multitude on Pentecost, as it is to us, as a plain matter of fact, on which the whole fabric of Christianity is built, and which itself securely rests on the concordant testimony of those who knew Him alive, saw Him dead, and were familiar with Him risen.

There is a noble ring of certitude in Peter’s affirmation, and of confidence that the testimony producible was overwhelming. Unless Jesus had risen, there would neither have been a Pentecost nor a Church to receive the gift. The simple fact which Peter alleged in that first sermon, ‘whereof we all are witnesses,’ is still too strong for the deniers of the Resurrection, as their many devices to get over it prove.

But, a listener might ask, what has this witness of yours to do with Joel’s prophecy, or with this speaking with tongues? The answer follows in the last part of the sermon. The risen Jesus has ascended up; that is inseparable from the fact of resurrection, and is part of our testimony. He is ‘exalted by,’ or, perhaps, at, ‘the right hand of God.’ And that exaltation is to us the token that there He has received from the Father the Spirit, whom He promised to send when He left us. Therefore it is He-’this Jesus’-who has ‘poured forth this,’-this new strange gift, the tokens of which you see flaming on each head, and hear bursting in praise from every tongue.

What triumphant emphasis is in that ‘He’! Peter quotes Joel’s word ‘pour forth.’ The prophet had said, as the mouthpiece of God, ‘*I* will pour forth’; Peter unhesitatingly transfers the word to Jesus. We must not assume in him at this stage a fully-developed consciousness of our Lord’s divine nature, but neither must we blink the tremendous assumption which he feels warranted in making, that the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of God meant His exercising the power which belonged to God Himself.

In Act. 2:34, he stays for a moment to establish by prophecy that the Ascension, of which he had for the first time spoken in Act. 2:33, is part of the prophetic characteristics of the Messiah. His demonstration runs parallel with his preceding one as to the Resurrection. He quotes Psa. 110:1 - Psa. 110:7, which he had learned to do from his Master, and just as he had argued about the prediction of Resurrection, that the dead Psalmist's words could not apply to himself, and must therefore apply to the Messiah; so he concludes that it was not 'David' who was called by Jehovah to sit as 'Lord' on His right hand. If not David, it could only be the Messiah who was thus invested with Lordship, and exalted as participator of the throne of the Most High.

Then comes the final thrust of the spear, for which all the discourse has been preparing. The Apostle rises to the full height of his great commission, and sets the trumpet to his mouth, summoning 'all the house of Israel,' priests, rulers, and all the people, to acknowledge his Master. He proclaims his supreme dignity and Messiahship. He is the 'Lord' of whom the Psalmist sang, and the prophet declared that whoever called on His name should be saved; and He is the Christ for whom Israel looked.

Last of all, he sets in sharp contrast what God had done with Jesus, and what Israel had done, and the barb of his arrow lies in the last words, 'whom ye crucified.' And this bold champion of Jesus, this undaunted arraigner of a nation's crimes, was the man who, a few weeks before, had quailed before a maid-servant's saucy tongue! What made the change? Will anything but the Resurrection and Pentecost account for the psychological transformation effected in him and the other Apostles?

II. No wonder that 'they were pricked in their heart'!

Such a thrust must have gone deep, even where the armour of prejudice was thick. The scene they had witnessed, and the fiery words of explanation, taken together, produced incipient conviction, and the conviction produced alarm. How surely does the first glimpse of Jesus as Christ and Lord set conscience to work! The question, 'What shall we do?' is the beginning of conversion. The acknowledgment of Jesus which does not lead to it is shallow and worthless. The most orthodox accepter, so far as intellect goes, of the gospel, who has not been driven by it to ask his own duty in regard to it, and what he is to do to receive its benefits, and to escape from his sins, has not accepted it at all.

Peter’s answer lays down two conditions: repentance and baptism. The former is often taken in too narrow a sense as meaning sorrow for sin, whereas it means a change of disposition or mind, which will be accompanied, no doubt, with ‘godly sorrow,’ but is in itself deeper than sorrow, and is the turning away of heart and will from past love and practice of evil. The second, baptism, is ‘in the name of Jesus Christ,’ or more accurately, ‘*upon* the name,’-that is, on the ground of the revealed character of Jesus. That necessarily implies faith in that Name; for, without such faith, the baptism would not be on the ground of the Name. The two things are regarded as inseparable, being the inside and the outside of the Christian discipleship. Repentance, faith, baptism, these three, are called for by Peter.

But ‘remission of sins’ is not attached to the immediately preceding clause, so as that baptism is said to secure remission, but to the whole of what goes before in the sentence. Obedience to the requirements would bring the same gift to the obedient as the disciples had received; for it would make them disciples also. But, while repentance and baptism which presupposed faith were the normal, precedent conditions of the Spirit’s bestowal, the case of Cornelius, where the Spirit was given before baptism, forbids the attempt to link the rite and the divine gift more closely together.

The Apostle was eager to share the gift. The more we have of the Spirit, the more shall we desire that others may have Him, and the more sure shall we be that He is meant for all. So Peter went on to base his assurance, that his hearers might all possess the Spirit, on the universal destination of the promise. Joel had said, ‘on all flesh’; Peter declares that word to point downwards through all generations, and outwards to all nations. How swiftly had he grown in grasp of the sweep of Christ’s work! How far beneath that moment of illumination some of his subsequent actions fell!

We have only a summary of his exhortations, the gist of which was earnest warning to separate from the fate of the nation by separating in will and mind from its sins. Swift conviction followed the Spiri-given words, as it ever will do when the speaker is filled with the Holy Spirit, and has therefore a tongue of fire. Three thousand new disciples were made that day, and though there must have been many superficial adherents, and none with much knowledge, it is perhaps not fanciful to see in Luke’s speaking of them as ‘souls’ a hint that, in general, the acceptance of Jesus as Messiah was deep and real. Not only were three thousand ‘names’ added to the hundred and twenty, but three thousand souls.

III. The fair picture of the morning brightness, so soon overclouded, so long lost, follows.

First, the narrative tells how the raw converts were incorporated in the community, and assimilated to its character. They, too, ‘continued steadfastly’ [Act. 1:14]. Note the four points enumerated: ‘teaching,’ which would be principally instruction in the life of Jesus and His Messianic dignity, as proved by prophecy; ‘fellowship,’ which implies community of disposition and oneness of heart manifested in outward association; ‘breaking of bread,’-that is, the observance of the Lord’s Supper; and ‘the prayers,’ which were the very life-breath of the infant Church [Act. 1:14]. Thus oneness in faith and in love, participation in the memorial feast and in devotional acts bound the new converts to the original believers, and trained them towards maturity. These are still the methods by which a sudden influx of converts is best dealt with, and babes in Christ nurtured to full growth. Alas! that so often churches do not know what to do with novices when they come in numbers.

A wider view of the state of the community as a whole closes the chapter. It is the first of several landing-places, as it were, on which Luke pauses to sum up an epoch. A reverent awe laid hold of the popular mind, which was increased by the miraculous powers of the Apostles. The Church will produce that impression on the world in proportion as it is manifestly filled with the Spirit. Do we? The s-called community of goods was not imposed by commandment, as is plain from Peter’s recognition of Ananias’ right to do as he chose with his property. The facts that Mark’s mother, Mary, had a house of her own, and that Barnabas, her relative, is specially signalised as having sold his property, prove that it was not universal. It was an irrepressible outcrop of the brotherly feeling that filled all hearts. Christ has not come to lay down laws, but to give impulses. Compelled communism is not the repetition of that oneness of sympathy which effloresced in the bright flower of this common possession of individual goods. But neither is the closed purse, closed because the heart is shut, which puts to shame so much profession of brotherhood, justified because the liberality of the primitive disciples was not by constraint nor of obligation, but willing and spontaneous.

Act. 2:46 - Act. 2:47 add an outline of the beautiful daily life of the community, which was, like their liberality, the outcome of the feeling of brotherhood, intensified by the sense of the gulf between them and the crooked generation from which they had separated themselves. Luke shows it on two sides. Though they had separated from the nation, they clung to the Temple services, as they continued to do till the end. They had not come to clear consciousness of all that was involved in their discipleship, It was not God's will that the new spirit should violently break with the old letter. Convulsions are not His way, except as second-best. The disciples had to stay within the fold of Israel, if they were to influence Israel. The time of outward parting between the Temple and the Church was far ahead yet.

But the truest life of the infant Church was not nourished in the Temple, but in the privacy of their homes. They were one family, and lived as such. Their 'breaking bread at home' includes both their ordinary meals and the Lord's Supper; for in these first days every meal, at least the evening meal of every day, was hallowed by having the Supper as a part of it. Each meal was thus a religious act, a token of brotherhood, and accompanied with praise. Surely *then* 'men did eat angels' food,' and on platter and cup was written 'Holiness to the Lord.' The ideal of human fellowship was realised, though but for a moment, and on a small scale. It was inevitable that divergences should arise, but it was not inevitable that the Church should depart so far from the brief brightness of its dawn. Still the sweet concordant brotherhood of these morning hours witnesses what Christian love can do, and prophesies what shall yet be and shall not pass.

No wonder that such a Church won favour with all the people! We hear nothing of its evangelising activity, but its life was such that, without recorded speech, multitudes were drawn into so sweet a fellowship. If we were like the Pentecostal Christians, we should attract wearied souls out of the world's Babel into the calm home where love and brotherhood reigned, and God would 'add' to *us* 'day by day those that were being saved.'

14)Acts 2:36

Acts

PETER’S FIRST SERMON

THE NAME ABOVE EVERY NAME

Act. 2:36.

It is no part of my purpose at this time to consider the special circumstances under which these words were spoken, nor even to enter upon an exposition of their whole scope. I select them for one reason, the occurrence in them of the three names by which we designate our Saviour-Jesus, Lord, Christ. To us they are very little more than three proper names; they were very different to these men who listened to the characteristically vehement discourse of the Apostle Peter. It wanted some courage to stand up at Pentecost and proclaim on the housetop what he had spoken in the ear long ago, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!’ To most of his listeners to say ‘Jesus is the Christ’ was folly, and to say ‘Jesus is the Lord’ was blasphemy.

The three names are names of the same Person, but they proclaim altogether different aspects of His work and His character. The name ‘Jesus’ is the name of the Man, and brings to us a Brother; the name ‘Christ’ is the name of office, and brings to us a Redeemer; the name ‘Lord’ is the name of dignity, and brings to us a King.

I. First, then, the name Jesus is the name of the Man, and tells us of a Brother.

There were many men in Palestine who bore the name of ‘Jesus’ when He bore it. We find that one of the early Christians had it; and it comes upon us with almost a shock when we read that ‘Jesus, called Justus,’ was the name of one of the friends of the Apostle Paul [Col. 4:11]. But, through reverence on the part of Christians, and through horror on the part of Jews, the name ceased to be a common one; and its disappearance from familiar use has hid from us the fact of its common employment at the time when our Lord bore it. Though it was given to Him as indicative of His office of saving His people from their sins, yet none of all the crowds who knew Him as Jesus of Nazareth supposed that in His name there was any greater significance than in those of the ‘Simons,’ ‘Johns,’ and ‘Judahs’ in the circle of His disciples.

Now the use of Jesus as the proper name of our Lord is very noticeable. In the Gospels, as a rule, it stands alone hundreds of times, whilst in combination with any other of the titles it is rare. ‘Jesus Christ,’ for instance, only occurs, if I count aright, twice in Matthew, once in Mark, twice in John. But if you turn to the Epistles and the latter books of the Scriptures, the proportions are reversed. There you have a number of instances of the occurrence of such combinations as ‘Jesus Christ,’ ‘Christ Jesus,’ ‘The Lord Jesus,’ ‘Christ the Lord,’ and more rarely the full solemn title, ‘The Lord Jesus Christ,’ but the occurrence of the proper name ‘Jesus’ alone is the exception. So far as I know, there are only some thirty or forty instances of its use singly in the whole of the books of the New Testament outside of the four Evangelists. The occasions where it is used are all of them occasions in which one may see that the writer’s intention is to put strong emphasis, for some reason or other, on the Manhood of our Lord Jesus, and to assert, as broadly as may be, His entire participation with us in the common conditions of our human nature, corporeal and mental.

And I think I shall best bring out the meaning and worth of the name by putting a few of these instances before you.

For example, more than once we find phrases like these: ‘we believe that *Jesus* died,’ ‘having therefore boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of *Jesus*,’ and the like-which emphasise His death as the death of a man like ourselves, and bring us close to the historical reality of His human pains and agonies for us. ‘*Christ* died’ is a statement which makes the purpose and efficacy of His death more plain, but ‘*Jesus* died’ shows us His death as not only the work of the appointed Messiah, but as the act of our brother man, the outcome of His human love, and never rightly to be understood if His work be thought of apart from His personality.

There is brought into view, too, prominently, the side of Christ’s sufferings which we are all apt to forget-the common human side of His agonies and

His pains. I know that a certain school of preachers, and some unctuous religious hymns, and other forms of composition, dwell, a great deal too much for reverence, upon the mere physical aspect of Christ's sufferings. But the temptation, I believe, with most of us is to dwell too little upon that,-to argue about the death of Christ, to think about it as a matter of speculation, to regard it as a mysterious power, to look upon it as an official act of the Messiah who was sent into the world for us; and to forget that He bore a manhood like our own, a body that was impatient of pains and wounds and sufferings, and a human life which, like all human lives, naturally recoiled and shrank from the agony of death.

And whilst, therefore, the great message, 'It is Christ that died,' is ever to be pondered, we have also to think with sympathy and gratitude on the homelier representation coming nearer to our hearts, which proclaims that 'Jesus died.' Let us not forget the Brother's manhood that had to agonise and to suffer and to die as the price of our salvation.

Again, when the Scripture would set our Lord before us, as in His humanity, our pattern and example, it sometimes uses this name, in order to give emphasis to the thought of His Manhood-as, for example, in the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 'looking unto Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of faith.' That is to say-a mighty stimulus to all brave perseverance in our efforts after higher Christian nobleness lies in the vivid and constant realisation of the true manhood of our Lord, as the type of all goodness, as having Himself lived by faith, and that in a perfect degree and manner. We are to turn away our eyes from contemplating all other lives and motives, and to 'look off' from them to Him. In all our struggles let us think of Him. Do not take poor human creatures for your ideal of excellence, nor tune your harps to their keynotes. To imitate men is degradation, and is sure to lead to deformity. None of them, is a safe guide. Black veins are in the purest marble, and flaws in the most lustrous diamonds. But to imitate Jesus is freedom, and to be like Him is perfection. Our code of morals is His life. He is the Ideal incarnate. The secret of all progress is, 'Run-looking unto Jesus.'

Then, again, we have His manhood emphasised when His sympathy is to be commended to our hearts. 'The great High Priest, who is passed into the heavens' is '*Jesus*' . . . 'who was in all points tempted like as we are.' To every sorrowing soul, to all men burdened with heavy tasks, unwelcome duties, pains and sorrows of the imagination, or of the heart, or of memory, or of physical life, or of circumstances-to all there comes the thought, 'Every ill that flesh is heir to' He knows by experience, and in the Man Jesus we find not only the pity of a God, but the sympathy of a Brother.

When one of our princes goes for an afternoon into the slums in East London, everybody says, and says deservedly, 'right!' and 'princely!' *This* prince has learned pity in 'the huts where poor men lie,' and knows by experience all their squalor and misery. The Man Jesus is the sympathetic Priest. The Rabbis, who did not usually see very far into the depth of things, yet caught a wonderful glimpse when they said: 'Messias will be found sitting outside the gate of the city *amongst the lepers*.' That *is* where He sits; and the perfectness of His sympathy, and the completeness of His identification of Himself with all our tears and our sorrows, are taught us when we read that our High Priest is not merely Christ the Official, but Jesus the Man.

And then we find such words as these: 'If we believe that *Jesus* died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him': I think any one that reads with sympathy must feel how very much closer to our hearts that consolation comes, 'Jesus rose again,' than even the mighty word which the Apostle uses on another occasion, 'Christ is risen from the dead.' The one tells us of the risen Redeemer, the other tells us of the risen Brother. And wherever there are sorrowing souls, enduring loss and following their dear ones into the darkness with yearning hearts, they are comforted when they feel that the beloved dead lie down beside their Brother, and with their Brother they shall rise again.

So, again, most strikingly, and yet somewhat singularly, in the words of Scripture which paint most loftily the exaltation of the risen Saviour to the right hand of God, and His wielding of absolute power and authority, it is the old human name that is used; as if the writers would bind together the humiliation and the exaltation, and were holding up hands of wonder at the thought that a Man had risen thus to the Throne of the Universe. What an emphasis and glow of hope there is in such words as these: 'We see not yet all things put under Him, but we see *Jesus*'-the very Man that was here with us- 'crowned with glory and honour.' So in the Book of the Revelation the chosen name for Him who sits amidst the glories of the heavens, and settles the destinies of the universe, and orders the course of history, is Jesus. As if the Apostle would assure us that the face which looked down upon him from amidst the blaze of the glory was indeed the face that he knew long ago upon earth, and the breast that 'was girded with a golden girdle' was the breast upon which he so often had leaned his happy head.

So the ties that bind us to the Man Jesus should be the human bonds that knit us to one another, transferred to Him and purified and strengthened. All that we have failed to find in men we can find in Him. Human wisdom has its limits, but here is a Man whose word is truth, who is Himself the truth. Human love is sometimes hollow, often impotent; it looks down upon us, as a great thinker has said, like the Venus of Milo, that lovely statue, smiling in pity, but it has no arms. But here is a love that is mighty to help, and on which we can rely without disappointment or loss. Human excellence is always limited and imperfect, but here is One whom we may imitate and be pure. So let us do like that poor woman in the Gospel story-bring our precious alabaster box of ointment-the love of these hearts of ours, which is the most precious thing we have to give. The box of ointment that we have so often squandered upon unworthy heads-let us come and pour it upon His, not unmingled with our tears, and anoint Him, our beloved and our King. This Man has loved each of us with a brother's heart; let us love Him with all our hearts.

II. So much for the first name. The second-'Christ'-is the name of office, and brings to us a Redeemer.

I need not dwell at any length upon the original significance and force of the name; it is familiar, of course, to us all. It stands as a transference into Greek of the Hebrew Messias; the one and the other meaning, as we all know, the 'Anointed.' But what is the meaning of claiming for Jesus that He is anointed? A sentence will answer the question. It means that He fulfils all which the inspired imagination of the great ones of the past had seen in that dim Figure that rose before prophet and psalmist. It means that He is anointed or inspired by the divine indwelling to be Prophet, Priest, and

King all over the world. It means that He is-though the belief had faded away from the minds of His generation-a sufferer whilst a Prince, and appointed to ‘turn away unrighteousness’ from the world, and not from ‘Jacob’ only, by a sacrifice and a death.

I cannot see less in the contents of the Jewish idea, the prophetic idea, of the Messias, than these points: divine inspiration or anointing; a sufferer who is to redeem; the fulfiller of all the rapturous visions of psalmist and of prophet in the past.

And so, when Peter stood up amongst that congregation of wondering strangers and scowling Pharisees, and said, ‘The Man that died on the Cross, the Rabbi-peasant from half-heathen Galilee, is the Person to whom Law and Prophets have been pointing,’-no wonder that no one believed him except those whose hearts were touched, for it is never possible for the common mind, at any epoch, to believe that a man who stands beside them is very much bigger than themselves. Great men have always to die, and get a halo of distance around them, before their true stature can be seen.

And now two remarks are all I can afford myself upon this point, and one is this: the hearty recognition of His Messiahship is the centre of all discipleship. The earliest and the simplest Christian creed, which yet-like the little brown roll in which the infant beec-leaves lie folded up-contains in itself all the rest, was this: ‘Jesus is Christ.’ Although it is no part of my business to say how much imperfection and confusion of head comprehension may co-exist with a heart acceptance of Jesus that saves a soul from sin, yet I cannot in faithfulness to my own convictions conceal my belief that he who contents himself with ‘Jesus’ and does not grasp ‘Christ’ has cast away the most valuable and characteristic part of the Christianity which he professes. Surely a most simple inference is that a *Christian* is at least a man who recognises the Christship of Jesus. And I press that upon you, my friends. It is not enough for the sustenance of your own souls and for the cultivation of a vigorous religious life that men should admire, howsoever profoundly and deeply, the humanity of the Lord unless that humanity leads them on to see the office of the Messiah to whom their whole hearts cleave. ‘Jesus is the Christ’ is the minimum Christian creed.

And then, still further, let me remind you how the recognition of Jesus as Christ is essential to giving its full value to the facts of the manhood. 'Jesus died!' Yes. What then? What is that to me? Is that all that I have to say? If His is simply a human death, like all others, I want to know what makes the story of it a Gospel. I want to know what more interest I have in it than I have in the death of Socrates, or in the death of any man or woman whose name was in the obituary column of yesterday's newspaper. 'Jesus died.' That is a fact. What is wanted to turn the fact into a gospel? That I shall know who it was that died, and why He died. 'I declare unto you the gospel which I preach,' Paul says, 'how that *Christ* died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.' The belief that the death of Jesus was the death of the Christ is needful in order that it shall be the means of my deliverance from the burden of sin. If it be only the death of Jesus, it is beautiful, pathetic, as many another martyr's has been, but if it be the death of Christ, then 'my faith can lay her hand' on that great Sacrifice 'and know her guilt was there.'

So in regard to His perfect example. If we only see His manhood when we are 'looking unto Jesus,' the contemplation of His perfection would be as paralysing as spectacles of supreme excellence usually are. But when we can say, '*Christ* also suffered for us, leaving us an example,' and so can deepen the thought of His Manhood into that of His Messiahship, and the conception of His work as example into that of His work as sacrifice, we can hope that His divine power will dwell in us to mould our lives to the likeness of His human life of perfect obedience.

So in regard to His Resurrection and glorious Ascension to the right hand of God. We have not only to think of the solitary man raised from the grave and caught up to the throne. If it were only 'Jesus' who rose and ascended, His Resurrection and Ascension might be as much to us as the raising of Lazarus, or the rapture of Elijah- namely, a demonstration that death did not destroy conscious being, and that a man could rise to heaven; but they would be no more. But if '*Christ* is risen from the dead,' He is 'become the first-fruits of them that slept.' If *Jesus* has gone up on high, others may or may not follow in His train. He may show that manhood is not incapable of elevation to heaven, but has no power to draw others up after Him. But if *Christ* is gone up, He is gone to prepare a place for us, not to fill a solitary throne, and His Ascension is the assurance that He will lift us too to dwell with Him and share His triumph over death and sin.

Most of the blessedness and beauty of His Example, all the mystery and meaning of His Death, and all the power of His Resurrection, depend on the fact that ‘it is *Christ* that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God.’

III. ‘The Lord’ is the name of dignity and brings before us the King.

There are three grades, so to speak, of dignity expressed by this one word ‘Lord’ in the New Testament. The lowest is that in which it is almost the equivalent of our own English title of respectful courtesy, ‘Sir,’ in which sense it is often used in the Gospels, and applied to our Lord as to many other of the persons there. The second is that in which it expresses dignity and authority-and in that sense it is frequently applied to Christ. The third and highest is that in which it is the equivalent of the Old Testament ‘Lord,’ as a divine name; in which sense also it is applied to Christ in the New Testament.

The first and last of these may be left out of consideration now: the central one is the meaning of the word here. I have only time to touch upon two thoughts-to connect this name of dignity first with one and then with the other of the two names that we have already considered.

Jesus is Lord, that is to say, wonderful as it is, His manhood is exalted to supreme dignity. It is the teaching of the New Testament, that in Jesus, the Child of Mary, our nature sits on the throne of the universe and rules over all things. Those rude herdsmen, brothers of Joseph, who came into Pharaoh’s palace-strange contrast to their tents!-there found their brother ruling over that ancient and highly civilised land! We have the Man Jesus for the Lord over all. Trust His dominion and rejoice in His rule, and bow before His authority. Jesus is Lord.

Christ is Lord. That is to say: His sovereign authority and dominion are built upon the fact of His being Deliverer, Redeemer, Sacrifice. His Kingdom is a Kingdom that rests upon His suffering. ‘Wherefore God also hath exalted Him, and given Him a Name that is above every name.’

It is because He wears a vesture dipped in blood, that ‘on the vesture is the name written “King of kings, and Lord of lords.”‘ It is ‘because He shall deliver the needy when he crieth,’ as the prophetic psalm has it, that ‘all kings shall fall down before Him and all nations shall serve Him.’ Because He has given His life for the world He is the Master of the World. His humanity is raised to the throne because His humanity stooped to the cross. As long as men’s hearts can be touched by absolute unselfish surrender, and as long as they can know the blessedness of responsive surrender, so long will He who gave Himself for the world be the Sovereign of the world, and the First-born from the dead be the Prince of all the kings of the earth.

And so, dear friends, our thoughts to-day all point to this lesson- do not you content yourselves with a maimed Christ. Do not tarry in the Manhood; do not think it enough to cherish reverence for the nobility of His soul, the gentle wisdom of His words, the beauty of His character, the tenderness of His compassion. All these will be insufficient for your needs. There is more in His mission than these -even His death for you and for all men. Take Him for your Christ, but do not lose the Person in the Work, any more than you lose the work in the Person. And be not content with an intellectual recognition of Him, but bring Him the faith which cleaves to Him and His work as its only hope and peace, and the love which, because of His work as Christ, flows out to the beloved Person who has done it all. Thus loving Jesus and trusting Christ, you will bring obedience to your Lord and homage to your King, and learn the sweetness and power of ‘the name that is above every name’-the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

May we all be able, with clear and unfaltering conviction of our understandings and loving affiance of our whole souls, to repeat as our own the grand words in which so many centuries have proclaimed their faith-words which shed a spell of peacefulness over stormy lives, and fling a great light of hope into the black jaws of the grave: ‘I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord!’

15)Acts 2:37-41

Acts

PETER'S FIRST SERMON

Act. 2:32 - Act. 2:47.

This passage may best be dealt with as divided into three parts: the sharp spear-thrust of Peter's closing words [Act. 2:32 - Act. 2:36], the wounded and healed hearers [Act. 2:37 - Act. 2:41], and the fair morning dawn of the Church [Act. 2:42 - Act. 2:47].

I. Peter's address begins with pointing out the fulfilment of prophecy in the gift of the Spirit [Act. 2:14 - Act. 2:21].

It then declares the Resurrection of Jesus as foretold by prophecy, and witnessed to by the whole body of believers [Act. 2:22 - Act. 2:32], and it ends by bringing together these two facts, the gift of the Spirit and the Resurrection and Ascension, as effect and cause, and as establishing beyond all doubt that Jesus is the Christ of prophecy, and the Lord on whom Joel had declared that whoever called should be saved. We now begin with the last verse of the second part of the address.

Observe the significant alternation of the names of 'Christ' and 'Jesus' in Act. 2:31 - Act. 2:32. The former verse establishes that prophecy had foretold the Resurrection of the Messiah, whoever he might be; the latter asserts that 'this Jesus' has fulfilled the prophetic conditions. That is not a thing to be argued about, but to be attested by competent witnesses. It was presented to the multitude on Pentecost, as it is to us, as a plain matter of fact, on which the whole fabric of Christianity is built, and which itself securely rests on the concordant testimony of those who knew Him alive, saw Him dead, and were familiar with Him risen.

There is a noble ring of certitude in Peter's affirmation, and of confidence that the testimony producible was overwhelming. Unless Jesus had risen, there would neither have been a Pentecost nor a Church to receive the gift. The simple fact which Peter alleged in that first sermon, 'whereof we all are witnesses,' is still too strong for the deniers of the Resurrection, as their many devices to get over it prove.

But, a listener might ask, what has this witness of yours to do with Joel's prophecy, or with this speaking with tongues? The answer follows in the last part of the sermon. The risen Jesus has ascended up; that is inseparable from the fact of resurrection, and is part of our testimony. He is 'exalted by,' or, perhaps, at, 'the right hand of God.' And that exaltation is to us the token that there He has received from the Father the Spirit, whom He promised to send when He left us. Therefore it is He-'this Jesus'-who has 'poured forth this,'-this new strange gift, the tokens of which you see flaming on each head, and hear bursting in praise from every tongue.

What triumphant emphasis is in that 'He'! Peter quotes Joel's word 'pour forth.' The prophet had said, as the mouthpiece of God, '*I* will pour forth'; Peter unhesitatingly transfers the word to Jesus. We must not assume in him at this stage a fully-developed consciousness of our Lord's divine nature, but neither must we blink the tremendous assumption which he feels warranted in making, that the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of God meant His exercising the power which belonged to God Himself.

In Act. 2:34, he stays for a moment to establish by prophecy that the Ascension, of which he had for the first time spoken in Act. 2:33, is part of the prophetic characteristics of the Messiah. His demonstration runs parallel with his preceding one as to the Resurrection. He quotes Psa. 110:1 - Psa. 110:7, which he had learned to do from his Master, and just as he had argued about the prediction of Resurrection, that the dead Psalmist's words could not apply to himself, and must therefore apply to the Messiah; so he concludes that it was not 'David' who was called by Jehovah to sit as 'Lord' on His right hand. If not David, it could only be the Messiah who was thus invested with Lordship, and exalted as participator of the throne of the Most High.

Then comes the final thrust of the spear, for which all the discourse has been preparing. The Apostle rises to the full height of his great commission, and sets the trumpet to his mouth, summoning 'all the house of Israel,' priests, rulers, and all the people, to acknowledge his Master. He proclaims his supreme dignity and Messiahship. He is the 'Lord' of whom the Psalmist sang, and the prophet declared that whoever called on His name should be saved; and He is the Christ for whom Israel looked.

Last of all, he sets in sharp contrast what God had done with Jesus, and what Israel had done, and the barb of his arrow lies in the last words, 'whom ye crucified.' And this bold champion of Jesus, this undaunted arraigner of a nation's crimes, was the man who, a few weeks before, had quailed before a maid-servant's saucy tongue! What made the change? Will anything but the Resurrection and Pentecost account for the psychological transformation effected in him and the other Apostles?

II. No wonder that 'they were pricked in their heart'!

Such a thrust must have gone deep, even where the armour of prejudice was thick. The scene they had witnessed, and the fiery words of explanation, taken together, produced incipient conviction, and the conviction produced alarm. How surely does the first glimpse of Jesus as Christ and Lord set conscience to work! The question, 'What shall we do?' is the beginning of conversion. The acknowledgment of Jesus which does not lead to it is shallow and worthless. The most orthodox accepter, so far as intellect goes, of the gospel, who has not been driven by it to ask his own duty in regard to it, and what he is to do to receive its benefits, and to escape from his sins, has not accepted it at all.

Peter's answer lays down two conditions: repentance and baptism. The former is often taken in too narrow a sense as meaning sorrow for sin, whereas it means a change of disposition or mind, which will be accompanied, no doubt, with 'godly sorrow,' but is in itself deeper than sorrow, and is the turning away of heart and will from past love and practice of evil. The second, baptism, is 'in the name of Jesus Christ,' or more accurately, '*upon* the name,'-that is, on the ground of the revealed character of Jesus. That necessarily implies faith in that Name; for, without such faith, the baptism would not be on the ground of the Name. The two things are regarded as inseparable, being the inside and the outside of the Christian discipleship. Repentance, faith, baptism, these three, are called for by Peter.

But 'remission of sins' is not attached to the immediately preceding clause, so as that baptism is said to secure remission, but to the whole of what goes before in the sentence. Obedience to the requirements would bring the same gift to the obedient as the disciples had received; for it would make them disciples also. But, while repentance and baptism which presupposed faith were the normal, precedent conditions of the Spirit's bestowal, the case of Cornelius, where the Spirit was given before baptism, forbids the attempt to link the rite and the divine gift more closely together.

The Apostle was eager to share the gift. The more we have of the Spirit, the more shall we desire that others may have Him, and the more sure shall we be that He is meant for all. So Peter went on to base his assurance, that his hearers might all possess the Spirit, on the universal destination of the promise. Joel had said, 'on all flesh'; Peter declares that word to point downwards through all generations, and outwards to all nations. How swiftly had he grown in grasp of the sweep of Christ's work! How far beneath that moment of illumination some of his subsequent actions fell!

We have only a summary of his exhortations, the gist of which was earnest warning to separate from the fate of the nation by separating in will and mind from its sins. Swift conviction followed the Spiri-given words, as it ever will do when the speaker is filled with the Holy Spirit, and has therefore a tongue of fire. Three thousand new disciples were made that day, and though there must have been many superficial adherents, and none with much knowledge, it is perhaps not fanciful to see in Luke's speaking of them as 'souls' a hint that, in general, the acceptance of Jesus as Messiah was deep and real. Not only were three thousand 'names' added to the hundred and twenty, but three thousand souls.

III. The fair picture of the morning brightness, so soon overclouded, so long lost, follows.

First, the narrative tells how the raw converts were incorporated in the community, and assimilated to its character. They, too, 'continued steadfastly' [Act. 1:14]. Note the four points enumerated: 'teaching,' which would be principally instruction in the life of Jesus and His Messianic dignity, as proved by prophecy; 'fellowship,' which implies community of disposition and oneness of heart manifested in outward association; 'breaking of bread,'-that is, the observance of the Lord's Supper; and 'the prayers,' which were the very life-breath of the infant Church [Act. 1:14]. Thus oneness in faith and in love, participation in the memorial feast and in devotional acts bound the new converts to the original believers, and trained them towards maturity. These are still the methods by which a sudden influx of converts is best dealt with, and babes in Christ nurtured to full growth. Alas! that so often churches do not know what to do with novices when they come in numbers.

A wider view of the state of the community as a whole closes the chapter. It is the first of several landing-places, as it were, on which Luke pauses to sum up an epoch. A reverent awe laid hold of the popular mind, which was increased by the miraculous powers of the Apostles. The Church will produce that impression on the world in proportion as it is manifestly filled with the Spirit. Do we? The s-called community of goods was not imposed by commandment, as is plain from Peter's recognition of Ananias' right to do as he chose with his property. The facts that Mark's mother, Mary, had a house of her own, and that Barnabas, her relative, is specially signalised as having sold his property, prove that it was not universal. It was an irrepressible outcrop of the brotherly feeling that filled all hearts. Christ has not come to lay down laws, but to give impulses. Compelled communism is not the repetition of that oneness of sympathy which effloresced in the bright flower of this common possession of individual goods. But neither is the closed purse, closed because the heart is shut, which puts to shame so much profession of brotherhood, justified because the liberality of the primitive disciples was not by constraint nor of obligation, but willing and spontaneous.

Act. 2:46 - Act. 2:47 add an outline of the beautiful daily life of the community, which was, like their liberality, the outcome of the feeling of brotherhood, intensified by the sense of the gulf between them and the crooked generation from which they had separated themselves. Luke shows it on two sides. Though they had separated from the nation, they clung to the Temple services, as they continued to do till the end. They had not come to clear consciousness of all that was involved in their discipleship, It was not God's will that the new spirit should violently break with the old letter. Convulsions are not His way, except as second-best. The disciples had to stay within the fold of Israel, if they were to influence Israel. The time of outward parting between the Temple and the Church was far ahead yet.

But the truest life of the infant Church was not nourished in the Temple, but in the privacy of their homes. They were one family, and lived as such.

Their ‘breaking bread at home’ includes both their ordinary meals and the Lord’s Supper; for in these first days every meal, at least the evening meal of every day, was hallowed by having the Supper as a part of it. Each meal was thus a religious act, a token of brotherhood, and accompanied with praise. Surely *then* ‘men did eat angels’ food,’ and on platter and cup was written ‘Holiness to the Lord.’ The ideal of human fellowship was realised, though but for a moment, and on a small scale. It was inevitable that divergences should arise, but it was not inevitable that the Church should depart so far from the brief brightness of its dawn. Still the sweet concordant brotherhood of these morning hours witnesses what Christian love can do, and prophesies what shall yet be and shall not pass.

No wonder that such a Church won favour with all the people! We hear nothing of its evangelising activity, but its life was such that, without recorded speech, multitudes were drawn into so sweet a fellowship. If we were like the Pentecostal Christians, we should attract wearied souls out of the world’s Babel into the calm home where love and brotherhood reigned, and God would ‘add’ to *us* ‘day by day those that were being saved.’

16)Acts 2:42

Acts

PETER’S FIRST SERMON

A FOURFOLD CORD

Act. 2:42.

The Early Church was not a pattern for us, and the idea of its greatly superior purity is very largely a delusion. But still, though that be true, the occasional glimpses that we get at intervals in the early chapters of this Book of the Acts of the Apostles do present a very instructive and beautiful picture of what a Christian society may be, and therefore of what Christian Churches and Christian individuals ought to be.

The words that I have read, however, are not the description of the demeanour of the whole community, but of that portion of it which had been added so swiftly to the original nucleus on the Day of Pentecost. Think, on the morning of that day ‘the number of the names was one hundred and twenty,’ on the evening of that day it was three thousand over that number-a sufficiently swift and large increase to have swamped the original nucleus, unless there had been a great power of assimilation to itself lodged in that little body. These new converts held to the Apostolic ‘doctrine’ and ‘fellowship,’ and to ‘breaking of bread’ and to ‘prayers,’ and so became homogeneous with the others, and all worked to one end.

Now, these four points which are signalised in this description may well afford us material for consideration. They give us the ideal of a Church’s inner life, which in the divine order should precede, and be the basis of, a Church’s work in the world. But, while we speak of an ideal for a Church, let us not forget that it is realised only by the lives of individuals being conformed to it.

I. The first point, which is fundamental to all the others, is ‘They continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine.’

An earnest desire after fuller knowledge is the basis of all healthy Christian life. We cannot realise, without a great effort, the ignorance of these new converts. ‘Parthians and Medes and Elamites,’ and Jews gathered from every corner of the Roman world, they had come up to Jerusalem, and the bulk of them knew no more about Christ and Christianity than what they picked up out of Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost. But that was enough to change their hearts and their wills and to lead them to a real faith. And though the *contents* of their faith were very incomplete, the *power* of their faith was very great. For there is no necessary connection between the amount believed and the grasp with which it is held. Believing, they were eager for more light to be poured on to their half-seeing eyes. They had no Gospels, they had no written record, they had no means of learning anything about the faith which they were now professing except listening to one or other of the original Eleven, with the addition of any of the other ‘old disciples’-that is, *early* disciples-who might perchance have equal claims to be listened to as ‘witnesses from the beginning.’ We shall very much misunderstand the meaning of the words here, if we suppose that these novices were dosed with theological instruction, or that ‘the Apostles’ doctrine' consisted of such fully developed truths as we find later on in Paul's writings. If you will look at the first sermons that Peter is recorded as having delivered, in the early chapters of the Acts, you will find that he by no means enunciates a definite theology such as he unfolds in his later Epistle. There is no word about the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ; His designation is 'Thy holy child Jesus.' There is no word about the atoning nature of Christ's sacrifice; His death is simply the great crime of the Jewish people, and His Resurrection the great divine fact witnessing to the truth of His Messiahship. All that which we now regard, and rightly regard, as the very centre and living focus of divine truth was but beginning to shine out on the Apostles' minds, or rather to gather itself into form, and to shape itself by slow degrees into propositions. 'The Apostles' teaching'-for 'doctrine' does not convey to modern ears what Luke meant by the word-must have been very largely, if not exclusively, of the same kind as is preserved to us in the four Gospels, and especially in the first three of them. The recital to these listeners, to whom it was all so fresh and strange and transcendent, of the story that has become worn and commonplace to us by its familiarity, of Christ in His birth, Christ in His gentleness, Christ in His deeds, Christ in the deep words that the Apostles were only beginning to understand; Christ in His Death, Resurrection, and Ascension-these were the themes on the narration of which this company of three thousand waited with such eagerness.

But, of course, there was necessarily involved in the story a certain amount of what we now call doctrine-that is, theological teaching- because one cannot tell the story of Jesus Christ, as it is told in the four Gospels, without impressing upon the hearers the conviction that His nature was divine and that His death was a sacrifice. Beyond these truths we know not how far the Apostles went. To these, perhaps, they did not at first rise. But whether they did so or no, and although the facts that the hearers were thus eager to receive, and treasured when they received, are the commonplaces of our Sunda-schools, and quite uninteresting to many of us, the spirit which marked these early converts is the spirit that must lie at the foundation of progressive and healthy Christianity in us. The consciousness of our own ignorance, of the great sweep of God's revealed mind and will, the eager desire to fill up the gaps in the circle, and to widen the diameter, of our knowledge, and the consequent steadfastness and persistence of our continuance in the teachings-far fuller and deeper and richer and nobler than were heard in the upper room at Jerusalem by the first three thousand-which, through the divine Spirit and the experience of the Church for nineteen hundred years are available for us, ought to characterise us all.

Now, dear friends, ask yourselves the question very earnestly, Does this desire of fuller Christian knowledge at all mark my Christian character, and does it practically influence my Christian conduct and life? There are thousands of men and women in all our churches who know no more about the rich revelation of God in Jesus Christ than they did on that day long, long ago, when first they began to apprehend that He was the Saviour of their souls. When I sometimes get glimpses into the utter Biblical ignorance of educated members of my own and of other congregations, I am appalled; I do not wonder how we ministers do so little by our preaching, when the minds of the people to whom we speak are so largely in such a chaotic state in reference to Scriptural truth. I believe that there is an intolerance of plain, sober, instructive Christian teaching from the pulpit, which is one of the worst signs of the Christianity of this generation. And I believe that there are a terribly large number of professing Christians, and good people after a fashion, whose Bibles are as clean to-day, except on one or two favourite pages, as they were when they came out of the bookseller’s shop years and years ago. You will never be strong Christians, you will never be happy ones, until you make conscience of the study of God’s Word and ‘continue steadfastly in the Apostles’ teaching.’ You may produce plenty of emotional Christianity, and of busy and sometimes fussy work without it, but you will not get depth. I sometimes think that the complaint of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews might be turned upside down nowadays. He says: ‘When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles.’ Nowadays we might say in Sunday-schools and other places of church work: ‘When for the time ye ought to be *learners*, you have taken to teaching before you know what you are teaching, and so neither you nor your scholars will profit much.’ The vase should be full before you begin to empty it.

Again, there ought to be, and we ought to aim after, an equable temper of mutual brotherhood conquering selfishness.

‘They continued in the Apostles’ doctrine and in fellowship.’ ‘Fellowship’ here, as I take it, applies to community of feeling. A verse or two afterwards it is applied to community of goods, but we have nothing to do with that subject at present. What is meant is that these three thousand, as was most natural, cut off altogether from their ancient associations, finding themselves at once separated by a great gulf from their nation and its hopes and its religion, were driven together as sheep are when wolves are prowling around. And, being individually weak, they held on by one another, so that many weaknesses might make a strength, and glimmering embers raked together might break into a flame.

Now, all these circumstances, or almost all of them, that drove the primitive believers together, are at an end, and the tendencies of this day are rather to drive Christian people apart than to draw them together. Differences of position, occupation, culture, ways of looking at things, views of Christian truth and the like, all come powerfully in to the reinforcement of the natural selfishness which tempts us all, unless the grace of God overcomes it. Although we do not want any hysterical or histrionic presentation of Christian sympathy and brotherhood, we do need-far more than any of us have awakened to the consciousness of the need-for the health of our own souls we need to make definite efforts to cultivate more of that sense of Christian brotherhood with all that hold the same Lord Christ, and to realise this truth: that they and we, however separate, are nearer one another than are we and those nearest to us who do not share in our Christian faith.

I do not dwell upon this point. It is one on which it is easy to gush, and it has got a bad name because there has been so much unreal and sickly talk about it. But if any Christian man will honestly try to cultivate the brotherly feeling which my text suggests, and to which our common relation to Jesus Christ binds us, and will try it in reference to *A*, *B*, or *C*, whom he does not much like, with whose ways he has no kind of sympathy, whom he believes to be a heretic, and who perhaps returns the belief about him with interest, he will find it is a pretty sharp test of his Christian principle. Let us be real, at any rate, and not pretend to have more love than we really have in our hearts. And let us remember that ‘he that loveth Him that begat, loveth Him also that is begotten of Him.’

II. Another characteristic which comes out in the words before us is the blending of worship with life.

‘They continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine . . . and in breaking of bread.’ Commentators who can only see one thing at a time-and there are a good many of that species-have got up great discussions as to whether this phrase means eating ordinary meals or partaking of the Lord’s Supper. I venture to say it means both, because, clearly enough, in the beginning, the common meal was hallowed by what we now call the Lord’s Supper being associated with it, and every day’s evening repast was eaten ‘in remembrance of Him.’

So, naturally, and without an idea of anything awful or sacred about the rite, the first Christians, when they went home after a hard day’s work and sat down to take their own suppers, blessed the bread and the wine, and whether they ate or drank, did the one and the other ‘in remembrance of Him.’

The gradual growth of the sentiment attaching to the Lord’s Supper, until it reached the portentous height of regarding it as a ‘tremendous sacrifice’ which could only be administered by priests with ordained hands in Apostolic succession, can be partly traced even in New Testament times. The Lord’s Supper began as an appendage to, or rather as a heightening of, the evening meal, and at first, as this chapter tells us in a subsequent verse, was observed day by day. Then, before the epoch of the Acts of the Apostles is ended, we find it has become a weekly celebration, and forms part of the service on the first day of the week. But even when the observance had ceased to be daily, the association with an ordinary meal continued, and that led to the disorders at Corinth which Paul rebuked, and which would have been impossible if later ideas of the Lord’s Supper had existed then.

The history of the transformation of that simple Supper into ‘the bloodless sacrifice’ of the Mass, and all the mischief consequent thereon, does not concern us now. But it does concern us to note that these first believers hallowed common things by doing them, and common food by partaking of it, with the memory of His great sacrifice in their minds. The poorest fare, the coarsest bread, the sourest wine, on the humblest table, became a memorial of that dear Lord. Religion and life, the domestic and the devout, were so closely braided together that when a household sat at table it was both a family and a church; and while they were eating their meat for the strength of their body, they were partaking of the memorial of their dying Lord.

Is your house like that? Is your daily life like that? Do you bring the sacred and the secular as close together as that? Are the dying words of your Master, ‘This do in remembrance of Me,’ written by you over everything you do? And so is all life worship, and all worship hope?

III. The last thing here is habitual devotion.

I suppose the disciples had no forms of set Christian prayers. They still used the Jewish liturgy, for we read that ‘they continued daily with one accord in the Temple.’ I am sure that no two things can be less like one another than the worship of the primitive Church and the worship, say, of one of our congregations. Did you ever try to paint for yourselves, for instance, the scene described in the First Epistle to the Corinthians? When they came together in their meetings for worship, ‘every one had a psalm, a doctrine, an interpretation.’ ‘Let the prophets speak, by ones, or at most by twos’; and if another gets up to interrupt, let the first speaker sit down. Paul goes on to say, ‘Let all things be done decently and in order.’ So there must have been tendencies to disorder, and much at which some of our modern ecclesiastical martinets would have been very much scandalised as ‘unbecoming.’ Wise men are in no haste to change forms. Forms change of themselves when their users change; but it would be a good day for Christendom if the faith and devoutness of a community of believers such as we, for instance, profess to be, were so strong and so demanding expression as that, instead of my poor voice continually sounding here, every one of you had a psalm or a doctrine, and every one of you were able and impelled to speak out of the fulness of the Spirit which God poured into you. It will come some day; it must come if Christendom is not to die of its own dignity. But we do not need to hurry matters, only let us remember that unless a Church continues steadfast in prayer it is worth very little.

Now, dear brethren, it is said about us Free Churchmen that we think a great deal too much of preaching and a great deal too little of the prayers of the congregation. That is a stock criticism. I am bound to say that there is a grain of truth in it, and that there is not, with too many of our congregations, as lofty a conception of the power and blessedness of the united prayers of the congregation as there ought to be, or else you would not hear about ‘introductory services.’ Introductory to what? Do we speak to God merely by way of preface to one of us talking to his brethren? Is that the proper order? ‘They continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ teaching,’ no doubt; but also ‘steadfastly in prayer.’ I pray you to try to make this picture of the Pentecostal converts the ideal of your own lives, and to do your best to help forward the time when it shall be the reality in this church, and in every other society of professing Christians.

17)Acts 2:43-46

Acts

PETER’S FIRST SERMON

Act. 2:32 - Act. 2:47.

This passage may best be dealt with as divided into three parts: the sharp spear-thrust of Peter’s closing words [Act. 2:32 - Act. 2:36], the wounded and healed hearers [Act. 2:37 - Act. 2:41], and the fair morning dawn of the Church [Act. 2:42 - Act. 2:47].

I. Peter’s address begins with pointing out the fulfilment of prophecy in the gift of the Spirit [Act. 2:14 - Act. 2:21].

It then declares the Resurrection of Jesus as foretold by prophecy, and witnessed to by the whole body of believers [Act. 2:22 - Act. 2:32], and it ends by bringing together these two facts, the gift of the Spirit and the Resurrection and Ascension, as effect and cause, and as establishing beyond all doubt that Jesus is the Christ of prophecy, and the Lord on whom Joel had declared that whoever called should be saved. We now begin with the last verse of the second part of the address.

Observe the significant alternation of the names of ‘Christ’ and ‘Jesus’ in Act. 2:31 - Act. 2:32. The former verse establishes that prophecy had foretold the Resurrection of the Messiah, whoever he might be; the latter asserts that ‘this Jesus’ has fulfilled the prophetic conditions. That is not a thing to be argued about, but to be attested by competent witnesses. It was presented to the multitude on Pentecost, as it is to us, as a plain matter of fact, on which the whole fabric of Christianity is built, and which itself securely rests on the concordant testimony of those who knew Him alive, saw Him dead, and were familiar with Him risen.

There is a noble ring of certitude in Peter’s affirmation, and of confidence that the testimony producible was overwhelming. Unless Jesus had risen, there would neither have been a Pentecost nor a Church to receive the gift. The simple fact which Peter alleged in that first sermon, ‘whereof we all are witnesses,’ is still too strong for the deniers of the Resurrection, as their many devices to get over it prove.

But, a listener might ask, what has this witness of yours to do with Joel’s prophecy, or with this speaking with tongues? The answer follows in the last part of the sermon. The risen Jesus has ascended up; that is inseparable from the fact of resurrection, and is part of our testimony. He is ‘exalted by,’ or, perhaps, at, ‘the right hand of God.’ And that exaltation is to us the token that there He has received from the Father the Spirit, whom He promised to send when He left us. Therefore it is He-’this Jesus’-who has ‘poured forth this,’-this new strange gift, the tokens of which you see flaming on each head, and hear bursting in praise from every tongue.

What triumphant emphasis is in that ‘He’! Peter quotes Joel’s word ‘pour forth.’ The prophet had said, as the mouthpiece of God, ‘*I* will pour forth’; Peter unhesitatingly transfers the word to Jesus. We must not assume in him at this stage a fully-developed consciousness of our Lord’s divine nature, but neither must we blink the tremendous assumption which he feels warranted in making, that the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of God meant His exercising the power which belonged to God Himself.

In Act. 2:34, he stays for a moment to establish by prophecy that the Ascension, of which he had for the first time spoken in Act. 2:33, is part of the prophetic characteristics of the Messiah. His demonstration runs parallel with his preceding one as to the Resurrection. He quotes Psa. 110:1 - Psa. 110:7, which he had learned to do from his Master, and just as he had argued about the prediction of Resurrection, that the dead Psalmist’s words could not apply to himself, and must therefore apply to the Messiah; so he concludes that it was not ‘David’ who was called by Jehovah to sit as ‘Lord’ on His right hand. If not David, it could only be the Messiah who was thus invested with Lordship, and exalted as participator of the throne of the Most High.

Then comes the final thrust of the spear, for which all the discourse has been preparing. The Apostle rises to the full height of his great commission, and sets the trumpet to his mouth, summoning ‘all the house of Israel,’ priests, rulers, and all the people, to acknowledge his Master. He proclaims his supreme dignity and Messiahship. He is the ‘Lord’ of whom the Psalmist sang, and the prophet declared that whoever called on His name should be saved; and He is the Christ for whom Israel looked.

Last of all, he sets in sharp contrast what God had done with Jesus, and what Israel had done, and the barb of his arrow lies in the last words, ‘whom ye crucified.’ And this bold champion of Jesus, this undaunted arraigner of a nation’s crimes, was the man who, a few weeks before, had quailed before a maid-servant’s saucy tongue! What made the change? Will anything but the Resurrection and Pentecost account for the psychological transformation effected in him and the other Apostles?

II. No wonder that ‘they were pricked in their heart’!

Such a thrust must have gone deep, even where the armour of prejudice was thick. The scene they had witnessed, and the fiery words of explanation, taken together, produced incipient conviction, and the conviction produced alarm. How surely does the first glimpse of Jesus as Christ and Lord set conscience to work! The question, ‘What shall we do?’ is the beginning of conversion. The acknowledgment of Jesus which does not lead to it is shallow and worthless. The most orthodox accepter, so far as intellect goes, of the gospel, who has not been driven by it to ask his own duty in regard to it, and what he is to do to receive its benefits, and to escape from his sins, has not accepted it at all.

Peter’s answer lays down two conditions: repentance and baptism. The former is often taken in too narrow a sense as meaning sorrow for sin, whereas it means a change of disposition or mind, which will be accompanied, no doubt, with ‘godly sorrow,’ but is in itself deeper than sorrow, and is the turning away of heart and will from past love and practice of evil. The second, baptism, is ‘in the name of Jesus Christ,’ or more accurately, ‘*upon* the name,’-that is, on the ground of the revealed character of Jesus. That necessarily implies faith in that Name; for, without such faith, the baptism would not be on the ground of the Name. The two things are regarded as inseparable, being the inside and the outside of the Christian discipleship. Repentance, faith, baptism, these three, are called for by Peter.

But ‘remission of sins’ is not attached to the immediately preceding clause, so as that baptism is said to secure remission, but to the whole of what goes before in the sentence. Obedience to the requirements would bring the same gift to the obedient as the disciples had received; for it would make them disciples also. But, while repentance and baptism which presupposed faith were the normal, precedent conditions of the Spirit’s bestowal, the case of Cornelius, where the Spirit was given before baptism, forbids the attempt to link the rite and the divine gift more closely together.

The Apostle was eager to share the gift. The more we have of the Spirit, the more shall we desire that others may have Him, and the more sure shall we be that He is meant for all. So Peter went on to base his assurance, that his hearers might all possess the Spirit, on the universal destination of the promise. Joel had said, ‘on all flesh’; Peter declares that word to point downwards through all generations, and outwards to all nations. How swiftly had he grown in grasp of the sweep of Christ’s work! How far beneath that moment of illumination some of his subsequent actions fell!

We have only a summary of his exhortations, the gist of which was earnest warning to separate from the fate of the nation by separating in will and mind from its sins. Swift conviction followed the Spiri-given words, as it ever will do when the speaker is filled with the Holy Spirit, and has therefore a tongue of fire. Three thousand new disciples were made that day, and though there must have been many superficial adherents, and none with much knowledge, it is perhaps not fanciful to see in Luke’s speaking of them as ‘souls’ a hint that, in general, the acceptance of Jesus as Messiah was deep and real. Not only were three thousand ‘names’ added to the hundred and twenty, but three thousand souls.

III. The fair picture of the morning brightness, so soon overclouded, so long lost, follows.

First, the narrative tells how the raw converts were incorporated in the community, and assimilated to its character. They, too, ‘continued steadfastly’ [Act. 1:14]. Note the four points enumerated: ‘teaching,’ which would be principally instruction in the life of Jesus and His Messianic dignity, as proved by prophecy; ‘fellowship,’ which implies community of disposition and oneness of heart manifested in outward association; ‘breaking of bread,’-that is, the observance of the Lord’s Supper; and ‘the prayers,’ which were the very life-breath of the infant Church [Act. 1:14]. Thus oneness in faith and in love, participation in the memorial feast and in devotional acts bound the new converts to the original believers, and trained them towards maturity. These are still the methods by which a sudden influx of converts is best dealt with, and babes in Christ nurtured to full growth. Alas! that so often churches do not know what to do with novices when they come in numbers.

A wider view of the state of the community as a whole closes the chapter. It is the first of several landing-places, as it were, on which Luke pauses to sum up an epoch. A reverent awe laid hold of the popular mind, which was increased by the miraculous powers of the Apostles. The Church will produce that impression on the world in proportion as it is manifestly filled with the Spirit. Do we? The s-called community of goods was not imposed by commandment, as is plain from Peter’s recognition of Ananias’ right to do as he chose with his property. The facts that Mark’s mother, Mary, had a house of her own, and that Barnabas, her relative, is specially signalised as having sold his property, prove that it was not universal. It was an irrepressible outcrop of the brotherly feeling that filled all hearts. Christ has not come to lay down laws, but to give impulses. Compelled communism is not the repetition of that oneness of sympathy which effloresced in the bright flower of this common possession of individual goods. But neither is the closed purse, closed because the heart is shut, which puts to shame so much profession of brotherhood, justified because the liberality of the primitive disciples was not by constraint nor of obligation, but willing and spontaneous.

Act. 2:46 - Act. 2:47 add an outline of the beautiful daily life of the community, which was, like their liberality, the outcome of the feeling of brotherhood, intensified by the sense of the gulf between them and the crooked generation from which they had separated themselves. Luke shows it on two sides. Though they had separated from the nation, they clung to the Temple services, as they continued to do till the end. They had not come to clear consciousness of all that was involved in their discipleship, It was not God's will that the new spirit should violently break with the old letter. Convulsions are not His way, except as second-best. The disciples had to stay within the fold of Israel, if they were to influence Israel. The time of outward parting between the Temple and the Church was far ahead yet.

But the truest life of the infant Church was not nourished in the Temple, but in the privacy of their homes. They were one family, and lived as such. Their 'breaking bread at home' includes both their ordinary meals and the Lord's Supper; for in these first days every meal, at least the evening meal of every day, was hallowed by having the Supper as a part of it. Each meal was thus a religious act, a token of brotherhood, and accompanied with praise. Surely *then* 'men did eat angels' food,' and on platter and cup was written 'Holiness to the Lord.' The ideal of human fellowship was realised, though but for a moment, and on a small scale. It was inevitable that divergences should arise, but it was not inevitable that the Church should depart so far from the brief brightness of its dawn. Still the sweet concordant brotherhood of these morning hours witnesses what Christian love can do, and prophesies what shall yet be and shall not pass.

No wonder that such a Church won favour with all the people! We hear nothing of its evangelising activity, but its life was such that, without recorded speech, multitudes were drawn into so sweet a fellowship. If we were like the Pentecostal Christians, we should attract wearied souls out of the world's Babel into the calm home where love and brotherhood reigned, and God would 'add' to *us* 'day by day those that were being saved.'

18)Acts 2:47

A PURE CHURCH AN INCREASING CHURCH

Act. 2:47.

‘And the Lord added to them day by day those that were being saved.’-[R. V.] You observe that the principal alterations of these words in the Revised Version are two: the one the omission of ‘the church,’ the other the substitution of ‘were being saved’ for ‘such as should be saved.’ The former of these changes has an interest as suggesting that at the early period referred to the name of ‘the church’ had not yet been definitely attached to the infant community, and that the word afterwards crept into the text at a time when ecclesiasticism had become a great deal stronger than it was at the date of the writing of the Acts of the Apostles. The second of the changes is of more importance. The Authorised Version’s rendering suggests that salvation is a future thing, which in one aspect is partially true. The Revised Version, which is also by far the more literally accurate, suggests the other idea, that salvation is a process going on all through the course of a Christian man’s life. And that carries very large and important lessons.

I. I ask you to notice here, first, the profound conception which the writer had of the present action of the ascended Christ. ‘The Lord added to them day by day those that were being saved.’

Then Christ [for it is He that is here spoken of as the Lord], the living, ascended Christ, was present in, and working with, that little community of believing souls. You will find that the thought of a present Saviour, who is the life-blood of the Church on earth, and the spring of action for all good that is done in it and by it, runs through the whole of this Book of the Acts of the Apostles. The keynote is struck in its first verses: ‘The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began to do and to teach, until the day in which He was taken up.’ That is the description of Luke’s Gospel, and it implies that the Acts of the Apostles is the *second* treatise, which tells all that Jesus continued to do and teach *after* that He was taken up. So the Lord, the ascended Christ, is the true theme and hero of this book. It is He, for instance, who sends down the Spirit on the Day of

Pentecost. It is He whom the dying martyr sees ‘standing at the right hand of God,’ ready to help. It is He who appears to the persecutor on the road to Damascus. It is He who sends Paul and his company to preach in Europe. It is He who opens hearts for the reception of their message. It is He who stands by the Apostle in a vision, and bids him ‘be of good cheer,’ and go forth upon his work. Thus, at every crisis in the history of the Church, it is the Lord-that is to say, Christ Himself-who is revealed as working in them and for them, the ascended but yet eve-present Guide, Counsellor, Inspirer, Protector, and Rewarder of them that put their trust in Him. So here it is He that ‘adds to the Church daily them that were being saved.’

I believe, dear brethren, that modern Christianity has far too much lost the vivid impression of this present Christ as actually dwelling and working among us. What is good in us and what is bad in us conspire to make us think more of the past work of an ascended Christ than of the present work of an indwelling Christ. We cannot think too much of that Cross by which He has laid the foundation for the salvation and reconciliation of all the world; but we may easily think too exclusively of it, and so fix our thoughts upon that work which He completed when on Calvary He said, ‘It is finished!’ as to forget the continual work which will never be finished until His Church is perfected, and the world is redeemed. If we are a Church of Christ at all, we have Christ in very deed among us, and working through us and on us. And unless we have, in no mystical and unreal and metaphorical sense, but in the simplest and yet grandest prose reality, that living Saviour here in our hearts and in our fellowship, better that these walls were levelled with the ground, and this congregation scattered to the four winds of heaven. The present Christ is the life of His Church.

Notice, and that but for a moment, for I shall have to deal with it more especially at another part of this discourse,-the specific action which is here ascribed to Him. *He* adds to the Church, not *we*, not our preaching, not our eloquence, our fervour, our efforts. These may be the weapons in His hands, but the hand that wields the weapon gives it all its power to wound and to heal, and it is Christ Himself who, by His present energy, is here represented as being the Agent of all the good that is done by any Christian community, and the Builder-up of His Churches, in numbers and in power.

It is His will for, His ideal of, a Christian Church, that continuously it should be gathering into its fellowship those that are being saved. That is His meaning in the establishment of His Church upon earth, and that is His will concerning it and concerning us, and the question should press on every society of Christians: Does our reality correspond to Christ's ideal? Are we, as a portion of His great heritage, being continually replenished by souls that come to tell what God has done for them? Is there an unbroken flow of such into what we call our communion? I speak to you members of this church, and I ask you to ponder the question,-Is it so? and the other question, If it is not so, wherefore? 'The Lord added daily,'- why does not the Lord add daily to us?

II. Let us go to the second part of this text, and see if we can find an answer. Notice how emphatically there is brought out here the attractive power of an earnest and pure Church.

My text is the end of a sentence. What is the beginning of the sentence? Listen,-'All that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the Temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added.' Yes; of course. Suppose you were like these people. Suppose this church and congregation bore stamped upon it, plain and deep as the broad arrow of the king, these characteristics-manifest fraternal unity, plain unselfish unworldliness, habitual unbroken devotion, gladness which had in it the solemnity of Heaven, and a transparent simplicity of life and heart, which knew nothing of by-ends and shabby, personal motives or distracting duplicity of purpose-do you not think that the Lord would add to you daily such as should be saved? Or, to put it into other words, wherever there is a little knot of men obviously held together by a living Christ, and obviously manifesting in their lives and characters the likeness of that Christ transforming and glorifying them, there will be drawn to them-by natural gravitation, I was going to say, but we may more correctly say, by the gravitation which is natural in the supernatural realm-souls that have been touched by the grace of the Lord, and souls to whom that grace has been brought the nearer by looking upon *them*. Wherever there is inward vigour of life there will be outward growth; and the Church which is pure, earnest, living will be a Church which spreads and increases.

Historically, it has always been the case that in God’s Church seasons of expansion have followed upon seasons of deepened spiritual life on the part of His people. And the only kind of growth which is wholesome, and to be desired in a Christian community, is growth as a consequence of the revived religiousness of the individuals who make up the community.

And just in like manner as such a community will draw to it men who are like-minded, so it will repel from it all the formalist people. There are congregations that have the stamp of worldliness so deep upon them that any persons who want to be burdened with as little religion as may be respectable will find themselves at home there. And I come to you Christian people here, for whose Christian character I am in some sense and to some degree responsible, with this appeal: Do you see to it that, so far as your influence extends, this community of ours be such as that half-dead Christians will never think of coming near us, and those whose religion is tepid will be repelled from us, but that they who love the Lord Jesus Christ with earnest devotion and lofty consecration, and seek to live unworldly and saint-like lives, shall recognise in us men lik-minded, and from whom they may draw help. I beseech you-if you will not misunderstand the expression-make your communion such that it will repel as well as attract; and that people will find nothing here to draw them to an easy religion of words and formalism, beneath which all vermin of worldliness and selfishness may lurk, but will recognise in us a church of men and women who are bent upon holiness, and longing for more and more conformity to the divine Master.

Now, if all this be true, it is possible for worldly and stagnant communities calling themselves ‘Churches’ to thwart Christ’s purpose, and to make it both impossible and undesirable that He should add to them souls for whom He has died. It is a solemn thing to feel that we may clog Christ’s chariot-wheels, that there may be so little spiritual life in us, as a congregation, that, if I may so say, He dare not intrust us with the responsibility of guarding and keeping the young converts whom He loves and tends. We may not be fit to be trusted with them, and that may be why we do not get them. It may not be good for them that they should be dropped into the refrigerating atmosphere of such a church, and that may be why they do not come.

Depend upon it, brethren, that, far more than my preaching, your lives will determine the expansion of this church of ours. And if my preaching is pulling one way and your lives the other, and I have half an hour a week for talk and you have seven days for contradictory life, which of the two do you think is likely to win in the tug? I beseech you, take the words that I am now trying to speak, to yourselves. Do not pass them to the man in the next pew and think how well they fit him, but accept them as needed by you. And remember, that just as a bit of sealing-wax, if you rub it on your sleeve and so warm it, develops an attractive power, the Church which is warmed will draw many to itself. If the earlier words of this context apply to any Christian community, then certainly its blessed promise too will apply to it, and to such a church the Lord will 'add day by day them that are being saved.'

III. And now, lastly, observe the definition given here of the class of persons gathered into the community.

I have already observed, in the earlier portion of this discourse, that here we have salvation represented as a process, a progressive thing which runs on all through life. In the New Testament there are various points of view from which that great idea of salvation is represented. It is sometimes spoken of as past, in so far as in the definite act of conversion and the first exercise of faith in Jesus Christ the whole subsequent evolution and development are involved, and the process of salvation has its beginning then, when a man turns to God. It is sometimes spoken of as present, in so far as the joy of deliverance from evil and possession of good, which is God, is realised day by day. It is sometimes spoken of as future, in so far as all the imperfect possession and pre-libations of salvation which we taste here on earth prophesy and point onwards to their own perfecting in the climax of heaven. But all these three points of view, past, present, and future, may be merged into this one of my text, which speaks of every saint on earth, from the infantile to the most mature, as standing in the same row, though at different points; walking on the same road, though advanced different distances; all participant of the same process of 'being saved.'

Through all life the deliverance goes on, the deliverance from sin, the deliverance from wrath. The Christian salvation, then, according to the teaching of this emphatic phrase, is a process begun at conversion, carried on progressively through the life, and reaching its climax in another state. Day by day, through the spring and the early summer, the sun shines longer in the sky, and rises higher in the heavens; and the path of the Christian is as the shining light. Last year's greenwood is this year's hardwood; and the Christian, in like manner, has to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Saviour.' So these progressively, and, therefore, as yet imperfectly, saved people, were gathered into the Church.

Now I have but two things to say about that. If that be the description of the kind of folk that come into a Christian Church, the duties of that Church are very plainly marked. And the first great one is to see to it that the community help the growth of its members. There are Christian Churches-I do not say whether ours is one of them or not-into which, if a young plant is brought, it is pretty sure to be killed. The temperature is so low that the tender shoots are nipped as with frost, and die. I have seen people, coming all full of fervour and of faith, into Christian congregations, and finding that the average round them was so much lower than their own, that they have cooled down after a time to the fashionable temperature, and grown indifferent like their brethren. Let us, dear friends, remember that a Christian Church is a nursery of imperfect Christians, and, for ourselves and for one another, try to make our communion such as shall help shy and tender graces to unfold themselves, and woo out, by the encouragement of example, the lowest and the least perfect to lofty holiness and consecration like the Master's.

And if I am speaking to any in this congregation who hold aloof from Christian fellowship for more or less sufficient reasons, let me press upon them, in one word, that if they are conscious of a possession, however imperfect, of that incipient salvation, their place is thereby determined, and they are doing wrong if they do not connect themselves with some Christian Communion, and stand forth as members of Christ's Church.

And now one last word. I have tried to show you that salvation, in the New Testament, is regarded as a process. The opposite thing is a process too.

There is a very awful contrast in one of Paul’s Epistles. ‘The preaching of the Cross is to them *who are in the act of perishing* foolishness; unto us who are *being saved*, it is the power of God.’ These two processes start, as it were, from the same point, one by slow degrees and almost imperceptible motion, rising higher and higher, the other, by slow degrees and almost unconscious descent, sliding steadily and fatally downward ever further and further. And my point now is that in each of us one or other of these processes is going on. Either you are slowly rising or you are slipping down. Either a larger measure of the life of Christ, which is salvation, is passing into your hearts, or bit by bit you are dying like some man with creeping paralysis that begins at the extremities, and with fell, silent, inexorable footstep, advances further and further towards the citadel of the heart, where it lays its icy hand at last, and the man is dead. You are either ‘being saved’ or you are ‘perishing.’ No man becomes a devil all at once, and no man becomes an angel all at once. Trust yourself to Christ, and He will lift you to Himself; turn your back upon Him, as some of you are doing, and you will settle down, down, down in the muck and the mire of your own sensuality and selfishness, until at last the foul ooze spreads over your head, and you are lost in the bog for ever.

19)Acts 3:1-13

Acts

‘THEN SHALL THE LAME MAN LEAP AS AN HART’

Act. 3:1 - Act. 3:16.

‘Many wonders and signs were done by the Apostles’ [Act. 2:43], but this one is recorded in detail, both because it was conspicuous as wrought in the Temple, and because it led to weighty consequences. The narrative is so vivid and full of minute particulars that it suggests an eye-witness. Was Peter Luke’s informant? The style of the story is so like that of Mark’s Gospel that we might reasonably presume so.

The scene and the persons are first set before us. It was natural that a close alliance should be cemented between Peter and John, both because they were the principal members of the quartet which stood first among the Apostles, and because they were so unlike each other, and therefore completed each other. Peter's practical force and eye for externals, and John's more contemplative nature and eye for the unseen, needed one another. So we find them together in the judgment hall, at the sepulchre, and here.

They 'went up to the Temple,' or, to translate more exactly and more picturesquely, 'were going up,' when the incident to be recorded stayed them. They had passed through the court, and came to a gate leading into the inner court, which was called 'Beautiful.' from its artistic excellence, when they were arrested by the sight of a lame beggar, who had been carried there every day for many years to appeal, by the display of his helplessness, to the entering worshippers. Precisely similar sights may be seen to-day at the doors of many a famous European church and many a mosque. He mechanically wailed out his formula, apparently scarcely looking at the two strangers, nor expecting a response. Long habit and many rebuffs had not made him hopeful, but it was his business to ask, and so he asked.

Some quick touch of pity shot through the two friends' hearts, which did not need to be spoken in order that each might feel it to be shared by the other. So they paused, and, as was in keeping with their characters, Peter took speech in hand, while John stood by assenting. Purposed devotion is well delayed when postponed in order to lighten misery.

There must have been something magnetic in Peter's voice and steady gaze as he said, 'Look on us!' It was a strange preface, if only some small coin was to follow. It kindled some flicker of hope of he knew not what in the beggar. He expected to receive 'something' from them, and, no doubt, was asking himself what. Expectation and receptivity were being stirred in him, though he could not divine what was coming. We have no right to assume that his state of mind was operative in fitting him to be cured, nor to call his attitude 'faith,' but still he was lifted from his usual dreary hopelessness, and some strange anticipation was creeping into his heart.

Then comes the grand word of power. Again Peter is spokesman, but John takes part, though silently. With a fixed gaze, which told of concentrated purpose, and went to the lame man's heart, Peter triumphantly avows what most men are ashamed of, and try to hide: 'Silver and gold have I none.' He had 'left all and followed Christ'; he had not made demands on the common stock. Empty pockets may go along with true wealth.

There is a fine flash of exultant confidence in Peter's next words, which is rather spoiled by the Authorised Version. He did not say '*such* as I have,' as it it was inferior to money, which he had not, but he said '*what* I have' [Rev. Ver.],-a very different tone. The expression eloquently magnifies the power which he possessed as far more precious than wealth, and it speaks of his assurance that he did possess it-an assurance which rested, not only on his faith in his Lord's promise and gift, but on his experience in working former miracles.

How deep his words go into the obligations of possession! 'What I have I give' should be the law for all Christians in regard to all that they have, and especially in regard to spiritual riches. God gives us these, not only in order that we may enjoy them ourselves, but in order that we may impart, and so in our measure enter into the joy of our Lord and know the greater blessedness of giving than of receiving. How often it has been true that a poor church has been a miracle-working church, and that, when it could not say 'Silver and gold have I none' it has also lost the power of saying, 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk'!

The actual miracle is most graphically narrated. With magnificent boldness Peter rolls out his Master's name, there, in the court of the Temple, careless who may hear. He takes the very name that had been used in scorn, and waves it like a banner of victory. His confidence in his possession of power was not confidence in himself, but in his Lord. When we can peal forth the Name with as much assurance of its miracle-working power as Peter did, we too shall be able to make the lame walk. A faltering voice is unworthy to speak such words, and will speak them in vain.

The process of cure is minutely described. Peter put out his hand to help the lame man up, and, while he was doing so, power came into the shrunken muscles and weak ankles, so that the cripple felt that he could raise himself, and, though all passed in a moment, the last part of his rising was his own doing, and what began with his being 'lifted up' ended in his 'leaping up.'

Then came an instant of standing still, to steady himself and make sure of his new strength, and then he began to walk.

The interrupted purpose of devotion could now be pursued, but with a gladsome addition to the company. How natural is that ‘walking and leaping and praising God’! The new power seemed so delightful, so wonderful, that sober walking did not serve. It was a strange way of going into the Temple, but people who are borne along by the sudden joy of new gifts beyond hope need not be expected to go quietly, and sticklers for propriety who blamed the man’s extravagance, and would have had him pace along with sober gait and downcast eyes, like a Pharisee, did not know what made him thus obstreperous, even in his devout thankfulness. ‘Leaping and praising God’ do make a singular combination, but before we blame, let us be sure that we understand.

One of the old manuscripts inserts a clause which brings out more clearly that there was a pause, during which the three remained in the Temple in prayer. It reads, ‘And when Peter and John came out, he came out with them, holding them, and they [the people] being astonished, stood in the porch,’ etc. So we have to think of the buzzing crowd, waiting in the court for their emergence from the sanctuary. Solomon’s porch was, like the Beautiful gate, on the east side of the Temple enclosure, and may probably have been a usual place of rendezvous for the brethren, as it had been a resort of their Lord.

It was a great moment, and Peter, the unlearned Galilean, the former cowardly renegade, rose at once to the occasion. Truly it was given him in that hour what to speak. His sermon is distinguished by its undaunted charging home the guilt of Christ’s death on the nation, its pitying recognition of the ignorance which had done the deed, and its urgent entreaty. We here deal with its beginning only. ‘Why marvel ye at this?’-it would have been a marvel if they had not marvelled. The thing was no marvel to the Apostle, because he believed that Jesus was the Christ and reigned in Heaven. Miracles fall into their place and become supremely ‘natural’ when we have accepted that great truth.

The fervent disavowal of their ‘own power or holiness’ as concerned in the healing is more than a modest disclaimer. It leads on to the declaration of who is the true Worker of all that is wrought for men by the hands of Christians. That disavowal has to be constantly repeated by us, not so much to turn away men's admiration or astonishment from us, as to guard our own foolish hearts from taking credit for what it may please Jesus to do by us as His tools.

The declaration of Christ as the supreme Worker is postponed till after the solemn indictment of the nation. But the true way to regard the miracle is set forth at once, as being God's glorifying of Jesus. Peter employs a designation of our Lord which is peculiar to these early chapters of Acts. He calls Him God's 'Servant,' which is a quotation of the Messianic title in the latter part of Isaiah, 'the Servant of the Lord.'

The fiery speaker swiftly passes to contrast God's glorifying with Israel's rejection. The two points on which he seizes are noteworthy. 'Ye delivered Him up'; that is, to the Roman power. That was the deepest depth of Israel's degradation. To hand over their Messiah to the heathen,-what could be completer faithlessness to all Israel's calling and dignity? But that was not all: 'ye denied Him.' Did Peter remember some one else than the Jews who had done the same, and did a sudden throb of conscious fellowship even in that sin make his voice tremble for a moment? Israel's denial was aggravated because it was 'in the presence of Pilate,' and had overborne his determination to release his prisoner. The Gentile judge would rise in the judgment to condemn them, for he had at least seen that Jesus was innocent, and they had hounded him on to an illegal killing, which was murder as laid to his account, but national apostasy as laid to theirs.

These were daring words to speak in the Temple to that crowd. But the humble fisherman had been filled with the Spirit, who is the Strengthener, and the fear of man was dead in him. If we had never heard of Pentecost, we should need to invent something of the sort to make intelligible the transformation of these timid folk, the first disciples, into heroes. A dead Christ, lying in an unknown grave, could never have inspired His crushed followers with such courage, insight, and elastic confidence and gladness in the face of a frowning world.

20)Acts 3:14-15

‘THEN SHALL THE LAME MAN LEAP AS AN HART’

‘THE PRINCE OF LIFE’

Act. 3:14 - Act. 3:15.

This early sermon of Peter’s, to the people, is marked by a comparative absence of the highest view of Christ’s person and work. It is open to us to take one of two explanations of that fact. We may either say that the Apostle was but learning the full significance of the marvellous events that had passed so recently, or we may say that he suited his words to his audience, and did not declare all that he knew.

At the same time, we should not overlook the significance of the Christology which it does contain. ‘His child Jesus’ is really a translation of Isaiah’s ‘Servant of the Lord.’ ‘The Holy One and the Just’ is a distinct assertion of Jesus’ perfect, sinless manhood, and ‘the Prince of Life’ plainly asserts Jesus to be the Lord and Source of it.

Notice, too, the pathetic ‘denied’: was Peter thinking of the shameful hour in his own experience? It is a glimpse into the depth of his penitence, and the tenderness with others’ sins which it had given him, that he twice uses the word here, as if he had said ‘You have done no more than I did myself. It is not for me to heap reproaches on you. We have been alike in sin-and I can preach forgiveness to you sinners, because I have received it for myself.’

Notice, too, the manifold antitheses of the words. Barabbas is set against Christ; the Holy One and the Just against a robber, the Prince of Life against a murderer. ‘You killed’-’the Prince of Life.’ ‘You killed’-’God raised.’

There are here three paradoxes, three strange and contradictory things: the paradoxes of man’s perverted and fatal choice, of man’s hate bringing death to the Lord of life, and of God’s love and power causing life to come by death.

I. The paradox of man’s fatal choice.

There occurs often in history a kind of irony in which the whole tendency of a time or of a conflict is summed up in a single act, and certainly the fact which is referred to here is one of these. Let us put it as it would have seemed to an onlooker then, leaving out for the moment any loftier meaning which may attach to it.

Peter’s words here, thus boldly addressed to the people, are a strong testimony to the impression which the character of Christ had made on His contemporaries. ‘The Holy One and the Just’ implies moral perfection. The whole narrative of the Crucifixion brings out that impression. Pilate’s wife speaks with awe of ‘that just person.’ ‘Which of you convinceth me of sin?’ ‘If I have done evil, bear witness of the evil.’ ‘I find no fault in Him.’ We may take it for granted that the impression Jesus made among His contemporaries was, at the lowest, that He was a pure and good man.

The nation had to choose one of two. Jesus was the one; who was the other? A man half brigand, half rebel, who had raised some petty revolt against Rome, more as a pretext for robbery and crime than from patriotism, and whose hands reeked with blood. And this was the nation’s hero!

The juxtaposition throws a strong light on the people’s motive for rejecting Jesus. The rulers may have condemned Him for blasphemy, but the people had a more practical reason, and in it no doubt the rulers shared. It was not because He claimed to be the Messiah that they gave Him up to Pilate, but because He would not meet their notions of what the Messiah should be and do. If He had called them to arms, not a man of them would have betrayed Him to Pilate, but all, or the more daring of them, would have rallied to His standard. Their hate was the measure of their deep disappointment with His course. If instead of showing love and meekness, He had blown up the coals of religious hatred; if instead of going about doing good, He had mustered the men of lawless Galilee for a revolt, would these fawning hypocrites have dragged him to Pilate on the charge of forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, and of claiming to be a King? Why, there was not one of them but would have been glad to murder every tax-gatherer in Palestine, not one of them but bore inextinguishable in his inmost heart the faith in ‘one Christ a King.’ And if that meek and silent martyr had only lifted His finger, He might have had legions of His accusers at His back, ready to sweep Pilate and his soldiers out of Jerusalem. They saw Christ's goodness and holiness. It did not attract them. They wanted a Messiah who would bring them outward freedom by the use of outward weapons, and so they all shouted 'Not this man but Barabbas!' The whole history of the nation was condensed in that one cry-their untamable obstinacy, their blindness to the light of God, their fierce grasp of the promises which they did not understand, their hard worldliness, their cruel patriotism, their unquenchable hatred of their oppressors, which was only equalled by their unquenchable hatred of those who showed them the only true way for deliverance.

And this strange paradox is not confined to these Jews. It is repeated wherever Christ is presented to men. We are told that all men naturally admire goodness, and so on. Men mostly know it when they see it, but I doubt whether they all either admire or like it. People generally had rather have something more outward and tangible. It is not spiritualising this incident, but only referring it to the principle of which it is an illustration, to ask you to see in it the fatal choice of multitudes. Christ is set before us all, and His beauty is partially seen but is dimmed by externals. Men's desires are fixed on gross sensuous delights, or on success in business, or on intellectual eminence, or on some of the thousand other visible and temporal objects that outshine, to vulgar eyes, the less dazzling lustre of the things unseen. They appreciate these, and make heroes of the men who have won them. These are their ideals, but of Jesus they have little care.

And is it not true that all such competitors of His, when they lead men to prefer them to Him, are 'murderers,' in a sadder sense than Barabbas was? Do they not slay the souls of their admirers? Is it not but too ghastly a reality that all who thus choose them draw down ruin on themselves and 'love death'?

This fatal paradox is being repeated every day in the lives of thousands. The crowds who yelled, 'Not this man but Barabbas!' were less guilty and less mad than those who to-day cry, 'Not Jesus but worldly wealth, or fleeting bodily delights, or gratified ambition!'

II. The paradox of Death's seeming conquest over the Lord of Life.

The word rendered ‘Prince’ means an originator, and hence a leader and hence a lord. Whether Peter had yet reached a conception of the divinity of Jesus or not, he had clearly reached a much higher one of Him than he had attained before His death. In some sense he was beginning to recognise that His relation to ‘life’ was loftier and more mysterious than that of other men. Was it His death only that thus elevated the disciples’ thoughts of Jesus? Strange that if He died and there an end, such a result should have followed. One would have expected His death to have shattered their faith in Him, but somehow it strengthened their faith. Why did they not all continue to lament, as did the two of them on the road to Emmaus: ‘We trusted that this had been He who should have redeemed Israel’-but now we trust no more, and our dreams are buried in His grave? Why did they not go back to Galilee and their nets? What raised their spirits, their courage, and increased their understanding of Him, and their faith in Him? How came His death to be the occasion of consolidating, not of shattering, their fellowship? How came Peter to be so sure that a man who had died was the ‘Prince of Life’? The answer, the only one psychologically possible, is in what Peter here proclaims to unwilling ears, ‘Whom God raised from the dead.’

The fact of the Resurrection sets the fact of the Death in another light. Meditating on these twin facts, the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, we hear Himself speaking as He did to John in Patmos: ‘I am the Living One who became dead, and lo, I am alive for evermore!’

If we try to listen with the ears of these first hearers of Peter’s words, we shall better appreciate his daring paradox. Think of the tremendous audacity of the claim which they make, that Jesus should be the ‘Prince of Life,’ and of the strange contradiction to it which the fact that they ‘killed’ Him seems to give. How could death have power over the Prince of Life? That sounds as if, indeed, the ‘sun were turned into darkness,’ or as if fire became ice. That brief clause ‘ye killed the Prince of Life’ must have seemed sheer absurdity to the hearers whose hands were still red with the blood of Jesus.

But there is another paradox here. It was strange that death should be able to invade that Life, but it is no less strange that men should be able to inflict it. But we must not forget that Jesus died, not because men slew Him, but because He willed to die. The whole of the narratives of the Crucifixion in the Gospels avoid using the word ‘death.’ Such expressions as He ‘gave up the ghost,’ or the like, are used, implying what is elsewhere distinctly asserted, that His death was His offering of Himself, the result of His own volition, not of exhaustion or of torture. Thus, even in dying, He showed Himself the Lord of Life and the Master of Death. Men indeed fastened Jesus to the Cross, but He died, not because He was so fastened, but because He willed to ‘make His soul an offering for sin.’ Bound as it were to a rock in the midst of the ocean, He, of His own will, and at His own time, bowed His head, and let the waves of the sea of death roll over it.

III. The triumphant divine paradox of life given and death conquered through a death.

Jesus is ‘Prince’ in the sense of being source of life to mankind, just because He died. Hie death is the death of Death. His apparent defeat is His real victory.

By His death He takes away our sins.

By His death He abolishes death.

The physical fact remains, but all else which makes the ‘sting of death’ to men is gone. It is no more a solitude, for He has died, and thereby He becomes a companion in that hour to every lover of His. Its darkness changes into light to those who, by ‘following Him,’ have, even there, ‘the light of life.’ This Samson carried away the gates of the prison on His own strong shoulders when He came forth from it. It is His to say, ‘O death! I will be thy plague.’

By His death He diffuses life.

‘The Spirit was not given’ till Jesus was ‘glorified,’ which glorification is John’s profound synonym for His crucifixion. When the alabaster box of His pure body was broken, the whole house of humanity was filled with the odour of the ointment.

So the great paradox becomes a blessed truth, that man’s deepest sin works out God’s highest act of Love and Pardon.

21)Acts 3:16

Acts

‘THEN SHALL THE LAME MAN LEAP AS AN HART’

THE HEALING POWER OF THE NAME

Act. 3:16.

Peter said, ‘Why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk?’ eagerly disclaiming being anything else than a medium through which Another’s power operated. Jesus Christ said, ‘That ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, I say unto thee, Arise, take up thy bed, and walk’-unmistakably claiming to be a great deal more than a medium. Why the difference? Jesus Christ did habitually in His miracles adopt the tone on which Moses once ventured when he smote the rock and said, ‘Ye rebels! must *we* bring the water for you?’ and he was punished for it by exclusion from the Promised Land. Why the difference? Moses was ‘in all his house as a servant, but Christ as a Son over His own house’; and what was arrogance in the servant was natural and reasonable in the Son.

The gist of this verse is a reference to Jesus Christ as a source of miraculous power, not merely because He wrought miracles when on earth, but because from heaven He gave the power of which Peter was but the channel. Now it seems to me that in these emphatic and singularly reduplicated words of the Apostle there are two or three very important lessons which I offer for your consideration.

I. The first is the power of the Name.

Now the Name of which Peter is speaking is not the collocation of syllables which are sounded ‘Jesus Christ.’ His hearers were familiar with the ancient and Eastern method of regarding names as very much more than distinguishing labels. They are, in the view of the Old Testament, attempts at a summary description of things by their prominent characteristics. They are condensed definitions. And so the Old Testament uses the expression, the ‘Name’ of God, as equivalent to ‘that which God is manifested to be.’ Hence, in later days-and there are some tendencies thither even in Scripture-in Jewish literature ‘the Name’ came to be a reverential synonym for God Himself. And there are traces that this peculiar usage with regard to the divine Name was beginning to shape itself in the Church with reference to the name of Jesus, even at that period in which my text was spoken. For instance, in the fifth chapter we read that the Apostles ‘departed from the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the Name,’ and we find at a much later date that missionaries of the Gospel are described by the Apostle John as going forth ‘for the sake of the Name.’

The name of Christ, then, is the representation or embodiment of that which Christ is declared to be for us men, and it is that Name, the totality of what He is manifested to be, in which lies all power for healing and for strengthening. The Name, that is, the whole Christ, in His nature, His offices, His work, His Incarnation, His Life, His Death, Resurrection, Session at the right hand of God-it is this Christ whose Name made that man strong, and will make us strong. Brethren, let us remember that, while fragments of the Name will have fragmentary power, as the curative virtue that resides in any substance belongs to the smallest grain of it, if detached from the mass-whilst fragments of the Name of Christ have power, thanks be to Him! so that no man can have even a very imperfect and rudimentary view of what Jesus Christ is and does, without getting strength and healing in proportion to the completeness of his conception, yet in order to realise all that He can be and do, a man must take the whole Christ as He is revealed.

The Early Church had a symbol for Jesus Christ, a fish, to which they were led because the Greek word for a fish is made up of the initials of the words which they conceived to be the Name. And what was it? ‘*Jesus Christ*, *God’s Son*, *Saviour*’; *Jesus*, humanity; *Christ*, the apex of Revelation, the fulfilment of prophecy, the Anointed Prophet, Priest, and King; *Son of God*, the divine nature: and all these, the humanity, the Messiahship, the divinity, found their sphere of activity in the last name, which, without them, would in its fulness have been impossible-*Saviour*. He is not such a Saviour as He may be to each of us, unless our conception of the Name grasps these three truths: His humanity, His Messiahship, His divinity. ‘His Name has made this man strong.’

II. Notice how the power of the Name comes to operate.

Now, if you will observe the language of my text, you will note that Peter says, as it would appear, the same thing twice over: ‘His Name, through faith in His Name, hath made this man strong.’ And then, as if he were saying something else, he adds what seems to be the same thing: ‘Yea! the faith which is by Him hath given him this perfect soundness.’

Now, note that in the first of these two statements nothing appears except the ‘man,’ the ‘Name,’ and ‘faith’ I take it, though of course it may be questionable, that that clause refers to the man’s faith, and that we have in it the intentional exclusion of the human workers, and are presented with the only two parties really concerned-at the one end the Name, at the other end ‘this man made strong.’ And the link of connection between the two in this clause is faith-that is, the man’s trust. But then, if we come to the next clause, we find that although Peter has just previously disclaimed all merit in the cure, yet there is a sense in which some one’s faith, working as from without, *gave* to the man ‘this perfect soundness.’ And it seems very natural to me to understand that here, where human faith is represented as being, in some subordinate sense, the bestower of the healing which really the Name had bestowed, it is the faith of the human miracle-worker or medium which is referred to. Peter’s faith did give, but Peter only gave what he had received through faith. And so let all the praise be given to the water, and none to the cup.

Whether that be a fair interpretation of the words of my text, with their singular and apparently meaningless tautology or no, at all events the principle which is involved in the explanation is one that I wish to dwell upon briefly now; and that is, that in order for the Name, charged and supercharged with healing and strengthening power as it is, to come into operation, there must be a twofold trust.

The healer, the medium of healing, must have faith in the Name. Yes! of course. In all regions the first requisite, the one indispensable condition, of a successful propagandist, is enthusiastic confidence in what he promulgates. ‘That man will go far,’ said a cynical politician about one of his rivals; ‘he believes every word he says.’ And that is the condition always of getting other people to believe us. Faith is contagious; men catch from other people’s tongues the accent of conviction. If one wants to enforce any opinion upon others, the first condition is that he shall be utterly sel-oblivious; and when he is manifestly saying, as the Apostles in this context did, ‘Do not fix your eyes on us, as though we were doing anything,’ then hearts will bow before him, as the trees of the wood are bowed by the wind.

If that is true in all regions, it is eminently true in regard to religion. For what we need there most is not to be instructed, but to be impressed. Most of us have, lying dormant in the bedchamber and infirmary of our brains, convictions which only need to be awakened to revolutionise our lives. Now one of the most powerful ways of waking them is contact with any man in whom they are awake. So all successful teachers and messengers of Jesus Christ have had this characteristic in common, however unlike each other they have been. The divergences of temperament, of moods, of point of view, of method of working which prevailed even in the little group of Apostles, and broadly distinguished Paul from Peter, Peter from James, and Paul and Peter and James from John, are only types of what has been repeated ever since. Get together the great missionaries of the Cross, and you would have the most extraordinary collection of miscellaneous idiosyncrasies that the world ever saw, and they would not understand each other, as some of them wofully misunderstood each other when here together. But there was one characteristic in them all, a flaming earnestness of belief in the power of the Name. And so it did not matter much, if at all, what their divergences were. Each of them was fitted for the Master’s use.

And so, brethren, here is the reason-I do not say the only reason, but the main one, and that which most affects us-for the slow progress, and even apparent failure, of Christianity. It has fallen into the hands of a Church that does not half believe its own Gospel. By reason of formality and ceremonial and sacerdotalism and a lazy kind of expectation that, somehow or other, the benefits of Christ’s love can come to men apart from their own personal faith in Him, the Church has largely ceased to anticipate that great things can be done by its utterance of the Name. And if you have, I do not say ministers, or teachers, or official proclaimers, or Sunday-school teachers, or the like, but I say if you have a *Church*, that is honeycombed with doubt, and from which the strength and flood-tide of faith have in many cases ebbed away, why, it may go on uttering its formal proclamations of the Name till the Day of Judgment, and all that will come of it will be-'The man in whom the devils were, leaped upon them, and overcame them, and said'-as he had a good right to say-'Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are ye?' You cannot kindle a fire with snowballs. If the town crier goes into a quiet corner of the marketplace and rings his bell apologetically, and gives out his message in a whisper, it is small wonder if nobody listens. And that is the way in which too many so-called Christian teachers and communities hold forth the Name, as if begging pardon of the world for being so narrow and old-fashioned as to believe in it still.

And no less necessary is faith on the other side. The recipient must exercise trust. This lame man, no doubt, like the other that Paul looked at in a similar case, had faith to be healed. That was the length of his tether. He believed that he was going to have his legs made strong, and they were made strong accordingly. If he had believed more, he would have got more. Let us hope that he did get more, because he believed more, at a later day. But in the meantime the Apostles' faith was not enough to cure him; and it is not enough for you that Jesus Christ should be standing with all His power at your elbow, and that, earnestly and enthusiastically, some of Christ's messengers may press upon you the acceptance of Him as a Saviour. He is of no good in the world to you, and never will be, unless you have the personal faith that knits you to Him.

It cannot be otherwise. Depend upon it, if Jesus Christ could save every one without terms and conditions at all, He would be only too glad to do it. But it cannot be done. The nature of His work, and the sort of blessings that He brings by His work, are such as that it is an impossibility that any man should receive them unless he has that trust which, beginning with the acceptance by the understanding of Christ as Saviour, passes on to the assent of the will, and the outgoing of the heart, and the yielding of the whole nature to Him. How can a truth do any good to any one who does not believe in it? How is it possible that, if you do not take a medicine, it will work? How can you expect to see, unless you open your eyes? How do you propose to have your blood purified, if you do not fill your lungs with air?

Is it of any use to have gas-fittings in your house, if they are not connected with the main? Will a water tap run in your sculleries, if there is no pipe that joins it with the source of supply? My dear friend, these rough illustrations are only approximations to the absolute impossibility that Christ can help, heal, or save any man without the man's personal faith. 'Whosoever believeth' is no arbitrary limitation, but is inseparable from the very nature of the salvation given.

III. And now, lastly, note the effects of the power of the Name.

The Apostle puts in two separate clauses what, in the case in hand, was really one thing-'hath made this man strong,' and 'hath given him perfect soundness.' Ah! we can part the two, cannot we? There is the disease, the disease of an alienated heart, of a perverted will, of a swollen self, all of which we need to have cured and checked before we can do right. And there is weakness, the impotence to do what is good, 'how to perform I find not,' and we need to be strengthened as well as cured. There is only one thing that will do these two, and that is that Christ's power, ay, and Christ's own life, should pass, as it will pass if we trust Him, into our foulness and precipitate all the impurity-into our weakness and infuse strength. 'A reed shaken with the wind,' and without substance or solidity to resist, may be placed in what is called a petrifying well, and, by the infiltration of stony substance into its structure, may be turned into a rigid mass, like a little bar of iron. So, if Christ comes into my poor, weak, tremulous nature, there will be an infiltration into the very substance of my being of a present power which will make me strong.

My brother, you and I need, first and foremost, the healing, and then the strength-giving power, which we never find in its completeness anywhere but in Christ, and which we shall always find in Him.

And now notice, Jesus Christ does not make half cures-'this *perfect* soundness.' If any man, in contact with Him, is but half delivered from his infirmities and purged from his sins, it is not because Christ's power is inadequate, but because his own faith is defective.

Christ's cures should be visible to all around. A man's own testimony is not the most satisfactory. Peter appeals to the bystanders. 'You have seen him lying here for years, a motionless lump of mendicancy, at the Temple gate. Now you see him walking and leaping and praising God. Is it a cure, or is it not?' You professing Christians, would you like to stand that test, to empanel a jury of people that have no sympathy with your religion, in order that they might decide whether you were healed and strengthened or not? It is a good thing for us when the world bears witness that Jesus Christ's power has come into us, and made us what we are.

And so, dear friends, I lay all these thoughts on your hearts. Christ's gift is amply sufficient to deliver us from all evils of weakness, sickness, incapacity: to endue us with all gifts of spiritual and immortal strength. But, while the limit of what Christ gives is His boundless wealth, the limit of what you possess is your faith. The rainfall comes down in the same copiousness on rock and furrow, but it runs off the one, having stimulated no growth and left no blessing, and it sinks into the other and quickens every dormant germ into life which will one day blossom into beauty. We are all of us either rock or soil, and which we are depends on the reality, the firmness, and the force of our faith in Christ. He Himself has laid down the principle on which He bestows His gifts when He says, 'According to thy faith be it unto thee!'

22)Acts 3:26

Acts

THE SERVANT OF THE LORD

Act. 3:26.

So ended Peter's bold address to the wondering crowd gathered in the Temple courts around him, with his companion John and the lame man whom they had healed. A glance at his words will show how extraordinarily outspoken and courageous they are. He charges home on his hearers the guilt of Christ's death, unfalteringly proclaims His Messiahship, bears witness to His Resurrection and Ascension, asserts that He is the End and Fulfilment of ancient revelation, and offers to all the great blessings that Christ brings. And this fiery, tender oration came from the same lips which, a few weeks before, had been blanched with fear before a flippant maidservant, and had quivered as they swore, ‘I know not the man!’

One or two simple observations may be made by way of introduction. ‘Unto you *first*’-’first’ implies second; and so the Apostle has shaken himself clear of the Jews’ narrow belief that Messias belonged to them only, and is already beginning to contemplate the possibility of a transference of the kingdom of God to the outlying Gentiles. ‘God having raised up His Son’-that expression has no reference, as it might at first seem, to the fact of the Resurrection; but is employed in the same sense as, and indeed looks back to, previous words. For he had just quoted Moses’ declaration, ‘A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you from your brethren.’ So it is Christ’s equipment and appointment for His office, and not His Resurrection, which is spoken about here. ‘His Son Jesus’-the Revised Version more accurately translates ‘His Servant Jesus.’ I shall have a word or two to say about that translation presently, but in the meantime I simply note the fact.

With this slight explanation let us now turn to two or three of the aspects of the words before us.

I. First, I note the extraordinary transformation which they indicate in the speaker.

I have already referred to his cowardice a very short time before. That transformation from a coward to a hero he shared in common with his brethren. On one page we read, ‘They all forsook Him and fled.’ We turn over half a dozen leaves and we read: ‘They departed from the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.’ What did that?

Then there is another transformation no less swift, sudden, and inexplicable, except on one hypothesis. All through Christ’s life the disciples had been singularly slow to apprehend the highest aspects of His teachings, and they had clung with a strange obstinacy to their narrow Pharisaic and Jewish notions of the Messiah as coming to establish a temporal dominion, in which Israel was to ride upon the necks of the subject nations. And now, all at once, this Apostle, and his fellows with him, have stepped from these puerile and narrow ideas out into this large place, that he and they recognise that the Jew had no exclusive possession of Messiah's blessings, and that these blessings consisted in no external kingdom, but lay mainly and primarily in His 'turning every one of you from your iniquities.' At one time the Apostles stood upon a gross, low, carnal level, and in a few weeks they were, at all events, feeling their way to, and to a large extent had possession of, the most spiritual and lofty aspects of Christ's mission. What did that?

Something had come in between which wrought more, in a short space, than all the three years of Christ's teaching and companionship had done for them. What was it? Why did they not continue in the mood which two of them are reported to have been in, after the Crucifixion, when they said-'It is all up! we trusted that this had been He,' but the force of circumstances has shivered the confidence into fragments, and there is no such hope left for us any longer. What brought them out of that Slough of Despond?

I would put it to any fair-minded man whether the psychological facts of this sudden maturing of these childish minds, and their sudden change from slinking cowards into heroes who did not blanch before the torture and the scaffold, are accountable, if you strike out the Resurrection, the Ascension, and Pentecost? It seems to me that, for the sake of avoiding a miracle, the disbelievers in the Resurrection accept an impossibility, and tie themselves to an intellectual absurdity. And I for one would rather believe in a miracle than believe in an uncaused change, in which the Apostles take exactly the opposite course from that which they necessarily must have taken, if there had not been the facts that the New Testament asserts that there were, Christ's rising again from the dead, and Ascension.

Why did not the Church share the fate of John's disciples, who scattered like sheep without a shepherd when Herod chopped off their master's head? Why did not the Church share the fate of that abortive rising, of which we know that when Theudas, its leader, was slain, 'all, as many as believed on him, came to nought.' Why did these men act in exactly the opposite way? I take it that, as you cannot account for Christ except on the hypothesis that He is the Son of the Highest, you cannot account for the continuance of the Christian Church for a week after the Crucifixion, except on the hypothesis that the men who composed it were witnesses of His Resurrection, and saw

Him floating upwards and received into the Shechinah cloud and lost to their sight. Peter's change, witnessed by the words of my text-these bold and clear-sighted words-seems to me to be a perfect monstrosity, and incapable of explication, unless he saw the risen Lord, beheld the ascended Christ, was touched with the fiery Spirit descending on Pentecost, and so 'out of weakness was made strong,' and from a babe sprang to the stature of a man in Christ.

II. Look at these words as setting forth a remarkable view of Christ.

I have already referred to the fact that the word rendered 'son' ought rather to be rendered 'servant.' It literally means 'child' or 'boy,' and appears to have been used familiarly, just in the same fashion as we use the same expression 'boy,' or its equivalent 'maid,' as a more gentle designation for a servant. Thus the kindly centurion, when he would bespeak our Lord's care for his menial, calls him his 'boy'; and our Bible there translates rightly 'servant.'

Again, the designation is that which is continually employed in the Greek translation of the Old Testament as the equivalent for the well-known prophetic phrase 'the Servant of Jehovah,' which, as you will remember, is characteristic of the second portion of the prophecies of Isaiah. And consequently we find that, in a quotation of Isaiah's prophecy in the Gospel of Matthew, the very phrase of our text is there employed: 'Behold My Servant whom I uphold!'

Now, it seems as if this designation of our Lord as God's Servant was very familiar to Peter's thoughts at this stage of the development of Christian doctrine. For we find the name employed twice in this discourse-in the thirteenth verse, 'the God of our Fathers hath glorified His Servant Jesus,' and again in my text. We also find it twice in the next chapter, where Peter, offering up a prayer amongst his brethren, speaks of 'Thy Holy Child Jesus,' and prays 'that signs and wonders may be done through the name' of that 'Holy Child.' So, then, I think we may fairly take it that, at the time in question, this thought of Jesus as the 'Servant of the Lord' had come with especial force to the primitive Church. And the fact that the designation never occurs again in the New Testament seems to show that they passed on from it into a deeper perception than even it attests of who and what this Jesus was in relation to God.

But, at all events, we have in our text the Apostle looking back to that dim, mysterious Figure which rises up with shadowy lineaments out of the great prophecy of ‘Isaiah,’ and thrilling with awe and wonder, as he sees, bit by bit, in the Face painted on the prophetic canvas, the likeness of the Face into which he had looked for three blessed years, that now began to tell him more than they had done whilst their moments were passing.

‘The Servant of the Lord’-that means, first of all, that Christ, in all which He does, meekly and obediently executes the Father’s will. As He Himself said, ‘I come not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me.’ But it carries us further than that, to a point about which I would like to say one word now; and that is, the clear recognition that the very centre of Jewish prophecy is the revelation of the personality of the Christ. Now, it seems to me that present tendencies, discussions about the nature and limits of inspiration, investigations which, in many directions, are to be welcomed and are fruitful as to the manner of origin of the books of the Old Testament, and as to their collection into a Canon and a whole-that all this new light has a counterbalancing disadvantage, in that it tends somewhat to obscure in men’s minds the great central truth about the revelation of God in Israel-viz. that it was all progressive, and that its goal and end was Jesus Christ. ‘The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy,’ and however much we may have to learn-and I have no doubt that we have a great deal to learn, about the composition, the structure, the authorship, the date of these ancient books-I take leave to say that the unlearned reader, who recognises that they all converge on Jesus Christ, has hold of the clue of the labyrinth, and has come nearer to the marrow of the books than the most learned investigators, who see all manner of things besides in them, and do not see that ‘they that went before cried, saying, Hosanna! Blessed be He that cometh in the name of the Lord!’

And so I venture to commend to you, brethren-not as a barrier against any reverent investigation, not as stopping any careful study-this as the central truth concerning the ancient revelation, that it had, for its chief business, to proclaim the coming of the Servant of Jehovah, Jesus the Christ.

III. And now, lastly, look at these words as setting forth the true centre of Christ’s work.

‘He has sent Him to bless you in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.’ I have already spoken about the gross, narrow, carnal apprehensions of Messiah’s work which cleaved to the disciples during all our Lord’s life here, and which disturbed even the sanctity of the upper chamber at that last meal, with squabbles about precedence which had an eye to places in the court of the Messiah when He assumed His throne. But here Peter has shaken himself clear of all these, and has grasped the thought that, whatever derivative and secondary blessings of an external and visible sort may, and must, come in Messiah’s train, *the* blessing which He brings is of a purely spiritual and inward character, and consists in turning away single souls from their love and practice of evil. That is Christ’s true work.

The Apostle does not enlarge as to how it is done. We know how it is done. Jesus turns away men from sin because, by the magnetism of His love, and the attractive raying out of influence from His Cross, He turns them to Himself. He turns us from our iniquities by the expulsive power of a new affection, which, coming into our hearts like a great river into some foul Augean stable, sweeps out on its waters all the filth that no broom can ever clear out in detail. He turns men from their iniquities by His gift of a new life, kindred with that from which it is derived.

There is an old superstition that lightning turned whatever it struck towards the point from which the flash came, so that a tree with its thousand leaves had each of them pointed to that quarter in the heavens where the blaze had been.

And so Christ, when He flings out the beneficent flash that slays only our evil, and vitalises ourselves, turns us to Him, and away from our transgressions. ‘Turn us, O Christ, and we shall be turned.’

Ah, brethren! that is the blessing that we need most, for ‘iniquities’ are universal; and so long as man is bound to his sin it will embitter all sweetnesses, and neutralise every blessing. It is not culture, valuable as that is in many ways, that will avail to stanch man’s deepest wounds. It is not a new social order that will still the discontent and the misery of humanity. You may adopt collective economic and social arrangements, and divide property out as it pleases you. But as long as man continues selfish he will continue sinful, and as long as he continues sinful *any* social order will be pregnant with sorrow, ‘and when it is finished it will bring forth death.’ You have to go deeper down than all that, down as deep as this Apostle goes in this sermon of his, and recognise that Christ’s prime blessing is the turning of men from their iniquities, and that only after that has been done will other good come.

How shallow, by the side of that conception, do modern notions of Jesus as the great social Reformer look! These are true, but they want their basis, and their basis lies only here, that He is the Redeemer of individuals from their sins. There were people in Christ’s lifetime who were all untouched by His teachings, but when they found that He gave bread miraculously they said, ‘This is of a truth the Prophet! That’s the prophet for my money; the Man that can make bread, and secure material well-being.’ Have not certain modern views of Christ’s work and mission a good deal in common with these vulgar old Jews-views which regard Him mainly as contributing to the material good, the social and economical well-being of the world?

Now, I believe that He does that. And I believe that Christ’s principles are going to revolutionise society as it exists at present. But I am sure that we are on a false scent if we attempt to preach consequences without proclaiming their antecedents, and that such preaching will end, as all such attempts have ended, in confusion and disappointment.

They used to talk about Jesus Christ, in the first French Revolution, as ‘the Good *Sansculotte*.’ Perfectly true! But as the basis of that, and of all representations of Him, that will have power on the diseases of the community, we have to preach Him as the Saviour of the individual from his sin.

And so, brethren, has He saved you? Do you begin your notions of Jesus Christ where His work begins? Do you feel that what you want most is neither culture nor any superficial and external changes, but something that will deal with the deep, indwelling, rooted, obstinate self-regard which is the centre of all sin? And have you gone alone to Him as a sinful man? As the Apostle here suggests, Jesus Christ does not save communities. The doctor has his patients into the consulting-room one by one. There is no applying of Christ's benefits to men in batches, by platoons and regiments, as Clovis baptized his Franks; but you have to go, every one of you, through the turnstile singly, and alone to confess, and alone to be absolved, and alone to be turned, from your iniquity.

If I might venture to alter the position of words in my text, I would lay them, so modified, on the hearts of all my friends whom my words may reach now, and say, 'Unto you-*unto thee*, God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, *first* in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.'

23)Acts 4:1-12

Acts

THE FIRST BLAST OF TEMPEST

Act. 4:1 - Act. 4:14.

Hitherto the Jewish authorities had let the disciples alone, either because their attention had not been drawn even by Pentecost and the consequent growth of the Church, or because they thought that to ignore the new sect was the best way to end it. But when its leaders took to vehement preaching in Solomon's porch, and crowds eagerly listened, it was time to strike in.

Our passage describes the first collision of hostile authority with Christian faith, and shows, as in a glass, the constant result of that collision in all ages.

The motives actuating the assailants are significantly analysed, and may be distributed among the three classes enumerated. The priests and the captain of the Temple would be annoyed by the very fact that Peter and John taught the people: the former, because they were jealous of their official prerogative: the latter, because he was responsible for public order, and a riot in the Temple court would have been a scandal. The Saddueees were indignant at the substance of the teaching, which affirmed the resurrection of the dead, which they denied, and alleged it as having occurred 'in Jesus.'

The position of Sadducees and Pharisees is inverted in Acts as compared with the Gospels. While Christ lived, the Pharisees were the soul of the opposition to Him, and His most solemn warnings fell on them; after the Resurrection, the Sadducees head the opposition, and among the Pharisees are some, like Gamaliel and afterwards Paul, who incline to the new faith. It was the Resurrection that made the difference, and the difference is an incidental testimony to the fact that Christ's Resurrection was proclaimed from the first. To ask whether Jesus had risen, and to examine the evidence, were the last things of which the combined assailants thought. This public activity of the Apostles threatened their influence or their pet beliefs, and so, like persecutors in all ages, they shut their eyes to the important question, 'Is this preaching true or false?' and took the easier course of laying hands on the preachers.

So the night fell on Peter and John in prison, the first of the thousands who have suffered bonds and imprisonment for Christ, and have therein found liberty. What lofty faith, and what subordination of the fate of the messengers to the progress of the message, are expressed in that abrupt introduction, in Act. 4:4, of the statistics of the increase of the Church from that day's work! It mattered little that it ended with the two Apostles in custody, since it ended too with five thousand rejoicing in Christ.

The arrest seems to have been due to a sudden thought on the part of the priests, captain, and Sadducees, without commands from the Sanhedrin or the high priest. But when these inferior authorities had got hold of their prisoners, they probably did not quite know what to do with them, and so moved the proper persons to summon the Sanhedrin. In all haste, then, a session was called for next morning. ‘Rulers, elders, and scribes’ made up the constituent members of the court, and the same two ‘high priests’ who had tried Jesus are there, attended by a strong contingent of dependants, who could be trusted to vote as they were bidden. Annas was an *emeritus* high priest, whose age and relationship to Caiaphas, the actual holder of the post and Annas’s son-in-law, gave him an influential position. He retained the title, though he had ceased to hold the office, as a cleric without a charge is usually called ‘Reverend.’

It was substantially the same court which had condemned Jesus, and probably now sat in the same hall as then. So that Peter and John would remember the last time when they had together been in that room, and Who had stood in the criminal’s place where they now were set.

The court seems to have been somewhat at a loss how to proceed. The Apostles had been arrested for their words, but they are questioned about the miracle. It was no crime to teach in the Temple, but a crime might be twisted out of working a miracle in the name of any but Jehovah. To do that would come near blasphemy or worshipping strange gods. The Sanhedrin knew what the answer to their question would be, and probably they intended, as soon as the anticipated answer was given, to ‘rend their clothes,’ and say, as they had done once before, ‘What need we further witnesses? They have spoken blasphemy.’ But things did not go as was expected. The crafty question was put. It does not attempt to throw doubt on the reality of the miracle, but there is a world of arrogant contempt in it, both in speaking of the cure as ‘this,’ and in the scornful emphasis with which, in the Greek, ‘ye’ stands last in the sentence, and implies, ‘ye poor, ignorant fishermen.’

The last time that Peter had been in the judgment-hall his courage had oozed out of him at the prick of a maid-servant’s sharp tongue, but now he fronts all the ecclesiastical authorities without a tremor. Whence came the transformation of the cowardly denier into the heroic confessor, who turns the tables on his judges and accuses them? The narrative answers. He was ‘filled with the Holy Ghost.’ That abiding possession of the Spirit, begun on Pentecost, did not prevent special inspiration for special needs, and the

Greek indicates that there was granted such a temporary influx in this critical hour.

One cannot but note the calmness of the Apostle, so unlike his old tumultuous self. He begins with acknowledging the lawful authority of the court, and goes on, with just a tinge of sarcasm, to put the vague ‘this’ of the question in its true light. It was ‘a good deed done to an impotent man,’ for which John and he stood there. Singular sort of crime that! Was there not a presumption that the power which had wrought so ‘good’ a deed was good? ‘Do men gather grapes of thorns?’ Many a time since then Christianity has been treated as criminal, because of its beneficence to bodies and souls.

But Peter rises to the full height of the occasion, when he answers the Sanhedrin’s question with the pealing forth of his Lord’s name. He repeats in substance his former contrast of Israel’s treatment of Jesus and God’s; but, in speaking to the rulers, his tone is more severe than it was to the people. The latter had been charged, at Pentecost and in the Temple, with crucifying *Jesus*; the former are here charged with crucifying the *Christ*. It was their business to have tested his claims, and to have welcomed the Messiah. The guilt was shared by both, but the heavier part lay on the shoulders of the Sanhedrin.

Mark, too, the bold proclamation of the Resurrection, the stone of offence to the Sadducees. How easy it would have been for them to silence the Apostle, if they could have pointed to the undisturbed and occupied grave! That would have finished the new sect at once. Is there any reason why it was not done but the one reason that it could not be done?

Thus far Peter has been answering the interrogation legally put, and has done as was anticipated. Now was the time for Annas and the rest to strike in; but they could not carry out their programme, for the fiery stream of Peter’s words does not stop when they expected, and instead of a timid answer followed by silence, they get an almost defiant proclamation of the Name, followed by a charge against them, which turns the accused into the accuser, and puts them at the bar. Peter learned to apply the passage in the Psalm [Act. 4:11] to the rulers, from his Master’s use of it [Mat. 21:42]; and there is no quaver in his voice nor fear in his heart when, in the face of all these learned Rabbis and high and mighty dignitaries, he brands them as foolish builders, blind to the worth of the Stone ‘chosen of God, and precious,’ and tells them that the course of divine Providence will run counter to their rejection of Jesus, and make him the very ‘Head of the corner,’-the crown, as well as the foundation, of God’s building.

But not even this bold indictment ends the stream of his speech. The proclamation of the power of the Name was fitly followed by pressing home the guilt and madness of rejecting Jesus, and that again by the glad tidings of salvation for all, even the rejecters. Is not the sequence in Peter’s defence substantially that which all Christian preaching should exhibit? First, strong, plain proclamation of the truth; then pungent pressing home of the sin of turning away from Jesus; and then earnest setting forth of the salvation in His name,- a salvation wide as the world, and deep as our misery and need, but narrow, inasmuch as it is ‘in none other.’ The Apostle will not end with charging his hearers with guilt, but with offering them salvation. He will end with lifting up ‘the Name’ high above all other, and setting it in solitary clearness before, not these rulers only, but the whole world. The salvation which it had wrought on the lame man was but a parable and picture of the salvation from all ills of body and spirit, which was stored in that Name, and in it alone.

The rulers’ contempt had been expressed by their emphatic ending of their question with that ‘ye.’ Peter expresses his brotherhood and longing for the good of his judges by ending his impassioned, or, rather, inspired address with a loving, pleading ‘we.’ He puts himself on the same level with them as needing salvation, and would fain have them on the same level with himself and John as receiving it. That is the right way to preach.

Little need be said as to the effect of this address. Whether it went any deeper in any susceptible souls or not, it upset the schemes of the leaders. Something in the manner and matter of it awed them into wonder, and paralysed them for the time. Here was the first instance of the fulfilment of that promise, which has been fulfilled again and again since, of ‘a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist.’ ‘Unlearned,’ as ignorant of Rabbinical traditions, and ‘ignorant,’ or, rather, ‘private,’ as holding no official position, these two wielded a power over hearts and consciences which not even official indifference and arrogance could shake off. Thank God, that day’s experience is repeated still, and any of us may have the same Spirit to clothe us with the same armour of light!

The Sanhedrin knew well enough that the Apostles had been with Jesus, and the statement that ‘they took knowledge of them’ cannot mean that that fact dawned on the rulers for the first time. Rather it means that their wonder at the ‘boldness’ of the two drove home the fact of their association with Him to their minds. That association explained the marvel; for the Sanhedrin remembered how He had stood, meek but unawed, at the same bar. They said to themselves, ‘We know where these men get this brave freedom of speech,-from that Nazarene.’ Happy shall we be if our demeanour recalls to spectators the ways of our Lord!

How came the lame man there? He had not been arrested with the Apostles. Had he voluntarily and bravely joined them? We do not know, but evidently he was not there as accused, and probably had come as a witness of the reality of the miracle. Notice the emphatic ‘standing,’ as in Act. 4:10,-a thing that he had never done all his life. No wonder that the Sanhedrin were puzzled, and settled down to the ‘lame and impotent conclusion’ which follows. So, in the first round of the world-long battle between the persecutors and the persecuted, the victory is all on the side of the latter. So it has been ever since, though often the victors have died in the conflict. ‘The Church is an anvil which has worn out many hammers,’ and the story of the first collision is, in essentials, the story of all.

24)Acts 4:13

Acts

THE FIRST BLAST OF TEMPEST

WITH AND LIKE CHRIST

Act. 4:13.

Two young Galilean fishermen, before the same formidable tribunal which a few weeks before had condemned their Master, might well have quailed. And evidently 'Annas, the high priest, and Caiaphas, and John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the kindred of the high priest,' were very much astonished that their united wisdom and dignity did not produce a greater impression on these two contumacious prisoners. They were 'unlearned,' knowing nothing about Rabbinical wisdom; they were 'ignorant,' or, as the word ought rather to be rendered, 'persons in a private station,' without any kind of official dignity. And yet there they stood, perfectly unembarrassed and at their ease, and said what they wanted to say, all of it, right out. So, as great astonishment crept over the dignified ecclesiastics who were sitting in judgment upon them, their astonishment led them to remember what, of course, they knew before, only that it had not struck them so forcibly, as explaining the Apostles' demeanour-viz.,'that they had been with Jesus.' So they said to themselves: 'Ah, that explains it all! There is the root of it. The company that they have kept accounts for their unembarrassed boldness.'

Now, I need not notice by more than a word in passing, what a testimony it is to the impression that that meek and gracious Sufferer had made upon His judges, that when they saw these two men standing there unfaltering, they began to remember how that other Prisoner had stood. And perhaps some of them began to think that they had made a mistake in that last trial. It is a testimony to the impression that Christ had made that the strange demeanour of His two servants recalled the Master to the mind of the judges.

I. The first thing that strikes us here is the companionship that transforms.

The rulers were partly right, and they were partly wrong. The source from which these men had drawn their boldness was their being with Christ; but it was not such companionship with Christ, as Annas and Caiaphas had in view, that had given them courage. For as long as the Apostles had His personal presence with them, there was no perceptible transforming or elevating process going on in them; and it was not until after they had lost that corporeal presence that there came upon them the change which even the prejudiced eyes of these judges could not help seeing.

The writer of Acts gives a truer explanation with which we may fill out the incomplete explanation of the rulers, when he says, ‘Then Peter, *filled with the Holy Ghost*, said unto them.’ Ah, that is it! They had been with Jesus all the days that He went in and out amongst them. They had companioned with Him, and they had gained but little from it. But when He went away, and they were relegated to the same kind of companionship with Him that you and I have or may have, then a change began to take place on them. And so the companionship that transforms is not what the Apostle calls ‘knowing Christ after the flesh,’ but inward communion with Him, the companionship and familiarity which are as possible for us as for any Peter or John of them all, and without which our Christianity is nothing but sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.

They were ‘with Jesus,’ as each of us may be. Their communion was in no respect different from the communion that is open and indispensable to any real Christian. To be with Him is possible for us all. When we go to our daily work, when we are compassed about by distracting and trivial cares, when men come buzzing round us, and the ordinary secularities of life seem to close in upon us like the walls of a prison, and to shut out the blue and the light-oh! it is hard, but it *is* possible, for every one of us to think these all away, and to carry with us into everything that blessed thought of a Presence that is not to be put aside, that sits beside me at my study table, that stands beside you at your tasks, that goes with you in shop and mart, that is always near, with its tender encircling, with its mighty protection, with its all-sufficing sweetness and power. To be with Christ is no prerogative, either of Apostles and teachers of the primitive age, or of saints that have passed into the higher vision; but it is possible for us all. No doubt there are as yet unknown forms and degrees of companionship with Christ in the future state, in comparison with which to be ‘present in the body is to be absent from the Lord’; but in the inmost depth of reality, the soul that loves is where it loves, and has whom it loves ever with it. ‘Where the treasure is, there will the heart be also,’ and we may be with Christ if only we will honestly try hour by hour to keep ourselves in touch with Him, and to make Him the motive as well as the end of the work that other men do along with us, and do from altogether secular and low motives.

Another phase of being with Christ lies in frank, full, and familiar conversation with Him. I do not understand a dumb companionship. When we are with those that we love, and with whom we are at ease, speech comes instinctively. If we are co-denizens of the Father's house with the Elder Brother, we shall talk to Him. We shall not need to be reminded of the 'duty of prayer,' but shall rather instinctively and as a matter of course, without thinking of what we are doing, speak to Him our momentary wants, our passing discomforts, our little troubles. There may be a great deal more virtue in monosyllabic prayers than in long liturgies. Little jets of speech or even of unspoken speech that go up to Him are likely to be heart-felt and to be heard. It is said of Israel's army on one occasion, 'they cried unto God in the battle, and He was entreated of them.' Do you think that theirs would be very elaborate prayers? Was there any time to make a long petition when the sword of a Philistine was whizzing about the suppliant's ears? It was only a cry, but it *was* a cry; and so 'He was entreated of them.' If we are 'with Christ' we shall talk to Him; and if we are with Christ He will talk to us. It is for us to keep in the attitude of listening and, so far as may be, to hush other voices, in order that His may be heard, If we do so, even here 'shall we ever be with the Lord.'

II. Now, note next the character that this companionship produces.

Annas and Caiaphas said to each other: 'Ah, these two have been with that Jesus! That is where they have got their boldness. They are like Him.'

As is the Master, so is the servant. That is the broad, general principle that lies in my text. To be with Christ makes men Christlike. A soul habitually in contact with Jesus will imbibe sweetness from Him, as garments laid away in a drawer with some preservative perfume absorb fragrance from that beside which they lie. Therefore the surest way for Christian people to become what God would have them to be, is to direct the greater part of their effort, not so much to the acquirement of individual characteristics and excellences, as to the keeping up of continuity of communion with the Master. Then the excellences will come. Astronomers, for instance, have found out that if they take a sensitive plate and lay it so as to receive the light from a star, and keep it in place by giving it a motion corresponding with the apparent motion of the heavens, for hours and hours, there will become visible upon it a photographic image of dim stars that no human eye or telescope can see. Persistent lying before the light stamps the image of the light upon the plate. Communion with Christ is the secret of Christlikeness. So instead of all the wearisome, painful, futile attempts at tinkering one's own character apart from Him, here is the royal road. Not that there is no effort in it. We must never forget nor undervalue the necessity for struggle in the Christian life. But that truth needs to be supplemented with the thought that comes from my text-viz. that the fruitful direction in which the struggle is to be mainly made lies in keeping ourselves in touch with Jesus Christ, and if we do that, then transformation comes by beholding. 'We all, reflecting as a mirror does, the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image.' 'They have been with Jesus,' and so they were like Him.

But now look at the specific kinds of excellence which seem to have come out of this communion. 'They beheld the *boldness* of Peter and John.' The word that is translated 'boldness' no doubt conveys that idea, but it also conveys another. Literally it means 'the act of saying everything.' It means openness of unembarrassed speech, and so comes to have the secondary signification, which the text gives, of 'boldness.'

Then, to be with Christ gives a living knowledge of Him and of truth, far in advance of the head knowledge of wise and learned people. It was a fact that these two knew nothing about what Rabbi *This*, or Rabbi *That*, or Rabbi *The Other* had said, and yet could speak, as they had been speaking, large religious ideas that astonished these hide-bound Pharisees, who thought that there was no way to get to the knowledge of the revelation of God made to Israel, except by the road of their own musty and profitless learning. Ay! and it always is so. An ounce of experience is worth a ton of theology. The men that have summered and wintered with Jesus Christ may not know a great many things that are supposed to be very important parts of religion, but they have got hold of the central truth of it, with a power, and in a fashion, that men of books, and ideas, and systems, and creeds, and theological learning, may know nothing about. 'Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, are called.' Let a poor man at his plough-tail, or a poor woman in her garret, or a collier in the pit, have Jesus Christ for their Companion, and they have got the kernel; and the gentlemen that like such diet may live on the shell if they will, and can. Religious ideas are of little use unless there be heart-experiences; and heart-experiences are wonderful teachers of religious truth.

Again, to be with Christ frees from the fear of man. It was a new thing for such persons as Peter and John to stand cool and unawed before the Council. Not so very long ago one of the two had been frightened into a momentary apostasy by dread of being haled before the rulers, and now they are calmly heroic, and threats are idle words to them. I need not point to the strong presumption, raised by the contrast of the Apostles’ past cowardice and present courage, of the occurrence of some such extraordinary facts as the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Descent of the Spirit. Something had happened which revolutionised these men. It was their communion with Jesus, made more real and deep by the cessation of His bodily presence, which made these unlearned and non-official Galileans front the Council with calmly beating hearts and unfaltering tongues. Doubtless, temperament has much to do with courage, but, no doubt, he who lives near Jesus is set free from undue dependence on things seen and on persons. Perfect love casts out fear, not only of the Beloved, but of all creatures. It is the bravest thing in the world.

Further, to be with Christ will open a man’s lips. The fountain, if it is full, must well up. ‘Light is light which circulates. Heat is heat which radiates.’ The true possession of Jesus Christ will always make it impossible for the possessor to be dumb. I pray you to test yourselves, as I would that all professing Christians should test themselves, by that simple truth, that a full heart must find utterance. The instinct that drives a man to speak of the thing in which he is interested should have full play in the Christian life. It seems to me a terribly sad fact that there are such hosts of good, kind people, with some sort of religion about them, who never feel any anxiety to say a word to any soul concerning the Master whom they profess to love. I know, of course, that deep feeling is silent, and that the secrets of Christian experience are not to be worn on the sleeve for daws to peck at. And I know that the conventionalities of this generation frown very largely upon the frank utterance of religious convictions on the part of religious people, except on Sundays, in Sunday-schools, pulpits, and the like. But for all that, what is in you will come out. If you have never felt ‘I was weary of forbearing, and I could not stay,’ I do not think that there is much sign in you of a very deep or a very real being with Jesus.

III. The last point to be noted is, the impression which such a character makes.

It was not so much what Peter and John said that astonished the Council, as the fact of their being composed and bold enough to say anything.

A great deal more is done by character than by anything else. Most people in the world take their notions of Christianity from its concrete embodiments in professing Christians. For one man that has read his Bible, and has come to know what religion is thereby, there are a hundred that look at you and me, and therefrom draw their conclusions as to what religion is. It is not my sermons, but your life, that is the most important agency for the spread of the Gospel in this congregation. And if we, as Christian people, were to live so as to make men say, ‘Dear me, that is strange. That is not the kind of thing that one would have expected from that man. That is of a higher strain than he is of. Where did it come from, I wonder?’ ‘Ah, he learned it of that Jesus’-if people were constrained to speak in that style to themselves about us, dear friends, and about all our brethren, England would be a different England from what it is t-day. It is Christians’ lives, after all, that make dints in the world’s conscience.

Do you remember one of the Apostle’s lovely and strong metaphors? Paul says that that little Church in Thessalonica rung out clear and strong the name of Jesus Christ-resonant like the clang of a bugle, ‘so that we need not to speak anything.’ The word that he employs for ‘sounded out’ is a technical expression for the ringing blast of a trumpet. Very small penny whistles would be a better metaphor for the instruments which the bulk of professing Christians play on.

‘Adorn the doctrine of Christ.’ And that you may, listen to His own word, which says all I have been trying to say in this sermon: ‘Abide in Me. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.’

25)Acts 4:14

Acts

THE FIRST BLAST OF TEMPEST

Act. 4:1 - Act. 4:14.

Hitherto the Jewish authorities had let the disciples alone, either because their attention had not been drawn even by Pentecost and the consequent growth of the Church, or because they thought that to ignore the new sect was the best way to end it. But when its leaders took to vehement preaching in Solomon’s porch, and crowds eagerly listened, it was time to strike in.

Our passage describes the first collision of hostile authority with Christian faith, and shows, as in a glass, the constant result of that collision in all ages.

The motives actuating the assailants are significantly analysed, and may be distributed among the three classes enumerated. The priests and the captain of the Temple would be annoyed by the very fact that Peter and John taught the people: the former, because they were jealous of their official prerogative: the latter, because he was responsible for public order, and a riot in the Temple court would have been a scandal. The Sadduceees were indignant at the substance of the teaching, which affirmed the resurrection of the dead, which they denied, and alleged it as having occurred ‘in Jesus.’

The position of Sadducees and Pharisees is inverted in Acts as compared with the Gospels. While Christ lived, the Pharisees were the soul of the opposition to Him, and His most solemn warnings fell on them; after the Resurrection, the Sadducees head the opposition, and among the Pharisees are some, like Gamaliel and afterwards Paul, who incline to the new faith. It was the Resurrection that made the difference, and the difference is an incidental testimony to the fact that Christ’s Resurrection was proclaimed from the first. To ask whether Jesus had risen, and to examine the evidence, were the last things of which the combined assailants thought. This public activity of the Apostles threatened their influence or their pet beliefs, and so, like persecutors in all ages, they shut their eyes to the important question, ‘Is this preaching true or false?’ and took the easier course of laying hands on the preachers.

So the night fell on Peter and John in prison, the first of the thousands who have suffered bonds and imprisonment for Christ, and have therein found liberty. What lofty faith, and what subordination of the fate of the messengers to the progress of the message, are expressed in that abrupt introduction, in Act. 4:4, of the statistics of the increase of the Church from that day’s work! It mattered little that it ended with the two Apostles in custody, since it ended too with five thousand rejoicing in Christ.

The arrest seems to have been due to a sudden thought on the part of the priests, captain, and Sadducees, without commands from the Sanhedrin or the high priest. But when these inferior authorities had got hold of their prisoners, they probably did not quite know what to do with them, and so moved the proper persons to summon the Sanhedrin. In all haste, then, a session was called for next morning. ‘Rulers, elders, and scribes’ made up the constituent members of the court, and the same two ‘high priests’ who had tried Jesus are there, attended by a strong contingent of dependants, who could be trusted to vote as they were bidden. Annas was an *emeritus* high priest, whose age and relationship to Caiaphas, the actual holder of the post and Annas’s son-in-law, gave him an influential position. He retained the title, though he had ceased to hold the office, as a cleric without a charge is usually called ‘Reverend.’

It was substantially the same court which had condemned Jesus, and probably now sat in the same hall as then. So that Peter and John would remember the last time when they had together been in that room, and Who had stood in the criminal’s place where they now were set.

The court seems to have been somewhat at a loss how to proceed. The Apostles had been arrested for their words, but they are questioned about the miracle. It was no crime to teach in the Temple, but a crime might be twisted out of working a miracle in the name of any but Jehovah. To do that would come near blasphemy or worshipping strange gods. The Sanhedrin knew what the answer to their question would be, and probably they intended, as soon as the anticipated answer was given, to ‘rend their clothes,’ and say, as they had done once before, ‘What need we further witnesses? They have spoken blasphemy.’ But things did not go as was expected. The crafty question was put. It does not attempt to throw doubt on the reality of the miracle, but there is a world of arrogant contempt in it, both in speaking of the cure as ‘this,’ and in the scornful emphasis with which, in the Greek, ‘ye’ stands last in the sentence, and implies, ‘ye poor, ignorant fishermen.’

The last time that Peter had been in the judgment-hall his courage had oozed out of him at the prick of a maid-servant’s sharp tongue, but now he fronts all the ecclesiastical authorities without a tremor. Whence came the transformation of the cowardly denier into the heroic confessor, who turns the tables on his judges and accuses them? The narrative answers. He was ‘filled with the Holy Ghost.’ That abiding possession of the Spirit, begun on Pentecost, did not prevent special inspiration for special needs, and the Greek indicates that there was granted such a temporary influx in this critical hour.

One cannot but note the calmness of the Apostle, so unlike his old tumultuous self. He begins with acknowledging the lawful authority of the court, and goes on, with just a tinge of sarcasm, to put the vague ‘this’ of the question in its true light. It was ‘a good deed done to an impotent man,’ for which John and he stood there. Singular sort of crime that! Was there not a presumption that the power which had wrought so ‘good’ a deed was good? ‘Do men gather grapes of thorns?’ Many a time since then Christianity has been treated as criminal, because of its beneficence to bodies and souls.

But Peter rises to the full height of the occasion, when he answers the Sanhedrin’s question with the pealing forth of his Lord’s name. He repeats in substance his former contrast of Israel’s treatment of Jesus and God’s; but, in speaking to the rulers, his tone is more severe than it was to the people. The latter had been charged, at Pentecost and in the Temple, with crucifying *Jesus*; the former are here charged with crucifying the *Christ*. It was their business to have tested his claims, and to have welcomed the Messiah. The guilt was shared by both, but the heavier part lay on the shoulders of the Sanhedrin.

Mark, too, the bold proclamation of the Resurrection, the stone of offence to the Sadducees. How easy it would have been for them to silence the Apostle, if they could have pointed to the undisturbed and occupied grave! That would have finished the new sect at once. Is there any reason why it was not done but the one reason that it could not be done?

Thus far Peter has been answering the interrogation legally put, and has done as was anticipated. Now was the time for Annas and the rest to strike in; but they could not carry out their programme, for the fiery stream of Peter's words does not stop when they expected, and instead of a timid answer followed by silence, they get an almost defiant proclamation of the Name, followed by a charge against them, which turns the accused into the accuser, and puts them at the bar. Peter learned to apply the passage in the Psalm [Act. 4:11] to the rulers, from his Master's use of it [Mat. 21:42]; and there is no quaver in his voice nor fear in his heart when, in the face of all these learned Rabbis and high and mighty dignitaries, he brands them as foolish builders, blind to the worth of the Stone 'chosen of God, and precious,' and tells them that the course of divine Providence will run counter to their rejection of Jesus, and make him the very 'Head of the corner,'-the crown, as well as the foundation, of God's building.

But not even this bold indictment ends the stream of his speech. The proclamation of the power of the Name was fitly followed by pressing home the guilt and madness of rejecting Jesus, and that again by the glad tidings of salvation for all, even the rejecters. Is not the sequence in Peter's defence substantially that which all Christian preaching should exhibit? First, strong, plain proclamation of the truth; then pungent pressing home of the sin of turning away from Jesus; and then earnest setting forth of the salvation in His name,- a salvation wide as the world, and deep as our misery and need, but narrow, inasmuch as it is 'in none other.' The Apostle will not end with charging his hearers with guilt, but with offering them salvation. He will end with lifting up 'the Name' high above all other, and setting it in solitary clearness before, not these rulers only, but the whole world. The salvation which it had wrought on the lame man was but a parable and picture of the salvation from all ills of body and spirit, which was stored in that Name, and in it alone.

The rulers’ contempt had been expressed by their emphatic ending of their question with that ‘ye.’ Peter expresses his brotherhood and longing for the good of his judges by ending his impassioned, or, rather, inspired address with a loving, pleading ‘we.’ He puts himself on the same level with them as needing salvation, and would fain have them on the same level with himself and John as receiving it. That is the right way to preach.

Little need be said as to the effect of this address. Whether it went any deeper in any susceptible souls or not, it upset the schemes of the leaders. Something in the manner and matter of it awed them into wonder, and paralysed them for the time. Here was the first instance of the fulfilment of that promise, which has been fulfilled again and again since, of ‘a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist.’ ‘Unlearned,’ as ignorant of Rabbinical traditions, and ‘ignorant,’ or, rather, ‘private,’ as holding no official position, these two wielded a power over hearts and consciences which not even official indifference and arrogance could shake off. Thank God, that day’s experience is repeated still, and any of us may have the same Spirit to clothe us with the same armour of light!

The Sanhedrin knew well enough that the Apostles had been with Jesus, and the statement that ‘they took knowledge of them’ cannot mean that that fact dawned on the rulers for the first time. Rather it means that their wonder at the ‘boldness’ of the two drove home the fact of their association with Him to their minds. That association explained the marvel; for the Sanhedrin remembered how He had stood, meek but unawed, at the same bar. They said to themselves, ‘We know where these men get this brave freedom of speech,-from that Nazarene.’ Happy shall we be if our demeanour recalls to spectators the ways of our Lord!

How came the lame man there? He had not been arrested with the Apostles. Had he voluntarily and bravely joined them? We do not know, but evidently he was not there as accused, and probably had come as a witness of the reality of the miracle. Notice the emphatic ‘standing,’ as in Act. 4:10,-a thing that he had never done all his life. No wonder that the Sanhedrin were puzzled, and settled down to the ‘lame and impotent conclusion’ which follows. So, in the first round of the world-long battle between the persecutors and the persecuted, the victory is all on the side of the latter. So it has been ever since, though often the victors have died in the conflict. ‘The Church is an anvil which has worn out many hammers,’ and the story of the first collision is, in essentials, the story of all.

26)Acts 4:19

Acts

OBEDIENT DISOBEDIENCE

Act. 4:19 - Act. 4:31.

The only chance for persecution to succeed is to smite hard and swiftly. If you cannot strike, do not threaten. Menacing words only give courage. The rulers betrayed their hesitation when the end of their solemn conclave was but to ‘straitly threaten’; and less heroic confessors than Peter and John would have disregarded the prohibition as mere wind. None the less the attitude of these two Galilean fishermen is noble and singular, when their previous cowardice is remembered. This first collision with civil authority gives, as has been already noticed, the main lines on which the relations of the Church to hostile powers have proceeded.

I. The heroic refusal of unlawful obedience.

We shall probably not do injustice to John if we suppose that Peter was spokesman. If so, the contrast of the tone of his answer with all previously recorded utterances of his is remarkable. Warm-hearted impulsiveness, often wrong-headed and sometimes illogical, had been their mark; but here we have calm, fixed determination, which, as is usually its manner, wastes no words, but in its very brevity impresses the hearers as being immovable. Whence did this man get the power to lay down once for all the foundation principles of the limits of civil obedience, and of the duty of Christian confession? His words take rank with the ever-memorable sayings of thinkers and heroes, from Socrates in his prison telling the Athenians that he loved them, but that he must ‘obey God rather than you,’ to Luther at Worms with his ‘It is neither safe nor right to do anything against conscience. Here I stand; I can do nothing else. God help me! Amen.' Peter's words are the first of a long series.

This first instance of persecution is made the occasion for the clear expression of the great principles which are to guide the Church. The answer falls into two parts, in the first of which the limits of obedience to civil authority are laid down in a perfectly general form to which even the Council are expected to assent, and in the second an irresistible compulsion to speak is boldly alleged as driving the two Apostles to a flat refusal to obey.

It was a daring stroke to appeal to the Council for an endorsement of the principle in Act. 4:19, but the appeal was unanswerable; for this tribunal had no other ostensible reason for existence than to enforce obedience to the law of God, and to Peter's dilemma only one reply was possible. But it rested on a bold assumption, which was calculated to irritate the court; namely, that there was a blank contradiction between their commands and God's, so that to obey the one was to disobey the other. When that parting of the ways is reached, there remains no doubt as to which road a religious man must take.

The limits of civil obedience are clearly drawn. It is a duty, because 'the powers that be are ordained of God,' and obedience to them is obedience to Him. But if they, transcending their sphere, claim obedience which can only be rendered by disobedience to Him who has appointed them, then they are no longer His ministers, and the duty of allegiance falls away. But there must be a plain conflict of commands, and we must take care lest we substitute whims and fancies of our own for the injunctions of God. Peter was not guided by his own conceptions of duty, but by the distinct precept of his Master, which had bid him speak. It is not true that it is the cause which makes the martyr, but it is true that many good men have made themselves martyrs needlessly. This principle is too sharp a weapon to be causelessly drawn and brandished. Only an unmistakable opposition of commandments warrants its use; and then, he has little right to be called Christ's soldier who keeps the sword in the scabbard.

The articulate refusal in Act. 4:20 bases itself on the ground of irrepressible necessity: 'We cannot but speak.' The immediate application was to the facts of Christ’s life, death, and glory. The Apostles could not help speaking of these, both because to do so was their commission, and because the knowledge of them and of their importance forbade silence. The truth implied is of wide reach. Whoever has a real, personal experience of Christ’s saving power, and has heard and seen Him, will be irresistibly impelled to impart what he has received. Speech is a relief to a full heart. The word, concealed in the prophet’s heart, burned there ‘like fire in his bones, and he was weary of forbearing.’ So it always is with deep conviction. If a man has never felt that he must speak of Christ, he is a very imperfect Christian. The glow of his own heart, the pity for men who know Him not, his Lord’s command, all concur to compel speech. The full river cannot be dammed up.

II. The lame and impotent conclusion of the perplexed Council.

How plain the path is when only duty is taken as a guide, and how vigorously and decisively a man marches along it! Peter had no hesitation, and his resolved answer comes crashing in a straight course, like a cannon-ball. The Council had a much more ambiguous oracle to consult in order to settle their course, and they hesitate accordingly, and at last do a something which is a nothing. They wanted to trim their sails to catch popular favour, and so they could not do anything thoroughly. To punish or acquit was the only alternative for just judges. But they were not just; and as Jesus had been crucified, not because Pilate thought Him guilty, but to please the people, so His Apostles were let off, not because they were innocent, but for the same reason. When popularity-hunters get on the judicial bench, society must be rotten, and nearing its dissolution. To ‘decree unrighteousness by a law’ is among the most hideous of crimes. Judges ‘willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,’ are portents indicative of corruption. We may remark here how the physician’s pen takes note of the patient’s age, as making his cure more striking, and manifestly miraculous.

III. The Church’s answer to the first assault of the world’s power.

How beautifully natural that is, ‘Being let go, they went to their own,’ and how large a principle is expressed in the naive words! The great law of association according to spiritual affinity has much to do in determining relations here. It aggregates men, according to sorts; but its operation is thwarted by other conditions, so that companionship is often misery. But a time comes when it will work unhindered, and men will be united with their like, as the stones on some sea-beaches are laid in rows, according to their size, by the force of the sea. Judas ‘went to his own place,’ and, in another world, like will draw to like, and prevailing tendencies will be increased by association with those who share them.

The prayer of the Church was probably the inspired outpouring of one voice, and all the people said ‘Amen,’ and so made it theirs. Whose voice it was which thus put into words the common sentiment we should gladly have known, but need not speculate. The great fact is that the Church answered threats by prayer. It augurs healthy spiritual life when opposition and danger neither make cheeks blanch with fear nor flush with anger. No man there trembled nor thought of vengeance, or of repaying threats with threats. Every man there instinctively turned heavenwards, and flung himself, as it were, into God’s arms for protection. Prayer is the strongest weapon that a persecuted Church can use. Browning makes a tyrant say, recounting how he had tried to crush a man, that his intended victim

‘Stood erect, caught at God’s skirts, and prayed,
So I was afraid.’

The contents of the prayer are equally noteworthy. Instead of minutely studying it verse by verse, we may note some of its salient points. Observe its undaunted courage. That company never quivered or wavered. They had no thought of obeying the mandate of the Council. They were a little army of heroes. What had made them so? What but the conviction that they had a living Lord at God’s right hand, and a mighty Spirit in their spirits? The world has never seen a transformation like that. Unique effects demand unique causes for their explanation, and nothing but the historical truth of the facts recorded in the last pages of the Gospels and first of the Acts accounts for the demeanour of these men.

Their courage is strikingly marked by their petition. All they ask is ‘boldness’ to speak a word which shall not be theirs, but God’s. Fear would have prayed for protection; passion would have asked retribution on enemies. Christian courage and devotion only ask that they may not shrink from their duty, and that the word may be spoken, whatever becomes of the speakers. The world is powerless against men like that. Would the Church of to-day meet threats with like unanimity of desire for boldness in confession? If not, it must be because it has not the same firm hold of the Risen Lord which these first believers had. The truest courage is that which is conscious of its weakness, and yet has no thought of flight, but prays for its own increase.

We may observe, too, the body of belief expressed in the prayer. First it lays hold on the creative omnipotence of God, and thence passes to the recognition of His written revelation. The Church has begun to learn the inmost meaning of the Old Testament, and to find Christ there. David may not have written the second Psalm. Its attribution to him by the Church stands on a different level from Christ's attribution of authorship, as, for instance, of the hundred and tenth Psalm. The prophecy of the Psalm is plainly Messianic, however it may have had a historical occasion in some forgotten revolt against some Davidic king; and, while the particular incidents to which the prayer alludes do not exhaust its far-reaching application, they are rightly regarded as partly fulfilling it. Herod is a 'king of the earth,' Pilate is a 'ruler'; Roman soldiers are Gentiles; Jewish rulers are the representatives of 'the people.' Jesus is 'God's Anointed.' The fact that such an unnatural and daring combination of rebels was predicted in the Psalm bears witness that even that crime at Calvary was foreordained to come to pass, and that God's hand and counsel ruled. Therefore all other opposition, such as now threatened, will turn out to be swayed by that same Mighty Hand, to work out His counsel. Why, then, should the Church fear? If we can see God's hand moving all things, terror is dead for us, and threats are like the whistling of idle wind.

Mark, too, the strong expression of the Church's dependence on God. 'Lord' here is an unusual word, and means 'Master,' while the Church collectively is called 'Thy servants,' or properly, 'slaves.' It is a different word from that of 'servant' [rather than 'child'] applied to Jesus in Act. 4:27 - Act. 4:30. God is the Master, we are His 'slaves,' bound to absolute obedience, unconditional submission, belonging to Him, not to ourselves, and therefore having claims on Him for such care as an owner gives to his slaves or his cattle. He will not let them be maltreated nor starved. He will defend them and feed them; but they must serve him by life, and death if need be. Unquestioning submission and unreserved dependence are our duties. Absolute ownership and unshared responsibility for our well-being belong to Him.

Further, the view of Christ's relationship to God is the same as occurs in other of the early chapters of the Acts. The title of 'Thy holy Servant Jesus' dwells on Christ's office, rather than on His nature. Here it puts Him in contrast with David, also called 'Thy servant.' The latter was imperfectly what Jesus was perfectly. His complete realisation of the prophetic picture of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah is emphasised by the adjective 'holy,' implying complete devotion or separation to the service of God, and unsullied, unlimited moral purity. The uniqueness of His relation in this aspect is expressed by the definite article in the original. He is *the* Servant, in a sense and measure all His own. He is further *the* Anointed Messiah. This was the Church's message to Israel and the stay of its own courage, that Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed and perfect Servant of the Lord, who was now in heaven, reigning there. All that this faith involved had not yet become clear to their consciousness, but the Spirit was guiding them step by step into all the truth; and what they saw and heard, not only in the historical facts of which they were the witnesses, but in the teaching of that Spirit, they could not but speak.

The answer came swift as the roll of thunder after lightning. They who ask for courage to do God's will and speak Christ's name have never long to wait for response. The place 'was shaken,' symbol of the effect of faithful witness-bearing, or manifestation of the power which was given in answer to their prayer. 'They were all filled with the Holy Ghost,' who now did not, as before, confer ability to speak with other tongues, but wrought no less worthily in heartening and fitting them to speak 'in their own tongue, wherein they were born,' in bold defiance of unlawful commands.

The statement of the answer repeats the petition verbatim: 'With all boldness they spake the word.' What we desire of spiritual gifts we get, and God moulds His replies so as to remind us of our petitions, and to show by the event that these have reached His ear and guided His giving hand.

27)Acts 4:20

Acts

OBEDIENT DISOBEDIENCE

IMPOSSIBLE SILENCE

Act. 4:20.

The context tells us that the Jewish Council were surprised, as they well might be, at the boldness of Peter and John, and traced it to their having been with Jesus. But do you remember that they were by no means bold when they were with Jesus, and that the bravery came after what, in ordinary circumstances, would have destroyed any of it in a man? A leader's execution is not a usual recipe for heartening his followers, but it had that effect in this case, and the Peter who was frightened out of all his heroics by a sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued servant-maid, a few weeks after bearded the Council and 'rejoiced that he was counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name.' It was not Christ's death that did that, and it was not His life that did that. You cannot understand, to use a long word, the 'psychological' transformation of these cowardly deniers who fled and forsook Him, unless you bring in three things: Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost. Then it is explicable.

However the boldness came; these two men before the Council were making an epoch at that moment, and their grand words are the Magna Charta of the right of every sincere conviction to free speech. They are the direct parent of hundreds of similar sayings that flash out down the world's history. Two things Peter and John adduced as making silence impossible-a definite divine command, and an inward impulse. 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.'

But I wish to use these words now in a somewhat wider application. They may suggest that there are great facts which make silence and non-aggressiveness an impossibility for an individual or a Church, and that by the very law of its being, a Church must be a missionary Church, and a

Christian cannot be a dumb Christian, unless he is a dead Christian. And so I turn to look at these words as suggesting to us two or three of the grounds on which Christian effort, in some form or another, is inseparable from Christian experience.

And, first, I wish you to notice that there is-

I. An inward necessity which makes silence impossible.

‘We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard,’ is a principle that applies far more widely than to the work of a Christian Church, or to any activity that is put in force to spread the name of Jesus Christ. For there is a universal impulse which brings it about that whatever, in the nature of profound conviction, of illuminating truth, especially as affecting moral and spiritual matters, is granted to any man, knocks at the inner side of the door of his lips, and demands an exit and free air and utterance. As surely as the tender green spikelet of the springing corn pushes its way through the hard clods, or as the bud in the fig-tree’s polished stem swells and opens, so surely whatever a man, in his deepest heart, knows to be true, calls upon him to let it out and manifest itself in his words and in his life. ‘We believe, and therefore speak,’ is a universal sequence. There were four leprous men long ago that, in their despair, made their way into the camp of the beleaguering enemy, found it empty; and after they feasted themselves-and small blame to them-then flashed upon them the thought, ‘We do not well, this is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace; if we tarry till the morning light, some evil will befall us.’ Something like that is the uniform accompaniment of all profound conviction. And if so, especially imperative and urgent will this necessity be, wherever there is true Christian life. For whether we consider the greatness of the gift that is imparted to us, in the very act of our receiving that Lord, or whether we consider the soreness of the need of a world that is without Him, surely there can be nothing that so reinforces the natural necessity and impulse to impart what we possess of truth or beauty or goodness as the greatness of the unspeakable gift, and the wretchedness of a world that wants it. Brethren, there are many things that come in the way-and perhaps never more than in our own generation-of Christian men and women making direct and specific efforts, by lip as well as by life, to speak about Jesus Christ to other people. There is the standing hindrance of love of ease and selfish absorption in our own concerns. There are the conventional hindrances of our canons of social intercourse which make it ‘bad form’ to speak to men about anything beneath the surface, and God forbid that I should urge any man to a brusque, and indiscriminate, and unwise forcing of his faith upon other people. But I believe, that deep down below all these reasons, there are two main reasons why the practice of the clear utterance of their faith on the part of Christian people is so rare. The one is a deficient conception of what the Gospel is, and the other is a feeble grasp of it for ourselves. If you do not think that you have very much to say, you will not be very anxious to say it; and if your notion of Christianity, and of Christ’s relation to the world, is that of the superficial professing Christian, then of course you will be smitten with no earnestness of desire to impart the truth to others. Types of Christianity which enfeeble or obscure the central thought of Christ’s work for the salvation of a world that needs a Saviour, and is perishing without Him, never were, never are, never will be, missionary or aggressive. There is no driving force in them. They have little to say, and naturally they are in no hurry to say it. But there is a deeper reason than that. I said a minute ago that a dumb Christian was an impossibility unless he were a dead Christian. And *there* is the reason why so many of us feel so little, so very little, of that knocking at the door of our hearts, and saying, ‘Let me out!’ which we should feel if we deeply believed, and felt, as well as intellectually accepted, the gospel of our salvation.

The cause of a silent Church is a defective conception of the Gospel entrusted to it, or a feeble grasp of the same. And as our silence or indifference is the symptom, so by reaction it is in its turn the cause of a greater enfeeblement of our faith, and of a weaker grasp of the Gospel. Of course I know that it is perfectly possible for a man to talk away his convictions, and I am afraid that that temptation which besets all men of my profession, is not always resisted by us as it ought to be. But, on the other hand, sure am I that no better way can be devised of deepening my own hold of the truths of Christianity than an honest, right attempt to make another share my morsel with me. Convictions bottled, like other things bottled up, are apt to evaporate and to spoil. They say that sometimes wine-growers, when they go down into their cellars, find in a puncheon no wine, but a huge fungus. That is what befalls the Christianity of people that never let air in, and never speak their faith out. ‘We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard’; and if we do not speak, the vision fades and the sound becomes faint.

Now there is another side to this same inward necessity of which I have been speaking, on which I must just touch. I have referred to the impulse which flows from the possession of the Gospel. There is an impulse which flows from that which is but another way of putting the same thing, the union with Jesus Christ, which is the result of our faith in the Gospel. If I am a Christian I am, in a very profound and real sense, one with Jesus Christ, and have His Spirit for the life of my spirit. And in the measure in which I am thus one with Him, I shall look at things as He looks at them, and do such things as He did. If the mind of Jesus Christ is in us ‘Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross,’ who ‘counted not equality with God a thing to be desired, but made Himself of no reputation,’ and ‘was found in fashion as a man,’ then we too shall feel that our work in the world is not done, and our obligations to Him are not discharged, unless to the very last particle of our power we spread His name. Brethren, if there were no commandment at all from Christ’s lips laying upon His followers the specific duty of making His gospel known, still this inward impulse of which I am speaking would have created all the forms of Christian aggressiveness which we see round about us, because, if we have Christ and His Gospel in our hearts, ‘we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.’

And now turn to another aspect of this matter. There is-

II. A command which makes silence criminal.

I do not need to do more than remind you of the fact that the very last words which our Lord has left us according to the two versions of them which are given in the Gospel of Matthew, and the beginning of this Book of the Acts, coincide in this. ‘You are to be My witnesses to the ends of the earth. Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.’ Did you ever think what an extraordinary thing it is that that confident anticipation of a worldwide dominion, and of being Himself adapted to all mankind, in every climate and in every age, and at every stage of culture, should have been the conviction which the departing Christ sought to stamp upon the minds of those eleven poor men? What audacity! What tremendous confidence! What a task to which to set them! What an unexampled belief in Himself and His work! And it is all coming true; for the world is finding out, more and more, that Jesus Christ is its Saviour and its King.

This commandment which is laid upon us Christian men submerges all distinctions of race, and speech, and nationality, and culture. There are high walls parting men off from one another. This great message and commission, like some rising tide, rolls over them all, and obliterates them, and flows boundless, having drowned the differences, from horizon to horizon, east and west and south and north.

Now let me press the thought that this commandment makes indifference and silence criminal. We hear people talk, people whose Christianity it is not for me to question, though I may question two things about it, its clearness and its depth-we hear them talk as if to help or not to help, in the various forms of Christian activity, missionary or otherwise, was a matter left to their own inclination. No! it is not. Let us distinctly understand that to help or not to help is not the choice open to any man who would obey Jesus Christ. Let us distinctly understand-and God grant that we may all feel it more- that we dare not stand aside, be negligent, do nothing, leave other people to give and to toil, and say, ‘Oh! my sympathies do not go in that direction.’ Jesus Christ told you that they were to go in that direction, and if they do not, so much the worse for the sympathies for one thing, and so much the worse for you, the rebel, the disobedient in heart. I do not want to bring down this great gift and token of love which Jesus Christ has given to His servants, in entrusting them with the spread of the Gospel, to the low level of a mere commandment, but I do sometimes think that the tone of feeling, ay! and of speech, and still more the manner of action, among professing Christian people, in regard to the whole subject of the missionary work of God’s Church, shows that they need to be reminded; as the Duke of Wellington said, ‘There are your marching orders!’ and the soldier who does not obey his marching orders is a mutineer. There is a definite commandment which makes indifference criminal.

There is another thing I should like to say, viz. that this definite commandment overrides everything else. We hear a great deal from unsympathetic critics, which is but a reproduction of an old grumble that did not come from a very creditable source. ‘To what purpose is this waste?’ Why do you not spend your money upon technical schools, soup-kitchens, housing of the poor, and the like? Well, our answer is, ‘He told us.’ We hear, too, especially just in these days, a great deal about the necessity for increased caution in pursuing missionary operations in heathen lands. And some people that do not know anything about the subject have ventured to say, for instance, that the missionaries are responsible for Chinese antagonism to Europeans, and for similar phenomena. Well, we are ready to be as wise and prudent as you like. We do not ask any consuls to help us. Our brethren are men who have hazarded their lives; and I never heard of a Baptist missionary running under the skirts of an ambassador, or praying the government to come and protect him. We do not ask for cathedrals to be built, or territory to be ceded, as compensation for the loss of precious lives. But if these advisers of caution mean no more than they say, ‘Caution!’ we agree. But if they mean, what some of them mean, that we are to be silent for fear of consequences, then, whether it be prime ministers, or magistrates, or mobs that say it, our answer is, ‘Whether it be right to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye! We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.’

So, lastly, there is-

III. The bond of brotherhood which makes silence unnatural.

I have spoken of an inward impulse. That thought turns our attention to our own hearts. I have spoken of a definite command; that turns our eyes to the Throne. I speak now of a bond of brotherhood. That sends our thoughts out over the whole world. There is such a bond. Jesus Christ by His Incarnation has taken the nature of every man upon Himself, and has brought all men into one. Jesus Christ ‘by the grace of God, has tasted death for every man,’ and has brought all men into unity. And so the much-abused and vulgarised conception of ‘fraternity,’ and even the very word ‘humanity,’ are the creation of Christianity, and flow from these two facts-the Cradle of Bethlehem and the Cross of Calvary, besides that prior one that ‘God hath made of one blood all nations of men.’ If that be so, then what flows from that unity, from that brotherhood thus sacredly founded upon the facts of the life and death of Jesus Christ, the world’s Redeemer? This to begin with, that Christian men are bound to look out over humanity with Christ’s eyes, and not-as is largely the case to-day- to regard other nations as enemies and rivals, and the ‘lower races’ as existing to be exploited for our wealth, to be coerced for our glory, to be conquered for our Empire. We have to think of them as Jesus Christ thought. I cannot but remember days in England when the humanitarian sentiment in regard to the inferior races was far more vigorous, and far more operative in national life than it is to-day. I can go back in boyhood’s memory to the emancipation of the West Indian slaves, and that was but the type of the general tendency of thought amongst the better minds of England in those days. Would that it were so now!

But further, brethren, we as Christian people have laid upon us this responsibility by that very bond of brotherhood, that we should carry whithersoever our influence may go the great message of the Elder Brother who makes us all one. We give much to the ‘heathen’ populations within our Empire or the reach of our trade. We give them English laws, English science, English literature, English outlooks on life, the English tongue, English vices-opium, profligacy, and the like. Are these all the gifts that we are bound to carry to heathen lands? Dynamos and encyclopaedias, gin and rifles, shirtings and castings? Have we not to carry Christ? And all the more because we are so closely knit with so many of them. I wonder how many of you get the greater part of your living out of India and China?

Surely, if there is a place in England where the missionary appeal should be responded to, it is Manchester. ‘As a nest hast thou gathered the riches of the nations.’ What have you given? Make up the balance-sheet, brethren. ‘We are debtors,’ let us put down the items:-

Debtors by a common brotherhood.

Debtors by the possession of Christ for ourselves.

Debtors by benefits received.

Debtors by injuries inflicted.

The debit side of the account is heavy. Let us try to discharge some portion of the debt, in the fashion in which the Apostle from whom I have been quoting thought that he would best discharge it when, after declaring himself debtor to many kinds of men, he added, ‘So as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the Gospel.’ May we all say, more truly than we have ever said before, ‘We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard!’

28)Acts 4:21-24

Acts

OBEDIENT DISOBEDIENCE

Act. 4:19 - Act. 4:31.

The only chance for persecution to succeed is to smite hard and swiftly. If you cannot strike, do not threaten. Menacing words only give courage. The rulers betrayed their hesitation when the end of their solemn conclave was but to ‘straitly threaten’; and less heroic confessors than Peter and John would have disregarded the prohibition as mere wind. None the less the attitude of these two Galilean fishermen is noble and singular, when their previous cowardice is remembered. This first collision with civil authority gives, as has been already noticed, the main lines on which the relations of the Church to hostile powers have proceeded.

I. The heroic refusal of unlawful obedience.

We shall probably not do injustice to John if we suppose that Peter was spokesman. If so, the contrast of the tone of his answer with all previously recorded utterances of his is remarkable. Warm-hearted impulsiveness, often wrong-headed and sometimes illogical, had been their mark; but here we have calm, fixed determination, which, as is usually its manner, wastes no words, but in its very brevity impresses the hearers as being immovable. Whence did this man get the power to lay down once for all the foundation principles of the limits of civil obedience, and of the duty of Christian confession? His words take rank with the ever-memorable sayings of thinkers and heroes, from Socrates in his prison telling the Athenians that he loved them, but that he must ‘obey God rather than you,’ to Luther at Worms with his ‘It is neither safe nor right to do anything against conscience. Here I stand; I can do nothing else. God help me! Amen.’ Peter’s words are the first of a long series.

This first instance of persecution is made the occasion for the clear expression of the great principles which are to guide the Church. The answer falls into two parts, in the first of which the limits of obedience to civil authority are laid down in a perfectly general form to which even the Council are expected to assent, and in the second an irresistible compulsion to speak is boldly alleged as driving the two Apostles to a flat refusal to obey.

It was a daring stroke to appeal to the Council for an endorsement of the principle in Act. 4:19, but the appeal was unanswerable; for this tribunal had no other ostensible reason for existence than to enforce obedience to the law of God, and to Peter’s dilemma only one reply was possible. But it rested on a bold assumption, which was calculated to irritate the court; namely, that there was a blank contradiction between their commands and God’s, so that to obey the one was to disobey the other. When that parting of the ways is reached, there remains no doubt as to which road a religious man must take.

The limits of civil obedience are clearly drawn. It is a duty, because ‘the powers that be are ordained of God,’ and obedience to them is obedience to Him. But if they, transcending their sphere, claim obedience which can only be rendered by disobedience to Him who has appointed them, then they are no longer His ministers, and the duty of allegiance falls away. But there must be a plain conflict of commands, and we must take care lest we substitute whims and fancies of our own for the injunctions of God. Peter was not guided by his own conceptions of duty, but by the distinct precept of his Master, which had bid him speak. It is not true that it is the cause which makes the martyr, but it is true that many good men have made themselves martyrs needlessly. This principle is too sharp a weapon to be causelessly drawn and brandished. Only an unmistakable opposition of commandments warrants its use; and then, he has little right to be called Christ’s soldier who keeps the sword in the scabbard.

The articulate refusal in Act. 4:20 bases itself on the ground of irrepressible necessity: ‘We cannot but speak.’ The immediate application was to the facts of Christ’s life, death, and glory. The Apostles could not help speaking of these, both because to do so was their commission, and because the knowledge of them and of their importance forbade silence. The truth implied is of wide reach. Whoever has a real, personal experience of Christ’s saving power, and has heard and seen Him, will be irresistibly impelled to impart what he has received. Speech is a relief to a full heart. The word, concealed in the prophet’s heart, burned there ‘like fire in his bones, and he was weary of forbearing.’ So it always is with deep conviction. If a man has never felt that he must speak of Christ, he is a very imperfect Christian. The glow of his own heart, the pity for men who know Him not, his Lord’s command, all concur to compel speech. The full river cannot be dammed up.

II. The lame and impotent conclusion of the perplexed Council.

How plain the path is when only duty is taken as a guide, and how vigorously and decisively a man marches along it! Peter had no hesitation, and his resolved answer comes crashing in a straight course, like a cannon-ball. The Council had a much more ambiguous oracle to consult in order to settle their course, and they hesitate accordingly, and at last do a something which is a nothing. They wanted to trim their sails to catch popular favour, and so they could not do anything thoroughly. To punish or acquit was the only alternative for just judges. But they were not just; and as Jesus had been crucified, not because Pilate thought Him guilty, but to please the people, so His Apostles were let off, not because they were innocent, but for the same reason. When popularity-hunters get on the judicial bench, society must be rotten, and nearing its dissolution. To ‘decree unrighteousness by a law’ is among the most hideous of crimes. Judges ‘willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,’ are portents indicative of corruption. We may remark here how the physician’s pen takes note of the patient’s age, as making his cure more striking, and manifestly miraculous.

III. The Church’s answer to the first assault of the world’s power.

How beautifully natural that is, ‘Being let go, they went to their own,’ and how large a principle is expressed in the naive words! The great law of association according to spiritual affinity has much to do in determining relations here. It aggregates men, according to sorts; but its operation is thwarted by other conditions, so that companionship is often misery. But a time comes when it will work unhindered, and men will be united with their like, as the stones on some sea-beaches are laid in rows, according to their size, by the force of the sea. Judas 'went to his own place,' and, in another world, like will draw to like, and prevailing tendencies will be increased by association with those who share them.

The prayer of the Church was probably the inspired outpouring of one voice, and all the people said 'Amen,' and so made it theirs. Whose voice it was which thus put into words the common sentiment we should gladly have known, but need not speculate. The great fact is that the Church answered threats by prayer. It augurs healthy spiritual life when opposition and danger neither make cheeks blanch with fear nor flush with anger. No man there trembled nor thought of vengeance, or of repaying threats with threats. Every man there instinctively turned heavenwards, and flung himself, as it were, into God's arms for protection. Prayer is the strongest weapon that a persecuted Church can use. Browning makes a tyrant say, recounting how he had tried to crush a man, that his intended victim

'Stood erect, caught at God's skirts, and prayed,
So I was afraid.'

The contents of the prayer are equally noteworthy. Instead of minutely studying it verse by verse, we may note some of its salient points. Observe its undaunted courage. That company never quivered or wavered. They had no thought of obeying the mandate of the Council. They were a little army of heroes. What had made them so? What but the conviction that they had a living Lord at God's right hand, and a mighty Spirit in their spirits? The world has never seen a transformation like that. Unique effects demand unique causes for their explanation, and nothing but the historical truth of the facts recorded in the last pages of the Gospels and first of the Acts accounts for the demeanour of these men.

Their courage is strikingly marked by their petition. All they ask is 'boldness' to speak a word which shall not be theirs, but God's. Fear would have prayed for protection; passion would have asked retribution on enemies. Christian courage and devotion only ask that they may not shrink from their duty, and that the word may be spoken, whatever becomes of the speakers. The world is powerless against men like that. Would the Church of to-day meet threats with like unanimity of desire for boldness in confession? If not, it must be because it has not the same firm hold of the Risen Lord which these first believers had. The truest courage is that which is conscious of its weakness, and yet has no thought of flight, but prays for its own increase.

We may observe, too, the body of belief expressed in the prayer. First it lays hold on the creative omnipotence of God, and thence passes to the recognition of His written revelation. The Church has begun to learn the inmost meaning of the Old Testament, and to find Christ there. David may not have written the second Psalm. Its attribution to him by the Church stands on a different level from Christ's attribution of authorship, as, for instance, of the hundred and tenth Psalm. The prophecy of the Psalm is plainly Messianic, however it may have had a historical occasion in some forgotten revolt against some Davidic king; and, while the particular incidents to which the prayer alludes do not exhaust its far-reaching application, they are rightly regarded as partly fulfilling it. Herod is a 'king of the earth,' Pilate is a 'ruler'; Roman soldiers are Gentiles; Jewish rulers are the representatives of 'the people.' Jesus is 'God's Anointed.' The fact that such an unnatural and daring combination of rebels was predicted in the Psalm bears witness that even that crime at Calvary was foreordained to come to pass, and that God's hand and counsel ruled. Therefore all other opposition, such as now threatened, will turn out to be swayed by that same Mighty Hand, to work out His counsel. Why, then, should the Church fear? If we can see God's hand moving all things, terror is dead for us, and threats are like the whistling of idle wind.

Mark, too, the strong expression of the Church's dependence on God. 'Lord' here is an unusual word, and means 'Master,' while the Church collectively is called 'Thy servants,' or properly, 'slaves.' It is a different word from that of 'servant' [rather than 'child'] applied to Jesus in Act. 4:27 - Act. 4:30. God is the Master, we are His 'slaves,' bound to absolute obedience, unconditional submission, belonging to Him, not to ourselves, and therefore having claims on Him for such care as an owner gives to his slaves or his cattle. He will not let them be maltreated nor starved. He will defend them and feed them; but they must serve him by life, and death if need be. Unquestioning submission and unreserved dependence are our duties. Absolute ownership and unshared responsibility for our well-being belong to Him.

Further, the view of Christ's relationship to God is the same as occurs in other of the early chapters of the Acts. The title of 'Thy holy Servant Jesus' dwells on Christ's office, rather than on His nature. Here it puts Him in contrast with David, also called 'Thy servant.' The latter was imperfectly what Jesus was perfectly. His complete realisation of the prophetic picture of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah is emphasised by the adjective 'holy,' implying complete devotion or separation to the service of God, and unsullied, unlimited moral purity. The uniqueness of His relation in this aspect is expressed by the definite article in the original. He is *the* Servant, in a sense and measure all His own. He is further *the* Anointed Messiah. This was the Church's message to Israel and the stay of its own courage, that Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed and perfect Servant of the Lord, who was now in heaven, reigning there. All that this faith involved had not yet become clear to their consciousness, but the Spirit was guiding them step by step into all the truth; and what they saw and heard, not only in the historical facts of which they were the witnesses, but in the teaching of that Spirit, they could not but speak.

The answer came swift as the roll of thunder after lightning. They who ask for courage to do God's will and speak Christ's name have never long to wait for response. The place 'was shaken,' symbol of the effect of faithful witness-bearing, or manifestation of the power which was given in answer to their prayer. 'They were all filled with the Holy Ghost,' who now did not, as before, confer ability to speak with other tongues, but wrought no less worthily in heartening and fitting them to speak 'in their own tongue, wherein they were born,' in bold defiance of unlawful commands.

The statement of the answer repeats the petition verbatim: 'With all boldness they spake the word.' What we desire of spiritual gifts we get, and

God moulds His replies so as to remind us of our petitions, and to show by the event that these have reached His ear and guided His giving hand.

29)Acts 4:25

Acts

OBEDIENT DISOBEDIENCE

THE SERVANT AND THE SLAVES

Act. 4:25, Act. 4:27, Act. 4:29.

I do not often take fragments of Scripture for texts; but though these are fragments, their juxtaposition results in by no means fragmentary thoughts. There is obvious intention in the recurrence of the expression so frequently in so few verses, and to the elucidation of that intention my remarks will be directed. The words are parts of the Church's prayer on the occasion of its first collision with the civil power. The incident is recorded at full length because it is the *first* of a long and bloody series, in order that succeeding generations might learn their true weapon and their sure defence. Prayer is the right answer to the world's hostility, and they who only ask for courage to stand by their confession will never ask in vain. But it is no part of my intention to deal either with the incident or with this noble prayer.

A word or two of explanation may be necessary as to the language of our texts. You will observe that, in the second of them, I have followed the Revised Version, which, instead of 'Thy holy child,' as in the Authorised Version, reads 'Thy holy Servant.' The alteration is clearly correct. The word, indeed, literally means 'a child,' but, like our own English 'boy,' or even 'man,' or 'maid,' it is used to express the relation of servant, when the desire is to cover over the harsher features of servitude, and to represent the servant as a part of the family. Thus the kindly centurion, who besought Jesus to come and heal his servant, speaks of him as his 'boy.' And that the word is here used in this secondary sense of 'servant' is unmistakable. For there is no discernible reason why, if stress were meant to be laid on Christ as being the Son of God, the recognised expression for that relationship should not have been employed. Again, the Greek translation of the Old

Testament, with which the Apostles were familiar, employs the very phrase that is here used as its translation of the well-known Old Testament designation of the Messiah, ‘the Servant of the Lord’ and the words here are really a quotation from the great prophecies of the second part of the Book of Isaiah. Further, the same word is employed in reference to King David and in reference to Jesus Christ. In regard to the former, it is evident that it must have the meaning of ‘servant’; and it would be too harsh to suppose that in the compass of so few verses the same expression should be used, at one time in the one signification, and at another in the other. So, then, David and Jesus are in some sense classified here together as both servants of God. That is the first point that I desire to make.

Then, in regard to the third of my texts, the expression is not the same there as in the other two. The disciples do not venture to take the loftier designation. Rather they prefer the humble one, ‘slaves,’ bondmen, the familiar expression found all through the New Testament as almost a synonym to Christians.

So, then, we have here three figures: the Psalmist-king, the Messiah, the disciples; Christ in the midst, on the one hand a servant with whom He deigns to be classed, on the other hand the slaves who, through Him, have become sons. And I think I shall best bring out the intended lessons of these clauses in their connection if I ask you to note these two contrasts, the servants and the Servant; the Servant and the slaves. ‘David Thy servant’; ‘Thy holy Servant Jesus’; us ‘Thy servants.’

I. First, then, notice the servants and the Servant.

The reason for the application of the name to the Psalmist lies, not so much in his personal character or in his religious elevation, as in the fact that he was chosen of God for a specific purpose, to carry on the divine plans some steps towards their realisation. Kings, priests, prophets, the collective Israel, as having a specific function in the world, and being, in some sense, the instruments and embodiments of the will of God amongst men, have in an eminent degree the designation of His ‘servants.’ And we might widen out the thought and say that all men who, like the heathen Cyrus, are God’s shepherds, though they do not know it-guided by Him, though they understand not whence comes their power, and blindly do His work in the world, being ‘epoch-making’ men, as the fashionable phrase goes now-are really, though in a subordinate sense, entitled to the designation.

But then, whilst this is true, and whilst Jesus Christ comes into this category, and is one of these special men raised up and adapted for special service in connection with the carrying out of the divine purpose, mark how emphatically and broadly the line is drawn here between Him and the other members of the class to which, in a certain sense, He does belong. Peter says, ‘Thy servant David,’ but he says ‘Thy *holy* Servant Jesus.’ And in the Greek the emphasis is still stronger, because the definite article is employed before the word ‘servant.’ ‘*The* holy Servant of Thine’-that is His specific and unique designation.

There are many imperfect instruments of the divine will. Thinkers and heroes and saints and statesmen and warriors, as well as prophets and priests and kings, are so regarded in Scripture, and may profitably be so regarded by us; but amongst them all there is One who stands in their midst and yet apart from them, because He, and He alone, can say, ‘I have done all Thy pleasure, and into my doing of Thy pleasure no bitter leaven of self-regard or by-ends has ever, in the faintest degree, entered.’ ‘Thy holy Servant Jesus’ is the unique designation of *the* Servant of the Lord.

And what is the meaning of *holy*? The word does not originally and primarily refer to character so much as to relation to God. The root idea of holiness is not righteousness nor moral perfectness, but something that lies behind these-viz, separation for the service and uses of God. The first notion of the word is consecration, and, built upon that and resulting from it, moral perfection. So then these men, some of whom had lived beside Jesus Christ for all those years, and had seen everything that He did, and studied Him through and through, had summered and wintered with Him, came away from the close inspection of His character with this thought; He is utterly and entirely devoted to the service of God, and in Him there is neither spot nor wrinkle nor blemish such as is found in all other men.

I need not remind you with what strange persistence of affirmation, and yet with what humility of self-consciousness, our Lord Himself always claimed to be in possession of this entire consecration, and complete obedience, and consequent perfection. Think of human lips saying, ‘I do always the things that please Him.' Think of human lips saying, 'My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me.' Think of a man whose whole life's secret was summed up in this: 'As the Father hath given Me commandment, *so*'-no more, no less, no otherwise-'so I speak.' Think of a man whose inspiring principle was, consciously to himself, 'not My will, but Thine be done'; and who could say that it was so, and not be met by universal ridicule. There followed in Jesus the moral perfectness that comes from such uninterrupted and complete consecration of self to God. 'Thy servant David,'-what about Bathsheba, David? What about a great many other things in your life? The poet-king, with the poet-nature so sensitive to all the delights of sense, and so easily moved in the matter of pleasure, is but like all God's other servants in the fact of imperfection. In every machine power is lost through friction; and in every man, the noblest and the purest, there is resistance to be overcome ere motion in conformity with the divine impulse can be secured. We pass in review before our minds saints and martyrs and lovely characters by the hundred, and amongst them all there is not a jewel without a flaw, not a mirror without some dint in it where the rays are distorted, or some dark place where the reflecting surface has been rubbed away by the attrition of sin, and where there is no reflection of the divine light. And then we turn to that meek Figure who stands there with the question that has been awaiting an answer for nineteen centuries upon His lips, and is unanswered yet: 'Which of you convinceth Me of sin?' 'He is the holy Servant,' whose consecration and character mark Him off from all the class to which He belongs as the only one of them all who, in completeness, has executed the Father's purpose, and has never attempted anything contrary to it.

Now there is another step to be taken, and it is this. The Servant who stands out in front of all the group-though the noblest names in the world's history are included therein-could not be *the* Servant unless He were the Son. This designation, as applied to Jesus Christ, is peculiar to these three or four earlier chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. It is interesting because it occurs over and over again there, and because it never occurs anywhere else in the New Testament. If we recognise what I think must be recognised, that it is a quotation from the ancient prophecies, and is an assertion of the Messianic character of Jesus, then I think we here see the Church in a period of transition in regard to their conceptions of their Lord. There is no sign that the proper Sonship and Divinity of our Lord was clear before them at this period. They had the facts, but they had not yet come to the distinct apprehension of how much was involved in these. But, if they knew that Jesus Christ had died and had risen again-and they knew that, for they had seen Him-and if they believed that He was the Messiah, and if they were certain that in His character of Messiah there had been faultlessness and absolute perfection-and they were certain of that, because they had lived beside Him-then it would not be long before they took the next step, and said, as I say, ‘He cannot be the Servant unless He is more than man.’

And we may well ask ourselves the question, if we admit, as the world does admit, the moral perfectness of Jesus Christ, how comes it that this Man alone managed to escape failures and deflections from the right, and sins, and that He only carried through life a stainless garment, and went down to the grave never having needed, and not needing then, the exercise of divine forgiveness? Brethren, I venture to say that it is hopeless to account for Jesus Christ on naturalistic principles; and that either you must give up your belief in His sinlessness, or advance, as the Christian Church as a whole advanced, to the other belief, on which alone that perfectness is explicable: ‘Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ! Thou art the Everlasting Son of the Father!’

II. And so, secondly, let us turn to the other contrast here-the Servant and the slaves.

I said that the humble group of praying, persecuted believers seemed to have wished to take a lower place than their Master’s, even whilst they ventured to assume that, in some sense, they too, like Him, were doing the Father’s will. So they chose, by a fine instinct of humility rather than from any dogmatical prepossessions, the name that expresses, in its most absolute and roughest form, the notion of bondage and servitude. He is the Servant; we standing here are slaves. And that this is not an overweighting of the word with more than is meant by it seems to be confirmed by the fact that in the first clause of this prayer, we have, for the only time in the New Testament, God addressed as ‘Lord’ by the correlative word to *slave*, which has been transferred into English, namely, *despot*.

The true position, then, for a man is to be God’s slave. The harsh, repellent features of that wicked institution assume an altogether different character when they become the features of my relation to Him. Absolute submission, unconditional obedience, on the slave’s part; and on the part of the Master complete ownership, the right of life and death, the right of disposing of all goods and chattels, the right of separating husband and wife, parents and children, the right of issuing commandments without a reason, the right to expect that those commandments shall be swiftly, unhesitatingly, punctiliously, and completely performed-these things inhere in our relation to God. Blessed the man who has learned that they do, and has accepted them as his highest glory and the security of his most blessed life! For, brethren, such submission, absolute and unconditional, the blending and the absorption of my own will in His will, is the secret of all that makes manhood glorious and great and happy.

Remember, however, that in the New Testament these names of slave and owner are transferred to Christians and Jesus Christ. ‘The Servant’ has His slaves; and He who is God’s Servant, and does not His own will but the Father’s will, has us for His servants, imposes His will upon us, and we are bound to render to Him a revenue of entire obedience like that which He hath laid at His Father’s feet.

Such slavery is the only freedom. Liberty does not mean doing as you like, it means liking as you ought, and doing that. He only is free who submits to God in Christ, and thereby overcomes himself and the world and all antagonism, and is able to do that which it is his life to do. A prison out of which we do not desire to go is no restraint, and the will which coincides with law is the only will that is truly free. You talk about the bondage of obedience. Ah! ‘the weight of too much liberty’ is a far sorer bondage. They are the slaves who say, ‘Let us break His bonds asunder, and cast away His cords from us’; and they are the free men who say, ‘Lord, put Thy blessed shackles on my arms, and impose Thy will upon my will, and fill my heart with Thy love; and then will and hands will move freely and delightedly.’ ‘If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.’

Such slavery is the only nobility. In the wicked old empires, as in some of their modern survivals to-day, viziers and prime ministers were mostly drawn from the servile classes. It is so in God's kingdom. They who make themselves God's slaves are by Him made kings and priests, and shall reign with Him on earth. If we are slaves, then are we sons and heirs of God through Jesus Christ.

Remember the alternative. You cannot be your own masters without being your own slaves. It is a far worse bondage to live as chartered libertines than to walk in the paths of obedience. Better serve God than the devil, than the world, than the flesh. Whilst they promise men liberty, they make them 'the most abject and downtrodden vassals of perdition.'

The Servant-Son makes us slaves and sons. It matters nothing to me that Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the law of God; it is so much the better for Him, but of no value for me, unless He has the power of making me like Himself. And He has it, and if you will trust yourselves to Him, and give your hearts to Him, and ask Him to govern you, He will govern you; and if you will abandon your false liberty which is servitude, and take the sober freedom which is obedience, then He will bring you to share in His temper of joyful service; and even we may be able to say, 'My meat and my drink is to do the will of Him that sent me,' and truly saying that, we shall have the key to all delights, and our feet will be, at least, on the lower rungs of the ladder whose top reaches to Heaven.

'What fruit had ye in the things of which ye are now ashamed? But being made free from sin, and become the slaves of God, ye have your fruit unto holiness; and the end everlasting life.' Brethren, I beseech you, by the mercies of God, that ye yield yourselves to Him, crying, 'O Lord, truly I am Thy servant. Thou hast loosed my bonds.'

30)Acts 4:26

Acts

OBEDIENT DISOBEDIENCE

Act. 4:19 - Act. 4:31.

The only chance for persecution to succeed is to smite hard and swiftly. If you cannot strike, do not threaten. Menacing words only give courage. The rulers betrayed their hesitation when the end of their solemn conclave was but to 'straitly threaten'; and less heroic confessors than Peter and John would have disregarded the prohibition as mere wind. None the less the attitude of these two Galilean fishermen is noble and singular, when their previous cowardice is remembered. This first collision with civil authority gives, as has been already noticed, the main lines on which the relations of the Church to hostile powers have proceeded.

I. The heroic refusal of unlawful obedience.

We shall probably not do injustice to John if we suppose that Peter was spokesman. If so, the contrast of the tone of his answer with all previously recorded utterances of his is remarkable. Warm-hearted impulsiveness, often wrong-headed and sometimes illogical, had been their mark; but here we have calm, fixed determination, which, as is usually its manner, wastes no words, but in its very brevity impresses the hearers as being immovable. Whence did this man get the power to lay down once for all the foundation principles of the limits of civil obedience, and of the duty of Christian confession? His words take rank with the ever-memorable sayings of thinkers and heroes, from Socrates in his prison telling the Athenians that he loved them, but that he must 'obey God rather than you,' to Luther at Worms with his 'It is neither safe nor right to do anything against conscience. Here I stand; I can do nothing else. God help me! Amen.' Peter's words are the first of a long series.

This first instance of persecution is made the occasion for the clear expression of the great principles which are to guide the Church. The answer falls into two parts, in the first of which the limits of obedience to civil authority are laid down in a perfectly general form to which even the Council are expected to assent, and in the second an irresistible compulsion to speak is boldly alleged as driving the two Apostles to a flat refusal to obey.

It was a daring stroke to appeal to the Council for an endorsement of the principle in Act. 4:19, but the appeal was unanswerable; for this tribunal had no other ostensible reason for existence than to enforce obedience to the law of God, and to Peter’s dilemma only one reply was possible. But it rested on a bold assumption, which was calculated to irritate the court; namely, that there was a blank contradiction between their commands and God’s, so that to obey the one was to disobey the other. When that parting of the ways is reached, there remains no doubt as to which road a religious man must take.

The limits of civil obedience are clearly drawn. It is a duty, because ‘the powers that be are ordained of God,’ and obedience to them is obedience to Him. But if they, transcending their sphere, claim obedience which can only be rendered by disobedience to Him who has appointed them, then they are no longer His ministers, and the duty of allegiance falls away. But there must be a plain conflict of commands, and we must take care lest we substitute whims and fancies of our own for the injunctions of God. Peter was not guided by his own conceptions of duty, but by the distinct precept of his Master, which had bid him speak. It is not true that it is the cause which makes the martyr, but it is true that many good men have made themselves martyrs needlessly. This principle is too sharp a weapon to be causelessly drawn and brandished. Only an unmistakable opposition of commandments warrants its use; and then, he has little right to be called Christ’s soldier who keeps the sword in the scabbard.

The articulate refusal in Act. 4:20 bases itself on the ground of irrepressible necessity: ‘We cannot but speak.’ The immediate application was to the facts of Christ’s life, death, and glory. The Apostles could not help speaking of these, both because to do so was their commission, and because the knowledge of them and of their importance forbade silence. The truth implied is of wide reach. Whoever has a real, personal experience of Christ’s saving power, and has heard and seen Him, will be irresistibly impelled to impart what he has received. Speech is a relief to a full heart. The word, concealed in the prophet’s heart, burned there ‘like fire in his bones, and he was weary of forbearing.’ So it always is with deep conviction. If a man has never felt that he must speak of Christ, he is a very imperfect Christian. The glow of his own heart, the pity for men who know Him not, his Lord’s command, all concur to compel speech. The full river cannot be dammed up.

II. The lame and impotent conclusion of the perplexed Council.

How plain the path is when only duty is taken as a guide, and how vigorously and decisively a man marches along it! Peter had no hesitation, and his resolved answer comes crashing in a straight course, like a cannon-ball. The Council had a much more ambiguous oracle to consult in order to settle their course, and they hesitate accordingly, and at last do a something which is a nothing. They wanted to trim their sails to catch popular favour, and so they could not do anything thoroughly. To punish or acquit was the only alternative for just judges. But they were not just; and as Jesus had been crucified, not because Pilate thought Him guilty, but to please the people, so His Apostles were let off, not because they were innocent, but for the same reason. When popularity-hunters get on the judicial bench, society must be rotten, and nearing its dissolution. To 'decree unrighteousness by a law' is among the most hideous of crimes. Judges 'willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,' are portents indicative of corruption. We may remark here how the physician's pen takes note of the patient's age, as making his cure more striking, and manifestly miraculous.

III. The Church's answer to the first assault of the world's power.

How beautifully natural that is, 'Being let go, they went to their own,' and how large a principle is expressed in the naive words! The great law of association according to spiritual affinity has much to do in determining relations here. It aggregates men, according to sorts; but its operation is thwarted by other conditions, so that companionship is often misery. But a time comes when it will work unhindered, and men will be united with their like, as the stones on some sea-beaches are laid in rows, according to their size, by the force of the sea. Judas 'went to his own place,' and, in another world, like will draw to like, and prevailing tendencies will be increased by association with those who share them.

The prayer of the Church was probably the inspired outpouring of one voice, and all the people said 'Amen,' and so made it theirs. Whose voice it was which thus put into words the common sentiment we should gladly have known, but need not speculate. The great fact is that the Church answered threats by prayer. It augurs healthy spiritual life when opposition and danger neither make cheeks blanch with fear nor flush with anger. No man there trembled nor thought of vengeance, or of repaying threats with threats. Every man there instinctively turned heavenwards, and flung himself, as it were, into God’s arms for protection. Prayer is the strongest weapon that a persecuted Church can use. Browning makes a tyrant say, recounting how he had tried to crush a man, that his intended victim

‘Stood erect, caught at God’s skirts, and prayed,
So I was afraid.’

The contents of the prayer are equally noteworthy. Instead of minutely studying it verse by verse, we may note some of its salient points. Observe its undaunted courage. That company never quivered or wavered. They had no thought of obeying the mandate of the Council. They were a little army of heroes. What had made them so? What but the conviction that they had a living Lord at God’s right hand, and a mighty Spirit in their spirits? The world has never seen a transformation like that. Unique effects demand unique causes for their explanation, and nothing but the historical truth of the facts recorded in the last pages of the Gospels and first of the Acts accounts for the demeanour of these men.

Their courage is strikingly marked by their petition. All they ask is ‘boldness’ to speak a word which shall not be theirs, but God’s. Fear would have prayed for protection; passion would have asked retribution on enemies. Christian courage and devotion only ask that they may not shrink from their duty, and that the word may be spoken, whatever becomes of the speakers. The world is powerless against men like that. Would the Church of to-day meet threats with like unanimity of desire for boldness in confession? If not, it must be because it has not the same firm hold of the Risen Lord which these first believers had. The truest courage is that which is conscious of its weakness, and yet has no thought of flight, but prays for its own increase.

We may observe, too, the body of belief expressed in the prayer. First it lays hold on the creative omnipotence of God, and thence passes to the recognition of His written revelation. The Church has begun to learn the inmost meaning of the Old Testament, and to find Christ there. David may not have written the second Psalm. Its attribution to him by the Church stands on a different level from Christ's attribution of authorship, as, for instance, of the hundred and tenth Psalm. The prophecy of the Psalm is plainly Messianic, however it may have had a historical occasion in some forgotten revolt against some Davidic king; and, while the particular incidents to which the prayer alludes do not exhaust its far-reaching application, they are rightly regarded as partly fulfilling it. Herod is a 'king of the earth,' Pilate is a 'ruler'; Roman soldiers are Gentiles; Jewish rulers are the representatives of 'the people.' Jesus is 'God's Anointed.' The fact that such an unnatural and daring combination of rebels was predicted in the Psalm bears witness that even that crime at Calvary was foreordained to come to pass, and that God's hand and counsel ruled. Therefore all other opposition, such as now threatened, will turn out to be swayed by that same Mighty Hand, to work out His counsel. Why, then, should the Church fear? If we can see God's hand moving all things, terror is dead for us, and threats are like the whistling of idle wind.

Mark, too, the strong expression of the Church's dependence on God. 'Lord' here is an unusual word, and means 'Master,' while the Church collectively is called 'Thy servants,' or properly, 'slaves.' It is a different word from that of 'servant' [rather than 'child'] applied to Jesus in Act. 4:27 - Act. 4:30. God is the Master, we are His 'slaves,' bound to absolute obedience, unconditional submission, belonging to Him, not to ourselves, and therefore having claims on Him for such care as an owner gives to his slaves or his cattle. He will not let them be maltreated nor starved. He will defend them and feed them; but they must serve him by life, and death if need be. Unquestioning submission and unreserved dependence are our duties. Absolute ownership and unshared responsibility for our well-being belong to Him.

Further, the view of Christ's relationship to God is the same as occurs in other of the early chapters of the Acts. The title of 'Thy holy Servant Jesus' dwells on Christ's office, rather than on His nature. Here it puts Him in contrast with David, also called 'Thy servant.' The latter was imperfectly what Jesus was perfectly. His complete realisation of the prophetic picture of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah is emphasised by the adjective 'holy,' implying complete devotion or separation to the service of God, and unsullied, unlimited moral purity. The uniqueness of His relation in this aspect is expressed by the definite article in the original. He is *the* Servant, in a sense and measure all His own. He is further *the* Anointed Messiah. This was the Church's message to Israel and the stay of its own courage, that Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed and perfect Servant of the Lord, who was now in heaven, reigning there. All that this faith involved had not yet become clear to their consciousness, but the Spirit was guiding them step by step into all the truth; and what they saw and heard, not only in the historical facts of which they were the witnesses, but in the teaching of that Spirit, they could not but speak.

The answer came swift as the roll of thunder after lightning. They who ask for courage to do God's will and speak Christ's name have never long to wait for response. The place 'was shaken,' symbol of the effect of faithful witness-bearing, or manifestation of the power which was given in answer to their prayer. 'They were all filled with the Holy Ghost,' who now did not, as before, confer ability to speak with other tongues, but wrought no less worthily in heartening and fitting them to speak 'in their own tongue, wherein they were born,' in bold defiance of unlawful commands.

The statement of the answer repeats the petition verbatim: 'With all boldness they spake the word.' What we desire of spiritual gifts we get, and God moulds His replies so as to remind us of our petitions, and to show by the event that these have reached His ear and guided His giving hand.

31)Acts 4:27

Acts

OBEDIENT DISOBEDIENCE

THE SERVANT AND THE SLAVES

Act. 4:25, Act. 4:27, Act. 4:29.

I do not often take fragments of Scripture for texts; but though these are fragments, their juxtaposition results in by no means fragmentary thoughts. There is obvious intention in the recurrence of the expression so frequently in so few verses, and to the elucidation of that intention my remarks will be directed. The words are parts of the Church's prayer on the occasion of its first collision with the civil power. The incident is recorded at full length because it is the *first* of a long and bloody series, in order that succeeding generations might learn their true weapon and their sure defence. Prayer is the right answer to the world's hostility, and they who only ask for courage to stand by their confession will never ask in vain. But it is no part of my intention to deal either with the incident or with this noble prayer.

A word or two of explanation may be necessary as to the language of our texts. You will observe that, in the second of them, I have followed the Revised Version, which, instead of 'Thy holy child,' as in the Authorised Version, reads 'Thy holy Servant.' The alteration is clearly correct. The word, indeed, literally means 'a child,' but, like our own English 'boy,' or even 'man,' or 'maid,' it is used to express the relation of servant, when the desire is to cover over the harsher features of servitude, and to represent the servant as a part of the family. Thus the kindly centurion, who besought Jesus to come and heal his servant, speaks of him as his 'boy.' And that the word is here used in this secondary sense of 'servant' is unmistakable. For there is no discernible reason why, if stress were meant to be laid on Christ as being the Son of God, the recognised expression for that relationship should not have been employed. Again, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, with which the Apostles were familiar, employs the very phrase that is here used as its translation of the well-known Old Testament designation of the Messiah, 'the Servant of the Lord' and the words here are really a quotation from the great prophecies of the second part of the Book of Isaiah. Further, the same word is employed in reference to King David and in reference to Jesus Christ. In regard to the former, it is evident that it must have the meaning of 'servant'; and it would be too harsh to suppose that in the compass of so few verses the same expression should be used, at one time in the one signification, and at another in the other. So, then, David and Jesus are in some sense classified here together as both servants of God. That is the first point that I desire to make.

Then, in regard to the third of my texts, the expression is not the same there as in the other two. The disciples do not venture to take the loftier designation. Rather they prefer the humble one, 'slaves,' bondmen, the familiar expression found all through the New Testament as almost a synonym to Christians.

So, then, we have here three figures: the Psalmist-king, the Messiah, the disciples; Christ in the midst, on the one hand a servant with whom He deigns to be classed, on the other hand the slaves who, through Him, have become sons. And I think I shall best bring out the intended lessons of these clauses in their connection if I ask you to note these two contrasts, the servants and the Servant; the Servant and the slaves. ‘David Thy servant’; ‘Thy holy Servant Jesus’; us ‘Thy servants.’

I. First, then, notice the servants and the Servant.

The reason for the application of the name to the Psalmist lies, not so much in his personal character or in his religious elevation, as in the fact that he was chosen of God for a specific purpose, to carry on the divine plans some steps towards their realisation. Kings, priests, prophets, the collective Israel, as having a specific function in the world, and being, in some sense, the instruments and embodiments of the will of God amongst men, have in an eminent degree the designation of His ‘servants.’ And we might widen out the thought and say that all men who, like the heathen Cyrus, are God’s shepherds, though they do not know it-guided by Him, though they understand not whence comes their power, and blindly do His work in the world, being ‘epoch-making’ men, as the fashionable phrase goes now-are really, though in a subordinate sense, entitled to the designation.

But then, whilst this is true, and whilst Jesus Christ comes into this category, and is one of these special men raised up and adapted for special service in connection with the carrying out of the divine purpose, mark how emphatically and broadly the line is drawn here between Him and the other members of the class to which, in a certain sense, He does belong. Peter says, ‘Thy servant David,’ but he says ‘Thy *holy* Servant Jesus.’ And in the Greek the emphasis is still stronger, because the definite article is employed before the word ‘servant.’ ‘*The* holy Servant of Thine’-that is His specific and unique designation.

There are many imperfect instruments of the divine will. Thinkers and heroes and saints and statesmen and warriors, as well as prophets and priests and kings, are so regarded in Scripture, and may profitably be so regarded by us; but amongst them all there is One who stands in their midst and yet apart from them, because He, and He alone, can say, ‘I have done all Thy pleasure, and into my doing of Thy pleasure no bitter leaven of self-regard or by-ends has ever, in the faintest degree, entered.’ ‘Thy holy Servant Jesus’ is the unique designation of *the* Servant of the Lord.

And what is the meaning of *holy*? The word does not originally and primarily refer to character so much as to relation to God. The root idea of holiness is not righteousness nor moral perfectness, but something that lies behind these-viz, separation for the service and uses of God. The first notion of the word is consecration, and, built upon that and resulting from it, moral perfection. So then these men, some of whom had lived beside Jesus Christ for all those years, and had seen everything that He did, and studied Him through and through, had summered and wintered with Him, came away from the close inspection of His character with this thought; He is utterly and entirely devoted to the service of God, and in Him there is neither spot nor wrinkle nor blemish such as is found in all other men.

I need not remind you with what strange persistence of affirmation, and yet with what humility of self-consciousness, our Lord Himself always claimed to be in possession of this entire consecration, and complete obedience, and consequent perfection. Think of human lips saying, ‘I do always the things that please Him.’ Think of human lips saying, ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me.’ Think of a man whose whole life’s secret was summed up in this: ‘As the Father hath given Me commandment, *so*’-no more, no less, no otherwise-’so I speak.’ Think of a man whose inspiring principle was, consciously to himself, ‘not My will, but Thine be done’; and who could say that it was so, and not be met by universal ridicule. There followed in Jesus the moral perfectness that comes from such uninterrupted and complete consecration of self to God. ‘Thy servant David,’-what about Bathsheba, David? What about a great many other things in your life? The poet-king, with the poet-nature so sensitive to all the delights of sense, and so easily moved in the matter of pleasure, is but like all God’s other servants in the fact of imperfection. In every machine power is lost through friction; and in every man, the noblest and the purest, there is resistance to be overcome ere motion in conformity with the divine impulse can be secured. We pass in review before our minds saints and martyrs and lovely characters by the hundred, and amongst them all there is not a jewel without a flaw, not a mirror without some dint in it where the rays are distorted, or some dark place where the reflecting surface has been rubbed away by the attrition of sin, and where there is no reflection of the divine light. And then we turn to that meek Figure who stands there with the question that has been awaiting an answer for nineteen centuries upon His lips, and is unanswered yet: ‘Which of you convinceth Me of sin?’ ‘He is the holy Servant,’ whose consecration and character mark Him off from all the class to which He belongs as the only one of them all who, in completeness, has executed the Father’s purpose, and has never attempted anything contrary to it.

Now there is another step to be taken, and it is this. The Servant who stands out in front of all the group-though the noblest names in the world’s history are included therein-could not be *the* Servant unless He were the Son. This designation, as applied to Jesus Christ, is peculiar to these three or four earlier chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. It is interesting because it occurs over and over again there, and because it never occurs anywhere else in the New Testament. If we recognise what I think must be recognised, that it is a quotation from the ancient prophecies, and is an assertion of the Messianic character of Jesus, then I think we here see the Church in a period of transition in regard to their conceptions of their Lord. There is no sign that the proper Sonship and Divinity of our Lord was clear before them at this period. They had the facts, but they had not yet come to the distinct apprehension of how much was involved in these. But, if they knew that Jesus Christ had died and had risen again-and they knew that, for they had seen Him-and if they believed that He was the Messiah, and if they were certain that in His character of Messiah there had been faultlessness and absolute perfection-and they were certain of that, because they had lived beside Him-then it would not be long before they took the next step, and said, as I say, ‘He cannot be the Servant unless He is more than man.’

And we may well ask ourselves the question, if we admit, as the world does admit, the moral perfectness of Jesus Christ, how comes it that this Man alone managed to escape failures and deflections from the right, and sins, and that He only carried through life a stainless garment, and went down to the grave never having needed, and not needing then, the exercise of divine forgiveness? Brethren, I venture to say that it is hopeless to account for Jesus Christ on naturalistic principles; and that either you must give up your belief in His sinlessness, or advance, as the Christian Church as a whole advanced, to the other belief, on which alone that perfectness is explicable: ‘Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ! Thou art the Everlasting Son of the Father!’

II. And so, secondly, let us turn to the other contrast here-the Servant and the slaves.

I said that the humble group of praying, persecuted believers seemed to have wished to take a lower place than their Master’s, even whilst they ventured to assume that, in some sense, they too, like Him, were doing the Father’s will. So they chose, by a fine instinct of humility rather than from any dogmatical prepossessions, the name that expresses, in its most absolute and roughest form, the notion of bondage and servitude. He is the Servant; we standing here are slaves. And that this is not an overweighting of the word with more than is meant by it seems to be confirmed by the fact that in the first clause of this prayer, we have, for the only time in the New Testament, God addressed as ‘Lord’ by the correlative word to *slave*, which has been transferred into English, namely, *despot*.

The true position, then, for a man is to be God’s slave. The harsh, repellent features of that wicked institution assume an altogether different character when they become the features of my relation to Him. Absolute submission, unconditional obedience, on the slave’s part; and on the part of the Master complete ownership, the right of life and death, the right of disposing of all goods and chattels, the right of separating husband and wife, parents and children, the right of issuing commandments without a reason, the right to expect that those commandments shall be swiftly, unhesitatingly, punctiliously, and completely performed-these things inhere in our relation to God. Blessed the man who has learned that they do, and has accepted them as his highest glory and the security of his most blessed life! For, brethren, such submission, absolute and unconditional, the blending and the absorption of my own will in His will, is the secret of all that makes manhood glorious and great and happy.

Remember, however, that in the New Testament these names of slave and owner are transferred to Christians and Jesus Christ. ‘The Servant’ has His slaves; and He who is God’s Servant, and does not His own will but the Father’s will, has us for His servants, imposes His will upon us, and we are bound to render to Him a revenue of entire obedience like that which He hath laid at His Father’s feet.

Such slavery is the only freedom. Liberty does not mean doing as you like, it means liking as you ought, and doing that. He only is free who submits to God in Christ, and thereby overcomes himself and the world and all antagonism, and is able to do that which it is his life to do. A prison out of which we do not desire to go is no restraint, and the will which coincides with law is the only will that is truly free. You talk about the bondage of obedience. Ah! ‘the weight of too much liberty’ is a far sorer bondage. They are the slaves who say, ‘Let us break His bonds asunder, and cast away His cords from us’; and they are the free men who say, ‘Lord, put Thy blessed shackles on my arms, and impose Thy will upon my will, and fill my heart with Thy love; and then will and hands will move freely and delightedly.’ ‘If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.’

Such slavery is the only nobility. In the wicked old empires, as in some of their modern survivals to-day, viziers and prime ministers were mostly drawn from the servile classes. It is so in God’s kingdom. They who make themselves God’s slaves are by Him made kings and priests, and shall reign with Him on earth. If we are slaves, then are we sons and heirs of God through Jesus Christ.

Remember the alternative. You cannot be your own masters without being your own slaves. It is a far worse bondage to live as chartered libertines than to walk in the paths of obedience. Better serve God than the devil, than the world, than the flesh. Whilst they promise men liberty, they make them ‘the most abject and downtrodden vassals of perdition.’

The Servant-Son makes us slaves and sons. It matters nothing to me that Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the law of God; it is so much the better for Him, but of no value for me, unless He has the power of making me like Himself. And He has it, and if you will trust yourselves to Him, and give your hearts to Him, and ask Him to govern you, He will govern you; and if you will abandon your false liberty which is servitude, and take the sober freedom which is obedience, then He will bring you to share in His temper of joyful service; and even we may be able to say, ‘My meat and my drink is to do the will of Him that sent me,’ and truly saying that, we shall have the key to all delights, and our feet will be, at least, on the lower rungs of the ladder whose top reaches to Heaven.

‘What fruit had ye in the things of which ye are now ashamed? But being made free from sin, and become the slaves of God, ye have your fruit unto holiness; and the end everlasting life.’ Brethren, I beseech you, by the mercies of God, that ye yield yourselves to Him, crying, ‘O Lord, truly I am Thy servant. Thou hast loosed my bonds.’

32)Acts 4:28

Acts

OBEDIENT DISOBEDIENCE

Act. 4:19 - Act. 4:31.

The only chance for persecution to succeed is to smite hard and swiftly. If you cannot strike, do not threaten. Menacing words only give courage. The rulers betrayed their hesitation when the end of their solemn conclave was but to ‘straitly threaten’; and less heroic confessors than Peter and John would have disregarded the prohibition as mere wind. None the less the attitude of these two Galilean fishermen is noble and singular, when their previous cowardice is remembered. This first collision with civil authority gives, as has been already noticed, the main lines on which the relations of the Church to hostile powers have proceeded.

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This first instance of persecution is made the occasion for the clear expression of the great principles which are to guide the Church. The answer falls into two parts, in the first of which the limits of obedience to civil authority are laid down in a perfectly general form to which even the Council are expected to assent, and in the second an irresistible compulsion to speak is boldly alleged as driving the two Apostles to a flat refusal to obey.

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The limits of civil obedience are clearly drawn. It is a duty, because ‘the powers that be are ordained of God,’ and obedience to them is obedience to Him. But if they, transcending their sphere, claim obedience which can only be rendered by disobedience to Him who has appointed them, then they are no longer His ministers, and the duty of allegiance falls away. But there must be a plain conflict of commands, and we must take care lest we substitute whims and fancies of our own for the injunctions of God. Peter was not guided by his own conceptions of duty, but by the distinct precept of his Master, which had bid him speak. It is not true that it is the cause which makes the martyr, but it is true that many good men have made themselves martyrs needlessly. This principle is too sharp a weapon to be causelessly drawn and brandished. Only an unmistakable opposition of commandments warrants its use; and then, he has little right to be called Christ's soldier who keeps the sword in the scabbard.

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How beautifully natural that is, 'Being let go, they went to their own,' and how large a principle is expressed in the naive words! The great law of association according to spiritual affinity has much to do in determining relations here. It aggregates men, according to sorts; but its operation is thwarted by other conditions, so that companionship is often misery. But a time comes when it will work unhindered, and men will be united with their like, as the stones on some sea-beaches are laid in rows, according to their size, by the force of the sea. Judas 'went to his own place,' and, in another world, like will draw to like, and prevailing tendencies will be increased by association with those who share them.

The prayer of the Church was probably the inspired outpouring of one voice, and all the people said 'Amen,' and so made it theirs. Whose voice it was which thus put into words the common sentiment we should gladly have known, but need not speculate. The great fact is that the Church answered threats by prayer. It augurs healthy spiritual life when opposition and danger neither make cheeks blanch with fear nor flush with anger. No man there trembled nor thought of vengeance, or of repaying threats with threats. Every man there instinctively turned heavenwards, and flung himself, as it were, into God's arms for protection. Prayer is the strongest weapon that a persecuted Church can use. Browning makes a tyrant say, recounting how he had tried to crush a man, that his intended victim

'Stood erect, caught at God's skirts, and prayed,
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The contents of the prayer are equally noteworthy. Instead of minutely studying it verse by verse, we may note some of its salient points. Observe its undaunted courage. That company never quivered or wavered. They had no thought of obeying the mandate of the Council. They were a little army of heroes. What had made them so? What but the conviction that they had a living Lord at God's right hand, and a mighty Spirit in their spirits? The world has never seen a transformation like that. Unique effects demand unique causes for their explanation, and nothing but the historical truth of the facts recorded in the last pages of the Gospels and first of the Acts accounts for the demeanour of these men.

Their courage is strikingly marked by their petition. All they ask is ‘boldness’ to speak a word which shall not be theirs, but God’s. Fear would have prayed for protection; passion would have asked retribution on enemies. Christian courage and devotion only ask that they may not shrink from their duty, and that the word may be spoken, whatever becomes of the speakers. The world is powerless against men like that. Would the Church of to-day meet threats with like unanimity of desire for boldness in confession? If not, it must be because it has not the same firm hold of the Risen Lord which these first believers had. The truest courage is that which is conscious of its weakness, and yet has no thought of flight, but prays for its own increase.

We may observe, too, the body of belief expressed in the prayer. First it lays hold on the creative omnipotence of God, and thence passes to the recognition of His written revelation. The Church has begun to learn the inmost meaning of the Old Testament, and to find Christ there. David may not have written the second Psalm. Its attribution to him by the Church stands on a different level from Christ’s attribution of authorship, as, for instance, of the hundred and tenth Psalm. The prophecy of the Psalm is plainly Messianic, however it may have had a historical occasion in some forgotten revolt against some Davidic king; and, while the particular incidents to which the prayer alludes do not exhaust its far-reaching application, they are rightly regarded as partly fulfilling it. Herod is a ‘king of the earth,’ Pilate is a ‘ruler’; Roman soldiers are Gentiles; Jewish rulers are the representatives of ‘the people.’ Jesus is ‘God’s Anointed.’ The fact that such an unnatural and daring combination of rebels was predicted in the Psalm bears witness that even that crime at Calvary was foreordained to come to pass, and that God’s hand and counsel ruled. Therefore all other opposition, such as now threatened, will turn out to be swayed by that same Mighty Hand, to work out His counsel. Why, then, should the Church fear? If we can see God’s hand moving all things, terror is dead for us, and threats are like the whistling of idle wind.

Mark, too, the strong expression of the Church’s dependence on God. ‘Lord’ here is an unusual word, and means ‘Master,’ while the Church collectively is called ‘Thy servants,’ or properly, ‘slaves.’ It is a different word from that of ‘servant’ [rather than ‘child’] applied to Jesus in Act. 4:27 - Act. 4:30. God is the Master, we are His ‘slaves,’ bound to absolute obedience, unconditional submission, belonging to Him, not to ourselves, and therefore having claims on Him for such care as an owner gives to his slaves or his cattle. He will not let them be maltreated nor starved. He will defend them and feed them; but they must serve him by life, and death if need be. Unquestioning submission and unreserved dependence are our duties. Absolute ownership and unshared responsibility for our well-being belong to Him.

Further, the view of Christ’s relationship to God is the same as occurs in other of the early chapters of the Acts. The title of ‘Thy holy Servant Jesus’ dwells on Christ’s office, rather than on His nature. Here it puts Him in contrast with David, also called ‘Thy servant.’ The latter was imperfectly what Jesus was perfectly. His complete realisation of the prophetic picture of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah is emphasised by the adjective ‘holy,’ implying complete devotion or separation to the service of God, and unsullied, unlimited moral purity. The uniqueness of His relation in this aspect is expressed by the definite article in the original. He is *the* Servant, in a sense and measure all His own. He is further *the* Anointed Messiah. This was the Church’s message to Israel and the stay of its own courage, that Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed and perfect Servant of the Lord, who was now in heaven, reigning there. All that this faith involved had not yet become clear to their consciousness, but the Spirit was guiding them step by step into all the truth; and what they saw and heard, not only in the historical facts of which they were the witnesses, but in the teaching of that Spirit, they could not but speak.

The answer came swift as the roll of thunder after lightning. They who ask for courage to do God’s will and speak Christ’s name have never long to wait for response. The place ‘was shaken,’ symbol of the effect of faithful witness-bearing, or manifestation of the power which was given in answer to their prayer. ‘They were all filled with the Holy Ghost,’ who now did not, as before, confer ability to speak with other tongues, but wrought no less worthily in heartening and fitting them to speak 'in their own tongue, wherein they were born,' in bold defiance of unlawful commands.

The statement of the answer repeats the petition verbatim: 'With all boldness they spake the word.' What we desire of spiritual gifts we get, and God moulds His replies so as to remind us of our petitions, and to show by the event that these have reached His ear and guided His giving hand.

33)Acts 4:29

Acts

OBEDIENT DISOBEDIENCE

THE SERVANT AND THE SLAVES

Act. 4:25, Act. 4:27, Act. 4:29.

I do not often take fragments of Scripture for texts; but though these are fragments, their juxtaposition results in by no means fragmentary thoughts. There is obvious intention in the recurrence of the expression so frequently in so few verses, and to the elucidation of that intention my remarks will be directed. The words are parts of the Church's prayer on the occasion of its first collision with the civil power. The incident is recorded at full length because it is the *first* of a long and bloody series, in order that succeeding generations might learn their true weapon and their sure defence. Prayer is the right answer to the world's hostility, and they who only ask for courage to stand by their confession will never ask in vain. But it is no part of my intention to deal either with the incident or with this noble prayer.

A word or two of explanation may be necessary as to the language of our texts. You will observe that, in the second of them, I have followed the Revised Version, which, instead of 'Thy holy child,' as in the Authorised Version, reads 'Thy holy Servant.' The alteration is clearly correct. The word, indeed, literally means 'a child,' but, like our own English 'boy,' or even 'man,' or 'maid,' it is used to express the relation of servant, when the desire is to cover over the harsher features of servitude, and to represent the servant as a part of the family. Thus the kindly centurion, who besought

Jesus to come and heal his servant, speaks of him as his ‘boy.’ And that the word is here used in this secondary sense of ‘servant’ is unmistakable. For there is no discernible reason why, if stress were meant to be laid on Christ as being the Son of God, the recognised expression for that relationship should not have been employed. Again, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, with which the Apostles were familiar, employs the very phrase that is here used as its translation of the well-known Old Testament designation of the Messiah, ‘the Servant of the Lord’ and the words here are really a quotation from the great prophecies of the second part of the Book of Isaiah. Further, the same word is employed in reference to King David and in reference to Jesus Christ. In regard to the former, it is evident that it must have the meaning of ‘servant’; and it would be too harsh to suppose that in the compass of so few verses the same expression should be used, at one time in the one signification, and at another in the other. So, then, David and Jesus are in some sense classified here together as both servants of God. That is the first point that I desire to make.

Then, in regard to the third of my texts, the expression is not the same there as in the other two. The disciples do not venture to take the loftier designation. Rather they prefer the humble one, ‘slaves,’ bondmen, the familiar expression found all through the New Testament as almost a synonym to Christians.

So, then, we have here three figures: the Psalmist-king, the Messiah, the disciples; Christ in the midst, on the one hand a servant with whom He deigns to be classed, on the other hand the slaves who, through Him, have become sons. And I think I shall best bring out the intended lessons of these clauses in their connection if I ask you to note these two contrasts, the servants and the Servant; the Servant and the slaves. ‘David Thy servant’; ‘Thy holy Servant Jesus’; us ‘Thy servants.’

I. First, then, notice the servants and the Servant.

The reason for the application of the name to the Psalmist lies, not so much in his personal character or in his religious elevation, as in the fact that he was chosen of God for a specific purpose, to carry on the divine plans some steps towards their realisation. Kings, priests, prophets, the collective Israel, as having a specific function in the world, and being, in some sense, the instruments and embodiments of the will of God amongst men, have in an eminent degree the designation of His 'servants.' And we might widen out the thought and say that all men who, like the heathen Cyrus, are God's shepherds, though they do not know it-guided by Him, though they understand not whence comes their power, and blindly do His work in the world, being 'epoch-making' men, as the fashionable phrase goes now-are really, though in a subordinate sense, entitled to the designation.

But then, whilst this is true, and whilst Jesus Christ comes into this category, and is one of these special men raised up and adapted for special service in connection with the carrying out of the divine purpose, mark how emphatically and broadly the line is drawn here between Him and the other members of the class to which, in a certain sense, He does belong. Peter says, 'Thy servant David,' but he says 'Thy *holy* Servant Jesus.' And in the Greek the emphasis is still stronger, because the definite article is employed before the word 'servant.' '*The* holy Servant of Thine'-that is His specific and unique designation.

There are many imperfect instruments of the divine will. Thinkers and heroes and saints and statesmen and warriors, as well as prophets and priests and kings, are so regarded in Scripture, and may profitably be so regarded by us; but amongst them all there is One who stands in their midst and yet apart from them, because He, and He alone, can say, 'I have done all Thy pleasure, and into my doing of Thy pleasure no bitter leaven of self-regard or by-ends has ever, in the faintest degree, entered.' 'Thy holy Servant Jesus' is the unique designation of *the* Servant of the Lord.

And what is the meaning of *holy*? The word does not originally and primarily refer to character so much as to relation to God. The root idea of holiness is not righteousness nor moral perfectness, but something that lies behind these-viz, separation for the service and uses of God. The first notion of the word is consecration, and, built upon that and resulting from it, moral perfection. So then these men, some of whom had lived beside Jesus Christ for all those years, and had seen everything that He did, and studied Him through and through, had summered and wintered with Him, came away from the close inspection of His character with this thought; He is utterly and entirely devoted to the service of God, and in Him there is neither spot nor wrinkle nor blemish such as is found in all other men.

I need not remind you with what strange persistence of affirmation, and yet with what humility of self-consciousness, our Lord Himself always claimed to be in possession of this entire consecration, and complete obedience, and consequent perfection. Think of human lips saying, ‘I do always the things that please Him.’ Think of human lips saying, ‘My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me.’ Think of a man whose whole life’s secret was summed up in this: ‘As the Father hath given Me commandment, *so*’-no more, no less, no otherwise-’so I speak.’ Think of a man whose inspiring principle was, consciously to himself, ‘not My will, but Thine be done’; and who could say that it was so, and not be met by universal ridicule. There followed in Jesus the moral perfectness that comes from such uninterrupted and complete consecration of self to God. ‘Thy servant David,’-what about Bathsheba, David? What about a great many other things in your life? The poet-king, with the poet-nature so sensitive to all the delights of sense, and so easily moved in the matter of pleasure, is but like all God’s other servants in the fact of imperfection. In every machine power is lost through friction; and in every man, the noblest and the purest, there is resistance to be overcome ere motion in conformity with the divine impulse can be secured. We pass in review before our minds saints and martyrs and lovely characters by the hundred, and amongst them all there is not a jewel without a flaw, not a mirror without some dint in it where the rays are distorted, or some dark place where the reflecting surface has been rubbed away by the attrition of sin, and where there is no reflection of the divine light. And then we turn to that meek Figure who stands there with the question that has been awaiting an answer for nineteen centuries upon His lips, and is unanswered yet: ‘Which of you convinceth Me of sin?’ ‘He is the holy Servant,’ whose consecration and character mark Him off from all the class to which He belongs as the only one of them all who, in completeness, has executed the Father’s purpose, and has never attempted anything contrary to it.

Now there is another step to be taken, and it is this. The Servant who stands out in front of all the group-though the noblest names in the world’s history are included therein-could not be *the* Servant unless He were the Son. This designation, as applied to Jesus Christ, is peculiar to these three or four earlier chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. It is interesting because it occurs over and over again there, and because it never occurs anywhere else in the New Testament. If we recognise what I think must be recognised, that it is a quotation from the ancient prophecies, and is an assertion of the Messianic character of Jesus, then I think we here see the Church in a period of transition in regard to their conceptions of their Lord. There is no sign that the proper Sonship and Divinity of our Lord was clear before them at this period. They had the facts, but they had not yet come to the distinct apprehension of how much was involved in these. But, if they knew that Jesus Christ had died and had risen again-and they knew that, for they had seen Him-and if they believed that He was the Messiah, and if they were certain that in His character of Messiah there had been faultlessness and absolute perfection-and they were certain of that, because they had lived beside Him-then it would not be long before they took the next step, and said, as I say, ‘He cannot be the Servant unless He is more than man.’

And we may well ask ourselves the question, if we admit, as the world does admit, the moral perfectness of Jesus Christ, how comes it that this Man alone managed to escape failures and deflections from the right, and sins, and that He only carried through life a stainless garment, and went down to the grave never having needed, and not needing then, the exercise of divine forgiveness? Brethren, I venture to say that it is hopeless to account for Jesus Christ on naturalistic principles; and that either you must give up your belief in His sinlessness, or advance, as the Christian Church as a whole advanced, to the other belief, on which alone that perfectness is explicable: ‘Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ! Thou art the Everlasting Son of the Father!’

II. And so, secondly, let us turn to the other contrast here-the Servant and the slaves.

I said that the humble group of praying, persecuted believers seemed to have wished to take a lower place than their Master’s, even whilst they ventured to assume that, in some sense, they too, like Him, were doing the Father’s will. So they chose, by a fine instinct of humility rather than from any dogmatical prepossessions, the name that expresses, in its most absolute and roughest form, the notion of bondage and servitude. He is the Servant; we standing here are slaves. And that this is not an overweighting of the word with more than is meant by it seems to be confirmed by the fact that in the first clause of this prayer, we have, for the only time in the New Testament, God addressed as 'Lord' by the correlative word to *slave*, which has been transferred into English, namely, *despot*.

The true position, then, for a man is to be God's slave. The harsh, repellent features of that wicked institution assume an altogether different character when they become the features of my relation to Him. Absolute submission, unconditional obedience, on the slave's part; and on the part of the Master complete ownership, the right of life and death, the right of disposing of all goods and chattels, the right of separating husband and wife, parents and children, the right of issuing commandments without a reason, the right to expect that those commandments shall be swiftly, unhesitatingly, punctiliously, and completely performed-these things inhere in our relation to God. Blessed the man who has learned that they do, and has accepted them as his highest glory and the security of his most blessed life! For, brethren, such submission, absolute and unconditional, the blending and the absorption of my own will in His will, is the secret of all that makes manhood glorious and great and happy.

Remember, however, that in the New Testament these names of slave and owner are transferred to Christians and Jesus Christ. 'The Servant' has His slaves; and He who is God's Servant, and does not His own will but the Father's will, has us for His servants, imposes His will upon us, and we are bound to render to Him a revenue of entire obedience like that which He hath laid at His Father's feet.

Such slavery is the only freedom. Liberty does not mean doing as you like, it means liking as you ought, and doing that. He only is free who submits to God in Christ, and thereby overcomes himself and the world and all antagonism, and is able to do that which it is his life to do. A prison out of which we do not desire to go is no restraint, and the will which coincides with law is the only will that is truly free. You talk about the bondage of obedience. Ah! 'the weight of too much liberty' is a far sorer bondage. They are the slaves who say, 'Let us break His bonds asunder, and cast away His cords from us'; and they are the free men who say, 'Lord, put Thy blessed shackles on my arms, and impose Thy will upon my will, and fill my heart with Thy love; and then will and hands will move freely and delightedly.' 'If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.'

Such slavery is the only nobility. In the wicked old empires, as in some of their modern survivals to-day, viziers and prime ministers were mostly drawn from the servile classes. It is so in God's kingdom. They who make themselves God's slaves are by Him made kings and priests, and shall reign with Him on earth. If we are slaves, then are we sons and heirs of God through Jesus Christ.

Remember the alternative. You cannot be your own masters without being your own slaves. It is a far worse bondage to live as chartered libertines than to walk in the paths of obedience. Better serve God than the devil, than the world, than the flesh. Whilst they promise men liberty, they make them 'the most abject and downtrodden vassals of perdition.'

The Servant-Son makes us slaves and sons. It matters nothing to me that Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the law of God; it is so much the better for Him, but of no value for me, unless He has the power of making me like Himself. And He has it, and if you will trust yourselves to Him, and give your hearts to Him, and ask Him to govern you, He will govern you; and if you will abandon your false liberty which is servitude, and take the sober freedom which is obedience, then He will bring you to share in His temper of joyful service; and even we may be able to say, 'My meat and my drink is to do the will of Him that sent me,' and truly saying that, we shall have the key to all delights, and our feet will be, at least, on the lower rungs of the ladder whose top reaches to Heaven.

'What fruit had ye in the things of which ye are now ashamed? But being made free from sin, and become the slaves of God, ye have your fruit unto holiness; and the end everlasting life.' Brethren, I beseech you, by the mercies of God, that ye yield yourselves to Him, crying, 'O Lord, truly I am Thy servant. Thou hast loosed my bonds.'

34)Acts 4:30-31

OBEDIENT DISOBEDIENCE

Act. 4:19 - Act. 4:31.

The only chance for persecution to succeed is to smite hard and swiftly. If you cannot strike, do not threaten. Menacing words only give courage. The rulers betrayed their hesitation when the end of their solemn conclave was but to 'straitly threaten'; and less heroic confessors than Peter and John would have disregarded the prohibition as mere wind. None the less the attitude of these two Galilean fishermen is noble and singular, when their previous cowardice is remembered. This first collision with civil authority gives, as has been already noticed, the main lines on which the relations of the Church to hostile powers have proceeded.

I. The heroic refusal of unlawful obedience.

We shall probably not do injustice to John if we suppose that Peter was spokesman. If so, the contrast of the tone of his answer with all previously recorded utterances of his is remarkable. Warm-hearted impulsiveness, often wrong-headed and sometimes illogical, had been their mark; but here we have calm, fixed determination, which, as is usually its manner, wastes no words, but in its very brevity impresses the hearers as being immovable. Whence did this man get the power to lay down once for all the foundation principles of the limits of civil obedience, and of the duty of Christian confession? His words take rank with the ever-memorable sayings of thinkers and heroes, from Socrates in his prison telling the Athenians that he loved them, but that he must 'obey God rather than you,' to Luther at Worms with his 'It is neither safe nor right to do anything against conscience. Here I stand; I can do nothing else. God help me! Amen.' Peter's words are the first of a long series.

This first instance of persecution is made the occasion for the clear expression of the great principles which are to guide the Church. The answer falls into two parts, in the first of which the limits of obedience to civil authority are laid down in a perfectly general form to which even the Council are expected to assent, and in the second an irresistible compulsion to speak is boldly alleged as driving the two Apostles to a flat refusal to obey.

It was a daring stroke to appeal to the Council for an endorsement of the principle in Act. 4:19, but the appeal was unanswerable; for this tribunal had no other ostensible reason for existence than to enforce obedience to the law of God, and to Peter’s dilemma only one reply was possible. But it rested on a bold assumption, which was calculated to irritate the court; namely, that there was a blank contradiction between their commands and God’s, so that to obey the one was to disobey the other. When that parting of the ways is reached, there remains no doubt as to which road a religious man must take.

The limits of civil obedience are clearly drawn. It is a duty, because ‘the powers that be are ordained of God,’ and obedience to them is obedience to Him. But if they, transcending their sphere, claim obedience which can only be rendered by disobedience to Him who has appointed them, then they are no longer His ministers, and the duty of allegiance falls away. But there must be a plain conflict of commands, and we must take care lest we substitute whims and fancies of our own for the injunctions of God. Peter was not guided by his own conceptions of duty, but by the distinct precept of his Master, which had bid him speak. It is not true that it is the cause which makes the martyr, but it is true that many good men have made themselves martyrs needlessly. This principle is too sharp a weapon to be causelessly drawn and brandished. Only an unmistakable opposition of commandments warrants its use; and then, he has little right to be called Christ’s soldier who keeps the sword in the scabbard.

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II. The lame and impotent conclusion of the perplexed Council.

How plain the path is when only duty is taken as a guide, and how vigorously and decisively a man marches along it! Peter had no hesitation, and his resolved answer comes crashing in a straight course, like a cannon-ball. The Council had a much more ambiguous oracle to consult in order to settle their course, and they hesitate accordingly, and at last do a something which is a nothing. They wanted to trim their sails to catch popular favour, and so they could not do anything thoroughly. To punish or acquit was the only alternative for just judges. But they were not just; and as Jesus had been crucified, not because Pilate thought Him guilty, but to please the people, so His Apostles were let off, not because they were innocent, but for the same reason. When popularity-hunters get on the judicial bench, society must be rotten, and nearing its dissolution. To 'decree unrighteousness by a law' is among the most hideous of crimes. Judges 'willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,' are portents indicative of corruption. We may remark here how the physician's pen takes note of the patient's age, as making his cure more striking, and manifestly miraculous.

III. The Church's answer to the first assault of the world's power.

How beautifully natural that is, 'Being let go, they went to their own,' and how large a principle is expressed in the naive words! The great law of association according to spiritual affinity has much to do in determining relations here. It aggregates men, according to sorts; but its operation is thwarted by other conditions, so that companionship is often misery. But a time comes when it will work unhindered, and men will be united with their like, as the stones on some sea-beaches are laid in rows, according to their size, by the force of the sea. Judas 'went to his own place,' and, in another world, like will draw to like, and prevailing tendencies will be increased by association with those who share them.

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So I was afraid.'

The contents of the prayer are equally noteworthy. Instead of minutely studying it verse by verse, we may note some of its salient points. Observe its undaunted courage. That company never quivered or wavered. They had no thought of obeying the mandate of the Council. They were a little army of heroes. What had made them so? What but the conviction that they had a living Lord at God's right hand, and a mighty Spirit in their spirits? The world has never seen a transformation like that. Unique effects demand unique causes for their explanation, and nothing but the historical truth of the facts recorded in the last pages of the Gospels and first of the Acts accounts for the demeanour of these men.

Their courage is strikingly marked by their petition. All they ask is 'boldness' to speak a word which shall not be theirs, but God's. Fear would have prayed for protection; passion would have asked retribution on enemies. Christian courage and devotion only ask that they may not shrink from their duty, and that the word may be spoken, whatever becomes of the speakers. The world is powerless against men like that. Would the Church of to-day meet threats with like unanimity of desire for boldness in confession? If not, it must be because it has not the same firm hold of the Risen Lord which these first believers had. The truest courage is that which is conscious of its weakness, and yet has no thought of flight, but prays for its own increase.

We may observe, too, the body of belief expressed in the prayer. First it lays hold on the creative omnipotence of God, and thence passes to the recognition of His written revelation. The Church has begun to learn the inmost meaning of the Old Testament, and to find Christ there. David may not have written the second Psalm. Its attribution to him by the Church stands on a different level from Christ's attribution of authorship, as, for instance, of the hundred and tenth Psalm. The prophecy of the Psalm is plainly Messianic, however it may have had a historical occasion in some forgotten revolt against some Davidic king; and, while the particular incidents to which the prayer alludes do not exhaust its far-reaching application, they are rightly regarded as partly fulfilling it. Herod is a ‘king of the earth,’ Pilate is a ‘ruler’; Roman soldiers are Gentiles; Jewish rulers are the representatives of ‘the people.’ Jesus is ‘God’s Anointed.’ The fact that such an unnatural and daring combination of rebels was predicted in the Psalm bears witness that even that crime at Calvary was foreordained to come to pass, and that God’s hand and counsel ruled. Therefore all other opposition, such as now threatened, will turn out to be swayed by that same Mighty Hand, to work out His counsel. Why, then, should the Church fear? If we can see God’s hand moving all things, terror is dead for us, and threats are like the whistling of idle wind.

Mark, too, the strong expression of the Church’s dependence on God. ‘Lord’ here is an unusual word, and means ‘Master,’ while the Church collectively is called ‘Thy servants,’ or properly, ‘slaves.’ It is a different word from that of ‘servant’ [rather than ‘child’] applied to Jesus in Act. 4:27 - Act. 4:30. God is the Master, we are His ‘slaves,’ bound to absolute obedience, unconditional submission, belonging to Him, not to ourselves, and therefore having claims on Him for such care as an owner gives to his slaves or his cattle. He will not let them be maltreated nor starved. He will defend them and feed them; but they must serve him by life, and death if need be. Unquestioning submission and unreserved dependence are our duties. Absolute ownership and unshared responsibility for our well-being belong to Him.

Further, the view of Christ’s relationship to God is the same as occurs in other of the early chapters of the Acts. The title of ‘Thy holy Servant Jesus’ dwells on Christ’s office, rather than on His nature. Here it puts Him in contrast with David, also called ‘Thy servant.’ The latter was imperfectly what Jesus was perfectly. His complete realisation of the prophetic picture of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah is emphasised by the adjective ‘holy,’ implying complete devotion or separation to the service of God, and unsullied, unlimited moral purity. The uniqueness of His relation in this aspect is expressed by the definite article in the original. He is *the* Servant, in a sense and measure all His own. He is further *the* Anointed Messiah. This was the Church’s message to Israel and the stay of its own courage, that Jesus was the Christ, the Anointed and perfect Servant of the Lord, who was now in heaven, reigning there. All that this faith involved had not yet become clear to their consciousness, but the Spirit was guiding them step by step into all the truth; and what they saw and heard, not only in the historical facts of which they were the witnesses, but in the teaching of that Spirit, they could not but speak.

The answer came swift as the roll of thunder after lightning. They who ask for courage to do God’s will and speak Christ’s name have never long to wait for response. The place ‘was shaken,’ symbol of the effect of faithful witness-bearing, or manifestation of the power which was given in answer to their prayer. ‘They were all filled with the Holy Ghost,’ who now did not, as before, confer ability to speak with other tongues, but wrought no less worthily in heartening and fitting them to speak ‘in their own tongue, wherein they were born,’ in bold defiance of unlawful commands.

The statement of the answer repeats the petition verbatim: ‘With all boldness they spake the word.’ What we desire of spiritual gifts we get, and God moulds His replies so as to remind us of our petitions, and to show by the event that these have reached His ear and guided His giving hand.

35)Acts 4:32

Acts

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

Act. 4:32. - Act. 5:11.

Once more Luke pauses and gives a general survey of the Church’s condition. It comes in appropriately at the end of the account of the triumph over the first assault of civil authority, which assault was itself not only baffled, but turned to good. Just because persecution had driven them closer to God and to one another, were the disciples so full of brotherly love and of grace as Luke delights to paint them.

I. We note the fair picture of what the Church once was.

The recent large accessions to it might have weakened the first feelings of brotherhood, so that it is by no means superfluous to repeat substantially the features of the earlier description [Act. 2:44 - Act. 2:45]. ‘The multitude’ is used with great meaning, for it was a triumph of the Spirit’s influence that the warm stream of brotherly love ran through so many hearts, knit together only by common submission to Jesus. That oneness of thought and feeling was the direct issue of the influx of the Spirit mentioned as the blessed result of the disciples’ dauntless devotion [Act. 4:31]. If our Churches were ‘filled with the Holy Ghost,’ we too should be fused into oneness of heart and mind, though our organisations as separate communities continued, just as all the little pools below high-water mark are made one when the tide comes up.

The first result and marvellous proof of that oneness was the so-called ‘community of goods,’ the account of which is remarkable both because it all but fills this picture, and because it is broken into two by Act. 4:33, rapidly summarising other characteristics. The two halves may be considered together, and it may be noted that the former presents the sharing of property as the result of brotherly unity, while the latter traces it [‘for,’ Act. 4:34] to the abundant divine grace resting on the whole community. The terms of the description should be noted, as completely negativing the notion that the fact in question was anything like compulsory abolition of the right of individual ownership. ‘Not one of them said that aught of the things which he possessed was his own.’ That implies that the right of possession was not abolished. It implies, too, that the common feeling of brotherhood was stronger than the self-centred regard which looks on possessions as to be used for self. Thus they possessed as though they possessed not, and each held his property as a trust from God for his brethren.

We must observe, further, that the act of selling was the owners’, as was the act of handing the proceeds to the Apostles. The community had nothing to do with the money till it had been given to them. Further, the distribution was not determined by the rule of equality, but by the ‘need’ of the recipients; and its result was not that all had share and share alike, but that ‘none lacked.’

There is nothing of modern communism in all this, but there is a lesson to the modern Church as to the obligations of wealth and the claims of brotherhood, which is all but universally disregarded. The spectre of communism is troubling every nation, and it will become more and more formidable, unless the Church learns that the only way to lay it is to live by the precepts of Jesus and to repeat in new forms the spirit of the primitive Church. The Christian sense of stewardship, not the abolition of the right of property, is the cure for the hideous facts which drive men to shriek ‘Property is theft.’

Luke adds two more points to his survey,-the power of the Apostolic testimony, and the great grace which lay like a bright cloud on the whole Church. The Apostles’ special office was to bear witness to the Resurrection. They held a position of prominence in the Church by virtue of having been chosen by Jesus and having been His companions, but the Book of Acts is silent about any of the other mysterious powers which later ages have ascribed to them. The only Apostles who appear in it are Peter, John, and James, the last only in a parenthesis recording His martyrdom. Their peculiar work was to say, ‘Behold! we saw, and know that He died and rose again.’

II. The general description is followed by one example of the surrender of wealth, which is noteworthy as being done by one afterwards to play a great part in the book, and also as leading on to an example of hypocritical pretence. Side by side stand Barnabas and the wretched couple, Ananias and Sapphira.

Luke introduces the new personage with some particularity, and, as He does not go into detail without good reason, we must note his description. First, the man’s character is given, as expressed in the name bestowed by the Apostles, in imitation of Christ’s frequent custom. He must have been for some time a disciple, in order that his special gift should have been recognised. He was a ‘son of exhortation’; that is, he had the power of rousing and encouraging the faith and stirring the believing energy of the brethren. An example of this was given in Antioch, where he ‘exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.’ So much the more beautiful was his self-effacement when with Paul, for it was the latter who was ‘the chief speaker.’ Barnabas felt that his gift was less than his brother’s, and so, without jealousy, took the second place. He, being silent, yet speaketh, and bids us learn our limits, and be content to be surpassed.

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His first appearance witnessed to the depth and simple genuineness of his character and faith. The old law forbidding Levites to hold land had gradually become inoperative, and perhaps Barnabas' estate was in Cyprus, though more probably it was, like that of his relative Mary, the mother of Mark, in Jerusalem. He did as many others were doing, and brought the proceeds to the assembly of the brethren, and there publicly laid them at the Apostles' feet, in token of their authority to administer them as they thought well.

III. Why was Barnabas' act singled out for mention, since there was nothing peculiar about it?

Most likely because it stimulated Ananias and his wife to imitation. Wherever there are signal instances of Christian self-sacrifice, there will spring up a crop of base copies. Ananias follows Barnabas as surely as the shadow the substance. It was very likely a pure impulse which led him and his wife to agree to sell their land; and it was only when they had the money in their hands, and had to take the decisive step of parting with it, and reducing themselves to pennilessness, that they found the surrender harder than they could carry out. Satan spoils many a well-begun work, and we often break down half-way through a piece of Christian unselfishness. Well begun is half-but only half-ended.

Be that as it may, Peter’s stern words to Ananias put all the stress of the sin on its being an acted lie. The motives of the trick are not disclosed. They may have been avarice, want of faith, greed of applause, reluctance to hang back when others were doing like Barnabas. It is hard to read the mingled motives which lead ourselves wrong, and harder to separate them in the case of another. How much Ananias kept back is of no moment; indeed, the less he retained the greater the sin; for it is baser, as well as more foolish, to do wrong for a little advantage than for a great one.

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The death of Ananias was not inflicted by Peter, ‘Hearing these words’ he ‘fell down and’ died. Surely that expression suggests that the stern words had struck at his life, and that his death was the result of the agitation of shame and guilt which they excited. That does not at all conflict with regarding his death as a punitive divine act.

One can fancy the awed silence that fell on the congregation, and the restrained, mournful movement that ran through it when Sapphira entered. Why the two had not come in company can only be conjectured. Perhaps the husband had gone straight to the Apostles after completing the sale, and had left the wife to follow at her convenience. Perhaps she had not intended to come at all, but had grown alarmed at the delay in Ananias’ return. She may have come in fear that something had gone wrong, and that fear would be increased by her not seeing her husband in her quick glance round the company.

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The judgment on Sapphira was not inflicted by Peter. He foretold it by his prophetic power, but it was the hand of God which vindicated the purity of the infant Church. The terrible severity of the punishment can only be understood by remembering the importance of preserving the young community from corruption at the very beginning. Unless the vermin are cleared from the springing plant, it will not grow. As Achan's death warned Israel at the beginning of their entrance into the promised land, so Ananias and Sapphira perished, that all generations of the Church might fear to pretend to self-surrender while cherishing its opposite, and might feel that they have to give account to One who knows the secrets of the heart, and counts nothing as given if anything is surreptitiously kept back.

36)Acts 5:11

Acts

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

Act. 4:32. - Act. 5:11.

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37)Acts 5:17-30

Acts

WHOM TO OBEY,-ANNAS OR ANGEL?

Act. 5:17 - Act. 5:32.

The Jewish ecclesiastics had been beaten in the first round of the fight, and their attempt to put out the fire had only stirred the blaze. Popular sympathy is fickle, and if the crowd does not shout with the persecutors, it will make heroes and idols of the persecuted. So the Apostles had gained favour by the attempt to silence them, and that led to the second round, part of which is described in this passage.

The first point to note is the mean motives which influenced the high-priest and his adherents. As before, the Sadducees were at the bottom of the assault; for talk about a resurrection was gall and wormwood to them. But Luke alleges a much more contemptible emotion than zeal for supposed truth as the motive for action. The word rendered in the Authorised Version ‘indignation,’ is indeed literally ‘zeal,’ but it here means, as the Revised Version has it, nothing nobler than ‘jealousy.’ ‘Who are those ignorant Galileans that they should encroach on the office of us dignified teachers? and what fools the populace must be to listen to them! Our prestige is threatened. If we don’t bestir ourselves, our authority will be gone.’ A lofty spirit in which to deal with grave movements of opinion, and likely to lead its possessors to discern truth!

The Sanhedrin, no doubt, talked solemnly about the progress of error, and the duty of firmly putting it down, and, like Jehu, said, ‘Come, and see our zeal for the Lord’; but it was zeal for greetings in the marketplace, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and the other advantages of their position. So it has often been since. The instruments which zeal for truth uses are argument, Scripture, and persuasion. That zeal which betakes itself to threats and force is, at the best, much mingled with the wrath and jealousy of man.

The arrest of the Apostles and their committal to prison was simply for detention, not punishment. The rulers cast their net wider this time, and secured all the Apostles, and, having them safe under lock and key, they went home triumphant, and expecting to deal a decisive blow to-morrow. Then comes one of the great ‘buts’ of Scripture. Annas and Caiaphas thought that they had scored a success, but an angel upset their calculations.

To try to explain the miracle away is hopeless. It is wiser to try to understand it.

The very fact that it did not lead to the Apostles’ deliverance, but that the trial and scourging followed next day, just as if it had not happened, which has been alleged as a proof of its uselessness, and inferentially of its falsehood, puts us on the right track. It was not meant for their deliverance, but for their heartening, and for the bracing of all generations of Christians, by showing, at the first conflict with the civil power, that the Lord was with His Church. His strengthening power is operative when no miracle is wrought. If His servants are not delivered, it is not that He lacks angels, but that it is better for them and the Church that they should lie in prison or die at the stake.

The miracle was a transient revelation of a perpetual truth, and has shed light on many a dark dungeon where God’s servants have lain rotting. It breathed heroic constancy into the Twelve. How striking and noble was their prompt obedience to the command to resume the perilous work of preaching! As soon as the dawn began to glimmer over Olivet, and the priests were preparing for the morning sacrifice, there were these irrepressible disturbers, whom the officials thought they had shut up safely last night, lifting up their voices again as if nothing had happened. What a picture of dauntless persistence, and what a lesson for us! The moment the pressure is off, we should spring back to our work of witnessing for Christ.

The bewilderment of the Council comes in strong contrast with the unhesitating action of the Apostles. There is a half ludicrous side to it, which Luke does not try to hide. There was the pompous assembling of all the great men at early morning, and their dignified waiting till their underlings brought in the culprits. No doubt, Annas put on his severest air of majesty, and all were prepared to look their sternest for the confusion of the prisoners. The prison, the Temple, and the judgment hall, were all near each other. So there was not long to wait. But, behold! the officers come back alone, and their report shakes the assembly out of its dignity. One sees the astonished underlings coming up to the prison, and finding all in order, the sentries patrolling, the doors fast [so the angel had shut them as well as opened them], and then entering ready to drag out the prisoners, and-finding all silent. Such elaborate guard kept over an empty cage!

It was not the officers' business to offer explanations, and it does not seem that any were asked. One would have thought that the sentries would have been questioned. Herod went the natural way to work, when he had Peter's guards examined and put to death. But Annas and his fellows do not seem to have cared to inquire how the escape had been made. Possibly they suspected a miracle, or perhaps feared that inquiry might reveal sympathisers with the prisoners among their own officials. At any rate, they were bewildered, and lost their heads, wondering what was to come next, and how this thing was to end.

The further news that these obstinate fanatics were at their old work in the Temple again, must have greatly added to the rulers' perplexity, and they must have waited the return of the officers sent off for the second time to fetch the prisoners, with somewhat less dignity than before. The officers felt the pulse of the crowd, and did not venture on force, from wholesome fear for their own skins. An excited mob in the Temple court was not to be trifled with, so persuasion was adopted. The brave Twelve went willingly, for the Sanhedrin had no terrors for them, and by going they secured another opportunity of ringing out their Lord's salvation. Wherever a Christian can witness for Christ, he should be ready to go.

The high-priest discreetly said nothing about the escape. Possibly he had no suspicion of a miracle, but, even if he had, Act. 4:16 shows that that would not have led to any modification of his hostility. Persecutors, clothed with a little brief authority, are strangely blind to the plainest indications of the truth spoken by their victims. Annas did not know what a question about the escape might bring out, so he took the safer course of charging the Twelve with disobedience to the Sanhedrin's prohibition. How characteristic of all his kind that is! Never mind whether what the martyr says is true or not. He has broken our law, and defied our authority; that is enough. Are we to be chopping logic, and arguing with every ignorant upstart who chooses to vent his heresies? Gag him,-that is easier and more dignified.

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So, in its attempt to browbeat the accused, in its empty airs of authority, in its utter indifference to the truth involved, in its contempt for the preachers and their message, in its brazen denial of responsibility, its dread of the mob, and its disregard of the far-off divine judgment, his bullying speech is a type of how persecutors, from Roman governors down, have hectored their victims.

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Council’s face. That was a great moment in the history of the world and the Church. How much lay in it, as in a seed,-Luther’s ‘Here I stand, I can do none other. God help me! Amen’; Plymouth Rock, and many a glorious and blood-stained page in the records of martyrdom.

Peter goes on to vindicate his assumption that in disobeying Annas they are obeying God, by reiterating the facts which since Pentecost he had pressed on the national conscience. Israel had slain, and God had exalted, Jesus to His right hand. That was God’s verdict on Israel’s action. But it was also the ground of hope for Israel; for the exaltatior of Jesus was that He might be ‘Prince [or Leader] and Saviour,’ and from His exalted hand were shed the gifts of ‘repentance and remission of sins,’ even of the great sin of slaying Him. These things being so, how could the Apostles be silent? Had not God bid them speak, by their very knowledge of these? They were Christ’s witnesses, constituted as such by their personal acquaintance with Him and their having seen Him raised and ascending, and appointed to be such by His own lips, and inspired for their witnessing by the Holy Spirit shed on them at Pentecost. Peter all but reproduces the never-to-be-forgotten words heard by them all in the upper room, ‘He shall bear witness of Me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with Me from the beginning.’ Silence would be treason. So it is still. What were Annas and his bluster to men whom Christ had bidden to speak, and to whom He had given the Spirit of the Father to speak in them?

38)Acts 5:31

Acts

WHOM TO OBEY,-ANNAS OR ANGEL?

OUR CAPTAIN

Act. 5:31.

The word rendered ‘Prince’ is a rather infrequent designation of our Lord in Scripture. It is only employed in all four times-twice in Peter’s earlier sermons recorded in this Book of the Acts; and twice in the Epistle to the Hebrews. In a former discourse of the Apostle’s he had spoken of the crime of the Jews in killing ‘the Prince of life.’ Here he uses the word without any appended epithet. In the Epistle to the Hebrews we read once of the ‘Captain of Salvation,’ and once of the ‘Author of Faith.’

Now these three renderings ‘Prince,’ ‘Captain,’ ‘Author,’ seem singularly unlike. But the explanation of their being all substantially equivalent to the original word is not difficult to find. It seems to mean properly a Beginner, or Originator, who takes the lead in anything, and hence the notions of chieftainship and priority are easily deduced from it. Then, very naturally, it comes to mean something very much like *cause*; with only this difference, that it implies that the person who is the Originator is Himself the Possessor of that of which He is the Cause to others. So the two ideas of a Leader, and of a Possessor who imparts, are both included in the word.

My intention in this sermon is to deal with the various forms of this expression, in order to try to bring out the fulness of the notion which Scripture attaches to this leadership of Jesus Christ. He is first of all, generally, as our text sets Him forth, the Leader, absolutely. Then there are the specific aspects, expressed by the other three passages, in which He is set forth as the Leader through death to life; the Leader through suffering to salvation; and the Leader in the path of faith. Let us look, then, at these points in succession.

I. First, we have the general notion of Christ the Leader.

Now I suppose we are all acquainted with the fact that the names ‘Joshua’ and ‘Jesus’ are, in the original, one. It is further to be noticed that, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which was familiar to Peter’s hearers, the word of our text is that employed to describe the office of the military leaders of Israel. It is still further to be observed that, in all the instances in the New Testament, it is employed in immediate connection with the name of Jesus. Now, putting all these things together, remembering to whom Peter was speaking, remembering the familiarity which many of his audience must have had with the Old Testament in its Greek translation, remembering the identity of the two names Joshua and Jesus, it is difficult to avoid the supposition that the expression of our text is coloured by a reference to the bold soldier who successfully led his brethren into the Promised Land. Joshua was the ‘Captain of the Lord’s host’ to lead them to

Canaan; the second Joshua is the Captain of the Host of the Lord to lead them to a better rest. Of all the Old Testament heroes perhaps there is none, at first sight, less like the second Joshua than the first was. He is only a rough, plain, prompt, and bold soldier. No prophet was he, no word of wisdom ever fell from his lips, no trace of tenderness was in anything that he did; meekness was alien from his character, he was no sage, he was no saint, but decisive, swift, merciless when necessary, full of resource, sharp and hard as his own sword. And yet a parallel may be drawn.

The second Joshua is the Captain of the Lord's host, as was typified to the first one, in that strange scene outside the walls of Jericho, where the earthly commander, sunk in thought, was brooding upon the hard nut which he had to crack, when suddenly he lifted up his eyes, and beheld a man with a drawn sword. With the instinctive alertness of his profession and character, his immediate question was, 'Art thou for us or for our enemies?' And he got the answer 'No! I am not on thy side, nor on the other side, but thou art on Mine. As Captain of the Lord's host am I come up.'

So Jesus Christ, the 'Strong Son of God,' is set forth by this military emblem as being Himself the first Soldier in the army of God, and the Leader of all the host. We forget far too much the militant character of Jesus Christ. We think of His meekness, His gentleness, His patience, His tenderness, His humility, and we cannot think of these too much, too lovingly, too wonderingly, too adoringly, but we too often forget the strength which underlay the gentleness, and that His life, all gracious as it was, when looked at from the outside, had beneath it a continual conflict, and was in effect the warfare of God against all the evils and the sorrows of humanity. We forget the courage that went to make the gentleness of Jesus, the daring that underlay His lowliness; and it does us good to remember that all the so-called heroic virtues were set forth in supreme form, not in some vulgar type of excellence, such as a conqueror, whom the world recognises, but in that meek King whose weapon was love, yet was wielded with a soldier's hand.

This general thought of Jesus Christ as the first Soldier and Captain of the Lord's army not only opens for us a side of His character which we too often pass by, but it also says something to us as to what our duties ought to be. He stands to us in the relation of General and Commander-in-Chief; then we stand to Him in the relation of private soldiers, whose first duty is unhesitating obedience, and who in doing their Master's will must put forth a bravery far higher than the vulgar courage that is crowned with wreathed laurels on the bloody battlefield, even the bravery that is caught from Him who 'set His face as a flint' to do His work.

Joshua's career has in it a great stumbling-block to many people, in that merciless destruction of the Canaanite sinners, which can only be vindicated by remembering, first, that it was a divine appointment, and that God has the right to punish; and, second, that those old days were under a different law, or at least a less manifestly developed law of loving-kindness and mercy than, thank God! we live in. But whilst we look with wonder on these awful scenes of destruction, may there not lie in them the lesson for us that antagonism and righteous wrath against evil in all its forms is the duty of the soldiers of Christ? There are many causes to-day which to further and fight for is the bounden duty of every Christian, and to further and fight for which will tax all the courage that any of us can muster. Remember that the leadership of Christ is no mere pretty metaphor, but a solemn fact, which brings with it the soldier's responsibilities. When our Centurion says to us, 'Come!' we must come. When He says to us, 'Go!' we must go. When He says to us 'Do this!' we must do it, though heart and flesh should shrink and fail. Unhesitating obedience to His authoritative command will deliver us from many of the miseries of self-will; and brave effort at Christ's side is as much the privilege as the duty of His servants and soldiers.

II. So note, secondly, the Leader through death to life.

Peter, in the sermon which is found in the third chapter of this Book of the Acts, has his mind and heart filled with the astounding fact of the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ, and in the same breath as he gives forth the paradoxical indictment of the Jewish sin, 'You have killed the Prince of Life'-the Leader of Life-he also says, 'And God hath raised Him from the dead.' So that the connection seems to point to the risen and glorified life into which Christ Himself passed, and by passing became capable of imparting it to others. The same idea is here as in Paul's other metaphor: 'Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept'-the first sheaf of the harvest, which was carried into the Temple and consecrated to God, and was the pledge and prophecy of the reaping in due season of all the miles of golden grain that waved in the autumn sunshine. 'So,' says Peter, 'He is the Leader of Life, who Himself has passed through the darkness, for "you killed Him"; mystery of mysteries as it is that you should have been able to do it, deeper mystery still that you should have been willing to do it, deepest mystery of all that you did it not when you did it, but that "He became dead and is alive for evermore." You killed the Prince of Life, and God raised Him from the dead.'

He has gone before us. He is 'the first that should rise from the dead.' For, although the partial power of His communicated life did breathe for a moment resuscitation into two dead men and one dead maiden, these shared in no resurrection-life, but only came back again into mortality, and were quickened for a time, but to die at last the common death of all. But Jesus Christ is the first that has gone into the darkness and come back again to live for ever. Across the untrodden wild there is one track marked, and the footprints upon it point both ways-to the darkness and from the darkness. So the dreary waste is not pathless any more. The broad road that all the generations have trodden on their way into the everlasting darkness is left now, and the 'travellers pass by the byway' which Jesus Christ has made by the touch of His risen feet.

Thus, not only does this thought teach us the priority of His resurrection-life, but it also declares to us that Jesus Christ, possessing the risen life, possesses it to impart it. For, as I remarked in my introductory observations, the conception of this word includes not only the idea of a Leader, but that of One who, Himself possessing or experiencing something, gives it to others. All men rise again. Yes, 'but every man in his own order.' There are two principles at work in the resurrection of all men. They are raised on different grounds, and they are raised to different issues. They that are Christ's are brought again from the dead, because the life of Christ is in them; and it is as 'impossible' that they, as that 'He, should be holden of it.' Union with Jesus Christ by simple faith is the means, and the only means revealed to us, whereby men shall be raised from the dead at the last by a resurrection which is anything else than a prolonged death. As for others, ‘some shall rise unto shame and everlasting contempt,’ rising dead, and dead after they are risen-dead as long as they live. There be two resurrections, whether simultaneous in time or not is of no moment, and all of us must have our part in the one or the other; and faith in Jesus Christ is the only means by which we can take a place in the great army and procession that He leads down into the valley and up to the sunny heights.

If He be the Leader through death unto life, then it is certain that all who follow in His train shall attain to His side and shall share in His glory. The General wears no order which the humblest private in the ranks may not receive likewise, and whomsoever He leads, His leading will not end till He has led them close to His side, if they trust Him. So, calmly, confidently, we may each of us look forward to that dark journey waiting for us all. All our friends will leave us at the tunnel’s mouth, but He will go with us through the gloom, and bring us out into the sunny lands on the southern side of the icy white mountains. The Leader of our souls will be our Guide, not only unto death, but far beyond it, into His own life.

III. So, thirdly, note the Leader through suffering to salvation.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews it is written, ‘It became Him for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Captain’-or the Leader-’of their salvation perfect through sufferings.’ That expression might seem at first to shut Jesus Christ out from any participation in the thing which He gives. For salvation is His gift, but not that which He Himself possesses and enjoys; but it is to be noticed that in the context of the words which I have quoted, ‘glory’ is put as substantially synonymous with salvation, and that the whole is suffused with the idea of a long procession, as shown by the phrase, ‘bringing many sons.’ Of this procession Jesus Christ Himself is the Leader.

So, clearly, the notion in the context now under consideration is that the life of Jesus Christ is the type to which all His servants are to be conformed. He is the Representative Man, who Himself passes through the conditions through which we are to pass, and Himself reaches the glory which, given to us, becomes salvation.

‘Christ is perfected through sufferings.’ So must we be. Perfected through sufferings? you say. Then did His humanity need perfecting? Yes, and No. There needed nothing to be hewn away from that white marble. There was nothing to be purged by fire out of that pure life. But I suppose that Jesus Christ’s human nature needed to be unfolded by life; as the Epistle to the Hebrews says, ‘He learned obedience, though He were a Son, through the things which He suffered.’ And fitness for His office of leading us to glory required to be reached through the sufferings which were the condition of our forgiveness and of our acceptance with God. So, whether we regard the word as expressing the agony of suffering in unfolding His humanity, or in fitting Him for His redeeming work, it remains true that He was perfected by His sufferings.

So must we be. Our characters will never reach the refinement, the delicacy, the unworldliness, the dependence upon God, which they require for their completion, unless we have been passed through many a sorrow. There are plants which require a touch of frost to perfect them, and we all need the discipline of a Father’s hand. The sorrows that come to us all are far more easily borne when we think that Christ bore them all before us. It is but a blunted sword which sorrow wields against any of us; it was blunted on His armour. It is but a spent ball that strikes us; its force was exhausted upon Him. Sorrow, if we keep close to Him, may become solemn joy, and knit us more thoroughly to Himself. Ah, brother! we can better spare our joys than we can spare our sorrows. Only let us cleave to Him when they fall upon us.

Christ’s sufferings led Him to His glory, so will ours if we keep by His side- and only if we do. There is nothing in the mere fact of being tortured and annoyed here on earth, which has in itself any direct and necessary tendency to prepare us for the enjoyment, or to secure to us the possession, of future blessedness. You often hear superficial people saying, ‘Oh! he has been very much troubled here, but there will be amends for it hereafter.’ Yes; God would wish to make amends for it hereafter, but He cannot do so unless we comply with the conditions. And it needs that we should keep close to Jesus Christ in sorrow, in order that it should work for us ‘the peaceable fruit of righteousness.’ The glory will come if the patient endurance has preceded, and has been patience drawn from Jesus.

‘I wondered at the beauteous hours, The slow result of winter showers, You scarce could see the grass for flowers.’

The sorrows that have wounded any man’s head like a crown of thorns will be covered with the diadem of Heaven, if they are sorrows borne with Christ.

IV. Lastly, we have Jesus, the Leader in the path of faith.

‘The Author of faith,’ says the verse in the Epistle to the Hebrews. ‘Author’ does not cover all the ground, though it does part of it. We must include the other ideas which I have been trying to set forth He is ‘Possessor’ first and ‘Giver’ afterwards. For Jesus Christ Himself is both the Pattern and the Inspirer of our faith. It would unduly protract my remarks to dwell adequately upon this; but let me just briefly hint some thoughts connected with it.

Jesus Christ Himself walked by continual faith. His manhood depended upon God, just as ours has to depend upon Jesus. He lived in the continued reception of continual strength from above by reason of His faith, just as our faith is the condition of our reception of His strength. We are sometimes afraid to recognise the fact that the Man Jesus, who is our pattern in all things, is our pattern in this, the most special and peculiarly human aspect of the religious life. But if Christ was not the first of believers, His pattern is wofully defective in its adaptation to our need. Rather let us rejoice in the thought that all that great muster-roll of the heroes of the faith, which the Epistle to the Hebrews has been dealing with, have for their Leader-though, chronologically, He marches in the centre- Jesus Christ, of whose humanity this is the document and proof that He says, in the Prophet’s words: ‘I will put My trust in Him.’

Remember, too, that the same Jesus who is the Pattern is the Object and the Inspirer of our faith; and that if we fulfil the conditions in the text now under consideration, ‘looking off’ from all others, stimulating and beautiful as their example may be, sweet and tender as their love may be, and ‘looking unto Jesus,’ He will be in us, and above us-in us to inspire, and above us to receive and to reward our humble confidence.

So, dear friends, it all comes to this, 'Follow thou Me!' In that commandment all duty is summed, and in obeying it all blessedness and peace are ensured. If we will take Christ for our Captain, He will teach our fingers to fight. If we obey Him we shall not want guidance, and be saved from perplexities born of self-will. If we keep close to Him and turn our eyes to Him, away from all the false and fleeting joys and things of earth, we shall not walk in darkness, howsoever earthly lights may be quenched, but the gloomiest path will be illuminated by His presence, and the roughest made smooth by His bleeding feet that passed along it. If we follow Him, He will lead us down into the dark valley, and up into the blessed sunshine, where participation in His own eternal life and glory will be salvation. If we march in His ranks on earth, then shall we

'With joy upon our heads arise
And meet our Captain in the skies.'

39)Acts 5:32

Acts

WHOM TO OBEY,-ANNAS OR ANGEL?

Act. 5:17 - Act. 5:32.

The Jewish ecclesiastics had been beaten in the first round of the fight, and their attempt to put out the fire had only stirred the blaze. Popular sympathy is fickle, and if the crowd does not shout with the persecutors, it will make heroes and idols of the persecuted. So the Apostles had gained favour by the attempt to silence them, and that led to the second round, part of which is described in this passage.

The first point to note is the mean motives which influenced the high-priest and his adherents. As before, the Sadducees were at the bottom of the assault; for talk about a resurrection was gall and wormwood to them. But Luke alleges a much more contemptible emotion than zeal for supposed truth as the motive for action. The word rendered in the Authorised Version 'indignation,' is indeed literally 'zeal,' but it here means, as the Revised

Version has it, nothing nobler than ‘jealousy.’ ‘Who are those ignorant Galileans that they should encroach on the office of us dignified teachers? and what fools the populace must be to listen to them! Our prestige is threatened. If we don’t bestir ourselves, our authority will be gone.’ A lofty spirit in which to deal with grave movements of opinion, and likely to lead its possessors to discern truth!

The Sanhedrin, no doubt, talked solemnly about the progress of error, and the duty of firmly putting it down, and, like Jehu, said, ‘Come, and see our zeal for the Lord’; but it was zeal for greetings in the marketplace, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and the other advantages of their position. So it has often been since. The instruments which zeal for truth uses are argument, Scripture, and persuasion. That zeal which betakes itself to threats and force is, at the best, much mingled with the wrath and jealousy of man.

The arrest of the Apostles and their committal to prison was simply for detention, not punishment. The rulers cast their net wider this time, and secured all the Apostles, and, having them safe under lock and key, they went home triumphant, and expecting to deal a decisive blow to-morrow. Then comes one of the great ‘buts’ of Scripture. Annas and Caiaphas thought that they had scored a success, but an angel upset their calculations. To try to explain the miracle away is hopeless. It is wiser to try to understand it.

The very fact that it did not lead to the Apostles’ deliverance, but that the trial and scourging followed next day, just as if it had not happened, which has been alleged as a proof of its uselessness, and inferentially of its falsehood, puts us on the right track. It was not meant for their deliverance, but for their heartening, and for the bracing of all generations of Christians, by showing, at the first conflict with the civil power, that the Lord was with His Church. His strengthening power is operative when no miracle is wrought. If His servants are not delivered, it is not that He lacks angels, but that it is better for them and the Church that they should lie in prison or die at the stake.

The miracle was a transient revelation of a perpetual truth, and has shed light on many a dark dungeon where God’s servants have lain rotting. It breathed heroic constancy into the Twelve. How striking and noble was their prompt obedience to the command to resume the perilous work of preaching! As soon as the dawn began to glimmer over Olivet, and the priests were preparing for the morning sacrifice, there were these irrepressible disturbers, whom the officials thought they had shut up safely last night, lifting up their voices again as if nothing had happened. What a picture of dauntless persistence, and what a lesson for us! The moment the pressure is off, we should spring back to our work of witnessing for Christ.

The bewilderment of the Council comes in strong contrast with the unhesitating action of the Apostles. There is a half ludicrous side to it, which Luke does not try to hide. There was the pompous assembling of all the great men at early morning, and their dignified waiting till their underlings brought in the culprits. No doubt, Annas put on his severest air of majesty, and all were prepared to look their sternest for the confusion of the prisoners. The prison, the Temple, and the judgment hall, were all near each other. So there was not long to wait. But, behold! the officers come back alone, and their report shakes the assembly out of its dignity. One sees the astonished underlings coming up to the prison, and finding all in order, the sentries patrolling, the doors fast [so the angel had shut them as well as opened them], and then entering ready to drag out the prisoners, and-finding all silent. Such elaborate guard kept over an empty cage!

It was not the officers’ business to offer explanations, and it does not seem that any were asked. One would have thought that the sentries would have been questioned. Herod went the natural way to work, when he had Peter’s guards examined and put to death. But Annas and his fellows do not seem to have cared to inquire how the escape had been made. Possibly they suspected a miracle, or perhaps feared that inquiry might reveal sympathisers with the prisoners among their own officials. At any rate, they were bewildered, and lost their heads, wondering what was to come next, and how this thing was to end.

The further news that these obstinate fanatics were at their old work in the Temple again, must have greatly added to the rulers’ perplexity, and they must have waited the return of the officers sent off for the second time to fetch the prisoners, with somewhat less dignity than before. The officers felt the pulse of the crowd, and did not venture on force, from wholesome fear for their own skins. An excited mob in the Temple court was not to be trifled with, so persuasion was adopted. The brave Twelve went willingly, for the Sanhedrin had no terrors for them, and by going they secured another opportunity of ringing out their Lord's salvation. Wherever a Christian can witness for Christ, he should be ready to go.

The high-priest discreetly said nothing about the escape. Possibly he had no suspicion of a miracle, but, even if he had, Act. 4:16 shows that that would not have led to any modification of his hostility. Persecutors, clothed with a little brief authority, are strangely blind to the plainest indications of the truth spoken by their victims. Annas did not know what a question about the escape might bring out, so he took the safer course of charging the Twelve with disobedience to the Sanhedrin's prohibition. How characteristic of all his kind that is! Never mind whether what the martyr says is true or not. He has broken our law, and defied our authority; that is enough. Are we to be chopping logic, and arguing with every ignorant upstart who chooses to vent his heresies? Gag him,-that is easier and more dignified.

A world of self-consequence peeps out in that '*we* straitly charged you,' and a world of contempt peeps out in the avoidance of naming Jesus. 'This name' and 'this man' is the nearest that the proud priest will come to soiling his lips by mentioning Him. He bears unconscious testimony to the Apostles' diligence, and to the popular inclination to them, by charging them with having filled the city with what he contemptuously calls '*your* teaching,' as if it had no other source than their own ignorant notions.

Then the deepest reason for the Sanhedrin's bitterness leaks out in the charge of inciting the mob to take vengeance on them for the death of Jesus. It was true that the Apostles had charged that guilt home on them, but not on them only, but on the whole nation, so that no incitement to revenge lay in the charge. It was true that they had brought 'this man's blood' on the rulers, but only to draw them to repentance, not to hound at them their sharers in the guilt. Had Annas forgot 'His blood be on us, and on our children'? But, when an evil deed is complete, the doers try to shuffle off the responsibility which they were ready to take in the excitement of hurrying to do it. Annas did not trouble himself about divine vengeance; it was the populace whom he feared.

So, in its attempt to browbeat the accused, in its empty airs of authority, in its utter indifference to the truth involved, in its contempt for the preachers and their message, in its brazen denial of responsibility, its dread of the mob, and its disregard of the far-off divine judgment, his bullying speech is a type of how persecutors, from Roman governors down, have hectored their victims.

And Peter's brave answer is, thank God! the type of what thousands of trembling women and meek men have answered. His tone is severer now than on his former appearance. Now he has no courteous recognition of the court's authority. Now he brushes aside all Annas's attempts to impose on him the sanctity of its decrees, and flatly denies that the Council has any more right to command than any other 'men.' They claimed to be depositaries of God's judgments. This revolutionary fisherman sees nothing in them but 'men,' whose commands point one way, while God's point the other. The angel bade them 'speak'; the Council had bid them be dumb. To state the opposition was to determine their duty. Formerly Peter had said 'judge ye' which command it is right to obey. Now, he wraps his refusal in no folds of courtesy, but thrusts the naked 'We must obey God' in the Council's face. That was a great moment in the history of the world and the Church. How much lay in it, as in a seed,-Luther's 'Here I stand, I can do none other. God help me! Amen'; Plymouth Rock, and many a glorious and blood-stained page in the records of martyrdom.

Peter goes on to vindicate his assumption that in disobeying Annas they are obeying God, by reiterating the facts which since Pentecost he had pressed on the national conscience. Israel had slain, and God had exalted, Jesus to His right hand. That was God's verdict on Israel's action. But it was also the ground of hope for Israel; for the exaltatior of Jesus was that He might be 'Prince [or Leader] and Saviour,' and from His exalted hand were shed the gifts of 'repentance and remission of sins,' even of the great sin of slaying Him. These things being so, how could the Apostles be silent? Had not God bid them speak, by their very knowledge of these? They were Christ's witnesses, constituted as such by their personal acquaintance with Him and their having seen Him raised and ascending, and appointed to be such by His own lips, and inspired for their witnessing by the Holy Spirit shed on them at Pentecost. Peter all but reproduces the never-to-be-forgotten words heard by them all in the upper room, ‘He shall bear witness of Me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with Me from the beginning.’ Silence would be treason. So it is still. What were Annas and his bluster to men whom Christ had bidden to speak, and to whom He had given the Spirit of the Father to speak in them?

40)Acts 5:38-39

Acts

GAMALIEL’S COUNSEL

Act. 5:38 - Act. 5:39.

The little that is known of Gamaliel seems to indicate just such a man as would be likely to have given the advice in the text. His was a character which, on its good side and by its admirers, would be described as prudent, wise, cautious and calm, tolerant, opposed to fanaticism and violence. His position as president of the Sanhedrin, his long experience, his Rabbinical training, his old age, and his knowledge that the national liberty depended on keeping things quiet, would be very likely to exaggerate such tendencies into what his enemies would describe as worldly shrewdness without a trace of enthusiasm, indifference to truth, and the like.

It is, of course, possible that he bases his counsel of letting the followers of Jesus alone, on the grounds which he adduces, because he knew that reasons more favourable to Christians would have had no weight with the Sanhedrin. Old Church traditions make him out to have been a Christian, and the earliest Christian romance, a very singular book, of which the main object was to blacken the Apostle Paul, roundly asserts that at the date of this advice he was ‘secretly our brother,’ and that he remained in the Sanhedrin to further Christian views. But there seems not the slightest reason to suppose that. He lived and died a Jew, spared the sight of the destruction of Jerusalem which, according to his own canon in the text, would have proved that the system to which he had given his life was not of God; and the only relic of his wisdom is a prayer against Christian heretics.

It is remarkable that he should have given this advice; but two things occur to account for it. Thus far Christianity had been very emphatically the preaching of the Resurrection, a truth which the Pharisees believed and held as especially theirs in opposition to the Sadducees, and Gamaliel was old and worldly-wise enough to count all as his friends who were the enemies of his enemies. He was not very particular where he looked for allies, and rather shrank from helping Sadducees to punish men whose crime was that they ‘preached through Jesus a resurrection from the dead.’

Then the Jewish rulers had a very ticklish part to play. They were afraid of any popular shout which might bring down the avalanche of Roman power on them, and they were nervously anxious to keep things quiet. So Gamaliel did not wish to have any fuss made about ‘these men,’ lest it should be supposed that another popular revolt was on foot; and he thought that to let them alone was the best way to reduce their importance. Perhaps, too, there was a secret hope in the old man’s mind, which he scarcely ventured to look at and dared not speak, that here might be the beginning of a rising which had more promise in it than that abortive one under Theudas. He could not venture to say this, but perhaps it made him chary of voting for repression. He had no objection to let these poor Galileans fling away their lives in storming against the barrier of Rome. If they fail, it is but one more failure. If they succeed, he and his like will say that they have done well. But while the enterprise is too perilous for him to approve or be mixed up in it, he would let it have its chance.

Note that Gamaliel regards the whole movement as the probable germ of an uprising against Rome, as is seen from the parallels that he quotes. It is not as a religious teaching which is true or false, but as a political agitation, that he looks at Christianity.

It is to his credit that he stood calm and curbed the howling of the fanatics round him, and that he was the first and only Jewish authority who counselled abstinence from persecution.

It is interesting to compare him with Gallio, who had a glimpse of the true relation of the civil magistrate to religious opinion. Gamaliel has a glimpse of the truth of the impotence of material force against truth, how it is of a quick and spiritual essence, which cannot be cleaved in pieces with a sword, but lives on in spite of all. But while all this may be true, the advice on the whole is a low and bad one. It rests on false principles; it takes a false view of a man's duty; it is not wholly sincere; and it is one impossible to be carried out. It is singularly in accordance with many of the tendencies of this age, and with modes of thought and counsels of action which are in active operation amongst us to-day, and we may therefore criticise it now.

I. Here is disbelief professing to be 'honest doubt.'

Gamaliel professes not to have materials for judging. 'If-if'; was it a time for 'ifs'? What was that Sanhedrin there for, but to try precisely such cases as these?

They had had the works of Christ; miracles which they had investigated and could not disprove; a life which was its own witness; prophecies fulfilled; His own presence before their bar; the Resurrection and the Pentecost.

I am not saying whether these facts were enough to have convinced them, nor even whether the alleged miracles were true. All that I am concerned with is that, so far as we know, neither Gamaliel nor any of his tribe had ever made the slightest attempt to inquire into them, but had, without examination, complacently treated them as lies. All that body of evidence had been absolutely ignored. And now he is, with his 'ifs,' posing as very calm and dispassionate.

So to-day it is fashionable to doubt, to hang up most of the Christian truths in the category of uncertainties.

[*a*] When that is the fashion, we need to be on our guard.

[*b*] If you doubt, have you ever taken the pains to examine?

[*c*] If you doubt, you are bound to go further, and either reach belief or rejection. Doubt is not the permanent condition for a man. The central truth

of Christianity is either to be received or rejected.

II. Here is disbelief masquerading as suspension of judgment.

Gamaliel talked as if he did not know, or had not decided in his own mind, whether the disciples' claims for their Master were just or not. But the attitude of impartiality and hesitation was the cover of rooted unbelief. He speaks as if the alternative was that either this 'counsel and work' was 'of man' or 'of God.' But he would have been nearer the truth if he had stated the antithesis-God or devil; a glorious truth or a hell-born lie. If Christ's work was not a revelation from above, it was certainly an emanation from beneath.

We sometimes hear disbelief, in our own days, talking in much the same fashion. Have we never listened to teachers who first of all prove to their own satisfaction that Jesus is a myth, that all the gospel story is unreliable, and all the gospel message a dream, and then turn round and overflow in praise of Him and in admiration of it? Browning's professor in *Christmas Day* first of all reduces 'the pearl of price' to dust and ashes, and then 'Bids us, when we least expect it, Take back our faith-if it be not just whole, Yet a pearl indeed, as his tests affect it.'

And that is very much the tone of not a few very superior persons to-day. But let us have one thing or the other-a Christ who was what He claimed to be, the Incarnate Word of God, who died for our sins and rose again for our justification; or a Galilean peasant who was either a visionary or an impostor, like Judas of Galilee and Theudas.

III. Here is success turned into a criterion of truth.

It is such, no doubt, in the long run, but not till then, and so till the end it is utterly false to argue that a thing is true because multitudes think it to be so. The very opposite is more nearly true. It in usually minorities who have been right.

Gamaliel laid down an immoral principle, which is only too popular to-day, in relation to religion and to much else.

IV. Here is a selfish neutrality pretending to be judicial calmness.

Even if it were true that success is a criterion, we have to help God to ensure the success of His truth. No doubt, taking sides is very inconvenient to a cool, tolerant man of the world. And it is difficult to be in a party without becoming a partisan. We know all the beauty of mild, tolerant wisdom, and that truth is usually shared between combatants, but the dangers of extremes and exaggeration must be faced, and perhaps these are better than the cool indifference of the eclectic, sitting apart, holding no form of creed, but contemplating all. It is not good for a man to stand aloof when his brethren are fighting.

In every age some great causes which are God's are pressing for decision. In many of them we may be disqualified for taking sides. But feel that you are bound to cast your influence on the side which conscience approves, and bound to settle which side that is, Deborah's fierce curse against Meroz because its people came not up to the help of the Lord against the mighty was deserved.

But the region in which such judicial calmness, which shrinks from taking its side, is most fatal and sadly common, is in regard to our own individual relation to Jesus, and in regard to the establishment of His kingdom among men.

'He that is not with Me is against Me.' Neutrality is opposition. Not to gather with Him is to scatter. Not to choose Him is to reject Him.

Gamaliel had a strange notion of what constituted 'refraining from these men and letting them alone,' and he betrayed his real position and opposition by his final counsel to scourge them, before letting them go. That is what the world's neutrality comes to.

How poor a figure this politic ecclesiastic, mostly anxious not to commit himself, ready to let whoever would risk a struggle with Rome, so that he kept out of the fray and survived to profit by it, cuts beside the disciples, who had chosen their side, had done with 'ifs,' and went away from the Council rejoicing 'that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name'! Who would not rather be Peter or John with their bleeding backs than Gamaliel, sitting soft in his presidential chair, and too cautious to commit himself to an opinion whether the name of Jesus was that of a prophet or a pretender?

41)Acts 6:3

Acts

FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

Act. 6:3, Act. 6:5, Act. 6:8.

I have taken the liberty of wrenching these three fragments from their context, because of their remarkable parallelism, which is evidently intended to set us thinking of the connection of the various characteristics which they set forth. The first of them is a description, given by the Apostles, of the sort of man whom they conceived to be fit to look after the very homely matter of stifling the discontent of some members of the Church, who thought that their poor people did not get their fair share of the daily ministration. The second and third of them are parts of the description of the foremost of these seven men, the martyr Stephen. In regard to the first and second of our three fragmentary texts, you will observe that the cause is put first and the effect second. The 'deacons' were to be men 'full of the Holy Ghost,' and that would make them 'full of wisdom.' Stephen was 'full of faith,' and that made him 'full of the Holy Ghost.' Probably the same relation subsists in the third of our texts, of which the true reading is not, as it appears in our Authorised Version, 'full of faith and power,' but as it is given in the Revised Version, 'full of grace and power.' He was filled with grace-by which apparently is here meant the sum of the divine spiritual gifts-and therefore he was full of power. Whether that is so or not, if we link these three passages together, as I have taken the liberty of doing, we get a point of view appropriate for such a day [Footnote: Preached on Whit Sunday.] as this, when all that calls itself Christendom is commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit, and His abiding influence upon the Church. So I simply wish to gather together the principles that come out of these three verses thus concatenated.

I. We may all, if we will, be full of the Holy Spirit.

If there is a God at all, there is nothing more reasonable than to suppose that He can come into direct contact with the spirits of the men whom He has made. And if that Almighty God is not an Almighty indifference, or a pure devil-if He is love-then there is nothing more certain than that, if He can touch and influence men's hearts towards goodness and His own likeness, He most certainly will.

The probability, which all religion recognises, and in often crude forms tries to set forth, and by superstitious acts to secure, is raised to an absolute certainty, if we believe that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Truth, speaks truth to us about this matter. For there is nothing more certain than that the characteristic which distinguishes Him from all other teachers, is to be found not only in the fact that He did something for us on the Cross, as well as taught us by His word; but that in His teaching He puts in the forefront, not the prescriptions of our duty, but the promise of God's gift; and ever says to us, 'Open your hearts and the divine influences will flow in and fill you and fit you for all goodness.' The Spirit of God fills the human spirit, as the mysterious influence which we call life permeates and animates the whole body, or as water lies in a cup.

Consider how that metaphor is caught up, and from a different point of view is confirmed, in regard to the completeness which it predicates, by other metaphors of Scripture. What is the meaning of the Baptist's saying, 'He shall baptise you in the Holy Ghost and fire'? Does that not mean a complete immersion in, and submersion under, the cleansing flood? What is the meaning of the Master's own saying, 'Tarry ye. . . till ye be clothed with power from on high'? Does not that mean complete investiture of our nakedness with that heavenly-woven robe? Do not all these emblems declare to us the possibility of a human spirit being charged to the limits of its capacity with a divine influence?

We do not here discuss questions which separate good Christian people from one another in regard of this matter. My object now is not to lay down theological propositions, but to urge upon Christian men the acquirement of an experience which is possible for them. And so, without caring to enter by argument on controversial matters, I desire simply to lay emphasis upon the plain implication of that word, ‘*filled* with the Holy Ghost.’ Does it mean less than the complete subjugation of a man’s spirit by the influence of God’s Spirit brooding upon him, as the prophet laid himself on the dead child, lip to lip, face to face, beating heart to still heart, limb to limb, and so diffused a supernatural life into the dead? That is an emblem of what all you Christian people may have if you like, and if you will adopt the discipline and observe the conditions which God has plainly laid down.

That fulness will be a growing fulness, for our spirits are capable, if not of infinite, at any rate of indefinite, expansion, and there is no limit known to us, and no limit, I suppose, which will ever be reached, so that we can go no further-to the possible growth of a created spirit that is in touch with God, and is having itself enlarged and elevated and ennobled by that contact. The vessel is elastic, the walls of the cup of our spirit, into which the new wine of the divine Spirit is poured, widen out as the draught is poured into them. The more a man possesses and uses of the life of God, the more is he capable of possessing and the more he will receive. So a continuous expansion in capacity, and a continuous increase in the amount of the divine life possessed, are held out as the happy prerogative and possibility of a Christian soul.

This Stephen had but a very small amount of the clear Christian knowledge that you and I have, but he was leagues ahead of most Christian people in regard to this, that he was ‘filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Brethren, you can have as much of that Spirit as you want. It is my own fault if my Christian life is not what the Christian lives of some of us, I doubt not, are. ‘Filled with the Holy Spirit’! rather a little drop in the bottom of the cup, and all the rest gaping emptiness; rather the fire died down, Pentecostal fire though it be, until there is scarcely anything but a heap of black cinders and grey ashes in your grate, and a little sandwich of flickering flame in one corner; rather the rushing mighty wind died down into all but a dead calm, like that which afflicts sailing-ships in the equatorial regions, when the thick air is deadly still, and the empty sails have not strength even to flap upon the masts; rather the ‘river of the water of life’ that pours ‘out of the throne of God, and of the Lamb,’ dried up into a driblet.

That is the condition of many Christian people. I say not of which of us. Let each man settle for himself how that may be. At all events here is the possibility, which may be realised with increasing completeness all through a Christian man's life. We may be filled with the Holy Spirit.

II. If we are 'full of faith' we shall be filled with the Spirit.

That is the condition as suggested by one of our texts-'a man full of faith,' and therefore 'of the Holy Ghost.' Now, of course, I believe, as I suppose all people who have made any experience of their own hearts must believe, that before a soul exercises confidence in Jesus Christ, and passes into the household of faith, there have been playing upon it the influences of that divine Comforter whose first mission is to 'convince the world of sin.' But between such operations as these, which I believe are universally diffused, wheresoever the Word of God and the message of salvation are proclaimed-between such operations as these, and those to which I now refer, whereby the divine Spirit not only operates upon, but dwells in, a man's heart, and not only brings conviction to the world of sin, there is a wide gulf fixed; and for all the hallowing, sanctifying, illuminating and strength-giving operations of that divine Spirit, the pre-requisite condition is our trust. Jesus Christ taught us so, in more than one utterance, and His Apostle, in commenting on one of the most remarkable of His sayings on this subject, says, 'This spake He concerning the Holy Spirit which *they that believed* in Him were to receive.' Faith is the condition of receiving that divine influence. But what kind of faith? Well, let us put away theological words. If you do not believe that there is any such influence to be got, you will not get it. If you do not want it, you will not get it. If you do not expect it, you will not get it. If professing to believe it, and to wish it, and to look for it, you are behaving yourself in such a way as to show that you do not really desire it, you will never get it. It is all very well to talk about faith as the condition of receiving that divine Spirit. Do not let us lose ourselves in the word, but try to translate the somewhat threadbare expression, which by reason of its familiarity produces little effect upon some of us, and to turn it into non-theological English. It just comes to this,-if we are simply trusting ourselves to Jesus Christ our Lord, and if in that trust we do believe in the possibility of even *our* being filled with the divine Spirit, and if that possibility lights up a leaping flame of desire in our hearts which aspires towards the possession of such a gift, and if belief that our reception of that gift is possible because we trust ourselves to Jesus Christ, and longing that we may receive it, combine to produce the confident expectation that we shall, and if all of these combine to produce conduct which neither quenches nor grieves that divine Guest, then, and only then, shall we indeed be filled with the Spirit.

I know of no other way by which a man can receive God into his heart than by opening his heart for God to come in. I know of no other way by which a man can woo-if I may so say-the Divine Lover to enter into his spirit than by longing that He would come, waiting for His coming, expecting it, and being supremely blessed in the thought that such a union is possible. Faith, that is trust, with its appropriate and necessary sequels of desire and expectation and obedience, is the completing of the electric circuit, and after it the spark is sure to come. It is the opening of the windows, after which sunshine cannot but flood the chamber. It is the stretching out of the hand, and no man that ever, with love and longing, lifted an empty hand to God, dropped it still empty. And no man who, with penitence for his own act, and trust in the divine act, lifted blood-stained and foul hands to God, ever held them up there without the gory patches melting away, and becoming white as snow. Not 'all the perfumes of Araby' can sweeten those bloody hands. Lift them up to God, and they become pure. Whosoever wishes that he may, and believes that he shall, receive from Christ the fulness of the Spirit, will not be disappointed. Brethren, 'Ye have not because ye ask not.' 'If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children,' shall not 'your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?'

III. Lastly, if we are filled with the Spirit we shall be 'full of wisdom, grace, and power.'

The Apostles seemed to think that it was a very important business to look after a handful of poor widows, and see that they had their fair share in the dispensing of the modest charity of the half-pauper Jerusalem church, when they said that for such a purely secular thing as that a man would need to be 'full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.' Surely, something a little less august might have served their turn to qualify men for such a task! 'Wisdom' here, I suppose, means practical sagacity, common sense, the power of picking out an impostor when she came whining for a dole. Very commonplace virtues! -but the Apostles evidently thought that such everyday operations of the understanding as these were not too secular and commonplace to owe their origin to the communication to men of the fulness of the Holy Spirit.

May we not take a lesson from that, that God's great influences, when they come into a man, do not concern themselves only with great intellectual problems and the like, but that they will operate to make him more fit to do the most secular and the most trivial things that can be put into his hand to do? The Holy Ghost had to fill Stephen before he could hand out loaves and money to the widows in Jerusalem.

And do you not think that your day's work, and your business perplexities, come under the same category? Perhaps the best way to secure understanding of what we ought to do, in regard to very small and secular matters, is to keep ourselves very near to God, with the windows of our hearts opened towards Jerusalem, that all the guidance and light that can come from Him may come into us. Depend upon it, unless we have God's guidance in the trivialities of life, ninety per cent., ay! and more, of our lives will be without God's guidance; because trivialities make up life. And unless my Father in heaven can guide me about what we, very mistakenly, call 'secular' things, and what we very vulgarly call trivial things, His guidance is not worth much. The Holy Ghost will give you wisdom for to-morrow, and all its little cares, as well as for the higher things, of which I am not going to speak now, because they do not come within my text.

'Full of grace,'-that is a wide word, as I take it. If, by our faith, we have brought into our hearts that divine influence, the Spirit of God does not come empty-handed, but He communicates to us whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, whatsoever things are fair and honourable, whatsoever things in the eyes of men are worthy to be praised, and by the tongues of men have been called virtue. These things will all be given to us step by step, not without our own diligent co-operation, by that divine Giver. Effort without faith, and faith without effort, are equally incomplete, and the co-operation of the two is that which is blessed by God.

Then the things which are ‘gracious,’ that is to say, given by His love, and also gracious in the sense of partaking of the celestial beauty which belongs to all virtue, and to all likeness in character to God, these things will give us a strange, supernatural *power* amongst men. The word is employed in my third text, I presume, in its narrow sense of miracle-working power, but we may fairly widen it to something much more than that. Our Lord once said, when He was speaking about the gift of the Holy Spirit, that there were two stages in its operation. In the first, it availed for the refreshment and the satisfying of the desires of the individual; in the second it became, by the ministration of that individual, a source of blessing to others. He said, ‘If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink,’ and then, immediately, ‘He that believeth on Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.’ That is to say, whoever lives in touch with God, having that divine Spirit in his heart, will walk amongst men the wielder of an unmistakable power, and will be able to bear witness to God, and move men’s hearts, and draw them to goodness and truth. The only power for Christian service is the power that comes from being clothed with God’s Spirit. The only power for self-government is the power that comes from being clothed with God’s Spirit. The only power which will keep us in the way that leads to life, and will bring us at last to the rest and the reward, is the power that comes from being clothed with God’s Spirit.

I am charged to all who hear me now with this message. Here is a gift offered to you. You cannot pare and batter at your own characters so as to make them what will satisfy your own consciences, still less what will satisfy the just judgment of God; but you can put yourself under the moulding influences of Christ’s love. Dear brethren, the one hope for dead humanity, the bones very many and very dry, is that from the four winds there should come the breath of God, and breathe in them, and they shall live, ‘an exceeding great army.’ Forget all else that I have been saying now, if you like, but take these two sentences to your hearts, and do not rest till they express your own personal experience; If I am to be good I must have God’s Spirit within me. If I am to have God’s Spirit within me, I must be ‘full of faith.’

42)Acts 6:5

Acts

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That is the condition of many Christian people. I say not of which of us. Let each man settle for himself how that may be. At all events here is the possibility, which may be realised with increasing completeness all through a Christian man's life. We may be filled with the Holy Spirit.

II. If we are 'full of faith' we shall be filled with the Spirit.

That is the condition as suggested by one of our texts-'a man full of faith,' and therefore 'of the Holy Ghost.' Now, of course, I believe, as I suppose all people who have made any experience of their own hearts must believe, that before a soul exercises confidence in Jesus Christ, and passes into the household of faith, there have been playing upon it the influences of that divine Comforter whose first mission is to 'convince the world of sin.' But between such operations as these, which I believe are universally diffused, wheresoever the Word of God and the message of salvation are proclaimed-between such operations as these, and those to which I now refer, whereby the divine Spirit not only operates upon, but dwells in, a man's heart, and not only brings conviction to the world of sin, there is a wide gulf fixed; and for all the hallowing, sanctifying, illuminating and strength-giving operations of that divine Spirit, the pre-requisite condition is our trust. Jesus Christ taught us so, in more than one utterance, and His Apostle, in commenting on one of the most remarkable of His sayings on this subject, says, 'This spake He concerning the Holy Spirit which *they that believed* in Him were to receive.' Faith is the condition of receiving that divine influence. But what kind of faith? Well, let us put away theological words. If you do not believe that there is any such influence to be got, you will not get it. If you do not want it, you will not get it. If you do not expect it, you will not get it. If professing to believe it, and to wish it, and to look for it, you are behaving yourself in such a way as to show that you do not really desire it, you will never get it. It is all very well to talk about faith as the condition of receiving that divine Spirit. Do not let us lose ourselves in the word, but try to translate the somewhat threadbare expression, which by reason of its familiarity produces little effect upon some of us, and to turn it into non-theological English. It just comes to this,-if we are simply trusting ourselves to Jesus Christ our Lord, and if in that trust we do believe in the possibility of even *our* being filled with the divine Spirit, and if that possibility lights up a leaping flame of desire in our hearts which aspires towards the possession of such a gift, and if belief that our reception of that gift is possible because we trust ourselves to Jesus Christ, and longing that we may receive it, combine to produce the confident expectation that we shall, and if all of these combine to produce conduct which neither quenches nor grieves that divine Guest, then, and only then, shall we indeed be filled with the Spirit.

I know of no other way by which a man can receive God into his heart than by opening his heart for God to come in. I know of no other way by which a man can woo-if I may so say-the Divine Lover to enter into his spirit than by longing that He would come, waiting for His coming, expecting it, and being supremely blessed in the thought that such a union is possible. Faith, that is trust, with its appropriate and necessary sequels of desire and expectation and obedience, is the completing of the electric circuit, and after it the spark is sure to come. It is the opening of the windows, after which sunshine cannot but flood the chamber. It is the stretching out of the hand, and no man that ever, with love and longing, lifted an empty hand to God, dropped it still empty. And no man who, with penitence for his own act, and trust in the divine act, lifted blood-stained and foul hands to God, ever held them up there without the gory patches melting away, and becoming white as snow. Not ‘all the perfumes of Araby’ can sweeten those bloody hands. Lift them up to God, and they become pure. Whosoever wishes that he may, and believes that he shall, receive from Christ the fulness of the Spirit, will not be disappointed. Brethren, ‘Ye have not because ye ask not.’ ‘If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children,’ shall not ‘your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?’

III. Lastly, if we are filled with the Spirit we shall be ‘full of wisdom, grace, and power.’

The Apostles seemed to think that it was a very important business to look after a handful of poor widows, and see that they had their fair share in the dispensing of the modest charity of the half-pauper Jerusalem church, when they said that for such a purely secular thing as that a man would need to be ‘full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.’ Surely, something a little less august might have served their turn to qualify men for such a task! ‘Wisdom’ here, I suppose, means practical sagacity, common sense, the power of picking out an impostor when she came whining for a dole. Very commonplace virtues! -but the Apostles evidently thought that such everyday operations of the understanding as these were not too secular and commonplace to owe their origin to the communication to men of the fulness of the Holy Spirit.

May we not take a lesson from that, that God's great influences, when they come into a man, do not concern themselves only with great intellectual problems and the like, but that they will operate to make him more fit to do the most secular and the most trivial things that can be put into his hand to do? The Holy Ghost had to fill Stephen before he could hand out loaves and money to the widows in Jerusalem.

And do you not think that your day's work, and your business perplexities, come under the same category? Perhaps the best way to secure understanding of what we ought to do, in regard to very small and secular matters, is to keep ourselves very near to God, with the windows of our hearts opened towards Jerusalem, that all the guidance and light that can come from Him may come into us. Depend upon it, unless we have God's guidance in the trivialities of life, ninety per cent., ay! and more, of our lives will be without God's guidance; because trivialities make up life. And unless my Father in heaven can guide me about what we, very mistakenly, call 'secular' things, and what we very vulgarly call trivial things, His guidance is not worth much. The Holy Ghost will give you wisdom for to-morrow, and all its little cares, as well as for the higher things, of which I am not going to speak now, because they do not come within my text.

'Full of grace,'-that is a wide word, as I take it. If, by our faith, we have brought into our hearts that divine influence, the Spirit of God does not come empty-handed, but He communicates to us whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, whatsoever things are fair and honourable, whatsoever things in the eyes of men are worthy to be praised, and by the tongues of men have been called virtue. These things will all be given to us step by step, not without our own diligent co-operation, by that divine Giver. Effort without faith, and faith without effort, are equally incomplete, and the co-operation of the two is that which is blessed by God.

Then the things which are 'gracious,' that is to say, given by His love, and also gracious in the sense of partaking of the celestial beauty which belongs to all virtue, and to all likeness in character to God, these things will give us a strange, supernatural *power* amongst men. The word is employed in my third text, I presume, in its narrow sense of miracle-working power, but we may fairly widen it to something much more than that. Our Lord once said, when He was speaking about the gift of the Holy Spirit, that there were two stages in its operation. In the first, it availed for the refreshment and the satisfying of the desires of the individual; in the second it became, by the ministration of that individual, a source of blessing to others. He said, ‘If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink,’ and then, immediately, ‘He that believeth on Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.’ That is to say, whoever lives in touch with God, having that divine Spirit in his heart, will walk amongst men the wielder of an unmistakable power, and will be able to bear witness to God, and move men’s hearts, and draw them to goodness and truth. The only power for Christian service is the power that comes from being clothed with God’s Spirit. The only power for self-government is the power that comes from being clothed with God’s Spirit. The only power which will keep us in the way that leads to life, and will bring us at last to the rest and the reward, is the power that comes from being clothed with God’s Spirit.

I am charged to all who hear me now with this message. Here is a gift offered to you. You cannot pare and batter at your own characters so as to make them what will satisfy your own consciences, still less what will satisfy the just judgment of God; but you can put yourself under the moulding influences of Christ’s love. Dear brethren, the one hope for dead humanity, the bones very many and very dry, is that from the four winds there should come the breath of God, and breathe in them, and they shall live, ‘an exceeding great army.’ Forget all else that I have been saying now, if you like, but take these two sentences to your hearts, and do not rest till they express your own personal experience; If I am to be good I must have God’s Spirit within me. If I am to have God’s Spirit within me, I must be ‘full of faith.’

43)Acts 6:8

Acts

FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

Act. 6:3, Act. 6:5, Act. 6:8.

I have taken the liberty of wrenching these three fragments from their context, because of their remarkable parallelism, which is evidently intended to set us thinking of the connection of the various characteristics which they set forth. The first of them is a description, given by the Apostles, of the sort of man whom they conceived to be fit to look after the very homely matter of stifling the discontent of some members of the Church, who thought that their poor people did not get their fair share of the daily ministration. The second and third of them are parts of the description of the foremost of these seven men, the martyr Stephen. In regard to the first and second of our three fragmentary texts, you will observe that the cause is put first and the effect second. The 'deacons' were to be men 'full of the Holy Ghost,' and that would make them 'full of wisdom.' Stephen was 'full of faith,' and that made him 'full of the Holy Ghost.' Probably the same relation subsists in the third of our texts, of which the true reading is not, as it appears in our Authorised Version, 'full of faith and power,' but as it is given in the Revised Version, 'full of grace and power.' He was filled with grace-by which apparently is here meant the sum of the divine spiritual gifts-and therefore he was full of power. Whether that is so or not, if we link these three passages together, as I have taken the liberty of doing, we get a point of view appropriate for such a day [Footnote: Preached on Whit Sunday.] as this, when all that calls itself Christendom is commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit, and His abiding influence upon the Church. So I simply wish to gather together the principles that come out of these three verses thus concatenated.

I. We may all, if we will, be full of the Holy Spirit.

If there is a God at all, there is nothing more reasonable than to suppose that He can come into direct contact with the spirits of the men whom He has made. And if that Almighty God is not an Almighty indifference, or a pure devil-if He is love-then there is nothing more certain than that, if He can touch and influence men's hearts towards goodness and His own likeness, He most certainly will.

The probability, which all religion recognises, and in often crude forms tries to set forth, and by superstitious acts to secure, is raised to an absolute certainty, if we believe that Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Truth, speaks truth to us about this matter. For there is nothing more certain than that the characteristic which distinguishes Him from all other teachers, is to be found not only in the fact that He did something for us on the Cross, as well as taught us by His word; but that in His teaching He puts in the forefront, not the prescriptions of our duty, but the promise of God's gift; and ever says to us, 'Open your hearts and the divine influences will flow in and fill you and fit you for all goodness.' The Spirit of God fills the human spirit, as the mysterious influence which we call life permeates and animates the whole body, or as water lies in a cup.

Consider how that metaphor is caught up, and from a different point of view is confirmed, in regard to the completeness which it predicates, by other metaphors of Scripture. What is the meaning of the Baptist's saying, 'He shall baptise you in the Holy Ghost and fire'? Does that not mean a complete immersion in, and submersion under, the cleansing flood? What is the meaning of the Master's own saying, 'Tarry ye. . . till ye be clothed with power from on high'? Does not that mean complete investiture of our nakedness with that heavenly-woven robe? Do not all these emblems declare to us the possibility of a human spirit being charged to the limits of its capacity with a divine influence?

We do not here discuss questions which separate good Christian people from one another in regard of this matter. My object now is not to lay down theological propositions, but to urge upon Christian men the acquirement of an experience which is possible for them. And so, without caring to enter by argument on controversial matters, I desire simply to lay emphasis upon the plain implication of that word, '*filled* with the Holy Ghost.' Does it mean less than the complete subjugation of a man's spirit by the influence of God's Spirit brooding upon him, as the prophet laid himself on the dead child, lip to lip, face to face, beating heart to still heart, limb to limb, and so diffused a supernatural life into the dead? That is an emblem of what all you Christian people may have if you like, and if you will adopt the discipline and observe the conditions which God has plainly laid down.

That fulness will be a growing fulness, for our spirits are capable, if not of infinite, at any rate of indefinite, expansion, and there is no limit known to us, and no limit, I suppose, which will ever be reached, so that we can go no further-to the possible growth of a created spirit that is in touch with God, and is having itself enlarged and elevated and ennobled by that contact. The vessel is elastic, the walls of the cup of our spirit, into which the new wine of the divine Spirit is poured, widen out as the draught is poured into them. The more a man possesses and uses of the life of God, the more is he capable of possessing and the more he will receive. So a continuous expansion in capacity, and a continuous increase in the amount of the divine life possessed, are held out as the happy prerogative and possibility of a Christian soul.

This Stephen had but a very small amount of the clear Christian knowledge that you and I have, but he was leagues ahead of most Christian people in regard to this, that he was 'filled with the Holy Spirit.' Brethren, you can have as much of that Spirit as you want. It is my own fault if my Christian life is not what the Christian lives of some of us, I doubt not, are. 'Filled with the Holy Spirit'! rather a little drop in the bottom of the cup, and all the rest gaping emptiness; rather the fire died down, Pentecostal fire though it be, until there is scarcely anything but a heap of black cinders and grey ashes in your grate, and a little sandwich of flickering flame in one corner; rather the rushing mighty wind died down into all but a dead calm, like that which afflicts sailing-ships in the equatorial regions, when the thick air is deadly still, and the empty sails have not strength even to flap upon the masts; rather the 'river of the water of life' that pours 'out of the throne of God, and of the Lamb,' dried up into a driblet.

That is the condition of many Christian people. I say not of which of us. Let each man settle for himself how that may be. At all events here is the possibility, which may be realised with increasing completeness all through a Christian man's life. We may be filled with the Holy Spirit.

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44)Acts 7:56

Acts

STEPHEN'S VISION

Act. 7:56.

I. The vision of the Son of Man, or the abiding manhood of Jesus.

Stephen's Greek name, and his belonging to the Hellenistic part of the Church, make it probable that he had never seen Jesus during His earthly life. If so, how beautiful that he should thus see and recognise Him! How significant, in any case, is it he should instinctively have taken on his lips that name, 'the Son of Man,' to designate Him whom he saw, through the opened heavens, standing on the right hand of God! We remember that in the same Council-chamber and before the same court, Jesus had lashed the rulers into a paroxysm of fury by declaring, ‘Hereafter ye shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power,’ and now here is one of His followers, almost, as it were, flinging in their teeth the words which they had called ‘blasphemy,’ and witnessing that he, at all events, saw their partial fulfilment. They saw only the roof of the chamber, or, if the Council met in the open court of the Temple, the quivering blue of the Syrian sky; but to him the blue was parted, and a brighter light than that of its lustre was flashed upon his inward eye. His words roused them to an even wilder outburst than those of Jesus had set loose, and with yells of fury, and stopping their ears that they might not hear the blasphemy, they flung themselves on him, unresisting, and dragged him to his doom. Their passion is a measure of the preciousness to the Christian consciousness of that which Stephen saw, and said that he saw.

Whatever more the great designation, ‘Son of Man,’ means, it unmistakably means the embodiment of perfect manhood. Stephen’s vision swept into his soul, as on a mighty wave, the fact, overwhelming if it had not been so transcendently strengthening to the sorely bestead prisoner, that the Jesus whom he had trusted unseen, was still the same Jesus that He had been ‘in the days of His flesh,’ and, with whatever changes, still was ‘found in fashion as a man.’ He still ‘bent on earth a brother’s eye.’ Whatever He had dropped from Him as He ascended, His manhood had not fallen away, and, whatever changes had taken place in His body so as to fit it for its enthronement in the heavens, all that had knit Him to His humble friends on earth was still His. The bonds that united Him and them had not been snapped by being stretched to span the distance between the Council-chamber and the right hand of God. His sympathy still continued. All that had won their hearts was still in Him, and every tender remembrance of His love and leading was transformed into the assurance of a present possession. He was still the Son of Man.

We are all too apt to feel as if the manhood of Jesus was now but a memory, and, though our creed affirms the contrary, yet our faith has difficulty in realising the full force and blessedness of its affirmations. For the Resurrection and Ascension seem to remove Him from close contact with us, and sometimes we feel as if we stretch out groping fingers into the dark and find no warm human hand to grasp. His exaltation seems to withdraw Him from our brotherhood, and the cloud, though it is a cloud of glory, sometimes seems to hide Him from our sight. The thickening veil of increasing centuries becomes more and more difficult for faith to pierce. What Stephen saw was not for him only but for us all, and its significance becomes more and more precious as we drift further and further away in time from the days of the life of Jesus on earth. More and more do we need to make very visible to ourselves this vision, and to lay on our hearts the strong consolation of gazing steadfastly into heaven and seeing there the Son of Man. So we shall feel that He is all to us that He was to those who companied with Him here. So shall we be more ready to believe that 'this same Jesus shall so come in like manner as He went,' and that till He come, He is knit to us and we to Him, by the bonds of a common manhood.

II. The vision of the Son of Man at the right hand of God, or the glory of the Man Jesus.

We will not discuss curious questions which may be asked in connection with Stephen's vision, such as whether the glorified humanity of Jesus implies His special presence in a locality; but will rather try to grasp its bearings on topics more directly related to more important matters than dim speculations on points concerning which confident affirmations are sure to be wrong. Whether the representation implies locality or not, it is clear that the deepest meaning of the expression 'the right hand of God,' is the energy of His unlimited power, and that, therefore, the deepest meaning of the expression 'to be at His right hand,' is wielding the might of the divine Omnipotence. The vision is but the visible confirmation of Jesus' words, 'All power is given unto Me in heaven and on earth.'

It is to be taken into account that Scripture usually represents the Christ as seated at the right hand of God, and that posture, taken in conjunction with that place, indicates the completion of His work, the majestic calm of His repose, like that creative rest, which did not follow the creative work because the Worker was weary, but because He had fulfilled His ideal. God rested because His work was finished, and was 'very good.' So Jesus sits, because He, too, has finished His work on earth. 'When,' and because 'He had by Himself purged our sins, He sat down on the right hand of God.'

Further, that place at the right hand of God certifies that He is the Judge.

Further, it is a blessed vision for His children, as being the sure pledge of their glory.

It is a glorious revelation of the capabilities of sinless human nature.

It makes heaven habitable for us.

‘I go to prepare a place for you.’ An emigrant does not feel a stranger in new country, if his elder brother has gone before him, and waits to meet him when he lands. The presence of Jesus makes that dim, heavenly state, which is so hard to imagine, and from which we often feel that even its glories repel, or, at least, do not attract, home to those who love Him. To be where He is, and to be as He is- that is heaven.

III. The vision of the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, or the ever-ready help of the glorified Jesus.

The divergence of the vision from the usual representation of the attitude of Jesus is not the least precious of its elements. Stephen saw Him ‘standing,’ as if He had risen to His feet to see His servant’s need and was preparing to come to his help.

What a rush of new strength for victorious endurance would flood Stephen’s soul as he beheld his Lord thus, as it were, starting to His feet in eagerness to watch and to succour! He looks down from amid the glory, and His calm repose does not involve passive indifference to His servant’s sufferings. Into it comes full knowledge of all that they bear for Him, and His rest is not the negation of activity on their behalf, but its intensest energy. Just as one of the Gospels ends with a twofold picture, which at first sight seems to draw a sad distinction between the Lord ‘received up into heaven and set down at the right hand of God,’ and His servants left below, who ‘went everywhere, preaching the word,’ but of which the two halves are fused together by the next words, ‘the Lord also working with them,’ so Stephen’s vision brought together the glorified Lord and His servant, and filled the martyr’s soul with the fact that He not only ‘worked,’ but suffered with those who suffered for His sake.

That vision is a transient revelation of an eternal fact. Jesus knows and shares in all that affects His servants. He stands in the attitude to help, and He wields the power of God. He is, as the prophet puts it, ‘the Arm of the Lord,’ and the cry, ‘Awake, O Arm of the Lord!’ is never unanswered. He helps His servants by actually directing the course of Providence for their sakes. He helps by wielding the forces of nature on their behalf. He ‘rebukes kings for their sake, saying, Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm.’ He helps by breathing His own life and strength into them. He helps by disclosing to them the vision of Himself. He helps even when, like Stephen, they are apparently left to the murderous hate of their enemies, for what better help could any of His followers get from Him than that He should, as Stephen prayed that He would, receive their spirit, and ‘so give His beloved sleep’? Blessed they whose lives are lighted by that Vision, and whose deaths are such a falling on sleep!

45)Acts 7:58

Acts

THE YOUNG SAUL AND THE AGED PAUL 1

Act. 7:58. - Phm. 1:9.

A far greater difference than that which was measured by years separated the young Saul from the aged Paul. By years, indeed, the difference was, perhaps, not so great as the words might suggest, for Jewish usage extended the term of youth farther than we do, and began age sooner. No doubt, too, Paul’s life had aged him fast, and probably there were not thirty years between the two periods. But the difference between him and himself at the beginning and the end of his career was a gulf; and his life was not evolution, but revolution.

At the beginning you see a brilliant young Pharisee, Gamaliel’s promising pupil, advanced above many who were his equals in his own religion, as he says himself; living after its straitest sect, and eager to have the smallest part in what seemed to him the righteous slaying of one of the followers of the blaspheming Nazarene. At the end he was himself one of these followers. He had cast off, as folly, the wisdom which took him so much pains to acquire. He had turned his back upon all the brilliant prospects of distinction which were opening to him. He had broken with countrymen and kindred. And what had he made of it? He had been persecuted, hunted, assailed by every weapon that his old companions could fashion or wield; he is a solitary man, laden with many cares, and accustomed to look perils and death in the face; he is a prisoner, and in a year or two more he will be a martyr. If he were an apostate and a renegade, it was not for what he could get by it.

What made the change? The vision of Jesus Christ. If we think of the transformation on Saul, its causes and its outcome, we shall get lessons which I would fain press upon your hearts now. Do you wonder that I would urge on you just such a life as that of this man as your highest good?

I. I would note, then, first, that faith in Jesus Christ will transform and ennoble any life.

It has been customary of late years, amongst people who do not like miracles, and do not believe in sudden changes of character, to allege that Paul's conversion was but the appearance, on the surface, of an underground process that had been going on ever since he kept the witnesses' clothes. Modern critics know a great deal more about the history of Paul's conversion than Paul did. For to him there was no consciousness of undermining, but the change was instantaneous. He left Jerusalem a bitter persecutor, exceeding mad against the followers of the Nazarene, thinking that Jesus was a blasphemer and an impostor, and His disciples pestilent vermin, to be harried off the face of the earth. He entered Damascus a lowly disciple of that Christ. His conversion was not an underground process that had been silently sapping the foundations of his life; it was an explosion. And what caused it? What was it that came on that day on the Damascus road, amid the blinding sunshine of an Eastern noontide? The vision of Jesus Christ. An overwhelming conviction flooded his soul that He whom he had taken to be an impostor, richly deserving the Cross that He endured, was living in glory, and was revealing Himself to Saul then and there. That truth crumbled his whole past into nothing; and he stood there trembling and astonished, like a man the ruins of whose house have fallen about his ears. He bowed himself to the vision. He surrendered at discretion without a struggle. ‘Immediately,’ says he, ‘I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,’ and when he said ‘Lord, Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?’ he flung open the gates of the fortress for the Conqueror to come in. The vision of Christ reversed his judgments, transformed his character, revolutionised his life.

That initial impulse operated through all the rest of his career. Hearken to him: ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. To me to live is Christ. Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; or whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Living or dying, we are the Lord’s.’ ‘We labour that whether present or absent, we may be accepted of Him.’ The transforming agency was the vision of Christ, and the bowing of the man’s whole nature before the seen Saviour.

Need I recall to you how noble a life issued from that fountain? I am sure that I need do no more than mention in a word or two the wondrous activity, flashing like a flame of fire from East to West, and everywhere kindling answering flames, the noble self-oblivion, the continual communion with God and the Unseen, and all the other great virtues and nobleness which came from such sources as these. I need only, I am sure, remind you of them, and draw this lesson, that the secret of a transforming and noble life is to be found in faith in Jesus Christ. The vision that changed Paul is as available for you and me. For it is all a mistake to suppose that the essence of it is the miraculous appearance that flashed upon the Apostle’s eyes. He speaks of it himself, in one of his letters, in other language, when he says, ‘It pleased God to reveal His Son *in* me.’ And that revelation in all its fulness, in all its sweetness, in all its transforming and ennobling power, is offered to every one of us. For the eye of faith is no less gifted with the power of direct and certain vision-yea! is even more gifted with this-than is the eye of sense. ‘If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.’ Christ is revealed to each one of us as really, as veritably, and the revelation may become as strong an impulse and motive in our lives as ever it was to the Apostle on the Damascus road. What is wanted is not revelation, but the bowed will-not the heavenly vision, but obedience to the vision. I suppose that most of you think that you believe all that about Jesus Christ, which transformed

Gamaliel’s pupil into Christ’s disciple. And what has it done for you? In many cases, nothing. Be sure of this, dear young friends, that the shortest way to a life adorned with all grace, with all nobility, fragrant with all goodness, and permanent as that life which does the will of God must clearly be, is this, to bow before the seen Christ, seen in His word, and speaking to your hearts, and to take His yoke and carry His burden. Then you will build upon what will stand, and make your days noble and your lives stable. If you build on anything else, the structure will come down with a crash some day, and bury you in its ruins. Surely it is better to learn the worthlessness of a non-Christian life, in the light of His merciful face, when there is yet time to change our course, than to see it by the fierce light of the great White Throne set for judgment. We must each of us learn it here or there.

II. Faith in Christ will make a joyful life, whatever its circumstances.

I have said that, judged by the standard of the Exchange, or by any of the standards which men usually apply to success in life, this life of the Apostle was a failure. We know, without my dwelling more largely upon it, what he gave up. We know what, to outward appearance, he gained by his Christianity. You remember, perhaps, how he himself speaks about the external aspects of his life in one place, where he says ‘Even unto this present hour we both hunger and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling-place, and labour, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it; being defamed, we entreat. We are made as the filth of the world, and as the offscouring of all things unto this day.’

That was one side of it. Was that all? This man had that within him which enabled him to triumph over all trials. There is nothing more remarkable about him than the undaunted courage, the unimpaired elasticity of spirit, the buoyancy of gladness, which bore him high upon the waves of the troubled sea in which he had to swim. If ever there was a man that had a bright light burning within him, in the deepest darkness, it was that little weather-beaten Jew, whose ‘bodily presence was weak, and his speech contemptible.’ And what was it that made him master of circumstances, and enabled him to keep sunshine in his heart when winter bound all the world around him? What made this bird sing in a darkened cage? One thing-the continual presence, consciously with Him by faith, of that Christ who had revolutionised his life, and who continued to bless and to gladden it. I have quoted his description of his external condition. Let me quote two or three words that indicate how he took all that sea of troubles and of sorrows that poured its waves and its billows over him. ‘In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.’ ‘As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation aboundeth also by Christ.’ ‘For which cause we faint not, but though our outward man perish, yet our inward man is renewed day by day.’ ‘Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.’ ‘I have learned in whatsoever state I am therewith to be content.’ ‘As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing all things.’

There is the secret of blessedness, my friends; there is the fountain of perpetual joy. Cling to Christ, set His will on the throne of your hearts, give the reins of your life and of your character into His keeping, and nothing ‘that is at enmity with joy’ can either ‘abolish or destroy’ the calm blessedness of your spirits.

You will have much to suffer; you will have something to give up. Your life may look, to men whose tastes have been vulgarised by the glaring brightnesses of this vulgar world, but grey and sombre, but it will have in it the calm abiding blessedness which is more than joy, and is diviner and more precious than the tumultuous transports of gratified sense or successful ambition. Christ is peace, and He gives His peace to us; and then He gives a joy which does not break but enhances peace. We are all tempted to look for our gladness in creatures, each of which satisfies but a part of our desire. But no man can be truly blessed who has to find many contributories to make up his blessedness. That which makes us rich must be, not a multitude of precious stones, howsoever precious they may be, but one Pearl of great price; the one Christ who is our only joy. And He says to us that He gives us Himself, if we behold Him and bow to Him, that His joy might remain in us, and that our joy might be full, while all other gladnesses are partial and transitory. Faith in Christ makes life blessed. The writer of Ecclesiastes asked the question which the world has been asking ever since: ‘Who knoweth what is good for a man in this life, all the days of this vain life which he passeth as a shadow?’ You young people are asking, ‘Who will show us any good?’ Here is the answer-Faith in Christ and obedience to Him; that is the good part which no man taketh from us. Dear young friend, have you made it yours?

III. Faith in Christ produces a life which bears being looked back upon.

In a later Epistle than that from which my second text is taken, we get one of the most lovely pictures that was ever drawn, albeit it is unconsciously drawn, of a calm old age, very near the gate of death; and looking back with a quiet heart over all the path of life. I am not going to preach to you, dear friends, in the flush of your early youth, a gospel which is only to be recommended because it is good to die by, but it will do even you, at the beginning, no harm to realise for a moment that the end will come, and that retrospect will take the place in your lives which hope and anticipation fill now. And I ask you what you expect to feel and say then?

What did Paul say? ‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.’ He was not self-righteous; but it is possible to have lived a life which, as the world begins to fade, vindicates itself as having been absolutely right in its main trend, and to feel that the dawning light of Eternity confirms the choice that we made. And I pray you to ask yourselves, ‘Is my life of that sort?’ How much of it would bear the scrutiny which will have to come, and which in Paul’s case was so quiet and calm? He had had a stormy day, many a thundercloud had darkened the sky, many a tempest had swept across the plain; but now, as the evening draws on, the whole West is filled with a calm amber light, and all across the plain, right away to the grey East, he sees that he has been led by, and has been willing to walk in, the right way to the ‘City of habitation.’ Would that be your experience if the last moment came now?

There will be, for the best of us, much sense of failure and shortcoming when we look back on our lives. But whilst some of us will have to say, ‘I have played the fool and erred exceedingly,’ it is possible for each of us to lay himself down in peace and sleep, awaiting a glorious rising again and a crown of righteousness.

Dear young friends, it is for you to choose whether your past, when you summon it up before you, will look like a wasted wilderness, or like a garden of the Lord. And though, as I have said, there will always be much sense of failure and shortcoming, yet that need not disturb the calm retrospect; for whilst memory sees the sins, faith can grasp the Saviour, and quietly take leave of life, saying, ‘I know in whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him against that day.’

So I press upon you all this one truth, that faith in Jesus Christ will transform, will ennoble, will make joyous your lives whilst you live, and will give you a quiet heart in the retrospect when you come to die. Begin right, dear young friends. You will never find it so easy to take any decisive step, and most of all this chiefest step, as you do to-day. You will get lean and less flexible as you get older. You will get set in your ways. Habits will twine their tendrils round you, and hinder your free movement. The truth of the Gospel will become commonplace by familiarity. Associations and companions will have more and more power over you; and you will be stiffened as an old tree-trunk is stiffened. You cannot count on to-morrow; be wise to-day. Begin this year aright. Why should you not now see the Christ and welcome Him? I pray that every one of us may behold Him and fall before Him with the cry, ‘Lord! what wilt Thou have me to do?’

1 To the young.

46)Acts 7:59-60

Acts

THE DEATH OF THE MASTER AND THE DEATH OF THE SERVANT

Act. 7:59 - Act. 7:60.

This is the only narrative in the New Testament of a Christian martyrdom or death. As a rule, Scripture is supremely indifferent to what becomes of the people with whom it is for a time concerned. As long as the man is the organ of the divine Spirit he is somewhat; as soon as that ceases to speak through him he drops into insignificance. So this same Acts of the Apostles-if I may so say- kills off James the brother of John in a parenthesis; and his is the only other martyrdom that it concerns itself even so much as to mention.

Why, then, this exceptional detail about the martyrdom of Stephen? For two reasons: because it is the first of a series, and the Acts of the Apostles always dilates upon the first of each set of things which it describes, and condenses about the others. But more especially, I think, because if we come to look at the story, it is not so much an account of Stephen's death as of Christ's power in Stephen's death. And the theme of this book is not the acts of the Apostles, but the acts of the risen Lord, in and for His Church.

There is no doubt but that this narrative is modelled upon the story of our Lord's Crucifixion, and the two incidents, in their similarities and in their differences, throw a flood of light upon one another.

I shall therefore look at our subject now with constant reference to that other greater death upon which it is based. It is to be observed that the two sayings on the lips of the proto-martyr Stephen are recorded for us in their original form on the lips of Christ, in *Luke's* Gospel, which makes a still further link of connection between the two narratives.

So, then, my purpose now is merely to take this incident as it lies before us, to trace in it the analogies and the differences between the death of the Master and the death of the servant, and to draw from it some thoughts as to what it is possible for a Christian's death to become, when Christ's presence is felt in it.

I. Consider, in general terms, this death as the last act of imitation to Christ.

The resemblance between our Lord's last moments and Stephen's has been thought to have been the work of the narrator, and, consequently, to cast some suspicion upon the veracity of the narrative. I accept the correspondence, I believe it was intentional, but I shift the intention from the writer to the actor, and I ask why it should not have been that the dying martyr should consciously, and of set purpose, have made his death conformable to his Master's death? Why should not the dying martyr have sought to put himself [as the legend tells one of the other Apostles in outward form sought to do] in Christ’s attitude, and to die as He died?

Remember, that in all probability Stephen died on Calvary. It was the ordinary place of execution, and, as many of you may know, recent investigations have led many to conclude that a little rounded knoll outside the city wall-not a ‘green hill,’ but still ‘outside a city wall,’ and which still bears a lingering tradition of connection with Him-was probably the site of that stupendous event. It was the place of stoning, or of public execution, and there in all probability, on the very ground where Christ’s Cross was fixed, His first martyr saw ‘the heavens opened and Christ standing on the right hand of God.’ If these were the associations of the place, what more natural, and even if they were not, what more natural, than that the martyr’s death should be shaped after his Lord’s?

Is it not one of the great blessings, in some sense the greatest of the blessings, which we owe to the Gospel, that in that awful solitude where no other example is of any use to us, His pattern may still gleam before us? Is it not something to feel that as life reaches its highest, most poignant and exquisite delight and beauty in the measure in which it is made an imitation of Jesus, so for each of us death may lose its most poignant and exquisite sting and sorrow, and become something almost sweet, if it be shaped after the pattern and by the power of His? We travel over a lonely waste at last. All clasped hands are unclasped; and we set out on the solitary, though it be ‘the common, road into the great darkness.’ But, blessed be His Name! ‘the Breaker is gone up before us,’ and across the waste there are footprints that we

‘Seeing, may take heart again.’

The very climax and apex of the Christian imitation of Christ may be that we shall bear the image of His death, and be like Him then.

Is it not a strange thing that generations of martyrs have gone to the stake with their hearts calm and their spirits made constant by the remembrance of that Calvary where Jesus died with more of trembling reluctance, shrinking, and apparent bewildered unmanning than many of the weakest of His followers? Is it not a strange thing that the death which has thus been the source of composure, and strength, and heroism to thousands, and has lost none of its power of being so to-day, was the death of a Man who shrank from the bitter cup, and that cried in that mysterious darkness, ‘My God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me?’

Dear brethren, unless with one explanation of the reason for His shrinking and agony, Christ’s death is less heroic than that of some other martyrs, who yet drew all their courage from Him.

How come there to be in Him, at one moment, calmness unmoved, and heroic self-oblivion, and at the next, agony, and all but despair? I know only one explanation, ‘The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.’ And when He died, shrinking and trembling, and feeling bewildered and forsaken, it was your sins and mine that weighed Him down. The servant whose death was conformed to his Master’s had none of these experiences because he was only a martyr.

The Lord had them, because He was the Sacrifice for the whole world.

II. We have here, next, a Christian’s death as being the voluntary entrusting of the spirit to Christ.

‘They stoned Stephen.’ Now, our ordinary English idea of the manner of the Jewish punishment of stoning, is a very inadequate and mistaken one. It did not consist merely in a miscellaneous rabble throwing stones at the criminal, but there was a solemn and appointed method of execution which is preserved for us in detail in the Rabbinical books. And from it we gather that the *modus operandi* was this. The blasphemer was taken to a certain precipitous rock, the height of which was prescribed as being equal to that of two men. The witnesses by whose testimony he had been condemned had to cast him over, and if he survived the fall it was their task to roll upon him a great stone, of which the weight is prescribed in the Talmud as being as much as two men could lift. If he lived after that, then others took part in the punishment.

Now, at some point in that ghastly tragedy, probably, we may suppose as they were hurling him over the rock, the martyr lifts his voice in this prayer of our text.

As they were stoning him he ‘called upon’-not *God*, as our Authorised Version has supplied the wanting word, but, as is obvious from the context and from the remembrance of the vision, and from the language of the following supplication, ‘called upon *Jesus*, saying, Lord Jesus! receive my spirit.’

I do not dwell at any length upon the fact that here we have a distinct instance of prayer to Jesus Christ, a distinct recognition, in the early days of His Church, of the highest conceptions of His person and nature, so as that a dying man turns to Him, and commits his soul into His hands. Passing this by, I ask you to think of the resemblance, and the difference, between this intrusting of the spirit by Stephen to his Lord, and the committing of His spirit to the Father by His dying Son. Christ on the Cross speaks to God; Stephen, on Calvary, speaks, as I suppose, to Jesus Christ. Christ, on the Cross, says, ‘I commit.’ Stephen says, ‘Receive,’ or rather, ‘Take.’ The one phrase carries in it something of the notion that our Lord died not because He must, but because He would; that He was active in His death; that He chose to summon death to do its work upon Him; that He ‘yielded up His spirit,’ as one of the Evangelists has it, pregnantly and significantly. But Stephen says, ‘Take!’ as knowing that it must be his Lord’s power that should draw his spirit out of the coil of horror around him. So the one dying word has strangely compacted in it authority and submission; and the other dying word is the word of a simple waiting servant. The Christ says, ‘I commit.’ ‘I have power to lay down My life, and I have power to take it again.’ Stephen says, ‘Take my spirit,’ as longing to be away from the weariness and the sorrow and the pain and all the hell of hatred that was seething and boiling round about him, but yet knowing that he had to wait the Master’s will.

So from the language I gather large truths, truths which unquestionably were not present to the mind of the dying man, but are all the more conspicuous because they were unconsciously expressed by him, as to the resemblance and the difference between the death of the martyr, done to death by cruel hands, and the death of the atoning Sacrifice who gave Himself up to die for our sins.

Here we have, in this dying cry, the recognition of Christ as the Lord of life and death. Here we have the voluntary and submissive surrender of the spirit to Him. So, in a very real sense, the martyr's death becomes a sacrifice, and he too dies not merely because he must, but he accepts the necessity, and finds blessedness in it. We need not be passive in death; we need not, when it comes to our turn to die, cling desperately to the last vanishing skirts of life. We may yield up our being, and pour it out as a libation; as the Apostle has it, 'If I be offered as a drink-offering upon the sacrifice of your faith, I joy and rejoice.' Oh! brethren, to die *like* Christ, to die yielding oneself to Him!

And then in these words there is further contained the thought coming gleaming out like a flash of light into some murky landscape-of passing into perennial union with Him. 'Take my spirit,' says the dying man; 'that is all I want. I see Thee standing at the right hand. For what hast Thou started to Thy feet, from the eternal repose of Thy session at the right hand of God the Father Almighty? To help and succour me. And dost Thou succour me when Thou dost let these cruel hands cast me from the rock and bruise me with heavy stones? Yes, Thou dost. For the highest form of Thy help is to take my spirit, and to let me be with Thee.'

Christ delivers His servant from death when He leads the servant into and through death. Brothers, can you look forward thus, and trust yourselves, living or dying, to that Master who is near us amidst the coil of human troubles and sorrows, and sweetly draws our spirits, as a mother her child to her bosom, into His own arms when He sends us death? Is that what it will be to you?

III. Then, still further, there are other words here which remind us of the final triumph of an all-forbearing charity.

Stephen had been cast from the rock, had been struck with the heavy stone. Bruised and wounded by it, he strangely survives, strangely somehow or other struggles to his knees even though desperately wounded, and, gathering all his powers together at the impulse of an undying love, prays his last words and cries, 'Lord Jesus! Lay not this sin to their charge!'

It is an echo, as I have been saying, of other words, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' An echo, and yet an independent tone! The one cries 'Father!' the other invokes the 'Lord.' The one says, 'They know not what they do'; the other never thinks of reading men's motives, of apportioning their criminality, of discovering the secrets of their hearts. It was fitting that the Christ, before whom all these blind instruments of a mighty design stood patent and naked to their deepest depths, should say, 'They know not what they do.' It would have been unfitting that the servant, who knew no more of his fellows' heart than could be guessed from their actions, should have offered such a plea in his prayer for their forgiveness.

In the very humiliation of the Cross, Christ speaks as knowing the hidden depths of men's souls, and therefore fitted to be their Judge, and now His servant's prayer is addressed to Him as actually being so.

Somehow or other, within a very few years of the time when our Lord dies, the Church has come to the distinctest recognition of *His* Divinity to whom the martyr prays; to the distinctest recognition of *Him* as the Lord of life and death whom the martyr asks to take his spirit, and to the clearest perception of the fact that He is the Judge of the whole earth by whose acquittal men shall be acquitted, and by whose condemnation they shall be condemned.

Stephen knew that Christ was the Judge. He knew that in two minutes he would be standing at Christ's judgment bar. His prayer was not, 'Lay not my sins to my charge,' but 'Lay not this sin to their charge.' Why did he not ask forgiveness for himself? Why was he not thinking about the judgment that he was going to meet so soon? He had done all that long ago. He had no fear about that judgment for himself, and so when the last hour struck, he was at leisure of heart and mind to pray for his persecutors, and to think of his Judge without a tremor. Are you? If you were as near the edge as Stephen was, would it be wise for you to be interceding for other people's forgiveness? The answer to that question is the answer to this other one,- have you sought your pardon already, and got it at the hands of Jesus Christ?

IV. One word is all that I need say about the last point of analogy and contrast here-the serene passage into rest: 'When he had said this he fell asleep.'

The New Testament scarcely ever speaks of a Christian's death as death but as sleep, and with other similar phrases. But that expression, familiar and all but universal as it is in the Epistles, in reference to the death of believers, is never in a single instance employed in reference to the death of Jesus Christ. He did die that you and I may live. His death was death indeed-He endured not merely the physical fact, but that which is its sting, the consciousness of sin. And He died that the sting might be blunted, and all its poison exhausted upon Him. So the ugly thing is sleeked and smoothed; and the foul form changes into the sweet semblance of a sleep-bringing angel. Death is gone. The physical fact remains, but all the misery of it, the essential bitterness and the poison of it is all sucked out of it, and it is turned into 'he fell asleep,' as a tired child on its mother's lap, as a weary man after long toil.

'Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.'

Death is but sleep now, because Christ has died, and that sleep is restful, conscious, perfect life.

Look at these two pictures, the agony of the one, the calm triumph of the other, and see that the martyr's falling asleep was possible because the Christ had died before. And do you commit the keeping of your souls to Him now, by true faith; and then, living you may have Him with you, and, dying, a vision of His presence bending down to succour and to save, and when you are dead, a life of rest conjoined with intensest activity. To sleep in Jesus is to awake in His likeness, and to be satisfied.

47)Acts 8:1-17

Acts

SEED SCATTERED AND TAKING ROOT

Act. 8:1 - Act. 8:17.

The note of time in Act. 8:1 is probably to be rendered as in the Revised Version, 'on that day.' The appetite for blood roused by Stephen's martyrdom at once sought for further victims. Thus far the persecutors had been the rulers, and the persecuted the Church's leaders; but now the populace are the hunters, and the whole Church the prey. The change marks an epoch. Luke does not care to make much of the persecution, which is important to him chiefly for its bearing on the spread of the Church's message. It helped to diffuse the Gospel, and that is why he tells of it. But before proceeding to narrate how it did so, he gives us a picture of things as they stood at the beginning of the assault.

Three points are noted: the flight of the Church except the Apostles, the funeral of Stephen, and Saul's eager search for the disciples. We need not press 'all,' as if it were to be taken with mathematical accuracy. Some others besides the Apostles may have remained, but the community was broken up. They fled, as Christ had bid them do, if persecuted in one city. Brave faithfulness goes with prudent self-preservation, and a valuable 'part of valour is discretion.' But the disciples who fled were not necessarily less courageous than the Apostles who remained, nor were the latter less prudent than the brethren who fled. For *noblesse oblige*; high position demands high virtues, and the officers should be the last to leave a wreck. The Apostles, no doubt, felt it right to hold together, and preserve a centre to which the others might return when the storm had blown itself out.

In remarkable contrast with the scattering Church are the ‘devout men’ who reverently buried the martyr. They were not disciples, but probably Hellenistic Jews [Act. 2:5]; perhaps from the synagogue whose members had disputed with Stephen and had dragged him to the council. His words or death may have touched them, as many a time the martyr’s fire has lighted others to the martyr’s faith. Stephen was like Jesus in his burial by non-disciples, as he had been in his death.

The eager zeal of the young Pharisee brought new severity into the persecution, in his hunting out his victims in their homes, and in his including women among his prisoners. There is nothing so cruel as so-called religious zeal. So Luke lifts the curtain for a moment, and in that glimpse of the whirling tumult of the city we see the three classes, of the brave and prudent disciples, ready to flee or to stand and suffer as duty called; the good men who shrunk from complicity with a bloodthirsty mob, and were stirred to sympathy with his victims; and the zealot, who with headlong rage hated his brother for the love of God. But the curtain drops, and Luke turns to his true theme. He picks up the threads again in Act. 8:4, telling of the dispersal of the disciples, with the significant addition of their occupation when scattered,-’preaching the word.’

The violent hand of the persecutor acted as the scattering hand of the sower. It flung the seeds broadcast, and wherever they fell they sprouted. These fugitives were not officials, nor were they commissioned by the Apostles to preach. Without any special command or position, they followed the instincts of believing hearts, and, as they carried their faith with them, they spoke of it wherever they found themselves. A Christian will be impelled to speak of Christ if his personal hold of Him is vital. He should need no ecclesiastical authorisation for that. It is riot every believer’s duty to get into a pulpit, but it *is* his duty to ‘preach Christ.’ The scattering of the disciples was meant by men to put out the fire, but, by Christ, to spread it. A volcanic explosion flings burning matter over a wide area.

Luke takes up one of the lines of expansion, in his narrative of Philip's doings in Samaria, which he puts first because Jesus had indicated Samaria first among the regions beyond Judaea [Act. 1:8]. Philip's name comes second in the list of deacons [Act. 6:5], probably in anticipation of his work in Samaria. How unlike the forecast by the Apostles was the actual course of things! They had destined the seven for purely 'secular' work, and regarded preaching the word as their own special engagement. But Stephen saw and proclaimed more clearly than they did the passing away of Temple and ritual; and Philip, on his own initiative, and apparently quite unconscious of the great stride forward that he was taking, was the first to carry the gospel torch into the regions beyond. The Church made Philip a 'deacon,' but Christ made him an 'evangelist'; and an evangelist he continued, long after he had ceased to be a deacon in Jerusalem [Act. 21:8].

Observe, too, that, as soon as Stephen is taken away, Philip rises up to take his place. The noble army of witnesses never wants recruits. Its Captain sends men to the front in unbroken succession, and they are willing to occupy posts of danger because He bids them. Probably Philip fled to Samaria for convenience' sake, but, being there, he probably recalled Christ's instructions in Act. 1:8, repealing His prohibition in Mat. 10:5. What a different world it would be, if it was true of Christians now that they 'went down into the city of So-and-So and proclaimed Christ'! Many run to and fro, but some of them leave their Christianity at home, or lock it up safely in their travelling trunks.

Jerusalem had just expelled the disciples, and would fain have crushed the Gospel; despised Samaria received it with joy. 'A foolish nation' was setting Israel an example [Deu. 32:21; Rom. 10:19]. The Samaritan woman had a more spiritual conception of the Messiah than the run of Jews had, and her countrymen seem to have been ready to receive the word. Is not the faith of our mission converts often a rebuke to us?

But the Gospel met new foes as well as new friends on the new soil. Simon the sorcerer, probably a Jew or a Samaritan, would have been impossible on Jewish ground, but was a characteristic product of that age in the other parts of the Roman empire. Just as, to-day, people who are weary of Christianity are playing with Buddhism, it was fashionable in that day of unrest to trifle with Eastern magic-mongers; and, of course, demand created supply, and where there was a crowd of willing dupes, there soon came to be a crop of profit-seeking deceivers. Very characteristically, the dupes claimed more for the deceiver than he did for himself. He probably could perform some simple chemical experiments and conjuring tricks, and had a store of what sounded to ignorant people profound teaching about deep mysteries, and gave forth enigmatical utterances about his own greatness. An accomplished charlatan will leave much to be inferred from nods and hints, and his admirers will generally spin even more out of them than he meant. So the Samaritans bettered Simon's 'some great one' into 'that power of God which is called great,' and saw in him some kind of emanation of divinity.

The quack is great till the true teacher comes, and then he dwindles. Simon had a bitter pill to swallow when he saw this new man stealing his audience, and doing things which he, with his sorceries, knew that he only pretended to do. Luke points very clearly to the likeness and difference between Simon and Philip by using the same word ['gave heed'] in regard to the Samaritan's attitude to both, while in reference to Philip it was 'the things spoken by' him, and in reference to Simon it was himself to which they attended. The one preached Christ, the other himself; the one 'amazed' with 'sorceries,' the other brought good tidings and hid himself, and his message called, not for stupid, open-mouthed astonishment, but for belief and obedience to the name of Jesus. The whole difference between the religion of Jesus and the superstitions which the world calls religions, is involved in the significant contrast, so inartificially drawn.

'Simon also himself believed.' Probably there was in his action a good deal of swimming with the stream, in the hope of being able to divert it; but, also, he may have been all the more struck by Philip's miracles, because he knew a real one, by reason of his experience of sham ones. At any rate, neither Philip nor Luke drew a distinction between his belief and that of the Samaritans; and, as in their cases, his baptism followed on his profession of belief. But he seems not to have got beyond the point of wondering at the miracles, as it is emphatically said that he did even after his baptism. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but was more interested in studying Philip to find out how he did the miracles than in listening to his teaching.

Such an imperfect belief had no transforming power, and left him the same man as before, as was soon miserably manifest.

The news of Philip’s great step forward reached the Apostles by some unrecorded means. It is not stated that Philip reported his action, as if to superiors whose authorisation was necessary. More probably the information filtered through other channels. At all events, sending a deputation was natural, and needs not to be regarded as either a sign of suspicion or an act necessary in order to supplement imperfections inherent in the fact that Philip was not an Apostle. The latter meaning has been read-not to say forced-into the incident; but Luke’s language does not support it. It was not because they thought that the Samaritans were not admissible to the full privileges of Christians without Apostolic acts, but because they ‘heard that Samaria had received the word,’ that the Apostles sent Peter and John.

The Samaritans had not yet received the Holy Ghost-that is, the special gifts, such as those of Pentecost. That fact proves that baptism is not necessarily and inseparably connected with the gift of the Spirit; and Act. 10:44, Act. 10:47, proves that the Spirit may be given before baptism. As little does this incident prove that the imposition of Apostolic hands was necessary in order to the impartation of the Spirit. Luke, at any rate, did not think so; for he tells how Ananias’ hand laid on the blind Saul conveyed the gift to him. The laying on of hands is a natural, eloquent symbol, but it was no prerogative of the Apostles [Act. 10:17; 1Ti. 4:14].

The Apostles came down to Samaria to rejoice in the work which their Lord had commanded, and which had been begun without their help, to welcome the new brethren, to give them further instruction, and to knit closely the bonds of unity between the new converts and the earlier ones. But that they came to bestow spiritual gifts which, without them, could not have been imparted, is imported into, not deduced from, the simple narrative of Luke.

48)Acts 8:21

SIMON THE SORCERER

Act. 8:21.

The era of the birth of Christianity was one of fermenting opinion and decaying faith. Then, as now, men's minds were seething and unsettled, and that unrest which is the precursor of great changes in intellectual and spiritual habitudes affected the civilised world. Such a period is ever one of predisposition to superstition. The one true bond which unites God and man being obscured, and to the consciousness of many snapped, men's minds become the prey of visionary terrors. Demand creates supply, and the magician and miracle-worker, the possessor of mysterious ways into the Unknown, is never far off at such a time. Partly deceived and partly deceiving, he is as sure a sign of the lack of profound religious conviction and of the presence of unsatisfied religious aspirations in men's souls, as the stormy petrel or the floating seaweed is of a tempest on the seas.

So we find the early preachers of Christianity coming into frequent contact with pretenders to magical powers. Sadly enough, they were mostly Jews, who prostituted their clearer knowledge to personal ends, and having tacked on to it some theosophic rubbish which they had learned from Alexandria, or mysticism which had filtered to them from the East, or magic arts from Phrygia, went forth, the only missionaries that Judaism sent out, to bewilder and torture men's minds. What a fall from Israel's destination, and what a lesson for the stewards of the 'oracles of God'!

Of such a sort were Elymas, the sorcerer whom Paul found squatting at the ear of the Roman Governor of Cyprus; the magicians at Ephesus; the vagabond Jews exorcists, who with profitable eclecticism, as they thought, tried to add the name of Jesus as one more spell to their conjurations; and, finally, this Simon the sorcerer. Established in Samaria, he had been juggling and conjuring and seeing visions, and professing to be a great mysterious personality, and had more than permitted the half-heathen Samaritans, who seem to have had more religious susceptibility and less religious knowledge than the Jews, and so were a prepared field for all such pretenders, to think of him as in some sense an incarnation of God, and perhaps to set him up as a rival or caricature of Him who in the neighbouring Judaea was being spoken of as the power of God, God manifest in the flesh.

To the city thus moved comes no Apostle, but a Christian man who begins to preach, and by miracles and teaching draws many souls to Christ.

The story of Simon Magus in his attitude to the Gospel is a very striking and instructive one. It presents for our purpose now mainly three points to which I proceed to refer.

I. An instance of a wholly unreal, because inoperative, faith.

‘He believed,’ says the narrative, and believing was baptized. It is worth noting, in passing, how the profession of faith without anything more was considered by the Early Church sufficient. But obviously his was no true faith. The event showed that it was not.

What was it which made his faith thus unreal?

It rested wholly on the miracles and signs; he ‘wondered’ when he saw them. Of course, miracles were meant to lead to faith; but if they did not lead on to a deeper sense of one’s own evil and need, and so to a spiritual apprehension, then they were of no use.

The very beginning of the story points to the one bond that unites to God, as being the sense of need and the acceptance with heart and will of the testimony of Jesus Christ. Such a disposition is shown in the Samaritans, who make a contrast with Simon in that they believed Philip *preaching*, while Simon believed him *working miracles*. The true place of miracles is to attract attention, to prepare to listen to the word. They are only introductory. A faith may be founded on them, but, on the other hand, the impressions which they produce may be evanescent. How subordinate then, their place at the most! And the one thing which avails is a living contact of heart and soul with Jesus Christ.

Again, Simon’s belief was purely an affair of the understanding. We are not to suppose, I think, that he merely believed in Philip as a miracle-worker; he must have had some notion about Philip’s Master, and we know that it was belief in Jesus as the Christ that qualified in the Apostolic age for baptism. So it is reasonable to suppose that he had so much of head knowledge. But it was only head knowledge. There was in it no penitence, no self-abandonment, no fruit in holy desires; or in other words, there was no heart. It was credence, but not trust.

Now it does not matter how much or how little you know about Jesus Christ. It does not matter how you have come to that knowledge. It does not matter though you have received Christian ordinances as Simon had. If your faith is not a living power, leading to love and self-surrender, it is really nought. And here, on its earliest conflict with heathen magic, the gospel proclaims by the mouth of the Apostle what is true as to all formalists and nominal Christians: 'Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter, *for* thy heart is not right.' One thing only unites to God-a faith which cleanses the heart, a faith which lays hold on Christ with will and conscience, a faith which, resting on penitent acknowledgment of sin, trusts wholly to His great mercy.

II. An instance of the constant tendency to corrupt Christianity with heathen superstition.

The Apostles' bestowal of the Holy Ghost, which was evidently accompanied by visible signs, had excited Simon's desire for so useful an aid to his conjuring, and he offers to buy the power, judging of them by himself, and betraying that what he was ready to buy he was also intending to sell.

The offer to buy has been taken as his great sin. Surely it was but the outcome of a greater. It was not only what he offered, but what he desired, that was wrong. He wanted that on 'whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost.' That preposterous wish was quite as bad as, and was the root of, his absurd offer to bribe Peter. Bribe Peter, indeed! Some of Peter's successors would have been amenable to such considerations, but not the horny-handed fisherman who had once said, 'Silver and gold have I none.'

Peter's answer, especially the words of my text, puts the Christian principle in sharp antagonism to the heathen one.

Simon regards what is sacred and spiritual purely as part of his stock-in-trade, contributing to his prestige. He offers to buy it. And the foundation of all his errors is that he regards spiritual gifts as capable of being received and exercised apart altogether from moral qualifications. He does not think at all of what is involved in the very name, ‘the Holy Ghost.’

Now, on the other hand, Peter’s answer lays down broadly and sharply the opposite truth, the Christian principle that a heart right in the sight of God is the indispensable qualification for all possession of spiritual power, or of any of the blessings which Jesus gives.

How the heart is made right, and what constitutes righteousness is another matter. That leads to the doctrine of repentance and faith.

The one thing that makes such participation impossible is being and continuing in ‘the gall of bitterness, and the bond of iniquity.’ Or, to put it into more modern words, all the blessings of the Gospel are a gift of God, and are bestowed only on moral conditions. Faith which leads to love and personal submission to the will of God makes a man a Christian. Therefore, outward ordinances are only of use as they help a man to that personal act.

Therefore, no other man or body of men can do it for us, or come between us and God.

And in confirmation, notice how Peter here speaks of forgiveness. His words do not sound as if he thought that he held the power of absolution, but he tells Simon to go to God who alone can forgive, and refers Simon’s fate to God’s mercy.

These tendencies, which Simon expresses so baldly, are in us all, and are continually reappearing. How far much of what calls itself Christianity has drifted from Peter’s principle laid down here, that moral and spiritual qualifications are the only ones which avail for securing ‘part or lot in the matter’ of Christ’s gifts received for, and bestowed on, men! How much which really rests on the opposite principle, that these gifts can be imparted by men who are supposed to possess them, apart altogether from the state of heart of the would-be recipient, we see around us to-day! *Simony* is said to be the securing ecclesiastical promotion by purchase. But it is much rather the belief that ‘the gift of God can be purchased with’ anything but personal faith in Jesus, the Giver and the Gift. The effects of it are patent among us. Ceremonies usurp the place of faith. A priesthood is exalted. The universal Christian prerogative of individual access to God is obscured. Christianity is turned into a kind of magic.

III. An instance of the worthlessness of partial convictions.

Simon was but slightly moved by Peter’s stern rebuke. He paid no heed to the exhortation to pray for forgiveness and to repent of his wickedness, but still remained in substantially his old error, in that he accredited Peter with power, and asked him to pray for him, as if the Apostle’s prayer would have some special access to God which his, though he were penitent, could not have. Further, he showed no sense of sin. All that he wished was that ‘none of the things which ye have spoken come upon me.’

How useless are convictions which go no deeper down than Simon’s did!

What became of him we do not know. But there are old ecclesiastical traditions about him which represent him as a bitter enemy in future of the Apostle. And Josephus has a story of a Simon who played a degrading part between Felix and Drusilla, and who is thought by some to have been he. But in any case, we have no reason to believe that he ever followed Peter’s counsel or prayed to God for forgiveness. So he stands for us as one more tragic example of a man, once ‘not far from the kingdom of God’ and drifting ever further away from it, because, at the fateful moment, he would not enter in. It is hard to bring such a man as near again as he once was. Let us learn that the one key which opens the treasury of God’s blessings, stored for us all in Jesus, is our own personal faith, and let us beware of shutting our ears and our hearts against the merciful rebukes that convict us of ‘this our wickedness,’ and point us to the ‘Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world,’ and therefore our sin.

49)Acts 8:26-39

Acts

A MEETING IN THE DESERT

Act. 8:26 - Act. 8:40.

Philip had no special divine command either to flee to, or to preach in, Samaria, but ‘an angel of the Lord’ and afterwards ‘the Spirit,’ directed him to the Ethiopian statesman. God rewards faithful work with more work. Samaria was a borderland between Jew and Gentile, but in preaching to the eunuch Philip was on entirely Gentile ground. So great a step in advance needed clear command from God to impel to it and to justify it.

I. We have, then, first, the new commission.

Philip might well wonder why he should be taken away from successful work in a populous city, and despatched to the lonely road to Gaza. But he obeyed at once. He knew not for what he was sent there, but that ignorance did not trouble or retard him. It should be enough for us to see the next step. ‘We walk by faith, not by sight,’ for we none of us know what comes of our actions, and we get light as we go. Do to-day’s plain duty, and when to-morrow is to-day its duty will be plain too. The river on which we sail winds, and not till we round the nearest bend do we see the course beyond. So we are kept in the peaceful posture of dependent obedience, and need to hold our communications with God open, that we may be sure of His guidance.

No doubt, as Philip trudged along till he reached the Gaza road, he would have many a thought as to what he was to find there, and, when he came at last to the solitary track, would look eagerly over the uninhabited land for an explanation of his strange and vague instructions. But an obedient heart is not long left perplexed, and he who looks for duty to disclose itself will see it in due time.

II. So we have next the explanation of the errand.

Luke’s ‘Behold!’ suggests the sudden sight of the great man’s cortege in the distance. No doubt, he travelled with a train of attendants, as became his dignity, and would be conspicuous from afar. Philip, of course, did not know who he was when he caught sight of him, but Luke tells his rank at once, in order to lay stress on it, as well as to bring out the significance of his occupation and subsequent conversion. Here was a full-blooded Gentile, an eunuch, a courtier, who had been drawn to Israel’s God, and was studying Israel’s prophets as he rode. Perhaps he had chosen that road to Egypt for its quietness. At any rate, his occupation revealed the bent of his mind.

Philip felt that the mystery of his errand was solved now, and he recognised the impulse to break through conventional barriers and address the evidently dignified stranger, as the voice of God’s Spirit, and not his own. How he was sure of that we do not know, but the distinction drawn between the former communication by an angel and this from the Spirit points to a clear difference in his experiences, and to careful discrimination in the narrator. The variation is not made at random. Philip did not mistake a buzzing in his ears from the heating of his own heart for a divine voice. We have here no hallucinations of an enthusiast, but plain fact.

How manifestly the meeting of these two, starting so far apart, and so ignorant of each other and of the purpose of their being thrown together, reveals the unseen hand that moved each on his own line, and brought about the intersection of the two at that exact spot and hour! How came it that at that moment the Ethiopian was reading, of all places in his roll, the very words which make the kernel of the gospel of the evangelical prophet? Surely such ‘coincidences’ are a hard nut to crack for deniers of a Providence that shapes our ends!

It is further to be noticed that the eunuch’s conversion does not appear to have been of importance for the expansion of the Church. It exercised no recorded influence, and was apparently not communicated to the Apostles, as, if it had been, it could scarcely have failed to have been referred to when the analogous case of Cornelius was under discussion. So, divine intervention and human journeying and work were brought into play simply for the sake of one soul which God’s eye saw to be ripe for the Gospel. He cares for the individual, and one sheep that can be reclaimed is precious enough in the Shepherd’s estimate to move His hand to action and His heart to love. Not because he was a man of great authority at Candace’s court, but because he was yearning for light, and ready to follow it when it shone, did the eunuch meet Philip on that quiet road.

III. The two men being thus strangely brought together, we have next the conversation for the sake of which they were brought together.

The eunuch was reading aloud, as people not very much used to books, or who have some difficult passage in hand, often do. Philip must have been struck with astonishment when he caught the, to him, familiar words, and must have seen at once the open door for his preaching. His abrupt question wastes no time with apologies or polite, gradual approaches to his object. Probably the very absence of the signs of deference to which he was accustomed impressed the eunuch with a dim sense of the stranger's authority, which would be deepened by the home-thrust of his question.

The wistful answer not only shows no resentment at the brusque stranger's thrusting himself in, but acknowledges bewilderment, and responds to the undertone of proffered guidance in the question. A teacher has often to teach a pupil his ignorance, to begin with; but it should be so done as to create desire for instruction, and to kindle confidence in him as instructor. It is insolent to ask, 'Understandest thou?' unless the questioner is ready and able to help to understand.

The invitation to a seat in the great man's chariot showed how eagerness to learn had obliterated distinctions of rank, and swiftly knit a new bond between these two, who had never heard of each other five minutes before. A true heart will hail as its best and closest friend him who leads it to know God's mind more clearly. How earthly dignities dwindle when God's messenger lays hold of a soul!

So the chariot rolls on, and through the silence of the desert the voices of these two reach the wondering attendants, as they plod along. The Ethiopian was reading the Septuagint translation of Isaiah, which, though it missed part of the force of the original, brought clearly before him the great figure of a Sufferer, meek and dumb, swept from the earth by unjust judgment. He understood so much, but what he did not understand was who this great, tragic Figure represented. His question goes to the root of the matter, and is a burning question to-day, as it was all these centuries ago on the road to Gaza. Philip had no doubt of the answer. Jesus was the 'lamb dumb before its shearers.' This is not the place to enter on such wide questions, but we may at least affirm that, whatever advance modern schools have made in the criticism and interpretation of the Old Testament, the very spirit of the whole earlier Revelation is missed if Jesus is not discerned as the Person to whom prophet and ritual pointed, in whom law was fulfilled and history reached its goal.

No doubt much instruction followed. How long they had rode together before they came to ‘a certain water’ we know not, but it cannot have been more than a few hours. Time is elastic, and when the soil is prepared, and rain and sunlight are poured down, the seed springs up quickly. People who deny the possibility of ‘sudden conversions’ are blind to facts, because they wear the blinkers of a theory. Not always have they who ‘anon with joy receive’ the word ‘no root in themselves.’

As is well known, the answer to the eunuch’s question [Act. 8:37] is wanting in authoritative manuscripts. The insertion may have been due to the creeping into the text of a marginal note. A recent and most original commentator on the Acts [Blass] considers that this, like other remarkable readings found in one set of manuscripts, was written by Luke in a draft of the book, which he afterwards revised and somewhat abbreviated into the form which most of the manuscripts present. However that may be, the required conditions in the doubtful verse are those which the practice of the rest of the Acts shows to have been required. Faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God was the qualification for the baptisms there recorded.

And there was no other qualification. Philip asked nothing about the eunuch’s proselytism, or whether he had been circumcised or not. He did not, like Peter with Cornelius, need the evidence of the gift of the Spirit before he baptized; but, notwithstanding his experience of an unworthy candidate in Simon the sorcerer, he unhesitatingly administered baptism. There was no Church present to witness the rite. We do not read that the Holy Ghost fell on the eunuch.

That baptism in the quiet wady by the side of the solitary road, while the swarthy attendants stood in wonder, was a mighty step in advance; and it was taken, not by an Apostle, nor with ecclesiastical sanction, but at the bidding of Christian instinct, which recognised a brother in any man who had faith in Jesus, the Son of God. The new faith is bursting old bonds. The universality of the Gospel is overflowing the banks of Jewish narrowness.

Probably Philip was quite unconscious of the revolutionary nature of his act, but it was done, and in it was the seed of many more.

The eunuch had said that he could not understand unless some man guided him. But when Philip is caught away, he does not bewail the loss of his guide. He went on his road with joy, though his new faith might have craved longer support from the crutch of a teacher, and fuller enlightenment. What made him able to do without the guide that a few hours before had been so indispensable? The presence in his heart of a better one, even of Him whom Jesus promised, to guide His servants into all truth. If those who believe that Scripture without an authorised interpreter is insufficient to lead men aright, would consider the end of this story, they might find that a man's dependence on outward teachers ceases when he has God's Spirit to teach him, and that for such a man the Word of God in his hand and the Spirit of God in his spirit will give him light enough to walk by, so that, in the absence of all outward instructors, he may still be filled with true wisdom, and in absolute solitude may go 'on his way rejoicing.'

50)Acts 9:1

Acts

GRACE TRIUMPHANT

Act. 9:1 - Act. 9:12; Act. 9:17 - Act. 9:20.

This chapter begins with 'but,' which contrasts Saul's persistent hatred, which led him to Gentile lands to persecute, with Philip's expansive evangelistic work. Both men were in profound earnest, both went abroad to carry on their work, but the one sought to plant what the other was eager to destroy. If the 'but' in Act. 9:1 contrasts, the 'yet' connects the verse with Act. 8:3. Saul's fury was no passing outburst, but enduring. Like other indulged passions, it grew with exercise, and had come to be as his very life-breath, and now planned, not only imprisonment, but death, for the heretics.

Not content with carrying his hateful inquisition into the homes of the Christians in Jerusalem, he will follow the fugitives to Damascus. The extension of the persectution was his own thought. He was not the tool of the Sanhedrin, but their mover. They would probably have been content to cleanse Jerusalem, but the young zealot would not rest till he had followed the dispersed poison into every corner where it might have trickled. The high priest would not discourage such useful zeal, however he might smile at its excess.

So Saul got the letters he asked, and some attendants, apparently, to help him in his hunt, and set off for Damascus. Painters have imagined him as riding thither, but more probably he and his people went on foot. It was a journey of some five or six days. The noon of the last day had come, and the groves of Damascus were, perhaps, in sight. No doubt, the young Pharisee's head was busy settling what he was to begin with when he entered the city, and was exulting in the thought of how he would harry the meek Christians, when the sudden light shone.

At all events, the narrative does not warrant the view, often taken now, that there had been any preparatory process in Saul's mind, which had begun to sap his confidence that Jesus was a blasphemer, and himself a warrior for God. That view is largely adopted in order to get rid of the supernatural, and to bolster up the assumption that there are no sudden conversions; but the narrative of Luke, and Paul's own references, are dead against it. At one moment he is 'yet breathing threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord,' and in almost the next he is prone on his face, asking, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' It was not a case of a landslide suddenly sweeping down, but long prepared for by the gradual percolation of water to the slippery understrata, but the solid earth was shaken, and the mountain crashed down in sudden ruin.

The causes of Saul's conversion are plain in the narrative, even though the shortened form is adopted, which is found in the Revised Version. The received text has probably been filled out by additions from Paul's own account in Act. 26:1 - Act. 26:32 First came the blaze of light outshining the midday sun, even in that land where its beams are like swords. That blinding light 'shone round about him,' enveloping him in its glory. Act.

26:13 tells that his companions also were wrapped in the lustre, and that all fell to the earth, no doubt in terror.

Saul is not said, either in this or in his own accounts, to have seen Jesus, but 1Co. 15:8 establishes that he did so, and Ananias [Act. 9:17] refers to Jesus as having 'appeared.' That appearance, whatever may have been the psychological account of it, was by Paul regarded as being equal in evidential value to the flesh-and-blood vision of the risen Lord which the other Apostles witnessed to, and as placing him in the same line as a witness.

It is to be noted also, that, while the attendants saw the light, they were not blinded, as Saul was; from which it may be inferred that he saw with his bodily eyes the glorified manhood of Jesus, as we are told that one day, when He returns as Judge, 'every eye shall see Him.' Be that as it may,-and we have not material for constructing a theory of the manner of Christ's appearance to Saul,- the overwhelming conviction was flooded into his soul, that the Jesus whom he had thought of as a blasphemer, falsely alleged to have risen from the dead, lived in heavenly glory, amid celestial brightness too dazzling for human eyes.

The words of gentle remonstrance issuing from the flashing glory went still further to shake the foundations of the young Pharisee's life; for they, as with one lightning gleam, laid hare the whole madness and sin of the crusade which he had thought acceptable to God. 'Why persecutest thou Me?' Then the odious heretics were knit by some mysterious bond to this glorious One, so that He bled in their wounds and felt their pains! Then Saul had been, as his old teacher dreaded they of the Sanhedrin might be, fighting against God! How the reasons for Saul's persecution had crumbled away, till there were none left with which to answer Jesus' question! Jesus lived, and was exalted to glory. He was identified with His servants. He had appeared to Saul, and deigned to plead with him.

No wonder that the man who had been planning fresh assaults on the disciples ten minutes before, was crushed and abject as he lay there on the road, and these tremendous new convictions rushed like a cataract over and into his soul! No wonder that the lessons burned in on him in that hour of destiny became the centre-point of all his future teaching! That vision revolutionised his thinking and his life. None can affirm that it was incompetent to do so.

Luke’s account here, like Paul’s in Act. 22:1 - Act. 22:30, represents further instructions from Jesus as postponed till Saul’s meeting with Ananias, while Paul’s other account in Act. 26:1 - Act. 26:32 omits mention of the latter, and gives the substance of what he said in Damascus as said on the road by Jesus. The one account is more detailed than the other, that is all. The gradual unfolding of the heavenly purpose which our narrative gives is in accord with the divine manner. For the moment enough had been done to convert the persecutor into the servant, to level with the ground his self-righteousness, to reveal to him the glorified Jesus, to bend his will and make it submissive. The rest would be told him in due time.

The attendants had fallen to the ground like him, but seem to have struggled to their feet again, while he lay prostrate. They saw the brightness, but not the Person: they heard the voice, but not the words. Saul staggered by their help to his feet, and then found that with open eyes he was blind. Imagination or hallucination does not play tricks of that sort with the organs of sense.

The supernatural is too closely intertwined with the story to be taken out of it without reducing it to tatters. The greatest of Christian teachers, who has probably exercised more influence than any man who ever lived, was made a Christian by a miracle. That fact is not to be got rid of. But we must remember that once when He speaks of it He points to God’s revelation of His Son ‘*in* Him’ as its essential character. The external appearance was the vehicle of the inward revelation. It is to be remembered, too, that the miracle did not take away Saul’s power of accepting or rejecting the Christ; for he tells Agrippa that he was ‘not disobedient to the heavenly vision.’

What a different entry he made into Damascus from what he expected, and what a different man it was that crawled up to the door of Judas, in the street that is called Straight, from the self-confident young fanatic who had left Jerusalem with the high priest’s letters in his bosom and fierce hate in his heart!

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51)Acts 9:2

Acts

GRACE TRIUMPHANT

'THIS WAY'

Act. 9:2.

The name of ‘Christian’ was not applied to themselves by the followers of Jesus before the completion of the New Testament. There were other names in currency before that designation-which owed its origin to the scoffing wits of Antioch-was accepted by the Church. They called themselves ‘disciples,’ ‘believers, ‘saints,’ ‘brethren,’ as if feeling about for a title.

Here is a name that had obtained currency for a while, and was afterwards disused. We find it five times in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, never elsewhere; and always, with one exception, it should be rendered, as it is in the Revised Version, not ‘*this* way,’ as if being one amongst many, but ‘*the* way,’ as being the only one.

Now, I have thought that this designation of Christians as ‘those of the way’ rests upon a very profound and important view of what Christianity is, and may teach us some lessons if we will ponder it; and I ask your attention to two or three of these for a few moments now.

I. First, then, I take this name as being a witness to the conviction that in Christianity we have the only road to God.

There may be some reference in the name to the remarkable words of our Lord Jesus Christ: ‘I am the Way. No man cometh to the Father but by Me,’-words of which the audacity is unparalleled and unpardonable, except upon the supposition that He bears an unique relation to God on the one hand, and to all mankind upon the other. In them He claims to be the sole medium of communication between heaven and earth, God and man. And that same exclusiveness is reflected in this name for Christians. It asserts that faith in Jesus Christ, the acceptance of His teaching, mediation and guidance, is the only path that climbs to God, and by it alone do we come into knowledge of, and communion with, our divine Father.

I do not dwell upon the fact that, according to our Lord’s own teaching, and according to the whole New Testament, Christ’s work of making God known to man did not begin with His Incarnation and earthly life, but that from the beginning that eternal Word was the agent of all divine activity in creation, and in the illumination of mankind. So that, not only all the acts of the self-revealing God were through Him, but that from Him, as from the light of men, came all the light in human hearts, of reason and of conscience, by which there were and are in all men, some dim knowledge of God, and some feeling after, or at the lowest some consciousness of, Him. But the historical facts of Christ's incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension are the source of all solid certitude, and of all clear knowledge of our Father in Heaven. His words are spirit and life; His works are unspoken words; and by both He declares unto His brethren the Name, and is the self-manifestation of, the Father.

Think of the contrast presented by the world's conceptions of Godhead, and the reality as unveiled in Christ! On the one hand you have gods lustful, selfish, passionate, capricious, cruel, angry, vile; or gods remote, indifferent, not only passionless, but heartless, inexorable, unapproachable, whom no man can know, whom no man can love, whom no man can trust. On the other hand, if you look at Christ's tears as the revelation of God; if you look at Christ's ruth and pity as the manifestation of the inmost glory of the divine nature; if you take your stand at the foot of the Cross-a strange place to see 'the power of God and the wisdom of God'!-and look up there at Him dying for the world, and are able to say, 'Lo! this is our God! through all the weary centuries we have waited for Him, and this is He!' then you can understand how true it is that there, and there only, is the good news proclaimed that lifts the burden from every heart, and reveals God the Lover and the Friend of every soul.

And if, further, we consider the difference between the dim 'peradventures,' the doubts and fears, the uncertain conclusions drawn from questionable, and often partial, premises, which confessedly never amount to demonstration, if we consider the contrast between these and the daylight of fact which we meet in Jesus Christ, His love, life, and death, then we can feel how superior in certitude, as in substance, the revelation of God in Jesus is to all these hopes, longings, doubts, and how it alone is worthy to be called the knowledge of God, or is solid enough to abide comparison with the certainties of the most arrogant physical science.

There never was a time in the history of the world when, so clearly and unmistakably, every thinking soul amongst cultivated nations was being brought up to this alternative-Christ, the Revealer of God, or no knowledge of God at all. The old dreams of heathenism are impossible for us; modern agnosticism will make very quick work of a deism which does not cling to the Christ as the Revealer of the Godhead. And I, for my part, believe that there is one thing, and one thing only, which will save modern Europe from absolute godlessness, and that is the coming back to the old truth, ‘No man hath seen God’ by sense, or intuition, or reason, or conscience, ‘at any time. The only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.’

But it is not merely as bringing to us the only certain knowledge of our Father God that Christianity is ‘the way,’ but it is also because by it alone we come into fellowship with the God whom it reveals to us. If there rises up before your mind the thought of Him in the Heavens, there will rise up also in your consciousness the sense of your own sin. And that is no delusion nor fancy; it is the most patent fact, that between you and your Father in Heaven, howsoever loving, tender, compassionate, and forgiving, there lies a great gulf. You cannot go to God, my brother, with all that guilt heaped upon your conscience; you cannot come near to Him with all that mass of evil which you know is there, working in your soul. How shall a sinful soul come to a holy God? And there is only one answer-that great Lord, by His blessed death upon the Cross, has cleared away all the mountains of guilt and sin that rise up frowning between each single soul and the Father in Heaven; and through Him, by a new and living way, which He hath opened for us, we have entrance to God, and dwell with Him.

And it is not only that He brings to us the knowledge of God, and that He clears away all obstacles, and makes fellowship between God and us possible for the most polluted and sinful of spirits, but it is also that, by the knowledge of His great love to us, love is kindled in our hearts, and we are drawn into that path which, as a matter of fact, we shall not tread unless we yield to the magnetic attraction of the love of God as revealed ‘in the face of Jesus Christ.’

Men do not seek fellowship with God until they are drawn to Him by the love that is revealed upon the Cross. Men do not yield their hearts to Him until their hearts are melted down by the fire of that Infinite divine love which disdained not to be humiliated and refused not to die for their sakes. Practically and really we come to God, when-and I venture upon the narrowness of saying, *only* when-God has come to us in His dear Son. '*The* way' to God is through Christ. Have you trod it, my friend-that new and living way, which leads within the veil, into the secrets of loving communion with your Father in Heaven?

II. Then there is another principle, of which this designation of our text is also the witness, viz., that in Christianity we have the path of conduct and practical life traced out for us all.

The 'way of a man' is, of course, a metaphor for his outward life and conduct. It is connected with the familiar old image which belongs to the poetry of all languages, by which life is looked at as a journey. That metaphor speaks to us of the continual changefulness of our mortal condition; it speaks to us, also, of the effort and the weariness which often attend it. It proclaims also the solemn thought that a man's life is a unity, and that, progressive, it goes some whither, and arrives at a definite goal.

And that idea is taken up in this phrase, '*the* way,' in such a fashion as that there are two things asserted: first, that Christianity provides *a* way, a path for the practical activity, that it moulds our life into a unity, that it prescribes the line of direction which it is to follow, that it has a starting-point, and stages, and an end; also, that Christianity is *the* way for practical life, the only path and mode of conduct which corresponds with all the obligations and nature of a man, and which reason, conscience, and experience will approve. Let us look, just for a moment or two, at these two thoughts: Christianity is *a* way; Christianity is *the* way.

It is a way. These early disciples must have grasped with great clearness and tenacity the practical side of the Gospel, or they would never have adopted this name. If they had thought of it as being only a creed, they would not have done so.

And it is not only a creed. All creed is meant to influence conduct. If I may so say, *credenda*, 'things to be believed,' are meant to underlie the *agenda*, the things to be done. Every doctrine of the New Testament, like the great blocks of concrete that are dropped into a river in order to lay the foundation of a bridge, or the embankment that is run across a valley in order to carry a railway upon it,-every doctrine of the New Testament is meant to influence the conduct, the 'walk and conversation,' and to provide a path on which activity may advance and expatiate.

I cannot, of course, dwell upon this point with sufficient elaboration, or take up one after another the teachings of the New Testament, in order to show how close is their bearing upon practical life. There is plenty of abstract theology in the form of theological systems, skeletons all dried up that have no life in them. There is nothing of that sort in the principles as they lie on the pages of the New Testament. There they are all throbbing with life, and all meant to influence life and conduct.

Remember, my friend, that unless your Christianity is doing that for you, unless it has prescribed a path of life for you, and moulded your steps into a great unity, and drawn you along the road, it is nought,-nought!

But the whole matter may be put into half a dozen sentences. The living heart of Christianity, either considered as a revelation to a man, or as a power within a man, that is to say, either objective or subjective, is love. It is the revelation of the love of God that is the inmost essence of it as revelation. It is love in my heart that is the inmost essence of it as a fact of my nature. And is not love the most powerful of all forces to influence conduct? Is it not 'the fulfilling of the law,' because its one single self includes all commandments, and is the ideal of all duty, and also because it is the power which will secure the keeping of all the law which itself lays down?

But love may be followed out into its two main effects. These are self-surrender and imitation. And I say that a religious system which is, in its inmost heart and essence, love, is thereby shown to be the most practical of all systems, because thereby it is shown to be a great system of self-surrender and imitation.

The deepest word of the Gospel is, 'Yield yourselves to God.' Bring your wills and bow them before Him, and say, 'Here am I; take me, and use me as a pawn on Thy great chessboard, to be put where Thou wilt.' When once a man’s will is absorbed into the divine will, as a drop of water is into the ocean, he is free, and has happiness and peace, and is master and lord of himself and of the universe. That system which proclaims love as its heart sets in action self-surrender as the most practical of all the powers of life.

Love is imitation. And Jesus Christ’s life is set before us as the pattern for all our conduct. We are to follow In His footsteps. These mark our path. We are to follow Him, as a traveller who knows not his way will carefully tread in the steps of his guide. We are to imitate Him, as a scholar who is learning to draw will copy every touch of the master’s pencil.

Strange that that short life, fragmentarily reported in four little tracts, full of unapproachable peculiarities, and having no part in many of the relationships which make so large a portion of most lives, is yet so transparently under the influence of the purest and broadest principles of righteousness and morality as that every age and each sex, and men of all professions, idiosyncrasies, temperaments, and positions, all stages of civilisation and culture, of every period, and of every country, may find in it the all-sufficient pattern for them!

Thus in Christianity we have a way. It prescribes a line of direction for the life, and brings all its power to bear in marking the course which we should pursue and in making us willing and able to pursue it.

How different, how superior to all other systems which aspire to regulate the outward life that system is! It is superior, in its applicability to all conditions. It is a very difficult thing for any man to apply the generalities of moral law and righteousness to the individual cases in his life. The stars are very bright, but they do not show me which street to turn up when I am at a loss; but Christ’s example comes very near to us, and guides us, not indeed in regard to questions of prudence or expediency, but in regard to all questions of right or wrong. It is superior, in the help it gives to a soul struggling with temptation. It is very hard to keep law or duty clearly before our eyes at such a moment, when it is most needful to do so. The lighthouse is lost in the fog, but the example of Jesus Christ dissipates many mists of temptation to the heart that loves Him; and ‘they that follow Him shall not walk in darkness.’

It is superior in this, further, that patterns fail because they are only patterns, and cannot get themselves executed, and laws fail because they are only laws and cannot get themselves obeyed. What is the use of a signpost to a man who is lame, or who does not want to go down the road, though he knows it well enough? But Christianity brings both the commandment and the motive that keeps the commandment.

And so it is *the* path along which we can travel. It is the only road that corresponds to all our necessities, and capacities, and obligations.

It is the only path, my brother, that will be approved by reason, conscience, and experience. The greatest of our English mystics says somewhere-I do not profess to quote with verbal accuracy-'There are two questions which put an end to all the vain projects and designs of human life. The one is, "What for?" the other, "What good will the aim do you if attained?"'

If we look at 'all the ways of men' calmly, and with due regard to the wants of their souls, reason cannot but say that they are 'vain and melancholy.' If we consult our own experience we cannot but confess that whatsoever we have had or enjoyed, apart from God, has either proved disappointing in the very moment of its possession, or has been followed by a bitter taste on the tongue; or in a little while has faded, and left us standing with the stalk in our hands from which the bloom has dropped. Generation after generation has sighed its 'Amen!' to the stern old word: 'Vanity of vanities; all is vanity!' And here to-day, in the midst of the boasted progress of this generation, we find cultured men amongst us, lapped in material comfort, and with all the light of this century blazing upon them, preaching again the old Buddhist doctrine that annihilation is the only heaven, and proclaiming that life is not worth living, and that 'it were better not to be.'

Dear brother, one path, and one path only, leads to what all men desire-peace and happiness. One path, and one path only, leads to what all men know they ought to seek-purity and godliness. We are like men in the backwoods, our paths go circling round and round, we have lost our way. 'The labour of the foolish wearieth every one of them, for he knoweth not how to come to the city.' Jesus Christ has cut a path through the forest. Tread you in it, and you will find that it is 'the way of pleasantness' and 'the path of peace.'

III. And now, one last word. This remarkable designation seems to me to be a witness also to another truth, viz. that in Christianity we have the only way home.

The only way home! All other modes and courses of life and conduct stop at the edge of a great gulf, like some path that goes down an incline to the edge of a precipice, and the heedless traveller that has been going on, not knowing whither it led, tilts over when he comes there. Every other way that men can follow is broken short off by death. And if there were no other reason to allege, that is enough to condemn them. What is a man to do in another world if all his life long he has only cultivated tastes which want this world for their gratification? What is the sensualist to do when he gets there? What is the shrewd man of business in Manchester to do when he comes into a world where there are no bargains, and he cannot go on 'Change on Tuesdays and Fridays? What will he do with himself? What does he do with himself now, when he goes away from home for a month, and does not get his ordinary work and surroundings? What will he do then? What will a young lady do in an other world, who spends her days here in reading trashy novels and magazines? What will any of us do who have set our affections and our tastes upon this poor, perishing, miserable world? Would you think it was common sense in a young man who was going to be a doctor, and took no interest in anything but farming? Is it not as stupid a thing for men and women to train themselves for a condition which is transient, and not to train themselves for the condition into which they are certainly going?

And, on the other hand, the path that Christ makes runs clear on, without a break, across the gulf, like some daring railway bridge thrown across a mountain gorge, and goes straight on on the other side without a curve, only with an upward gradient. The manner of work may change; the spirit of the work and the principles of it will remain. Self-surrender will be the law of Heaven, and 'they shall follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.' Better to begin here as we mean to end yonder! Better to begin here what we can carry with us, in essence though not in form, into the other life; and so, through all the changes of life, and through the great change of death, to keep one unbroken straight course! 'They go from strength to strength; every one of them in Zion appeareth before God'.

We live in an else trackless waste, but across the desert Jesus Christ has thrown a way; too high for ravenous beasts to spring on or raging foes to storm; too firm for tempest to overthrow or make impair able; too plain for simple hearts to mistake. We may all journey on it, if we will, and ‘come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon our heads.’

Christ is the Way. O brother I trust thy sinful soul to His blood and mediation, and thy sins will be forgiven. And then, loving Him, follow Him. ‘This is the way; walk ye in it.’

52)Acts 9:3-5

Acts

GRACE TRIUMPHANT

Act. 9:1 - Act. 9:12; Act. 9:17 - Act. 9:20.

This chapter begins with ‘but,’ which contrasts Saul’s persistent hatred, which led him to Gentile lands to persecute, with Philip’s expansive evangelistic work. Both men were in profound earnest, both went abroad to carry on their work, but the one sought to plant what the other was eager to destroy. If the ‘but’ in Act. 9:1 contrasts, the ‘yet’ connects the verse with Act. 8:3. Saul’s fury was no passing outburst, but enduring. Like other indulged passions, it grew with exercise, and had come to be as his very life-breath, and now planned, not only imprisonment, but death, for the heretics.

Not content with carrying his hateful inquisition into the homes of the Christians in Jerusalem, he will follow the fugitives to Damascus. The extension of the persectution was his own thought. He was not the tool of the Sanhedrin, but their mover. They would probably have been content to cleanse Jerusalem, but the young zealot would not rest till he had followed the dispersed poison into every corner where it might have trickled. The high priest would not discourage such useful zeal, however he might smile at its excess.

So Saul got the letters he asked, and some attendants, apparently, to help him in his hunt, and set off for Damascus. Painters have imagined him as riding thither, but more probably he and his people went on foot. It was a journey of some five or six days. The noon of the last day had come, and the groves of Damascus were, perhaps, in sight. No doubt, the young Pharisee's head was busy settling what he was to begin with when he entered the city, and was exulting in the thought of how he would harry the meek Christians, when the sudden light shone.

At all events, the narrative does not warrant the view, often taken now, that there had been any preparatory process in Saul's mind, which had begun to sap his confidence that Jesus was a blasphemer, and himself a warrior for God. That view is largely adopted in order to get rid of the supernatural, and to bolster up the assumption that there are no sudden conversions; but the narrative of Luke, and Paul's own references, are dead against it. At one moment he is 'yet breathing threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord,' and in almost the next he is prone on his face, asking, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' It was not a case of a landslide suddenly sweeping down, but long prepared for by the gradual percolation of water to the slippery understrata, but the solid earth was shaken, and the mountain crashed down in sudden ruin.

The causes of Saul's conversion are plain in the narrative, even though the shortened form is adopted, which is found in the Revised Version. The received text has probably been filled out by additions from Paul's own account in Act. 26:1 - Act. 26:32 First came the blaze of light outshining the midday sun, even in that land where its beams are like swords. That blinding light 'shone round about him,' enveloping him in its glory. Act. 26:13 tells that his companions also were wrapped in the lustre, and that all fell to the earth, no doubt in terror.

Saul is not said, either in this or in his own accounts, to have seen Jesus, but 1Co. 15:8 establishes that he did so, and Ananias [Act. 9:17] refers to Jesus as having 'appeared.' That appearance, whatever may have been the psychological account of it, was by Paul regarded as being equal in evidential value to the flesh-and-blood vision of the risen Lord which the other Apostles witnessed to, and as placing him in the same line as a witness.

It is to be noted also, that, while the attendants saw the light, they were not blinded, as Saul was; from which it may be inferred that he saw with his bodily eyes the glorified manhood of Jesus, as we are told that one day, when He returns as Judge, ‘every eye shall see Him.’ Be that as it may,-and we have not material for constructing a theory of the manner of Christ’s appearance to Saul,- the overwhelming conviction was flooded into his soul, that the Jesus whom he had thought of as a blasphemer, falsely alleged to have risen from the dead, lived in heavenly glory, amid celestial brightness too dazzling for human eyes.

The words of gentle remonstrance issuing from the flashing glory went still further to shake the foundations of the young Pharisee’s life; for they, as with one lightning gleam, laid hare the whole madness and sin of the crusade which he had thought acceptable to God. ‘Why persecutest thou Me?’ Then the odious heretics were knit by some mysterious bond to this glorious One, so that He bled in their wounds and felt their pains! Then Saul had been, as his old teacher dreaded they of the Sanhedrin might be, fighting against God! How the reasons for Saul’s persecution had crumbled away, till there were none left with which to answer Jesus’ question! Jesus lived, and was exalted to glory. He was identified with His servants. He had appeared to Saul, and deigned to plead with him.

No wonder that the man who had been planning fresh assaults on the disciples ten minutes before, was crushed and abject as he lay there on the road, and these tremendous new convictions rushed like a cataract over and into his soul! No wonder that the lessons burned in on him in that hour of destiny became the centre-point of all his future teaching! That vision revolutionised his thinking and his life. None can affirm that it was incompetent to do so.

Luke’s account here, like Paul’s in Act. 22:1 - Act. 22:30, represents further instructions from Jesus as postponed till Saul’s meeting with Ananias, while Paul’s other account in Act. 26:1 - Act. 26:32 omits mention of the latter, and gives the substance of what he said in Damascus as said on the road by Jesus. The one account is more detailed than the other, that is all. The gradual unfolding of the heavenly purpose which our narrative gives is in accord with the divine manner. For the moment enough had been done to convert the persecutor into the servant, to level with the ground his self-righteousness, to reveal to him the glorified Jesus, to bend his will and make it submissive. The rest would be told him in due time.

The attendants had fallen to the ground like him, but seem to have struggled to their feet again, while he lay prostrate. They saw the brightness, but not the Person: they heard the voice, but not the words. Saul staggered by their help to his feet, and then found that with open eyes he was blind. Imagination or hallucination does not play tricks of that sort with the organs of sense.

The supernatural is too closely intertwined with the story to be taken out of it without reducing it to tatters. The greatest of Christian teachers, who has probably exercised more influence than any man who ever lived, was made a Christian by a miracle. That fact is not to be got rid of. But we must remember that once when He speaks of it He points to God’s revelation of His Son ‘*in* Him’ as its essential character. The external appearance was the vehicle of the inward revelation. It is to be remembered, too, that the miracle did not take away Saul’s power of accepting or rejecting the Christ; for he tells Agrippa that he was ‘not disobedient to the heavenly vision.’

What a different entry he made into Damascus from what he expected, and what a different man it was that crawled up to the door of Judas, in the street that is called Straight, from the self-confident young fanatic who had left Jerusalem with the high priest’s letters in his bosom and fierce hate in his heart!

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Ananias discharged his commission with lovely tenderness and power. How sweet and strange to speaker and hearer would that ‘Brother Saul’ sound! How strong and grateful a confirmation of his vision would Ananias’s reference to the appearance of the Lord bring! How humbly would the proud Pharisee bow to receive, laid on his head, the hands that he had thought to bind with chains! What new eyes would look out on a world in which all things had become new, when there fell from them as it had been scales, and as quickly as had come the blinding, so quickly came the restored vision!

Ananias was neither Apostle nor official, yet the laying on of his hands communicated ‘the Holy Ghost.’ Saul received that gift before baptism, not after or through the ordinance. It was important for his future relations to the Apostles that he should not have been introduced to the Church by them, or owed to them his first human Christian teaching. Therefore he could say that he was ‘an Apostle, not from men, neither through man.’ It was important for us that in that great instance that divine gift should have been bestowed without the conditions accompanying, which have too often been regarded as necessary for, its possession.

53)Acts 9:6

Mark **- Acts**

GRACE TRIUMPHANT
LOVE’S QUESTION

Mar. 10:51. - Act. 9:6.

Christ asks the first question of a petitioner, and the answer is a prayer for sight. Saul asks the second question of Jesus, and the answer is a command. Different as they are, we may bring them together. The one is the voice of love, desiring to be besought in order that it may bestow; the other is the voice of love, desiring to be commanded in order that it may obey.

Love delights in knowing, expressing, and fulfilling the beloved’s wishes.

I. The communion of Love delights on both sides in knowing the beloved's wishes.

Christ delights in knowing ours. He encourages us to speak though He knows, because it is pleasant to Him to hear, and good for us to tell. His children delight in knowing His will.

II. It delights in expressing wishes-His commandments are the utterance of His Love:

His Providences are His loving ways of telling us what He desires of us, and if we love Him as we ought, both commandments and providences will be received by us as lovers do gifts that have 'with my love' written on them.

On the other hand, our love will delight in telling Him what we wish, and to speak all our hearts to Jesus will be our instinct in the measure of our love to Him.

III. It delights in fulfilling wishes-puts key of treasure-house into our hands.

He refused John and James. Be sure that He does still delight to give us our desires, and so be sure that when any of these are not granted there must be some loving reason for refusal.

Our delight should be in obedience, and only when our wills are submitted to His does He say to us, 'What wilt thou?' 'If ye abide in Me and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will and it shall be done unto you.'

54)Acts 9:7-12

Acts

GRACE TRIUMPHANT

Act. 9:1 - Act. 9:12; Act. 9:17 - Act. 9:20.

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56)Acts 9:31

Acts

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Act. 9:31.

A man climbing a hill stops every now and then to take breath and look about him; and in the earlier part of this Book of the Acts of the Apostles there are a number of such landing-places where the writer suspends the course of his narrative, in order to give a general notion of the condition of the Church at the moment. We have in this verse one of the shortest, but perhaps the most significant, of these resting-places. The original and proper reading, instead of 'the Churches,' as our Version has it, reads 'the Church' as a whole -the whole body of believers in the three districts named-Judaea, Galilee, and Samaria-being in the same circumstances and passing through like experiences. The several small communities of disciples formed a whole. They were 'churches' individually; they were collectively 'the Church.' Christ's order of expansion, given in Act. 1:1 - Act. 1:26, had been thus far followed, and the sequence here sums up the progress which the Acts has thus far recorded. Galilee had been the cradle of the Church, but the onward march of the Gospel had begun at Jerusalem. Before Luke goes on to tell how the last part of our Lord's programme-'to the uttermost parts of the earth'-began to be carried into execution by the conversion of Cornelius, he gives us this bird's-eye view. To its significant items I desire to draw your attention now.

There are three of them: outward rest, inward progress, outward increase.

I. Outward rest.

‘Then had the Church rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria.’

The principal persecutor had just been converted, and that would somewhat damp the zeal of his followers. Saul having gone over to the enemy, it would be difficult to go on harrying the Church with the same spirit, when the chief actor was turned traitor. And besides that, historians tell us that there were political complications which gave both Romans and Jews quite enough to do to watch one another, instead of persecuting this little community of Christians. I have nothing to do with these, but this one point I desire to make, that the condition of security and tranquillity in which the Church found itself conduced to spiritual good and growth. This has not always been the case. As one of our quaint divines says, ‘as in cities where ground is scarce men build high up, so in times of straitness and persecution the Christian community, and the individuals who compose it, are often raised to a higher level of devotion than in easier and quieter times.’ But these primitive Christians utilised this breathing-space in order to grow, and having a moment of lull and stillness in the storm, turned it to the highest and best uses. Is that what you and I do with our quiet times? None of us have any occasion to fear persecution or annoyance of that sort, but there are other thorns in our pillows besides these, and other rough places in our beds, and we are often disturbed in our nests. When there does come a quiet time in which no outward circumstances fret us, do we seize it as coming from God, in order that, with undistracted energies, we may cast ourselves altogether into the work of growing like our Master and doing His will more fully? How many of us, dear brethren, have misused both our adversity and our prosperity by making the one an occasion for deeper worldliness, and the other a reason for forgetting Him in the darkness as in the light? To be absorbed by earthly things, whether by the enjoyment of their possession or by the bitter pain and misery of their withdrawal, is fatal to all our spiritual progress, and only they use things prosperous and things adverse aright, who take them both as means by which they may be wafted nearer to their God. Whatsoever forces act upon us, if we put the helm right and trim the sails as we ought, they will carry us to our haven. And whatsoever forces act upon us, if we neglect the sailor’s skill and duty, we shall be washed backwards and forwards in the trough of the sea, and make no progress in the voyage. ‘Then had the Church rest’-and grew lazy? ‘Then had the Church rest’-and grew worldly? Then was I happy and prosperous and peaceful in my home and in my business, and I said, ‘I shall never be moved,’ and I forgot my God? ‘Then had the Church rest, and was edified.’

Now, in the next place, note the

II. Inward progress.

There are difficulties about the exact relation of the clauses here to one another, the discussion of which would be fitter for a lecture-room than for a pulpit. I do not mean to trouble you with these, but it seems to me that we may perhaps best understand the writer’s intention if we throw together the clauses which stand in the middle of this verse, and take them as being a description of the inward progress, being ‘edified’ and ‘walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost.’ There are two things, then-the being ‘edified’ and ‘walking’; and I wish to say a word or two about each of them.

Now that word ‘edified’ and the cognate one ‘edification’ have been enfeebled in signification so as to mean very much less than they did to Luke. When we speak of ‘being edified,’ what do we mean? Little more than that we have been instructed, and especially that we have been comforted. And what is the instrument of edification in our ordinary religious parlance? Good words, wise teaching, or pious speech. But the New Testament means vastly more than this by the word, and looks not so much to other people’s utterances as to a man’s own strenuous efforts, as the means of edification. Much misunderstanding would have been avoided if our translators had really translated, instead of putting us off with a Latinised word which to many readers conveys little meaning and none of the significant metaphor of the original. ‘Being edified’ sounds very theological and far away from daily life. Would it not sound more real if we read ‘being built up’? That is the emblem of the process that ought to go on, not only in the Christian community as a whole, but in every individual member of it. Each Christian is bound to build himself up and to help to build up other Christians; and God builds them all up by His Spirit. We have brought before us the picture of the rising of some stately fabric upon a firm foundation, course by course, stone by stone, each laid by a separate act of the builder's hand, and carefully bedded in its place until the whole is complete.

That is one emblem of the growth of the Christian community and of the Christian individual, and the other clause that is coupled with it in the text seems to me to give the same idea under a slightly different figure. The rising of a stately building and the advance on a given path suggest substantially the same notion of progress.

And of these two metaphors, I would dwell chiefly on the former, because it is the less familiar of the two to modern readers, and because it is of some consequence to restore it to its weight and true significance in the popular mind. Edification, then, is the building up of Christian character, and it involves four things: a foundation, a continuous progress, a patient, persistent effort, and a completion.

Now, Christian men and women, this is our office for ourselves, and, according to our faculty and opportunities, for the Churches with which we may stand connected, that on the foundation which is Jesus Christ-'and other foundation can no man lay'-we all should slowly, carefully, unceasingly be at our building work; each day's attainment, like the course of stones laid in some great temple, becoming the basis upon which to-morrow's work is to be piled, and each having in it the toil of the builder and being a result and monument of his strenuous effort, and each being built in, according to the plan that the great Architect has given, and each tending a little nearer to the roof-tree, and the time that 'the top stone shall be brought forth with the shout of rejoicing.' Is that a transcript of my life and yours? Do we make a business of the cultivation of Christian character thus? Do we rest the whole structure of our lives upon Jesus Christ? And then, do we, hour by hour, moment by moment, lay the fair stones, until

'Firm and fair the building rise,
A temple to His praise.'

The old worn metaphor, which we have vulgarised and degraded into a synonym for a comfortable condition produced by a brother's words, carries in it the solemnest teaching as to what the duty and privilege of all Christian souls is-to ‘build themselves up for an habitation of God through the Spirit.’

But note further the elements of which this progress consists. May we not suppose that both metaphors refer to the clauses that follow, and that ‘the fear of the Lord’ and ‘the comfort of the Holy Ghost’ are the particulars in which the Christian is built up and walks?

‘The fear of the Lord’ is eminently an Old Testament expression, and occurs only once or twice in the New. But its meaning is thoroughly in accordance with the loftiest teaching of the new revelation. ‘The fear of the Lord’ is that reverential awe of Him, by which we are ever conscious of His presence with us, and ever seek, as our supreme aim and end, to submit our wills to His commandment, and to do the things that are pleasing in His sight. Are you and I building ourselves up in that? Do we feel more thrillingly and gladly to-day than we did yesterday, that God is beside us? And do we submit ourselves more loyally, more easily, more joyously to His will, in blessed obedience, now than ever before? Have we learned, and are we learning, moment by moment, more of that ‘secret of the Lord’ which ‘is with them that fear Him,’ and of that ‘covenant’ which ‘He will show’ to them? Unless we do, our growth in Christian character is a very doubtful thing. And are we advancing, too, in that other element which so beautifully completes and softens the notion of the fear of the Lord, ‘the encouragement’ which the divine Spirit gives us? Are we bolder to-day than we were yesterday? Are we ready to meet with more undaunted confidence whatever we may have to face? Do we feel ever increasing within us the full blessedness and inspiration of that divine visitant? And do these sweet communications take all the ‘torment’ away from ‘fear,’ and leave only the bliss of reverential love? They who walk in the fear of the Lord, and who with the fear have the courage that the divine Spirit gives, will ‘have rest,’ like the first Christians, whatsoever storms may howl around them, and whatsoever enemies may threaten to disturb their peace.

And so, lastly, note

III. The outward growth.

Thus building themselves up, and thus growing, the Church 'was multiplied.' Of course it was. Christian men and women that are spiritually alive, and who, because they are alive, grow, and grow in these things, the manifest reverence of God, and the manifest 'comfort' of the divine Spirit's giving, will commend their gospel to a blind world. They will be an attractive force in the midst of men, and their inward growth will make them eager to hold forth the word of life, and will give them 'a mouth and wisdom' which nothing but genuine spiritual experience can give.

And so, dear friends, especially those of you who set yourselves to any of the many forms of Christian work which prevail in this day, learn the lesson of my text, and make sure of '*a*' before you go on to '*b*,' and see to it that before you set yourselves to try to multiply the Church, you set yourselves to build up yourselves in your most holy faith.

We hear a great deal nowadays about 'forward movements,' and I sympathise with all that is said in favour of them. But I would remind you that the precursor of every genuine forward movement is a Godward movement, and that it is worse than useless to talk about lengthening the cords unless you begin with strengthening the stakes. The little prop that holds up the bell-tent that will contain half-a-dozen soldiers will be all too weak for the great one that will cover a company. And the fault of some Christian people is that they set themselves to work upon others without remembering that the first requisite is a deepened and growing godliness and devotion in their own souls. Dear friends, begin at home, and remember that whilst what the world calls eloquence may draw people, and oddities *will* draw them, and all sorts of lower attractions will gather multitudes for a little while, the one solid power which Christian men and women can exercise for the numerical increase of the Church is rooted in, and only tenable through, their own personal increase day by day in consecration and likeness to the Saviour, in possession of the Spirit, and in loving fear of the Lord.

57)Acts 9:34

COPIES OF CHRIST'S MANNER

Act. 9:34, Act. 9:40.

I have put these two miracles together, not only because they were closely connected in time and place, but because they have a very remarkable and instructive feature in common. They are both evidently moulded upon Christ's miracles; are distinct imitations of what Peter had seen Him do. And their likenesses to and differences from our Lord's manner of working are equally noteworthy. It is to the lessons from these two aspects, common to both miracles, that I desire to turn now.

I. First, notice the similarities and the lesson which they teach.

The two cases before us are alike, in that both of them find parallels in our Lord's miracles. The one is the cure of a paralytic, which pairs off with the well-known story in the Gospels concerning the man that was borne by four, and let down through the roof into Christ's presence. The other of them, the raising of Dorcas, or Tabitha, of course corresponds with the three resurrections of dead people which are recorded in the Gospels.

And now, note the likenesses. Jesus Christ said to the paralysed man, 'Arise, take up thy bed.' Peter says to Aeneas, 'Arise, and make thy bed.' The one command was appropriate to the circumstances of a man who was not in his own house, and whose control over his long-disused muscles in obeying Christ's word was a confirmation to himself of the reality and completeness of his cure. The other was appropriate to a man bedridden in his own house; and it had precisely the same purpose as the analogous injunction from our Lord, 'Take up thy bed and walk.' Aeneas was lying at home, and so Peter, remembering how Jesus Christ had demonstrated to others, and affirmed to the man himself, the reality of the miraculous blessing given to him, copies his Master's method, 'Aeneas, make thy bed.' It is an echo and resemblance of the former incident, and is a distinct piece of imitation of it.

And then, if we turn to the other narrative, the intentional moulding of the manner of the miracle, consecrated in the eyes of the loving disciple, because it was Christ's manner, is still more obvious. When Jesus Christ went into the house of Jairus there was the usual hubbub, the noise of the loud Eastern mourning, and He put them all forth, taking with Him only the father and mother of the damsel, and Peter with James and John. When Peter goes into the upper room, where Tabitha is lying, there are the usual noise of lamentation and the clack of many tongues, extolling the virtues of the dead woman. He remembers how Christ had gone about His miracle, and he, in his turn, 'put them all forth.' Mark, who was Peter's mouthpiece in his Gospel, gives us the very Aramaic words which our Lord employed when He raised the little girl, *Talitha*, the Aramaic word for 'a damsel,' or young girl; *cumi*, which means in that language 'arise.' Is it not singular and beautiful that Peter's word by the bedside of the dead Dorcas is, with the exception of one letter, absolutely identical? Christ says, *Talitha cumi*. Peter remembered the formula by which the blessing was conveyed, and he copied it. 'Tabitha cumi!' Is it not clear that he is posing after his Master's attitude; that he is, consciously or unconsciously, doing what he remembered so well had been done in that other upper room, and that the miracles are both of them shaped after the pattern of the miraculous working of Jesus Christ?

Well, now, although we are no miracle-workers, the very same principle which underlay these two works of supernatural power is to be applied to all our work, and to our lives as Christian people. I do not know whether Peter *meant* to do like Jesus Christ or not; I think rather that he was unconsciously and instinctively dropping into the fashion that to him was so sacred. Love always delights in imitation; and the disciples of a great teacher will unconsciously catch the trick of his intonation, even the awkwardness of his attitudes or the peculiarities of his way of looking at things-only, unfortunately, outsides are a good deal more easily imitated than insides. And many a disciple copies such external trifles, and talks in the tones that have, first of all, brought blessed truths to him, whose resemblance to his teacher goes very little further. The principle that underlies these miracles is just this-get near Jesus Christ, and you will catch His manner. Dwell in fellowship with Him, and whether you are thinking about it or not, there will come some faint resemblance to that Lord into your characters and your way of doing things, so that men will 'take knowledge of you that you have been with Jesus.' The poor bit of cloth which has held some precious piece of solid perfume will retain fragrance for many a day afterwards, and will bless the scentless air by giving it forth. The man who keeps close to Christ, and has folded Him in his heart, will, like the poor cloth, give forth a sweetness not his own that will gladden and refresh many nostrils. Live in the light, and you will become light. Keep near Christ, and you will be Christlike. Love Him, and love will do to you what it does to many a wedded pair, and to many kindred hearts: it will transfuse into you something of the characteristics of the object of your love. It is impossible to trust Christ, to obey Christ, to hold communion with Him, and to live beside Him, without becoming like Him. And if such be our inward experience, so will be our outward appearance.

But there may be a specific point given to this lesson in regard to Christian people's ways of doing their work in the world and helping and blessing other folk. Although, as I say, we have no miraculous power at our disposal, we do not need it in order to manifest Jesus Christ and His way of working in our work. And if we dwell beside Him, then, depend upon it, all the characteristics-far more precious than the accidents of manner, or tone, or attitude in working a miracle-all the characteristics so deeply and blessedly stamped upon His life of self-sacrifice and man-helping devotion will be reproduced in us. Jesus Christ, when He went through the wards of the hospital of the world, was overflowing with quick sympathy for every sorrow that met His eye. If you and I are living near Him, we shall never steel our hearts nor lock up our sensibilities against any suffering that it is within our power to stanch or to alleviate. Jesus Christ never grudged trouble, never thought of Himself, never was impatient of interruption, never repelled importunity, never sent away empty any outstretched hand. And if we live near Him, self-oblivious willingness to spend and be spent will mark our lives, and we shall not consider that we have the right of possession or of sole enjoyment of any of the blessings that are given to us. Jesus Christ, according to the beautiful and significant words of one of the Gospels, 'healed them that had need of healing.' Why that singular designation for the people that were standing around Him but to teach us that wide as men's necessity was His sympathy, and that broad as the sympathy of Christ were the help and healing which He brought? And so, with like width of compassion, with like perfectness of self-oblivion, with equal remoteness from consciousness of superiority or display of condescension, Christian men should go amongst the sorrowful and the sad and the outcast and do their miracles-'greater works' than those which Christ did, as He Himself has told us-after the manner in which He did His. If they did, the world would be a different place, and the Church would be a different Church, and you would not have people writing in the newspapers to demonstrate that Christianity was 'played out.'

II. Further, note the differences and the lessons from them.

Take the first of the two miracles. 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole: arise, and make thy bed.' That first clause points to the great difference. Take the second miracle, 'Jesus Christ put them all forth, and stretched out His hand, and said, Damsel, arise!' 'Peter put them all forth, . . . and said, Tabitha, arise!' but between the putting forth and the miracle he did something which Christ did not do, and he did not do something which Christ did do. 'He kneeled down and prayed.' Jesus Christ did not do that. 'And Jesus put forth His hand, and said, Arise!' Peter did not do that. But he put forth his hand *after* the miracle was wrought; not to communicate life, but to help the living woman to get to her feet; and so, both by what he did in his prayer and by what he did not do after Christ's pattern, the extension of the hand that was the channel of the vitality, he drew a broad distinction between the servant's copy and the Master's original.

The lessons from the differences are such as the following.

Christ works miracles by His inherent power; His servants do their works only as His instruments and organs. I need not dwell upon the former thought; but it is the latter at which I wish to look for a moment. The lesson, then, of the difference is that Christian men, in all their work for the Master and for the world, are ever to keep clear before themselves, and to make very obvious to other people, that they are nothing more than channels and instruments. The less the preacher, the teacher, the Christian benefactor of any sort puts himself in the foreground, or in evidence at all, the more likely are his words and works to be successful. If you hear a man, for instance, preaching a sermon, and you see that he is thinking about himself, he may talk with the tongues of men and of angels, but he will do no good to anybody. The first condition of work for the Lord is-hide yourself behind your message, behind your Master, and make it very plain that His is the power, and that you are but a tool in the Workman's hand.

And then, further, another lesson is, Be very sure of the power that will work in you. What a piece of audacity it was for Peter to go and stand by the paralytic man's couch and say, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole.' Yes, audacity; unless he had been in such constant and close touch with his Master that he was sure that his Master was working through him. And is it not beautiful to see how absolutely confident he is that Jesus Christ's work was not ended when He went up into heaven; but that there, in that little stuffy room, where the man had lain motionless for eight long years, Jesus Christ was present, and working? O brethren, the Christian Church does not half enough believe in the actual presence and operation of Jesus Christ, here and now, in and through all His servants! We are ready enough to believe that He worked when He was in the world long ago, that He is going to work when He comes back to the world, at some far-off future period. But do we believe that He is verily putting forth His power, in no metaphor, but in simple reality, at present and here, and, if we will, through us?

'Jesus Christ maketh thee whole.' Be sure that if you keep near Christ, if you will try to mould yourselves after His likeness, if you expect Him to work through you, and do not hinder His work by self-conceit and self-consciousness of any sort, then it will be no presumption, but simple faith which He delights in and will vindicate, if you, too, go and stand by a paralytic and say, 'Jesus Christ maketh thee whole,' or go and stand by people dead in trespasses and sins and say, after you have prayed, 'Arise.'

We are here for the very purpose for which Peter was in Lydda and Joppa-to carry on and copy the healing and the quickening work of Christ, by His present power, and after His blessed example.

58)Acts 10:1-20

Acts

WHAT GOD HATH CLEANSED

Act. 10:1 - Act. 10:20.

The Church was at first in appearance only a Jewish sect; but the great stride is now to be taken which carries it over the border into the Gentile world, and begins its universal aspect. If we consider the magnitude of the change, and the difficulties of training and prejudice which it had to encounter in the Church itself, we shall not wonder at the abundance of supernatural occurrences which attended it. Without some such impulse, it is difficult to conceive of its having been accomplished.

In this narrative we see the supernatural preparation on both sides. God, as it were, lays His right hand on Cornelius, and His left on Peter, and impels them towards each other. Philip had already preached to the Ethiopian, and probably the anonymous brethren in Act. 11:20 had already spoken the word to pure Greeks at Antioch; but the importance of Peter's action here is that by reason of his Apostleship, his recognition of Gentile Christians becomes the act of the whole community. His entrance into Cornelius's house ended the Jewish phase of the Church. The epoch was worthy of divine intervention, and the step needed divine warrant. Therefore the abundance of miracle at this point is not superfluous.

I. We have the vision which guided the seeker to the light.

Caesarea, as the seat of government, was the focus of Gentilism, and that the Gospel should effect a lodgment there was significant. Still more so was the person whom it first won,-an officer of the Roman army, the very emblem of worldly power, loathed by every true Jew. A centurion was not an officer of high rank, but Cornelius's name suggests the possibility of his connection with a famous Roman family, and the name of the 'band' or 'cohort,' of which his troop was part, suggests that it was raised in Italy, and therefore properly officered by Romans. His residence in Judaea had touched his spirit with some knowledge of, and reverence for, the Jehovah whom this strange people worshipped. He was one of a class numerous in these times of religious unrest, who had been more or less affected by the pure monotheism of the Jew.

It is remarkable that the centurions of the New Testament are all more or less favourably inclined towards Christ and Christianity, and the fact has been laid hold of to throw doubt on the narratives; but it is very natural that similarity of position and training should have produced similarity of thought; and that three or four such persons should have come in contact with Jesus and His Apostles makes no violent demands on probability, while there was no occasion to mention others who were not like-minded. Quartered for considerable periods in the country, and brought into close contact with its religion, and profoundly sceptical of their own, as all but the lowest minds then were, Cornelius and his brother in arms and spirit whose faith drew wondering praise from Jesus, are bright examples of the possibility of earnest religious life being nourished amid grave disadvantages, and preach a lesson, often neglected, that we should be slow to form unfavourable opinions of classes of men, or to decide that those of such and such a profession, or in such and such circumstances, must be of such and such a character.

It would have seemed that the last place to look for the first Gentile Christian would have been in the barracks at Caesarea; and yet there God's angel went for him, and found him. It has often been discussed whether Cornelius was a 'proselyte' or not. It matters very little. He was drawn to the Jews' religion, had adopted their hours of prayer, reverenced their God, had therefore cast off idolatry, gave alms to the people as acknowledgment that their God was his God, and cultivated habitual devotion, which he had diffused among his household, both of slaves and soldiers. It is a beautiful picture of a soul feeling after a deeper knowledge of God, as a plant turns its half-opened flowers to the sun.

Such seekers do not grope without touching. It is not only 'unto the seed of Jacob' that God has never said, 'Seek ye Me in vain.' The story has a message of hope to all such seekers, and sheds precious light on dark problems in regard to the relation of such souls in heathen lands to the light and love of God, The vision appeared to Cornelius in the manner corresponding to his spiritual susceptibility, and it came at the hour of prayer. God's angels ever draw near to hearts opened by desire to receive them. Not in visible form, but in reality, 'bright-harnessed angels stand' all around the chamber where prayer is made. Our hours of supplication are God's hours of communication.

The vision to Cornelius is not to be whittled down to a mental impression. It was an objective, supernatural appearance,-whether to sense or soul matters little. The story gives most graphically the fixed gaze of terror which Cornelius fastened on the angel, and very characteristically the immediate recovery and quick question to which his courage and military promptitude helped him. ‘What is it, Lord?’ does not speak of terror, but of readiness to take orders and obey. ‘Lord’ seems to be but a title of reverence here.

In the angel’s answer, the order in which prayers and alms are named is the reverse of that in Act. 10:2. Luke speaks as a man, beginning with the visible manifestation, and passing thence to the inward devotion which animated the external beneficence. The angel speaks as God sees, beginning with the inward, and descending to the outward. The strong ‘anthropomorphism’ of the representation that man’s prayer and alms keep God in mind of him needs no vindication and little explanation. It substitutes the mental state which in us originates certain acts for the acts themselves. God’s ‘remembrance’ is in Scripture frequently used to express His loving deeds, which show that their recipient is not forgotten of Him.

But the all-important truth in the words is that the prayers and alms [coming from a devout heart] of a man who had never heard of Jesus Christ were acceptable to God. None the less Cornelius needed Jesus, and the recompense made to him was the knowledge of the Saviour. The belief that in many a heathen heart such yearning after a dimly known God has stretched itself towards light, and been accepted of God, does not in the least conflict with the truth that ‘there is none other Name given among men, whereby we must be saved,’ but it sheds a bright and most welcome light of hope into that awful darkness. Christ is the only Saviour, but it is not for us to say how far off from the channel in which it flows the water of life may percolate, and feed the roots of distant trees. Cornelius’s religion was not a substitute for Christ, but was the occasion of his being led to Christ, and finding full, conscious salvation there. God leads seeking souls by His own wonderful ways; and we may leave all such in His hand, assured that no heart ever hungered after righteousness and was not filled.

The instruction to send for Peter tested Cornelius’s willingness to be taught by an unknown Jew, and his belief in the divine origin of the vision. The direction given by which to find this teacher was not promising. A lodger in a tan-yard by the seaside was certainly not a man of position or wealth. But military discipline helped religious reverence; and without delay, as soon as the angel ‘was departed’ [an expression which gives the outward reality of the appearance strongly], Cornelius’s confidential servants, sympathisers with him in his religion, were told all the story, and before nightfall were on their march to Joppa. Swift obedience to whatever God points out as our path towards the light, even if it seem somewhat unattractive, will always mark our conduct if we really long for the light, and believe that He is pointing our way.

II. The vision which guided the light-bearer to the seeker.-

All through the night the messengers marched along the maritime plain in which both Caesarea and Joppa lay, much discussing, no doubt, their strange errand, and wondering what they would find. The preparation of Peter, which was as needful as that of Cornelius, was so timed as to be completed just as the messengers stood at the tanner’s door.

The first point to note in regard to it is its scene. It is of subordinate importance, but it can scarcely have been entirely unmeaning, that the flashing waters of the Mediterranean, blazing in midday sunshine, stretched before Peter’s eyes as he sat on the housetop ‘by the seaside.’ His thoughts may have travelled across the sea, and he may have wondered what lay beyond the horizon, and whether there were men there to whom Christ’s commission extended. ‘The isles’ of which prophecy had told that they should ‘wait for His law’ were away out in the mysterious distance. Some expansion of spirit towards regions beyond may have accompanied his gaze. At all events, it was by the shore of the great highway of nations and of truth that the vision which revealed that all men were ‘cleansed’ filled the eye and heart of the Apostle, and told him that, in his calling as ‘fisher of men,’ a wider water than the land-locked Sea of Galilee was his.

We may also note the connection of the form of the vision with his circumstances. His hunger determined its shape. The natural bodily sensations coloured his state of mind even in trance, and afforded the point of contact for God’s message. It does not follow that the vision was only the consequence of his hunger, as has been suggested by critics who wish to get rid of the supernatural. But the form which it took teaches us how mercifully God is wont to mould His communications according to our needs, and how wisely He shapes them, so as to find entrance through even the lower wants. The commonest bodily needs may become avenues for His truth, if our prayer accompanies our hunger.

The significance of the vision is plain to us, though Peter was ‘much perplexed’ about it. In the light of the event, we understand that the ‘great sheet let down from heaven by four corners,’ and containing all manner of creatures, is the symbol of universal humanity [to use modern language]. The four corners correspond to the four points of the compass,-north, south, east, and west,-the contents to the swarming millions of men. Peter would perceive no more in the command to ‘kill and eat’ than the abrogation of Mosaic restrictions. Meditation was needful to disclose the full extent of the revolution shadowed by the vision and its accompanying words. The old nature of Peter was not so completely changed but that a flash of it breaks out still. The same self-confidence which had led him to ‘rebuke’ Jesus, and to say, ‘This shall not be unto Thee,’ speaks in his unhesitating and irreverent ‘Not so, Lord!’

The naive reason he gives for not obeying-namely, his never having done as he was now bid to do-is charmingly illogical and human. God tells him to do a new thing, and his reason for not doing it is that it is new. Use and wont are set up by us all against the fresh disclosures of God’s will. The command to kill and eat was not repeated. It was but the introduction to the truth which was repeated thrice, the same number of times as Peter had denied his Master and had received his charge to feed His sheep.

That great truth has manifold applications, but its direct purpose as regards Peter is to teach that all restrictions which differentiated Jew from Gentile are abolished. ‘Cleansing’ does not here apply to moral purifying, but to the admission of all mankind to the same standing as the Jew. Therefore the Gospel is to be preached to all men, and the Jewish Christian has no pre-eminence.

Peter’s perplexity as to the meaning of the vision is very intelligible. It was not so plain as to carry its own interpretation, but, like most other of God’s teachings, was explained by circumstances. What was next done made the best commentary on what had just been beheld. While patient reflection is necessary to do due honour to God’s teachings and to discover their bearing on events, it is generally true that events unfold their significance as meditation alone never can. Life is the best commentator on God’s word. The three men down at the door poured light on the vision on the housetop. But the explanation was not left to circumstances. The Spirit directed Peter to go with the messengers, and thus taught him the meaning of the enigmatical words which he had heard from heaven.

It is to be remembered that the Apostle had no need of fresh illumination as to the world-wide preaching of the Gospel. Christ’s commission to ‘the uttermost parts of the earth’ ever rang in his ears, as we may be sure. But what he did need was the lesson that the Gentiles could come into the Church without going through the gate of Judaism. If all peculiar sanctity was gone from the Jew, and all men shared in the ‘cleansing,’ there was no need for keeping up any of the old restrictions, or insisting on Gentiles being first received into the Israelitish community as a stage in their progress towards Christianity.

It took Peter and the others years to digest the lesson given on the housetop, but he began to put it in practice that day. How little he knew the sweep of the truth then declared to him! How little we have learned it yet! All exclusiveness which looks down on classes or races, all monkish asceticism which taboos natural appetites and tastes, all morbid scrupulosity which shuts out from religious men large fields of life, all Pharisaism which says ‘The temple of the Lord are we,’ are smitten to dust by the great words which gather all men into the same ample, impartial divine love, and, in another aspect, give Christian culture and life the charter of freest use of all God’s fair world, and place the distinction between clean and unclean in the spirit of the user rather than in the thing used. ‘Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled. . . is nothing pure.’

59)Acts 10:30-44

Acts

‘GOD IS NO RESPECTER OF PERSONS’

Act. 10:30 - Act. 10:44.

This passage falls into three parts: Cornelius's explanation, Peter's sermon, and the descent of the Spirit on the new converts. The last is the most important, and yet is told most briefly. We may surely recognise the influence of Peter's personal reminiscences in the scale of the narrative, and may remember that Luke and Mark were thrown together in later days.

I. Cornelius repeats what his messengers had already told Peter, but in fuller detail.

He tells how he was occupied when the angel appeared. He was keeping the Jewish hour of prayer, and the fact that the vision came to him as he prayed had attested to him its heavenly origin. If we would see angels, the most likely place to behold them is in the secret place of prayer. He tells, too, that the command to send for Peter was a consequence of God's remembrance of his prayer ['therefore,' Act. 10:32]. His prayers and alms showed that he was 'of the light,' and therefore he was directed to what would yield further light.

The command to send for Peter is noteworthy in two respects. It was, first, a test of humility and obedience. Cornelius, as a Roman officer, would be tempted to feel the usual contempt for one of the subject race, and, unless his eagerness to know more of God's will overbore his pride, to kick at the idea of sending to beg the favour of the presence and instruction of a Jew, and of one, too, who could find no better quarters than a tanner's house. The angel's voice commanded, but it did not compel. Cornelius bore the test, and neither waived aside the vision as a hallucination to which it was absurd for a practical man to attend, nor recoiled from the lowliness of the proposed teacher. He pocketed official and racial loftiness, and, as he emphasises, 'forthwith' despatched his message. It was as if an English official in the Punjab had been sent to a Sikh 'Guru' for teaching.

The other remarkable point about the command is that Philip was probably in Caesarea at the time. Why should Peter have been brought, then, by two visions and two long journeys? The subsequent history explains why. For the storm of criticism in the Jerusalem church provoked by Cornelius's baptism would have raged with tenfold fury if so revolutionary an act had been done by any less authoritative person than the leader of the Apostles. The Lord would stamp His own approval on the deed which marked so great an expansion of the Church, and therefore He makes the first of the Apostles His agent, and that by a double vision.

‘Thou hast well done that thou art come,’-a courteous welcome, with just a trace of the doubt which had occupied Cornelius during the ‘four days,’ whether this unknown Jew would obey so strange an invitation. Courtesy and preparedness to receive the unknown message beautifully blend in Cornelius’s closing words, which do not directly ask Peter to speak, but declare the auditors’ eagerness to hear, as well as their confidence that what he says will be God’s voice.

A variant reading in Act. 10:33 gives ‘in thy sight’ for ‘in the sight of God,’ and has much to recommend it. But in any case we have here the right attitude for us all in the presence of the uttered will and mind of God. Where such open-eared and open-hearted preparedness marks the listeners, feebler teachers than Peter will win converts. The reason why much earnest Christian teaching is vain is the indifference and non-expectant attitude of the hearers, who are not hearkeners. Seed thrown on the wayside is picked up by the birds.

II. Peter’s sermon is, on the whole, much like his other addresses which are abundantly reported in the early part of the Acts.

The great business of the preachers then was to tell the history of Jesus. Christianity is, first, a recital of historical events, from which, no doubt, principles are deduced, and which necessarily lead on to doctrines; but the facts are first.

But the familiar story is told to Cornelius with some variation of tone. And it is prefaced by a great word, which crystallises the large truth that had sprung into consciousness and startling power in Peter, as the result of his own and Cornelius’s experience. He had not previously thought of God as ‘a respecter of persons,’ but the conviction that He was not had never blazed with such sun-clearness before him as it did now. Jewish narrowness had, unconsciously to himself, somewhat clouded it; but these four days had burned in on him, as if it were a new truth, that ‘in every nation’ there may be men accepted of God, because they ‘fear Him and work righteousness.’

That great saying is twisted from its right meaning when it is interpreted as discouraging the efforts of Christians to carry the Gospel to the heathen; for, if the ‘light of nature’ is sufficient, what was Peter sent to Caesarea for? But it is no less maltreated when evangelical Christians fail to grasp its world-wide significance, or doubt that in lands where Christ’s name has not been proclaimed there are souls groping for the light, and seeking to obey the law written on their hearts. That there are such, and that such are ‘accepted of Him,’ and led by His own ways to the fuller light, is obviously taught in these words, and should be a welcome thought to us all.

The tangled utterances which immediately follow, sound as if speech staggered under the weight of the thoughts opening before the speaker. Whatever difficulty attends the construction, the intention is clear,-to contrast the limited scope of the message, as confined to the children of Israel, with its universal destination as now made clear. The statement which in the Authorised and Revised Versions is thrown into a parenthesis is really the very centre of the Apostle’s thought. Jesus, who has hitherto been preached to Israel, is ‘Lord of all,’ and the message concerning Him is now to be proclaimed, not in vague outline and at second hand, as it had hitherto reached Cornelius, but in full detail, and as a message in which he was concerned.

Contrast the beginning and the ending of the discourse,-’the word sent unto the children of Israel’ and ‘every one that believeth on Him shall receive remission of sins.’ A remarkable variation in the text is suggested by Blass in his striking commentary, who would omit ‘Lord’ and read, ‘The word which He sent to the children of Israel, bringing the good tidings of peace through Jesus Christ,-this [word] belongs to all.’ That reading does away with the chief difficulties, and brings out clearly the thought which is more obscurely expressed in a contorted sentence by the present reading.

The subsequent *resume* of the life of Jesus is substantially the same as is found in Peter’s other sermons. But we may note that the highest conceptions of our Lord’s nature are not stated. It is hard to suppose that Peter after Pentecost had not the same conviction as burned in his confession, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ But in these early discourses neither the Divinity and Incarnation nor the atoning sacrifice of Jesus is set forth. He is the Christ, ‘anointed with the Holy

Ghost and with power.' God is with Him [Nicodemus had got as far as that]. He is 'ordained of God to be the judge of quick and dead.'

We note, too, that His teaching is not touched upon, nor any of the profounder aspects of His work as the Revealer of God, but His beneficence and miraculous deliverances of devil-ridden men. His death is declared, but without any of the accusations of His murderers, which, like lance-thrusts, 'pricked' Jewish hearers. Nor is the efficacy of that death as the sacrifice for the world's sin touched upon, but it is simply told as a fact, and set in contrast with the Resurrection. These were the plain facts which had first to be accepted.

The only way of establishing facts is by evidence of eye-witnesses. So Peter twice [Act. 10:39, Act. 10:41] adduces his own and his colleagues' evidence. But the facts are not yet a gospel, unless they are further explained as well as established. Did such things happen? The answer is, 'We saw them.' What did they mean? The answer begins by adducing the 'witness' of the Apostles to a different order of truths, which requires a different sort of witness. Jesus had bidden them 'testify' that He is to be Judge of living and dead; that is, of all mankind. Their witness to that can only rest on His word.

Nor is that all. There is yet another body of 'witnesses' to yet another class of truths. 'All the prophets' bear witness to the great truth which makes the biography of the Man the gospel for all men,- that the deepest want of all men is satisfied through the name which Peter ever rang out as all-powerful to heal and bless. The forgiveness of sins through the manifested character and work of Jesus Christ is given on condition of faith to any and every one who believes, be he Jew or Gentile, Galilean fisherman or Roman centurion. Cornelius may have known little of the prophets, but he knew the burden of sin. He did not know all that we know of Jesus, and of the way in which forgiveness is connected with His work, but he did know now that it was connected, and that this Jesus was risen from the dead, and was to be the Judge. His faith went out to that Saviour, and as he heard he believed.

III. Therefore the great gift, attesting the divine acceptance of him and the rest of the hearers, came at once.

There had been no confession of their faith, much less had there been baptism, or laying on of Apostolic hands. The sole qualification and condition for the reception of the Spirit which John lays down in his Gospel when he speaks of the 'Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive,' was present here, and it was enough. Peter and his brethren might have hesitated about baptizing an uncircumcised believer. The Lord of the Church showed Peter that He did not hesitate.

So, like a true disciple, Peter followed Christ's lead, and though 'they of the circumcision' were struck with amazement, he said to himself, 'Who am I, that I should withstand God?' and opened his heart to welcome these new converts as possessors of 'like precious faith' as was demonstrated by their possession of the same Spirit. Would that Peter's willingness to recognise all who manifest the Spirit of Christ, whatever their relation to ecclesiastical regulations, had continued the law and practice of the Church!

60)Acts 11:1-18

Acts

PETER'S APOLOGIA

Act. 11:1 - Act. 11:18.

Peter's action in regard to Cornelius precipitated a controversy which was bound to come if the Church was to be anything more than a Jewish sect. It brought to light the first tendency to form a party in the Church. 'They. . . of the circumcision' were probably 'certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed,' and were especially zealous for all the separating prescriptions of the ceremonial law. They were scarcely a party as yet, but the little rift was destined to grow, and they became Paul's bitterest opponents through all his life, dogging him with calumnies and counterworking his toil. It is a black day for a Church when differences of opinion lead to the formation of cliques. Zeal for truth is sadly apt to enlist spite, malice, and blindness to a manifest work of God, as its allies.

Poor Peter, no doubt, expected that the brethren would rejoice with him in the extension of the Gospel to 'the Gentiles,' but his reception in Jerusalem was very unlike his hopes. The critics did not venture to cavil at his preaching to Gentiles. Probably none of them had any objection to such being welcomed into the Church, for they can scarcely have wished to make the door into it narrower than that into the synagogue, but they insisted that there was no way in but through the synagogue. By all means, said they, let Gentiles come, but they must first become Jews, by submitting to circumcision and living as Jews do. Thus they did not attack Peter for preaching to the Roman centurion and his men, but for eating with them. That eating not only was a breach of the law, but it implied the reception of Cornelius and his company into the household of God, and so destroyed the whole fabric of Jewish exclusiveness. We condemn such narrowness, but do many of us not practise it in other forms? Wherever Christians demand adoption of external usages, over and above exercise of penitent faith, as a condition of brotherly recognition, they are walking in the steps of them 'of the circumcision.'

Peter's answer to the critics is the true answer to all similar hedging up of the Church, for he contents himself with showing that he was only following God's action in every step of the way which he took, and that God, by the gift of the divine Spirit, had shown that He had taken these uncircumcised men into His fellowship, before Peter dared to 'eat with them.' He points to four facts which show God's hand in the matter, and thinks that he has done enough to vindicate himself thereby. The first is his vision on the housetop. He tells that he was praying when it came, and what God shows to a praying spirit is not likely to mislead. He tells that he was 'in a trance,'-a condition in which prophets had of old received their commands. That again was a guarantee for the divine origin of the vision in the eyes of every Jew, though nowadays it is taken by anti-supernaturalists as a demonstration of its morbidness and unreliableness. He tells of his reluctance to obey the command to 'kill and eat.' A flash of the old brusque spirit impelled his flat refusal, 'Not so, Lord!' and his daring to argue with his Lord still, as he had done with Him on earth. He tells of the interpreting and revolutionary word, evoked by his audacious objection, and then he tells how 'this was done thrice,' so that there could be no mistake in his remembrance of it, and then that the whole was drawn up into heaven,-a sign that the purpose of the vision was accomplished when that word was spoken. What, then, was the meaning of it?

Clearly it swept away at once the legal distinction of clean and unclean meats, and of it, too, may be spoken what Mark, Peter's mouthpiece, writes of earthly words of Christ's: 'This He said, making all meats clean.' But with the sweeping away of that distinction much else goes, for it necessarily involves the abrogation of the whole separating ordinances of the law, and of the distinction between clean and unclean persons. Its wider application was not seen at the moment, but it flashed on him, no doubt, when face to face with Cornelius. God had cleansed him, in that his prayers had 'gone up for a memorial before God,' and so Peter saw that 'in every nation,' and not among Jews only, there might be men cleansed by God. What was true of Cornelius must be true of many others. So the whole distinction between Jew and Gentile was cut up by the roots. Little did Peter know the width of the principle revealed to him then, as all of us know but little of the full application of many truths which we believe. But he obeyed so much of the command as he understood, and more of it gradually dawned on his mind, as will always be the case if we obey what we know.

The second fact was the coincident arrival of the messengers and the distinct command to accompany them. Peter could distinguish quite assuredly his own thoughts from divine instructions, as his account of the dialogue in the trance shows. How he distinguished is not told; that he distinguished is. The coincidence in time clearly pointed to one divine hand working at both ends of the line,- Caesarea and Joppa. It interpreted the vision which had 'much perplexed' Peter as to what it 'might mean.' But he was not left to interpret it by his own pondering. The Spirit spoke authoritatively, and the whole force of his justification of himself depends on the fact that he knew that the impulse which made him set out to Caesarea was not his own. If the reading of the Revised Version is adopted in Act. 11:12, 'making no distinction,' the command plainly referred to the vision, and showed Peter that he was to make no distinction of 'clean and unclean' in his intercourse with these Gentiles.

The third fact is the vision to Cornelius, of which he was told on arriving. The two visions fitted into each other, confirmed each other, interpreted each other. We may estimate the greatness of the step in the development of the Church which the admission of Cornelius into it made, and the obstacles on both sides, by the fact that both visions were needed to bring these two men together. Peter would never have dreamed of going with the messengers if he had not had his narrowness beaten out of him on the housetop, and Cornelius would never have dreamed of sending to Joppa if he had not seen the angel. The cleft between Jew and Gentile was so wide that God's hand had to be applied on both sides to press the separated parts together. He had plainly done it, and that was Peter's defence.

The fourth fact is the gift of the Spirit to these Gentiles. That is the crown of Peter's vindication, and his question, 'Who was I, that I could withstand God?' might be profitably pondered and applied by those whose ecclesiastical theories oblige them to deny the 'orders' and the 'validity of the sacraments' and the very name of a Church, to bodies of Christians who do not conform to their polity. If God, by the gift of His Spirit manifest in its fruits, owns them, they have the true 'notes of the Church,' and 'they of the circumcision' who recoil from recognising them do themselves more harm thereby than they inflict on these. 'As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God,' even though some brother may be 'angry' that the Father welcomes them.

61)Acts 11:20-21

Acts

THE FIRST PREACHING AT ANTIOCH

Act. 11:20 - Act. 11:21.

Thus simply does the historian tell one of the greatest events in the history of the Church. How great it was will appear if we observe that the weight of authority among critics and commentators sees here an extension of the message of salvation to Greeks, that is, to pure heathens, and not a mere preaching to Hellenists, that is, to Greek-speaking Jews born outside Palestine.

If that be correct, this was a great stride forward in the development of the Church. It needed a vision to overcome the scruples of Peter, and impel him to the bold innovation of preaching to Cornelius and his household, and, as we know, his doing so gave grave offence to some of his brethren in

Jerusalem. But in the case before us, some Cypriote and African Jews-men of no note in the Church, whose very names have perished, with no official among them, with no vision nor command to impel them, with no precedent to encourage them, with nothing but the truth in their minds and the impulses of Christ's love in their hearts-solve the problem of the extension of Christ's message to the heathen, and, quite unconscious of the greatness of their act, do the thing about the propriety of which there had been such serious question in Jerusalem.

This boldness becomes even more remarkable if we notice that the incident of our text may have taken place before Peter's visit to Cornelius. The verse before our text, 'They which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled, . . . preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only,' is almost a *verbatim* repetition of words in an earlier chapter, and evidently suggests that the writer is returning to that point of time, in order to take up another thread of his narrative contemporaneous with those already pursued. If so, three distinct lines of expansion appear to have started from the dispersion of the Jerusalem church in the persecution-namely, Philip's mission to Samaria, Peter's to Cornelius, and this work in Antioch. Whether prior in time or no, the preaching in the latter city was plainly quite independent of the other two. It is further noteworthy that this, the effort of a handful of unnamed men, was the true 'leader'-the shoot that grew. Philip's work, and Peter's so far as we know, were side branches, which came to little; this led on to a church at Antioch, and so to Paul's missionary work, and all that came of that.

The incident naturally suggests some thoughts bearing on the general subject of Christian work, which we now briefly present.

I. Notice the spontaneous impulse which these men obeyed.

Persecution drove the members of the Church apart, and, as a matter of course, wherever they went they took their faith with them, and, as a matter of course, spoke about it. The coals were scattered from the hearth in Jerusalem by the armed heel of violence. That did not put the fire out, but only spread it, for wherever they were flung they kindled a blaze. These men had no special injunction 'to preach the Lord Jesus.' They do not seem to have adopted this line of action deliberately, or of set purpose. 'They believed, and therefore spoke.’ A spontaneous impulse, and nothing more, leads them on. They find themselves rejoicing in a great Saviour-Friend. They see all around them men who need Him, and that is enough. They obey the promptings of the voice within, and lay the foundations of the first Gentile Church.

Such a spontaneous impulse is ever the natural result of our own personal possession of Christ. In regard to worldly good the instinct, except when overcome by higher motives, is to keep the treasure to oneself. But even in the natural sphere there are possessions which to have is to long to impart, such as truth and knowledge. And in the spiritual sphere, it is emphatically the case that real possession is always accompanied by a longing to impart. The old prophet spoke a universal truth when he said: ‘Thy word was as a fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.’ If we have found Christ for ourselves, we shall undoubtedly wish to speak forth our knowledge of His love. Convictions which are deep demand expression. Emotion which is strong needs utterance. If our hearts have any fervour of love to Christ in them, it will be as natural to tell it forth, as tears are to sorrow or smiles to happiness. True, there is a reticence in profound feeling, and sometimes the deepest love can only ‘love and be silent,’ and there is a just suspicion of loud or vehement protestations of Christian emotion, as of any emotion. But for all that, it remains true that a heart warmed with the love of Christ needs to express its love, and will give it forth, as certainly as light must radiate from its centre, or heat from a fire.

Then, true kindliness of heart creates the same impulse. We cannot truly possess the treasure for ourselves without pity for those who have it not. Surely there is no stranger contradiction than that Christian men and women can be content to keep Christ as if He were their special property, and have their spirits untouched into any likeness of His divine pity for the multitudes who were as ‘sheep having no shepherd.’ What kind of Christians must they be who think of Christ as ‘a Saviour for me,’ and take no care to set Him forth as ‘a Saviour for you’? What should we think of men in a shipwreck who were content to get into the lifeboat, and let everybody else drown? What should we think of people in a famine feasting sumptuously on their private stores, whilst women were boiling their children for a meal and men fighting with dogs for garbage on the dunghills? ‘He that withholdeth bread, the people shall curse him.’ What of him who withholds the Bread of Life, and all the while claims to be a follower of the Christ, who gave His flesh for the life of the world?

Further, loyalty to Christ creates the same impulse. If we are true to our Lord, we shall feel that we cannot but speak up and out for Him, and that all the more where His name is unloved and unhonoured. He has left His good fame very much in our hands, and the very same impulse which hurries words to our lips when we hear the name of an absent friend calumniated should make us speak for Him. He is a doubtfully loyal subject who, if he lives among rebels, is afraid to show his colours. He is already a coward, and is on the way to be a traitor. Our Master has made us His witnesses. He has placed in our hands, as a sacred deposit, the honour of His name. He has entrusted to us, as His selectest sign of confidence, the carrying out of the purposes for which on earth His blood was shed, on which in heaven His heart is set. How can we be loyal to Him if we are not forced by a mighty constraint to respond to His great tokens of trust in us, and if we know nothing of that spirit which said: ‘Necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!’ I do not say that a man cannot be a Christian unless he knows and obeys this impulse. But, at least, we may safely say that he is a very weak and imperfect Christian who does not.

II. This incident suggests the universal obligation on all Christians to make known Christ.

These men were not officials. In these early days the Church had a very loose organisation. But the fugitives in our narrative seem to have had among them none even of the humble office-bearers of primitive times. Neither had they any command or commission from Jerusalem. No one there had given them authority, or, as would appear, knew anything of their proceedings. Could there be a more striking illustration of the great truth that whatever varieties of function may be committed to various officers in the Church, the work of telling Christ’s love to men belongs to every one who has found it for himself or herself? ‘This honour have all the saints.’

Whatever may be our differences of opinion as to Church order and offices, they need not interfere with our firm grasp of this truth. ‘Preaching Christ,’ in the sense in which that expression is used in the New Testament, implies no one special method of proclaiming the glad tidings. A word written in a letter to a friend, a sentence dropped in casual conversation, a lesson to a child on a mother's lap, or any other way by which, to any listeners, the great story of the Cross is told, is as truly-often more truly-preaching Christ as the set discourse which has usurped the name.

We profess to believe in the priesthood of all believers, we are ready enough to assert it in opposition to sacerdotal assumptions. Are we as ready to recognise it as laying a very real responsibility upon us, and involving a very practical inference as to our own conduct? We all have the power, therefore we all have the duty. For what purpose did God give us the blessing of knowing Christ ourselves? Not for our own well-being alone, but that through us the blessing might be still further diffused.

'Heaven doth with us as men with torches do,
Not light them for themselves.'

'God hath shined into our hearts' that we might give to others 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' Every Christian is solemnly bound to fulfil this divine intention, and to take heed to the imperative command, 'Freely ye have received, freely give.'

III. Observe, further, the simple message which they proclaimed.

'Preaching the Lord Jesus,' says the text-or more accurately perhaps-'preaching Jesus as Lord.' The substance, then, of their message was just this-proclamation of the person and dignity of their Master, the story of the human life of the Man, the story of the divine sacrifice and self-bestowment by which He had bought the right of supreme rule over every heart; and the urging of His claims on all who heard of His love. And this, their message, was but the proclamation of their own personal experience. They had found Jesus to be for themselves Lover and Lord, Friend and Saviour of their souls, and the joy they had received they sought to share with these Greeks, worshippers of gods and lords many.

Surely anybody can deliver that message who has had that experience. All have not the gifts which would fit for public speech, but all who have 'tasted that the Lord is gracious' can somehow tell how gracious He is. The first Christian sermon was very short, and it was very efficacious, for it 'brought to Jesus' the whole congregation. Here it is: 'He first findeth his brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messias.' Surely we can all say that, if we have found Him. Surely we shall all long to say it, if we are glad that we have found Him, and if we love our brother.

Notice, too, how simple the form as well as the substance of the message. 'They *spake*.' It was no set address, no formal utterance, but familiar, natural talk to ones and twos, as opportunity offered. The form was so simple that we may say that there was none. What we want is that Christian people should speak anyhow. What does the shape of the cup matter? What does it matter whether it be gold or clay? The main thing is that it shall bear the water of life to some thirsty lip. All Christians have to preach, as the word is used here, that is, to tell the good news. Their task is to carry a message-no refinement of words is needed for that-arguments are not needed. They have to tell it simply and faithfully, as one who only cares to repeat what he has had given to him. They have to tell it confidently, as having proved it true. They have to tell it beseechingly, as loving the souls to whom they bring it. Surely we can all do that, if we ourselves are living on Christ and have drunk into His Spirit. Let His mighty salvation, experienced by yourselves, be the substance of your message, and let the form of it be guided by the old words, 'It shall be, when the Spirit of the Lord is come upon thee, that thou shalt do as occasion shall serve thee.'

IV. Notice, lastly, the mighty Helper who prospered their work.

'The hand of the Lord was with them.' The very keynote of this Book of the Acts is the work of the ascended Christ in and for His Church. At every turning-point in the history, and throughout the whole narratives, forms of speech like this occur, bearing witness to the profound conviction of the writer that Christ's active energy was with His servants, and Christ's Hand the origin of all their security and of all their success.

So this is a statement of a permanent and universal fact. We do not labour alone; however feeble our hands, that mighty Hand is laid on them to direct their movements and to lend strength to their weakness. It is not our speech which will secure results, but His presence with our words which will bring it about that even through them a great number shall believe and turn to the

Lord. There is our encouragement when we are despondent. There is our rebuke when we are self-confident. There is our stimulus when we are indolent. There is our quietness when we are impatient. If ever we are tempted to think our task heavy, let us not forget that He who set it helps us to do it, and from His throne shares in all our toils, the Lord still, as of old, working with us. If ever we feel that our strength is nothing, and that we stand solitary against many foes, let us fall back upon the peace-giving thought that one man against the world, with Christ to help him, is always in the majority, and let us leave issues of our work in His hands, whose hand will guard the seed sown in weakness, whose smile will bless the springing thereof.

How little any of us know what will become of our poor work, under His fostering care! How little these men knew that they were laying the foundations of the great change which was to transform the Christian community from a Jewish sect into a world-embracing Church! So is it ever. We know not what we do when simply and humbly we speak His name. The far-reaching results escape our eyes. Then, sow the seed, and He will 'give it a body as it pleaseth Him.' On earth we may never know the fruits of our labours. They will be among the surprises of heaven, where many a solitary worker shall exclaim with wonder, as he looks on the hitherto unknown children whom God hath given him, 'Behold, I was left alone; these, where had they been?' Then, though our names may have perished from earthly memories, like those of the simple fugitives of Cyprus and Cyrene, who 'were the first that ever burst' into the night of heathendom with the torch of the Gospel in their hands, they will be written in the Lamb's book of life, and He will confess them in the presence of His Father in heaven.

62)Acts 11:23

Acts

THE EXHORTATION OF BARNABAS 1

Act. 11:23.

The first purely heathen converts had been brought into the Church by the nameless men of Cyprus and Cyrene, private persons with no office or commission to preach, who, in simple obedience to the instincts of a Christian heart, leaped the barrier which seemed impassable to the Church in Jerusalem, and solved the problem over which Apostles were hesitating. Barnabas is sent down to see into this surprising new phenomenon, and his mission, though probably not hostile, was, at all events, one of inquiry and doubt. But like a true man, he yielded to facts, and widened his theory to suit them. He saw the tokens of Christian life in these Gentile converts, and that compelled him to admit that the Church was wider than some of his friends in Jerusalem thought. A pregnant lesson for modern theorists who, on one ground or another of doctrine or of orders, narrow the great conception of Christ's Church! Can you see 'the grace of God' in the people? Then they are in the Church, whatever becomes of your theories, and the sooner you let them out so as to fit the facts, the better for you and for them.

Satisfied as to their true Christian character, Barnabas sets himself to help them to grow. Now, remember how recently they had been converted; how, from their Gentile origin, they can have had next to no systematic instruction; how the taint of heathen morals, such as were common in that luxurious, corrupt Antioch, must have clung to them; how unformed must have been their loose Church organisation- and remembering all this, think of this one exhortation as summing up all that Barnabas had to say to them. He does not say, Do this, or Believe that, or Organise the other; but he says, Stick to Jesus Christ the Lord. On this commandment hangs all the law; it is the one all-inclusive summary of the duties of the Christian life.

So, brethren and fathers, I venture to take these words now, as containing large lessons for us all, appropriate at all times, and especially in a sermon on such an occasion as the present.

We may deal with the thoughts suggested by these words very simply, just looking at the points as they lie-what Barnabas *saw*, what he *felt*, what he *said*.

I. What Barnabas saw.

The grace of God here has very probably the specific meaning of the miracle-working gift of the Holy Spirit. That is rendered probable by the analogy of other instances recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, such as Peter’s experience at Caesarea, where all his hesitations and reluctance were swept away when ‘the Holy Ghost fell on them as on us at the beginning, and they spake with tongues.’ If so, what convinced Barnabas that these uncircumcised Gentiles were Christians like himself, may have been their similar possession of the visible and audible effects of that gift of God. But the language does not compel this interpretation; and the absence of all distinct reference to these extraordinary powers as existing there, among the new converts at Antioch, may be intended to mark a difference in the nature of the evidence. At any rate, the possibly intentional generality of the expression is significant and fairly points to an extension of the spiritual gifts much beyond the limits of miraculous powers. There are other ways by which the grace of God may be seen and heard, thank God! than by speaking with tongues and working miracles; and the first lesson of our text is that wherever that grace is made visible by its appropriate manifestations, there we are to recognise a brother.

Augustine said, ‘Where Christ is there is the Church,’ and that is true, but vague; for the question still remains, ‘And where *is* Christ?’ The only satisfying answer is, Christ is wherever Christlike men manifest a life drawn from, and kindred with, His life. And so the true form of the dictum for practical purposes comes to be: ‘Where the grace of Christ is visible, there is the Church.’

That great truth is sinned against and denied in many ways. Most chiefly, perhaps, by the successors in modern garb of the more Jewish portion of that Church at Jerusalem who sent Barnabas to Antioch. They had no objection to Gentiles entering the Church, but they must come in by the way of circumcision; they quite believed that it was Christ who saved, and His grace which sanctified, but they thought that His grace would only flow in a given channel; and so do their modern representatives, who exalt sacraments, and consequently priests, to the same place as the Judaizers in the early Church did the rite of the old Covenant. Such teachers have much to say about the notes of the Church, and have elaborated a complicated system of identification by which you may know the genuine article, and unmask impostors. The attempt is about as wise as to try to weave a network fine enough to keep back a stream. The water will flow through the closest meshes, and when Christ pours out the Spirit, He is apt to do it in utter disregard of notes of the Church, and of channels of sacramental grace.

We Congregationalists, who have no orders, no sacraments, no Apostolic succession; who in order not to break loose from Christ and conscience have had to break loose from ‘Catholic tradition,’ and have been driven to separation by the true schismatics, who have insisted on another bond of Church unity than union to Christ, are denied nowadays a place in His Church.

The true answer to all that arrogant assumption and narrow pedantry which confine the free flow of the water of life to the conduits of sacraments and orders, and will only allow the wind that bloweth where it listeth to make music in the pipes of their organs, is simply the homely one which shivered a corresponding theory to atoms in the fair open mind of Barnabas.

The Spirit of Christ at work in men’s hearts, making them pure and gentle, simple and unworldly, refining their characters, elevating their aims, toning their whole being into accord with the music of His life, is the true proof that men are Christians, and that communities of such men are Churches of His. Mysterious efficacy is claimed for Christian ordinances. Well, the question is a fair one: Is the type of Christian character produced within these sacred limits, which we are hopelessly outside, conspicuously higher and more manifestly Christlike than that nourished by no sacraments, and grown not under glass, but in the unsheltered open? Has not God set His seal on these communities to which we belong? With many faults for which we have to be, and are, humble before Him, we can point to the lineaments of the family likeness, and say, ‘Are they Hebrews? so are we. Are they Israelites? so are we. Are they the seed of Abraham? so are we.’

Once get that truth wrought into men’s minds, that the true test of Christianity is the visible presence of a grace in character which is evidently God’s, and whole mountains of prejudice and error melt away. We are just as much in danger of narrowing the Church in accordance with our narrowness as any ‘sacramentarian’ of them all. We are tempted to think that no good thing can grow up under the baleful shadow of that tree, a sacerdotal Christianity. We are tempted to think that all the good people are Dissenters, just as Churchmen are to think that nobody can be a Christian who prays without a prayer-book. Our own type of denominational character-and there is such a thing-comes to be accepted by us as the all but exclusive ideal of a devout man; and we have not imagination enough to conceive, nor charity enough to believe in, the goodness which does not speak our dialect, nor see with our eyes. Dogmatical narrowness has built as high walls as ceremonial Christianity has reared round the fold of Christ, And the one deliverance for us all from the transformed selfishness, which has so much to do with shaping all these wretched narrow theories of the Church, is to do as this man did-open our eyes with sympathetic eagerness to see God's grace in many an unexpected place, and square our theories with His dealings.

It used to be an axiom that there was no life in the sea beyond a certain limit of a few hundred feet. It was learnedly and conclusively demonstrated that pressure and absence of light, and I know not what beside, made life at greater depths impossible. It was proved that in such conditions creatures could not live. And then, when that was settled, the *Challenger* put down her dredge five miles, and brought up healthy and good-sized living things, with eyes in their heads, from that enormous depth. So, then, the savant had to ask, *How* can there be life? instead of asserting that there cannot be; and, no doubt, the answer will be forth coming some day.

We have all been too much accustomed to set arbitrary limits to the diffusion of the life of Christ among men. Let us rather rejoice when we see forms of beauty, which bear the mark of His hand, drawn from depths that we deemed waste, and thankfully confess that the bounds of our expectation, and the framework of our institutions, do not confine the breadth of His working, nor the sweep of His grace.

II. What Barnabas felt.

'He was glad.' It was a triumph of Christian principle to recognise the grace of God under new forms, and in so strange a place. It was a still greater triumph to hail it with rejoicing. One need not have wondered if the acknowledgment of a fact, dead in the teeth of all his prejudices, and seemingly destructive of some profound convictions, had been somewhat grudging. Even a good, true man might have been bewildered and reluctant to let go so much as was destroyed by the admission-'Then hath God granted to the Gentiles also repentance unto life,'-and might have been pardoned if he had not been able to do more than acquiesce and hold his peace. We are scarcely just to these early Jewish Christians when we wonder at their hesitation on this matter, and are apt to forget the enormous strength of the prejudices and sacred conviction which they had to overcome. Hence the context seems to consider that the quick recognition of Christian character on the part of Barnabas, and his gladness at the discovery, need explanation, and so it adds, with special reference to these, as it would seem, 'for he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith,' as if nothing short of such characteristics could have sufficiently emancipated him from the narrowness that would have refused to discern the good, or the bitterness that would have been offended at it.

So, dear brethren, we may well test ourselves with this question: Does the discovery of the working of the grace of God outside the limits of our own Churches and communions excite a quick, spontaneous emotion of gladness in *our* hearts? It may upset some of our theories; it may teach us that things which we thought very important, 'distinctive principles' and the like, are not altogether as precious as we thought them; it may require us to give up some pleasant ideas of our superiority, and of the necessary conformity of all good people to our type. Are we willing to let them all go, and without a twinge of envy or a hanging back from prejudice, to welcome the discovery that 'God fulfils Himself in many ways'? Have we schooled ourselves to say honestly, 'Therein I do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice'?

There is much to overcome if we would know this Christlike gladness. The good and the bad in us may both oppose it. The natural deeper interest in the well-being of the Churches of our own faith and order, the legitimate ties which unite us with these, our conscientious convictions, our friendships, the *esprit de corps* born of fighting shoulder to shoulder, will, of course, make our sympathies flow most quickly and deeply in denominational channels. And then come in abundance of less worthy motives, some altogether bad and some the exaggeration of what is good, and we get swallowed up in our own individual work, or in that of our ‘denomination,’ and have but a very tepid joy in anybody else’s prosperity.

In almost every town of England, your Churches, and those to which I belong, with Presbyterians and Wesleyans, stand side by side. The conditions of our work make some rivalry inevitable, and none of us, I suppose, object to that. It helps to keep us all diligent: a sturdy adherence to our several ‘distinctive principles’ and an occasional hard blow in fair fight on their behalf we shall all insist upon. Our brotherhood is all the more real for frank speech, and ‘the animated No!’ is an essential in all intercourse which is not stagnant or mawkish. There is much true fellowship and much good feeling among all these. But we want far more of an honest rejoicing in each other’s success, a quicker and truer manly sympathy with each other’s work, a fuller consciousness of our solidarity in Christ, and a clearer exhibition of it before the world.

And on a wider view, as our eyes travel over the wide field of Christendom, and our memories go back over the long ages of the story of the Church, let gladness, and not wonder or reluctance, be the temper with which we see the graces of Christian character lifting their meek blossoms in corners strange to us, and breathing their fragrance over the pastures of the wilderness. In many a cloister, in many a hermit’s cell, from amidst the smoke of incense, through the dust of controversies, we should see, and be glad to see, faces bright with the radiance caught from Christ. Let us set a jealous watch over our hearts that self-absorption, or denominationalism, or envy do not make the sight a pain instead of a joy; and let us remember that the eye-salve which will purge our dim sight to behold the grace of God in all its forms is that grace itself, which ever recognises its own kindred, and lives in the gladness of charity, and the joy of beholding a brother’s good. If we are to have eyes to know the grace of God when we see it, and a heart to rejoice when we know it, we must get them as Barnabas got his, and be good men, because we are full of the Holy Ghost, and full of the Holy Ghost because we are full of faith.

III. What Barnabas said.

‘He exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.’ The first thing that strikes one about this all-sufficient directory for Christian life is the emphasis with which it sets forth ‘the Lord’ as the one object to be grasped and held. The sum of all objective Religion is Christ-the sum of all subjective Religion is cleaving to Him. A living Person to be laid hold of, and a personal relation to that Person, such is the conception of Religion, whether considered as revelation or as inward life, which underlies this exhortation. Whether we listen to His own words about Himself, and mark the altogether unprecedented way in which He was His own theme, and the unique decisiveness and plainness with which He puts His own personality before us as the Incarnate Truth, the pattern for all human conduct, the refuge and the rest for the world of weary ones; or whether we give ear to the teaching of His Apostles; from whatever point of view we approach Christianity, it all resolves itself into the person of Jesus Christ. He is the *Revelation* of God; theology, properly so called, is but the formulating of the facts which He gives us; and for the modern world the alternative is, Christ the manifested God, or no God at all, other than the shadow of a name. He is the perfect *Exemplar* of humanity! The law of life and the power to fulfil the law are both in Him; and the superiority of Christian morality consists not in this or that isolated precept, but in the embodiment of all goodness in His life, and in the new motive which He supplies for keeping the commandment. Wrenched away from Him, Christian morality has no being. He is the sacrifice for the world, the salvation of which flows from what He does, and not merely from what He taught or was. His personality is the foundation of His work, and the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation is all contained in the name of Jesus.

There is a constant tendency to separate the results of Christ’s life and death, whether considered as revelation, atonement, or ethics, from Him, and unconsciously to make these the sum of our Religion, and the object of our faith. Especially is this the case in times of restless thought and eager canvassing of the very foundations of religious belief, like the present. Therefore it is wholesome for us all to be brought back to the pregnant simplicity of the thought which underlies this text, and to mark how vividly these early Christians apprehended a living Lord as the sum and substance of all which they had to grasp.

There is a whole world between the man to whom God’s revelation consists in certain doctrines given to us by Jesus Christ, and the man to whom it consists in that Christ Himself. Grasping a living person is not the same as accepting a proposition. True, the propositions are about Him, and we do not know Him without them. But equally true, we need to be reminded that *He* is our Saviour and not *they*, and that God has revealed Himself to us not in words and sentences but in a life.

For, alas! the doctrinal element has overborne the personal among all Churches and all schools of thought, and in the necessary process of formulating and systematising the riches which are in Jesus, we are all apt to confound the creeds with the Christ, and so to manipulate Christianity until, instead of being the revelation of a Person and a gospel, it has become a system of divinity. Simple, devout souls have to complain that they cannot find even a dead Christ, to say nothing of a living one, for the theologians have 'taken away their Lord, and they know not where they have laid Him.'

It is, therefore, to be reckoned as a distinct gain that one result of the course of more recent thought, both among friends and foes, has been to make all men feel more than before, that all revelation is contained in the living person of Jesus Christ. So did the Church believe before creeds were. So it is coming to feel again, with a consciousness enriched and defined by the whole body of doctrine, which has flowed from Him during all the ages. That solemn, gracious Figure rises day by day more clearly before men, whether they love Him or no, as the vital centre of this great whole of doctrines, laws, institutions, which we call Christianity. Round the story of His life the final struggle is to be waged. The foe feels that, so long as that remains, all other victories count for nothing. We feel that if that goes, there is nothing to keep. The principles and the precepts will perish alike, as the fair palace of the old legend, that crumbled to dust when its builder died. But so long as He stands before mankind as He is painted in the Gospel, it will endure. If all else were annihilated, Churches, creeds and all, leave us these four Gospels, and all else would be evolved again. The world knows now, and the Church has always known, though it has not always been true to the significance of the fact, that Jesus Christ is Christianity, and that because He lives, it will live also.

And consequently the sum of all personal religion is this simple act described here as *cleaving to Him*.

Need I do more than refer to the rich variety of symbols and forms of expression under which that thought is put alike by the Master and by His servants? Deepest of all are His own great words, of which our text is but a feeble echo, ‘Abide in Me, and I in you.’ Fairest of all is that lovely emblem of the vine, setting forth the sweet mystery of our union with Him. Far as it is from the outmost pliant tendril to the root, one life passes to the very extremities, and every cluster swells and reddens and mellows because of its mysterious flow. ‘So also is Christ.’ We remember how often the invitation flowed from His lips, *Come* unto Me; how He was wont to beckon men away from self and the world with the great command, *Follow* Me; how He explained the secret of all true life to consist in *eating* Him. We may recall, too, the emphasis and perpetual reiteration with which Paul speaks of being ‘in Jesus’ as the condition of all blessedness, power, and righteousness; and the emblems which he so often employs of the building bound into a whole on the foundation from which it derives its stability, of the body compacted and organised into a whole by the head from which it derives its life.

We begin to be Christians, as this context tells us, when we ‘turn to the Lord.’ We continue to be Christians, as Barnabas reminded these ignorant beginners, by ‘cleaving to the Lord.’ Seeing, then, that our great task is to preserve that which we have as the very foundation of our Christian life, clearly the truest method of so keeping it will be the constant repetition of the act by which we got it at first. In other words, faith joined us to Christ, and continuously reiterated acts of faith keep us united to Him. So, if I may venture, fathers and brethren, to cast my words into the form of exhortation, even to such an audience as the present, I would earnestly say, Let us cleave to Christ by continual renewal of our first faith in Him.

The longest line may be conceived of as produced simply by the motion of its initial point. So should our lives be, our progress not consisting in leaving our early acts of faith behind us, but in repeating them over and over again till the points coalesce in one unbroken line which goes straight to the Throne and Heart of Jesus. True, the repetition should be accompanied with fuller knowledge, with calmer certitude, and should come from a heart ennobled and encircled by a Christ-possessing past. As in some great symphony the theme which was given out in low notes on one poor instrument recurs over and over again, embroidered with varying harmonies, and unfolding a richer music, till it swells into all the grandeur of the triumphant close, so our lives should be bound into a unity, and in their unity bound to Christ by the constant renewal of our early faith, and the fathers should come round again to the place which they occupied when as children they first knew Him that is ‘from the beginning’ to the end one and the same.

Such constant reiteration is needed, too, because yesterday’s trust has no more power to secure to-day’s union than the shreds of cloth and nails which hold last year’s growth to the wall will fasten this year’s shoots. Each moment must be united to Christ by its own act of faith, or it will be separated from Him. So living in the Lord we shall be strong and wise, happy and holy. So dying in the Lord we shall be of the dead who are blessed. So sleeping in Jesus we shall at the last be found in Him at that day, and shall be raised up together, and made to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

But more specially let us cleave to Christ by habitual contemplation. There can be no real continuous closeness of intercourse with Him, except by thought ever recurring to Him amidst all the tumult of our busy days. I do not mean professional thinking or controversial thinking, of which we ministers have more than enough. There is another mood of mind in which to approach our Lord than these, a mood sadly unfamiliar, I am afraid, in these days: when poor Mary has hardly a chance of a reputation for ‘usefulness’ by the side of busy, bustling Martha-that still contemplation of the truth which we possess, not with the view of discovering its foundations, or investigating its applications, or even of increasing our knowledge of its contents, but of bringing our own souls more completely under its influence, and saturating our being with its fragrance. The Church has forgotten how to meditate. We are all so occupied arguing and deducing and elaborating, that we have no time for retired, still contemplation, and therefore lose the finest aroma of the truth we profess to believe. Many of us are so busy thinking about Christianity that we have lost our hold of Christ. Sure I am that there are few things more needed by our modern religion than the old exhortation, ‘Come, My people, enter into thy chambers and shut thy doors about thee.’ Cleave to the Lord by habitual play of meditative thought on the treasures hidden in His name, and waiting like gold in the quartz, to be the prize of our patient sifting and close gaze.

And when the great truths embodied in Him stand clear before us, then let us remember that we have not done with them when we have *seen* them. Next must come into exercise the moral side of faith, the voluntary act of trust, the casting ourselves on Him whom we behold, the making our own of the blessings which He holds out to us. Flee to Christ as to our strong habitation to which we may continually resort. Hold tightly by Christ with a grasp which nothing can slacken [that whitens your very knuckles as you clutch Him], lean on Christ all your weight and all your burdens. Cleave to the Lord with full purpose of heart.

Let us cleave to the Lord by constant outgoings of our love to Him. That is the bond which unites human spirits together in the only real union, and Scripture teaches us to see in the sweetest, sacredest, closest tie that men and women can know, a real, though faint, shadow of the far deeper and truer union between Christ and us. The same love which is the bond of perfectness between man and man, is the bond between us and Christ. In no dreamy, semi-pantheistic fusion of the believer with his Lord do we find the true conception of the unity of Christ and His Church, but in a union which preserves the individualities lest it should slay the love. Faith knits us to Christ, and faith is the mother of love, which maintains the blessed union. So let us not be ashamed of the *emotional* side of our religion, nor deem that we can cleave to Christ unless our hearts twine their tendrils round Him, and our love pours its odorous treasures on His sacred feet, not without weeping and embraces. Cold natures may carp, but Love is justified of her children, and Christ accepts the homage that has a heart in it. Cleaving to the Lord is not merely love, but it is impossible without it. The order is Faith, Love, Obedience-that threefold cord knits men to Christ, and Christ to men. For the understanding, a continuous grasp of Him as the object of thought. For the heart, a continuous outgoing to Him as the object of our love. For the will, a continuous submission to Him as the Lord of our obedience. For the whole nature, a continuous cleaving to Him as the object of our faith and worship.

Such is the true discipline of the Christian life. Such is the all-sufficient command; as for the newest convert from heathenism, with little knowledge and the taint of his old vices in his soul, so for the saint fullest of wisdom and nearest the Light.

It *is* all-sufficient. If Barnabas had been like some of us, he would have had a very different style of exhortation. He would have said, ‘This irregular work has been well done, but there are no authorised teachers here, and no provision has been made for the due administration of the sacraments of the Church. The very first thing of all is to give these people the blessing of bishops and priests.’ Some of us would have said, ‘Valuable work has been done, but these good people are terribly ignorant. The best thing would be to get ready as soon as possible some manual of Christian doctrine, and in the meantime provide for their systematic instruction in at least the elements of the faith.’ Some of us would have said, ‘No doubt they have been converted, but we fear there has been too much of the emotional in the preaching. The moral side of Christianity has not been pressed home, and what they chiefly need is to be taught that it is not feeling, but righteousness. Plain, practical instruction in Christian duty is the one thing they want.’

Barnabas knew better. He did not despise organisation, nor orthodoxy, nor practical righteousness, but he knew that all three, and everything else that any man needed for his perfecting would come, if only the converts kept near to Christ, and that nothing else was of any use if they did not. That same conviction should for us settle the relative importance which we attach to these subordinate and derivative things, and to the primary and primitive duty. Obedience to it will secure them. They, without it, are not worth securing.

We spend much pains and effort nowadays in perfecting our organisations and consolidating our resources, and I have not a word to say against that. But heavier machinery needs more power in the engine, and that means greater capacity in your boilers and more fire in your furnace. The more complete our organisation, the more do we need a firm hold of Christ, or we shall be overweighted by it, shall be in danger of burning incense to our own net, shall be tempted to trust in drill rather than in courage, in mechanism rather than in the life drawn from Christ. On the other hand, if we put as our first care the preservation of the closeness of our union with Christ, that life will shape a body for itself, and ‘to every seed its own body.’

True conceptions of Him, and a definite theology, are good and needful. Let us cleave to Him with mind and heart, and we shall receive all the knowledge we need, and be guided into the deep things of God. In Him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and the basis of all theology is the personal possession of Him who is ‘the wisdom of God’ and ‘the Light of the world.’ Every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. *Pectus facit Theologum*.

Plain, straightforward morality and everyday righteousness are better than all emotion and all dogmatism and all churchism, says the world, and Christianity says much the same; but plain, straightforward righteousness and everyday morality come most surely when a man is keeping close to Christ. In a word, everything that can adorn the character with beauty, and clothe the Church with glorious apparel, whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, all that the world or God calls virtue and crowns with praise, they are all in their fulness in Him, and all are most surely derived from Him by keeping fast hold of His hand, and preserving the channels clear through which His manifold grace may flow into our souls. The same life is strength in the arm, pliancy in the fingers, swiftness in the foot, light in the eye, music on the lips; so the same grace is Protean in its forms, and to His servants who trust Him Christ ever says, ‘What would ye that I should do unto you? Be it even as thou wilt.’ The same mysterious power lives in the swaying branch, and in the veined leaf, and in the blushing clusters. With like wondrous transformations of the one grace, the Lord pours Himself into our spirits, filling all needs and fitting for all circumstances. Therefore for us all, individuals and Churches, this remains the prime command, ‘With purpose of heart cleave unto the Lord.’ Dear brethren in the ministry, how sorely we need this exhortation! Our very professional occupation with Christ and His truth is full of danger for us; we are so accustomed to handle these sacred themes as a means of instructing or impressing others that we get to regard them as our weapons, even if we do not degrade them still further by thinking of them as our stock-in-trade and means of oratorical effect. We must keep very firm hold of Christ for ourselves by much solitary communion, and so retranslating into the nutriment of our own souls the message we bring to men, else when we have preached to others we ourselves may he cast away. All the ordinary tendencies which draw men from Him work on us, and a host of others peculiar to ourselves, and all around us run strong currents of thought which threaten to sweep many away. Let us tighten our grasp of Him in the face of modern doubt; and take heed to ourselves that neither vanity, nor worldliness, nor sloth; neither the gravitation earthward common to all, nor the temptations proper to our office; neither unbelieving voices without nor voices within, seduce us from His side. There only is our peace, there our wisdom, there our power.

Subtly and silently the separating forces are ever at work upon us, and all unconsciously to ourselves our hold may relax, and the flow of this grace into our spirits may cease, while yet we mechanically keep up the round of outward service, nor even suspect that our strength is departed from us. Many a stately elm that seems full of vigorous life, for all its spreading boughs and clouds of dancing leaves, is hollow at the heart, and when the storm comes goes down with a crash, and men wonder, as they look at the ruin, how such a mere shell of life with a core of corruption could stand so long. It rotted within, and fell at last, because its roots did not go deep down to the rich soil, where they would have found nourishment, but ran along near the surface among gravel and stones. If we would stand firm, be sound within, and bring forth much fruit, we must strike our roots deep in Him who is the anchorage of our souls, and the nourisher of all our being.

Hearken, beloved brethren, in this great work of the ministry, not to the exhortation of the servant, but to the solemn command of the Master, ‘Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in Me.’ And let us, knowing our own weakness, take heed of the self-confidence that answers, ‘Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I,’ and turn the vows which spring to our lips into the lowly prayer, ‘My soul cleaveth unto the dust, quicken Thou me according to Thy word.’ Then, thinking rather of His cleaving to us than of our cleaving to Him, let us resolutely take as the motto of our lives the grand words: ‘I follow after, if that I may lay hold of that for which I am also laid hold of by Christ Jesus!’

1 Preached before the Congregational Union of England and Wales.

63)Acts 11:24

Acts

WHAT A GOOD MAN IS, AND HOW HE BECOMES SO

Act. 11:24.

'A good man.' How easily that title is often gained! There is, perhaps, no clearer proof that men are bad than the sort of people whom they consent to call good.

It is a common observation that all words describing moral excellence tend to deteriorate and to contract their meaning, just as bright metal rusts by exposure, or coins become light and illegible by use. So it comes to pass that any decently respectable man, especially if he has an easy temper and a dash of frankness and good humour, is christened with this title 'good.' The Bible, which is the verdict of the Judge, is a great deal more chary in its use of the word. You remember how Jesus Christ once rebuked a man for addressing Him so, not that He repudiated the title, but that the giver had bestowed it lightly and out of mere conventional politeness. The word is too noble to be applied without very good reason.

But here we have a picture of Barnabas hung in the gallery of Scripture portraits, and this is the description of it in the catalogue, 'He was a good man.'

You observe that my text is in the nature of an analysis. It begins at the outside, and works inwards. 'He was a good man.' Indeed;-how came he to be so? He was 'full of the Holy Ghost.' Full of the Holy Ghost, was he? How came he to be that? He was 'full of faith.' So the writer digs down, as it were, till he gets to the bed-rock, on which all the higher strata repose; and here is his account of the way in which it is possible for human nature to win this resplendent title, and to be adjudged of God as 'good,' 'full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.'

So these three steps in the exposition of the character and its secret will afford a framework for what I have to say now.

I. Note, then, first, the sort of man whom the Judge will call ‘good.’

Now, I suppose I need not spend much time in massing together, in brief outline, the characteristics of Barnabas. He was a Levite, belonging to the sacerdotal tribe, and perhaps having some slight connection with the functions of the Temple ministry. He was not a resident in the Holy Land, but a Hellenistic Jew, a native of Cyprus, who had come into contact with heathenism in a way that had beaten many a prejudice out of him. We first hear of him as taking a share in the self-sacrificing burst of brotherly love, which, whether it was wise or not, was noble. ‘He, having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the Apostles’ feet.’ And, as would appear from a reference in one of Paul’s letters, he had to support himself afterwards by manual labour.

Then the next thing that we hear of him is that, when the young man who had been a persecuting Pharisee, and the rising hope of the anti-Christian party, all at once came forward with some story of a vision which he had seen on the road to Damascus, and when the older Christians were suspicious of a trick to worm himself into their secrets by a pretended conversion, Barnabas, with the generosity of an unsuspicious nature, which often sees deeper into men than do suspicious eyes, was the first to cast the aegis of his recognition round him. In like manner, when Christianity took an entirely spontaneous and, to the Church at Jerusalem, rather unwelcome new development and expansion, when some unofficial believers, without any authority from headquarters, took upon themselves to stride clean across the wall of separation, and to speak of Jesus Christ to blank heathens, and found, to the not altogether gratified surprise of the Christians at Jerusalem, ‘that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost,’ it was Barnabas who was sent down to look into this surprising new phenomenon, and we read that ‘when he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad.’ The reason why he rejoiced over the manifestation of the grace of God in such a strange form was because ‘he was a good man,’ and his goodness recognised goodness in others and was glad at the work of the Lord. The new condition of affairs sent him to look for Paul, and to put him to work. Then we find him set apart to missionary service, and the leader of the first missionary band, in which he was accompanied by his friend Saul. He acquiesced frankly, and without a murmur, in the superiority of the junior, and yielded up pre-eminence to him quite willingly. The story of that missionary journey begins 'Barnabas and Saul,' but very soon it comes to be 'Paul and Barnabas,' and it keeps that order throughout. He was an older man than Paul, for when at Lystra the people thought that the gods had come down in the likeness of men; Barnabas was Jupiter, and Paul the quick-footed Mercury, messenger of the gods. He was in the work before Paul was thought of, and it must have taken a great deal of goodness to acquiesce in 'He must increase and I must decrease.' Then came the quarrel between them, the foolish fondness for his runaway nephew John Mark, whom he insisted on retaining in a place for which he was conspicuously unfitted. And so he lost his friend, the confidence of the Church, and his work. He sulked away into Cyprus; he had his nephew, for whom he had given up all these other things. A little fault may wreck a life, and the whiter the character the blacker the smallest stain upon it.

We do not hear anything more of him. Apparently, from one casual allusion, he continued to serve the Lord in evangelistic work, but the sweet communion of the earlier days, and the confident friendship with the Apostle, seem to have come to an end with that sharp contention. So Barnabas drops out of the rank of Christian workers. And yet 'he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.'

Now I have spent more time than I meant over this brief outline of the sort of character here pointed at. Let me just gather into one or two sentences what seem to me to be the lessons of it. The first is this, that the tap-root of all goodness is reference to God and obedience to Him. People tell us that morality is independent of religion. I admit that many men are better than their creeds, and many men are worse than their creeds; but I would also venture to assert that morality is the garment of religion; the body of which religion is the soul; the expression of religion in daily life. And although I am not going to say that nothing which a man does without reference to God has any comparative goodness in it, or that all the acts which are thus void of reference to Him stand upon one level of evil, I do venture to say that the noblest deed, which is not done in conscious obedience to the will of God, lacks its supreme nobleness. The loftiest perfection of conduct is obedience to God. And whatever excellence of self-sacrifice, ‘whatsoever things lovely and of good report,’ there may be, apart from the presence of this perfect motive, those deeds are imperfect. They do not correspond either to the whole obligations or to the whole possibilities of man, and, therefore, they are beneath the level of the highest good. Good is measured by reference to God.

Then, further, let me remark that one broad feature which characterises the truest goodness is the suppression of self. That is only another way of saying the same thing as I have been saying. It is illustrated for us all through this story of Barnabas. Whosoever can say, ‘I think not of myself, but of others; of the cause; of the help I can give to men; and I lay not goods only, nor prejudices only, nor the pride of position and the supremacy of place only at the feet of God, but I lay down my whole self; and I desire that self may be crucified, that God may live in me,’-he, and only he, has reached the height of goodness. Goodness requires the suppression of self.

Further, note that the gentler traits of character are pre-eminent in Christian goodness. There is nothing about this man heroic or exceptional. His virtues are all of the meek and gracious sort-those which we relegate sometimes to an inferior place in our estimates. These things make but a poor show by the side of some of the tawdry splendours of what the vulgar world calls virtues. It requires an educated eye to see the harmony of the sober colouring of some great painter. A child, a clown, a vulgar person-and there are such in all ranks-will prefer flaring reds and blues and yellows heaped together in staring contrast. A thrush or a blackbird is but a soberly clad creature by the side of macaws and paroquets; but the one has a song and the others have only a screech. The gentle virtues are the truly Christian virtues-patience and meekness and long-suffering and sympathy and readiness to efface oneself for the sake of God and of men.

So there is a bit of comfort for us commonplace, humdrum people, to whom God has only given one or two talents, and who can never expect to make a figure before men. We may be little violets below a stone, if we cannot be flaunting hollyhocks and tiger lilies. We may have the beauty of goodness in us after Christ’s example, and that is better than to be great.

Barnabas was no genius. He was not even a genius in goodness; he did not strike out anything original and out of the way. He seems to have been a commonplace kind of man enough; but ‘he was a good man.’ And the weakest and the humblest of us may hope to have the same thing said of us, if we will.

And then, note further, that true goodness, thank God! does not exclude the possibility of falling and sinning. There is a black spot in this man’s history; and there are black spots in the histories of all saints. Thank God! the Bible is, as some people would say, almost brutally frank in telling us about the imperfections of the best. Very often imperfections are the exaggerations of characteristic goodnesses, and warn us to take care that we do not push, as Barnabas did, our facility to the point of criminal complicity with weaknesses; and that we do not indulge, instead of strenuously rebuking when need is. Never let our gentleness fall away, like a badly made jelly, into a trembling heap, and never let our strength gather itself together into a repulsive attitude, but guard against the exaggeration of virtue into vice.

Remember that whilst there may be good men who sin, there is One entire and flawless, in whom all types of excellence do meet, and who alone of humanity can front the verdict of the world, and has fronted it now for nineteen centuries, with the question upon His lips, which none have dared to answer, ‘Which of you convinceth Me of sin?’

II. Secondly, notice the divine Helper who makes men good.

Luke, if he be the writer of the Acts, goes on with his analysis. He has done with the first fold, the outer garment, as it were; he strips it off and shows us the next fold, ‘full of the Holy Ghost.’

A divine Helper, not merely a divine influence, but a divine Person, who not only helps men from without, but so enters into a man as that the man’s whole nature is saturated with Him-that is strange language. Mystical and unreal I dare say some of you may think it, but let us consider whether some such divine Helper is not plainly pointed as necessary, by the experience of every man that ever honestly tried to make himself good.

I have no doubt that I am speaking to many persons who, more or less constantly and courageously and earnestly, have laboured at the task of self-improvement and self-culture. I venture to think that, if their standard of what they wish to attain is high, their confession of what they have attained will be very low. Ah, brother! if we think of what it is that we need to make us good-viz. the strengthening of these weak wills of ours, which we cannot strengthen but to a very limited degree by any tonics that we can apply, or any supports with which we may bind them round; if we consider the resistance which ourselves, our passions, our tastes, our habits, our occupations offer, and the resistance which the world around us, friends, companions, and all the aggregate, dread and formidable, of material things present to our becoming, in any lofty and comprehensive sense of the term, good men and women, I think we shall be ready to listen, as to a true Gospel, to the message that says, 'You do not need to do it by yourself.' You have got the wolf by the ears, perhaps, for a moment, but there is tremendous strength in the brute, and your hands and wrists will ache in holding him presently, and what will happen then? You do not need to try it yourself. There is a divine Helper standing at your sides and waiting to strengthen you, and that Helper does not work from outside; He will pass within, and dwell in your hearts and mould and strengthen your wills to what is good, and suppress your inclinations to evil, and, by His inward presence, teach 'your hands to war and your fingers to fight.'

Surely, surely, the experience of the world from the beginning, confirmed by the consciousness and conscience of every one of us, tells us that of ourselves we are impotent, and that the good that is within the reach of our unaided efforts is poor and fragmentary and superficial indeed.

The great promise of the Gospel is precisely this promise. We terribly limit and misunderstand what we call the Gospel if we give such exclusive predominance to one part of it, as some of us are accustomed to do. Thank God I the first word that Jesus Christ says to any soul is, 'Thy sins be forgiven thee.' But that first word has a second that follows it, 'Arise! and walk!' and it is for the sake of the second that the first is spoken. The gift of pardon, the consciousness of acceptance, the fact of reconciliation with God, the closing of the doors of the place of retribution, the quieting of the stings of accusing conscience, all these are but meant to be introductory to that which Jesus Christ Himself, in the Gospel of John, emphatically calls more than once '*the* gift of God,' which He symbolised by 'living water,' which whosoever drank should never thirst, and which whosoever possessed would give it forth in living streams of holy life and noble deeds. The promise of the Gospel is the promise of new life, derived from Christ and maintained in us by the indwelling Spirit, which will come like fresh reinforcements to an all but beaten army in some hard-fought field, which will stand like a stay behind a man, to us almost blown over by the gusts of temptation, which will strengthen what is weak, raise what is low, illumine what is dark, and will make us who are evil good with a goodness given by God through His Son.

Surely there is nothing more congruous with that divine character than that He who Himself is good, and good from Himself, should rejoice in making us, His poor children, into His own likeness. Surely He would not be good unless He delighted to make us good. Surely it is something very like presumption in men to assert that the direct communication of the Spirit of God with the spirits whom God has made is an impossibility. Surely it is flying in the face of Scripture teaching to deny that such communication is a promise. Surely it is a flagrant contradiction of the depths of Christian experience to falter in the belief that it is a very solid reality.

'Full of the Holy Ghost,' as a vessel might be to its brim of golden wine; Christian men and women! does that describe you? Full? A dribbling drop or two in the bottom of the jar. Whose fault is it? Why, with that rushing mighty wind to fill our sails if we like, should we be lying in the sickly calms of the tropics, with the pitch oozing out of the seams, and the idle canvas flapping against the mast? Why, with those tongues of fire hovering over our heads, should we be cowering over grey ashes in which there lives a little spark? Why, with that great rushing tide of the river of the water of life, should we be like the dry watercourses of the desert, with bleached and white stones baking where the stream should be running? 'O! Thou that art named the House of Israel, is the Spirit of the Lord straitened? Are these His doings?'

III. And so, lastly, we are shown how that divine Helper comes to men.

‘Full of the Holy Ghost, and of faith.’ There is no goodness without the impulse and indwelling of the divine Spirit, and there is no divine Spirit to dwell in a man’s heart without that man’s trusting in Jesus Christ. The condition of receiving the gift that makes us good is simply and solely that we should put our trust in Jesus Christ the Giver. That opens the door, and the divine Spirit enters.

True! there are convincing operations which He effects upon the world; but these are not in question here. These come prior to, and independent of, faith. But the work of the Spirit of God, present within us to heal and hallow us, has as condition our trust in Jesus Christ, the Great Healer. If you open a chink, the water will come in. If you trust in Jesus Christ, He will give you the new life of His Spirit, which will make you free from the law of sin and death. That divine Spirit ‘which they that believe in Him should receive’ delights to enter into every heart where His presence is desired. Faith is desire; and desires rooted in faith cannot be in vain. Faith is expectation; and expectations based upon the divine promise can never be disappointed. Faith is dependence, and dependence that reckons upon God, and upon God’s gift of His Spirit, will surely be recompensed.

The measure in which we possess the power that makes us good depends altogether upon ourselves. ‘Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it.’ You may have as much of God as you want, and as little as you will. The measure of your faith will determine at once the measure of your goodness, and of your possession of the Spirit that makes good. Just as when the prophet miraculously increased the oil in the cruse, the golden stream flowed as long as they brought vessels, and stayed when there were no more, so as long as we open our hearts for the reception, the gift will not be withheld, but God will not let it run like water spilled upon the ground that cannot be gathered up. If we will desire, if we will expect, if we will reckon on, if we will look to, Jesus Christ, and, beside all this, if we will honestly use the power that we possess, our capacity will grow, and the gift will grow, and our holiness and purity will grow with it.

Some of you have been trying more or less continuously, all your lives, to mend your own characters and improve yourselves. Brethren, there is a better way than that. A modern poet says-

‘Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,
These three alone lift life to sovereign power.’

Taken by itself that is pure heathenism. Self cannot improve self. Put self into God’s keeping, and say, ‘I cannot guard, keep, purge, hallow mine own self. Lord, do Thou do it for me!’ It is no use to try to build a tower whose top shall reach to heaven. A ladder has been let down on which we may pass upwards, and by which God’s angels of grace and beauty will come down to dwell in our hearts. If the Judge is to say of each of us, ‘He was a good man,’ He must also be able to say, ‘He was full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.’

64)Acts 11:26

Acts

A NICKNAME ACCEPTED

Act. 11:26.

Nations and parties, both political and religious, very often call themselves by one name, and are known to the outside world by another. These outside names are generally given in contempt; and yet they sometimes manage to hit the very centre of the characteristics of the people on whom they are bestowed, and so by degrees get to be adopted by them, and worn as an honour.

So it has been with the name ‘Christian.’ It was given at the first by the inhabitants of the Syrian city of Antioch, to a new sort of people that had sprung up amongst them, and whom they could not quite make out. They would not fit into any of their categories, and so they had to invent a new name for them. It is never used in the New Testament by Christians about themselves. It occurs here in this text; it occurs in Agrippa’s half-contemptuous exclamation: ‘You seem to think it is a very small matter to make me-me, a king!-a Christian, one of those despised people!’ And it occurs once more, where the Apostle Peter is specifying the charges brought against them: ‘If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf [1Pe. 4:16]. That sounds like the beginning of the process which has gone on ever since, by which the nickname, flung by the sarcastic men of Antioch, has been turned into the designation by which, all over the world, the followers of Jesus Christ have been proud to call themselves.

Now in this text there are the outside name by which the world calls the followers of Jesus Christ, and one of the many interior names by which the Church called itself. I have thought it might be profitable now to put all the New Testament names for Christ's followers together, and think about them.

I. So, to begin with, we deal with this name given by the world to the Church, which the Church has adopted.

Observe the circumstances under which it was given. A handful of large-hearted, brave men, anonymous fugitives belonging to the little Church in Jerusalem, had come down to Antioch; and there, without premeditation, without authority, almost without consciousness- certainly without knowing what a great thing they were doing-they took, all at once, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, a great step by preaching the Gospel to pure heathen Greeks; and so began the process by which a small Jewish sect was transformed into a world-wide church. The success of their work in Antioch, amongst the pure heathen population, has for its crowning attestation this, that it compelled the curiosity-hunting, pleasure-loving, sarcastic Antiocheans to find out a new name for this new thing; to write out a new label for the new bottles into which the new wine was being put. Clearly the name shows that the Church was beginning to attract the attention of outsiders.

Clearly it shows, too, that there was a novel element in the Church. The earlier disciples had been all Jews, and could be lumped together along with their countrymen, and come under the same category. But here was something that could not be called either Jew or Greek, because it embraced both. The new name is the first witness to the cosmopolitan character of the primitive Church. Then clearly, too, the name indicates that in a certain dim, confused way, even these superficial observers had got hold of the right notion of what it was that *did* bind these people together. They called them 'Christians' -Christ's men, Christ's followers. But it was only a very dim refraction of the truth that had got to them; they had no notion that ‘Christ’ was not a proper name, but the designation of an office; and they had no notion that there was anything peculiar or strange in the bond which united its adherents to Christ. Hence they called His followers ‘Christians,’ just as they would have called Herod’s followers ‘Herodians,’ in the political world, or Aristotle’s followers ‘Aristotelians’ in the philosophical world. Still, in their groping way, they bad put their finger on the fact that the one power that held this heterogeneous mass together, the one bond that bound up ‘Jew and Gentile, barbarian, Scythian, bond and free’ into one vital unity, was a personal relation to a living Person. And so they said-not understanding the whole significance of it, but having got hold of the right end of the clue-they said, ‘They are Christians!’ ‘Christ’s people,’ ‘the followers of this Christ.’

And their very blunder was a felicity. If they had called them ‘Jesuits’ that would have meant the followers of the mere man. They did not know how much deeper they had gone when they said, not followers of Jesus, but ‘followers of Christ’; for it is not Jesus the Man, but Jesus Christ, the Man with His office, that makes the centre and the bond of the Christian Church.

These, then, are the facts, and the fair inferences from them. A plain lesson here lies on the surface. The Church-that is to say, the men and women who make its members-should draw to itself the notice of the outside world. I do not mean by advertising, and ostentation, and sounding trumpets, and singularities, and affectations. None of all these are needed. If you are live Christians it will be plain enough to outsiders. It is a poor comment on your consistency, if, being Christ’s followers, you can go through life unrecognised even by ‘them that are without.’ What shall we say of leaven which does *not* leaven, or of light which does *not* shine, or of salt which does *not* repel corruption? It is a poor affair if, being professed followers of Jesus Christ, you do not impress the world with the thought that ‘here is a man who does not come under any of our categories, and who needs a new entry to describe *him*.’ The world ought to have the same impression about you which Haman had about the Jews-’Their laws are diverse from all people.’

Christian professors, are the world's names for each other enough to describe you by, or do you need another name to be coined for you in order to express the manifest characteristics that you display? The Church that does not *provoke* the attention-I use the word in its etymological, not its offensive sense-the Church that does not call upon itself the attention and interest of outsiders, is not a Church as Jesus Christ meant it to be, and it is not a Church that is worth keeping alive; and the sooner it has decent burial the better for itself and for the world!

There is another thing here, viz.: this name suggests that the clear impression made by our conduct and character, as well as by our words, should be that we belong to Jesus Christ. The eye of an outside observer may be unable to penetrate the secret of the deep sweet tie uniting us to Jesus, but there should be no possibility of the most superficial and hasty glance overlooking the fact that we *are* His. He should manifestly be the centre and the guide, the impulse and the pattern, the strength and the reward, of our whole lives. We are Christians. That should be plain for all folks to see, whether we speak or be silent. Brethren, is it so with you? Does your life need no commentary of your words in order that men should know what is the hidden spring that moves all its wheels; what is the inward spirit that co-ordinates all its motions into harmony and beauty? Is it true that like 'the ointment of the right hand which bewrayeth itself' your allegiance to Jesus Christ, and the overmastering and supreme authority which He exercises upon you, and upon your life, 'cannot be hid'? Do you think that, without your words, if you, living in the way you do, were put down into the middle of Pekin, as these handful of people were put down into the middle of the heathen city of Antioch, the wits of the Chinese metropolis would have to invent a name for you, as the clever men of Antioch did for these people; and do you think that if they had to invent a name, the name that would naturally come to their lips, looking at you, would be 'Christians,' 'Christ's men'? If it would not, there is something wrong.

The last word that I say about this first part of my text is this. It is a very sad thing, but it is one that is always occurring, that the world's inadequate notions of what makes a follower of Jesus Christ get accepted by the Church. Why was it that the name 'Christian' ran all over Christendom in the course of a century and a half? I believe very largely because it was a conveniently vague name; because it did not describe the deepest and sacredest of the bonds that unite us to Jesus Christ. Many a man is quite willing to say, ‘I am a Christian,’ who would hesitate a long time before he said, ‘I am a believer,’ ‘I am a disciple.’ The vagueness of the name, the fact that it erred by defect in not touching the central, deepest relation between man and Jesus Christ, made it very appropriate to the declining spirituality and increasing formalism of the Christian Church in the post-Apostolic age. It is a sad thing when the Church drops its standard down to the world’s notion of what It ought to be, and adopts the world’s name for itself and its converts.

II. I turn now to set side by side with this vague, general, outside name the more specific and *interior* names-if I may so call them- by which Christ’s followers at first knew themselves.

The world said, ‘You are Christ’s men’; and the names which were self-imposed and are now to be considered might be taken as being the Church’s explanation of what the world was fumbling at when it so called them. There are four of them: of course, I can only just touch on them.

[*a*] The first is in this verse-’*disciples*.’ The others are *believers*, *saints*, *brethren*. These four are the Church’s own christening of itself; its explanation and expansion, its deepening and heightening, of the vague name given by the world.

As to the first, *disciples*, any concordance will show that the name was employed almost exclusively during the time of Christ’s life upon earth. It is the only name for Christ’s followers in the Gospels; it occurs also, mingled with others, in the Acts of the Apostles, and it never occurs thereafter.

The name ‘disciple,’ then, carries us back to the historical beginning of the whole matter, when Jesus was looked upon as a Rabbi having followers called disciples; just as were John the Baptist and his followers, Gamaliel and his school, or Socrates and his. It sets forth Christ as being the Teacher, and His followers as being His adherents, His scholars, who learned at His feet.

Now that is always true. *We* are Christ's scholars quite as much as were the men who heard and saw with their eyes and handled with their hands, of the Word of Life. Not by words only, but by gracious deeds and fair, spotless life, He taught them and us and all men to the end of time, our highest knowledge of God of whom He is the final revelation, our best knowledge of what men should and shall be by His perfect life in which is contained all morality, our only knowledge of that future in that He has died and is risen and lives to help and still to teach. He teaches us still by the record of His life, and by the living influence of that Spirit whom He sends forth to guide us into all truth. He is the Teacher, the only Teacher, the Teacher for all men, the Teacher of all truth, the Teacher for evermore. He speaks from Heaven. Let us give heed to His voice.

But that Name is not enough to tell all that He is to us, or we to Him, and so after He had passed from earth it unconsciously and gradually dropped out of use by the disciples, as they felt a deepened bond uniting them to Him who was not only their Teacher of the Truth which was Himself, but was their Sacrifice and Advocate with the Father. And for all who hold the, as I believe, essentially imperfect conception of Jesus Christ as being mainly a Teacher, either by word or by pattern; whether it be put into the old form or into the modern form of regarding Him as the Ideal and Perfect Man, it seems to me a fact well worthy of consideration, that the name of disciple and the relation expressed by it were speedily felt by the Christian Church to be inadequate as a representation of the bond that knit them to Him. He is our Teacher, we His scholars. He is more than that, and a more sacred bond unites us to Him. As our Master we owe Him absolute submission. When He speaks, we have to accept His dictum. What He says is truth, pure and entire. His utterance is the last word upon any subject that He touches, it is the ultimate appeal, and the Judge that ends the strife. We owe Him submission, an open eye for all new truth, constant docility, as conscious of our own imperfections, and a confident expectation that He will bless us continuously with high and as yet unknown truths that come from His inexhaustible stores of wisdom and knowledge.

[*b*] Teacher and scholars move in a region which, though it be important, is not the central one. And the word that was needed next to express what the early Church felt Christ was to them, and they to Him, lifts us into a higher

atmosphere altogether,-'*believers*,' they who are exercising not merely intellectual submission to the dicta of the Teacher, but who are exercising living trust in the person of the Redeemer. The belief which is faith is altogether a higher thing than its first stage, which is the belief of the understanding. There is in it the moral element of trust. We believe a truth, we trust a Person; and the trust which we are to exercise in Jesus Christ, and which knits us to Him, is our trust in Him, not in any character that we may choose to ascribe to Him, but in the character in which He is revealed in the New Testament-Redeemer, Saviour, Manifest God; and therefore, the Infinite Friend and Helper of our souls.

That trust, my brethren, is the one bond that binds, men to God, and the one thing that makes us Christ's men. Apart from it, we may be very near Him, but we are not joined to Him. By it, and by it alone, the union is completed, and His power and His grace flow into our spirits. Are you, not merely a 'Christian,' in the world's notion, being bound in some vague way to Jesus Christ, but are you a Christian in the sense of trusting your soul's salvation to Him?

[*c*] Then, still further, there is another name-'*saints*.' It has suffered perhaps more at the hands both of the world and of the Church than any other. It has been taken by the latter and restricted to the dead, and further restricted to those who excel, according to the fantastic, ascetic standard of mediaeval Christianity. It has suffered from the world in that it has been used with a certain bitter emphasis of resentment at the claim of superior purity supposed to be implied in it, and so has come to mean on the world's lips one who pretends to be better than other people and whose actions contradict his claim. But the name belongs to all Christ's followers. It makes no claim to special purity, for the central idea of the word 'saint' is not purity. Holiness, which is the English for the Latinised 'sanctity,' holiness which is attributed in the Old Testament to God first, to men only secondarily, does not primarily mean *purity*, but *separation*. God is holy, inasmuch as by that whole majestic character of His, He is lifted above all bounds of creatural limitations, as well as above man's sin. A sacrifice, the Sabbath, a city, a priest's garment, a mitre-all these things are 'holy,' not when they are pure, but when they are devoted to Him. And men are holy,

not because they are clean, but because by free self-surrender they have consecrated themselves to Him.

Holiness is consecration, that is to say, holiness is giving myself up to Him to do what He will with. ‘I am holy’ is not the declaration of my estimate ‘I am pure,’ but the declaration of the fact ‘I am thine, O Lord.’ So the New Testament idea of saint has in it these elements-consecration, consecration resting on faith in Christ, and consecration leading to separation from the world and its sin. And that glad yielding of oneself to God, as wooed by His mercies, and thereby drawn away from communion with our evil surroundings and from submission to our evil selves, must be a part of the experience of every true Christian. All His people are saints, not as being pure, but as being given up to Him, in union with whom alone will the cleansing powers flow into their lives and clothe them with ‘the righteousness of saints.’ Have you thus consecrated yourself to God?

[*d*] The last name is ‘*brethren*,’-a name which has been much maltreated both by the insincerity of the Church, and by the sarcasm of the world. It has been an unreal appellation which has meant nothing and been meant to mean nothing, so that the world has said that our ‘brethren’ signified a good deal less than their ‘brothers.’ ‘‘Tis true, ‘tis pity; pity ‘tis, ‘tis true.’

But what I ask you to notice is that the main thing about that name ‘brethren’ is not the relation of the brethren to one another, but their common relation to their Father.

When we call ourselves as Christian people ‘brethren,’ we mean first this: that we are the possessors of a supernatural life, which has come from one Father, and which has set us in altogether new relations to one another, and to the world round about us. Do you believe that if you have any of that new life which comes through faith in Jesus Christ, then you are the brethren of all those that possess the same?

As society becomes more complicated, as Christian people grow unlike each other in education, in social position, in occupation, in their general outlook into the world, it is more and more difficult to feel what is nevertheless true: that any two Christian people, however unlike each other, are nearer each other in the very roots of their nature, than a Christian and a non-Christian, however like each other. It is difficult to feel that, and it is getting more and more difficult, but for all that it is a fact.

And now I wish to ask you, Christian men and women, whether you feel more at home with people who love Jesus Christ-as you say that you love Him-or whether you like better to be with people who do not?

There are some of you who choose your intimate associates, whom you ask to your homes and introduce to your children as desirable companions, with no reference at all to their religious character. The duties of your position, of course, oblige each of you to be much among people who do not share your faith, and it is cowardly and wrong to shrink from the necessity. But for Christian people to make choice of heart friends, or close intimates, among those who have no sympathy with their professed belief about, and love to, Jesus Christ, does not say much for the depth and reality of their religion. A man is known by the company he keeps, and if your friends are picked out for other reasons, and their religion is no part of their attraction, it is not an unfair conclusion that there are other things for which you care more than you do for faith in Jesus Christ and love to Him. If you deeply feel the bond that knits you to Christ, and really live near to Him, you will be near to your brethren. You will feel that ‘blood is thicker than water,’ and however like you may be to irreligious people in many things, you will feel that the deepest bond of all knits you to the poorest, the most ignorant, the most unlike you in social position; ay! and the most unlike you in theological opinion, who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.

Now that is the sum of the whole matter. And my last word to you is this: Do not you be contented with the world’s vague notions of what makes Christ’s man. I do not ask you if you are Christians; plenty of you would say: ‘Oh yes! of course! Is not this a Christian country? Was not I christened when I was a child? Are we not all members of the Church of England by virtue of our birth? Yes! of course I am!’

I do not ask you that; *I* do not ask you anything; but I pray you to ask yourselves these four questions: Am I Christ’s scholar? Am I believing on Him? Am I consecrated to Him? Am I the possessor of a new life from Him? And never give yourselves rest until you can say humbly and yet confidently, ‘Yes! thank God, I am!’

65)Acts 12:2

Acts

THE MARTYRDOM OF JAMES

Act. 12:2.

One might have expected more than a clause to be spared to tell the death of a chief man and the first martyr amongst the Apostles. James, as we know, was one of the group of the Apostles who were in especially close connection with Jesus Christ. He is associated in the Gospels with Peter and his brother John, and is always named before John, as if he were the more important of the two, by reason of age or of other circumstances unknown to us. But yet we know next to nothing about him. In the Acts of the Apostles he is a mere lay figure; his name is only mentioned in the catalogue at the beginning, and here again in the brief notice of his death. The reticent and merely incidental character of the notice of his martyrdom is sufficiently remarkable. I think the lessons of the fact, and of the, I was going to say, slight way in which the writer of this book refers to it, may perhaps be most pointedly brought out if we take four contrasts-James and Stephen, James and Peter, James and John, James and James. Now, if we take these four I think we shall learn something.

I. First, then, James and Stephen.

Look at the different scale on which the incidents of the deaths of these two are told: the martyrdom of the one is beaten out over chapters, the martyrdom of the other is crammed into a corner of a sentence. And yet, of the two men, the one who is the less noticed filled the larger place officially, and the other was only a simple deacon and preacher of the Word. The fact that Stephen was the first Christian to follow his Lord in martyrdom is not sufficient to account for the extraordinary difference. The difference is to be sought for in another direction altogether. The Bible cares so little about the people whom it names because its true theme is the works of God, and not of man; and the reason why the ‘Acts of the Apostles’ kills off one of the chief Apostles in this fashion is simply that, as the writer tells us, his theme is ‘all that *Jesus*’ continued ‘to do and to teach after He was taken up.’ Since it is Christ who is the true actor, it matters uncommonly little what becomes of James or of the other ten. This book is *not* the ‘Acts of the Apostles,’ but it is the Acts of Jesus Christ.

I might suggest, too, in like manner, that there is another contrast which I have not included in my four, between the scale on which the death of Jesus Christ is told by Luke, and that on which this death is narrated. What is the reason why so disproportionate a space of the Gospel is concerned with the last two days of our Lord’s life on earth? What is the reason why years are leaped over in silence and moments are spread out in detail, but that the death of a man is only a death, but the death of the Christ is the life of the world? It is little needful that we should have poetical, emotional, picturesque descriptions of martyrdoms and the like in a book which is altogether devoted to tracking the footsteps of Christ in history; and which regards men as nothing more than the successive instruments of His purpose, and the depositories of His grace.

Another lesson which we may draw from the reticence in the case of the Apostle, and the expansiveness in the case of the protomartyr, is that of a wise indifference to the utterly insignificant accident of posthumous memory or oblivion of us and our deeds and sufferings. James sleeps none the less sweetly in his grave, or, rather, wakes none the less triumphantly in heaven, because his life and death are both so scantily narrated. If we ‘self-infold the large results’ of faithful service, we need not trouble ourselves about its record on earth.

But another lesson which may be learned from this cursory notice of the Apostle’s martyrdom is-how small a thing death really is! Looked at from beside the Lord of life and death, which is the point of view of the author of this narrative, ‘great death’ dwindles to a very little thing. We need to revise our notions if we would understand how trivial it really is. To us it frowns like a black cliff blocking the upper end of our valley, but there is a path round its base, and though the throat of the pass be narrow, it has room for us to get through and up to the sunny uplands beyond. From a mountain top the country below seems level plain, and what looked like an impassable precipice has dwindled to be indistinguishable. The triviality of death, to those who look upon it from the heights of eternity, is well represented by these brief words which tell of the first breach thereby in the circle of the Apostles.

II. There is another contrast, James and Peter.

Now this chapter tells of two things: the death of one of that pair of friends; the miracle that was wrought for the deliverance of the other from death. Why could not the parts have been exchanged, or why could not the miraculous hand that was stretched out to save the one fisherman of Bethsaida have been put forth to save the other? Why should James be slain, and Peter miraculously delivered? A question easily asked; a question not to be answered by us. We may say that the one was more useful for the development of the Church than the other. But we have all seen lives that, to our poor vision, seemed to be all but indispensable, ruthlessly swept away, and lives that seemed to be, and were, perfectly profitless, prolonged to extreme old age. We may say that maturity of character, development of Christian graces, made the man ready for glory. But we have all seen some struck down when anything but ready; and others left for the blessing of mankind many, many a day after they were far fitter for heaven than thousands that, we hope, have gone there.

So all these little explanations do not go down to the bottom of the matter, and we are obliged just to leave the whole question in the loving Hands that hold the keys of life and death for us all. Only we may be sure of this, that James was as dear to Christ as Peter was, and that there was no greater love shown in sending the angel that delivered the one out of the 'hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews,' than was shown in sending the angel that stood behind the headsman and directed the stroke of the fatal sword on the neck of the other.

The one was as dear to the Christ as the other-ay, and the one was as surely, and more blessedly, delivered 'from the mouth of the lion' as the other was, though the one seemed to be dragged from his teeth, and the other seemed to be crushed by his powerful jaws. James escaped from Herod when Herod slew him but could not make him unfaithful to his Master, and his deliverance was not less complete than the deliverance of his friend.

But let us remember, also, that if thus, to two equally beloved, there were dealt out these two different fates, it must be because that evil, which, as I said, is not so great as it looks, is also not so bitter as it tastes, and there is no real evil, for the loving heart, in the stroke that breaks its bands and knits it to Jesus Christ. If we are Christians, the deepest desire of our souls is fuller communion with our Lord. We realise that, in some stunted and scanty measure, by life; but oh! is it not strange that we should shrink from that change which will enable us to realise it fully and eternally? The contrast of James and Peter may teach us the equal love that presides over the life of the living and the death of the dying.

III. Another contrast is that of James and John.

The close union, and subsequent separation by this martyrdom, of that pair of brothers is striking and pathetic. They seem to have together pursued their humble trade of fishermen in the little fishing village of Bethsaida, apparently as working partners with their father Zebedee. They were not divided by discipleship, as was the sad fate of many a brother delivered by a brother to death. If we may attach any weight to the suggestion that the expression in John's narrative, 'He first findeth *his own* brother, Simon,' implies that 'the other disciple' did the same by *his* brother, James was brought to Jesus by John, and new tenderness and strength thereby given to their affection. They were closely associated in their Apostleship, and were together the companions of Jesus in the chief incidents of His life. They were afterwards united in the leadership of the Church. By death they were separated very far: the one the first of all the Apostles to 'become a prey to Satan's rage,' the other 'lingering out his fellows all,' and 'dying in bloodless age,' living to be a hundred years old or more, and looking back through all the long parting to the brother who had joined with him in the wish that even Messiah's Kingdom should not part them, and yet had been parted so soon and parted so long.

Ah! may we not learn the lesson that we should recognise the mercy and wisdom of the ministry of Death the separator, and should tread with patience the lonely road, do calmly the day's work, and tarry till He comes, though those that stood beside us be gone? We may look forward with the assurance that 'God keeps a niche in heaven to hide our idols'; and 'albeit

He breaks them to our face,' yet shall we find them again, like Memnon's statue, vocal in the rising sunshine of the heavens.

The brothers, so closely knit, so soon parted, so long separated, were at last reunited. Even to us here, with the chronology of earth still ours, the few years between the early martyrdom of James and the death of the centenarian John seem but a span. The lapse of the centuries that have rolled away since then makes the difference of the dates of the two deaths seem very small, even to us. What a mere nothing it will have looked to them, joined together once more before God!

IV. Lastly, James and James. In his hot youth, when he deserved the name of a son of thunder-so energetic, boisterous, I suppose, destructive perhaps, he was-he and his brother, and their foolish mother, whose name is kindly not told us, go to Christ and say, 'Grant that we may sit, the one on Thy right hand and the other on Thy left, in Thy kingdom.' That was what he wished and hoped for, and what he got was years of service, and a taste of persecution, and finally the swish of the headsman's sword.

And so our dreams get disappointed, and their disappointment is often the road to their fulfilment, for Jesus Christ was answering James' prayer, 'Grant that we may sit on Thy right hand in Thy kingdom,' when He called him to Himself, by the brief and bloody passage of martyrdom. James said, when he did not know what he meant, and the vow was noble though it was ignorant, 'we can drink of the cup that Thou drinkest.' And all honour to him! he stuck to his vow; and when the cup was proffered to him he manfully, and like a Christian, took it and drank it to the dregs; and, I suppose, went silently to his grave. But the change between his ardent anticipations and his calm resignation, and between his foolish dream and the stern reality, may well teach us that, whether our wishes he fulfilled or disappointed, they all need to be purified, and that the disappointment of them on earth is often God's way of fulfilling them for us in higher fashion than we dreamed or asked.

So, brethren, let us leave for ourselves, and for all dear ones, that question of living or dying, to His decision. Only let us be sure that whether our lives be long like John's, or short like James', 'living or dying we are the Lord's.' And then, whatever be the length of life or the manner of death, both will bring us the fulfilment of our highest wishes, and will lead us to His side at whose right hand all those shall sit who have loved Him here, and, though long parted, shall be reunited in common enjoyment of the pleasures for evermore which bloom unfading there. ‘And so shall we ever be with the Lord.’

66)Acts 12:5

Acts

PETER’S DELIVERANCE FROM PRISON

Act. 12:5

The narrative of Peter’s miraculous deliverance from prison is full of little vivid touches which can only have come from himself. The whole tone of it reminds us of the Gospel according to St. Mark, which is in like manner stamped with peculiar minuteness and abundance of detail. One remembers that at a late period in the life of the Apostle Paul, Mark and Luke were together with him; and no doubt in those days in Rome, Mark, who had been Peter’s special companion and is called by one of the old Christian writers his ‘interpreter,’ was busy in telling Luke the details about Peter which appear in the first part of this Book of the Acts.

The whole story seems to me to be full of instruction as well as of picturesque detail; and I desire to bring out the various lessons which appear to me to lie in it.

I. The first of them is this: the strength of the helpless.

Look at that eloquent ‘but’ in the verse that I have taken as a starting-point: ‘Peter therefore was kept in prison, *but* prayer was made earnestly of the Church unto God for him.’ There is another similarly eloquent ‘but’ at the end of the chapter:

‘Herod . . . was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost, *but* the Word of God grew and multiplied.’ Here you get, on the one hand, all the pompous and elaborate preparations-’four quaternions of soldiers’- four times four is sixteen-sixteen soldiers, two chains, three gates with guards at each of them, Herod’s grim determination, the people’s malicious expectation of having an execution as a pleasant sensation with which to wind up the Passover Feast. And what had the handful of Christian people? Well, they had prayer; and they had Jesus Christ. That was all, and that is more than enough. How ridiculous all the preparation looks when you let the light of that great ‘but’ in upon it! Prayer, earnest prayer, ‘was made of the Church unto God for him.’ And evidently, from the place in which that fact is stated, it is intended that we should say to ourselves that it was *because* prayer was made for him that what came to pass did come to pass. It is not jerked out as an unconnected incident; it is set in a logical sequence. ‘Prayer was made earnestly of the Church unto God for him’ -and so when Herod would have brought him forth, behold, the angel of the Lord came, and the light shined into the prison. It is the same sequence of thought that occurs in that grand theophany in the eighteenth Psalm, ‘My cry entered into His ears; then the earth shook and trembled’; and there came all the magnificence of the thunderstorm and the earthquake and the divine manifestation; and this was the purpose of it all-’He sent from above, He took me, He drew me out of many waters.’ The whole energy of the divine nature is set in motion and comes swooping down from highest heaven to the trembling earth. And of that fact the one end is one poor man’s cry, and the other end is his deliverance. The moving spring of the divine manifestation was an individual’s prayer; the aim of it was the individual’s deliverance. A little water is put into a hydraulic ram at the right place, and the outcome is the lifting of tons. So the helpless men who could only pray are stronger than Herod and his quaternions and his chains and his gates. ‘Prayer was made,’ therefore all that happened was brought to pass, and Peter was delivered.

Peter’s companion, James, was killed off, as we read in a verse or two before. Did not the Church pray for him? Surely they did. Why was their prayer not answered, then? God has not any step-children. James was as dear to God as Peter was. One prayer was answered; was the other left unanswered? It was the divine purpose that Peter, being prayed for, should be delivered; and we may reverently say that, if there had not been the many in Mary’s house praying, there would have been no angel in Peter’s cell.

So here are revealed the strength of the weak, the armour of the unarmed, the defence of the defenceless. If the Christian Church in its times of persecution and affliction had kept itself to the one weapon that is allowed it, it would have been more conspicuously victorious. And if we, in our individual lives-where, indeed, we have to do something else besides pray-would remember the lesson of that eloquent 'but,' we should be less frequently brought to perplexity and reduced to something bordering on despair. So my first lesson is the strength of the weak.

II. My next is the delay of deliverance.

Peter had been in prison for some time before the Passover, and the praying had been going on all the while, and there was no answer. Day after day 'of the unleavened bread' and of the festival was slipping away. The last night had come; 'and the same night' the light shone, and the angel appeared. Why did Jesus Christ not hear the cry of these poor suppliants sooner? For their sakes; for Peter's sake; for our sakes; for His own sake. For the eventual intervention, at the very last moment, and yet at a sufficiently early moment, tested faith. And look how beautifully all bore the test. The Apostle who was to be killed to-morrow is lying quietly sleeping in his cell. Not a very comfortable pillow he had to lay his head upon, with a chain on each arm and a legionary on each side of him. But he slept; and whilst he was asleep Christ was awake, and the brethren were awake. Their faith was tested, and it stood the test, and thereby was strengthened. And Peter's patience and faith, being tested in like manner and in like manner standing the test, were deepened and confirmed. Depend upon it, he was a better man all his days, because he had been brought close up to Death and looked it in the fleshless eye-sockets, unwinking and unterrified. And I dare say if, long after, he had been asked, 'Would you not have liked to have escaped those two or three days of suspense, and to have been let go at an earlier moment?' he would have said, 'Not for worlds! For I learned in those days that my Lord's time is the best. I learned patience'-a lesson which Peter especially needed-'and I learned trust.'

Do you remember another incident, singularly parallel in essence, though entirely unlike in circumstances, to this one? The two weeping sisters at Bethany send their messenger across the Jordan, grudging every moment that he takes to travel to the far-off spot where Jesus is. The message sent is only this: ‘He whom Thou lovest is sick.’ What an infinite trust in Christ’s heart that form of the message showed! They would not say ‘Come!’; they would not ask Him to do anything; they did not think that to do so was needful: they were quite sure that what He would do would be right.

And how was the message received? ‘Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus.’ Well, did that not make Him hurry as fast as He could to the bedside? No; it rooted Him to the spot. ‘He abode, *therefore*’- because He loved them-’two days still in the same place where He was,’ to give him plenty of time to die, and the sisters plenty of time to test their confidence in Him. Their confidence does not seem to have altogether stood the test. ‘Lord, if Thou hadst been here my brother had not died.’ ‘And why wast Thou *not* here?’ is implied. Christ’s time was the best time. It was better to get a dead brother back to their arms and to their house than that they should not have lost him for those dreary four days. So delay tests faith, and makes the deliverance, when it comes, not only the sweeter, but the more conspicuously divine. So, brother, ‘men ought always to pray, and not to faint’-always to trust that ‘the Lord will help them, and that right early.’

III. The next lesson that I would suggest is the leisureliness of the deliverance.

A prisoner escaping might be glad to make a bolt for it, dressed or undressed, anyhow. But when the angel comes into the cell, and the light shines, look how slowly and, as I say, leisurely, he goes about it. ‘Put on thy shoes.’ He had taken them off, with his girdle and his upper garment, that he might lie the less uncomfortably. ‘Put on thy shoes; lace them; make them all right. Never mind about these two legionaries; they will not wake. Gird thyself; tighten thy girdle. Put on thy garment. Do not be afraid. Do not be in a hurry; there is plenty of time. Now, are you ready? Come!’ It would have been quite as easy for the angel to have whisked him out of the cell and put him down at Mary’s door; but that was not to be the way. Peter was led past all the obstacles-’the first ward,’ and the soldiers at it; ‘the second ward,’ and the soldiers at it; ‘and the third gate that leads into the city,’ which was no doubt bolted and barred. There was a leisurely procession through the prison.

Why? Because Omnipotence is never in a hurry, and God, not only in His judgments but in His mercies, very often works slowly, as becomes His majesty. ‘Ye shall not go out with haste; nor go by flight, for the Lord will go before you; and the God of Israel shall be your rereward.’ We are impatient, and hurry our work over; God works slowly; for He works certainly. That is the law of the divine working in all regions; and we have to regulate the pace of our eager expectation so as to fall in with the slow, solemn march of the divine purposes, both in regard to our individual salvation and the providences that affect us individually, and in regard to the world’s deliverance from the world’s evils. ‘An inheritance may be gotten hastily in the beginning, but the end thereof shall not be blessed.’ ‘He that believeth shall not make haste.’

IV. We see here, too, the delivered prisoner left to act for himself as soon as possible.

As long as the angel was with Peter, he was dazed and amazed. He did not know-and small blame to him-whether he was sleeping or waking; but he gets through the gates, and out into the empty street, glimmering in the morning twilight, and the angel disappears, and the slumbering city is lying around him. When he is *left* to himself, he *comes* to himself. He could not have passed the wards without a miracle, but he can find his way to Mary’s house without one. He needed the angel to bring him as far as the gate and down into the street, but he did not need him any longer. So the angel vanished into the morning light, and then he felt himself, and steadied himself, when responsibility came to him. That is the thing to sober a man. So he stood in the middle of the unpeopled street, and ‘he considered the thing,’ and found in his own wits sufficient guidance, so that he did not miss the angel. He said to himself, ‘I will go to Mary’s house.’ Probably he did not know that there were any praying there, but it was near, and it was, no doubt, convenient in other respects that we do not know of. The economy of miraculous power is a remarkable feature in Scriptural miracles. God never does anything for us that we could do for ourselves. Not but that our doing for ourselves is, in a deeper sense, His working on us and in us, but He desires us to take the share that belongs to us in completing the deliverance which must begin by supernatural intervention of a Mightier than the angel, even the Lord of angels.

And so this little picture of the angel leading Peter through the prison, and then leaving him to his own common sense and courage as soon as he came out into the street, is just a practical illustration of the great text, ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you.’

67)Acts 12:7

Acts

THE ANGEL’S TOUCH

Act. 12:7, Act. 12:23.

The same heavenly agent performs the same action on Peter and on Herod. To the one, his touch brings freedom and the dropping off of his chains; to the other it brings gnawing agonies and a horrible death. These twofold effects of one cause open out wide and solemn thoughts, on which it is well to look.

I. The one touch has a twofold effect.

So it is always when God’s angels come, or God Himself lays His hand on men. Every manifestation of the divine power, every revelation of the divine presence, all our lives’ experiences, are charged with the solemn possibility of bringing us one or other of two directly opposite results. They all offer us an alternative, a solemn ‘either -or.’

The Gospel too comes charged with that double possibility, and is the intensest and most fateful example of the dual effect of all God’s messages and dealings. Just as the ark maimed Dagon and decimated the Philistine cities and slew Uzzah, but brought blessing and prosperity to the house of Obed-edom, just as the same pillar was light to Israel all the night long, but cloud and darkness to the Egyptians, so is Christ set ‘for the fall of’ some and ‘for the rising of’ others amidst the ‘many in Israel,’ and His Gospel is either ‘the savour of life unto life or of death unto death,’ but in both cases is in itself ‘unto God,’ one and the same ‘sweet savour in Christ.’

II. These twofold effects are parts of one plan and purpose.

Peter's liberation and Herod's death tended in the same direction-to strengthen and conserve the infant Church, and thus to prepare the way for the conquering march of the Gospel. And so it is in all God's self-revelations and manifested energies, whatever may be their effects. They come from one source and one motive, they are fundamentally the operations of one changeless Agent, and, as they are one in origin and character, so they are one in purpose. We are not to separate them into distinct classes and ascribe them to different elements in the divine nature, setting down this as the work of Love and that as the outcome of Wrath, or regarding the acts of deliverance as due to one part of that great whole and the acts of destruction as due to another part of it. The angel was the same, and his celestial fingers were moved by the same calm, celestial will when he smote Peter into liberty and life, and Herod to death.

God changes His ways, but not His heart. He changes His acts, but not His purposes. Opposite methods conduce to one end, as winter storms and June sunshine equally tend to the yellowed harvest.

III. The character of the effects depends on the men who are touched.

As is the man, so is the effect of the angel's touch. It could only bring blessing to the one who was the friend of the angel's Lord, and it could bring only death to the other, who was His enemy. It could do nothing to the Apostle but cause his chains to drop from his wrists, nor anything to the vainglorious king but bring loathsome death.

This, too, is a universal truth. It is we ourselves who settle what God's words and acts will be to us. The trite proverb, 'One man's meat is another man's poison,' is true in the highest regions. It is eminently, blessedly or tragically true in our relation to the Gospel, wherein all God's self-revelation reaches its climax, wherein 'the arm of the Lord' is put forth in its most blessed energy, wherein is laid on each of us the touch, tender and more charged with blessing than that of the angel who smote the calmly sleeping Apostle. That Gospel may either be to us the means of freeing us from our chains, and leading us out of our prison-house into sunshine and security, or be the fatal occasion of condemnation and death. Which it shall be depends on ourselves. Which shall I make it for myself?

68)Acts 12:11

Acts

‘SOBER CERTAINTY’

Act. 12:11.

Where did Luke get his information of Peter’s thoughts in that hour? This verse sounds like first-hand knowledge. Not impossibly John Mark may have been his informant, for we know that both were in Rome together at a later period. In any case, it is clear that, through whatever channels this piece of minute knowledge reached Luke, it must have come originally from Peter himself. And what a touch of naturalness and evident truth it is! No wonder that the Apostle was half dazed as he came from his dungeon, through the prison corridors and out into the street. To be wakened by an angel, and to have such following experiences, would amaze most men.

I. The bewilderment of the released captive.

God’s mercies often come suddenly, and with a rush and a completeness that outrun our expectations and our power of immediate comprehension. And sometimes He sends us sorrows in such battalions and so overwhelming that we are dazed for the moment. A Psalmist touched a deep experience when he sang, ‘When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like unto them that dream.’

The angel has to be gone before we are sure that he was really here. The tumult of emotion in an experience needs to be calmed down before we understand the experience. Reflection discovers more of heaven and of God in the great moments of our lives than was visible to us while we were living through them,

There is one region in which this is especially true-that of the religious life. There sometimes attend its beginnings in a soul a certain excitement and perturbation which disable from calm realising of the greatness of the change which has passed. And it is well when that excitement is quieted down and succeeded by meditative reflection on the treasures that have been poured into the lap, almost as in the dark. No man understands what he has received when he first receives Christ and Christ's gifts. It occupies a lifetime to take possession of that which we possess from the first in Him, and the oldest saint is as far from full possession of the unspeakable and infinite 'gift of God,' as the babes in Christ are.

But, looking more generally at this characteristic of not rightly understanding the great epochs of our lives till they are past, we may note that, while in part it is inevitable and natural, there is an element of fault in it. If we lived in closer fellowship with God, we should live in an atmosphere of continual calm, and nothing, either sorrowful or joyful, would be able so to sweep us off our feet that we should be bewildered by it. Astonishment would never so fill our souls as that we could not rightly appraise events, nor should we need any time, even in the thick of the most wonderful experiences, to 'come to' ourselves and discern the angel.

But if it be so that our lives disclose their meanings best, when we look back on them, how much of the understanding of them, and the drawing of all its sweetness out of each event in them, is entrusted to memory! And how negligent of a great means of happiness and strength we are, if we do not often muse on 'all the way by which God the Lord has led us these many years in the wilderness'! It is needful for Christian progress to 'forget the things that are behind,' and not to let them limit our expectations nor prescribe our methods, but it is quite as needful to remember our past, or rather God's past with us, in order to confirm our grateful faith and enlarge our boundless hope.

II. The disappearance of the angel.

Why did he leave Peter standing there, half dazed and with his deliverance incomplete? He 'led him through one street' only, and 'straightway departed from him.' The Apostle delivered by miracle has now to use his brains. One distinguishing characteristic of New Testament miracles is their economy of miraculous power. Jesus raised Lazarus, for He alone could do that, but other hands must 'loose him and let him go,' He gave life to Jairus's little daughter, but He bid others ‘give her something to eat’ God does nothing for us that we can do for ourselves. That economy was valuable as a preservative of the Apostles from the possible danger of expecting or relying on miracles, and as stirring them to use their own energies. Reliance on divine power should not lead us to neglect ordinary means. Alike in the natural and in the spiritual life we have to do our part, and to be sure that God will do His.

III. The symbol here of a greater deliverance.

Fancy may legitimately employ this story as setting forth for us under a lovely image the facts of Christian death, if only we acknowledge that such a use is entirely the work of fancy. But, making that acknowledgment, may we not make the use? Is not Death, too, God’s messenger to souls that love Him, ‘mighty and beauteous, though his face be hid’? Would it not be more Christian-like, and more congruous with our eternal hope, if we pictured him thus than by the hideous emblems of our cemeteries and tombs? He comes to Christ’s servants, and his touch is gentle though his fingers are icy-cold. He removes only the chains that bind us, and we ourselves are emancipated by his touch. He leads us to ‘the iron gate that leadeth into the city,’ and it opens to us ‘of its own accord.’ But he disappears as soon as our happy feet have touched the pavement of that street of the city which is ‘pure gold, as transparent as glass,’ and in the midst of which flows the river of the crystal-bright ‘water of life proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.’ Then, when we see the Face as of the sun shining in his strength, we shall come to ourselves, and ‘know of a surety that the Lord hath sent His angel and delivered’ us from all our foes and ills for evermore.

69)Acts 12:13

Acts

RHODA

Act. 12:13.

‘Rhoda’ means ‘a rose,’ and *this* rose has kept its bloom for eighteen hundred years, and is still sweet and fragrant! What a lottery undying fame is! Men will give their lives to earn it; and this servant-girl got it by one little act, and never knew that she had it, and I suppose she does not know to-day that, everywhere throughout the whole world where the Gospel is preached, ‘this that she hath done is spoken of as a memorial to her.’ Is the love of fame worthy of being called ‘the last infirmity of noble minds’? Or is it the delusion of ignoble ones? Why need we care whether anybody ever hears of us after we are dead and buried, so long as God knows about us? The ‘damsel named Rhoda’ was little the better for the immortality which she had unconsciously won.

Now there is a very singular resemblance between the details of this incident and those of another case, when Peter was recognised in dim light by his voice, and the Evangelist Luke, who is the author of the Acts of the Apostles, seems to have had the resemblance between the two scenes-that in the high priest’s palace and that outside Mary’s door-in his mind, because he uses in this narrative a word which occurs, in the whole of the New Testament, only here and in his account of what took place on that earlier occasion. In both instances a maid-servant recognises Peter by his voice, and in both ‘she constantly affirms’ that it was so. I do not think that there is anything to be built upon the resemblance, but at all events I think that the use of the same unusual word in the two cases, and nowhere else, seems to suggest that Luke felt how strangely events sometimes double themselves; and how the Apostle who is here all but a martyr is re-enacting, with differences, something like the former scene, when he was altogether a traitor. But, be that as it may, there are some lessons which we may gather from this vivid picture of Rhoda and her behaviour on the one side of the door, while Peter stood hammering, in the morning twilight, on the other.

I. We may notice in the relations of Rhoda to the assembled believers a striking illustration of the new bond of union supplied by the Gospel.

Rhoda was a slave. The word rendered in our version ‘damsel’ means a female slave. Her name, which is a Gentile name, and her servile condition, make it probable that she was not a Jewess. If one might venture to indulge in a guess, it is not at all unlikely that her mistress, Mary, John Mark’s mother, Barnabas’ sister, a well-to-do woman of Jerusalem, who had a house large enough to take in the members of the Church in great numbers, and to keep up a considerable establishment, had brought this slave-girl from the island of Cyprus. At all events, she was a slave. In the time of our Lord, and long after, these relations of slavery brought an element of suspicion, fear, and jealous espionage into almost every Roman household, because every master knew that he passed his days and nights among men and women who wanted nothing better than to wreak their vengeance upon him. A man’s foes were eminently those of his own household. And now here this child-slave, a Gentile, has been touched by the same mighty love as her mistress; and Mary and Rhoda were kneeling together in the prayer-meeting when Peter began to hammer at the door. Neither woman thought now of the unnatural, unwholesome relation which had formerly bound them. In God’s good time, and by the slow process of leavening society with Christian ideas, that diabolical institution perished in Christian lands. Violent reformation of immoralities is always a blunder. ‘Raw haste’ is ‘half-sister to delay.’ Settlers in forest lands have found that it is endless work to grub up the trees, or even to fell them. ‘Root and branch’ reform seldom answers. The true way is to girdle the tree by taking off a ring of bark round the trunk, and letting nature do the rest. Dead trees are easily dealt with; living ones blunt many axes and tire many arms, and are alive after all. Thus the Gospel waged no direct war with slavery, but laid down principles which, once they are wrought into Christian consciousness, made its continuance impossible. But, pending that consummation, the immediate action of Christianity was to ameliorate the condition of the slave. The whole aspect of the ugly thing was changed as soon as master and slave together became the slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel has the same sort of work to do to-day, and there are institutions in full flourishing existence in this and every other civilised community as entirely antagonistic to the spirit and principles of Christianity as Roman slavery was. I, for my part, believe that the one uniting bond and healing medicine for society is found in Jesus Christ; and that in Him, and that the principles deducible from His revelation by word and work, applied to all social evils, are their cure, and their only cure. That slight, girlish figure standing at the door of Mary, her slave and yet her sister in Christ, may be taken as pointing symbolically the way by which the social and civic evils of this day are to be healed, and the war of classes to cease.

II. Note how we get here a very striking picture of the sacredness and greatness of small common duties.

Bhoda came out from the prayer-meeting to open the gate. It was her business, as we say, ‘to answer the door,’ and so she left off praying to go and do it. So doing, she was the means of delivering the Apostle from the danger which still dogged him. It was of little use to be praying on one side of the shut door when on the other he was standing in the street, and the day was beginning to dawn; Herod’s men would be after him as soon as daylight disclosed his escape. The one thing needful for him was to be taken in and sheltered. So the praying group and the girl who stops praying when she hears the knock, to which it was her business to attend, were working in the same direction. It is not necessary to insist that no heights or delights of devotion and secret communion are sufficient excuses for neglecting or delaying the doing of the smallest and most menial task which is our task. If your business is to keep the door, you will not be leaving, but abiding in, the secret place of the Most High, if you get up from your knees in the middle of your prayer, and go down to open it. The smallest, commonest acts of daily life are truer worship than is rapt and solitary communion or united prayer, if the latter can only be secured by the neglect of the former. Better to be in the lower parts of the house attending to the humble duties of the slave than to be in the upper chamber, uniting with the saints in supplication and leaving tasks unperformed.

Let us remember how we may find here an illustration of another great truth, that the smallest things, done in the course of the quiet discharge of recognised duty, and being, therefore, truly worship of God, have in them a certain quality of immortality, and may be eternally commemorated. It was not only the lofty and unique expression of devotion, which another woman gave when she broke the alabaster box to anoint the feet of the Saviour which were to be pierced with nails to-morrow, that has been held worthy of undying remembrance. The name and act of a poor slave girl have been commemorated by that Spirit who preserves nothing in vain, in order that we should learn that things which we vulgarly call great, and those which we insolently call small, are regarded by Him, not according to their apparent magnitude, but according to their motive and reference to Him. He says, ‘I will never forget any of their works’; and this little deed of Rhoda’s, like the rose petals that careful housekeepers in the country keep upon the sideboard in china bowls to diffuse a fragance through the room, is given us to keep in memory for ever, a witness of the sanctity of common life when filled with acts of obedience to Him.

III. The same figure of the 'damsel named Rhoda' may give us a warning as to the possibility of forgetting very plain duties under the pressure of very legitimate excitement.

'She opened not the door for gladness,' but ran in and told them. And if, whilst she was running in with her message, Herod's quaternions of soldiers had come down the street, there would have been 'no small stir' in the church as to 'what had become of Peter.' He would have gone back to his prison sure enough. Her *first* duty was to open the door; her *second* one was to go and tell the brethren, 'we have got him safe inside'; but in the rush of joyous emotions she naively forgot what her first business was, 'lost her head,' as we say, and so went off to tell that he was outside, instead of letting him in. Now joy and sorrow are equally apt to make us forget plain and pressing duties, and we may learn from this little incident the old-fashioned, but always necessary advice, to keep feeling well under control, to use it as impulse, not as guide, and never to let emotion, which should be down in the engine-room, come on deck and take the helm. It is dangerous to obey feeling, unless its decrees are countersigned by calm common sense illuminated by Scripture. Sorrow is apt to obscure duty by its darkness, and joy to do so by its dazzle. It is hard to see the road at midnight, or at midday when the sun is in our eyes. Both need to be controlled. Duty remains the same, whether my heart is beating like a sledge-hammer, or whether 'my bosom's lord sits lightly on its throne.' Whether I am sad or glad, the door that God has given me to watch has to be opened and shut by me. And whether I am a door-keeper in the house of the Lord, like Rhoda in Mary's, or have an office that people think larger and more important, the imperativeness of my duties is equally independent of my momentary emotions and circumstances. Remember, then, that duty remains while feeling fluctuates, and that, sorrowful or joyful, we have still the same Lord to serve and the same crown to win.

IV. Lastly, we have here an instance of a very modest but positive and fully-warranted trust in one’s own experience in spite of opposition.

I need not speak about that extraordinary discussion which the brethren got up in the upper room. They had been praying, as has often been remarked, for Peter’s deliverance, and now that he is delivered they will not believe it. I am afraid that there is often a dash of unbelief in immediate answers to our prayers mingling with the prayers. And although the petitions in this case were intense and fervent, as the original tells us, and had been kept up all night long, and although their earnestness and worthiness are guaranteed by the fact that they were answered, yet when the veritable Peter, in flesh and blood, stood before the door, the suppliants first said to the poor girl, ‘Thou art mad,’ and then, ‘It is his angel! It cannot be he.’ Nobody seems to have thought of going to the door to see whether it was he or not, but they went on arguing with Rhoda as to whether she was right or wrong. The unbelief that alloys even golden faith is taught us in this incident.

Rhoda ‘constantly affirmed that it was so,’ like the other porteress that had picked out Peter’s voice amongst the men huddled round the fire in the high priest’s chamber.

The lesson is-trust your own experience, whatever people may have to say against it. If you have found that Jesus Christ can help you, and has loved you, and that your sins have been forgiven, because you have trusted in Him, do not let anybody laugh or talk you out of that conviction. If you cannot argue, do like Rhoda, ‘constantly affirm that it is so.’ That is the right answer, especially if you can say to the antagonistic party, ‘Have you been down to the door, then, to see?’ And if they have to say ‘No!’ then the right answer is, ‘You go and look as I did, and you will come back with the same belief which I have.’

So at last they open the door and there he stands. Peter’s hammer, hammer, hammer at the gate is wonderfully given in the story. It goes on as a kind of running accompaniment through the talk between Rhoda and the friends. It might have put a stop to the conversation, one would have thought. But Another stands at the door knocking, still more persistently, still more patiently. ‘Behold! I stand at the door and knock. If any man open the door I will come in.’

70)Acts 12:17

Acts

PETER AFTER HIS ESCAPE

Act. 12:17.

When the angel ‘departed from him,’ Peter had to fall back on his own wits, and they served him well. He ‘considered the thing,’ and resolved to make for the house of Mary. He does not seem to have intended to remain there, so dangerously near Herod, but merely to have told its inmates of his deliverance, and then to have hidden himself somewhere, till the heat of the hunt after him was abated. Apparently he did not go into the house at all, but talked to the brethren, when they came trooping after Rhoda to open the gate. The signs of haste in the latter part of the story, where Peter has to think and act for himself, contrast strikingly with the majestic leisureliness of the action of the angel, who gave his successive commands to him to dress completely, as if careless of the sleeping legionaries who might wake at any moment. There was need for haste, for the night was wearing thin, and the streets of Jerusalem were no safe promenade for a condemned prisoner, escaped from his guards.

We do not deal here with the scene in Mary’s house and at the gate. We only note, in a word, the touch of nature in Rhoda’s forgetting to open ‘for gladness,’ and so leaving Peter in peril, if a detachment of his guards had already been told off to chase him. Equally true to nature, alas, is the incredulity of the praying ‘many,’ when the answer to their prayers was sent to them. They had rather believe that the poor girl was ‘mad’ or that, for all their praying, Peter was dead, and this was his ‘angel,’ than that their intense prayer had been so swiftly and completely answered. Is their behaviour not a mirror in which we may see our own?

Very like Peter, as well as very intelligible in the circumstances, is it that he ‘continued knocking,’ Well he might, and evidently his energetic fusillade of blows was heard even above the clatter of eager tongues, discussing Rhoda’s astonishing assertions. Some one, at last, seems to have kept his head sufficiently to suggest that perhaps, instead of disputing whether these were true or not, it might be well to go to the door and see. So they all went in a body, Rhoda being possibly afraid to go alone, and others afraid to stay behind, and there they saw his veritable self. But we notice that there is no sign of his being taken in and refreshed or cared for. He waved an imperative hand, to quiet the buzz of talk, spoke two or three brief words, and departed.

I. Note Peter’s account of his deliverance.

We have often had occasion to remark that the very keynote of this Book of Acts is the working of Christ from heaven, which to its writer is as real and efficient as was His work on earth. Peter here traces his deliverance to ‘the Lord.’ He does not stay to mention the angel. His thoughts went beyond the instrument to the hand which wielded it. Nor does he seem to have been at all astonished at his deliverance. His moment of bewilderment, when he did not know whether he was dreaming or awake, soon passed, and as soon as ‘the sober certainty of his waking bliss’ settled on his mind, his deliverance seemed to him perfectly natural. What else was it to be expected that ‘the Lord’ would do? Was it not just like Him? There was nothing to be astonished at, there was everything to be thankful for. That is how Christian hearts should receive the deliverances which the Lord is still working for them.

II. Note Peter’s message to the brethren.

James, the Lord’s brother, was not an Apostle. That he should have been named to receive the message indicates that already he held some conspicuous position, perhaps some office, in the Church. It may also imply that there were no Apostles in Jerusalem then. We note also that the ‘many’ who were gathered in Mary’s house can have been only a small part of the whole. We here get a little glimpse into the conditions of the life of a persecuted Church, which a sympathetic imagination can dwell on till it is luminous. Such gatherings as would attract notice had to be avoided, and what meetings were held had to be in private houses and with shut doors, through which entrance was not easy. Mary’s ‘door’ had a ‘gate’ in it, and only that smaller postern, which admitted but one at a time, was opened to visitors, and that after scrutiny. But though assemblies were restricted, communications were kept up, and by underground ways information of events important to the community spread through its members. The consciousness of brotherhood was all the stronger because of the common danger, the universal peril had not made the brethren selfish, but sympathetic. We may note, too, how great a change had come since the time when the Christians were in favour with all the people, and may reflect how fickle are the world's smiles for Christ's servants.

III. Note Peter's disappearance.

All that is said of it is that he 'went into another place.' Probably Luke did not know where he went. It would be prudent at the time to conceal it, and the habit of concealment may have survived the need for it. But two points suggest themselves in regard to the Apostle's flight. There may be a better use for an Apostle than to kill him, and Christ's boldest witnesses are sometimes bound to save themselves by fleeing into another city. To hide oneself 'till the calamity be overpast' may be rank cowardice or commendable prudence. All depends on the circumstances of each case. Prudence is an element in courage, and courage without it is fool-hardiness. There are outward dangers from which it is Christian duty to run, and there are outward dangers which it is Christian duty to face. There are inward temptations which it is best to avoid, as there are others which have to be fought to the death. Peter was as brave and braver when he went and hid himself, than when he boasted, 'Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I!' A morbid eagerness for martyrdom wrought much harm in the Church at a later time. The primitive Church was free from it.

But we must not omit to note that here Peter is dropped out of the history, and is scarcely heard of any more. We have a glimpse of him in Act. 15:1 - Act. 15:41, at the Council in Jerusalem, but, with that exception, this is the last mention of him in Acts. How little this Book cares for its heroes! Or rather how it has only one Hero, and one Name which it celebrates, the name of that Lord to whom Peter ascribed his deliverance, and of whom he himself declared that 'there is none other Name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved.'

END OF VOL. I.

71)Acts 12:23

Acts

THE ANGEL'S TOUCH

Act. 12:7, Act. 12:23.

The same heavenly agent performs the same action on Peter and on Herod. To the one, his touch brings freedom and the dropping off of his chains; to the other it brings gnawing agonies and a horrible death. These twofold effects of one cause open out wide and solemn thoughts, on which it is well to look.

I. The one touch has a twofold effect.

So it is always when God's angels come, or God Himself lays His hand on men. Every manifestation of the divine power, every revelation of the divine presence, all our lives' experiences, are charged with the solemn possibility of bringing us one or other of two directly opposite results. They all offer us an alternative, a solemn 'either -or.'

The Gospel too comes charged with that double possibility, and is the intensest and most fateful example of the dual effect of all God's messages and dealings. Just as the ark maimed Dagon and decimated the Philistine cities and slew Uzzah, but brought blessing and prosperity to the house of Obed-edom, just as the same pillar was light to Israel all the night long, but cloud and darkness to the Egyptians, so is Christ set 'for the fall of' some and 'for the rising of' others amidst the 'many in Israel,' and His Gospel is either 'the savour of life unto life or of death unto death,' but in both cases is in itself 'unto God,' one and the same 'sweet savour in Christ.'

II. These twofold effects are parts of one plan and purpose.

Peter's liberation and Herod's death tended in the same direction-to strengthen and conserve the infant Church, and thus to prepare the way for the conquering march of the Gospel. And so it is in all God's self-revelations and manifested energies, whatever may be their effects. They come from one source and one motive, they are fundamentally the operations of one changeless Agent, and, as they are one in origin and character, so they are one in purpose. We are not to separate them into distinct classes and ascribe them to different elements in the divine nature, setting down this as the work of Love and that as the outcome of Wrath, or regarding the acts of deliverance as due to one part of that great whole and the acts of destruction as due to another part of it. The angel was the same, and his celestial fingers were moved by the same calm, celestial will when he smote Peter into liberty and life, and Herod to death.

God changes His ways, but not His heart. He changes His acts, but not His purposes. Opposite methods conduce to one end, as winter storms and June sunshine equally tend to the yellowed harvest.

III. The character of the effects depends on the men who are touched.

As is the man, so is the effect of the angel's touch. It could only bring blessing to the one who was the friend of the angel's Lord, and it could bring only death to the other, who was His enemy. It could do nothing to the Apostle but cause his chains to drop from his wrists, nor anything to the vainglorious king but bring loathsome death.

This, too, is a universal truth. It is we ourselves who settle what God's words and acts will be to us. The trite proverb, 'One man's meat is another man's poison,' is true in the highest regions. It is eminently, blessedly or tragically true in our relation to the Gospel, wherein all God's self-revelation reaches its climax, wherein 'the arm of the Lord' is put forth in its most blessed energy, wherein is laid on each of us the touch, tender and more charged with blessing than that of the angel who smote the calmly sleeping Apostle. That Gospel may either be to us the means of freeing us from our chains, and leading us out of our prison-house into sunshine and security, or be the fatal occasion of condemnation and death. Which it shall be depends on ourselves. Which shall I make it for myself?

72)Acts 13:1-8

TO THE REGIONS BEYOND

Act. 13:1 - Act. 13:13.

We stand in this passage at the beginning of a great step forward. Philip and Peter had each played a part in the gradual expansion of the church beyond the limits of Judaism; but it was from the church at Antioch that the messengers went forth who completed the process. Both its locality and its composition made that natural.

I. The solemn designation of the missionaries is the first point in the narrative.

The church at Antioch was not left without signs of Christ's grace and presence. It had its band of 'prophets and teachers.' As might be expected, four of the five named are Hellenists,-that is, Jews born in Gentile lands, and speaking Gentile languages. Barnabas was a Cypriote, Simeon's byname of Niger ['Black'] was probably given because of his dark complexion, which was probably caused by his birth in warmer lands. He may have been a North African, as Lucius of Cyrene was. Saul was from Tarsus, and only Manaen remains to represent the pure Palestinian Jew. His had been a strange course, from being foster-brother of the Herod who killed John to becoming a teacher in the church at Antioch. Barnabas was the leader of the little group, and the younger Pharisee from Tarsus, who had all along been Barnabas's *protege*, brought up the rear.

The order observed in the list is a little window which shows a great deal. The first and last names all the world knows; the other three are never heard of again. Immortality falls on the two, oblivion swallows up the three. But it matters little whether our names are sounded in men's ears, if they are in the Lamb's book of life.

These five brethren were waiting on the Lord by fasting and prayer. Apparently they had reason to expect some divine communication, for which they were thus preparing themselves. Light will come to those who thus seek it. They were commanded to set apart two of their number for 'the work whereunto I have called them.' That work is not specified, and yet the two, like carrier pigeons on being let loose, make straight for their line of flight, and know exactly whither they are to go.

If we strictly interpret Luke’s words [‘I *have* called them’], a previous intimation from the Spirit had revealed to them the sphere of their work. In that case, the *separation* was only the recognition by the brethren of the divine appointment. The inward call must come first, and no ecclesiastical designation can do more than confirm that. But the solemn designation by the Church identifies those who remain behind with the work of those who go forth; it throws responsibility for sympathy and support on the former, and it ministers strength and the sense of companionship to the latter, besides checking that tendency to isolation which accompanies earnestness. To go forth on even Christian service, unrecognised by the brethren, is not good for even a Paul.

But although Luke speaks of the Church sending them away, he takes care immediately to add that it was the Holy Ghost who ‘sent them forth.’ Ramsay suggests that ‘sent them away’ is not the meaning of the phrase in Act. 13:3, but that it should be rendered ‘gave them leave to depart.’ In any case, a clear distinction is drawn between the action of the Church and that of the Spirit, which constituted Paul’s real commission as an Apostle. He himself says that he was an Apostle, ‘not from men, neither through man.’

II. The events in the first stage of the journey are next summarily presented.

Note the local colouring in ‘went *down* to Seleucia,’ the seaport of Antioch, at the mouth of the river. The missionaries were naturally led to begin at Cyprus, as Barnabas’s birthplace, and that of some of the founders of the church at Antioch.

So, for the first time, the Gospel went to sea, the precursor of so many voyages. It was an ‘epoch-making moment’ when that ship dropped down with the tide and put out to sea. Salamis was the nearest port on the south-eastern coast of Cyprus, and there they landed,- Barnabas, no doubt, familiar with all he saw; Saul probably a stranger to it all. Their plan of action was that to which Paul adhered in all his after work,-to carry the Gospel to the Jew first, a proceeding for which the manner of worship in the synagogues gave facilities. No doubt, many such were scattered through Cyprus, and Barnabas would be well known in most.

They thus traversed the island from east to west. It is noteworthy that only now is John Mark’s name brought in as their attendant. He had come with them from Antioch, but Luke will not mention him, when he is telling of the sending forth of the other two, because Mark was not sent by the Spirit, but only chosen by his uncle, and his subsequent defection did not affect the completeness of their embassy. His entirely subordinate place is made obvious by the point at which he appears.

Nothing of moment happened on the tour till Paphos was reached. That was the capital, the residence of the pro-consul, and the seat of the foul worship of Venus. There the first antagonist was met. It is not Sergius Paulus, pro-consul though he was, who is the central figure of interest to Luke, but the sorcerer who was attached to his train. His character is drawn in Luke’s description, and in Paul’s fiery exclamation. Each has three clauses, which fall ‘like the beats of a hammer.’ ‘Sorcerer, false prophet, Jew,’ make a climax of wickedness. That a Jew should descend to dabble in the black art of magic, and play tricks on the credulity of ignorant people by his knowledge of some simple secrets of chemistry; that he should pretend to prophetic gifts which in his heart he knew to be fraud, and should be recreant to his ancestral faith, proved him to deserve the penetrating sentence which Paul passed on him. He was a trickster, and knew that he was: his inspiration came from an evil source; he had come to hate righteousness of every sort.

Paul was not flinging bitter words at random, or yielding to passion, but was laying the black heart bare to the man's own eyes, that the seeing himself as God saw him might startle him into penitence. 'The corruption of the best is the worst.' The bitterest enemies of God's ways are those who have cast aside their early faith. A Jew who had stooped to be a juggler was indeed causing God's 'name to be blasphemed among the Gentiles.'

He and Paul each recognised in the other his most formidable foe. Elymas instinctively felt that the pro-consul must be kept from listening to the teaching of these two fellow-countrymen, and 'sought to *pervert* him from the faith,' therein *perverting* [the same word is used in both cases] 'the right ways of the Lord'; that is, opposing the divine purpose. He was a specimen of a class who attained influence in that epoch of unrest, when the more cultivated and nobler part of Roman society had lost faith in the old gods, and was turning wistfully and with widespread expectation to the mysterious East for enlightenment.

So, like a ship which plunges into the storm as soon as it clears the pier-head, the missionaries felt the first dash of the spray and blast of the wind directly they began their work. Since this was their first encounter with a foe which they would often have to meet, the duel assumes importance, and we understand not only the fulness of the narrative, but the miracle which assured Paul and Barnabas of Christ's help, and was meant to diffuse its encouragement along the line of their future work. For Elymas it was chastisement, which might lead him to cease to pervert the ways of the Lord, and himself begin to walk in them. Perhaps, after a season, he did see 'the better Sun.'

Saul's part in the incident is noteworthy. We observe the vivid touch, he 'fastened his eyes on him.' There must have been something very piercing in the fixed gaze of these flashing eyes. But Luke takes pains to prevent our thinking that Paul spoke from his own insight or was moved by human passion. He was 'filled with the Holy Ghost,' and, as His organ, poured out the scorching words that revealed the cowering apostate to himself, and announced the merciful punishment that was to fall. We need to be very sure that we are similarly filled before venturing to imitate the Apostle’s tone.

III. The shifting of the scene to the mainland presents some noteworthy points.

It is singular that there is no preaching mentioned as having been attempted in Perga, or anywhere along the coast, but that the two evangelists seem to have gone at once across the great mountain range of Taurus to Antioch of Pisidia.

A striking suggestion is made by Ramsay to the effect that the reason was a sudden attack of the malarial fever which is endemic in the low-lying coast plains, and for which the natural remedy is to get up among the mountains. If so, the journey to Antioch of Pisidia may not have been in the programme to which John Mark had agreed, and his return to Jerusalem may have been due to this departure from the original intention. Be that as it may, he stands for us as a beacon, warning against hasty entrance on great undertakings of which we have not counted the cost, no less than against cowardly flight from work, as soon as it begins to involve more danger or discomfort than we had reckoned on.

John Mark was willing to go a-missionarying as long as he was in Cyprus, where he was somebody and much at home, by his relationship to Barnabas; but when Perga and the climb over Taurus into strange lands came to be called for, his zeal and courage oozed out at his finger-ends, and he skulked back to his mother’s house at Jerusalem. No wonder that Paul ‘thought not good to take with them him who withdrew from them.’ But even such faint hearts as Mark’s may take courage from the fact that he nobly retrieved his youthful error, and won back Paul’s confidence, and proved himself ‘profitable to him for the ministry.’

73)Acts 13:9

TO THE REGIONS BEYOND

WHY SAUL BECAME PAUL

Act. 13:9.

Hitherto the Apostle has been known by the former of these names, henceforward he is known exclusively by the latter. Hitherto he has been second to his friend Barnabas, henceforward he is first. In an earlier verse of the chapter we read that ‘Barnabas and Saul’ were separated for their missionary work, and again, that it was ‘Barnabas and Saul’ for whom the governor of Cyprus sent, to hear the word of the Lord. But in a subsequent verse of the chapter we read that ‘Paul and his company loosed from Paphos.’

The change in the order of the names is significant, and the change in the names not less so. Why was it that at this period the Apostle took up this new designation? I think that the coincidence between his name and that of the governor of Cyprus, who believed at his preaching, Sergius Paulus, is too remarkable to be accidental. And though, no doubt, it was the custom for the Jews of that day, especially for those of them who lived in Gentile lands, to have, for convenience’ sake, two names, one Jewish and one Gentile-one for use amongst their brethren, and one for use amongst the heathen-still we have no distinct intimation that the Apostle bore a Gentile name before this moment. And the fact that the name which he bears now is the same as that of his first convert, seems to me to point the explanation.

I take it, then, that the assumption of the name of Paul instead of the name of Saul occurred at this point, stood in some relation to his missionary work, and was intended in some sense as a memorial of his first victory in the preaching of the Gospel.

I think that there are lessons to be derived from the substitution of one of these names for the other which may well occupy us for a few moments.

I. First of all, then, the new name expresses a new nature.

Jesus Christ gave the Apostle whom He called to Himself in the early days, a new name, in order to prophesy the change which, by the discipline of sorrow and the communication of the grace of God, should pass over Simon Barjona, making him into a Peter, a ‘Man of Rock.’ With characteristic independence, Saul chooses for himself a new name, which shall express the change that he feels has passed over his inmost being. True, he does not assume it at his conversion, but that is no reason why we should not believe that he assumes it because he is beginning to understand what it is that has happened to him at his conversion.

The fact that he changes his name as soon as he throws himself into public and active life, is but gathering into one picturesque symbol his great principle; ‘If any man be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away and all things are become new.’

So, dear brethren, we may, from this incident before us, gather this one great lesson, that the central heart of Christianity is the possession of a new life, communicated to us through faith in that Son of God, Who is the Lord of the Spirit. Wheresoever there is a true faith, there is a new nature. Opinions may play upon the surface of a man’s soul, like moonbeams on the silver sea, without raising its temperature one degree or sending a single beam into its dark caverns. And that is the sort of Christianity that satisfies a great many of you-a Christianity of opinion, a Christianity of surface creed, a Christianity which at the best slightly modifies some of our outward actions, but leaves the whole inner man unchanged.

Paul’s Christianity meant a radical change in his whole nature. He went out of Jerusalem a persecutor, he came into Damascus a Christian. He rode out of Jerusalem hating, loathing, despising Jesus Christ; he groped his way into Damascus, broken, bruised, clinging contrite to His feet, and clasping His Cross as his only hope. He went out proud, self-reliant, pluming himself upon his many prerogatives, his blue blood, his pure descent, his Rabbinical knowledge, his Pharisaical training, his external religious earnestness, his rigid morality; he rode into Damascus blind in the eyes, but seeing in the soul, and discerning that all these things were, as he says in his strong, vehement way, ‘but dung’ in comparison with his winning Christ.

And his theory of conversion, which he preaches in all his Epistles, is but the generalisation of his own personal experience, which suddenly, and in a moment, smote his old self to shivers, and raised up a new life, with new tastes, views, tendencies, aspirations, with new allegiance to a new King. Such changes, so sudden, so revolutionary, cannot be expected often to take place amongst people who, like us, have been listening to Christian teaching all our lives. But unless there be this infusion of a new life into men's spirits which shall make them love and long and aspire after new things that once they did not care for, I know not why we should speak of them as being Christians at all. The transition is described by Paul as 'passing from death unto life.' That cannot be a surface thing. A change which needs a new name must be a profound change. Has our Christianity revolutionised our nature in any such fashion? It is easy to be a Christian after the superficial fashion which passes muster with so many of us. A verbal acknowledgment of belief in truths which we never think about, a purely external performance of acts of worship, a subscription or two winged by no sympathy, and a fairly respectable life beneath the cloak of which all evil may burrow undetected-make the Christianity of thousands. Paul's Christianity transformed him; does yours transform you? If it does not, are you quite sure that it *is* Christianity at all?

II. Then, again, we may take this change of name as being expressive of a life's work.

Paul is a Roman name. He strips himself of his Jewish connections and relationships. His fellow-countrymen who lived amongst the Gentiles were, as I said at the beginning of these remarks, in the habit of doing the same thing; but they carried *both* their names; their Jewish for use amongst their own people, their Gentile one for use amongst Gentiles. Paul seems to have altogether disused his old name of Saul. It was almost equivalent to seceding from Judaism. It is like the acts of the renegades whom one sometimes hears of, who are found by travellers, dressed in turban and flowing robes, and bearing some Turkish name, or like some English sailor, lost to home and kindred, who deserts his ship in an island of the Pacific, and drops his English name for a barbarous title, in token that he has given up his faith and his nationality.

So Paul, contemplating for his life’s work preaching amongst the Gentiles, determines at the beginning, ‘I lay down all of which I used to be proud. If my Jewish descent and privileges stand in my way I cast them aside. “Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews, as touching the law, a Pharisee,”-all these I wrap together in one bundle, and toss them behind me that I may be the better able to help some to whom they would have hindered my access.’ A man with a heart will throw off his silken robes that his arm may be bared to rescue, and his feet free to run to succour.

So we may, from the change of the Apostle’s name, gather this lesson, never out of date, that the only way to help people is to go down to their level. If you want to bless men, you must identify yourself with them. It is no use standing on an eminence above them, and patronisingly talking down to them. You cannot scold, or hector, or lecture men into the possession and acceptance of religious truth if you take a position of superiority. As our Master has taught us, if we want to make blind beggars see we must take the blind beggars by the hand.

The spirit which led the Apostle to change the name of Saul, with its memories of the royal dignity which, in the person of its great wearer, had honoured his tribe, for a Roman name is the same which he formally announces as a deliberately adopted law of his life. ‘To them that are without law I became as without law . . . that I might gain them that are without law . . . I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.’

It is the very inmost principle of the Gospel. The principle that influenced the servant in this comparatively little matter, is the principle that influenced the Master in the mightiest of all events. ‘He who was in the form of God, and thought not equality with God a thing to be eagerly snatched at, made Himself of no reputation, and was found in fashion as a man and in form as a servant, and became obedient unto death.’ ‘For as much as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise took part of the same’; and the mystery of incarnation came to pass, because when the Divine would help men, the only way by which the Infinite love could reach its end was that the Divine should become man;

identifying Himself with those whom He would help, and stooping to the level of the humanity that He would lift.

And as it is the very essence and heart of Christ's work, so, my brother, it is the condition of all work that benefits our fellows. It applies all round. We must stoop if we would raise. We must put away gifts, culture, everything that distinguishes us, and come to the level of the men that we seek to help. Sympathy is the parent of all wise counsel, because it is the parent of all true understanding of our brethren's wants. Sympathy is the only thing to which people will listen, sympathy is the only disposition correspondent to the message that we Christians are entrusted with. For a Christian man to carry the Gospel of Infinite condescension to his fellows in a spirit other than that of the Master and the Gospel which he speaks, is an anomaly and a contradiction.

And, therefore, let us all remember that a vast deal of so-called Christian work falls utterly dead and profitless, for no other reason than this, that the doers have forgotten that they must come to the level of the men whom they would help, before they can expect to bless them.

You remember the old story of the heroic missionary whose heart burned to carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ amongst captives, and as there was no other way of reaching them, let himself be sold for a slave, and put out his hands to have the manacles fastened upon them. It is the law for all Christian service; become like men if you will help them,-'To the weak as weak, all things to all men, that we might by all means save some.'

And, my brother, there was no obligation on Paul's part to do Christian work which does not lie on you.

III. Further, this change of name is a memorial of victory.

The name is that of Paul's first convert. He takes it, as I suppose, because it seemed to him such a blessed thing that at the very moment when he began to sow, God helped him to reap. He had gone out to his work, no doubt, with much trembling, with weakness and fear. And lo! here, at once, the fields were white already to the harvest, Great conquerors have been named from their victories; Africanus, Germanicus, Nelson of the Nile, Napier of Magdala, and the like. Paul names himself from the first victory that God gives him to win; and so, as it were, carries ever on his breast a memorial of the wonder that through him it had been given to preach, and that not without success, amongst the Gentiles 'the unsearchable riches of Christ.'

That is to say, this man thought of it as his highest honour, and the thing best worthy to be remembered about his life, that God had helped him to help his brethren to know the common Master. Is that your idea of the best thing about a life? What would you, a professing Christian, like to have for an epitaph on your grave? 'He was rich; he made a big business in Manchester'; 'He was famous, he wrote books'; 'He was happy and fortunate'; or, 'He turned many to righteousness'? This man flung away his literary tastes, his home joys, and his personal ambition, and chose as that for which he would live, and by which he would fain be remembered, that he should bring dark hearts to the light in which he and they together walked.

His name, in its commemoration of his first success, would act as a stimulus to service and to hope. No doubt the Apostle, like the rest of us, had his times of indolence and languor, and his times of despondency when he seemed to have laboured in vain, and spent his strength for nought. He had but to say 'Paul' to find the antidote to both the one and the other, and in the remembrance of the past to find a stimulus for service for the future, and a stimulus for hope for the time to come. His first convert was to him the first drop that predicts the shower, the first primrose that prophesies the wealth of yellow blossoms and downy green leaves that will fill the woods in a day or two. The first convert 'bears in his hand a glass which showeth many more.' Look at the workmen in the streets trying to get up a piece of the roadway. How difficult it is to lever out the first paving stone from the compacted mass! But when once it has been withdrawn, the rest is comparatively easy. We can understand Paul's triumph and joy over the first stone which he had worked out of the strongly cemented wall and barrier of heathenism; and his conviction that having thus made a breach, if it were but wide enough to let the end of his lever in, the fall of the whole was only a question of time. I suppose that if the old alchemists had turned but one grain of base metal into gold they might have turned tons, if only they had had the retorts and the appliances with which to do it. And so, what has brought one man's soul into harmony with God, and given one man the true life, can do the same for all men. In the first fruits we may see the fields whitening to the harvest. Let us rejoice then, in any little work that God helps us to do, and be sure that if so great be the joy of the first fruits, great beyond speech will be the joy of the ingathering.

IV. And now last of all, this change of name is an index of the spirit of a life's work.

'Paul' means 'little'; 'Saul' means 'desired.' He abandons the name that prophesied of favour and honour, to adopt a name that bears upon its very front a profession of humility. His very name is the condensation into a word of his abiding conviction: 'I am less than the least of all saints.' Perhaps even there may he an allusion to his low stature, which may be pointed at in the sarcasm of his enemies that his letters were strong, though his bodily presence was 'weak.' If he was, as Renan calls him, 'an ugly little Jew,' the name has a double appropriateness.

But, at all events, it is an expression of the spirit in which he sought to do his work. The more lofty the consciousness of his vocation the more lowly will a true man's estimate of himself be. The higher my thought of what God has given me grace to do, the more shall I feel weighed down by the consciousness of my unfitness to do it. And the more grateful my remembrance of what He has enabled me to do, the more shall I wonder that I have been enabled, and the more profoundly shall I feel that it is not my strength but His that has won the victories.

So, dear brethren, for all hope, for all success in our work, for all growth in Christian grace and character, this disposition of lowly self-abasement and recognised unworthiness and infirmity is absolutely indispensable. The mountain-tops that lift themselves to the stars are barren, and few springs find their rise there. It is in the lowly valleys that the flowers grow and the rivers run. And it is they who are humble and lowly in heart to whom God gives strength to serve Him, and the joy of accepted service.

I beseech you, then, learn your true life's task. Learn how to do it by identifying yourselves with the humbler brethren whom you would help. Learn the spirit in which it must be done; the spirit of lowly self-abasement. And oh! above all, learn this, that unless you have the new life, the life of God in your hearts, you have no life at all.

Have you, my brother, that faith by which we receive into our spirits Christ's own Spirit, to be our life? If you have, then you are a new creature, with a new name, perhaps but dimly visible and faintly audible, amidst the imperfections of earth, but sure to shine out on the pages of the Lamb's Book of Life; and to be read 'with tumults of acclaim' before the angels of Heaven. 'I will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth save he that receiveth it.'

74)Acts 13:10-12

Acts

TO THE REGIONS BEYOND

Act. 13:1 - Act. 13:13.

We stand in this passage at the beginning of a great step forward. Philip and Peter had each played a part in the gradual expansion of the church beyond the limits of Judaism; but it was from the church at Antioch that the messengers went forth who completed the process. Both its locality and its composition made that natural.

I. The solemn designation of the missionaries is the first point in the narrative.

The church at Antioch was not left without signs of Christ's grace and presence. It had its band of 'prophets and teachers.' As might be expected, four of the five named are Hellenists,-that is, Jews born in Gentile lands, and speaking Gentile languages. Barnabas was a Cypriote, Simeon's byname of Niger ['Black'] was probably given because of his dark complexion, which was probably caused by his birth in warmer lands. He may have been a North African, as Lucius of Cyrene was. Saul was from

Tarsus, and only Manaen remains to represent the pure Palestinian Jew. His had been a strange course, from being foster-brother of the Herod who killed John to becoming a teacher in the church at Antioch. Barnabas was the leader of the little group, and the younger Pharisee from Tarsus, who had all along been Barnabas's *protege*, brought up the rear.

The order observed in the list is a little window which shows a great deal. The first and last names all the world knows; the other three are never heard of again. Immortality falls on the two, oblivion swallows up the three. But it matters little whether our names are sounded in men's ears, if they are in the Lamb's book of life.

These five brethren were waiting on the Lord by fasting and prayer. Apparently they had reason to expect some divine communication, for which they were thus preparing themselves. Light will come to those who thus seek it. They were commanded to set apart two of their number for 'the work whereunto I have called them.' That work is not specified, and yet the two, like carrier pigeons on being let loose, make straight for their line of flight, and know exactly whither they are to go.

If we strictly interpret Luke's words ['I *have* called them'], a previous intimation from the Spirit had revealed to them the sphere of their work. In that case, the *separation* was only the recognition by the brethren of the divine appointment. The inward call must come first, and no ecclesiastical designation can do more than confirm that. But the solemn designation by the Church identifies those who remain behind with the work of those who go forth; it throws responsibility for sympathy and support on the former, and it ministers strength and the sense of companionship to the latter, besides checking that tendency to isolation which accompanies earnestness. To go forth on even Christian service, unrecognised by the brethren, is not good for even a Paul.

But although Luke speaks of the Church sending them away, he takes care immediately to add that it was the Holy Ghost who 'sent them forth.' Ramsay suggests that 'sent them away' is not the meaning of the phrase in Act. 13:3, but that it should be rendered 'gave them leave to depart.' In any case, a clear distinction is drawn between the action of the Church and that of the Spirit, which constituted Paul's real commission as an Apostle. He himself says that he was an Apostle, 'not from men, neither through man.'

II. The events in the first stage of the journey are next summarily presented.

Note the local colouring in 'went *down* to Seleucia,' the seaport of Antioch, at the mouth of the river. The missionaries were naturally led to begin at Cyprus, as Barnabas's birthplace, and that of some of the founders of the church at Antioch.

So, for the first time, the Gospel went to sea, the precursor of so many voyages. It was an 'epoch-making moment' when that ship dropped down with the tide and put out to sea. Salamis was the nearest port on the south-eastern coast of Cyprus, and there they landed,- Barnabas, no doubt, familiar with all he saw; Saul probably a stranger to it all. Their plan of action was that to which Paul adhered in all his after work,-to carry the Gospel to the Jew first, a proceeding for which the manner of worship in the synagogues gave facilities. No doubt, many such were scattered through Cyprus, and Barnabas would be well known in most.

They thus traversed the island from east to west. It is noteworthy that only now is John Mark's name brought in as their attendant. He had come with them from Antioch, but Luke will not mention him, when he is telling of the sending forth of the other two, because Mark was not sent by the Spirit, but only chosen by his uncle, and his subsequent defection did not affect the completeness of their embassy. His entirely subordinate place is made obvious by the point at which he appears.

Nothing of moment happened on the tour till Paphos was reached. That was the capital, the residence of the pro-consul, and the seat of the foul worship of Venus. There the first antagonist was met. It is not Sergius Paulus, pro-consul though he was, who is the central figure of interest to Luke, but the sorcerer who was attached to his train. His character is drawn in Luke's description, and in Paul's fiery exclamation. Each has three clauses, which fall 'like the beats of a hammer.' 'Sorcerer, false prophet, Jew,' make a climax of wickedness. That a Jew should descend to dabble in the black art of magic, and play tricks on the credulity of ignorant people by his knowledge of some simple secrets of chemistry; that he should pretend to prophetic gifts which in his heart he knew to be fraud, and should be recreant to his ancestral faith, proved him to deserve the penetrating sentence which Paul passed on him. He was a trickster, and knew that he was: his inspiration came from an evil source; he had come to hate righteousness of every sort.

Paul was not flinging bitter words at random, or yielding to passion, but was laying the black heart bare to the man's own eyes, that the seeing himself as God saw him might startle him into penitence. 'The corruption of the best is the worst.' The bitterest enemies of God's ways are those who have cast aside their early faith. A Jew who had stooped to be a juggler was indeed causing God's 'name to be blasphemed among the Gentiles.'

He and Paul each recognised in the other his most formidable foe. Elymas instinctively felt that the pro-consul must be kept from listening to the teaching of these two fellow-countrymen, and 'sought to *pervert* him from the faith,' therein *perverting* [the same word is used in both cases] 'the right ways of the Lord'; that is, opposing the divine purpose. He was a specimen of a class who attained influence in that epoch of unrest, when the more cultivated and nobler part of Roman society had lost faith in the old gods, and was turning wistfully and with widespread expectation to the mysterious East for enlightenment.

So, like a ship which plunges into the storm as soon as it clears the pier-head, the missionaries felt the first dash of the spray and blast of the wind directly they began their work. Since this was their first encounter with a foe which they would often have to meet, the duel assumes importance, and we understand not only the fulness of the narrative, but the miracle which assured Paul and Barnabas of Christ's help, and was meant to diffuse its encouragement along the line of their future work. For Elymas it was chastisement, which might lead him to cease to pervert the ways of the Lord, and himself begin to walk in them. Perhaps, after a season, he did see 'the better Sun.'

Saul's part in the incident is noteworthy. We observe the vivid touch, he 'fastened his eyes on him.' There must have been something very piercing in the fixed gaze of these flashing eyes. But Luke takes pains to prevent our thinking that Paul spoke from his own insight or was moved by human passion. He was ‘filled with the Holy Ghost,’ and, as His organ, poured out the scorching words that revealed the cowering apostate to himself, and announced the merciful punishment that was to fall. We need to be very sure that we are similarly filled before venturing to imitate the Apostle’s tone.

III. The shifting of the scene to the mainland presents some noteworthy points.

It is singular that there is no preaching mentioned as having been attempted in Perga, or anywhere along the coast, but that the two evangelists seem to have gone at once across the great mountain range of Taurus to Antioch of Pisidia.

A striking suggestion is made by Ramsay to the effect that the reason was a sudden attack of the malarial fever which is endemic in the low-lying coast plains, and for which the natural remedy is to get up among the mountains. If so, the journey to Antioch of Pisidia may not have been in the programme to which John Mark had agreed, and his return to Jerusalem may have been due to this departure from the original intention. Be that as it may, he stands for us as a beacon, warning against hasty entrance on great undertakings of which we have not counted the cost, no less than against cowardly flight from work, as soon as it begins to involve more danger or discomfort than we had reckoned on.

John Mark was willing to go a-missionarying as long as he was in Cyprus, where he was somebody and much at home, by his relationship to Barnabas; but when Perga and the climb over Taurus into strange lands came to be called for, his zeal and courage oozed out at his finger-ends, and he skulked back to his mother’s house at Jerusalem. No wonder that Paul ‘thought not good to take with them him who withdrew from them.’ But even such faint hearts as Mark’s may take courage from the fact that he nobly retrieved his youthful error, and won back Paul’s confidence, and proved himself ‘profitable to him for the ministry.’

75) Acts 13:13

TO THE REGIONS BEYOND

JOHN MARK

Act. 13:13.

The few brief notices of John Mark in Scripture are sufficient to give us an outline of his life, and some inkling of his character. He was the son of a well-to-do Christian woman in Jerusalem, whose house appears to have been the resort of the brethren as early as the period of Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison. As the cousin of Barnabas he was naturally selected to be the attendant and secular factotum of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. For some reason, faint-heartedness, lack of interest, levity of disposition, or whatever it may have been, he very quickly abandoned that office and returned to his home. His kindly-natured and indulgent relative sought to reinstate him in his former position on the second journey of Paul and himself. Paul's kinder severity refused to comply with the wish of his colleague Barnabas, and so they part, and Barnabas and Mark sail away to Cyprus, and drop out of the Acts of the Apostles. We hear no more about him until near the end of the Apostle Paul's life, when the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon show him as again the companion of Paul in his captivity. He seems to have left him in Rome, to have gone to Asia Minor for a space, to have returned to the Apostle during his last imprisonment and immediately prior to his death, and then to have attached himself to the Apostle Peter, and under his direction and instruction to have written his Gospel.

Now these are the bones of his story; can we put flesh and blood upon them: and can we get any lessons out of them? I think we may; at any rate I am going to try.

I. Consider then, first, his-what shall I call it? well, if I may use the word which Paul himself designates it by, in its correct signification, we may call it his-apostasy.

It was not a departure from Christ, but it was a departure from very plain duty. And if you will notice the point of time at which Mark threw up the work that was laid upon him, you will see the reason for his doing so. The first place to which the bold evangelists went was Cyprus. Barnabas was a native of Cyprus, which was perhaps the reason for selecting it as the place in which to begin the mission. For the same reason, because it was the native place of his relative, it would be very easy work for John Mark as long as they stopped in Cyprus, among his friends, with people that knew him, and with whom no doubt he was familiar. But as soon as they crossed the strait that separated the island from the mainland, and set foot upon the soil of Asia Minor, so soon he turned tail; like some recruit that goes into battle, full of fervour, but as soon as the bullets begin to 'ping' makes the best of his way to the rear. He was quite ready for missionary work as long as it was easy work; quite ready to do it as long as he was moving upon known ground and there was no great call upon his heroism, or his self-sacrifice; he does not wait to test the difficulties, but is frightened by the imagination of them, does not throw himself into the work and see how he gets on with it, but before he has gone a mile into the land, or made any real experience of the perils and hardships, has had quite enough of it, and goes away back to his mother in Jerusalem.

Yes, and we find exactly the same thing in all kinds of strenuous life. Many begin to run, but one after another, as 'lap' after 'lap' of the racecourse is got over, has had enough of it, and drops on one side; a hundred started, and at the end the field is reduced to three or four. All you men that have grey hairs on your heads can remember many of your companions that set out in the course with you, 'did run well' for a little while: what has become of them? This thing hindered one, the other thing hindered another; the swiftly formed resolution died down as fast as it blazed up; and there are perhaps some three or four that, 'by patient continuance in well-doing,' have been tolerably faithful to their juvenile ideal; and to use the homely word of the homely Abraham Lincoln, kept 'pegging away' at what they knew to be the task that was laid upon them.

This is very 'threadbare' morality, very very familiar and old-fashioned teaching; but I am accustomed to believe that no teaching is threadbare until it is practised; and that however well-worn the platitudes may be, you and I want them once again unless we have obeyed them, and done all which they enjoin. And so in regard to every career which has in it anything of honour and of effort, let John Mark teach us the lesson not swiftly to begin and inconsiderately to venture upon a course, but once begun to let nothing discourage, 'nor bate one jot of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer right onward.'

And still further and more solemnly still, how like this story is to the experience of hundreds and thousands of young Christians! Any man who has held such an office as I hold, for as many years as I have filled it, will have his memory full-and, may I say, his eyes not empty-of men and women who began like this man, earnest, fervid, full of zeal, and who, like him, have slackened in their work; who were Sunday-school teachers, workers amongst the poor, I know not what, when they were young men and women, and who now are idle and unprofitable servants.

Some of you, dear brethren, need the word of exhortation and earnest beseeching to contrast the sluggishness, the indolence of your present, with the brightness and the fervour of your past. And I beseech you, do not let your Christian life be like that snow that is on the ground about us to-day-when it first lights upon the earth, radiant and white, but day by day gets more covered with a veil of sooty blackness until it becomes dark and foul.

Many of us have to acknowledge that the fervour of early days has died down into coldness. The river that leapt from its source rejoicing, and bickered amongst the hills in such swift and musical descent, creeps sluggish and almost stagnant amongst the flats of later life, or has been lost and swallowed up altogether in the thirsty and encroaching sands of a barren worldliness. Oh! my friends, let us all ponder this lesson, and see to it that no repetition of the apostasy of this man darken our Christian lives and sadden our Christian conscience.

II. And now let me ask you to look next, in the development of this little piece of biography, to Mark's eclipse.

Paul and Barnabas differed about how to treat the renegade. Which of them was right? Would it have been better to have put him back in his old post, and given him another chance, and said nothing about the failure; or was it better to do what the sterner wisdom of Paul did, and declare that a man who had once so forgotten himself and abandoned his work was not the man to put in the same place again? Barnabas' highest quality, as far as we know, was a certain kind of broad generosity and rejoicing to discern good in all men. He was a 'son of consolation'; the gentle kindness of his natural disposition, added to the ties of relationship, influenced him in his wish regarding his cousin Mark. He made a mistake. It would have been the cruellest thing that could have been done to his relative to have put him back again without acknowledgment, without repentance, without his riding quarantine for a bit, and holding his tongue for a while. He would not then have known his fault as he ought to have known it, and so there would never have been the chance of his conquering it.

The Church manifestly sympathised with Paul, and thought that he took the right view; for the contrast is very significant between the unsympathising silence which the narrative records as attending the departure of Barnabas and Mark-'Barnabas took Mark, and sailed away to Cyprus'-and the emphasis with which it tells us that the other partner in the dispute, Paul, 'took Silas and departed, being recommended by the brethren to the grace of God.'

The people at Antioch had no doubt who was right, and I think they were right in so deciding. So let us learn that God treats His renegades as Paul treated Mark, and not as Barnabas would have treated him, He is ready, even infinitely ready, to forgive and to restore, but desires to see the consciousness of the sin first, and desires, before large tasks are re-committed to hands that once have dropped them, to have some kind of evidence that the hands have grown stronger and the heart purified from its cowardice and its selfishness. Forgiveness does not mean impunity. The infinite mercy of God is not mere weak indulgence which so deals with a man's failures and sins as to convey the impression that these are of no moment whatsoever. And Paul's severity which said: 'No, such work is not fit for such hands until the heart has been "broken and healed,"' is of a piece with God's severity which is love. 'Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions.' Let us learn the difference between a weak charity which loves too foolishly, and therefore too selfishly, to let a man inherit the fruit of his doings, and the large mercy which knows how to take the bitterness out of the chastisement, and yet knows how to chastise.

And still further, this which I have called Mark's eclipse may teach us another lesson, viz., that the punishment for shirking work is to be denied work, just as the converse is true, that in God's administration of the world and of His Church, the reward for faithful work is to get more to do, and the filling a narrower sphere is the sure way to have a wider sphere to fill. So if a man abandons plain duties, then he will get no work to do. And that is why so many Christian men and women are idle in this world; and stand in the market-place, saying, with a certain degree of truth, 'No man hath hired us.' No; because so often in the past tasks have been presented to you, forced upon you, almost pressed into your unwilling hands, that you have refused to take; and you are not going to get any more. You have been asked to work,-I speak now to professing Christians- duties have been pressed upon you, fields of service have opened plainly before you, and you have not had the heart to go into them. And so you stand idle all the day now, and the work goes to other people that will do it. Thus God honours them, and passes you by.

Mark sails away to Cyprus, he does not go back to Jerusalem; he and Barnabas try to get up some little schismatic sort of mission of their own. Nothing comes of it; nothing ought to have come of it. He drops out of the story; he has no share in the joyful conflicts and sacrifices and successes of the Apostle. When he heard how Paul, by God's help, was flaming like a meteor from East to West, do you not think he wished that he had not been such a coward? When the Lord was opening doors, and he saw how the work was prospering in the hands of ancient companions, and Silas filled the place that he might have filled, if he had been faithful to God, do you not think the bitter thought occupied his mind, of how he had flung away what never could come back to him now? The punishment of indolence is absolute idleness.

So, my friends, let us learn this lesson, that the largest reward that God can give to him that has been faithful in a few things, is to give him many things to be faithful over. Beware, all of you professing Christians, lest to you should come the fate of the slothful servant with his one burled talent, to whom the punishment of burying it unused was to lose it altogether; according to that solemn word which was fulfilled in the temporal sphere in this story on which I am commenting: ‘To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away.’

III. Again consider the process of recovery.

Concerning it we read nothing indeed in Scripture; but concerning it we know enough to be able at least to determine what its outline must have been. The silent and obscure years of compulsory inactivity had their fruit, no doubt. There is only one road, with well-marked stages, by which a backsliding or apostate Christian can return to his Master. And that road has three halting-places upon it, through which the heart must pass if it have wandered from its early faith, and falsified its first professions. The first of them is the consciousness of the fall, the second is the resort to the Master for forgiveness; and the last is the deepened consecration to Him.

The patriarch Abraham, in a momentary lapse from faith to sense, thought himself compelled to leave the land to which God had sent him, because a famine threatened; and when he came back from Egypt, as the narrative tells us with deep significance, he went to the ‘place where he had pitched his tent at the beginning; to the altar which lie had reared at the first.’ Yes, my friends, we must begin over again, tread all the old path, enter by the old wicket-gate, once more take the place of the penitent, once more make acquaintance with the pardoning Christ, once more devote ourselves in renewed consecration to His service. No man that wanders into the wilderness but comes back by the King’s highway, if he comes back at all.

IV. And so lastly, notice the reinstatement of the penitent renegade.

If you turn at your leisure to the remaining notices of John Mark in Scripture, you will find, in two of Paul’s Epistles of the captivity, viz., those to the Colossians and Philemon, references to him; and these references are of a very interesting and beautiful nature. Paul says that in Rome Mark was one of the four born Jews who had been a cordial and a comfort to him in his imprisonment. He commends him, in the view of a probable journey, to the loving reception of the church at Colosse, as if they knew something derogatory to his character, the impression of which the Apostle desired to remove. He sends to Philemon the greetings of the repentant renegade in strange juxtaposition with the greetings of two other men, one who was an apostate at the end of his career instead of at the beginning, and of whom we do not read that he ever came back, and one who all his life long is the type of a faithful friend and companion, ‘Mark, Demas, Luke’ are bracketed as greeting Philemon; the first a runaway that came back, the second a fugitive who, so far as we know, never returned, and the last the faithful friend throughout.

And then in Paul’s final Epistle, and in almost the last words of it, we read his request to Timothy. ‘Take Mark, and bring him with thee, for he is profitable to me for the ministry.’ The first notice of him was: ‘They had John to their minister’; the last word about him is: ‘he is profitable for the ministry.’ The Greek words in the original are not identical, but their meaning is substantially the same. So notwithstanding the failure, notwithstanding the wise refusal of Paul years before to have anything more to do with him, he is now reinstated in his old office, and the aged Apostle, before he dies, would like to have the comfort of his presence once more at his side. Is not the lesson out of that, this eternal Gospel that even early failures, recognised and repented of, may make a man better fitted for the tasks from which once he fled? Just as they tell us-I do not know whether it is true or not, it will do for an illustration-just as they tell us that a broken bone renewed is stronger at the point of fracture than it ever was before, so the very sin that we commit, when once we know it for a sin, and have brought it to Christ for forgiveness, may minister to our future efficiency and strength. The Israelites fought twice upon one battlefield. On the first occasion they were shamefully defeated; on the second, on the same ground, and against the same enemies, they victoriously emerged from the conflict, and reared the stone which said, ‘Ebenezer!’ ‘Hitherto the Lord hath helped us.’

And so the temptations which have been sorest may be overcome, the sins into which we most naturally fall we may put our foot upon; the past is no specimen of what the future may be. The page that is yet to be written need have none of the blots of the page that we have turned over shining through it. Sin which we have learned to know for sin and to hate, teaches us humility, dependence, shows us where our weak places are. Sin which is forgiven knits us to Christ with deeper and more fervid love, and results in a larger consecration. Think of the two ends of this man's life-flying like a frightened hare from the very first suspicion of danger or of difficulty, sulking in his solitude, apart from all the joyful stir of consecration and of service; and at last made an evangelist to proclaim to the whole world the story of the Gospel of the Servant. God works with broken reeds, and through them breathes His sweetest music.

So, dear brethren, 'Take with you words, and return unto the Lord; say unto Him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously,' and the answer will surely be:-'I will heal their backsliding; I will love them freely; I will be as the dew unto Israel.'

76)Acts 13:26-35

Acts

THE FIRST PREACHING IN ASIA MINOR

Act. 13:26 - Act. 13:39.

The extended report of Paul's sermon in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia marks it, in accordance with Luke's method, as the first of a series. It was so because, though the composition of the audience was identical with that of those in the synagogues of Cyprus, this was the beginning of the special work of the tour, the preaching in the cities of Asia Minor. The part of the address contained in the passage falls into three sections,-the condensed narrative of the Gospel facts [Act. 13:26 - Act. 13:31], the proof that the resurrection was prophesied [Act. 13:32 - Act. 13:37], and the pungent personal application [Act. 13:38 - Act. 13:52].

I. The substance of the narrative coincides, as it could not but do, with Peter's sermons, but yet with differences, partly due to the different audience, partly to Paul's idiosyncrasy.

After the preceding historical *resume*, he girds himself to his proper work of proclaiming the Gospel, and he marks the transition in Act. 13:26 by reiterating his introductory words.

His audience comprised the two familiar classes of Jews and Gentile proselytes, and he seeks to win the ears of both. His heart goes out in his address to them all as ‘brethren,’ and in his classing himself and Barnabas among them as receivers of the message which he has to proclaim. What skill, if it were not something much more sacred, even humility and warm love, lies in that ‘to *us* is the word of this salvation sent’! He will not stand above them as if he had any other possession of his message than they might have. He, too, has received it, and what he is about to say is not his word, but God’s message to them and him. That is the way to preach.

Notice, too, how skilfully he introduces the narrative of the rejection of Jesus as the reason why the message has now come to them his hearers away in Antioch. It is ‘sent forth’ ‘to us,’ Asiatic Jews, *for* the people in the sacred city would not have it. Paul does not prick his hearers’ consciences, as Peter did, by charging home the guilt of the rejection of Jesus on them. They had no share in that initial crime. There is a faint purpose of dissociating himself and his hearers from the people of Jerusalem, to whom the Dispersion were accustomed to look up, in the designation, ‘they that dwell in Jerusalem, and *their* rulers.’ Thus far the Antioch Jews had had hands clean from that crime; they had now to choose whether they would mix themselves up with it.

We may further note that Paul says nothing about Christ’s life of gentle goodness, His miracles or teaching, but concentrates attention on His death and resurrection. From the beginning of his ministry these were the main elements of his ‘Gospel’ [1Co. 15:3 - 1Co. 15:4]. The full significance of that death is not declared here. Probably it was reserved for subsequent instruction. But it and the Resurrection, which interpreted it, are set in the forefront, as they should always be. The main point insisted on is that the men of Jerusalem were fulfilling prophecy in slaying Jesus. With tragic deafness, they knew not the voices of the prophets, clear and unanimous as they were, though they heard them every Sabbath of their lives, and yet they fulfilled them. A prophet’s words had just been read in the synagogue; Paul’s words might set some hearer asking whether a veil had been over his heart while his ears had heard the sound of the word.

The Resurrection is established by the only evidence for a historical fact, the testimony of competent eyewitnesses. Their competence is established by their familiar companionship with Jesus during His whole career; their opportunities for testing the reality of the fact, by the 'many days' of His appearances.

Paul does not put forward his own testimony to the Resurrection, though we know, from 1Co. 15:8, that he regarded Christ's appearance to him as being equally valid evidence with that afforded by the other appearances; but he distinguishes between the work of the Apostles, as 'witnesses unto the people'-that is, the Jews of Palestine-and that of Barnabas and himself. They had to bear the message to the regions beyond. The Apostles and he had the same work, but different spheres.

II. The second part turns with more personal address to his hearers.

Its purport is not so much to preach the Resurrection, which could only be proved by testimony, as to establish the fact that it was the fulfilment of the promises to the fathers. Note how the idea of fulfilled prophecy runs in Paul's head. The Jews had *fulfilled* it by their crime; God *fulfilled* it by the Resurrection. This reiteration of a key-word is a mark of Paul's style in his Epistles, and its appearance here attests the accuracy of the report of his speech.

The second Psalm, from which Paul's first quotation is made, is prophetic of Christ, inasmuch as it represents in vivid lyrical language the vain rebellion of earthly rulers against Messiah, and Jehovah's establishing Him and His kingdom by a steadfast decree. Peter quoted its picture of the rebels, as fulfilled in the coalition of Herod, Pilate, and the Jewish rulers against Christ. The Messianic reference of the Psalm, then, was already seen; and we may not be going too far if we assume that Jesus Himself had included it among things written in the Psalms 'concerning Himself,' which He had explained to the disciples after the Resurrection. It depicts Jehovah speaking to Messiah, *after* the futile attempts of the rebels: 'This day have I begotten Thee.' That day is a definite point in time. The Resurrection was a birth from the dead; so Paul, in Col. 1:18, calls Jesus 'the first begotten from the dead.' Rom. 1:4,'declared to be the Son of God . . . by the resurrection from the dead,' is the best commentary on Paul's words here.

The second and third quotations must apparently be combined, for the second does not specifically refer to resurrection, but it promises to ‘you,’ that is to those who obey the call to partake in the Messianic blessings, a share in the ‘sure’ and enduring ‘mercies of David’; and the third quotation shows that not ‘to see corruption’ was one of these ‘mercies.’ That implies that the speaker in the Psalm was, in Paul’s view, David, and that his words were his believing answer to a divine promise. But David was dead. Had the ‘sure mercy’ proved, then, a broken reed? Not so: for Jesus, who is Messiah, and is God’s ‘Holy One’ in a deeper sense than David was, has not seen corruption. The Psalmist’s hopes are fulfilled in Him, and through Him, in all who will ‘eat’ that their ‘souls may live,’

III. But Paul’s yearning for his brethren’s salvation is not content with proclaiming the fact of Christ’s resurrection, nor with pointing to it as fulfilling prophecy; he gathers all up into a loving, urgent offer of salvation for every believing soul, and solemn warning to despisers.

Here the whole man flames out. Here the characteristic evangelical teaching, which is sometimes ticketed as ‘Pauline’ by way of stigma, is heard. Already had he grasped the great antithesis between Law and Gospel. Already his great word ‘justified’ has taken its place in his terminology. The essence of the Epistles to Romans and Galatians is here. Justification is the being pronounced and treated as not guilty. Law cannot justify. ‘In Him’ we are justified. Observe that this is an advance on the previous statement that ‘through Him’ we receive remission of sins.

‘In Him’ points, thought but incidentally and slightly, to the great truth of incorporation with Jesus, of which Paul had afterwards so much to write. The justifying in Christ is complete and absolute. And the sole sufficient condition of receiving it is faith. But the greater the glory of the light the darker the shadow which it casts. The broad offer of complete salvation has ever to be accompanied with the plain warning of the dread issue of rejecting it. Just because it is so free and full, and to be had on such terms, the warning has to be rung into deaf ears, ‘Beware *therefore*!’ Hope and fear are legitimately appealed to by the Christian evangelist. They are like the two wings which may lift the soul to soar to its safe shelter in the Rock of Ages.

77)Acts 13:36-37

Acts

THE FIRST PREACHING IN ASIA MINOR

LUTHER-A STONE ON THE CAIRN

Act. 13:36 - Act. 13:37.

I take these words as a motto rather than as a text. You will have anticipated the use which I purpose to make of them in connection with the Luther Commemoration. They set before us, in clear sharp contrast, the distinction between the limited, transient work of the servants and the unbounded, eternal influence of the Master. The former are servants, and that but for a time; they do their work, they are laid in the grave, and as their bodies resolve into their elements, so their influence, their teaching, the institutions which they may have founded, disintegrate and decay. He lives. His relation to the world is not as theirs; He is 'not for an age, but for all time.' Death is not the end of His work. His Cross is the eternal foundation of the world's hope. His life is the ultimate, perfect revelation of the divine Nature which can never be surpassed, or fathomed, or antiquated. Therefore the last thought, in all commemorations of departed teachers and guides, should be of Him who gave them all the force that they had; and the final word should be: 'They were not suffered to continue by reason of death, this Man continueth ever.'

In the same spirit then as the words of my text, and taking them as giving me little more than a starting-point and a framework, I draw from them some thoughts appropriate to the occasion.

I. First, we have to think about the limited and transient work of this great servant of God.

The miner's son, who was born in that little Saxon village four hundred years ago, presents at first sight a character singularly unlike the traditional type of mediaeval Church fathers and saints. Their ascetic habits, and the repressive system under which they were trained, withdraw them from our sympathy; but this sturdy peasant, with his full-blooded humanity, unmistakably a man, and a man all round, is a new type, and looks strangely out of place amongst doctors and mediaeval saints.

His character, though not complex, is many-sided and in some respects contradictory. The face and figure that look out upon us from the best portraits of Luther tell us a great deal about the man. Strong, massive, not at all elegant; he stands there, firm and resolute, on his own legs, grasping a *Bible* in a muscular hand. There is plenty of animalism-a source of power as well as of weakness-in the thick neck; an iron will in the square chin; eloquence on the full, loose lips; a mystic, dreamy tenderness and sadness in the steadfast eyes- altogether a true king and a leader of men!

The first things that strike one in the character are the iron will that would not waver, the indomitable courage that knew no fear, the splendid audacity that, single-handed, sprang into the arena for a contest to the death with Pope, Emperors, superstitions, and devils; the insight that saw the things that were ‘hid from the wise and prudent,’ and the answering sincerity that would not hide what he saw, nor say that he saw what he did not.

But there was a great deal more than that in the man. He was no mere brave revolutionary, he was a cultured scholar, abreast of all the learning of his age, capable of logic-chopping and scholastic disputation on occasion, and but too often the victim of his own over-subtle refinements. He was a poet, with a poet’s dreaminess and waywardness, fierce alternations of light and shade, sorrow and joy. All living things whispered and spoke to him, and he walked in communion with them all. Little children gathered round his feet, and he had a big heart of love for all the weary and the sorrowful.

Everybody knows how he could write and speak. He made the German language, as we may say, lifting it up from a dialect of boors to become the rich, flexible, cultured speech that it is. And his Bible, his single-handed work, is one of the colossal achievements of man; like Stonehenge or the Pyramids. ‘His words were half-battles,’ ‘they were living creatures that had hands and feet’; his speech, direct, strong, homely, ready to borrow words from the kitchen or the gutter, is unmatched for popular eloquence and impression. There was music in the man. His flute solaced his lonely hours in his home at Wittemberg; and the Marseillaise of the Reformation, as that grand hymn of his has been called, came, words and music, from his heart. There was humour in him, coarse horseplay often; an honest, hearty, broad laugh frequently, like that of a Norse god. There were coarse tastes in him, tastes of the peasant folk from whom he came, which clung to him through life, and kept him in sympathy with the common people, and intelligible to them. And withal there was a constitutional melancholy, aggravated by his weary toils, perilous fightings, and fierce throes, which led him down often into the deep mire where there was no standing; and which sighs through all his life. The penitential Psalms and Paul's wail: 'O wretched man that I am,' perhaps never woke more plaintive echo in any human heart than they did in Martin Luther's.

Faults he had, gross and plain as the heroic mould in which he was cast. He was vehement and fierce often; he was coarse and violent often. He saw what he did see so clearly, that he was slow to believe that there was anything that he did not see. He was oblivious of counterbalancing considerations, and given to exaggerated, incautious, unguarded statements of precious truths. He too often aspired to be a driver rather than a leader of men; and his strength of will became obstinacy and tyranny. It was too often true that he had dethroned the pope of Rome to set up a pope at Wittemberg. And foul personalities came from his lips, according to the bad controversial fashion of his day, which permitted a licence to scholars that we now forbid to fishwives.

All that has to be admitted; and when it is all admitted, what then? This is a fastidious generation; Erasmus is its heroic type a great deal more than Luther-I mean among the cultivated classes of our day-and that very largely because in Erasmus there is no quick sensibility to religious emotion as there is in Luther, and no inconvenient fervour. The faults are there-coarse, plain, palpable- and perhaps more than enough has been made of them. Let us remember, as to his violence, that he was following the fashion of the day; that he was fighting for his life; that when a man is at death-grips with a tiger he may be pardoned if he strikes without considering whether he is going to spoil the skin or not; and that on the whole you cannot throttle snakes in a graceful attitude. Men fought then with bludgeons; they fight now with dainty polished daggers, dipped in cold, colourless poison of sarcasm. Perhaps there was less malice in the rougher old way than in the new.

The faults are there, and nobody who is not a fool would think of painting that homely Saxon peasant-monk’s face without the warts and the wrinkles. But it is quite as unhistorical, and a great deal more wicked, to paint nothing but the warts and wrinkles; to rake all the faults together and make the most of them; and present them in answer to the question: ‘What sort of a man was Martin Luther?’

As to the work that he did, like the work of all of us, it had its limitations, and it will have its end. The impulse that he communicated, like all impulses that are given from men, will wear out its force. New questions will arise of which the dead leaders never dreamed, and in which they can give no counsel. The perspective of theological thought will alter, the centre of interest will change, a new dialect will begin to be spoken. So it comes to pass that all religious teachers and thinkers are left behind, and that their words are preserved and read rather for their antiquarian and historical interest than because of any impulse or direction for the present which may linger in them; and if they founded institutions, these too, in their time, will crumble and disappear.

But I do not mean to say that the truths which Luther rescued from the dust of centuries, and impressed upon the conscience of Teutonic Europe, are getting antiquated. I only mean that his connection with them and his way of putting them, had its limitations and will have its end: ‘This man, having served his own generation by the will of God, was gathered to his fathers, and saw corruption.’

What *were* the truths, what was his contribution to the illumination of Europe, and to the Church? Three great principles-which perhaps closer analysis might reduce to one; but which for popular use, on such an occasion as the present, had better be kept apart-will state his service to the world.

There were three men in the past who, as it seems to me, reach out their hands to one another across the centuries-Paul, St. Augustine, and Martin Luther, The three very like each other, all three of them joining the same subtle speculative power with the same capacity of religious fervour, and of flaming up at the contemplation of divine truth; all of them gifted with the same exuberant, and to fastidious eyes, incorrect eloquence; all three trained in a school of religious thought of which each respectively was destined to be the antagonist and all but the destroyer.

The young Pharisee, on the road to Damascus, blinded, bewildered, with all that vision flaming upon him, sees in its light his past, which he thought had been so pure, and holy, and God-serving, and amazedly discovers that it had been all a sin and a crime, and a persecution of the divine One. Beaten from every refuge, and lying there, he cries: 'What wouldst Thou have me to do, Lord?'

The young Manichean and profligate in the fourth century, and the young monk in his convent in the fifteenth, passed through a similar experience;-different in form, identical in substance-with that of Paul the persecutor. And so Paul's Gospel, which was the description and explanation, the rationale, of his own experience, became their Gospel; and when Paul said: 'Not by works of righteousness which our own hands have done, but by His mercy He saved us' [Tit. 3:5], the great voice from the North African shore, in the midst of the agonies of barbarian invasions and a falling Rome, said 'Amen. Man lives by faith,' and the voice from the Wittemberg convent, a thousand years after, amidst the unspeakable corruption of that phosphorescent and decaying Renaissance, answered across the centuries, 'It is true!' 'Herein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith.' Luther's word to the world was Augustine's word to the world; and Luther and Augustine were the echoes of Saul of Tarsus-and Paul learned his theology on the Damascus road, when the voice bade him go and proclaim 'forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Me' [Act. 26:18]. That is Luther's first claim on our gratitude, that he took this truth from the shelves where it had reposed, dust-covered, through centuries, that he lifted this truth from the bier where it had lain, smothered with sacerdotal garments, and called with a loud voice, 'I say unto thee, arise!' and that now the commonplace of Christianity is this: All men are sinful men, justice condemns us all, our only hope is God's infinite mercy, that mercy comes to us all in Jesus Christ that died for us, and he that gets that into his heart by simple faith, he is forgiven, pure, and he is an heir of Heaven.

There are other aspects of Christian truth which Luther failed to apprehend. The Gospel is, of course, not merely a way of reconciliation and forgiveness. He pushed his teaching of the uselessness of good works as a means of salvation too far. He said rash and exaggerated things in his vehement way about the 'justifying power' of faith alone. Doubtless his language was often overstrained, and his thoughts one-sided, in regard to subjects that need very delicate handling and careful definition. But after all this is admitted, it remains true that his strong arm tossed aside the barriers and rubbish that had been piled across the way by which prodigals could go home to their Father, and made plain once more the endless mercy of God, and the power of humble faith. He was right when he declared that whatever heights and depths there may be in God's great revelation, and however needful it is for a complete apprehension of the truth as it is in Jesus that these should find their place in the creed of Christendom, still the firmness with which that initial truth of man's sinfulness and his forgiveness and acceptance through simple faith in Christ is held, and the clear earnestness with which it is proclaimed, are the test of a standing or a falling Church.

And then closely connected with this central principle, and yet susceptible of being stated separately, are the other two; of neither of which do I think it necessary to say more than a word. Following on that great discovery-for it was a discovery-by the monk in his convent, of justification by faith, there comes the other principle of the entire sweeping away of all priesthood, and the direct access to God of every individual Christian soul. There are no more external rites to be done by a designated and separate class. There is one sacrificing Priest, and one only, and that is Jesus Christ, who has sacrificed Himself for us all, and there are no other priests, except in the sense in which every Christian man is a priest and minister of the most high God. And no man comes between me and my Father; and no man has power to do anything for me which brings me any grace, except in so far as mine own heart opens for the reception, and mine own faith lays hold of the grace given.

Luther did not carry that principle so far as some of us modern Nonconformists carry it. He left illogical fragments of sacramentarian and sacerdotal theories in his creed and in his Church. But, for all that, we owe mainly to him the clear utterance of that thought, the warm breath of which has thawed the ice chains which held Europe in barren bondage. Notwithstanding the present portentous revival of sacerdotalism, and the strange turning again of portions of society to these beggarly elements of the past, I believe that the figments of a sacrificing priesthood and sacramental efficacy will never again permanently darken the sky in this land, the home of the men who speak the tongue of Milton, and owe much of their religious and political freedom to the reformation of Luther.

And the third point, which is closely connected with these other two, is this, the declaration that every illuminated Christian soul has a right and is bound to study God's Word without the Church at his elbow to teach him what to think about it. It was Luther's great achievement that, whatever else he did, he put the Bible into the hands of the common people. In that department and region, his work perhaps bears more distinctly the traces of limitation and imperfection than anywhere else, for he knew nothing-how could he?- of the difficult questions of this day in regard to the composition and authority of Scripture, nor had he thought out his own system or done full justice to his own principle.

He could be as inquisitorial and as dogmatic as any Dominican of them all. He believed in force; he was as ready as all his fellows were to invoke the aid of the temporal power. The idea of the Church, as helped and sustained-which means fettered, and weakened, and paralysed-by the civic government, bewitched him as it did his fellows. We needed to wait for George Fox, and Roger Williams, and more modern names still, before we understood fully what was involved in the rejection of priesthood, and the claim that God's Word should speak directly to each Christian soul. But for all that, we largely owe to Luther the creed that looks in simple faith to Christ, a Church without a priest, in which every man is a priest of the Most High,-the only true democracy that the world will ever see-and a Church in which the open Bible and the indwelling Spirit are the guides of every humble soul within its pale. These are his claims on our gratitude.

Luther’s work had its limitations and its imperfections, as I have been saying to you. It will become less and less conspicuous as the ages go on. It cannot be otherwise. That is the law of the world. As a whole green forest of the carboniferous era is represented now in the rocks by a thin seam of coal, no thicker than a sheet of paper, so the stormy lives and the large works of the men that have gone before, are compressed into a mere film and line, in the great cliff that slowly rises above the sea of time and is called the history of the world.

II. Be it so; be it so! Let us turn to the other thought of our text, the perpetual work of the abiding Lord.

‘He whom God raised up saw no corruption.’ It is a fact that there are thousands of men and women in the world to-day who have a feeling about that nineteen-centuries-dead Galilean carpenter’s son that they have about no one else. All the great names of antiquity are but ghosts and shadows, and all the names in the Church and in the world, of men whom we have not seen, are dim and ineffectual to us. They may evoke our admiration, our reverence, and our wonder, but none of them can touch our hearts. But here is this unique, anomalous fact that men and women by the thousand love Jesus Christ, the dead One, the unseen One, far away back there in the ages, and feel that there is no mist of oblivion between them and Him.

That is because He does for you and me what none of these other men can do. Luther preached about the Cross; Christ *died* on it. ‘Was Paul crucified for you?’ there is the secret of His undying hold upon the world. The further secret lies in this, that He is not a past force but a present one. He is no exhausted power but a power mighty to-day; working in us, around us, on us, and for us-a living Christ. ‘This Man whom God raised up from the dead saw no corruption,’ the others move away from us like figures in a fog, dim as they pass into the mists, having a blurred half-spectral outline for a moment, and then gone.

Christ’s death has a present and a perpetual power. He has ‘offered one sacrifice for sins for ever’; and no time can diminish the efficacy of His Cross, nor our need of it, nor the full tide of blessings which flow from it to the believing soul. Therefore do men cling to Him today as if it was but yesterday that He had died for them. When all other names carved on the world’s records have become unreadable, like forgotten inscriptions on decaying grave-stones, His shall endure for ever, deep graven on the fleshly tables of the heart. His revelation of God is the highest truth. Till the end of time men will turn to His life for their clearest knowledge and happiest certainty of their Father in heaven. There is nothing limited or local in His character or works. In His meek beauty and gentle perfectness, He stands so high above us all that, to-day, the inspiration of His example and the lessons of His conduct touch us as much as if He had lived in this generation, and will always shine before men as their best and most blessed law of conduct. Christ will not be antiquated till He is outgrown, and it will be some time before that happens.

But Christ’s power is not only the abiding influence of His earthly life and death. He is not a past force, but a present one. He is putting forth fresh energies to-day, working in and for and by all who love Him. We believe in a living Christ.

Therefore the final thought, in all our grateful commemoration of dead helpers and guides, should be of the undying Lord. He sent whatsoever power was in them. He is with His Church to-day, still giving to men the gifts needful for their times. Aaron may die on Hor, and Moses be laid in his unknown grave on Pisgah, but the Angel of the Covenant, who is the true Leader, abides in the pillar of cloud and fire, Israel’s guide in the march, and covering shelter in repose. That is our consolation in our personal losses when our dear ones are ‘not suffered to continue by reason of death.’ He who gave them all their sweetness is with us still, and has all the sweetness which He lent them for a time. So if we have Christ with us we cannot be desolate. Looking on all the men, who in their turn have helped forward His cause a little way, we should let their departure teach us His presence, their limitations His all-sufficiency, their death His life.

Luther was once found, at a moment of peril and fear, when he had need to grasp unseen strength, sitting in an abstracted mood, tracing on the table with his finger the words ‘*Vivit*! *vivit*!’-’He lives! He lives!’ It is our hope for ourselves, and for God’s truth, and for mankind. Men come and go; leaders, teachers, thinkers speak and work for a season and then fall silent and impotent. He abides. They die, but He lives. They are lights kindled, and therefore sooner or later quenched, but He is the true light from which they draw all their brightness, and He shines for evermore. Other men are left behind and, as the world glides forward, are wrapped in ever-thickening folds of oblivion, through which they shine feebly for a little while, like lamps in a fog, and then are muffled in invisibility. We honour other names, and the coming generations will forget them, but 'His name shall endure for ever, His name shall continue as long as the sun, and men shall be blessed in Him; all nations shall call Him blessed.'

78)Acts 13:38-39

Acts

THE FIRST PREACHING IN ASIA MINOR

Act. 13:26 - Act. 13:39.

The extended report of Paul's sermon in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia marks it, in accordance with Luke's method, as the first of a series. It was so because, though the composition of the audience was identical with that of those in the synagogues of Cyprus, this was the beginning of the special work of the tour, the preaching in the cities of Asia Minor. The part of the address contained in the passage falls into three sections,-the condensed narrative of the Gospel facts [Act. 13:26 - Act. 13:31], the proof that the resurrection was prophesied [Act. 13:32 - Act. 13:37], and the pungent personal application [Act. 13:38 - Act. 13:52].

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After the preceding historical *resume*, he girds himself to his proper work of proclaiming the Gospel, and he marks the transition in Act. 13:26 by reiterating his introductory words.

His audience comprised the two familiar classes of Jews and Gentile proselytes, and he seeks to win the ears of both. His heart goes out in his address to them all as 'brethren,' and in his classing himself and Barnabas among them as receivers of the message which he has to proclaim. What skill, if it were not something much more sacred, even humility and warm love, lies in that ‘to *us* is the word of this salvation sent’! He will not stand above them as if he had any other possession of his message than they might have. He, too, has received it, and what he is about to say is not his word, but God’s message to them and him. That is the way to preach.

Notice, too, how skilfully he introduces the narrative of the rejection of Jesus as the reason why the message has now come to them his hearers away in Antioch. It is ‘sent forth’ ‘to us,’ Asiatic Jews, *for* the people in the sacred city would not have it. Paul does not prick his hearers’ consciences, as Peter did, by charging home the guilt of the rejection of Jesus on them. They had no share in that initial crime. There is a faint purpose of dissociating himself and his hearers from the people of Jerusalem, to whom the Dispersion were accustomed to look up, in the designation, ‘they that dwell in Jerusalem, and *their* rulers.’ Thus far the Antioch Jews had had hands clean from that crime; they had now to choose whether they would mix themselves up with it.

We may further note that Paul says nothing about Christ’s life of gentle goodness, His miracles or teaching, but concentrates attention on His death and resurrection. From the beginning of his ministry these were the main elements of his ‘Gospel’ [1Co. 15:3 - 1Co. 15:4]. The full significance of that death is not declared here. Probably it was reserved for subsequent instruction. But it and the Resurrection, which interpreted it, are set in the forefront, as they should always be. The main point insisted on is that the men of Jerusalem were fulfilling prophecy in slaying Jesus. With tragic deafness, they knew not the voices of the prophets, clear and unanimous as they were, though they heard them every Sabbath of their lives, and yet they fulfilled them. A prophet’s words had just been read in the synagogue; Paul’s words might set some hearer asking whether a veil had been over his heart while his ears had heard the sound of the word.

The Resurrection is established by the only evidence for a historical fact, the testimony of competent eyewitnesses. Their competence is established by their familiar companionship with Jesus during His whole career; their opportunities for testing the reality of the fact, by the ‘many days’ of His appearances.

Paul does not put forward his own testimony to the Resurrection, though we know, from 1Co. 15:8, that he regarded Christ’s appearance to him as being equally valid evidence with that afforded by the other appearances; but he distinguishes between the work of the Apostles, as ‘witnesses unto the people’-that is, the Jews of Palestine-and that of Barnabas and himself. They had to bear the message to the regions beyond. The Apostles and he had the same work, but different spheres.

II. The second part turns with more personal address to his hearers.

Its purport is not so much to preach the Resurrection, which could only be proved by testimony, as to establish the fact that it was the fulfilment of the promises to the fathers. Note how the idea of fulfilled prophecy runs in Paul’s head. The Jews had *fulfilled* it by their crime; God *fulfilled* it by the Resurrection. This reiteration of a key-word is a mark of Paul’s style in his Epistles, and its appearance here attests the accuracy of the report of his speech.

The second Psalm, from which Paul’s first quotation is made, is prophetic of Christ, inasmuch as it represents in vivid lyrical language the vain rebellion of earthly rulers against Messiah, and Jehovah’s establishing Him and His kingdom by a steadfast decree. Peter quoted its picture of the rebels, as fulfilled in the coalition of Herod, Pilate, and the Jewish rulers against Christ. The Messianic reference of the Psalm, then, was already seen; and we may not be going too far if we assume that Jesus Himself had included it among things written in the Psalms ‘concerning Himself,’ which He had explained to the disciples after the Resurrection. It depicts Jehovah speaking to Messiah, *after* the futile attempts of the rebels: ‘This day have I begotten Thee.’ That day is a definite point in time. The Resurrection was a birth from the dead; so Paul, in Col. 1:18, calls Jesus ‘the first begotten from the dead.’ Rom. 1:4,’declared to be the Son of God . . . by the resurrection from the dead,’ is the best commentary on Paul’s words here.

The second and third quotations must apparently be combined, for the second does not specifically refer to resurrection, but it promises to ‘you,’ that is to those who obey the call to partake in the Messianic blessings, a share in the ‘sure’ and enduring ‘mercies of David’; and the third quotation shows that not ‘to see corruption’ was one of these ‘mercies.’ That implies that the speaker in the Psalm was, in Paul’s view, David, and that his words were his believing answer to a divine promise. But David was dead. Had the ‘sure mercy’ proved, then, a broken reed? Not so: for Jesus, who is Messiah, and is God’s ‘Holy One’ in a deeper sense than David was, has not seen corruption. The Psalmist’s hopes are fulfilled in Him, and through Him, in all who will ‘eat’ that their ‘souls may live,’

III. But Paul’s yearning for his brethren’s salvation is not content with proclaiming the fact of Christ’s resurrection, nor with pointing to it as fulfilling prophecy; he gathers all up into a loving, urgent offer of salvation for every believing soul, and solemn warning to despisers.

Here the whole man flames out. Here the characteristic evangelical teaching, which is sometimes ticketed as ‘Pauline’ by way of stigma, is heard. Already had he grasped the great antithesis between Law and Gospel. Already his great word ‘justified’ has taken its place in his terminology. The essence of the Epistles to Romans and Galatians is here. Justification is the being pronounced and treated as not guilty. Law cannot justify. ‘In Him’ we are justified. Observe that this is an advance on the previous statement that ‘through Him’ we receive remission of sins.

‘In Him’ points, thought but incidentally and slightly, to the great truth of incorporation with Jesus, of which Paul had afterwards so much to write. The justifying in Christ is complete and absolute. And the sole sufficient condition of receiving it is faith. But the greater the glory of the light the darker the shadow which it casts. The broad offer of complete salvation has ever to be accompanied with the plain warning of the dread issue of rejecting it. Just because it is so free and full, and to be had on such terms, the warning has to be rung into deaf ears, ‘Beware *therefore*!’ Hope and fear are legitimately appealed to by the Christian evangelist. They are like the two wings which may lift the soul to soar to its safe shelter in the Rock of Ages.

79)Acts 13:44-45

JEWISH REJECTERS AND GENTILE RECEIVERS

Act. 13:44 - Act. 13:52 - Act. 14:1 - Act. 14:7.

In general outline, the course of events in the two great cities of Asia Minor, with which the present passage is concerned, was the same. It was only too faithful a forecast of what was to be Paul's experience everywhere. The stages are: preaching in the synagogue, rejection there, appeal to the Gentiles, reception by them, a little nucleus of believers formed; disturbances fomented by the Jews, who swallow their hatred of Gentiles by reason of their greater hatred of the Apostles, and will riot with heathens, though they will not pray nor eat with them; and finally the Apostles' departure to carry the gospel farther afield. This being the outline, we have mainly to consider any special features diversifying it in each case.

Their experience in Antioch was important, because it forced Paul and Barnabas to put into plain words, making very clear to themselves as well as to their hearers, the law of their future conduct. It is always a step in advance when circumstances oblige us to formularise our method of action. Words have a wonderful power in clearing up our own vision. Paul and Barnabas had known all along that they were sent to the Gentiles; but a conviction in the mind is one thing, and the same conviction driven in on us by facts is quite another. The discipline of Antioch crystallised floating intentions into a clear statement, which henceforth became the rule of Paul's conduct. Well for us if we have open eyes to discern the meaning of difficulties, and promptitude and decision to fix and speak out plainly the course which they prescribe!

The miserable motives of the Jews' antagonism are forcibly stated in Act. 13:44 - Act. 13:45. They did not 'contradict and blaspheme,' because they had taken a week to think over the preaching and had seen its falseness, but simply because, dog-in-the-manger like, they could not bear that 'the whole city' should be welcome to share the message. No doubt there was a crowd of 'Gentile dogs' thronging the approach to the synagogue; and one can almost see the scowling faces and hear the rustle of the robes drawn closer to avoid pollution. Who were these wandering strangers that they should gather such a crowd? And what had the uncircumcised rabble of Antioch to do with ‘the promises made to the fathers’? It is not the only time that religious men have taken offence at crowds gathering to hear God’s word. Let us take care that we do not repeat the sin. There are always some who-

‘Taking God’s word under wise protection,
Correct its tendency to diffusiveness.’

It needed some courage to front the wild excitement of such a mob, with calm, strong words likely to increase the rage.

‘Lo, we turn to the Gentiles.’ This is not to be regarded as announcing a general course of action, but simply as applying to the actual rejecters in Antioch. The necessity that the word should first be spoken to the Jews continued to be recognised, in each new sphere of work, by the Apostle; but wherever, as here, men turned from the message, the messengers turned from them without further waste of time. Paul put into words here the law for his whole career. The fit punishment of rejection is the withdrawal of the offer. There is something pathetic in the persistence with which, in place after place, Paul goes through the same sequence, his heart yearning over his brethren according to the flesh, and hoping on, after all repulses. It was far more than natural patriotism; it was an offshoot of Christ’s own patient love.

Note also the divine command. Paul bases his action on a prophecy as to the Messiah. But the relation on which prophecy insists between the personal servant of Jehovah and the collective Israel, is such that the great office of being the Light of the world devolves from Him on it and the true Israel is to be a light to the Gentiles. These very Jews in Antioch, lashing themselves into fury because Gentiles were to be offered a share in Israel’s blessings, ought to have been discharging this glorious function. Their failure showed that they were no parts of the real Israel. No doubt the two missionaries left the synagogue as they spoke, and, as the door swung behind them, it shut hope out and unbelief in. The air was fresh outside, and eager hearts welcomed the word. Very beautifully is the gladness of the Gentile hearers set in contrast with the temper of the Jews. It is strange news to heathen hearts that there is a God who loves them, and a divine Christ who has died for them. The experience of many a missionary follows Paul's here.

'As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.' The din of many a theological battle has raged round these words, the writer of which would have probably needed a good deal of instruction before he could have been made to understand what the fighting was about. But it is to be noted that there is evidently intended a contrast between the envious Jews and the gladly receptive Gentiles, which is made more obvious by the repetition of the words 'eternal life.' It would seem much more relevant and accordant with the context to understand the word rendered 'ordained' as meaning 'adapted' or 'fitted,' than to find in it a reference to divine foreordination. Such a meaning is legitimate, and strongly suggested by the context. The reference then would be to the 'frame of mind of the heathen, and not to the decrees of God.'

The only points needing notice in the further developments at Antioch are the agents employed by the Jews, the conduct of the Apostles, and the sweet little picture of the converts. As to the former, piously inclined women in a heathen city would be strongly attracted by Judaism and easily lend themselves to the impressions of their teachers. We know that many women of rank were at that period powerfully affected in this manner; and if a Rabbi could move a Gentile of influence through whispers to the Gentile's wife, he would not be slow to do it. The ease with which the Jews stirred up tumults everywhere against the Apostle indicates their possession of great influence; and their willingness to be hand in glove with heathen for so laudable an object as crushing one of their own people who had become a heretic, measures the venom of their hate and the depth of their unscrupulousness.

The Apostles had not to fear violence, as their enemies were content with turning them out of Antioch and its neighbourhood; but they obeyed Christ's command, shaking off the dust against them, in token of renouncing all connection. The significant act is a trace of early knowledge of Christ's words, long before the date of our Gospels.

While the preachers had to leave the little flock in the midst of wolves, there was peace in the fold. Like the Ethiopian courtier when deprived of

Philip, the new believers at Antioch found that the withdrawal of the earthly brought the heavenly Guide. ‘They were filled with joy.’ What! left ignorant, lonely, ringed about with enemies, how could they be glad? Because they were filled ‘with the Holy Ghost.’ Surely joy in such circumstances was no less supernatural a token of His presence than rushing wind or parting flames or lips opened to speak with tongues. God makes us lonely that He may Himself be our Companion.

It was a long journey to the great city of Iconium. According to some geographers, the way led over savage mountains; but the two brethren tramped along, with an unseen Third between them, and that Presence made the road light. They had little to cheer them in their prospects, if they looked with the eye of sense; but they were in good heart, and the remembrance of Antioch did not embitter or discourage them. Straight to the synagogue, as before, they went. It was their best introduction to the new field. There, if we take the plain words of Act. 14:1, they found a new thing, ‘Greeks,’ heathens pure and simple, not Hellenists or Greek-speaking Jews, nor even proselytes, in the synagogue. This has seemed so singular that efforts have been made to impose another sense on the words, or to suppose that the notice of Greeks, as well as Jews, believing is loosely appended to the statement of the preaching in the synagogue, omitting notice of wider evangelising. But it is better to accept than to correct our narrative, as we know nothing of the circumstances that may have led to this presence of Greeks in the synagogue. Some modern setters of the Bible writers right would be all the better for remembering occasionally that improbable things have a strange knack of happening.

The usual results followed the preaching of the Gospel. The Jews were again the mischief-makers, and, with the astuteness of their race, pushed the Gentiles to the front, and this time tried a new piece of annoyance. ‘The brethren’ bore the brunt of the attack; that is, the converts, not Paul and Barnabas. It was a cunning move to drop suspicions into the minds of influential townsmen, and so to harass, not the two strangers, but their adherents. The calculation was that that would stop the progress of the heresy by making its adherents uncomfortable, and would also wound the teachers through their disciples.

But one small element had been left out of the calculation-the sort of men these teachers were; and another factor which had not hitherto appeared came into play, and upset the whole scheme. Paul and Barnabas knew when to retreat and when to stand their ground. This time they stood; and the opposition launched at their friends was the reason why they did so. ‘Long time *therefore* abode they.’ If their own safety had been in question, they might have fled; but they could not leave the men whose acceptance of their message had brought them into straits. But behind the two bold speakers stood ‘the Lord,’ Christ Himself, the true Worker. Men who live in Him are made bold by their communion with Him, and He witnesses for those who witness for Him.

Note the designation of the Gospel as ‘the word of His grace.’ It has for its great theme the condescending, giving love of Jesus. Its subject is grace; its origin is grace; its gift is grace. Observe, too, that the same connection between boldness of speech and signs and wonders is found in Act. 4:29 - Act. 4:30. Courageous speech for Christ is ever attended by tokens of His power, and the accompanying tokens of His power make the speech more courageous.

The normal course of events was pursued. Faithful preaching provoked hostility, which led to the alliance of discordant elements, fused for a moment by a common hatred-alas! that enmity to God’s truth should be often a more potent bond of union than love!-and then to a wise withdrawal from danger. Sometimes it is needful to fling away life for Jesus; but if it can be preserved without shirking duty, it is better to flee than to die. An unnecessary martyr is a suicide. The Christian readiness to be offered has nothing in common with fanatical carelessness of life, and still less with the morbid longing for martyrdom which disfigures some of the most pathetic pages of the Church’s history. Paul living to preach in the regions beyond was more useful than Paul dead in a street riot in Iconium. A heroic prudence should ever accompany a trustful daring, and both are best learned in communion with Jesus.

80)Acts 13:46

JEWISH REJECTERS AND GENTILE RECEIVERS

UNWORTHY OF LIFE

Act. 13:46.

So ended the first attempt on Paul’s great missionary journey to preach to the Jews. It is described at great length and the sermon given in full because it is the first. A wonderful sermon it was; touching all keys of feeling, now pleading almost with tears, now flashing with indignation, now calmly dealing with Scripture prophecies, now glowing as it tells the story of Christ’s death for men. It melted some of the hearers, but the most were wrought up to furious passion-and with characteristic vehemence, like their ancestors and their descendants through long dreary generations, fell to ‘contradicting and blaspheming.’ We can see the scene in the synagogue, the eager faces, the vehement gestures, the hubbub of tongues, the bitter words that stormed round the two in the midst, Barnabas like Jupiter, grave, majestic, and venerable; Paul like Mercury, agile, mobile, swift of speech. They bore the brunt of the fury till they saw it to be hopeless to try to calm it, and then departed with these remarkable words.

They are even more striking if we notice that ‘judge’ here may be used in its full legal sense. It is not merely equivalent to *consider*, for these Jews by no means thought themselves unworthy of eternal life, but it means, ‘ye adjudge and pass sentence on yourselves to be.’ Their rejection of the message was a self-pronounced sentence. It proved them to be, and made them, ‘unworthy of eternal life.’ There are two or three very striking thoughts to be gathered from these words which I would dwell on now.

I. What constitutes worthiness and unworthiness.

There are two meanings to the word ‘worthy’-deserving or fit. They run into each other and yet they may be kept quite apart. For instance you may say of a man that ‘he is worthy’ to be something or other, for which he is obviously qualified, not thinking at all whether he deserves it or not.

Now in the first of these senses-we are all unworthy of eternal life. That is just to state in other words the tragic truth of universal sinfulness. The natural outcome and issue of the course which all men follow is death. But yet there are men who are fit for and capable of eternal life. Who they are and what fitness is can only be ascertained when we rightly understand what eternal life is. It is not merely future blessedness or a synonym for a vulgar heaven. That is the common notion of its meaning. Men think of that future as a blessed state to which God can admit anybody if He will, and, as He is good, will admit pretty nearly everybody. But eternal life is a present possession as well as a future one, and passing by its deeper aspects, it includes-

Deliverance from evil habits and desires.

Purity, and love of all good and fair things.

Communion with God.

As well as forgiveness and removal of punishment.

What then are the qualifications making a man worthy of, in the sense of fit for, such a state?

[*a*] To know oneself to be unworthy.

He who judges himself to be worthy is unworthy. He who knows himself to be unworthy is worthy.

The first requisite is consciousness of sin, leading to repentance.

[*b*] To abandon striving to make oneself worthy.

By ourselves we never can do so. Many of us think that we must do our best, and then God will do the rest.

There must be the entire cessation of all attempt to work out by our own efforts characters that would entitle us to eternal life.

[*c*] To be willing to accept life on God’s terms.

As a mere gift.

[*d*] To desire it.

God cannot give it to any one who does not want it. He cannot force His gifts on us.

This then is the worthiness.

II. How we pass sentence on ourselves as unworthy.

It is quite clear that ‘judge’ here does not mean consider, for a sense of unworthiness is not the reason which keeps men away from the Gospel. Rather, as we have seen, a proud belief in our worthiness keeps very many away. But ‘judge’ here means ‘adjudicate’ or ‘pronounce sentence on,’ and worthy means fit, qualified.

Consider then-

[*a*] That our attitude to the Gospel is a revelation of our deepest selves.

The Gospel is a ‘discerner of thoughts and intents of the heart.’ It judges us here and now, and by their attitude to it ‘the thoughts of many hearts shall be revealed.’

[*b*] That our rejection of it plainly shows that we have not the qualifications for eternal life.

No doubt some men are kept from accepting Christ by intellectual doubts and difficulties, but even these would alter their whole attitude to Him if they had a profound consciousness of sin, and a desire for deliverance from it.

But with regard to the great bulk of its hearers, no doubt the hindrance is chiefly moral. Many causes may combine to produce the absence of qualification. The excuses in the parable’-farm, oxen, wife’-all amount to engrossment with this present world, and such absorption in the things seen and temporal deadens desire. So the Gospel preached excites no longings, and a man hears the offer of salvation without one motion of his heart towards it, and thus proclaims himself ‘unworthy of eternal life.’

But the great disqualification is the absence of all consciousness of sin. This is the very deepest reason which keeps men away from Christ.

How solemn a thing the preaching and hearing of this word is!

How possible for you to make yourselves fit!

How simple the qualification! We have but to know ourselves sinners and to trust Jesus and then we ‘shall be counted worthy to obtain that world and the resurrection from the dead.’ Then we shall be ‘worthy to escape and to stand before the Son of Man.’ Then shall we be ‘worthy of this calling,’ and the Judge himself shall say: ‘They shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.’

81)Acts 13:47-51

Acts

JEWISH REJECTERS AND GENTILE RECEIVERS

Act. 13:44 - Act. 13:52 - Act. 14:1 - Act. 14:7.

In general outline, the course of events in the two great cities of Asia Minor, with which the present passage is concerned, was the same. It was only too faithful a forecast of what was to be Paul’s experience everywhere. The stages are: preaching in the synagogue, rejection there, appeal to the Gentiles, reception by them, a little nucleus of believers formed; disturbances fomented by the Jews, who swallow their hatred of Gentiles by reason of their greater hatred of the Apostles, and will riot with heathens, though they will not pray nor eat with them; and finally the Apostles’ departure to carry the gospel farther afield. This being the outline, we have mainly to consider any special features diversifying it in each case.

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82)Acts 13:52

Acts

JEWISH REJECTERS AND GENTILE RECEIVERS

'FULL OF THE HOLY GHOST'

Act. 13:52.

That joy was as strange as a garden full of flowers would be in bitter winter weather. For everything in the circumstances of these disciples tended to make them sad. They had been but just won from heathenism, and they were raw, ignorant, unfit to stand alone. Paul and Barnabas, their only guides, had been hunted out of Antioch by a mob, and it would have been no wonder if these disciples had felt as if they had been taken on to the ice and then left, when they most needed a hand to steady them. Luke emphasises the contrast between what might have been expected, and what was actually the case, by that eloquent 'and' at the beginning of our verse, which links together the departure of the Apostles and the joy of the disciples. But the next words explain the paradox. These new converts, left in a great heathen city, with no helpers, no guides, to work out as best they might a faith of which they had but newly received the barest rudiments, were 'full of joy' because they were 'full of the Holy Ghost.'

Now that latter phrase, so striking here, is characteristic of this book of the Acts, and especially of its earlier chapters, which are all, as it were, throbbing with wonder at the new gift which Pentecost had brought. Let me for a moment, in the briefest possible fashion, try to recall to you the instances of its occurrence, for they are very significant and very important.

You remember how at Pentecost ‘all’ the disciples were ‘filled with the Holy Ghost.’ Then when the first persecution broke over the Church, Peter before the Council is ‘filled with the Holy Spirit,’ and therefore he beards them, and ‘speaks with all boldness.’ When he goes back to the Church and tells them of the threatening cloud that was hanging over them, they too are filled with the Holy Spirit, and therefore rise buoyantly upon the tossing wave, as a ship might do when it passes the bar and meets the heaving sea. Then again the Apostles lay down the qualifications for election to the so-called office of deacon as being that the men should be ‘full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom’; and in accordance therewith, we read of the first of the seven, Stephen, that he was ‘full of faith and of the Holy Ghost,’ and therefore ‘full of grace and power.’ When he stood before the Council he was ‘full of the Holy Ghost,’ and therefore looked up into heaven and saw it opened, and the Christ standing ready to help him. In like manner we read of Barnabas that he ‘was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.’ And finally we read in our text that these new converts, left alone in Antioch of Pisidia, were ‘full of joy and of the Holy Ghost.’

Now these are the principal instances, and my purpose now is rather to deal with the whole of these instances of the occurrence of this remarkable expression than with the one which I have selected as a text, because I think that they teach us great truths bearing very closely on the strength and joyfulness of the Christian life which are far too much neglected, obscured, and forgotten by us to-day.

I wish then to point you, first, to the solemn thought that is here, as to what should be-

I. The experience of every Christian,

Note the two things, the universality and the abundance of this divine gift. I have often had occasion to say to you, and so I merely repeat it again in the briefest fashion, that we do not grasp the central blessedness of the Christian faith unless, beyond forgiveness and acceptance, beyond the mere putting away of the dread of punishment either here or hereafter, we see that the gift of God in Jesus Christ is the communication to every believing soul of that divine life which is bestowed by the Spirit of Christ granted to every believing heart. But I would have you notice how the universality of the gift is unmistakably taught us by the instances which I have briefly gathered together in my previous remarks. It was no official class on which, on the day of Pentecost, the tongues of fire fluttered down. It was to the whole Church that courage to front the persecutor was imparted. When in Samaria the preaching of Philip brought about the result of the communication of the Holy Spirit, it was to all the believers that it was granted, and when, in the Roman barracks at Caesarea, Cornelius and his companion listened to Peter, it was upon them all that that Divine Spirit descended.

I suppose I need not remind you of how, if we pass beyond this book of the Acts into the Epistles of Paul, his affirmations do most emphatically insist upon the fact that ‘we are all made to drink into one Spirit’; and so convinced is he of the universality of the possession of that divine life by every Christian, that he does not hesitate to say that ‘if any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His,’ and to clear away all possibility of misunderstanding the depth and wonderfulness of the gift, he further adds in another place, ‘Know ye not that the Spirit is in you, except ye be reprobates?’ Similarly another of the New Testament writers declares, in the broadest terms, that ‘this spake he of the Holy Spirit, which’-Apostles? no; office-bearers? no; ordained men? no; distinguished and leading men? No-’*they that believe on Him* should receive.’ Christianity is the true democracy, because it declares that upon all, handmaidens and servants, young men and old men, there comes the divine gift. The world thinks of a divine inspiration in a more or less superficial fashion, as touching only the lofty summits, the great thinkers and teachers and artists and mighty men of light and leading of the race. The Old Testament regarded prophets and kings, and those who were designated to important offices, as the possessors of the Divine Spirit. But Christianity has seen the sun rising so high in the heavens that the humblest floweret, in the deepest valley, basks in its beams and opens to its light. ‘We have *all* been made to drink into the one Spirit.’

Let me remind you too of how, from the usage of this book, as well as from the rest of the New Testament teaching, there rises the other thought of the abundance of the gift. ‘Full of the Holy Spirit’-the cup is brimming with generous wine. Not that that fulness is such as to make inconsistencies impossible, as, alas, the best of us know. The highest condition for us is laid down in the sad words which yet have triumph in their sadness-’The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.’ But whilst the fulness is not such as to exclude the need of conflict, it is such as to bring the certainty of victory.

Again if we turn to the instances to which I have already referred, we shall find that they fall into two classes, which are distinguished in the original by a slight variation in the form of the words employed. Some instances refer to a habitual possession of an abundant spiritual life moulding the character constantly, as in the cases of Stephen and Barnabas. Others refer rather to occasional and special influxes of special power on account of special circumstances, and drawn forth by special exigencies, as when there poured into Peter’s heart the Divine Spirit that made him bold before the Council; or as when the dying martyr’s spirit was flooded with a new clearness of vision that pierced the heavens and beheld the Christ. So then there may be and ought to be, in each of us, a fulness of the Spirit, up to the edge of our capacity, and yet of such a kind as that it may be reinforced and increased when special needs arise.

Not only so, but that which fills me to-day should not fill me to-morrow, because, as in earthly love, so in heavenly, no man can tell to what this thing shall grow. The more of fruition the more there will be of expansion, and the more of expansion the more of desire, and the more of desire the more of capacity, and the more of capacity the more of possession. So, brethren, the man who receives a spark of the divine life, through his most rudimentary and tremulous faith, if he is a faithful steward of the gift that is given to him, will find that it grows and grows, and that there is no limit to its growth, and that in its limitless growth there lies the surest prophecy of an eternal growth in the heavens.

A universal gift, that is to say, a gift to each of us if we are Christians, an abundant gift that fills the whole nature of a man, according to the measure of his present power to receive-that is the ideal, that is what God means, that is what these first believers had. It did not make them perfect, it did not save them from faults or from errors, but it was real, it was influential, it was moulding their characters, it was progressive. And that is the ideal for all Christians. Is it our actual? We are meant to be full of the Holy Ghost. Ah! how many of us have never realised that there is such a thing as being thus possessed with a divine life, partly because we do not understand that such a fulness will not be distinguishable from our own self, except by bettering of the works of self, and partly because of other reasons which I shall have to touch upon presently! Brethren, we may, every one of us, be filled with the Spirit. Let each of us ask, 'Am I? and if I am not, why this emptiness in the presence of such abundance?'

And now let me ask you to look, in the second place, at what we gather from these instances as to-

II. The results of that universal, abundant life.

Do not let us run away with the idea that the New Testament, or any part of it, regards miracles and tongues and the like as being the normal and chiefest gifts of that Divine Spirit. People read this book of the Acts of the Apostles and, averse from the supernatural, exaggerate the extent to which the primitive gift of the Holy Spirit was manifested by signs and wonders, tongues of fire, and so on. We have only to look at the instances to which I have already referred to see that far more lofty and far more conspicuous than any such external and transient manifestations, which yet have their place, are the permanent and inward results, moulding character, and making men. And Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians goes as far in the way of setting the moral and spiritual effects of the divine influence above the merely miraculous and external ones, as the most advanced opponent of the supernatural could desire.

Let us look, and it can only be briefly, at the various results which are presented in the instances to which I have referred. The most general expression for all, which is the result of the Divine Spirit dwelling in a man, is that it makes him good. Look at one of the instances to which we have referred. 'Barnabas was a good man'-was he? How came he to be so? Because he was 'full of the Holy Ghost.' And how came he to be 'full of the

Holy Ghost'? Because he was 'full of faith.' Get the divine life into you, and that will make you good; and, brethren, nothing else will. It is like the bottom heat in a green-house, which makes all the plants that are there, whatever their orders, grow and blossom and be healthy and strong. Therein is the difference between Christian morality and the world's ethics. They may not differ much, they do in some respects, in their ideal of what constitutes goodness, but they differ in this, that the one says, 'Be good, be good, be good!' but, like the Pharisees of old, puts out not a finger to help a man to bear the burdens that it lays upon him. The other says, 'Be good,' but it also says, 'take this and it will make you good.' And so the one is Gospel and the other is talk, the one is a word of good tidings, and the other is a beautiful speculation, or a crushing commandment that brings death rather than life. 'If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness had been by the law.' But since the clearest laying down of duty brings us no nearer to the performance of duty, we need and, thank God! we have, a gift bestowed which invests with power. He in whom the 'Spirit of Holiness' dwells, and he alone, will be holy. The result of the life of God in the heart is a life growingly like God's, manifested in the world.

Then again let me remind you of how, from another of our instances, there comes another thought. The result of this majestic, supernatural, universal, abundant, divine life is practical sagacity in the commonest affairs of life. 'Look ye out from among you seven men, full of the Holy Ghost and of wisdom.' What to do? To meet wisely the claims of suspicious and jealous poverty, and to distribute fairly a little money. That was all. And are you going to invoke such a lofty gift as this, to do nothing grander than that? Yes. Gravitation holds planets in their orbits, and keeps grains of dust in their places. And one result of the inspiration of the Almighty, which is granted to Christian people, is that they will be wise for the little affairs of life. But Stephen was also 'full of grace and power,' two things that do not often go together-grace, gentleness, loveliness, graciousness, on the one side, and strength on the other, which divorced, make wild work of character, and which united, make men like God. So if we desire our lives to be full of sweetness and light and beauty, the best way is to get the life of Christ into them; and if we desire our lives not to be made placid and effeminate by our cult of graciousness and gracefulness, but to have their beauty stiffened and strengthened by manly energy, then the best way is to get the life of the ‘strong Son of God, immortal love,’ into our lives.

The same Stephen, ‘full of the Holy Ghost,’ looked up into heaven and saw the Christ. So one result of that abundant life, if we have it, will be that even though as with him, when he saw the heavens opened, there may be some smoke-darkened roof above our heads, we can look through all the shows of this vain world, and our purged eyes can behold the Christ. Again the disciples in our text ‘were full of joy,’ because ‘they were full of the Holy Spirit,’ and we, if we have that abundant life within us, shall not be dependent for our gladness on the outer world, but like explorers in the Arctic regions, even if we have to build a hut of snow, shall be warm within it when the thermometer is far below zero; and there will be light there when the long midnight is spread around the dwelling. So, dear friends, let us understand what is the main thing for a Christian to endeavour after,-not so much the cultivation of special graces as the deepening of the life of Christ in the spirit.

We gather from some of these instances-

III. The way by which we may be thus filled.

We read that Stephen was ‘full of faith and of the Holy Spirit,’ and that Barnabas was ‘full of the Holy Ghost and of faith,’ and it is quite clear from the respective contexts that, though the order in which these fulnesses are placed is different in the two clauses, their relation to each other is the same. Faith is the condition of possessing the Spirit. And what do we mean in this connection by faith? I mean, first, a belief in the truth of the possible abiding of the divine Spirit in our spirits, a truth which the superficial Christianity of this generation sorely needs to have forced upon its consciousness far more than it has it. I mean aspiration and desire after; I mean confident expectation of. Your wish measures your possession. You have as much of God as you desire. If you have no more, it is because you do not desire any more. The Christian people of to-day, many of whom are so empty of God, are in a very tragic sense, ‘full,’ because they have as much as they can take in. If you bring a tiny cup, and do not much care whether anything pours into it or not, you will get it filled, but you might have had a gallon vessel filled if you had chosen to bring it. Of course there are other conditions too. We have to use the life that is given us. We have to see that we do not quench it by sin, which drives the dove of God from a man's heart. But the great truth is that if I open the door of my heart by faith, Christ will come in, in His Spirit. If I take away the blinds the light will shine into the chamber. If I lift the sluice the water will pour in to drive my mill. If I deepen the channels, more of the water of life can flow into them, and the deeper I make them the fuller they will be.

Brethren, we have wasted much time and effort in trying to mend our characters. Let us try to get that into them which will mend them. And let us remember that, if we are full of faith, we shall be full of the Holy Spirit, and therefore full of wisdom, full of grace and power, full of goodness, full of joy, whatever our circumstances. And when death comes, though it may be in some cruel form, we shall be able to look up and see the opened heavens and the welcoming Christ.

83)Acts 14:1-7

Acts

JEWISH REJECTERS AND GENTILE RECEIVERS

Act. 13:44 - Act. 13:52 - Act. 14:1 - Act. 14:7.

In general outline, the course of events in the two great cities of Asia Minor, with which the present passage is concerned, was the same. It was only too faithful a forecast of what was to be Paul's experience everywhere. The stages are: preaching in the synagogue, rejection there, appeal to the Gentiles, reception by them, a little nucleus of believers formed; disturbances fomented by the Jews, who swallow their hatred of Gentiles by reason of their greater hatred of the Apostles, and will riot with heathens, though they will not pray nor eat with them; and finally the Apostles' departure to carry the gospel farther afield. This being the outline, we have mainly to consider any special features diversifying it in each case.

Their experience in Antioch was important, because it forced Paul and Barnabas to put into plain words, making very clear to themselves as well as to their hearers, the law of their future conduct. It is always a step in advance when circumstances oblige us to formularise our method of action. Words have a wonderful power in clearing up our own vision. Paul and Barnabas had known all along that they were sent to the Gentiles; but a conviction in the mind is one thing, and the same conviction driven in on us by facts is quite another. The discipline of Antioch crystallised floating intentions into a clear statement, which henceforth became the rule of Paul's conduct. Well for us if we have open eyes to discern the meaning of difficulties, and promptitude and decision to fix and speak out plainly the course which they prescribe!

The miserable motives of the Jews' antagonism are forcibly stated in Act. 13:44 - Act. 13:45. They did not 'contradict and blaspheme,' because they had taken a week to think over the preaching and had seen its falseness, but simply because, dog-in-the-manger like, they could not bear that 'the whole city' should be welcome to share the message. No doubt there was a crowd of 'Gentile dogs' thronging the approach to the synagogue; and one can almost see the scowling faces and hear the rustle of the robes drawn closer to avoid pollution. Who were these wandering strangers that they should gather such a crowd? And what had the uncircumcised rabble of Antioch to do with 'the promises made to the fathers'? It is not the only time that religious men have taken offence at crowds gathering to hear God's word. Let us take care that we do not repeat the sin. There are always some who-

'Taking God's word under wise protection,
Correct its tendency to diffusiveness.'

It needed some courage to front the wild excitement of such a mob, with calm, strong words likely to increase the rage.

'Lo, we turn to the Gentiles.' This is not to be regarded as announcing a general course of action, but simply as applying to the actual rejecters in Antioch. The necessity that the word should first be spoken to the Jews continued to be recognised, in each new sphere of work, by the Apostle; but wherever, as here, men turned from the message, the messengers turned from them without further waste of time. Paul put into words here the law for his whole career. The fit punishment of rejection is the withdrawal of the offer. There is something pathetic in the persistence with which, in place after place, Paul goes through the same sequence, his heart yearning over his brethren according to the flesh, and hoping on, after all repulses. It was far more than natural patriotism; it was an offshoot of Christ's own patient love.

Note also the divine command. Paul bases his action on a prophecy as to the Messiah. But the relation on which prophecy insists between the personal servant of Jehovah and the collective Israel, is such that the great office of being the Light of the world devolves from Him on it and the true Israel is to be a light to the Gentiles. These very Jews in Antioch, lashing themselves into fury because Gentiles were to be offered a share in Israel's blessings, ought to have been discharging this glorious function. Their failure showed that they were no parts of the real Israel. No doubt the two missionaries left the synagogue as they spoke, and, as the door swung behind them, it shut hope out and unbelief in. The air was fresh outside, and eager hearts welcomed the word. Very beautifully is the gladness of the Gentile hearers set in contrast with the temper of the Jews. It is strange news to heathen hearts that there is a God who loves them, and a divine Christ who has died for them. The experience of many a missionary follows Paul's here.

'As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.' The din of many a theological battle has raged round these words, the writer of which would have probably needed a good deal of instruction before he could have been made to understand what the fighting was about. But it is to be noted that there is evidently intended a contrast between the envious Jews and the gladly receptive Gentiles, which is made more obvious by the repetition of the words 'eternal life.' It would seem much more relevant and accordant with the context to understand the word rendered 'ordained' as meaning 'adapted' or 'fitted,' than to find in it a reference to divine foreordination. Such a meaning is legitimate, and strongly suggested by the context. The reference then would be to the 'frame of mind of the heathen, and not to the decrees of God.'

The only points needing notice in the further developments at Antioch are the agents employed by the Jews, the conduct of the Apostles, and the sweet little picture of the converts. As to the former, piously inclined women in a heathen city would be strongly attracted by Judaism and easily lend themselves to the impressions of their teachers. We know that many women of rank were at that period powerfully affected in this manner; and if a Rabbi could move a Gentile of influence through whispers to the Gentile's wife, he would not be slow to do it. The ease with which the Jews stirred up tumults everywhere against the Apostle indicates their possession of great influence; and their willingness to be hand in glove with heathen for so laudable an object as crushing one of their own people who had become a heretic, measures the venom of their hate and the depth of their unscrupulousness.

The Apostles had not to fear violence, as their enemies were content with turning them out of Antioch and its neighbourhood; but they obeyed Christ's command, shaking off the dust against them, in token of renouncing all connection. The significant act is a trace of early knowledge of Christ's words, long before the date of our Gospels.

While the preachers had to leave the little flock in the midst of wolves, there was peace in the fold. Like the Ethiopian courtier when deprived of Philip, the new believers at Antioch found that the withdrawal of the earthly brought the heavenly Guide. ‘They were filled with joy.’ What! left ignorant, lonely, ringed about with enemies, how could they be glad? Because they were filled ‘with the Holy Ghost.’ Surely joy in such circumstances was no less supernatural a token of His presence than rushing wind or parting flames or lips opened to speak with tongues. God makes us lonely that He may Himself be our Companion.

It was a long journey to the great city of Iconium. According to some geographers, the way led over savage mountains; but the two brethren tramped along, with an unseen Third between them, and that Presence made the road light. They had little to cheer them in their prospects, if they looked with the eye of sense; but they were in good heart, and the remembrance of Antioch did not embitter or discourage them. Straight to the synagogue, as before, they went. It was their best introduction to the new field. There, if we take the plain words of Act. 14:1, they found a new thing, ‘Greeks,’ heathens pure and simple, not Hellenists or Greek-speaking Jews, nor even proselytes, in the synagogue. This has seemed so singular that efforts have been made to impose another sense on the words, or to suppose that the notice of Greeks, as well as Jews, believing is loosely appended to the statement of the preaching in the synagogue, omitting notice of wider evangelising. But it is better to accept than to correct our narrative, as we know nothing of the circumstances that may have led to this presence of Greeks in the synagogue. Some modern setters of the Bible writers right would be all the better for remembering occasionally that improbable things have a strange knack of happening.

The usual results followed the preaching of the Gospel. The Jews were again the mischief-makers, and, with the astuteness of their race, pushed the Gentiles to the front, and this time tried a new piece of annoyance. ‘The brethren’ bore the brunt of the attack; that is, the converts, not Paul and Barnabas. It was a cunning move to drop suspicions into the minds of influential townsmen, and so to harass, not the two strangers, but their adherents. The calculation was that that would stop the progress of the heresy by making its adherents uncomfortable, and would also wound the teachers through their disciples.

But one small element had been left out of the calculation-the sort of men these teachers were; and another factor which had not hitherto appeared came into play, and upset the whole scheme. Paul and Barnabas knew when to retreat and when to stand their ground. This time they stood; and the opposition launched at their friends was the reason why they did so. ‘Long time *therefore* abode they.’ If their own safety had been in question, they might have fled; but they could not leave the men whose acceptance of their message had brought them into straits. But behind the two bold speakers stood ‘the Lord,’ Christ Himself, the true Worker. Men who live in Him are made bold by their communion with Him, and He witnesses for those who witness for Him.

Note the designation of the Gospel as ‘the word of His grace.’ It has for its great theme the condescending, giving love of Jesus. Its subject is grace; its origin is grace; its gift is grace. Observe, too, that the same connection between boldness of speech and signs and wonders is found in Act. 4:29 - Act. 4:30. Courageous speech for Christ is ever attended by tokens of His power, and the accompanying tokens of His power make the speech more courageous.

The normal course of events was pursued. Faithful preaching provoked hostility, which led to the alliance of discordant elements, fused for a moment by a common hatred-alas! that enmity to God’s truth should be often a more potent bond of union than love!-and then to a wise withdrawal from danger. Sometimes it is needful to fling away life for Jesus; but if it can be preserved without shirking duty, it is better to flee than to die. An unnecessary martyr is a suicide. The Christian readiness to be offered has nothing in common with fanatical carelessness of life, and still less with the morbid longing for martyrdom which disfigures some of the most pathetic pages of the Church’s history. Paul living to preach in the regions beyond was more useful than Paul dead in a street riot in Iconium. A heroic prudence should ever accompany a trustful daring, and both are best learned in communion with Jesus.

84)Acts 14:11

Acts

DEIFIED AND STONED

DREAM AND REALITY

Act. 14:11.

This was the spontaneous instinctive utterance of simple villagers when they saw a deed of power and kindness. Many an English traveller and settler among rude people has been similarly honoured. And in Lycaonia the Apostles were close upon places that were celebrated in Greek mythology as having witnessed the very two gods, here spoken of, wandering among the shepherds and entertained with modest hospitality in their huts.

The incident is a very striking and picturesque one. The shepherd people standing round, the sudden flash of awe and yet of gladness which ran through them, the tumultuous outcry, which, being in their rude dialect, was unintelligible to the Apostles till it was interpreted by the appearance of the priest of Jupiter with oxen and garlands for offerings, the glimpse of the two Apostles-the older, graver, venerable Barnabas, the younger, more active, ready-tongued Paul, whom their imaginations converted into the Father of gods and men, and the herald Mercury, who were already associated in local legends; the priest, eager to gain credit for his temple 'before the city,' the lowing oxen, and the vehement appeal of the Apostles, make a picture which is more vividly presented in the simple narrative than even in the cartoon of the great painter whom the narrative has inspired.

But we have not to deal with the picturesque element alone. The narratives of Scripture are representative because they are so penetrating and true. They go to the very heart of the men and things which they describe: and hence the words and acts which they record are found to contain the essential characteristics of whole classes of men, and the portrait of an individual becomes that of a class. This joyful outburst of the people of Lycaonia gives utterance to one of the most striking and universal convictions of heathenism, and stands in very close and intimate relations with that greatest of all facts in the history of the world, the Incarnation of the Eternal Word. That the gods come down in the likeness of men is the dream of heathenism. ‘The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us,’ is the sober, waking truth which meets and vindicates and transcends that cry.

I. The heathen dream of incarnation.

In all lands we find this belief in the appearance of the gods in human form. It inspired the art and poetry of Greece. Rome believed that gods had charged in front of their armies and given their laws. The solemn, gloomy religion of Egypt, though it worshipped animal forms, yet told of incarnate and suffering gods. The labyrinthine mythologies of the East have their long-drawn stories of the avatars of their gods floating many a rood on the weltering ocean of their legends. Tibet cherishes each living sovereign as a real embodiment of the divine. And the lowest tribes, in their degraded worship, have not departed so far from the common type but that they too have some faint echoes of the universal faith.

Do these facts import anything at all to us? Are we to dismiss them as simply the products of a stage which we have left far behind, and to plume ourselves that we have passed out of the twilight?

Even if we listen to what comparative mythology has to say, it still remains to account for the tendency to shape legends of the earthly appearance of the gods; and we shall have to admit that, while they belong to an early stage of the world’s progress, the feelings which they express belong to all stages of it.

Now I think we may note these thoughts as contained in this universal belief:

The consciousness of the need of divine help.

The certainty of a fellowship between heaven and earth.

The high ideal of the capacities and affinities of man.

We may note further what were the general characteristics of these incarnations. They were transient, they were ‘docetic,’ as they are called-that is, they were merely apparent assumptions of human form which brought the god into no nearer or truer kindred with humanity, and they were, for the most part, for very self-regarding and often most immoral ends, the god’s personal gratification of very ungodlike passions and lust, or his winning victories for his favourites, or satisfying his anger by trampling on those who had incurred his very human wrath.

II. The divine answer which transcends the human dream.

We have to insist that the truth of the Incarnation is the corner-stone of Christianity. If that is struck out the whole fabric falls. Without it there may be a Christ who is the loftiest and greatest of men, but not the Christ who ‘saves His people from their sins.’

That being so, and Christianity having this feature in common with all the religions of men, how are we to account for the resemblance? Are we to listen to the rude solution which says, ‘All lies alike’? Are we to see in it nothing but the operation of like tendencies, or rather illusions, of human thought-man’s own shadow projected on an illuminated mist? Are we to let the resemblance discredit the Christian message? Or are we to say that all these others are unconscious prophecies-man’s half-instinctive expression of his deep need and much misunderstood longing, and that the Christian proclamation that Jesus is ‘God manifest in the flesh’ is the trumpet-toned announcement of Heaven’s answer to earth’s cry?

Fairly to face that question is to go far towards answering it. For as soon as we begin to look steadily at the facts, we find that the differences between all these other appearances and the Incarnation are so great as to raise the presumption that their origins are different. The ‘gods’ slipped on the appearance of humanity over their garment of deity in appearance only, and that for a moment. Jesus is ‘bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh,’ and is not merely ‘found in fashion as a man,’ but is ‘in all points like as we are.’ And that garb of manhood He wears for ever, and in His heavenly glory is ‘the Man Christ Jesus.’

But *the* difference between all these other appearances of gods and the Incarnation lies in the acts to which they and it respectively led, and the purposes for which they and it respectively took place. A god who came down to suffer, a god who came to die, a god who came to be the supreme example of all fair humanities, a god who came to suffer and to die that men might have life and be victors over sin- where is he in all the religions of the world? And does not the fact that Christianity alone sets before men such a God, such an Incarnation, for such ends, make the assertion a reasonable one, that the sources of the universal belief in gods who come down among men and of the Christian proclamation that the Eternal Word became flesh are not the same, but that these are men's half-understood cries, and this is Heaven's answer?

85)Acts 14:12-22

Acts

DEIFIED AND STONED

Act. 14:11 - Act. 14:22.

The scene at Lystra offers a striking instance of the impossibility of eliminating the miraculous element from this book. The cure of a lame man is the starting-point of the whole story. Without it the rest is motiveless and inexplicable. There can be no explosion without a train and a fuse. The miracle, and the miracle only, supplies these. We may choose between believing and disbelieving it, but the rejection of the supernatural does not make this book easier to accept, but utterly chaotic.

I. We have, first, the burst of excited wonder which floods the crowd with the conviction that the two Apostles are incarnations of deities.

It is difficult to grasp the indications of locality in the story, but probably the miracle was wrought in some crowded place, perhaps the forum. At all events, it was in full view of 'the multitudes,' and they were mostly of the lower orders, as their speaking in 'the speech of Lycaonia' suggests.

This half-barbarous crowd had the ancient faith in the gods unweakened, and the legends, which had become dim to pure Greek and Roman, some of which had originated in their immediate neighbourhood, still found full credence among them. A Jew's first thought on seeing a miracle was, 'by the prince of the devils'; an average Greek's or Roman's was 'sorcery'; these simple people's, like many barbarous tribes to which white men have gone with the marvels of modern science, was 'the gods have come down'; our modern superior person's, on reading of one, is 'hallucination,' or 'a mistake of an excited imagination.' Perhaps the cry of the multitudes at Lystra gets nearer the heart of the thing than those others. For the miracle is a witness of present divine power, and though the worker of it is not an incarnation of divinity, 'God *is* with him.'

But that joyful conviction, which shot through the crowd, reveals how deep lies the longing for the manifestation of divinity in the form of humanity, and how natural it is to believe that, if there is a divine being, he is sure to draw near to us poor men, and that in our own likeness. Then is the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation but one more of the many reachings out of the heart to paint a fair picture of the fulfilment of its longings? Well, since it is the only such that is alleged to have taken place in historic times, and the only one that comes with any body of historic evidence, and the only one that brings with it transforming power, and since to believe in a God, and also to believe that He has never broken the awful silence, nor done anything to fulfil a craving which He has set in men's hearts, is absurd, it is reasonable to answer, No. 'The gods are come down in the likeness of men' is a wistful confession of need, and a dim hope of its supply. 'The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us' is the supply.

Barnabas was the older man, and his very silence suggested his superior dignity. So he was taken for Jupiter [Zeus in the Greek], and the younger man for his inferior, Mercury [Hermes in the Greek], 'the messenger of the gods.' Clearly the two missionaries did not understand what the multitudes were shouting in their 'barbarous' language, or they would have intervened. Perhaps they had left the spot before the excitement rose to its height, for they knew nothing of the preparations for the sacrifice till they '*heard* of it, and then they 'sprang forth,' which implies that they were within some place, possibly their lodging.

If we could be sure what ‘gates’ are meant in Act. 14:13, the course of events would be plainer. Were they those of the city, in which case the priest and procession would be coming from the temple outside the walls? or those of the temple itself? or those of the Apostles’ lodging? Opinions differ, and the material for deciding is lacking. At all events, whether from sharing in the crowd’s enthusiasm, or with an eye to the reputation of his shrine, the priest hurriedly procured oxen for a sacrifice, which one reading of the text specifies as an ‘additional’ offering-that is, over and above the statutory sacrifices. Is it a sign of haste that the ‘garlands,’ which should have been twined round the oxen’s horns, are mentioned separately? If so, we get a lively picture of the exultant hurry of the crowd.

II. The Apostles are as deeply moved as the multitude is, but by what different emotions!

The horror of idolatry, which was their inheritance from a hundred generations, flamed up at the thought of themselves being made objects of worship. They had met many different sorts of receptions on this journey, but never before anything like this. Opposition and threats left them calm, but this stirred them to the depths. ‘Scoff at us, fight with us, maltreat us, and we will endure; but do not make gods of us.’ I do not know that their ‘successors’ have always felt exactly so.

In Act. 14:14 Barnabas is named first, contrary to the order prevailing since Paphos, the reason being that the crowd thought him the superior. The remonstrance ascribed to both, but no doubt spoken by Paul, contains nothing that any earnest monotheist, Jew or Gentile philosopher, might not have said. The purpose of it was not to preach Christ, but to stop the sacrifice. It is simply a vehemently earnest protest against idolatry, and a proclamation of one living God. The comparison with the speech in Athens is interesting, as showing Paul’s exquisite felicity in adapting his style to his audience. There is nothing to the peasants of Lycaonia about poets, no argumentation about the degradation of the idea of divinity by taking images as its likeness, no wide view of the course of history, no glimpse of the mystic thought that all creatures live and move in Him. All that might suit the delicate ears of Athenians, but would have been wasted in Lystra amidst the tumultuous crowd. But we have instead of these the fearless assertion, flung in the face of the priest of Jupiter, that idols are ‘vanities,’ as Paul had learned from Isaiah and Jeremiah; the plain declaration of the one God, ‘living,’ and not like these inanimate images; of His universal creative power; and the earnest exhortation to turn to Him.

In Act. 14:16 Paul meets an objection which rises in his mind as likely to be springing in his hearers: ‘If there is such a God, why have we never heard of Him till now?’ That is quite in Paul’s manner. The answer is undeveloped, as compared with the Athenian address or with Rom. 1:1 - Rom. 1:32 But there is couched in Act. 14:16 a tacit contrast between ‘the generations gone by’ and the present, which is drawn out in the speech on Mars Hill: ‘but *now* commandeth all men everywhere to repent,’ and also a contrast between the ‘nations’ left to walk in their own ways, and Israel to whom revelation had been made. The place and the temper of the listeners did not admit of enlarging on such matters.

But there was a plain fact, which was level to every peasant’s apprehension, and might strike home to the rustic crowd. God *had* left ‘the nations to walk in their own ways,’ and yet not altogether. That thought is wrought out in Rom. 1:1 - Rom. 1:32, and the difference between its development there and here is instructive. Beneficence is the sign-manual of heaven. The orderly sequence of the seasons, the rain from heaven, the seat of the gods from which the two Apostles were thought to have come down, the yearly miracle of harvest, and the gladness that it brings-all these are witnesses to a living Person moving the processes of the universe towards a beneficent end for man.

In spite of all modern impugners, it still remains true that the phenomena of ‘nature,’ their continuity, their co-operation, and their beneficent issues, demand the recognition of a Person with a loving purpose moving them all. ‘*Thou* crownest the year with Thy goodness; and *Thy* paths drop fatness.’

III. The malice of the Jews of Antioch is remarkable.

Not content with hounding the Apostles from that city, they came raging after them to Lystra, where there does not appear to have been a synagogue, since we hear only of their stirring up the ‘multitudes.’ The mantle of Saul had fallen on them, and they were now ‘persecuting’ *him* ‘even unto strange cities.’

No note is given of the time between the attempted sacrifice and the accomplished stoning, but probably some space intervened. Persuading the multitudes, however fickle they were, would take some time; and indeed one ancient text of Acts has an expansion of the verse: ‘They persuaded the multitudes to depart from them [the Apostles], saying that they spake nothing true, but lied in everything.’

No doubt some time elapsed, but few emotions are more transient than such impure religious excitement as the crowd had felt, and the ebb is as great as the flood, and the oozy bottom laid bare is foul. Popular favourites in other departments have to experience the same fate-one day, ‘roses, roses, all the way’; the next, rotten eggs and curses. Other folks than the ignorant peasants at Lystra have had devout emotion surging over them and leaving them dry.

Who are ‘they’ who stoned Paul? Grammatically, the Jews, and probably it was so. They hated him so much that they themselves began the stoning; but no doubt the mob, which is always cruel, because it needs strong excitement, lent willing hands. Did Paul remember Stephen, as the stones came whizzing on him? It is an added touch of brutality that they dragged the supposed corpse out of the city, with no gentle hands, we may be sure. Perhaps it was flung down near the very temple ‘before the city,’ where the priest that wanted to sacrifice was on duty.

The crowd, having wreaked their vengeance, melted away, but a handful of brave disciples remained, standing round the bruised, unconscious form, ready to lay it tenderly in some hastily dug grave. No previous mention of disciples has been made. The narrative of Acts does not profess to be complete, and the argument from its silence is precarious.

Luke shows no disposition to easy belief in miracles. He does not know that Paul was dead; his medical skill familiarised him with protracted states of unconsciousness; so all he vouches for is that Paul lay as if dead on some rubbish heap ‘without the camp,’ and that, with courage and persistence which were supernatural, whether his reviving was so or not, the man thus sorely battered went back to the city, and next day went on with his work, as if stoning was a trifle not to be taken account of.

The Apostles turned at Derbe, and coming back on their outward route, reached Antioch, encouraging the new disciples, who had now to be left truly like shepherdless sheep among wolves. They did not encourage them by making light of the dangers waiting them, but they plainly set before them the law of the Kingdom, which they had seen exemplified in Paul, that we must suffer if we would reign with the King. That 'we' in Act. 14:22 is evidently quoted from Paul, and touchingly shows how he pointed to his own stoning as what they too must be prepared to suffer. It is a thought frequently recurring in his letters. It remains true in all ages, though the manner of suffering varies.

86)Acts 14:27

Acts

'THE DOOR OF FAITH'

Act. 14:27.

There are many instances of the occurrence of this metaphor in the New Testament, but none is exactly like this. We read, for example, of 'a great door and effectual' being opened to Paul for the free ministry of the word; and to the angel of the Church in Philadelphia, 'He that openeth and none shall shut' graciously says, 'I have set before thee a door opened, which none can shut.' But here the door is faith, that is to say faith is conceived of as the means of entrance for the Gentiles into the Kingdom, which, till then, Jews had supposed to be entered by hereditary rite.

I. Faith is the means of our entrance into the Kingdom.

The Jew thought that birth and the rite of circumcision were the door, but the 'rehearsing' of the experiences of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary tour shattered that notion by the logic of facts. Instead of that narrow postern another doorway had been broken in the wall of the heavenly city, and it was wide enough to admit of multitudes entering.

Gentiles had plainly come in. How had they come in? By believing in Jesus. Whatever became of previous exclusive theories, there was a fact that had to be taken into account. It distinctly proved that faith was ‘the gate of the Lord into which,’ not the circumcised but the ‘righteous,’ who were righteous because believing, ‘should enter.’

We must not forget the other use of the metaphor, by our Lord Himself, in which. He declares that He is the Door. The two representations are varying but entirely harmonious, for the one refers to the objective fact of Christ’s work as making it possible that we should draw near to and dwell with God, and the other to our subjective appropriation of that possibility, and making it a reality in our own blessed experience.

II. Faith is the means of God’s entrance into our hearts.

We possess the mysterious and awful power of shutting God out of these hearts. And faith, which in one aspect is our means of entrance into the Kingdom of God, is, in another, the means of God’s entrance into us. The Psalm, which invokes the divine presence in the Temple, calls on the ‘everlasting doors’ to be ‘lifted up,’ and promises that then ‘the King of Glory will come in.’ And the voice of the ascended Christ, the King of Glory, knocking at the closed door, calls on us with our own hands to open the door, and promises that He ‘will come in.’

Paul prayed for the Ephesian Christians ‘that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith,’ and there is no other way by which His indwelling is possible. Faith is not constituted the condition of that divine indwelling by any arbitrary appointment, as a sovereign might determine that he would enter a city by a certain route, chosen without any special reason from amongst many, but in the nature of things it is necessary that trust, and love which follows trust, and longing which follows love should be active in a soul if Christ is to enter in and abide there.

III. Faith is the means of the entrance of the Kingdom into us.

If Christ comes in He comes with His pierced hands full of gifts. Through our faith we receive all spiritual blessings. But we must ever remember, what this metaphor most forcibly sets forth, that faith is but the means of entrance. It has no worth in itself, but is precious only because it admits the true wealth. The door is nothing. It is only an opening. Faith is the pipe that brings the water, the flinging wide the shutters that the light may flood the dark room, the putting oneself into the path of the electric circuit. Salvation is not arbitrarily connected with faith. It is not the reward of faith but the possession of what comes through faith, and cannot come in any other way. Our ‘hearts’ are ‘purified by faith,’ because faith admits into our hearts the life, and instals as dominant in them the powers, the motives, the Spirit, which purify. We are ‘saved by faith,’ for faith brings into our spirits the Christ who saves His people from their sins, when He abides in them and they abide in Him through their faith.

87)Acts 15:1-6

Acts

THE BREAKING OUT OF DISCORD

Act. 15:1 - Act. 15:6.

The question as to the conditions on which Gentiles could be received into Christian communion had already been raised by the case of Cornelius, but it became more acute after Paul’s missionary journey. The struggle between the narrower and broader views was bound to come to a head. Traces of the cleft between Palestinian and Hellenist believers had appeared as far back as the ‘murmuring’ about the unfair neglect of the Hellenist widows in the distribution of relief, and the whole drift of things since had been to widen the gap.

Whether the ‘certain men’ had a mission to the Church in Antioch or not, they had no mandate to lay down the law as they did. Luke delicately suggests this by saying that they ‘came down from Judaea,’ rather than from Jerusalem. We should be fair to these men, and remember how much they had to say in defence of their position. They did not question that Gentiles could be received into the Church, but ‘kept on teaching’ [as the word in the Greek implies] that the divinely appointed ordinance of circumcision was the ‘door’ of entrance. God had prescribed it, and through all the centuries since Moses, all who came into the fold of Israel had gone in by that gate. Where was the commandment to set it aside? Was not Paul teaching men to climb up some other way, and so blasphemously abrogating a divine law?

No wonder that honest believers in Jesus as Messiah shrank with horror from such a revolutionary procedure. The fact that they were Palestinian Jews, who had never had their exclusiveness rubbed off, as Hellenists like Paul and Barnabas had had, explains, and to some extent excuses, their position. And yet their contention struck a fatal blow at the faith, little as they meant it. Paul saw what they did not see-that if anything else than faith was brought in as necessary to knit men to Christ, and make them partakers of salvation, faith was deposed from its place, and Christianity sank back to be a religion of 'works.' Experience has proved that anything whatever introduced as associated with faith ejects faith from its place, and comes to be recognised as *the* means of salvation. It must be faith *or* circumcision, it cannot be faith *and* circumcision. The lesson is needed to-day as much as in Antioch. The controversy started then is a perennial one, and the Church of the present needs Paul's exhortation, 'Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.'

The obvious course of appealing to Jerusalem was taken, and it is noteworthy that in Act. 15:2 the verb 'appointed' has no specified subject. Plainly, however, it was the Church which acted, and so natural did that seem to Luke that he felt it unnecessary to say so. No doubt Paul concurred, but the suggestion is not said to have come from him. He and Barnabas might have asserted their authority, and declined to submit what they had done by the Spirit's guidance to the decision of the Apostles, but they seek the things that make for peace.

No doubt the other side was represented in the deputation. Jerusalem was the centre of unity, and remained so till its fall. The Apostles and elders were the recognised leaders of the Church. Elders here appear as holding a position of authority; the only previous mention of them is in Act. 11:30, where they receive the alms sent from Antioch. It is significant that we do not hear of their first appointment. The organisation of the Church took shape as exigencies prescribed.

The deputation left Antioch, escorted lovingly for a little way by the Church, and, journeying by land, gladdened the groups of believers in ‘Phenicia and Samaria’ with the news that the Gentiles were turning to God. We note that they are not said to have spoken of the thorny question in these countries, and that it is not said that there was joy in Judaea. Perhaps the Christians in it were in sympathy with the narrower view.

The first step taken in Jerusalem was to call a meeting of the Church to welcome the deputation. It is significant that the latter did not broach the question in debate, but told the story of the success of their mission. That was the best argument for receiving Gentile converts without circumcision. God had received them; should not the Church do so? Facts are stronger than theories. It was Peter’s argument in the case of Cornelius: they ‘have received the Holy Ghost as well as we,’ ‘who was I, that I could withstand God?’ It is the argument which shatters all analogous narrowing of the conditions of Christian life. If men say, ‘Except ye be’ this or that ‘ye cannot be saved,’ it is enough to point to the fruits of Christian character, and say, ‘These show that the souls which bring them forth *are* saved, and you must widen your conceptions of the possibilities to include these actualities.’ It is vain to say ‘Ye cannot be’ when manifestly they are.

But the logic of facts does not convince obstinate theorists, and so the Judaising party persisted in their ‘It is needful to circumcise them.’ None are so blind as those to whom religion is mainly a matter of ritual. You may display the fairest graces of Christian character before them, and you get no answer but the reiteration of ‘It is needful to circumcise you.’ But on their own ground, in Jerusalem, the spokesmen of that party enlarged their demands. In Antioch they had insisted on circumcision, in Jerusalem they added the demand for entire conformity to the Mosaic law. They were quite logical; their principle demanded that extension of the requirement, and was thereby condemned as utterly unworkable. Now that the whole battery was unmasked the issue was clear-Is Christianity to be a Jewish sect or the universal religion? Clear as it was, few in that assembly saw it. But the parting of the ways had been reached.

88)Acts 15:12-29

THE CHARTER OF GENTILE LIBERTY

Act. 15:12 - Act. 15:29.

Much was at stake in the decision of this gathering of the Church. If the Jewish party triumphed, Christianity sank to the level of a Jewish sect. The question brought up for decision was difficult, and there was much to be said for the view that the Mosaic law was binding on Gentile converts. It must have been an uprooting of deepest beliefs for a Jewish Christian to contemplate the abrogation of that law, venerable by its divine origin, by its hoary antiquity, by its national associations. We must not be hard upon men who clung to it; but we should learn from their final complete drifting away from Christianity how perilous is the position which insists on the necessity to true discipleship of any outward observance.

Our passage begins in the middle of the conference. Peter has, with characteristic vehemence, dwelt upon the divine attestation of the genuine equality of the uncircumcised converts with the Jewish, given by their possession of the same divine Spirit, and has flung fiery questions at the Judaisers, which silenced them. Then, after the impressive hush following his eager words, Barnabas and Paul tell their story once more, and clinch the nail driven by Peter by asserting that God had already by ‘signs and wonders’ given His sanction to the admission of Gentiles without circumcision. Characteristically, in Jerusalem Barnabas is restored to his place above Paul, and is named first as speaking first, and regarded by the Jerusalem Church as the superior of the missionary pair.

The next speaker is James, not an Apostle, but the bishop of the Church in Jerusalem, of whom tradition tells that he was a zealous adherent to the Mosaic law in his own person, and that his knees were as hard as a camel’s through continual prayer. It is singular that this meeting should be so often called ‘the Apostolic council,’ when, as a fact, only one Apostle said a word, and he not as an Apostle, but as the chosen instrument to preach to the Gentiles. ‘The elders,’ of whose existence we now hear for the first time in this wholly incidental manner, were associated with the Apostles [Act. 15:6], and the ‘multitude’ [Act. 15:12] is most naturally taken to be ‘the whole Church' [Act. 15:22]. James represents the eldership, and as bishop in Jerusalem and an eager observer of legal prescriptions, fittingly speaks. His words practically determined the question. Like a wise man, he begins with facts. His use of the intensely Jewish form of the name Simeon is an interesting reminiscence of old days. So he had been accustomed to call Peter when they were all young together, and so he calls him still, though everybody else named him by his new name. What God had done by him seems to James to settle the whole question; for it was nothing else than to put the Gentile converts without circumcision on an equality with the Jewish part of the Church.

Note the significant juxtaposition of the words 'Gentiles' and 'people'-the former the name for heathen, the latter the sacred designation of the chosen nation. The great paradox which, through Peter's preaching at Caesarea, had become a fact was that the 'people of God' were made up of Gentiles as well as Jews-that His name was equally imparted to both. If God had made Gentiles His people, had He not thereby shown that the special observances of Israel were put aside, and that, in particular, circumcision was no longer the condition of entrance? The end of national distinction and the opening of a new way of incorporation among the people of God were clearly contained in the facts. How much Christian narrowness would be blown to atoms if its advocates would do as James did, and let God's facts teach them the width of God's purposes and the comprehensiveness of Christ's Church! We do wisely when we square our theories with facts; but many of us go to work in the opposite way, and snip down facts to the dimension of our theories.

James's next step is marked equally by calm wisdom and open-mindedness. He looks to God's word, as interpreted by God's deeds, to throw light in turn on the deeds and to confirm the interpretation of these. Two things are to be noted in considering his quotation from Amos-its bearing on the question in hand, and its divergence from the existing Hebrew text. As to the former, there seems at first sight nothing relevant to James's purpose in the quotation, which simply declares that the Gentiles will seek the Lord when the fallen tabernacle of David is rebuilt. That period of time has at least begun, thinks James, in the work of Jesus, in whom the decayed dominion of David is again in higher form established. The return of the

Gentiles does not merely synchronise with, but is the intended issue of, Christ's reign. Lifted from the earth, He will draw all men unto Him, and they shall 'seek the Lord,' and on them His name will be called.

Now the force of this quotation lies, as it seems, first in the fact that Peter's experience at Caesarea is to be taken as an indication of how God means the prophecy to be fulfilled, namely, without circumcision; and secondly, in the *argumentum a silentio*, since the prophet says nothing about ritual or the like, but declares that moral and spiritual qualifications-on the one hand a true desire after God, and on the other receiving the proclamation of His name and calling themselves by it-are all that are needed to make Gentiles God's people. Just because there is nothing in the prophecy about observing Jewish ceremonies, and something about longing and faith, James thinks that these are the essentials, and that the others may be dropped by the Church, as God had dropped them in the case of Cornelius, and as Amos had dropped them in his vision of the future kingdom. God knew what He meant to do when He spoke through the prophet, and what He has done has explained the words, as James says in Act. 15:18.

The variation from the Hebrew text requires a word of comment. The quotation is substantially from the Septuagint, with a slight alteration. Probably James quoted the version familiar to many of his hearers. It seems to have been made from a somewhat different Hebrew text in Act. 15:17, but the difference is very much slighter than an English reader would suppose. Our text has 'Edom' where the Septuagint has 'men'; but the Hebrew words without vowels are identical but for the addition of one letter in the former. Our text has 'inherit' where the Septuagint has 'seek after'; but there again the difference in the two Hebrew words would be one letter only, so that there may well have been a various reading as preserved in the Septuagint and Acts. James adds to the Septuagint 'seek' the evidently correct completion 'the Lord.'

Now it is obvious that, even if we suppose his rendering of the whole verse to be a paraphrase of the same Hebrew text as we have, it is a correct representation of the meaning; for the 'inheriting of Edom' is no mere external victory, and Edom is always in the Old Testament the type of the godless man. The conquest of the Gentiles by the restorer of David's tabernacle is really the seeking after the Lord, and the calling of His name upon the Gentiles.

The conclusion drawn by James is full of practical wisdom, and would have saved the Church from many a sad page in its history, if its spirit had been prevalent in later 'councils.' Note how the very designation given to the Gentile converts in Act. 15:19 carries argumentative force. 'They turn to God from among the Gentiles'-if they have done that, surely their new separation and new attachment are enough, and make insistence on circumcision infinitely ridiculous. They have the thing signified; what does it matter about the sign, which is good for us Jews, but needless for them? If Church rulers had always been as open-eyed as this bishop in Jerusalem, and had been content if people were joined to God and parted from the world, what torrents of blood, what frowning walls of division, what scandals and partings of brethren would have been spared!

The observances suggested are a portion of the precepts enjoined by Judaism on proselytes. The two former were necessary to the Christian life; the two latter were not, but were concessions to the Jewish feelings of the stricter party. The conclusion may be called a compromise, but it was one dictated by the desire for unity, and had nothing unworthy in it. There should be giving and taking on both sides. If the Jewish Christians made the, to them, immense concession of waiving the necessity of circumcision, the Gentile section might surely make the small one of abstinence from things strangled and from blood. Similarities in diet would daily assimilate the lives of the two parties, and would be a more visible and continuous token of their oneness than the single act of circumcision.

But what does the reason in Act. 15:21 mean? Why should the reading of Moses every Sabbath be a reason for these concessions? Various answers are given: but the most natural is that the constant promulgation of the law made respect for the feelings [even if mistaken] of Jewish Christians advisable, and the course suggested the most likely to win Jews who were not yet Christians. Both classes would be flung farther apart if there were not some yielding. The general principle involved is that one cannot be too tender with old and deeply rooted convictions even if they be prejudices, and that Christian charity, which is truest wisdom, will consent to limitations of Christian liberty, if thereby any little one who believes in Him shall be saved from being offended, or any unbeliever from being repelled.

The letter embodying James's wise suggestion needs little further notice. We may observe that there was no imposing and authoritative decision of the Ecclesia, but that the whole thing was threshed out in free talk, and then the unanimous judgment of the community, 'Apostles, elders and the whole Church,' was embodied in the epistle. Observe the accurate rendering of Act. 15:25, 'having *come* to one accord,' which gives a lively picture of the process. Note too that James's proposal of a letter was mended by the addition of a deputation, consisting of an unknown 'Judas called Barsabas' [perhaps a relative of 'Joseph called Barsabas,' the unsuccessful nominee for Apostleship in Act. 1:23], and the well-known Silas or Silvanus, of whom we hear so much in Paul's letters. That journey was the turning-point in his life, and he henceforward, attracted by the mass and magnetism of Paul's great personality, revolved round him, and forsook Jerusalem.

Probably James drew up the document, which has the same somewhat unusual 'greeting' as his Epistle. The sharp reference to the Judaising teachers would be difficult for their sympathisers to swallow, but charity is not broken by plain repudiation of error and its teachers. 'Subverting your souls' is a heavy charge. The word is only here found in the New Testament, and means to unsettle, the image in it being that of packing up baggage for removal. The disavowal of these men is more complete if we follow the Revised Version in reading [Act. 15:24] 'no commandment' instead of 'no such commandment.'

These unauthorised teachers 'went'; but, in strong contrast with them, Judas and Silas are chosen out and sent. Another thrust at the Judaising teachers is in the affectionate eulogy of Paul and Barnabas as 'beloved,' whatever disparaging things had been said about them, and as having 'hazarded their lives,' while these others had taken very good care of themselves, and had only gone to disturb converts whom Paul and Barnabas had won at the peril of their lives.

The calm matter-of-course assertion that the decision which commended itself to 'us' is the decision of 'the Holy Ghost' was warranted by Christ's promises, and came from the consciousness that they had observed the conditions which He had laid down. They had brought their minds to bear upon the question, with the light of facts and of Scripture, and had come to a unanimous conclusion. If they believed their Lord’s parting words, they could not doubt that His Spirit had guided them. If we lived more fully in that Spirit, we should know more of the same peaceful assurance, which is far removed from the delusion of our own infallibility, and is the simple expression of trust in the veracious promises of our Lord.

The closing words of the letter are beautifully brotherly, sinking authority, and putting in the foreground the advantage to the Gentile converts of compliance with the injunctions. ‘Ye shall do well,’ rightly and conformably with the requirements of brotherly love to weaker brethren. And thus doing well, they will ‘fare well,’ and be strong. That is not the way in which ‘lords over God’s heritage’ are accustomed to end their decrees. Brotherly affection, rather than authority imposing its will, breathes here. Would that all succeeding ‘Councils’ had imitated this as well as ‘it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us’!

89)Acts 15:37-38

Acts

A GOOD MAN’S FAULTS

Act. 15:37 - Act. 15:38.

Scripture narratives are remarkable for the frankness with which they tell the faults of the best men. It has nothing in common with the cynical spirit in historians, of which this age has seen eminent examples, which fastens upon the weak places in the noblest natures, like a wasp on bruises in the ripest fruit, and delights in showing how all goodness is imperfect, that it may suggest that none is genuine. Nor has it anything in common with that dreary melancholy which also has its representatives among us, that sees everywhere only failures and fragments of men, and has no hope of ever attaining anything beyond the common average of excellence. But Scripture frankly confesses that all its noblest characters have fallen short of unstained purity, and with boldness of hope as great as its frankness teaches the weakest to aspire, and the most sinful to expect perfect likeness to a perfect Lord, It is a plane mirror, giving back all images without distortion.

We recall how emphatically and absolutely it eulogised Barnabas as ‘a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith’-and now we have to notice how this man, thus full of the seminal principle of all goodness, derived into his soul by deep and constant communion through faith, and showing in his life practical righteousness and holiness, yet goes sadly astray, tarnishes his character, and mars his whole future.

The two specific faults recorded of him are his over-indulgence in the case of Mark, and his want of firmness in opposition to the Judaising teachers who came down to Antioch. They were neither of them grave faults, but they were real. In the one he was too facile in overlooking a defect which showed unfitness for the work, and seems to have yielded to family affection and to have sacrificed the efficiency of a mission to it. Not only was he wrong in proposing to condone Mark’s desertion, but he was still more wrong in his reception of the opposition to his proposal. With the firmness which weak characters so often display at the wrong time, he was resolved, come what would, to have his own way. Temper rather than principle made him obstinate where he should have been yielding, as it had made him in Antioch yielding, where he should have been firm. Paul’s remonstrances have no effect. He will rather have his own way than the companionship of his old friend, and so there come alienation and separation. The Church at Antioch takes Paul’s view-all the brethren are unanimous in disapproval. But Barnabas will not move. He sets up his own feeling in opposition to them all. The sympathy of his brethren, the work of his life, the extension of Christ’s kingdom, are all tossed aside. His own foolish purpose is more to him in that moment of irritation than all these. So he snaps the tie, abandons his work, and goes away without a kindly word, without a blessing, without the Church’s prayers-but with his nephew for whom he had given up all these. Paul sails away to do God’s work, and the Church ‘recommends him to the grace of God,’ but Barnabas steals away home to Cyprus, and his name is no more heard in the story of the planting of the kingdom of Christ.

One hopes that his work did not stop thus, but his recorded work does, and in the band of friends who surrounded the great Apostle, the name of his earliest friend appears no more. Other companions and associates in labour take his place; he, as it appears, is gone for ever. One reference [1Co. 9:6] at a later date seems most naturally to suggest that he still continued in the work of an evangelist, and still practised the principle to which he and Paul had adhered when together, of supporting himself by manual labour. The tone of the reference implies that there were relations of mutual respect. But the most we can believe is that probably the two men still thought kindly of each other and honoured each other for their work's sake, but found it better to labour apart, and not to seek to renew the old companionship which had been so violently torn asunder.

The other instance of weakness was in some respects of a still graver kind. The cause of it was the old controversy about the obligations of Jewish law on Gentile Christians. Paul, Peter, and Barnabas all concurred in neglecting the restrictions imposed by Judaism, and in living on terms of equality and association in eating and drinking with the heathen converts at Antioch. A principle was involved, to which Barnabas had bean the first to give in his adhesion, in the frank recognition of the Antioch Church. But as soon as emissaries from the other party came down, Peter and he abandoned their association with Gentile converts, not changing their convictions but suppressing the action to which their convictions should have led. They pretended to be of the same mind with these narrow Jews from Jerusalem. They insulted their brethren, they deserted Paul, they belied their convictions, they imperilled the cause of Christian liberty, they flew in the face of what Peter had said that God Himself had showed him, they did their utmost to degrade Christianity into a form of Judaism-all for the sake of keeping on good terms with the narrow bigotry of these Judaising teachers.

Now if we take these two facts together, and set them side by side with the eulogy pronounced on Barnabas as 'a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith,' we have brought before us in a striking form some important considerations.

I. The imperfect goodness of good men.

A good man does not mean a faultless man. Of course the power which works on a believing soul is always tending to produce goodness and only goodness. But its operation is not such that we are always equally, uniformly, perfectly under its influence. Power in germ is one thing, in actual operation another. There may be but a little ragged patch of green in the garden, and yet it may be on its way to become a flower-bed. A king may not have established dominion over all his land. The actual operation of that transforming Spirit at any given moment is limited, and we can withdraw ourselves from it. It does not begin by leavening all our nature.

So we have to note-

> The root of goodness.
>
> The main direction of a life.
>
> The progressive character of goodness.
>
> The highest style of Christian life is a struggle. So we draw practical inferences as to the conduct of life.
>
> This thought of imperfection does not diminish the criminality of individual acts.
>
> It does not weaken aspiration and effort towards higher life.
>
> It does alleviate our doubts and fears when we find evil in ourselves.

II. The possible evil lurking in our best qualities.

In Barnabas, his amiability and openness of nature, the very characteristics that had made him strong, now make him weak and wrong.

How clearly then there is brought out here the danger that lurks even in our good! I need not remind you how every virtue may be run to an extreme and become a vice. Liberality is exaggerated into prodigality; firmness, into obstinacy; mercy, into weakness; gravity, into severity; tolerance, into feeble conviction; humility, into abjectness.

And these extremes are reached when these graces are developed at the expense of the symmetry of the character.

We are not simple but complex, and what we need to aim at is a character, not an excrescence. Some people's goodness is like a wart or a wen. Their virtues are cases of what medical technicality calls hypertrophy. But our goodness should be like harmonious Indian patterns, where all colours blend in a balanced whole.

Such considerations enforce the necessity for rigid self-control. And that in two directions.

[*a*] Beware of your excellences, your strong points.

[*b*] Cultivate sedulously the virtues to which you are not inclined.

The special form of error into which Barnabas fell is worth notice. It was over-indulgence, tolerance of evil in a person; feebleness of grasp, a deficiency of boldness in carrying out his witness to a disputed truth. In this day liberality, catholicity, are pushed so far that there is danger of our losing the firmness of our grasp of principles, and indulgence for faults goes so far that we are apt to lose the habit of unsparing, though unangry, condemnation of unworthy characters. This generation is like Barnabas; very quick in sympathy, generous in action, ready to recognise goodness where-ever it is beheld. But Barnabas may be a beacon, warning us of the possible evils that dog these excellences like their shadows.

III. The grave issues of small faults.

Comparatively trivial as was Barnabas's error, it seems to have wrecked his life, at least to have marred it for long years, and to have broken his sweet companionship with Paul. I think we may go further and say, that most good men are in more danger from trivial faults than from great ones. No man reaches the superlative degree of wickedness all at once. Few men spring from the height to the abyss, they usually slip down. The erosive action of the sand of the desert is said to be gradually cutting off the Sphinx's head. The small faults are most numerous. We are least on our guard against them. There is a microscopic weed that chokes canals. Snowflakes make the sky as dark as an eclipse does. White ants eat a carcase quicker than a lion does.

So we urge the necessity for bringing ordinary deeds and small actions to be ruled and guided by God's Spirit.

How the contemplation of the imperfection, which is the law of life, should lead us to hope for that heaven where perfection is.

How the contemplation of the limits of all human goodness should lead us to exclusive faith in, and imitation of, the one perfect Lord. He stands stainless among the stained. In Him alone is no sin, from Him alone like goodness may be ours.

90)Acts 16:10-11

Acts

HOW TO SECURE A PROSPEROUS VOYAGE

Act. 16:10 - Act. 16:11.

This book of the Acts is careful to point out how each fresh step in the extension of the Church's work was directed and commanded by Jesus Christ Himself. Thus Philip was sent by specific injunction to 'join himself' to the chariot of the Ethiopian statesman. Thus Peter on the house-top at Joppa, looking out over the waters of the western sea, had the vision of the great sheet, knit at the four corners. And thus Paul, in singularly similar circumstances, in the little seaport of Troas, looking out over the narrower sea which there separates Asia from Europe, had the vision of the man of Macedonia, with his cry, 'Come over and help *us*!' The whole narrative before us bears upon the one point, that Christ Himself directs the expansion of His kingdom. And there never was a more fateful moment than that at which the Gospel, in the person of the Apostle, crossed the sea, and effected a lodgment in the progressive quarter of the world.

Now what I wish to do is to note how Paul and his little company behaved themselves when they had received Christ's commandment. For I think there are lessons worth the gathering to be found there. There was no doubt about the vision; the question was what it meant. So note three stages. First, careful consideration, with one's own common sense, of what God wants us to do-'Assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us.' Then, let no grass grow under our feet- immediate obedience-'Straightway we endeavoured to go into Macedonia.' And then, patient pondering and instantaneous submission get the reward-'We came with a straight course.' He gave the winds and the waves charge concerning them. Now there are three lessons for us. Taken together, they are patterns of what ought to be in our experience, and will be, if the conditions are complied with.

I. First, Careful Consideration.

Paul had no doubt that what he saw was a vision from Christ, and not a mere dream of the night, born of the reverberation of waking thoughts and anxieties, that took the shape of the plaintive cry of the man of Macedonia. But then the next step was to be quite sure of what the vision meant. And so, wisely, he does not make up his mind himself, but calls in the three men who were with him. And what a significant little group it was! There were Timothy, Silas, and Luke -Silas, from Jerusalem; Timothy, half a Gentile; Luke, altogether a Gentile; and Paul himself-and these four shook the world. They come together, and they talk the matter over. The word of my text rendered 'assuredly gathering' is a picturesque one. It literally means 'laying things together.' They set various facts side by side, or as we say in our colloquial idiom, 'They put this and that together,' and so they came to understand what the vision meant.

What had they to help them to understand it? Well, they had this fact, that in all the former part of their journey they had been met by hindrances; that their path had been hedged up here, there, and everywhere. Paul set out from Antioch, meaning a quiet little tour of visitation amongst the churches that had been already established. Jesus Christ meant Philippi and Athens and Corinth and Ephesus, before Paul got back again. So we read in an earlier portion of the chapter that the Spirit of Jesus forbade them to speak the Word in one region, and checked and hindered them when, baffled, they tried to go to another. There then remained only one other road open to them, and that led to the coast. Thus putting together their hindrances and their stimuluses, they came to the conclusion that unitedly the two said plainly, ‘Go across the sea, and preach the word there.’

Now it is a very commonplace and homely piece of teaching to remind you that time is not wasted in making quite sure of the meaning of providences which seem to declare the will of God, before we begin to act. But the commonest duties are very often neglected; and we preachers, I think, would very often do more good by hammering at commonplace themes than by bringing out original and fresh ones. And so I venture to say a word about the immense importance to Christian life and Christian service of this preliminary step-’assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us.’ What have we to do in order to be quite sure of God’s intention for us?

Well, the first thing seems to me to make quite sure that we want to know it, and that we do not want to force our intentions upon Him, and then to plume ourselves upon being obedient to His call, when we are only doing what we like. There is a vast deal of unconscious insincerity in us all; and especially in regard to Christian work there is an enormous amount of it. People will say, ‘Oh, I have such a strong impulse in a given direction, to do certain kinds of Christian service, that I am quite sure that it is God’s will.’ How are you sure? A strong impulse may be a temptation from the devil as well as a call from God. And men who simply act on untested impulses, even the most benevolent which spring directly from large Christian principles, may be making deplorable mistakes. It is not enough to have pure motives. It is useless to say, ‘Such and such a course of action is clearly the result of the truths of the Gospel.’ That may be all perfectly true, and yet the course may not be the course for you. For there may be practical considerations, which do not come into our view unless we carefully think about them, which forbid us to take such a path. So remember that strong impulses are not guiding lights; nor is it enough to vindicate our pursuing some mode of Christian service that it is in accordance with the principles of the Gospel. ‘Circumstances alter cases’ is a very homely old saying; but if Christian people would only bring the common sense to bear upon their religious life which they need to bring to bear upon their business life, unless they are going into the *Gazette*, there would be less waste work in the Christian Church than there is to-day. I do not want less zeal; I want that the reins of the fiery steed shall be kept well in hand. The difference between a fanatic, who is a fool, and an enthusiast, who is a wise man, is that the one brings calm reason to bear, and an open-eyed consideration of circumstances all round; and the other sees but one thing at a time, and shuts his eyes, like a bull in a field, and charges at that. So let us be sure, to begin with, that we want to know what God wants us to do; and that we are not palming our wishes upon Him, and calling them His providences.

Then there is another plain, practical consideration that comes out of this story, and that is, Do not be above being taught by failures and hindrances. You know the old proverb, 'It is waste time to flog a dead horse.' There is not a little well-meant work flung away, because it is expended on obviously hopeless efforts to revivify, perhaps, some moribund thing or to continue, perhaps, in some old, well-worn rut, instead of striking out into a new path. Paul was full of enthusiasm for the evangelisation of Asia Minor, and he might have said a great deal about the importance of going to Ephesus. He tried to do it, but Christ said 'No.' and Paul did not knock his head against the stone wall that lay between him and the accomplishment of his purpose, but he gave it up and tried another tack. He next wished to go up into Bithynia, and he might have said a great deal about the needs of the people by the Euxine; but again down came the barrier, and he had once more to learn the lesson, 'Not as thou wilt, but as I will.' He was not above being taught by his failures. Some of us are; and it is very difficult, and needs a great deal of Christian wisdom and unselfishness, to distinguish between hindrances in the way of work which are meant to evoke larger efforts, and hindrances which are meant to say, 'Try another path, and do not waste time here any longer.'

But if we wish supremely to know God's will, He will help us to distinguish between these two kinds of difficulties. Some one has said, 'Difficulties are things to be overcome.' Yes, but not always. They very often are, and we should thank God for them then; but they sometimes are God's warnings to us to go by another road. So we need discretion, and patience, and suspense of judgment to be brought to bear upon all our purposes and plans.

Then, of course, I need not remind you that the way to get light is to seek it in the Book and in communion with Him whom the Book reveals to us as the true Word of God: 'He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.' So careful consideration is a preliminary to all good Christian work. And, if you can, talk to some Timothy and Silas and Luke about your course, and do not be above taking a brother's advice.

II. The next step is Immediate Submission.

When they had assuredly gathered that the Lord had called them, 'immediately'-there is great virtue in that one word-'we endeavoured to go into Macedonia.' Delayed obedience is the brother- and, if I may mingle metaphors, sometimes the father-of disobedience. It sometimes means simple feebleness of conviction, indolence, and a general lack of fervour. It means very often a reluctance to do the duty that lies plainly before us. And, dear brethren, as I have said about the former lesson, so I say about this. The homely virtue, which we all know to be indispensable to success in common daily life and commercial undertakings, is no less indispensable to all vigour of Christian life and to all nobleness of Christian service. We have no hours to waste; the time is short. In the harvest-field, especially when it is getting near the end of the week, and the Sunday is at hand, there are little leisure and little tolerance of slow workers. And for us the fields are white, the labourers are few, the Lord of the harvest is imperative, the sun is hurrying to the west, and the sickles will have to be laid down before long. So, '*immediately* we endeavoured.'

Delayed duty is present discomfort. As long as a man has a conscience, so long will he be restless and uneasy until he has, as the Quakers say, 'cleared himself of his burden,' and done what he knows that he ought to do, and got done with it. Delayed obedience means wasted possibilities of service, and so is ever to be avoided. The more disagreeable anything is which is plainly a duty, the more reason there is for doing it right away. 'I made haste, and delayed not, but made haste to keep Thy commandments.'

Did you ever count how many '*straightways*' there are in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel? If you have not, will you do it when you go home; and notice how they come in? In the story of Christ's opening ministry every fresh incident is tacked on to the one before it, in that chapter, by that same word 'straightway.' 'Straightway' He does that; 'anon' He does this; 'immediately' He does the other thing. All is one continuous stream of acts of service. The Gospel of Mark is the Gospel of the servant, and it sets forth the pattern to which all Christian service ought to be conformed.

So if we take Jesus Christ for our Example, unhasting and unresting in the work of the Lord, we shall let no moment pass burdened with undischarged duty; and we shall find that all the moments are few enough for the discharge of the duties incumbent upon us.

III. So, lastly, careful consideration and unhesitating obedience lead to a Straight Course.

Well, it is not so always, but it is so generally. There is a wonderful power in diligent doing of God's known will to smooth away difficulties and avoid troubles. I do not, of course, mean that a man who thus lives, patiently ascertaining and then promptly doing what God would have him do, has any miraculous exemption from the ordinary sorrows and trials of life. But sure I am that a very, very large proportion of all the hindrances and disappointments, storms and quicksands, calms which prevent progress and headwinds that beat in our faces, are directly the products of our negligence in one or other of these two respects, and that although by no means absolutely, yet to an extent that we should not believe if we had not the experience of it, the wish to do God's will and the doing of it with our might when we know what it is have a talismanic power in calming the seas and bringing us to the desired haven.

But though this is not always absolutely true in regard of outward things, it is, without exception or limitation, true in regard of the inward life. For if my supreme will is to do God's will then nothing which is His will, and comes to me because it is can be a hindrance in my doing that.

As an old proverb says, 'Travelling merchants can never be out of their road.' And a Christian man whose path is simple obedience to the will of God can never be turned from that path by whatever hindrances may affect his outward life. So, in deepest truth, there is always a calm voyage for the men whose eyes are open to discern, and whose hands are swift to fulfil, the commandments of their Father in heaven. For them all winds blow them to their port; for them 'all things work together for good'; with them God's servants who hearken to the voice of His commandments, and are His ministers to do His pleasure, can never be other than in amity and alliance. He who is God’s servant is the world’s master. ‘All things are yours if ye are Christ’s.’

So, brethren, careful study of providences and visions, of hindrances and stimulus, careful setting of our lives side by side with the Master’s, and a swift delight in doing the will of the Lord, will secure for us, in inmost truth, a prosperous voyage, till all storms are hushed, ‘and they are glad because they be quiet; so He bringeth them to their desired haven.’

91)Acts 16:13

Acts

PAUL AT PHILIPPI

Act. 16:13.

This is the first record of the preaching of the Gospel in Europe, and probably the first instance of it. The fact that the vision of the man of Macedonia was needed in order to draw the Apostle across the straits into Macedonia, and the great length at which the incidents at Philippi are recorded, make this probable. If so, we are here standing, as it were, at the wellhead of a mighty river, and the thin stream of water assumes importance when we remember the thousand miles of its course, and the league-broad estuary in which it pours itself into the ocean. Here is the beginning; the Europe of to-day is what came out of it. There is no sign whatever that the Apostle was conscious of an epoch in this transference of the sphere of his operations, but we can scarcely help being conscious of such.

And so, looking at the words of my text, and seeing here how unobtrusively there stole into the progressive part of the world the power which was to shatter and remould all its institutions, to guide and inform the onward march of its peoples, to be the basis of their liberties, and the starting-point of their literature, we can scarcely avoid drawing lessons of importance.

The first point which I would suggest, as picturesquely enforced for us by this incident, is-

I. The apparent insignificance and real greatness of Christian work.

There did not seem in the whole of that great city that morning a more completely insignificant knot of people than the little weather-beaten Jew, travel-stained, of weak bodily presence, and of contemptible speech, with the handful of his attendants, who slipped out in the early morning and wended their way to the quiet little oratory, beneath the blue sky, by the side of the rushing stream, and there talked informally and familiarly to the handful of women. The great men of Philippi would have stared if any one had said to them, ‘You will be forgotten, but two of these women will have their names embalmed in the memory of the world for ever. Everybody will know Euodia and Syntyche. Your city will be forgotten, although a battle that settled the fate of the civilised world was fought outside your gates. But that little Jew and the letter that he will write to that handful of believers that are to be gathered by his preaching will last for ever.’ The mightiest thing done in Europe that morning was when the Apostle sat down by the riverside, ‘and spake to the women which resorted thither.’

The very same vulgar mistake as to what is great and as to what is small is being repeated over and over again; and we are all tempted to it by that which is worldly and vulgar in ourselves, to the enormous detriment of the best part of our natures. So it is worth while to stop for a moment and ask what is the criterion of greatness in our deeds? I answer, three things-their motive, their sphere, their consequences. What is done for God is always great. You take a pebble and drop it into a brook, and immediately the dull colouring upon it flashes up into beauty when the sunlight strikes through the ripples, and the magnitude of the little stone is enlarged. If I may make use of such a violent expression, drop your deeds into God, and they will all be great, however small they are. Keep them apart from Him, and they will be small, though all the drums of the world beat in celebration, and all the vulgar people on the earth extol their magnitude. This altar magnifies and sanctifies the giver and the gift. The great things are the things that are done for God.

A deed is great according to its sphere. What bears on and is confined to material things is smaller than what affects the understanding. The teacher is more than the man who promotes material good. And on the very same principle, above both the one and the other, is the doer of deeds which touch the diviner part of a man's nature, his will, his conscience, his affections, his relations to God. Thus the deeds that impinge upon these are the highest and the greatest; and far above the scientific inventor, and far above the mere teacher, as I believe, and as I hope you believe, stands the humblest work of the poorest Christian who seeks to draw any other soul into the light and liberty which he himself possesses. The greatest thing in the world is charity, and the purest charity in the world is that which helps a man to possess the basis and mother-tincture of all love, the love towards God who has first loved us, in the person and the work of His dear Son.

That which being done has consequences that roll through souls, 'and grow for ever and for ever,' is a greater work than the deed whose issues are more short-lived. And so the man who speaks a word which may deflect a soul into the paths which have no end until they are swallowed up in the light of the God who 'is a Sun,' is a worker whose work is truly great. Brethren, it concerns the nobleness of the life of us Christian people far more closely than we sometimes suppose, that we should purge our souls from the false estimate of magnitudes which prevails so extensively in the world's judgment of men and their doings. And though it is no worthy motive for a man to seek to live so that he may do great things, it is a part of the discipline of the Christian mind, as well as heart, that we should be able to reduce the swollen bladders to their true flaccidity and insignificance, and that we should understand that things done for God, things done on men's souls, things done with consequences which time will not exhaust, nor eternity put a period to, are, after all, the great things of human life.

Ah, there will be a wonderful reversal of judgments one day! Names that now fill the trumpet of fame will fall silent. Pages that now are read as if they were leaves of the 'Book of Life' will be obliterated and unknown, and when all the flashing cressets in Vanity Fair have smoked and stunk themselves out, 'They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.' The great things are the Christian things, and there was no greater deed done that day, on this round earth, than when that Jewish wayfarer, travel-stained and insignificant, sat himself down in the place of prayer, and 'spake unto the women which resorted thither.' Do not be over-cowed by the loud talk of the world, but understand that Christian work is the mightiest work that a man can do.

Let us take from this incident a hint as to-

II. The law of growth in Christ's Kingdom.

Here, as I have said, is the thin thread of water at the source. We to-day are on the broad bosom of the expanded stream. Here is the little beginning; the world that we see around us has come from this, and there is a great deal more to be done yet before all the power that was transported into Europe, on that Sabbath morning, has wrought its legitimate effects. That is to say, 'the Kingdom of God cometh not by observation.' Let me say a word, and only a word, based on this incident, about the law of small beginnings and the law of slow, inconspicuous development.

We have here an instance of the law of small, silent beginnings. Let us go back to the highest example of everything that is good; the life of Jesus Christ. A cradle at Bethlehem, a carpenter's shop in Nazareth, thirty years buried in a village, two or three years, at most, going up and down quietly in a remote nook of the earth, and then He passed away silently and the world did not know Him. 'He shall not strive nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets.' And as the Christ so His Church, and so His Gospel, and so all good movements that begin from Him. Destructive preparations may be noisy; they generally are. Constructive beginnings are silent and small. If a thing is launched with a great beating of drums and blowing of trumpets, you may be pretty sure there is very little in it. Drums are hollow, or they would not make such a noise. Trumpets only catch and give forth wind. They say-I know not whether it is true-that the *Wellingtonia gigantea*, the greatest of forest trees, has a smaller seed than any of its congeners. It may be so, at any rate it does for an illustration. The germ-cell is always microscopic. A little beginning is a prophecy of a great ending.

In like manner there is another large principle suggested here which, in these days of impatient haste and rushing to and fro, and religious as well as secular advertising and standing at street corners, we are very apt to forget, but which we need to remember, and that is that the rate of growth is swift when the duration of existence is short. A reed springs up in a night. How long does an oak take before it gets too high for a sheep to crop at? The moth lives its full life in a day. There is no creature that has helpless infancy so long as a man. We have the slow work of mining; the dynamite will be put into the hole one day, and the spark applied- and then? So ‘an inheritance may be gotten hastily at the beginning, but the end thereof shall not be blessed.’

Let us apply that to our own personal life and work, and to the growth of Christianity in the world, and let us not be staggered because either are so slow. ‘The Lord is not slack concerning His promises, as some men count slackness. One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.’ How long will that day be of which a thousand years are but as the morning twilight? Brethren, you have need of patience. You Christian workers, and I hope I am speaking to a great many such now; how long does it take before we can say that we are making any impression at all on the vast masses of evil and sin that are round about us? God waited, nobody knows how many millenniums and more than millenniums, before He had the world ready for man. He waited for more years than we can tell before He had the world ready for the Incarnation. His march is very slow because it is ever onwards. Let us be thankful if we forge ahead the least little bit; and let us not be impatient for swift results which are the fool’s paradise, and which the man who knows that he is working towards God’s own end can well afford to do without.

And now, lastly, let me ask you to notice, still further as drawn from this incident-

III. The simplicity of the forces to which God entrusts the growth of His Kingdom.

It is almost ludicrous to think, if it were not pathetic and sublime, of the disproportion between the end that was aimed at and the way that was taken to reach it, which the text opens before us. ‘We went out to the riverside, and we spake unto the women which resorted thither.’ That was all. Think of Europe as it was at that time. There was Greece over the hills, there was

Rome ubiquitous and ready to exchange its contemptuous toleration for active hostility. There was the unknown barbarism of the vague lands beyond. Think of the established idolatries which these men had to meet, around which had gathered, by the superstitious awe of untold ages, everything that was obstinate, everything that was menacing, everything that was venerable. Think of the subtleties to which they had to oppose their unlettered message. Think of the moral corruption that was eating like an ulcer into the very heart of society. Did ever a Cortez on the beach, with his ships in flames behind him, and a continent in arms before, cast himself on a more desperate venture? And they conquered! How? What were the small stones from the brook that slew Goliath? Have we got them? Here they are, the message that they spoke, the white heat of earnestness with which they spoke it, and the divine Helper who backed them up. And we have this message. Brethren, that old word, ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself,’ is as much needed, as potent, as truly adapted to the complicated civilisation of this generation, as surely reaching the deepest wants of the human soul, as it was in the days when first the message poured, like a red-hot lava flood, from the utterances of Paul. Like lava it has gone cold to-day, and stiff in many places, and all the heat is out of it. That is the fault of the speaker, never of the message. It is as mighty as ever it was, and if the Christian Church would keep more closely to it, and would realise more fully that the Cross does not need to be propped up so much as to be proclaimed, I think we should see that it is so. That sword has not lost its temper, and modern modes of warfare have not antiquated it. As David said to the high priests at Nob, when he was told that Goliath’s sword was hid behind the ephod, ‘Give me that. There is none like it.’ It was not miracles, it was the Gospel that was preached, which was ‘the power of God unto salvation.’

And that message was preached with earnestness. There is one point in which every successful servant of Jesus Christ who has done work for Him, winning men to Him, has been like every other successful servant, and there is only one point. Some of them have been wise men, some of them have been foolish. Some of them have been clad with many puerile notions and much rubbish of ceremonial and sacerdotal theories. Some of them have been high Calvinists, some of them low Arminians; some of them have been scholars, some of them could hardly read. But they have all had this one thing: they believed with all their hearts what they spake. They fulfilled the Horatian principle, ‘If you wish me to weep, your own eyes must overflow’-and if you wish me to believe, you must speak, not ‘with bated breath and whispering humbleness,’ but as if you yourself believed it, and were dead set on getting other people to believe it, too.

And then the third thing that Paul had we have, and that is the presence of the Christ. Note what it says in the context about one convert who was made that morning, Lydia, ‘whose heart the Lord opened.’ Now I am not going to deduce Calvinism or any other ‘ism’ from these words, but I pray you to note that there is emerging on the surface here what runs all through this book of Acts, and animates the whole of it, viz., that Jesus Christ Himself is working, doing all the work that is done through His servants. Wherever there are men aflame with that with which every Christian man and woman should be aflame, the consciousness of the preciousness of their Master, and their own responsibility for the spreading of His Name, there, depend upon it, will be the Christ to aid them. The picture with which one of the Evangelists closes his Gospel will be repeated: ‘They went everywhere preaching the word, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.’

Dear brethren, the vision of the man of Macedonia which drew Paul across the water from Troas to Philippi speaks to us. ‘Come over and help us,’ comes from many voices. And if we, in however humble and obscure, and as the foolish purblind world calls it, ‘small,’ way, yield to the invitation, and try to do what in us lies, then we shall find that, like Paul by the riverside in that oratory, we are building better than we know, and planting a little seed, the springing whereof God will bless. ‘Thou sowest not that which shall be, but bare grain . . . and God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him.’

92)Acts 16:19-29

Acts

THE RIOT AT PHILIPPI

Act. 16:19 - Act. 16:34.

This incident gives us the Apostle’s first experience of purely Gentile opposition. The whole scene has a different stamp from that of former antagonisms, and reminds us that we have passed into Europe. The accusers and the grounds of accusation are new. Formerly Jews had led the attack; now Gentiles do so. Crimes against religion were charged before; now crimes against law and order. Hence the narrative is more extended, in accordance with the prevailing habit of the book, to dilate on the first of a series and to summarise subsequent members of it. We may note the unfounded charge and unjust sentence; the joyful confessors and the answer to their trust; the great light that shone on the jailer’s darkness.

I. This was a rough beginning of the work undertaken at the call of Christ.

Less courageous and faithful men might have thought, ‘Were we right in “assuredly gathering” that His hand pointed us hither, since this is the reception we find?’ But though the wind meets us as soon as we clear the harbour, the salt spray dashing in our faces is no sign that we should not have left shelter. A difficult beginning often means a prosperous course; and hardships are not tokens of having made a mistake.

The root of the first antagonism to the Gospel in Europe was purely mercenary. The pythoness’s masters had no horror of Paul’s doctrines. They were animated by no zeal for Apollo. They only saw a source of profit drying up. Infinitely more respectable was Jewish opposition, which was, at all events, the perverted working of noble sentiments. Zeal for religion, even when the zeal is impure and the notions of religion imperfect, is higher than mere anger at pecuniary loss. How much of the opposition since and to-day comes from the same mean source! Lust and appetite organise profitable trades, in which ‘the money has no smell,’ however foul the cesspool from which it has been brought. And when Christian people set themselves against these abominations, capital takes the command of the mob of drink-sellers and consumers, or of those from haunts of fleshly sin, and shrieks about interfering with honest industry, and seeking to enforce sour-faced Puritanism on society. The Church may be very sure that it is failing in some part of its duty, if there is no class of those who fatten on providing for sin howling at its heels, because it is interfering with the hope of their gains.

The charge against the little group took no heed of the real character of their message. It artfully put prominent their nationality. These early anti-Semitic agitators knew the value of a good solid prejudice, and of a nickname. ‘Jews’-that was enough. The rioters were ‘Romans’-of a sort, no doubt, but it was poor pride for a Macedonian to plume himself on having lost his nationality. The great crime laid to Paul’s charge was-troubling the city. So it always is. Whether it be George Fox, or John Wesley, or the Salvation Army, the disorderly elements of every community attack the preachers of the Gospel in the name of order, and break the peace in their eagerness to have it kept. There was no ‘trouble’ in Philippi, but the uproar which they themselves were making. The quiet praying-place by the riverside, and the silencing of the maiden’s shout in the streets, were not exactly the signs of disturbers of civic tranquillity.

The accuracy of the charge may be measured by the ignorance of the accusers that Paul and his friends were in any way different from the run of Jews. No doubt they were supposed to be teaching Jewish practices, which were supposed to be inconsistent with Roman citizenship. But if the magistrates had said, ‘What customs?’ the charge would have collapsed. Thank God, the Gospel has a witness to bear against many ‘customs’; but it does not begin by attacking even these, much less by prescribing illegalities. Its errand was and is to the individual first. It sets the inner man right with God, and then the new life works itself out, and will war against evils which the old life deemed good; but the conception of Christianity as a code regulating actions is superficial, whether it is held by friends or foes.

There is always a mob ready to follow any leader, especially if there is the prospect of hurting somebody. The lovers of tranquillity showed how they loved it by dragging Paul and Silas into the forum, and bellowing untrue charges against them. The mob seconded them; ‘they rose up together [with the slave-owners] against Paul and Silas.’ The magistrates, knowing the ticklish material that they had to deal with, and seeing only a couple of Jews from nobody knew where, did not think it worth while to inquire or remonstrate. They were either cowed or indifferent; and so, to show how zealous they and the mob were for Roman law, they drove a coach-and-six clean through it, and without the show of investigation, scourged and threw into prison the silent Apostles. It was a specimen of what has happened too often since. How many saints have been martyred to keep popular feeling in good tune! And how many politicians will strain conscience to-day, because they are afraid of what Luke here unpolitely calls ‘the multitude,’ or as we might render it, ‘the mob,’ but which we now fit with a much more respectful appellation!

The jailer, on his part, in the true spirit of small officials, was ready to better his instructions. It is dangerous to give vague directions to such people. When the judge has ordered unlawful scourging, the turnkey is not likely to interpret the requirement of safe keeping too leniently. One would not look for much human kindness in a Philippian jail. So it was natural that the deepest, darkest, most foul-smelling den should he chosen for the two, and that they should he thrust, bleeding backs and all, into the stocks, to sleep if they could.

II. These birds could sing in a darkened cage.

The jailer’s treatment of them after his conversion shows what he had neglected to do at first. They had no food; their bloody backs were unsponged; they were thrust into a filthy hole, and put in a posture of torture. No wonder that they could not sleep! But what hindered sleep would, with most men, have sorely dimmed trust and checked praise. Not so with them. God gave them ‘songs in the night.’ We can hear the strains through all the centuries, and they bid us be cheerful and trustful, whatever befalls. Surely Christian faith never is more noble than when it triumphs over circumstances, and brings praises from lips which, if sense had its way, would wail and groan. ‘This is the victory that overcometh the world.’ The true anaesthetic is trust in God. No wonder that the baser sort of prisoners-and base enough they probably were-’were listening to them,’ for such sounds had never been heard there before. In how many a prison have they been heard since!

We are not told that the Apostles prayed for deliverance. Such deliverance had not been always granted. Peter indeed had been set free, but Stephen and James had been martyred, and these two heroes had no ground to expect a miracle to free them. But thankful trust is always an appeal to God. And it is always answered, whether by deliverance from or support in trial.

This time deliverance came. The tremor of the earth was the token of God’s answer. It does not seem likely that an earthquake could loosen fetters in a jail full of prisoners, but more probably the opening of the doors and the falling off of the chains were due to a separate act of divine power, the earthquake being but the audible token thereof. At all events, here again, the first of a series has distinguishing features, and may stand as type of all its successors. God will never leave trusting hearts to the fury of enemies. He sometimes will stretch out a hand and set them free, He sometimes will leave them to bear the utmost that the world can do, but He will always hear their cry and save them. Paul had learned the lesson which Philippi was meant to teach, when he said, though anticipating a speedy death by martyrdom, ‘The Lord will deliver me from every evil work, and will save me into His heavenly Kingdom.’

III. The jailer behaves as such a man in his position would do.

He apparently slept in a place that commanded a view of the doors; and he lay dressed, with his sword beside him, in case of riot or attempted escape. His first impulse on awaking is to look at the gates. They are open; then some of his charge have broken them. His immediate thought of suicide not only shows the savage severity of punishment which he knew would fall on him, but tells a dreary tale of the desperate sense of the worthlessness of life and blank ignorance of anything beyond which then infected the Roman world. Suicide, the refuge of cowards or of pessimists, sometimes becomes epidemic. Faith must have died and hope vanished before a man can say, ‘I will take the leap into the dark.’

Paul’s words freed the man from one fear, but woke a less selfish and profounder awe. What did all this succession of strange things mean? Here are doors open; how came that? Here are prisoners with the possibility of escape refusing it; how came that? Here is one of his victims tenderly careful of his life and peacefulness, and taking the upper hand of him; how came that? A nameless awe begins to creep over him; and when he gets lights, and sees the two whom he had made fast in the stocks standing there free, and yet not caring to go forth, his rough nature is broken down. He recognises his superiors. He remembers the pythoness's testimony, that they told 'the way of salvation.'

His question seems 'psychologically impossible' to critics, who have probably never asked it themselves. Wonderful results follow from the judicious use of that imposing word 'psychologically'; but while we are not to suppose that this man knew all that 'salvation' meant, there is no improbability in his asking such a question, if due regard is paid to the whole preceding events, beginning with the maiden's words, and including the impression of Paul's personality and the mysterious freeing of the prisoners.

His dread was the natural fear that springs when a man is brought face to face with God; and his question, vague and ignorant as it was, is the cry of the dim consciousness that lies dormant in all men-the consciousness of needing deliverance and healing. It erred in supposing that he had to 'do' anything; but it was absolutely right in supposing that he needed salvation, and that Paul could tell him how to get it. How many of us, knowing far more than he, have never asked the same wise question, or have never gone to Paul for an answer? It is a question which we should all ask; for we all need salvation, which is deliverance from danger and healing for soul-sickness.

Paul's answer is blessedly short and clear. Its brevity and decisive plainness are the glory of the Gospel. It crystallises into a short sentence the essential directory for all men.

See how little it takes to secure salvation. But see how much it takes; for the hardest thing of all is to be content to accept it as a gift, 'without money and without price.' Many people have listened to sermons all their lives, and still have no clear understanding of the way of salvation. Alas that so often the divine simplicity and brevity of Paul's answer are darkened by a multitude of irrelevant words and explanations which explain nothing!

The passage ends with the blessing which we may all receive. Of course the career begun then had to be continued by repeated acts of faith, and by growing knowledge and obedience. The incipient salvation is very incomplete, but very real. There is no reason to doubt that, for some characters, the only way of becoming Christians is to become so by one dead-lift of resolution. Some things are best done slowly; some things best quickly. One swift blow makes a cleaner fracture than filing or sawing. The light comes into some lives like sunshine in northern latitudes, with long dawn and slowly growing brightness; but in some the sun leaps into the sky in a moment, as in the tropics. What matter how long it takes to rise, if it does rise, and climb to the zenith?

93)Acts 16:30-31

Acts

THE RIOT AT PHILIPPI

THE GREAT QUESTION AND THE PLAIN ANSWER

Act. 16:30 - Act. 16:31.

The keeper of a Macedonian jail was not likely to be a very nervous or susceptible person. And so the extraordinary state of agitation and panic into which this rough jailer was cast needs some kind of explanation. There had been, as you will all remember, an earthquake of a strange kind, for it not only opened the prison doors, but shook the prisoner’s chains off. The doors being opened, there was on the part of the jailer, who probably ought not to have been asleep, a very natural fear that his charge had escaped.

So he was ready, with that sad willingness for suicide which marked his age, to cast himself on his sword, when Paul encouraged him.

That fear then was past; what was he afraid of now? He knew the prisoners were all safe; why should he have come pale and trembling? Perhaps we shall find an answer to the question in another one. Why should he have gone to Paul and Silas, his two prisoners, for an anodyne to his fears?

The answer to that may possibly be found in remembering that for many days before this a singular thing had happened. Up and down the streets of Philippi a woman possessed with ‘a spirit of divination’ had gone at the heels of these two men, proclaiming in such a way as to disturb them:

‘These are the servants of the Most High God, which show unto us the way of salvation.’ It was a new word and a new idea in Philippi or in Macedonia. This jailer had got it into his mind that these two men had in their hands a good which he only dimly understood. The panic caused by the earthquake deepened into a consciousness of some supernatural atmosphere about him, and stirred in his rude nature unwonted aspirations and terrors other than he had known, which cast him at Paul’s feet with this strange question.

Now do you think that the jailer’s question was a piece of foolish superstition? I daresay some of you do, or some of you may suppose too that it was one very unnecessary for him or anybody to ask. So I wish now, in a very few words, to deal with these three points-the question that we should all ask, the answer that we may all take, the blessing that we may all have.

I. The question that we should all ask.

I know that it is very unfashionable nowadays to talk about ‘salvation’ as man’s need. The word has come to be so worn and commonplace and technical that many men turn away from it; but for all that, let me try to stir up the consciousness of the deep necessity that it expresses.

What is it to be saved? Two things; to be healed and to be safe. In both aspects the expression is employed over and over again in Scripture. It means either restoration from sickness or deliverance from peril. I venture to press upon every one of my hearers these two considerations-we all need healing from sickness; we all need safety from peril.

Dear brethren, most of you are entire strangers to me; I daresay many of you never heard my voice before, and probably may never hear it again. But yet, because ‘we have all of us one human heart,’ a brother-man comes to you as possessing with you one common experience, and ventures to say on the strength of his knowledge of himself, if on no other ground, ‘We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God.’

Mind, I am not speaking about vices. I have no doubt you are a perfectly respectable man, in all the ordinary relations of life. I am not speaking about crimes. I daresay there may be a man or two here that has been in a dock in his day. Possibly. It does not matter whether there is or not. But I am not speaking about either vices or crimes; I am speaking about how we stand in reference to God. And I pray you to bring yourselves-for no one can do it for you, and no words of mine can do anything but stimulate you to the act-face to face with the absolute and dazzlingly pure righteousness of your Father in Heaven, and to feel the contrast between your life and what you know He desires you to be. Be honest with yourselves in asking and answering the question whether or not *you* have this sickness of sin, its paralysis in regard to good or its fevered inclination to evil. If salvation means being healed of a disease, we all have the disease; and whether we wish it or no, we want the healing.

And what of the other meaning of the word? Salvation means being safe. Are you safe? Am I safe? Is anybody safe standing in front of that awful law that rules the whole universe, 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap'? I am not going to talk about any of the moot points which this generation has such a delight in discussing, as to the nature, the duration, the purpose, or the like, of future retribution. All that I am concerned in now is that all men, deep down in the bottom of their consciousness-and you and I amongst the rest-know that there *is* such a thing as retribution here; and if there be a life beyond the grave at all, necessarily in an infinitely intenser fashion there. Somewhere and somehow, men will have to lie on the beds that they have made; to drink as they have brewed. If sin means separation from God, and separation from God means, as it assuredly does, death, then I ask you-and there is no need for any exaggerated words about it-Are we not in danger? And if salvation be a state of deliverance from sickness, and a state of deliverance from peril, do we not need it?

Ah, brethren, I venture to say that we need it more than anything else. You will not misunderstand me as expressing the slightest depreciation of other remedies that are being extensively offered now for the various evils under which society and individuals groan. I heartily sympathise with them all, and would do my part to help them forward; but I cannot but feel that whilst culture of the intellect, of the taste, of the sense of beauty, of the refining agencies generally, is very valuable; and whilst moral and social and economical and political changes will all do something, and some of them a great deal, to diminish the sum of human misery, you have to go deeper down than these reach. It is not culture that we want most; it is salvation. Brethren, you and I are wrong in our relation to God, and that means death and-if you do not shrink from the vulgar old word-damnation. We are wrong in our relation to God, and that has to be set right before we are fundamentally and thoroughly right. That is to say, salvation is our deepest need.

Then how does it come that men go on, as so many of my friends here now have gone on, all their days paying no attention to that need? Is there any folly, amidst all the irrationalities of that irrational creature man, to be matched with the folly of steadily refusing to look forward and settle for ourselves the prime element in our condition-viz., our relation to God? Strange is it not-that power that we have of refusing to look at the barometer when it is going down, of turning away from unwholesome subjects just because we know them to be so unwelcome and threatening, and of buying a moment's exemption from discomfort at the price of a life's ruin?

Do you remember that old story of the way in which the prisoners in the time of the French Revolution used to behave? The tumbrils came every morning and carried off a file of them to the guillotine, and the rest of them had a ghastly make-believe of carrying on the old frivolities of the life of the *salons* and of society. And it lasted for an hour or two, but the tumbril came next morning all the same, and the guillotine stood there gaping in the *Place*. And so it is useless, although it is so frequently done by so many of us, to try to shut out facts instead of facing them. A man is never so wise as when he says to himself, 'Let me fairly know the whole truth of my relation to the unseen world in so far as it can be known here, and if that is wrong, let me set about rectifying it if it be possible.' 'What will ye do in the end?' is the wisest question that a man can ask himself, when the end is as certain as it is with us, and as unsatisfactory as I am afraid it threatens to be with some of us if we continue as we are.

Have I not a right to appeal to the half-sleeping and half-waking consciousness that endorses my words in some hearts as I speak? O brethren, you would be far wiser men if you did like this jailer in the

Macedonian prison, came and gave yourselves no rest till you have this question cleared up, ‘What must I do to be saved?’

There was an old Rabbi who used to preach to his disciples, ‘Repent the day before you die.’ And when they said to him, ‘Rabbi, we do not know what day we are going to die.’ ‘Then,’ said he, ‘repent to-day.’ And so I say to you, ‘Settle about the end before the end comes, and as you do not know when it may come, settle about it now.’

II. That brings me to the next point here, viz., the blessed, clear answer that we may all take.

Paul and Silas were not non-plussed by this question, nor did they reply to it in the fashion in which many men would have answered it. Take a specimen of other answers. If anybody were so far left to himself as to go with this question to some of our modern wise men and teachers, they would say, ‘Saved? My good fellow, there is nothing to be saved from. Get rid of delusions, and clear your mind of cant and superstition.’ Or they would say, ‘Saved? Well, if you have gone wrong, do the best you can in the time to come.’ Or if you went to some of our friends they would say, ‘Come and be baptized, and receive the grace of regeneration in holy baptism; and then come to the sacraments, and be faithful and loyal members of the Church which has Apostolic succession in it.’ And some would say, ‘Set yourselves to work and toil and labour.’ And some would say, ‘Don’t trouble yourselves about such whims. A short life and a merry one; make the best of it, and jump the life to come.’ Neither cold morality, nor godless philosophy, nor wild dissipation, nor narrow ecclesiasticism prompted Paul’s answer. He said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.’

What did that poor heathen man know about the Lord Jesus Christ? Next to nothing. How could he believe upon Him if he knew so little about Him? Well, you hear in the context that this summary answer to the question was the beginning, and not the end, of a conversation, which conversation, no doubt, consisted largely in extending and explaining the brief formulary with which it had commenced. But it is a grand thing that we can put the all-essential truth into half a dozen simple words, and then expound and explain them as may be necessary. And I come to you now, dear brethren, with nothing newer or more wonderful, or more out of the ordinary way than the old threadbare message which men have been preaching for nineteen hundred years, and have not exhausted, and which some of you have heard for a lifetime, and have never practised, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Now I am not going to weary you with mere dissertations upon the significance of these words. But let me single out two points about them, which perhaps though they may be perfectly familiar to you, may come to you with fresh force from my lips now.

Mark, first, whom it is that we are to believe on. '*The Lord*,' that is the divine Name; '*Jesus*,' that is the name of a Man; '*Christ*,' that is the name of an office. And if you put them all together, they come to this, that He on whom we sinful men may put our sole trust and hope for our healing and our safety, is the Son of God, who came down upon earth to live our life and to die our death that He might bear on Himself our sins, and fulfil all which ancient prophecy and symbol had proclaimed as needful, and therefore certain to be done, for men. It is not a starved half-Saviour whose name is only Jesus, and neither Lord nor Christ, faith in whom will save you. You must grasp the whole revelation of His nature and His power if from Him there is to flow the life that you need.

And note what it is that we are to exercise towards Jesus Christ. To 'believe on Him' is a very different thing from *believing Him*. You may accept all that I have been saying about who and what He is, and be as far away from the faith that saves a soul as if you had never hoard His name. To believe on the Lord Jesus Christ is to lean the whole weight of yourselves upon Him. What do you do when you trust a man who promises you any small gift or advantage? What do you do when dear ones say, 'Rest on my love'? You simply trust them. And the very same exercise of heart and mind which is the blessed cement that holds human society together, and the power that sheds peace and grace over friendships and love, is the power which, directed to Jesus Christ, brings all His saving might into exercise in our lives. Brethren, trust Him, trust Him as Lord, trust Him as Jesus, trust Him as Christ. Learn your sickness, learn your danger; and be sure of your

Healer and rejoice in your security. ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.’

III. Lastly, consider the blessing we may all receive.

This jailer about whom we have been speaking was a heathen when the sun set and a Christian when it rose. On the one day he was groping in darkness, a worshipper of idols, without hope in the future, and ready in desperation to plunge himself into the darkness beyond, when he thought his prisoners had fled. In an hour or two ‘he rejoiced, believing in God with all his house.’

A sudden conversion, you say, and sudden conversions are always suspicious. I am not so sure about that; they may be, or they may not be, according to circumstances. I know very well that it is not fashionable now to preach the possibility or the probability of men turning all at once from darkness to light, and that people shrug their shoulders at the old theory of sudden conversions. I think, so much the worse. There are a great many things in this world that have to be done suddenly if they are ever to be done at all. And I, for my part, would have far more hope for a man who, in one leap, sprung from the depth of the degradation of that coarse jailer into the light and joy of the Christian life, than for a man who tried to get to it by slow steps. You have to do everything in this world worth doing by a sudden resolution, however long the preparation may have been which led up to the resolution. The act of resolving is always the act of an instant. And when men are plunged in darkness and profligacy, as are, perhaps, some of my hearers now, there is far more chance of their casting off their evil by a sudden jerk than of their unwinding the snake by slow degrees from their arms. There is no reason whatever why the soundest and solidest and most lasting transformation of character should not begin in a moment’s resolve.

And there is an immense danger that with some of you, if that change does not begin in a moment’s resolve now, you will be further away from it than ever you were. I have no doubt there are many of you who, at any time for years past, have known that you ought to be Christians, and who, at any time for years past, have been saying to yourselves: ‘Well, I will think about it, and I am tending towards it, but I cannot quite make the plunge.’ Why not; and why not now? You can if you will; you ought; you will be a better and happier man if you do. You will be saved from your sickness and safe from your danger.

The outcast jailer changed nationalities in a moment. You who have dwelt in the suburbs of Christ’s Kingdom all your lives-why cannot you go inside the gate as quickly? For many of us the gradual ‘growing up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord’ has been the appointed way. For some of us I verily believe the sudden change is the best. Some of us have a sunrise as in the tropics, where the one moment is grey and cold, and next moment the seas are lit with the glory. Others of us have a sunrise as at the poles, where a long slowly-growing light precedes the rising, and the rising itself is scarce observable. But it matters little as to how we get to Christ, if we are there, and it matters little whether a man’s faith grows up in a moment, or is the slow product of years. If only it be rooted in Christ it will bear fruit unto life eternal.

And so, dear brethren, I come to you with my last question, this man rejoiced, believing in the Lord; why should not you; and why should not you now? ‘Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.’ A look is a swift act, but if it be the beginning of a lifelong gaze, it will be the beginning of salvation and of a glory longer than life.

94)Acts 16:32-34

Acts

THE RIOT AT PHILIPPI

Act. 16:19 - Act. 16:34.

This incident gives us the Apostle’s first experience of purely Gentile opposition. The whole scene has a different stamp from that of former antagonisms, and reminds us that we have passed into Europe. The accusers and the grounds of accusation are new. Formerly Jews had led the attack; now Gentiles do so. Crimes against religion were charged before; now crimes against law and order. Hence the narrative is more extended, in accordance with the prevailing habit of the book, to dilate on the first of a series and to summarise subsequent members of it. We may note the unfounded charge and unjust sentence; the joyful confessors and the answer to their trust; the great light that shone on the jailer's darkness.

I. This was a rough beginning of the work undertaken at the call of Christ.

Less courageous and faithful men might have thought, 'Were we right in "assuredly gathering" that His hand pointed us hither, since this is the reception we find?' But though the wind meets us as soon as we clear the harbour, the salt spray dashing in our faces is no sign that we should not have left shelter. A difficult beginning often means a prosperous course; and hardships are not tokens of having made a mistake.

The root of the first antagonism to the Gospel in Europe was purely mercenary. The pythoness's masters had no horror of Paul's doctrines. They were animated by no zeal for Apollo. They only saw a source of profit drying up. Infinitely more respectable was Jewish opposition, which was, at all events, the perverted working of noble sentiments. Zeal for religion, even when the zeal is impure and the notions of religion imperfect, is higher than mere anger at pecuniary loss. How much of the opposition since and to-day comes from the same mean source! Lust and appetite organise profitable trades, in which 'the money has no smell,' however foul the cesspool from which it has been brought. And when Christian people set themselves against these abominations, capital takes the command of the mob of drink-sellers and consumers, or of those from haunts of fleshly sin, and shrieks about interfering with honest industry, and seeking to enforce sour-faced Puritanism on society. The Church may be very sure that it is failing in some part of its duty, if there is no class of those who fatten on providing for sin howling at its heels, because it is interfering with the hope of their gains.

The charge against the little group took no heed of the real character of their message. It artfully put prominent their nationality. These early anti-Semitic agitators knew the value of a good solid prejudice, and of a nickname. 'Jews'-that was enough. The rioters were 'Romans'-of a sort, no doubt, but it was poor pride for a Macedonian to plume himself on having lost his nationality. The great crime laid to Paul's charge was-troubling the city. So it always is. Whether it be George Fox, or John Wesley, or the Salvation

Army, the disorderly elements of every community attack the preachers of the Gospel in the name of order, and break the peace in their eagerness to have it kept. There was no ‘trouble’ in Philippi, but the uproar which they themselves were making. The quiet praying-place by the riverside, and the silencing of the maiden’s shout in the streets, were not exactly the signs of disturbers of civic tranquillity.

The accuracy of the charge may be measured by the ignorance of the accusers that Paul and his friends were in any way different from the run of Jews. No doubt they were supposed to be teaching Jewish practices, which were supposed to be inconsistent with Roman citizenship. But if the magistrates had said, ‘What customs?’ the charge would have collapsed. Thank God, the Gospel has a witness to bear against many ‘customs’; but it does not begin by attacking even these, much less by prescribing illegalities. Its errand was and is to the individual first. It sets the inner man right with God, and then the new life works itself out, and will war against evils which the old life deemed good; but the conception of Christianity as a code regulating actions is superficial, whether it is held by friends or foes.

There is always a mob ready to follow any leader, especially if there is the prospect of hurting somebody. The lovers of tranquillity showed how they loved it by dragging Paul and Silas into the forum, and bellowing untrue charges against them. The mob seconded them; ‘they rose up together [with the slave-owners] against Paul and Silas.’ The magistrates, knowing the ticklish material that they had to deal with, and seeing only a couple of Jews from nobody knew where, did not think it worth while to inquire or remonstrate. They were either cowed or indifferent; and so, to show how zealous they and the mob were for Roman law, they drove a coach-and-six clean through it, and without the show of investigation, scourged and threw into prison the silent Apostles. It was a specimen of what has happened too often since. How many saints have been martyred to keep popular feeling in good tune! And how many politicians will strain conscience to-day, because they are afraid of what Luke here unpolitely calls ‘the multitude,’ or as we might render it, ‘the mob,’ but which we now fit with a much more respectful appellation!

The jailer, on his part, in the true spirit of small officials, was ready to better his instructions. It is dangerous to give vague directions to such people. When the judge has ordered unlawful scourging, the turnkey is not likely to interpret the requirement of safe keeping too leniently. One would not look for much human kindness in a Philippian jail. So it was natural that the deepest, darkest, most foul-smelling den should he chosen for the two, and that they should he thrust, bleeding backs and all, into the stocks, to sleep if they could.

II. These birds could sing in a darkened cage.

The jailer's treatment of them after his conversion shows what he had neglected to do at first. They had no food; their bloody backs were unsponged; they were thrust into a filthy hole, and put in a posture of torture. No wonder that they could not sleep! But what hindered sleep would, with most men, have sorely dimmed trust and checked praise. Not so with them. God gave them 'songs in the night.' We can hear the strains through all the centuries, and they bid us be cheerful and trustful, whatever befalls. Surely Christian faith never is more noble than when it triumphs over circumstances, and brings praises from lips which, if sense had its way, would wail and groan. 'This is the victory that overcometh the world.' The true anaesthetic is trust in God. No wonder that the baser sort of prisoners-and base enough they probably were-'were listening to them,' for such sounds had never been heard there before. In how many a prison have they been heard since!

We are not told that the Apostles prayed for deliverance. Such deliverance had not been always granted. Peter indeed had been set free, but Stephen and James had been martyred, and these two heroes had no ground to expect a miracle to free them. But thankful trust is always an appeal to God. And it is always answered, whether by deliverance from or support in trial.

This time deliverance came. The tremor of the earth was the token of God's answer. It does not seem likely that an earthquake could loosen fetters in a jail full of prisoners, but more probably the opening of the doors and the falling off of the chains were due to a separate act of divine power, the earthquake being but the audible token thereof. At all events, here again, the first of a series has distinguishing features, and may stand as type of all its successors. God will never leave trusting hearts to the fury of enemies. He sometimes will stretch out a hand and set them free, He sometimes will leave them to bear the utmost that the world can do, but He will always hear their cry and save them. Paul had learned the lesson which Philippi was meant to teach, when he said, though anticipating a speedy death by martyrdom, 'The Lord will deliver me from every evil work, and will save me into His heavenly Kingdom.'

III. The jailer behaves as such a man in his position would do.

He apparently slept in a place that commanded a view of the doors; and he lay dressed, with his sword beside him, in case of riot or attempted escape. His first impulse on awaking is to look at the gates. They are open; then some of his charge have broken them. His immediate thought of suicide not only shows the savage severity of punishment which he knew would fall on him, but tells a dreary tale of the desperate sense of the worthlessness of life and blank ignorance of anything beyond which then infected the Roman world. Suicide, the refuge of cowards or of pessimists, sometimes becomes epidemic. Faith must have died and hope vanished before a man can say, 'I will take the leap into the dark.'

Paul's words freed the man from one fear, but woke a less selfish and profounder awe. What did all this succession of strange things mean? Here are doors open; how came that? Here are prisoners with the possibility of escape refusing it; how came that? Here is one of his victims tenderly careful of his life and peacefulness, and taking the upper hand of him; how came that? A nameless awe begins to creep over him; and when he gets lights, and sees the two whom he had made fast in the stocks standing there free, and yet not caring to go forth, his rough nature is broken down. He recognises his superiors. He remembers the pythoness's testimony, that they told 'the way of salvation.'

His question seems 'psychologically impossible' to critics, who have probably never asked it themselves. Wonderful results follow from the judicious use of that imposing word 'psychologically'; but while we are not to suppose that this man knew all that 'salvation' meant, there is no improbability in his asking such a question, if due regard is paid to the whole preceding events, beginning with the maiden's words, and including the impression of Paul’s personality and the mysterious freeing of the prisoners.

His dread was the natural fear that springs when a man is brought face to face with God; and his question, vague and ignorant as it was, is the cry of the dim consciousness that lies dormant in all men-the consciousness of needing deliverance and healing. It erred in supposing that he had to ‘do’ anything; but it was absolutely right in supposing that he needed salvation, and that Paul could tell him how to get it. How many of us, knowing far more than he, have never asked the same wise question, or have never gone to Paul for an answer? It is a question which we should all ask; for we all need salvation, which is deliverance from danger and healing for soul-sickness.

Paul’s answer is blessedly short and clear. Its brevity and decisive plainness are the glory of the Gospel. It crystallises into a short sentence the essential directory for all men.

See how little it takes to secure salvation. But see how much it takes; for the hardest thing of all is to be content to accept it as a gift, ‘without money and without price.’ Many people have listened to sermons all their lives, and still have no clear understanding of the way of salvation. Alas that so often the divine simplicity and brevity of Paul’s answer are darkened by a multitude of irrelevant words and explanations which explain nothing!

The passage ends with the blessing which we may all receive. Of course the career begun then had to be continued by repeated acts of faith, and by growing knowledge and obedience. The incipient salvation is very incomplete, but very real. There is no reason to doubt that, for some characters, the only way of becoming Christians is to become so by one dead-lift of resolution. Some things are best done slowly; some things best quickly. One swift blow makes a cleaner fracture than filing or sawing. The light comes into some lives like sunshine in northern latitudes, with long dawn and slowly growing brightness; but in some the sun leaps into the sky in a moment, as in the tropics. What matter how long it takes to rise, if it does rise, and climb to the zenith?

95)Acts 17:1-12

Acts

THESSALONICA AND BEREA

Act. 17:1 - Act. 17:12.

'Shamefully entreated at Philippi,' Paul tells the Thessalonians, he 'waxed bold in our God to' preach to them. His experience in the former city might well have daunted a feebler faith, but opposition affected Paul as little as a passing hailstorm dints a rock. To change the field was common sense; to abandon the work would have been sin. But Paul's brave persistence was not due to his own courage; he drew it from God. Because he lived in communion with Him, his courage 'waxed' as dangers gathered. He knew that he was doing a daring thing, but he knew who was his helper. So he went steadily on, whatever might front him. His temper of mind and the source of it are wonderfully revealed in his simple words.

The transference to Thessalonica illustrates another principle of his action; namely, his preference of great centres of population as fields of work. He passes through two less important places to establish himself in the great city. It is wise to fly at the head. Conquer the cities, and the villages will fall of themselves. That was the policy which carried Christianity through the empire like a prairie fire. Would that later missions had adhered to it!

The methods adopted in Thessalonica were the usual ones. Luke bids us notice that Paul took the same course of action in each place: namely, to go to the synagogue first, when there was one, and there to prove that Jesus was the Christ. The three Macedonian towns already mentioned seem not to have had synagogues. Probably there were comparatively few Jews in them, and these were ecclesiastically dependent on Thessalonica. We can fancy the growing excitement in the synagogue, as for three successive Sabbaths the stranger urged his proofs of the two all-important but most unwelcome assertions, that their own scriptures foretold a suffering Messiah,-a side of Messianic prophecy which was ignored or passionately denied-and that Jesus was that Messiah. Many a vehement protest would be shrieked out, with flashing eyes and abundant gesticulation, as he ‘opened’ the sense of Scripture, and ‘quoted passages’-for that is the meaning here of the word rendered ‘alleging.’ He gives us a glimpse of the hot discussions when he says that he preached ‘in much conflict’ [1Th. 2:2].

With whatever differences in manner of presentation, the true message of the Christian teacher is still the message that woke such opposition in the synagogue of Thessalonica,-the bold proclamation of the personal Christ, His death and resurrection. And with whatever differences, the instrument of conviction is still the Scriptures, ‘the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.’ The more closely we keep ourselves to that message and that weapon the better.

The effects of the faithful preaching of the gospel are as uniform as the method. It does one of two things to its hearers-either it melts their hearts and leads them to faith, or it stirs them to more violent enmity. It is either a stone of stumbling or a sure corner-stone. We either build on or fall over it, and at last are crushed by it. The converts included Jews and proselytes in larger numbers, as may be gathered from the distinction drawn by ‘some’-referring to the former, and ‘a great multitude’-referring to the latter. Besides these there were a good many ladies of rank and refinement, as was also the case presently at Beroea. Probably these, too, were proselytes.

The prominence of women among the converts, as soon as the gospel is brought into Europe, is interesting and prophetic. The fact of the social position of these ladies may suggest that the upper classes were freer from superstition than the lower, and may point a not favourable contrast with present social conditions, which do not result in a similar accession of women of ‘honourable estate’ to the Church.

Opposition follows as uniform a course as the preaching. The broad outlines are the same in each case, while the local colouring varies. If we compare Paul’s narrative in I Thessalonians, which throbs with emotion, and, as it were, pants with the stress of the conflict, with Luke’s calm account here, we see not only how Paul felt, but why the Jews got up a riot. Luke says that they ‘became jealous.’ Paul expands that into ‘they are contrary to all men; forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved.’ Then it was not so much dislike to the preaching of Jesus as Messiah as it was rage that their Jewish prerogative was infringed, and the children's bread offered to the dogs, that stung them to violent opposition. Israel had been chosen, that it might be God's witness, and diffuse the treasure it possessed through all the world. It had become, not the dispenser, but the would-be monopolist, of its gift. Have there been no Christian communities in later days animated by the same spirit?

There were plenty of loafers in the market-place ready for any mischief, and by no means particular about the pretext for a riot. Anything that would give an opportunity for hurting somebody, and for loot, would attract them as corruption does flesh-flies. So the Jewish ringleaders easily got a crowd together. To tell their real reasons would scarcely have done, but to say that there was a house to be attacked, and some foreigners to be dragged out, was enough for the present. Jason's house was probably Paul's temporary home, where, as he tells us in 1Th. 2:9, he had worked at his trade, that he might not be burdensome to any. Possibly he and Silas had been warned of the approach of the rioters and had got away elsewhere. At all events, the nest was empty, but the crowd must have its victims, and so, failing Paul, they laid hold of Jason. His offence was a very shadowy one. But since his day there have been many martyrs, whose only crime was 'harbouring' Christians, or heretics, or recusant priests, or Covenanters. If a bull cannot gore a man, it will toss his cloak.

The charge against Jason is that he receives the Apostle and his party, and constructively favours their designs. The charge against them is that they are revolutionists, rebels against the Emperor, and partisans of a rival. Now we may note three things about the charge. First, it comes with a very distinct taint of insincerity from Jews, who were, to say the least, not remarkable for loyalty or peaceful obedience. The Gracchi are complaining of sedition! A Jew zealous for Caeesar is an anomaly, which might excite the suspicions of the least suspicious ruler. The charge of breaking the peace comes with remarkable appropriateness from the leaders of a riot. They were the troublers of the city, not Paul, peacefully preaching in the synagogue. The wolf scolds the lamb for fouling the river.

Again, the charges are a violent distortion of the truth. Possibly the Jewish ringleaders believed what they said, but more probably they consciously twisted Paul’s teachings, because they knew that no other charges would excite so much hostility or be so damning as those which they made. The mere suggestion of treason was often fatal. The wild exaggeration that the Christians had ‘turned the whole civilised world upside down’ betrays passionate hatred and alarm, if it was genuine, or crafty determination to rouse the mob, if it was consciously trumped up. But whether the charges were believed or not by those who made them, here were Jews disclaiming their nation’s dearest hope, and, like the yelling crowd at the Crucifixion, declaring they had no king but Caesar. The degradation of Israel was completed by these fanatical upholders of its prerogatives.

But, again, the charges were true in a far other sense than their bringers meant. For Christianity is revolutionary, and its very aim is to turn the world upside down, since the wrong side is uppermost at present, and Jesus, not Caesar, or any king or emperor or czar, is the true Lord and ruler of men. But the revolution which He makes is the revolution of individuals, turning them from darkness to light; for He moulds single souls first and society afterwards. Violence is always a mistake, and the only way to change evil customs is to change men’s natures, and then the customs drop away of themselves. The true rule begins with the sway of hearts; then wills are submissive, and conduct is the expression of inward delight in a law which is sweet because the lawgiver is dear.

Missing Paul, the mob fell on Jason and the brethren. They were ‘bound over to keep the peace.’ Evidently the rulers had little fear of these alleged desperate revolutionaries, and did as little as they dared, without incurring the reproach of being tepid in their loyalty.

Probably the removal of Paul and his travelling companions from the neighbourhood was included in the terms to which Jason had to submit. Their hurried departure does not seem to have been caused by a renewal of disturbances. At all events, their Beroean experience repeated that of Philippi and of Thessalonica, with one great and welcome difference. The Beroean Jews did exactly what their compatriots elsewhere would not do-they looked into the subject with their own eyes, and tested Paul’s assertions by Scripture. ‘Therefore,’ says Luke, with grand confidence in the impregnable foundations of the faith, ‘many of them believed.’ True nobility of soul consists in willingness to receive the Word, combined with diligent testing of it. Christ asks for no blind adhesion. The true Christian teacher wishes for no renunciation, on the part of his hearers, of their own judgments. ‘Open your mouth and shut your eyes, and swallow what I give you,’ is not the language of Christianity, though it has sometimes been the demand of its professed missionaries, and not the teacher only, but the taught also, have been but too ready to exercise blind credulity instead of intelligent examination and clear-eyed faith. If professing Christians to-day were better acquainted with the Scriptures, and more in the habit of bringing every new doctrine to them as its touchstone, there would be less currency of errors and firmer grip of truth.

96)Acts 17:22-30

Acts

PAUL AT ATHENS

Act. 17:22 - Act. 17:34.

‘I am become all things to all men,’ said Paul, and his address at Athens strikingly exemplifies that principle of his action. Contrast it with his speech in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, which appeals entirely to the Old Testament, and is saturated with Jewish ideas, or with the remonstrance to the rude Lycaonian peasants [Act. 14:15, etc.], which, while handling some of the same thoughts as at Athens, does so in a remarkably different manner. There he appealed to God’s gifts of ‘rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons,’ the things most close to his hearers’ experience; here, speaking to educated ‘philosophers,’ he quotes Greek poetry, and sets forth a reasoned declaration of the nature of the Godhead and the relations of a philosophy of history and an argument against idolatry. The glories of Greek art were around him; the statues of Pallas Athene and many more fair creations looked down on the little Jew who dared to proclaim their nullity as representations of the Godhead.

Paul’s flexibility of mind and power of adapting himself to every circumstance were never more strikingly shown than in that great address to the quick-witted Athenians. It falls into three parts: the conciliatory prelude [Act. 17:22 - Act. 17:23]; the declaration of the Unknown God [Act. 17:24 - Act. 17:29]; and the proclamation of the God-ordained Man [Act. 17:30 - Act. 17:31].

I. We have, first, the conciliatory prelude.

It is always a mistake for the apostle of a new truth to begin by running a tilt at old errors. It is common sense to seek to find some point in the present beliefs of his hearers to which his message may attach itself. An orator who flatters for the sake of securing favour for himself is despicable; a missionary who recognises the truth which lies under the system which he seeks to overthrow, is wise.

It is incredible that Paul should have begun his speech to so critical an audience by charging them with excessive superstition, as the Authorised Version makes him do. Nor does the modified translation of the Revised Version seem to be precisely what is meant. Paul is not blaming the Athenians, but recording a fact which he had noticed, and from which he desired to start. Ramsay's translation gives the truer notion of his meaning-'more than others respectful of what is divine.' 'Superstition' necessarily conveys a sense of blame, but the word in the original does not.

We can see Paul as a stranger wandering through the city, and noting with keen eyes every token of the all-pervading idolatry. He does not tell his hearers that his spirit burned within him when he saw the city full of idols; but he smothers all that, and speaks only of the inscription which he had noticed on one, probably obscure and forgotten, altar: 'To the Unknown God.' Scholars have given themselves a great deal of trouble to show from other authors that there were such altars. But Paul is as good an 'authority' as these, and we may take his word that he did see such an inscription. Whether it had the full significance which he reads into it or not, it crystallised in an express avowal that sense of Something behind and above the 'gods many' of Greek religion, which found expression in the words of their noblest thinkers and poets, and lay like a nightmare on them.

To charge an Athenian audience, proud of their knowledge, with ignorance, was a hazardous and audacious undertaking; to make them charge themselves was more than an oratorical device. It appealed to the deepest consciousness even of the popular mind. Even with this prelude, the claims of this wandering Jew to pose as the instructor of Epicureans and Stoics, and to possess a knowledge of the Divine which they lacked, were daring. But how calmly and confidently Paul makes them, and with what easy and conciliatory adoption of their own terminology, if we adopt the reading of Act. 17:23 in Revised Version [‘What ye worship . . . this,’ etc.], which puts forward the abstract conception of divinity rather than the personal God.

The spirit in which Paul approached his difficult audience teaches all Christian missionaries and controversialists a needed and neglected lesson. We should accentuate points of resemblance rather than of difference, to begin with. We should not run a tilt against even errors, and so provoke to their defence, but rather find in creeds and practices an ignorant groping after, and so a door of entrance for, the truth which we seek to recommend.

II. The declaration of the Unknown God has been prepared for, and now follows, and with it is bound up a polemic against idolatry.

Conciliation is not to be carried so far as to hide the antagonism between the truth and error. We may give non-Christian systems of religion credit for all the good in them, but we are not to blink their contrariety to the true religion. Conciliation and controversy are both needful; and he is the best Christian teacher who has mastered the secret of the due proportion between them.

Every word of Paul’s proclamation strikes full and square at some counter belief of his hearers. He begins with creation, which he declares to have been the act of one personal God, and neither of a multitude of deities, as some of his hearers held, nor of an impersonal blind power, as others believed, nor the result of chance, nor eternal, as others maintained. He boldly proclaims there, below the shadow of the Parthenon, that there is but one God,-the universal Lord, because the universal Creator. Many consequences from that fact, no doubt, crowded into Paul’s mind; but he swiftly turns to its bearing on the pomp of temples which were the glory of Athens, and the multitude of sacrifices which he had beheld on their altars. The true conception of God as the Creator and Lord of all things cuts up by the roots the pagan notions of temples as dwelling-places of a god and of sacrifices as ministering to his needs. With one crushing blow Paul pulverises the fair fanes around him, and declares that sacrifice, as practised there, contradicted the plain truth as to God's nature. To suppose that man can give anything to Him, or that He needs anything, is absurd. All heathen worship reverses the parts of God and man, and loses sight of the fact that He is the giver continually and of everything. Life in its origination, the continuance thereof [breath], and all which enriches it, are from Him. Then true worship will not be giving to, but thankfully accepting from and using for, Him, His manifold gifts.

So Paul declares the one God as Creator and Sustainer of all. He goes on to sketch in broad outline what we may call a philosophy of history. The declaration of the unity of mankind was a wholly strange message to proud Athenians, who believed themselves to be a race apart, not only from the 'barbarians,' whom all Greeks regarded as made of other clay than they, but from the rest of the Greek world. It flatly contradicted one of their most cherished prerogatives. Not only does Paul claim one origin for all men, but he regards all nations as equally cared for by the one God. His hearers believed that each people had its own patron deities, and that the wars of nations were the wars of their gods, who won for them territory, and presided over their national fortunes. To all that way of thinking the Apostle opposes the conception, which naturally follows from his fundamental declaration of the one Creator, of His providential guidance of all nations in regard to their place in the world and the epochs of their history.

But he rises still higher when he declares the divine purpose in all the tangled web of history-the variety of conditions of nations, their rise and fall, their glory and decay, their planting in their lands and their rooting out,-to be to lead all men to 'seek God.' That is the deepest meaning of history. The whole course of human affairs is God's drawing men to Himself. Not only in Judea, nor only by special revelation, but by the gifts bestowed, and the schooling brought to bear on every nation, He would stir men up to seek for Him.

But that great purpose has not been realised. There is a tragic 'if haply' inevitable; and men may refuse to yield to the impulses towards God. They are the more likely to do so, inasmuch as to find Him they must 'feel after

Him,' and that is hard. The tendrils of a plant turn to the far-off light, but men's spirits do not thus grope after God. Something has come in the way which frustrates the divine purpose, and makes men blind and unwilling to seek Him.

Paul docs not at once draw the two plain inferences, that there must be something more than the nations have had, if they are to find God, even His seeking them in some new fashion; and that the power which neutralises God's design in creation and providence is sin. He has a word to say about both these, but for the moment he contents himself with pointing to the fact, attested by his hearers' consciousness, and by many a saying of thinkers and poets, that the failure to find God does not arise from His hiding Himself in some remote obscurity. Men are plunged, as it were, in the ocean of God, encompassed by Him as an atmosphere, and-highest thought of all, and not strange to Greek thought of the nobler sort-kindred with Him as both drawing life from Him and being in His image. Whence, then, but from their own fault, could men have failed to find God? If He is 'unknown,' it is not because He has shrouded Himself in darkness, but because they do not love the light. One swift glance at the folly of idolatry, as demonstrated by this thought of man's being the offspring of God, leads naturally to the properly Christian conclusion of the address.

III. It is probable that this part of it was prematurely ended by the mockery of some and the impatience of others, who had had enough of Paul and his talk, and who, when they said, 'We will hear thee again,' meant, 'We will not hear you now.' But, even in the compass permitted him, he gives much of his message.

We can but briefly note the course of thought. He comes back to his former word 'ignorance,' bitter pill as it was for the Athenian cultured class to swallow. He has shown them how their religion ignores or contradicts the true conceptions of God and man. But he no sooner brings the charge than he proclaims God's forbearance. And he no sooner proclaims God's forbearance than he rises to the full height of his mission as God's ambassador, and speaks in authoritative tones, as bearing His 'commands.'

Now the hint in the previous part is made more plain. The demand for repentance implies sin. Then the 'ignorance' was not inevitable or innocent.

There was an element of guilt in men's not feeling after God, and sin is universal, for 'all men everywhere' are summoned to repent. Philosophers and artists, and cultivated triflers, and sincere worshippers of Pallas and Zeus, and all 'barbarian' people, are alike here. That would grate on Athenian pride, as it grates now on ours. The reason for repentance would be as strange to the hearers as the command was-a universal judgment, of which the principle was to be rigid righteousness, and the Judge, not Minos or Rhadamanthus, but 'a Man' ordained for that function.

What raving nonsense that would appear to men who had largely lost the belief in a life beyond the grave! The universal Judge a man! No wonder that the quick Athenian sense of the ridiculous began to rise against this Jew fanatic, bringing his dreams among cultured people like them! And the proof which he alleged as evidence to all men that it is so, would sound even more ridiculous than the assertion meant to be proved. 'A man has been raised from the dead; and this anonymous Man, whom nobody ever heard of before, and who is no doubt one of the speaker's countrymen, is to judge us, Stoics, Epicureans, polished people, and we are to be herded to His bar in company with Boeotians and barbarians! The man is mad.'

So the assembly broke up in inextinguishable laughter, and Paul silently 'departed from among them,' having never named the name of Jesus to them. He never more earnestly tried to adapt his teaching to his audience; he never was more unsuccessful in his attempt by all means to gain some. Was it a remembrance of that scene in Athens that made him write to the Corinthians that his message was 'to the Greeks foolishness'?

97)Acts 17:31

Acts

PAUL AT ATHENS

THE MAN WHO IS JUDGE

Act. 17:31.

I. The Resurrection of Jesus gives assurance of judgment.

[*a*] Christ’s Resurrection is the pledge of ours.

The belief in a future life, as entertained by Paul’s hearers on Mars Hill, was shadowy and dashed with much unbelief. Disembodied spirits wandered ghostlike and spectral in a shadowy underworld.

The belief in the Resurrection of Jesus converts the Greek peradventure into a fact. It gives that belief solidity and makes it easier to grasp firmly. Unless the thought of a future life is completed by the belief that it is a corporeal life, it will never have definiteness and reality enough to sustain itself as a counterpoise to the weight of things seen.

[*b*] Resurrection implies judgment.

A future bodily life affirms individual identity as persisting beyond the accident of death, and can only be conceived of as a state in which the earthly life is fully developed in its individual results. The dead, who are raised, are raised that they may ‘receive the things done in the body, according to that they have done, whether it be good or bad.’ Historically, the two thoughts have always gone together; and as has been the clearness with which a resurrection has been held as certain, so has been the force with which the anticipation of judgment to come has impinged on conscience.

Jesus is, even in this respect, our Example, for the glory to which He was raised and in which He reigns now is the issue of His earthly life; and in His Resurrection and Ascension we have the historical fact which certifies to all men that a life of self-sacrifice here will assuredly flower into a life of glory there, ‘Ours the Cross, the grave, the skies.’

II. The Resurrection of Jesus gives the assurance that He is Judge.

The bare fact that He is risen does not carry that assurance; we have to take into account that He has risen.

After such a life.

His Resurrection was God’s setting the seal of His approval and acceptance on Christ’s work; His endorsement of Christ’s claims to special relations with Him; His affirmation of Christ’s sinlessness. Jesus had declared that He did always the things that pleased the Father; had claimed to be the pure and perfect realisation of the divine ideal of manhood; had presented Himself as the legitimate object of utter devotion and of religious trust, love, and obedience, and as the only way to God. Men said that He was a blasphemer; God said, and said most emphatically, by raising Him from the dead: ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’

With such a sequel.

‘Christ being raised from the dead, dieth no more,’ and that fact sets Him apart from others who, according to Scripture, have been raised. His resurrection is, if we may use such a figure, a point; His Ascension and Session at the right hand of God are the line into which the point is prolonged. And from both the point and the line come the assurance that He is the Judge.

III. The risen Jesus is Judge because He is Man.

That seems a paradox. It is a commonplace that we are incompetent to judge another, for human eyes cannot read the secrets of a human heart, and we can only surmise, not know, each other’s motives, which are the all-important part of our deeds. But when we rightly understand Christ’s human nature, we understand how fitted He is to be our Judge, and how blessed it is to think of Him as such. Paul tells the Athenians with deep significance that He who is to be their and the world’s Judge is ‘the Man.’ He sums up human nature in Himself, He is the ideal and the real Man.

And further, Paul tells his hearers that God judges ‘through’ Him, and does so ‘in righteousness.’ He is fitted to be our Judge, because He perfectly and completely bears our nature, knows by experience all its weaknesses and windings, as from the inside, so to speak, and is ‘wondrous kind’ with the kindness which ‘fellow-feeling’ enkindles. He knows us with the knowledge of a God; He knows us with the sympathy of a brother.

The Man who has died for all men thereby becomes the Judge of all. Even in this life, Jesus and His Cross judge us. Our disposition towards Him is the test of our whole character. By their attitude to Him, the thoughts of many hearts are revealed. ‘What think ye of Christ?’ is the question, the answer to which determines our fate, because it reveals our inmost selves and their capacities for receiving blessing or harm from God and His mercy. Jesus Himself has taught us that ‘in that day’ the condition of entrance into the Kingdom is ‘doing the will of My Father which is in heaven.’ He has also taught us that ‘this is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.’ Faith in Jesus as our Saviour is the root from which will grow the good tree which will bring forth good fruit, bearing which our love will be ‘made perfect, that we may have boldness before Him in the day of judgment.’

98)Acts 17:32-34

Acts

PAUL AT ATHENS

Act. 17:22 - Act. 17:34.

‘I am become all things to all men,’ said Paul, and his address at Athens strikingly exemplifies that principle of his action. Contrast it with his speech in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, which appeals entirely to the Old Testament, and is saturated with Jewish ideas, or with the remonstrance to the rude Lycaonian peasants [Act. 14:15, etc.], which, while handling some of the same thoughts as at Athens, does so in a remarkably different manner. There he appealed to God’s gifts of ‘rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons,’ the things most close to his hearers’ experience; here, speaking to educated ‘philosophers,’ he quotes Greek poetry, and sets forth a reasoned declaration of the nature of the Godhead and the relations of a philosophy of history and an argument against idolatry. The glories of Greek art were around him; the statues of Pallas Athene and many more fair creations looked down on the little Jew who dared to proclaim their nullity as representations of the Godhead.

Paul’s flexibility of mind and power of adapting himself to every circumstance were never more strikingly shown than in that great address to the quick-witted Athenians. It falls into three parts: the conciliatory prelude [Act. 17:22 - Act. 17:23]; the declaration of the Unknown God [Act. 17:24 - Act. 17:29]; and the proclamation of the God-ordained Man [Act. 17:30 - Act. 17:31].

I. We have, first, the conciliatory prelude.

It is always a mistake for the apostle of a new truth to begin by running a tilt at old errors. It is common sense to seek to find some point in the present beliefs of his hearers to which his message may attach itself. An orator who flatters for the sake of securing favour for himself is despicable; a missionary who recognises the truth which lies under the system which he seeks to overthrow, is wise.

It is incredible that Paul should have begun his speech to so critical an audience by charging them with excessive superstition, as the Authorised Version makes him do. Nor does the modified translation of the Revised Version seem to be precisely what is meant. Paul is not blaming the Athenians, but recording a fact which he had noticed, and from which he desired to start. Ramsay’s translation gives the truer notion of his meaning-’more than others respectful of what is divine.’ ‘Superstition’ necessarily conveys a sense of blame, but the word in the original does not.

We can see Paul as a stranger wandering through the city, and noting with keen eyes every token of the all-pervading idolatry. He does not tell his hearers that his spirit burned within him when he saw the city full of idols; but he smothers all that, and speaks only of the inscription which he had noticed on one, probably obscure and forgotten, altar: ‘To the Unknown God.’ Scholars have given themselves a great deal of trouble to show from other authors that there were such altars. But Paul is as good an ‘authority’ as these, and we may take his word that he did see such an inscription. Whether it had the full significance which he reads into it or not, it crystallised in an express avowal that sense of Something behind and above the ‘gods many’ of Greek religion, which found expression in the words of their noblest thinkers and poets, and lay like a nightmare on them.

To charge an Athenian audience, proud of their knowledge, with ignorance, was a hazardous and audacious undertaking; to make them charge themselves was more than an oratorical device. It appealed to the deepest consciousness even of the popular mind. Even with this prelude, the claims of this wandering Jew to pose as the instructor of Epicureans and Stoics, and to possess a knowledge of the Divine which they lacked, were daring. But how calmly and confidently Paul makes them, and with what easy and conciliatory adoption of their own terminology, if we adopt the reading of Act. 17:23 in Revised Version [‘What ye worship . . . this,’ etc.], which puts forward the abstract conception of divinity rather than the personal God.

The spirit in which Paul approached his difficult audience teaches all Christian missionaries and controversialists a needed and neglected lesson. We should accentuate points of resemblance rather than of difference, to begin with. We should not run a tilt against even errors, and so provoke to their defence, but rather find in creeds and practices an ignorant groping after, and so a door of entrance for, the truth which we seek to recommend.

II. The declaration of the Unknown God has been prepared for, and now follows, and with it is bound up a polemic against idolatry.

Conciliation is not to be carried so far as to hide the antagonism between the truth and error. We may give non-Christian systems of religion credit for all the good in them, but we are not to blink their contrariety to the true religion. Conciliation and controversy are both needful; and he is the best Christian teacher who has mastered the secret of the due proportion between them.

Every word of Paul’s proclamation strikes full and square at some counter belief of his hearers. He begins with creation, which he declares to have been the act of one personal God, and neither of a multitude of deities, as some of his hearers held, nor of an impersonal blind power, as others believed, nor the result of chance, nor eternal, as others maintained. He boldly proclaims there, below the shadow of the Parthenon, that there is but one God,-the universal Lord, because the universal Creator. Many consequences from that fact, no doubt, crowded into Paul's mind; but he swiftly turns to its bearing on the pomp of temples which were the glory of Athens, and the multitude of sacrifices which he had beheld on their altars. The true conception of God as the Creator and Lord of all things cuts up by the roots the pagan notions of temples as dwelling-places of a god and of sacrifices as ministering to his needs. With one crushing blow Paul pulverises the fair fanes around him, and declares that sacrifice, as practised there, contradicted the plain truth as to God's nature. To suppose that man can give anything to Him, or that He needs anything, is absurd. All heathen worship reverses the parts of God and man, and loses sight of the fact that He is the giver continually and of everything. Life in its origination, the continuance thereof [breath], and all which enriches it, are from Him. Then true worship will not be giving to, but thankfully accepting from and using for, Him, His manifold gifts.

So Paul declares the one God as Creator and Sustainer of all. He goes on to sketch in broad outline what we may call a philosophy of history. The declaration of the unity of mankind was a wholly strange message to proud Athenians, who believed themselves to be a race apart, not only from the 'barbarians,' whom all Greeks regarded as made of other clay than they, but from the rest of the Greek world. It flatly contradicted one of their most cherished prerogatives. Not only does Paul claim one origin for all men, but he regards all nations as equally cared for by the one God. His hearers believed that each people had its own patron deities, and that the wars of nations were the wars of their gods, who won for them territory, and presided over their national fortunes. To all that way of thinking the Apostle opposes the conception, which naturally follows from his fundamental declaration of the one Creator, of His providential guidance of all nations in regard to their place in the world and the epochs of their history.

But he rises still higher when he declares the divine purpose in all the tangled web of history-the variety of conditions of nations, their rise and fall, their glory and decay, their planting in their lands and their rooting out,-to be to lead all men to 'seek God.' That is the deepest meaning of history. The whole course of human affairs is God's drawing men to Himself. Not only in Judea, nor only by special revelation, but by the gifts bestowed, and the schooling brought to bear on every nation, He would stir men up to seek for Him.

But that great purpose has not been realised. There is a tragic ‘if haply’ inevitable; and men may refuse to yield to the impulses towards God. They are the more likely to do so, inasmuch as to find Him they must ‘feel after Him,’ and that is hard. The tendrils of a plant turn to the far-off light, but men’s spirits do not thus grope after God. Something has come in the way which frustrates the divine purpose, and makes men blind and unwilling to seek Him.

Paul docs not at once draw the two plain inferences, that there must be something more than the nations have had, if they are to find God, even His seeking them in some new fashion; and that the power which neutralises God’s design in creation and providence is sin. He has a word to say about both these, but for the moment he contents himself with pointing to the fact, attested by his hearers’ consciousness, and by many a saying of thinkers and poets, that the failure to find God does not arise from His hiding Himself in some remote obscurity. Men are plunged, as it were, in the ocean of God, encompassed by Him as an atmosphere, and-highest thought of all, and not strange to Greek thought of the nobler sort-kindred with Him as both drawing life from Him and being in His image. Whence, then, but from their own fault, could men have failed to find God? If He is ‘unknown,’ it is not because He has shrouded Himself in darkness, but because they do not love the light. One swift glance at the folly of idolatry, as demonstrated by this thought of man’s being the offspring of God, leads naturally to the properly Christian conclusion of the address.

III. It is probable that this part of it was prematurely ended by the mockery of some and the impatience of others, who had had enough of Paul and his talk, and who, when they said, ‘We will hear thee again,’ meant, ‘We will not hear you now.’ But, even in the compass permitted him, he gives much of his message.

We can but briefly note the course of thought. He comes back to his former word ‘ignorance,’ bitter pill as it was for the Athenian cultured class to swallow. He has shown them how their religion ignores or contradicts the true conceptions of God and man. But he no sooner brings the charge than he proclaims God’s forbearance. And he no sooner proclaims God’s forbearance than he rises to the full height of his mission as God’s ambassador, and speaks in authoritative tones, as bearing His ‘commands.’

Now the hint in the previous part is made more plain. The demand for repentance implies sin. Then the ‘ignorance’ was not inevitable or innocent. There was an element of guilt in men’s not feeling after God, and sin is universal, for ‘all men everywhere’ are summoned to repent. Philosophers and artists, and cultivated triflers, and sincere worshippers of Pallas and Zeus, and all ‘barbarian’ people, are alike here. That would grate on Athenian pride, as it grates now on ours. The reason for repentance would be as strange to the hearers as the command was-a universal judgment, of which the principle was to be rigid righteousness, and the Judge, not Minos or Rhadamanthus, but ‘a Man’ ordained for that function.

What raving nonsense that would appear to men who had largely lost the belief in a life beyond the grave! The universal Judge a man! No wonder that the quick Athenian sense of the ridiculous began to rise against this Jew fanatic, bringing his dreams among cultured people like them! And the proof which he alleged as evidence to all men that it is so, would sound even more ridiculous than the assertion meant to be proved. ‘A man has been raised from the dead; and this anonymous Man, whom nobody ever heard of before, and who is no doubt one of the speaker’s countrymen, is to judge us, Stoics, Epicureans, polished people, and we are to be herded to His bar in company with Boeotians and barbarians! The man is mad.’

So the assembly broke up in inextinguishable laughter, and Paul silently ‘departed from among them,’ having never named the name of Jesus to them. He never more earnestly tried to adapt his teaching to his audience; he never was more unsuccessful in his attempt by all means to gain some. Was it a remembrance of that scene in Athens that made him write to the Corinthians that his message was ‘to the Greeks foolishness’?

99)Acts 18:1-4

PAUL AT CORINTH

Act. 18:1 - Act. 18:11.

Solitude is a hard trial for sensitive natures, and tends to weaken their power of work. Paul was entirely alone in Athens, and appears to have cut his stay there short, since his two companions, who were to have joined him in that city, did not do so till after he had been some time in Corinth. His long stay there has several well-marked stages, which yield valuable lessons.

I. First, we note the solitary Apostle, seeking friends, toiling for bread, and withal preaching Christ.

Corinth was a centre of commerce, of wealth, and of moral corruption. The celebrated local worship of Aphrodite fed the corruption as well as the wealth. The Apostle met there with a new phase of Greek life, no less formidable in antagonism to the Gospel than the culture of Athens. He tells us that he entered on his work in Corinth 'in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling,' but also that he did not try to attract by adaptation of his words to the prevailing tastes either of Greek or Jew, but preached 'Jesus Christ, and Him crucified,' knowing that, while that appeared to go right in the teeth of the demands of both, it really met their wants. This ministry was begun, in his usual fashion, very unobtrusively and quietly. His first care was to find a home; his second, to provide his daily bread; and then he was free to take the Sabbath for Christian work in the synagogue.

We cannot tell whether he had had any previous acquaintance with Aquila and his wife, nor indeed is it certain that they had previously been Christians. Paul's reason for living with them was simply the convenience of getting work at his trade, and it seems probable that, if they had been disciples, that fact would have been named as part of his reason. Pontus lay to the north of Cilicia, and though widely separated from it, was near enough to make a kind of bond as of fellow-countrymen, which would be the stronger because they had the same craft at their finger-ends.

It was the wholesome practice for every Rabbi to learn some trade. If all graduates had to do the same now there would be fewer educated idlers, who are dangerous to society and burdens to themselves and their friends. What a curl of contempt would have lifted the lips of the rich men of Corinth if they had been told that the greatest man in their city was that little Jew tent-maker, and that in this unostentatious fashion he had begun to preach truths which would be like a charge of dynamite to all their social and religious order! True zeal can be patiently silent.

Sewing rough goat's-hair cloth into tents may be as truly serving Christ as preaching His name. All manner of work that contributes to the same end is the same in worth and in recompense. Perhaps the wholesomest form of Christian ministry is that after the Apostolic pattern, when the teacher can say, as Paul did to the people of Corinth, 'When I was present with you and was in want, I was not a burden on any man.' If not in letter, at any rate in spirit, his example must be followed. If the preacher would win souls he must be free from any taint of suspicion as to money.

II. The second stage in Paul's Corinthian residence is the increased activity when his friends, Silas and Timothy, came from Beroea.

We learn from Php. 4:15, and 2Co. 11:9, that they brought gifts from the Church at Philippi; and from 1Th. 3:6, that they brought something still more gladdening namely, good accounts of the steadfastness of the Thessalonian converts. The money would make it less necessary to spend most of the week in manual labour; the glad tidings of the Thessalonians' 'faith and love' did bring fresh life, and the presence of his helpers would cheer him. So a period of enlarged activity followed their coming.

The reading of Act. 18:5, 'Paul was constrained by the word,' brings out strikingly the Christian impulse which makes speech of the Gospel a necessity. The force of that impulse may vary, as it did with Paul; but if we have any deep possession of the grace of God for ourselves, we shall, like him, feel it pressing us for utterance, as soon as the need of providing daily bread becomes less stringent and our hearts are gladdened by Christian communion. It augurs ill for a man's hold of the word if the word does not hold him. He who never felt that he was weary of forbearing, and that the word was like a fire, if it was 'shut up in his bones,' has need to ask himself if he has any belief in the Gospel. The craving to impart ever accompanies real possession.

The Apostle’s solemn symbolism, announcing his cessation of efforts among the Jews, has of course reference only to Corinth, for we find him in his subsequent ministry adhering to his method, ‘to the Jew first.’ It is a great part of Christian wisdom in evangelical work to recognise the right time to give up efforts which have been fruitless. Much strength is wasted, and many hearts depressed, by obstinate continuance in such methods or on such fields as have cost much effort and yielded no fruit. We often call it faith, when it is only pride, which prevents the acknowledgment of failure. Better to learn the lessons taught by Providence, and to try a new ‘claim,’ than to keep on digging and washing when we only find sand and mud. God teaches us by failures as well as by successes. Let us not be too conceited to learn the lesson or to confess defeat, and shift our ground accordingly.

It is a solemn thing to say ‘I am clean.’ We need to have been very diligent, very loving, very prayerful to God, and very persuasive in pleading with men, before we dare to roll all the blame of their condemnation on themselves. But we have no right to say, ‘Henceforth I go to’ others, until we can say that we have done all that man-or, at any rate, that we-can do to avert the doom.

Paul did not go so far away but that any whose hearts God had touched could easily find him. It was with a lingering eye to his countrymen that he took up his abode in the house of ‘one that feared God,’ that is, a proselyte; and that he settled down next door to the synagogue. What a glimpse of yearning love which cannot bear to give Israel up as hopeless, that simple detail gives us! And may we not say that the yearning of the servant is caught from the example of the Master? ‘How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?’ Does not Christ, in His long-suffering love, linger in like manner round each closed heart? and if He withdraws a little way, does He not do so rather to stimulate search after Him, and tarry near enough to be found by every seeking heart?

Paul’s purpose in his solemn warning to the Jews of Corinth was partly accomplished. The ruler of the synagogue ‘believed in the Lord with all his house.’ Thus men are sometimes brought to decision for Christ by the apparently impending possibility of His Gospel leaving them to themselves. ‘Blessings brighten as they take their flight.’ Severity sometimes effects what forbearance fails to achieve. If the train is on the point of starting, the hesitating passenger will swiftly make up his mind and rush for a seat. It is permissible to press for immediate decision on the ground that the time is short, and that soon these things ‘will be hid from the eyes.’

We learn from 1Co. 1:14, that Paul deviated from his usual practice, and himself baptized Crispus. We may be very sure that his doing so arose from no unworthy subserviency to an important convert, but indicated how deeply grateful he was to the Lord for giving him, as a seal to a ministry which had seemed barren, so encouraging a token. The opposition and blasphemy of many are outweighed, to a true evangelist, by the conversion of one; and while all souls are in one aspect equally valuable, they are unequal in the influence which they may exert on others. So it was with Crispus, for ‘many of the Corinthians hearing’ of such a signal fact as the conversion of the chief of the synagogue, likewise ‘believed.’ We may distinguish in our estimate of the value of converts, without being untrue to the great principle that all men are equally precious in Christ’s eyes.

III. The next stage is the vision to Paul and his consequent protracted residence in Corinth.

God does not waste visions, nor bid men put away fears which are not haunting them. This vision enables us to conceive Paul’s state of mind when it came to him. He was for some reason cast down. He had not been so when things looked much more hopeless. But though now he had his friends and many converts, some mood of sadness crept over him. Men like him are often swayed by impulses rising within, and quite apart from outward circumstances. Possibly he had reason to apprehend that his very success had sharpened hostility, and to anticipate danger to life. The contents of the vision make this not improbable.

But the mere calming of fear, worthy object as it is, is by no means the main part of the message of the vision. ‘Speak, and hold not thy peace,’ is its central word. Fear which makes a Christian dumb is always cowardly, and always exaggerated. Speech which comes from trembling lips may be very powerful, and there is no better remedy for terror than work for Christ. If we screw ourselves up to do what we fear to do, the dread vanishes, as a bather recovers himself as soon as his head has once been under water.

Why was Paul not to be afraid? It is easy to say, ‘Fear not,’ but unless the exhortation is accompanied with some good reason shown, it is wasted breath. Paul got a truth put into his heart which ends all fear-’For I am with thee.’ Surely that is enough to exorcise all demons of cowardice or despondency, and it is the assurance that all Christ’s servants may lay up in their hearts, for use at all moments and in all moods. His presence, in no metaphor, but in deepest inmost reality, is theirs, and whether their fears come from without or within, His presence is more than enough to make them brave and strong.

Paul needed a vision, for Paul had never seen Christ ‘after the flesh,’ nor heard His parting promise. We do not need it, for we have the unalterable word, which He left with all His disciples when He ascended, and which remains true to the ends of the world and till the world ends.

The consequence of Christ’s presence is not exemption from attacks, but preservation in them. Men may ‘set on’ Paul, but they cannot ‘hurt’ him. The promise was literally fulfilled when the would-be accusers were contemptuously sent away by Gallio, the embodiment of Roman even-handedness and despising of the deepest things. It is fulfilled no less truly to-day; for no hurt can come to us if Christ is with us, and whatever does come is not hurt.

‘I have much people in this city.’ Jesus saw what Paul did not, the souls yet to be won for Him. That loving Eye gladly beholds His own sheep, though they may be yet in danger of the wolves, and far from the Shepherd. ‘Them also He must bring’; and His servants are wise if, in all their labours, they cherish the courage that comes from the consciousness of His presence, and the unquenchable hope, which sees in the most degraded and alienated those whom the Good Shepherd will yet find in the wilderness and bear back to the fold. Such a hope will quicken them for all service, and such a vision will embolden them in all peril.

100) Acts 18:5

PAUL AT CORINTH

‘CONSTRAINED BY THE WORD’

Act. 18:5.

The Revised Version, in concurrence with most recent authorities, reads, instead of ‘pressed in the spirit,’ ‘constrained by the word.’ One of these alterations depends on a diversity of reading, the other on a difference of translation. The one introduces a significant difference of meaning; the other is rather a change of expression. The word rendered here ‘pressed,’ and by the Revised Version ‘constrained,’ is employed in its literal use in ‘Master, the multitude throng Thee and *press* Thee,’ and in its metaphorical application in ‘The love of Christ *constraineth us*.’ There is not much difference between ‘constrained’ and ‘pressed,’ but there is a large difference between ‘in the spirit’ and ‘by the word.’ ‘Pressed in the spirit’ simply describes a state of feeling or mind; ‘constrained by the word’ declares the force which brought about that condition of pressure or constraint. What then does ‘constrained by the word’ refer to? It indicates that Paul’s message had a grip of him, and held him hard, and forced him to deliver it.

One more preliminary remark is that our text evidently brings this state of mind of the Apostle, and the coming of his two friends Silas and Timothy, into relation as cause and effect. He had been alone in Corinth. His work of late had not been encouraging. He had been comparatively silent there, and had spent most of his time in tent-making. But when his two friends came a cloud was lifted off his spirit, and he sprang back again, as it were, to his old form and to his old work.

Now if we take that point of view with regard to the passage before us, I think we shall find that it yields valuable lessons, some of which I wish to try to enforce now.

I. Let me ask you to look with me at the downcast Apostle.

‘Downcast,’ you say; ‘is not that an unworthy word to use about a minister of Jesus Christ inspired as Paul was?’ By no means. We shall very much mistake both the nature of inspiration and the character of this inspired Apostle, if we do not recognise that he was a man of many moods and tremulously susceptible to external influences. Such music would never have come from him if his soul had not been like an Aeolian harp, hung in a tree and vibrating in response to every breeze. And so we need not hesitate to speak of the Apostle's mood, as revealed to us in the passage before us, as being downcast.

Now notice that in the verses preceding my text his conduct is extremely abnormal and unlike his usual procedure. He goes into Corinth, and he does next to nothing in evangelistic work. He repairs to the synagogue once a week, and talks to the Jews there. But that is all. The notice of his reasoning in the synagogue is quite subordinate to the notice that he was occupied in finding a lodging with another pauper Jew and stranger in the great city, and that these two poor men went into a kind of partnership, and tried to earn a living by hard work. Such procedure makes a singular contrast to Paul's usual methods in a strange city.

Now the reason for that slackening of impulse and comparative cessation of activity is not far to seek. The first Epistle to Thessalonica was written immediately after these two brethren rejoined Paul. And how does the Apostle describe in that letter his feelings before they came? He speaks of 'all our distress and affliction.' He tells that he was tortured by anxiety as to how the new converts in Thessalonica were getting on, and could not forbear to try to find out whether they were still standing steadfast. Again in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, you will find that there, looking back to this period, he describes his feelings in similar fashion and says: 'I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.' And if you look forward a verse or two in our chapter you will see that a vision came to Paul, which presupposes that some touch of fear, and some temptation to silence, were busy in his heart. For God shapes His communications according to our need, and would not have said, 'Do not be afraid, and hold not thy peace, but speak,' unless there had been a danger both of Paul's being frightened and of his being dumb.

And what thus brought a cloud over his sky? A little exercise of historical imagination will very sufficiently answer that. A few weeks before, in obedience, as he believed, to a direct divine command, Paul had made a plunge, and ventured upon an altogether new phase of work. He had crossed into Europe, and from the moment that he landed at the harbour of Philippi, up to the time when he took refuge in some quiet little room in Corinth, he had had nothing but trouble and danger and disappointment. The prison at Philippi, the riots that hounded him out of Thessalonica, the stealthy, hurried escape from Beroea, the almost entire failure of his first attempt to preach the Gospel to Greeks in Athens, his loneliness, and the strangeness of his surroundings in the luxurious, wicked, wealthy Greek city of Corinth-all these things weighed on him, and there is no wonder that his spirits went down, and he felt that now he must lie fallow for a time and rest, and pull himself together again.

So here we have, in this great champion of the faith, in this strong runner of the Christian race, in this chief of men, an example of the fluctuation of mood, the variation in the way in which we look at our duties and our obligations and our difficulties, the slackening of the impulse which dominates our lives, that are too familiar to us all. It brings Paul nearer us to feel that he, too, knew these ups and downs. The force that drove this meteor through the darkness varied, as the force that impels us varies to our consciousness. It is the prerogative of God to be immutable; men have their moods and their fluctuations. Kindled lights flicker; the sun burns steadily. An Elijah to-day beards Ahab and Jezebel and all their priests, and to-morrow hides his head in his hands, and says, ‘Take me away, I am not better than my fathers.’ There will be ups and down in the Christian vigour of our lives, as well as in all other regions, so long as men dwell in this material body and are surrounded by their present circumstances.

Brethren, it is no small part of Christian wisdom and prudence to recognise this fact, both in order that it may prevent us from becoming unduly doubtful of ourselves when the ebb tide sets in on our souls, and also in order that we may lay to heart this other truth, that because these moods and changes of aspect and of vigour *will* come to us, therefore the law of life must be effort, and the duty of every Christian man be to minimise, in so far as possible, the fluctuations which, in some degree, are inevitable. No human hand has ever drawn an absolutely straight line. That is the ideal of the mathematician, but all ours are crooked. But we may indefinitely diminish the magnitude of the curves. No two atoms are so close together as that there is no film between them. No human life has ever been an absolutely continuous, unbroken series of equally holy and devoted thoughts and acts, but we may diminish the intervals between kindred states, and may make our lives so far uniform as that to a bystander they shall look like the bright circle, which a brand whirled round in the air makes the impression of, on the eye that beholds. We shall have times of brightness and of less brilliancy, of vigour and of consequent reaction and exhaustion. But Christianity has, for one of its objects, to help us to master our moods, and to bring us nearer and nearer, by continual growth, to the steadfast, immovable attitude of those whose faith is ever the same.

Do not forget the plain lesson which comes from the incident before us-viz., that the wisest thing that a man can do, when he feels that the wheels of his religious being are driving heavily, is to set himself doggedly to the plain, homely work of daily life. Paul did not sit and bemoan himself because he felt this slackening of impulse, but he went away to Aquila, and said, ‘Let us set to work and make camel’s-hair cloth and tents.’ Be thankful for your homely, prosaic, secular, daily task. You do not know from how many sickly fancies it saves you, and how many breaches in the continuity of your Christian feeling it may bridge over. It takes you away from thinking about yourselves, and sometimes you cannot think about anything less profitably. So stick to your work; and if ever you feel, as Paul did, ‘cast down,’ be sure that the workshop, the office, the desk, the kitchen will prevent you from being ‘destroyed,’ if you give yourselves to the plain duties which no moods alter, but which can alter a great many moods.

II. And now note the ‘constraining word.’

I have already said that the return of the two, who had been sent to see how things were going with the recent converts in the infant Churches, brought the Apostle good tidings, and so lifted off a great load of anxiety from his heart. No wonder! He had left raw recruits under fire, with no captain, and he might well doubt whether they would keep their ranks. But they did. So the pressure was lifted off, and the pressure being lifted off, spontaneously the old impulse gripped him once more; like a spring which leaps back to its ancient curve when some alien force is taken from it. It must have been a very deep and a very habitual impulse, which thus instantly reasserted itself the moment that the pressure of anxiety was taken out of the way.

The word constrained him. What to do? To declare it. Paul's example brings up two thoughts-that that impulse may vary at times, according to the pressure of circumstances, and may even be held in abeyance for a while; and that if a man is honestly and really a Christian, as soon as the incumbent pressure is taken away, he will feel, 'Necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is me if I preach not the Gospel.' For though Paul's sphere of work was different from ours, his obligation to work and his impulse to work were such as are, or should be, common to all Christians. The impulse to utter the word that we believe and live by seems to me to be, in its very nature, inseparable from earnest Christian faith. All emotion demands expression; and if a man has never felt that he must let his Christian faith have vent, it is a very bad sign. As certainly as fermentation or effervescence demands outgush, so certainly does emotion demand expression. We all know that. The same impulse that makes a mother bend over her babe with unmeaning words and tokens that seem to unsympathetic onlookers foolish, ought to influence all Christians to speak the Name they love. All conviction demands expression. There may be truths which have so little bearing upon human life that he who perceives them feels little obligation to say anything about them. But these are the exceptions; and the more weighty and the more closely affecting human interests anything that we have learned to believe as truth is, the more do we feel in our hearts that, in making us its believers, it has made us its apostles. Christ's saying, 'What ye hear in the ear, that preach ye on the housetops,' expresses a universal truth which is realised in many regions, and ought to be most emphatically realised in the Christian. For surely of all the truths that men can catch a glimpse of, or grapple to their hearts, or store in their understandings, there are none which bring with them such tremendous consequences, and therefore are of so solemn import to proclaim to all the children of men, as the truth, which we profess we have received, of personal salvation through Jesus Christ.

If there never had been a single commandment to that effect, I know not how the Christian Church or the Christian individual could have abstained from declaring the great and sweet Name to which it and he owe so much. I do not care to present this matter as a commandment, nor to speak now of obligation or responsibility. The *impulse* is what I would fix your attention upon. It is inseparable from the Christian life. It may vary in force, as we see in the incident before us. It will vary in grip, according as other circumstances and duties insist upon being attended to. The form in which it is yielded to will vary indefinitely in individuals. But if they are Christian people it is always there.

Well then, what about the masses of so-called Christians who feel nothing of any such constraining force? And what about the many who feel enough of it to make them also feel that they are wrong in not yielding to it, but not enough to make their conduct be influenced by it? Brethren, I venture to believe that the measure in which this impulse to speak the word and use direct efforts for somebody's conversion is felt by Christians, is a very fair test of the depth of their own religion. If a vessel is half empty it will not run over. If it is full to the brim, the sparkling treasure will fall on all sides. A weak plant may never push its green leaves above the ground, but a strong one will rise into the light. A spark may be smothered in a heap of brushwood, but a steady flame will burn its way out. If this word has not a grip of you, impelling you to its utterance, I would have you not to be too sure that you have a grip of it.

III. Lastly, we have here the witness to the word.

'He was constrained by the word, *testifying*.' Now I do not know whether it is imposing too much meaning upon a non-significant difference of expression, if I ask you to note the difference between that phrase and the one which describes his previous activity: 'He *reasoned* in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade' the Jews and the Greeks, but when the old impulse came back in new force, *reasoning* was far too cold a method, and Paul took to *testifying*. Whether that be so or no, mark that the witness of one's own personal conviction and experience is the strongest weapon that a Christian can use. I do not despise the place of reasoning, but arguments do not often change opinions; they never change hearts. Logic and controversial discoursing may 'prepare the way of the Lord,' but it is 'in the wilderness.' But when a man calls aloud, 'Come and hear all ye, and I will declare what God hath done for my soul'; or when he tells his brother, ‘We have found the Messias’; or when he sticks to ‘One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see,’ it is difficult for any one to resist, and impossible for any one to answer, that way of testifying,

It is a way that we can all adopt if we will. Christian men and women can all say such things. I do not forget that there are indirect ways of spreading the Gospel. Some of you think that you do enough when you give your money and your interest in order to diffuse it. You can buy a substitute in the militia, but you cannot buy a substitute in Christ’s service. You have each some congregation to which you can speak, if it is no larger than Paul’s-namely, two people, Aquila and Priscilla. What talks they would have in their lodging, as they plaited the wisps of black hair into rough cloth, and stitched the strips into tents! Aquila was not a Christian when Paul picked him up, but he became one very soon; and it was the preaching in the workshop, amidst the dust, that made him one. If we long to speak about Christ we shall find plenty of people to speak to. ‘Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord.’

Now, dear friends, I have only one word more. I have no doubt there are some among us who have been saying, ‘This sermon does not apply to me at all.’ Does it not? If it does not, what does that mean? It means that you have not the first requisite for spreading the word- viz. personal faith in the word. It means that you have put away, or at least neglected to take in, the word and the Saviour of whom it speaks, into your own lives. But it does *not* mean that you have got rid of the word thereby. It will not in that case lay the grip of which I have been speaking upon you, but it will not let you go. It will lay on you a far more solemn and awful clutch, and like a jailer with his hand on the culprit’s shoulder, will ‘constrain’ you into the presence of the Judge. You can make it a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death. And though you do not grasp it, it grasps and holds you. ‘The word that I speak unto him, the same shall judge him at the last day.’

101) Acts 18:6-11

Acts

PAUL AT CORINTH

Act. 18:1 - Act. 18:11.

Solitude is a hard trial for sensitive natures, and tends to weaken their power of work. Paul was entirely alone in Athens, and appears to have cut his stay there short, since his two companions, who were to have joined him in that city, did not do so till after he had been some time in Corinth. His long stay there has several well-marked stages, which yield valuable lessons.

I. First, we note the solitary Apostle, seeking friends, toiling for bread, and withal preaching Christ.

Corinth was a centre of commerce, of wealth, and of moral corruption. The celebrated local worship of Aphrodite fed the corruption as well as the wealth. The Apostle met there with a new phase of Greek life, no less formidable in antagonism to the Gospel than the culture of Athens. He tells us that he entered on his work in Corinth ‘in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling,’ but also that he did not try to attract by adaptation of his words to the prevailing tastes either of Greek or Jew, but preached ‘Jesus Christ, and Him crucified,’ knowing that, while that appeared to go right in the teeth of the demands of both, it really met their wants. This ministry was begun, in his usual fashion, very unobtrusively and quietly. His first care was to find a home; his second, to provide his daily bread; and then he was free to take the Sabbath for Christian work in the synagogue.

We cannot tell whether he had had any previous acquaintance with Aquila and his wife, nor indeed is it certain that they had previously been Christians. Paul’s reason for living with them was simply the convenience of getting work at his trade, and it seems probable that, if they had been disciples, that fact would have been named as part of his reason. Pontus lay to the north of Cilicia, and though widely separated from it, was near enough to make a kind of bond as of fellow-countrymen, which would be the stronger because they had the same craft at their finger-ends.

It was the wholesome practice for every Rabbi to learn some trade. If all graduates had to do the same now there would be fewer educated idlers, who are dangerous to society and burdens to themselves and their friends. What a curl of contempt would have lifted the lips of the rich men of

Corinth if they had been told that the greatest man in their city was that little Jew tent-maker, and that in this unostentatious fashion he had begun to preach truths which would be like a charge of dynamite to all their social and religious order! True zeal can be patiently silent.

Sewing rough goat’s-hair cloth into tents may be as truly serving Christ as preaching His name. All manner of work that contributes to the same end is the same in worth and in recompense. Perhaps the wholesomest form of Christian ministry is that after the Apostolic pattern, when the teacher can say, as Paul did to the people of Corinth, ‘When I was present with you and was in want, I was not a burden on any man.’ If not in letter, at any rate in spirit, his example must be followed. If the preacher would win souls he must be free from any taint of suspicion as to money.

II. The second stage in Paul’s Corinthian residence is the increased activity when his friends, Silas and Timothy, came from Beroea.

We learn from Php. 4:15, and 2Co. 11:9, that they brought gifts from the Church at Philippi; and from 1Th. 3:6, that they brought something still more gladdening namely, good accounts of the steadfastness of the Thessalonian converts. The money would make it less necessary to spend most of the week in manual labour; the glad tidings of the Thessalonians’ ‘faith and love’ did bring fresh life, and the presence of his helpers would cheer him. So a period of enlarged activity followed their coming.

The reading of Act. 18:5, ‘Paul was constrained by the word,’ brings out strikingly the Christian impulse which makes speech of the Gospel a necessity. The force of that impulse may vary, as it did with Paul; but if we have any deep possession of the grace of God for ourselves, we shall, like him, feel it pressing us for utterance, as soon as the need of providing daily bread becomes less stringent and our hearts are gladdened by Christian communion. It augurs ill for a man’s hold of the word if the word does not hold him. He who never felt that he was weary of forbearing, and that the word was like a fire, if it was ‘shut up in his bones,’ has need to ask himself if he has any belief in the Gospel. The craving to impart ever accompanies real possession.

The Apostle’s solemn symbolism, announcing his cessation of efforts among the Jews, has of course reference only to Corinth, for we find him in his subsequent ministry adhering to his method, ‘to the Jew first.’ It is a great part of Christian wisdom in evangelical work to recognise the right time to give up efforts which have been fruitless. Much strength is wasted, and many hearts depressed, by obstinate continuance in such methods or on such fields as have cost much effort and yielded no fruit. We often call it faith, when it is only pride, which prevents the acknowledgment of failure. Better to learn the lessons taught by Providence, and to try a new ‘claim,’ than to keep on digging and washing when we only find sand and mud. God teaches us by failures as well as by successes. Let us not be too conceited to learn the lesson or to confess defeat, and shift our ground accordingly.

It is a solemn thing to say ‘I am clean.’ We need to have been very diligent, very loving, very prayerful to God, and very persuasive in pleading with men, before we dare to roll all the blame of their condemnation on themselves. But we have no right to say, ‘Henceforth I go to’ others, until we can say that we have done all that man-or, at any rate, that we-can do to avert the doom.

Paul did not go so far away but that any whose hearts God had touched could easily find him. It was with a lingering eye to his countrymen that he took up his abode in the house of ‘one that feared God,’ that is, a proselyte; and that he settled down next door to the synagogue. What a glimpse of yearning love which cannot bear to give Israel up as hopeless, that simple detail gives us! And may we not say that the yearning of the servant is caught from the example of the Master? ‘How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?’ Does not Christ, in His long-suffering love, linger in like manner round each closed heart? and if He withdraws a little way, does He not do so rather to stimulate search after Him, and tarry near enough to be found by every seeking heart?

Paul’s purpose in his solemn warning to the Jews of Corinth was partly accomplished. The ruler of the synagogue ‘believed in the Lord with all his house.’ Thus men are sometimes brought to decision for Christ by the apparently impending possibility of His Gospel leaving them to themselves. ‘Blessings brighten as they take their flight.’ Severity sometimes effects what forbearance fails to achieve. If the train is on the point of starting, the hesitating passenger will swiftly make up his mind and rush for a seat. It is permissible to press for immediate decision on the ground that the time is short, and that soon these things ‘will be hid from the eyes.’

We learn from 1Co. 1:14, that Paul deviated from his usual practice, and himself baptized Crispus. We may be very sure that his doing so arose from no unworthy subserviency to an important convert, but indicated how deeply grateful he was to the Lord for giving him, as a seal to a ministry which had seemed barren, so encouraging a token. The opposition and blasphemy of many are outweighed, to a true evangelist, by the conversion of one; and while all souls are in one aspect equally valuable, they are unequal in the influence which they may exert on others. So it was with Crispus, for ‘many of the Corinthians hearing’ of such a signal fact as the conversion of the chief of the synagogue, likewise ‘believed.’ We may distinguish in our estimate of the value of converts, without being untrue to the great principle that all men are equally precious in Christ’s eyes.

III. The next stage is the vision to Paul and his consequent protracted residence in Corinth.

God does not waste visions, nor bid men put away fears which are not haunting them. This vision enables us to conceive Paul’s state of mind when it came to him. He was for some reason cast down. He had not been so when things looked much more hopeless. But though now he had his friends and many converts, some mood of sadness crept over him. Men like him are often swayed by impulses rising within, and quite apart from outward circumstances. Possibly he had reason to apprehend that his very success had sharpened hostility, and to anticipate danger to life. The contents of the vision make this not improbable.

But the mere calming of fear, worthy object as it is, is by no means the main part of the message of the vision. ‘Speak, and hold not thy peace,’ is its central word. Fear which makes a Christian dumb is always cowardly, and always exaggerated. Speech which comes from trembling lips may be very powerful, and there is no better remedy for terror than work for Christ. If we screw ourselves up to do what we fear to do, the dread vanishes, as a bather recovers himself as soon as his head has once been under water.

Why was Paul not to be afraid? It is easy to say, ‘Fear not,’ but unless the exhortation is accompanied with some good reason shown, it is wasted breath. Paul got a truth put into his heart which ends all fear-’For I am with thee.’ Surely that is enough to exorcise all demons of cowardice or despondency, and it is the assurance that all Christ’s servants may lay up in their hearts, for use at all moments and in all moods. His presence, in no metaphor, but in deepest inmost reality, is theirs, and whether their fears come from without or within, His presence is more than enough to make them brave and strong.

Paul needed a vision, for Paul had never seen Christ ‘after the flesh,’ nor heard His parting promise. We do not need it, for we have the unalterable word, which He left with all His disciples when He ascended, and which remains true to the ends of the world and till the world ends.

The consequence of Christ’s presence is not exemption from attacks, but preservation in them. Men may ‘set on’ Paul, but they cannot ‘hurt’ him. The promise was literally fulfilled when the would-be accusers were contemptuously sent away by Gallio, the embodiment of Roman even-handedness and despising of the deepest things. It is fulfilled no less truly to-day; for no hurt can come to us if Christ is with us, and whatever does come is not hurt.

‘I have much people in this city.’ Jesus saw what Paul did not, the souls yet to be won for Him. That loving Eye gladly beholds His own sheep, though they may be yet in danger of the wolves, and far from the Shepherd. ‘Them also He must bring’; and His servants are wise if, in all their labours, they cherish the courage that comes from the consciousness of His presence, and the unquenchable hope, which sees in the most degraded and alienated those whom the Good Shepherd will yet find in the wilderness and bear back to the fold. Such a hope will quicken them for all service, and such a vision will embolden them in all peril.

102) **Acts 18:14-15**

GALLIO

Act. 18:14 - Act. 18:15.

There is something very touching in the immortality of fame which comes to the men who for a moment pass across the Gospel story, like shooting stars kindled for an instant as they enter our atmosphere. How little Gallio dreamed that he would live for ever in men's mouths by reason of this one judicial dictum! He was Seneca's brother, and was possibly leavened by his philosophy and indisposed to severity. He has been unjustly condemned. There are some striking lessons from the story.

I. The remarkable anticipation of the true doctrine as to the functions of civil magistrates.

Gallio draws a clear distinction between conduct and opinion, and excepts the whole of the latter region from his sway. It is the first case in which the civil authorities refused to take cognisance of a charge against a man on account of his opinions. Nineteen hundred years have not brought all tribunals up to that point yet. Gallio indeed was influenced mainly by philosophic contempt for the trivialities of what he thought a superstition. We are influenced by our recognition of the sanctity of individual conviction, and still more by reverence for truth and by the belief that it should depend only on its own power for progress and on itself for the defeat of its enemies.

II. The tragic mistake about the nature of the Gospel which men make.

There is something very pathetic in the erroneous estimates made by those persons mentioned in Acts who some once or twice come in contact with the preachers of Christ. How little they recognise what was before them! Their responsibility is in better hands than ours. But in Gallio there is a trace of tendencies always in operation.

We see in him the practical man's contempt for mere ideas. The man of affairs, be he statesman or worker, is always apt to think that things are more than thoughts. Gallio, proconsul in Corinth, and his brother official, Pilate, in Jerusalem, both believed in powers that they could see. The question of the one, for an answer to which he did not wait, was not the inquiry of a searcher after truth, but the exclamation of a sceptic who thought all the contradictory answers that rang through the world to be demonstrations that the question had no answer. The impatient refusal of the other to have any concern in settling ‘such matters’ was steeped in the same characteristically Roman spirit of impatient distrust and suspicion of mere ideas. He believed in Roman force and authority, and thought that such harmless visionaries as Paul and his company might be allowed to go their own way, and he did not know that they carried with them a solvent and constructive power before which the solid-seeming structure of the Empire was destined to crumble, as surely as thick-ribbed ice before the sirocco.

And how many of us believe in wealth and material progress, and regard the region of truth as very shadowy and remote! This is a danger besetting us all. The true forces that sway the world are ideas.

We see in Gallio supercilious indifference to mere ‘theological subtleties.’ To him Paul’s preaching and the Jews’ passionate denials of it seemed only a squabble about ‘words and names.’ Probably he had gathered his impression from Paul’s eager accusers, who would charge him with giving the name of ‘Christ’ to Jesus.

Gallio’s attitude was partly Stoical contempt for all superstitions, partly, perhaps, an eclectic belief that all these warring religions were really saying the same thing and differed only in words and names; and partly sheer indifference to the whole subject. Thus Christianity appears to many in this day.

What is it in reality? Not words but power: a Name, indeed, but a Name which is life. Alas for us, who by our jangling have given colour to this misconception!

We see in Gallio the mistake that the Gospel has little relation to conduct. Gallio drew a broad distinction between conduct and opinion, and there he was right. But he imagined that this opinion had nothing to do with conduct, and how wrong he was there we need not elaborate.

The Gospel is the mightiest power for shaping conduct.

III. The ignorant levity with which men pass the crisis of their lives.

How little Gallio knew of what a possibility was opened out before him! Angels were hovering unseen. We seldom recognise the fateful moments of our lives till they are past.

The offer of salvation in Christ is ever a crisis. It may never be repeated. Was Gallio ever again brought into contact with Paul or Paul's Lord? We know not. He passes out of sight, the search-light is turned in another direction, and we lose him in the darkness. The extent of his criminality is in better hands than ours, though we cannot but let our thoughts go forward to the time when he, like us all, will stand at the judgment bar of Jesus, no longer a judge but judged. Let us hope that before he passed hence, he learned how full of spirit and of life the message was, which he once took for a mere squabble about 'words and names,' and thought too trivial to occupy his court. And let us remember that the Jesus, whom we are sometimes tempted to judge as of little importance to us, will one day judge us, and that His judgment will settle our fate for evermore.

103) Acts 19:1-12

Acts

TWO FRUITFUL YEARS

Act. 19:1 - Act. 19:12.

This passage finds Paul in Ephesus. In the meantime he had paid that city a hasty visit on his way back from Greece, had left his friends, Aquila and Priscilla, in it, and had gone on to Jerusalem, thence returning to Antioch, and visiting the churches in Asia Minor which he had planted on his former journeys. From the inland and higher districts he has come down to the coast, and established himself in the great city of Ephesus, where the labours of Aquila, and perhaps others, had gathered a small band of disciples. Two points are especially made prominent in this passage-the incorporation of John's disciples with the Church, and the eminent success of Paul's preaching in Ephesus.

The first of these is a very remarkable and, in some respects, puzzling incident. It is tempting to bring it into connection with the immediately preceding narrative as to Apollos. The same stage of spiritual development is presented in these twelve men and in that eloquent Alexandrian. They and he were alike in knowing only of John’s baptism; but if they had been Apollos’ pupils, they would most probably have been led by him into the fuller light which he received through Priscilla and Aquila. More probably, therefore, they had been John’s disciples, independently of Apollos. Their being recognised as ‘disciples’ is singular, when we consider their very small knowledge of Christian truth; and their not having been previously instructed in its rudiments, if they were associating with the Church, is not less so. But improbable things do happen, and part of the reason for an event being recorded is often its improbability. Luke seems to have been struck by the singular similarity between Apollos and these men, and to have told the story, not only because of its importance but because of its peculiarity.

The first point to note is the fact that these men were disciples. Paul speaks of their having ‘believed,’ and they were evidently associated with the Church. But the connection must have been loose, for they had not received baptism. Probably there was a fringe of partial converts hanging round each church, and Paul, knowing nothing of the men beyond the fact that he found them along with the others, accepted them as ‘disciples.’ But there must have been some reason for doubt, or his question would not have been asked. They ‘believed’ in so far as John had taught the coming of Messiah. But they did not know that Jesus was the Messiah whose coming John had taught.

Paul’s question is, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ Obviously he missed the marks of the Spirit in them, whether we are to suppose that these were miraculous powers or moral and religious elevation. Now this question suggests that the possession of the Holy Spirit is the normal condition of all believers; and that truth cannot be too plainly stated or urgently pressed to-day. He is ‘the Spirit, which they that believe on Him’ shall ‘receive.’ The outer methods of His bestowment vary: sometimes He is given after baptism, and sometimes, as to Cornelius, before it; sometimes by laying on of Apostolic hands, sometimes without it.

But one thing constantly precedes, namely, faith; and one thing constantly follows faith, namely, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Modern Christianity does not grasp that truth as firmly or make it as prominent as it ought.

The question suggests, though indirectly, that the signs of the Spirit's presence are sadly absent in many professing Christians. Paul asked it in wonder. If he came into modern churches, he would have to ask it once more. Possibly he looked for the visible tokens in powers of miracle-working and the like. But these were temporary accidents, and the permanent manifestations are holiness, consciousness of sonship, God-directed longings, religious illumination, victory over the flesh. These things should be obvious in disciples. They will be, if the Spirit is not quenched. Unless they are, what sign of being Christians do we present?

The answer startles. They had not heard whether the Holy Ghost had been *given*; for that is the true meaning of their reply. John had foretold the coming of One who should baptize with the fire of that divine Spirit. His disciples, therefore, could not be ignorant of the existence thereof; but they had never heard whether their Master's prophecy had been fulfilled. What a glimpse that gives us of the small publicity attained by the story of Jesus!

Paul's second question betrays even more astonishment than did his first. He had taken for granted that, as disciples, the men had been baptized; and his question implies that a pre-requisite of Christian baptism was the teaching which they said that they had not had, and that a consequence of it was the gift of the Spirit, which he saw that they did not possess. Of course Paul's teaching is but summarised here. Its gist was that Jesus was the Messiah whom John had heralded, that John had himself taught that his mission was preliminary, and that therefore his true disciples must advance to faith in Christ.

The teaching was welcomed, for these men were not of the sort who saw in Jesus a rival to John, as others of his disciples did. They became 'disciples indeed,' and then followed baptism, apparently not administered by Paul, and imposition of Paul's hands. The Holy Spirit then came on them, as on the disciples on Pentecost, and 'they spoke with tongues and prophesied.' It was a repetition of that day, as a testimony that the gifts were not limited by time or place, but were the permanent possession of believers, as truly in heathen Ephesus as in Jerusalem; and we miss the meaning of the event unless we add, as truly in Britain to-day as in any past. The fire lit on Pentecost has not died down into grey ashes. If we 'believe,' it will burn on our heads and, better, in our spirits.

Much ingenuity has been expended in finding profound meanings in the number of 'twelve' here. The Apostles and their supernatural gifts, the patriarchs as founders of Israel, have been thought of as explaining the number, as if these men were founders of a new Israel, or Apostolate. But all that is trifling with the story, which gives no hint that the men were of any special importance, and it omits the fact that they were '*about* twelve,' not precisely that number. Luke simply wishes us to learn that there was a group of them, but how many he does not exactly know. More important is it to notice that this is the last reference to John or his disciples in the New Testament. The narrator rejoices to point out that some at least of these were led onwards into full faith.

The other part of the section presents mainly the familiar features of Apostolic ministration, the first appeal to the synagogue, the rejection of the message by it, and then the withdrawal of Paul and the Jewish disciples. The chief characteristics of the narrative are Paul's protracted stay in Ephesus, the establishment of a centre of public evangelising in the lecture hall of a Gentile teacher, the unhindered preaching of the Gospel, and the special miracles accompanying it. The importance of Ephesus as the eye and heart of proconsular Asia explains the lengthened stay. 'A great door and effectual,' said Paul, 'is opened unto me'; and he was not the man to refrain from pushing in at it because 'there are many adversaries.' Rather opposition was part of his reason for persistence, as it should always he.

There comes a point in the most patient labour, however, when it is best no longer to 'cast pearls' before those who 'trample them under foot,' and Paul set an example of wise withdrawal as well as of brave pertinacity, in leaving the synagogue when his remaining there only hardened disobedient hearts. Note that word *disobedient*. It teaches that the moral element in unbelief is resistance of the will. The two words are not synonyms, though they apply to the same state of mind. Rather the one lays bare the root of the other and declares its guilt. Unbelief comes from disobedience, and therefore is fit subject for punishment. Again observe that expression for Christianity, ‘the Way,’ which occurs several times in the Acts. The Gospel points the path for us to tread. It is not a body of truth merely, but it is a guide for practice. Discipleship is manifested in conduct. This Gospel points the way through the wilderness to Zion and to rest. It is ‘*the* Way,’ the only path, ‘the Way everlasting.’

It was a bold step to gather the disciples in ‘the school of Tyrannus.’ He was probably a Greek professor of rhetoric or lecturer on philosophy, and Paul may have hired his hall, to the horror, no doubt, of the Rabbis. It was a complete breaking with the synagogue and a bold appeal to the heathen public. Ephesus must have been better governed than Philippi and Lystra, and the Jewish element must have been relatively weaker, to allow of Paul’s going on preaching with so much publicity for two years.

Note the flexibility of his methods, his willingness to use even a heathen teacher’s school for his work, and the continuous energy of the man. Not on Sabbath days only, but daily, he was at his post. The multitudes of visitors from all parts to the great city supplied a constant stream of listeners, for Ephesus was a centre for the whole country. We may learn from Paul to concentrate work in important centres, not to be squeamish about where we stand to preach the Gospel, and not to be afraid of making ourselves conspicuous. Paul’s message hallows the school of Tyrannus; and the school of Tyrannus, where men have been accustomed to go for widely different teaching, is a good place for Paul to give forth his message in.

The ‘special miracles’ which were wrought are very remarkable, and unlike the usual type of miracles. It does not appear that Paul himself sent the ‘handkerchiefs and aprons,’ which conveyed healing virtue, but that he simply permitted their use. The converts had faith to believe that such miracles would be wrought, and God honoured the faith. But note how carefully the narrative puts Paul’s part in its right place. God ‘wrought’; Paul was only the channel. If the eager people, who carried away the garments, had superstitiously fancied that there was virtue in Paul, and had not looked beyond him to God, it is implied that no miracles would have been wrought. But still the cast of these healings is anomalous, and only paralleled by the similar instances in Peter’s case.

The principle laid down by Peter [Act. 3:12] is to be kept in view in the study of all the miracles in the Acts. It is Jesus Christ who works, and not His servants who heal by their 'own power or holiness.' Jesus can heal with or without material channels, but sometimes chooses to employ such vehicles as these, just as on earth He chose to anoint blind eyes with clay, and to send the man to wash it off at the pool. Sense-bound faith is not rejected, but is helped according to its need, that it may be strengthened and elevated.

104) Acts 19:15

Acts

WOULD-BE EXORCISTS

Act. 19:15.

These exorcists had no personal union with Jesus. To them He was only 'Jesus whom Paul preached.' They spoke His name tentatively, as an experiment, and imitatively. To command 'in the name of Jesus' was an appeal to Jesus to glorify His name and exert His power, and so when the speaker had no real faith in the name or the power, there was no answer, because there was really no appeal.

I. The only power which can cast out the evil spirits is the name of Jesus.

That is a commonplace of Christian belief. But it is often held in a dangerously narrow way and leads to most unwise pitting of the Gospel against other modes of bettering and elevating men, instead of recognising them as allies. Earnest Christian workers are tempted to forget Jesus' own word: 'He that is not against us is for us.' There is no need to disparage other agencies because we believe that it is the Gospel which is 'the power of God unto salvation.' Many of the popular philanthropic movements of the day, many of its curbing and enlightening forces, many of its revolutionary social ideas, are really in their essence and historically in their origin, profoundly Christian, and are the application of the principles inherent in 'the Name' to the evils of society. No doubt many of their eager apostles are non-Christian or even anti-Christian, but though some of them have tried violently to pluck up the plant by the root from the soil in which it first flowered, much of that soil still adheres to it, and it will not live long if torn from its native ‘habitat.’

It is not narrowness or hostility to non-Christian efforts to cast out the demons from humanity, but only the declaration of a truth which is taught by the consideration of what is the difference between all other such efforts and Christianity, and is confirmed by experience, if we maintain that, whatever good results may follow from these other influences, it is the powers lodged in the Name of Jesus, and these alone which can, radically and completely, conquer and eject the demons from a single soul, and emancipate society from their tyranny.

For consider that the Gospel which proclaims Jesus as the Saviour is the only thing which deals with the deepest fact in our natures, the fact of sin; gives a personal Deliverer from its power; communicates a new life of which the very essence is righteousness, and which brings with it new motives, new impulses, and new powers.

Contrast with this the inadequate diagnosis of the disease and the consequent imperfection of the remedy which other physicians of the world’s sickness present. Most of them only aim at repressing outward acts. None of them touch more than a part of the whole dreadful circumference of the dark orb of evil. Law restrains actions. Ethics proclaims principles which it has no power to realise. It shows men a shining height, but leaves them lame and grovelling in the mire. Education casts out the demon of ignorance, and makes the demons whom it does not cast out more polite and perilous. It brings its own evils in its train. Every kind of crop has weeds which spring with it. The social and political changes, which are eagerly preached now, will do much; but one thing, which is the all-important thing, they will not do, they will not change the nature of the individuals who make up the community. And till that nature is changed any form of society will produce its own growth of evils. A Christless democracy will be as bad as, if not worse than, a Christless monarchy or aristocracy. If the bricks remain the same, it does not much matter into what shape you build them.

These would-be exorcists but irritated the demons by their vain attempts at ejecting them, and it is sometimes the case that efforts to cure social diseases only result in exacerbating them. If one hole in a Dutch dyke is stopped up, more pressure is thrown on another weak point and a leak will soon appear there. There is but one Name that casts a spell over all the ills that flesh is heir to. There is but one Saviour of society-Jesus who saves from sin through His death, and by participation in His life delivers men from that life of self which is the parent of all the evils from which society vainly strives to be delivered by any power but His.

II. That Name must be spoken by believing men if it is to put forth its full power.

These exorcists had no faith. All that they knew of Jesus was that He was the one ‘whom Paul preached.’ Even the name of Jesus is spoiled and is powerless on the lips of one who repeats it, parrot-like, because he has seen its power when it came flame-like from the fiery lips of some man of earnest convictions.

In all regions, and especially in the matter of art or literature, imitators are poor creatures, and men are quick to detect the difference between the original and the copy. The copyists generally imitate the weak points, and seldom get nearer than the imitation of external and trivial peculiarities. It is more feasible to reproduce the ‘contortions of the Sibyl’ than to catch her ‘inspiration.’

This absence or feebleness of personal faith is the explanation of much failure in so-called Christian work. No doubt there may be other causes for the want of success, but after all allowance is made for these, it still remains true that the chief reason why the Gospel message is often proclaimed without casting out demons is that it is proclaimed with faltering faith, tentatively and without assured confidence in its power, or imitatively, with but little, if any, inward experience of the magic of its spell. The demons have ears quick to discriminate between Paul’s fiery accents and the cold repetition of them. Incomparably the most powerful agency which any man can employ in producing conviction in others is the utterance of his own intense conviction. ‘If you wish me to weep, your own tears must flow,’ said the Roman poet. Other factors may powerfully aid the exorcising power of the word spoken by faith, and no wise man will disparage these, but they are powerless without faith and it is powerful without them.

Consider the effect of that personal faith on the speaker-in bringing all his force to bear on his words; in endowing him for a time with many of the subsidiary qualities which make our words winged and weighty; in lifting to a height of self-oblivion, which itself is magnetic.

Consider its effect on the hearers-how it bows hearts as trees are bent before a rushing wind.

Consider its effect in bringing into action God's own power. Of the man, all aflame with Christian convictions and speaking them with the confidence and urgency which become them and him, it may truly be said, 'It is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaketh in you.'

Here then we have laid bare the secret of success and a cause of failure, in Christian enterprise. Here we see, as in a concrete example, the truth exemplified, which all who long for the emancipation of demon-ridden humanity would be wise to lay to heart, and thereby to be saved from much eager travelling on a road that leads nowhither, and much futile expenditure of effort and sympathy, and many disappointments. It is as true to-day as it was long ago in Ephesus, that the evil spirits 'feel the Infant's hand from far Judea's land,' and are forced to confess, 'Jesus we know and Paul we know'; but to other would-be exorcists their answer is, 'Who are ye?' 'When a strong man armed keepeth his house, his goods are in peace.' There is but 'One stronger than he who can come upon him, and having overcome him, can take from him all his armour wherein he trusted and divide the spoils,' and that is the Christ, at whose name, faithfully spoken, 'the devils fear and fly.'

105) Acts 19:21

Acts

THE FIGHT WITH WILD BEASTS AT EPHESUS

Act. 19:21 - Act. 19:34.

Paul’s long residence in Ephesus indicates the importance of the position. The great wealthy city was the best possible centre for evangelising all the province of Asia, and that was to a large extent effected during the Apostle’s stay there. But he had a wider scheme in his mind. His settled policy was always to fly at the head, as it were. The most populous cities were his favourite fields, and already his thoughts were travelling towards the civilised world’s capital, the centre of empire-Rome. A blow struck there would echo through the world. Paul had his plan, and God had His, and Paul’s was not realised in the fashion he had meant, but it was realised in substance. He did not expect to enter Rome as a prisoner. God shaped the ends which Paul had only rough-hewn.

The programme in Act. 19:21 - Act. 19:22 was modified by circumstances, as some people would say; Paul would have said, by God. The riot hastened his departure from Ephesus. He did go to Jerusalem, and he did see Rome, but the chain of events that drew him there seemed to him, at first sight, the thwarting, rather than the fulfilment, of his long-cherished hope. Well it is for us to carry all our schemes to God, and to leave them in His hands.

The account of the riot is singularly vivid and lifelike. It reveals a new phase of antagonism to the Gospel, a kind of trades-union demonstration, quite unlike anything that has met us in the Acts. It gives a glimpse into the civic life of a great city, and shows demagogues and mob to be the same in Ephesus as in England. It has many points of interest for the commentator or scholar, and lessons for all. Luke tells the story with a certain dash of covert irony.

We have, first, the protest of the shrine-makers’ guild or trades-union, got up by the skilful manipulation of Demetrius. He was evidently an important man in the trade, probably well-to-do. As his speech shows, he knew exactly how to hit the average mind. The small shrines which he and his fellow-craftsmen made were of various materials, from humble pottery to silver, and were intended for ‘votaries to dedicate in the temple,’ and represented the goddess Artemis sitting in a niche with her lions beside her. Making these was a flourishing industry, and must have employed a large number of men and much capital. Trade was beginning to be slack, and sales were falling off. No doubt there is exaggeration in Demetrius’s rhetoric, but the meeting of the craft would not have been held unless a perceptible effect had been produced by Paul’s preaching. Probably Demetrius and the rest were more frightened than hurt; but men are very quick to take alarm when their pockets are threatened.

The speech is a perfect example of how self-interest masquerades in the garb of pure concern for lofty objects, and yet betrays itself. The danger to ‘our craft’ comes first, and the danger to the ‘magnificence’ of the goddess second; but the precedence given to the trade is salved over by a ‘not only,’ which tries to make the religious motive the chief. No doubt Demetrius was a devout worshipper of Artemis, and thought himself influenced by high motives in stirring up the craft. It is natural to be devout or moral or patriotic when it pays to be so. One would not expect a shrine-maker to be easily accessible to the conviction that ‘they be no gods which are made with hands.’

Such admixture of zeal for some great cause, with a shrewd eye to profit, is very common, and may deceive us if we are not always watchful. Jehu bragged about his ‘zeal for the Lord’ when it urged him to secure himself on the throne by murder; and he may have been quite honest in thinking that the impulse was pure, when it was really mingled. How many foremost men in public life everywhere pose as pure patriots, consumed with zeal for national progress, righteousness, etc., when all the while they are chiefly concerned about some private bit of log-rolling of their own! How often in churches there are men professing to be eager for the glory of God, who are, perhaps half-unconsciously, using it as a stalking-horse, behind which they may shoot game for their own larder! A drop of quicksilver oxidises and dims as soon as exposed to the air. The purest motives get a scum on them quickly unless we constantly keep them clear by communion with God.

Demetrius may teach us another lesson. His opposition to Paul was based on the plain fact that, if Paul’s teaching prevailed, no more shrines would be wanted. That was a new ground of opposition to the Gospel, resembled only by the motive for the action of the owners of the slave girl at Philippi; but it is a perennial source of antagonism to it. In our cities especially there are many trades which would be wiped out if Christ’s laws of life were universally adopted. So all the purveyors of commodities and pleasures which the Gospel forbids a Christian man to use are arrayed against it. We have to make up our minds to face and fight them. A liquor-seller, for instance, is not likely to look complacently on a religion which would bring his ‘trade into disrepute’; and there are other occupations which would be gone if Christ were King, and which therefore, by the instinct of self-preservation, are set against the Gospel, unless, so to speak, its teeth are drawn.

According to one reading, the shouts of the craftsmen which told that Demetrius had touched them in the tenderest part, their pockets, was an invocation, ‘Great Diana!’ not a profession of faith; and we have a more lively picture of an excited crowd if we adopt the alteration. It is easy to get a mob to yell out a watchword, whether religious or political; and the less they understand it, the louder are they likely to roar. In Athanasius’ days the rabble of Constantinople made the city ring with cries, degrading the subtlest questions as to the Trinity, and examples of the same sort have not been wanting nearer home. It is criminal to bring such incompetent judges into religious or political or social questions, it is cowardly to be influenced by them. ‘The voice of the people’ is not always ‘the voice of God.’ It is better to ‘be in the right with two or three’ than to swell the howl of Diana’s worshippers,

II. A various reading of Act. 19:28 gives an additional particular, which is of course implied in the received text, but makes the narrative more complete and vivid if inserted.

It adds that the craftsmen rushed ‘into the street,’ and there raised their wild cry, which naturally ‘filled’ the city with confusion. So the howling mob, growing larger and more excited every minute, swept through Ephesus, and made for the theatre, the common place of assembly.

On their road they seem to have come across two of Paul’s companions, whom they dragged with them. What they meant to do with the two they had probably not asked themselves. A mob has no plans, and its most savage acts are unpremeditated. Passion let loose is almost sure to end in bloodshed, and the lives of Gaius and Aristarchus hung by a thread. A gust of fury storming over the mob, and a hundred hands might have torn them to atoms, and no man have thought himself their murderer.

What a noble contrast to the raging crowd the silent submission, no doubt accompanied by trustful looks to Heaven and unspoken prayers, presents! And how grandly Paul comes out! He had not been found, probably had not been sought for, by the rioters, whose rage was too blind to search for him, but his brave soul could not bear to leave his friends in peril and not plant himself by their sides. So he 'was minded to enter in unto the people,' well knowing that there he had to face more ferocious 'wild beasts' than if a cageful of lions had been loosed on him. Faith in God and fellowship with Christ lift a soul above fear of death. The noblest kind of courage is not that born of flesh or temperament, or of the madness of battle, but that which springs from calm trust in and absolute surrender to Christ.

Not only did the disciples restrain Paul as feeling that if the shepherd were smitten the sheep would be scattered, but interested friends started up in an unlikely quarter. The 'chief of Asia' or Asiarchs, who sent to dissuade him, 'were the heads of the imperial political-religious organisation of the province, in the worship of "Rome and the emperors"; and their friendly attitude is a proof both that the spirit of the imperial policy was not as yet hostile to the new teaching, and that the educated classes did not share the hostility of the superstitious vulgar' [Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller*, p. 281]. It is probable that, in that time of crumbling faith and religious unrest, the people who knew most about the inside of the established worship believed in it least, and in their hearts agreed with Paul that 'they be no gods which are made with hands.'

So we have in these verses the central picture of calm Christian faith and patient courage, contrasted on the one hand with the ferocity and excitement of heathen fanatical devotees, and on the other with the prudent regard to their own safety of the Asiarchs, who had no such faith in Diana as to lead them to joining the rioters, nor such faith in Paul's message as to lead them to oppose the tumult, or to stand by his side, but contented themselves with *sending* to warn him. Who can doubt that the courage of the Christians is infinitely nobler than the fury of the mob or the cowardice of the Asiarchs, kindly as they were? If they were his friends, why did they not do something to shield him? ‘A plague on such backing!’

III. The scene in the theatre, to which Luke returns in Act. 19:32, is described with a touch of scorn for the crowd, who mostly knew not what had brought them together.

One section of it kept characteristically cool and sharp-eyed for their own advantage. A number of Jews had mingled in it, probably intending to fan the flame against the Christians, if they could do it safely. As in so many other cases in Acts, common hatred brought Jew and Gentile together, each pocketing for the time his disgust with the other. The Jews saw their opportunity. Half a dozen cool heads, who know what they want, can often sway a mob as they will. Alexander, whom they ‘put forward,’ was no doubt going to make a speech disclaiming for the Jews settled in Ephesus any connection with the obnoxious Paul. We may be very sure that his ‘defence’ was of the former, not of the latter.

But the rioters were in no mood to listen to fine distinctions among the members of a race which they hated so heartily. Paul was a Jew, and this man was a Jew; that was enough. So the roar went up again to Great Diana, and for two long hours the crowd surged and shouted themselves hoarse, Gaius and Aristarchus standing silent all the while and expecting every moment to be their last. The scene reminds one of Baal’s priests shrieking to him on Carmel. It is but too true a representation of the wild orgies which stand for worship in all heathen religions. It is but too lively an example of what must always happen when excited crowds are ignorantly stirred by appeals to prejudice or self-interest.

The more democratic the form of government under which we live, the more needful is it to distinguish the voice of the people from the voice of the mob, and to beware of exciting, or being governed by, clamour however loud and long.

106) Acts 20:22-23

PARTING COUNSELS

Act. 20:22 - Act. 20:35.

This parting address to the Ephesian elders is perfect in simplicity, pathos, and dignity. Love without weakness and fervent yet restrained self-devotion throb in every line. It is personal without egotism, and soars without effort. It is ‘Pauline’ through and through, and if Luke or some unknown second-century Christian made it, the world has lost the name of a great genius. In reading it, we have to remember the Apostle’s long stay in Ephesus, and his firm conviction that he was parting for ever from those over whom he had so long watched, and so long loved, as well as guided. Parting words should be tender and solemn, and these are both in the highest degree.

The prominence given to personal references is very marked and equally natural. The whole address down to Act. 20:22 is of that nature, and the same theme recurs in Act. 20:31, is caught up again in Act. 20:33, and continues thence to the end. That abundance of allusions to himself is characteristic of the Apostle, even in his letters; much more is it to be looked for in such an outpouring of his heart to trusted friends, seen for the last time. Few religious teachers have ever talked so much of themselves as Paul did, and yet been as free as he is from taint of display or self-absorption.

The personal references in Act. 20:22 - Act. 20:27 turn on two points-his heroic attitude in prospect of trials and possible martyrdom, and his solemn washing his hands of all responsibility for ‘the blood’ of those to whom he had declared all the counsel of God. He looks back, and his conscience witnesses that he has discharged his ministry; he looks forward, and is ready for all that may confront him in still discharging it, even to the bloody end.

Nothing tries a man’s mettle more than impending evil which is equally certain and undefined. Add that the moment of the sword’s falling is unknown, and you have a combination which might shake the firmest nerves. Such a combination fronted Paul now. He told the elders, what we do not otherwise know, that at every halting-place since setting his face towards Jerusalem he had been met by the same prophetic warnings of ‘bonds and afflictions’ waiting for him. The warnings were vague, and so the more impressive. Fear has a vivid imagination, and anticipates the worst.

Paul was not afraid, but he would not have been human if he had not recognised the short distance for him between a prison and a scaffold. But the prospect did not turn him a hairsbreadth from his course. True, he was ‘bound in the spirit,’ which may suggest that he was not so much going joyfully as impelled by a constraint felt to be irresistible. But whatever his feelings, his will was iron, and he went calmly forward on the road, though he knew that behind some turn of it lay in wait, like beasts of prey, dangers of unknown kinds.

And what nerved him thus to front death itself without a quiver? The supreme determination to do what Jesus had given him to do. He knew that his Lord had set him a task, and the one thing needful was to accomplish that. We have no such obstacles in our course as Paul had in his, but the same spirit must mark us if we are to do our work. Consciousness of a mission, fixed determination to carry it out, and consequent contempt of hindrances, belong to all noble lives, and especially to true Christian ones. Perils and hardships and possible evils should have no more power to divert us from the path which Christ marks for us than storms or tossing of the ship have to deflect the needle from pointing north.

It is easy to talk heroically when no foes are in sight; but Paul was looking dangers in the eyes, and felt their breath on his cheeks when he spoke. His longing was to ‘fulfil his course.’ ‘With joy’ is a weakening addition. It was not ‘joy,’ but the discharge of duty, which seemed to him infinitely desirable. What was aspiration at Miletus became fact when, in his last Epistle, he wrote, ‘I have finished my course.’

In Act. 20:25 - Act. 20:27 the Apostle looks back as well as forward. His anticipation that he was parting for ever from the Ephesian elders was probably mistaken, but it naturally leads him to think of the long ministry among them which was now, as he believed, closed. And his retrospect was very different from what most of us, who are teachers, feel that ours must be. It is a solemn thought that if we let either cowardice or love of ease and the good opinion of men hold us back from speaking out all that we know of God’s truth, our hands are reddened with the blood of souls.

We are all apt to get into grooves of favourite thoughts, and to teach but part of the whole Gospel. If we do not seek to widen our minds to take in, and our utterances to give forth, all the will of God as seen by us, our limitations and repetitions will repel some from the truth, who might have been won by a completer presentation of it, and their blood will be required at our hands. None of us can reach to the apprehension, in its full extent and due proportion of its parts, of that great gospel; but we may at least seek to come nearer the ideal completeness of a teacher, and try to remember that we are ‘pure from the blood of all men,’ only when we have not ‘shrunk from declaring all God’s counsel.’ We are not required to know it completely, but we are required not to shrink from declaring it as far as we know it.

Paul’s purpose in this retrospect was not only to vindicate himself, but to suggest to the elders their duty. Therefore he passes immediately to exhortation to them, and a forecast of the future of the Ephesian Church. ‘Take heed to yourselves.’ The care of one’s own soul comes first. He will be of little use to the Church whose own personal religion is not kept warm and deep. All preachers and teachers and men who influence their fellows need to lay to heart this exhortation, especially in these days when calls to outward service are so multiplied. The neglect of it undermines all real usefulness, and is a worm gnawing at the roots of the vines.

We note also the condensed weightiness of the following exhortation, in which solemn reasons are suggested for obeying it. The divine appointment to office, the inclusion of the ‘bishops’ in the flock, the divine ownership of the flock, and the cost of its purchase, are all focussed on the one point, ‘Take heed to all the flock.’ Of course a comparison with Act. 20:17 shows that *elder* and *bishop* were two designations for one officer; but the question of the primitive organisation of church offices, important as it is, is less important than the great thoughts as to the relation of the Church to God, and as to the dear price at which men have been won to be truly His.

We note the reading in the Act. 20:28 [margin], 'the flock of the Lord,' but do not discuss it. The chief thought of the verse is that the Church is God's flock, and that the death of Jesus has bought it for His, and that negligent under-shepherds are therefore guilty of grievous sin.

The Apostle had premonitions of the future for the Church as well as for himself, and the horizons were dark in both outlooks. He foresaw evils from two quarters, for 'wolves' would come from without, and perverse teachers would arise within, drawing the disciples after them and away from the Lord. The simile of wolves may be an echo of Christ's warning in Mat. 7:15. How sadly Paul's anticipations were fulfilled the Epistle to the Church in Ephesus [Rev. 2:1 - Rev. 2:29] shows too clearly. Unslumbering alertness, as of a sentry in front of the enemy, is needed if the slinking onset of the wolf is to be beaten back. Paul points to his own example, and that in no vainglorious spirit, but to stimulate and also to show how watchfulness is to be carried out. It must be unceasing, patient, tenderly solicitous, and grieving over the falls of others as over personal calamities. If there were more such 'shepherds,' there would be fewer stray sheep.

Anxious forebodings and earnest exhortations naturally end in turning to God and invoking His protecting care. The Apostle's heart runs over in his last words [Act. 20:32 - Act. 20:35]. He falls back for himself, in the prospect of having to cease his care of the Church, on the thought that a better Guide will not leave it, and he would comfort the elders as well as himself by the remembrance of God's power to keep them. So Jacob, dying, said, 'I die, but God shall be with you.' So Moses, dying, said, 'The Lord hath said unto me, thou shalt not go over this Jordan. The Lord thy God, He will go before thee.' Not even Paul is indispensable. The under-shepherds die, *the* Shepherd lives, and watches against wolves and dangers. Paul had laid the foundation, and the edifice would not stand unfinished, like some half-reared palace begun by a now dead king. The growth of the Church and of its individual members is sure. It is wrought by God.

His instrument is 'the word of His grace.' Therefore if we would grow, we must use that word. Christian progress is no more possible, if the word of God is not our food, than is an infant's growth if it refuses milk. That building up or growth or advance [for all three metaphors are used, and mean the same thing] has but one natural end, the entrance of each redeemed soul into its own allotment in the true land of promise, the inheritance of those who are sanctified. If we faithfully use that word which tells of and brings God's grace, that we may grow thereby, He will bring us at last to dwell among those who here have growingly been made saints. He is able to do these things. It is for us to yield to His power, and to observe the conditions on which it will work on us.

Even at the close Paul cannot refrain from personal references. He points to his example of absolute disinterestedness, and with a dramatic gesture holds out 'these hands' to show how they are hardened by work. Such a warning against doing God's work for money would not have been his last word, at a time when all hearts were strung up to the highest pitch, unless the danger had been very real. And it is very real to-day. If once the suspicion of being influenced by greed of gain attaches to a Christian worker, his power ebbs away, and his words lose weight and impetus.

It is that danger which Paul is thinking of when he tells the elders that by 'labouring' they 'ought to support the weak'; for by *weak* he means not the poor, but those imperfect disciples who might be repelled or made to stumble by the sight of greed in an elder. Shepherds who obviously cared more for wool than for the sheep have done as much harm as 'grievous wolves.'

Paul quotes an else unrecorded saying of Christ's which, like a sovereign's seal, confirms the subject's words. It gathers into a sentence the very essence of Christian morality. It reveals the inmost secret of the blessedness of the giving God. It is foolishness and paradox to the self-centred life of nature. It is blessedly true in the experience of all who, having received the 'unspeakable gift,' have thereby been enfranchised into the loftier life in which self is dead, and to which it is delight, kindred with God's own blessedness, to impart.

107) Acts 20:24

THE FIGHT WITH WILD BEASTS AT EPHESUS

PARTING COUNSELS

A FULFILLED ASPIRATION

Act. 20:24. - 2Ti. 4:7.

I do not suppose that Paul in prison, and within sight of martyrdom, remembered his words at Ephesus. But the fact that what was aspiration whilst he was in the very thick of his difficulties came to be calm retrospect at the close is to me very beautiful and significant. ‘So that I may finish my course,’ said he wistfully; whilst before him there lay dangers clearly discerned and others that had all the more power over the imagination because they were but dimly discerned-’Not knowing the things that shall befall me there,’ said he, but knowing this, that ‘bonds and afflictions abide me.’ When a man knows exactly what he has to be afraid of he can face it. When he knows a little corner of it, and also knows that there is a great stretch behind that is unknown, that is a state of things that tries his mettle. Many a man will march up to a battery without a tremor who would not face a hole where a snake lay. And so Paul’s ignorance, as well as Paul’s knowledge, made it very hard for him to say ‘None of these things move me’ if only ‘I might finish my course.’

Now there are in these two passages, thus put together, three points that I touch for a moment. These are, What Paul thought that life chiefly was; what Paul aimed at; and what Paul won thereby.

I. What he thought that life chiefly was.

‘That I may finish my course.’ Now ‘course,’ in our modern English, is far too feeble a word to express the Apostle’s idea here. It has come to mean with us a quiet sequence or a succession of actions which, taken together, complete a career; but in its original force the English word ‘course,’ and still more the Greek, of which it is a translation, contain a great deal more than that. If we were to read ‘race,’ we should get nearer to at least one side of the Apostle’s thought. This was the image under which life presented itself to him, as it does to every man that does anything in the world worth doing, whether he be Christian or not-as being not a place for enjoyment, for selfish pursuits, making money, building family, satisfying love, seeking pleasure, or the like; but mainly as being an appointed field for a succession of efforts, all in one direction, and leading progressively to an end. In that image of life as a race, threadbare as it is, there are several grave considerations involved, which it will contribute to the nobleness of our own lives to keep steadily in view.

To begin with, the metaphor regards life as a track or path marked out and to be kept to by us. Paul thought of his life as a racecourse, traced for him by God, and from which it would be perilous and rebellious to diverge. The consciousness of definite duties loomed larger than anything else before him. His first waking thought was, 'What is God's will for me to-day? What stage of the course have I to pass over to-day?' Each moment brought to him an appointed task which at all hazards he must do. And this elevating, humbling, and bracing ever-present sense of responsibility, not merely to circumstances, but to God, is an indispensable part of any life worth the living, and of any on which a man will ever dare to look back.

'My course.' O brethren! if we carried with us, always present, that solemn, severe sense of all-pervading duty and of obligation laid upon us to pursue faithfully the path that is appointed us, there would be less waste, less selfishness, less to regret, and less that weakens and defiles, in the lives of us all. And blessed be His name! however trivial be our tasks, however narrow our spheres, however secular and commonplace our businesses or trades, we may write upon them, as on all sorts of lives, except weak and selfish ones, this inscription, 'Holiness to the Lord.'

The broad arrow stamped on Crown property gives a certain dignity to whatever bears it, and whatever small duty has the name of God written across it is thereby ennobled. If our days are to be full-fraught with the serenity and purity which it is possible for them to attain, and if we ourselves are to put forth all our powers and make the most of ourselves, we must cultivate the continual sense that life is a course-a series of definite duties marked out for us by God.

Again, the image suggests the strenuous efforts needed for discharge of our appointed tasks. The Apostle, like all men of imaginative and sensitive nature, was accustomed to speak in metaphors, which expressed his fervid convictions more adequately than more abstract expressions would have done. That vigorous figure of a ‘course’ speaks more strongly of the stress of continual effort than many words. It speaks of the straining muscles, and the intense concentration, and the forward-flung body of the runner in the arena. Paul says in effect, ‘I, for my part, live at high pressure. I get the most that I can out of myself. I do the very best that is in me.’ And that is a pattern for us.

There is nothing to be done unless we are contented to live on the stretch. Easygoing lives are always contemptible lives. A man who never does anything except what he can do easily never comes to do anything greater than what he began with, and never does anything worth doing at all. Effort is the law of life in all departments, as we all of us know and practise in regard to our daily business. But what a strange thing it is that we seem to think that our Christian characters can be formed and perfected upon other conditions, and in other fashions, than those by which men make their daily bread or their worldly fortunes!

The direction which effort takes is different in these two regions. The necessity for concentration and vigorous putting into operation of every faculty is far more imperative in the Christian course than in any other form of life.

I believe most earnestly that we grow Christlike, not by effort only, but by faith. But I believe that there is no faith without effort, and that the growth which comes from faith will not be appropriated and made ours without it. And so I preach, without in the least degree feeling that it impinges upon the great central truth that we are cleansed and perfected by the power of God working upon us, the sister truth that we must ‘work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.’

Brethren, unless we are prepared for the dust and heat of the race, we had better not start upon the course. Christian men have an appointed task, and to do it will take all the effort that they can put forth, and will assuredly demand continuous concentration and the summoning of every faculty to its utmost energy.

Still further, there is another idea that lies in the emblem, and that is that the appointed task which thus demands the whole man in vigorous exercise ought in fact to be, and in its nature is, progressive. Is the Christianity of the average church member and professing Christian a continuous advance? Is to-day better than yesterday? Are former attainments continually being left behind? Does it not seem the bitterest irony to talk about the usual life of a Christian as a course? Did you ever see a squad of raw recruits being drilled in the barrack-yard? The first thing the sergeants do is to teach them the 'goose-step,' which consists in lifting up one foot and then the other, *ad infinitum*, and yet always keeping on the same bit of ground. That is the kind of 'course' which hosts of so-called Christians content themselves with running-a vast deal of apparent exercise and no advance. They are just at the same spot at which they stood five, ten, or twenty years ago; not a bit wiser, more like Christ, less like the devil and the world; having gained no more mastery over their characteristic evils; falling into precisely the same faults of temper and conduct as they used to do in the far-away past. By what right can *they* talk of running the Christian race? Progress is essential to real Christian life.

II. Turn now to another thought here, and consider what Paul aimed at.

It is a very easy thing for a man to say, 'I take the discharge of my duty, given to me by Jesus Christ, as my great purpose in life,' when there is nothing in the way to prevent him from carrying out that purpose. But it is a very different thing when, as was the case with Paul, there lie before him the certainties of affliction and bonds, and the possibilities which very soon consolidated themselves into certainties, of a bloody death and that swiftly. To say *then*, without a quickened pulse or a tremor in the eyelid, or a quiver in the voice, or a falter in the resolution, to say then, 'none of these things move me, if only I may do what I was set to do'-that is to be in Christ indeed; and that is the only thing worth living for.

Look how beautifully we see in operation in these heartfelt and few words of the Apostle the power that there is in an absolute devotion to God-enjoined duty, to give a man 'a solemn scorn of ills,' and to lift him high above everything that would bar or hinder his path. Is it not bracing to see any one actuated by such motives as these? And why should they not be motives for us all? The one thing worth our making our aim in life is to accomplish our course.

Now notice that the word in the original here, ‘finish,’ does not merely mean ‘end,’ which would be a very poor thing. Time will do that for us all. It will end our course. But an ended course may yet be an unfinished course. And the meaning that the Apostle attaches to the word in both of our texts is not merely to scramble through anyhow, so as to get to the last of it; but to complete, accomplish the course, or, to put away the metaphor, to do all that it was meant by God that he should do.

Now some very early transcriber of the Acts of the Apostles mistook the Apostle’s meaning, and thought that he only said that he desired to end his career; and so, with the best intentions in the world, he inserted, probably on the margin, what he thought was a necessary addition-that unfortunate ‘with joy,’ which appears in our Authorised Version, but has no place in the true text. If we put it in we necessarily limit the meaning of the word ‘finish’ to that low, superficial sense which I have already dismissed. If we leave it out we get a far nobler thought. Paul was not thinking about the joy at the end. What he wanted was to do his work, all of it, right through to the very last. He knew there would be joy, but he does not speak about it. What he wanted, as all faithful men do, was to do the work, and let the joy take care of itself.

And so for all of us, the true anaesthetic or ‘painkiller’ is that all-dominant sense of obligation and duty which lays hold upon us, and grips us, and makes us, not exactly indifferent to, but very partially conscious of, the sorrows or the hindrances or the pains that may come in our way. You cannot stop an express train by stretching a rope across the line, nor stay the flow of a river with a barrier of straw. And if a man has once yielded himself fully to that great conception of God’s will driving him on through life, and prescribing his path for him, it is neither in sorrow nor in joy to arrest his course. They may roll all the golden apples out of the garden of the Hesperides in his path, and he will not stop to pick one of them up; or Satan may block it with his fiercest flames, and the man will go into them, saying, ‘When I pass through the fires He will be with me.’

III. Lastly, what Paul won thereby.

‘That I *may* finish my course . . . I *have* finished my course’; in the same lofty meaning, not merely *ended*, though that was true, but ‘completed, accomplished, perfected.’

Now some hyper-sensitive people have thought that it was very strange that the Apostle, who was always preaching the imperfection of all human obedience and service, should, at the end of his life, indulge in such a piece of what they fancy was self-complacent retrospect as to say ‘I have kept the faith; I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course.’ But it was by no means complacent self-righteousness. Of course he did not mean that he looked back upon a career free from faults and flecks and stains. No. There is only one pair of human lips that ever could say, in the full significance of the word, ‘It is finished! . . . I have completed the work which Thou gavest Me to do.’ Jesus Christ’s retrospect of a stainless career, without defect or discordance at any point from the divine ideal, is not repeated in any of His servants’ experiences. But, on the other hand, if a man in the middle of his difficulties and his conflict pulls himself habitually together and says to himself, ‘Nothing shall move me, so that I may complete this bit of my course,’ depend upon it, his effort, his believing effort, will not be in vain; and at the last he will be able to look back on a career which, though stained with many imperfections, and marred with many failures, yet on the whole has realised the divine purpose, though not with absolute completeness, at least sufficiently to enable the faithful servant to feel that all his struggle has not been in vain.

Brethren, no one else can. And oh! how different the two ‘courses’ of the godly man and the worldling look, in their relative importance, when seen from this side, as we are advancing towards them, and from the other as we look back upon them! Pleasures, escape from pains, ease, comfort, popularity, quiet lives-all these things seem very attractive; and God’s will often seems very hard and very repulsive, when we are advancing towards some unwelcome duty. But when we get beyond it and look back, the two careers have changed their characters; and all the joys that could be bought at the price of the smallest neglected duty or the smallest perpetrated sin, dwindle and dwindle and dwindle, and the light is out of them, and they show for what they are-nothings, gilded nothings, painted emptinesses, lies varnished over. And on the other hand, to do right, to discharge the smallest duty, to recognise God’s will, and with faithful effort to seek to do it in dependence upon Him, that towers and towers and towers, and there seems to be, as there really is, nothing else worth living for.

So let us live with the continual remembrance in our minds that all which we do has to be passed in review by us once more, from another standpoint, and with another illumination falling upon it. And be sure of this, that the one thing worth looking back upon, and possible to be looked back upon with peace and quietness, is the humble, faithful, continual discharge of our appointed tasks for the dear Lord’s sake. If you and I, whilst work and troubles last, do truly say, ‘None of these things move me, so that I *might* finish my course,’ we too, with all our weaknesses, may be able to say at the last, ‘Thanks be to God! I *have* finished my course.’

108) Acts 20:25-31

Acts

PARTING COUNSELS

THE FIGHT WITH WILD BEASTS AT EPHESUS

Act. 19:21 - Act. 19:34.

Paul’s long residence in Ephesus indicates the importance of the position. The great wealthy city was the best possible centre for evangelising all the province of Asia, and that was to a large extent effected during the Apostle’s stay there. But he had a wider scheme in his mind. His settled policy was always to fly at the head, as it were. The most populous cities were his favourite fields, and already his thoughts were travelling towards the civilised world’s capital, the centre of empire-Rome. A blow struck there would echo through the world. Paul had his plan, and God had His, and Paul’s was not realised in the fashion he had meant, but it was realised in substance. He did not expect to enter Rome as a prisoner. God shaped the ends which Paul had only rough-hewn.

The programme in Act. 19:21 - Act. 19:22 was modified by circumstances, as some people would say; Paul would have said, by God. The riot hastened his departure from Ephesus. He did go to Jerusalem, and he did see Rome, but the chain of events that drew him there seemed to him, at first sight, the thwarting, rather than the fulfilment, of his long-cherished hope. Well it is for us to carry all our schemes to God, and to leave them in His hands.

The account of the riot is singularly vivid and lifelike. It reveals a new phase of antagonism to the Gospel, a kind of trades-union demonstration, quite unlike anything that has met us in the Acts. It gives a glimpse into the civic life of a great city, and shows demagogues and mob to be the same in Ephesus as in England. It has many points of interest for the commentator or scholar, and lessons for all. Luke tells the story with a certain dash of covert irony.

We have, first, the protest of the shrine-makers' guild or trades-union, got up by the skilful manipulation of Demetrius. He was evidently an important man in the trade, probably well-to-do. As his speech shows, he knew exactly how to hit the average mind. The small shrines which he and his fellow-craftsmen made were of various materials, from humble pottery to silver, and were intended for 'votaries to dedicate in the temple,' and represented the goddess Artemis sitting in a niche with her lions beside her. Making these was a flourishing industry, and must have employed a large number of men and much capital. Trade was beginning to be slack, and sales were falling off. No doubt there is exaggeration in Demetrius's rhetoric, but the meeting of the craft would not have been held unless a perceptible effect had been produced by Paul's preaching. Probably Demetrius and the rest were more frightened than hurt; but men are very quick to take alarm when their pockets are threatened.

The speech is a perfect example of how self-interest masquerades in the garb of pure concern for lofty objects, and yet betrays itself. The danger to 'our craft' comes first, and the danger to the 'magnificence' of the goddess second; but the precedence given to the trade is salved over by a 'not only,' which tries to make the religious motive the chief. No doubt Demetrius was a devout worshipper of Artemis, and thought himself influenced by high motives in stirring up the craft. It is natural to be devout or moral or patriotic when it pays to be so. One would not expect a shrine-maker to be easily accessible to the conviction that ‘they be no gods which are made with hands.’

Such admixture of zeal for some great cause, with a shrewd eye to profit, is very common, and may deceive us if we are not always watchful. Jehu bragged about his ‘zeal for the Lord’ when it urged him to secure himself on the throne by murder; and he may have been quite honest in thinking that the impulse was pure, when it was really mingled. How many foremost men in public life everywhere pose as pure patriots, consumed with zeal for national progress, righteousness, etc., when all the while they are chiefly concerned about some private bit of log-rolling of their own! How often in churches there are men professing to be eager for the glory of God, who are, perhaps half-unconsciously, using it as a stalking-horse, behind which they may shoot game for their own larder! A drop of quicksilver oxidises and dims as soon as exposed to the air. The purest motives get a scum on them quickly unless we constantly keep them clear by communion with God.

Demetrius may teach us another lesson. His opposition to Paul was based on the plain fact that, if Paul’s teaching prevailed, no more shrines would be wanted. That was a new ground of opposition to the Gospel, resembled only by the motive for the action of the owners of the slave girl at Philippi; but it is a perennial source of antagonism to it. In our cities especially there are many trades which would be wiped out if Christ’s laws of life were universally adopted. So all the purveyors of commodities and pleasures which the Gospel forbids a Christian man to use are arrayed against it. We have to make up our minds to face and fight them. A liquor-seller, for instance, is not likely to look complacently on a religion which would bring his ‘trade into disrepute’; and there are other occupations which would be gone if Christ were King, and which therefore, by the instinct of self-preservation, are set against the Gospel, unless, so to speak, its teeth are drawn.

According to one reading, the shouts of the craftsmen which told that Demetrius had touched them in the tenderest part, their pockets, was an invocation, ‘Great Diana!’ not a profession of faith; and we have a more lively picture of an excited crowd if we adopt the alteration. It is easy to get a mob to yell out a watchword, whether religious or political; and the less they understand it, the louder are they likely to roar. In Athanasius' days the rabble of Constantinople made the city ring with cries, degrading the subtlest questions as to the Trinity, and examples of the same sort have not been wanting nearer home. It is criminal to bring such incompetent judges into religious or political or social questions, it is cowardly to be influenced by them. 'The voice of the people' is not always 'the voice of God.' It is better to 'be in the right with two or three' than to swell the howl of Diana's worshippers,

II. A various reading of Act. 19:28 gives an additional particular, which is of course implied in the received text, but makes the narrative more complete and vivid if inserted.

It adds that the craftsmen rushed 'into the street,' and there raised their wild cry, which naturally 'filled' the city with confusion. So the howling mob, growing larger and more excited every minute, swept through Ephesus, and made for the theatre, the common place of assembly.

On their road they seem to have come across two of Paul's companions, whom they dragged with them. What they meant to do with the two they had probably not asked themselves. A mob has no plans, and its most savage acts are unpremeditated. Passion let loose is almost sure to end in bloodshed, and the lives of Gaius and Aristarchus hung by a thread. A gust of fury storming over the mob, and a hundred hands might have torn them to atoms, and no man have thought himself their murderer.

What a noble contrast to the raging crowd the silent submission, no doubt accompanied by trustful looks to Heaven and unspoken prayers, presents! And how grandly Paul comes out! He had not been found, probably had not been sought for, by the rioters, whose rage was too blind to search for him, but his brave soul could not bear to leave his friends in peril and not plant himself by their sides. So he 'was minded to enter in unto the people,' well knowing that there he had to face more ferocious 'wild beasts' than if a cageful of lions had been loosed on him. Faith in God and fellowship with Christ lift a soul above fear of death. The noblest kind of courage is not that born of flesh or temperament, or of the madness of battle, but that which springs from calm trust in and absolute surrender to Christ.

Not only did the disciples restrain Paul as feeling that if the shepherd were smitten the sheep would be scattered, but interested friends started up in an unlikely quarter. The 'chief of Asia' or Asiarchs, who sent to dissuade him, 'were the heads of the imperial political-religious organisation of the province, in the worship of "Rome and the emperors"; and their friendly attitude is a proof both that the spirit of the imperial policy was not as yet hostile to the new teaching, and that the educated classes did not share the hostility of the superstitious vulgar' [Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller*, p. 281]. It is probable that, in that time of crumbling faith and religious unrest, the people who knew most about the inside of the established worship believed in it least, and in their hearts agreed with Paul that 'they be no gods which are made with hands.'

So we have in these verses the central picture of calm Christian faith and patient courage, contrasted on the one hand with the ferocity and excitement of heathen fanatical devotees, and on the other with the prudent regard to their own safety of the Asiarchs, who had no such faith in Diana as to lead them to joining the rioters, nor such faith in Paul's message as to lead them to oppose the tumult, or to stand by his side, but contented themselves with *sending* to warn him. Who can doubt that the courage of the Christians is infinitely nobler than the fury of the mob or the cowardice of the Asiarchs, kindly as they were? If they were his friends, why did they not do something to shield him? 'A plague on such backing!'

III. The scene in the theatre, to which Luke returns in Act. 19:32, is described with a touch of scorn for the crowd, who mostly knew not what had brought them together.

One section of it kept characteristically cool and sharp-eyed for their own advantage. A number of Jews had mingled in it, probably intending to fan the flame against the Christians, if they could do it safely. As in so many other cases in Acts, common hatred brought Jew and Gentile together, each pocketing for the time his disgust with the other. The Jews saw their opportunity. Half a dozen cool heads, who know what they want, can often sway a mob as they will. Alexander, whom they 'put forward,' was no doubt going to make a speech disclaiming for the Jews settled in Ephesus any connection with the obnoxious Paul. We may be very sure that his ‘defence’ was of the former, not of the latter.

But the rioters were in no mood to listen to fine distinctions among the members of a race which they hated so heartily. Paul was a Jew, and this man was a Jew; that was enough. So the roar went up again to Great Diana, and for two long hours the crowd surged and shouted themselves hoarse, Gaius and Aristarchus standing silent all the while and expecting every moment to be their last. The scene reminds one of Baal’s priests shrieking to him on Carmel. It is but too true a representation of the wild orgies which stand for worship in all heathen religions. It is but too lively an example of what must always happen when excited crowds are ignorantly stirred by appeals to prejudice or self-interest.

The more democratic the form of government under which we live, the more needful is it to distinguish the voice of the people from the voice of the mob, and to beware of exciting, or being governed by, clamour however loud and long.

109) Acts 20:32

Acts

THE FIGHT WITH WILD BEASTS AT EPHESUS

PARTING COUNSELS

PARTING WORDS 1

Act. 20:32.

I may be pardoned if my remarks now should assume somewhat of a more personal character than is my wont. I desire to speak mainly to my own friends, the members of my own congregation; and other friends who have come to give me a parting ‘Godspeed’ will forgive me if my observations have a more special bearing on those with whom I am more immediately connected.

The Apostle whose words I have taken for my text was leaving, as he supposed, for the last time, the representatives of the Church in Ephesus, to whom he had been painting in very sombre colours the dangers of the future and his own forebodings and warnings. Exhortations, prophecies of evil, expressions of anxious solicitude, motions of Christian affection, all culminate in this parting utterance. High above them all rises the thought of the present God, and of the mighty word which in itself, in the absence of all human teachers, had power to 'build them up, and to give them an inheritance amongst them that are sanctified.'

If we think of that Church in Ephesus, this brave confidence of the Apostle's becomes yet more remarkable. They were set in the midst of a focus of heathen superstition, from which they themselves had only recently been rescued. Their knowledge was little, they had no Apostolic teacher to be present with them; they were left alone there to battle with the evils of that corrupt society in which they dwelt. And yet Paul leaves them-'sheep in the midst of wolves,' with a very imperfect Christianity, with no Bible, with no teachers-in the sure confidence that no harm will come to them, because God is with them, and the 'word of His grace' is enough.

And that is the feeling, dear brethren, with which I now look you in the face for the last time for a little while. I desire that you and I should together share the conviction that each of us is safe because God and the 'word of His grace' will go and remain with us.

I. So then, first of all, let me point you to the one source of security and enlightenment for the Church and for the individual.

We are not to separate between God and the 'word of His grace,' but rather to suppose that the way by which the Apostle conceived of God as working for the blessing and the guardianship of that little community in Ephesus was mainly, though not exclusively, through that which he here designates 'the word of His grace.' We are not to forget the ever-abiding presence of the indwelling Spirit who guards and keeps the life of the individual and of the community. But what is in the Apostle's mind here is the objective revelation, the actual spoken word [not yet written] which had its origin in God's condescending love, and had for its contents, mainly, the setting forth of that love. Or to put it into other words, the revelation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, with all the great truths that cluster round and are evolved from it, is the all-sufficient source of enlightenment and security for individuals and for Churches. And whosoever will rightly use and faithfully keep that great word, no evil shall befall him, nor shall he ever make shipwreck of the faith. It is ‘able to build you up,’ says Paul. In God’s Gospel, in the truth concerning Jesus Christ the divine Redeemer, in the principles that flow from that Cross and Passion, and that risen life and that ascension to God, there is all that men need, all that they want for life, all that they want for godliness. The basis of their creed, the sufficient guide for their conduct, the formative powers that will shape into beauty and nobleness their characters, all lie in the germ in this message, ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself.’ Whoever keeps that in mind and memory, ruminates upon it till it becomes the nourishment of his soul, meditates on it till the precepts and the promises and the principles that are enwrapped in it unfold themselves before Him, needs none other guide for life, none other solace in sorrow, none other anchor of hope, none other stay in trial and in death. ‘I commend you to God and the word of His grace,’ which is a storehouse full of all that we need for life and for godliness. Whoever has it is like a landowner who has a quarry on his estate, from which at will he can dig stones to build his house. If you truly possess and faithfully adhere to this Gospel, you have enough.

Remember that these believers to whom Paul thus spoke had no New Testament, and most of them, I dare say, could not read the Old. There were no written Gospels in existence. The greater part of the New Testament was not written; what was written was in the shape of two or three letters that belonged to Churches in another part of the world altogether. It was to the spoken word that he commended them. How much more securely may we trust one another to that permanent record of the divine revelation which we have here in the pages of Scripture!

As for the individual, so for the Church, that written word is the guarantee for its purity and immortality. Christianity is the only religion that has ever passed through periods of decadence and purified itself again. They used to say that Thames water was the best to put on shipboard because, after it became putrid, it cleared itself and became sweet again. I do not know anything about whether that is true or not, but I know that it is true about

Christianity. Over and over again it has rotted, and over and over again it has cleared itself, and it has always been by the one process. Men have gone back to the word and laid hold again of it in its simple omnipotence, and so a decadent Christianity has sprung up again into purity and power. The word of God, the principles of the revelation contained in Christ and recorded for ever in this New Testament, are the guarantee of the Church's immortality and of the Church's purity. This man and that man may fall away, provinces may be lost from the empire for a while, standards of rebellion and heresy may be lifted, but 'the foundation of God standeth sure,' and whoever will hark back again and dig down through the rubbish of human buildings to the living Rock will build secure and dwell at peace. If all our churches were pulverised to-morrow, and every formal creed of Christendom were torn in pieces, and all the institutions of the Church were annihilated-if there was a New Testament left they would all be built up again. 'I commend you to God, and to the word of His grace.'

II. Secondly, notice the possible benefit of the silencing of the *human* voice.

Paul puts together his absence and the power of the word. 'Now I know that you will see my face no more'-'I commend you to God.' That is to say, it is often a good thing that the voice of man may be hushed in order that the sweeter and deeper music of the word of God, sounding from no human lips, may reach our hearts. Of course I am not going to depreciate preachers and books and religious literature and the thought and the acts of good and wise men who have been interpreters of God's meaning and will to their brethren, but the human ministration of the divine word, like every other help to knowing God, may become a hindrance instead of a help; and in all such helps there is a tendency, unless there be continual jealous watchfulness on the part of those who minister them, and on the part of those who use them, to assert themselves instead of leading to God, and to become not mirrors in which we may behold God, but obscuring *media* which come between us and Him. This danger belongs to the great ordinance and office of the Christian ministry, large as its blessings are, just as it belongs to all other offices which are appointed for the purpose of bringing men to God. We may make them ladders or we may make them barriers; we may climb by them or we may remain in them. We may look at the colours on the painted glass until we do not see or think of the light which strikes through the colours.

So it is often a good thing that a human voice which speaks the divine word, should be silenced; just as it is often a good thing that other helps and props should be taken away. No man ever leans all his weight upon God's arm until every other crutch on which he used to lean has been knocked from him.

And therefore, dear brethren, applying these plain things to ourselves, may I not say that it may and should be the result of my temporary absence from you that some of you should be driven to a more first-hand acquaintance with God and with His word? I, like all Christian ministers, have of course my favourite ways of looking at truth, limitations of temperament, and idiosyncrasies of various sorts, which colour the representations that I make of God's great word. All the river cannot run through any pipe; and what does run is sure to taste somewhat of the soil through which it runs. And for some of you, after thirty years of hearing my way of putting things- and I have long since told you all that I have got to say-it will be a good thing to have some one else to speak to you, who will come with other aspects of that great Truth, and look at it from other angles and reflect other hues of its perfect whiteness. So partly because of these limitations of mine, partly because you have grown so accustomed to my voice that the things that I say do not produce half as much effect on many of you as if I were saying them to somebody else, or somebody else were saying them to you, and partly because the affection, born of so many years of united worship, for which in many respects I am your debtor, may lead you to look at the vessel rather than the treasure, do you not think it may be a means of blessing and help to this congregation that I should step aside for a little while and some one else should stand here, and you should be driven to make acquaintance with 'God and the word of His grace' a little more for yourselves? What does it matter though you do not have nay sermons? You have your Bibles and you have God's Spirit. And if my silence shall lead any of you to prize and to use *these* more than you have done, then my silence will have done a great deal more than my speech. Ministers are like doctors, the test of their success is that they are not needed any more. And when we can say, 'They can stand without us, and they do not need us,’ that is the crown of our ministry.

III. Thirdly, notice the best expression of Christian solicitude and affection.

‘I commend you,’ says Paul, ‘to God, and to the word of His grace.’ If we may venture upon a very literal translation of the word, it is, ‘I lay you down beside God.’ That is beautiful, is it not? Here had Paul been carrying the Ephesian Church on his back for a long time now. He had many cares about them, many forebodings as to their future, knowing very well that after his departure grievous wolves were going to enter in. He says, ‘I cannot carry the load any longer; here I lay it down at the Throne, beneath those pure Eyes, and that gentle and strong Hand.’ For to commend them to God is in fact a prayer casting the care which Paul could no longer exercise, upon Him.

And that is the highest expression of, as it is the only soothing for, manly Christian solicitude and affection. Of course you and I, looking forward to these six months of absence, have all of us our anxieties about what may be the issue. I may feel afraid lest there should be flagging here, lest good work should be done a little more languidly, lest there should be a beggarly account of empty pews many a time, lest the bonds of Christian union here should be loosened, and when I come back I may find it hard work to reknit them. All these thoughts must be in the mind of a true man who has put most of his life, and as much of himself as during that period he could command, into his work. What then? ‘I commend you to God.’ You may have your thoughts and anxieties as well as I have mine. Dear brethren, let us make an end of solicitude and turn it into petition and bring one another to God, and leave one another there.

This ‘commending,’ as it is the highest expression of Christian solicitude, so it is the highest and most natural expression of Christian affection. I am not going to do what is so easy to do- bring tears at such a moment. I do not purpose to speak of the depth, the sacredness of the bond that unites a great many of us together. I think we can take that for granted without saying any more about it. But, dear brethren, I do want to pledge you and myself to this, that our solicitude and our affection should find voice in prayer, and that when we are parted we may be united, because the eyes of both are turned to the one Throne. There is a reality in prayer. Do you pray for me, as I will for you, when we are far apart. And as the vapour that rises from the southern seas where I go may fall in moisture, refreshing these northern lands, so what rises on one side of the world from believing hearts in loving prayers may fall upon the other in the rain of a divine blessing. 'I commend you to God, and the word of His grace.'

IV. Lastly, notice the parting counsels involved in the commendation.

If it be true that God and His Word are the source of all security and enlightenment, and are so, apart altogether from human agencies, then to commend these brethren to God was exhortation as well as prayer, and implied pointing them to the one source of security that they might cling to that source. I am going to give no advices about little matters of church order and congregational prosperity. These will all come right, if the two main exhortations that are involved in this text are laid to heart; and if they are not laid to heart, then I do not care one rush about the smaller things, of full pews and prosperous subscription lists and Christian work. These are secondary, and they will be consequent if you take these two advices that are couched in my text:-

[*a*] 'Cleave to the Lord with full purpose of heart,' as the limpet does to the rock. Cling to Jesus Christ, the revelation of God's grace. And how do we cling to Him? What is the cement of souls? Love and trust; and whoever exercises these in reference to Jesus Christ is built into Him, and belongs to Him, and has a vital unity knitting him with that Lord. Cleave to Christ, brother, by faith and love, by communion and prayer, and by practical conformity of life. For remember that the union which is effected by faith can be broken by sin, and that there will be no reality in our union to Jesus unless it is manifested and perpetuated by righteousness of conduct and character. Two smoothly-ground pieces of glass pressed together will adhere. If there be a speck of sand, microscopic in dimensions, between the two, they will fall apart; and if you let tiny grains of sin come between you and your Master, it is delusion to speak of being knit to Him by faith and love. Keep near Jesus Christ and you will be safe.

[*b*] Cleave to ‘the word of His grace.’ Try to understand its teachings better; study your Bibles with more earnestness; believe more fully than you have ever done that in that great Gospel there lie every truth that we need and guidance in all circumstances. Bring the principles of Christianity into your daily life; walk by the light of them; and live in the radiance of a present God. And then all these other matters which I have spoken of, which are important, highly important but secondary, will come right.

Many of you, dear brethren, have listened to my voice for long years, and have not done the one thing for which I preach-viz. set your faith, as sinful men, on the great atoning Sacrifice and Incarnate Lord. I beseech you let my last word go deeper than its predecessors, and yield yourselves to God in Christ, bringing all your weakness and all your sin to Him, and trusting yourselves wholly and utterly to His sacrifice and life.

‘I commend you to God and to the word of His grace,’ and beseech you ‘that, whether I come to see you or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel.’

1 Preached prior to a long absence in Australia.

110) **Acts 20:33-34**

Acts

PARTING COUNSELS

THE FIGHT WITH WILD BEASTS AT EPHESUS

Act. 19:21 - Act. 19:34.

Paul’s long residence in Ephesus indicates the importance of the position. The great wealthy city was the best possible centre for evangelising all the province of Asia, and that was to a large extent effected during the Apostle’s stay there. But he had a wider scheme in his mind. His settled policy was always to fly at the head, as it were. The most populous cities were his favourite fields, and already his thoughts were travelling towards the civilised world’s capital, the centre of empire-Rome. A blow struck there would echo through the world. Paul had his plan, and God had His, and Paul’s was not realised in the fashion he had meant, but it was realised in substance. He did not expect to enter Rome as a prisoner. God shaped the ends which Paul had only rough-hewn.

The programme in Act. 19:21 - Act. 19:22 was modified by circumstances, as some people would say; Paul would have said, by God. The riot hastened his departure from Ephesus. He did go to Jerusalem, and he did see Rome, but the chain of events that drew him there seemed to him, at first sight, the thwarting, rather than the fulfilment, of his long-cherished hope. Well it is for us to carry all our schemes to God, and to leave them in His hands.

The account of the riot is singularly vivid and lifelike. It reveals a new phase of antagonism to the Gospel, a kind of trades-union demonstration, quite unlike anything that has met us in the Acts. It gives a glimpse into the civic life of a great city, and shows demagogues and mob to be the same in Ephesus as in England. It has many points of interest for the commentator or scholar, and lessons for all. Luke tells the story with a certain dash of covert irony.

We have, first, the protest of the shrine-makers' guild or trades-union, got up by the skilful manipulation of Demetrius. He was evidently an important man in the trade, probably well-to-do. As his speech shows, he knew exactly how to hit the average mind. The small shrines which he and his fellow-craftsmen made were of various materials, from humble pottery to silver, and were intended for 'votaries to dedicate in the temple,' and represented the goddess Artemis sitting in a niche with her lions beside her. Making these was a flourishing industry, and must have employed a large number of men and much capital. Trade was beginning to be slack, and sales were falling off. No doubt there is exaggeration in Demetrius's rhetoric, but the meeting of the craft would not have been held unless a perceptible effect had been produced by Paul's preaching. Probably Demetrius and the rest were more frightened than hurt; but men are very quick to take alarm when their pockets are threatened.

The speech is a perfect example of how self-interest masquerades in the garb of pure concern for lofty objects, and yet betrays itself. The danger to 'our craft' comes first, and the danger to the 'magnificence' of the goddess second; but the precedence given to the trade is salved over by a 'not only,' which tries to make the religious motive the chief. No doubt Demetrius was a devout worshipper of Artemis, and thought himself influenced by high motives in stirring up the craft. It is natural to be devout or moral or patriotic when it pays to be so. One would not expect a shrine-maker to be easily accessible to the conviction that ‘they be no gods which are made with hands.’

Such admixture of zeal for some great cause, with a shrewd eye to profit, is very common, and may deceive us if we are not always watchful. Jehu bragged about his ‘zeal for the Lord’ when it urged him to secure himself on the throne by murder; and he may have been quite honest in thinking that the impulse was pure, when it was really mingled. How many foremost men in public life everywhere pose as pure patriots, consumed with zeal for national progress, righteousness, etc., when all the while they are chiefly concerned about some private bit of log-rolling of their own! How often in churches there are men professing to be eager for the glory of God, who are, perhaps half-unconsciously, using it as a stalking-horse, behind which they may shoot game for their own larder! A drop of quicksilver oxidises and dims as soon as exposed to the air. The purest motives get a scum on them quickly unless we constantly keep them clear by communion with God.

Demetrius may teach us another lesson. His opposition to Paul was based on the plain fact that, if Paul’s teaching prevailed, no more shrines would be wanted. That was a new ground of opposition to the Gospel, resembled only by the motive for the action of the owners of the slave girl at Philippi; but it is a perennial source of antagonism to it. In our cities especially there are many trades which would be wiped out if Christ’s laws of life were universally adopted. So all the purveyors of commodities and pleasures which the Gospel forbids a Christian man to use are arrayed against it. We have to make up our minds to face and fight them. A liquor-seller, for instance, is not likely to look complacently on a religion which would bring his ‘trade into disrepute’; and there are other occupations which would be gone if Christ were King, and which therefore, by the instinct of self-preservation, are set against the Gospel, unless, so to speak, its teeth are drawn.

According to one reading, the shouts of the craftsmen which told that Demetrius had touched them in the tenderest part, their pockets, was an invocation, ‘Great Diana!’ not a profession of faith; and we have a more lively picture of an excited crowd if we adopt the alteration. It is easy to get a mob to yell out a watchword, whether religious or political; and the less they understand it, the louder are they likely to roar. In Athanasius' days the rabble of Constantinople made the city ring with cries, degrading the subtlest questions as to the Trinity, and examples of the same sort have not been wanting nearer home. It is criminal to bring such incompetent judges into religious or political or social questions, it is cowardly to be influenced by them. 'The voice of the people' is not always 'the voice of God.' It is better to 'be in the right with two or three' than to swell the howl of Diana's worshippers,

II. A various reading of Act. 19:28 gives an additional particular, which is of course implied in the received text, but makes the narrative more complete and vivid if inserted.

It adds that the craftsmen rushed 'into the street,' and there raised their wild cry, which naturally 'filled' the city with confusion. So the howling mob, growing larger and more excited every minute, swept through Ephesus, and made for the theatre, the common place of assembly.

On their road they seem to have come across two of Paul's companions, whom they dragged with them. What they meant to do with the two they had probably not asked themselves. A mob has no plans, and its most savage acts are unpremeditated. Passion let loose is almost sure to end in bloodshed, and the lives of Gaius and Aristarchus hung by a thread. A gust of fury storming over the mob, and a hundred hands might have torn them to atoms, and no man have thought himself their murderer.

What a noble contrast to the raging crowd the silent submission, no doubt accompanied by trustful looks to Heaven and unspoken prayers, presents! And how grandly Paul comes out! He had not been found, probably had not been sought for, by the rioters, whose rage was too blind to search for him, but his brave soul could not bear to leave his friends in peril and not plant himself by their sides. So he 'was minded to enter in unto the people,' well knowing that there he had to face more ferocious 'wild beasts' than if a cageful of lions had been loosed on him. Faith in God and fellowship with Christ lift a soul above fear of death. The noblest kind of courage is not that born of flesh or temperament, or of the madness of battle, but that which springs from calm trust in and absolute surrender to Christ.

Not only did the disciples restrain Paul as feeling that if the shepherd were smitten the sheep would be scattered, but interested friends started up in an unlikely quarter. The 'chief of Asia' or Asiarchs, who sent to dissuade him, 'were the heads of the imperial political-religious organisation of the province, in the worship of "Rome and the emperors"; and their friendly attitude is a proof both that the spirit of the imperial policy was not as yet hostile to the new teaching, and that the educated classes did not share the hostility of the superstitious vulgar' [Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller*, p. 281]. It is probable that, in that time of crumbling faith and religious unrest, the people who knew most about the inside of the established worship believed in it least, and in their hearts agreed with Paul that 'they be no gods which are made with hands.'

So we have in these verses the central picture of calm Christian faith and patient courage, contrasted on the one hand with the ferocity and excitement of heathen fanatical devotees, and on the other with the prudent regard to their own safety of the Asiarchs, who had no such faith in Diana as to lead them to joining the rioters, nor such faith in Paul's message as to lead them to oppose the tumult, or to stand by his side, but contented themselves with *sending* to warn him. Who can doubt that the courage of the Christians is infinitely nobler than the fury of the mob or the cowardice of the Asiarchs, kindly as they were? If they were his friends, why did they not do something to shield him? 'A plague on such backing!'

III. The scene in the theatre, to which Luke returns in Act. 19:32, is described with a touch of scorn for the crowd, who mostly knew not what had brought them together.

One section of it kept characteristically cool and sharp-eyed for their own advantage. A number of Jews had mingled in it, probably intending to fan the flame against the Christians, if they could do it safely. As in so many other cases in Acts, common hatred brought Jew and Gentile together, each pocketing for the time his disgust with the other. The Jews saw their opportunity. Half a dozen cool heads, who know what they want, can often sway a mob as they will. Alexander, whom they 'put forward,' was no doubt going to make a speech disclaiming for the Jews settled in Ephesus any connection with the obnoxious Paul. We may be very sure that his ‘defence’ was of the former, not of the latter.

But the rioters were in no mood to listen to fine distinctions among the members of a race which they hated so heartily. Paul was a Jew, and this man was a Jew; that was enough. So the roar went up again to Great Diana, and for two long hours the crowd surged and shouted themselves hoarse, Gaius and Aristarchus standing silent all the while and expecting every moment to be their last. The scene reminds one of Baal’s priests shrieking to him on Carmel. It is but too true a representation of the wild orgies which stand for worship in all heathen religions. It is but too lively an example of what must always happen when excited crowds are ignorantly stirred by appeals to prejudice or self-interest.

The more democratic the form of government under which we live, the more needful is it to distinguish the voice of the people from the voice of the mob, and to beware of exciting, or being governed by, clamour however loud and long.

111) Acts 20:35

Acts

PARTING COUNSELS

THE BLESSEDNESS OF GIVING

Act. 20:35.

How ‘many other things Jesus did’ and said ‘which are not written in this book’! Here is one precious unrecorded word, which was floating down to the ocean of oblivion when Paul drew it to shore and so enriched the world. There is, however, a saying recorded, which is essentially parallel in content though differing in garb, ‘The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister.’ It is tempting to think that the text gives a glimpse into the deep fountains of the pure blessedness of Jesus Himself, and was a transcript of His own human experience. It helps us to understand how the

Man of Sorrows could give as a legacy to His followers ‘My joy,’ and could speak of it as abiding and full.

I. The reasons on which this saying rests.

It is based not only on the fact that the act of giving has in it a sense of power and of superiority, and that the act of receiving may have a painful consciousness of obligation, though a cynic might endorse it on that ground, but on a truth far deeper than these, that there is a pure and godlike joy in making others blessed.

The foundation on which the axiom rests is that giving is the result of love and self-sacrifice. Whenever they are not found, the giving is not the giving which ‘blesses him that gives.’ If you give with some *arriere pensee* of what you will get by it, or for the sake of putting some one under obligation, or indifferently as a matter of compulsion or routine, if with your alms there be contempt to which pity is ever near akin, then these are not examples of the giving on which Christ pronounced His benediction. But where the heart is full of deep, real love, and where that love expresses itself by a cheerful act of self-sacrifice, then there is felt a glow of calm blessedness far above the base and greedy joys of self-centred souls who delight only in keeping their possessions, or in using them for themselves. It comes not merely from contemplating the relief or happiness in others of which our gifts may have been the source, but from the working in our own hearts of these two godlike emotions. To be delivered from making myself my great object, and to be delivered from the undue value set upon having and keeping our possessions, are the twin factors of true blessedness. It is heaven on earth to love and to give oneself away.

Then again, the highest joy and noblest use of all our possessions is found in imparting them.

True as to this world’s goods.

The old epitaph is profoundly true, which puts into the dead lips the declaration: ‘What I kept I lost. What I gave I kept.’ Better to learn that and act on it while living!

True as to truth, and knowledge.

True as to the Gospel of the grace of God.

II. The great example in God of the blessedness of giving.

God gives-gives only-gives always-and He in giving has joy, blessedness. He would not be ‘the ever-blessed God’ unless He were ‘the giving God.’ Creation we are perhaps scarcely warranted in affirming to be a necessity to the divine nature, and we run on perilous heights of speculation when we speak of it as contributing to His blessedness; but this at least we may say, that He, in the deep words of the Psalmist, ‘delights in mercy.’ Before creation was realised in time, the divine Idea of it was eternal, inseparable from His being, and therefore from everlasting He ‘rejoiced in the habitable parts of the earth, and His delights were with the sons of men.’

The light and glory thus thrown on His relation to us.

He gives. He does not exact until He has given. He gives what He requires. The requirement is made in love and is itself a ‘grace given,’ for it permits to God’s creatures, in their relation to Him, some feeble portion and shadow of the blessedness which He possesses, by permitting them to bring offerings to His throne, and so to have the joy of giving to Him what He has given to them. ‘All things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee.’ Then how this thought puts an end to all manner of slavish notions about God’s commands and demands, and about worship, and about merits, or winning heaven by our own works.

Notice that the same emotions which we have found to make the blessedness of giving are those which come into play in the act of receiving spiritual blessings. We receive the Gospel by faith, which assuredly has in it love and self-sacrifice.

Having thus the great Example of all giving in heaven, and the shadow and reflex of that example in our relations to Him on earth, we are thereby fitted for the exemplification of it in our relation to men. To give, not to get, is to be our work, to love, to sacrifice ourselves.

This axiom should regulate Christians' relation to the world, and to each other, in every way. It should shape the Christian use of money. It should shape our use of all which we have.

112) Acts 21:1-7

Acts

DRAWING NEARER TO THE STORM

Act. 21:1 - Act. 21:15.

Paul's heroic persistency in disregarding the warnings of 'bonds and afflictions' which were pealed into his ears in every city, is the main point of interest in this section. But the vivid narrative abounds with details which fill it with life and colour. We may gather it all round three points-the voyage, Tyre, and Caesarea.

I. The log of the voyage, as given in Act. 21:1 - Act. 21:3, shows the leisurely way of navigation in those days and in that sea.

Obviously the coaster tied up or anchored in port at night. Running down the coast from Miletus, they stayed overnight, first at the small island of Coos, then stretched across the next day to Rhodes, and on the third struck back to the mainland at Patara, from which, according to one reading, they ran along the coast a little further east to Myra, the usual port of departure for Syria. Ramsay explains that the prevalent favourable wind for a vessel bound for Syria blows steadily in early morning, and dies down towards nightfall, so that there would have been no use in keeping at sea after sundown.

At Patara [or Myra] Paul and his party had to tranship, for their vessel was probably of small tonnage, and only fit to run along the coast. In either port they would have no difficulty in finding some merchantman to take them across to Syria. Accordingly they shifted into one bound for Tyre, and apparently ready to sail. The second part of their voyage took them right out to sea, and their course lay to the west, and then to the south of Cyprus, which Luke mentions as if to remind us of Paul's visit there when he was beginning his missionary work. How much had passed since that day at Paphos [which they might have sighted from the deck]! He had left Paphos with Barnabas and John Mark-where were they? He had sailed away from Cyprus to carry the Gospel among Gentiles; he sails past it, accompanied by a group of these whom he had won for Christ. There he had begun his career; now the omens indicated that possibly its end was near. Many a thought would be in his mind as he looked out over the blue waters and saw the glittering roofs and groves of Paphos.

Tyre was the first port of call, and there the cargo was to be landed. The travellers had to wait till that was done, and probably another one shipped. The seven days' stay is best understood as due to that cause; for we find that Paul re-embarked in the same ship, and went in her as far as Ptolemais, at all events, perhaps to Caesarea.

We note that no brethren are mentioned as having been met at any of the ports of call, and no evangelistic work as having been done in them. The party were simple passengers, who had to shape their movements to suit the convenience of the master of the vessel, and were only in port at night, and off again next morning early. No doubt the leisure at sea was as restorative to them as it often is to jaded workers now.

II. Tyre was a busy seaport then, and in its large population the few disciples would make but little show.

They had to be sought out before they were 'found.' One can feel how eagerly the travellers would search, and how thankfully they would find themselves again among congenial souls. Since Miletus they had had no Christian communion, and the sailors in such a ship as theirs would not be exactly kindred spirits. So that week in Tyre would be a blessed break in the voyage. We hear nothing of visiting the synagogue, nor of preaching to the non-Christian population, nor of instruction to the little Church.

The whole interest of the stay at Tyre is, for Luke, centred on the fact that here too the same message which had met Paul everywhere was repeated to him. It was 'through the Spirit.' Then was Paul flying in the face of divine prohibitions when he held on his way in spite of all that could be said? Certainly not. We have to bring common sense to bear on the interpretation of the words in Act. 21:4, and must suppose that what came from ‘the Spirit’ was the prediction of persecutions waiting Paul, and that the exhortation to avoid these by keeping clear of Jerusalem was the voice of human affection only. Such a blending of clear insight and of mistaken deductions from it is no strange experience.

No word is said as to the effect of the Tyrian Christians’ dissuasion. It had none. Luke mentions it in order to show how continuous was the repetition of the same note, and his silence as to the manner of its reception is eloquent. The parting scene at Tyre is like, and yet very unlike, that at Miletus. In both the Christians accompany Paul to the beach, in both they kneel down and pray. It would scarcely have been a Christian parting without that. In both loving farewells are said, and perhaps waved when words could no longer be heard. But at Tyre, where there were no bonds of old comradeship nor of affection to a spiritual father, there was none of the yearning, clinging love that could not bear to part, none of the hanging on Paul’s neck, none of the deep sorrow of final separation. The delicate shades of difference in two scenes so similar tell of the hand of an eye-witness. The touch that ‘all’ the Tyrian Christians went down to the beach, and took their wives and children with them, suggests that they can have been but a small community, and so confirms the hint given by the use of the word ‘found’ in Act. 21:4.

III. The vessel ran down the coast to Ptolemais where one day’s stop was made, probably to land and ship cargo, if, as is possible, the further journey to Caesarea was by sea.

But it may have been by land; the narrative is silent on that point. At Ptolemais, as at Tyre, there was a little company of disciples, the brevity of the stay with whom, contrasted with the long halt in Caesarea, rather favours the supposition that the ship’s convenience ruled the Apostle’s movements till he reached the latter place. There he found a haven of rest, and, surrounded by loving friends, no wonder that the burdened Apostle lingered there before plunging into the storm of which he had had so many warnings.

The eager haste of the earlier part of the journey, contrasted with the delay in Caesarea at the threshold of his goal, is explained by supposing that at the beginning Paul's one wish had been to get to Jerusalem in time for the Feast, and that at Caesarea he found that, thanks to his earlier haste and his good passages, he had a margin to spare. He did not wish to get to the Holy City much before the Feast.

Two things only are told as occurring in Caesarea-the intercourse with Philip and the renewed warnings about going to Jerusalem. Apparently Philip had been in Caesarea ever since we last heard of him [Act. 8:1 - Act. 8:40]. He had brought his family there, and settled down in the headquarters of Roman government. He had been used by Christ to carry the Gospel to men outside the Covenant, and for a time it seemed as if he was to be the messenger to the Gentiles; but that mission soon ended, and the honour and toil fell to another. But neither did Philip envy Paul, nor did Paul avoid Philip. The Master has the right to settle what each slave has to do, and whether He sets him to high or low office, it matters not.

Philip might have been contemptuous and jealous of the younger man, who had been nobody when he was chosen as one of the Seven, but had so far outrun him now. But no paltry personal feeling marred the Christian intercourse of the two, and we can imagine how much each had to tell the other, with perhaps Cornelius for a third in company, during the considerably extended stay in Caesarea. No doubt Luke too made good use of the opportunity of increasing his knowledge of the first days, and probably derived much of the material for the first chapters of Acts from Philip, either then or at his subsequent longer residence in the same city.

We have heard of the prophet Agabus before [Act. 11:28]. Why he is introduced here, as if a stranger, we cannot tell, and it is useless to guess, and absurd to sniff suspicion of genuineness in the peculiarity. His prophecy is more definite than any that preceded it. That is God's way. He makes things clearer as we go on, and warnings more emphatic as danger approaches. The source of the 'afflictions' was now for the first time declared, and the shape which they would take. Jews would deliver Paul to Gentiles, as they had delivered Paul's Master.

But there the curtain falls. What would the Gentiles do with him? That remained unrevealed. Half the tragedy was shown, and then darkness covered the rest. That was more trying to nerves and courage than full disclosure to the very end would have been. Imagination had just enough to work on, and was stimulated to shape out all sorts of horrors. Similarly incomplete and testing to faith are the glimpses of the future which we get in our own lives. We see but a little way ahead, and then the road takes a sharp turn, and we fancy dreadful shapes hiding round the corner.

Paul’s courage was unmoved both by Agabus’s incomplete prophecy and by the tearful implorings of his companions and of the Caesarean Christians. His pathetic words to them are misunderstood if we take ‘break my heart’ in the modern sense of that phrase, for it really means ‘to melt away my resolution,’ and shows that Paul felt that the passionate grief of his brethren was beginning to do what no fear for himself could do-shake even his steadfast purpose. No more lovely blending of melting tenderness and iron determination has ever been put into words than that cry of his, followed by the great utterance which proclaimed his readiness to bear all things, even death itself, for ‘the name of the Lord Jesus.’ What kindled and fed that noble flame of self-devotion? The love of Jesus Christ, built on the sense that He had redeemed the soul of His servant, and had thereby bought him for His own.

If we feel that we have been ‘bought with a price,’ we too, in our small spheres, shall be filled with that ennobling passion of devoted love which will not count life dear if He calls us to give it up. Let us learn from Paul how to blend the utmost gentleness and tender responsiveness to all love with fixed determination to glorify the Name. A strong will and a loving heart make a marvellously beautiful combination, and should both abide in every Christian.

113) Acts 21:8

Acts

DRAWING NEARER TO THE STORM

PHILIP THE EVANGELIST

Act. 21:8.

The life of this Philip, as recorded, is a very remarkable one. It is divided into two unequal halves: one full of conspicuous service, one passed in absolute obscurity. Like the moon in its second quarter, part of the disc is shining silver and the rest is invisible. Let us put together the notices of him.

He bears a name which makes it probable that he was not a Palestinian Jew, but one of the many who, of Jewish descent, had lived in Gentile lands and contracted Gentile habits and associations. We first hear of him as one of the Seven who were chosen by the Church, at the suggestion of the Apostles, in order to meet the grumbling of that section of the Church, who were called 'Hellenists,' about their people being neglected in the distribution of alms. He stands in that list next to Stephen, who was obviously the leader. Then after Stephen's persecution, he flies from Jerusalem, like the rest of the Church, and comes down to Samaria and preaches there. He did that because circumstances drove him; he had become one of the Seven because his brethren appointed him, but his next step was in obedience to a specific command of Christ. He went and preached the Gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch, and then he was borne away from the new convert, and after the Spirit had put him down at Ashdod he had to tramp all the way up the Palestinian coast, left to the guidance of his own wits, until he came to Caesarea. There he remained for twenty years; and we do not hear a word about him in all that time. But at last Paul and his companions, hurrying to keep the Feast at Jerusalem, found that they had a little time to spare when they reached Caesarea, and so they came to 'the house of Philip the evangelist,' whom we last heard of twenty years before, and spent 'many days' with him. That is the final glimpse that we have of Philip.

Now let us try to gather two or three plain lessons, especially those which depend on that remarkable contrast between the first and the second periods of this man's life. There is, first, a brief space of brilliant service, and then there are long years of obscure toil.

I. The brief space of brilliant service.

The Church was in a state of agitation, and there was murmuring going on because, as I have already said, a section of it thought that their poor were unfairly dealt with by the native-born Jews in the Church. And so the Apostles said: ‘What is the use of your squabbling thus? Pick out any seven that you like, of the class that considers itself aggrieved, and we will put the distribution of these eleemosynary grants into their hands. That will surely stop your mouths. Do you choose whom you please, and we will confirm your choice.’ So the Church selected seven brethren, all apparently belonging to the ‘Grecians’ or Greek-speaking Jews, as the Apostles had directed that they should be, and one of them, not a Jew by birth, but a ‘proselyte of Antioch.’ These men’s partialities would all be in favour of the class to which they belonged, and to secure fair play for which they were elected by it.

Now these seven are never called ‘deacons’ in the New Testament, though it is supposed that they were the first holders of that office. It is instructive to note how their office came into existence. It was created by the Apostles, simply as the handiest way of getting over a difficulty. Is that the notion of Church organisation that prevails among some of our brethren who believe that organisation is everything, and that unless a Church has the three orders of bishops, priests, and deacons, it is not worth calling a Church at all? The plain fact is that the Church at the beginning had no organisation. What organisation it had grew up as circumstances required. The only two laws which governed organisation were, first, ‘One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren’; and second, ‘When the Spirit of the Lord is come upon thee, thou shalt do as occasion shall serve thee.’ Thus these seven were appointed to deal with a temporary difficulty and to distribute alms when necessary; and their office dropped when it was no longer required, as was probably the case when, very soon after, the Jerusalem Church was scattered. Then, by degrees, came elders and deacons. People fancy that there is but one rigid, unalterable type of Church organisation, when the reality is that it is fluent and flexible, and that the primitive Church never was meant to be the pattern according to which, in detail, and specifically, other Churches in different circumstances should be constituted. There are great principles which no organisation must break, but if these be kept, the form is a matter of convenience.

That is the first lesson that I take out of this story. Although it has not much to do with Philip himself, still it is worth saying in these days when a particular organisation of the Church is supposed to be essential to Christian fellowship, and we Nonconformists, who have not the 'orders' that some of our brethren seem to think indispensable, are by a considerable school unchurched, because we are without them. But the primitive Church also was without them.

Still further and more important for us, in these brief years of brilliant service I note the spontaneous impulse which sets a Christian man to do Christian work. It was his brethren that picked out Philip, and said, 'Now go and distribute alms,' but his brethren had nothing to do with his next step. He was driven by circumstances out of Jerusalem, and he found himself in Samaria, and perhaps he remembered how Jesus Christ had said, on the day when He went up into Heaven, 'Ye shall be witnesses unto Me, both in Jerusalem *and in Samaria*, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth.' But whether he remembered that or not, he was here in Samaria, amongst the ancestral enemies of his nation. Nobody told him to preach when he went to Samaria. He had no commission from the Apostles to do so. He did not hold any office in the Church, except that which, according to the Apostles' intention in establishing it, ought to have stopped his mouth from preaching. For they said, when they appointed these seven, 'Let *them* serve tables, and we will give ourselves to the ministry of the word.' But Jesus Christ has a way of upsetting men's restrictions as to the functions of His servants. And so Philip, without a commission, and with many prejudices to stop his mouth, was the first to break through the limitations which confined the message of salvation to the Jews. Because he found himself in Samaria, and they needed Christ there, he did not wait for Peter and James and John to lay their hands upon his head, and say, 'Now you are entitled to speak about Him'; he did not wait for any appointment, but yielded to his own heart, a heart that was full of Jesus Christ, and *must* speak about Him; find he proclaimed the Gospel in that city.

So he has the noble distinction of being the very first Christian man who put a bold foot across the boundary of Judaism, and showed a light to men that were in darkness beyond. Remember he did it as a simple private Christian; uncalled, uncommissioned, unordained by anybody; and he did it because he could not help it, and he never thought to himself, 'I am doing a daring, new thing.' It seemed the most natural thing in the world that he should preach in Samaria. So it would be to us, if we were Christians with the depth of faith and of personal experience which this man had.

There is another lesson that I take from these first busy years of Philip's service. Christ provides wider spheres for men who have been faithful in narrower ones. It was because he had 'won his spurs,' if I may so say, in Samaria, and proved the stuff he was made of, that the angel of the Lord came and said to Philip, 'Go down on the road to Gaza, which is desert. Do not ask now what you are to do when you get there. Go!' So with his sealed orders be went. No doubt he thought to himself, 'Strange that I should be taken from this prosperous work in Samaria, and sent to a desert road, where there is not a single human being!' But he went; and when he struck the point of junction of the road from Samaria with that from Jerusalem, looked about to discover what he had been sent there for. The only thing in sight was one chariot, and he said to himself, 'Ah, that is it,' and he drew near to the chariot, and heard the occupant reading aloud Isaiah's great prophecy. The Ethiopian chamberlain was probably not very familiar with the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which he seems to have been using and, as poor readers often do, helped his comprehension by speaking the words he sees on the page. Philip knew at once that here was the object of his mission, and so 'joined himself to the chariot,' and set himself to his work.

So Christ chooses His agents for further work from those who, out of their own spontaneous love of Him, have done what lay at their hands. 'To him that hath shall be given.' If you are ambitious of a wider sphere, be sure that you fill your narrow one. It will widen quite fast enough for your capacities.

II. Now let me say a word about the long years of obscurity.

Philip went down to Caesarea, and, as I said, he drops out of the story for twenty years. I wonder why it was that when Jesus Christ desired that Cornelius, who lived in Caesarea, should hear the gospel, He did not direct him to Philip, who also was in Caesarea, but bid him send all the way to Joppa to bring Peter thence? I wonder why it was that when Barnabas at Antioch turned his face northwards to seek for young Saul at Tarsus, he never dreamed of turning southwards to call out Philip from Caesarea? I wonder how it came to pass that this man, who at one time looked as if he was going to be the leader in the extension of the Church to the Gentiles, and who, as a matter of fact, was the first, not only in Samaria but on the desert road, to press beyond the narrow bounds of Judaism, was passed over in the further stages by Jesus, and why his brethren passed him over, and left him there all these years in Caesarea, whilst there was so much going on that was the continuation and development of the very movement that he had begun. We do not know why, and it is useless to try to speculate, but we may learn lessons from the fact.

Here is a beautiful instance of the contented acceptance of a lot very much less conspicuous, very much less brilliant, than the early beginnings had seemed to promise. I suppose that there are very few of us but have had, back in the far-away past, moments when we seemed to have opening out before us great prospects of service which have never been realised; and the remembrance of the brief moments of dawning splendour is very apt to make the rest of the life look grey and dull, and common things flat, and to make us sour. We look back and we think, ‘Ah, the gates were opened for me then, but how they have slammed to since! It is hard for me to go on in this lowly condition, and this eclipsed state into which I have been brought, without feeling how different it might have been if those early days had only continued.’ Well, for Philip it was enough that Jesus Christ sent him to the eunuch and did not send him to Cornelius. He took the position that his Master put him in and worked away therein.

And there is a further lesson for us, who, for the most part, have to lead obscure lives. For there was in Philip not only a contented acceptance of an obscure life, but there was a diligent doing of obscure work. Did you notice that one significant little word in the clause that I have taken for my text: ‘We entered into the house of Philip *the evangelist*, which was one of the seven’? Luke does not forget Philip’s former office, but he dwells rather on what his other office was, twenty years afterwards. He was ‘an evangelist’ now, although the evangelistic work was being done in a very quiet corner, and nobody was paying much attention to it. Time was when he had a great statesman to listen to his words. Time was when a whole city was moved by his teaching. Time was when it looked as if he was going to do the work that Paul did. But all these visions were shattered, and he was left to toil for twenty long years in that obscure corner, and not a soul knew anything about his work except the people to whom it was directed and the four unmarried girls at home whom his example had helped to bring to Jesus Christ, and who were ‘prophetesses.’ At the end of the twenty years he is ‘Philip the evangelist.’

There is patient perseverance at unrecompensed, unrecorded, and unnoticed work. ‘Great’ and ‘small’ have nothing to do with the work of Christian people. It does not matter who knows our work or who does not know it, the thing is that *He* knows it. Now the most of us have to do absolutely unnoticed Christian service. Those of us who are in positions like mine have a little more notoriety-and it is no blessing-and a year or two after a man’s voice ceases to sound from a pulpit he is forgotten. What does it matter? ‘Surely I will never forget any of their works.’ And in these advertising days, when publicity seems to be the great good that people in so many cases seek after, and no one is contented to do his little bit of work unless he gets reported in the columns of the newspapers, we may all take example from the behaviour of Philip, and remember the man who began so brilliantly, and for twenty years was hidden, and was ‘the evangelist’ all the time.

III. Now, there is one last lesson that I would draw, and that is the ultimate recognition of the work and the joyful meeting of the workers.

I think it is very beautiful to see that when Paul entered Philip’s house he came into a congenial atmosphere; and although he had been hurrying, out of breath as it were, all the way from Corinth to get to Jerusalem in time for the Feast, he slowed off at once; partly, no doubt, because he found that he was in time, and partly, no doubt, that he felt the congeniality of the society that he met.

So there was no envy in Philip’s heart of the younger brother that had so outrun him. He was quite content to share the fate of pioneers, and rejoiced in the junior who had entered into his labour. ‘One soweth and another reapeth’; he was prepared for that, and rejoiced to hear about what the Lord had done by his brother, though once he had thought it might have been done by him. How they would talk! How much there would be to tell! How glad the old man would be at the younger man’s success!

And there was one sitting by who did not say very much, but had his ears wide open, and his name was Luke. In Philip's long, confidential conversations he no doubt got some of the materials, which have been preserved for us in this book, for his account of the early days of the Church in Jerusalem.

So Philip, after all, was not working in so obscure a corner as he thought. The whole world knows about him. He had been working behind a curtain all the while, and he never knew that 'the beloved physician,' who was listening so eagerly to all he had to tell about the early days, was going to twitch down the curtain and let the whole world see the work that he thought he was doing, all unknown and soon to be forgotten.

And that is what will happen to us all. The curtain will be twitched down, and when it is, it will be good for us if we have the same record to show that this man had-namely, toil for the Master, indifferent to whether men see or do not see; patient labour for Him, coming out of a heart purged of all envy and jealousy of those who have been called to larger and more conspicuous service.

May we not take these many days of quiet converse in Philip's house, when the pioneer and the perfecter of the work talked together, as being a kind of prophetic symbol of the time when all who had a share in the one great and then completed work will have a share in its joy? No matter whether they have dug the foundations or laid the early courses or set the top stone and the shining battlements that crown the structure, they have all their share in the building and their portion in the gladness of the completed edifice, 'that he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.'

114) Acts 21:9-15

Acts

DRAWING NEARER TO THE STORM

Act. 21:1 - Act. 21:15.

Paul’s heroic persistency in disregarding the warnings of ‘bonds and afflictions’ which were pealed into his ears in every city, is the main point of interest in this section. But the vivid narrative abounds with details which fill it with life and colour. We may gather it all round three points-the voyage, Tyre, and Caesarea.

I. The log of the voyage, as given in Act. 21:1 - Act. 21:3, shows the leisurely way of navigation in those days and in that sea.

Obviously the coaster tied up or anchored in port at night. Running down the coast from Miletus, they stayed overnight, first at the small island of Coos, then stretched across the next day to Rhodes, and on the third struck back to the mainland at Patara, from which, according to one reading, they ran along the coast a little further east to Myra, the usual port of departure for Syria. Ramsay explains that the prevalent favourable wind for a vessel bound for Syria blows steadily in early morning, and dies down towards nightfall, so that there would have been no use in keeping at sea after sundown.

At Patara [or Myra] Paul and his party had to tranship, for their vessel was probably of small tonnage, and only fit to run along the coast. In either port they would have no difficulty in finding some merchantman to take them across to Syria. Accordingly they shifted into one bound for Tyre, and apparently ready to sail. The second part of their voyage took them right out to sea, and their course lay to the west, and then to the south of Cyprus, which Luke mentions as if to remind us of Paul’s visit there when he was beginning his missionary work. How much had passed since that day at Paphos [which they might have sighted from the deck]! He had left Paphos with Barnabas and John Mark-where were they? He had sailed away from Cyprus to carry the Gospel among Gentiles; he sails past it, accompanied by a group of these whom he had won for Christ. There he had begun his career; now the omens indicated that possibly its end was near. Many a thought would be in his mind as he looked out over the blue waters and saw the glittering roofs and groves of Paphos.

Tyre was the first port of call, and there the cargo was to be landed. The travellers had to wait till that was done, and probably another one shipped. The seven days’ stay is best understood as due to that cause; for we find that

Paul re-embarked in the same ship, and went in her as far as Ptolemais, at all events, perhaps to Caesarea.

We note that no brethren are mentioned as having been met at any of the ports of call, and no evangelistic work as having been done in them. The party were simple passengers, who had to shape their movements to suit the convenience of the master of the vessel, and were only in port at night, and off again next morning early. No doubt the leisure at sea was as restorative to them as it often is to jaded workers now.

II. Tyre was a busy seaport then, and in its large population the few disciples would make but little show.

They had to be sought out before they were 'found.' One can feel how eagerly the travellers would search, and how thankfully they would find themselves again among congenial souls. Since Miletus they had had no Christian communion, and the sailors in such a ship as theirs would not be exactly kindred spirits. So that week in Tyre would be a blessed break in the voyage. We hear nothing of visiting the synagogue, nor of preaching to the non-Christian population, nor of instruction to the little Church.

The whole interest of the stay at Tyre is, for Luke, centred on the fact that here too the same message which had met Paul everywhere was repeated to him. It was 'through the Spirit.' Then was Paul flying in the face of divine prohibitions when he held on his way in spite of all that could be said? Certainly not. We have to bring common sense to bear on the interpretation of the words in Act. 21:4, and must suppose that what came from 'the Spirit' was the prediction of persecutions waiting Paul, and that the exhortation to avoid these by keeping clear of Jerusalem was the voice of human affection only. Such a blending of clear insight and of mistaken deductions from it is no strange experience.

No word is said as to the effect of the Tyrian Christians' dissuasion. It had none. Luke mentions it in order to show how continuous was the repetition of the same note, and his silence as to the manner of its reception is eloquent. The parting scene at Tyre is like, and yet very unlike, that at Miletus. In both the Christians accompany Paul to the beach, in both they kneel down and pray. It would scarcely have been a Christian parting without that. In both loving farewells are said, and perhaps waved when words could no longer be heard. But at Tyre, where there were no bonds of old comradeship nor of affection to a spiritual father, there was none of the yearning, clinging love that could not bear to part, none of the hanging on Paul's neck, none of the deep sorrow of final separation. The delicate shades of difference in two scenes so similar tell of the hand of an eye-witness. The touch that 'all' the Tyrian Christians went down to the beach, and took their wives and children with them, suggests that they can have been but a small community, and so confirms the hint given by the use of the word 'found' in Act. 21:4.

III. The vessel ran down the coast to Ptolemais where one day's stop was made, probably to land and ship cargo, if, as is possible, the further journey to Caesarea was by sea.

But it may have been by land; the narrative is silent on that point. At Ptolemais, as at Tyre, there was a little company of disciples, the brevity of the stay with whom, contrasted with the long halt in Caesarea, rather favours the supposition that the ship's convenience ruled the Apostle's movements till he reached the latter place. There he found a haven of rest, and, surrounded by loving friends, no wonder that the burdened Apostle lingered there before plunging into the storm of which he had had so many warnings.

The eager haste of the earlier part of the journey, contrasted with the delay in Caesarea at the threshold of his goal, is explained by supposing that at the beginning Paul's one wish had been to get to Jerusalem in time for the Feast, and that at Caesarea he found that, thanks to his earlier haste and his good passages, he had a margin to spare. He did not wish to get to the Holy City much before the Feast.

Two things only are told as occurring in Caesarea-the intercourse with Philip and the renewed warnings about going to Jerusalem. Apparently Philip had been in Caesarea ever since we last heard of him [Act. 8:1 - Act. 8:40]. He had brought his family there, and settled down in the headquarters of Roman government. He had been used by Christ to carry the Gospel to men outside the Covenant, and for a time it seemed as if he was to be the messenger to the Gentiles; but that mission soon ended, and the honour and toil fell to another. But neither did Philip envy Paul, nor did Paul avoid Philip. The Master has the right to settle what each slave has to do, and whether He sets him to high or low office, it matters not.

Philip might have been contemptuous and jealous of the younger man, who had been nobody when he was chosen as one of the Seven, but had so far outrun him now. But no paltry personal feeling marred the Christian intercourse of the two, and we can imagine how much each had to tell the other, with perhaps Cornelius for a third in company, during the considerably extended stay in Caesarea. No doubt Luke too made good use of the opportunity of increasing his knowledge of the first days, and probably derived much of the material for the first chapters of Acts from Philip, either then or at his subsequent longer residence in the same city.

We have heard of the prophet Agabus before [Act. 11:28]. Why he is introduced here, as if a stranger, we cannot tell, and it is useless to guess, and absurd to sniff suspicion of genuineness in the peculiarity. His prophecy is more definite than any that preceded it. That is God's way. He makes things clearer as we go on, and warnings more emphatic as danger approaches. The source of the 'afflictions' was now for the first time declared, and the shape which they would take. Jews would deliver Paul to Gentiles, as they had delivered Paul's Master.

But there the curtain falls. What would the Gentiles do with him? That remained unrevealed. Half the tragedy was shown, and then darkness covered the rest. That was more trying to nerves and courage than full disclosure to the very end would have been. Imagination had just enough to work on, and was stimulated to shape out all sorts of horrors. Similarly incomplete and testing to faith are the glimpses of the future which we get in our own lives. We see but a little way ahead, and then the road takes a sharp turn, and we fancy dreadful shapes hiding round the corner.

Paul's courage was unmoved both by Agabus's incomplete prophecy and by the tearful implorings of his companions and of the Caesarean Christians. His pathetic words to them are misunderstood if we take 'break my heart' in the modern sense of that phrase, for it really means 'to melt away my resolution,' and shows that Paul felt that the passionate grief of his brethren was beginning to do what no fear for himself could do-shake even his steadfast purpose. No more lovely blending of melting tenderness and iron determination has ever been put into words than that cry of his, followed by the great utterance which proclaimed his readiness to bear all things, even death itself, for 'the name of the Lord Jesus.' What kindled and fed that noble flame of self-devotion? The love of Jesus Christ, built on the sense that He had redeemed the soul of His servant, and had thereby bought him for His own.

If we feel that we have been 'bought with a price,' we too, in our small spheres, shall be filled with that ennobling passion of devoted love which will not count life dear if He calls us to give it up. Let us learn from Paul how to blend the utmost gentleness and tender responsiveness to all love with fixed determination to glorify the Name. A strong will and a loving heart make a marvellously beautiful combination, and should both abide in every Christian.

115) Acts 21:16

Acts

AN OLD DISCIPLE

Act. 21:16.

There is something that stimulates the imagination in these mere shadows of men that we meet in the New Testament story. What a strange fate that is to be made immortal by a line in this book- immortal and yet so unknown! We do not hear another word about this host of Paul's, but his name will be familiar to men's ears till the world's end. This figure is drawn in the slightest possible outline, with a couple of hasty strokes of the pencil. But if we take even these few bare words and look at them, feeling that there is a man like ourselves sketched in them, I think we can get a real picture out of them, and that even this dim form crowded into the background of the Apostolic story may have a word or two to say to us.

His name and his birthplace show that he belonged to the same class as Paul, that is, he was a Hellenist, or a Jew by descent, but born on Gentile soil, and speaking Greek. He came from Cyprus, the native island of

Barnabas, who may have been a friend of his. He was an ‘old disciple,’ which does not mean simply that he was advanced in life, but that he was ‘a disciple from the beginning,’ one of the original group of believers. If we interpret the word strictly, we must suppose him to have been one of the rapidly diminishing nucleus, who thirty years or more ago had seen Christ in the flesh, and been drawn to Him by His own words. Evidently the mention of the early date of his conversion suggests that the number of his contemporaries was becoming few, and that there were a certain honour and distinction conceded by the second generation of the Church to the survivors of the primitive band. Then, of course, as one of the earliest believers, he must, by this time, have been advanced in life. A Cypriote by birth, he had emigrated to, and resided in a village on the road to Jerusalem; and must have had means and heart to exercise a liberal hospitality there. Though a Hellenist like Paul he does not seem to have known the Apostle before, for the most probable rendering of the context is that the disciples from Caesarea, who were travelling with the Apostle from that place to Jerusalem, ‘brought us to Mnason,’ implying that this was their first introduction to each other. But though probably unacquainted with the great teacher of the Gentiles-whose ways were looked on with much doubt by many of the Palestinian Christians-the old man, relic of the original disciples as he was, had full sympathy with Paul, and opened his house and his heart to receive him. His adhesion to the Apostle would no doubt carry weight with ‘the many thousands of Jews which believed, and were all zealous of the law,’ and was as honourable to him as it was helpful to Paul.

Now if we put all this together, does not the shadowy figure begin to become more substantial? and does it not preach to us some lessons that we may well take to heart?

I. The first thing which this old disciple says to us out of the misty distance is: Hold fast to your early faith, and to the Christ whom you have known.

Many a year had passed since the days when perhaps the beauty of the Master’s own character and the sweetness of His own words had drawn this man to Him. How much had come and gone since then-Calvary and the Resurrection, Olivet and the Pentecost! His own life and mind had changed from buoyant youth to sober old age. His whole feelings and outlook on the world were different. His old friends had mostly gone. James indeed was still there, and Peter and John remained until this present, but most had fallen on sleep. A new generation was rising round about him, and new thoughts and ways were at work. But one thing remained for him what it had been in the old days, and that was Christ. ‘One generation cometh and another goeth, but the “Christ” abideth for ever.’

‘We all are changed by still degrees;
All but the basis of the soul,’

and the ‘basis of the soul,’ in the truest sense, is that one God-laid foundation on which whosoever buildeth shall never be confounded, nor ever need to change with changing time. Are we building there? and do we find that life, as it advances, but tightens our hold on Jesus Christ, who is our hope?

There is no fairer nor happier experience than that of the old man who has around him the old loves, the old confidences, and some measure of the old joys. But who can secure that blessed unity in his life if he depend on the love and help of even the dearest, or on the light of any creature for his sunshine? There is but one way of making all our days one, because one love, one hope, one joy, one aim binds them all together, and that is by taking the abiding Christ for ours, and abiding in Him all our days. Holding fast by the early convictions does not mean stiffening in them. There is plenty of room for advancement in Christ. No doubt Mnason, when he was first a disciple, knew but very little of the meaning and worth of his Master and His work, compared with what he had learned in all these years. And our true progress consists, not in growing away from Jesus but in growing up into Him, not in passing through and leaving behind our first convictions of Him as Saviour, but in having these verified by the experience of years, deepened and cleared, unfolded and ordered into a larger, though still incomplete, whole. We may make our whole lives helpful to that advancement and blessed shall we be if the early faith is the faith that brightens till the end, and brightens the end. How beautiful it is to see a man, below whose feet time is crumbling away, holding firmly by the Lord whom he has loved and served all his days, and finding that the pillar of cloud, which guided him while he lived, begins to glow in its heart of fire as the shadows fall, and is a pillar of light to guide him when he comes to die! Dear friends, whether you be near the starting or near the prize of your Christian course, ‘cast not away your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward.’ See to it that the ‘knowledge of the Father,’ which is the ‘little children’s’ possession, passes through the strength of youth, and the ‘victory over the world’ into the calm knowledge of Him ‘that is from the beginning,’ wherein the fathers find their earliest convictions deepened and perfected, ‘Grow in grace and in the knowledge’ of Him, whom to know ever so imperfectly is eternal life, whom to know a little better is the true progress for men, whom to know more and more fully is the growth and gladness and glory of the heavens. Look at this shadowy figure that looks out on us here, and listen to his far-off voice ‘exhorting us all that with purpose of heart we should cleave unto the Lord.’

II. But there is another and, as some might think, opposite lesson to be gathered from this outline sketch, namely, The welcome which we should be ready to give to new thoughts and ways.

It is evidently meant that we should note Mnason’s position in the Church as significant in regard to his hospitable reception of the Apostle. We can fancy how the little knot of ‘original disciples’ would be apt to value themselves on their position, especially as time went on, and their ranks were thinned. They would be tempted to suppose that they must needs understand the Master’s meaning a great deal better than those who had never known Christ after the flesh; and no doubt they would be inclined to share in the suspicion with which the thorough-going Jewish party in the Church regarded this Paul, who had never seen the Lord. It would have been very natural for this good old man to have said, ‘I do not like these new-fangled ways. There was nothing of this sort in my younger days. Is it not likely that we, who were at the beginning of the Gospel, should understand the Gospel and the Church’s work without this new man coming to set us right? I am too old to go in with these changes.’ All the more honourable is it that he should have been ready with an open house to shelter the great champion of the Gentile Churches; and, as we may reasonably believe, with an open heart to welcome his teaching. Depend on it, it was not every ‘old disciple’ that would have done as much.

Now does not this flexibility of mind and openness of nature to welcome new ways of work, when united with the persistent constancy in his old creed, make an admirable combination? It is one rare enough at any age, but especially in elderly men. We are always disposed to rend apart what ought never to be separated, the inflexible adherence to a fixed centre of belief, and the freest ranging around the whole changing circumference. The man of strong convictions is apt to grip every trifle of practice and every unimportant bit of his creed with the same tenacity with which he holds its vital heart, and to take obstinacy for firmness, and dogged self-will for faithfulness to truth. The man who welcomes new light, and reaches forward to greet new ways, is apt to delight in having much fluid that ought to be fixed, and to value himself on a 'liberality' which simply means that he has no central truth and no rooted convictions. And as men grow older they stiffen more and more, and have to leave the new work for new hands, and the new thoughts for new brains. That is all in the order of nature, but so much the finer is it when we do see old Christian men who join to their firm grip of the old Gospel the power of welcoming, and at least bidding God-speed to, new thoughts and new workers and new ways of work.

The union of these two characteristics should be consciously aimed at by us all. Hold unchanging, with a grasp that nothing can relax, by Christ our life and our all; but with that tenacity of mind, try to cultivate flexibility too. Love the old, but be ready to welcome the new. Do not invest your own or other people's habits of thought or forms of work with the same sanctity which belongs to the central truths of our salvation; do not let the willingness to entertain new light lead you to tolerate any changes there. It is hard to blend the two virtues together, but they are meant to be complements, not opposites, to each other. The fluttering leaves and bending branches need a firm stem and deep roots. The firm stem looks noblest in its unmoved strength when it is contrasted with a cloud of light foliage dancing in the wind. Try to imitate the persistency and the open mind of that 'old disciple' who was so ready to welcome and entertain the Apostle of the Gentile Churches.

III. But there is still another lesson which, I think, this portrait may suggest, and that is, the beauty that may dwell in an obscure life.

There is nothing to be said about this old man but that he was a disciple. He had done no great thing for his Lord. No teacher or preacher was he. No eloquence or genius was in him. No great heroic deed or piece of saintly endurance is to be recorded of him, but only this, that he had loved and followed Christ all his days. And is not that record enough? It is his blessed fate to live for ever in the world's memory, with only that one word attached to his name-a disciple.

The world may remember very little about us a year after we are gone. No thought, no deed may be connected with our names but in some narrow circle of loving hearts. There may be no place for us in any record written with a man's pen. But what does that matter, if our names, dear friends, are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, with this for sole epitaph, 'a disciple'? That single phrase is the noblest summary of a life. A thinker? a hero? a great man? a millionaire? No, a 'disciple.' That says all. May it be your epitaph and mine!

What Mnason could do he did. It was not his vocation to go into the 'regions beyond,' like Paul; to guide the Church, like James; to put his remembrances of his Master in a book, like Matthew; to die for Jesus, like Stephen. But he could open his house for Paul and his company, and so take his share in their work. 'He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward.' He that with understanding and sympathy welcomes and sustains the prophet, shows thereby that he stands on the same spiritual level, and has the makings of a prophet in him, though he want the intellectual force and may never open his lips to speak the burden of the Lord. Therefore he shall be one in reward as he is in spirit. The old law in Israel is the law for the warfare of Christ's soldiers. 'As his part is that goeth down to the battle, so shall his part be that abideth by the stuff: they shall part alike.' The men in the rear who guard the camp and keep the communications open, may deserve honours, and crosses, and prize-money as much as their comrades who led the charge that cut through the enemy's line and scattered their ranks. It does not matter, so far as the real spiritual worth of the act is concerned, what we do, but only why we do it. All deeds are the same which are done from the same motive and with the same devotion; and He who judges, not by our outward actions but by the springs from which they come, will at last bracket together as equals many who were widely separated here in the form of their service and the apparent magnitude of their work.

‘She hath done what she could.’ Her power determined the measure and the manner of her work. One precious thing she had, and only one, and she broke her one rich possession that she might pour the fragrant oil over His feet. Therefore her useless deed of utter love and uncalculating self-sacrifice was crowned by praise from His lips whose praise is our highest honour, and the world is still ‘filled with the odour of the ointment.’

So this old disciple’s hospitality is strangely immortal, and the record of it reminds us that the smallest service done for Jesus is remembered and treasured by Him. Men have spent their lives to win a line in the world’s chronicles which are written on sand, and have broken their hearts because they failed; and this passing act of one obscure Christian, in sheltering a little company of travel-stained wayfarers, has made his name a possession for ever. ‘Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not’; but let us fill our little corners, doing our unnoticed work for love of our Lord, careless about man’s remembrance or praise, because sure of Christ’s, whose praise is the only fame, whose remembrance is the highest reward. ‘God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love.’

116) Acts 21:27-39

Acts

PAUL IN THE TEMPLE

Act. 21:27 - Act. 21:39.

The stronger a man’s faith, the greater will and should be his disposition to conciliate. Paul may seem to have stretched consideration for weak brethren to its utmost, when he consented to the proposal of the Jerusalem elders to join in performing the vow of a Nazarite, and to appear in the Temple for that purpose. But he was quite consistent in so doing; for it was not Jewish ceremonial to which he objected, but the insisting on it as necessary. For himself, he lived as a Jew, except in his freedom of intercourse with Gentiles. No doubt he knew that the death-warrant of Jewish ceremonial had been signed, but he could leave it to time to carry out the sentence. The one thing which he was resolved should not be was its imposition on Gentile Christians. Their road to Jesus was not through Temple or synagogue. As for Jewish Christians, let them keep to the ritual if they chose. The conciliatory plan recommended by the elders, though perfectly consistent with Paul's views and successful with the Jewish Christians, roused non-Christian Jews as might have been expected.

This incident brings out very strikingly the part played by each of the two factors in carrying out God's purposes for Paul. They are unconscious instruments, and co-operation is the last thing dreamed of on either side; but Jew and Roman together work out a design of which they had not a glimpse.

I. Note the charge against Paul.

The 'Jews from Asia' knew him by sight, as they had seen him in Ephesus and elsewhere; and possibly some of them had been fellow-passengers with him from Miletus. No wonder that they construed his presence in the Temple into an insult to it. If Luther or John Knox had appeared in St. Peter's, he would not have been thought to have come as a worshipper. Paul's teaching may very naturally have created the impression in hot-tempered partisans, who could not draw distinctions, that he was the enemy of Temple and sacrifice.

It has always been the vice of religious controversy to treat inferences from heretical teaching, which appear plain to the critics, as if they were articles of the heretic's belief. These Jewish zealots practised a very common method when they fathered on Paul all which they supposed to be involved in his position. Their charges against him are partly flat lies, partly conclusions drawn from misapprehension of his position, partly exaggeration, and partly hasty assumptions. He had never said a word which could be construed as 'against the people.' He had indeed preached that the law was not for Gentiles, and was not the perfect revelation which brought salvation, and he had pointed to Jesus as in Himself realising all that the Temple shadowed; but such teaching was not 'against' either, but rather for both, as setting both in their true relation to the whole process of revelation. He had not brought 'Greeks' into the Temple, not even the one

Greek whom malice multiplied into many. When passion is roused, exaggerations and assumptions soon become definite assertions. The charges are a complete object-lesson in the baser arts of religious [!] partisans; and they have been but too faithfully reproduced in all ages. Did Paul remember how he had been ‘consenting’ to the death of Stephen on the very same charges? How far he has travelled since that day!

II. Note the immediately kindled flame of popular bigotry.

The always inflammable population of Jerusalem was more than usually excitable at the times of the Feasts, when it was largely increased by zealous worshippers from a distance. Noble teaching would have left the mob as stolid as it found them; but an appeal to the narrow prejudices which they thought were religion was a spark in gunpowder, and an explosion was immediate. It is always easier to rouse men to fight for their ‘religion’ than to live by it. Jehu was proud of what he calls his ‘zeal for the Lord,’ which was really only ferocity with a mask on. The yelling crowd did not stop to have the charges proved. That they were made was enough. In Scotland people used to talk of ‘Jeddart justice,’ which consisted in hanging a man first, and trying him leisurely afterwards. It was usually substantially just when applied to moss-troopers, but does not do so well when administered to Apostles.

Notice the carefulness to save the Temple from pollution, which is shown by the furious crowds dragging Paul outside before they kill him. They were not afraid to commit murder, but they were horror-struck at the thought of a breach of ceremonial etiquette. Of course! for when religion is conceived of as mainly a matter of outward observances, sin is reduced to a breach of these. We are all tempted to shift the centre of gravity in our religion, and to make too much of ritual etiquette. Kill Paul if you will, but get him outside the sacred precincts first. The priests shut the doors to make sure that there should be no profanation, and stopped inside the Temple, well pleased that murder should go on at its threshold. They had better have rescued the victim. Time was when the altar was a sanctuary for the criminal who could grasp its horns, but now its ministers wink at bloodshed with secret approval. Paul could easily have been killed in the crowd, and no responsibility for his death have clung to any single hand. No doubt that was the cowardly calculation which they made, and they were well on the way to carry it out when the other factor comes into operation.

III. Note the source of deliverance.

The Roman garrison was posted in the fortress of Antonia, which commanded the Temple from a higher level at the north-west angle of the enclosure. Tidings 'came *up*' to the officer in command, Claudius Lysias by name [Act. 23:26], that all Jerusalem was in confusion. With disciplined promptitude he turned out a detachment and 'ran down upon them.' The contrast between the quiet power of the legionaries and the noisy feebleness of the mob is striking. The best qualities of Roman sway are seen in this tribune's unhesitating action, before which the excited mob cowers in fright. They 'left beating of Paul,' as knowing that a heavier hand would fall on them for rioting. With swift decision Lysias acts first and talks afterwards, securing the man who was plainly the centre of disturbance, and then having got him fast with two chains on him, inquiring who he was, and what he had been doing.

Then the crowd breaks loose again in noisy and contradictory explanations, all at the top of their voices, and each drowning the other. Clearly the bulk of them could not answer either of Lysias' questions, though they could all bellow 'Away with him!' till their throats were sore. It is a perfect picture of a mob, which is always ferocious and volubly explanatory in proportion to its ignorance. One man kept his head in the hubbub, and that was Lysias, who determined to hold his prisoner till he did know something about him. So he ordered him to be taken up into the castle; and as the crowd saw their prey escaping they made one last fierce rush, and almost swept away the soldiers, who had to pick Paul up and carry him. Once on the stairs leading to the castle they were clear of the crowd, which could only send a roar of baffled rage after them, and to this the stolid legionaries were as deaf as were their own helmets.

The part here played by the Roman authority is that which it performs throughout the Acts. It shields infant Christianity from Jewish assailants, like the wolf which, according to legend, suckled Romulus. The good and the bad features of Roman rule were both valuable for that purpose. Its contempt for ideas, and above all for speculative differences in a religion which it regarded as a hurtful superstition, its unsympathetic incapacity for understanding its subject nations, its military discipline, its justice, which though often tainted was yet better than the partisan violence which it coerced, all helped to make it the defender of the first Christians. Strange that Rome should shelter and Jerusalem persecute!

Mark, too, how blindly men fulfil God's purposes. The two bitter antagonists, Jew and Roman, seem to themselves to be working in direct opposition; but God is using them both to carry out His design. Paul has to be got to Rome, and these two forces are combined by a wisdom beyond their ken, to carry him thither. Two cogged wheels turning in opposite directions fit into each other, and grind out a resultant motion, different from either of theirs. These soldiers and that mob were like pawns on a chessboard, ignorant of the intentions of the hand which moves them.

IV. Note the calm courage of Paul.

He too had kept his head, and though bruised and hustled, and having but a minute or two beforehand looked death in the face, he is ready to seize the opportunity to speak a word for his Master. Observe the quiet courtesy of his address, and his calm remembrance of the tribune's right to prevent his speaking. There is nothing more striking in Paul's character than his self-command and composure in all circumstances. This ship could rise to any wave, and ride in any storm. It was not by virtue of happy temperament but of a fixed faith that his heart and mind were kept in perfect peace. It is not easy to disturb a man who counts not his life dear if only he may complete his course. So these two men front each other, and it is hard to tell which has the quieter pulse and the steadier hand. The same sources of tranquil self-control and calm superiority to fortune which stood Paul in such good stead are open to us. If God is our rock and our high tower we shall not be moved.

The tribune had for some unknown reason settled in his mind that the Apostle was a well-known 'Egyptian,' who had headed a band of 'Sicarii' or 'dagger-men,' of whose bloody doings Josephus tells us. How the Jews should have been trying to murder such a man Lysias does not seem to have considered. But when he heard the courteous, respectful Greek speech of the Apostle he saw at once that he had got no uncultured ruffian to deal with, and in answer to Paul's request and explanation gave him leave to speak. That has been thought an improbability. But strong men recognise each other, and the brave Roman was struck with something in the tone and bearing of the brave Jew which made him instinctively sure that no harm would come of the permission. There ought to be that in the demeanour of a Christian which is as a testimonial of character for him, and sways observers to favourable constructions.

117) Acts 22:6-16

Acts

PAUL ON HIS OWN CONVERSION

Act. 22:6 - Act. 22:16.

We follow Paul's example when we put Jesus' appearance to him from heaven in a line with His appearances to the disciples on earth. 'Last of all, He appeared to me also.' But it does not follow that the appearances are all of the same kind, or that Paul thought that they were. They were all equally real, equally 'objective,' equally valid proofs of Jesus' risen life. On two critical occasions Paul told the story of Jesus' appearance as his best 'Apologia.' 'I saw and heard Him, and that revolutionised my life, and made me what I am.' The two accounts are varied, as the hearers were, but the differences are easily reconciled, and the broad facts are the same in both versions, and in Luke's rendering in Luk. 9:1 - Luk. 9:62

A favourite theory in some quarters is that Paul's conversion was not sudden, but that misgivings had been working in him ever since Stephen's death. Surely that view is clean against facts. Persecuting its adherents to the death is a strange result of dawning belief in 'this way.' Paul may be supposed to have known his state of mind as well as a critic nineteen centuries off does, and he had no doubt that he set out from Jerusalem a bitter hater of the convicted impostor Jesus, and stumbled into Damascus a convinced disciple because he had seen and heard Him. That is his account of the matter, which would not have been meddled with if the meddlers had not taken offence at 'the supernatural element.' We note the emphasis which

Paul puts on the suddenness of the appearance, implying that the light burst all in a moment. A little bit of personal reminiscence comes up in his specifying the time as ‘about noon,’ the brightest hour. He remembers how the light outblazed even the blinding brilliance of a Syrian noontide. He insists too on the fact that his senses were addressed, both eye and ear. He saw the glory of that light, and heard the voice. He does not say here that he saw Jesus, but that he did so is clear from Ananias’ words, ‘to see the Righteous One’ [Act. 22:14], and from 1Co. 15:8. Further, he makes it very emphatic that the vision was certified as no morbid fancy of his own, but yet was marked as meant for him only, by the double fact that his companions did share in it, but only in part. They did see the light, but not ‘the Righteous One’; they did hear the sound of the voice, but not so as to know what it said. The difference between merely hearing a noise and discerning the sense of the words is probably marked by the construction in the Greek, and is certainly to be understood.

The blaze struck all the company to the ground [Act. 26:14]. Prone on the earth, and probably with closed eyes, their leader heard his own name twice sounded, with appeal, authority, and love in the tones. The startling question which followed not only pierced conscience, and called for a reasonable vindication of his action, but flashed a new light on it as being persecution which struck at this unknown heavenly speaker. So the first thought in Saul’s mind is not about himself or his doings but about the identity of that Speaker. Awe, if not actual worship, is expressed in addressing Him as Lord. Wonder, with perhaps some foreboding of what the answer would be, is audible in the question, ‘Who art Thou?’ Who can imagine the shock of the answer to Saul’s mind? Then the man whom he had thought of as a vile apostate, justly crucified and not risen as his dupes dreamed, lived in heaven, knew him, Saul, and all that he had been doing, was ‘apparelled in celestial light,’ and yet in heavenly glory was so closely identified with these poor people whom he had been hunting to death that to strike them was to hurt Him! A bombshell had burst, shattering the foundation of his fortifications. A deluge had swept away the ground on which he had stood. His whole life was revolutionised. Its most solid elements were dissolved into vapour, and what he had thought misty nonsense was now the solid thing. To find a ‘why’ for his persecuting was impossible, unless he had said [what in effect he did say], ‘I did it ignorantly.’ When a man has a glimpse of Jesus exalted to heaven, and is summoned by Him to give a reason for his life of alienation, that life looks very different from what it did, when seen by dimmer light. Clothes are passable by candle-light that look very shabby in sunshine. When Jesus comes to us, His first work is to set us to judge our past, and no man can muster up respectable answers to His question, ‘Why?’ for all sin is unreasonable, and nothing but obedience to Him can vindicate itself in His sight.

Saul threw down his arms at once. His characteristic impetuosity and eagerness to carry out his convictions impelled him to a surrender as complete as his opposition. The test of true belief in the ascended Jesus is to submit the will to Him, to be chiefly desirous of knowing His will, and ready to do it. ‘Who art Thou, Lord?’ should be followed by ‘What shall I do, Lord?’

Blind Saul, led by the hand into the city which he had expected to enter so differently, saw better than ever before. ‘The glory of that light’ blinds us to things seen, but makes us able to see afar off the only realities, the things unseen. Speaking to Jews, as here, Paul described Ananias as a devout adherent of the law, in order to conciliate them and to suggest his great principle that a Christian was not an apostate but a complete Jew. To Agrippa he drops all reference to Ananias as irrelevant, and throws together the words on the road and the commission received through Ananias as equally Christ’s voice. Here he lays stress on his agency in restoring sight, and on his message as including two points-that it was ‘the God of our fathers’ who had ‘appointed’ the vision, and that the purpose of the vision was to make Saul a witness to all men. The bearing of this on the conciliatory aim of the discourse is plain. We note also the precedence given in the statement of the particulars of the vision to ‘knowing his will’-that was the end for which the light and the voice were given. Observe too how the twofold evidence of sense is signalised, both in the reference to seeing the Righteous One and to hearing His voice and in the commission to witness what Saul had seen and heard. The personal knowledge of Jesus, however attained, constitutes the qualification and the obligation to be His witness. And the convincing testimony is when we can say, as we all can say if we are Christ’s, ‘That which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that . . . declare we unto you.’

118) Acts 22:17-30

Acts

ROME PROTECTS PAUL

Act. 22:17 - Act. 22:30.

The threatened storm soon burst on Paul in Jerusalem. On the third day after his arrival he began the ceremonial recommended by the elders to prove his adherence to the law. Before the seven days during which it lasted were over the riot broke out, and he was saved from death only by the military tribune hurrying down to the Temple and dragging him from the mob.

The tribune’s only care was to stamp out a riot, and whether the victim was ‘that Egyptian’ or not, to prevent his being murdered. He knew nothing, and cared as little, about the grounds of the tumult, but he was not going to let a crowd of turbulent Jews take the law into their own hands, and flout the majesty of Roman justice. So he lets the nearly murdered man say his say and keeps the mob off him. It was a strange scene-below, the howling zealots; above, on the stairs, the Christian apologists guarded from his countrymen by a detachment of legionaries; and the assembly presided over by a Roman tribune.

It is very characteristic of Paul that he thought that his own conversion was the best argument that he could use with his fellow-Israelites. So he tells his story, and this section strikes into his speech at the point where he is coming to very thin ice indeed, and is about to vindicate his work among the Gentiles by declaring that it was done in obedience to a command from heaven. We need not discuss the date of the trance, whether it was in his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion or, as Ramsay strongly argues, is to be put at the visit mentioned in Act. 11:30 and Act. 12:25.

We note the delicate, conciliatory skill with which he brings out that his conversion had not made him less a devout worshipper in the Temple, by specifying it as the scene of the trance, and prayer as his occupation then. The mention of the Temple also invested the vision with sanctity.

Very noticeable too is the avoidance of the name of Jesus, which would have stirred passion in the crowd. We may also observe that the first words of our Lord, as given by Paul, did not tell him whither he was to go, but simply bade him leave Jerusalem. The full announcement of the mission to the Gentiles was delayed both by Jesus to Paul and by Paul to his brethren. He was to 'get quickly out of Jerusalem'; that was tragic enough. He was to give up working for his own people, whom he loved so well. And the reason was their rooted incredulity and their hatred of him. Other preachers might do something with them, but Paul could not. 'They will not receive testimony of *thee*.'

But the Apostle's heart clung to his nation, and not even his Lord's command was accepted without remonstrance. His patriotism led him to the verge of disobedience, and encouraged him to put in his 'But, Lord,' with boldness that was all but presumption. He ventures to suggest a reason why the Jews *would*, as he thinks, receive his testimony. They knew what he had been, and they must bethink themselves that there must be something real and mighty in the power which had turned his whole way of thinking and living right round, and made him love all that he had hated, and count all that he had prized 'but dung.' The remonstrance is like Moses', like Jeremiah's, like that of many a Christian set to work that goes against the grain, and called to relinquish what he would fain do, and do what he would rather leave undone.

But Jesus does not take His servants' remonstrances amiss, if only they will make them frankly to Him, and not keep muttering them under their breath to themselves. Let us say all that is in our hearts. He will listen, and clear away hesitations, and show us our path, and make us willing to walk in it. Jesus did not discuss the matter with Paul, but reiterated the command, and made it more pointed and clear; and then Paul stopped objecting and yielded his will, as we should do. 'When he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done.' The Apostle had kept from the obnoxious word as long as he could, but it had to come, and he tells the enraged listeners at last, without circumlocution, that he is the Apostle of the Gentiles, that Jesus has made him so against his will, and that therefore he must do the work appointed him, though his heart-strings crack with seeming to be cold to Israel.

The burst of fury, expressed in gestures which anybody who has ever seen two Easterns quarrelling can understand, looks fitter for a madhouse than an audience of men in their senses. They yelled and tore their garments [and their beards, no doubt], and clutched handfuls of dust and tossed it in the air, like Shimei cursing David. What a picture of frenzied hate! And what was it all for? Because Gentiles were to be allowed to share in Israel's privileges. And what were the privileges which they thus jealously monopolised? The favour and protection of the God who, as their own prophets had taught them, was the God of the whole earth, and revealed Him to Israel that Israel might reveal Him to the world.

The less they entered into the true possession of their heritage, the more savagely they resented sharing it with the nations. The more their prerogative became a mere outward thing, the more they snarled at any one who proposed to participate in it. To seek to keep religious blessings to one's self is a conclusive proof that they are not really possessed. If we have them we shall long to impart them. Formal religionists always dislike missionary enterprise.

The tribune no doubt had been standing silently watching, in his strong, contemptuous Roman way, the paroxysm of rage sweeping over his troublesome charge. Of course he did not understand a word that the culprit had been saying, and could not make out what had produced the outburst. He felt that there was something here that he had not fathomed, and that he must get to the bottom of. It was useless to lay hold of any of these shrieking maniacs and try to get a reasonable word out of them. So he determined to see what he could make of the orator, who had already astonished him by traces of superior education, and was evidently no mere vulgar firebrand or sedition-monger. He might have tried gentler means of extracting the truth than scourging, but that process of 'examination,' as it is flatteringly called, was common, and has not been antiquated for so many centuries that we need wonder at this Roman officer using it.

Paul submitted, and was already tied up to some whipping-post, in an attitude which would expose his back to the lash, when he quietly dropped, to the inferior officer detailed to superintend the flogging, the question which fell like a bombshell. Possibly the Apostle had not known what the soldiers were ordered to do with him till he was tied up. We cannot tell why he did not plead his citizenship sooner. But we may remember that at Philippi he did not plead it at all till after the scourging. Why he delayed so long in the present instance, and why he at last spoke the magic words, ‘I am a Roman citizen,’ we cannot say. But we may gather the two lessons that Christ’s servants are often wise in submitting silently to wrongs, and that they are within their rights in availing themselves of legal defences against illegal treatment. Whether silence or protest is the more expedient must be determined in each case by conscience, guided by the sought-for guidance of the enlightening Spirit. The determining consideration should be, Which course will best glorify my Master?

The information brought the tribune in haste to the place where the Apostle was still tied up. The tables were turned indeed. His brief answer, ‘Yea,’ was accepted at once, for to claim the sacred name of Roman falsely would have been too dangerous, and no doubt Paul’s bearing impressed the tribune with a conviction of his truthfulness. A hint of contempt and doubt lies in his remark that he had paid dearly for the franchise, which remark implies, ‘Where did a poor man like you get the money then?’ A shameful trade in selling citizens’ rights was carried on in the degraded days of the Empire by underlings at court, and no doubt the tribune had procured his citizenship in that way. Paul’s answer explains that he was born free, and so was above his questioner.

That discovery put an end to all thought of scourging. Paul was at once liberated, and the tribune, terrified that he might be reported, seeks to repair his error and changes his tactics, retaining Paul for safety in the castle, and summoning the Sanhedrim, to try to find out more of this strange affair through them. The great council of the nation had sunk low indeed when it had to obey the call of a Roman soldier.

Thus once more, as so continually in the Acts, Rome is friendly to the Christian teachers and saves them from Jewish fury. To point out that early protection and benevolent sufferance is one purpose of the whole book. The days of Roman persecution had not yet come. The Empire was favourable to Christianity, not only because its officials were too proud to take interest in petty squabbles between two sects of Jews about their absurd superstitions, but reasons of political wisdom combined with supercilious indifference to bring about this attitude.

The strong hand of Rome, too, if it crushed national independence, also suppressed violence, kept men from flying at each other's throats, spread peace over wide lands, and made the journeyings of Paul and the planting of the early Christian Churches possible. It was a God-appointed, though an imperfect, and in some aspects, mischievous unity, and prepared the way for that higher form of unity realised in the Church which finally shattered the coarser Empire which had at first sheltered it. The Caesars were doing God's work when they were following their own lust of empire. They were yoked to Christ's chariot, though unwitting and unwilling. To them, as truly as to Cyrus, might the divine voice have said, 'I girded thee, though thou hast not known Me.'

119) Acts 23:11

Acts

CHRIST'S WITNESSES

Act. 23:11.

It had long been Paul's ambition to 'preach the Gospel to you that are at Rome also.' His settled policy, as shown by this Book of the Acts, was to fly at the head, to attack the great centres of population. We trace him from Antioch to Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus; and of course Rome was the goal, where a blow struck at the heart might reverberate through the empire. So he had planned for it, and prayed about it, and thought about it, and spoken about it. But his wish was accomplished, as our prayers and purposes so often are, in a manner very strange to him. A popular riot in Jerusalem, a half-friendly arrest by the contemptuous impartiality of a Roman officer, a final rejection by the Sanhedrim, a prison in Caesarea, an appeal to Caesar, a weary voyage, a shipwreck: this was the chain of circumstances which fulfilled his desire, and brought him to the imperial city.

My text comes at the crisis of his fate. He has just been rejected by his people, and for the moment is in safety in the castle under the charge of the Roman garrison. One can fancy how, as he lay there in the barrack that night, he felt that he had come to a turning-point; and the thoughts were busy in his mind, ‘Is this for life or for death? Am I to do any more work for Christ, or am I silenced for ever?’-’And the Lord stood by him and said, Be of good cheer, Paul!’ The divine message assured him that he should live; it testified of Christ’s approbation of his past, and promised him that, in recompense for that past, he should have wider work to do. So he passed to the unknown future quietly; and went on his way with the Master by his side.

Now, dear friends, it seems to me that in these great words there lie lessons applying to all Christian people as truly, though in different fashion, as they did to the Apostle, and having an especial bearing on that great enterprise of Christian missions, with which I would connect them in this sermon. I desire, then, to draw out the lessons which seem to me to lie under the surface of this great promise.

I. To live ought to be, for a Christian, to witness.

The promise in form is a promise of continued testimony-bearing; in its substance, one might say, it is a promise of continued life. Paul is cheered, not by being told that the wrath of the enemy will launch itself at his head in vain, and that he will bear a charmed life through it all, but by being told that there is work for him to do yet. That is the shape in which the promise of life is held out to him. So it always ought to be; a Christian man’s life ought to be one continuous witnessing for that Lord Christ who stood by the Apostle in the castle at Jerusalem.

Let me just urge this upon you for a few moments. It seems to me that to raise up witnesses for Himself is, in one aspect, the very purpose of all Christ’s work. You and I, dear brethren, if we have any living hold of that Lord, have received Him into our hearts, not only in order that for ourselves we may rejoice in Him, but in order that, for ourselves rejoicing in Him, we may ‘show forth the virtues of Him who hath called us out of darkness into His marvellous light.’ There is no creature so great as that he is not regarded as a means to a further end; and there is no creature so small but that he has the right to claim happiness and blessing from the Hand that made him. Jesus Christ has drawn us to Himself, that we may know the sweetness of His presence, the cleansing of His blood, the stirring and impulse of His indwelling life in us for our own joy and our own completion, but also that we may be His witnesses and weapons, according to that great word: ‘This people have I formed for Myself. They shall shew forth My praise.’

God has ‘shined into our hearts in order that we may give,’ reflecting the beams that fall upon them, ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ.’ Brother and sister, if you have the Christian life in your souls, one purpose of your possessing it is that you may bear witness for Him.

Again, such witness-bearing is the result of all true, deep, Christian life. All life longs to manifest itself in action. Every conviction that a man has seeks for utterance; especially so do the beliefs that go deepest and touch the moral and spiritual nature and relationships of a man. He that perceives them is thereby impelled to desire to utter them. There can be no real, deep possession of that great truth of the Gospel which we profess to be the foundation of our personal lives, unless we have felt the impulse to spread the name and to declare the sweetness of the Lord. The very same impulse that makes the loving heart carve the beloved name on the smooth rind of the tree makes it sweet to one who is in real touch and living fellowship with Jesus Christ to speak about Him. O brother! *there* is a very sharp test for us. I know that there are hundreds of professing Christians-decent, respectable sort of people, with a tepid, average amount of Christian faith and principle in them-who never felt that overmastering desire, ‘I *must* let this thing out through my lips.’ Why? Why do they not feel it? Because their own possession of Christ is so superficial and partial. Jeremiah’s experience will be repeated where there is vigorous Christian life: ‘Thy word shut up in my bones was like a fire’-that burned itself through all the mass that was laid upon it, and ate its way victoriously into the light-’and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.’ Christian men and women, do you know anything of that o’er-mastering impulse? If you do not, look to the depth and reality of your Christian profession.

Again, this witnessing is the condition of all strong life. If you keep nipping the buds off a plant you will kill it. If you never say a word to a human soul about your Christianity, your Christianity will tend to evaporate. Action confirms and strengthens convictions; speech deepens conviction; and although it is possible for any one- and some of us ministers are in great danger of making the possibility a reality-to talk away his religion, for one of us who loses it by speaking too much about it, there are twenty that damage it by speaking too little. Shut it up, and it will be like some wild creature put into a cellar, fast locked and unventilated; when you open the door it will be dead. Shut it up, as so many of our average Christian professors and members of our congregations and churches do, and when you come to take it out, it will be like some volatile perfume that has been put into a vial and locked away in a drawer and forgotten; there will be nothing left but an empty bottle, and a rotten cork. Speak your faith if you would have your faith strengthened. Muzzle it, and you go a long way to kill it. You are witnesses, and you cannot blink the obligation nor shirk the duties without damaging that in yourselves to which you are to witness.

Further, this task of witnessing for Christ can be done by all kinds of life. I do not need to dwell upon the distinction between the two great methods which open themselves out before every one of us. They do so; for direct work in speaking the name of Jesus Christ is possible for every Christian, whoever he or she is, however weak, ignorant, uninfluential, with howsoever narrow a circle. There is always somebody that God means to be the audience of His servant whenever that servant speaks of Christ. Do you not know that there are people in this world, as wives, children, parents, friends of different sorts, who would listen to you more readily than they would listen to any one else speaking about Jesus Christ? Friend, have you utilised these relationships in the interests of that great Name, and in the highest interests of the persons that sustain them to you, and of yourselves who sustain these to them?

And then there is indirect work that we can all do in various ways, I do not mean only by giving money, though of course that is important, but I mean all the manifold ways in which Christian people can show their sympathy with, and their interest in, the various forms in which adventurous, chivalrous, enterprising Christian benevolence expresses itself. It was an old law in Israel that ‘as his part was that went down into the battle, so should his part be that tarried by the stuff.’ When victory was won and the spoil came to be shared, the men who had stopped behind and looked after the base of operations and kept open the communications received the same portion as the man that, in the front rank of the battle, had rushed upon the spears of the Amalekites. Why? Because from the same motive they had been co-operant to the same great end. The Master has taken up that very thought, and has applied it in relation to the indirect work of His people, when He says, ‘He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward.’ The motive is the same; therefore the essential character of the act is the same; therefore the recompense is identical. You can witness for Christ directly, if you can say-and you can all say if you like-’We have found the Messias,’ and you can witness for Christ by casting yourselves earnestly into sympathy with and, so far as possible, help to the work that your brethren are doing. Dear friends, I beseech you to remember that we are all of us, if we are His followers, bound in our humble measure and degree, and with a reverent apprehension of the gulf between us and Him, still to take up His words and say, ‘To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I might bear witness to the truth.’

II. There is a second thought that I would suggest from these words, and that is that secular events are ordered with a view to this witnessing.

Take the case before us. Here are two independent and hostile powers; on the one hand the bigoted Jewish Sanhedrim, hating the Roman yoke; and on the other hand the haughty and cruel pressure of that yoke on a recalcitrant and reluctant people: and these two internecine enemies are working on their own lines, each very willing to thwart the other, Mechanicians talk of the ‘composition of forces,’ by which two pressures acting at right angles to each other on a given object, impart to it a diagonal motion. The Sanhedrim on the one side, representing Judaism, and the captain of the castle on the other, representing the Roman power, work into each other’s hands, although neither of them knows it; and work out the fulfilment of a purpose that is hidden from them both.

No doubt it would be a miserably inadequate account of things to say that the Roman Empire came into existence for the sake of propagating Christianity. No doubt it is always dangerous to account for any phenomenon by the ends which, to our apprehension, it serves. But at the same time the study of the purposes which a given thing, being in existence, serves, and the study of the forces which brought it into existence, ought to be combined, and when combined, they present a double reason for adoring that great Providence which ‘makes the wrath of men to praise’ it, and uses for moral and spiritual ends the creatures that exist, the events that emerge, and even the godless doings of godless men.

So here we have a standing example of the way in which, like silk-worms that are spinning threads for a web that they have no notion of, the deeds of men that think not so are yet grasped and twined together by Jesus Christ, the Lord of providence, so as to bring about the realisation of His great purposes. And that is always so, more or less clearly.

For instance, if we wish to understand our own lives, do not let us dwell upon the superficialities of joy or sorrow, gain or loss, but let us get down to the depth, and see that all these externals have two great purposes in view-first, that we may be made like our Lord, as the Scripture itself says, ‘That we may be partakers of His holiness,’ and then that we may bear our testimony to His grace and love. Oh, if we would only look at life from that point of view, we should be brought to a stand less often at what we choose to call the mysteries of providence! Not enjoyment, not sorrow, but our perfecting in godliness and of the increase of our power and opportunities to bear witness to Him, are the intention of all that befalls us.

I need not speak about how this same principle must be applied, by every man who believes in a divine providence, to the wider events of the world’s history, I need not dwell upon that, nor will your time allow me to do it, but one word I should like to say, and that is that surely the two facts that we, as Christians, possess, as we believe, the pure faith, and that we, as Englishmen, are members of a community whose influence is world-wide, do not come together for nothing, or only that some of you might make fortunes out of the East Indian and China trade, but in order that all we English Christians might feel that, our speaking as we do the language which is destined, as it would appear, to run round the whole world, and our having, as we have, the faith which we believe brings salvation to every man of every race and tongue who accepts it, and our having this responsible necessary contact with the heathen races, lay upon us English Christians obligations the pressure and solemnity of which we have yet failed to appreciate.

Paul was immortal till his work was done. ‘Be of good cheer, Paul; thou must bear witness at Rome.’ And so, for ourselves and for the Gospel that we profess, the same divine Providence which orders events so that His servants may have the opportunities of witnessing to it, will take care that it shall not perish-notwithstanding all the premature jubilation of anti-Christian literature and thought in this day-until it has done its work. We need have no fear for ourselves, for though our blind eyes often fail to see, and our bleeding hearts often fail to accept, the conviction that there are no unfinished lives for His servants, yet we may be sure that He will watch over each of His children till they have finished the work that He gives them to do. And we may be sure, in regard to His great Gospel, that nothing can sink the ship that carries Christ and His fortunes. ‘Be of good cheer . . . thou hast borne witness . . . thou must bear witness.’

III. Lastly, we have here another principle-namely that faithful witnessing is rewarded by further witnessing.

‘Thou hast . . . in Jerusalem,’ the little city perched upon its crag; ‘Thou must . . . in Rome,’ the great capital seated on its seven hills. The reward for work is more work. Jesus Christ did not say to the Apostle, though he was ‘wearied with that which came upon him daily, the care of all the churches,’ ‘Thou hast borne witness, and now come apart and rest’; but He said to him, ‘Thou hast filled the smaller sphere; for recompense I put thee into a larger.’

That is the law for life and everywhere, the tools to the hand that can use them. The man that can do a thing gets it to do in too large a measure, as he sometimes thinks; but he gets it, and it is all right that he should. ‘To him that hath shall be given.’ And it is the law for heaven. ‘Thou hast borne witness down on the little dark earth; come up higher and witness for Me here, amid the blaze.’

It is the law for this Christian work of ours. If you have shone faithfully in your ‘little corner,’ as the child’s hymn says, you will be taken out and set upon the lamp-stand, that you ‘may give light to all that are in the house.’ And it is the law for this great enterprise of Christian missions, as we all know. We are overwhelmed with our success. Doors are opening around us on every side. There is no limit to the work that English Churches can do, except their inclination to do it. But the opportunities open to us require a far deeper consecration and a far closer dwelling beside our Master than we have ever realised. We are half asleep yet; we do not know our resources in men, in money, in activity, in prayer.

Surely there can be no sadder sign of decadence and no surer precursor of extinction than to fall beneath the demands of our day; to have doors opening at which we are too lazy or selfish to go in; to be so sound asleep that we never hear the man of Macedonia when he stands by us and cries, ‘Come over and help us!’ We are members of a Church that God has appointed to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. We are citizens of a nation whose influence is ubiquitous and felt in every land. By both characters, God summons us to tasks which will tax all our resources worthily to do. We inherit a work from our fathers which God has shown that He owns by giving us these golden opportunities. He summons us: ‘Lengthen thy cords and strengthen thy stakes. Come out of Jerusalem; come into Rome.’ Shall we respond? God give us grace to fill the sphere in which He has set us, till He lifts us to the wider one, where the faithfulness of the steward is exchanged for the authority of the ruler, and the toil of the servant for the joy of the Lord!

120) Acts 23:12-22

Acts

A PLOT DETECTED

Act. 23:12 - Act. 23:22.

‘The wicked plotteth against the just. . . . The Lord will laugh at him.’ The Psalmist’s experience and his faith were both repeated in Paul’s case. His speech before the Council had set Pharisees and Sadducees squabbling, and the former had swallowed his Christianity for the sake of his being ‘a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee.’ Probably, therefore, the hatchers of this plot were Sadducees, who hated Pharisees even more than they did Christians. The Apostle himself was afterwards not quite sure that his skilful throwing of the apple of discord between the two parties was right [Act. 24:21], and apparently it was the direct occasion of the conspiracy. A Christian man’s defence of himself and his faith gains nothing by clever tactics. It is very doubtful whether what Paul spoke ‘in that hour’ was taught him by the Spirit.

I. ‘The corruption of the best is the worst.’

There is a close and strange alliance between formal religion and murderous hatred and vulpine craft, as the history of ecclesiastical persecution shows; and though we have done with fire and faggot now, the same evil passions and tempers do still in modified form lie very near to a Christianity which has lost its inward union with Jesus and lives on surface adherence to forms. In that sense too ‘the letter killeth.’ We lift up our hands in horror at these fierce fanatics, ‘ready to kill’ Paul, because he believed in resurrection, angel, and spirit. We need to guard ourselves lest something of their temper should be in us. There is a devilish ingenuity about the details of the plot, and a truly Oriental mixture of murderous passion and calculating craft. The serpent’s wisdom and his poison fangs are both apparent. The forty conspirators must have been ‘ready,’ not only to kill Paul, but to die in the attempt, for the distance from the castle to the council-chamber was short, and the detachment of legionaries escorting the prisoner would have to be reckoned with.

The pretext of desiring to inquire more fully into Paul’s opinions derived speciousness from his ambiguous declaration, which had set the Council by the ears and had stopped his examination. Luke does not tell us what the Council said to the conspirators, but we learn from what Paul’s nephew says in Act. 23:20 that it ‘agreed to ask thee to bring down Paul.’ So once more the tail drove on the head, and the Council became the tool of fierce zealots. No doubt most of its members would have shrunk from themselves killing Paul, but they did not shrink from having a hand in his death. They were most religious and respectable men, and probably soothed their consciences with thinking that, after all, the responsibility was on the shoulders of the forty conspirators. How men can cheat themselves for a while as to the criminality of indirectly contributing to criminal acts, and how rudely the thin veil will be twitched aside one day!

II. The abrupt introduction of Paul’s nephew into the story piques curiosity, but we cannot say more about him than is told us here.

We do not know whether he was moved by being a fellow-believer in Jesus, or simply by kindred and natural affection. Possibly he was, as his uncle had been, a student under some distinguished Rabbi. At all events, he must have had access to official circles to have come on the track of the plot, which would, of course, be covered up as much as possible. The rendering in the margin of the Revised Version gives a possible explanation of his knowledge of it by suggesting that he had ‘come in upon them’; that is, upon the Council in their deliberations. But probably the rendering preferred in the text is preferable, and we are left to conjecture his source of information, as almost everything else about him. But it is more profitable to note how God works out His purposes and delivers His servants by ‘natural’ means, which yet are as truly divine working as was the sending of the angel to smite off Peter’s chains, or the earthquake at Philippi.

This lad was probably not an inhabitant of Jerusalem, and that he should have been there then, and come into possession of the carefully guarded secret, was more than a fortunate coincidence. It was divinely ordered, and God’s finger is as evident in the concatenation of co-operating natural events as in any ‘miracle.’ To co-ordinate these so that they concur to bring about the fulfilment of His will may be a less conspicuous, but is not a less veritable, token of a sovereign Will at work in the world than any miracle is. And in this case how wonderfully separate factors, who think themselves quite independent, are all handled like pawns on a chessboard by Him who ‘makes the wrath of man to praise Him, and girds Himself with the remainder thereof!’ Little did the fiery zealots who were eager to plunge their daggers into Paul’s heart, or the lad who hastened to tell him the secret he had discovered, or the Roman officer who equally hastened to get rid of his troublesome prisoner, dream that they were all partners in bringing about one God-determined result-the fulfilment of the promise that had calmed Paul in the preceding night: ‘So must thou bear witness also at Rome.’

III. Paul had been quieted after his exciting day by the vision which brought that promise, and this new peril did not break his peace.

With characteristic clear-sightedness he saw the right thing to do in the circumstances, and with characteristic promptitude he did it at once. Luke wastes no words in telling of the Apostle’s emotions when this formidable danger was sprung on him, and the very reticence deepens the impression of Paul’s equanimity and practical wisdom. A man who had had such a vision last night might well possess his soul in patience, even though such a plot was laid bare this morning; and each servant of Jesus may be as well assured, as was Paul the prisoner, that the Lord shall ‘keep him from all evil,’ and that if his life is ‘witness’ it will not end till his witness is complete. Our faith should work in us calmness of spirit, clearness of perception of the right thing to do, swift seizing of opportunities. Paul trusted Jesus’ word that he should be safe, whatever dangers threatened, but that trust stimulated his own efforts to provide for his safety.

IV. The behaviour of the captain is noteworthy, as showing that he had been impressed by Paul’s personal magnetism, and that he had in him a strain of courtesy and kindliness.

He takes the lad by the hand to encourage him, and he leads him aside that he may speak freely, and thereby shows that he trusted him. No doubt the youth would be somewhat flustered at being brought into the formidable presence and by the weight of his tidings, and the great man’s gentleness would be a cordial. A superior’s condescension is a wonderful lip-opener. We all have some people who look up to us, and to whom small kindlinesses from us are precious. We do not ‘render to all their dues,’ unless we give gracious courtesy to those beneath, as well as ‘honour’ to those above, us. But the captain could clothe himself too with official reserve and keep up the dignity of his office. He preserved an impenetrable silence as to his intentions, and simply sealed the young man’s lips from tattling about the plot or the interview with him. Promptly he acted, without waiting for the Council’s application to him. At once he prepared to despatch Paul to Caesarea, glad enough, no doubt, to wash his hands of so troublesome a charge. Thus he too was a cog in the wheel, an instrument to fulfil the promise made in vision, God’s servant though he knew it not.

121) Acts 24:2-3

Acts

A LOYAL TRIBUTE 1

Act. 24:2 - Act. 24:3.

These words were addressed by a professional flatterer to one of the worst of the many bad Roman governors of Syria. The speaker knew that he was lying, the listeners knew that the eulogium was undeserved; and among all the crowd of bystanders there was perhaps not a man who did not hate the governor, and would not have been glad to see him lying dead with a dagger in his breast.

But both the fawning Tertullus and the oppressor Felix knew in their heart of hearts that the words described what a governor ought to be. And though they are touched with the servility which is not loyalty, and embrace a conception of the royal function attributing far more to the personal influence of a monarch than our State permits, still we may venture to take them as the starting-point for two or three considerations suggested to us, by the celebrations of the past week.

I almost feel that I owe an apology for turning to that subject, for everything that can be said about it has been said far better than I can say it. But still, partly because my silence might be misunderstood, and partly because an opportunity is thereby afforded for looking from a Christian point of view at one or two subjects that do not ordinarily come within the scope of one’s ministry, I venture to choose such a text now.

I. The first thing that I would take it as suggesting is the grateful acknowledgment of personal worth.

I suppose the world never saw a national rejoicing like that through which we have passed. For the reigns that have been long enough to admit of it have been few, and those in which intelligently and sincerely a whole nation of freemen could participate have been fewer still. But now all England has been one; whatever our divisions of opinion, there have been no divisions here. Not only have the bonfires flared from hill to hill in this little island of ours, but all over the world, into every out of the way corner where our widely-spread race has penetrated, the same sentiment has extended. All have yielded to the common impulse, the rejoicing of a free people in a good Queen.

That common sentiment has embraced two things, the office and the person. There was a pathetic contrast between these two when that sad-hearted widow walked alone up the nave of Westminster Abbey, and took her seat on the stone of destiny on which for a millennium kings have been crowned. The contrast heightened both the reverence due to the office and the sympathy due to the woman. The Sovereign is the visible expression of national power, the incarnation of England, living history, the outcome of all the past, the representative of harmonised and blended freedom and law, a powerful social influence from which much good might flow, a moderating and uniting power amidst fierce partisan bitterness and hate, a check against rash change. There is no nobler office upon earth.

And when, as is the case in this long reign, that office has been filled with some consciousness of its responsibilities, the recognition of the fact is no flattery but simple duty. We cannot attribute to the personal initiative of the Queen the great and beneficent changes which have coincided with her reign. Thank God, no monarch can make or mar England now. But this we can say,

'Her court was pure, her life serene.'

A life touched with many gracious womanly charities, delighting in simple country pleasures, not strange to the homes of the poor, quick to sympathise with sorrow, especially the humblest, as many a weeping widow at a pit mouth has thankfully felt; sternly repressive of some forms of vice in high places, and, as we may believe, not ignorant of the great Comforter nor disobedient to the King of kings,-for such a royal life a nation may well be thankful. We outsiders do not know how far personal influence from the throne has in any case restrained or furthered national action, but if it be true, as is alleged, that twice in her reign the Queen has kept England from the sin and folly of war, once from a fratricidal conflict with the great new England across the Atlantic, then we owe her much. If in later years that life has somewhat shrunk into itself and sat silent, with Grief for a companion, those who know a like desolation will understand, and even the happy may honour an undying love and respect the seclusion of an undying sorrow. So I say: 'Forasmuch as under thee we enjoy great quietness, we accept it with all thankfulness.'

II. My text may suggest for us a wider view of progress which, although not initiated by the Queen, has coincided with her fifty years' reign.

In the Revised Version, instead of 'worthy deeds are done,' we read '*evils are corrected*'; and that is the true rendering. The double function which is here attributed falsely to an oppressive tyrant is the ancient ideal of monarchy-first, that it shall repress disorders and secure tranquillity within the borders and across the frontiers; and second, that abuses and evils shall be corrected by the foresight of the monarch.

Now, in regard to both these functions we have learned that a nation can do them a great deal better than a sovereign. And so when we speak of progress during this fifty years' reign, we largely mean the progress which England in its toiling millions and in its thinking few has won for itself. Let me in very brief words try to touch upon the salient points of that progress for which as members of the nation it becomes us as Christian people to be thankful. Enough hosannas have been sung already, and I need not add my poor voice to them, about material progress and commercial prosperity and the growth of manufacturing industry and inventions and all the rest of it. I do not for a moment mean to depreciate these, but it is of more importance that a telegraph should have something to say than that it should be able to speak across the waters, and 'man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.' We who live in a great commercial community and know how solid comfort and hope and gladness are all contingent, in millions of humble homes, upon the manufacturing industry of these districts, shall never be likely to underrate the enormous expansion in national industry, and the consequent enormous increase in national wealth, which belongs to this last half century. I need say nothing about these.

Let me remind you, and I can only do it in a sentence or two, of more important changes in these fifty years. English manners and morals have been bettered, much of savagery and coarseness has been got rid of; low, cruel amusements have been abandoned. Thanks to the great Total Abstinence movement very largely, the national conscience has been stirred in regard to the great national sin of intoxication. A national system of education has come into operation and is working wonders in this land. Newspapers and books are cheapened; political freedom has been extended and 'broadened slowly down,' as is safe, 'from precedent to precedent,' so that no party thinks now of reversing any of the changes, howsoever fiercely they were contested ere they were won. Religious thought has widened, the sects have come nearer each other, men have passed from out of a hard doctrinal Christianity, in which the person of Christ was buried beneath the cobwebs of theology, into a far freer and a far more Christ-regarding and Christ-centred faith. And if we are to adopt such a point of view as the brave Apostle Paul took, the antagonism against religion, which is a marked feature of our generation, and contrasts singularly with the sleepy acquiescence of fifty years ago, is to be put down to the credit side of the account. 'For,' he said, like a bold man believing that he had an irrefragable truth in his hands, 'I will tarry here, for a great door and an effectual is opened, and there are many adversaries.' Wherever a whole nation is interested and stirred about religious subjects, even though it may be in contradiction and antagonism, God's truth can fight opposition far better than it can contend with indifference. Then if we look upon our churches, whilst there is amongst them all abounding worldliness much to be deplored, there is also, thank God, springing up amongst us a new consciousness of responsibility, which is not confined to Christian people, for the condition of the poor and the degraded around us; and everywhere we see good men and women trying to stretch their hands across these awful gulfs in our social system which make such a danger in our modern life, and to reclaim the outcasts of our cities, the most hopeless of all the heathen on the face of the earth. These things, on which I have touched with the lightest hand, all taken together do make a picture for which we may be heartily thankful.

Only, brethren, let us remember that that sort of talk about England’s progress may very speedily become offensive self-conceit, and a measuring of ourselves with ludicrous self-satisfaction against all other nations. There is a bastard patriotism which has been very loud-mouthed in these last days, of which wise men should beware.

Further, such a contemplation of the elements of national progress, which we owe to no monarch and to no legislature, but largely to the indomitable pluck and energy of our people, to Anglo-Saxon persistence not knowing when it is beaten, and to the patient meditation of thoughtful minds and the self-denying efforts of good philanthropical and religious people-such a contemplation, I say, may come between us and the recognition of the highest source from which it flows, and be corrupted into forgetfulness of God. ‘Beware lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied, then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the Lord thy God. . . and thou say in thine heart, My power, and the might of mine hand, hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God, for it is He that giveth thee power to get wealth.’

And the last caution that I would put in here is, let us beware lest the hosannas over national progress shall be turned into ‘Rest and be thankful,’ or shall ever come in the way of the strenuous and persistent reaching forth to the fair ideal that lies so far before us.

III. That leads me to the last point on which I would say a word, viz., that my text with its reference to the correction of evils, as one of the twin functions of the monarch, naturally suggests to us the thought which should follow all recognition of progress in the past-the consideration of what yet remains to be done.

A great controversy has been going on, or at least a remarkable difference of opinion has been expressed in recent months by two of the greatest minds and clearest heads in England; one of our greatest poets and one of our greatest statesmen. The one looking back over sixty years sees but foiled aspirations and present devildom and misery. The other looking back over the same period sees accomplished dreams and the prophecy of further progress. It is not for me to enter upon the strife between such authorities. Both are right. Much has been achieved. ‘There remaineth yet very much land to be possessed.’ Whatever have been the victories and the blessings of the past, there are rotten places in our social state which, if not cauterised and healed, will break out into widespread and virulent sores. There are dangers in the near future which may well task the skill of the bravest and the faith of the most trustful. There are clouds on the horizon which may speedily turn jubilations into lamentations, and the best security against these is that each of us in his place, as a unit however insignificant in the great body politic, should use our little influence on the side that makes for righteousness, and see to it that we leave some small corner of this England, which God has given us in charge, sweeter and holier because of our lives. The ideal for you Christian men and women is the organisation of society on Christian principles. Have we got to that yet, or within sight of it, do you suppose? Look round you. Does anybody believe that the present arrangements in connection with unrestricted competition and the distribution of wealth coincide accurately with the principles of the New Testament? Will anybody tell me that the state of a hundred streets within a mile of this spot is what it would be if the Christian men of this nation lived the lives that they ought to live? Could there be such rottenness and corruption if the ‘salt’ had not ‘lost his savour’? Will anybody tell me that the disgusting vice which our newspapers do not think themselves degraded by printing in loathsome detail, and so bringing the foulness of a common sewer on to every breakfast-table in the kingdom, is in accordance with the organisation of society on Christian principles? Intemperance, social impurity, wide, dreary tracts of ignorance, degradation, bestiality, the awful condition of the lowest layer in our great cities, crushed like some crumbling bricks beneath the ponderous weight of the splendid superstructure, the bitter partisan spirit of politics, where the followers of each chief think themselves bound to believe that he is immaculate and that the other side has no honour or truth belonging to it-these things testify against English society, and make one almost despair when one thinks that, after a thousand years and more of professing Christianity, that is all that we can show for it.

O brethren! we may be thankful for what has been accomplished, but surely there had need also to be penitent recognition of failure and defect. And I lay it on the consciences of all that listen to me now to see to it that they do their parts as members of this body politic of England. A great heritage has come down from our fathers; pass it on bettered by your self-denial and your efforts. And remember that the way to mend a kingdom is to begin by mending yourselves, and letting Christ's kingdom come in your own hearts. Next we are bound to try to further its coming in the hearts of others, and so to promote its leavening society and national life. No Christian is clear from the blood of men and the guilt of souls who does not, according to opportunity and capacity, repair before his own door, and seek to make some one know the unsearchable riches of the Gospel of Christ.

There is no finality for a Christian patriot until his country be organised on Christian principles, and so from being merely a 'kingdom of the world' become 'a Kingdom of our God and of His Christ.' To help forward that consummation, by however little, is the noblest service that prince or peasant can render to his country. By conformity to the will of God and not by material progress or intellectual enlightenment is a state prosperous and strong. To keep His statutes and judgments is 'your wisdom and understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'

1 Preached on the occasion of the Jubilee of Queen Victoria.

122) Acts 24:10-24

Acts

PAUL BEFORE FELIX

Act. 24:10 - Act. 24:25.

Tertellus made three charges against Paul: first, that he incited to rebellion; second, that he was a principal member of a 'sect'; third [with a 'moreover,' as if an afterthought], that he had profaned the Temple. It was more clever than honest to put the real cause of Jewish hatred last, since it was a trifle in Roman eyes, and to put first the only thing that Felix would think worth notice. A duller man than he might have scented something suspicious in Jewish officials being so anxious to suppress insurrection against Rome, and probably he had his own thoughts about the good faith of the accusers, though he said nothing. Paul takes up the three points in order. Unsupported charges can only be met by emphatic denials.

I. Paul's speech is the first part of the passage.

Its dignified, courteous beginning contrasts well with the accuser's dishonest flattery. Paul will not lie, but he will respect authority, and will conciliate when he can do so with truth. Felix had been 'judge' for several years, probably about six. What sort of a judge he had been Paul will not say. At any rate he had gained experience which might help him in picking his way through Tertullus's rhetoric.

The Apostle answers the first charge with a flat denial, with the remark that as the whole affair was less than a fortnight old the truth could easily be ascertained, and that the time was very short for the Jews to have 'found' him such a dangerous conspirator, and with the obviously unanswerable demand for proof to back up the charge. In the absence of witnesses there was nothing more to be done about number one of the accusations, and a just judge would have said so and sent Tertullus and his clients about their business.

The second charge Paul both denies and admits. He does belong to the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. But that is not a 'sect'; it is 'the Way.' It is not a divergence from the path in which the fathers have walked, trodden only by some self-willed schismatics, but it is the one God-appointed path of life, 'the old way,' the only road by which a man can walk nobly and travel to the skies. Paul's whole doctrine as to the relation of Judaism to Christianity is here in germ and in a form adapted to Felix's comprehension. This so-called sect [Act. 24:14 takes up Tertullus's word in Act. 24:5] is the true Judaism, and its members are more truly 'Jews' than they who are such 'outwardly.' For what has Paul cast away in becoming a Christian? Not the worship of the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, not the law, not the prophets, not the hope of a resurrection.

He does not say that he practises all the things written in the law, but that he 'believes' them. Then the law was revelation as well as precept, and was to be embraced by faith before it could be obeyed in practice; it was, as he says elsewhere, a 'schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.' Judaism is the bud; Christianity is the bright consummate flower. Paul was not preaching his whole Gospel, but defending himself from a specific charge; namely that, as being a 'Nazarene,' he had started off from the main line of Jewish religion. He admits that he is a 'Nazarene,' and he assumes correctly that Felix knew something about them, but he denies that he is a sectary, and he assumes that the charge would be more truly made against those who, accusing him, disbelieved in Christ. He hints that they did not believe in either law or prophets, else they would have been Nazarenes too.

The practical results of his faith are stated. 'Herein'; that is in the faith and hope just spoken of. He will not say that these make him blameless towards God and men, but that such blamelessness is his aim, which he pursues with earnest toil and self-control. A Christianity which does not sovereignly sway life and brace its professor up to the self-denial needful to secure a conscience void of offence is not Paul's kind of Christianity. If we move in the circle of the great Christian truths we shall gird ourselves to subdue the flesh, and will covet more than aught else the peace of a good conscience. But, like Paul, we shall be slow to say that we have attained, yet not afraid to say that we strive towards, that ideal.

The third charge is met by a plain statement of his real purpose in coming to Jerusalem and frequenting the Temple. 'Profane the Temple! Why, I came all the way from Greece on purpose to worship at the Feast; and I did not come empty-handed either, for I brought alms for my nation'-the contributions of the Gentiles to Jews-'and I was a worshipper, discharging the ceremonial purifications.' They called him a 'Nazarene'; he was in the Temple as a 'Nazarite.' Was it likely that, being there on such an errand, he should have profaned it?

He begins a sentence, which would probably have been an indignant one, about the 'certain Jews from Asia,' the originators of the whole trouble, but he checks himself with a fine sense of justice. He will say nothing about absent men. And that brings him back to his strong point, already urged, the absence of proof of the charges. Tertullus and company had only hearsay. What had become of the people who said they saw him in the Temple? No doubt they had thought discretion the better part of valour, and were not anxious to face the Roman procedure.

The close of the speech carries the war into the enemy's quarters, challenging the accusers to tell what they had themselves heard. They *could* be witnesses as to the scene at the Council, which Tertullus had wisely said nothing about. Pungent sarcasm is in Paul's closing words, especially if we remember that the high officials, like Ananias the high-priest, were Sadducees. The Pharisees in the Council had acquitted him when they heard his profession of faith in a resurrection. That was his real crime, not treason against Rome or profanation of the Temple. The present accusers might be eager for his condemnation, but half of their own Sanhedrim had acquitted him. 'And these unworthy Jews, who have cast off the nation's hope and believe in no resurrection, are accusing me of being an apostate! Who is the sectary-I or they?'

II. There was only one righteous course for Felix, namely, to discharge the prisoner.

But he yielded to the same temptation as had mastered Pilate, and shrank from provoking influential classes by doing the right thing. He was the less excusable, because his long tenure of office had taught him something, at all events, of 'the Way.' He had too many crimes to venture on raising enemies in his government; he had too much lingering sense of justice to give up an innocent man. So like all weak men in difficult positions he temporised, and trusted to accident to make the right thing easier for him.

His plea for delay was conveniently indefinite. When was Lysias coming? His letter said nothing about such an intention, and took for granted that all the materials for a decision would be before Felix. Lysias could tell no more. The excuse was transparent, but it served to stave off a decision, and to-morrow would bring some other excuse. Prompt carrying out of all plain duty is the only safety. The indulgence given to Paul, in his light confinement, only showed how clearly Felix knew himself to be doing wrong, but small alleviations do not patch up a great injustice.

III. One reading inserts in Act. 24:24 the statement that Drusilla wished to see Paul, and that Felix summoned him in order to gratify her.

Very probably she, as a Jewess, knew something of ‘the Way,’ and with a love of anything odd and new, which such women cannot do without, she wanted to see this curious man and hear him talk. It might amuse her, and pass an hour, and be something to gossip about.

She and Felix got more than they bargained for. Paul was not now the prisoner, but the preacher; and his topics were not wanting in directness and plainness. He ‘reasoned of righteousness’ to one of the worst of unrighteous governors; of ‘temperance’ to the guilty couple who, in calling themselves husband and wife, were showing themselves given over to sinful passions; and of ‘judgment to come’ to a man who, to quote the Roman historian, ‘thought that he could commit all evil with impunity.’

Paul’s strong hand shook even that obdurate soul, and roused one of the two sleeping consciences. Drusilla may have been too frivolous to be impressed, but Felix had so much good left that he could be conscious of evil. Alas! he had so much evil that he suppressed the good. His ‘convenient season’ was then; it never came again. For though he communed with Paul often, he trembled only once. So he passed into the darkness.

123) Acts 24:25

Acts

PAUL BEFORE FELIX

FELIX BEFORE PAUL

A Sermon to the Young

Act. 24:25.

Felix and his brother had been favourite slaves of the Emperor, and so had won great power at court. At the date of this incident he had been for some five or six years the procurator of the Roman province of Judaea; and how he used his power the historian Tacitus tells us in one of his bitter sentences, in which he says, ‘He wielded his kingly authority with the spirit of a slave, in all cruelty and lust.’

He had tempted from her husband, Drusilla, the daughter of that Herod whose dreadful death is familiar to us all; and his court reeked with blood and debauchery. He is here face to face with Paul for the second time. On a former interview he had seen good reason to conclude that the Roman Empire was not in much danger from this one Jew whom his countrymen, with suspicious loyalty, were charging with sedition; and so he had allowed him a very large margin of liberty.

On this second occasion he had sent for him evidently not as a judge, but partly with a view to try to get a bribe out of him, and partly because he had some kind of languid interest, as most Romans then had, in Oriental thought-some languid interest perhaps too in this strange man. Or he and Drusilla were possibly longing for a new sensation, and not indisposed to give a moment’s glance at Paul with his singular ideas.

So they called for the Apostle, and the guilty couple found a judge in their prisoner. Paul does not speak to them as a Greek philosopher, anxious to please high personages, might have done, but he goes straight at their sins: he reasons ‘of righteousness’ with the unjust judge, ‘of temperance’ with the self-indulgent, sinful pair, ‘of the judgment to come’ with these two who thought that they could do anything they liked with impunity. Christianity has sometimes to be exceedingly rude in reference to the sins of the upper classes.

As Paul went on, a strange fear began to creep about the heart of Felix. It is the watershed of his life that he has come to, the crisis of his fate. Everything depends on the next five minutes. Will he yield? Will he resist? The tongue of the balance trembles and hesitates for a moment, and then, but slowly, the wrong scale goes down; ‘Go thy way for this time.’ Ah! if he had said, ‘Come and help me to get rid of this strange fear,’ how different all might have been! The metal was at the very point of melting. What shape would it take? It ran into the wrong mould, and, as far as we know, it was hardened there. ‘It might have been once, and he missed it, lost it for ever. No sign marked out that moment from the common uneventful moments, though it saw the death of a soul.’

Now, my dear young friends, I do not intend to say anything more to you of this man and his character, but I wish to take this incident and its lessons and urge them on your hearts and consciences.

I. Let me say a word or two about the fact, of which this incident is an example, and of which I am afraid the lives of many of you would furnish other examples, that men lull awakened consciences to sleep and excuse delay in deciding for Christ by half-honest promises to attend to religion at some future time.

'Go thy way for this time' is what Felix is really anxious about. His one thought is to get rid of Paul and his disturbing message for the present. But he does not wish to shut the door altogether. He gives a sop to his conscience to stop its barking, and he probably deceives himself as to the gravity of his present decision by the lightly given promise and its well-guarded indefiniteness, 'When I have a convenient season I will send for thee.' The thing he really means is-Not now, at all events; the thing he hoodwinks himself with is- By and by. Now that is what I know that some of you are doing; and my purpose and earnest prayer are to bring you now to the decision which, by one vigorous act of your wills, will settle the question for the future as to which God you are going to follow.

So then I have just one or two things to say about this first part of my subject. Let me remind you that however beautiful, however gracious, however tender and full of love and mercy and good tidings the message of God's love in Jesus Christ is, there is another side to it, a side which is meant to rouse men's consciences and to awaken men's fears.

If you bring a man like the man in the story, Felix, or a very much better man than he-any of you who hear me now-into contact with these three thoughts, 'Righteousness, temperance, judgment to come,' the effect of such a direct appeal to moral convictions will always be more or less to awaken a sense of failure, insufficiency, defect, sin, and to create a certain creeping dread that if I set myself against the great law of God, that law of God will have a way of crushing me. The fear is well founded, and not only does the contemplation of God's *law* excite it. God's gospel comes to us, and just because it is a gospel, and is intended to lead you and me to love and trust Jesus Christ, and give our whole hearts and souls to Him-just because it is the best ‘good news’ that ever came into the world, it begins often [not always, perhaps] by making a man feel what a sinful man he is, and how he has gone against God’s law, and how there hang over him, by the very necessities of the case and the constitution of the universe, consequences bitter and painful. Now I believe that there are very few people who, like you, come occasionally into contact with the preaching of the truth, who have not had their moments when they felt-’Yes, it is all true-it is all true. I *am* bad, and I *have* broken God’s law, and there *is* a dark lookout before me!’ I believe that most of us know what that feeling is.

And now my next step is-that the awakened conscience is just like the sense of pain in the physical world, it has a work to do and a mission to perform. It is meant to warn you off dangerous ground. Thank God for pain! It keeps off death many a time. And in like manner thank God for a swift conscience that speaks! It is meant to ring an alarm-bell to us, to make us, as the Bible has it, ‘flee for refuge to the hope that is set before us.’ My imploring question to my young friends now is: ‘Have you used that sense of evil and wrongdoing, when it has been aroused in your consciences, to lead you to Jesus Christ, or what have you done with it?’

There are two persons in this Book of the Acts of the Apostles who pass through the same stages of feeling up to a certain point, and then they diverge. And the two men’s outline history is the best sermon that I can preach upon this point. Felix becoming afraid, recoils, shuts himself up, puts away the message that disturbs him, and settles himself back into his evil. The Philippian jailer becoming afraid [the phrases in the original being almost identical], like a sensible man tries to find out the reason of his fear and how to get rid of it; and falls down at the Apostles’ feet and says, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’

The fear is not meant to last; it is of no use in itself. It is only an impelling motive that leads us to look to the Saviour, and the man that uses it so has used it rightly. Yet there rises in many a heart that transparent self-deception of delay. ‘They all with one consent began to make excuse’; that is as true to-day as it was true then. My experience tells me that it will be true in regard to a sad number of you who will go away feeling that my poor word has gone a little way into their hardened hide, but settling themselves back into their carelessness, and forgetting all impressions that have been made. O dear young friend, do not do that, I beseech you! Do not stifle the wholesome alarm and cheat yourself with the notion of a little delay!

II. And now I wish next to pass very swiftly in review before you some of the reasons why we fall into this habit of self-deceiving, indecision, and delay-

‘Go thy way’ would be too sharp and unmistakable if it were left alone, so it is fined off. ‘I will not commit myself beyond to-day,’ ‘for this time go thy way, and when I have a convenient season I will call for thee.’

What are the reasons for such an attitude as that? Let me enumerate one or two of them as they strike me. First, there is the instinctive, natural wish to get rid of a disagreeable subject-much as a man, without knowing what he is doing, twitches his hand away from the surgeon’s lancet. So a great many of us do not like-and no wonder that we do not like-these thoughts of the old Book about ‘righteousness and temperance and judgment to come,’ and make a natural effort to turn our minds away from the contemplation of the subject, because it is painful and unpleasant. Do you think it would be a wise thing for a man, if he began to suspect that he was insolvent, to refuse to look into his books or to take stock, and let things drift, till there was not a halfpenny in the pound for anybody? What do you suppose his creditors would call him? They would not compliment him on either his honesty or his prudence, would they? And is it not the part of a wise man, if he begins to see that something is wrong, to get to the bottom of it and, as quickly as possible, to set it right? And what do you call people who, suspecting that there may be a great hole in the bottom of the ship, never man the pumps or do any caulking, but say, ‘Oh, she will very likely keep afloat until we get into harbour’?

Do you not think that it would be a wiser thing for you if, *because* the subject is disagreeable, you would force yourself to think about it until it became agreeable to you? You can change it if you will, and make it not at all a shadow or a cloud or a darkness over you. And you can scarcely expect to claim the designation of wise and prudent orderers of your lives until you do. Certainly it is not wise to shuffle a thing out of sight because it is not pleasing to think about.

Then there is another reason. A number of our young people say, ‘Go thy way for this time,’ because you have a notion that it is time enough for you to begin to think about serious things and be religious when you grow a bit older. And some of you even, I dare say, have an idea that religion is all very well for people that are turned sixty and are going down the hill, but that it is quite unnecessary for you. Shakespeare puts a grim word into the mouth of one of his characters, which sets the theory of many of us in its true light, when, describing a dying man calling on God, he makes the narrator say: ‘I, to comfort him, bid him he should not think of God. I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet.’

Some of my hearers practically live on that principle, and are tempted to regard thoughts of God as in place only among medicine bottles, or when the shadows of the grave begin to fall cold and damp on our path. ‘Young men will be young men,’ ‘We must sow our wild oats,’ ‘You can’t put old heads on young shoulders’-and such like sayings, often practically mean that vice and godlessness belong to youth, and virtue and religion to old age, just as flowers do to spring and fruit to autumn. Let me beseech you not to be deceived by such a notion; and to search your own thoughts and see whether it be one of the reasons which leads you to say, ‘Go thy way for this time.’

Then again some of us fall into this habit of putting off the decision for Christ, not consciously, not by any distinct act of saying, ‘No, I will not,’ but simply by letting the impressions made on our hearts and consciences be crowded out of them by cares and enjoyments and pleasures and duties of this world. If you had not so much to study at College, you would have time to think about religion. If you had not so many parties and balls to go to, you would have time to nourish and foster these impressions. If you had not your place to make in the warehouse, if you had not this, that, and the other thing to do; if you had not love and pleasure and ambition and advancement and mental culture to attend to, you would have time for religion; but as soon as the seed is sown and the sower’s back is turned, hovering flocks of light-winged thoughts and vanities pounce down upon it and carry it away, seed by seed. And if some stray seed here and there remains and begins to sprout, the ill weeds which grow apace spring up with ranker stems and choke it. ‘The cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and efface the impression made upon your hearts.

Here as I speak some serious thought is roused; by to-morrow at midday it has all gone. You did not intend it to go, you did not set yourself to banish it, you simply opened the door to the flocking in of the whole crowd of the world’s cares and occupations, and away went the shy, solitary thought that, if it had been cared for and tended, might have led you at last to the Cross of Jesus Christ. Do not allow yourselves to be drifted, by the rushing current of earthly cares, from the impressions that are made upon your consciences and from the duty that you know you ought to do!

And then some of you fall into this attitude of delay, and say to the messenger of God’s love, ‘Go thy way for this time,’ because you do not like to give up something that you know is inconsistent with His love and service. Felix would not part with Drusilla nor disgorge the ill-gotten gains of his province. Felix therefore was obliged to put away from him the thoughts that looked in that direction. I wonder if there is any young man listening to me now who feels that if he lets my words carry him where they seek to carry him, he will have to give up ‘fleshly lusts which war against the soul’? I wonder if there is any young woman listening to me now who feels that if she lets my words carry her where they would carry her, she will have to live a different life from that which she has been living, to have more of a high and a noble aim in it, to live for something else than pleasure? I wonder if there are any of you who are saying, ‘I cannot give up that’? My dear young friend, ‘If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee. It is better for thee to enter into life blind than with both eyes to be cast into hell-fire.’

Reasons for delay, then, are these: first, getting rid of an unpleasant subject; second, thinking that there is time enough; third, letting the world obliterate the impressions that have been made; and fourth, shrinking from the surrender of something that you know you will have to give up.

III. And now let me very briefly, as my last point, put before you one or two of the reasons which I would fain might be conclusive with you for present decision to take Christ for your Saviour and your Master.

And I say, Do not delay, but *now* choose Him for your Redeemer, your Friend, your Helper, your Commander, your All; because delay is really decision in the wrong way. Do not delay, but take Jesus Christ as the Saviour of your sinful souls, and rest your hearts upon Him to-night before you sleep; because there is no real reason for delay. No season will be more convenient than the present season. Every time is the right time to do the right thing, every time is the right time to begin following Him. There is nothing to wait for. There is no reason at all, except their own disinclination, why every man and woman listening to me should not now grasp the Cross of Christ as their only hope for forgiveness and acceptance, and yield themselves to that Lord, to live in His service for ever. Let not this day pass without your giving yourselves to Jesus Christ, because every time that you have this message brought to you, and you refuse to accept it, or delay to accept it, you make yourselves less capable of receiving it another time.

If you take a bit of phosphorus and put it upon a slip of wood and ignite the phosphorus, bright as the blaze is, there drops from it a white ash that coats the wood and makes it almost incombustible. And so when the flaming conviction laid upon your hearts has burnt itself out, it has coated the heart, and it will be very difficult to kindle the light there again. Felix said, 'Go thy way, when I have a more convenient season I will send for thee.' Yes, and he did send for Paul, and he talked with him often-he repeated the conversation, but we do not know that he repeated the trembling. He often communed with Paul, but it was only once that he was alarmed. You are less likely to be touched by the Gospel message for every time that you have heard it and put it away. That is what makes my place here so terribly responsible, and makes me feel that my words are so very feeble in comparison with what they ought to be. I know that I may be doing harm to men just because they listen and are not persuaded, and so go away less and less likely to be touched.

Ah, dear friends! you will perhaps never again have as deep impressions as you have now; or at least they are not to be reckoned upon as probable, for the tendency of all truth is to lose its power by repetition, and the tendency of all emotion which is not acted upon is to become fainter and fainter. And so I beseech you that now you would cherish any faint impression that is being made upon your hearts and consciences. Let it lead you to Christ; and take Him for your Lord and Saviour now.

I say to you: Do that now because delay robs you of large blessing. You will never want Jesus Christ more than you do to-day. You need Him in your early hours. Why should it be that a portion of your lives should be left unfilled by that rich mercy? Why should you postpone possessing the purest joy, the highest blessing, the divinest strength? Why should you put off welcoming your best Friend into your heart? Why should you?

I say to you again, Take Christ for your Lord, because delay inevitably lays up for you bitter memories and involves dreadful losses. There are good Christian men and women, I have no doubt, in this world now, who would give all they have, if they could blot out of the tablets of their memories some past hours of their lives, before they gave their hearts to Jesus Christ. I would have you ignorant of such transgression. O young men and women! if you grow up into middle life not Christians, then should you ever become so, you will have habits to fight with, and remembrances that will smart and sting; and some of you, perhaps, remembrances that will pollute, even though you are conscious that you are forgiven. It is a better thing not to know the depths of evil than to know them and to have been raised from them. You will escape infinite sorrows by an early cleaving to Christ your Lord.

And last of all I say to you, give yourselves now to Jesus Christ, because no to-morrow may be yours. Delay is gambling, very irrationally, with a very uncertain thing-your life and your future opportunities. 'You know not what shall be on the morrow.'

For a generation I have preached in Manchester these annual sermons to the young. Ah, how many of those that heard the early ones are laid in their graves; and how many of them were laid in *early* graves; and how many of them said, as some of you are saying, 'When I get older I will turn religious'! And they never got older. It is a commonplace word that, but I leave it on your hearts. You have no time to lose.

Do not delay, because delay is decision in the wrong way; do not delay, because there is no reason for delay; do not delay, because delay robs you of a large blessing; do not delay, because delay lays up for you, if ever you come back, bitter memories; do not delay, because delay may end in death. And for all these reasons, come as a sinful soul to Christ the Saviour; and ask Him to forgive you, and follow in His footsteps, and do it now! 'To-day, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.'

124) Acts 26:14

Acts

CHRIST'S REMONSTRANCES

Act. 26:14.

'Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?' No. But God can change the skin, because He can change the nature. In this story of the conversion of the Apostle Paul-the most important thing that happened that day-we have an instance how brambles may become vines; tares may become wheat; and a hater of Jesus Christ may be changed in a moment into His lover and servant, and, if need be, His martyr.

Now the very same motives and powers which were brought to bear upon the Apostle Paul by miracle are being brought to bear upon every one of us; and my object now is just to trace the stages of the process set forth here, and to ask some of you, if you, like Paul, have been 'obedient to the heavenly vision.' Stages, I call them, though they were all crowded into a moment, for even the lightning has to pass through the intervening space when it flashes from one side of the heavens to another, and we may divide its path into periods. Time is very elastic, as any of us whose lives have held great sorrows or great joys or great resolutions well know.

I. The first of these all but simultaneous and yet separable stages was the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Of course to the Apostle it was mediated by miracle; but real as he believed that appearance of the risen Lord in the heavens to be, and valid as he maintained that it was as the ground of his Apostleship, he himself, in one of his letters, speaks of the whole incident as being the revelation of God's Son in him. The revelation in heart and mind was the main thing, of which the revelation to eye and ear were but means. The means, in his case, are different from those in ours; the end is the same. To Paul it came like the rush of a cataract that the Christ whom he had thought of as lying in an unknown grave was living in the heavens and ruling there. You and I, I suppose, do not need to be convinced by miracle of the resurrection of Jesus Christ; but the bare fact that Jesus was living in the heavens would have had little effect upon Saul, unless it had been accompanied with the revelation of the startling fact that between him and Jesus Christ there were close personal relations, so that he had to do with Jesus, and Jesus with him.

‘Saul, Saul! why persecutest thou Me?’ They used to think that they could wake sleep-walkers by addressing them by name. Jesus Christ, by speaking His name to the Apostle, wakes him out of his diseased slumber, and brings him to wholesome consciousness. There are stringency and solemnity of address in that double use of the name ‘Saul, Saul!’

What does such an address teach you and me? That Jesus Christ, the living, reigning Lord of the universe, has perfect knowledge of each of us, and that we each stand isolated before Him, as if all the light of omniscience were focussed upon us. He knows our characters; He knows all about us, and more than that, He directly addresses Himself to each man and woman among us.

We are far too apt to hide ourselves in the crowd, and let all the messages of God’s love, the warnings of His providences, as well as the teachings and invitations and pleadings of His gospel, fly over our heads as if they were meant vaguely for anybody. But they are all intended for *thee*, as directly as if thou, and thou only, wert in the world. I beseech you, lay this to heart, that although no audible sounds may rend the silent heavens, nor any blaze may blind thine eye, yet that as really, though not in the same outward fashion as Saul, when they were all fallen to the earth, felt himself to be singled out, and heard a voice ‘speaking to *him* in the Hebrew tongue, saying, Saul, Saul!’ *thou* mayest hear a voice speaking to thee in the English tongue, by thy name, and directly addressing its gracious remonstrances and its loving offers to thy listening ear. I want to sharpen the blunt ‘whosoever’ into the pointed ‘thou.’ And I would fain plead with each of my friends hearing me now to believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is meant for thee, and that Christ speaks to *thee*. ‘I have a message from God unto thee,’ just as Nathan said unto David. ‘*Thou* art the man!’

Do not lose yourselves in the crowd or hide yourselves from the personal incidence of Christ’s offer, but feel that you stand, as you do indeed, alone the hearer of His voice, the possible recipient of His saving mercy.

II. Secondly, notice, as another stage in this process the discovery of the true character of the past.

‘Why persecutest thou Me?’ Now I am not going to be tempted from my more direct purpose in this sermon to dwell even for a moment on the beautiful, affecting, strengthening thought here, of the unity of Jesus Christ with all the humble souls that love Him, so as that, whatsoever any member suffers, the Head suffers with it. I must leave that truth untouched.

Saul was brought to look at all his past life as standing in immediate connection with Jesus Christ. Of course he knew before the vision that he had no love to Him whom he thought to be a Galilean impostor, and that the madness with which he hated the servants was only the glancing off of the arrow that he would fain have aimed at the Master. But he did not know that Jesus Christ counted every blow struck at one of His servants as being struck at Him. Above all he did not know that the Christ whom he was persecuting was reigning in the heavens. And so his whole past life stood before him in a new aspect when it was brought into close connection with Christ, and looked at as in relation to Him.

The same process would yield very remarkable results if applied to our lives. If I could only get you for one quiet ten minutes, to lay all your past, as far as memory brought it to your minds, right before that pure and loving Face, I should have done much. One infallible way of judging of the rottenness or goodness of our actions is that we should bring them where they will all be brought one day, into the brightness of Christ’s countenance. If you want to find out the flaws in some thin, badly-woven piece of cloth, you hold it up against the light, do you not? and then you see all the specks and holes, and the irregular threads. Hold up your lives in like fashion against the light, and I shall be surprised if you do not find enough there to make you very much ashamed of yourselves. Were you ever on the stage of a theatre in the daytime? Did you ever see what miserable daubs the scenes look, and how seamy it all is when the pitiless sunshine comes in? Let that great light pour on your life, and be thankful if you find out what a daub it has been, whilst yet colours and brushes and time are at your disposal, and you may paint the future fairer than the past.

Again, this revelation of Saul’s past life disclosed its utter unreasonableness. That one question, ‘*Why* persecutest thou Me?’ pulverised the whole thing. It was like the wondering question so unanswerable in the Psalm, ‘Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?’ If you take into account what you are, and where you stand, you can find no reason, except utterly unreasonable ones, for the lives that I fear some of us are living-lives of godlessness and Christlessness. There is nothing in all the world a tithe so stupid as sin. There is nothing so unreasonable, if there be a God at all, and if we depend upon Him, and have duties to Him, as the lives that some of you are living. You admit, most of you, that there is such a God; you admit, most of you, that you do hang upon Him; you admit, in theory, that you ought to love and serve Him. The bulk of you call yourselves Christians. That is to say, you believe, as a piece of historical fact, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came into this world and died for men. And, believing that, you turn your back on Him, and neither love nor serve nor trust Him nor turn away from your iniquity. Is there anything outside a lunatic asylum more madlike than that? ‘Why persecutest thou?’ ‘And he was speechless,’ for no answer was possible. Why neglectest thou? Why forgettest thou? Why, admitting what thou dost, art thou not an out-and-out Christian? If we think of all our obligations and relations, and the facts of the universe, we come back to the old saying, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,’ and any man who, like many of my hearers, fails to give his heart and life to Jesus Christ will one day have to say, ‘Behold, I have played the fool, and erred exceedingly.’ Wake up, my brother, to apply calm reason to your lives while yet there is time, and face the question, Why dost thou stand as thou dost to Jesus Christ? There is nothing sadder than the small share that deliberate reason and intelligent choice have in the ordering of most men’s lives. You live by impulse, by habit, by example, by constraint of the outward necessities of your position. But I am sure that there are many amongst us now who have very seldom, if ever, sat down and said, ‘Now let me think, until I get to the ultimate grounds of the course of life that I am pursuing.’ You can carry on the questions very gaily for a step or two, but then you come to a dead pause. ‘What do I do so-and-so for?’ ‘Because I like it.’ ‘Why do I like it?’ ‘Because it meets my needs, or my desires, or my tastes, or my intellect.’ Why do you make the meeting of your needs, or your desires, or your tastes, or your intellect your sole object? Is there any answer to that? The Hindoos say that the world rests upon an elephant, and the elephant rests upon a tortoise. What does the tortoise rest on? Nothing! Then that is what the world and the elephant rest on. And so, though you may go bravely through the first stages of the examination, when you come to the last question of all, you will find out that your whole scheme of life is built upon a blunder; and the blunder is this, that anybody can be blessed without God.

Further, this disclosure of the true character of his life revealed to Saul, as in a lightning flash, the ingratitude of it.

‘Why persecutest thou Me?’ That was as much as to say, ‘What have I done to merit thy hate? What have I *not* done to merit rather thy love?’ Paul did not know all that Jesus Christ had done for him. It took him a lifetime to learn a little of it, and to tell his brethren something of what he had learned. And he has been learning it ever since that day when, outside the walls of Rome, they hacked off his head. He has been learning more and more of what Jesus Christ has done for him, and why he should not persecute Him but love Him.

But the same appeal comes to each of us. What has Jesus Christ done for thee, my friend, for me, for every soul of man? He has loved me better than His own life. He has given Himself for me. He has lingered beside me, seeking to draw me to Himself, and He still lingers. And this, at the best, tremulous faith, this, at the warmest, tepid love, this, at the completest, imperfect devotion and service, are all that we bring to Him; and some of us do not bring even these. Some of us have never known what it was to sacrifice one inclination for the sake of Christ, nor to do one act for His dear love’s sake, nor to lean our weakness upon Him, nor to turn to Him and say, ‘I give Thee myself, that I may possess Thee.’ ‘Do ye thus requite the Lord, O foolish people and unwise?’ I have heard of wounded soldiers striking with their bayonets at the ambulance men who came to help them. That is like what some of you do to the Lord who died for your healing, and comes as the Physician, with bandages and with balm, to bind up the brokenhearted. ‘Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?’

III. Lastly, we have here a warning against self-inflicted wounds.

That second clause of the remonstrance on the lips of Christ in my text is, according to the true reading, not found in the account of Paul’s conversion in the ninth chapter of this book. My text is from Paul’s own story; and it is interesting to notice that he adds this eminently pathetic and forcible appeal to the shorter account given by the writer of the book. It had gone deep into his heart, and he could not forget.

The metaphor is a very plain one. The ox-goad was a formidable weapon, some seven or eight feet in length, shod with an iron point, and capable of being used as a spear, and of inflicting deadly wounds at a pinch. Held in the firm hand of the ploughman, it presented a sharp point to the rebellious animal under the yoke. If the ox had readily yielded to the gentle prick, given, not in anger, but for guidance, it had been well. But if it lashes out with its hoofs against the point, what does it get but bleeding flanks? Paul had been striking out instead of obeying, and he had won by it only bloody hocks.

There are two truths deducible from this saying, which may have been a proverb in common use. One is the utter futility of lives that are spent in opposing the divine will. There is a strong current running, and if you try to go against it you will only be swept away by it. Think of some little fishing coble coming across the bow of a great ocean-going steamer. What will be the end of that? Think of a pony-chaise jogging up the line, and an express train thundering down it. What will be the end of that? Think of a man lifting himself up and saying to God, ‘I will *not*!’ when God says, ‘Do thou this!’ or ‘Be thou this!’ What will be the end of that? ‘The world passeth away, and the lusts thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’ ‘It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks’-hard in regard to breaches of common morality, as some of my friends sitting quietly in these pews very well know. It is hard to indulge in sensual sin. You cannot altogether dodge what people call the ‘natural consequences’; but it was God who made Nature; and so I call them God-inflicted penalties. It is hard to set yourselves against Christianity. I am not going to speak of that at all now, only when we think of the expectations of victory with which so many antagonists of the Cross have gaily leaped into the arena, and of how the foes have been forgotten and there stands the Cross still, we may say of the whole crowd, beginning with the earliest, and coming down to the latest brand-new theory that is going to explode Christianity -’it is hard to kick against the pricks.’ Your own limbs you may wound; you will not do the goad much harm.

But there is another side to the proverb of my text, and that is the self-inflicted harm that comes from resisting the pricks of God's rebukes and remonstrances, whether inflicted by conscience or by any other means; including, I make bold to say, even such poor words as these of mine. For if the first little prick of conscience, a warning and a guide, be neglected, the next will go a great deal deeper. The voice which, before you do the wrong thing, says to you, 'Do not do it,' in tones of entreaty and remonstrance, speaks, after you have done it, more severely and more bitterly. The Latin word *remorse*, and the old English name for conscience, 'again-bite'-which latter is a translation of the other-teach us the same lesson, that the gnawing which comes after wrong done is far harder to bear than the touch that should have kept us from the evil. The stings of marine jelly-fish will burn for days after, if you wet them. And so all wrong-doing, and all neglect of right-doing of every sort, carries with it a subsequent pain, or else the wounded limb *mortifies*, and that is worse. There is no pain then; it would be better if there were. There is such a possibility as to have gone on so obstinately kicking against the pricks and leaving the wounds so unheeded, as that they mortify and feeling goes. A conscience 'seared with a hot iron' is ten times more dreadful than a conscience that pains and stings.

So, dear brethren, let me beseech you to listen to the pitying Christ, who says to us each, more in sorrow than in anger, 'It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.' It is no pleasure to Him to hold the goad, nor that we should wound ourselves upon it. He has another question to put to us, with another 'why,' 'Why should ye be stricken any more? Turn ye, turn ye; why will ye die, O house of Israel?'

There is another metaphor drawn from the employment of oxen which we may set side by side with this of my text: 'Take My yoke upon you, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.' The yoke accepted, the goad is laid aside; and repose and healing from its wounds are granted to us. Dear brethren, if you will listen to the Christ revealed in the heavens, as knowing all about you, and remonstrating with you for your unreasonableness and ingratitude, and setting before you the miseries of rebellion and the suicide of sin, then you will have healing for all your wounds, and your lives will neither be self-tormenting, futile, nor unreasonable. The mercy of Jesus Christ lavished upon you makes your yielding yourselves to Him your only rational course. Anything else is folly beyond comparison and harm and loss beyond count.

125) Acts 26:18

Acts

FAITH IN CHRIST

Act. 26:18.

It is commonly said, and so far as the fact is concerned, said truly, that what are called the distinguishing doctrines of Christianity are rather found in the Epistles than in the Gospels. If we wish the clearest statements of the nature and person of Christ, we turn to Paul's Epistle to the Colossians. If we wish the fullest dissertation upon Christ's work as a sacrifice, we go to the Epistle to the Hebrews. If we seek to prove that men are justified by faith, and not by works, it is to the Epistles to Romans and Galatians that we betake ourselves,-to the writings of the servant rather than the words of the Master. Now this fuller development of Christian doctrine contained in the teaching of the Apostles cannot be denied, and need not be wondered at. The reasons for it I am not going to enter upon at present; they are not far to seek. Christ came not to *speak* the Gospel, but *to be* the Gospel. But then, this truth of a fuller development is often over-strained, as if Christ 'spake nothing concerning priesthood,' sacrifices, faith. He *did* so speak when on earth. It is often misused by being made the foundation of an inference unfavourable to the authority of the Apostolic teaching, when we are told, as we sometimes are, that not Paul but Jesus speaks the words which we are to receive.

Here we have Christ Himself speaking from the heavens to Paul at the very beginning of the Apostle's course, and if any one asks us where did Paul get the doctrines which he preached, the answer is, Here, on the road to Damascus, when blind, bleeding, stunned, with all his self-confidence driven out of him-with all that he had been crushed into shivers-he saw his Lord, and heard Him speak. These words spoken then are the germ of all Paul's Epistles, the keynote to which all his writings are but the melody that follows, the mighty voice of which all his teaching is but the prolonged echo. ‘Delivering thee,’ says Christ to him, ‘from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God; that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith that is in Me.’ Now, I ask you, what of Paul’s Gospel is not here? Man’s ruin, man’s depravity and state of darkness, the power of Satan, the sole redemptive work of Christ, justification by belief in that, sanctification coming with justification, and glory and rest and heaven at last-there they all are in the very first words that sounded upon the quickened ear of the blinded man when he turned from darkness to light.

It would be foolish, of course, to try to exhaust such a passage as this in a sermon. But notice, what a complete summary of Christian truth there lies in that one last clause of the verse, ‘Inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Me.’ Translate that into distinct propositions, and they are these: Faith refers to Christ; that is the first thing. Holiness depends on faith; that is the next: ‘*sanctified* by faith.’ Heaven depends on holiness: that is the last: ‘*inheritance* among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Me.’ So there we have the whole gospel!

To the one part of this comprehensive summary which is contained in my text I desire to turn now, in hope of gathering from it some truths as to that familiar word ‘faith’ which may be of use to us all. The expression is so often on our lips that it has come to be almost meaningless in many minds. These keywords of Scripture meet the same fate as do coins that have been long in circulation. They pass through so many fingers that the inscriptions get worn off them. We can all talk about faith and forgiveness and justifying and sanctifying, but how few of us have definite notions as to what these words that come so easily from our lips mean! There is a vast deal of cloudy haze in the minds of average church and chapel goers as to what this wonder-working faith may really be. Perhaps we may then be able to see large and needful truths gleaming in these weighty syllables which Christ Jesus spoke from heaven to Paul, ‘faith that is in Me.’

I. In the first place, then, the object of faith is Christ.

‘Faith that is in Me’ is that which is directed towards Christ as its object. Christianity is not merely a system of truths about God, nor a code of morality deducible from these. In its character of a revelation, it is the revelation of God in the person of His Son. Christianity in the soul is not the belief of these truths about God, still less the acceptance and practice of these pure ethics, but the affiance and the confidence of the whole spirit fixed upon the redeeming, revealing Christ,

True, the object of our faith is Christ as made known to us in the facts of His recorded life and the teaching of His Apostles. True, our only means of knowing Him as of any other person whom we have never seen, are the descriptions of Him, His character and work, which are given. True, the empty name ‘Christ’ has to be filled with the doctrinal and biographical statements of Scripture before the Person on whom faith is to fix can be apprehended or beheld. True, it is Christ as He is made known to us in the word of God, the Incarnate Son, the perfect Man, the atoning Sacrifice, the risen Lord, the ascended Intercessor in whom we have to trust. The characteristics and attributes of Christ are known to us only by biographical statements and by doctrinal propositions. These must be understood in some measure and accepted, ere there can be faith in Him. Apart from them, the image of Christ must stand a pale, colourless phantom before the mind, and the faith which is directed towards such a nebula will be an unintelligent emotion, as nebulous and impotent as the vagueness towards which it turns.

Thus far, then, the attempt which is sometimes made to establish a Christianity without doctrines on the plea that the object of faith is not a proposition, but a person, must be regarded as nugatory; for how can the ‘person’ be an object of thought at all, but through the despised ‘propositions’?

But while on the one hand it is true that Christ as revealed in these doctrinal statements of Scripture, the divine human Saviour, is the Object of faith, on the other hand it is to be remembered that it is He, and not the statements about Him, who is the Object.

Look at His own words. He does not merely say to us, ‘Believe this, that, and the other thing about Me; put your credence in this and the other doctrine; accept this and the other promise; hope for this and the other future thing.' All these come with but are not the central act. He says, 'Believe: believe in Me! "*I* am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life": He that cometh to *Me* shall never hunger, and he that believeth in *Me* shall never thirst.' Do we rightly appreciate that? I think that if people firmly grasped this truth- that Christ is the Gospel, and that the Object of faith is not simply the truths that are recorded here in the word, but He with regard to whom these truths are recorded-it would clear away rolling wreaths of fog and mist from their perceptions. The whole feeling and attitude of a man's mind is different, according as he is trusting a person, or according as he is believing something about a person. And this, therefore, is the first broad truth that lies here. Faith has reference not merely to a doctrine, not to a system; but deeper than all these, to a living Lord-'faith that is *in Me*.'

I cannot help observing, before I go on-though it may be somewhat of a digression-what a strong inference with regard to the divinity of Christ is deducible from this first thought that He is the Object to whom faith has reference. If you look into the Old Testament, you will find constantly, 'Trust ye in the Lord for ever'; 'Put thy trust in Jehovah!' There, too, though under the form of the Law, there, too, faith was the seed and germ of all religion. There, too, though under the hard husk of apparently external obedience and ceremonial sacrifices, the just lived by faith. Its object was the Jehovah of that ancient covenant. Religion has always been the same in every dispensation. At every time, that which made a man a devout man has been identically the same thing. It has always been true that it has been faith which has bound man to God, and given man hope. But when we come to the New Testament, the centre is shifted, as it would seem. What has become of the grand old words, 'Trust ye in the Lord Jehovah'? Look! Christ stands there, and says, 'Believe upon Me'! With calm, simple, profound dignity, He lays His hand upon all the ancient and consecrated words, upon all the ancient and hallowed emotions that used to set towards the unseen God between the cherubim, throned above judgment and resting upon mercy; and He says, 'They are Mine-give them to Me! That ancient trust, I claim the right to have it. That old obedience, it belongs to Me. I am He to whom in all time the loving hearts of them that loved God, have set. I am the Angel of the Covenant, in whom whoever trusteth shall never be confounded.' And I ask you just to take that one simple fact, that Christ thus steps, in the New Testament-in so far as the direction of the religious emotions of faith and love are concerned-that Christ steps into the place filled by the Jehovah of the Old; and ask yourselves honestly what theory of Christ's nature and person and work explains that fact, and saves Him from the charge of folly and blasphemy? 'He that believeth upon Me shall never hunger.' Ah, my brother! He was no mere *man* who said that. He that spake from out of the cloud to the Apostle on the road to Damascus, and said, 'Sanctified by faith that is in Me,' was no mere *man*. Christ was our brother and a man, but He was the Son of God, the divine Redeemer. The Object of faith is Christ; and as Object of faith He must needs be divine.

II. And now, secondly, closely connected with and springing from this thought as to the true object of faith, arises the consideration as to the nature and the essence of the act of faith itself.

Whom we are to trust in we have seen: what it is to *have* faith may be very briefly stated. If the Object of faith were certain truths, the assent of the understanding would be enough. If the Object of faith were unseen things, the confident persuasion of them would be sufficient. If the Object of faith were promises of future good, the hope rising to certainty of the possession of these would be sufficient. But if the Object be more than truths, more than unseen realities, more than promises; if the Object be a living Person,- then there follows inevitably this, that faith is not merely the assent of the understanding, that faith is not merely the persuasion of the reality of unseen things, that faith is not merely the confident expectation of future good; but that faith is the personal relation of him who has it to the living Person its Object, -the relation which is expressed not more clearly, perhaps a little more forcibly to us, by substituting another word, and saying, Faith is *trust*.

And I think that there again, by laying hold of that simple principle, Because Christ is the Object of Faith, therefore Faith must be trust, we get bright and beautiful light upon the grandest truths of the Gospel of God. If we will only take that as our explanation, we have not indeed defined faith by substituting the other word for it, but we have made it a little more clear to our apprehensions, by using a non-theological word with which our daily acts teach us to connect an intelligible meaning. If we will only take that as our explanation, how simple, how grand, how familiar too it sounds,-to *trust* Him! It is the very same kind of feeling, though different in degree, and glorified by the majesty and glory of its Object, as that which we all know how to put forth in our relations with one another. We trust each other. That is faith. We have confidence in the love that has been around us, breathing benedictions and bringing blessings ever since we were little children. When the child looks up into the mother's face, the symbol to it of all protection, or into the father's eye, the symbol to it of all authority,-that emotion by which the little one hangs upon the loving hand and trusts the loving heart that towers above it in order to bend over it and scatter good, is the same as the one which, glorified and made divine, rises strong and immortal in its power, when fixed and fastened on Christ, and saves the soul. The Gospel rests upon a mystery, but the practical part of it is no mystery. When we come and preach to you, 'Trust in Christ and thou shalt be saved,' we are not asking you to put into exercise some mysterious power. We are only asking you to give to Him that which you give to others, to transfer the old emotions, the blessed emotions, the exercise of which makes gladness in life here below, to transfer them to Him, and to rest safe in the Lord. Faith is trust. The living Person as its Object rises before us there, in His majesty, in His power, in His gentleness, and He says, 'I shall be contented if thou wilt give to Me these emotions which thou dost fix now, to thy death and loss, on the creatures of a day.' Faith is mighty, divine, the gift of God; but Oh! it is the exercise of a familiar habit, only fixed upon a divine and eternal Person.

And if this be the very heart and kernel of the Christian doctrine of faith-that it is simple personal trust in Jesus Christ; it is worthy of notice, how all the subsidiary meanings and uses of the word flow out of that, whilst it cannot be explained by any of them. People are in the habit of setting up antitheses betwixt faith and reason, betwixt faith and sight, betwixt faith and possession. They say, 'We do not *know*, we must *believe*'; they say, 'We do not *see*, we must have faith'; they say, 'We do not *possess*, we must trust.' Now faith-the trust in Christ-the simple personal relation of confidence in Him-*that* lies beneath all these other meanings of the word. For instance, faith is, in one sense, the opposite and antithesis of sight; because Christ, unseen, having gone into the unseen world, the confidence which is directed towards Him must needs pass out beyond the region of sense, and fix upon the immortal verities that are veiled by excess of light at

God’s right hand. Faith is the opposite of sight; inasmuch as Christ, having given us assurance of an unseen and everlasting world, we, trusting in Him, believe what He says to us, and are persuaded and know that there are things yonder which we have never seen with the eye nor handled with the hand. Similarly, faith is the completion of reason; because, trusting Christ, we believe what He says, and He has spoken to us truths which we in ourselves are unable to discover, but which, when revealed, we accept on the faith of His truthfulness, and because we rely upon Him. Similarly, faith is contrasted with present possession, because Christ has promised us future blessings and future glories; and having confidence in the Person, we believe what He says, and know that we shall possess them. But the root from which spring the power of faith as the opposite of sight, the power of faith as the telescope of reason, the power of faith as the ‘confidence of things not possessed,’ is the deeper thing-faith in the Person, which leads us to believe Him whether He promises, reveals, or commands, and to take His words as verity because He *is* ‘the Truth.’

And then, again, if this, the personal trust in Christ as our living Redeemer-if this be faith, then there come also, closely connected with it, certain other emotions or feelings in the heart. For instance, if I am trusting to Christ, there is inseparably linked with it self-distrust. There are two sides to the emotion; where there is reliance upon another, there must needs be non-reliance upon self. Take an illustration. There is the tree: the trunk goes upward from the little seed, rises into the light, gets the sunshine upon it, and has leaves and fruit. That is the upward tendency of faith- trust in Christ. There is the root, down deep, buried, dark, unseen. Both are springing, but springing in apposite directions, from the one seed. That is, as it were, the negative side, the downward tendency-self-distrust. The two things go together-the positive reliance upon another, the negative distrust of myself. There must be deep consciousness not only of my own impotence, but of my own sinfulness. The heart must be emptied that the seed of faith may grow; but the entrance in of faith is itself the means for the emptying of the heart. The two things co-exist; we can divide them in thought. We can wrangle and squabble, as divided sects hare done, about which comes first, the fact being, that though you can part them in thought, you cannot part them in experience, inasmuch as they are but the obverse and the reverse, the two sides of the same coin. Faith and repentance-faith and self-distrust-they are done in one and the same indissoluble act.

And again, faith, as thus conceived of, will obviously have for its certain and immediate consequence, love. Nay, the two emotions will be inseparable and practically co-existent. In thought we can separate them. Logically, faith comes first, and love next, but in life they will spring up together. The question of their order of existence is an often-trod battle-ground of theology, all strewed with the relics of former fights. But in the real history of the growth of religious emotions in the soul, the interval which separates them is impalpable, and in every act of trust, love is present, and fundamental to every emotion of love to Christ is trust in Christ.

But without further reference to such matters, here is the broad principle of our text. Trust in Christ, not mere assent to a principle, personal dependence upon Him revealed as the 'Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world,' an act of the will as well as of the understanding, and essentially an act of the will and not of the understanding-that is the thing by which a soul is saved. And much of the mist and confusion about saving faith, and non-saving faith, might be lifted and dispersed if we once fully apprehended and firmly held by the divine simplicity of the truth, that faith is trust in Jesus Christ.

III. Once more: from this general definition there follows, in the third place, an explanation of the power of faith.

'We are justified,' says the Bible, 'by faith.' If a man believes, he is saved. Why so? Not, as some people sometimes seem to fancy, as if in faith itself there was any merit. There is a very strange and subtle resurrection of the whole doctrine of works in reference to this matter; and we often hear belief in the Gospel of Christ spoken about as if *it*, the work of the man believing, was, in a certain way and to some extent, that which God rewarded by giving him salvation. What is that but the whole doctrine of works come up again in a new form? What difference is there between what a man does with his hands and what a man feels in his heart? If the one merit salvation, or if the other merit salvation, equally we are shut up to this,-Men get heaven by what they do; and it does not matter a bit what they do it with, whether it be body or soul. When we say we are saved by faith, we mean accurately, *through* faith. It is God that saves. It is Christ's life, Christ's blood, Christ's sacrifice, Christ's intercession, that saves. Faith is simply the channel through which there flows over into my emptiness the divine fulness; or, to use the good old illustration, it is the hand which is held up to receive the benefit which Christ lays in it. A living trust in Jesus has power unto salvation, only because it is the means by which 'the power of God unto salvation' may come into my heart. On one side is the great ocean of Christ's love, Christ's abundance, Christ's merits, Christ's righteousness; or, rather, there is the great ocean of Christ Himself, which includes them all; and on the other is the empty vessel of my soul-and the little narrow pipe that has nothing to do but to bring across the refreshing water, is the act of faith in Him. There is no merit in the dead lead, no virtue in the mere emotion. It is not faith that saves us; it is Christ that saves us, and saves us through faith.

And now, lastly, these principles likewise help us to understand wherein consists the guilt and criminality of unbelief. People are sometimes disposed to fancy that God has arbitrarily selected this one thing, believing in Jesus Christ, as the means of salvation, and do not distinctly see why and how non-belief is so desperate and criminal a thing. I think that the principles that I have been trying feebly to work out now, help us to see how faith is not arbitrarily selected as the instrument and means of our salvation. There is no other way of effecting it. God could not save us in any other way than that, salvation being provided, the condition of receiving it should be trust in His Son.

And next they show where the guilt of unbelief lies. Faith is not first and principally an act of the understanding; it is not the mere assent to certain truths. I believe, for my part, that men are responsible even for their intellectual processes, and for the beliefs at which they arrive by the working of these; and I think it is a very shallow philosophy that stands up and says-[it is almost exploded now, and perhaps not needful even to mention it]-that men are 'no more responsible for their belief than they are for the colour of their hair.' Why, if faith were no more than an intellectual process, it would still be true that they are responsible for it; but the faith that saves a man, and unbelief that ruins a man, are not processes of the understanding alone. It is the will, the heart, the whole moral being, that is concerned. Why does any one not trust Jesus Christ? For one reason only: because *he will not*. Why has any one not faith in the Lamb of God? Because his whole nature is turning away from that divine and loving Face, and is setting itself in rebellion against it. Why does any one refuse to believe? Because he has confidence in himself; because he has not a sense of his sins; because he has not love in his heart to his Lord and Saviour. Men are responsible for unbelief. Unbelief is criminal, because it is a moral act-an act of the whole nature. Belief or unbelief is the test of a man's whole spiritual condition, just because it is the whole being, affections, will, conscience and all, as well as the understanding, which are concerned in it. And therefore Christ, who says, 'Sanctified by faith that is in Me,' says likewise, 'He that believeth not, shall be condemned.'

And now, brethren, take this one conviction into your hearts, that what makes a man a Christian-what saves my soul and yours-what brings the love of Christ into any life, and makes the sacrifice of Christ a power to pardon and purify,-that that is not merely believing this Book, not merely understanding the doctrines that are there, but a far more profound act than that. It is the casting of myself upon Himself, the bending of my willing heart to His loving Spirit; the close contact, heart to heart, soul to soul, will to will, of my emptiness with His fulness, of my sinfulness with His righteousness, of my death with His life: that I may live by Him, be sanctified by Him, be saved by Him, 'with an everlasting salvation.' Faith is trust: Christ is the Object of faith. Faith is the condition of salvation; and unbelief is your fault, your loss-the crime which ruins men's souls!

126) Acts 26:19

Acts

'BEFORE GOVERNORS AND KINGS'

'THE HEAVENLY VISION'

Act. 26:19.

This is Paul's account of the decisive moment in his life on which all his own future, and a great deal of the future of Christianity and of the world, hung. The gracious voice had spoken from heaven, and now everything depended on the answer made in the heart of the man lying there blind and amazed. Will he rise melted by love, and softened into submission, or hardened by resistance to the call of the exalted Lord? The somewhat singular expression which he employs in the text, makes us spectators of the very process of his yielding. For it might be rendered, with perhaps an advantage, 'I *became* not disobedient'; as if the 'disobedience' was the prior condition, from which we see him in the very act of passing, by the melting of his nature and the yielding of his will. Surely there have been few decisions in the world's history big with larger destinies than that which the captive described to Agrippa in the simple words: 'I became not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.'

I. Note, then, first, that this heavenly vision shines for us too.

Paul throughout his whole career looked back to the miraculous appearance of Jesus Christ in the heavens, as being equally availably as valid ground for his Christian convictions as were the appearances of the Lord in bodily form to the Eleven after His resurrection. And I may venture to work the parallel in the inverse direction, and to say to you that what we see and know of Jesus Christ is as valid a ground for our convictions, and as true and powerful a call for our obedience, as when the heaven was rent, and the glory above the midday sun bathed the persecutor and his followers on the stony road to Damascus. For the revelation that is made to the understanding and the heart, to the spirit and the will, is the same whether it be made, as it was to Paul, through a heavenly vision, or, as it was to the other Apostles, through the facts of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, which their senses certified to them, or, as it is to us, by the record of the same facts, permanently enshrined in Scripture. Paul's sight of Christ was for a moment; we can see Him as often and as long as we will, by turning to the pages of this Book. Paul's sight of Christ was accompanied with but a partial apprehension of the great and far-reaching truths which he was to learn and to teach, as embodied in the Lord whom he saw. To see Him was the work of a moment, to 'know Him' was the effort of a lifetime. We have the abiding results of the lifelong process lying ready to our hands in Paul's own letters, and we have not only the permanent record of Christ in the Gospels instead of the transient vision in the heavens, and the unfolding of the meaning and bearings of the historical facts, in the authoritative teaching of the Epistles, but we have also, in the history of the Church founded on these, in the manifest workings of a divine power for and through the company of believers, as well as in the correspondence between the facts and doctrines of Christianity and the wants of humanity, a vision disclosed and authenticated as heavenly, more developed, fuller of meaning and more blessed to the eyes which see it, than that which was revealed to the persecutor as he reeled from his horse on the way to the great city.

Dear brethren, they who see Christ in the word, In the history of the world, in the pleading of the preacher, in the course of the ages, and who sometimes hear His voice in the warnings which He breathes into their consciences, and in the illuminations which He flashes on their understanding, need ask for no loftier, no more valid and irrefragable manifestation of His gracious self. To each of us this vision is granted. May I say, without seeming egotism to you it is granted even through the dark and cloudy envelope of my poor words?

II. The vision of Christ, howsoever perceived, comes demanding obedience.

The purpose for which Jesus Christ made Himself known to Paul was to give him a charge which should influence his whole life. And the manner in which the Lord, when He had appeared, prepared the way for the charge was twofold. He revealed Himself in His radiant glory, in His exalted being, in His sympathetic and mysterious unity with them that loved Him and trusted Him, in His knowledge of the doings of the persecutor; and He disclosed to Saul the inmost evil that lurked in his own heart, and showed him to his bewilderment and confusion, how the course that he thought to be righteousness and service was blasphemy and sin. So, by the manifestation of Himself enthroned omniscient, bound by the closest ties of identity and of sympathy with all that love Him, and by the disclosure of the amazed gazer's evil and sin, Jesus Christ opened the way for the charge which bore in its very heart an assurance of pardon, and was itself a manifestation of His love.

In like manner all heavenly visions are meant to secure human obedience. We have not done what God means us to do with any knowledge of Him which He grants, unless we utilise it to drive the wheels of life and carry it out into practice in our daily conduct. Revelation is not meant to satisfy mere curiosity or the idle desire to know. It shines above us like the stars, but, unlike them, it shines to be the guide of our lives. And whatsoever glimpse of the divine nature, or of Christ's love, nearness, and power, we have ever caught, was meant to bow our wills in glad submission, and to animate our hands for diligent service and to quicken our feet to run in the way of His commandments.

There is plenty of idle gazing, with more or less of belief, at the heavenly vision. I beseech you to lay to heart this truth, that Christ rends the heavens and shows us God, not that men may know, but that men may, knowing, do; and all His visions are the bases of commandments. So the question for us all is, What are we doing with what we know of Jesus Christ? Nothing? Have we translated our thoughts of Him into actions, and have we put all our actions under the control of our thoughts of Him? It is not enough that a man should say, 'Whereupon I *saw* the vision,' or, 'Whereupon I was *convinced* of the vision,' or, 'Whereupon I *understood* the vision.' Sight, apprehension, theology, orthodoxy, they are all very well, but the right result is, 'Whereupon I was *not disobedient* to the heavenly vision.' And unless your knowledge of Christ makes you do, and keep from doing, a thousand things, it is only an idle vision, which adds to your guilt.

But notice, in this connection, the peculiarity of the obedience which the vision requires. There is not a word, in this story of Paul's conversion, about the thing which Paul himself always puts in the foreground as the very hinge upon which conversion turns-viz. faith. Not a word. The name is not here, but the thing is here, if people will look. For the obedience which Paul says that he rendered to the vision was not rendered with his hands. He got up to his feet on the road there, 'not disobedient,' though he had not yet done anything. This is to say, the man's will had melted. It had all gone with a run, so to speak, and the inmost being of him was subdued. The obedience was the submission of self to God, and not the more or less diligent and continuous consequent external activity in the way of God’s commandments.

Further, Paul’s obedience is also an obedience based upon the vision of Jesus Christ enthroned, living, bound by ties that thrill at the slightest touch to all hearts that love Him, and making common cause with them.

And furthermore, it is an obedience based upon the shuddering recognition of Paul’s own unsuspected evil and foulness, how all the life, that he had thought was being built up into a temple that God would inhabit, was rottenness and falsehood.

And it is an obedience, further, built upon the recognition of pity and pardon in Christ, who, after His sharp denunciation of the sin, looks down from Heaven with a smile of forgiveness upon His lips, and says: ‘But rise and stand upon thy feet, for I will send thee to make known My name.’

An obedience which is the inward yielding of the will, which is all built upon the revelation of the living Christ, who was dead and is alive for evermore, and close to all His followers; and is, further, the thankful tribute of a heart that knows itself to be sinful, and is certain that it is forgiven-what is that but the obedience which is of faith? And thus, when I say that the heavenly vision demands obedience, I do not mean that Christ shows Himself to you to set you to work, but I mean that Christ shows Himself to you that you may yield yourselves to Him, and in the act may receive power to do all His sweet and sacred will.

III. Thirdly, this obedience is in our own power to give or to withhold.

Paul, as I said in my introductory remarks, puts us here as spectators of the very act of submission. He shows it to us in its beginning-he shows us the state from which he came and that into which he passed, and he tells us, ‘I *became*-not disobedient.’ In his case it was a complete, swift, and permanent revolution, as if some thick-ribbed ice should all at once melt into sweet water. But whether swift or slow it was his own act, and after the Voice had spoken it was possible that Paul should have resisted and risen from the ground, not a servant, but a persecutor still. For God’s grace constrains no man, and there is always the possibility open that when He calls we refuse, and that when He beseeches we say, ‘I will not.’

There is the mystery on which the subtlest intellects have tasked their powers and blunted the edge of their keenness in all generations; and it is not likely to be settled in five minutes of a sermon of mine. But the practical point that I have to urge is simply this: there are two mysteries, the one that men *can*, and the other that men *do*, resist Christ’s pleading voice. As to the former, we cannot fathom it. But do not let any difficulty deaden to you the clear voice of your own consciousness. If I cannot trust my sense that I can do this thing or not do it, as I choose, there is nothing that I can trust. Will is the power of determining which of two roads I shall go, and, strange as it is, incapable of statement in any more general terms than the reiteration of the fact; yet here stands the fact, that God, the infinite Will, has given to men, whom He made in His own image, this inexplicable and awful power of coinciding with or opposing His purposes and His voice.

‘Our wills are ours, we know not how;
Our wills are ours, to make them Thine.’

For the other mystery is, that men *do* consciously set themselves against the will of God, and refuse the gifts which they know all the while are for their good. It is of no use to say that sin is ignorance. No; that is only a surface explanation. You and I know too well that many a time when we have been as sure of what God wanted us to do as if we had seen it written in flaming letters on the sky there, we have gone and done the exact opposite. I know that there are men and women who are convinced in their inmost souls that they ought to be Christians, and that Jesus Christ is pleading with them at the present hour, and yet in whose hearts there is no yielding to what, they yet are certain, is the will and voice of Jesus Christ.

IV. Lastly, this obedience may, in a moment, revolutionise a life.

Paul rode from Jerusalem ‘breathing out threatenings and slaughters.’ He fell from his warhorse, a persecutor of Christians, and a bitter enemy of Jesus. A few moments pass. There was one moment in which the crucial decision was made; and he staggered to his feet, loving all that he had hated, and abandoning all in which he had trusted. His own doctrine that ‘if any man be in Christ he is a new creature, old things are passed away and all things are become new,’ is but a generalisation of what befell himself on the Damascus road. It is of no use trying to say that there had been a warfare going on in this man’s mind long before, of which his complete capitulation was only the final visible outcome. There is not a trace of anything of the kind in the story. It is a pure hypothesis pressed into the service of the anti-supernatural explanation of the fact.

There are plenty of analogies of such sudden and entire revolution. All reformation of a moral kind is best done quickly. It is a very hopeless task, as every one knows, to tell a drunkard to break off his habits gradually. There must be one moment in which he definitely turns himself round and sets his face in the other direction. Some things are best done with slow, continuous pressure; other things need to be done with a wrench if they are to be done at all.

There used to be far too much insistence upon one type of religious experience, and all men that were to be recognised as Christians were, by evangelical Nonconformists, required to be able to point to the moment when, by some sudden change, they passed from darkness to light. We have drifted away from that very far now, and there is need for insisting, not upon the necessity, but upon the possibility, of sudden conversions. However some may try to show that such experiences cannot be, the experience of every earnest Christian teacher can answer-well! whether they can be or not, they are. Jesus Christ cured two men gradually, and all the others instantaneously. No doubt, for young people who have been born amidst Christian influences, and have grown up in Christian households, the usual way of becoming Christians is that slowly and imperceptibly they shall pass into the consciousness of communion with Jesus Christ. But for people who have grown up irreligious and, perhaps, profligate and sinful, the most probable way is a sudden stride out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God’s dear Son. So I come to you all with this message. No matter what your past, no matter how much of your life may have ebbed away, no matter how deeply rooted and obstinate may be your habits of evil, no matter how often you may have tried to mend yourself and have failed, it is possible by one swift act of surrender to break the chains and go free. In every man's life there have been moments into which years have been crowded, and which have put a wider gulf between his past and his present self than many slow, languid hours can dig. A great sorrow, a great joy, a great, newly discerned truth, a great resolve will make 'one day as a thousand years.' Men live through such moments and feel that the past is swallowed up as by an earthquake. The highest instance of thus making time elastic and crowding it with meaning is when a man forms and keeps the swift resolve to yield himself to Christ. It may be the work of a moment, but it makes a gulf between past and future, like that which parted the time before and the time after that in which 'God said, Let there be light: and there was light.' If you have never yet bowed before the heavenly vision and yielded yourself as conquered by the love which pardons, to be the glad servant of the Lord Jesus who takes all His servants into wondrous oneness with Himself, do it now. You can do it. Delay is disobedience, and may be death. Do it now, and your whole life will be changed. Peace and joy and power will come to you, and you, made a new man, will move in a new world of new relations, duties, energies, loves, gladnesses, helps, and hopes. If you take heed to prolong the point into a line, and hour by hour to renew the surrender and the cry, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' you will ever have the vision of the Christ enthroned, pardoning, sympathising, and commanding, which will fill your sky with glory, point the path of your feet, and satisfy your gaze with His beauty, and your heart with His all-sufficing and ever-present love.

127) Acts 26:20-27

Acts

'BEFORE GOVERNORS AND KINGS'

Act. 26:19 - Act. 26:32.

Festus was no model of a righteous judge, but he had got hold of the truth as to Paul, and saw that what he contemptuously called 'certain questions of their own superstition,' and especially his assertion of the Resurrection, were the real crimes of the Apostle in Jewish eyes. But the fatal wish to curry favour warped his course, and led him to propose a removal of the ‘venue’ to Jerusalem. Paul knew that to return thither would seal his death-warrant, and was therefore driven to appeal to Rome.

That took the case out of Festus’s jurisdiction. So that the hearing before Agrippa was an entertainment, got up for the king’s diversion, when other amusements had been exhausted, rather than a regular judicial proceeding. Paul was examined ‘to make a Roman holiday.’ Festus’s speech [Act. 25:24 - Act. 25:27] tries to put on a colour of desire to ascertain more clearly the charges, but that is a very thin pretext. Agrippa had said that he would like ‘to hear the man,’ and so the performance was got up ‘by request.’ Not a very sympathetic audience fronted Paul that day. A king and his sister, a Roman governor, and all the elite of Caesarean society, ready to take their cue from the faces of these three, did not daunt Paul. The man who had seen Jesus on the Damascus road could face ‘small and great.’

The portion of his address included in the passage touches substantially the same points as did his previous ‘apologies.’ We may note how strongly he puts the force that impelled him on his course, and lays bare the secret of his life. ‘I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision’; then the possibility of disobedience was open after he had heard Christ ask, ‘Why persecutest thou Me?’ and had received commands from His mouth. Then, too, the essential character of the charge against him was that, instead of kicking against the owner’s goad, he had bowed his neck to his yoke, and that his obstinate will had melted. Then, too, the ‘light above the brightness of the sun’ still shone round him, and his whole life was one long act of obedience.

We note also how he sums up his work in Act. 26:20, representing his mission to the Gentiles as but the last term in a continuous widening of his field, from Damascus to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to Judaea [a phase of his activity not otherwise known to us, and for which, with our present records, it is difficult to find a place], from Judaea to the Gentiles. Step by step he had been led afield, and at each step the ‘heavenly vision’ had shone before him.

How superbly, too, Paul overleaps the distinction of Jew and Gentile, which disappeared to him in the unity of the broad message, which was the same to every man. Repentance, turning to God, works worthy of repentance, are as needful for Jew as for Gentile, and as open to Gentile as to Jew. What but universal can such a message be? To limit it would be to mutilate it.

We note, too, the calmness with which he lays his finger on the real cause of Jewish hate, which Festus had already found out. He does not condescend to rebut the charge of treason, which he had already repelled, and which nobody in his audience believed. He is neither afraid nor angry, as he quietly points to the deadly malice which had no ground but his message.

We further note the triumphant confidence in God and assurance of His help in all the past, so that, like some strong tower after the most crashing blows of the battering-ram, he still 'stands.' 'His steps had wellnigh slipped,' when foe after foe stormed against him, but 'Thy mercy, O Lord, held me up.'

Finally, Paul gathers himself together, to leave as his last word the mighty sentence in which he condenses his whole teaching, in its aspect of witness-bearing, in its universal destination and identity to the poorest and to loftily placed men and women, such as sat languidly looking at him now, in its perfect concord with the earlier revelation, and in its threefold contents, that it was the message of the Christ who suffered, who rose from the dead, who was the Light of the world. Surely the promise was fulfilled to him, and it was 'given him in that hour what he should speak.'

The rustle in the crowd was scarcely over, when the strong masterful voice of the governor rasped out the coarse taunt, which, according to one reading, was made coarser [and more lifelike] by repetition, 'Thou art mad, Paul; thou art mad.' So did a hard 'practical man' think of that strain of lofty conviction, and of that story of the appearance of the Christ. To be in earnest about wealth or power or science or pleasure is not madness, so the world thinks; but to be in earnest about religion, one's own soul, or other people's, is. Which was the saner, Paul, who 'counted all things but dung that he might win Christ,' or Festus, who counted keeping his governorship, and making all that he could out of it, the one thing worth living for? Who is the madman, he who looks up and sees Jesus, and bows before Him for lifelong service, or he who looks up and says, 'I see nothing up there; I keep my eyes on the main chance down here'? It would be a saner and a happier world if there were more of us mad after Paul's fashion.

Paul’s unruffled calm and dignity brushed aside the rude exclamation with a simple affirmation that his words were true in themselves, and spoken by one who had full command over his faculties; and then he turned away from Festus, who understood nothing, to Agrippa, who, at any rate, did understand a little. Indeed, Festus has to take the second place throughout, and it may have been the ignoring of him that nettled him. For all his courtesy to Agrippa, he knew that the latter was but a vassal king, and may have chafed at Paul’s addressing him exclusively.

The Apostle has finished his defence, and now he towers above the petty dignitaries before him, and goes straight at the conscience of the king. Festus had dismissed the Resurrection of ‘one Jesus’ as unimportant: Paul asserted it, the Jews denied it. It was not worth while to ask which was right. The man was dead, that was agreed. If Paul said He was alive after death, that was only another proof of madness, and a Roman governor had more weighty things to occupy him than investigating such obscure and absurd trifles. But Agrippa, though not himself a Jew, knew enough of the history of the last twenty years to have heard about the Resurrection and the rise of the Church. No doubt he would have been ready to admit his knowledge, but Paul shows a disposition to come to closer quarters by his swift thrust, ‘Believest thou the prophets?’ and the confident answer which the questioner gives.

What was the Apostle bringing these two things-the publicity given to the facts of Christ’s life, and the belief in the prophets- together for? Obviously, if Agrippa said Yes, then the next question would be, ‘Believest thou the Christ, whose life and death and resurrection thou knowest, and who has fulfilled the prophets thereby?’ That would have been a hard question for the king to answer. His conscience begins to be uncomfortable, and his dignity is wounded by this extremely rude person, who ventures to talk to him as if he were a mere common man. He has no better answer ready than a sarcasm; not a very forcible one, betraying, however, his penetration into, and his dislike of, and his embarrassment at, Paul’s drift. His ironical words are no confession of being ‘almost persuaded,’ but a taunt. ‘And do you really suppose that it is so easy a matter to turn me-the great Me, a Herod, a king,’ and he might have added, a sensual bad man, ‘into a Christian?’

Paul met the sarcastic jest with deep earnestness, which must have hushed the audience of sycophants ready to laugh with the king, and evidently touched him and Festus. His whole soul ran over in yearning desire for the salvation of them all. He took no notice of the gibe in the word *Christian*, nor of the levity of Agrippa. He showed that purest love fills his heart, that he has found the treasure which enriches the poorest and adds blessedness to the highest. So peaceful and blessed is he, a prisoner, that he can wish nothing better for any than to be like him in his faith. He hints his willingness to take any pains and undergo any troubles for such an end; and, with almost a smile, he looks at his chains, and adds, ‘except these bonds.’

Did Festus wince a little at the mention of these, which ought not to have been on his wrists? At all events, the entertainment had taken rather too serious a turn for the taste of any of the three,-Festus, Agrippa, or Bernice. If this strange man was going to shake their consciences in that fashion, it was high time to end what was, after all, as far as the rendering of justice was concerned, something like a farce.

So with a rustle, and amid the obeisances of the courtiers, the three rose, and, followed by the principal people, went through the form of deliberation. There was only one conclusion to be come to. He was perfectly innocent. So Agrippa solemnly pronounced, what had been known before, that he had done nothing worthy of death or bonds, though he had ‘these bonds’ on his arms; and salved the injustice of keeping an innocent man in custody by throwing all the blame on Paul himself for appealing to Csesar. But the person to blame was Festus, who had forced Paul to appeal in order to save his life.

128) Acts 26:28

Acts

‘BEFORE GOVERNORS AND KINGS’

‘ME A CHRISTIAN!’

Act. 26:28.

This Agrippa was son of the other Herod of whom we hear in the Acts as a persecutor. This one appears from other sources, to have had the vices but not the force of character of his bad race. He was weak and indolent, a mere hanger-on of Rome, to which he owed his kingdom, and to which he stoutly stuck during all the tragedy of the fall of Jerusalem. In position and in character [largely resulting from the position] he was uncommonly like those semi-independent rajahs in India, who are allowed to keep up a kind of shadow of authority on condition of doing what Calcutta bids them. Of course frivolity and debauchery become the business of such men. What sort of a man this was may be sufficiently inferred from the fact that Bernice was his sister.

But he knew a good deal about the Jews, about their opinions, their religion, and about what had been going on during the last half century amongst them. Or grounds of policy he professed to accept the Jewish faith-of which an edifying example is given in the fact that, on one occasion, Bernice was prevented from accompanying him to Rome because she was fulfilling a Nazarite vow in the Temple at Jerusalem!

So the Apostle was fully warranted in appealing to Agrippa's knowledge, not only of Judaism, but of the history of Jesus Christ, and in his further assertion, 'I know that thou believest.' But the home-thrust was too much for the king. His answer is given in the words of our text.

They are very familiar words, and they have been made the basis of a great many sermons upon being all but persuaded to accept of Christ as Saviour. But, edifying as such a use of them is, it can scarcely be sustained by their actual meaning. Most commentators are agreed that our Authorised Version does not represent either Agrippa's words or his tone. He was not speaking in earnest. His words are sarcasm, not a half melting into conviction, and the Revised Version gives what may, on the whole, be accepted as being a truer representation of their intention when it reads, 'With but little persuasion thou wouldst fain make me a Christian.'

He is half amused and half angry at the Apostle's presumption in supposing that so easily or so quickly he was going to land his fish. 'It is a more difficult task than you fancy, Paul, to make a Christian of a man like me.' That is the real meaning of his words, and I think that, rightly understood, they yield lessons of no less value than those that have been so often drawn from them as they appear in our Authorised Version. So I wish to try and gather up and urge upon you now these lessons:-

I. First, then, I see here an example of the danger of a superficial familiarity with Christian truth.

As I said, Agrippa knew, in a general way, a good deal not only about the prophets and the Jewish religion, but of the outstanding facts of the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul's assumption that he knew would have been very quickly repudiated if it had not been based upon fact. And the inference from his acceptance without contradiction of the Apostle's statement is confirmed by his use of the word 'Christian,' which had by no means come into general employment when he spoke; and in itself indicates that he knew a good deal about the people who were so named. Mark the contrast, for instance, between him and the bluff Roman official at his side. To Festus, Paul's talking about a dead man's having risen, and a risen Jew becoming a light to all nations, was such utter nonsense that, with characteristic Roman contempt for men with ideas, he breaks in, with his rough, strident voice, 'Much learning has made thee mad.' There was not much chance of that cause producing that effect on Festus. But he was apparently utterly bewildered at this entirely novel and unintelligible sort of talk. Agrippa, on the other hand, knows all about the Resurrection; has heard that there was such a thing, and has a general rough notion of what Paul believed as a Christian.

And was he any better for it? No; he was a great deal worse. It took the edge off a good deal of his curiosity. It made him fancy that he knew beforehand all that the Apostle had to say. It stood in the way of his apprehending the truths which he thought that he understood.

And although the world knows a great deal more about Jesus Christ and the Gospel than he did, the very same thing is true about hundreds and thousands of people who have all their lives long been brought into contact with Christianity. Superficial knowledge is the worst enemy of accurate knowledge, for the first condition of knowing a thing is to know that we do not know it. And so there are a great many of us who, having picked up since childhood vague and partially inaccurate notions about Christ and His

Gospel and what He has done, are so satisfied on the strength of these that we know all about it, that we listen to preaching about it with a very languid attention. The ground in our minds is preoccupied with our own vague and imperfect apprehensions. I believe that there is nothing that stands more in the way of hundreds of people coming into real intelligent contact with Gospel truth than the half knowledge that they have had of it ever since they were children. You fancy that you know all that I can tell you. Very probably you do. But have you ever taken a firm hold of the plain central facts of Christianity-your own sinfulness and helplessness, your need of a Saviour, the perfect work of Jesus Christ who died on the Cross for you, and the power of simple faith therein to join you to Him, and, if followed by consecration and obedience, to make you partakers of His nature, and heirs of the inheritance that is above? These are but the fundamentals, the outlines of Gospel truth. But far too many of you see them, in such a manner as you see the figures cast upon a screen when the lantern is not rightly focussed, with a blurred outline, and the blurred outline keeps you from seeing the sharp-cut truth as it is in Jesus. In all regions of thought inaccurate knowledge is the worst foe to further understanding, and eminently is this the case in religion. Brethren, some of you are in that position.

Then there is another way in which such knowledge as that of which the king in our text is an example is a hindrance, and that is, that it is knowledge which has no effect on character. What do hundreds of us do with our knowledge of Christianity? Our minds seem built in watertight compartments, and we keep the doors of them shut very close, so that truths in the understanding have no influence on the will. Many of you believe the Gospel intellectually, and it does not make a hairsbreadth of difference to anything that you ever either thought or wished or did. And because you so believe it, it is utterly impossible that it should ever be of any use to you. ‘Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.’ ‘Yes, believest the prophets, and Bernice sitting by thy side there- believest the prophets, and livest in utter bestial godlessness.’ What is the good of a knowledge of Christianity like that? And is it not such knowledge of Christianity that blocks the way with some of you for anything more real and more operative? There is nothing more impotent than a firmly believed and utterly neglected truth. And that is what the Christianity of some of you is when it is analysed.

II. Now, secondly, notice how we have here the example of a proud man indignantly recoiling from submission,

There is a world of contempt in Agrippa’s words, in the very putting side by side of the two things. ‘Me! *Me*,’ with a very large capital M-’Me a Christian?’ He thinks of his dignity, poor creature. It was not such a very tremendous dignity after all. He was a petty kinglet, permitted by the grace of Rome to live and to pose as if he were the real thing, and yet he struts and claps his wings and crows on his little hillock as if it were a mountain. ‘*Me* a Christian?’ ‘The great Agrippa a *Christian*!’ And he uses that word ‘Christian’ with the intense contempt which coined it and adhered to it, until the men to whom it was applied were wise enough to take it and bind it as a crown of honour upon their head. The wits at Antioch first of all hit upon the designation. They meant a very exquisite piece of sarcasm by their nickname. These people were ‘Christians,’ just as some other people were Herodians-Christ’s men, the men of this impostor who pretended to be a Messiah. That seemed such an intensely ludicrous thing to the wise people in Antioch that they coined the name; and no doubt thought they had done a very clever thing. It is only used in the Bible in tike notice of its origin; here, with a very evident connotation of contempt; and once more when Peter in his letter refers to it as being the indictment on which certain disciples suffered. So when Agrippa says, ‘Me a Christian,’ he puts all the bitterness that he can into that last word. As if he said, ‘Do you really think that I-I-am going to bow myself down to be a follower and adherent of that Christ of yours? The thing is too ridiculous! With but little persuasion you would fain make me a Christian. But you will find it a harder task than you fancy.’

Now, my dear friends, the shape of this unwillingness is changed but the fact of it remains. There are two or three features of what I take to be the plain Gospel of Jesus Christ which grate very much against all self-importance and self-complacency, and operate very largely, though not always consciously, upon very many amongst us. I just run them over, very briefly.

The Gospel insists on dealing with everybody in the same fashion, and on regarding all as standing on the same level. Many of us do not like that. Translate Agrippa's scorn into words that fit ourselves: 'I am a well-to-do Manchester man. Am I to stand on the same level as my office-boy?' Yes! the very same. 'I, a student, perhaps a teacher of science, or a cultivated man, a scholar, a lawyer, a professional man-am I to stand on the same level as people that scarcely know how to read and write?' Yes, exactly. So, like the man in the Old Testament, 'he turned and went away in a rage.' Many of us would like that there should be a little private door for us in consideration of our position or acquirements or respectability, or this, that, or the other thing. At any rate we are not to be classed in the same category with the poor and the ignorant and the sinful and the savage all over the world. But we are so classed. Do not you and the men in Patagonia breathe the same air? Are not your bodies subject to the same laws? Have you not to be contented to be fed in the same fashion, and to sleep and eat and drink in the same way? 'We have all of us one human heart'; and 'there is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' The identities of humanity, in all its examples, are deeper than the differences in any. We have all the one Saviour and are to be saved in the same fashion. That is a humbling thing for those of us who stand upon some little elevation, real or fancied, but it is only the other side of the great truth that God's love is world-wide, and that Christ's Gospel is meant for humanity. Naaman, to whom I have already referred in passing, wanted to be treated as a great man who happened to be a leper; Elisha insisted on treating him as a leper who happened to be a great man. And that makes all the difference. I remember seeing somewhere that a great surgeon had said that the late Emperor of Germany would have had a far better chance of being cured if he had gone *incognito* to the hospital for throat diseases. We all need the same surgery, and we must be contented to take it in the same fashion. So, some of us recoil from humbling equality with the lowest and worst.

Then again, another thing that sometimes makes people shrink back from the Gospel is that it insists upon every one being saved solely by dependence on Another. We would like to have a part in our salvation, and many of us had rather do anything in the way of sacrifice or suffering or penance than take this position:

'Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy Cross I cling.'

Corrupt forms of Christianity have taken an acute measure of the worst parts of human nature, when they have taught men that they can eke out Christ's work by their own, and have some kind of share in their own salvation. Dear brethren, I have to bring to you another Gospel than that, and to say, All is done for us, and all will be done in us, and nothing has to be done by us. Some of you do not like that. Just as a man drowning is almost sure to try to help himself, and get his limbs inextricably twisted round his would-be rescuer and drown them both, so men will not, without a struggle, consent to owe everything to Jesus Christ, and to let Him draw them out of many waters and set them on the safe shore. But unless we do so, we have little share in His Gospel.

And another thing stands in the way-namely, that the Gospel insists upon absolute obedience to Jesus Christ. Agrippa fancied that it was an utterly preposterous idea that he should lower his flag, and doff his crown, and become the servant of a Jewish peasant. A great many of us, though we have a higher idea of our Lord than his, do yet find it quite as hard to submit our wills to His, and to accept the condition of absolute obedience, utter resignation to Him, and entire subjection to His commandment. We say, 'Let my own will have a little bit of play in a corner.' Some of us find it very hard to believe that we are to bring all our thinking upon religious and moral subjects to Him, and to accept His word as conclusive, settling all controversies. 'I, with my culture; am I to accept what Christ says as the end of strife?' Yes, absolute submission is the plainest condition of real Christianity. The very name tells us that. We are Christians, *i.e.* Christ's men; and unless we are, we have no right to the name. But some of us had rather be our own masters and enjoy the miseries of independence and self-will, and so be the slaves of our worse selves, than bow ourselves utterly before that dear Lord, and so pass into the freedom of a service love-inspired, and by love accepted, 'Thou wouldst fain persuade *me* to be a *Christian*,' is the recoil of a proud heart from submission. Brethren, let me beseech you that it may not be yours.

III. Again, we have here an example of instinctive shrinking from the personal application of broad truths.

Agrippa listened, half-amused and a good deal interested, to Paul as long as he talked generalities and described his own experience. But when he came to point the generalities and to drive them home to the hearer's heart it was time to stop him. That question of the Apostle's, keen and sudden as the flash of a dagger, went straight home, and the king at once gathered himself together into an attitude of resistance. Ah, that is what hundreds of people do! You will let me preach as long as I like-only you will get a little weary sometimes-you will let me preach generalities *ad libitum*. But when I come to 'And thou?' then I am 'rude' and 'inquisitorial' and 'personal' and 'trespassing on a region where I have no business,' and so on and so on. And so you shut up your heart if not your ears.

And yet, brethren, what is the use of toothless generalities? What am I here for if I am not here to take these broad, blunt truths and sharpen them to a point, and try to get them in between the joints of your armour? Can any man faithfully preach the Gospel who is always flying over the heads of his hearers with universalities, and never goes straight to their hearts with 'Thou-thou art the man!' 'Believest *thou*?'

And so, dear friends, let me press that question upon you. Never mind about other people. Suppose you and I were alone together and my words were coming straight *to thee*. Would they not have more power than they have now? They are so coming. Think away all these other people, and this place, ay, and me too, and let the word of Christ, which deals with no crowds but with single souls, come to you in its individualising force: 'Believest *thou*?' You will have to answer that question one day. Better to face it now and try to answer it than to leave it all vague until you get yonder, where 'each one of us shall give account of *himself* to God.

IV. Lastly, we have here an example of a soul close to the light, but passing into the dark.

Agrippa listens to Paul; Bernice listens; Festus listens. And what comes of it? Only this, 'And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, This man hath done nothing worthy of death or of bonds.' May I translate into a modern equivalent: And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, 'This man preached a very impressive sermon,' or, 'This man preached a very wearisome sermon,' and there an end.

Agrippa and Bernice went their wicked way, and Festus went his, and none of them knew what a fateful moment they had passed through. Ah, brethren! there are many such in our lives when we make decisions that influence our whole future, and no sign shows that the moment is any way different from millions of its undistinguished fellows. It is eminently so in regard to our relation to Jesus Christ and His Gospel. These three had been in the light; they were never so near it again. Probably they never heard the Gospel preached any more, and they went away, not knowing what they had done when they silenced Paul and left him. Now you will probably hear plenty of sermons in future. You may or you may not. But be sure of this, that if you go away from this one, unmelted and unbelieving, you have not done a trivial thing. You have added one more stone to the barrier that you yourself build to shut you out from holiness and happiness, from hope and heaven. It is not I that ask you the question, it is not Paul that asks it, Jesus Christ Himself says to you, as He said to the blind man, 'Dost thou believe on the Son of God?' or as He said to the weeping sister of Lazarus, 'Believest thou this?' O dear friends, do not answer like this arrogant bit of a king, but cry with tears, 'Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief!'

129) Acts 26:29-32

Acts

'BEFORE GOVERNORS AND KINGS'

Act. 26:19 - Act. 26:32.

Festus was no model of a righteous judge, but he had got hold of the truth as to Paul, and saw that what he contemptuously called 'certain questions of their own superstition,' and especially his assertion of the Resurrection, were the real crimes of the Apostle in Jewish eyes. But the fatal wish to curry favour warped his course, and led him to propose a removal of the ‘venue’ to Jerusalem. Paul knew that to return thither would seal his death-warrant, and was therefore driven to appeal to Rome.

That took the case out of Festus’s jurisdiction. So that the hearing before Agrippa was an entertainment, got up for the king’s diversion, when other amusements had been exhausted, rather than a regular judicial proceeding. Paul was examined ‘to make a Roman holiday.’ Festus’s speech [Act. 25:24 - Act. 25:27] tries to put on a colour of desire to ascertain more clearly the charges, but that is a very thin pretext. Agrippa had said that he would like ‘to hear the man,’ and so the performance was got up ‘by request.’ Not a very sympathetic audience fronted Paul that day. A king and his sister, a Roman governor, and all the elite of Caesarean society, ready to take their cue from the faces of these three, did not daunt Paul. The man who had seen Jesus on the Damascus road could face ‘small and great.’

The portion of his address included in the passage touches substantially the same points as did his previous ‘apologies.’ We may note how strongly he puts the force that impelled him on his course, and lays bare the secret of his life. ‘I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision’; then the possibility of disobedience was open after he had heard Christ ask, ‘Why persecutest thou Me?’ and had received commands from His mouth. Then, too, the essential character of the charge against him was that, instead of kicking against the owner’s goad, he had bowed his neck to his yoke, and that his obstinate will had melted. Then, too, the ‘light above the brightness of the sun’ still shone round him, and his whole life was one long act of obedience.

We note also how he sums up his work in Act. 26:20, representing his mission to the Gentiles as but the last term in a continuous widening of his field, from Damascus to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to Judaea [a phase of his activity not otherwise known to us, and for which, with our present records, it is difficult to find a place], from Judaea to the Gentiles. Step by step he had been led afield, and at each step the ‘heavenly vision’ had shone before him.

How superbly, too, Paul overleaps the distinction of Jew and Gentile, which disappeared to him in the unity of the broad message, which was the same to every man. Repentance, turning to God, works worthy of repentance, are as needful for Jew as for Gentile, and as open to Gentile as to Jew. What but universal can such a message be? To limit it would be to mutilate it.

We note, too, the calmness with which he lays his finger on the real cause of Jewish hate, which Festus had already found out. He does not condescend to rebut the charge of treason, which he had already repelled, and which nobody in his audience believed. He is neither afraid nor angry, as he quietly points to the deadly malice which had no ground but his message.

We further note the triumphant confidence in God and assurance of His help in all the past, so that, like some strong tower after the most crashing blows of the battering-ram, he still 'stands.' 'His steps had wellnigh slipped,' when foe after foe stormed against him, but 'Thy mercy, O Lord, held me up.'

Finally, Paul gathers himself together, to leave as his last word the mighty sentence in which he condenses his whole teaching, in its aspect of witness-bearing, in its universal destination and identity to the poorest and to loftily placed men and women, such as sat languidly looking at him now, in its perfect concord with the earlier revelation, and in its threefold contents, that it was the message of the Christ who suffered, who rose from the dead, who was the Light of the world. Surely the promise was fulfilled to him, and it was 'given him in that hour what he should speak.'

The rustle in the crowd was scarcely over, when the strong masterful voice of the governor rasped out the coarse taunt, which, according to one reading, was made coarser [and more lifelike] by repetition, 'Thou art mad, Paul; thou art mad.' So did a hard 'practical man' think of that strain of lofty conviction, and of that story of the appearance of the Christ. To be in earnest about wealth or power or science or pleasure is not madness, so the world thinks; but to be in earnest about religion, one's own soul, or other people's, is. Which was the saner, Paul, who 'counted all things but dung that he might win Christ,' or Festus, who counted keeping his governorship, and making all that he could out of it, the one thing worth living for? Who is the madman, he who looks up and sees Jesus, and bows before Him for lifelong service, or he who looks up and says, 'I see nothing up there; I keep my eyes on the main chance down here'? It would be a saner and a happier world if there were more of us mad after Paul's fashion.

Paul’s unruffled calm and dignity brushed aside the rude exclamation with a simple affirmation that his words were true in themselves, and spoken by one who had full command over his faculties; and then he turned away from Festus, who understood nothing, to Agrippa, who, at any rate, did understand a little. Indeed, Festus has to take the second place throughout, and it may have been the ignoring of him that nettled him. For all his courtesy to Agrippa, he knew that the latter was but a vassal king, and may have chafed at Paul’s addressing him exclusively.

The Apostle has finished his defence, and now he towers above the petty dignitaries before him, and goes straight at the conscience of the king. Festus had dismissed the Resurrection of ‘one Jesus’ as unimportant: Paul asserted it, the Jews denied it. It was not worth while to ask which was right. The man was dead, that was agreed. If Paul said He was alive after death, that was only another proof of madness, and a Roman governor had more weighty things to occupy him than investigating such obscure and absurd trifles. But Agrippa, though not himself a Jew, knew enough of the history of the last twenty years to have heard about the Resurrection and the rise of the Church. No doubt he would have been ready to admit his knowledge, but Paul shows a disposition to come to closer quarters by his swift thrust, ‘Believest thou the prophets?’ and the confident answer which the questioner gives.

What was the Apostle bringing these two things-the publicity given to the facts of Christ’s life, and the belief in the prophets- together for? Obviously, if Agrippa said Yes, then the next question would be, ‘Believest thou the Christ, whose life and death and resurrection thou knowest, and who has fulfilled the prophets thereby?’ That would have been a hard question for the king to answer. His conscience begins to be uncomfortable, and his dignity is wounded by this extremely rude person, who ventures to talk to him as if he were a mere common man. He has no better answer ready than a sarcasm; not a very forcible one, betraying, however, his penetration into, and his dislike of, and his embarrassment at, Paul’s drift. His ironical words are no confession of being ‘almost persuaded,’ but a taunt. ‘And do you really suppose that it is so easy a matter to turn me-the great Me, a Herod, a king,’ and he might have added, a sensual bad man, ‘into a Christian?’

Paul met the sarcastic jest with deep earnestness, which must have hushed the audience of sycophants ready to laugh with the king, and evidently touched him and Festus. His whole soul ran over in yearning desire for the salvation of them all. He took no notice of the gibe in the word *Christian*, nor of the levity of Agrippa. He showed that purest love fills his heart, that he has found the treasure which enriches the poorest and adds blessedness to the highest. So peaceful and blessed is he, a prisoner, that he can wish nothing better for any than to be like him in his faith. He hints his willingness to take any pains and undergo any troubles for such an end; and, with almost a smile, he looks at his chains, and adds, 'except these bonds.'

Did Festus wince a little at the mention of these, which ought not to have been on his wrists? At all events, the entertainment had taken rather too serious a turn for the taste of any of the three,-Festus, Agrippa, or Bernice. If this strange man was going to shake their consciences in that fashion, it was high time to end what was, after all, as far as the rendering of justice was concerned, something like a farce.

So with a rustle, and amid the obeisances of the courtiers, the three rose, and, followed by the principal people, went through the form of deliberation. There was only one conclusion to be come to. He was perfectly innocent. So Agrippa solemnly pronounced, what had been known before, that he had done nothing worthy of death or bonds, though he had 'these bonds' on his arms; and salved the injustice of keeping an innocent man in custody by throwing all the blame on Paul himself for appealing to Csesar. But the person to blame was Festus, who had forced Paul to appeal in order to save his life.

130) Acts 27:13-22

Acts

TEMPEST AND TRUST

Act. 27:13 - Act. 27:26.

Luke's minute account of the shipwreck implies that he was not a Jew. His interest in the sea and familiarity with sailors' terms are quite unlike a persistent Jewish characteristic which still continues. We have a Jew's description of a storm at sea in the Book of Jonah, which is as evidently the work of a landsman as Luke's is of one who, though not a sailor, was well up in maritime matters. His narrative lays hold of the essential points, and is as accurate as it is vivid. This section has two parts: the account of the storm, and the grand example of calm trust and cheery encouragement given in Paul's words.

I. The consultation between the captain of the vessel and the centurion, at which Paul assisted, strikes us, with our modern notions of a captain's despotic power on his own deck, and single responsibility, as unnatural.

But the centurion, as a military officer, was superior to the captain of an Alexandrian corn-ship, and Paul had already made his force of character so felt that it is not wonderful that he took part in the discussion. Naturally the centurion was guided by the professional rather than by the amateur member of the council, and the decision was come to to push on as far and fast as possible.

The ship was lying in a port which gave scanty protection against the winter weather, and it was clearly wise to reach a more secure harbour if possible. So when a gentle southerly breeze sprang up, which would enable them to make such a port, westward from their then position, they made the attempt. For a time it looked as if they would succeed, but they had a great headland jutting out in front which they must get round, and their ability to do this was doubtful. So they kept close in shore and weathered the point. But before they had made their harbour the wind suddenly chopped round, as is frequent of that coast, and the gentle southerly breeze turned into a fierce squall from the north-east or thereabouts, sweeping down from the Cretan mountains. That began their troubles. To make the port was impossible. The unwieldy vessel could not 'face the wind,' and so they had to run before it. It would carry them in a south-westerly direction, and towards a small island, under the lee of which they might hope for some shelter. Here they had a little breathing time, and could make things rather more ship-shape than they had been able to do when suddenly caught by the squall. Their boat had been towing behind them, and had to be hoisted on deck somehow.

A more important, and probably more difficult, task was to get strong hawsers under the keel and round the sides, so as to help to hold the timbers together. The third thing was the most important of all, and has been misunderstood by commentators who knew more about Greek lexicons than ships. The most likely explanation of ‘lowering the gear’ [Rev. Ver.] is that it means ‘leaving up just enough of sail to keep the ship’s head to the wind, and bringing down everything else that could be got down’ [Ramsay, *St. Paul*, p. 329].

Note that Luke says ‘we’ about hauling in the boat, and ‘they’ about the other tasks. He and the other passengers could lend a hand in the former, but not in the latter, which required more skilled labour. The reason for bringing down all needless top-hamper, and leaving up a little sail, was to keep the vessel from driving on to the great quicksands off the African coast, to which they would certainly have been carried if the wind held.

As soon as they had drifted out from the lee of the friendly little island they were caught again in the storm. They were in danger of going down. As they drifted they had their ‘starboard’ broadside to the force of the wild sea, and it was a question how long the vessel’s sides would last before they were stove in by the hammering of the waves, or how long she would be buoyant enough to ship seas without foundering. The only chance was to lighten her, so first the crew ‘jettisoned’ the cargo, and next day, as that did not give relief enough,’they,’ or, according to some authorities, ‘we’-that is passengers and all-threw everything possible overboard.

That was the last attempt to save themselves, and after it there was nothing to do but to wait the apparently inevitable hour when they would all go down together. Idleness feeds despair, and despair nourishes idleness. Food was scarce, cooking it was impossible, appetite there was none. The doomed men spent the long idle days- which were scarcely day, so thick was the air with mist and foam and tempest-crouching anywhere for shelter, wet, tired, hungry, and hopeless. So they drifted ‘for many days,’ almost losing count of the length of time they had been thus. It was a gloomy company, but there was one man there in whom the lamp of hope burned when it had gone out in all others. Sun and stars were hidden, but Paul saw a better light, and his sky was clear and calm.

II. A common danger makes short work of distinctions of rank.

In such a time some hitherto unnoticed man of prompt decision, resource, and confidence, will take the command, whatever his position. Hope, as well as timidity and fear, is infectious, and one cheery voice will revive the drooping spirits of a multitude. Paul had already established his personal ascendency in that motley company of Roman soldiers, prisoners, sailors, and disciples. Now he stands forward with calm confidence, and infuses new hope into them all. What a miraculous change passes on externals when faith looks at them! The circumstances were the same as they had been for many days. The wind was howling and the waves pounding as before, the sky was black with tempest, and no sign of help was in sight, but Paul spoke, and all was changed, and a ray of sunshine fell on the wild waters that beat on the doomed vessel.

Three points are conspicuous in his strong tonic words. First, there is the confident assurance of safety. A less noble nature would have said more in vindication of the wisdom of his former advice. It is very pleasant to small minds to say, ‘Did I not tell you so? You see how right I was.’ But the Apostle did not care for petty triumphs of that sort. A smaller man might have sulked because his advice had not been taken, and have said to himself, ‘They would not listen to me before, I will hold my tongue now.’ But the Apostle only refers to his former counsel and its confirmation in order to induce acceptance of his present words.

It is easy to ‘bid’ men ‘be of good cheer,’ but futile unless some reason for good cheer is given. Paul gave good reason. No man’s life was to be lost though the ship was to go. He had previously predicted that life, as well as ship and lading, would be lost if they put to sea. That opinion was the result of his own calculation of probabilities, as he lets us understand by saying that he ‘perceived’ it [Act. 27:10]. Now he speaks with authority, not from his perception, but from God’s assurance. The bold words might well seem folly to the despairing crew as they caught them amidst the roar of tempest and looked at their battered hulk. So Paul goes at once to tell the ground of his confidence-the assurance of the angel of God.

What a contrast between the furious gale, the almost foundering ship, the despair in the hearts of the sleeping company, and the bright vision that came to Paul! Peter in prison, Paul in Caesarea and now in the storm, see the angel form calm and radiant. God’s messengers are wont to come into the darkest of our hours and the wildest of our tempests.

Paul’s designation of the heavenly messenger as ‘an angel of the God whose I am, whom also I serve,’ recalls Jonah’s confession of faith, but far surpasses it, in the sense of belonging to God, and in the ardour of submission and of active obedience, expressed in it. What Paul said to the Corinthians [1Co. 6:19] he realised for himself: ‘Ye are not your own; for ye were bought with a price.’ To recognise that we are God’s, joyfully to yield ourselves to Him, and with all the forces of our natures to serve Him, is to bring His angel to our sides in every hour of tempest and peril, and to receive assurance that nothing shall by any means harm us. To yield ourselves to be God’s is to make God ours. It was because Paul owned that he belonged to God, and served Him, that the angel came to him, and he explains the vision to his hearers by his relation to God. Anything was possible rather than that his God should leave him unhelped at such an hour of need.

The angel’s message must have included particulars unnoticed in Luke’s summary; as, for instance, the wreck on ‘a certain island.’ But the two salient points in it are the certainty of Paul’s own preservation, that the divine purpose of his appearing before Caesar might be fulfilled, and the escape of all the ship’s company. As to the former, we may learn how Paul’s life, like every man’s, is shaped according to a divine plan, and how we are ‘immortal till our work is done,’ and till God has done His work in and on and by us. As to the latter point, we may gather from the word ‘has *given*’ the certainty that Paul had been praying for the lives of all that sailed with him, and may learn, not only that the prayers of God’s servants are a real element in determining God’s dealings with men, but that a true servant of God’s will ever reach out his desires and widen his prayers to embrace those with whom he is brought into contact, be they heathens, persecutors, rough and careless, or fellow-believers. If Christian people more faithfully discharged the duty of intercession, they would more frequently receive in answer the lives of ‘all them that sail with’ them over the stormy ocean of life.

The third point in the Apostle's encouraging speech is the example of his own faith, which is likewise an exhortation to the hearers to exercise the same. If God speaks by His angel with such firm promises, man's plain wisdom is to grasp the divine assurance with a firm hand. We must build rock upon rock. 'I believe God,' that surely is a credence demanded by common sense and warranted by the sanest reason. If we do so believe, and take His word as the infallible authority revealing present duty and future blessings, then, however lowering the sky, and wild the water, and battered the vessel, and empty of earthly succour the gloomy horizon, and heavy our hearts, we shall 'be of good cheer,' and in due time the event will warrant our faith in God and His promise, even though all around us seems to make our faith folly and our hope a mockery.

131) Acts 27:23

Acts

TEMPEST AND TRUST

A SHORT CONFESSION OF FAITH

Act. 27:23.

I turn especially to those last words, 'Whose I am and whom I serve.'

A great calamity, borne by a crowd of men in common, has a wonderful power of dethroning officials and bringing the strong man to the front. So it is extremely natural, though it has been thought to be very unhistorical, that in this story of Paul's shipwreck he should become guide, counsellor, inspirer, and a tower of strength; and that centurions and captains and all the rest of those who held official positions should shrink into the background. The natural force of his character, the calmness and serenity that came from his faith-these things made him the leader of the bewildered crowd. One can scarcely help contrasting this shipwreck-the only one in the New Testament- with that in the Old Testament. Contrast Jonah with Paul, the guilty stupor of the one, down 'in the sides of the ship' cowering before the storm, with the calm behaviour and collected courage of the other.

The vision of which the Apostle speaks does not concern us here, but in the words which I have read there are several noteworthy points. They bring vividly before us the essence of true religion, the bold confession which it prompts, and the calmness and security which it ensures. Let us then look at them from these points of view.

I. We note the clear setting forth of the essence of true religion.

Remember that Paul is speaking to heathens; that his present purpose is not to preach the Gospel, but to make his own position clear. So he says 'the God'-never mind who *He* is at present-'the God to whom I belong '-that covers all the inward life-'and whom I serve' -that covers all the outward.

'Whose I am.' That expresses the universal truth that men belong to God by virtue of their being the creatures of His hand. As the 100th Psalm says, according to one, and that a probably correct reading, 'It is He that hath made us, and *we are His*.' But the Apostle is going a good deal deeper than any such thoughts, which he, no doubt, shared in common with the heathen men around him, when he declares that, in a special fashion, God had claimed him for His, and he had yielded to the claim. 'I am Thine,' is the deepest thought of this man's mind and the deepest feeling of his heart. And that is godliness in its purest form, the consciousness of belonging to God. We must interpret this saying by others of the Apostle's, such as, 'Ye are not your own, ye are bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God in your bodies and spirits which are His.' He traces God's possession of him, not to that fact of creation [which establishes a certain outward relationship, but nothing more], nor even to the continuous facts of benefits showered upon his head, but to the one transcendent act of the divine Love, which gave itself to us, and so acquired us for itself. For we must recognise as the deepest of all thoughts about the relations of spiritual beings, that, as in regard to ourselves in our earthly affections, so in regard to our relations with God, there is only one way by which a spirit can own a spirit, whether it be a man on the one side and a woman on the other, or whether it be God on the one side and a man on the other, and that one way is by the sweetness of complete and reciprocal love. He who gives himself to God gets God for himself. So when Paul said, 'Whose I am,' he was thinking that he would never have belonged either to God or to himself unless, first of all, God, in His own Son, had given Himself to Paul. The divine ownership of us is only realised when we are consciously His, because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Brethren, God does not count that a man belongs to Him simply because He made him, if the man does not feel his dependence, his obligation, and has not surrendered himself. He in the heavens loves you and me too well to care for a formal and external ownership. He desires hearts, and only they who have yielded themselves unto God, moved thereto by the mercies of God, and especially by the encyclopaediacal mercy which includes all the rest in its sweep, only they belong to Him, in the estimate of the heavens.

And if you and I are His, then that involves that we have deposed from his throne the rebel Self, the ancient Anarch that disturbs and ruins us. They who belong to God cease to live to themselves. There are two centres for human life, and I believe there are only two-the one is God, the other is my wretched self. And if we are swept, as it were, out of the little orbit that we move in, when the latter is our centre, and are drawn by the weight and mass of the great central sun to become its satellites, then we move in a nobler orbit and receive fuller and more blessed light and warmth. They who have themselves for their centres are like comets, with a wide elliptical course, which carries them away out into the cold abysses of darkness. They who have God for their sun are like planets. The old fable is true of these ‘sons of the morning’-they make music as they roll and they flash back His light.

And then do not let us forget that this yielding of one’s self to Him, swayed by His love, and this surrendering of will and purpose and affection and all that makes up our complex being, lead directly to the true possession of Him and the true possession of ourselves.

I have said that the only way by which spirit possesses spirit is by love, and that it must needs be on both sides. So we get God for ourselves when we give ourselves to God. There is a wonderful alternation of giving and receiving between the loving God and his beloved lovers; first the impartation of the divine to the human, then the surrender of the human to the divine, and then the larger gift of God to man, just as in some series of mirrors the light is flashed back from the one to the other, in bewildering manifoldness and shimmering of rays from either polished surface. God is ours when we are God's. 'And this is the covenant that I will make with them after these days, saith the Lord. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'

And, in like manner, we never own ourselves until we have given ourselves to God. Each of us is like some feudatory prince, dependent upon an overlord. His subjects in his little territory rebel, and he has no power to subdue the insurgents, but he can send a message to the capital, and get the army of the king, who is his sovereign and theirs, to come down and bring them back to order, and establish his tottering throne. So if you desire to own yourself or to know the sweetness that you may get out of your own nature and the exercise of your powers, if you desire to be able to govern the realm within, put yourself into God's hands and say, 'I am Thine; hold Thou me up, and I shall be safe.'

I need not say more than just a word about the other side of Paul's confession of faith, 'Whom I serve.' He employs the word which means the service of a worshipper, or even of a priest, and not that which means the service of a slave. His purpose was to represent how, as his whole inward nature bowed in submission to, and was under the influence of, God to whom he belonged, so his whole outward life was a life of devotion. He was serving Him there in the ship, amidst the storm and the squalor and the terror. His calmness was service; his confidence was service; the cheery words that he was speaking to these people were service. And on his whole life he believed that this was stamped, that he was devoted to God. So *there* is the true idea of a Christian life, that in all its aspects, attitudes, and acts it is to be a manifestation, in visible form, of inward devotion to, and ownership by, God. All our work may be worship, and we may 'pray without ceasing,' though no supplications come from our lips, if our hearts are in touch with Him and through our daily life we serve and honour Him. God's priests never are far away from their altar, and never are without, somewhat to offer, as long as they have the activities of daily duty and the difficulties of daily conflict to bring to Him and spread before Him.

II. So let me turn for a moment to some of the other aspects of these words to which I have already referred, I find in them, next, the bold

confession which true religion requires.

Shipboard is a place where people find out one another very quickly. Character cannot well be hid there. And such circumstances as Paul had been in for the last fortnight, tossing up and down in *Adria*, with Death looking over the bulwarks of the crazy ship every moment, were certain to have brought out the inmost secrets of character. Paul durst not have said to these people ‘the God whose I am and whom I serve’ if he had not known that he had been living day by day a consistent and godly life amongst them.

And so, I note, first of all, that this confession of individual and personal relationship to God is incumbent on every Christian. We do not need to be always brandishing it before people’s faces. There is very little fear of the average Christian of this day blundering on that side. But we need, still less, to be always hiding it away. One hears a great deal from certain quarters about a religion that does not need to be vocal but shows what it is, without the necessity for words. Blessed be God! there is such a religion, but you will generally find that the people who have most of it are the people who are least tongue-tied when opportunity arises; and that if they have been witnessing for God in their quiet discharge of duty, with their hands instead of their lips, they are quite as ready to witness with their lips when it is fitting that they should do so. And surely, surely, if a man belongs to God, and if his whole life is to be the manifestation of the ownership that he recognises, that which specially reveals him-viz., his own articulate speech-cannot be left out of his methods of manifestation.

I am afraid that there are a great many professing Christian people nowadays who never, all their lives, have said to any one, ‘The God whose I am and whom I serve.’ And I beseech you, dear brethren, suffer this word of exhortation. To say so is a far more effectual, or at least more powerful, means of appeal than any direct invitation to share in the blessings. You may easily offend a man by saying to him, ‘Won’t you be a Christian too?’ But it is hard to offend if you simply say that you are a Christian. The statement of personal experience is more powerful by far than all argumentation or eloquence or pleading appeals. We do more when we say, ‘That which we have tasted and felt and handled of the Word of Life, declare we unto you,’ than by any other means.

Only remember that the avowal must be backed up by a life, as Paul’s was backed up on board that vessel. For unless it is so, the profession does far more harm than good. There are always keen critics round us, especially if we say that we are Christians. There were keen critics on board that ship. Do you think that these Roman soldiers, and the other prisoners, would not have smiled contemptuously at Paul, if this had been the first time that they had any reason to suppose that he was at all different from them? They would have said, ‘The God whose *you* are and whom *you* serve? Why, you are just the same sort of man as if you worshipped Jupiter like the rest of us!’ And that is what the world has a right to say to Christian people. The clearer our profession, the holier must be our lives.

III. Last of all, I find in these words the calmness and security which true religion secures.

The story, as I have already glanced at it in my introductory remarks, brings out very wonderfully and very beautifully Paul’s promptitude, his calmness in danger, his absolute certainty of safety, and his unselfish thoughtfulness about his companions in peril. And all these things were the direct results of his entire surrender to God, and of the consistency of his daily life. It needed the angel in the vision to assure him that his life would be spared. But whether the angel had ever come or not, and though death had been close at his hand, the serenity and the peaceful assurance of safety which come out so beautifully in the story would have been there all the same. The man who can say ‘I belong to God’ does not need to trouble himself about dangers. He will have to exercise his common sense, as the Apostle shows us; he will have to use all the means that are in his power for the accomplishment of ends that he knows to be right and legitimate. But having done all that, he can say, ‘I belong to Him,’ it is His business to look after His own property. He is not going to hold His possessions with such a slack hand as that they shall slip between His fingers, and be lost in the mire. ‘Thou wilt not lose the souls that are Thine in the grave, neither wilt Thou suffer the man whom Thou lovest to see corruption.’ God keeps His treasures, and the surer we are that He is able to keep them unto that day, the calmer we may be in all our trouble.

And the safety that followed was also the direct result of the relationship of mutual possession and love established between God and the Apostle. We do not know to which of the two groups of the shipwrecked Paul belonged; whether he could swim or whether he had to hold on to some bit of floating wreckage or other, and so got ‘safe to land.’ But whichever way it was, it was neither his swimming nor the spar to which, perhaps, he clung, that landed him safe on shore. It was the God to whom he belonged. Faith is the true lifebelt that keeps us from being drowned in any stormy sea. And if you and I feel that we are His, and live accordingly, we shall be calm amid all change, serene when others are troubled, ready to be helpers of others even when we ourselves are in distress. And when the crash comes, and the ship goes to pieces: ‘so it will come to pass that, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship, they all come safe to land,’ and when the Owner counts His subjects and possessions on the quiet shore, as the morning breaks, there will not be one who has been lost in the surges, or whose name will be unanswered to when the muster-roll of the crew is called.

132) Acts 27:24-26

Acts

TEMPEST AND TRUST

Act. 27:13 - Act. 27:26.

Luke’s minute account of the shipwreck implies that he was not a Jew. His interest in the sea and familiarity with sailors’ terms are quite unlike a persistent Jewish characteristic which still continues. We have a Jew’s description of a storm at sea in the Book of Jonah, which is as evidently the work of a landsman as Luke’s is of one who, though not a sailor, was well up in maritime matters. His narrative lays hold of the essential points, and is as accurate as it is vivid. This section has two parts: the account of the storm, and the grand example of calm trust and cheery encouragement given in Paul’s words.

I. The consultation between the captain of the vessel and the centurion, at which Paul assisted, strikes us, with our modern notions of a captain's despotic power on his own deck, and single responsibility, as unnatural.

But the centurion, as a military officer, was superior to the captain of an Alexandrian corn-ship, and Paul had already made his force of character so felt that it is not wonderful that he took part in the discussion. Naturally the centurion was guided by the professional rather than by the amateur member of the council, and the decision was come to to push on as far and fast as possible.

The ship was lying in a port which gave scanty protection against the winter weather, and it was clearly wise to reach a more secure harbour if possible. So when a gentle southerly breeze sprang up, which would enable them to make such a port, westward from their then position, they made the attempt. For a time it looked as if they would succeed, but they had a great headland jutting out in front which they must get round, and their ability to do this was doubtful. So they kept close in shore and weathered the point. But before they had made their harbour the wind suddenly chopped round, as is frequent of that coast, and the gentle southerly breeze turned into a fierce squall from the north-east or thereabouts, sweeping down from the Cretan mountains. That began their troubles. To make the port was impossible. The unwieldy vessel could not 'face the wind,' and so they had to run before it. It would carry them in a south-westerly direction, and towards a small island, under the lee of which they might hope for some shelter. Here they had a little breathing time, and could make things rather more ship-shape than they had been able to do when suddenly caught by the squall. Their boat had been towing behind them, and had to be hoisted on deck somehow.

A more important, and probably more difficult, task was to get strong hawsers under the keel and round the sides, so as to help to hold the timbers together. The third thing was the most important of all, and has been misunderstood by commentators who knew more about Greek lexicons than ships. The most likely explanation of 'lowering the gear' [Rev. Ver.] is that it means 'leaving up just enough of sail to keep the ship's head to the wind, and bringing down everything else that could be got down' [Ramsay, *St. Paul*, p. 329].

Note that Luke says 'we' about hauling in the boat, and 'they' about the other tasks. He and the other passengers could lend a hand in the former, but not in the latter, which required more skilled labour. The reason for bringing down all needless top-hamper, and leaving up a little sail, was to keep the vessel from driving on to the great quicksands off the African coast, to which they would certainly have been carried if the wind held.

As soon as they had drifted out from the lee of the friendly little island they were caught again in the storm. They were in danger of going down. As they drifted they had their 'starboard' broadside to the force of the wild sea, and it was a question how long the vessel's sides would last before they were stove in by the hammering of the waves, or how long she would be buoyant enough to ship seas without foundering. The only chance was to lighten her, so first the crew 'jettisoned' the cargo, and next day, as that did not give relief enough,'they,' or, according to some authorities, 'we'-that is passengers and all-threw everything possible overboard.

That was the last attempt to save themselves, and after it there was nothing to do but to wait the apparently inevitable hour when they would all go down together. Idleness feeds despair, and despair nourishes idleness. Food was scarce, cooking it was impossible, appetite there was none. The doomed men spent the long idle days- which were scarcely day, so thick was the air with mist and foam and tempest-crouching anywhere for shelter, wet, tired, hungry, and hopeless. So they drifted 'for many days,' almost losing count of the length of time they had been thus. It was a gloomy company, but there was one man there in whom the lamp of hope burned when it had gone out in all others. Sun and stars were hidden, but Paul saw a better light, and his sky was clear and calm.

II. A common danger makes short work of distinctions of rank.

In such a time some hitherto unnoticed man of prompt decision, resource, and confidence, will take the command, whatever his position. Hope, as well as timidity and fear, is infectious, and one cheery voice will revive the drooping spirits of a multitude. Paul had already established his personal ascendency in that motley company of Roman soldiers, prisoners, sailors, and disciples. Now he stands forward with calm confidence, and infuses new hope into them all. What a miraculous change passes on externals when faith looks at them! The circumstances were the same as they had been for many days. The wind was howling and the waves pounding as before, the sky was black with tempest, and no sign of help was in sight, but Paul spoke, and all was changed, and a ray of sunshine fell on the wild waters that beat on the doomed vessel.

Three points are conspicuous in his strong tonic words. First, there is the confident assurance of safety. A less noble nature would have said more in vindication of the wisdom of his former advice. It is very pleasant to small minds to say, ‘Did I not tell you so? You see how right I was.’ But the Apostle did not care for petty triumphs of that sort. A smaller man might have sulked because his advice had not been taken, and have said to himself, ‘They would not listen to me before, I will hold my tongue now.’ But the Apostle only refers to his former counsel and its confirmation in order to induce acceptance of his present words.

It is easy to ‘bid’ men ‘be of good cheer,’ but futile unless some reason for good cheer is given. Paul gave good reason. No man’s life was to be lost though the ship was to go. He had previously predicted that life, as well as ship and lading, would be lost if they put to sea. That opinion was the result of his own calculation of probabilities, as he lets us understand by saying that he ‘perceived’ it [Act. 27:10]. Now he speaks with authority, not from his perception, but from God’s assurance. The bold words might well seem folly to the despairing crew as they caught them amidst the roar of tempest and looked at their battered hulk. So Paul goes at once to tell the ground of his confidence-the assurance of the angel of God.

What a contrast between the furious gale, the almost foundering ship, the despair in the hearts of the sleeping company, and the bright vision that came to Paul! Peter in prison, Paul in Caesarea and now in the storm, see the angel form calm and radiant. God’s messengers are wont to come into the darkest of our hours and the wildest of our tempests.

Paul’s designation of the heavenly messenger as ‘an angel of the God whose I am, whom also I serve,’ recalls Jonah’s confession of faith, but far surpasses it, in the sense of belonging to God, and in the ardour of submission and of active obedience, expressed in it. What Paul said to the Corinthians [1Co. 6:19] he realised for himself: ‘Ye are not your own; for ye were bought with a price.’ To recognise that we are God’s, joyfully to yield ourselves to Him, and with all the forces of our natures to serve Him, is to bring His angel to our sides in every hour of tempest and peril, and to receive assurance that nothing shall by any means harm us. To yield ourselves to be God’s is to make God ours. It was because Paul owned that he belonged to God, and served Him, that the angel came to him, and he explains the vision to his hearers by his relation to God. Anything was possible rather than that his God should leave him unhelped at such an hour of need.

The angel’s message must have included particulars unnoticed in Luke’s summary; as, for instance, the wreck on ‘a certain island.’ But the two salient points in it are the certainty of Paul’s own preservation, that the divine purpose of his appearing before Caesar might be fulfilled, and the escape of all the ship’s company. As to the former, we may learn how Paul’s life, like every man’s, is shaped according to a divine plan, and how we are ‘immortal till our work is done,’ and till God has done His work in and on and by us. As to the latter point, we may gather from the word ‘has *given*’ the certainty that Paul had been praying for the lives of all that sailed with him, and may learn, not only that the prayers of God’s servants are a real element in determining God’s dealings with men, but that a true servant of God’s will ever reach out his desires and widen his prayers to embrace those with whom he is brought into contact, be they heathens, persecutors, rough and careless, or fellow-believers. If Christian people more faithfully discharged the duty of intercession, they would more frequently receive in answer the lives of ‘all them that sail with’ them over the stormy ocean of life.

The third point in the Apostle’s encouraging speech is the example of his own faith, which is likewise an exhortation to the hearers to exercise the same. If God speaks by His angel with such firm promises, man’s plain wisdom is to grasp the divine assurance with a firm hand. We must build rock upon rock. ‘I believe God,’ that surely is a credence demanded by common sense and warranted by the sanest reason. If we do so believe, and take His word as the infallible authority revealing present duty and future blessings, then, however lowering the sky, and wild the water, and battered the vessel, and empty of earthly succour the gloomy horizon, and heavy our hearts, we shall ‘be of good cheer,’ and in due time the event will warrant our faith in God and His promise, even though all around us seems to make our faith folly and our hope a mockery.

133) Acts 27:30-44

Acts

A TOTAL WRECK, ALL HANDS SAVED

Act. 27:30 - Act. 27:44.

The Jews were not seafaring people. Their coast had no safe harbours, and they seldom ventured on the Mediterranean. To find Paul in a ship with its bow pointed westwards is significant. It tells of the expansion of Judaism into a world-wide religion, and of the future course of Christianity. The only Old Testament parallel is Jonah, and the dissimilarities of the two incidents are as instructive as are their resemblances.

This minute narrative is evidently the work of one of the passengers who knew a good deal about nautical matters. It reads like a log-book. But as James Smith has well noted in his interesting monograph on the chapter, the writer’s descriptions, though accurate, are unprofessional, thus confirming Luke’s authorship. Where had the ‘beloved physician’ learned so much about the sea and ships? Did the great galleys carry surgeons as now? At all events the story is one of the most graphic accounts ever written. This narrative begins when the doomed ship has cast anchor, with a rocky coast close under her lee. The one question is, Will the four anchors hold? No wonder that the passengers longed for daylight!

The first point is the crew’s dastardly trick to save themselves, frustrated by Paul’s insight and promptitude. The pretext for getting into the boat was specious. Anchoring by the bow as well as by the stern would help to keep the ship from driving ashore; and if once the crew were in the boat and pulled as far as was necessary to lay out the anchors, it would be easy, under cover of the darkness, to make good their escape on shore and leave the landsmen on board to shift for themselves. The boat must have been of considerable size to hold the crew of so large a ship. It was already lying alongside, and landsmen would not suspect what lay under the apparently brave attempt to add to the vessel's security, but Paul did so. His practical sagacity was as conspicuous a trait as his lofty enthusiasm. Common sense need not be divorced from high aims or from the intensest religious self-devotion. The idealist beat the practical centurion in penetrating the sailors' scheme.

That must have been a great nature which combined such different characteristics as the Apostle shows. Unselfish devotion is often wonderfully clear-sighted as to the workings of its opposite. The Apostle's promptitude is as noticeable as his penetration. He wastes no time in remonstrance with the cowards, who would have been over the side and off in the dark while he talked, but goes straight to the man in authority. Note, too, that he keeps his place as a prisoner. It is not his business to suggest what is to be done. That might have been resented as presumptuous; but he has a right to point out the danger, and he leaves the centurion to settle how to meet it. Significantly does he say 'ye,' not 'we.' He was perfectly certain that he 'must be brought before Caesar'; and though he believed that all on board would escape, he seems to regard his own safety as even more certain than that of the others.

The lesson often drawn from his words is rightly drawn. They imply the necessity of men's action in order to carry out God's purpose. The whole shipful are to be saved, but 'except these abide . . . ye cannot be saved,' The belief that God wills anything is a reason for using all means to effect it, not for folding our hands and saying, 'God will do it, whether we do anything or not.' The line between fatalism and Christian reliance on God's will is clearly drawn in Paul's words.

Note too the prompt, decisive action of the soldiers. They waste no words, nor do they try to secure the sailors, but out with their knives and cut the tow-rope, and away into the darkness drifts the boat. It might have been better to have kept it, as affording a chance of safety for all; but probably it was wisest to get rid of it at once. Many times in every life it is necessary to sacrifice possible advantages in order to secure a more necessary good. The boat has to be let go if the passengers in the ship are to be saved. Misused good things have sometimes to be given up in order to keep people from temptation.

The next point brings Paul again to the front. In the night he had been the saviour of the whole shipload of people. Now as the twilight is beginning, and the time for decisive action will soon be here with the day, he becomes their encourager and counsellor. Again his saving common sense is shown. He knew that the moment for intense struggle was at hand, and so he prepares them for it by getting them to eat a substantial breakfast. It was because of his faith that he did so. His religion did not lead him to do as some people would have done- begin to talk to the soldiers about their souls-but he looked after their bodies. Hungry, wet, sleepless, they were in no condition to scramble through the surf, and the first thing to be done was to get some food into them. Of course he does not mean that they had eaten absolutely nothing for a fortnight, but only that they had had scanty nourishment. But Paul's religion went harmoniously with his care for men's bodies. He 'gave thanks to God in presence of them all'; and who shall say that that prayer did not touch hearts more deeply than religious talk would have done? Paul's calmness would be contagious; and the root of it, in his belief in what his God had told him, would be impressively manifested to all on board. Moods are infectious; so 'they were all of good cheer,' and no doubt things looked less black after a hearty meal,

A little point may be noticed here, namely, the naturalness of the insertion of the numbers on board at this precise place in the narrative. There would probably be a muster of all hands for the meal, and in view of the approaching scramble, in order that, if they got to shore, there might be certainty as to whether any were lost. So here the numbers come in. They were still not without hope of saving the ship, though Paul had told them it would be lost; and so they jettison the cargo of wheat from Alexandria. By this time it is broad day and something must be done.

The next point is the attempt to beach the vessel. 'They knew not the land,' that is, the part of the coast where they had been driven; but they saw that, while for the most part it was iron-bound, there was a shelving sandy bay at one point on to which it might be possible to run her ashore. The Revised Version gives a much more accurate and seaman-like account than the Authorised Version does. The anchors were not taken on board, but to save time and trouble were 'left in the sea,' the cables being simply cut. The 'rudder-bands'-that is, the lashings which had secured the two paddle-like rudders, one on either beam, which had been tied up to be out of the way when the stern anchors were put out-are loosed, and the rudders drop into place. The foresail [not 'mainsail,' as the Authorised Version has it] is set to help to drive the ship ashore. It is all exactly what we should expect to be done.

But an unexpected difficulty met the attempt, which is explained by the lie of the coast at St. Paul's Bay, Malta, as James Smith fully describes in his book. A little island, separated from the mainland by a channel of not more than one hundred yards in breadth, lies off the north-east point of the bay, and to a beholder at the entrance to the bay looks as if continuous with it. When the ship got farther in, they would see the narrow channel, through which a strong current sets and makes a considerable disturbance as it meets the run of the water in the bay. A bank of mud has been formed at the point of meeting. Thus not only the water shoals, but the force of the current through the narrows would hinder the ship from getting past it to the beach. The two things together made her ground, 'stem on' to the bank; and then, of course, the heavy sea running into the bay, instead of helping her to the shore, began to break up the stern which was turned towards it.

Common peril makes beasts of prey and their usual victims crouch together. Benefits received touch generous hearts. But the legionaries on board had no such sentiments. Paul's helpfulness was forgotten. A still more ignoble exhibition of the instinct of self-preservation than the sailors had shown dictated that cowardly, cruel suggestion to kill the prisoners. Brutal indifference to human life, and Rome's iron discipline holding terror over the legionaries' heads, are vividly illustrated in the 'counsel,' So were Paul's kindnesses requited! It is hard to melt rude natures even by kindness; and if Paul had been looking for gratitude he would have been disappointed, as we so often are. But if we do good to men because we expect requital, even in thankfulness, we are not pure in motive. 'Looking for nothing again' is the spirit enforced by God's pattern and by experience.

The centurion had throughout, like most of his fellows in Scripture, been kindly disposed, and showed more regard for Paul than the rank and file did. He displays the good side of militarism, while they show its bad side; for he is collected, keeps his head in extremities, knows his own mind, holds the reins in a firm hand, even in that supreme moment, has a quick eye to see what must be done, and decision to order it at once. It was prudent to send first those who could swim; they could then help the others. The distance was short, and as the bow was aground, there would be some shelter under the lee of the vessel, and shoal water, where they could wade, would be reached in a few minutes or moments.

'And so it came to pass, that they all escaped safe to the land.' So Paul had assured them they would. God needs no miracles in order to sway human affairs. Everything here was perfectly 'natural,' and yet His hand wrought through all, and the issue was His fulfilment of His promises. If we rightly look at common things, we shall see God working in them all, and believe that He can deliver us as truly without miracles as ever He did any by miracles. Promptitude, prudence, skill, and struggle with the waves, saved the whole two hundred and seventy-six souls in that battered ship; yet it was God who saved them all. Whether Paul was among the party that could swim, or among the more helpless who had to cling to anything that would float, he was held up by God's hand, and it was He who 'sent from above, took him, and drew him out of many waters.'

134) Acts 28:1-16

Acts

AFTER THE WRECK

Act. 28:1 - Act. 28:16.

'They *all* escaped safe to land,' says Luke with emphasis, pointing to the verification of Paul's assurance that there should be no loss of life. That two hundred and seventy-six men on a wreck should all be saved was very improbable, but the angel had promised, and Paul had believed that it should be 'even so as it had been spoken unto him.' Therefore the improbable came to pass, and every man of the ship’s company stood safe on the shore. Faith which grasps God’s promise ‘laughs at impossibilities’ and brings them into the region of facts.

Wet, cold, weary, and anxious, the rescued men huddled together on the shore in the early morning, and no doubt they were doubtful what reception they would have from the islanders who had been attracted to the beach. Their first question was, ‘Where are we?’ so completely had they lost their reckoning. Some of the inhabitants could speak Greek or Latin, and could tell them that they were on Melita, but the most part of the crowd that came round them could only speak in a tongue strange to Luke, and are therefore called by him ‘barbarians,’ not as being uncivilised, but as not speaking Greek. But they could speak the eloquent language of kindness and pity. They were heathens, but they were men. They had not come down to the wreck for plunder, as might have been feared, but to help the unfortunates who were shivering on the beach in the downpour of rain, and chilled to the bone by exposure.

As always, Paul fills Luke’s canvas; the other two hundred and seventy-five were ciphers. Two incidents, in which the Apostle appears as protected by God from danger, and as a fountain of healing for others, are all that is told of the three months’ stay in Malta. Taken together, these cover the whole ground of the Christian’s place in the world; he is an object of divine care, he is a medium of divine blessing. In the former one, we see in Paul’s activity in gathering his bundle of brushwood an example of how he took the humblest duties on himself, and was not hindered either by the false sense of dignity which keeps smaller men from doing small things, as Chinese gentlemen pride themselves on long nails as a token that they do no work, or by the helplessness in practical matters which is sometimes natural to, and often affected by, men of genius, from taking his share in common duties.

The shipwreck took place in November probably, and the ‘viper’ had curled itself up for its winter sleep, and had been lifted with the twigs by Paul’s hasty hand. Roused by the warmth, it darted at Paul’s hand before it could be withdrawn, and fixed its fangs. The sight of it dangling there excited suspicions in the mind of the natives, who would know that Paul was a prisoner, and so jumped to the conclusion that he was a murderer pursued by the Goddess of Justice. These rude islanders had consciences, which bore witness to a divine law of retribution.

However mistaken may be heathens' conceptions of what constitutes right and wrong, they all know that it is wrong to do wrong, and the dim anticipation of God-inflicted punishment is in their hearts. The swift change of opinion about Paul is like, though it is the reverse of, what the people of Lystra thought of him. *They* first took him for a god, and then for a criminal, worshipping him to-day and stoning him to-morrow. This teaches us how unworthy the heathen conception of a deity is, and how lightly the name was given. It may teach us too how fickle and easily led popular judgments are, and how they are ever prone to rush from one extreme to another, so that the people's idol of one week is their abhorrence the next, and the applause and execration are equally undeserved. These Maltese critics did what many of us are doing with less excuse-arguing as to men's merits from their calamities or successes. A good man may be stung by a serpent in the act of doing a good thing; that does not prove him to be a monster. He may be unhurt by what seems fatal; that does not prove him to be a god or a saint.

The other incident recorded as occurring in Malta brings out the Christian's relation to others as a source of healing. An interesting incidental proof of Luke's accuracy is found in the fact that inscriptions discovered in Malta show that the official title of the governor was 'First of the Melitaeans.' The word here rendered 'chief' is literally 'first.' Luke's precision is shown in another direction in his diagnosis of the diseases of Publius's father, which are described by technical medical terms. The healing seems to have been unasked. Paul 'went in,' as if from a spontaneous wish to render help. There is no record of any expectation or request from Publius.

Christians are to be 'like the dew on the grass, which waiteth not for man,' but falls unsought. The manner of the healing brings out very clearly its divine source, and Paul's part as being simply that of the channel for God's power. He prays, and then lays his hands on the sick man. There are no words assuring him of healing. God is invoked, and then His power flows through the hands of the suppliant. So with all our work for men in bringing the better cure with which we are entrusted, we are but channels of the blessing, pipes through which the water of life is brought to thirsty lips. Therefore prayer must precede and accompany all Christian efforts to communicate the healing of the Gospel; and the most gifted are but, like Paul, 'ministers through whom' faith and salvation come.

The argument from silence is precarious, but the entire omission of notice of evangelistic work in Melita is noteworthy. Probably the Apostle as a prisoner was not free to preach Christ in any public manner.

Ancient navigation was conducted in a leisurely fashion very strange to us. Three months' delay in the island, rendered necessary by wintry storms, would end about the early part of March, when the season for safe sailing began. So the third ship which was used in this voyage set sail. Luke notices its 'sign' as being that of the Twin Brethren, the patrons of sailors, whose images were, no doubt, displayed on the bow, just as to-day boats in that region often have a Madonna nailed on the mast. Strange conjunction-Castor and Pollux on the prow, and Paul on the deck!

Puteoli, on the bay of Naples, was the landing-place, and there, after long confinement with uncongenial companions, the three Christians, Paul, Aristarchus, and Luke, found brethren. We can understand the joy of such a meeting, and can almost hear the narrative of perils which would be poured into sympathetic ears. Observe that, according to what seems the true reading, Act. 28:14 says, 'We were consoled among them, remaining seven days.' The centurion could scarcely delay his march to please the Christians at Puteoli; and the thought that the Apostle, whose spirit had never flagged while danger was near and effort was needed, felt some tendency to collapse, and required cheering when the strain was off, is as natural as it is pathetic.

So the whole company set off on their march to Rome-about a hundred and forty miles. The week's delay in Puteoli would give time for apprising the church in Rome of the Apostle's coming, and two parties came out to meet him, one travelling as far as Appii Forum, about forty Roman miles from the city; the other as far as 'The Three Taverns,' some ten miles nearer it. The simple notice of the meeting is more touching than many words would have been. It brings out again the Apostle's somewhat depressed state, partly due, no doubt, to nervous tension during the long and hazardous voyage, and partly to his consciousness that the decisive moment was very near. But when he grasped the hands and looked into the faces of the Roman brethren, whom he had so long hungered to see, and to whom he had poured out his heart in his letter, he ‘thanked God, and took courage.’ The most heroic need, and are helped by, the sympathy of the humble. Luther was braced for the Diet of Worms by the knight who clapped him on the back as he passed in and spoke a hearty word of cheer.

There would be some old friends in the delegation of Roman Christians, perhaps some of those who are named in Rom. 16:1 - Rom. 16:27, such as Priscilla and Aquila, and the unnamed matron, Rufus’s mother, whom Paul there calls ‘his mother and mine.’ It would be an hour of love and effusion, and the shadow of appearing before Caesar would not sensibly dim the brightness. Paul saw God’s hand in that glad meeting, as we should do in all the sweetness of congenial intercourse. It was not only because the welcomers were his friends that he was glad, but because they were Christ’s friends and servants. The Apostle saw in them the evidence that the kingdom was advancing even in the world’s capital, and under the shadow of Caesar’s throne, and that gladdened him and made him forget personal anxieties. We too should be willing to sink our own interests in the joy of seeing the spread of Christ’s kingdom.

Paul turned thankfulness for the past and present into calm hope for the future: ‘He took courage.’ There was much to discourage and to excuse tremors and forebodings, but he had God and Christ with him, and therefore he could front the uncertain future without flinching, and leave all its possibilities in God’s hands. Those who have such a past as every Christian has should put fear far from them, and go forth to meet any future with quiet hearts, and minds kept in perfect peace because they are stayed on God.

135) Acts 28:17-29

Acts

THE LAST GLIMPSE OF PAUL

Act. 28:17 - Act. 28:31.

We have here our last certain glimpse of Paul. His ambition had long been to preach in Rome, but he little knew how his desire was to be fulfilled. We too are often surprised at the shape which God's answers to our wishes take. Well for us if we take the unexpected or painful events which accomplish some long-cherished purpose as cheerfully and boldly as did Paul. We see him in this last glimpse as the centre of three concentric widening circles.

I. We have Paul and the leaders of the Roman synagogue.

He was not the man to let the grass grow under his feet. After such a voyage a pause would have been natural for a less eager worker; but three days were all that he allowed himself, and these would, no doubt, be largely occupied by intercourse with the Roman Christians, and with the multitude of little things to be looked after on entering on his new lodging. Paul had gifts that we have not, he exemplified many heroic virtues which we are not called on to repeat; but he had eminently the prosaic virtue of diligence and persistence in work, and the humblest life affords a sphere in which that indispensable though homely excellence of his can be imitated. What a long holiday some of us would think we had earned, if we had come through what Paul had encountered since he left Caesarea!

The summoning of the 'chief of the Jews' to him was a prudent preparation for his trial rather than an evangelistic effort. It was important to ascertain their feelings, and if possible to secure their neutrality in regard to the approaching investigation. Hence the Apostle seeks to put his case to them so as to show his true adherence to the central principles of Judaism, insisting that he is guiltless of revolt against either the nation or the law and traditional observances; that he had been found innocent by the Palestinian representatives of Roman authority; that his appeal to Caesar, which would naturally seem hostile to the rulers in Jerusalem, was not meant as an accusation of the nation to which he felt himself to belong, and so was no sign of deficient patriotism, but had been forced on him as his only means of saving his life.

It was a difficult course which he had to steer, and he picked his way between the shoals with marvellous address. But his explanation of his position is not only a skilful piece of *apologia*, but it embodies one of his strongest convictions, which it is worth our while to grasp firmly; namely, that Christianity is the true fulfilment and perfecting of the old revelation. His declaration that, so far from his being a deserter from Israel, he was a prisoner just because he was true to the Messianic hope which was Israel's highest glory, was not a clever piece of special pleading meant for the convincing of the Roman Jews, but was a principle which runs through all his teaching. Christians were the true Jews. He was not a recreant in confessing, but they were deserters in denying, the fulfilment in Jesus of the hope which had shone before the generation of 'the fathers.' The chain which bound him to the legionary who 'kept him,' and which he held forth as he spoke, was the witness that he was still 'an Hebrew of the Hebrews.'

The heads of the Roman synagogue went on the tack of non-committal, as was quite natural. They were much too astute to accept at once an *ex parte* statement, and so took refuge in professing ignorance. Probably they knew a good deal more than they owned. Their statement has been called 'unhistorical,' and, oddly enough, has been used to discredit Luke's narrative. It is a remarkable canon of criticism that a reporter is responsible for the truthfulness of assertions which he reports, and that, if he has occasion to report truthfully an untruth, he is convicted of the untruth which he truthfully reports. Luke is responsible for telling what these people found it convenient to say; they are responsible for its veracity. But they did not say quite as much as is sometimes supposed. As the Revised Version shows, they simply said that they had not had any official deputation or report about Paul, which is perfectly probable, as it was extremely unlikely that any ship leaving after Paul's could have reached Italy. They may have known a great deal about him, but they had no information to act upon about his trial. Their reply is plainly shaped so as to avoid expressing any definite opinion or pledging themselves to any course of action till they do hear from 'home.'

They are politely cautious, but they cannot help letting out some of their bile in their reference to 'this sect.' Paul had said nothing about it, and their allusion betrays a fuller knowledge of him and it than it suited their plea for delay to own. Their wish to hear what he thought sounded very innocent and impartial, but was scarcely the voice of candid seekers after truth. They must have known of the existence of the Roman Church, which included many Jews, and they could scarcely be ignorant of the beliefs on which it was founded; but they probably thought that they would hear enough from Paul in the proposed conference to enable them to carry the synagogue with them in doing all they could to procure his condemnation. He had hoped to secure at least their neutrality; they seem to have been preparing to join his enemies. The request for full exposition of a prisoner's belief has often been but a trap to ensure his martyrdom. But we have to 'be ready to give to every man a reason for the hope that is in us,' even when the motive for asking it may be anything but the sincere desire to learn.

II. Therefore Paul was willing to lay his heart's belief open, whatever doing so might bring.

So the second circle forms round him, and we have him preaching the Gospel to 'many' of the Jews. He could not go to the synagogue, so much of the synagogue came to him. The usual method was pursued by Paul in arguing from the old revelation, but we may note the twofold manner of his preaching, 'testifying' and 'persuading,' the former addressed more to the understanding, and the latter to the affections and will, and may learn how Christian teachers should seek to blend both-to work their arguments, not in frost, but in fire, and not to bully or scold or frighten men into the Kingdom, but to draw them with cords of love. Persuasion without a basis of solid reasoning is puerile and impotent; reasoning without the warmth of persuasion is icy cold, and therefore nothing grows from it.

Note too the protracted labour 'from morning till evening.' One can almost see the eager disputants spending the livelong day over the rolls of the prophets, relays of Rabbis, perhaps, relieving one another in the assault on the one opponent's position, and he holding his ground through all the hours-a pattern for us teachers of all degrees.

The usual effects followed. The multitude was sifted by the Gospel, as its hearers always are, some accepting and some rejecting. These double effects ever follow it, and to one or other of these two classes we each belong. The same fire melts wax and hardens clay; the same light is joy to sound eyes and agony to diseased ones; the same word is a savour of life unto life and a savour of death unto death; the same Christ is set for the fall and for the rising of men, and is to some the sure foundation on which they build secure, and to some the stone on which, stumbling, they are broken, and which, falling on them, grinds them to powder.

Paul's solemn farewell takes up Isaiah's words, already used by Jesus. It is his last recorded utterance to his brethren after the flesh, weighty, and full of repressed yearning and sorrow. It is heavy with prophecy, and marks an epoch in the sad, strange history of that strange nation. Israel passes out of sight with that dread sentence fastened to its breast, like criminals of old, on whose front was fixed the record of their crimes and their condemnation. So this tragic self-exclusion from hope and life is the end of all that wondrous history of ages of divine revelation and patience, and of man's rebellion. The Gospel passes to the Gentiles, and the Jew shuts himself out. So it has been for nineteen centuries. Was not that scene in Paul's lodging in Rome the end of an epoch and the prediction of a sad future?

III. Not less significant and epoch-making is the glimpse of Paul which closes the Acts.

We have the third concentric circle-Paul and the multitudes who came to his house and heard the Gospel. We note two points here. First, that his unhindered preaching in the very heart of the world's capital for two whole years is, in one aspect, the completion of the book. As Bengel tersely says, 'The victory of the word of God, Paul at Rome. The apex of the Gospel, the end of Acts.'

But, second, as clearly, the ending is abrupt, and is not a satisfying close. The lengthened account of the whole process of Paul's imprisonments and hearings before the various Roman authorities is most unintelligible if Luke intended to break off at the very crucial point, and say nothing about the event to which he had been leading up for so many chapters. There is much probability in Ramsay's suggestion that Luke intended to write a third book, containing the account of the trial and subsequent events, but was prevented by causes unknown, perhaps by martyrdom. Be that as it may, these two verses, with some information pieced out of the Epistles written during the imprisonment, are all that we know of Paul's life in Rome. From Philippians we learn that the Gospel spread by reason of the earlier stages of his trial. From the other Epistles we can collect some particulars of his companions, and of the oversight which he kept up of the Churches.

The picture here drawn lays hold, not on anything connected with his trial, but on his evangelistic activity, and shows us how, notwithstanding all hindrances, anxieties about his fate, weariness, and past toils, the flame of evangelistic fervour burned undimmed in ‘Paul the aged,’ as the flame of mistaken zeal had burned in the ‘young man named Saul,’ and how the work which had filled so many years of wandering and homelessness was carried on with all the old joyfulness, confidence, and success, from the prisoner’s lodging. In such unexpected fashion did God fulfil the Apostle’s desire to ‘preach the Gospel to you that are at Rome also.’ To preach the word with all boldness is the duty of us Christians who have entered into the heritage of fuller freedom than Paul’s, and of whom it is truer than of him that we can do it, ‘no man forbidding’ us.

136) Acts 28:30-31

Acts

THE THEME OF ACTS

THE LAST GLIMPSE OF PAUL

PAUL IN ROME

Act. 28:30 - Act. 28:31.

So ends this book. It stops rather than ends. Many reasons might be suggested for closing here. Probably the simplest is the best, that nothing more is said for nothing more had yet been done. Probably the book was written during these two years. This abrupt close suggests several noteworthy thoughts.

I. The true theme of the book.

How convenient if Luke had told us a little more! But Paul’s history is unfinished, like Peter’s and John’s. This book’s treatment of all the Apostles teaches, as we have often had to remark, that Christ and His acts are its true subject.

We are wise if we learn the lesson of keeping all human teachers, even a Paul, in their inferior place, and if we say of each of them: ‘He was not the Light, but came that he might bear witness of the Light.’

II. God’s unexpected and unwelcome ways of fulfilling our desires, and His purposes.

It had long been Paul’s dream to ‘see Rome.’ How little he knew the steps by which his dream was to be fulfilled! He told the Ephesian elders that he was going up to Jerusalem under compulsion of the Spirit, and ‘not knowing the things that should befall him there,’ except that he was certain of ‘bonds and imprisonment.’ He did not know that these were God’s way of bringing him to Rome. Jewish fury, Roman statecraft and law-abidingness, two years of a prison, a stormy voyage, a shipwreck, led him to his long-wished-for goal. God uses even man’s malice and opposition to the Gospel to advance the progress of the Gospel. Men, like coral insects, build their little bit, all unaware of the whole of which it is a part, but the reef rises above the waves and ocean breaks against it in vain.

So we may gather lessons of submission, of patient acceptance of apparently adverse circumstances, and of quiet faith that He who ‘makes stormy winds to fulfil His word and flaming fires His ministers,’ will bend to the carrying out of His designs all things, be they seemingly friendly or hostile, and will realise our dreams, if in accordance with His will, even through events which seem to shatter them. Let us trust and be patient till we see the issues of events.

III. The world’s mistaken estimate of greatness.

Who was the greatest man in Rome at that hour? Not the Caesar but the poor Jewish prisoner. How astonished both would have been if they had been told the truth! The two kingdoms were, so to speak, set face to face in these two, their representatives, and neither of them knew his own relative importance. The Caesar was all unaware that, for all his legions and his power, he was but ‘a noise’; Paul was as unconscious that he was incomparably the most powerful of the influences that were then at work in the world. The haughty and stolid eyes of Romans saw in him nothing but a prisoner, sent up from a turbulent subject land on some obscure charge, a mere nobody. The crowds in forum and amphitheatre would have laughed at any one who had pointed to that humble ‘hired house,’ and said, ‘There lodges a man who bears a word that will shatter and remould the city, the Empire, the world.’

Let us have confidence in the greatness of the word, though the world may be deaf to its music and blind to its power, and let us never fear to ally ourselves with a cause which we know to be God's, however it may be unpopular and made light of by the 'leaders of opinion.'

IV. The true relation between the Church and the State.

'None forbidding him' marks a great step forward. Paul's unhindered freedom of speech in Rome itself marks 'the victory of the word, the apex of the Gospel.' The neutral attitude of the imperial power was, indeed, broken by subsequent persecutions, but we may say that on the whole Rome let Christianity alone. That is the best service that the State can render to the Church. Anything more is help which encumbers and is harmful to the true spiritual power of the Gospel. The real requirement which it makes on the civil power is simply what the Greek philosopher asked of the king who was proffering his good offices, 'Stand out of the sunshine!'

Romans

1) ROMANS 1:4
2) ROMANS 1:7
3) ROMANS 1:11-12
4) ROMANS 1:14
5) ROMANS 1:16
6) ROMANS 3:19-21
7) ROMANS 3:22
8) ROMANS 3:23-26
9) ROMANS 5:1
10) ROMANS 5:2
11) ROMANS 5:3-4
12) ROMANS 5:5
13) ROMANS 5:8
14) ROMANS 5:21
15) ROMANS 6:17
16) ROMANS 8:2
17) ROMANS 8:3
18) ROMANS 8:16

19) ROMANS 8:17
20) ROMANS 8:19
21) ROMANS 8:23
22) ROMANS 8:26
23) ROMANS 8:32
24) ROMANS 8:37
25) ROMANS 8:38-39
26) ROMANS 12:1
27) ROMANS 12:2
28) ROMANS 12:3
29) ROMANS 12:4-5
30) ROMANS 12:6-8
31) ROMANS 12:9-10
32) ROMANS 12:11
33) ROMANS 12:12
34) ROMANS 12:13-15
35) ROMANS 12:16
36) ROMANS 12:17-18
37) ROMANS 12:19-21
38) ROMANS 13:8-10
39) ROMANS 13:11
40) ROMANS 13:12
41) ROMANS 13:13-14
42) ROMANS 14:12-23
43) ROMANS 15:4
44) ROMANS 15:13
45) ROMANS 16:1-2
46) ROMANS 16:3-5
47) ROMANS 16:10-11
48) ROMANS 16:12
49) ROMANS 16:20
50) ROMANS 16:22
51) ROMANS 16:23

1) Romans 1:4

Romans

THE WITNESS OF THE RESURRECTION

Rom. 1:4.

It is a great mistake to treat Paul's writings, and especially this Epistle, as mere theology. They are the transcript of his life's experience. As has been well said, the gospel of Paul is an interpretation of the significance of the life and work of Jesus based upon the revelation to him of Jesus as the risen Christ. He believed that he had seen Jesus on the road to Damascus, and it was that appearance which revolutionised his life, turned him from a persecutor into a disciple, and united him with the Apostles as ordained to be a witness with them of the Resurrection. To them all the Resurrection of Jesus was first of all a historical fact appreciated chiefly in its bearing on Him. By degrees they discerned that so transcendent a fact bore in itself a revelation of what would become the experience of all His followers beyond the grave, and a symbol of the present life possible for them. All three of these aspects are plainly declared in Paul's writings. In our text it is chiefly the first which is made prominent. All that distinguishes Christianity; and makes it worth believing, or mighty, is inseparably connected with the Resurrection.

I. The Resurrection of Christ declares His Sonship.

Resurrection and Ascension are inseparably connected. Jesus does not rise to share again in the ills and weariness of humanity. Risen, 'He dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over Him.' 'He died unto sin once'; and His risen humanity had nothing in it on which physical death could lay hold. That He should from some secluded dimple on Olivet ascend before the gazing disciples until the bright cloud, which was the symbol of the Divine Presence, received Him out of their sight, was but the end of the process which began unseen in morning twilight. He laid aside the garments of the grave and passed out of the sepulchre which was made sure by the great stone rolled against its mouth. The grand avowal of faith in His Resurrection loses meaning, unless it is completed as Paul completed his 'yea rather that was raised from the dead,' with the triumphant 'who is at the right hand of God.' Both are supernatural, and the Virgin Birth corresponds at the beginning to the supernatural Resurrection and Ascension at the close. Both such an entrance into the world and such a departure from it, proclaim at once His true humanity, and that ‘this is the Son of God.’

Still further, the Resurrection is God’s solemn ‘Amen’ to the tremendous claims which Christ had made. The fact of His Resurrection, indeed, would not declare His divinity; but the Resurrection of One who had spoken such words does. If the Cross and a nameless grave had been the end, what a *reductio ad absurdum* that would have been to the claims of Jesus to have ever been with the Father and to be doing always the things that pleased Him. The Resurrection is God’s last and loudest proclamation, ‘This is My beloved Son: hear ye Him.’ The Psalmist of old had learned to trust that his sonship and consecration to the Father made it impossible that that Father should leave his soul in Sheol, or suffer one who was knit to Him by such sacred bonds to see corruption; and the unique Sonship and perfect self-consecration of Jesus went down into the grave in the assured confidence, as He Himself declared, that the third day He would rise again. The old alternative seems to retain all its sharp points: Either Christ rose again from the dead, or His claims are a series of blasphemous arrogances and His character irremediably stained.

But we may also remember that Scripture not only represents Christ’s Resurrection as a divine act but also as the act of Christ’s own power. In His earthly life He asserted that His relation both to physical death and to resurrection was an entirely unique one. ‘I have power,’ said He, ‘to lay down my life, and I have power to take it again’; and yet, even in this tremendous instance of self-assertion, He remains the obedient Son, for He goes on to say, ‘This commandment have I received of My Father.’ If these claims are just, then it is vain to stumble at the miracles which Jesus did in His earthly life. If He could strip it off and resume it, then obviously it was not a life like other men’s. The whole phenomenon is supernatural, and we shall not be in the true position to understand and appreciate it and Him until, like the doubting Thomas, we fall at the feet of the risen Son, and breathe out loyalty and worship in that rapturous exclamation, ‘My Lord and my God.’

II. The Resurrection interprets Christ’s Death.

There is no more striking contrast than that between the absolute non-receptivity of the disciples in regard to all Christ's plain teachings about His death and their clear perception after Pentecost of the mighty power that lay in it. The very fact that they continued disciples at all, and that there continued to be such a community as the Church, demands their belief in the Resurrection as the only cause which can account for it. If He did not rise from the dead, and if His followers did not know that He did so by the plainest teachings of common-sense, they ought to have scattered, and borne in isolated hearts the bitter memories of disappointed hopes; for if He lay in a nameless grave, and they were not sure that He was risen from the dead, His death would have been a conclusive showing up of the falsity of His claims. In it there would have been no atoning power, no triumph over sin. If the death of Christ were not followed by His Resurrection and Ascension, the whole fabric of Christianity falls to pieces. As the Apostle puts it in his great chapter on resurrection, 'Ye are yet in your sins.' The forgiveness which the Gospel holds forth to men does not depend on the mercy of God or on the mere penitence of man, but upon the offering of the one sacrifice for sins in His death, which is justified by His Resurrection as being accepted by God. If we cannot triumphantly proclaim 'Christ is risen indeed,' we have nothing worth preaching.

We are told now that the ethics of Christianity are its vital centre, which will stand out more plainly when purified from these mystical doctrines of a Death as the sin-offering for the world, and a Resurrection as the great token that that offering avails. Paul did not think so. To him the morality of the Gospel was all deduced from the life of Christ the Son of God as our Example, and from His death for us which touches men's hearts and makes obedience to Him our joyful answer to what He has done for us. Christianity is a new thing in the world, not as moral teaching, but as moral power to obey that teaching, and that depends on the Cross interpreted by the Resurrection. If we have only a dead Christ, we have not a living Christianity.

III. Resurrection points onwards to Christ's coming again.

Paul at Athens declared in the hearing of supercilious Greek philosophers, that the Jesus, whom he proclaimed to them, was 'the Man whom God had ordained to judge the world in righteousness,' and that 'He had given assurance thereof unto all men, in that He raised Him from the dead.' The Resurrection was the beginning of the process which, from the human point of view, culminated in the Ascension. Beyond the Ascension stretches the supernatural life of the glorified Son of God. Olivet cannot be the end, and the words of the two men in white apparel who stood amongst the little group of the upward gazing friends, remain as the hope of the Church: 'This same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven.' That great assurance implies a visible corporeal return locally defined, and having for its purpose to complete the work which Incarnation, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, each advanced a stage. The Resurrection is the corner-stone of the whole Christian faith. It seals the truths that Jesus is the Son of God with power, that He died for us, that He has ascended on high to prepare a place for us, that He will come again and take us to Himself. If we, by faith in Him, take for ours the women's greeting on that Easter morning, 'The Lord hath risen indeed,' He will come to us with His own greeting, 'Peace be unto you.'

2) Romans 1:7

Romans

PRIVILEGE AND OBLIGATION

Rom. 1:7.

This is the address of the Epistle. The first thing to be noticed about it, by way of introduction, is the universality of this designation of Christians. Paul had never been in Rome, and knew very little about the religious stature of the converts there. But he has no hesitation in declaring that they are all 'beloved of God' and 'saints.' There were plenty of imperfect Christians amongst them; many things to rebuke; much deadness, coldness, inconsistency, and yet none of these in the slightest degree interfered with the application of these great designations to them. So, then, 'beloved of God' and 'saints' are not distinctions of classes within the pale of Christianity, but belong to the whole community, and to each member of the body.

The next thing to note, I think, is how these two great terms, ‘beloved of God’ and ‘saints,’ cover almost the whole ground of the Christian life. They are connected with each other very closely, as I shall have occasion to show presently, but in the meantime it may be sufficient to mark how the one carries us deep into the heart of God and the other extends over the whole ground of our relation to Him. The one is a statement of a universal prerogative, the other an enforcement of a universal obligation. Let us look, then, at these two points, the universal privilege and the universal obligation of the Christian life.

I. The universal privilege of the Christian life.

‘Beloved of God.’ Now we are so familiar with the juxtaposition of the two ideas, ‘love’ and ‘God,’ that we cease to feel the wonderfulness of their union. But until Jesus Christ had done His work no man believed that the two thoughts could be brought together.

Does God love any one? We think the question too plain to need to be put, and the answer instinctive. But it is not by any means instinctive, and the fact is that until Christ answered it for us, the world stood dumb before the question that its own heart raised, and when tortured spirits asked, ‘Is there care in heaven, and is there love?’ there was ‘no voice, nor answer, nor any that regarded.’ Think of the facts of life; think of the facts of nature. Think of sorrows and miseries and pains, and sins, and wasted lives and storms, and tempests, and diseases, and convulsions; and let us feel how true the grim saying is, that

‘Nature, red in tooth and claw,
With rapine, shrieks against the creed’

that God is love.

And think of what the world has worshipped, and of all the varieties of monstrosity, not the less monstrous because sometimes beautiful, before which men have bowed. Cruel, lustful, rapacious, capricious, selfish, indifferent deities they have adored. And then, ‘God hath established,’ proved, demonstrated ‘His love to us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.’

Oh, brethren, do not let us kick down the ladder by which we have climbed; or, in the name of a loving God, put away the Christian teaching which has begotten the conception in humanity of a God that loves. There are men to-day who would never have come within sight of that sunlight truth, even as a glimmering star, away down upon the horizon, if it had not been for the Gospel; and who now turn round upon that very Gospel which has given them the conception, and accuse it of narrow and hard thoughts of the love of God.

One of the Scripture truths against which the assailant often turns his sharpest weapons is that which is involved in my text, the Scripture answer to the other question, 'Does not God love all?' Yes! yes! a thousand times, yes! But there is another question, Does the love of God, to all, make His special designation of Christian men as His beloved the least unlikely? Surely there is no kind of contradiction between the broadest proclamation of the universality of the love of God and Paul's decisive declaration that, in a very deep and real manner, they who are in Christ are the beloved of God. Surely special affection is not in its nature, inconsistent with universal beneficence and benevolence. Surely it is no exaltation, but rather a degradation of the conception of the divine love, if we proclaim its utter indifference to men's characters. Surely you are not honouring God when you say, 'It is all the same to Him whether a man loves Him and serves Him, or lifts himself up in rebellion against Him, and makes himself his own centre, and earth his aim and his all.' Surely to imagine a God who not only makes His sun to shine and His rains and dews to fall on the unthankful and the evil, that He may draw them to love Him, but who also is conceived as taking the sinful creature who yet cleaves to his sins to His heart, as He does the penitent soul that longs for His image to be produced in it, is to blaspheme, and not to honour the love, the universal love of God.

God forbid that any words that ever drop from my lips should seem to cast the smallest shadow of doubt on that great truth, 'God so loved the world that He gave His Son!' But God forbid, equally, that any words of mine should seem to favour the, to me, repellent idea that the infinite love of God disregards the character of the man on whom it falls. There are manifestations of that loving heart which any man can receive; and each man gets as much of the love of God as it is possible to pour upon him. But granite rock does not drink in the dew as a flower does; and the nature of the man on whom God’s love falls determines how much, and what manner of its manifestations shall pass into his true possession, and what shall remain without.

So, on the whole, we have to answer the questions, ‘Does God love any? Does not God love all? Does God specially love some?’ with the one monosyllable, ‘Yes.’

And so, dear brethren, let us learn the path by which we can pass into that blessed community of those on whom the fullness and sweetness and tenderest tenderness of the Father’s heart will fall. ‘If a man love Me, he will keep My words; and My Father will love him.’ Myths tell us that the light which, at the beginning, had been diffused through a nebulous mass, was next gathered into a sun. So the universal love of God is concentrated in Jesus Christ; and if we have Him we have it; and if we have faith we have Him, and can say, ‘Neither life, nor death, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

II. Then, secondly, mark the universal obligation of the Christian life.

‘Called to be saints,’ says my text. Now you will observe that the two little words ‘to be’ are inserted here as a supplement. They may be correct enough, but they are open to the possibility of misunderstanding, as if the saintship, to which all Christian people are ‘called’ was something future, and not realised at the moment. Now, in the context, the Apostle employs the same form of expression with regard to himself in a clause which illuminates the meaning of my text. ‘Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ’ says he, in the first verse, ‘called to be an Apostle’ or, more correctly, ‘a called Apostle.’ The apostleship coincided in time with the call, was contemporaneous with that which was its cause. And if Paul was an Apostle since he was called, saints are saints since *they* are called. ‘The beloved of God’ are ‘the called saints.’

I need only observe, further, that the word ‘called’ here does not mean ‘named’ or ‘designated’ but ‘summoned.’ It describes not the name by which Christian men are known, but the thing which they are invited, summoned, ‘called’ by God to be. It is their vocation, not their designation. Now, then, I need not, I suppose, remind you that ‘saint’ and ‘holy’ convey precisely the same idea: the one expressing it in a word of Teutonic, and the other in one of classic derivation.

We notice that the true idea of this universal holiness which, *ipso facto*, belongs to all Christian people, is consecration to God. In the old days temple, altars, sacrifices, sacrificial vessels, persons such as priests, periods like Sabbaths and feasts, were called ‘holy.’ The common idea running through all these uses of the word is *belonging to God*, and that is the root notion of the New Testament ‘saint’ a man who is God’s. God has claimed us for Himself when He gave us Jesus Christ. We respond to the claim when we accept Christ. Henceforth we are not our own, but ‘consecrated’-that is, ‘saints.’

Now the next step is purity, which is the ordinary idea of sanctity. Purity will follow consecration, and would not be worth much without it, even if it was possible to be attained. Now, look what a far deeper and nobler idea of the service and conditions of moral goodness this derivation of it from surrender to God gives, than does a God-ignoring morality which talks and talks about acts and dispositions, and never goes down to the root of the whole matter; and how much nobler it is than a shallow religion which in like manner is ever straining after acts of righteousness, and forgets that in order to be right there must be prior surrender to God. Get a man to yield himself up to God and no fear about the righteousness. Virtue, goodness, purity, righteousness, all these synonyms express very noble things; but deep down below them all lies the New Testament idea of holiness, consecration of myself to God, which is the parent of them all.

And then the next thing to remind you of is that this consecration is to be applied all through a man’s nature. Yielding yourselves to God is the talismanic secret of all righteousness, as I have said; and every part of our complex, manifold being is capable of such consecration. I hallow my heart if its love twines round His heart. I hallow my thoughts if I take His truth for my guide, and ever seek to be led thereby in practice and in belief. I hallow my will when it bows and says, ‘Speak, Lord! Thy servant heareth!’ I hallow my senses when I use them as from Him, with recognition of Him and for Him. In fact, there are two ways of living in the world; and, narrow as it sounds, I venture to say there are only two. Either God is my centre, and that is holiness; or self is my centre, in more or less subtle forms, and that is sin.

Then the next step is that this consecration, which will issue in all purity, and will cover the whole ground of a human life, is only possible when we have drunk in the blessed thought ‘beloved of God.’ My yielding of myself to Him can only be the echo of His giving of Himself to me. He must be the first to love. You cannot argue a man into loving God, any more than you can hammer a rosebud open. If you do you spoil its petals. But He can love us into loving Him, and the sunshine, falling on the closed flower, will expand it, and it will grow by its reception of the light, and grow sunlike in its measure and according to its nature. So a God who has only claims upon us will never be a God to whom we yield ourselves. A God who has love for us will be a God to whom it is blessed that we should be consecrated, and so saints.

Then, still further, this consecration, thus built upon the reception of the divine love, and influencing our whole nature, and leading to all purity, is a universal characteristic of Christians. There is no faith which does not lead to surrender. There is no aristocracy in the Christian Church which deserves to have the family name given especially to it. ‘Saint’ this, and ‘Saint’ that, and ‘Saint’ the other-these titles cannot be used without darkening the truth that this honour and obligation of being saints belong equally to all that love Jesus Christ. All the men whom thus God has drawn to Himself, by His love in His Son, they are all, if I may so say, objectively holy; they belong to God. But consecration may be cultivated, and must be cultivated and increased. There is a solemn obligation laid upon every one of us who call ourselves Christians, to be saints, in the sense that we have consciously yielded up our whole lives to Him; and are trying, body, soul, and spirit, ‘to perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord.’

Paul’s letter, addressed to the ‘beloved in God,’ the ‘called saints’ that are in Rome, found its way to the people for whom it was meant. If a letter so addressed were dropped in our streets, do you think anybody would bring it to you, or to any Christian society as a whole, recognising that we were the people for whom it was meant? The world has taunted us often enough with the name of saints; and laughed at the profession which they thought was included in the word. Would that their taunts had been undeserved, and that it were not true that ‘saints’ in the Church sometimes means less than ‘good men’ out of the Church! ‘Seeing that we have these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit; perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord.’

3) Romans 1:11-12

Romans

PAUL’S LONGING 1

Rom. 1:11 - Rom. 1:12.

I am not wont to indulge in personal references in the pulpit, but I cannot but yield to the impulse to make an exception now, and to let our happy circumstances mould my remarks. I speak mainly to mine own people, and I must trust that other friends who may hear or read my words will forgive my doing so.

In taking such a text as this, I desire to shelter myself behind Paul, and in expounding his feelings to express my own, and to draw such lessons as may be helpful and profitable to us all. And so there are three things in this text that I desire to note: the manly expression of Christian affection; the lofty consciousness of the purpose of their meeting; and the lowly sense that there was much to be received as well as much to be given. A word or two about each of these things is all on which I can venture.

I. First, then, notice the manly expression of Christian affection which the Apostle allows himself here.

Very few Christian teachers could or should venture to talk so much about themselves as Paul did. The strong infusion of the personal element in all his letters is so transparently simple, so obviously sincere, so free from any jarring note of affectation or unctuous sentiment that it attracts rather than repels. If I might venture upon a paradox, his personal references are instances of self-oblivion in the midst of self-consciousness.

He had never been in Rome when he wrote these words; he had no personal relations with the believers there; he had never looked them in the face; there were no sympathy and confidence between them, as the growth of years. But still his heart went out towards them, and he was not ashamed to show it. ‘I *long* to see you,’-in the original the word expresses a very intense amount of yearning blended with something of regret that he had been so long kept from them.

Now it is not a good thing for people to make many professions of affection, and I think a public teacher has something better to do than to parade such feelings before his audiences. But there are exceptions to all rules, and I suppose I may venture to let my heart speak, and to say how gladly I come back to the old place, dear to me by so many sacred memories and associations, and how gladly I reknit the bonds of an affection which has been unbroken, and deepening on both sides through thirty long years.

Dear friends! let us together thank God to-day if He has knit our hearts together in mutual affection; and if you and I can look each other, as I believe we can, in the eyes, with the assurance that I see only the faces of friends, and that you see the face of one who gladly resumes the old work and associations.

But now, dear brethren, let us draw one lesson. Unless there be this manly, honest, though oftenest silent, Christian affection, the sooner you and I part the better. Unless it be in my heart I can do you no good. No man ever touched another with the sweet constraining forces that lie in Christ’s Gospel unless the heart of the speaker went out to grapple the hearts of the hearers. And no audience ever listen with any profit to a man when they come in the spirit of carping criticism, or of cold admiration, or of stolid indifference. There must be for this simple relationship which alone binds a Nonconformist preacher to his congregation, as a *sine qua non* of all higher things and of all spiritual good, a real, though oftenest it be a concealed, mutual affection and regard. We have to thank God for much of it; let us try to get more. That is all I want to say about the first point here.

II. Note the lofty consciousness of the purpose of their meeting.

‘I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift.’ Paul knew that he had something which he could give to these people, and he calls it by a very comprehensive term, ‘some spiritual gift’-a gift of some sort which, coming from the Divine Spirit, was to be received into the human spirit.

Now that expression-a spiritual gift-in the New Testament has a variety of applications. Sometimes it refers to what we call miraculous endowments, sometimes it refers to what we may call official capacity; but here it is evidently neither the one nor the other of these more limited and special things, but the general idea of a divine operation upon the human spirit which fills it with Christian graces-knowledge, faith, love. Or, in simpler words, what Paul wanted to give them was a firmer grasp and fuller possession of Jesus Christ, His love and power, which would secure a deepening and strengthening of their whole Christian life. He was quite sure he had this to give, and that he could impart it, if they would listen to what he would say to them. But whilst thus he rises into the lofty conception of the purpose and possible result of his meeting the Roman Christians, he is just as conscious of the limitations of his power in the matter as he is of the greatness of his function. These are indicated plainly. The word which he employs here, ‘gift’ is never used in the New Testament for a thing that one man can give to another, but is always employed for the concrete results of the grace of God bestowed upon men. The very expression, then, shows that Paul thought of himself, not as the original giver, but simply as a channel through which was communicated what God had given. In the same direction points the adjective which accompanies the noun-a ‘*spiritual* gift’-which probably describes the origin of the gift as being the Spirit of God, rather than defines the seat of it when received as being the spirit of the receiver. Notice, too, as bearing on the limits of Paul’s part in the gift, the propriety and delicacy of the language in his statement of the ultimate purpose of the gift. He does not say ‘that I may strengthen you,’ which might have sounded too egotistical, and would have assumed too much to himself, but he says ‘that ye may be strengthened,’ for the true strengthener is not Paul, but the Spirit of God.

So, on the one hand, the Christian teacher is bound to rise to the height of the consciousness of his lofty vocation as having in possession a gift that he can bestow; on the other hand, he is bound ever to remember the limitations within which that is true-viz. that the gift is not his, but God's, and that the Spirit of the Lord is the true Giver of all the graces which may blossom when His word, ministered by human agents, is received into human hearts.

And, now, what are the lessons that I take from this? Two very simple ones. First, no Christian teacher has any business to open his mouth, unless he is sure that he has received something to impart to men as a gift from the Divine Spirit. To preach our doubts, to preach our own opinions, to preach poor platitudes, to talk about politics and morals and taste and literature and the like in the pulpit, is profanation and blasphemy. Let no man open his lips unless he can say: 'The Lord hath showed me this; and this I bring to you as His word.' Nor has a Christian organisation any right to exist, unless it recognises the communication and reception and further spreading of this spiritual gift as its great function. Churches which have lost that consciousness, and, instead of a divine gift, have little more to offer than formal worship, or music, or entertainments, or mere intellectual discourse, whether orthodox or 'advanced,' have no right to be; and by the law of the survival of the fittest will not long be. The one thing that warrants such a relationship as subsists between you and me is this, my consciousness that I have a message from God, and your belief that you hear such from my lips. Unless that be our bond the sooner these walls crumble, and this voice ceases, and these pews are emptied, the better. 'I have,' says, Paul, 'a gift to impart; and I long to see you that I may impart it to you.' Oh! for more, in all our pulpits, of that burdened consciousness of a divine message which needs the relief of speech, and longs with a longing caught from Christ to impart its richest treasures.

That is the one lesson. And the other one is this. Have you, dear friends, received the gift that I have, under the limitations already spoken of, to bestow? There are some of you who have listened to my voice ever since you were children-some of you, though not many, have heard it for well on to thirty years. Have you taken the thing that all these years I have been-God knows how poorly, but God knows how honestly-trying to bring to you? That is, have you taken Christ, and have you faith in Him? And, as for those of you who say that you are Christians, many blessings have passed between you and me through all these years; but, dear friends, has the chief blessing been attained? Are you being strengthened day by day for the burdens and the annoyances and the sorrows of life by your coming here? Do I do you any good in that way; are you better men than when we first met together? Is Christ dearer, and more real and nearer to you; and are your lives more transparently consecrated, more manifestly the result of a hidden union with Him? Do you walk in the world like the Master, because you are members of this congregation? If so, its purpose has been accomplished. If not, it has miserably failed.

I have said that I have to thank God for the unbroken affection that has knit us together. But what is the use of such love if it does not lead onwards to this? I have had enough, and more than enough, of what you call popularity and appreciation, undeserved enough, but rendered unstintedly by you. I do not care the snap of a finger for it by comparison with this other thing. And oh, dear brethren! if all that comes of our meeting here Sunday after Sunday is either praise or criticism of my poor words and ways, our relationship is a curse, and not a blessing, and we come together for the worse and not for the better. The purpose of the Church, and the purpose of the ministry, and the meaning of our assembling are, that spiritual gifts may be imparted, not by me alone, but by you, too, and by me in my place and measure, and if that purpose be not accomplished, all other purposes, that are accomplished, are of no account, and worse than nothing.

III. And now, lastly, note the lowly consciousness that much was to be received as well as much to be given.

The Apostle corrects himself after he has said ‘that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift,’ by adding, ‘that is, that I may be comforted [or rather, encouraged] together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.’ If his language were not so transparently sincere, and springing from deep interest in the relationship between himself and these people, we should say that it was exquisite courtesy and beautiful delicacy. But it moves in a region far more real than the region of courtesy, and it speaks the inmost truth about the conditions on which the Roman Christians should receive-viz. that they should also give. There is only one Giver who is only a Giver, and that is God. All other givers are also receivers. Paul desired to see his Roman brethren that he might be encouraged; and when he did see them, as he marched along the Appian Way, a shipwrecked prisoner, the Acts of the Apostles tells us, ‘He thanked God and took courage.’ The sight of them strengthened him and prepared him for what lay before him.

Paul’s was a richly complicated nature-firm as a rock in its will, tremulously sensitive in its sympathies; like some strongly-rooted tree with its stable stem and a green cloud of fluttering foliage that moves in the lightest air. So his spirit rose and fell according to the reception that he met from his brethren, and the manifestation of their faith quickened and strengthened his.

And he is but one instance of a universal law. All teachers, the more genuine they are, the more sympathetic they are, are the more sensitive of their environment. The very oratorical temperament places a man at the mercy of surroundings. All earnest work has ever travelling with it as its shadow seasons of deep depression; and the Christian teacher does not escape these. I am not going to speak about myself, but this is unquestionably true, that every Elijah, after the mightiest effort of prophecy, is apt to cover his head in his mantle and to say, ‘Take me away; I am not better than my fathers.’ And when a man for thirty years, amidst all the changes incident to a great city congregation in that time, has to stand up Sunday after Sunday before the same people, and mark how some of them are stolidly indifferent, and note how others are dropping away from their faithfulness, and see empty places where loving forms used to sit-no wonder that the mood comes ever and anon, ‘Then, said I, surely I have laboured in vain and spent my strength for nought.’ The hearer reacts on the speaker quite as much as the speaker does on the hearer. If you have ice in the pews, that brings down the temperature up here. It is hard to be fervid amidst people that are all but dead. It is difficult to keep a fire alight when it is kindled on the top of an iceberg. And the unbelief and low-toned religion of a congregation are always pulling down the faith and the fervour of their minister, if he be better and holier, as they expect him to be, than they are.

‘He did not many works because of their unbelief.’ Christ knew the hampering and the restrictions of His power which came from being surrounded by a chill, unsympathetic environment. My strength and my weakness are largely due to you. And if you want your minister to preach better, and in all ways to do his work more joyfully and faithfully, the means lie largely in your own hands. Icy indifference, ill-natured interpretations, carping criticisms, swift forgetfulness of one's words, all these things kill the fervour of the pulpit.

On the other hand, the true encouragement to give a man when he is trying to do God's will, to preach Christ's Gospel, is not to pat him on the back and say, 'What a remarkable sermon that was of yours! what a genius! what an orator!' not to go about praising it, but to come and say, 'Thy words have led me to Christ, and from thee I have taken the gift of gifts.'

Dear brethren, the encouragement of the minister is in the conversion and the growth of the hearers. And I pray that in this new lease of united fellowship which we have taken out, be it longer or shorter-and advancing years tell me that at the longest it must be comparatively short-I may come to you ever more and more with the lofty and humbling consciousness that I have a message which Christ has given to me, and that you may come more and more receptive-not of *my* words, God forbid-but of Christ's truth; and that so we may be helpers one of another, and encourage each other in the warfare and work to which we all are called and consecrated.

1 Preached after long absence on account of illness.

4) Romans 1:14

Romans

DEBTORS TO ALL MEN

Rom. 1:14.

No doubt Paul is here referring to the special obligation laid upon him by his divine call to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. He was entrusted with the Gospel as a steward, and was therefore bound to carry it to all sorts and conditions of men. But the principle underlying the statement applies to all Christians. The indebtedness referred to is no peculiarity of the Apostolic order, but attaches to every believer. Every servant of Jesus Christ, who has received the truth for himself, has received it as a steward, and is, as such, indebted to God, from whom he got the trust, and to the men for whom he got it. The only limit to the obligation is, as Paul says in the context, ‘as much as in me is.’ Capacity, determined by faculties, opportunities, and circumstances, prescribes the kind and the degree of the work to be done in discharge of the obligation; but the obligation is universal. We are not at liberty to choose whether we shall do our part in spreading the name of Jesus Christ. It is a debt that we owe to God and to men. Is that the view of duty which the average Christian man takes? I am afraid it is not. If it were, our treasuries would be full, and great would be the multitude of them that preached the Word.

It is no very exalted degree of virtue to pay our debts. We do not expect to be praised for that; and we do not consider that we are at liberty to choose whether we shall do it or not. We are dishonest if we do not. It is no merit in us to be honest. Would that all Christian people applied that principle to their religion. The world would be different, and the Church would be different, if they did.

Let me try, then, to enforce this thought of indebtedness and of common honesty in discharging the indebtedness, which underlies these words. Paul thought that he went a long way to pay his debts to humanity by carrying to everybody whom he could reach the ‘Name that is above every name.’

I. Now, first, let me say that we Christians are debtors to all men by our common manhood.

It is not the least of the gifts which Christianity has brought to the world, that it has introduced the new thought of the brotherhood of mankind. The very word ‘humanity’ is a Christian coinage, and it was coined to express the new thought that began to throb in men’s hearts, as soon as they accepted the message that Jesus Christ came to give, the message of the Fatherhood of God. For it is on that belief of God’s Fatherhood that the belief of man’s brotherhood rests, and on it alone can it be secured and permanently based.

Here is a Jew writing to Latins in the Greek language. The phenomenon itself is a sign of a new order of things, of the rising of a flood that had surged over, and in the course of ages would sap away and dissolve, the barriers between men. The Apostle points to two of the widest gulfs that separated men, in the words of my text. ‘Greeks and Barbarians’ divides mankind, according to race and language. ‘Wise and unwise’ divides them according to culture and intellectual capacity. Both gulfs exist still, though they have been wonderfully filled up by the influence, direct and indirect, of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The fiercest antagonisms of race which still subsist are felt to belong to a decaying order, and to be sure, sooner or later, to pass away. I suppose that the gulf made by the increased culture of modern society between civilised and the savage peoples, and, within the limits of our own land, the gulf made by education between the higher and the lower layers of our community-I speak not of higher and lower in regard to wealth or station, but in regard to intellectual acquirement and capacity-are greater than, perhaps, they ever were in the past. But yet over the gulf a bridge is thrown, and the gulf itself is being filled up. High above all the superficial distinctions which separate Jew and Gentile, Greek and Barbarian, educated and illiterate, scientific and unscientific, wise and unwise, there stretches the great rainbow of the truth that all are one in Christ Jesus. Fraternity without Fatherhood is a ghastly mockery that ended a hundred years ago in the guillotine, and to-day will end in disappointment; and it is little more than cant. But when Christianity comes and tells us that we have one Father and one Redeemer, then the unity of the race is secured.

And that oneness which makes us debtors to all men is shown to be real by the fact that, beneath all superficial distinctions of culture, race, age, or station, there are the primal necessities and yearnings and possibilities that lie in every human soul. All men, savage or cultivated, breathe the same air, see by the same light, are fed by the same food and drink, have the same yearning hearts, the same lofty aspirations that unfulfilled are torture; the same experience of the same guilt, and, blessed be God! the same Saviour and the same salvation.

Because, then, we are all members of the one family, every man is bound to regard all that he possesses, and is, and can do, as committed to him in stewardship to be imparted to his fellows. We are not sponges to absorb, but we are pipes placed in the spring, that we may give forth the precious water of life.

Cain is not a very good model, but his question is the world's question, and it implies the expectation of a negative answer-'Am I my brother's keeper?' Surely, the very language answers itself, and, although Cain thinks that the only answer is 'No,' wisdom sees that the only answer is 'Yes.' For if I am my brother's brother, then surely I am my brother's keeper. We have a better example. There is another Elder Brother who has come to give to His brethren all that Himself possessed, and we but poorly follow our Master's pattern unless we feel that the mystic tie which binds us in brotherhood to every man makes us every man's debtor to the extent of our possessions. That is the Christian truth that underlies the modern Socialistic idea, and, whatever the form in which it is ultimately brought into practice as the rule of mankind, the principle will triumph one day; and we are bound, as Christian men, to hasten the coming of its victory. We are debtors by reason of our common humanity.

II. We are debtors by our possession of the universal salvation.

The principle which I have already been laying down applies all round, to everything that we have, are, or can do. But its most stringent obligation, and the noblest field for its operations, are found in reference to the Christian man's possession of the Gospel for the joy of his own heart, and to the duties that are therein involved. Christ draws men to Himself for their own sakes, blessed be His name! but not for their own sakes only. He draws them to Himself, that they, in their turn, may draw others with whose hands theirs are linked, and so may swell the numbers of the flock that gathers round the one Shepherd. He puts the dew of His blessing into the chalice of the tiniest flower, that it may 'share its dewdrop with another near.' Just as every particle of inert dough as it is leavened becomes in its turn leaven, and the medium for leavening the particle contiguous to it, so every Christian is bound, or, to use the metaphor of my text, is a debtor to God and man, to impart the Gospel of Jesus Christ. 'Greek and Barbarian,' says Paul, 'wise or unwise'; all distinctions vanish. If I can get at a man, no matter what colour, his race, his language, his capacity, his acquirements, he is my creditor, and I am defrauding him of what he has a right to expect from me if I do not do my best to bring him to Jesus Christ.

This obligation receives additional weight from the proved adaptation of the Gospel to all sorts and conditions of men. Alone of all religions has Christianity proved itself capable of dominating every type of character, of influencing every stage of civilisation, of assuming the speech of every tongue, and of wearing the garb of every race. There are other religions which are evidently destined only to a narrow field of operations, and are rigidly limited by geographical conditions, or by stages of civilisation. There are wines that are ruined by a sea voyage, and can only be drunk in the land where the vintage was gathered; and that is the condition of all the ethnic religions. Christianity alone passes through the whole earth, and influences all men. The history of missions shows us that. There has yet to be found the race that is incapable of receiving, or is beyond the need of possessing, or cannot be elevated by the operation of, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So to all men we are bound, as much as in us is, to carry the Gospel. The distinction that is drawn so often by the people who never move a finger to help the heathen either at home or abroad, between the home and the foreign field of work, vanishes altogether when we stand at the true Christian standpoint. Here is a man who wants the Gospel; I have it; I can give it to him. That constitutes a summons as imperative as if we were called by name from Heaven, and bade to go, and as much as in us is to preach the Gospel. Brethren! we do not obey the command, ‘Owe no man anything,’ unless, to the extent of our ability, or over the whole field which we can influence at home or abroad, we seek to spread the name of Christ and the salvation that is in Him.

III. We are debtors by benefits received.

I am speaking to men and women a very large proportion of whom get their living, and some of whom amass their wealth, by trade with lands that need the Gospel. It is not for nothing that England has won the great empire that she possesses-won it, alas! far too often by deeds that will not bear investigation in the light of Christian principle, but won it.

What do we owe to the lands that we call ‘heathen’ ? The very speech by which we communicate with one another; the beginning of our civilisation; wide fields for expanding population and emigration; treasures of wisdom of many kinds; an empire about which we are too fond of crowing and too reluctant to recognise its responsibilities-and Manchester its commerce and prosperity! Did God put us where we are as a nation only in order that we might carry the gifts of our literature, great as that is; of our science, great as that is; of our law, blessed as that is; of our manufactures, to those distant lands? The best thing that we can give is the thing that all of us can help to give-the Gospel of Jesus Christ. ‘Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?’

IV. Lastly, we are debtors by injuries inflicted.

Many subject-races seem destined to fade away by contact with our race; and if we think of the nameless cruelties, and the iliad of woes which England’s possession of this great Colonial Empire has had accompanying it, we may feel that the harm in many aspects outweighs the good, and that it had been better for these men to be left suckled in creeds outworn, and ignorant of our civilisation, than to receive from us the fatal gifts that they often have received. I do not wish to exaggerate, but if you will take the facts of the case as brought out by people that have no Christian prejudices to serve, I think you will acknowledge that we as a nation owe a debt of reparation to the barbarians and the unwise.

What about killing African tribes by the thousand with the vile stuff that we call rum, and send to them in exchange for their poor commodities? What about introducing new diseases, the offspring of vice, into the South Sea Islands, decimating and all but destroying the population? Is it not true that, as the prophet wailed of old about a degenerate Israel, we may wail about the beach-combers and other loafers that go amongst savage lands from England-’Through you the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles.’ A Hindoo once said to a missionary, ‘Your Book is very good. If you were as good as your Book you would conquer India in five years.’ That may be true or it may not, but it gives us the impression that is produced by godless Englishmen on heathen peoples. We are taking away their religion from them, necessarily, as the result of education and contact with European thought. And if we do not substitute for it the one faith that elevates and saves, the last state of that man will be worse than the first.

We can almost hear the rattle of the guns on the north-west frontier of India to-day. There is another specimen of the injuries inflicted. This is not the place to talk politics, but I feel that this is the place to ask this question, 'Are Christian principles to have anything to do in determining national actions?' Is it Christian to impose our yoke on unwilling tribes who have as deep a love for independence as the proudest Englishmen of us all, and as good a right to it? Are punitive expeditions and Maxim guns instalments of our debt to all men? I wonder what Jesus Christ, who died for Afridis and Orakzais and all the rest of them, thinks about such conduct?

Brethren, we are debtors to all men. Let us do our best to influence national action in accordance with the brotherhood which has been revealed to us by the Elder Brother of us all; and let us, at least for our own parts, recognise, and, as much as in us is, discharge the debt which, by our common humanity, and by our possession of the universal Gospel we owe to all men, and which is made more weighty by the benefits we receive from many, and by the injuries which England has inflicted on not a few. Else shall we hear rise above all the voices that palliate crime, on the plea of 'State necessity,' the stern words of the Master, 'In thy skirts is found the blood of the souls of poor innocents.' We are debtors; let us pay our debts.

5) Romans 1:16

Romans

THE GOSPEL THE POWER OF GOD 1

Rom. 1:16.

To preach the Gospel in Rome had long been the goal of Paul's hopes. He wished to do in the centre of power what he had done in Athens, the home of wisdom; and with superb confidence, not in himself, but in his message, to try conclusions with the strongest thing in the world. He knew its power well, and was not appalled. The danger was an attraction to his chivalrous spirit. He believed in flying at the head when you are fighting with a serpent, and he knew that influence exerted in Rome would thrill through the Empire. If we would understand the magnificent audacity of these words of my text we must try to listen to them with the ears of a Roman. Here was a poor little insignificant Jew, like hundreds of his countrymen down in the Ghetto, one who had his head full of some fantastic nonsense about a young visionary whom the procurator of Syria had very wisely put an end to a while ago in order to quiet down the turbulent province; and he was going into Rome with the notion that his word would shake the throne of the Cæsars. What proud contempt would have curled their lips if they had been told that the travel-stained prisoner, trudging wearily up the Appian Way, had the mightiest thing in the world entrusted to his care! Romans did not believe much in ideas. Their notion of power was sharp swords and iron yokes on the necks of subject peoples. But the history of Christianity, whatever else it has been, has been the history of the supremacy and the revolutionary force of ideas. Thought is mightier than all visible forces. Thought dissolves and reconstructs. Empires and institutions melt before it like the carbon rods in an electric lamp; and the little hillock of Calvary is higher than the Palatine with its regal homes and the Capitoline with its temples: ‘I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation.’

Now, dear friends, I have ventured to take these great words for my text, though I know, better than any of you can tell me, how sure my treatment of them is to enfeeble rather than enforce them, because I, for my poor part, feel that there are few things which we, all of us, people and ministers, need more than to catch some of the infection of this courageous confidence, and to be fired with some spark of Paul’s enthusiasm for, and glorying in, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I ask you, then, to consider three things: [1] what Paul thought was the Gospel? [2] what Paul thought the Gospel was? and [3] what he felt about the Gospel?

I. What Paul thought was the Gospel?

He has given to us in his own rapid way a summary statement, abbreviated to the very bone, and reduced to the barest elements, of what he meant by the Gospel. What was the irreducible minimum? The facts of the Death and

Resurrection of Jesus Christ, as you will find written in the fifteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. So, then, to begin with, the Gospel is not a statement of principles, but a record of facts, things that have happened in this world of ours. But the least part of a fact is the visible part of it, and it is of no significance unless it has explanation, and so Paul goes on to bind up with the facts an explanation of them. The mere fact that Jesus, a young Nazarene, was executed is no more a gospel than the other one, that two brigands were crucified beside Him. But the fact that could be seen, plus the explanation which underlies and interprets it, turns the chronicle into a gospel, and the explanation begins with the name of the Sufferer; for if you want to understand His death you must understand who it was that died. His death is a thought pathetic in all aspects, and very precious in many. But when we hear 'Christ died according to the Scriptures,' the whole symbolism of the ancient ritual and all the glowing anticipations of the prophets rise up before us, and that death assumes an altogether different aspect. If we stop with 'Jesus died,' then that death may be a beautiful example of heroism, a sweet, pathetic instance of innocent suffering, a conspicuous example of the world's wages to the world's teachers, but it is little more. If, however, we take Paul's words upon our lips, 'Brethren, I declare unto you the Gospel which I preached . . . how that Christ died . . . according to the Scriptures,' the fact flashes up into solid beauty, and becomes the Gospel of our salvation. And the explanation goes on, 'How that Christ died for our sins.' Now, I may be very blind, but I venture to say that I, for my part, cannot see in what intelligible sense the Death of Christ can be held to have been for, or on behalf of, our sins-that is, that they may be swept away and we delivered from them-unless you admit the atoning nature of His sacrifice for sins. I cannot stop to enlarge, but I venture to say that any narrower interpretation evacuates Paul's words of their deepest significance. The explanation goes on, 'And that He was buried.' Why that trivial detail? Partly because it guarantees the fact of His Death, partly because of its bearing on the evidences of His Resurrection. 'And that He rose from the dead according to the Scriptures.' Great fact, without which Christ is a shattered prop, and 'ye are yet in your sins.'

But, further, notice that my text is also Paul's text for this Epistle, and that it differs from the condensed summary of which I have been speaking only as a bud with its petals closed differs from one with them expanded in their beauty. And now, if you will take the words of my text as being the keynote of this letter, and read over its first eight chapters, what is the Apostle talking about when he in them fulfils his purpose and preaches ‘the Gospel’ to them that are at Rome also? Here is, in the briefest possible words, his summary-the universality of sin, the awful burden of guilt, the tremendous outlook of penalty, the impossibility of man rescuing himself or living righteously, the Incarnation, and Life, and Death of Jesus Christ as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, the hand of faith grasping the offered blessing, the indwelling in believing souls of the Divine Spirit, and the consequent admission of man into a life of sonship, power, peace, victory, glory, the child’s place in the love of the Father from which nothing can separate. These are the teachings which make the staple of this Epistle. These are the explanations of the weighty phrases of my text. These are at least the essential elements of the Gospel according to Paul.

But he was not alone in this construction of his message. We hear a great deal to-day about Pauline Christianity, with the implication, and sometimes with the assertion, that he was the inventor of what, for the sake of using a brief and easily intelligible term, I may call Evangelical Christianity. Now, it is a very illuminating thought for the reading of the New Testament that there are the three sets of teaching, roughly, the Pauline, Petrine, and Johannine, and you cannot find the distinctions between these three in any difference as to the fundamental contents of the Gospel; for if Paul rings out, ‘God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us,’ Peter declares, ‘Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree,’ and John, from his island solitude, sends across the waters the hymn of praise, ‘Unto Him that loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood.’ And so the proud declaration of the Apostle, which he dared not have ventured upon in the face of the acrid criticism he had to front unless he had known he was perfectly sure of his ground, is natural and warranted-’Therefore, whether it were I or they, so we preach.’

We are told that we must go back to the Christ of the Gospels, the historical Christ, and that He spoke nothing concerning all these important points that I have mentioned as being Paul’s conception of the Gospel. Back to the Christ of the Gospels by all means, if you will go to the Christ of all the Gospels and of the whole of each Gospel. And if you do, you will go back to the Christ who said, ‘The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.’ You will go back to the Christ who said, ‘And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.’ You will go back to the Christ who said, ‘The bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.’ You will go back to the Christ who bade His followers hold in everlasting memory, not the tranquil beauty of His life, not the persuasive sweetness of His gracious words, not the might of His miracles of blessing, but the mysterious agonies of His last hours, by which He would have us learn that there lie the secret of His power, the foundation of our hopes, the stimulus of our service.

Now, brethren, I have ventured to dwell so long upon this matter, because it is no use talking about the Gospel unless we understand what we mean by it, and I, for my part, venture to say that that is what Paul meant by it, and that is what I mean by it. I plead for no narrow interpretation of the phrases of my text. I would not that they should be used to check in the smallest degree the diversities of representation which, according to the differences of individual character, must ever prevail in the conceptions which we form and which we preach of this Gospel of Jesus Christ. I want no parrot-like repetition of a certain set of phrases embodied, however great may be their meanings, in every sermon. And I would that the people to whom those truths are true would make more allowance than they sometimes do for the differences to which I have referred, and would show a great deal more sympathy than they often do to those, especially those young men, who, with their faces toward Christ, have not yet grown to the full acceptance of all that is implied in those gracious words. There is room for a whole world of thought in the Gospel of Christ as Paul conceived it, with all the deep foundations of implication and presupposition on which it rests, and with all the, as yet, undiscovered range of conclusions to which it may lead. Remember that the Cross of Christ is the key to the universe, and sends its influence into every region of human thought.

II. What Paul thought the Gospel was.

‘The power of God unto salvation.’ There was in the background of the Apostle’s mind a kind of tacit reference to the antithetical power that he was going up to meet, the power of Rome, and we may trace that in the words of my text. Rome, as I have said, was the embodiment of physical force, with no great faith in ideas. And over against this carnal might Paul lifts the undissembled weakness of the Cross, and declares that it is stronger than man, 'the power of God unto salvation.' Rome is high in force; Athens is higher; the Cross is highest of all, and it comes shrouded in weakness having a poor Man hanging dying there. That is a strange embodiment of divine power. Yes, and because so strange, it is so touching, and so conquering. The power that is draped in weakness is power indeed. Though Rome's power did make for righteousness sometimes, yet its stream of tendency was on the whole a power to destruction and grasped the nations of the earth as some rude hand might do rich clusters of grapes and squeeze them into a formless mass. The tramp of the legionary meant death, and it was true in many respects of them what was afterwards said of later invaders of Europe, that where their horses' hoofs had once stamped no grass ever grew. Over against this terrific engine of destruction Paul lifts up the meek forces of love which have for their sole object the salvation of man.

Then we come to another of the keywords about which it is very needful that people should have deeper and wider notions than they often seem to cherish. What is salvation? Negatively, the removal and sweeping away of all evil, physical and moral, as the schools speak. Positively, the inclusion of all good for every part of the composite nature of a man which the man can receive and which God can bestow. And that is the task that the Gospel sets to itself. Now, I need not remind you how, for the execution of such a purpose, it is plain that something else than man's power is absolutely essential. It is only God who can alter my relation to His government. It is only God who can trammel up the inward consequences of my sins and prevent them from scourging me. It is only God who can bestow upon my death a new life, which shall grow up into righteousness and beauty, caught of, and kindred to, His own. But if this be the aim of the Gospel, then its diagnosis of man's sickness is a very much graver one than that which finds favour amongst so many of us now. Salvation is a bigger word than any of the little gospels that we hear clamouring round about us are able to utter. It means something a great deal more than either social or intellectual, or still more, material or political betterment of man's condition. The disease lies so deep, and so great are the destruction and loss partly experienced, and still more awfully impending over every soul of us, that something else than tinkering at the outsides, or dealing, as self-culture does, with man's understanding or, as social gospels do, with man's economical and civic condition, should be brought to bear. Dear brethren, especially you Christian ministers, preach a social Christianity by all means, an applied Christianity, for there does lie in the Gospel of Jesus Christ a key to all the problems that afflict our social condition. But be sure first that there is a Christianity before you talk about applying it. And remember that the process of salvation begins in the deep heart of the individual and transforms him first and foremost. The power is 'to every one that believeth.' It is power in its most universal sweep. Rome's Empire was wellnigh ubiquitous, but, blessed be God, the dove of Christ flies farther than the Roman eagle with beak and claw ready for rapine, and wherever there are men here is a Gospel for them. The limitation is no limitation of its universality. It is no limitation of the claim of a medicine to be a panacea that it will only do good to the man who swallows it. And that is the only limitation of which the Gospel is susceptible, for we have all the same deep needs, the same longings; we are fed by the same bread, we are nourished by the same draughts of water, we breathe the same air, we have the same sins, and, thanks be to God, we have the same Saviour. 'The power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.'

Now before I pass from this part of my subject there is only one thing more that I want to say, and that is, that you cannot apply that glowing language about 'the power of God unto salvation' to anything but the Gospel that Paul preached. Forms of Christianity which have lost the significance of the Incarnation and Death of Jesus Christ, and which have struck out or obscured the central facts with which I have been dealing, are not, never were, and, I may presumptuously venture to say, never will be, forces of large account in this world. Here is a clock, beautiful, chased on the back, with a very artistic dial-plate, and works modelled according to the most approved fashion, but, somehow or other, the thing won't go. Perhaps the mainspring is broken. And so it is only the Gospel, as Paul expounds it and expands it in this Epistle, that is 'the power of God unto salvation.' Dear brethren, in the course of a sermon like this, of course, one must lay himself open to the charge of dogmatising. That cannot be helped under the conditions of my space. But let me say as my own solemn conviction-I know that that is not worth much to you, but it is my justification for speaking in such a fashion-let me say as my solemn conviction that you may as well take the keystone out of an arch, with nothing to hold the other stones together or keep them from toppling in hideous ruin on your unfortunate head, as take the doctrine that Paul summed up in that one word out of your conception of Christianity and expect it to work. And be sure of this, that there is only one Name that lords it over the demons of afflicted humanity, and that if a man goes and tries to eject them with any less potent charm than Paul's Gospel, they will turn upon him with 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?'

III. What Paul felt about this Gospel.

His restrained expression, 'I am not ashamed,' is the stronger for its very moderation. It witnesses to the fixed purpose of his heart and attitude of his mind, whilst it suggests that he was well aware of all the temptations in Rome to being ashamed of it there. Think of what was arrayed against him-venerable religion, systematised philosophies, bitter hatred and prejudice, material power and wealth. These were the brazen armour of Goliath, and this little David went cheerily down into the valley with five pebble stones in a leathern wallet, and was quite sure how it was going to end. And it ended as he expected. His Gospel shook the kingdom of the Roman, and cast it in another mould.

And there are temptations, plenty of them, for us, dear friends, to-day, to bate our confidence. The drift of what calls itself influential opinion is anti-supernatural, and we all are conscious of the presence of that element all round about us. It tells with special force upon our younger men, but it affects us all. In this day, when a large portion of the periodical press, which does the thinking for most of us, looks askance at these truths, and when, on the principle that in the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is the king, popular novelists become our theological tutors, and when every new publishing season brings out a new conclusive destruction of Christianity, which supersedes last season's equally complete destruction, it is hard for some of us to keep our flags flying. The ice round about us will either bring down the temperature, or, if it stimulates us to put more fuel on the fire, perhaps the fire may melt it. And so the more we feel ourselves encompassed by these temptations, the louder is the call to Christian men to cast themselves back on the central verities, and to draw at first hand from them the inspiration which shall be their safety. And how is that to be done? Well, there are many ways by which thoughtful, and cultivated, students may do it. But may I venture to deal here rather with ways which all Christian people have open before them? And I am bold to say that the way to be sure of 'the power of God unto salvation' is to submit ourselves continually to its cleansing and renewing influence. This certitude, brethren, may be contributed to by books of apologetics, and by other sources of investigation and study which I should be sorry indeed to be supposed in any degree to depreciate. But the true way to get it is, by deep communion with the living God, to realise the personality of Jesus Christ as present with us, our Friend, our Saviour, our Sanctifier by His Holy Spirit. Why, Paul's Gospel was, I was going to say, altogether-that would be an exaggeration-but it was to a very large extent simply the generalisation of his own experience. That is what all of us will find to be the Gospel that we have to preach. 'We speak that we do know and testify that we have seen.' And it was because this man could say so assuredly-because the depths of his own conscience and the witness within him bore testimony to it-'He loved me and gave Himself for me,' that he could also say, 'The power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.' Go down into the depths, brother and friend; cry to Him out of the depths. Then you will feel His strong, gentle grip lifting you to the heights, and that will give power that nothing else will, and you will be able to say, 'I have heard Him myself, and I know that this is the Christ, the Saviour of the world.'

But there is yet another source of certitude open to us all, and that is the history of the centuries. Our modern sceptics, attacking the truth of Christianity mostly from the physical side, are strangely blind to the worth of history. It is a limitation of faculty that besets them in a good many directions, but it does not work anywhere more fatally than it does in their attitude towards the Gospel. After all, Jesus Christ spoke the ultimate word when He said, 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' And it is so, because just as what is morally wrong cannot be politically right, so what is intellectually false cannot be morally good. Truth, goodness, beauty, they are but three names for various aspects of one thing, and if it be that the difference between B.C. and A.D. has come from a Gospel which is not the truth of God, then all I can say is, that the richest vintage that ever the world saw, and the noblest wine of which it ever drank, did grow upon a thorn. I know that the Christian Church has sinfully and tragically failed to present Christ adequately to the world. But for all that, ‘Ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord’; and nobler manners and purer laws have come in the wake of this Gospel of Jesus Christ. And as I look round about upon what Christianity has done in the world, I venture to say, ‘Show us any system of religion or of no religion that has done that or anything the least like it, and then we will discuss with you the other evidences of the Gospel.’

In closing these words, may I venture relying on the melancholy privilege of seniority, to drop for a minute or two into a tone of advice? I would say, do not be frightened out of your confidence either by the premature paean of victory from the opposite camp, or by timid voices in our own ranks. And that you may not be so frightened, be sure to keep clear in your mind the distinction between the things that can be shaken and the kingdom that cannot be moved. It is bad strategy to defend an elongated line. It is cowardice to treat the capture of an outpost as involving the evacuation of the key of the position. It is a mistake, to which many good Christian people are sorely tempted in this day, to assert such a connection between the eternal Gospel and our deductions from the principles of that Gospel as that the refutation of the one must be the overthrow of the other. And if it turns out to be so in any case, a large part of the blame lies upon those good and mistaken people who insist that everything must be held or all must be abandoned. The burning questions of this day about the genuineness of the books of Scripture, inspiration, inerrancy, and the like, are not so associated with this word, ‘God so loved the world . . . that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life,’ as that the discovery of errors in the Second Book of Chronicles shakes the foundations of the Christian certitude. In a day like this truth must change its vesture. Who believes that the Dissenting Churches of England are the highest, perfect embodiment of the Kingdom of God? And who believes that any creed of man’s making has in it all and has in it only the everlasting Gospel? So do not be frightened, and do not think that when the things that can be shaken are removed, the things that cannot be shaken are at all less likely to remain. Depend upon it, the Gospel, whose outline I have imperfectly tried to set before you now, will last as long as men on earth know they are sinners and need a Saviour. Did you ever see some mean buildings that have by degrees been gathered round the sides of some majestic cathedral, and do you suppose that the sweeping away of those shanties would touch the solemn majesty of the mediæval glories of the building that rises above them? Take them away if need be, and it, in its proportion, beauty, strength, and heavenward aspiration, will stand more glorious for the sweeping away. Preach positive truth. Do not preach doubts. You remember Mr. Kingsley's book *Yeast*. Its title was its condemnation. Yeast is not meant to be drunk; it is meant to be kept in the dark till the process of fermentation goes on and it works itself clear, and then you may bring it out. Do not be always arguing with the enemy. It is a great deal better to preach the truth. Remember what Jesus said: 'Let them alone, they are blind leaders of the blind, they will fall into the ditch.' It is not given to every one of us to conduct controversial arguments in the pulpit. There are some much wiser and abler brethren amongst us than you or I who can do it. Let us be contented with, not the humbler but the more glorious, office of telling what we have known, leaving it, as it will do, to prove itself. You remember what the old woman, who had been favoured by her pastor with an elaborate sermon to demonstrate the existence of God, said when he had finished; 'Well, I believe there is a God, for all the gentleman says.'

As one who sees the lengthening shadows falling over the darkening field, may I say one word to my junior brethren, with all whose struggles and doubts and difficulties I, for one, do most tenderly sympathise? I beseech them-though, alas! the advice condemns the giver of it as he looks back over long years of his ministry-to be faithful to the Gospel how that 'Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.' Dear young friends, if you only go where Paul went, and catch the inspiration that he caught there, your path will be clear. It was in contact with Christ, whose passion for soul-winning brought Him from heaven, that Paul learned his passion for soul-winning. And if you and I are touched with the divine enthusiasm, and have that aim clear before us, we shall soon find out that there is only one power, one name given under heaven among men whereby we can accomplish what we desire-the name of 'Jesus Christ that died, yea, rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, and also maketh intercession for us.' If our aim is clear before us it will prescribe our methods, and if the inspiration of our ministry is, 'I determine not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified,' then, whether men will hear or whether they will forbear, they shall know that there hath been a Prophet among them.

1 Preached before Baptist Union.

6) Romans 3:19-21

Romans

WORLD-WIDE SIN AND WORLD-WIDE REDEMPTION

Rom. 3:19 - Rom. 3:26.

Let us note in general terms the large truths which this passage contains. We may mass these under four heads:

I. Paul's view of the purpose of the law.

He has been quoting a mosaic of Old Testament passages from the Psalms and Isaiah. He regards these as part of 'the law,' which term, therefore, in his view, here includes the whole previous revelation, considered as making known God's will as to man's conduct. Every word of God, whether promise, or doctrine, or specific command, has in it some element bearing on conduct. God reveals nothing only in order that we may know, but all that, knowing, we may do and be what is pleasing in His sight. All His words are law.

But Paul sets forth another view of its purpose here; namely, to drive home to men's consciences the conviction of sin. That is not the only purpose, for God reveals duty primarily in order that men may do it, and His law is meant to be obeyed. But, failing obedience, this second purpose comes into action, and His law is a swift witness against sin. The more clearly we know our duty, the more poignant will be our consciousness of failure. The light which shines to show the path of right, shines to show our deviations from it. And that conviction of sin, which it was the very purpose of all the previous Revelation to produce, is a merciful gift; for, as the Apostle implies, it is the prerequisite to the faith which saves.

As a matter of fact, there was a far profounder and more inward conviction of sin among the Jews than in any heathen nation. Contrast the wailings of many a psalm with the tone in Greek or Roman literature. No doubt there is a law written on men’s hearts which evokes a lower measure of the same consciousness of sin. There are prayers among the Assyrian and Babylonian tablets which might almost stand beside the Fifty-first Psalm; but, on the whole, the deep sense of sin was the product of the revealed law. The best use of our consciousness of what we ought to be, is when it rouses conscience to feel the discordance with it of what we are, and so drives us to Christ. Law, whether in the Old Testament, or as written in our hearts by their very make, is the slave whose task is to bring us to Christ, who will give us power to keep God’s commandments.

Another purpose of the law is stated in Rom. 3:21, as being to bear witness, in conjunction with the prophets, to a future more perfect revelation of God’s righteousness. Much of the law was symbolic and prophetic. The ideal it set forth could not always remain unfulfilled. The whole attitude of that system was one of forward-looking expectancy. There is much danger lest, in modern investigations as to the authorship, date, and genesis of the Old Testament revelation, its central characteristic should be lost sight of; namely, its pointing onwards to a more perfect revelation which should supersede it.

II. Paul’s view of universal sinfulness.

He states that twice in this passage [Rom. 3:20 - Rom. 3:24], and it underlies his view of the purpose of law. In Rom. 3:20 he asserts that ‘by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified,’ and in Rom. 3:23 he advances from that negative statement to the positive assertion that all have sinned. The impossibility of justification by the works of the law may be shown from two considerations: one, that, as a matter of fact, no flesh has ever done them all with absolute completeness and purity; and, second, that, even if they had ever been so done, they would not have availed to secure acquittal at a tribunal where motive counts for more than deed. The former is the main point with Paul.

In Rom. 3:23 the same fact of universal experience is contemplated as both positive sin and negative falling short of the ‘glory’ [which here seems to mean, as in Joh. 5:44, Joh. 12:43, approbation from God]. ‘There is no distinction,’ but all varieties of condition, character, attainment, are alike in this, that the fatal taint is upon them all. ‘We have, all of us, one human heart.’ We are alike in physical necessities, in primal instincts, and, most tragically of all, in the common experience of sinfulness.

Paul does not mean to bring all varieties of character down to one dead level, but he does mean to assert that none is free from the taint. A man need only be honest in self-examination to endorse the statement, so far as he himself is concerned. The Gospel would be better understood if the fact of universal sinfulness were more deeply felt. Its superiority to all schemes for making everybody happy by rearrangements of property, or increase of culture, would be seen through; and the only cure for human misery would be discerned to be what cures universal sinfulness.

III. So we have next Paul’s view of the remedy for man’s sin.

That is stated in general terms in Rom. 3:21 - Rom. 3:22. Into a world of sinful men comes streaming the light of a ‘righteousness of God.’ That expression is here used to mean a moral state of conformity with God’s will, imparted by God. The great, joyful message, which Paul felt himself sent to proclaim, is that the true way to reach the state of conformity which law requires, and which the unsophisticated, universal conscience acknowledges not to have been reached, is the way of faith.

The message is so familiar to us that we may easily fail to realise its essential greatness and wonderfulness when first proclaimed. That God should give righteousness, that it should be ‘of God,’ not only as coming from Him, but as, in some real way, being kindred with His own perfection; that it should be brought to men by Jesus Christ, as ancient legends told that a beneficent Titan brought from heaven, in a hollow cane, the gift of fire; and that it should become ours by the simple process of trusting in Jesus Christ, are truths which custom has largely robbed of their wonderfulness. Let us meditate more on them till they regain, by our own experience of their power, some of the celestial light which belongs to them.

Observe that in Rom. 3:22 the universality of the redemption which is in Christ is deduced from the universality of sin. The remedy must reach as far as the disease. If there is no difference in regard to sin, there can be none in regard to the sweep of redemption. The doleful universality of the covering spread over all nations, has corresponding to it the blessed universality of the light which is sent forth to flood them all. Sin's empire cannot stretch farther than Christ's kingdom.

IV. Paul's view of what makes the Gospel the remedy.

In Rom. 3:21 - Rom. 3:22 it was stated generally that Christ was the channel, and faith the condition, of righteousness. The personal object of faith was declared, but not the special thing in Christ which was to be trusted in. That is fully set forth in Rom. 3:24. We cannot attempt to discuss the great words in these verses, each of which would want a volume. But we may note that 'justified' here means to be accounted or declared righteous, as a judicial act; and that justification is traced in its ultimate source to God's 'grace,'-His own loving disposition-which bends to unworthy and lowly creatures, and is regarded as having for the medium of its bestowal the 'redemption' that is in Christ Jesus. That is the channel through which grace comes from God.

'Redemption' implies captivity, liberation, and a price paid. The metaphor of slaves set free by ransom is exchanged in Rom. 3:25 for a sacrificial reference. A propitiatory sacrifice averts punishment from the offerer. The death of the victim procures the life of the worshipper. So, a propitiatory or atoning sacrifice is offered by Christ's blood, or death. That sacrifice is the ransom-price through which our captivity is ended, and our liberty assured. As His redemption is the channel 'through' which God's grace comes to men, so faith is the condition 'through' which [Rom. 3:25] we make that grace ours.

Note, then, that Paul does not merely point to Jesus Christ as Saviour, but to His death as the saving power. We are to have faith in Jesus Christ [Rom. 3:22]. But that is not a complete statement. It must be faith in His propitiation, if it is to bring us into living contact with His redemption. A gospel which says much of Christ, but little of His Cross, or which dilates on the beauty of His life, but stammers when it begins to speak of the sacrifice in His death, is not Paul's Gospel, and it will have little power to deal with the universal sickness of sin.

The last verses of the passage set forth another purpose attained by Christ's sacrifice; namely, the vindication of God's righteousness in forbearing to inflict punishment on sins committed before the advent of Jesus. That Cross rayed out its power in all directions-to the heights of the heavens; to the depths of Hades [Col. 1:20]; to the ages that were to come, and to those that were past. The suspension of punishment through all generations, from the beginning till that day when the Cross was reared on Calvary, was due to that Cross having been present to the divine mind from the beginning. 'The judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted,' or left unpunished. There would be a blot on God's government, not because it was so severe, but because it was so forbearing, unless His justice was vindicated, and the fatal consequences of sin shown in the sacrifice of Christ. God could not have shown Himself just, in view either of age-long forbearance, or of now justifying the sinner, unless the Cross had shown that He was not immorally indulgent toward sin.

7) Romans 3:22

Romans

WORLD-WIDE SIN AND WORLD-WIDE REDEMPTION

NO DIFFERENCE

Rom. 3:22.

The things in which all men are alike are far more important than those in which they differ. The diversities are superficial, the identities are deep as life. Physical processes and wants are the same for everybody. All men, be they kings or beggars, civilised or savage, rich or poor, wise or foolish, cultured or illiterate, breathe the same breath, hunger and thirst, eat and drink, sleep, are smitten by the same diseases, and die at last the same death. We have all of us one human heart. Tears and grief, gladness and smiles, move us all. Hope, fear, love, play the same music upon all heart-strings. The same great law of duty over-arches every man, and the same heaven of God bends above him.

Religion has to do with the deep-seated identities and not with the superficial differences. And though there have been many aristocratic religions in the world, it is the great glory of Christianity that it goes straight to the central similarities, and brushes aside, as of altogether secondary importance, all the subordinate diversities, grappling with the great facts which are common to humanity, and with the large hopes which all may inherit.

Paul here, in his grand way, triumphs and rises above all these small differences between man and man, more pure or less pure, Jew or Gentile, wise or foolish, and avers that, in regard of the deepest and most important things, ‘there is no difference,’ and so his Gospel is a Gospel for the world, because it deals with all men on the same level. Now I wish to work out this great glory and characteristic of the Gospel system in a few remarks, and to point out to you the more important of these things in which all men, be they what or who they may, stand in one category and have identical experiences and interests.

I. First, there is no difference in the fact of sin.

Now let us understand that the Gospel does not assert that there is no difference in the degrees of sin. Christianity does not teach, howsoever some of its apostles may seem to have taught, or unconsciously lent themselves to representations which imply the view that there was no difference between a man who ‘did by nature the things contained in the law,’ as Paul says, and the man who set himself to violate law. There is no such monstrous teaching in the New Testament as that all blacks are the same shade, all sin of the same gravity, no such teaching as that a man that tries according to his light to do what is right stands on exactly the same level as the man who flouts all such obligations, and has driven the chariots of his lusts and passions through every law that may stand in his way.

But even whilst we have to insist upon that, that the teaching of my text is not of an absolute identity of criminality, but only an universal participation in criminality, do not let us forget that, if you take the two extremes, and suppose it possible that there were a best man in all the world, and a worst man in all the world, the difference between these two is not perhaps so great as at first sight it looks. For we have to remember that motives make actions, and that you cannot judge of these by considering those, that ‘as a man thinketh in his heart,’ and not as a man does with his hands, ‘so is he.’ We have to remember, also, that there may be lives, sedulously and immaculately respectable and pure, which are white rather with the unwholesome leprosy of disease than with the wholesome purity of health.

In Queen Elizabeth’s time, the way in which they cleaned the hall of a castle, the floor of which might be covered with remnants of food and all manner of abominations, was to strew another layer of rushes over the top of the filth, and then they thought themselves quite neat and respectable. And that is what a great many of you do, cover the filth well up with a sweet smelling layer of conventional proprieties, and think yourselves clean, and the pinks of perfection. God forbid that I should say one word that would seem to cast any kind of slur upon the effort that any man makes to do what he knows to be right, but this I proclaim, or rather my text proclaims for me, that, giving full weight and value to all that, and admitting the existence of variations in degree, the identity is deeper than the diversity; and there is ‘not a just man upon earth that doeth good and sinneth not.’

Oh, dear friends! it is not a question of degree, but of direction; not how far the ship has gone on her voyage, but how she heads. Good and evil are the same in essence, whatever be their intensity and whatever be their magnitude. Arsenic is arsenic, whether you have a ton of it or a grain; and a very small dose will be enough to poison. The Gospel starts with the assertion that there is no difference in the fact of sin. The assertion is abundantly confirmed. Does not conscience assent? We all admit ‘faults,’ do we not? We all acknowledge ‘imperfections.’ It is that little word ‘sin’ which seems to bring in another order of considerations, and to command the assent of conscience less readily. But sin is nothing except fault considered in reference to God’s law. Bring the notion of God into the life, and ‘faults’ and ‘slips’ and ‘weaknesses,’ and all the other names by which we try to smooth down the ugliness of the ugly thing, start up at once into their tone, magnitude, and importance, and stand avowed as *sins*.

Well now, if there be, therefore, this universal consciousness of imperfection, and if that consciousness of imperfection has only need to be brought into contact with God, as it were, to flame thus, let me remind you, too, that this fact of universal sinfulness puts us all in one class, no matter what may be the superficial difference. Shakespeare and the Australian savage, the biggest brain and the smallest, the loftiest and the lowest of us, the purest and the foulest of us, we all come into the same order. It is a question of classification. ‘The Scripture hath concluded all under sin,’ that is to say, has shut all men up as in a prison. You remember in the French Revolution, all manner of people were huddled indiscriminately into the same dungeon of the Paris prisons. You would find a princess and some daughter of shame from the gutters; a boor from the country and a landlord, a count, a marquis, a *savant*, a philosopher and an illiterate workman, all together in the dungeons. They kept up the distinctions of society and of class with a ghastly mockery, even to the very moment when the tumbrils came for them. And so here are we all, in some sense inclosed within the solemn cells of this great prison-house, and whether we be wise or foolish, we are prisoners, whether we have titles or not, we are prisoners. You may be a student, but you are a sinner: you may be a rich Manchester merchant, but you are a sinner; you may be a man of rank, but you are a sinner. Naaman went to Elisha and was very much offended because Elisha treated him as a leper who happened to be a nobleman. He wanted to be treated as a nobleman who happened to be a leper. And that is the way with a great many of us; we do not like to be driven into one class with all the crowd of evildoers. But, my friend, ‘there is no difference.’ ‘All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.’

II. Again, there is no difference in the fact of God’s love to us.

God does not love men because of what they are, therefore He does not cease to love them because of what they are. His love to the sons of men is not drawn out by their goodness, their morality, their obedience, but it wells up from the depths of His own heart, because ‘it is His nature and property,’ and if I may so say, He cannot help loving. You do not need to pump up that great affection by any machinery of obedience and of merits; it rises like the water in an Artesian well, of its own impulse, with ebullient power from the central heat, and spreads its great streams everywhere. And therefore, though our sin may awfully disturb our relations with God, and may hurt and harm us in a hundred ways, there is one thing it cannot do, it cannot stop Him from loving us. It cannot dam back His great love, which flows out for ever towards all His creatures, and laves them all in its gentle, strong flood, from which nothing can draw them away. ‘In Him we live, and move, and have our being,’ and to live in Him, whatever else it may mean-and it means a great deal more-is most certainly to live in His love. A man can as soon pass out of the atmosphere in which he breathes as he can pass out of the love of God. We can no more travel beyond that great over-arching firmament of everlasting love which spans all the universe than a star set in the blue heavens can transcend the liquid arch and get beyond its range. ‘There is no difference’ in the fact that all men, unthankful and evil as they are, are grasped and held in the love of God.

But there *is* a difference. Sin cannot dam God’s love back, but sin has a terrible power in reference to the love of God. Two things it can do. It can make us incapable of receiving the highest blessings of that love. There are many mercies which God pours ‘upon the unthankful and the evil.’ These are His least gifts; His highest and best cannot be given to the unthankful and the evil. They would if they could, but they cannot, because they cannot be received by them. You can shut the shutters against the light; you can close the vase against the stream. You cannot prevent its shining, you cannot prevent its flowing, but you can prevent yourself from receiving its loftiest and best blessings.

And another awful power that my sin has in reference to God’s love is, that it can modify the form which God’s love takes in its dealings with me. We may force Him to do ‘His work,’ ‘His strange work,’ as Isaiah calls it, and to punish when He would fain only succour and comfort and bless. Just as a fog in the sky does not touch the sun, but turns it to our eyes into a fiery ball, red and lurid, so the mist of my sin coming between me and God, may, to my apprehension and to my capacity of reception, solemnly make different that great love of His. But yet there is no difference in the fact of God’s love to us.

III. Thirdly, there is no difference in the purpose and power of Christ’s Cross for us all.

‘He died for all.’ The area over which the purpose and the power of Christ’s death extend is precisely conterminous with the area over which the power of sin extends. It cannot be-blessed be God!-that the raven Sin shall fly further than the dove with the olive branch in its mouth. It cannot be that the disease shall go wider than the cure. And so, dear friends, I have to come to you now with this message. No matter what a man is, how far he has gone, how sinful he has been, how long he has stayed away from the sweetness and grace of that great sacrifice on the Cross, that death was for him. The power of Christ's sacrifice makes possible the forgiveness of all the sins of all the world, past, present, and to come. The worth of that sacrifice, which was made by the willing surrender of the Incarnate Son of God to the death of the Cross, is sufficient for the ransom price of all the sins of all men.

Nor is it only the power of the Cross which is all embracing, but its purpose also. In the very hour of Christ's death, there stood, clear and distinct, before His divine omniscience, each man, woman, and child of the race. And for them all, grasping them all in the tenderness of His sympathy and in the clearness of His knowledge, in the design of His sufferings for them all, He died, so that every human being may lay his hand on the head of the sacrifice, and *know* 'his guilt was there,' and may say, with as triumphant and appropriating faith as Paul did, 'He loved *me*,' and in that hour of agony and love 'gave Himself for *me*.'

To go back to a metaphor already employed, the prisoners are gathered together in the prison, not that they may be slain, but 'God hath included them all,' shut them all up, 'that He might have mercy upon all.' And so, as it was in the days of Christ's life upon earth, so is it now, and so will it be for ever. All the crowd may come to Him, and whosoever comes 'is made whole of whatsoever disease he had.' There are no incurables nor outcasts. 'There is no difference.'

IV. Lastly, there is no difference in the way which we must take for salvation.

The only thing that unites men to Jesus Christ is faith. You must trust Him, you must trust the power of His sacrifice, you must trust the might of His living love. You must trust Him with a trust which is self-distrust. You must trust Him out and out. The people with whom Paul is fighting, in this chapter, were quite willing to admit that faith was the thing that made

Christians, but they wanted to tack on something besides. They wanted to tack on the rites of Judaism and obedience to the moral law. And ever since men have been going on in that erroneous rut. Sometimes it has been that people have sought to add a little of their own morality; sometimes to add ceremonies and sacraments. Sometimes it has been one thing and sometimes it has been another; but there are not two ways to the Cross of Christ, and to the salvation which He gives. There is only one road, and all sorts of men have to come by it. You cannot lean half upon Christ and half upon yourselves, like the timid cripple that is not quite sure of the support of the friendly arm. You cannot eke out the robe with which He will clothe you with a little bit of stuff of your own weaving. It is an insult to a host to offer to pay for entertainment. The Gospel feast that Christ provides is not a social meal to which every guest brings a dish. Our part is simple reception, we have to bring empty hands if we would receive the blessing.

We must put away superficial differences. The Gospel is for the world, therefore the act by which we receive it must be one which all men can perform, not one which only some can do. Not wisdom, nor righteousness, but faith joins us to Christ. And, therefore, people who fancy themselves wise or righteous are offended that 'special terms' are not made with them. They would prefer to have a private portion for themselves. It grates against the pride of the aristocratic class, whether it be aristocratic by culture-and that is the most aristocratic of all-or by position, or anything else-it grates against their pride to be told: 'You have to go in by that same door that the beggar is going in at'; and 'there is no difference.' Therefore, the very width of the doorway, that is wide enough for all the world, gets to be thought narrowness, and becomes a hindrance to our entering. As Naaman's servant put a common-sense question to him, so may I to you. 'If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it?' Ay! that you would! 'How much more when He says "Wash and be clean!"' There is only one way of getting dirt off, and that is by water. There is only one way of getting sin off, and that is by the blood of Jesus Christ. There is only one way of having that blood applied to your heart, and that is trusting Him. 'The common salvation' becomes ours when we exercise 'the common faith.' 'There is no difference' in our sins. Thank God! 'there is no difference' in the fact that He grasps us with His love. There is no difference in the fact that Jesus Christ has died for us all. Let there be no difference in our faith, or there will be a difference, deep as the difference between Heaven and Hell; the difference between them that believe and them that believe not, which will darken and widen into the difference between them that are saved and them that perish.

8) Romans 3:23-26

Romans

WORLD-WIDE SIN AND WORLD-WIDE REDEMPTION

Rom. 3:19 - Rom. 3:26.

Let us note in general terms the large truths which this passage contains. We may mass these under four heads:

I. Paul’s view of the purpose of the law.

He has been quoting a mosaic of Old Testament passages from the Psalms and Isaiah. He regards these as part of ‘the law,’ which term, therefore, in his view, here includes the whole previous revelation, considered as making known God’s will as to man’s conduct. Every word of God, whether promise, or doctrine, or specific command, has in it some element bearing on conduct. God reveals nothing only in order that we may know, but all that, knowing, we may do and be what is pleasing in His sight. All His words are law.

But Paul sets forth another view of its purpose here; namely, to drive home to men’s consciences the conviction of sin. That is not the only purpose, for God reveals duty primarily in order that men may do it, and His law is meant to be obeyed. But, failing obedience, this second purpose comes into action, and His law is a swift witness against sin. The more clearly we know our duty, the more poignant will be our consciousness of failure. The light which shines to show the path of right, shines to show our deviations from it. And that conviction of sin, which it was the very purpose of all the previous Revelation to produce, is a merciful gift; for, as the Apostle implies, it is the prerequisite to the faith which saves.

As a matter of fact, there was a far profounder and more inward conviction of sin among the Jews than in any heathen nation. Contrast the wailings of many a psalm with the tone in Greek or Roman literature. No doubt there is a law written on men's hearts which evokes a lower measure of the same consciousness of sin. There are prayers among the Assyrian and Babylonian tablets which might almost stand beside the Fifty-first Psalm; but, on the whole, the deep sense of sin was the product of the revealed law. The best use of our consciousness of what we ought to be, is when it rouses conscience to feel the discordance with it of what we are, and so drives us to Christ. Law, whether in the Old Testament, or as written in our hearts by their very make, is the slave whose task is to bring us to Christ, who will give us power to keep God's commandments.

Another purpose of the law is stated in Rom. 3:21, as being to bear witness, in conjunction with the prophets, to a future more perfect revelation of God's righteousness. Much of the law was symbolic and prophetic. The ideal it set forth could not always remain unfulfilled. The whole attitude of that system was one of forward-looking expectancy. There is much danger lest, in modern investigations as to the authorship, date, and genesis of the Old Testament revelation, its central characteristic should be lost sight of; namely, its pointing onwards to a more perfect revelation which should supersede it.

II. Paul's view of universal sinfulness.

He states that twice in this passage [Rom. 3:20 - Rom. 3:24], and it underlies his view of the purpose of law. In Rom. 3:20 he asserts that 'by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified,' and in Rom. 3:23 he advances from that negative statement to the positive assertion that all have sinned. The impossibility of justification by the works of the law may be shown from two considerations: one, that, as a matter of fact, no flesh has ever done them all with absolute completeness and purity; and, second, that, even if they had ever been so done, they would not have availed to secure acquittal at a tribunal where motive counts for more than deed. The former is the main point with Paul.

In Rom. 3:23 the same fact of universal experience is contemplated as both positive sin and negative falling short of the 'glory' [which here seems to mean, as in Joh. 5:44, Joh. 12:43, approbation from God]. ‘There is no distinction,’ but all varieties of condition, character, attainment, are alike in this, that the fatal taint is upon them all. ‘We have, all of us, one human heart.’ We are alike in physical necessities, in primal instincts, and, most tragically of all, in the common experience of sinfulness.

Paul does not mean to bring all varieties of character down to one dead level, but he does mean to assert that none is free from the taint. A man need only be honest in self-examination to endorse the statement, so far as he himself is concerned. The Gospel would be better understood if the fact of universal sinfulness were more deeply felt. Its superiority to all schemes for making everybody happy by rearrangements of property, or increase of culture, would be seen through; and the only cure for human misery would be discerned to be what cures universal sinfulness.

III. So we have next Paul’s view of the remedy for man’s sin.

That is stated in general terms in Rom. 3:21 - Rom. 3:22. Into a world of sinful men comes streaming the light of a ‘righteousness of God.’ That expression is here used to mean a moral state of conformity with God’s will, imparted by God. The great, joyful message, which Paul felt himself sent to proclaim, is that the true way to reach the state of conformity which law requires, and which the unsophisticated, universal conscience acknowledges not to have been reached, is the way of faith.

The message is so familiar to us that we may easily fail to realise its essential greatness and wonderfulness when first proclaimed. That God should give righteousness, that it should be ‘of God,’ not only as coming from Him, but as, in some real way, being kindred with His own perfection; that it should be brought to men by Jesus Christ, as ancient legends told that a beneficent Titan brought from heaven, in a hollow cane, the gift of fire; and that it should become ours by the simple process of trusting in Jesus Christ, are truths which custom has largely robbed of their wonderfulness. Let us meditate more on them till they regain, by our own experience of their power, some of the celestial light which belongs to them.

Observe that in Rom. 3:22 the universality of the redemption which is in Christ is deduced from the universality of sin. The remedy must reach as far as the disease. If there is no difference in regard to sin, there can be none in regard to the sweep of redemption. The doleful universality of the covering spread over all nations, has corresponding to it the blessed universality of the light which is sent forth to flood them all. Sin's empire cannot stretch farther than Christ's kingdom.

IV. Paul's view of what makes the Gospel the remedy.

In Rom. 3:21 - Rom. 3:22 it was stated generally that Christ was the channel, and faith the condition, of righteousness. The personal object of faith was declared, but not the special thing in Christ which was to be trusted in. That is fully set forth in Rom. 3:24. We cannot attempt to discuss the great words in these verses, each of which would want a volume. But we may note that 'justified' here means to be accounted or declared righteous, as a judicial act; and that justification is traced in its ultimate source to God's 'grace,'-His own loving disposition-which bends to unworthy and lowly creatures, and is regarded as having for the medium of its bestowal the 'redemption' that is in Christ Jesus. That is the channel through which grace comes from God.

'Redemption' implies captivity, liberation, and a price paid. The metaphor of slaves set free by ransom is exchanged in Rom. 3:25 for a sacrificial reference. A propitiatory sacrifice averts punishment from the offerer. The death of the victim procures the life of the worshipper. So, a propitiatory or atoning sacrifice is offered by Christ's blood, or death. That sacrifice is the ransom-price through which our captivity is ended, and our liberty assured. As His redemption is the channel 'through' which God's grace comes to men, so faith is the condition 'through' which [Rom. 3:25] we make that grace ours.

Note, then, that Paul does not merely point to Jesus Christ as Saviour, but to His death as the saving power. We are to have faith in Jesus Christ [Rom. 3:22]. But that is not a complete statement. It must be faith in His propitiation, if it is to bring us into living contact with His redemption. A gospel which says much of Christ, but little of His Cross, or which dilates on the beauty of His life, but stammers when it begins to speak of the sacrifice in His death, is not Paul's Gospel, and it will have little power to deal with the universal sickness of sin.

The last verses of the passage set forth another purpose attained by Christ's sacrifice; namely, the vindication of God's righteousness in forbearing to inflict punishment on sins committed before the advent of Jesus. That Cross rayed out its power in all directions-to the heights of the heavens; to the depths of Hades [Col. 1:20]; to the ages that were to come, and to those that were past. The suspension of punishment through all generations, from the beginning till that day when the Cross was reared on Calvary, was due to that Cross having been present to the divine mind from the beginning. 'The judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted,' or left unpunished. There would be a blot on God's government, not because it was so severe, but because it was so forbearing, unless His justice was vindicated, and the fatal consequences of sin shown in the sacrifice of Christ. God could not have shown Himself just, in view either of age-long forbearance, or of now justifying the sinner, unless the Cross had shown that He was not immorally indulgent toward sin.

9) Romans 5:1

Romans

LET US HAVE PEACE

Rom. 5:1.

In the rendering of the Revised Version, 'Let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,' the alteration is very slight, being that of one letter in one word, the substitution of a long 'o' for a short one. The majority of manuscripts of authority read 'let us have,' making the clause an exhortation and not a statement. I suppose the reason why, in some inferior MSS., the statement takes the place of the exhortation is because it was felt to be somewhat of a difficulty to understand the Apostle's course of thought. But I shall hope to show you that the true understanding of the context, as well as of the words I have taken for my text, requires the exhortation and not the affirmation.

One more remark of an introductory character: is it not very beautiful to see how the Apostle here identifies himself, in all humility, with the Christians whom he is addressing, and feels that he, Apostle as he is, has the same need for the same counsel and stimulus that the weakest of those to whom he is writing have? It would have been so easy for him to isolate himself, and say, ‘Now you have peace with God; see that you keep it.’ But he puts himself into the same class as those whom he is exhorting, and that is what all of us have to do who would give advice that will be worth anything or of any effect. He does not stand upon a little molehill of superiority, and look down upon the Roman Christians, and imply that they have needs that he has not, but he exhorts himself too, saying, ‘Let all of us who have obtained like precious faith, which is alike in an Apostle and in the humblest believer, have peace with God.’

Now a word, first, about the meaning of this somewhat singular exhortation.

There is a theory of man and his relation to God underlying it, which is very unfashionable at present, but which corresponds to the deepest things in human nature, and the deepest mysteries in human history, and that is, that something has come in to produce the totally unnatural and monstrous fact that between God and man there is not amity or harmony. Men, on their side, are alienated, because their wills are rebellious and their aims diverse from God’s purpose concerning them. And-although it is an awful thing to have to say, and one from which the sentimentalism of much modern Christianity weakly recoils-on God’s side, too, the relation has been disturbed, and ‘we are by nature the children of wrath, even as others’; not of a wrath which is unloving, not of a wrath which is impetuous and passionate, not of a wrath which seeks the hurt of its objects, but of a wrath which is the necessary antagonism and recoil of pure love from such creatures as we have made ourselves to be. To speak as if the New Testament taught that ‘reconciliation’ was lop-sided-which would be a contradiction in terms, for reconciliation needs two to make it-to talk as if the New Testament taught that reconciliation was only man’s putting away his false relation to God, is, as I humbly think, to be blind to its plainest teaching. So, there being this antagonism and separation between God and man, the Gospel comes to deal with it, and proclaims that Jesus Christ has abolished the enmity, and by His death on the Cross has become our peace;

and that we, by faith in that Christ, and grasping in faith His death, pass from out of the condition of hostility into the condition of reconciliation.

With this by way of basis, let us come back to my text. It sounds strange; ‘Therefore, being justified by faith, let up have peace.’ ‘Well,’ you will say, ‘but is not all that you have been saying just this, that to be justified by faith, to be declared righteous by reason of faith in Him who makes us righteous, is to have peace with God? Is not your exhortation an entirely superfluous one?’ No doubt that is what the old scribe thought who originated the reading which has crept into our Authorised Version. The two things do seem to be entirely parallel. To be justified by faith is a certain process, to have peace with God is the inseparable and simultaneous result of that process itself. But that is going rather too fast. ‘Being justified by faith let us have peace with God,’ really is just this-see that you abide where you are; keep what you have. The exhortation is not to attain peace, but retain it. ‘Hold fast that thou hast; let no man take thy crown.’ ‘Being justified by faith’ cling to your treasure and let nothing rob you of it-’let us have peace with God.’

Now a word, in the next place, as to the necessity and importance of this exhortation.

There underlies it, this solemn thought, which Christian people, and especially some types of Christian doctrine, do need to have hammered into them over and over again, that we hold the blessed life itself, and all its blessings, only on condition of our own cooperation in keeping them; and that just as physical life dies, unless by reception of food we nourish and continue it, so a man that is in this condition of being justified by faith, and having peace with God, needs, in order to the permanence of that condition, to give his utmost effort and diligence. It will all go if he do not. All the old state will come back again if we are slothful and negligent. We cannot keep the treasure unless we guard it. And just because we have it, we need to put all our mind, the earnestness of our will, and the concentration of our efforts, into the specific work of retaining it.

For, consider how manifold and strong are the forces which are always working against our continual possession of this justification by faith, and consequent peace with God. There are all the ordinary cares and duties and avocations and fortunes of our daily life, which, indeed, may be so hallowed in their motives and in their activities, as that they may be turned into helps instead of hindrances, but which require a great deal of diligence and effort in order that they should not work like grains of dust that come between the parts of some nicely-fitting engine, and so cause friction and disaster. There are all the daily tasks that tempt us to forget the things that we only know by faith, and to be absorbed in the things that we can touch and taste and handle. If a man is upon an inclined plane, unless he is straining his muscles to go upwards, gravitation will make short work of him, and bring him down. And unless Christian men grip hard and continually that sense of having fellowship and peace with God, as sure as they are living they will lose the clearness of that consciousness, and the calm that comes from it. For we cannot go into the world and do the work that is laid upon us all without there being possible hostility to the Christian life in everything that we meet. Thank God there is possible help, too, and whether our daily calling is an enemy or a friend to our religion depends upon the earnestness and continuousness of our own efforts. But there is a worse force than these external distractions working to draw us away, one that we carry within, in our own vacillating wills and wayward hearts and treacherous affections and passions that usually lie dormant, but wake up sometimes at the most inopportune periods. Unless we keep a very tight hand upon ourselves, certainly these will rob us of this consciousness of being justified by faith which brings with it peace with God that passes understanding.

In the Isle of Wight massive cliffs rise hundreds of feet above the sea, and seem as if they were as solid as the framework of the earth itself. But they rest upon a sharply inclined plane of clay, and the moisture trickles through the rifts in the majestic cliffs above, and gets down to that slippery substance and makes it like the greased ways down which they launch a ship; and away goes the cliff one day, with its hundreds of feet of buttresses that have fronted the tempest for centuries, and it lies toppled in hideous ruin on the beach below. We have all a layer of ‘blue slipper’ in ourselves, and unless we take care that no storm-water finds its way down through the chinks in the rocks above they will slide into awful ruin. ‘Being justified, let us have peace with God,’ and remember that the exhortation is enforced not only by a consideration of the many strong forces which tend to deprive us of this peace, but also by a consideration of the hideous disaster that comes upon a man’s whole nature if he loses peace with God. For there is no peace with ourselves, and there is no peace with man, and there is no peace in face of the warfare of life and the calamities that are certainly before us all, unless, in the deepest sanctuary of our being, there is the peace of God because in our consciences there is peace with God. If I desire to be at rest-and there is no blessedness but rest-if I desire to know the sovereign joy of tranquillity, undisturbed by my own stormy passions or by any human enmity, and to have even the ‘beasts of the field at peace with’ me, and all things my helpers and allies, there is but one way to realise the desire, and that is the retention of peace with God that comes with being justified by faith.

Lastly, a word or two as to the ways by which this exhortation can be carried into effect.

I have tried to explain how the peace of which my text speaks comes originally through Christ’s work laid hold of by my faith, and now I would say only three things.

Retain the peace by the exercise of that same faith which at first brought it. Next, retain it by union with that same Lord from whom you at first received it. Very significantly, in the immediate context, we have the Apostle drawing a broad distinction between the benefits which we have received from Christ’s death, and those which we shall receive through His life. And that is the best commentary on the words of my text. ‘If when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.’ So let our faith grasp firmly the great twin facts of the Christ who died that He might abolish the enmity, and bring us peace; and of the Christ who lives in order that He may pour into our hearts more and more of His own life, and so make us more and more in His own image. And the last word that I would say, in addition to these two plain, practical precepts is, let your conduct be such as will not disturb your peace with God. For if a man lets his own will rise up in rebellion against God’s, whether that divine will command duty or impose suffering, away goes all his peace. There is no possibility of the tranquil sense of union and communion with my Father in heaven lasting when I am in rebellion against Him. The smallest sin destroys, for the time being, our sense of forgiveness and our peace with God. The blue surface of the lake, mirroring in its unmoved tranquillity the sky and the bright sun, or the solemn stars, loses all that reflected heaven in its heart when a cat's paw of wind ruffles its surface. If we would keep our hearts as mirrors, in their peace, of the peace in the heavens that shine down on them, we must fence them from the winds of evil passions and rebellious wills. 'Oh! that thou wouldest hearken unto Me, then had thy peace been like a river.'

10)Romans 5:2

Romans

THE SOURCES OF HOPE

ACCESS INTO GRACE

Rom. 5:2.

I may be allowed to begin with a word or two of explanation of the terms of this passage. Note then, especially, that *also* which sends us back to the previous clause, and tells us that our text adds something to what was spoken of there. What was spoken of there? 'The peace of God' which comes to a man by Jesus Christ through faith, the removal of enmity, and the declaration of righteousness. But that peace with God, which is the beginning of everything in the Christian view, is only the beginning, and there is much to follow. While, then, there is a progress clearly marked in the words of our text, and 'access into this grace wherein we stand' is something more than, and after, the 'peace with God,' mark next the similarity of the text and the preceding verse. The two great truths in the latter, Christ's mediation or intervention, and our faith as the condition by which we receive the blessings which are brought to us in and through Him, are both repeated, with no unmeaning tautology, but with profound significance in our text-'By whom also we have access'-as well as-'the peace of God'-'access *by faith* into this grace.' So then, for the initial blessing, and for all the subsequent blessings of the Christian life, the way is the same. The medium and channel is one, and the act by which we avail ourselves of the blessings coming through that one medium is the same. Now the language of my text, with its talking about access, faith, and grace, sounds to a great many of us, I am afraid, very hard and remote and technical. And there are not wanting people who tell us that all that terminology in the New Testament is like a dying brand in the fire, where the little kernel of glowing heat is getting covered thicker and thicker with grey ashes. Yes; but if you blow the ashes off, the fire is there all the same. Let us try if we can blow the ashes off.

This text seems to me in its archaic phraseology, only to need to be pondered in order to flash up into wonderful beauty. It carries in it a magnificent ideal of the Christian life, in three things: the Christian place, ‘access into grace’; the Christian attitude, ‘wherein we stand’; and the Christian means of realising that ideal, ‘through Christ’ and ‘by faith.’ Now let us look at these three points.

I. The Christian Place.

There is clearly a metaphor here, both in the word ‘access’ and in that other one ‘stand.’ ‘The grace’ is supposed as some ample space into which a man is led, and where he can continue, stand, and expatiate. Or, we may say, it is regarded as a palace or treasure-house into which we can enter. Now, if we take that great New Testament word ‘grace,’ and ponder its meanings, we find that they run something in this fashion. The central thought, grand and marvellous, which is enshrined in it, and which often is buried for careless ears, is that of the active love of God poured out upon inferiors who deserve something very different. Then there follows a second meaning, which covers a great part of the ground of the use of the phrase in the New Testament, and that is the communication of that love to men, the specific and individualised gifts which come out of that great reservoir of patient, pardoning, condescending, and bestowing love. Then there may be taken into view a meaning which is less prominent in Scripture but not absent, namely, the resulting beauty of character. A gracious soul ought to be, and is, a graceful soul; a supreme loveliness is imparted to human nature by the communication to it of the gifts which are the results of the undeserved, free, and infinite love of God.

Now if we take all these three thoughts as blended together in the grand metaphor of the Apostle, of the ample space into which the Christian man passes, we get such lessons as this. A Christian life may, and therefore should, be suffused with a continual consciousness of the love of God. That would change everything in it. Here is some great sweep of rolling country, perhaps a Highland moor: the little tarns on it are grey and cold, the vegetation is gloomy and dark, dreariness is over all the scene, because there is a great pall of cloud drawn beneath the blue. But the sun pierces with his lances through the grey, and crumples up the mists, and sends them flying beneath the horizon. Then what a change in the landscape! All the tarns that looked black and wicked are now infantile in their innocent blue and sunny gladness, and every dimple in the heights shows, and all the heather burns with the sunshine that falls upon it. So my lonely doleful life, if that light from God, the beam of His love, shines down upon it, rises into nobility, and flashes into beauty, and is calm and fair and great, as nothing else can make it. You may dwell in love by dwelling in God, and then your lives will be fair. You have access into the grace; see that you go there. They tell us that nightingales sing by the wayside by preference, and we may have in our lives, singing a quiet tune, the continual thought of the love of God, even whilst life’s highway is dusty and rough, and our feet are often weary in treading it. A Christian life may be, and therefore should be, suffused with the sense of the abiding love of God.

Take the other meaning of the word, the secondary and derived meaning, the communication of that love to us, and that leads us to say that a Christian life may, and therefore should, be enriched with continual gifts from God’s fullness. I said that the Apostle was using a metaphor here, regarding the grace as being an ample space into which a man was admitted, or we may say that he is thinking of it as a great treasure-house. We have the right of entrance there, where on every side, as it were, lie ingots of uncoined gold, and masses of treasure, and we may have just as much or as little as we choose. It is entirely in our own determination how much of the wealth of God we shall possess. We have access to the treasure-house; and this permit is put into our hands: ‘Be it unto thee even as thou wilt.’ The size of the sack that the man brings, in the old story, determined the amount of wealth that he carried away. Some of you bring very tiny baskets and expect little and desire little; you get no more than you desired and expected.

That wealth, the fullness of God, takes the shape of, as well as is determined in its measure by the magnitude of, the vessel into which it is put. It is multiform, and we get whatever we desire, and whatever either our characters or our circumstances require. The one gift assumes all forms, just as water poured into a vase takes the shape of the vase into which it is poured. The same gift unfolds itself in an infinite variety of manners, according to the needs of the man to whom it is given; just as the writer's pen, the carpenter's hammer, the farmer's ploughshare, are all made out of the same metal. So God's grace comes to you in a different shape from that in which it comes to me, according to our different callings and needs, as fixed by our circumstances, our duties, our sorrows, our temptations.

So, brethren, how shameful it is that, having the possibility of so much, we should have the actuality of so little. There is an old story about one of our generals in India long ago, who, when he came home, was accused of rapacity because he had brought away so much treasure from the Rajahs whom he had conquered, and his answer to the charge was, 'I was surprised at my own moderation.' Ah! there are a great many Christian people who ought to be ashamed of their moderation. They have gone into the treasure-house; stacks of jewels, jars of gold on all sides of them-and they have been content to come away with some one poor little coin, when they might have been 'rich beyond the dreams of avarice.' Brethren, you have 'access' to the fullness of God. Whose fault is it if you are empty?

Then, further, I said there was another meaning in these great words. The love which may suffuse our lives, the gifts, the consequence of that love, which may enrich our lives, should, and in the measure in which they are received will, adorn and make beautiful our lives. For 'grace' means loveliness as well as goodness, and the God who is the fountain of it all is the fountain of 'whatsoever things are fair,' as well as of whatsoever things are good. That suggests two considerations on which I have no time to dwell. One is that the highest beauty is goodness, and unless the art of a nation learns that, its art will become filthy and a minister of sin. They talk about 'Art for Art's sake.' Would that all these poets and painters who are trying to find beauty in corruption-and there is a phosphorescent glimmer in rotting wood, and a prismatic colouring on the scum of a stagnant pond-would that all those men who are seeking to find beauty apart from goodness, and so are turning a divine instinct into a servant of evil, would learn that the true gracefulness comes from the grace which is the fullness of God given unto men.

But there is another lesson, and that is that Christian people who say that they have their lives irradiated by the love of God, and who profess to be receiving gifts from His full hand, are bound to take care that their goodness is not 'harsh and crabbed,' as not only 'dull fools suppose' it to be, but as it sometimes is, but is musical and fair. You are bound to make your goodness attractive, and to show that the things that are 'of good report' are likewise the 'things that are lovely.'

II. And so, now, turn to the second point here, viz. the Christian attitude.

'The grace wherein ye *stand*'; that word is very emphatic here, and does not merely mean 'continue,' but it suggests what I have put into that phrase, the Christian attitude.

Two things are implied. One is that a life thus suffused by the love, and enriched by the gifts, and adorned by the loveliness that come from God, will be stable and steadfast. Resistance and stability are implied in the words. One very important item in determining a man's power of resistance, and of standing firm against whatever assaults may be hurled against him, is the sort of footing that he has. If you stand on slippery mud, or on the ice of a glacier, you will find it hard to stand firm; but if you plant your foot on the grace of God, then you will be able to 'withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand.' And how does a man plant his foot on the grace of God? simply by trusting in God, and not in himself. So that the secret of all steadfastness of life, and of all successful resistance to the whirling onrush of temptations and of difficulties, is to set your foot upon that rock, and then your 'goings' will be established.

Jesus Christ brings to us, in the gift of life in Him, stability which will check the vacillations of our own hearts. We go up and down, we yield when pressure is brought to bear against us, we are carried off our feet often by the sudden swirl of the stream, and the fitful blast of the wind. But His grace comes in, and will make us able to stand against all assaults. Our poor natures, necessarily changeable, and sinfully vacillating and weak, will be uniform, in the measure in which the grace of God comes into our hearts. Just as in these so-called petrifying wells, they take a bit of cloth, a bird’s nest, a billet of wood, and plunge it into the water, and the mineral held in solution there infiltrates into the substance of the thing plunged in, and makes it firm and inflexible: so let us plunge our poor, changeful, vacillating resolutions, our wayward, wandering hearts, our passions, so easily excited by temptation, into that great fountain, and there will filter into our flexibility what will make it firm, and into our changefulness what will give in us some faint copy of the divine immutability, and we shall stand fast in the Lord and in the power of His might.

Further, in regard to this attitude, which is the result of the possession of grace, we may say that it indicates not only stability and steadfastness, but erectness, as in opposition to crouching or bowing. A man’s independence is guaranteed by his dependence upon, and his possession of, that communicated grace of God. And so you have the fact that the phase of the Christian teaching which has laid most stress on the decrees and sovereign will of God, on divine grace in fact, and too little upon the human side-the phase which is roughly described as Calvinism-has underlain the liberties of Europe, and has stiffened men into the rejection of all priestly and civic domination. ‘Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty,’ and if a man has in his heart the grace of God, then he stands erect as a man. ‘Ye are bought with a price; be ye not the servants of men.’ The Christian democracy, the Christian rejection of all sacerdotal and other domination, flows from the access of each individual Christian to the fountain of all wisdom, the only source of law and command, the inspirer of all strength, the giver of all grace. By faith ye stand. ‘Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made you free.’

III. Lastly, and only a word; we have here the Christian way of entrance into grace.

I have already remarked on the emphasis with which, both in my text and in the preceding clause, there are laid down the two conditions of possessing this grace, or the peace which precedes it: ‘By Christ-through faith.’ Notice, too, that Jesus Christ gives us ‘access.’ Now that expression is but an imperfect rendering of the original. If it were not for its trivial associations, one might read instead of ‘access,’ introduction, ‘by whom we have introduction into this grace wherein we stand.’ The thought is that Jesus Christ secures us entry into this ample space, this treasure-house, as some court officer might take by the hand a poor rustic, standing on the threshold of the palace, and lead him through all the glittering series of unfamiliar splendour, and present him at last in the central ring around the king. The reality that underlies the metaphor is plain. We sinners can never pass into that central glory, nor ever possess those gifts of grace, unless the barrier that stands between us and God, between us and His highest gifts of love, is swept away.

I recall an old legend where two knights are represented as seeking to enter a palace, where there is a mysterious fire burning in the middle of the portal. One of them tries to pass through, and recoils scorched; but when the other essays an entrance the fierce fire sinks, and the path is cleared. Jesus Christ has died, and I say it with all reverence, as His blood touches the fire it flickers down and the way is opened ‘into the holiest of all, whither the Forerunner is for us entered.’ He both brings the grace and makes it possible that we should go in where the grace is.

But Jesus Christ’s work is nothing to you unless your personal faith comes in, and so that is pointed to in the second of the clauses here: ‘*By faith* we have access.’ That is no arbitrary appointment. It lies in the very nature of the gift and of the recipient. How can God give access into that grace to a man who shrinks from being near Him; who does not want ‘access,’ and who could not use the grace if he had it? How can God bestow inward and spiritual gifts upon any man who closes his heart against them, and will not have them? My faith is the condition; Christ is the Giver. If I ally myself to Him by my faith, He gives to me. If I do not, with all the will to do it, He cannot bestow His best gifts any more than a man who stretches out his hand to another sinking in the flood can lift him out, and set him on the safe shore, if the drowning man’s hand is not stretched out to grasp the rescuer’s outstretched hand.

Brethren, God is infinitely willing to give the choicest gifts of His love to us all, to gladden, to enrich, to adorn, to make stable and erect. But He cannot give them unless you will trust Him. ‘It pleased the Father that in Him should all fullness dwell.’ That alabaster box is brought to earth. It was broken on the Cross that ‘the house’ might be ‘filled with the odour of the ointment.’ Our faith is the only condition; it is only the condition, but it is the indispensable condition, of our being anointed with that fragrant anointing. He, and He only, can give us the fullness of God.

11)Romans 5:3-4

Romans

THE SOURCES OF HOPE

Rom. 5:2 - Rom. 5:4.

We have seen in a previous sermon that the Apostle in the foregoing context is sketching a grand outline of the ideal Christian life, as all rooted in ‘being justified by faith,’ and flowering into ‘peace with God,’ ‘access into grace,’ and a firm stand against all antagonists and would-be masters. In our text he advances to complete the outline by sketching the true Christian attitude towards the future. I have ventured to take so pregnant and large a text, because there is a very striking and close connection throughout the verses, which is lost unless we take them together. Note, then, ‘we rejoice in hope,’ ‘we glory in tribulation.’ Now, it is one word in the original which is diversely rendered in these two clauses by ‘rejoice’ and ‘glory.’ The latter is a better rendering than the former, because the original expression designates not only the emotion of joy, but the expression of it, especially in words. So it is frequently rendered in the New Testament by the word ‘boast,’ which, of course, has unpleasant associations, which scarcely fit it for use here. So then you see Paul regards it as possible for, and more than possibly characteristic of, a Christian, that the very same emotion should he excited by that great bright future hope, and by the blackness of present sorrow. That is strong meat; and so he goes on to explain how he thinks it can and must be so, and points out that trouble, through a series of results, arrives at last at this, that if it is rightly borne, it flashes up into greater brightness the hope which has grasped the glory of God. So then we have here, not only a wonderful designation of the object around which Christian hope twines its tendrils, but of the double source from which that hope may come, and of the one emotion with which Christian people should front the darkness of the present and the brightness of the future. Ah! how different our lives would be if that ideal of a steadfast hope and an untroubled joy were realised by each of us. It may be. It should be. So I ask you to look at these three points which I have suggested.

I. That wonderful designation of the one object of Christian hope which should fill, with an uncoruscating and unflickering light, all that dark future.

‘We rejoice in hope of the glory of God.’ Now, I suppose I need not remind you that that phrase ‘the glory of God’ is, in the Old Testament, used especially to mean the light that dwelt between the cherubim above the mercy-seat; the symbol of the divine perfections and the token of the Divine Presence. The reality of which it was a symbol is the total splendour, so to speak, of that divine nature, as it rays itself out into all the universe. And, says Paul, the true hope of the Christian man is nothing less than that of that glory he shall be, in some true sense, and in an eternally growing degree, the real possessor. It is a tremendous claim, and one which leads us into deep places that I dare not venture into now, as to the resemblance between the human person and the Divine Person, notwithstanding all the differences which of course exist, and which only a presumptuous form of religion has ventured to treat as transitory or insignificant. Let me use a technical word, and say that it is no pantheistic absorption in an impersonal Light, no Nirvana of union with a vague whole, which the Apostle holds out here, but it is the closest possible union, personality being saved and individual consciousness being intensified. It is the clothing of humanity with so much of that glory as can be imparted to a finite creature. That means perfect knowledge, perfect purity, perfect love, and that means the dropping away of all weaknesses and the access of strange new powers, and that means the end of the schism between ‘will’ and ‘ought,’ and of the other schism between ‘will’ and ‘can.’ It means what this Apostle says: ‘Whom He justified them He also glorified,’ and what He says again, ‘We all, beholding as in a glass’-or rather, perhaps, mirroring as a glass does-’the glory, are changed into the same image.’

The very heart of Christianity is that the Divine Light of which that Shekinah was but a poor and transitory symbol has ‘tabernacled’ amongst men in the Christ, and has from Him been communicated, and is being communicated in such measure as earthly limitations and conditions permit, and that these do point on assuredly to perfect impartation hereafter, when ‘we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ The Three could walk in the furnace of fire, because there was One with them, ‘like unto the Son of God.’ ‘Who among us shall dwell with the everlasting fire,’ the fire of that divine perfection? They who have had introduction by Christ into the grace, and who will be led by Him into the glory.

Now, brethren, it seems to me to be of great importance that this, the loftiest of conceptions of that future life, should be the main aspect under which we think of it. It is well to speak of rest from toil; it is well to speak of all the negations of present unfavourable, afflictive conditions which that future presents to us. And perhaps there is none of the aspects of it which appeals to deeper feelings in ourselves, than those which say ‘there shall be no night there,’ ‘there shall be no tears there, neither sorrow nor sighing’; ‘there shall be no toil there.’ But we must rise above all that, for our heaven is to live in God, and to be possessors of His glory. Do not let us dwell upon the symbols instead of the realities. Do not let us dwell only on the oppositions and contradictions to earth. Let us rather rise high above symbols, high above negations, to the positive truth, and not contented with saying ‘We shall be full of blessedness; we shall be full of purity; we shall be full of knowledge,’ let us rather think of that which embraces them all-we shall be full of God.

So much, then, for the one object of Christian hope. We have here-

II. The double source of that hope.

Observe that the first clause of my text comes as the last term in a sequence. It began with ‘being justified by faith.’ The second round of the ladder was, ‘we have peace with God.’ The third, ‘we have access into this grace.’ The fourth, ‘we stand,’ and then comes, ‘we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.’ That is to say, to put it into general words, and, of course, presupposing the revelation in Jesus Christ as the basis of all, without which there is no assured hope of a future beyond the grave, then the facts of a Christian man’s life are for him the best brighteners of the hope beyond. Of course, that is so. ‘Justified by faith’-’peace with God’-’access into grace’; what, in the name of common-sense, can death do with these things? How can its blunted sword cut the bond that unites a soul that has had such experiences as these with the source of them all? Nothing can be more grotesque, nothing more incongruous, than to think that that subordinate and accidental fact, whose region is the physical, has anything whatever to do with this higher region of consciousness.

And, further than that, it is absolutely unthinkable to a man in the possession of these spiritual gifts, that they should ever come to a close; and the fact that in the precise degree in which we realise as our very own possession, here and now, these Christian emotions and blessings, we instinctively rise to the belief that they are ‘not for an age, but for all time,’ and not for all time, but for eternity, is itself, if not a proof, yet a very strong presumption, if you believe in God, that a man who thus ‘feels he was not made to die’ because he has grasped the Eternal, is right in so feeling. If, too, we look at the experiences themselves, they all have the stamp of incompleteness, and suggest completeness by their own incompleteness. The new moon with its ragged edge not more surely prophesies its completed silver round, than do the experiences of the Christian life here, in their greatness and in their smallness, declare that there come a time and an order of things in which what was thwarted tendency shall be accomplished result. The tender green spikelet, pushing up through the brown clods, does not more surely prophesy the waving yellow ear, nor the broad highway on which a man comes in the wilderness more surely declare that there is a village at the end of it, than do the facts of the Christian life, here and now, attest the validity of the hope of the glory of God.

And so, brethren, if you wish to brighten that great light that fills the future, see to it that your present Christianity is fuller of ‘peace with God,’ ‘access into grace,’ and the firm, erect standing which flows from these. When the springs in the mountains dry up, the river in the valley shrinks; and when they are full, it glides along level with the top of its banks. So when our Christian life in the present is richest, our Christian hope of the future will be the brighter. Look into yourselves. Is there anything there that witnesses to that great future; anything there that is obviously incipient, and destined to greater power; anything there which is like a tropical plant up here in 45 degrees of north latitude, managing to grow, but with dwarfed leaves and scanty flowers and half shrivelled and sourish fruit, and that in the cold dreams of the warm native land? Reflecting telescopes show the stars in a mirror, and the observer looks down to see the heavens. Look into yourselves, and see whether, on the polished plate within, there are any images of the stars that move around the Throne of God.

But let us turn for a moment to the second source to which the Apostle traces the Christian hope here. I must not be tempted to more than just a word of explanation, but perhaps you will tolerate that. Paul says that trouble works patience, that is to say, not only passive endurance, but brave persistence in a course, in spite of antagonisms. That is what trouble does to a man when it is rightly borne. Of course the Apostle is speaking here of its ideal operation, and not of the reality which alas! often is seen when our tribulations lash us into impatience, or paralyse our efforts. Tribulation worketh patience, ‘and patience *experience*.’ That is a difficult word to put into English. There underlies it the frequent thought which is familiar in Scripture, of trouble of all kinds as testing a man, whether as the refiner’s fire or the winnower’s fan. It tests a man, and if he bears the trouble with patient persistence, then he has passed the test and is approved. Patient perseverance thus works approval, or proof of the man’s Christianity, and, still more, proof of the reality and power of the Christ whom his Christianity grasps. And so from out of that approval or proof which comes, through perseverance, from tribulation, there rises, of course, in that heart that has been tested and has stood, a calm hope that the future will be as the past, and that, having fought through six troubles, by God’s help the seventh will be vanquished also, till at last troubles will end, and heaven be won.

Brethren, there is the true point of view from which to look, not only at tribulations, but at all the trials, for they too bring trials, that lie in duty and in enjoyment, and in earthly things. They are meant to work in us a conviction, by our experience of having been able to meet them aright, of the reality of our grasp of God, and of the reality and power of the God whom we grasp. If we took that point of view in regard to all the changes of this changeful life, we should not so often be bewildered and upset by the darkest of our sorrows. The shining lancets and cruel cutting instruments that the surgeon lays out on his table before he begins the operation are very dreadful. But the way to think of them is that they are there in order to remove from a man what it does him harm to keep, and what, if it is not taken away, will kill him. So life, with its troubles, great and small, is all meant for this, to make us surer of, and bring us closer to, our God, and to brace and strengthen us in our own personal character. And if it does that, then blessed be everything that produces these results, and leads us thereby to glorying in the troubles by which shines out on us a brighter hope.

So there are the two sources, you see: the one is the blessedness of the Christian life, the other the sorrows of the outward life, and both may converge upon the brightening of our Christian hope. Our rainbow is the child of the marriage of the sun and the rain. The Christian hope comes from being 'justified by faith, having peace with God . . . and access into grace,' and it comes from tribulation, which 'worketh patience,' and patience which 'worketh approval.' The one spark is struck from the hard flint by the cold steel, and the other is kindled by the sun itself, but they are both fire.

And so, lastly, we have here-

III. The one emotion with which the Christian should front all the facts, inward and outward, of his earthly life.

'We glory in the hope,' 'we glory in tribulation,' I need not dwell upon the lesson which is taught us here by the fact that the Apostle puts as one in a series of Christian characteristics this of a steadfast and all-embracing joy. I do not believe that we Christian people half enough realise how imperative a Christian duty, as well as how great a Christian privilege, it is to be glad always. You have no right to be anxious; you are wrong to be hypochondriac and depressed, and weary and melancholy. True; there are a great many occasions in our Christian life which minister sadness. True; the Christian joy looks very gloomy to a worldly eye. But there are far more occasions which, if we were right, would make joy instinctive, and which, whether we are right or not, make it obligatory upon us. I need not speak of how, if that hope were brighter than it commonly is with us, and if it were more constantly present to our minds and hearts, we should sing with gladness. I need not dwell upon that great and wonderful paradox by which the co-existence of sorrow and of joy is possible. The sorrows are on the surface; beneath there may be rest. All the winds of heaven may rave across the breast of ocean, and fret it into clouds of spume against a storm-swept sky. But deep down there is stillness, and yet not stagnation, because there is the great motion that brings life and freshness; and so, though there will be wind-vexed surfaces on our too-often agitated spirits, there ought to be deeper than these the calm setting of the whole ocean of our nature towards God Himself. It is possible, as this Apostle has it, to be 'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.' It is possible, as his brother Apostle has it, to 'rejoice greatly, though now for a season we are in sorrow through manifold temptations.' Look back upon your lives from the point of view that your tribulation is an instrument to produce hope, and you will be able to thank God for all the way by which He has led you.

Now, brethren, the plain lesson of all this is just that we have here, in these texts, a linked chain, one end of which is wrapped around our sinful hearts, and the other is fastened to the Throne of God. You cannot drop any of the links, and you must begin at the beginning, if you are to be carried on to the end. If we are to have a joy immovable, we must have a 'steadfast hope.' If we are to have a 'steadfast hope,' we must have a present 'grace.' If we are to have a present 'grace,' and 'access' to the fullness of God, we must have 'peace with God.' If we are to have 'peace with God,' we must have the condemnation and the guilt taken away. If we are to have the condemnation and the guilt taken away, Jesus Christ must take them. If Jesus Christ is to take them away, we must have faith in Him. Then you can work it backward, and begin at your own end, and say, 'If I have faith in Jesus Christ, then every link of the chain in due succession will pass through my hand, and I shall have justifying, peace, access, the grace, erectness, hope, and exultation, and at last He will lead me by the hand into the glory for which I dare to hope, the glory which the Father gave to Him before the foundation of the world, and which He will give to me when the world has passed away in fervent heat.'

12)Romans 5:5

Job - **Romans**

TWO KINDS OF HOPE
A THREEFOLD CORD

Rom. 5:5.

We have seen in former sermons that, in the previous context, the Apostle traces Christian hope to two sources: one, the series of experiences which follow 'being justified by faith' and the other, those which follow on trouble rightly borne. Those two golden chains together hold up the precious jewel of hope. But a chain that is to bear a weight must have a staple, or it will fall to the ground. And so Paul here turns to yet another thought, and, going behind both our inward experiences and our outward discipline, falls back on that which precedes all. After all is said and done, the love of God, eternal, self-originated, the source of all Christian experiences because of the work of Christ which originates them all, is the root fact of the universe, and the guarantee that our highest anticipations and desires are not unsubstantial visions, but morning dreams, which are proverbially sure to be fulfilled. God is love; therefore the man who trusts Him shall not be put to shame.

But you will notice that here the Apostle not only adduces the love of God as the staple, so to speak, from which these golden chains hang, but that he traces the heart's being suffused with that love to its source, and as, of course, is always the case in the order of analysis, that which was last in time comes first in statement. We begin at the surface, and go down and down and down from effect to cause, and yet again to the cause of that cause which is itself effect. We strip off, as it were, layer after layer, until we get to the living centre-hope comes from the love, the love comes from the Spirit in the heart. And so to get at the order of time and of manifestation, we must reverse the order of analysis in my text, and begin where it ends. So we have here three things-the Spirit given, the love shed abroad by that Spirit, and the hope established by that love. Now just look at them for a moment.

I. The Spirit given.

Now, the first point to notice here is that the Revised Version presents the meaning of our text more accurately than the Authorised Version, because, instead of reading 'is given,' it correctly reads 'was given.' And any of you that can consult the original will see that the form of the language implies that the Apostle is thinking, not so much of a continuous bestowment, as of a definite moment when this great gift was bestowed upon the man to whom he is speaking.

So the first question is, when was that Spirit given to these Roman Christians? The Christian Church has been split in two by its answers to that question. One influential part, which has taken a new lease of life amongst us to-day, says 'in baptism,' and the other says 'at the moment of faith.' I am not going to be tempted into controversial paths now, for my purpose is a very different one, but I cannot help just a word about the former of these two answers. 'Given in baptism,' say our friends, and I venture to think that they thereby degrade Christianity into a system of magic, bringing together two entirely disparate things, an external physical act and a spiritual change. I do not say anything about the disastrous effects that have followed from such a conception of the medium by which this greatest of all Christian gifts is effected upon men. Since the Spirit who is given is life, the result of the gift of that Spirit is a new life, and we all know what disastrous and debasing consequences have followed from that dogma of regeneration by baptism. No doubt it is perfectly true that normally, in the early Church, the Divine Spirit was given at baptism; but for one thing, that general rule had exceptions, as in the case of Cornelius, and, for another thing, though it was given *at* baptism, it was not given *in* baptism, but it was given through faith, of which in those days baptism was the sequel and the sign.

But I pass altogether from this, and fall back on the great words which, to me at least, if there were no other, would determine the whole answer to this question as to when the Spirit was given: ‘This spake He of the Holy Ghost, which they that *believe* on Him should receive’; and I would ask the modern upholders of the other theory the indignant question which the Apostle Paul fired off out of his heavy artillery at their ancient analogues, the circumcisers in the Galatian Church: ‘This only would I know of you: Received ye the Holy Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?’

The answer which the evangelical Christian gives to this ancient question suggested by my text, ‘When was that Divine Spirit bestowed?’ is congruous with the spirituality of the Christian faith, and is eminently reasonable. For the condition required is the opening of the whole nature in willing welcome to the entrance of the Divine Spirit, and as surely as, wherever there is an indentation of the land, and a concavity of a receptive bay, the ocean will pour into it and fill it, so surely where a heart is open for God, God in His Divine Spirit will enter into that heart, and there will shed His blessed influences.

So, dear brethren, and this is the main point to which I wish to direct your attention, the Apostle here takes it for granted that all these Roman Christians knew in themselves the truth of what he was saying, and had an experience which confirmed his assertion that the Divine Spirit of God was given to them when they believed. Ah! I wonder if that is true about us professing Christians; if we are aware in any measure of a higher life than our own having been breathed into us; if we are aware in any measure of a Divine Spirit dwelling in our spirits, moulding, lifting, enlightening, guiding, constraining, and yet not coercing? We ought to be, ‘Know ye not that the Spirit dwelleth in you, except ye be rejected?’ Brethren, it seems to me to be of the very last importance, in this period of the Church’s history, that the proportion between the Church’s teaching as to the work of Christ on the Cross, and as to the consequent work of the Spirit of Christ in our hearts and spirits, should be changed. We must become more mystical if we are not to become less Christian. And the fact that so many of us seem to imagine that the whole Gospel lies in this, that ‘He died for our sins according to the Scriptures,’ and have relegated the teaching that He, by His

Spirit, lives in us, if we are His disciples, to a less prominent place, has done enormous harm, not only to the type of Christian life, but to the conception of what Christianity is, both amongst those who receive it, and amongst those who do not accept it, making it out to be nothing more than a means of escape from the consequences of our transgression, instead of recognising it for what it is, the impartation of a new life which will flower into all beauty, and bear fruit in all goodness.

There was a question put once to a group of disciples, in astonishment and incredulity, by this Apostle, when he said to the twelve disciples in Ephesus, ‘Did you receive the Holy Ghost when you believed?’ The question might well be put to a multitude of professing Christians amongst us, and I am afraid a great many of them, if they answered truly, would answer as those disciples did, ‘We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.’

And now for the second point in my text-

II. The love which is shed abroad by that Spirit.

Now, I suppose I do not need to do more than point out that ‘the love of God’ here means His to us, and not ours to Him, and that the metaphor employed is but partially represented by that rendering ‘shed abroad.’ ‘Poured out’ would better convey Paul’s image, which is that of a flood sent coursing through the heart, or, perhaps, rather lying there, as a calm deep lake on whose unruffled surface the heavens, with all their stars, are reflected. Of course, if God’s love to us thus suffuses a heart, then there follows the consciousness of that love; though it is not the consciousness of the love that the Apostle is primarily speaking of, but that which lies behind it, the actual flowing into the human heart of that sweet and all-satisfying Love. This Divine Spirit that dwells in us, if we are trusting in Christ, will pour it in full streams into our else empty hearts. Surely there is nothing incongruous with the nature either of God or of man, in believing that thus a real communication is possible between them, and that by thoughts the occasions of which we cannot trace, by moments of elevation, by swift, piercing convictions, by sudden clear illuminations, God may speak, and will speak, in our waiting hearts.

'Such rebounds the inmost ear
Catches often from afar.
Listen, prize them, hold them dear;
For of God, of God, they are.'

But we must not forget, too, that, according to the whole strain of New Testament thinking, the means by which that Divine Spirit does pour out the flashing flood of the love of God into a man's heart is, as Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, by taking the things of Christ and showing them to us.

Now, as I said about a former point of my sermon, that the Apostle was taking for granted that this gift of the Spirit belonged to all Christian people; so here again he takes for granted that in every Christian heart there is, by a divine operation, the presence of the love, and of the consciousness of the love, of God. And, again, the question comes to some of us stunningly, to all of us warningly, Is that a transcript of our experience? It is the ideal of a Christian life; it is meant that it should be so, and should be so continuously. The stream that is poured out is intended to run summer and winter, not to be dried up in drought, nor made turbid and noisy in flood, but with equable flow throughout. I fear me that the experience of most good people is rather like one of those tropical wadies, or nullahs in Eastern lands, where there alternate times of spate and times of drought; and instead of a flashing stream, pouring life everywhere, and full to the top of its banks, there is for long periods a dismal stretch of white sun-baked stones, and a chaos of tumbled rocks with not a drop of water in the channel. The Spirit pours God's love into men's spirits, but there may be dams and barriers, so that no drop of the water comes into the empty heart.

Our Quaker friends have a great deal to say about 'waiting for the springing of the life within us.' Never mind about the phraseology: what is meant is profoundly true, that no Christian man will realise this blessing unless he knows how to sit still and meditate, and let the gracious influence soak into him. Thus being quiet, he may, he will, find rising in his heart the consciousness of the love of God. You will not, if you give only broken momentary sidelong glances; you will not, if you do not lie still. If you hold up a cup in a shaking hand beneath a fountain, and often twitch it aside, you will get little water in it; and unless we ‘wait on the Lord,’ we shall not ‘renew our strength.’ You can build a dam as they do in Holland that will keep out, not only the waters of a river, but the waters of an ocean, and not a drop will come through the dike. Brethren, we must keep ourselves in the love of God.

Lastly, we have here-

III. The hope that is established by the love poured out.

I need not dwell at any length upon this point, because, to a large extent, it has been anticipated in former sermons, but just a word or two may be permitted me. That love, you may be very sure, is not going to lose its objects in the dust. The old Psalmist who knew so much less than we do as to the love of God, and knew nothing of the whispers of a Divine Spirit within his heart charged with the message of the love as it was manifested in Jesus Christ, had risen to a height of confidence, the beauty of the expression of which is often lost sight of, because we insist upon dealing with it as merely being a Messianic prophecy, which it is, but not merely: ‘Thou wilt not leave my soul in Sheol, neither wilt Thou suffer Thy beloved’ [for that is the real meaning of the word translated ‘thy Holy One’]-’Thou wilt not suffer the child of Thy love to see corruption.’ Death’s bony fingers can untie all true lover’s knots but one; and they fumble at that one in vain. God will not lose His child in the grave.

That love, we may be very sure, will not foster in us hopes that are to be disappointed. Now, it is a fact that the more a man feels that God loves him, the less is it possible for him to believe that that love will ever terminate, or that he shall ‘all die.’ In the lock of a canal, as the water pours in, the vessel rises. In our hearts, as the flood of the full love of God pours in, our hopes are borne up and up, nearer and nearer to the heavens. Since it is so, we must find in the fact that the constant and necessary result of communion with Him here on earth is a conviction of the immortality of that communion, a very, very strong guarantee for ourselves that the hope is not in vain. And if you say that that is all merely subjective, yet I think that the universality of the experience is a fact to be taken into account even by those who doubt the reality of the hope, and for ourselves, at all events, is a sufficient ground on which to rest. We have the historical fact of the

Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have the fact that wherever there has been earthly experience of true communion with God, there, and in the measure in which it has been realised, the thermometer of our hopes of immortality, so to speak, has risen. ‘God is love,’ and God will not bring the man that trusts Him to confusion.

And may we not venture to say that, contemplating the analogous earthly love, we are permitted to believe that that divine Lover of our souls desires to have His beloved with Him, and desires that there be no separation between Him and them, either, if I might so say, in place or in disposition? As certainly as husband and wife, lover and friend, long to be together, and need it for perfection and for rest, so surely will that divine love not be satisfied until it has gathered all its children to its breast and made them partakers of itself.

There are many, many hopes that put the men who cherish them to shame, partly because they are never fulfilled, partly because, though fulfilled, they are disappointed, since the reality is so much less than the anticipation. Who does not know that the spray of blossom on the tree looks far more lovely hanging above our heads than when it is grasped by us? Who does not know that the fish struggling on the hook seems heavier than it turns out to be when lying on the bank? We go to the rainbow’s end, and we find, not a pot of gold, but a huddle of cold, wet mist. There is one man that is entitled to say: ‘To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.’ Who is he? Only the man whose hope is in the Lord his God. If we open our hearts by faith, then these three lines of sequence of which we have been speaking will converge, and we shall have the hope that is the shining apex of ‘being justified by faith,’ and the hope that is the calm result of trouble and agitation, and the hope that, travelling further and higher than anything in our inward experience or our outward discipline, grasps the key-word of the universe, ‘God is love,’ and triumphantly makes sure that ‘neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

13)Romans 5:8

WHAT PROVES GOD’S LOVE

Rom. 5:8.

We have seen in previous sermons on the preceding context that the Apostle has been tracing various lines of sequence, all of which converge upon Christian hope. The last of these pointed to the fact that the love of God, poured into a heart like oil into a lamp, brightened that flame; and having thus mentioned the great Christian revelation of God as love, Paul at once passes to emphasise the historical fact on which the conviction of that love rests, and goes on to say that ‘the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given to us, *for* when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.’ Then there rises before him the thought of how transcendent and unparalleled a love is that which pours its whole preciousness on unworthy and unresponsive hearts. He thinks to himself-’We are all ungodly; without strength-yet, He died for us. Would any man do that? No! for,’ says he, ‘it will be a hard thing to find any one ready to die for a righteous man-a man rigidly just and upright, and because rigidly just, a trifle hard, and therefore not likely to touch a heart to sacrifice; and even for a good man, in whom austere righteousness has been softened and made attractive, and become graciousness and beneficence, well! it is just within the limits of possibility that somebody might be found even to die for a man that had laid such a strong hand upon his affections. But God commendeth His love in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.’ Now, when Paul says ‘commend,’ he uses a very significant word which is employed in two ways in the New Testament. It sometimes means to establish, or to prove, or to make certain. But ‘prove’ is a cold word, and the expression also means to recommend, to set forth in such a way as to appeal to the heart, and God does both in that great act. He establishes the fact, and He, as it were, sweeps it into a man’s heart, on the bosom of that full tide of self-sacrifice.

So there are two or three points that arise from these words, on which I desire to dwell now-to lay them upon our hearts, and not only upon our understandings. For it is a poor thing to prove the love of God, and we need that not only shall we be sure of it, but that we shall be softened by it. So now let me ask you to look with me, first, at this question-

I. What Paul thought Jesus Christ died for.

'Died *for* us.' Now that expression plainly implies two things: first, that Christ died of His own accord, and being impelled by a great motive, beneficence; and, second, that that voluntary death, somehow or other, is for our behoof and advantage. The word in the original, 'for,' does not define in what way that death ministers to our advantage, but it does assert that for those Roman Christians who had never seen Jesus Christ, and by consequence for you and me nineteen centuries off the Cross, there is benefit in the fact of that death. Now, suppose we quote an incident in the story of missionary martyrdom. There was a young lady, whom some of us knew and loved, in a Chinese mission station, who, with the rest of the missionary band, was flying. Her life was safe. She looked back, and saw a Chinese boy that her heart twined round, in danger. She returned to save him; they laid hold of her and flung her into the burning house, and her charred remains have never been found. That was a death for another, but 'Jesus died for us' in a deeper sense than that. Take another case. A man sets himself to some great cause, not his own, and he sees that in order to bless humanity, either by the proclamation of some truth, or by the origination of some great movement, or in some other way, if he is to carry out his purpose, he must give his life. He does so, and dies a martyr. What he aimed at could only be done by the sacrifice of his life. The death was a means to his end, and he died for his fellows. That is not the depth of the sense in which Paul meant that Jesus Christ died for us. It was not that He was true to His message, and, like many another martyr, died. There is only one way, as it seems to me, in which any beneficial relation can be established between the Death of Christ and us, and it is that when He died He died for us, because 'He bare our sins in His own body on the tree.'

Dear brethren, I dare say some of you do not take that view, but I know not how justice can be done to the plain words of Scripture unless this is the point of view from which we look at the Cross of Calvary-that there the Lamb of Sacrifice was bearing, and bearing away, the sins of the whole world. I know that Christian men who unite in the belief that Christ's death was a sacrifice and an atonement diverge from one another in their interpretations of the way in which that came to be a fact, and I believe, for my part, that the divergent interpretations are like the divergent beams of light that fall upon men who stand round the same great luminary, and that all of them take their origin in, and are part of the manifestation of, the one transcendent fact, which passes all understanding, and gathers into itself all the diverse conceptions of it which are formed by limited minds. He died for us because, in His death, our sins are taken away and we are restored to the divine favour.

I know that Jesus Christ is said to have made far less of that aspect of His work in the Gospels than His disciples have done in the Epistles, and that we are told that, if we go back to Jesus, we shall not find the doctrine which for some of us is the first form in which the Gospel finds its way into the hearts of men. I admit that the fully-developed teaching followed the fact, as was necessarily the case. I do not admit that Jesus Christ 'spake nothing concerning Himself' as the sacrifice for the world's sins. For I hear from His lips-not to dwell upon other sayings which I could quote-I hear from His lips, 'The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister'-that is only half His purpose-'and to give His life a ransom instead of the many.' You cannot strike the atoning aspect of His death out of that expression by any fair handling of the words.

And what does the Lord's Supper mean? Why did Jesus Christ select that one point of His life as the point to be remembered? Why did He institute the double memorial, the body parted from the blood being a sign of a violent death? I know of no explanation that makes that Lord's Supper an intelligible rite except the explanation which says that He came, to live indeed, and in that life to be a sacrifice, but to make the sacrifice complete by Himself bearing the consequences of transgression, and making atonement for the sins of the world.

Brethren, that is the only aspect of Christ's death which makes it of any consequence to us. Strip it of that, and what does it matter to me that He died, any more than it matters to me that any philanthropist, any great teacher, any hero or martyr or saint, should have died? As it seems to me, nothing. Christ's death is surrounded by tenderly pathetic and beautiful accompaniments. As a story it moves the hearts of men, and 'purges them, by pity and by terror.' But the death of many a hero of tragedy does all that. And if you want to have the Cross of Christ held upright in its place as the Throne of Christ and the attractive power for the whole world, you must not tamper with that great truth, but say, 'He died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.'

Now, there is a second question that I wish to ask, and that is-

II. How does Christ's death 'commend' God's love?

That is a strange expression, if you will think about it, that '*God* commendeth His love towards us in that *Christ* died.' If you take the interpretation of Christ's death of which I have already been speaking, one could have understood the Apostle if he had said, 'Christ commendeth His love towards us in that Christ died.' But where is the force of the fact of a *man's* death to prove *God's* love? Do you not see that underlying that swift sentence of the Apostle there is a presupposition, which he takes for granted? It is so obvious that I do not need to dwell upon it to vindicate his change of persons, viz. that 'God was in Christ,' in such fashion as that whatsoever Christ did was the revelation of God. You cannot suppose, at least I cannot see how you can, that there is any force of proof in the words of my text, unless you come up to the full belief, 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.'

Suppose some great martyr who dies for his fellows. Well, all honour to him, and the race will come to his tomb for a while, and bring their wreaths and their sorrow. But what bearing has his death upon our knowledge of God's love towards us? None whatever, or at most a very indirect and shadowy one. We have to dig deeper down than that. 'God commends His love . . . in that Christ died.' 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.' And we have the right and the obligation to argue back from all that is manifest in the tender Christ to the heart of God, and say, not only, 'God so loved the world that He' sent His Son, but to see that the love that was in Christ is the manifestation of the love of God Himself.

So there stands the Cross, the revelation to us, not only of a Brother's sacrifice, but of a Father's love; and that because Jesus Christ is the revelation of God as being the ‘eradiation of His glory, and the express image of His person.’ Friends! light does pour out from that Cross, whatever view men take of it. But the omnipotent beam, the all-illuminating radiance, the transforming light, the heat that melts, are all dependent on our looking at it-I do not only say, as Paul looked at it, nor do I even say as Christ looked at it, but as the deep necessities of humanity require that the world should look at it, as the altar whereon is laid the sacrifice for our sins, the very Son of God Himself. To me the great truths of the Incarnation and the Atonement of Jesus Christ are not points in a mere speculative theology; they are the pulsating vital centre of religion. And every man needs them in his own experience.

I was going to have said a word or two here-but it is not necessary-about the need that the love of God should be irrefragably established, by some plain and undeniable and conspicuous fact. I need not dwell upon the ambiguous oracles which-

‘Nature, red in tooth and claw,
With rapine’

gives forth, nor on how the facts of human life, our own sorrows, and the world’s miseries, the tears that swathe the earth, as it rolls on its orbit, like a misty atmosphere, war against the creed that God is love. I need not remind you, either, of how deep, in our own hearts, when the conscience begins to speak its *not* ambiguous oracles, there does rise the conviction that there is much in us which it is impossible should be the object of God’s love. Nor need I remind you how all these difficulties in believing in a God who is love, based on the contradictory aspects of nature, and the mysteries of providence, and the whisperings of our own consciousness, are proved to have been insuperable by the history of the world, where we find mythologies and religions of all types and gods of every sort, but nowhere in all the pantheon a God who is Love.

Only let me press upon you that that conviction of the love of God, which is found now far beyond the limits of Christian faith, and amongst many of us who, in the name of that conviction itself, reject Christianity, because of its sterner aspects, is historically the child of the evangelical doctrine of the

Incarnation and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And if it still subsists, as I know it does, especially in this generation, amongst many men who reject what seems to me to be the very kernel of Christianity-subsists like the stream cut off from its source, but still running, that only shows that men hold many convictions the origin of which they do not know. God is love. You will not permanently sustain that belief against the pressure of outward mysteries and inward sorrows, unless you grasp the other conviction that Christ died for our sins. The two are inseparable.

And now lastly-

III. What kind of love does Christ's death declare to us as existing in God?

A love that is turned away by no sin-that is the thing that strikes the Apostle here, as I have already pointed out. The utmost reach of human affection might be that a man would die for the good-he would scarcely die for the righteous. But God sends His Son, and comes Himself in His Son, and His Son died for the ungodly and the sinner. That death reveals a love which is its own origin and motive. We love because we discern, or fancy we do, something lovable in the object. God loves under the impulse, so to speak, of His own welling-up heart.

And yet it is a love which, though not turned away by any sin, is witnessed by that death to be rigidly righteous. It is no mere flaccid, flabby laxity of a loose-girt affection, no mere foolish indulgence like that whereby earthly parents spoil their children. God's love is not lazy good-nature, as a great many of us think it to be and so drag it in the mud, but it is rigidly righteous, and therefore Christ died. That Death witnesses that it is a love which shrinks from no sacrifices. This Isaac was not 'spared.' God gave up His Son. Love has its very speech in surrender, and God's love speaks as ours does. It is a love which, turned away by no sin, and yet rigidly righteous and shrinking from no sacrifices, embraces all ages and lands. 'God commendeth'-not 'commended.' The majestic present tense suggests that time and space are nothing to the swift and all-filling rays of that great Light. That love is 'towards us,' you and me and all our fellows. The Death is an historical fact, occurring in one short hour. The Cross is an eternal power, raying out light and love over all humanity and through all ages.

God lays siege to all hearts in that great sacrifice. Do you believe that Jesus Christ died for *your* sins 'according to the Scriptures' ? Do you see there the assurance of a love which will lift you up above all the cross-currents of earthly life, and the mysteries of providence, into the clear ether where the sunshine is unobscured? And above all, do you fling back the reverberating ray from the mirror of your own heart that directs again towards heaven the beam of love which heaven has shot down upon you? 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and gave His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.' Is it true of us that we love God because He first loved us?

14)Romans 5:21

Romans

THE WARRING QUEENS

Rom. 5:21.

I am afraid this text will sound to some of you rather unpromising. It is full of well-worn terms, 'sin,' 'death,' 'grace,' 'righteousness,' 'eternal life,' which suggest dry theology, if they suggest anything. When they welled up from the Apostle's glowing heart they were like a fiery lava-stream. But the stream has cooled, and, to a good many of us, they seem as barren and sterile as the long ago cast out coils of lava on the sides of a quiescent volcano. They are so well-worn and familiar to our ears that they create but vague conceptions in our minds, and they seem to many of us to be far away from a bearing upon our daily lives. But you much mistake Paul if you take him to be a mere theological writer. He is an earnest evangelist, trying to draw men to love and trust in Jesus Christ. And his writings, however old-fashioned and doctrinally hard they may seem to you, are all throbbing with life-instinct with truths that belong to all ages and places, and which fit close to every one of us.

I do not know if I can give any kind of freshness to these words, but I wish to try. To begin with, I notice the highly-imaginative and picturesque form into which the Apostle casts his thoughts here. He, as it were, draws back a curtain, and lets us see two royal figures, which are eternally opposed and dividing the dominion between them. Then he shows us the issues to which these two rulers respectively conduct their subjects; and the question that is trembling on his lips is ‘Under which of them do you stand?’ Surely that is not fossil theology, but truths that are of the highest importance, and ought to be of the deepest interest, to every one of us. They are to you the former, whether they are the latter or not.

I. So, first, look at the two Queens who rule over human life.

Sin and Grace are both personified; and they are both conceived of as female figures, and both as exercising dominion. They stand face to face, and each recognises as her enemy the other. The one has established her dominion: ‘Sin *hath* reigned.’ The other is fighting to establish hers: ‘That Grace *might* reign.’ And the struggle is going on between them, not only on the wide field of the world; but in the narrow lists of the heart of each of us.

Sin reigns. The truths that underlie that solemn picture are plain enough, however unwelcome they may be to some of us, and however remote from the construction of the universe which many of us are disposed to take.

Now, let us understand our terms. Suppose a man commits a theft. You may describe it from three different points of view. He has thereby broken the law of the land; and when we are thinking about that we call it crime. He has also broken the law of ‘morality,’ as we call it; and when we are looking at his deed from that point of view, we call it vice. Is that all? He has broken something else. He has broken the law of God; and when we look at it from that point of view we call it sin. Now, there are a great many things which are sins that are not crimes; and, with due limitations, I might venture to say that there are some things which are sins that are not to be qualified as vices. Sin implies God. The Psalmist was quite right when he said; ‘Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned’; although he was confessing a foul injury he had done to Bathsheba, and a glaring crime that he had committed against Uriah. It was as to God, and in reference to Him only, that his crime and his vice darkened and solidified into sin.

And what is it, in our actions or in ourselves considered in reference to God, that makes our actions sins and ourselves sinners? Remember the prodigal son. ‘Father! Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.’ There you have it all. He went away, and ‘wasted his substance in riotous living.’ To claim myself for my own; to act independently of, or contrary to, the will of God; to try to shake myself clear of Him; to have nothing to do with Him, even though it be by mere forgetfulness and negligence, and, in all my ways to comport myself as if I had no relations of dependence on and submission to him-that is sin. And there may be that oblivion or rebellion, not only in the gross vulgar acts which the law calls crimes, or in those which conscience declares to be vices, but also in many things which, looked at from a lower point of view, may be fair and pure and noble. If there is this assertion of self in them, or oblivion of God and His will in them, I know not how we are to escape the conclusion that even these fall under the class of sins. For there can be no act or thought, truly worthy of a man, situated and circumstanced as we are, which has not, for the very core and animating motive of it, a reference to God.

Now, when I come and say, as my Bible teaches me to say, that this is the deepest view of the state of humanity that sin reigns, I do not wish to fall into the exaggerations by which sometimes that statement has been darkened and discredited; but I do want to press upon you, dear brethren, this, as a matter of *personal* experience, that wherever there is a heart that loves, and leaves God out, and wherever there is a will that resolves, determines, impels to action, and does not bow itself before Him, and wherever there are hands that labour, or feet that run, at tasks and in paths self-chosen and unconsecrated by reference to our Father in heaven, no matter how great and beautiful subsidiary lustres may light up their deeds, the very heart of them all is transgression of the law of God. For this, and nothing else or less, is His law: ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind.’ I do not charge you with crimes. You know how far it would be right to charge you with vices. *I* do not charge you with anything; but I pray you to come with me and confess: ‘We all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.’

I suppose I need not dwell upon the difficulty of getting a lodgment for this conviction in men’s hearts. There is no sadder, and no more conclusive proof, of the tremendous power of sin over us, than that it has lulled us into unconsciousness, hard to be broken, of its own presence and existence. You remember the old stories-I suppose there is no truth in them, but they will do for an illustration-about some kind of a blood-sucking animal that perched upon a sleeping man, and with its leathern wings fanned him into deeper drowsiness whilst it drew from him his life-blood. That is what this hideous Queen does for men. She robes herself in a dark cloud, and sends out her behests from obscurity. And men fancy that they are free whilst all the while they are her servants. Oh, dear brethren! you may call this theology, but it is a simple statement of the facts of our condition. ‘Sin hath reigned.’

And now turn to the other picture, ‘Grace might reign.’ Then there is an antagonistic power that rises up to confront the widespread dominion of this anarch of old. And this Queen comes with twenty thousand to war against her that has but ten thousand on her side.

Again I say, let us understand our terms. I suppose, there are few of the keywords of the New Testament which have lost more of their radiance, like quicksilver, by exposure in the air during the centuries than that great word Grace, which is always on the lips of this Apostle, and to him had music in its sound, and which to us is a piece of dead doctrine, associated with certain high Calvinistic theories which we enlightened people have long ago grown beyond, and got rid of. Perhaps Paul was more right than we when his heart leaped up within him at the very thought of all which he saw to lie palpitating and throbbing with eager desire to bless men, in that great word. What does he mean by it? Let me put it into the shortest possible terms. This antagonist Queen is nothing but the love of God raying out for ever to us inferior creatures, who, by reason of our sinfulness, have deserved something widely different. Sin stands there, a hideous hag, though a queen; Grace stands here, ‘in all her gestures dignity and love,’ fair and self-communicative, though a sovereign. The love of God in exercise to sinful men: that is what the New Testament means by grace. And is it not a great thought?

Notice, for further elucidation of the Apostle’s conception, how he sacrifices the verbal correctness of his antithesis in order to get to the real opposition. What is the opposite of Sin? Righteousness. Why does he not say, then, that ‘as Sin hath reigned unto death, even so might Righteousness reign unto life’ ? Why? Because it is not man, or anything in man, that can be the true antagonist of, and victor over, the regnant Sin of humanity; but God Himself comes into the field, and only He is the foe that Sin dreads. That is to say, the only hope for a sin-tyrannised world is in the out-throb of the love of the great heart of God. For, notice the weapon with which He fights man’s transgression, if I may vary the figure for a moment. It is only subordinately punishment, or law, or threatening, or the revelation of the wickedness of the transgression. All these have their places, but they are secondary places. The thing that will conquer a world’s wickedness is nothing else but the manifested love of God. Only the patient shining down of the sun will ever melt the icebergs that float in all our hearts. And wonderful and blessed it is to think that, in whatsoever aspects man’s sin may have been an interruption and a contradiction of the divine purpose, out of the evil has come a good; that the more obdurate and universal the rebellion, the more has it evoked a deeper and more wondrous tenderness. The blacker the thundercloud, the brighter glows the rainbow that is flung across it. So these two front each other, the one settled in her established throne-

‘Fierce as ten furies, terrible as hell-’

the other coming on her adventurous errand to conquer the world to herself, and to banish the foul tyranny under which men groan. ‘Sin hath reigned.’ Grace is on her way to her dominion.

II. Notice the gifts of these two Queens to their subjects.

‘Sin hath reigned in death’ [as the accurate translation has it]; ‘Grace reigns unto eternal life.’ The one has established her dominion, and its results are wrought out, her reign is, as it were, a reign in a cemetery; and her subjects are dead. If you want a modern instance to illustrate an ancient saw, think of Armenia. There is a reign whose gifts to its subjects are death. Sin reigns, says Paul, and for proof points to the fact that men die.

Now, I am not going to enter into the question here, and now, whether physical death passes over mankind because of the fact of transgression. I do not suppose that this is so. But I ask you to remember that when the

Bible says that ‘Death passed upon all men, for all have sinned,’ it does not merely mean the physical fact of dissolution, but it means that fact along with the accompaniments of it, and the forerunners of it, in men’s consciences. ‘The sting of death is sin,’ says Paul, in another place. By which he implies, I presume, that, if it were not for the fact of alienation from God and opposition to His holy will, men might lie down and die as placidly as an animal does, and might strip themselves for it ‘as for a bed, that longing they’d been sick for.’ No doubt, there was death in the world long before there were men in it. No doubt, also, the complex whole phenomenon gets its terror from the fact of men’s sin.

But it is not so much that physical fact with its accompaniments which Paul is thinking about when he says that ‘sin reigns in death,’ as it is that solemn truth which he is always reiterating, and which I pray you, dear friends, to lay to heart, that, whatever activity there may be in the life of a man who has rent himself away from dependence upon God-however vigorous his brain, however active his hand, however full charged with other interests his life, in the very depth of it is a living death, and the right name for it is death. So this is Sin’s gift-that over our whole nature there come mortality and decay, and that they who live as her subjects are dead whilst they live. Dear brethren, that may be figurative, but it seems to me that it is absurd for you to turn away from such thoughts, shrug your shoulders, and say, ‘Old-fashioned Calvinistic theology!’ It is simply putting into a vivid form the facts of your life and of your condition in relation to God, if you are subjects of Sin.

Then, on the other hand, the other queenly figure has her hands filled with one great gift which, like the fatal bestowment which Sin gives to her subjects, has two aspects, a present and a future one. Life, which is given in our redemption from Death and Sin, and in union with God; that is the present gift that the love of God holds out to every one of us. That life, in its very incompleteness here, carries in itself the prophecy of its own completion hereafter, in a higher form and world, just as truly as the bud is the prophet of the flower and of the fruit; just as truly as a half-reared building is the prophecy of its own completion when the roof tree is put upon it. The men that here have, as we all may have if we choose, the gift of life eternal in the knowledge of God through Jesus Christ His Son, must necessarily tend onwards and upwards to a region where Death is beneath the horizon, and Life flows and flushes the whole heaven. Brother! do you put out your whole hand to take the poisoned gift from the claw-like hand of that hideous Queen; or do you turn and take the gift of life eternal from the hands of the queenly Grace?

III. How this queenly Grace gives her gifts.

You observe that the Apostle, as is his wont-I was going to say-gets himself entangled in a couple of almost parenthetical or, at all events, subsidiary sentences. I suppose when he began to write he meant to say, simply, 'as Sin hath reigned unto death, so Grace might reign unto life.' But notice that he inserts two qualifications: 'through righteousness,' 'through Jesus Christ our Lord.' What does he mean by these?

He means this, first, that even that great love of God, coming throbbing straight from His heart, cannot give eternal life as a mere matter of arbitrary will. God can make His sun to shine and His rain to fall, 'on the unthankful and on the evil,' and if God could, God would give eternal life to everybody, bad and good; but He cannot. There must be righteousness if there is to be life. Just as sin's fruit is death, the fruit of righteousness is life.

He means, in the next place, that whilst there is no life without righteousness, there is no righteousness without God's gift. You cannot break away from the dominion of Sin, and, as it were, establish yourselves in a little fortress of your own, repelling her assaults by any power of yours. Dear brethren, we cannot undo the past; we cannot strip off the poisoned garment that clings to our limbs; we can mend ourselves in many respects, but we cannot of our own volition and motion clothe ourselves with that righteousness of which the wearers shall be worthy to 'pass through the gate into the city.' There is no righteousness without God's gift.

And the other subsidiary clause completes the thought: 'through Christ.' In Him is all the grace, the manifest love, of God gathered together. It is not diffused as the nebulous light in some chaotic incipient system, but it is gathered into a sun that is set in the centre, in order that it may pour down warmth and life upon its circling planets. The grace of God is in Christ Jesus our Lord. In Him is life eternal; therefore, if we desire to possess it we must possess Him. In Him is righteousness; therefore, if we desire our own foulness to be changed into the holiness which shall see God, we must go to Jesus Christ. Grace reigns in life, but it is life through righteousness, which is through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So, then, brother, my message and my petition to each of you are-knit yourself to Him by faith in Him. Then He who is ‘full of grace and truth’ will come to you; and, coming, will bring in His hands righteousness and life eternal. If only we rest ourselves on Him, and keep ourselves close in touch with Him; then we shall be delivered from the tyranny of the darkness, and translated into the Kingdom of the Son of His love.

15)Romans 6:17

Romans

‘THE FORM OF TEACHING’

Rom. 6:17.

There is room for difference of opinion as to what Paul precisely means by ‘form’ here. The word so rendered appears in English as *type*, and has a similar variety of meaning. It signifies originally a mark made by pressure or impact; and then, by natural transitions, a *mould*, or more generally a *pattern* or *example*, and then the copy of such an example or pattern, or the cast from such a mould. It has also the other meaning which its English equivalent has taken on very extensively of late years, such as, for instance, you find in expressions like ‘An English type of face,’ meaning thereby the general outline which preserves the distinguishing characteristics of a thing. Now we may choose between these two meanings in our text. If the Apostle means type in the latter sense of the word, then the rendering ‘form’ is adequate, and he is thinking of the Christian teaching which had been given to the Roman Christians as possessing certain well-defined characteristics which distinguished it from other kinds of teaching-such, for instance, as Jewish or heathen.

But if we take the other meaning, then he is, in true Pauline fashion, bringing in a vivid and picturesque metaphor to enforce his thought, and is thinking of the teaching which the Roman Christians had received as being a kind of mould into which they were thrown, a pattern to which they were to be conformed. And that that is his meaning seems to me to be made a little more probable by the fact that the last words of my text would be more accurate if inverted, and instead of reading, as the Authorised Version does, ‘that form of doctrine which was delivered you,’ we were to read, as the Revised Version does, ‘that form whereunto ye were delivered.’

If this be the general meaning of the words before us, there are three thoughts arising from them to which I turn briefly. First, Paul’s Gospel was a definite body of teaching; secondly, that teaching is a mould for conduct and character; lastly, that teaching therefore demands obedience. Take, then, these three thoughts.

I. First, Paul’s Gospel was a definite body of teaching.

Now the word ‘doctrine,’ which is employed in my text, has, in the lapse of years since the Authorised Version was made, narrowed its significance. At the date of our Authorised translation ‘doctrine’ was probably equivalent to ‘teaching,’ of whatever sort it might be. Since then it has become equivalent to a statement of abstract principles, and that is not at all what Paul means. He does not mean to say that his gospel was a form of doctrine in the sense of being a theological system, but he means to say that it was a body of teaching, the nature of the teaching not being defined at all by the word.

Therefore we have to notice that the great, blessed peculiarity of the Gospel is that it is a teaching, not of abstract dry principles, but of concrete historical facts. From these principles in plenty may be gathered, but in its first form as it comes to men fresh from God it is not a set of propositions, but a history of deeds that were done upon earth. And, therefore, is it fitted to be the food of every soul and the mould of every character.

Jesus Christ did not come and talk to men about God, and say to them what His Apostles afterwards said, ‘God is love,’ but He lived and died, and that mainly was His teaching about God. He did not come to men and lay down a theory of atonement or a doctrine of propitiation, or theology about sin and its relations to God, but He went to the Cross and gave Himself for us, and that was His teaching about sacrifice. He did not say to men ‘There is a future life, and it is of such and such a sort,' but He came out of the grave and He said 'Touch Me, and handle Me. A spirit hath not flesh and bones,' and *therefore* He brought life and immortality to light, by no empty words but by the solid realities of facts. He did not lecture upon ethics, but He lived a perfect human life out of which all moral principles that will guide human conduct may be gathered. And so, instead of presenting us with a *hortus siccus*, with a botanic collection of scientifically arranged and dead propositions, He led us into the meadow where the flowers grow, living and fair. His life and death, with all that they imply, are the teaching.

Let us not forget, on the other hand, that the history of a fact is not the mere statement of the outward thing that has happened. Suppose four people, for instance, standing at the foot of Christ's Cross; four other 'evangelists' than the four that we know. There is a Roman soldier; there is a Pharisee; there is one of the weeping crowd of poor women, not disciples; and there is a disciple. The first man tells the fact as he saw it: 'A Jewish rebel was crucified this morning.' The second man tells the fact: 'A blaspheming apostate suffered what he deserved to-day.' The woman tells the fact: 'A poor, gentle, fair soul was martyred to-day.' And the fourth one tells the fact: 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins.' The three tell the same fact; the fourth preaches the Gospel-that is to say, Christian teaching is the facts plus their explanation; and it is that which differentiates it from the mere record which is of no avail to anybody. So Paul himself in one of his other letters puts it. This is his gospel: Jesus of Nazareth 'died for *our* sins according to the Scriptures, and He was buried, and rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures.' That is what turns the bald story of the facts into teaching, which is the mould for life.

So on the one hand, dear brethren, do not let us fall into the superficial error of fancying that our religion is a religion of emotion and morality only. It is a religion with a basis of divine truth, which, being struck away, all the rest goes. There is a revolt against dogma to-day, a revolt which in large measure is justified as an essential of progress, and in large measure as an instance of progress; but human nature is ever prone to extremes, and in the revolt from man's dogma there is danger of casting away God's truth. Christianity is not preserved when we hold by the bare facts of the outward history, unless we take with these facts the interpretation of them, which declares the divinity and the sacrifice of the Son of God.

And on the other hand, let us keep very clear in our minds the broad and impassable gulf of separation between the Christian teaching as embodied in the Scripture and the systems which Christianity has evolved therefrom. Men's intellects must work upon the pabulum that is provided for them, and a theology in a systematised form is a necessity for the intellectual and reasonable life of the Christian Church. But there is all the difference between man's inferences from and systematising of the Christian truth and the truth that lies here. The one is the golden roof that is cast over us; the other is too often but the spiders' webs that are spun across and darken its splendour. It is a sign of a wholesome change in the whole sentiment and attitude of the modern Christian mind that the word 'doctrine,' which has come to mean men's inferences from God's truth, should have been substituted as it has been in our Revised Version of my text, by the wholesome Christian word 'teaching.' The teaching is the facts with the inspired commentary on them.

II. Secondly, notice that this teaching is in Paul's judgment a mould or pattern according to which men's lives are to be conformed.

There can be no question but that, in that teaching as set forth in Scripture, there does lie the mightiest formative power for shaping our lives, and emancipating us from our evil.

Christ is *the* type, the mould into which men are to be cast. The Gospel, as presented in Scripture, gives us three things. It gives us the perfect mould; it gives us the perfect motive; it gives us the perfect power. And in all three things appears its distinctive glory, apart from and above all other systems that have ever tried to affect the conduct or to mould the character of man.

In Jesus Christ we have in due combination, in perfect proportion, all the possible excellences of humanity. As in other cases of perfect symmetry, the very precision of the balanced proportions detracts from the apparent magnitude of the statue or of the fair building, so to a superficial eye there is but little beauty there that we should desire Him, but as we learn to know Him, and live nearer to Him, and get more familiar with all His sweetness, and with all His power, He towers before us in ever greater and yet never repellent or exaggerated magnitude, and never loses the reality of His brotherhood in the completeness of His perfection. We have in the Christ the one type, the one mould and pattern for all striving, the ‘glass of form,’ the perfect Man.

And that likeness is not reproduced in us by pressure or by a blow, but by the slow and blessed process of gazing until we become like, beholding the glory until we are changed into the glory.

It is no use having a mould and metal unless you have a fire. It is no use having a perfect Pattern unless you have a motive to copy it. Men do not go to the devil for want of examples; and morality is not at a low ebb by reason of ignorance of what the true type of life is. But nowhere but in the full-orbed teaching of the New Testament will you find a motive strong enough to melt down all the obstinate hardness of the ‘northern iron’ of the human will, and to make it plastic to His hand. If we can say, ‘He loved me and gave Himself for me’ then the sum of all morality, the old commandment that ‘ye love one another’ receives a new stringency, and a fresh motive as well as a deepened interpretation, when His love is our pattern. The one thing that will make men willing to be like Christ is their faith that Christ is their Sacrifice and their Saviour. And sure I am of this, that no form of mutilated Christianity, which leaves out or falteringly proclaims the truth that Christ died on the Cross for the sins of the world, will ever generate heat enough to mould men’s wills, or kindle motives powerful enough to lead to a life of growing imitation of and resemblance to Him. The dial may be all right, the hours most accurately marked in their proper places, every minute registered on the circle, the hands may be all right, delicately fashioned, truly poised, but if there is no main-spring inside, dial and hands are of little use, and a Christianity which says, ‘Christ is the Teacher; do you obey Him?’ is as impotent as the dial face with the broken main-spring. What we need, and what, thank God, in ‘the teaching’ we have, is the pattern brought near to us, and the motive for imitating the pattern, set in motion by the great thought, ‘He loved me and gave Himself for me.’

Still further, the teaching is a power to fashion life, inasmuch as it brings with it a gift which secures the transformation of the believer into the likeness of his Lord. Part of 'the teaching' is the fact of Pentecost; part of the teaching is the fact of the Ascension; and the consequence of the Ascension and the sure promise of the Pentecost is that all who love Him, and wait upon Him, shall receive into their hearts the 'Spirit of life in Christ Jesus' which shall make them free from the law of sin and death.

So, dear friends, on the one hand, let us remember that our religion is meant to work, that we have nothing in our creed that should not be in our character, that all our *credenda* are to be our *agenda*; everything *believed* to be something *done*; and that if we content ourselves with the simple acceptance of the teaching, and make no effort to translate that teaching into life, we are hypocrites or self-deceivers.

And, on the other hand, do not let us forget that religion is the soul of which morality is the body, and that it is impossible in the nature of things that you shall ever get a true, lofty, moral life which is not based upon religion. I do not say that men cannot be sure of the outlines of their duty without Christianity, though I am free to confess that I think it is a very maimed and shabby version of human duty, which is supplied, minus the special revelation of that duty which Christianity makes; but my point is, that the knowledge will not work without the Gospel.

The Christian type of character is a distinct and manifestly separate thing from the pagan heroism or from the virtues and the righteousnesses of other systems. Just as the musician's ear can tell, by half a dozen bars, whether that strain was Beethoven's, or Handel's, or Mendelssohn's, just as the trained eye can see Raffaelle's magic in every touch of his pencil, so Christ, the Teacher, has a style; and all the scholars of His school carry with them a certain mark which tells where they got their education and who is their Master, if they are scholars indeed. And that leads me to the last word.

III. This mould demands obedience.

By the very necessity of things it is so. If the 'teaching' was but a teaching of abstract truths it would be enough to assent to them. I believe that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, and I have done my duty by that proposition when I have said 'Yes! it is so.' But the 'teaching' which Jesus Christ gives and *is*, needs a good deal more than that. By the very nature of the teaching, assent drags after it submission. You can please yourself whether you let Jesus Christ into your minds or not, but if you do let Him in, He will be Master. There is no such thing as taking Him in and not obeying.

And so the requirement of the Gospel which we call faith has in it quite as much of the element of obedience as of the element of trust. And the presence of that element is just what makes the difference between a sham and a real faith. ‘Faith which has not works is dead, being alone.’ A faith which is all trust and no obedience is neither trust nor obedience.

And that is why so many of us do not care to yield ourselves to the faith that is in Jesus Christ. If it simply came to us and said, ‘If you will trust Me you will get pardon,’ I fancy there would be a good many more of us honest Christians than are so. But Christ comes and says, ‘Trust Me, follow Me, and take Me for your Master; and be like Me,’ and one’s will kicks, and one’s passions recoil, and a thousand of the devil’s servants within us prick their ears up and stiffen their backs in remonstrance and opposition. ‘Submit’ is Christ’s first word; submit by faith, submit in love.

That heart obedience, which is the requirement of Christianity, means freedom. The Apostle draws a wonderful contrast in the context between the slavery to lust and sin, and the freedom which comes from obedience to God and to righteousness. Obey the Truth, and the Truth, in your obeying, shall make you free, for freedom is the willing submission to the limitations which are best. ‘I will walk at liberty for I keep Thy precepts.’ Take Christ for your Master, and, being His servants, you are your own masters, and the world’s to boot. For ‘all things are yours if ye are Christ’s.’ Refuse to bow your necks to that yoke which is easy, and to take upon your shoulders that burden which is light, and you do not buy liberty, though you buy licentiousness, for you become the slaves and downtrodden vassals of the world and the flesh and the devil, and while you promise yourselves liberty, you become the bondsmen of corruption. Oh! then, let us obey from the heart that mould of teaching to which we are delivered, and so obeying, we shall be free indeed.

16)Romans 8:2

'THY FREE SPIRIT'

Rom. 8:2.

We have to distinguish two meanings of law. In the stricter sense, it signifies the authoritative expressions of the will of a ruler proposed for the obedience of man; in the wider, almost figurative sense, it means nothing more than the generalised expression of constant similar facts. For instance, objects attract one another in certain circumstances with a force which in the same circumstances is always the same. When that fact is stated generally, we get the law of gravitation. Thus the word comes to mean little more than a regular process. In our text the word is used in a sense much nearer the latter than the former of these two. 'The law of sin and of death' cannot mean a series of commandments; it certainly does not mean the Mosaic law. It must either be entirely figurative, taking sin and death as two great tyrants who domineer over men; or it must mean the continuous action of these powers, the process by which they work. These two come substantially to the same idea. The law of sin and of death describes a certain constancy of operation, uniform and fixed, under the dominion of which men are struggling. But there is another constancy of operation, uniform and fixed too, a mighty antagonistic power, which frees from the dominion of the former: it is 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.'

I. The bondage.

The Apostle is speaking about himself as he was, and we have our own consciousness to verify his transcript of his own personal experience. Paul had found that, by an inexorable iron sequence, sin worked in himself the true death of the soul, in separation from God, in the extinction of good and noble capacities, in the atrophying of all that was best in himself, in the death of joy and peace. And this iron sequence he, with an eloquent paradox, calls a 'law,' though its very characteristic is that it is lawless transgression of the true law of humanity. He so describes it, partly, because he would place emphasis on its dominion over us. Sin rules with iron sway; men madly obey it, and even when they think themselves free, are under a bitter tyranny. Further, he desires to emphasise the fact that sin and death are parts of one process which operates constantly and uniformly. This dark anarchy and wild chaos of disobedience and transgression has its laws. All happens there according to rule. Rigid and inevitable as the courses of the stars, or the fall of the leaf from the tree, is sin hurrying on to its natural goal in death. In this fatal dance, sin leads in death; the one fair spoken and full of dazzling promises, the other in the end throws off the mask, and slays. It is true of all who listen to the tempting voice, and the deluded victim 'knows not that the dead are there, and that her guests are in the depth of hell.'

II. The method of deliverance.

The previous chapter sounded the depths of human impotence, and showed the tragic impossibility of human efforts to strip off the poisoned garment. Here the Apostle tells the wonderful story of how he himself was delivered, in the full rejoicing confidence that what availed for his emancipation would equally avail for every captived soul. Because he himself has experienced a divine power which breaks the dreadful sequence of sin and of death, he knows that every soul may share in the experience. No mere outward means will be sufficient to emancipate a spirit; no merely intellectual methods will avail to set free the passions and desires which have been captured by sin. It is vain to seek deliverance from a perverted will by any republication, however emphatic, of a law of duty. Nothing can touch the necessities of the case but a gift of power which becomes an abiding influence in us, and develops a mightier energy to overcome the evil tendencies of a sinful soul.

That communicated power must impart life. Nothing short of a Spirit of life, quick and powerful, with an immortal and intense energy, will avail to meet the need. Such a Spirit must give the life which it possesses, must quicken and bring into action dormant powers in the spirit that it would free. It must implant new energies and directions, new motives, desires, tastes, and tendencies. It must bring into play mightier attractions to neutralise and deaden existing ones; as when to some chemical compound a substance is added which has a stronger affinity for one of the elements, a new thing is made.

Paul’s experience, which he had a right to cast into general terms and potentially to extend to all mankind, had taught him that such a new life for such a spirit had come to him by union with Jesus Christ. Such a union, deep and mystical as it is, is, thank God, an experience universal in all true Christians, and constitutes the very heart of the Gospel which Paul rejoiced to believe was entrusted to his hands for the world. His great message of ‘Christ in us’ has been wofully curtailed and mangled when his other message of ‘Christ for us’ has been taken, as it too often has been, to be the whole of his Gospel. They who take either of these inseparable elements to be the whole, rend into two imperfect halves the perfect oneness of the Gospel of Christ.

We are often told that Paul was the true author of Christian doctrine, and are bidden to go back from him to Jesus. If we do so, we hear His grave sweet voice uttering in the upper-room the deep words, ‘I am the Vine, ye are the branches’; and, surely, Paul is but repeating, without metaphor, what Christ, once for all, set forth in that lovely emblem, when he says that ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death.’ The branches in their multitude make the Vine in its unity, and the sap which rises from the deep root through the brown stem, passes to every tremulous leaf, and brings bloom and savour into every cluster. Jesus drew His emblem from the noblest form of vegetative life; Paul, in other places, draws his from the highest form of bodily life, when he points to the many members in one body, and the Head which governs all, and says, ‘So also is Christ.’ In another place he points to the noblest form of earthly love and unity. The blessed fellowship and sacred oneness of husband and wife are an emblem sweet, though inadequate, of the fellowship in love and unity of spirit between Christ and His Church.

And all this mysterious oneness of life has an intensely practical side. In Jesus, and by union with Him, we receive a power that delivers from sin and arrests the stealthy progress of sin’s follower, death. Love to Him, the result of fellowship with Him, and the consequence of life received from Him, becomes the motive which makes the redeemed heart delight to do His will, and takes all the power out of every temptation. We are in Him, and He in us, on condition, and by means, of our humble faith; and because my faith thus knits me to Him it is ‘the victory that overcomes the world’ and breaks the chains of many sins. So this communion with Jesus Christ is the way by which we shall increase that triumphant spiritual life, which is the only victorious antagonist of the else inevitable consequence which declares that the 'soul that sinneth it shall die,' and die even in sinning.

III. The process of the deliverance.

Following the R. V. we read 'made me free,' not 'hath made me.' The reference is obviously, as the Greek more clearly shows, to a single historical event, which some would take to be the Apostle's baptism, but which is more properly supposed to be his conversion. His strong bold language here does not mean that he claims to be sinless. The emancipation is effected, although it is but begun. He holds that at that moment when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, and he yielded to Him as Lord, his deliverance was real, though not complete. He was conscious of a real change of position in reference to that law of sin and of death. Paul distinguishes between the true self and the accumulation of selfish and sensual habits which make up so much of ourselves. The deeper and purer self may be vitalised in will and heart, and set free even while the emancipation is not worked out in the life. The parable of the leaven applies in the individual renewal; and there is no fanaticism, and no harm, in Paul's point of view, if only it be remembered that sins by which passion and externals overbear my better self are mine in responsibility and in consequences. Thus guarded, we may be wholly right in thinking of all the evils which still cleave to the renewed Christian soul as not being part of it, but destined to drop away.

And this bold declaration is to be vindicated as a prophetic confidence in the supremacy and ultimate dominion of the new power which works even through much antagonism in an imperfect Christian. Paul, too, calls 'things that are not as though they were.' If my spirit of life is the 'Spirit of life in Christ,' it will go on to perfection. It is Spirit, therefore it is informing and conquering the material; it is a divine Spirit, therefore it is omnipotent; it is the Spirit of life, leading in and imparting life like itself, which is kindred with it and is its source; it is the Spirit of life in Christ, therefore leading to life like His, bringing us to conformity with Him because the same causes produce the same effects; it is a life in Christ having a law and regular orderly course of development. So, just as if we have the germ we may hope for fruit, and can see the infantile oak in the tightly-shut acorn, or in the egg the creature which shall afterwards grow there, we have in this gift of the Spirit, the victory. If we have the cause, we have the effects implicitly folded in it; and we have but to wait further development.

The Christian life is to be one long effort, partial, and gradual, to unfold the freedom possessed. Paul knew full well that his emancipation was not perfect. It was, probably, after this triumphant expression of confidence that he wrote, ‘Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect.’ The first stage is the gift of power, the appropriation and development of that power is the work of a life; and it ought to pass through a well-marked series and cycle of growing changes. The way to develop it is by constant application to the source of all freedom, the life-giving Spirit, and by constant effort to conquer sins and temptations. There is no such thing in the Christian conflict as a painless development. We must mortify the deeds of the body if we are to live in the Spirit. The Christian progress has in it the nature of a crucifixion. It is to be effort, steadily directed for the sake of Christ, and in the joy of His Spirit, to destroy sin, and to win practical holiness. Homely moralities are the outcome and the test of all pretensions to spiritual communion.

We are, further, to perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord, by ‘waiting for the Redemption,’ which is not merely passive waiting, but active expectation, as of one who stretches out a welcoming hand to an approaching friend. Nor must we forget that this accomplished deliverance is but partial whilst upon earth. ‘The body is dead because of sin, but the spirit is life because of righteousness.’ But there may be indefinite approximation to complete deliverance. The metaphors in Scripture under which Christian progress is described, whether drawn from a conflict or a race, or from a building, or from the growth of a tree, all suggest the idea of constant advance against hindrances, which yet, constant though it is, does not reach the goal here. And this is our noblest earthly condition-not to be pure, but to be tending towards it and conscious of impurity. Hence our tempers should be those of humility, strenuous effort, firm hope. We are as slaves who have escaped, but are still in the wilderness, with the enemies’ dogs baying at our feet; but we shall come to the land of freedom, on whose sacred soil sin and death can never tread.

17)Romans 8:3

Romans

CHRIST CONDEMNING SIN

Rom. 8:3.

In the first verse of this chapter we read that ‘There is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.’ The reason of that is, that they are set free from the terrible sequence of cause and effect which constitutes ‘the law of sin and death’; and the reason why they are freed from that awful sequence by the power of Christ is, because He has ‘condemned sin in the flesh.’ The occurrence of the two words ‘condemnation’ [Rom. 8:1] and ‘condemned’ [Rom. 8:3] should be noted. Sin is personified as dwelling in the flesh, which expression here means, not merely the body, but unregenerate human nature. He has made his fortress there, and rules over it all. The strong man keeps his house and his goods are in peace. He laughs to scorn the attempts of laws and moralities of all sorts to cast him out. His dominion is death to the human nature over which he tyrannises. Condemnation is inevitable to the men over whom he rules. They or he must perish. If he escape they die. If he could be slain they might live. Christ comes, condemns the tyrant, and casts him out. So, he being condemned, we are acquitted; and he being slain there is no death for us. Let us try to elucidate a little further this great metaphor by just pondering the two points prominent in it-Sin tyrannising over human nature and resisting all attempts to overcome it, and Christ’s condemnation and casting out of the tyrant.

I. Sin tyrannising over human nature, and resisting all attempts to overcome it.

Paul is generalising his own experience when he speaks of the condemnation of an intrusive alien force that holds unregenerate human nature in bondage. He is writing a page of his own autobiography, and he is sure that all the rest of us have like pages in ours. Heart answereth unto heart as in a mirror. If each man is a unity, the poison must run through all his veins and affect his whole nature. Will, understanding, heart, must all be affected and each in its own way by the intruder; and if men are a collective whole, each man’s experience is repeated in his brother’s.

The Apostle is equally transcribing his own experience when in the text he sadly admits the futility of all efforts to shake the dominion of sin. He has found in his own case that even the loftiest revelation in the Mosaic law utterly fails in the attempt to condemn sin. This is true not only in regard to the Mosaic law but in regard to the law of conscience, and to moral teachings of any kind. It is obvious that all such laws do condemn sin in the sense that they solemnly declare God’s judgment about it, and His sentence on it; but in the sense of real condemnation, or casting out, and depriving sin of its power, they all are impotent. The law may deter from overt acts or lead to isolated acts of obedience; it may stir up antagonism to sin’s tyranny, but after that it has no more that it can do. It cannot give the purity which it proclaims to be necessary, nor create the obedience which it enjoins. Its thunders roll terrors, and no fruitful rain follows them to soften the barren soil. There always remains an unbridged gulf between the man and the law.

And this is what Paul points to in saying that it ‘was weak through the flesh.’ It is good in itself, but it has to work through the sinful nature. The only powers to which it can appeal are those which are already in rebellion. A discrowned king whose only forces to conquer his rebellious subjects are the rebels themselves, is not likely to regain his crown. Because law brings no new element into our humanity, its appeal to our humanity has little more effect than that of the wind whistling through an archway. It appeals to conscience and reason by a plain declaration of what is right; to will and understanding by an exhibition of authority; to fears and prudence by plainly setting forth consequences. But what is to be done with men who know what is right but have no wish to do it, who believe that they ought but will not, who know the consequences but ‘choose rather the pleasures of sin for a season,’ and shuffle the future out of their minds altogether? This is the essential weakness of all law. The tyrant is not afraid so long as there is no one threatening his reign, but the unarmed herald of a discrowned king. His citadel will not surrender to the blast of the trumpet blown from Sinai.

II. Christ’s condemnation and casting out of the tyrant.

The Apostle points to a triple condemnation.

‘In the likeness of sinful flesh,’ Jesus condemns sin by His own perfect life. That phrase, ‘the likeness of the flesh of sin,’ implies the real humanity of Jesus, and His perfect sinlessness; and suggests the first way in which He condemns sin in the flesh. In His life He repeats the law in a higher fashion. What the one spoke in words the other realised in ‘loveliness of perfect deeds’; and all men own that example is the mightiest preacher of righteousness, and that active goodness draws to itself reverence and sways men to imitate. But that life lived in human nature gives a new hope of the possibilities of that nature even in us. The dream of perfect beauty ‘in the flesh’ has been realised. What the Man Christ Jesus was, He was that we may become. In the very flesh in which the tyrant rules, Jesus shows the possibility and the loveliness of a holy life.

But this, much as it is, is not all. There is another way in which Christ condemns sin in the flesh, and that is by His perfect sacrifice. To this also Paul points in the phrase, ‘the flesh of sin.’ The example of which we have been speaking is much, but it is weak for the very same reason for which law is weak-that it operates only through our nature as it is; and that is not enough. Sin’s hold on man is twofold-one that it has perverted his relation to God, and another that it has corrupted his nature. Hence there is in him a sense of separation from God and a sense of guilt. Both of these not only lead to misery, but positively tend to strengthen the dominion of sin. The leader of the mutineers keeps them true to him by reminding them that the mutiny laws decree death without mercy. Guilt felt may drive to desperation and hopeless continuance in wrong. The cry, ‘I am so bad that it is useless to try to be better,’ is often heard. Guilt stifled leads to hardening of heart, and sometimes to desire and riot. Guilt slurred over by some easy process of absolution may lead to further sin. Similarly separation from God is the root of all evil, and thoughts of Him as hard and an enemy, always lead to sin. So if the power of sin in the past must be cancelled, the sense of guilt must be removed, and the wall of partition between man and God thrown down. What can law answer to such a demand? It is silent; it can only say, ‘What is written is written.’ It has no word to speak that promises ‘the blotting out of the handwriting that is against us'; and through its silence one can hear the mocking laugh of the tyrant that keeps his castle.

But Christ has come 'for sin'; that is to say His Incarnation and Death had relation to, and had it for their object to remove, human sin. He comes to blot out the evil, to bring God's pardon. The recognition of His sacrifice supplies the adequate motive to copy His example, and they who see in His death God's sacrifice for man's sin, cannot but yield themselves to Him, and find in obedience a delight. Love kindled at His love makes likeness and transmutes the outward law into an inward 'spirit of life in Christ Jesus.'

Still another way by which God 'condemns sin in the flesh' is pointed to by the remaining phrase of our text, 'sending His own Son.' In the beginning of this epistle Jesus is spoken of as 'being declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness'; and we must connect that saying with our text, and so think of Christ's bestowal of His perfect gift to humanity of the Spirit which sanctifies as being part of His condemnation of sin in the flesh. Into the very region where the tyrant rules, the Son of God communicates a new nature which constitutes a real new power. The Spirit operates on all our faculties, and redeems them from the bondage of corruption. All the springs in the land are poisoned; but a new one, limpid and pure, is opened. By the entrance of the Spirit of holiness into a human spirit, the usurper is driven from the central fortress: and though he may linger in the outworks and keep up a guerilla warfare, that is all that he can do. We never truly apprehend Christ's gift to man until we recognise that He not merely 'died for our sins,' but lives to impart the principle of holiness in the gift of His Spirit. The dominion of that imparted Spirit is gradual and progressive. The Canaanite may still be in the land, but a growing power, working in and through us, is warring against all in us that still owns allegiance to that alien power, and there can be no end to the victorious struggle until the whole body, soul, and spirit, be wholly under the influence of the Spirit that dwelleth in us, and nothing shall hurt or destroy in what shall then be all God's holy mountain.

Such is, in the most general terms, the statement of what Christ does 'for us'; and the question comes to be the all-important one for each, Do I let

Him do it for me? Remember the alternative. There must either be condemnation for us, or for the sin that dwelleth in us. There is no condemnation for them who are in Christ Jesus, because there is condemnation for the sin that dwells in them. It must he slain, or it will slay us. It must be cast out, or it will cast us out from God. It must be separated from us, or it will separate us from Him. We need not be condemned, but if it be not condemned, then we shall be.

18)Romans 8:16

Romans

THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

Rom. 8:16.

The sin of the world is a false confidence, a careless, complacent taking for granted that a man is a Christian when he is not. The fault, and sorrow, and weakness of the Church is a false diffidence, an anxious fear whether a man be a Christian when he is. There are none so far away from false confidence as those who tremble lest they be cherishing it. There are none so inextricably caught in its toils as those who are all unconscious of *its* existence and of *their* danger. The two things, the false confidence and the false diffidence, are perhaps more akin to one another than they look at first sight. Their opposites, at all events-the true confidence, which is faith in Christ; and the true diffidence, which is utter distrust of myself-are identical. But there may sometimes be, and there often is, the combination of a real confidence and a false diffidence, the presence of faith, and the doubt whether it be present. Many Christians go through life with this as the prevailing temper of their minds-a doubt sometimes arising almost to agony, and sometimes dying down into passive patient acceptance of the condition as inevitable-a doubt whether, after all, they be not, as they say, ‘deceiving themselves’; and in the perverse ingenuity with which that state of mind is constantly marked, they manage to distil for themselves a bitter vinegar of self-accusation out of grand words in the Bible, that were meant to afford them but the wine of gladness and of consolation.

Now this great text which I have ventured to take-not with the idea that I can exalt it or say anything worthy of it, but simply in the hope of clearing away some misapprehensions-is one that has often and often tortured the mind of Christians. They say of themselves, ‘I know nothing of any such evidence: I am not conscious of any Spirit bearing witness with my spirit.’ Instead of looking to other sources to answer the question whether they are Christians or not-and then, having answered it, thinking thus, ‘That text asserts that *all* Christians have this witness, therefore certainly I have it in some shape or other,’ they say to themselves, ‘I do not feel anything that corresponds with my idea of what such a grand, supernatural voice as the witness of God’s Spirit in my spirit must needs be; and therefore I doubt whether I am a Christian at all.’ I should be thankful if the attempt I make now to set before you what seems to me to be the true teaching of the passage, should be, with God’s help, the means of lifting some little part of the burden from some hearts that are right, and that only long to know that they are, in order to be at rest.

‘The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.’ The general course of thought which I wish to leave with you may be summed up thus: Our cry ‘Father’ is the witness that we are sons. That cry is not simply ours, but it is the voice of God’s Spirit. The divine Witness in our spirits is subject to the ordinary influences which affect our spirits.

Let us take these three thoughts, and dwell on them for a little while.

I. Our cry ‘Father’ is the witness that we are sons.

Mark the terms of the passage: ‘The Spirit itself beareth witness *with* our spirit-.’ It is not so much a revelation made to my spirit, considered as the recipient of the testimony, as a revelation made in or with my spirit considered as co-operating in the testimony. It is not that my spirit says one thing, bears witness that I am a child of God; and that the Spirit of God comes in by a distinguishable process, with a separate evidence, to say Amen to my persuasion; but it is that there is one testimony which has a conjoint origin-the origin from the Spirit of God as true source, and the origin from my own soul as recipient and co-operant in that testimony. From the teaching of this passage, or from any of the language which Scripture uses with regard to the inner witness, it is not to be inferred that there will rise up in a Christian’s heart, from some origin consciously beyond the sphere of his own nature, a voice with which he has nothing to do; which at once, by its own character, by something peculiar and distinguishable about it, by something strange in its nature, or out of the ordinary course of human thinking, shall certify itself to be not his voice at all, but *God’s* voice. That is not the direction in which you are to look for the witness of God’s Spirit. It is evidence borne, indeed, by the Spirit of God; but it is evidence borne not only to our spirit, but through it, with it. The testimony is one, the testimony of a man’s own emotion, and own conviction, and own desire, the cry, Abba, Father! So far, then, as the form of the evidence goes, you are not to look for it in anything ecstatic, arbitrary, parted off from your own experience by a broad line of demarcation; but you are to look into the experience which at first sight you would claim most exclusively for your own, and to try and find out whether *there* there be not working with your soul, working through it, working beneath it, distinct from it but not distinguishable from it by anything but its consequences and its fruitfulness-a deeper voice than yours-a ‘still small voice,’-no whirlwind, nor fire, nor earthquake-but the voice of God speaking in secret, taking the voice and tones of your own heart and your own consciousness, and saying to you, ‘Thou art my child, inasmuch as, operated by My grace, and Mine inspiration alone, there rises, tremblingly but truly, in thine own soul the cry, Abba, Father.’

So much, then, for the form of this evidence-my own conviction. Then with regard to the substance of it: conviction of what? The text itself does not tell us what is the evidence which the Spirit bears, and by reason of which we have a right to conclude that we are the children of God. The previous verse tells us. I have partially anticipated what I have to say on that point, but it will bear a little further expansion. ‘Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry Abba, Father.’ ‘The Spirit itself,’ by this means of our cry, Abba, Father, ‘beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.’ The substance, then, of the conviction which is lodged in the human spirit by the testimony of the Spirit of God is not primarily directed to our relation or feelings to God, but to a far grander thing than that-to God’s feelings and relation to us. Now I want you to think for one moment, before I pass on, how entirely different the whole aspect of this witness of the

Spirit of which Christian men speak so much, and sometimes with so little understanding, becomes according as you regard it mistakenly as being the direct testimony to you that you are a child of God, or rightly as being the direct testimony to you that God is your Father. The two things seem to be the same, but they are not. In the one case, the false case, the mistaken interpretation, we are left to this, that a man has no deeper certainty of his condition, no better foundation for his hope, than what is to be drawn from the presence or absence of certain emotions within his own heart. In the other case, we are admitted into this 'wide place,' that all which is our own is second and not first, and that the true basis of all our confidence lies not in the thought of what we are and feel to God, but in the thought of what God is and feels to us. And instead, therefore, of being left to labour for ourselves, painfully to search amongst the dust and rubbish of our own hearts, we are taught to sweep away all that crumbled, rotten surface, and to go down to the living rock that lies beneath it; we are taught to say, in the words of the book of Isaiah, 'Doubtless Thou art our Father-we are all an unclean thing; our iniquities, like the wind, have carried us away'; there is nothing stable in us; our own resolutions, they are swept away like the chaff of the summer threshing-floor, by the first gust of temptation; but what of that?-'in those is continuance, and we shall be saved!' Ah, brethren! expand this thought of the conviction that God is my Father, as being the basis of all my confidence that I am His child, into its widest and grandest form, and it leads us up to the blessed old conviction, I am nothing, my holiness is nothing, my resolutions are nothing, my faith is nothing, my energies are nothing; I stand stripped, and barren, and naked of everything, and I fling myself out of myself into the merciful arms of my Father in heaven! There is all the difference in the world between searching for evidence of my sonship, and seeking to get the conviction of God's Fatherhood. The one is an endless, profitless, self-tormenting task; the other is the light and liberty, the glorious liberty, of the children of God.

And so the *substance* of the Spirit's evidence is the direct conviction based on the revelation of God's infinite love and fatherhood in Christ the Son, that God is my Father; from which direct conviction I come to the conclusion, the inference, the second thought, Then I may trust that I am His son. But why? Because of anything in me? No: because of Him. The very emblem of fatherhood and sonship might teach us that *that* depends upon the Father’s will and the Father’s heart. The Spirit’s testimony has for form my own conviction: and for substance my humble cry, ‘Oh Thou, my Father in heaven!’ Brethren, is not that a far truer and nobler kind of thing to preach than saying, Look into your own heart for strange, extraordinary, distinguishable signs which shall mark you out as God’s child-and which are proved to be His Spirit’s, because they are separated from the ordinary human consciousness? Is it not far more blessed for us, and more honouring to Him who works the sign, when we say, that it is to be found in no out-of-rule, miraculous evidence, but in the natural [which is in reality supernatural] working of His Spirit in the heart which is its recipient, breeding there the conviction that God is my Father? And oh, if I am speaking to any to whom that text, with all its light and glory, has seemed to lift them up into an atmosphere too rare and a height too lofty for their heavy wings and unused feet, if I am speaking to any Christian man to whom this word has been like the cherubim and flaming sword, bright and beautiful, but threatening and repellent when it speaks of a Spirit that bears witness with our spirit-I ask you simply to take the passage for yourself, and carefully and patiently to examine it, and see if it be not true what I have been saying, that your trembling conviction-sister and akin as it is to your deepest distrust and sharpest sense of sin and unworthiness-that your trembling conviction of a love mightier than your own, everlasting and all-faithful, is indeed the selectest sign that God can give you that you *are* His child. Oh, brethren and sisters! be confident; for it is not false confidence: be confident if up from the depths of that dark well of your own sinful heart there rises sometimes, through all the bitter waters, unpolluted and separate, a sweet conviction, forcing itself upward, that God hath love in His heart, and that God is *my* Father. Be confident; ‘the Spirit itself beareth witness with your spirit.’

II. And now, secondly, That cry is not simply ours, but it is the voice of God’s Spirit.

Our own convictions are ours because they are God’s. Our own souls possess these emotions of love and tender desire going out to God-our own spirits possess them; but our own spirits did not originate them. They are ours by property; they are His by source. The spirit of a Christian man has no good thought in it, no true thought, no perception of the grace of God’s

Gospel, no holy desire, no pure resolution, which is not stamped with the sign of a higher origin, and is not the witness of God's Spirit in his spirit. The passage before us tells us that the sense of Fatherhood which is in the Christian's heart, and becomes his cry, comes from God's Spirit. This passage, and that in the Epistle to the Galatians which is almost parallel, put this truth very forcibly, when taken in connection. 'Ye have received,' says the text before us, 'the Spirit of adoption, whereby *we* cry, Abba, Father.' The variation in the Epistle to the Galatians is this: 'Because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, *crying* [the Spirit crying], Abba, Father.' So in the one text, the cry is regarded as the voice of the believing heart; and in the other the same cry is regarded as the voice of God's Spirit. And these two things are both true; the one would want its foundation if it were not for the other; the cry of the Spirit is nothing for me unless it be appropriated by me. I do not need to plunge here into metaphysical speculation of any sort, but simply to dwell upon the plain practical teaching of the Bible-a teaching verified, I believe, by every Christian's experience, if he will search into it-that everything in him which makes the Christian life, is not his, but is God's by origin, and his only by gift and inspiration. And the whole doctrine of my text is built on this one thought-without the Spirit of God in your heart, you never can recognise God as your Father. That in us which runs, with love, and childlike faith, and reverence, to the place 'where His honour dwelleth,' that in us which says 'Father,' is kindred with God, and is not the simple, unhelped, unsanctified human nature. There is no ascent of human desires above their source. And wherever in a heart there springs up heavenward a thought, a wish, a prayer, a trembling confidence, it is because that came down first from heaven, and rises to seek its level again. All that is divine in man comes from God. All that tends towards God in man is God's voice in the human heart; and were it not for the possession and operation, the sanctifying and quickening, of a living divine Spirit granted to us, our souls would for ever cleave to the dust and dwell upon earth, nor ever rise to God and live in the light of His presence. Every Christian, then, may be sure of this, that howsoever feeble may be the thought and conviction in his heart of God's Fatherhood, *he* did not work it, he received it only, cherished it, thought of it, watched over it, was careful not to quench it; but in origin it was God's, and it is now and ever the voice of the Divine Spirit in the child's heart.

But, my friends, if this principle be true, it does not apply only to this one single attitude of the believing soul when it cries, Abba, Father; it must be widened out to comprehend the whole of a Christian's life, outward and inward, which is not sinful and darkened with actual transgression. To all the rest of his being, to everything in heart and life which is right and pure, the same truth applies. 'The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit' in every perception of God's word which is granted, in every revelation of His counsel which dawns upon our darkness, in every aspiration after Him which lifts us above the smoke and dust of this dim spot, in every holy resolution, in every thrill and throb of love and desire. Each of these is mine-inasmuch as in my heart it is experienced and transacted; it is mine, inasmuch as I am not a mere dead piece of matter, the passive recipient of a magical and supernatural grace; but it is God's; and therefore, and therefore only, has it come to be mine!

And if it be objected, that this opens a wide door to all manner of delusion, and that there is no more dangerous thing than for a man to confound his own thoughts with the operations of God's Spirit, let me just give you [following the context before us] the one guarantee and test which the Apostle lays down. He says, 'There is a witness from God in your spirits.' You may say, That witness, if it come in the form of these convictions in my own heart, I may mistake and falsely read. Well, then, here is an outward guarantee. 'As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God'; and so, on the regions both of heart and of life the consecrating thought,-God's work, and God's Spirit's work-is stamped. The heart with its love, the head with its understanding, the conscience with its quick response to the law of duty, the will with its resolutions,-these are all, as sanctified by Him, the witness of His Spirit; and the life with its strenuous obedience, with its struggles against sin and temptation, with its patient persistence in the quiet path of ordinary duty, as well as with the times when it rises into heroic stature of resignation or allegiance, the martyrdom of death and the martyrdom of life, this too is all [in so far as it is pure and right] the work of that same Spirit. The test of the inward conviction is the outward life; and they that have the witness of the Spirit within them have the light of their life lit by the Spirit of God, whereby they may read the handwriting on the heart, and be sure that it is God's and not their own.

III. And now, lastly, this divine Witness in our spirits is subject to the ordinary influences which affect our spirits.

The notion often prevails that if there be in the heart this divine witness of God’s Spirit, it must needs be perfect, clearly indicating its origin by an exemption from all that besets ordinary human feelings, that it must be a strong, uniform, never flickering, never darkening, and perpetual light, a kind of vestal fire burning always on the altar of the heart! The passage before us, and all others that speak about the matter, give us the directly opposite notion. The Divine Spirit, when it enters into the narrow room of the human spirit, condescends to submit itself, not wholly, but to such an extent as practically for our present purpose *is* wholly to submit itself to the ordinary laws and conditions and contingencies which befall and regulate our own human nature. Christ came into the world divine: He was ‘found in fashion as a man,’ in form a servant; the humanity that He wore limited [if you like], regulated, modified, the manifestation of the divinity that dwelt in it. And not otherwise is the operation of God’s Holy Spirit when it comes to dwell in a human heart. There too, working through man, *it* ‘is found in fashion as a man’; and though the origin of the conviction be of God, and though the voice in my heart be not only my voice, but God’s voice there, it will obey those same laws which make human thoughts and emotions vary, and fluctuate, flicker and flame up again, burn bright and burn low, according to a thousand circumstances. The witness of the Spirit, if it were yonder in heaven, would shine like a perpetual star; the witness of the Spirit, here in the heart on earth, burns like a flickering flame, never to be extinguished, but still not always bright, wanting to be trimmed, and needing to be guarded from rude blasts. Else, brother, what does an Apostle mean when he says to you and me, ‘Quench not the Spirit’ ? what does he mean when he says to us, ‘Grieve not the Spirit’ ? What does the whole teaching which enjoins on us, ‘Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning,’ and ‘What I say to you, I say to all, Watch!’ mean, unless it means this, that God-given as [God be thanked!] that conviction of Fatherhood is, it is not given in such a way as that, irrespective of our carefulness, irrespective of our watching, it shall burn on-the same and unchangeable? The Spirit’s witness comes from God, therefore it is veracious, divine, omnipotent; but the Spirit’s witness from God is in man, therefore it may be wrongly read, it may be checked, it may for a time be kept down, and prevented from showing itself to be what it is.

And the practical conclusion that comes from all this, is just the simple advice to you all: Do not wonder, in the first place, if that evidence of which we speak, vary and change in its clearness and force in your own hearts. ‘The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh.’ Do not think that it cannot be genuine, because it is changeful. There is a sun in the heavens, but there are heavenly lights too that wax and wane; they *are* lights, they *are* in the heavens though they change. You have no reason, Christian man, to be discouraged, cast down, still less despondent, because you find that the witness of the Spirit changes and varies in your heart. Do not despond because it does; watch it, and guard it, lest it do; live in the contemplation of the Person and the fact that calls it forth, that it may not. You will never ‘brighten your evidences’ by polishing at them. To polish the mirror ever so assiduously does not secure the image of the sun on its surface. The only way to do that is to carry the poor bit of glass out into the sunshine. It will shine then, never fear. It is weary work to labour at self-improvement with the hope of drawing from our own characters evidences that we are the sons of God. To have the heart filled with the light of Christ’s love to us is the only way to have the whole being full of light. If you would have clear and irrefragable, for a perpetual joy, a glory and a defence, the unwavering confidence, ‘I am Thy child,’ go to God’s throne, and lie down at the foot of it, and let the first thought be, ‘My Father in heaven,’ and *that* will brighten, that will stablish, that will make omnipotent in your life the witness of the Spirit that you are the child of God.

19)Romans 8:17

Romans

SONS AND HEIRS

Rom. 8:17.

God Himself is His greatest gift. The loftiest blessing which we can receive is that we should be heirs, possessors of God. There is a sublime and wonderful mutual possession of which Scripture speaks much wherein the Lord is the inheritance of Israel, and Israel is the inheritance of the Lord. ‘The Lord hath taken you to be to Him a people of inheritance,’ says Moses; ‘Ye are a people for a possession,’ says Peter. And, on the other hand, ‘The Lord is the portion of my inheritance,’ says David; ‘Ye are heirs of God,’ echoes Paul. On earth and in heaven the heritage of the children of the Lord is God Himself, inasmuch as He is with them for their delight, in them to make them ‘partakers of the divine nature,’ and for them in all His attributes and actions.

This being clearly understood at the outset, we shall be prepared to follow the Apostle’s course of thought while he points out the conditions upon which the possession of that inheritance depends. It is children of God who are heirs of God. It is by union with Christ Jesus, the Son, to whom the inheritance belongs, that they who believe on His name receive power to become the sons of God, and with that power the possession of the inheritance. Thus, then, in this condensed utterance of the text there appear a series of thoughts which may perhaps be more fully unfolded in some such manner as the following, that there is no inheritance without sonship, that there is no sonship without a spiritual birth, that there is no spiritual birth without Christ, and that there is no Christ for us without faith.

I. First, then, the text tells us, no inheritance without sonship.

In general terms, spiritual blessings can only be given to those who are in a certain spiritual condition. Always and necessarily the capacity or organ of reception precedes and determines the bestowment of blessings. The light falls everywhere, but only the eye drinks it in. The lower orders of creatures are shut out from all participation in the gifts which belong to the higher forms of life, simply because they are so made and organised as that these cannot find entrance into their nature. They are, as it were, walled up all round; and the only door they have to communicate with the outer world is the door of sense. Man has higher gifts simply because he has higher capacities. All creatures are plunged in the same boundless ocean of divine beneficence and bestowment, and into each there flows just that, and no more, which each, by the make and constitution that God has given it, is capable of receiving. In the man there are more windows and doors opened out than in the animal He is capable of receiving intellectual impulses, spiritual emotions; he can think, and feel, and desire, and will, and resolve: and so he stands on a higher level than the beast below him.

Not otherwise is it in regard to God's kingdom, 'which is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.' The gift and blessing of salvation is primarily a spiritual gift, and only involves outward consequences secondarily and subordinately. It mainly consists in the heart being at peace with God, in the whole soul being filled with divine affections, in the weight and bondage of transgression being taken away, and substituted by the impulse and the life of the new love. Therefore, neither God can give, nor man can receive, that gift upon any other terms, than just this, that the heart and nature be fitted and adapted for it. Spiritual blessings require a spiritual capacity for the reception of them; or, as my text says, you cannot have the inheritance unless you are sons. If salvation consisted simply in a change of place; if it were merely that by some expedient or arrangement, an outward penalty, which was to fall or not to fall at the will of an arbitrary judge, were prevented from coming down, why then, it would be open to Him who held the power of letting the sword fall, to decide on what terms He might choose to suspend its infliction. But inasmuch as God's deliverance is not a deliverance from a mere arbitrary and outward punishment: inasmuch as God's salvation, though it be deliverance from the penalty as well as from the guilt of sin, is by no means chiefly a deliverance from outward consequences, but mainly a removal of the nature and disposition that makes these outward consequences certain,-therefore a man cannot be saved, God's love cannot save him, God's justice will not save him, God's power stands back from saving him, upon any other condition than this that his soul shall be adapted and prepared for the reception and enjoyment of the blessing of a spiritual salvation.

But the inheritance which my text speaks about is also that which a Christian hopes to receive and enter upon in heaven. The same principle precisely applies there. There is no inheritance of heaven without sonship; because all the blessings of that future life are of a spiritual character. The joy and the rapture and the glory of that higher and better life have, of course, connected with them certain changes of bodily form, certain changes of local dwelling, certain changes which could perhaps be granted equally to a man, of whatever sort he was. But, friends, it is not the golden harps, not the pavement of 'glass mingled with fire,' not the cessation from work, not the still composure, and changeless indwelling, not the society even, that makes the heaven of heaven. All these are but the embodiments and rendering visible of the inward facts, a soul at peace with God in the depths of its being, an eye which gazes upon the Father, and a heart which wraps itself in His arms. Heaven is no heaven except in so far as it is the possession of God. That saying of the Psalmist is not an exaggeration, nor even a forgetting of the other elements of future blessedness, but it is a simple statement of the literal fact of the case, 'I have none in heaven but Thee!' God is the heritage of His people. To dwell in His love, and to be filled with His light, and to walk for ever in the glory of His sunlit face, to do His will, and to bear His character stamped upon our foreheads-*that* is the glory and the perfectness to which we are aspiring. Do not then rest in the symbols that show us, darkly and far off, what that future glory is. Do not forget that the picture is a shadow. Get beneath all these figurative expressions, and feel that whilst it may be true that for us in our present earthly state, there can be no higher, no purer, no more spiritual nor any truer representations of the blessedness which is to come, than those which couch it in the forms of earthly experience, and appeal to sense as the minister of delight-yet that all these things are representations, and not adequate presentations. The inheritance of the servants of the Lord is the Lord Himself, and they dwell in Him, and *there* is their joy.

Well then, if that be even partially true-admitting all that you may say about circumstances which go to make some portion of the blessedness of that future life-if it be true that God is the true blessing given by His Gospel upon earth, that He Himself is the greatest gift that can be bestowed, and that He is the true Heaven of heaven-what a flood of light does it cast upon that statement of my text, 'If children, then heirs'; no inheritance without sonship! For who can possess God but they who love Him? who can love, but they who know His love? who can have Him working in their hearts a blessed and sanctifying change, except the souls that lie thankfully quiet beneath the forming touch of His invisible hand, and like flowers drink in the light of His face in their still joy? How can God dwell in any heart except a heart which has in it a love of purity? Where can He make His temple except in the 'upright heart and pure' ? How can there be fellowship betwixt Him and any one except the man who is a son because he hath received of the divine nature, and in whom that divine nature is growing up into a divine likeness? ‘What fellowship hath Christ with Belial?’ is not only applicable as a guide for our practical life, but points to the principle on which God’s inheritance belongs to God’s sons alone. ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’; and those only who love, and are children, to them alone does the Father come and does the Father belong.

So much, then, for the first principle: No inheritance without sonship.

II. Secondly, the text leads us to the principle that there is no sonship without a spiritual birth.

The Apostle John in that most wonderful preface to his Gospel, where all deepest truths concerning the Eternal Being in itself and in the solemn march of His progressive revelations to the world are set forth in language simple like the words of a child and inexhaustible like the voice of a god, draws a broad distinction between the relation to the manifestations of God which every human soul by virtue of his humanity sustains, and that into which some, by virtue of their faith, enter. Every man is lighted by the true light because he is a man. They who believe in His name receive from Him the prerogative to become the sons of God. Whatever else may be taught in John’s words, surely they do teach us this, that the sonship of which he speaks does not belong to man as man, is not a relation into which we are born by natural birth, that we *become* sons after we *are* men, that those who become sons do not include all those who are lighted by the Light, but consist of so many of that greater number as receive Him, and that such become sons by a divine act, the communication of a spiritual life, whereby they are born of God.

The same Apostle, in his Epistles, where the widest love is conjoined with the most firmly drawn lines of moral demarcation between the great opposites-life, light, love-death, darkness, hate-contrasts in the most unmistakable antithesis the sons of God who are known for such because they do righteousness, and the world which knew not Christ, nor knows those who, dimly beholding, partially resemble Him. Nay, he goes further, and says in strange contradiction to the popular estimate of his character, but in true imitation of that Incarnate love which hated iniquity, ‘In this the children of God are manifested and the children of the devil'-echoing thus the words of Him whose pitying tenderness had sometimes to clothe itself in sharpest words, even as His hand of powerful love had once to grasp the scourge of small cords. 'If God were your Father, ye would love Me: ye are of your father, the devil.'

These are but specimens of a whole cycle of Scripture statements which in every form of necessary implication, and of direct statement, set forth the principle that he who is born again of the Spirit, and he only, is a son of God.

Nothing in all this contradicts the belief that all men are the children of God, inasmuch as they are shaped by His divine hand and He has breathed into their nostrils the breath of life. They who hold that sonship is obtained on the condition which these passages seem to assert, do also rejoice to believe and to preach that the Father's love broods over every human heart as the dovelike Spirit over the primeval chaos. They rejoice to proclaim that Christ has come that all, that each, may receive the adoption of sons. They do not feel that their message to, nor their hope for, the world is less blessed, less wide, because while they call on all to come and take the things that are freely given to them of God, they believe that those only who do come and take possess the blessing. Every man may become a son and heir of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

But notwithstanding all the mercies that belong to us all, notwithstanding the divine beneficence, which, like the air and the light, pervades all nature, and underlies all our lives, notwithstanding the universal adaptation and intention of Christ's work, notwithstanding the wooing of His tender voice and the unceasing beckoning of His love, it still remains true that there are men in the world, created by God, loved and cared for by Him, for whom Christ died, who might be, but are not, sons of God.

Fatherhood! what does that word itself teach us? It speaks of the communication of a life, and the reciprocity of love. It rests upon a divine act, and it involves a human emotion. It involves that the father and the child shall have kindred life-the father bestowing and the child possessing a life which is derived; and because derived, kindred; and because kindred, unfolding itself in likeness to the father that gave it. And it requires that between the father's heart and the child's heart there shall pass, in blessed interchange and quick correspondence, answering love, flashing backwards and forwards, like the lightning that touches the earth and rises from it again. A simple appeal to your own consciousness will decide if that be the condition of all men. Are you, my brother, conscious of anything within you higher than the common life that belongs to you because you are an immortal soul? Can you say, 'From God's hand I have received the granting and implantation of a new and better life?' Is your claim verified by this, that you are kindred with God in holy affections, in like purposes, loving what He loves, hating what He hates, doing what He wills, accepting what He sends, longing for Himself, and blessed in His presence? Is your sonship proved by the depth and sincerity, the simplicity and power, of your throbbing heart of love to your Father in heaven? Or are all these emotions empty words to you, things that are spoken in pulpits, but to which you have nothing in your life corresponding? Oh then, my friend, what am I to say to you? What but this? no sonship except by that spiritual birth; and if not such sonship, then the spirit of bondage. If not such sonship, why then, by all the tendencies of your nature, and by all the affinities of your moral being, if you are not holding of heaven, you are holding of hell; if you are not drawing your life, your character, your emotions, your affections, from the sacred well that lies up yonder, you are drawing them from the black one that lies down there. There are heaven, hell, and the earth that lies between, ever influenced either from above or from below. You are sons because born again, or slaves and 'enemies by wicked works.' It is a grim alternative, but it is a fact.

III. Thirdly, no spiritual birth without Christ.

We have seen that the sonship which gives power of possessing the inheritance and which comes by spiritual birth, rests upon the giving of life, spiritual life, from God; and unfolds itself in certain holy characters, and affections, and desires, the throbbing of the whole soul in full accord and harmony with the divine character and will. Well then, it looks very clear that a man cannot make that new life for himself, cannot do it because of the habit of sin, and cannot do it because of the guilt and punishment of sin. If for sonship there must be a birth again, why, surely, the very symbol might convince you that such a process does not lie within our own power.

There must come down a divine leaven into the mass of human nature, before this new being can be evolved in any one. There must be a gift of God. A divine energy must be the source and fountain of all holy and of all Godlike life. Christ comes, comes to make you and me live again as we never lived before; live possessors of God's love; live tenanted and ruled by a divine Spirit; live with affections in our hearts which *we* never could kindle there; live with purposes in our souls which *we* never could put there.

And I want to urge this thought, that the centre point of the Gospel is this regeneration; because if we understand, as we are too much disposed to do, that the Gospel simply comes to make men live better, to work out a moral reformation,-why, there is no need for a Gospel at all. If the change were a simple change of habit and action on the part of men, we could do without a Christ. If the change simply involved a bracing ourselves up to behave better for the future, we could manage somehow or other about as well as or better than we have managed in the past. But if redemption be the giving of life from God; and if redemption be the change of position in reference to God's love and God's law as well, neither of these two changes can a man effect for himself. You cannot gather up the spilt water; you cannot any more gather up and re-issue the past life. The sin remains, the guilt remains. The inevitable law of God will go on its crashing way in spite of all penitence, in spite of all reformation, in spite of all desires after newness of life. There is but one Being who can make a change in our position in regard to God, and there is but one Being who can make the change by which man shall become a 'new creature.' The Creative Spirit that shaped the earth must shape its new being in my soul; and the Father against whose law I have offended, whose love I have slighted, from whom I have turned away, must effect the alteration that I can never effect-the alteration in my position to His judgments and justice, and to the whole sweep of His government. No new birth without Christ; no escape from the old standing-place, of being 'enemies to God by wicked works,' by anything that we can do: no hope of the inheritance unless the Lord and the Man, the 'second Adam from heaven,' have come! He *has* come, and He has 'dwelt with us,' and He has worn this life of ours, and He has walked in the midst of this world, and He knows all about our human condition, and He has effected an actual change in the possible aspect of the divine justice and government to us; and He has carried in the golden urn of His humanity a new spirit and a new life which He has set down in the midst of the race; and the urn was broken on the cross of Calvary, and the water flowed out, and whithersoever that water comes there is life, and whithersoever it comes not there is death!

IV. Last of all, no Christ without faith.

It is not enough, brethren, that we should go through all these previous steps, if we then go utterly astray at the end, by forgetting that there is only one way by which we become partakers of any of the benefits and blessings that Christ has wrought out. It is much to say that for inheritance there must be sonship. It is much to say that for sonship there must be a divine regeneration. It is much to say that the power of this regeneration is all gathered together in Christ Jesus. But there are plenty of people that would agree to all that, who go off at that point, and content themselves with *this* kind of thinking-that in some vague mysterious way, they know not how, in a sort of half-magical manner, the benefit of Christ's death and work comes to all in Christian lands, whether there be an act of faith or not! Now I am not going to talk theology at present, at this stage of my sermon; but what I want to leave upon all your hearts is this profound conviction,-Unless we are wedded to Jesus Christ by the simple act of trust in His mercy and His power, Christ is nothing to us. Do not let us, my friends, blink that deciding test of the whole matter. We may talk about Christ for ever; we may set forth aspects of His work, great and glorious. He may be to us much that is very precious; but the one question, the question of questions, on which everything else depends, is, Am I trusting to Him as my divine Redeemer? am I resting in Him as the Son of God? Some of us here now have a sort of nominal connection with Christ, who have a kind of imaginative connection with Him; traditional, ceremonial, by habit of thought, by attendance on public worship, and by I know not what other means. Ceremonies are nothing, notions are nothing, beliefs are nothing, formal participation in worship is nothing. Christ is everything to him that trusts Him. Christ is nothing but a judge and a condemnation to him who trusts Him not. And here is the turning-point, Am I resting upon that Lord for my salvation? If so, you can begin upon that step, the low one on which you can put your foot, the humble act of faith, and with the foot there, can climb up. If faith, then new birth; if new birth, then sonship; if sonship, then an heir of God, and a joint-heir with Christ.' But if you have not got your foot upon the lowest round of the ladder, you will never come within sight of the blessed face of Him who stands at the top of it, and who looks down to you at this moment, saying to you, 'My child, *wilt* thou not cry unto Me "Abba, Father?"'

Romans

SUFFERING WITH CHRIST, A CONDITION OF GLORY WITH CHRIST

Rom. 8:17.

In the former part of this verse the Apostle tells us that in order to be heirs of God, we must become sons through and joint-heirs with Christ. He seems at first sight to add in these words of our text another condition to those already specified, namely, that of suffering with Christ.

Now, of course, whatever may be the operation of suffering in fitting for the possession of the Christian inheritance, either here or in another world, the sonship and the sorrows do not stand on the same level in regard to that possession. The one is the indispensable condition of all; the other is but the means for the operation of the condition. The one-being sons, 'joint-heirs with Christ,'-is the root of the whole matter; the other-the 'suffering with Him,'-is but the various process by which from the root there come 'the blade, and the ear, and the full corn in the ear.' Given the sonship-if it is to be worked out into power and beauty, there must be suffering with Christ. But unless there be sonship, there is no possibility of inheriting God; discipline and suffering will be of no use at all.

The chief lesson which I wish to gather from this text now is that all God's sons must suffer with Christ; and in addition to this principle, we may complete our considerations by adding briefly, that the inheritance must be won by suffering, and that if we suffer with Him, we certainly shall receive the inheritance.

I. First, then, sonship with Christ necessarily involves suffering with Him.

I think that we entirely misapprehend the force of this passage before us, if we suppose it to refer principally or merely to the outward calamities, what you call trials and afflictions, which befall people, and see in it only the teaching, that the sorrows of daily life may have in them a sign of our being children of God, and some power to prepare us for the glory that is to come. There is a great deal more in the thought than that, brethren. This is not merely a text for people who are in affliction, but for all of us. It does not merely contain a law for a certain part of life, but it contains a law for the whole of life. It is not merely a promise that in all our afflictions Christ will be afflicted, but it is a solemn injunction that we seek to know 'the fellowship of His sufferings, and be made conformable to the likeness of His death,' if we expect to be 'found in the likeness of His Resurrection,' and to have any share in the community of His glory. In other words, the foundation of it is not that Christ shares in our sufferings; but that we, as Christians, in a deep and real sense do necessarily share and participate in Christ's. We 'suffer with Him'; *not* He suffers with us.

Now, do not let us misunderstand each other, or the Apostle's teaching. Do not suppose that I am forgetting, or wishing you to account as of small importance, the awful sense in which Christ's suffering stands as a thing by itself and unapproachable, a solitary pillar rising up, above the waste of time, to which all men everywhere are to turn with the one thought, 'I can do nothing like that; I need to do nothing like it; it has been done once, and once for all; and what I have to do is, simply to lie down before Him, and let the power and the blessings of that death and those sufferings flow into my heart.' The Divine Redeemer makes eternal redemption. The sufferings of Christ-the sufferings of His life, and the sufferings of His death-both because of the nature which bore them, and of the aspect which they wore in regard to us, are in their source, in their intensity, in their character, and consequences, unapproachable, incapable of repetition, and needing no repetition whilst the world shall stand. But then, do not let us forget that the very books and writers in the New Testament that preach most broadly Christ's sole, all-sufficient, eternal redemption for the world by His sufferings and death, turn round and say to us too, '"Be planted together in the likeness of His death”; you are “crucified to the world” by the Cross of Christ; you are to “fill up that which is behind of the sufferings of Christ.”‘ He Himself speaks of our drinking of the cup that He drank of, and being baptized with the baptism that He was baptized with, if we desire to sit yonder on His throne, and share with Him in His glory.

Now what do the Apostles, and what does Christ Himself, in that passage that I have quoted, mean, by such solemn words as these? Some people shrink from them, and say that it is trenching upon the central doctrine of the Gospel, when we speak about drinking of the cup which Christ drank of. They ask, Can it be? Yes, it can be, if you will think thus:-If a Christian has the Spirit and life of Christ in him, his career will be moulded, imperfectly but really, by the same Spirit that dwelt in his Lord; and similar causes will produce corresponding effects. The life of Christ which-divine, pure, incapable of copy and repetition-in one aspect has ended for ever for men, remains to be lived, in another view of it, by every Christian, who in like manner has to fight with the world; who in like manner has to resist temptation; who in like manner has to stand, by God’s help, pure and sinless, in so far as the new nature of him is concerned, in the midst of a world that is full of evil. For were the sufferings of the Lord only the sufferings that were wrought upon Calvary? Were the sufferings of the Lord only the sufferings which came from the contradiction of sinners against Himself? Were the sufferings of the Lord only the sufferings which were connected with His bodily afflictions and pain, precious and priceless as they were, and operative causes of our redemption as they were? Oh no. Conceive of that perfect, sinless, really human life, in the midst of a system of things that is all full of corruption and of sin; coming ever and anon against misery, and wrong-doing, and rebellion; and ask yourselves whether part of His sufferings did not spring from the contact of the sinless Son of man with a sinful world, and the apparently vain attempt to influence and leaven that sinful world with care for itself and love for the Father. If there had been nothing more than that, yet Christ’s sufferings as the Son of God in the midst of sinful men would have been deep and real. ‘O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?’ was wrung from Him by the painful sense of want of sympathy between His aims and theirs. ‘Oh that I had wings like a dove, for then I would fly away and be at rest,' must often be the language of those who are like Him in spirit, and in consequent sufferings.

And then again, another branch of the 'sufferings of Christ' is to be found in that deep and mysterious fact on which I durst not venture to speak beyond what the actual words of Scripture put into my lips-the fact that Christ wrought out His perfect obedience as a man, through temptation and by suffering. There was no sin *within* Him, no tendency to sin, no yielding to the evil that assailed. 'The Prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me.' But yet, when that dark Power stood by His side, and said, 'If thou be the Son of God, cast Thyself down,' it was a real temptation and not a sham one. There was no wish to do it, no faltering for a moment, no hesitation. There was no rising up in that calm will of even a moment's impulse to do the thing that was presented;-but yet it was presented, and, when Christ triumphed, and the tempter departed for a season, there had been a temptation and there had been a conflict. And though obedience be a joy, and the doing of His Father's will was His delight, as it must needs be in pure and in purified hearts; yet obedience which is sustained in the face of temptation, and which never fails, though its path lead to bodily pains and the 'contradiction of sinners,' may well be called suffering. We cannot speak of our Lord's obedience as the surrender of His own will to the Father's, with the implication that these two wills ever did or could move except in harmony. There was no place in Christ's obedience for that casting out of sinful self which makes our submission a surrender joined with suffering, but He knew temptation. Flesh, and sense, and the world, and the prince of this world, presented it to Him; and therefore His obedience too was suffering, even though to do the will of His Father was His meat and His drink, His sustenance and His refreshment.

But then, let me remind you still further, that not only does the life of Christ, as sinless in the midst of sinful men, and the life of Christ, as sinless whilst yet there was temptation presented to it-assume the aspect of being a life of suffering, and become, in that respect, the model for us; but that also the Death of Christ, besides its aspect as an atonement and sacrifice for sin, the power by which transgression is put away and God's love flows out upon our souls, has another power given to it in the teaching of the New Testament. The Death of Christ is a type of the Christian's life, which is to be one long, protracted, and daily dying to sin, to self, to the world. The crucifixion of the old manhood is to be the life's work of every Christian, through the power of faith in that Cross by which 'the world is crucified unto Me, and I unto the world.' That thought comes over and over again in all forms of earnest presentation in the Apostle's teaching. Do not slur it over as if it were a mere fanciful metaphor. It carries in its type a most solemn reality. The truth is, that, if a Christian, you have a double life. There is Christ, with His power, with His Spirit, giving you a nature which is pure and sinless, incapable of transgression, like His own. The new man, that which is born of God, sinneth not, cannot sin. But side by side with it, working through it, working in it, leavening it, indistinguishable from it to your consciousness, by anything but this that the one works righteousness and the other works transgression, there is the 'old man,' 'the flesh,' 'the old Adam,' your own godless, independent, selfish, proud being. And the one is to slay the other! Ah, let me tell you, these words-crucifying, casting out the old man, plucking out the right eye, maiming self of the right hand, mortifying the deeds of the body-they are something very much deeper and more awful than poetical symbols and metaphors. They teach us this, that there is no growth without sore sorrow. Conflict, not progress, is the word that defines man's path from darkness into light. No holiness is won by any other means than this, that wickedness should be slain day by day, and hour by hour. In long lingering agony often, with the blood of the heart pouring out at every quivering vein, you are to cut right through the life and being of that sinful self; to do what the Word does, pierce to the dividing asunder of the thoughts and intents of the heart, and get rid by crucifying and slaying-a long process, a painful process-of your own sinful self. And not until you can stand up and say, 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,' have you accomplished that to which you are consecrated and vowed by your sonship-'being conformed unto the likeness of His death,' and 'knowing the fellowship of His sufferings.'

It is this process, the inward strife and conflict in getting rid of evil, which the Apostle designates here with the name of 'suffering with Christ, that we may be also glorified together.' On this high level, and not upon the lower one of the consideration that Christ will help us to bear outward infirmities and afflictions, do we find the true meaning of all that Scripture teaching which says indeed, 'Yes, our sufferings are *His*'; but lays the foundation of it in this, ‘His sufferings are *ours*.’ It begins by telling us that Christ has done a work and borne a sorrow that no second can ever do. Then it tells us that Christ’s life of obedience-which, because it *was* a life of obedience, was a life of suffering, and brought Him into a condition of hostility to the men around Him-is to be repeated in us. It sets before us the Cross of Calvary, and the sorrows and pains that were felt there;-and it says to us, Christian men and women, if you want the power for holy living, have fellowship in that atoning death; and if you want the pattern of holy living, look at that Cross and feel, ‘I am crucified to the world by it; and the life that I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God.’

Such considerations as these, however, do not necessarily exclude the other one [which we may just mention and dwell on for a moment], namely, that where there is this spiritual participation in the sufferings of Christ, and where His death is reproduced and perpetuated, as it were, in our daily mortifying ourselves in the present evil world-there Christ is with us in our afflictions. God forbid that I should try to strike away any word of consolation that has come, as these words of my text have come, to so many sorrowing hearts in all generations, like music in the night and like cold waters to a thirsty soul. We need not hold that there is no reference here to that comforting thought, ‘In all our affliction He is afflicted.’ Brethren, you and I have, each of us-one in one way, and one in another, all in some way, all in the right way, none in too severe a way, none in too slight a way-to tread the path of sorrow; and is it not a blessed thing, as we go along through that dark valley of the shadow of death down into which the sunniest paths go sometimes, to come, amidst the twilight and the gathering clouds, upon tokens that Jesus has been on the road before us? They tell us that in some trackless lands, when one friend passes through the pathless forests, he breaks a twig ever and anon as he goes, that those who come after may see the traces of his having been there, and may know that they are not out of the road. Oh, when we are journeying through the murky night, and the dark woods of affliction and sorrow, it is something to find here and there a spray broken, or a leafy stem bent down with the tread of His foot and the brush of His hand as He passed, and to remember that the path He trod He has hallowed, and thus to find lingering fragrances and hidden strengths in the remembrance of Him as ‘in all points tempted like as we are,’ bearing grief *for* us, bearing grief *with* us, bearing grief *like* us.

Oh, do not, do not, my brethren, keep these sacred thoughts of Christ's companionship in sorrow, for the larger trials of life. If the mote in the eye be large enough to annoy you, it is large enough to bring out His sympathy; and if the grief be too small for Him to compassionate and share, it is too small for you to be troubled by it. If you are ashamed to apply that divine thought, 'Christ bears this grief with me,' to those petty molehills that you sometimes magnify into mountains, think to yourselves that then it is a shame for you to be stumbling over them. But on the other hand, never fear to be irreverent or too familiar in the thought that Christ is willing to bear, and help you to bear, the pettiest, the minutest, and most insignificant of the daily annoyances that may come to ruffle you. Whether it be a poison from one serpent sting, or whether it be poison from a million of buzzing tiny mosquitoes, if there be a smart, go to Him, and He will help you to endure it. He will do more, He will bear it with you, for if so be that we suffer with Him, He suffers with us, and our oneness with Christ brings about a community of possessions whereby it becomes true of each trusting soul in its relations to Him, that 'all mine [joys and sorrows alike] are thine, and all thine are mine.'

II. There remain some other considerations which may be briefly stated, in order to complete the lessons of this text. In the second place, this community of suffering is a necessary preparation for the community of glory.

I name this principally for the sake of putting in a caution. The Apostle does not mean to tell us, of course, that if there were such a case as that of a man becoming a son of God, and having no occasion or opportunity afterwards, by brevity of life or other causes, for passing through the discipline of sorrow, his inheritance would be forfeited. We must always take such passages as this-which seem to make the discipline of the world an essential part of the preparing of us for glory-in conjunction with the other undeniable truth which completes them, that when a man has the love of God in his heart, however feebly, however newly, there and then he is fit for the inheritance. I think that Christian people make vast mistakes sometimes in talking about 'being made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light,' about being 'ripe for glory,' and the like. One thing at any rate is very certain, it is not the discipline that fits. That which fits goes before the discipline, and the discipline only develops the fitness. ‘God hath made us meet for the inheritance of the saints in light,’ says the Apostle. That is a past act. The preparedness for heaven comes at the moment-if it be a momentary act-when a man turns to Christ. You may take the lowest and most abandoned form of human character, and in one moment [it is possible, and it is often the case] the entrance into that soul of the feeble germ of that new affection shall at once change the whole moral habitude of that man. Though it be true, then, that heaven is only open to those who are capable-by holy aspirations and divine desires-of entering into it, it is equally true that such aspirations and desires may be the work of an instant, and may be superinduced in a moment in a heart the most debased and the most degraded. ‘This day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise,’-*fit* for the inheritance!

And, therefore, let us not misunderstand such words as this text, and fancy that the necessary discipline, which we have to go through before we are ready for heaven, is necessary in anything like the same sense in which it is necessary that a man should have faith in Christ in order to be saved. The one may be dispensed with, the other cannot. A Christian at any period of his Christian experience, if it please God to take him, is fit for the kingdom. The life *is* life, whether it be the budding beauty and feebleness of childhood, or the strength of manhood, or the maturity and calm peace of old age. But ‘add to your faith,’ that ‘an entrance may be ministered unto you *abundantly*.’ Remember that though the root of the matter, the seed of the kingdom, may be in you; and that though, therefore, you have a right to feel that, at any period of your Christian experience, if it please God to take you out of this world, you are fit for heaven-yet in His mercy He is leaving you here, training you, disciplining you, cleansing you, making you to be polished shafts in His quiver; and that all the glowing furnaces of fiery trial and all the cold waters of affliction are but the preparation through which the rough iron is to be passed before it becomes tempered steel, a shaft in the Master’s hand.

And so learn to look upon all trial as being at once the seal of your sonship, and the means by which God puts it within your power to win a higher place, a loftier throne, a nobler crown, a closer fellowship with Him ‘who hath suffered, being tempted,’ and who will receive into His own blessedness and rest them that are tempted. ‘The child, though he be an heir, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; but is under tutors and governors.’ God puts us in the school of sorrow under that stern tutor and governor here, and gives us the opportunity of ‘suffering with Christ,’ that by the daily crucifixion of our old nature, by the lessons and blessings of outward calamities and change, there may grow up in us a still nobler and purer, and perfecter divine life; and that we may so be made capable-more capable, and capable of more-of that inheritance for which the only necessary thing is the death of Christ, and the only fitness is faith in His name.

III. Finally, that inheritance is the necessary result of the suffering that has gone before.

The suffering results from our union with Christ. That union must needs culminate in glory. It is not only because the joy hereafter seems required in order to vindicate God’s love to His children, who here reap sorrow from their sonship, that the discipline of life cannot but end in blessedness. That ground of mere compensation is a low one on which to rest the certainty of future bliss. But the inheritance is sure to all who here suffer with Christ, because the one cause-union with the Lord-produces both the present result of fellowship in His sorrows, and the future result of joy in His joy, of possession of His possessions. The inheritance is sure because Christ possesses it now. The inheritance is sure because earth’s sorrows not merely require to be repaid by its peace, but because they have an evident design to fit us for it, and it would be destructive to all faith in God’s wisdom, and God’s knowledge of His own purposes, not to believe that what He has wrought us for will be given to us. Trials have no meaning, unless they are means to an end. The end is the inheritance, and sorrows here, as well as the Spirit’s work here, are the earnest of the inheritance. Measure the greatness of the glory by what has preceded it. God takes all these years of life, and all the sore trials and afflictions that belong inevitably to an earthly career, and works them in, into the blessedness that *shall* come. If a fair measure of the greatness of any result of productive power be the length of time that was taken for getting it ready, we can dimly conceive what that joy must be for which seventy years of strife and pain and sorrow are but a momentary preparation; and what must be the weight of that glory which is the counterpoise and consequence to the afflictions of this lower world. The further the pendulum swings on the one side, the further it goes up on the other. The deeper God plunges the comet into the darkness out yonder, the closer does it come to the sun at its nearest distance, and the longer does it stand basking and glowing in the full blaze of the glory from the central orb. So in *our* revolution, the measure of the distance from the farthest point of our darkest earthly sorrow, *to* the throne, may help us to the measure of the closeness of the bright, perfect, perpetual glory above, when we are *on* the throne: for if so be that we are sons, we *must* suffer with Him; if so be that we suffer, we *must* be glorified together!

20)Romans 8:19

Romans

THE REVELATION OF SONS

Rom. 8:19.

The Apostle has been describing believers as ‘sons’ and ‘heirs.’ He drops from these transcendent heights to contrast their present apparent condition with their true character and their future glory. The sad realities of suffering darken his lofty hopes, even although these sad realities are to his faith tokens of joint-heirship with Jesus, and pledges that if our inheritance is here manifested by suffering with him, that very fact is a prophecy of common glory hereafter. He describes that future as the revealing of a glory, to which the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared; and then, in our text he varies the application of that thought of revealing and thinks of the subjects of it as being the ‘sons of God.’ They will be revealed when the glory which they have as joint-heirs with Christ is revealed in them. They walk, as it were, compassed with mist and cloud, but the splendour which will fall on them will scatter the envious darkness, and ‘when Christ who is our life shall appear, then shall His co-heirs also appear with Him in glory.’

We may consider-

I. The present veil over the sons of God.

There is always a difference between appearance and reality, between the ideal and its embodiments. For all men it is true that the full expression of oneself is impossible. Each man's deeds fall short of disclosing the essential self in the man. Every will is hampered by the fleshly screen of the body. 'I would that my tongue could utter the thoughts that arise in me,' is the yearning of every heart that is deeply moved. Contending principles successively sway every personality and thwart each other's expression. For these, and many other reasons, the sum-total of every life is but a shrouded representation of the man who lives it; and we, all of us, after all efforts at self-revelation, remain mysteries to our fellows and to ourselves. All this is eminently true of the sons of God. They have a life-germ hidden in their souls, which in its very nature is destined to fill and expand their whole being, and to permeate with its triumphant energy every corner of their nature. But it is weak and often overborne by its opposite. The seed sown is to grow in spite of bad weather and a poor soil and many weeds, and though it is destined to overcome all these, it may to-day only be able to show on the surface a little patch of pale and struggling growth. When we think of the cost at which the life of Christ was imparted to men, and of the divine source from which it comes, and of the sedulous and protracted discipline through which it is being trained, we cannot but conclude that nothing short of its universal dominion over all the faculties of its imperfect possessors can be the goal of its working. Hercules in his cradle is still Hercules, and strangles snakes. Frost and sun may struggle in midwinter, and the cold may seem to predominate, but the sun is steadily enlarging its course in the sky, and increasing the fervour of its beams, and midsummer day is as sure to dawn as the shortest day was.

The sons of God, even more truly than other men, have contending principles fighting within them. It was the same Apostle who with oaths denied that he 'knew the man,' and in a passion of clinging love and penitence fell at His feet; but for the mere onlooker it would be hard to say which was the true man and which would conquer. The sons of God, like other men, have to express themselves in words which are never closely enough fitted to their thoughts and feelings. David's penitence has to be contented with groans which are not deep enough; and John's calm raptures on his Saviour's breast can only be spoken by shut eyes and silence. The sons of God never fully correspond to their character, but always fall somewhat beneath their desire, and must always be somewhat less than their intention. The artist never wholly embodies his conception. It is only God who ‘rests from His works’ because the works fully embody His creative design and fully receive the benediction of His own satisfaction with them.

From all such thoughts there arises a piece of plain practical wisdom, which warns Christian men not to despond or despair if they do not find themselves living up to their ideal. The sons of God are ‘veiled’ because the world’s estimate of them is untrue. The old commonplace that the world knows nothing of its greatest men is verified in the opinions which it holds about the sons of God. It is not for their Christianity that they get any of the world’s honours and encomiums, if such fall to their share. They are *un*known and yet *well*-known. They live for the most part veiled in obscurity. ‘The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not.’ They are God’s hidden ones. If they are wise, they will look for no recognition nor eulogy from the world, and will be content to live, as unknown by the princes of this world as was the Lord of glory, whom they slew because their dim eyes could not see the flashing of the glory ‘through the veil, that is to say, His flesh.’ But no consciousness of imperfection in our revelation of an indwelling Christ must ever be allowed to diminish our efforts to live out the life that is in us, and to shine as lights in the world; nor must the consciousness that we walk as ‘veiled,’ lead us to add to the thick folds the criminal one of voluntary silence and cowardly hiding in dumb hearts the secret of our lives.

II. The unveiling of the sons of God.

That unveiling is in the text represented as coming along with the glory which shall be revealed to usward, and as being contemporaneous with the deliverance of the creation itself from the bondage of corruption, and its passing into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. It coincides with the vanishing of the pain in which the whole creation now groans and travails, and with the adoption-that is, the redemption of our body. Then hope will be seen and will pass into still fruition. All this points to the time when Jesus Christ is revealed, and His servants are revealed with Him in glory. That revelation brings with it of necessity the manifestation of the sons of God for what they are-the making visible in the life of what God sees them to be.

That revelation of the sons of God is the result of the entire dominion and transforming supremacy of the Spirit of God in them. In the whole sweep of their consciousness there will in that day be nothing done from other motives; there will be no sidelights flashing in and disturbing the perfect illumination from the candle of the Lord set on high in their being; there will be no contradictions in the life. It will be one and simple, and therefore perfectly intelligible. Such is the destined issue of the most imperfect Christian life. The Christian man who has in his experience to-day the faintest and most interrupted operation of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has therein a pledge of immortality, because nothing short of an endless life of progressive and growing purity will be adequate to receive and exemplify the power which can never terminate until it is made like Him and perfectly seeing Him as He is.

But that unveiling further guarantees the possession of fully adequate means of expression. The limitations and imperfections of our present bodily life will all drop away in putting on 'the body of glory' which shall be ours. The new tongue will perfectly utter the new knowledge and rapture of the new life; new hands will perfectly realise our ideals; and on every forehead will be stamped Christ's new name.

That unveiling will be further realised by a divine act indicating the characters of the sons of God by their position. Earth's judgments will be reversed by that divine voice, and the great promise, which through weary ages has shone as a far-off star,-'I will set him on high because he hath known my name'-will then be known for the sun near at hand. Many names loudly blown through the world's trumpet will fall silent then. Many stars will be quenched, but 'they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament.'

That revelation will be more surprising to no one than to those who are its subjects, when they see themselves mirrored in that glass, and so unlike what they are here. Their first impulse will be to wonder at the form they see, and to ask, almost with incredulity, 'Lord, is it I?' Nor will the wonder be less when they recognise many whom they knew not. The surprises when the family of God is gathered together at last will be great. The Israel of Captivity lifts up her wondering eyes as she sees the multitudes flocking to her side as the doves to their windows, and, half-ashamed of her own narrow vision, exclaims, ‘I was left alone; these, where had they been?’ Let us rejoice that in the day when the sons of God are revealed, many hidden ones from many dark corners will sit at the Father’s table. That revelation will be made to the whole universe; we know not how, but we know that it shall be; and, as the text tells us, that revelation of the sons of God is the hope for which ‘the earnest expectation of the creature waits’ through the weary ages.

21)Romans 8:23

Romans

THE REDEMPTION OF THE BODY

Rom. 8:23.

In a previous verse Paul has said that all true Christians have received ‘the Spirit of adoption.’ They become sons of God through Christ the Son. They receive a new spiritual and divine life from God through Christ, and that life is like its source. In so far as that new life vitalises and dominates their nature, believers have received ‘the Spirit of adoption,’ and by it they cry ‘Abba, Father.’ But the body still remains a source of weakness, the seat of sin. It is sluggish and inapt for high purposes; it still remains subject to ‘the law of sin and death’; and so is not like the Father who breathed into it the breath of life. It remains in bondage, and has not yet received the adoption. This text, in harmony with the Apostle’s whole teaching, looks forward to a change in the body and in its relations to the renewed spirit, as the crown and climax of the work of redemption, and declares that till that change is effected, the condition of Christian men is imperfect, and is a waiting, and often a groaning.

In dealing with some of the thoughts that arise from this text, we note-

I. That a future bodily life is needed in order to give definiteness and solidity to the conception of immortality.

Before the Gospel came men’s belief in a future life was vague and powerless, mainly because it had no Gospel of the Resurrection, and so nothing tangible to lay hold on. The Gospel has made the belief in a future state infinitely easier and more powerful, mainly because of the emphasis with which it has proclaimed an actual resurrection and a future bodily life. Its great proof of immortality is drawn, not merely from ethical considerations of the manifest futility of earthly life which has no sequel beyond the grave, nor from the intuitions and longings of men’s souls, but from the historical fact of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of His Ascension in bodily form into heaven. It proclaims these two facts as parts of His experience, and asserts that when He rose from the dead and ascended up on high, He did so as ‘the first-born among many brethren,’ their forerunner and their pattern. It is this which gives the Gospel its power, and thus transforms a vague and shadowy conception of immortality into a solid faith, for which we have already an historical guarantee. Stupendous mysteries still veil the nature of the resurrection process, though these are exaggerated into inconceivabilities by false notions of what constitutes personal identity; but if the choice lies between accepting the Christian doctrine of a resurrection and the conception of a finite spirit disembodied and yet active, there can be no doubt as to which of these two is the more reasonable and thinkable. Body, soul, and spirit make the complete triune man.

The thought of the future life as a bodily life satisfies the longings of the heart. Much natural shrinking from death comes from unwillingness to part company with an old companion and friend. As Paul puts it in 2nd Corinthians, ‘Not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon.’ All thoughts of the future which do not give prominence to the idea of a bodily life open up but a ghastly and uninviting mode of existence, which cannot but repel those who are accustomed to the fellowship of their bodies, and they feel that they cannot think of themselves as deprived of that which was their servant and instrument, through all the years of their earthly consciousness.

II. ‘The body that shall be’ is an emancipated body.

The varied gifts of the Spirit bestowed upon the Christian Church served to quicken the hope of the yet greater gifts of that indwelling Spirit which were yet to come. Chief amongst these our text considers the transformation of the earthly into a spiritual body. This transformation our text regards as being the participation by the body in the redemption by which Christ has bought us with the great price of His blood. We have to interpret the language here in the light of the further teaching of Paul in the great Resurrection chapter of 1Co. 15:1 - 1Co. 15:58, which distinctly lays stress, not on the identity of the corporeal frame which is laid in the grave with 'the body of glory,' but upon the entire contrast between the 'natural body,' which is fit organ for the lower nature, and is informed by it, and the 'spiritual body,' which is fit organ for the spirit. We have to interpret 'the resurrection of the body' by the definite apostolic declaration, 'Thou sowest not that body that shall be. . . but God giveth it a body as it hath pleased Him'; and we have to give full weight to the contrasts which the Apostle draws between the characteristics of that which is 'sown' and of that which is 'raised.' The one is 'sown in corruption and raised in incorruption.' Natural decay is contrasted with immortal youth. The one is 'sown in dishonour,' the other is 'raised in glory.' That contrast is ethical, and refers either to the subordinate position of the body here in relation to the spirit, or to the natural sense of shame, or to the ideas of degradation which are attached to the indulgence of the appetites. The one is 'sown in weakness,' the other is 'raised in power'; the one is 'sown a natural body,' the other is 'raised a spiritual body.' Is not Paul in this whole series of contrasts thinking primarily of the vision which he saw on the road to Damascus when the risen Christ appeared before him? And had not the years which had passed since then taught him to see in the ascended Christ the prophecy and the pattern of what His servants should become? We have further to keep in view Paul's other representation in 2Co. 5:1 - 2Co. 5:21, where he strongly puts the contrast between the corporeal environment of earth and 'the body of glory,' which belongs to the future life, in his two images: 'the earthly house of this tabernacle'-a clay hut which lasts but for a time,-and 'the building of God, the house not made with hands and eternal.' The body is an occasion of separation from the Lord.

These considerations may well lead us to, at least, general outlines on which a confident and peaceful hope may fix. For example, they lead us to the thought that that redeemed body is no more subject to decay and death, is no more weighed upon by weakness and weariness, has no work beyond its strength, needs no sustenance by food, and no refreshment of sleep. ‘The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them,’ suggests strength constantly communicated by a direct divine gift. And from all these negative characteristics there follows that there will be in that future bodily life no epochs of age marked by bodily changes. The two young men who were seen sitting in the sepulchre of Jesus had lived before Adam, and would seem as young if we saw them to-day.

Similarly the redeemed body will be a more perfect instrument for communication with the external universe. We know that the present body conditions our knowledge, and that our senses do not take cognisance of all the qualities of material things. Microscopes and telescopes have enlarged our field of vision, and have brought the infinitely small and the infinitely distant within our range. Our ear hears vibrations at a certain rate per second, and no doubt if it were more delicately organised we could hear sounds where now is silence. Sometimes the creatures whom we call ‘inferior’ seem to have senses that apprehend much of which we are not aware. Balaam’s ass saw the obstructing angel before Balaam did. Nor is there any reason to suppose that all the powers of the mind find tools to work with in the body. It is possible that that body which is the fit instrument of the spirit may become its means of knowing more deeply, thinking more wisely, understanding more swiftly, comprehending more widely, remembering more firmly and judging more soundly. It is possible that the contrast between then and now may be like the contrast between telegraph and slow messenger in regard to the rapidity, between photograph and poor daub in regard to the truthfulness, between a full-orbed circle and a fragmentary arc in regard to the completeness of the messages which the body brings to the indwelling self.

But, once more, the body unredeemed has appetites and desires which may lead to their own satisfaction, which do lead to sordid cares and weary toil. ‘The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh.’ The redeemed body will have in it nothing to tempt and nothing to clog, but will be a helper to the spirit and a source of strength. Glorious work of God as the body is, it has its weaknesses, its limitations, and its tendencies to evil.

We must not be tempted into brooding over unanswered questions as to ‘How do the dead rise, and with what body do they come?’ But we can lift our eyes to the mountain-top where Jesus went up to pray. ‘And as He prayed the fashion of His countenance was altered, and His raiment became white and dazzling’; and He was capable of entering into the Shekinah cloud and holding fellowship therein with the Father, who attested His Sonship and bade us listen to His voice. And we can look to Olivet and follow the ascending Jesus as He lets His benediction drop on the upturned faces of His friends, until He again passes into the Shekinah cloud, and leaving the world, goes to the Father. And from both His momentary transfiguration and His permanent Ascension we can draw the certain assurance that ‘He shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of His glory, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself.’

III. The redeemed body is a consequence of Christ’s indwelling Spirit.

It is no natural result of death or resurrection, but is the outcome of the process begun on earth, by which, ‘through faith and the righteousness of faith,’ the spirit is life. The context distinctly enforces this view by its double use of ‘adoption,’ which in one aspect has already been received, and is manifested by the fact that ‘now are we the sons of God,’ and in another aspect is still ‘waited’ for. The Christian man in his regenerated spirit has been born again; the Christian man still waits for the completion of that sonship in a time when the regenerated spirit will no longer dwell in the clay cottage of ‘this tabernacle,’ but will inhabit a congruous dwelling in ‘the building of God not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.’

Scripture is too healthy and comprehensive to be contented with a merely spiritual regeneration, and is withal too spiritual to be satisfied with a merely material heaven. It gives full place to both elements, and yet decisively puts all belonging to the latter second. It lays down the laws that for a complete humanity there must be body as well as spirit; that there must be a correspondence between the two, and as is the spirit so must the body be, and further, that the process must begin at the centre and work outwards, so that the spirit must first be transformed, and then the body must be participant of the transformation.

All that Scripture says about ‘rising in glory’ is said about believers. It is represented as a spiritual process. They who have the Spirit of God in their spirits because they have it receive the glorified body which is like their Saviour’s. It is not enough to die in order to ‘rise glorious.’ ‘If the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by His Spirit that dwelleth in you.’ The resurrection is promised for all mankind, but it may be a resurrection in which there shall be endless living and no glory, nor any beauty and no blessedness. But the body may be ‘sown in weakness,’ and in weakness raised; it may be ‘sown in dishonour’ and in dishonour raised; it may be sown dead, and raised a living death. ‘Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.’ Does that mean nothing? ‘They that have done evil to the resurrection of condemnation.’ Does that mean nothing? There are dark mysteries in these and similar words of Scripture which should make us all pause and solemnly reflect. The sole way which leads to the resurrection of glory is the way of faith in Jesus Christ. If we yield ourselves to Him, He will plant His Spirit in our spirits, will guide and growingly sanctify us through life, will deliver us by the indwelling of the Spirit of life in Him from the law of sin and death. Nor will His transforming power cease till it has pervaded our whole being with its fiery energy, and we stand at the last men like Christ, redeemed in body, soul, and spirit, ‘according to the mighty working whereby He is able to subdue all things unto Himself.’

22)Romans 8:26

Romans

THE INTERCEDING SPIRIT

Rom. 8:26.

Pentecost was a transitory sign of a perpetual gift. The tongues of fire and the rushing mighty wind, which were at first the most conspicuous results of the gifts of the Spirit, tongues, and prophecies, and gifts of healing, which were to the early Church itself and to onlookers palpable demonstrations of an indwelling power, were little more lasting than the fire and the wind. Does anything remain? This whole great chapter is Paul's triumphant answer to such a question. The Spirit of God dwells in every believer as the source of his true life, is for him 'the Spirit of adoption' and witnesses with his spirit that he is a child of God, and a joint-heir with Christ. Not only does that Spirit co-operate with the human spirit in this witness-bearing, but the verse, of which our text is a part, points to another form of co-operation: for the word rendered in the earlier part of the verse 'helpeth' in the original suggests more distinctly that the Spirit of God in His intercession for us works in association with us.

First, then-

I. The Spirit's intercession is not carried on apart from us.

Much modern hymnology goes wrong in this point, that it represents the Spirit's intercession as presented in heaven rather than as taking place within the personal being of the believer. There is a broad distinction carefully observed throughout Scripture between the representations of the work of Christ and that of the Spirit of Christ. The former in its character and revelation and attainment was wrought upon earth, and in its character of intercession and bestowment of blessings is discharged at the right hand of God in heaven; the whole of the Spirit's work, on the other hand, is wrought in human spirits here. The context speaks of intercession expressed in 'groanings which cannot be uttered,' and which, unexpressed though they are, are fully understood 'by Him who searches the heart.' Plainly, therefore, these groanings come from human hearts, and as plainly are the Divine Spirit's voicing them.

II. The Spirit's intercession in our spirits consists in our own divinely-inspired longings.

The Apostle has just been speaking of another groaning within ourselves, which is the expression of 'the earnest expectation' of 'the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body'; and he says that that longing will be the more patient the more it is full of hope. This, then, is Paul's conception of the normal attitude of a Christian soul; but that attitude is hard to keep up in one's own strength, because of the distractions of time and sense which are ever tending to disturb the continuity and fixity of that onward look, and to lead us rather to be satisfied with the gross, dull present. That redemption of the body, with all which it implies and includes, ought to be the supreme object to which each Christian heart should ever be turning, and Christian prayers should be directed. But our own daily experience makes us only too sure that such elevation above, and remoteness from earthly thoughts, with all their pettinesses and limitations, is impossible for us in our own strength. As Paul puts it here, ‘We know not what to pray for’; nor can we fix and focus our desires, nor present them ‘as we ought.’ It is to this weakness and incompleteness of our desires and prayers that the help of the Spirit is directed. He strengthens our longings by His own direct operation. The more vivid our anticipations and the more steadfast our hopes, and the more our spirits reach out to that future redemption, the more are we bound to discern something more than human imaginings in them, and to be sure that such visions are too good not to be true, too solid to be only the play of our own fancy. The more we are conscious of these experiences as our own, the more certain we shall be that in them it is not we that speak, but ‘the Spirit of the Father that speaketh in us.’

III. These divinely-inspired longings are incapable of full expression.

They are shallow feelings that can be spoken. Language breaks down in the attempt to express our deepest emotions and our truest love. For all the deepest things in man, inarticulate utterance is the most self-revealing. Grief can say more in a sob and a tear than in many weak words; love finds its tongue in the light of an eye and the clasp of a hand. The groanings which rise from the depths of the Christian soul cannot be forced into the narrow frame-work of human language; and just because they are unutterable are to be recognised as the voice of the Holy Spirit.

But where amidst the Christian experience of to-day shall we find anything in the least like these unutterable longings after the redemption of the body which Paul here takes it for granted are the experience of all Christians? There is no more startling condemnation of the average Christianity of our times than the calm certainty with which through all this epistle the Apostle takes it for granted that the experience of the Roman Christians will universally endorse his statements. Look for a moment at what these statements are. Listen to the briefest summary of them: ‘We cry, Abba, Father’; ‘We are children of God’; ‘We suffer with Him that we may be glorified with Him’; ‘Glory shall be revealed to usward’; ‘We have the first-fruits of the Spirit’; ‘We ourselves groan within ourselves’; ‘By hope were we saved’; ‘We hope for that which we see not’; ‘Then do we with patience wait for it’; ‘We know that to them that love God all things work together for good’; ‘In all these things we are more than conquerors’; ‘Neither death nor life. . . nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God.’ He believed that in these rapturous and triumphant words he was gathering together the experience of every Roman Christian, and would evoke from their lips a confident ‘Amen.’ Where are the communities to-day in whose hearing these words could be reiterated with the like assurance? How few among us there are who know anything of these ‘groanings which cannot be uttered!’ How few among us there are whose spirits are stretching out eager desires towards the land of perpetual summer, like migratory birds in northern latitudes when the autumn days are shortening and the temperature is falling!

But, however we must feel that our poor experience falls far short of the ideal in our text, an ideal which was to some extent realised in the early Christian Church, we must beware of taking the imperfections of our experience as any evidence of the unreality of our Christianity. They are a proof that we have limited and impeded the operation of the Spirit within us. They teach us that He will not intercede ‘with groanings which cannot be uttered’ unless we let Him speak through our voices. Therefore, if we find that in our own consciousness there is little to correspond to those unuttered groanings, we should take the warning: ‘Quench not the Spirit.’ ‘Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God in whom ye were sealed unto the day of redemption.’

IV. The unuttered longings are sure to be answered.

He that searcheth the heart knows the meaning of the Spirit’s unspoken prayers; and looking into the depths of the human spirit interprets its longings, discriminating between the mere human and partial expression and the divinely-inspired desire which may be unexpressed. If our prayers are weak, they are answered in the measure in which they embody in them, though perhaps mistaken by us, a divine longing. Apparent disappointment of our petitions may be real answers to our real prayer. It was because Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus that He abode still in the same place where He was, to let Lazarus die that He might be raised again. That was the true answer to the sisters' hope of His immediate coming. God's way of giving to us is to breathe within us a desire, and then to answer the desire inbreathed. So, longing is the prophecy of fulfilment when it is longing according to the will of God. They who 'hunger and thirst after righteousness' may ever be sure that their bread shall be given them, and their water will be made sure. The true object of our desires is often not clear to us, and so we err in translating it into words. Let us be thankful that we pray to a God who can discern the prayer within the prayer, and often gives the substance of our petitions in the very act of refusing their form.

23)Romans 8:32

Romans

THE GIFT THAT BRINGS ALL GIFTS

Rom. 8:32.

We have here an allusion to, if not a distinct quotation from, the narrative in Genesis, of Abraham's offering up of Isaac. The same word which is employed in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, to translate the Hebrew word rendered in our Bible as 'withheld,' is employed here by the Apostle. And there is evidently floating before his mind the thought that, in some profound and real sense, there is an analogy between that wondrous and faithful act of giving up and the transcendent and stupendous gift to the world, from God, of His Son.

If we take that point of view, the language of my text rises into singular force, and suggests many very deep thoughts, about which, perhaps, silence is best. But led by that analogy, let us deal with these words.

I. Consider this mysterious act of divine surrender.

The analogy seems to suggest to us, strange as it may be, and remote from the cold and abstract ideas of the divine nature which it is thought to be philosophical to cherish, that something corresponding to the pain and loss that shadowed the patriarch's heart flitted across the divine mind when the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. Not merely to give, but to give up, is the highest crown and glory of love, as we know it. And who shall venture to say that we so fully apprehend the divine nature as to be warranted in declaring that some analogy to that is impossible for Him? Our language is, 'I will not offer unto God that which doth cost me nothing.' Let us bow in silence before the dim intimation that seems to flicker out of the words of my text, that so He says to us, 'I will not offer unto you that which doth cost Me nothing.' 'He *spared* not His own Son'; withheld Him not from us.

But passing from that which, I dare say, many of you may suppose to be fanciful and unwarranted, let us come upon the surer ground of the other words of my text. And notice how the reality of the surrender is emphasised by the closeness of the bond which, in the mysterious eternity, knits together the Father and the Son. As with Abraham, so in this lofty example, of which Abraham and Isaac were but as dim, wavering reflections in water, the Son is His own Son. It seems to me impossible, upon any fair interpretation of the words before us, to refrain from giving to that epithet here its very highest and most mysterious sense. It cannot be any mere equivalent for Messiah, it cannot merely mean a man who was like God in purity of nature and in closeness of communion. For the force of the analogy and the emphasis of that word which is even more emphatic in the Greek than in the English 'His *own* Son,' point to a community of nature, to a uniqueness and singleness of relation, to a closeness of intimacy, to which no other is a parallel. And so we have to estimate the measure of the surrender by the tenderness and awfulness of the bond. 'Having one Son, His well-beloved, He sent Him.'

Notice, again, how the greatness of the surrender is made more emphatic by the contemplation of it in its double negative and positive aspect, in the two successive clauses. 'He spared not His Son, but delivered Him up,' an absolute, positive giving of Him over to the humiliation of the life and to the mystery of the death.

And notice how the tenderness and the beneficence that were the sole motive of the surrender are lifted into light in the last words, ‘for us all.’ The single, sole reason that bowed, if I may so say, the divine purpose, and determined the mysterious act, was a pure desire for our blessing. No definition is given as to the manner in which that surrender wrought for our good. The Apostle does not need to dwell upon that. His purpose is to emphasise the entire unselfishness, the utter simplicity of the motive which moved the divine will. One great throb of love to the whole of humanity led to that transcendent surrender, before which we can only bow and say, ‘Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift.’

And now, notice how this mysterious act is grasped by the Apostle here as what I may call the illuminating fact as to the whole divine nature. From it, and from it alone, there falls a blaze of light on the deepest things in God. We are accustomed to speak of Christ’s perfect life of unselfishness, and His death of pure beneficence, as being the great manifestation to us all that in His heart there is an infinite fountain of love to us. We are, further, accustomed to speak of Christ’s mission and death as being the revelation to us of the love of God as well as of the Man Christ Jesus, because we believe that ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world,’ and that He has so manifested and revealed the very nature of divinity to us, in His life and in His person, that, as He Himself says, ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.’ And every conclusion that we draw as to the love of Christ is, *ipso facto*, a conclusion as to the love of God. But my text looks at the matter from rather a different point of view, and bids us see, in Christ’s mission and sacrifice, the great demonstration of the love of God, not only because ‘God was in Christ,’ but because the Father’s will, conceived of as distinct from, and yet harmonious with, the will of the Son, gives Him up for us. And we have to say, not only that we see the love of God in the love of Christ, but ‘God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son’ that we might have life through Him.

These various phases of the love of Christ as manifesting the divine love, may not be capable of perfect harmonising in our thoughts, but they do blend into one, and by reason of them all, ‘God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’ We have to think not only of Abraham who gave up, but of the unresisting, innocent

Isaac, bearing on his shoulders the wood for the burnt offering, as the Christ bore the Cross on His, and suffering himself to be bound upon the pile, not only by the cords that tied his limbs, but by the cords of obedience and submission, and in both we have to bow before the Apocalypse of divine love.

II. So, secondly, look at the power of this divine surrender to bring with it all other gifts.

‘How shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?’ The Apostle’s triumphant question requires for its affirmative answer only the belief in the unchangeableness of the Divine heart, and the uniformity of the Divine purpose. And if these be recognised, their conclusion inevitably follows. ‘With Him He will freely give us all things.’

It is so, because the greater gift implies the less. We do not expect that a man who hands over a million of pounds to another, to help him, will stick at a farthing afterwards. If you give a diamond you may well give a box to keep it in. In God’s gift the lesser will follow the lead of the greater; and whatsoever a man can want, it is a smaller thing for Him to bestow, than was the gift of His Son.

There is a beautiful contrast between the manners of giving the two sets of gifts implied in words of the original, perhaps scarcely capable of being reproduced in any translation. The expression that is rendered ‘freely give,’ implies that there is a grace and a pleasantness in the act of bestowal. God gave in Christ, what we may reverently say it was something like pain to give. Will He not give the lesser, whatever they may be, which it is the joy of His heart to communicate? The greater implies the less.

Farther, this one great gift draws all other gifts after it, because the purpose of the greater gift cannot be attained without the bestowment of the lesser. He does not begin to build being unable to finish; He does not miscalculate His resources, nor stultify Himself by commencing upon a large scale, and having to stop short before the purpose with which He began is accomplished. Men build great palaces, and are bankrupt before the roof is put on. God lays His plans with the knowledge of His powers, and having first of all bestowed this large gift, is not going to have it bestowed in vain for want of some smaller ones to follow it up. Christ puts the same argument to us, beginning only at the other end of the process. Paul says, ‘God has laid the foundation in Christ.’ Do you think He will stop before the headstone is put on? Christ said, ‘It is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom.’ Do you think He will not give you bread and water on the road to it? Will He send out His soldiers half-equipped; will it be found when they are on their march that they have been started with a defective commissariat, and with insufficient trenching tools? Shall the children of the King, on the road to their thrones, be left to scramble along anyhow, in want of what they need to get there? That is not God’s way of doing. He that hath begun a good work will also perfect the same, and when He gave to you and me His Son, He bound Himself to give us every subsidiary and secondary blessing which was needed to make that Son’s work complete in each of us.

Again, this great blessing draws after it, by necessary consequence, all other lesser and secondary gifts, inasmuch as, in every real sense, everything is included and possessed in the Christ when we receive Him. ‘With Him,’ says Paul, as if that gift once laid in a man’s heart actually enclosed within it, and had for its indispensable accompaniment the possession of every smaller thing that a man can need, Jesus Christ is, as it were, a great Cornucopia, a horn of abundance, out of which will pour, with magic affluence, all manner of supplies according as we require. This fountain flows with milk, wine, and water, as men need. Everything is given us when Christ is given to us, because Christ is the Heir of all things, and we possess all things in Him; as some poor village maiden married to a prince in disguise, who, on the morrow of her wedding finds that she is lady of broad lands, and mistress of a kingdom. ‘He that spared not His own Son,’ not only ‘with Him will give,’ but in Him has ‘given us all things.’

And so, brethren, just as that great gift is the illuminating fact in reference to the divine heart, so is it the interpreting fact in reference to the divine dealings. Only when we keep firm hold of Christ as the gift of God, and the Explainer of all that God does, can we face the darkness, the perplexities, the torturing questions that from the beginning have harassed men’s minds as they looked upon the mysteries of human misery. If we recognise that God has given us His Son, then all things become, if not plain, at least lighted with some gleam from that great gift; and we feel that the surrender of Christ is the constraining fact which shapes after its own likeness, and for its own purpose, all the rest of God's dealings with men. That gift makes anything believable, reasonable, possible, rather than that He should spare not His own Son, and then should counterwork His own act by sending the world anything but good.

III. And now, lastly, take one or two practical issues from these thoughts, in reference to our own belief and conduct.

First, I would say, Let us correct our estimates of the relative importance of the two sets of gifts. On the one side stands the solitary Christ; on the other side are massed all delights of sense, all blessings of time, all the things that the vulgar estimation of men unanimously recognises to be good. These are only makeweights. They are all lumped together into an 'also.' They are but the golden dust that may be filed off from the great ingot and solid block. They are but the outward tokens of His far deeper and true preciousness. They are secondary; He is the primary. What an inversion of our notions of good! Do *you* degrade all the world's wealth, pleasantness, ease, prosperity, into an 'also?' Are you content to put it in the secondary place, as a result, if it please Him, of Christ? Do you live as if you did? Which do you hunger for most? Which do you labour for hardest? 'Seek ye first the Kingdom and the King, and all 'these things shall be added unto you.'

Let these thoughts teach us that sorrow too is one of the gifts of the Christ. The words of my text, at first sight, might seem to be simply a promise of abundant earthly good. But look what lies close beside them, and is even part of the same triumphant burst. 'Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?' These are some of the 'all things' which Paul expected that God would give him and his brethren. And looking upon all, he says, 'They all work together for good'; and in them all we may be more than conquerors. It would be a poor, shabby issue of such a great gift as that of which we have been speaking, if it were only to be followed by the sweetnesses and prosperity and wealth of this world. But here is the point that we have to keep hold of-inasmuch as He gives us all things, let us take all the things that come to us as being as distinctly the gifts of His love, as is the gift of Christ Himself. A wise physician, to an ignorant onlooker, might seem to be acting in contradictory fashions when in the one moment he slashes into a limb, with a sharp, gleaming knife, and in the next sedulously binds the wounds, and closes the arteries, but the purpose of both acts is one.

The diurnal revolution of the earth brings the joyful sunrise and the pathetic sunset. The same annual revolution whirls us through the balmy summer days and the biting winter ones. God’s purpose is one. His methods vary. The road goes straight to its goal; but it sometimes runs in tunnels dank and dark and stifling, and sometimes by sunny glades and through green pastures. God’s purpose is always love, brother. His withdrawals are gifts, and sorrow is not the least of the benefits which come to us through the Man of Sorrows.

So again, let these thoughts teach us to live by a very quiet and peaceful faith. We find it a great deal easier to trust God for Heaven than for earth-for the distant blessings than for the near ones. Many a man will venture his soul into God’s hands, who would hesitate to venture to-morrow’s food there. Why? Is it not because we do not really trust Him for the greater that we find it so hard to trust Him for the less? Is it not because we want the less more really than we want the greater, that we can put ourselves off with faith for the one, and want something more solid to grasp for the other? Live in the calm confidence that God gives all things; and gives us for to-morrow as for eternity; for earth as for heaven.

And, last of all, make you quite sure that you have taken *the* great gift of God. He gives it to all the world, but they only have it who accept it by faith. Have you, my brother? I look out upon the lives of the mass of professing Christians; and this question weighs on my heart, judging by conduct-have they really got Christ for their own? ‘Wherefore do ye spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not?’ Look how you are all fighting and scrambling, and sweating and fretting, to get hold of the goods of this present life, and here is a gift gleaming before you all the while that you will not condescend to take. Like a man standing in a market-place offering sovereigns for nothing, which nobody accepts because they think the offer is too good to be true, so God complains and wails: I have stretched out My hands all the day, laden with gifts, and no man regarded.

'It is only heaven may be had for the asking;
It is only God that is given away.'

He gives His Son. Take Him by humble faith in His sacrifice and Spirit; take Him, and with Him He freely gives you all things.

24)Romans 8:37

MORE THAN CONQUERORS

Rom. 8:37.

In order to understand and feel the full force of this triumphant saying of the Apostle, we must observe that it is a negative answer to the preceding questions, ‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?’ A heterogeneous mass the Apostle here brigades together as an antagonistic army. They are alike in nothing except that they are all evils. There is no attempt at an exhaustive enumeration, or at classification. He clashes down, as it were, a miscellaneous mass of evil things, and then triumphs over them, and all the genus to which they belong, as being utterly impotent to drag men away from Jesus Christ. To ask the question is to answer it, but the form of the answer is worth notice. Instead of directly replying, ‘No! no such powerless things as these can separate us from the love of Christ,’ he says, ‘No! In all these things, whilst weltering amongst them, whilst ringed round about by them, as by encircling enemies, “we are more than conquerors.”‘ Thereby, he suggests that there is something needing to be done by us, in order that the foes may not exercise their natural effect. And so, taking the words of my text in connection with that to which they are an answer, we have three things-the impotent enemies of love; the abundant victory of love; ‘We are more than conquerors’; and the love that makes us victorious. Let us look then at these three things briefly.

I. First of all, the impotent enemies of love.

There is contempt in the careless massing together of the foes which the Apostle enumerates. He begins with the widest word that covers everything-’affliction.’ Then he specifies various forms of it-’distress,’ *straitening*, as the word might be rendered, then he comes to evils inflicted for Christ’s sake by hostile men-’persecution,’ then he names purely physical evils, ‘hunger’ and ‘nakedness,’ then he harks back again to man’s antagonism, ‘peril,’ and ‘sword.’ And thus carelessly, and without an effort at logical order, he throws together, as specimens of their class, these salient points, as it were, and crests of the great sea, whose billows threaten to roll over us; and he laughs at them all, as impotent and nought, when compared with the love of Christ, which shields us from them all.

Now it must be noticed that here, in his triumphant question, the Apostle means not our love to Christ but His to us; and not even our sense of that love, but the fact itself. And his question is just this:-Is there any evil in the world that can make Christ stop loving a man that cleaves to Him? And, as I said, to ask the question is to answer it. The two things belong to two different regions. They have nothing in common. The one moves amongst the low levels of earth; the other dwells up amidst the abysses of eternity, and to suppose that anything that assails and afflicts us here has any effect in making that great heart cease to love us is to fancy that the mists can quench the sunlight, is to suppose that that which lies down low in the earth can rise to poison and to darken the heavens.

There is no need, in order to rise to the full height of the Christian contempt for calamity, to deny any of its terrible power. These things can separate us from much. They can separate us from joy, from hope, from almost all that makes life desirable. They can strip us to the very quick, but the quick they cannot touch. The frost comes and kills the flowers, browns the leaves, cuts off the stems, binds the sweet music of the flowing rivers in silent chains, casts mists and darkness over the face of the solitary grey world, but it does not touch the life that is in the root.

And so all these outward sorrows that have power over the whole of the outward life, and can slay joy and all but stifle hope, and can ban men into irrevocable darkness and unalleviated solitude, they do not touch in the smallest degree the secret bond that binds the heart to Jesus, nor in any measure affect the flow of His love to us. Therefore we may front them and smile at them and say:

'Do as thou wilt, devouring time,
With this wide world, and all its fading sweets';

'my flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.'

You need not be very much afraid of anything being taken from you as long as Christ is left you. You will not be altogether hopeless so long as Christ, who is our hope, still speaks His faithful promises to you, nor will the world be lonely and dark to them who feel that they are lapt in the sweet and all-pervading consciousness of the changeless love of the heart of Christ. ‘Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution?’-in any of these things, ‘we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.’ Brethren, that is the Christian way of looking at all externals, not only at the dark and the sorrowful, but at the bright and the gladsome. If the withdrawal of external blessings does not touch the central sanctities and sweetness of a life in communion with Jesus, the bestowal of external blessedness does not much brighten or gladden it. We can face the withdrawal of them all, we need not covet the possession of them all, for we have all in Christ; and the world without His love contributes less to our blessedness and our peace than the absence of all its joys with His love does. So let us feel that earth, in its givings and in its withholdings, is equally impotent to touch the one thing that we need, the conscious possession of the love of Christ.

All these foes, as I have said, have no power over the fact of Christ’s love to us, but they have power, and a very terrible power, over our consciousness of that love; and we may so kick against the pricks as to lose, in the pain of our sorrows, the assurance of His presence, or be so fascinated by the false and vulgar sweetnesses and promises of the world as, in the eagerness of our chase after them, to lose our sense of the all-sufficing certitude of His love. Tribulation does not strip us of His love, but tribulation may so darken our perceptions that we cannot see the sun. Joys need not rob us of His heart, but joys may so fill ours, as that there shall be no longing for His presence within us. Therefore let us not exaggerate the impotence of these foes, but feel that there are real dangers, as in the sorrows so in the blessings of our outward life, and that the evil to be dreaded is that outward things, whether in their bright or in their dark aspects, may come between us and the home of our hearts, the love of the loving Christ.

II. So then, note next, the abundant victory of love.

Mark how the Apostle, in his lofty and enthusiastic way, is not content here with simply saying that he and his fellows conquer. It would be a poor thing, he seems to think, if the balance barely inclined to our side, if the victory were but just won by a hair's breadth and triumph were snatched, as it were, out of the very jaws of defeat. There must be something more than that to correspond to the power of the victorious Christ that is in us. And so, he says, we very abundantly conquer; we not only hinder these things which he has been enumerating from doing that which it is their aim apparently to do, but we actually convert them into helpers or allies. The '*more* than conquerors' seems to mean, if there is any definite idea to be attached to it, the conversion of the enemy conquered into a friend and a helper. The American Indians had a superstition that every foe tomahawked sent fresh strength into the warrior's arm. And so all afflictions and trials rightly borne, and therefore overcome, make a man stronger, and bring him nearer to Jesus Christ.

Note then, further, that not only is this victory more than bare victory, being the conversion of the enemy into allies, but that it is a victory which is won even whilst we are in the midst of the strife. It is not that we shall be conquerors in some far-off heaven, when the noise of battle has ceased and they hang the trumpet in the hall, but it is here now, in the hand-to-hand and foot-to-foot death-grapple that we do overcome. No ultimate victory, in some far-off and blessed heaven, will be ours unless moment by moment, here, to-day,' we *are* more than conquerors through Him that loved us.'

So, then, about this abundant victory there are these things to say:-You conquer the world only, then, when you make it contribute to your conscious possession of the love of Christ. That is the real victory, the only real victory in life. Men talk about overcoming here on earth, and they mean thereby the accomplishment of their designs. A man has 'victory,' as it is phrased, in the world's strife, when he secures for himself the world's goods at which he has aimed, but that is not the Christian idea of the conquest of calamity. Everything that makes me feel more thrillingly in my inmost heart the verity and the sweetness of the love of Jesus Christ as my very own, is conquered by me and compelled to subserve my highest good, and everything which slips a film between me and Him, which obscures the light of His face to me, which makes me less desirous of, and less sure of, and less happy in, and less satisfied with, His love, is an enemy that has conquered me. And all these evils as the world calls them, and as our bleeding hearts have often felt them to be, are converted into allies and friends when they drive us to Christ, and keep us close to Him, in the conscious possession of His sweet and changeless love. That is the victory, and the only victory. Has the world helped me to lay hold of Christ? Then I have conquered it. Has the world loosened my grasp upon Him? Then it has conquered me.

Note then, further, that this abundant victory depends on how we deal with the changes of our outward lives, our sorrows or our joys. There is nothing, *per se*, salutary in affliction, there is nothing, *per se*, antagonistic to Christian faith in it either. No man is made better by his sorrows, no man need be made worse by them. That depends upon how we take the things which come storming against us. The set of your sails, and the firmness of your grasp upon the tiller, determine whether the wind shall carry you to the haven or shall blow you out, a wandering waif, upon a shoreless and melancholy sea. There are some of you that have been blown away from your moorings by sorrow. There are some professing Christians who have been hindered in their work, and had their peace and their faith shattered all but irrevocably, because they have not accepted, in the spirit in which they were sent, the trials that have come for their good. The worst of all afflictions is a wasted affliction, and they are all wasted unless they teach us more of the reality and the blessedness of the love of Jesus Christ.

III. Lastly, notice the love which makes us conquerors.

The Apostle, with a wonderful instinctive sense of fitness, names Christ here by a name congruous to the thoughts which occupy his mind, when he speaks of Him that loved us. His question has been, Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? And his answer is, So far from that being the case, that very love, by occasion of sorrows and afflictions, tightens its grasp upon us, and, by the communication of itself to us, makes us more than conquerors. This great love of Jesus Christ, from which nothing can separate us, will use the very things that seem to threaten our separation as a means of coming nearer to us in its depth and in its preciousness.

The Apostle says ‘Him that loved us,’ and the words in the original distinctly point to some one fact as being the great instance of love. That is to say they point to His death. And so we may say Christ’s love helps us to conquer because in His death He interprets for us all possible sorrows. If it be true that love to each of us nailed Him there, then nothing that can come to us but must be a love-token, and a fruit of that same love. The Cross is the key to all tribulation, and shows it to be a token and an instrument of an unchanging love.

Further, that great love of Christ helps us to conquer, because in His sufferings and death He becomes the Companion of all the weary. The rough, dark, lonely road changes its look when we see His footprints there, not without specks of blood in them, where the thorns tore His feet. We conquer our afflictions if we recognise that ‘in all our afflictions He was afflicted,’ and that Himself has drunk to its bitterest dregs the cup which He commends to our lips. He has left a kiss upon its margin, and we need not shrink when He holds it out to us and says ‘Drink ye all of it.’ That one thought of the companionship of the Christ in our sorrows makes us more than conquerors.

And lastly, this dying Lover of our souls communicates to us all, if we will, the strength whereby we may coerce all outward things into being helps to the fuller participation of His perfect love. Our sorrows and all the other distracting externals do seek to drag us away from Him. Is all that happens in counteraction to that pull of the world, that we tighten our grasp upon Him, and will not let Him go; as some poor wretch might the horns of the altar that did not respond to his grasp? Nay what we lay hold of is no dead thing, but a living hand, and it grasps us more tightly than we can ever grasp it. So because He holds us, and not because we hold Him, we shall not be dragged away, by anything outside of our own weak and wavering souls, and all these embattled foes may come against us, they may shear off everything else, they cannot sever Christ from us unless we ourselves throw Him away. ‘In this thou shalt conquer.’ ‘They overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of His testimony.’

25)Romans 8:38-39

Romans

LOVE’S TRIUMPH

Rom. 8:38 - Rom. 8:39.

These rapturous words are the climax of the Apostle's long demonstration that the Gospel is the revelation of 'the righteousness of God from faith to faith,' and is thereby 'the power of God unto salvation.' What a contrast there is between the beginning and the end of his argument! It started with sombre, sad words about man's sinfulness and aversion from the knowledge of God. It closes with this sunny outburst of triumph; like some stream rising among black and barren cliffs, or melancholy moorlands, and foaming through narrow rifts in gloomy ravines, it reaches at last fertile lands, and flows calm, the sunlight dancing on its broad surface, till it loses itself at last in the unfathomable ocean of the love of God.

We are told that the Biblical view of human nature is too dark. Well, the important question is not whether it is dark, but whether it is true. But, apart from that, the doctrine of Scripture about man's moral condition is not dark, if you will take the whole of it together. Certainly, a part of it is very dark. The picture, for instance, of what men are, painted at the beginning of this Epistle, is shadowed like a canvas of Rembrandt's. The Bible is 'Nature's sternest painter but her best.' But to get the whole doctrine of Scripture on the subject, we have to take its confidence as to what men may become, as well as its portrait of what they are-and then who will say that the anthropology of Scripture is gloomy? To me it seems that the unrelieved blackness of the view which, because it admits no fall, can imagine no rise, which sees in all man's sins and sorrows no token of the dominion of an alien power, and has, therefore, no reason to believe that they can be separated from humanity, is the true 'Gospel of despair,' and that the system which looks steadily at all the misery and all the wickedness, and calmly proposes to cast it all out, is really the only doctrine of human nature which throws any gleam of light on the darkness. Christianity begins indeed with, 'There is none that doeth good, no, not one,' but it ends with this victorious pæan of our text.

And what a majestic close it is to the great words that have gone before, fitly crowning even their lofty height! One might well shrink from presuming to take such words as a text, with any idea of exhausting or of enhancing them. My object is very much more humble. I simply wish to bring out the remarkable order, in which Paul here marshals, in his passionate, rhetorical amplification, all the enemies that can be supposed to seek to wrench us away from the love of God; and triumphs over them all. We shall best measure the fullness of the words by simply taking these clauses as they stand in the text.

I. The love of God is unaffected by the extremest changes of our condition.

The Apostle begins his fervid catalogue of vanquished foes by a pair of opposites which might seem to cover the whole ground-'neither death nor life.' What more can be said? Surely, these two include everything. From one point of view they do. But yet, as we shall see, there is more to be said. And the special reason for beginning with this pair of possible enemies is probably to be found by remembering that they are a pair, that between them they do cover the whole ground and represent the *extremes* of change which can befall us. The one stands at the one pole, the other at the other. If these two stations, so far from each other, are equally near to God's love, then no intermediate point can be far from it. If the most violent change which we can experience does not in the least matter to the grasp which the love of God has on us, or to the grasp which we may have on it, then no less violent a change can be of any consequence. It is the same thought in a somewhat modified form, as we find in another word of Paul's, 'Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord.' Our subordination to Him is the same, and our consecration should be the same, in all varieties of condition, even in that greatest of all variations. His love to us makes no account of that mightiest of changes. How should it be affected by slighter ones?

The distance of a star is measured by the apparent change in its position, as seen from different points of the earth's surface or orbit. But this great Light stands steadfast in our heaven, nor moves a hair's-breadth, nor pours a feebler ray on us, whether we look up to it from the midsummer day of busy life, or from the midwinter of death. These opposites are parted by a distance to which the millions of miles of the world's path among the stars are but a point, and yet the love of God streams down on them alike.

Of course, the confidence in immortality is implied in this thought. Death does not, in the slightest degree, affect the essential vitality of the soul; so it does not, in the slightest degree, affect the outflow of God’s love to that soul. It is a change of condition and circumstance, and no more. He does not lose us in the dust of death. The withered leaves on the pathway are trampled into mud, and indistinguishable to human eyes; but He sees them even as when they hung green and sunlit on the mystic tree of life.

How beautifully this thought contrasts with the saddest aspect of the power of death in our human experience! He is Death the Separator, who unclasps our hands from the closest, dearest grasp, and divides asunder joints and marrow, and parts soul and body, and withdraws us from all our habitude and associations and occupations, and loosens every bond of society and concord, and hales us away into a lonely land. But there is one bond which his ‘abhorred shears’ cannot cut. Their edge is turned on *it*. One Hand holds us in a grasp which the fleshless fingers of Death in vain strive to loosen. The separator becomes the uniter; he rends us apart from the world that He may ‘bring us to God.’ The love filtered by drops on us in life is poured upon us in a flood in death; ‘for I am persuaded, that neither death nor life shall be able to separate us from the love of God.’

II. The love of God is undiverted from us by any other order of beings.

‘Nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers,’ says Paul. Here we pass from conditions affecting ourselves to living beings beyond ourselves. Now, it is important for understanding the precise thought of the Apostle to observe that this expression, when used without any qualifying adjective, seems uniformly to mean good angels, the hierarchy of blessed spirits before the throne. So that there is no reference to ‘spiritual wickedness in high places’ striving to draw men away from God. The supposition which the Apostle makes is, indeed, an impossible one, that these ministering spirits, who are sent forth to minister to them who shall be heirs of salvation, should so forget their mission and contradict their nature as to seek to bar us out from the love which it is their chiefest joy to bring to us. He knows it to be an impossible supposition, and its very impossibility gives energy to his conclusion, just as when in the same fashion he makes the other equally impossible supposition about an angel from heaven preaching another gospel than that which he had preached to them.

So we may turn the general thought of this second category of impotent efforts in two different ways, and suggest, first, that it implies the utter powerlessness of any third party in regard to the relations between our souls and God.

We alone have to do with Him alone. The awful fact of individuality, that solemn mystery of our personal being, has its most blessed or its most dread manifestation in our relation to God. There no other Being has any power. Counsel and stimulus, suggestion or temptation, instruction or lies, which may tend to lead us nearer to Him or away from Him, they may indeed give us; but after they have done their best or their worst, all depends on the personal act of our own innermost being. Man or angel can affect that, but from without. The old mystics called prayer 'the flight of the lonely soul to the only God.' It is the name for all religion. These two, God and the soul, have to 'transact,' as our Puritan forefathers used to say, as if there were no other beings in the universe but only they two. Angels and principalities and powers may stand beholding with sympathetic joy; they may minister blessing and guardianship in many ways; but the decisive act of union between God and the soul they can neither effect nor prevent.

And as for them, so for men around us; the limits of their power to harm us are soon set. They may shut us out from human love by calumnies, and dig deep gulfs of alienation between us and dear ones; they may hurt and annoy us in a thousand ways with slanderous tongues, and arrows dipped in poisonous hatred, but one thing they cannot do. They may build a wall around us, and imprison us from many a joy and many a fair prospect, but they cannot put a roof on it to keep out the sweet influences from above, or hinder us from looking up to the heavens. Nobody can come between us and God but ourselves.

Or, we may turn this general thought in another direction, and say, These blessed spirits around the throne do not absorb and intercept His love. They gather about its steps in their 'solemn troops and sweet societies'; but close as are their ranks, and innumerable as is their multitude, they do not prevent that love from passing beyond them to us on the outskirts of the crowd. The planet nearest the sun is drenched and saturated with fiery brightness, but the rays from the centre of life pass on to each of the sister spheres in its turn, and travel away outwards to where the remotest of them all rolls in its far-off orbit, unknown for millenniums to dwellers closer to the sun, but through all the ages visited by warmth and light according to its needs. Like that poor, sickly woman who could lay her wasted fingers on the hem of Christ's garment, notwithstanding the thronging multitude, we can reach our hands through all the crowd, or rather He reaches His strong hand to us and heals and blesses us. All the guests are fed full at that great table. One's gain is not another's loss. The multitudes sit on the green grass, and the last man of the last fifty gets as much as the first. 'They did all eat, and were filled'; and more remains than fed them all. So all beings are 'nourished from the King's country,' and none jostle others out of their share. This healing fountain is not exhausted of its curative power by the early comers. 'I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.' 'Nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, shall be able to separate us from the love of God.'

III. The love of God is raised above the power of time.

'Nor things present, nor things to come,' is the Apostle's next class of powers impotent to disunite us from the love of God. The rhythmical arrangement of the text deserves to be noticed, as bearing not only on its music and rhetorical flow, but as affecting its force. We had first a pair of opposites, and then a triplet; 'death and life: angels, principalities, and powers.' We have again a pair of opposites; 'things present, things to come,' again followed by a triplet, 'height nor depth, nor any other creature.' The effect of this is to divide the whole into two, and to throw the first and second classes more closely together, as also the third and fourth. Time and Space, these two mysterious ideas, which work so fatally on all human love, are powerless here.

The great revelation of God, on which the whole of Judaism was built, was that made to Moses of the name 'I Am that I Am.' And parallel to the verbal revelation was the symbol of the Bush, burning and unconsumed, which is so often misunderstood. It appears wholly contrary to the usage of Scriptural visions, which are ever wont to express in material form the same truth which accompanies them in words, that the meaning of that vision should be, as it is frequently taken as being, the continuance of Israel unharmed by the fiery furnace of persecution. Not the continuance of Israel, but the eternity of Israel's God is the teaching of that flaming wonder. The burning Bush and the Name of the Lord proclaimed the same great truth of self-derived, self-determined, timeless, undecaying Being. And what better symbol than the bush burning, and yet not burning out, could be found of that God in whose life there is no tendency to death, whose work digs no pit of weariness into which it falls, who gives and is none the poorer, who fears no exhaustion in His spending, no extinction in His continual shining?

And this eternity of Being is no mere metaphysical abstraction. It is eternity of love, for God is love. That great stream, the pouring out of His own very inmost Being, knows no pause, nor does the deep fountain from which it flows ever sink one hair's-breadth in its pure basin.

We know of earthly loves which cannot die. They have entered so deeply into the very fabric of the soul, that like some cloth dyed in grain, as long as two threads hold together they will retain the tint. We have to thank God for such instances of love stronger than death, which make it easier for us to believe in the unchanging duration of His. But we know, too, of love that can change, and we know that all love must part. Few of us have reached middle life, who do not, looking back, see our track strewed with the gaunt skeletons of dead friendships, and dotted with 'oaks of weeping,' waving green and mournful over graves, and saddened by footprints striking away from the line of march, and leaving us the more solitary for their departure.

How blessed then to know of a love which cannot change or die! The past, the present, and the future are all the same to Him, to whom 'a thousand years,' that can corrode so much of earthly love, are in their power to change 'as one day,' and 'one day,' which can hold so few of the expressions of our love, may be 'as a thousand years' in the multitude and richness of the gifts which it can be expanded to contain. The whole of what He has been to any past, He is to us to-day. 'The God of Jacob is our refuge.' All these old-world stories of loving care and guidance may be repeated in our lives.

So we may bring the blessedness of all the past into the present, and calmly face the misty future, sure that it cannot rob us of His love.

Whatever may drop out of our vainly-clasping hands, it matters not, if only our hearts are stayed on His love, which neither things present nor things to come can alter or remove. Looking on all the flow of ceaseless change, the waste and fading, the alienation and cooling, the decrepitude and decay of earthly affection, we can lift up with gladness, heightened by the contrast, the triumphant song of the ancient Church: ‘Give thanks unto the Lord: for He is good: because His mercy endureth for ever!’

IV. The love of God is present everywhere.

The Apostle ends his catalogue with a singular trio of antagonists; ‘nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature,’ as if he had got impatient of the enumeration of impotencies, and having named the outside boundaries in space of the created universe, flings, as it were, with one rapid toss, into that large room the whole that it can contain, and triumphs over it all.

As the former clause proclaimed the powerlessness of Time, so this proclaims the powerlessness of that other great mystery of creatural life which we call Space, Height or depth, it matters not. That diffusive love diffuses itself equally in all directions. Up or down, it is all the same. The distance from the centre is the same to Zenith or to Nadir.

Here, we have the same process applied to that idea of Omnipresence as was applied in the former clause to the idea of Eternity. That thought, so hard to grasp with vividness, and not altogether a glad one to a sinful soul, is all softened and glorified, as some solemn Alpine cliff of bare rock is when the tender morning light glows on it, when it is thought of as the Omnipresence of Love. ‘Thou, God, seest me,’ may be a stern word, if the God who sees be but a mighty Maker or a righteous Judge. As reasonably might we expect a prisoner in his solitary cell to be glad when he thinks that the jailer’s eye is on him from some unseen spy-hole in the wall, as expect any thought of God but one to make a man read that grand one hundred and thirty-ninth Psalm with joy: ‘If I ascend into heaven, Thou art there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there.’ So may a man say shudderingly to himself, and tremble as he asks in vain, ‘Whither shall I flee from Thy Presence?’ But how different it all is when we can cast over the marble whiteness of that solemn thought the warm hue of life, and change the form of our words into this of our text: ‘Nor height, nor depth, shall be able to separate us from the love of God.’

In that great ocean of the divine love we live and move and have our being, floating in it like some sea flower which spreads its filmy beauty and waves its long tresses in the depths of mid-ocean. The sound of its waters is ever in our ears, and above, beneath, around us, its mighty currents run evermore. We need not cower before the fixed gaze of some stony god, looking on us unmoved like those Egyptian deities that sit pitiless with idle hands on their laps, and wide-open lidless eyes gazing out across the sands. We need not fear the Omnipresence of Love, nor the Omniscience which knows us altogether, and loves us even as it knows. Rather we shall be glad that we are ever in His Presence, and desire, as the height of all felicity and the power for all goodness, to walk all the day long in the light of His countenance, till the day come when we shall receive the crown of our perfecting in that we shall be ‘ever with the Lord.’

The recognition of this triumphant sovereignty of love over all these real and supposed antagonists makes us, too, lords over them, and delivers us from the temptations which some of them present us to separate ourselves from the love of God. They all become our servants and helpers, uniting us to that love. So we are set free from the dread of death and from the distractions incident to life. So we are delivered from superstitious dread of an unseen world, and from craven fear of men. So we are emancipated from absorption in the present and from careful thought for the future. So we are at home everywhere, and every corner of the universe is to us one of the many mansions of our Father’s house. ‘All things are yours, . . . and ye are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.’

I do not forget the closing words of this great text. I have not ventured to include them in our present subject, because they would have introduced another wide region of thought to be laid down on our already too narrow canvas.

But remember, I beseech you, that this love of God is explained by our Apostle to be ‘in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ Love illimitable, all-pervasive, eternal; yes, but a love which has a channel and a course; love which has a method and a process by which it pours itself over the world. It is not, as some representations would make it, a vague, nebulous light diffused through space as in a chaotic half-made universe, but all gathered in that great Light which rules the day-even in Him who said: ‘I am the Light of the world.’ In Christ the love of God is all centred and embodied, that it may be imparted to all sinful and hungry hearts, even as burning coals are gathered on a hearth that they may give warmth to all that are in the house. ‘God *so* loved the world’-not merely *so much*, but in *such a fashion*-’that’-that what? Many people would leap at once from the first to the last clause of the verse, and regard eternal life for all and sundry as the only adequate expression of the universal love of God. Not so does Christ speak. Between that universal love and its ultimate purpose and desire for every man He inserts two conditions, one on God’s part, one on man’s. God’s love reaches its end, namely, the bestowal of eternal life, by means of a divine act and a human response. ‘God *so* loved the world, that He *gave* His only begotten Son, that whosoever *believeth* in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ So all the universal love of God for you and me and for all our brethren is ‘in Christ Jesus our Lord,’ and faith in Him unites us to it by bonds which no foe can break, no shock of change can snap, no time can rot, no distance can stretch to breaking. ‘For I am persuaded, that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.’

26)Romans 12:1

Romans

THE SACRIFICE OF THE BODY

Rom. 12:1.

In the former part of this letter the Apostle has been building up a massive fabric of doctrine, which has stood the waste of centuries, and the assaults of enemies, and has been the home of devout souls. He now passes to speak of practice, and he binds the two halves of his letter indissolubly together by that significant ‘therefore,’ which does not only look back to the thing last said, but to the whole of the preceding portion of the letter. ‘What God hath joined together let no man put asunder.’ Christian living is inseparably connected with Christian believing. Possibly the error of our forefathers was in cutting faith too much loose from practice, and supposing that an orthodox creed was sufficient, though I think the extent to which they did suppose that has been very much exaggerated. The temptation of this day is precisely the opposite. ‘Conduct is three-fourths of life,’ says one of our teachers. Yes. But what about the *fourth* fourth which underlies conduct? Paul’s way is the right way. Lay broad and deep the foundations of God’s facts revealed to us, and then build upon that the fabric of a noble life. This generation superficially tends to cut practice loose from faith, and so to look for grapes from thorns and figs from thistles. Wrong thinking will not lead to right doing. ‘I beseech you, *therefore*, brethren, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice.’

The Apostle, in beginning his practical exhortations, lays as the foundations of them all two companion precepts: one, with which we have to deal, affecting mainly the outward life; its twin sister, which follows in the next verse, affecting mainly the inward life. He who has drunk in the spirit of Paul’s doctrinal teaching will present his body a living sacrifice, and be renewed in the spirit of his mind; and thus, outwardly and inwardly, will be approximating to God’s ideal, and all specific virtues will be his in germ. Those two precepts lay down the broad outline, and all that follow in the way of specific commandments is but filling in its details.

I. We observe that we have here, first, an all-inclusive directory for the outward life.

Now, it is to be noticed that the metaphor of sacrifice runs through the whole of the phraseology of my text. The word rendered ‘present’ is a technical expression for the sacerdotal action of offering. A tacit contrast is drawn between the sacrificial ritual, which was familiar to Romans as well as Jews, and the true Christian sacrifice and service. In the former a large portion of the sacrifices consisted of animals which were slain. Ours is to be ‘a living sacrifice.’ In the former the offering was presented to the Deity, and became His property. In the Christian service, the gift passes, in like manner, from the possession of the worshipper, and is set apart for the uses of God, for that is the proper meaning of the word ‘holy.’ The outward sacrifice gave an odour of a sweet smell, which, by a strong metaphor, was declared to be fragrant in the nostrils of Deity. In like manner, the Christian sacrifice is ‘acceptable unto God.’ These other sacrifices were purely outward, and derived no efficacy from the disposition of the worshipper. Our sacrifice, though the material of the offering be corporeal, is the act of the inner man, and so is called ‘rational’ rather than ‘reasonable,’ as our Version has it, or as in other parts of Scripture, ‘spiritual.’ And the last word of my text, ‘service,’ retains the sacerdotal allusion, because it does not mean the service of a slave or domestic, but that of a priest.

And so the sum of the whole is that the master-word for the outward life of a Christian is sacrifice. That, again, includes two things-self-surrender and surrender to God.

Now, Paul was not such a superficial moralist as to begin at the wrong end, and talk about the surrender of the outward life, unless as the result of the prior surrender of the inward, and that priority of the consecration of the man to his offering of the body is contained in the very metaphor. For a priest needs to be consecrated before he can offer, and we in our innermost wills, in the depths of our nature, must be surrendered and set apart to God ere any of our outward activities can be laid upon His altar. The Apostle, then, does not make the mistake of substituting external for internal surrender, but he presupposes that the latter has preceded. He puts the sequence more fully in the parallel passage in this very letter: ‘Yield yourselves unto God, and your bodies as instruments of righteousness unto Him.’ So, then, first of all, we must be priests by our inward consecration, and then, since ‘a priest must have somewhat to offer,’ we must bring the outward life and lay it upon His altar.

Now, of the two thoughts which I have said are involved in this great keyword, the former is common to Christianity, with all noble systems of morality, whether religious or irreligious. It is a commonplace, on which I do not need to dwell, that every man who will live a man’s life, and not that of a beast, must sacrifice the flesh, and rigidly keep it down. But that commonplace is lifted into an altogether new region, assumes a new solemnity, and finds new power for its fulfilment when we add to the moralist's duty of control of the animal and outward nature the other thought, that the surrender must be to God.

There is no need for my dwelling at any length on the various practical directions in which this great exhortation must be wrought out. It is of more importance, by far, to have well fixed in our minds and hearts the one dominant thought that sacrifice is the keyword of the Christian life than to explain the directions in which it applies. But still, just a word or two about these. There are three ways in which we may look at the body, which the Apostle here says is to be yielded up unto God.

It is the recipient of impressions from without. *There* is a field for consecration. The eye that looks upon evil, and by the look has rebellious, lustful, sensuous, foul desires excited in the heart, breaks this solemn law. The eye that among the things seen dwells with complacency on the pure, and turns from the impure as if a hot iron had been thrust into its pupil; that in the things seen discerns shimmering behind them, and manifested through them, the things unseen and eternal, is the consecrated eye. 'Art for Art's sake,' to quote the cant of the day, has too often meant art for the flesh's sake. And there are pictures and books, and sights of various sorts, flashed before the eyes of you young men and women which it is pollution to dwell upon, and should be pain to remember. I beseech you all to have guard over these gates of the heart, and to pray, 'Turn away mine eyes from viewing vanity.' And the other senses, in like manner, have need to be closely connected with God if they are not to rush us down to the devil.

The body is not only the recipient of impressions. It is the possessor of appetites and necessities. See to it that these are indulged, with constant reference to God. It is no small attainment of the Christian life 'to eat our meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God.' In a hundred directions this characteristic of our corporeal lives tends to lead us all away from supreme consecration to Him. There is the senseless luxury of this generation. There is the exaggerated care for physical strength and completeness amongst the young; there is the intemperance in eating and drinking, which is the curse and the shame of England. There is the provision for the flesh, the absorbing care for the procuring of material comforts, which drowns the spirit in miserable anxieties, and makes men bond-slaves. There is the corruption which comes from drunkenness and from lust. There is the indolence which checks lofty aspirations and stops a man in the middle of noble work. And there are many other forms of evil on which I need not dwell, all of which are swept clean out of the way when we lay to heart this injunction: ‘I beseech you present your bodies a living sacrifice,’ and let appetites and tastes and corporeal needs be kept in rigid subordination and in conscious connection with Him. I remember a quaint old saying of a German schoolmaster, who apostrophised his body thus: ‘I go with you three times a day to eat; you must come with me three times a day to pray.’ Subjugate the body, and let it be the servant and companion of the devout spirit.

It is also, besides being the recipient of impressions, and the possessor of needs and appetites, our instrument for working in the world. And so the exhortation of my text comes to include this, that all our activities done by means of brain and eye and tongue and hand and foot shall be consciously devoted to Him, and laid as a sacrifice upon His altar. That pervasive, universally diffused reference to God, in all the details of daily life, is the thing that Christian men and women need most of all to try to cultivate. ‘Pray without ceasing,’ says the Apostle. This exhortation can only be obeyed if our work is indeed worship, being done by God’s help, for God’s sake, in communion with God.

So, dear friends, sacrifice is the keynote-meaning thereby surrender, control, and stimulus of the corporeal frame, surrender to God, in regard to the impressions which we allow to be made upon our senses, to the indulgence which we grant to our appetites, and the satisfaction which we seek for our needs, and to the activities which we engage in by means of this wondrous instrument with which God has trusted us. These are the plain principles involved in the exhortation of my text. ‘He that soweth to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption.’ ‘I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection.’ It is a good servant; it is a bad master.

II. Note, secondly, the relation between this priestly service and other kinds of worship.

I need only say a word about that. Paul is not meaning to depreciate the sacrificial ritual, from which he drew his emblem. But he is meaning to assert that the devotion of a life, manifested through bodily activity, is higher in its nature than the symbolical worship of any altar and of any sacrifice. And that falls in with prevailing tendencies in this day, which has laid such a firm hold on the principle that daily conduct is better than formal worship, that it has forgotten to ask the question whether the daily conduct is likely to be satisfactory if the formal worship is altogether neglected. I believe, as profoundly as any man can, that the true worship is distinguishable from and higher than the more sensuous forms of the Catholic or other sacramentarian churches, or the more simple of the Puritan and Nonconformist, or the altogether formless of the Quaker. I believe that the best worship is the manifold activities of daily life laid upon God's altar, so that the division between things secular and things sacred is to a large extent misleading and irrelevant. But at the same time I believe that you have very little chance of getting this diffused and all-pervasive reference of all a man's doings to God unless there are, all through his life, recurring with daily regularity, reservoirs of power, stations where he may rest, kneeling-places where the attitude of service is exchanged for the attitude of supplication; times of quiet communion with God which shall feed the worshipper's activities as the white snowfields on the high summits feed the brooks that sparkle by the way, and bring fertility wherever they run. So, dear brethren, remember that whilst life is the field of worship there must be the inward worship within the shrine if there is to be the outward service.

III. Lastly, note the equally comprehensive motive and ground of this all-inclusive directory for conduct.

'I beseech you, by the mercies of God.' That plural does not mean that the Apostle is extending his view over the whole wide field of the divine beneficence, but rather that he is contemplating the one all-inclusive mercy about which the former part of his letter has been eloquent-viz. the gift of Christ-and contemplating it in the manifoldness of the blessings which flow from it. The mercies of God which move a man to yield himself as a sacrifice are not the diffused beneficences of His providence, but the concentrated love that lies in the person and work of His Son.

And there, as I believe, is the one motive to which we can appeal with any prospect of its being powerful enough to give the needful impetus all through a life. The sacrifice of Christ is the ground on which our sacrifices can be offered and accepted, for it was the sacrifice of a death propitiatory and cleansing, and on it, as the ancient ritual taught us, may be reared the enthusiastic sacrifice of a life-a thankoffering for it.

Nor is it only the ground on which our sacrifice is accepted, but it is the great motive by which our sacrifice is impelled. *There* is the difference between the Christian teaching, ‘present your bodies a sacrifice,’ and the highest and noblest of similar teaching elsewhere. One of the purest and loftiest of the ancient moralists was a contemporary of Paul’s. He would have re-echoed from his heart the Apostle’s directory, but he knew nothing of the Apostle’s motive. So his exhortations were powerless. He had no spell to work on men’s hearts, and his lofty teachings were as the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Whilst Seneca taught, Rome was a cesspool of moral putridity and Nero butchered. So it always is. There may be noble teachings about self-control, purity, and the like, but an evil and adulterous generation is slow to dance to such piping.

Our poet has bid us-

‘Move upwards, casting out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die.’

But how is this heavy bulk of ours to ‘move upwards’; how is the beast to be ‘cast out’; how are the ‘ape and tiger’ in us to be slain? Paul has told us, ‘By the mercies of God.’ Christ’s gift, meditated on, accepted, introduced into will and heart, is the one power that will melt our obstinacy, the one magnet that will draw us after it.

Nothing else, brethren, as your own experience has taught you, and as the experience of the world confirms, nothing else will bind Behemoth, and put a hook in his nose. Apart from the constraining motive of the love of Christ, all the cords of prudence, conscience, advantage, by which men try to bind their unruly passions and manacle the insisting flesh, are like the chains on the demoniac’s wrists-’And he had oftentimes been bound by chains, and the chains were snapped asunder.' But the silken leash with which the fair Una in the poem leads the lion, the silken leash of love will bind the strong man, and enable us to rule ourselves. If we will open our hearts to the sacrifice of Christ, we shall be able to offer ourselves as thankofferings. If we will let His love sway our wills and consciences, He will give our wills and consciences power to master and to offer up our flesh. And the great change, according to which He will one day change the body of our humiliation into the likeness of the body of His glory, will be begun in us, if we live under the influence of the motive and the commandment which this Apostle bound together in our text and in his other great words, 'Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body and spirit, which are His.'

27)Romans 12:2

Romans

TRANSFIGURATION

Rom. 12:2.

I had occasion to point out, in a sermon on the preceding verse, that the Apostle is, in this context, making the transition from the doctrinal to the practical part of his letter, and that he lays down broad principles, of which all his subsequent injunctions and exhortations are simply the filling up of the details. One master word, for the whole Christian life, as we then saw, is sacrifice, self-surrender, and that to God. In like manner, Paul here brackets, with that great conception of the Christian life, another equally dominant and equally comprehensive. In one aspect, it is self-surrender; in another, it is growing transformation. And, just as in the former verse we found that an inward surrender preceded the outward sacrifice, and that the inner man, having been consecrated as a priest, by this yielding of himself to God, was then called upon to manifest inward consecration by outward sacrifice, so in this further exhortation, an inward 'renewing of the mind' is regarded as the necessary antecedent of transformation of outward life.

So we have here another comprehensive view of what the Christian life ought to be, and that not only grasped, as it were, in its very centre and essence, but traced out in two directions-as to that which must precede it within, and as to that which follows it as consequence. An outline of the possibilities, and therefore the duties, of the Christian, is set forth here, in these three thoughts of my text, the renewed mind issuing in a transfigured life, crowned and rewarded by a clearer and ever clearer insight into what we ought to be and do.

I. Note, then, that the foundation of all transformation of character and conduct is laid deep in a renewed mind.

Now it is a matter of world-wide experience, verified by each of us in our own case, if we have ever been honest in the attempt, that the power of self-improvement is limited by very narrow bounds. Any man that has ever tried to cure himself of the most trivial habit which he desires to get rid of, or to alter in the slightest degree the set of some strong taste or current of his being, knows how little he can do, even by the most determined effort. Something may be effected, but, alas! as the proverbs of all nations and all lands have taught us, it is very little indeed. ‘You cannot expel nature with a fork,’ said the Roman. ‘What’s bred in the bone won’t come out of the flesh,’ says the Englishman. ‘Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?’ says the Hebrew. And we all know what the answer to that question is. The problem that is set before a man when you tell him to effect self-improvement is something like that which confronted that poor paralytic lying in the porch at the pool: ‘If you can walk you will be able to get to the pool that will make you able to walk. But you have got to be cured before you can do what you need to do in order to be cured.’ Only one knife can cut the knot. The Gospel of Jesus Christ presents itself, not as a mere republication of morality, not as merely a new stimulus and motive to do what is right, but as an actual communication to men of a new power to work in them, a strong hand laid upon our poor, feeble hand with which we try to put on the brake or to apply the stimulus. It is a new gift of a life which will unfold itself after its own nature, as the bud into flower, and the flower into fruit; giving new desires, tastes, directions, and renewing the whole nature. And so, says Paul, the beginning of transformation of character is the renovation in the very centre of the being, and the communication of a new impulse and power to the inward self.

Now, I suppose that in my text the word ‘mind’ is not so much employed in the widest sense, including all the affections and will, and the other faculties of our nature, as in the narrower sense of the perceptive power, or that faculty in our nature by which we recognise, and make our own, certain truths. ‘The renewing of the mind,’ then, is only, in such an interpretation, a theological way of putting the simpler English thought, a change of estimates, a new set of views; or if that word be too shallow, as indeed it is, a new set of convictions. It is profoundly true that ‘As a man thinketh, so is he.’ Our characters are largely made by our estimates of what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable. And what the Apostle is thinking about here is, as I take it, principally how the body of Christian truth, if it effects a lodgment in, not merely the brain of a man, but his whole nature, will modify and alter it all. Why, we all know how often a whole life has been revolutionised by the sudden dawning or rising in its sky, of some starry new truth, formerly hidden and undreamed of. And if we should translate the somewhat archaic phraseology of our text into the plainest of modern English, it just comes to this: If you want to change your characters, and God knows they all need it, change the deep convictions of your mind; and get hold, as living realities, of the great truths of Christ’s Gospel. If you and I really believed what we say we believe, that Jesus Christ has died for us, and lives for us, and is ready to pour out upon us the gift of His Divine Spirit, and wills that we should be like Him, and holds out to us the great and wonderful hopes and prospects of an absolutely eternal life of supreme and serene blessedness at His right hand, should we be, could we be, the sort of people that most of us are? It is not the much that you say you believe that shapes your character; it is the little that you habitually realise. Truth professed has no transforming power; truth received and fed upon can revolutionise a man’s whole character.

So, dear brethren, remember that my text, though it is an analysis of the methods of Christian progress, and though it is a wonderful setting forth of the possibilities open to the poorest, dwarfed, blinded, corrupted nature, is also all commandment. And if it is true that the principles of the Gospel exercise transforming power upon men’s lives, and that in order for these principles to effect their natural results there must be honest dealing with them, on our parts, take this as the practical outcome of all this first part of my sermon-let us all see to it that we keep ourselves in touch with the truths which we say we believe; and that we thorough-goingly apply these truths in all their searching, revealing, quickening, curbing power, to every action of our daily lives. If for one day we could bring everything that we do into touch with the creed that we profess, we should be different men and women. Make of your every thought an action; link every action with a thought. Or, to put it more Christianlike, let there be nothing in your creed which is not in your commandments; and let nothing be in your life which is not moulded by these. The beginning of all transformation is the revolutionised conviction of a mind that has accepted the truths of the Gospel.

II. Well then, secondly, note the transfigured life.

The Apostle uses in his positive commandment, ‘Be ye transformed,’ the same word which is employed by two of the Evangelists in their account of our Lord’s transfiguration. And although I suppose it would be going too far to assert that there is a distinct reference intended to that event, it may be permissible to look back to it as being a lovely illustration of the possibilities that open to an honest Christian life-the possibility of a change, coming from within upwards, and shedding a strange radiance on the face, whilst yet the identity remains. So by the rippling up from within of the renewed mind will come into our lives a transformation not altogether unlike that which passed on Him when His garments did shine ‘so as no fuller on earth could white them’; and His face was as the sun in his strength.

The life is to be transfigured, yet it remains the same, not only in the consciousness of personal identity, but in the main trend and drift of the character. There is nothing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ which is meant to obliterate the lines of the strongly marked individuality which each of us receives by nature. Rather the Gospel is meant to heighten and deepen these, and to make each man more intensely himself, more thoroughly individual and unlike anybody else. The perfection of our nature is found in the pursuit, to the furthest point, of the characteristics of our nature, and so, by reason of diversity, there is the greater harmony, and, all taken together, will reflect less inadequately the infinite glories of which they are all partakers. But whilst the individuality remains, and ought to be heightened by Christian consecration, yet a change should pass over our lives, like the change that passes over the winter landscape when the summer sun draws out the green leaves from the hard black boughs, and flashes a fresh colour over all the brown pastures. There should be such a change as when a drop or two of ruby wine falls into a cup, and so diffuses a gradual warmth of tint over all the whiteness of the water. Christ in us, if we are true to Him, will make us more ourselves, and yet new creatures in Christ Jesus.

And the transformation is to be into His likeness who is the pattern of all perfection. We must be moulded after the same type. There are two types possible for us: this world; Jesus Christ. We have to make our choice which is to be the headline after which we are to try to write. ‘They that make them are like unto them.’ Men resemble their gods; men become more or less like their idols. What you conceive to be desirable you will more and more assimilate yourselves to. Christ is the Christian man’s pattern; is He not better than the blind, corrupt world?

That transformation is no sudden thing, though the revolution which underlies it may be instantaneous. The working *out* of the new motives, the working *in* of the new power, is no mere work of a moment. It is a lifelong task till the lump be leavened. Michael Angelo, in his mystical way, used to say that sculpture effected its aim by the removal of parts; as if the statue lay somehow hid in the marble block. We have, day by day, to work at the task of removing the superfluities that mask its outlines. Sometimes with a heavy mallet, and a hard blow, and a broad chisel, we have to take away huge masses; sometimes, with fine tools and delicate touches, to remove a grain or two of powdered dust from the sparkling block, but always to seek more and more, by slow, patient toil, to conform ourselves to that serene type of all perfectness that we have learned to love in Jesus Christ.

And remember, brethren, this transformation is no magic change effected whilst men sleep. It is a commandment which we have to brace ourselves to perform, day by day to set ourselves to the task of more completely assimilating ourselves to our Lord. It comes to be a solemn question for each of us whether we can say, ‘To-day I am liker Jesus Christ than I was yesterday; to-day the truth which renews the mind has a deeper hold upon me than it ever had before.’

But this positive commandment is only one side of the transfiguration that is to be effected. It is clear enough that if a new likeness is being stamped upon a man, the process may be looked at from the other side; and that in proportion as we become liker Jesus Christ, we shall become more unlike the old type to which we were previously conformed. And so, says Paul, ‘Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed.’ He does not mean to say that the nonconformity precedes the transformation. They are two sides of one process; both arising from the renewing of the mind within.

Now, I do not wish to do more than just touch most lightly upon the thoughts that are here, but I dare not pass them by altogether. ‘This world’ here, in my text, is more properly ‘this age,’ which means substantially the same thing as John’s favourite word ‘world,’ viz. the sum total of godless men and things conceived of as separated from God, only that by this expression the essentially fleeting nature of that type is more distinctly set forth. Now the world is the world to-day just as much as it was in Paul’s time. No doubt the Gospel has sweetened society; no doubt the average of godless life in England is a better thing than the average of godless life in the Roman Empire. No doubt there is a great deal of Christianity diffused through the average opinion and ways of looking at things, that prevail around us. But the World is the world still. There are maxims and ways of living, and so on, characteristic of the Christian life, which are in as complete antagonism to the ideas and maxims and practices that prevail amongst men who are outside of the influences of this Christian truth in their own hearts, as ever they were.

And although it can only be a word, I want to put in here a very earnest word which the tendencies of this generation do very specially require. It seems to be thought, by a great many people, who call themselves Christians nowadays, that the nearer they can come in life, in ways of looking at things, in estimates of literature, for instance, in customs of society, in politics, in trade, and especially in amusements-the nearer they can come to the un-Christian world, the more ‘broad’ [save the mark!] and ‘superior to prejudice’ they are. ‘Puritanism,’ not only in theology, but in life and conduct, has come to be at a discount in these days. And it seems to be by a great many professing Christians thought to be a great feat to walk as the mules on the Alps do, with one foot over the path and the precipice down below. Keep away from the edge. You are safer so. Although, of course, I am not talking about mere conventional dissimilarities; and though I know and believe and feel all that can be said about the insufficiency, and even insincerity, of such, yet there is a broad gulf between the man who believes in Jesus Christ and His Gospel and the man who does not, and the resulting conducts cannot be the same unless the Christian man is insincere.

III. And now lastly, and only a word, note the great reward and crown of this transfigured life.

Paul puts it in words which, if I had time, would require some commenting upon. The issue of such a life is, to put it into plain English, an increased power of perceiving, instinctively and surely, what it is God’s will that we should do. And that is the reward. Just as when you take away disturbing masses of metal from near a compass, it trembles to its true point, so when, by the discipline of which I have been speaking, there are swept away from either side of us the things that would perturb our judgment, there comes, as blessing and reward, a clear insight into that which it is our duty to do.

There may be many difficulties left, many perplexities. There is no promise here, nor is there anything in the tendencies of Christ-like living, to lead us to anticipate that guidance in regard to matters of prudence or expediency or temporal advantage will follow from such a transfigured life. All such matters are still to be determined in the proper fashion, by the exercise of our own best judgment and common-sense. But in the higher region, the knowledge of good and evil, surely it is a blessed reward, and one of the highest that can be given to a man, that there shall be in him so complete a harmony with God that, like God’s Son, he ‘does always the things that please Him,’ and that the Father will show him whatsoever things Himself doeth; and that these also will the son do likewise. To know beyond doubt what I ought to do, and knowing, to have no hesitation or reluctance in doing it, seems to me to be heaven upon earth, and the man that has it needs but little more. This, then, is the reward. Each peak we climb opens wider and clearer prospects into the untravelled land before us.

And so, brethren, here is the way, the only way, by which we can change ourselves, first let us have our minds renewed by contact with the truth, then we shall be able to transform our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ, and our faces too will shine, and our lives will be ennobled, by a serene beauty which men cannot but admire, though it may rebuke them. And as the issue of all we shall have clearer and deeper insight into that will, which to know is life, in keeping of which there is great reward. And thus our apostle's promise may be fulfilled for each of us. 'We all with unveiled faces reflecting'-as a mirror does-'the glory of the Lord, are changed . . . into the same image.'

28)Romans 12:3

Romans

SOBER THINKING

Rom. 12:3.

It is hard to give advice without seeming to assume superiority; it is hard to take it, unless the giver identifies himself with the receiver, and shows that his counsel to others is a law for himself. Paul does so here, led by the delicate perception which comes from a loving heart, compared with which deliberate 'tact' is cold and clumsy. He wishes, as the first of the specific duties to which he invites the Roman Christians, an estimate of themselves based upon the recognition of God as the Giver of all capacities and graces, and leading to a faithful use for the general good of the 'gifts differing according to the grace given to us.' In the first words of our text, he enforces his counsel by an appeal to his apostolic authority; but he so presents it that, instead of separating himself from the Roman Christians by it, he unites himself with them. He speaks of 'the grace given to *me*,' and in Rom. 12:6 of 'the grace given to *us*.' He was made an Apostle by the same giving God who has bestowed varying gifts on each of *them*. He knows what is the grace which he possesses as he would have them know; and in these counsels he is assuming no superiority, but is simply using the special gift bestowed on him for the good of all. With this delicate turn of what might else have sounded harshly authoritative, putting prominently forward the divine gift and letting the man Paul to whom it was given fall into the background, he counsels as the first of the social duties which Christian men owe to one another, a sober and just estimate of themselves. This sober estimate is here regarded as being important chiefly as an aid to right service. It is immediately followed by counsels to the patient and faithful exercise of differing gifts. For thus we may know what our gifts are; and the acquisition of such knowledge is the aim of our text.

I. What determines our gifts.

Paul here gives a precise standard, or ‘measure’ as he calls it, according to which we are to estimate ourselves. ‘Faith’ is the measure of our gifts, and is itself a gift from God. The strength of a Christian man’s faith determines his whole Christian character. Faith is trust, the attitude of receptivity. There are in it a consciousness of need, a yearning desire and a confidence of expectation. It is the open empty hand held up with the assurance that it will be filled; it is the empty pitcher let down into the well with the assurance that it will be drawn up filled. It is the precise opposite of the self-dependent isolation which shuts us out from God. The law of the Christian life is ever, ‘according to your faith be it unto you’; ‘believe that ye receive and ye have them.’ So then the more faith a man exercises the more of God and Christ he has. It is the measure of our capacity, hence there may be indefinite increase in the gifts which God bestows on faithful souls. Each of us will have as much as he desires and is capable of containing. The walls of the heart are elastic, and desire expands them.

The grace given by faith works in the line of its possessor’s natural faculties; but these are supernaturally reinforced and strengthened while, at the same time, they are curbed and controlled, by the divine gift, and the natural gifts thus dealt with become what Paul calls *charisms*. The whole nature of a Christian should be ennobled, elevated, made more delicate and intense, when the ‘Spirit of life that is in Christ Jesus’ abides in and inspires it. Just as a sunless landscape is smitten into sudden beauty by a burst of sunshine which heightens the colouring of the flowers on the river’s bank, and is flashed back from every silvery ripple on the stream, so the faith which brings the life of Christ into the life of the Christian makes him more of a man than he was before. So, there will be infinite variety in the resulting characters. It is the same force in various forms that rolls in the thunder or gleams in the dewdrops, that paints the butterfly's feathers or flashes in a star. All individual idiosyncrasies should be developed in the Christian Church, and will be when its members yield themselves fully to the indwelling Spirit, and can truly declare that the lives which they live in the flesh they live by the faith of the Son of God.

But Paul here regards the measure of faith as itself 'dealt to every man'; and however we may construe the grammar of this sentence there is a deep sense in which our faith is God's gift to us. We have to give equal emphasis to the two conceptions of faith as a human act and as a divine bestowal, which have so often been pitted against each other as contradictory when really they are complementary. The apparent antagonism between them is but one instance of the great antithesis to which we come to at last in reference to all human thought on the relations of man to God. 'It is He that worketh in us both to will and to do of His own good pleasure'; and all our goodness is God-given goodness, and yet it is our goodness. Every devout heart has a consciousness that the faith which knits it to God is God's work in it, and that left to itself it would have remained alienated and faithless. The consciousness that his faith was his own act blended in full harmony with the twin consciousness that it was Christ's gift, in the agonised father's prayer, 'Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief.'

II. What is a just estimate of our gifts.

The Apostle tells us, negatively, that we are not to think more highly than we ought to think, and positively that we are to 'think soberly.'

To arrive at a just estimate of ourselves the estimate must ever be accompanied with a distinct consciousness that all is God's gift. That will keep us from anything in the nature of pride or over-weening self-importance. It will lead to true humility, which is not ignorance of what we can do, but recognition that we, the doers, are of ourselves but poor creatures. We are less likely to fancy that we are greater than we are when we feel that, whatever we are, God made us so. 'What hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now, if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?'

Further, it is to be noted that the estimate of gifts which Paul enjoins is an estimate with a view to service. Much self-investigation is morbid, because it is self-absorbed; and much is morbid because it is undertaken only for the purpose of ascertaining one's 'spiritual condition.' Such self-examination is good enough in its way, and may sometimes be very necessary; but a testing of one's own capacities for the purpose of ascertaining what we are fit for, and what therefore it is our duty to do, is far more wholesome. Gifts are God's summons to work, and our first response to the summons should be our scrutiny of our gifts with a distinct purpose of using them for the great end for which we received them. It is well to take stock of the loaves that we have, if the result be that we bring our poor provisions to Him, and put them in His hands, that He may give them back to us so multiplied as to be more than adequate to the needs of the thousands. Such just estimate of our gifts is to be attained mainly by noting ourselves at work. Patient self-observation may be important, but is apt to be mistaken; and the true test of what we can do is what we *do* do.

The just estimate of our gifts which Paul enjoins is needful in order that we may ascertain what God has meant us to be and do, and may neither waste our strength in trying to be some one else, nor hide our talent in the napkin of ignorance or false humility. There is quite as much harm done to Christian character and Christian service by our failure to recognise what is in our power, as by ambitious or ostentatious attempts at what is above our power. We have to be ourselves as God has made us in our natural faculties, and as the new life of Christ operating on these has made us new creatures in Him not by changing but by enlarging our old natures. It matters nothing what the special form of a Christian man's service may be; the smallest and the greatest are alike to the Lord of all, and He appoints His servants' work. Whether the servant be a cup-bearer or a counsellor is of little moment. 'He that is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in much.'

The positive aspect of this right estimate of one's gifts is, if we fully render the Apostle's words, as the Revised Version does, 'so to think as to think soberly.' There is to be self-knowledge in order to 'sobriety,' which includes not only what we mean by sober-mindedness, but self-government; and this aspect of the apostolic exhortation opens out into the thought that the gifts, which a just estimate of ourselves pronounces us to possess, need to be kept bright by the continual suppression of the mind of the flesh, by putting down earthly desires, by guarding against a selfish use of them, by preventing them by rigid control from becoming disproportioned and our masters. All the gifts which Christ bestows upon His people He bestows on condition that they bind them together by the golden chain of self-control.

29)Romans 12:4-5

Romans

MANY AND ONE

Rom. 12:4 - Rom. 12:5.

To Paul there was the closest and most vital connection between the profoundest experiences of the Christian life and its plainest and most superficial duties. Here he lays one of his most mystical conceptions as the very foundation on which to rear the great structure of Christian conduct, and links on to one of his profoundest thoughts, the unity of all Christians in Christ, a comprehensive series of practical exhortations. We are accustomed to hear from many lips: ‘I have no use for these dogmas that Paul delights in. Give me his practical teaching. You may keep the Epistle to the Romans, I hold by the thirteenth of First Corinthians.’ But such an unnatural severance between the doctrine and the ethics of the Epistle cannot be effected without the destruction of both. The very principle of this Epistle to the Romans is that the difference between the law and the Gospel is, that the one preaches conduct without a basis for it, and that the other says, First believe in Christ, and in the strength of that belief, do the right and be like Him. Here, then, in the very laying of the foundation for conduct in these verses we have in concrete example the secret of the Christian way of making good men.

I. The first point to notice here is, the unity of the derived life.

Many are one, because they are each in Christ, and the individual relationship and derivation of life from Him makes them one whilst continuing to be many. That great metaphor, and nowadays much forgotten and neglected truth, is to Paul's mind the fact which ought to mould the whole life and conduct of individual Christians and to be manifested therein. There are three most significant and instructive symbols by which the unity of believers in Christ Jesus is set forth in the New Testament. Our Lord Himself gives us the one of the vine and its branches, and that symbol suggests the silent, effortless process by which the life-giving sap rises and finds its way from the deep root to the furthest tendril and the far-extended growth. The same symbol loses indeed in one respect its value if we transfer it to growths more congenial to our northern climate, and instead of the vine with its rich clusters, think of some great elm, deeply rooted, and with its firm bole and massive branches, through all of which the mystery of a common life penetrates and makes every leaf in the cloud of foliage through which we look up participant of itself. But, profound and beautiful as our Lord's metaphor is, the vegetative uniformity of parts and the absence of individual characteristics make it, if taken alone, insufficient. In the tree one leaf is like another; it 'grows green and broad and takes no care.' Hence, to express the whole truth of the union between Christ and us we must bring in other figures. Thus we find the Apostle adducing the marriage tie, the highest earthly example of union, founded on choice and affection. But even that sacred bond leaves a gap between those who are knit together by it; and so we have the conception of our text, the unity of the body as representing for us the unity of believers with Jesus. This is a unity of life. He is not only head as chief and sovereign, but He is soul or life, which has its seat, not in this or that organ as old physics teach, but pervades the whole and 'filleth all in all.' The mystery which concerns the union of soul and body, and enshrouds the nature of physical life, is part of the felicity of this symbol in its Christian application. That commonest of all things, the mysterious force which makes matter live and glow under spiritual emotion, and changes the vibrations of a nerve, or the undulations of the grey brain, into hope and love and faith, eludes the scalpel and the microscope. Of man in his complex nature it is true that 'clouds and darkness are round about him,' and we may expect an equally solemn mystery to rest upon that which makes out of separate individuals one living body, animated with the life and moved by the Spirit of the indwelling Christ. We can get no further back, and dig no deeper down, than His own words, ‘I am . . . the life.’

But, though this unity is mysterious, it is most real. Every Christian soul receives from Christ the life of Christ. There is a real implantation of a higher nature which has nothing to do with sin and is alien from death. There is a true regeneration which is supernatural, and which makes all who possess it one, in the measure of their possession, as truly as all the leaves on a tree are one because fed by the same sap, or all the members in the natural body are one, because nourished by the same blood. So the true bond of Christian unity lies in the common participation of the one Lord, and the real Christian unity is a unity of derived life.

The misery and sin of the Christian Church have been, and are, that it has sought to substitute other bonds of unity. The whole weary history of the divisions and alienations between Christians has surely sufficiently, and more than sufficiently, shown the failure of the attempts to base Christian oneness upon uniformity of opinion, or of ritual, or of purpose. The difference between the real unity, and these spurious attempts after it, is the difference between bundles of faggots, dead and held together by a cord, and a living tree lifting its multitudinous foliage towards the heavens. The bundle of faggots may be held together in some sort of imperfect union, but is no exhibition of unity. If visible churches must be based on some kind of agreement, they can never cover the same ground as that of ‘the body of Christ.’

That oneness is independent of our organisations, and even of our will, since it comes from the common possession of a common life. Its enemies are not divergent opinions or forms, but the evil tempers and dispositions which impede, or prevent, the flow into each Christian soul of the uniting ‘Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ which makes the many who may be gathered into separate folds one flock clustered around the one Shepherd. And if that unity be thus a fundamental fact in the Christian life and entirely apart from external organisation, the true way to increase it in each individual is, plainly, the drawing nearer to Him, and the opening of our spirits so as to receive fuller, deeper, and more continuous inflows from His own inexhaustible fullness. In the old Temple stood the seven-branched candlestick, an emblem of a formal unity; in the new the seven candlesticks are one, because Christ stands in the midst. He makes the body one; without Him it is a carcase.

II. The diversity.

‘We have many members in one body, but all members have not the same office.’ Life has different functions in different organs. It is light in the eye, force in the arm, music on the tongue, swiftness in the foot; so also is Christ. The higher a creature rises in the scale of life, the more are the parts differentiated. The lowest is a mere sac, which performs all the functions that the creature requires; the highest is a man with a multitude of organs, each of which is definitely limited to one office. In like manner the division of labour in society measures its advance; and in like manner in the Church there is to be the widest diversity. What the Apostle designates as ‘gifts’ are natural characteristics heightened by the Spirit of Christ; the effect of the common life in each ought to be the intensifying and manifestation of individuality of character. In the Christian ideal of humanity there is place for every variety of gifts. The flora of the Mountain of God yields an endless multiplicity of growths on its ascending slopes which pass through every climate. There ought to be a richer diversity in the Church than anywhere besides; that tree should ‘bear twelve manner of fruits, yielding its fruit every month for the healing of the nations.’ ‘All flesh is not the same flesh.’ ‘Star differeth from star in glory.’

The average Christian life of to-day sorely fails in two things: in being true to itself, and in tolerance of diversities. We are all so afraid of being ticketed as ‘eccentric,’ ‘odd,’ that we oftentimes stifle the genuine impulses of the Spirit of Christ leading us to the development of unfamiliar types of goodness, and the undertaking of unrecognised forms of service. If we trusted in Christ in ourselves more, and took our laws from His whispers, we should often reach heights of goodness which tower above us now, and discover in ourselves capacities which slumber undiscerned. There is a dreary monotony and uniformity amongst us which impoverishes us, and weakens the testimony that we bear to the quickening influence of the Spirit that is in Christ Jesus; and we all tend to look very suspiciously at any man who ‘puts all the others out’ by being himself, and letting the life that he draws from the Lord dictate its own manner of expression. It would breathe a new life into all our Christian communities if we allowed full scope to the diversities of operation, and realised that in them all there was the one Spirit. The world condemns originality: the Church should have learned to prize it. ‘One after this fashion, and one after that,’ is the only wholesome law of the development of the manifold graces of the Christian life.

III. The harmony.

‘We being many are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.’ That expression is remarkable, for we might have expected to read rather members *of the body*, than *of each other*; but the bringing in of such an idea suggests most emphatically that thought of the mutual relation of each part of the great whole, and that each has offices to discharge for the benefit of each. In the Christian community, as in an organised body, the active co-operation of all the parts is the condition of health. All the rays into which the spectrum breaks up the pure white light must be gathered together again in order to produce it; just as every instrument in the great orchestra contributes to the volume of sound. The Lancashire hand-bell ringers may illustrate this point for us. Each man picks up his own bell from the table and sounds his own note at the moment prescribed by the score, and so the whole of the composer’s idea is reproduced. To suppress diversities results in monotony; to combine them is the only sure way to secure harmony. Nor must we forget that the indwelling life of the Church can only be manifested by the full exhibition and freest possible play of all the forms which that life assumes in individual character. It needs all, and more than all, the types of mental characteristics that can be found in humanity to mirror the infinite beauty of the indwelling Lord. ‘There are diversities of operations,’ and all those diversities but partially represent that same Lord ‘who worketh all in all,’ and Himself is more than all, and, after all manifestation through human characters, remains hinted at rather than declared, suggested but not revealed.

Still further, only by the exercise of possible diversities is the one body nourished, for each member, drawing life directly and without the intervention of any other from Christ the Source, draws also from his fellow-Christian some form of the common life that to himself is unfamiliar, and needs human intervention in order to its reception. Such dependence upon one's brethren is not inconsistent with a primal dependence on Christ alone, and is a safeguard against the cultivating of one's own idiosyncrasies till they become diseased and disproportionate. The most slenderly endowed Christian soul has the double charge of giving to, and receiving from, its brethren. We have all something which we can contribute to the general stock. We have all need to supplement our own peculiar gifts by brotherly ministration. The prime condition of Christian vitality has been set forth for ever by the gracious invitation, which is also an imperative command, 'Abide in Me and I in you'; but they who by such abiding are recipients of a communicated life are not thereby isolated, but united to all who like them have received 'the manifestation of the Spirit to do good with.'

30)Romans 12:6-8

Romans

GRACE AND GRACES

Rom. 12:6 - **Rom. 12:8**.

The Apostle here proceeds to build upon the great thought of the unity of believers in the one body a series of practical exhortations. In the first words of our text, he, with characteristic delicacy, identifies himself with the Roman Christians as a recipient, like them, of 'the grace that is given to us,' and as, therefore, subject to the same precepts which he commends to them. He does not stand isolated by the grace that is given to him; nor does he look down as from the height of his apostleship on the multitude below, saying to them,-Go. As one of themselves he stands amongst them, and with brotherly exhortation says,-Come. If that had been the spirit in which all Christian teachers had besought men, their exhortations would less frequently have been breath spent in vain.

We may note

I. The grace that gives the gifts.

The connection between these two is more emphatically suggested by the original Greek, in which the word for ‘gifts’ is a derivative of that for ‘grace.’ The relation between these two can scarcely be verbally reproduced in English; but it may be, though imperfectly, suggested by reading ‘graces’ instead of ‘gifts.’ The gifts are represented as being the direct product of, and cognate with, the grace bestowed. As we have had already occasion to remark, they are in Paul’s language a designation of natural capacities strengthened by the access of the life of the Spirit of Christ. As a candle plunged in a vase of oxygen leaps up into more brilliant flame, so all the faculties of the human soul are made a hundred times themselves when the quickening power of the life of Christ enters into them.

It is to be observed that the Apostle here assumes that every Christian possesses, in some form, that grace which gives graces. To him a believing soul without Christ-given gifts is a monstrosity. No one is without some graces, and therefore no one is without some duties. No one who considers the multitude of professing Christians who hamper all our churches to-day, and reflects on the modern need to urge on the multitude of idlers forms of Christian activity, will fail to recognise signs of terribly weakened vitality. The humility, which in response to all invitations to work for Christ pleads unfitness is, if true, more tragical than it at first seems, for it is a confession that the man who alleges it has no real hold of the Christ in whom he professes to trust. If a Christian man is fit for no Christian work, it is time that he gravely ask himself whether he has any Christian life. ‘Having gifts’ is the basis of all the Apostle’s exhortations. It is to him inconceivable that any Christian should not possess, and be conscious of possessing, some endowment from the life of Christ which will fit him for, and bind him to, a course of active service.

The universality of this possession is affirmed, if we note that, according to the Greek, it was ‘given’ at a special time in the experience of each of these Roman Christians. The rendering ‘was given’ might be more accurately exchanged for ‘has been given,’ and that expression is best taken as referring to a definite moment in the history of each believer namely, his conversion. When we ‘yield ourselves to God,’ as Paul exhorts us to do in the beginning of this chapter, as the commencement of all true life of conformity to His will, Christ yields Himself to us. The possession of these gifts of grace is no prerogative of officials; and, indeed, in all the exhortations which follow there is no reference to officials, though of course such were in existence in the Roman Church. They had their special functions and special qualifications for these. But what Paul is dealing with now is the grace that is inseparable from individual surrender to Christ, and has been bestowed upon all who are His. To limit the gifts to officials, and to suppose that the universal gifts in any degree militate against the recognition of officials in the Church, are equally mistakes, and confound essentially different subjects.

II. The graces that flow from the grace.

The Apostle’s catalogue of these is not exhaustive, nor logically arranged; but yet a certain loose order may be noted, which may be profitable for us to trace. They are in number seven-the sacred number; and are capable of being divided, as so many of the series of sevens are, into two portions, one containing four and the other three. The former include more public works, to each of which a man might be specially devoted as his life work for and in the Church. Three are more private, and may be conceived to have a wider relation to the world. There are some difficulties of construction and rendering in the list, which need not concern us here; and we may substantially follow the Authorised Version.

The first group of four seems to fall into two pairs, the first of which, ‘prophecy’ and ‘ministry,’ seem to be bracketed together by reason of the difference between them. Prophecy is a very high form of special inspiration, and implies a direct reception of special revelation, but not necessarily of future events. The prophet is usually coupled in Paul’s writings with the apostle, and was obviously amongst those to whom was given one of the highest forms of the gifts of Christ. It is very beautiful to note that by natural contrast the Apostle at once passes to one of the forms of service which a vulgar estimate would regard as remotest from the special revelation of the prophet, and is confined to lowly service. Side by side with the exalted gift of prophecy Paul puts the lowly gift of ministry. Very significant is the juxtaposition of these two extremes. It teaches us that the lowliest office is as truly allotted by Jesus as the most sacred, and that His highest gifts find an adequate field for manifestation in him who is servant of all. Ministry to be rightly discharged needs spiritual character. The original seven were men ‘full of faith and of the Holy Ghost,’ though all they had to do was to hand their pittances to poor widows. It may be difficult to decide for what reason other than the emphasising of this contrast the Apostle links together ministry and prophecy, and so breaks a natural sequence which would have connected the second pair of graces with the first member of the first pair. We should have expected that here, as elsewhere, ‘prophet,’ ‘teacher,’ ‘exhorter,’ would have been closely connected, and there seems no reason why they should not have been so, except that which we have suggested, namely, the wish to bring together the highest and the lowest forms of service.

The second pair seem to be linked together by likeness. The ‘teacher’ probably had for his function, primarily, the narration of the facts of the Gospel, and the setting forth in a form addressed chiefly to the understanding the truths thereby revealed; whilst the ‘exhorter’ rather addressed himself to the will, presenting the same truth, but in forms more intended to influence the emotions. The word here rendered ‘exhort’ is found in Paul’s writings as bearing special meanings, such as consoling, stimulating, encouraging, rebuking and others. Of course these two forms of service would often be associated, and each would be imperfect when alone; but it would appear that in the early Church there were persons in whom the one or the other of these two elements was so preponderant that their office was thereby designated. Each received a special gift from the one Source. The man who could only say to his brother, ‘Be of good cheer,’ was as much the recipient of the Spirit as the man who could connect and elaborate a systematic presentation of the truths of the Gospel.

These four graces are followed by a group of three, which may be regarded as being more private, as not pointing to permanent offices so much as to individual acts. They are ‘giving,’ ‘ruling,’ ‘showing pity,’ concerning which we need only note that the second of these can hardly be the ecclesiastical office, and that it stands between two which are closely related, as if it were of the same kind. The gifts of money, or of direction, or of pity, are one in kind. The right use of wealth comes from the gift of God’s grace; so does the right use of any sway which any of us have over any of our brethren; and so does the glow of compassion, the exercise of the natural human sympathy which belongs to all, and is deepened and made tenderer and intenser by the gift of the Spirit. It would be a very different Church, and a very different world, if Christians, who were not conscious of possessing gifts which made them fit to be either prophets, or teachers, or exhorters, and were scarcely endowed even for any special form of ministry, felt that a gift from their hands, or a wave of pity from their hearts, was a true token of the movement of God's Spirit on their spirits. The fruit of the Spirit is to be found in the wide fields of everyday life, and the vine bears many clusters for the thirsty lips of wearied men who may little know what gives them their bloom and sweetness. It would be better for both giver and receiver if Christian beneficence were more clearly recognised as one of the manifestations of spiritual life.

III. The exercise of the graces.

There are some difficulties in reference to the grammatical construction of the words of our text, into which it is not necessary that we should enter here. We may substantially follow the Authorised and Revised Versions in supplying verbs in the various clauses, so as to make of the text a series of exhortations. The first of these is to 'prophesy according to the proportion of faith'; a commandment which is best explained by remembering that in the preceding verse 'the measure of faith' has been stated as being the measure of the gifts. The prophet then is to exercise his gifts in proportion to his faith. He is to speak his convictions fully and openly, and to let his utterances be shaped by the indwelling life. This exhortation may well sink into the heart of preachers in this day. It is but the echo of Jeremiah's strong words: 'He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord. Is not my word like as fire, saith the Lord, and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?' The ancient prophet's woe falls with double weight on those who use their words as a veil to obscure their real beliefs, and who prophesy, not 'according to the proportion of faith,' but according to the expectations of the hearers, whose faith is as vague as theirs.

In the original, the next three exhortations are alike in grammatical construction, which is represented in the Authorised Version by the supplement 'let us wait on,' and in the Revised Version by 'let us give ourselves to'; we might with advantage substitute for either the still more simple form 'be in,' after the example of Paul's exhortation to Timothy 'be in these things'; that is, as our Version has it, 'give thyself wholly to them.' The various gifts are each represented as a sphere within which its possessor is to move, for the opportunities for the exercise of which he is carefully to watch, and within the limits of which he is humbly to keep. That general law applies equally to ministry, and teaching and exhorting. We are to seek to discern our spheres; we are to be occupied with, if not absorbed in, them. At the least we are diligently to use the gift which we discover ourselves to possess, and thus filling our several spheres, we are to keep within them, recognising that each is sacred as the manifestation of God's will for each of us. The divergence of forms is unimportant, and it matters nothing whether 'the Giver of all' grants less or more. The main thing is that each be faithful in the administration of what he has received, and not seek to imitate his brother who is diversely endowed, or to monopolise for himself another's gifts. To insist that our brethren's gifts should be like ours, and to try to make ours like theirs, are equally sins against the great truth, of which the Church as a whole is the example, that there are 'diversities of operations but the same Spirit.'

The remaining three exhortations are in like manner thrown together by a similarity of construction in which the personality of the doer is put in the foreground, and the emphasis of the commandment is rested on the manner in which the grace is exercised. The reason for that may be that in these three especially the manner will show the grace. 'Giving' is to be 'with simplicity.' There are to be no sidelong looks to self-interest; no flinging of a gift from a height, as a bone might be flung to a dog; no seeking for gratitude; no ostentation in the gift. Any taint of such mixed motives as these infuses poison into our gifts, and makes them taste bitter to the receiver, and recoil in hurt upon ourselves. To 'give with simplicity' is to give as God gives.

'Diligence' is the characteristic prescribed for the man that rules. We have already pointed out that this exhortation includes a much wider area than that of any ecclesiastical officials. It points to another kind of rule, and the natural gifts needed for any kind of rule are diligence and zeal. Slackly-held reins make stumbling steeds; and any man on whose shoulders is laid the weight of government is bound to feel it as a weight. The history of many a nation, and of many a family, teaches that where the rule is slothful all evils grow apace; and it is that natural energy and earnestness, deepened and hallowed by the Christian life, which here is enjoined as the true Christian way of discharging the function of ruling, which, in some form or another, devolves on almost all of us.

‘He that showeth mercy with cheerfulness.’ The glow of natural human sympathy is heightened so as to become a ‘gift,’ and the way in which it is exercised is defined as being ‘with cheerfulness.’ That injunction is but partially understood if it is taken to mean no more than that sympathy is not to be rendered grudgingly, or as by necessity. No sympathy is indeed possible on such terms; unless the heart is in it, it is nought. And that it should thus flow forth spontaneously wherever sorrow and desolation evoke it, there must be a continual repression of self, and a heart disengaged from the entanglements of its own circumstances, and at leisure to make a brother’s burden its very own. But the exhortation may, perhaps, rather mean that the truest sympathy carries a bright face into darkness, and comes like sunshine in a shady place.

31)Romans 12:9-10

Romans

LOVE THAT CAN HATE

Rom. 12:9 - Rom. 12:10.

Thus far the Apostle has been laying down very general precepts and principles of Christian morals. Starting with the one all-comprehensive thought of self-sacrifice as the very foundation of all goodness, of transformation as its method, and of the clear knowledge of our several powers and faithful stewardship of these, as its conditions, he here proceeds to a series of more specific exhortations, which at first sight seem to be very unconnected, but through which there may be discerned a sequence of thought.

The clauses of our text seem at first sight strangely disconnected. The first and the last belong to the same subject, but the intervening clause strikes a careless reader as out of place and heterogeneous. I think that we shall see it is not so; but for the present we but note that here are three sets of precepts which enjoin, first, honest love; then, next, a healthy vehemence against evil and for good; and finally, a brotherly affection and mutual respect.

I. Let love be honest.

Love stands at the head, and is the fontal source of all separate individualised duties. Here Paul is not so much prescribing love as describing the kind of love which he recognises as genuine, and the main point on which he insists is sincerity. The 'dissimulation' of the Authorised Version only covers half the ground. It means, hiding what one is; but there is simulation, or pretending to be what one is not. There are words of love which are like the iridescent scum on the surface veiling the black depths of a pool of hatred. A Psalmist complains of having to meet men whose words were 'smoother than butter' and whose true feelings were as 'drawn swords'; but, short of such consciously lying love, we must all recognise as a real danger besetting us all, and especially those of us who are naturally inclined to kindly relations with our fellows, the tendency to use language just a little in excess of our feelings. The glove is slightly stretched, and the hand in it is not quite large enough to fill it. There is such a thing, not altogether unknown in Christian circles, as benevolence, which is largely cant, and words of conventional love about individuals which do not represent any corresponding emotion. Such effusive love pours itself in words, and is most generally the token of intense selfishness. Any man who seeks to make his words a true picture of his emotions must be aware that few harder precepts have ever been given than this brief one of the Apostle's, 'Let love be without hypocrisy.'

But the place where this exhortation comes in the apostolic sequence here may suggest to us the discipline through which obedience to it is made possible. There is little to be done by the way of directly increasing either the fervour of love or the honesty of its expression. The true method of securing both is to be growingly transformed by 'the renewing of our minds,' and growingly to bring our whole old selves under the melting and softening influence of ‘the mercies of God.’ It is swollen self-love, ‘thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think,’ which impedes the flow of love to others, and it is in the measure in which we receive into our minds ‘the mind that was in Christ Jesus,’ and look at men as He did, that we shall come to love them all honestly and purely. When we are delivered from the monstrous oppression and tyranny of self, we have hearts capable of a Christlike and Christ-giving love to all men, and only they who have cleansed their hearts by union with Him, and by receiving into them the purging influence of His own Spirit, will be able to love without hypocrisy.

II. Let love abhor what is evil, and cleave to what is good.

If we carefully consider this apparently irrelevant interruption in the sequence of the apostolic exhortations, we shall, I think, see at once that the irrelevance is only apparent, and that the healthy vehemence against evil and resolute clinging to good is as essential to the noblest forms of Christian love as is the sincerity enjoined in the previous clause. To detest the one and hold fast by the other are essential to the purity and depth of our love. Evil is to be loathed, and good to be clung to in our own moral conduct, and wherever we see them. These two precepts are not mere tautology, but the second of them is the ground of the first. The force of our recoil from the bad will be measured by the firmness of our grasp of the good; and yet, though inseparably connected, the one is apt to be easier to obey than is the other. There are types of Christian men to whom it is more natural to abhor the evil than to cleave to the good; and there are types of character of which the converse is true. We often see men very earnest and entirely sincere in their detestation of meanness and wickedness, but very tepid in their appreciation of goodness. To hate is, unfortunately, more congenial with ordinary characters than to love; and it is more facile to look down on badness than to look up at goodness.

But it needs ever to be insisted upon, and never more than in this day of spurious charity and unprincipled toleration, that a healthy hatred of moral evil and of sin, wherever found and however garbed, ought to be the continual accompaniment of all vigorous and manly cleaving to that which is good. Unless we shudderingly recoil from contact with the bad in our own lives, and refuse to christen it with deceptive euphemisms when we meet it in social and civil life, we shall but feebly grasp, and slackly hold, that which is good. Such energy of moral recoil from evil is perfectly consistent with honest love, for it is things, not men, that we are to hate; and it is needful as the completion and guardian of love itself. There is always danger that love shall weaken the condemnation of wrong, and modern liberality, both in the field of opinion and in regard to practical life, has so far condoned evil as largely to have lost its hold upon good. The criminal is pitied rather than blamed, and a multitude of agencies are so occupied in elevating the wrong-doers that they lose sight of the need of punishing.

Nor is it only in reference to society that this tendency works harm. The effect of it is abundantly manifest in the fashionable ideas of God and His character. There are whole schools of opinion which practically strike out of their ideal of the Divine Nature abhorrence of evil, and, little as they think it, are thereby fatally impoverishing their ideal of God, and making it impossible to understand His government of the world. As always, so in this matter, the authentic revelation of the Divine Nature, and the perfect pattern for the human are to be found in Jesus Christ. We recall that wonderful incident, when on His last approach to Jerusalem, rounding the shoulder of the Mount of Olives, He beheld the city, gleaming in the morning sunshine across the valley, and forgetting His own sorrow, shed tears over its approaching desolation, which yet He steadfastly pronounced. His loathing of evil was whole-souled and absolute, and equally intense and complete was His cleaving to that which is good. In both, and in the harmony between them, He makes God known, and prescribes and holds forth the ideal of perfect humanity to men.

III. Let sincere and discriminating love be concentrated on Christian men.

In the final exhortation of our text ‘the love of the brethren’ takes the place of the more diffused and general love enjoined in the first clause. The expression ‘kindly affectioned’ is the rendering of a very eloquent word in the original in which the instinctive love of a mother to her child, or the strange mystical ties which unite members of a family together, irrespective of their differences of character and temperament, are taken as an example after which Christian men are to mould their relations to one another. The love which is without hypocrisy, and is to be diffused on all sides, is also to be gathered together and concentrated with special energy on all who ‘call upon Jesus Christ as Lord, both their Lord and ours.’ The more general precept and the more particular are in perfect harmony, however our human weakness sometimes confuses them. It is obvious that this final precept of our text will be the direct result of the two preceding, for the love which has learned to be moral, hating evil, and clinging to good as necessary, when directed to possessors of like precious faith will thrill with the consciousness of a deep mystical bond of union, and will effloresce in all brotherly love and kindly affections. They who are like one another in the depths of their moral life, who are touched by like aspirations after like holy things, and who instinctively recoil with similar revulsion from like abominations, will necessarily feel the drawing of a unity far deeper and sacreder than any superficial likenesses of race, or circumstance, or opinion. Two men who share, however imperfectly, in Christ’s Spirit are more akin in the realities of their nature, however they may differ on the surface, than either of them is to another, however like he may seem, who is not a partaker in the life of Christ.

This instinctive, Christian love, like all true and pure love, is to manifest itself by ‘preferring one another in honour’; or as the word might possibly be rendered, ‘anticipating one another.’ We are not to wait to have our place assigned before we give our brother his. There will be no squabbling for the chief seat in the synagogue, or the uppermost rooms at the feast, where brotherly love marshals the guests. The one cure for petty jealousies and the miserable strife for recognition, which we are all tempted to engage in, lies in a heart filled with love of the brethren because of its love to the Elder Brother of them all, and to the Father who is His Father as well as ours. What a contrast is presented between the practice of Christians and these precepts of Paul! We may well bow ourselves in shame and contrition when we read these clear-drawn lines indicating what we ought to be, and set by the side of them the blurred and blotted pictures of what we are. It is a painful but profitable task to measure ourselves against Paul’s ideal of Christ’s commandment; but it will only be profitable if it brings us to remember that Christ gives before He commands, and that conformity with His ideal must begin, not with details of conduct, or with emotion, however pure, but with yielding ourselves to the God who moves us by His mercies, and being 'transformed by the renewing of our minds' and 'the indwelling of Christ in our hearts by faith.'

32)Romans 12:11

Romans

A TRIPLET OF GRACES

Rom. 12:11.

Paul believed that Christian doctrine was meant to influence Christian practice; and therefore, after the fundamental and profound exhibition of the central truths of Christianity which occupies the earlier portion of this great Epistle, he tacks on, with a 'therefore' to his theological exposition, a series of plain, practical teachings. The place where conduct comes in the letter is profoundly significant, and, if the significance of it had been observed and the spirit of it carried into practice, there would have been less of a barren orthodoxy, and fewer attempts at producing righteous conduct without faith.

But not only is the place where this series of exhortations occur very significant, but the order in which they appear is also instructive. The great principle which covers all conduct, and may be broken up into all the minutenesses of practical directions is self-surrender. Give yourselves up to God; that is the Alpha and the Omega of all goodness, and wherever that foundation is really laid, on it will rise the fair building of a life which is a temple, adorned with whatever things are lovely and of good report. So after Paul has laid deep and broad the foundation of all Christian virtue in his exhortation to present ourselves as living sacrifices, he goes on to point out the several virtues in which such self-surrender will manifest itself. There runs through the most of these exhortations an arrangement in triplets-three sister Graces linked together hand-in-hand as it were-and my text presents an example of that threefoldness in grouping. 'Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord.'

I. We have, first, the prime grace of Christian diligence.

‘Not slothful in business’ suggests, by reason of our modern restriction of that word ‘business’ to a man’s daily occupation, a much more limited range to this exhortation than the Apostle meant to give it. The idea which is generally drawn from these words by English readers is that they are to do their ordinary work diligently, and, all the while, notwithstanding the cooling or distracting influences of their daily avocations, are to keep themselves ‘fervent in spirit.’ That is a noble and needful conception of the command, but it does not express what is in the Apostle’s mind. He does not mean by ‘business’ a trade or profession, or daily occupation. But the word means ‘zeal’ or ‘earnestness.’ And what Paul says is just this-’In regard to your earnestness in all directions, see that you are not slothful.’

The force and drift of the whole precept is just the exhortation to exercise the very homely virtue of diligence, which is as much a condition of growth and maturity in the Christian as it is in any other life. The very homeliness and obviousness of the duty causes us often to lose sight of its imperativeness and necessity.

Many of us, if we would sit quietly down and think of how we go about our ‘business,’ as we call it, and of how we go about our Christian life, which ought to be our highest business, would have great cause for being ashamed. We begin the one early in the morning, we keep hard at it all day, our eyes are wide open to see any opening where money is to be made; that is all right. We give our whole selves to our work whilst we are at it; that is as it should be. But why are there not the same concentration, the same wide-awakeness, the same open-eyed eagerness to find out ways of advancement, the same resolved and continuous and all-comprehending and dominating enthusiasm about our Christianity as there is about our shop, or our mill, or our success as students? Why are we all fire in the one case and all ice in the other? Why do we think that it is enough to lift the burden that Christ lays upon us with one languid finger, and to put our whole hand, or rather, as the prophet says, ‘both hands earnestly,’ to the task of lifting the load of daily work? ‘In your earnestness be not slothful.’

Brethren, that is a very homely exhortation. I wonder how many of us can say, ‘Lord! I have heard, and I have obeyed Thy precept.’

II. Diligence must be fed by a fervent spirit.

The word translated ‘fervent’ is literally boiling. The metaphor is very plain and intelligible. The spirit brought into contact with Christian truth and with the fire of the Holy Spirit will naturally have its temperature raised, and will be moved by the warm touch as heat makes water in a pot hung above a fire boil. Such emotion, produced by the touch of the fiery Spirit of God, is what Paul desires for, and enjoins on, all Christians; for such emotion is the only way by which the diligence, without which no Christian progress will be made, can be kept up.

No man will work long at a task that his heart is not in; or if he does, because he is obliged, the work will be slavery. In order, then, that diligence may neither languish and become slothfulness, nor be felt to be a heavy weight and an unwelcome necessity, Paul here bids us see to it that our hearts are moved because there is a fire below which makes ‘the soul’s depths boil in earnest.’

Now, of course, I know that, as a great teacher has told us, ‘The gods approve the depth and not the tumult of the soul,’ and I know that there is a great deal of emotional Christianity which is worth nothing. But it is not that kind of fervour that the Apostle is enjoining here. Whilst it is perfectly true that mere emotion often does co-exist with, and very often leads to, entire negligence as to possessing and manifesting practical excellence, the true relation between these is just the opposite-viz. that this fervour of which I speak, this wide-awakeness and enthusiasm of a spirit all quickened into rapidity of action by the warmth which it has felt from God in Christ, should drive the wheels of life. Boiling water makes steam, does it not? And what is to be done with the steam that comes off the ‘boiling’ spirit? You may either let it go roaring through a waste-pipe and do nothing but make a noise and be idly dissipated in the air, or you may lead it into a cylinder and make it lift a piston, and then you will get work out of it. That is what the Apostle desires us to do with our emotion. The lightning goes careering through the sky, but we have harnessed it to tram-cars nowadays, and made it ‘work for its living,’ to carry our letters and light our rooms. Fervour of a Christian spirit is all right when it is yoked to Christian work, and made to draw what else is a heavy chariot. It is not emotion, but it is indolent emotion, that is the curse of much of our ‘fervent’ Christianity.

There cannot be too much fervour. There may be too little outlet provided for the fervour to work in. It may all go off in comfortable feeling, in enthusiastic prayers and ‘Amens!’ and ‘So be it, Lords!’ and the like, or it may come with us into our daily tasks, and make us buckle to with more earnestness, and more continuity. Diligence driven by earnestness, and fervour that works, are the true things.

And surely, surely there cannot be any genuine Christianity-certainly there cannot be any deep Christianity-which is not fervent.

We hear from certain quarters of the Church a great deal about the virtue of moderation. But it seems to me that, if you take into account what Christianity tells us, the ‘sober’ feeling is fervent feeling, and tepid feeling is imperfect feeling. I cannot understand any man believing as plain matter-of-fact the truths on which the whole New Testament insists, and keeping himself ‘cool,’ or, as our friends call it, ‘moderate.’ Brethren, enthusiasm-which properly means the condition of being dwelt in by a god-is the wise, the reasonable attitude of Christian men, if they believe their own Christianity and are really serving Jesus Christ. They should be ‘diligent in business, fervent’-boiling-in spirit.

III. The diligence and the fervency are both to be animated by the thought, ‘Serving the Lord!’

Some critics, as many of you know, no doubt, would prefer to read this verse in its last clause ‘serving the time.’ But that seems to me a very lame and incomplete climax for the Apostle’s thought, and it breaks entirely the sequence which, as I think, is discernible in it. Much rather, he here, in the closing member of the triplet, suggests a thought which will be stimulus to the diligence and fuel to the fire that makes the spirit boil.

In effect he says, ‘Think, when your hands begin to droop, and when your spirits begin to be cold and indifferent, and languor to steal over you, and the paralysing influences of the commonplace and the familiar, and the small begin to assert themselves-think that you are serving the Lord.’ Will that not freshen you up? Will that not set you boiling again? Will it not be easy to be diligent when we feel that we are ‘ever in the great Taskmaster’s eye’ ? There are many reasons for diligence-the greatness of the work, for it is no small matter for us to get the whole lump of our nature leavened with the good leaven; the continual operation of antagonistic forces which are all round us, and are working night-shifts as well as day ones, whether we as Christians are on short time or not, the brevity of the period during which we have to work, and the tremendous issues which depend upon the completeness of our service here-all these things are reasons for our diligence. But *the* reason is: 'Thou Christ hast died for me, and livest for me; truly I am Thy slave.' That is the thought that will make a man bend his back to his work, whatever it be, and bend his will to his work, too, however unwelcome it may be; and that is the thought that will stir his whole spirit to fervour and earnestness, and thus will deliver him from the temptations to languid and perfunctory work that ever creep over us.

You can carry that motive-as we all know, and as we all forget when the pinch comes-into your shop, your study, your office, your mill, your kitchen, or wherever you go. 'On the bells of the horses there shall be written, Holiness to the Lord,' said the prophet, and 'every bowl in Jerusalem' may be sacred as the vessels of the altar. All life may flash into beauty, and tower into greatness, and be smoothed out into easiness, and the crooked things may be made straight and the rough places plain, and the familiar and the trite be invested with freshness and wonder as of a dream, if only we write over them, 'For the sake of the Master.' Then, whatever we do or bear, be it common, insignificant, or unpleasant, will change its aspect, and all will be sweet. Here is the secret of diligence and of fervency, 'I set the Lord always before me.'

33)Romans 12:12

Romans

ANOTHER TRIPLET OF GRACES

Rom. 12:12.

These three closely connected clauses occur, as you all know, in the midst of that outline of the Christian life with which the Apostle begins the practical part of this Epistle. Now, what he omits in this sketch of Christian duty seems to me quite as significant as what he inserts. It is very remarkable that in the twenty verses devoted to this subject, this is the only one which refers to the inner secrets of the Christian life. Paul's notion of 'deepening the spiritual life' was 'Behave yourself better in your relation to other people.' So all the rest of this chapter is devoted to inculcating our duties to one another. Conduct is all-important. An orthodox creed is valuable if it influences action, but not otherwise. Devout emotion is valuable, if it drives the wheels of life, but not otherwise. Christians should make efforts to attain to clear views and warm feelings, but the outcome and final test of both is a daily life of visible imitation of Jesus. The deepening of spiritual life should be manifested by completer, practical righteousness in the market-place and the street and the house, which non-Christians will acknowledge.

But now, with regard to these three specific exhortations here, I wish to try to bring out their connection as well as the force of each of them.

I. So I remark first, that the Christian life ought to be joyful because it is hopeful.

Now, I do not suppose that many of us habitually recognise it as a Christian duty to be joyful. We think that it is a matter of temperament and partly a matter of circumstance. We are glad when things go well with us. If we have a sunny disposition, and are naturally light-hearted, all the better; if we have a melancholy or morose one, all the worse. But do we recognise this, that a Christian who is not joyful is not living up to his duty; and that there is no excuse, either in temperament or in circumstances, for our not being so, and always being so? 'Rejoice in the Lord alway,' says Paul; and then, as if he thought, 'Some of you will be thinking that that is a very rash commandment, to aim at a condition quite impossible to make constant,' he goes on-'and, to convince you that I do not say it hastily, I will repeat it-"and again I say, rejoice."' Brethren, we shall have to alter our conceptions of what true gladness is before we can come to understand the full depth of the great thought that joy is a Christian duty. The true joy is not the kind of joy that a saying in the Old Testament compares to the 'crackling of thorns under a pot,' but something very much calmer, with no crackle in it; and very much deeper, and very much more in alliance with 'whatsoever things are lovely and of good report,' than that foolish, short-lived, and empty mirth that burns down so soon into black ashes.

To be glad is a Christian duty. Many of us have as much religion as makes us sombre, and impels us often to look upon the more solemn and awful aspects of Christian truth, but we have not enough to make us glad. I do not need to dwell upon all the sources in Christian faith and belief, of that lofty and imperatively obligatory gladness, but I confine myself to the one in my text, 'Rejoicing in hope.'

Now, we all know-from the boy that is expecting to go home for his holidays in a week, up to the old man to whose eye the time-veil is wearing thin-that hope, if it is certain, is a source of gladness. How lightly one's bosom's lord sits upon its throne, when a great hope comes to animate us! how everybody is pleasant, and all things are easy, and the world looks different! Hope, if it is certain, will gladden, and if our Christianity grasps, as it ought to do, the only hope that is absolutely certain, and as sure as if it were in the past and had been experienced, then our hearts, too, will sing for joy. True joy is *not* a matter of temperament, so much as a matter of faith. It is *not* a matter of circumstances. All the surface drainage may be dry, but there is a well in the courtyard deep and cool and full and exhaustless, and a Christian who rightly understands and cherishes the Christian hope is lifted above temperament, and is not dependent upon conditions for his joys.

The Apostle, in an earlier part of this same letter, defines for us what that hope is, which thus is the secret of perpetual gladness, when he speaks about 'rejoicing in hope of the glory of God.' Yes, it is that great, supreme, calm, far off, absolutely certain prospect of being gathered into the divine glory, and walking there, like the three in the fiery furnace, unconsumed and at ease; it is that hope that will triumph over temperament, and over all occasions for melancholy, and will breathe into our life a perpetual gladness. Brethren, is it not strange and sad that with such a treasure by our sides we should consent to live such poor lives as we do?

But remember, although I cannot say to myself, 'Now I will be glad,' and cannot attain to joy by a movement of the will or direct effort, although it is of no use to say to a man-which is all that the world can ever say to him-'Cheer up and be glad,' whilst you do not alter the facts that make him sad, there is a way by which we can bring about feelings of gladness or of gloom. It is just this-we can choose what we will look at. If you prefer to occupy your mind with the troubles, losses, disappointments, hard work, blighted hopes of this poor sin-ridden world, of course sadness will come over you often, and a general grey tone will be the usual tone of your lives, as it is of the lives of many of us, broken only by occasional bursts of foolish mirth and empty laughter. But if you choose to turn away from all these, and instead of the dim, dismal, hard present, to sun yourselves in the light of the yet unrisen sun, which you can do, then, having rightly chosen the subjects to think about, the feeling will come as a matter of course. You cannot make yourselves glad by, as it were, laying hold of yourselves and lifting yourselves into gladness, but you can rule the direction of your thoughts, and so can bring around you summer in the midst of winter, by steadily contemplating the facts-and they are present facts, though we talk about them collectively as ‘the future’-the facts on which all Christian gladness ought to be based. We can carry our own atmosphere with us; like the people in Italy, who in frosty weather will be seen sitting in the market-place by their stalls with a dish of embers, which they grasp in their hands, and so make themselves comfortably warm on the bitterest day. You can bring a reasonable degree of warmth into the coldest weather, if you will lay hold of the vessel in which the fire is, and keep it in your hand and close to your heart. Choose what you think about, and feelings will follow thoughts.

But it needs very distinct and continuous effort for a man to keep this great source of Christian joy clear before him. We are like the dwellers in some island of the sea, who, in some conditions of the atmosphere, can catch sight of the gleaming mountain-tops on the mainland across the stormy channel between. But thick days, with a heavy atmosphere and much mist, are very frequent in our latitude, and then all the distant hills are blotted out, and we see nothing but the cold grey sea, breaking on the cold, grey stones. Still, you can scatter the mist if you will. You can make the atmosphere bright; and it is worth an effort to bring clear before us, and to keep high above the mists that cling to the low levels, the great vision which will make us glad. Brethren, I believe that one great source of the weakness of average Christianity amongst us to-day is the dimness into which so many of us have let the hope of the glory of God pass in our hearts. So I beg you to lay to heart this first commandment, and to rejoice in hope.

II. Now, secondly, here is the thought that life, if full of joyful hope, will be patient.

I have been saying that the gladness of which my text speaks is independent of circumstances, and may persist and be continuous even when externals occasion sadness. It is possible-I do not say it is easy, God knows it is hard-I do not say it is frequently attained, but I do say it is possible-to realise that wonderful ideal of the Apostle's 'As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.' The surface of the ocean may be tossed and fretted by the winds, and churned into foam, but the great central depths 'hear not the loud winds when they call,' and are still in the midst of tempest. And we, dear brethren, ought to have an inner depth of spirit, down to the disturbance of which no surface-trouble can ever reach. That is the height of attainment of Christian faith, but it is a possible attainment for every one of us.

And if there be that burning of the light under the water, like 'Greek fire,' as it was called, which many waters could not quench-if there be that persistence of gladness beneath the surface-sorrow, as you find a running stream coming out below a glacier, then the joy and the hope, which co-exist with the sorrow, will make life patient.

Now, the Apostle means by these great words, 'patient' and 'patience,' which are often upon his lips, something more than simple endurance. That endurance is as much as many of us can often muster up strength to exercise. It sometimes takes all our faith and all our submission simply to say, 'I opened not my mouth, because thou didst it; and I will bear what thine hand lays upon me.' But that is not all that the idea of Christian 'patience' includes, for it also takes in the thought of active work, and it is *perseverance* as much as *patience*.

Now, if my heart is filled with a calm gladness because my eye is fixed upon a celestial hope, then both the passive and active sides of Christian 'patience' will be realised by me. If my hope burns bright, and occupies a large space in my thoughts, then it will not be hard to take the homely consolation of good John Newton's hymn and say-

'Though painful at present,

'Twill cease before long;
And then, oh, how pleasant
The conqueror's song!'

A man who is sailing to America, and knows that he will be in New York in a week, does not mind, although his cabin is contracted, and he has a great many discomforts, and though he has a bout of sea-sickness. The disagreeables are only going to last for a day or two. So our hope will make us bear trouble, and not make much of it.

And our hope will strengthen us, if it is strong, for all the work that is to be done. Persistence in the path of duty, though my heart be beating like a smith's hammer on the anvil, is what Christian men should aim at, and possess. If we have within our hearts that fire of a certain hope, it will impel us to diligence in doing the humblest duty, whether circumstances be for or against us; as some great steamer is driven right on its course, through the ocean, whatever storms may blow in the teeth of its progress, because, deep down in it, there are furnaces and boilers which supply the steam that drives the engines. So a life that is joyful because it is hopeful will be full of calm endurance and strenuous work. 'Rejoicing in hope; patient,' persevering in tribulation.

III. Lastly, our lives will be joyful, hopeful, and patient, in proportion as they are prayerful.

'Continuing instant'-which, of course, just means steadfast-'in prayer.' Paul uttered a paradox when he said, 'Rejoice in the Lord alway,' as he said long before this verse, in the very first letter that he ever wrote, or at least the first which has come down to us. There he bracketed it along with two other equally paradoxical sayings. 'Rejoice evermore; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks.' If you pray without ceasing you can rejoice without ceasing.

But can I pray without ceasing? Not if by prayer you mean only words of supplication and petition, but if by prayer you mean also a mental attitude of devotion, and a kind of sub-conscious reference to God in all that you do, such unceasing prayer is possible. Do not let us blunt the edge of this commandment, and weaken our own consciousness of having failed to obey it, by getting entangled in the cobwebs of mere curious discussions as to whether the absolute ideal of perfectly unbroken communion with God is possible in this life. At all events it is possible to us to approximate to that ideal a great deal more closely than our consciences tell us that we ever yet have done. If we are trying to keep our hearts in the midst of daily duty in contact with God, and if, ever and anon in the press of our work, we cast a thought towards Him and a prayer, then joy and hope and patience will come to us, in a degree that we do not know much about yet, but might have known all about long, long ago.

There is a verse in the Old Testament which we may well lay to heart: 'They cried unto God in the battle, and He was entreated of them.' Well, what sort of a prayer do you think that would be? Suppose that you were standing in the thick of battle with the sword of an enemy at your throat, there would not be much time for many words of prayer, would there? But the cry could go up, and the thought could go up, and as they went up, down would come the strong buckler which God puts between His servants and all evil. That is the sort of prayer that you, in the battle of business, in your shops and counting-houses and warehouses and mills, we students in our studies, and you mothers in your families and your kitchens, can send up to heaven. If thus we 'pray without ceasing,' then we shall 'rejoice evermore,' and our souls will be kept in patience and filled with the peace of God.

34)Romans 12:13-15

Romans

STILL ANOTHER TRIPLET

Rom. 12:13 - Rom. 12:15.

In these verses we pass from the innermost region of communion with God into the wide field of duties in relation to men. The solitary secrecies of rejoicing hope, endurance, and prayer unbroken, are exchanged for the publicities of benevolence and sympathy. In the former verses the Christian soul is in ‘the secret place of the Most High’; in those of our text he comes forth with the light of God on his face, and hands laden with blessings. The juxtaposition of the two suggests the great principles to which the morality of the New Testament is ever true-that devotion to God is the basis of all practical helpfulness to man, and that practical helpfulness to man is the expression and manifestation of devotion to God.

The three sets of injunctions in our text, dissimilar though they appear, have a common basis. They are varying forms of one fundamental disposition-love; which varies in its forms according to the necessities of its objects, bringing temporal help to the needy, meeting hostility with blessing, and rendering sympathy to both the glad and the sorrowful. There is, further, a noteworthy connection, not in sense but in sound, between the first and second clauses of our text, which is lost in our English Version. ‘Given to hospitality’ is, as the Revised margin shows, literally, pursuing hospitality. Now the Greek, like the English word, has the special meaning of following with a hostile intent, and the use of it in the one sense suggests its other meaning to Paul, whose habit of ‘going off at a word,’ as it has been called, is a notable feature of his style. Hence, this second injunction, of blessing the persecutors, comes as a kind of play upon words, and is obviously occasioned by the verbal association. It would come more appropriately at a later part of the chapter, but its occurrence here is characteristic of Paul’s idiosyncrasy. We may represent the connection of these two clauses by such a rendering as: Pursue hospitality, and as for those who pursue you, bless, and curse not.

We may look at these three flowers from the one root of love.

I. Love that speaks in material help.

We have here two special applications of that love which Paul regards as ‘the bond of perfectness,’ knitting all Christians together. The former of these two is love that expresses itself by tangible material aid. The persons to be helped are ‘saints,’ and it is their ‘needs’ that are to be aided. There is no trace in the Pauline Epistles of the community of goods which for a short time prevailed in the Church of Jerusalem and which was one of the causes that led to the need for the contribution for the poor saints in that city which occupied so much of Paul’s attention at Corinth and elsewhere. But, whilst

Christian love leaves the rights of property intact, it charges them with the duty of supplying the needs of the brethren. They are not absolute and unconditioned rights, but are subject to the highest principles of stewardship for God, trusteeship for men, and sacrifice for Christ. These three great thoughts condition and limit the Christian man's possession of the wealth, which, in a modified sense, it is allowable for him to call his own. His brother's need constitutes a first charge on all that belongs to him, and ought to precede the gratification of his own desires for superfluities and luxuries. If we 'see our brother have need and shut up our bowels of compassion against him' and use our possessions for the gratification of our own whims and fancies, 'how dwelleth the love of God in us?' There are few things in which Christian men of this day have more need for the vigorous exercise of conscience, and for enlightenment, than in their getting, and spending, and keeping money. In that region lies the main sphere of usefulness for many of us; and if we have not been 'faithful in that which is least,' our unfaithfulness there makes it all but impossible that we should be faithful in that which is greatest. The honest and rigid contemplation of our own faults in the administration of our worldly goods, might well invest with a terrible meaning the Lord's tremendous question, 'If ye have not been faithful in that which is another's, who shall give you that which is your own?'

The hospitality which is here enjoined is another shape which Christian love naturally took in the early days. When believers were a body of aliens, dispersed through the world, and when, as they went from one place to another, they could find homes only amongst their own brethren, the special circumstances of the time necessarily attached special importance to this duty; and as a matter of fact, we find it recognised in all the Epistles of the New Testament as one of the most imperative of Christian duties. 'It was the unity and strength which this intercourse gave that formed one of the great forces which supported Christianity.' But whilst hospitality was a special duty for the early Christians, it still remains a duty for us, and its habitual exercise would go far to break down the frowning walls which diversities of social position and of culture have reared between Christians.

II. The love that meets hostility with blessing.

There are perhaps few words in Scripture which have been more fruitful of the highest graces than this commandment. What a train of martyrs, from primitive times to the Chinese Christians in recent years, have remembered these words, and left their legacy of blessing as they laid their heads on the block or stood circled by fire at the stake! For us, in our quieter generation, actual persecution is rare, but hostility of ill-will more or less may well dog our steps, and the great principle here commended to us is that we are to meet enmity with its opposite, and to conquer by love. The diamond is cut with sharp knives, and each stroke brings out flashing beauty. There are kinds of wood which are fragrant when they burn; and there are kinds which show their veining under the plane. It is a poor thing if a Christian character only gives back like a mirror the expression of the face that looks at it. To meet hate with hate, and scorn with scorn, is not the way to turn hate into love and scorn into sympathy. Indifferent equilibrium in the presence of active antagonism is not possible for us. As long as we are sensitive we shall wince from a blow, or a sarcasm, or a sneer. We must bless in order to keep ourselves from cursing. The lesson is very hard, and the only way of obeying it fully is to keep near Christ and drink in His spirit who prayed ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’

III. Love that flows in wide sympathy.

Of the two forms of sympathy which are here enjoined, the former is the harder. To ‘rejoice with them that do rejoice’ makes a greater demand on unselfish love than to ‘weep with them that weep.’ Those who are glad feel less need of sympathy than do the sorrowful, and envy is apt to creep in and mar the completeness of sympathetic joy. But even the latter of the two injunctions is not altogether easy. The cynic has said that there is ‘something not wholly displeasing in the misfortunes of our best friends’; and, though that is an utterly worldly and unchristian remark, it must be confessed not to be altogether wanting in truth.

But for obedience to both of these injunctions, a heart at leisure from itself is needed to sympathise; and not less needed is a sedulous cultivation of the power of sympathy. No doubt temperament has much to do with the degree of our obedience; but this whole context goes on the assumption that the grace of God working on temperament strengthens natural endowments by turning them into 'gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us.' Though we live in that awful individuality of ours, and are each, as it were, islanded in ourselves 'with echoing straits between us thrown,' it is possible for us, as the result of close communion with Jesus Christ, to bridge the chasms, and to enter into the joy of a brother's joy. He who groaned in Himself as He drew near to the grave of Lazarus, and was moved to weep with the weeping sisters, will help us, in the measure in which we dwell in Him and He in us, that we too may look 'not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.'

On the whole, love to Jesus is the basis of love to man, and love to man is the practical worship of Christianity. As in all things, so in the exhortations which we have now been considering, Jesus is our pattern and power. He Himself communicates with our necessities, and opens His heart to give us hospitable welcome there. He Himself has shown us how to meet and overcome hatred with love, and hurt with blessing. He shares our griefs, and by sharing lessens them. He shares our joys, and by sharing hallows them. The summing up of all these specific injunctions is, 'Let that mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.'

35)Romans 12:16

Romans

STILL ANOTHER TRIPLET

Rom. 12:16.

We have here again the same triple arrangement which has prevailed through a considerable portion of the context. These three exhortations are linked together by a verbal resemblance which can scarcely be preserved in translation. In the two former the same verb is employed: and in the third the word for 'wise' is cognate with the verb found in the other two clauses. If we are to seek for any closer connection of thought we may find it first in this-that all the three clauses deal with mental attitudes, whilst the preceding ones dealt with the expression of such; and second in this-that the first of the three is a general precept, and the second and third are warnings against faults which are most likely to interfere with it.

I. We note, the bond of peace.

‘Be of the same mind one toward another.’ It is interesting to notice how frequently the Apostle in many of his letters exhorts to mutual harmonious relations. For instance, in this very Epistle he invokes ‘the God of patience and of comfort’ to grant to the Roman Christians ‘to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus,’ and to the Corinthians, who had their full share of Greek divisiveness, he writes, ‘Be of the same mind, live in peace,’ and assures them that, if so, ‘the God of love and peace will be with them’; to his beloved Philippians he pours out his heart in beseeching them by ‘the consolation that is in Christ Jesus, and the comfort of love, and the fellowship of the Spirit-’ that they would ‘fulfil his joy, that they be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind’; whilst to the two women in that Church who were at variance with one another he sends the earnest exhortation ‘to be of the same mind in the Lord,’ and prays one whom we only know by his loving designation of ‘a true yokefellow,’ to help them in what would apparently put a strain upon their Christian principle. For communities and for individuals the cherishing of the spirit of amity and concord is a condition without which there will be little progress in the Christian life.

But it is to be carefully noted that such a spirit may co-exist with great differences about other matters. It is not opposed to wide divergence of opinion, though in our imperfect sanctification it is hard for us to differ and yet to be in concord. We all know the hopelessness of attempting to make half a dozen good men think alike on any of the greater themes of the Christian religion; and if we could succeed in such a vain attempt, there would still be many an unguarded door through which could come the spirit of discord, and the half-dozen might have divergence of heart even whilst they profess identity of opinion. The true hindrances to our having ‘the same mind one toward another’ lie very much deeper in our nature than the region in which we keep our creeds. The self-regard and self-absorption, petulant dislike of fellow-Christians’ peculiarities, the indifference which comes from lack of imaginative sympathy, and which ministers to the ignorance which causes it, and a thousand other weaknesses in Christian character bring about the deplorable alienation which but too plainly marks the relation of Christian communities and of individual Christians to one another in this day. When one thinks of the actual facts in every corner of Christendom, and probes one's own feelings, the contrast between the apostolic ideal and the Church's realisation of it presents a contradiction so glaring that one wonders if Christian people at all believe that it is their duty 'to be of the same mind one toward another.'

The attainment of this spirit of amity and concord ought to be a distinct object of effort, and especially in times like ours, when there is no hostile pressure driving Christian people together, but when our great social differences are free to produce a certain inevitable divergence and to check the flow of our sympathy, and when there are deep clefts of opinion, growing deeper every day, and seeming to part off Christians into camps which have little understanding of, and less sympathy with, one another. Even the strong individualism, which it is the glory of true Christian faith to foster in character, and which some forms of Christian fellowship do distinctly promote, works harm in this matter; and those who pride themselves on belonging to 'Free churches,' and standing apart from creed-bound and clergy-led communities, are specially called upon to see to it that they keep this exhortation, and cultivate 'the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.'

It should not be necessary to insist that the closest mutual concord amongst all believers is but an imperfect manifestation, as all manifestations in life of the deepest principles must be, of the true oneness which binds together in the most sacred unity, and should bind together in closest friendship, all partakers of the one life. And assuredly the more that one life flows into our spirits, the less power will all the enemies of Christian concord have over us. It is the Christ in us which makes us kindred with all others in whom He is. It is self, in some form or other, that separates us from the possessors of like precious faith. When the tide is out, the little rock-pools on the shore lie separated by stretches of slimy weeds, but the great sea, when it rushes up, buries the divisions, and unites them all. Our Christian unity is unity in Christ, and the only sure way 'to be of the same mind one toward another' is, that 'the mind which was in Christ Jesus be in us also.'

II. The divisive power of selfish ambition.

‘Set not your mind on high things, but condescend to things that are lowly.’ The contrast here drawn between the high and the lowly makes it probable that the latter as well as the former is to be taken as referring to ‘things’ rather than persons. The margin of the Revised Version gives the literal rendering of the word translated ‘condescend.’ ‘To be carried away with,’ is metaphorically equivalent to surrendering one’s self to; and the two clauses present two sides of one disposition, which seeks not for personal advancement or conspicuous work which may minister to self-gratulation, but contentedly fills the lowly sphere, and ‘the humblest duties on herself doth lay.’ We need not pause to point out that such an ideal is dead against the fashionable maxims of this generation. Personal ambition is glorified as an element in progress, and to a world which believes in such a proverb as ‘devil take the hindmost,’ these two exhortations can only seem fanatical absurdity. And yet, perhaps, if we fairly take into account how the seeking after personal advancement and conspicuous work festers the soul, and how the flower of heart’s-ease grows, as Bunyan’s shepherd-boy found out, in the lowly valley, these exhortations to a quiet performance of lowly duties and a contented filling of lowly spheres, may seem touched with a higher wisdom than is to be found in the arenas where men trample over each other in their pursuit of a fame ‘which appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.’ What a peaceful world it would be, and what peaceful souls they would have, if Christian people really adopted as their own these two simple maxims. They are easy to understand, but how hard they are to follow.

It needs scarcely be noted that the temper condemned here destroys all the concord and amity which the Apostle has been urging in the previous clause. Where every man is eagerly seeking to force himself in front of his neighbour, any community will become a struggling mob; and they who are trying to outrun one another and who grasp at ‘high things,’ will never be ‘of the same mind one toward another.’ But, we may observe that the surest way to keep in check the natural selfish tendency to desire conspicuous things for ourselves is honestly, and with rigid self-control, to let ourselves be carried away by enthusiasm for humble tasks. If we would not disturb our lives and fret our hearts by ambitions that, even when gratified, bring no satisfaction, we must yield ourselves to the impulse of the continuous stream of lowly duties which runs through every life.

But, plainly as this exhortation is needful, it is too heavy a strain to be ever carried out except by the power of Christ formed in the heart. It is in His earthly life that we find the great example of the highest stooping to the lowest duties, and elevating them by taking them upon Himself. He did not ‘strive nor cry, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets.’ Thirty years of that perfect life were spent in a little village folded away in the Galilean hills, with rude peasants for the only spectators, and the narrow sphere of a carpenter’s shop for its theatre. For the rest, the publicity possible would have been obscurity to an ambitious soul. To speak comforting words to a few weeping hearts; to lay His hands on a few sick folk and heal them; to go about in a despised land doing good, loved indeed by outcasts and sinners, unknown by all the dispensers of renown, and consciously despised by all whom the world honoured-that was the perfect life of the Incarnate God. And that is an example which His followers seem with one consent to set aside in their eager race after distinction and work that may glorify their names. The difficulty of a faithful following of these precepts, and the only means by which that difficulty can be overcome, are touchingly taught us in another of Paul’s Epistles by the accumulation of motives which he brings to bear upon his commandment, when he exhorts by the tender motives of ‘comfort in Christ, consolation of love, fellowship of the Spirit, and tender mercies and compassions, that ye fulfil my joy, being of the same mind, of one accord; doing nothing through faction or vainglory, but in lowliness of mind each counting other better than himself.’ As the pattern for each of us in our narrow sphere, he holds forth the mind that was in Christ Jesus, and the great self-emptying which he shrank not from, ‘but being in the form of God counted it not a prize to be on an equality with God, but, being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient even unto death.’

III. The divisive power of intellectual self-conceit.

In this final clause the Apostle, in some sense, repeats the maxim with which he began the series of special exhortations in this chapter. He there enjoined ‘every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think'; here he deals with one especial form of such too lofty thinking, viz. intellectual conceit. He is possibly quoting the Book of Proverbs [Pro. 3:7], where we read, 'Be not wise in thine own eyes,' which is preceded by, 'Lean not to thine own understanding; in all thy ways acknowledge Him'; and is followed by, 'Fear the Lord and depart from evil'; thus pointing to the acknowledgment and fear of the Lord as the great antagonist of such over-estimate of one's own wisdom as of all other faults of mind and life. It needs not to point out how such a disposition breaks Christian unity of spirit. There is something especially isolating in that form of self-conceit. There are few greater curses in the Church than little coteries of superior persons who cannot feed on ordinary food, whose enlightened intelligence makes them too fastidious to soil their dainty fingers with rough, vulgar work, and whose supercilious criticism of the unenlightened souls that are content to condescend to lowly Christian duties, is like an iceberg that brings down the temperature wherever it floats. That temper indulged in, breaks the unity, reduces to inactivity the work, and puts an end to the progress, of any Christian community in which it is found; and just as its predominance is harmful, so the obedience to the exhortation against it is inseparable from the fulfilling of its sister precepts. To know ourselves for the foolish creatures that we are, is a mighty help to being 'of the same mind one toward another.' Who thinks of himself soberly and according to the measure of faith which God hath dealt to him will not hunger after high things, but rather prefer the lowly ones that are on a level with his lowly self.

The exhortations of our text were preceded with injunctions to distribute material help, and to bestow helpful sympathy. The tempers enjoined in our present text are the inward source and fountain of such external bestowments. The rendering of material help and of sympathetic emotion are right and valuable only as they are the outcome of this unanimity and lowliness. It is possible to 'distribute to the necessity of saints' in such a way as that the gift pains more than a blow; it is possible to proffer sympathy so that the sensitive heart shrinks from it. It was 'when the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and one soul' that it became natural to have all things common. As in the aurora borealis, quivering beams from different centres stream out and at each throb approach each other till they touch and make an arch of light that glorifies the winter’s night, so, if Christian men were ‘of the same mind toward one another,’ did not ‘set their minds on high things, but condescended to things that were lowly, and were not wise in their own conceits,’ the Church of Christ would shine forth in the darkness of a selfish world and would witness to Him who came down ‘from the highest throne in glory’ to the lowliest place in this lowly world, that He might lift us to His own height of glory everlasting.

36)Romans 12:17-18

Romans

STILL ANOTHER TRIPLET

Rom. 12:17 - Rom. 12:18.

The closing words of this chapter have a certain unity in that they deal principally with a Christian’s duty in the face of hostility and antagonism. A previous injunction touched on the same subject in the exhortation to bless the persecutors; but with that exception, all the preceding verses have dealt with duties owing to those with whom we stand in friendly relations. Such exhortations take no cognisance of the special circumstances of the primitive Christians as ‘lambs in the midst of wolves’; and a large tract of Christian duty would be undealt with, if we had not such directions for feelings and actions in the face of hate and hurt. The general precept in our text is expanded in a more complete form in the verses which follow the text, and we may postpone its consideration until we have to deal with them. It is one form of the application of the ‘love without hypocrisy’ which has been previously recommended. The second of these three precepts seems quite heterogeneous, but it may be noticed that the word for ‘evil’ in the former and that for ‘honourable,’ in these closely resemble each other in sound, and the connection of the two clauses may be partially owing to that verbal resemblance; whilst we may also discern a real link between the thoughts in the consideration that we owe even to our enemies the exhibition of a life which a prejudiced hostility will be forced to recognise as good. The third of these exhortations prescribes unmoved persistence in friendly regard to all men.

Dealing then, in this sermon only, with the second and third of these precepts, and postponing the consideration of the first to the following discourse, we have here the counsel that

I. Hostility is to be met with a holy and beautiful life.

The Authorised Version inadequately translates the significant word in this exhortation by ‘honest.’ The Apostle is not simply enjoining honesty in our modern, narrow sense of the word, which limits it to the rendering to every man his own. It is a remarkable thing that ‘honest,’ like many other words expressing various types of goodness, has steadily narrowed in signification, and it is very characteristic of England that probity as to money and material goods should be its main meaning. Here the word is used in the full breadth of its ancient use, and is equivalent to that which is fair with the moral beauty of goodness.

A Christian man then is bound to live a life which all men will acknowledge to be good. In that precept is implied the recognition of even bad men’s notions of morality as correct. The Gospel is not a new system of ethics, though in some points it brings old virtues into new prominence, and alters their perspective. It is further implied that the world’s standard of what Christians ought to be may be roughly taken as a true one. Christian men would learn a great deal about themselves, and might in many respects heighten their ideal, if they would try to satisfy the expectations of the most degraded among them as to what they ought to be. The worst of men has a rude sense of duty which tops the attainments of the best. Christian people ought to seek for the good opinion of those around them. They are not to take that opinion as the motive for their conduct, nor should they do good in order to be praised or admired for it; but they are to ‘adorn the doctrine,’ and to let their light shine that men seeing their good may be led to think more loftily of its source, and so to ‘glorify their Father which is in heaven.’ That is one way of preaching the Gospel. The world knows goodness when it sees it, though it often hates it, and has no better ground for its dislike of a man than that his purity and beauty of character make the lives of others seem base indeed. Bats feel the light to be light, though they flap against it, and the winnowing of their leathery wings and their blundering flight are witnesses to that against which they strike. Jesus had to say, ‘The world hateth Me because I testify of it that the deeds thereof are evil.' That witness was the result of His being 'the Light of the world'; and if His followers are illuminated from Him, they will have the same effect, and must be prepared for the same response. But none the less is it incumbent upon them to 'take thought for things honourable in the sight of all men.'

This duty involves the others of taking care that we have goodness to show, and that we do not make our goodness repulsive by our additions to it. There are good people who comfort themselves when men dislike them, or scoff at them, by thinking that their religion is the cause, when it is only their own roughness and harshness of character. It is not enough that we present an austere and repellent virtue; the fair food should be set on a fair platter. This duty is especially owing to our enemies. They are our keenest critics. They watch for our halting. The thought of their hostile scrutiny should ever stimulate us, and the consciousness that Argus-eyes are watching us, with a keenness sharpened by dislike, should lead us not only to vigilance over our own steps, but also to the prayer, 'Lead me in a plain path, because of those who watch me.' To 'provide things honest in the sight of all men' is a possible way of disarming some hostility, conciliating some prejudice, and commending to some hearts the Lord whom we seek to imitate.

II. Be sure that, if there is to be enmity, it is all on one side.

'As much as in you lieth, be at peace with all.' These words are, I think, unduly limited when they are supposed to imply that there are circumstances in which a Christian has a right to be at strife. As if they meant: Be peaceable as far as you can; but if it be impossible, then quarrel. The real meaning goes far deeper than that. 'It takes two to make a quarrel,' says the old proverb; it takes two to make peace also, does it not? We cannot determine whether our relations with men will be peaceful or no; we are only answerable for our part, and for that we are answerable. 'As much as lieth in you' is the explanation of 'if it be possible.' Your part is to be at peace; it is not your part up to a certain point and no further, but always, and in all circumstances, it is your part. It may not be possible to be at peace with all men; there may be some who *will* quarrel with you. You are not to blame for that, but their part and yours are separate, and your part is the same whatever they do. Be you at peace with all men whether they are at peace with you or not. Don’t you quarrel with them even if they will quarrel with you. That seems to me to be plainly the meaning of the words. It would be contrary to the tenor of the context and the teaching of the New Testament to suppose that here we had that favourite principle, ‘There is a point beyond which forbearance cannot go,’ where it becomes right to cherish hostile sentiments or to try to injure a man. If there be such a point, it is very remarkable that there is no attempt made in the New Testament to define it. The nearest approach to such definition is ‘till seventy times seven,’ the two perfect numbers multiplied into themselves. So I think that this injunction absolutely prescribes persistent, patient peacefulness, and absolutely proscribes our taking up the position of antagonism, and under no circumstances meeting hate with hate. It does not follow that there is never to be opposition. It may be necessary for the good of the opponent himself, and for the good of society, that he should be hindered in his actions of hostility, but there is never to be bitterness; and we must take care that none of the devil’s leaven mingles with our zeal against evil.

There is no need for enlarging on the enormous difficulty of carrying out such a commandment in our daily lives. We all know too well how hard it is; but we may reflect for a moment on the absolute necessity of obeying this precept to the full. For their own souls’ sakes Christian men are to avoid all bitterness, strife, and malice. Let us try to remember, and to bring to bear on our daily lives, the solemn things which Jesus said about God’s forgiveness being measured by our forgiveness. The faithful, even though imperfect, following of this exhortation would revolutionise our lives. Nothing that we can only win by fighting with our fellows is worth fighting for. Men will weary of antagonism which is met only by the imperturbable calm of a heart at peace with God, and seeking peace with all men. The hot fire of hatred dies down, like burning coals scattered on a glacier, when laid against the crystal coldness of a patient, peaceful spirit. Watch-dogs in farmhouses will bark half the night through because they hear another barking a mile off. It takes two to make a quarrel; let me be sure that I am never one of the two!

37)Romans 12:19-21

STILL ANOTHER TRIPLET

Rom. 12:19 - Rom. 12:21.

The natural instinct is to answer enmity with enmity, and kindliness with kindliness. There are many people of whom we think well and like, for no other reason than because we believe that they think well of and like us. Such a love is really selfishness. In the same fashion, dislike, and alienation on the part of another naturally reproduce themselves in our own minds. A dog will stretch its neck to be patted, and snap at a stick raised to strike it. It requires a strong effort to master this instinctive tendency, and that effort the plainest principles of Christian morality require from us all. The precepts in our text are in twofold form, negative and positive; and they are closed with a general principle, which includes both these forms, and much more besides. There are two pillars, and a great lintel coping them, like the trilithons of Stonehenge.

I. We deal with the negative precept.

‘Avenge not yourselves, beloved, but give place unto wrath.’ Do not take the law into your own hands, but leave God’s way of retribution to work itself out. By avenging, the Apostle means a passionate redress of private wrongs at the bidding of personal resentment. We must note how deep this precept goes. It prohibits not merely external acts which, in civilised times are restrained by law, but, as with Christian morality, it deals with thoughts and feelings, and not only with deeds. It forbids such natural and common thoughts as ‘I owe him an ill turn for that’; ‘I should like to pay him off.’ A great deal of what is popularly called ‘a proper spirit’ becomes extremely improper if tested by this precept. There is an eloquent word in German which we can only clumsily reproduce, which christens the ugly pleasure at seeing misfortune and calls it ‘joy in others’ disasters.’ We have not the word; would that we had not the thing!

A solemn reason is added for the difficult precept, in that frequently misunderstood saying, ‘Give place unto wrath.’ The question is, Whose wrath? And, plainly, the subsequent words of the section show that it is

God’s. That quotation comes from Deu. 32:35. It is possibly unfortunate that ‘vengeance’ is ascribed to God; for hasty readers lay hold of the idea of passionate resentment, and transfer it to Him, whereas His retributive action has in it no resentment and no passion. Nor are we to suppose that the thought here is only the base one, *they are sure to be punished, so we need not trouble*. The Apostle points to the solemn fact of retribution as an element in the Divine government. It is not merely automatically working laws which recompense evil by evil, but it is the face of the Lord which is inexorably and inevitably set ‘against them that do evil.’ That recompense is not hidden away in the future behind the curtain of death, but is realised in the present, as every evil-doer too surely and bitterly experiences.

‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.’ God only has the right to recompense the ungodly and the sinner as well as the righteous. Dwelling in such a system as we do, how dares any one take that work into his hands? It requires perfect knowledge of the true evil of an action, which no one has who cannot read the heart; it requires perfect freedom from passion; it requires perfect immunity from evil desert on the part of the avenger; in a word, it belongs to God, and to Him alone. We have nothing to do with apportioning retribution to desert, either in private actions or in the treatment of so-called criminals. In the latter our objects should be reformation and the safety of society. If we add to these retribution, we transcend our functions.

II. Take the positive,-Follow God’s way of meeting hostility with beneficence.

The hungry enemy is to be fed, the thirsty to be given drink; and the reason is, that such beneficence will ‘heap coals of fire upon his head.’ The negative is not enough. To abstain from vengeance will leave the heart unaffected, and may simply issue in the cessation of all intercourse. The reason assigned sounds at first strange. It is clear that the ‘coals of fire’ which are to be heaped on the head are meant to melt and soften the heart, and cause it to glow with love. There may be also included the burning pangs of shame felt by a man whose evil is answered by good. But these are secondary and auxiliary to the true end of kindling the fire of love in his alienated heart. The great object which every Christian man is bound to have in view is to win over the enemy and melt away misconceptions and hostility. It is not from any selfish regard to one's own personal ease that we are so to act, but because of the sacred regard which Christ has taught us to cherish for the blessing of peace amongst men, and in order that we may deliver a brother from the snare, and make him share in the joys of fellowship with God. The only way to burn up the evil in his heart is by heaping coals of kindness and beneficence on his head. And for such an end it becomes us to watch for opportunities. We have to mark the right moment, and make sure that we time our offer for food when he is hungry and of drink when he thirsts; for often *mal-a-propos* offers of kindness make things worse. Such is God's way. His thunderbolts we cannot grasp, His love we can copy. Of the two weapons mercy and judgment which He holds in His hand, the latter is emphatically His own; the former should be ours too.

III. In all life meet and conquer evil with good.

This last precept, 'Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good,' is cast into a form which covers not only relations to enemies, but all contact with evil of every kind. It involves many great thoughts which can here be only touched. It implies that in all our lives we have to fight evil, and that it conquers, and we are beaten when we are led to do it. It is only conquered by being transformed into good. We overcome our foes when we win them to be lovers. We overcome our temptations to doing wrong when we make them occasions for developing virtues; we overcome the evil of sorrow when we use it to bring us nearer to God; we overcome the men around us when we are not seduced by their example to evil, but attract them to goodness by ours.

Evil is only thus transformed by the positive exercise of goodness on our part. We have seen this in regard to enemies in the preceding remarks. In regard to other forms of evil, it is often better not to fight them directly, but to occupy the mind and heart with positive truth and goodness, and the will and hands with active service. A rusty knife shall not be cleaned so effectually by much scouring as by strenuous use. Our lives are to be moulded after the great example of Him, who at almost the last moment of His earthly course said, 'Be of good cheer: I have overcome the world.'

Jesus seeks to conquer evil in us all, and counts that He has conquered it when He has changed it into love.

38)Romans 13:8-10

Romans

LOVE AND THE DAY

Rom. 13:8 - Rom. 13:14.

The two paragraphs of this passage are but slightly connected. The first inculcates the obligation of universal love; and the second begins by suggesting, as a motive for the discharge of that duty, the near approach of 'the day.' The light of that dawn draws Paul's eyes and leads him to wider exhortations on Christian purity as befitting the children of light.

I. Rom. 13:8 - Rom. 13:10 set forth the obligation of a love which embraces all men, and comprehends all duties to them.

The Apostle has just been laying down the general exhortation, 'Pay every man his due' and applying it especially to the Christian's relation to civic rulers. He repeats it in a negative form, and bases on it the obligation of loving every man. That love is further represented as the sum and substance of the law. Thus Paul brings together two thoughts which are often dealt with as mutually exclusive,-namely, love and law. He does not talk sentimentalisms about the beauty of charity and the like, but lays it down, as a 'hard and fast rule,' that we are bound to love every man with whom we come in contact; or, as the Greek has it, 'the other.'

That is the first plain truth taught here. Love is not an emotion which we may indulge or not, as we please. It is not to select its objects according to our estimate of their lovableness or goodness. But we are bound to love, and that all round, without distinction of beautiful or ugly, good or bad. 'A hard saying; who can hear it?' Every man is our creditor for that debt. He does not get his due from us unless he gets love. Note, further, that the debt of love is never discharged. After all payments it still remains owing. There is no paying in full of all demands, and, as Bengel says, it is an undying debt. We are apt to weary of expending love, especially on unworthy recipients, and to think that we have wiped off all claims, and it may often be true that our obligations to others compel us to cease helping one; but if we laid Paul's words to heart, our patience would be longer-breathed, and we should not be so soon ready to shut hearts and purses against even unthankful suitors.

Further, Paul here teaches us that this debt [*debitum*, 'duty'] of love includes all duties. It is the fulfilling of the law, inasmuch as it will secure the conduct which the law prescribes. The Mosaic law itself indicates this, since it recapitulates the various commandments of the second table, in the one precept of love to our neighbour [Lev. 19:18]. Law enjoins but has no power to get its injunctions executed. Love enables and inclines to do all that law prescribes, and to avoid all that it prohibits. The multiplicity of duties is melted into unity; and that unity, when it comes into act, unfolds into whatsoever things are lovely and of good report. Love is the mother tincture which, variously diluted and manipulated, yields all potent and fragrant draughts. It is the white light which the prism of daily life resolves into its component colours.

But Paul seems to limit the action of love here to negative doing no ill. That is simply because the commandments are mostly negative, and that they are is a sad token of the lovelessness natural to us all. But do we love ourselves only negatively, or are we satisfied with doing ourselves no harm? That stringent pattern of love to others not only prescribes degree, but manner. It teaches that true love to men is not weak indulgence, but must sometimes chastise, and thwart, and always must seek their good, and not merely their gratification.

Whoever will honestly seek to apply that negative precept of working no ill to others, will find it positive enough. We harm men when we fail to help them. If we can do them a kindness, and do it not, we do them ill. Non-activity for good is activity for evil. Surely, nothing can be plainer than the bearing of this teaching on the Christian duty as to intoxicants. If by using these a Christian puts a stumbling-block in the way of a weak will, then he is working ill to his neighbour, and that argues absence of love, and that is dishonest, shirking payment of a plain debt.

II. The great stimulus to love and to all purity is set forth as being the near approach-of the day [Rom. 13:11 - Rom. 13:14].

‘The day,’ in Paul’s writing, has usually the sense of the great day of the Lord’s return, and may have that meaning here; for, as Jesus has told us, ‘it is not for’ even inspired Apostles ‘to know the times or the seasons,’ and it is no dishonour to apostolic inspiration to assign to it the limits which the Lord has assigned.

But, whether we take this as the meaning of the phrase, or regard it simply as pointing to the time of death as the dawning of heaven’s day, the weight of the motive is unaffected. The language is vividly picturesque. The darkness is thinning, and the blackness turning grey. Light begins to stir and whisper. A band of soldiers lies asleep, and, as the twilight begins to dawn, the bugle call summons them to awake, to throw off their night-gear,-namely, the works congenial to darkness,-and to brace on their armour of light. Light may here be regarded as the material of which the glistering armour is made; but, more probably, the expression means weapons appropriate to the light.

Such being the general picture, we note the fact which underlies the whole representation; namely, that every life is a definite whole which has a fixed end. Jesus said, ‘We must work the works of Him that sent Me, while it is day: the night cometh.’ Paul uses the opposite metaphors in these verses. But, though the two sayings are opposite in form, they are identical in substance. In both, the predominant thought is that of the rapidly diminishing space of earthly life, and the complete unlikeness to it of the future. We stand like men on a sandbank with an incoming tide, and every wash of the waves eats away its edges, and presently it will yield below our feet. We forget this for the most part, and perhaps it is not well that it should be ever present; but that it should never be present is madness and sore loss.

Paul, in his intense moral earnestness, in Rom. 13:13, bids us regard ourselves as already in ‘the day,’ and shape our conduct as if it shone around us and all things were made manifest by its light. The sins to be put off are very gross and palpable. They are for the most part sins of flesh, such as even these Roman Christians had to be warned against, and such as need to be manifested by the light even now among many professing Christian communities.

But Paul has one more word to say. If he stopped without it, he would have said little to help men who are crying out, ‘How am I to strip off this clinging evil, which seems my skin rather than my clothing? How am I to put on that flashing panoply?’ There is but one way,-put on the Lord Jesus Christ. If we commit ourselves to Him by faith, and front our temptations in His strength, and thus, as it were, wrap ourselves in Him, He will be to us dress and armour, strength and righteousness. Our old self will fall away, and we shall take no forethought for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.

39)Romans 13:11

Romans

LOVE AND THE DAY

SALVATION NEARER

Rom. 8:11.

There is no doubt, I suppose, that the Apostle, in common with the whole of the early Church, entertained more or less consistently the expectation of living to witness the second coming of Jesus Christ. There are in Paul’s letters passages which look both in the direction of that anticipation, and in the other one of expecting to taste death. ‘We which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord,’ he says twice in one chapter. ‘I am ready to be offered, and the hour of my departure is at hand,’ he says in his last letter.

Now this contrariety of anticipation is but the natural result of what our Lord Himself said, ‘It is not for you to know the times and the seasons,’ and no one, who is content to form his doctrine of the knowledge resulting from inspiration from the words of Jesus Christ Himself, need stumble in the least degree in recognising the plain fact that Paul and his brother Apostles did not know when the Master was to come. Christ Himself had told them that there was a chamber locked against their entrance, and therefore we do not need to think that it militates against the authoritative inspiration of these early teachers of the Church, if they, too, searched ‘what manner of time the Spirit which was in them did signify when it testified beforehand . . . the glory that should follow.’

Now, my text is evidently the result of the former of these two anticipations, viz. that Paul and his generation were probably to see the coming of the Lord from heaven. And to him the thought that’ the night was far spent,’ as the context says, ‘and the day was at hand,’ underlay his most buoyant hope, and was the inspiration and motive-spring of his most strenuous effort.

Now, our relation to the closing moments of our own earthly lives, to the fact of death, is precisely the same as that of the Apostle and his brethren to the coming of the Lord. We, too, stand in that position of partial ignorance, and for us practically the words of my text, and all their parallel words, point to how we should think of, and how we should be affected by, the end to which we are coming. And this is the grand characteristic of the Christian view of that last solemn moment. ‘Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.’ So I would note, first of all, what these words teach us should be the Christian view of our own end; and, second, to what conduct that view should lead us.

I. The Christian view of death.

‘Now is our salvation nearer.’ We have to think away by faith and hope all the grim externals of death, and to get to the heart of the thing. And then everything that is repulsive, everything that makes flesh and blood shrink, disappears and is evaporated, and beneath the folds of his black garment, there is revealed God’s last, sweetest, most triumphant angel-messenger to Christian souls, the great, strong, silent Angel of Death, and he carries in his hand the gift of a full salvation. That is what our Apostle rose to the rapture of beholding, when he knew that the thought of his surviving till Christ came again must be put away, and when close to the last moment of his life, he said, ‘The Lord shall deliver me, and save me into His everlasting kingdom.’ What was the deliverance and being saved that he expected and expresses in these words? Immunity from punishment? Escape from the headsman’s axe? Being ‘delivered from the mouth of the lion,’ the persecuting fangs of the bloody Nero? By no means. He knew that death was at hand, and he said, ‘He will save me’-not from it, but through it-’into His everlasting kingdom.’ And so in the words of my text we may say-though Paul did not mean them so-as we see the distance between us, and that certain close, dwindling, dwindling, dwindling: ‘Now,’ as moment after moment ticks itself into the past, ‘now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.’ Children, when they are getting near their holidays, take strips of paper, and tear off a piece as each day passes. And as we tear off the days let us feel that we are drawing closer to our home, and that the blessedness laid up for us in it is drawing nearer to us. ‘Our salvation,’ not our destruction, our fuller life, not in any true sense of the word our ‘death,’ is ‘nearer than when we believed.’

But some one may say, ‘Is a man not saved till after he is dead?’ Is salvation future, not coming till after the grave? No, certainly not. There are three aspects of that word in Scripture. Sometimes the New Testament writers treat salvation as past, and represent a Christian as being invested with the possession of it all at the very moment of his first faith. That is true, that whatever is yet to be evolved from what is given to the poorest and foulest sinner, in the moment of his initial faith in Christ, there is nothing to be added to it. The salvation which the penitent thief received on the cross is all the salvation that he was ever to get. But out of it there came welling and welling and welling, when he had passed into the region ‘where beyond these voices there is peace’-there came welling out from that inexhaustible fountain which was opened in him all the fullnesses of an eternal progress in the heavens. And so it is with us. Salvation is a past gift which we received when we believed.

But in another aspect, which is also emphatically stated in Scripture, it is a progressive process, and not merely a gift bestowed once for all in the past. I do not dwell upon that thought, but just remind you of a turn of expression which occurs in various connections more than once. ‘The Lord added to the Church daily such as were being saved,' says Luke. Still more emphatically in the Epistle to the Corinthians, the Apostle puts into antithesis the two progressive processes, and speaks of the Gospel as being preached, and being a savour of life unto life 'to them that are being saved,' and a savour of destruction 'to them that are being lost.' No moral or spiritual condition is stereotyped or stagnant. It is all progressive. And so the salvation that is given once for all is ever being unfolded, and the Christian life on earth is the unfolding of it.

But in another aspect still, such as is presented in my text, and in other parallel passages, that salvation is regarded as lying on the other side of the flood, because the manifestations of it there, the evolving there of what is in it, and the great gifts that come then, are so transcendently above all even of our selectest experiences here, that they are, as it were, new, though still their roots are in the old. The salvation which culminates in the absolute removal from our whole being of all manner of evil, whether it be sorrow or sin, and in the conclusive bestowal upon us of all manner of good, whether it be righteousness or joy, and which has for its seal 'the adoption, to wit, the redemption of the body,' so that body, soul, and spirit 'make one music as before, but vaster,' is so far beyond the germs of itself which here we experience that my text and its like are amply vindicated. And the man who is most fully persuaded and conscious that he possesses the salvation of God, and most fully and blessedly aware that that salvation is gradually gaining power in his life, is the very man who will most feel that between its highest manifestation on earth, and its lowest in the heavens there is such a gulf as that the wine that he will drink there at the Father's table is indeed new wine. And so 'is our salvation nearer,' though we already possess it, 'than when we believed.'

Dear brethren, if these things be true, and if to die is to be saved into the kingdom, do not two thoughts result? The one is that that blessed consummation should occupy more of our thoughts than I am afraid it does. As life goes on, and the space dwindles between us and it, we older people naturally fall into the way, unless we are fools, of more seriously and frequently turning our thoughts to the end. I suppose the last week of a voyage to Australia has far more thoughts in it about the landing next week than the two or three first days of beating down the English Channel had. I do not want to put old heads on young shoulders in this or in any other respect. But sure I am that it does belong very intimately to the strength of our Christian characters that we should, as the Psalmist says, be ‘wise’ to ‘consider our latter end.’

The other thought that follows is as plain, viz. that that anticipation should always be buoyant, hopeful, joyous. We have nothing to do with the sad aspects of parting from earth. They are all but non-existent for the Christian consciousness, when it is as vigorous and God-directed as it ought to be. They drop into the background, and sometimes are lost to sight altogether. Remember how this Apostle, when he does think about death, looks at it with-I was going to quote words which may strike you as being inappropriate-’a frolic welcome’; how, at all events, he is neither a bit afraid of it, nor does he see in it anything from which to shrink. He speaks of being with Christ, which is far better; ‘absent from the body, present with the Lord’; ‘the dissolution of the earthly house of this tabernacle’-the tumbling down of the old clay cottage in order that a stately palace of marble and precious stones may be reared upon its site; ‘the hour of my departure is at hand; I have finished the fight.’ Peter, too, chimes in with his words: ‘My exodus; my departure,’ and both of the two are looking, if not longingly, at all events without a tremor of the eyelid, into the very eyeballs of the messenger whom most men feel so hideous. Is it not a wonderful gift to Christian souls that by faith in Jesus Christ, the realm in which their hope can expatiate is more than doubled, and annexes the dim lands beyond the frontier of death? Dear friends, if we are living in Christ, the thought of the end and that here we are absent from home, ought to be infinitely sweet, of whatever superficial terrors this poor, shrinking flesh may still be conscious. And I am sure that the nearer we get to our Saviour, and the more we realise the joyous possession of salvation as already ours, and the more we are conscious of the expanding of that gift in our hearts, the more we shall be delivered from that fear of death which makes men all their ‘lifetime subject to bondage.’ So I beseech you to aim at this, that, when you look forward, the furthest thing you see on the horizon of earth may be that great Angel of Death coming to save you into the everlasting kingdom.

Now, just a word about

II. The conduct to which such a hope should incite.

The Apostle puts it very plainly in the context, and we need but expand in a word or two what he teaches us there. ‘And that knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep, for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.’ To what does he refer by ‘that’ ? The whole of the practical exhortations to a Christian life which have been given before. Everything that is duty becomes tenfold more stringent and imperative when we apprehend the true meaning of that last moment. They tell us that it is unwholesome to be thinking about death and the beyond, because to do so takes away interest from much of our present occupations and weakens energy. If there is anything from which a man is wrenched away because he steadily contemplates the fact of being wrenched away altogether from everything before long, it is something that he had better be wrenched from. And if there be any occupations which dwindle into nothingness, and into which a man cannot for the life of him fling himself with any thoroughgoing enthusiasm or interest, if once the thought of death stirs in him, depend upon it they are occupations which are in themselves contemptible and unworthy. All good aims will gain greater power over us; we shall have a saner estimate of what is worth living for; we shall have a new standard of what is the relative importance of things; and if some that looked very great turn out to be very small when we let that searching light in upon them, and others which seemed very insignificant spring suddenly up into dominating magnitude-that new and truer perspective will be all clear gain. The more we feel that our salvation is sweeping towards us, as it were, from the throne of God through the blue abysses, the more diligently we shall ‘work while it is called day,’ and the more earnestly we shall seek, when the Saviour and His salvation come, to be found with loins girt for all strenuous work, and lamps burning in all the brightness of the light of a Christian character.

Further, says Paul, this hopeful, cheerful contemplation of approaching salvation should lead us to cast off the evil, and to put on the good. You will remember the heart-stirring imagery which the Apostle employs in the context, where he says, ‘The day is at hand; let us therefore fling off the works of darkness’-as men in the morning, when the daylight comes through the window, and makes them lift their eyelids, fling off their night-gear-'and let us put on the armour of light.' We are soldiers, and must be clad in what will be bullet-proof, and will turn a sword's edge. And where shall steel of celestial temper be found that can resist the fiery darts shot at the Christian soldier? His armour must be 'of light.' Clad in the radiance of Christian character he will be invulnerable. And how can we, who have robed ourselves in the works of darkness, either cast them off or array ourselves in sparkling armour of light? Paul tells us, 'Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh.' The picture is of a camp of sleeping soldiers; the night wears thin, the streaks of saffron are coming in the dawning east. One after another the sleepers awake; they cast aside their night-gear, and they brace on the armour that sparkles in the beams of the morning sun. So they are ready when the trumpet sounds the reveille, and with the morning comes the Captain of the Lord's host, and with the Captain comes the perfecting of the salvation which is drawing nearer and nearer to us, as our moments glide through our fingers like the beads of a rosary. Many men think of death and fear; the Christian should think of death-and hope.

40)Romans 13:12

John **- Romans**

LOVE AND THE DAY
ONE METAPHOR AND TWO MEANINGS
THE SOLDIER'S MORNING-CALL

Rom. 13:12.

It is interesting to notice that the metaphor of the Christian armour occurs in Paul's letters throughout his whole course. It first appears, in a very rudimentary form, in the earliest of the Epistles, that to the Thessalonians. It appears here in a letter which belongs to the middle of his career, and it appears finally in the Epistle to the Ephesians, in its fully developed and drawn-out shape, at almost the end of his work. So we may fairly suppose that it was one of his familiar thoughts. Here it has a very picturesque addition, for the picture that is floating before his vivid imagination is that of a company of soldiers, roused by the morning bugle, casting off their night-gear because the day is beginning to dawn, and bracing on the armour that sparkles in the light of the rising sun. ‘That,’ says Paul, ‘is what you Christian people ought to be. Can you not hear the notes of the reveille? The night is far spent; the day is at hand; therefore let us put off the works of darkness-the night-gear that was fit for those hours of slumber. Toss it away, and put on the armour that belongs to the day.’

Now, I am not going to ask or try to answer the question of how far this Apostolic exhortation is based upon the Apostle’s expectation that the world was drawing near its end. That does not matter at all for us at present, for the fact which he expresses as the foundation of this exhortation is true about us all, and about our position in the midst of these fleeting shadows round us. We are hastening to the dawning of the true day. And so let me try to emphasise the exhortation here, old and threadbare and commonplace as it is, because we all need it, at whatever point of life’s journey we have arrived.

Now, the first thing that strikes me is that the garb for the man expectant of the day is armour.

We might have anticipated something very different in accordance with the thoughts that Paul’s imagery here suggests, about the difference between the night which is so swiftly passing, and is full of enemies and dangers, and the day which is going to dawn, and is full of light and peace and joy. We might have expected that he would have said, ‘Let us put on the festal robes.’ But no! ‘The night is far spent; the day is at hand.’ But the dress that befits the expectant of the day is not yet the robe of the feast, but it is ‘the armour’ which, put into plain words, means just this, that there is fighting, always fighting, to be done. If you are ever to belong to the day, you have to equip yourselves *now* with armour and weapons. I do not need to dwell upon that, but I do wish to insist upon this fact, that after all that may be truly said about growth in grace, and the peaceful approximation towards perfection in the Christian character, we cannot dispense with the other element in progress, and that is fighting. We have to struggle for every step. *Growth* is not enough to define completely the process by which men become conformed to the image of the Father, and are ‘made meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.’ Growth does express part of it, but only a part. Conflict is needed to come in, before you have the whole aspect of Christian progress before your minds. For there will always be antagonism without and traitors within. There will always be recalcitrant horses that need to be whipped up, and jibbing horses that need to be dragged forward, and shying ones that need to be violently coerced and kept in the traces. Conflict is the law, because of the enemies, and because of the conspiracy between the weakness within and the things without that appeal to it.

We hear a great deal to-day about being 'sanctified by faith.' I believe that as much as any man, but the office of faith is to bring us the power that cleanses, and the application of that power requires our work, and it requires our fighting. So it is not enough to say, 'Trust for your sanctifying as you have trusted for your justifying and acceptance,' but you have to work out what you get by your faith, and you will never work it out unless you fight against your unworthy self, and the temptations of the world. The garb of the candidate for the day is armour.

And there is another side to that same thought, and that is, the more vivid our expectations of that blessed dawn the more complete should be our bracing on of the armour. The anticipation of that future, in very many instances, in the Christian Church, has led to precisely the opposite state of mind. It has induced people to drop into mere fantastic sentiment, or to ignore this contemptible present, and think that they have nothing to do with it, and are only 'waiting for the coming of the Lord,' and the like. Paul says, 'Just because, on your eastern horizon, you can see the pink flush that tells that the night is gone, and the day is coming, therefore do not be a sentimentalist, do not be idle, do not be negligent or contemptuous of the daily tasks; but because you see it, put on the armour of light, and whether the time between the rising of the whole orb of the sun on the horizon be long or short, fill the hours with triumphant conflict. Put on the whole armour of light.'

Again, note here what the armour is. Of course that phrase, 'the armour of light,' may be nothing more than a little bit of colour put in by a picturesque imagination, and may suggest simply how the burnished steel would shine and glitter when the sunbeams smote it, and the glistening armour, like that of Spenser’s Red Cross Knight, would make a kind of light in the dark cave, into which he went. Or it may mean ‘the armour that befits the light’; as is perhaps suggested by the antithesis ‘the works of darkness,’ which are to be ‘put off.’ These are works that match the darkness, and similarly the armour is to be the armour that befits the light, and that can flash back its beams. But I think there is more than that in the expression. I would rather take the phrase to be parallel to another of this Apostle’s, who speaks in 2nd Corinthians of the ‘armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left.’ ‘Light’ makes the armour, ‘righteousness’ makes the armour. The two phrases say the same thing, the one in plain English, the other in figure, which being brought down to daily life is just this, that the true armour and weapon of a Christian man is Christian character. ‘Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report,’ these are the pieces of armour, and these are the weapons which we are to wield. A Christian man fights against evil in himself by putting on good. The true way to empty the heart of sin is to fill the heart with righteousness. The lances of the light, according to the significant old Greek myth, slew pythons. The armour is ‘righteousness on the right hand and on the left.’ Stick to plain, simple, homely duties, and you will find that they will defend your heart against many a temptation. A flask that is full of rich wine may be plunged into the saltest ocean, and not a drop will find its way in. Fill your heart with righteousness; your lives-let them glisten in the light, and the light will be your armour. God is light, wherefore God cannot be tempted with evil. ‘Walk in the light, as He is in the light’ . . . and ‘the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.’

But there is another side to that thought, for if you will look, at your leisure, to the closing words of the chapter, you will find the Apostle’s own exposition of what putting on the armour of light means. ‘Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ’-that is his explanation of putting on ‘the armour of light.’ For ‘once ye were darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord,’ and it is in the measure in which we are united to Him, by the faith which binds us to Him, and by the love which works obedience and conformity, that we wear the invulnerable armour of light. Christ Himself is, and He supplies to all, the separate graces which Christian men can wear. We may say that He is ‘the panoply of God,’ as Paul calls it in Ephesians, and when we wear Him, and only in the measure in which we do wear Him, in that measure are we clothed with it. And so the last thing that I would point out here is that the obedience to these commands requires continual effort.

The Christians in Rome, to whom Paul was writing, were no novices in the Christian life. Long ago many of them had been brought to Him. But the oldest Christian amongst them needed the exhortation as much as the rawest recruit in the ranks. Continual renewal day by day is what we need, and it will not be secured without a great deal of work. Seeing that there is a ‘putting off’ to go along with the ‘putting on,’ the process is a very long one. ‘‘Tis a lifelong task till the lump be leavened.’ It is a lifelong task till we strip off all the rags of this old self; and ‘being clothed,’ are not ‘found naked.’ It takes a lifetime to fathom Jesus; it takes a lifetime to appropriate Jesus, it takes a lifetime to be clothed with Jesus. And the question comes to each of us, have we ‘put off the old man with his deeds’ ? Are we daily, as sure as we put on our clothes in the morning, putting on Christ the Lord?

For notice with what solemnity the Apostle gives the master His full, official, formal title here, ‘put ye on the *Lord Jesus Christ*.’ Do we put Him on as *Lord*; bowing our whole wills to Him, and accepting Him, His commandments, promises, providences, with glad submission? Do we put on *Jesus*, recognising in His manhood as our Brother not only the pattern of our lives, but the pledge that the pattern, by His help and love, is capable of reproduction in ourselves? Do we put Him on as ‘the Lord Jesus *Christ*,’ who was anointed with the Divine Spirit, that from the head it might flow, even to the skirts of the garments, and every one of us might partake of that unction and be made pure and clean thereby? ‘Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ,’ and do it day by day, and then you have ‘put on the whole armour of God.’

And when the day that is dawning has risen to its full, then, not till then, may we put off the armour and put on the white robe, lay aside the helmet, and have our brows wreathed with the laurel, sheathe the sword, and grasp the palm, being ‘more than conquerors through Him who loved us,’ and fights in us, as well as for us.

41)Romans 13:13-14

LOVE AND THE DAY

Rom. 13:8 - Rom. 13:14.

The two paragraphs of this passage are but slightly connected. The first inculcates the obligation of universal love; and the second begins by suggesting, as a motive for the discharge of that duty, the near approach of ‘the day.’ The light of that dawn draws Paul’s eyes and leads him to wider exhortations on Christian purity as befitting the children of light.

I. Rom. 13:8 - Rom. 13:10 set forth the obligation of a love which embraces all men, and comprehends all duties to them.

The Apostle has just been laying down the general exhortation, ‘Pay every man his due’ and applying it especially to the Christian’s relation to civic rulers. He repeats it in a negative form, and bases on it the obligation of loving every man. That love is further represented as the sum and substance of the law. Thus Paul brings together two thoughts which are often dealt with as mutually exclusive,-namely, love and law. He does not talk sentimentalisms about the beauty of charity and the like, but lays it down, as a ‘hard and fast rule,’ that we are bound to love every man with whom we come in contact; or, as the Greek has it, ‘the other.’

That is the first plain truth taught here. Love is not an emotion which we may indulge or not, as we please. It is not to select its objects according to our estimate of their lovableness or goodness. But we are bound to love, and that all round, without distinction of beautiful or ugly, good or bad. ‘A hard saying; who can hear it?’ Every man is our creditor for that debt. He does not get his due from us unless he gets love. Note, further, that the debt of love is never discharged. After all payments it still remains owing. There is no paying in full of all demands, and, as Bengel says, it is an undying debt. We are apt to weary of expending love, especially on unworthy recipients, and to think that we have wiped off all claims, and it may often be true that our obligations to others compel us to cease helping one; but if we laid Paul’s words to heart, our patience would be longer-breathed, and we should not be so soon ready to shut hearts and purses against even unthankful suitors.

Further, Paul here teaches us that this debt [*debitum*, ‘duty’] of love includes all duties. It is the fulfilling of the law, inasmuch as it will secure the conduct which the law prescribes. The Mosaic law itself indicates this, since it recapitulates the various commandments of the second table, in the one precept of love to our neighbour [Lev. 19:18]. Law enjoins but has no power to get its injunctions executed. Love enables and inclines to do all that law prescribes, and to avoid all that it prohibits. The multiplicity of duties is melted into unity; and that unity, when it comes into act, unfolds into whatsoever things are lovely and of good report. Love is the mother tincture which, variously diluted and manipulated, yields all potent and fragrant draughts. It is the white light which the prism of daily life resolves into its component colours.

But Paul seems to limit the action of love here to negative doing no ill. That is simply because the commandments are mostly negative, and that they are is a sad token of the lovelessness natural to us all. But do we love ourselves only negatively, or are we satisfied with doing ourselves no harm? That stringent pattern of love to others not only prescribes degree, but manner. It teaches that true love to men is not weak indulgence, but must sometimes chastise, and thwart, and always must seek their good, and not merely their gratification.

Whoever will honestly seek to apply that negative precept of working no ill to others, will find it positive enough. We harm men when we fail to help them. If we can do them a kindness, and do it not, we do them ill. Non-activity for good is activity for evil. Surely, nothing can be plainer than the bearing of this teaching on the Christian duty as to intoxicants. If by using these a Christian puts a stumbling-block in the way of a weak will, then he is working ill to his neighbour, and that argues absence of love, and that is dishonest, shirking payment of a plain debt.

II. The great stimulus to love and to all purity is set forth as being the near approach-of the day [Rom. 13:11 - Rom. 13:14].

‘The day,’ in Paul’s writing, has usually the sense of the great day of the Lord’s return, and may have that meaning here; for, as Jesus has told us, ‘it is not for’ even inspired Apostles ‘to know the times or the seasons,’ and it is no dishonour to apostolic inspiration to assign to it the limits which the Lord has assigned.

But, whether we take this as the meaning of the phrase, or regard it simply as pointing to the time of death as the dawning of heaven’s day, the weight of the motive is unaffected. The language is vividly picturesque. The darkness is thinning, and the blackness turning grey. Light begins to stir and whisper. A band of soldiers lies asleep, and, as the twilight begins to dawn, the bugle call summons them to awake, to throw off their night-gear,-namely, the works congenial to darkness,-and to brace on their armour of light. Light may here be regarded as the material of which the glistering armour is made; but, more probably, the expression means weapons appropriate to the light.

Such being the general picture, we note the fact which underlies the whole representation; namely, that every life is a definite whole which has a fixed end. Jesus said, ‘We must work the works of Him that sent Me, while it is day: the night cometh.’ Paul uses the opposite metaphors in these verses. But, though the two sayings are opposite in form, they are identical in substance. In both, the predominant thought is that of the rapidly diminishing space of earthly life, and the complete unlikeness to it of the future. We stand like men on a sandbank with an incoming tide, and every wash of the waves eats away its edges, and presently it will yield below our feet. We forget this for the most part, and perhaps it is not well that it should be ever present; but that it should never be present is madness and sore loss.

Paul, in his intense moral earnestness, in Rom. 13:13, bids us regard ourselves as already in ‘the day,’ and shape our conduct as if it shone around us and all things were made manifest by its light. The sins to be put off are very gross and palpable. They are for the most part sins of flesh, such as even these Roman Christians had to be warned against, and such as need to be manifested by the light even now among many professing Christian communities.

But Paul has one more word to say. If he stopped without it, he would have said little to help men who are crying out, ‘How am I to strip off this clinging evil, which seems my skin rather than my clothing? How am I to put on that flashing panoply?’ There is but one way,-put on the Lord Jesus Christ. If we commit ourselves to Him by faith, and front our temptations in His strength, and thus, as it were, wrap ourselves in Him, He will be to us dress and armour, strength and righteousness. Our old self will fall away, and we shall take no forethought for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.

42)Romans 14:12-23

Romans

THE LIMITS OF LIBERTY

Rom. 14:12 - Rom. 14:23.

The special case in view, in the section of which this passage is part, is the difference of opinion as to the lawfulness of eating certain meats. It is of little consequence, so far as the principles involved are concerned, whether these were the food which the Mosaic ordinances made unclean, or, as in Corinth, meats offered to idols. The latter is the more probable, and would be the more important in Rome. The two opinions on the point represented two tendencies of mind, which always exist; one more scrupulous, and one more liberal. Paul has been giving the former class the lesson they needed in the former part of this chapter; and he now turns to the ‘stronger’ brethren, and lays down the law for their conduct. We may, perhaps, best simply follow him, verse by verse.

We note then, first, the great thought with which he starts, that of the final judgment, in which each man shall give account of himself. What has that to do with the question in hand? This, that it ought to keep us from premature and censorious judging. We have something more pressing to do than to criticise each other. Ourselves are enough to keep our hands full, without taking a lift of our fellows’ conduct. And this, further, that, in view of the final judgment, we should hold a preliminary investigation on our own principles of action, and ‘decide’ to adopt as the overruling law for ourselves, that we shall do nothing which will make duty harder for our brethren. Paul habitually settled small matters on large principles, and brought the solemnities of the final account to bear on the marketplace and the meal.

In Rom. 14:13 he lays down the supreme principle for settling the case in hand. No Christian is blameless if he voluntarily acts so as to lay a stumbling-block or an occasion to fall in another's path. Are these two things the same? Possibly, but a man may stumble, and not fall, and that which makes him stumble may possibly indicate a temptation to a less grave evil than that which makes him fall does. It may be noticed that in the sequel we hear of a brother's being 'grieved' first, and then of his being 'overthrown.' In any case, there is no mistake about the principle laid down and repeated in Rom. 14:21. It is a hard saying for some of us. Is my liberty to be restricted by the narrow scruples of 'strait-laced' Christians? Yes. Does not that make them masters, and attach too much importance to their narrowness? No. It recognises Christ as Master, and all His servants as brethren. If the scrupulous ones go so far as to say to the more liberal, 'You cannot be Christians if you do not do as we do' then the limits of concession have been reached, and we are to do as Paul did, when he flatly refused to yield one hair's-breadth to the Judaisers. If a man says, You must adopt this, that, or the other limitation in conduct, or else you shall be unchurched, the only answer is, I will not. We are to be flexible as long as possible, and let weak brethren's scruples restrain our action. But if they insist on things indifferent as essential, a yet higher duty than that of regard to their weak consciences comes in, and faithfulness to Christ limits concession to His servants.

But, short of that extreme case, Paul lays down the law of curbing liberty in deference to 'narrowness.' In Rom. 14:14 he states with equal breadth the extreme principle of the liberal party, that nothing is unclean of itself. He has learned that 'in the Lord Jesus.' Before he was 'in Him,' he had been entangled in cobwebs of legal cleanness and uncleanness; but now he is free. But he adds an exception, which must be kept in mind by the liberal-minded section-namely, that a clean thing is unclean to a man who thinks it is. Of course, these principles do not affect the eternal distinctions of right and wrong. Paul is not playing fast and loose with the solemn, divine law which makes sin and righteousness independent of men’s notions. He is speaking of things indifferent-ceremonial observances and the like; and the modern analogies of these are conventional pieces of conduct, in regard to amusements and the like, which, in themselves, a Christian man can do or abstain from without sin.

Rom. 14:15 is difficult to understand, if the ‘for’ at the beginning is taken strictly. Some commentators would read instead of it a simple ‘but’ which smooths the flow of thought. But possibly the verse assigns a reason for the law in Rom. 14:13, rather than for the statements in Rom. 14:14. And surely there is no stronger reason for tender consideration for even the narrowest scruples of Christians than the obligation to walk in love. Our common brotherhood binds us to do nothing that would even grieve one of the family. For instance, Christian men have different views of the obligations of Sunday observance. It is conceivable that a very ‘broad’ Christian might see no harm in playing lawn-tennis in his garden on a Sunday; but if his doing so scandalised, or, as Paul says, ‘grieved’ Christian people of less advanced views, he would be sinning against the law of love if he did it.

There are many other applications of the principle readily suggested. The principle is the thing to keep clearly in view. It has a wide field for its exercise in our times, and when the Christian brotherhood includes such diversities of culture and social condition. And that is a solemn deepening of it, ‘Destroy not with thy meat him for whom Christ died.’ Note the almost bitter emphasis on ‘thy,’ which brings out not only the smallness of the gratification for which the mischief is done, but the selfishness of the man who will not yield up so small a thing to shield from evil which may prove fatal, a brother for whom Christ did not shrink from yielding up life. If He is our pattern, any sacrifice of tastes and liberties for our brother’s sake is plain duty, and cannot be neglected without selfish sin. One great reason, then, for the conduct enjoined, is set forth in Rom. 14:15. It is the clear dictate of Christian love.

Another reason is urged in Rom. 14:16 - Rom. 14:18. It displays the true character of Christianity, and so reflects honour on the doer. ‘Your good’ is an expression for the whole sum of the blessings obtained by becoming Christians, and is closely connected with what is here meant by the ‘kingdom of God.’ That latter phrase seems here to be substantially equivalent to the inward condition in which they are who have submitted to the dominion of the will of God. It is ‘the kingdom within us’ which is ‘righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.’ What have you won by your Christianity? the Apostle in effect says, Do you think that its purpose is mainly to give you greater licence in regard to these matters in question? If the most obvious thing in your conduct is your ‘eating and drinking,’ your whole Christian standing will be misconceived, and men will fancy that your religion permits laxity of life. But if, on the other hand, you show that you are Christ’s servants by righteousness, peace, and joy, you will be pleasing to God, and men will recognise that your religion is from Him, and that you are consistent professors of it.

Modern liberal-minded brethren can easily translate all this for to-day’s use. Take care that you do not give the impression that your Christianity has its main operation in permitting you to do what your weaker brethren have scruples about. If you do not yield to them, but flaunt your liberty in their and the world’s faces, your advanced enlightenment will be taken by rough-and-ready observers as mainly cherished because it procures you these immunities. Show by your life that you have the true spiritual gifts. Think more about them than about your ‘breadth,’ and superiority to ‘narrow prejudices.’ Realise the purpose of the Gospel as concerns your own moral perfecting, and the questions in hand will fall into their right place.

In Rom. 14:19 two more reasons are given for restricting liberty in deference to others’ scruples. Such conduct contributes to peace. If truth is imperilled, or Christ’s name in danger of being tarnished, counsels of peace are counsels of treachery; but there are not many things worth buying at the price of Christian concord. Such conduct tends to build up our own and others’ Christian character. Concessions to the ‘weak’ may help them to become strong, but flying in the face of their scruples is sure to hurt them, in one way or another.

In Rom. 14:15, the case was supposed of a brother’s being grieved by what he felt to be laxity. That case corresponded to the stumbling-block of Rom. 14:13. A worse result seems contemplated in Rom. 14:20,-that of the weak brother, still believing that laxity was wrong, and yet being tempted by the example of the stronger to indulge in it. In that event, the responsibility of overthrowing what God had built lies at the door of the tempter. The metaphor of ‘overthrowing’ is suggested by the previous one of ‘edifying.’ Christian duty is mutual building up of character; inconsiderate exercise of ‘liberty’ may lead to pulling down, by inducing to imitation which conscience condemns.

From this point onwards, the Apostle first reiterates in inverse order his two broad principles, that clean things are unclean to the man who thinks them so, and that Christian obligation requires abstinence from permitted things if our indulgence tends to a brother’s hurt. The application of the latter principle to the duty of total abstinence from intoxicants for the sake of others is perfectly legitimate, but it is an application, not the direct purpose of the Apostle’s injunctions.

In Rom. 14:22 - Rom. 14:23, the section is closed by two exhortations, in which both parties, the strong and the weak, are addressed. The former is spoken to in Rom. 14:22, the latter in Rom. 14:23. The strong brother is bid to be content with having his wider views, or ‘faith’-that is, certainty that his liberty is in accordance with Christ’s will. It is enough that he should enjoy that conviction, only let him make sure that he can hold it as in God’s sight, and do not let him flourish it in the faces of brethren whom it would grieve, or might lead to imitating his practice, without having risen to his conviction. And let him be quite sure that his conscience is entirely convinced, and not bribed by inclination; for many a man condemns himself by letting wishes dictate to conscience.

On the other hand, there is a danger that those who have scruples should, by the example of those who have not, be tempted to do what they are not quite sure is right. If you have any doubts, says Paul, the safe course is to abstain from the conduct in question. Perhaps a brother can go to the theatre without harm, if he believes it right to do so; but if you have any hesitation as to the propriety of going, you will be condemned as sinning if you do. You must not measure your corn by another man’s bushel. Your convictions, not his, are to be your guides. ‘Faith’ is used here in a somewhat unusual sense. It means certitude of judgment. The last words of Rom. 14:23 have no such meaning as is sometimes extracted from them;

namely, that actions, however pure and good, done by unbelievers, are of the nature of sin. They simply mean that whatever a Christian man does without clear warrant of his judgment and conscience is sin to him, whatever it is to others.

43)Romans 15:4

Romans

TWO FOUNTAINS, ONE STREAM

Rom. 15:4, Rom. 15:14.

There is a river in Switzerland fed by two uniting streams, bearing the same name, one of them called the ‘white,’ one of them the ‘grey,’ or dark. One comes down from the glaciers, and bears half-melted snow in its white ripple; the other flows through a lovely valley, and is discoloured by its earth. They unite in one common current. So in these two verses we have two streams, a white and a black, and they both blend together and flow out into a common hope. In the former of them we have the dark stream-’through patience and comfort,’ which implies affliction and effort. The issue and outcome of all difficulty, trial, sorrow, ought to be hope. And in the other verse we have the other valley, down which the light stream comes: ‘The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope.’

So both halves of the possible human experience are meant to end in the same blessed result; and whether you go round on the one side of the sphere of human life, or whether you take the other hemisphere, you come to the same point, if you have travelled with God’s hand in yours, and with Him for your Guide.

Let us look, then, at these two contrasted origins of the same blessed gift, the Christian hope.

I. We have, first of all, the hope that is the child of the night, and born in the dark.

‘Whatsoever things,’ says the Apostle, ‘were written aforetime, were written for our learning, that we, through patience,’-or rather *the brave perseverance*-’and consolation’-or rather perhaps *encouragement*-’of the Scriptures might have hope.’ The written word is conceived as the source of patient endurance which acts as well as suffers. This grace Scripture works in us through the encouragement which it ministers in manifold ways, and the result of both is hope.

So, you see, our sorrows and difficulties are not connected with, nor do they issue in, bright hopefulness, except by reason of this connecting link. There is nothing in a man’s troubles to make him hopeful. Sometimes, rather, they drive him into despair; but at all events, they seldom drive him to hopefulness, except where this link comes in. We cannot pass from the black frowning cliffs on one side of the gorge to the sunny tablelands on the other without a bridge-and the bridge for a poor soul from the blackness of sorrow, and the sharp grim rocks of despair, to the smiling pastures of hope, with all their half-open blossoms, is builded in that Book, which tells us the meaning and purpose of them all; and is full of the histories of those who have fought and overcome, have hoped and not been ashamed.

Scripture is given for this among other reasons, that it may encourage us, and so may produce in us this great grace of active patience, if we may call it so.

The first thing to notice is, how Scripture gives encouragement-for such rather than consolation is the meaning of the word. It is much to dry tears, but it is more to stir the heart as with a trumpet call. Consolation is precious, but we need more for well-being than only to be comforted. And, surely, the whole tone of Scripture in its dealing with the great mystery of pain and sorrow, has a loftier scope than even to minister assuagement to grief, and to stay our weeping. It seeks to make us strong and brave to face and to master our sorrows, and to infuse into us a high-hearted courage, which shall not merely be able to accept the biting blasts, but shall feel that they bring a glow to the cheek and oxygen to the blood, while wrestling with them builds up our strength, and trains us for higher service. It would be a poor aim to comfort only; but to encourage-to make strong in heart, resolved in will, and incapable of being overborne or crushed in spirit by any sorrows-that is a purpose worthy of the Book, and of the God who speaks through it.

This purpose, we may say, is effected by Scripture in two ways. It encourages us by its records, and by its revelation of principles.

Who can tell how many struggling souls have taken heart again, as they pondered over the sweet stories of sorrow subdued which stud its pages, like stars in its firmament? The tears shed long ago which God has put ‘in His bottle,’ and recorded in ‘His book,’ have truly been turned into pearls. That long gallery of portraits of sufferers, who have all trodden the same rough road, and been sustained by the same hand, and reached the same home, speaks cheer to all who follow them. Hearts wrung by cruel partings from those dearer to them than their own souls, turn to the pages which tell how Abraham, with calm sorrow, laid his Sarah in the cave at Macpelah; or how, when Jacob’s eyes were dim that he could not see, his memory still turned to the hour of agony when Rachael died by him, and he sees clear in its light her lonely grave, where so much of himself was laid; or to the still more sacred page which records the struggle of grief and faith in the hearts of the sisters of Bethany. All who are anyways afflicted in mind, body, or estate find in the Psalms men speaking their deepest experiences before them; and the grand majesty of sorrow that marks ‘the patience of Job,’ and the flood of sunshine that bathes him, revealing the ‘end of the Lord,’ have strengthened countless sufferers to bear and to hold fast, and to hope. We are all enough of children to be more affected by living examples than by dissertations, however true, and so Scripture is mainly history, revealing God by the record of His acts, and disclosing the secret of human life by telling us the experiences of living men.

But Scripture has another method of ministering encouragement to our often fainting and faithless hearts. It cuts down through all the complications of human affairs, and lays bare the innermost motive power. It not only shows us in its narratives the working of sorrow, and the power of faith, but it distinctly lays down the source and the purpose, the whence and the whither of all suffering. No man need quail or faint before the most torturing pains or most disastrous strokes of evil, who holds firmly the plain teaching of Scripture on these two points. They all come *from* my Father, and they all come *for* my good. It is a short and simple creed, easily apprehended. It pretends to no recondite wisdom. It is a homely philosophy which common intellects can grasp, which children can understand, and hearts half paralysed by sorrow can take in. So much the better. Grief and pain are so common that their cure had need to be easily obtained. Ignorant and stupid people have to writhe in agony as well as wise and clever ones, and until grief is the portion only of the cultivated classes, its healing must come from something more universal than philosophy; or else the nettle would be more plentiful than the dock; and many a poor heart would be stung to death. Blessed be God! the Christian view of sorrow, while it leaves much unexplained, focuses a steady light on these two points; its origin and its end. 'He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness,' is enough to calm all agitation, and to make the faintest heart take fresh courage. With that double certitude clear before us, we can face anything. The slings and arrows which strike are no more flung blindly by an 'outrageous fortune,' but each bears an inscription, like the fabled bolts, which tells what hand drew the bow, and they come with His love.

Then, further, the courage thus born of the Scriptures produces another grand thing-patience, or rather perseverance. By that word is meant more than simply the passive endurance which is the main element in patience, properly so called. Such passive endurance is a large part of our duty in regard to difficulties and sorrows, but is never the whole of it. It is something to endure and even while the heart is breaking, to submit unmurmuring, but, transcendent as that is, it is but half of the lesson which we have to learn and to put in practice. For if all our sorrows have a disciplinary and educational purpose, we shall not have received them aright, unless we have tried to make that purpose effectual, by appropriating whatsoever moral and spiritual teaching they each have for us. Nor does our duty stop there. For while one high purpose of sorrow is to deaden our hearts to earthly objects, and to lift us above earthly affections, no sorrow can ever relax the bonds which oblige us to duty. The solemn pressure of 'I ought,' is as heavy on the sorrowful as on the happy heart. We have still to toil, to press forward, in the sweat of our brow, to gain our bread, whether it be food for our bodies, or sustenance for our hearts and minds. Our responsibilities to others do not cease because our lives are darkened. Therefore, heavy or light of heart, we have still to stick to our work, and though we may never more be able to do it with the old buoyancy, still to do it with our might.

It is that dogged persistence in plain duty, that tenacious continuance in our course, which is here set forth as the result of the encouragement which Scripture gives. Many of us have all our strength exhausted in mere endurance, and have let obvious duties slip from our hands, as if we had done all that we could do when we had forced ourselves to submit. Submission would come easier if you took up some of those neglected duties, and you would be stronger for patience, if you used more of your strength for service. You do well if you do not sink under your burden, but you would do better if, with it on your shoulders, you would plod steadily along the road; and if you did, you would feel the weight less. It seems heaviest when you stand still doing nothing. Do not cease to toil because you suffer. You will feel your pain more if you do. Take the encouragement which Scripture gives, that it may animate you to bate no jot of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer right onward.

And let the Scripture directly minister to you perseverance as well as indirectly supply it through the encouragement which it gives. It abounds with exhortations, patterns, and motives of such patient continuance in well-doing. It teaches us a solemn scorn of ills. It, angel-like, bears us up on soft, strong hands, lest we bruise ourselves on, or stumble over, the rough places on our roads. It summons us to diligence by the visions of the prize, and glimpses of the dread fate of the slothful, by all that is blessed in hope, and terrible in foreboding, by appeals to an enlightened self-regard, and by authoritative commands to conscience, by the pattern of the Master, and by the tender motives of love to Him to which He, Himself, has given voice. All these call on us to be followers of them who, through faith and perseverance, inherit the promises.

But we have yet another step to take. These two, the encouragement and perseverance produced by the right use of Scripture, will lead to hope.

It depends on how sorrow and trial are borne, whether they produce a dreary hopelessness which sometimes darkens into despair, or a brighter, firmer hope than more joyous days knew. We cannot say that sorrow produces hope. It does not, unless we have this connecting link-the experience in sorrow of a God-given courage which falters not in the onward course, nor shrinks from any duty. But if, in the very press and agony, I am able, by God’s grace, to endure nor cease to toil, I have, in myself, a living proof of His power, which entitles me to look forward with the sure confidence that, through all the uproar of the storm, He will bring me to my harbour of rest where there is peace. The lion once slain houses a swarm of bees who lay up honey in its carcase. The trial borne with brave persistence yields a store of sweet hopes. If we can look back and say, ‘Thou hast been with me in six troubles,’ it is good logic to look forward and say, ‘and in seven Thou wilt not forsake me.’ When the first wave breaks over the ship, as she clears the heads and heels over before the full power of the open sea, inexperienced landsmen think they are all going to the bottom, but they soon learn that there is a long way between rolling and foundering, and get to watch the highest waves towering above the bows in full confidence that these also will slip quietly beneath the keel as the others have done, and be left harmless astern.

The Apostle, in this very same letter, has another word parallel to this, in which he describes the issues of rightly-borne suffering when he says, ‘Tribulation worketh perseverance’-the same word that is used here-’and perseverance worketh’ the proof in our experience of a sustaining God; and the proof in our experience of a sustaining God works hope. We know that of ourselves we could not have met tribulation, and therefore the fact that we have been able to meet and overcome it is demonstration of a mightier power than our own, working in us, which we know to be from God, and therefore inexhaustible and ever ready to help. That is foundation firm enough to build solid fabrics of hope upon, whose bases go down to the centre of all things, the purpose of God, and whose summits, like the upward shooting spire of some cathedral, aspire to, and seem almost to touch, the heavens.

So hope is born of sorrow, when these other things come between. The darkness gives birth to the light, and every grief blazes up a witness to a future glory. Each drop that hangs on the wet leaves twinkles into rainbow light that proclaims the sun. The garish splendours of the prosperous day hide the stars, and through the night of our sorrow there shine, thickly sown and steadfast, the constellations of eternal hopes. The darker the midnight, the surer, and perhaps the nearer, the coming of the day. Sorrow has not had its perfect work unless it has led us by the way of courage and perseverance to a stable hope. Hope has not pierced to the rock, and builds only ‘things that can be shaken,’ unless it rests on sorrows borne by God’s help.

II. So much then for the genealogy of one form of the Christian hope.

But we have also a hope that is born of the day, the child of sunshine and gladness; and that is set before us in the second of the two verses which we are considering, ‘The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope.’

So then, ‘the darkness and the light are both alike’ to our hope, in so far as each may become the occasion for its exercise. It is not only to be the sweet juice expressed from our hearts by the winepress of calamities, but that which flows of itself from hearts ripened and mellowed under the sunshine of God-given blessedness.

We have seen that the bridge by which sorrow led to hope, is perseverance and courage; in this second analysis of the origin of hope, joy and peace are the bridge by which Faith passes over into it. Observe the difference: there is no direct connection between affliction and hope, but there is between joy and hope. We have no right to say, ‘Because I suffer, I shall possess good in the future’; but we have a right to say, ‘Because I rejoice’-of course with a joy in God-’I shall never cease to rejoice in Him.’ Such joy is the prophet of its own immortality and completion. And, on the other hand, the joy and peace which are naturally the direct progenitors of Christian hope, are the children of faith. So that we have here two generations, as it were, of hope’s ancestors;-Faith produces joy and peace, and these again produce hope.

Faith leads to joy and peace. Paul has found, and if we only put it to the proof, we shall also find, that the simple exercise of simple faith fills the soul with ‘*all* joy and peace.’ Gladness in all its variety and in full measure, calm repose in every kind and abundant in its still depth, will pour into my heart as water does into a vessel, on condition of my taking away the barrier and opening my heart through faith. Trust and thou shalt be glad. Trust, and thou shalt be calm. In the measure of thy trust shall be the measure of thy joy and peace.

Notice, further, how indissolubly connected the present exercise of faith is with the present experience of joy and peace. The exuberant language of this text seems a world too wide for anything that many professing Christians ever know even in the moments of highest elevation, and certainly far beyond the ordinary tenor of their lives. But it is no wonder that these should have so little joy, when they have so little faith. It is only while we are looking to Jesus that we can expect to have joy and peace. There is no flashing light on the surface of the mirror, but when it is turned full to the sun. Any interruption in the electric current is registered accurately by an interruption in the continuous line perforated on the telegraph ribbon; and so every diversion of heart and faith from Jesus Christ is recorded by the fading of the sunshine out of the heart, and the silencing of all the song-birds. Yesterday's faith will not bring joy to-day; you cannot live upon past experience, nor feed your souls with the memory of former exercises of Christian faith. It must be like the manna, gathered fresh every day, else it will rot and smell foul. A present faith, and a present faith only, produces a present joy and peace. Is there, then, any wonder that so much of the ordinary experience of ordinary Christians should present a sadly broken line-a bright point here and there, separated by long stretches of darkness? The gaps in the continuity of their joy are the tell-tale indicators of the interruptions in their faith. If the latter were continuous, the former would be unbroken. Always believe, and you will always be glad and calm.

It is easy to see that this is the natural result of faith. The very act of confident reliance on another for all my safety and well-being has a charm to make me restful, so long as my reliance is not put to shame. There is no more blessed emotion than the tranquil happiness which, in the measure of its trust, fills every trustful soul. Even when its objects are poor, fallible, weak, ignorant dying men and women, trust brings a breath of more than earthly peace into the heart. But when it grasps the omnipotent, all-wise, immortal Christ, there are no bounds but its own capacity to the blessedness which it brings into the soul, because there is none to the all-sufficient grace of which it lays hold.

Observe again how accurately the Apostle defines for us the conditions on which Christian experience will be joyful and tranquil. It is 'in believing,' not in certain other exercises of mind, that these blessings are to be realised.

And the forgetfulness of that plain fact leads to many good people’s religion being very much more gloomy and disturbed than God meant it to be. For a large part of it consists in sadly testing their spiritual state, and gazing at their failures and imperfections. There is nothing cheerful or tranquillising in grubbing among the evils of your own heart, and it is quite possible to do that too much and too exclusively. If your favourite subject of contemplation in your religious thinking is yourself, no wonder that you do not get much joy and peace out of that. If you do, it will be of a false kind. If you are thinking more about your own imperfections than about Christ’s pardon, more about the defects of your own love to Him than about the perfection of His love to you, if instead of practising faith you are absorbed in self-examination, and instead of saying to yourself, ‘I know how foul and unworthy I am, but I look away from myself to my Saviour,’ you are bewailing your sins and doubting whether you are a Christian, you need not expect God’s angels of joy and peace to nestle in your heart. It is ‘in believing,’ and not in other forms of religious contemplation, however needful these may in their places be, that these fair twin sisters come to us and make their abode with us.

Then, the second step in this tracing of the origin of the hope which has the brighter source is the consideration that the joy and peace which spring from faith, in their turn produce that confident anticipation of future and progressive good.

Herein lies the distinguishing blessedness of the Christian joy and peace, in that they carry in themselves the pledge of their own eternity. Here, and here only, the mad boast which is doomed to be so miserably falsified when applied to earthly gladness is simple truth. Here ‘to-morrow *shall* be as this day and much more abundant.’ Such joy has nothing in itself which betokens exhaustion, as all the less pure joys of earth have. It is manifestly not born for death, as are they. It is not fated, like all earthly emotions or passions, to expire in the moment of its completeness, or even by sudden revulsion to be succeeded by its opposite. Its sweetness has no after pang of bitterness. It is not true of this gladness, that ‘Hereof cometh in the end despondency and madness,’ but its destiny is to ‘remain’ as long as the soul in which it unfolds shall exist, and ‘to be full’ as long as the source from which it flows does not run dry.

So that the more we experience the present blessedness, which faith in Christ brings us, the more shall we be sure that nothing in the future, either in or beyond time, can put an end to it; and hence a hope that looks with confident eyes across the gorge of death, to the ‘shining tablelands’ on the other side, and is as calm as certitude, shall be ours. To the Christian soul, rejoicing in the conscious exercise of faith and the conscious possession of its blessed results, the termination of a communion with Christ, so real and spiritual, by such a trivial accident as death, seems wildly absurd and therefore utterly impossible. Just as Christ’s Resurrection seems inevitable as soon as we grasp the truth of His divine nature, and it becomes manifestly impossible that He, being such as He is-should be holden of death,’ being such as it is, so for His children, when once they come to know the realities of fellowship with their Lord, they feel the entire dissimilarity of these to anything in the realm which is subjected to the power of death, and to know it to be as impossible that these purely spiritual experiences should be reduced to inactivity, or meddled with by it, as that a thought should be bound with a cord or a feeling fastened with fetters. They, and death, belong to two different regions. It can work its will on ‘this wide world, and all its fading sweets’-but is powerless in the still place where the soul and Jesus hold converse, and all His joy passes into His servant’s heart. I saw, not long since, in a wood a mass of blue wild hyacinths, that looked like a little bit of heaven dropped down upon earth. You and I may have such a tiny bit of heaven itself lying amidst all the tangle of our daily lives, if only we put our trust in Christ, and so get into our hearts some little portion of that joy that is unspeakable, and that peace that passeth understanding.

Thus, then, the sorrows of the earthly experience and the joys of the Christian life will blend together to produce the one blessed result of a hope that is full of certainty, and is the assurance of immortality. There is no rainbow in the sky unless there be both a black cloud and bright sunshine. So, on the blackest, thickest thunder-mass of our sorrows, if smitten into moist light by the sunshine of joy and peace drawn from Jesus Christ by faith, there may be painted the rainbow of hope, the many-coloured, steadfast token of the faithful covenant of the faithful God.

44)Romans 15:13

TWO FOUNTAINS, ONE STREAM

JOY AND PEACE IN BELIEVING

Rom. 15:13.

With this comprehensive and lofty petition the Apostle closes his exhortation to the factions in the Roman Church to be at unity. The form of the prayer is moulded by the last words of a quotation which he has just made, which says that in the coming Messiah 'shall the Gentiles hope.' But the prayer itself is not an instance of being led away by a word-in form, indeed, it is shaped by verbal resemblance; in substance it points to the true remedy for religious controversy. Fill the contending parties with a fuller spiritual life, and the ground of their differences will begin to dwindle, and look very contemptible. When the tide rises, the little pools on the rocks are all merged into one.

But we may pass beyond the immediate application of these words, and see in them the wish, which is also a promise, and like the exhibition of every ideal is a command. This is Paul's conception of the Christian life as it might and should be, in one aspect. You notice that there is not a word in it about conduct. It goes far deeper than action. It deals with the springs of action in the individual life. It is the depths of spiritual experience here set forth which will result in actions that become a Christian. And in these days, when all around us we see a shallow conception of Christianity, as if it were concerned principally with conduct and men's relations with one another, it is well to go down into the depths, and to remember that whilst 'Do, do, do!' is very important, 'Be, be, be!' is the primary commandment. Conduct is a making visible of personality, and the Scripture teaching which says first faith and then works is profoundly philosophical as well as Christian. So we turn away here from externals altogether, and regard the effect of Christianity on the inward life.

I. I wish to notice man's faith and God's filling as connected, and as the foundation of everything.

‘The God of hope fill you . . .’-let us leave out the intervening words for a moment-’in believing.’ Now, you notice that Paul does not stay to tell us what or whom we are to believe in, or on. He takes that for granted, and his thought is fastened, for the moment, not on the object but on the act of faith. And he wishes to drive home to us this, that the attitude of trust is the necessary prerequisite condition of God’s being able to fill a man’s soul, and that God’s being able to fill a man’s soul is the necessary consequence of a man’s trust. Ah, brethren, we cannot altogether shut God out from our spirits. There are loving and gracious gifts that, as our Lord tells us, He makes to ‘fall on the unthankful and the evil.’ His rain is not like the summer showers that we sometimes see, that fall in one spot and leave another dry; nor like the destructive thunderstorms, that come down bringing ruin upon one cane-brake and leave the plants in the next standing upright. But the best, the highest, the truly divine gifts which He is yearning to give to us all, cannot be given except there be consent, trust, and desire for them. You can shut your hearts or you can open them. And just as the wind will sigh round some hermetically closed chamber in vain search for a cranny, and the man within may be asphyxiated though the atmosphere is surging up its waves all round his closed domicile, so by lack of our faith, which is at once trust, consent, and desire, we shut out the gift with which God would fain fill our spirits. You can take a porous pottery vessel, wrap it up in waxcloth, pitch it all over, and then drop it into mid-Atlantic, and not a drop will find its way in. And that is what we can do with ourselves, so that although in Him ‘we live and move and have our being,’ and are like the earthen vessel in the ocean, no drop of the blessed moisture will ever find its way into the heart. There must be man’s faith before there can be God’s filling.

Further, this relation of the two things suggests to us that a consequence of a Christian man’s faith is the direct action of God upon him. Notice how the Apostle puts that truth in a double form here, in order that he may emphasise it, using one form of expression, involving the divine, direct activity, at the beginning of his prayer, and another at the end, and so enclosing, as it were, within a great casket of the divine action, all the blessings, the flashing jewels, which he desires his Roman friends to possess. ‘The God of hope fill you . . . through the power of the Holy Ghost.’ I wish I could find words by which I could bear in upon the ordinary type of the Evangelical Christianity of this generation anything like the depth and earnestness of my own conviction that, for lack of a proportionate development of that great truth, of the direct action of the giving God on the believing heart, it is weakened and harmed in many ways. Surely He that made my spirit can touch my spirit; surely He who filleth all things according to their capacity can Himself enter into and fill the spirit which is opened for Him by simple faith. We do not need wires for the telegraphy between heaven and the believing soul, but He comes directly to, and speaks in, and moves upon, and moulds and blesses, the waiting heart. And until you know, by your own experience rightly interpreted, that there is such a direct communion between the giving God and the recipient believing spirit, you have yet to learn the deepest depth, and the most blessed blessedness, of Christian faith and experience. For lack of it a hundred evils beset modern Christianity. For lack of it men fix their faith so exclusively as that the faith is itself harmed thereby, on the past act of Christ's death on the Cross. You will not suspect me of minimising that, but I beseech you remember one climax of the Apostle's which, though not bearing the same message as my text, is in harmony with it, 'Christ that died, yea, rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.' And remember that Christ Himself bestows the gift of His Divine Spirit as the result of the humiliation and the agony of His Cross. Faith brings the direct action of the giving God.

And one more word about this first part of my text: the result of that direct action is complete-'the God of hope fill you' with no shrunken stream, no painful trickle out of a narrow rift in the rock, but a great exuberance which will pass into a man's nature in the measure of his capacity, which is the measure of his trust and desire. There are two limits to God's gifts to men: the one is the limitless limit of God's infinitude, the other is the working limit-our capacity-and that capacity is precisely measured, as the capacity of some built-in vessel might be measured by a little gauge on the outside, by our faith. 'The God of hope' fills you in 'believing,' and 'according to thy faith shall it be unto thee.'

II. Notice the joy and peace which come from the direct action of the God of hope on the believer's soul.

Now, it is not only towards God that we exercise trust, but wherever it is exercised, to some extent, and in the measure in which the object on which it rests is discovered by experience to be worthy, it produces precisely these results. Whoever trusts is at peace, just as much as he trusts. His confidence may be mistaken, and there will come a tremendous awakening if it is, and the peace will be shattered like some crystal vessel dashed upon an iron pavement, but so long as a man's mind and heart are in the attitude of dependence upon another, conceived to be dependable, one knows that there are few phases of tranquillity and blessedness which are sweeter and deeper than that. 'The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her'-that is one illustration, and a hundred more might be given. And if you will take that attitude of trust which, even when it twines round some earthly prop, is upheld for a time, and bears bright flowers-if you take it and twine it round the steadfast foundations of the Throne of God, what can shake that sure repose? 'Joy and peace' will come when the Christian heart closes with its trust, which is God in Christ.

He that believes has found the short, sure road to joy and peace, because his relations are set right with God. For these relations are the disturbing elements in all earthly tranquillity, and like the skeleton at the feast in all earthly joy, and a man can never, down to the roots of his being, be at rest until he is quite sure that there is nothing wrong between him and God. And so believing, we come to that root of all real gladness which is anything better than a crackling of thorns under a pot, and to that beginning of all true tranquillity. Joy in the Lord and peace with God are the parents of all joy and peace that are worthy of the name.

And that same faith will again bring these two bright-winged angels into the most saddened and troubled lives, because that faith brings right relations with ourselves. For our inward strifes stuff thorns into the pillow of our repose, and mingle bitterness with the sweetest, foaming draughts of our earthly joys. If a man's conscience and inclinations pull him two different ways, he is torn asunder as by wild horses. If a man has a hungry heart, for ever yearning after unattained and impossible blessings, then there is no rest there. If a man's little kingdom within him is all anarchical, and each passion and appetite setting up for itself, then there is no tranquillity. But if by faith we let the God of hope come in, then hungry hearts are satisfied, and warring dispositions are harmonised, and the conscience becomes quieted, and fair imaginations fill the chamber of the spirit, and the man is at rest, because he himself is unified by the faith and fear of God.

And the same faith brings joy and peace because it sets right our relations with other people, and with all externals. If I am living in an atmosphere of trust, then sorrow will never be absolute, nor have exclusive monopoly and possession of my spirit. But there will be the paradox, and the blessedness, of Christian experience, ‘as sorrowful yet always rejoicing.’ For the joy of the Christian life has its source far away beyond the swamps from which the sour drops of sorrow may trickle, and it is possible that, like the fabled fire that burned under water, the joy of the Lord may be bright in my heart, even when it is drenched in floods of calamity and distress.

And so, brethren, the joy and peace that come from faith will fill the heart which trusts. Only remember how emphatically the Apostle here puts these two things together, ‘joy and peace in believing.’ As long as, and not a moment longer than, you are exercising the Christian act of trust, will you be experiencing the Christian blessedness of ‘joy and peace.’ Unscrew the pipe, and in an instant the water ceases to flow. Touch the button and switch off, and out goes the light. Some Christian people fancy they can live upon past faith. You will get no present joy and peace out of past faith. The rain of this day twelve months will not moisten the parched ground of to-day. Yesterday’s religion was all used up yesterday. And if you would have a continuous flow of joy and peace through your lives, keep up a uniform habit and attitude of trust in God. You will get it then; you will get it in no other way.

III. Lastly, note the hope which springs from this experience of joy and peace.

‘The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope.’ Here, again, the Apostle does not trouble himself to define the object of the hope. In this, as in the former clause, his attention is fixed upon the emotion, not upon that towards which it goes out. And just as there was no need to say in whom it was that the Christian man was to believe, so there is no room to define what it is that the Christian man has a right to hope for. For his hope is intended to cover all the future, the next moment, or to-morrow, or the dimmest distance where time has ceased to be, and eternity stands unmoved. The attitude of the Christian mind ought to be a cheery optimism, an unconquerable hope. ‘The best has yet to be’ is the true Christian thought in contemplating the future for myself, for my dear ones, for God’s Church, and for God’s universe.

And the truest basis on which that hope can rest is the experience granted to us, on condition of our faith, of a present, abundant possession of the joy and peace which God gives. The gladder you are to-day, if the gladness comes from the right source, the surer you may be that that gladness will never end. That is not what befalls men who live by earthly joys. For the more poignant, precious, and, as we faithlessly think, indispensable some of these are to us, the more into their sweetest sweetness creeps the dread thought: ‘This is too good to last; this must pass.’ We never need to think that about the peace and joy that come to us through believing. For they, in their sweetness, prophesy perpetuity. I need not dwell upon the thought that the firmest, most personally precious convictions of an eternity of future blessedness, rise and fall in a Christian consciousness with the purity and the depth of its own experience of the peace and joy of the Gospel. The more you have of Jesus Christ in your lives and hearts to-day, the surer you will be that whatever death may do, it cannot touch that, and the more ludicrously impossible it will seem that anything that befalls this poor body can touch the bond that knits us to Jesus Christ. Death can separate us from a great deal. Its sharp scythe cuts through all other bonds, but its edge is turned when it is tried against the golden chain that binds the believing soul to the Christ in whom he has believed.

So, brethren, there is the ladder-begin at the bottom step, with faith in Jesus Christ. That will bring God’s direct action into your spirit, through His Holy Spirit, and that one gift will break up into an endless multiplicity of blessings, just as a beam of light spilt upon the surface of the ocean breaks into diamonds in every wave, and that ‘joy and peace’ will kindle in your hearts a hope fed by the great words of the Lord: ‘Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you,’ ‘My joy shall remain in you, and your joy shall be full,’ ‘He that liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.’

45)Romans 16:1-2

PHŒBE

Rom. 16:1 - Rom. 16:2.

This is an outline picture of an else wholly unknown person. She, like most of the other names mentioned in the salutations in this chapter, has had a singular fate. Every name, shadowy and unreal as it is to us, belonged to a human life filled with hopes and fears, plunged sometimes in the depths of sorrows, struggling with anxieties and difficulties; and all the agitations have sunk into forgetfulness and calm. There is left to the world an immortal remembrance, and scarcely a single fact associated with the undying names.

Note the person here disclosed.

A little rent is made in the dark curtain through which we see as with an incandescent light concentrated for a moment upon her, one of the many good women who helped Paul, as their sisters had helped Paul's Master, and who thereby have won, little as either Paul or she thought it, an eternal commemoration. Her name is a purely idolatrous one, and stamps her as a Greek, and by birth probably a worshipper of Apollo. Her Christian associations were with the Church at Cenchrea, the port of Corinth, of which little Christian community nothing further is known. But if we take into account the hideous immoralities of Corinth, we shall deem it probable that the port, with its shifting maritime population, was, like most seaports, a soil in which goodness was hard put to it to grow, and a church had much against which to struggle. To be a Christian at Cenchrea can have been no light task. Travellers in Egypt are told that Port Said is the wickedest place on the face of the earth; and in Phœbe's home there would be a like drift of disreputables of both sexes and of all nationalities. It was fitting that one good woman should be recorded as redeeming womanhood there. We learn of her that she was a 'servant,' or, as the margin preferably reads, a 'deaconess of the Church which is at Cenchrea'; and in that capacity, by gentle ministrations and the exhibition of purity and patient love, as well as by the gracious administration of material help, had been a 'succourer of many.' There is a whole world of unmentioned kindnesses and a life of self-devotion hidden away under these few words. Possibly the succour which she administered was her own gift. She may have been rich and influential, or perhaps she but distributed the Church’s bounty; but in any case the gift was sweetened by the giver’s hand, and the succour was the impartation of a woman’s sympathy more than the bestowment of a donor’s gift. Sometime or other, and somehow or other, she had had the honour and joy of helping Paul, and no doubt that opportunity would be to her a crown of service. She was now on the point of taking the long journey to Rome on her own business, and the Apostle bespeaks for her help from the Roman Church ‘in whatsoever matter she may have need of you,’ as if she had some difficult affair on hand, and had no other friends in the city. Possibly then she was a widow, and perhaps had had some lawsuit or business with government authorities, with whom a word from some of her brethren in Rome might stand her in good stead. Apparently she was the bearer of this epistle, which would give her a standing at once in the Roman Church, and she came among them with a halo round her from the whole-hearted commendation of the Apostle.

Mark the lessons from this little picture.

We note first the remarkable illustration here given of the power of the new bond of a common faith. The world was then broken up into sections, which were sometimes bitterly antagonistic and at others merely rigidly exclusive. The only bond of union was the iron fetter of Rome, which crushed the people, but did not knit them together. But here are Paul the Jew, Phœbe the Greek, and the Roman readers of the epistle, all fused together by the power of the divine love that melted their hearts, and the common faith that unified their lives. The list of names in this chapter, comprising as it does men and women of many nationalities, and some slaves as well as freemen, is itself a wonderful testimony of the truth of Paul’s triumphant exclamation in another epistle, that in Christ there is ‘neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female.’

The clefts have closed, and the very line of demarcation is obliterated; and these clefts were deeper than any of which we moderns have had experience. It remains something like a miracle that the members of Paul’s churches could ever be brought together, and that their consciousness of oneness could ever overpower the tremendous divisive forces. We sometimes wonder at their bickerings; we ought rather to wonder at their unity, and be ashamed of the importance which we attach to our infinitely slighter mutual disagreements. The bond that was sufficient to make the early Christians all one in Christ Jesus seems to have lost its binding power to-day, and, like an used-up elastic band, to have no clasping grip left in it.

Another thought which we may connect with the name of Phœbe is the characteristic place of women in Christianity.

The place of woman amongst the Jews was indeed free and honourable as compared with her position either in Greece or Rome, but in none of them was she placed on the level of man, nor regarded mainly in the aspect of an equal possessor of the same life of the Spirit. But a religion which admits her to precisely the same position of a supernatural life as is granted to man, necessarily relegates to a subordinate position all differences of sex as it does all other natural distinctions. The women who ministered to Jesus of their substance, the two sisters of Bethany, the mourners at Calvary, the three who went through the morning twilight to the tomb, were but the foremost conspicuous figures in a great company through all the ages who have owed to Jesus their redemption, not only from the slavery of sin, but from the stigma of inferiority as man’s drudge or toy. To the world in which Paul lived it was a strange, new thought that women could share with man in his loftiest emotions. Historically the emancipation of one half of the human race is the direct result of the Christian principle that all are one in Christ Jesus. In modern life the emancipation has been too often divorced from its one sure basis, and we have become familiar with the sight of the ‘advanced’ women who have advanced so far as to have lost sight of the Christ to whom they owe their freedom. The picture of Phœbe in our text might well be commended to all such as setting forth the most womanlike ideal. She was ‘a succourer of many.’ Her ministry was a ministry of help; and surely such gentle ministry is that which most befits the woman’s heart and comes most graciously to the woman’s fingers.

Phœbe then may well represent to us the ministry of succour in this world of woe and need. There is ever a cry, even in apparently successful lives, for help and a helper. Man’s clumsy hand is but too apt to hurt where it strives to soothe, and nature itself seems to devolve on the swifter sympathies and more delicate perceptions of woman the joy of binding up wounded spirits. In the verses immediately following our text we read of another woman to whom was entrusted a more conspicuous and direct form of service. Priscilla 'taught Apollos the way of God more perfectly,' and is traditionally represented as being united with her husband in evangelistic work. But it is not merely prejudice which takes Phœbe rather than Priscilla as the characteristic type of woman's special ministry. We must remember our Lord's teaching, that the giver of 'a cup of cold water in the name of a prophet' in some measure shares in the prophet's work, and will surely share in the prophet's reward. She who helped Paul must have entered into the spirit of Paul's labours; and He to whom all service that is done from the same motive is one in essence, makes no difference between him whose thirsty lips drink and her whose loving hand presents the cup of cold water. 'Small service is true service while it lasts.' Paul and Phœbe were one in ministry and one in its recompense.

We may further see in her a foreshadowing of the reward of lowly service, though it be only the service of help. Little did Phœbe dream that her name would have an eternal commemoration of her unnoticed deeds of kindness and aid, standing forth to later generations and peoples of whom she knew nothing, as worthy of eternal remembrance. For those of us who have to serve unnoticed and unknown, here is an instance and a prophecy which may stimulate and encourage. 'Surely I will never forget any of their works' is a gracious promise which the most obscure and humble of us may take to heart, and sustained by which, we may patiently pursue a way on which there are 'none to praise and very few to love.' It matters little whether our work be noticed or recorded by men, so long as we know that it is written in the Lamb's book of life and that He will one day proclaim it 'before the Father in heaven and His angels.'

46)Romans 16:3-5

Romans

PRISCILLA AND AQUILA

Rom. 16:3 - Rom. 16:5.

It has struck me that this wedded couple present, even in the scanty notices that we have of them, some interesting points which may be worth while gathering together.

Now, to begin with, we are told that Aquila was a Jew. We are not told whether Priscilla was a Jewess or no. So far as her name is concerned, she may have been, and very probably was, a Roman, and, if so, we have in their case a ‘mixed marriage’ such as was not uncommon then, and of which Timothy’s parents give another example. She is sometimes called Prisca, which was her proper name, and sometimes Priscilla, an affectionate diminutive. The two had been living in Rome, and had been banished under the decree of the Emperor, just as Jews have been banished from England and from every country in Europe again and again. They came from Rome to Corinth, and were, perhaps, intending to go back to Aquila’s native place, Pontus, when Paul met them in the latter city, and changed their whole lives. His association with them began in a purely commercial partnership. But as they abode together and worked at their trade, there would be many earnest talks about the Christ, and these ended in both husband and wife becoming disciples. The bond thus knit was too close to be easily severed, and so, when Paul sailed across the Ægean for Ephesus, his two new friends kept with him, which they would be the more ready to do, as they had no settled home. They remained with him during his somewhat lengthened stay in the great Asiatic city; for we find in the first Epistle to the Corinthians which was written from Ephesus about that time, that the Apostle sends greetings from ‘Priscilla and Aquila and the Church which is in their house.’ But when Paul left Ephesus they seem to have stayed behind, and afterwards to have gone their own way.

About a year after the first Epistle to the Corinthians was sent from Ephesus, the Epistle to the Romans was written, and we find there the salutation to Priscilla and Aquila which is my text. So this wandering couple were back again in Rome by that time, and settled down there for a while. They are then lost sight of for some time, but probably they returned to Ephesus. Once more we catch a glimpse of them in Paul’s last letter, written some seven or eight years after that to the Romans. The Apostle knows that death is near, and, at that supreme moment, his heart goes out to these two faithful companions, and he sends them a parting token of his undying love. There are only two messages to friends in the second Epistle to Timothy, and one of these is to Prisca and Aquila. At the mouth of the valley of the shadow of death he remembered the old days in Corinth, and the, to us, unknown instance of devotion which these two had shown, when, for his life, they laid down their own necks.

Such is all that we know of Priscilla and Aquila. Can we gather any lessons from these scattered notices thus thrown together?

I. Here is an object lesson as to the hallowing effect of Christianity on domestic life and love.

Did you ever notice that in the majority of the places where these two are named, if we adopt the better readings, Priscilla’s name comes first? She seems to have been ‘the better man of the two’; and Aquila drops comparatively into the background. Now, such a couple, and a couple in which the wife took the foremost place, was an absolute impossibility in heathenism. They are a specimen of what Christianity did in the primitive age, all over the Empire, and is doing to-day, everywhere-lifting woman to her proper place. These two, yoked together in ‘all exercise of noble end,’ and helping one another in Christian work, and bracketed together by the Apostle, who puts the wife first, as his fellow-helpers in Christ Jesus, stands before us as a living picture of what our sweet and sacred family life and earthly loves may be glorified into, if the light from heaven shines down upon them, and is thankfully received into them.

Such a house as the house of Prisca and Aquila is the product of Christianity, and such ought to be the house of every professing Christian. For we should all make our homes as ‘tabernacles of the righteous,’ in which the voice of joy and rejoicing is ever heard. Not only wedded love, but family love, and all earthly love, are then most precious, when into them there flows the ennobling, the calming, the transfiguring thought of Christ and His love to us.

Again, notice that, even in these scanty references to our two friends, there twice occurs that remarkable expression ‘the church that is in their house.’

Now, I suppose that that gives us a little glimpse into the rudimentary condition of public worship in the primitive church. It was centuries after the time of Priscilla and Aquila before circumstances permitted Christians to have buildings devoted exclusively to public worship. Up to a very much later period than that which is covered by the New Testament, they gathered together wherever was most convenient. And, I suppose, that both in Rome and Ephesus, this husband and wife had some room-perhaps the workshop where they made their tents, spacious enough for some of the Christians of the city to meet together in. One would like people who talk so much about 'the Church,' and refuse the name to individual societies of Christians, and even to an aggregate of these, unless it has 'bishops,' to explain how the little gathering of twenty or thirty people in the workshop attached to Aquila's house, is called by the Apostle without hesitation 'the church which is in their house.' It was a part of the Holy Catholic Church, but it was also 'a Church,' complete in itself, though small in numbers. We have here not only a glimpse into the manner of public worship in early times, but we may learn something of far more consequence for us, and find here a suggestion of what our homes ought to be. 'The Church that is in thy house'-fathers and mothers that are responsible for your homes and their religious atmosphere, ask yourselves if any one would say that about your houses, and if they could not, why not?

II. We may get here another object lesson as to the hallowing of common life, trade, and travel.

It does not appear that, after their stay in Ephesus, Aquila and his wife were closely attached to Paul's person, and certainly they did not take any part as members of what we may call his evangelistic staff. They seem to have gone their own way, and as far as the scanty notices carry us, they did not meet Paul again, after the time when they parted in Ephesus. Their gipsy life was probably occasioned by Aquila's going about-as was the custom in old days when there were no trades-unions or organised centres of a special industry-to look for work where he could find it. When he had made tents in Ephesus for a while, he would go on somewhere else, and take temporary lodgings there. Thus he wandered about as a working man. Yet Paul calls him his 'fellow worker in Christ Jesus'; and he had, as we saw, a Church in his house. A roving life of that sort is not generally supposed to be conducive to depth of spiritual life. But their wandering course did not hurt these two. They took their religion with them. It did not depend on locality, as does that of a great many people who are very religious in the town where they live, and, when they go away for a holiday, seem to leave their religion, along with their silver plate, at home. But no matter whether they were in Corinth or Ephesus or Rome, Aquila and Priscilla took their Lord and Master with them, and while working at their camel's-hair tents, they were serving God.

Dear brethren, what we want is not half so much preachers such as my brethren and I, as Christian tradesmen and merchants and travellers, like Aquila and Priscilla.

III. Again, we may see here a suggestion of the unexpected issues of our lives.

Think of that complicated chain of circumstances, one end of which was round Aquila and the other round the young Pharisee in Jerusalem. It steadily drew them together until they met in that lodging at Corinth. Claudius, in the fullness of his absolute power, said, 'Turn all these wretched Jews out of my city. I will not have it polluted with them any more. Get rid of them!' So these two were uprooted, and drifted to Corinth. We do not know why they chose to go thither; perhaps they themselves did not know why; but God knew. And while they were coming thither from the west, Paul was coming thither from the east and north. He was 'prevented by the Spirit from speaking in Asia,' and driven across the sea against his intention to Neapolis, and hounded out of Philippi and Thessalonica and Beræa; and turned superciliously away from Athens; and so at last found himself in Corinth, face to face with the tentmaker from Rome and his wife. Then one of the two men said, 'Let us join partnership together, and set up here as tent-makers for a time.' What came out of this unintended and apparently chance meeting?

The first thing was the conversion of Aquila and his wife; and the effects of that are being realised by them in heaven at this moment, and will go on to all eternity.

So, in the infinite complexity of events, do not let us worry ourselves by forecasting, but let us trust, and be sure that the Hand which is pushing us is pushing us in the right direction, and that He will bring us, by a right, though a roundabout way, to the City of Habitation. It seems to me that we poor, blind creatures in this world are somewhat like a man in a prison, groping with his hand in the dark along the wall, and all unawares touching a spring which moves a stone, disclosing an aperture that lets in a breath of purer air, and opens the way to freedom. So we go on as if stumbling in the dark, and presently, without our knowing what we do, by some trivial act we originate a train of events which influences our whole future.

Again, when Aquila and Priscilla reached Ephesus they formed another chance acquaintance in the person of a brilliant young Alexandrian, whose name was Apollos. They found that he had good intentions and a good heart, but a head very scantily furnished with the knowledge of the Gospel. So they took him in hand, just as Paul had taken them. If I may use such a phrase, they did not know how large a fish they had caught. They had no idea what a mighty power for Christ was lying dormant in that young man from Alexandria who knew so much less than they did. They instructed Apollos, and Apollos became second only to Paul in the power of preaching the Gospel. So the circle widens and widens. God's grace fructifies from one man to another, spreading onward and outward. And all Apollos' converts, and *their* converts, and *theirs* again, right away down the ages, we may trace back to Priscilla and Aquila.

So do not let us be anxious about the further end of our deeds-viz. their results; but be careful about the nearer end of them-viz. their motives; and God will look after the other end. Seeing that 'thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that,' or how much any of them will prosper, let us grasp *all* opportunities to do His will and glorify His name.

IV. Further, here we have an instance of the heroic self-devotion which love to Christ kindles.

'For my sake they laid down their own necks.' We do not know to what Paul is referring: perhaps to that tumult in Ephesus, where he certainly was in danger. But the language seems rather more emphatic than such danger would warrant. Probably it was at some perilous juncture of which we know nothing [for we know very little, after all, of the details of the Apostle’s life], in which Aquila and Priscilla had said, ‘Take us and let him go. He can do a great deal more for God than we can do. We will put our heads on the block, if he may still live.’ That magnanimous self-surrender was a wonderful token of the passionate admiration and love which the Apostle inspired, but its deepest motive was love to Christ and not to Paul only.

Faith in Christ and love to Him ought to turn cowards into heroes, to destroy thoughts of self, and to make the utmost self-sacrifice natural, blessed, and easy. We are not called upon to exercise heroism like Priscilla’s and Aquila’s, but there is as much heroism needed for persistently Christian life, in our prosaic daily circumstances, as has carried many a martyr to the block, and many a tremulous woman to the pyre. We can all be heroes; and if the love of Christ is in us, as it should be, we shall all be ready to ‘yield ourselves living sacrifices, which is our reasonable service.’

Long years after, the Apostle, on the further edge of life, looked back over it all; and, whilst much had become dim, and some trusted friends had dropped away, like Demas, he saw these two, and waved them his last greeting before he turned to the executioner-’Salute Prisca and Aquila.’ Paul’s Master is not less mindful of His friends’ love, or less eloquent in the praise of their faithfulness, or less sure to reward them with the crown of glory. ‘Whoso confesseth Me before men, him will I also confess before the angels in heaven.’

47)Romans 16:10-11

Romans

TWO HOUSEHOLDS

Rom. 16:10 - Rom. 16:11.

There does not seem much to be got out of these two sets of salutations to two households in Rome; but if we look at them with eyes in our heads, and some sympathy in our hearts, I think we shall get lessons worth the treasuring.

In the first place, here are two sets of people, members of two different households, and that means mainly, if not exclusively, slaves. In the next place, in each case there was but a section of the household which was Christian. In the third place, in neither household is the master included in the greeting. So in neither case was *he* a Christian.

We do not know anything about these two persons, men of position evidently, who had large households. But the most learned of our living English commentators of the New Testament has advanced a very reasonable conjecture in regard to each of them. As to the first of them, Aristobulus: that wicked old King Herod, in whose life Christ was born, had a grandson of the name, who spent all his life in Rome, and was in close relations with the Emperor of that day. He had died some little time before the writing of this letter. As to the second of them, there is a very notorious Narcissus, who plays a great part in the history of Rome just a little while before Paul's period there, and he, too, was dead. And it is more than probable that the slaves and retainers of these two men were transferred in both cases to the emperor's household and held together in it, being known as Aristobulus' men and Narcissus' men. And so probably the Christians among them are the brethren to whom these salutations are sent.

Be that as it may, I think that if we look at the two groups, we shall get out of them some lessons.

I. The first of them is this: the penetrating power of Christian truth.

Think of the sort of man that the master of the first household was, if the identification suggested be accepted. He is one of that foul Herodian brood, in all of whom the bad Idumæan blood ran corruptly. The grandson of the old Herod, the brother of Agrippa of the Acts of the Apostles, the hanger-on of the Imperial Court, with Roman vices veneered on his native wickedness, was not the man to welcome the entrance of a revolutionary ferment into his household; and yet through his barred doors had crept quietly, he knowing nothing about it, that great message of a loving God, and a Master whose service was freedom. And in thousands of like cases the Gospel was finding its way underground, undreamed of by the great and wise, but steadily pressing onwards, and undermining all the towering grandeur that was so contemptuous of it. So Christ's truth spread at first; and I believe that is the way it always spreads. Intellectual revolutions begin at the top and filter down; religious revolutions begin at the bottom and rise; and it is always the ‘lower orders’ that are laid hold of first. ‘Ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called,’ but a handful of slaves in Aristobulus’ household, with this living truth lodged in their hearts, were the bearers and the witnesses and the organs of the power which was going to shatter all that towered above it and despised it. And so it always is.

Do not let us be ashamed of a Gospel that has not laid hold of the upper and the educated classes, but let us feel sure of this, that there is no greater sign of defective education and of superficial culture and of inborn vulgarity than despising the day of small things, and estimating truth by the position or the intellectual attainments of the men that are its witnesses and its lovers. The Gospel penetrated at first, and penetrates still, in the fashion that is suggested here.

II. Secondly, these two households teach us very touchingly and beautifully the uniting power of Christian sympathy.

A considerable proportion of the first of these two households would probably be Jews-if Aristobulus were indeed Herod’s grandson. The probability that he was is increased by the greeting interposed between those to the two households-’Salute Herodion.’ The name suggests some connection with Herod, and whether we suppose the designation of ‘my kinsman,’ which Paul gives him, to mean ‘blood relation’ or ‘fellow countryman,’ Herodion, at all events, was a Jew by birth. As to the other members of these households, Paul may have met some of them in his many travels, but he had never been in Rome, and his greetings are more probably sent to them as conspicuous sections, numerically, of the Roman Church, and as tokens of his affection, though he had never seen them. The possession of a common faith has bridged the gulf between him and them. Slaves in those days were outside the pale of human sympathy, and almost outside the pale of human rights. And here the foremost of Christian teachers, who was a freeman born, separated from these poor people by a tremendous chasm, stretches a brother’s hand across it and grasps theirs. The Gospel that came into the world to rend old associations and to split up society, and to make a deep cleft between fathers and children and husband and wife, came also to more than counterbalance its dividing effects by its uniting power. And in that old world that was separated into classes by gulfs deeper than any of which we have any experience, it, and it alone, threw a bridge across the abysses and bound men together. Think of what a revolution it must have been, when a master and his slave could sit down together at the table of the Lord and look each other in the face and say ‘Brother’ and for the moment forget the difference of bond and free. Think of what a revolution it must have been when Jew and Gentile could sit down together at the table of the Lord, and forget circumcision and uncircumcision, and feel that they were all one in Jesus Christ. And as for the third of the great clefts-that, alas! which made so much of the tragedy and the wickedness of ancient life-viz. the separation between the sexes-think of what a revolution it was when men and women, in all purity of the new bond of Christian affection, could sit down together at the same table, and feel that they were brethren and sisters in Jesus Christ.

The uniting power of the common faith and the common love to the one Lord marked Christianity as altogether supernatural and new, unique in the world’s experience, and obviously requiring something more than a human force to produce it. Will anybody say that the Christianity of this day has preserved and exhibits that primitive demonstration of its superhuman source? Is there anything obviously beyond the power of earthly motives in the unselfish, expansive love of modern Christians? Alas! alas! to ask the question is to answer it, and everybody knows the answer, and nobody sorrows over it. Is any duty more pressingly laid upon Christian churches of this generation than that, forgetting their doctrinal janglings for a while, and putting away their sectarianisms and narrowness, they should show the world that their faith has still the power to do what it did in the old times, bridge over the gulf that separates class from class, and bring all men together in the unity of the faith and of the love of Jesus Christ? Depend upon it, unless the modern organisations of Christianity which call themselves ‘churches’ show themselves, in the next twenty years, a great deal more alive to the necessity, and a great deal more able to cope with the problem, of uniting the classes of our modern complex civilisation, the term of life of these churches is comparatively brief. And the form of Christianity which another century will see will be one which reproduces the old miracle of the early days, and reaches across the deepest clefts that separate modern society, and makes all one in Jesus Christ. It is all very well for us to glorify the ancient love of the early Christians, but there is a vast deal of false sentimentality about our eulogistic talk of it. It were better to praise it less and imitate it more. Translate it into present life, and you will find that to-day it requires what it nineteen hundred years ago was recognised as manifesting, the presence of something more than human motive, and something more than man discovers of truth. The cement must be divine that binds men thus together.

Again, these two households suggest for us the tranquillising power of Christian resignation.

They were mostly slaves, and they continued to be slaves when they were Christians. Paul recognised their continuance in the servile position, and did not say a word to them to induce them to break their bonds. The Epistle to the Corinthians treats the whole subject of slavery in a very remarkable fashion. It says to the slave: ‘If you were a slave when you became a Christian, stop where you are. If you have an opportunity of being free, avail yourself of it; if you have not, never mind.’ And then it adds this great principle: ‘He that is called in the Lord, being a slave, is Christ’s freeman. Likewise he that is called, being free, is Christ’s slave.’ The Apostle applies the very same principle, in the adjoining verses, to the distinction between circumcision and uncircumcision. From all which there comes just the same lesson that is taught us by these two households of slaves left intact by Christianity-viz. that where a man is conscious of a direct, individual relation to Jesus Christ, that makes all outward circumstances infinitely insignificant. Let us get up to the height, and they all become very small. Of course, the principles of Christianity killed slavery, but it took eighteen hundred years to do it. Of course, there is no blinking the fact that slavery was an essentially immoral and unchristian institution. But it is one thing to lay down principles and leave them to be worked in and then to be worked out, and it is another thing to go blindly charging at existing institutions and throwing them down by violence, before men have grown up to feel that they are wicked. And so the New Testament takes the wise course, and leaves the foolish one to foolish people. It makes the tree good, and then its fruit will be good.

But the main point that I want to insist upon is this: what was good for these slaves in Rome is good for you and me. Let us get near to Jesus Christ, and feel that we have got hold of His hand for our own selves, and we shall not mind very much about the possible varieties of human condition. Rich or poor, happy or sad, surrounded by companions or treading a solitary path, failures or successes as the world has it, strong or broken and weak and wearied-all these varieties, important as they are, come to be very small when we can say, ‘We are the Lord’s.’ That amulet makes all things tolerable; and the Christian submission which is the expression of our love to, and confidence in, His infinite sweetness and unerring goodness, raises us to a height from which the varieties of earthly condition seem to blend and melt into one. When we are down amongst the low hills, it seems a long way from the foot of one of them to the top of it; but when we are on the top they all melt into one dead level, and you cannot tell which is top and which is bottom. And so, if we only can rise high enough up the hill, the possible diversities of our condition will seem to be very small variations in the level.

III. Lastly, these two groups suggest to us the conquering power of Christian faithfulness.

The household of Herod’s grandson was not a very likely place to find Christian people in, was it? Such flowers do not often grow, or at least do not easily grow, on such dunghills. And in both these cases it was only a handful of the people, a portion of each household, that was Christian. So they had beside them, closely identified with them-working, perhaps, at the same tasks, I might almost say, chained with the same chains-men who had no share in their faith or in their love. It would not be easy to pray and love and trust God and do His will, and keep clear of complicity with idolatry and immorality and sin, in such a pigsty as that; would it? But these men did it. And nobody need ever say, ‘I am in such circumstances that I cannot live a Christian life.’ There are no such circumstances, at least none of God’s appointing. There are often such that we bring upon ourselves, and then the best thing is to get out of them as soon as we can. But as far as He is concerned, He never puts anybody anywhere where he cannot live a holy life.

There were no difficulties too great for these men to overcome; there are no difficulties too great for us to overcome. And wherever you and I may be, we cannot be in any place where it is so hard to live a consistent life as these people were. Young men in warehouses, people in business here in Manchester, some of us with unfortunate domestic or relative associations, and so on-we may all feel as if it would be so much easier for us if this, that, and the other thing were changed. No, it would not be any easier; and perhaps the harder the easier, because the more obviously the atmosphere is poisonous, the more we shall put some cloth over our mouths to prevent it from getting into our lungs. The dangerous place is the place where the vapours that poison are scentless as well as invisible. But whatever be the difficulties, there is strength waiting for us, and we may all win the praise which the Apostle gives to another of these Roman brethren, whom he salutes as ‘Apelles, approved in Christ’-a man that had been ‘tried’ and had stood his trial. So in our various spheres of difficulty and of temptation we may feel that the greeting from heaven, like Paul’s message to the slaves in Rome, comes to us with good cheer, and that the Master Himself sees us, sympathises with us, salutes us, and stretches out His hand to help and to keep us.

48)Romans 16:12

Romans

TRYPHENA AND TRYPHOSA

Rom. 16:12.

The number of salutations to members of the Roman Church is remarkable when we take into account that Paul had never visited it. The capital drew all sorts of people to it, and probably there had been personal intercourse between most of the persons here mentioned and the Apostle in some part of his wandering life. He not only displays his intimate knowledge of the persons saluted, but his beautiful delicacy and ingenuity in the varying epithets applied to them shows how in his great heart and tenacious memory individuals had a place. These shadowy saints live for ever by

Paul’s brief characterisation of them, and stand out to us almost as clearly and as sharply distinguished as they did to him.

These two, Tryphena and Tryphosa, were probably sisters. That is rendered likely by their being coupled together here, as well as by the similarity of their names. These names mean luxurious, or delicate, and no doubt expressed the ideal for their daughters which the parents had had, and possibly indicate the kind of life from which these two women had come. We can scarcely fail to note the contrast between the meaning of their names and the Christian lives they had lived. Two dainty women, probably belonging to a class in which a delicate withdrawal from effort and toil was thought to be the woman’s distinctive mark, had fled from luxury, which often tended to be voluptuous, and was always self-indulgent, and had chosen the better part of ‘labour in the Lord.’ They had become untrue to their names, because they must be true to their Master and themselves. We may well take the lesson that lies here, and is eminently needful to-day amidst the senseless, and often sinful, tide of luxury which runs so strongly as to threaten the great and eternal Christian principle of self-denial.

The first thing that strikes us in looking at these salutations is the illustration which it gives of the uniting power of a common faith. Tryphena and Tryphosa were probably Roman ladies of some social standing, and their names may indicate that they at least inherited a tendency to exclusiveness; yet here they occur immediately after the household of Narcissus and in close connection with that of Aristobulus, both of which are groups of slaves. Aristobulus was a grandson of Herod the Great, and Narcissus was a well-known freedman, whose slaves at his death would probably become the property of the Emperor. Other common slave names are those of Ampliatus and Urbanus; and here in these lists they stand side by side with persons of some distinction in the Roman world, and with men and women of widely differing nationalities. The Church of Rome would have seemed to any non-Christian observer a motley crowd in which racial distinctions, sex, and social conditions had all been swept away by the rising tide of a common fanaticism. In it was exemplified in actual operation Paul’s great principle that in Christ Jesus ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor free, but in Him all are one.’ Roman society in that day, as Juvenal shows us, was familiar with the levelling and uniting power of common vice and immorality, and the few sternly patriotic Romans who were left lamented that ‘the Orontes flowed into the Tiber’; but such common wallowing in filth led to no real unity, whereas, in the obscure corner of the great city where there were members of the infant Church gathered together, there was the beginning of a common life in the one Lord which lifted each participant of it out of the dreary solitude of individuality, and imparted to each heart the tingling consciousness of oneness with all who held the one faith in the one Lord and had received the one baptism in the one Name. That fair dawn has been shadowed by many clouds, and the churches of to-day, however they may have developed doctrine, may look back with reproach and shame to the example of Rome, where Tryphena and Tryphosa, with all their inherited, fastidious delicacy, recognised in the household of Aristobulus and the household of Narcissus ‘brethren in the Lord,’ and were as glad to welcome Jews, Asiatics, Persians, and Greeks, as Romans of the bluest blood, into the family of Christ. The Romish Church of our day has lost its early grace of welcoming all who love the one Lord into its fellowship; and we of the Protestant churches have been but too swift to learn the bad lesson of forbidding all who follow not with us.

Another thought which may be suggested by Tryphena and Tryphosa is the blessed hallowing of natural family relations by common faith. They were probably sisters, or, at all events, as their names indicate, near relatives, and to them that faith must have been doubly precious because they shared it with each other. None of the trials to which the early Christians were exposed was more severe than the necessity which their Christianity so often imposed upon them of breaking the sacred family ties. It saddened even Christ’s heart to think that He had come to rend families in sunder, and to make ‘a man’s foes them of his own household’; and we can little imagine how bitter the pang must have been when family love had to be cast aside at the bidding of allegiance to Him.

But though the stress of that separation between those most nearly related in blood by reason of unshared faith is alleviated in this day, it still remains; and that is but a feeble Christian life which does not feel that it is drawing a heart from closest human embraces and constituting a barrier between it and the dearest of earth. There is still need in these days of relaxed Christian sentiment for the stern austerity of the law, ‘He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me’; and there are many Christian souls who would be infinitely stronger and more mature, if they did not yield to the seductions of family affections which are not rooted in Jesus Christ. But still, though our faith ought to be far more than it often is, the determining element in our affections and associations, its noblest work is not to separate but to unite; and whilst it often must divide, it is meant to draw more closely together hearts that are already knit by earthly love. Its legitimate effect is to make all earthly sweetnesses sweeter, all holy bonds more holy and more binding, to infuse a new constraint and preciousness into all earthly relationships, to make brothers tenfold more brotherly and sisters more sisterly. The heart, in which the deepest devotion is yielded to Jesus Christ, has its capacity for devotion infinitely increased, and they who, looking into each other’s faces, see reflected there something of the Lord whom they both love, love each other all the more because they love Him most, and in their love to Him, and His to them, have found a new measure for all their affection. They who, looking on their dear ones, can ‘trust they live in God,’ will there find them ‘worthier to be loved,’ and will there find a power of loving them. Tryphena and Tryphosa were more sisterly than ever when they clung to their Elder Brother. ‘There is no man that hath left brethren, or sisters, or mother, or father, for My sake, but he shall receive a hundredfold more in this time, brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and in the world to come eternal life.’

The contrast between the names of these two Roman ladies and the characterisation of their ‘labour in the Lord’ may suggest to us the most formidable foe of Christian earnestness. Their names, as we have already noticed, point to a state of society in which the parents ideal for their daughters was dainty luxuriousness and a withdrawal from the rough and tumble of common life; but these two women, magnetised by the love of Jesus, had turned their backs on the parental ideal, and had cast themselves earnestly into a life of toil. That ideal was never more formidably antagonistic to the vigour of Christian life than it is to-day. Rome, in Paul’s time, was not more completely honeycombed with worldliness than England is to-day; and the English churches are not far behind the English ‘world’ in their paralysing love of luxury and self-indulgence. In all ages, earnest Christians have had to take up the same vehement remonstrance against the tendency of the average Christian to let his religious life be weakened by the love of the world and the things of the world. The protests against growing luxury have been a commonplace in all ages of the Church; but, surely, there has never been a time when it has reached a more senseless, sinful, and destroying height than in our day. The rapid growth of wealth, with no capacity of using it nobly, which modern commerce has brought, has immensely influenced all our churches for evil. It is so hard for us, aggregated in great cities, to live our own lives, and the example of our class has such immense power over us that it is very hard to pursue the path of 'plain living and high thinking' in communities, all classes of which are more and more yielding to the temptation to ostentation, so-called comfort, and extravagant expenditure; and that this is a danger-we are tempted to say *the* danger-to the purity, loftiness, and vigour of religious life among us, he must be blind who cannot see, and he must be strangely ignorant of his own life who cannot feel that it is the danger for him. I believe that for one professing Christian whose earnestness is lost by reason of intellectual doubts, or by some grave sin, there are a hundred from whom it simply oozes away unnoticed, like wind out of a bladder, so that what was once round and full becomes limp and flaccid. If Demas begins with loving the present world, it will not be long before he finds a reason for departing from Paul.

We may take these two sisters, finally, as pointing for us the true victory over this formidable enemy. They had turned resolutely away from the heathen ideal enshrined in their names to a life of real hard toil, as is distinctly implied by the word used by the Apostle. What that toil consisted in we do not know, and need not inquire; but the main point to be noted is that their 'labour' was 'in the Lord.' That union with Christ makes labour for Him a necessity, and makes it possible. 'The labour we delight in physics pain'; and if we are in Him, we shall not only 'live in Him,' but all our work begun, continued, and ended in Him, will in Him and by Him be accepted. There is no victorious antagonist of worldly ease and self-indulgence comparable to the living consciousness of union with Jesus and His life in us. To dwell in the swamps at the bottom of the mountain is to live in a region where effort is impossible and malaria weakens vitality; to climb the heights brings bracing to the limbs and a purer air into the expanding lungs, and makes work delightsome that would have been labour down below. If we are ‘in the Lord,’ He is our atmosphere, and we can draw from Him full draughts of a noble life in which we shall not need the stimulus of self-interest or worldly success to use it to the utmost in acts of service to Him. They who live in the Lord will labour in the Lord, and they who labour in the Lord will rest in the Lord.

Romans

PERSIS

Rom. 16:12.

There are a great number of otherwise unknown Christians who pass for a moment before our view in this chapter. Their characterisations are like the slight outlines in the background of some great artist’s canvas: a touch of the brush is all that is spared for each, and yet, if we like to look sympathetically, they live before us. Now, this good woman, about whom we never hear again, and for whom these few words are all her epitaph-was apparently, judging by her name, of Persian descent, and possibly had been brought to Rome as a slave. At all events, finding herself there, she had somehow or other become connected with the Church in that city, and had there distinguished herself by continuous and faithful Christian toil which had won the affection of the Apostle, though he had never seen her, and knew no more about her. That is all. She comes into the foreground for a moment, and then she vanishes. What does she say to us?

First of all, like the others named by Paul, she helps us to understand, by her living example, that wonderful, new, uniting process that was carried on by means of Christianity. The simple fact of a Persian woman getting a loving message from a Jew, the woman being in Rome and the Jew in Corinth, and the message being written in Greek, brings before us a whole group of nationalities all fused together. They had been hammered together, or, if you like it better, chained together, by Roman power, but they were melted together by Christ’s Gospel. This Eastern woman and this Jewish man, and the many others whose names and different nationalities pass in a flash before us in this chapter, were all brought together in Jesus Christ.

If we run our eye over these salutations, what strikes one, even at the first sight, is the very small number of Jewish names; only one certain, and another doubtful. Four or five names are Latin, and then all the rest are Greek, but this woman seemingly came from further east than any of them. There they all were, forgetting the hostile nationalities to which they belonged, because they had found One who had brought them into one great community. We talk about the uniting influence of Christianity, but when we see the process going on before us, in a case like this, we begin to understand it better.

But another point may be noticed in regard to this uniting process-how it brought into action the purest and truest love as a bond that linked men. There are four or five of the people commended in this chapter of whom the Apostle has nothing to say but that they are beloved. This is the only woman to whom he applies that term. And notice his instinctive delicacy: when he is speaking of men he says, '*My* beloved'; when he is greeting Persis he says, '*the* beloved,' that there may be no misunderstanding about the 'my'-'the beloved Persis which laboured much in the Lord'-indicating, by one delicate touch, the loftiness, the purity, and truly Christian character of the bond that held them together. And that is no true Church, where anything but that is the bond-the love that knits us to one another, because we believe that each is knit to the dear Lord and fountain of all love.

What more does this good woman say to us? She is an example living and breathing there before us, of what a woman may be in God's Church. Paul had never been in Rome; no Apostle, so far as we know, had had anything to do with the founding of the Church. The most important Church in the Roman Empire, and the Church which afterwards became the curse of Christendom, was founded by some anonymous Christians, with no commission, with no supervision, with no officials amongst them, but who just had the grace of God in their hearts, and found themselves in Rome, and could not help speaking about Jesus Christ. God helped them, and a little Church sprang into being. And the great abundance of salutations here, and the honourable titles which the Apostle gives to the Christians of whom he speaks, and many of whom he signalises as having done great service, are a kind of certificate on his part to the vigorous life which, without any apostolic supervision or official direction, had developed itself there in that Church.

Now, it is to be noticed that this striking form of eulogium which is attached to our Persis she shares in common with others in the group. And it is to be further noticed that all those who are, as it were, decorated with this medal-on whom Paul bestows this honour of saying that they had ‘laboured,’ or ‘laboured much in the Lord,’ are women that stand alone in the list. There are several other women in it, but they are all coupled with men-husbands or brothers, or some kind of relative. But there are three sets of women, I do not say single women, but three sets of women, standing singly in the list, and it is about them, and them only, that Paul says they ‘laboured,’ or ‘laboured much.’ There is a Mary who stands alone, and she ‘bestowed much labour on’ Paul and others. Then there are, in the same verse as my text, two sisters, Tryphena and Tryphosa, whose names mean ‘the luxurious.’ And the Apostle seems to think, as he writes the two names that spoke of self-indulgence: ‘Perhaps these rightly described these two women once, but they do not now. In the bad old days, before they were Christians, they may have been rightly named luxurious-living. But here is their name now, the luxurious is turned into the self-sacrificing worker, and the two sisters “labour in the Lord.”‘ Then comes our friend Persis, who also stands alone, and she shares in the honour that only these other two companies of women share with her. She ‘laboured much in the Lord.’ In that little community, without any direction from Apostles and authorised teachers, the brethren and sisters had every one found their tasks; and these solitary women, with nobody to say to them, ‘Go and do this or that,’ had found out for themselves, or rather had been taught by the Spirit of Jesus, what they had to do, and they worked at it with a will. There are many things that Christian women can do a great deal better than men, and we are not to forget that this modern talk about the emancipation of women has its roots here in the New Testament. We are not to forget either that prerogative means obligation, and that the elevation of woman means the laying upon her of solemn duties to perform. I wonder how many of the women members of our Churches and congregations deserve such a designation as that? We hear a great deal about ‘women’s rights’ nowadays. I wish some of my friends would lay a little more to heart than they do, ‘women’s duties.’

And now, lastly, the final lesson that I draw from this eulogium of an otherwise altogether unknown woman is that she is a model of Christian service.

First, in regard to its measure. She 'laboured much in the Lord.' Now, both these two words, 'laboured' and 'much,' are extremely emphatic. The word rightly translated 'laboured' will appear in its full force if I recall to you a couple of other places in which it is employed in the New Testament. You remember that touching incident about our Lord when, being '*wearied* with His journey, He sat thus on the well.' 'Wearied' is the same word as is here used. Then, you remember how the Apostle, after he had been hauling empty nets all night in the little, wet, dirty fishing-boat, said, perhaps with a yawn, 'Master, we have *toiled* all the night and caught nothing.' He uses the same word as is employed here. Such is the sort of work that these women had done-work carried to the point of exhaustion, work up to the very edge of their powers, work unsparing and continuous, and not done once in some flash of evanescent enthusiasm, but all through a dreary night, in spite of apparent failures.

There is the measure of service. Many of us seem to think that if we say 'I am tired,' that is a reason for not doing anything. Sometimes it is, no doubt; and no man has a right so to labour as to impair his capacity for future labour, but subject to that condition I do not know that the plea of fatigue is a sufficient reason for idleness. And I am quite sure that the true example for us is the example of Him who, when He was most wearied, sitting on the well, was so invigorated and refreshed by the opportunity of winning another soul that, when His disciples came back to Him, they looked at His fresh strength with astonishment, and said to themselves, 'Has any man brought Him anything to eat?' Ay, what He had to eat was work that He finished for the Father, and some of us know that the truest refreshment in toil is a change of toil. It is almost as good to shift the load on to the other shoulder, or to take a stick into the other hand, as it is to put away the load altogether. Oh, the careful limits which Christian people nowadays set to their work for Jesus! They are not afraid of being tired in their pursuit of business or pleasure, but in regard to Christ's work they will let anything go to wrack and ruin rather than that they should turn a hair, by persevering efforts to prevent it. Work to the limit of power if you live in the light of blessedness.

She ‘laboured much in the Lord,’ or, as Jesus Christ said about the other woman who was blamed by the people that did not love enough to understand the blessedness of self-sacrifice, ‘she had done what she could.’ It was an apology for the form of Mary’s service, but it was a stringent demand as to its amount. ‘What she could’-not *half* of what she could; not what she *conveniently* could. That is the measure of acceptable service.

Then, still further, may we not learn from Persis the spring of all true Christian work? She ‘laboured much in the Lord,’ because she *was* ‘in Him,’ and in union with Him there came to her power and desire to do things which, without that close fellowship, she neither would have desired nor been able to do. It is vain to try to whip up Christian people to forms of service by appealing to lower motives. There is only one motive that will last, and bring out from us all that is in us to do, and that is the appeal to our sense of union and communion with Jesus Christ, and the exhortation to live in Him, and then we shall work in Him. If you link the spindles in your mill, or the looms in your weaving-shed, with the engine, they will go. It is of no use to try to turn them by hand. You will only spoil the machinery, and it will be poor work that you will get off them.

So, dear brethren, be ‘in the Lord.’ That is the secret of service, and the closer we come to Him, and the more continuously, moment by moment, we realise our individual dependence upon Him, and our union with Him, the more will our lives effloresce and blossom into all manner of excellence and joyful service, and nothing else that Christian people are whipped up to do, from lower and more vulgar motives than that, will. It may be of a certain kind of inferior value, but it is far beneath the highest beauty of Christian service, nor will its issues reach the loftiest point of usefulness to which even our poor service may attain.

Persis seems to me to suggest, too, the safeguard of work. Ah, if she had not ‘laboured in the Lord,’ and been ‘in the Lord’ whilst she was labouring, she would very soon have stopped work. Our Christian work, however pure its motive when we begin it, has in itself the tendency to become mechanical, and to be done from lower motives than those from which it was begun.

That is true about a man in my position. It is true about all of us, in our several ways of trying to serve our dear Lord and Master. Unless we make a conscience of continually renewing our communion with Him, and getting our feet once more firmly upon the rock, we shall certainly in our Christian work, having begun in the spirit, continue in the flesh, and before we know where we are, we shall be doing work from habit, because we did it yesterday at this hour, because people expect it of us, because A, B, or C does it, or for a hundred other reasons, all of which are but too familiar to us by experience. They are sure to slip in; they change the whole character of the work, and they harm the workers. The only way by which we can keep the garland fresh is by continually dipping it in the fountain. The only way by which we can keep our Christian work pure, useful, worthy of the Master, is by seeing to it that our work itself does not draw us away from our fellowship with Him. And the more we have to do, the more needful is it that we should listen to Christ's voice when He says to us, 'Come ye yourselves apart with Me into a solitary place, and there renew your communion with Me.'

The last lesson about our work which I draw from Persis is the unexpected immortality of true Christian service. How Persis would have opened her eyes if anybody had told her that nearly 1900 years after she lived, people in a far-away barbarous island would be sitting thinking about her, as you and I are doing now! How astonished she would have been if it had been said to her, 'Now, Persis, wheresoever in the whole world the Gospel is preached, your name and your work and your epitaph will go with it, and as long as men know about Jesus Christ, your and their Master, they will know about you, His humble servant.' Well, we shall not have our names in that fashion in men's memories, but Jesus will have your name and mine, if we do His work as this woman did it, in *His* memory. 'I will never forget any of their works.' And if we-self-forgetful to the limit of our power, and as the joyful result of our personal union with that Saviour who has done everything for us-try to live for His praise and glory in any fashion, then be sure of this, that our poor deeds are as immortal as Him for whom they are done, and that we may take to ourselves the great word which He has spoken, when He has declared that at the last He will confess His confessors' names before the angels in heaven. Blessed are the living that 'live in the Lord'; blessed are the workers that work 'in the Lord,' for when they come to be the dead that ‘die in the Lord’ and rest from their labours, their works shall follow them.

49)Romans 16:20

Romans

A CRUSHED SNAKE

Rom. 16:20.

There are three other Scriptural sayings which may have been floating in the Apostle’s mind when he penned this triumphant assurance. ‘Thou shalt bruise his head’; the great first Evangel-we are to be endowed with Christ’s power; ‘The lion and the adder thou shalt trample under foot’-all the strength that was given to ancient saints is ours; ‘Behold! I give you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy’-the charter of the seventy is the perennial gift to the Church. Echoing all these great words, Paul promises the Roman Christians that ‘the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly.’ Now, when any special characteristic is thus ascribed to God, as when He is called ‘the God of patience’ or ‘the God of hope,’ in the preceding chapter, the characteristic selected has some bearing on the prayer or promise following. For example, this same designation, ‘the God of peace,’ united with the other, ‘that brought again from the dead the Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,’ is laid as the foundation of the prayer for the perfecting of the readers of the Epistle to the Hebrews in every good work. It is, then, because of that great name that the Apostle is sure, and would have his Roman brethren to be sure, that Satan shall shortly be bruised under their feet. No doubt there may have been some reference in Paul’s mind to what he had just said about those who caused divisions in the Church; but, if there is such reference, it is of secondary importance. Paul is gazing on all the great things in God which make Him the God of peace, and in them all he sees ground for the confident hope that His power will be exerted to crush all the sin that breaks His children’s peace.

Now the first thought suggested by these words is the solemn glimpse given of the struggle that goes on in every Christian soul.

Two antagonists are at hand-grips in every one of us. On the one hand, the 'God of peace,' on the other, 'Satan.' If you believe in the personality of the One, do not part with the belief in the personality of the other. If you believe that a divine power and Spirit is ready to help and strengthen you, do not think so lightly of the enemies that are arrayed against you as to falter in the belief that there *is* a great personal Power, rooted in evil, who is warring against each of us. Ah, brethren! we live far too much on the surface, and we neither go down deep enough to the dark source of the Evil, nor rise high enough to the radiant Fountain of the Good. It is a shallow life that strikes that antagonism of God and Satan out of itself. And though the belief in a personal tempter has got to be very unfashionable nowadays, I am going to venture to say that you may measure accurately the vitality and depth of a man's religion by the emphasis with which he grasps the thought of that great antagonism. There is a star of light, and there is a star of darkness; and they revolve, as it were, round one centre.

But whilst, on the one hand, our Christianity is made shallow in proportion as we ignore this solemn reality, on the other hand, it is sometimes paralysed and perverted by our misunderstanding of it. For, notice, 'the God of peace shall bruise Satan *under your feet*.' Yes, it is God that bruises, but He uses our feet to do it. It is God from whom the power comes, but the power works through us, and we are neither merely the field, nor merely the prize, of the conflict between these two, but we ourselves have to put all our pith into the task of keeping down the flat, speckled head that has the poison gland in it. 'The God of peace'-blessed be His Name-'shall bruise Satan under your feet,' but it will need the tension of your muscles, and the downward force of your heel, if the wriggling reptile is to be kept under.

Turn, now, to the other thought that is here, the promise and pledge of victory in the name, the God of peace. I have already referred to two similar designations of God in the previous chapter, and if we take them in union with this one in our text, what a wonderfully beautiful and strengthening threefold view of that divine nature do we get! 'The God of patience and consolation' is the first of the linked three. It heads the list, and blessed is it that it does, because, after all, sorrow makes up a very large proportion of the experience of us all, and what most men seem to themselves to need most is a God that will bear their sorrows with them and help them to bear, and a God that will comfort them. But, supposing that He has been made known thus as the source of endurance and the God of all consolation, He becomes 'the God of hope,' for a dark background flings up a light foreground, and a comforted sorrow patiently endured is mighty to produce a radiant hope. The rising of the muddy waters of the Nile makes the heavy crops of 'corn in Egypt.' So the name 'the God of hope' fitly follows the name 'the God of patience and consolation.'

Then we come to the name in my text, built perhaps on the other two, or at least reminiscent of them, and recalling them, 'the God of peace,' who, through patience and consolation, through hope, and through many another gift, breathes the benediction of His own great tranquillity and unruffled calm over our agitated, distracted, sinful hearts. In connection with one of those previous designations to which I have referred, the Apostle has a prayer very different in form from this, but identical in substance, when he says 'the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing.' Is not that closely allied to the promise of my text, 'The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly' ? Is there any surer way of 'bruising Satan' under a man's feet than filling him 'with joy and peace in believing' ? What can the Devil do to that man? If his soul is saturated, and his capacities filled, with that pure honey of divine joy, will he have any taste for the coarse dainties, the leeks and the garlic, that the Devil offers him? Is there any surer way of delivering a man from the temptations of his own baser nature, and the solicitations of this busy intrusive world round about him, than to make him satisfied with the goodness of the Lord, and conscious in his daily experience of 'all joy and peace' ? Fill the vessel with wine, and there is no room for baser liquors or for poison. I suppose that the way by which you and I, dear friends, will most effectually conquer any temptations, is by falling back on the superior sweetness of divine joys. When we live upon manna we do not crave onions. So He 'will bruise Satan under your feet' by giving that which will arm your hearts against all his temptations and all his weapons. Blessed be God for the way of conquest, which is the possession of a supremer good!

But then, notice how beautifully too this name, ‘the God of peace,’ comes in to suggest that even in the strife there may be tranquillity. I remember in an old church in Italy a painting of an Archangel with his foot on the dragon’s neck, and his sword thrust through its scaly armour. It is perhaps the feebleness of the artist’s hand, but I think rather it is the clearness of his insight, which has led him to represent the victorious angel, in the moment in which he is slaying the dragon, as with a smile on his face, and not the least trace of effort in the arm, which is so easily smiting the fatal blow. Perhaps if the painter could have used his brush better he would have put more expression into the attitude and the face, but I think it is better as it is. We, too, may achieve a conquest over the dragon which, although it requires effort, does not disturb peace. There is a possibility of bruising that slippery head under my foot, and yet not having to strain myself in the process. We may have ‘peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation.’ Do you remember how the Apostle, in another place, gives us the same beautiful-though at first sight contradictory-combination when he says, ‘The peace of God shall garrison your heart’ ?

‘My soul! there is a country
Far, far beyond the stars,
Where stands an armed sentry,
All skilful in the wars.’

And her name is Peace, as the poet goes on to tell us. Ah, brethren! if we lived nearer the Lord, we should find it more possible to ‘fight the good fight of faith,’ and yet to have ‘our feet shod with the preparedness of the gospel of peace.’

‘The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet’; and in bruising He will give you His peace to do it, and His peace in doing it, and in still greater measure after doing it. For every struggle of the Christian soul adds something to the subsequent depth of its tranquillity. And so the name of the God of peace is our pledge of victory in, and of deepened peace after, our warfare with sin and temptation.

Lastly, note the swiftness with which Paul expects that this process shall he accomplished.

I dare say that he was thinking about the coming of the Lord, when all the fighting and struggle would be over, and that when he said ‘God shall bruise him under your feet shortly,’ there lay in the back of his mind the thought, ‘the Lord is at hand.’ But be that as it may, there is another way of looking at the words. They are not in the least like our experience, are they? ‘Shortly!’-and here am I, a Christian man for the last half century perhaps; and have I got much further on in my course? Have I brought the sin that used to trouble me much down, and is my character much more noble, Christ-like, than it was long years ago? Would other people say that it is? Instead of ‘shortly’ we ought to put ‘slowly’ for the most of us. But, dear friend, the ideal is swift conquest, and it is our fault and our loss, if the reality is sadly different.

There are a great many evils that, unless they are conquered suddenly, have very small chance of ever being conquered at all. You never heard of a man being cured of his love of intoxicating drink, for instance, by a gradual process. The serpent’s life is not crushed out of it by gradual pressure, but by one vigorous stamp of a nervous heel.

But if my experience as a Christian man does not enable me to set to my seal that this text is true, the text itself will tell me why. It is ‘the God of peace’ that is going to ‘bruise Satan.’ Do you keep yourself in touch with Him, dear friend? And do you let His powers come uninterruptedly and continuously into your spirit and life? It is sheer folly and self-delusion to wonder that the medicine does not work as quickly as was promised, if you do not take the medicine. The slow process by which, at the best, many Christian people ‘bruise Satan under their feet,’ during which he hurts their heels more than they hurt his head, is mainly due to their breaking the closeness and the continuity of their communion with God in Jesus Christ.

But, after all, it is Heaven’s chronology that we have to do with here. ‘Shortly,’ and it will be ‘shortly,’ if we reckon by heavenly scales of duration. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. ‘The Lord will help her, and that right early.’ ‘The Lord is at hand.’ When we get yonder, ah! how all the long years of fighting will have dwindled down, and we shall say ‘the Lord did help me, and that right early,’ and though there may have been more than threescore years and ten of fighting, that, while we were in the thick of it, did not seem to come to much, we shall then look back and say: ‘Yes, Lord, it was but for a moment, and it has brought me to the undying day of Eternal Peace.’

50)Romans 16:22

Romans

TERTIUS

Rom. 16:22.

One sometimes sees in old religious pictures, in some obscure corner, a tiny kneeling figure, the portrait of the artist. So Tertius here gets leave to hold the pen for a moment on his own account, and from Corinth sends his greeting to his unknown brethren in Rome. Apparently he was a stranger to them, and needed to introduce himself. He is never heard of before or since. For one brief moment he is visible, like a star of a low magnitude, shining out for a moment between two banks of darkness and then swallowed up. Judging by his name, he was probably a Roman, and possibly had some connection with Italy, but clearly was a stranger to the Church in Rome. We do not know whether he was a resident in Corinth, where he wrote this epistle, or one of Paul’s travelling companions. Probably he was the former, as his name never recurs in any of Paul’s letters. One can understand the impulse which led him for one moment to come out of obscurity and to take up personal relations with those who had so long enjoyed his pen. He would fain float across the deep gulf of alienation a thread of love which looked like gossamer, but has proved to be stronger than centuries and revolutions.

This humble and modest greeting is an expression of a sentiment which the world may smile at, but which, being ‘in the Lord,’ partakes of immortality. No doubt the world’s hate drove more closely together all the disciples in primitive times; but the yearning of Tertius for some little corner in the love of his Roman brethren might well influence us to-day. There ought to be an effort of imagination going out towards unknown brethren. Christian love is not meant to be kept within the limits of sight and personal knowledge; it should overleap the narrow bounds of the communities to which we belong, and expatiate over the whole wide field. The great Shepherd has prescribed for us the limits to the very edge of which our Christian love should consciously go forth, and has rebuked the narrowness to which we are prone, when He has said, ‘Other sheep I have which are not of this fold.’ We are all too prone to let identities of opinion and of polity, or even the accident of locality, set bounds to our consciousness of brotherhood; and the example of this little gush of affection, that reaches out a hand across the ocean and grasps the hands of unknown partakers in the common life of the one Lord, may well shame us out of our narrowness, and quicken us into a wide perception and deepened feeling towards all who in every place call up Jesus Christ as their Lord-’both their Lord and ours.’

Another lesson which we may learn from Tertius’ characterisation of himself is the dignity of subordinate work towards a great end. His office as amanuensis was very humble, but it was quite as necessary as Paul’s inspired fervour. It is to him that we owe our possession of the Epistle; it is to him that Paul owed it that he was able to record in imperishable words the thoughts that welled up in his mind, and would have been lost if Tertius had not been at his side. The power generated in the boilers does its work through machines of which each little cog-wheel is as indispensable as the great shafts. Members of the body which seem to be ‘more feeble, are necessary.’ Every note in a great concerted piece of music, and every instrument, down to the triangle and the little drum in the great orchestra, is necessary. This lesson of the dignity of subordinate work needs to be laid to heart both by those who think themselves to be capable of more important service, and by those who have to recognise that the less honourable tasks are all for which they are fit. To the former it may preach humility, the latter it may encourage. We are all very ignorant of what is great and what is small in the matter of our Christian service, and we have sometimes to look very closely and to clear away a great many vulgar misconceptions before we can clearly discriminate between mites and talents. ‘We know not which may prosper, whether this or that’; and in our ignorance of what it may please God to bring out of any service faithfully rendered to Him, we had better not be too sure that true service is ever small, or that the work that attracts attention and is christened by men ‘great’ is really so in His eyes. It is well to have the noble ambition to ‘desire earnestly the greater gifts,’ but it is better to ‘follow the more excellent way,’ and to seek after the love which knows nothing of great or small, and without which prophecy and the knowledge of all mysteries, and all conspicuous and all the shining qualities profit nothing.

We can discern in Tertius' words a little touch of what we may call pride in his work. No doubt he knew it to be subordinate, but he also knew it to be needful; and no doubt he had put all his strength into doing it well. No man will put his best into any task which he does not undertake in such a spirit. It is a very plain piece of homely wisdom that 'what is worth doing at all is worth doing well.' Without a lavish expenditure of the utmost care and effort, our work will tend to be slovenly and unpleasing to God, and man, and to ourselves. We may be sure there were no blots and bits of careless writing in Tertius' manuscript, and that he would not have claimed the friendly feelings of his Roman brethren, if he had not felt that he had put his best into the writing of this epistle. The great word of King David has a very wide application. 'I will not take that which is thine for the Lord, nor offer burnt offerings without cost.'

Tertius' salutation may suggest to us the best thing by which to be remembered. All his life before and after the hours spent at Paul's side has sunk in oblivion. He wished to be known only as having written the Epistle. Christian souls ought to desire to live chiefly in the remembrance of those to whom they have been known as having done some little bit of work for Jesus Christ. We may well ask ourselves whether there is anything in our lives by which we should thus wish to be remembered. All our many activities will sink into silence; but if the stream of our life, which has borne along down its course so much mud and sand, has brought some grains of gold in the form of faithful and loving service to Christ and men-these will not be lost in the ocean, but treasured by Him. What we do for Jesus and to spread the knowledge of His name is the immortal part of our mortal lives, and abides in His memory and in blessed results in our own characters, when all the rest that made our busy and often stormy days has passed into oblivion. All that we know of Tertius who wrote this Epistle is that he wrote it. Well will it be for us if the summary of our lives be something like that of his!

51)Romans 16:23

Romans

QUARTUS A BROTHER

Rom. 16:23.

I am afraid very few of us read often, or with much interest, those long lists of names at the end of Paul’s letters. And yet there are plenty of lessons in them, if anybody will look at them lovingly and carefully. There does not seem much in these three words; but I am very much mistaken if they will not prove to be full of beauty and pathos, and to open out into a wonderful revelation of what Christianity is and does, as soon as we try to freshen them up into some kind of human interest.

It is easy for us to make a little picture of this brother Quartus. He is evidently an entire stranger to the Church in Rome. They had never heard his name before: none of them knew anything about him. Further, he is evidently a man of no especial reputation or position in the Church at Corinth, from which Paul writes. He contrasts strikingly with the others who send salutations to Rome. ‘Timotheus, my work-fellow’-the companion and helper of the Apostle, whose name was known everywhere among the Churches, heads the list. Then come other prominent men of his more immediate circle. Then follows a loving greeting from Paul’s amanuensis, who, naturally, as the pen is in his own hand, says: ‘*I*, Tertius, who wrote this epistle, salute you in the Lord.’ Then Paul begins again to dictate, and the list runs on. Next comes a message from ‘Gaius mine host, and of the whole Church’-an influential man in the community, apparently rich, and willing, as well as able, to extend to them large and loving hospitality. Erastus, the chamberlain or treasurer of the city, follows-a man of consequence in Corinth. And then, among all these people of mark, comes the modest, quiet Quartus. He has no wealth like Gaius, nor civic position like Erastus, nor wide reputation like Timothy. He is only a good, simple, unknown Christian. He feels a spring of love open in his heart to these brethren far across the sea, whom he never met. He would like them to know that he thought lovingly of them, and to be lovingly thought of by them. So he begs a little corner in Paul’s letter, and gets it; and there, in his little niche, like some statue of a forgotten saint, scarce seen amidst the glories of a great cathedral, ‘Quartus a brother’ stands to all time.

The first thing that strikes me in connection with these words is, how deep and real they show that new bond of Christian love to have been.

A little incident of this sort is more impressive than any amount of mere talk about the uniting influence of the Gospel. Here we get a glimpse of the power in actual operation in a man’s heart, and if we think of all that this simple greeting presupposes and implies, and of all that had to be overcome before it could have been sent, we may well see in it the sign of the greatest revolution that was ever wrought in men’s relations to one another, Quartus was an inhabitant of Corinth, from which city this letter was written. His Roman name may indicate Roman descent, but of that we cannot be sure. Just as probably he may have been a Greek by birth, and so have had to stretch his hand across a deep crevasse of national antipathy, in order to clasp the hands of his brethren in the great city. There was little love lost between Rome, the rough imperious conqueror, and Corinth, prostrate and yet restive under her bonds, and nourishing remembrances of a freedom which Rome had crushed, and of a culture that Rome haltingly followed.

And how many other deep gulfs of separation had to be bridged before that Christian sense of oneness could be felt! It is impossible for us to throw ourselves completely back to the condition of things which the Gospel found. The world then was like some great field of cooled lava on the slopes of a volcano, all broken up by a labyrinth of clefts and cracks, at the bottom of which one can see the flicker of sulphurous flames. Great gulfs of national hatred, of fierce enmities of race, language, and religion; wide separations of social condition, far profounder than anything of the sort which we know, split mankind into fragments. On the one side was the freeman, on the other, the slave; on the one side, the Gentile, on the other, the Jew; on the one side, the insolence and hard-handedness of Roman rule, on the other, the impotent, and therefore envenomed, hatred of conquered peoples.

And all this fabric, full of active repulsions and disintegrating forces, was bound together into an artificial and unreal unity by the iron clamp of Rome’s power, holding up the bulging walls that were ready to fall-the unity of the slave-gang manacled together for easier driving. Into this hideous condition of things the Gospel comes, and silently flings its clasping tendrils over the wide gaps, and binds the crumbling structure of human society with a new bond, real and living. We know well enough that that was so, but we are helped to apprehend it by seeing, as it were, the very process going on before our eyes, in this message from ‘Quartus a brother.’

It reminds us that the very notion of humanity, and of the brotherhood of man, is purely Christian. A world-embracing society, held together by love, was not dreamt of before the Gospel came; and since the Gospel came it is more than a dream. If you wrench away the idea from its foundation, as people do who talk about fraternity, and seek to bring it to pass without Christ, it is a mere piece of Utopian sentiment-a fine dream. But in Christianity it worked. It works imperfectly enough, God knows. Still there is some reality in it, and some power. The Gospel first of all produced the thing and the practice, and then the theory came afterwards. The Church did not talk much about the brotherhood of man, or the unity of the race; but simply ignored all distinctions, and gathered into the fold the slave and his master, the Roman and his subject, fair-haired Goths and swarthy Arabians, the worshippers of Odin and of Zeus, the Jew and the Gentile. That actual unity, utterly irrespective of all distinctions, which came naturally in the train of the Gospel, was the first attempt to realise the oneness of the race, and first taught the world that all men were brethren.

And before this simple word of greeting could have been sent, and the unknown man in Corinth felt love to a company of unknown men in Rome, some profound new impulse must have been given to the world; something altogether unlike any of the forces hitherto in existence. What was that? What should it be but the story of One who gave Himself for the whole world, who binds men into a unity because of His common relation to them all, and through whom the great proclamation can be made: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.’ Brother Quartus’ message, like some tiny flower above-ground which tells of a spreading root beneath, is a modest witness to that mighty revolution, and presupposes the preaching of a Saviour in whom he and his unseen friends in Rome are one.

So let us learn not to confine our sympathy and the play of our Christian affection within the limits of our personal knowledge. We must go further afield than that. Like this man, let us sometimes send our thoughts across mountains and seas. He knew nobody in the Roman Church, and nobody knew him, but he wished to stretch out his hand to them, and to feel, as it were, the pressure of their fingers in his palm. That is a pattern for us.

Let me suggest another thing. Quartus was a Corinthian. The Corinthian Church was remarkable for its quarrellings and dissensions. One said, ‘I am of Paul, and another, I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ.’ I wonder if our friend Quartus belonged to any of these parties? There is nothing more likely than that he had a much warmer glow of Christian love to the brethren over there in Rome than to those who sat on the same bench with him in the upper room at Corinth. For you know that sometimes it is true about people, as well as about scenery, that ‘distance lends enchantment to the view.’ A great many of us have much keener sympathies with ‘brethren’ who are well out of our reach, and whose peculiarities do not jar against ours, than with those who are nearest. I do not say Quartus was one of these, but he may very well have been one of the wranglers in Corinth who found it much easier to love his brother whom he had not seen than his brother whom he had seen. So take the hint, if you need it. Do not let your Christian love go wandering away abroad only, but keep some for home consumption.

Again, how simply, and with what unconscious beauty, the deep reason for our Christian unity is given in that one word, a ‘Brother.’ As if he had said, Never mind telling them anything about what I am, what place I hold, or what I do. Tell them I am a brother, that will be enough. It is the only name by which I care to be known; it is the name which explains my love to them.

We are brethren because we are sons of one Father. So that favourite name, by which the early Christians knew each other, rested upon and proclaimed the deep truth that they knew themselves to be all partakers of a common life derived from one Parent. When they said they were brethren, they implied, ‘We have been born again by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.’ The great Christian truth of regeneration, the communication of a divine life from God the Father, through Christ the Son, by the Holy Spirit, is the foundation of Christian brotherhood. So the name is no mere piece of effusive sentiment, but expresses a profound fact. ‘To as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God,’ and therein to become the brethren of all His sons.

That is the true ground of our unity, and of our obligation to love all who are begotten of Him. You cannot safely put them on any other footing. All else-identity of opinion, similarity of practice and ceremonial, local or national ties, and the like-all else is insufficient. It may be necessary for Christian communities to require in addition a general identity of opinion, and even some uniformity in government and form of worship; but if ever they come to fancy that such subordinate conditions of visible oneness are the grounds of their spiritual unity, and to enforce these as such, they are slipping off the real foundation, and are perilling their character as Churches of Christ. The true ground of the unity of all Christians is here: ‘Have we not all one Father?’ We possess a kindred life derived from Him. We are a family of brethren because we are sons.

Another remark is, how strangely and unwittingly this good man has got himself an immortality by that passing thought of his. One loving message has won for him the prize for which men have joyfully given life itself,-an eternal place in history. Wheresoever the Gospel is preached there also shall this be told as a memorial of him. How much surprised he would have been if, as he leaned forward to Tertius hurrying to end his task and said, ‘Send my love too,’ anybody had told him that that one act of his would last as long as the world, and his name be known for ever! And how much ashamed some of the other people in the New Testament would have been if they had known that their passing faults-the quarrel of Euodia and Syntyche for instance-were to be gibbeted for ever in the same fashion! How careful they would have been, and we would be, of our behaviour if we knew that it was to be pounced down upon and made immortal in that style! Suppose you were to be told-Your thoughts and acts to-morrow at twelve o’clock will be recorded for all the world to read-you would be pretty careful how you behaved. When a speaker sees the reporters in front of him, he weighs his words.

Well, Quartus’ little message is written down here, and the world knows it. All our words and works are getting put down too, in another Book up there, and it is going to be read out one day. It does seem wonderful that you and I should live as we do, knowing that all the while that God is recording it all. If we are not ashamed to do things, and let Him note them on His tablets that they may be for the time to come, for ever and ever, it is strange that we should be more careful to attitudinise and pose ourselves before one another than before Him. Let us then keep ever in mind ‘those pure eyes and perfect witness of the all-judging’ God. The eternal record of this little message is only a symbol of the eternal life and eternal record of all our transient and trivial thoughts and deeds before Him. Let us live so that each act, if recorded, would shine with some modest ray of true light like brother Quartus’ greeting, and let us seek that, like him,-all else about us being forgotten, position, talents, wealth, buried in the dust,-we may be remembered, if we are remembered at all, by such a biography as is condensed into these three words. Who would not wish to be embalmed, so to speak, in such a record? Who would not wish to have such an epitaph as this? A sweet fate to live for ever in the world’s memory by three words which tell his name, his Christianity, and his brotherly love! So far as we are remembered at all, may the like be our life’s history and our epitaph!

1 Corinthians

1) 1 CORINTHIANS 1:2
2) 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18
3) 1 CORINTHIANS 2:2
4) 1 CORINTHIANS 3:9
5) 1 CORINTHIANS 3:12-13
6) 1 CORINTHIANS 3:16
7) 1 CORINTHIANS 3:21-22
8) 1 CORINTHIANS 3:23
9) 1 CORINTHIANS 4:3-4
10) 1 CORINTHIANS 5:8
11) 1 CORINTHIANS 7:19
12) 1 CORINTHIANS 7:19
13) 1 CORINTHIANS 7:22
14) 1 CORINTHIANS 7:24
15) 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13
16) 1 CORINTHIANS 9:16-17

17) 1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-23
18) 1 CORINTHIANS 9:24
19) 1 CORINTHIANS 9:25
20) 1 CORINTHIANS 10:23-33
21) 1 CORINTHIANS 11:24
22) 1 CORINTHIANS 12:7
23) 1 CORINTHIANS 13:8
24) 1 CORINTHIANS 13:13
25) 1 CORINTHIANS 15:3
26) 1 CORINTHIANS 15:4
27) 1 CORINTHIANS 15:6
28) 1 CORINTHIANS 15:10
29) 1 CORINTHIANS 15:11
30) 1 CORINTHIANS 15:20
31) 1 CORINTHIANS 15:21
32) 1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-58
33) 1 CORINTHIANS 16:13-14

34) 1 CORINTHIANS 16:21-24

1) 1 Corinthians 1:2

1 Corinthians

CALLING ON THE NAME

1Co. 1:2.

There are some difficulties, with which I need not trouble you, about both the translation and the connection of these words. One thing is quite clear, that in them the Apostle associates the church at Corinth with the whole mass of Christian believers in the world. The question may arise whether he does so in the sense that he addresses his letter both to the church at Corinth and to the whole of the churches, and so makes it a catholic epistle. That is extremely unlikely, considering how all but entirely this letter is taken up with dealing with the especial conditions of the Corinthian church. Rather I should suppose that he is simply intending to remind ‘the Church of God at Corinth . . . sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints,’ that they are in real, living union with the whole body of believers. Just as the water in a little land-locked bay, connected with the sea by some narrow strait like that at Corinth, is yet part of the whole ocean that rolls round the world, so that little community of Christians had its living bond of union with all the brethren in every place that called upon the name of Jesus Christ.

Whichever view on that detail of interpretation be taken, this phrase, as a designation of Christians, is worth considering. It is one of many expressions found in the New Testament as names for them, some of which have now dropped out of general use, while some are still retained. It is singular that the name of ‘Christian,’ which has all but superseded all others, was originally invented as a jeer by sarcastic wits at Antioch, and never appears in the New Testament, as a name by which believers called themselves. Important lessons are taught by these names, such as disciples, believers, brethren, saints, those of the way, and so on, each of which embodies some characteristic of a follower of Jesus. So this appellation in the text, ‘those who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,’ may yield not unimportant lessons if it be carefully weighed, and to some of these I would ask your attention now.

I. First, it gives us a glimpse into the worship of the primitive Church.

To 'call on the name of the Lord' is an expression that comes straight out of the Old Testament. It means there distinctly adoration and invocation, and it means precisely these things when it is referred to Jesus Christ.

We find in the Acts of the Apostles that the very first sermon that was preached at Pentecost by Peter all turns upon this phrase. He quotes the Old Testament saying, 'Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved,' and then goes on to prove that 'the Lord,' the 'calling on whose Name' is salvation, is Jesus Christ; and winds up with 'Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.'

Again we find that Ananias of Damascus, when Jesus Christ appeared to him and told him to go to Paul and lay his hands upon him, shrank from the perilous task because Paul had been sent to 'bind them that call upon the name of the Lord,' and to persecute them. We find the same phrase recurring in other connections, so that, on the whole, we may take the expression as a recognised designation of Christians.

This was their characteristic, that they prayed to Jesus Christ. The very first word, so far as we know, that Paul ever heard from a Christian was, 'Lord Jesus! receive my spirit.' He heard that cry of calm faith which, when he heard it, would sound to him as horrible blasphemy from Stephen's dying lips. How little he dreamed that he himself was soon to cry to the same Jesus, 'Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?' and was in after-days to beseech Him thrice for deliverance, and to be answered by sufficient grace. How little he dreamed that, when his own martyrdom was near, he too would look to Jesus as Lord and righteous Judge, from whose hands all who loved His appearing should receive their crown! Nor only Paul directs desires and adoration to Jesus as Lord; the last words of Scripture are a cry to Him as Lord to come quickly, and an invocation of His 'grace' on all believing souls.

Prayer to Christ from the very beginning of the Christian Church was, then, the characteristic of believers, and He to whom they prayed, thus, from the beginning, was recognised by them as being a Divine Person, God manifest in the flesh.

The object of their worship, then, was known by the people among whom they lived. Singing hymns to Christus as a god is nearly all that the Roman proconsul in his well-known letter could find to tell his master of their worship. They were the worshippers-not merely the disciples-of one Christ. That was their peculiar distinction. Among the worshippers of the false gods they stood erect; before Him, and Him only, they bowed. In Corinth there was the polluted worship of Aphrodite and of Zeus. These men called not on the name of these lustful and stained deities, but on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And everybody knew whom they worshipped, and understood whose men they were. Is that true about us? Do we Christian men so habitually cultivate the remembrance of Jesus Christ, and are we so continually in the habit of invoking His aid, and of contemplating His blessed perfections and sufficiency, that every one who knew us would recognise us as meant by those who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ?

If this be the proper designation of Christian people, alas! alas! for so many of the professing Christians of this day, whom neither bystanders nor themselves would think of as included in such a name!

Further, the connection here shows that the divine worship of Christ was universal among the churches. There was no ‘place’ where it was not practised, no community calling itself a church to whom He was not the Lord to be invoked and adored. This witness to the early and universal recognition in the Christian communities of the divinity of our Lord is borne by an undisputedly genuine epistle of Paul’s. It is one of the four which the most thorough-going destructive criticism accepts as genuine. It was written before the Gospels, and is a voice from the earlier period of Paul’s apostleship. Hence the importance of its attestation to this fact that all Christians everywhere, both Jewish, who had been trained in strict monotheism, and Gentile, who had burned incense at many a foul shrine, were perfectly joined together in this, that in all their need they called on the name of Jesus Christ as Lord and brought to Him, as divine, adoration not to be rendered to any creatures. From the day of Pentecost onwards, a Christian was not merely a disciple, a follower, or an admirer, but a worshipper of Christ, the Lord.

II. We may see here an unfolding of the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

Note that solemn accumulation, in the language of my text, of all the designations by which He is called, sometimes separately and sometimes unitedly, the name of ‘our Lord Jesus Christ.’ We never find that full title given to Him in Scripture except when the writer’s mind is labouring to express the manifoldness and completeness of our Lord’s relations to men, and the largeness and sufficiency of the blessings which He brings. In this context I find in the first nine or ten verses of this chapter, so full is the Apostle of the thoughts of the greatness and wonderfulness of his dear Lord on whose name he calls, that six or seven times he employs this solemn, full designation.

Now, if we look at the various elements of this great name we shall get various aspects of the way in which calling on Christ is the strength of our souls.

‘Call on the name of-the Lord.’ That is the Old Testament Jehovah. There is no mistaking nor denying, if we candidly consider the evidence of the New Testament writings, that, when we read of Jesus Christ as ‘Lord,’ in the vast majority of cases, the title is not a mere designation of human authority, but is an attribution to Him of divine nature and dignity. We have, then, to ascribe to Him, and to call on Him as possessing, all which that great and incommunicable Name certified and sealed to the Jewish Church as their possession in their God. The Jehovah of the Old Testament is our Lord of the New. He whose being is eternal, underived, self-sufficing, self-determining, knowing no variation, no diminution, no age, He who is because He is and that He is, dwells in His fulness in our Saviour. To worship Him is not to divert worship from the one God, nor is it to have other gods besides Him. Christianity is as much monotheistic as Judaism was, and the law of its worship is the old law-Him only shalt thou serve. It is the divine will that all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father.

But what is it to call on the name of Jesus? That name implies all the sweetness of His manhood. He is our Brother. The name ‘Jesus’ is one that many a Jewish boy bore in our Lord’s own time and before it; though, afterwards, of course, abhorrence on the part of the Jew and reverence on the part of the Christian caused it almost entirely to disappear. But at the time when He bore it it was as undistinguished a name as Simeon, or Judas, or any other of His followers’ names. To call upon the name of Jesus means to realise and bring near to ourselves, for our consolation and encouragement, for our strength and peace, the blessed thought of His manhood, so really and closely knit to ours; to grasp the blessedness of the thought that He knows our frame because He Himself has worn it, and understands and pities our weakness, being Himself a man. To Him whom we adore as Lord we draw near in tenderer, but not less humble and prostrate, adoration as our brother when we call on the name of the Lord Jesus, and thus embrace as harmonious, and not contradictory, both the divinity of the Lord and the humanity of Jesus.

To call on the name of Christ is to embrace in our faith and to beseech the exercise on our behalf of all which Jesus is as the Messiah, anointed by God with the fulness of the Spirit. As such He is the climax, and therefore the close of all revelation, who is the long-expected fruition of the desire of weary hearts, the fulfilment, and therefore the abolition, of sacrifice and temple and priesthood and prophecy and all that witnessed for Him ere He came. We further call on the name of Christ the Anointed, on whom the whole fulness of the Divine Spirit dwelt in order that, calling upon Him, that fulness may in its measure be granted to us.

So the name of the Lord Jesus Christ brings to view the divine, the human, the Messiah, the anointed Lord of the Spirit, and Giver of the divine life. To call on His name is to be blessed, to be made pure and strong, joyous and immortal. ‘The name of the Lord is a strong tower, the righteous runneth into it and is safe.’ Call on His name in the day of trouble and ye shall be heard and helped.

III. Lastly, this text suggests what a Christian life should be.

We have already remarked that to call on the name of Jesus was the distinctive peculiarity of the early believers, which marked them off as a people by themselves. Would it be a true designation of the bulk of so-called Christians now? You do not object to profess yourself a Christian, or, perhaps, even to say that you are a disciple of Christ, or even to go the length of calling yourself a follower and imitator. But are you a worshipper of Him? In your life have you the habit of meditating on Him as Lord, as Jesus, as Christ, and of refreshing and gladdening dusty days and fainting strength by the living water, drawn from the one unfailing stream from these triple fountains? Is the invocation of His aid habitual with you?

There needs no long elaborate supplication to secure His aid. How much has been done in the Church’s history by short bursts of prayer, as ‘Lord, help me!’ spoken or unspoken in the moment of extremity! ‘They cried unto God in the battle.’ They would not have time for very lengthy petitions then, would they? They would not give much heed to elegant arrangement of them or suiting them to the canons of human eloquence. ‘They cried unto God in the battle’; whilst the enemy’s swords were flashing and the arrows whistling about their ears. These were circumstances to make a prayer a ‘cry’; no composed and stately utterance of an elegantly modulated voice, nor a languid utterance without earnestness, but a short, sharp, loud call, such as danger presses from panting lungs and parched throats. Therefore the cry was answered, ‘and He was entreated of them.’ ‘Lord, save us, we perish!’ was a very brief prayer, but it brought its answer. And so we, in like manner, may go through our warfare and work, and day by day as we encounter sudden bursts of temptation may meet them with sudden jets of petition, and thus put out their fires. And the same help avails for long-continuing as for sudden needs. Some of us may have to carry lifelong burdens and to fight in a battle ever renewed. It may seem as if our cry was not heard, since the enemy’s assault is not weakened, nor our power to beat it back perceptibly increased. But the appeal is not in vain, and when the fight is over, if not before, we shall know what reinforcements of strength to our weakness were due to our poor cry entering into the ears of our Lord and Brother. No other ‘name’ is permissible as our plea or as recipient of our prayer. In and on the name of the Lord we must call, and if we do, anything is possible rather than that the promise which was claimed for the Church and referred to Jesus, in the very first Christian preaching on Pentecost, should not be fulfilled-’Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

‘In every place.’ We may venture to subject the words of my text to a little gentle pressure here. The Apostle only meant to express the universal characteristics of Christians everywhere. But we may venture to give a different turn to the words, and learn from them the duty of devout communion with Christ as a duty for each of us wherever we are. If a place is not fit to pray in it is not fit to be in. We may carry praying hearts, remembrances of the Lord, sweet, though they may be swift and short, contemplations of His grace, His love, His power, His sufficiency, His nearness, His punctual help, like a hidden light in our hearts, into all the dusty ways of life, and in every place call on His name. There is no place so dismal but that thoughts of Him will make sunshine in it; no work so hard, so commonplace, so prosaic, so uninteresting, but that it will become the opposite of all these if whatever we do is done in remembrance of our Lord. Nothing will be too hard for us to do, and nothing too bitter for us to swallow, and nothing too sad for us to bear, if only over all that befalls us and all that we undertake and endeavour we make the sign of the Cross and call upon the name of the Lord. If ‘in every place’ we have Him as the object of our faith and desire, and as the Hearer of our petition, in ‘every place’ we shall have Him for our help, and all will be full of His bright presence; and though we have to journey through the wilderness we shall ever drink of that spiritual rock that will follow us, and that Rock is Christ. In every place call upon His name, and every place will be a house of God, and a gate of heaven to our waiting souls.

2) 1 Corinthians 1:18

1 Corinthians

PERISHING OR BEING SAVED

1Co. 1:18.

The starting-point of my remarks is the observation that a slight variation of rendering, which will be found in the Revised Version, brings out the true meaning of these words. Instead of reading ‘them that perish’ and ‘us which are saved,’ we ought to read ‘them that *are perishing*,’ and ‘us which *are being* saved.’ That is to say, the Apostle represents the two contrasted conditions, not so much as fixed states, either present or future, but rather as processes which are going on, and are manifestly, in the present, incomplete. That opens some very solemn and intensely practical considerations.

Then I may further note that this antithesis includes the whole of the persons to whom the Gospel is preached. In one or other of these two classes they all stand. Further, we have to observe that the consideration which determines the class to which men belong, is the attitude which they respectively take to the preaching of the Cross. If it be, and because it is, ‘foolishness’ to some, they belong to the catalogue of the perishing. If it be, and because it is, ‘the power of God’ to others, they belong to the class of those who are in process of being saved.

So, then, we have the ground cleared for two or three very simple, but, as it seems to me, very important thoughts.

I. I desire, first, to look at the two contrasted conditions, ‘perishing’ and ‘being saved.’

Now we shall best, I think, understand the force of the darker of these two terms if we first ask what is the force of the brighter and more radiant. If we understand what the Apostle means by ‘saving’ and ‘salvation’ we shall understand also what he means by ‘perishing.’

If, then, we turn for a moment to Scripture analogy and teaching, we find that that threadbare word ‘salvation,’ which we all take it for granted that we understand, and which, like a well-worn coin, has been so passed from hand to hand that it scarcely remains legible-that well-worn word ‘salvation’ starts from a double metaphorical meaning. It means either-and is used for both-being healed or being made safe. In the one sense it is often employed in the Gospel narratives of our Lord’s miracles, and it involves the metaphor of a sick man and his cure; in the other it involves the metaphor of a man in peril and his deliverance and security. The negative side, then, of the Gospel idea of salvation is the making whole from a disease, and the making safe from a danger. Negatively, it is the removal from each of us of the one sickness, which is sin; and the one danger, which is the reaping of the fruits and consequences of sin, in their variety as guilt, remorse, habit, and slavery under it, perverted relation to God, a fearful apprehension of penal consequences here, and, if there be a hereafter, there, too. The sickness of soul and the perils that threaten life, flow from the central fact of sin, and salvation consists, negatively, in the sweeping away of all of these, whether the sin itself, or the fatal facility with which we yield to it, or the desolation and perversion which it brings into all the faculties and susceptibilities, or the perversion of relation to God, and the consequent evils, here and hereafter, which throng around the evil-doer. The sick man is healed, and the man in peril is set in safety.

But, besides that, there is a great deal more. The cure is incomplete till the full tide of health follows convalescence. When God saves, He does not only bar up the iron gate through which the hosts of evil rush out upon the defenceless soul, but He flings wide the golden gate through which the glad troops of blessings and of graces flock around the delivered spirit, and enrich it with all joys and with all beauties. So the positive side of salvation is the investiture of the saved man with throbbing health through all his veins, and the strength that comes from a divine life. It is the bestowal upon the delivered man of everything that he needs for blessedness and for duty. All good conferred, and every evil banned back into its dark den, such is the Christian conception of salvation. It is much that the negative should be accomplished, but it is little in comparison with the rich fulness of positive endowments, of happiness, and of holiness which make an integral part of the salvation of God.

This, then, being the one side, what about the other? If this be salvation, its precise opposite is the Scriptural idea of ‘perishing.’ Utter ruin lies in the word, the entire failure to be what God meant a man to be. That is in it, and no contortions of arbitrary interpretation can knock that solemn significance out of the dreadful expression. If salvation be the cure of the sickness, perishing is the fatal end of the unchecked disease. If salvation be the deliverance from the outstretched claws of the harpy evils that crowd about the trembling soul, then perishing is the fixing of their poisoned talons into their prey, and their rending of it into fragments.

Of course that is metaphor, but no metaphor can be half so dreadful as the plain, prosaic fact that the exact opposite of the salvation, which consists in the healing from sin and the deliverance from danger, and in the endowment with all gifts good and beautiful, is the Christian idea of the alternative ‘perishing.’ Then it means the disease running its course. It means the dangers laying hold of the man in peril. It means the withdrawal, or the non-bestowal, of all which is good, whether it be good of holiness or good of happiness. It does not mean, as it seems to me, the cessation of conscious existence, any more than salvation means the bestowal of conscious existence. But he who perishes knows that he has perished, even as he knows the process while he is in the process of perishing. Therefore, we have to think of the gradual fading away from consciousness, and dying out of a life, of many things beautiful and sweet and gracious, of the gradual increase of distance from Him, union with whom is the condition of true life, of the gradual sinking into the pit of utter ruin, of the gradual increase of that awful death in life and life in death in which living consciousness makes the conscious subject aware that he is lost; lost to God, lost to himself.

Brethren, it is no part of my business to enlarge upon such awful thoughts, but the brighter the light of salvation, the darker the eclipse of ruin which rings it round. This, then, is the first contrast.

II. Now note, secondly, the progressiveness of both members of the alternative.

All states of heart or mind tend to increase, by the very fact of continuance. Life is a process, and every part of a spiritual being is in living motion and continuous action in a given direction. So the law for the world, and for every man in it, in all regions of his life, quite as much as in the religious, is ‘To him that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance.’

Look, then, at this thought of the process by which these two conditions become more and more confirmed, consolidated, and complete. Salvation is a progressive fact. In the New Testament we have that great idea looked at from three points of view. Sometimes it is spoken of as having been accomplished in the past in the case of every believing soul-’Ye have been saved’ is said more than once. Sometimes it is spoken of as being accomplished in the present-’Ye are saved’ is said more than once. And sometimes it is relegated to the future-’Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed,' and the like. But there are a number of New Testament passages which coincide with this text in regarding salvation as, not the work of any one moment, but as a continuous operation running through life, not a point either in the past, present, or future, but a continued life. As, for instance, 'The Lord added to the Church daily those that were being saved.' By one offering He hath perfected for ever them that are being sanctified. And in a passage in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, which, in some respects, is an exact parallel to that of my text, we read of the preaching of the Gospel as being a 'savour of Christ in them that are being saved, and in them that are perishing.'

So the process of being saved is going on as long as a Christian man lives in this world; and every one who professes to be Christ's follower ought, day by day, to be growing more and more saved, more fully filled with that Divine Spirit, more entirely the conqueror of his own lusts and passions and evil, more and more invested with all the gifts of holiness and of blessedness which Jesus Christ is ready to bestow upon him.

Ah, brethren! that notion of a progressive salvation at work in all true Christians has all but faded away out of the beliefs, as it has all but disappeared from the experience, of hosts of you that call yourselves Christ's followers, and are not a bit further on than you were ten years ago; are no more healed of your corruptions [perhaps less so, for relapses are dangerous] than you were then-have not advanced any further into the depths of God than when you first got a glimpse of Him as loving, and your Father, in Jesus Christ-are contented to linger, like some weak band of invaders in a strange land, on the borders and coasts, instead of pressing inwards and making it all your own. Growing Christians-may I venture to say?-are not the majority of professing Christians.

And, on the other side, as certainly, there are progressive deterioration and approximation to disintegration and ruin. How many men there are listening to me now who were far nearer being delivered from their sins when they were lads than they have ever been since! How many in whom the sensibility to the message of salvation has disappeared, in whom the world has ossified their consciences and their hearts, in whom there is a more entire and unstruggling submission to low things and selfish things and worldly things and wicked things, than there used to be! I am sure that there are not a few among us now who were far better, and far happier, when they were poor and young, and could still thrill with generous emotion and tremble at the Word of God, than they are to-day. Why! there are some of you that could no more bring back your former loftier impulses, and compunction of spirit and throbs of desire towards Christ and His salvation, than you could bring back the birds' nests or the snows of your youthful years. You are perishing, in the very process of going down and down into the dark.

Now, notice, that the Apostle treats these two classes as covering the whole ground of the hearers of the Word, and as alternatives. If not in the one class we are in the other. Ah, brethren! life is no level plane, but a steep incline, on which there is no standing still, and if you try to stand still, down you go. Either up or down must be the motion. If you are not more of a Christian than you were a year ago, you are less. If you are not more saved-for there is a degree of comparison-if you are not more saved, you are less saved.

Now, do not let that go over your head as pulpit thunder, meaning nothing. It means *you*, and, whether you feel or think it or not, one or other of these two solemn developments is at this moment going on in you. And that is not a thought to be put lightly on one side.

Further, note what a light such considerations as these, that salvation and perishing are vital processes-'going on all the time,' as the Americans say-throw upon the future. Clearly the two processes are incomplete here. You get the direction of the line, but not its natural termination. And thus a heaven and a hell are demanded by the phenomena of growing goodness and of growing badness which we see round about us. The arc of the circle is partially swept. Are the compasses going to stop at the point where the grave comes in? By no means. Round they will go, and will complete the circle. But that is not all. The necessity for progress will persist after death; and all through the duration of immortal being, goodness, blessedness, holiness, Godlikeness, will, on the one hand, grow in brighter lustre; and on the other, alienation from God, loss of the noble elements of the nature, and all the other doleful darknesses which attend that conception of a lost man, will increase likewise. And so, two people, sitting side by side here now, may start from the same level, and by the operation of the one principle the one may rise, and rise, and rise, till he is lost in God, and so finds himself, and the other sink, and sink, and sink, into the obscurity of woe and evil that lies beneath every human life as a possibility.

III. And now, lastly, notice the determining attitude to the Cross which settles the class to which we belong.

Paul, in my text, is explaining his reason for not preaching the Gospel with what he calls ‘the words of man’s wisdom,’ and he says, in effect, ‘It would be of no use if I did, because what settles whether the Cross shall look “foolishness” to a man or not is the man’s whole moral condition, and what settles whether a man shall find it to be “the power of God” or not is whether he has passed into the region of those that are being saved.’

So there are two thoughts suggested which sound as if they were illogically combined, but which yet are both true. It is true that men perish, or are saved, because the Cross is to them respectively ‘foolishness’ or ‘the power of God’; and the other thing is also true, that the Cross is to them ‘foolishness,’ or ‘the power of God’ because, respectively, they are perishing or being saved. That is not putting the cart before the horse, but both aspects of the truth are true.

If you see nothing in Jesus Christ, and His death for us all, except ‘foolishness,’ something unfit to do you any good, and unnecessary to be taken into account in your lives-oh, my friends! *that* is the condemnation of your eyes, and not of the thing you look at. If a man, gazing on the sun at twelve o’clock on a June day, says to me, ‘It is not bright,’ the only thing I have to say to him is, ‘Friend, you had better go to an oculist.’ And if to us the Cross is ‘foolishness,’ it is because already a process of ‘perishing’ has gone so far that it has attacked our capacity of recognising the wisdom and love of God when we see them.

But, on the other hand, if we clasp that Cross in simple trust, we find that it is the power which saves us out of all sins, sorrows, and dangers, and ‘shall save us’ at last ‘into His heavenly kingdom.’

Dear friends, that message leaves no man exactly as it found him. My words, I feel, in this sermon, have been very poor, set by the side of the greatness of the theme; but, poor as they have been, you will not be exactly the same man after them, if you have listened to them, as you were before. The difference may be very imperceptible, but it will be real. One more, almost invisible, film, over the eyeball; one more thin layer of wax in the ear; one more fold of insensibility round heart and conscience-or else some yielding to the love; some finger put out to take the salvation; some lightening of the pressure of the sickness; some removal of the peril and the danger. The same sun hurts diseased eyes, and gladdens sound ones. The same fire melts wax and hardens clay. 'This Child is set for the rise and fall of many in Israel.' 'To the one He is the savour of life unto life; to the other He is the savour of death unto death.' *Which* is He, for He *is* one of them, to you?

3) 1 Corinthians 2:2

1 Corinthians

THE APOSTLE'S THEME

1Co. 2:2.

Many of you are aware that to-day I close forty years of ministry in this city-I cannot say to this congregation, for there are very, very few that can go back with me in memory to the beginning of these years. You will bear me witness that I seldom intrude personal references into the pulpit, but perhaps it would be affectation not to do so now. Looking back over these long years, many thoughts arise which cannot be spoken in public. But one thing I may say, and that is, that I am grateful to God and to you, dear friends, for the unbroken harmony, confidence, affection, and forbearance which have brightened and lightened my work. Of its worth I cannot judge; its imperfections I know better than the most unfavourable critic; but I can humbly take the words of this text as expressive, not, indeed, of my attainments, but of my aims. One of my texts, on my first Sunday in Manchester, was 'We preach Christ and Him crucified,' and I look back, and venture to say that the noble words of this text have been, however imperfectly followed, my guiding star.

Now, I wish to say a word or two, less personal perhaps, and yet, as you can well suppose, not without a personal reference in my own consciousness.

I. Note here first, then, the Apostolic theme-Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Now, the Apostle, in this context, gives us a little autobiographical glimpse which is singularly and interestingly confirmed by some slight incidental notices in the Book of the Acts. He says, in the context, that he was with the Corinthians ‘in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,’ and, if we turn to the narrative, we find that a singular period of silence, apparent abandonment of his work and dejection, seems to have synchronised with his coming to the great city of Corinth. The reasons were very plain. He had recently come into Europe for the first time and had had to front a new condition of things, very different from what he had found in Palestine or in Asia Minor. His experience had not been encouraging. He had been imprisoned in Philippi; he had been smuggled away by night from Thessalonica; he had been hounded from Berea; he had all but wholly failed to make any impression in Athens, and in his solitude he came to Corinth, and lay quiet, and took stock of his adversaries. He came to the conclusion which he records in my text; he felt that it was not for him to argue with philosophers, or to attempt to vie with Sophists and professional orators, but that his only way to meet Greek civilisation, Greek philosophy, Greek eloquence, Greek self-conceit, was to preach ‘Christ and Him crucified.’ The determination was not come to in ignorance of the conditions that were fronting him. He knew Corinth, its wealth, its wickedness, its culture, and knowing these he said, ‘I have made up my mind that I will know nothing amongst you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.’

So, then, this Apostle’s conception of his theme was-the biography of a Man, with especial emphasis laid on one act in His history-His death. Christianity is Christ, and Christ is Christianity. His relation to the truth that He proclaimed, and to the truths that may be deducible from the story of His life and death, is altogether different from the relation of any other founder of a religion to the truths that he has proclaimed. For in these you can accept the teaching, and ignore the teacher. But you cannot do that with Christianity; ‘I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life’; and in that revealing biography, which is the preacher’s theme, the palpitating heart and centre is the death upon the Cross. So, whatever else Christianity comes to be-and it comes to be a great deal else-the principle of its growth, and the germ which must vitalise the whole, lie in the personality and the death of Jesus Christ.

That is not all. The history of the life and the death want something more to make them a gospel. The fact, I was going to say, is the least part of the fact; as in some vegetable growths, there is far more underground than above. For, unless along with, involved in, and deducible from, but capable of being stated separately from, the external facts, there is a certain commentary or explanation of them: the history is a history, the biography is a biography, the story of the Cross is a touching narrative, but it is no gospel.

And what was Paul’s commentary which lifted the bare facts up into the loftier region? This-as for the person, Jesus Christ ‘declared to be the son of God with power’-as for the fact of the death, ‘died for our sins according to the Scriptures.’ Let in these two conceptions into the facts-and they are the necessary explanation and presupposition of the facts-the Incarnation and the Sacrifice, and then you get what Paul calls ‘my gospel,’ not because it was his invention, but because it was the trust committed to him. That is the Gospel which alone answers to the facts which he deals with; and that is the Gospel which, God helping me, I have for forty years tried to preach.

We hear a great deal at present, or we did a few years ago, about this generation having recovered Jesus Christ, and about the necessity of going ‘back to the Christ of the Gospels.’ By all means, I say, if in the process you do not lose the Christ of the Epistles, who is the Christ of the Gospels, too. I am free to admit that a past generation has wrapped theological cobwebs round the gracious figure of Christ with disastrous results. For it is perfectly possible to know the things that are said about Him, and not to know Him about whom these things are said. But the mistake into which the present generation is far more likely to fall than that of substituting theology for Christ, is the converse one-that of substituting an undefined Christ for the

Christ of the Gospels and the Epistles, the Incarnate Son of God, who died for our salvation. And that is a more disastrous mistake than the other, for you can know nothing about Him and He can be nothing to you, except as you grasp the Apostolic explanation of the bare facts-seeing in Him the Word who became flesh, the Son who died that we might receive the adoption of sons.

I would further point out that a clear conception of what the theme is, goes a long way to determine the method in which it shall be proclaimed. The Apostle says, in the passage which is parallel to the present one, in the previous chapter, ‘We preach Christ crucified’; with strong emphasis on the word ‘preach.’ ‘The Jew required a sign’; he wanted a man who would do something. The Greek sought after wisdom; he wanted a man who would perorate and argue and dissertate. Paul says, ‘No!’ ‘We have nothing to *do*. We do not come to philosophise and to argue. We come with a message of fact that has occurred, of a Person that has lived.’ And, as most of you know, the word which he uses means in its full signification, ‘to proclaim as a herald does.’

Of course, if my business were to establish a set of principles, theological or otherwise, then argumentation would be my weapon, proofs would be my means, and my success would be that I should win your credence, your intellectual consent, and conviction. If I were here to proclaim simply a morality, then the thing that I would aim to secure would be obedience, and the method of securing it would be to enforce the authority and reasonableness of the command. But, seeing that my task is to proclaim a living Person and a historical fact, then the way to do that is to do as the herald does when in the market-place he stands, trumpet in one hand and the King’s message in the other-proclaim it loudly, confidently, not ‘with bated breath and whispering humbleness,’ as if apologising, nor too much concerned to buttress it up with argumentation out of his own head, but to say, ‘Thus saith the Lord,’ and to what the Lord saith conscience says, ‘Amen.’ Brethren, we need far more, in all our pulpits, of that unhesitating confidence in the plain, simple proclamation, stripped, as far as possible, of human additions and accretions, of the great fact and the great Person on whom all our salvation depends.

II. So let me ask you to notice the exclusiveness which this theme demands.

‘Nothing but,’ says Paul. I might venture to say-though perhaps the tone of the personal allusions in this sermon may seem to contradict it-that this exclusiveness is to be manifested in one very difficult direction, and that that is, the herald shall efface himself. We have to hold up the picture; and if I might take such a metaphor, like a man in a gallery who is displaying some masterpiece to the eyes of the beholders, we have to keep ourselves well behind it; and it will be wise if not even a finger-tip is allowed to steal in front and come into sight. One condition, I believe, of real power in the ministration of the Gospel, is that people shall be convinced that the preacher is thinking not at all about himself, but altogether about his message. You remember that wonderfully pathetic utterance from John the Baptist’s stern lips, which derives much additional pathos and tenderness from the character of the man from whom it came, when they asked him, ‘Who art thou?’ and his answer was, ‘I am a Voice.’ I am a Voice; that is all! Ah, that is the example! We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord. We must efface ourselves if we would proclaim Christ.

But I turn to another direction in which this theme demands exclusiveness, and I revert to the previous chapter where in the parallel portion to the words of my text, we find the Apostle very clearly conscious of the two great streams of expectation and wish which he deliberately thwarted and set at nought. ‘The Jews require a sign-but we preach Christ crucified. The Greeks seek after wisdom,’ but again, ‘we preach Christ crucified.’ Now, take these two. They are representations, in a very emphatic way, of two sets of desires and mental characteristics, which divide the world between them.

On the one hand, there is the sensuous tendency that wants something done for it, something to see, something that sense can grasp at; and so, as it fancies, work itself upwards into a higher region. ‘The Jew requires a sign’-that is, not merely a miracle, but something to look at. He wants a visible sacrifice; he wants a priest. He wants religion to consist largely in the doing of certain acts which may be supposed to bring, in some magical fashion, spiritual blessings. And Paul opposes to that, ‘We preach Christ crucified.’

Brethren, the tendency is strong to-day, not only in those parts of the Anglican communion where sacramentarian theories are in favour, but amongst all sections of the Christian Church, in which there is obvious a drift towards more ornate ritual, and aesthetic services, as means of attracting to church or chapel, and as more important than proclaiming Christ. I am free to confess that possibly some of us, with our Puritan upbringing and tendency, too much disregard that side of human nature. Possibly it is so. But for all that I profoundly believe that if religion is to be strong it must have a very, very small infusion of these external aids to spiritual worship, and that few things more weaken the power of the Gospel that Paul preached than the lowering of the flag in conformity with desires of men of sense, and substituting for the simple glory of the preached Word the meretricious, and in time impotent, and always corrupting, attractions of a sensuous worship.

Further, 'The Greeks seek after wisdom.' They wanted demonstration, abstract principles, systematised philosophies, and the like. Paul comes again with his 'We preach Christ and Him crucified.' The wisdom is there, as I shall have to say in a moment, but the form that it takes is directly antagonistic to the wishes of these wisdom-seeking Greeks. The same thing in modern guise besets us to-day. We are called upon, on all sides, to bring into the pulpit what they call an ethical gospel; putting it into plain English, to preach morality, and to leave out Christ. We are called upon, on all sides, to preach an applied Christianity, a social gospel-that is to say, largely to turn the pulpit into a Sunday supplement to the daily newspaper. We are asked to deal with the intellectual difficulties which spring from the collision of science, true or false, with religion, and the like. All that is right enough. But I believe from my heart that the thing to do is to copy Paul's example, and to preach Christ and Him crucified. You may think me right or you may think me wrong, but here and now, at the end of forty years, I should like to say that I have for the most part ignored that class of subjects deliberately, and of set purpose, and with a profound conviction, be it erroneous or not, that a ministry which listens much to the cry for 'wisdom' in its modern forms, has departed from the true perspective of Christian teaching, and will weaken the churches which depend upon it. Let who will turn the pulpit into a professor's chair, or a lecturer's platform, or a concert-room stage or a politician’s rostrum, I for one determine to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

III. Lastly, observe the all-sufficient comprehensiveness which this theme secures.

Paul says ‘nothing but’; he might have said ‘everything in.’ For ‘Jesus Christ and Him crucified’ covers all the ground of men’s needs. No doubt many of you will have been saying to yourselves whilst you have been listening, if you have been listening, to what I have been saying, ‘Ah! old-fashioned narrowness; quite out of date in this generation.’ Brethren, there are two ways of adapting one’s ministry to the times. One is falling in with the requirements of the times, and the other is going dead against them, and both of these methods have to be pursued by us.

But the exclusiveness of which I have been speaking, is no narrow exclusiveness. Paul felt that, if he was to give the Corinthians what they needed, he must refuse to give them what they wanted, and that whilst he crossed their wishes he was consulting their necessities. That is true yet, for the preaching that bases itself upon the life and death of Jesus Christ, conceived as Paul had learned from Jesus Christ to conceive them, that Gospel, whilst it brushes aside men’s superficial wishes, goes straight to the heart of their deep-lying universal necessities, for what the Jew needs most is not a sign, and what the Greek needs most is not wisdom, but what they both need most is deliverance from the guilt and power of sin. And we all, scholars and fools, poets and common-place people, artists and ploughmen, all of us, in all conditions of life, in all varieties of culture, in all stages of intellectual development, in all diversities of occupation and of mental bias, what we all have in common is that human heart in which sin abides, and what we all need most to have is that evil drop squeezed out of it, and our souls delivered from the burden and the bondage. Therefore, any man that comes with a sign, and does not deal with the sin of the human heart, and any man that comes with a philosophical system of wisdom, and does not deal with sin, does not bring a Gospel that will meet the necessities even of the people to whose cravings he has been aiming to adapt his message.

But, beyond that, in this message of Christ and Him crucified, there lies in germ the satisfaction of all that is legitimate in these desires that at first sight it seems to thwart. ‘A sign?’ Yes, and where is there power like the power that dwells in Him who is the Incarnate might of omnipotence? ‘Wisdom?’ Yes, and where is there wisdom, except ‘in Him in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ ? Let the Jew come to the Cross, and in the weak Man hanging there, he will find a mightier revelation of the power of God than anywhere else. Let the Greek come to the Cross, and there he will find wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and redemption. The bases of all social, economical, political reform and well-being, lie in the understanding and the application to social and national life, of the principles that are wrapped in, and are deduced from, the Incarnation and the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We have not learned them all yet. They have not all been applied to national and individual life yet. I plead for no narrow exclusiveness, but for one consistent with the widest application of Christian principles to all life. Paul determined to know nothing but Jesus, and to know everything in Jesus, and Jesus in everything. Do not begin your building at the second-floor windows. Put in your foundations first, and be sure that they are well laid. Let the Sacrifice of Christ, in its application to the individual and his sins, be ever the basis of all that you say. And then, when that foundation is laid, exhibit, to your heart’s content, the applications of Christianity and its social aspects. But be sure that the beginning of them all is the work of Christ for the individual sinful soul, and the acceptance of that work by personal faith.

Dear friends, ours has been a long and happy union but it is a very solemn one. My responsibilities are great; yours are not small. Let me beseech you to ask yourselves if, with all your kindness to the messenger, you have given heed to the message. Have you passed beyond the voice that speaks, to Him of whom it speaks? Have you taken the truth-veiled and weakened as I know it has been by my words, but yet in them-for what it is, the word of the living God? My occupancy of this pulpit must in the nature of things, before long, come to a close, but the message which I have brought to you will survive all changes in the voice that speaks here. ‘All flesh is grass . . . the Word of the Lord endureth for ever.’ And, closing these forty years, during a long part of which some of you have listened most lovingly and most forbearingly, I leave with you this, which I venture to quote, though it is my Master’s word about Himself, ‘I judge you not; the word which I have spoken unto you, the same shall judge you in the last day.’

4) 1 Corinthians 3:9

1 Corinthians

GOD’S FELLOW-WORKERS

1Co. 3:9.

The characteristic Greek tendency to factions was threatening to rend the Corinthian Church, and each faction was swearing by a favourite teacher. Paul and his companion, Apollos, had been taken as the figureheads of two of these parties, and so he sets himself in the context, first of all to show that neither of the two was of any real importance in regard to the Church’s life. They were like a couple of gardeners, one of whom did the planting, and the other the watering; but neither the man that put the little plant into the ground, nor the man that came after him with a watering-pot, had anything to do with originating the mystery of the life by which the plant grew. That was God’s work, and the pair that had planted and watered were nothing. So what was the use of fighting which of two nothings was the greater?

But then he bethinks himself that that is not quite all. The man that plants and the man that waters are something after all. They do not communicate life, but they do provide for its nourishment. And more than that, the two operations-that of the man with the dibble and that of the man with the watering-pot-are one in issue; and so they are partners, and in some respects may be regarded as one. Then what is the sense of pitting them against each other?

But even that is not quite all; though united in operation, they are separate in responsibility and activity, and will be separate in reward. And even that is not all; for, being nothing and yet something, being united and yet separate, they are taken into participation and co-operation with God; and as my text puts it, in what is almost a presumptuous phrase, they are ‘labourers together with Him.’ That partnership of co-operation is not merely a partnership of the two, but it is a partnership of the three-God and the two who, in some senses, are one.

Now whilst this text is primarily spoken in regard to the apostolic and evangelistic work of these early teachers, the principle which it embodies is a very wide one, and it applies in all regions of life and activity, intellectual, scholastic, philanthropic, social. Where-ever men are thinking God's thoughts and trying to carry into effect any phase or side of God's manifold purposes of good and blessing to the world, there it is true. We claim no special or exclusive prerogative for the Christian teacher. Every man that is trying to make men understand God's thought, whether it is expressed in creation, or whether it is written in history, or whether it is carven in half-obliterated letters on the constitution of human nature, every man who, in any region of society or life, is seeking to effect the great designs of the universal loving Father-can take to himself, in the measure and according to the manner of his special activity, the great encouragement of my text, and feel that he, too, in his little way, is a fellow-helper to the truth and a fellow-worker with God. But then, of course, according to New Testament teaching, and according to the realities of the case, the highest form in which men thus can co-operate with God, and carry into effect His purposes is that in which men devote themselves, either directly or indirectly, to spreading throughout the whole world the name and the power of the Saviour Jesus Christ, in whom all God's will is gathered, and through whom all God's blessings are communicated to mankind. So the thought of my text comes appropriately when I have to bring before you the claims of our missionary operations.

Now, the first way in which I desire to look at this great idea expressed in these words, is that we find in it

I. A solemn thought.

'Labourers together with God.' Cannot He do it all Himself? No. God needs men to carry out His purposes. True, on the Cross, Jesus spoke the triumphant word, 'It is finished!' He did not thereby simply mean that He had completed all His suffering; but He meant that He had then done all which the world needed to have done in order that it should be a redeemed world. But for the distribution and application of that finished work God depends on men. You all know, in your own daily businesses, how there must be a middleman between the mill and the consumer. The question of organising a distributing agency is quite as important as any other part of the manufacturer's business. The great reservoir is full, but there has to be a system of irrigating-channels by which the water is carried into every corner of the field that is to be watered. Christian men individually, and the Church collectively, supply-may I call it the missing link?-between a redeeming Saviour and the world which He has redeemed in act, but which is not actually redeemed, until it has received the message of the great Redemption that is wrought. The supernatural is implanted in the very heart of the mass of leaven by the Incarnation and Sacrifice of Jesus Christ; but the spreading of that supernatural revelation is left in the hands of men who work through natural processes, and who thus become labourers together with God, and enable Christ to be to single souls, in blessed reality, what He is potentially to the world, and has been ever since. He died upon the Cross. 'It is finished.' Yes-because it is finished, our work begins.

Let me remind you of the profound symbolism in that incident where our Lord for once appeared conspicuously, and almost ostentatiously, before Israel as its true King. He had need-as He Himself said-of the meek beast on which He rode. He cannot pass, in His coronation procession, through the world unless He has us, by whom He may be carried into every corner of the earth. So 'the Lord has need' of us, and we are 'fellow-labourers with Him.'

But this same thought suggests another point. We have here a solemn call addressed to every Christian man and woman.

Do not let us run away with the idea that, because here the Apostle is speaking in regard to himself and Apollos, he is enunciating a truth which applies only to Apostles and evangelists. It is true of all Christians. My knowledge of and faith in Jesus Christ as my own personal Saviour impose upon me the obligation, in so far as my opportunities and capacities extend, thus to co-operate with Him in spreading His great Name. Every Christian man, just because he is a Christian, is invested with the power-and power to its last particle is duty-and is, therefore, burdened with the honourable obligation to work for God. There is such a thing as 'coming to the help of the Lord,' though that phrase seems to reverse altogether the true relation. It is the duty of every Christian, partly because of loyalty to Jesus, and partly because of the responsibility which the very constitution of society lays upon every one of us, to diffuse what he possesses, and to be a distributing agent for the life that he himself enjoys. Brethren! there is no possibility of Christian men or women being fully faithful to the Saviour, unless they recognise that the duty of being a fellow-labourer with God inevitably follows on being a possessor of Christ's salvation; and that no Apostle, no official, no minister, no missionary, has any more necessity laid upon him to preach the Gospel, nor pulls down any heavier woe on himself if he is unfaithful, than has and does each one of Christ's servants.

So 'we are fellow-labourers with God.' Alas! alas! how poorly the average Christian realises-I do not say discharges, but realises-that obligation! Brethren, I do not wish to find fault, but I do beseech you to ask yourselves whether, if you are Christians, you are doing anything the least like what my text contemplates as the duty of all Christians.

May I say a word or two with regard to another aspect of this solemn call? Does not the thought of working along with God prescribe for us the sort of work that we ought to do? We ought to work in God's fashion, and if we wish to know what God's fashion is, we have but to look at Jesus Christ. We ought to work in Jesus Christ's fashion. We all know what that involved of self-sacrifice, of pain, of weariness, of utter self-oblivious devotion, of gentleness, of tenderness, of infinite pity, of love running over. 'The master's eye makes a good servant.' The Master's hand working along with the servant ought to make the servant work after the Master's fashion. 'As My Father hath sent Me, so send I you.' If we felt that side by side with us, like two sailors hauling on one rope, 'the Servant of the Lord' was toiling, do you not think it would burn up all our selfishness, and light up all our indifference, and make us spend ourselves in His service? A fellow-labourer with God will surely never be lazy and selfish. Thus my text has in it, to begin with, a solemn call.

It suggests

II. A signal honour.

Suppose a great painter, a Raphael or a Turner, taking a little boy that cleaned his brushes, and saying to him, 'Come into my studio, and I will let you do a bit of work upon my picture.' Suppose an aspirant, an apprentice in any walk of life, honoured by being permitted to work along with some one who was recognised all over the world as being at the very top of that special profession. Would it not be a feather in the boy's cap all his life? And would he not think it the greatest honour that ever had been done him that he was allowed to co-operate, in however inferior a fashion, with such an one? Jesus Christ says to us, 'Come and work here side by side with Me,' But Christian men, plenty of them, answer, 'It is a perpetual nuisance, this continual application for money! money! money! work! work! work! It is never-ending, and it is a burden!' Yes, it is a burden, just because it is an honour. Do you know that the Hebrew word which means 'glory' literally means 'weight' ? There is a great truth in that. You cannot get true honours unless you are prepared to carry them as burdens. And the highest honour that Jesus Christ gives to men when He says to them, not only 'Go work to-day in My vineyard,' but 'Come, work here side by side with Me,' is a heavy weight which can only be lightened by a cheerful heart.

Is it not the right way to look at all the various forms of Christian activity which are made imperative upon Christian people, by their possession of Christianity as being tokens of Christ's love to us? Do you remember that this same Apostle said, 'Unto me who am less than the least of all saints is this grace given, that I should preach the unsearchable riches of Christ?' He could speak about burdens and heavy tasks, and being 'persecuted but not forsaken,' almost crushed down and yet not in despair, and about the weights that came upon him daily, 'the care of all the churches,' but far beneath all the sense of his heavy load lay the thrill of thankful wonder that to him, of all men in the world, knowing as he did better than anybody else could do his own imperfection and insufficiency, this distinguishing honour had been bestowed, that he was made the Apostle to the Gentiles. That is the way in which the true man will always look at what the selfish man, and the half-and-half Christian, look at as being a weight and a weariness, or a disagreeable duty, which is to be done as perfunctorily as possible. One question that a great many who call themselves Christians ask is, 'With how little service can I pass muster?' Ah, it is because we have so little of the Spirit of Christ in us that we feel burdened by His command, 'Go ye into all the world,' as being so heavy; and that so many of us-I leave you to judge if you are in the class-so many of us make it criminally light if we do not ignore it altogether. I believe that, if it were possible to conceive of the duty and privilege of spreading Christ's name in the world being withdrawn from the Church, all His real servants would soon be yearning to have it back again. It is a token of His love; it is a source of infinite blessings to ourselves; 'if the house be not worthy, your peace shall return to you again.'

And now, lastly, we have suggested by this text

III. A strong encouragement.

'Fellow-labourers with God'-then, God is a Fellow-labourer with us. The co-operation works both ways, and no man who is seeking to spread that great salvation, to distribute that great wealth, to irrigate some little corner of the field by some little channel that he has dug, needs to feel that he is labouring alone. If I am working with God, God is working with me. Do you remember that most striking picture which is drawn in the verses appended to Mark's Gospel, which tells how the universe seemed parted into two halves, and up above in the serene the Lord 'sat on the right hand of God,' while below, in the murky and obscure, 'they went everywhere preaching the Word.' The separation seems complete, but the two halves are brought together by the next word-'The Lord also,' sitting up yonder, 'working with them' the wandering preachers down here, 'confirming the words with signs following.' Ascended on high, entered into His rest, having finished His work, He yet is working with us, if we are labourers together with God. If we turn to the last book of Scripture, which draws back the curtain from the invisible world which is all filled with the glorified Christ, and shows its relations to the earthly militant church, we read no longer of a Christ enthroned in apparent ease, but of a Christ walking amidst the candlesticks, and of a Lamb standing in the midst of the Throne, and opening the seals, launching forth into the world the sequences of the world's history, and of the Word of God charging His enemies on His white horse, and behind Him the armies of God following. The workers who labour with God have the ascended Christ labouring with them.

But if God works with us, success is sure. Then comes the old question that Gideon asked with bitterness of heart, when he was threshing out his handful of wheat in a corner to avoid the oppressors, 'If the Lord be with us, wherefore is all this come upon us? Will any one say that the progress of the Gospel in the world has been at the rate which its early believers expected, or at the rate which its own powers warranted them to expect? Certainly not. And so it comes to this, that whilst every true labourer has God working with him, and therefore success is certain, the planter and the waterer can delay the growth of the plant by their unfaithfulness, by not expecting success, by not so working as to make it likely, or by neutralising their evangelistic efforts by their worldly lives. When Jesus Christ was on earth, it is recorded, 'He could there do no mighty works because of their unbelief, save that He laid His hands on a few sick folk and healed them.' A faithless Church, a worldly Church, a lazy Church, an unspiritual Church, an un-Christlike Church-which, to a large extent, is the designation of the so-called Church of to day-can clog His chariot-wheels, can thwart the work, can hamper the Divine Worker. If the Christians of Manchester were revived, they could win Manchester for Jesus. If the Christians of England lived their Christianity, they could make England what it never has been but in name-a Christian country. If the Church universal were revived, it could win the world. If the single labourer, or the community of such, is labouring 'in the Lord,' their labour will not be in vain; and if they thus plant and water, God will give the increase.

5) 1 Corinthians 3:12-13

1 Corinthians

THE TESTING FIRE

1Co. 3:12 - 1Co. 3:13.

Before I enter upon the ideas which the words suggest, my exegetical conscience binds me to point out that the original application of the text is not exactly that which I purpose to make of it now. The context shows that the Apostle is thinking about the special subject of Christian teachers and their work, and that the builders of whom he speaks are the men in the Corinthian Church, some of them his allies and some of them his rivals, who were superimposing upon the foundation of the preaching of Jesus Christ other doctrines and principles. The 'wood, hay, stubble' are the vapid and trivial doctrines which the false teachers were introducing into the

Church. The ‘gold, silver, and precious stones’ are the solid and substantial verities which Paul and his friends were proclaiming. And it is about these, and not about the Christian life in the general, that the tremendous metaphors of my text are uttered.

But whilst that is true, the principles involved have a much wider range than the one case to which the Apostle applies them. And, though I may be slightly deflecting the text from its original direction, I am not doing violence to it, if I take it as declaring some very plain and solemn truths applicable to all Christian people, in their task of building up a life and character on the foundation of Jesus Christ; truths which are a great deal too much forgotten in our modern popular Christianity, and which it concerns us all very clearly to keep in view. There are three things here that I wish to say a word about-the patchwork building, the testing fire, the fate of the builders.

I. First, the patchwork structure.

‘If any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble.’ In the original application of the metaphor, Paul is thinking of all these teachers in that church at Corinth as being engaged in building the one structure-I venture to deflect here, and to regard each of us as rearing our own structure of life and character on the foundation of the preached and accepted Christ.

Now, what the Apostle says is that these builders were, some of them, laying valuable things like gold and silver and costly stones-by which he does not mean jewels, but marbles, alabasters, polished porphyry or granite, and the like; sumptuous building materials, which were employed in great palaces or temples-and that some of them were bringing timber, hay, stubble, reeds gathered from the marshes or the like, and filling in with such trash as that. That is a picture of what a great many Christian people are doing in their own lives-the same man building one course of squared and solid and precious stones, and topping them with rubbish. You will see in the walls of Jerusalem, at the base, five or six courses of those massive blocks which are the wonders of the world yet; well jointed, well laid, well cemented, and then on the top of them a mass of poor stuff, heaped together anyhow; scamped work-may I use a modern vulgarism?-’jerry-building.’

You may go to some modern village, on an ancient historic site, and you will find built into the mud walls of the hovels in which the people are living, a marble slab with fair carving on it, or the drum of a great column of veined marble, and on the top of that, timber and clay mixed together.

That is the type of the sort of life that hosts of Christian people are living. For, mark, all the builders are on the foundation. Paul is not speaking about mere professed Christians who had no faith at all in them, and no real union with Jesus Christ. These builders were ‘on the foundation’; they were building on the foundation, there was a principle deep down in their lives-which really lay at the bottom of their lives-and yet had not come to such dominating power as to mould and purify and make harmonious with itself the life that was reared upon it. We all know that that is the condition of many men, that they have what really are the fundamental bases of their lives, in belief and aim and direction; and which yet are not strong enough to master the whole of the life, and to manifest themselves through it. Especially it is the condition of some Christian people. They have a real faith, but it is of the feeblest and most rudimentary kind. They are on the foundation, but their lives are interlaced with the most heterogeneous mixty-maxty of good and evil, of lofty, high, self-sacrificing thoughts and heavenward aspirations, of resolutions never carried out into practice; and side by side with these there shall be meannesses, selfishnesses, tempers, dispositions all contradictory of the former impulses. One moment they are all fire and love, the next moment ice and selfishness. One day they are all for God, the next day all for the world, the flesh, and the devil. Jacob sees the open heavens and the face of God and vows; to-morrow he meets Laban and drops to shifty ways. Peter leaves all and follows his Master, and in a little while the fervour has gone, and the fire has died down into grey ashes, and a flippant servant-girl’s tongue leads him to say ‘I know not the man.’ ‘Gold, silver, precious stones,’ and topping them, ‘wood, hay, stubble!’

The inconsistencies of the Christian life are what my text, in the application that I am venturing to make of it, suggests to us. Ah, dear friends! we do not need to go to Jacob and Peter; let us look at our own hearts, and if we will honestly examine one day of our lives, I think we shall understand how it is possible for a man, on the foundation, yet to build upon it these worthless and combustible things, ‘wood, hay, stubble.’

We are not to suppose that one man builds *only* ‘gold, silver, precious stones.’ There is none of us that does that. And we are not to suppose that any man who *is* on the foundations has so little grasp of it, as that he builds *only* ‘wood, hay, stubble.’

There is none of us who has not intermingled his building, and there is none of us, if we are Christians at all, who has not sometimes laid a course of ‘precious stones.’ If your faith is doing *nothing* for you except bringing to you a belief that you are not going to hell when you die, then it is no faith at all. ‘Faith without works is dead.’ So there is a mingling in the best, and-thank God!-there is a mingling of good with evil, in the worst of real Christian people.

II. Note here, the testing fire.

Paul points to two things, the day and the fire.

‘The day shall declare it,’ that is the day on which Jesus Christ comes to be the Judge; and it, that is ‘the day,’ ‘shall be revealed in fire; and the fire shall test every man’s work.’ Now, it is to be noticed that here we are moving altogether in the region of lofty symbolism, and that the metaphor of the testing fire is suggested by the previous enumeration of building materials, gold and silver being capable of being assayed by flame; and ‘wood, hay, stubble’ being combustible, and sure to be destroyed thereby. The fire here is not an emblem of punishment; it is not an emblem of cleansing. There is no reference to anything in the nature of what Roman Catholics call purgatorial fires. The allusion is simply to some stringent and searching means of testing the quality of a man’s work, and of revealing that quality.

So then, we come just to this, that for people ‘on the foundation,’ there is a Day of revelation and testing of their life’s work. It is a great misfortune that so-called Evangelical Christianity does not say as much as the New Testament says about the judgment that is to be passed on ‘the house of God.’ People seem to think that the great doctrine of salvation, ‘not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy,’ is, somehow or other, interfered with when we proclaim, as Paul proclaims, speaking to Christian people, ‘We must be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ,' and declares that 'Every man will receive the things done in his body, according to that he has done, whether it be good or bad.' Paul saw no contradiction, and there is no contradiction. But a great many professing Christians seem to think that the great blessing of their salvation by faith is, that they are exempt from that future revelation and testing and judgment of their acts. That is not the New Testament teaching. But, on the contrary, 'Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap,' was originally said to a church of Christian people. And here we come full front against that solemn truth, that the Lord will 'gather together His saints, those that have made a covenant with Him by sacrifice, that He may judge His people.' Never mind about the drapery, the symbolism, the expression in material forms with which that future judgment is arranged, in order that we may the more easily grasp it. Remember that these pictures in the New Testament of a future judgment are highly symbolical, and not to be interpreted as if they were plain prose; but also remember that the heart of them is this, that there comes for Christian people as for all others, a time when the light will shine down upon their past, and will flash its rays into the dark chambers of memory, and when men will-to themselves if not to others-be revealed 'in the day when the Lord shall judge the secrets of men according to my Gospel.'

We have all experience enough of how but a few years, a change of circumstances, or a growth into another stage of development, give us fresh eyes with which to estimate the moral quality of our past. Many a thing, which we thought to be all right at the time when we did it, looks to us now very questionable and a plain mistake. And when we shift our stations to up yonder, and get rid of all this blinding medium of flesh and sense, and have the issues of our acts in our possession, and before our sight-ah! we shall think very differently of a great many things from what we think of them now. Judgment will begin at the house of God.

And there is the other thought, that the fire which reveals and tests has also in it a power of destruction. Gold and silver will lose no atom of their weight, and will be brightened into greater lustre as they flash back the beams. The timber and the stubble will go up in a flare, and die down into black ashes. That is highly metaphorical, of course. What does it mean? It means that some men's work will be crumpled up and perish, and be as of none effect, leaving a great, black sorrowful gap in the continuity of the structure, and that other men's work will stand. Everything that we do is, in one sense, immortal, because it is represented in our final character and condition, just as a thin stratum of rock will represent forests of ferns that grew for one summer millenniums ago, or clouds of insects that danced for an hour in the sun. But whilst that is so, and nothing human ever dies, on the other hand, deeds which have been in accordance, as it were, with the great stream that sweeps the universe on its bosom will float on that surface and never sink. Acts which have gone against the rush of God's will through creation will be like a child's go-cart that comes against the engine of an express train-be reduced, first, to stillness, all the motion knocked out of them, and then will be crushed to atoms. Deeds which stand the test will abide in blessed issue for the doer, and deeds which do not will pass away in smoke, and leave only ashes. Some of us, building on the foundation, have built more rubbish than solid work, and that will be

'Cast as rubbish to the void
When God has made the pile complete.'

III. So, lastly, we have here the fate of the two builders.

The one man gets wages. That is not the bare notion of salvation, for both builders are conceived of as on the foundation, and both are saved. He gets wages. Yes, of course! The architect has to give his certificate before the builder gets his cheque. The weaver, who has been working his hand-loom at his own house, has to take his web to the counting-house and have it overlooked before he gets his pay. And the man who has built 'gold, silver, precious stones,' will have-over and above the initial salvation-in himself the blessed consequences, and unfold the large results, of his faithful service; while the other man, inasmuch as he has not such work, cannot have the consequences of it, and gets no wages; or at least his pay is subject to heavy deductions for the spoiled bits in the cloth, and for the gaps in the wall.

The Apostle employs a tremendous metaphor here, which is masked in our Authorised Version, but is restored in the Revised. 'He shall be saved, yet so as' [not 'by' but] 'through fire'; the picture being that of a man surrounded by a conflagration, and making a rush through the flames to get to a place of safety. Paul says that he will get through, because down *below* all inconsistency and worldliness, there was a little of that which ought to have been *above* all the inconsistency and the worldliness-a true faith in Jesus Christ. But because it was so imperfect, so feeble, so little operative in his life as that it could not keep him from piling up inconsistencies into his wall, therefore his salvation is so as through the fire.

Brethren, I dare not enlarge upon that great metaphor. It is meant for us professing Christians, real and imperfect Christians-it is meant for us; and it just tells us that there are degrees in that future blessedness proportioned to present faithfulness. We begin there where we left off here. That future is not a dead level; and they who have earnestly striven to work out their faith into their lives shall 'summer high upon the hills of God.' One man, like Paul in his shipwreck, shall lose ship and lading, though 'on broken pieces of the ship' he may 'escape safe to land'; and another shall make the harbour with full cargo of works of faith, to be turned into gold when he lands. If we build, as we all may, 'on that foundation, gold and silver and precious stones,' an entrance 'shall be ministered unto us abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'; whilst if we bring a preponderance of 'wood, hay, stubble,' we shall be 'saved, yet so as through the fire.'

6) 1 Corinthians 3:16

1 Corinthians

TEMPLES OF GOD

1Co. 3:16.

The great purpose of Christianity is to make men like Jesus Christ. As He is the image of the invisible God we are to be the images of the unseen Christ. The Scripture is very bold and emphatic in attributing to Christ's followers likeness to Him, in nature, in character, in relation to the world, in office, and in ultimate destiny. Is He the anointed of God? We are anointed-Christs in Him. Is He the Son of God? We in Him receive the adoption of sons. Is

He the Light of the world? We in Him are lights of the world too. Is He a King? A Priest? He hath made us to be kings and priests.

Here we have the Apostle making the same solemn assertion in regard to Christian men, 'Know ye not that ye are'-as your Master, and because your Master is-'that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?'

Of course the allusion in my text is to the whole aggregate of believers-what we call the Catholic Church, as being collectively the habitation of God. But God cannot dwell in an aggregate of men, unless He dwells in the individuals that compose the aggregate. And God has nothing to do with institutions except through the people who make the institutions. And so, if the Church as a whole is a Temple, it is only because all its members are temples of God.

Therefore, without forgetting the great blessed lesson of the unity of the Church which is taught in these words, I want rather to deal with them in their individual application now; and to try and lay upon your consciences, dear brethren, the solemn obligations and the intense practical power which this Apostle associated with the thought that each Christian man was, in very deed, a temple of God.

It would be very easy to say eloquent things about this text, but that is no part of my purpose.

I. Let me deal, first of all, and only for a moment or two, with the underlying thought that is here-that every Christian is a dwelling-place of God.

Now, do not run away with the idea that that is a metaphor. It was the outward temple that was the metaphor. The reality is that which you and I, if we are God's children in Jesus Christ, experience. There was no real sense in which that Mighty One whom the Heaven of Heavens cannot contain, dwelt in any house made with hands. But the Temple, and all the outward worship, were but symbolical of the facts of the Christian life, and the realities of our inward experience. These are the truths whereof the other is the shadow. We use words to which it is difficult for us to attach any meaning, when we talk about God as being locally present in any material building; but we do not use words to which it is so difficult to attach a meaning, when we talk about the Infinite Spirit as being present and abiding in a spirit shaped to hold Him, and made on purpose to touch Him and be filled by Him.

All creatures have God dwelling in them in the measure of their capacity. The stone that you kick on the road would not be there if there were not a present God. Nothing would happen if there were not abiding in creatures the force, at any rate, which is God. But just as in this great atmosphere in which we all live and move and have our being, the eye discerns undulations which make light, and the ear catches vibrations which make sound, and the nostrils are recipient of motions which bring fragrance, and all these are in the one atmosphere, and the sense that apprehends one is utterly unconscious of the other, so God's creatures, each through some little narrow slit, and in the measure of their capacity, get a straggling beam from Him into their being, and therefore they are.

But high above all other ways in which creatures can lie patent to God, and open for the influx of a Divine Indweller, lies the way of faith and love. Whosoever opens his heart in these divinely-taught emotions, and fixes them upon the Christ in whom God dwells, receives into the very roots of his being-as the water that trickles through the soil to the rootlets of the tree-the very Godhead Himself. 'He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit.'

That God shall dwell in my heart is possible only from the fact that He dwelt in all His fulness in Christ, through whom I touch Him. That Temple consecrates all heart-shrines; and all worshippers that keep near to Him, partake with Him of the Father that dwelt in Him.

Only remember that in Christ God dwelt completely, all 'the fulness of the Godhead bodily' was there, but in us it is but partially; that in Christ, therefore, the divine indwelling was uniform and invariable, but in us it fluctuates, and sometimes is more intimate and blessed, and sometimes He leaves the habitation when we leave Him; that in Christ, therefore, there was no progress in the divine indwelling, but that in us, if there be any true inhabitation of our souls by God, that abiding will become more and more, until every corner of our being is hallowed and filled with the searching effulgence of the all-pervasive Light. And let us remember that God dwelt in Christ, but that in us it is God in Christ who dwells. So to Him we owe it all, that our poor hearts are made the dwelling-place of God; or, as this Apostle puts it, in other words conveying the same idea, 'Ye are built upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief Corner-stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth . . . for a habitation of God through the Spirit.'

II. Now then, turning from this underlying idea of the passage, let us look, for a moment, at some of the many applications of which the great thought is susceptible. I remark, then, in the second place, that as temples all Christians are to be manifesters of God.

The meaning of the Temple as of all temples was, that there the indwelling Deity should reveal Himself; and if it be true that we Christian men and women are, in this deep and blessed reality of which I have been speaking, the abiding places and habitations of God, then it follows that we shall stand in the world as the great means by which God is manifested and made known, and that in a two-fold way; *to ourselves* and *to other people*.

The real revelation of God to our hearts must be His abiding in our hearts. We do not learn God until we possess God. He must fill our souls before we know His sweetness. The answer that our Lord made to one of His disciples is full of the deepest truth. 'How is it,' said one of them in his blundering way, 'how is it that Thou wilt manifest Thyself to us?' And the answer was, 'We will come and make Our abode with him.' You do not know God until, if I might so say, He sits at your fireside and talks with you in your hearts. Just as some wife may have a husband whom the world knows as hero, or sage, or orator, but she knows him as nobody else can; so the outside, and if I may so say, the public character of God is but the surface of the revelation that He makes to us, when in the deepest secrecy of our own hearts He pours Himself into our waiting spirits. O brethren! it is within the curtains of the Holiest of all that the Shekinah flashes; it is within our own hearts, shrined and templed there, that God reveals Himself to us, as He does not unto the world.

And then, further, Christian men, as the temples and habitations of God, are appointed to be the great means of making Him known to the world around.

The eye that cannot look at the sun can look at the rosy clouds that lie on either side of it, and herald its rising; their opalescent tints and pearly lights are beautiful to dim vision, to which the sun itself is too bright to be looked upon. Men will believe in a gentle Christ when they see you gentle. They will believe in a righteous love when they see it manifesting itself in you. You are 'the secretaries of God's praise,' as George Herbert has it. He dwells in your hearts that out of your lives He may be revealed. The pictures in a book of travels, or the diagrams in a mathematical work, tell a great deal more in half a dozen lines than can be put into as many pages of dry words. And it is not books of theology nor eloquent sermons, but it is a Church glowing with the glory of God, and manifestly all flushed with His light and majesty, that will have power to draw men to believe in the God whom it reveals. When explorers land upon some untravelled island and meet the gentle inhabitants with armlets of rough gold upon their wrists, they say there must be many a gold-bearing rock of quartz crystal in the interior of the land. And if you present yourselves, Christian men and women, to the world with the likeness of your Master plain upon you, then people will believe in the Christianity that you profess. You have to popularise the Gospel in the fashion in which go-betweens and middlemen between students and the populace popularise science. You have to make it possible for men to believe in the Christ because they see Christ in you. 'Know ye not that ye are the temples of the living God?' Let His light shine from you.

III. I remark again that as temples all Christian lives should be places of sacrifice.

What is the use of a temple without worship? And what kind of worship is that in which the centre point is not an altar? That is the sort of temple that a great many professing Christians are. They have forgotten the altar in their spiritual architecture. Have you got one in your heart? It is but a poor, half-furnished sanctuary that has not. Where is yours? The key and the secret of all noble life is to yield up one's own will, to sacrifice oneself. There never was anything done in this world worth doing, and there never will be till the end of time, of which sacrifice is not the centre and inspiration. And the difference between all other and lesser nobilities of life, and the supreme beauty of a true Christian life is that the sacrifice of the Christian is properly a *sacrifice*-that is, an offering to *God*, done for the sake of the great love wherewith He has loved us. As Christ is the one true Temple, and we become so by partaking of Him, so He is the one Sacrifice for sins for ever, and we become sacrifices only through Him. If there be any lesson which comes out of this great truth of Christians as temples, it is not a lesson of pluming ourselves on our dignity, or losing ourselves in the mysticisms which lie near this truth, but it is the hard lesson-If a temple, then an altar; if an altar, then a sacrifice. 'Ye are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, that ye may offer spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God'-sacrifice, priest, temple, all in one; and all for the sake and by the might of that dear Lord who has given Himself a bleeding Sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, that we might offer a Eucharistic sacrifice of thanks and praise and self-surrender unto Him, and to His Father God.

IV. And, lastly, this great truth of my text enforces the solemn lesson of the necessary sanctity of the Christian life.

'The temple of God,' says the context, 'the temple of God is holy, which [holy persons] ye are.' The plain first idea of the temple is a place set apart and consecrated to God.

Hence, of course, follows the idea of purity, but the parent idea of 'holiness' is not purity, which is the consequence, but consecration or separation to God, which is the root.

And so in very various applications, on which I have not time to dwell now, this idea of the necessary sanctity of the Temple is put forth in these two letters to the Corinthian Church. Corinth was a city honeycombed with the grossest immoralities; and hence, perhaps, to some extent the great emphasis and earnestness and even severity of the Apostle in dealing with some forms of evil.

But without dwelling on the details, let me just point you to three directions in which this general notion of sanctity is applied. There is that of our context here 'Know ye not that ye are the temple of God? If any man *destroy* the temple of God, him shall God destroy, for the temple of God is holy, and such ye are.'

He is thinking here mainly, I suppose, about the devastation and destruction of this temple of God, which was caused by schismatical and heretical teaching, and by the habit of forming parties, ‘one of Paul, one of Apollos, one of Cephas, one of Christ,’ which was rending that Corinthian Church into pieces. But we may apply it more widely than that, and say that anything which corrupts and defiles the Christian life and the Christian character assumes a darker tint of evil when we think that it is sacrilege-the profanation of the temple, the pollution of that which ought to be pure as He who dwells in it.

Christian men and women, how that thought darkens the blackness of all sin! How solemnly there peals out the warning, ‘If any man destroy or impair the temple,’ by any form of pollution, ‘him’ with retribution in kind, ‘him shall God destroy.’ Keep the temple clear; keep it clean. Let Him come with His scourge of small cords and His merciful rebuke. You Manchester men know what it is to let the money-changers into the sanctuary. Beware lest, beginning with making your hearts ‘houses of merchandise,’ you should end by making them ‘dens of thieves.’

And then, still further, there is another application of this same principle, in the second of these Epistles. ‘What agreement hath the temple of God with idols?’ ‘Ye are the temple of the living God.’

Christianity is intolerant. There is to be one image in the shrine. One of the old Roman Stoic Emperors had a pantheon in his palace with Jesus Christ upon one pedestal and Plato on the one beside Him. And some of us are trying the same kind of thing. Christ there, and somebody else here. Remember, Christ must be everything or nothing! Stars may be sown by millions, but for the earth there is one sun. And you and I are to shrine one dear Guest, and one only, in the inmost recesses of our hearts.

And there is another application of this metaphor also in our letter. ‘Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you?’ Christianity despises ‘the flesh’; Christianity reverences the body; and would teach us all that, being robed in that most wonderful work of God’s hands, which becomes a shrine for God Himself if He dwell in our hearts, all purity, all chastisement and subjugation of animal passion is our duty. Drunkenness, and gluttony, lusts of every kind, impurity of conduct, and impurity of word and look and thought, all these assume a still darker tint when they are thought of as not only crimes against the physical constitution and the moral law of humanity, but insults flung in the face of the God that would inhabit the shrine.

And in regard to sins of this kind, which it is so difficult to speak of in public, and which grow unchecked in secrecy, and are ruining hundreds of young lives, the words of this context are grimly true, ‘If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy.’ I speak now mainly in brotherly or fatherly warning to young men-did you ever read this, ‘His bones are full of the iniquities of his youth, which shall lie down with him in the dust’ ? ‘Know ye not that ye are the temple of God?’

And so, brethren, our text tells us what we may all be. There is no heart without its deity. Alas! alas! for the many listening to me now whose spirits are like some of those Egyptian temples, which had in the inmost shrine a coiled-up serpent, the mummy of a monkey, or some other form as animal and obscene.

Oh! turn to Christ and cry, ‘Arise, O Lord, into Thy rest, Thou and the ark of Thy strength.’ Open your hearts and let Christ come in. And before Him, as of old, the bestial Dagon will be found, dejected and truncated, lying on the sill there; and all the vain, cruel, lustful gods that have held riot and carnival in your hearts will flee away into the darkness, like some foul ghosts at cock-crow. ‘If any man hear My voice and open the door I will come in.’ And the glory of the Lord shall fill the house.

7) 1 Corinthians 3:21-22

1 Corinthians

SERVANTS AND LORDS

DEATH, THE FRIEND

1Co. 3:21 - 1Co. 3:22.

What Jesus Christ is to a man settles what everything else is to Him. Our relation to Jesus determines our relation to the universe. If we belong to Him, everything belongs to us. If we are His servants, all things are our servants. The household of Jesus, which is the whole Creation, is not divided against itself, and the fellow-servants do not beat one another. Two bodies moving in the same direction, and under the impulse of the same force, cannot come into collision, and since 'all things work together,' according to the counsel of His will, 'all things work together for good' to His lovers. The triumphant words of my text are no piece of empty rhetoric, but the plain result of two facts-Christ's rule and the Christian's submission. 'All things are yours, and ye are Christ's,' so the stars in their courses fight against those who fight against Him, and if we are at peace with Him we shall 'make a league with the beasts of the field, and the stones of the field,' which otherwise would be hindrances and stumbling-blocks, 'shall be at peace with' us.

The Apostle carries his confidence in the subservience of all things to Christ's servants very far, and the words of my text, in which he dares to suggest that 'the Shadow feared of man' is, after all, a veiled friend, are hard to believe, when we are brought face to face with death, either when we meditate on our own end, or when our hearts are sore and our hands are empty. Then the question comes, and often is asked with tears of blood, Is it true that this awful force, which we cannot command, does indeed serve us? Did it serve those whom it dragged from our sides; and in serving them, did it serve us? Paul rings out his 'Yes'; and if we have as firm a hold of Paul's Lord as Paul had, our answer will be the same. Let me, then, deal with this great thought that lies here, of the conversion of the last enemy into a friend, the assurance that we may all have that death is ours, though not in the sense that we can command it, yet in the sense that it ministers to our highest good.

That thought may be true about ourselves when it comes to our turn to die, and, thank God, has been true about all those who have departed in His faith and fear. Some of you may have seen two very striking engravings by a great, though somewhat unknown artist, representing Death as the Destroyer, and Death as the Friend. In the one case he comes into a scene of wild revelry, and there at his feet lie, stark and stiff, corpses in their gay clothing and with garlands on their brows, and feasters and musicians are flying in terror from the cowled Skeleton. In the other he comes into a quiet church belfry, where an aged saint sits with folded arms and closed eyes, and an open Bible by his side, and endless peace upon the wearied face. The window is flung wide to the sunrise, and on its sill perches a bird that gives forth its morning song. The cowled figure has brought rest to the weary, and the glad dawning of a new life to the aged, and is a friend. The two pictures are better than all the poor words that I can say. It depends on the people to whom he comes, whether he comes as a destroyer or as a helper. Of course, for all of us the mere physical facts remain the same, the pangs and the pain, the slow torture of the loosing of the bond, or the sharp agony of its instantaneous rending apart. But we have gone but a very little way into life and its experiences, if we have not learnt that identity of circumstances may cover profound difference of essentials, and that the same experiences may have wholly different messages and meanings to two people who are equally implicated in them. Thus, while the physical fact remains the same for all, the whole bearing of it may so differ that Death to one man will be a Destroyer, while to another it is a Friend.

For, if we come to analyse the thoughts of humanity about the last act in human life on earth, what is it that makes the dread darkness of death, which all men know, though they so seldom think of it? I suppose, first of all, if we seek to question our feelings, that which makes Death a foe to the ordinary experience is, that it is like a step off the edge of a precipice in a fog; a step into a dim condition of which the imagination can form no conception, because it has no experience, and all imagination’s pictures are painted with pigments drawn from our past. Because it is impossible for a man to have any clear vision of what it is that is coming to meet him, and he cannot tell ‘in that sleep what dreams may come,’ he shrinks, as we all shrink, from a step into the vast Inane, the dim Unknown. But the Gospel comes and says, ‘It *is* a land of great darkness,’ but ‘To the people that sit in darkness a great light hath shined.’

‘Our knowledge of that life is small,
The eye of faith is dim.’

But faith has an eye, and there is light, and this we can see-One face whose brightness scatters all the gloom, One Person who has not ceased to be the Sun of Righteousness with healing in His beams, even in the darkness of the grave. Therefore, one at least of the repellent features which, to the timorous heart, makes Death a foe, is gone, when we know that the known Christ fills the Unknown.

Then, again, another of the elements, as I suppose, which constitute the hostile aspect that Death assumes to most of us, is that it apparently hales us away from all the wholesome activities and occupations of life, and bans us into a state of apparent inaction. The thought that death is rest does sometimes attract the weary or harassed, or they fancy it does, but that is a morbid feeling, and much more common in sentimental epitaphs than among the usual thoughts of men. To most of us there is no joy, but a chill, in the anticipation that all the forms of activity which have so occupied, and often enriched, our lives here, are to be cut off at once. 'What am I to do if I have no books?' says the student. 'What am I to do if I have no mill?' says the spinner. 'What am I to do if I have no nursery or kitchen?' say the women. What are you to do? There is only one quieting answer to such questions. It tells us that what we are doing here is learning our trade, and that we are to be moved into another workshop there, to practise it. Nothing can bereave us of the force we made our own, being here; and 'there is nobler work for us to do' when the Master of all the servants stoops from His Throne and says: 'Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things; have thou authority over ten cities.' Then the faithfulness of the steward will be exchanged for the authority of the ruler, and the toil of the servant for a share in the joy of the Lord.

So another of the elements which make Death an enemy is turned into an element which makes it a friend, and instead of the separation from this earthly body, the organ of our activity and the medium of our connection with the external universe being the condemnation of the naked spirit to inaction, it is the emancipation of the spirit into greater activity. For nothing drops away at death that does not make a man the richer for its loss, and when the dross is purged from the silver, there remains 'a vessel unto honour, fit for the Master's use.' This mightier activity is the contribution to our blessedness, which Death makes to them who use their activities here in Christ’s service.

Then, still further, another of the elements which is converted from being a terror into a joy is that Death, the separator, becomes to Christ’s servants Death, the uniter. We all know how that function of death is perhaps the one that makes us shrink from it the most, dread it the most, and sometimes hate it the most. But it will be with us as it was with those who were to be initiated into ancient religious rites. Blindfolded, they were led by a hand that grasped theirs but was not seen, through dark, narrow, devious passages, but they were led into a great company in a mighty hall. Seen from this side, the ministry of Death parts a man from dear ones, but, oh! if we could see round the turn in the corridor, we should see that the solitude is but for a moment, and that the true office of Death is not so much to part from those beloved on earth as to carry to, and unite with, Him that is best Beloved in the heavens, and in Him with all His saints. They that are joined to Christ, as they who pass from earth are joined, are thereby joined to all who, in like manner, are knit to Him. Although other dear bonds are loosed by the bony fingers of the Skeleton, his very loosing of them ties more closely the bond that unites us to Jesus, and when the dull ear of the dying has ceased to hear the voices of earth that used to thrill it in their lowest whisper, I suppose it hears another Voice that says: ‘When thou passest through the fire I will be with thee, and through the waters they shall not overflow thee.’ Thus the Separator unites, first to Jesus, and then to ‘the general assembly and Church of the first-born,’ and leads into the city of the living God, the pilgrims who long have lived, often isolated, in the desert.

There is a last element in Death which is changed for the Christian, and that is that to men generally, when they think about it, there is an instinctive recoil from Death, because there is an instinctive suspicion that after Death is the Judgment, and that, somehow or other-never mind about the drapery in which the idea may be embodied for our weakness-when a man dies he passes to a state where he will reap the consequences of what he has sown here. But to Christ’s servant that last thought is robbed of its sting, and all the poison sucked out of it, for he can say: ‘He that died for me makes it possible for me to die undreading, and to pass thither, knowing that I shall meet as my Judge Him whom I have trusted as my Saviour, and so may have boldness before Him in the Day of Judgment.’

Knit these four contrasts together. Death as a step into a dim unknown *versus* Death as a step into a region lighted by Jesus; Death as the cessation of activity *versus* Death as the introduction to nobler opportunities, and the endowment with nobler capacities of service; Death as the separator and isolator *versus* Death as uniting to Jesus and all His lovers; Death as haling us to the judgment-seat of the adversary *versus* Death as bringing us to the tribunal of the Christ; and I think we can understand how Christians can venture to say, ‘All things are ours, whether life or death’ which leads to a better life.

And now let me add one word more. All this that I have been saying, and all the blessed strength for ourselves and calming in our sorrows which result therefrom, stand or fall with the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is nothing else that makes these things certain. There are, of course, instincts, peradventures, hopes, fears, doubts. But in this region, and in regard to all this cycle of truths, the same thing applies which applies round the whole horizon of Christian Revelation-if you want not speculations but certainties, you have to go to Jesus Christ for them. There were many men who thought that there were islands of the sea beyond the setting sun that dyed the western waves, but Columbus went and came back again, and brought their products-and then the thought became a fact. Unless you believe that Jesus Christ has come back from ‘the bourne from which no traveller returns,’ and has come laden with the gifts of ‘happy isles of Eden’ far beyond the sea, there is no certitude upon which a dying man can lay his head, or by which a bleeding heart can be staunched. But when He draws near, alive from the dead, and says to us, as He did to the disciples on the evening of the day of Resurrection, ‘Peace be unto you,’ and shows us His hands and His side, then we do not only speculate or think a future life possible or probable, or hesitate to deny it, or hope or fear, as the case may be, but we *know*, and we can say: ‘All things are ours . . . death’ amongst others. The fact that Jesus Christ has died changes the whole aspect of death to His servant, inasmuch as in that great solitude he has a companion, and in the valley of the shadow of death sees footsteps that tell him of One that went before.

Nor need I do more than remind you how the manner of our Lord’s death shows that He is Lord not only of the dead but of the Death that makes them dead. For His own tremendous assertion, ‘I have power to lay down My life, and I have power to take it again,’ was confirmed by His attitude and His words at the last, as is hinted at by the very expressions with which the Evangelists record the fact of His death: ‘He yielded up His spirit,’ ‘He gave up the ghost,’ ‘He breathed out His life.’ It is confirmed to us by such words as those remarkable ones of the Apocalypse, which speak of Him as ‘the Living One,’ who, by His own will, ‘became dead.’ He died because He would, and He would die because He loved you and me. And in dying, He showed Himself to be, not the Victim, but the Conqueror, of the Death to which He submitted. The Jewish king on the fatal field of Gilboa called his sword-bearer, and the servant came, and Saul bade him smite, and when his trembling hand shrank from such an act, the king fell on his own sword. The Lord of life and death summoned His servant Death, and He came obedient, but Jesus died not by Death’s stroke, but by His own act. So that Lord of Death, who died because He would, is the Lord who has the keys of death and the grave. In regard to one servant He says, ‘I will that he tarry till I come,’ and that man lives through a century, and in regard to another He says, ‘Follow thou Me,’ and that man dies on a cross. The dying Lord is Lord of Death, and the living Lord is for us all the Prince of Life.

Brethren, we have to take His yoke upon us by the act of faith which leads to a love that issues in an obedience which will become more and more complete, as we become more fully Christ’s. Then death will be ours, for then we shall count that the highest good for us will be fuller union with, a fuller possession of, and a completer conformity to, Jesus Christ our King, and that whatever brings us these, even though it brings also pain and sorrow and much from which we shrink, is all on our side. It is possible-may it be so with each of us!-that for us Death may be, not an enemy that bans us into darkness and inactivity, or hales us to a judgment-seat, but the Angel who wakes us, at whose touch the chains fall off, and who leads us through ‘the iron gate that opens of its own accord,’ and brings us into the City.

8) 1 Corinthians 3:23

1 Corinthians

SERVANTS AND LORDS

1Co. 3:21 - 1Co. 3:23.

The Corinthian Christians seem to have carried into the Church some of the worst vices of Greek-and English-political life. They were split up into wrangling factions, each swearing by the name of some person. Paul was the battle-cry of one set; Apollos of another. Paul and Apollos were very good friends, their admirers bitter foes-according to a very common experience. The springs lie close together up in the hills, the rivers may be parted by half a continent.

These feuds were all the more detestable to the Apostle because his name was dragged into them; and so he sets himself, in the first part of this letter, with all his might, to shame and to argue the Corinthian Christians out of their wrangling. This great text is one of the considerations which he adduces with that purpose. In effect he says, ‘To pin your faith to any one teacher is a wilful narrowing of the sources of your blessing and your wisdom. You say you are Paul’s men. Has Apollos got nothing that he could teach you? and may you not get any good out of brave brother Cephas? Take them all; they were all meant for your good. Let no man glory in individuals.’

That is all that his argument required him to say. But in his impetuous way he goes on into regions far beyond. His thought, like some swiftly revolving wheel, catches fire of its own rapid motion; and he blazes up into this triumphant enumeration of all the things that serve the soul which serves Jesus Christ. ‘You are lords of men, of the world of time, of death, of eternity; but you are not lords of yourselves. You belong to Jesus, and in the measure in which you belong to Him do all things belong to you.’

I. I think, then, that I shall best bring out the fulness of these words by simply following them as they lie before us, and asking you to consider, first, how Christ’s servants are men’s lords.

‘All things are yours, Paul, Apollos, Cephas.’ These three teachers were all lights kindled at the central Light, and therefore shining. They were fragments of His wisdom, of Him that spoke; varying, but yet harmonious, and mutually complementary aspects of the one infinite Truth had been committed to them. Each was but a part of the mighty whole, a little segment of the circle

‘They are but broken lights of Thee,
And Thou, O Lord! art more than they.’

And in the measure, therefore, in which men adhere to Christ, and have taken Him for theirs; in that measure are they delivered from all undue dependence on, still more from all slavish submission to, any single individual teacher or aspect of truth. To have Christ for ours, and to be His, which are only the opposite sides of the same thing, mean, in brief, to take Jesus Christ for the source of all knowledge of moral and religious truth. His Word is the Christian’s creed, His Person and the truths that lie in Him, are the fountains of all our knowledge of God and man. To be Christ’s is to take Him as the master who has absolute authority over conduct and practice. His commandment is the Christian’s duty; His pattern the Christian’s all-sufficient example; His smile the Christian’s reward. To be Christ’s is to take Him for the home of our hearts, in whose gracious and sweet love we find all sufficiency and a rest for our seeking affections. And so, if ye are His, Paul, Apollos, Cephas, all men are yours; in the sense that you are delivered from all undue dependence upon them; and in the sense that they subserve your highest good.

So the true democracy of Christianity, which abjures swearing by the words of any teacher, is simply the result of loyal adherence to the teaching of Jesus Christ. And that proud independence which some of you seek to cultivate, and on the strength of which you declare that no man is your master upon earth, is an unwholesome and dangerous independence, unless it be conjoined with the bowing down of the whole nature, in loyal submission, to the absolute authority of the only lips that ever spoke truth, truth only, and truth always. If Christ be our Master, if we take our creed from Him, if we accept His words and His revelation of the Father as our faith and our objective religion, then all the slavery to favourite names, all the taking of truth second-hand from the lips that we honour, all the partisanship for one against another which has been the shame and the ruin of the Christian Church, and is working untold mischiefs in it to-day, are ended at once. ‘One is your Master, even Christ.’ ‘Call no man Rabbi! upon earth; but bow before Him, the Incarnate and the Personal Truth.’

And in like manner they who are Christ’s are delivered from all temptations to make men’s maxims and practices and approbation the law of their conduct. Society presses upon each of us; what we call public opinion, which is generally the clatter of the half-dozen people that happen to stand nearest us, rules us; and it needs to be said very emphatically to all Christian men and women-Take your law of conduct from His lips, and from nobody else’s.

‘They say. What say they? Let them say.’ If we take Christ’s commandment for our absolute law, and Christ’s approbation for our highest aim and all-sufficient reward, we shall then be able to brush aside other maxims and other people’s opinions of us, safely and humbly, and to say, ‘With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you, or of man’s judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord.’

The envoy of some foreign power cares very little what the inhabitants of the land to which he is ambassador may think of him and his doings; it is his sovereign’s good opinion that he seeks to secure. The soldier’s reward is his commander’s praise, the slave’s joy is the master’s smile, and for us it ought to be the law of our lives, and in the measure in which we really belong to Christ it will be the law of our lives, that ‘we labour that, whether present or absent, we may be pleasing to Him.’

So, brethren, as teachers, as patterns, as objects of love which is only too apt to be exclusive and to master us, we can only take one another in subordination to our supreme submission to Christ, and if we are His, our duty, as our joy, is to count no man necessary to our wellbeing, but to hang only on the one Man, whom it is safe and blessed to believe utterly, to obey abjectly, and to love with all our strength, because He is more than man, even God manifest in the flesh.

II. And now let us pass to the next idea here, secondly, Christ's servants are the lords of 'the world.'

That phrase is used here, no doubt, as meaning the external material universe. These creatures around us, they belong to us, if we belong to Jesus Christ. That man owns the world who despises it. There are plenty of rich men in Manchester who say they possess so many thousand pounds. Turn the sentence about and it would be a great deal truer-the thousands of pounds possess them. They are the slaves of their own possessions, and every man who counts any material thing as indispensable to his wellbeing, and regards it as the chiefest good, is the slave-servant of that thing. He owns the world who turns it to the highest use of growing his soul by it. All material things are given, and, I was going to say, were created, for the growth of men, or at all events their highest purpose is that men should, by them, grow. And therefore, as the scaffolding is swept away when the building is finished, so God will sweep away this material universe with all its wonders of beauty and of contrivance, when men have been grown by means of it. The material is less than the soul, and he is master of the world, and owns it, who has got thoughts out of it, truth out of it, impulses out of it, visions of God out of it, who has by it been led nearer to his divine Master. If I look out upon a fair landscape, and the man who draws the rents of it is standing by my side, and I suck more sweetness, and deeper impulses, and larger and loftier thoughts out of it than he does, it belongs to me far more than it does to him. The world is his who from it has learned to despise it, to know himself and to know God. He owns the world who uses it as the arena, or wrestling ground, on which, by labour, he may gain strength, and in which he may do service. Antagonism helps to develop muscle, and the best use of the outward frame of things is that we shall take it as the field upon which we can serve God.

And now all these three things-the contempt of earth, the use of earth for growing souls, and the use of earth as the field of service-all these things belong most truly to the man who belongs to Christ. The world is His, and if we live near Him and cultivate fellowship with Him, and see His face gleaming through all the Material, and are led up nearer to Him by everything around us, then we own the world and wring the sweetness to the last drop out of it, though we may have but little of that outward relation to its goods which short-sighted men call possessing them. We may solve the paradox of those who, ‘having nothing, yet have all,’ if we belong to Christ the Lord of all things, and so have co-possession with Him of all His riches.

III. Further, my text tells us, in the third place, that Christian men, who belong to Jesus Christ, are the lords and masters of ‘life and death.’

Both of these words are here used, as it seems to me, in their simple, physical sense, natural life and natural death. You may say, ‘Well, everybody is lord of life in that sense.’ Yes, of course, in a fashion we all possess it, seeing that we are all alive. But that mysterious gift of personality, that awful gift of conscious existence, only belongs, in the deepest sense, to the men who belong to Jesus Christ. I do not call that man the owner of his own life who is not the lord of his own spirit. I do not see in what, except in the mere animal sense in which a fly, or a spider, or a toad may be called the master of its life, that man owns himself who has not given up himself to Jesus Christ. The only way to get a real hold of yourselves is to yield yourselves to Him who gives you back Himself, and yourself along with Him. The true ownership of life depends upon self-control, and self-control depends upon letting Jesus Christ govern us wholly. So the measure in which it is true of me that ‘I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,’ is the measure in which the lower life of sense really belongs to us, and ministers to our highest good.

And then turn to the other member of this wonderful antithesis, ‘whether life or *death*.’ Surely if there is anything over which no man can become lord, except by sinfully taking his fate into his own hands, it is death. And yet even death, in which we seem to be abjectly passive, and by which so many of us are dragged away reluctantly from everything that we care to possess, may become a matter of consent and therefore a moral act. Animals expire; a Christian man may yield his soul to his Saviour, who is the Lord both of the dead and of the living. If thus we feel our dependence upon Him, and yield up our lives to Him, and can say, ‘Living or dying we are the Lord’s,’ then we may be quite sure that death, too, will be our servant, and that our wills will be concerned even in passing out of life.

Still more, if you and I, dear brethren, belong to Jesus Christ, then death is our fellow-servant who comes to call us out of this ill-lighted workshop into the presence of the King. And at His magic cold touch, cares and toils and sorrows are stiffened into silence, like noisy streams bound in white frost; and we are lifted clean up out of all the hubbub and the toil into eternal calm. Death is ours because it fulfils our deepest desires, and comes as a messenger to paupers to tell them they have a great estate. Death is ours if we be Christ's.

IV. And lastly, Christ's servants are the lords of time and eternity, 'things present or things to come.'

Our Apostle's division, in this catalogue of his, is rhetorical rather than logical; and we need not seek to separate the first of this final pair from others which we have already encountered in our study of the words, but still we may draw a distinction. The whole mass of 'things present,' including not only that material universe which we call the world, but all the events and circumstances of our lives, over these we may exercise supreme control. If we are bowing in humble submission to Jesus Christ, they will all subserve our highest good. Every weather will be right; night and day equally desirable; the darkness will be good for eyes that have been tired of brightness and that need repose, the light will be good. The howling tempests of winter and its white snows, the sharp winds of spring and its bursting sunshine; the calm steady heat of June and the mellowing days of August, all serve to ripen the grain. And so all 'things present,' the light and the dark, the hopes fulfilled and the hopes disappointed, the gains and the losses, the prayers answered and the prayers unanswered, they will all be recognised, if we have the wisdom that comes from submission to Jesus Christ's will, as being ours and ministering to our highest blessing.

We shall be their lords too inasmuch as we shall be able to control them. We need not be 'anvils but hammers.' We need not let outward circumstances dominate and tyrannise over us. We need not be like the mosses in the stream, that lie whichever way the current sets, nor like some poor little sailing boat that is at the mercy of the winds and the waves, but may carry an inward impulse like some great ocean-going steamer, the throb of whose power shall drive us straight forward on our course, whatever beats against us. That we may have this inward power and mastery over things present, and not be shaped and moulded and made by them, let us yield ourselves to Christ, and He will help us to rule them.

And then, all ‘things to come,’ the dim, vague future, shall be for each of us like some sunlit ocean stretching shoreless to the horizon; every little ripple flashing with its own bright sunshine, and all bearing us onwards to the great Throne that stands on the sea of glass mingled with fire.

Then, my brother, ask yourselves what your future is if you have not Christ for your Friend.

‘I backward cast mine eye

On prospects drear;

And forward though I cannot see,

I guess and fear.’

So I beseech you, yield yourselves to Jesus Christ, He died to win us. He bears our sins that they may be all forgiven. If we give ourselves to Him who has given Himself to us, then we shall be lords of men, of the world, of life and death, of time and eternity.

In the old days conquerors used to bestow upon their followers lands and broad dominions on condition of their doing suit and service, and bringing homage to them. Christ, the King of the universe, makes His subjects kings, and will give us to share in His dominion, so that to each of us may be fulfilled that boundless and almost unbelievable promise: ‘He that overcometh shall inherit all things.’ ‘All are yours if ye are Christ’s.’

9) 1 Corinthians 4:3-4

1 Corinthians

THE THREE TRIBUNALS

1Co. 4:3 - 1Co. 4:4.

The Church at Corinth was honeycombed by the characteristic Greek vice of party spirit. The three great teachers, Paul, Peter, Apollos, were pitted against each other, and each was unduly exalted by those who swore by him, and unduly depreciated by the other two factions. But the men whose names were the war-cries of these sections were themselves knit in closest friendship, and felt themselves to be servants in common of one Master, and fellow-workers in one task.

So Paul, in the immediate context, associating Peter and Apollos with himself, bids the Corinthians think of '*us*' as being servants of Christ, and not therefore responsible to men; and as stewards of the mysteries of God, that is, dispensers of truths long hidden but now revealed, and as therefore accountable for correct accounts and faithful dispensation only to the Lord of the household. Being responsible to Him, they heeded very little what others thought about them. Being responsible to Him, they could not accept vindication by their own consciences as being final. There was a judgment beyond these.

So here we have three tribunals-that of man's estimates, that of our own consciences, that of Jesus Christ. An appeal lies from the first to the second, and from the second to the third. It is base to depend on men's judgments; it is well to attend to the decisions of conscience, but it is not well to take it for granted that, if conscience approve, we are absolved. The court of final appeal is Jesus Christ, and what He thinks about each of us. So let us look briefly at these three tribunals.

I. First, the lowest-men's judgment.

'With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you,' enlightened Christians that you are, or by the outside world. Now, Paul's letters give ample evidence that he was keenly alive to the hostile and malevolent criticisms and slanders of his untiring opponents. Many a flash of sarcasm out of the cloud like a lightning bolt, many a burst of wounded affection like rain from summer skies, tell us this. But I need not quote these. Such a character as his could not but be quick to feel the surrounding atmosphere, whether it was of love or of suspicion. So, he had to harden himself against what naturally had a great effect upon him, the estimate which he felt that people round him were making of him. There was nothing brusque, rough, contemptuous in his brushing aside these popular judgments. He gave them all due weight, and yet he felt, ‘From all that this lowest tribunal may decide, there are two appeals, one to my own conscience, and one to my Master in heaven.’

Now, I suppose I need not say a word about the power which that terrible court which is always sitting, and which passes judgment upon every one of us, though we do not always hear the sentences read, has upon us all. There is a power which it is meant to have. It is not good for a man to stand constantly in the attitude of defying whatever anybody else chooses to say or to think about him. But the danger to which we are all exposed, far more than that other extreme, is of deferring too completely and slavishly to, and being far too subtly influenced in all that we do by, the thought of what A, B, or C, may have to say or to think about it. ‘The last infirmity of noble minds,’ says Milton about the love of fame. It is an infirmity to love it, and long for it, and live by it. It is a weakening of humanity, even where men are spurred to great efforts by the thought of the reverberation of these in the ear of the world, and of the honour and glory that may come therefrom.

But not only in these higher forms of seeking after reputation, but in lower forms, this trembling before, and seeking to conciliate, the tribunal of what we call ‘general opinion,’ which means the voices of the half-dozen people that are beside us and know about us, besets us all, and weakens us all in a thousand ways. How many men would lose all the motive that they have for living reputable lives, if nobody knew anything about it? How many of you, when you go to London, and are strangers, frequent places that you would not be seen in in Manchester? How many of us are hindered, in courses which we know that we ought to pursue, because we are afraid of this or that man or woman, and of what they may look or speak? There is a regard to man’s judgment, which is separated by the very thinnest partition from hypocrisy. There is a very shadowy distinction between the man who, consciously or unconsciously, does a thing with an eye to what people may say about it, and the man who pretends to be what he is not for the sake of the reputation that he may thereby win.

Now, the direct tendency of Christian faith and principle is to dwindle into wholesome insignificance the multitudinous voice of men’s judgments. For, if I understand at all what Christianity means, it means centrally and essentially this, that I am brought into loving personal relation with Jesus Christ, and draw from Him the power of my life, and from Him the law of my life, and from Him the stimulus of my life, and from Him the reward of my life. If there is a direct communication between me and Him, and if I am deriving from Him the life that He gives, which is 'free from the law of sin and death,' I shall have little need or desire to heed the judgment that men, who see only the surface, may pass upon me, and upon my doings, and I shall refer myself to Him instead of to them. Those who can go straight to Christ, whose lives are steeped in Him, who feel that they draw all from Him, and that their actions and character are moulded by His touch and His Spirit, are responsible to no other tribunal. And the less they think about what men have to say of them the stronger, the nobler, the more Christ-like they will be.

There is no need for any contempt or roughness to blend with such a putting aside of men's judgments. The velvet glove may be worn upon the iron hand. All meekness and lowliness may go with this wholesome independence, and must go with it unless that independence is false and distorted. 'With me it is a very small thing to be judged of you, or of man's judgment,' need not be said in such a tone as to mean 'I do not care a rush what you think about me'; but it must be said in such a tone as to mean 'I care supremely for one approbation, and if I have that I can bear anything besides.'

Let me appeal to you to cultivate more distinctly, as a plain Christian duty, this wholesome independence of men's judgment. I suppose there never was a day when it was more needed that men should be themselves, seeing with their own eyes what God may reveal to them and they are capable of receiving, and walking with their own feet on the path that fits them, whatsoever other people may say about it. For the multiplication of daily literature, the way in which we are all living in glass houses nowadays-everybody knowing everything about everybody else, and delighting in the gossip which takes the place of literature in so many quarters-and the tendency of society to a more democratic form give the many-headed monster and its many tongues far more power than is wholesome, in the shaping of the lives and character and conduct of most men. The evil of democracy is that it levels down all to one plane, and that it tends to turn out millions of people, as like each other as if they had been made in a machine. And so we need, I believe, even more than our fathers did, to lay to heart this lesson, that the direct result of a deep and strong Christian faith is the production of intensely individual character. And if there are plenty of angles in it, perhaps so much the better. We are apt to be rounded by being rubbed against each other, like the stones on the beach, till there is not a sharp corner or a point that can prick anywhere. So society becomes utterly monotonous, and is insipid and profitless because of that. You Christian people, be yourselves, after your own pattern. And whilst you accept all help from surrounding suggestions and hints, make it 'a very small thing that you be judged of men.' And you, young men, in warehouses and shops, and you, students, and you, boys and girls, that are budding into life, never mind what other people say. 'Let thine eyes look right onwards,' and let all the clatter on either side of you go on as it will. The voices are very loud, but if we go up high enough on the hill-top, to the secret place of the Most High, we shall look down and see, but not hear, the bustle and the buzz; and in the great silence Christ will whisper to us, 'Well done! good and faithful servant.' That praise is worth getting, and one way to get it is to put aside the hindrance of anxious seeking to conciliate the good opinion of men.

II. Note the higher court of conscience.

Our Apostle is not to be taken here as contradicting what he says in other places. 'I judge not mine own self,'-yet in one of these same letters to the Corinthians he says, 'If we judged ourselves we should not be judged.' So that he does not mean here that he is entirely without any estimate of his own character or actions. That he did in some sense judge himself is evident from the next clause, because he goes on to say, 'I know nothing against myself.' If he acquitted himself, he must previously have been judging himself. But his acquittal of himself is not to be understood as if it covered the whole ground of his life and character, but it is to be confined to the subject in hand-viz. his faithfulness as a steward of the mysteries of God. But though there is nothing in that region of his life which he can charge against himself as unfaithfulness, he goes on to say, 'Yet am I not hereby justified?'

Our absolution by conscience is not infallible. I suppose that conscience is more reliable when it condemns than when it acquits. It is never safe for a man to neglect it when it says, ‘You are wrong!’ It is just as unsafe for a man to accept it, without further investigation, when it says, ‘You are right!’ For the only thing that is infallible about what we call conscience is its sentence, ‘It is right to do right.’ But when it proceeds to say ‘This, that, and the other thing is right; and therefore it is right for you to do it,’ there may be errors in the judgment, as everybody’s own experience tells them. The inward judge needs to be stimulated, to be enlightened, to be corrected often. I suppose that the growth of Christian character is very largely the discovery that things that we thought innocent are not, for us, so innocent as we thought them.

You only need to go back to history, or to go down into your own histories, to see how, as light has increased, dark corners have been revealed that were invisible in the less brilliant illumination. How long it has taken the Christian Church to find out what Christ’s Gospel teaches about slavery, about the relations of sex, about drunkenness, about war, about a hundred other things that you and I do not yet know, but which our successors will wonder that we failed to see! Inquisitor and martyr have equally said, ‘We are serving God.’ Surely, too, nothing is more clearly witnessed by individual experience, than that we may do a wrong thing, and think that it is right. ‘They that kill you will think that they do God service.’

So, Christian people, accept the inward monition when it is stern and prohibitive. Do not be too sure about it when it is placable and permissive. ‘Happy is he that condemneth not himself in the thing which he alloweth.’ There may be secret faults, lying all unseen beneath the undergrowth in the forest, which yet do prick and sting. The upper floors of the house where we receive company, and where we, the tenants, generally live, may be luxurious, and sweet, and clean. What about the cellars, where ugly things crawl and swarm, and breed, and sting?

Ah, dear brethren! when my conscience says to me, ‘You may do it,’ it is always well to go to Jesus Christ, and say to Him ‘May I?’ ‘Search me, O God, and . . . see if there be any wicked way in me,’ and show it to me, and help me to cast it out. 'I know nothing against myself; yet am I not hereby justified.'

III. Lastly, note the supreme court of final appeal.

'He that judgeth me is the Lord.' Now it is obvious that 'the Lord' here is Christ, both because of the preceding context and because of the next verse, which speaks of His coming. And it is equally obvious, though it is often unnoticed, that the judgment of which the Apostle is here speaking is a present and preliminary judgment. 'He that *judgeth* me'-not, 'will judge,' but *now*, at this very moment. That is to say, whilst people round us are passing their superficial estimates upon me, and whilst my conscience is excusing, or else accusing me-and in neither case with absolute infallibility-there is another judgment, running concurrently with them, and going on in silence. That calm eye is fixed upon me, and sifting me, and knowing me. *That* judgment is not fallible, because before Him 'the hidden things' that the darkness shelters, those creeping things in the cellars that I was speaking about, are all manifest; and to Him the 'counsels of the heart,' that is, the motives from which the actions flow, are all transparent and legible. So His judgment, the continual estimate of me which Jesus Christ, in His supreme knowledge of me, has, at every moment of my life-*that* is uttering the final word about me and my character.

His estimate will dwindle the sentences of the other two tribunals into nothingness. What matter what his fellow-servants say about the steward's accounts, and distribution of provisions, and management of the household? He has to render his books, and to give account of his stewardship, only to his lord.

The governor of a Crown Colony may attach some importance to colonial opinion, but he reports home; and it is what the people in Downing Street will say that he thinks about. We have to report home; and it is the King whom we serve, to whom we have to give an account. The gladiator, down in the arena, did not much mind whether the thumbs of the populace were up or down, though the one was the signal for his life and the other for his death. He looked to the place where, between the purple curtains and the flashing axes of the lictors, the emperor sate. Our Emperor once was down on the sand Himself, and although we are 'compassed about with a cloud of witnesses,' we look to the Christ, the supreme Arbiter, and take acquittal or condemnation, life or death, from Him.

That judgment, persistent all through each of our lives, is preliminary to the future tribunal and sentence. The Apostle employs in this context two distinct words, both of which are translated in our version 'judge.' The one which is used in these three clauses, on which I have been commenting, means a preliminary examination, and the one which is used in the next verse means a final decisive trial and sentence. So, dear brethren, Christ is gathering materials for His final sentence; and you and I are writing the depositions which will be adduced in evidence. Oh! how little all that the world may have said about a man will matter then! Think of a man standing before that great white throne, and saying, 'I held a very high place in the estimation of my neighbours. The newspapers and the reviews blew my trumpet assiduously. My name was carved upon the plinth of a marble statue, that my fellow-citizens set up in honour of my many virtues,'-and the name was illegible centuries before the statue was burned in the last fire!

Brother! seek for the praise from Him, which is praise indeed. If He says, 'Well done, good and faithful servant,' it matters little what censures men may pass on us. If He says, 'I never knew you,' all their praises will not avail. 'Wherefore we labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him.'

10)1 Corinthians 5:8

1 Corinthians

THE FESTAL LIFE

1Co. 5:8.

There had been hideous immorality in the Corinthian Church. Paul had struck at it with heat and force, sternly commanding the exclusion of the sinner. He did so on the ground of the diabolical power of infection possessed by evil, and illustrated that by the very obvious metaphor of leaven, a morsel of which, as he says, 'will leaven the whole lump,' or, as we say, 'batch.' But the word 'leaven' drew up from the depths of his memory a host of sacred associations connected with the Jewish Passover. He remembered the sedulous hunting in every Jewish house for every scrap of leavened matter; the slaying of the Paschal Lamb, and the following feast. Carried away by these associations, he forgets the sin in the Corinthian Church for a moment, and turns to set forth, in the words of the text, a very deep and penetrating view of what the Christian life is, how it is sustained, and what it demands. 'Wherefore,' says he, 'let us keep the feast . . . with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.' That 'wherefore' takes us back to the words before it, And what are these? 'Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us'; therefore-because of that sacrifice, to us is granted the power, and on us is laid imperatively the obligation, to make life a festival and to purge ourselves. Now, in the notion of a feast, there are two things included-joy and plentiful sustenance. So there are three points here, which I have already indicated-what the Christian life is, a festival; on what it is sustained, the Paschal Sacrifice; what it demands, scrupulous purging out of the old leaven.

I. The Christian life ought to be a continual festival.

The Christian life a feast? It is more usually represented as a fight, a wrestle, a race; and such metaphors correspond, as it would appear, far more closely to the facts of our environment, and to the experiences of our hearts, than does such a metaphor as this. But the metaphor of the festival goes deeper than that of the fight or race, and it does not ignore the strenuous and militant side of the Christian life. No man ever lived a more strenuous life than Paul; no man had heavier tasks, and did them more cheerily; no man had a sterner fight and fought it more bravely. There is nothing soft, Epicurean, or oblivious of the patent sad facts of humanity in the declaration that after all, beneath all, above all, central to all, the Christian life is a glad festival, when it is the life that it ought to be.

But you say, 'Ah! it is all very well to call it so; but in the first place, continual joy is impossible in the presence of the difficulties, and often sadnesses, that meet us on our life's path; and, in the second place, it is folly to tell us to pump up emotions, or to ignore the occasions for much heaviness and sorrow of heart.' True; but, still, it is possible to cultivate such a temper as makes life habitually joyful. We can choose the aspect under which we by preference and habitually regard our lives. All emotion follows upon a preceding thought, or sensible experience, and we can pick the objects of our thoughts, and determine what aspect of our lives to look at most.

The sky is often piled with stormy, heaped-up masses of blackness, but between them are lakes of calm blue. We can choose whether we look at the clouds or at the blue. *These* are in the lower ranges; *that* fills infinite spaces, upwards and out to the horizon. These are transient, eating themselves away even whilst we look, and black and thunderous as they may be, they are there but for a moment-that is perennial. If we are wise, we shall fix our gaze much rather on the blue than on the ugly cloud-rack that hides it, and thus shall minister to ourselves occasions for the noble kind of joy which is not noisy and boisterous, 'like the crackling of thorns under a pot,' and does not foam itself away by its very ebullience, but is calm like the grounds of it; still, like the heaven to which it looks; eternal, like the God on whom it is fastened. If we would only steadfastly remember that the one source of worthy and enduring joy is God Himself, and listen to the command, 'Rejoice in the Lord,' we should find it possible to 'rejoice always.' For that thought of Him, His sufficiency, His nearness, His encompassing presence, His prospering eye, His aiding hand, His gentle consolation, His enabling help will take the sting out of even the bitterest of our sorrows, and will brace us to sustain the heaviest, otherwise crushing burdens, and greatly to 'rejoice, though now for a season we are in heaviness through manifold temptations.' The Gulf Stream rushes into the northern hemisphere, melts the icebergs and warms the Polar seas, and so the joy of the Lord, if we set it before us as we can and should do, will minister to us a gladness which will make our lives a perpetual feast.

But there is another thing that we can do; that is, we can clearly recognise the occasions for sorrow in our experience, and yet interpret them by the truths of the Christian faith. That is to say, we can think of them, not so much as they tend to make us sad or glad, but as they tend to make us more assured of our possession of, more ardent in our love towards, and more submissive in our attitude to, the all-ordering Love which is God. Brethren, if we thought of life, and all its incidents, even when these are darkest and most threatening, as being what it and they indeed are, His training of us into capacity for fuller blessedness, because fuller possession of Himself, we should be less startled at the commandment, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always,’ and should feel that it was possible, though the figtree did not blossom, and there was no fruit in the vine, though the flocks were cut off from the pastures, and the herds from the stall, yet to rejoice in the God of our salvation. Rightly understood and pondered on, all the darkest passages of life are but like the cloud whose blackness determines the brightness of the rainbow on its front. Rightly understood and reflected on, these will teach us that the paradoxical commandment, ‘Count it all joy that ye fall into divers temptations,’ is, after all, the voice of true wisdom speaking at the dictation of a clear-eyed faith.

This text, since it is a commandment, implies that obedience to it, and therefore the realisation of this continual festal aspect of life, is very largely in our own power. Dispositions differ, some of us are constitutionally inclined to look at the blacker, and some at the brighter, side of our experiences. But our Christianity is worth little unless it can modify, and to some extent change, our natural tendencies. The joy of the Lord being our strength, the cultivation of joy in the Lord is largely our duty. Christian people do not sufficiently recognise that it is as incumbent on them to seek after this continual fountain of calm and heavenly joy flowing through their lives, as it is to cultivate some of the more recognised virtues and graces of Christian conduct and character.

Secondly, we have here-

II. The Christian life is a continual feeding on a sacrifice.

‘Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Wherefore let us keep the feast.’ It is very remarkable that this is the only place in Paul’s writings where he articulately pronounces that the Paschal Lamb is a type of Jesus Christ. There is only one other instance in the New Testament where that is stated with equal clearness and emphasis, and that is in John’s account of the Crucifixion, where he recognises the fact that Christ died with limbs unbroken, as being a fulfilment, in the New Testament sense of that word, of what was enjoined in regard to the antitype, ‘a bone of him shall not be broken.’

But whilst the definite statement which precedes my text that Christ is ‘our Passover,’ and ‘sacrificed for us’ as such, is unique in Paul’s writings, the thought to which it gives clear and crystallised expression runs through the whole of the New Testament. It underlies the Lord’s Supper. Did you ever think of how great was the self-assertion of Jesus Christ when He laid His hand on that sacredest of Jewish rites, which had been established, as the words of the institution of it say, to be ‘a perpetual memorial through all generations,’ brushed it on one side, and in effect, said: ‘You do not need to remember the Passover any more. I am the true Paschal Lamb, whose blood sprinkled on the doorposts averts the sword of the destroying Angel, whose flesh, partaken of, gives immortal life. Remember Me, and this do in remembrance of Me.’ The Lord’s Supper witnesses that Jesus thought Himself to be what Paul tells the Corinthians that He is, even our Passover, sacrificed for us. But the point to be observed is this, that just as in that ancient ritual, the lamb slain became the food of the Israelites, so with us the Christ who has died is to be the sustenance of our souls, and of our Christian life. ‘Therefore let us keep the feast.’

Feed upon Him; that is the essential central requirement for all Christian life, and what does feeding on Him mean? ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ said the Jews, and the answer is plain now, though so obscure then. The flesh which He gave for the life of the world in His death, must by us be taken for the very nourishment of our souls, by the simple act of faith in Him. That is the feeding which brings not only sustenance but life. Christ’s death for us is the basis, but it is only the basis, of Christ’s living in us, and His death for me is of no use at all to me unless He that died for me lives in me. We feed on Him by faith, which not only trusts to the Sacrifice as atoning for sin, but feeds on it as communicating and sustaining eternal life-’Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, wherefore let us keep the Feast.’

Again, we keep the feast when our minds feed upon Christ by contemplation of what He is, what He has done, what He is doing, what He will do; when we take Him as ‘the Master-light of all our seeing,’ and in Him, His words and works, His Passion, Resurrection, Ascension, Session as Sovereign at the right hand of God, find the perfect revelation of what God is, the perfect discovery of what man is, the perfect disclosure of what sin is, the perfect prophecy of what man may become, the Light of light, the answer to every question that our spirits can put about the loftiest verities of God and man, the universe and the future. We feed on Christ when, with lowly submission, we habitually subject thoughts, purposes, desires, to His authority, and when we let His will flow into, and make plastic and supple, our wills. We nourish our wills by submitting them to Jesus, and we feed on Him when we not only say ‘Lord! Lord!’ but when we do the things that He says. We feed on Christ, when we let His great, sacred, all-wise, all-giving, all satisfying love flow into our restless hearts and make them still, enter into our vagrant affections and fix them on Himself. Thus when mind and conscience and will and heart all turn to Jesus, and in Him find their sustenance, we shall be filled with the feast of fat things which He has prepared for all people. With that bread we shall be satisfied, and with it only, for the husks of the swine are no food for the Father’s son, and we ‘spend our money for that which is not bread, and our labour for that which satisfieth not,’ if we look anywhere else than to the Paschal Lamb slain for us for the food of our souls.

III. The Christian life is a continual purging out of the old leaven.

I need not remind you how vivid and profoundly significant that emblem of leaven, as applied to all manner of evil, is. But let me remind you how, just as in the Jewish Ritual, the cleansing from all that was leavened was the essential pre-requisite to the participation in the feast, feeding on Jesus Christ, as I have tried to describe it, is absolutely impossible unless our leaven is cleansed away. Children spoil their appetites for wholesome food by eating sweetmeats. Men destroy their capacity for feeding on Christ by hungry desires, and gluttonous satisfying of those desires with the delusive sweets of this passing world. But, my brother, your experience, if you are a Christian man at all, will tell you that in the direct measure in which you have been drawn away into paltering with evil, your appetite for Christ and your capacity for gazing upon Him, contemplating Him, feeding on Him, has died out. There comes a kind of constriction in a man’s throat when he is hungering after lesser good, especially when there is a tinge of evil in the supposed good that he is hungering after, which incapacitates Him from eating the bread of God, which is Jesus Christ.

But let us remember that absolute cleansing from all sin is not essential, in order to have real participation in Jesus Christ. The Jew had to take every scrap of leaven out of his house before he began the Passover. If that were the condition for us, alas! for us all; but the effort after purity, though it has not entirely attained its aim, is enough. Sin abhorred does not prevent a man from participating in the Bread that came down from heaven.

Then observe, too, that for this power to cleanse ourselves, we must have had some participation in Christ, by which there is given to us that new life that conquers evil. In the words immediately preceding my text, the Apostle bases his injunction to purge out the old leaven on the fact that 'ye are unleavened.' Ideally, in so far as the power possessed by them was concerned, these Corinthians were unleavened, even whilst they were bid to purge out the leaven. That is to say, be what you are; realise your ideal, utilise the power you possess, and since by your faith there has been given to you a new life that can conquer all corruption and sin, see that you use the life that is given. Purge out the old leaven because ye are unleavened.

One last word-this stringent exhortation, which makes Christian effort after absolute purity a Christian duty, and the condition of participation in the Paschal Lamb, is based upon that thought to which I have already referred, of the diabolical power of infection which Evil possesses. Either you must cast it out, or it will choke the better thing in you. It spreads and grows, and propagates itself, and works underground through and through the whole mass. A water-weed got into some of our canals years ago, and it has all but choked some of them. The slime on a pond spreads its green mantle over the whole surface with rapidity. If we do not eject Evil it will eject the good from us. Use the implanted power to cast out this creeping, advancing evil. Sometimes a wine-grower has gone into his cellars, and found in a cask no wine, but a monstrous fungus into which all the wine had, in the darkness, passed unnoticed. I fear some Christian people, though they do not know it, have something like that going on in them.

It is possible for us all to keep this perpetual festival. To live in, on, for, Jesus Christ will give us victory over enemies, burdens, sorrows, sins. We may, if we will, dwell in a calm zone where no tempests rage, hear a perpetual strain of sweet music persisting through thunder peals of sorrow and suffering, and find a table spread for us in the presence of our enemies, at which we shall renew our strength for conflict, and whence we shall rise to fight the good fight a little longer, till we sit with Him at His table in His Kingdom, and 'eat, and live for ever.'

11)1 Corinthians 7:19

1 Corinthians

FORMS *VERSUS* CHARACTER

1Co. 7:19. - Gal. 5:6. - Gal. 6:16.

The great controversy which embittered so much of Paul's life, and marred so much of his activity, turned upon the question whether a heathen man could come into the Church simply by the door of faith, or whether he must also go through the gate of circumcision. We all know how Paul answered the question. Time, which settles all controversies, has settled that one so thoroughly that it is impossible to revive any kind of interest in it; and it may seem to be a pure waste of time to talk about it. But the principles that fought then are eternal, though the forms in which they manifest themselves vary with every varying age.

The Ritualist-using that word in its broadest sense-on the one hand, and the Puritan on the other, represent permanent tendencies of human nature; and we find to-day the old foes with new faces. These three passages, which I have read, are Paul's deliverance on the question of the comparative value of external rites and spiritual character. They are remarkable both for the identity in the former part of each and for the variety in the latter. In all the three cases he affirms, almost in the same language, that 'circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing,' that the Ritualist's rite and the Puritan's protest are equally insignificant in comparison with higher things. And then he varies the statement of what the higher things are, in a very remarkable and instructive fashion. The 'keeping of the commandments of God,' says one of the texts, is the all-important matter. Then, as it were, he pierces deeper, and in another of the texts [I take the liberty of varying their order] pronounces that 'a new creature' is the all-important thing. And then he pierces still deeper to the bottom of all, in the third text, and says the all-important thing is ‘faith which worketh by love.’

I think I shall best bring out the force of these words by dealing first with that emphatic threefold proclamation of the nullity of all externalism; and then with the singular variations in the triple statement of what is essential, viz. spiritual conduct and character.

I. First, the emphatic proclamation of the nullity of outward rites.

‘Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing,’ say two texts. ‘Circumcision availeth nothing, and uncircumcision availeth nothing,’ says the other. It neither is anything nor does anything. Did Paul say that because circumcision was a Jewish rite? No. As I believe, he said it because it was *a rite*; and because he had learned that the one thing needful was spiritual character, and that no external ceremonial of any sort could produce that. I think we are perfectly warranted in taking this principle of my text, and in extending it beyond the limits of the Jewish rite about which Paul was speaking. For if you remember, he speaks about baptism, in the first chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, in a precisely similar tone and for precisely the same reason, when he says, in effect, ‘I baptized Crispus and Gaius and the household of Stephanas, and I think these are all. I am not quite sure. I do not keep any kind of record of such things; God did not send me to baptize, He sent me to preach the Gospel.’

The thing that produced the spiritual result was not the rite, but the truth, and therefore he felt that his function was to preach the truth and leave the rite to be administered by others. Therefore we can extend the principle here to all externalisms of worship, in all forms, in all churches, and say that in comparison with the essentials of an inward Christianity they are nothing and they do nothing.

They have their value. As long as we are here on earth, living in the flesh, we must have outward forms and symbolical rites. It is in Heaven that the seer ‘saw no temple.’ Our sense-bound nature requires, and thankfully avails itself of, the help of external rites and ceremonials to lift us up towards the Object of our devotion. A man prays all the better if he bow his head, shut his eyes, and bend his knees. Forms do help us to the realisation of the realities, and the truths which they express and embody. Music may waft our souls to the heavens, and pictures may stir deep thoughts. That is the simple principle on which the value of all external aids to devotion depends. They may be helps towards the appreciation of divine truth, and to the suffusing of the heart with devout emotions which may lead to building up a holy character.

There is a worth, therefore-an auxiliary and subordinate worth-in these things, and in that respect they are *not* nothing, nor do they 'avail nothing.' But then all external rites tend to usurp more than belongs to them, and in our weakness we are apt to cleave to them, and instead of using them as means to lift us higher, to stay in them, and as a great many of us do, to mistake the mere gratification of taste and the excitement of the sensibilities for worship. A bit of stained glass may be glowing with angel-forms and pictured saints, but it always keeps some of the light out, and it always hinders us from seeing through it. And all external worship and form have so strong a tendency to usurp more than belongs to them, and to drag us down to their own level, even whilst we think that we are praying, that I believe the wisest man will try to pare down the externals of his worship to the lowest possible point. If there be as much body as will keep a soul in, as much form as will embody the spirit, that is all that we want. What is more is dangerous.

All form in worship is like fire, it is a good servant but it is a bad master, and it needs to be kept very rigidly in subordination, or else the spirituality of Christian worship vanishes before men know; and they are left with their dead forms which are only evils-crutches that make people limp by the very act of using them.

Now, my dear friends, when that has happened, when men begin to say, as the people in Paul's time were saying about circumcision, and as people are saying in this day about Christian rites, that they are necessary, then it is needful to take up Paul's ground and to say, 'No! they are nothing!' They are useful in a certain place, but if you make them obligatory, if you make them essential, if you say that grace is miraculously conveyed through them, then it is needful that we should raise a strong note of protestation, and declare their absolute nullity for the highest purpose, that of making that spiritual character which alone is essential.

And I believe that this strange recrudescence-to use a modern word-of ceremonialism and aesthetic worship which we see all round about us, not only in the ranks of the Episcopal Church, but amongst Nonconformists, who are sighing for a less bare service, and here and there are turning their chapels into concert-rooms, and instead of preaching the Gospel are having 'Services of Song' and the like-that all this makes it as needful to-day as ever it was to say to men: 'Forms are not worship. Rites may crush the spirit. Men may yield to the sensuous impressions which they produce, and be lapped in an atmosphere of aesthetic emotion, without any real devotion.'

Such externals are only worth anything if they make us grasp more firmly with our understandings and feel more profoundly with our hearts, the great truths of the Gospel. If they do that, they help; if they are not doing that, they hinder, and are to be fought against. And so we have again to proclaim to-day, as Paul did, 'Circumcision is nothing,' 'but the keeping of the commandments of God.'

Then notice with what remarkable fairness and boldness and breadth the Apostle here adds that other clause: 'and uncircumcision is nothing.' It is a very hard thing for a man whose life has been spent in fighting against an error, not to exaggerate the value of his protest. It is a very hard thing for a man who has been delivered from the dependence upon forms, not to fancy that his formlessness is what the other people think that their forms are. The Puritan who does not believe that a man can be a good man because he is a Ritualist or a Roman Catholic, is committing the very same error as the Ritualist or the Roman Catholic who does not believe that the Puritan can be a Christian unless he has been 'christened.' The two people are exactly the same, only the one has hold of the stick at one end, and the other at the other. There may be as much idolatry in superstitious reliance upon the bare worship as in the advocacy of the ornate; and many a Nonconformist who fancies that he has 'never bowed the knee to Baal' is as true an idol-worshipper in his superstitious abhorrence of the ritualism that he sees in other communities, as are the men who trust in it the most.

It is a large attainment in Christian character to be able to say with Paul, ‘Circumcision is nothing, and my own favourite point of uncircumcision is nothing either. Neither the one side nor the other touches the essentials.’

II. Now let us look at the threefold variety of the designation of these essentials here.

In our first text from the Epistle to the Corinthians we read, ‘Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.’ If we finished the sentence it would be, ‘but the keeping of the commandments of God is everything.’

And by that ‘keeping the commandments,’ of course, the Apostle does not mean merely external obedience. He means something far deeper than that, which I put into this plain word, that the one essential of a Christian life is the conformity of the will with God’s-not the external obedience merely, but the entire surrender and the submission of my will to the will of my Father in Heaven. That is the all-important thing; that is what God wants; that is the end of all rites and ceremonies; that is the end of all revelation and of all utterances of the divine heart. The Bible, Christ’s mission, His passion and death, the gift of His Divine Spirit, and every part of the divine dealings in providence, all converge upon this one aim and goal. For this purpose the Father worketh hitherto, and Christ works, that man’s will may yield and bow itself wholly and happily and lovingly to the great infinite will of the Father in heaven.

Brethren! that is the perfection of a man’s nature, when his will fits on to God’s like one of Euclid’s triangles superimposed upon another, and line for line coincides. When his will allows a free passage to the will of God, without resistance or deflection, as light travels through transparent glass; when his will responds to the touch of God’s finger upon the keys, like the telegraphic needle to the operator’s hand, then man has attained all that God and religion can do for him, all that his nature is capable of; and far beneath his feet may be the ladders of ceremonies and forms and outward acts, by which he climbed to that serene and blessed height, ‘Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of God’s commandments is everything.’

That submission of will is the sum and the test of your Christianity. Your Christianity does not consist only in a mere something which you call faith in Jesus Christ. It does not consist in emotions, however deep and blessed and genuine they may be. It does not consist in the acceptance of a creed. All these are means to an end. They are meant to drive the wheel of life, to build up character, to make your deepest wish to be, ‘Father! not my will, but Thine, be done.’ In the measure in which that is your heart’s desire, and not one hair’s-breadth further, have you a right to call yourself a Christian.

But, then, I can fancy a man saying: ‘It is all very well to talk about bowing the will in this fashion; how can I do that?’ Well, let us take our second text-the third in the order of their occurrence-’For neither circumcision is anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.’ That is to say, if we are ever to keep the will of God we must be made over again. Ay! we must! Our own consciences tell us that; the history of all the efforts that ever we have made-and I suppose all of us have made some now and then, more or less earnest and more or less persistent-tells us that there needs to be a stronger hand than ours to come into the fight if it is ever to be won by us. There is nothing more heartless and more impotent than to preach, ‘Bow your wills to God, and then you will be happy; bow your wills to God, and then you will be good.’ If that is all the preacher has to say, his powerless words will but provoke the answer, ‘We cannot. Tell the leopard to change his spots, or the Ethiopian his skin, as soon as tell a man to reduce this revolted kingdom within him to obedience, and to bow his will to the will of God. We cannot do it.’ But, brethren, in that word, ‘a new creature,’ lies a promise from God; for a creature implies a creator. ‘It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves.’ The very heart of what Christ has to offer us is the gift of His own life to dwell in our hearts, and by its mighty energy to make us free from the law of sin and death which binds our wills. We may have our spirits moulded into His likeness, and new tastes, and new desires, and new capacities infused into us, so as that we shall not be left with our own poor powers to try and force ourselves into obedience to God’s will, but that submission and holiness and love that keeps the commandments of God, will spring up in our renewed spirits as their natural product and growth. Oh! you men and women who have been honestly trying, half your lifetime, to make yourselves what you know God wants you to be, and who are obliged to confess that you have failed, hearken to the message: ‘If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature, old things are passed away.' The one thing needful is keeping the commandments of God, and the only way by which we can keep the commandments of God is that we should be formed again into the likeness of Him of whom alone it is true that 'He did always the things that pleased' God.

And so we come to the last of these great texts: 'In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.' That is to say, if we are to be made over again, we must have faith in Christ Jesus. We have got to the root now, so far as we are concerned. We must keep the commandments of God; if we are to keep the commandments we must be made over again, and if our hearts ask how can we receive that new creating power into our lives, the answer is, by 'faith which worketh by love.'

Paul did not believe that external rites could make men partakers of a new nature, but he believed that if a man would trust in Jesus Christ, the life of that Christ would flow into his opened heart, and a new spirit and nature would be born in him. And, therefore, his triple requirements come all down to this one, so far as we are concerned, as the beginning and the condition of the other two. 'Neither circumcision does anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love,' does everything. He that trusts Christ opens his heart to Christ, who comes with His new-creating Spirit, and makes us willing in the day of His power to keep His commandments.

But faith leads us to obedience in yet another fashion, than this opening of the door of the heart for the entrance of the new-creating Spirit. It leads to it in the manner which is expressed by the words of our text, 'worketh by love.' Faith shows itself living, because it leads us to love, and through love it produces its effects upon conduct.

Two things are implied in this designation of faith. If you trust Christ you will love Him. That is plain enough. And you will not love Him unless you trust Him. Though it lies wide of my present purpose, let us take this lesson in passing. You cannot work yourself up into a spasm or paroxysm of religious emotion and love by resolution or by effort. All that you can do is to go and look at the Master and get near Him, and that will warm you up.

You can love if you trust. Your trust will make you love; unless you trust you will never love Him.

The second thing implied is, that if you love you will obey. That is plain enough. The keeping of the commandments will be easy where there is love in the heart. The will will bow where there is love in the heart. Love is the only fire that is hot enough to melt the iron obstinacy of a creature's will. The will cannot be driven. Strike it with violence and it stiffens; touch it gently and it yields. If you try to put an iron collar upon the will, like the demoniac in the Gospels, the touch of the apparent restraint drives it into fury, and it breaks the bands asunder. Fasten it with the silken leash of love, and a 'little child' can lead it. So faith works by love, because whom we trust we shall love, and whom we love we shall obey.

Therefore we have got to the root now, and nothing is needful but an operative faith, out of which will come all the blessed possession of a transforming Spirit, and all sublimities and noblenesses of an obedient and submissive will.

My brother! Paul and James shake hands here. There is a ‘faith’ so called, which does not work. It is dead! Let me beseech you, none of you to rely upon what you choose to call your faith in Jesus Christ, but examine it. Does it do anything? Does it help you to be like Him? Does it open your hearts for His Spirit to come in? Does it fill them with love to that Master, a love which proves itself by obedience? Plain questions, questions that any man can answer; questions that go to the root of the whole matter. If your faith does that, it is genuine; if it does not, it is not.

And do not trust either to forms, or to your freedom from forms. They will not save your souls, they will not make you more Christ-like. They will not help you to pardon, purity, holiness, blessedness. In these respects neither if we have them are we the better, nor if we have them not are we the worse. If you are trusting to Christ, and by that faith are having your hearts moulded and made over again into all holy obedience, then you have all that you need. Unless you have, though you partook of all Christian rites, though you believed all Christian truth, though you fought against superstitious reliance on forms, you have not the one thing needful, for ‘in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.’

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Gaius and the household of Stephanas, and I think these are all. I am not quite sure. I do not keep any kind of record of such things; God did not send me to baptize, He sent me to preach the Gospel.'

The thing that produced the spiritual result was not the rite, but the truth, and therefore he felt that his function was to preach the truth and leave the rite to be administered by others. Therefore we can extend the principle here to all externalisms of worship, in all forms, in all churches, and say that in comparison with the essentials of an inward Christianity they are nothing and they do nothing.

They have their value. As long as we are here on earth, living in the flesh, we must have outward forms and symbolical rites. It is in Heaven that the seer 'saw no temple.' Our sense-bound nature requires, and thankfully avails itself of, the help of external rites and ceremonials to lift us up towards the Object of our devotion. A man prays all the better if he bow his head, shut his eyes, and bend his knees. Forms do help us to the realisation of the realities, and the truths which they express and embody. Music may waft our souls to the heavens, and pictures may stir deep thoughts. That is the simple principle on which the value of all external aids to devotion depends. They may be helps towards the appreciation of divine truth, and to the suffusing of the heart with devout emotions which may lead to building up a holy character.

There is a worth, therefore-an auxiliary and subordinate worth-in these things, and in that respect they are *not* nothing, nor do they 'avail nothing.' But then all external rites tend to usurp more than belongs to them, and in our weakness we are apt to cleave to them, and instead of using them as means to lift us higher, to stay in them, and as a great many of us do, to mistake the mere gratification of taste and the excitement of the sensibilities for worship. A bit of stained glass may be glowing with angel-forms and pictured saints, but it always keeps some of the light out, and it always hinders us from seeing through it. And all external worship and form have so strong a tendency to usurp more than belongs to them, and to drag us down to their own level, even whilst we think that we are praying, that I believe the wisest man will try to pare down the externals of his worship to the lowest possible point. If there be as much body as will keep a soul in, as much form as will embody the spirit, that is all that we want. What is more is dangerous.

All form in worship is like fire, it is a good servant but it is a bad master, and it needs to be kept very rigidly in subordination, or else the spirituality of Christian worship vanishes before men know; and they are left with their dead forms which are only evils-crutches that make people limp by the very act of using them.

Now, my dear friends, when that has happened, when men begin to say, as the people in Paul's time were saying about circumcision, and as people are saying in this day about Christian rites, that they are necessary, then it is needful to take up Paul's ground and to say, 'No! they are nothing!' They are useful in a certain place, but if you make them obligatory, if you make them essential, if you say that grace is miraculously conveyed through them, then it is needful that we should raise a strong note of protestation, and declare their absolute nullity for the highest purpose, that of making that spiritual character which alone is essential.

And I believe that this strange recrudescence-to use a modern word-of ceremonialism and aesthetic worship which we see all round about us, not only in the ranks of the Episcopal Church, but amongst Nonconformists, who are sighing for a less bare service, and here and there are turning their chapels into concert-rooms, and instead of preaching the Gospel are having 'Services of Song' and the like-that all this makes it as needful to-day as ever it was to say to men: 'Forms are not worship. Rites may crush the spirit. Men may yield to the sensuous impressions which they produce, and be lapped in an atmosphere of aesthetic emotion, without any real devotion.'

Such externals are only worth anything if they make us grasp more firmly with our understandings and feel more profoundly with our hearts, the great truths of the Gospel. If they do that, they help; if they are not doing that, they hinder, and are to be fought against. And so we have again to proclaim to-day, as Paul did, 'Circumcision is nothing,' 'but the keeping of the commandments of God.'

Then notice with what remarkable fairness and boldness and breadth the Apostle here adds that other clause: ‘and uncircumcision is nothing.’ It is a very hard thing for a man whose life has been spent in fighting against an error, not to exaggerate the value of his protest. It is a very hard thing for a man who has been delivered from the dependence upon forms, not to fancy that his formlessness is what the other people think that their forms are. The Puritan who does not believe that a man can be a good man because he is a Ritualist or a Roman Catholic, is committing the very same error as the Ritualist or the Roman Catholic who does not believe that the Puritan can be a Christian unless he has been ‘christened.’ The two people are exactly the same, only the one has hold of the stick at one end, and the other at the other. There may be as much idolatry in superstitious reliance upon the bare worship as in the advocacy of the ornate; and many a Nonconformist who fancies that he has ‘never bowed the knee to Baal’ is as true an idol-worshipper in his superstitious abhorrence of the ritualism that he sees in other communities, as are the men who trust in it the most.

It is a large attainment in Christian character to be able to say with Paul, ‘Circumcision is nothing, and my own favourite point of uncircumcision is nothing either. Neither the one side nor the other touches the essentials.’

II. Now let us look at the threefold variety of the designation of these essentials here.

In our first text from the Epistle to the Corinthians we read, ‘Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.’ If we finished the sentence it would be, ‘but the keeping of the commandments of God is everything.’

And by that ‘keeping the commandments,’ of course, the Apostle does not mean merely external obedience. He means something far deeper than that, which I put into this plain word, that the one essential of a Christian life is the conformity of the will with God’s-not the external obedience merely, but the entire surrender and the submission of my will to the will of my Father in Heaven. That is the all-important thing; that is what God wants; that is the end of all rites and ceremonies; that is the end of all revelation and of all utterances of the divine heart. The Bible, Christ’s mission, His passion and death, the gift of His Divine Spirit, and every part of the divine dealings in providence, all converge upon this one aim and goal. For this purpose the Father worketh hitherto, and Christ works, that man's will may yield and bow itself wholly and happily and lovingly to the great infinite will of the Father in heaven.

Brethren! that is the perfection of a man's nature, when his will fits on to God's like one of Euclid's triangles superimposed upon another, and line for line coincides. When his will allows a free passage to the will of God, without resistance or deflection, as light travels through transparent glass; when his will responds to the touch of God's finger upon the keys, like the telegraphic needle to the operator's hand, then man has attained all that God and religion can do for him, all that his nature is capable of; and far beneath his feet may be the ladders of ceremonies and forms and outward acts, by which he climbed to that serene and blessed height, 'Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of God's commandments is everything.'

That submission of will is the sum and the test of your Christianity. Your Christianity does not consist only in a mere something which you call faith in Jesus Christ. It does not consist in emotions, however deep and blessed and genuine they may be. It does not consist in the acceptance of a creed. All these are means to an end. They are meant to drive the wheel of life, to build up character, to make your deepest wish to be, 'Father! not my will, but Thine, be done.' In the measure in which that is your heart's desire, and not one hair's-breadth further, have you a right to call yourself a Christian.

But, then, I can fancy a man saying: 'It is all very well to talk about bowing the will in this fashion; how can I do that?' Well, let us take our second text-the third in the order of their occurrence-'For neither circumcision is anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.' That is to say, if we are ever to keep the will of God we must be made over again. Ay! we must! Our own consciences tell us that; the history of all the efforts that ever we have made-and I suppose all of us have made some now and then, more or less earnest and more or less persistent-tells us that there needs to be a stronger hand than ours to come into the fight if it is ever to be won by us. There is nothing more heartless and more impotent than to preach, 'Bow your wills to God, and then you will be happy; bow your wills to God, and then you will be good.' If that is all the preacher has to say, his powerless words will but provoke the answer, 'We cannot. Tell the leopard to change his spots, or the Ethiopian his skin, as soon as tell a man to reduce this revolted kingdom within him to obedience, and to bow his will to the will of God. We cannot do it.' But, brethren, in that word, 'a new creature,' lies a promise from God; for a creature implies a creator. 'It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves.' The very heart of what Christ has to offer us is the gift of His own life to dwell in our hearts, and by its mighty energy to make us free from the law of sin and death which binds our wills. We may have our spirits moulded into His likeness, and new tastes, and new desires, and new capacities infused into us, so as that we shall not be left with our own poor powers to try and force ourselves into obedience to God's will, but that submission and holiness and love that keeps the commandments of God, will spring up in our renewed spirits as their natural product and growth. Oh! you men and women who have been honestly trying, half your lifetime, to make yourselves what you know God wants you to be, and who are obliged to confess that you have failed, hearken to the message: 'If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature, old things are passed away.' The one thing needful is keeping the commandments of God, and the only way by which we can keep the commandments of God is that we should be formed again into the likeness of Him of whom alone it is true that 'He did always the things that pleased' God.

And so we come to the last of these great texts: 'In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.' That is to say, if we are to be made over again, we must have faith in Christ Jesus. We have got to the root now, so far as we are concerned. We must keep the commandments of God; if we are to keep the commandments we must be made over again, and if our hearts ask how can we receive that new creating power into our lives, the answer is, by 'faith which worketh by love.'

Paul did not believe that external rites could make men partakers of a new nature, but he believed that if a man would trust in Jesus Christ, the life of that Christ would flow into his opened heart, and a new spirit and nature would be born in him. And, therefore, his triple requirements come all down to this one, so far as we are concerned, as the beginning and the condition of the other two. ‘Neither circumcision does anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love,’ does everything. He that trusts Christ opens his heart to Christ, who comes with His new-creating Spirit, and makes us willing in the day of His power to keep His commandments.

But faith leads us to obedience in yet another fashion, than this opening of the door of the heart for the entrance of the new-creating Spirit. It leads to it in the manner which is expressed by the words of our text, ‘worketh by love.’ Faith shows itself living, because it leads us to love, and through love it produces its effects upon conduct.

Two things are implied in this designation of faith. If you trust Christ you will love Him. That is plain enough. And you will not love Him unless you trust Him. Though it lies wide of my present purpose, let us take this lesson in passing. You cannot work yourself up into a spasm or paroxysm of religious emotion and love by resolution or by effort. All that you can do is to go and look at the Master and get near Him, and that will warm you up. You can love if you trust. Your trust will make you love; unless you trust you will never love Him.

The second thing implied is, that if you love you will obey. That is plain enough. The keeping of the commandments will be easy where there is love in the heart. The will will bow where there is love in the heart. Love is the only fire that is hot enough to melt the iron obstinacy of a creature’s will. The will cannot be driven. Strike it with violence and it stiffens; touch it gently and it yields. If you try to put an iron collar upon the will, like the demoniac in the Gospels, the touch of the apparent restraint drives it into fury, and it breaks the bands asunder. Fasten it with the silken leash of love, and a ‘little child’ can lead it. So faith works by love, because whom we trust we shall love, and whom we love we shall obey.

Therefore we have got to the root now, and nothing is needful but an operative faith, out of which will come all the blessed possession of a transforming Spirit, and all sublimities and noblenesses of an obedient and submissive will.

My brother! Paul and James shake hands here. There is a ‘faith’ so called, which does not work. It is dead! Let me beseech you, none of you to rely upon what you choose to call your faith in Jesus Christ, but examine it. Does it do anything? Does it help you to be like Him? Does it open your hearts for His Spirit to come in? Does it fill them with love to that Master, a love which proves itself by obedience? Plain questions, questions that any man can answer; questions that go to the root of the whole matter. If your faith does that, it is genuine; if it does not, it is not.

And do not trust either to forms, or to your freedom from forms. They will not save your souls, they will not make you more Christ-like. They will not help you to pardon, purity, holiness, blessedness. In these respects neither if we have them are we the better, nor if we have them not are we the worse. If you are trusting to Christ, and by that faith are having your hearts moulded and made over again into all holy obedience, then you have all that you need. Unless you have, though you partook of all Christian rites, though you believed all Christian truth, though you fought against superstitious reliance on forms, you have not the one thing needful, for 'in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.'

13)1 Corinthians 7:22

1 Corinthians

SLAVES AND FREE

1Co. 7:22.

This remarkable saying occurs in a remarkable connection, and is used for a remarkable purpose. The Apostle has been laying down the principle, that the effect of true Christianity is greatly to diminish the importance of outward circumstance. And on that principle he bases an advice, dead in the teeth of all the maxims recognised by worldly prudence. He says, in effect, 'Mind very little about getting on and getting up. Do God's will wherever you are, and let the rest take care of itself.' Now, the world says, 'Struggle, wriggle, fight, do anything to better yourself.' Paul says, 'You will better yourself by getting nearer God, and if you secure that-art thou a slave? care not for it; if thou mayest be free, use it rather; art thou bound to a wife?

seek not to be loosed; art thou loosed? seek not to be bound; art thou circumcised? seek not to be uncircumcised; art thou a Gentile? seek not to become in outward form a Jew.' Never mind about externals: the main thing is our relation to Jesus Christ, because in that there is what will be compensation for all the disadvantages of any disadvantageous circumstances, and in that there is what will take the gilt off the gingerbread of any superficial and fleeting good, and will bring a deep-seated and permanent blessing.

Now, I am not going to deal in this sermon with that general principle, nor even to be drawn aside to speak of the tone in which the Apostle here treats the great abomination of slavery, and the singular advice that he gives to its victims; though the consideration of the tone of Christianity to that master-evil of the old world might yield a great many thoughts very relevant to pressing questions of to-day. But my one object is to fix upon the combination which he here brings out in regard to the essence of the Christian life; how that in itself it contains both members of the antithesis, servitude and freedom; so that the Christian man who is free externally is Christ's slave, and the Christian man who is outwardly in bondage is emancipated by his union with Jesus Christ.

There are two thoughts here, the application in diverse directions of the same central idea-viz. the slavery of Christ's free men, and the freedom of Christ's slaves. And I deal briefly with these two now.

I. First, then, note how, according to the one-half of the antithesis, Christ's freed men are slaves.

Now, the way in which the New Testament deals with that awful wickedness of a man held in bondage by a man is extremely remarkable. It might seem as if such a hideous piece of immorality were altogether incapable of yielding any lessons of good. But the Apostles have no hesitation whatever in taking slavery as a clear picture of the relation in which all Christian people stand to Jesus Christ their Lord. He is the owner and we are the slaves. For you must remember that the word most inadequately rendered here, 'servant' does not mean a hired man who has, of his own volition, given himself for a time to do specific work and get wages for it; but it means 'a bond-slave,' a chattel owned by another. All the ugly associations which gather round the word are transported bodily into the Christian region, and there, instead of being hideous, take on a shape of beauty, and become expressions of the deepest and most blessed truths, in reference to Christian men's dependence upon, and submission to, and place in the household and the heart of, Jesus Christ, their Owner.

And what is the centre idea that lies in this metaphor, if you like to call it so? It is this: absolute authority, which has for its correlative-for the thing in us that answers to it-unconditional submission. Jesus Christ has the perfect right to command each of us, and we are bound to bow ourselves, unreluctant, unmurmuring, unhesitating, with complete submission at His feet. His authority, and our submission, go far, far deeper than the most despotic sway of the most tyrannous master, or than the most abject submission of the most downtrodden slave. For no man can coerce another man's will, and no man can require more, or can ever get more, than that outward obedience which may be rendered with the most sullen and fixed rebellion of a hating heart and an obstinate will. But Jesus Christ demands that if we call ourselves Christians we shall bring, not our members only as instruments to Him, in outward surrender and service, but that we shall yield ourselves, with our capacities of willing and desiring, utterly, absolutely, constantly to Him.

The founder of the Jesuits laid it down as a rule for his Order that each member of it was to be at the master's disposal like a corpse, or a staff in the hand of a blind man. That was horrible. But the absolute putting of myself at the disposal of another's will, which is expressed so tyrannously in Loyola's demand, is the simple duty of every Christian, and as long as we have recalcitrating wills, which recoil at anything which Christ commands or appoints, and perk up their own inclinations in the face of His solemn commandment, or that shrink from doing and suffering whatsoever He imposes and enjoins, we have still to learn what it means to be Christ's disciples.

Dear brethren, absolute submission is not all that makes a disciple, but, depend upon it, there is no discipleship worth calling by the name without it. So I come to each of you with His message to you:-Down on your faces before Him! Bow your obstinate will, surrender yourselves and accept Him as absolute, dominant Lord over your whole being! Are you Christians after that pattern? Being freemen, are you Christ's slaves?

It does not matter what sort of work the owner sets his household of slaves to do. One man is picked out to be his pipe-bearer, or his shoe-cleaner; and, if the master is a sovereign, another one is sent off, perhaps, to be governor of a province, or one of his council. They are all slaves; and the service that each does is equally important.

'All service ranks the same with God:
There is no last nor first.'

What does it matter what you and I are set to do? Nothing. And, so, why need we struggle and wear our hearts out to get into conspicuous places, or to do work that shall bring some revenue of praise said glory to ourselves? 'Play well thy part; there all the honour lies,' the world can say. Serve Christ in anything, and all His servants are alike in His sight.

The slave-owner had absolute power of life and death over his dependants. He could split up families; he could sell away dear ones; he could part husband and wife, parent and child. The slave was his, and he could do what he liked with his own, according to the cruel logic of ancient law. And Jesus Christ, the Lord of the household, the Lord of providence, can say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes into the mists and the shadows of death. And He can say to those who are most closely united, 'Loose your hands! I have need of one of you yonder. I have need of the other one here.' And if we are wise, if we are His servants in any real deep sense, we shall not kick against the appointments of His supreme, autocratic, and yet most loving Providence, but be content to leave the arbitrament of life and death, of love united or of love parted, in His hands, and say, 'Whether we live we are the Lord's, or whether we die we are the Lord's; living or dying we are His.'

The slave-owner owned all that the slave owned. He gave him a little cottage, with some humble sticks of furniture in it; and a bit of ground on which to grow his vegetables for his family. But he to whom the owner of the vegetables and the stools belonged owned them too. And if we are Christ's servants, our banker's book is Christ's, and our purse is Christ's, and our investments are Christ’s; and our mills, and our warehouses, and our shops and our businesses are His. We are not His slaves, if we arrogate to ourselves the right of doing what we like with His possessions.

And, then, still further, there comes into our Apostle’s picture here yet another point of resemblance between slaves and the disciples of Jesus. For the hideous abominations of the slave-market are transferred to the Christian relation, and defecated and cleansed of all their abominations and cruelty thereby. For what immediately follows my text is, ‘Ye are bought with a price.’ Jesus Christ has won us for Himself. There is only one price that can buy a heart, and that is a heart. There is only one way of getting a man to be mine, and that is by giving myself to be his. So we come to the very vital, palpitating centre of all Christianity when we say, ‘He gave Himself for us, that He might acquire to Himself a people for His possession.’ Thus His purchase of His slave, when we remember that it is the buying of a man in his inmost personality, changes all that might seem harsh in the requirement of absolute submission into the most gracious and blessed privilege. For when I am won by another, because that other has given him or her whole self to me, then the language of love is submission, and the conformity of the two wills is the delight of each loving will. Whoever has truly been wooed into relationship with Jesus, by reflection upon the love with which Jesus grapples him to His heart, finds that there is nothing so blessed as to yield one’s self utterly and for ever to His service.

The one bright point in the hideous institution of slavery was, that it bound the master to provide for the slave, and though that was degrading to the inferior, it made his life a careless, child-like, merry life, even amidst the many cruelties and abominations of the system. But what was a good, dashed with a great deal of evil, in that relation of man to man, comes to be a pure blessing and good in our relation to Him. If I am Christ’s slave, it is His business to take care of His own property, and I do not need to trouble myself much about it. If I am His slave, He will be quite sure to find me in food and necessaries enough to get His tale of work out of me; and I may cast all my care upon Him, for He careth for me. So, brethren, absolute submission and the devolution of all anxiety on the Master are what is laid upon us, if we are Christ’s slaves.

II. Then there is the other side, about which I must say, secondly, a word or two; and that is, the freedom of Christ's slaves.

As the text puts it, 'He that is called, being a servant, is the Lord's freedman.' A freedman was one who was emancipated, and who therefore stood in a relation of gratitude to his emancipator and patron. So in the very word 'freedman' there is contained the idea of submission to Him who has struck off the fetters.

But, apart from that, let me just remind you, in a sentence or two, that whilst there are many other ways by which men have sought, and have partially attained, deliverance from the many fetters and bondages that attach to our earthly life, the one perfect way by which a man can be truly, in the deepest sense of the word and in his inmost being, a free man is by faith in Jesus Christ.

I do not for a moment forget how wisdom and truth, and noble aims and high purposes, and culture of various kinds have, in lower degrees and partially, emancipated men from self and flesh and sin and the world, and all the other fetters that bind us. But sure I am that the process is never so completely and so assuredly effected as by the simple way of absolute submission to Jesus Christ, taking Him for the supreme and unconditional Arbiter and Sovereign of a life.

If we do that, brethren, if we really yield ourselves to Him, in heart and will, in life and conduct, submitting our understanding to His infallible Word, and our wills to His authority, regulating our conduct by His perfect pattern, and in all things seeking to serve Him and to realise His presence, then be sure of this, that we shall be set free from the one real bondage, and that is the bondage of our own wicked selves. There is no such tyranny as mob tyranny; and there is no such slavery as to be ruled by the mob of our own passions and lusts and inclinations and other meannesses that yelp and clamour within us, and seek to get hold of us and to sway. There is only one way by which the brute domination of the lower part of our nature can be surely and thoroughly put down, and that is by turning to Jesus Christ and saying to Him, 'Lord! do Thou rule this anarchic kingdom within me, for I cannot govern it myself. Do Thou guide and direct and subdue.' You can only govern yourself and be free from the compulsion of your own evil nature when you surrender the control to the Master, and say ever, ‘Speak, Lord! for Thy slave hears. Here am I, send me.’

And that is the only way by which a man can be delivered from the bondage of dependence upon outward things. I said at the beginning of these remarks that my text occurred in the course of a discussion in which the Apostle was illustrating the tendency of true Christian faith to set man free from, and to make him largely independent of, the varieties in external circumstances. Christian faith does so, because it brings into a life a sufficient compensation for all losses, limitations, and sorrows, and a good which is the reality of which all earthly goods are but shadows. So the slave may be free in Christ, and the poor man may be rich in Him, and the sad man may be joyful, and the joyful man may be delivered from excess of gladness, and the rich man be kept from the temptations and sins of wealth, and the free man be taught to surrender his liberty to the Lord who makes him free. Thus, if we have the all-sufficient compensation which there is in Jesus Christ, the satisfaction for all our needs and desires, we do not need to trouble ourselves so much as we sometimes do about these changing things round about us. Let them come, let them go; let the darkness veil the light, and the light illuminate the darkness; let summer and winter alternate; let tribulation and prosperity succeed each other; we have a source of blessedness unaffected by these. Ice may skin the surface of the lake, but deep beneath, the water is at the same temperature in winter and in summer. Storms may sweep the face of the deep, but in the abyss there is calm which is not stagnation. So he that cleaves to Christ is delivered from the slavery that binds men to the details and accidents of outward life.

And if we are the servants of Christ, we shall be set free, in the measure in which we are His, from the slavery which daily becomes more oppressive as the means of communication become more complete, the slavery to popular opinion and to men round us. Dare to be singular; take your beliefs at first hand from the Master. Never mind what fellow-slaves say. It is His smile or frown that is of importance. ‘Ye are bought with a price; be not servants of men.’

And so, brethren, ‘choose you this day whom ye will serve.’ You are not made to be independent. You must serve some thing or person. Recognise the narrow limitations within which your choice lies, and the issues which depend upon it. It is not whether you will serve Christ or whether you will be free. It is whether you will serve Christ or your own worst self, the world, men, and I was going to add, the flesh and the devil. Make your choice. He has bought you. You belong to Him by His death. Yield yourselves to Him, it is the only way of breaking your chains. He that doeth sin is the servant of sin. ‘If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed,’ and not only free; for the King’s slaves are princes and nobles, and ‘all things are yours, and ye are Christ’s.’ They who say to Him ‘O Lord! truly I am Thy servant,’ receive from Him the rank of kings and priests to God, and shall reign with Him for ever.

14)1 Corinthians 7:24

1 Corinthians

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

1Co. 7:24.

You find that three times within the compass of a very few verses this injunction is repeated. ‘As God hath distributed to every man,’ says the Apostle in the seventeenth verse, ‘as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all the churches.’ Then again in the twentieth verse, ‘Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he is called.’ And then finally in our text.

The reason for this emphatic reiteration is not difficult to ascertain. There were strong temptations to restlessness besetting the early Christians. The great change from heathenism to Christianity would seem to loosen the joints of all life, and having been swept from their anchorage in religion, all external things would appear to be adrift. It was most natural that a man should seek to alter even the circumstances of his outward life, when such a revolution had separated him from his ancient self. Hence would tend to come the rupture of family ties, the separation of husband and wife, the Jewish convert seeking to become like a Gentile, the Gentile seeking to become like a Jew; the slave trying to be free, the freeman, in some paroxysm of disgust at his former condition, trying to become a slave. These three cases are all referred to in the context-marriage, circumcision, slavery. And for all three the Apostle has the same advice to give-'Stop where you are.' In whatever condition you were when God's invitation drew you to Himself-for that, and not being set to a 'vocation' in life, is the meaning of the word 'called' here-remain in it.

And then, on the other hand, there was every reason why the Apostle and his co-workers should set themselves, by all means in their power, to oppose this restlessness. For, if Christianity in those early days had once degenerated into the mere instrument of social revolution, its development would have been thrown back for centuries, and the whole worth and power of it, for those who first apprehended it, would have been lost. So you know Paul never said a word to encourage any precipitate attempts to change externals. He let slavery-he let war alone; he let the tyranny of the Roman Empire alone-not because he was a coward, not because he thought that these things were not worth meddling with, but because he, like all wise men, believed in making the tree good and then its fruit good. He believed in the diffusion of the principles which he proclaimed, and the mighty Name which he served, as able to girdle the poison-tree, and to take the bark off it, and the rest, the slow dying, might be left to the work of time. And the same general idea underlies the words of my text. 'Do not try to change,' he says, 'do not trouble about external conditions; keep to your Christian profession; let those alone, they will right themselves. Art thou a slave? Seek not to be freed. Art thou circumcised? Seek not to be uncircumcised. Get hold of the central, vivifying, transmuting influence, and all the rest is a question of time.'

But, besides this more especial application of the words of my text to the primitive times, it carries with it, dear brethren, a large general principle that applies to all times-a principle, I may say, dead in the teeth of the maxims upon which life is being ordered by the most of us. *Our* maxim is, 'Get on!' Paul's is, 'Never mind about getting *on*, get *up*!' Our notion is-'Try to make the circumstances what I would like to have them.' Paul's is-'Leave circumstances to take care of themselves, or rather leave God to take care of the circumstances. You get close to Him, and hold His hand, and everything else will right itself.' Only he is not preaching stolid acquiescence. His previous injunctions were-'Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.' He sees that that may be misconceived and abused, and so, in his third reiteration of the precept, he puts in a word which throws a flood of light upon the whole thing-'Let every man wherein he is called therein abide.' Yes, but that is not all-'therein abide *with God*!' Ay, that is it! not an impossible stoicism; not hypocritical, fanatical contempt of the external. But whilst that gets its due force and weight, whilst a man yields himself in a measure to the natural tastes and inclinations which God has given him, and with the intention that he should find there subordinate guidance and impulse for his life, still let him abide where he is called with God, and seek to increase his fellowship with Him, as the main thing that he has to do.

I. Thus we are led from the words before us first to the thought that our chief effort in life ought to be union with God.

'Abide with God,' which, being put into other words, means, I think, mainly two things-constant communion, the occupation of all our nature with Him, and, consequently, the recognition of His will in all circumstances.

As to the former, we have the mind and heart and will of God revealed to us for the light, the love, the obedience of our will and heart and mind; and our Apostle's precept is, first, that we should try, moment by moment, in all the bustle and stir of our daily life, to have our whole being consciously directed to and engaged with, fertilised and calmed by contact with, the perfect and infinite nature of our Father in heaven.

As we go to our work again to-morrow morning, what difference would obedience to this precept make upon my life and yours? Before all else, and in the midst of all else, we should think of that Divine Mind that in the heavens is waiting to illumine our darkness; we should feel the glow of that uncreated and perfect Love, which, in the midst of change and treachery, of coldness and of 'greetings where no kindness is,' in the midst of masterful authority and unloving command, is ready to fill our hearts with tenderness and tranquillity: we should bow before that Will which is absolute and supreme indeed, but neither arbitrary nor harsh, which is 'the eternal purpose that He hath purposed in Himself' indeed, but is also 'the good pleasure of His goodness and the counsel of His grace.'

And with such a God near to us ever in our faithful thoughts, in our thankful love, in our lowly obedience, with such a mind revealing itself to us, and such a heart opening its hidden storehouses for us as we approach, like some star that, as one gets nearer to it, expands its disc and glows into rich colour, which at a distance was but pallid silver, and such a will sovereign above all, energising, even through opposition, and making obedience a delight, what room, brethren, would there be in our lives for agitations, and distractions, and regrets, and cares, and fears-what room for earthly hopes or for sad remembrances? They die in the fruition of a present God all-sufficient for mind, and heart, and will-even as the sun when it is risen with a burning heat may scorch and wither the weeds that grow about the base of the fruitful tree, whose deeper roots are but warmed by the rays that ripen the rich clusters which it bears. ‘Let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide *with God*.’

And then, as a consequence of such an occupation of the whole being with God, there will follow that second element which is included in the precept, namely, the recognition of God’s will as operating in and determining all circumstances. When our whole soul is occupied with Him, we shall see Him everywhere. And this ought to be our honest effort-to connect everything which befalls ourselves and the world with Him. We should see that Omnipotent Will, the silent energy which flows through all being, asserting itself through all secondary causes, marching on towards its destined and certain goal, amidst all the whirl and perturbation of events, bending even the antagonism of rebels and the unconsciousness of godless men, as well as the play of material instruments, to its own purposes, and swinging and swaying the whole set and motion of things according to its own impulse and by the touch of its own fingers.

Such a faith does not require us to overlook the visible occasions for the things which befall us, nor to deny the stable laws according to which that mighty will operates in men’s lives. Secondary causes? Yes. Men’s opposition and crime? Yes. Our own follies and sins? No doubt. Blessings and sorrows falling indiscriminately on a whole community or a whole world? Certainly. And yet the visible agents are not the sources, but only the vehicles of the power, the belting and shafting which transmit a mighty impulse which they had nothing to do in creating. And the antagonism subserves the purposes of the rule which it opposes, as the blow of the surf may consolidate the sea-wall that it breaks against. And our own follies and sins may indeed sorrowfully shadow our lives, and bring on us pains of body and disasters in fortune, and stings in spirit for which we alone are responsible, and which we have no right to regard as inscrutable judgments-yet even these bitter plants of which our own hands have sowed the seed, spring by His merciful will, and *are* to be regarded as His loving, fatherly chastisements-sent before to warn us by a premonitory experience that 'the wages of sin is death.' As a rule, God does not interpose to pick a man out of the mud into which he has been plunged by his own faults and follies, until he has learned the lessons which he can find in plenty down in the slough, if he will only look for them! And the fact that some great calamity or some great joy affects a wide circle of people, does not make its having a special lesson and meaning for each of them at all doubtful. *There* is one of the great depths of all-moving wisdom and providence, that in the very self-same act it is in one aspect universal, and in another special and individual. The ordinary notion of a special providence goes perilously near the belief that God's will is less concerned in some parts of a man's life than in others. It is very much like desecrating and secularising a whole land by the very act of focussing the sanctity in some single consecrated shrine. But the true belief is that the whole sweep of a life is under the will of God, and that when, for instance, war ravages a nation, though the sufferers be involved in a common ruin occasioned by murderous ambition and measureless pride, yet for each of the sufferers the common disaster has a special message. Let us believe in a divine will which regards each individual caught up in the skirts of the horrible storm, even as it regards each individual on whom the equal rays of His universal sunshine fall. Let us believe that every single soul has a place in the heart, and is taken into account in the purposes of Him who moves the tempest, and makes His sun to shine upon the unthankful and on the good. Let us, in accordance with the counsel of the Apostle here, first of all try to anchor and rest our own souls fast and firm in God all the day long, that, grasping His hand, we may look out upon all the confused dance of fleeting circumstances and say, 'Thy will is done on earth'-if not yet 'as it is done in heaven,' still done in the issues and events of all-and done with my cheerful obedience and thankful acceptance of its commands and allotments in my own life.

II. The second idea which comes out of these words is this-Such union with God will lead to contented continuance in our place, whatever it be.

Our text is as if Paul had said, ‘You have been “called” in such and such worldly circumstances. The fact proves that these circumstances do not obstruct the highest and richest blessings. The light of God can shine on your souls through them. Since then you have such sacred memorials associated with them, and know by experience that fellowship with God is possible in them, do you remain where you are, and keep hold of the God who has visited you in them.’

If once, in accordance with the thoughts already suggested, our minds have, by God’s help, been brought into something like real, living fellowship with Him, and we have attained the wisdom that pierces through the external to the Almighty will that underlies all its mazy whirl, then why should we care about shifting our place? Why should we trouble ourselves about altering these varying events, since each in its turn is a manifestation of His mind and will; each in its turn is a means of discipline for us; and through all their variety a single purpose works, which tends to a single end-’that we should be partakers of His holiness’ ?

And that is the one point of view from which we can bear to look upon the world and not be utterly bewildered and over-mastered by it. Calmness and central peace are ours; a true appreciation of all outward good and a charm against the bitterest sting of outward evils are ours; a patient continuance in the place where He has set us is ours-when by fellowship with Him we have learned to look upon our work as primarily doing His will, and upon all our possessions and conditions primarily as means for making us like Himself. Most men seem to think that they have gone to the very bottom of the thing when they have classified the gifts of fortune as good or evil, according as they produce pleasure or pain. But that is a poor, superficial classification. It is like taking and arranging books by their bindings and flowers by their colours. Instead of saying, ‘We divide life into two halves, and we put there all the joyful, and here all the sad, for that is the ruling distinction’-let us rather say, ‘The whole is one, because it all comes from one purpose, and it all tends towards one end. The only question worth asking in regard to the externals of our life is-How far does each thing help me to be a good man? how far does it open my understanding to apprehend Him? how far does it make my spirit pliable and plastic under His touch? how far does it make me capable of larger reception of greater gifts from Himself? what is its effect in preparing me for that world beyond?' Is there any other greater, more satisfying, more majestic thought of life than this-the scaffolding by which souls are built up into the temple of God? And to care whether a thing is painful or pleasant is as absurd as to care whether the bricklayer's trowel is knocking the sharp corner off a brick, or plastering mortar on the one below it before he lays it carefully on its course. Is the *building* getting on? That is the one question that is worth thinking about.

You and I write our lives as if on one of those manifold writers which you use. A thin filmy sheet *here*, a bit of black paper below it; but the writing goes through upon the next page, and when the blackness that divides two worlds is swept away *there*, the history of each life written by ourselves remains legible in eternity. And the question is-What sort of autobiography are we writing for the revelation of that day, and how far do our circumstances help us to transcribe fair in our lives the will of our God and the image of our Redeemer?

If, then, we have once got hold of that principle that all which is-summer and winter, storm and sunshine, possession and loss, memory and hope, work and rest, and all the other antitheses of life-is equally the product of His will, equally the manifestation of His mind, equally His means for our discipline, then we have the amulet and talisman which will preserve us from the fever of desire and the shivering fits of anxiety as to things which perish. And, as they tell of a Christian father who, riding by one of the great lakes of Switzerland all day long, on his journey to the Church Council that was absorbing his thoughts, said towards evening to the deacon who was pacing beside him, 'Where is the lake?' so you and I, journeying along by the margin of this great flood of things when wild storms sweep across it, or when the sunbeams glint upon its blue waters, 'and birds of peace sit brooding on the charmed wave,' will be careless of the changeful sea, if the eye looks beyond the visible and beholds the unseen, the unchanging real presences that make glory in the darkest lives, and 'sunshine in the shady place.' 'Let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God.'

III. Still further, another thought may be suggested from these words, or rather from the connection in which they occur, and that is-Such contented continuance in our place is the dictate of the truest wisdom.

There are two or three collateral topics, partly suggested by the various connections in which this commandment occurs in the chapter, from which I draw the few remarks I have to make now.

And the first point I would suggest is that very old commonplace one, so often forgotten, that after all, though you may change about as much as you like, there is a pretty substantial equipoise and identity in the amount of pain and pleasure in all external conditions. The total length of day and night all the year round is the same at the North Pole and at the Equator-half and half. Only, in the one place, it is half and half for four-and-twenty hours at a time, and in the other, the night lasts through gloomy months of winter, and the day is bright for unbroken weeks of summer. But, when you come to add them up at the year's end, the man who shivers in the ice, and the man who pants beneath the beams from the zenith, have had the same length of sunshine and of darkness. It does not matter much at what degrees between the Equator and the Pole you and I live; when the thing comes to be made up we shall be all pretty much upon an equality. You do not get the happiness of the rich man over the poor one by multiplying twenty shillings a week by as many figures as will suffice to make it up to £10,000 a year. What is the use of such eager desires to change our condition, when every condition has disadvantages attending its advantages as certainly as a shadow; and when all have pretty nearly the same quantity of the raw material of pain and pleasure, and when the amount of either actually experienced by us depends not on where we are, but on *what* we are?

Then, still further, there is another consideration to be kept in mind upon which I do not enlarge, as what I have already said involves it-namely, that whilst the portion of external pain and pleasure summed up comes pretty much to the same in everybody's life, any condition may yield the fruit of devout fellowship with God.

Another very remarkable idea suggested by a part of the context is-What is the need for my troubling myself about outward changes when *in Christ* I can get all the peculiarities which make any given position desirable to me?

For instance, hear how Paul talks to slaves eager to be set free: ‘For he that is called in the Lord, *being* a servant, is the Lord’s freeman: likewise also he that is called, *being* free, is Christ’s servant.’ If you generalise that principle it comes to this, that in union with Jesus Christ we possess, by our fellowship with Him, the peculiar excellences and blessings that are derivable from external relations of every sort. To take concrete examples-if a man is a slave, he may be free in Christ. If free, he may have the joy of utter submission to an absolute master in Christ. If you and I are lonely, we may feel all the delights of society by union with Him. If surrounded and distracted by companionship, and seeking for seclusion, we may get all the peace of perfect privacy in fellowship with Him. If we are rich, and sometimes think that we were in a position of less temptation if we were poorer, we may find all the blessings for which we sometimes covet poverty in communion with Him. If we are poor, and fancy that, if we had a little more just to lift us above the grinding, carking care of to-day and the anxiety of to-morrow, we should be happier, we may find all tranquillity in Him. And so you may run through all the variety of human conditions, and say to yourself-What is the use of looking for blessings flowing from these from without? Enough for us if we grasp that Lord who is all in all, and will give us in peace the joy of conflict, in conflict the calm of peace, in health the refinement of sickness, in sickness the vigour and glow of health, in memory the brightness of undying hope, in hope the calming of holy memory, in wealth the lowliness of poverty, in poverty the ease of wealth; in life and in death being all and more than all that dazzles us by the false gleam of created brightness!

And so, finally-a remark which has no connection with the text itself, but which I cannot avoid inserting here-I want you to think, and think seriously, of the antagonism and diametrical opposition between these principles of my text and the maxims current in the world, and nowhere more so than in this city. Our text is a revolutionary one. It is dead against the watchwords that you fathers give your children-’push,’ ‘energy,’ ‘advancement,’ ‘get on, whatever you do.’ You have made a philosophy of it, and you say that this restless discontent with a man’s present position and eager desire to get a little farther ahead in the scramble, underlies much modern civilisation and progress, and leads to the diffusion of wealth and to employment for the working classes, and to mechanical inventions, and domestic comforts, and

I don't know what besides. You have made a religion of it; and it is thought to be blasphemy for a man to stand up and say-'It is idolatry!' My dear brethren, I declare I solemnly believe that, if I were to go on to the Manchester Exchange next Tuesday, and stand up and say-'There is no God,' I should not be thought half such a fool as if I were to go and say-'Poverty is not an evil *per se*, and men do not come into this world to get *on* but to get *up*-nearer and liker to God.' If you, by God's grace, lay hold of this principle of my text, and honestly resolve to work it out, trusting in that dear Lord who 'though He was rich yet for our sakes became poor,' in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred you will have to make up your minds to let the big prizes of your trade go into other people's hands, and be contented to say-'I live by peaceful, high, pure, Christ-like thoughts.' 'He that needs least,' said an old heathen, 'is nearest the gods'; but I would rather modify the statement into, 'He that needs most, and knows it, is nearest the gods.' For surely Christ is more than mammon; and a spirit nourished by calm desires and holy thoughts into growing virtues and increasing Christlikeness is better than circumstances ordered to our will, in the whirl of which we have lost our God. 'In everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God and the God of peace shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.'

15)1 Corinthians 8:1-13

1 Corinthians

'LOVE BUILDETH UP'

1Co. 8:1 - 1Co. 8:13.

It is difficult for us to realise the close connection which existed between idol-worship and daily life. Something of the same sort is found in all mission fields. It was almost impossible for Christians to take any part in society and not seem to sanction idolatry. Would that Christianity were as completely interwoven with our lives as heathen religions are into those of their devotees! Paul seems to have had referred to him a pressing case of conscience, which divided the Corinthian Church, as to whether a Christian could join in the usual feasts or sacrifices. His answer is in this passage.

The longest way round is sometimes the shortest way home. The Apostle begins far away from the subject in hand by running a contrast between knowledge and love, and setting the latter first. But his contrast is very relevant to his purpose. Small questions should be solved on great principles.

The first principle laid down by Paul is the superiority of love over knowledge, the bearing of which on the question in hand will appear presently. We note that there is first a distinct admission of the Corinthians' intelligence, though there is probably a tinge of irony in the language 'We know that we all have knowledge.' 'You Corinthians are fully aware that you are very superior people. Whatever else you know, you know that, and I fully recognise it.'

The admission is followed by a sudden, sharp comment, to which the Corinthians' knowledge that they knew laid them open. Swift as the thrust of a spear comes flashing 'Knowledge puffeth up.' Puffed-up things are swollen by wind only, and the more they are inflated the hollower and emptier they are; and such a sharp point as Paul's saying shrivels them. The statement is not meant as the assertion of a necessary or uniform result of knowledge, but it does put plainly a very usual result of it, if it is unaccompanied by love. It is a strange, sad result of superior intelligence or acquirements, that it so often leads to conceit, to a false estimate of the worth and power of knowing, to a ridiculous over-valuing of certain acquirements, and to an insolent contempt and cruel disregard of those who have them not. Paul's dictum has been only too well confirmed by experience.

'Love builds up,' or 'edifies.' Probably the main direction in which that building up is conceived of as taking effect, is in aiding the progress of our neighbours, especially in the religious life. But the tendency of love to rear a fair fabric of personal character is not to be overlooked. In regard to effect on character, the palm must be given to love, which produces solid excellence far beyond what mere knowledge can effect. Further, that pluming one's self on knowledge is a sure proof of ignorance. The more real our acquirements, the more they disclose our deficiencies. All self-conceit hinders us from growing intellectually or morally, and intellectual conceit is the worst kind of it.

Very significantly, love to God, and not the simple emotion of love without reference to its object, is opposed to knowledge; for love so directed is the foundation of all excellence, and of all real love to men. Love to God is not the antithesis of true knowledge, but it is the only victorious antagonist of the conceit of knowing. Very significantly, too, does Paul vary his conclusion in 1Co. 8:3 by saying that the man who loves God 'is known of Him,' instead of, as we might have expected, 'knows Him.' The latter is true, but the statement in the verse puts more strongly the thought of the man's being an object of God's care. In regard, then, to their effects on character, in producing consideration and helpfulness to others, and in securing God's protection, love stands first, and knowledge second.

What has all this to do with the question in hand? This, that if looked at from the standpoint of knowledge, it may be solved in one way, but if from that of love, it will be answered in another. So, in 1Co. 8:4 - 1Co. 8:6, Paul treats the matter on the ground of knowledge. The fundamental truth of Christianity, that there is one God, who is revealed and works through Jesus Christ, was accepted by all the Corinthians. Paul states it here broadly, denying that there were any objective realities answering to the popular conceptions or poetic fancies or fair artistic presentments of the many gods and lords of the Greek pantheon, and asserting that all Christians recognise one God, the Father, from whom the universe of worlds and living things has origin, and to whom we as Christians specially belong, and one Lord, the channel through whom all divine operations of creation, providence, and grace flow, and by whose redeeming work we Christians are endowed with our best life. If a believer was fully convinced of these truths, he could partake of sacrificial feasts without danger to himself, and without either sanctioning idolatry or being tempted to return to it.

No doubt it was on this ground that an idol was nothing that the laxer party defended their action in eating meat offered to idols; and Paul fully recognises that they had a strong case, and that, if there were no other considerations to come in, the answer to the question of conscience submitted to him would be wholly in favour of the less scrupulous section. But there is something better than knowledge; namely, love. And its decision must be taken before the whole material for a judgment is in evidence.

Therefore, in the remainder of the chapter, Paul dwells on loving regard for brethren. In 1Co. 8:7, he reminds the ‘knowing’ Corinthians that new convictions do not obliterate the power of old associations. The awful fascination of early belief still exercises influence. The chains are not wholly broken off. Every mission field shows examples of this. Every man knows that habits are not so suddenly overcome, that there is no hankering after them or liability to relapse. It would be a dangerous thing for a weak believer to risk sharing in an idol feast; for he would be very likely to slide down to his old level of belief, and Zeus or Pallas to seem to him real powers once more.

The considerations in 1Co. 8:7 would naturally be followed by the further thoughts in 1Co. 8:9, etc. But, before dealing with these, Paul interposes another thought in 1Co. 8:8, to the effect that partaking of or abstinence from any kind of food will not, in itself, either help or hinder the religious life. The bearing of that principle on his argument seems to be to reduce the importance of the whole question, and to suggest that, since eating of idol sacrifices could not be called a duty or a means of spiritual progress, the way was open to take account of others’ weakness as determining our action in regard to it. A modern application may illustrate the point. Suppose that a Christian does not see total abstinence from intoxicants to be obligatory on him. Well, he cannot say that drinking is so, or that it is a religious duty, and so the way is clear for urging regard to others’ weakness as an element in the case.

That being premised, Paul comes to his final point; namely, that Christian men are bound to restrict their liberty so that they shall not tempt weaker brethren on to a path on which they cannot walk without stumbling. He has just shown the danger to such of partaking of the sacrificial feasts. He now completes his position by showing, in 1Co. 8:10, that the stronger man’s example may lead the weaker to do what he cannot do innocently. What is harmless to us may be fatal to others, and, if we have led them to it, their blood is on our heads.

The terrible discordance of such conduct with our Lord’s example, which should be our law, is forcibly set forth in 1Co. 8:11, which has three strongly emphasised thoughts-the man’s fate-he perishes; his relation to his slayer-a brother; what Christ did for the man whom a Christian has sent to destruction-died for him. These solemn thoughts are deepened in 1Co. 8:12, which reminds us of the intimate union between the weakest and Christ, by which He so identifies Himself with them that any blow struck on them touches Him.

There is no greater sin than to tempt weak or ignorant Christians to thoughts or acts which their ignorance or weakness cannot entertain or do without damage to their religion. There is much need for laying that truth to heart in these days. Both in the field of speculation and of conduct, Christians, who think that they know so much better than ignorant believers, need to be reminded of it.

So Paul, in 1Co. 8:13, at last answers the question. His sudden turning to his own conduct is beautiful. He will not so much command others, as proclaim his own determination. He does so with characteristic vehemence and hyperbole. No doubt the liberal party in Corinth were ready to complain against the proposal to restrict their freedom because of others’ weakness; and they would be disarmed, or at least silenced, and might be stimulated to like noble resolution, by Paul’s example.

The principle plainly laid down here is as distinctly applicable to the modern question of abstinence from intoxicants. No one can doubt that ‘moderation’ in their use by some tempts others to use which soon becomes fatally immoderate. The Church has been robbed of promising members thereby, over and over again. How can a Christian man cling to a ‘moderate’ use of these things, and run the risk of destroying by his example a brother for whom Christ died?

16)1 Corinthians 9:16-17

THE SIN OF SILENCE

1Co. 9:16 - 1Co. 9:17.

The original reference of these words is to the Apostle's principle and practice of not receiving for his support money from the churches. Gifts he did accept; pay he did not. The exposition of his reason is interesting, ingenuous, and chivalrous. He strongly asserts his right, even while he as strongly declares that he will waive it. The reason for his waiving it is that he desires to have somewhat in his service beyond the strict line of his duty. His preaching itself, with all its toils and miseries, was but part of his day's work, which he was bidden to do, and for doing which he deserved no thanks nor praise. But he would like to have a little bit of glad service over and above what he is ordered to do, that, as he ingenuously says, he may have 'somewhat to boast of.'

In this exposition of motives we have two great principles actuating the Apostle-one, his profound sense of obligation, and the other his desire, if it might be, to do more than he was bound to do, because he loved his work so much. And though he is speaking here as an apostle, and his example is not to be unconditionally transferred to us, yet I think that the motives which actuated his conduct are capable of unconditional application to ourselves.

There are three things here. There is the obligation of speech, there is the penalty of silence, and there is the glad obedience which transcends obligation.

I. First, mark the obligation of speech.

No doubt the Apostle had, in a special sense, a 'necessity laid upon' him, which was first laid upon him on that road to Damascus, and repeated many a time in his life. But though he differs from us in the direct supernatural commission which was given to him, in the width of the sphere in which he had to work, and in the splendour of the gifts which were entrusted to his stewardship, he does not differ from us in the reality of the obligation which was laid upon him. Every Christian man is as truly bound as was Paul to preach the Gospel. The commission does not depend upon apostolic dignity. Jesus Christ, when He said, ‘Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature,’ was not speaking to the eleven, but to all generations of His Church. And whilst there are many other motives on which we may rest the Christian duty of propagating the Christian faith, I think that we shall be all the better if we bottom it upon this, the distinct and definite commandment of Jesus Christ, the grip of which encloses all who for themselves have found that the Lord is gracious.

For that commandment is permanent. It is exactly contemporaneous with the duration of the promise which is appended to it, and whosoever suns himself in the light of the latter is bound by the precept of the former. ‘Lo! I am with you alway, even to the end of the world,’ defines the duration of the promise, and it defines also the duration of the duty. Nay, even the promise is made conditional upon the discharge of the duty enjoined. For it is to the Church ‘going into all the world, and preaching the Gospel to every creature,’ that the promise of an abiding presence is made.

Let us remember, too, that, just because this commission is given to the whole Church, it is binding on every individual member of the Church. There is a very common fallacy, not confined to this subject, but extending over the whole field of Christian duty, by which things that are obligatory on the community are shuffled off the shoulders of the individual. But we have to remember that the whole Church is nothing more than the sum total of all its members, and that nothing is incumbent upon it which is not in their measure incumbent upon each of them. Whatsoever Christ says to all, He says to each, and the community has no duties which you and I have not.

Of course, there are diversities of forms of obedience to this commandment; of course, the restrictions of locality and the other obligations of life, come in to modify it; and it is not every man’s duty to wander over the whole world doing this work. But the direct work of communicating to others who know it not the sweetness and the power of Jesus Christ belongs to every Christian man. You cannot buy yourselves out of the ranks, as they used to be able to do out of the militia, by paying for a substitute. Both forms of service are obligatory upon each of us. We all, if we know anything of Christ and His love and His power, are bound, by the fact that we do know it, to tell it to those whom we can reach. You have all got congregations if you would look for them. There is not a Christian man or woman in this world who has not somebody that he or she can speak to more efficiently than anybody else can. You have your friends, your relations, the people with whom you are brought into daily contact, if you have no wider congregations. You cannot all stand up and preach in the sense in which I do so. But this is not the meaning of the word in the New Testament. It does not imply a pulpit, nor a set discourse, nor a gathered multitude; it simply implies a herald's task of proclaiming. Everybody who has found Jesus Christ can say, 'I have found the Messiah,' and everybody who knows Him can say, 'Come and hear, and I will tell what the Lord hath done for my soul.' Since you can do it you are bound to do it; and if you are one of 'the dumb dogs, lying down and loving to slumber,' of whom there are such crowds paralysing the energies and weakening the witness of every Church upon earth, then you are criminally and suicidally oblivious of an obligation which is a joy and a privilege as much as a duty.

Oh, brethren! I do want to lay on the consciences of all you Christian people this, that nothing can absolve you from the obligation of personal, direct speech to some one of Christ and His salvation. Unless you can say, 'I have not refrained my lips, O Lord! Thou knowest,' there frowns over against you an unfulfilled duty, the neglect of which is laming your spiritual activity, and drying up the sources of your spiritual strength.

But, then, besides this direct effort, there are the other indirect methods in which this commandment can be discharged, by sympathy and help of all sorts, about which I need say no more here.

Jesus Christ's ideal of His Church was an active propaganda, an army in which there were no non-combatants, even although some of the combatants might be detailed to remain in the camp and look after the stuff, and others of them might be in the forefront of the battle. But is that ideal ever fulfilled in any of our churches? How many amongst us there are who do absolutely nothing in the shape of Christian work! Some of us seem to think that the voluntary principle on which our Nonconformist churches are largely organised means, ‘I do not need to do anything unless I like. Inclination is the guide of duty, and if I do not care to take any active part in the work of our church, nobody has anything to say.’ No man can force me, but if Jesus Christ says to me, ‘Go!’ and I say, ‘I had rather not,’ Jesus Christ and I have to settle accounts between us. The less *men* control, the more stringent ought to be the control of Christ. And if the principle of Christian obedience is a willing heart, then the duty of a Christian is to see that the heart is willing.

A stringent obligation, not to be shuffled off by any of the excuses that we make, is laid upon us all. It makes very short work of a number of excuses. There is a great deal in the tone of this generation which tends to chill the missionary spirit. We know more about the heathen world, and familiarity diminishes horror. We have taken up, many of us, milder and more merciful ideas about the condition of those who die without knowing the name of Jesus Christ. We have taken to the study of comparative religion as a science, forgetting sometimes that the thing that we are studying as a science is spreading a dark cloud of ignorance and apathy over millions of men. And all these reasons somewhat sap the strength and cool the fervour of a good many Christian people nowadays. Jesus Christ’s commandment remains just as it was.

Then some of us say, ‘I prefer working at home!’ Well, if you are doing all that you can there, and really are enthusiastically devoted to one phase of Christian service, the great principle of division of labour comes in to warrant your not entering upon other fields which others cultivate. But unless you are thus casting all your energies into the work which you say that you prefer, there is no reason in it why you should do nothing in the other direction. Jesus Christ still says, ‘Go ye into all the world.’

Then some of you say, ‘Well, I do not much believe in your missionary societies. There is a great deal of waste of money about them. A number of things there are that one does not approve of. I have heard stories about missionaries being very idle, very luxurious, and taking too much pay, and doing too little work.’ Well, be it so! Very probably it is partly true; though I do not know that the people whose testimony is so willingly accepted, to the detriment of our brethren in foreign lands, are precisely the kind of people that should talk much about self-sacrifice and luxurious living, or whose estimate of Christian work is to be relied upon. I fancy many of them, if they walked about the streets of an English town, would have a somewhat similar report to give, as they have when they walk about the streets of an Indian one. But be that as it may, does that indictment draw a wet sponge across the commandment of Jesus Christ? or can you chisel out of the stones of Sinai one of the words written there, by reason of the imperfections of those who are seeking to obey them? Surely not! Christ still says, ‘Go ye into all the world!’

I sometimes venture to think that the day will come when the condition of being received into, and retained in, the communion of a Christian church will be obedience to that commandment. Why, even bees have the sense at a given time of the year to turn the drones out of the hives, and sting them to death. I do not recommend the last part of the process, but I am not sure but that it would be a benefit to us all, both to those ejected and to those retained, that we should get rid of that added weight that clogs every organised community in this and other lands-the dead weight of idlers who say that they are Christ’s disciples. Whether it is a condition of church membership or not, sure I am that it is a condition of fellowship with Jesus Christ, and a condition, therefore, of health in the Christian life, that it should be a life of active obedience to this plain, imperative, permanent, and universal command.

II. Secondly, a word as to the penalty of silence.

‘Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel.’ I suppose Paul is thinking mainly of a future issue, but not exclusively of that. At all events, let me point you, in a word or two, to the plain penalties of silence here, and to the awful penalties of silence hereafter.

‘Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel.’ If you are a dumb and idle professor of Christ’s truth, depend upon it that your dumb idleness will rob you of much communion with Jesus Christ. There are many Christians who would be ever so much happier, more joyous, and more assured Christians if they would go and talk about Christ to other people. Because they have locked up God’s word in their hearts it melts away unknown, and they lose more than they suspect of the sweetness and buoyancy and assured confidence that might mark them, for no other reason than because they seek to keep their morsel to themselves. Like that mist that lies white and dull over the ground on a winter's morning, which will be blown away with the least puff of fresh air, there lie doleful dampnesses, in their sooty folds, over many a Christian heart, shutting out the sun from the earth, and a little whiff of wholesome activity in Christ's cause would clear them all away, and the sun would shine down upon men again. If you want to be a happy Christian, work for Jesus Christ. I do not lay that down as a specific by itself. There are other things to be taken in conjunction with it, but yet it remains true that the woe of a languid Christianity attaches to the men who, being professing Christians, are silent when they should speak, and idle when they should work.

There is, further, the woe of the loss of sympathies, and the gain of all the discomforts and miseries of a self-absorbed life. And there is, further, the woe of the loss of one of the best ways of confirming one's own faith in the truth-viz. that of seeking to impart it to others. If you want to learn a thing, teach it. If you want to grasp the principles of any science, try to explain it to somebody who does not understand it. If you want to know where, in these days of jangling and controversy, the true, vital centre of the Gospel is, and what is the essential part of the revelation of God, go and tell sinful men about Jesus Christ who died for them; and you will find out that it is the Cross, and Him who died thereon, as dying for the world, that is the power which can move men's hearts. And so you will cleave with a closer grasp, in days of difficulty and unsettlement, to that which is able to bring light into darkness and to harmonise the discord of a troubled and sinful soul. And, further, there is the woe of having none that can look to you and say, 'I owe myself to thee.' Oh, brethren! there is no greater joy accessible to a man than that of feeling that through his poor words Christ has entered into a brother's heart. And you are throwing away all this because you shut your mouths and neglect the plain commandment of your Lord.

Ay! but that is not all. There is a future to be taken into account, and I think that Christian people do far too little realise the solemn truth that it is not all the same *then* whether a man has kept his Master's commandments or neglected them. I believe that whilst a very imperfect faith saves a man, there is such a thing as being 'saved, yet so as through fire,' and that there is such a thing as having ‘an abundant entrance ministered unto us into the everlasting kingdom.’ He whose life has been very slightly influenced by Christian principle, and who has neglected plain, imperative duties, will not stand on the same level of blessedness as the man who has more completely yielded himself in life to the constraining power of Christ’s love, and has sought to keep all His commandments.

Heaven is not a dead level. Every man there will receive as much blessedness as he is capable of, but capacities will vary, and the principal factor in determining the capacity, which capacity determines the blessedness, will be the thoroughness of obedience to all the ordinances of Christ in the course of the life upon earth. So, though we know, and therefore dare say, little about that future, I do beseech you to take this to heart, that he who there can stand before God, and say, ‘Behold! I and the children whom God hath given me’ will wear a crown brighter than the starless ones of those who saved themselves, and have brought none with them.

‘Some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship, they all came safe to land.’ But the place where they stand depends on their Christian life, and of that Christian life one main element is obedience to the commandment which makes them the apostles and missionaries of their Lord.

III. Lastly, note the glad obedience which transcends the limits of obligation.

‘If I do this thing willingly I have a reward.’ Paul desired to bring a little more than was required, in token of his love to his Master, and of his thankful acceptance of the obligation. The artist who loves his work will put more work into his picture than is absolutely needed, and will linger over it, lavishing diligence and care upon it, because he is in love with his task. The servant who seeks to do as little as he can scrape through with without rebuke is actuated by no high motives. The trader who barely puts as much into the scale as will balance the weight in the other is grudging in his dealings; but he who, with liberal hand, gives ‘shaken down, pressed together, and running over’ measure, gives because he delights in the giving.

And so it is in the Christian life. There are many of us whose question seems to be, ‘How little can I get off with? how much can I retain?’-many of us whose effort is to find out how much of the world is consistent with the profession of Christianity, and to find the minimum of effort, of love, of service, of gifts which may free us from obligation.

And what does that mean? It means that we are slaves. It means that if we durst we would give nothing, and do nothing. And what does that mean? It means that we do not care for the Lord, and have no joy in our work. And what does that mean? It means that our work deserves no praise, and will get no reward. If we love Christ we shall be anxious, if it were possible, to do more than He commands us, in token of our loyalty to the King, and of our delight in the service. Of course, in the highest view, nothing can be more than necessary. Of course He has the right to all our work; but yet there are heights of Christian consecration and self-sacrifice which a man will not be blamed if he has not climbed, and will be praised if he has. What we want, if I might venture to say so, is extravagance of service. Judas may say, ‘To what purpose is this waste?’ but Jesus will say, He ‘hath wrought a good work on Me,’ and the fragrance of the ointment will smell sweet through the centuries.

So, dear brethren, the upshot of the whole thing is, Do not let us do our Christian work reluctantly, else it is only slave’s work, and there is no blessing in it, and no reward will come to us from it. Do not let us ask, ‘How little may I do?’ but ‘How much can I do?’ Thus, asking, we shall not offer as burnt offering to the Lord that which doth cost us nothing. On His part He has given the commandment as a sign of His love. The stewardship is a token that He trusts us, the duty is an honour, the burden is a grace. On our parts let us seek for the joy of service which is not contented with the bare amount of the tribute that is demanded, but gives something over, if it were possible, because of our love to Him. They who thus give to Jesus Christ their all of love and effort and service will receive it all back a hundredfold, for the Master is not going to be in debt to any of His servants, and He says to them all, ‘I will repay it, howbeit I say not unto thee how thou owest unto Me even thine own self besides.’

17)1 Corinthians 9:19-23

A SERVANT OF MEN

1Co. 9:19 - 1Co. 9:23.

Paul speaks much of himself, but he is not an egotist. When he says, ‘I do so and so,’ it is a gracious way of enjoining the same conduct on his readers. He will lay no burden on them which he does not himself carry. The leader who can say ‘Come’ is not likely to want followers. So, in this section, the Apostle is really enjoining on the Corinthians the conduct which he declares is his own.

The great principle incumbent on all Christians, with a view to the salvation of others, is to go as far as one can without untruthfulness in the direction of finding points of resemblance and contact with those to whom we would commend the Gospel. There is a base counterfeit of this apostolic example, which slurs over distinctive beliefs, and weakly tries to please everybody by differing from nobody. That trimming to catch all winds never gains any. Mr. Facing-both-ways is not a powerful evangelist. The motive of becoming all things to all men must be plainly disinterested, and the assimilation must have love for the souls concerned and eagerness to bring the truth to them, and them to the truth, legibly stamped upon it, or it will be regarded, and rightly so, as mere cowardice or dishonesty. And there must be no stretching the assimilation to the length of either concealing truth or fraternising in evil. Love to my neighbour can never lead to my joining him in wrongdoing.

But, while the limits of this assumption of the colour of our surroundings are plainly marked, there is ample space within these for the exercise of this eminently Christian grace. We must get near people if we would help them. Especially must we identify ourselves with them in sympathy, and seek to multiply points of assimilation, if we would draw them to Jesus Christ. He Himself had to become man that He might gain men, and His servants have to do likewise, in their degree. The old story of the Christian teacher who voluntarily became a slave, that he might tell of Christ to slaves, has in spirit to be repeated by us all.

We can do no good by standing aloof on a height and flinging down the Gospel to the people below. They must feel that we enter into their circumstances, prejudices, ways of thinking, and the like, if our words are to have power. That is true about all Christian teachers, whether of old or young. You must be a boy among boys, and try to show that you enter into the boy's nature, or you may lecture till doomsday and do no good.

Paul instances three cases in which he had acted, and still continued to do so, on this principle. He was a Jew, but after his conversion he had to 'become a Jew' by a distinct act; that is, he had receded so far from his old self, that he, if he had had only himself to think of, would have given up all Jewish observances. But he felt it his duty to conciliate prejudice as far as he could, and so, though he would have fought to the death rather than given countenance to the belief that circumcision was necessary, he had no scruple about circumcising Timothy; and, though he believed that for Christians the whole ancient ritual was abolished, he was quite willing, if it would smooth away the prejudices of the 'many thousands of Jews who believed,' to show, by his participation in the temple worship, that he 'walked orderly, keeping the law.' If he was told 'You must,' his answer could only be 'I will not'; but if it was a question of conciliating, he was ready to go all lengths for that.

The category which he names next is not composed of different persons from the first, but of the same persons regarded from a somewhat different point of view. 'Them that are under the law' describes Jews, not by their race, but by their religion; and Paul was willing to take his place among them, as we have just observed. But he will not do that so as to be misunderstood, wherefore he protests that in doing so he is voluntarily abridging his freedom for a specific purpose. He is not 'under the law'; for the very pith of his view of the Christian's position is that he has nothing to do with that Mosaic law in any of its parts, because Christ has made him free.

The second class to whom in his wide sympathies he is able to assimilate himself, is the opposite of the former-the Gentiles who are 'without law.' He did not preach on Mars' Hill as he did in the synagogues. The many-sided Gospel had aspects fitted for the Gentiles who had never heard of

Moses, and the many-sided Apostle had links of likeness to the Greek and the barbarian. But here, too, his assimilation of himself to those whom he seeks to win is voluntary; wherefore he protests that he is not without law, though he recognises no longer the obligations of Moses' law, for he is 'under [or, rather, "in"] law to Christ.'

'The weak' are those too scrupulous-conscienced Christians of whom he has been speaking in 1Co. 8:1 - 1Co. 8:13 and whose narrow views he exhorted stronger brethren to respect, and to refrain from doing what they could do without harming their own consciences, lest by doing it they should induce a brother to do the same, whose conscience would prick him for it. That is a lesson needed to-day as much as, or more than, in Paul's time, for the widely different degrees of culture and diversities of condition, training, and associations among Christians now necessarily result in very diverse views of Christian conduct in many matters. The grand principle laid down here should guide us all, both in regard to fellow-Christians and others. Make yourself as like them as you honestly can; restrict yourself of allowable acts, in deference to even narrow prejudices; but let the motive of your assimilating yourself to others be clearly their highest good, that you may 'gain' them, not for yourself but for your Master.

1Co. 9:23 lays down Paul's ruling principle, which both impelled him to become all things to all men, with a view to their salvation, as he has been saying, and urged him to effort and self-discipline, with a view to his own, as he goes on to say. 'For the Gospel's sake' seems to point backward; 'that I may be a joint partaker thereof points forward. We have not only to preach the Gospel to others, but to live on it and be saved by it ourselves.

18)1 Corinthians 9:24

1 Corinthians

HOW THE VICTOR RUNS

1Co. 9:24.

'*So* run.' Does that mean 'Run so that ye obtain?' Most people, I suppose, superficially reading the words, attach that significance to them, but the 'so' here carries a much greater weight of meaning than that. It is a word of comparison. The Apostle would have the Corinthians recall the picture which he has been putting before them-a picture of a scene that was very familiar to them; for, as most of us know, one of the most important of the Grecian games was celebrated at intervals in the immediate neighbourhood of Corinth. Many of the Corinthian converts had, no doubt, seen, or even taken part in them. The previous portion of the verse in which our text occurs appeals to the Corinthians' familiar knowledge of the arena and the competitors, 'Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize?' He would have them picture the eager racers, with every muscle strained, and the one victor starting to the front; and then he says, 'Look at that panting conqueror. That is how you should run. *So* run-'meaning thereby not, 'Run so that you may obtain the prize,' but 'Run so' as the victor does, 'in order that you may obtain.' So, then, this victor is to be a lesson to us, and we are to take a leaf out of his book. Let us see what he teaches us.

I. The first thing is, the utmost tension and energy and strenuous effort.

It is very remarkable that Paul should pick out these Grecian games as containing for Christian people any lesson, for they were honeycombed, through and through, with idolatry and all sorts of immorality, so that no Jew ventured to go near them, and it was part of the discipline of the early Christian Church that professing Christians should have nothing to do with them in any shape.

And yet here, as in many other parts of his letters, Paul takes these foul things as patterns for Christians. 'There is a soul of goodness in things evil, if we would observantly distil it out.' It is very much as if English preachers were to refer their people to a racecourse, and say, 'Even there you may pick out lessons, and learn something of the way in which Christian people ought to live.'

On the same principle the New Testament deals with that diabolical business of fighting. It is taken as an emblem for the Christian soldier, because, with all its devilishness, there is in it this, at least, that men give themselves up absolutely to the will of their commander, and are ready to fling away their lives if he lifts his finger. That at least is grand and noble, and to be imitated on a higher plane.

In like manner Paul takes these poor racers as teaching us a lesson. Though the thing be all full of sin, we can get one valuable thought out of it, and it is this-If people would work half as hard to gain the highest object that a man can set before him, as hundreds of people are ready to do in order to gain trivial and paltry objects, there would be fewer stunted and half-dead Christians amongst us. ‘That is the way to run,’ says Paul, ‘if you want to obtain.’

Look at the contrast that he hints at, between the prize that stirs these racers’ energies into such tremendous operation and the prize which Christians profess to be pursuing. ‘They do it to obtain a corruptible crown’-a twist of pine branch out of the neighbouring grove, worth half-a-farthing, and a little passing glory not worth much more. They do it to obtain a corruptible crown; we do *not* do it, though we professedly have an incorruptible one as our aim and object. If we contrast the relative values of the objects that men pursue so eagerly, and the objects of the Christian course, surely we ought to be smitten down with penitent consciousness of our own unworthiness, if not of our own hypocrisy.

It is not even there that the lesson stops, because we Christian people may be patterns and rebukes to ourselves. For, on the one side of our nature we show what we can do when we are really in earnest about getting something; and on the other side we show with how little work we can be contented, when, at bottom, we do not much care whether we get the prize or not. If you and I really believed that that crown of glory which Paul speaks about might be ours, and would be all sufficing for us if it were ours, as truly as we believe that money is a good thing, there would not be such a difference between the way in which we clutch at the one and the apathy which scarcely cares to put out a hand for the other. The things that are seen and temporal do get the larger portion of the energies and thoughts of the average Christian man, and the things that are unseen and eternal get only what is left. Sometimes ninety per cent. of the water of a stream is taken away to drive a milldam or do work, and only ten per cent. can be spared to trickle down the half-dry channel and do nothing but reflect the bright sun and help the little flowers and the grass to grow. So, the larger portion of most lives goes to drive the mill-wheels, and there is very little left, in the case of many of us, in order to help us towards God, and bring us closer into communion with our Lord. ‘Run’ for the crown as eagerly as you ‘run’ for your incomes, or for anything that you really, in your deepest desires, want. Take yourselves for your own patterns and your own rebukes. Your own lives may show you how you *can* love, hope, work, and deny yourselves when you have sufficient inducement, and their flame should put to shame their frost, for the warmth is directed towards trifles and the coldness towards the crown. If you would run for the incorruptible prize of effort in the fashion in which others and yourselves run for the corruptible, your whole lives would be changed. Why! if Christian people in general really took half-half? ay! a tenth part of-the honest, persistent pains to improve their Christian character, and become more like Jesus Christ, which a violinist will take to master his instrument, there would be a new life for most of our Christian communities. Hours and hours of patient practice are not too much for the one; how many moments do we give to the other? ‘So run, that ye obtain.’

II. The victorious runner sets Christians an example of rigid self-control.

Every man that is striving for the mastery is ‘temperate in all things.’ The discipline for runners and athletes was rigid. They had ten months of spare diet-no wine-hard gymnastic exercises every day, until not an ounce of superfluous flesh was upon their muscles, before they were allowed to run in the arena. And, says Paul, that is the example for us. They practise this rigid discipline and abstinence by way of preparation for the race, and after it was run they might dispense with the training. You and I have to practise rigid abstinence as part of the race, as a continuous necessity. *They* did not abstain only from bad things, they did not only avoid criminal acts of sensuous indulgence; but they abstained from many perfectly legitimate things. So for us it is not enough to say, ‘I draw the line there, at this or that vice, and I will have nothing to do with these.’ You will never make a growing Christian if abstinence from palpable sins only is your standard. You must ‘lay aside’ every sin, of course, but also ‘every *weight*’ Many things are ‘weights’ that are not ‘sins’; and if we are to run fast we must run light, and if we are to do any good in this world we have to live by rigid control and abstain from much that is perfectly legitimate, because, if we do not, we shall fail in accomplishing the highest purposes for which we are here. Not only in regard to the gross sensual indulgences which these men had to avoid, but in regard to a great deal of the outgoings of our interests and our hearts, we have to apply the knife very closely and cut to the quick, if we would have leisure and sympathy and affection left for loftier objects. It is a very easy thing to be a Christian in one aspect, inasmuch as a Christian at bottom is a man that is trusting to Jesus Christ, and that is not hard to do. It is a very hard thing to be a Christian in another aspect, because a real Christian is a man who, by reason of his trusting Jesus Christ, has set his heel upon the neck of the animal that is in him, and keeps the flesh well down, and not only the flesh, but the desires of the mind as well as of the flesh, and subordinates them all to the one aim of pleasing Him. 'No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life' if his object is to please Him that has called him to be a soldier. Unless we cut off a great many of the thorns, so to speak, by which things catch hold of us as we pass them, we shall not make much advance in the Christian life. Rigid self-control and abstinence from else legitimate things that draw us away from Him are needful, if we are so to run as the poor heathen racer teaches us.

III. The last grace that is suggested here, the last leaf to take out of these racers' book, is definiteness and concentration of aim.

'I, therefore,' says the Apostle, 'so run not as uncertainly.' If the runner is now heading that way and now this, making all manner of loops upon his path, of course he will be left hopelessly in the rear. It is the old fable of the Grecian mythology transplanted into Christian soil. The runner who turned aside to pick up the golden apple was disappointed of his hopes of the radiant fair. The ship, at the helm of which is a steersman who has either a feeble hand or does not understand his business, and which therefore keeps yawing from side to side, with the bows pointing now this way and now that, is not holding a course that will make the harbour first in the race. The people that to-day are marching with their faces towards Zion, and to-morrow making a loop-line to the world, will be a long time before they reach their terminus. I believe there are few things more lacking in the average Christian life of to-day than resolute, conscious concentration upon an aim which is clearly and always before us. Do you know what you are aiming at? That is the first question. Have you a distinct theory of life's purpose that you can put into half a dozen words, or have you not? In the one case, there is some chance of attaining your object; in the other one, none. Alas! we find many Christian people who do not set before themselves, with emphasis and constancy, as their aim the doing of God's will, and so sometimes they do it, when it happens to be easy, and sometimes, when temptations are strong, they do not. It needs a strong hand on the tiller to keep it steady when the wind is blowing in puffs and gusts, and sometimes the sail bellies full and sometimes it is almost empty. The various strengths of the temptations that blow us out of our course are such that we shall never keep a straight line of direction, which is the shortest line, and the only one on which we shall 'obtain,' unless we know very distinctly where we want to go, and have a good strong will that has learned to say 'No!' when the temptations come. 'Whom resist steadfast in the faith.' 'I therefore so run, not as uncertainly,' taking one course one day and another the next.

Now, that definite aim is one that can be equally pursued in all varieties of life. 'This one thing I do' said one who did about as many things as most people, but the different kinds of things that Paul did were all, at bottom, one thing. And we, in all the varieties of our circumstances, may keep this one clear aim before us, and whether it be in this way or in that, we may be equally and at all times seeking the better country, and bending all circumstances and all duty to make us more like our Master and bring us closer to Him.

The Psalmist did not offer an impossible prayer when he said: 'One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to enquire in His temple.' Was David in 'the house of the Lord' when he was with his sheep in the wilderness, and when he was in Saul's palace, and when he was living with wild beasts in dens and caves of the earth, and when he was a fugitive, hunted like a partridge upon the mountains? Was he always in the Lord's house? Yes! At any rate he could be. All that we do may be doing His will, and over a life, crowded with varying circumstances and yet simplified and made blessed by unvarying obedience, we may write, 'This one thing I do.'

But we shall not keep this one aim clear before our eyes, unless we habituate ourselves to the contemplation of the end. The runner, according to Paul's vivid picture in another of his letters, forgets the things that are behind, and stretches out towards the things that are before. And just as a man runs with his body inclining forward, and his eager hand nearer the prize than his body, and his eyesight and his heart travelling ahead of them both to grasp it, so if we want to live with the one worthy aim for ours, and to put all our effort and faith into what deserves it all-the Christian race-we must bring clear before us continually, or at least with the utmost frequency, the prize of our high calling, the crown of righteousness. Then we shall run so that we may, at the last, be able to finish our course with joy, and dying to hope with all humility that there is laid up for us a crown of righteousness.

19)1 Corinthians 9:25

1 Corinthians

'CONCERNING THE CROWN'

1Co. 9:25.

One of the most famous of the Greek athletic festivals was held close by Corinth. Its prize was a pine-wreath from the neighbouring sacred grove. The painful abstinence and training of ten months, and the fierce struggle of ten minutes, had for their result a twist of green leaves, that withered in a week, and a little fading fame that was worth scarcely more, and lasted scarcely longer. The struggle and the discipline were noble; the end was contemptible. And so it is with all lives whose aims are lower than the highest. They are greater in the powers they put forth than in the objects they compass, and the question, 'What is it for?' is like a douche of cold water from the cart that lays the clouds of dust in the ways.

So, says Paul, praising the effort and contemning the prize, 'They do it to obtain a corruptible crown.' And yet there was a soul of goodness in this evil thing. Though these festivals were indissolubly intertwined with idolatry, and besmirched with much sensuous evil, yet he deals with them as he does with war and with slavery; points to the disguised nobility that lay beneath the hideousness, and holds up even these low things as a pattern for Christian men.

But I do not mean here to speak so much about the general bearing of this text as rather to deal with its designation of the aim and reward of Christian energy, that ‘incorruptible crown’ of which my text speaks. And in doing so I desire to take into account likewise other places in Scripture in which the same metaphor occurs.

I. The crown.

Let me recall the other places where the same metaphor is employed. We find the Apostle, in the immediate prospect of death, rising into a calm rapture in which imprisonment and martyrdom lose their terrors, as he thinks of the ‘crown of righteousness’ which the Lord will give to him. The Epistle of James, again, assures the man who endures temptation that ‘the Lord will give him the crown of life which He has promised to all them that love Him.’ The Lord Himself from heaven repeats that promise to the persecuted Church at Smyrna: ‘Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.’ The elders cast their crowns before the feet of Him that sitteth upon the throne. The Apostle Peter, in his letter, stimulates the elders upon earth to faithful discharge of their duty, by the hope that thereby they shall ‘receive a crown of righteousness that fadeth not away.’ So all these instances taken together with this of my text enable us to gather two or three lessons.

It is extremely unlikely that all these instances of the occurrence of the emblem carry with them reference, such as that in my text, to the prize at the athletic festivals. For Peter and James, intense Jews as they were, had probably never seen, and possibly never heard of, the struggles at the Isthmus and at Olympus and elsewhere. The Book of the Revelation draws its metaphors almost exclusively from the circle of Jewish practices and things. So that we have to look in other directions than the arena or the racecourse to explain these other uses of the image. It is also extremely unlikely that in these other passages the reference is to a crown as the emblem of sovereignty, for that idea is expressed, as a rule, by another word in Scripture, which we have Anglicised as ‘diadem.’ The ‘crown’ in all these passages is a garland twisted out of some growth of the field. In ancient usage roses were twined for revellers; pine-shoots or olive branches for the victors in the games; while the laurel was ‘the meed of mighty conquerors’; and plaited oak leaves were laid upon the brows of citizens who had deserved well of their country, and myrtle sprays crowned the fair locks of the bride.

And thus in these directions, and not towards the wrestling ground or the throne of the monarch, must we look for the ideas suggested by the emblem.

Now, if we gather together all these various uses of the word, there emerge two broad ideas, that the ‘crown’ which is the Christian’s aim symbolises a state of triumphant repose and of festal enjoyment. There are other aspects of that great and dim future which correspond to other necessities of our nature, and I suppose some harm has been done and some misconceptions have been induced, and some unreality imported into the idea of the Christian future, by the too exclusive prominence given to these two ideas-victorious rest after the struggle, and abundant satisfaction of all desires. That future is other and more than a festival; it is other and more than repose. There are larger fields there for the operation of powers that have been trained and evolved here. The faithfulness of the steward is exchanged, according to Christ’s great words, for the authority of the ruler over many cities. But still, do we not all know enough of the worry and turbulence and strained effort of the conflict here below, to feel that to some of our deepest and not ignoble needs and desires that image appeals? The helmet that pressed upon the brow even whilst it protected the brain, and wore away the hair even whilst it was a defence, is lifted off, and on unruffled locks the garland is intertwined that speaks victory and befits a festival. One of the old prophets puts the same metaphor in words imperfectly represented by the English translation, when he promises ‘a crown’ or a garland ‘for ashes’-instead of the symbol of mourning, strewed grey and gritty upon the dishevelled hair of the weepers, flowers twined into a wreath-’the oil of joy for mourning,’ and the festival ‘garment of praise’ to dress the once heavy spirit. So the satisfaction of all desires, the accompaniments of a feast, in abundance, rejoicing and companionship, and conclusive conquest over all foes, are promised us in this great symbol.

But let us look at the passages separately, and we shall find that they present the one thought with differences, and that if we combine these, as in a stereoscope, the picture gains solidity.

The crown is described in three ways. It is the crown of 'life,' of 'glory' and of 'righteousness.' And I venture to think that these three epithets describe the material, so to speak, of which the wreath is composed. The everlasting flower of life, the radiant blossoms of glory, the white flower of righteousness; these are its components.

I need not enlarge upon them, nor will your time allow that I should. Here we have the promise of life, that fuller life which men want, 'the life of which our veins are scant,' even in the fullest tide and heyday of earthly existence. The promise sets that future over against the present, as if then first should men know what it means to live: so buoyant, elastic, unwearied shall be their energies, so manifold the new outlets for activity, and the new inlets for the surrounding glory and beauty; so incorruptible and glorious shall be their new being. Here we live a living death; there we shall live indeed; and that will be the crown, not only in regard to physical, but in regard to spiritual, powers and consciousness.

But remember that all this full tide of life is Christ's gift. There is no such thing as natural immortality; there is no such thing as independent life. All Being, from the lowest creature up to the loftiest created spirit, exists by one law, the continual impartation to it of life from the fountain of life, according to its capacities. And unless Jesus Christ, all through the eternal ages of the future, imparted to the happy souls that sit garlanded at His board the life by which they live, the wreaths would wither on their brows, and the brows would melt away, and dissolve from beneath the wreaths. 'I will give him a crown of life.'

It is a crown of 'glory,' and that means a lustrousness of character imparted by radiation and reflection from the central light of the glory of God. 'Then shall the righteous blaze out like the sun in the Kingdom of My Father.' Our eyes are dim, but we can at least divine the far-off flashing of that great light, and may ponder upon what hidden depths and miracles of transformed perfectness and unimagined lustre wait for us, dark and limited as we are here, in the assurance that we all shall be changed into the ‘likeness of the body of His glory.’

It is a crown of ‘righteousness.’ Though that phrase may mean the wreath that rewards righteousness, it seems more in accordance with the other similar expressions to which I have referred to regard it, too, as the material of which the crown is composed. It is not enough that there should be festal gladness, not enough that there should be calm repose, not enough that there should be flashing glory, not enough that there should be fulness of life. To accord with the intense moral earnestness of the Christian system there must be, emphatically, in the Christian hope, cessation of all sin and investiture with all purity. The word means the same thing as the ancient promise, ‘Thy people shall be all righteous.’ It means the same thing as the latest promise of the ascended Christ, ‘They shall walk with Me in white.’ And it sets, I was going to say, the very climax and culmination on the other hopes, declaring that absolute, stainless, infallible righteousness which one day shall belong to our weak and sinful spirits.

These, then, are the elements, and on them all is stamped the signature of perpetuity. The victor’s wreath is tossed on the ashen heap, the reveller’s flowers droop as he sits in the heat of the banqueting-hall; the bride’s myrtle blossom fades though she lay it away in a safe place. The crown of life is incorruptible. It is twined of amaranth, ever blossoming into new beauty and never fading.

II. Now look, secondly, at the discipline by which the crown is won.

Observe, first of all, that in more than one of the passages to which we have already referred great emphasis is laid upon Christ as *giving* the crown. That is to say, that blessed future is not won by effort, but is bestowed as a free gift. It is given from the hands which have procured it, and, as I may say, twined it for us. Unless His brows had been pierced with the crown of thorns, ours would never have worn the garland of victory. Jesus provides the sole means, by His work, by which any man can enter into that inheritance; and Jesus, as the righteous Judge who bestows the rewards, which are likewise the results, of our life here, gives the crown. It remains for ever the gift of His love. ‘The wages of sin is death,’ but we rise above the region of retribution and desert when we pass to the next clause-’the gift of God is eternal life,’ and that ‘through Jesus Christ.’

Whilst, then, this must be laid as the basis of all, there must also, with equal earnestness and clearness, be set forth the other thought that Christ’s gift has conditions, which conditions these passages plainly set forth. In the one, which I have read as a text, we have these conditions declared as being twofold-protracted discipline and continuous effort. The same metaphor employed by the same Apostle, in his last dying utterance, associates his consciousness that he had fought the good fight and run his race, like the pugilists and runners of the arena, with the hope that he shall receive the crown of righteousness. James declares that it is given to the man who *endures* temptation, not only in the sense of bearing, but of so bearing as not thereby to be injured in Christian character and growth in Christian life. Peter asserts that it is the reward of self-denying discharge of duty. And the Lord from heaven lays down the condition of faithfulness unto death as the necessary pre-requisite of His gift of the crown of life. In two of the passages there is included, though not precisely on the level of these other requirements, the love of Him and the love of ‘His appearing,’ as the necessary qualifications for the gift of the crown.

So, to begin with, unless a man has such a love to Jesus Christ as that he is happy in His presence, and longs to have Him near, as parted loving souls do; and, especially, is looking forward to that great judicial coming, and feeling that there is no tremor in his heart at the prospect of meeting the Judge, but an outgoing of desire and love at the hope of seeing his Saviour and his Friend, what right has he to expect the crown? None. And he will never get it. There is a test for us which may well make some of us ask ourselves, Are we Christians, then, at all?

And then, beyond that, there are all these other conditions which I have pointed out, which may be gathered into one-strenuous discharge of daily duty and continual effort after following in Christ’s footsteps.

This needs to be as fully and emphatically preached as the other doctrine that eternal life is the gift of God. All manner of mischiefs may come, and have come, from either of these twin thoughts, wrenched apart. But let us weave them as closely together as the stems of the flowers that make the garlands are twined, and feel that there is a perfect consistency of both in theory, and that there must be a continual union of both, in our belief and in our practice. Eternal life is the gift of God, on condition of our diligence and earnestness. It is not all the same whether you are a lazy Christian or not. It does make an eternal difference in our condition whether here we ‘run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus.’ We have to receive the crown as a gift; we have to wrestle and run, as contending for a prize.

III. And now, lastly, note the power of the reward as motive for life.

Paul says roundly in our text that the desire to obtain the incorruptible crown is a legitimate spring of Christian action. Now, I do not need to waste your time and my own in defending Christian morality from the fantastic objection that it is low and selfish, because it encourages itself to efforts by the prospect of the crown. If there are any men who are Christians-if such a contradiction can be even stated in words-only because of what they hope to gain thereby in another world, they will not get what they hope for; and they would not like it if they did. I do not believe that there are any such; and sure I am, if there are, that it is not Christianity that has made them so. But a thought that we must not take as a supreme motive, we may rightly accept as a subsidiary encouragement. We are not Christians unless the dominant motive of our lives be the love of the Lord Jesus Christ; and unless we feel a necessity, because of loving Him, to aim to be like Him. But, that being so, who shall hinder me from quickening my flagging energies, and stimulating my torpid faith, and encouraging my cowardice, by the thought that yonder there remain rest, victory, the fulness of life, the flashing of glory, and the purity of perfect righteousness? If such hopes are low and selfish as motives, would God that more of us were obedient to such low and selfish motives!

Now it seems to me, that this spring of action is not as strong in the Christians of this day as it used to be, and as it should be. You do not hear much about heaven in ordinary preaching. I do not think it occupies a very large place in the average Christian man’s mind. We have all got such a notion nowadays of the great good that the Gospel does in society and in the present, and some of us have been so frightened by the nonsense that has been talked about the ‘other-worldliness’ of Christianity-as if that was a disgrace to it-that it seems to me that the future of glory and blessedness has very largely faded away, as a motive for Christian men’s energies, like the fresco off a neglected convent wall.

And I want to say, dear brethren, that I believe, for my part, that we suffer terribly by the comparative neglect into which this side of Christian truth has fallen. Do you not think that it would make a difference to you if you really believed, and carried always with you in your thoughts, the thrilling consciousness that every act of the present was registered, and would tell on the far side yonder?

We do not know much of that future, and these days are intolerant of mere unverifiable hypotheses. But accuracy of knowledge and definiteness of impression do not always go together, nor is there the fulness of the one wanted for the clearness and force of the other. Though the thread which we throw across the abyss is very slender, it is strong enough, like the string of a boy’s kite, to bear the messengers of hope and desire that we may send up by it, and strong enough to bear the gifts of grace that will surely come down along it.

We cannot understand to-day unless we look at it with eternity for a background. The landscape lacks its explanation, until the mists lift and we see the white summits of the Himalayas lying behind and glorifying the low sandy plain. Would your life not be different; would not the things in it that look great be wholesomely dwindled and yet be magnified; would not sorrow be calmed, and life become ‘a solemn scorn of ills,’ and energies be stimulated, and all be different, if you really ‘did it to obtain an incorruptible crown?’

Brethren, let us try to keep more clearly before us, as solemn and blessed encouragement in our lives, these great thoughts. The garland hangs on the goal, but ‘a man is not crowned unless he strive according to the laws’ of the arena. The laws are two-No man can enter for the conflict but by faith in Christ; no man can win in the struggle but by faithful effort. So the first law is, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,’ and the second is, ‘Hold fast that thou hast; let no man take thy crown.’

20)1 Corinthians 10:23-33

1 Corinthians

THE LIMITS OF LIBERTY

1Co. 10:23 - 1Co. 10:33.

This passage strikingly illustrates Paul's constant habit of solving questions as to conduct by the largest principles. He did not keep his 'theology' and his ethics in separate water-tight compartments, having no communication with each other. The greatest truths were used to regulate the smallest duties. Like the star that guided the Magi, they burned high in the heavens, but yet directed to the house in Bethlehem.

The question here in hand was one that pressed on the Corinthian Christians, and is very far away from our experience. Idolatry had so inextricably intertwined itself with daily life that it was hard to keep up any intercourse with non-Christians without falling into constructive idolatry; and one very constantly obtruding difficulty was that much of the animal food served on private tables had been slaughtered as sacrifices or with certain sacrificial rites. What was a Christian to do in such a case? To eat or not to eat? Both views had their vehement supporters in the Corinthian church, and the importance of the question is manifest from the large space devoted to it in this letter.

In 1Co. 8:1 - 1Co. 8:13 we have a weighty paragraph, in which one phase of the difficulty is dealt with-the question whether a Christian ought to attend a feast in an idol temple, where, of course, the viands had been offered as sacrifices. But in 1Co. 10:1 - 1Co. 10:33 Paul deals with the case in which the meat had been bought in the flesh-market, and so was not necessarily sacrificial. Paul's manner of handling the point is very instructive. He envelops, as it were, the practical solution in a wrapping of large principles; 1Co. 10:23 - 1Co. 10:24 precede the specific answer, and are general principles; 1Co. 10:25 - 1Co. 10:30 contain the practical answer; 1Co. 10:31 - 1Co. 10:33 and 1Co. 11:1 of the next chapter are again general principles, wide and imperative enough to mould all conduct, as well as to settle the matter immediately in hand, which, important as it was at Corinth, has become entirely uninteresting to us.

We need not spend time in elucidating the specific directions given as to the particular question in hand further than to note the immense gift of saving common-sense which Paul had, and how sanely and moderately he dealt with his problem. His advice was-'Don't ask where the joint set before you came from. If you do not know that it was offered, your eating of it does not commit you to idol worship.' No doubt there were Corinthian Christians with inflamed consciences who did ask such questions, and rather prided themselves on their strictness and rigidity; but Paul would have them let sleeping dogs lie. If, however, the meat is known to have been offered to an idol, then Paul is as rigid and strict as they are. That combination of willingness to go as far as possible, and inflexible determination not to go one step farther, of yieldingness wherever principle does not come in, and of iron fixedness wherever it does, is rare indeed, but should be aimed at by all Christians. The morality of the Gospel would make more way in the world if its advocates always copied the 'sweet reasonableness' of Paul, which, as he tells us in this passage, he learned from Jesus.

As to the wrapping of general principles, they may all be reduced to one-the duty of limiting Christian liberty by consideration for others. In the two verses preceding the practical precepts, that duty is stated with reference entirely to the obligations flowing from our relationship to others. We are all bound together by a mystical chain of solidarity. Since every man is my neighbour, I am bound to think of him and not only of myself in deciding what I may do or refrain from doing. I must abstain from lawful things if, by doing them, I should be likely to harm my neighbour's building up of a strong character. I can, or I believe that I can, pursue some course of conduct, engage in some enterprise, follow some line of life, without damage to myself, either in regard to worldly position, or in regard to my religious life. Be it so, but I have to take some one else into account. Will my example call out imitation in others, to whom it may be harmful or fatal to do as I can do with real or supposed impunity? If so, I am guilty of something very like murder if I do not abstain.

‘What harm is there in betting a shilling? I can well afford to lose it, and I can keep myself from the feverish wish to risk more.’ Yes, and you are thereby helping to hold up that gambling habit which is ruining thousands.

‘I can take alcohol in moderation, and it does me no harm, and I can go to a prayer-meeting after my dinner and temperate glass, and I am within my Christian liberty in doing so.’ Yes, and you take part thereby in the greatest curse that besets our country, and are, by countenancing the drink habit, guilty of the blood of souls. How any Christian man can read these two verses and not abstain from all intoxicants is a mystery. They cut clean through all the pleas for moderate drinking, and bring into play another set of principles which limit liberty by regard to others’ good. Surely, if there was ever a subject to which these words apply, it is the use of alcohol, the proved cause of almost all the crime and poverty on both sides of the Atlantic. To the Christians who plead their ‘liberty’ we can only say, ‘Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.’

The same general considerations reappear in the verses following the specific precept, but with a difference. The neighbour’s profit is still put forth as the limiting consideration, but it is elevated to a higher sacredness of obligation by being set in connection with the ‘glory of God’ and the example of Christ. ‘Do all to the glory of God.’ To put the thought here into modern English-Could you ask a blessing over a glass of spirits when you think that, though it should do you no harm, your taking it may, as it were, tip some weak brother over the precipice? Can you drink to God’s glory when you know that drink is slaying thousands body and soul, and that hopeless drunkards are made by wholesale out of moderate drinkers? ‘Give no occasion of stumbling’; do not by your example tempt others into risky courses. And remember that ‘neighbour’ [1Co. 10:24] resolves itself into ‘Jews’ and ‘Greeks’ and the ‘Church of God’-that is, substantially to your own race and other races-to men with whom you have affinities, and to men with whom you have none.

A Christian man is bound to shape his life so that no man shall be able to say of him that he was the occasion of that one’s fall. He is so bound because every man is his neighbour. He is so bound because he is bound to live to the glory of God, which can never be advanced by laying stumbling-blocks in the way for feeble feet. He is so bound because, unless Christ had limited Himself within the bound of manhood, and had sought not His own profit or pleasure, we should have had neither life nor hope. For all these reasons, the duty of thinking of others, and of abstaining, for their sakes, from what one might do, is laid on all Christians. How do they discharge that duty who will not forswear alcohol for their neighbour's sake?

21)1 Corinthians 11:24

1 Corinthians

'IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME'

1Co. 11:24.

The account of the institution of the Lord's Supper, contained in this context, is very much the oldest extant narrative of that event. It dates long before any of the Gospels, and goes up, probably, to somewhere about five and twenty years after the Crucifixion. It presupposes a previous narrative which had been orally delivered to the Corinthians, and, as the Apostle alleges, was derived by him from Christ Himself. It is intended to correct corruptions in the administration of the rite which must have taken some time to develop themselves. And so we are carried back to a period very close indeed to the first institution of the rite, by the words before us.

No reasonable doubt can exist, then, that within a very few years of our Lord's death, the whole body of Christian people believed that Jesus Christ Himself appointed the Lord's Supper. I do not stay to dwell upon the value of a rite contemporaneous with the fact which it commemorates, and continuously lasting throughout the ages, as a witness of the historical veracity of the alleged fact; but I want to fix upon this thought, that Jesus Christ, who cared very little for rites, who came to establish a religion singularly independent of any outward form, did establish two rites, one of them to be done once in a Christian lifetime, one of them to be repeated with indefinite frequency, and, as it appears, at first repeated daily by the early believers. The reason why these two, and only these two, external ordinances were appointed by Jesus Christ was, that, taken together, they cover the whole ground of revealed fact, and they also cover the whole ground of Christian experience. There is no room for any other rites, because these two, the rite of initiation, which is baptism, and the rite of commemoration, which is the Lord's Supper, say everything about Christianity as a revelation, and about Christianity as a living experience.

Not only so, but in the simple primitive form of the Lord's Supper there is contained a reference to the past, the present and the future. It covers all time as well as all revelation and all Christian experience. For the past, as the text shows us, it is a memorial of one Person, and one fact in that Person's life. For the present, it is the symbol of the Christian life, as that great sixth chapter in John's gospel sets forth; and for the future, it is a prophecy, as our Lord Himself said on that night in the upper chamber, 'Till I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom,' and as the Apostle in this context says, 'Till He come.' It is to these three aspects of this ordinance, as the embodiment of all essential Christian truth, and as the embodiment of all deep Christian experience, covering the past, the present, and the future, that I wish to turn now. I do not deal so much with the mere words of my text as with this threefold significance of the rite which it appoints.

I. So then, first, we have to think of it as a memorial of the past.

'Do this,' is the true meaning of the words, not 'in remembrance of Me,' but something far more sweet and pathetic-'do this for the *remembering* of Me.' The former expression is equal to 'Do this because you remember.' The real meaning of the words is, 'Do this in case you forget'; do this in order that you may recall to memory what the slippery memory is so apt to lose-the impression of even the sweetest sweetness, of the most loving love, and the most self-abnegating sacrifice, which He offered for us.

There is something to me infinitely pathetic and beautiful in looking at the words not only as the commandment of the Lord, but as the appeal of the Friend, who wished, as we all do, not to be utterly forgotten by those whom He cared for and loved; and who, not only because their remembrance was their salvation, but because their forgetfulness pained His human heart, brings to their hearts the plaintive appeal: 'Do not forget Me when I am gone away from you; and even if you have no better way of remembering

Me, take these poor symbols, to which I am not too proud to entrust the care of My memory, and do this, lest you forget Me.'

But, dear brethren, there are deeper thoughts than this, on which I must dwell briefly. 'In remembrance of Me'-Jesus Christ, then, takes up an altogether unique and solitary position here, and into the sacredest hours of devotion and the loftiest moments of communion with God, intrudes His personality, and says, 'When you are most religious, remember Me; and let the highest act of your devout life be a thought turned to Myself.'

Now, I want you to ask, is that thought diverted from God? And if it is not, how comes it not to be? I want you honestly to ask yourselves this question-what did *He* think about Himself who, at that moment, when all illusions were vanishing, and life was almost at its last ebb, took the most solemn rite of His nation and laid it solemnly aside and said: 'A greater than Moses is here; a greater deliverance is being wrought' : 'Remember Me.' Is that insisting on His own personality, and making the remembrance of it the very apex and shining summit of all religious aspiration-is that the work of one about whom all that we have to say is, He was the noblest of men? If so, then I want to know how Jesus Christ, in that upper chamber, founding the sole continuous rite of the religion which He established, and making its heart and centre the remembrance of His own personality, can be cleared from the charge of diverting to Himself what belongs to God only, and how you and I, if we obey His commands, escape the crime of idolatry and man-worship? 'Do this in remembrance,'-not of God-'in remembrance of Me,' 'and let memory, with all its tendrils, clasp and cleave to My person.' What an extraordinary demand! It is obscuring God, unless the 'Me' *is* God manifest in the flesh.

Then, still further, let me remind you that in the appointment of this solitary rite as His memorial to all generations, Jesus Christ Himself designates one part of His whole manifestation as the part into which all its pathos, significance, and power are concentrated. We who believe that the death of Christ is the life of the world, are told that one formidable objection to our belief is that Jesus Christ Himself said so little during His life about His death. I believe His reticence upon that question is much exaggerated, but apart altogether from that, I believe also that there was a necessity in the order of the evolution of divine truth, for the reticence, such as it is, because, whatsoever might be possible to Moses and Elias, on the Mount of Transfiguration, 'His decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem,' could not be much spoken about in the plain till it had been accomplished. But, apart from both of these considerations, reflect, that whether He said much about His death or not, He said something very much to the purpose about it when He said 'Do this in remembrance of Me.'

It is not His personality only that we are to remember. The whole of the language of the institution of the ritual, as well as the form of the rite, and its connection with the ancient passover, and its connection with the new covenant into connection with which Christ Himself brings it, all point to the significance in His eyes of His death as the Sacrifice for the world's sin. Wherefore 'the body' and 'the blood' separately remembered, except to indicate death by violence? Wherefore the language 'the body *broken* for you'; 'the blood *shed* for many for the remission of sins?' Wherefore the association with the Passover sacrifice? Wherefore the declaration that 'this is the blood of the Covenant,' unless all tended to the one thought-His death is the foundation of all loving relationships possible to us with God; and the condition of the remission of sins-the Sacrifice for the whole world?'

This is the point that He desires us to remember; this is that which He would have live for ever in our grateful hearts.

I say nothing about the absolute exclusion of any other purpose of this memorial rite. If it was the mysterious thing that the superstition of later ages has made of it, how, in the name of common-sense, does it come that not one syllable, looking in that direction, dropped from His lips when He established it? Surely He, in that upper chamber, knew best what He meant, and what He was doing when He established the rite; and I, for my part, am contented to be told that I believe in a poor, bald Zwinglianism, when I say with my Master, that the purpose of the Lord's Supper is simply the commemoration, and therein the proclamation, of His death. There is no magic, no mystery, no 'sacrament' about it. It blesses us when it makes us remember Him. It does the same thing for us which any other means of bringing Him to mind does. It does that through a different vehicle. A sermon does it by words, the Communion does it by symbols. That is the difference to be found between them. And away goes the whole fabric of superstitious Christianity, and all its mischiefs and evils, when once you accept the simple ‘Remember.’ Christ told us what He meant by the rite when He said ‘Do this in remembrance of Me.’

II. And now one word or two more about the other particulars which I have suggested. The past, however sweet and precious, is not enough for any soul to live upon. And so this memorial rite, just because it is memorial, is a symbol for the present.

That is taught us in the great chapter-the sixth of John’s Gospel-which was spoken long before the institution of the Lord’s Supper, but expresses in words the same ideas which it expresses by material forms. The Christ who died is the Christ who lives, and must be lived upon by the Christian. If our relation to Jesus Christ were only that ‘Once in the end of the ages He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself’; and if we had to look back through lengthening vistas of distance and thickening folds of oblivion, simply to a historical past, in which He was once offered, the retrospect would not have the sweetness in it which it now has. But when we come to this thought that the Christ who was for us is also the Christ in us, and that He is not the Christ for us unless He is the Christ in us; and His death will never wash away our sins unless we feed upon Him, here and now, by faith and meditation, then the retrospect becomes blessedness. The Christian life is not merely the remembrance of a historical Christ in the past, but it is the present participation in a living Christ, with us now.

He is near each of us that we may make Him the very food of our spirits. We are to live upon Him. He is to be incorporated within us by our own act. This is no mysticism, it is a piece of simple reality. There is no Christian life without it. The true life of the believer is just the feeding of our souls upon Him,-our minds accepting, meditating upon, digesting the truths which are incarnated in Jesus; our hearts feeding upon the love which is so tender, warm, stooping, and close; our wills feeding upon and nourished by the utterance of His will in commandments which to know is joy and to keep is liberty; our hopes feeding upon Him who is our Hope, and in whom they find no chaff and husks of peradventures, but the pure wheat of ‘Verily! verily I say unto you’; the whole nature thus finding its nourishment in Jesus Christ. You are Christians in the measure in which the very strength of your spirits, and sustenance of all your faculties, are found in loving communion with the living Lord.

Remember, too, that all this communion, intimate, sweet, sacred, is possible only, or at all events is in its highest forms and most blessed reality, possible only, to those who approach Him through the gate of His death. The feeding upon the living Christ which will be the strength of our hearts and our portion for ever, must be a feeding upon the whole Christ. We must not only nourish our spirits on the fact that He was incarnated for our salvation, but also on the truth that He was crucified for our acceptance with God. 'He that eateth Me, even he shall live by Me,' has for its deepest explanation, 'He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath eternal life.'

My friends, what about the hunger of your souls? Where is it satisfied? With the swine's husks, or with the 'Bread of God which came down from Heaven?'

III. Now, lastly, that rite which is a memorial and a symbol is also a prophecy.

In the original words of the institution our Lord Himself makes reference to the future; 'till I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom.' And in the context here, the Apostle provides for the perpetual continuance, and emphasises the prophetic aspect, of the rite, by that word, 'till He come.' His death necessarily implies His coming again. The Cross and the Throne are linked together by an indissoluble bond. Being what it is, the death cannot be the end. Being what He is, if He has once been offered to bear the sins of many, so He must come the second time without sin unto salvation. The rite, just because it is a rite, is the prophecy of a time when the need for it, arising from weak flesh and an intrusive world, shall cease. 'They shall say no more, The ark of the covenant of the Lord; at that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord.' There shall be no temple in that great city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the Temple thereof. So all external worship is a prophecy of the coming of the perfect time, when that which is perfect being come, the external helps and ladders to climb to the loftiest shall be done away.

But more than that, the memorial and symbol is a prophecy. That upper chamber, with its troubled thoughts, its unbidden tears, starting to the eyes of the half-understanding listeners, who only felt that He was going away and the sweet companionship was dissolved, may seem to be but a blurred and a poor image of the better communion of heaven. But though on that sad night the Master bore a burdened heart, and the servants had but partial apprehension and a more partial love; though He went forth to agonise and to die, and they went forth to deny and to betray, and to leave Him alone, still it was a prophecy of Christ's table in His kingdom. Heaven is to be a feast. That representation promises society to the solitary, rest to the toilers, the oil of joy for mourning, and the full satisfaction of all desires. That heavenly feast surpasses indeed the antitype in the upper chamber, in that there the Master Himself partook not, and yonder we shall sup with Him and He with us, but is prophetic in that, as there He took a towel and girded Himself and washed the disciples' feet, so yonder He will come forth Himself and serve them. The future is unlike the prophetic past in that 'we shall go no more out'; there shall be no sequences of sorrow, and struggle, and distance and ignorance; but like it in that we shall feast on Christ, for through eternity the glorified Jesus will be the Bread of our spirits, and the fact of His past sacrifice the foundation of our hopes.

So, dear brethren, though our external celebration of this rite be dashed, as it always is, with much ignorance and with feeble faith; and though we gather round this table as the first generation of Israelites did round the passover, of which it is the successor, with staff in hand and loins girded, and have to eat it often with bitter herbs mingled, and though there be at our sides empty places, yet even in our clouded and partial apprehension, and in the imperfections of this outward type, we may see a gracious shadow of what is waiting for us when we shall go no more out, and all empty places shall be filled, and the bitter herbs shall be changed for the asphodel of Heaven and the sweet flowerage round the throne of God, and we shall feast upon the Christ, and in the loftiest experience of the utmost glories of the Heavens, shall remember the bitter Cross and agony as that which has bought it all. 'This do in remembrance of Me.' May it be a symbol of our inmost life, and the prophecy of the Heaven to which we each shall come!

22)1 Corinthians 12:7

THE UNIVERSAL GIFT

1Co. 12:7.

The great fact which to-day 1 commemorates is too often regarded as if it were a transient gift, limited to those on whom it was first bestowed. We sometimes hear it said that the great need of the Christian world is a second Pentecost, a fresh outpouring of the Spirit of God and the like. Such a way of thinking and speaking misconceives the nature and significance of the first Pentecost, which had a transient element in it, but in essence was permanent. The rushing mighty wind and the cloven tongues of fire, and the strange speech in many languages, were all equally transient. The rushing wind swept on, and the house was no more filled with it. The tongues flickered into invisibility and disappeared from the heads. The hubbub of many languages was quickly silent. But that which these things but symbolised is permanent; and we are not to think of Pentecost as if it were a sudden gush from a great reservoir, and the sluice was let down again after it, but as if it were the entrance into a dry bed, of a rushing stream, whose first outgush was attended with noise, but which thereafter flows continuous and unbroken. If churches or individuals are scant of that gift, it is not because it has not been bestowed, but because it has not been accepted.

My text tells us two things: it unconditionally and broadly asserts that every Christian possesses this great gift-the manifestation is given to every man; and then it asserts that the gift of each is meant to be utilised for the good of all. ‘The manifestation is given to every man to profit withal.’

I. Let me, then, say a word or two, to begin with, about the universality of this gift.

Now, that is implied in our Lord’s own language, as commented upon by the Evangelist. For Jesus Christ declared that this was the standing law of His kingdom, to be universally applied to all its members, that ‘He that believeth on Him, out of him shall flow rivers of living water’; and the Evangelist’s comment goes on to say, ‘This spake He of the Spirit which they that believe on Him should receive.’ *There* is the condition and the qualification. Wherever there is faith, there the Spirit of God is bestowed, and bestowed in the measure in which faith is exercised. So, then, in full accordance with such fundamental principles in reference to the gift of the Spirit of God, comes the language of my text, and of many another text to which I cannot do more than refer. But let me just quote one or two of them, in order that I may make more emphatic what I believe a great many Christian people do not realise as they ought-viz. that the gift of God's Holy Spirit is not a thing to be desired, as if it were not possessed or confined to select individuals, or manifested by exceptional and lofty attainments, but is the universal heritage of the whole Christian Church. 'Know ye not that ye are the temple of the Holy Ghost?' 'We have all been made to drink into one Spirit,' says Paul again, in the immediate context. 'If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His,' says he, unconditionally. And in many other places the same principle is laid down, a principle which I believe the Christian Church to-day needs to have recalled to its consciousness, that it may be quickened to realise it in its experience far more than is the case at present.

Let me remind you, too, that that universality of the gifts of the Divine Spirit is implied in the very conception of what Christ's work, in its deepest and most precious aspects to us, is. For we are not to limit, as a great many so-called earnest evangelical teachers and believers do-we are not to limit His work to that which is effected when a man first becomes a Christian-viz. pardon and acceptance with God. God forbid that I should ever seem to underrate that great initial gift on which everything else must be built. But I am not underrating it when I say, 'Let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith,' and the 'proportion of faith' has been violated, and the perspective and completeness of Christian truth, and of Christ's gifts, have been, alas! to a very large extent distorted because Christian people, trained in what we call the evangelical school, have laid far too little emphasis on the fact that the essential gift of Christ to His people is not pardon, nor acceptance, nor justification, but *life*; and that forgiveness, and altered relationship to God, and assurance of acceptance with Him, are all preliminaries. They are, if I may recur to a figure that I have already employed, the preparing of the channel, and the taking away of the obstacles that block its mouth, in order to the inrush of the flood of the river of the water of life.

This life that Christ gives is the result of the gift of the Spirit. So ‘If any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His.’ The life is the gift considered from our side, and the Spirit is the gift considered from the divine side. ‘Every man that hath the Son hath life’; because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ has made him free from the law of sin and death. So you see if that is true-and I for my part am sure that it is-then all that vulgar way of looking at the influences of the Holy Spirit upon men, as if they were confined to certain exceptional people, or certain abnormal and extraordinary and elevated acts, is swept away. It is not the spasmodic, the exceptional, the rare, not the lofty or transcendentally Christlike acts or characters that are alone the manifestation of the Spirit.

Nor is this gift a thing that a man can discover as distinct from his own consciousness. The point where the river of the water of life comes into the channel of our spirits lies away far up, near the sources, and long before the stream comes into sight in our own consciousness, the blended waters have been inseparably mingled, and flow on peacefully together. ‘The Spirit beareth witness *with* our spirits’; and you are not to expect that you can hear two voices speaking, but it is one voice and one only.

Now, that universality of this divine gift underlies the very constitution of the Christian Church. ‘Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty,’ said Paul. It is because each Christian man has access to the one Source of illumination and of truth and righteousness and holiness, that no Christian man is to become subject to the dominion of a brother. And it is because on the servants and on the handmaidens has been poured out, in these days, God’s Spirit and they prophesy, that all domination of classes or individuals, and all stiffening of the free life of God’s Church by man-made creeds, are contrary to the very basis of its existence, and an attack on the dignity of each individual member of the Church. ‘Ye have an unction from the Holy One’ is said to all Christian people-and ‘ye need not that any man teach you,’ still less that any man, or body of men, or document framed by men, should be set up as normal and authoritative over Christ’s free people.

Still further, and only one word-Let me remind you of what I have already said, and what is only too sadly true, that this grand universality of the Spirit’s gift to all Christian people does not fill, in the mind of the ordinary

Christian man, the place that it ought, and it does not fill it, therefore, in his experience. I say no more upon that point.

II. And now let me say a word, secondly, about the many-sidedness of this universal gift.

One of the reasons why Christian people as a whole do not realise the universality as they ought is, as I have already suggested in a somewhat different connection, because they limit their notions far too much of what the gift of God's Spirit is to do to men. We must take a wider view of what that Spirit is meant to effect than we ordinarily take, before we understand how real and how visible its universal manifestations are. Take a leaf out of the Old Testament. The man who made the brass-work for the Tabernacle was 'full of the Spirit of God.' The poets who sung the Psalms, in more than one place, declare of themselves that they, too, were but the harps upon which the divine finger played. Samson was capable of his rude feats of physical strength, because 'the Spirit of God was upon him.' Art, song, counsel, statesmanlike adaptation of means to ends, and discernment of proper courses for a nation, such as were exemplified in Joseph and in Daniel, are, in the Old Testament, ascribed to the Spirit of God, and even the rude physical strength of the simple-natured and sensuous athlete is traced up to the same source.

But again, we see another sphere of the Spirit's working in the manifestations of it in the experience of the primitive Church. These are, as we all know, accompanied with miracles, speaking with tongues and working wonders. The signs of that Spirit in those days were visible and audible. As I said, when the river first came into its bed, it came like the tide in Morecambe Bay, breast-high, with a roar and a rush. But it was quiet after that. In the context we have a whole series of manifestations of this Divine Spirit, some of them miraculous and some being natural faculties heightened, but all concerned with the Church as a society, and being for the benefit of the community.

But there is another class. If you turn to the Epistle to the Galatians, you will find a wonderful list there of what the Apostle calls 'the fruit of the Spirit,' beginning with 'love, joy, peace.' These are all moral and religious, bearing upon personal experience and the completeness of the individual character.

Now, let us include all these aspects in our conception of the fruit of the Spirit’s working on men-the secular, if we may use that word, as exhibited in the Old Testament; the miraculous, as seen in the first days of the Church; the ecclesiastical, if we may so designate the endowments mentioned in the context, and the purely personal, moral, and religious emotions and acts. The plain fact is that everything in a Christian’s life, except his sin, is the manifestation of that Divine Spirit, from whom all good thoughts, counsels, and works do proceed. He is the ‘Spirit of adoption,’ and whenever in my heart there rises warm and blessed the aspiration ‘Abba! Father!’ it is not my voice only, but the voice of that Divine Spirit. He is the Spirit of intercession; and whenever in my soul there move yearning desires after infinite good, child-like longings to be knit more closely to Him, that, too, is the voice of God’s Spirit; and our prayers are then ‘sweet, indeed, when He the Spirit gives by which we pray.’ In like manner, all the variety of Christian emotions and experiences is to be traced to the conjoint operation of that Divine Spirit as the source, and my own spirit as influenced by, and the organ of, the Spirit of God. If I may take a very rough illustration, there is a story in the Old Testament about a king, to whom were given a bow and arrow, with the command to shoot. The prophet’s hand was laid on the king’s weak hand, and the weak hand was strengthened by the touch of the other; and with one common pull they drew back the string and the arrow sped. The king drew the bow, but it was the prophet’s hand grasping his wrist that gave him strength to do it. And that is how the Spirit of God will work with us if we will.

III. Finally, consider the purpose of all the diverse manifestations of the one universal gift.

‘To profit withal’-for his own good who possesses it, and for the good of all the rest of his brethren.

Now, that involves two plain things. There have been people in the Christian Church who have said, ‘We have all the Spirit, and therefore we do not need one another.’ There may be isolation, and self-sufficiency, and a host of other evils coming in, if we only grasp the thought, ‘The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man,' but they are all corrected if we go on and say, 'to profit withal.' For every one of us has something, and no one of us has everything; so, on the one hand, we want each other, and, on the other hand, we are responsible for the use of what we have.

You get the life, not in order that you may plume yourself on its possession, nor in order that you may ostentatiously display it, still less in order that you may shut it up and do nothing with it; but you get the life in order that it may spread through you to others.

'The least flower with a brimming cup may stand,
And share its dew-drop with another near.'

We each have the life that God's grace may fructify through us to all. Power is duty; endowment is obligation; capacity prescribes work. 'The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal.'

You can regulate the flow. You have the sluice; you can shut it or open it. I have said that the condition, and the only condition, of possessing the fulness of God's Spirit is faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the more you trust the more you have, and the less your faith the less the gift. You can get much or little, according to the greatness or the smallness, the fixity or the transiency, of your desires. If you hold the empty cup with a tremulous hand, the precious liquid will not be poured into it-for some of it will be spilt-in the same fulness as it would be if you held it steadily. It is the old story-the miraculous flow of the oil stopped when the widow had no more pots and vessels to bring. The reason why some of us have so little of that Divine Spirit is because we have not held out our vessels to be filled. You can diminish the flow by ignoring it, and that is what a host of so-called Christian people do nowadays. You can diminish it by neglecting to use the little that you have for the purpose for which it was given you. Does anybody profit by your spiritual life? Do you profit much by it yourselves? Has it ever been of the least good to anybody else in the world? 'The manifestation of the Spirit is given to' you, if you are a Christian man or woman, more or less. And if you shut it up, and do never an atom of good with it, either to yourselves or to anybody else, of course it will slip away; and, sometime or other, to your astonishment, you will find that the vessels are empty, and that the Spirit of the Lord has departed from you. 'Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.'

1 Whitsunday.

23)1 Corinthians 13:8

1 Corinthians

WHAT LASTS

1Co. 13:8, 1Co. 13:13.

We discern the run of the Apostle's thought best by thus omitting the intervening verses and connecting these two. The part omitted is but a buttress of what has been stated in the former of our two verses; and when we thus unite them there is disclosed plainly the Apostle's intention of contrasting two sets of things, three in each set. The one set is 'prophecies, tongues, knowledge'; the other, 'faith, hope, charity.' There also comes out distinctly that the point mainly intended by the contrast is the transiency of the one and the permanence of the other. Now, that contrast has been obscured and weakened by two mistakes, about which I must say a word.

With regard to the former statement, 'Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease,' that has been misunderstood as if it amounted to a declaration that the miraculous gifts in the early Church were intended to be of brief duration. However true that may be, it is not what Paul means here. The cessation to which he refers is their cessation in the light of the perfect Future. With regard to the other statement, the abiding of faith, hope, charity, that, too, has been misapprehended as if it indicated that faith and hope belonged to this state of things only, and that love was the greatest of the three, because it was permanent. The reason for that misconception has mainly lain in the misunderstanding of the force of '*Now*,' which has been taken to mean 'for the present,' as an implied contrast to an unspoken 'then'; just as in the previous verse we have, '*Now* we see through a glass, *then* face to face.' But the 'now' in this text is not, as the grammarians say, temporal, but logical. That is, it does not refer to time, but to the sequence of the Apostle’s thought, and is equivalent to ‘so then.’ ‘So then abideth faith, hope, charity.’

The scope of the whole, then, is to contrast the transient with the permanent, in Christian experience. If we firmly grasped the truth involved, our estimates would be rectified and our practice revolutionised.

I. I ask this question-What will drop away?

Paul answers, ‘prophecies, tongues, knowledge.’ Now these three were all extraordinary gifts belonging to the present phase of the Christian life. But inasmuch as these gifts were the heightening of natural capacities and faculties, it is perfectly legitimate to enlarge the declaration and to use these three words in their widest signification. So understood, they come to this, that all our present modes of apprehension and of utterance are transient, and will be left behind.

‘Knowledge, it shall cease,’ and as the Apostle goes on to explain, in the verses which I have passed over for my present purpose, it shall cease because the perfect will absorb into itself the imperfect, as the inrushing tide will obliterate the little pools in the rocks on the seashore. For another reason, the knowledge, the mode of apprehension belonging to the present, will pass-because here it is indirect, and there it will be immediate. ‘We shall know face to face,’ which is what philosophers mean by intuition. Here our knowledge ‘creeps from point to point,’ painfully amassing facts, and thence, with many hesitations and errors, groping its way towards principles and laws. Here it is imperfect, with many a gap in the circumference; or like the thin red line on a map which shows the traveller’s route across a prairie, or like the spider’s thread in the telescope, stretched athwart the blazing disc of the sun-’but then face to face.’ Incomplete knowledge shall be done away; and many of its objects will drop, and much of what makes the science of earth will be antiquated and effete. What would the hand-loom weaver’s knowledge of how to throw his shuttle be worth in a weaving-shed with a thousand looms? Just so much will the knowledges of earth be when we get yonder.

Modes of utterance will cease. With new experiences will come new methods of communication. As a man can speak, and a beast can only growl or bark, so a man in heaven, with new experiences, will have new methods of communication. The comparison between that mode of utterance which we now have, and that which we shall then possess, will be like the difference between the old-fashioned semaphore, that used to wave about clumsy wooden arms in order to convey intelligence, and the telegraph.

Think, then, of a man going into that future life, and saying ‘I knew more about Sanscrit than anybody that ever lived in Europe’; ‘I sang sweet songs’; ‘I was a past master in philology, grammars, and lexicons’; ‘I was a great orator.’ ‘Tongues shall cease’; and the modes of utterance that belonged to earth, and all that holds of them, will drop away, and be of no more use.

If these things are true, brethren, with regard even to the highest form of these high and noble things, how much more and more solemnly true are they with regard to the aims and objects which most of us have in view? They will all drop away, and we shall be left, stripped of what, for most of us, has made the whole interest and activity of our lives.

II. What will last?

‘So then, abideth these three, faith, hope, love.’ When Paul takes three nouns and couples them with a verb in the singular, he is not making a slip of the pen, or committing a grammatical blunder which a child could correct. But there is a great truth in that piece of apparent grammatical irregularity; for the faith, the hope, and the love, for which he can only afford a singular verb, are thereby declared to be in their depth and essence one thing, and it, the triple star, abides, and continues to shine. The three primitive colours are unified in the white beam of light. Do not correct the grammar, and spoil the sense, but discern what he means when he says, ‘Now, abid*eth* faith, hope, love.’ For this is what he means, that the two latter come out of the former, and that without it they are nought, and that it without them is dead.

Faith breeds Hope. *There* is the difference between earthly hopes and Christian people’s hopes. Our hopes, apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, are but the balancing of probabilities, and the scale is often dragged down by the clutch of eager desires. But all is baseless and uncertain, unless our hopes are the outcome of our faith. Which, being translated into other words, is just this, that the one basis on which men can rest-ay! even for the immediate future, and the contingencies of life, as well as for the solemnities and certainties of heaven-any legitimate and substantial hope is trust in Jesus Christ, His word, His love, His power, and for the heavenly future, in His Resurrection and present glory. A man who believes these things, and only that man, has a rock foundation on which he can build his hope.

Faith, in like manner, is the parent of Love. Paul and John, diverse as they are in the whole cast of their minds, the one being speculative and the other mystical, the one argumentative and the other simply gazing and telling what he sees, are precisely agreed in regard to this matter. For, to the Apostle of Love, the foundation of all human love towards God is, 'We have known and believed the love that God hath to us,' and 'We love Him because He first loved us,' and to Paul the first step is the trusting reception of the love of God, 'commended to us' by the fact that 'whilst we were yet sinners Christ died for us,' and from that necessarily flows, if the faith be genuine, the love that answers the sacrifice and obeys the Beloved. So faith, hope, love, these three are a trinity in unity, and it abideth. That is the main point of our last text. Let me say a word or two about it.

I have said that the words have often been misunderstood as if the 'now' referred only to the present order of things, in which faith and hope are supposed to find their only appropriate sphere. But that is clearly not the Apostle's meaning here, for many reasons with which I need not trouble you. The abiding of all three is eternal abiding, and there is a heavenly as well as an earthly form of faith and hope as well as of love. Just look at these points for a moment.

'Faith abides,' says Paul, yonder, as here. Now, there is a common saying, which I suppose ninety out of a hundred people think comes out of the Bible, about faith being lost in sight. There is no such teaching in Scripture. True, in one aspect, faith is the antithesis of sight. True, Paul does say 'We walk by faith, not by sight.' But that antithesis refers only to part of faith's significance. In so far as it is the opposite of sight, of course it will cease to be in operation when 'we shall know even as we are known' and 'see Him as He is.' But the essence of faith is not in the absence of the person trusted, but the emotion of trust which goes out to the person, present or absent. And in its deepest meaning of absolute dependence and happy confidence, faith abides through all the glories and the lustres of the heavens, as it burns amidst the dimnesses and the darknesses of earth. For ever and ever, on through the irrevoluble ages of eternity, dependence on God in Christ will be the life of the glorified, as it was the life of the militant, Church. No millenniums of possession, and no imaginable increases in beauty and perfectness and enrichment with the wealth of God, will bring us one inch nearer to casting off the state of filial dependence which is, and ever will be, the condition of our receiving them all. Faith 'abides.'

Hope 'abides.' For it is no more a Scriptural idea that hope is lost in fruition, than it is that faith is lost in sight. Rather that Future presents itself to us as the continual communication of an inexhaustible God to our progressively capacious and capable spirits. In that continual communication there is continual progress. Wherever there is progress there must be hope. And thus the fair form, which has so often danced before us elusive, and has led us into bogs and miry places and then faded away, will move before us through all the long avenues of an endless progress, and will ever and anon come back to tell us of the unseen glories that lie beyond the next turn, and to woo us further into the depths of heaven and the fulness of God. Hope 'abides.'

Love 'abides.' I need not, I suppose, enlarge upon that thought which nobody denies, that love is the eternal form of the human relation to God. It, too, like the mercy which it clasps, 'endureth for ever.'

But I may remind you of what the Apostle does not explain in our text, that it is greater than its linked sisters, because whilst faith and hope belong only to a creature, and are dependent and expectant of some good to come to themselves, and correspond to something which is in God in Christ, the love which springs from faith and hope not only corresponds to, but resembles, that from which it comes and by which it lives. The fire kindled is cognate with the fire that kindles; and the love that is in man is like the love that is in God. It is the climax of his nature; it is the fulfilling of all duty; it is the crown and jewelled clasp of all perfection. And so ‘abideth faith, hope, love, and the greatest of these is love.’

III. Lastly, what follows from all this?

First, let us be quite sure that we understand what this abiding love is. I dare say you have heard people say ‘Ah! I do not care much about Paul’s theology. Give me the thirteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians. That is beautiful; that praise of Love; *that* comes home to men.’ Yes, very beautiful. Are you quite sure that you know what Paul means by ‘love’ ? I do not use the word charity, because that lovely word, like a glistening meteor that falls upon the earth, has a rust, as it were, upon its surface that dims its brightness very quickly. Charity has come to mean an indulgent estimate of other people’s faults; or, still more degradingly, the giving of money out of your pockets to other people’s necessities. These are what the people who do not care much about Paul’s theology generally suppose that he means here. But these do not exhaust his meaning. Paul’s notion of love is the response of the human love to the divine, which divine is received into the heart by simple faith in Jesus Christ. And his notion of love which never faileth, and endureth all things, and hopeth all things, is love to men, which is but one stream of the great river of love to God. If we rightly understand what he means by love, we shall find that his praise of love is as theological as anything that he ever wrote. We shall never get further than barren admiration of a beautiful piece of writing, unless our love to men has the source and root to which Paul points us.

Again, let us take this great thought of the permanence of faith, hope, and love as being the highest conception that we can form of our future condition. It is very easy to bewilder ourselves with speculations and theories of another life. I do not care much about them. The great gates keep their secret well. Few stray beams of light find their way through their crevices. The less we say the less likely we are to err. It is easy to let ourselves be led away, by turning rhetoric into revelation, and accepting the symbols of the New Testament as if they carried anything more than images of the realities. But far beyond golden pavements, and harps, and crowns, and white robes, lies this one great thought that the elements of the imperfect, Christlike life of earth are the essence of the perfect, Godlike life in heaven. ‘Now abide these three, faith, hope, love.’

Last of all, let us shape our lives in accordance with these certainties. The dropping away of the transient things is no argument for neglecting or despising them; for our handling of them makes our characters, and our characters abide. But it is a very excellent argument for shaping our lives so as to seek first the first things, and to secure the permanent qualities, and so to use the transient as that it shall all help us towards that which does not pass.

What will a Manchester man that knows nothing except goods and office work, and knows these only in their superficial aspect, and not as related to God, what, in the name of common-sense, will he do with himself when he gets into a world where there is not a single ledger, nor a desk, nor a yard of cloth of any sort? What will some of us do when, in like manner, we are stripped of all the things that we have cared about, and worked for, and have made our aims down here? Suppose that you knew that you were under sailing orders to go somewhere or other, and that at any moment a breathless messenger might appear and say, ‘Come along! we are all waiting for you’; and suppose that you never did a single thing towards getting your outfit ready, or preparing yourself in any way for that which might come at any moment, and could not but come before very long. Would you be a wise man? But that is what a great many of us are doing; doing every day, and all day long, and doing that only. ‘He shall leave them in the midst of his days,’ says a grim text, ‘and at his latter end shall be a fool.’

What will drop? Modes of apprehension, modes of utterance, occupations, duties, relationships, loves; and we shall be left standing naked, stripped, as it were, to the very quick, and only as much left as will keep our souls alive. But if we are clothed with faith, hope, love, we shall not be found naked. Cultivate the high things, the permanent things; then death will not wrench you violently from all that you have been and cared for; but it will usher you into the perfect form of all that you have been and done upon earth. All these things will pass, but faith, hope, love, ‘stay not behind nor in the grave are trod,’ but will last as long as Christ, their Object, lives, and as long as we in Him live also.

24)1 Corinthians 13:13

1 Corinthians

WHAT LASTS

1Co. 13:8, 1Co. 13:13.

We discern the run of the Apostle’s thought best by thus omitting the intervening verses and connecting these two. The part omitted is but a buttress of what has been stated in the former of our two verses; and when we thus unite them there is disclosed plainly the Apostle’s intention of contrasting two sets of things, three in each set. The one set is ‘prophecies, tongues, knowledge’; the other, ‘faith, hope, charity.’ There also comes out distinctly that the point mainly intended by the contrast is the transiency of the one and the permanence of the other. Now, that contrast has been obscured and weakened by two mistakes, about which I must say a word.

With regard to the former statement, ‘Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease,’ that has been misunderstood as if it amounted to a declaration that the miraculous gifts in the early Church were intended to be of brief duration. However true that may be, it is not what Paul means here. The cessation to which he refers is their cessation in the light of the perfect Future. With regard to the other statement, the abiding of faith, hope, charity, that, too, has been misapprehended as if it indicated that faith and hope belonged to this state of things only, and that love was the greatest of the three, because it was permanent. The reason for that misconception has mainly lain in the misunderstanding of the force of ‘*Now*,’ which has been taken to mean ‘for the present,’ as an implied contrast to an unspoken ‘then’; just as in the previous verse we have, ‘*Now* we see through a glass, *then* face to face.’ But the ‘now’ in this text is not, as the grammarians say, temporal, but logical. That is, it does not refer to time, but to the sequence of the Apostle’s thought, and is equivalent to ‘so then.’ ‘So then abideth faith, hope, charity.’

The scope of the whole, then, is to contrast the transient with the permanent, in Christian experience. If we firmly grasped the truth involved, our estimates would be rectified and our practice revolutionised.

I. I ask this question-What will drop away?

Paul answers, ‘prophecies, tongues, knowledge.’ Now these three were all extraordinary gifts belonging to the present phase of the Christian life. But inasmuch as these gifts were the heightening of natural capacities and faculties, it is perfectly legitimate to enlarge the declaration and to use these three words in their widest signification. So understood, they come to this, that all our present modes of apprehension and of utterance are transient, and will be left behind.

‘Knowledge, it shall cease,’ and as the Apostle goes on to explain, in the verses which I have passed over for my present purpose, it shall cease because the perfect will absorb into itself the imperfect, as the inrushing tide will obliterate the little pools in the rocks on the seashore. For another reason, the knowledge, the mode of apprehension belonging to the present, will pass-because here it is indirect, and there it will be immediate. ‘We shall know face to face,’ which is what philosophers mean by intuition. Here our knowledge ‘creeps from point to point,’ painfully amassing facts, and thence, with many hesitations and errors, groping its way towards principles and laws. Here it is imperfect, with many a gap in the circumference; or like the thin red line on a map which shows the traveller’s route across a prairie, or like the spider’s thread in the telescope, stretched athwart the blazing disc of the sun-’but then face to face.’ Incomplete knowledge shall be done away; and many of its objects will drop, and much of what makes the science of earth will be antiquated and effete. What would the hand-loom weaver’s knowledge of how to throw his shuttle be worth in a weaving-shed with a thousand looms? Just so much will the knowledges of earth be when we get yonder.

Modes of utterance will cease. With new experiences will come new methods of communication. As a man can speak, and a beast can only growl or bark, so a man in heaven, with new experiences, will have new methods of communication. The comparison between that mode of utterance which we now have, and that which we shall then possess, will be like the difference between the old-fashioned semaphore, that used to wave about clumsy wooden arms in order to convey intelligence, and the telegraph.

Think, then, of a man going into that future life, and saying ‘I knew more about Sanscrit than anybody that ever lived in Europe’; ‘I sang sweet songs’; ‘I was a past master in philology, grammars, and lexicons’; ‘I was a great orator.’ ‘Tongues shall cease’; and the modes of utterance that belonged to earth, and all that holds of them, will drop away, and be of no more use.

If these things are true, brethren, with regard even to the highest form of these high and noble things, how much more and more solemnly true are they with regard to the aims and objects which most of us have in view? They will all drop away, and we shall be left, stripped of what, for most of us, has made the whole interest and activity of our lives.

II. What will last?

‘So then, abideth these three, faith, hope, love.’ When Paul takes three nouns and couples them with a verb in the singular, he is not making a slip of the pen, or committing a grammatical blunder which a child could correct. But there is a great truth in that piece of apparent grammatical irregularity; for the faith, the hope, and the love, for which he can only afford a singular verb, are thereby declared to be in their depth and essence one thing, and it, the triple star, abides, and continues to shine. The three primitive colours are unified in the white beam of light. Do not correct the grammar, and spoil the sense, but discern what he means when he says, ‘Now, abid*eth* faith, hope, love.’ For this is what he means, that the two latter come out of the former, and that without it they are nought, and that it without them is dead.

Faith breeds Hope. *There* is the difference between earthly hopes and Christian people’s hopes. Our hopes, apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, are but the balancing of probabilities, and the scale is often dragged down by the clutch of eager desires. But all is baseless and uncertain, unless our hopes are the outcome of our faith. Which, being translated into other words, is just this, that the one basis on which men can rest-ay! even for the immediate future, and the contingencies of life, as well as for the solemnities and certainties of heaven-any legitimate and substantial hope is trust in Jesus Christ, His word, His love, His power, and for the heavenly future, in His Resurrection and present glory. A man who believes these things, and only that man, has a rock foundation on which he can build his hope.

Faith, in like manner, is the parent of Love. Paul and John, diverse as they are in the whole cast of their minds, the one being speculative and the other mystical, the one argumentative and the other simply gazing and telling what he sees, are precisely agreed in regard to this matter. For, to the

Apostle of Love, the foundation of all human love towards God is, ‘We have known and believed the love that God hath to us,’ and ‘We love Him because He first loved us,’ and to Paul the first step is the trusting reception of the love of God, ‘commended to us’ by the fact that ‘whilst we were yet sinners Christ died for us,’ and from that necessarily flows, if the faith be genuine, the love that answers the sacrifice and obeys the Beloved. So faith, hope, love, these three are a trinity in unity, and it abideth. That is the main point of our last text. Let me say a word or two about it.

I have said that the words have often been misunderstood as if the ‘now’ referred only to the present order of things, in which faith and hope are supposed to find their only appropriate sphere. But that is clearly not the Apostle’s meaning here, for many reasons with which I need not trouble you. The abiding of all three is eternal abiding, and there is a heavenly as well as an earthly form of faith and hope as well as of love. Just look at these points for a moment.

‘Faith abides,’ says Paul, yonder, as here. Now, there is a common saying, which I suppose ninety out of a hundred people think comes out of the Bible, about faith being lost in sight. There is no such teaching in Scripture. True, in one aspect, faith is the antithesis of sight. True, Paul does say ‘We walk by faith, not by sight.’ But that antithesis refers only to part of faith’s significance. In so far as it is the opposite of sight, of course it will cease to be in operation when ‘we shall know even as we are known’ and ‘see Him as He is.’ But the essence of faith is not in the absence of the person trusted, but the emotion of trust which goes out to the person, present or absent. And in its deepest meaning of absolute dependence and happy confidence, faith abides through all the glories and the lustres of the heavens, as it burns amidst the dimnesses and the darknesses of earth. For ever and ever, on through the irrevoluble ages of eternity, dependence on God in Christ will be the life of the glorified, as it was the life of the militant, Church. No millenniums of possession, and no imaginable increases in beauty and perfectness and enrichment with the wealth of God, will bring us one inch nearer to casting off the state of filial dependence which is, and ever will be, the condition of our receiving them all. Faith ‘abides.’

Hope ‘abides.’ For it is no more a Scriptural idea that hope is lost in fruition, than it is that faith is lost in sight. Rather that Future presents itself to us as the continual communication of an inexhaustible God to our progressively capacious and capable spirits. In that continual communication there is continual progress. Wherever there is progress there must be hope. And thus the fair form, which has so often danced before us elusive, and has led us into bogs and miry places and then faded away, will move before us through all the long avenues of an endless progress, and will ever and anon come back to tell us of the unseen glories that lie beyond the next turn, and to woo us further into the depths of heaven and the fulness of God. Hope ‘abides.’

Love ‘abides.’ I need not, I suppose, enlarge upon that thought which nobody denies, that love is the eternal form of the human relation to God. It, too, like the mercy which it clasps, ‘endureth for ever.’

But I may remind you of what the Apostle does not explain in our text, that it is greater than its linked sisters, because whilst faith and hope belong only to a creature, and are dependent and expectant of some good to come to themselves, and correspond to something which is in God in Christ, the love which springs from faith and hope not only corresponds to, but resembles, that from which it comes and by which it lives. The fire kindled is cognate with the fire that kindles; and the love that is in man is like the love that is in God. It is the climax of his nature; it is the fulfilling of all duty; it is the crown and jewelled clasp of all perfection. And so ‘abideth faith, hope, love, and the greatest of these is love.’

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25)1 Corinthians 15:3

1 Corinthians

THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTION

1Co. 15:3 - 1Co. 15:4.

Christmas day is probably not the true anniversary of the Nativity, but Easter is certainly that of the Resurrection. The season is appropriate. In the climate of Palestine the first fruits of the harvest were ready at the Passover for presentation in the Temple. It was an agricultural as well as a historical festival; and the connection between that aspect of the feast and the

Resurrection of our Lord is in the Apostle's mind when he says, in a subsequent part of this chapter, that Christ is 'risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept.'

In our colder climate the season is no less appropriate. The 'life re-orient out of dust' which shows itself to-day in every bursting leaf-bud and springing flower is Nature's parable of the spring that awaits man after the winter of death. No doubt, apart from the Resurrection of Jesus, the yearly miracle kindles sad thoughts in mourning hearts, and suggests bitter contrasts to those who sorrow, having no hope, but the grave in the garden has turned every blossom into a smiling prophet of the Resurrection.

And so the season, illuminated by the event, teaches us lessons of hope that 'we shall not all die.' Let us turn, then, to the thoughts naturally suggested by the day, and the great fact which it brings to each mind, and confirmed thereafter by the miracle that is being wrought round about us.

I. First, then, in my text, I would have you note the facts of Paul's gospel.

'First of all . . . I delivered' these things. And the 'first' not only points to the order of time in the proclamation, but to the order of importance as well. For these initial facts are the fundamental facts, on which all that may follow thereafter is certainly built. Now the first thing that strikes me here is that, whatever else the system unfolded in the New Testament is, it is to begin with a simple record of historical fact. It becomes a philosophy, it becomes a religious system; it is a revelation of God; it is an unveiling of man; it is a body of ethical precepts. It is morals and philosophy and religion all in one; but it is first of all a story of something that took place in the world.

If that be so, there is a lesson for men whose work it is to preach it. Let them never forget that their business is to insist upon the truth of these great, supernatural, all-important, and fundamental facts, the death and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. They must evolve all the deep meanings that lie in them; and the deeper they dig for their meanings the better. They must open out the endless treasures of consolation and enforce the omnipotent motives of action which are wrapped up in the facts; but howsoever far they may carry their evolving and their application of them, they will neither be faithful to their Lord nor true stewards of their message unless, clear above all other aspects of their work, and underlying all other forms of their ministry, there be the unfaltering proclamation-'first of all,' midst of all, last of all-'how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,' and 'that He was raised again according to the Scriptures.'

Note, too, how this fundamental and original character of the gospel which Paul preached, as a record of facts, makes short work of a great deal that calls itself 'liberal Christianity' in these days. We are told that it is quite possible to be a very good Christian man, and reject the supernatural, and turn away with incredulity from the story of the Resurrection. It may be so, but I confess that it puzzles me to understand how, if the fundamental character of Christian teaching be the proclamation of certain facts, a man who does not believe those facts has the right to call himself a Christian.

Note, further, how there is an element of explanation involved in the proclamation of the facts which turns them into a gospel. Mark how 'that *Christ* died,' not *Jesus*. It is a great truth, that the man, our Brother, Jesus, passed through the common lot, but that is not what Paul says here, though he often says it. What he says is that '*Christ* died.' Christ is the name of an office, into which is condensed a whole system of truth, declaring that it is He who is the Apex, the Seal, and ultimate Word of all divine revelation. It was the *Christ* who died; unless it was so, the death of Jesus is no gospel.

'He died for our sins.' Now, if the Apostle had only said 'He died for us,' that might conceivably have meant that, in a multitude of different ways of example, appeal to our pity and compassion and the like, His death was of use to mankind. But when he says 'He died *for our sins*,' I take leave to think that that expression has no meaning, unless it means that He died as the expiation and sacrifice for men's sins. I ask you, in what intelligible sense could Christ 'die for our sins' unless He died as bearing their punishment and as bearing it for us? And then, finally, 'He died and rose . . . according to the Scriptures,' and so fulfilled the divine purposes revealed from of old.

To the fact that a man was crucified outside the gates of Jerusalem, 'and rose again the third day,' which is the narrative, there are added these three things-the dignity of the Person, the purpose of His death, the fulfilment of the divine intention manifested from of old. And these three things, as I said, turn the narrative into a Gospel.

So, brethren, let us remember that, without all three of them, the death of Jesus Christ is nothing to us, any more than the death of thousands of sweet and saintly men in the past has been, who may have seen a little more of the supreme goodness and greatness than their fellows, and tried in vain to make purblind eyes participate in their vision. Do you think that these twelve fishermen would ever have shaken the world if they had gone out with the story of the Cross, unless they had carried along with it the commentary which is included in the words which I have emphasised? And do you suppose that the type of Christianity which slurs over the explanation, and so does not know what to do with the facts, will ever do much in the world, or will ever touch men? Let us liberalise our Christianity by all means, but do not let us evaporate it; and evaporate it we surely shall if we falter in saying with Paul, 'I declare, first of all, that which received,' how that the death and resurrection were the death and resurrection of the Christ, 'for our sins, according to the Scriptures.' These are the facts which make Paul's gospel.

II. Now I ask you to look, in the second place, at what establishes the facts.

We have here, in this chapter, a statement very much older than our existing written gospels. This epistle is one of the four letters of Paul which nobody that I know of-with some quite insignificant exceptions in modern times-has ever ventured to dispute. It is admittedly the writing of the Apostle, written before the gospels, and in all probability within five-and-twenty years of the date of the Crucifixion. And what do we find alleged by it as the state of things at its date? That the belief in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was the subject of universal Christian teaching, and was accepted by all the Christian communities. Its evidence to that fact is undeniable; because there was in the early Christian Church a very formidable and large body of bitter antagonists of Paul's, who would have been only too glad to have convicted him, if they could, of any misrepresentation of the usual notions, or divergence from the usual type of teaching. So we may take it as undeniable that the representation of this chapter is historically true; and that within five-and-twenty years of the death of Jesus Christ every Christian community and every Christian teacher believed in and proclaimed the fact of the Resurrection.

But if that be so, we necessarily are carried a great deal nearer the Cross than five-and-twenty years; and, in fact, there is not, between the moment when Paul penned these words and the day of Pentecost, a single chink in the history where you can insert such a tremendous innovation as the full-fledged belief in a resurrection coming in as something new.

I do not need to dwell at all upon this other thought, that, unless the belief that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead originated at the time of His death, there would never have been a Church at all. Why was it that they did not tumble to pieces? Take the nave out of the wheel and what becomes of the spokes? A dead Christ could never have been the basis of a living Church. If He had not risen from the dead, the story of His disciples would have been the same as that which Gamaliel told the Sanhedrim was the story of all former pseudo-Messiahs such as that man Theudas. ‘He was slain, and as many as followed him were dispersed and came to naught.’ Of course! The existence of the Church demands, as a pre-requisite, the initial belief in the Resurrection. I think, then, that the contemporaneousness of the evidence is sufficiently established.

What about its good faith? I suppose that nobody, nowadays, doubts the veracity of these witnesses. Anybody that knows an honest man when he sees him, anybody that has the least ear for the tone of sincerity and the accent of conviction, must say that they may have been fanatics, they may have been mistaken, but one thing is clear as sunlight, they were not false witnesses for God.

What, then, about their competency? Their simplicity, their ignorance, their slowness to believe, their stupor of surprise when the fact first dawned upon them, which they tell not with any idea of manufacturing evidence in their own favour, but simply as a piece of history, all tend to make us certain that there was no play of a morbid imagination, no hysterical turning of a wish into a fact, on the part of these men. The sort of things which they say that they saw and experienced are such as to make any such supposition altogether absurd. There are long conversations, appearances appealing to more than one sense, appearances followed by withdrawals, sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the evening, sometimes at a distance, as on the mountain, sometimes close by, as in the chamber, to single souls and to multitudes. Fancy five hundred people all at once smitten with the same mistake, imagining that they saw what they did not see! Miracles may be difficult to believe, they are not half so difficult to believe as absurdities. And this modern explanation of the faith in the Resurrection I venture respectfully to designate as absurd.

But there is one other point to which I would like to turn for a moment; and that is that little clause in my text that 'He was buried.' Why does Paul introduce that amongst his facts? Possibly in order to affirm the reality of Christ's death; but I think for another reason. If it be true that Jesus Christ was laid in that sepulchre, a stone's throw outside the city gate, do you not see what a difficulty that fact puts in the way of disbelief or denial of His Resurrection? If the grave-and it was not a grave, remember, like ours, but a cave, with a stone at the door of it, that anybody could roll away for entrance-if the grave was there, why, in the name of common-sense, did not the rulers put an end to the pestilent heresy by saying, 'Let us go and see if the body is there' ?

Modern deniers of the Resurrection may fairly be asked to front this thought-If Jesus Christ's body was in the sepulchre, how was it possible for belief in the Resurrection to have been originated, or maintained? If His body was not in the grave, what had become of it? If His friends stole it away then they were deceivers of the worst type in preaching a resurrection; and we have already seen that that hypothesis is ridiculous. If His enemies took it away, for which they had no motive, why did they not produce it and say, 'There is an answer to your nonsense. There is the dead man. Let us hear no more of this absurdity of His having risen from the dead' ?

'He died . . . according to the Scriptures, and He was buried.' And the angels' word carries the only explanation of the fact which it proclaims, 'He is not here-He is risen.'

I take leave to say that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is established by evidence which nobody would ever have thought of doubting unless for the theory that miracles were impossible. The reason for disbelief is not the deficiency of the evidence, but the bias of the judge.

III. And now I have no time to do more than touch the last thought. I have tried to show what establishes the facts. Let me remind you, in a sentence or two, what the facts establish.

I by no means desire to suspend the whole of the evidence for Christianity on the testimony of the eyewitnesses to the Resurrection. There are a great many other ways of establishing the truth of the Gospel besides that, upon which I do not need to dwell now. But, taking this one specific ground which my text suggests, what do the facts thus established prove?

Well, the first point to which I would refer, and on which I should like to enlarge, if I had time, is the bearing of Christ’s Resurrection on the acceptance of the miraculous. We hear a great deal about the impossibility of miracle and the like. It upsets the certainty and fixedness of the order of things, and so forth, and so forth. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead; and that opens a door wide enough to admit all the rest of the Gospel miracles. It is of no use paring down the supernatural in Christianity, in order to meet the prejudices of a quasi-scientific scepticism, unless you are prepared to go the whole length, and give up the Resurrection. There is the turning point. The question is, Do you believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, or do you not? If your objections to the supernatural are valid, then Christ is not risen from the dead; and you must face the consequences of that. If He is risen from the dead, then you must cease all your talk about the impossibility of miracle, and be willing to accept a supernatural revelation as God’s way of making Himself known to man.

But, further, let me remind you of the bearing of the Resurrection upon Christ’s work and claims. If He be lying in some forgotten grave, and if all that fair thought of His having burst the bands of death is a blunder, then there was nothing in His death that had the least bearing upon men’s sin, and it is no more to me than the deaths of thousands in the past. But if He is risen from the dead, then the Resurrection casts back a light upon the Cross, and we understand that His death is the life of the world, and that ‘by His stripes we are healed.’

But, further, remember what He said about Himself when He was in the world-how He claimed to be the Son of God; how He demanded absolute obedience, implicit trust, supreme love, how He identified faith in Himself with faith in God-and consider the Resurrection as bearing on the reception or rejection of these tremendous claims. It seems to me that we are brought sharp up to this alternative-Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and was declared by the Resurrection to be the Son of God with power; or Jesus Christ has *not* risen from the dead-and what then? Then He was either deceiver or deceived, and in either case has no right to my reverence and my love. We may be thankful that men are illogical, and that many who reject the Resurrection retain reverence, genuine and deep, for Jesus Christ. But whether they have any right to do so is another matter. I confess for myself that, if I did not believe that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead, I should find it very hard to accept, as an example of conduct, or as religious teacher, a man who had made such great claims as He did, and had asked from me what He asked. It seems to me that He is either a great deal more, or a great deal less, than a beautiful saintly soul. If He rose from the dead He is much more; if He did not, I am afraid to say how much less He is.

And, finally, the bearing of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ upon our own hopes of the future may be suggested. It teaches us that life has nothing to do with organisation, but persists apart from the body. It teaches us that a man may pass from death and be unaltered in the substance of his being; and it teaches us that the earthly house of our tabernacle may be fashioned like unto the glorious house in which He dwells now at the right hand of God. There is no other absolute proof of immortality than the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If we accept with all our hearts and minds Paul’s Gospel in its fundamental facts, we need not fear to die, because He has died, and by dying has been the death of death. We need not doubt that we shall live again, because He was dead and is alive for ever more. This Samson has carried away the gates on His strong shoulders, and death is no more a dungeon but a passage. If we rest ourselves upon Him, then we can take up, for ourselves and for all that are dear to us and have gone before us, the triumphant song, ‘O Death, where is thy sting?’ ‘Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.’

26)1 Corinthians 15:4

Matthew **- 1 Corinthians**

THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTION ON THE MOUNTAIN

Mat. 28:16 - Mat. 28:17. - 1Co. 15:4.

To infer an historian's ignorance from his silence is a short and easy, but a rash, method. Matthew has nothing to say of our Lord's appearances in Jerusalem, except in regard to that of the women in the early morning of Easter Day. But it does not follow that he was ignorant of these appearances. Imperfect knowledge may be the explanation; but the scope and design of his Gospel is much more likely to be so. It is emphatically the Gospel of the King of Israel, and it moves, with the exception of the story of the Passion, wholly within the limits of the Galilean ministry. What more probable than that the same motive which induced Jesus to select the mountain which He had appointed as the scene of this meeting should have induced the Evangelist to pass by all the other manifestations in order to fix upon this one? It was fitting that in Galilee, where He had walked in lowly gentleness, 'kindly with His kind,' He should assume His sovereign authority. It was fitting that in 'Galilee of the Gentiles,' that outlying and despised province, half heathen in the eyes of the narrow-minded Pharisaic Jerusalem, He should proclaim the widening of His kingdom from Israel to all nations.

If we had Matthew's words only, we should suppose that none but the eleven were present on this occasion. But it is obviously the same incident to which Paul refers when he speaks of the appearance to 'five hundred brethren at once.' These were the Galilean disciples who had been faithful in the days of His lowliness, and were thus now assembled to hear His proclamation of exaltation. Apparently the meeting had been arranged beforehand. They came without Him to 'the mountain where Jesus had appointed.' Probably it was the same spot on which the so-called Sermon on the Mount, the first proclamation of the King, had been delivered, and it was naturally chosen to be the scene of a yet more exalted proclamation. A thousand tender memories and associations clustered round the spot. So we have to think of the five hundred gathered in eager expectancy; and we notice how unlike the manner of His coming is to that of the former manifestations. Then, suddenly, He became visibly present where a moment before He had been unseen. But now He gradually approaches, for the doubting and the worshipping took place 'when they saw Him,' and before 'He came to them.' I suppose we may conceive of Him as coming down the hill and drawing near to them, and then, when He stands above them, and yet close to them-else the five hundred could not have seen Him 'at once'-doubts vanish; and they listen with silent awe and love. The words are majestic; all is regal. There is no veiled personality now, as there had been to Mary, and to the two on the road to Emmaus. There is no greeting now, as there had been in the upper chamber; no affording of a demonstration of the reality of His appearance, as there had been to Thomas and to the others. He stands amongst them as the King, and the music of His words, deep as the roll of thunder, and sweet as harpers harping with their harps, makes all comment or paraphrase sound thin and poor. But yet so many great and precious lessons are hived in the words that we must reverently ponder them. The material is so abundant that I can but touch it in the slightest possible fashion. This great utterance of our Lord's falls into three parts: a great claim, a great commission, a great promise.

I. There is a Great Claim.

'All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth.' No words can more absolutely express unconditional, unlimited authority and sovereignty. Mark the variety of the gift-'all power'; every kind of force, every kind of dominion is in His hands. Mark the sphere of sovereignty-'in heaven and in earth.' Now, brethren, if we know anything about Jesus Christ, we know that He made this claim. There is no reason, except the unwillingness of some people to admit that claim, for casting any sort of doubt upon these words, or making any distinction in authority between them and the rest of the words of graciousness which the whole world has taken to its heart. But if He said this, what becomes of His right to the veneration of mankind, as the Perfect Example of the self-sacrificing, self-oblivious religious life? It is a mystery that I cannot solve, how any man can keep his reverence for

Jesus, and refuse to believe that beneath these tremendous words there lies a solemn and solid reality.

Notice, too, that there is implied a definite point of time at which this all-embracing authority was given. You will find in the Revised Version a small alteration in the reading, which makes a great difference in the sense. It reads, ‘All power has been given’; and that points, as I say, to a definite period. When was it given? Let another portion of Scripture answer the question-’Declared to be the Son of God with power, by the resurrection from the dead.’ Then to the Man Jesus was given authority over heaven and earth. All the early Christian documents concur in this view of the connection between the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and His investiture with this sovereign power. Hearken to Paul, ‘Became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross; wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name that is above every name.’ Hearken to Peter, ‘Who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory.’ Hearken to the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, ‘We see Jesus crowned with glory and honour for the suffering of death.’ Hearken to John, ‘To Him that is the Faithful Witness, and the First-born from the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth.’ Look with his eyes to the vision of the ‘Lamb as it had been slain,’ enthroned in the midst of the throne, and say whether this unanimous consent of the earliest Christian teachers is explicable on any reasonable grounds, unless there had been underlying it just the words of our text, and the Master Himself had taught them that all power was given to Him in heaven and in earth. As it seems to me impossible to account for the existence of the Church if we deny the Resurrection, so it seems to me impossible to account for the faith of the earliest stratum of the Christian Church without the acceptance of some such declaration as this, as having come from the Lord Himself. And so the hands that were pierced with the nails wield the sceptre of the Universe, and on the brows that were wounded and bleeding with the crown of thorns are wreathed the many crowns of universal Kinghood.

But we have further to notice that in this investiture, with ‘all power in heaven and on earth,’ we have not merely the attestation of the perfection of His obedience, the completeness of His work, and the power of His sacrifice, but that we have also the elevation of Manhood to enthronement with Divinity. For the new thing that came to Jesus after His resurrection was that His humanity was taken into, and became participant of, ‘the glory which I had with Thee, before the world was.’ Then our nature, when perfect and sinless, is so cognate and kindred with the Divine that humanity is capable of being invested with, and bearing, that ‘exceeding and eternal weight of glory.’ In that elevation of the Man Christ Jesus, we may read a prophecy, that shall not be unfulfilled, of the destiny of all those who conform to Him through faith, love, and obedience, finally to sit down with Him on His throne, even as He is set down with the Father on His throne.

Ah! brethren, Christianity has dark and low views of human nature, and men say they are too low and too dark. It is ‘Nature’s sternest painter,’ and, therefore, ‘its best.’ But if on its palette the blacks are blacker than anywhere else, its range of colour is greater, and its white is more lustrous. No system thinks so condemnatorily of human nature as it is; none thinks so glowingly of human nature as it may become. There are bass notes far down beyond the limits of the scale to which ears dulled by the world and sin and sorrow are sensitive; and there are clear, high tones, thrilling and shrilling far above the range of perception of such ears. The man that is in the lowest depths may rise with Jesus to the highest, but it must be by the same road by which the Master went. ‘If we suffer with Him, we shall also reign with Him,’ and only ‘if.’ There is no other path to the Throne but the Cross. Via crucis, via lucis-the way of the Cross is the way of light. It is to those who have accepted their Gethsemanes and their Calvarys that He appoints a kingdom, as His Father has appointed unto Him.

So much, then, for the first point here in these words; turn now to the second.

II. The Great Commission.

One might have expected that the immediate inference to be drawn from ‘All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth’ would have been some word of encouragement and strengthening to those who were so soon to be left, and who were beginning to be conscious of their feebleness. But there is nothing more striking in the whole of the incidents of those forty days than the prominence which is given in them to the work of the Church when the Master had left it, and to the imperative obligations devolving upon it.

And so here, not encouragement, but obligation is the inference that is drawn from that tremendous claim. ‘Because I have all power, therefore you are charged with the duty of winning the world for its King.’ The all-ruling Christ calls for the universal proclamation of His sovereignty by His disciples. These five hundred little understood the sweep of the commandment, and, as history shows, terribly failed to apprehend the emancipating power of it. But He says to us, as to them, ‘I am not content with the authority given to Me by God, unless I have the authority that each man for himself can give Me, by willing surrender of his heart and will to Me.’ Jesus Christ craves no empty rule, no mere elevation by virtue of Divine supremacy, over men. He regards that elevation as incomplete without the voluntary surrender of men to become His subjects and champions. Without its own consent He does not count that His universal power is established in a human heart. Though that dominion be all-embracing like the ocean, and stretching into all corners of the universe, and dominating over all ages, yet in that ocean there may stand up black and dry rocks, barren as they are dry, and blasted as they are black, because, with the awful power of a human will, men have said, ‘We will not have this Man to reign over us.’ It is willing subjects whom Christ seeks, in order to make the Divine grant of authority a reality.

In that work He needs His servants. The gift of God notwithstanding, the power of His Cross notwithstanding, the perfection and completeness of His great reconciling and redeeming work notwithstanding, all these are vain unless we, His servants, will take them in our hands as our weapons, and go forth on the warfare to which He has summoned us. This is the command laid upon us all, ‘Make disciples of all nations.’ Only so will the reality correspond to the initial and all-embracing grant.

It would take us too far to deal at all adequately, or in anything but the most superficial fashion, with the remaining parts of this great commission. ‘Make disciples of all nations’-that is the first thing. Then comes the second step: ‘Baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.’ Who are to be baptized? Now, notice, if I may venture upon being slightly technical for a moment, that the word ‘nations’ in the preceding clause is a neuter one, and that the word for ‘them’ in this clause is a masculine, which seems to me fairly to imply that the command ‘baptizing them’ does not refer to ‘all nations,’ but to the disciples latent among them, and to be drawn from them. Surely, surely the great claim of absolute and unbounded power has for its consequence something better than the lame and impotent conclusion of appointing an indiscriminate rite, as the means of making disciples! Surely that is not in accordance with the spirituality of the Christian faith!

‘Baptizing them into the Name’-the name is one, that of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Does that mean the name of God, and of a man, and of an influence, all jumbled up together in blasphemous and irrational union? Surely, if Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have one name, the name of Divinity, then it is but a step to say that three Persons are one God! But there is a great deal more here than a baptismal formula, for to be baptized into the Name is but the symbol of being plunged into communion with this one threefold God of our salvation. The ideal state of the Christian disciple is that he shall be as a vase dropped into the Atlantic, encompassed about with God, and filled with Him. We all ‘live, and move, and have our being’ in Him, but some of us have so wrapped ourselves, if I may venture to use such a figure, in waterproof covering, that, though we are floating in an ocean of Divinity, not a drop finds its way in. Cast the covering aside, and you will be saturated with God, and only in the measure in which you live and move and have your being in the Name are you disciples.

There is another step still. Making disciples and bringing into communion with the Godhead is not all that is to flow from, and correspond to, and realise in the individual, the absolute authority of Jesus Christ-’Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.’ We hear a great deal in these days about the worthlessness of mere dogmatic Christianity. Jesus Christ anticipated all that talk, and guarded it from exaggeration. For what He tells us here that we are to train ourselves and others in, is not creed but conduct; not things to be believed or credenda but things to be done or agenda-’teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.’ A creed that is not wrought out in actions is empty; conduct that is not informed, penetrated, regulated by creed, is unworthy of a man, not to say of a Christian. What we are to know we are to know in order that we may do, and so inherit the benediction, which is never bestowed upon them that know, but upon them that, knowing these things, are blessed in, as well as for, the doing of them.

That training is to be continuous, educating to new views of duty; new applications of old truths, new sensitiveness of conscience, unveiling to us, ever as we climb, new heights to which we aspire. The Christian Church has not yet learnt-thank God it is learning, though by slow degrees-all the moral and practical implications and applications of ‘the truth as it is in Jesus.’ And so these are the three things by which the Church recognises and corresponds to the universal dominion of Christ, the making disciples universally; the bringing them into the communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and the training of them to conduct ever approximating more and more to the Divine ideal of humanity in the glorified Christ.

And now I must gather just into a sentence or two what is to be said about the last point. There is-

III. The Great Promise.

‘I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world,’ or, as it might be read, ‘with you all the days, even to the accomplishment of the age.’ Note that emphatic ‘I am,’ which does not only denote certainty, but is the speech of Him who is lifted above the lower regions where Time rolls and the succession of events occurs. That ‘I am’ covers all the varieties of was, is, will be. Notice the long vista of variously tinted days which opens here. Howsoever many they be, howsoever different their complexion, days of summer and days of winter, days of sunshine and days of storm, days of buoyant youth and days of stagnant, stereotyped old age, days of apparent failure and days of apparent prosperity, He is with us in them all. They change, He is ‘the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.’ Notice the illimitable extent of the promise-’even unto the end.’ We are always tempted to think that long ago the earth was more full of God than it is to-day, and that away forward in the future it will again be fuller, but that this moment is comparatively empty. The heavens touch the earth on the horizon in front and behind, and they are highest and remotest above us just where we stand. But no past day had more of Christ in it than to-day has, and that He has gone away is the condition of His coming. ‘He therefore departed for a season, that we might receive Him for ever.’

But mark that the promise comes after a command, and is contingent, for all its blessedness and power, upon our obedience to the prescribed duty. That duty is primarily to make disciples of all nations, and the discharge of it is so closely connected with the realisation of the promise that a non-missionary Church never has much of Christ's presence. But obedience to all the King's commands is required if we stand before Him, and are to enjoy His smile. If you wish to keep Christ very near you, and to feel Him with you, the way to do so is no mere cultivation of religious emotion, or saturating your mind with religious books and thoughts, though these have their place; but on the dusty road of life doing His will and keeping His commandments. 'If a man love Me he will keep My words, and My Father will love Him. We will come to Him, and make our abode with Him.'

27)1 Corinthians 15:6

1 Corinthians

REMAINING AND FALLING ASLEEP

1Co. 15:6.

There were, then, some five-and-twenty years after the Resurrection, several hundred disciples who were known amongst the churches as having been eyewitnesses of the risen Saviour. The greater part survived; some, evidently a very few, had died. The proportion of the living to the dead, after five-and-twenty years, is generally the opposite. The greater part have 'fallen asleep'; some, a comparatively few, remain 'unto this present.' Possibly there was some divine intervention which supernaturally prolonged the lives of these witnesses, in order that their testimony might be the more lasting. But, be that as it may, they evidently were men of mark, and some kind of honour and observance surrounded them, as was very natural, and as appears from the fact that Paul here knows so accurately [and can appeal to His fellow-Christians' accurate knowledge] the proportion between the survivors and the departed. We read of one of them in the Acts of the Apostles at a later date than this, one Mnason, an 'original disciple.'

So we get a glimpse into the conditions of life in the early Church, interesting and of value in an evidential point of view. But my purpose at present is to draw your attention to the remarkable language in which the Apostle here speaks of the living and the dead amongst these witnesses. In neither case does he use the simple, common words ‘living’ or ‘dead’; but in the one clause he speaks of their ‘remaining,’ and in the other of their ‘falling asleep’; both phrases being significant, and, as I take it, both being traced up to the fact of their having seen the risen Lord as the cause why their life could be described as a ‘remaining,’ and their death as a ‘falling asleep.’ In other words, we have here brought before us, by these two striking expressions, the transforming effect upon life and upon death of the faith in a risen Lord, whether grounded on sight or not. And it is simply to these two points that I desire to turn now.

I. First, then, we have to consider what life may become to those who see the risen Christ.

‘The greater part remain until this present.’ Now the word *remain* is no mere synonym for living or surviving. It not only tells us the fact that the survivors were living, but the kind of life that they did live. It is very significant that it is the same expression as our Lord used in the profound prophetic words, ‘If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?’ Now we are told in John’s Gospel that ‘that saying went abroad amongst the brethren,’ and inasmuch as it was a matter of common notoriety in the early Church, it is by no means a violent supposition that it may be floating in Paul’s memory here, and may determine his selection of this remarkable expression ‘they remain,’ or ‘they tarry,’ and they were tarrying till the Master came. So, then, I think if we give due weight to the significance of the phrase, we get two or three thoughts worth pondering.

One of them is that the sight of a risen Christ will make life calm and tranquil. Fancy one of these 500 brethren, after that vision, going back to his quiet rural home in some little village amongst the hills of Galilee. How small and remote from Him, and unworthy to ruffle or disturb the heart in which the memory of that vision was burning, would seem the things that otherwise would have been important and distracting! The faith which we have in the risen Christ ought to do the same thing for us, and will do it in the measure in which there shines clearly before that inward eye, which is our true means of apprehending Him, the vision which shone before the outward gaze of that company of wondering witnesses. If we build our nests amidst the tossing branches of the world's trees, they will sway with every wind, and perhaps be blown from their hold altogether by such a storm as we all have sometimes to meet. But we may build our nests in the clefts of the rock, like the doves, and be quiet, as they are. Distractions will cease to distract, and troubles will cease to agitate, and across the heaving surface of the great ocean there will come a Form beneath whose feet the waves smooth themselves, and at whose voice the winds are still. They who see Christ need not be troubled. The ship that is empty is tossed upon the ocean, that which is well laden is steady. The heart that has Christ for a passenger need not fear being rocked by any storm. Calmness will come with the vision of the Lord, and we shall abide or 'remain,' for there will be no need for us to flee from this Refuge to that, nor shall we be driven from our secure abode by any contingencies. 'He that believeth shall not make haste.'

It is a good thing to cultivate the disposition that says about most of the trifles of this life, 'It does not much matter'; but the only way to prevent wholesome contempt of the world's trivialities from degenerating into supercilious indifference is, to base it upon Christ, discerned as near us and bestowing upon us the calmness of His risen life. Make Him your scale of importance, and nothing will be too small to demand and be worthy of the best efforts of your work, but nothing will be too great to sweep you away from the serenity of your faith.

Again, the vision of the risen Christ will also lead to patient persistence in duty. If we have Him before us, the distasteful duty which He sets us will not be distasteful, and the small tasks, in which great faithfulness may be manifested, will cease to be small. If we have Him before us we have in that risen Christ the great and lasting Example of how patient continuance in well-doing triumphs over the sorrows that it bears, by and in patiently bearing them, and is crowned at last with glory and honour. The risen Christ is the Pattern for the men who will not be turned aside from the path of duty by any obstacles, dangers, or threats. The risen Christ is the signal Example of glory following upon faithfulness, and of the crown being the result of the Cross. The risen Christ is the manifest Helper of them that put their trust in Him; and one of the plainest lessons and of the most imperative commands which come from the believing gaze upon that Lord who died because He would do the will of the Father, and is throned and crowned in the heavens because He died, is-By patient continuance in well-doing let us commit the keeping of our souls to Him: and abide in the calling wherewith we are called.

And, again, the sight of the risen Christ leads to a life of calm expectancy. ‘If I will that He *tarry* till I come’ conveys that shade of meaning. The Apostle was to wait for the Lord from Heaven, and that vision which was given to these 500 men sent them home to their abodes to make all the rest of their lives one calm aspiration for, and patient expectation of, the return of the Lord. These primitive Christians expected that Jesus Christ would come speedily. That expectation was disappointed in so far as the date was concerned, but after nineteen centuries it still remains true that all vigorous and vital Christian life must have in it, as a very important element of its vitality, the onward look which ever is anticipating, which often is desiring, and which constantly is confident of, the coming of the Lord from Heaven. The Resurrection has for its consequences, its sequel and corollary, first the Ascension; then the long tract of time during which Jesus Christ is absent, but still in divine presence rules the world; and, finally, His coming again in that same body in which the disciples saw Him depart from them. And no Christian life is up to the level of its privileges, nor has any Christian faith grasped the whole articles of its creed, except that which sets in the very centre of all its visions of the future that great thought-He shall come again.

Questions of chronology have nothing to do with that. It stands there before us, the certain fact, made certain and inevitable by the past facts of the Cross and the Grave and Olivet. He has come, He will come; He has gone, He will come back. And for us the life that we live in the flesh ought to be a life of waiting for God’s Son from Heaven, and of patient, confident expectancy that when He shall be manifested we also shall be manifested with Him in glory.

So much, then, for life-calm, persistent in every duty, and animated by that blessed and far-off, but certain, hope, and all of these founded upon the vision and the faith of a risen Lord. What have fears and cares and distractions and faint-heartedness and gloomy sorrow to do with the eyes that have beheld the Christ, and with the lives that are based on faith in the risen Lord?

II. So, secondly, consider what death becomes to those who have seen Christ risen from the dead.

‘Some are fallen asleep.’ Now that most natural and obvious metaphor for death is not only a Christian idea, but is found, as would be expected, in many tongues, but yet with a great and significant difference. The Christian reason for calling death a sleep embraces a great deal more than the heathen reason for doing so, and in some respects is precisely the opposite of that, inasmuch as to most others who have used the word, death has been a sleep that knew no waking, whereas the very pith and centre of the Christian reason for employing the symbol are that it makes our waking sure. We have here what the act of dying and the condition of the dead become by virtue of faith in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

They have ‘fallen asleep.’ The act of dying is but a laying one’s self down to rest, and a dropping out of consciousness of the surrounding world. It is very remarkable and very beautiful that the new Testament scarcely ever employs the words *dying* and *death* for the act of separating body and spirit, or for the condition either of the spirit parted from the body, or of the body parted from the spirit. It keeps those grim words for the reality, the separation of the soul from God; and it only exceptionally uses them for the shadow and the symbol, the physical fact of the parting of the man from the house which here he has dwelt in. But the reason why Christianity uses these periphrases or metaphors, these euphemisms for death, is the opposite of the reason why the world uses them. The world is so afraid of dying that it durst not name the grim, ugly thing. The Christian, or at least the Christian faith, is so little afraid of death that it does not think such a trivial matter worth calling by the name, but only names it ‘falling asleep.’

Even when the circumstances of that dropping off to slumber are painful and violent, the Bible still employs the term. Is it not striking that the first martyr, kneeling outside the city, bruised by stones and dying a bloody death, should have been said to fall asleep? If ever there was an instance in which the gentle metaphor seemed all inappropriate it was that cruel death, amidst a howling crowd, and with fatal bruises, and bleeding limbs mangled by the heavy rocks that lay upon them. But yet, ‘when he had said this he fell asleep.’ If that be true of such a death, no physical pains of any kind make the sweet word inappropriate for any.

We have here not only the designation of the act of dying, but that of the condition of the dead. They are fallen asleep, and they continue asleep. How many great thoughts gather round that metaphor on which it is needless for me to try to dilate! They will suggest themselves without many words to you all.

There lies in it the idea of repose. ‘They rest from their labours.’ Sleep restores strength, and withdraws a man at once from effort on the outer world, and from communication from it. We may carry the analogy into that unseen world. We know nothing about the relations to an external universe of the departed who sleep in Jesus. It may be that, if they sleep in Him, since He knows all, they, through Him, may know, too, something-so much as He pleases to impart to them-of what is happening here. And it may even be that, if they sleep in Him, and He wields the energies of Omnipotence, they, through Him, may have some service to do, even while they wait for their house which is from heaven. But there is no need for, nor profit in, such speculations. It is enough that the sweet emblem suggests repose, and that in that sleep there are folded around the sleepers the arms of the Christ on whose bosom they rest, as an infant does on its first and happiest home-its mother’s breast.

But then, besides that, the emblem suggests the idea of continuous and conscious existence. A man asleep does not cease to be a man; a dead man does not cease to live. It has often been argued from this metaphor that we are to conceive of the space between death and the resurrection as being a period of unconsciousness, but the analogies seem to me to be in the opposite direction. A sleeping man does not cease to know himself to be, and he does not cease to know himself to be himself. That mysterious consciousness of personal identity survives the passage from waking to sleep, as dreams sufficiently show us. And, therefore, they that sleep know themselves to be.

And, finally, the emblem suggests the idea of waking. Sleep is a parenthesis. If the night comes, the morning comes. ‘If winter comes, can spring be far behind?’ They that sleep will awake, and be satisfied when they ‘awake with Thy likeness.’ And so these three things-repose, conscious, continuous existence, and the certainty of awaking-all lie in that metaphor.

Now, then, the risen Christ is the only ground of such hope, and faith in Him is the only state of mind which is entitled to cherish it. Nothing proves immortality except that open grave. Every other foundation is too weak to bear the weight of such a superstructure. The current of present opinion shows, I think, that neither metaphysical nor ethical arguments for the future life will stand the force of the disintegrating criticism which is brought to bear upon that hope by the fashionable materialism of this generation. There is one barrier that will resist that force, and only one, and that is the historical facts that Jesus Christ died, and that Jesus Christ has risen again. He rose; therefore death is not the end of individual existence. He rose; therefore life beyond the grave is possible for humanity. He rose; therefore His sacrifice for the world’s sin is accepted, and I may be delivered from my guilt and my burden. He rose; therefore He is declared to be the Son of God with power. He rose; therefore we, if we trust Him, may partake in His Resurrection and in some reflection of His glory. The old Greek architects were often careless of the solidity of the soil on which they built their temples, and so, many of them have fallen in ruins. The Temple of Immortality can be built only upon the rock of that proclamation-Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. And we, dear brethren, should have all our hopes founded upon that one fact.

So then, for us, the calm, peaceful passage from life into what else is the great darkness is possible on condition of our having beheld the risen Lord. These witnesses of whom my text speaks, Paul would suggest to us, laid themselves quietly down to sleep, because before them there still hovered the memory of the vision which they had beheld. Faith in the risen Christ is the anchor of the soul in death, and there is nothing else by which we can hold then.

As the same Apostle, in one of his other letters, puts it, the belief that Christ is risen is not only the irrefragable ground of our hope that we, too, shall rise, but has the power to change the whole aspect of our death. Did you ever observe the emphasis with which He says, 'If we believe that Jesus *died* and rose again, even so them also which *sleep* in Jesus will God bring with Him?' His death was death indeed, and faith in it softens ours to sleep. He bore the reality that we might never need to know it, and if our poor hearts are resting upon that dear Lord, then the flames are but painted ones and will not burn, and we shall pass through them, and no smell of fire will be upon us, and all that will be consumed will be the bonds which bind us. He has abolished death. The physical fact remains, but all which to men makes the idea of death is gone if we trust the risen Lord. So that, between two men dying under precisely the same circumstances, of the same disease, in adjacent beds in the same hospital, there may be such a difference as that the same word cannot be applied to the experiences of both.

My dear friends, we have each of us to pass through that last struggle; but we may make it either a quiet going to sleep with a loved Face bending over our closing eyes, like a mother's over her child's cradle, and the same Face meeting us when we open them in the morning of heaven; or we may make it a reluctant departure from all that we care for, and a trembling advance into all from which conscience and heart shrink.

Which is it going to be to you? The answer depends upon that to another question. Are you looking to that Christ that died and is alive for evermore as your life and your salvation? Do you hold fast that Gospel which Paul preached, 'how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures' ? If you do, life will be a calm, persevering, expectant waiting upon Him, and death will be nothing more terrible than falling asleep.

28)1 Corinthians 15:10

1 Corinthians

PAUL'S ESTIMATE OF HIMSELF

1Co. 15:10.

The Apostle was, all his life, under the hateful necessity of vindicating his character and Apostleship. Thus here, though his main purpose in the context is simply to declare the Gospel which he preached, he is obliged to turn aside in order to assert, and to back up his assertion, that there was no sort of difference between him and the other recognised teachers of Christian truth. He was forced to do this by persistent endeavours in the Corinthian Church to deny his Apostleship, and the faithfulness of his representation of the Christian verities. The way in which he does it is eminently beautiful and remarkable. He fires up in vindication of himself; and then he checks himself. 'By the grace of God I am'-and he is going to say what he is, but he bethinks himself, as if he had reflected; 'No! I will leave other people to say what that is. By the grace of God I am-what I am, whatever that be. And all that I have to say is that God made me, and that I helped Him. For the grace of God which was bestowed upon me was not in vain. You Corinthians may judge what the product is. I tell you how it has come about.' So there are thoughts here, I think, well worth our pondering and taking into our hearts and lives.

I. First, as to the one power that makes men.

'By the grace of God I am what I am.' Now that word 'grace' has got to be worn threadbare, and to mean next door to nothing, in the ears and minds of a great many continual hearers of the Gospel. But Paul had a very definite idea of what he meant by it; and what he meant by it was a very large thing, which we may well ponder for a moment as being the only thing which will transform and ennoble character and will produce fruit that a man need not be ashamed of. The grace of God, in Paul's use of the words, which is the scriptural use of them generally, implies these two things which are connected as root and product-the active love of God, in exercise towards us low and sinful creatures, and the gifts with which that love comes full charged to men. These two things, which at bottom are one, love and its gifts, are all, in the Apostle's judgment, gathered up and stored, as in a great storehouse, in Jesus Christ Himself, and through Him are made accessible to us, and brought to bear upon us for the ennobling of our natures, and the investing of us with graces and beauties of character, all strange to us apart from these.

Now it seems to me that these two things, which come from one root, are the precise things which you and I need in order to make us nobler and purer and more Godlike men than otherwise we could ever become. For what is it that men need most for noble and pure living? These two things precisely-motive and power to carry out the dictates of conscience.

Every man in the world knows enough of duty and of right to be a far nobler man than any man in the world is. And it is not for want of clear convictions of duty, it is not for want of recognised models and patterns of life, that men go wrong; but it is because there are these two things lacking, motives for nobler service, and power to do and be what they know they ought to be. And precisely here Paul's gospel comes in, 'By the grace of God I am what I am.' That grace, considered in its two sides of love and of giving, supplies all that we want.

It supplies motives. There is nothing that will bend a man's will like the recognition of divine love which it is blessedness to come in contact with, and to obey. You may try to sway him by motives of advantage and self-interest, and to thunder into his ears the pealing words of duty and right and 'ought,' and there is no adequate response. You cannot soften a heart by the hammers of the law. You cannot force a man to do right by brandishing before him the whip that punishes doing wrong. You cannot sway the will by anything but the heart; and when you can touch the deepest spring it moves the whole mass.

You have seen some ponderous piece of machinery, which resists all attempts of a puny hand laid upon it to make it revolve. But down in one corner is a little hidden spring. Touch that and with majestic slowness and certainty the mighty mass turns. You know those rocking-stones down in the south of England; tons of weight poised upon a pin point, and so exquisitely balanced that a child's finger rightly applied may move the mass. So the whole man is made mobile only by the touch of love; and the grace that comes to us, and says, 'If ye love Me, keep My commandments'-is, as I believe, the sole motive which will continuously and adequately sway the rebellious, self-centred wills of men, to obedience resulting in nobility of life.

The other aspect of this same great word is, in like manner, that which we need. What men want is, first of all, the will to be noble and good; and, second, the power to carry out the will. It is God that worketh in us both the willing and the doing. I venture to affirm that there is no power known, either to thinkers, or philanthropists, or doctrinaires, or strivers after excellence in the world-no power known and available which will lift a life to such heights of beauty and self-sacrificing nobility, as will the power that comes to us by communication of the grace that is in Jesus Christ.

I am perpetually trying to insist, dear brethren, upon this one thought, that the communication of actual new life is the central gift of the Gospel; and this new life it is, this nature endowed with new desires, hopes, aims, capacities, which alone will lift the whole man into unwonted heights of beauty and serenity. It is the grace of God, the gift of His Divine Spirit who will dwell with all of us, if we will, which alone can be trusted to make men good.

And now, if that be true, what follows? Surely this, that for all you who have, in any measure, caught a glimpse of what you ought to be, and have been more or less vainly trying to realise your ideal, and reach your goal, there is a better way than the way of self-centred and self-derived and self-dependent effort. There is the way of opening your hearts and spirits to the entrance and access of that great power, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which will do in us and for us all that we know we ought to do, and yet feel hampered and hindered in performing.

Oh, dear friends! there are many of you, I believe, who have more or less spasmodically and interruptedly, but with a continual recurrence to the effort, sought to plant your feet firmly in the paths of righteousness, and have more or less failed. Listen to this Gospel, and accept it, and put it to the proof. The love of God which is in Christ Jesus, and the life which that love brings in its hands, for all of us who will trust it, will dwell in you if you will, and mould you into His own likeness, and the law of the spirit of life which was in Christ Jesus will make us free from the law of sin and death.

All noble living is a battle. Can you and I, with our ten thousand, meet him that cometh against us with his twenty, the temptations of the world and of its Prince? Send for the reinforcements, and Jesus Christ will come and teach your hands to war and your fingers to fight. All noble life is self-denial, coercion, restraint; and can my poor, feeble hands apply muscular force enough to the brake to keep the wheels clogged, and prevent them from whirling me downhill into ruin? Let Him come and put His great gentle hand on the top of yours, and that will enable you to scotch the wheels, and make self-denial possible. All noble life is a building up by slow degrees from the foundation. And can you and I complete the task with our own limited resources, and our own feeble strengths? Will not 'all that pass by begin to mock' us and say, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish' ? That is the epitaph written over all moralities and over all lives which, catching some glimpse of the good and the true and the noble, have tried, apart from Christ, to reproduce them in themselves. Frightful gaps, and an unfinished, however fair structure end them all. Go to Him. 'His hand hath laid the foundation of the house, His hand shall also finish it.' He who is Himself the foundation-stone is also the headstone of the corner, which is brought forth with shouting of 'Grace! Grace unto it!'

I need not, I suppose, linger to remind you what important and large lessons these thoughts carry, not only for men who are trying to work at the task of mending and making their own characters, but on the larger scale, for all who seek to benefit and elevate their fellows. Brethren, it is not for me to depreciate any workers who, in any department, and by any methods, seek, and partially effect, the elevation of humanity. But I should be untrue to my own deepest convictions, and unfaithful to the message which God's providence has given it to me as my life's task to proclaim, if I did not declare that nothing will truly *re-form* humanity, society, the nation, the city, except that which re-creates the individual: 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ' entering into their midst.

II. And so, secondly, and very briefly, notice the lesson we get here as to how we should think of our own attainments.

I have already pointed out that there are two beautiful touches in my text. The Apostle traces everything that he is, in his character and in his Christian standing and in his Apostolic work and success, to that grace that has come down upon him, and clothed his nakedness with so glorious a garment. And then, in addition to that, he modestly, and with a fine sense of dignity, refrains from parading his attainments or his achievements, and says, ‘It is not for me to estimate what I am; it is for you to do it.’ True, indeed, in the next verse he does set forth, in very lofty language, his claims to be in nothing behind the very chiefest of the Apostles, and ‘to have laboured more abundantly than they all.’ But still the spirit of that humble and yet dignified silence runs through the whole context. ‘By the grace of God I am-what I am.’

Well, then, it is not necessary for a man to be ignorant, or to pretend that he is ignorant, of what he can do. We hear a great deal about the unconsciousness of genius. There is a partial truth in it; and possibly the highest examples of power and success, in any department of mental or intellectual effort, are unaware of their achievements and stature. But if a man can do a certain kind of service there is no harm whatever in his recognising the fact that he can do it. The only harm is in his thinking that because he can, he is a very fine fellow, and that the work itself is a great work; and so setting himself up above his brethren. There is a vast deal of hypocrisy in what is called unconsciousness of power. Most men who have been chosen and empowered to do a great work for God or for men, in any department, have been aware that they could do it. But the less we think about ourselves, in any way, the better. The more entire our recognition of the influx of grace on which we depend for keeping our reservoir full, the less likelihood there will be of touchy self-assertion, the less likelihood of the misuse of the powers that we have. If we are to do much for God, if we are to keep what we have already attained, if we are to make our own lives sweet and beautiful, if we are to be invested with any increase of capacity, or led to any higher heights of nobleness and Christlikeness, we must copy, and make a conscious effort to copy, these two things, which marked the Apostle’s estimate of himself-a distinct recognition that we are only reservoirs and nothing more-’What hast thou that thou hast not received? Why then dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it?’-and a humble waiving aside of the attempt to determine what it is that we are. For however clearly a man may know his own powers and achievements, it is hard for him to estimate the relations of these to his whole character.

So, dear brethren, although it is a very homely piece of advice, and may seem to be beneath the so-called dignity of the pulpit, let me venture just to remind you that self-conceit is no disease peculiar to the ten-talented people, but is quite as rife, if not a good deal rifer, among those with one talent. They are very humble when it comes to work, and are quite contented to wrap the one talent up in a napkin then; but when it comes to self-assertion, or what they expect to receive of recognition from others, they need to be reminded quite as much as their betters in endowment-'By the grace of God I am what I am.'

III. And so, lastly, one word about the responsibility for our co-operation with the grace, in order to the accomplishment of its results.

'The grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain,' says Paul. 'Not I, but the grace of God which was with me, and so I laboured more abundantly than they all.' That is to say, God in His giving love; Christ with His ever out-flowing Spirit, move round our hearts, and desire to enter. But the grace, the love, the gifts of the love may all be put away by our unfaithfulness, by our non-receptivity, by our misuse, and by our negligence. Paul yielded himself to the grace that was brought to work upon him. Have you yielded yourselves?

Paul said, 'By the grace of God I am what I am.' He could not have said that, could he, if he had known that the most part of what he was was dead against God's will and purpose? Has God anything to do with making you what you are, or has it been the devil that has had the greater share in it? This man, because he knew that he had submitted himself to the often painful, searching, crucifying, self-restraining and stimulating influences of the Gospel and Spirit of Christ, could say, 'God's grace has made me what I am, and I helped Him to make me.' And can you say anything like that?

Take your life. In how many of its deeds has there been present the consciousness of God and His love? Take your character. How much of it has been shot through and through, so to speak, by the fiery darts of that cleansing, warming, consuming grace of God? Are you daily being baptized in that Spirit, searched by that Spirit, condemned by that grace? Is it the grace of God, or nature and self and the world and the flesh that have made you what you are?

Oh, brethren I let us cultivate the sense of our need of this divine help, for it does not come where men do not know how weak they are, and how much they want it. The mountain tops are high,-yes! and they are dry; there is no water there. The rivers run in the green valleys deep down. ‘God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.’ Let us see that we open our hearts to the reception of these quickening and cleansing influences, for it is possible for us to cover ourselves over with such an impenetrable covering that that grace cannot pass through it. Let us see to it that we keep ourselves in close contact with the foundation of all this grace, even Jesus Christ Himself, by desire, by faith, by love, by communion, by meditation, by approximation, by sympathy, by service. And let us see that we use the grace that we possess. ‘For to him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not’-not possessing in any real sense because not utilising for its appointed purpose-’shall be taken away even that he hath.’ Wherefore, brethren, I ‘beseech you that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.’

29)1 Corinthians 15:11

1 Corinthians

THE UNITY OF APOSTOLIC TEACHING

1Co. 15:11.

Party spirit and faction were the curses of Greek civic life, and they had crept into at least one of the Greek churches-that in the luxurious and powerful city of Corinth. We know that there was a very considerable body of antagonists to Paul, who ranked themselves under the banner of Apollos or of Cephas *i.e.* Peter. Therefore, Paul, keenly conscious that he was speaking to some unfriendly critics, hastens in the context to remove the possible objection which might be made, that the Gospel which he preached was peculiar to himself, and proceeds to assert that the whole substance of what he had to say to men, was held with unbroken unanimity by the other apostles. ‘They’ means all of *them*; and ‘so’ means the summary of the Gospel teaching in the preceding verses.

Now, Paul would not have ventured to make that assertion, in the face of men whom he knew to be eager to pick holes in anything that he said, unless he had been perfectly sure of his ground. There were broad differences between him and the others. But their partisans might squabble, as is often the case, and the men, whose partisans they were, be unanimous. There were differences of individual character, of temper, and of views about certain points of Christian truth. But there was an unbroken front of unanimity in regard to all that lies within the compass of that little word which covers so much ground-'*So* we preach.'

Now, I wish to turn to that outstanding fact-which does not always attract the attention which it deserves-of the absolute identity of the message which all the apostles and primitive teachers delivered, and to seek to enforce some of the considerations and lessons which seem to me naturally to flow from it.

I. First, then, I ask you to think of the fact itself-the unbroken unanimity of the whole body of Apostolic teachers.

As I have said, there were wide differences of characteristics between them, but there was a broad tract of teaching wherein they all agreed. Let me briefly gather up the points of unanimity, the contents of the one Gospel, which every man of them felt was his message to the world. I may take it all from the two clauses in the preceding context, 'how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.' These are the things about which, as Paul declares, there was not the whisper of a dissentient voice. There is the vital centre which he declares every Christian teacher grasped as being the essential of his message, and in various tones and manners, but in substantial identity of content, declared to the world.

Now, what lies in it? The Person spoken of-the Christ, and all that that word involves of reference to the ancient and incomplete Revelation in the past, its shadows and types, its prophecies and ceremonies, its priesthood and its sacrifices; with all that it involves of reference to the ancient hopes on which a thousand generations had lived, and which either are baseless delusions, or are realised in Jesus-the Person whom all the Apostles proclaimed was One anointed from God as Prophet, Priest, and King; who had come into the world to fulfil all that the ancient system had shadowed by sacrifice, temple, and priest, and was the Monarch of Israel and of the world.

And not only were they absolutely unanimous in regard to the Person, but they were unbrokenly consentient in regard to the facts of His life, His death, and His Resurrection. But the proclamation of the external fact is no gospel. You must add the clause ‘for our sins,’ and then the record, which is a mere piece of history, with no more good news in it than the record of the death of any other martyr, hero, or saint, starts into being truly the good news for the world. The least part of a historical fact is the fact; the greatest part of it is the explanation of the fact, and the setting it in its place in regard to other facts, the exhibition of the principles which it expresses, and of the conclusions to which it leads. So the bare historical declaration of a death and a resurrection is transmuted into a gospel, by that which is the most important part of the Gospel, the explanation of the meaning of the fact-’He died for our sins.’

If redemption from sin through the death of a Person is the fundamental conception of the Gospel for the world, then it is clear that, for such a purpose, a divine nature in the Person is wanted. Your notion of what Christ came to do will determine your notion of who He is. If you only recognise that His work is to teach, or to show in exercise a fair human character, then you may rest content with the lower notion of His nature which sees in Him but the foremost of the sons of men. But if we grasp ‘died for our sins,’ then for such a task the incarnation of the Eternal Son of God is the absolute prerequisite.

Still further, our text brings out the contents of this gospel as being the declaration of the Resurrection. On that I need not here and now dwell at any length. But these are the points, the Person, the two facts, death and resurrection, and the great meaning of the death-viz. the expiation for the world’s sins: these are the things on which the whole of the primitive teachers of the Apostolic Church had one voice and one message.

Now, I do not suppose that I need spend any time in showing to you how the extant records bear out, absolutely, this contention of the Apostle’s. I need only remind you how the opposition that was waged against him-and it was a very vigorous and a very bitter opposition-from a section of the Church, had no bearing at all upon the question of what he taught, but only upon the question of to whom it was to be taught. The only objection that the so-called Judaising party in the early Church had against Paul and his preaching, was not the Gospel that he declared, but his assertion that the Gentile nations might enter into the Church through faith in Jesus Christ, without passing through the gate of circumcision. Depend upon it, if there had been any, even the most microscopic, divergence on his part from the general, broad stream of Christian teaching, the sleepless, keen-eyed, unscrupulous enemies that dogged him all his days would have pounced upon it eagerly, and would never have ceased talking about it. But not one of them ever said a word of the sort, but allowed his teaching to pass, because it was the teaching of every one of the apostles.

If I had time, or if it were necessary, it would be easy to point you to the records that we have left of the Apostolic teaching, in order to confirm this unbroken unanimity. I do not need to spend time on that. Proof-texts are not worth so much as the fact that these doctrines are interwoven into the whole structure of the New Testament as a whole-just as they are into Paul's letters. But I may gather one or two sayings, in which the substance of each writer's teaching has been concentrated by himself. For instance, Peter speaks about being 'redeemed by the precious blood of Christ as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot,' and declares that 'He Himself bare our sins in His own body on the tree.' John comes in with his doxology: 'Unto Him that loved us, and loosed us from our sins in His own blood'; and it is his pen that records how in the heavens there echoed 'glory and honour and thanks and blessing, for ever and ever, to the Lamb that was slain, and has redeemed us unto God by His blood.' The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, steeped as he is in ceremonial and sacrificial ideas, and having for his one purpose to work out the thought that Jesus Christ is all that the ancient ritual, sacerdotal and sacrificial system shadows and foretells, sums up his teaching in the statement that Christ having come, a high priest of good things to come, 'through His own blood, entered in, once for all, into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.'

There were limits to the unanimity, as I have already said. Paul and Peter had a great quarrel about circumcision and related subjects. The Apostolic writings are wondrously diverse from one another. Peter is far less constructive and profound than Paul. Paul and Peter are both untouched with the mystic wisdom of the Apostle John. But, in regard to the facts that I have signalised, the divinity, the person of Jesus Christ, His death and Resurrection, and the significance to be attached to that death, they are absolutely one. The instruments in the orchestra are various, the tender flute, the ringing trumpet, and many another, but the note they strike is the same. ‘Whether it were I or they, so we preach.’

II. Now, let me ask you to consider the only explanation of this unanimity.

Time was when the people, who did not believe in Christ’s divinity and sacrificial death, tortured themselves to try and make out meanings for these epistles, which should not include the obnoxious doctrines. That is nearly antiquated. I suppose that there is nobody now, or next to nobody, who does not admit that, right or wrong, Paul, Peter, John-all of them-teach these two things, that Christ is the Eternal Son of the Father, and that His death is the Sacrifice for the world’s sin. But they say that that is not the primitive, simple teaching of the Man of Nazareth; and that the unanimity is a unanimity of misapprehension of, and addition to, His words and to the drift of His teaching.

Now, just think what a huge-I was going to say-inconceivability that supposition is. For there is no point, say from the time at which the Apostle who wrote the words of my text, which was somewhere about the year 56 or 57 A.D.,-there is no point between that period, working backwards through the history of the Church to the Crucifixion, where you can insert such a tremendous revolution of teaching as this. There is no trace of such a change. Peter’s earliest speeches, as recorded in Acts, are in some important respects less developed doctrinally than are the epistles, but Christ’s Messiahship, death, and Resurrection, with which is connected the remission of sins, are as clearly and emphatically proclaimed as at any later time. So these points of the Apostolic testimony were preached from the first, and, if in preaching them, the witnesses perverted the simple teaching of the Carpenter of Nazareth, and ascribed to Him a character which He had not claimed, and to His death a power of which He had not dreamed, they did so at the very time when the impressions of His personality and teaching were most recent and strong. It seems to me, apart altogether from other considerations, that such a right-about-face movement on the part of the early teachers of Christianity, is an absolute impossibility, regard being had to the facts of the case, even if you make much allowance for possible errors in the record.

But I would make another remark. If misapprehension came in, if these men, in their unanimous declaration of Christ's death as the Sacrifice for sin, were not fairly representing the conclusions inevitable from the facts of Christ's life and death, and from His own words, is it not an odd thing that the same misapprehension affected them all? When people misconceive a teacher's doctrine, they generally differ in the nature of their misconceptions, and split into sections and parties. But here you have to account for the fact that every man of them, with all their diversity of idiosyncrasy and character, tumbled into the same pit of error, and that there was not one of them left sane enough to protest. Does that seem to be a likely thing?

And what about the worth of the teacher's teaching, that did not guard its receivers from such absolute misapprehension as that? If the whole Church unanimously mistook everything that Jesus Christ had said to them, and unwarrantably made out of Him what they did, on this hypothesis, I do not think that there is much left to honour or admire in a teacher, whose teaching was so ambiguous, as that it led all that received it into such an error as that into which, by the supposition, they fell.

No, brethren; they were one, because their Gospel was the only possible statement of the principles that underlay, and the conclusions that flowed from, the plain facts of the life and the teaching of Jesus Christ. I am not going to spend time in quoting His own words. I can only refer to one or two of them very succinctly. 'Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.' 'My flesh is the bread which I will give for the life of the world.' 'The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.' 'This is My body broken for you; take, eat, in remembrance of Me.' 'This is My blood, shed for many for the remission of sins; this do ye, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me.' What possible explanation, doing justice to these words, is there, except 'Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures' ? And how could men who had heard them with their own ears, and with their own eyes had seen Him risen from the dead and ascending into heaven, do otherwise than eagerly, enthusiastically, at the cost of all, and with unhesitating voice of unbroken unanimity, 'so preach' ?

I quite admit that in Christ's teaching in the gospels you will not find the articulate drawing out into doctrinal statement of the principles that underlay, and the conclusions that flow from, the historical fact of Christ's propitiatory death. I do not wonder at that, nor do I admit that it is any argument against the truth of the divine revelation which is made in these doctrinal statements, to allege that we find nothing corresponding to them in Jesus Christ's own words. The silence is not as absolute as is alleged, as the quotations which I have made, and which might have been multiplied, do distinctly enough show. Even if it were more absolute than it is, the silence is by no means unintelligible. Christ had to offer the Sacrifice before the Sacrifice could be preached. He Himself warned His disciples against accepting His own words prior to the Cross, as the conclusive and ultimate revelation. 'I have many things to say unto you, but you cannot carry them now.' There was need that the Cross should be a fact before it was evolved into a doctrine. And so I venture to say that the unanimity of the preaching is only explicable on the ground of that preaching in both its parts-its assertion of Jesus' Messiahship and of His propitiatory death-being the repetition on the housetop of the lessons which they had heard in the ear from Him.

III. Note, briefly, the lesson from this unanimity.

Let us distinctly apprehend where is the living heart of the Gospel-that it is the message of redemption by the incarnation and sacrifice of the Son of God. There follows from that incarnation and sacrifice all the great teaching about the work of the Divine Spirit in men, dwelling in them for evermore. But the beginning of all is, 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.' And, brethren, that message meets, as nothing else meets, the deepest needs of every human soul. It is able, as nothing else is able, to open out into a whole encyclopædia and universe of wisdom and truth and power. If we strike it out of our conception of Christianity, or if we obscure it as being the very palpitating centre of the whole, then feebleness will creep over the Christianity that is *minus* a Cross, or does not see in it the Sacrifice for the world's sin. You may cast overboard the sails to lighten the ship. If you do, she lies a log on the waters. And if, for the sake of meeting new phases of thought, Christian churches tamper with this central truth, they have flung away their means of progress and of power.

Let me say again, and in a word only, that the considerations that I have been trying to submit to you in this sermon, show us the limits within which the modern cry of 'Back to the Christ of the Gospels,' is right, and where it may be wrong. I believe that in former days, and to some extent in the present day, we evangelical teachers have too much sometimes talked rather about the doctrines than about the Person who is the doctrines. And if the cry of 'Back to the Christ' means, 'Do not talk so much about the Atonement and Propitiation; talk about the Christ who atones,' then, with all my heart, I say, 'Amen!' But put the Person in the foreground, the living-loving, the dying-loving, the risen-loving Christ, put Him in the foreground. But if it is implied, as I am afraid it is often implied, that the Christ of the Gospels is one and the Christ of the epistles is another, and that to go back to the Christ of the gospels means to drop 'died for our sins according to the Scriptures,' and to retain only the non-miraculous, moral and religious teachings that are recorded in the three first gospels, then I say that it is fatal for the Church, and it is false to the facts, for the Christ of the epistles is the Christ of the gospels: the difference only being that in the one you have the facts, and in the other you have their meaning and their power.

So, lastly, let this text teach us what we ourselves have to do with this unanimous testimony. 'So we preach, and so ye believed.' Brother! Do you believe *so*? That is to say, is your conception of the Gospel the mighty redemptive agency which is wrought by the Incarnate Son of God, who was crucified for our offences, and rose that we might live, and is glorified that we, too, may share His glory? Is that your Gospel? But do not be content with an intellectual grasp of the thing. 'So ye believed' means a great deal more than 'I believe that Christ died for our sins.' It means 'I believe in the Christ who did die for my sins.' You must cast yourself as a sinful man on

Him; and, so casting, you will find that it is no vain story which is commended to us by all these august voices from the past, but you will have in your own experience the verification of the fact that He died for our sins, in your own consciousness of sins forgiven, and new love bestowed; and so may turn round to Paul, the leader of the chorus, and to all the apostolic band, and say to them, ‘Now I believe, not because of thy saying, but because I have seen Him, and myself heard Him.’

30)1 Corinthians 15:20

1 Corinthians

THE DEATH OF DEATH

THE CERTAINTY AND JOY OF THE RESURRECTION

1Co. 15:20.

The Apostle has been contemplating the long train of dismal consequences which he sees would arise if we only had a dead Christ. He thinks that he, the Apostle, would have nothing to preach, and we, nothing to believe. He thinks that all hope of deliverance from sin would fade away. He thinks that the one fact which gives assurance of immortality having vanished, the dead who had nurtured the assurance have perished. And he thinks that if things were so, then Christian men, who had believed a false gospel, and nourished an empty faith, and died clinging to a baseless hope, were far more to be pitied than men who had had less splendid dreams and less utter illusions.

Then, with a swift revulsion of feeling, he turns away from that dreary picture, and with a change of key, which the dullest ear can appreciate, from the wailing minors of the preceding verses, he breaks into this burst of triumph. ‘Now’-things being as they are, for it is the logical ‘now,’ and not the temporal one-things being as they are, ‘Christ is risen from the dead, and that as the first fruits of them that slept.’

Part of the ceremonial of the Passover was the presentation in the Temple of a barley sheaf, the first of the harvest, waved before the Lord in dedication to Him, and in sign of thankful confidence that all the fields would be reaped and their blessing gathered. There may be some allusion to that ceremony, which coincided in time with the Resurrection of our Lord, in the words here, which regard that one solitary Resurrection as the early ripe and early reaped sheaf, the pledge and the prophecy of the whole ingathering.

Now there seem to me, in these words, to ring out mainly two things-an expression of absolute certainty in the fact, and an expression of unbounded triumph in the certainty of the fact.

And if we look at these two things, I think we shall get the main thoughts that the Apostle would impress upon our minds.

I. The certainty of Christ's Resurrection.

'Now *is* Christ risen,' says he, defying, as it were, doubt and negation, and basing himself upon the firm assurance which he possesses of that historical fact. 'Ah!' you say, 'seeing is believing; and he had evidence such as we can never have.' Well! let us see. Is it possible for us, nineteen centuries nearly after that day, to catch some echo of this assured confidence, and in the face of modern doubts and disbeliefs, to reiterate with as unfaltering assurance as that with which they came from his glowing lips, the great words of my text? Can we, logically and reasonably, as men who are guided by evidence and not by feeling, stand up before the world, and take for ours the ancient confession: 'I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. The third day He rose again from the dead' ? I think we can.

The way to prove a fact is by the evidence of witnesses. You cannot argue that it would be very convenient, if such and such a thing should be true; that great moral effects would follow if we believed it was true, and so on. The way to do is to put people who have seen it into the witness-box, and to make sure that their evidence is worth accepting.

And at the beginning of my remarks I wish to protest, in a sentence, against confusing the issues about this question of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ in that fashion which is popular nowadays, when we are told that miracle is impossible, and *therefore* there has been no Resurrection, or that death is the end of human existence, and that *therefore* there has been no Resurrection. That is not the way to go about ascertaining the truth as to asserted facts. Let us hear the evidence. The men who brush aside the testimony of the New Testament writers, in obedience to a theory, either about the impossibility of the supernatural, or about the fatal and final issues of human death, are victims of prejudice, in the strictest meaning of the word; and are no more logical than the well-known and proverbial reasoner who, when told that facts were against him, with sublime confidence in his own infallibility, is reported to have said, 'So much the worse for the facts.' Let us deal with evidence, and not with theory, when we are talking about alleged facts of history.

So then, let me remind you that, in this chapter from which my text is taken, we have a record of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, older than, and altogether independent of, the records contained in the gospels, which are all subsequent in date to it; that this Epistle to the Corinthians is one of the four undisputed Epistles of the Apostle, which not the most advanced school of modern criticism has a word to say against; that, therefore, this chapter, written, at the latest, some seven and twenty years after the date of the Crucifixion, carries us up very close to that event; that it shows that the Resurrection was *universally* believed all over the Church, and therefore must have then been long believed; that it enables us to trace the same belief as universal, and in undisputed possession of the field among the churches, at the time of Paul's conversion, which cannot be put down at much more than five or six years after the Crucifixion, and that so we are standing in the presence of absolutely contemporaneous testimony. This is not a case in which a belief slowly and gradually grew up. Whether we accept the evidence or not, we are bound to admit that it is strictly contemporaneous testimony to the fact of Christ's Resurrection.

And the witnesses are reliable and competent, as well as contemporaneous. The old belief that their testimony was imposture is dead long ago; as, indeed, how could it live? It would be an anomaly, far greater than the Resurrection, to believe that these people, Mary, Peter, John, Paul, and all the rest of them, were conspirators in a lie, and that the fairest system of morality and the noblest consecration that the world has ever seen, grew up out of a fraud, like flowers upon a dunghill. That theory will not hold water;

and even those who will not accept the testimony have long since confessed that it will not. But the Apostle, in my context, seems to think that that is the only tenable alternative to the other theory that the witnesses were veracious, and I am disposed to believe that he is right. He says, ‘If Christ be not risen, then, are we’ the utterly impossible thing of ‘false witnesses to God,’ devout perjurers, as the phrase might be paraphrased: men who are lying to please God. If Christ be not risen, they have sworn to a thing that they know to be untrue, in order to advance His cause and His kingdom. If that theory be not accepted, there is no other about these men and their message that will hold water for a minute, except the admission of its truth.

The fashionable modern one, that it was hallucination, is preposterous. Hallucinations that five hundred people at once shared! Hallucinations that lasted all through long talks, spread at intervals over more than a month! Hallucinations that included eating and drinking, speech and answer; the clasp of the hand and the feeling of the breath! Hallucinations that brought instruction! Hallucinations that culminated in the fancy that a gathered multitude of them saw Him going up into heaven! The hallucination is on the other side, I think. They have got the saddle on the wrong horse when they talk about the Apostolic witnesses being the victims of hallucination. It is the people who believe it possible that they should be who are so. The old argument against miracles used to say that it is more consonant with experience that testimony should be false, than that a miracle should be true. I venture to say it is a much greater strain on a man’s credulity, to believe that *such* evidence is false than that *such* a miracle, *so* attested, is true. And I, for my part, venture to think that the reasonable men are the men who listen to these eye-witnesses when they say, ‘We saw Him rise’; and echo back in answer the triumphant certitude, ‘Christ is risen indeed!’

There is another consideration that I might put briefly. A very valuable way of establishing facts is to point to the existence of other facts, which indispensably require the previous ones for their explanation. Let me give you an illustration of what I mean. I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, amongst other reasons, because I do not understand how it was possible for the Church to exist for a week after the Crucifixion, unless Jesus Christ rose again. Why was it that they did not all scatter? Why was it that the spirit of despondency and the tendency to separation, which were beginning to creep over them when they were saying: ‘Ah! it is all up! We *trusted* that this had been He,’ did not go on to their natural issue? How came it that these people, with their Master taken away from the midst of them, and the bond of union between them removed, and all their hopes crushed did not say: ‘We have made a mistake, let us go back to Gennesareth and take to our fishing again, and try and forget our bright illusions’ ? That is what John the Baptist’s followers did when he died. Why did not Christ’s do the same? Because Christ rose again and re-knit them together. When the Shepherd was smitten, the flock would have been scattered, and never drawn together any more, unless there had been just such a thing as the Resurrection asserts there was, to reunite the dispersed and to encourage the depressed. And so I say, Christianity with a *dead* Christ, and a Church gathered round a grave from which the stone has *not* been rolled away, is more unbelievable than the miracle, for it is an absurdity.

Then there is another thing that I would say in a word. Let me put an illustration to explain what I mean. Suppose, after the execution of King Charles I., in some corner of the country a Pretender had sprung up and said, ‘I am the King!’ the way to end that would have been for the Puritan leaders to have taken people to St. George’s Chapel, and said, ‘Look! there is the coffin, there is the body, is that the king, or is it not?’ Jesus Christ was said to have risen again, within a week of the time of His death. The rulers of the nation had the grave, the watch, the stone, the seal. They could have put an end to the pestilent nonsense in two minutes, if it had been nonsense, by the simple process of saying, ‘Go and look at the tomb, and you will see Him there.’ But this question has never been answered, and never will be- What became of that sacred corpse if Jesus Christ did not rise again from the dead? The clumsy lie that the rulers told, that the disciples had stolen away the body, was only their acknowledgment that the grave was empty. If the grave were empty, either His servants were impostors, which we have seen it is incredible that they were, or the Christ was risen again.

And so, dear brethren, for many other reasons besides this handful that I have ventured to gather and put before you, and in spite of the prejudices of modern theories, I lift up here once more, with unfaltering certitude, the glad message which I beseech you to accept: ‘Christ is risen, the first fruits of them that slept.’

II. So much, then, for the first point in this passage. A word or two about the second-the triumph in the certitude of that Resurrection.

As I remarked at a previous point of this discourse, the Apostle has been speaking about the consequences which would follow from the fact that Christ was not raised. If we take all these consequences and reverse them, we get the glad issues of His Resurrection, and understand why it was that this great burst of triumph comes from the Apostle’s lips. And though I must necessarily treat this part of my subject very inadequately, let me try to gather together the various points on which, as I think, our Easter gladness ought to be built.

First, then, I say, the risen Christ gives us a complete Gospel. A dead Christ annihilates the Gospel. ‘If Christ be not risen,’ says the Apostle, ‘our preaching,’ by which he means not the act but the substance of his preaching, ‘is vain.’ Or, as the word might be more accurately rendered, ‘empty.’ There is nothing in it; no contents. It is a blown bladder; nothing in it but wind.

What was Paul’s ‘preaching’ ? It all turned upon these points-that Jesus Christ was the Son of God; that He was Incarnate in the flesh for us men; that He died on the Cross for our offences; that He was raised again, and had ascended into Heaven, ruling the world and breathing His presence into believing hearts; and that He would come again to be our Judge. These were the elements of what Paul called ‘his Gospel.’ He faces the supposition of a dead Christ, and he says, ‘It is all gone! It is all vanished into thin air. I have nothing to preach if I have not a Cross to preach which is man’s deliverance from sin, because on it the Son of God hath died, and I only know that Jesus Christ’s sacrifice is accepted and sufficient, because I have it attested to me in His rising again from the dead.’

Dear brethren, on the fact of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is suspended everything which makes the Gospel a gospel. Strike that out, and what have you left? Some beautiful bits of moral teaching, a lovely life, marred by tremendous mistakes about Himself and His own importance and His relation to men and to God; but you have got nothing left that is worth calling a gospel. You have the cross rising there, gaunt, black, solitary; but, unless on the other side of the river you have the Resurrection, no bridge will ever be thrown across the black gulf, and the Cross remains 'dead, being alone.' You must have a Resurrection to explain the Cross, and then the Life and the Death tower up into the manifestation of God in the flesh and the propitiation for our sins. Without it we have nothing to preach which is worth calling a gospel.

Again, a living Christ gives faith something to lay hold of. The Apostle here in the context twice says, according to the Authorised Version, that a dead Christ makes our faith 'vain.' But he really uses two different words, the former of which is applied to 'preaching,' and means literally 'empty,' while the latter means 'of none effect' or 'powerless.' So there are two ideas suggested here which I can only touch with the lightest hand.

The risen Christ puts some contents, so to speak, into my faith; He gives me something for it to lay hold of.

Who can trust a *dead* Christ, or who can trust a *human* Christ? That would be as much a blasphemy as trusting any other man. It is only when we recognise Him as declared to be the Son of God, and that by the Resurrection from the dead, that our faith has anything round which it can twine, and to which it can cleave. That living Saviour will stretch out His hand to us if we look to Him, and if I put my poor, trembling little hand up towards Him, He will bend to me and clasp it. You cannot exercise faith unless you have a risen Saviour, and unless you exercise faith in Him your lives are marred and sad.

Again, if Christ be dead, our faith, if it could exist, would be as devoid of effect as it would be empty of substance. For such a faith would be like an infant seeking nourishment at a dead mother's breast, or men trying to kindle their torches at an extinguished lamp. And chiefly would it fail to bring the first blessing which the believing soul receives through and from a risen Christ, namely, deliverance from sin. If He whom we believed to be our sacrifice by His death and our sanctification by His life has not risen, then, as we have seen, all which makes His death other than a martyr's vanishes, and with it vanish forgiveness and purifying. Only when we recognise that in His Cross explained by His Resurrection, we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins, and by the communication of the risen life from the risen Lord possess that new nature which sets us free from the dominion of our evil, is faith operative in setting us free from our sins.

So, dear friends, the risen Christ gives us something for faith to lay hold of, and will make it the hand by which we grasp His strong hand, which lifts us ‘out of the horrible pit and the miry clay, and sets our feet upon a rock.’ But if He lie dead in the grave your faith is vain, because it grasps nothing but a shadow; and it is vain as being purposeless; you are yet in your sins.

The last thought is that the risen Christ gives us the certitude of our Resurrection. I do not for a moment mean to say that, apart from the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the thought, be it a wish or a dread, of immortality, has not been found in men, but there is all the difference in the world between forebodings, aspirations, wishes it were so, fears that it might be so, and the calm certitude that it is so. Many men talked about a western continent, but Columbus went there and came back again, and that ended doubt. Many men before, and apart from Jesus, have cherished thoughts of an immortal life beyond the grave, but He has been there and returned. And that, and, as I believe, that only puts the doctrine of immortality upon an irrefragable foundation; and we can say, ‘Now, I know that there is that land beyond.’ They tell us that death ends everything. Modern materialism, in all its forms, asserts that it is the extinction of the personality. Jesus Christ died, and went through it, and came out of it the same, and I will trust Him. Brethren, the set of opinion amongst the educated and cultured classes in England, and all over Europe, at this moment, proves to anybody who has eyes to see, that for this generation, rejection of immortality will follow certainly on the rejection of Jesus Christ. And for England to-day, as for Greece when Paul sent his letter to Corinth, the one light of certitude in the great darkness is the fact that Jesus Christ hath died, and is risen again.

If you will let Him, He will make you partakers of His own immortal life. ‘The first fruits of them that slept’ is the pledge and the prophecy of all the waving abundance of golden grain that shall be gathered into the great husbandman’s barns. The Apostle goes on to represent the resurrection of ‘them that are Christ’s’ as a consequence of their union to Jesus. He has conquered for us all. He has entered the prison-house and come forth bearing its iron gates on His shoulders, and henceforth it is not possible that we should be holden of it. There are two resurrections-one, that of Christ’s servants, one that of others. They are not the same in principle-and, alas, they are awfully different in issue. ‘Some shall wake to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.’

Let me beseech you to make Jesus Christ the life of your dead souls, by humble, penitent trust in Him. And then, in due time, He will be the life of your transformed bodies, changing these into the likeness of the body of His glory, ‘according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself.’

31)1 Corinthians 15:21

1 Corinthians

THE DEATH OF DEATH

1Co. 15:20 - 1Co. 15:21; 1Co. 15:50 - 1Co. 15:58.

This passage begins with the triumphant ringing out of the great fact which changes all the darkness of an earthly life without a heavenly hope into a blaze of light. All the dreariness for humanity, and all the vanity for Christian faith and preaching, vanish, like ghosts at cock-crow, when the Resurrection of Jesus rises sun-like on the world’s night. It is a historical fact, established by the evidence proper for such,-namely, the credible testimony of eye-witnesses. They could attest His rising, but the knowledge of the worldwide significance of it comes, not from testimony, but from revelation. Those who saw Him risen join to declare: ‘Now is Christ risen from the dead,’ but it is a higher Voice that goes on to say, ‘and become the first-fruits of them that slept.’

That one Man risen from the grave was like the solitary sheaf of paschal first-fruits, prophesying of many more, a gathered harvest that will fill the great Husbandman’s barns. The Resurrection of Jesus is not only a prophecy, showing, as it and it alone does, that death is not the end of man, but that life persists through death and emerges from it, like a buried river coming again flashing into the light of day, but it is the source or cause of the Christian’s resurrection. The oneness of the race necessitated the diffusion through all its members of sin and of its consequence-physical death. If the fountain is poisoned, all the stream will be tainted. If men are to be redeemed from the power of the grave, there must be a new personal centre of life; and union with Him, which can only be effected by faith, is the condition of receiving life from Him, which gradually conquers the death of sin now, and will triumph over bodily death in the final resurrection. It is the resurrection of Christians that Paul is dealing with. Others are to be raised, but on a different principle, and to sadly different issues. Since Christ’s Resurrection assures us of the future waking, it changes death into ‘sleep,’ and that sleep does not mean unconsciousness any more than natural sleep does, but only rest from toil, and cessation of intercourse with the external world.

In the part of the passage, 1Co. 15:50 - 1Co. 15:58, the Apostle becomes, not the witness or the reasoner, as in the earlier parts of the chapter, but the revealer of a ‘mystery.’ That word, so tragically misunderstood, has here its uniform scriptural sense of truth, otherwise unknown, made known by revelation. But before he unveils the mystery, Paul states with the utmost force a difficulty which might seem to crush all hope,-namely, that corporeity, as we know it, is clearly incapable of living in such a world as that future one must be. To use modern terms, organism and environment must be adapted to each other. A fish must have the water, the creatures that flourish at the poles would not survive at the equator. A man with his gross earthly body, so thoroughly adapted to his earthly abode, would be all out of harmony with his surroundings in that higher world, and its rarified air would be too thin and pure for his lungs. Can there be any possibility of making him fit to live in a spiritual world? Apart from revelation, the dreary answer must be ‘No.’ But the ‘mystery’ answers with ‘Yes.’ The change from physical to spiritual is clearly necessary, if there is to be a blessed life hereafter.

That necessary change is assured to all Christians, whether they die or ‘remain till the coming of the Lord.’ Paul varies in his anticipations as to whether he and his contemporaries will belong to the one class or the other; but he is quite sure that in either case the indwelling Spirit of Jesus will effect on living and dead the needful change. The grand description in 1Co. 15:52, like the parallel in 1Th. 4:16, is modelled on the account of the theophany on Sinai. The trumpet was the signal of the Divine Presence. That last manifestation will be sudden, and its startling breaking in on daily commonplace is intensified by the reduplication: ‘In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.’ With sudden crash that awful blare of ‘loud, uplifted angel trumpet’ will silence all other sounds, and hush the world. The stages of what follows are distinctly marked. First, the rising of the dead changed in passing through death, so as to rise in incorruptible bodies, and then the change of the bodies of the living into like incorruption. The former will not be found naked, but will be clothed with their white garments; the latter will, as it were, put on the glorious robes above the ‘muddy vesture of decay,’ or, more truly, will see the miracle of these being transfigured till they shine ‘so as no fuller on earth could white them.’ The living will witness the resurrection of the dead; the risen dead will witness the transformation of the living. Then both hosts will be united, and, through all eternity, ‘live together,’ and that ‘with Him.’ Paul evidently expects that he and the Corinthians will be in the latter class, as appears by the ‘we’ in 1Co. 15:52. He, as it were, points to his own body when he says, recurring to his former thought of the necessity of harmony between organism and environment, ‘*this* corruptible must put on incorruption.’ Here ‘corruption’ is used in its physical application, though the ethical meaning may be in the background.

The Apostle closes his long argument and revelation with a burst, almost a shout, of triumph. Glowing words of old prophets rush into his mind, and he breathes a new, grander meaning into them. Isaiah had sung of a time when the veil over all nations should be destroyed ‘in this mountain,’ and when death should be swallowed up for ever; and Paul grasps the words and says that the prophet’s loftiest anticipations will be fulfilled when that monster, whose insatiable maw swallows down youth, beauty, strength, wisdom, will himself be swallowed up. Hosea had prophesied of Israel’s restoration under figure of a resurrection, and Paul grasps *his* words and fills them with a larger meaning. He modifies them, in a manner on which we need not enlarge, to express the great Christian thought that death has conquered man but that man in Christ will conquer the conqueror. With swift change of metaphor he represents death as a serpent, armed with a poisoned sting, and that suggests to him the thought, never far away in his view of man, that death's power to slay is derived from-or, so to say, concentrated in-sin; and that at once raises the other equally characteristic and familiar thought that law stimulates sin, since to know a thing to be forbidden creates in perverse humanity an itching to do it, and law reveals sin by setting up the ideal from which sin is the departure. But just as the tracks in Paul's mind were well worn, by which the thought of death brought in that of sin, and that of sin drew after it that of law, so with equal closeness of established association, that of law condemnatory and slaying, brought up that of Christ the all-sufficient refuge from that gloomy triad-Death Sin, Law. Through union with Him each of us may possess His immortal risen life, in which Death, the engulfer, is himself engulfed; Death, the conqueror, is conquered utterly and for ever; Death, the serpent, has his sting drawn, and is harmless. That participation in Christ's life is begun even here, and God 'giveth us the victory' now, even while we live outward lives that must end in death, and will give it perfectly in the resurrection, when 'they cannot die any more,' and death itself is dead.

The loftiest Christian hopes have close relation to the lowliest Christian duties, and Paul's triumphant song ends with plain, practical, prose exhortations to steadfastness, unmovable tenacity, and abundant fruitfulness, the motive and power of which will be found in the assurance that, since there is a life beyond, all labour here, however it may fail in the eyes of men, will not be in vain, but will tell on character and therefore on condition through eternity. If our peace does not rest where we would fain see it settle, it will not be wasted, but will return to us again, like the dove to the ark, and we shall 'self-enfold the large results of' labour that seemed to have been thrown away.

32)1 Corinthians 15:50-58

1 Corinthians

THE DEATH OF DEATH

1Co. 15:20 - 1Co. 15:21; 1Co. 15:50 - 1Co. 15:58.

This passage begins with the triumphant ringing out of the great fact which changes all the darkness of an earthly life without a heavenly hope into a blaze of light. All the dreariness for humanity, and all the vanity for Christian faith and preaching, vanish, like ghosts at cock-crow, when the Resurrection of Jesus rises sun-like on the world's night. It is a historical fact, established by the evidence proper for such,-namely, the credible testimony of eye-witnesses. They could attest His rising, but the knowledge of the worldwide significance of it comes, not from testimony, but from revelation. Those who saw Him risen join to declare: 'Now is Christ risen from the dead,' but it is a higher Voice that goes on to say, 'and become the first-fruits of them that slept.'

That one Man risen from the grave was like the solitary sheaf of paschal first-fruits, prophesying of many more, a gathered harvest that will fill the great Husbandman's barns. The Resurrection of Jesus is not only a prophecy, showing, as it and it alone does, that death is not the end of man, but that life persists through death and emerges from it, like a buried river coming again flashing into the light of day, but it is the source or cause of the Christian's resurrection. The oneness of the race necessitated the diffusion through all its members of sin and of its consequence-physical death. If the fountain is poisoned, all the stream will be tainted. If men are to be redeemed from the power of the grave, there must be a new personal centre of life; and union with Him, which can only be effected by faith, is the condition of receiving life from Him, which gradually conquers the death of sin now, and will triumph over bodily death in the final resurrection. It is the resurrection of Christians that Paul is dealing with. Others are to be raised, but on a different principle, and to sadly different issues. Since Christ's Resurrection assures us of the future waking, it changes death into 'sleep,' and that sleep does not mean unconsciousness any more than natural sleep does, but only rest from toil, and cessation of intercourse with the external world.

In the part of the passage, 1Co. 15:50 - 1Co. 15:58, the Apostle becomes, not the witness or the reasoner, as in the earlier parts of the chapter, but the revealer of a 'mystery.' That word, so tragically misunderstood, has here its uniform scriptural sense of truth, otherwise unknown, made known by revelation. But before he unveils the mystery, Paul states with the utmost force a difficulty which might seem to crush all hope,-namely, that corporeity, as we know it, is clearly incapable of living in such a world as that future one must be. To use modern terms, organism and environment must be adapted to each other. A fish must have the water, the creatures that flourish at the poles would not survive at the equator. A man with his gross earthly body, so thoroughly adapted to his earthly abode, would be all out of harmony with his surroundings in that higher world, and its rarified air would be too thin and pure for his lungs. Can there be any possibility of making him fit to live in a spiritual world? Apart from revelation, the dreary answer must be 'No.' But the 'mystery' answers with 'Yes.' The change from physical to spiritual is clearly necessary, if there is to be a blessed life hereafter.

That necessary change is assured to all Christians, whether they die or 'remain till the coming of the Lord.' Paul varies in his anticipations as to whether he and his contemporaries will belong to the one class or the other; but he is quite sure that in either case the indwelling Spirit of Jesus will effect on living and dead the needful change. The grand description in 1Co. 15:52, like the parallel in 1Th. 4:16, is modelled on the account of the theophany on Sinai. The trumpet was the signal of the Divine Presence. That last manifestation will be sudden, and its startling breaking in on daily commonplace is intensified by the reduplication: 'In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.' With sudden crash that awful blare of 'loud, uplifted angel trumpet' will silence all other sounds, and hush the world. The stages of what follows are distinctly marked. First, the rising of the dead changed in passing through death, so as to rise in incorruptible bodies, and then the change of the bodies of the living into like incorruption. The former will not be found naked, but will be clothed with their white garments; the latter will, as it were, put on the glorious robes above the 'muddy vesture of decay,' or, more truly, will see the miracle of these being transfigured till they shine 'so as no fuller on earth could white them.' The living will witness the resurrection of the dead; the risen dead will witness the transformation of the living. Then both hosts will be united, and, through all eternity, 'live together,' and that 'with Him.' Paul evidently expects that he and the Corinthians will be in the latter class, as appears by the 'we' in 1Co.

15:52. He, as it were, points to his own body when he says, recurring to his former thought of the necessity of harmony between organism and environment, '*this* corruptible must put on incorruption.' Here 'corruption' is used in its physical application, though the ethical meaning may be in the background.

The Apostle closes his long argument and revelation with a burst, almost a shout, of triumph. Glowing words of old prophets rush into his mind, and he breathes a new, grander meaning into them. Isaiah had sung of a time when the veil over all nations should be destroyed 'in this mountain,' and when death should be swallowed up for ever; and Paul grasps the words and says that the prophet's loftiest anticipations will be fulfilled when that monster, whose insatiable maw swallows down youth, beauty, strength, wisdom, will himself be swallowed up. Hosea had prophesied of Israel's restoration under figure of a resurrection, and Paul grasps *his* words and fills them with a larger meaning. He modifies them, in a manner on which we need not enlarge, to express the great Christian thought that death has conquered man but that man in Christ will conquer the conqueror. With swift change of metaphor he represents death as a serpent, armed with a poisoned sting, and that suggests to him the thought, never far away in his view of man, that death's power to slay is derived from-or, so to say, concentrated in-sin; and that at once raises the other equally characteristic and familiar thought that law stimulates sin, since to know a thing to be forbidden creates in perverse humanity an itching to do it, and law reveals sin by setting up the ideal from which sin is the departure. But just as the tracks in Paul's mind were well worn, by which the thought of death brought in that of sin, and that of sin drew after it that of law, so with equal closeness of established association, that of law condemnatory and slaying, brought up that of Christ the all-sufficient refuge from that gloomy triad-Death Sin, Law. Through union with Him each of us may possess His immortal risen life, in which Death, the engulfer, is himself engulfed; Death, the conqueror, is conquered utterly and for ever; Death, the serpent, has his sting drawn, and is harmless. That participation in Christ's life is begun even here, and God 'giveth us the victory' now, even while we live outward lives that must end in death, and will give it perfectly in the resurrection, when 'they cannot die any more,' and death itself is dead.

The loftiest Christian hopes have close relation to the lowliest Christian duties, and Paul’s triumphant song ends with plain, practical, prose exhortations to steadfastness, unmovable tenacity, and abundant fruitfulness, the motive and power of which will be found in the assurance that, since there is a life beyond, all labour here, however it may fail in the eyes of men, will not be in vain, but will tell on character and therefore on condition through eternity. If our peace does not rest where we would fain see it settle, it will not be wasted, but will return to us again, like the dove to the ark, and we shall ‘self-enfold the large results of’ labour that seemed to have been thrown away.

33)1 Corinthians 16:13-14

1 Corinthians

STRONG AND LOVING

1Co. 16:13 - 1Co. 16:14.

There is a singular contrast between the first four of these exhortations and the last. The former ring sharp and short like pistol-shots; the last is of gentler mould. The former sound like the word of command shouted from an officer along the ranks; and there is a military metaphor running all through them. The foe threatens to advance; let the guards keep their eyes open. He comes nearer; prepare for the charge, stand firm in your ranks. The battle is joined; ‘quit you like men’-strike a man’s stroke-’be strong.’

And then all the apparatus of warfare is put away out of sight, and the captain’s word of command is softened into the Christian teacher’s exhortation: ‘Let all your deeds be done in charity.’ For love is better than fighting, and is stronger than swords. And yet, although there is a contrast here, there is also a sequence and connection. No doubt these exhortations, which are Paul’s last word to that Corinthian Church on whom he had lavished in turn the treasures of his manifold eloquence, indignation, argumentation, and tenderness, reflected the deficiencies of the people to whom he was speaking. They were schismatic and factious to the very core, and so they needed the exhortation to be left last in their ears, as it were, that everything should be done in love. They were ill-grounded in regard to the very fundamental doctrines of the faith, as all Paul's argumentation about the resurrection proves, and so they needed to be bidden to 'stand fast in the faith.' Their slothful carelessness as to the discipline of the Christian life, and their consequent feebleness of grasp of the Christian verities, made them loose-braced and weak in all respects, and incapacitated them for vigorous warfare. Thus, we see a picture in these injunctions of the sort of community that Paul had to deal with in Corinth, which yet he called a Church of saints, and for which he loved and laboured. Let me then run over and try to bring out the importance and mutual connection of what I may call this drill-book for the Christian warfare, which is the Christian life.

'Watch ye.' That means one of two things certainly, probably both-Keep awake, and keep your eyes open. Our Lord used the same metaphor, you remember, very frequently, but with a special significance. On His lips it generally referred to the attitude of expectation of His coming in judgment. Paul uses sometimes the figure with the same application, but here, distinctly, it has another. As I said, there is the military idea underlying it. What will become of an army if the sentries go to sleep? And what chance will a Christian man have of doing his *devoir* against his enemy, unless he keeps himself awake, and keeps himself alert? Watchfulness, in the sense of always having eyes open for the possible rush down upon us of temptation and evil, is no small part of the discipline and the duty of the Christian life. One part of that watchfulness consists in exercising a very rigid and a very constant and comprehensive scrutiny of our motives. For there is no way by which evil creeps upon us so unobserved, as when it slips in at the back door of a specious motive. Many a man contents himself with the avoidance of actual evil actions, and lets any kind of motives come in and out of his mind unexamined. It is all right to look after our *doings*, but 'as a man *thinketh* in his heart, so is he.' The good or the evil of anything that I do is determined wholly by the motive with which I do it. And we are a great deal too apt to palm off deceptions on ourselves to make sure that our motives are right, unless we give them a very careful and minute scrutiny. One side of this watchfulness, then, is a habitual inspection of our motives and reasons for action. 'What am I doing this for?' is a question that would stop dead an enormous proportion of our activity, as if you had turned the steam off from an engine. If you will use a very fine sieve through which to strain your motives, you will go a long way to keeping your actions right. We should establish a rigid examination for applicants for entrance, and make quite sure that each that presents itself is not a wolf in sheep's clothing. Make them all bring out their passports. Let every vessel that comes into your harbour remain isolated from all communication with the shore, until the health officer has been on board and given a clean bill. 'Watch ye,' for yonder, away in the dark, in the shadow of the trees, the black masses of the enemy are gathered, and a midnight attack is but too likely to bring a bloody awakening to a camp full of sleepers.

My text goes on to bring the enemy nearer and nearer and nearer. 'Watch ye'-and if, not unnoticed, they come down on you, 'stand fast in the faith.' There will be no keeping our ranks, or keeping our feet-or at least, it is not nearly so likely that there will be-unless there has been the preceding watchfulness. If the first command has not been obeyed, there is small chance of the second's being so. If there has not been any watchfulness, it is not at all likely that there will be much steadfastness. Just as with a man going along a crowded pavement, a little touch from a passer-by will throw him off his balance, whereas if he had known it was coming, and had adjusted his poise rightly, he would have stood against thrice as violent a shock, so, in order that we may stand fast, we must watch. A sudden assault will be a great deal less formidable when it is a foreseen assault.

'Stand fast *in the faith*.' I take it that this does not mean 'the thing that we believe,' which use of the word 'faith' is the ecclesiastical, but not the New Testament meaning. In Scripture, faith means not the body of truths that we believe, but the act of believing them. This further command tells us that, in addition to our watchfulness, and as the basis of our steadfastness, confidence in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ will enable us to keep our feet whatever comes against us, and to hold our ground, whoever may assault us.

But remember that it is not because I have faith that I stand fast, but because of that in which I have faith. My feet may be well shod-and it used to be said that a soldier's shoes were of as much importance in the battle as his musket-my feet may be well shod, but if they are not well planted upon firm ground I never shall be able to stand the collision of the foe. So then, it is not my grasp of the blessed truth, God in Christ my Friend and Helper, but it is that truth which I grasp at, that makes me strong. Or, to put it into other words, it is the foothold, and not the foot that holds it, that ensures our standing firm. Only there is no steadfastness communicated to us from the source of all stability, except by way of our faith, which brings Christ into us. ‘Watch ye; stand fast in the faith.’

The next two words of command are very closely connected, though not quite identical. ‘Quit you like men.’ Play a man’s part in the battle; strike with all the force of your muscles. But the Apostle adds, ‘be strong.’ You cannot play a man’s part unless you are. ‘Be strong’-the original would rather bear ‘become strong.’ What is the use of telling men to ‘*be* strong’ ? It is a waste of words, in nine cases out of ten, to say to a weak man, ‘Pluck up your courage, and show strength.’ But the Apostle uses a very uncommon word here, at least uncommon in the New Testament, and another place where he uses it will throw light upon what he means: ‘Strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man.’ Then is it so vain a mockery to tell a poor, weak creature like me to become strong, when you can point me to the source of all strength, in that ‘Spirit of power and of love and of a sound mind’ ? We have only to take our weakness there to have it stiffened into strength; as people put bits of wood into what are called ‘petrifying wells’ which infiltrate into them mineral particles, that do not turn the wood into stone, but make the wood as strong as stone. So my manhood, with all its weakness, may have filtered into it divine strength, which will brace me for all needful duty, and make me ‘more than conqueror through Him that loved us.’ Then, it is not mockery and cruelty, vanity and surplusage to preach ‘Quit you like men; be strong, and be a man’; because if we will observe the plain and not hard conditions, strength will come to us according to our day, in fulfilment of the great promises: ‘My grace is sufficient for thee; and My strength is made perfect in weakness.’

And now we have done with the fighting words of command, and come to the gentler exhortation: ‘Let all your things be done in charity.’

That was a hard lesson for these Corinthians who were splitting themselves into factions and sects, and tearing each other’s eyes out in their partisanship for various Christian teachers. But the advice has a much wider application than to the suppression of squabbles in Christian communities. It is the sum of all commandments of the Christian life, if you will take love in its widest sense, in the sense, that is, in which it is always used in Paul’s writings. We cut it into two halves, and think of it as sometimes meaning love to God, and sometimes love to man. The two are inseparably interpenetrated in the New Testament writings; and so we have to interpret this supreme commandment in the whole breadth and meaning of that great word *Love*. And then it just comes to this, that love is the victor in all the Christian warfare. If we love God, at any given moment, consciously having our affection engaged with Him, and our heart going out to Him, do you think that any evil or temptation would have power over us? Should we not see them as they are, to be devils in disguise? In the proportion in which I love God I conquer all sin. And at the moment in which that great, sweet, all-satisfying light floods into my soul, I see through the hollowness and the shams, and detect the ugliness and the filth of the things that otherwise would be temptations. If you desire to be conquerors in the Christian fight, remember that the true way of conquest is, as another Apostle says, ‘Keep yourselves in the love of God.’ ‘Let all your things be done in charity.’

And, further, how beautifully the Apostle here puts the great truth that we are all apt to forget, that the strongest type of human character is the gentlest and most loving, and that the mighty man is not the man of intellectual or material force, such as the world idolises, but the man who is much because he loves much. If we would come to supreme beauty of Christian character, there must be inseparably manifested in our lives, and lived in our hearts, strength and love, might and gentleness. That is the perfect man, and that was the union which was set before us, in the highest form, in the ‘Strong Son of God, Immortal Love,’ whom we call our Saviour, and whom we are bound to follow. His soldiers conquer as the Captain of their salvation has conquered, when watchfulness and steadfastness and courage and strength are all baptized in love and perfected thereby.

34) 1 Corinthians 16:21-24

ANATHEMA AND GRACE

1Co. 16:21 - 1Co. 16:24.

Terror and tenderness are strangely mingled in this parting salutation, which was added in the great characters shaped by Paul's own hand, to the letter written by an amanuensis. He has been obliged, throughout the whole epistle, to assume a tone of remonstrance abundantly mingled with irony and sarcasm and indignation. He has had to rebuke the Corinthians for many faults, party spirit, lax morality, toleration of foul sins, grave abuses in their worship even at the Lord's Supper, gross errors in opinion in the denial of the Resurrection. And in this last solemn warning he traces all these vices to their fountainhead-the defect of love to Jesus Christ-and warns of their fatal issue. 'Let him be Anathema.'

But he will not leave these terrible words for his last. The thunder is followed by gentle rain, and the sun glistens on the drops; 'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.' Nor for himself will he let the last impression be one of rebuke or even of warning. He desires to show that his heart yearns over them all; so he gathers them all-the partisans; the poor brother that has fallen into sin; the lax ones who, in their misplaced tenderness, had left him in his sin; the misguided reasoners who had struck the Resurrection out of the articles of the Christian creed-he gathers them all into his final salutation, and he says, 'Take and share my love-though I have had to rebuke-amongst the whole of you.'

Is not that beautiful? And does not the juxtaposition of such messages in this farewell go deeper than the revelation of Paul's character? May we not see, in these terrible and tender thoughts thus inextricably intertwined and braided together, a revelation of the true nature both of the terror and the tenderness of the Gospel which Paul preached? It is from that point of view that I wish to look at them now.

I. I take first that thought-the terror of the fate of the unloving.

Now, I must ask you for a moment's attention in regard to these two untranslated words. *Anathema Maran-atha*. The first thing to be noticed is that the latter of them stands independently of the former, and forms a sentence by itself, as I shall have to show you presently. 'Anathema' means an offering, or a thing devoted; and its use in the New Testament arises from its use in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where it is employed for persons and things that, in a peculiar sense, were set apart and devoted to God. In the story of the conquest of Canaan, for instance, we read of Jericho and other places, persons, or things that were, as our version somewhat unfortunately renders it, 'accursed,' or as it ought rather to be rendered, 'devoted,' or 'put under a ban.' And this 'devotion' was of such a sort as that the things or persons devoted were doomed to destruction. All the dreadful things that were done in the Conquest were the consequences of the persons that endured them being thus 'consecrated,' in a very dreadful sense, or set apart for God. The underlying idea was that evil things brought into contact with Him were necessarily destroyed with a swift destruction. That being the meaning of the word, it is clear that its use in my text is distinctly metaphorical, and that it suggests to us that the unloving, like those cities full of uncleanness, when they are brought into contact with the infinite love of the coming Judge, shrivel up and are destroyed.

The other word 'Maran-atha,' as I said, is to be taken as a separate sentence. It belongs to the dialect, which was probably the vernacular of Palestine in the time of Paul, and to which belong, for the most part, the other untranslated words that are scattered up and down the Gospels, such as 'Aceldama,' 'Ephphatha,' and the like. It means 'our Lord comes.' Why Paul chose to use that untranslated scrap of another tongue in a letter to a Gentile Church we cannot tell. Perhaps it had come to be a kind of watchword amongst the early Jewish Christians, which came naturally to his lips. But, at any rate, the use of it here is distinctly to confirm the warning of the previous clause, by pointing to the time at which that warning shall be fulfilled. 'If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be devoted and destroyed. Our Lord comes.' The only other thing to be noticed by way of introduction is that this first clause is not an imprecation, nor any wish on the part of the Apostle, but is a solemn prophetic warning [acquiesced in by every righteous heart] of that which will certainly come.

The significance of the whole may be gathered into one simple sentence-The coming of the Lord of Love is the destruction of the unloving.

‘Our Lord comes.’ Paul’s Christianity gathered round two facts and moments-one in the past, Christ has come; one in the future, Christ will come. For memory, the coming by the cradle and the Cross; for hope, the coming on His throne in glory; and between these two moments, like the solid piers of a suspension bridge, the frail structure of the Present hangs swinging. In this day men have lost their expectation of the one, and to a large extent their faith in the other. But we shall not understand Scripture unless we seek to make as prominent in our thoughts as on its pages that second coming as the complement and necessary issue of the first. It stands stamped on every line. It colours all the New Testament views of life. It is used as a motive for every duty, and as a magnet to draw men to Jesus Christ by salutary dread. There is no hint in my text about the time of the Lord’s coming, no disturbing of the solemnity of the thought by non-essential details of chronology, so we may dismiss these from our minds. The fact is the same, and has the same force as a motive for life, whether it is to be fulfilled in the next moment or thousands of years hence, provided only that you and I are to be there when He comes.

There have been many comings in the past, besides the comings in the flesh. The days of the Lord that have already appeared in the history of the world are not few. One characteristic is stamped upon them all, and that is the swift annihilation of what is opposed to Him. The Bible has a set of standing metaphors by which to illustrate this thought of the Coming of the Lord-a flood, a harvest when the ears are ripe for the sickle, the waking of God from slumber, and the like; all suggesting similar thoughts. *The* day of the Lord, *the* coming of the Lord, will include and surpass all the characteristics which these lesser and premonitory judgment days presented in miniature. I do not enlarge on this theme. I would not play the orator about it if I could; but I appeal to your consciences, which, in the case of most of us, not only testify of right and wrong, but of responsibility, and suggest a judge to whom we are responsible. And I urge on each, and on myself, this simple question: Have I allowed its due weight on my life and character to that watchword of the ancient church-*Maran-atha*, ‘our Lord cometh’ ?

Now, the coming of the Lord of Love is the annihilation of the unloving. The destruction implied in Anathema does not mean the cessation of Being, but a death which is worse than death, because it is a death in life. Suppose a man with all his past annihilated, with all its effort foiled and crushed, with all its possessions evaporated and disappeared, and with his memory and his conscience stung into clear-sighted activity, so that he looks back upon his former self and into his present self, and feels that it is all waste and chaos, would not that fulfil the word of my text-'Let him be Anathema' ? And suppose that such a man, in addition to these thoughts, and as the root and the source of them, had ever the quivering consciousness that he was and must be in the presence of an unloved Judge; have you not there the naked bones of a very dreadful thing, which does not need any tawdry eloquence of man to make it more solemn and more real? The unloving heart is always ill at ease in the presence of Him whom it does not love. The unloving heart does not love, because it does not trust, nor see the love. Therefore, the unloving heart is a heart that is only capable of apprehending the wrathful side of Christ's character. It is a heart devoid of the fruits of love which are likeness and righteousness, 'without which no man shall see the Lord,' nor stand the flash of the brightness of His coming. So there is no cruelty nor arbitrariness in the decree that the heart that loves not, when brought into contact with the infinite Lord of Love, must find in the touch death and not life, darkness and not light, terror and not hope. Notice that Paul's negation *is* a negation and not an affirmation. He does not say 'he that hateth,' but 'he that doth not love.' The absence of the active emotion of love, which is the child of faith, the parent of righteousness, the condition of joy in His presence, is sufficient to ensure that this fate shall fall upon a man. I durst not enlarge. I leave the truth on your hearts.

II. Secondly, notice the present grace of the coming Lord.

'Our Lord cometh. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.' These two things are not contradictory, but we often deal with them as if they were. And some men lay hold of the one side of the antithesis, and some men lay hold of the other, and rend them apart, and make antagonistic theories of Christianity out of them. But the real doctrine puts the two together and says there is no terror without tenderness, and there is no tenderness without terror. If we sacrifice the aspects of the divine nature, as revealed to us in the gentle Christ, which kindle a wholesome dread, we have, all unwittingly, robbed the aspects of the divine nature, which warm in us a gracious love, of their power to inflame and to illuminate. You cannot have love which is anything nobler than facile good nature and unrighteous indifference, unless you have along with it aspects of God's character and government which ought to make some men afraid. And you cannot keep these latter aspects from being exaggerated and darkened into a Moloch of cruelty, unless you remember that, side by side with them, or rather underlying them and determining them, are aspects of the divine nature to which only child-like confidence and calm beatific returns of love do rightly respond. The terror of the Lord is a garb which our sins force upon the love of the Lord, and when the one is presented it brings with it the other. Never should they be parted in our thoughts or in our teaching.

Note what that present grace is. It is a tenderness which gathers into its embrace all these imperfect, immoral, lax, heretical people in Corinth, as well as everywhere else-'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with *you all*.' There were men in that church that said, 'I am of Paul, I of Apollos, I of Cephas, I of Christ.' There were men in that church that had defiled their souls and their flesh, and corrupted the community, and blasphemed the name of Christ by such foul, sensual sin as was 'not even named among the Gentiles.' There were men in that church so dead to all the sanctities even of the communion-table as that, with the bread between their teeth and the wine-cup in their hands, one was hungry and another drunken. There were men in that church, whose Christianity was so anomalous and singularly fragmentary that they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. And yet Paul flings the great rainbow, as it were, of Christ's enclosing love over them all. And surely the love which gathers in such people leaves none outside its sweep; and the tenderness which stoops from heaven to pity, to pardon, to cleanse such is a tenderness to which the weakest, saddest, sinfullest, foulest of the sons of men may confidently resort. Let nothing rob you of this assurance, that Christ, the coming Lord, is present with us all, and with all our weak and wicked brethren, in the full condescension of His all-embracing, all-hoping, all-forgetting, and all-restoring love. All that we need, in order to get its full sunshine into our hearts, is that we trust Him utterly, and, so trusting, love Him back again with that love which is the fulfilling of the Law and the crown of the Gospel.

III. And now, lastly, note the tenderness, caught from the Master Himself, of the servant who rebukes.

This last message of love from the Apostle himself, in 1Co. 16:24, is quite anomalous. There is no other instance in his letters where he introduces himself and his own love at the end, after he has pronounced solemn benediction commending to Christ's grace. But here, as if he had felt that he must leave an impression of himself on their minds, which corresponded to the impression of his Master that he desired to leave, he deviates from his ordinary habit, and makes his last word a personal word-'*My love* be with you all in Christ Jesus.' Rebuke is the sign of love. Sharp condemnation may be the language of love. Plain warning of possible evils is the simple duty of love. So Paul folds all whom he has been rebuking in the warm embrace of his proffered love, which was the very cause of his rebuke. The healing balm of this closing message was to be applied to the wounds which his keen edged words had made, and to show that they were wounds by a surgeon, not by a foe. In effect, this parting smile of love says, 'I am not become your enemy because I tell you the truth; I show my love to you by the plainness and roughness of my words.' Generalise that, free it from its personal reference, and it just comes to this: There never was a shallower sneer than the sneer which is cast at Christianity, as if it were harsh, 'ferocious,' or unloving, when it preaches the terror of the Lord. No! rather, because the Gospel *is* a Gospel, it must speak plainly about death and destruction to the unloving. The danger signal is not to be blamed for a collision, which it is hoisted to avert; and it is a strange sign of an unfeeling and unsympathetic, or of a harsh and gloomy system, that it should tell men where they are driving, in order that they may never reach the miserable goal. 'Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men.' And when people say to us preachers, 'Is that your Gospel, a Gospel that talks about everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord at the glory of His coming-is that your Gospel?' We can only answer, 'Yes, it is! Because, so to talk, may by God's mercy, secure that some who hear shall never know anything of the wrath, save the hearing of it with the ear, and may, by the warning of it, be drawn to the Rock of Ages for safety and shelter from the storm.'

Therefore, dear friends, the upshot of all that I have been feebly trying to say is just this; let us lay hold with all our hearts, and by simple faith, of the present grace of the coming, loving Lord and Judge. You can do it. It is your only hope to do it. *Have* you done it? If so, then you may lift up your heads to the throne, and be glad, as those who know that their Friend and Deliverer will come at last, to help, to bless, to save. If not, dear friend, take the warning, that not to love is to be shrivelled like a leaf in the flame, at that coming which is life to them that love, and destruction to all besides. ‘Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness before Him in the day of judgment.’

2 Corinthians

1) 2 CORINTHIANS 1:20
2) 2 CORINTHIANS 1:21
3) 2 CORINTHIANS 1:22
4) 2 CORINTHIANS 2:14
5) 2 CORINTHIANS 3:3
6) 2 CORINTHIANS 3:18
7) 2 CORINTHIANS 4:18
8) 2 CORINTHIANS 5:1
9) 2 CORINTHIANS 5:5
10) 2 CORINTHIANS 5:8
11) 2 CORINTHIANS 5:9
12) 2 CORINTHIANS 5:14
13) 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17
14) 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20
15) 2 CORINTHIANS 7:1
16) 2 CORINTHIANS 7:10
17) 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-12
18) 2 CORINTHIANS 8:9
19) 2 CORINTHIANS 8:11
20) 2 CORINTHIANS 9:8
21) 2 CORINTHIANS 9:15
22) 2 CORINTHIANS 10:5-6
23) 2 CORINTHIANS 11:3
24) 2 CORINTHIANS 12:8-9

25) 2 CORINTHIANS 12:14

1) 2 Corinthians 1:20

2 Corinthians

GOD’S YEA; MAN’S AMEN

2Co. 1:20.

This is one of the many passages the force and beauty of which are, for the first time, brought within the reach of an English reader by the alterations in the Revised Version. These are partly dependent upon the reading of the text and partly upon the translation. As the words stand in the Authorised Version, ‘yea’ and ‘amen’ seem to be very nearly synonymous expressions, and to point substantially to the same thing-viz. that Jesus Christ is, as it were, the confirmation and seal of God’s promises. But in the Revised Version the alterations, especially in the pronouns, indicate more distinctly that the Apostle means two different things by the ‘yea’ and the ‘amen’ . The one is God’s voice, the other is man’s. The one has to do with the certainty of the divine revelation, the other has to do with the certitude of our faith in the revelation. When God speaks in Christ, He confirms everything that He has said before, and when we listen to God speaking in Christ, our lips are, through Christ, opened to utter our assenting ‘Amen’ to His great promises. So, then, we have the double form of our Lord’s work, covering the whole ground of His relations to man, set forth in these two clauses, in the one of which God’s confirmation of His past revelations by Jesus Christ is treated of, and in the other of which the full and confident assent which men may give to that revelation is set before us. I deal, then, with these two points-God’s certainties in Christ, and man’s certitudes through Christ.

Now these two things do not always go together. We may be very certain, as far as our persuasion is concerned, of a very doubtful fact, or we may be very doubtful, as far as our persuasion is concerned, of a very certain fact. We speak about truths or facts as being certain, and we ought to mean by that, not how we think about them, but what they are in the evidence on which they rest. A certain truth is a truth which has its evidence irrefragable; and the only fitting attitude for men, in the presence of a certain truth, is to have a certitude of the truth. And these two things are, our Apostle tells us, both given to us in and through Jesus Christ. Let me deal, then, with these two sides.

I. First, God's certainties in Christ.

Of course the original reference of the text is to the whole series of great promises given in the Old Testament. These, says Paul, are sealed and confirmed to men by the revelation and work of Jesus Christ, but it is obvious that the principle which is good in reference to them is good on a wider field. I venture to take that extension, and to ask you to think briefly about some of the things that are made for us indubitably certain in Jesus Christ.

And, first of all, there is the certainty about God's heart. Everywhere else we have only peradventures, hopes, fears, guesses more or less doubtful, and roundabout inferences as to His disposition and attitude towards us. As one of the old divines says somewhere, 'All other ways of knowing God are like the bended bow, Christ is the straight string.' The only means by which, indubitably, as a matter of demonstration, men can be sure that God in the heavens has a heart of love towards them is by Jesus Christ. For consider what will make us sure of that. Nothing but facts; words are of little use, arguments are of little use. A revelation, however precious, which simply says to us, 'God is Love' is not sufficient for our need. We want to see love in operation if we are to be sure of it, and the only demonstration of the love of God is to witness the love of God in actual working. And you get it-where? On the Cross of Jesus Christ. I do not believe that anything else irrefragably establishes the fact for the yearning hearts of us poor men who want love, and yet cannot grope our way in amidst the mysteries and the clouds in providence and nature, except this-'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.'

The question may arise in some minds, Is there any need for proving God's love? The question never arose except within the limits of Christianity. It is only men who have lived all their lives in an atmosphere saturated by

Christian sentiment and conviction that ever come to the point of saying, ‘We do not want historical revelation to prove to us the fact of a loving God.’ They would never have fancied that they did not need the revelation unless, unconsciously to themselves, and indirectly, all their thoughts had been coloured and illuminated by the revelation that they profess they reject. God as Love is ‘our dearest faith, our ghastliest doubt,’ and the only way to make absolutely certain of the fact that His heart is full of mercy to us is to look upon Him as He stands revealed to us, not merely in the words of Christ, for, precious as they are, these are the smallest part of His revelation, but in the life and in the death which open for us the heart of God. Remember what He said Himself, *not* ‘He who hath listened to Me, doth understand the Father,’ but ‘He that hath *seen* Me hath seen the Father.’ ‘In Him is yea,’ and the hopes and shadowy fore-revelations of the loving heart of God are confirmed by the fact of His life and death. God *establishes*, not ‘commends’ as our translation has it, ‘His love towards us in that whilst we were yet sinners Christ died for us.’

Further, in Him we have the certainty of pardon. Every deep heart-experience amongst men has felt the necessity of having a clear certainty and knowledge about forgiveness. Men do not feel it always. A man can skate over the surface of the great deeps that lie beneath the most frivolous life, and may suppose, in his superficial way of looking at things, that there is no need for any definite teaching about sin and the mode of dealing with it. But once bring that man face to face, in a quiet hour, with the facts of his life and of a divine law, and all that superficial ignoring of evil in himself and of the dread of punishment and consequences, passes away. I am sure of this, that no religion will ever go far and last long and work mightily, and lay a sovereign hand upon human life, which has not a most plain and decisive message to preach in reference to pardon. And I am sure of this, that one reason for the comparative feebleness of much so-called Christian teaching in this generation is just that the deepest needs of a man’s conscience are not met by it. In a religion on which the whole spirit of a man may rest itself, there must be a very plain message about what is to be done with sin. The only message which answers to the needs of an awakened conscience and an alarmed heart is the old-fashioned message that Jesus Christ the Righteous has died for us sinful men. All other religions have felt after a clear doctrine of forgiveness, and all have failed to find it. Here is the divine ‘Yea!’ And on it alone we can suspend the whole weight of our soul’s salvation. The rope that is to haul us out of the horrible pit and the miry clay had much need to be tested before we commit ourselves to it. There are plenty of easygoing superficial theories about forgiveness predominant in the world to-day. Except the one that says, ‘In whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sin,’ they are all like the rope let down into the dark mine to lift the captives beneath, half of the strands of which have been cut on the sharp edge above, and when the weight hangs on to it, it will snap. There is nothing on which a man who has once learned the tragical meaning and awful reality and depth of the fact of his transgression can suspend his forgiveness, except this, that ‘Christ has died, the just for the unjust, to bring us unto God.’ ‘In Him the promise is yea.’

And, again, we have in Christ divine certainties in regard to life. We have in Him the absolutely perfect pattern to which we are to conform our whole doings. And so, notwithstanding that there may, and will still be many uncertainties and much perplexity, we have the great broad lines of morals and of duty traced with a firm hand, and all that we need to know of obligation and of perfectness lies in this-Be like Jesus Christ! So the solemn commandments of the ethical side of Divine Revelation, as well as the promises of it, get their ‘yea’ in Jesus Christ, and He stands the Law of our lives.

We have certainties for life, in the matter of protection, guidance, supply of all necessity, and the like, treasured and garnered in Jesus Christ. For He not only confirms, but fulfils, the promises which God has made. If we have that dear Lord for our very own, and He belongs to us as He does belong to them who love Him and trust Him, then in Him we have in actual possession these promises, how many soever they be, which are given by God’s other words.

Christ is Protean, and becomes everything to each man that each man requires. He is, as it were, ‘a box where sweets compacted lie.’ ‘In Him are hid all the treasures,’ not only of wisdom and knowledge, but of divine gifts, and we have but to go to Him in order to have that which at each moment as it emerges, we most require. As in some of those sunny islands of the Southern Pacific, one tree supplies the people with all that they need for their simple wants, fruit for their food, leaves for their houses, staves, thread, needles, clothing, drink, everything-so Jesus Christ, this Tree of Life, is Himself the sum of all the promises, and, having Him, we have everything that we need.

And, lastly, in Christ we have the divine certainties as to the Future over which, apart from Him, lie cloud and darkness. As I said about the revelation of the heart of God, so I say about the revelation of a future life-a verbal revelation is not enough. We have enough of arguments; what we want is facts. We have enough of man's peradventures about a future life, enough of evidence more or less valid to show that it is 'probable,' or 'not inconceivable,' or 'more likely than not,' and so on and so on. What we want is that somebody shall cross the gulf and come back again, and so we get in the Resurrection of Christ the one fact on which men may safely rest their convictions of immortality, and I do not think that there is a second anywhere. On it alone, as I believe, hinges the whole answer to the question-'If a man die, shall he live again?' This generation is brought, in my reading of it, right up to this alternative-Christ's Resurrection,-or we die like the brutes that perish. 'All the promises of God in Him are yea.'

II. And now a word as to the second portion of my text-viz. man's certitudes, which answer to God's certainties.

The latter are *in* Christ, the former are *through* Christ. Now it is clear that the only fitting attitude for professing Christians in reference to these certainties of God is the attitude of unhesitating affirmation and joyful assent. Certitude is the fitting response to certainty.

There should be some kind of correspondence between the firmness with which we grasp, the tenacity with which we hold, the assurance with which we believe, these great truths, and the rock-like firmness and immovableness of the evidence upon which they rest. It is a poor compliment to God to come to His most veracious affirmations, sealed with the broad seal of His Son's life and death, and to answer with a hesitating 'Amen,' that falters and almost sticks in our throat. Build rock upon rock. Be sure of the certain things. Grasp with a firm hand the firm stay. Immovably cling to the immovable foundation; and though you be but like the limpet on the rock hold fast by the Rock, as the limpet does; for it is an insult to the certainty of the revelation, when there is hesitation in the believer.

I need not dwell for more than a moment upon the lamentable contrast which is presented between this certitude, which is our only fitting attitude, and the hesitating assent and half belief in which so many professing Christians pass their lives. The reasons for that are partly moral, partly intellectual. This is not a day which is favourable to the unhesitating avowal of convictions in reference to an unseen world, and many of us are afraid of being called narrow, or dogmatisers, and think it looks like breadth, and liberality, and culture, and I know not what, to say 'Well! perhaps it is, but I am not quite sure; I think it is, but I will not commit myself.' All the promises of God, which in Him are yea, ought through Him to get from us an 'Amen.'

There is a great deal that will always be uncertain. The firmer our convictions, the fewer will be the things that they grasp; but, if they be few, they will be large, and enough for us. These truths certified in Christ concerning the heart of God, the message of pardon, the law for life, the gifts of guidance, defence, and sanctifying, the sure and certain hope of immortality-these things we ought to be sure about, whatever borderland of uncertainty may lie beyond them. The Christian verb is 'we *know*,' not 'we hope, we calculate, we infer, we think,' but 'we *know*.' And it becomes us to apprehend for ourselves the full blessedness and power of the certitude which Christ has given to us by the certainties which he has brought us.

I need not speak about the blessedness of such a calm assurance, about the need of it for power, for peace, for effort, for fixedness in the midst of a world and age of change. But I must, before I close, point you to the only path by which that certitude is attainable. '*Through* Him is the amen.' He is the Door. The truths which He confirms are so inextricably intertwined with Himself that you cannot get them and put away Him. Christ's relation to Christ's Gospel is not the relation of other teachers to their words. You may accept the words of a Plato, whatever you think of the Plato who spoke the words. But you cannot separate Christ and His teaching in that fashion, and you must have *Him* if you are to get *it*. So, faith in Him, the intellectual acceptance of Him, as the authoritative and infallible Revealer, the bowing down of heart and will to Him as our Commander and our Lord, the absolute trust in Him as the foundation of all our hope and the source of all our blessedness-that is the way to certitude, and there is no other road that we can take.

If thus we keep near Him, our faith will bring us the present experience and fulfilment of the promises, and we shall be sure of them, because we have them already. And whilst men are asking, 'Do we know anything about God? Is there a God at all? Is there such a thing as forgiveness? Can anybody find anywhere absolute rules for his life? Is there anything beyond the grave but mist and darkness?' we can say, 'One thing I know, Jesus Christ is my Saviour, and in Him I know God, and pardon, and duty, and sanctifying, and safety, and immortality; and whatever is dark, this, at least, is sun-clear.' Get high enough up and you will be above the fog; and while the men down in it are squabbling as to whether there is anything outside the mist, you, from your sunny station, will see the far-off coasts, and haply catch some whiff of perfume from their shore, and see some glinting of a glory upon the shining turrets of 'the city that hath foundations.' We have a present possession of all the promises of God; and whoever doubts their certitude, the man who knows himself a son of God by faith, and has experience of forgiveness and guidance and answered prayer and hopes whose 'sweetness yieldeth proof that they were born for immortality,' *knows* the things which others question and doubt.

So live near Jesus Christ, and, holding fast by His hand, you may lift up your joyful 'Amen' to every one of God's 'Yeas.' For in Him we know the Father, in Him we know that we have the forgiveness of sins, in Him we know that God is near to bless and succour and guide, and in Him 'we know that, though our earthly house were dissolved, we have a building of God.' Wherefore we are always confident; and when the Voice from Heaven says 'Yea!' our choral shout may go up 'Amen! Thou art the faithful and true witness.'

2) 2 Corinthians 1:21

2 Corinthians

ANOINTED AND STABLISHED

2Co. 1:21.

The connection in which these words occur is a remarkable illustration of the Apostle’s habit of looking at the most trivial things in the light of the highest truths. He had been obliged, as the context informs us, to abandon an intended visit to Corinth. The miserable crew of antagonists, who yelped at his heels all his life, seized this change of purpose as the occasion for a double-barrelled charge. They said he was either fickle and infirm of purpose, or insincere, and saying ‘Yea’ with one side of his mouth and ‘Nay’ with the other. He rebuts this accusation with apparently quite disproportionate vehemence and great solemnity. He points in the context to the faithfulness of God, to the firm Gospel which he had preached, to God’s great ‘Yea!’ as his answer. He says in effect, ‘How could I, with such a word burning in my heart, move in a region of equivocation and double-dealing; or how could I, whose whole being is saturated with so firm and stable a Gospel, be unreliable and fickle? The message must make the messenger like itself. Communion with a faithful God must make faith-keeping men; the certainties of God’s “Yea,” and the certitudes of our “Amen,” must influence our characters.’ And so to suppose that a man, influenced by Christianity, is a weak, double-dealing, unsteadfast man is a contradiction in terms. In the text he carries his argument a step further, and points, not only to the power of the Gospel to steady and confirm, but also to the fact that God Himself communicates to the believing soul Christian stability by the anointing which He bestows.

So, then, we have in these words the declaration that inflexible, immovable steadfastness is a mark of a Christian, and that this Christian steadfastness, without which there is no Christianity worth the naming, is a direct gift from God Himself by means of that great anointing which He confers upon men. To that thought, in one or two of its aspects, I ask your attention.

I. Notice the deep source of this Christian steadfastness.

The language of the original, carefully considered, seems to me to bear this interpretation, that the ‘anointing’ of the second clause is the means of the ‘establishing’ of the first-that is to say, that God confers Christian steadfastness of character by the bestowment of the unction of His Divine Spirit.

Now notice how deep Paul digs in order to get a foundation for a common virtue. There are many ways by which men may cultivate the tenacity and steadfastness of purpose which ought to mark us all. Much discipline may be brought to bear in order to secure that; but the text says that the deepest ground upon which it can be rested is nothing less divine and solemn than this, the actual communication to men, to feeble, vacillating, fluctuating wills, and treacherous, wayward, wandering hearts, of the strength and fixedness which are given by God's own Spirit.

I suppose I need not remind you that from beginning to end of Scripture, 'anointing' is taken as the symbol of the communication of a true divine influence. The oil poured on the head of prophet, priest, and king was but the expression of the communication to the recipient of a divine influence which fitted him as well as designated him, for the office that he filled. And although it is aside from my present purpose, I may just, in a sentence, point to the felicity of the emblem. The flowing oil smoothes the surface upon which it is spread, supples the limbs, and is nutritive and illuminating; thus giving an appropriate emblem of the secret, silent, quickening, nourishing, enlightening influences of that Spirit which God gives to all His sons.

And inasmuch as here this oil of the Divine Spirit is stated as being the true ground and basis of Christian steadfastness, it is obvious that the anointing intended cannot be that of mere designation to, and inspiration for, apostolic or other office, but must be the universal possession of all Christian men and women. 'Ye,' says another Apostle, speaking to the whole democracy of the Christian Church, and not to any little group of selected aristocrats therein-'ye have an unction from the Holy One,' and every man and woman who has a living grasp of the living Christ, receives from Him this great gift.

Then, notice further that this anointing by a Divine Spirit, which is a true source of life to those that possess it, is derived from, and parallel with, Christ's anointing. We use the word 'Christ' as a proper name, and forget what it means. The 'Christ' is *the Anointed One*. And do you think that it was a mere accident, or the result of a scanty vocabulary, which compelled the Apostle, in these two contiguous clauses, to use cognate words when he said:-'He that establisheth us with you in the *Anointed*, and hath *anointed* us, is God' ? Did he not mean to say thereby, 'Each of you in a very true sense, if you are a Christian, is a *Christ*' ? You, too, are anointed; you, too, are God's Messiahs. On you in a measure the same Spirit rests which dwelt without measure in Him. The chief of Christ's gifts to the Church is the gift of His own life. All His brethren are anointed with the oil that was poured upon His head, even as the oil upon Aaron's locks percolated to the very skirts of his garments. Being anointed with the anointing which was on Him, all His people may claim an identity of nature, may hope for an identity of destiny, and are bound to a prolongation of part of His function and a similarity of character. If He by that anointing was made Prophet, Priest, and King for the world, all His children partake of these offices in subordinate but real fashion, and are prophets to make God known to men, priests to offer up spiritual sacrifices, and kings at least over themselves, and, if they will, over a world which obeys and serves those that serve and love God. Ye are anointed-'Messiahs' and 'Christs,' by derivation of the life of Jesus Christ.

And if these things be true, it is plain enough how this divine unction, which is granted to all Christians, lies at the root of steadfastness.

We talk a great deal about the gentleness of Christ; we cannot celebrate it too much, but we may forget that it is the gentleness of strength. We do not sufficiently mark the masculine features in that character, the tremendous tenacity of will, the inflexible fixedness of purpose, the irremovable constancy of obedience in the face of all temptations to the contrary. The figure that rises before us is that of the Christ yearning over weaklings far oftener than it is that of the Christ with knitted brow, and tightened lips, and far-off gazing eye, 'steadfastly setting His face to go to Jerusalem,' and followed as He pressed up the rocky road from Jericho, by that wondering group, astonished at the rigidity of purpose that was stamped on His features. That Christ gives us His Spirit to make us tenacious, constant, righteously obstinate, inflexible in the pursuit of all that is lovely and of good report, like Himself. That Divine Spirit will cure the fickleness of our natures; for our wills are never fixed till they are fixed in obedience, and never free until they elect to serve Him. That Divine Spirit will cure the wandering of our hearts and bind us to Himself. It will lift us above the selfish and cowardly dependence on externals and surroundings, men and things, in which we are all tempted to live. We are all too like aneroid barometers, that go up and down with every variation of a foot or two in our level, but if we have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in us, it will cut the bonds that bind us to the world, and give us possession of a deeper love than can be sustained by, or is derived from, these superficial sources. The true possession of the Divine Spirit, if I might use such a metaphor, sets a man on an insulating stool, and all the currents that move round about him are powerless to reach him. If we have that Divine Spirit within us, it will give us an experience of the preciousness and the truth, the certitude and the sweetness, of Christ's Gospel, which will make it impossible that we should ever cast away the confidence which has such 'recompense of reward.' No man will be surely bound to the truth and person of Christ with bonds that cannot be snapped, except he who in his heart has the knowledge of Him which is possession, and by the gift of the Divine Spirit is knit to Jesus Christ.

So, dear friends, whilst the world is full of wise words about steadfastness, and exalts determination of character and fixity of purpose, rightly, as the basis of much good, our Gospel comes to us poor, light, thistledown creatures, and lets us see how we can be steadfast and settled by being fastened to a steadfast and settled Christ. When storms are raging they lash light articles on deck to holdfasts. Let us lash ourselves to the abiding Christ, and we, too, shall abide.

II. In the next place, notice the aim or purpose of this Christian steadfastness.

'He stablisheth us with you in Christ,' or as the original has it even more significantly, *into* or '*unto* Christ.' Now that seems to me to imply two things-first, that our steadfastness, made possible by our possession of that Divine Spirit, is steadfastness in our relations to Jesus Christ. We are established in reference or in regard to Him. In other words, what Paul here means is, first, a fixed conviction of the truth that He is the Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, and my Saviour. That is the first step. Men who are steadfast without their intellect guiding and settling the steadfastness are not steadfast, but obstinate and pigheaded. We are meant to be guided by our understandings, and no fixity is anything better than the immobility of a stone, unless it be based upon a distinct and whole-brained intellectual acceptance of Jesus Christ as the All-in-all for us, for life and death, for inward and outward being.

Paul means, next, a steadfastness in regard to Christ in our trust and love. Surely if from Him there is for ever streaming out an unbroken flow of tenderness, there should be ever on our sides an equally unbroken opening of our hearts for the reception of His love, and an equally uninterrupted response to it in our grateful affection. There can be no more damning condemnation of the vacillations and fluctuations of Christian men's affections than the steadfastness of Christ's love to them. He loves ever; He is unalterable in the communication and effluence of His heart. Surely it is most fitting that we should be steadfast in our devotion and answering love to Him. And Paul means not only fixedness of intellectual conviction and continuity of loving response, but also habitual obedience, which is always ready to do His will.

So we should answer His 'Yea!' with our 'Amen!' and having an unchanging Christ to rest upon, we should rest upon Him unchanging. The broken, fluctuating affections and trusts and obediences which mark so much of the average Christian life of this day are only too sad proofs of how scant our possession of that Spirit of steadfastness must be supposed to be. God's 'Yea' is answered by our faltering 'Amen'; God's truth is hesitatingly accepted; God's love is partially returned; God's work is slothfully and negligently done. 'Be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.'

Another thought is suggested by these words-viz. that such steadfastness as we have been trying to describe has for its result a deeper penetration into Jesus Christ and a fuller possession of Him. The only way by which we can grow nearer and nearer to our Lord is by steadfastly keeping beside Him. You cannot get the spirit of a landscape unless you sit down and gaze, and let it soak into you. The cheap tripper never sees the lake. You cannot get to know a man until you summer and winter with him. No subject worth studying opens itself to the hasty glance. Was it not Sir Isaac Newton who used to say, ‘I have no genius, but I keep a subject before me’ ? ‘Abide in Me; as the branch cannot bear fruit except it abide in the vine, no more can ye except ye abide in Me.’ Continuous, steadfast adhesion to Him is the condition of growing up into His likeness, and receiving more and more of His beauty into our waiting hearts. ‘Wait on the Lord; wait, I say, on the Lord.’

III. Lastly, notice the very humble and commonplace sphere in which the Christian steadfastness manifests itself.

It was nothing of more importance than that Paul had said he was going to Corinth, and did not, on which he brings all this array of great principles to bear. From which I gather just this thought, that the highest gifts of God’s grace and the greatest truths of God’s Word are meant to regulate the tiniest things in our daily life. It is no degradation to the lightning to have to carry messages. It is no profanation of the sun to gather its rays into a burning glass to light a kitchen fire with. And it is no unworthy use of the Divine Spirit that God gives to His children, to say it will keep a man from hasty and precipitate decisions as to little things in life, and from chopping and changing about, with a levity of purpose and without a sufficient reason. If our religion is not going to influence the trifles, what is it going to influence? Our life is made up of trifles, and if these are not its field, where is its field? You may be quite sure that, if your religion does not influence the little things, it will never influence the great ones. If it has not power enough to guide the horses when they are at a slow, sober walk, what do you think it will do when they are at a gallop and plunging? ‘He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.’ So let us see to two things-first, that all our religion is worked into our life, for only so much of it as is so inwrought is our religion-and, second, that all our life is brought under the sway of motives derived from our religion: for only in proportion as it is, will it be pure and good.

And as regards this special virtue and prime quality of steadfastness and fixedness of purpose, you can do no good in the world without it. Unless a man can hold his own, and turn an obstinate negative to the temptations that lie thick about him, he will never come to any good at all, either in this life or in the next. The basis of all excellence is a wholesome disregard of externals, and the cultivation of a strong self-reliant and self-centred, because God-trusting and Christ-centred, will. And I tell you, especially you young men and women, if you want to do or be anything worth doing or being, you must try to get your natures hardened into being ‘steadfast, unmovable.’ There is only one infallible way of doing it, and that is to let the ‘strong Son of God’ live in you, and in Him to find your strength for resistance, your strength for obedience, your strength for submission. ‘I have set the Lord always before me; because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.’

There are two types of men in the world. The one has his emblem in the chaff, rootless, with no hold, swept out of the threshing-floor by every gust of wind. That the picture of many whose principles lie at the mercy of the babble of tongues round about them, whose rectitude goes at a puff of temptation, like the smoke out of a chimney when the wind blows; who have no will for what is good, but live as it happens. The other type of man has his emblem in the tree, rooted deep, and therefore rising high, with its roots going as far underground as its branches spread in the blue, and therefore green of leaf and rich of fruit ‘We are made partakers of Christ if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence, steadfast until the end.’

3) 2 Corinthians 1:22

2 Corinthians

SEAL AND EARNEST

2Co. 1:22.

There are three strong metaphors in this and the preceding verse-’anointing,’ ‘sealing,’ and ‘giving the earnest’-all of which find their reality in the same divine act. These three metaphors all refer to the same subject, and what that subject is is sufficiently explained in the last of them. The ‘earnest’ consists of ‘the Spirit in our hearts,’ and the same explanation might have been appended to both the preceding clauses, for the ‘anointing’ is the anointing of the Spirit, and the ‘seal’ is the seal of the Spirit. Further, these three metaphors all refer to one and the same act. They are not three things, but three aspects of one thing, just as a sunbeam might be regarded either as the source of warmth, or of light, or of chemical action. So the one gift of the one Spirit, 'anoints,' 'seals,' and is the 'earnest.' Further, these three metaphors all declare a universal prerogative of Christians. Every man that loves Jesus Christ has the Spirit in the measure of his faith,' and if any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His.'

I. Note the first metaphor in the text-the 'seal' of the Spirit.

A seal is impressed upon a recipient material made soft by warmth, in order to leave there a copy of itself. Now it is not fanciful, nor riding a metaphor to death, when I dwell upon these features of the emblem in order to suggest their analogies in Christian life. The Spirit of God comes into our spirits, and by gentle contact impresses upon the material, which was intractable until it was melted by the genial warmth of faith and love, the likeness of Himself, but yet so as that prominences correspond to the hollows, and what is in relief in the one is sunk in the other. Expand that general statement for a moment or two.

The effect of all the divine indwelling, which is the characteristic gift of Christ to every Christian soul, is to mould the recipient into the image of the divine inhabitant. There is in the human spirit-such are its dignity amidst its ruins, and its nobility shining through its degradation-a capacity of receiving that image of God which consists not only in voluntary and intelligent action and the consciousness of personal being, but in the love of the things that are fair, and in righteousness, and true holiness. His Spirit, entering into a heart, will make that heart wise with its own wisdom, strong with some infusion of its own strength, gracious with some drops of its own grace, gentle with some softening from its own gentleness, holy with some purity reflected from its own transcendent whiteness. The Spirit, which is life, moulds the heart into which it enters to a kindred, and, therefore, similar life.

There are, however, characteristics in this 'seal' of the Spirit which are not so much copies as correspondences. That is to say, just as what is convex in the seal is concave in the impression, and *vice versb*, so, when that Divine Spirit comes into our spirits, its promises will excite faith, its gifts will breed desire; to every bestowment there will answer an opening receptivity.

Recipient love will correspond to the love that longs to dispense, the sense of need to the divine fulness and sufficiency, emptiness to abundance, prayers to promises; the cry ‘Abba! Father’ ! the yearning consciousness of sonship, to the word ‘Thou art My Son’; and the upward eye of aspiration and petition, and necessity, and waiting, to the downward glance of love bestowing itself. The open heart answers to the extended hand, and the seal which God’s Spirit impresses upon the heart that is submitted to it, has the two-fold character of resemblance in moral nature and righteousness, and of correspondence as regards the mysteries of the converse between the recipient man and the giving God.

Then, mark that the material is made capable of receiving the stamp, because it is warmed and softened. That is to say, faith must prepare the heart for the sanctifying indwelling of that Divine Spirit. The hard wax may be struck with the seal, but it leaves no trace. God does not do with man as the coiner does with his blanks, put them cold into a press, and by violence from without stamp an image upon them, but He does as men do with a seal, warms the wax first, and then, with a gentle, firm touch, leaves the likeness there. So, brother! learn this lesson: if you wish to be good, lie under the contact of the Spirit of righteousness, and see that your heart is warm.

Still further, note that this aggregate of Christian character, in likeness and correspondence, is the true sign that we belong to God. The seal is the mark of ownership, is it not? Where the broad arrow has been impressed, everybody knows that that is royal property. And so this seal of God’s Divine Spirit, in its effects upon my character, is the one token to myself and to other people that I belong to God, and that He belongs to me. Or, to put it into plain English, the best reason for any man’s being regarded as a Christian is his possession of the likeness and correspondence to God which that Divine Spirit gives. Likeness and correspondence, I say, for the one class of results is the more open for the observation of the world, and the other class is of the more value for ourselves. I believe that Christian people ought to have, and are meant by that Divine Spirit dwelling in them to have, a consciousness that they are Christians and God’s children, for their own peace and rest and joy. But you cannot use that in demonstration to other people; you may be as sure of it as you will, in your inmost hearts, but it is no sign to anybody else. And, on the other hand, there may be much of outward virtue and beauty of character which may lead other people to say about a man: '*That* is a good Christian man, at any rate,' and yet there may be in the heart an all but absolute absence of any joyful assurance that we are Christ's, and that He belongs to us. So the two facts must go together. Correspondence, the spirit of sonship which meets His taking us as sons, the faith which clasps the promise, the reception which welcomes bestowment, must be stamped upon the inward life. For the outward life there must be the manifest impress of righteousness upon my actions, if there is to be any real seal and token that I belong to Him. God writes His own name upon the men that are His. All their goodness, their gentleness, patience, hatred of evil, energy and strenuousness in service, submission in suffering, with whatsoever other radiance of human virtue may belong to them, are really 'His mark!'

There is no other worth talking about, and to you Christian men I come and say, Be very sure that your professions of inward communion and happy consciousness that you are Christ's are verified to yourself and to others by a plain outward life of righteousness like the Lord's. Have you got that seal stamped upon your lives, like the hall-mark that says, 'This is genuine silver, and no plated Brummagem stuff' ? Have you got that seal of a visible righteousness and every-day purity to confirm your assertion that you belong to Christ? Is it woven into the whole length of your being, like the scarlet thread that is spun into every Admiralty cable as a sign that it is Crown property? God's seal, visible to me and to nobody else, is my consciousness that I am His; but that consciousness is vindicated and delivered from the possibility of illusion or hypocrisy, only when it is checked and fortified by the outward evidence of the holy life which the Spirit of God has wrought.

Further, this sealing, which is thus the token of God's ownership, is also the pledge of security. A seal is stamped in order that there may be no tampering with what it seals; that it may be kept safe from all assaults, thieves, and violence. And in the metaphor of our text there is included this thought, too, which is also of an intensely practical nature. For it just comes to this-our true guarantee that we shall come at last into the sweet security and safety of the perfect state is present likeness to the indwelling Spirit and present reception of divine grace. The seal is the pledge of security, just because it is the mark of ownership. When, by God's Spirit dwelling in us, we are led to love the things that are fair, and to long after more possession of whatever things are of good report, that is like God's hoisting His flag upon a newly-annexed territory. And is He going to be so careless in the preservation of His property as that He will allow that which is thus acquired to slip away from Him? Does He account us as of so small value as to hold us with so slack a hand? But no man has a right to rest on the assurance of God's saving him into the heavenly kingdom, unless He is saving him at this moment from the devil and his own evil heart. And, therefore, I say the Christian character, in its outward manifestations and in its sweet inward secrets of communion, is the guarantee that we shall not fall. Rest upon Him, and He will hold you up. We are 'kept by the power of God unto salvation,' and that power keeps us and that final salvation becomes ours, 'through faith.'

II. Now, secondly, turn to the other emblem, that 'earnest' which consists in like manner 'of the Spirit.'

The 'earnest,' of course, is a small portion of purchase-money, or wages, or contract-money, which is given at the making of a bargain, as an assurance that the whole amount will be paid in due time. And, says the Apostle, this seal is also an earnest. It not only makes certain God's ownership and guarantees the security of those on whom it is impressed, but it also points onwards to the future, and at once guarantees that, and to a large extent reveals the nature of it. So, then, we have here two thoughts on which I touch.

The Christian character and experience are the earnest of the inheritance, in the sense of being its guarantee, inasmuch as the experiences of the Christian life here are plainly immortal. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the objective and external proof of a future life. The facts of the Christian life, its aspirations, its communion, its clasp of God as its very own, are the subjective and inward proofs of a future life. As a matter of fact, if you will take the Old Testament, you will see that the highest summits in it, to which the hope of immortality soared, spring directly from the experience of deep and blessed communion with the living God. When the Psalmist said ‘Thou wilt not leave my soul in *Sheol*; neither wilt Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption,’ he was speaking a conviction that had been floated into his mind on the crest of a great wave of religious enjoyment and communion. And, in like manner, when the other Psalmist said, ‘Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever,’ he was speaking of the glimpse that he had got of the land that was very far off, from the height which he had climbed on the Mount of fellowship with God. And for us, I suppose that the same experience holds good. Howsoever much we may say that we believe in a future life and in a heaven, we really grasp them as facts that will be true about ourselves, in the proportion in which we are living here in direct contact and communion with God. The conviction of immortality is the distinct and direct result of the present enjoyment of communion with Him, and it is a reasonable result. No man who has known what it is to turn himself to God with a glow of humble love, and to feel that he is not turning his face to vacuity, but to a Face that looks on him with love, can believe that anything can ever come to destroy that communion. What have faith, love, aspiration, resignation, fellowship with God, to do with death? They cannot be cut through with the stroke that destroys physical life, any more than you can divide a sunbeam with a sword. It unites again, and the impotent edge passes through and has effected nothing. Death can shear asunder many bonds, but that invisible bond that unites the soul to God is of adamant, against which his scythe is in vain. Death is the grim porter that opens the door of a dark hole and herds us into it as sheep are driven into a slaughter-house. But to those who have learned what it is to lay a trusting hand in God’s hand, the grim porter is turned into the gentle damsel, who keeps the door, and opens it for light and warmth and safety to the hunted prisoner that has escaped from the dungeon of life. Death cannot touch communion, and the consciousness of communion with God is the earnest of the inheritance.

It is so for another reason also. All the results of the Divine Spirit’s sealing of the soul are manifestly incomplete, and as manifestly tend towards completeness. The engine is clearly working now at half-speed. It is obviously capable of much higher pressure than it is going at now. Those powers in the Christian man can plainly do a great deal more than they ever have done here, and are meant to do a great deal more. Is this imperfect Christianity of ours, our little faith so soon shattered, our little love so quickly disproved, our faltering resolutions, our lame performances, our earthward cleavings-are these things all that Jesus Christ’s bitter agony was for, and all that a Divine Spirit is able to make of us? Manifestly, here is but a segment of the circle, in heaven is the perfect round; and the imperfections, so far as life is concerned, in the work of so obviously divine an Agent, cry aloud for a region where tendency shall become result, and all that it was possible for Him to make us we shall become. The road evidently leads upwards, and round that sharp corner where the black rocks come so near each other and our eyesight cannot travel, we may be sure it goes steadily up still to the top of the pass, until it reaches ‘the shining table-lands whereof our God Himself is Sun and Moon,’ and brings us all to the city set on a hill.

And, further, that divine seal is the earnest, inasmuch as itself is part of the whole. The truest and the loftiest conception that we can form of heaven is as being the perfecting of the religious experience of earth. The shilling or two, given to the servant in old-fashioned days, when he was hired, is of the same currency as the balance that he is to get when the year’s work is done. The small payment to-day comes out of the same purse, and is coined out of the same specie, and is part of the same currency of the same kingdom, as what we get when we go yonder and count the endless riches to which we have fallen heirs at last. You have but to take the faith, the love, the obedience, the communion of the highest moments of the Christian life on earth, and free them from all their limitations, subtract from them all their imperfections, multiply them to their superlative possibility, and endow them with a continual power of growth, and stretch them out to absolute eternity, and you get heaven. The earnest is of a piece with the inheritance.

So, dear brethren, here is a gift offered for us all, a gift which our feebleness sorely needs, a gift for every timid nature, for every weak will, for every man, woman, and child beset with snares and fighting with heavy tasks, the offer of a reinforcement as real and as sure to bring victory as when, on that day when the fate of Europe was determined, after long hours of conflict, the Prussian bugles blew, and the English commander knew that [with the fresh troops that came on the field] victory was made certain. So you and I may have in our hearts the Spirit of God, the spirit of strength, the spirit of love and of a sound mind, the spirit of adoption, the spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, to enlighten our darkness, to bind our hearts to Him, to quicken and energise our souls, to make the weakest among us strong, and the strong as an angel of God. And the condition on which we may get it is this simple one which the Apostle lays down; '*After that ye believed*, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance.' The Christ, who is the Lord and Giver of the Spirit, has shown us how its blessed influences may be ours when, on the great day of the feast, He stood and cried with a voice that echoes across the centuries, and is meant for each of us, 'If any man thirsts, let him come unto Me and drink. He that believeth in Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. This spake He of the Spirit which they that believe or Him should receive.'

4) 2 Corinthians 2:14

2 Corinthians

THE TRIUMPHAL PROCESSION

2Co. 2:14

I suppose most of us have some knowledge of what a Roman Triumph was, and can picture to ourselves the long procession, the victorious general in his chariot with its white horses, the laurelled soldiers, the sullen captives, with suppressed hate flashing in their sunken eyes, the wreathing clouds of incense that went up into the blue sky, and the shouting multitude of spectators. That is the picture in the Apostle's mind here. The Revised Version correctly alters the translation into 'Thanks unto God which always *leadeth us in* triumph in Christ.'

Paul thinks of himself and of his coadjutors in Christian work as being conquered captives, made to follow their Conqueror and to swell His triumph. He is thankful to be so overcome. What was deepest degradation is to him supreme honour. Curses in many a strange tongue would break from the lips of the prisoners who had to follow the general's victorious chariot. But from Paul's lips comes irrepressible praise; he joins in the shout of acclamation to the Conqueror.

And then he passes on to another of the parts of the ceremonial. As the wreathing incense appealed at once to two senses, and was visible in its curling clouds of smoke, and likewise fragrant to the nostrils, so says Paul, with a singular combination of expression, ‘He maketh *manifest*,’ that is visible, the *savour* of His knowledge. From a heart kindled by the flame of the divine love there will go up the odour of a holy life visible and fragrant, sweet and fair.

And thus all Christians, and not Christian workers only in the narrower sense of the word, who may be doing evangelistic work, have set before them in these great words the very ideal and secret of their lives.

There are three things here, on each of which I touch as belonging to the true notion of a Christian life-the conquered captive; that captive partaking in the triumph of his Conqueror; and the conquered captive led as a trophy and a witness to the Conqueror’s power. These three things, I think, explain the Apostle’s thoughts here. Let me deal with them now.

I. First then, let us look at that thought of all Christians being in the truest sense conquered captives, bound to the chariot wheels of One who has overcome them.

The image implies a prior state of hostility and alienation. Now, do not let us exaggerate, let us take Paul’s own experience. He is speaking about himself here; he is not talking doctrine, he is giving us autobiography, and he says, ‘I was an enemy, and I have been conquered.’

What sort of an enemy was he? Well! He says that before he became a Christian he lived a pure, virtuous, respectable life. He was a man ‘as touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.’ Observant of all relative duties, sober, temperate, chaste; no man could say a word against him; he knew nothing against himself. His conscience acquitted him of wrong: ‘I thought I ought to do many things,’ as I did them. And yet, looking back from his present point of view upon a life thus adorned with many virtues, pure from all manifest corruption, to a large extent regulated by conscientious and religious motives of a kind, he says, ‘Notwithstanding all that, I was an enemy.’ Why? Because the retrospect let him see that his life was barren of the deepest faith and the purest love. And so I come to some of my friends here now, and I say to you, ‘Change the name, and the story is true about you,’ respectable people, who are trying to live pure and righteous lives, doing all duties that present themselves to you with a very tolerable measure of completeness and abominating and trying to keep yourselves from the things that your consciences tell you are wrong, yet needing to be conquered, in the deepest recesses of your wills and your hearts, before you become the true subjects of the true King. I do not want to exaggerate, nor to say of the ordinary run of people who listen to us preachers, that they commit manifest sins, ‘gross as a mountain, open, palpable.’ Some of you do, no doubt, for, in every hundred people, there are always some whose lives are foul and whose memories are stained and horrible; but the run of you are not like that. And yet I ask you, has your will been bowed and broken, and your heart overcome and conquered by this mighty Prince, the Prince of Peace, the Prince of Life? Unless it has, for all your righteousness and respectability, for all your outward religion and real religiousness of a sort, you are still hostile and rebellious, in your inmost hearts. That is the basis of the representation of my text.

What else does it suggest? It suggests the wonderful struggle and victory of weaponless love. As was said about the first Christian emperor, so it may be said about the great Emperor in the heavens, ‘*In hoc signo vinces!*’ By this sign thou shalt conquer. For His only weapon is the Cross of His Son, and He fights only by the manifestation of infinite love, sacrifice, suffering, and pity. He conquers as the sun conquers the thick-ribbed ice by raying down its heat upon it, and melting it into sweet water. So God in Christ fights against the mountains of man’s cold, hard sinfulness and alienation, and by the warmth of His own radiation turns them all into rivers that flow in love and praise. He conquers simply by forbearance and pity and love.

And what more does this first part of my text say to us? It tells us, too, of the true submission of the conquered captive; how we are conquered when we perceive and receive His love; how there is nothing else needed to win us all for Him except only that we shall recognise His great love to us.

This picture of the triumph comes with a solemn appeal and commandment to every one of us professing Christians. Think of these men, dragged at the conqueror’s chariot-wheels, abject, with their weapons broken, with their resistance quelled, chained, yoked, haled away from their own land, dependant for life or death on the caprice of the general who rode before them there. It is a picture of what you Christian men and women are bound to be if you believe that God in Christ has loved you as we have been saying that He does. For abject submission, unconditional surrender, the yielding up of our whole will to Him, the yielding of all our possessions as His vassals-these are the duties that are correspondent to the facts of the case.

If we are thus won by infinite love, and not our own, but bought with a price, no conquered king, dragged at an emperor's chariot-wheels, was ever half as absolutely and abjectly bound to be his slave, and to live or die by his breath, as you are bound to your Master. You are Christians in the measure in which you are the captives of His spear and of His bow; in the measure in which you hold your territories as vassal kings, in the measure in which you say, stretching out your willing hands for the fetters, 'Lord! here am I, do with me as Thou wilt.' 'I am not mine own; be Thou my will, my Emperor, my Commander, my all.' Loyola used to say, as the law of his order, that every man that became a member of the Society of Jesus was to be like as a staff in a man's hand, or like as a corpse. It was a blasphemous and wicked claim, but it is but a poor fragmentary statement of the truth about those of us who enter the real Society of Jesus, and put ourselves in His hands to be wielded as His staff and His rod, and submit ourselves to Him, not as a corpse, but yield yourselves to our Christ 'as those that are alive from the dead.'

II. Now we have here, as part of the ideal of the Christian life, the conquered captives partaking in the triumph of their general.

Two groups made up the triumphal procession-the one that of the soldiers who had fought for, the other that of the prisoners who had fought against, the leader. And some commentators are inclined to believe that the Apostle is here thinking of himself and his fellows as belonging to the conquering army, and not to the conquered enemy. That seems to me to be less probable and in accordance with the whole image than the explanation which I have adopted. But be that as it may, it suggests to us this thought, that in the deepest reality in that Christian life of which all this metaphor is but the expression, they who are conquered foes become conquering allies. Or, to put it into other words-to be triumphed over by Christ is to triumph with Christ. And the praise which breaks from the Apostle's lips suggests the same idea. He pours out his thanks for that which he recognises as being no degradation but an honour, and a participation in his Conqueror's triumph.

We may illustrate that thought, that to be triumphed over by Christ is to triumph with Christ, by such considerations as these. This submission of which I have been speaking, abject and unconditional, extending to life and death, this submission and captivity is but another name for liberty. The man who is absolutely dependent upon Jesus Christ is absolutely independent of everything and everybody besides, himself included. That is to say, to be His slave is to be everybody else's master, and when we bow ourselves to Him, and take upon us the chains of glad obedience, and life-deep as well as life-long consecration, then He breaks off all other chains from our hands, and will not suffer that any others should have a share with Him in the possession of His servant. If you are His servants you are free from all besides; if you give yourselves up to Jesus Christ, in the measure in which you give yourselves up to Him, you will be set at liberty from the worst of all slaveries, that is the slavery of your own will and your own weakness, and your own tastes and fancies. You will be set at liberty from dependence upon men, from thinking about their opinion. You will be set at liberty from your dependence upon externals, from feeling as if you could not live unless you had this, that, or the other person or thing. You will be emancipated from fears and hopes which torture the men who strike their roots no deeper than this visible film of time which floats upon the surface of the great, invisible abyss of Eternity. If you have Christ for your Master you will be the masters of the world, and of time and sense and men and all besides; and so, being triumphed over by Him, you will share in His triumph.

And again, we may illustrate the same principle in yet another way. Such absolute and entire submission of will and love as I have been speaking about is the highest honour of a man. It was a degradation to be dragged at the chariot-wheels of conquering general, emperor, or consul-it broke the heart of many a barbarian king, and led some of them to suicide rather than face the degradation. It is a degradation to submit ourselves, even as much as many of us do, to the domination of human authorities, or to depend upon men as much as many of us do for our completeness and our satisfaction. But it is the highest ennobling of humanity that it shall lay itself down at Christ's feet, and let Him put His foot upon its neck. It is the exaltation of human nature to submit to Christ. The true nobility are those that 'come over with the Conqueror.' When we yield ourselves to Him, and let Him be our King, then the patent of nobility is given to us, and we are lifted in the scale of being. All our powers and faculties are heightened in their exercise, and made more blessed in their employment, because we have bowed ourselves to His control. And so to be triumphed over by Christ is to triumph with Christ.

And the same thought may be yet further illustrated. That submission which I have been speaking about so unites us to our Lord that we share in all that belongs to Him and thus partake in His triumph. If in will and heart we have yielded ourselves to Him, he that is thus joined to the Lord is one spirit, and all 'mine is Thine, and all Thine is mine.' He is the Heir of all things, and all things of which He is the Heir are our possession. 'All things are yours, and ye are Christ's.' Thus His dominion is the dominion of all that love Him, and His heritage is the heritage of all those that have joined themselves to Him; and no sparkle of the glory that falls upon His head but is reflected on the heads of His servants. The 'many crowns' that He wears are the crowns with which He crowns His followers.

Thus, my brother, to be overcome by God is to overcome the world, to be triumphed over by Christ is to share in His triumph; and he over whom Incarnate Love wins the victory, like the patriarch of old in his mystical struggle, conquers in the hour of surrender; and to him it is said: 'As a prince thou hast power with God and hast prevailed.'

III. Lastly, a further picture of the ideal of the Christian life is set before us here in the thought of these conquered captives being led as the trophies and the witnesses of His overcoming power.

That idea is suggested by both halves of our verse. Both the emblem of the Apostle as marching in the triumphal procession, and the emblem of the Apostle as yielding from his burning heart the fragrant visible odour of the ascending incense, convey the same idea, viz. that one great purpose which

Jesus Christ has in conquering men for Himself, and binding them to His chariot wheels, is that from them may go forth the witness of His power and the knowledge of His name.

That opens very wide subjects for our consideration which I can only very briefly touch upon. Let me just for an instant dwell upon some of them. First, the fact that Jesus Christ, by His Cross and Passion, is able to conquer men’s wills, and to bind men’s hearts to Him, is the highest proof of His power. It is an entirely unique thing in the history of the world. There is nothing the least like it anywhere else. The passionate attachment which this dead Galilean peasant is able to evoke in the hearts of people all these centuries after His death, is an unheard of and an unparalleled thing. All other teachers ‘serve their generations by the will of God,’ and then their names become speedily less and less powerful, and thicker and thicker mists of oblivion wrap them round until they disappear. But time has no power over Christ’s influence. The bond which binds you and me to Him nineteen centuries after His death is the very same in quality as, and in degree is often far deeper and stronger than, the bond which united to Him the men that had seen Him. It stands as an unique fact in the history of the world, that from Christ of Nazareth there rays out through all the ages the spiritual power which absolutely takes possession of men, dominates them and turns them into His organs and instruments. This generation prides itself upon testing all things by an utilitarian test, and about every system says:-’Well, let us see it working.’ And I do not think that Christianity need shrink from the test. With all its imperfections, the long procession of holy men and women who, for nineteen centuries, have been marching through history, owning Christ as their Conqueror, and ascribing all their goodness to Him, is a witness to His power to sway and to satisfy men, the force of whose testimony it is hard to overthrow. And I would like to ask the simple question: Will any system of belief or of no belief, except the faith in Christ’s atoning sacrifice, do the like for men? He leads through the world the train of His captives, the evidence of His conquests.

And then, further, let me remind you that out of this representation there comes a very stimulating and solemn suggestion of duty for us Christian people. We are bound to live, setting forth whose we are, and what He has done for us. Just as the triumphal procession took its path up the Appian

Way and along the side of the Forum to the altar of the Capitol, wreathed about by curling clouds of fragrant incense, so we should march through the world encompassed by the sweet and fragrant odour of His name, witnessing for Him by word, witnessing for Him by character, speaking for Him and living like Him, showing in our life that He rules us, and professing by our words that He does; and so should manifest His power.

Still further, Paul's thanksgiving teaches us that we should be thankful for all opportunities of doing such work. Christian men and women often grudge their services and grudge their money, and feel as if the necessities for doing Christian work in the world were rather a burden than an honour. This man's generous heart was so full of love to his Prince that it glowed with thankfulness at the thought that Christ had let him do such things for Him. And He lets you do them if you will.

So, dear friends, it comes to be a very solemn question for us. What part are we playing in that great triumphal procession? We are all of us marching at His chariot wheels, whether we know it or not. But there were two sets of people in the old triumph. There were those who were conquered by force and unconquered in heart, and out of their eyes gleamed unquenchable malice and hatred, though their weapons were broken and their arms fettered. And there were those who, having shared in the commander's fight, shared in his triumph and rejoiced in his rule. And when the procession reached the gate of the temple, some, at any rate, of the former class were put to death before the gates. I pray you to remember that if we are dragged after Him reluctantly, the word will come: 'These, mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither and slay them before Me.' Whereas, on the other hand, for those who have yielded heart and soul to Him in love and submission born of the reception of His great love, the blessed word will come: 'He that overcometh shall inherit all things.' Which of the two parts of the procession do you belong to, my friend? Make your choice where you shall march, and whether you will be His loyal allies and soldiers who share in His triumph, or His enemies, who, overcome by His power, are not melted by His love. The one live, the other perish.

5) 2 Corinthians 3:3

Jeremiah

SIN’S WRITING AND ITS ERASURE

Jer. 17:1. - 2Co. 3:3. - Col. 2:14.

I have put these verses together because they all deal with substantially the same metaphor. The first is part of a prophet’s solemn appeal. It describes the sin of the nation as indelible. It is written in two places. First, on their hearts, which reminds us of the promise of the new covenant to be written on the heart. The ‘red-leaved tablets of the heart’ are like waxen tables on which an iron stylus makes a deep mark, an ineradicable scar. So Judah’s sin is, as it were, eaten into their heart, or, if we might so say, tattooed on it. It is also written on the stone horns of the altar, with a diamond which can cut the rock [an illustration of ancient knowledge of the properties of the diamond]. That sounds a strange place for the record of sin to appear, but the image has profound meaning, as we shall see presently.

Then the two New Testament passages deal with other applications of the same metaphor. Christ is, in the first, represented as writing on the hearts of the Corinthians, and in the second, as taking away ‘the handwriting contrary to us.’ The general thought drawn from all is that sin’s writing on men’s hearts is erased by Christ and a new inscription substituted.

I. The handwriting of sin.

Sin committed is indelibly written on the heart of the doer.

‘The heart,’ of course, in Hebrew means more than merely the supposed seat of the affections. It is figuratively the centre of the spiritual life, just as physically it is the centre of the natural. Thoughts and affections, purposes and desires are all included, and out of it are ‘the issues of life,’ the whole outgoings of the being. It is the fountain and source of all the activity of the man, the central unity from which all comes. Taken in this wide sense it is really the whole inner self that is meant, or, as is said in one place, ‘the hidden man of the heart.’ And so the thought in this vigorous metaphor may be otherwise put, that all sin makes indelible marks on the whole inward nature of the man who does it.

Now to begin with, think for a moment of that truth that everything which we do reacts on us the doers.

We seldom think of this. Deeds are done, and we fancy that when done, they are done *with*. They pass, as far as outward seeming goes, and their distinguishable consequences in the outward world, in the vast majority of cases, soon apparently pass. All seems evanescent and irrecoverable as last year's snows, or the water that flowed over the cataract a century ago. But there is nothing more certain than that all which we do leaves indelible traces on ourselves. The mightiest effect of a man's actions is on his own inward life. The recoil of the gun is more powerful than the blow from its shot. Our actions strike inwards and there produce their most important effects. The river runs ceaselessly and its waters pass away, but they bring down soil, which is deposited and makes firm land, or perhaps they carry down grains of gold.

This is the true solemnity of life, that in all which we do we are carrying on a double process, influencing others indeed, but influencing ourselves far more.

Consider the illustrations of this law in regard to our sins.

Now the last thing people think of when they hear sermons about 'sin' is that what is meant is the things that they are doing every day. I can only ask you to try to remember, while I speak, that I mean those little acts of temper, or triflings with truth, or yieldings to passion or anger, or indulgence in sensuality, and above all, the living without God, to which we are all prone.

> [a] All wrong-doing makes indelible marks on character. It makes its own repetition easier. Habit strengthens inclination. Peter found denying his Lord three times easier than doing it once. It weakens resistance. In going downhill the first step is the only one that needs an effort; gravity will do the rest.

It drags after it a tendency to other evil. All wrong things have so much in common that they lead on to one another. A man with only one vice is a rare phenomenon. Satan sends his apostles forth two by two. Sins hunt in couples, or more usually in packs, like wolves, only now and then do they prey alone like lions. Small thieves open windows for greater ones. It requires continually increasing draughts, like indulgence in stimulants. The palate demands cayenne tomorrow, if it has had black pepper to-day.

So, whatever else we do by our acts, we are making our own characters, either steadily depraving or steadily improving them. There will come a slight slow change, almost unnoticed but most certain, as a dim film will creep over the peach, robbing it of all its bloom, or some microscopic growth will steal across a clearly cut inscription, or a breath of mist will dim a polished steel mirror.

> [b] All wrong-doing writes indelible records on the memory, that awful and mysterious power of recalling past things out of the oblivion in which they seem to lie. How solemn and miserable it is to defile it with the pictures of things evil! Many a man in his later years has tried to 'turn over a new leaf,' and has never been able to get the filth out of his memory, for it has been printed on the old page in such strong colours that it shines through. I beseech you all, and especially you young people, to keep yourselves 'innocent of much transgression,' and 'simple concerning evil'-to make your memories like an illuminated missal with fair saints and calm angels bordering the holy words, and not an *Illustrated* Police News. Probably there is no real oblivion. Each act sinks in as if forgotten, gets overlaid with a multitude of others, but it is there, and memory will one day bring it to us.

And all sin pollutes the imagination. It is a miserable thing to have one's mind full of ugly foul forms painted on the inner walls of our chamber of imagery, like the hideous figures in some heathen temple, where gods of lust and murder look out from every inch of space on the walls.

> [c] All wrong-doing writes indelible records on the conscience. It does so partly by sophisticating it-the sensibility to right and wrong being weakened by every evil act, as a cold in the head takes away the sense of smell. It brings on colour-blindness to some extent. One does not know how far one may go towards 'Evil! be thou my good'-or how far towards incapacity of distinguishing evil. But at all events the

> tendency of each sin is in that direction. So conscience may become seared, though perhaps never so completely as that there are no intervals when it speaks. It may long lie dormant, as Vesuvius did, till great trees grow on the floor of the crater, but all the while the communication with the central fires is open, and one day they will burst out.

The writing may be with invisible ink, but it will be legible one day. So, then, all this solemn writing on the heart is done by ourselves. What are you writing? There is a presumption in it of a future retribution, when you will have to read your autobiography, with clearer light and power of judging yourselves. At any rate there is retribution now, which is described by many metaphors, such as sowing and reaping, drinking as we have brewed, and others-but this one of indelible writing is not the least striking.

Sin is graven deep on sinful men’s worship.

The metaphor here is striking and not altogether clear. The question rises whether the altars are idolatrous altars, or Jehovah’s. If the former, the expression may mean simply that the Jews’ idolatry, which was their sin, was conspicuously displayed in these altars, and had, as it were, its most flagrant record in their sacrifices. The altar was the centre point of all heathen and Old Testament worship, and altars built by sinners were the most conspicuous evidences of their sins.

So the meaning would be that men’s sin shapes and culminates in their religion; and that is very true, and explains many of the profanations and abominations of heathenism, and much of the formal worship of so-called Christianity.

For instance, a popular religion which is a mere Deism, a kind of vague belief in a providence, and in a future state where everybody is happy, is but the product of men’s sin, striking out of Christianity all which their sin makes unwelcome in it. The justice of God, punishment, sinfulness of sin, high moral tone, are all gone. And the very horns of their altars are marked with the signs of the worshippers’ sin.

But the ‘altars’ may be God’s altars, and then another idea will come in. The horns of the altar were the places where the blood of the sacrifice was smeared, as token of its offering to God. They were then a part of the ritual of propitiation. They had, no doubt, the same meaning in the heathen ritual. And so regarded, the metaphor means that a sense of the reality of sin shapes sacrificial religion.

There can be no doubt that a very real conviction of sin lies at the foundation of much, if not all, of the system of sacrifices. And it is a question well worth considering whether a conviction so widespread is not valid, and whether we should not see in it the expression of a true human need which no mere culture, or the like, will supply.

At all events, altars stand as witnesses to the consciousness of sin. And the same thought may be applied to much of the popular religion of this day. It may be ineffectual and shallow but it bears witness to a consciousness of evil. So its existence may be used in order to urge profounder realisation of evil on men. You come to worship, you join in confessions, you say ‘miserable sinners’-do you mean anything by it? If all that be true, should it not produce a deeper impression on you?

But another way of regarding the metaphor is this. The horns of the altar were to be touched with the blood of propitiation. But look! the blood flows down, and after it has trickled away, there, deep carven on the horns, still appears the sin, *i.e.* the sin is not expiated by the sinner’s sacrifice. Jeremiah is then echoing Isaiah’s word, ‘Bring no more vain oblations.’ The picture gives very strikingly the hopelessness, so far as men are concerned, of any attempt to blot out this record. It is like the rock-cut cartouches of Egypt on which time seems to have no effect. There they abide deep for ever. Nothing that we can do can efface them. ‘What I have written, I have written.’ Pen-knives and detergents that we can use are all in vain.

II. Sin’s writing may be erased, and another put in its place.

The work of Christ, made ours by faith, blots it out.

> [a] Its influence on conscience and the sense of guilt. The accusations of conscience are silenced. A red line is drawn across the indictment,

or, as Colossians has it, it is ‘nailed to the cross.’ There is power in His death to set us free from the debt we owe.

[b] Its influence on memory. Christ does not bring oblivion, but yet takes away the remorse of remembrance. Faith in Christ makes memory no longer a record which we blush to turn over, or upon which we gloat with imaginative delight in guilty pleasures past, but a record of our shortcomings that humbles us with a penitence which is not pain, but serves as a beacon and warning for the time to come. He who has a clear beam of memory on his backward track, and a bright light of hope on his forward one, will steer right.

[c] Its influence on character.

We attain new hopes and tastes. ‘We become epistles of Christ known and read of all men,’ like palimpsests, Homer or Ovid written over with the New Testament gospels or epistles.

Christ’s work is twofold, erasure and rewriting. For the one, ‘I will blot out as a cloud their transgressions.’ None but He can remove these. For the other, ‘I will put My law into their minds and will write it on their hearts.’ He can impress all holy desires on, and can put His great love and His mighty spirit into, our hearts.

So give your hearts to Him. They are all scrawled over with hideous and wicked writing that has sunk deep into their substance. Graven as if on rock are your sins in your character. Your worship and sacrifices will not remove them, but Jesus Christ can. He died that you might be forgiven, He lives that you may be purified. Trust yourself to Him, and lean all your sinfulness on His atonement and sanctifying power, and the foul words and bad thoughts that have been scored so deep into your nature will be erased, and His own hand will trace on the page, poor and thin though it be, which has been whitened by His blood, the fair letters and shapes of His own likeness. Do not let your hearts be the devil’s copybooks for all evil things to scrawl their names there, as boys do on the walls, but spread them before Him, and ask Him to make them clean and write upon them His new name, indicating that you now belong to another, as a new owner writes his name on a book that he has bought.

6) 2 Corinthians 3:18

2 Corinthians

TRANSFORMATION BY BEHOLDING

2Co. 3:18.

This whole section of the Epistle in which our text occurs is a remarkable instance of the fervid richness of the Apostle's mind, which acquires force by motion, and, like a chariot-wheel, catches fire as it revolves. One of the most obvious peculiarities of his style is his habit of 'going off at a word.' Each thought is, as it were, barbed all round, and catches and draws into sight a multitude of others, but slightly related to the main purpose in hand. And this characteristic gives at first sight an appearance of confusion to his writings. But it is not confusion, it is richness. The luxuriant underwood which this fertile soil bears, as some tropical forest, does not choke the great trees, though it drapes them.

Paul's immediate purpose seems to be to illustrate the frank openness which ought to mark the ministry of Christianity. He does this by reference to the veil which Moses wore when he came forth from talking with God. There, he says in effect, we have a picture of the Old Dispensation-a partial revelation, gleaming through a veil, flashing through symbols, expressed here in a rite, there in a type, there again in an obscure prophecy, but never or scarcely ever fronting the world with an unveiled face and the light of God shining clear from it. Christianity is, and Christian teachers ought to be, the opposite of all this. It has, and they are to have, no esoteric doctrines, no hints where plain speech is possible, no reserve, no use of symbols and ceremonies to overlay truth, but an intelligible revelation in words and deeds, to men's understandings. It and they are plentifully to declare the thing as it is.

But he gets far beyond this point in his uses of his illustration. It opens out into a series of contrasts between the two revelations. The veiled Moses represents the clouded revelation of old. The vanishing gleam on his face recalls the fading glories of that which was abolished; and then, by a quick turn of association, Paul thinks of the veiled readers in the synagogues, copies, as it were, of the lawgiver with the shrouded countenance; only too significant images of the souls obscured by prejudice and obstinate unbelief, with which Israel trifles over the uncomprehended letter of the old law.

The contrast to all this lies in our text. Judaism had the one lawgiver who beheld God, while the people tarried below. Christianity leads us all, to the mount of vision, and lets the lowliest pass through the fences, and go up where the blazing glory is seen. Moses veiled the face that shone with the irradiation of Deity. We with unveiled face are to shine among men. He had a momentary gleam, a transient brightness; we have a perpetual light. Moses' face shone, but the lustre was but skin deep. But the light that we have is inward, and works transformation into its own likeness.

So there is here set forth the very loftiest conception of the Christian life as direct vision, universal, manifest to men, permanent, transforming.

I. Note then, first, that the Christian life is a life of contemplating and reflecting Christ.

It is a question whether the single word rendered in our version 'beholding as in a glass,' means that, or 'reflecting as a glass does.' The latter seems more in accordance with the requirements of the context, and with the truth of the matter in hand. Unless we bring in the notion of reflected lustre, we do not get any parallel with the case of Moses. Looking into a glass does not in the least correspond with the allusion, which gave occasion to the whole section, to the glory of God smiting him on the face, till the reflected lustre with which it glowed became dazzling, and needed to be hid. And again, if Paul is here describing Christian vision of God as only indirect, as in a mirror, then that would be a point of inferiority in us as compared with Moses, who saw Him face to face. But the whole tone of the context prepares us to expect a setting forth of the particulars in which the Christian attitude towards the manifested God is above the Jewish. So, on the whole, it seems better to suppose that Paul meant 'mirroring,' than 'seeing in a mirror.'

But, whatever be the exact force of the word, the thing intended includes both acts. There is no reflection of the light without a previous reception of the light. In bodily sight, the eye is a mirror, and there is no sight without an image of the thing perceived being formed in the perceiving eye. In spiritual sight, the soul which beholds is a mirror, and at once beholds and reflects. Thus, then, we may say that we have in our text the Christian life described as one of contemplation and manifestation of the light of God.

The great truth of a direct, unimpeded vision, as belonging to Christian men on earth, sounds strange to many of us. ‘That cannot be,’ you say; ‘does not Paul himself teach that we see through a glass darkly? Do we not walk by faith and not by sight? “No man hath seen God at any time, nor can see Him”; and besides that absolute impossibility, have we not veils of flesh and sense, to say nothing of the covering of sin “spread over the face of all nations,” which hide from us even so much of the eternal light as His servants above behold, who see His face and bear His name on their foreheads?’

But these apparent difficulties drop away when we take into account two things-first, the object of vision, and second, the real nature of the vision itself.

As to the former, who is the Lord whose glory we receive on our unveiled faces? He is Jesus Christ. Here, as in the overwhelming majority of instances where *Lord* occurs in the New Testament, it is the name of the manifested God our brother. The glory which we behold and give back is not the incomprehensible, incommunicable lustre of the absolute divine perfectness, but that glory which, as John says, we beheld in Him who tabernacled with us, full of grace and truth; the glory which was manifested in loving, pitying words and loveliness of perfect deeds; the glory of the will resigned to God, and of God dwelling in and working through the will; the glory of faultless and complete manhood, and therein of the express image of God.

And as for the vision itself, that seeing which is denied to be possible is the bodily perception and the full comprehension of the Infinite God; that seeing which is affirmed to be possible, and actually bestowed in Christ, is the beholding of Him with the soul by faith; the immediate direct consciousness of His presence the perception of Him in His truth by the mind, the feeling of Him in His love by the heart, the contact with His gracious energy in our recipient and opening spirits. Faith is made the antithesis of sight. It is so, in certain respects. But faith is also paralleled with and exalted above the mere bodily perception. He who believing grasps the living Lord has a contact with Him as immediate and as real as that of the eyeball with light, and knows Him with a certitude as reliable as that which sight gives. ‘Seeing is believing,’ says sense; ‘Believing is seeing’ says the spirit which clings to the Lord, ‘whom having not seen’ it loves. A bridge of perishable flesh, which is not myself but my tool, connects me with the outward world. *It* never touches myself at all, and I know it only by trust in my senses. But nothing intervenes between my Lord and me, when I love and trust. Then Spirit is joined to spirit, and of His presence I have the witness in myself. He is the light, which proves its own existence by revealing itself, which strikes with quickening impulse on the eye of the spirit that beholds by faith. Believing we see, and, seeing, we have that light in our souls to be ‘the master light of all our seeing.’ We need not think that to know by the consciousness of our trusting souls is less than to know by the vision of our fallible eyes; and though flesh hides from us the spiritual world in which we float, yet the only veil which really dims God to us-the veil of sin, the one separating principle-is done away in Christ, for all who love Him; so as that he who has not seen and yet has believed, has but the perfecting of his present vision to expect, when flesh drops away and the apocalypse of the heaven comes. True, in one view, ‘We see through a glass darkly’; but also true, ‘We all, with unveiled face, behold and reflect the glory of the Lord.’

Then note still further Paul’s emphasis on the universality of this prerogative-’We all.’ This vision does not belong to any select handful; does not depend upon special powers or gifts, which in the nature of things can only belong to a few. The spiritual aristocracy of God’s Church is not the distinction of the law-giver, the priest or the prophet. There is none of us so weak, so low, so ignorant, so compassed about with sin, but that upon our happy faces that light may rest, and into our darkened hearts that sunshine may steal.

In that Old Dispensation, the light that broke through clouds was but that of the rising morning. It touched the mountain tops of the loftiest spirits: a Moses, a David, an Elijah caught the early gleams; while all the valleys slept in the pale shadow, and the mist clung in white folds to the plains. But the noon has come, and, from its steadfast throne in the very zenith, the sun, which never sets, pours down its rays into the deep recesses of the narrowest gorge, and every little daisy and hidden flower catches its brightness, and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof. We have no privileged class or caste now; no fences to keep out the mob from the place of vision, while lawgiver and priest gaze upon God. Christ reveals Himself to all His servants in the measure of their desire after Him. Whatsoever special gifts may belong to a few in His Church, the greatest gift belongs to all. The servants and the handmaidens have the Spirit, the children prophesy, the youths see visions, the old men dream dreams. ‘The mobs,’ ‘the masses,’ ‘the plebs,’ or whatever other contemptuous name the heathen aristocratic spirit has for the bulk of men, makes good its standing within the Church, as possessor of Christ’s chiefest gifts. Redeemed by Him, it can behold His face and be glorified into His likeness. Not as Judaism with its ignorant mass, and its enlightened and inspired few-we *all* behold the glory of the Lord.

Again, this contemplation involves reflection, or giving forth the light which we behold.

They who behold Christ have Christ formed in them, as will appear in my subsequent remarks. But apart from such considerations, which belong rather to the next part of this sermon, I touch on this thought here for one purpose-to bring out this idea-that what we *see* we shall certainly *show*. That will be the inevitable result of all true possession of the glory of Christ. The necessary accompaniment of vision is reflecting the thing beheld. Why, if you look closely enough into a man’s eye, you will see in it little pictures of what he beholds at the moment; and if our hearts are beholding Christ, Christ will be mirrored and manifested on our hearts. Our characters will show what we are looking at, and ought, in the case of Christian people, to bear His image so plainly, that men cannot but take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus.

This ought to lead all of us who say that we have seen the Lord, to serious self-questioning. Do beholding and reflecting go together in our cases? Are our characters like those transparent clocks, where you can see not only the figures and hands, but the wheels and works? Remember that, consciously and unconsciously, by direct efforts and by insensible influences on our lives, the true secret of our being ought to come, and will come, forth to light. The convictions which we hold, the emotions that are dominant in our hearts, will mould and shape our lives. If we have any deep, living perception of Christ, bystanders looking into our faces will be able to tell what it is up yonder that is making them like the faces of the angels-even vision of the opened heavens and of the exalted Lord. These two things are inseparable-the one describes the attitude and action of the Christian man towards Christ; the other the very same attitude and action in relation to men. And you may be quite sure that, if little light comes from a Christian character, little light comes into it; and if it be swathed in thick veils from men, there must be no less thick veils between it and God.

Nor is it only that our fellowship with Christ will, as a matter of course, show itself in our characters, and beauty born of that communion 'shall pass into our face,' but we are also called on, as Paul puts it here, to make direct conscious efforts for the communication of the light which we behold. As the context has it, God hath shined in our hearts, that we might give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus. Away with all veils! No reserve, no fear of the consequences of plain speaking, no diplomatic prudence regulating our frank utterance, no secret doctrines for the initiated! We are to 'renounce the hidden things of dishonesty.' Our power and our duty lie in the full exhibition of the truth. We are only clear from the blood of men when we, for our parts, make sure that if any light be hid, it is hid not by reason of obscurity or silence on our parts, but only by reason of the blind eyes, before which the full-orbed radiance gleams in vain. All this is as true for every one possessing that universal prerogative of seeing the glory of Christ, as it is for an Apostle. The business of all such is to make known the name of Jesus, and if from idleness, or carelessness, or selfishness, they shirk that plain duty, they are counteracting God's very purpose in shining on their hearts, and going far to quench the light which they darken.

Take this, then, Christian men and women, as a plain practical lesson from this text. You are bound to manifest what you believe, and to make the secret of your lives, in so far as possible, an open secret. Not that you are to drag into light before men the sacred depths of your own soul's experience. Let these lie hid. The world will be none the better for your confessions, but it needs your Lord. Show Him forth, not your own emotions about Him. What does the Apostle say close by my text? 'We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord.' Self-respect and reverence for the sanctities of our deepest emotions forbid our proclaiming these from the house-tops. Let these be curtained, if you will, from all eyes but God's, but let no folds hang before the picture of your Saviour that is drawn on your heart. See to it that you have the unveiled face turned towards Christ to be irradiated by His brightness, and the unveiled face turned towards men, from which shall shine every beam of the light which you have caught from your Lord. 'Arise! shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee!'

II. Notice, secondly, that this life of contemplation is therefore a life of gradual transformation.

The brightness on the face of Moses was only skin-deep. It faded away, and left no trace. It effaced none of the marks of sorrow and care, and changed none of the lines of that strong, stern face. But, says Paul, the glory which we behold sinks inward, and changes us as we look, into its own image. Thus the superficial lustre, that had neither permanence nor transforming power, becomes an illustration of the powerlessness of law to change the moral character into the likeness of the fair ideal which it sets forth. And, in opposition to its weakness, the Apostle proclaims the great principle of Christian progress, that the beholding of Christ leads to the assimilation to Him.

The metaphor of a mirror does not wholly serve us here. When the sunbeams fall upon it, it flashes in the light, just because they do not enter its cold surface. It is a mirror, because it does not drink them up, but flings them back. The contrary is the case with these sentient mirrors of our spirits. In them the light must first sink in before it can ray out. They must first be filled with the glory, before the glory can stream forth. They are not so much like a reflecting surface as like a bar of iron, which needs to be heated right down to its obstinate black core, before its outer skin glows with the whiteness of a heat that is too hot to sparkle. The sunshine must fall on us, not as it does on some lonely hill-side, lighting up the grey stones with a passing gleam that changes nothing, and fades away, leaving the solitude to its sadness; but as it does on some cloud cradled near its setting, which it drenches and saturates with fire till its cold heart burns, and all its wreaths of vapour are brightness palpable, glorified by the light which lives amidst its mists. So must we have the glory sink into us before it can be reflected from us. In deep inward beholding we must have Christ in our hearts, that He may shine forth from our lives.

And this contemplation will be gradual transformation. There is the great principle of Christian morals. ‘We all beholding . . . are changed.’ The power to which is committed the perfecting of our characters lies in looking upon Jesus. It is not the mere beholding, but the gaze of love and trust that moulds us by silent sympathy into the likeness of His wondrous beauty, who is fairer than the children of men. It was a deep, true thought which the old painters had, when they drew John as likest to his Lord. Love makes us like. We learn *that* even in our earthly relationships, where habitual familiarity with parents and dear ones stamps some tone of voice or look, or little peculiarity of gesture, on a whole house. And when the infinite reverence and aspiration which the Christian soul cherishes to its Lord are superadded, the transforming power of loving contemplation of Him becomes mighty beyond all analogies in human friendship, though one in principle with these. What a marvellous thing that a block of rude sandstone, laid down before a perfect marble, should become a copy of its serene loveliness just by lying there! Lay your hearts down before Christ. Contemplate Him. Love Him. Think about Him. Let that pure face shine upon heart and spirit, and as the sun photographs itself on the sensitive plate exposed to its light, and you get a likeness of the sun by simply laying the thing in the sun, so He will ‘be formed in, you.’ Iron near a magnet becomes magnetic. Spirits that dwell with Christ become Christ-like. The Roman Catholic legends put this truth in a coarse way, when they tell of saints who have gazed on some ghastly crucifix till they have received, in their tortured flesh, the copy of the wounds of Jesus, and have thus borne in their body the marks of the Lord. The story is hideous and gross, the idea beneath is ever true. Set your faces towards the Cross with loving, reverent gaze, and you will ‘be conformed unto His death,’ that in due time you may ‘be also in the likeness of His Resurrection.’

Dear friends, surely this message-’Behold and be like’-ought to be very joyful and enlightening to many of us, who are wearied with painful struggles after isolated pieces of goodness, that elude our grasp. You have been trying, and trying, and trying half your lifetime to cure faults and make yourselves better and stronger. Try this other plan. Let love draw you, instead of duty driving you. Let fellowship with Christ elevate you, instead of seeking to struggle up the steeps on hands and knees. Live in sight of your Lord, and catch His Spirit. The man who travels with his face northwards has it grey and cold. Let him turn to the warm south, where the midday sun dwells, and his face will glow with the brightness that he sees. ‘Looking unto Jesus’ is the sovereign cure for all our ills and sins. It is the one condition of running with patience ‘the race that is set before us.’ Efforts after self-improvement which do not rest on it will not go deep enough, nor end in victory. But from that gaze will flow into our lives a power which will at once reveal the true goal, and brace every sinew for the struggle to reach it. Therefore, let us cease from self, and fix our eyes on our Saviour till His image imprints itself on our whole nature.

Such transformation, it must be remembered, comes gradually. The language of the text regards it as a lifelong process. ‘We *are* changed’; that is a continuous operation. ‘From glory to glory’; that is a course which has well-marked transitions and degrees. Be not impatient if it be slow. It will take a lifetime. Do not fancy that it is finished with you. Life is not long enough for it. Do not be complacent over the partial transformation which you have felt. There is but a fragment of the great image yet reproduced in your soul, a faint outline dimly traced, with many a feature wrongly drawn, with many a line still needed, before it can be called even approximately complete. See to it that you neither turn away your gaze, nor relax your efforts till all that you have beheld in Him is repeated in you.

Likeness to Christ is the aim of all religion. To it conversion is introductory; doctrines, devout emotion, worship and ceremonies, churches and organisations are valuable as auxiliary. Let that wondrous issue of God’s mercy be the purpose of our lives, and the end as well as the test of all the things which we call our Christianity. Prize and use them as helps towards it, and remember that they are helps only in proportion as they show us that Saviour, the image of whom is our perfection, the beholding of whom is our transformation.

III. Notice, lastly, that the life of contemplation finally becomes a life of complete assimilation.

‘Changed into the same image, from glory to glory.’ The lustrous light which falls upon Christian hearts from the face of their Lord is permanent, and it is progressive. The likeness extends, becomes deeper, truer, every way perfecter, comprehends more and more of the faculties of the man; soaks into him, if I may say so, until he is saturated with the glory; and in all the extent of his being, and in all the depth possible to each part of that whole extent, is like his Lord. That is the hope for heaven, towards which we may indefinitely approximate here, and at which we shall absolutely arrive there. There we expect changes which are impossible here, while compassed with this body of sinful flesh. We look for the merciful exercise of His mighty working to ‘change the body of our lowliness, that it may be fashioned like unto the body of His glory’; and that physical change in the resurrection of the just rightly bulks very large in good men’s expectations. But we are somewhat apt to think of the perfect likeness of Christ too much in connection with that transformation that begins only after death, and to forget that the main transformation must begin here. The glorious, corporeal life like our Lord’s, which is promised for heaven, is great and wonderful, but it is only the issue and last result of the far greater change in the spiritual nature, which by faith and love begins here. It is good to be clothed with the immortal vesture of the resurrection, and in that to be like Christ. It is better to be like Him in our hearts. His true image is that we should feel as He does, should think as He does, should will as He does; that we should have the same sympathies, the same loves, the same attitude towards God, and the same attitude towards men. It is that His heart and ours should beat in full accord, as with one pulse, and possessing one life. Wherever there is the beginning of that oneness and likeness of spirit, all the rest will come in due time. As the spirit, so the body. The whole nature must be transformed and made like Christ’s, and the process will not stop till that end be accomplished in all who love Him. But the beginning here is the main thing which draws all the rest after it as of course. 'If the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies, by His Spirit that dwelleth in you.'

And, while this complete assimilation in body and spirit to our Lord is the end of the process which begins here by love and faith, my text, carefully considered, adds a further very remarkable idea. 'We are all changed,' says Paul, 'into the *same* image.' Same as what? Possibly the same as we behold; but more probably the phrase, especially 'image' in the singular, is employed to convey the thought of the blessed likeness of all who become perfectly like Him. As if he had said, 'Various as we are in disposition and character, unlike in the histories of our lives, and all the influences that these have had upon us, differing in everything but the common relation to Jesus Christ, we are all growing like the same image, and we shall come to be perfectly like it, and yet each retain his own distinct individuality.' 'We being many are one, for we are all partakers of one.'

Perhaps, too, we may connect with this another idea which occurs more than once in Paul's Epistles. In that to the Ephesians, for instance, he says that the Christian ministry is to continue, till a certain point of progress has been reached, which he describes as our *all* coming to 'a perfect *man*.' The whole of us together make a perfect man-the whole make one image. That is to say, perhaps the Apostle's idea is, that it takes the aggregated perfectness of the whole Catholic Church, one throughout all ages, and containing a multitude that no man can number, to set worthily forth anything like a complete image of the fulness of Christ. No one man, even raised to the highest pitch of perfection, and though his nature be widened out to perfect development, can be the full image of that infinite sum of all beauty; but the whole of us taken together, with all the diversities of natural character retained and consecrated, being collectively His body which He vitalises, may, on the whole, be a not wholly inadequate representation of our perfect Lord. Just as we set round a central light sparkling prisms, each of which catches the glow at its own angle, and flashes it back of its own colour, while the sovereign completeness of the perfect white radiance comes from the blending of all their separate rays, so they who stand round about the starry throne receive each the light in his own measure and manner, and give forth each a true and perfect, and altogether a complete, image of Him who enlightens them all, and is above them all.

And whilst thus all bear the same image, there is no monotony; and while there is endless diversity, there is no discord. Like the serene choirs of angels in the old monk’s pictures, each one with the same tongue of fire on the brow, with the same robe flowing in the same folds to the feet, with the same golden hair, yet each a separate self, with his own gladness, and a different instrument for praise in his hand, and his own part in that ‘undisturbed song of pure content,’ we shall all be changed into the same image, and yet each heart shall grow great with its own blessedness, and each spirit bright with its own proper lustre of individual and characteristic perfection.

The law of the transformation is the same for earth and for heaven. Here we see Him in part, and beholding grow like. There we shall see Him as He is, and the likeness will be complete. That Transfiguration of our Lord [which is described by the same word as occurs in this text] may become for us the symbol and the prophecy of what we look for. As with Him, so with us; the indwelling glory shall come to the surface, and the countenance shall shine as the light, and the garments shall be ‘white as no fuller on earth can white them.’ Nor shall that be a fading splendour, nor shall we fear as we enter into the cloud, nor, looking on Him, shall flesh bend beneath the burden, and the eyes become drowsy, but we shall be as the Lawgiver and the Prophet who stood by Him in the lambent lustre, and shone with a brightness above that which had once been veiled on Sinai. We shall never vanish from His side, but dwell with Him in the abiding temple which He has built, and there, looking upon Him for ever, our happy souls shall change as they gaze, and behold Him more perfectly as they change, for ‘we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’

7) 2 Corinthians 4:18

2 Corinthians

LOOKING AT THE UNSEEN

2Co. 4:18.

Men may be said to be divided into two classes, materialists and idealists, in the widest sense of those two words. The mass care for, and are occupied by, and regard as really solid good, those goods which can be touched and enjoyed by sense. The minority-students, thinkers, men of ideas, moralists, and the like-believe in, and care for, impalpable spiritual riches. Everybody admits that the latter class is distinctly the higher. Now it is from no disregard to the importance and reality of that broad distinction that I insist, to begin with, that it is not the antithesis which is in the Apostle's mind here. His notion of 'the things that are seen' and 'the things that are not seen' is a much grander and wider one than that. By 'the things that are seen' he means the whole of this visible world, with all its circumstances and relations, and by 'the things that are not seen' he means the realities beyond the stars.

He means the same thing that we mean when we talk in a much less true and impressive contrast about the present and the future. To him the 'things that are not seen' are present instead of being, as we weakly and foolishly christen them, 'the future state.' And it makes all the difference whether we think of that august realm as lying far away ahead of us, or whether we feel that it is, as it is, in very deed, all round about us, and pressing in upon us, only that 'the veil'-that is to say, our 'flesh'-has come between us and it. Do not habitually think of these two sets of objects according to that misleading distinction 'present' and 'future,' but think of them rather as 'the things that are seen,' and 'the things that are not seen.'

I. Now, first, I wish to say a word or two about what such a look will do for us.

Paul's notion is, as you will see if you look at the context, that if we want to understand the visible, or to get the highest good out of the things that are seen, we must bring into the field of vision 'the things that are not seen.' The case with which he is dealing is that of a man in trouble. He talks about light affliction which is but for a moment, working out a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, 'while we look at the things which are not seen.' But the principle on which that statement is made, of course, has its widest application to all sorts and conditions of human life.

And the thought that emerges from it directly is that only when we take the ‘things that are not seen’ into account, and make them the standard and the scale by which we judge all things, do we understand ‘the things that are seen.’ That triumphant paradox of the Apostle’s about the heavy burdens that pressed upon him and his brethren, lifelong as these burdens were, which yet he calls ‘light’ and ‘but for a moment’ is possible only when we open the shutter of the dungeon which we fancied was the whole universe, and look out on to the fair land that stretches beyond. A man who has seen the Himalayas will not be much overwhelmed by the height of Helvellyn. They who look out into the eternities have the true measuring rod and standard by which to estimate the duration and intensity of the things that are present. We are all tempted to do as villagers in some little hamlet do-think that their small local affairs are the world’s affairs, and mighty, until they have been up to London and seen the scale of things there. If you and I would let the steady light of Eternity, and the sustaining pressure of the ‘exceeding weight of glory’ pour into our minds, we should carry with us a standard which would bring down the greatness, dwindle the duration, lighten the pressure, of the most crushing sorrow, and would set in its true dimensions everything that is here. It is for want of that that we go on as we do, calculating wrongly what are the great things and what are the small things. When, like some of those prisoners in the Inquisition, the heavy iron weights are laid upon our half-crushed hearts, we are tempted to shriek, ‘Oh, these will be my death!’ instead of taking in that great vision which, as it makes all earthly riches dross, so it makes all crushing burdens and blows of sorrow light as a feather.

But, on the other hand, do not let us forget that this same standard which thus dwindles, also magnifies the small, and in a very solemn sense, makes eternal the else fleeting things of this life. For there is nothing that makes this present existence of ours so utterly contemptible, insignificant, and transitory, as to block out of our sight its connection with Eternity. And there is nothing which so lifts the commonplace into the solemn, and invests with everlasting and tremendous importance everything that a man does here, as to feel that it all tells on his condition away beyond there. The shafting is on this side of the wall, but the work that it does is through the wall there, in the other chamber; and you do not understand the cranks and the wheels here unless you know that they go through the partition and are doing something there beyond. If you shut out Eternity from our life in time, then it is an inexplicable riddle; and I, for my part, would venture to say that in that case, the men who answer the question, 'Is life worth living?' with a distinct negative, are wise. It is a tale told by an idiot, 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,' unless the light of 'the things not seen' flashes and flares in upon it.

Further, this look of which my text speaks is the condition on which Time prepares for Eternity.

The Apostle is speaking about the effect of affliction in making ready for us an eternal weight of glory, and he says that is done while, or on condition that during the suffering, we are looking steadfastly towards the 'things that are not seen.' But no outward circumstances or events can prepare a weight of glory for us hereafter, unless they prepare us for the glory. Affliction works for us that blessed result, in the measure in which it fits us for that result. And so you will find that, only a verse or two after my text, Paul, using the same very significant and emphatic verb, writes inverting the order of things, and says 'He that hath wrought *us for* the self-same thing is God.' So that working the thing for us, and working us for the thing, are one and the same process. Or, to put it into plain English, our various duties and circumstances here will prepare the glory of Eternity for us if they prepare us for the glory of Eternity. But only in the measure in which these outward things do thus shape and mould our characters do they work out for us 'an exceeding weight of glory.'

It is often thought that a man has been so miserable here that God is sure to give him future blessedness to recompense him. Well! 'that depends.' If he has used his miserableness as he will use it when he lets the light of 'the things not seen' in upon it, then, certainly, it will work out for him the blessed results. But if he does not, then, as certainly, it will not. Whilst there are many ways by which character is hammered and moulded and shaped into that which is fit to be clothed upon with the glory that is yonder, one of the foremost of these is the passing through things temporal with a continual regard to the things that are eternal. If you want to understand to-day you must bring Eternity into the account, and if you want to use to-day you must use it with the light of the eternal world full upon it. The sum of it all is, brethren, that the things seen cannot be estimated in their true character, unless they are regarded in immediate connection with the things that are unseen; and that the things seen will only prepare an eternal weight of glory for us when they prepare us for an eternal weight of glory.

II. And so, I note that this look at the things not seen is only possible through Jesus Christ.

He is the only window which opens out and gives the vision of that far-off land. I, for my part, believe that, if I might use such a metaphor, He is the Columbus of the New World. Men believed, and argued, and doubted about the existence of it across the seas there, until a man went, and came back again, and then went to found a new city yonder. And men hoped for immortality, and believed after a fashion-some of them-in a future life, and dreaded that it might be true, and discussed and debated whether it was, but doubt clouded all minds, until One, our Brother, went away into the darkness, and came back again, in most respects as He had gone, and then departed once more to make ready a city in which all who love Him should finally dwell, and to which you and I may be sure that we shall emigrate. It is only in Jesus Christ that the look which my text enjoins is possible.

For not only has He given a certitude so that we need now not to say ‘We think, we hope, we fear, we are pretty well sure, that there must be a life beyond,’ but we can say ‘We know.’ Not only has He done this, but also in Him and His life of glory at God’s right hand in heaven, is summed up all that we really can know about that future. We look into the darkness in vain; we look at Him, and, our knowledge, though limited, is blessed. All other adumbrations of a life beyond must necessarily be cast into the metaphorical forms or the negative symbols in which the New Testament abounds. We may speak of golden pavements, and thrones, and harps, and the like. We may say: ‘No night there, no sighing, nor weeping, no burdened hearts, no toil, no pain, for the former things are passed away.’ But a future life which is all described in metaphors, and a future life of which we know only that it is the negation of the disagreeables and limitations of the present, is but a poor affair. Here is the positive truth, ‘To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me on My throne.’ ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ And beyond that nearness to

Christ, blessed communion with Christ, likeness to Christ, royalty derived from Christ, I think we neither know nor need to know anything about that life.

Not only is He our sole medium of knowledge and Himself the revelation of our heaven, but it is only by Him that man's thoughts and desires are drawn to, and find themselves at home in, that tremendous thought of immortality. I know not how it may be with you, but I am not ashamed to confess that to me the idea of eternal continuance of my conscious being is an awful thought, rather depressing and bewildering than delighting and attractive. I, for my part, do not believe that men generally do grapple to their hearts, with any gratitude or joy, that solemn belief of immortal life unless they feel that it is life with, and in, and like, Jesus Christ. 'To depart' is dreary, and it is only when we can say 'and to be with Christ' that it becomes distinctly 'far better.' He is, if I may so say, at once telescope and star. By Him we see Him; we see, seeing Him, that the things that are unseen all cluster round Himself and become blessed.

III. And now, lastly, this look should be habitual with all Christian people.

Paul takes it for granted that every Christian man is, as the habitual direction of his thoughts, looking towards those 'things that are not seen.' The original shows that even more distinctly than our translation, but our translation shows it plainly enough. He does not say 'works for us an exceeding weight of glory *for*,' but '*while'* we look, as if it were a matter of course. He took it for granted as to these Corinthians. I wonder if he would be warranted in taking it for granted about us?

Note what sort of a look it is which produces these blessed effects. The word which the Apostle employs here is a more pointed one than the ordinary one for 'seeing.' It is translated in other places in the New Testament, '*Mark'* them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample, and the like. And it implies a concentrated, protracted effort and interested gaze. A man, standing on the deck of a ship, casts a languid eye for a moment out on to the horizon, and sees nothing. A keen-eyed sailor by his side shades his eyes with his hand, and shuts out cross-lights, and looks, and peers, and keeps his eyes steady, and he sees the filmy outline of the mountain land. If you look for a minute, not much caring whether you see anything or not, and then turn away, and get your eye dazzled with all those vulgar, crude, high colours round about you here on earth, it is very little that you will see of 'the things that are not seen.' Concentrated attention, and a steadfast look, are wanted to make the invisible visible. You have to alter the focus of your eye if you are to see the thing that is afar off.

There has to be a positive shutting out of all other things, as is emphatically taught in the text by putting first the not looking at 'the things that are seen.' Here they are pressing in upon our eyeballs, all round us, insisting on being looked at, and unless we resolutely avert our eyes, we shall not see anything else. They monopolise us unless we resist the intrusive appeals that they make to us. We are like men down in some fertile valley, surrounded by rich vegetation, but seeing nothing beyond the green sides of the glen. We have to go up to the hill-top if we are to look out over the flashing ocean, and behold afar off the towers of the mother city across the restless waves. Brethren, unless you shut out the world you will never see the things that are not seen.

Now, as I have said, the Apostle regards this conscious effort at bringing ourselves into touch, in mind and heart and faith, with 'the things that are not seen' as being a habitual characteristic of Christian men. I am very much afraid that the present generation of Christian people do not, in anything like the degree in which they should, recreate and strengthen themselves with the contemplation which he here recommends. It seems to me, for instance, that we do not hear nearly as much in pulpits about the life beyond the grave as we used to do when I was a boy. And, though I confess I speak from limited knowledge, it seems to me that these great motives which lie in the thought of Eternity and our place there, are by no means as prominent in the minds of the Christian people of this generation as they used to be. Partly, I suppose, that arises from the wholesome emphasis which has been given of late years to the present day, and this-side-the grave effects of Christianity, upon character and life. Partly it arises, I think, from the half-consciousness of being surrounded by an atmosphere of scepticism and unbelief as to a future life, and from the most unwise, inexpedient, and cowardly yielding to the temptation to say very little about the distinctive features of Christianity, and to dwell rather upon those which are sure to be recognised by even unbelieving people. And it comes, too, from the lack of faith, which, again, it tends mightily to increase.

Oh, dear brethren! our consciences tell us what different people we should be if habitually there shone before us that great, solemn issue to which we are all tending. Variations in the atmosphere there will always be, and sometimes the distant outlines will be clearer and sharper than at others, and the colours will shine out more distinctly. But surely it should not be that our vision of the Eternal should be like the vision that dwellers amongst the mountains have of the summits. They say that some of the great peaks of the world are swathed in mist all day long, and that only for a few moments in the morning, or for a brief space in the evening, does the solemn summit gleam rosy in the light. And that, I am afraid, is very much like the degree in which most of us look at 'the things that are not seen' and so we are feeble, and we do not understand 'the things that are not seen'; and we do not get the good out of them.

Dear brethren, let us turn away our eyes from the gauds that we can see, and open the eyes of our spirits on the things that are, the things where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Surely, surely, it is madness that when two sets of objects are before us, the one lasting for a moment, and then dying down into black nothingness, and the other shining on for ever; and when our 'look' settles whether we shall share the fate of the one or of the other, we should choose to gaze with all our eyes and hearts at the perishable and turn away from the permanent. Surely, if it is true that the things which are seen are temporal, common-sense, and a reasonable regard for our own well-being, bid us look at the eternal 'things which are not seen,' since only so can the light and the momentary afflictions, joys, sorrows, or circumstances, work out for us, and work us for 'a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.'

8) 2 Corinthians 5:1

2 Corinthians

TENT AND BUILDING

2Co. 5:1.

Knowledge and ignorance, doubt and certitude, are remarkably blended in these words. The Apostle knows what many men are not certain of; the Apostle doubts as to what all men now are certain of. '*If* our earthly house of this tabernacle be dissolved'-there is surely no if about that. But we must remember that the first Christians, and the Apostles with them, did not know whether they might not survive till the coming of Christ; and so not die, but 'be changed.' And this possibility, as appears from the context, is clearly before the Apostle's mind. Such a limitation of his knowledge is in entire accordance with our Lord's own words, 'It is not for you to know the times and the seasons,' and does not in the smallest degree derogate from his authority as an inspired teacher. But his certitude is as remarkable as his hesitation. He knows-and he modestly and calmly affirms the confidence, as possessed by all believers-that, in the event of death coming to him or them, he and they have a mansion waiting for their entrance; a body of glory like to that which Jesus already wears.

I. So my text mainly sets before us very strikingly the Christian certitude as to the final future.

I need not dwell, I suppose, upon that familiar metaphor by which the relation of man to his bodily environment is described as that of a man to his dwelling-place. Only I would desire, in a word, to emphasise this as being the first of the elements of the blessed certitude in which Christian people may expatiate-the clear, broad distinction between me and my physical frame. There is no more connection, says Paul, between us and the organisation in which we at present dwell than there is between a man and the house that he inhabits. 'The foolish senses crown' Death and call him lord; but the Christian's certitude firmly draws the line, and declares that the man, the whole personality, is undisturbed by anything that befalls his residence; and that he may pass unimpaired from one house to another, being in both the self-same person. And that is something to keep firm hold of in these days when we are being told that life and consciousness are but a function of organisation, and that if the one be annihilated the other cannot persist. No; though all illustrations and metaphors must necessarily fail, the two which lie side by side here in my text and its context are far truer than that pseudo-science-which is not science at all, but only inference from science-which denies that the man is one thing and his house altogether another.

Then again, note, as part of the elements of this Christian certitude, the blessed thought that a body is part of the perfection of manhood. No mere dim, ghostly future, where consciousness somehow persists, without environment or tools to act upon an outer world, completes the idea of God in reference to man. But the old trinity is the eternal trinity for humanity, body, soul, and spirit. Corporeity, with all that it means of definiteness, with all that it means of relation to an external universe, is the perfection of manhood. To dwell naked, as the Apostle says in the context, is a thing from which man shudderingly recoils; and it is not to be his final fate. Let us take this as no small gain in reference to our conceptions of a future-the emphatic drawing into light of that thought that for his perfection man requires body, soul, and spirit.

And now, if we turn for a moment to the characteristics of the two conditions with which my text deals, we get some familiar enough but yet great and strengthening thoughts. The 'earthly house of this tabernacle is dissolved,' or, more correctly, retaining the metaphor of the house, is to be pulled down-and in its place there comes a building of God, a 'house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.'

Now the contrast that is drawn here, whilst it would run out into a great many other particulars, about which we know nothing, and therefore had better say nothing, revolves in the Apostle's mind mainly round these two 'earthly' as contrasted with 'in the heavens'; and 'tabernacle,' or tent, as contrasted, first of all with a 'building,' and then with the predicate 'eternal.'

That is to say, the first outstanding difference which arises before the Apostle as blessed and glorious, is the contrast between the fragile dwelling-place, with its thin canvas, its bending poles, its certain removal some day, and the permanence of that which is not a 'tent,' but a 'building' which is 'eternal.' Involved in that is the thought that all the limitations and weaknesses which are necessarily associated with the perishableness of the present abode are at an end for ever. No more fatigue, no more working beyond the measure of power, no more need for recuperation and repose; no more dread of sickness and weakness; no more possibility of decay, 'It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption'-neither '*can* they die any more.' Whether that be by reason of any inherent immortality, or by reason of the uninterrupted flow into the creature of the immortal life of Christ, to whom he is joined, is a question that need not trouble us now. Enough for us that the contrast between the Bedouin tent-which is folded up and carried away, and nothing left but the black circle where the cheerful hearth once glinted amidst the sands of the desert-and the stately mansion reared for eternity, is the contrast between the organ of the spirit in which we now dwell and that which shall be ours.

And the other contrast is no less glorious and wonderful. 'The *earthly* house of this tent' does not merely define the composition, but also the whole relations and capacities of that to which it refers. The 'tent' is 'earthly' , not merely because, to use a kindred metaphor, it is a 'building of clay,' but because, by all its capacities, it belongs to, corresponds with, and is fitted only for, this lower order of things, the seen and the perishable. And, on the other hand, the 'mansion' is in 'the heavens,' even whilst the future tenant is a nomad in his tent. That is so, because the power which can create that future abode is 'in the heavens.' It is so called in order to express the security in which it is kept for those who shall one day enter upon it. And it is so, further, to express the order of things with which it brings its dwellers into contact. 'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption.' That future home of the spirit will be congruous with the region in which it dwells; fitted for the heavens in which it is now preserved. And thus the two contrasts-adapted to the perishable, and itself perishable, belonging to the eternal and itself incorruptible-are the two which loom largest before the Apostle's mind.

Let no man say that such ideas of a possible future bodily frame are altogether inconsistent with all that we know of the limitations and characteristics of what we call matter. 'There is one flesh of beasts and another of birds,' says Paul; 'there is one glory of the sun and another of the moon.' And his old-fashioned argument is perfectly sound to-day.

Do you know so fully all the possibilities of creation as that you are warranted in asserting that such a thing as a body which is the fit organ of the spirit, and is incorruptible like the heavens in which it dwells, is an impossibility? Surely the forms of matter are sufficiently varied to make us chary in asserting that other forms are impossible, to which there may belong, as characteristics, even these glorious ones of my text. The old story of the king in the tropics, who laughed to scorn some one who told him that water could be turned into a solid, may well be quoted in this connection. Let us be less confident that we know all that is to be known in regard to the sweep of God's creative power; and let us thankfully accept the teaching by which we, too, in all our ignorance, may be able to say, 'We know that . . . we have a building of God . . . eternal in the heavens.'

Now there is only one more remark that I wish to make about this part of my subject; and it is this, that the teaching of my text and its context casts great light-and I think by many people much-needed light-on what the resurrection of the dead means. That doctrine has been weighted with a great many incredibilities and I venture to say absurdities, by well-meaning misconceptions and exaggerations. We have heard grand platitudes about 'the scattered dust being gathered from the four winds of heaven,' and so on, but the teaching of my text is that the contrast between the present physical frame and the future bodily environment is utter and complete; and that resurrection does not mean the assuming again of the body that is left behind and done with, but the reinvestiture of the man with another body. And so the Scriptural phrase is, not 'the resurrection of the body,' but 'the resurrection of the dead.' It is a house 'in the heavens.' It comes 'from heaven.'

We leave the tent. Life and thought

. . . have gone away, side by side,
Leaving doors and windows wide;
Careless tenants they!

And they may well be careless, because in the heavens they have another mansion, incorruptible and glorious.

We leave the ‘tent’; we enter the ‘building.’ There is nothing here of some germ of immortality being somehow extricated from the ruins, and fostered into glorious growth. Or, to take another metaphor of the context, we strip off the garment and are naked; and then we are clothed with another garment and are not found naked. The resurrection of the dead is the clothing of the spirit with the house which is from heaven. And there is as much difference between the two habitations as there is between the grim, solid architecture of northern peoples, amidst snow and ice, needed to resist the blasts, and to keep the life within in an ungenial climate, and the light, graceful dwellings of those who walk in an atmosphere of perpetual sunshine in the tropics, as there is between the close-knit and narrow-windowed and narrow-doored abode in which we now have to pass our days, and that large house, with broad windows that take in a mightier sweep and new senses that have relation with new qualities in the world then around us. Therefore let us, whilst we grope in the dark here, and live in a narrow hovel in a back street, look forward to the time when we shall dwell on the sunny heights in the great pavilion which God prepares for them that love Him.

II. And now note, again, how we come to this certitude.

My text is very significantly followed by a ‘for,’ which gives the reason of the knowledge in a very remarkable manner. ‘We know, . . . for in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house, which is from heaven.’ Now that singular collocation of ideas may be set forth thus-whatever longing there is in a Christian, God-inspired soul, that longing is a prophecy of its own fulfilment. We know that there is a house, because of the yearning, which is deepest and strongest when we are nearest God, and likest what He would have us to be-the yearning to be ‘clothed upon with our house which is from heaven.’ That is a truth that goes a long way; though to enlarge on it is irrelevant to our present purpose. It has its limitations, as is obvious from the context, in which are human elements which are not destined to be gratified, mingled with the yearning, which is of God, and which is destined to be satisfied. But this at least we may firmly hold by, that just because God will not put men to confusion intellectually, and does not let them entertain uncherished-still less Himself foster and excite-longings which He does not mean to gratify, a Christian yearning for immortality is, to the man who feels it, a declaration that immortality is sure for him. ‘Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart.’ Whatsoever, in touching Him, we do deeply long for may have blended with it human elements, which will be dispersed unsatisfied, but the substance of it is a prophecy of its own fulfilment. And as surely as the stork in the heavens, flying southward, will reach the sunny lands which draw it from the grim northern winter, so surely may a man say, ‘I know that I have a house in heaven, because I long for it, and shrink from being found naked.’

Of course such longing, such aspiration and revulsion are no proofs of a fact except there be some fact which changes them, from mere vague desires, and makes these solid certainties. And such a fact we have in that which is the only proof that the world has received, of the persistence of life through death and the continuance of personal identity unchanged by the grave, and that is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Our faith in immortality does not depend merely on our own subjective desires and longings, but these desires and longings are quickened, confirmed, and certified by this great fact that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead; and therefore we know that the yearnings in us are not in vain. So we come to this certitude, first, by reason of his experience; and, second, by reason of the longings which that experience fosters if it does not kindle, within our hearts.

And let no man take exception to the Apostle’s word here, ‘we know,’ or tell us that ‘Knowledge is of the things we see.’ That is true, and not true. It is true in regard to what arrogates to itself the name of science. And we are willing to admit the limitation if the men who insist upon it will, on their sides, admit that there are other sources of certitude than so-called ‘facts,’ by which they mean merely material facts. If it is meant to assert that we are less sure of the love of God, of immortality, than we are of the existence of this piece of wood, or that flame of gas; then I humbly venture to say that there is another region of facts than those which are appreciable by sense; that the evidence upon which we rest our certitude of immortal blessedness is quite as valid, quite as true, quite as able to bear the weight of a leaning heart as anything that can be produced, in the nature of evidence, for the things round us. It is not, ‘We fancy, we believe, we hope, we are pretty nearly sure,’ but it is ‘We *know* . . . that we have a building of God.’

III. Lastly, note what this certitude does.

The Apostle tells us by the ‘for’ which lies at the beginning of my text, and makes it a reason for something that has preceded, and what has preceded is this, ‘We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.’

That is to say, such a joyous, calm certitude draws men’s thoughts away from this shabby and transitory present, and fixes them on the solemn majesties of that eternal future. Yes! and nothing else will. Take away the idea of resurrection, and the remaining idea of immortality is a poor, shadowy, impotent thing. There is no force in it; there is no blessedness in it; there is nothing in it for a man to lay hold of. And, as a matter of fact, there is no vivid faith in a future life without belief in the resurrection and bodily existence of the perfected dead.

And we shall not let our thoughts willingly go out thither unless our own personal wellbeing there is very sure to us. When we know that for us individually there is that house waiting for us to enter into it, when the Lord comes, then we shall not be unwilling to turn our hearts and our desires thither. We look at the things which are not seen, for we know that we have a house eternal.

And such a certitude will also make a man willing to accept the else unwelcome necessity of leaving the tent, and for a while doing without the mansion. It is that which the Apostle is speaking of in subsequent verses, on which I cannot enter now. He says-and therein speaks a universal experience-that men recoil from the idea of having to lay aside this earthly body and be ‘naked.’ But we know that we have that glorious mansion waiting for us, and that till the day comes when we enter upon it we may be lapt in Christ instead, and, in that so-called intermediate state, may have Him to surround us, Him to be to us the medium by which we come into connection with anything external, and so can contentedly go away from our home in the body; and go to our home in Christ. ‘Wherefore, we are always confident, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord.’

Oh, brethren! do we think of our future thus? If we do, then let us lay to heart the final words of our teacher in this part of his letter: ‘Wherefore we make it our aim, whether at home or absent, to be well-pleasing unto Him.’

9) 2 Corinthians 5:5

2 Corinthians

THE PATIENT WORKMAN

2Co. 5:5.

These words penetrate deep into the secrets of God. They assume to have read the riddle of life. To Paul everything which we experience, outwardly or inwardly, is from the divine working. Life is to him no mere blind whirl, or unintelligent play of accidental forces, nor is it the unguided result of our own or of others’ wills, but is the slow operation of the great Workman. Paul assumes to know the meaning of this protracted process, that it all has one design which we may know and grasp and further. And he believes that the clear perception of the divine purpose, and the habit of looking at everything as contributing thereto, will be a magic charm against all sorrow, doubt, despondency, or fear, for he adds, ‘Therefore we are always confident.’ So let us try to follow the course of thought which issues in such a blessed gift as that of a continual, courageous outlook, and buoyant though grave lightheartedness, because we discern what He means ‘Who worketh all things according to the counsel of His own will.’

I. The first thought here is, God’s purpose in all His working; ‘He that hath wrought us for the self-same thing is God.’

What is that ‘self-same thing’ ? To understand it we must look back for a moment to the previous context. The Apostle has been speaking about the instinctive reluctance which even good men feel at prospect of dying and ‘putting off the earthly house of this tabernacle.’ He distinguishes between three different conditions in which the human spirit may be-dwelling in the earthly body, stripped of that, and 'clothed with the house which is from Heaven,' and to this last and highest state he sees that for him and for his brethren there were two possible roads. They might reach it either through losing the present body, in the act of death, and passing through a period of what he calls nakedness; or they might attain it by being 'superinvested,' as it were, with the glorious body which was to come to saints with Christ when He came; and so slip on, as it were, the wedding garment over their old clothes, without having to denude themselves of these. And he says that deep in the Christian heart there lay reluctance to take the former road and the preference for the latter. His longing was that that which is mortal might be 'swallowed up of life,' as some sand-bank in the tide-way may be gradually covered and absorbed by the rejoicing waters. And then he says, 'Now He that hath wrought us for this very thing, is God.'

Of course it is impossible that he can mean by this 'very thing' the second of the roads by which it was possible to reach the ultimate issue, because he did not know whether his brethren and he were to die or to be changed. He speaks in the context about death as a possible contingency for himself and for them,-'*If* our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved,' and so on. Therefore we must suppose that 'the self-same thing' of which he is thinking as the divine purpose in all His dealings with us, is not the manner in which we may attain that ultimate condition, but the condition itself which, by one road or another, God's children shall attain. Or, in other words, the highest aim of the divine love in all its dealings with us Christian men, is not merely a blessed spiritual life, but the completion of our humanity in a perfect spirit dwelling in a glorified body. Corporeity-the dwelling in a body by which the pure spirit moves amidst pure universes-is the highest end of God's will concerning us.

That glorified body is described in our context in wonderful words, which it would take me far too long to do more than just touch upon. Here we dwell in a tent, there we shall dwell in a building. Here in a house made with hands, a corporeal frame derived from parents by material transmission and intervention; there we shall dwell in a building of which God is the maker. Here we dwell in a crumbling clay tenement, which rains dissolve, which lightning strikes, and winds overthrow, and which finally lies on the ground a heap of tumbled ruin. There we dwell in a building, God's direct work, eternal, and knowing no corruption nor change. Here we dwell in a body congruous with, and part of, the perishable earthly world in which it abides, and with which it stands in relation; there we dwell in a house partaking of the nature of the heavens in which it moves, a body that is the fit organ of a perfect spirit.

And so, says Paul, the end of what God means with us is not stated in all its wonderfulness, when we speak of spirits imbued with His wisdom and surcharged with His light and perfectness, but when we add to that the thought of a fitting organ in which these spirits dwell, whereby they can come into contact with an external universe, incorruptible, and so reach the summit of their destined completeness. ‘The house not made with hands,’ eternal, the building of God in the Heavens, is the end that God has in view for all His children.

II. So, then, secondly, note the slow process of the Divine Workman.

The Apostle employs here a very emphatic compound term for ‘hath wrought.’ It conveys not only the idea of operation, but the idea of continuous and somewhat toilsome and effortful work, as if against the resistance of something that did not yield itself naturally to the impulse that He would bestow. Like some sculptor with a hard bit of marble, or some metallurgist who has to work the rough ore till it becomes tractable, so the loving, patient, Divine Artificer is here represented as labouring long and earnestly with a somewhat obstinate material which can and does resist His loving touch, and yet going on with imperturbable and patient hope, by manifold touches, here a little and there a little, all through life preparing a man for His purpose. The great Artificer toils at His task, ‘rising early’ and working long, and not discouraged when He comes upon a black vein in the white marble, nor when the hard stone turns the edge of His chisels.

Now I would have you notice that there lies in this conception a very important thought, viz. God cannot make you fit for heaven all at a jump, or by a simple act of will. That is not His way of working. He can make a world so, He cannot make a saint so. He can speak and it is done when it is only a universe that has to be brought into being; or He can say, ‘Let there be light,’ and light springs at His word. But He cannot say, and He does not say, Let there be holiness, and it comes. Not so can God make man meet for the ‘inheritance of the saints in light.’ And it takes Him all His energies, for all a lifetime, to prepare His child for what He wants to make of him.

There is another thought here, which I can only touch, and that is that God cannot give a man that glorified body of which I have been speaking, unless the man’s spirit is Christlike. He cannot raise a bad man at the resurrection with the body of His glory. By the necessities of the case it is confined to the purified, because it corresponds to their inward spiritual being. It is only a perfect spirit that can dwell in a perfect body. You could not put a bad man, Godless and Christless, into the body which will be fit for them whom Christ has changed first of all in heart and spirit into His own likeness. He would be like those hermit crabs that you see on the beach who run into any kind of a shell, whether it fits them or not, in order to get a house.

There are two principles at work in the resurrection of the dead. The glorified body is not the physical outcome of the material body here, but is the issue and manifestation, in visible form, of the perfect and Christlike spirit. Some shall rise to glory and immortality, some to shame and everlasting contempt. If we are to stand at the last with the body of our humiliation changed into a body of glory, we must begin by being changed in the spirit of our mind. As the mind is, so will the body be one day. But, passing from such thoughts as these, and remembering that the Apostle here is speaking only about Christian people, and the divine operations upon them, we may still extend the meaning of this significant word ‘wrought’ somewhat further, and ask you just to consider, and that very briefly, the three-fold processes which, in the divine working, terminate in, and contemplate, this great issue.

God has wrought us for it in the very act of making us what we are. Human nature is an insoluble enigma, if this world is its only field. Amidst all the waste, the mysterious waste, of creation, there is no more profligate expenditure of powers than that which is involved in giving a man such faculties and capacities, if this be the only field on which they are to be exercised. If you think of what most of us do in this world, and of what it is in us to be, and to do, it is almost ludicrous to consider the disproportion. All other creatures fit their circumstances; nothing in them is bigger than their environment. They find in life a field for every power. You and I do not. ‘The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have roosting-places.’ They all correspond to their circumstances, but we have an infinitude of faculty lying half dormant in each of us, which finds no work at all in this present world. And so, looking at men as they are with eternity in their hearts, with natures that go reaching out towards infinity, the question comes up: ‘Wherefore hast Thou made all men in vain? What is the use of us, and why should we be what we are, if there is nothing for us except this poor present?’ God, or whoever made us, has made a mistake; and strangely enough, if we were not made, but evolved, evolution has worked out faculties which have no correspondence with the things around them.

Life and man are an insoluble enigma except on one hypothesis, and that is that this is a nursery-ground, and that the plants will be pricked out some day, and planted where they are meant to grow. The hearts that feel after absolute and perfect love, the spirits that can conceive the idea of an infinite goodness, the dumb desires, the blank misgivings that wander homeless amidst the narrowness of this poor earth, all these things proclaim that there is a region where they will find their nutriment and expatiate, and when we look at a man we can only say, He that hath wrought him for an infinite world, and an endless communion with a perfect good, is God.

Still further, another field of the divine operation to this end is in what we roughly call ‘providences.’ What is the meaning of all this discipline through which we are passed, if there is nothing to be disciplined for? What is the good of an apprenticeship if there is no journeyman’s life to come after it, where the powers that have been slowly acquired shall be nobly exercised upon broader fields? Why should men be taken, as it were, and, like the rough iron from the ground,

‘Be heated hot with hopes and fears,
And plunged in baths of hissing tears,
And battered with the shocks of doom,’

if, after all the process, the polished shaft is to be broken in two, and tossed away as rubbish? If death ends faculty, it is a pity that the faculty was so patiently developed. If God is educating us all in His school, and then means that, like some wastrel boys, we should lose all our education as soon as we leave its benches, there is little use in the rod, and little meaning in the training. Brethren! life is an insoluble riddle unless the purpose of it lie yonder, and unless all this patient training of our sorrows and our gladnesses, the warmth that expands and the cold that contracts the heart, the light that gladdens and the darkness that saddens the eye and the spirit, are equally meant for training us for the perfect life of a perfect soul moving a perfect body in a perfect universe. Here is a pillar in some ancient hall that has fallen into poor hands, and has had a low roof thrown across the centre of the chamber at half its height. In the lower half there is part of a pillar that means nothing; ugly, bare, evidently climbing, and passing through the aperture, and away above yonder is the carved capital and the great entablature that it carries. Who could understand the shaft unless he could look up through the aperture, and see the summit? And who can think of life as anything but a wretched fragment unless he knows that all which begins here runs upwards into the room above, and there finds its explanation and its completion?

But there is the third sphere of the divine operation. As in creation and in providence, so in all the work and mystery of our redemption, this is the goal that God has in view. It was not worth Christ's while to come and die, if nothing more was to come of it than the imperfect reception of His blessings and gifts which the noblest Christian life in this world presents. The meaning and purpose of the Cross, the meaning and purpose of all the patient dealings of His whispering Spirit, are that we shall be like our Divine Lord in spirit first, and in body afterwards.

And everything about the experiences of a true Christian spirit is charged with a prophecy of immortality. I have not time to dwell upon one point gathered from the context, that I intended to have insisted upon, viz. that the very desires which God's good Spirit works in a believing soul are themselves confirmations of their own fulfilment. But if you notice at your leisure the verses that precede my text, you will find that the Apostle adduces the groanings of 'earnest desire to be clothed with our house which is from Heaven,' as a proof that we *have* 'a building of God, a house not made with hands.' That is to say, every longing in a Christian heart when it is most filled with that Spirit, and most in contact with God, and which is the answer of that heart to a promise of Christ-every such longing carries with it the assurance of its own fulfilment. He that hath wrought it has wrought it in order that the desire may fit us for its answer, and that the open mouth may be ready for the abundant filling which His grace designs. He works upon us, therefore, by making us desire a gift, and then He gives that which He desires. So let us cherish these longings, not for the accident of escaping death, nor as choosing the path by which we shall reach the blessed issue, but longing for that great issue itself; and try to keep more distinct and clear before all our minds this thought, 'God means for me the participation in Christ's glorified Manhood, and my attaining of that Manhood is the end that He has in view in all that He does with me.'

III. So I must say one word about the last thought that is here, and that is the certainty and the confidence. 'Therefore we are always confident,' says the Apostle.

'He that hath wrought us for the self-same thing is God.' Then we may be sure that as far as He is concerned, the work will not be suspended nor vain. *This* man does not begin to build and is unable to finish. This workman has infinite resources, an unchanging purpose, and infinite long-suffering. He will complete His task.

In the quarries of Egypt you will find gigantic stones, half-dressed, and intended to have been transported to some great temple. But there they lie, the work incomplete, and they never carried to their place. There are no half-polished stones in God's quarries. They are all finished where they lie, and then borne across the sea, like Hiram's from Lebanon, to the Temple on the hill. It is a certainty that God will finish His work; and since 'He that hath wrought us is God,' we may be sure that He will not stop till He has done.

But it is a certainty that you can thwart. It is an operation that you can counterwork. The potter in Jeremiah's parable was making a vessel upon his wheel, and the vessel was marred in his hand, and did not turn out what he wanted it. The meaning of the metaphor, which has often been twisted to express the very opposite, is that the potter's work may fail, that the artificer may be balked, that you can counterwork the divine dealing, and that all His purpose in your creation, in His providence and in His gift of His Son for your redemption, may come to nought as far as you are concerned. ‘I beseech you that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.’ ‘In vain have I smitten your children,’ wailed the Divine Love; ‘they have received no correction.’ In vain God lavishes upon some of us His mercies, in vain for some of us has Christ toiled and suffered and died. Oh, brother! do not let all God’s work on you come to nought, but yield yourselves to it. Rejoice in the confidence that He is moulding your character, cheerfully welcome and accept the providences, painful as they may be, by which He prepares you for heaven. The chisel is sharp that strikes off the superfluous pieces of marble, and when the chisel cuts, not into marble, but into a heart, there is a pang. Bear it, bear it! and understand the meaning of the blow of the sculptor’s mallet, and see in all life the divine hand working towards the accomplishment of His own loving purpose. Then if we turn to Him, amid the pains of His discipline and the joys of His gifts of grace, with recognition and acceptance of His meaning in them all, and cry to Him, ‘Thy mercy, O Lord, endureth for ever, forsake not the work of Thine own hands,’ we may be always confident, as knowing that ‘the Lord will perfect that which concerneth us.’

10)2 Corinthians 5:8

2 Corinthians

THE OLD HOUSE AND THE NEW

2Co. 5:8.

There lie in the words of my text simply these two things; the Christian view of what death is, and the Christian temper in which to anticipate it.

I. First, the Christian view of what death is.

Now it is to be observed that, properly speaking, the Apostle is not here referring to the state of the dead, but to the act of dying. The language would more literally and accurately be rendered ‘willing to *go from* home, from the body, and to *go* home, to the Lord.’ The moment of transition of course leads to a permanent state, but it is the moment of transition which is in view in the words. I need not remind you, I suppose, that the metaphor of the home is one which has already been dwelt upon in the early part of the chapter, where the contrast is drawn between the transitory house of 'this tent,' and the 'building of God,' the body of incorruption and glory which the saints at the Resurrection day shall receive. So, then, the Christian view of the act of death is that it is simply a change of abode.

Very clearly and firmly does Paul draw the line between the man and his dwelling-place. Life is more than a result of organisation. Consciousness, thought, feeling, are more than functions of matter. No materialist philosopher has ever been, or ever will be, able to explain within the limits of his system the strange difference between the cause and the effect; how it comes to pass that at the one end of the chain there is an impression upon a nerve, and at the other there is pain; how at the one end there is the throb of an inch of matter in a man's skull, and at the other end there are thoughts that breathe and words that burn, and that live for ever. That brings us up to the edge of a gulf over which no materialist philosopher has ever been able to cast a bridge. The scalpel cannot cut deep enough to solve this mystery. Conscience as well as instinct cry out against the theory that the worker and the tools are inseparable. For such a theory reduces human actions to mechanical results, and shatters all responsibility. Man is more than his dwelling-place. You crush a shell on the beach with your heel, and you slay its tiny inhabitant. But you can pull down the tent, and pluck up its pegs, and roll up its canvas, and put it away in a dark corner, and the tenant is untouched. The foolish senses crown Death as last, and lord of all. But wisdom says, 'Life and thought have gone away side by side, leaving doors and windows wide,' and that is all that has happened.

Still further, my text suggests that to the Christian soul the departure from the one house is the entrance into the other. The home has been the body; the home is now to be Jesus Christ. And very beautiful and significant with meanings, which only experience will fully unfold, is the representation that the Lord Christ Himself assumes the place which the bodily environment has hitherto held.

That teaches us, at all events, that there is a new depth and closeness of union with Jesus waiting the Christian soul, when it lays aside the separating film of flesh. Here the bodily organisation, with its limitations, necessarily shuts us off from the closeness of intercourse which is possible for a naked soul. We know not how much separation may depend upon the immersing of the spirit in the fleshly tabernacle, but this we know, that, though here and now, by faith which dominates sense, souls can live in Christ even whilst they live in the body; yet there shall come a form of union so much more close, intimate, all-pervading, and all-encircling, as that the present union with Him by faith, precious as it is, shall be, as the Apostle calls it in our context, 'absence from the Lord.' 'We have to be discharged,' says an old thinker, 'of a great deal of what we call body, and then we shall be more truly ourselves,' and more truly united to Him who, if we are Christian people at all, is the self of ourselves and the life of our lives. No man knows how close he can nestle to the bosom of Christ when the film of flesh is rent away. Just as when in some crowded street of a great city some grimy building is pulled down, a sudden daylight fills the vacant space, and all the site that had been shut out from the sky for many years is drenched in sunshine, so when 'the earthly house of this tabernacle' is ruinated and falls, the light will flood the place where it stood, and to be 'absent from the body' shall be to be 'present with the Lord.'

May we go a step further and suggest that, perhaps, in the bold metaphor of my text, there is an answer to the questions which so often rack loving and parted hearts? 'Do the dead know aught of what affects us here? and can they do aught but gaze on Him, and love, and rest?' If it be that there is any such analogy as seems to be dimly shadowed in my text, between the relation of the body on earth to the spirit that inhabits it, and that of Jesus Christ to him who dwells in Him, and is clothed by Him, then it may be that, as the flesh, so the Christ transmits to the spirit that has Him for its home impressions from the outside world, and affords a means of action upon that world. Christ may be, if I might so say, the sensorium of the disembodied spirit; and Christ may be the hand of the man who hath no other instrument by which to express himself. But all that is fancy perhaps, speculation certainly; and yet there seems to be a shadow of a foundation for at least entertaining the possibility of such a thought as that Jesus is the means of knowing and the means of acting to those who rest from their labours in Him, and dwell in peace in His arms. But be that as it may, the reality of a close communion and encircling by the felt presence of Jesus Christ, which, in its blessed closeness, will make the closest communion here seem to be obscure, is certainly declared in the words before us.

Then this transition is regarded in my text as being the work of a moment. It is not a long journey of which the beginning is ‘to go *from* home, from the body,’ and the end is ‘to *go* home, to the Lord.’ But it is one and the same motion which, looked at from the one side, is departure, and looked at from the other is arrival. The old saying has it, ‘there is but a step between me and death.’ The truth is, there is but a step between me and *life*. The mighty angel in the Apocalypse, that stood with one foot on the firm land and the other on the boundless ocean, is but the type of the spirit in the brief moment of transition, when the consciousness of two worlds blends, and it is clothed upon with the house which is from heaven, in the very act of stripping off the earthly house of this tabernacle.

Nor need I remind you, I suppose, in more than a sentence, that this transition obviously leads into a state of conscious communion with Jesus Christ. The dreary figment of an unconscious interval for the disembodied spirit has no foundation, either in what we know of spirit, or in what is revealed to us in Scripture. For the one thing that seems to make it probable-the use of that metaphor of ‘sleeping in Jesus’-is quite sufficiently accounted for by the notions of repose, and cessation of outward activity, and withdrawal of capacity of being influenced by the so-called realities of this lower world, without dragging in the unfounded notion of unconsciousness. My text is incompatible with it, for it is absurd to say of an unconscious spirit, clear of a bodily environment, that it is anywhere; and there is no intelligible sense in which the condition of such a spirit can be called being ‘with the Lord.’

So, then, I think a momentary transition, with uninterrupted consciousness, which leads to a far deeper and more wonderful and blessed sense of unity with Jesus Christ than is possible here on earth, is the true shape in which the act of death presents itself to the Christian thinker.

And remember, dear brethren, that is all we know. Nothing else is certain-nothing but this, ‘with the Lord,’ and the resulting certainty that therefore it is well with them. It is enough for our faith, for our comfort, for our patient waiting. They live in Christ, ‘and there we find them worthier to be loved,’ and certainly lapped in a deeper rest. ‘Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord.’

II. In the next place, note the Christian temper in which to anticipate the transition.

‘We are always courageous, and willing rather to leave our home in the body, and to go home to the Lord.’ Now I must briefly remind you of how the Apostle comes to this state of feeling. He has been speaking about the natural shrinking, which belongs to all humanity, from the act of dissolution, considered as being the stripping off of the garment of the flesh. And he has declared, on behalf of himself and the early Christian Church, his own and their personal desire that they might escape from that trial by the path which seemed possible to the early Christians-viz. that of surviving until the return of Jesus Christ from Heaven, when they would be ‘clothed upon with the house which is from Heaven,’ without the necessity of stripping off that with which at present they are invested. Then he says-and this is a very remarkable thought-that just because this instinctive shrinking from death and yearning for the glorified body is so strong in the Christian heart, that is a sign that there is such a glorified body waiting for us. He says, ‘we know that if our house . . . were dissolved, we have a building of God.’ And his reason for knowing it is this, ‘*for* in this we groan.’ That is a bold position to say that a yearning in the Christian consciousness prophesies its own fulfilment. Our desires are the prophecies of His gifts. Then, on this certainty-which he deduces from the fact of the longing for it-on this certainty of the glorious, ultimate body of the Resurrection he bases his willingness expressed in the text, to go through the unwelcome process of leaving the old house, although he shrinks from it.

So, then, Christian faith does not destroy the natural reluctance to put aside the old companion of our lives. The old house, though it be smoky, dimly lighted, and, by our own careless keeping, sluttish and grimy in many a corner, yet is the only house we have ever known, and to be absent from it is untried and strange. There is nothing wrong in saying ‘we would not be unclothed but clothed upon.’ Nature speaks there. We may reverently entertain the same feelings which our Pattern acknowledged, when He said, ‘I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened until it be accomplished.’ And there would be nothing sinful in repeating His prayer with His conditions, ‘If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me.’

But then the text suggests to us the large Christian possessions and hope which counterwork this reluctance, in the measure in which we live lives of faith. There is the assurance of that ultimate home in which all the transiency of the present material organisation is exchanged for the enduring permanence which knows no corruption. The ‘tent’ is swept away to make room for the ‘building.’ The earthly house is dissolved in order that there may be reared round the homeless tenant the house eternal, ‘not made with hands,’ God’s own work, which is waiting in the heavens; because the power that shall frame it is there. Not only that great hope of the ‘body of His glory,’ with which at the last all true souls shall be invested, but furthermore, ‘the earnest of the spirit,’ and the blessed experiences therefrom, resulting even here, ought to make the unwelcome necessity less unwelcome. If the firstfruits be righteousness and peace and joy of the Holy Ghost, what shall the harvest be? If the ‘earnest,’ the shilling given in advance, be so precious, what will the whole wealth of the inheritance which it heralds be when it is received?

For such reasons the transitory passage becomes less painful and unwelcome. Who is there that would hesitate to dip his foot into the ice-cold brook if he knew that it would not reach above his ankles, and that a step would land him in blessedness unimagined till experienced?

Therefore the Christian temper is that of quiet willingness and constant courage. There is nothing hysterical here, nothing morbid, nothing overstrained, nothing artificial. The Apostle says: ‘I would rather not. I should like if I could escape it. It is an unwelcome necessity; but when I see what I do see beyond,’ I am ready. Since so it must be, I will go, not reluctantly, nor dragged away from life, nor clinging desperately to it as it slips from my hands, nor dreading anything that may happen beyond; but always courageous, and prepared to go whithersoever the path may take me, since I am sure that it ends in His bosom. He is willing to go from the home of the body, because to do that is to go home to Christ.

There are other references of our Apostle’s, substantially of the same tone as that of my text, but with very beautiful and encouraging differences. When he was nearer his end, when it seemed to him as if the headsman’s block was not very far off, his *willingness* had intensified into ‘having a *desire* to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better.' And when the end was all but reached, and he knew that death was waiting just round the next turn in the road, he said, with the confidence that in the midst of the struggle would have been vainglory, but at the end of it was a foretaste of the calm of Heaven, 'I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.' That is our model, dear brethren,-'always courageous,' afraid of nothing in life, in death, or beyond, and therefore willing to go from home from the body and to go home to the Lord.

Think of this man thus fronting the inevitable, with no excitement and with no delusions. Remember what Paul believed about death, about sin, about his own sin, about judgment, about hell. And then think of how to him death had made its darkness beautiful with the light of Christ's face, and all the terror was gone out of it. Do you think so about death? Do you shrink from it? Why? Why do you not take Paul's cure for the shrinking? If you can say, 'To me to live is Christ,' you will have no difficulty in saying, 'and to die is gain.' That is the only way by which you can come to such a temper, and then you will be willing to move from the cottage to the palace, and to wait in peace till you are shifted again into 'the building of God, the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.'

11)2 Corinthians 5:9

2 Corinthians

PLEASING CHRIST

2Co. 5:9.

We do not usually care very much for, or very much trust, a man's own statement of the motives of his life, especially if in the statement he takes credit for lofty and noble ones. And it would be rather a dangerous experiment for the ordinary run of so-called Christian people to stand up and say what Paul says here, that the supreme design and aim towards which all their lives are directed is to please Jesus Christ. In his case the tree was known by its fruits. Certainly there never was a life of more noble self-abnegation, of more continuous heroism, of loftier aspiration and lowlier service than the life of which we see the very pulse in these words.

But Paul is not only professing his own faith, he is speaking in the name of all his brethren. ‘We,’ ought to include every man and woman who calls himself or herself a Christian. It is this setting of the will of Jesus Christ high up above all other commandments, and proposing to one’s self as the aim that swallows up all other aims, that I may please Him-it is this, and not creeds, forms, opinions, professions, or even a faith that simply trusts in Him for salvation, that makes a true Christian. You are a Christian in the precise measure in which Christ’s will is uppermost and exclusive in your life, and for all your professions and your orthodoxy and your worship and your faith, not one hair’s-breadth further. Here is the signature and the common characteristic of all real Christians, ‘We labour that whether present or absent we may be well-pleasing to Him.’

So then in looking together at these words now, I take three points, the supreme aim of the Christian life; the concentration of effort which that aim demands; and the insignificance to which it reduces all external things.

I. First, then, let me deal with that supreme aim of the Christian life.

The word which is, correctly enough, rendered ‘accepted,’ may more literally, and perhaps with a closer correspondence to the Apostle’s meaning, be translated ‘well-pleasing,’ and the aim is this, not merely that we may be accepted, but that we may bring a smile into His face, and some joy and complacent delight in us into His heart, when He looks upon our doings. That pleasure of Jesus Christ in them that ‘fear Him, and in them that hope in His mercy’ and do His will is a present emotion that fills His heart in looking upon His followers, and it will be especially declared in the solemn, final judgment. We must keep in view both of these periods, if we would rightly understand the sweep of the aim which ought to be uppermost in all Christian people. Here and now in our present acts, we should so live as to occasion a present sentiment of complacent delight in us, in the heart of the Christ who sees us here and now and always. We should so live as that at that far-off future day when we shall ‘all be manifested before the Judgment-seat of Christ,’ the Judge may bend from His tribunal, and welcome us into His presence with a word of congratulation and an outstretched hand of loving reception. Set that two-fold aim before you, Christian men and women, else you will fail to experience the full stimulus of this thought.

Now such an aim as this implies a very wonderful conception of Jesus Christ’s present relations to us. It is a truth that we may minister to His joy. It is a truth that just as really as you mothers are glad when you hear from a far-off land that your boy is doing well, and getting on, so Jesus Christ’s heart fills with gladness when He sees you and me walking in the paths in which He would have us go. We often think about our dear dead that they cannot know of us and our doings here, because the sorrow that would sometimes come from the contemplation of our evil, or of our misfortunes, would trouble them in their serene rest. We know not how that may be, but this at least we do know, that the Man Jesus Christ, who, like those dear ones, ‘was dead, and is alive for evermore,’ in His human nature has knowledge of all His children’s failures, as well as successes, and is affected with some shadow of regret, or with some reality of delight, according as they follow or stray from the paths in which He would have them walk. If it be so with Him it may be so with them; and though it be not so with them it must be so with Him. So this strange, sweet, tender, and powerful thought is a piece of plain prose, that Christ is glad when you and I are good.

Does it need any word to emphasise the force of that motive to a Christian heart that loves the Master? Surely this is the great and blessed peculiarity of all the morality of Christianity that it has all a personal bearing and aspect, and that just as the sum of all our duty is gathered up in the one command, ‘Imitate Christ,’ so the motive for all our duty lies in ‘If you love Me, keep My commandments,’ and the reward which ought to stimulate more than anything besides is the one thought, not, of what I shall get because I am good, but of what I shall give Him by my obedience, a joy in the heart that was stabbed through and through by sorrow for my sake. That we may please Him ‘who pleased not Himself,’ is surely the grandest motive on which the pursuit of holiness, and the imitation of Jesus Christ can ever be made to rest. Oh! how different, and how much more blessed such a motive and aim is than all the lower reasons for which men are sometimes exhorted and encouraged to be good! What a difference it is when we say, ‘Do that thing because it is right,’ and when we say, ‘Do that thing because you will be happier if you do,’ or when we say, ‘Do it because He would like you to do it.’ The one is all cold and abstract. To stand before a man and simply say: ‘Now go and do your duty,’ is a poor way of setting his feet upon a rock and establishing his goings. Duty is not a word that stirs men’s hearts, however it may awe their consciences. It rises up before us like some goddess statuesque and serene, with purity, indeed, in her deep and solemn eyes, but with nothing appealing to our affections in her stern lineaments. But when the thought of ‘You ought’ melts into ‘For my sake,’ and through the dissolving face of the cold marble goddess there shine the beloved lineaments of Him who ‘wears the Godhead’s most benignant grace,’ the smile upon His face becomes a motive that touches all hearts. Transmute obligation into gratitude, and in front of duty and appeals to self put Christ, and all the harshness and difficulty and burden and self-sacrifice of obedience becomes easy and a joy.

Then let me remind you that this one supreme aim of pleasing Jesus Christ can be carried on through all life in every varying form, great or small. A blessed unity is given to our whole being when the little things and the big things, the easy things and the hard things, deeds which are conspicuous and deeds which no eye sees, are all brought under the influence of the one motive and made co-operant to the one end. Drive that one steadfast aim through your lives like a bar of iron, and it will give the lives strength and consistency-not rigidity, because they may still be flexible. Nothing will be too small to be consecrated by that motive; nothing too great to own its power. You can please Him everywhere and always. The only thing that is inconsistent with pleasing Him is the thing which, alas! we do at all times and should do at no time, and that is to sin against Him. If we bear with us this as a conscious motive in every part of our day’s work it will give us a quick discernment as to what is evil, which I believe nothing else will so surely give. If you desire life to be noble, uniform, dignified, great in its minutest acts and solemn in its very trifles, and if you would have some continual test and standard by which you can detect all spurious, apparent virtues, and discover lurking and masked temptations, carry this one aim clear and high above all else, and make it the purpose of the whole life, to be well-pleasing unto Him.

II. Now, in the next place, notice the concentrated effort which this aim requires.

The word rendered in my text ‘labour’ is a peculiar one, very seldom employed in Scripture. It means, in its most literal signification, to be fond of honour, or to be actuated by a love of honour; and hence it comes, by a very natural transition, to mean to strive to gain something for the sake of the honour connected with it. That is to say, it not only expresses the notion of diligent, strenuous effort, but it reveals the reason for that diligence and strenuousness in what I may call [for the word might almost be so rendered] the *ambition* of being honoured by pleasing Christ. So that the ‘labour’ of my text covers the whole ground, not only of the act but of its motive. The concentration of effort which such an aim requires may be enforced by one or two simple exhortations.

First, let me say that we ought, as Christian people, to cultivate this noble ambition of pleasing Jesus Christ. Men have all got the love of approbation deep in them. God put it there for a good purpose, not that we might shape our lives so as to get others to pat us on the back, and say, ‘Well done!’ but that, in addition to the other solemn and sovereign motives for following the paths of righteousness, we might have this highest ambition to impel us on the road. And it is the duty of all Christians to see to it that they discipline themselves so as, in their own feelings, to put high above all the approbation or censure of their fellows the approbation or censure of Jesus Christ. That will take some cultivation. It is a great deal easier to shape our courses so as to get one another’s praise. I remember a quaint saying in a German book. ‘An old schoolmaster tried to please this one and that one, and it failed. “Well, then,” said he, “I will try to please Christ.” And that succeeded.’

And let me remind you that a second part of the concentration of effort which this aim requires is to strive with the utmost energy in the accomplishment of it. Paul did not believe that anybody could please Jesus Christ without a fight for it. His notion of acceptable service was service which a man suppressed much to render, and overcame much to bring. And I urge upon you this, dear brethren, that with all the mob of faces round about us which shut out Christ’s face, and with all the temptations to follow other aims, and with the weaknesses of our own characters, it never was, is not, nor ever will be, an easy thing, or a thing to be done without a struggle and a dead lift, to live so as to be well-pleasing to Him.

Look at Paul's metaphors with which he sets forth the Christian life-a warfare, a race, a struggle, a building up of some great temple structure, and the like-all suggesting at the least the idea of patient, persistent, continuous toil, and most of them suggesting also the idea of struggle with antagonistic forces and difficulties, either within or without. So we must set our shoulders to the wheel, put our backs into our work. Do not think that you are going to be carried into the condition of conformity with Jesus Christ in a dream, or that the road to heaven is a primrose path, to be trodden in silver slippers. 'I will not offer unto the Lord that which doth cost me nothing,' and if you do, it will be worth exactly what it costs. There must be concentration of effort if we are to be well-pleasing to Him.

But then do not forget, on the other hand, that deeper than all effort, and the very spring and life of it, there must be the opening of our hearts for the entrance of His life and spirit, by the presence of which only are we well-pleasing to Christ. That which pleases Him in you and me is our likeness to Him. According to the old Puritan illustration, the refiner sat by the furnace until he could see in the molten metal his own face mirrored, and then he knew it was pure. So what pleases Christ in us is the reflection of Himself. And how can we get that likeness to Himself except by receiving into our hearts the Spirit that was in Christ Jesus, and will dwell in us, and will produce in us in our measure the same image that it formed in Him? 'Work *out* your own salvation,' because 'it is God that worketh *in* you.' Labour, concentrate effort, and above all open the heart to the entrance of that transforming power.

III. Lastly, let me suggest the utter insignificance to which this aim reduces all externals.

'We labour,' says Paul, 'that whether present or absent, we may be accepted.' What differences of condition are covered by that parenthetical phrase-'present or absent!' He talks about it as if it was a very small matter, does he not? And what is included in it? Whether a man shall be in the body or out of it; that is to say, whether he be alive or dead. Here is an aim then, so great, so lofty, so all-comprehensive that it reduces the difference between living in the world and being out of it, to a trifle. And if we stand so high up that these two varieties of condition dwindle into insignificance and seem to have melted into one, do you think that there is anything else that will be very big? If the difference between life and death is dwindled and dwarfed, what else do you suppose will remain? Nothing, I should think.

So if we only, by God's help, which will be given to us if we want it, keep this clear before us as the motive of all our life, then all the possible alternatives of human condition and circumstance will sink into insignificance, and from that lofty summit will 'show scarce so gross as beetles' in the air beneath our lofty station.

Whether we be rich or poor, solitary or beset by friends, happy or sad, hopeful or despairing, young or old, wearied or buoyant, learned or foolish, it matters not. The one aim lifts itself before us, and they in whose eyes shine the light of that great issue are careless of the road along which they pass. Do you enlist yourselves in the company that fires at the long range, and all those that take aim at the shorter ones will seem to be very pitifully limiting their powers.

Then remember that this same aim, and this same result may be equally pursued and attained whether here or yonder. It is something to have a course of life which runs straight along, unbent aside, and not cut short off, by the change from earth to Heaven. And this felicity he only has who, amidst things temporal and insignificant, sees and seeks the eternal smile on the face of his unchanging Saviour. On earth, in death, through eternity, such a life will be homogeneous and of a piece; and when all other aims are hull down below the horizon, forgotten and out of sight, then still this will be the purpose, and yonder it will be the accomplished purpose, of each, to please the Lord Jesus Christ.

My dear friend, remember that in its full meaning this aim regards the future, and points onward to that great judgment-seat where you and I will certainly each of us give account of himself. Do you think that you will please Christ then? Do you think that when that day dawns, a smile of welcome will come into His eyes, and a glow of gladness at the meeting into yours? Or have you cause to fear that you will 'call on the rocks and the hills to cover you from the face of Him that sitteth on the Throne?'

We are all close by one another; our voices are very audible to each other. Do you learn, Christian people, that the first,-or at least a prime-condition of all Christian and Christ-pleasing life, is a wholesome disregard of what anybody says but Himself. The old Lacedæmonians used to stir themselves to heroism by the thought: 'What will they say of us in Sparta?' The governor of some outlying English colony minds very little what the people that he is set to rule think about him. He reports to Downing Street, and it is the opinion of the Home Government that influences him. You report to headquarters. Never mind what anybody else thinks of you. Your business is to please Christ, and the less you trouble yourselves about pleasing men the more you will succeed in doing it. Be deaf to the tittle tattle of your fellow soldiers in the ranks. It is your Commander's smile that will be your highest reward.

'Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,

But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes,

And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;

As he pronounces lastly on each deed,

Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed.'

12)2 Corinthians 5:14

2 Corinthians

THE LOVE THAT CONSTRAINS

2Co. 5:14.

It is a dangerous thing to be unlike other people. It is still more dangerous to be better than other people. The world has a little heap of depreciatory terms which it flings, age after age, at all men who have a higher standard and nobler aims than their fellows. A favourite term is 'mad.' So, long ago they said, 'The prophet is a fool; the spiritual man is mad,' and, in His turn, Jesus was said to be ‘beside Himself,’ and Festus shouted from the judgment-seat to Paul that he was mad. A great many people had said the same thing about him before, as the context shows. For the verse before my text is: ‘Whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God: or whether we be sober, it is for your cause.’ Now the former clause can only refer to other people’s estimate of the Apostle. No doubt there were many things about him that gave colour to it. He said that a dead Man had appeared to him and spoken with him. He said that he had been carried up into the third heaven. He had a very strange creed in the judgment of the times. He had abandoned a brilliant career for a very poor one. He was obviously utterly indifferent to the ordinary aims of men. He had a consuming enthusiasm. And so the world explained him satisfactorily to itself by the short and easy method of saying, ‘Insane.’ And Paul explained himself by the great word of my text, ‘The love of Christ constraineth us.’ Wherever there is a life adequately under the influence of Christ’s love the results will be such as an unsympathising world may call madness, but which are the perfection of sober-mindedness. Would there were more such madmen! I wish to try to make one or two of them now, by getting some of you to take for your motto, ‘The love of Christ constraineth us.’

I. Now the first thing to notice is this constraining love.

I need not spend time in showing that when Paul says here ‘The love of Christ,’ he means Christ’s love to him, not his to Christ. That is in accordance with his continual usage of the expression; and it is in accordance with facts. For it is not my love to Jesus, but His love to me, that brings the real moulding power into my life, and my love to Him is only the condition on which the true power acts upon me. To get the fulcrum and the lever which will heave a life up to the heights you have to get out of yourselves.

Now Paul never saw Jesus Christ in this earthly life. Timothy, who is associated with him in this letter, and perhaps is one of the ‘us,’ never saw Him either. The Corinthian believers whom he is addressing had, of course, never seen Him. And yet the Apostle has not the slightest hesitation in taking that great benediction of Christ’s love and spreading it over them all. That love is independent of time and of space; it includes humanity, and is co-extensive with it. Unturned away by unworthiness, unrepelled by non-responsiveness, undisgusted by any sin, unwearied by any, however numerous, foiling of its attempts, the love of Christ, like the great heavens that bend above us, wraps us all in its sweetness, and showers upon us all its light and its dew.

And yet, brethren, I would have you remember that whilst we thus try to paint, in poor, poor words, the universality of that love, we have to remember that it does not partake of the weakness that infects all human affections, which are only strong when they are narrow, and as the river expands it becomes shallow, and loses the force in its flow which it had when it was gathered between straiter banks, so as that a universal charity is almost akin to a universal indifference. But this love that grasps us all, this river that 'proceedeth from the Throne of God and of the Lamb,' flows in its widest reaches as deep and as impetuous in its career as if it were held within the narrowest of gorges. For Christ's universal love is universal only because it is individualising and particular. We love our nation by generalising and losing sight of the individuals. Christ loves the world because He loves every man and woman in it, and His grace enwraps all because His grace hovers over each.

'The sun whose beams most glorious are
Despiseth no beholder,'

but the rays come straight to each eyeball. Be sure of this: that He who, when the multitude thronged Him and pressed Him, felt the tremulous, timid, scarcely perceptible touch of one woman's wasted finger on the hem of His garment, holds each of us in the grasp of His love, which is universal, because it applies to each. You and I have each the whole radiance of it pouring down on our heads, and none intercepts the beams from any other. So, brethren, let us each feel not only the love that grasps the world, but the love that empties itself on me.

But there is one more remark that I wish to make in reference to this constraining love of Jesus Christ, and that is, that in order to see and feel it we must take the point of view that this Apostle takes in my text. For hearken how he goes on. 'The love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then all died, and that He died for all,' etc. That is to say, the death of Christ for all, which is equivalent to the death of Christ for each, is the great solvent by which the love of God melts men's hearts, and is the great proof that Jesus Christ loves me, and thee, and all of us. If you strike out that conception you have struck out from your Christianity the vindication of the belief that Christ loves the world. What possible meaning is there in the expression, 'He died for all?' How can the fact of His death on a 'green hill' outside the gates of a little city in Syria have world-wide issues, unless in that death He bore, and bore away, the sins of the whole world? I know that there have been many-and there are many to-day-who not accepting what seems to me to be the very vital heart of Christianity-viz. the death of Christ for the world's sin, do yet cherish-as I think illogically-yet do cherish a regard for Him, which puts some of us who call ourselves 'orthodox,' and are tepid, to the blush. Thank God! men are often better than their creeds, as well as worse than them. But that fact does not affect what I am saying now, and what I beg you to take for what you find it to be worth, that unless we believe that Jesus Christ died for all, I do not know what claim He has on the love of the world. We shall admire Him, we shall bow before Him, as the very realised ideal of humanity, though how this one Man has managed to escape the taint of the all-pervading evil remains, upon that hypothesis, very obscure. But love Him? No! Why should I? But if I feel that His death had world-wide issues, and that He went down into the darkness in order that He might bring the world into the light, then-and I am sure, on the wide scale and in the long-run only then-will men turn to Him and say, 'Thou hast died for me, help me to live for Thee.' Brethren, I beseech you, take care of emptying the death of Christ of its deepest meaning, lest you should thereby rob His character of its chiefest charm, and His name of its mightiest soul-melting power. The love that constraineth is the love that died, and died for all, because it died for each.

II. Now let me ask you to consider the echo of this constraining love.

I said a moment or two ago that Christ's love to us is the constraining power, and that ours to Him is but the condition on which that power works. But between the two there comes something which brings that constraining love to bear upon our hearts. And so notice what my text goes on to adduce as needful for Christ’s love to have its effect-namely, ‘because we thus judge,’ etc. Then my estimate, my apprehension of the love of Christ must come in between its manifestation and its power to grip, to restrain, to impel me. If I may use such a figure, He stands, as it were, bugle in hand, and blows the sweet strains that are meant to set the echoes flying. But the rock must receive the impact of the vibrations ere it can throw back the thinned echo of the music. Love must be believed and known ere it can be responded to.

Now the only answer and echo that hearts desire is the love of the beloved heart. We all know that in our earthly life. Love is as much a hunger to be loved as the outgoing of my own affection. The two things are inseparable, and there is nothing that repays love but love. Jesus Christ wishes each of us to love Him. If it is true that He loves me, then, intertwisted with the outgoing of His heart towards me is the yearning that my heart may go out towards Him. Dear brethren, this is no pulpit rhetoric, it is a plain, simple fact, inseparable from the belief in Christ’s love-that He wishes you and every soul of man to love Him, and that, whatever else you bring, lip reverence, orthodox belief, apparent surrender, in the assay shop of His great mint all these are rejected, and the only metal that passes the fire is the pure gold of an answering love. Brethren! is that what you bring to Jesus Christ?

Love seeks for love, and our love can only be an echo of His. He takes the beginning in everything. If I am to love Him back again, I must have faith in His love to me. And if that be so, then the true way by which you, imperfect Christian people, can deepen and strengthen your love to Jesus Christ is not so much by efforts to work up a certain warmth of sentiment and glow of affection, as by gazing, with believing eyes of the heart, upon that which kindles your love to Him. If you want ice to melt, put it out into the sunshine, If you want the mirror to gleam, do not spend all your time in polishing it. Carry it where it can catch the ray, and it will flash it back in glory. ‘We love Him because He first loved us.’ Our love is an echo; be sure that you listen for the parent note, and link yourselves by faith with that great love which has come down from Heaven for us all.

But how can I speak about echoes and responses when I know that there are scores of men and women whom a preacher's words reach who would be ashamed of themselves, and rightly, if they exhibited the same callousness of heart and selfishness of ingratitude to some human, partial benefactor as they are not ashamed to have exhibited all their lives to Jesus Christ. Echo? Yes! your heartstrings are set vibrating fast enough whenever, in the adjoining apartment, an instrument is touched which is tuned to the same key as your heart. Pleasures, earthly aims, worldly gifts, the sweetnesses of human life, all these things set them thrilling, and you can hear the music, but your hearts are not tuned to answer to the note that is struck in 'He loved me and gave Himself for me.' The bugle is blown, and there is silence, and no echo, faint and far, comes whispering back. Brethren, we use no one else, in whose love we have any belief, a thousandth part so ill as we use Jesus Christ.

III. Now, lastly, let me say a word about the constraining influence of this echoed love.

Its first effect, if it has any real power in our hearts and lives, will be to change their centre, to decentralise. Look what the Apostle goes on to say: 'We thus judge that He . . . died for all, that they which live should not live henceforth unto themselves.' That is the great transformation. Secure that, and all nobleness will follow, and 'whatsoever things are lovely and of good report' will come, like doves to their windows, flocking into the soul that has ceased to find its centre in its poor rebellious self. All love derives its power to elevate, refine, beautify, ennoble, conquer, from the fact that, in lower degree, all love makes the beloved the centre, and not the self. Hence the mother's self-sacrifice, hence the sweet reciprocity of wedded life, hence everything in humanity that is noble and good. Love is the antagonist of selfishness, and the highest type of love should be, and in the measure in which we are under the influence of Christ's love will be, the self-surrendering life of a Christian man. I know that in saying so I am condemning myself and my brethren. All the same, it is true. The one power that rescues a man from the tyranny of living for self, which is the mother of all sin and ignobleness, is when a man can say 'Christ is my aim,' 'Christ is my object.' 'The life that I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.' There is no secret of self-annihilation, which is self-transfiguration, and, I was going to say, deification, like that of loving Christ with all my heart because He has loved me so.

Again, let me remind you that, on its lower reaches and levels, we find that all true affection has in it a strange power of assimilating its objects to one another. Just as a man and woman who have lived together for half a century in wedded life come to have the same notions, the same prejudices, the same tastes, and sometimes you can see their very faces being moulded into likeness, so, if I love Jesus Christ, I shall by degrees grow liker and liker to Him, and be ‘changed into the same image, from glory to glory.’

Again, the love constrains, and not only constrains but impels, because it becomes a joy to divine and to do the will of the beloved Christ. ‘My yoke is easy.’ Is it? It is very hard to be a Christian. His requirements are a great deal sterner than others. His yoke is easy, not because it is a lighter yoke, but because it is padded with love. And that makes all service a sacrament, and the surrender of my own will, which is the essence of obedience, a joy.

So, dear friends, we come here in sight of the unique and blessed characteristic of all Christian morality, and of all its practical exhortations, and the Gospel stands alone as the mightiest moulding power in the world, just because its word is ‘love, and do as thou wilt.’ For in the measure of thy love will thy will coincide with the will of Christ. There is nothing else that has anything like that power. We do not want to be told what is right. We know it a great deal better than we practise it. A revelation from heaven that simply told me my duty would be surplusage. ‘If there had been a law that could have given life, righteousness had been by the law.’ We want a life, not a law, and the love of Christ brings the life to us.

And so, dear friends, that life, restrained and impelled by the love to which it is being assimilated, is a life of liberty and a life of blessedness. In the measure in which the love of Christ constrains any man, it makes for him difficulties easy, the impossible possible, the crooked things straight, and the rough places plain. The duty becomes a delight, and self ceases to disturb. If the love of God is shed abroad in a heart, and in the measure in which it is, that heart will be at rest, and a great peace will brood over it. Then the will bows in glad submission, and all the powers arise to joyous service. We are lords of the world and ourselves when we are Christ’s servants for love’s sake; and earth and its good are never so good as when the power of His echoed love rules our lives. Do you know and believe that Christ loves you? Do you know and believe that you had a place in His heart when He hung on the Cross for the salvation of the world? Have you answered that love with yours, kindled by your faith in, and experience of, His? Is His love the overmastering impulse which urges you to all good, the mighty constraint that keeps you back from all evil, the magnet that draws, the anchor that steadies, the fortress that defends, the light that illumines, the treasure that enriches? Is it the law that commands, and the power that enables? Then you are blessed, though people will perhaps say that you are mad, whilst here; and you will be blessed for ever and ever.

13)2 Corinthians 5:17

2 Corinthians

AN IMPOSSIBILITY MADE POSSIBLE

Jer. 13:23. - 2Co. 5:17. - Rev. 21:5.

Put these three texts together. The first is a despairing question to which experience gives only too sad and decisive a negative answer. It is the answer of many people who tell us that character must be eternal, and of many a baffled man who says, ‘It is of no use-I have tried and can do nothing.’ The second text is the grand Christian answer, full of confidence. It was spoken by one who had no superficial estimate of the evil, but who had known in himself the power of Christ to revolutionise a life, and make a man love all he had hated, and hate all he had loved, and fling away all he had treasured. The last text predicts the completion of the renovating process lying far ahead, but as certain as sunrise.

I. The unchangeableness of character, especially of faults.

We note the picturesque rhetorical question here. They were occasionally accustomed to see the dark-skinned, Ethiopian, whether we suppose that these were true negroes from Southern Egypt or dark Arabs, and now and then leopards came up from the thickets on the Jordan, or from the hills of the southern wilderness about the Dead Sea. The black hue of the man, the dark spots that starred the skin of the fierce beast, are fitting emblems of the evil that dyes and speckles the soul. Whether it wraps the whole character in black, or whether it only spots it here and there with tawny yellow, it is ineradicable; and a man can no more change his character once formed than a negro can cast his skin, or a leopard whiten out the spots on his hide.

Now we do not need to assert that a man has no power of self-improvement or reformation. The exhortations of the prophet to repentance and to cleansing imply that he has. If he has not, then it is no blame to him that he does not mend. Experience shows that we have a very considerable power of such a kind. It is a pity that some Christian teachers speak in exaggerated terms about the impossibility of such self-improvement.

But it is very difficult.

Note the great antagonist as set forth here-Habit, that solemn and mystical power. We do not know all the ways in which it operates, but one chief way is through physical cravings set up. It is strange how much easier a second time is than a first, especially in regard to evil acts. The hedge once broken down, it is very easy to get through it again. If one drop of water has percolated through the dyke, there will be a roaring torrent soon. There is all the difference between once and never; there is small difference between once and twice. By habit we come to do things mechanically and without effort, and we all like that. One solitary footfall across the snow soon becomes a beaten way. As in the banyan-tree, each branch becomes a root. All life is held together by cords of custom which enable us to reserve conscious effort and intelligence for greater moments. Habit tends to weigh upon us with a pressure 'heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.' But also it is the ally of good.

The change to good is further made difficult because liking too often goes with evil, and good is only won by effort. It is a proof of man's corruption that if left alone, evil in some form or other springs spontaneously, and that the opposite good is hard to win. Uncultivated soil bears thistles and weeds. Anything can roll downhill. It is always the least trouble to go on as we have been going.

Further, the change is made difficult because custom blinds judgment and conscience. People accustomed to a vitiated atmosphere are not aware of its foulness.

How long it takes a nation, for instance, to awake to consciousness of some national crime, even when the nation is 'Christian'! And how men get perfectly sophisticated as to their own sins, and have all manner of euphemisms for them!

Further, how hard it is to put energy into a will that has been enfeebled by long compliance. Like prisoners brought out of the Bastille.

So if we put all these reasons together, no wonder that such reformation is rare.

I do not dwell on the point that it must necessarily be confined within very narrow limits. I appeal to experience. You have tried to cure some trivial habit. You know what a task that has been-how often you thought that you had conquered, and then found that all had to be done over again. How much more is this the case in this greater work! Often the efforts to break off evil habits have the same effect as the struggles of cattle mired in a bog, who sink the deeper for plunging. The sad cry of many a foiled wrestler with his own evil is, 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' We do not wish to exaggerate, but simply to put it that experience shows that for men in general, custom and inclination and indolence and the lack of adequate motive weigh so heavily that a thorough abandonment of evil, much more a hearty practice of good, are not to be looked for when once a character has been formed. So you young people, take care. And all of us listen to-

II. The great hope for individual renewal.

The second text sets forth a possibility of entire individual renewal, and does so by a strong metaphor.

'If any man be in Christ he is a new creature,' or as the words might be rendered, 'there is a new creation,' and not only is he renewed, but all things are become new. He is a new Adam in a new world.

Now [a] let us beware of exaggeration about this matter. There are often things said about the effects of conversion which are very far in advance of reality, and give a handle to caricature. The great law of continuity runs on through the change of conversion. Take a man who has been the slave of some sin. The evil will not cease to tempt, nor will the effects of the past on character be annihilated. 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,' remains true. In many ways there will be permanent consequences. There will remain the scars of old wounds; old sores will be ready to burst forth afresh. The great outlines of character do remain.

[b] What is the condition of renewal?

'If any man be in Christ'-how distinctly that implies something more than human in Paul's conception of Christ. It implies personal union with Him, so that He is the very element or atmosphere in which we live. And that union is brought about by faith in Him.

> [c] How does such a state of union with Christ make a man over again?

It gives a new aim and centre for our lives. Then we live not unto ourselves; then everything is different and looks so, for the centre is shifted. That union introduces a constant reference to Him and contemplation of His death for us, it leads to self-abnegation.

It puts all life under the influence of a new love. ‘The love of Christ constraineth.’ As is a man’s love, so is his life. The mightiest devolution is to excite a new love, by which old loves and tastes are expelled. ‘A new affection’ has ‘expulsive power,’ as the new sap rising in the springtime pushes off the lingering withered leaves. So union with Him meets the difficulty arising from inclination still hankering after evil. It lifts life into a higher level where the noxious creatures that were proper to the swamps cannot live. The new love gives a new and mighty motive for obedience.

That union breaks the terrible chain that binds us to the past. ‘All died.’ The past is broken as much as if we were dead. It is broken by the great act of forgiveness. Sin holds men by making them feel as if what has been must be-an awful entail of evil. In Christ we die to former self.

That union brings a new divine power to work in us. ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’

It sets us in a new world which yet is the old. All things are changed if we are changed. They are the same old things, but seen in a new light, used for new purposes, disclosing new relations and powers. Earth becomes a school and discipline for heaven. The world is different to a blind man when cured, or to a deaf one,-there are new sights for the one, new sounds for the other.

All this is true in the measure in which we live in union with Christ.

So no man need despair, nor think, ‘I cannot mend now.’ You may have tried and been defeated a thousand times. But still victory is possible, not without effort and sore conflict, but still possible. There is hope for all, and hope for ME.

III. The completion in a perfectly renewed creation.

The renovation here is only partial. Its very incompleteness is prophetic. If there be this new life in us, it obviously has not reached its fulness here, and it is obviously not manifested here for all that even here it is.

It is like some exotic that does not show its true beauty in our greenhouses. The life of a Christian on earth is a prophecy by both its greatness and its smallness, by both its glory and its shame, by both its brightness and its spots. It cannot be that there is always to be this disproportion between aspiration and performance, between willing and doing. Here the most perfect career is like a half-lighted street, with long gaps between the lamps.

The surroundings here are uncongenial to the new creatures. 'Foxes have holes'-all creatures are fitted for their environment; only man, and eminently renewed man, wanders as a pilgrim, not in his home. The present frame of things is for discipline. The schooling over, we burn the rod. So we look for an external order in full correspondence with the new nature.

And Christ throned 'makes all things new.' How far the old is renewed we cannot tell, and we need not ask. Enough that there shall be a universe in perfect harmony with the completely renewed nature, that we shall find a home where all things will serve and help and gladden and further us, where the outward will no more distract and clog the spirit.

Brethren, let that mighty love constrain you; and look to Christ to renew you. Whatever your old self may have been, you may bury it deep in His grave, and rise with Him to newness of life. Then you may walk in this old world, new creatures in Christ Jesus, looking for the blessed hope of entire renewal into the perfect likeness of Him, the perfect man, in a perfect world, where all old sorrows and sins have passed away and He has made all things new. Through eternity, new joys, new knowledge, new progress, new likeness, new service will be ours- and not one leaf shall ever wither in the amaranthine crown, nor 'the cup of blessing' ever become empty or flat and stale. Eternity will be but a continual renewal and a progressive increase of ever fresh and ever familiar treasures. The new and the old will be one.

Begin with trusting to Him to help you to change a deeper blackness than that of the Ethiopian's skin, and to erase firier spots than stain the tawny leopard's hide, and He will make you a new man, and set you in His own time in a 'new heaven and earth, where dwelleth righteousness.'

14)2 Corinthians 5:20

2 Corinthians

THE ENTREATIES OF GOD

2Co. 5:20.

These are wonderful and bold words, not so much because of what they claim for the servants as because of what they reveal of the Lord. That thought, 'as though God did beseech,' seems to me to be the one deserving of our attention now, far rather than any inferences which may be drawn from the words as to the relation of preachers of the Gospel to man and to God. I wish, therefore, to try to set forth the wonderfulness of this mystery of a beseeching God, and to put by the side of it the other wonder and mystery of men refusing the divine beseechings.

Before doing so, however, I remark that the supplement which stands in our Authorised Version in this text is a misleading and unfortunate one. 'As though God did beseech *you*' and 'we pray *you*' unduly narrow the scope of the Apostolic message, and confuse the whole course of the Apostolic reasoning here. For he has been speaking of a world which is reconciled to God, and he finds a consequence of that reconciliation of the world in the fact that he and his fellow-preachers are entrusted with the word of reconciliation. The scope of their message, then, can be no narrower than the scope of the reconciliation; and inasmuch as that is world-wide the beseeching must be co-extensive therewith, and must cover the whole ground of humanity. It is a universal message that is set forth here. The Corinthians, to whom Paul was speaking, are, by his hypothesis, already reconciled to God, and the message which he has in trust for them is given in the subsequent words: ‘We then, as workers together with God, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.’ But the message, the pleading of the divine heart, ‘be ye reconciled to God,’ is a pleading that reaches over the whole range of a reconciled world. I take then, just these two thoughts, God beseeching man, and man refusing God.

I. God beseeching man.

Now notice how, in my text, there alternates, as if substantially the same idea, the thoughts that Christ and that God pray men to be reconciled. ‘We are ambassadors on *Christ’s* behalf, as though *God* did beseech you by us, we pray on *Christ’s* behalf.’ So you see, first, Christ the Pleader, then God beseeching, then Christ again entreating and praying. Could any man have so spoken, passing instinctively from the one thought to the other, unless he had believed that whatsoever things the Father doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise; and that Jesus Christ is the Representative of the whole Deity for mankind, so as that when He pleads God pleads, and God pleads through Him. I do not dwell upon this, but I simply wish to mark it in passing as one of the innumerable strong and irrefragable testimonies to the familiarity and firmness with which that thought of the divinity of Jesus Christ, and the full revelation of the Father by Him, was grasped by the Apostle, and was believed by the people to whom he spoke. God pleads, therefore Christ pleads, Christ pleads, therefore God pleads; and these Two are One in their beseechings, and the voice of the Father echoes to us in the tenderness of the Son.

So, then, let us think of that pleading. To sue for love, to beg that an enemy will put away his enmity is the part of the inferior rather than of the superior; is the part of the offender rather than of the offended; is the part of the vanquished rather than of the victor; is the part surely not of the king but of the rebel. And yet here, in the sublime transcending of all human precedent and pattern which characterises the divine dealing, we have the place of the suppliant and of the supplicated inverted, and Love upon the Throne bends down to ask of the rebel that lies powerless and sullen at His feet, and yet is not conquered until his heart be won, though his limbs be manacled, that he would put away all the bitterness out of his heart, and come back to the love and the grace which are ready to pour over him. ‘He that might the vengeance best have taken, finds out the remedy.' He against whom we have transgressed prays us to be reconciled; and the Infinite Love lowers Himself in that lowering which is, in another aspect, the climax of His exaltation, to pray the rebels to accept His amnesty.

Oh, dear brethren! this is no mere piece of rhetoric. What facts in the divine heart does it represent? What facts in the divine conduct does it represent? It represents these facts in the divine heart, that there is in it an infinite longing for the creature's love, an infinite desire for unity between Him and us.

There are wonderful significance and beauty in the language of my text which are lost in the Authorised Version; but are preserved in the Revised. 'We are ambassadors' not only '*for* Christ,' but '*on Christ's behalf*.' And the same proposition is repeated in the subsequent clause. 'We pray you,' not merely 'in Christ's stead,' though that is much, but '*on His account*,' which is more-as if it lay very near His heart that we should put away our enmity; and as if in some transcendent and wonderful manner the all-perfect, self-sufficing God was made glad, and the Master, who is His image for us, 'saw of the travail of His soul, and,' in regard to one man, 'was satisfied,' when the man lets the warmth of God's love in Christ thaw away the coldness out of his heart, and kindle there an answering flame. An old divine says, 'We cannot do God a greater pleasure or more oblige His very heart, than to trust in Him as a God of love.' He is ready to stoop to any humiliation to effect that purpose. So intense is the divine desire to win the world to His love, that He will stoop to sue for it rather than lose it. Such is at least part of the fact in the divine heart, which is shadowed forth for us by that wonderful thought of the beseeching God.

And what facts in the divine conduct does this great word represent? A God that beseeches. Well, think of the tears of imploring love which fell from Christ's eyes as He looked across the valley from Olivet, and saw the Temple glittering in the early sunshine. Think of 'O Jerusalem! Jerusalem! . . . how often would I have gathered thy children together . . . and ye would not.' And are we not to see in the Christ who wept in the earnestness of His desire, and in the pain of its disappointment, the very revelation of the Father's heart and the very action of the Father's arm? 'Come unto me, all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' That is Christ beseeching and God beseeching in Him. Need I quote other words, gentle, winning, loving? Do we not feel, when looking upon Christ, as if the secret of His whole life was the stretching out imploring and welcoming hands to men, and praying them to grasp His hands, and be saved? But, oh, brethren! the fact that towers above all others, which explains the whole procedure of divinity, and is the keystone of the whole arch of revelation; the fact which reveals in one triple beam of light, God, man, and sin in the clearest illumination, is the Cross of Jesus Christ. And if that be not the very sublime of entreaty; and if any voice can be conceived, human or divine, that shall reach men's hearts with a more piercing note of pathetic invitation than sounds from that Cross, I know not where it is. Christ that dies, in His dying breath calls to us, and 'the blood of sprinkling speaketh better things than that of Abel'; inasmuch as its voice is, 'Come unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.'

Not only in the divine facts of the life and death of Jesus Christ, but in all the appeals of that great revelation which lies before us in Scripture; and may I say, in the poor, broken utterances of men whose harsh, thin voices try to set themselves, in some measure, to the sweetness and the fulness of His beseeching tones-does God call upon you to draw close to Him, and put away your enmity. And not only by His Word written or ministered from human lips, but also by the patient providences of His love He calls and prays you to come. A mother will sometimes, in foolish fondness, coax her sullen child by injudicious kindness, or, in wise patience, will seek to draw the little heart away from the faults that she desires not to notice, by redoubled ingenuity of tenderness and of care. And so God does with us. When you and I, who deserve-oh! so different treatment-get, as we do get, daily care and providential blessings from Him, is not that His saying to us, 'I beseech you to cherish no alienation, enmity, indifference, but to come back and live in the love' ? When He draws near to us in these outward gifts of His mercy, is He not doing Himself what He has bid us to do; and what He never could have bid us to do, nor our hearts have recognised to be the highest strain of human virtue to do, unless He Himself were doing it first? 'If thine enemy hunger, feed him. If he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head.'

Not only by the great demonstration of His stooping and infinite desire for our love which lies in the life and death of Jesus Christ, nor only by His outward work, nor by His providence, but by many an inward touch on our spirits, by many a prick of conscience, by many a strange longing that has swept across our souls, sudden as some perfumed air in the scentless atmosphere; by many an inward voice, coming we know not whence, that has spoken to us of Him, of His love, of our duty; by many a drawing which has brought us nearer to the Cross of Jesus Christ, only, alas! in some cases that we might recoil further from it,-has He been beseeching, beseeching us all.

Brethren! God pleads with you. He pleads with you because there is nothing in His heart to any of you but love, and a desire to bless you; He pleads with you because, unless you will let Him, He cannot lavish upon you His richest gifts and His highest blessings. He pleads with you, bowing to the level, and beneath the level, of your alienation and reluctance. And the sum and substance of all His dealings with every soul is, ‘My son! give Me thy heart.’ ‘Be ye reconciled to God.’

II. And now turn, very briefly, to the next suggestion arising from this text, the terrible obverse, so to speak, of the coin: Man refusing a beseeching God.

That is the great paradox and mystery. Nobody has ever fathomed that yet, and nobody will. How it comes, how it is possible, there is no need for us to inquire. It is an awful and a solemn power that every poor little speck of humanity has, to lift itself up in God’s face, and say, in answer to all His pleadings, ‘I will not!’ as if the dwellers in some little island, a mere pin-point of black, barren rock, jutting up at sea, were to declare war against a kingdom that stretched through twenty degrees of longitude on the mainland. So we, on our little bit of island, our pin-point of rock in the great waste ocean, we can separate ourselves from the great Continent; or, rather, God has, in a fashion, made us separate in order that we may either unite ourselves with Him, by our willing yielding, or wrench ourselves away from Him by our antagonism and rebellion. God beseeches because God has so settled the relations between Him and us, that that is what He has to do in order to get men to love Him. He cannot force them. He cannot prise open a man’s heart with a crowbar, as it were, and force Himself inside. The door opens from within. ‘Behold! I stand at the door and knock.’ There is an ‘if.’ ‘If any man open I will come in.’ Hence the beseeching, hence the wail of wisdom that cries aloud and no man regards it; of love that stands at the entering in of the city, and pleads in vain, and says, ‘I have called, and ye have refused. . .. How often would I have gathered . . . and ye would not.’ Oh, brethren! it is an awful responsibility, a mysterious prerogative, which each one of us, whether consciously or no, has to exercise, to accept or to refuse the pleadings of an entreating Christ.

And let me remind you that the act of refusal is a very simple one. Not to accept is to reject; not to yield is to rebel. You have only to do nothing, to do it all. There are dozens of people in our churches and chapels listening with self-satisfied unconcern, who have all their lives been refusing a beseeching God. And they do not know that they ever did it! They say, ‘Oh! I will be a Christian some time or other.’ They cherish vague ideas that, somehow or other, they are so already. They have done nothing at all, they have simply been absolutely indifferent and passive. Some of you have heard sermons like this so often that they produce no effect. ‘It is the right kind of thing to say. It is the thing we have heard a hundred times.’ Perhaps you wonder why I should be so much in earnest about the matter, and then you go outside, and discuss me or the weather, and forget all about the sermon.

And thus, once more, you reject Christ. It is done without knowing it; done simply by doing nothing. My brother! do not stop your ears any more against that tender, imploring love.

Then let me remind you that this refusing the beseeching of God is the climax of all folly. For consider what it is,-a man refusing his highest good and choosing his certain ruin. I am afraid that people have been arguing and fighting so much of late years over disputable points in reference to the doctrine of future retribution that the indisputable fact of such retribution has lost much of its solemn power.

I pray you, brethren, to ask yourselves one question: Is there anything, in the present or in the future condition of a man that is not reconciled to God, which explains God’s beseeching urgency? Why this energy and intensity of divine desire? Why this which, if it were human only, would be called *passionate* entreaty? Why was it needful for Jesus Christ to die? Why was it worth His while to bear the punishment of man's sin? Why should God and Christ, through all the ages, plead with unintermittent voice? There must be some explanation of it all, and here is the explanation, 'They that hate Me love *death*.' 'Be ye reconciled to God,' for enmity is ruin and destruction.

And finally, dear friends, this turning away from Him that speaketh from Heaven, of which some of you have all your lives been guilty, is not only supreme folly, but it is the climax of all guilt. For there can be nothing worse, darker, arguing a nature more averse or indifferent to the highest good, than that God should plead, and I should steel my heart and deafen mine ear against His voice. The crown of a man's sin, because it is the disclosure of the secrets of his deepest heart as loving darkness rather than light, is turning away from the divine voice that woos us to love and to God.

Oh! there are some of you that have heard that Voice too often to be much touched by it. There are some of you too busy to attend to it, who hear it not because of the clatter of the streets and the whir of the spindles. There are some of you that are seeking to drown it in the shouts of mirth and revelry. There are some of you to whom it comes muffled in the mists of doubt; but I beseech you all, look at the Cross, *look at the Cross!* and hear Him that hangs there pleading with you.

Before the battle there comes out the captain of the twenty thousand to the King with the ten thousand, who in His loftiness is not afraid to stoop to sue for peace from the weaker power. My brother! the moment is precious; the white flag may never be waved before your eyes again. Do not; do not refuse! or the next instant the clarion of the assault may sound, and where will you be then?

It is vain for thee to rush against the thick bosses of the Almighty buckler. 'We beseech, in Christ's behalf, be ye reconciled with God.'

15) 2 Corinthians 7:1

2 Corinthians

HOPE AND HOLINESS

2Co. 7:1

It is often made a charge against professing Christians that their religion has very little to do with common morality. The taunt has sharpened multitudes of gibes and been echoed in all sorts of tones: it is very often too true and perfectly just, but if ever it is, let it be distinctly understood that it is not so because of Christian men's religion but in spite of it. Their bitterest enemy does not condemn them half so emphatically as their own religion does: the sharpest censure of others is not so sharp as the rebukes of the New Testament. If there is one thing which it insists upon more than another, it is that religion without morality is nothing--that the one test to which, after all, every man must submit is, what sort of character has he and how has he behaved--is he pure or foul? All high-flown pretension, all fervid emotion has at last to face the question which little children ask, 'Was he a good man?'

The Apostle has been speaking about very high and mystical truths, about all Christians being the temple of God, about God dwelling in men, about men and women being His sons and daughters; these are the very truths on which so often fervid imaginations have built up a mystical piety that had little to do with the common rules of right and wrong. But Paul keeps true to the intensely practical purpose of his preaching and brings his heroes down to the prosaic earth with the homely common sense of this far-reaching exhortation, which he gives as the fitting conclusion for such celestial visions.

I. A Christian life should be a life of constant self-purifying.

This epistle is addressed to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the _saints_ which are in all Achaia.

Looking out over that wide region, Paul saw scattered over godless masses a little dispersed company to each of whom the sacred name of Saint applied. They had been deeply stained with the vices of their age and place, and after a black list of criminals he had had to say to them 'such were some of you,' and he lays his finger on the miracle that had changed them and hesitates not to say of them all, ‘But ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.’

The first thing, then, that every Christian has is a cleansing which accompanies forgiveness, and however his garment may have been ‘spotted by the flesh,’ it is ‘washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb.’ Strange cleansing by which black stains melt out of garments plunged in red blood! With the cleansing of forgiveness and justification comes, wherever they come, the gift of the Holy Spirit--a new life springing up within the old life, and untouched by any contact with its evils. These gifts belong universally to the initial stage of the Christian life and require for their possession only the receptiveness of faith. They admit of no co-operation of human effort, and to possess them men have only to ‘take the things that are freely given to them of God.’ But of the subsequent stages of the Christian life, the laborious and constant effort to develop and apply that free gift is as essential as, in the earliest stage, it is worse than useless. The gift received has to be wrought into the very substance of the soul, and to be wrought out in all the endless varieties of life and conduct. Christians are cleansed to begin with, but they have still daily to cleanse themselves: the leaven is hid in the three measures of meal, but ‘‘tis a life-long task till the lump be leavened,’ and no man, even though he has the life that was in Jesus within him, will grow up ‘into the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’ unless, by patient and persistent effort, he is ever pressing on to ‘the things that are before’ and daily striving to draw nearer to the prize of his high calling. We are cleansed, but we have still to cleanse ourselves.

Yet another paradox attaches to the Christian life, inasmuch as God cleanses us, but we have to cleanse ourselves. The great truth that the spirit of God in a man is the fontal source of all his goodness, and that Christ’s righteousness is given to us, is no pillow on which to rest an idle head, but should rather be a trumpet-call to effort which is thereby made certain of success. If we were left to the task of self-purifying by our own efforts we might well fling it up as impossible. It is as easy for a man to lift himself from the ground by gripping his own shoulders as it is for us to rise to greater heights of moral conduct by our own efforts; but if we can believe that God gives the impulse after purity, and the vision of what purity is, and imparts the power of attaining it, strengthening at once our dim sight and stirring our feeble desires and energising our crippled limbs, then we can ‘run with patience the race that is set before us.’

We must note the thoroughness of the cleansing which the Apostle here enjoins. What is to be got rid of is not this or that defect or vice, but ‘_all_ filthiness of flesh and spirit.’ The former, of course, refers primarily to sins of impurity which in the eyes of the Greeks of Corinth were scarcely sins at all, and the latter to a state of mind when fancy, imagination, and memory were enlisted in the service of evil. Both are rampant in our day as they were in Corinth. Much modern literature and the new gospel of ‘Art for Art’s sake’ minister to both, and every man carries in himself inclinations to either. It is no partial cleansing with which Paul would have us to be satisfied: ‘_all_’ filthiness is to be cast out. Like careful housewives who are never content to cease their scrubbing while a speck remains upon furniture, Christian men are to regard their work as unfinished as long as the least trace of the unclean thing remains in their flesh or in their spirit. The ideal may be far from being realised at any moment, but it is at the peril of the whole sincerity and peacefulness of their lives if they, in the smallest degree, lower the perfection of their ideal in deference to the imperfection of their realisation of it.

It must be abundantly clear from our own experience that any such cleansing is a very long process. No character is made, whether it be good or bad, but by a slow building up: no man becomes most wicked all at once, and no man is sanctified by a wish or at a jump. As long as men are in a world so abounding with temptation, ‘he that is washed’ will need daily to ‘wash his feet’ that have been stained in the foul ways of life, if he is to be ‘clean every whit.’

As long as the spirit is imprisoned in the body and has it for its instrument there will be need for much effort at purifying. We must be content to overcome one foe at a time, and however strong may be the pilgrim’s spirit in us, we must be content to take one step at a time, and to advance by very slow degrees. Nor is it to be forgotten that as we get nearer what we ought to be, we should be more conscious of the things in which we are not what we ought to be. The nearer we get to Jesus Christ, the more will our consciences be enlightened as to the particulars in which we are still distant from Him. A speck on a polished shield will show plain that would never have been seen on a rusty one. The saint who is nearest God will think more of his sins than the man who is furthest from him. So new work of purifying will open before us as we grow more pure, and this will last as long as life itself.

II. The Christian life is to be not merely a continual getting rid of evil, but a continual becoming good.

Paul here draws a distinction between cleansing ourselves from filthiness and perfecting holiness, and these two, though closely connected and capable of being regarded as being but the positive and negative sides of one process, are in reality different, though in practice the former is never achieved without the latter, nor the latter accomplished without the former. Holiness is more than purity; it is consecration. That is holy which is devoted to God, and a saint is one whose daily effort is to devote his whole self, in all his faculties and nature, thoughts, heart, and will, more and more, to God, and to receive into himself more and more of God.

The purifying which Paul has been enjoining will only be successful in the measure of our consecration, and the consecration will only be genuine in the measure of our purifying. Herein lies the broad and blessed distinction between the world’s morality and Christian ethics. The former fails just because it lacks the attitude towards a Person who is the very foundation of Christian morality, and changes a hard and impossible law into love. There is no more futile waste of breath than that of teachers of morality who have no message but Be good! Be good! and no motive by which to urge it but the pleasures of virtue and the disadvantages of vice, but when the vagueness of the abstract thought of goodness solidifies into a living Person and that Person makes his appeal first to our hearts and bids us love him, and then opens before us the unstained light of his own character and beseeches us to be like him, the repellent becomes attractive: the impossible becomes possible, and ‘if ye love Me keep My commandments’ becomes a constraining power and a victorious impulse in our lives.

III. The Christian life of purifying and consecration is to be animated by hope and fear.

The Apostle seems to connect hope more immediately with the cleansing, and holiness with the fear of God, but probably both hope and fear are in his mind as the double foundation on which both purity and consecration are to rest, or the double emotion which is to produce them both. These promises refer directly to the immediately preceding words, ‘I will be a Father unto you and ye shall be My sons and daughters,’ in which all the blessings which God can give or men can receive are fused together in one lustrous and all-comprehensive whole. So all the great truths of the Gospel and all the blessed emotions of sonship which can spring up in a human heart are intended to find their practical result in holy and pure living. For this end God has spoken to us out of the thick darkness; for this end Christ has come into our darkness; for this end He has lived; for this end He died; for this end He rose again; for this end He sends His Spirit and administers the providence of the world. The purpose of all the Divine activity as regards us men is not merely to make us happy, but to make us happy in order that we may be good. He whom what he calls his religion has only saved from the wrath of God and the fear of hell has not learned the alphabet of religion. Unless God’s promises evoke men’s goodness it will be of little avail that they seem to quicken their hope. Joyful confidence in our sonship is only warranted in the measure in which we are like our Father. Hope often deludes and makes men dreamy and unpractical. It generally paints pictures far lovelier than the realities, and without any of their shadows; it is too often the stimulus and ally of ignoble lives, and seldom stirs to heroism or endurance, but its many defects are not due to itself but to its false choice of objects on which to fix. The hope which is lifted from trailing along the earth and twining round creatures and which rises to grasp these promises ought to be, and in the measure of its reality is the ally of all patient endurance and noble self-sacrifice. Its vision of coming good is all directed to the coming Christ, and ‘every man that hath this hope in Him, purifieth himself even as He is pure.’

In Paul’s experience there was no contrariety between hope set on Jesus and fear directed towards God. It is in the fear of God that holiness is to be perfected. There is a fear which has no torment. Yet more, there is no love in sons or daughters without fear. The reverential awe with which God’s children draw near to God has in it nothing slavish and no terror. Their love is not only joyful but lowly. The worshipping gaze upon His Divine majesty, the reverential and adoring contemplation of His ineffable holiness, and the poignant consciousness, after all effort, of the distance between us and Him will bow the hearts that love Him most in lowliest prostration before Him. These two, hope and fear, confidence and awe, are like the poles on which the whole round world turns and are united here in one result. They who ‘set their hope in God’ must ‘not forget the works of God but keep His commandments’; they who ‘call Him Father,’ ‘who without respect of persons judgeth’ must ‘pass the time of their sojourning here in fear,’ and their hopes and their fears must drive the wheels of life, purify them from all filthiness and perfect them in all holiness.

16)2 Corinthians 7:10

2 Corinthians

SORROW ACCORDING TO GOD

2Co. 7:10.

Very near the close of his missionary career the Apostle Paul summed up his preaching as being all directed to enforcing two points, ‘Repentance towards God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.’ These two, repentance and faith, ought never to be separated in thought, as they are inseparable in fact. True repentance is impossible without faith, true faith cannot exist without repentance.

Yet the two are separated very often, even by earnest Christian teachers. The tendency of this day is to say a great deal about faith, and not nearly enough in proportion about repentance; and the effect is to obscure the very idea of faith, and not seldom to preach ‘Peace! peace! when there is no peace.’ A gospel which is always talking about faith, and scarcely ever talking about sin and repentance, is denuded, indeed, of some of its most unwelcome characteristics, but is also deprived of most of its power, and it may very easily become an ally of unrighteousness, and an indulgence to sin. The reproach that the Christian doctrine of salvation through faith is immoral in its substance derives most of its force from forgetting that ‘repentance towards God’ is as real a condition of salvation as is ‘faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.’ We have here the Apostle’s deliverance about one of these twin thoughts. We have three stages--the root, the stem, the fruit; sorrow, repentance, salvation. But there is a right and a wrong kind of sorrow for sin. The right kind breeds repentance, and thence reaches salvation; the wrong kind breeds nothing, and so ends in death.

Let us then trace these stages, not forgetting that this is not a complete statement of the case, and needs to be supplemented in the spirit of the words which I have already quoted, by the other part of the inseparable whole, ‘faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ.’

I. First, then, consider the true and the false sorrow for sin.

The Apostle takes it for granted that a recognition of our own evil, and a consequent penitent regretfulness, lie at the foundation of all true Christianity. Now I do not insist upon any uniformity of experience in people, any more than I should insist that all their bodies should be of one shape or of one proportion. Human lives are infinitely different, human dispositions are subtly varied, and because neither the one nor the other are ever reproduced exactly in any two people, therefore the religious experience of no two souls can ever be precisely alike.

We have no right to ask--and much harm has been done by asking--for an impossible uniformity of religious experience, any more than we have a right to expect that all voices shall be pitched in one key, or all plants flower in the same month, or after the same fashion. You can print off as many copies as you like, for instance, of a drawing of a flower on a printing-press, and they shall all be alike, petal for petal, leaf for leaf, shade for shade; but no two hand-drawn copies will be so precisely alike, still less will any two of the real buds that blow on the bush. Life produces resemblance with differences; it is machinery that makes facsimiles.

So we insist on no pedantic or unreal uniformity; and yet, whilst leaving the widest scope for divergencies of individual character and experience, and not asking that a man all diseased and blotched with the leprosy of sin for half a lifetime, and a little child that has grown up at its mother's knee, 'in the nurture and admonition of the Lord,' and so has been kept 'innocent of much transgression,' shall have the same experience; yet Scripture, as it seems to me, and the nature of the case do unite in asserting that there are certain elements which, in varying proportions indeed, will be found in all true Christian experience, and of these an indispensable one--and in a very large number, if not in the majority of cases, a fundamental one--is this which my text calls 'godly sorrow.'

Dear brethren, surely a reasonable consideration of the facts of our conduct and character point to that as the attitude that becomes us. Does it not? I do not charge you with crimes in the eye of the law. I do not suppose that many of you are living in flagrant disregard of the elementary principles of common every-day morality. Some are, no doubt. There are, no doubt, unclean men here; there are some who eat and drink more than is good for them, habitually; there are, no doubt, men and women who are living in avarice and worldliness, and doing things which the ordinary conscience of the populace points to as faults and blemishes. But I come to you respectable people that can say: 'I am not as other men are, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican'; and pray you, dear friends, to look at your character all round, in the light of the righteousness and love of God, and to plead to the indictment which charges you with neglect of many a duty and with sin against Him. How do you plead, 'guilty or not guilty, sinful or not sinful?' Be honest with yourselves, and the answer will not be far to seek.

Notice how my text draws a broad distinction between the right and the wrong kind of sorrow for sin. 'Godly sorrow' is, literally rendered,'sorrow according to God,' which may either mean sorrow which has reference to God, or sorrow which is in accordance with His will; that is to say, which is pleasing to Him. If it is the former, it will be the latter. I prefer to suppose that it is the former--that is, sorrow which has reference to God. And then, there is another kind of sorrow, which the Apostle calls the 'sorrow of the world,' which is devoid of that reference to God. Here we have the characteristic difference between the Christian way of looking at our own faults and shortcomings, and the sorrow of the world, which has got no blessing in it, and will never lead to anything like righteousness and peace.

It is just this--one has reference to God, puts its sin by His side, sees its blackness relieved against the ‘fierce light’ of the Great White Throne, and the other has not that reference.

To expand that for a moment,--there are plenty of us who, when our sin is behind us, and its bitter fruits are in our hands, are sorry enough for our faults. A man that is lying in the hospital a wreck, with the sins of his youth gnawing the flesh off his bones, is often enough sorry that he did not live more soberly and chastely and temperately in the past days. That fraudulent bankrupt who has not got his discharge and has lost his reputation, and can get nobody to lend him money enough to start him in business again, as he hangs about the streets, slouching in his rags, is sorry enough that he did not keep the straight road. The ‘sorrow of the world’ has no thought about God in it at all. The consequences of sin set many a man’s teeth on edge who does not feel any compunction for the wrong that he did. My brethren, is that the position of any that are listening to me now?

Again, men are often sorry for their conduct without thinking of it as sin against God. Crime means the transgression of man’s law, wrong means the transgression of conscience’s law, sin is the transgression of God’s law. Some of us would perhaps have to say--’I have done crime.’ We are all of us quite ready to say: ‘I have done wrong many a time’; but there are some of us who hesitate to take the other step, and say: ‘I have done sin.’ Sin has, for its correlative, God. If there is no God there is no sin. There may be faults, there may be failures, there may be transgressions, breaches of the moral law, things done inconsistent with man’s nature and constitution, and so on; but if there be a God, then we have personal relations to that Person and His law; and when we break His law it is more than crime; it is more than fault; it is more than transgression; it is more than wrong; it is sin. It is when you lift the shutter off conscience, and let the light of God rush in upon your hearts and consciences, that you have the wholesome sorrow that worketh repentance and salvation and life.

Oh, dear friends, I do beseech you to lay these simple thoughts to heart. Remember, I urge no rigid uniformity of experience or character, but I do say that unless a man has learned to see his sin in the light of God, and in the light of God to weep over it, he has yet to know ‘the strait gate that leadeth unto life.’

I believe that a very large amount of the superficiality and easy-goingness of the Christianity of to-day comes just from this, that so many who call themselves Christians have never once got a glimpse of themselves as they really are. I remember once peering over the edge of the crater of Vesuvius, and looking down into the pit, all swirling with sulphurous fumes. Have you ever looked into your hearts, in that fashion, and seen the wreathing smoke and the flashing fire there? If you have, you will cleave to that Christ, who is your sole deliverance from sin.

But, remember, there is no prescription about depth or amount or length of time during which this sorrow shall be felt. If, on the one hand, it is essential, on the other hand there are a great many people who ought to be walking in the light and the liberty of God’s Gospel who bring darkness and clouds over themselves by the anxious scrutinising question: ‘Is my sorrow deep enough?’ Deep enough! What for? What is the use of sorrow for sin? To lead a man to repentance and to faith. If you have as much sorrow as leads you to penitence and trust you have enough. It is not your sorrow that is going to wash away your sin, it is Christ’s blood. So let no man trouble himself about the question, Have I sorrow enough? The one question is: ‘Has my sorrow led me to cast myself on Christ?’

II. Still further, look now for a moment at the next stage here. ‘Godly sorrow worketh repentance.’

What is repentance? No doubt many of you would answer that it is ‘sorrow for sin,’ but clearly this text of ours draws a distinction between the two. There are very few of the great key-words of Christianity that have suffered more violent and unkind treatment, and have been more obscured by misunderstandings, than this great word. It has been weakened down into penitence, which in the ordinary acceptation, means simply the emotion that I have already been speaking about, viz., a regretful sense of my own evil. And it has been still further docked and degraded, both in its syllables and in its substance, into _penance_. But the ‘repentance’ of the New Testament and of the Old Testament--one of the twin conditions of salvation--is neither sorrow for sin nor works of restitution and satisfaction, but it is, as the word distinctly expresses, a change of purpose in regard to the sin for which a man mourns. I cannot now expand and elaborate this idea as I should like, but let me remind you of one or two passages in Scripture which may show that the right notion of the word is not sorrow but changed attitude and purpose in regard to my sin.

We find passages, some of which ascribe and some deny repentance to the Divine nature. But if there be a repentance which is possible for the Divine nature, it obviously cannot mean sorrow for sin, but must signify a change of purpose. In the Epistle to the Romans we read, ‘The gifts and calling of God are without repentance,’ which clearly means without change of purpose on His part. And I read in the story of the mission of the Prophet Jonah, that ‘the Lord repented of the evil which He had said He would do unto them, and He did it not.’ Here, again, the idea of repentance is clearly and distinctly that of a change of purpose. So fix this on your minds, and lay it on your hearts, dear friends, that the repentance of the New Testament is not idle tears nor the twitchings of a vain regret, but the resolute turning away of the sinful heart from its sins. It is ‘repentance toward God,’ the turning from the sin to the Father, and that is what leads to salvation. The sorrow is separated from the repentance in idea, however closely they may be intertwined in fact. The sorrow is one thing, and the repentance which it works is another.

Then notice that this change of purpose and breaking off from sin is produced by the sorrow for sin, of which I have been speaking; and that the production of this repentance is the main characteristic difference between the godly sorrow and the sorrow of the world. A man may have his paroxysms of regret, but the question is: Does it make any difference in his attitude? Is he standing, after the tempest of sorrow has swept over him, with his face in the same direction as before; or has it whirled him clean round, and set him in the other direction? The one kind of sorrow, which measures my sin by the side of the brightness and purity of God, vindicates itself as true, because it makes me hate my evil and turn away from it. The other, which is of the world, passes over me like the empty wind through an archway, it whistles for a moment and is gone, and there is nothing left to show that it was ever there. The one comes like one of those brooks in tropical countries, dry and white for half the year, and then there is a rush of muddy waters, fierce but transient, and leaving no results behind. My brother! when your conscience pricks, which of these two things does it do? After the prick, is the word of command that your Will issues ‘Right about face!’ or is it ‘As you were’? Godly sorrow worketh a change of attitude, purpose, mind; the sorrow of the world leaves a man standing where he was. Ask yourselves the question: Which of the two are you familiar with?

Again, the true means of evoking true repentance is the contemplation of the Cross. Law and the fear of hell may startle into sorrow, and even lead to some kind of repentance. But it is the great power of Christ’s love and sacrifice which will really melt the heart into true repentance. You may hammer ice to pieces, but it is ice still. You may bray a fool in a mortar, and his folly will not depart from him. Dread of punishment may pulverise the heart, but not change it; and each fragment, like the smallest bits of a magnet, will have the same characteristics as the whole mass. But ‘the goodness of God leads to repentance’ as the prodigal is conquered and sees the true hideousness of the swine’s trough, when he bethinks himself of the father’s love. I beseech you to put yourselves under the influence of that great love, and look on that Cross till your hearts melt.

III. We come to the last stage here. Salvation is the issue of repentance. ‘Godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation not to be repented of.’

What is the connection between repentance and salvation? Two sentences will answer the question. You cannot get salvation without repentance. You do not get salvation by repentance.

You cannot get the salvation of God unless you shake off your sin. It is no use preaching to a man, ‘Faith, Faith, Faith!’ unless you preach along with it,’Break off your iniquities.’ ‘Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him turn unto the Lord.’ The nature of the case forbids it. It is a clear contradiction in terms, and an absolute impossibility in fact, that God should save a man with the salvation which consists in the deliverance from sin, whilst that man is holding to his sin. Unless, therefore, you have not merely sorrow, but repentance, which is turning away from sin with resolute purpose, as a man would turn from a serpent, you cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

But you do not get salvation for your repentance. It is no case of barter, it is no case of salvation by works, that work being repentance:

‘Could my zeal no respite know,

Could my tears for ever flow,

All for sin could not atone,

Thou must save, and Thou alone.’

Not my penitence, but Christ’s death, is the ground of the salvation of every one that is saved at all. Yet repentance is an indispensable condition of salvation.

What is the connection between repentance and faith? There can be no true repentance without trust in Christ. There can be no true trust in Christ without the forsaking of my sin. Repentance without faith, in so far as it is possible, is one long misery; like the pains of those poor Hindoo devotees that will go all the way from Cape Comorin to the shrine of Juggernaut, and measure every foot of the road with the length of their own bodies in the dust. Men will do anything, and willingly make any sacrifice, rather than open their eyes to see this,--that repentance, clasped hand in hand with Faith, leads the guiltiest soul into the forgiving presence of the crucified Christ, from whom peace flows into the darkest heart.

On the other hand, faith without repentance is not possible, in any deep sense. But in so far as it is possible, it produces a superficial Christianity which vaguely trusts to Christ without knowing exactly what it is trusting Him for, or why it needs Him; and which has a great deal to say about what I may call the less important parts of the Christian system, and nothing to say about its vital centre; which preaches a morality which is not a living power to create; which practises a religion which is neither a joy nor a security. The old word of the Master has a deep truth in it: ‘These are they which heard the word, and anon with joy received it.’ Having no sorrow, no penitence, no deep consciousness of sin, ‘they have no root in themselves, and in time of temptation they fall away.’ If there is to be a profound, an all-pervading, life-transforming-sin, and devil-conquering faith, it must be a faith rooted deep in penitence and sorrow for sin.

Dear brethren, if, by God’s grace, my poor words have touched your consciences at all, I beseech you, do not trifle with the budding conviction! Do not seek to have the wound skinned over. Take care that you do not let it all pass in idle sorrow or impotent regret. If you do, you will be hardened, and the worse for it, and come nearer to that condition which the sorrow of the world worketh, the awful death of the soul. Do not wince from the knife before the roots of the cancer are cut out. The pain is merciful. Better the wound than the malignant growth. Yield yourselves to the Spirit that would convince you of sin, and listen to the voice that calls to you to forsake your unrighteous ways and thoughts. But do not trust to any tears, do not trust to any resolves, do not trust to any reformation. Trust only to the Lord who died on the Cross for you, whose death for you, whose life in you, will be deliverance from your sin. Then you will have a salvation which, in the striking language of my text, ‘is not to be repented of,’ which will leave no regrets in your hearts in the day when all else shall have faded, and the sinful sweets of this world shall have turned to ashes and bitterness on the lips of the men that feed on them.

‘The sorrow of the world works death.’ There are men and women listening to me now who are half conscious of their sin, and are resisting the pleading voice that comes to them, who at the last will open their eyes upon the realities of their lives, and in a wild passion of remorse, exclaim: ‘I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly.’ Better to make thorough work of the sorrow, and by it to be led to repentance toward God and faith in Christ, and so secure for our own that salvation for which no man will ever regret having given even the whole world, since he gains his own soul.

17)2 Corinthians 8:1-12

2 Corinthians

GIVING AND ASKING

2Co. 8:1-12.

A collection from Gentile churches for their poor brethren in Jerusalem occupied much of Paul’s time and efforts before his last visit to that city. Many events, which have filled the world with noise and been written at length in histories, were less significant than that first outcome of the unifying spirit of common faith. It was a making visible of the grand thought, ‘Ye are all one in Christ Jesus.’ Practical help, prompted by a deep-lying sense of unity which overleaped gulfs of separation in race, language, and social conditions, was a unique novelty. It was the first pulsation of that spirit of Christian liberality which has steadily grown in force and sweep ever since. Foolish people gibe at some of its manifestations. Wiser ones regard its existence as not the least of the marks of the divine origin of Christianity.

This passage is a striking example of the inimitable delicacy of the Apostle. His words are full of what we should call tact, if it were not manifestly the spontaneous utterance of right feeling. They are a perfect model of the true way to appeal for money, and set forth also the true spirit in which such appeals should be made.

In verses 1 to 5, Paul seeks to stimulate the liberality of the Corinthians by recounting that of the Macedonian churches. His sketch draws in outline the picture of what all Christian money-giving should be. We note first the designation of the Macedonian Christians’ beneficence as ‘a grace’ given by God to them. It is twice called so [vers. 1, 4], and the same name is applied in regard to the Corinthians’ giving [vers. 6, 7]. That is the right way to look at money contributions. The opportunity to give them, and the inclination to do so, are God’s gifts. How many of us think that calls for service or money are troublesome obligations, to be got out of as easily as possible! A true Christian will be thankful, as for a love token from God, for every occasion of giving to Him. It would be a sharp test for many of us to ask ourselves whether we can say, ‘To me . . . is this grace given,’ that I should part with my money for Christ’s sake.

Note, further, the lovely picture of these Macedonian givers. They were plunged in sorrows and troubles, but these did not dry their fountains of sympathy. Nothing is apt to be more selfish than grief; and if we have tears to spare for others, when they are flowing bitterly for ourselves, we have graduated well in Christ’s school. Paul calls the Macedonians’ troubles ‘proof of their affliction,’ meaning that it constituted a proof of their Christian character; that is, by the manner in which it was borne; and in it they had still ‘abundance of joy,’ for the paradox of the Christian life is that it admits of the co-existence of grief and gladness.

Again, Christian giving gives from scanty stores. ‘Deep poverty’ is no excuse for not giving, and will be no hindrance to a willing heart. ‘I cannot afford it’ is sometimes a genuine valid reason, but oftener an insincere plea. Why are subscriptions for religious purposes the first expenditure to be reduced in bad times?

Further, Christian giving gives up to the very edge of ability, and sometimes goes beyond the limits of so-called prudence. In all regions ‘power to its last particle is duty,’ and unless power is strained it is not fully exercised. It is in trying to do what we cannot do that we do best what we can do. He who keeps well within the limits of his supposed ability will probably not do half as much as he could. While there is a limit behind which generosity even for Christ may become dishonesty or disregard of other equally sacred claims, there is little danger of modern Christians transgressing that limit, and they need the stimulus to do a little more than they think they can do, rather than to listen to cold-blooded prudence.

Further, Christian giving does not wait to be asked, but takes the opportunity to give as itself ‘grace’ and presses its benefactions. It is an unwonted experience for a collector of subscriptions to be besought to take them ‘with much entreaty,’ but it would not be so anomalous if Christian people understood their privileges.

Further, Christian giving begins with the surrender of self to Christ, from which necessarily follows the glad offering of wealth. These Macedonians did more than Paul had hoped, and the explanation of the unexpected largeness of their contributions was their yielding of themselves to Jesus. That is the deepest source of all true liberality. If a man feels that he does not own himself, much less will he feel that his goods are his own. A slave’s owner possesses the slave’s bit of garden ground, his hut, and its furniture. If I belong to Christ, to whom does my money belong? But the consciousness that my goods are not mine, but Christ’s, is not to remain a mere sentiment. It can receive practical embodiment by my giving them to Christ's representatives. The way for the Macedonians to show that they regarded their goods as Christ's, was to give them to Paul for Christ's poor saints. Jesus has His representatives still, and it is useless for people to talk or sing about belonging to Him, unless they verify their words by deeds.

Verse 6 tells the Corinthians that the success of the collection in Macedonia had induced Paul to send Titus to Corinth to promote it there. He had previously visited it on the same errand [2Co. 12:14], and now is coming to complete 'this grace.' The rest of the passage is Paul's appeal to the Corinthians for their help in the matter, and certainly never was such an appeal made in a more dignified, noble, and lofty tone. He has been dilating on the liberality of others, and thereby sanctioning the stimulating of Christian liberality, in the same way as other graces may legitimately be stimulated, by example. That is delicate ground to tread on, and needs caution if it is not to degenerate into an appeal to rivalry, as it too often does, but in itself is perfectly legitimate and wholesome. But, passing from that incitement, Paul rests his plea on deeper grounds.

First, Christian liberality is essential to the completeness of Christian character. Paul's praise in verse 7 is not mere flattery, nor meant to put the Corinthians into good humour. He will have enough to say hereafter about scandals and faults, but now he gives them credit for all the good he knew to be in them. Faith comes first, as always. It is the root of every Christian excellence. Then follow two graces, eminently characteristic of a Greek church, and apt to run to seed in it,--utterance and knowledge. Then two more, both of a more emotional character,--earnestness and love, especially to Paul as Christ's servant. But all these fair attributes lacked completeness without the crowning grace of liberality. It is the crowning grace, because it is the practical manifestation of the highest excellences. It is the result of sympathy, of unselfishness, of contact with Christ, of drinking in of His spirit, Love is best. Utterance and knowledge and earnestness are poor beside it. This grace is like the diamond which clasps a necklace of jewels.

Christian giving does not need to be commanded. 'I speak not by way of commandment.' That is poor virtue which only obeys a precept. Gifts given because it is duty to give them are not really gifts, but taxes. They leave no sweet savour on the hand that bestows, and bring none to that which receives. ‘I call you not servants, but friends.’ The region in which Christian liberality moves is high above the realm of law and its correlative, obligation.

Further, Christian liberality springs spontaneously from conscious possession of Christ’s riches. We cannot here enter on the mysteries of Christ’s emptying Himself of His riches of glory. We can but touch the stupendous fact, remembering that the place whereon we stand is holy ground. Who can measure the nature and depth of that self-denuding of the glory which He had with the Father before the world was? But, thank God, we do not need to measure it, in order to feel the solemn, blessed force of the appeal which it makes to us. Adoring wonder and gratitude, unfaltering trust and absolute self-surrender to a love so self-sacrificing, must ever follow the belief of that mystery of Divine mercy, the incarnation and sacrifice of the eternal Son.

But Paul would have us remember that the same mighty act of stooping love, which is the foundation of all our hope, is to be the pattern for all our conduct. Even in His divinest and most mysterious act, Christ is our example. A dewdrop is rounded by the same laws which shape the planetary spheres or the sun himself; and Christians but half trust Christ if they do not imitate Him. What selfishness in enjoyment of our ‘own things’ could live in us if we duly brought ourselves under the influence of that example? How miserably poor and vulgar the appeals by which money is sometimes drawn from grudging owners and tight-buttoned pockets, sound beside that heart-searching and heart-moving one, ‘Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ!’

Further, Christian liberality will not go off in good intentions and benevolent sentiments. The Corinthians were ready with their ‘willing’ on Titus’s previous visit. Now Paul desires them to put their good feelings into concrete shape. There is plenty of benevolence that never gets to be beneficence. The advice here has a very wide application: ‘As there was the readiness to will, so there may be the completion also.’ We all know where the road leads that is paved with good intentions.

Further, Christian liberality is accepted and rewarded according to willingness, if that is carried into act according to ability. While the mere wish to help is not enough, it is the vital element in the act which flows from it; and there may be more of it in the widow’s mite than in the rich man’s large donation--or there may be less. The conditions of acceptable offerings are twofold--first, readiness, glad willingness to give, as opposed to closed hearts or grudging bestowals; and, second, that willingness embodied in the largest gift possible. The absence of either vitiates all. The presence of both gives trifles a place in God’s storehouse of precious things. A father is glad when his child brings him some utterly valueless present, not because he must, but because he loves; and many a parent has such laid away in sacred repositories. God knows how to take gifts from His children, not less well than we who are evil know how to do it.

But the gracious saying of our passage has a solemn side; for if only gifts ‘according as a man hath’ are accepted, what becomes of the many which fall far short of our ability, and are really given, not because we have the willing mind, but because we could not get out of the unwelcome necessity to part with a miserably inadequate percentage of our possessions. Is God likely to be satisfied with the small dividends which we offer as composition for our great debt?

18)2 Corinthians 8:9

2 Corinthians

RICH YET POOR

2Co. 8:9

The Apostle has been speaking about a matter which, to us, seems very small, but to him was very great viz., a gathering of pecuniary help from the Gentile churches for the poor church in Jerusalem. Large issues, in his estimation, attended that exhibition of Christian unity, and, be it great or small, he applies the highest of all motives to this matter. ‘For ye know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich yet for your sakes He became poor.’ The trivial things of life are to be guided and shaped by reference to the highest of all things, the example of Jesus Christ; and that in the whole depth of His humiliation, and even in regard to His cross and passion. We have here set forth, as the pattern to which the Christian life is to be conformed, the deepest conception of what our Lord’s career on earth was.

The whole Christian Church is about to celebrate the nativity of our Lord at this time. This text gives us the true point of view from which to regard it. We have here the work of Christ in its deepest motive, ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus.’ We have it in its transcendent self-impoverishment, ‘Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor.’ We have it in its highest issue, ‘That ye through His poverty might become rich.’ Let us look at those points.

I. Here we have the deepest motive which underlies the whole work of Christ, unveiled to us.

‘Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Every word here is significant. It is very unusual in the New Testament to find that expression ‘grace’ applied to Jesus Christ. Except in the familiar benediction, I think there are only one or two instances of such a collocation of words. It is ‘the grace of God’ which, throughout the New Testament, is the prevailing expression. But here ‘grace is attributed to Jesus’; that is to say, the love of the Divine heart is, without qualification or hesitation, ascribed to Him. And what do we mean by grace? We mean love in exercise to inferiors. It is infinite condescension in Jesus to love. His love stoops when it embraces us. Very significant, therefore, is the employment here of the solemn full title, ‘the Lord Jesus Christ,’ which enhances the condescension by making prominent the height from which it bent. The ‘grace’ is all the more wonderful because of the majesty and sovereignty, to say the least of it, which are expressed in that title, the Lord. The highest stoops and stands upon the level of the lowest. ‘Grace’ is love that expresses itself to those who deserve something else. And the deepest motive, which is the very key to the whole phenomena of the life of Jesus Christ, is that it is all the exhibition, as it is the consequence, of a love that, stooping, forgives. ‘Grace’ is love that, stooping and forgiving, communicates its whole self to unworthy and transgressing recipients. And the key to the life of Jesus is that we have set forth in its operation a love which is not content to speak only the ordinary language of human affection, or to do its ordinary deeds, but is self-impelled to impart what transcends all other gifts of human tenderness, and to give its very self. And so a love that condescends, a love that passes by unworthiness, is turned away by no sin, is unmoved to any kind of anger, and never allows its cheek to flush or its heart to beat faster, because of any provocation and a love that is content with nothing short of entire surrender and self-impartation underlies all that precious life from Bethlehem to Calvary.

But there is another word in our text that may well be here taken into consideration. ‘For your sakes,’ says the Apostle to that Corinthian church, made up of people, not one of whom had ever seen or been seen by Jesus. And yet the regard to them was part of the motive that moved the Lord to His life, and His death. That is to say, to generalise the thought, this grace, thus stooping and forgiving and self-imparting, is a love that gathers into its embrace and to its heart all mankind; and is universal because it is individualising. Just as each planet in the heavens, and each tiny plant upon the earth, are embraced by, and separately receive, the benediction of that all-encompassing arch of the heaven, so that grace enfolds all, because it takes account of each. Whilst it is love for a sinful world, every soul of us may say: ‘He loved me, and’--therefore--’gave Himself for me.’ Unless we see beneath the sweet story of the earthly life this deep-lying source of it all, we fail to understand that life itself. We may bring criticism to bear upon it; we may apprehend it in diverse affecting, elevating, educating aspects; but, oh! brethren, we miss the blazing centre of the light, the warm heart of the fire, unless we see pulsating through all the individual facts of the life this one, all-shaping, all-vitalising motive; the grace--the stooping, the pardoning, the self-communicating, the individualising, and the universal love of Jesus Christ.

So then, we have here set before us the work of Christ in its--

II. Most mysterious and unique self-impoverishment.

‘He was . . . He became,’ there is one strange contrast. ‘He was _rich_ . . . He became _poor_,’ there is another. ‘He was . . . He became.’ What does that say? Well, it says that if you want to understand Bethlehem, you must go back to a time before Bethlehem. The meaning of Christ's birth is only understood when we turn to that Evangelist who does not narrate it. For the meaning of it is here; 'the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.' The surface of the fact is the smallest part of the fact. They say that there is seven times as much of an iceberg under water as there is above the surface. And the deepest and most important fact about the nativity of our Lord is that it was not only the birth of an Infant, but the Incarnation of the Word. 'He was . . . He became.' We have to travel back and recognise that that life did not begin in the manger. We have to travel back and recognise the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh.

And these two words 'He was . . . He became,' imply another thing, and that is, that Jesus Christ who died because He chose, was not passive in His being born, but as at the end of His earthly life, so at its beginning exercised His volition, and was born because He willed, and willed because of 'the grace of our Lord Jesus.'

Now in this connection it is very remarkable, and well worth our pondering, that throughout the whole of the Gospels, when Jesus speaks of His coming into the world, He never uses the word 'born' but once, and that was before the Roman governor, who would not have understood or cared for anything further, to whom He did say,'To this end was I born.' But even when speaking to him His consciousness that that word did not express the whole truth was so strong that He could not help adding--though He knew that the hard Roman procurator would pay no attention to the apparent tautology--the expression which more truly corresponded to the fact, 'and for this cause came I into the world.' The two phrases are not parallel. They are by no means synonymous. One expresses the outward fact; the other expresses that which underlay it. 'To this end was I born.' Yes! 'And for this cause came I.' He Himself put it still more definitely when He said, 'I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go unto the Father.' So the two extremities of the earthly manifestation are neither of them ends; but before the one, and behind the other, there stretches an identity or oneness of Being and condition. The one as the other, the birth and the death, may be regarded as, in deepest reality, not only what He passively endured, but what He actively did. He was born, and He died, that in all points He might be 'like unto His brethren.' He ‘came’ into the world, and He ‘went’ to the Father. The end circled round to the beginning, and in both He acted because He chose, and chose because He loved.

So much, then, lies in the one of these two antitheses of my text; and the other is no less profound and significant. ‘He was rich; He became poor.’ In this connection ‘rich’ can only mean possessed of the Divine fulness and independence; and ‘poor’ can only mean possessed of human infirmity, dependence, and emptiness. And so to Jesus of Nazareth, to be born was impoverishment. If there is nothing more in His birth than in the birth of each of us, the words are grotesquely inappropriate to the facts of the case. For as between nothingness, which is the alternative, and the possession of conscious being, there is surely a contrast the very reverse of that expressed here. For us, to be born is to be endowed with capacities, with the wealth of intelligent, responsible, voluntary being; but to Jesus Christ, if we accept the New Testament teaching, to be born was a step, an infinite step, downwards, and He, alone of all men, might have been ‘ashamed to call men brethren.’ But this denudation of Himself, into the particulars of which I do not care to enter now, was the result of that stooping grace which ‘counted it not a thing to be clutched hold of, to be equal with God; but He made Himself of no reputation, and was found in fashion as a man, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.’

And so, dear friends, we know the measure of the stooping love of Jesus only when we read the history by the light of this thought, that ‘though He was rich’ with all the fulness of that eternal Word which was ‘in the beginning with God,’ ‘He became poor,’ with the poverty, the infirmity, the liability to temptation, the weakness, that attach to humanity; ‘and was found in all points like unto His brethren,’ that He might be able to help and succour them all.

The last thing here is--

III. The work of Christ set forth in its highest issue.

‘That we through His poverty might become rich.’ Of course, the antithetical expressions must be taken to be used in the same sense, and with the same width of application, in both of the clauses. And if so, just think reverently, wonderingly, thankfully, of the infinite vista of glorious possibility that is open to us here. Christ was rich in the possession of that Divine glory which Had had with the Father before the world was. ‘He became poor,’ in assuming the weakness of the manhood that you and I carry, that we, in the human poverty which is like His poverty, may become rich with wealth that is like His riches, and that as He stooped to earth veiling the Divine with the human, we may rise to heaven, clothing the human with the Divine.

For surely there is nothing more plainly taught in Scriptures, and I am bold to say nothing to which any deep and vital Christian experience even here gives more surely an anticipatory confirmation, than the fact that Christ became like unto us, that each of us may become like unto Him. The divine and the human natures are similar, and the fact of the Incarnation, on the one hand, and of the man’s glorification by possession of the divine nature on the other, equally rest upon that fundamental resemblance between the divine nature and the human nature which God has made in His own image. If that which in each of us is unlike God is cleared away, as it can be cleared away, through faith in that dear Lord, then the likeness as a matter of course, comes into force.

The law of all elevation is that whosoever desires to lift must stoop; and the end of all stooping is to lift the lowly to the place from which the love hath bent itself. And this is at once the law for the Incarnation of the Christ, and for the elevation of the Christian. ‘We shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is.’ And the great love, the stooping, forgiving, self-communicating love, doth not reach its ultimate issue, nor effect fully the purposes to which it ever is tending, unless and until all who have received it are ‘changed from glory to glory even into the image of the Lord.’ We do not understand Jesus, His cradle, or His Cross, unless on the one hand we see in them His emptying Himself that He might fill us, and, on the other hand, see, as the only result which warrants them and satisfies Him, our complete conformity to His image, and our participation in that glory which He has at the right hand of God. That is the prospect for humanity, and it is possible for each of us.

I do not dwell upon other aspects of this great self-emptying of our Lord's, such as the revelation in it to us of the very heart of God, and of the divinest thing in the divine nature, which is love, or such as the sympathy which is made possible thereby to Him, and which is not only the pity of a God, but the compassion of a Brother. Nor do I touch upon many other aspects which are full of strengthening and teaching. That grand thought that Jesus has shared our human poverty that we may share His divine riches is the very apex of the New Testament teaching, and of the Christian hope. We have within us, notwithstanding all our transgressions, what the old divines used to call a 'deiform nature,' capable of being lifted up into the participation of divinity, capable of being cleansed from all the spots and stains which make us so unlike Him in whose likeness we were made.

Brethren, let us not forget that this stooping, and pardoning, and self-imparting love, has for its main instrument to appeal to our hearts, not the cradle but the Cross. We are being told by many people to-day that the centre of Christianity lies in the thought of an Incarnation. Yes. But our Lord Himself has told us what that was for.

'The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.' It is only when we look to that Lord in His death, and see there the very lowest point to which He stooped, and the supreme manifestation of His grace, that we shall be drawn to yield our hearts and lives to Him in thankfulness, in trust, and in imitation: and shall set Him before us as the pattern for our conduct, as well as the Object of our trust.

Brethren, my text was spoken originally as presenting the motive and the example for a little piece of pecuniary liability. Do you take the cradle and the Cross as the law of your lives? For depend upon it, the same necessity which obliged Jesus to come down to our level, if He would lift us to His; to live our life and die our death, if He would make us partakers of His immortal life, and deliver us from death; makes it absolutely necessary that if we are to live for anything nobler than our own poor, transitory self-aggrandisement, we too must learn to stoop to forgive, to impart ourselves, and must die by self-surrender and sacrifice, if we are ever to communicate any life, or good of life, to others. He has loved us, and given Himself for us. He has set us therein an example which He commends to us by His own word when He tells us that ‘if a corn of wheat’ is to bring forth ‘much fruit’ it must die, else it ‘abideth alone.’ Unless we die, we never truly live; unless we die to ourselves for others, and like Jesus, we live alone in the solitude of a self-enclosed self-regard. So living, we are dead whilst we live.

19)2 Corinthians 8:11

2 Corinthians

WILLING AND NOT DOING

2Co. 8:11

The Revised Version reads: ‘But now complete the doing also; that as there was the readiness to will, so there may be the completion also out of your ability.’ A collection of money for the almost pauper church at Jerusalem bulked very largely in the Apostle’s mind at the date of the writing of the two letters to the Corinthian church. We learn that that church had been the first to agree to the project, and then had very distinctly hung back from implementing its promises and fulfilling its good intentions. So the Apostle, in the chapter from which my text is taken, with wonderful delicacy, dignity, and profundity, sets forth the true principle, not only of Christian giving, but of Christian asking. The text advises that the gushing sentiments of brotherly sympathy and liberality which had inspired the Corinthians a year ago should now bear some fruit in action. So Paul is going to send Titus, his right-hand man at the time, to hurry up and finish off the collection and have done with it. The text is in effect the message which Titus was to carry; but it has a far wider application than that. It is a needful advice for us all about a great many other things: ‘As there was a readiness to will, so let there be a performance also.’

Resolutions, noble and good and Christlike, have a strange knack of cheating the people who make them. So we all need the exhortation not to be befooled by fancying that we have done, when we have only willed. Of course we shall not do unless we will. But there is a wide gap, as our experience witnesses, between the two things. We all know what place it is to which, according to the old proverb, the road is paved with good intentions; and the only way to pull up that paving is to take Paul's advice here and always, and immediately to put into action the resolves of our hearts. Now I desire to say two or three very plain and simple things about this matter.

I. I would have you consider the necessity of this commandment.

Consider that the fault here warned against is a universal one. What different men we should be if our resolutions had fruited in conduct! In all regions of life that is true, but most emphatically is it true in regard to religion. The damning tragedy of many lives, and I dare say of those of some of my hearers, is that men have over and over again determined that they would be Christians, and they are not Christians yet; just because they have let 'the native hue of resolution be sicklied over' by some paleness or other, and so have resolved and resolved and resolved till every nerve of action is rotted away, and they will die unchristian. I dare say that there are men or women listening to me now, perhaps with grey hairs upon them, who can remember times, in the springtide of their youth, when they said, 'I will give my heart to Jesus Christ, and set my faith upon Him'; and they have not done it yet. Now, therefore, 'as there was a readiness to will, let there be also the performance.'

But it is not only in regard to that most important of all resolves that I wish to say a word. All Christians, I am sure, know what it is, over and over again, to have had stirrings in their hearts which they have been able to consolidate into determination, but have not been able to carry into act. 'The children have come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring them forth.' That is true about all of us, more or less, and it is very solemnly true of a great many of us professing Christians. We have tried to cure--we have determined that we will cure--manifest and flagrant defects or faults in our Christian life. We have resolved, and some nipping frost has come, and the blossoms have dropped on the grass before they have ever set into fruit. I know that is so about you, because I know that it is so about myself. And therefore, dear brethren, I appeal to you, and ask you whether the exhortation of my text has not a sharp point for every one of us--whether the universality of this defect does not demand that we all should gravely consider the exhortation here before us?

Then, again, let me remind you how this injunction is borne in upon us by the consideration of the strength of the opposition with which we have always to contend, in every honest attempt to bring to act our best resolutions. Did you ever try to cure some little habit, some mere trifle, a trick of manner or twist of the finger, or some attitude or tone that might be ugly and awkward, and that people told you that it would be better to get rid of? You know how hard it is. There is always a tremendous gulf between the ideal and its realisation in life. As long as we are moving _in vacuo_ we move without any friction or difficulty; but as soon as we come out into a world where there are an atmosphere and opposing forces, then friction comes in, and speed diminishes; and we never become what we aim to be. We begin with grand purposes, and we end with very poor results. We all start, in our early days, with the notion that our lives are going to be radiant and beautiful, and all unlike what the limitations of power and the antagonisms that we have to meet make of them at last. The tree of our life's doings has to grow, like those contorted pines on the slopes of the Alps, in many storms, with heavy weights of snow on its branches, and beaten about by tempests from every quarter of the heavens; and so it gets gnarled and knotted and very unlike the symmetrical beauty that we dreamed would adorn it. We begin with saying: 'Come! Let us build a tower whose top shall reach to heaven'; and we are contented at last, if we have put up some little tumble-down shed where we can get shelter for our heads from the blast.

And the difficulty in bringing into action our best selves besets us in the matter of translating our resolutions into practice. What are arrayed against it? A feeble will, enslaved too often by passions and flesh and habits, and all about us lie obstacles to our carrying into action our conscientious convictions, our deepest resolutions; obstacles to our being true to our true selves; to which obstacles, alas, far too many of us habitually, and all of us occasionally, succumb. That being the case, do not we all need to ponder in our deepest hearts, and to pray for grace to make the motto of our lives, 'As there was a readiness to will, let there be a performance'?

II. Consider the importance of this counsel.

That is borne in upon mind and conscience by looking at the disastrous effects of letting resolutions remain sterile. Consider how apt we are to deceive ourselves with unfulfilled purposes. The quick response which an easily-moved nature may make to some appeal of noble thought or lofty principle is mistaken for action, and we are tempted to think that willing is almost as good as if we had done what we half resolved on. And there is a kind of glow of satisfaction that comes when such a man thinks, ‘I have done well in that I have determined.’ The Devil will let you resolve as much as you like--the more the better; only the more easily you resolve, the more certainly he will block the realisation. Let us take care of that seducing temptation which is apt to lead us all to plume ourselves on good resolutions, and to fancy that they are almost equivalent to their own fulfilment. Cheques are all very well if there be bullion in the bank cellars to pay them with when they fall due, but if that be not so, then the issuing of them is crime and fraud. Our resolutions, made and forgotten as so many of our good resolutions are, are very little better.

Note, too, how rapidly the habit of substituting lightly-made resolutions for seriously-endeavoured acts grows.

And mark, further, how miserable and debilitating it is to carry the dead weight of such unaccomplished intentions.

Nothing so certainly weakens a man as a multitude of resolves that he knows he has never fulfilled. They weaken his will, burden his conscience, stand in the way of his hopes, make him feel as if the entail of evil was too firm and strong to be ever broken. ‘O wretched man that I am!’ said one who had made experience of what it was to will what was good, and not to find how to perform, ‘who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’ It is an awful thing to have to carry a corpse about on your back. And that was what Paul thought the man did who loaded his own shoulders with abortive resolutions, that perished in the birth, and never grew up to maturity. Weak and miserable is always the man who is swift to resolve and slow to carry out his resolutions.

III. And now let me say a word before I close about how this universal and grave disease is to be coped with.

Well, I should say to begin with, let us take very soberly and continually into our consciousness the recognition of the fact that the disease is there. And then may I say, let us be rather slower to resolve than we often are. ‘Better is it that thou shouldest not vow than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.’ The man who has never had the determination to give up some criminal indulgence--say, drink--is possibly less criminal, and certainly less weak, than the man who, when his head aches, and the consequences of his self-indulgence are vividly realised by him, makes up his mind to be a teetotaller, and soon stumbles into the first dram-shop that is open, and then reels out a drunkard. Do not vow until you have made up your minds to pay. Remember that it is a solemn act to determine anything, especially anything bearing on moral and religious life; and that you had far better keep your will in suspense than spring to the resolution with thoughtless levity and leave it with the same.

Further, the habit of promptly carrying out our resolves is one that, like all other habits, can be cultivated. And we can cultivate it in little things, in the smallest trifles of daily life, which by their myriads make up life itself, in order that it may be a fixed custom of our minds when great resolves have to be made. The man who has trained himself day in and day out, in regard to the insignificances of daily life, to let act follow resolve as the thunder peal succeeds the lightning flash, is the man who, if he is moved to make a great resolve about his religion, or about his conduct, will be most likely to carry it out. Get the magical influence of habit on your side, and you will have done much to conquer the evil of abortive resolutions.

But then there is something a great deal more than that to be said. The Apostle did not content himself, in the passage already referred to, with bewailing the wretchedness of the condition in which to will was present, but how to perform he found not. He asked, and he triumphantly answered, the question, ‘Who shall deliver me?’ with the great words, ‘I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.’ There is the secret; keep near Him, trust Him, open your hearts to the influences of that Divine Spirit who makes us free from the law of sin and death. And if thus, knowing our weakness, recognising our danger, humbly trying to cultivate the habit of prompt discharge of all discerned duty, we leave ourselves in Jesus Christ's hands, and wait, and ask, and believe that we possess, His cleansing Spirit, then we shall not ask and wait in vain. 'Work out your own salvation, . . . for it is God that worketh in you, both the willing and the doing.'

20)2 Corinthians 9:8

2 Corinthians

ALL GRACE ABOUNDING

2Co. 9:8

In addition to all his other qualities the Apostle was an extremely good man of business; and he had a field for the exercise of that quality in the collection for the poor saints of Judea, which takes up so much of this letter, and occupied for so long a period so much of his thoughts and efforts. It was for the sake of showing by actual demonstration that would 'touch the hearts' of the Jewish brethren, the absolute unity of the two halves of the Church, the Gentile and the Jewish, that the Apostle took so much trouble in this matter. The words which I have read for my text come in the midst of a very earnest appeal to the Corinthian Christians for their pecuniary help. He is dwelling upon the same thought which is expressed in the well-known words: 'What I gave I kept; what I kept I lost.'

But whilst the words of my text primarily applied to money matters, you see that they are studiously general, universal. The Apostle, after his fashion, is lifting up a little 'secular' affair into a high spiritual region; and he lays down in my text a broad general law, which goes to the very depths of the Christian life.

Now, notice, we have here in three clauses three stages which we may venture to distinguish as the fountain, the basin, the stream. 'God is able to make all grace abound toward you';--there is the fountain. 'That ye always, having all-sufficiency in all things';--there is the basin that receives the gush from the fountain. 'May abound in every good work';--there is the steam that comes from the basin. The fountain pours into the basin, that the flow from the basin may feed the stream.

Now this thought of Paul's goes to the heart of things. So let us look at it.

I. The Fountain.

The Christian life in all its aspects and experiences is an outflow from the 'the Fountain of Life,' the giving God. Observe how emphatically the Apostle, in the context, accumulates words that express universality: '_all_ grace . . . _all_-sufficiency for _all_ things . . . _every_ good work.' But even these expressions do not satisfy Paul, and he has to repeat the word 'abound,' in order to give some faint idea of his conception of the full tide which gushes from the fountain. It is 'all grace,' and it is abounding grace.

Now what does he mean by 'grace'? That word is a kind of shorthand for the whole sum of the unmerited blessings which come to men through Jesus Christ. Primarily, it describes what we, for want of a better expression, have to call a 'disposition' in the divine nature; and it means, then, if so looked at, the unconditioned, undeserved, spontaneous, eternal, stooping, pardoning love of God. That is grace, in the primary New Testament use of the phrase.

But there are no idle 'dispositions' in God. They are always energising, and so the word glides from meaning the disposition, to meaning the manifestation and activities of it, and the 'grace' of our Lord is that love in exercise. And then, since the divine energies are never fruitless, the word passes over, further, to mean all the blessed and beautiful things in a soul which are the consequences of the Promethean truth of God's loving hand, the outcome in life of the inward bestowment which has its cause, its sole cause, in God's ceaseless, unexhausted love, unmerited and free.

That, very superficially and inadequately set forth, is at least a glimpse into the fulness and greatness of meaning that lies in that profound New Testament word, 'grace.' But the Apostle here puts emphasis on the variety of forms which the one divine gift assumes. It is '_all_ grace' which God is able to make abound toward you. So then, you see this one transcendent gift from the divine heart, when it comes into our human experience, is like a meteor when it passes into the atmosphere of earth, and catches fire and blazes, showering out a multitude of radiant points of light. The grace is many-sided--many-sided to us, but one in its source and in its character. For at bottom, that which God in His grace gives to us as His grace is what? Himself; or if you like to put it in another form, which comes to the same thing--new life through Jesus Christ. That is the encyclopædiacal gift, which contains within itself all grace. And just as the physical life in each of us, one in all its manifestations, produces many results, and shines in the eye, and blushes in the cheek, and gives strength to the arm, and flexibility and deftness to the fingers and swiftness to the foot: so also is that one grace which, being manifold in its manifestations, is one in its essence. There are many graces, there is one Grace.

But this grace is not only many-sided, but abounding. It is not congruous with God's wealth, nor with His love, that He should give scantily, or, as it were, should open but a finger of the hand that is full of His gifts, and let out a little at a time. There are no sluices on that great stream so as to regulate its flow, and to give sometimes a painful trickle and sometimes a full gush, but this fountain is always pouring itself out, and it 'abounds.'

But then we are pulled up short by another word in this first clause: 'God is _able_ to make.' Paul does not say, 'God will make.' He puts the whole weight of responsibility for that ability becoming operative upon us. There are conditions; and although we may have access to that full fountain, it will not pour on us 'all grace' and 'abundant grace,' unless we observe these, and so turn God's ability to give into actual giving. And how do we do that? By desire, by expectance, by petition, by faithful stewardship. If we have these things, if we have tutored ourselves, and experience has helped in the tuition, to make large our expectancy, God will smile down upon us and 'do exceeding abundantly above all' that we 'think' as well as above all that we 'ask.' Brethren, if our supplies are scant, when the full fountain is gushing at our sides, we are 'not straitened in God, we are straitened in ourselves.' Christian possibilities are Christian obligations, and what we might have and do not have, is our condemnation.

I turn, in the next place, to what I have, perhaps too fancifully, called

II. The Basin.

‘God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that ye, having always all-sufficiency in all things, may,’ . . . etc.

The result of all this many-sided and exuberant outpouring of grace from the fountain is that the basin may be full. Considering the infinite source and the small receptacle, we might have expected something more than ‘sufficiency’ to have resulted.

Divine grace is sufficient. Is it not more than sufficient? Yes, no doubt. But what Paul wishes us to feel is this--to put it into very plain English--that the good gifts of the divine grace will always be proportioned to our work, and to our sufferings too. We shall feel that we have enough, if we are as we ought to be. Sufficiency is more than a man gets anywhere else. ‘Enough is as good as a feast.’ And if we have strength, which we may have, to do the day’s tasks, and strength to carry the day’s crosses, and strength to accept the day’s sorrows, and strength to master the day’s temptations, that is as much as we need wish to have, even out of the fulness of God. And we shall get it, dear brethren, if we will only fulfil the conditions. If we exercise expectance, and desire and petition and faithful stewardship, we shall get what we need. ‘Thy shoes shall be iron and brass,’ if the road is a steep and rocky one that would wear out leather. ‘As thy days so shall thy strength be.’ God does not hurl His soldiers in a blundering attack on some impregnable mountain, where they are slain in heaps at the base; but when He lays a commandment on my shoulders, He infuses strength into me, and according to the good homely old saying that has brought comfort to many a sad and weighted heart, makes the back to bear the burden. The heavy task or the crushing sorrow is often the key that opens the door of God’s treasure-house. You have had very little experience either of life or of Christian life, if you have not learnt by this time that the harder your work, and the darker your sorrows, the mightier have been God’s supports, and the more starry the lights that have shone upon your path. ‘That ye, always having all-sufficiency in all things.’

One more word: this sufficiency _should be_ more uniform, _is_ uniform in the divine intention, and in so far as the flow of the fountain is concerned. Always having had I may be sure that I always shall have. Of course I know that, in so far as our physical nature conditions our spiritual experience, there will be ups and downs, moments of emancipation and moments of slavery. There will be times when the flower opens, and times when it shuts itself up. But I am sure that the great mass of Christian people might have a far more level temperature in their Christian experience than they have; that we could, if we would, have far more experimental knowledge of this 'always' of my text. God means that the basin should be always full right up to the top of the marble edge, and that the more is drawn off from it, the more should flow into it. But it is very often like the reservoirs in the hills for some great city in a drought, where great stretches of the bottom are exposed, and again, when the drought breaks, are full to the top of the retaining wall. That should not be. Our Christian life should run on the high levels. Why does it not? Possibilities are duties.

And now, lastly, we have here what, adhering to my metaphor, I call

III. The stream.

'That ye, always having all-sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work.'

That is what God gives us His grace for; and that is a very important consideration. The end of God's dealings with us, poor, weak, sinful creatures, is character and conduct. Of course you can state the end in a great many other ways; but there have been terrible evils arising from the way in which Evangelical preachers have too often talked, as if the end of God's dealings with us was the vague thing which they call 'salvation,' and by which many of their hearers take them to mean neither more nor less than dodging Hell. But the New Testament, with all its mysticism, even when it soars highest, and speaks most about the perfection of humanity, and the end of God's dealings being that we may be 'filled with the fulness of God,' never loses its wholesome, sane hold of the common moralities of daily life, and proclaims that we receive all, in order that we may be able to 'maintain good works for necessary uses.' And if we lay that to heart, and remember that a correct creed, and a living faith, and precious, select, inward emotions and experiences are all intended to evolve into lives, filled and radiant with common moralities and 'good works'--not meaning thereby the things which go by that name in popular phraseology, but 'whatsoever things are lovely . . . and of good report'--then we shall understand a little better what we are here for and what Jesus Christ died for, and what His Spirit is given and lives in us for. So ‘good works’ is the end, in one very important aspect, of all that avalanche of grace which has been from eternity rushing down upon us from the heights of God.

There is one more thing to note, and that is that, in our character and conduct, we should copy the ‘giving grace.’ Look how eloquently and significantly, in the first and last clauses of my text, the same words recur. ‘God is able to make _all_ grace abound, that ye may _abound_ in _all_ good work.’ Copy God in the many-sidedness and in the copiousness of the good that flows out from your life and conduct, because of your possession of that divine grace. And remember, ‘to him that hath shall be given.’ We pray for more grace; we need to pray for that, no doubt. Do we use the grace that God has given us? If we do not, the remainder of that great word which I have just quoted will be fulfilled in you. God forbid that any of us should receive the grace of God in vain, and therefore come under the stern and inevitable sentence, ‘From him that hath not shall be taken away, even that which he hath!’

21)2 Corinthians 9:15

2 Corinthians

GOD’S UNSPEAKABLE GIFT

2Co. 9:15

It seems strange that there should ever have been any doubt as to what gift it is which evokes this burst of thanksgiving. There is but one of God’s many mercies which is worthy of being thus singled out. There is one blazing central sun which shines out amidst all the galaxy of lights which fill the heavens. There is one gift of God which, beyond all others, merits the designation of ‘unspeakable.’ The gift of Christ draws all other divine gifts after it. ‘How should He not with Him also freely give us all things.’

The connection in which this abrupt jet of praise stands is very remarkable. The Apostle has been dwelling on the Christian obligation of giving bountifully and cheerfully, and on the great law that a glad giver is ‘enriched’ and not impoverished thereby, whilst the recipients, for their part, are blessed by having thankfulness evoked towards the givers. And that contemplation of the happy interchange of benefit and thanks between men leads the fervid Apostle to the thoughts which were always ready to spring to his lips--of God as the great pattern of giving and of the gratitude to Him which should fill all our souls. The expression here ‘unspeakable’ is what I wish chiefly to fix upon now. It means literally that which cannot be fully declared. Language fails because thought fails.

I. The gift comes from unspeakable love.

God _so_ loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. The love is the cause of the gift: the gift is the expression of the love. John’s Gospel says that the Son which is in the bosom of the Father has _declared_ Him. Paul here uses a related word for _unspeakable_ which might be rendered ‘that which cannot be fully declared.’ The declaration of the Father partly consists in this, that He is declared to be undeclarable, the proclamation of His name consists partly in this that it is proclaimed to be a name that cannot be proclaimed. Language fails when it is applied to the expression of human emotion; no tongue can ever fully serve the heart. Whether there be any thoughts too great for words or no, there are emotions too great. Language is ever ‘weaker than our grief’ and not seldom weaker than our love. It is but the surface water that can be run off through the narrow channel of speech: the central deep remains. If it be so with human affection, how much more must it be so with God’s love? With lowly condescension He uses all sweet images drawn from earthly relationships, to help us in understanding His. Every dear name is pressed into the service--father, mother, husband, wife, brother, friend, and after all are exhausted, the love which clothed itself in them all in turn, and used them all to give some faint hint of its own perfection, remains unspoken. We know human love, its limitations, its changes, its extravagances, its shortcomings, and cannot but feel how unworthy it is to mirror for us that perfection in God which we venture to name by a name so soiled. The analogies between what we call love in man and love in God must be supplemented by the differences between them, if we are ever to approach a worthy conception of the unspeakable love that underlies the unspeakable gift.

II. The gift involves unspeakable sacrifice.

Human love desires to give its most precious treasures to its object and is then most blessed: divine love cannot come short of human in this most characteristic of its manifestations. Surely the copy is not to surpass the original, nor the mirror to flash more brightly than the sun which, at the brightest, it but reflects. In such a matter we can but stammer when we try to find words. As our text warns us, we are trying to utter the unutterable when we seek to speak of God's giving up for us; but however such a thought may seem to be forbidden by other aspects of the divine nature, it seems to be involved in the great truth that 'God is love.' Since He is, His blessedness too, must be in imparting, and in parting with what He gives. A humble worshipper in Jewish times loved enough to say that he would not offer unto God an offering that cost him nothing, and that loving height of self-surrender was at the highest, but a lowly imitation of the love to which it looked up. When Paul in the Epistle to the Romans says, 'He that spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all,' he is obviously alluding to, and all but quoting, the divine words to Abraham, 'Seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me,' and the allusion permits us to parallel what God did when He sent His Son with what Abraham did when, with wrung heart, but with submission, he bound and laid Isaac on the altar and stretched forth his hand with the knife in it to slay him. Such a representation contradicts the vulgar conceptions of a passionless, self-sufficing, icy deity, but reflection on the facts of our own experience and on the blessed secrets of our own love, leads us to believe that some shadow of loss passed across the infinite and eternal completeness of the divine nature when 'God sent forth His Son made of a woman.' And may we not go further and say that when Jesus on the Cross cried from out of the darkness of eclipse, 'My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?' there was something in the heavens corresponding to the darkness that covered the earth and something in the Father's heart that answered the Son's. But our text warns us that such matters are not for our handling in speech, and are best dealt with, not as matters of possibly erring speculation, but as materials for lowly thanks unto God for His unspeakable gift.

But whatever may be true about the love of the Father who sent, there can be no doubt about the love of the Son who came. No man helps his fellows in suffering but at the cost of his own suffering. Sympathy means _fellow-feeling_, and the one indispensable condition of all rescue work of any sort is that the rescuer must bear on his own shoulders the sins or sorrows that he is able to bear away. Heartless help is no help. It does not matter whether he who ‘stands and says, "Be ye clothed and fed,"‘ gives or does not give ‘the things necessary,’ he will be but a ‘miserable comforter’ if he has not in heart and feeling entered into the sorrows and pains which he seeks to alleviate. We need not dwell on the familiar truths concerning Him who was a ‘man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.’ All through His life He was in contact with evil, and for Him the contact was like that of a naked hand pressed upon hot iron. The sins and woes of the world made His path through it like that of bare feet on sharp flints. If He had never died it would still have been true that ‘He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.’ On the Cross He completed the libation which had continued throughout His life and ‘poured out His soul unto death’ as He had been pouring it out all through His life. We have no measure by which we can estimate the inevitable sufferings in such a world as ours of such a spirit as Christ’s. We may know something of the solitude of uncongenial society; of the pain of seeing miseries that we cannot comfort, of the horrors of dwelling amidst impurities that we cannot cleanse, and of longings to escape from them all to some nest in the wilderness, but all these are but the feeblest shadows of the incarnate sorrows whose name among men was Jesus. Nothing is more pathetic than the way in which our Lord kept all these sorrows close locked within His own heart, so that scarcely ever did they come to light. Once He did permit a glimpse into that hidden chamber when He said, ‘O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you, how long shall I suffer you?’ But for the most part His sorrow was unspoken because it was ‘unspeakable.’ Once beneath the quivering olives in the moonlight of Gethsemane, He made a pitiful appeal for the little help which three drowsy men could give Him, when He cried, ‘My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death. Tarry ye here and watch with Me,’ but for the most part the silence at which His judges ‘marvelled greatly,’ and raged as much as they marvelled, was unbroken, and as ‘a sheep before her shearers is dumb,’ so ‘He opened not His mouth.’ The sacrifice of His death was, for the most part, silent like the sacrifice of His life. Should it not call forth from us floods of praise and thanks to God for His unspeakable gift?

III. The gift brings with it unspeakable results.

In Christ are hid ‘all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.’ When God gave us Him, He gave us a storehouse in which are contained treasures of truth which can never be fully comprehended, and which, even if comprehended, can never be exhausted. The mystery of the Divine Name revealed in Jesus, the mystery of His person, are themes on which the Christian world has been nourished ever since, and which are as full of food, not for the understanding only, but far more for the heart and the will, to-day as ever they were. The world may think that it has left the teaching of Jesus behind, but in reality the teaching is far ahead, and the world’s practise is but slowly creeping towards its imperfect attainment. The Gospel is the guide of the race, and each generation gathers something more from it, and progresses in the measure in which it follows Christ; and as for the race, so for the individual. Each of Christ’s scholars finds his own gift, and in the measure of his faithfulness to what he has found makes ever new discoveries in the unsearchable riches of Christ. After all have fed full there still remain abundant baskets full to be taken up.

He who has sounded the depths of Jesus most completely is ever the first to acknowledge that he has been but as a child ‘gathering pebbles on the beach while the great ocean lies unsounded before him.’ No single soul, and no multitude of souls, can exhaust Jesus; neither our individual experiences, nor the experiences of a believing world can fully realise the endless wealth laid up in Him. He is the Alpha and the Omega of all our speech, the first letter and the last of our alphabet, between which lie all the rest.

The gift is completed in consequences yet unspeakable. Even the first blessings which the humblest faith receives from the pierced hands have more in them than words can tell. Who has ever spoken adequately and in full correspondence with reality what it is to have God’s pardoning love flowing in upon the soul? Many singers have sung sweet psalms and hymns and spiritual songs on which generations of devout souls have fed, but none of them has spoken the deepest blessedness of a Christian life, or the calm raptures of communion with God. It is easy to utter the words ‘forgiveness, reconciliation, acceptance, fellowship, eternal life’; the syllables can be spoken, but who knows or can utter the depths of the meanings? After all human words the half has not been told us, and as every soul carries within itself unrevealable emotions, and is a mystery after all revelation, so the things which God's gift brings to a soul are after all speech unspeakable, and the words 'cannot be uttered' which they who are caught up into the third heavens hear.

Then we may extend our thoughts to the future form of Christian experience. 'It doth not yet appear what we should be.' All our conceptions of a future existence must necessarily be inadequate. Nothing but experience can reveal them to us, and our experience there will be capable of indefinite expansion, and through eternity there will be endless growth in the appropriation of the unspeakable gift.

For us the only recompense that we can make for the unspeakable gift is to receive it with 'thanks unto God' and the yielding up of our hearts to Him. God pours this love upon us freely, without stint. It is unspeakable in the depths of its source, in the manner of its manifestation, in the glory of its issues. It is like some great stream, rising in the trackless mountains, broad and deep, and leading on to a sunlit ocean. We stand on the bank; let us trust ourselves to its broad bosom. It will bear us safe. And let us take heed that we receive not the gift of God _in vain_.

22)2 Corinthians 10:5-6

2 Corinthians

A MILITANT MESSAGE

2Co. 10:5-6 [R.V.].

None of Paul's letters are so full of personal feeling as this one is. It is written, for the most part, at a white heat; he had heard from his trusted Titus tidings which on one hand filled him with a thankfulness of which the first half of the letter is the expression; but there had also been tidings of a very different kind, and from this point onwards the letter is seething with the feelings which these had produced. There was in the Corinthian Church a party, probably Judaisers, which denied his authority and said bitter things about his character. They apparently had contrasted the force of his letters and the feebleness of his ‘bodily presence’ and speech. They insinuated that his ‘bark was worse than his bite.’ Their language put into plain English would be something like this, ‘Ah! He is very bold at a distance, let him come and face us and we shall see a difference. Vapouring in his letters, he will be meek enough when he is here.’

These slanderers seem to have thought of Paul as if he ‘warred according to flesh,’ and it is this charge, that he was actuated in his opposition to the evils in Corinth by selfish considerations and worldly interests, which seems to have set the Apostle on fire. In answer he pours out quick, indignant questionings, sharp irony, vehement self-vindication, passionate remonstrances, flashes of wrath, sudden jets of tenderness. What a position for him to have to say, ‘I am not a low schemer; I am not working for myself.’ Yet it is the common lot of all such men to be misread by little, crawling creatures who cannot believe in heroic self-forgetfulness. He answers the taunt that he ‘walked according to the flesh’ in the context by saying, ‘Yes, I live in the flesh, my outward life is like that of other men, but I do not go a-soldiering _according_ to the flesh. It is not for my own sinful self that I get the rules of my life’s battle, neither do I get my weapons from the flesh. They could not do what they do if that were their origin: they are of God and therefore mighty.’ Then the metaphor as it were catches fire, and in our text he expands the figure of a warfare and sets before us the destruction of fortresses, the capture of their garrisons, and the leading of them away into another land, the stern punishment of the rebels who still hold out, and the merciful delay in administering it. It has been suggested that there is an allusion in our text to the extermination of the pirates in Paul’s native Cilicia which happened some fifty or sixty years before his birth and ended in destroying their robber-holds and taking some thousands of prisoners. Whether that be so or no, the Apostle’s kindled imagination sets forth here great truths as to the effects which his message is meant to produce and, thank God, has produced.

I. The opposing fortresses.

The Apostle conceives of himself and of his brother preachers of Christ as going forth on a merciful warfare. He thinks of strong rock fortresses, with lofty walls set on high, and frowning down on any assailants. No doubt he is thinking first of the opposition which he had to front in Corinth from the Judaisers to whom we have referred, but the application of the metaphor goes far beyond the petty strife in Corinth and carries for us the wholesome lesson that one main cause which keeps men back from Christ is a too high estimate of themselves. Some of us are enclosed in the fortress of self-sufficiency: we will not humbly acknowledge our dependence on God, and have turned self-reliance into the law of our lives. There are many voices, some of them sweet and powerful, which to-day are preaching that gospel. It finds eager response in many hearts, and there is something in us all to which it appeals. We are often tempted to say defiantly, ‘Who is Lord over us?’ And the teaching that bids us rely on ourselves is so wholly in accord with the highest wisdom and the noblest life that what is good and what is evil in each of us contribute to reinforce it. Self-dependence is a great virtue, and the mother of much energy and nobleness, but it is also a great error and a great sin. To be so self-sufficing as not to need externals is good; to be so self-sufficing as not to need or to see God is ruin and death. The title which, as one of our great thinkers tells us, a humourist put on the back of a volume of heterodox tracts, ‘Every man his own redeemer,’ makes a claim for self-sufficiency which more or less unconsciously shuts out many men from the salvation of Christ.

There is the fortress of culture and the pride of it in which many of us are to-day entrenched against the Gospel. The attitude of mind into which persons of culture tend to fall is distinctly adverse to their reception of the Gospel, and that is not because the Gospel is adverse to culture, but because cultured people do not care to be put on the same level with publicans and harlots. They would be less disinclined to go into the feast if there were in it reserved seats for superior people and a private entrance to them. If the wise and prudent were more of both, they would be liker the babes to whom these things are revealed, and they would be revealed to them too. Not knowledge but the superciliousness which is the result of the conceit of knowledge hinders from God, and is one of the strongest fortresses against which the weapons of our warfare have to be employed.

There is the fortress of ignorance. Most men who are kept from Christ are so because they know neither themselves nor God. The most widely prevailing characteristic of the superficial life of most men is their absolute unconsciousness of the fact of sin; they neither know it as universal nor as personal. They have never gone deeply enough down into the depths of their own hearts to have come up scared at the ugly things that lie sleeping there, nor have they ever reflected on their own conduct with sufficient gravity to discern its aberrations from the law of right, hence the average man is quite unconscious of sin, and is a complete stranger to himself. The cup has been drunk by and intoxicated the world, and the masses of men are quite unaware that it has intoxicated them.

They are ignorant of God as they are of themselves, and if at any time, by some flash of light, they see themselves as they are, they think of God as if He were altogether such an one as themselves, and fall back on a vague trust in the vaguer mercy of their half-believed-in God as their hope for a vague salvation. Men who thus walk in a vain show will never feel their need of Jesus, and the lazy ignorance of themselves and the as lazy trust in what they call their God, are a fortress against which it will task the power of God to make any weapons of warfare mighty to its pulling down.

II. The casting down of fortresses.

The first effect of any real contact with Christ and His Gospel is to reveal a man to himself, to shatter his delusive estimates of what he is, and to pull down about his ears the lofty fortress in which he has ensconced himself. It seems strange work for what calls itself a Gospel to begin by forcing a man to cry out with sobs and tears, Oh, wretched man that I am! But no man will ever reach the heights to which Christ can lift him, who does not begin his upward course by descending to the depths into which Christ’s Gospel begins its work by plunging him. Unconsciousness of sin is sure to lead to indifference to a Saviour, and unless we know ourselves to be miserable and poor and blind and naked, the offer of gold refined by fire and white garments that we may clothe ourselves will make no appeal to us. The fact of sin makes the need for a Saviour; our individual sense of sin makes us sensible of our need of a Saviour.

Paul believed that the weapons of his warfare were mighty enough to cast down the strongest of all strongholds in which men shut themselves up against the humbling Gospel of salvation by the mercy of God. The weapons to which he thus trusted were the same to which Jesus pointed His disciples when, about to leave them, He said, ‘When the Comforter is come He will convict the world of sin because they believe not in Me.’ Jesus brought to the world the perfect revelation of the holiness of God, and set before us all a divine pattern of manhood to rebuke and condemn our stained and rebellious lives, and He turned us away from the superficial estimate of actions to the careful scrutiny of motives. By all these and many other ways He presented Himself to the world a perfect man, the incarnation of a holy God and the revelation and condemnation of sinful humanity. Yet, all that miracle of loveliness, gentleness, and dignity is beheld by men without a thrill, and they see in Him no ‘beauty that they should desire Him,’ and no healing to which they will trust. Paul’s way of kindling penitence in impenitent spirits was not to brandish over them the whips of law or to seek to shake souls with terror of any hell, still less was it to discourse with philosophic calm on the obligations of duty and the wisdom of virtuous living; his appeal to conscience was primarily the pressing on the heart of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. When the heart is melted, the conscience will not long continue indurated. We cannot look lovingly and believingly at Jesus and then turn to look complacently on ourselves. Not to believe on Him is the sin of sins, and to be taught that it is so is the first step in the work of Him who never merits the name of the Comforter more truly than when He convicts the world of sin.

For a Christianity that does not begin with the deep consciousness of sin has neither depth nor warmth and has scarcely vitality. The Gospel is no Gospel, and we had almost said, ‘The Christ is no Christ’ to one who does not feel himself, if parted from Christ, ‘dead in trespasses and sins.’ Our religion depends for all its force, our gratitude and love for all their devotion, upon our sense that ‘the chastisement of our peace was laid upon Him, and that by His stripes we are healed.’ Since He gave Himself for us, it is meet that we give ourselves to Him, but there will be little fervour of devotion or self-surrender, unless there has been first the consciousness of the death of sin and then the joyous consciousness of newness of life in Christ Jesus.

III. The captives led away to another land.

The Apostle carries on his metaphor one step further when he goes on to describe what followed the casting down of the fortresses. The enemy, driven from their strongholds, have nothing for it but to surrender and are led away in captivity to another land. The long strings of prisoners on Assyrian and Egyptian monuments show how familiar an experience this was. It may be noted that perhaps our text regards the obedience of Christ as being the far country into which ‘every thought was to be brought.’ At all events Paul’s idea here is that the end of the whole struggle between ‘the flesh’ and the weapons of God is to make men willing captives of Jesus Christ. We are Christians in the measure in which we surrender our wills to Christ. That surrender rests upon, and is our only adequate answer to, His surrender for us. The ‘obedience of Christ’ is perfect freedom; His captives wear no chains and know nothing of forced service; His yoke is easy, not because it does not press hard upon the neck but because it is lined with love, and ‘His burden is light’ not because of its own weight but because it is laid on us by love and is carried by kindred love. He only commands himself who gladly lets Christ command him. Many a hard task becomes easy; crooked things are straightened out and rough places often made surprisingly plain for the captives of Christ, whom He leads into the liberty of obedience to Him.

IV. Fate of the disobedient.

Paul thinks that in Corinth there will be found some stiff-necked opponents of whom he cannot hope that their ‘obedience shall be fulfilled,’ and he sees in the double issue of the small struggle that was being waged in Corinth a parable of the wider results of the warfare in the world. ‘Some believed and some believed not’; that has been the brief summary of the experience of all God’s messengers everywhere, and it is their experience to-day. No doubt when Paul speaks of ‘being in readiness to avenge all disobedience,’ he is alluding to the exercise of his apostolic authority against the obdurate antagonists whom he contemplates as still remaining obdurate, and it is beautiful to note the long-suffering patience with which he will hold his hand until all that can be won has been won. But we must not forget that Paul’s demeanour is but a faint shadow of his Lord’s, and that the weapons which were ready to avenge all disobedience were the weapons of God. If a man steels himself against the efforts of divine love, builds up round himself a fortress of self-righteousness and locks its gates against the merciful entrance of convictions of sin and the knowledge of a Saviour, and if he therefore lives, year in, year out, in disobedience, the weapons which he thinks himself to have resisted will one day make him feel their edge. We cannot set ourselves against the salvation of Jesus without bringing upon ourselves consequences which are wholly evil and harmful. Torpid consciences, hungry hearts, stormy wills, tyrannous desires, vain hopes and not vain fears come to be, by slow degrees, the tortures of the man who drops the portcullis and lifts the bridge against the entrance of Jesus. There are hells enough on earth if men’s hearts were displayed.

But the love which is obliged to smite gives warning that it is ready to avenge, long before it lets the blow fall, and does so in order that it may never need to fall. As long as it is possible that the disobedient shall become obedient to Christ, He holds back the vengeance that is ready to fall and will one day fall ‘on all disobedience.’ Not till all other means have been patiently tried will He let that terrible ending crash down. It hangs over the heads of many of us who are all unaware that we walk beneath the shadow of a rock that at any moment may be set in motion and bury us beneath its weight. It is ‘in readiness,’ but it is still at rest. Let us be wise in time and yield to the merciful weapons with which Jesus would make His way into our hearts. Or if the metaphor of our text presents Him in too warlike a guise, let us listen to His own gentle pleading, ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him.’

23)2 Corinthians 11:3

2 Corinthians

SIMPLICITY TOWARDS CHRIST

2Co. 11:3

The Revised Version, amongst other alterations, reads, ‘the simplicity that is _towards_ Christ.’

The inaccurate rendering of the Authorised Version is responsible for a mistake in the meaning of these words, which has done much harm. They have been supposed to describe a quality or characteristic belonging to Christ or the Gospel; and, so construed, they have sometimes been made the watchword of narrowness and of intellectual indolence. ‘Give us the simple Gospel’ has been the cry of people who have thought themselves to be evangelical when they were only lazy, and the consequence has been that preachers have been expected to reiterate commonplaces, which have made both them and their hearers listless, and to sink the educational for the evangelistic aspect of the Christian teacher’s function.

It is quite true that the Gospel is simple, but it is also true that it is deep, and they will best appreciate its simplicity who have most honestly endeavoured to fathom its depth. When we let our little sounding lines out, and find that they do not reach the bottom, we begin to wonder even more at the transparency of the clear abyss. It is not simplicity _in_ Christ, but _towards_ Christ of which the Apostle is speaking; not a quality in Him, but a quality in _us_ towards Him. I wish, then, to turn to the two thoughts that these words suggest. First and chiefly, the attitude towards Christ which befits our relation to Him; and, secondly and briefly, the solicitude for its maintenance.

I. First, then, look at the attitude towards Christ which befits the Christian relation to Him.

The word ‘simplicity’ has had a touch of contempt associated with it. It is a somewhat doubtful compliment to say of a man that he is ‘simple-minded.’ All noble words which describe great qualities get oxidised by exposure to the atmosphere, and rust comes over them, as indeed all good things tend to become deteriorated in time and by use. But the notion of the word is really a very noble and lofty one. To be ‘without a fold,’ which is the meaning of the Greek word and of its equivalent ‘simplicity,’ is, in one aspect, to be transparently honest and true, and in another to be out and out of a piece. There is no underside of the cloth, doubled up beneath the upper which shows, and running in the opposite direction; but all tends in one way. A man with no under-currents, no by-ends, who is down to the very roots what he looks, and all whose being is knit together and hurled in one direction, without reservation or back-drawing, that is the ‘simple’ man whom the Apostle means. Such simplicity is the truest wisdom; such simplicity of devotion to Jesus Christ is the only attitude of heart and mind which corresponds to the facts of our relation to Him. That relation is set forth in the context by a very sweet and tender image, in the true line of scriptural teaching, which in many a place speaks of the Bride and Bridegroom, and which on its last page shows us the Lamb’s wife descending from Heaven to meet her husband. The state of devout souls and of the community of such here on earth is that of betrothal. Their state in heaven is that of marriage. Very beautiful it is to see how this fiery Paul, like the ascetic John, who never knew the sacred joys of that state, lays hold of the thought of the Bridegroom and the Bride, and of his individual relation to both as indicating the duties of the Church and the solicitude of the Apostle. He says that he has been the intermediary who, according to Oriental custom, arranged the preliminaries of the marriage, and brought the bride to the bridegroom, and, as the friend of the latter, standing by rejoices greatly to hear the bridegroom’s voice, and is solicitous mainly that in the tremulous heart of the betrothed there should be no admixture of other loves, but a whole-hearted devotion, an exclusive affection, and an absolute obedience. ‘I have espoused you,’ says he, ‘to one husband that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear lest . . . your mind should be corrupted from the simplicity that is towards Him.’

Now that metaphor carries in its implication all that anybody can say about the exclusiveness, the depth, the purity, the all-pervasiveness of the dependent love which should knit us to Jesus Christ. The same thought of whole-hearted, single, absolute devotion is conveyed by other Scripture metaphors, the _slave_ and the _soldier_ of Christ. But all that is repellent or harsh in these is softened and glorified when we contemplate it in the light of the metaphor of my text.

So I might leave it to do its own work, but I may perhaps be allowed to follow out the thought in one or two directions.

The attitude, then, which corresponds to our relation to Jesus Christ is that, first, of a faith which looks to Him exclusively as the source of salvation and of light. The specific danger which was alarming Paul, in reference to that little community of Christians in Corinth, was one which, in its particular form, is long since dead and buried. But the principles which underlay it, the tendencies to which it appealed, and the perils which alarmed Paul for the Corinthian Church, are perennial. He feared that these Judaising teachers, who dogged his heels all his life long, and whose one aim seemed to be to build upon his foundation and to overthrow his building, should find their way into this church and wreck it. The keenness of the polemic, in this and in the contextual chapters, shows how real and imminent the danger was. Now what they did was to tell people that Jesus Christ had a partner in His saving work. They said that obedience to the Jewish law, ceremonial and other, was a condition of salvation, along with trust in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. And because they thus shared out the work of salvation between Jesus Christ and something else, Paul thundered and lightened at them all his life, and, as he tells us in this context, regarded them as preaching another Jesus, another spirit, and another gospel. That particular error is long dead and buried.

But is there nothing else that has come into its place? Has this old foe not got a new face, and does not it live amongst us as really as it lived then? I think it does; whether in the form of the grosser kind of sacramentarianism and ecclesiasticism which sticks sacraments and a church in front of the Cross, or in the form of the definite denial that Jesus Christ's death on the Cross is the one means of salvation, or simply in the form of the coarse, common wish to have a finger in the pie and a share in the work of saving oneself, as a drowning man will sometimes half drown his rescuer by trying to use his own limbs. These tendencies that Paul fought, and which he feared would corrupt the Corinthians from their simple and exclusive reliance on Christ, and Christ alone, as the ground and author of their salvation, are perennial in human nature, and we have to be on our guard for ever and for ever against them. Whether they come in organised, systematic, doctrinal form, or whether they are simply the rising in our own hearts of the old Adam of pride and self-trust, they equally destroy the whole work of Christ, because they infringe upon its solitariness and uniqueness. It is not Christ and anything else. Men are not saved by a syndicate. It is Jesus Christ alone, and 'beside Him there is no Saviour.' You go into a Turkish mosque and see the roof held up by a forest of slim pillars. You go into a cathedral chapter-house and see one strong support in the centre that bears the whole roof. The one is an emblem of the Christless multiplicity of vain supports, the other of the solitary strength and eternal sufficiency of the one Pillar on which the whole weight of a world's salvation rests, and which lightly bears it triumphantly aloft. 'I fear lest your minds be corrupted from the simplicity' of a reasonable faith directed towards Christ.

And in like manner He is the sole light and teacher of men as to God, themselves, their duty, their destinies and prospects. He, and He alone, brings these things to light. His word, whether it comes from His lips or from the deeds which are part of His revelation, or from the voice of the Spirit which takes of His and speaks to the ages through His apostles, should be 'the end of all strife.' What He says, and all that He says, and nothing else than what He says, is the creed of the Christian. He, and He only, is 'the light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.' In this day of babblements and confusions, let us listen for the voice of Christ and accept all which comes from Him, and let the language of our deepest hearts be, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou only hast the words of eternal life.'

Again, our relation to Jesus Christ demands exclusive love to Him. 'Demands' is an ugly word to bracket with love. We might say, and perhaps more truly, permits or privileges. It is the joy of the betrothed that her duty is to love, and to keep her heart clear from all competing affections. But it is none the less her duty because it is her joy. What Christ is to you, if you are a Christian, and what He longs to be to us all, whether we are Christians or not, is of such a character as that the only fitting attitude of our hearts to Him in response is that of exclusive affection. I do not mean that we are to love nothing but Him, but I mean that we are to love all things else in Him, and that, if any creature so delays or deflects our love as that either it does not pass, by means of the creature, into the presence of the Christ, or is turned away from the Christ by the creature, then we have fallen beneath the sweet level of our lofty privilege, and have won for ourselves the misery due to distracted and idolatrous hearts. Love to one who has done what He has done for us is in its very nature exclusive, and its exclusiveness is all-pervasive exclusiveness. The centre diamond makes the little stones set round it all the more lustrous. We must love Jesus Christ all in all or not at all. Divided love incurs the condemnation that falls heavily upon the head of the faithless bride.

Dear friends, the conception of the essence of religion as being love is no relaxation, but an increase, of its stringent requirements. The more we think of that sweet bond as being the true union of the soul with God, who is its only rest and home, the more reasonable and imperative will appear the old commandment, ‘Thou shalt love Him with all thy heart, and soul, and strength, and mind.’

But, further, our relation to Jesus Christ is such as that nothing short of absolute obedience to His commandment corresponds to it. There must be the simplicity, the single-mindedness that thus obeys, obeys swiftly, cheerfully, constantly. In all matters His command is my law, and, as surely as I make His command my law, will He make my desire His motive. For He Himself has said, in words that bring together our obedience to His will and His compliance with our wishes, in a fashion that we should not have ventured upon unless He had set us an example, ‘If ye love Me, keep My commandments. If ye ask anything in My name I will do it.’ The exclusive love that binds us, by reason of our faith in Him alone, to that Lord ought to express itself in unhesitating, unfaltering, unreserved, and unreluctant obedience to every word that comes from His mouth.

These brief outlines are but the poorest attempt to draw out what the words of my text imply. But such as they are, let us remember that they do set forth the only proper response of the saved man to the saving Christ. ‘Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.’ Anything short of a faith that rests on Him alone, of a love that knits itself to His single, all-sufficient heart, and of an obedience that bows the whole being to the sweet yoke of His commandment is an unworthy answer to the Love that died, and that lives for us all.

II. And now I have only time to glance at the solicitude for the maintenance of this exclusive single-mindedness towards Christ.

Think of what threatens it. I say nothing about the ferment of opinion in this day, for one man that is swept away from a thorough whole-hearted faith by intellectual considerations, there are a dozen from whom it is filched without their knowing it, by their own weaknesses and the world’s noises. And so it is more profitable that we should think of the whole crowd of external duties, enjoyments, sweetnesses, bitternesses, that solicit us, and would seek to draw us away. Who can hear the low voice that speaks peace and wisdom when Niagara is roaring past his ears? ‘The world is too much with us, late and soon. Buying and selling we lay waste our powers,’ and break ourselves away from our simple devotion to that dear Lord. But it is possible that we may so carry into all the whirl the central peace, as that we shall not be disturbed by it; and possible that ‘whether we eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, we may do all to His glory,’ so that we can, even in the midst of our daily pressing avocations and cares be keeping our hearts in the heavens, and our souls in touch with our Lord.

But it is not only things without that draw us away. Our own weaknesses and waywardnesses, our strong senses, our passions, our desires, our necessities, all these have a counteracting force, which needs continual watchfulness in order to be neutralised. No man can grasp a stay, which alone keeps him from being immersed in the waves, with uniform tenacity, unless every now and then he tightens his muscles. And no man can keep himself firmly grasping Jesus Christ without conscious effort directed to bettering his hold.

If there be dangers around us, and dangers within us, the discipline which we have to pursue in order to secure this uniform, single-hearted devotion is plain enough. Let us be vividly conscious of the peril--which is what some of us are not. Let us take stock of ourselves lest creeping evil may be encroaching upon us, while we are all unaware--which is what some of us never do. Let us clearly contemplate the possibility of an indefinite increase in the closeness and thoroughness of our surrender to Him--a conviction which has faded away from the minds of many professing Christians. Above all, let us find time or make time for the patient, habitual contemplation of the great facts which kindle our devotion. For if you never think of Jesus Christ and His love to you, how can you love Him back again? And if you are so busy carrying out your own secular affairs, or pursuing your own ambitions, or attending to your own duties, as they may seem to be, that you have no time to think of Christ, His death, His life, His Spirit, His yearning heart over His bride, how can it be expected that you will have any depth of love to Him? Let us, too, wait with prayerful patience for that Divine Spirit who will knit us more closely to our Lord.

Unless we do so, we shall get no happiness out of our religion, and it will bring no praise to Christ or profit to ourselves. I do not know a more miserable man than a half-and-half Christian, after the pattern of, I was going to say, the ordinary average of professing Christians of this generation. He has religion enough to prick and sting him, and not enough to impel him to forsake the evil which yet he cannot comfortably do. He has religion enough to 'inflame his conscience,' not enough to subdue his will and heart. How many of my hearers are in that condition it is for them to settle. If we are to be Christian men at all, let us be it out and out. Half-and-half religion is no religion.

'One foot in sea, and one on shore; To one thing constant never!'

That is the type of thousands of professing Christians. 'I fear lest by any means your minds be corrupted from the simplicity that is towards Christ.'

24)2 Corinthians 12:8-9

2 Corinthians

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

2Co. 12:8-9

This very remarkable page in the autobiography of the Apostle shows us that he, too, belonged to the great army of martyrs who, with hearts bleeding and pierced through and through with a dart, yet did their work for God. It is of little consequence what his thorn in the flesh may have been. The original word suggests very much heavier sorrow than the metaphor of 'a thorn' might imply. It really seems to mean not a tiny bit of thorn that might lie half concealed in the finger tip, but one of those hideous stakes on which the cruel punishment of impalement used to be inflicted. And Paul's thought is, not that he has a little, trivial trouble to bear, but that he is, as it were, forced quivering upon that tremendous torture.

Unquestionably, what he means is some bodily ailment or other. The hypothesis that the ‘thorn in the flesh’ was the sting of the animal nature inciting him to evil is altogether untenable, because such a thorn could never have been left when the prayer for its removal was earnestly presented; nor could it ever have been, when left, an occasion for glorifying. Manifestly it was no weakness removable by his own effort, no incapacity for service which in any manner approximated to being a fault, but purely and simply some infliction from God’s hand [though likewise capable of being regarded as a ‘messenger of Satan’] which hindered him in his work, and took down any proud flesh and danger of spiritual exaltation in consequence of the largeness of his religious privileges.

Our text sets before us three most instructive windings, as it were, of the stream of thoughts that passed through the Apostle’s mind, in reference to this burden that he had to carry, and may afford wholesome contemplation for us to-day. There is, first, the instinctive shrinking which took refuge in prayer. Then there is the insight won by prayer into the sustaining strength for, and the purposes of, the thorn that was not to be plucked out. And then, finally, there is the peace of acquiescence, and a will that accepts--not the inevitable, but the loving.

I. First of all we see the instinctive shrinking from that which tortured the flesh, which takes refuge in prayer.

There is a wonderful, a beautiful, and, I suppose, an intentional parallel between the prayers of the servant and of the Master. Paul’s petitions are the echo of Gethsemane. There, under the quivering olives, in the broken light of the Paschal moon, Jesus ‘thrice’ prayed that the cup might pass from Him. And here the servant, emboldened and instructed by the example of the Master, ‘thrice’ reiterates his human and natural desire for the removal of the pain, whatever it was, which seemed to him so to hinder the efficiency and the fulness, as it certainly did the joy, of his service.

But He who prayed in Gethsemane was He to whom Paul addressed his prayer. For, as is almost always the case in the New Testament, ‘the Lord’ here evidently means Christ, as is obvious from the connection of the answer to the petition with the Apostle’s final confidence and acquiescence. For the answer was, ‘My strength is made perfect in weakness’; and the

Apostle’s conclusion is, ‘Most gladly will I glorify in infirmity,’ that the strength or ‘power _of Christ_ may rest upon me.’ Therefore the prayer with which we have to deal here is a prayer offered to Jesus, who prayed in Gethsemane, and to whom we can bring our petitions and our desires.

Notice how this thought of prayer directed to the Master Himself helps to lead us deep into the sacredest and most blessed characteristics of prayer. It is only telling Christ what is in our hearts. Oh, if we lived in the true understanding of what prayer really is--the emptying out of our inmost desire and thoughts before our Brother, who is likewise our Lord--questions as to what it was permissible to pray for, and what it was not permissible to pray for, would be irrelevant, and drop away of themselves. If we had a less formal notion of prayer, and realised more thoroughly what it was--the speech of a confiding heart to a sympathising Lord--then everything that fills our hearts would be seen to be a fitting object of prayer. If anything is large enough to interest me, it is not too small to be spoken about to Him.

So the question, which is often settled upon very abstract and deep grounds that have little to do with the matter--the question as to whether prayer for outward blessings is permissible--falls away of itself. If I am to talk to Jesus Christ about everything that concerns me, am I to keep my thumb upon all that great department and be silent about it? One reason why our prayers are often so unreal is, because they do not fit our real wants, nor correspond to the thoughts that are busy in our minds at the moment of praying. Our hearts are full of some small matter of daily interest, and when we kneel down not a word about it comes to our lips. Can that be right?

The difference between the different objects of prayer is not to be found in the rejection of all temporal and external, but in remembering that there are two sets of things to be prayed about, and over one set must ever be written ‘If it be Thy will,’ and over the other it need not be written, because we are sure that the granting of our wishes _is_ His will. We know about the one that ‘if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us.’ That may seem to be a very poor and shrunken kind of hope to give a man, that if his prayer is in conformity with the previous determination of the divine will, it will be answered. But it availed for the joyful confidence of that Apostle who saw deepest into the conditions and the blessedness of the harmony of the will of God and of man. But about the other set we can only say, ‘Not my will, but Thine be done.’ With that sentence, not as a formula upon our lips but deep in our hearts, let us take everything into His presence--thorns and stakes, pinpricks and wounds out of which the life-blood is ebbing--let us take them all to Him, and be sure that we shall take none of them in vain.

So then we have the Person to whom the prayer is addressed, the subjects with which it is occupied, and the purpose to which it is directed. ‘Take away the burden’ was the Apostle’s petition; but it was a mistaken petition and, therefore, unanswered.

II. That brings me to the second of the windings, as I have ventured to call them, of this stream--viz. the insight into the source of strength for, and the purpose of, the thorn that could not be taken away. The Lord said unto me, ‘My grace is sufficient for thee. For My strength’ [where the word ‘My’ is a supplement, but a necessary one] ‘is made perfect in weakness.’

The answer is, in form and in substance, a gentle refusal of the form of the petition, but it is a more than granting of its essence. For the best answer to such a prayer, and the answer which a true man means when he asks, ‘Take away the burden,’ need not be the external removal of the pressure of the sorrow, but the infusing of power to sustain it. There are two ways of lightening a burden, one is diminishing its actual weight, the other is increasing the strength of the shoulder that bears it. And the latter is God’s way, is Christ’s way, of dealing with us.

Now mark that the answer which this faithful prayer receives is no communication of anything fresh, but it is the opening of the man’s eyes to see that already he has all that he needs. The reply is not, ‘I _will_ give thee grace sufficient,’ but ‘My grace’ [which thou hast now] ‘is sufficient for thee.’ That grace is given and possessed by the sorrowing heart at the moment when it prays. Open your eyes to see what you have, and you will not ask for the load to be taken away. Is not that always true? Many a heart is carrying some heavy weight; perhaps some have an incurable sorrow, some are stricken by disease that they know can never be healed, some are aware that the shipwreck has been total, and that the sorrow that they carry to-day will lie down with them in the dust. Be it so! ‘My grace [not shall be, but] _is_ sufficient for thee.' And what thou hast already in thy possession is enough for all that comes storming against thee of disease, disappointment, loss, and misery. Set on the one side all possible as well as all actual weaknesses, burdens, pains, and set on the other these two words--'My grace,' and all these dwindle into nothingness and disappear. If troubled Christian men would learn what they have, and would use what they already possess, they would less often beseech Him with vain petitions to take away their blessings which are in the thorns in the flesh. 'My grace is sufficient.'

How modestly the Master speaks about what He gives! 'Sufficient'? Is not there a margin? Is there not more than is wanted? The overplus is 'exceeding abundant,' not only 'above what we ask or think,' but far more than our need. 'Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not _sufficient_ that every one may take a little,' says Sense. Omnipotence says, 'Bring the few small loaves and fishes unto Me'; and Faith dispensed them amongst the crowd; and Experience 'gathered up of the fragments that remained' more than there had been when the multiplication began. So the grace utilised increases; the gift grows as it is employed. 'Unto him that hath shall be given.' And the 'sufficiency' is not a bare adequacy, just covering the extent of the need, with no overlapping margin, but is large beyond expectation, desire, or necessity; so leading onwards to high hopes and a wider opening of the open mouths of our need that the blessing may pour in.

The other part of this great answer, that the Christ from Heaven spoke in or to the praying spirit of this not disappointed, though refused, Apostle, unveiled the purpose of the sorrow, even as the former part had disclosed the strength to bear it. For, says He, laying down therein the great law of His kingdom in all departments and in all ways, 'My strength is made perfect'--that is, of course, perfect in its manifestation or operations, for it is perfect in itself already. 'My strength is made perfect in weakness.' It works in and through man's weakness.

God works with broken reeds. If a man conceits himself to be an iron pillar, God can do nothing with or by him. All the self-conceit and confidence have to be taken out of him first. He has to be brought low before the Father can use him for His purposes. The lowlands hold the water, and, if only the sluice is open, the gravitation of His grace does all the rest and carries the flood into the depths of the lowly heart.

His strength loves to work in weakness, only the weakness must be conscious, and the conscious weakness must have passed into conscious dependence. There, then, you get the law for the Church, for the works of Christianity on the widest scale, and in individual lives. Strength that conceits itself to be such is weakness; weakness that knows itself to be such is strength. The only true source of Power, both for Christian work and in all other respects, is God Himself; and our strength is ours but by derivation from Him. And the only way to secure that derivation is through humble dependence, which we call faith in Jesus Christ. And the only way by which that faith in Jesus Christ can ever be kindled in a man's soul is through the sense of his need and emptiness. So when we know ourselves weak, we have taken the first step to strength; just as, when we know ourselves sinners, we have taken the first step to righteousness; just as in all regions the recognition of the doleful fact of our human necessity is the beginning of the joyful confidence in the glad, triumphant fact of the divine fulness. All our hollownesses, if I may so say, are met with His fulness that fits into them. It only needs that a man be aware of that which he is, and then turn himself to Him who is all that he is not, and then into his empty being will flow rejoicing the whole fulness of God. 'My strength is made perfect in weakness.'

III. Lastly, mark the calm final acquiescence in the loving necessity of continued sorrow.

'Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmity that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' The will is entirely harmonised with Christ's. The Apostle begins with instinctive shrinking, he passes onwards to a perception of the purpose of his trial and of the sustaining grace; and he comes now to acquiescence which is not passivity, but glad triumph. He is more than submissive, he gladly glories in his infirmity in order that the power of Christ may 'spread a tabernacle over' him. 'It is good for me that I have been afflicted,' said the old prophet. Paul says, in a yet higher note of concord with God's will, 'I am glad that I sorrow. I rejoice in weakness, because it makes it easier for me to cling, and, clinging, I am strong, and conquer evil.’ Far better is it that the sting of our sorrow should be taken away, by our having learned what it is for, and having bowed to it, than that it should be taken away by the external removal which we sometimes long for. A grief, a trial, an incapacity, a limitation, a weakness, which we use as a means of deepening our sense of dependence upon Him, is a blessing, and not a sorrow. And if we would only go out into the world trying to interpret its events in the spirit of this great text, we should less frequently wonder and weep over what sometimes seem to us the insoluble mysteries of the sorrows of ourselves and of other men. They are all intended to make it more easy for us to realise our utter hanging upon Him, and so to open our hearts to receive more fully the quickening influences of His omnipotent and self-sufficing grace.

Here, then, is a lesson for those who have to carry some cross and know they must carry it throughout life. It will be wreathed with flowers if you accept it. Here is a lesson for all Christian workers. Ministers of the Gospel especially should banish all thoughts of their own cleverness, intellectual ability, culture, sufficiency for their work, and learn that only when they are emptied can they be filled, and only when they know themselves to be nothing are they ready for God to work through them. And here is a lesson for all who stand apart from the grace and power of Jesus Christ as if they needed it not. Whether you know it or not, you are a broken reed; and the only way of your ever being bound up and made strong is that you shall recognise your sinfulness, your necessity, your abject poverty, your utter emptiness, and come to Him who is righteousness, riches, fulness, and say, ‘Because I am weak, be Thou my strength.’ The secret of all noble, heroic, useful, happy life lies in the paradox, ‘When I am weak, then am I strong,’ and the secret of all failures, miseries, hopeless losses, lies in its converse, ‘When I am strong, then am I weak.’

25)2 Corinthians 12:14

2 Corinthians

NOT YOURS BUT YOU

2Co. 12:14

Men are usually quick to suspect others of the vices to which they themselves are prone. It is very hard for one who never does anything but with an eye to what he can make out of it, to believe that there are other people actuated by higher motives. So Paul had, over and over again, to meet the hateful charge of making money out of his apostleship. It was one of the favourite stones that his opponents in the Corinthian Church, of whom there were very many, very bitter ones, flung at him. In this letter he more than once refers to the charge. He does so with great dignity, and with a very characteristic and delicate mixture of indignation and tenderness, almost playfulness. Thus, in the context, he tells these Corinthian grumblers that he must beg their pardon for not having taken anything of them, and so honoured them. Then he informs them that he is coming again to see them for the third time, and that that visit will be marked by the same independence of their help as the others had been. And then he just lets a glimpse of his pained heart peep out in the words of my text. ‘I seek not yours, but you.’ _There_ speaks a disinterested love which feels obliged, and yet reluctant, to stoop to say that it _is_ love, and that it _is_ disinterested. Where did Paul learn this passionate desire to possess these people, and this entire suppression of self in the desire? It was a spark from a sacred fire, a drop from an infinite ocean, an echo of a divine voice. The words of my text would never have been Paul’s if the spirit of them had not first been Christ’s. I venture to take them in that aspect, as setting forth Christ’s claims upon us, and bearing very directly on the question of Christian service and of Christian liberality.

I. So, then, first of all, I remark, Christ desires personal surrender.

‘I seek not yours, but _you_,’ is the very mother-tongue of love; but upon our lips, even when our love is purest, there is a tinge of selfishness blending with it, and very often the desire for another’s love is as purely selfish as the desire for any material good. But in so far as human love is pure in its desire to possess another, we have the right to believe the deep and wonderful thought that there is something corresponding to it in the heart of Christ, which is a revelation for us of the heart of God; and that, however little we may be able to construe the whole meaning of the fact, He does stretch out an arm of desire towards us; and for His own sake, as for ours, would fain draw us near to Himself, and is ‘satisfied,’ as He is not without it, when men’s hearts yield themselves up to Him, and let Him love them and lavish Himself upon them. I do not venture into these depths, but I would lay upon our hearts that the very inmost meaning of all that Jesus Christ has said, and is saying, to each of us by the records of His life, by the pathos of His death, by the miracle of His Resurrection, by the glory of His Ascension, by the power of His granted Spirit, is, ‘I seek you.’

And, brethren, our self-surrender is the essence of our Christianity. Our religion lies neither in our heads nor in our acts; the deepest notion of it is that it is the entire yielding up of ourselves to Jesus Christ our Lord. There is plenty of religion which is a religion of the head and of creeds. There is plenty of religion which is the religion of the hand and of the tongue, and of forms and ceremonies and sacraments; external worship. There is plenty of religion which surrenders to Him some of the more superficial parts of our personality, whilst the ancient Anarch, Self, sits undisturbed on his dark throne, in the depths of our being. But none of these are the religion that either Christ requires or that we need. The only true notion of a Christian is a man who can truly say, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’

And that is the only kind of life that is blessed; our only true nobleness and beauty and power and sweetness are measured by, and accurately correspond with, the completeness of our surrender of ourselves to Jesus Christ. As long as the earth was thought to be the centre of the planetary system there was nothing but confusion in the heavens. Shift the centre to the sun and all becomes order and beauty. The root of sin, and the mother of death, is making myself my own law and Lord; the germ of righteousness, and the first pulsations of life, lie in yielding ourselves to God in Christ, because He has yielded Himself unto us.

I need not remind you, I suppose, that this self-surrender is a great deal more than a vivid metaphor: that it implies a very hard fact; implies at least two things, that we have yielded ourselves to Jesus Christ, by the love of our hearts, and by the unreluctant submission of our wills, whether He commands or whether He sends sufferings or joys.

And, oh, brethren, be sure of this, that no such giving of myself away, in the sweet reciprocities of a higher than human affection, is possible, in the general, and on the large scale, if you evacuate from the Gospel the great truth, ‘He loved me, and gave Himself for me.’ I believe--and therefore I am bound to preach it--that the only power which can utterly annihilate and cast out the dominion of self from a human soul is the power that is lodged in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross for sinful men.

And whilst I would fully recognise all that is noble, and all that is effective, in systems either of religion, or of irreligious morality, which have no place within their bounds for that great motive, I am sure of this, that the evil self within us is too strong to be exorcised by anything short of the old message, ‘Jesus Christ has given His life for thee, wilt thou not give thyself unto Him?’

II. Christ seeks personal service.

‘I seek . . . you’; not only for My love, but for My tools; for My instruments in carrying out the purposes for which I died, and establishing My dominion in the world. Now I want to say two or three very plain things about this matter, which lies very near my heart, as to some degree responsible for the amount of Christian activity and service in this my congregation. Brethren, the surrender of ourselves to Jesus Christ in acts of direct Christian activity and service, will be the outcome of a real surrender of ourselves to Him in love and obedience.

I cannot imagine a man who, in any deep sense, has realised his obligations to that Saviour, and in any real sense has made the great act of self-renunciation, and crowned Christ as his Lord, living for the rest of his life, as so many professing Christians do, dumb and idle, in so far as work for the Master is concerned. It seems to me that, among the many wants of this generation of professing Christians, there is none that is more needed than that a wave of new consecration should pass over the Church. If men who call themselves Christians lived more in habitual contact with the facts of their redeeming Saviour's sacrifice for them, there would be no need to lament the fewness of the labourers, as measured against the overwhelming multitude of the fields that are white to harvest. If once that flood of a new sense of Christ's gift, and a consequent new completeness of our returned gifts to Him, flowed over the churches, then all the little empty ravines would be filled with a flashing tide. Not a shuttle moves, not a spindle revolves, until the strong impulse born of fire rushes in; and then, all is activity. It is no use to flog, flog, flog, at idle Christians, and try to make them work. There is only one thing that will set them to work, and that is that they shall live nearer their Master, and find out more of what they owe to Him; and so render themselves up to be His instruments for any purpose for which He may choose to use them.

This surrender of ourselves for direct Christian service is the only solution of the problem of how to win the world for Jesus Christ. Professionals cannot do it. Men of my class cannot do it. We are clogged very largely by the fact that, being necessarily dependent on our congregations for a living, we cannot, with as clear an emphasis as you can, go to people and say, 'We seek not yours, but you.' I have nothing to say about the present ecclesiastical arrangements of modern Christian communities. That would take me altogether from my present purposes, but I want to lay this upon your consciences, dear brethren, that you who have other means of living than proclaiming Christ's name have an advantage, which it is at your peril that you fling away. As long as the Christian Church thought that an ordained priest was a man who could do things that laymen could not do, the limitation of Christian service to the priesthood was logical. But when the Christian Church, especially as represented by us Nonconformists, came to believe that a minister was only a man who preached the Gospel, which every Christian man is bound to do, the limitations of Christian service to the official class became an illogical survival, utterly incongruous with the fundamental principles of our conception of the Christian Church. And yet here it is, devastating our churches to-day, and making hundreds of good people perfectly comfortable, in an unscriptural and unchristian indolence, because, forsooth, it is the minister's business to preach the Gospel. I know that there is not nearly as much of that indolence as there used to be. Thank God for that. There are far more among our congregations than in former times who have realised the fact that it is _every_ Christian man's task, somehow or other, to set forth the great name of Jesus Christ. But still, alas, in a church with, say, 400 members, you may knock off the last cypher, and you will get a probably not too low statement of the number of people in it who have realised and fulfilled this obligation. What about the other 360 'dumb dogs, that will not bark'? And in that 360 there will probably be several men who can make speeches on political platforms, and in scientific lecture-halls, and about social and economical questions, only they cannot, for the life of them, open their mouths and say a word to a soul about Him whom they say they serve, and to whom they say they belong.

Brethren, this direct service cannot be escaped from, or commuted by a money payment. In the old days a man used to escape serving in the militia if he found a substitute, and paid for him. There are a great many good Christian people who seem to think that Christ's army is recruited on that principle. But it is a mistake. 'I seek you, not yours.'

III. Lastly, and only a word. Christ seeks us, _and_ ours.

Not you _without_ yours, still less yours without you. This is no place, nor is the fag end of a sermon the time, to talk about so wide a subject as the ethics of Christian dealing with money. But two things I will say--consecration of self is extremely imperfect which does not include the consecration of possessions, and, conversely, consecration of possessions which does not flow from, and is not accompanied by, the consecration of self, is nought.

If, then, the great law of self-surrender is to run through the whole Christian life, that law, as applied to our dealing with what we own, prescribes three things. The first is _stewardship_, not ownership; and that all round the circumference of our possessions. Depend upon it, the angry things that we hear to-day about the unequal distribution of wealth will get angrier and angrier, and will be largely justified in becoming so by the fact that so many of us, _Christians included_, have firmly grasped the notion of possession, and utterly forgotten the obligation of stewardship.

Again, the law of self-surrender, in its application to all that we have, involves our continual reference to Jesus Christ in our disposition of these our possessions. I draw no line of distinction, in this respect, between what a man spends upon himself, and what he spends upon ‘charity,’ and what he spends upon religious objects. _One_ principle is to govern, getting, hoarding, giving, enjoying, and that is, that in it all Christ shall be Master.

Again, the law of self-surrender, in its application to our possessions, implies that there shall be an element of sacrifice in our use of these; whether they be possessions of intellect, of acquirement, of influence, of position, or of material wealth. The law of help is sacrifice, and the law for a Christian man is that he shall not offer unto the Lord his God that which costs him nothing.

So, dear friends, let us all get near to that great central fire till it melts our hearts. Let the love which is our hope be our pattern. Remember that though only faintly, and from afar, can the issues of Christ’s great sacrifice be reproduced in any actions of ours, the spirit which brought Him to die is the spirit which must instruct and inspire us to live. Unless we can say, ‘He loved me, and gave Himself for me; I yield myself to Him’; and unless our lives confirm the utterance, we have little right to call ourselves His disciples.

Galatians

1) GALATIANS 2:20
2) GALATIANS 3:1
3) GALATIANS 3:4
4) GALATIANS 3:22
5) GALATIANS 4:4-5
6) GALATIANS 5:6
7) GALATIANS 5:16
8) GALATIANS 5:22-23
9) GALATIANS 6:5

10) GALATIANS 6:10
11) GALATIANS 6:16
12) GALATIANS 6:17

1) Galatians 2:20

Galatians

FROM CENTRE TO CIRCUMFERENCE

Gal. 2:20.

We have a bundle of paradoxes in this verse. First, ‘I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live.’ The Christian life is a dying life. If we are in any real sense joined to Christ, the power of His death makes us dead to self and sin and the world. In that region, as in the physical, death is the gate of life; and, inasmuch as what we die to in Christ is itself only a living death, we live because we die, and in proportion as we die.

The next paradox is, ‘Yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’ The Christian life is a life in which an indwelling Christ casts out, and therefore quickens, self. We gain ourselves when we lose ourselves. His abiding in us does not destroy but heightens our individuality. We then most truly live when we can say, ‘Not I, but Christ liveth in me’; the soul of my soul and the self of myself.

And the last paradox is that of my text, ‘The life which I live in the flesh, I live in’ [not ‘by’] ‘the faith of the Son of God.’ The true Christian life moves in two spheres at once. Externally and superficially it is ‘in the flesh,’ really it is ‘in faith.’ It belongs not to the material nor is dependent upon the physical body in which we are housed. We are strangers here, and the true region and atmosphere of the Christian life is that invisible sphere of faith.

So, then, we have in these words of my text a Christian man’s frank avowal of the secret of his own life. It is like a geological cutting, it goes down from the surface, where the grass and the flowers are, through the various strata, but it goes deeper than these, to the fiery heart, the flaming nucleus and centre of all things. Therefore it may do us all good to make a section of our hearts and see whether the _strata_ there are conformable to those that are here.

I. Let us begin with the centre, and work to the surface. We have, first, the great central fact named last, but round which all the Christian life is gathered.

‘The Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me.’ These two words, the ‘loving’ and the ‘giving,’ both point backwards to some one definite historical fact, and the only fact which they can have in view is the great one of the death of Jesus Christ. That is His giving up of Himself. That is the signal and highest manifestation and proof of His love.

Notice [though I can but touch in the briefest possible manner upon the great thoughts that gather round these words] the three aspects of that transcendent fact, the centre and nucleus of the whole Christian life, which come into prominence in these words before us. Christ’s death is a great act of self-surrender, of which the one motive is His own pure and perfect love. No doubt in other places of Scripture we have set forth the death of Christ as being the result of the Father’s purpose, and we read that in that wondrous surrender there were two givings up The Father ‘freely gave Him up to the death for us all.’ That divine surrender, the Apostle ventures, in another passage, to find dimly suggested from afar, in the silent but submissive and unreluctant surrender with which Abraham yielded his only begotten son on the mountain top. But besides that ineffable giving up by the Father of the Son, Jesus Christ Himself, moved only by His love, willingly yields Himself. The whole doctrine of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ has been marred by one-sided insisting on the truth that God sent the Son, to the forgetting of the fact that the Son ‘came’; and that He was bound to the Cross neither by cords of man’s weaving nor by the will of the Father, but that He Himself bound Himself to that Cross with the ‘cords of love and the bands of a man,’ and died from no natural necessity nor from any imposition of the divine will upon Him unwilling, but because He would, and that He would because He loved. ‘He loved me, and gave Himself for me.’

Then note, further, that here, most distinctly, that great act of self-surrendering love which culminates on the Cross is regarded as being for man in a special and peculiar sense. I know, of course, that from the mere wording of my text we cannot argue the atoning and substitutionary character of the death of Christ, for the preposition here does not necessarily mean 'instead of,' but 'for the behoof of.' But admitting that, I have another question. If Christ's death is for 'the behoof of' men, in what conceivable sense does it benefit them, unless it is in the place of men? The death 'for me' is only for me when I understand that it is 'instead of' me. And practically you will find that wherever the full-orbed faith in Christ Jesus as the death for all the sins of the whole world, bearing the penalty and bearing it away, has begun to falter and grow pale, men do not know what to do with Christ's death at all, and stop talking about it to a very large extent.

Unless He died as a sacrifice, I, for one, fail to see in what other than a mere sentimental sense the death of Christ is a death for men.

And lastly, about this matter, observe how here we have brought into vivid prominence the great thought that Jesus Christ in His death has regard to single souls. We preach that He died for all. If we believe in that august title which is laid here as the vindication of our faith on the one hand, and as the ground of the possibility of the benefits of His death being world-wide on the other--viz. the Son of God--then we shall not stumble at the thought that He died for all, because He died for each. I know that if you only regard Jesus Christ as human I am talking utter nonsense; but I know, too, that if we believe in the divinity of our Lord, there need be nothing to stumble us, but the contrary, in the thought that it was not an abstraction that He died for, that it was not a vague mass of unknown beings, clustered together, but so far away that He could not see any of their faces, for whom He gave His life on the Cross. That is the way in which, and in which alone, _we_ can embrace the whole mass of humanity--by losing sight of the individuals. We generalise, precisely because we do not see the individual units; but that is not God's way, and that is not Christ's way, who is divine. For Him the _all_ is broken up into its parts, and when we say that the divine love loves all, we mean that the divine love loves each. I believe [and I commend the thought to you] that we do not fathom the depth of Christ's sufferings unless we recognise that the sins of each man were consciously adding pressure to the load beneath which He sank; nor picture the wonders of His love until we believe that on the Cross it distinguished and embraced each, and, therefore, comprehended all. Every man may say, ‘He loved me, and gave Himself for me.’

II. So much, then, for the first central fact that is here. Now let me say a word, in the second place, about the faith which makes that fact the foundation of my own personal life.

‘I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me.’ I am not going to plunge into any unnecessary dissertations about the nature of faith; but may I say that, like all other familiar conceptions, it has got worn so smooth that it glides over our mental palate without roughening any of the _papillæ_ or giving any sense or savour at all? And I do believe that dozens of people like you, who have come to church and chapel all your lives, and fancy yourselves to be fully _au fait_ at all the Christian truth that you will ever hear from my lips, do not grasp with any clearness of apprehension the meaning of that fundamental word ‘faith.’

It is a thousand pities that it is confined by the accidents of language to our attitude in reference to Jesus Christ. So some of you think that it is some kind of theological juggle which has nothing to do with, and never can be seen in operation in, common life. Suppose, instead of the threadbare, technical ‘faith’ we took to a new translation for a minute, and said ‘_trust_,’ do you think that would freshen up the thought to you at all? It is the very same thing which makes the sweetness of your relations to wife and husband and friend and parent, which, transferred to Jesus Christ and glorified in the process, becomes the seed of immortal life and the opener of the gate of Heaven. Trust Jesus Christ. That is the living centre of the Christian life; that is the process by which we draw the general blessing of the Gospel into our own hearts, and make the world-wide truth, our truth.

I need not insist either, I suppose, on the necessity, if our Christian life is to be modelled upon the Apostolic lines, of our faith embracing the Christ in all these aspects in which I have been speaking about His work. God forbid that I should seem to despise rudimentary and incomplete feelings after Him in any heart which may be unable to say ‘Amen’ to Paul’s statement here. I want to insist very earnestly, and with special reference to the young, that the true Christian faith is not merely the grasp of the person, but it is the grasp of the Person who is ‘declared to be the Son of God,’ and whose death is the voluntary self-surrender motived by His love, for the carrying away of the sins of every single soul in the whole universe. That is the Christ, the full Christ, cleaving to whom our faith finds somewhat to grasp worthy of grasping. And I beseech you, be not contented with a partial grasp of a partial Saviour; neither shut your eyes to the divinity of His nature, nor to the efficacy of His death, but remember that the true Gospel preaches Christ and Him crucified; and that for us, saving faith is the faith that grasps the Son of God ‘Who loved me and gave Himself for me.’

Note, further, that true faith is personal faith, which appropriates, and, as it were, fences in as my very own, the purpose and benefit of Christ’s giving of Himself. It is always difficult for lazy people [and most of us are lazy] to transfer into their own personal lives, and to bring into actual contact with themselves and their own experience, wide, general truths. To assent to them, when we keep them in their generality, is very easy and very profitless. It does no man any good to say ‘All men are mortal’; but how different it is when the blunt end of that generalisation is shaped into a point, and I say ‘I have to die!’ It penetrates then, and it sticks. It is easy to say ‘All men are sinners.’ That never yet forced anybody down on his knees. But when we shut out on either side the lateral view and look straight on, on the narrow line of our own lives, up to the Throne where the Lawgiver sits, and feel ‘I am a sinful man,’ that sends us to our prayers for pardon and purity. And in like manner nobody was ever wholesomely terrified by the thought of a general judgment. But when you translate it into ‘I must stand there,’ the terror of the Lord persuades men.

In like manner that great truth which we all of us say we believe, that Christ has died for the world, is utterly useless and profitless to us until we have translated it into Paul’s world, ‘loved _me_ and gave Himself for _me_.’ I do not say that the essence of faith is the conversion of the general statement into the particular application, but I do say that there is no faith which does not realise one’s personal possession of the benefits of the death of Christ, and that until you turn the wide word into a message for yourself alone, you have not yet got within sight of the blessedness of the Christian life. The whole river may flow past me, but only so much of it as I can bring into my own garden by my own sluices, and lift in my own bucket, and put to my own lips, is of any use to me. The death of Christ for the world is a commonplace of superficial Christianity, which is no Christianity; the death of Christ for myself, as if He and I were the only beings in the universe, that is the death on which faith fastens and feeds.

And, dear brother, you have the right to exercise it. The Christ loves each, and therefore He loves all; that is the process in the divine mind. The converse is the process in the revelation of that mind; the Bible says to us, Christ loves all, and therefore we have the right to draw the inference that He loves each. You have as much right to take every 'whosoever' of the New Testament as your very own, as if on the page of your Bible that 'whosoever' was struck out, and your name, John, Thomas, Mary, Elizabeth, or whatever it is, were put in there. 'He loved _me_.' Can _you_ say that? Have you ever passed from the region of universality, which is vague and profitless, into the region of personal appropriation of the person of Jesus Christ and His death?

III. And now, lastly, notice the life which is built upon this faith.

The true Christian life is dual. It is a life in the flesh, and it is also a life in faith. These two, as I have said, are like two spheres, in either of which a man's course is passed, or, rather, the one is surface and the other is central. Here is a great trailing spray of seaweed floating golden on the unquiet water, and rising and falling on each wave or ripple. Aye! but its root is away deep, deep, deep below the storms, below where there is motion, anchored upon a hidden rock that can never move. And so my life, if it be a Christian life at all, has its surface amidst the shifting mutabilities of earth, but its root in the silent eternities of the centre of all things, which is Christ in God. I live in the flesh on the outside, but if I am a Christian at all, I live in the faith in regard of my true and proper being.

This faith, which grasps the Divine Christ as the person whose love-moved death is my life, and who by my faith becomes Himself the Indwelling Guest in my heart; this faith, if it be worth anything, will mould and influence my whole being. It will give me motive, pattern, power for all noble service and all holy living. The one thing that stirs men to true obedience is that their hearts be touched with the firm assurance that Christ loved them and died for them.

We sometimes used to see men starting an engine by manual force; and what toil it was to get the great cranks to turn, and the pistons to rise! So we set ourselves to try and move our lives into holiness and beauty and nobleness, and it is dispiriting work. There is a far better, surer way than that: let the steam in, and that will do it. That is to say--let the Christ in His dying power and the living energy of His indwelling Spirit occupy the heart, and activity becomes blessedness, and work is rest, and service is freedom and dominion.

The life that I live in the flesh is poor, limited, tortured with anxiety, weighed upon by sore distress, becomes dark and gray and dreary often as we travel nearer the end, and is always full of miseries and of pains. But if within that life in the flesh there be a life in faith, which is the life of Christ Himself brought to us through our faith, that life will be triumphant, quiet, patient, aspiring, noble, hopeful, gentle, strong, Godlike, being the life of Christ Himself within us.

So, dear friends, test your faith by these two tests, what it grasps and what it does. If it grasps a whole Christ, in all the glory of His nature and the blessedness of His work, it is genuine; and it proves its genuineness if, and only if, it works in you by love; animating all your action, bringing you ever into the conscious presence of that dear Lord, and making Him pattern, law, motive, goal, companion and reward. ‘To me to live is Christ.’

If so, then we live indeed; but to live in the flesh is to die; and the death that we die when we live in Christ is the gate and the beginning of the only real life of the soul.

2) Galatians 3:1

Galatians

THE EVIL EYE AND THE CHARM

Gal. 3:1

The Revised Version gives a shorter, and probably correct, form of this vehement question. It omits the two clauses ‘that ye should not obey the truth’ and ‘among you.’ The omission increases the sharpness of the thrust of the interrogation, whilst it loses nothing of the meaning.

Now, a very striking metaphor runs through the whole of this question, which may easily be lost sight of by ordinary readers. You know the old superstition as to the Evil Eye, almost universal at the date of this letter and even now in the East, and lingering still amongst ourselves. Certain persons were supposed to have the power, by a look, to work mischief, and by fixing the gaze of their victims, to suck the very life out of them. So Paul asks who the malign sorcerer is who has thus fascinated the fickle Galatians, and is draining their Christian life out of their eyes.

Very appropriately, therefore, if there is this reference, which the word translated ‘bewitched’ carries with it, he goes on to speak about Jesus Christ as having been displayed before their eyes. They had seen Him. How did they come to be able to turn away to look at anything else?

But there is another observation to be made by way of introduction, and that is as to the full force of the expression ‘evidently set forth.’ The word employed, as commentators tell us, is that which is used for the display of official proclamations, or public notices, in some conspicuous place, as the Forum or the market, that the citizens might read. So, keeping up the metaphor, the word might be rendered, as has been suggested by some eminent scholars, ‘placarded’--’Before whose eyes Jesus Christ has been placarded.’ The expression has acquired somewhat ignoble associations from modern advertising, but that is no reason why we should lose sight of its force. So, then, Paul says, ‘In my preaching, Christ was conspicuously set forth. It is like some inexplicable enchantment that, having seen Him, you should turn away to gaze on others.’ It is insanity which evokes wonder, as well as sin which deserves rebuke; and the fiery question of my text conveys both.

I. Keeping to the metaphor, I note first the placard which Paul had displayed.

‘Jesus Christ crucified has been conspicuously set forth before you,’ he says to these Galatians. Now, he is referring, of course, to his own work of preaching the Gospel to them at the beginning. And the vivid metaphor suggests very strikingly two things. We see in it the Apostle’s notion of what He had to do. His had been a very humble office, simply to hang up a proclamation. The one virtue of a proclamation is that it should be brief and plain. It must be authoritative, it must be urgent, it must be ‘writ large,’ it must be easily intelligible. And he that makes it public has nothing to do except to fasten it up, and make sure that it is legible. If I might venture into modern phraseology, what Paul means is that he was neither more nor less than a bill-sticker, that he went out with the placards and fastened them up.

Ah! if we ministers universally acted up to the implications of this metaphor, do you not think the pulpit would be more frequently a centre of power than it is to-day? And if, instead of presenting our own ingenuities and speculations, we were to realise the fact that we have to hide ourselves behind the broad sheet that we fasten up, there would be a new breath over many a moribund church, and we should hear less of the often warrantable sarcasms about the inefficiency of the modern pulpit.

But I turn from Paul’s conception of the office to his statement of his theme. ‘_Jesus_ was displayed amongst you.’ If I might vary the metaphor a little, the placard that Paul fastened up was like those that modern advertising ingenuity displays upon all our walls. It was a picture-placard, and on it was portrayed one sole figure--Jesus, the Person. Christianity is Christ, and Christ is Christianity; and wherever there is a pulpit or a book which deals rather with doctrines than with Him who is the Fountain and Quarry of all doctrine, there is divergence from the primitive form of the Gospel.

I know, of course, that doctrines--which are only formal and orderly statements of principles involved in the facts--must flow from the proclamation of the person, Christ. I am not such a fool as to run amuck against theology, as some people in this day do. But what I wish to insist upon is that the first form of Christianity is not a theory, but a history, and that the revelation of God is the biography of a man. We must begin with the person, Christ, and preach Him. Would that all our preachers and all professing Christians, in their own personal religious life, had grasped this--

that, since Christianity is not first a philosophy but a history, and its centre not an ordered sequence of doctrines but a living person, the act that makes a man possessor of Christianity is not the intellectual process of assimilating certain truths, and accepting them, but the moral process of clinging, with trust and love, to the person, Jesus.

But, further, if any of you consult the original, you will see that the order of the sentence is such as to throw a great weight of emphasis on that last word ‘crucified.’ It is not merely a person that is portrayed on the placard, but it is that person _upon the Cross_. Ah! brethren, Paul himself puts his finger, in the words of my text, on what, in his conception, was the throbbing heart of all his message, the vital point from which all its power, and all the gleam of its benediction, poured out upon humanity--’Christ crucified.’ If the placard is a picture of Christ in other attitudes and in other aspects, without the picture of Him crucified, it is an imperfect representation of the Gospel that Paul preached and that Christ was.

II. Now, think, secondly, of the fascinators that draw away the eyes.

Paul’s question is not one of ignorance, but it is a rhetorical way of rebuking, and of expressing wonder. He knew, and the Galatians knew, well enough who it was that had bewitched them. The whole letter is a polemic worked in fire, and not in frost, as some argumentation is, against a very well-marked class of teachers--viz. those emissaries of Judaism who had crept into the Church, and took it as their special function to dog Paul’s steps amongst the heathen communities that he had gathered together through faith in Christ, and used every means to upset his work.

I cannot but pause for a moment upon this original reference of my text, because it is very relevant to the present condition of things amongst us. These men whom Paul is fighting as if he were in a sawpit with them, in this letter, what was their teaching? This: they did not deny that Jesus was the Christ; they did not deny that faith knit a man to Him, but what they said was that the observance of the external rites of Judaism was necessary in order to entrance into the Church and to salvation. They did not in their own estimation detract from Christ, but they added to Him. And Paul says that to add is to detract, to say that anything is necessary except faith in Jesus Christ’s finished work is to deny that that finished work, and faith in it, are the means of salvation; and the whole evangelical system crumbles into nothingness if once you admit that.

Now, is there anybody to-day who is saying the same things, with variations consequent upon change of external conditions? Are there no people within the limits of the Christian Church who are reiterating the old Jewish notion that external ceremonies--baptism and the Lord’s Supper--are necessary to salvation and to connection with the Christian Church? And is it not true now, as it was then, that though they do not avowedly detract, they so represent these external rites as to detract, from the sole necessity of faith in the perfected work of Jesus Christ? The centre is shifted from personal union with a personal Saviour by a personal faith to participation in external ordinances. And I venture to think that the lava stream which, in this Epistle to the Galatians, Paul pours on the Judaisers of his day needs but a little deflection to pour its hot current over, and to consume, the sacramentarian theories of this day. ‘O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?’ Is it not like some malignant sorcery, that after the Evangelical revival of the last century and the earlier part of this, there should spring up again this old, old error, and darken the simplicity of the Gospel teaching, that Christ’s work, apprehended by faith, without anything else, is the means, and the only means, of salvation?

But I need not spend time upon that original application. Let us rather come more closely to our own individual lives and their weaknesses. It is a strange thing, so strange that if one did not know it by one’s own self, one would be scarcely disposed to believe it possible, that a man who has ‘tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come,’ and has known Jesus Christ as Saviour and Friend, should decline from Him, and turn to anything besides. And yet, strange and sad, and like some enchantment as it is, it is the experience at times and in a measure, of us all; and, alas! it is the experience, in a very tragical degree, of many who have walked for a little while behind the Master, and then have turned away and walked no more with Him. We may well wonder; but the root of the mischief is in no baleful glitter of a sorcerer’s eye without us, but it is in the weakness of our own wills and the waywardness of our own hearts, and the wandering of our own affections. We often court the coming of the evil influence, and are willing to be fascinated and to turn our backs upon Jesus.

Mysterious it is, for why should men cast away diamonds for paste? Mysterious it is, for we do not usually drop the substance to get the shadow. Mysterious it is, for a man does not ordinarily empty his pockets of gold in order to fill them with gravel. Mysterious it is, for a thirsty man will not usually turn away from the full, bubbling, living fountain, to see if he can find any drops still remaining, green with scum, stagnant and odorous, at the bottom of some broken cistern. But all these follies are sanity as compared with the folly of which we are guilty, times without number, when, having known the sweetness of Jesus Christ, we turn away to the fascinations of the world. Custom, the familiarity that we have with Him, the attrition of daily cares--like the minute grains of sand that are cemented on to paper, and make a piece of sandpaper that is strong enough to file an inscription off iron--the seductions of worldly delights, the pressure of our daily cares--all these are as a ring of sorcerers that stand round about us, before whom we are as powerless as a bird in the presence of a serpent, and they bewitch us and draw us away.

The sad fact has been verified over and over again on a large scale in the history of the Church. After every outburst of renewed life and elevated spirituality there is sure to come a period of reaction when torpor and formality again assert themselves. What followed the Reformation in Germany? A century of death. What followed Puritanism in England? An outburst of lust and godlessness.

So it has always been, and so it is with us individually, as we too well know. Ah, brethren! the seductions are omnipresent, and our poor eyes are very weak, and we turn away from the Lord to look on these misshapen monsters that are seeking by their gaze to draw us into destruction. I wonder how many professing Christians are in this audience who once saw Jesus Christ a great deal more clearly, and contemplated Him a great deal more fixedly, and turned their hearts to Him far more lovingly, than they do to-day? Some of the great mountain peaks of Africa are only seen for an hour or two in the morning, and then the clouds gather around them, and hide them for the rest of the day. It is like the experience of many professing Christians, who see Him in the morning of their Christian life far more vividly than they ever do after. ‘Who hath bewitched you?’ The world; but the arch-sorcerer sits safe in our own hearts.

III. Lastly, keeping to the metaphor, let me suggest, although my text does not touch upon it, the Amulet.

One has seen fond mothers in Egypt and Palestine who hang on their babies' necks charms, to shield them from the influence of the Evil Eye; and there is a charm that we may wear if we will, which will keep us safe. There is no fascination in the Evil Eye if you do not look at it.

The one object that the sorcerer has is to withdraw our gaze from Christ; it is not illogical to say that the way to defeat the object is to keep our gaze fixed on Christ. If you do not look at the baleful glitter of the Evil Eye it will exercise no power over you; and if you will steadfastly look at Him, then, and only then, you will not look at it. Like Ulysses in the legend, bandage the eyes and put wax in the ears, if you would neither be tempted by hearing the songs, nor by seeing the fair forms, of the sirens on their island. To look fixedly at Jesus Christ, and with the resolve never to turn away from Him, is the only safety against these tempting delights around us.

But, brethren, it is the crucified Christ, looking to whom, we are safe amidst all seductions and snares. I doubt whether a Christ who did not die for men has power enough over men's hearts and minds to draw them to Himself. The cords which bind us to Him are the assurance of His dying love which has conquered us. If only we will, day by day, and moment by moment, as we pass through the duties and distractions, the temptations and the trials, of this present life, by an act of will and thought turn ourselves to Him, then all the glamour of false attractiveness will disappear from the temptations around us, and we shall see that the sirens, for all their fair forms, end in loathly fishes' tails and sit amidst dead men's bones.

Brethren, 'looking _off_ unto Jesus' is the secret of triumph over the fascinations of the world. And if we will habitually so look, then the sweetness that we shall experience will destroy all the seducing power of lesser and earthly sweetness, and the blessed light of the sun will dim and all but extinguish the deceitful gleams that tempt us into the swamps where we shall be drowned. Turn away, then, from these things; cleave to Jesus Christ; and though in ourselves we may be as weak as a humming-bird before a snake, or a rabbit before a tiger, He will give us strength, and the light of His face shining down upon us will fix our eyes and make us insensible to the fascinations of the sorcerers. So we shall not need to dread the question, ‘Who hath bewitched you?’ but ourselves challenge the utmost might of the fascination with the triumphant question, ‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?’

Help us, O Lord! we beseech Thee, to live near Thee. Turn away our eyes from beholding vanity, and enable us to set the Lord always before us that we be not moved.

3) Galatians 3:4

Galatians

LESSONS OF EXPERIENCE

Gal. 3:4

Preached on the last Sunday of the year.

This vehement question is usually taken to be a reminder to the fickle Galatians that their Christian faith had brought upon them much suffering from the hands of their unbelieving brethren, and to imply an exhortation to faithfulness to the Gospel lest they should stultify their past brave endurance. Yielding to the Judaising teachers, and thereby escaping the ‘offence of the Cross,’ they would make their past sufferings vain. But it may be suggested that the word ‘suffered’ here is rather used in what is its known sense elsewhere, namely, with the general idea of _feeling_, the nature of the feeling being undefined. It is a touching proof of the preponderance of pain and sorrow that by degrees the significance of the word has become inextricably intertwined with the thought of sadness; still, it is possible to take it in the text as meaning _experienced_ or _felt_, and to regard the Apostle as referring to the whole of the Galatians’ past experience, and as founding his appeal for their steadfastness on all the joys as well as the sorrows, which their faith had brought them.

Taking the words in this more general sense they become a question which it is well for us to ask ourselves at such a time as this, when the calendar naturally invites us to look backwards and ask ourselves what we have made of all our experiences in the past, or rather what, by the help of them all, we have made of ourselves.

I. The duty of retrospect.

For almost any reason it is good for us to be delivered from our prevailing absorption in the present. Whatever counterpoises the overwhelming weight of the present is, so far, a blessing and a good, and whatever softens the heart and keeps up even the lingering remembrance of early, dewy freshness and of the high aspirations which, even for a brief space, elevated our past selves is gain amidst the dusty commonplaces of to-day. We see things better and more clearly when we get a little away from them, as a face is more distinctly visible at armslength than when held close.

But our retrospects are too often almost as trivial and degrading as is our absorption in the present, and to prevent memory from becoming a minister of frivolity if not of sin, it is needful that such a question as that of our text be urgently asked by each of us. Memory must be in closest union with conscience, as all our faculties must be, or she is of little use. There is a mere sentimental luxury of memory which finds a pensive pleasure in the mere passing out from the hard present into the soft light, not without illusion in its beams, of the ‘days that are no more.’ Merely to live over again our sorrows and joys without any clear discernment of what their effects on our moral character have been, is not the retrospect that becomes a man, however it might suit an animal. We have to look back as a man might do escaping from the ocean on to some frail sand-bank which ever breaks off and crumbles away at his very heels. To remember the past mainly as it affected our joy or our sorrow is as unworthy as to regard the present from the same point of view, and robs both of their highest worth. To remember is only then blessed and productive of its highest possible good in us, when the question of our text insists on being faced, and the object of retrospect is not to try to rekindle the cold coals of past emotions, but to ascertain what effect on our present characters our past experiences have had. We have not to turn back and try to gather some lingering flowers, but to look for the fruit which has followed the fallen blossoms.

II. The true test for the past.

The question of our text implies, as we have already suggested, that our whole lives, with all their various and often opposite experiences, are yet an ordered whole, having a definite end. There is some purpose beyond the moment to be served. Our joys and our sorrows, our gains and our losses, the bright hours and the dark hours, and the hours that are neither eminently bright nor supremely dark, our failures and our successes, our hopes disappointed or fulfilled, and all the infinite variety of condition and environment through which our varying days and years have led us, co-operate for one end. It is life that makes men; the infant is a bundle of possibilities, and as the years go on, one possible avenue of development after another is blocked. The child might have been almost anything; the man has become hardened and fixed into one shape.

But all this variety of impulses and complicated experiences need the co-operation of the man himself if they are to reach their highest results in him. If he is simply recipient of these external forces acting upon him, they will shape him indeed, but he will be a poor creature. Life does not make men unless men take the command of life, and he who lets circumstances and externals guide him, as the long water weeds in a river are directed by its current, will, from the highest point of view, have experienced the variations of a lifetime in vain.

No doubt each of our experiences has its own immediate and lower purpose to serve, and these purposes are generally accomplished, but beyond these each has a further aim which is not reached without diligent carefulness and persistent effort on our parts. If we would be sure of what it is to suffer life’s experiences in vain, we have but to ask ourselves what life is given us for, and we all know that well enough to be able to judge how far we have used life to attain the highest ends of living. We may put these ends in various ways in our investigation of the results of our manifold experiences. Let us begin with the lowest--we received life that we might learn truth, then if our experience has not taught us wisdom it has been in vain. It is deplorable to have to look round and see how little the multitude of men are capable of forming anything like an independent and intelligent opinion, and how they are swayed by gusts of passion, by blind prejudice, by pretenders and quacks of all sorts. It is no less sad for us to turn our eyes within and discover, perhaps not without surprise and shame, how few of what we are self-complacent enough to call our opinions are due to our own convictions.

If we ever are honest enough with ourselves to catch a glimpse of our own unwisdom, the question of our text will press heavily upon us, and may help to make us wiser by teaching us how foolish we are. An infinite source of wisdom is open to us, and all the rich variety of our lives' experiences has been lavished on us to help us, and what have we made of it all?

But we may rise a step higher and remember that we are made moral creatures. Therefore, whatever has not developed infant potentialities in us, and made them moral qualities, has been experienced in vain. 'Not enjoyment and not sorrow is our destined end and way.' Life is meant to make us love and do the good, and unless it has produced that effect on us, it has failed. If this be true, the world is full of failures, like the marred statues in a bad sculptor's studio, and we ourselves have earnestly to confess that the discipline of life has too often been wasted upon us, and that of us the divine complaint from of old has been true: 'In vain have I smitten thy children, they have received no correction.'

There is no sadder waste than the waste of sorrow, and alas! we all know how impotent our afflictions have been to make us better. But not afflictions only have failed in their appeal to us, our joys have as often been in vain as our sorrows, and memory, when it turns its lamp on the long past, sees so few points at which life has taught us to love goodness, and be good, that she may well quench her light and let the dead past bury its dead.

But we must rise still higher, and think of men as being made for God, and as being the only creatures known to us who are capable of religion. 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever.' And this chief end is in fullest harmony with the lower ends to which we have just referred, and they will never be realised in their fullest completeness unless that completeness is sought in this the chief end. From of old meditative souls have known that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and that that fear is as certainly the beginning of goodness. It was not an irrelevant rebuke to the question, 'What good thing shall I do?' when Jesus set the eager young soul who asked it, to justify to himself his courteous and superficial application to Him of the abused and vulgarised title of 'Good,' and pointed him to God as the only Being to whom that title, in its perfectness, could be given. If ‘there is none good but one, that is God,’ man’s goodness must be drawn from Him, and morality without religion will in theory be incomplete, and in practice a delusion. If, then, men are made to need God, and capable of possessing Him, and of being possessed by Him, then the great question for all of us is, has life, with all its rapid whirl of changing circumstance and varying fortunes, drawn us closer to God, and made us more fit to receive more of Him? So supreme is this chief end that a life which has not attained it can only be regarded as ‘in vain’ whatever other successes it may have attained. So unspeakably more important and necessary is it, that compared with it all else sinks into nothingness; hence many lives which are dazzling successes in the eyes of men are ghastly failures in reality.

Now, if we take these plain principles with us in our retrospect of the past year we shall be launched on a very serious inquiry, and brought face to face with a very penitent answer. Some of us may have had great sorrows, and the tears may be scarcely dry upon our cheeks: some of us may have had great gladnesses, and our hearts may still be throbbing with the thrill: some of us may have had great successes, and some of us heavy losses, but the question for us to ask is not of the quality of our past experiences, but as to their effects upon us. Has life been so used by us as to help us to become wiser, better, more devout? And the answer to that question, if we are honest in our scrutiny of ourselves, and if memory has not been a mere sentimental luxury, must be that we have too often been but unfaithful recipients alike of God’s mercies and God’s chastisements, and have received much of the discipline of life, and remained undisciplined. The question of our text, if asked by me, would be impertinent, but it is asked of each of us by the stern voice of conscience, and for some of us by the lips of dear ones whose loss has been among our chiefest sufferings. God asks us this question, and it is hard to make-believe to Him.

III. The best issue of the retrospect.

The world says, ‘What I have written I have written,’ and there is a very solemn and terrible reality in the thought of the irrevocable past. Whether life has achieved the ends for which it was given or no, it has achieved some ends. It may have made us into characters the very opposite of God's intention for us, but it has made us into certain characters which, so far as the world sees, can never be unmade or re-made. The world harshly preaches the indelibility of character, and proclaims that the Ethiopian may as soon be expected to change his skin or the leopard his spots as the man accustomed to do evil may learn to do well. That dreary fatalism which binds the effects of a dead past on a man's shoulders, and forbids him to hope that anything will obliterate the marks of 'what once hath been,' is in violent contradiction to the large hope brought into the world by Jesus Christ. What we have written we _have_ written, and we have no power to erase the lines and make the sheet clean again, but Jesus Christ has taken away the handwriting 'that was against us,' nailing it to His cross. Instead of our old sin-worn and sin-marked selves, He proffers to each of us a new self, not the outcome of what we have been, but the image of what He is and the prophecy of what we shall be. By the great gift of holiness for the future by the impartation of His own life and spirit, Jesus makes all things new. The Gospel recognises to the full how bad some who have received it were, but it can willingly admit their past foulness, because it contrasts with all that former filth their present cleanness, and to the most inveterately depraved who have trusted in Christ rejoices to say, 'Ye were washed, ye were sanctified, ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.'

4) Galatians 3:22

Galatians

THE UNIVERSAL PRISON

Gal. 3:22.

The Apostle uses here a striking and solemn figure, which is much veiled for the English reader by the ambiguity attaching to the word 'concluded.' It literally means 'shut up,' and is to be taken in its literal sense of confining, and not in its secondary sense of inferring. So, then, we are to conceive of a vast prison-house in which mankind is confined. And then, very characteristically, the Apostle passes at once to another metaphor when he goes on to say ‘under sin.’ What a moment before had presented itself to his vivid imagination as a great dungeon is now represented as a heavy weight, pressing down upon those beneath; if, indeed, we are not, perhaps, rather to think of the low roof of the dark dungeon as weighing on the captives.

Further, he says that Scripture has driven men into this captivity. That, of course, cannot mean that revelation makes us sinners, but it does mean that it makes us more guilty, and that it declares the fact of human sinfulness as no other voice has ever done. And then the grimness of the picture is all relieved and explained, and the office ascribed to God’s revelation harmonised with God’s love, by the strong, steady beam of light that falls from the last words, which tell us that the prisoners have not been bound in chains for despair or death, but in order that, gathered together in a common doleful destiny, they may become recipients of a common blessed salvation, and emerge into liberty and light through faith in Jesus Christ.

So here are three things--the prison-house, its guardian, and its breaker. ‘The Scripture hath shut up all under sin, in order that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given unto all them that believe.’

I. First, then, note the universal prison-house.

Now the Apostle says two things--and we may put away the figure and look at the facts that underlie it. The one is that all sin is imprisonment, the other is that all men are in that dungeon, unless they have come out of it through faith in Jesus Christ.

All sin is imprisonment. That is the direct contrary of the notion that many people have. They say to themselves, ‘Why should I be fettered and confined by these antiquated restrictions of a conventional morality? Why should I not break the bonds, and do as I like?’ And they laugh at Christian people who recognise the limitations under which God’s law has put them; and tell us that we are ‘cold-blooded folks who live by rule,’ and contrast their own broad ‘emancipation from narrow prejudice.’ But the reality is the other way. The man who does wrong is a slave in the measure in which he does it. If you want to find out--and mark this, you young people, who may be deceived by the false contrasts between the restraints of duty and the freedom of living a dissolute life--if you want to find out how utterly ‘he that committeth sin is the slave of sin,’ try to break it off, and you will find it out fast enough. We all know, alas! the impotence of the will when it comes to hand grips with some evil to which we have become habituated; and how we determine and determine, and try, and fail, and determine again, with no better result. We are the slaves of our own passions; and no man is free who is hindered by his lower self from doing that which his better self tells him he ought to do. The tempter comes to you, and says, ‘Come and do this thing, just for once. You can leave off when you like, you know. There is no need to do it a second time.’ And when you have done it, he changes his note, and says, ‘Ah! you are in, and you cannot get out. You have done it once; and in my vocabulary once means twice, and once and twice mean _always_.’

Insane people are sometimes tempted into a house of detention by being made to believe that it is a grand mansion, where they are just going to pay a flying visit, and can come away when they like. But once inside the walls, they never get past the lodge gates any more. The foolish birds do not know that there is lime on the twigs, and their little feet get fastened to the branch, and their wings flutter in vain. ‘He that committeth sin is the slave of sin--shut up,’ dungeoned, ‘under sin.’

But do not forget, either, the other metaphor in our text, in which the Apostle, with characteristic rapidity, and to the horror of rhetorical propriety, passes at once from the thought of a dungeon to the thought of an impending weight, and says, ‘Shut up _under_ sin.’

What does that mean? It means that we are guilty when we have done wrong; and it means that we are under penalties which are sure to follow. No deed that we do, howsoever it may fade from the tablets of our memory, but writes in visible characters, in proportion to its magnitude, upon our characters and lives. All human acts have perpetual consequences. The kick of the rifle against the shoulder of the man that fires it is as certain as the flight of the bullet from its muzzle. The chalk cliffs that rise above the Channel entomb and perpetuate the relics of myriads of evanescent lives; and our fleeting deeds are similarly preserved in our present selves. Everything that a man wills, whether it passes into external act or not, leaves, in its measure, ineffaceable impressions on himself. And so we are not only dungeoned in, but weighed upon by, and lie under, the evil that we do.

Nor, dear friends, dare I pass in silence what is too often passed in silence in the modern pulpit, the plain fact that there is a future waiting for each of us beyond the grave, of which the most certain characteristic, certified by our own forebodings, required by the reasonableness of creation, and made plain by the revelation of Scripture, is that it is a future of retribution, where we shall have to carry our works; and as we have brewed so shall we drink; and the beds that we have made we shall have to lie upon. ‘God shut up all under sin.’

Note, again, the universality of the imprisonment.

Now I am not going to exaggerate, I hope. I want to keep well within the limits of fact, and to say nothing that is not endorsed by your own consciences, if you will be honest with yourselves. And I say that the Bible does not charge men universally with gross transgressions. It does not talk about the virtues that grow in the open as if they were splendid vices; but it does say, and I ask you if our own hearts do not tell us that it says truly, that no man is, or has been, does, or has done, that which his own conscience tells him he should have been and done. We are all ready to admit faults, in a general way, and to confess that we have come short of what our own consciousness tells us we ought to be. But I want you to take the other step, and to remember that since we each stand in a personal relation to God, therefore all imperfections, faults, negligences, shortcomings, and, still more, transgressions of morality, or of the higher aspirations of our lives, are sins. Because sin--to use fine words--is the correlative of God. Or, to put it into plainer language, the deeds which in regard to law may be crimes, or those which in regard to morality may be vices, or in regard to our own convictions of duty may be shortcomings, seeing they all have some reference to Him, assume a very much graver character, and they are all sins.

Oh, brethren, if we realise how intimately and inseparably we are knit to God, and how everything that we do, and do not do, but should have done, has an aspect in reference to Him, I think we should be less unwilling to admit, and less tinged with levity and carelessness in admitting, that all our faults are transgressions of His law, and we should find ourselves more frequently on our knees before Him, with the penitent words on our lips and in our hearts, ‘Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight.’

That was the prayer of a man who had done a foul evil in other people’s sight; who had managed to accumulate about as many offences to as many people in one deed as was possible. For, as a king he had sinned against his nation, as a friend he had sinned against his companion, as a captain he had sinned against his brave subordinate, as a husband he had sinned against his wife, and he had sinned against Bathsheba. And yet, with all that tangle of offences against all these people, he says, ‘Against Thee, Thee only.’ Yes! Because, accurately speaking, the _sin_ had reference to God, and to God alone. And I wish for myself and for you to cultivate the habit of connecting, thus, all our actions, and especially our imperfections and our faults, with the thought of God, that we may learn how universal is the enclosure of man in this dreadful prison-house.

II. And so, I come, in the second place, to look at the guardian of the prison.

That is a strange phrase of my text attributing the shutting of men up in this prison-house to the merciful revelation of God in the Scripture. And it is made still more striking and strange by another edition of the same expression in the Epistle to the Romans, where Paul directly traces the ‘concluding all in disobedience’ to God Himself.

There may be other subtle thoughts connected with that expression which I do not need to enter upon now. But one that I would dwell upon, for a moment, is this, that one great purpose of Scripture is to convince us that we are sinful in God’s sight. I do not need to remind you, I suppose, how that was, one might almost say, the dominant intention of the whole of the ceremonial and moral law of Israel, and explains its many else inexplicable and apparently petty commandments and prohibitions. They were all meant to emphasise the difference between right and wrong, obedience and disobedience, and so to drive home to men’s hearts the consciousness that they had broken the commandments of the living God. And although the Gospel comes with a very different guise from that ancient order, and is primarily gift and not law, a Gospel of forgiveness, and not the promulgation of duty or the threatening of condemnation, yet it, too, has for one of its main purposes, which must be accomplished in us before it can reach its highest aim in us, the kindling in men's hearts of the same consciousness that they are sinful men in God's sight.

Ah, brethren, we all need it. There is nothing that we need more than to have driven deep into us the penetrating point of that conviction. There must be some external standard by which men may be convinced of their sinfulness, for they carry no such standard within them. Your conscience is only _you_ judging on moral questions, and, of course, as you change, it will change too. A man's whole state determines the voice with which conscience shall speak to him, and so the worse he is, and the more he needs it, the less he has it. The rebels cut the telegraph wires. The waves break the bell that hangs on the reef, and so the black rocks get many a wreck to gnaw with their sharp teeth. A man makes his conscience dumb by the very sins that require a conscience trumpet-tongued to reprehend them. And therefore it needs that God should speak from Heaven, and say to us, '_Thou_ art the man,' or else we pass by all these grave things that I am trying to urge upon you now, and fall back upon our complacency and our levity and our unwillingness to take stock of ourselves, and front the facts of our condition. And so we build up a barrier between ourselves and God, and God's grace, which nothing short of that grace and an omnipotent love and an all-powerful Redeemer can ever pull down.

I wish to urge in a few words, yet with much earnestness, this thought, that until we have laid to heart God's message about our own personal sinfulness we have not got to the place where we can in the least understand the true meaning of His Gospel, or the true work of His Son. May I say that I, for one, am old-fashioned enough to look with great apprehension on certain tendencies of present-day presentations of Christianity which, whilst they dwell much upon the social blessings which it brings, do seem to me to be in great peril of obscuring the central characteristic of the Gospel, that it is addressed to sinful men, and that the only way by which individuals can come to the possession of any of its blessings is by coming as penitent sinners, and casting themselves on the mercy of God in Jesus Christ? The beginning of all lies here, where Paul puts it, ‘the Scripture hath herded all men,’ in droves, into the prison, that it might have mercy upon all.

Dear friend, as the old proverb has it, deceit lurks in generalities. I have no doubt you are perfectly willing to admit that all are sinful. Come a little closer to the truth, I beseech you, and say each is sinful, and I am one of the captives.

III. And so, lastly, the breaker of the prison-house.

I need not spend your time in commenting on the final words of this text. Suffice it to gather their general purport and scope. The apparently stern treatment which God by revelation applies to the whole mass of mankind is really the tenderest beneficence. He has shut them up in the prison-house in order that, thus shut up, they may the more eagerly apprehend and welcome the advent of the Deliverer. He tells us each our state, in order that we may the more long for, and the more closely grasp, the great mercy which reverses the state. And so how shallow and how unfair it is to talk about evangelical Christianity as being gloomy, stern, or misanthropical! You do not call a doctor unkind because he tells an unsuspecting patient that his disease is far advanced, and that if it is not cured it will be fatal. No more should a man turn away from Christianity, or think it harsh and sour, because it speaks plain truths. The question is, are they true? not, are they unpleasant?

If you and I, and all our fellows, are shut up in this prison-house of sin, then it is quite clear that none of us can do anything to get ourselves out. And so the way is prepared for that great message with which Jesus opened His ministry, and which, whilst it has a far wider application, and reference to social as well as to individual evils, begins with the proclamation of liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.

There was once a Roman emperor who wished that all his enemies had one neck, that he might slay them all at one blow. The wish is a fact in regard to Christ and His work, for by it all our tyrants have been smitten to death by one stroke; and the death of Jesus Christ has been the death of sin and death and hell--of sin in its power, in its guilt, and in its penalty. He has come into the prison-house, and torn the bars away, and opened the fetters, and every man may, if he will, come out into the blessed sunshine and expatiate there.

And if, brethren, it is true that the universal prison-house is opened by the death of Jesus Christ, who is the Propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and the power by which the most polluted may become clean, then there follows, as plainly, that the only thing which we have to do is, recognising and feeling our bound impotence, to stretch out chained hands and take the gift that He brings. Since all is done for each of us, and since none of us can do sufficient for himself to break the bond, then what we should do is to trust to Him who has broken every chain and let the oppressed go free.

Oh, dear friend, if you want to get to the heart of the sweetness and the blessedness and power of the Gospel, you must begin here, with the clear and penitent consciousness that you are a sinful man in God's sight, and can do nothing to cleanse, help, or liberate yourself. Is Jesus Christ the breaker of the bond for you? Do you learn from Him what your need is? Do you trust yourself to Him for Pardon, for cleansing, for emancipation? Unless you do, you will never know His most precious preciousness, and you have little right to call yourself a Christian. If you do, oh, than a great light will shine in the prison-house, and your chains will drop from your wrists, and the iron door will open of its own accord, and you will come out into the morning sunshine of a new day, because you have confessed and abhorred the bondage into which you have cast yourselves, and accepted the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free.

5) Galatians 4:4-5

Galatians

THE SON SENT

Gal. 4:4-5 [R.V.].

It is generally supposed that by the 'fulness of time' Paul means to indicate that Christ came at the moment when the world was especially prepared to receive Him, and no doubt that is a true thought. The Jews had been trained by law to the conviction of sin; heathenism had tried its utmost, had reached the full height of its possible development, and was decaying. Rome had politically prepared the way for the spread of the Gospel. Vague expectations of coming change found utterance even from the lips of Roman courtier poets, and a feeling of unrest and anticipation pervaded society; but while no doubt all this is true and becomes more certain the more we know of the state of things into which Christ came, it is to be noted that Paul is not thinking of the fulness of time primarily in reference to the world which received Him, but to the Father who sent Him. Our text immediately follows words in which the air is described as being 'under guardians and stewards' until the time appointed of His Father, and the fulness of time is therefore the moment which God had ordained from the beginning for His coming. He, from of old, had willed that at that moment this Son should be born, and it is to the punctual accomplishment of His eternal purpose that Paul here directs our thoughts. No doubt the world's preparedness is part of the reason for the divine determination of the time, but it is that divine determination rather than the world's preparedness to which the first words of our text must be taken to refer.

The remaining portion of our text is so full of meaning that one shrinks from attempting to deal with it in our narrow space, but though it opens up depths beyond our fathoming, and gathers into one concentrated brightness lights on which our dim eyes can hardly look, we may venture to attempt some imperfect consideration even of these great words. Following their course of thought we may deal with

I. The mystery of love that sent.

The most frequent form under which the great fact of the incarnation is represented in Scripture is that of our text--'God sent His Son.' It is familiar on the lips of Jesus, but He also says that 'God gave His Son.' One can feel a shade of difference in the two modes of expression. The former bringing rather to our thoughts the representative character of the Son as Messenger, and the latter going still deeper into the mystery of Godhead and bringing into view the love of the Father who spared not His Son but freely bestowed Him on men. Yet another word is used by Jesus Himself when He says, 'I came forth from God,' and that expression brings into view the perfect willingness with which the Son accepted the mission and gave Himself, as well as was given by God. All three phases express harmonious, though slightly differing aspects of the same fact, as the facets of a diamond might flash into different colours, and all must be held fast if we would understand the unspeakable gift of God. Jesus was sent; Jesus was given; Jesus came. The mission from the Father, the love of the Father, the glad obedience of the Son, must ever be recognised as interpenetrating, and all present in that supreme act.

There have been many men specially sent forth from God, whose personal existence began with their birth, and so far as the words are concerned, Jesus might have been one of these. There was a man sent from God whose name was John, and all through the ages he has had many companions in his mission, but there has been only one who 'came' as well as 'was sent,' and He is the true light which lighteth every man. To speak in theological language of the pre-existence of the Son is cold, and may obscure the truth which it formulates in so abstract a fashion, and may rob it of power to awe and impress. But there can be no question that in our text, as is shown by the juxtaposition of 'sent' and 'born,' and in all the New Testament references to the subject, the birth of Jesus is not regarded as the beginning of the being of the Son. The one lies far back in the depths of eternity and the mystery of the divine nature, the other is a historical fact occurring in a definite place and at a dated moment. Before time was the Son was, delighting in the Father, and 'in the beginning was the word and the word was with God,' and He who in respect of His expression of the Father's mind and will was the Word, was the Son in respect of the love that bound the Father and Him in one. Into the mysteries of that love and union no eyes can penetrate, but unless our faith lays hold of it, we know not the God whom Jesus has declared to us. The mysteries of that divine union and communion lie beyond our reach, but well within the grasp of our faith and the work of the Son in the world, ever since there was a world, is not obscurely declared to all who have eyes to see and hearts to understand. For He has through all ages been the active energy of the divine power, or as the Old Testament words it, 'The Arm of the Lord,' the Agent of creation, the Revealer of God, the Light of the world and the Director of Providence. 'He was in the world and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not.'

Now all this teaching that the Son was long before Jesus was born is no mere mysterious dogma without bearing on daily needs, but stands in the closest connection with Christ’s work and our faith in it. It is the guarantee of His representative character; on it depends the reliableness of His revelation of God. Unless He is the Son in a unique sense, how could God have spoken unto us in Him, and how could we rely on His words? Unless He was ‘the effulgence of His glory and the express image of His person’: how could we be sure that the light of His countenance was light from God and that in His person God was so presented as that he who had seen Him had seen the Father? The completeness and veracity of His revelation, the authoritative fulness of His law, the efficacy of His sacrifice and the prevalence of His intercession all depend on the fact of His divine life with God long before His human life with men. It is a plain historical fact that a Christianity which has no place for a pre-existent Son in the bosom of the Father has only a maimed Christ in reference to the needs of sinful men. If our Christ were not the eternal Son of God, He will not be the universal Saviour of men.

Nor is this truth less needful in its bearing on modern theories which will have nothing to say to the supernatural, and in a fatalistic fashion regard history as all the result of an orderly evolution in which the importance of personal agents is minimised. To it Jesus, like all other great men, is a product of His age, and the immediate result of the conditions under which He appeared. But when we look far beyond the manger of Bethlehem into the depths of Eternity and see God so loving the world as to give His Son, we cannot but recognise that He has intervened in the course of human history and that the mightiest force in the development of man is the eternal Son whom He sent to save the world.

II. The miracle of lowliness that came.

The Apostle goes on from describing the great fact which took place in heaven to set forth the great fact which completed it on earth. The sending of the Son took effect in the birth of Jesus, and the Apostle puts it under two forms, both of which are plainly designed to present Christ’s manhood as His full identification of Himself with us. The Son of God became the son of a woman; from His mother He drew a true and complete humanity in body and soul. The humanity which He received was sufficiently kindred with the divinity which received it to make it possible that the one should dwell in the other and be one person. As born of a woman the Son of God took upon Himself all human experiences, became capable of sharing our pure emotions, wept our tears, partook in our joys, hoped and feared as we do, was subject to our changes, grew as we grow, and in everything but sin, was a man amongst men.

But the Son of God could not be as the sons of men. Him the Father heard always. Even when He came down from Heaven and became the Son of Man, He continued to be 'The Son of Man which is in Heaven.' Amid all the distractions and limitations of His earthly life, the continuity and depth of His communion with the Father were unbroken and the completeness of His obedience undiminished. He was a Man, but He was also the Man, the one realised ideal of humanity that has ever walked the earth, to whom all others, even the most complete, are fragments, the fairest foul, the most gracious harsh. In Him and in Him only has been 'given the world assurance of a man.'

The other condition which is here introduced is 'born under the law,' by which it may be noted that the Apostle does not mean the Jewish law, inasmuch as he does not use the definite article with the word. No doubt our Lord was born as a Jew and subject to the Jewish law, but the thought here and in the subsequent clause is extended to the general notion of law. The very heart of our Lord's human identification is that He too had duties imperative upon Him, and the language of one of the Messianic psalms was the voice of His filial will during all His earthly life; 'Lo! I come, in the volume of the Book it is written of Me, I delight to do Thy will and Thy law is within My heart.' The very secret of His human life was discovered by the heathen centurion, at whose faith He marvelled, who said, 'I _also_ am a man under authority'; so was Jesus. The Son had ever been obedient in the sweet communion of Heaven, but the obedience of Jesus was not less perfect, continual and unstained. It was the man Jesus who summed up His earthly life in 'I do always the things that please Him'; it was the man Jesus who, under the olives in Gethsemane, made the great surrender and yielded up His own will to the will of the Father who sent Him.

He was under law in that the will of God dominated His life, but He was not so under it as we are on whom its precepts often press as an unwelcome obligation, and who know the weight of guilt and condemnation. If there is any one characteristic of Jesus more conspicuous than another it is the absence in Him of any consciousness of deficiency in His obedience to law, and yet that absence does not in the smallest degree infringe on His claim to be ‘meek and lowly in heart.’ ‘Which of you convinceth Me of sin?’ would have been from any other man a defiance that would have provoked a crushing answer if it had not been taken as a proof of hopeless ignorance of self, but when Christ asks the question, the world is silent. The silence has been all but unbroken for nineteen hundred years, and of all the busy and often unfriendly eyes that have been occupied with Him and the hostile pens that have been eager to say something new about Him, none have discovered a flaw, or dared to ‘hint a fault.’ That character has stamped its own impression of perfectness on all eyes even the most unfriendly or indifferent. In Him there is seen the perfect union and balance of opposite characteristics; the rest of us, at the best, are but broken arcs; Jesus is the completed round. He is under law as fully, continuously and joyfully obedient; but for Him it had no accusing voice, and it laid on Him no burden of broken commandments. He was born of a woman, born under law, but he lived separate from sinners though identified with them.

III. The marvel of exaltation that results.

Our Lord’s lowliness is described in the two clauses which we have just been considering. They express His identification with us from a double point of view, and that double point of view is continued in the final clauses of our text which state the double purpose of God in sending His Son. He became one with us that we might become one with Him. The two elements of this double purpose are stated in the reverse order to the two elements of Christ’s lowliness. The redemption of them that were under law is presented as the reason for His being born under law, and our reception of the ‘adoption of sons’ is the purpose of the Son’s being sent and born of a woman. The order in which Paul here deals with the two parts of the divine purpose is not to be put down to mere rhetorical ornament, but corresponds to the order in which these two elements are realised by men. For there must be redemption from law before there is the adoption of sons.

We have already had occasion to point out that ‘law’ here must be taken in the wide sense and not restricted to the Jewish law. It is a world-wide redemption which the Father’s love had in view in sending His Son, but that all-comprehending, fatherly love could not reach its aim by the mere forth-putting of its own energy. A process was needed if the divine heart was to accomplish its desire, and the majestic stages in that process are set forth here by Paul. The world was under law in a very sad fashion, and though Jesus has come to redeem them that are under law, the crushing weight of commandments flouted, of duties neglected, of sins done, presses heavily upon many of us. And yet how many of us there are who do not know the burden that we carry and have had no personal experience like that of Bunyan’s Christian with the pack on his back all but weighing him down? Jesus Christ has become one of us, and in His sinless life has ‘magnified the law and made it honourable,’ and in His sinless death He endures the consequences of sin, not as due to Himself, but because they are man’s. But we must carefully keep in view, that as we have already pointed out, we are to think of Christ’s mission as His coming as well as the Father’s sending, and that therefore we do not grasp the full idea of our Lord’s enduring the consequences of sin unless we take it as meaning His voluntary identification of Himself in love with us sinful men. His obedience was perfect all His life long, and His last and highest act of obedience was when He became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.

This is the only means by which the burden of law in any of its forms can be taken away from us. For a law which is not loved will be heavy and hard however holy and just and good it may be, and a law which we have broken will become sooner or later its own avenger. Faithful in _Pilgrim’s Progress_ tells how ‘So soon as a man overtook me he was but a word and a blow, for down he knocked me and laid me for dead. . . . He struck me another deadly blow on the breast and beat me down backward, so I lay at his foot as dead as before, so when I came to myself again I cried him "Mercy," but he said, "I know not how to show mercy," and with that knocked me down again; he had doubtless made an end of me but that one came by and bid him forbear. . . . I did not know him at first, but as he went by I perceived the holes in his hands and in his sides.’ He was born under law that He might redeem them that were under law.

The slaves bought into freedom are received into the great family. The Son has become flesh that they who dwell in the flesh may rise to be sons, but the Son stands alone even in the midst of His identification with us, and of the great results which follow for us from it. He is the Son by nature; we are sons by adoption. He became man that we might share in the possession of God. When the burden of law is lifted off it is possible to bestow the further blessing of sonship, but that blessing is only possible through Him in whom, and from whom, we derive a life which is divine life. There is a profound truth in the prophetic sentence, ‘Behold I and the children which God hath given me!’ for, in one aspect, believers are the children of Christ, and in another, they are sons of God.

We have been speaking of the Son’s identification with us in His mission, and our identification with Him, but that identification depends on ourselves and is only an accomplished fact through our faith. When we trust in Him it is true that all His--His righteousness, His Sonship, His union with the Father--is ours, and that all ours--our sins, our guilt, our alienation from God and our dwelling in the far-off land of rags and vice--is His. In His voluntary identification with us, He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. It is for us to determine whether we will lay on Him our iniquities, as the Father has already laid the iniquities of us all. Are we by faith in Him who was born of a woman, born under law, making our very own the redemption from the law which He has wrought and the adoption of sons which He bestows?

6) Galatians 5:6

Galatians

WHAT MAKES A CHRISTIAN: CIRCUMCISION OR FAITH?

Gal. 5:6

It is a very singular instance of imaginative misreading of plain facts that the primitive Church should be held up as a pattern Church. The early communities had apostolic teaching; but beyond that, they seem to have been in no respect above, and in many respects below, the level of subsequent ages. If we may judge of their morality by the exhortations and dehortations which they received from the Apostle, Corinth and Thessalonica were but beginners in holiness. If we may judge of their intelligence by the errors into which they were in danger of falling, these first congregations had indeed need that one should teach them which were the first principles of the oracles of God. It could not be otherwise. They were but just rescued from heathenism, and we need not wonder if their spirits long bore the scars of their former bondage. If we wish to know what the apostolic churches were like, we have but to look at the communities gathered by modern missionaries. The same infantile simplicity, the same partial apprehensions of the truth, the same danger of being led astray by the low morality of their heathen kindred, the same openness to strange heresy, the same danger of blending the old with the new, in opinion and in practice, beset both.

The history of the first theological difference in the early churches is a striking confutation of the dream that they were perfect, and a striking illustration of the dangers to which they were exposed from the attempt, so natural to us all, to put new wine into old bottles. The Jewish and the Gentile elements did not coalesce. The point round which the strife was waged was not whether Gentiles might come into the Church. That was conceded by the fiercest Judaisers. But it was whether they could come in as Gentiles, without first being incorporated into the Jewish nation by circumcision, and whether they could remain in as Gentiles, without conforming to Jewish ceremonial and law.

Those who said ‘No’ _were_ members of the Christian communities, and, being so, they still insisted that Judaism was to be eternal. They demanded that the patched and stiff leathern bottle, which had no elasticity or pliability, should still contain the quick fermenting new wine of the kingdom. And certainly, if ever man had excuse for clinging to what was old and formal, these Judaising Christians held it. They held by a law written with God’s own finger, by ordinances awful by reason of divine appointment, venerable by reason of the generations to which they had been of absolute authority, commended by the very example of Christ Himself. Every motive which can bind heart and conscience to the reverence and the practice of the traditions of the Fathers, bound them to the Law and the ordinances which had been Israel’s treasure from Abraham to Jesus.

Those who said ‘Yes’ were mostly Gentiles, headed and inspired by a Hebrew of the Hebrews. They believed that Judaism was preparatory, and that its work was done. For those among themselves who were Jews, they were willing that its laws should still be obligatory; but they fought against the attempt to compel all Gentile converts to enter Christ’s kingdom through the gate of circumcision.

The fight was stubborn and bitter. I suppose it is harder to abolish forms than to change opinions. Ceremonies stand long after the thought which they express has fled, as a dead king may sit on his throne stiff and stark in his golden mantle, and no one come near enough to see that the light is gone out of his eyes, and the will departed from the hand that still clutches the sceptre. All through Paul’s life he was dogged and tormented by this controversy. There was a deep gulf between the churches he planted and this reactionary section of the Christian community. Its emissaries were continually following in his footsteps. As he bitterly reproaches them, they entered upon another man’s line of things made ready to their hand, not caring to plant churches of circumcised Gentiles themselves, but starting up behind him as soon as his back was turned, and spoiling his work.

This Epistle is the memorial of that foot-to-foot feud. It is of perennial use, as the tendencies against which it is directed are constant in human nature. Men are ever apt to confound form and substance, to crave material embodiments of spiritual realities, to elevate outward means into the place of the inward and real, to which all the outward is but subsidiary. In every period of strife between the two great opponents, this letter has been the stronghold of those who fight for the spiritual conception of religion. With it Luther waged his warfare, and in this day, too, its words are precious.

My text contains Paul’s condensed statement of his whole position in the controversy. It tells us what he fought for, and why he fought, against the attempt to suspend union to Christ on an outward rite.

I. The first grand principle contained in these words is that faith working by love makes a Christian.

The antithesis of our text appears in somewhat varied forms in two other places in the Apostle's writings. To the Corinthians he says, 'Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.' His last word to the Galatians--the gathering up into one strong sentence of his whole letter--is, 'In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.'

Now, all these assertions embody substantially the same opposition between the conception of Christianity as depending upon a ceremonial rite, and as being a spiritual change. And the variations in the second member of the contrast throw light on each other. In one, the essential thing is regarded from the divine side as being not a rite performed on the body, but a new nature, the result of a supernatural regeneration. In another, the essential thing is set forth as being not an outward act, but an inward principle, which produces appropriate effects on the whole being. In yet another the essential thing is conceived as being not a mere ceremonial, but practical obedience, the consequence of the active principle of faith, and the sign of the new life. There is an evident sequence in the three sayings. They begin with the deepest, the divine act of a new creation--and end with the outermost, the last result and object of both the others--deeds of conformity to God's law.

This one process in its triple aspects, says Paul, constitutes a man a Christian. What correspondence is there between it, in any of its parts, and a carnal ordinance? They belong to wholly different categories, and it is the most preposterous confusion to try to mix them up together. Are we to tack on to the solemn powers and qualities, which unite the soul to Christ, this beggarly addition that the Judaisers desire, and to say, the essentials of Christianity are a new creature, faith, obedience--and circumcision? That is, indeed, sewing old cloth on a new garment, and huddling together in grotesque chaos things which are utterly diverse. It is as absurd bathos as to say the essentials of a judge are integrity, learning, patience--and an ermine robe!

There would be less danger of being entangled in false notions of the sort which devastated Galatia and have afflicted the Church ever since, if people would put a little more distinctly before their own minds what they mean by 'religion'; what sort of man they intend when they talk about 'a Christian.'

A clear notion of the thing to be produced would thin away a wonderful deal of mist as to the way of producing it. So then, beginning at the surface, in order to work inward, my first remark is that religion is the harmony of the soul with God, and the conformity of the life to His law.

The loftiest purpose of God, in all His dealings, is to make us like Himself; and the end of all religion is the complete accomplishment of that purpose. There is no religion without these elements--consciousness of kindred with God, recognition of Him as the sum of all excellence and beauty, and of His will as unconditionally binding upon us, aspiration and effort after a full accord of heart and soul with Him and with His law, and humble confidence that that sovereign beauty will be ours. ‘Be ye imitators of God as dear children’ is the pure and comprehensive dictate which expresses the aim of all devout men. ‘To keep His commandments’ goes deeper than the mere external deeds. Were it not so, Paul’s grand words would shrink to a very poor conception of religion, which would then have its shrine and sphere removed from the sacred recesses of the inmost spirit to the dusty Babel of the market-place and the streets. But with that due and necessary extension of the words which results from the very nature of the case, that obedience must be the obedience of a man, and not of his deeds only, and must include the submission of the will and the prostration of the whole nature before Him; they teach a truth which, fully received and carried out, clears away whole mountains of theoretical confusion and practical error. Religion is no dry morality; no slavish, punctilious conforming of actions to a hard law. Religion is not right thinking alone, nor right emotion alone, nor right action alone. Religion is still less the semblance of these in formal profession, or simulated feeling, or apparent rectitude. Religion is not nominal connection with the Christian community, nor participation in its ordinances and its worship. But to be godly is to be godlike. The full accord of all the soul with His character, in whom, as their native home, dwell ‘whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely,’ and the full glad conformity of the will to His sovereign will, who is the life of our lives--this, and nothing shallower, nothing narrower, is religion in its perfection; and the measure in which we have attained to this harmony with God, is the measure in which we are Christians. As two stringed instruments may be so tuned to one keynote that, if you strike the one, a faint ethereal echo is heard from the other, which blends undistinguishably with its parent sound;

so, drawing near to God, and brought into unison with His mind and will, our responsive spirits vibrate in accord with His, and give forth tones, low and thin indeed, but still repeating the mighty music of heaven. ‘Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.’

But our text tells us, further, that if we look backwards from character and deed to motive, this harmony with God results from love becoming the ruling power of our lives. The imitation of the object of worship has always been felt to be the highest form of worship. Many an ancient teacher, besides the Stoic philosopher, has said, ‘He who copies the gods worships them adequately.’ One of the prophets lays it down as a standing rule, ‘The people will walk every one in the name of his God.’ But it is only in the Christian attitude towards God that the motive power is found which makes such imitation more than an impossible duty, even as it is only in the revealed character of God that a pattern is found, to imitate which is to be perfect. Everywhere besides, harmony with the gods meant discord with conscience and flagrant outrages of the commonest moralities. Everywhere else, the task of copying them was one lightened by no clear confidence in their love, and by no happy consciousness of our own. But for us, the love revealed is the perfect law, and the love evoked is the fulfilling of the law.

And this is the might and nobleness of the Christian love to God; that it is no idle emotion or lazy rapture, no vague sentiment, but the root of all practical goodness, of all strenuous effort, of all virtue, and of all praise. That strong tide is meant to drive the busy wheels of life and to bear precious freightage on its bosom; not to flow away in profitless foam. Love is the fruitful mother of bright children, as our great moralist-poet learned when he painted her in the House of Holiness:

‘A multitude of babes about her hung, Playing their sport that joyed her to behold.’

Her sons are Strength and Justice, and Self-control and Firmness, and Courage and Patience, and many more besides; and her daughters are Pity with her sad eyes, and Gentleness with her silvery voice, and Mercy whose sweet face makes sunshine in the shade of death, and Humility all unconscious of her loveliness; and linked hand in hand with these, all the radiant band of sisters that men call Virtues and Graces. These will dwell in our hearts, if Love their mighty mother be there. If we are without her, we shall be without them.

There is discord between man and God which can only be removed by the sweet commerce of love, established between earth and heaven. God's love has come to us. When ours springs responsive to Him, then the schism is ended, and the wandering child forgets his rebellion, as he lays his aching head on the father's bosom, and feels the beating of the father's heart. Our souls by reason of sin are 'like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh.' Love's master hand laid upon them restores to them their part in 'the fair music that all creatures make to their great Lord,' and brings us into such accord with God that 'We on earth with undiscording voice May rightly answer' even the awful harmonies of His lips. The essential of religion is concord with God, and the power which makes that concord is love to God.

But this text leads to a still further consideration, namely, the dominion of love to God in our hearts arises from faith.

We thus reach the last link, or rather the staple, of the chain from which all hangs. Religion is harmony with God; that harmony is produced by love; and that love is produced by faith. Therefore the fundamental of all Christianity in the soul is faith. Would this sound any fresher and more obvious if we varied the language, and said that to be religious we must be like God, that to be like Him we must love Him, and that to love Him we must be sure that He loves us? Surely that is too plain to need enlarging on.

And is it not true that faith must precede our love to God, and affords the only possible basis on which that can be built? How can we love Him so long as we are in doubt of His heart, or misconceive His character, as if it were only power and wisdom, or awful severity? Men cannot love an unseen person at all, without some very special token of his personal affection for them. The history of all religions shows that where the gods have been thought of as unloving, the worshippers have been heartless too. It is only when we know and believe the love that God hath to us, that we come to cherish any corresponding emotion to Him. Our love is secondary, His is primary; ours is reflection, His the original beam; ours is echo, His the mother-tone. Heaven must bend to earth before earth can rise to heaven.

The skies must open and drop down love, ere love can spring in the fruitful fields. And it is only when we look with true trust to that great unveiling of the heart of God which is in Jesus Christ, only when we can say, ‘Herein is love--that He gave His Son to be the propitiation for our sins,’ that our hearts are melted, and all their snows are dissolved into sweet waters, which, freed from their icy chains, can flow with music in their ripple and fruitfulness along their course, through our otherwise silent and barren lives. Faith in Christ is the only possible basis for active love to God.

And this thought presents the point of contact between the teaching of Paul and John. The one dwells on faith, the other on love, but he who insists most on the former declares that it produces its effects on character by the latter; and he who insists most on the latter is forward to proclaim that it owes its very existence to the former.

It presents also the point of contact between Paul and James. The one speaks of the essential of Christianity as faith, the other as works. They are only striking the stream at different points, one at the fountain-head, one far down its course among the haunts of men. They both preach that faith must be ‘faith that worketh,’ not a barren assent to a dogma, but a living trust that brings forth fruits in the life. Paul believes as much as James that faith without works is dead, and demands the keeping of the commandments as indispensable to all true Christianity. James believes as much as Paul that works without faith are of none effect. So all three of these great teachers of the Church are represented in this text, to which each of them might seem to have contributed a word embodying his characteristic type of doctrine. The threefold rays into which the prism parts the white light blend again here, where faith, love, and work are all united in the comprehensive saying, ‘In Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.’

The sum of the whole matter is this--He who is one in will and heart with God is a Christian. He who loves God is one in will and heart with Him. He who trusts Christ loves God. That is Christianity in its ultimate purpose and result. That is Christianity in its means and working forces. That is Christianity in its starting-point and foundation.

II. But we have to consider also the negative side of the Apostle’s words. They affirm that in comparison with the essential--faith, all externals are infinitely unimportant.

Paul’s habit was always to settle questions by the widest principles he could bring to bear upon them--which one may notice in passing is the very opposite to the method that has been in favour with many Church teachers and guides since, who have preferred to live from hand to mouth, and to dispose of difficulties by the narrowest considerations that would avail to quiet them. In our text the question in hand is settled on a ground which covers a great deal more than the existing dispute. Circumcision is regarded as one of a whole class--namely, the class of outward rites and observances; and the contrast drawn between it and faith extends to all the class to which it belongs. It is not said to be powerless because it is an Old Testament rite, but because it is a rite. Its impotence lies in the very nature which it has in common with all external institutions, whether they be of the Old Testament or of the New, whether they be enjoined of God or invented by men. To them all the same characteristic cleaves. Compared with faith they are of no avail. Not that they are absolutely useless. They have their place, but ‘_in Christ Jesus_’ they are nothing. Union to Him depends on quite another order of facts, which may or may not exist along with circumcision, or with baptism, or with the Lord’s Supper. However important these may be, they have no place among the things which bind a soul to its Saviour. They may be helps to these things, but nothing more. The rite does not ensure the faith, else the antithesis of our text were unmeaning. The rite does not stand in the place of faith, or the contrast implied were absurd. But the two belong to totally different orders of things, which may co-exist indeed, but may also be found separately; the one is the indispensable spiritual experience which makes us Christians, the other belongs to a class of material institutions which are much as helps to, but nothing as substitutes or equivalents for, faith.

Keep firm hold of the positive principle with which we have been dealing in the former part of this sermon, and all forms and externals fall as a matter of course into their proper place. If religion be the loving devotion of the soul to God, resting upon reasonable faith, then all besides is, at the most, a means which may further it. If loving trust which apprehends the truth, and cleaves to the Person, revealed to us in the Gospel, be the link which binds men to God, then the only way by which these externals can be ‘means of grace’ is by their aiding us to understand better and to feel more the truth as it is in Jesus, and to cleave closer to Him who is the truth. Do they enlighten the understanding? Do they engrave deeper the loved face carven on the tablets of memory, which the attrition of worldly cares is ever obliterating, and the lichens of worldly thoughts ever filling up? Do they clear out the rubbish from the channels of the heart, that the cleansing stream may flow through them? Do they, through the senses, minister to the soul its own proper food of clear thought, vivid impressions, loving affections, trustful obedience? Do they bring Christ to us, and us to Him, in the only way in which approach is possible--through the occupation of mind and heart and will with His great perfectness? Then they are means of grace, precious and helpful, the gifts of His love, the tokens of His wise knowledge of our weakness, the signs of His condescension, in that He stoops to trust some portion of our remembrance of Him to the ministry of sense. But in comparison with that faith which they cannot plant, though they may strengthen it, they are nothing; and in the matter of uniting the soul to God and making men ‘religious,’ they are of no avail at all.

And such thoughts as these have a very wide sweep, as well as a very deep influence. Religion is the devotion of the soul to God. Then _everything_ besides is not religion, but at most a means to it. That is true about all Christian ordinances. Baptism is spoken about by Paul in terms which plainly show that he regarded it as ‘nothing’ in the same sense, and under the same limitations, as he thought that circumcision was nothing. ‘I baptized some of you,’ says he to the Corinthians; ‘I scarcely remember whom, or how many. I have far more important work to do--to preach the Gospel.’ It is true about all acts and forms of Christian worship. These are not religion, but means to it. Their only value and their only test is--Do they help men to know and feel Christ and His truth? It is true about laws of life, and many points of conventional morality. Remember the grand freedom with which the same Apostle dealt with questions about meats offered to idols, and the observance of days and seasons. The same principle guided him there too, and he relegated the whole question back to its proper place with, ‘Meat commendeth us not to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, neither if we eat not are we the worse.’ ‘He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it.' It is true, though less obviously and simply, about subordinate doctrines. It is true about the mere intellectual grasp of the fundamental truths of God's revelation. These, and the belief of these, are not Christianity, they are helps towards it.

The separation is broad and deep. On one side are all externals, rites, ceremonies, politics, Church arrangements, forms of worship, modes of life, practices of morality, doctrines, and creeds--all which are externals to the soul: on the other is faith working through love, the inmost attitude and deepest emotion of the soul. The great heap is fuel. The flame is loving faith. The only worth of the fuel is to feed the flame. Otherwise it is of no avail, but lies dead and cold, a mass of blackness. We are joined to God by faith. Whatever strengthens that faith is precious as a help, but is worthless as a substitute.

III. There is a constant tendency to exalt these unimportant externals into the place of faith.

The whole purpose of the Gospel may be described to be our deliverance from the dominion of sense, and the transference of the centre of our life to the unseen world. This end is no doubt partly accomplished by the help of sense. So long as men have bodily organisations, there will be need for outward helps. Men's indolence, and men's sense-ridden natures, will take symbols for royalties, bank-notes for wealth. The eye will be tempted to stay on the rich colours of the glowing glass, instead of passing through them to heaven's light beyond. To make the senses a ladder for the soul to climb to heaven by, will be perilously likely to end in the soul going down the ladder instead of up. Forms are sure to encroach, to overlay the truth that lies at their root, to become dimly intelligible, or quite unmeaning, and to constitute at last the end instead of the means. Is it not then wise to minimise these potent and dangerous allies? Is it not needful to use them with the remembrance that a minute quantity may strengthen, but an overdose will kill--ay, and that the minute quantity may kill too? Christ instituted two outward rites. There could not have been fewer if there was to be an outward community at all, and they could not have been simpler; but look at the portentous outgrowth of superstition, and the unnumbered evils, religious, moral, social, and even political, which have come from the invincible tendency of human nature to corrupt forms, even when the forms are the sweet and simple ones of Christ's own appointment. What a lesson the history of the Lord's Supper, and its gradual change from the domestic memorial of the dying love of our Lord to the 'tremendous sacrifice,' reads us as to the dangerous ally which spiritual religion--and there is no other religion than spiritual--enlists when it seeks the help of external rites!

But remember that this danger of converting religion into outward actions has its root in us all, and is not annihilated by our rejection of an elaborate ceremonial. There is much significance in the double negation of my text, 'Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision.' If the Judaisers were tempted to insist on the former, as indispensable, their antagonists were as much tempted to insist on the latter. The one were saying, 'A man cannot be a Christian unless he be circumcised.' The other would be in danger of replying, 'He cannot be a Christian if he is.' There may be as much formalism in protesting against forms as in using them. Extremes meet; and an unspiritual Quaker, for instance, is at bottom of the same way of thinking as an unspiritual Roman Catholic. They agree in their belief that certain outward acts are essential to worship, and even to religion. They only differ as to what these acts are. The Judaiser who says, 'You must be circumcised,' and his antagonist who says, 'You must be uncircumcised,' are really in the same boat.

And this is especially needful to be kept in mind by those who, like the most of us, hold fast by the free and spiritual conception of Christianity. That freedom we may turn into a bondage, and that spirituality into a form, if we confound it with the essentials of Christianity, and deny the possibility of the life being developed except in conjunction with it. My text has a double edge. Let us use it against all this Judaising which is going on round about us, and against all the tendency to it in our own hearts. The one edge smites the former, the other edge the latter. Circumcision is nothing, as most of us are forward to proclaim. But, also, remember, when we are tempted to trust in our freedom, and to fancy that in itself it is good, _uncircumcision is nothing_. You are no more a Christian for your rejection of forms than another man is for his holding them. Your negation no more unites you to Christ than does his affirmation. One thing alone does that,--faith which worketh by love, against which sense ever wars, both by tempting some of us to place religion in outward acts and ceremonies, and by tempting others of us to place it in rejecting the forms which our brethren abuse.

IV. When an indifferent thing is made into an essential, it ceases to be indifferent, and must be fought against.

Paul proclaimed that circumcision and uncircumcision were alike unavailing. A man might be a good Christian either way. They were not unimportant in all respects, but in regard to being united to Christ, it did not matter which side one took. And, in accordance with this noble freedom, he for himself practised Jewish rites; and, when he thought it might conciliate prejudice without betraying principle, had Timothy circumcised. But when it came to be maintained as a principle that Gentiles _must_ be circumcised, the time for conciliation was past. The other side had made further concession impossible. The Apostle had no objection to circumcision. What he objected to was its being forced upon all as a necessary preliminary to entering the Church. And as soon as the opposite party took that ground, then there was nothing for it but to fight against them to the last. They had turned an indifferent thing into an essential, and he could no longer treat it as indifferent.

So whenever parties or Churches insist on external rites as essential, or elevate any of the subordinate means of grace into the place of the one bond which fastens our souls to Jesus, and is the channel of grace as well as the bond of union, then it is time to arm for the defence of the spirituality of Christ’s kingdom, and to resist the attempt to bind on free shoulders the iron yoke. Let men and parties do as they like, so long as they do not turn their forms into essentials. In broad freedom of speech and spirit, which holds by the one central principle too firmly to be much troubled about subordinate matters--in tolerance of diversities, which does not spring from indifference, but from the very clearness of our perception of, and from the very fervour of our adherence to, the one essential of the Christian life--let us take for our guide the large, calm, lofty thoughts which this text sets forth before us. Let us thankfully believe that men may love Jesus, and be fed from His fulness, whether they be on one side of this undying controversy or on the other. Let us watch jealously the tendencies in our own hearts to trust in our forms or in our freedom. And whensoever or wheresoever these subordinates are made into things essential, and the ordinances of Christ's Church are elevated into the place which belongs to loving trust in Christ's love, then let _our_ voices at least be heard on the side of that mighty truth that 'in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.'

7) Galatians 5:16

Galatians

'WALK IN THE SPIRIT'

Gal. 5:16

We are not to suppose that the Apostle here uses the familiar contrast of spirit and flesh to express simply different elements of human nature. Without entering here on questions for which a sermon is scarcely a suitable vehicle of discussion, it may be sufficient for our present purpose to say that, as usually, when employing this antithesis the Apostle means by Spirit the divine, the Spirit of God, which he triumphed in proclaiming to be the gift of every believing soul. The other member of the contrast, 'flesh,' is similarly not to be taken as equivalent to body, but rather as meaning the whole human nature considered as apart from God and kindred with earth and earthly things. The flesh, in its narrower sense, is no doubt a predominant part of this whole, but there is much in it besides the material organisation. The ethics of Christianity suffered much harm and were degraded into a false and slavish asceticism for long centuries, by monastic misunderstandings of what Paul meant by the flesh, but he himself was too clear-sighted and too high-toned to give his adhesion to the superficial notion that the body is the seat and source of sin. We need look no further than the catalogue of the 'works of the flesh' which immediately follows our text, for, although it begins with gross sins of a purely fleshly kind, it passes on to such as hatred, emulations, wrath, envyings and suchlike. Many of these works of the flesh are such as an angel with an evil heart could do, whether he had a body or not. It seems therefore right to say that the one member of the contrast is the divine Spirit of holiness, and the other is man as he is, without the life-giving influence of the Spirit of God. In Paul's thought the idea of the flesh always included the idea of sin, and the desires of the flesh were to him not merely rebellious, sensuous passion, but the sinful desires of godless human nature, however refined, and as some would say, 'spiritual' these might be. We do not need to inquire more minutely as to the meaning of the Apostle's terms, but may safely take them as, on the one hand, referring to the divine Spirit which imparts life and holiness, and on the other hand, to human nature severed from God, and distracted by evil desires because wrenched away from Him.

The text is Paul's battle-cry, which he opposed to the Judaising disturbers in Galatia. They said 'Do this and that; labour at a round of observances; live by rule.' Paul said, 'No! That is of no use; you will make nothing of such an attempt nor will ever conquer evil so. Live by the spirit and you will not need a hard outward law, nor will you be in bondage to the works of the flesh.' That feud in the Galatian churches was the earliest battle which Christianity had to fight between two eternal tendencies of thought--the conception of religion as consisting in outward obedience to a law, and consequently as made up of a series of painful efforts to keep it, and the conception of religion as being first the implanting of a new, divine life, and needing only to be nourished and cared for in order to drive forth evils from the heart, and so to show itself living. The difference goes very far and very deep, and these two views of what religion is have each their adherents to-day. The Apostle throws the whole weight of his authority into the one scale, and emphatically declares this as the one secret of victory, 'Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh.'

I. What it is to walk in the Spirit.

The thought which is but touched upon here is set forth more largely, and if we may so say, profoundly, in the Epistle to the Romans [chap. viii.]. There, to walk after the flesh, is substantially the same as to be carnally minded, and that 'mind of the flesh' is regarded as being by fatal necessity not 'subject to the law of God,' and consequently as in itself, with regard to future consequences, to be death. The fleshly mind which is thus in rebellion against the law of God is sure to issue in 'desires of the flesh,' just as when the pressure is taken off, some ebullient liquid will bubble. They that are after the flesh of course will ‘mind the things of the flesh.’ The vehement desires which we cherish when we are separated from God and which we call sins, are graver as a symptom than even they are in themselves, for they show which way the wind blows, and are tell-tales that betray the true direction of our nature. If we were not after the flesh we should not mind the things of the flesh. The one expression points to the deep-seated nature, the other to the superficial actions to which it gives rise.

And the same duality belongs to the life of those who are ‘after the Spirit.’ ‘To walk,’ of course, means to carry on the practical life, and the Spirit is here thought of not so much perhaps as the path on which we are to travel, but rather as the norm and direction by which we are to travel on life’s common way. Just as the desires of the flesh were certain to be done by those who in their deepest selves belonged to the flesh, so every soul which has received the unspeakable gift of newness of life through the Spirit of God will have the impulses to mind and do the things of the Spirit. If we live in the Spirit we shall also--and let us also--walk in the Spirit.

But let us make no mistakes, or think that our text in its great commandment and radiant hope has any word of cheer to those who have not received into their hearts, in however feeble a manner and minute a measure, the Spirit of the Son. The first question for us all is, have we received the Holy Ghost?--and the answer to that question is the answer to the other, have we accepted Christ? It is through Him and through faith in Him that that supreme gift of a living spirit is bestowed. And only when our spirits bear witness with that Spirit that we are the children of God, have we a right to look upon the text as pointing our duty and stimulating our hope. If our practical life is to be directed by the Spirit of God, He must enter into our spirits, and we shall not be in Him but in the measure that He is in us. Nor will our spirits be life because of righteousness unless He dwells in us and casts forth the works of the flesh. There will be no practical direction of our lives by the Spirit of God unless we make conscience of cultivating the reception of His life-giving and cleansing influences, and unless we have inward communion with our inward guide, intimate and frank, prolonged and submissive. If we are for ever allowing the light of our inward godliness to be blown about by gusts, or to show in our inmost hearts but a faint and flickering spark, how can we expect that it will shine safe direction on our outward path?

II. Such walking in the Spirit conquers the flesh.

We all know it as a familiar experience that the surest way to conquer any strong desire or emotion is to bring some other into operation. To concentrate attention on any overmastering thought or purpose, even if our object is to destroy it, is but too apt to strengthen it. And so to fix our minds on our own desires of the flesh, even though we may be honestly wishing to suppress them, is a sure way to invest them with new force; therefore the wise counsels of sages and moralists are, for the most part, destined to lead those who listen to them astray. Many a man has, in good faith, set himself to conquer his own evil lusts and has found that the nett result of his struggles has been to make the lusts more conspicuous and correspondingly more powerful. The Apostle knows a better way, which he has proved to his own experience, and now, with full confidence and triumph, presses upon his hearers. He would have them give up the monotonous and hopeless fight against the flesh and bring another ally into the field. His chief exhortation is a positive, not a negative one. It is vain to try to tie up men with restrictions and prohibitions, which when their desires are stirred will be burst like Samson’s bonds. But if once the positive exhortation here is obeyed, then it will surely make short work of the desires and passions which otherwise men, for the most part, do not wish to get rid of, and never do throw off by any other method.

We have pointed out that in our text to walk in the Spirit means to regulate the practical life by the Spirit of God, and that the ‘desires of the flesh’ mean the desires of the whole human nature apart from God. But even if we take the contrasted terms in their lower and commonly adopted sense, the text is true and useful. A cultivated mind habituated to lofty ideas, and quick to feel the nobility of ‘spiritual’ pursuits and possessions, will have no taste for the gross delights of sense, and will recoil with disgust from the indulgences in which more animal natures wallow. But while this is true, it by no means exhausts the great principle laid down here. We must take the contrasted terms in their fullest meaning if we would arrive at it. The spiritual life derived from Jesus Christ and lodged in the human spirit has to be guarded, cherished and made dominant, and then it will drive out the old. If the Spirit which is life because of righteousness is allowed free course in a human spirit, it will send forth its powers into the body which is ‘dead because of sin,’ will regulate its desires, and if needful will suppress them. And it is wiser and more blessed to rely on this overflowing influence than to attempt the hopeless task of coercing these desires by our own efforts.

If we walk in the Spirit, we shall thereby acquire new tastes and desires of a higher kind which will destroy the lower. They to whom manna is sweet as angel’s food find that they have lost their relish for the strong-smelling and rank-flavoured Egyptian leeks and garlic. A guest at a king’s table will not care to enter a smoky hovel and will not be hungry for the food to be found there. If we are still dependent on the desires of the flesh we are still but children, and if we are walking in the Spirit we have outgrown our childish toys. The enjoyment of the gifts which the Spirit gives deadens temptation and robs many things that were very precious of their lustre.

We may also illustrate the great principle of our text by considering that when we have found our supreme object there is no inducement to wander further in the search after delights. Desires are confessions of discontent, and though the absolute satisfaction of all our nature is not granted to us here, there is so much of blessedness given and so many of our most clamant desires fully met in the gift of life in Christ, that we may well be free from the prickings of desires which sting men into earnest seeking after often unreal good. ‘The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,’ and surely if we have these we may well leave the world its troubled delights and felicities. Christ’s joy remains in us and our joy is full. The world desires because it does not possess. When a deeper well is sunk, a shallower one is pretty sure to give out. If we walk in the Spirit we go down to the deepest water-holding stratum, and all the surface wells will run dry.

Further, we may note, that this walking in the Spirit brings into our lives the mightiest motives of holy living and so puts a bridle on the necks and a bit in the mouths of our untamed desires. Holding fellowship with the divine Indweller and giving the reins into His strong hand, we receive from Him the spirit of adoption and learn that if we are children then are we heirs. Is there any motive that will so surely still the desires of the flesh and of the mind as the blessed thought that God is ours and we His? Surely their feet should never stumble or stray, who are aware of the Spirit of the Son bearing witness with their spirit that they are the children of God. Surely the measure in which we realise this will be the measure in which the desires of the flesh will be whipped back to their kennels, and cease to disturb us with their barks.

The whole question here as between Paul and his opponents just comes to this; if a field is covered with filth, whether is it better to set to work on it with wheel-barrows and shovels, or to turn a river on it which will bear away all the foulness? The true way to change the fauna and flora of a country is to change the level, and as the height increases they change themselves. If we desire to have the noxious creatures expelled from ourselves, we must not so much labour at their expulsion as see to the elevation of our own personal being and then we shall succeed. That is what Paul says, ‘Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh.’

III. Such a life is not freed from the necessity of struggle.

The highest condition, of course, would be that we had only to grow, not to fight. It will come some day that all evil shall drop away, and that to walk in the Spirit will need no effort, but that time has not come yet. So in addition to all that we have been saying in this sermon, we must further say that Paul’s exhortation has always to be coupled with the other to fight the good fight. The highest word for our earthly lives is not ‘victory’ but ‘contest.’ We shall not walk in the Spirit without many a struggle to keep ourselves within that charmed atmosphere. The promise of our text is not that we shall not feel, but that we shall not fulfil, the desires of the flesh.

Now this is very commonplace and threadbare teaching, but it is none the less important, and is especially needful to be strongly emphasised when we have been speaking as we have just been doing. It is a historical fact, illustrated over and over again since Paul wrote, and not without illustration to-day, that there is constant danger of lax morality infecting Christian life under pretence of lofty spirituality. So it must ever be insisted upon that the test of a true walking in the Spirit is that we are thereby fitted to fight against the desires of the flesh. When we have the life of the Spirit within us, it will show itself as Paul has said in another place by the righteousness of the law being fulfilled in us, and by our 'mortifying the deeds of the body.' The gift of the Spirit does not take us out of the ranks of the combatants, but teaches us to fight, and arms us with its own sword for the conflict. There will be abundant opportunities of courage in attacking the sin that doth so easily beset us, and in resisting temptations which come to us by reason of our own imperfect sanctification. But there is all the difference between fighting at our own hand and fighting with the help of God's Spirit, and there is all the difference between fighting with the help of an unseen ally in heaven and fighting with a Spirit within us who helpeth our infirmities and Himself makes us able to contend, and sure, if we keep true to Him, to be more than conquerers through Him that loveth us.

Such a conflict is a gift and a joy. It is hard but it is blessed, because it is an expression of our truest love; it comes from our deepest will; it is full of hope and of assured victory. How different is the painful, often defeated and monotonous attempt to suppress our nature by main force, and to tread a mill-horse round! The joyous freedom and buoyant hope taught us in the gospel way of salvation have been cramped and confined and all their glories veiled as by a mass of cobwebs spun beneath a golden roof, but our text sweeps away the foul obstruction. Let us learn the one condition of victorious conflict, the one means of subduing our natural humanity and its distracting desires, and let nothing rob us of the conviction that this is God's way of making men like angels. 'Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh.'

8) Galatians 5:22-23

Galatians

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Gal. 5:22-23

'The fruit of the Spirit,' says Paul, not the fruits, as we might more naturally have expected, and as the phrase is most often quoted; all this rich variety of graces, of conduct and character, is thought of as one. The individual members are not isolated graces, but all connected, springing from one root and constituting an organic whole. There is further to be noted that the Apostle designates the results of the Spirit as fruit, in strong and intentional contrast with the results of the flesh, the grim catalogue of which precedes the radiant list in our text. The works of the flesh have no such unity, and are not worthy of being called fruit. They are not what a man ought to bring forth, and when the great Husbandman comes, He finds no fruit there, however full of activity the life has been. We have then here an ideal of the noblest Christian character, and a distinct and profound teaching as to how to attain it. I venture to take the whole of this list for my text, because the very beauty of each element in it depends on its being but part of a whole, and because there are important lessons to be gathered from the grouping.

I. The threefold elements of character here.

It is perhaps not too artificial to point out that we have here three triads of which the first describes the life of the Spirit in its deepest secret; the second, the same life in its manifestations to men; and the third, that life in relation to the difficulties of the world, and of ourselves.

The first of these three triads includes love, joy, and peace, and it is not putting too great a strain on the words to point out that the source of all three lies in the Christian relation to God. They regard nothing but God and our relation to Him; they would be all the same if there were no other men in the world, or if there were no world. We cannot call them duties or virtues; they are simply the results of communion with God--the certain manifestations of the better life of the Spirit. Love, of course, heads the list, as the foundation and moving principle of all the rest. It is the instinctive act of the higher life and is shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit. It is the life sap which rises through the tree and given form to all the clusters. The remaining two members of this triad are plainly consequences of the first. Joy is not so much an act or a grace of character as an emotion poured into men’s lives, because in their hearts abides love to God. Jesus Christ pledged Himself to impart His joy to remain in us, with the issue that our joy should be full. There is only one source of permanent joy which takes possession of and fills all the corners and crannies of the heart, and that is a love towards God equally abiding and all-pervasive. We have all known joys so perturbed, fragmentary and fleeting, that it is hard to distinguish them from sorrows, but there is no need that joys should be like green fruits hard and savourless and ready to drop from the tree. If God is ‘the gladness of our joy,’ and all our delights come from communion with Him, our joy will never pass and will fill the whole round of our spirits as the sea laves every shore.

Peace will be built upon love and joy, if our hearts are ever turning to God and ever blessed with the inter-communion of love between Him and us. What can be strong enough to disturb the tranquillity that fills the soul independent of all externals? However long and close may be the siege, the well in the castle courtyard will be full. True peace comes not from the absence of trouble but from the presence of God, and will be deep and passing all understanding in the exact measure in which we live in, and partake of, the love of God.

The second triad is long-suffering, kindness, goodness. All these three obviously refer to the spiritual life in its manifestations to men. The first of them--long-suffering--describes the attitude of patient endurance towards inflictors of injury or enemies, if we come forth from the blessed fellowship with God, where love, joy, and peace reign unbroken, and are met with a cold gust of indifference or with an icy wind of hate. The reality of our happy communion and the depth of our love will be tested by the patience of our long-suffering. Love suffereth long, is not easily provoked, is not soon angry. He has little reason to suppose that the love of God is shed abroad in his heart, or that the Spirit of God is bringing forth fruit in him, who has not got beyond the stage of repaying hate with hate, and scorn with scorn. Any fool can answer a fool according to his folly, but it takes a wise and a good man to overcome evil with good, and to love them that hate; and yet how certainly the fires of mutual antagonism would go out if there were only one to pile on the fuel! It takes two to make a quarrel, and no man living under the influence of the Spirit of God can be one of such a pair.

The second and third members of this triad--kindness, goodness, slide very naturally into one another. They do not only require the negative virtue of not retaliating, but express the Christian attitude towards all of meeting them, whatever their attitude, with good. It is possible that kindness here expresses the inward disposition and goodness, the habitual actions in which that disposition shows itself. If that be the distinction between them, the former would answer to benevolence and the latter to beneficence. These three graces include all that Paul presents as Christian duty to our fellows. The results of the life of the Spirit are to pass beyond ourselves and to influence our whole conduct. We are not to live only as mainly for the spiritual enjoyments of fellowship with God. The true field of religion is in moving amongst men, and the true basis of all service of men is love and fellowship with God.

The third triad--faithfulness, meekness, temperance--seems to point to the world in which the Christian life is to be lived as a scene of difficulties and oppositions. The rendering of the Revised Version is to be preferred to that of the Authorised in the first of the three, for it is not faith in its theological sense to which the Apostle is here referring. Possibly, however, the meaning may be trustfulness just as in 1 Corinthians xiii. it is given as a characteristic of love that it ‘believeth all things.’ More probably, however, the meaning is faithfulness, and Paul’s thought is that the Christian life is to manifest itself in the faithful discharge of all duties and the honest handling of all things committed to it. Meekness even more distinctly contemplates a condition of things which is contrary to the Christian life, and points to a submissiveness of spirit which does not lift itself up against oppositions, but bends like a reed before the storm. Paul preached meekness and practised it, but Paul could flash into strong opposition and with a resonant ring in his voice could say ‘To whom we gave place by subjection, No! not for an hour.’ The last member of the triad--temperance--points to the difficulties which the spiritual life is apt to meet with in the natural passions and desires, and insists upon the fact that conflict and rigid and habitual self-control are sure to be marks of that life.

II. The unity of the fruit.

We have already pointed out the Apostles remarkable use of the word ‘fruit’ here, by which he indicates that all the results of the life of the Spirit in the human spirit are to be regarded as a whole that has a natural growth. The foundation of all is of course that love which is the fulfilling of the law. It scarcely needs to be pointed out how love brings forth both the other elements of the first triad, but it is no less important to note that it and its two companions naturally lead on to the relations to men which make up the second triad. It is, however, worth while to dwell on that fact because there are many temptations for Christian people to separate between them. The two tables of the law are not seldom written so far apart that their unity ceases to be noted. There are many good people whose notions of religious duties are shut up in churches or chapels and limited to singing and praying, reading the Bible and listening to sermons, and who, even while they are doing good service in common life, do not feel that it is as much a religious duty to suppress the wish to retaliate as it is to sit in the sunshine of God's love and to feel Christ's joy and peace filling the heart. On the other hand many loud voices, some of them with great force of words and influence on the popular mind, are never wearied of preaching that Christianity is worn out as a social impulse, and that the service of man has nothing to do with the love of God. As plainly Paul's first triad naturally leads to his third. When the spiritual life has realised its deepest secret it will be strong to manifest itself as vigorous in reference to the difficulties of life. When that heart is blessed in its own settled love, abounding joy and untroubled peace, faithfulness and submission will both be possible and self-control will not be hard.

III. The culture of the tree which secures the fruit.

Can we suppose that the Apostle here is going back in thought to our Lord's profound teaching that every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, but the corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit? The obvious felicity of that metaphor often conceals for us the drastic force of its teaching, it regards all a man's conduct as but the outcome of his character, and brushes aside as trifling all attempts at altering products, whilst the producer remains unaltered. Whether Paul was here alluding to a known saying of Jesus or no, he was insisting upon the very centre of Christian ethics, that a man must first be good in order to do good. Our Lord's words seemed to make an impossible demand--'Make the tree good'--as the only way of securing good fruit, and it was in accordance with the whole cast of the Sermon on the Mount that the means of realising that demand was left unexpressed. But Paul stood on this side of Pentecost, and what was necessarily veiled in Christ's earlier utterances stood forth a revealed and blessed certainty to him. He had not to say 'Make the tree good' and be silent as to how that process was to be effected; to him the message had been committed, ‘The Spirit also helpeth our infirmity.’ There is but one way by which a corrupt tree can be made good, and that is by grafting into the wild briar stock a ‘layer’ from the rose. The Apostle had a double message to proclaim, and the one part was built upon the other. He had first to preach--and this day has first to believe that God has sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin--and then he had to proclaim that, through that mission, it became possible that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us who ‘walk not after the flesh but after the spirit.’ The beginning, then, of all true goodness is to be sought in receiving into our corrupt natures the uncorrupted germs of the higher life, and it is only in the measure in which that Spirit of God moves in our spirits and, like the sap in the vine, permeates every branch and tendril, that fruit to eternal life will grow. Christian graces are the products of the indwelling divine life, and nothing else will succeed in producing them. All the preachings of moralists and all the struggles after self-improvement are reduced to impotence and vanity by the stern, curt sentence--’a corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit.’ Surely it should come to us all as a true gospel when we feel ourselves foiled by our own evil nature in our attempts to be better, that the first thing we have to do is not to labour at either of the two impossible tasks of the making our bad selves good, or of the getting good fruits from bad selves, but to open our spirits through faith in Jesus for the entrance into us of His Spirit which will change our corruption into incorruption, and cleanse us from all filthiness of flesh and spirit. Shall we not seek to become recipient of that new life, and having received it, should we not give diligence that it may in us produce all its natural effects?

These fruits, though they are the direct results of the indwelling Spirit and will never be produced without its presence, are none the less truly dependent upon our manner of receiving that Spirit and on our faithfulness and diligence in the use of its gifts. It is, alas! sadly too true, and matter of tragically common experience that instead of ‘trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord’ heavy with ruddy clusters, there are but dwarfed and scrubby bushes which have scarcely life enough to keep up a little show of green leaves and ‘bring no fruit to perfection’. Would that so-called Christian people would more earnestly and searchingly ask themselves why it is that, with such possibilities offered to them, their actual attainments should be so small. They have a power which is able to do for them exceeding abundantly above all that they can ask or think, and its actual effects on them are well on this side of both their petitions and their conceptions. There need be no difficulty in answering the question why our Christian lives do not correspond more closely to the Spirit that inspires them. The plain answer is that we have not cultivated, used, and obeyed Him. The Lord of the vineyard would less often have to ask ‘Wherefore when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?’ if we listened more obediently to the pathetic command which surely should touch a grateful heart--’Grieve not the holy Spirit of God whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.’

IV. How this is the only worthy fruit.

We have already pointed out that the Apostle in the preceding context varies his terms, and catalogues the actions that come from the godless self as works, whilst those which are the outcome of the Spirit are fruit. The distinction thus drawn is twofold. Multiplicity is contrasted with unity and fruit with works. The deeds of the flesh have no consistency except that of evil; they are at variance with themselves--a huddled mob without regularity or order; and they are works indeed, but so disproportionate to the nature of the doer and his obligations that they do not deserve to be called fruit. It is not to attach too much importance to an accidental form of speech to insist upon this distinction as intended to be drawn, and as suggesting to us very solemn thoughts about many apparently very active lives. The man who lives to God truly lives; the busiest life which is not rooted in Him and directed towards Him has so far missed its aim as to have brought forth no good fruit, and therefore to have incurred the sentence that it is cut down and cast into the fire. There is a very remarkable expression in Scripture, ‘The unfruitful works of darkness,’ which admits the busy occupation and energy of the doers and denies that all that struggling and striving comes to anything. Done in the dark, they seemed to have some significance, when the light comes in they vanish. It is for us to determine whether our lives shall be works of the flesh, full, perhaps, of a time of ‘sound and fury,’ but ‘signifying nothing,’ or whether they shall be fruits of the Spirit, which we ‘who have gathered shall eat in the courts of His holiness.’ They will be so if, living in the Spirit, we walk in the Spirit, but if we ‘sow to the flesh’ we shall have a harder husbandry and a bitterer harvest when ‘of the flesh we reap corruption,’ and hear the awful and unanswerable question, ‘What fruit had ye then of those things whereof ye are now ashamed?’

9) Galatians 6:5

Galatians

BURDEN-BEARING

Gal. 6:5.

The injunction in the former of these verses appears, at first sight, to be inconsistent with the statement in the latter. But Paul has a way of setting side by side two superficially contradictory clauses, in order that attention may be awakened, and that we may make an effort to apprehend the point of reconciliation between them. So, for instance, you remember he puts in one sentence, and couples together by a ‘for,’ these two sayings: ‘Work out your own salvation’; ‘It is God that worketh in you.’ So here he has been exhorting the Galatian Christians to restore a fallen brother. That is one case to which the general commandment, ‘Bear ye one another’s burdens,’ is applicable.

I cannot here enter on the intervening verses by which he glides from the one to the other of these two thoughts which I have coupled together, but I may just point out in a word the outline of his course of thought. ‘Bear ye one another’s burden,’ says he; and then he thinks, ‘What is it that keeps men from bearing each other’s burdens?’ Being swallowed up with themselves, and especially being conceited about their own strength and goodness. And so he goes on: ‘If a man think himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.’ And what is the best cure for all these fancies inside us of how strong and good we are? To look at our work with an impartial and rigid judgment. It is easy for a man to plume himself on being good, and strong, and great; but let him look at what he has done, and try that by a high standard, and that will knock the conceit out of him. Or, if his work stands the test, then ‘he shall have rejoicing in himself, and not’ by comparing himself with other people. Two blacks do not make a white, and we are not to heighten the lustre of our own whiteness by comparing it with our neighbour's blackness. Take your act for what _it_ is worth, apart altogether from what other people are. Do not say, 'God! I thank thee that I am not as other men are . . . or even as this publican'; but look to yourself. There is an occupation with self which is good, and is a help to brotherly sympathy.

And so the Apostle has worked round, you see, to almost an opposite thought from the one with which he started. 'Bear ye one another's burdens.' Yes, but a man's work is his own and nobody else's, and a man's character is his own and nobody else's, so 'every man shall bear his own burden.' The statements are not contradictory. They complete each other. They are the north and the south poles, and between them is the rounded orb of the whole truth. So then, let me point out that:

I. There are burdens which can be shared, and there are burdens which _cannot_.

Let us take the case from which the whole context has arisen. Paul was exhorting the Galatians, as I explained, in reference to their duty to a fallen brother; and he speaks of him--according to our version--as 'overtaken in a fault.' Now, that is scarcely his idea, I think. The phrase, as it stands in our Bibles, suggests that Paul is trying to minimise the gravity of the man's offence; but just in proportion as he minimised its gravity would he weaken his exhortation to restore him. But what he is really doing is not to make as little as possible of the sin, but to make as much of it as is consistent with the truth. The word 'overtaken' suggests that some sin, like a tiger in a jungle, springs upon a man and overpowers him by the suddenness of the assault. The word so rendered may perhaps be represented by some such phrase as 'discovered'; or, if I may use a 'colloquialism,' if a man be caught 'red-handed.' That is the idea. And Paul does not use the weak word 'fault,' but a very much stronger one, which means stark staring sin. He is supposing a bad case of inconsistency, and is not palliating it at all. Here is a brother who has had an unblemished reputation; and all at once the curtain is thrown aside behind which he is working some wicked thing; and there the culprit stands, with the bull's-eye light flashed upon him, ashamed and trembling. Paul says, ‘If you are a spiritual man’--there is irony there of the graver sort--’show your spirituality by going and lifting him up, and trying to help him.’ When he says, ‘Restore such an one,’ he uses an expression which is employed in other connections in the New Testament, such as for mending the broken meshes of a net, for repairing any kind of damage, for setting the fractured bones of a limb. And that is what the ‘spiritual’ man has to do. He is to show the validity of his claim to live on high by stooping down to the man bemired and broken-legged in the dirt. We have come across people who chiefly show their own purity by their harsh condemnation of others’ sins. One has heard of women so very virtuous that they would rather hound a fallen sister to death than try to restore her; and there are saints so extremely saintly that they will not touch the leper to heal him, for fear of their own hands being ceremonially defiled. Paul says, ‘Bear ye one another’s burdens’; and especially take a lift of each other’s sin.

I need not remind you how the same command applies in relation to pecuniary distress, narrow circumstances, heavy duties, sorrows, and all the ‘ills that flesh is heir to.’ These can be borne by sympathy, by true loving outgoing of the heart, and by the rendering of such practical help as the circumstances require.

But there are burdens that cannot be borne by any but the man himself.

There is the awful burden of personal existence. It is a solemn thing to be able to say ‘I.’ And that carries with it this, that after all sympathy, after all nestling closeness of affection, after the tenderest exhibition of identity of feeling, and of swift godlike readiness to help, each of us lives alone. Like the inhabitants of the islands of the Greek Archipelago, we are able to wave signals to the next island, and sometimes to send a boat with provisions and succour, but we are parted, ‘with echoing straits between us thrown.’ Every man, after all, lives alone, and society is like the material things round about us, which are all compressible, because the atoms that compose them are not in actual contact, but separated by slenderer or more substantial films of isolating air. Thus there is even in the sorrows which we can share with our brethren, and in all the burdens which we can help to bear, an element which cannot be imparted. ‘The heart knoweth its own bitterness’, and neither ‘stranger’ nor other ‘intermeddleth’ with the deepest fountains of ‘its joy.’

Then again, there is the burden of responsibility which can be shared by none. A dozen soldiers may be turned out to make a firing party to shoot the mutineer, and no man knows who fired the shot, but one man did fire it. And however there may have been companions, it was his rifle that carried the bullet, and his finger that pulled the trigger. We say, ‘The woman that Thou gavest me tempted me, and I did eat.’ Or we say, ‘My natural appetites, for which I am not responsible, but Thou who madest me art, drew me aside, and I fell’, or we may say, ‘It was not I; it was the other boy.’ And then there rises up in our hearts a veiled form, and from its majestic lips comes ‘Thou art the man’; and our whole being echoes assent--_Mea culpa; mea maxima culpa_--’My fault, my exceeding great fault.’ No man can bear that burden.

And then, closely connected with responsibility there is another--the burden of the inevitable consequences of transgression, not only away yonder in the future, when all human bonds of companionship shall be broken, and each man shall ‘give account of himself to God,’ but here and now; as in the immediate context the Apostle tells us, ‘Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.’ The effects of our evil deeds come back to roost; and they never make a mistake as to where they should alight. If I have sown, I, and no one else, will gather. No sympathy will prevent to-morrow’s headache after to-night’s debauch, and nothing that anybody can do will turn the sleuth-hounds off the scent. Though they may be slow-footed, they have sure noses and deep-mouthed fangs. ‘If thou be wise thou shalt be wise for thyself, and if thou scornest thou alone shalt bear it.’ So there are burdens which can, and burdens which cannot, be borne.

II. Jesus Christ is the Burden-bearer for both sorts of burdens.

‘Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ,’ not only as spoken by His lips, but as set forth in the pattern of His life. We have, then, to turn to Him, and think of Him as Burden-bearer in even a deeper sense than the psalmist had discerned, who magnified God as ‘He who daily beareth our burdens.’

Christ is the Burden-bearer of our sin. ‘The Lord hath laid’--or made to meet--’upon Him the iniquity of us all.’ The Baptist pointed his lean, ascetic finger at the young Jesus, and said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God which beareth’--and beareth away--’the sin of the world.’ How heavy the load, how real its pressure, let Gethsemane witness, when He clung to human companionship with the unutterably solemn and plaintive words, ‘My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death. Tarry ye here and watch with Me.’ He bore the burden of the world’s sin.

Jesus Christ is the bearer of the burden of the consequences of sin, not only inasmuch as, in His sinless humanity, He knew by sympathy the weight of the world’s sin, but because in that same humanity, by identification of Himself with us, deeper and more wonderful than our plummets have any line long enough to sound the abysses of, He took the cup of bitterness which our sins have mixed, and drank it all when He said, ‘My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ Consequences still remain: thank God that they do! ‘Thou wast a God that forgavest them, and Thou didst inflict retribution on their inventions.’ So the outward, the present, the temporal consequences of transgression are left standing in all their power, in order that transgressors may thereby be scourged from their evil, and led to forsake the thing that has wrought them such havoc. But the ultimate consequence, the deepest of all, separation from God, has been borne by Christ, and need never be borne by us.

I suppose I need not dwell on the other aspects of this burden-bearing of our Lord, how that He, in a very deep and real sense, takes upon Himself the sorrows which we bear in union with, and faith on, Him. For then the griefs that still come to us, when so borne, are transmitted into ‘light affliction which is but for a moment.’ ‘In all their afflictions He was afflicted.’ Oh, brethren! you with sad hearts, you with lonely lives, you with carking cares, you with pressing, heavy duties, cast your burden on the Christ, and He ‘will sustain you,’ and sorrows borne in union with Him will change their character, and the very cross shall be wreathed in flowers.

Jesus bears the burden of that solemn solitude which our personal being lays upon us all. The rest of us stand round, and, as I said, hoist signals of sympathy, and sometimes can stretch a brotherly hand out and grasp the sufferer's hand. But their help comes from without; Christ comes in, and dwells in our hearts, and makes us no longer alone in the depths of our being, which He fills with the effulgence and peace of His companionship. And so for sin, for guilt, for responsibility, for sorrow, for holiness, Christ bears our burdens.

Yes! And when He takes ours on His shoulders, He puts His on ours. 'My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.' As the old mystics used to say, Christ's burden carries him that carries it. It may add a little weight, but it gives power to soar, and it gives power to progress. It is like the wings of a bird, it is like the sails of a ship.

III. Lastly, Christ's carrying our burdens binds us to carry our brother's!

'So fulfil the law of Christ.' There is a very biting sarcasm, and, as I said about another matter, a grave irony in Paul's use of that word 'law' here. For the whole of this Epistle has been directed against the Judaising teachers who were desirous of cramming Jewish law down Galatian throats, and is addressed to their victims in the Galatian churches who had fallen into the trap. Paul turns round on them here, and says, 'You want law, do you? Well, if you _will_ have it, here it is--the law of Christ.' Christ's life is our law. Practical Christianity is doing what Christ did. The Cross is not only the ground of our hope, but the pattern of our conduct.

And, says Paul in effect, the example of Jesus Christ, in all its sweep, and in all the depth of it, is the only motive by which this injunction that I am giving you will ever be fulfilled. 'Bear ye one another's burdens.' You will never do that unless you have Christ as the ground of your hope, and His great sacrifice as the example for your conduct. For the hindrance that prevents sympathy is self-absorption; and that natural selfishness which is in us all will never be exorcised and banished from us thoroughly, so as that we shall be awake to all the obligations to bear our brother's burdens, unless Christ has dethroned self, and is the Lord of our inmost spirits.

I rejoice as much as any man in the largely increased sense of mutual responsibility and obligation of mutual aid, which is sweetening society by degrees amongst us to-day, but I believe that no Socialistic or other schemes for the regeneration of society which are not based on the Incarnation and Sacrifice of Jesus Christ will live and grow. There is but one power that will cast out natural selfishness, and that is love to Christ, apprehending His Cross as the great example to which our lives are to be conformed. I believe that the growing sense of brotherhood amongst us, even where it is not consciously connected with any faith in Christianity, is, to a very large extent, the result of the diffusion through society of the spirit of Christianity, even where its body is rejected. Thank God, the river of the water of life can percolate through many a mile of soil, and reach the roots of trees far away, in the pastures of the wilderness, that know not whence the refreshing moisture has come. But on the wide scale be sure of this: it is the law of Christ that will fight and conquer the natural selfishness which makes bearing our brother's burdens an impossibility for men. Only, Christian people! let us take care that we are not robbed of our prerogative of being foremost in all such things, by men whose zeal has a less heavenly source than ours ought to have. Depend upon it, heresy has less power to arrest the progress of the Church than the selfish lives of Christian professors.

So, dear friends, let us see to it that we first of all cast our own burdens on the Christ who is able to bear them all, whatever they are. And then let us, with lightened hearts and shoulders, make our own the heavy burdens of sin, of sorrow, of care, of guilt, of consequences, of responsibility, which are crushing down many that are weary and heavy laden. For be sure of this, if we do not bear our brother's burdens, the load that we thought we had cast on Christ will roll back upon ourselves. He is able to bear both us and our burdens, if we will let Him, and if we will fulfil that law of Christ which was illustrated in all His life, 'Who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor,' and was written large in letters of blood upon that Cross where there was 'laid on Him the iniquity of us all.'

10)Galatians 6:10

Galatians

DOING GOOD TO ALL

Gal. 6:10

‘As we have therefore’--that points a finger backwards to what has gone before. The Apostle has been exhorting to unwearied well-doing, on the ground of the certain coming of the harvest season. Now, there is a double link of connection between the preceding words and our text; for ‘do good’ looks back to ‘well-doing,’ and the word rendered ‘opportunity’ is the same as that rendered ‘season.’ So, then, two thoughts arise--’well-doing’ includes doing good to others, and is not complete unless it does. The future, on the whole, is the season of reaping; the present life on the whole is the season of sowing; and while life as a whole is the seed-time, in detail it is full of opportunities, openings which make certain good deeds possible, and which therefore impose upon us the obligation to do them. If we were in the habit of looking on life mainly as a series of opportunities for well-doing, how different it would be; and how different we should be!

Now, this injunction is seen to be reasonable by every man, whether he obeys it or not. It is a commonplace of morality, which finds assent in all consciences, however little it may mould lives. But I wish to give it a particular application, and to try to enforce its bearing upon Christian missionary work. And the thought that I would suggest is just this, that no Christian man discharges that elementary obligation of plain morality, if he is indifferent to this great enterprise. ‘As we have an opportunity, let us do good to all.’ That is the broad principle, and one application is the duty of Christian men to diffuse the Gospel throughout the world.

I. Let me ask you to look at the obligation that is thus suggested.

As I have said, well-doing is the wider, and doing good to others the narrower, expression. The one covers the whole ground of virtue, the other declares that virtue which is self-regarding, the culture which is mainly occupied with self, is lame and imperfect, and there is a great gap in it, as if some cantle had been cut out of the silver disc of the moon. It is only full-orbed when in well-doing, and as a very large constituent element of it, there is included the doing good to others. That is too plain to need to be stated. We hear a great deal to-day about altruism. Well, Christianity preaches that more emphatically than any other system of thought, morals, or religion does. And Christianity brings the mightiest motives for it, and imparts the power by which obedience to that great law that every man's conscience responds to is made possible.

But whilst thus we recognise as a dictate of elementary morality that well-doing must necessarily include doing good to others, and feel, as I suppose we all do feel, when we are true to our deepest convictions, that possessions of all sorts, material, mental, and all others, are given to us in stewardship, and not in absolute ownership, in order that God's grace in its various forms may fructify through us to all, my present point is that, if that is recognised as being what it is, an elementary dictate of morality enforced by men's relationships to one another, and sealed by their own consciences, there is no getting away from the obligation upon all Christian men which it draws after it, of each taking his share in the great work of imparting the gospel to the whole world.

For that gospel is our highest good, the best thing that we can carry to anybody. We many of us recognise the obligation that is devolved upon us by the possession of wealth, to use it for others as well as for ourselves. We recognise, many of us, the obligation that is devolved upon us by the possession of knowledge, to impart it to others as well as ourselves. We are willing to give of our substance, of our time, of our effort, to impart much that we have. But some of us seem to draw a line at the highest good that we have, and whilst responding to all sorts of charitable and beneficent appeals made to us, and using our faculties often for the good of other people, we take no share and no interest in communicating the highest of all goods, the good which comes to the man in whose heart Christ rests. It is our highest good, because it deals with our deepest needs, and lifts us to the loftiest position. The gospel brings our highest good, because it brings eternal good, whilst all other benefits fade and pass, and are left behind with life and the dead flesh. It is our highest good, because if that great message of salvation is received into a heart, or moulds the life of a nation, it will bring after it, as its ministers and results, all manner of material and lesser benefit. And so, giving Christ we give _our_ best, and giving Christ we give the highest gift that a weary world can receive.

Remember, too, that the impartation of this highest good is one of the main reasons why we ourselves possess it. Jesus Christ can redeem the world alone, but it cannot become a redeemed world without the help of His servants. He needs us in order to carry into all humanity the energies that He brought into the midst of mankind by His Incarnation and Sacrifice; and the cradle of Bethlehem and the Cross of Cavalry are not sufficient for the accomplishment of the purpose for which they respectively came to pass, without the intervention and ministry of Christian people. It was for this end amongst others, that each of us who have received that great gift into our hearts have been enriched by it. The river is fed from the fountains of the hills, in order that it may carry verdure and life whithersoever it goes. And you and I have been brought to the Cross of Christ, and made His disciples, not only in order that we ourselves might be blessed and quickened by the gift unspeakable, but in order that through us it may be communicated, just as each particle when leavened in the mass of the dough communicates its energy to its adjacent particle until the whole is leavened.

I am afraid that indifference to the communication of the highest good, which marks sadly too many Christian professors in all ages, and in this age, is a suspicious indication of a very slight realisation of the good for themselves. Luther said that justification was the article of a standing or a falling church. That may be true in the region of theology, but in the region of practical life I do not know that you will find a test more reliable and more easy of application than this, Does a man care for spreading amongst his fellows the gospel that he himself has received? If he does not, let him ask himself whether, in any real sense, he has it. ‘Well-doing’ includes doing good to others, and the possession of Christ will make it certain that we shall impart Him.

II. Notice the bearing of this elementary injunction upon the scope of the obligation.

‘Let us do good to all men.’ It was Christianity that invented the word ‘humanity’; either in its meaning of the aggregate of men or its meaning of a gracious attitude towards them. And it invented the word because it revealed the thing on which it rests. ‘Brotherhood’ is the sequel of ‘Fatherhood,’ and the conception of mankind, beneath all diversities of race and culture and the like, as being an organic whole, knit together by a thousand mystical bands, and each atom of which has connection with, and obligations to, every other--that is a product of Christianity, however it may have been in subsequent ages divorced from a recognition of its source. So, then, the gospel rises above all the narrow distinctions which call themselves patriotism and are parochial, and it says that there is ‘neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, Jew nor Greek, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free,’ but all are one. Get high enough up upon the hill, and the hedges between the fields are barely perceptible. Live on the elevation to which the Gospel of Jesus Christ lifts men, and you look down upon a great prairie, without a fence or a ditch or a division. So my text comes with profound significance, ‘Let us do good to all,’ because all are included in the sweep of that great purpose of love, and in the redeeming possibilities of that great death on the Cross. Christ has swept the compass, if I may say so, of His love and work all round humanity; and are we to extend our sympathies or our efforts less widely? The circle includes the world; our sympathies should be as wide as the circle that Christ has drawn.

Let me remind you, too, that only such a world-wide communication of the highest good that has blessed ourselves will correspond to the proved power of that Gospel which treats as of no moment diversities that are superficial, and can grapple with and overcome, and bind to itself as a crown of glory, every variety of character, of culture, of circumstance, claiming for its own all races, and proving itself able to lift them all. ‘The Bread of God which came down from heaven’ is an exotic everywhere, because it came down from heaven, but it can grow in all soils, and it can bring forth fruit unto eternal life everywhere amongst mankind. So ‘let us do good to all.’

And then we are met by the old objection, ‘The eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth. Keep your work for home, that wants it.’ Well! I am perfectly ready to admit that in Christian work, as in all others there must be division of labour, and that one man’s tastes and inclinations will lead him to one sphere and one form of it; and another man’s to another; and I am quite ready, not to admit, but strongly to insist, that, whatever happens, home is not to be neglected. ‘All men’ includes the slums in England as well as the savages in Africa, and it is no excuse for neglecting either of these departments that we are trying to do something in the other. But it is not uncharitable to say that the objection to which I am referring is most often made by one or other of two classes, either by people who do not care about the Gospel, nor recognise the ‘good’ of it at all, or by people who are ingenious in finding excuses for not doing the duty to which they are at the moment summoned. The people that do the one are the people that do the other. Where do you get your money from for home work? Mainly from the Christian Churches. Who is it that keeps up missionary work abroad? Mainly the Christian Churches. There is a vast deal of unreality in that objection. Just think of the disproportion between the embarrassment of riches in our Christian appliances here in England and the destitution in these distant lands. Here the ships are crammed into a dock, close up against one another, rubbing their yards upon each other; and away out yonder on the waters there are leagues of loneliness, where never a sail is seen. Here, at home, we are drenched with Christian teaching, and the Churches are competing with each other, often like rival tradespeople for their customers; and away out yonder a man to half a million is considered a fair allowance. ‘Let us do good to all.’

III. Lastly, note the bearing of this elementary precept on the occasions that rise for the discharge of the duty.

‘As we have opportunity.’ As I have already said, the Christian way to look at our circumstances is to regard them as openings for the exercise of Christian virtue, and therefore summonses to its discharge. And if we regarded our own position individually, so we should find that there were many, many doors that had long been opened, into which we had been too blind or too lazy, or too selfishly absorbed in our own concerns, to enter. The neglected opportunities, the beckoning doors whose thresholds we have never crossed, the good that we might have done and have not done--these are as weighty to sink us as the positive sins, the opportunities for which have appealed to our worse selves.

But I desire to say a word, not only about the opportunities offered to us individually, but about those offered to England for this great enterprise. The prophet of old represented the proud Assyrian conqueror as boasting, ‘My hand hath gathered as a nest the riches of the peoples . . . and there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped.’ It might be the motto of England to-day. It is not for nothing that we and our brethren across the Atlantic, the inheritors of the same faith and morals and literature, and speaking the same tongue, have had given to us the wide dominion that we possess, I know that England has not climbed to her place without many a crime, and that in her 'skirts is found the blood of poor innocents,' but yet we have that connection, for good or for evil, with subject races all over the earth. And I ask whether or not that is an opportunity that the Christian Church is bound to make use of. What have we been intrusted with it for? Commerce, dominion, the impartation of Western knowledge, literature, laws? Yes! Is that all? Are you to send shirting and not the Gospel? Are you to send muskets that will burst, and gin that is poison, and not Christianity? Are you to send Shakespeare, and Milton, and modern science, and Herbert Spencer, and not Evangelists and the Gospels? Are you to send the code of English law and not Christ's law of love? Are you to send godless Englishmen, 'through whom the name of God is blasphemed amongst the Gentiles,' and are you not to send missionaries of the Cross? A Brahmin once said to a missionary, 'Look here! Your Book is a good Book. If you were as good as your Book you would make India Christian in ten years.'

Brethren! the European world to-day is fighting and scrambling over what it calls the unclaimed corners of the world; looking upon all lands that are uncivilised by Western civilisation either as markets, or as parts of their empire. Is there no other way of looking at the heathen world than that? How did Christ look at it? He was moved when He saw the multitudes as 'sheep having no shepherd.' Oh! if Christian men, as members of this nation, would rise to the height of Christ's place of vision, and would look at the world with His eyes, what a difference it would make! I appeal to you, Christian men and women, as members of this nation, and therefore responsible, though it may be infinitesimally, for what this nation is doing in the distant corners of the world, and urge on you that you are bound, so far as your influence goes, to protest against the way of looking at these heathen lands as existing to be exploited for the material benefit of these Western Powers. You are bound to lend your voice, however weak it may be, to the protests against the savage treatment of native races--against the drenching of China with narcotics, and Africa with rum; to try to look at the world as Christ looked at it, to rise to the height of that great vision which regards all men as having been in His heart when He died on the Cross, and refuses to recognise in this great work 'Barbarian, Scythian, bond or free.'

We have awful responsibilities; the world is open to us. We have the highest good. How shall we obey this elementary principle of our text, unless we help as we can in spreading Christ's reign? Blessed shall we be if, and only if, we fill the seed-time with delightful work, and remember that well-doing is imperfect unless it includes doing good to others, and that the best good we can do is to impart the Unspeakable Gift to the men that need it.

11)Galatians 6:16

1 Corinthians

FORMS *VERSUS* CHARACTER

1Co. 7:19. - Gal. 5:6. - Gal. 6:16.

The great controversy which embittered so much of Paul's life, and marred so much of his activity, turned upon the question whether a heathen man could come into the Church simply by the door of faith, or whether he must also go through the gate of circumcision. We all know how Paul answered the question. Time, which settles all controversies, has settled that one so thoroughly that it is impossible to revive any kind of interest in it; and it may seem to be a pure waste of time to talk about it. But the principles that fought then are eternal, though the forms in which they manifest themselves vary with every varying age.

The Ritualist-using that word in its broadest sense-on the one hand, and the Puritan on the other, represent permanent tendencies of human nature; and we find to-day the old foes with new faces. These three passages, which I have read, are Paul's deliverance on the question of the comparative value of external rites and spiritual character. They are remarkable both for the identity in the former part of each and for the variety in the latter. In all the three cases he affirms, almost in the same language, that 'circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing,' that the Ritualist's rite and the Puritan's protest are equally insignificant in comparison with higher things. And then he varies the statement of what the higher things are, in a very remarkable and instructive fashion. The 'keeping of the commandments of God,' says one of the texts, is the all-important matter. Then, as it were, he pierces deeper, and in another of the texts [I take the liberty of varying their order] pronounces that ‘a new creature’ is the all-important thing. And then he pierces still deeper to the bottom of all, in the third text, and says the all-important thing is ‘faith which worketh by love.’

I think I shall best bring out the force of these words by dealing first with that emphatic threefold proclamation of the nullity of all externalism; and then with the singular variations in the triple statement of what is essential, viz. spiritual conduct and character.

I. First, the emphatic proclamation of the nullity of outward rites.

‘Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing,’ say two texts. ‘Circumcision availeth nothing, and uncircumcision availeth nothing,’ says the other. It neither is anything nor does anything. Did Paul say that because circumcision was a Jewish rite? No. As I believe, he said it because it was *a rite*; and because he had learned that the one thing needful was spiritual character, and that no external ceremonial of any sort could produce that. I think we are perfectly warranted in taking this principle of my text, and in extending it beyond the limits of the Jewish rite about which Paul was speaking. For if you remember, he speaks about baptism, in the first chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, in a precisely similar tone and for precisely the same reason, when he says, in effect, ‘I baptized Crispus and Gaius and the household of Stephanas, and I think these are all. I am not quite sure. I do not keep any kind of record of such things; God did not send me to baptize, He sent me to preach the Gospel.’

The thing that produced the spiritual result was not the rite, but the truth, and therefore he felt that his function was to preach the truth and leave the rite to be administered by others. Therefore we can extend the principle here to all externalisms of worship, in all forms, in all churches, and say that in comparison with the essentials of an inward Christianity they are nothing and they do nothing.

They have their value. As long as we are here on earth, living in the flesh, we must have outward forms and symbolical rites. It is in Heaven that the seer 'saw no temple.' Our sense-bound nature requires, and thankfully avails itself of, the help of external rites and ceremonials to lift us up towards the Object of our devotion. A man prays all the better if he bow his head, shut his eyes, and bend his knees. Forms do help us to the realisation of the realities, and the truths which they express and embody. Music may waft our souls to the heavens, and pictures may stir deep thoughts. That is the simple principle on which the value of all external aids to devotion depends. They may be helps towards the appreciation of divine truth, and to the suffusing of the heart with devout emotions which may lead to building up a holy character.

There is a worth, therefore-an auxiliary and subordinate worth-in these things, and in that respect they are *not* nothing, nor do they 'avail nothing.' But then all external rites tend to usurp more than belongs to them, and in our weakness we are apt to cleave to them, and instead of using them as means to lift us higher, to stay in them, and as a great many of us do, to mistake the mere gratification of taste and the excitement of the sensibilities for worship. A bit of stained glass may be glowing with angel-forms and pictured saints, but it always keeps some of the light out, and it always hinders us from seeing through it. And all external worship and form have so strong a tendency to usurp more than belongs to them, and to drag us down to their own level, even whilst we think that we are praying, that I believe the wisest man will try to pare down the externals of his worship to the lowest possible point. If there be as much body as will keep a soul in, as much form as will embody the spirit, that is all that we want. What is more is dangerous.

All form in worship is like fire, it is a good servant but it is a bad master, and it needs to be kept very rigidly in subordination, or else the spirituality of Christian worship vanishes before men know; and they are left with their dead forms which are only evils-crutches that make people limp by the very act of using them.

Now, my dear friends, when that has happened, when men begin to say, as the people in Paul's time were saying about circumcision, and as people are saying in this day about Christian rites, that they are necessary, then it is needful to take up Paul's ground and to say, 'No! they are nothing!' They are useful in a certain place, but if you make them obligatory, if you make them essential, if you say that grace is miraculously conveyed through them, then it is needful that we should raise a strong note of protestation, and declare their absolute nullity for the highest purpose, that of making that spiritual character which alone is essential.

And I believe that this strange recrudescence-to use a modern word-of ceremonialism and aesthetic worship which we see all round about us, not only in the ranks of the Episcopal Church, but amongst Nonconformists, who are sighing for a less bare service, and here and there are turning their chapels into concert-rooms, and instead of preaching the Gospel are having 'Services of Song' and the like-that all this makes it as needful to-day as ever it was to say to men: 'Forms are not worship. Rites may crush the spirit. Men may yield to the sensuous impressions which they produce, and be lapped in an atmosphere of aesthetic emotion, without any real devotion.'

Such externals are only worth anything if they make us grasp more firmly with our understandings and feel more profoundly with our hearts, the great truths of the Gospel. If they do that, they help; if they are not doing that, they hinder, and are to be fought against. And so we have again to proclaim to-day, as Paul did, 'Circumcision is nothing,' 'but the keeping of the commandments of God.'

Then notice with what remarkable fairness and boldness and breadth the Apostle here adds that other clause: 'and uncircumcision is nothing.' It is a very hard thing for a man whose life has been spent in fighting against an error, not to exaggerate the value of his protest. It is a very hard thing for a man who has been delivered from the dependence upon forms, not to fancy that his formlessness is what the other people think that their forms are. The Puritan who does not believe that a man can be a good man because he is a Ritualist or a Roman Catholic, is committing the very same error as the Ritualist or the Roman Catholic who does not believe that the Puritan can be a Christian unless he has been 'christened.' The two people are exactly the same, only the one has hold of the stick at one end, and the other at the other. There may be as much idolatry in superstitious reliance upon the bare worship as in the advocacy of the ornate; and many a Nonconformist who fancies that he has 'never bowed the knee to Baal' is as true an idol-worshipper in his superstitious abhorrence of the ritualism that he sees in other communities, as are the men who trust in it the most.

It is a large attainment in Christian character to be able to say with Paul, 'Circumcision is nothing, and my own favourite point of uncircumcision is nothing either. Neither the one side nor the other touches the essentials.'

II. Now let us look at the threefold variety of the designation of these essentials here.

In our first text from the Epistle to the Corinthians we read, 'Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.' If we finished the sentence it would be, 'but the keeping of the commandments of God is everything.'

And by that 'keeping the commandments,' of course, the Apostle does not mean merely external obedience. He means something far deeper than that, which I put into this plain word, that the one essential of a Christian life is the conformity of the will with God's-not the external obedience merely, but the entire surrender and the submission of my will to the will of my Father in Heaven. That is the all-important thing; that is what God wants; that is the end of all rites and ceremonies; that is the end of all revelation and of all utterances of the divine heart. The Bible, Christ's mission, His passion and death, the gift of His Divine Spirit, and every part of the divine dealings in providence, all converge upon this one aim and goal. For this purpose the Father worketh hitherto, and Christ works, that man's will may yield and bow itself wholly and happily and lovingly to the great infinite will of the Father in heaven.

Brethren! that is the perfection of a man’s nature, when his will fits on to God’s like one of Euclid’s triangles superimposed upon another, and line for line coincides. When his will allows a free passage to the will of God, without resistance or deflection, as light travels through transparent glass; when his will responds to the touch of God’s finger upon the keys, like the telegraphic needle to the operator’s hand, then man has attained all that God and religion can do for him, all that his nature is capable of; and far beneath his feet may be the ladders of ceremonies and forms and outward acts, by which he climbed to that serene and blessed height, ‘Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of God’s commandments is everything.’

That submission of will is the sum and the test of your Christianity. Your Christianity does not consist only in a mere something which you call faith in Jesus Christ. It does not consist in emotions, however deep and blessed and genuine they may be. It does not consist in the acceptance of a creed. All these are means to an end. They are meant to drive the wheel of life, to build up character, to make your deepest wish to be, ‘Father! not my will, but Thine, be done.’ In the measure in which that is your heart’s desire, and not one hair’s-breadth further, have you a right to call yourself a Christian.

But, then, I can fancy a man saying: ‘It is all very well to talk about bowing the will in this fashion; how can I do that?’ Well, let us take our second text-the third in the order of their occurrence-’For neither circumcision is anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.’ That is to say, if we are ever to keep the will of God we must be made over again. Ay! we must! Our own consciences tell us that; the history of all the efforts that ever we have made-and I suppose all of us have made some now and then, more or less earnest and more or less persistent-tells us that there needs to be a stronger hand than ours to come into the fight if it is ever to be won by us. There is nothing more heartless and more impotent than to preach, ‘Bow your wills to God, and then you will be happy; bow your wills to God, and then you will be good.’ If that is all the preacher has to say, his powerless words will but provoke the answer, ‘We cannot. Tell the leopard to change his spots, or the Ethiopian his skin, as soon as tell a man to reduce this revolted kingdom within him to obedience, and to bow his will to the will of God. We cannot do it.’ But, brethren, in that word, ‘a new creature,’ lies a promise from God; for a creature implies a creator. ‘It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves.’ The very heart of what Christ has to offer us is the gift of His own life to dwell in our hearts, and by its mighty energy to make us free from the law of sin and death which binds our wills. We may have our spirits moulded into His likeness, and new tastes, and new desires, and new capacities infused into us, so as that we shall not be left with our own poor powers to try and force ourselves into obedience to God’s will, but that submission and holiness and love that keeps the commandments of God, will spring up in our renewed spirits as their natural product and growth. Oh! you men and women who have been honestly trying, half your lifetime, to make yourselves what you know God wants you to be, and who are obliged to confess that you have failed, hearken to the message: ‘If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature, old things are passed away.’ The one thing needful is keeping the commandments of God, and the only way by which we can keep the commandments of God is that we should be formed again into the likeness of Him of whom alone it is true that ‘He did always the things that pleased’ God.

And so we come to the last of these great texts: ‘In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.’ That is to say, if we are to be made over again, we must have faith in Christ Jesus. We have got to the root now, so far as we are concerned. We must keep the commandments of God; if we are to keep the commandments we must be made over again, and if our hearts ask how can we receive that new creating power into our lives, the answer is, by ‘faith which worketh by love.’

Paul did not believe that external rites could make men partakers of a new nature, but he believed that if a man would trust in Jesus Christ, the life of that Christ would flow into his opened heart, and a new spirit and nature would be born in him. And, therefore, his triple requirements come all down to this one, so far as we are concerned, as the beginning and the condition of the other two. ‘Neither circumcision does anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love,’ does everything. He that trusts Christ opens his heart to Christ, who comes with His new-creating Spirit, and makes us willing in the day of His power to keep His commandments.

But faith leads us to obedience in yet another fashion, than this opening of the door of the heart for the entrance of the new-creating Spirit. It leads to it in the manner which is expressed by the words of our text, ‘worketh by love.’ Faith shows itself living, because it leads us to love, and through love it produces its effects upon conduct.

Two things are implied in this designation of faith. If you trust Christ you will love Him. That is plain enough. And you will not love Him unless you trust Him. Though it lies wide of my present purpose, let us take this lesson in passing. You cannot work yourself up into a spasm or paroxysm of religious emotion and love by resolution or by effort. All that you can do is to go and look at the Master and get near Him, and that will warm you up. You can love if you trust. Your trust will make you love; unless you trust you will never love Him.

The second thing implied is, that if you love you will obey. That is plain enough. The keeping of the commandments will be easy where there is love in the heart. The will will bow where there is love in the heart. Love is the only fire that is hot enough to melt the iron obstinacy of a creature’s will. The will cannot be driven. Strike it with violence and it stiffens; touch it gently and it yields. If you try to put an iron collar upon the will, like the demoniac in the Gospels, the touch of the apparent restraint drives it into fury, and it breaks the bands asunder. Fasten it with the silken leash of love, and a ‘little child’ can lead it. So faith works by love, because whom we trust we shall love, and whom we love we shall obey.

Therefore we have got to the root now, and nothing is needful but an operative faith, out of which will come all the blessed possession of a transforming Spirit, and all sublimities and noblenesses of an obedient and submissive will.

My brother! Paul and James shake hands here. There is a ‘faith’ so called, which does not work. It is dead! Let me beseech you, none of you to rely upon what you choose to call your faith in Jesus Christ, but examine it. Does it do anything? Does it help you to be like Him? Does it open your hearts for His Spirit to come in? Does it fill them with love to that Master, a love which proves itself by obedience? Plain questions, questions that any man can answer; questions that go to the root of the whole matter. If your faith does that, it is genuine; if it does not, it is not.

And do not trust either to forms, or to your freedom from forms. They will not save your souls, they will not make you more Christ-like. They will not help you to pardon, purity, holiness, blessedness. In these respects neither if we have them are we the better, nor if we have them not are we the worse. If you are trusting to Christ, and by that faith are having your hearts moulded and made over again into all holy obedience, then you have all that you need. Unless you have, though you partook of all Christian rites, though you believed all Christian truth, though you fought against superstitious reliance on forms, you have not the one thing needful, for ‘in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but faith which worketh by love.’

12)Galatians 6:17

Galatians

THE OWNER’S BRAND

Gal. 6:17.

The reference in these words is probably to the cruel custom of branding slaves as we do cattle, with initials or signs, to show their ownership. It is true that in old times criminals, and certain classes of Temple servants, and sometimes soldiers, were also so marked, but it is most in accordance with the Apostle’s way of thinking that he here has reference to the first class, and would represent himself as the _slave_ of Jesus Christ, designated as His by the scars and weaknesses which were the consequences of his apostolic zeal. Imprisonment, beating by the Jewish rod, shipwrecks, fastings, weariness, perils, persecutions, all these he sums up in another place as being the tokens by which he was approved as an apostle of Jesus Christ. And here he, no doubt, has the same thought in his mind, that his bodily weakness, which was the direct issue of his apostolic work, showed that he was Christ’s. The painful infirmity under which, as we learn, he was more especially suffering, about the time of writing this letter, may also have been in his mind.

All through this Epistle he has been thundering and lightning against the disputers of this apostolic authority. And now at last he softens, and as it were, bares his thin arm, his scarred bosom, and bids these contumacious Galatians look upon them, and learn that he has a right to speak as the representative and messenger of the Lord Jesus.

So we have here two or three points, I think, worth considering. First, think for a moment of the slave of Christ; then of the brands which mark the ownership; then of the glory in the servitude and the sign; and then of the immunity from human disturbances which that service gives. 'From henceforth let no man trouble me. I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.'

I. First, then, a word or two about that conception of the slave of Christ.

It is a pity that our Bible has not rendered the title which Paul ever gives himself at the beginning of his letters, by that simple word 'slave,' instead of the feebler one, 'servant.' For what he means when he calls himself the 'servant of Jesus Christ' is not that he bore to Christ the kind of relation which servants among us bear to those who have hired and paid them, and to whom they have come under obligations of their own will which they can terminate at any moment by their own caprice; but that he was in the roughest and simplest sense of the word, Christ's slave.

What lies in that metaphor? Well, it is the most uncompromising assertion of the most absolute authority on the one hand, and claim of unconditional submission and subjection on the other.

The slave belonged to his master; the master could do exactly as he liked with him. If he killed him nobody had anything to say. He could set him to any task; he could do what he liked with any little possession or property that the slave seemed to have. He could break all his relationships, and separate him from wife and kindred.

All that is atrocious and blasphemous when it is applied to the relations between man and man, but it is a blessed and magnificent truth when it is applied to the relations between a man and Christ. For this Lord has absolute authority over us, and He can do what He likes with everything that belongs to us; and we, and our duties, and our circumstances, and our relationships, are all in His hands, and the one thing that we have to render to Him is utter, absolute, unquestioning, unhesitating, unintermittent and unreserved obedience and submission. That which is abject degradation when it is rendered to a man, that which is blasphemous presumption when it is required by a man, that which is impossible, in its deepest reality, as between man and man, is possible, is blessed, is joyful and strong when it is required by, and rendered to, Jesus Christ. We are His slaves if we have any living relationship to Him at all. Where, then, in the Christian life, is there a place for self-will; where a place for self-indulgence; where for murmuring or reluctance; where for the assertion of any rights of my own as against that Master? We owe absolute obedience and submission to Jesus Christ.

And what does the metaphor carry as to the basis on which this authority rests? How did men acquire slaves? Chiefly by purchase. The abominations of the slave market are a blessed metaphor for the deep realities of the Christian life. Christ has bought you for His own. The only thing that gives a human soul the right to have any true authority over another human soul is that it shall have yielded itself to the soul whom it would control. We must first of all give ourselves away before we have the right to possess, and the measure in which we give ourselves to another is the measure in which we possess another. And so Christ our Lord, according to the deep words of one of Paul's letters, 'gives Himself for us, that He might purchase unto Himself a people for His possession.' 'Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price.'

Therefore the absolute authority, and unconditional surrender and submission which are the very essence of the Christian life, at bottom are but the corresponding and twofold effects of one thing, and that is love. For there is no possession of man by man except that which is based on love. And there is no submission of man to man worth calling so except that which is also based therein.

‘Thou hearts alone wouldst move; Thou only hearts dost love.’

The relation in both its parts, on the side of the Master and on the side of the captive bondsman, is the direct result and manifestation of that love which knits them together.

Therefore the Christian slavery, with its abject submission, with its utter surrender and suppression of mine own will, with its complete yielding up of self to the control of Jesus, who died for me; because it is based upon His surrender of Himself to me, and in its inmost essence it is the operation of love, is therefore co-existent with the noblest freedom.

This great Epistle to the Galatians is the trumpet call and clarion proclamation of Christian liberty. The breath of freedom blows inspiringly through it all. The very spirit of the letter is gathered up in one of its verses, ‘I have been called unto liberty,’ and in its great exhortation, ‘Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free.’ It is then sufficiently remarkable and profoundly significant that in this very letter, which thus is the protest of the free Christian consciousness against all limitations and outward restrictions, there should be this most emphatic declaration that the liberty of the Christian is slavery and the slavery of the Christian is freedom. He is free whose will coincides with his outward law. He is free who delights to do what he must do. He is free whose rule is love, and whose Master is Incarnate Love. ‘If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed.’ ‘O Lord, truly I am Thy servant, Thou hast loosed my bands.’ ‘I bear in my body’ the charter of my liberty, for I bear in my body the ‘brand of the Lord Jesus.’

II. And so now a word in the next place about these marks of ownership.

As I have said, the Apostle evidently means thereby distinctly the bodily weaknesses, and possibly diseases, which were the direct consequences of his own apostolic faithfulness and zeal. He considered that he proved himself to be a minister of God by his stripes, imprisonments, fastings, by all the pains and sufferings and their permanent consequences in an enfeebled constitution, which he bore because he had preached the Cross of Christ. He knew that these things were the result of his faithful ministry. He believed that they had been sent by no blundering, blind fate; by no mere secondary causes; but by his Master Himself, whose hand had held the iron that branded into the hissing flesh the marks of His ownership. He felt that by means of these he had been drawn nearer to his Master, and the ownership had been made more perfect. And so in a rapture of contempt of pain, this heroic soul looks upon even bodily weakness and suffering as being the signs that he belonged to Christ, and the means of that possession being made more perfect.

Now, what is all that to us Christian people who have no persecutions to endure, and none of whom I am afraid have ever worked hard enough for Christ to have damaged our health by it? Is there anything in this text that may be of general application to us all? Yes! I think so. Every Christian man or woman ought to bear, in his or her body, in a plain, literal sense, the tokens that he or she belongs to Jesus Christ. You ask me how? 'If thy foot or thine hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee.'

There are things in your physical nature that you have to suppress; that you have always to regulate and coerce; that you have sometimes entirely to cast away and to do without, if you mean to be Jesus Christ's at all. The old law of self-denial, of subduing the animal nature, its passions, appetites, desires, is as true and as needful to-day as it ever was; and for us all it is essential to the loftiness and purity of our Christian life that our animal nature and our fleshly constitution should be well kept down under heel and subdued. As Paul himself said in another place, 'I bring under my body, and I keep it in subjection, lest by any means I should myself, having proclaimed to others the laws of the contest, be rejected from the prize.' Oh, you Christian men and women! if you are not living a life of self-denial, if you are not crucifying the flesh, with its affections and lusts, if you are not bearing 'about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Christ may be manifested in your mortal body,' what tokens are there that you are Christ's slaves at all?

Then, besides this, we may expand the thought even further, and say that, in a very real sense, all the pains and sorrows and disappointments and afflictions that mainly touch our mortal part should be taken by us as, and made by us to be, the tokens that we belong to the Master.

But it is not only in limitations and restrictions and self-denials and pains that Christ’s ownership of us ought to be manifested in our daily lives, and so by means of our mortal bodies, but if there be in our hearts a deep indwelling possession of the grace and sweetness of Christ, it will make itself visible, ay! even in our faces, and ‘beauty born of’ our communion with Him ‘shall pass into’ and glorify even rugged and care-lined countenances. There may be, and there ought to be, in all Christian people, manifestly visible the tokens of the indwelling serenity of the indwelling Christ. And it should not be left to some moment of rapture at the end of life, for men to look upon us, to behold our faces, ‘as it had been the face of an angel,’ but by our daily walk, by our countenances full of a removed tranquillity, and a joy that rises from within, men ought to take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus, and it should be the truth--I bear in my body the tokens of His possession.

III. Now, once more notice the glorying in the slavery and its signs.

‘I bear,’ says Paul; and he uses, as many of you may know, a somewhat remarkable word, which does not express mere bearing in the sense of toleration and patient endurance, although that is much; nor mere bearing in the sense of carrying, but implies bearing with a certain triumph as men would do who, coming back victorious from conflict, and being received into the city, were proud to show their scars, the honourable signs of their courage and constancy. So, with a triumph that is legitimate, the Apostle solemnly and proudly bears before men the marks of the Lord Jesus. Just as he says in another place:--’Thanks be unto God, which always leadeth us about in triumph in Jesus Christ,’ He was proud of being dragged at the conqueror’s chariot wheels, chained to them by the cords of love; and so he was proud of being the slave of Christ.

It is a degradation to a man to yield abject submission, unconditional service to another man. It is the highest honour of our natures so to bow before that dear Lord. To prostrate ourselves to Him is to lift ourselves high in the scale of being. The King’s servant is every other person’s master. And he that feels that he is Christ’s, may well be, not proud but conscious, of the dignity of belonging to such a Lord. The monarch’s livery is a sign of honour. In our old Saxon kingdom the king's menials were the first nobles. So it is with us. The aristocracy of humanity are the slaves of Jesus Christ.

And let us be proud of the marks of the branding iron, whether they come in the shape of sorrows and pains, or otherwise. It is well that we should have to carry these. It is blessed, and a special mark of the Master's favour that He should think it worth His while to mark us as His own, by any sorrow or by any pain. Howsoever hot may be the iron, and howsoever deeply it may be pressed by His firm, steady, gentle hand upon the quivering flesh and the shrinking heart, let us be thankful if He, even by it, impresses on us the manifest tokens of ownership. Oh, brethren! if we could come to look upon sorrows and losses with this clear recognition of their source, meaning and purpose, they change their nature, the paradox is fulfilled that we do 'gather grapes of thorns and figs of thistles.' 'I bear in my body,' with a solemn triumph and patient hope, 'the marks of the Lord Jesus.'

IV. And now, lastly, the immunity from any disturbance which men can bring, which these marks, and the servitude they express, secure.

'From henceforth let no man trouble me.' Paul claims that his apostolic authority, having been established by the fact of his sufferings for Christ, should give him a sacredness in their eyes; that henceforth there should be no rebellion against his teaching and his word. We may expand the thought to apply more to ourselves, and say that, in the measure in which we belong to Christ, and hear the marks of His possession of us, in that measure are we free from the disturbance of earthly influences and of human voices; and from all the other sources of care and trouble, of perturbation and annoyance, which harass and vex other men's spirits. 'Ye are bought with a price,' says Paul elsewhere. 'Be not the servants of men.' Christ is your Master; do not let men trouble you. Take your orders from Him; let men rave as they like. Be content to be approved by Him; let men think of you as they please. The Master's smile is life, the Master's frown is death to the slave; what matters it what other people may say? 'He that judgeth me is the Lord.' So keep yourselves above the cackle of 'public opinion'; do not let your creed be crammed down your throats even by a consensus of however venerable and grave human teachers. Take your directions from your Master, and pay no heed to other voices if they would command. Live to please Him, and do not care what other people think. You are Christ’s servant; ‘let no man trouble’ you.

And so it should be about all the distractions and petty annoyances that disturb human life and harass our hearts. A very little breath of wind will ruffle all the surface of a shallow pond, though it would sweep across the deep sea and produce no effect. Deepen your natures by close union with Christ, and absolute submission to Him, and there will be a great calm in them, and cares and sorrows, and all the external sources of anxiety, far away, down there beneath your feet, will ‘show scarce so gross as beetles,’ whilst you stand upon the high cliff and look down upon them all. ‘From henceforth no man shall trouble me.’ ‘I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.’

My brother! Whose marks do you bear? There are only two masters. If an eye that could see things as they are, were to go through this congregation, whose initials would it discern in your faces? There are some of us, I have no doubt, who in a very horrid sense bear in our bodies the marks of the idol that we worship. Men who have ruined their health by dissipation and animal sensualism--are there any of them here this morning? Are there none of us whose faces, whose trembling hands, whose diseased frames, are the tokens that they belong to the flesh and the world and the devil? Whose do _you_ bear?

Oh! when one looks at all the faces that pass one upon the street--this all drawn with avarice and earthly-mindedness; that all bloated with self-indulgence and loose living--when one sees the mean faces, the passionate faces, the cruel faces, the vindictive faces, the lustful faces, the worldly faces, one sees how many of us bear in our bodies the marks of _another_ lord. They have no rest day nor night who worship the beast; and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.

I pray you, yield yourselves to your true Lord, so on earth you may bear the beginnings of the likeness that stamps you His, and hereafter, as one of His happy slaves, shall do priestly service at His throne and see His face, and His name shall be in your foreheads.

Ephesians

1) EPHESIANS 1:1
2) EPHESIANS 1:3
3) EPHESIANS 1:5
4) EPHESIANS 1:7
5) EPHESIANS 1:11
6) EPHESIANS 1:14
7) EPHESIANS 1:18
8) EPHESIANS 1:18
9) EPHESIANS 1:19
10) EPHESIANS 2:4-5
11) EPHESIANS 2:7
12) EPHESIANS 2:8
13) EPHESIANS 2:10
14) EPHESIANS 2:20
15) EPHESIANS 3:15
16) EPHESIANS 3:16
17) EPHESIANS 3:17
18) EPHESIANS 3:18
19) EPHESIANS 3:18
20) EPHESIANS 3:19
21) EPHESIANS 3:20
22) EPHESIANS 4:1
23) EPHESIANS 4:5
24) EPHESIANS 4:7
25) EPHESIANS 4:13
26) EPHESIANS 4:20-21
27) EPHESIANS 4:22
28) EPHESIANS 4:24
29) EPHESIANS 4:30
30) EPHESIANS 5:1
31) EPHESIANS 5:8
32) EPHESIANS 5:9
33) EPHESIANS 5:10
34) EPHESIANS 5:11
35) EPHESIANS 5:12

36) EPHESIANS 5:15-16
37) EPHESIANS 6:13
38) EPHESIANS 6:14
39) EPHESIANS 6:14
40) EPHESIANS 6:15
41) EPHESIANS 6:16
42) EPHESIANS 6:17
43) EPHESIANS 6:18
44) EPHESIANS 6:23
45) EPHESIANS 6:24

1) Ephesians 1:1

Ephesians

SAINTS AND FAITHFUL

Eph. 1:1.

That is Paul’s way of describing a church. There were plenty of very imperfect Christians in the community at Ephesus and in the other Asiatic churches to which this letter went. As we know, there were heretics amongst them, and many others to whom the designation of ‘holy’ seemed inapplicable. But Paul classes them all under one category, and describes the whole body of believing people by these two words, which must always go together if either of them is truly applied, ‘saints’ and ‘faithful.’

Now I think that from this simple designation we may gather two or three very obvious indeed, and very familiar and old-fashioned, but also very important, thoughts.

I. A Christian is a saint.

We are accustomed to confine the word to persons who tower above their brethren in holiness and manifest godliness and devoutness. The New

Testament never does anything like that. Some people fancy that nobody can be a saint unless he wears a special uniform of certain conventional sanctities. The New Testament does not take that point of view at all, but regards all true believers in Jesus Christ as being, therein and thereby, saints.

Now, what does it mean by that? The word at bottom simply signifies separation. Whatever is told off from a mass for a specific purpose would be called, if it were a thing, 'holy.' But there is one special kind of separation which makes a person a saint, and that is separation to God, for His uses, in obedience to His commandment, that He may employ the man as He will. So in the Old Testament the designation 'holy' was applied quite as much to the high priest's mitre or to the sacrificial vessels of the Temple as it was to the people who used them. It did not imply originally, and in the first place, moral qualities at all, but simply that this person or that thing belonged to God. But then you cannot belong to God unless you are like Him. There can be no consecration to God except the heart is being purified. So the ordinary meaning of holiness, as moral purity and cleanness from sin, necessarily comes from the original meaning, separation and devotion to the service of God.

Thus we get the whole significance of Christian holiness. We are to belong to God, and to know that we do belong to Him. We are to be separated from the mass of people and things that have no consciousness of ownership and do not yield themselves up to Him for His use. But we cannot belong to Him, and be devoted to His service, unless we are being made day by day pure in heart, and like Him to whom we say that we belong. A human being can only be God's by the surrender of heart and will, and through the continual appropriation into his own character and life, of righteousness and purity like that which belongs to God. Holiness is God's stamp upon a man, His 'mark,' by which He says-This man belongs to Me. As you write your name in a book, so God writes His name on His property, and the name that He writes is the likeness of His own character.

Note, again, that in God's church there is no aristocracy of sanctity, nor does the name of saint belong only to those who live high above the ordinary tumults of life and the secularities of daily duty. You may be as true a saint in a factory-ay! and a far truer one-than in a hermitage. You do not need to cultivate a mediaeval or Roman Catholic type of ascetic piety in order to be called saints. You do not need to be amongst the select few to whom it is given here upon earth, but not given without their own effort, to rise to the highest summits of holy conformity with the divine will. But down amongst all the troubles and difficulties and engrossing occupations of our secular work, you may be living saintly lives; for the one condition of being holy is that we should know whose we are and whom we serve, and we can carry the consciousness of belonging to Him into every corner of the poorest, most crowded, and most distracted life, recognising His presence and seeking to do His will. The saint is the man who says, ‘O Lord, truly I am Thy servant; Thou hast loosed my bonds.’ Because He has loosed my bonds, the bonds that held me to my sins, He has therein fastened me with far more stringent bonds of love to the sweet and free service of His redeeming love. All His children are His saints.

The Old Testament ritual had one sacrifice which carried this truth in it. It is the first prescribed in the Book of Leviticus, the ceremonial book-namely, the burnt offering. Its especial meaning was this, that the whole man is to be laid upon God’s altar and there consumed in the fire of a divine love. It began with expiation, as all sacrifices must, and on the footing of expiation there followed the transformation, by the fire of God, from gross earthliness into vapour and odour which went up in wreaths of fragrance acceptable to God. So we are to be laid upon the divine altar. So, because we have been accepted in the Beloved, and have received the atonement for our sins through His great sacrifice, we are to be consecrated to His service and, touched by the fire which He sends down, we are to be changed into a sweet odour acceptable to Him as were ‘the saints which are in Ephesus.’

II. Further, Christian men are saints because they are believers.

‘The saints’ and ‘the faithful’ are not two sets of people, but one. The Apostle starts, as it were, on the surface, and goes down; takes off the uppermost layer and lets us see what is below it; begins with the flowers or the fruit, and then carries us to the root. The saints are saints because they are first of all faithful. ‘Faithful’ here, of course, does not mean, as it usually does in our ordinary language, ‘true’ and ‘trusty,’ ‘reliable’ and ‘keeping our word,’ but it means simply ‘believing’; having faith, not in the sense of fidelity, but in the sense of trust.

So, then, here is Paul’s notion-and it is not only Paul’s notion, it is God’s truth-that the only way by which a man ever comes to realise that he belongs to God, and to yield himself in glad surrender to His uses, and so to become pure and holy like Him whom He loves and aspires to, is by humble faith in Jesus Christ. If you want to talk in theological terminology, sanctification follows upon faith. It is when we believe and trust in Jesus Christ that all the great motives begin to tell upon life and heart, which deliver us from our selfishness, which bind us to God, which make it a joy to do anything for His service, which kindle in our hearts the flame of fructifying and consecrating and transforming love. Faith, the simple reliance of a desperate and therefore trusting heart upon Jesus Christ for all that it needs, is the foundation of the loftiest elevation and attainment of the Christian character. We begin down there that we may set the shining topstone of ‘Holiness to the Lord’ upon the heaven-pointing summit of our lives.

Note how here Paul sets forth the object of our faith and the blessedness of it. I do not think I am forcing too much meaning into his words when I ask you to notice with what distinct emphasis and intentional fulness he employs the double name of our Lord here to describe the object upon which our faith fixes, ‘Faithful in Christ Jesus.’ We must lay hold of the Manhood, and we must lay hold of the office. We must rest our soul’s salvation on Him as our brother, Jesus who was incarnate in sinful flesh for us; and we must also rest it on Him as God’s anointed, who came in human flesh to fulfil the divine loving-kindness and purposes, and in that flesh to die. A faith in a Jesus who was not a Christ would not sanctify; a faith in a Christ who is not Jesus would be impalpable and impotent. We must take the two together, believing and feeling that we lay hold upon a loving Man, ‘bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh’; and also upon Him who in His very humanity is the Messenger and Angel of God’s covenant; the Christ for whom the way has been being prepared from the beginning, and who has come to fulfil all the purposes of the divine heart.

And notice, too, how there is suggested here also, the blessedness of that faith, inasmuch as it is a faith in Christ. The New Testament speaks in diverse ways about the relation between the believing soul and Jesus Christ. It sometimes speaks of faith as being towards Him, and that suggests the going out of a hand that, as it were, stretches towards what it would lay hold of. It sometimes speaks of faith as being on Him, which suggests the idea of a building on its foundation, or a hand leaning on a support. And it sometimes speaks, as here, of faith being 'in Him,' which suggests the folded wings of the dove that has found its nest, the repose of faith, the quiet rest in the Lord, and 'waiting patiently for Him.' Such trust so directed is the one condition of such tranquillity. Then, again, note a Christian is all that he is because he is 'in Christ.' That phrase 'in Him' is in some sense the keynote of this Epistle to the Ephesians. If you will look over the letter, and pick out all the connections in which the expression 'in Him' occurs, I think you will be astonished to see how rich and full are its uses, and how manifold the blessings of which it is the condition. But the use which Paul makes of it here is just this-everything in our Christian life depends upon our being rooted and grafted in Jesus. Dear brethren, the main weakness, I believe, of what is called Evangelical Christianity has been that it has not always kept true to the proportionate prominence which the New Testament gives to the two thoughts, 'Christ for us,' and 'Christ in us.' For one sermon that you have heard which has dwelt earnestly and believingly on the thought of the indwelling Christ and the Christian indwelling in Him, you have heard a hundred about the Sacrifice on the Cross for sins, and the great atonement that was made by it. Those of you, who have listened to me from Sunday to Sunday, know that I am not to be charged with minimising or neglecting that truth, but I want to lay upon all your hearts this earnest conviction, that a gospel which throws into enormous prominence 'Christ for us,' and into very small prominence 'Christ in us,' is lame of one foot, is lopsided, untrue to the symmetry and proportion of the Gospel as it is revealed in the New Testament, and will never avail for the nourishment and maturity of Christian souls. 'Christ for us' by all means, and for evermore, but 'Christ in us,' or else He will not be 'for us.'

III. Lastly, a Christian may be a saint, and a believer, and in Christ Jesus, though he is in Ephesus.

Many of you know that probably the words ‘in Ephesus’ are no part of the original text of this epistle, which was apparently a circular letter, in which the designation of the various churches to which it was sent was left blank, to be filled in with the name of each little community to which Paul’s messenger from Rome carried it. The copy from which our text was taken had probably been delivered at Ephesus; and, at any rate, one of the copies would go there. What was Ephesus? Satan’s very headquarters and seat in Asia Minor, a focus of idolatry, superstition, wealth, luxury springing from commerce, and moral corruption. ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians.’ The books of Ephesus were a synonym for magical books. Many of us know how rotten to the core the society of that great city was. And there, on the dunghill, was this little garden of fragrant and flowering plants. They were ‘saints in Christ Jesus,’ though they were ‘saints in Ephesus.’

Never mind about surroundings. It is possible for us to keep ourselves in the love of God, and in the fellowship of His Son wherever we are, and whatever may lie around us. You and I have too to live in a big, wicked city, and to work out our religion in a society honeycombed with corruption, because of commerce and other influences. Do not let us forget that these people whom Paul called ‘saints’ and ‘faithful’ had a harder fight to wage than we have, with less to hearten and strengthen them in it. Only remember if the ‘saints in Ephesus’ are to be ‘in Christ,’ they need to keep themselves very straight up. The carbonic acid gas is heavy and goes down to the bottom of the cave, and if a man will walk bolt upright, he will keep his nostrils above it; but if he stoops, he will get down into it. Walk straight up, with your head erect, looking to the Master, and your respiratory organs will be above the poison. If we are to be in Christ when we are in Ephesus, we need to keep ourselves separate and faithful, and to keep ourselves in Christ. If the diver comes out of the diving-bell he is drowned. If he keeps inside its crystal walls he may be on the bottom of the ocean, but he is dry and safe. Keep in the fortress by loyal faith, by humble realisation of His presence, by continual effort, and ‘nothing shall by any means harm you,’ but ‘your lives shall be holy, being hid with Christ in God.’

2) Ephesians 1:3

‘ALL SPIRITUAL BLESSINGS’

Eph. 1:3

It is very characteristic of Paul’s impetuous fervour and exuberant faith that he begins this letter with a doxology, and plunges at once into the very heart of his theme. Colder natures reach such heights by slow degrees. He gains them at a bound, or rather, he dwells there always. Put a pen into his hand, and it is like tapping a blast furnace; and out rushes a fiery stream at white heat. But there is a great deal more than fervour in the words. In the rush of his thoughts there is depth and method. We come slowly after, and try by analysing and meditation to recover some of the fervour and the fire of such utterances as this.

Notice that buoyant, joyous, emphatic reiteration: ‘Blessed,’ ‘blest,’ ‘blessings.’ That is more than the fascination exercised over a man’s mind by a word; it covers very deep thoughts and goes very far into the centre of the Christian life. God blesses us by gifts; we bless Him by words. The aim of His act of blessing is to evoke in our hearts the love that praises. We receive first, and then, moved by His mercies, we give. Our highest response to His most precious gifts is that we shall ‘take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord,’ and in the depth of thankful and recipient hearts shall say, ‘Blessed be God who hath blessed us.’

Now I think that I shall best bring out the deep meaning of these words if I simply follow them as they lie before us. I do not wish to say anything about our echo in blessing God. I wish to speak about the original sweet sound, His blessing to us.

I. And I note, first of all, the character and the extent of these blessings which are the constituents of the Christian life.

‘All spiritual blessings,’ says the Apostle. Now, I am not going to weary you with mere exegetical remarks, but I do want to lay stress upon this, that, when the Apostle speaks about ‘spiritual blessings,’ he does not merely use that word ‘spiritual’ as defining the region in us in which the blessings are given, though that is also implied; but rather as pointing to the medium by which they are conferred. That is to say, he calls them 'spiritual,' not because they are, unlike material and outward blessings, gifts for the inner man, the true self, but because they are imparted to the waiting spirit by that Divine Spirit who communicates to men all the most precious things of God. They are 'spiritual' because the Holy Spirit is the medium of communication by which they reach men's spirits.

And I may just pause for one moment-and it shall only be for a moment-to point out to you how in-woven into the very texture of the writer's thoughts, and all the more emphatic because quite incidental, and needing to be looked for to be found, is here the evidence of his believing that the name of God was God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For it is the Father who is the Giver, the Son who is the Reservoir, the Spirit who is the Communicator, of these spiritual gifts. And I do not think that any man could have written these words of my text, the main purpose of which is altogether different to setting forth the mystery of the divine nature, unless he had believed in God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

But, apart altogether from that, let me remind you in one sentence of how the gifts which thus come to men by that Divine Spirit derive their characteristic quality from their very medium of communication. There are many other blessings for which we have to say, 'Blessed be God'; for all the gifts that come from 'the Father of Lights' are light, and everything that the Fountain of sweetness bestows upon mankind is sweet, but earthly blessings are but the shadow of blessing. They remain without us, and they pass. And if they were all for which we had to praise God, our praises had need to be often checked by sobs and tears, and often very doubtful and questioning. If there were none other but such, and if this poor life were all, then I do not think it would be true that it is

'better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all.'

It is but a quavering voice of praise, with many a sob between, that goes up to bless God for anything but spiritual blessings. Though it is true that all which comes from the Father of Lights is light, the sorrows and troubles that He sends have the light terribly muffled in darkness, and it needs strong faith and insight to pierce through the cloud to see the gleam of anything bright beneath. But when we turn to this other region, and think of what comes to every poor, tremulous, human heart, that likes to take it through that Divine Spirit-the forgiveness of sins, the rectification of errors, the purification of lusts and passions, the gleams of hope on the future, and the access with confidence into the standing and place of children; oh, then surely we can say, ‘Blessed be God for spiritual blessings.’

But if the word which defines may thus seem to limit, the other word which accompanies it sweeps away every limit; for it calls upon us to bless God for all spiritual blessings. That is to say, there is no gap in His gift. It is rounded and complete and perfect. Whatever a man’s needs may require, whatever his hopes can dream, whatever his wishes can stretch out towards, it is all here, compacted and complete. The spiritual gifts are encyclopaediacal and all-sufficient. They are not segments, but completed circles. When God gives He gives amply.

II. So much, then, for the first point; now, in the second place, note the one divine act by which all these blessings have been bestowed.

‘Blessed be God who has given’; or, still more definitely, pointing to some one specific moment and deed in which the benefaction was completed, ‘Blessed be God who gave.’

When? Well, ideally in the depths of His own eternal mind the gift was complete or ever the recipients were created to receive it, and historically the gift was complete in the act of redemption when He spared not His Own Son, but gave Him up unto the death for us all. A man may destine an estate for the benefit of some community which for generations long may continue to enjoy its benefits, but the gift is complete when he signs the deed that makes it over. Humphrey Chetham gave the boys in his school to-day their education when, centuries ago, he assigned his property to that beneficent purpose. So, away back in the mists of Eternity the gift was completed, and the signature was put to the deed when Jesus Christ was born, and the seal was added when Jesus Christ died. ‘Blessed be God who hath given.’

So, then, we may not only draw the conclusion which the Apostle drew, ‘how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?’ but we can draw an even grander one, ‘Has He not with Him also freely given us all things?’ And we possess them all to-day if our hearts are resting on Jesus Christ. The limit of the gift is only in ourselves. All has been given, but the question remains how much has been taken.

Oh, Christian men and women, there is nothing that we require more than to have what we have, to possess what is ours, to make our own what has been bestowed. You sometimes hear of some beggar, or private soldier, or farm labourer, who has come all at once into an estate that was his, years before he knew anything about it. There is such a boundless wealth belonging by right, and by the Giver’s gift, to every Christian soul; and yet, here are we, many of us, like the paupers who sometimes turn up in workhouses, all in rags, and with deposit-receipts for L200 or L300 stitched into the rags, that they get no good out of. Here are we, with all that wealth, paupers still. Be sure that you have what you have. Do you remember the exhortation to a valiant effort in one of the stories in the Old Testament-’Know ye that Ramoth-gilead is ours, and we take it not?’ And that is exactly what is true about hosts of professing Christians who have not, in any real sense, the possession of what God has given them. It is well to ask, for our desires are the measures of our capacities. It is well to ask, but we very often ask when what is wanted is not that we should get more, but that we should utilise what we have. And we make mistakes therein, as if God needed to be besought to give, when all the while it is we who need to be stirred up to grasp and keep the things that are freely given to us of God.

III. In the next place, notice the one place where all these blessings are kept.

‘Blessed be God who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places.’ ‘In heavenly places.’ Now that does not merely define the region of origin, the locality where they originated or whence they come. It does do that, but it does a great deal more. It does not merely tell us, as we often are disposed to think that it does, that ‘every good and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down’-though that is perfectly true, but it means much rather that in order to get the gift we must go up. They are in the heavenly places, and they cannot live anywhere else. They have been sticking shrubs in tubs outside our public buildings this last week. How long will they keep their leaves and their freshness? How soon will they need to be shifted and taken back again to the sweeter air, where they can flourish? God’s spiritual gifts cannot grow in smoke and dirt and a polluted atmosphere. And if a professing Christian man lives his life on the low levels he will have very few of the heavenly gifts coming down to him there. And that is the reason-the reason above all others-why, with such a large provision made for all possible necessities and longings of all sorts, people who call themselves Christians go up and down the world feeble and poor, and with little enjoyment of their religion, and having verified scarcely anything of the great promises which God has given them.

Brother, according to the old word with which the Mass used to begin, ‘Sursum corda’-up with your hearts! The blessings are in the heavens, and if we want them we must go where they are. It is not enough to drink sparing draughts from the stream as it flows through the plain. Travel up to the headwaters, where the great pure fountain is, that gushes out abundant and inexhaustible. The gifts are heavenly, and there they abide, and thither we must mount if we would possess them.

Now that this understanding of the words is correct I think is clearly shown by a verse in the next chapter, where we find the very same phrase employed. In this connection the Apostle says that ‘God hath raised us up together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.’ That is to say, the true ideal of the Christian life is that, even here and now, it is a life of such intimate union and incorporation with Jesus Christ as that where He is we are, and that even whilst we tabernacle upon earth and move about amongst its illusions and changing scenes, in the depth of our true being we may be fixed, and sit at rest with Christ where He is.

Do not dismiss that as mere pulpit rhetoric. Do not say that it is mystical and incomprehensible, and cannot be reduced into practice amidst the distractions of daily life. Brethren, it is not so! Jesus Christ Himself said about Himself that He came down from heaven, and that though He did, even whilst He wore the likeness of the flesh, and was one of us, He was ‘the Son of Man which is in Heaven,’ when He lay in the manger, when He worked at the carpenter’s bench in Nazareth, when He walked with weary feet those blessed acres, when He hung, for our advantage, on the bitter

Cross. And that was no incommunicable property of His mysterious nature, but it was the typical example of what it is possible for manhood to be. And you and I, if we are to possess in any measure corresponding with the gift of Christ the spiritual blessing which God bestows, must have our lives 'hid with Christ in God,' and sit together with Him in the heavenly places.

IV. Lastly, note the one Person in whom all spiritual blessings are enshrined.

'In the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.' You cannot separate between Him and His gifts, neither in the way of getting Him without them, nor in the way of getting them without Him. They are Himself, and in the deepest analysis all spiritual blessings are reducible to one-viz. that the Spirit of Jesus Christ Himself shall dwell with us.

Now, that union by which it is possible for poor, empty, sinful creatures to be filled with His fulness, animated with His life, strengthened with His omnipotence, and sanctified by His indwelling-that union is the very kernel of this Epistle to the Ephesians.

I dare say I have often drawn your attention to the singular emphasis and repetition with which that phrase 'in Christ' occurs throughout the letter. Just take the two or three instances of it that I gather as I speak. In this first chapter we read, 'the faithful in Jesus Christ.' Then comes our text, 'blessings in heavenly places in Christ.' Then, in the very next verse, we read, 'chosen us in Him.' Then, a verse or two after, we have 'accepted in the Beloved,' which is immediately followed by, 'in whom we have redemption through His blood.' Then, again, 'that He might gather together in one all things in Christ, in whom also we have obtained the inheritance.' I need not make other quotations, but throughout the letter every blessing that can gladden or sanctify the human spirit is regarded by the Apostle as being stored and shrined in Jesus Christ: inseparable from Him, and therefore to be found by us only in union with Him.

And that is the point of all which I want to say-viz. that, inasmuch as all spiritual blessings that a soul can need are hived in Him in whom is all sweetness, the way, and the only way, to get them is that we, too, should pass into Him and dwell in Jesus Christ. It is His own teaching: 'I am the

Vine, ye are the branches. Abide in Me. Separate from Me ye can do nothing,' and get nothing, and are nothing.

Oh, brethren! it is well that all our treasures should be in one place. It is better that they should all be in One Person. And if only we will lay our poor emptiness by the side of His fulness there will pass over from that infinite abundance and sufficiency everything that we can require.

We abide in Him by faith, by meditation, by love, by submission, by practical obedience, and, if we are wise, the effort of our lives will be to keep close to that Lord. As long as we keep touch with Him we have all and abound. Break the connection by wandering away, in thought and desire, by indulgence in sin, by letting earthly passions surge in and separate us from Him-break the connection by rebellion, by making ourselves our own ends and lords, and it is like switching off the electricity. Everything falls dead. You cannot have Christ's blessing unless you take Christ.

And so, dear brethren, 'abide in Me and I in you.' There is nothing else that will make us blessed; there is nothing else that will meet all the circumference of our necessities; there is nothing else that will quiet our hearts, will sanctify our understandings. Christ is yours if 'ye are Christ's.' 'Of His fulness have all we received,' for it all became ours when we became His, and Christian growth on earth and heaven is but the unfolding of the folded graces that are contained in Him. We possess the whole Christ, but eternity is needed to disclose all the unsearchable riches of our inheritance in Him.

3) Ephesians 1:5

EPHESIANS

ACCORDING TO'-I.

Eph. 1:5; Eph. 1:7.

That phrase, 'according to,' is one of the key-words of this profound epistle, which occurs over and over again, like a refrain. I reckon twelve instances of it in three chapters of the letter, and they all introduce one or other of the two thoughts which appear in the two fragments that I have taken for my text. They either point out how the great blessings of Christ's mission have underlying them the divine purpose, or they point out how the process of the Christian life in the individual has for its source and measure the abundances, the wealth of the grace and the power of God. So in both aspects the facts of earth are traced up to, and declared to be, the outcome of the heavenly depths, and that gives solemnity, grandeur, elevation, to this epistle all its own. We are carried, as it were, away up into the recesses of the mountains of God, and we look down upon the unruffled, mysterious, deep lake, from which come the rivers that water all the plains beneath.

Now of these two types of reference to the divine will and the divine wealth, I should like to gather together the instances, as they occur in this letter, in so far as I can, in the course of a sermon, touching them, it must be, very imperfectly. But I fear that it is impossible to deal with both the phases of this 'according to,' in one discourse. So I confine myself to that which is suggested by the first of our two texts, in the hope that some other day we may be able to overtake the other. So then, we have set before us here the Christian thought of the divine will which underlies, and therefore is manifest by, the work of Jesus Christ, in its whole sweep and breadth. And I just take up the various instances in which this expression occurs in a great variety of forms, but all retaining substantially the same meaning.

I. Note that that divine will which underlies and is operative in, and therefore is certified to us by the whole work of Jesus Christ, in its facts and its consequences, is a 'good pleasure.'

Now there are few thoughts which the history of the world has shown to be more productive of iron and steel in the human character than that of the sovereign will of God. That made Islam, and is the secret of its power to-day, amidst its many corruptions. Because these wild desert tribes were all stiffened, or I might say inflamed, by that profound conviction, the sovereign will of God, they came down like a hammer upon that corrupt so-called Christian Church, and swept it off the face of the earth, as it deserved to be swept. And the same thought of the sovereign will, of which we are but instruments-pawns on its chessboard-made the grand seventeenth century Puritanism in England, and its sister type of men and of religion in

Holland. For this is a historically proved thesis, that there is nothing which so contributes to the formation, and valuation of, and the readiness to die for, civil liberty, as the firm grasp of that thought of the divine sovereignty. Just because a man realises that the will of God is supreme over all the earth, he rebels against all forms of human despotism.

But with all the good that is in that great thought-and the Christianity of this day sorely wants the strength that might be given it by the exhibition of that steel medicine-it wants another, ‘the good pleasure of His will.’ And that word, ‘good pleasure,’ does not express, as I think, in Paul’s usage of it, the simple notion of sovereignty, but always the notion of a benevolent sovereignty. It is ‘the good pleasure’-as it is put in another place by the same Apostle-’of His goodness.’ And that thought, let in upon the solemnity and severity of the other one, is all that it needs in order to make the man who grasps it not only a hero in conflict, and a patient martyr in endurance, but a child in his Father’s house, rejoicing in the love of his Father everywhere and always.

Paul would have us believe that if we will take the work of Jesus Christ in the facts of His life, and its results upon humanity, as our horn-book and lesson, we shall draw from that some conceptions of the great thing that underlies it, ‘the good pleasure of His will.’ We stand in front of this complex universe, and some of us say: ‘Law’; and some of us say: ‘A Lawgiver behind the law; a Person at the heart of all things’; but unless we can say: ‘And in the heart of the Person a will, which is the expression of a steadfast, omnipotent love,’ then the world seems to me to be a place of unsolvable riddles and a torture-house. There goes the great steam-roller along the road. Everybody can see that it crushes down, and makes its own path. Who drives it? The steam in the boiler, or is there a hand on the lever? And what drives the hand? Christianity answers, and answers with unfaltering lip, rising clear above contradictions apparent and difficulties real, ‘The good pleasure of His will,’ and there men can rest.

Then there is another step. Another form in which this ‘according to’ appears in this letter is, if we adopt the rendering, which I am disposed to do in the present case, of the Authorised Version rather than of the Revised, ‘according to His good pleasure ... which He hath purposed in Himself.’

The Revised Version says, ‘Which He hath purposed in Him,’ and that is a perfectly possible rendering. But to me the old one is not only more eloquent, but more in accordance with the connection. So I venture to accept it without further ado-’His good pleasure which He hath purposed in Himself.’

That brings us into the presence of that same great thought, which in another aspect is expressed in saying ‘His name is Jehovah,’ and in yet another aspect is expressed in saying ‘God is love,’ viz. the thought which sounds familiar, but which has in it depths of strength and illumination and joy, if we rightly ponder it, that, to use human words, the motive of the divine action is all found within the divine nature.

We love one another because we discern, or think we discern, lovable qualities in the being on whom our love falls. God loves because He is God. That great artesian fountain wells up from the depths, by its own sweet impulse, and pours itself out; and ‘the good pleasure of His goodness’ has no other explanation than that it is His nature and property to be merciful. And so, dear brethren, we get clean past what has sometimes been the misapprehension of good people, and has oftener been the caricatured representation of Evangelical truth which its enemies have put forth-that God was made to love and pity by reason of the sacrifice of the Son, whereas the very opposite is the case. God loves, therefore He sent His Son, ‘that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life,’ and the notion of the Cross of Christ as changing the divine heart is as far away from Evangelical truth as it is from the natural conceptions that men form of the divine nature. We shake hands with our so-called antagonists and say, ‘Yes! we believe as much as you do that God does not love us because Christ died, but we believe what perhaps you do not, that Christ died because God loves us, and would save us.’ ‘The good pleasure which He hath purposed in Himself.’

Then, still further, there is another aspect of this same divine will brought out in other parts of this letter, of which this is a specimen, ‘Having made known unto us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He hath purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fulness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ,’ which, being turned into more modern phraseology, is just this-that the great aim of that divine sovereign will, self-originated, full of loving-kindness to the world, is to manifest to all men what God is, that all men may know Him for what He is, and thereby be drawn back again, and grouped in peaceful unity round His Son, Jesus Christ. That is the intention which is deepest in the divine heart, the desire which God has most for every one of us. And when the Old Testament tells us that the great motive of the divine action is for 'My own Name's sake,' that expression might be so regarded as to disclose an ugly despot, who only wants to be reverenced by abject and submissive subjects. But what it really means is this, that the divine love which hovers over its poor, prodigal children because it is love, and, therefore, lovingly delights in a loving recognition and response, desires most of all that all the wanderers should see the light, and that every soul of man should be able to whisper, with loving heart, the name, 'Abba! Father!' Is not that an uplifting thought as being the dominant motive which puts in action the whole of the divine activity? God created in order that He might fling His light upon creatures, who should thereby be glad. And God has redeemed in order that in Jesus Christ we might see Him, and, seeing Him, be at rest, and begin to grow like Him. This is the aim, 'That they might know Thee, the only true God ... whom to know is eternal life.' And so self-communication and self-revelation is the very central mystery of the will.

But that is not all. Another of the forms in which this phrase occurs tells us that that great purpose, the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord, was that, 'Now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known' by the Church 'the manifold wisdom of God.' And so we get another thought, that that whole work of redemption, operated by the Incarnation, and culminating in the Crucifixion and Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ, stands as being the means by which other orders of creatures, besides ourselves, learn to know 'the manifold wisdom of God.' According to the grand old saying, at Creation the 'morning stars sang together for joy.' All spiritual creatures, be they 'higher' or 'lower,' can only know God by the observation of His acts.

"Twas great to speak a world from nought,
'Tis greater to redeem,'

and the same angelic lips that sang these praises on the morning of Creation have learnt a new song that they sing; ‘Glory and honour and dominion and power be unto the Lamb that was slain.’

Thus to principalities and powers, a diviner height in the loftiness, and a diviner depth in the condescension, and a diviner tenderness in the love, and a diviner energy in the power, of the redeeming God have been made known, and this is the thought of His eternal purpose. And that brings me to another point which is involved in the words that I have just quoted, which stand in connection with those that I have previously referred to. The phrase ‘eternal purpose’ literally rendered is, ‘the purpose of the ages,’ and that, no doubt, may mean ‘eternal’ in the sense of running on through all the ages; or it may mean, perhaps, that which we usually attach to the word ‘eternal,’ viz. unbeginning and unending. I take the former meaning as the more probable one, that the Apostle contemplates that great will of God which culminates in Jesus Christ, as coming solemnly sweeping through all the epochs of time from the beginning. In a deeper sense than the poet meant it, ‘Through the ages an increasing purpose runs,’ and that binds the epochs of humanity together-’the purpose of God in Christ Jesus.’ The philosophy of history lies there, and it is a true instinct that makes the cradle at Bethlehem the pivot around which the world’s chronology revolves. For the deepest thing about all the ages on the further side of it is that they are ‘Before Christ,’ and the formative fact for all the ages after it is that they are Anno Domini.

And now the last thing that is suggested by yet another of these eloquent expressions is deduced from another part of the same phrase. The purpose of the ages is described as that which ‘He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ Now the word ‘purposed’ literally is ‘made.’ And it may be a question whether ‘purposed’ or ‘accomplished’ is the special meaning to be attached to the general word ‘made.’ Either is legitimate. I take it that what the Apostle means here is that the purpose of God, which we have thus seen as sovereign, self-originated, having for its great aim the communication to all His creatures of the knowledge of Himself, and running through the ages, and binding them into a unity, reaches its entire accomplishment in the Cradle, and the Cross, and the Throne of Jesus Christ our Lord.

He fulfils the divine intention. There is that one life, and in that life alone of humanity you have a character which is in entire sympathy with the divine mind, which is in full possession of the divine truth, which never diverges or deviates by a hair's-breadth from the divine will, which is the complete and perfect exponent to man of the divine heart and character; and that Christ is the fulfilment of all that God desired in the depths of eternity, and the abysses of His being. Did He will that men should know Him? Christ has declared Him. Did He will that men should be drawn back to Him? Christ lifted on the Cross draws all men unto Him. Was it 'according to the good pleasure of His goodness' that we men should attain to the adoption of sons? By that Son we too became sons. Was it the purpose of His will that we should obtain an 'inheritance'? We obtain it in Jesus Christ, 'being heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.' All that God willed to do is done. And when we look, on the one hand, up to that infinite purpose, and on the other, to the Cross, we hear from the dying lips, 'It is finished!' The purpose of the ages is accomplished in Christ Jesus.

Is it accomplished with you? I have been speaking about the divine counsel which is a 'good pleasure,' which runs through the whole history of mankind. But it is a divine purpose that you can thwart as far as you are concerned. 'How often would I have gathered ... and ye would not,' and your 'would not' neutralises His 'would.' Do not stand in the way of the steam-roller. You cannot stop it, but it can crush you. Do not have Him say about you, 'In vain have I smitten, in vain have I loved.' Bow, accept, recognise that all God's armoury is brought to bear upon each of us in that great Cross and Passion, in that great Incarnation and human life. And I beseech you, in your hearts, let the will of God be done even as for a world it has been done by the sacrifice of Calvary.

4) Ephesians 1:7

EPHESIANS

ACCORDING TO'-II.

Eph. 1:7.

We have seen, in a previous sermon, that a characteristic note of this letter is the frequent occurrence of that phrase ‘according to.’ I also then pointed out that it was employed in two different directions. One class of passages, with which I then tried to deal, used it to compare the divine purpose in our salvation with the historical process of the salvation. The type of that class of reference is found in a verse just before my text, ‘according to the good pleasure of His will.’ There is a second class of passages to which our text belongs, where the comparison is not between the purpose and its realisation, but between the stores of the divine riches and the experiences of the Christian life. The one set of passages suggests the ground of our salvation in the deep purpose of God; the other suggests the measure of the power which is working out that salvation.

The instances of this second use of the phrase, besides the one in my text, ‘according to the riches of His grace,’ are such as these: ‘According to the riches of His glory’; ‘According to the power that worketh in us’; ‘According to the measure of the gift of Christ’; ‘According to the energy of the might of His power, which He wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead.’

Now it is clear that all these are varying forms of the same thing. They vary in form, they are identical in substance. What a Jew calls a ‘cubit’ an Englishman calls a ‘foot,’ but the result is pretty nearly the same. Shillings, marks, francs, are various standards; they all come to substantially the same result. These varying measures of the divine gift which is at work in man’s salvation, have this in common, that they all run out into God’s immeasurable, unlimited power, boundless wealth. And so, if we gather them together, and try to focus them in a few words, they may help to widen our conceptions of what we ought to expect from God, to bow us in contrition as to the small use that we have made of it, and to open our desires wide, that they may be filled.

I only aspire, then, to deal with these four forms which I have already suggested.

I. The measure of our possible attainments is the whole wealth of God.

‘According to the riches of His grace.’ Another angle at which the same thought is viewed appears in another part of the letter, where we have this variation in the expression, ‘According to the riches of His glory.’ ‘Grace’ and ‘Glory’ are generally opposed antithetically; in this epistle they are united, for in the verse before my text I:read: ‘To the praise of the glory of His grace.’ So the first thought is, the whole wealth of God is available for every Christian soul.

Now it seems to me that there are very few things that the popular Christianity of this day needs more than a furnishing up of the familiar old Christian terminology, which has largely lost the freshness and the power that it once had. They tell us that these incandescent burners, that we are using nowadays, are very much more bright when they are first fixed than after the mantle gets a little worn. So it is with the terminology of Christianity. It needs to be re-stated, not in such a way as to take the pith out of it, which is what a great deal of the modern craze for re-statement means, but in such a way as to brighten it up again, and to invest it with something of the ‘celestial light’ with which it was ‘apparelled’ when it first came. Now that word ‘grace,’ I have no doubt, sounds to you hard, theological, remote. But what does it mean? It gathers into one burning point the whole of the rays of that conception of God, with which it is the glory of Christianity to have flooded and drenched the world. It tells us that at the heart of the universe there is a heart; that God is Love, that that love is the motive-spring of His activity, that it comes and bends over the lowliest with a smile of amity on its lips, with healing and help in its hands, with forgiveness for all sins against itself, with boundless wealth for the poorest, and that the wealth of His self-communicating love is the measure of the wealth that each of us may possess.

God gives ‘according to the riches of His grace.’ You do not expect a millionaire to give half-a-crown to a subscription fund; and God gives royally, divinely, measuring His bestowments by the abundance of His treasures, and handing over with an open palm large gifts of coined money, because there are infinite chests of uncirculated bullion in the deep storehouses. ‘How great is Thy goodness which Thou hast manifested before the sons of men for them that fear Thee. How much greater is Thy goodness which Thou hast laid up in store.’ But whilst He gives all, the question comes to be: What do I receive? The measure of His gift is His measureless grace; the measure of my reception is my-alas! easily-measured faith. What about the unearned increment? What about the unrealised wealth? Too many of us are like some man who has a great estate in another land. He knows nothing about it, and is living in grimy poverty in a back street. For you have all God's riches waiting for you, and 'the potentiality of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice' at your beck and call, and yet you are but poorly realising your possible riches. Alas, that when we might have so much we do have so little. 'According to the riches of His grace' He gives. But another 'according to' comes in. 'According to thy faith be it unto thee.' So we have to take these two measures together, and the working limit of our possession of God's riches comes out of the combination of them both.

Let me remind you, before I pass on, of what I have already suggested is but another phase of this same thought, Paul says in this epistle that God gives not only 'according to the riches of His grace,' but 'according to the riches of His glory,' and that the latter expression is substantially identical with the former, is plain from the combination of the two in an earlier verse of this chapter: 'To the praise of the glory of His grace.' Thus we come to the blessed thought that the glory of God is essentially the revelation of that stooping, pitying, pardoning, enriching love. Not in the physical attributes, not in the characteristics of the divine nature which part Him off from men, and make Him remote, both from their conceptions and their affections, but in the love that bends to them is the true glory of God. All these other things are but the fringes; the centre of glory is the Love, which is the mightiest and the divinest thing in the Might Divine. The sunshine is far stronger than the lightning, and there is more force developed in the rain than in an earthquake. That truth is what Christianity has made the common possession of the world. It has thereby broken the chains of dread; it has bridged over the infinite distance. It has given us a God that can love and be loved, can stoop and can lift, can pardon and can purify. 'According to the good pleasure of His goodness,'-there is the foundation of our salvation. 'According to the riches of His grace,'-there is the measure of our salvation.

II. We have another form of the same measure in another set of verses which speak of the present working of God's power.

The Apostle speaks in regard to his own apostolic commission of its being given ‘according to the working of His power’; and he speaks of all Christian men as receiving gifts ‘according to the power that worketh in us.’ So there we have a standard that comes, as it were, a little closer to ourselves. We do not need to travel up into the dim abysses above, or think of the sanctities and the secrecies of that divine heart in the light which is inaccessible, but we have the measure in ourselves.

The standards of length are kept at Greenwich, the standards of capacity are kept in the Tower; but there are local standards distributed throughout the land to which men may go and have their measures corrected. And so besides all these lofty thoughts about the grace and the glory which measures His gift, we can turn within, if we are Christian people, and say, ‘According to the power that worketh in us.’

Ah, brethren! there are few things that we want more than to revive and deepen the conviction that in every Christian man, by virtue of his faith, and in proportion to his faith, there is in operation an actual, superhuman, divine power moulding his nature, guiding, quickening, ennobling, lifting, confirming, and hallowing and shaping him into conformity with Jesus Christ. I would that we all believed not as a dogma, but realised as a personal experience, that irrefragable truth, ‘Know ye not that the Spirit of Christ dwelleth in you, except ye be reprobate?’ The life of self is evil; the life of Christ in self is good, and only good. And if you are Christian men, and in the proportion, as I have said, in which you are living by faith, you have working in your spirits the very Spirit of Christ Himself.

And that power is the measure of your possibilities. Obviously ‘the power that worketh in us’ is able to do a great deal more than it is doing in any of us. And so with deep significance the Apostle, side by side with his adducing of this power as being the measure of our possible attainments, speaks about God as being ‘able to do for us, exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think.’ ‘The power that works in us’ transcends in its possibilities our present experience, it transcends our conceptions, it transcends our desires. It is able to do everything; it actually does-well, you know what it does in you. And the responsibility of hampering and hindering that power from working out its only adequately corresponding results lies at our own doors. ‘A rushing, mighty wind’-yes; and in myself a scarcely perceptible breathing, and often a dead calm, stagnant as in the latitudes on either side of the Equator, where, for long, dreary days, no freshening motion in the atmosphere is perceptible. ‘A fire?’-yes; then why is my grate full of grey, cold ashes, and one little spark in the corner? ‘A fountain springing into everlasting life?’-yes; then why in my basin is there so much scum and ooze, mud and defilement, and so little of the flashing and brilliant water? ‘The power that works in us’ is sorely hindered by the weakness in which it works.

III. In the third place another form of this measure is stated by the Apostle, ‘According to the measure of the gift of Christ.’

That means, of course, the gift which Christ bestows. It is substantially the same idea as I have just been dealing with, only looked at from rather a different point of view. Therefore, I need not dwell upon its parallelism with what has just been occupying our attention, but rather ask you simply to consider one point in reference to it, and that is that, side by side with the reference to the gift of Christ as being the measure of our possible attainments, the Apostle enlarges on the Infinite variety of the shapes which that one gift takes in different people. ‘He gave some apostles, some prophets,’ etc.; one man receiving according to this fashion, and another according to that, and to each of us the distribution is made ‘according to the measure of the gift of Christ.’ That is to say, it takes us all, the collective goodness and beauty of the whole community of saints, to approximate to the fulness of that gift, and all are needed in their different types and forms of excellence, sanctity and beauty, in order to set forth, even imperfectly, the richness and the manifoldness of His great gift. And so ‘we all come’-there is a multiplicity-’unto the perfect man, the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’-there is a unity in which the multiplicity inheres.

So try to get a little more of some different type of excellence than that to which you are naturally inclined. Seek, and consciously endeavour, to appropriate into your character uncongenial excellences, and be very charitable in your judgments of the different types of Christian conformity to Christ our Lord. The crystals that are set round a light do not quarrel with each other as to whether green, or yellow, or blue, or red, or violet is the true colour to reflect. We need all the seven prismatic tints to make the perfect white light. The gift of Christ is many-sided; try not to be one-sided in your reception of it.

IV. And now the last form of this measure is ‘according to the energy of the might of His power, which He wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead.’

When we gazed upon the riches of God’s grace, they were high above us, when we looked upon ‘the power that worketh in us,’ we saw it working amidst many hindrances and hamperings, but here there is presented to us in a concrete example, close beside us, of what God can make of a man when the man is wholly pliable to His will, and the recipient of His influences. And so there stands before us the guarantee and the pattern of immortal life, the Christ whose Manhood died and lives, who is clothed with a spiritual body, who wields royal authority in the Kingdom of the Most High. And that is the measure of what God can do with me, and wishes to do with me, if I will let Him. Christ is my pattern, and the measure of my own possibilities.

To be with Him, where and what He is, is the only adequate result of the power that works in us, and of the process that is already begun in us, if we are Christian people. You are sometimes-there is one eminent example of it in that great Medicean Chapel at Florence-a statue exquisitely finished in all its limbs, but one part left in the rough. That is the best that Christian people come to here. Shall it always be so? Do not the very imperfections prophesy completion, and is it not certain that the half-finished torso will be carried to the upper workshop, and be there disengaged from the dead marble and made to stand out in perfect beauty and fullest completeness? Christ is the object of our hopes, and no hopes of the Christian life are adequate to the power that works in us, or to the progress already made, which do not see in the ‘energy of the might of the power’ which wrought in Christ, the example and the guarantee of the exceeding greatness of ‘His power which is to usward.’

And now, one last word. Besides all these passages which have been occupying us, there is another use of this same phrase in this letter which presents a very solemn and grim contrast. I can do no better with it than simply read it: ‘Ye were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh’-mark the allusion to the other words that we have been referring to-’in the children of disobedience.’ So there you have the alternative, either ‘dead in trespasses and sins,’ whilst living the physical and the intellectual life, or partaking of the life of Him ‘who was dead, and is alive for ever more’; either ‘walking according to the course of this world,’ which is ‘disobedience’ and ‘wrath,’ or walking ‘according to the power that worketh in us’; either ‘putting on,’ or rather continuing to wear, ‘the old man which is corrupt according to the lusts which deceive,’ or ‘putting on the new man, which according to God is created in righteousness and holiness and truth.’ The choice is before us. May God help us to choose aright!

5) Ephesians 1:11

EPHESIANS

GOD’S INHERITANCE AND OURS

Eph. 1:11

A dewdrop twinkles into green and gold as the sunlight falls on it. A diamond flashes many colours as its facets catch the light. So, in this context, the Apostle seems to be haunted with that thought of ‘inheriting’ and ‘inheritance,’ and he recurs to it several times, but sets it at different angles, and it flashes back different beauties of radiance. For the words, which I have wrenched from their context in the first of these two verses, are more accurately rendered, as in the Revised Version, in ‘whom also we were made,’ not ‘have obtained’-’an inheritance.’ Whose inheritance? God’s! The Christian community is God’s possession. Then, in my second text, we have the converse thought-’the earnest of our inheritance.’ What is the Christian’s possession? The same God whose possession is the Christian. So, then, there is a deep and a wonderful relation between the believing soul and God, and however different must be the two sides of that relation, the resemblance is greater than the difference. Surely that is the deepest, most blessed, and most strength-giving conception of the Christian life. Other notions of it lay stress, and that rightly, upon certain correspondence between us and God. My faith corresponds to His faithfulness and veracity. My obedience corresponds to His authority. My weakness lays hold on His strength. My emptiness is replenished by His fulness. But here we rise above the region of correspondences into that of similarity. In these other aspects the convexity fits the concavity; in this aspect the two hemispheres go together and make the complete globe. We possess God, and God possesses us, and it is the same set of facts which are set forth in the two thoughts, ‘We were made an inheritance, ... the earnest of our inheritance.’

I. Now, then, let me ask you to look first at this mutual possession.

We possess God; God possesses us. What does that mean? Well, it means plainly and chiefly this, a mutual love. For we all know-and many of us thankfully can bear witness to the truth of it in our earthly relationships,- that the one way by which a human spirit can possess a spirit is by the sweet mutual love which abolishes ‘mine’ and ‘thine,’ and all but abolishes ‘me’ and ‘thee.’ And so God sets little store by the ownership which depends on divinity and creation, though, of course, that relation brings with it a duty. As the old psalm has it, ‘It is He that hath made us, and we are His’; still, such a relationship as this, based upon the connection that subsists between the Maker and the work of His hands, is so purely external, and harsh, and superficial, that God does not reckon it to be a possession at all.

You perhaps remember how, in the great word which underlies all these New Testament conceptions of God’s ownership of His people, viz. the charter that constituted Israel into a nation, He said, ‘Ye shall be unto Me a people for a possession above all nations, for all the earth is Mine.’ And yet, though that ownership and mastership extended over everything that His hands had made, He-if I might so say-contemned it, and relegated it to a secondary position, and told the people that His heart hungered for something deeper, more real, more vital than such a possession, and that therefore, just because all the earth was His, and that was not enough to satisfy His heart, He took them and made them a peculiar treasure above all nations. We have, then, to think of that great Divine Love which possesses us when He loves us, and when we love Him.

But remember that of this sweet commerce and reverberation of love which constitutes possession, the origination must be in His heart. ‘We love Him because He first loved us.’ The mirrors are set all round the great hall, but their surfaces are cold and lifeless until the great candelabrum in the centre is lit, and then, from every polished sheet there flashes back an echoing, answering light, and they repeat and repeat, until you scarce can tell which is the original and which is the reflection. But quench the centre-light, and the daughter-radiances vanish into darkness. The love on either side is on one side spontaneous and underived, and on the other side is secondary and evoked, but it is love on both sides. His possession of us is, as it were, the upper side, and our possession of Him is, as it were, the underside of the one golden bond. It matters not whether you look at the stream with your face to its source or with your face to its mouth, the silvery plain is the same; and the deepest tie that knits men to God is the same as the tie that knits God to men. There is mutual possession because there is mutual love.

Then again, in this same thought of mutual possession there lies a mutual surrender. For to give is the life-breath of all true love, and there is nothing which the loving heart more desires than to be able to pour itself out-much rather than any subordinate gifts-on its object. But that, if it is one-sided, is misery, and only when it is reciprocal, is it blessed. God gives Himself to us, as we know, most chiefly in that unspeakable gift of His Son, and we possess Him by virtue of His self-communication which depends upon His love. And then we possess Him, and He possesses us, not less by the answering surrender of ourselves, which is the expression of our love. No love subsists if it is only recipient; no love subsists if it is only communicated. Exports and imports must both be realised in this sweet commerce, and we enrich ourselves far more by what we give to the Beloved than by what we keep for ourselves.

The last, the hardest thing to surrender, is our own wills. To give them up by constraint is slavery that degrades. To give them up because we love is a sacrifice which sanctifies, even in the lowest reaches of daily life. And the love that knits us to God is not invested with all its blessed possession of

Him, until it has surrendered its will, and said, ‘Not as I will, but as Thou wilt.’ The traveller in the old fable gathered his cloak around him all the more closely, and held it the more tightly, because of the tempest that blew, but when the warm sunbeams fell he dropped it. He that would coerce my will, stiffens it into rebellion; but when a beloved one says, ‘Though I might be much bold to enjoin thee, yet for love’s sake I rather beseech,’ then yielding is blessedness, and the giving ourselves away is the finding of God and ourselves.

I need not touch, in more than a word, upon another aspect of this mutual possession, brought into view lovingly in many parts of Scripture, and that is that there is in it not only mutual love and mutual surrender, but mutual indwelling, ‘He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.’ Jesus Christ has said the same thing to us, ‘I am the Vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in Me bringeth forth much fruit.’ We dwell in God, possessing Him; He dwells in us, possessing us. We dwell in God, being possessed by Him. He dwells in us, being possessed by us. And He moves in the heart that loves, as the Master walking through His house, as the divinity is present in the temple, and as the soul permeates the body, and is sight in the eye and colour in the cheek, and force in the arm, and deftness in the finger, and swiftness in the foot. So the indwelling God breathes through all the capacities, and all the desires, and all the needs of the soul which He inhabits, and makes them all blessed. The very same set of facts-the presence of a divine life in the life of the believing spirit-may either be looked at from the lower end, and then they are that I possess God, and find in Him the nutriment and the stimulus for all my being, or may be looked at from the upper end, that He possesses me and finds in me capacities and a nature the emptiness of which He fills, and organs which He uses. In both cases mutual love, mutual surrender, mutual inhabitation, make up God’s possession of me and my possession of God.

II. And now let me point you in a very few words to some of the plain, practical issues of this mutual possession.

God’s possession of us demands our consecration. ‘Ye are not your own, ye are bought with a price,’ therefore, to live for self is to fly in the face of the very purpose of Christ’s mission and of God’s communication of Himself to us. There are slaves who run away from their masters and ‘deny the Lord that bought them.’ We do that whenever, being God’s slaves, we set up anything else than His will as our law, or anything else than His glory as the aim of our lives. To live for self is to die, to die to self is to live. And the solemn obligations of that most blessed possession by God of us are as solemn as the possession is blessed, and can only be discharged when we turn to Him, and yield the whole control of our nature to His merciful hand, believing that He has not only the right to dispose of us, but that His disposition of us will always coincide with our sanest conceptions of good, and our wisest desires for happiness. Yield yourselves to God, for He has yielded Himself to you, and in the yielding we realise our largest and most blessed possession. It is a good bargain to give myself and to get God.

God’s possession of us not only demands consecration, but it ensures safety. Remember that great word, ‘No man is able to pluck them out of My Father’s hand.’ God is not a careless owner who leaves His treasures to be blown by every wind, or filched by every petty robber. He is not like the king of some decrepit monarchy, slices of whose territory his neighbours are for ever paring off and annexing. What God has God preserves. ‘He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.’ ‘They are Mine, saith the Lord, My jewels in the day which I make.’ But our security depends on our consecration. ‘No man is able to pluck them out of My Father’s hand.’ No! But you can wriggle yourself out of your Father’s hand, if you will. And the security avails only so long as you realise that you belong to God, and are living not for yourself.

Possessing God we are rich. There is nothing that is truly our wealth which remains outside of us, and can be separated from us. ‘Shrouds have no pockets,’ says the Spanish proverb. ‘His glory shall not descend after him,’ says the grim psalm. But if God possesses me He is not going to let His treasures be lost in the grave. And if I possess Him then I shall pass through death as a beam of light does through some denser medium-a little refracted indeed, but not broken up; and I shall carry with me all my wealth to begin another world with. And that is more than you can do with the money that you make here. If you have God, you have the capital to commence a new condition of things beyond the grave.

And so that mutual possession is the real pledge of immortal life, for nothing can be more incredible than that a soul which has risen to have God for its very own, and has bowed itself to accept God's ownership of it, can be affected by such a transient and physical incident as what we call death. We rise to the assurance of immortality because we have an inheritance which is God Himself. And in that inexhaustible Inheritance there lies the guarantee that we shall live while He lives, because He lives, and until we have incorporated into our lives all the majesty and the purity and the wisdom and the power that belong to us because they are God's.

But we have to notice the two words that lie at the beginning of our first text-'In whom we were made an inheritance.' That opens up the whole question of the means by which this mutual possession becomes possible for us men. Jesus Christ has died. That breaks the bondage under which the whole world is held. For the true slavery which interferes with the free service and the full possession of God is the slavery of self and sin. Jesus Christ has died. 'If the Son make you free ye shall be free indeed.' That great sacrifice not only 'breaks the power of cancelled sin,' but it also moves the heart, in the measure in which we truly accept it, to the love and the surrender which make the mutual possession of which we have been speaking. And so it is in Him that we become an Inheritance, that God comes to His rights in regard to each of us. And it is in Him that we, trusting the Son, have the inheritance for ours, and 'are heirs with God, and joint heirs with Christ.' So, dear friends, if we would 'be meet for the inheritance of the saints in light,' we must unite ourselves to that Lord by faith, and through Him and faith in Him, we shall receive 'the remission of sins and inheritance among all them that are sanctified.'

6) Ephesians 1:14

EPHESIANS

THE EARNEST AND THE INHERITANCE

Eph. 1:14

I have dealt with a portion of this verse in conjunction with the fragment of another in this chapter. I tried to show you how much the idea of the mutual possession of God by the believing soul, and of the believing soul by God, was present to the Apostle's thoughts in this context. These two ideas are brought into close juxtaposition in the verse before us, for, as you will see if you use the Revised Version, the latter clause is there rightly paraphrased by the addition of a supplement, and reads 'until the redemption of God's own possession.' So that in the first clause we have 'our inheritance,' and in the second we have 'God's possession.' This double idea, however, has appended to it in this verse some very striking and important thoughts. The possession of both sides is regarded as incomplete, for what we have is the 'earnest' of the 'inheritance,' and 'God's own possession' has yet to be 'redeemed,' in the fullest sense of that word, at some point in the future. An 'earnest' is a fraction of an inheritance, or of a sum hereafter to be paid, and is the guarantee and pledge that the whole shall one day be handed over to the man who has received the foretaste of it in the 'earnest.' The soldier's shilling, the ploughman's 'arles,' the clod of earth and tuft of grass which, in some forms of transfer, were handed over to the purchaser, were all the guarantee that the rest was going to come. So the great future is sealed to us by the small present and the experiences of the Christian life to-day, imperfect, fragmentary, defective as they are, are the best prophecy and the most glorious pledge of that great to-morrow. The same law of continuity which, in application to our characters, and our work, and our daily life, makes 'to-morrow as this day, and much more abundant,' in its application to the future life makes the life here its parent, and the life yonder the prolongation and the raising to its highest power, of what is the main though often impeded tendency and direction of the present. The earnest of the 'inheritance' is the pledge until the full redemption of 'God's own possession.' I wish, then, to draw attention to these additional thoughts which are here attached to the main idea with which we were dealing in the last sermon.

I. And I ask you to look with me, first, at the incompleteness of the present possession.

I tried to show in my last sermon how those great thoughts of God's having us, and our having God, rested upon the three ideas of mutual love, mutual communication, and mutual indwelling. On His side the love, the impartation, the indwelling, are all perfect. On our side they are incomplete, broken, defective; and, therefore, the incompleteness on our side hinders both God's possession of us, and our possession of Him; so that we have but the 'earnest' and not the 'inheritance.' That is to say, the ownership may be perfect in idea, but in realisation it is imperfect.

And then, if we turn to the word in the other clause, 'the redemption of the purchased possession,' that suggests the incompleteness with which God as yet owns us. For though the initial act of redeeming is complete, yet redemption is a process, and not an act. And we 'are having' it, as the Apostle says in another place very emphatically, in continual and growing experience. The estate has been acquired, but has not yet been fully subdued. For there are tribes in the jungles and in the hills who still hold out against the reign of Him who has won it for Himself. And so seeing that the redemption in its fulness is relegated to some point in the future, towards which we are progressively approximating, and seeing that the best that can be said about the Christian experience here is that we have an 'earnest of the inheritance,' we must recognise the incompleteness to-day of our possession of God, and of God's possession of us.

That is a matter of experience. We know that only too well. 'I have God'-have I? I have a drop at the bottom of a too often unsteadily held and spilling cup, and the great ocean rolls unfathomable and boundless at my feet. How partial, how fragmentary, how clouded with doubts and blank ignorance, how intermittent, and, alas! rare, is our knowledge of Him. We sometimes go down our streets between tall houses, walking in their shadow, and now and then there is a cross street down which a blaze of sunshine comes, and when we reach it, and the houses fall back, we see the blue beyond. But we go on, and we are in the shadow again. And so our earthly lives are passed, to a large extent, beneath the shade of the grimy buildings that we ourselves have put up, and which shut out heaven from us, and only now and then a slanting beam comes through some opening, and carries wistful thoughts and longings into the Empyrean beyond. And how feeble our faith, and how little of His power comes into our hearts, and how little of the joy of the Lord is realised in our daily experience we all know, and it is sometimes good for us to force ourselves to feel it is but an ‘earnest’ of the ‘inheritance’ that the best of us has.

‘God has us.’ Has He? Has He my will, which submits itself, and finds joy in submitting itself, to Him? How many competitors are there for my love which come in in front of Him, and we ‘cannot get at Him for the press’! How many other motives are dominant in our lives, and how often we wrench ourselves away from our submission to Him, and try to set up a little dominion of our own, and say, ‘Our lives are ours; who is lord over us?’ Oh, brethren! we have God if we are Christians at all, and God has us. But alas! surely all honest experience tells us that there are awful gaps in the circle, and that our possession of Him, and His possession of us, are wofully incomplete.

Now, let me remind you that this incompleteness is mainly our own fault. Of course, I know that for the absolute completeness, either of my possession of God or of His of me, I must pass from out this world, and enter upon another stage and manner of being. But it is not being in the flesh, but it is being dominated by the flesh, that is the reason for the incompleteness of our mutual possession. And it is not being in the world, but it is being seduced and tyrannised over by the influx of worldly desires and thoughts, surging into our hearts, that drives God from out of our hearts, and draws us away from the sweet security of being possessed by, and living close to, Him. Death does a great deal for a man in advancing him in the scale of being, and in changing the centre of gravity, as it were, of this life. But there is no reason to believe that anything in death, or beyond it, will so alter the set and direction of his soul as that it will lead him into that possession of God, and being possessed by Him, which he has not here. There are many of us who, if we were to die this instant, would no more have God for ours, or belong to God, than we do now. It is our fault if the circle is broken into so many segments, if the moments of mutual love, communion, and indwelling are so rare and interrupted in our lives. The incompleteness which is due to our earthly condition is nothing as compared with the incompleteness which is due to our own sin.

But this incompleteness is one which may be progressively diminished, and we may be tending moment by moment, and year by year, nearer and nearer, and ever nearer, to the unreachable ideal of the entire possession of, and being possessed by, our God. There is a continual process of redemption of ‘God’s own possession’ going on if a Christian man is true to himself and to that Divine Spirit which is the ‘earnest’ of the ‘inheritance.’ Mark that in my text, as it stands in our Bibles, and reads ‘until the redemption,’ there seems to be merely a pointing onwards to a future epoch, but that, in the more accurate rendering which you will find in the Revised Version, instead of ‘until’ we have ‘unto,’ and that teaches us that the Divine Spirit, which in one aspect is the ‘earnest of the inheritance,’ is also operating upon men’s hearts and minds so as to bring about the gradual completion of the process of redemption.

So, dear brethren, seeing that by our own faults the possession is incomplete, and seeing that in the incompleteness there is given to each of us, if we rightly use it, a mighty power which is working ever towards the completion, it becomes us day by day to draw into our spirits more and more of that divine influence, and to let it work more fully upon the sins and faults which, far more than the body of flesh, or the connection with the world which it brings about, are the reasons for the incompleteness of the possession. We have, if we are wise, the task to discharge of daily enclosing, so to speak, more and more of the broad land which is all given over to us for our inheritance, but of which only so much as we fence in and cultivate, and make our own, is our own.

The incompleteness is progressively completed, and it is our work as much as God’s work to complete it. For though in our text that redemption is conceived of as a divine act, it is not an act in which we are but passive. The air goes into the lungs, and that oxygenates the blood, but the lung has to inflate if the air is to penetrate all its vesicles. And so the Spirit which seals us unto the redemption of the possession has to be received, held, diffused throughout, and utilised by our own effort.

II. Now, secondly, notice the certainty of the completion of the incompleteness.

As I have already said, the clod of earth and the handful of grass, the servant’s wages, the soldier’s shilling, are all guarantees that the whole of the inheritance or of the pay will be forthcoming in due time. And so there emerges from this consideration of the Divine Spirit as the ‘earnest,’ the thought that the present experiences of a Christian soul are the surest proofs, and the irrefragable guarantees, of that perfect future. We ask for proofs of a future life. They may be very useful in certain states of mind, and to certain phases of opinion, but as it seems to me, far deeper than the region of logical understanding, and far more conclusive than anything that can be cast into the form of a syllogism, is the experience of a soul which knows that God is its, and that it is God’s. ‘I think, therefore, I am,’ said the philosopher. ‘I have God; therefore I shall always be,’ says the Christian. Whilst that evidence is available only for himself, it is absolutely conclusive for himself. And the fact that it does spring in the hearts which are purest, because nearest God, is no small matter to be considered by men who may be groping for proofs of a life to come. If the selected moments of the purest devotion here on earth bring with them inevitably the confidence of the unending continuance of that communion, then those who do not believe in that future have to account for the fact as best they may. As for us who do know, though brokenly, and by reason of our own faults very imperfectly, what it is to have God, and be had by Him, we do not need to travel out to dim and doubtful analogies, nor do we even depend entirely upon the fact of a risen Christ ascended to the heavens, and living evermore, but we can say, ‘I am God’s; God is mine, and death has no power over such a mutual possession.’

The very incompleteness adds strength to the assurance, for the facts of the Christian life are such as to demand, both by its greatness and by its littleness, by its loftiness and by its lapses into lowliness, by the floodtide of devotion that sometimes sweeps rejoicingly over the mud-shoals and by the ebb that sometimes leaves them all black and festering, a future life wherein what was manifestly meant to be, and capable of being, dominant, supreme, but was hampered and hindered here, shall reach its full development, and where the plant that was dwarfed in this alien soil, transplanted into that higher house, shall blossom and bear immortal fruits. The new moon has a ragged edge, and each of the protrusions and concavities are the prophecy of the perfect orb which shall ere long fill the night with calm light from its silvery shield. The incompleteness prophesies completion.

And if the incompleteness is so blessed, what will the completeness be? A shilling to a million pounds, Knowledge which is partial and intermittent, like the twilight, as contrasted with the blaze of noonday, Joy like winter sunshine as compared with the warmth and heat of the midday sun at the zenith on the Equator. The 'earnest' of the 'inheritance' is wealth; the inheritance itself shall be unaccountable treasure.

III. And so, lastly, a word about the completion of the possession.

The 'earnest' is always of the same nature as, and a part of the 'inheritance.' Therefore, since the Holy Spirit is the earnest, the conclusion is plain, that the inheritance is nothing less than God Himself. Heaven is to possess God, and to be possessed by Him. That is the highest conception that we can form of that future life. And it is sorely to be lamented that subsidiary conceptions, which are all useful in their subordinate places, have, by popular Christianity, been far too much elevated into being the central blessedness of that future heaven. It is all right that we should cast the things which it is 'impossible for men to utter' into the shape of symbols which may a little relieve the necessary inarticulateness; but golden streets, and crystal pavements, and white robes, and golden palms, and all such representations, are but the dimmest shadows of that which they intend to express, and do often, as is the vice of all symbols, obscure. We can only conceive of a condition of which we have had no experience, by the two ways of symbolism and of negation. We can say, 'There shall be no night there; there shall be no curse there; they need no candle, neither light of the sun; they rest not day nor night; there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away.' But all these negations, like their sister symbols, are but surface work, and we have to go deeper than all of them.

But to possess God, and to be possessed by Him, and in either case fully, perfectly in degree, progressively in measure, eternal in duration, is the Heaven of heaven.

If that is the true conception of the inheritance, then it follows indubitably that such a Heaven is not for everybody. God would fain have us all for His there, as He would fain have each of us here and now, but it may not be. There are creatures which live beneath stones, and if you turn their coverings up, and let light fall on them, it kills them. And there are men who have refused to belong to God here, and refused to claim their portion in Him, and such cannot possess that true Heaven which is God Himself. Then, if its possession is not a mere matter of divine volition, giving a man what he is not capable of receiving, it plainly follows that the preparation must begin now and here by the incomplete possession of which my text is discoursing. And the way of such preparation is plain. The context says: 'In whom, after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise.' Faith in Jesus Christ, and trust in Him and His work as my forgiveness, my acceptance, my changed nature and heart-is the condition of being 'sealed' with that Spirit whose sealing of us is the condition of our love, our surrender, and mutual indwelling, which are our possession of God and being possessed by Him, and are the condition of our future complete possession of the 'inheritance.' We must begin with faith in Christ. Then comes the sealing, then comes the earnest, then comes the growing redemption, and in due time shall come the fulness of the possession. 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ' if thou wouldst have the earnest, whilst thou dost tabernacle in tents in the wilderness of Time, and if thou wouldst have the inheritance when thou crossest the flood into the goodly land.

7) Ephesians 1:18

EPHESIANS

THE HOPE OF THE CALLING

Eph. 1:18

A man's prayers for others are a very fair thermometer of his own religious condition. What he asks for them will largely indicate what he thinks best for himself; and how he asks it will show the firmness of his own faith and the fervour of his own feeling. There is nothing colder than the intercession of a cold Christian; and, on the other hand, in no part of the fervid Apostle Paul's writings do his words come more winged and fast, or his spirit glow with greater fervour of affection and holy desire than in his petitions for his friends.

In that great prayer, of which my text forms a part, we have his response to the good news that had reached him of the steadfastness in faith and abundance in love of these Ephesian Christians. As the best expression of his glad love he asks for them the knowledge of three things, of which my text is the first, and the other two are the 'riches of the glory of the inheritance' and 'the exceeding greatness of God's power.'

Now if we take the 'hope' in my text, as is often done, as meaning the thing hoped for, there seems to be but a shadowy difference between the first and the second of these subjects of the apostolic petition. Whereas, if we take it as meaning, not the object on which the emotion is fixed, but the emotion itself, then all the three stand in a natural gradation and connection. We have, first, the Christian emotion; then the object upon which it is fixed; 'the glory of the inheritance'; then the power by which the latter is brought and the former is realised. We shall consider the second and third of these petitions in following sermons. For the present I confine myself to this first, the Apostle's great desire for Christians who had already made considerable progress in the Christian life, 'that they may know,' by experiencing it, 'what is the hope of His calling.'

I. Now the first thought that these words suggest to me is this, that the Christian hope is based upon the facts of Christian experience.

What does the Apostle mean by naming it 'the hope of his calling'? He means this, that the great act of the divine mercy revealed to us in the Gospel, by which God summons and invites men to Himself, will naturally produce in those who have yielded to it a hope of immortal and perfect life. Because God has called men, therefore the man who has yielded to the call may legitimately, and must, if he is to do his duty, cherish such a hope. It is clear enough that this is so, inasmuch as, unless there be a heaven of completeness for us who have yielded to the summons and obeyed the invitation of God in His Gospel, His whole procedure is enigmatical and bewildering. The fact of the call is inexplicable; the cost of it is no less so. It was not worth while for God to make the world unless with respect to another which was to follow. It is still less worth His while to redeem the world if the results of that redemption, as they are exhibited here and now, and as they are capable of being exhibited in this present condition of things, are all that are to flow from it. It was not worth Christ's while to die, it was not worth God's while to send His Son, there was no sense or consistency in that great voice that echoes from heaven, calling us to love and serve Him, unless, beyond the jangling contradictions, and imperfect attainments, and foiled aspirations, and fragmentary faith, and broken services of earth, there be a region of completeness where all that was tendency here shall have become effect; and all that was but in germ here, and sorely frostbitten by the ungenial climate, and shrivelled by the foul vapours in the atmosphere, shall blossom and burgeon into eternal life. The Christian life, as it is to-day, in its attainments and imperfections, is at once the witness of the reality of the power that has produced it, and clamantly calls for a sphere and environment in which that power shall be able to produce the effects which it is capable of producing.

God is 'not a man that He should lie, nor the son of man that He should repent.' Men begin grand designs which never get further than the paper that they are drawn on; or they build a porch, and then they are bankrupt, or change their minds, or die, and the palace remains unrealised, and all that pass by mock and say, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' But God's designs are certain of accomplishment. Unless we are to be reduced to a state of utter intellectual bewilderment and confusion, and forgo our belief in His veracity and resources to execute His designs, the design that lies in the calling must needs lead on to the realm of perfectness. If we consider the agent by which it is effected, even the risen Christ; if we consider the cost at which it was accomplished, even the death on the Cross, the mission of His Son, and His assumption of the limitations of an incarnate life; if we consider the manifest potencies of the power that He has brought into operation in the present Christian life; and if we consider, side by side with these, the stark, staring contradictions and as manifest inevitable limitations of the effects of that power, His calling carries in its depths the assurance that what He means shall be done, that Jesus Christ has not died in vain, that He has not ascended to fill a solitary throne, but is the Firstfruits of a great harvest; and that we shall one day be all that it is in the gospel of our salvation to make us, unhindered by the limitations and unthwarted by the antagonisms of this poor human life of ours. Unless there be a heaven in which all desires shall be satisfied, all evils removed, all good perfected, all ragged trees made symmetrical and full-grown, and all souls that love Him radiant with His own perfect image, then the light that seemed a light from heaven is the most delusive of all the marsh-fires of earth, and nothing in the illusions of sense or of men's cunning is so cruel or so tragic as the calling that seemed to be the voice of God, and summoned us to a heaven which was only a dream.

II. And so, secondly, notice how this hope of our text is in some sense the very topstone of the Christian life.

Paul has heard, concerning these people in Ephesus, of their faith and love. And because he has heard of these, therefore he brings this prayer. These two-the faith which apprehends the manifestation of God in Jesus Christ, and the love which that faith produces in the heart that accepts the revelation of the infinite love-are crowned by, and are imperfect without, and naturally lead on to the brightness of this great hope, Faith-the reliance of the spirit upon the veracity of the revealing God-gives hope its contents; for the Christian hope is not spun out of your own imaginations, nor is it the mere making objective in a future life of the unfulfilled desires of this disappointing present, but it is the recognition by the trusting spirit of the great and starry truths that are flashed upon it by the Word of God. Faith draws back the curtain, and Hope gazes into the supernal abysses. My hope, if it be anything else than the veriest will-o'-the-wisp and delusion, is the answer of my heart to the revealed truth of God.

Similarly the love which flows from faith not only necessarily leads on to the expectation of union being perfected with the object of its warm affection, but also so works upon the heart and character as that the false and seducing loves which draw away, like some sluice upon a river, the current of life from its true channel, are all sanctified and no more hinder hope. Loving, we hope for that which, unless we loved, would not draw desires nor yield foretastes of sweetness which, like perfumed oil, feed the pure flame of hope.

The triad of Christian graces is completed by Hope. Without her fair presence something is wanting to the completeness of her elder sisters. The great Campanile at Florence, though it be inlaid with glowing marbles, and fair sculptures, and perfect in its beauty, wants the gilded, skyward-pointing pinnacle of its topmost pyramid; and so it stands incomplete. And thus faith and love need for their crowning and completion the topmost grace that looks up to the sky, and is sure of a mansion there.

Brethren, our Christianity is wofully imperfect unless faith and love find their acme, their outstretching completion, in this Christian hope. Do you seek to complete your faith and love by a living hope full of immortality?

III. Thirdly, notice how this hope is an all-important element in the Christian life.

The Apostle asks for it as the best thing that can befall these Ephesian Christians, as the one thing that they need to make them strong and good and blessed. There are many other aspects of desire for them which appear in other parts of this letter. But here all Christian progress is regarded as being held in solution and included in vigorous hope.

Why is the activity of hope thus important for Christian life? Because it stimulates effort, calms sorrows, takes the fascination out of temptations, supplies a new aim for life and a new measure for the things of time and sense.

If we lived, as we ought to live, in the habitual apprehension of the great future awaiting all real Christians, would it not change the whole aspect of life? The world is very big when it is looked at from any point upon its surface; but suppose it could be looked at from the central sun, how large would it appear then? We can shift our station in like fashion, and then we get the true measure at once of the insignificance and of the greatness of life. This world means nothing worthy, except as an introduction to another. Not that thereby there will follow in any wise man contempt for the present, for the very same reference to the future which dwarfs the greatnesses and dwindles the sorrows, and almost extinguishes the dazzling lights of this present, does also lift it to its true significance and importance. It is the vestibule of that future, and that future is conditioned throughout by the results of the few years that we live here. An apprenticeship may be a very poor matter, looked at in itself; and the boy may say What is the use of my working at all these trivial things? but, since it is apprenticeship, it is worth while to attend to every trifle in its course, for attention to them will affect the standing of the man all his days.

Here and now we are getting ready for the great workshop yonder; learning the trick of the tools, and how to use our fingers and our powers, and, when the schooling is done, we shall be set to nobler work, and receive ample wages for the years here. Because that great ‘to-morrow will be as this day’ of earthly life, ‘and much more abundant,’ therefore it is no trifle to work amongst the trifles; and nothing is small which may tell on our condition yonder. The least deflection from the straight line, however acute may be the angle which the divergent lines enclose at the starting, and however small may seem to be the deviation from parallelism, will, if prolonged to infinity, have room between the two for all the stars, and the distance between them will be that the one is in heaven and the other is in hell. And so it is a great thing to live amongst the little things, and life gains its true significance when we dwarf and magnify it by linking it with the world to come.

If we only kept that hope bright before us, how little discomforts and sorrows and troubles would matter! Life would become ‘a solemn scorn of ills.’ It does not matter much what kind of cabin accommodation we have if we are only going a short voyage; the main thing is to make the port. If we, as Christian people, cherish, as we ought to do, this great hope, then we shall be able to control, and not to despise but to exalt this fleeting and transient scene, because it is linked inseparably with the life that is to come.

IV. Lastly, this hope needs enlightened eyes.

The Apostle prays that God may give to these Ephesians ‘the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him,’ and then he adds, as the result of that gift, the desire that the Ephesian believers may have ‘the eyes of their hearts enlightened.’ That is a remarkable expression. It does not mean, as an English reader might suppose it to mean, that the affections are the agents by which this knowledge reaches us; but ‘heart’ is here used, as it often is in Scripture, as a general expression for the whole inward life, and all that the Apostle means is that, by the gift of the Divine Spirit of wisdom, a man’s inner nature may be so touched as to be capable of perceiving and grasping the ‘hope of the calling.’

Observe, too, the language, ‘that ye may know the hope.’ How can you know a hope? How do you know any kind of feeling? By having it. The only way of knowing what is the hope is to hope, and this is only possible by dint of these eyes of the understanding being enlightened. For our inward nature, as we have it, and as we use it, without the touch of that Divine Spirit, is so engrossed with this present that the far-off blessedness to which my text refers has no chance of entering there. No man can look at something beside him with one eye, and at something half a mile off with the other. You have to focus the eye according to the object; and he who is gazing upon the near is thereby made blind to that which is afar off. If we go crawling along the low levels with our eyes upon the dust, then of course we cannot see the crown above.

We need more than the historical revelation of the light in order to enlighten the inward nature. There is many a man here now who knows all about the immortality that is brought to light by Jesus Christ just as well as the Christian man whose soul is full of the hope of it, and who yet, for all his knowledge, does not know the hope, because he has not felt it. You have to get further than to the acceptance intellectually of the historical facts of a risen and ascended Saviour before there can be, in your heart, any vital hope of immortality. The inward eye must be cleared and strengthened, cross lights must be shut out so that we may direct the single eye of our hearts towards the great objects which alone are worthy of its fixed contemplation. And we cannot do that without a divine help, that Spirit of wisdom which will fill our hearts if we ask for it, which will fix our affections, which will clear our eyesight, which will withdraw it from seeing vanity as well as give it reality to see.

But we must observe the conditions. Since this clearness of hope comes not merely from the acceptance as a truth of the fact of Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension, but comes through the gift of that Divine Spirit, then to have it you must ask for it. Christian people, do you ask for it? Do you ever pray-I do not mean in words, but in real desire-that God would help you to keep steadily before you that great future to which we are all going so fast? If you do you will get the answer. Seek for that Spirit; use it, and do not resist its touches. Do not fix your gaze on the world when God is trying to draw you to fix it upon Himself. Think more about Jesus Christ, more about

God’s high calling, live nearer to Him, and try more honestly, more earnestly, more prayerfully, more habitually, even amidst all the troubles and difficulties and trivialities of each day, to cultivate that great faculty of joyful and assured hope.

Surely God did not endue us with the power of hoping that we might fling it all away on trivial, transient things. We are all far too short-sighted; our fault is not that we do not hope, but that we hope for such near things, for such small things, like the old mariners who had no compass nor sextant, and were obliged to creep timidly along the coasts, and steer from headland to headland. But we ought to launch boldly out into mid-ocean, knowing that we have before us that star that cannot guide us amiss. Do not set your hopes on the things that perish, for if you do, hopes fulfilled and hopes disappointed will be equally bitter in your mouths. And you older people who, like myself, are drawing near the end of your days, and have little else left to hope for in this world, do you see to it that your anticipations extend ‘above the ruinable skies.’ There is an object beyond experience, above imagination, without example, for which the creation wants a comparison, we an apprehension, and the Word of God itself a sufficient revelation. ‘It doth not yet appear what we shall be.’ God hath called us to His eternal kingdom and glory; let us seek to walk in the light of the ‘hope of His calling.’

8) Ephesians 1:18

EPHESIANS

GOD’S INHERITANCE IN THE SAINTS

Eph. 1:18

The misery of Hope is that it so often owes its materials to the strength of our desires or to the activity of our imagination. But when mere wishes or fancies spin the thread, Hope cannot weave a lasting fabric. And so one of the old prophets, in speaking of the delusive hopes of man, says that they are like ‘spiders’ webs,’ and ‘shall not become garments.’ Paul, then, having been asking for these Ephesian Christians that they might have hopes lofty and worthy, and such as God’s summons to them would inspire, passes on to ask that they might have the material out of which they could weave such hope, namely, a sure and clear knowledge of the future blessings. The language in which he describes that future is remarkable-’the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.’ He calls it God’s inheritance, not as meaning that God is the Inheritor, but the Giver. He speaks of it as ‘in the saints,’ meaning that, just as the land of Canaan was distributed amongst tribes and families, and each man got his own little plot, so that broad land is parted out amongst those who are ‘partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.’

And so my text suggests to me three points to which I seek to call your attention. First, the inheritance; second, the heirs; and third, the heirs’ present knowledge of their future possession.

I. First, then, note the inheritance.

Now we must discharge from the word some of its ordinary associations. There is no reference to the thought of succession in it, as the mere English reader is accustomed to think-to whom inheritance means possession by the death of another. The idea is simply that of possession. The figure which underlies the word is, of course, that of the ancient partition of the land of Canaan amongst the tribes, but we must go a great deal deeper than that in order to understand its whole sweep and fulness of meaning.

What is the portion for a soul? God. God is Heaven, and Heaven is God. No interpretation of ‘the inheritance,’ however it may run into cheap and vulgar sensuous descriptions of a future glory, has come within sight of the meaning of the word, unless it has grasped this as the central thought: ‘Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee.’ Only God can be the portion of a human spirit. And none else can fill the narrowest and the smallest of man’s needs.

So, then, if there were realised all the accumulated changes of progress in blessedness, and the withdrawal of all external causes of disquiet and weariness and weeping, still the heart would hunger and be empty of its true possession unless God Himself had flowed into it. It were but a poor advancement and the gain of a loss, if yearnings were made immortal, and the aching vacuity, which haunts every soul that is parted from God, were cursed with immortality. It would be so, if it be not true that the inheritance is nothing less than the fuller possession of God Himself.

And how do men possess God? How do we possess one another, here and now? By precisely the same way, only indefinitely expanded and exalted, do we possess Him here, and shall we possess Him hereafter. Heart to heart is joined by love which is mutual and interpenetrating possession; where 'mine' and 'thine' become blended, like the several portions of the one ray of white light, in the blessed word 'ours.' Contemplation makes us possessors of God. Assimilation to His character makes us own and have Him. They who love and gaze, and are being changed by still degrees into His likeness, possess Him. This is the central idea of man's future destiny and highest blessedness, a union with God closer and more intimate in degree, but yet essentially the same in kind, as is here possible amidst the shows and vanities and wearinesses of this mortal life. 'His servants shall serve Him, and see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads.' Obedience, contemplation, transformation, these are the hands by which we here lay hold on God; and they in the heavens grasp Him just as we here on earth may do. The 'inheritance' is God Himself.

Surely that is in accordance with the whole teaching of Scripture, and is but the expansion of plain words which tell us that we 'are heirs of God.' If that be so, then all the other subsidiary blessings which have been, to the sore detriment of Christian anticipation and of Christian life in a hundred ways, elevated into disproportionate importance, fall into their right places, and are more when they are looked upon as secondary than when they are looked upon as primary.

Ah, brethren! neither the sensuous metaphors which, in accommodation to our weakness, Scripture has used to paint that future so that we may, in some measure, comprehend it, nor the translation of these, in so far as they refer to circumstances and externals, are enough for us. It is blessed to know that 'there shall be no night there'-blessed to grasp all those sweet negatives which contradict the miseries of the world, and to think of no sin, no curse, no tears, no sighing nor sorrow, neither any more pain, 'because the former things have passed away.' It is sweet and ennobling to think that, when we are discharged of the load of this cumbrous flesh, we shall be much more ourselves, and able to see where now is but darkness, and to feel where now is but vacancy. It is blessed to think of the recognising of lost and loved ones. But all these blessednesses, heaped together, as it seems to me, would become sickeningly the same if prolonged through eternity, unless we had God for our very own. Eternal is an awful word, even when the noun that goes with it is blessedness. And I know not how even the redeemed could be saved, as the long ages rolled on, from the oppression of monotony, and the feeling, ‘I would not live always,’ unless God was ‘the strength of their hearts, and their portion for ever.’ We must rise above everything that merely applies to changes in our own natures and in our relations to the external universe, and to other orders of creatures; and grasp, as the hidden sweetness that lies in the calyx of the gorgeous flower, the possession of God Himself as the rapture of our joy and the heaven of our heaven.

And if that be so, then these accumulated words with which the Apostle, in his fiery, impetuous way, tries to set forth the greatness of what he is speaking about, receive a loftier meaning than they otherwise would have.

‘The riches of the glory of His inheritance’-now that word ‘riches,’ or ‘wealth,’ is a favourite of Paul’s; and in this single letter occurs, if I count rightly, five times. In addition to our text, it is used twice in connection with God’s grace, ‘the riches of His grace’ once in connection with Jesus, ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ’; and once in a similar connection to, though with a different application from, our text, ‘the riches of His glory.’ Always, you see, it is applied to something that is special and properly divine. And here, therefore, it applies, not to the abundance of any creatural good, however exuberant and inexhaustible the store of it may be, but simply and solely to that unwearying energy, that self-feeding and ever-burning and never-decaying light, which is God. Of Him alone it can be said that work does not exhaust, nor Being tend to its own extinction, nor expenditure of resources to their diminution. The guarantee for eternal blessedness is the ‘riches’ of the eternal God, and so we may be sure that no time can exhaust, nor any expenditure empty, either His storehouse or our wealth.

And again, the ‘glory’ is not the lustrous light, however dazzling to our feeble eyes that may be, of any creature that reflects the light of God, but it is the far-flashing and never-dying radiance of His own manifestation of Himself to the hearts and souls of them that love Him. And so the ‘inheritance is incorruptible and undefiled, and fadeth not away’; not merely by reason of the communicated will of God operating upon creatures whom He preserves untarnished by corruption, and ungnawed by decay, but because He Himself is the ‘inheritance,’ and on Him time hath no power. On His wealth all His creatures may hang for ever; and it shall be as it was in the sweet parable of the miracle of old, the fragments that remain will be more than when the meal began. ‘The riches of the glory of His inheritance.’

II. Now notice, secondly, the heirs.

The words of my text receive, perhaps, their best commentary and explanation in those words which the writer of them heard, on the Damascus road, when the voice from heaven spoke to him about men ‘obtaining an inheritance among them that are sanctified.’ It almost sounds like an echo of that long past, but never-to-be-forgotten voice, when our Apostle writes as he does in our text.

Now what does he mean by ‘saints’? Who are these amongst whom the broad acres of that infinite prairie are to be parted out? The word has attracted to itself contemptuous meanings and ascetical meanings, and meanings which really deny the true democracy of Christianity and the equality of all believers in the sight of God. But its scriptural use has none of these narrowing and confusing associations adhering to it, nor does it even directly and at first mean, as we generally take it to mean, pure men, holy in the sense of clean and righteous. But something goes before that phase of meaning, and it is this-a saint is a man separated and set apart for God, as His property. That is the true meaning of the word. It is its meaning as it is applied to the vessels of the Temple, the priests, the services, and the altar. It is its meaning, only with the necessary substitution of spirit for body, as it is applied in the New Testament as a designation co-extensive with that of believers.

How does a man belong to God?

We asked a minute or two ago how God belonged to men. The answer to the converse question is almost identical. A man belongs to God by the affection of his heart, by the submission of his will, by the reference of his actions to Him; and he who thus belongs to God, in the same act in which he gives himself to God, receives God as his possession. The thing must be reciprocal. ‘All mine is Thine’; and God answers, ‘And all Mine is thine.’ He ever meets our ‘O Lord, I yield myself to Thee,’ with His ‘And My child, I give Myself to thee.’ It is so in regard of our earthly loves. It is so in regard of our relations to Him. And that being the case, purity, which is generally taken by careless readers as being the main idea of sanctity, will follow this self-surrender, which is the basis of all goodness, everywhere and always.

If that be true, and I do not think it can be effectively denied, then the next step is a very plain one, and that is that for the perfect possession of God, which is heaven, the same thing is needed in its perfection which is required for the partial possession of Him that makes the Christian life of earth. And just as here we get Him for ours in proportion as we give up ourselves to be His, so yonder the inheritance belongs, and can only belong to, 'the saints.' So, then, one can see that there is nothing arbitrary in this limitation of a possession, which in its very nature cannot go beyond the bounds which are thus marked out for it. If heaven were the vulgar thing that some of you think it, if that future life were desirable simply because you escaped from some external punishment and got all sorts of outward blessings and joys, felicities and advantages, hung round the neck, or pinned upon the breast, as they do to successful fighters, why then, of course, there might be partiality in the distribution of the decorations. But if that possession hinges upon our yielding ourselves to Him, then there is not an arbitrary link in the whole chain. Faith is set forth as the condition of heaven, because faith is the means of union with Christ, by and from whom alone we draw the motives for self-surrender and the power for sanctity. You cannot have heaven unless you have God. That is step number one. You cannot have God unless you have 'holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.' That is step number two. You cannot have holiness without faith. That is step number three. 'An inheritance among them that are sanctified'; and then there is added, 'by faith which is in Me.'

It is clear, too, what a fatal delusion some of us are under who think that we shall, and fancy that we should like to, as we say, 'go to heaven when we die.' Why, heaven is here, round about you, a present heaven in the imitation of God, in the practice of righteousness, in the cultivation of dependence upon Him, in the yielding of yourselves up to Him. Heaven is here, and by your own choice you stop outside of it. There must be a correspondence between environment and nature for blessedness. 'The mind is its own place,' as the great Puritan poet taught us, 'and makes a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.' Fishes die on the shore, and the man that drew them out dies in the water. Gills cannot breathe where lungs are useful, and lungs cannot, where gills come into play. If you have not here and now the holiness which knits you to God, and gives you possession of

Him, you would not like ‘heaven,’ if it were possible to carry you to that place, in so far as it is a place. It is rather strange, if you hope to go to heaven when you die, that you should be very unwilling to spend a little time in it whilst you are alive, and that you should expect blessedness then from that presence of God which brings you no blessedness now.

III. Lastly, we have here the heirs’ present knowledge of their future blessedness.

The Apostle asks that these men may know a thing that clearly seems unknowable. It is an impossible petition, we might be ready to say, because it is clear enough that there can be no true knowledge of the conditions and details of that future life. The dark mountains that lie between us and it hide their secret well, and few or no stray beams have reached us. An unborn babe, or a chrysalis in a hole in the ground or in a chink of a tree, might think as wisely about its future condition as we can do about that life beyond. There can be no knowledge until there is experience.

What, then, does Paul mean by framing such a petition as this? The answer is found in noticing that the knowledge which he is imploring here is a consequence of a previous knowledge. For, in a former verse, he prays that these men may have ‘the spirit of wisdom in the knowledge of God’; and when they have got the knowledge of God he thinks that they will have got the knowledge of ‘the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.’ Now, turn that into other words, and it is just this, that the knowledge of God, which comes by faith and love here, is in kind so identical with the fullest and loftiest riches of the knowledge of Him hereafter, that, if we have the one, we are not without the other. The one is in germ, the other, no doubt, full blown; the one is the twinkling of the rushlight, as it were, the other is the blaze of the sunshine. The two states of being are so correspondent that from the one we draw our clearest knowledge of the other. There are telescopes, in using which you do not look up when you want to see the stars, but down on to a reflecting mirror, and there you see them. Such a reflecting mirror, though it be sometimes muddied and dimmed and always very small, are the experiences of the Christian soul here.

So, dear friends, if we want to know as much as may be known of the blessedness of heaven, let us seek to possess as much as may be possessed of the knowledge and love of God on earth. Then we shall know the centre, at any rate; and that is light, though the circumference may be very dark. Much will remain obscure. That is of very small consequence to Hope, which does not need information half so much as it needs assurance. Like some flower in the cranny of the rock, it can spread a broad bright blossom on little soil, if only it be firmly rooted.

The path for us all is plain. Come to Jesus Christ as sinful men, and take what He has given, who has given Himself for us. Touched by His love, let us love Him back again, and yield ourselves to Him, and He will give Himself to us. They who can say, 'O Lord! I am Thine,' are sure to hear from heaven, 'I am thine.' And they who possess, in being possessed by, God Himself, do not need to die in order to go to heaven, but are at least doorkeepers in the house of the Lord now, and stand where they can see into the inner sanctuary which they will one day tread. A life of faith brings Heaven to us, and thereby gives us the surest and the clearest knowledge of what we shall be, and have, when we are brought to heaven.

9) Ephesians 1:19

EPHESIANS

THE MEASURE OF IMMEASURABLE POWER

Eph. 1:19

'The riches of the glory of the inheritance' will sometimes quench rather than stimulate hope. He can have little depth of religion who has not often felt that the transcendent glory of that promised future sharpens the doubt-'and can I ever hope to reach it?' Our paths are strewn with battlefields where we were defeated; how should we expect the victor's wreath? And so Paul does not think that he has asked all which his friends in Ephesus need when he has asked that they may know the hope and the inheritance. There is something more wanted, something more even for our knowledge of these, and that is the knowledge of the power which alone can fulfil the hope and bring the inheritance. His language swells and peals and becomes exuberant and noble with his theme. He catches fire, as it were, as he thinks about this power that worketh in us. It is 'exceeding.' Exceeding what? He does not tell us, but other words in this letter, in the other great prayer which it contains, may help us to supply the missing words. He speaks of the 'love of Christ which passeth knowledge,' and of God being 'able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think.' The power which is really at work in Christian men to-day is in its nature properly transcendent and immeasurable, and passes thought and desire and knowledge.

And yet it has a measure. 'According to the working of the strength of the might which He wrought in Christ.' Is that heaping together of synonyms or all but synonyms, mere tautology? Surely not. Commentators tell us that they can distinguish differences of meaning between the words, in that the first of them is the more active and outward, and the last of them is the more inward. And so they liken them to fruit and branch and root; but we need simply say that the gathering together of words so nearly co-extensive in their meaning is witness to the effort to condense the infinite within the bounds of human tongue, to speak the unspeakable; and that these reiterated expressions, like the blows of the billows that succeed one another on the beach, are hints of the force of the infinite ocean that lies behind.

And then the Apostle, when he has once come in sight of his risen Lord, as is his wont, is swept away by the ardour of his faith and the clearness of his vision, and breaks from his purpose in order to dilate on the glories of his King. We do not need to follow him into that. I limit myself now to the words which I have read as my text, with only such reference to the magnificent passage which succeeds as may be necessary for the exposition of this.

I. So, then, I ask you to look, first, at the measure and example of the immeasurable power that works in Christian men.

'According to the working of the strength of the might which He wrought in Christ'-the Resurrection, the Ascension, the session at the right hand of God, the rule over all creatures, and the exaltation above all things on earth or in the heavens-these are the facts which the Apostle brings before us as the pattern-works, the chefs-d’oeuvre of the power that is operating in all Christians. The present glories of the ascended Christ are glories possessed by a Man, and, that being so, they are available as evidences and measures of the power which works in believing souls. In them we see the possibilities of humanity, the ideal for man which God had when He created and breathed His blessing upon him. It is one of ourselves who has strength enough to bear the burden of the glory, one of ourselves who can stand within the blaze of encircling and indwelling Divinity and be unconsumed. The possibilities of human nature are manifest there. If we want to know what the Divine Power can make of us, let us turn to look with the eye of faith upon what it has made of Jesus Christ.

But such a thought, glorious as it is, still leaves room for doubt as to my personal attainment of such an ideal. Possibility is much, but we need solid certainty. And we find it in the truth that the bond between Christ and those who truly love and trust Him is such as that the possibility must become a reality and be consolidated into a certainty. The Vine and its branches, their Head and the members, the Christ and His Church, are knit together by such closeness of union as that wheresoever and whatsoever the one is, there and that must the others also be. Therefore, when doubts and fears, and consciousness of our own weakness, creep across us, and all our hopes are dimmed, as some star in the heavens is, when a light mist floats between us and it, let us turn away to Him our brother, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, and think that He, in His calm exaltation and regal authority and infinite blessedness, is not only the pattern of what humanity may be, but the pledge of what His Church must be. ‘Where I am, there shall also My servant be.’ ‘The glory that Thou gavest Me I have given them.’

Nor is that all. Not only a possibility and a certainty for the future are for us the measure of the power that worketh in us, but as this same letter teaches us, we have, as Christians, a present scale by which we may estimate the greatness of the power. For in the next chapter, after that glorious burst as to the dignity of his Lord, which we have not the heart to call a digression, the Apostle, recurring to the theme of my text, goes on to say, ‘And you hath He quickened,’ and then, catching it up again a verse or two afterwards, he reiterates, clause by clause, what had been done on Jesus as having been done on us Christians. If that Divine Spirit raised Him from the dead, and set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, it is as true that the same power hath ‘raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.’ And so not only the far-off, though real and brilliant, and eye and heart-filling glories of the ascended Christ give us the measure of the power, but also the limited experience of the present Christian life, the fact of the resurrection from the true death, the death of sin, the fact of union with Jesus Christ so real and close as that they who truly experience it do live, as far as the roots of their lives and the scope and the aim of them are concerned, ‘in the heavens,’ and ‘sit with Him in heavenly places’-these things afford us the measure of the power that worketh in us.

Then, because a Man is King of kings and Lord of lords; and because He who is our Life ‘is exalted high above all principalities and powers’; and because from His throne He has quickened us from the death of sin, and has drawn us so near to Himself that if we are His we truly live beside Him, even whilst we stumble here in the darkness, we may know the exceeding greatness of His power, according to the working of the strength of the might which He wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead.

II. Secondly, notice the knowledge of the unknowable power.

We have already come across the same apparent paradox, covering a deep truth, in the former sections of this series of petitions. I need only remind you, in reference to this matter, that the knowledge which is here in question is not the intellectual perception of a fact as revealed in Scripture, but is that knowledge to which alone the New Testament gives the noble name, being knowledge verified by inward experience, and the result of one’s own personal acquaintance with its object.

How do we know a power? By thrilling beneath its force. How are we to know the greatness of the power but because it comes surging and rejoicing into our aching emptiness, and lifts us buoyant above our temptations and weakness? Paul was not asking for these people theological conceptions. He was asking that their spirits might be so saturated with and immersed in that great ocean of force that pours from God as that they should never, henceforth, be able to doubt the greatness of that power which wrought in them. The knowledge that comes from experience is the knowledge that we all ought to seek. It is not merely to be desired that we should have right and just conceptions, but that we should have the vital knowledge which is, and which comes from, life eternal.

And that power, which thus we may all know by feeling it working upon ourselves, though it be immeasurable, has its measure; though it be, in its depth and fulness, unknowable and inexhaustible, may yet be really and truly known. You do not need a thunderstorm to experience the electric shock; a battery that you can carry in your pocket will do that for you. You do not need to have traversed all the length and breadth and depth and height of some newly-discovered country to be sure of its existence, and to have a real, though it may be a vague, conception of the magnitude of its shores. And so, really, though boundedly, we have the knowledge of God, and can rely upon it as valid, though partial; and similarly, by experience we have such a certified acquaintance with Him and His power as needs no enlargement to be trusted, and to become the source of blessings untold. We may see but a strip of the sky through the narrow chinks of our prison windows, and many a grating may further intercept the view, and much dust that might be cleared away may dim the glass but yet it is the sky that we see, and we can think of the great horizon circling round and round, and of the infinite depths above there, which neither eye nor thought can travel unwearied. Though all that we see be but an inch in breadth and a foot or two in height, yet we do see. We know the unknowable power that passeth knowledge.

And let me remind you of how large importance this knowledge of and constant reference to the measureless power manifested in Christ is for us. I believe there can be no vigorous, happy Christian life without it. It is our only refuge from pessimism and despair for the world. The old psalm said, ‘Thou hast crowned Him with glory and honour, and hast given Him dominion over the works of Thy hands,’ and hundreds of years afterwards the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews commented on it thus, ‘We see not yet all things put under Him.’ Was the old vision a dream, was it never intended to be fulfilled? Apparently so, if we take the history of the past into account, and the centuries that have passed since have done nothing to make it more probable, apart from Jesus Christ, that man will rise to the height which the Psalmist dreamed of. When we look at the exploded

Utopias that fill the past; when we think of the strange and apparently fatal necessity by which evil is developed from every stage of what men call progress, and how improvement is perverted, almost as soon as effected, into another fortress of weakness and misery; when we look on the world as it is to-day, I know not whence a man is to draw bright hopes, or what is to deliver him from pessimism as his last word about himself and his fellows, except the ‘working of the strength of the might which He wrought in Christ.’ ‘We see not yet all things put under Him’-be it so, ‘but we see Jesus,’ and, looking to Him, hope is possible, reasonable, and imperative.

The same knowledge is our refuge from our own consciousness of weakness. We look up, as a climber may do in some Alpine ravine, upon the smooth gleaming walls of the cliff that rises above us. It is marble, it is fair, there are lovely lands on the summit, but nothing that has not wings can get there. We try, but slip backwards almost as much as we rise. What is to be done? Are we to sit down at the foot of the cliff, and say, ‘We cannot climb, let us be content with the luscious herbage and sheltered ease below?’ Yes! That is what we are tempted to say. But look! a mighty hand reaches over, an arm is stretched down, the hand grasps us, and lifts us, and sets us there.

‘No man hath ascended up into heaven save He that came down from heaven,’ and having returned thither stoops thence, and will lift us to Himself. I am a poor, weak creature. Yes! I am all full of sin and corruption. Yes! I am ashamed of myself every day. Yes! I am too heavy to climb, and have no wings to fly, and am bound here by chains manifold. Yes! But we know the exceeding greatness of the power, and we triumph in Him.

That knowledge should shame us into contrition, when we think of such force at our disposal, and such poor results. That knowledge should widen our conceptions, enlarge our desires, breathe a brave confidence into our hopes, should teach us to expect great things of God, and to be intolerant of present attainments whilst anything remains unattained. And it should stimulate our vigorous effort, for no man will long seek to be better, if he is convinced that the effort is hopeless.

Learn to realise the exceeding greatness of the power that will clothe your weakness. ‘Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, for that He is strong in might, not one faileth.’ That is wonderful, but here is a far nobler operation of the divine power. It is great to ‘preserve the ancient heavens’ fresh and strong by His might, but it is greater to come down to my weakness, to ‘give power to the faint,’ and ‘increase strength to them that have no might.’ And that is what He will do with us.

III. Lastly, notice the conditions for the operations of the power.

‘To usward who believe,’ says Paul. He has been talking to these Ephesians, and saying ‘ye,’ but now, by that ‘us,’ he places himself beside them, identifies himself with them, and declares that all his gifts and strength come to him on precisely the same conditions on which theirs do to them; and that he, like them, is a waiter upon that grace which God bestows on them that trust Him.

‘To usward who believe.’ Once more we are back at the old truth which we can never make too emphatic and plain, that the one condition of the weakest among us being strong with the strength of the Lord is simple trust in Him, verified, of course, by continuance and by effort.

How did the water go into the Ship Canal at Eastham last week? First of all they cut a trench, and then they severed the little strip of land between the hole and the sea, and the sea did the rest. The wider and deeper the opening that we make in our natures by our simple trust in God, the fuller will be the rejoicing flood that pours into us. There is an old story about a Christian father, who, having been torturing himself with theological speculations about the nature of the Trinity, fell asleep and dreamed that he was emptying the ocean with a thimble! Well, you cannot empty it with a thimble, but you can go to it with one, and, if you have only a thimble in your hand, you will only bring away a thimbleful. The measure of your faith is the measure of God’s power given to you.

There are two measures of the immeasurable power-the one is that infinite limit, of ‘the power which He wrought in Christ,’ and the other the practical limit. The working measure of our spiritual life is our faith. In plain English, we can have as much of God as we want. We do have as much as we want. And if, in touch with the power that can shatter a universe, we only get a little thrill that is scarcely perceptible to ourselves, and all unnoticed by others, whose fault is that? If, coming to the fountain that laughs at drought, and can fill a universe with its waters, we scarcely bear away a straitened drop or two, that barely refreshes our parched lips, and does nothing to stimulate the growth of the plants of holiness in our gardens, whose fault is that? The practical measure of the power is for us the measure of our belief and desire. And if we only go to Him, as I pray we all may, and continue there, and ask from Him strength, according to the riches that are treasured in Jesus Christ, we shall get the old answer, 'According to your faith be it unto you.'

10)Ephesians 2:4-5

EPHESIANS

THE RESURRECTION OF DEAD SOULS

Eph. 2:4-5

Scripture paints man as he is, in darker tints, and man as he may become, in brighter ones, than are elsewhere found. The range of this portrait painter's palette is from pitchiest black to most dazzling white, as of snow smitten by sunlight. Nowhere else are there such sad, stern words about the actualities of human nature; nowhere else such glowing and wonderful ones about its possibilities. This Physician knows that He can cure the worst cases, if they will take His medicine, and is under no temptation to minimise the severity of the symptoms or the fatality of the disease. We have got both sides in my text; man's actual condition, 'dead in trespasses'; man's possible condition, and the actual condition of thousands of men-made to live again in Jesus Christ, and with Him raised from the dead, and with Him gone up on high, and with Him sitting at God's right hand. That is what you and I may be if we will; if we will not, then we must be the other.

So there are three things here to look at for a few moments-the dead souls; the pitying love that looks down upon them; and the resurrection of the dead.

I. First, here is a picture, a dogmatic statement if you like, about the actual condition of human nature apart from Jesus Christ-'Dead in

trespasses.’

The Apostle looks upon the world-many-coloured, full of activity, full of intellectual stir, full of human emotions, affections, joys, sorrows, fluctuations-as if it were one great cemetery, and on every gravestone there were written the same inscription. They all died of the same disease-’dead through sin,’ as the original more properly means.

Now, I dare say many who are listening to me are saying in their hearts, ‘Oh! Exaggeration! The old gloomy, narrow view of human nature cropping up again.’ Well, I am not at all unwilling to acknowledge that truths like this have very often been preached both with a tone and in a manner that repels, and which is rightly chargeable with exaggeration and undue gloom and narrowness. But let me remind you that it is not the Evangelical preacher nor the Apostle only who have to bear the condemnation of exaggeration, if this representation of my text be not true to facts, but it is Jesus Christ too; for He says, ‘Except ye eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man, ye have no life in you.’ And I think that be He divine or not divine, His words about the religious condition of men go so surely to the mark that a man must be tolerably impregnable in his self-conceit who charges Him with narrowness and exaggeration. At all events, I am content to say after Him, and I pray that you and I, when we accept Him as our Teacher, may take not only His gracious, but His stern, words, assured that a deep graciousness lies in these, too, if we rightly understand them.

Let me remind you that the phrase of my text is by no means confined to Christian teachers, but that, in common speech, we hear from all high thinkers about the lower type of humanity being dead to the loftier thoughts in which they live and move and have their being. It has passed into a commonplace of language to speak of men being ‘dead to honour,’ ‘dead to shame,’ ‘dead’ to this, that, and the other good and noble and gracious thing. And the same metaphor, if you like, lies here in my text-that men who have given their wills and inmost natures over to the dominion of self-and that is the definition of sin-that such men are, ipso facto, by reason of that very surrender of themselves to their worst selves, dead on what I may call the top side of their nature, and that all that is there is atrophied and dwindling away.

Unconsciousness is one characteristic of death. And oh! as I look round I know that there are tens, and perhaps hundreds, of men and women who are all but utterly unconscious of a whole universe in which are the only realities, and to which it becomes them to have access. You live, in the physical sense, and move and have your being in God, and yet your inmost life would not be altered one hair’s-breadth if there were no God at all. You pass the most resplendent instances and illustrations of His presence, His work, and you see nothing. You are blind on that side of your natures; or, as my text says, dead to the whole spiritual realm. Just as if there were a brick wall run against some man’s windows so that he could see nothing out of them; so you, by your persistent adherence to the paltry present, the material, the visible, the selfish, have reared up a wall against the windows of your souls that look heavenwards; and of God, and all the lofty starry realities that cluster round Him, you are as unconscious as the corpse upon its bier is of the sunshine that plays upon its pallid features, or of the dew that falls on its stiffened limbs. Dead, because of sin-is that exaggeration? Is it exaggeration which charges all but absolute unconsciousness of spiritual realities upon worldly men like some of you?

And, then, take another illustration. Another of the signatures of death is inactivity. And oh! what faculties in some of my friends listening to me now are shrivelled and all but extinct! They are dormant, at any rate, to use another word, for the death of my text is not so absolute a death but that a resurrection is possible, and so dormant comes to express pretty nearly the same thing. Faculties of service, of enthusiasm, of life for God, of noble obedience to Him-what have you done with them? Left them there until they have stiffened like an unused lock, or rusted like the hinges of an unopened door; and you are as little active in all the noblest activities of spirit, which are activities in submission to and dependence upon Him, as if you were laid in your coffin with your idle hands crossed for evermore upon an unheaving breast.

There is another illustration that I may suggest for a moment. Decay is another characteristic and signature of death. And your best self, in some of you, is rotting to corruption by sin.

Ay! Dear brethren, when we think of these tragedies of suicide that are going on in thousands of men round about us to-day, it seems to me as if the metaphor and the reality were reversed; and instead of saying that my text is a violent metaphor, transferring the facts of material death and corruption to the spiritual realm, I am almost disposed to say it is the other way about, and the real death is the death of the spirit; and the outer dissolution and unconsciousness and inactivity of the material body is only a kind of parable to preach to men what are the awful invisible facts ever associated with the fact of transgression.

There are three lives possible for each of us; two of them involuntary, the third requiring our consent and effort, but all of them sustained by the same cause. The first of them is that which we call life, the activity and the consciousness of the bodily frame; and that continues as long as the power of God keeps the body in life. When He withdraws His hand there comes what the senses call death. Then there is the natural life of thinking, loving, willing, enjoying, sorrowing, and the like, and that continues as long as He who is the life and light of men breathes into them the breath of that life. And these two are lived or died largely without the man’s own consent or choice.

But there is a third life, when all that lower is lifted to God, and thinking and willing and loving and enjoying and aspiring and trusting and obeying, and all these natural faculties find their home and their consecration and their immortality in Him. That life is only lived by our own will and it is the true life, and the others are, as I said, but parables, and envelopes, and vehicles, as it were, in which this life is carried, that is more precious than they. In the physical realm, separate the body from God, and it dies. In the natural conscious life, separate the soul, as we call it, from God, and it dies. And in the higher region, separate the spirit, which is the man grasping God, from God, and he dies; and that is the real death. Both the others are nothing in comparison with it.

It may co-exist with a large amount of intellectual and other forms of activity, as we see all round about us, and that makes it only the more ghastly and the sadder. You are full of energy in regard to all other subjects, but smitten into torpor about the highest; ready to live, to work, to enjoy, to think, to will, in all other directions, and utterly unconscious and unconcerned, or all but utterly unconscious and unconcerned, in regard to God.

Oh! a death which is co-existent with such feverish intensity of life as the most of you are expending all the week at your business and your daily pursuits is among the saddest of all the tragedies that angels are called upon to weep over, and that men are fools enough to enact. Brother! If the representation is a gloomy one, do not you think that it is better to ask the question-Is it a true one? than, Is it a cheerful one? I lay it upon your hearts that he that lives to God and with God is alive to the centre as well as out to the finger tips and circumference of his visible being. He that is dead to God is dead indeed whilst he lives.

II. Now, notice, in the second place, the pitying love that looks down on the cemetery.

‘God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us.’ Thus the great truth that is taught us here, first of all, is that that divine love of the Divine Father bends down over His dead children and cherishes them still. Oh! you can do much in separating yourselves from God through selfishness, selfwill, sensuality, or other forms of sin, but there is one thing you cannot do, you cannot prevent His loving you. If I might venture without seeming irreverent, I would point to that pathetic page in the Old Testament history where the king hears of the death, red-handed in treason, of his darling son, and careless of victory and forgetful of everything else, and oblivious that Absalom was a rebel, and only remembering that he was his boy, burst into that monotonous wail that has come down over all the centuries as the deepest expression of undying fatherly love. ‘Oh! my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Oh! Absalom, my son, my son!’ The name and the relationship will well up out of the Father’s heart, whatever the child’s crime. We are all His Absaloms, and though we are dead in trespasses and in sins, God, who is rich in mercy, bends over us and loves us with His great love.

The Apostle might well expatiate in these two varying forms of speech, both of them intended to express the same thing-’rich in mercy’ and ‘great in love.’ For surely a love which takes account of the sin that cannot repel it, and so shapes itself into mercy, sparing, and departing from the strict line of retribution and justice, is great. And surely a mercy which refuses to be provoked by seventy times seven transgressions in an hour, not to say a day, is rich. That mercy is wider than all humanity, deeper than all sin, was before all rebellion, and will last for ever. And it is open for every soul of man to receive if he will.

But there is another point to be noticed in reference to this wonderful manifestation of the divine love looking down upon the myriads of men dead in sin, and that is that this love shapes the divine action. Mark the language of our text, in which the Apostle attributes a certain line of conduct in the divine dealings with us to the fact of His great love. Because 'He loved us' therefore He did so and so. Now about that I have only two remarks to make, and I will make them very briefly. The one is, here is a demonstration, for some of you people who do not believe in the Evangelical doctrine of an Atonement by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that the true scriptural representation of that doctrine is not that which caricaturists have represented it-viz. that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ changed in any manner the divine heart and disposition. It is not as unfriendly critics [who, perhaps, are not to be so much blamed for their unfriendliness as for their superficiality] would have us to believe, that the doctrine of Atonement says that God loves because Christ died. But the Apostle who preached that doctrine and looked upon it as the very heart and centre of his message to the world here puts as the true sequence-Christ died because God loves. Jesus Christ said the same thing, 'God so loved the world that He sent His Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should be saved.'

And that brings me to the second of the remarks which I wish briefly to make-viz. this, that the Divine Love, great, patient, wonderful, unrepelled by men's sin, as it is, has to adopt a process to reach its end. God by His love does not, because He cannot, raise these dead souls into a life of righteousness without Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ comes to be the channel and the medium through which the love of God may attain its end. God's pitying love, because 'He is rich in mercy,' is not turned away by man's sin; and God's pitying love, because 'He is rich in mercy,' quickens men not by a bare will, but by the mission and work of His dear Son.

III. And so that is the last thing on which I speak a word-viz. the resurrection of the dead souls.

They died of sin. That was the disease that killed them. They cannot be quickened unless the disease be conquered. Dear brethren, I have to preach-not to argue, but to preach-and to press upon each soul the individual acceptance of the Death of Jesus Christ as being for each of us, if we will trust Him, the death of our death, and the death of our sin. By His great sacrifice and sufficient oblation He has borne the sins of the world and has taken away their guilt. And in Him the inmost reality of the spiritual death, and its outermost parable of corporeal dissolution, are equally and simultaneously overcome. If you will take Him for your Lord you will rise from the death of guilt, condemnation, selfishness, and sin into a new life of liberty, sonship, consecration, and righteousness, and will never see death.

And, on the other hand, the life of Jesus Christ is available for all of us. If we will put our trust in Him, His life will pass into our deadness; He Himself will vitalise our being, dormant capacities will be quickened and brought into blessed activity, a new direction will be given to the old faculties, desires, aspirations, emotions of our nature. The will will tower into new power because it obeys. The heart will throb with a better life because it has grasped a love that cannot change and will never die. And the thinking power will be brought into living, personal contact with the personal Truth, so that whatsoever darknesses and problems may still be left, at the centre there will be light and satisfaction and peace. You will live if you trust Christ and let Him be your Life.

And if thus, by simple faith in Him, knowing that the power of His atoning death has destroyed the burden of our guilt and condemnation, and knowing the quickening influences of His constraining love as drawing us to love new things and make us new creatures, we receive into our inmost spirits ‘the law of the spirit of life’ which was in Christ Jesus, and are thereby made ‘free from the law of sin and death,’ then it is only a question of time, when the vitalising force shall flow into all the cracks and crannies of our being and deliver us wholly from the bondage of corruption in the outer as well as in the inner life; for they who have learned that Christ is the life of their lives upon earth can never cease their appropriation of the fulness of

His quickening power until He has ‘changed the body of their humiliation into the likeness of the body of His glory, according to the working whereby He is able to subdue even all things unto Himself.’

Brethren! He Himself has said, and His words I beseech you to remember though you forget all mine, ‘He that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live, and he that liveth and believeth in Me shall never die.’ ‘Believest thou this?’

11)Ephesians 2:7

EPHESIANS

‘THE RICHES OF GRACE’

Eph. 2:7

One very striking characteristic of this epistle is its frequent reference to God’s purposes, and what, for want of a better word, we must call His motives, in giving us Jesus Christ. The Apostle seems to rise even higher than his ordinary height, while he gazes up to the inaccessible light, and with calm certainty proclaims not only what God has done, but why He has done it. Through all the earlier portions of this letter, the things on earth are contemplated in the light of the things in heaven. The great work of redemption is illuminated by the thought of the will and meaning of God therein; for example, we read in Chapter i. that He ‘hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in Christ, according as He hath chosen us in Him,’ and immediately after we read that He ‘has predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ according to the good pleasure of His will.’ Soon after, we hear that ‘He hath revealed to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself’; and that our predestination to an inheritance in Christ is ‘according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will.’

Not only so, but the motive or reason for the divine action in the gift of Christ is brought out in a rich variety of expression as being ‘the praise of the glory of His grace’ [1-6], or ‘that He might gather together in one all things in Christ' [1-10], or that 'we should be to the praise of His glory' [1-12], or that 'unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God.'

In like manner our text follows a sublime statement of what has been bestowed upon men in Jesus, with an equally sublime insight into the divine purpose of thereby showing 'the exceeding riches of His grace.' Such heights are not for our unaided traversing; it is neither reverent nor safe to speculate, and still less to dogmatise, concerning the meaning of the divine acts, but here, at all events, we have, as I believe, not a man making unwarranted assertions about God's purposes, but God Himself by a man, letting us see so far into the depths of Deity as to know the very deepest meaning of His very greatest acts, and when God speaks, it is neither reverent nor safe to refuse to listen.

I. The purpose of God in Christ is the display of His grace.

Of course we cannot speak of motives in the divine mind as in ours; they imply a previous state of indecision and an act of choice, from which comes the slow emerging of a resolve like that of the moon from the sea. A given end being considered by us desirable, we then cast about for means to secure it, which again implies limitation of power. Still we can speak of God's motives, if only we understand, as this epistle puts it so profoundly, that His 'is an eternal purpose which He purposed in Himself,' which never began to be formed, and was not formed by reason of anything external.

With that caution Paul would have us think that God's chiefest purpose in all the wondrous facts which make up the Gospel is the setting forth of Himself, and that the chiefest part of Himself, which He desires that all men should come to know, is the glory of His grace. Of course very many and various reasons for these acts may be alleged, but this is the deepest of them all. It has often been misunderstood and made into a very hard and horrible doctrine, which really means little else than all-mighty selfishness, but it is really a most blessed one; it is the proclamation in tenderest, most heart-melting fashion of the truth that God is Love, and therefore delights in imparting that which is His creatures' life and blessedness; it bids us think that He, too, amidst the blessedness of His infinite Being, knows the joy of communicating which makes so large a part of the blessedness of our finite selves, and that He, too, is capable of being touched and gladdened by the joy of expression. As an artist in his noblest work paints or chisels simply for love of pouring out his soul, so, but in infinitely loftier fashion, the great Artist delights to manifest Himself, and in manifesting to communicate somewhat of Himself. Creation is divine self-revelation, and we might say, with all reverence, that God acts as birds sing, and fountains leap, and stars shine.

But our text leads us still farther into mysteries of glory, when it defines what it is in God that he most desires to set forth. It is the 'exceeding riches of Grace,' in which wonderful expression we note the Apostle's passionate accumulation of epithets which he yet feels to be altogether inadequate to his theme. It would carry us too far to attempt to bring out the whole wealth contained in these words which glide so easily over unthinking lips, but we may lovingly dwell for a few moments upon them. Grace, in Paul's language, means love lavished upon the undeserving and sinful, a love which is not drawn forth by the perception of any excellence in its objects, but wells up and out like a fountain, by reason of the impulse in its subject, and which in itself contains and bestows all good and blessing. There may be, as this very letter shows, other aspects of the divine nature which God is glad that man should know. His power and His wisdom have their noblest illustration in the work of Jesus, and are less conspicuously manifested in all His work; but His grace is shrined in Christ alone, and from Him flows forth into a thirsty world. That love, 'unmerited and free,' holds in solution power, wisdom and all the other physical or metaphysical perfections belonging to God with all their energies. It is the elixir in which they are all contained, the molten splendour into which have been dissolved gold and jewels and all precious things. When we look at Christ, we see the divinest thing in God, and that is His grace. The Christ who shows us and certifies to us the grace of God must surely be more than man. Men look at Him and see it; He shows us that grace because He was full of grace and truth.

But Paul is here not propounding theological dogmas, but pouring out a heart full of personal experience, and so adds yet other words to express what he himself has found in the Divine Grace, and speaks of its riches. He has learned fully to trust its fulness, and in his own daily life has had the witness of its inexhaustible abundance, which remains the same after all its gifts. It ‘operates unspent.’ That continually self-communicating love pours out in no narrower stream to its last recipient than to its first. All ‘eat and are filled,’ and after they are satisfied, twelve baskets full of fragments are taken up. These riches are exceeding; they surpass all human conception, all parallel, all human needs; they are properly transcendent.

This, then, is what God would have us know of Himself. So His love is at once the motive of His great message to us in Jesus Christ, and is the whole contents of the message, like some fountain, the force of whose pellucid waters cleanses the earth, and rushes into the sunshine, being at once the reason for the flow and that which flows. God reveals because He loves, and His love is that which He reveals.

II. The great manifestation of grace is God’s kindness to us in Christ.

All the revelation of God in Creation and Providence carries the same message, but it is often there hard to decipher, like some half-obliterated inscription in a strange tongue. In Jesus the writing is legible, continuous, and needs no elaborate commentary to make its meaning intelligible. But we may note that what the Apostle founds on here is not so much Christ in Himself, as that which men receive in Christ. As he puts it in another part of this epistle, it is ‘through the Church’ that ‘principalities and powers in heavenly places’ are made to ‘know the manifold wisdom of God.’ It is ‘His kindness towards us’ by which ‘to the ages to come,’ is made known the exceeding riches of grace, and that kindness can be best estimated by thinking what we were, namely, dead in trespasses and sins; what we are, namely, quickened together in Christ; raised up with Him, and with Him made to sit in heavenly places, as the immediately preceding clauses express it. All this marvellous transformation of conditions and of self is realised ‘in Christ Jesus.’ These three words recur over and over again in this profound epistle, and may be taken as its very keynote. It would carry us beyond all limits to deal with the various uses and profound meanings of this phrase in this letter, but we may at least point out how intimately and inseparably it is intertwined with the other aspect of our relations to Christ in which He is mainly regarded as dying for us, and may press upon you that these two are not, as they have sometimes been taken to be, antagonistic but complementary. We shall never understand the depths of the one Apostolic conception unless we bring it into closest connection with the other. Christ is for us only if we are in Christ; we are in Christ only because He died for us.

God’s kindness is all ‘in Christ Jesus’; in Him is the great channel through which His love comes to men, the river of God which is full of water. And that kindness is realised by us when we are ‘in Christ.’ Separated from Him we do not possess it; joined to Him as we may be by true faith in Him, it is ours, and with it all the blessings which it brings into our else empty and thirsting hearts. Now all this sets in strong light the dignity and work of Christian men; the profundity and clearness of their religious character is the great sign to the world of the love of God. The message of Christ to man lacks one chief evidence of its worth if they who profess to have received it do not, in their lives, show its value. The characters of Christian people are in every age the clearest and most effectual witnesses of the power of the Gospel. God’s honour is in their hands. The starry heavens are best seen by reflecting telescopes, which, in their field, mirror the brightness above.

III. The manifestation of God through men ‘in Christ’ is for all ages.

In our text the ages to come open up into a vista of undefined duration, and, just as in another place in this epistle, Paul regards the Church as witnessing to the principalities and powers in heavenly places, so here he regards it as the perennial evidence to all generations of the ever-flowing riches of God’s grace. Whatever may have been the Apostle’s earlier expectations of the speedy coming of the day of the Lord, here he obviously expects the world to last through a long stretch of undefined time, and for all its changing epochs to have an unchanging light. That standing witness, borne by men in Christ, of the grace which has been so kind to them, is not to be antiquated nor superseded, but is as valid to-day as when these words gushed from the heart of Paul. Eyes which cannot look upon the sun can see it as a golden glory, tinging the clouds which lie cradled around it. And as long as the world lasts, so long will Christian men be God’s witnesses to it.

There are then two questions of infinite importance to us-do we show in character and conduct the grace which we have received by reverently submitting ourselves to its transforming energy? We need to be very close to Him for ourselves if we would worthily witness to others of what we have found Him to be. We have but too sadly marred our witness, and have been like dim reflectors round a lamp which have received but little light from it, and have communicated even less than we have received. Do we see the grace that shines so brightly in Jesus Christ? God longs that we should so see; He calls us by all endearments and by loving threats to look to that Incarnation of Himself. And when we lift our eyes to behold, what is it that meets our gaze? Intolerable light? The blaze of the white throne? Power that crushes our puny might? No! the 'exceeding riches of grace.' The voice cries, 'Behold your God!' and what we see is, 'In the midst of the throne a lamb as it had been slain.'

12)Ephesians 2:8

EPHESIANS

SALVATION: GRACE: FAITH

Eph. 2:8

Here are three of the key-words of the New Testament-'grace,' 'saved,' 'faith.' Once these terms were strange and new; now they are old and threadbare. Once they were like lava, glowing and cast up from the central depths; but it is a long while since the eruption, and the blocks have got cold, and the corners have been rubbed off them. I am afraid that some people, when they read such a text, will shrug the shoulder of weariness, and think that they are in for a dreary sermon.

But the more familiar a word is, the more likely are common ideas about it to be hazy. We substitute acquaintance with the sound for penetration into the sense. A frond of sea-weed, as long as it is in the ocean, unfolds its delicate films and glows with its subdued colours. Take it out, and it is hard and brown and ugly, and you have to plunge it into the water again before you see its beauty. So with these well-worn Christian terms; you have to put them back, by meditation and thought, especially as to their bearing on yourself, in order to understand their significance and to feel their power. And, although it is very hard, I want to try and do that for a few moments with this grand thought that lies in my text.

I. Here we have the Christian view of man's deepest need, and God's greatest gift.

'Ye have been saved.' Now, as I have said, 'saved,' and 'salvation,' and 'Saviour,' are all threadbare words. Let us try to grasp the whole throbbing meaning that is in them. Well, to begin with, and in its original and lowest application, this whole set of expressions is applied to physical danger from which it delivers, and physical disease which it heals. So, in the Gospels, for instance, you find 'Thy faith hath made thee whole'-literally, 'saved thee' And you hear one of the Apostles crying, in an excess of terror and collapse of faith, 'Save! Master! we perish!' The two notions that are conveyed in our familiar expression 'safe and sound,' both lie in the word-deliverance from danger, and healing of disease.

Then, when you lift it up into the loftier region, into which Christianity buoyed it up, the same double meaning attaches to it. The Christian salvation is, on its negative side, a deliverance from something impending-peril-and a healing of something infecting us-the sickness of sin.

It is a deliverance; what from? Take, in the briefest possible language, three sayings of Scripture to answer that question-what am I to be saved from? 'His name shall be called Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins.' He 'delivers'-or saves-'us from the wrath to come.' He 'saves a soul from death.' Sin, wrath death, death spiritual as well as physical, these are the dangers which lie in wait; and the enemies which have laid their grip upon us. And from these, as the shepherd drags the kid from the claws of the lion or the bear's hug, the salvation of the Gospel wrenches and rescues men.

The same general conceptions emerge, if we notice, on the other side-what are the things which the New Testament sets forth as the opposites of its salvation? Take, again, a brief reference to Scripture words: 'The Son of Man came not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.' So the antithesis is between judgment or condemnation on the one hand, and salvation on the other. That suggests thoughts substantially identical with the preceding but still more solemn, as bringing in the prospect a tribunal and a judge. The Gospel then reveals the Mighty Power that lifts itself between us and judgment, the Mighty Power that intervenes to prevent absolute destruction, the Power which saves from sin, from wrath, from death.

Along with them we may take the other thought, that salvation, as the New Testament understands it, is not only the rescue and deliverance of a man from evils conceived to lie round about him, and to threaten his being from without, but that it is his healing from evils which have so wrought themselves into his very being, and infected his whole nature, as that the emblem for them is a sickness unto death for the healing from which this mighty Physician comes. These are the negative sides of this great Christian thought.

But the New Testament salvation is more than a shelter, more than an escape. It not only trammels up evil possibilities, and prevents them from falling upon men's heads, but it introduces all good. It not only strips off the poisoned robe, but it invests with a royal garb. It is not only negatively the withdrawal from the power, and the setting above the reach, of all evil, in the widest sense of that word, physical and moral, but it is the endowment with every good, in the widest sense of that word, physical and moral, which man is capable of receiving, or God has wealth to bestow. And this positive significance of the Christian salvation, which includes not only pardon, and favour, and purity, and blessedness here in germ, and sure and certain hope of an overwhelming glory hereafter-this is all suggested to us by the fact that in Scripture, more than once, to 'have everlasting life,' and to 'enter into the Kingdom of God,' are employed as equivalent and alternative expressions for being saved with the salvation of God.

And that leads me to another point-my text, as those of you who have used the Revised Version will observe, is there slightly modified in translation, and reads 'Ye have been saved,'-a past act, done once, and with abiding present consequences, which are realised progressively in the Christian life, and reach forward into infinitude. So the Scripture sometimes speaks of salvation as past, 'He saved us by His mercy': sometimes of it as present and progressive, 'The Lord added to the Church daily those that were [in process of] being saved': sometimes of it as future, 'now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.' In that future all that is involved in the word will be evolved from it in blessed experience onwards through eternity.

I have said that we should try to make an effort to fathom the depth of meaning in this and other familiar commonplace terms of Scripture. But no effort prior to experience will ever fathom it. There was in the papers some time ago an account of some extraordinary deep-sea soundings that have been made away down in the South Pacific, 29,400 feet and no bottom, and the wire broke. The highest peak of the Himalayas might be put into that abyss, and there would be hundreds of feet between it and the surface. He 'casts all our sins,' mountainous as they are, behind His back 'into the depths of the sea'; and no plummet that man can drop will ever reach its profound abyss. 'Thy judgments are a great deep,' and deeper than the judgments is the depth of Thy salvation.

And now, brethren, before I go further, notice the-I was going to say theory, but that is a cold word-the facts of man's condition and need that underlie this great Christian term of salvation-viz. we are all in deadly peril; we are all sick of a fatal disease. 'Ah!' you say, 'that is Paul.' Yes! it is Paul. But it is not Paul only; it is Paul's Master, and, I hope, your Master; for He not only spoke loving, gentle words to and about men, and not only was grace poured into His lips, but there is another side to His utterances. No one ever spoke sadder, sterner words about the real condition of men than Jesus Christ did. Lost sheep, lost coins, prodigal sons, builders of houses on the sand that are destined to be blown down and flooded away, men in danger of an undying worm and unquenchable fire-these are parts of Christ's representations of the condition of humanity, and these are the conceptions that underlie this great thought of salvation as being man's deepest need.

It goes far deeper down than any of the superficial constructions of what humanity requires, which are found among non-Christian, social and economical, and intellectual and political reformers. It includes all that is true in the estimate of any of these people, and it supplies all that they aim at. But it goes far beyond them. And as they stand pottering round the patient, and administering-what shall I say? 'pills for the earthquake,' as we once heard-it comes and brushes them aside and says, 'Physicians of no value! here is the thing that is wanted-salvation that comes from God.'

Brother! it is what you need. Do not be led away by the notion that wealth, or culture, or anything less than Christ's gift to men will meet your necessities. If once we catch a glimpse of what we really are, there will be no words wanted to enforce the priceless value of the salvation that the Gospel offers. It is sure to be an uninteresting word and thing to a man who does not feel himself to be a sinner. It is sure to be of perennial worth to a man who does. Life-belts lie unnoticed on the cabin-shelf above the berth as long as the sun is bright, and the sea calm, and everything goes well; but when the ship gets on the rocks the passengers fight to get them. If you know yourself, you will know that salvation is what you need.

II. Here we have the Christian unfolding of the source of salvation.

‘By grace ye have been saved.’ There is another threadbare word. It is employed in the New Testament with a very considerable width of signification, which we do not need to attend to here. But, in regard of the present context, let me just point out that the main idea conveyed by the word is that of favour, or lovingkindness, or goodwill, especially when directed to inferiors, and most eminently when given to those who do not deserve it, but deserve its opposite. ‘Grace’ is love that stoops and that requites, not according to desert, but bestows upon those who deserve nothing of the kind; so when the Apostle declares that the source of salvation is ‘grace.’ he declares two things. One is that the fountain of all our deliverance from sin, and of our healing of our sicknesses, lies in the deep heart of God, from which it wells up undrawn, unmotived, uncaused by anything except His own infinite lovingkindness. People have often presented the New Testament teaching about salvation as if it implied that God’s love was brought to man because Jesus Christ died, and turned the divine affections. That is not New Testament teaching. Christ’s death is not the cause of God’s love, but God’s love is the cause of Christ’s death. ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.’

When we hear in the Old Testament, ‘I am that I am,’ we may apply it to this great subject. For that declaration of the very inmost essence of the divine nature is not merely the declaration, in half metaphysical terms, of a self-substituting, self-determining Being, high above limitation and time and change, but it is a declaration that when He loves He loves freely and unmodified save by the constraint of His own Being. Just as the light, because it is light and must radiate, falls upon dunghills and diamonds, upon black rocks and white snow, upon ice-peaks and fertile fields, so the great fountain of the Divine Grace pours out upon men by reason only of its own continual tendency to communicate its own fulness and blessedness.

There follows from that the other thought, on which the Apostle mainly dwells in our context, that the salvation which we need, and may have, is not won by desert, but is given as a gift. Mark the last words of my text-'that not of yourselves it is the gift of God.' They have often been misunderstood, as if they referred to the faith which is mentioned just before. But that is a plain misconception of the Apostle's meaning, and is contradicted by the whole context. It is not faith that is the gift of God, but it is salvation by grace. That is plain if you will read on to the next verse. 'By grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works lest any man should boast.' What is it that is 'not of works'? Faith? certainly not. Nobody would ever have thought it worth while to say, 'faith is not of works,' because nobody would have said that it was. The two clauses necessarily refer to the same thing, and if the latter of them must refer to salvation by grace, so must the former. Thus, the Apostle's meaning is that we get salvation, not because we work for it but because God gives it as a free gift, for which we have nothing to render, and which we can never deserve.

Now, I am sure that there are some of you who are saying to yourselves, 'This is that old, threadbare, commonplace preaching again!' Well! shame on us preachers if we have made a living Gospel into a dead theology. And shame no less on you hearers if by you the words that should be good news that would make the tongue of the dumb sing, and the lame man leap as a hart, have been petrified and fossilised into a mere dogma.

I know far better than you do how absolutely inadequate all my words are, but I want to bring it to you and to lay it not on your heads only but on your hearts, as the good news that we all need, that we have not to buy, that we have not to work to get salvation, but that having got it we have to work thereafter. 'What shall we do that we might work the works of God?' A whole series of diverse, long, protracted, painful toils? Christ swept away the question by striking out the 's' at the end of the word, and answered, 'This is the work' [not 'works'] 'of God,' the one thing which will open out into all heroism and practical obedience, ‘that ye believe on Him to whom He hath sent.’

III. That leads me to the last point-viz. the Christian requirement of the condition of salvation.

Note the precision of the Apostle’s prepositions: ‘Ye have been saved by grace’; there is the source-’Ye have been saved by grace, through faith’-there is the medium, the instrument, or, if I may so say, the channel; or, to put it into other words, the condition by which the salvation which has its source in the deep heart of God pours its waters into my empty heart. ‘Through faith,’ another threadbare word, which, withal, has been dreadfully darkened by many comments, and has unfortunately been so represented as that people fancy it is some kind of special attitude of mind and heart, which is only brought to bear in reference to Christ’s Gospel. It is a thousand pities, one sometimes thinks, that the word was not translated ‘trust’ instead of ‘faith,’ and then we should have understood that it was not a theological virtue at all, but just the common thing that we all know so well, which is the cement of human society and the blessedness of human affection, and which only needs to be lifted, as a plant that had been running along the ground, and had its tendrils bruised and its fruit marred might be lifted, and twined round the pillar of God’s throne, in order to grow up and bear fruit that shall be found after many days unto praise, and honour, and glory.

Trust; that is the condition. The salvation rises from the heart of God. You cannot touch the stream at its source, but you can tap it away down in its flow. What do you want machinery and pumps for? Put a yard of wooden pipe into the river, and your house will have all the water it needs.

So, dear brethren, here is the condition-it is a condition only, for there is no virtue in the act of trust, but only in that with which we are brought into living union when we do trust. When salvation comes, into my heart by faith it is not my faith but God’s grace that puts salvation there.

Faith is only the condition, ay! but it is the indispensable condition. How many ways are there of getting possession of a gift? One only, I should suppose, and that is, to put out a hand and take it. If salvation is by grace it must be 'through faith.' If you will not accept you cannot have. That is the plain meaning of what theologians call justification by faith; that pardon is given on condition of taking it. If you do not take it you cannot have it. And so this is the upshot of the whole-trust, and you have.

Oh, dear friends! open your eyes to see your dangers. Let your conscience tell you of your sickness. Do not try to deliver, or to heal yourselves. Self-reliance and self-help are very good things, but they leave their limitations, and they have no place here. 'Every man his own Redeemer' will not work. You can no more extricate yourself from the toils of sin than a man can release himself from the folds of a python. You can no more climb to heaven by your own effort than you can build a railway to the moon. You must sue in forma pauperis, and be content to accept as a boon an unmerited place in your Father's heart, an undeserved seat at His bountiful table, an unearned share in His wealth, from the hands of your Elder Brother, in whom is all His grace, and who gives salvation to every sinner if he will trust Him. 'By grace have ye been saved through faith.'

13)Ephesians 2:10

EPHESIANS

GOD'S WORKMANSHIP AND OUR WORKS

Eph. 2:10

The metal is molten as it runs out of the blast furnace, but it soon cools and hardens. Paul's teaching about salvation by grace and by faith came in a hot stream from his heart, but to this generation his words are apt to sound coldly, and hardly theological. But they only need to be reflected upon in connection with our own experience, to become vivid and vital again. The belief that a man may work towards salvation is a universal heresy. And the Apostle, in the context, summons all his force to destroy that error, and to substitute the great truth that we have to begin with an act of God's, and only after that can think about our acts. To work up towards salvation is, in the strict sense of the words, preposterous; it is inverting the order of things. It is beginning at the wrong end. It is saying X Y Z before you have learnt to say A B C. We are to work downwards from salvation because we have it, not that we may get it. And whatever ‘good works’ may mean, they are the consequences, not the causes, of ‘salvation,’ whatever that may mean. But they are consequences, and they are the very purpose of it. So says Paul in the archaic language of my text-which only wants a little steadfast looking at to be turned into up-to-date gospel-’We are His workmanship, created unto good works’; and the fact that we are is one great reason for the assertion which he brings it in to buttress, that we are saved by grace, not by works. Now, I wish, in the simplest possible way, to deal with these great words, and take them as they lie before us.

I. We have, first, then, this as the root of everything, the divine creation.

Now, you will find that in this profound letter of the Apostle there are two ideas cropping up over and over again, both of them representing the facts of the Christian life and of the transition from the unchristian to the Christian; and the one is Resurrection and the other is Creation. They have this in common, that they suggest the idea that the great gift which Christianity brings to men-no, do not let me use the abstract word ‘Christianity’-the great gift which Christ brings to men-is a new life. The low popular notion that salvation means mainly and primarily immunity from the ultimate, most lasting future consequences of transgression, a change of place or of condition, infects us all, and is far too dominant in our popular notions of Christianity and of salvation. And it is because people have such an unworthy, narrow, selfish idea of what ‘salvation’ is that they fall into the bog of misconception as to how it is to be attained. The ordinary man’s way of looking at the whole matter is summed up in a sentence which I heard not long since about a recently deceased friend of the speaker’s, and the like of which you have no doubt often heard and perhaps said, ‘He is sure to be saved because he has lived so straight.’ And at the foundation of that confident epitaph lay a tragical, profound misapprehension of what salvation was.

For it is something done in you; it is not something that you get, but it is something that you become. The teaching of this letter, and of the whole New Testament, is that the profoundest and most precious of all the gifts which come to us in Jesus Christ, and which in their totality are summed up in the one word that has so little power over us, because we understand it so little, and know it so well-'salvation'-is a change in a man's nature so deep, radical, vital, as that it may fairly be paralleled with a resurrection from the dead.

Now, I venture to believe that it is something more than a strong rhetorical figure when that change is described as being the creation of a new man within us. The resurrection symbol for the same fact may be treated as but a symbol. You cannot treat the teaching of a new life in Christ as being a mere figure. It is something a great deal more than that, and when once a man's eye is opened to look for it in the New Testament it is wonderful how it flashes out from every page and underlies the whole teaching. The Gospel of John, for example, is but one long symphony which has for its dominant theme 'I am come that they might have life.' And that great teaching-which has been so vulgarised, narrowed, and mishandled by sacerdotal pretensions and sacramentarian superstitions-that great teaching of Regeneration, or the new birth, rests upon this as its very basis, that what takes place when a man turns to Jesus Christ, and is saved by Him, is that there is communicated to him not in symbol but in spiritual fact [and spiritual facts are far more true than external ones which are called real] a spark of Christ's own life, something of 'that spirit of life which was in Christ Jesus,' and by which, and by which alone, being transfused into us, we become 'free from the law of sin and death.' I beseech you, brethren, see that, in your perspective of Christian truth, the thought of a new life imparted to us has as prominent and as dominant a place as it obviously has in the teaching of the New Testament. It is not so dominant in the current notions of Christianity that prevail amongst average people, but it is so in all men who let themselves be guided by the plain teaching of Christ Himself and of all His servants. Salvation? Yes! And the very essence of the salvation is the breathing into me of a divine life, so that I become partaker of 'the divine nature.'

Now, there is another step to be taken, and that is that this new life is realised in Christ Jesus. Now, this letter of the Apostle is distinguished even amongst his letters by the extraordinary frequency and emphasis with which he uses that expression 'in Christ Jesus.' If you will take up the epistle, and run your eye over it at your leisure, I think you will be surprised to find how, in all connections, and linked with every sort of blessing and good as its condition, there recurs that phrase. It is ‘in Christ’ that we obtain the inheritance; it is ‘in Christ’ that we receive ‘redemption, even the forgiveness of sins’; it is in Him that we are ‘builded together for a habitation of God’; it is in Him that all fulness of divine gifts, and all blessedness of spiritual capacities, is communicated to us; and unless, in our perspective of the Christian life, that expression has the same prominence as it has in this letter, we have yet to learn the sweetest sweetness, and have yet to receive the most mighty power, of the Gospel that we profess. ‘In Christ’-a union which leaves the individuality of the Saviour and of the saint unimpaired, because without such individuality sweet love were slain, and there were no communion possible, but which is so close, so real, so vital, as that only the separating wall of personality and individual consciousness comes in between-that is the New Testament teaching of the relation of the Christian to Christ. Is it your experience, dear brother? Do not be frightened by talking about mysticism. If a Christianity has no mysticism it has no life. There is a wholesome mysticism and there is a morbid one, and the wholesome one is the very nerve of the Gospel as it is presented by Jesus Himself: ‘I am the Vine, ye are the branches. Abide in Me, and I in you.’ If our nineteenth century busy Christianity could only get hold of that truth as firmly as it grasps the representative and sacrificial character of Christ’s work, I believe it would come like a breath of spring over ‘the winter of our discontent,’ and would change profoundly and blessedly the whole contexture of modern Christianity.

And now there is another step to take, and that is that this union with Christ, which results in the communication of a new life, or, as my text puts it, a new creation, depends upon our faith. We are not passive in the matter. There is the condition on which the entrance of the life into our spirits is made possible. You must open the door, you must fling wide the casement, and the blessed warm morning air of the sun of righteousness, with healing in its beams, will rush in, scatter the darkness and raise the temperature. ‘Faith’ by which we simply mean the act of the mind in accepting and of the will and heart in casting one’s self upon Christ as the Saviour-that act is the condition of this new life. And so each Christian is ‘God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus.’

And now, says Paul-and here some of us will hesitate to follow him-that new creation has to go before what you call ‘good works.’ Now, do not let us exaggerate. There has seldom been a more disastrous and untrue thing said than what one of the Fathers dared to say, that the virtues of godless men were ‘splendid vices.’ That is not so, and that is not the New Testament teaching. Good is good, whoever does it. But, then, no man will say that actions, however they may meet the human conception of excellence, however bright, pure, lofty in motive and in aim they may be, reach their highest possible radiance and are as good as they ought to be, if they are done without any reference to God and His love. Dear brethren, we surely do not need to have the alphabet of morality repeated to us, that the worth of an action depends upon its motive, that no motive is correspondent to our capacities and our relation to God and our consequent responsibilities, except the motive of loving obedience to Him. Unless that be present, the brightest of human acts must be convicted of having dark shadows in it, and all the darker because of the brightness that may stream from it. And so I venture to assert that since the noblest systems of morality, apart from religion, will all coincide in saying that to be is more than to do, and that the worth of an action depends upon its motive, we are brought straight up to the ‘narrow, bigoted’ teaching of the New Testament, that unless a man is swayed by the love of God in what he does, you cannot, in the most searching analysis, say that his deed is as good as it ought to be, and as it might be. To be good is the first thing, to do good is the second. Make the tree good and its fruit good. And since, as we have made ourselves we are evil, there must come a re-creation before we can do the good deeds which our relation to God requires at our hands.

II. I ask you to look at the purpose of this new creation brought out in our text.

‘Created in Christ Jesus unto good works.’ That is what life is given to you for. That is why you are saved, says Paul. Instead of working upwards from works to salvation, take your stand at the received salvation, and understand what it is for, and work downwards from it.

Now, do not let us take that phrase, ‘good works,’ which I have already said came hot from the Apostle’s heart, and is now cold as a bar of iron, in the limited sense which it has come to bear in modern religious phraseology. It means something a great deal more than that. It covers the whole ground of what the Apostle, in another of his letters, speaks of when he says, ‘Whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, if there be any virtue’-to use for a moment the world’s word, which has such power to conjure in Greek ethics-’or if there be any praise’-to use for a moment the world’s low motive, which has such power to sway men-’think of these things,’ and these things do. That is the width of the conception of ‘good works’; everything that is ‘lovely and of good report.’ That is what you receive the new life for.

Contrast that with other notions of the purpose of revelation and redemption. Contrast it with what I have already referred to, and so need not enlarge upon now, the miserably inadequate and low notions of the essentials of salvation which one hears perpetually, and which many of us cherish. It is no mere immunity from a future hell. It is no mere entrance into a vague heaven. It is not escaping the penalty of the inexorable law, ‘Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap,’ that is meant by ‘salvation,’ any more than it is putting away the rod, which the child would be all the better for having administered to him, that is meant by ‘forgiveness.’ But just as forgiveness, in its essence, means not suspension nor abolition of penalty, but the uninterrupted flow of the Father’s love, so salvation in its essence means, not the deliverance from any external evil or the alteration of anything in the external position, but the revolution and the re-creation of the man’s nature. And the purpose of it is that the saved man may live in conformity with the will of God, and that on his character there may be embroidered all the fair things which God desires to see on His child’s vesture.

Contrast it with the notion that an orthodox belief is the purpose of revelation. I remember hearing once of a man that ‘he was a very shady character, but sound on the Atonement.’ What is the use of being ‘sound on the Atonement’ if the Atonement does not make you live the Christ life? And what is the good of all your orthodoxy unless the orthodoxy of creed issues in orthopraxy of conduct? There are far too many of us who half-consciously do still hold by the notion that if a man believes rightly then that makes him a Christian. My text shatters to pieces any such conception.

You are saved that you may be good, and do good continually; and unless you are so doing you may be steeped to the eyebrows in the correctest of creeds, and it will only drown you.

Contrast this conception of the purpose of Christianity with the far too common notion that we are saved, mainly in order that we may indulge in devout emotions, and in the outgoing of affection and confidence to Jesus Christ. Emotional Christianity is necessary, but Christianity, which is mainly or exclusively emotional, lives next door to hypocrisy, and there is a door of communication between them. For there is nothing more certain and more often illustrated in experience than that there is a strange underground connection between a Christianity which is mainly fervid and a very shady life. One sees it over and over again. And the cure of that is to apprehend the great truth of my text, that we are saved, not in order that we may know aright, nor in order that we may feel aright, but in order that we may be good and do 'good works.' In the order of things, right thought touches the springs of right feeling, and right feeling sets going the wheels of right action. Do not let the steam all go roaring out of the waste-pipe in however sacred and blessed emotions. See that it is guided so as to drive the spindles and the shuttles and make the web.

III. And now, lastly, and only a word-here we have the field provided for the exercise of the 'good works.'

'Created unto good works which God has before prepared'-before the re-creation-'that we should walk in them.' That is to say, the true way to look at the life is to regard it as the exercising-ground which God has prepared for the development of the life that, through Christ, is implanted in us. He cuts the channels that the stream may flow. That is the way to look at tasks, at difficulties. Difficulty is the parent of power, and God arranges our circumstances in order that, by wrestling with obstacles, we may gain the 'thews that throw the world,' and in order that in sorrows and in joys, in the rough places and the smooth, we may find occasions for the exercise of the goodness which is lodged potentially in us, when He creates us in Christ Jesus. So be sure that the path and the power will always correspond. God does not lead us on roads that are too steep for our weakness, and too long for our strength. What He bids us do He fits us for; what He fits us for He thereby bids us do.

And so, dear brother, take heed that you are fulfilling the purpose for which you receive this new life. And let us all remember the order in which being and doing come. We must be good first, and then, and only then, shall we do good. We must have Christ for us first, our sacrifice and our means of receiving that new life, and then, Christ in us, the soul of our souls, the Life of our lives, the source of all our goodness.

> *'If any power we have, it is to ill,*
> *And all the power is Thine to do and eke to will.'*

14)Ephesians 2:20

EPHESIANS

'THE CHIEF CORNER-STONE'

Eph. 2:20

The Roman Empire had in Paul's time gathered into a great unity the Asiatics of Ephesus, the Greeks of Corinth, the Jews of Palestine, and men of many another race, but grand and imposing as that great unity was, it was to Paul a poor thing compared with the oneness of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. Asiatics of Ephesus, Greeks of Corinth, Jews of Palestine and members of many another race could say, 'Our citizenship is in heaven.' The Roman Eagle swept over wide regions in her flight, but the Dove of Peace, sent forth from Christ's hand, travelled further than she. As Paul says in the context, the Ephesians had been strangers, 'aliens from the commonwealth of Israel,' wandering like the remnants of some 'broken clans,' but now they are gathered in. That narrow community of the Jewish nation has expanded its bounds and become the mother-country of believing souls, the true 'island of saints.' It was not Rome which really made all peoples one, but it was the weakest and most despised of her subject races. 'Of Zion it shall be said,' 'Lo! this and that man was born in her.'

To emphasise the thought of the great unity of the Church, the Apostle uses here his often-repeated metaphor of a temple, of which the Ephesian Christians are the stones, apostles and prophets the builders, and Christ Himself the chief corner-stone. Of course the representation of the foundation, as being laid by apostles and prophets, refers to them as proclaiming the Gospel. The real laying of the foundation is the work of the divine power and love which gave us Christ, and it is the Divine Voice which proclaims, ‘Behold I lay in Zion a foundation!’ But that divine work has to be made known among men, and it is by the making of it known that the building rises course by course. There is no contradiction between the two statements, ‘I have laid the foundation’ and Paul’s ‘As a wise master-builder I have laid the foundation.’

A question may here rise as to the meaning of ‘prophets.’ Unquestionably the expression in other places of the Epistle does mean New Testament prophets, but seeing that here Jesus is designated as the foundation stone which, standing beneath two walls, has a face into each, and binds them strongly together, it is more natural to see in the prophets the representatives of the great teachers of the old dispensation as the apostles were of the new. The remarkable order in which these two classes are named, the apostles being first, and the prophets who were first in time being last in order of mention, confirms this explanation, for the two co-operating classes are named in the order in which they lie in the foundation. Digging down you come to the more recent first, to the earlier second, and deep and massive, beneath all, to the corner-stone on whom all rests, in whom all are united together. Following the Apostle’s order we may note the process of building; beneath that, the foundation on which the building rests; and beneath it, the corner-stone which underlies and unites the whole.

I. The process of building.

In the previous clauses the Apostle has represented the condition of the Ephesian Christians before their Christianity as being that of strangers and foreigners, lacking the rights of citizenship anywhere, a mob rather than in any sense a society. They had been like a confused heap of stones flung fortuitously together; they had become fellow-citizens with the saints. The stones had been piled up into an orderly building. He is not ignoring the facts of national, political, or civic relationships which existed independent of the new unity realised in a common faith. These relationships could not be ignored by one who had had Paul's experience of their formidable character as antagonists of him and of his message, but they seemed to him, in contrast with the still deeper and far more perfect union, which was being brought about in Christ, of men of all nationalities and belonging to mutually hostile races, to be little better than the fortuitous union of a pile of stones huddled together on the roadside. Measured against the architecture of the Church, as Paul saw it in his lofty idealism, the aggregations of men in the world do not deserve the name of buildings. His point of view is the exact opposite of that which is common around us, and which, alas! finds but too much support in the present aspects of the so-called churches of this day.

It is to be observed that in our text these stones are, in accordance with the propriety of the metaphor, regarded as being built, that is, as in some sense the subjects of a force brought to bear upon them, which results in their being laid together in orderly fashion and according to a plan, but it is not to be forgotten that, according to the teaching, not of this epistle alone, but of all Paul's letters, the living stones are active in the work of building, as well as beings subject to an influence. In another place of the New Testament we read the exhortation to 'build up yourselves on your most holy faith,' and the means of discharging that duty are set forth in the words which follow it; as being 'Praying in the Holy Spirit, keeping yourselves in the love of God, and looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Throughout the Pauline letters we have frequent references to edifying, a phrase which has been so vulgarised by much handling that its great meaning has been all but lost, but which still, rightly understood, presents the Christian life as one continuous effort after developing Christian character. Taking into view the whole of the apostolic references to this continuous process of building, we cannot but recognise that it all begins with the act of faith which brings men into immediate contact and vital union with Jesus Christ, and which is, if anything that a man does is, the act of his very inmost self passing out of its own isolation and resting itself on Jesus. It is by the vital and individual act of faith that any soul escapes from the dreary isolation of being a stranger and a foreigner, wandering, homeless and solitary, and finds through Jesus fellowship, an elder Brother, a Father, and a home populous with many brethren. But whilst faith is the condition of beginning the Christian life, which is the only real life, that life has to be continued and developed towards perfection by continuous effort. ‘Tis a life-long toil till the lump be leavened.’

One of the passages already referred to varies the metaphor of building, in so far as it seems to represent ‘your most holy faith’ as the foundation, and may be an instance of the doubtful New Testament usage of ‘faith,’ as meaning the believed Gospel, rather than the personal act of believing. But however that may be, context of the words clearly suggests the practical duties by which the Christian life is preserved and strengthened. They who build up themselves do so, mainly, by keeping themselves in the love of God with watchful oversight and continual preparedness for struggle against all foes who would drag them from that safe fortress, and subsidiarily, by like continuity in prayer, and in fixing their meek hope on the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. If Christian character is ever to be made more Christian, it must be by a firmer grasp and a more vivid realisation of Christ and His truth. The more we feel ourselves to be lapped in the love of God, the more shall we be builded up on our most holy faith. There is no mystery about the means of Christian progress. That which, at the beginning, made a man a Christian shapes his whole future course; the measure of our faith is the measure of our advance.

But the Apostle, in the immediately following words, goes on to pass beyond the bounds of his metaphor, and with complete indifference to the charge of mixing figures, speaks of the building as growing. That thought leads us into a higher region than that of effort. The process by which a great forest tree thickens its boles, expands the sweep of its branches and lifts them nearer the heavens, is very different from that by which a building rises slowly and toilsomely and with manifest incompleteness all the time, until the flag flies on the roof-tree. And if we had not this nobler thought of a possible advance by the increasing circulation within us of a mysterious life, there would be little gospel in a word which only enjoined effort as the condition of moral progress, and there would be little to choose between Paul and Plato. He goes on immediately to bring out more fully what he means by the growth of the building, when he says that if Christians are in

Christ, they are ‘built up for an habitation of God in the Spirit.’ Union with Christ, and a consequent life in the Spirit, are sure to result in the growth of the individual soul and of the collective community. That divine Spirit dwells in and works through every believing soul, and while it is possible to grieve and to quench It, to resist and even to neutralise Its workings, these are the true sources of all our growth in grace and knowledge. The process of building may be and will be slow. Sometimes lurking enemies will pull down in a night what we have laboured at for many days. Often our hands will be slack and our hearts will droop. We shall often be tempted to think that our progress is so slow that it is doubtful if we have ever been on the foundation at all or have been building at all. But ‘the Spirit helpeth our infirmities,’ and the task is not ours alone but His in us. We have to recognise that effort is inseparable from building, but we have also to remember that growth depends on the free circulation of life, and that if we are, and abide in, Jesus, we cannot but be built ‘for an habitation of God in the Spirit.’ We may be sure that whatever may be the gaps and shortcomings in the structures that we rear here, none will be able to say of us at the last, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’

II. The foundation on which the building rests.

In the Greek, as in our version, there is no definite article before ‘prophets,’ and its absence indicates that both sets of persons here mentioned come under the common vinculum of the one definite article preceding the first named. So that apostles and prophets belong to one class. It may be a question whether the foundation is theirs in the sense that they constitute it, an explanation in favour of which can be quoted the vision in the Apocalypse of the new Jerusalem, in the twelve foundations of which were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, or whether, as is more probable, the foundation is conceived of as laid by them. In like manner the Apostle speaks to the Corinthians of having ‘as a wise master-builder laid the foundation,’ and to the Romans of making it his aim to preach especially where Christ was not already named, that he might ‘not build upon another man’s foundation.’ Following these indications, it seems best to understand the preaching of the Gospel as being the laying of the foundation.

Further, the question may be raised whether the prophets here mentioned belong to the Old Testament or to the New. The latter alternative has been preferred on the ground that the apostles are named first, but, as we have already noticed, the order here begins at the top and goes downwards, what was last in order of time being first in order of mention. We need only recall Peter's bold words that 'all the prophets, as many as have spoken, have told of the days' of Christ, or Paul's sermon in the synagogue of Antioch in which he passionately insisted on the Jewish crime of condemning Christ as being the fulfilment of the voices of the prophets, and of the Resurrection of Jesus as being God's fulfilment of the promise made unto the fathers to understand how here, as it were, beneath the foundation laid by the present preaching of the apostles, Paul rejoices to discern the ancient stones firmly laid by long dead hands.

The Apostle's strongest conviction was that he himself had become more and not less of a Jew by becoming a Christian, and that the Gospel which he preached was nothing more than the perfecting of that Gospel before the Gospel, which had come from the lips of the prophets. We know a great deal more than he did as to the ways in which the progressive divine revelation was presented to Israel through the ages, and some of us are tempted to think that we know more than we do, but the true bearing of modern criticism, as applied to the Old Testament, is to confirm, even whilst it may to some extent modify, the conviction common to all the New Testament writers, and formulated by the last of the New Testament prophets, that 'the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.' Whatever new light may shine on the questions of the origin and composition of the books of the Old Testament, it will never obscure the radiance of the majestic figure of the Messiah which shines from the prophetic page. The inner relation between the foundation of the apostles and that of the prophets is best set forth in the solemn colloquy on the Mount of Transfiguration between Moses and Elias and Jesus. They 'were with Him' as witnessing to Him to whom law and ritual and prophecy had pointed, and they 'spake of His decease which He should accomplish at Jerusalem' as being the vital centre of all His work which the lambs slain according to ritual had foreshadowed, and the prophetic figure of the Servant of the Lord 'wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities' had more distinctly foretold.

III. The corner-stone which underlies and unites the whole.

Of course the corner-stone here is the foundation-stone and not ‘the head-stone of the corner.’ Jesus Christ is both. He is the first and the last; the Alpha and Omega. In accordance with the whole context, in which the prevailing idea is that which always fired Paul’s imagination, viz. that of reconciling Jew and Gentile in one new man, it is best to suppose a reference here to the union of Jew and Gentile. The stone laid beneath the two walls which diverge at right angles from each other binds both together and gives strength and cohesion to the whole. In the previous context the same idea is set forth that Christ ‘preached peace to them that were afar off [Gentiles] and to them that were nigh [Jews].’ By His death He broke down another wall, the middle wall of partition between them, and did so by abolishing ‘the law of commandments contained in ordinances.’ The old distinction between Jew and Gentile, which was accentuated by the Jew’s rigid observance of ordinances and which often led to bitter hatred on both sides, was swept away in that strange new thing, a community of believers drawn together in Jesus Christ. The former antagonistic ‘twain’ had become one in a third order of man, the Christian man. The Jew Christian and the Gentile Christian became brethren because they had received one new life, and they who had common feelings of faith and love to the same Saviour, a common character drawn from Him, and a common destiny open to them by their common relation to Jesus, could never cherish the old emotions of racial hate.

When we, in this day, try to picture to ourselves that strange new thing, the love which bound the early Christians together and buried as beneath a rushing flood the formidable walls of separation between them, we may well penitently ask ourselves how it comes that Jesus seems to have so much less power to triumph over the divisive forces that part us from those who should be our hearts’ brothers. In our modern life there are no such gulfs of separation from one another as were filled up unconsciously in the experience of the first believers, but the narrower chinks seem to remain in their ugliness between those who profess a common faith in one Lord, and who are all ready to assert that they are built on the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, and that Jesus Christ is from them the chief corner-stone.

If in reality He is so to us, and He is so if we have been builded upon Him through our faith, the metaphor of corner-stone and building will fail to express the reality of our relation to Him, for our corner-stone has in it an infinite vitality which rises up through all the courses of the living stones, and moulds each ‘into an immortal feature of loveliness and perfection.’ So it shall be for each individual, though here the appropriation of the perfect gift is imperfect. So it shall be in reference to the history of the world. Christ is its centre and foundation-stone, and as His coming makes the date from which the nations reckon, and all before it was in the deepest sense preparatory to His incarnation, all which is after it is in the deepest sense the appropriating of Him and the developing of His work. The multitudes which went before and that followed cried, saying, ‘Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.’

15)Ephesians 3:15

EPHESIANS

‘THE WHOLE FAMILY’

Eph. 3:15

Grammatically, we are driven to recognise that the Revised Version is more correct than the Authorised, when it reads ‘every family,’ instead of ‘the whole family.’ There is in the expression no reference to the thought, however true it is in itself, that the redeemed in heaven and the believers on earth make up but one family. The thought rather is, that, as has been said, ‘the father makes the family,’ and if any community of intelligent beings, human, or angelic, bears the great name of family, the great reason for that lies ‘in God’s paternal relationship.’

But my present purpose in selecting this text is not so much to speak of it as to lay hold of the probably incorrect rendering in the Authorised Version, as suggesting, though here inaccurately, the thought that believers struggling here and saints and angels glorious above ‘but one communion make,’ and in the light of that thought, to consider the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. I am, of course, fully conscious that in thus using the words, I am diverting them from their original purpose; but possibly in this case, open confession, my open confession, may merit your forgiveness and at all events, it, in some degree, brings me my own.

I. Consider the Lord’s Supper as a sign that the Church on earth is a family.

The Passover was essentially a family feast, and the Lord’s Supper, which was grafted on it, was plainly meant to be the same. The domestic character of the rite shines clearly out in the precious simplicity of the arrangements in the upper room. When Christ and the twelve sat down there, it was a family meal at which they sat. He was the head of the household; they were members of His family. The early examples of the rite, when the disciples ‘gathered together to break bread,’ obviously preserved the same familiar character, and stand in extraordinary contrast to the splendours of high mass in a Roman Catholic Cathedral. The Church, as a whole, is a household, and the very form of the rite proclaims that ‘we, being many, are one bread.’ The conception of a family brings clearly into view the deepest ground of Christian unity. It is the possession of a common life, just as men are born into an earthly family, not of their own will, nor of their own working, and come without any action of their own into bonds of blood relationship with brothers and sisters. When we become sons of God and are born again, we become brethren of all His children. That which gives us life in Him makes us kindred with all through whose veins flows that same life. It is the common partaking in the one bread which makes us one. The same blood flows in the veins of all the children.

Hence, the only ground on which the Church rests is this common possession of the life of Christ, and that ground makes, and ought to be felt to make, Christian union a far deeper, more blessed, and more imperative bond than can be found in any shallow similarities of aim-or identities of opinion or feeling. The deepest fact of Christian consciousness is the foundation fact of Christian brotherhood; each is nearer to every Christian than to any besides. A very solemn view of Christian duty arises from these thoughts, familiar as they are:

‘No distance breaks the tie of blood,
Brothers are brothers ever more.’

and every tongue is loud in condemnation of any man who is ashamed or afraid to recognise his brother and stand by him, whatever may be the difference in their worldly positions. ‘Every one who loveth Him that begat, loveth Him also that is begotten of Him.’

II. The Lord’s Supper as a prophecy of the family at home above.

The prophetic character was stamped on the first institution of the Lord’s Supper by Christ’s own words ‘until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God,’ and by His declaration that He appointed unto them a kingdom, that they might eat and drink at His table in His kingdom. We may also recall the mysterious feast spread on the shore of the lake, where, with obvious allusion both to his earlier miracles and to the sad hour in the upper room, he came ‘and taketh the bread and gave it to them.’ Blending these two together we get most blessed, though dim, thoughts of that future; they speak to us of an eternal home, an eternal feast, and an eternal society. We have to reverse not a few of the characteristics of the upper room in order to reach those of the table in the kingdom. The Lord’s Supper was followed for Him by Gethsemane and Calvary, and for them by going out to betray and to deny and to forsake Him. From that better table there is no more going out. The servant comes in from the field, spent with toil and stained with many a splash, but the Master Himself comes forth and serves His servant.

In the eternal feast, which is spread above, the bread as well as the wine is new, even whilst it is old, for there will be disclosed new depths of blessing and power in the old Christ, and new draughts of joy and strength in the old wine which will make the feasters say, in rapture and astonishment, to the Master of the feast, ‘Thou hast kept the good wine until now.’ There and then all broken ties will be re-knit, all losses supplied, and no shadow of change, nor fear of exhaustion, pass across the calm hearts.

III. The Lord’s Supper is a token of the present union of the two.

If it thus prophesies the perfectness of heaven, it also shows us how the two communities of earth and heaven are united. They, as we, live by derivation of the one life; they, as we, are fed and blessed by the one Lord. The occupations and thoughts of Christian life on earth and of the perfect life of

Saints above are one. They look to Christ as we do, when we live as Christians, though the sun which is the light of both regions shows there a broader disc, and pours forth more fervid rays, and is never obscured by clouds, nor ever sets in night. Whether conscious of us or not, they are doing there, in perfect fashion, what we imperfectly attempt, and partially accomplish.

'The Saints on earth and all the Dead
But one communion make.'

Heaven and earth are equally mansions in the Father's house.

To the faith which realises this great truth, death dwindles to a small matter. The Lord's table has an upper and a lower level. Sitting at the lower, we may feel that those who have gone from our sides, and have left empty places which never can be filled, are gathered round Him in the upper half, and though a screen hangs between the two, yet the feast is one and the family is one. Singly our dear ones go, and singly we all shall go. The table spread in the presence of enemies will be left vacant to its last place, and the one spread above will be filled to its last place, and so shall we ever be with the Lord, and the unity which was always real be perfectly and permanently manifested at the last.

16)Ephesians 3:16

EPHESIANS

STRENGTHENED WITH MIGHT

Eph. 3:16

In no part of Paul's letters does he rise to a higher level than in his prayers, and none of his prayers are fuller of fervour than this wonderful series of petitions. They open out one into the other like some majestic suite of apartments in a great palace-temple, each leading into a loftier and more spacious hall, each drawing nearer the presence-chamber, until at last we stand there.

Roughly speaking, the prayer is divided into four petitions, of which each is the cause of the following and the result of the preceding-'That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man'-that is the first. 'In order that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith,' 'ye being rooted and grounded in love'-such is the second, the result of the first, and the preparation for the third. 'That ye may be able to comprehend with all saints ... and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge,' such is the third, and all lead up at last to that wonderful desire beyond which nothing is possible-'that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.'

I venture to contemplate dealing with these four petitions in successive sermons, in order, God helping me, that I may bring before you a fairer vision of the possibilities of your Christian life than you ordinarily entertain. For Paul's prayer is God's purpose, and what He means with all who profess His name is that these exuberant desires may be fulfilled in them. So let us now listen to that petition which is the foundation of all, and consider that great thought of the divine strength-giving power which may be bestowed upon every Christian soul.

I. First, then, I remark that God means, and wishes, that all Christians should be strong by the possession of the Spirit of might.

It is a miserably inadequate conception of Christianity, and of the gifts which it bestows, and the blessings which it intends for men, when it is limited, as it practically is, by a large number-I might almost say the majority-of professing Christians to a simple means of altering their relation to the past, and to the broken law of God and of righteousness. Thanks be to His name! His great gift to the world begins in each individual case with the assurance that all the past is cancelled. He gives that blessed sense of forgiveness, which can never be too highly estimated unless it is forced out of its true place as the introduction, and made to be the climax and the end, of His gifts. I do not know what Christianity means, unless it means that you and I are forgiven for a purpose; that the purpose, if I may so say, is something in advance of the means towards the purpose, the purpose being that we should be filled with all the strength and righteousness and supernatural life granted to us by the Spirit of God.

It is well that we should enter into the vestibule. There is no other path to the throne but through the vestibule. But do not let us forget that the good news of forgiveness, though we need it day by day, and need it perpetually repeated, is but the introduction to and porch of the Temple, and that beyond it there towers, if I cannot say a loftier, yet I may say a further gift, even the gift of a divine life like His, from whom it comes, and of which it is in reality an effluence and a spark. The true characteristic blessing of the Gospel is the gift of a new power to a sinful weak world; a power which makes the feeble strong, and the strongest as an angel of God.

Oh, brethren! we who know how, ‘if any power we have, it is to ill’; we who understand the weakness, the unaptness of our spirits to any good, and our strength for every vagrant evil that comes upon them to tempt them, should surely recognise as a Gospel in very deed that which proclaims to us that the ‘everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth,’ who Himself ‘fainteth not, neither is weary.’ hath yet a loftier display of His strength-giving power than that which is visible in the heavens above, where, ‘because He is strong in might not one faileth.’ That heaven, the region of calm completeness, of law unbroken and therefore of power undiminished, affords a lesser and dimmer manifestation of His strength than the work that is done in the hell of a human heart that has wandered and is brought back, that is stricken with the weakness of the fever of sin, and is healed into the strength of obedience and the omnipotence of dependence. It is much to say ‘for that He is strong in might, not one of these faileth;’ it is more to say ‘He giveth power to them that have failed; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength.’ The Gospel is the gift of pardon for holiness, and its inmost and most characteristic bestowment is the bestowment of a new power for obedience and service.

And that power, as I need not remind you, is given to us through the gift of the Divine Spirit. The very name of that Spirit is the ‘Spirit of Might.’ Christ spoke to us about being ‘endued with power from on high.’ The last of His promises that dropped from His lips upon earth was the promise that His followers should receive the power of the Spirit coming upon them. Wheresoever in the early histories we read of a man who was full of the Holy Ghost, we read that he was ‘full of power.’ According to the teaching of this Apostle, God hath given us the ‘Spirit of power,’ which is also the

Spirit ‘of love and of a sound mind.’ So the strength that we must have, if we have strength at all, is the strength of a Divine Spirit, not our own, that dwells in us, and works through us.

And there is nothing in that which need startle or surprise any man who believes in a living God at all, and in the possibility, therefore, of a connection between the Great Spirit and all the human spirits which are His children. I would maintain, in opposition to many modern conceptions, the actual supernatural character of the gift that is bestowed upon every Christian soul. My reading of the New Testament is that as distinctly above the order of material nature as is any miracle, is the gift that flows into a believing heart. There is a direct passage between God and my spirit. It lies open to His touch; all the paths of its deep things can be trodden by Him. You and I act upon one another from without, He acts upon us within. We wish one another blessings; He gives the blessings. We try to train, to educate, to incline, and dispose, by the presentation of motives and the urging of reasons; He can plant in a heart by His own divine husbandry the seed that shall blossom into immortal life. And so the Christian Church is a great, continuous, supernatural community in the midst of the material world; and every believing soul, because it possesses something of the life of Jesus Christ, has been the seat of a miracle as real and true as when He said ‘Lazarus, come forth!’ Precisely this teaching does our Lord Himself present for our acceptance when He sets side by side, as mutually illustrative, as belonging to the same order of supernatural phenomena, ‘the hour is coming when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God and they that hear shall live,’ which is the supernatural resurrection of souls dead in sin,-and ‘the hour is coming in the which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice, and shall come forth,’ which is the future resurrection of the body, in obedience to His will.

So, Christian men and women, do you set clearly before you this: that God’s purpose with you is but begun when He has forgiven you, that He forgives you for a design, that it is a means to an end, and that you have not reached the conception of the large things which He intends for you unless you have risen to this great thought-He means and wishes that you should be strong with the strength of His own Divine Spirit.

II. Now notice, next, that this Divine Power has its seat in, and is intended to influence the whole of, the inner life.

As my text puts it, we may be ‘strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man.’ By the ‘inner man’ I suppose, is not meant the new creation through faith in Jesus Christ which this Apostle calls ‘the new man,’ but simply what Peter calls the ‘hidden man of the heart’ the ‘soul,’ or unseen self as distinguished from the visible material body which it animates and informs. It is this inner self, then, in which the Spirit of God is to dwell, and into which it is to breathe strength. The leaven is hid deep in three measures of meal until the whole be leavened. And the point to mark is that the whole inward region which makes up the true man is the field upon which this Divine Spirit is to work. It is not a bit of your inward life that is to be hallowed. It is not any one aspect of it that is to be strengthened, but it is the whole intellect, affections, desires, tastes, powers of attention, conscience, imagination, memory, will. The whole inner man in all its corners is to be filled, and to come under the influence of this power, ‘until there be no part dark, as when the bright shining of a candle giveth thee light.’

There is no part of my being that is not patent to the tread of this Divine Guest. There are no rooms of the house of my spirit into which He may not go. Let Him come with the master key in His hand into all the dim chambers of your feeble nature; and as the one life is light in the eye, and colour in the cheek, and deftness in the fingers, and strength in the arm, and pulsation in the heart, so He will come with the manifold results of the one gift to you. He will strengthen your understandings, and make you able for loftier tasks of intellect and of reason than you can face in your unaided power; He will dwell in your affections and make them vigorous to lay hold upon the holy things that are above their natural inclination, and will make it certain that their reach shall not be beyond their grasp, as, alas! it so often is in the sadness and disappointments of human love. He will come into that feeble, vacillating, wayward will of yours, that is only obstinate in its adherence to the low and the evil, as some foul creature, that one may try to wrench away, digs its claws into corruption and holds on by that. He will lift your will and make it fix upon the good and abominate the evil, and through the whole being He will pour a great tide of strength which shall cover all the weakness. He will be like some subtle elixir which, taken into the lips, steals through a pallid and wasted frame, and brings back a glow to the cheek and a lustre to the eye, and swiftness to the brain, and power to the whole nature. Or as some plant, drooping and flagging beneath the hot rays of the sun, when it has the scent of water given to it, will, in all its parts, stiffen and erect itself, so, when the Spirit is poured out on men, their whole nature is invigorated and helped.

That indwelling Spirit will be a power for suffering. The parallel passage to this in the twin epistle to the Colossians is-'strengthened with all might unto all patience and long-suffering with gentleness.' Ah, brethren! unless this Divine Spirit were a power for patience and endurance it were no power suited to us poor men. So dark at times is every life; so full at times of discouragements, of dreariness, of sadness, of loneliness, of bitter memories, and of fading hopes does the human heart become, that if we are to be strong we must have a strength that will manifest itself most chiefly in this, that it teaches us how to bear, how to weep, how to submit.

And it will be a power for conflict. We have all of us, in the discharge of duty and in the meeting of temptation, to face such tremendous antagonisms that unless we have grace given to us which will enable us to resist, we shall be overcome and swept away. God's power given by the Divine Spirit does not absolve us from the fight, but it fits us for the fight. It is not given in order that, holiness may be won without a struggle, as some people seem to think, but it is given to us in order that in the struggle for holiness we may never lose 'one jot of heart or hope,' but may be 'able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all to stand.'

It is a power for service. 'Tarry ye in Jerusalem till ye be endued with power from on high.' There is no such force for the spreading of Christ's Kingdom, and the witness-bearing work of His Church, as the possession of this Divine Spirit. Plunged into that fiery baptism, the selfishness and the sloth, which stand in the way of so many of us, are all consumed and annihilated, and we are set free for service because the bonds that bound us are burnt up in the merciful furnace of His fiery power.

'Ye shall be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man'-a power that will fill and flood all your nature if you will let it, and will make you strong to suffer, strong to combat, strong to serve, and to witness for your Lord.

III. And now, lastly, let me point you still further to the measure of this power. It is limitless with the boundlessness of God Himself. ‘That he would grant you’ is the daring petition of the Apostle, ‘according to the riches of His glory to be strengthened.’

There is the measure. There is no limit except the uncounted wealth of His own self-manifestation, the flashing light of revealed divinity. Whatsoever there is of splendour in that, whatsoever there is of power there, in these and in nothing on this side of them, lies the limit of the possibilities of a Christian life. Of course there is a working limit at each moment, and that is our capacity to receive; but that capacity varies, may vary indefinitely, may become greater and greater beyond our count or measurement. Our hearts may be more and more capable of God; and in the measure in which they are capable of Him they shall be filled by Him. A limit which is always shifting is no limit at all. A kingdom, the boundaries of which are not the same from one year to another, by reason of its own inherent expansive power, may be said to have no fixed limit. And so we appropriate and enclose, as it were, within our own little fence, a tiny portion of the great prairie that rolls boundlessly to the horizon. But to-morrow we may enclose more, if we will, and more and more; and so ever onwards, for all that is God’s is ours, and He has given us His whole self to use and to possess through our faith in His Son. A thimble can only take up a thimbleful of the ocean, but what if the thimble be endowed with a power of expansion which has no term known to men? May it not, then, be that some time or other it shall be able to hold so much of the infinite depth as now seems a dream too audacious to be realised?

So it is with us and God. He lets us come into the vaults, as it were, where in piles and masses the ingots of uncoined and uncounted gold are stored and stacked; and He says, ‘Take as much as you like to carry.’ There is no limit except the riches of His glory.

And now, dear friends, remember that this great gift, offered to each of us, is offered on conditions. To you professing Christians especially I speak. You will never get it unless you want it, and some of you do not want it.

There are plenty of people who call themselves Christian men that would not for the life of them know what to do with this great gift if they had it. You will get it if you desire it. ‘Ye have not because ye ask not.’

Oh! when one contrasts the largeness of God’s promises and the miserable contradiction to them which the average Christian life of this generation presents, what can we say? ‘Hath His mercy clean gone for ever? Doth His promise fail for evermore?’ Ye weak Christian people, born weakling and weak ever since, as so many of you are, open your mouths wide. Rise to the height of the expectations and the desires which it is our sin not to cherish; and be sure of this, as we ask so shall we receive. ‘Ye are not straitened in God.’ Alas! alas! ‘ye are straitened in yourselves.’

And mind, there must be self-suppression if there is to be the triumph of a divine power in you. You cannot fight with both classes of weapons. The human must die if the divine is to live. The life of nature, dependence on self, must be weakened and subdued if the life of God is to overcome and to fill you. You must be able to say ‘Not I!’ or you will never be able to say ‘Christ liveth in me.’ The patriarch who overcame halted on his thigh; and all the life of nature was lamed and made impotent that the life of grace might prevail. So crush self by the power and for the sake of the Christ, if you would that the Spirit should bear rule over you.

See to it, too, that you use what you have of that Divine Spirit. ‘To him that hath shall be given.’ What is the use of more water being sent down the mill lade, if the water that does come in it all runs away at the bottom, and none of it goes over the wheel? Use the power you have, and power will come to the faithful steward of what he possesses. He that is faithful in a little shall get much to be faithful over. Ask and use, and the ancient thanksgiving may still come from your lips. ‘In the day when I cried, Thou answeredst me, and strengthenedst me with strength in my soul.’

17)Ephesians 3:17

EPHESIANS

THE INDWELLING CHRIST

Eph. 3:17

We have here the second step of the great staircase by which Paul’s fervent desires for his Ephesian friends climbed towards that wonderful summit of his prayers-which is ever approached, never reached,-’that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.’

Two remarks of an expository character will prepare the way for the lessons of these verses. The first is as to the relation of this clause to the preceding. It might appear at first sight to be simply parallel with the former, expressing substantially the same ideas under a somewhat different aspect. The operation of the strength-giving Spirit in the inner man might very naturally be supposed to be equivalent to the dwelling of Christ in our hearts by faith. So many commentators do, in fact, take it; but I think that the two ideas may be distinguished, and that we are to see in the words of our text, as I have said, the second step in this prayer, which is in some sense a result of the ‘strengthening with might by the Spirit in the inner man.’ I need not enter in detail into the reasons for taking this view of the connection of the clause, which is obviously in accordance with the climbing-up structure of the whole verse. It is enough to point it out as the basis of my further remarks.

And now the second observation with which I will trouble you, before I come to deal with the thoughts of the verse, is as to the connection of the last words of it. You may observe that in reading the words of my text I omitted the ‘that’ which stands in the centre of the verse. I did so because the words, ‘Ye being rooted and grounded in love,’ in the original, do stand before the ‘that,’ and are distinctly separated by it from the subsequent clause. They ought not, therefore, to be shifted forward into it, as our translators and the Revised Version have, I think, unfortunately done, unless there were some absolute necessity either from meaning or from construction. I do not think that this is the case; but on the contrary, if they are carried forward into the next clause, which describes the result of Christ’s dwelling in our hearts by faith, they break the logical flow of the sentence by mixing together result and occasion. And so I attach them to the first part of this verse, and take them to express at once the consequence of Christ’s dwelling in the heart by faith, and the preparation or occasion for our being able to comprehend and know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge. Now that is all with which I need trouble you in the way of explanation of the meaning of the words. Let us come now to deal with their substance.

I. Consider the Indwelling of Christ, as desired by the Apostle for all Christians.

To begin with, let me say in the plainest, simplest, strongest way that I can, that that dwelling of Christ in the believing heart is to be regarded as being a plain literal fact.

To a man who does not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ, of course that is nonsense, but to those of us who do see in Him the manifested incarnate God, there ought to be no difficulty in accepting this as the simple literal force of the words before us, that in every soul where faith, howsoever feeble, has been exercised, there Jesus Christ does verily abide.

It is not to be weakened down into any notion of participation in His likeness, sympathy with His character, submission to His influence, following His example, listening to His instruction, or the like. A dead Plato may so influence his followers, but that is not how a living Christ influences His disciples. What is meant is no mere influence derived but separable from Him, however blessed and gracious that influence might be, but it is the presence of His own self, exercising influences which are inseparable from His presence, and only to be realised when He dwells in us.

I think that Christian people as a rule do far too little turn their attention to this aspect of the Gospel teaching, and concentrate their thoughts far too much upon that which is unspeakably precious in itself, but does not exhaust all that Christ is to us, viz. the work that He wrought for us upon Calvary; or to take a step further, the work that He is now carrying on for us as our Intercessor and Advocate in the heavens. You who listen to me Sunday after Sunday will not suspect me of seeking to minimise either of these two aspects of our Lord’s mission and operation, but I do believe that very largely the glad thought of an indwelling Christ, who actually abides and works in our hearts, and is not only for us in the heavens, or with us by some kind of impalpable and metaphorical presence, but in simple, that is to say, in spiritual reality is in our spirits, has faded away from the consciousness of the Christian Church.

And so we are called ‘mystics’ when we preach Christ in the heart. Ah, brother! unless your Christianity be in the good deep sense of the word ‘mystical,’ it is mechanical, which is worse. I preach, and rejoice that I have to preach, a ‘Christ that died, yea! rather that is risen again; who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.’ Nor do I stop there, but I preach a Christ that is in us, dwelling in our hearts if we be His at all.

Well, then, further observe that the special emphasis of the prayer here is that this ‘indwelling’ may be an unbroken and permanent one. Any of you who can consult the original for yourselves will see that the Apostle here uses a compound word which conveys the idea of intensity and continuity. What he desires, then, is not merely that these Ephesian Christians may have occasional visits of the indwelling Lord, or that at some lofty moments of spiritual enthusiasm they may be conscious that He is with them, but that always, in an unbroken line of deep, calm receptiveness, they may possess, and know that they possess, an indwelling Saviour.

And this, I think, is one of the reasons why we may and must distinguish between the apparently very similar petition in the previous verse, about which we spoke in the last sermon, and the petition which is now occupying us; for, as I shall have to show you, it is only as ‘strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man’ that we are capable of the continuous abiding of that Lord within us.

Oh! what a contrast to that idea of a perpetual unbroken inhabitation of Jesus in our spirits and to our consciousness is presented by our ordinary life! ‘Why shouldst Thou be as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night?’ may well be the utterance of the average Christian. We might, with unbroken blessedness, possess Him in our hearts, and instead, we have only ‘visits short and far between’ Alas, alas, how often do we drive away that indwelling Christ, because our hearts are ‘foul with sin,’ so that He

‘Can but listen at the gate
And hear the household jar within.’

Christian men and women! here is the ideal of our lives, capable of being approximated to [if not absolutely in its entirety reached] with far more perfection than it ever has yet been by us. There might be a line of light never interrupted running all through our religious experience. Instead of that there is a light point here, and a great gap of darkness there, like the straggling lamps by the wayside in the half-lighted squalid suburbs of some great city. Is that your Christian life, broken by many interruptions, and having often sounding through it the solemn words of the retreating divinity which the old profound legend tells us were heard the night before the Temple on Zion was burnt:-’Let us depart?’ ‘I will arise and return unto My place till they acknowledge their offences.’ God means and wishes that Christ may continuously dwell in our hearts. Does He to your own consciousness dwell in yours?

And then the last thought connected with this first part of my subject is that the heart, strengthened by the Spirit, is fitted to be the Temple of the indwelling Christ. How shall we prepare the chamber for such a guest? How shall some poor occupant of some wretched hut by the wayside fit it up for the abode of a prince? The answer lies in these words that precede my text. You cannot strengthen the rafters and lift the roof and adorn the halls and furnish the floor in a manner befitting the coming of the King; but you can turn to that Divine Spirit who will expand and embellish and invigorate your whole spirit, and make it capable of receiving the indwelling Christ.

That these two things which are here considered as cause and effect may, in another aspects be considered as but varying phases of the same truth, is only part of the depth and felicity of the teaching that is here; for if you come to look more deeply into it, the Spirit that strengtheneth with might is the Spirit of Christ; and He dwells in men’s hearts by His own Spirit. So that the apparent confusion, arising from what in other places are regarded as identical being here conceived as cause and effect, is no confusion at all, but is explained and vindicated by the deep truth that nothing but the indwelling of the Christ can fit for the indwelling of the Christ. The lesser gift of His presence prepares for the greater measure of it; the transitory inhabitation for the more permanent. Where He comes in smaller measure He opens the door and makes the heart capable of His own more entire indwelling. ‘Unto him that hath shall be given.’ It is Christ in the heart that makes the heart fit for Christ to dwell in the heart. You cannot do it by your own power; turn to Him and let Him make you temples meet for Himself.

II. So now, in the second place, notice the open door through which the Christ comes in to dwell-’that He may dwell in your hearts by faith.’

More accurately we may render ‘through faith’ and might even venture to suppose that the thought of faith as an open door through which Christ passes into the heart, floated half distinctly before the Apostle’s mind. Be that as it may, at all events faith is here represented as the means or condition through which this dwelling takes effect. You have but to believe in Him and He comes, drawn from heaven, floating down on a sunbeam, as it were, and enters into the heart and abides there.

Trust, which is faith, is self-distrust. ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit.’ Rivers do not run on the mountain tops, but down in the valleys. So the heart that is lifted up and self-complacent has no dew of His blessing resting upon it, but has the curse of Gilboa adhering to its barrenness; but the low lands, the humble and the lowly hearts, are they in which the waters that go softly scoop their course and diffuse their blessings. Faith is self-distrust. Self-distrust brings the Christ.

Faith is desire. Never, never in the history of the world has it been or can it be that a longing towards Him shall be a longing thrown back unsatisfied upon itself. You have but to trust, and you possess. We open the door for the entrance of Christ by the simple act of faith, and blessed be His name! He can squeeze Himself through a very little chink, and He does not require that the gates should be flung wide open in order that, with some of His blessings, He may come in.

Mystical Christianity of the false sort has much to say about the indwelling of God in the soul, but it spoils all its teaching by insisting upon it that the condition on which God dwells in the soul is the soul’s purifying itself to receive Him. But you cannot cleanse your hearts so as to bring Christ into them, you must let Him come and cleanse them by the process of His coming, and fit them thereby for His own indwelling. And, assuredly, He will so come, purging us from our evil and abiding in our hearts.

But do not forget that the faith which brings Christ into the spirit must be a faith which works by love, if it is to keep Christ in the spirit. You cannot bring that Lord into your hearts by anything that you do. The man who cleanses his own soul by his own strength, and so expects to draw God into it, has made the mistake which Christ pointed out when He told us that when the unclean spirit is gone out of a man he leaves his house empty, though it be swept and garnished. Moral reformation may turn out the devils, it will never bring in God, and in the emptiness of the swept and garnished heart there is an invitation to the seven to come back again and fill it.

And whilst that is true, remember, on the other hand, that a Christian man can drive away his Master by evil works. The sweet song-birds and the honey-making bees are said always to desert a neighbourhood before a pestilence breaks out in it. And if I may so say, similarly quick to feel the first breath of the pestilence is the presence of the Christ which cannot dwell with evil. You bring Christ into your heart by faith, without any work at all; you keep Him there by a faith which produces holiness.

III. And the last point is the gifts of this indwelling Christ,-'ye being,' or as the words might more accurately be translated, 'Ye having been rooted and grounded in love.'

Where He comes He comes not empty-handed. He brings His own love, and that, consciously received, produces a corresponding and answering love in our hearts to Him. So there is no need to ask the question here whether 'love' means Christ's love to me, or my love to Christ. From the nature of the case both are included-the recognition of His love and the response by mine are the result of His entering into the heart. This love, the recognition of His and the response by mine, is represented in a lovely double metaphor in these words as being at once the soil in which our lives are rooted and grow, and the foundation on which our lives are built and are steadfast.

There is no need to enlarge upon these two things, but let me just touch them for a moment. Where Christ abides in a man's heart, love will be the very soil in which his life will be rooted and grow. That love will be the motive of all service, it will underlie, as its productive cause, all fruitfulness. All goodness and all beauty will be its fruit. The whole life will be as a tree planted in this rich soil. And so the life will grow not by effort only, but as by an inherent power drawing its nourishment from the soil. This is blessedness. It is heaven upon earth that love should be the soil in which our obedience is rooted, and from which we draw all the nutriment that turns to flowers and fruit.

Where Christ dwells in the heart, love will be the foundation upon which our lives are builded steadfast and sure. The blessed consciousness of His love, and the joyful answer of my heart to it, may become the basis upon which my whole being shall repose, the underlying thought that gives security, serenity, steadfastness to my else fluctuating life. I may so plant myself upon Him, as that in Him I shall be strong, and then my life will not only grow like a tree and have its leaf green and broad, and its fruit the natural outcome of its vitality, but it will rise like some stately building, course by course, pillar by pillar, until at last the shining topstone is set there. He that buildeth on that foundation shall never be confounded.

For, remember that, deepest of all, the words of my text may mean that the Incarnate Personal Love becomes the very soil in which my life is set and blossoms, on which my life is founded.

'Thou, my Life, O let me be
Rooted, grafted, built in Thee.'

Christ is Love, and Love is Christ. He that is rooted and grounded in love has the roots of his being, and the foundation of his life fixed and fastened in that Lord.

So, dear brethren, go to Christ like those two on the road to Emmaus; and as Fra Angelico has painted them on his convent wall, put out your hands and lay them on His, and say, 'Abide with us. Abide with us!' And the answer will come:-'This is my rest for ever; here'-mystery of love!-'will I dwell, for I have desired it,' even the narrow room of your poor heart.

18)Ephesians 3:18

EPHESIANS

LOVE UNKNOWABLE AND KNOWN

Eph. 3:18

This constitutes the third of the petitions in this great prayer of Paul’s, each of which, as we have had occasion to see in former sermons, rises above, and is a consequence of the preceding, and leads on to, and is a cause or occasion of the subsequent one.

The two former petitions have been for inward strength communicated by a Divine Spirit, in order that Christ may dwell in our hearts, and so we may be rooted and grounded in love. The result of these desires being realised in our hearts is here set forth in two clauses which are substantially equivalent in meaning. ‘To comprehend’ may be taken as meaning nearly the same as ‘to know,’ only that perhaps the former expresses an act more purely intellectual. And, as we shall see in our next sermon, ‘the breadth and length and depth and height’ are the unmeasurable dimensions of the love which in the second clause is described as ‘passing knowledge.’ I purpose to deal with these measures in a separate discourse, and, therefore, omit them from consideration now.

We have, then, mainly two thoughts here, the one, that only the loving heart in which Christ dwells can know the love of Christ; and the other that even that heart can not know the love of Christ. The paradox is intentional, but it is intelligible. Let me deal then, as well as I can, with these two great thoughts.

I. First, we have this thought that only the loving heart can know Christ’s love.

Now the Bible uses that word know to express two different things; one which we call mere intellectual perception; or to put it into plainer words, mere head knowledge such as a man may have about any subject of study, and the other a deep and living experience which is possession before it is knowledge, and knowledge because it is possession.

Now the former of these two, the knowledge which is merely the work of the understanding, is, of course, independent of love. A man may know all about Christ and His love without one spark of love in his heart. And there are thousands of people who, as far as the mere intellectual understanding is concerned, know as much about Jesus Christ and His love as the saint who is closest to the Throne, and yet have not one trace of love to Christ in them. That is the kind of people that a widely diffused Christianity and a habit of hearing sermons produce. There are plenty of them, and some of us among them, who, as far as their heads are concerned, know quite as much of Jesus Christ and His love as any of us do, and could talk about it and argue about it, and draw inferences from it, and have the whole system of evangelical Christianity at their fingers' ends. Ay! It is at their fingers' ends, it never gets any nearer them than that.

There is a knowledge with which love has nothing to do, and it is a knowledge that for many people is quite sufficient. 'Knowledge puffeth up,' says the Apostle; into an unwholesome bubble of self-complacency that will one day be pricked and disappear, but 'love buildeth up'-a steadfast, slowly-rising, solid fabric. There be two kinds of knowledge: the mere rattle of notions in a man's brain, like the seeds of a withered poppy-head; very many, very dry, very hard; that will make a noise when you shake them. And there is another kind of knowledge which goes deep down into the heart, and is the only knowledge worth calling by the name; and that knowledge is the child, as my text has it, of love.

Now let us think about that for a moment. Love, says Paul, is the parent of all knowledge. Well, now, can we find any illustrations from similar facts in other regions? Yes! I think so. How do we know, really know, any emotions of any sort whatever? Only by experience. You may talk for ever about feelings, and you teach nothing about them to those who have not experienced them. The poets of the world have been singing about love ever since the world began. But no heart has learned what love is from even the sweetest and deepest songs. Who that is not a father can be taught paternal love by words, or can come to a perception of it by an effort of mind? And so with all other emotions. Only the lips that have drunk the cup of sweetness or of bitterness can tell how sweet or how bitter it is, and even when they, made wise by experience, speak out their deepest hearts, the listeners are but little the wiser, unless they too have been scholars in the same school. Experience is our only teacher in matters of feeling and emotion, as in the lower regions of taste and appetite. A man must be hungry to know what hunger is; he must taste honey or wormwood in order to know the taste of honey or wormwood, and in like manner he cannot know sorrow but by feeling its ache, and must love if he would know love. Experience is our only teacher, and her school-fees are heavy.

Just as a blind man can never be made to understand the glories of sunrise, or the light upon the far-off mountains; just as a deaf man may read books about acoustics, but they will not give him a notion of what it is to hear Beethoven, so we must have love to Christ before we know what love to Christ is, and we must consciously experience the love of Christ ere we know what the love of Christ is. We must have love to Christ in order to have a deep and living possession of love of Christ, though reciprocally it is also true that we must have the love of Christ known and felt by our answering hearts, if we are ever to love Him back again.

So in all the play and counterplay of love between Christ and us, and in all the reaction of knowledge and love this remains true, that we must be rooted and grounded in love ere we can know love, and must have Christ dwelling in our hearts, in order to that deep and living possession which, when it is conscious of itself, is knowledge, and is for ever alien to the loveless heart.

'He must be loved, ere that to you
He will seem worthy of your love.'

If you want to know the blessedness of the love of Christ, love Him, and open your hearts for the entrance of His love to you. Love is the parent of deep, true knowledge.

Of course, before we can love an unseen person and believe in his love, we must know about him by the ordinary means by which we learn about all persons outside the circle of our sight. So before the love which is thus the parent of deep, true knowledge, there must be the knowledge by study and credence of the record concerning Christ, which supplies the facts on which alone love can be nourished. The understanding has its part to play in leading the heart to love, and then the heart becomes the true teacher. He that loveth, knoweth God, for God is love. He that is rooted and grounded in love because Christ dwells in his heart, will be strengthened to know the love in which he is rooted. The Christ within us will know the love of Christ. We must first ‘taste,’ and then we shall ‘see’ that the Lord is good, as the Psalmist puts it with deep truth. First, the appropriation and feeding upon God, then the clear perception by the mind of the sweetness in the taste. First the enjoyment; then the reflection on the enjoyment. First the love; and then the consciousness of the love of Christ possessed and the love to Christ experienced. The heart must be grounded in love that the man may know the love which passeth knowledge.

Then notice that there is also here another condition for this deep and blessed knowledge laid down in these words, ‘That ye may be able to comprehend with all saints.’ That is to say, our knowledge of the love of Jesus Christ depends largely on our sanctity. If we are pure we shall know. If we were wholly devoted to Him we should wholly know His love to us, and in the measure in which we are pure and holy we shall know it. This heart of ours is like a reflecting telescope, the least breath upon the mirror of which will cause all the starry sublimities that it should shadow forth to fade and become dim. The slightest moisture in the atmosphere, though it be quite imperceptible where we stand, will be dense enough to shut out the fair, shining, snowy summits that girdle the horizon and to leave nothing visible but the lowliness and commonplaceness of the prosaic plain.

If you want to know the love of Christ, first of all, that love must purify your souls. But then you must keep your souls pure, assured of this, that only the single eye is full of light, and that they who are not ‘saints’ grope in the dark even at midday, and whilst drenched by the sunshine of His love, are unconscious of it altogether. And so we get that miserable and mysterious tragedy of men and women walking through life, as many of you are doing, in the very blaze and focus of Christ’s love, and never beholding it nor knowing anything about it.

Observe again the beginning of this path of knowledge, which we have thus traced. There must be, says my text, an indwelling Christ, and so an experience, deep and stable, of His love, and then we shall know the love which we thus experience. But how comes that indwelling? That is the question for us. The knowledge of His love is blessedness, is peace, is love, is everything; as we shall see in considering the last stage of this prayer. That knowledge arises from our fellowship with and our possession of the love of God, which is in Jesus Christ. How does that fellowship with, and possession of the love of God in Jesus Christ, come? That is the all-important question. What is the beginning of everything? 'That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.' There is the gate through which you and I may come, and by which we must come if we are to come at all into the possession and perception of Christ's great love. Here is the path of knowledge. First of all, there must be the simple historical knowledge of the facts of Christ's life and death for us, with the Scripture teaching of their meaning and power. And then we must turn these truths from mere notions into life. It is not enough to know the love that God has to us, in that lower sense of the word 'knowledge.' Many of you know that, who never got any blessing out of it all your days, and never will, unless you change. Besides the 'knowing' there must be the 'believing' of the love. You must translate the notion into a living fact in your experience. You must pass from the simple work of understanding the Gospel to the higher act of faith. You must not be contented with knowing, you must trust. And if you have done that all the rest will follow, and the little, narrow, low doorway of humble self-distrusting faith, through which a man creeps on his knees, leaving outside all his sin and his burden, opens out into the temple palace-the large place in which Christ's love is imparted to the soul.

Brethren, this doctrine of my text ought to be for every one of us a joy and a gospel. There is no royal road into the sweetness and the depth of Christ's love, for the wise or the prudent. The understanding is no more the organ for apprehending the love of Christ than the ear is the organ for perceiving light, or the heart the organ for learning mathematics. Blessed be God! the highest gifts are not bestowed upon the clever people, on the men of genius and the gifted ones, the cultivated and the refined, but they are open for all men; and when we say that love is the parent of knowledge, and that the condition of knowing the depths of Christ's heart is simple love which is the child of faith, we are only saying in other words what the Master embodied in His thanksgiving prayer, ‘I thank Thee, Father! Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.’

And that is so, not because Christianity, being a foolish system, can only address itself to fools; not because Christianity, contradicting wisdom, cannot expect to be received by the wise and the cultured, but because a man’s brains have as little to do with his trustful acceptance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a man’s eyes have to do with his capacity of hearing a voice. Therefore, seeing that the wise and prudent, and the cultured, and the clever, and the men of genius are always the minority of the race, let us vulgar folk that are neither wise, nor clever, nor cultured, nor geniuses, be thankful that all that has nothing to do with our power of knowing and possessing the best wisdom and the highest treasures, but that upon this path the wayfaring man though a fool shall not err, and all narrow foreheads and limited understandings, and poor, simple uneducated people as well as philosophers and geniuses have to learn love by their hearts and not by their heads, and by a sense of need and a humble trust and a daily experience have to appropriate and suck out the blessing that lies in the love of Jesus Christ. Blessed be His name! The end of all aristocracies of culture and superciliousness of intellect lies in that great truth that we possess the deepest knowledge and highest wisdom when we love and by our love.

II. Now a word in the next place as to the other thought here, that not even the loving heart can know the love of Christ.

‘It passeth knowledge,’ says my text. Now I do not suppose that the paradox here of knowing the love of Christ which ‘passeth knowledge’ is to be explained by taking ‘know’ and ‘knowledge’ in the two different senses which I have already referred to, so as that we may experience, and know by conscious experience, that love which the mere understanding is incapable of grasping. That of course is an explanation which might be defended, but I take it that it is much truer to the Apostle’s meaning to suppose that he uses the words ‘know’ and ‘knowledge’ both times in the same sense. And so we get familiar thoughts which I touch upon very briefly.

Our knowledge of Christ’s love, though real, is incomplete, and must always be so. You and I believe, I hope, that Christ’s love is not a man’s love, or at least that it is more than a man’s love. We believe that it is the flowing out to us of the love of God, that all the fulness of the divine heart pours itself through that narrow channel of the human nature of our Lord, and therefore that the flow is endless and the Fountain infinite.

I suppose I do not need to show you that it is possible for people to have, and that in fact we do possess a real, a valid, a reliable knowledge of that which is infinite; although we possess, as a matter of course, no adequate and complete knowledge of it. But I only remind you that we have before us in Christ’s love something which, though the understanding is not by itself able to grasp it, yet the understanding led by the heart can lay hold of, and can find in it infinite treasures. We can lay our poor hands on His love as a child might lay its tiny palm upon the base of some great cliff, and hold that love in a real grasp of a real knowledge and certitude, but we cannot put our hands round it and feel that we comprehend as well as apprehend. Let us be thankful that we cannot.

His love can only become to us a subject of knowledge as it reveals itself in its manifestations. Yet after even these manifestations it remains unuttered and unutterable even by the Cross and grave, even by the glory and the throne. ‘It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.’

We have no measure by which we can translate into the terms of our experience, and so bring within the grasp of our minds, what was the depth of the step, which Christ took at the impulse of His love, from the Throne to the Cross. We know not what He forewent; we know not, nor ever shall know, what depths of darkness and soul-agony He passed through at the bidding of His all-enduring love to us. Nor do we know the consequences of that great work of emptying Himself of His glory. We have no means by which we can estimate the darkness and the depth of the misery from which we have been delivered, nor the height and the radiance of the glory to which we are to be lifted. And until we can tell and measure by our compasses both of these two extremes of possible human fate, till we have gone down into the deepest abyss of a bottomless pit of growing alienation and misery, and up above the highest reach of all unending progress into light and glory and God-likeness, we have not stretched our compasses wide enough to touch the two poles of this great sphere, the infinite love of Jesus Christ. So we bow before it, we know that we possess it with a knowledge more sure and certain, more deep and valid, than our knowledge of ought but ourselves; but yet it is beyond our grasp, and towers above us inaccessible in the altitude of its glory, and stretches deep beneath us in the profundity of its condescension.

And, in like manner, we may say that this known love passes knowledge, inasmuch as our experience of it can never exhaust it. We are like the settlers on some great island continent-as, for instance, on the Australian continent for many years after its first discovery-a thin fringe of population round the seaboard here and there, and all the bosom of the land untraversed and unknown. So after all experiences of and all blessed participation in the love of Jesus Christ which come to each of us by our faith, we have but skimmed the surface, but touched the edges, but received a drop of what, if it should come upon us in fulness of flood like a Niagara of love, would overwhelm our spirits.

So we have within our reach not only the treasure of creatural affections which bring gladness into life when they come, and darkness over it when they depart; we have not only human love which, if I may so say, is always lifting its finger to its lips in the act of bidding us adieu; but we may possess a love which will abide with us for ever. Men die, Christ lives. We can exhaust men, we cannot exhaust Christ. We can follow other objects of pursuit, all of which have limitation to their power of satisfying and pall upon the jaded sense sooner or later, or sooner or later are wrenched away from the aching heart. But here is a love into which we can penetrate very deep and fear no exhaustion; a sea into which we can cast ourselves, nor dread that like some rash diver flinging himself into shallow water where he thought there was depth, we may be bruised and wounded. We may find in Christ the endless love that an immortal heart requires. Enter by the low door of faith, and your finite heart will have the joy of an infinite love for its possession, and your mortal life will rise transfigured into an immortal and growing participation in the immortal Love of the indwelling and inexhaustible Christ.

19)Ephesians 3:18

EPHESIANS

THE PARADOX OF LOVE’S MEASURE

Eph. 3:18

Of what? There can, I think, be no doubt as to the answer. The next clause is evidently the continuation of the idea begun in that of our text, and it runs: ‘And to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge.’ It is the immeasurable measure, then; the boundless bounds and dimensions of the love of Christ which fire the Apostle’s thoughts here. Of course, he had no separate idea in his mind attaching to each of these measures of magnitude, but he gathered them together simply to express the one thought of the greatness of Christ’s love. Depth and height are the same dimension measured from opposite ends. The one begins at the top and goes down, the other begins at the bottom and goes up, but the distance is the same in either case. So we have the three dimensions of a solid here-breadth, length, and depth.

I suppose that I may venture to use these expressions with a somewhat different purpose from that for which the Apostle employs them; and to see in each of them a separate and blessed aspect of the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

I. What, then, is the breadth of that love?

It is as broad as humanity. As all the stars lie in the firmament, so all creatures rest in the heaven of His love. Mankind has many common characteristics. We all suffer, we all sin, we all hunger, we all aspire, hope, and die; and, blessed be God! we all occupy precisely the same relation to the divine love which lies in Jesus Christ. There are no step-children in God’s great family, and none of them receives a more grudging or a less ample share of His love and goodness than every other. Far-stretching as the race, and curtaining it over as some great tent may enclose on a festal day a whole tribe, the breadth of Christ's love is the breadth of humanity.

And it is universal because it is divine. No human mind can be stretched so as to comprehend the whole of the members of mankind, and no human heart can be so emptied of self as to be capable of this absolute universality and impartiality of affection. But the intellectual difficulties which stand in the way of the width of our affections, and the moral difficulties which stand still more frowningly and forbiddingly in the way, have no power over that love of Christ's which is close and tender, and clinging with all the tenderness and closeness and clingingness of a human affection and lofty and universal and passionless and perpetual, with all the height and breadth and calmness and eternity of a divine heart.

And this broad love, broad as humanity, is not shallow because it is broad. Our love is too often like the estuary of some great stream which runs deep and mighty as long as it is held within narrow banks, but as soon as it widens becomes slow and powerless and shallow. The intensity of human affection varies inversely as its extension. A universal philanthropy is a passionless sentiment. But Christ's love is deep though it is wide, and suffers no diminution because it is shared amongst a multitude. It is like the great feast that He Himself spread for five thousand men, women, and children, all seated on the grass, 'and they did all eat and were filled.'

The whole love is the property of each recipient of it. He does not love as we do, who give a part of our heart to this one and a part to that one, and share the treasure of our affections amongst a multitude. All this gift belongs to every one, just as all the sunshine comes to every eye, and as every beholder sees the moon's path across the dark waters, stretching from the place where He stands to the centre of light.

This broad love, universal as humanity, and deep as it is broad, is universal because it is individual. You and I have to generalise, as we say, when we try to extend our affections beyond the limits of household and family and personal friends, and the generalising is a sign of weakness and limitation. Nobody can love an abstraction, but God's love and Christ's love do not proceed in that fashion. He individualises, loving each and therefore loving all. It is because every man has a space in His heart singly and separately and conspicuously, that all men have a place there. So our task is to individualise this broad, universal love, and to say, in the simplicity of a glad faith, ‘He loved me and gave Himself for me.’ The breadth is world-wide, and the whole breadth is condensed into, if I may so say, a shaft of light which may find its way through the narrowest chink of a single soul. There are two ways of arguing about the love of Christ, both of them valid, and both of them needing to be employed by us. We have a right to say, ‘He loves all, therefore He loves me.’ And we have a right to say, ‘He loves me, therefore He loves all.’ For surely the love that has stooped to me can never pass by any human soul.

What is the breadth of the love of Christ? It is broad as mankind, it is narrow as myself.

II. Then, in the next place, what is the length of the love of Christ?

If we are to think of Him only as a man, however exalted and however perfect, you and I have nothing in the world to do with His love. When He was here on earth it may have been sent down through the ages in some vague way, as the shadowy ghost of love may rise in the heart of a great statesman or philanthropist for generations yet unborn, which He dimly sees will be affected by His sacrifice and service. But we do not call that love. Such a poor, pale, shadowy thing has no right to the warm throbbing name; has no right to demand from us any answering thrill of affection. Unless you think of Jesus Christ as something more and other than the purest and the loftiest benevolence that ever dwelt in human form, I know of no intelligible sense in which the length of His love can be stretched to touch you.

If we content ourselves with that altogether inadequate and lame conception of Him and of His nature, of course there is no present bond between any man upon earth and Him, and it is absurd to talk about His present love as extending in any way to me. But we have to believe, rising to the full height of the Christian conception of the nature and person of Christ, that when He was here on earth the divine that dwelt in Him so informed and inspired the human as that the love of His man’s heart was able to grasp the whole, and to separate the individuals who should make up the race till the end of time;

so as that you and I, looking back over all the centuries, and asking ourselves what is the length of the love of Christ, can say, ‘It stretches over all the years, and it reached then, as it reaches now, to touch me, upon whom the ends of the earth have come.’ Its length is conterminous with the duration of humanity here or yonder.

That thought of eternal being, when we refer it to God, towers above us and repels us; and when we turn it to ourselves and think of our own life as unending, there come a strangeness and an awe that is almost shrinking, over the thoughtful spirit. But when we transmute it into the thought of a love whose length is unending, then over all the shoreless, misty, melancholy sea of eternity, there gleams a light, and every wavelet flashes up into glory. It is a dreadful thing to think, ‘For ever, Thou art God.’ It is a solemn thing to think, ‘For ever I am to be’; but it is life to say: ‘O Christ! Thy love endureth from everlasting to everlasting; and because it lives, I shall live also’-’Oh! give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever.’

There is another measure of the length of the love of Christ. ‘Master! How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?-I say not unto thee until seven times, but until seventy times seven.’ So said the Christ, multiplying perfection into itself twice-two sevens and a ten-in order to express the idea of boundlessness. And the law that He laid down for His servant is the law that binds Himself. What is the length of the love of Christ? Here is one measure of it-howsoever long drawn out my sin may be, this is longer; and the white line of His love runs out into infinity, far beyond the point where the black line of my sin stops. Anything short of eternal patience would have been long ago exhausted by your sins and mine, and our brethren’s. But the pitying Christ, the eternal Lover of all wandering souls, looks down from heaven upon every one of us; goes with us in all our wanderings, bears with us in all our sins, in all our transgressions still is gracious. His pleadings sound on, like some stop in an organ continuously persistent through all the other notes. And round His throne are written the divine words which have been spoken about our human love modelled after His: ‘Charity suffereth long and is kind; is not easily provoked, is not soon angry, beareth all things.’ The length of the love of Christ is the length of eternity, and outmeasures all human sin.

III. Then again, what is the depth of that love?

Depth and height, as I said at the beginning of these remarks, are but two ways of expressing the same dimension. For the one we begin at the top and measure down, for the other we begin at the bottom and measure up. The top is the Throne; and the downward measure, how is it to be stated? In what terms of distance are we to express it? How far is it from the Throne of the Universe to the manger of Bethlehem, and the Cross of Calvary, and the sepulchre in the garden? That is the depth of the love of Christ. Howsoever far may be the distance from that loftiness of co-equal divinity in the bosom of the Father, and radiant with glory, to the lowliness of the form of a servant, and the sorrows, limitations, rejections, pains and death-that is the measure of the depth of Christ's love. We can estimate the depth of the love of Christ by saying, 'He came from above, He tabernacled with us,' as if some planet were to burst from its track and plunge downwards in amongst the mist and the narrowness of our earthly atmosphere.

A well-known modern scientist has hazarded the speculation that the origin of life on this planet has been the falling upon it of the fragments of a meteor, or an aerolite from some other system, with a speck of organic life upon it, from which all has developed. Whatever may be the case in regard to physical life, that is absolutely true in the case of spiritual life. It all originates because this heaven-descended Christ has come down the long staircase of Incarnation, and has brought with Him into the clouds and oppressions of our terrestrial atmosphere a germ of life which He has planted in the heart of the race, there to spread for ever. That is the measure of the depth of the love of Christ.

And there is another way to measure it. My sins are deep, my helpless miseries are deep, but they are shallow as compared with the love that goes down beneath all sin, that is deeper than all sorrow, that is deeper than all necessity, that shrinks from no degradation, that turns away from no squalor, that abhors no wickedness so as to avert its face from it. The purest passion of human benevolence cannot but sometimes be aware of disgust mingling with its pity and its efforts, but Christ's love comes down to the most sunken. However far in the abyss of degradation any human soul has descended, beneath it are the everlasting arms, and beneath it is Christ's love. When a coalpit gets blocked up by some explosion, no brave rescuing party will venture to descend into the lowest depths of the poisonous darkness until some ventilation has been restored. But this loving Christ goes down, down, down into the thickest, most pestilential atmosphere, reeking with sin and corruption, and stretches out a rescuing hand to the most abject and undermost of all the victims. How deep is the love of Christ! The deep mines of sin and of alienation are all undermined and countermined by His love. Sin is an abyss, a mystery, how deep only they know who have fought against it; but

'O love! thou bottomless abyss,
My sins are swallowed up in thee.'

'I will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.' The depths of Christ's love go down beneath all human necessity, sorrow, suffering, and sin.

IV. And lastly, what is the height of the love of Christ?

We found that the way to measure the depth was to begin at the Throne, and go down to the Cross, and to the foul abysses of evil. The way to measure the height is to begin at the Cross and the foul abysses of evil, and to go up to the Throne. That is to say, the topmost thing in the Universe, the shining apex and pinnacle, glittering away up there in the radiant unsetting light, is the love of God in Jesus Christ. Other conceptions of that divine nature spring high above us and tower beyond our thoughts, but the summit of them all, the very topmost as it is the very bottommost, outside of everything, and therefore high above everything, is the love of God which has been revealed to us all, and brought close to us sinful men in the manhood and passion of our dear Christ.

And that love which thus towers above us, and gleams like the shining cross on the top of some lofty cathedral spire, does not flash up there inaccessible, nor lie before us like some pathless precipice, up which nothing that has not wings can ever hope to rise, but the height of the love of Christ is an hospitable height, which can be scaled by us. Nay, rather, that heaven of love which is 'higher than our thoughts,' bends down, as by a kind of optical delusion the physical heaven seems to do towards each of us, only with this blessed difference, that in the natural world the place where heaven touches earth is always the furthest point of distance from us: and in the spiritual world the place where heaven stoops to me is always right over my head, and the nearest possible point to me. He has come to lift us to Himself, and this is the height of His love, that it bears us, if we will, up and up to sit upon that throne where He Himself is enthroned.

So, brethren, Christ’s love is round about us all, as some sunny tropical sea may embosom in its violet waves a multitude of luxuriant and happy islets. So all of us, islanded on our little individual lives, lie in that great ocean of love, all the dimensions of which are immeasurable, and which stretches above, beneath, around, shoreless, tideless, bottomless, endless.

But, remember, this ocean of love you can shut out of your lives. It is possible to plunge a jar into mid-Atlantic, further than soundings have ever descended, and to bring it up on deck as dry inside as if it had been lying on an oven. It is possible for men and women-and I have them listening to me at this moment-to live and move and have their being in that sea of love, and never to have let one drop of its richest gifts into their hearts or their lives. Open your hearts for Him to come in, by humble faith in His great sacrifice for you. For if Christ dwell in your heart by faith, then and only then will experience be your guide; and you will be able to comprehend the boundless greatness, the endless duration, and absolute perfection, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge.

20)Ephesians 3:19

EPHESIANS

THE CLIMAX OF ALL PRAYER

Eph. 3:19

The Apostle's many-linked prayer, which we have been considering in successive sermons, has reached its height. It soars to the very Throne of God. There can be nothing above or beyond this wonderful petition. Rather, it might seem as if it were too much to ask, and as if, in the ecstasy of prayer, Paul had forgotten the limits that separate the creature from the Creator, as well as the experience of sinful and imperfect men, and had sought to 'wind himself too high for mortal life beneath the sky.' And yet Paul's prayers are God's promises; and we are justified in taking these rapturous petitions as being distinct declarations of God's desire and purpose for each of us; as being the end which He had in view in the unspeakable gift of His Son; and as being the certain outcome of His gracious working on all believing hearts.

It seems at first a paradoxical impossibility; looked at more deeply and carefully it becomes a possibility for each of us, and therefore a duty; a certainty for all the redeemed in fullest measure hereafter; and, alas! a rebuke to our low lives and feeble expectations. Let us look, then, at the petition, with the desire of sounding, as we may, its depths and realising its preciousness.

I. First of all, think with me of the significance of this prayer.

‘The fulness of God’ is another expression for the whole sum and aggregate of all the energies, powers, and attributes of the divine nature, the total Godhead in its plenitude and abundance.

‘God is love,’ we say. What does that mean, but that God desires to impart His whole self to the creatures whom He loves? What is love in its lofty and purest forms, even as we see them here on earth; what is love except the infinite longing to bestow one’s self? And when we proclaim that which is the summit and climax of the revelation of our Father in the person of His Son, and say with the last utterances of Scripture that ‘God is love,’ we do in other words proclaim that the very nature and deepest desire and purpose of the divine heart is to pour itself on the emptiness and need of His lowly creatures in floods that keep back nothing. Lofty, wonderful, incomprehensible to the mere understanding as this thought may be, clearly it is the inmost meaning of all that Scripture tells us about God as being the ‘portion of His people,’ and about us, as being by Christ and in Christ ‘heirs of God,’ and possessors of Himself.

We have, then, as the promise that gleams from these great words, this wonderful prospect, that the divine love, truth, holiness, joy, in all their rich plenitude of all-sufficient abundance, may be showered upon us. The whole Godhead is our possession; for the fulness of God is no far-off remote treasure that lies beyond human grasp and outside of human experience. Do not we believe that, to use the words of this Apostle in another letter, ‘it pleased the Father that in Him should all the fulness dwell’? Do we not believe that, to use the words of the same epistle, ‘In Christ dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily’? Is not that abundance of the resources of the whole Deity insphered and incarnated in Jesus Christ our Lord, that it may be near us, and that we may put out our hand and touch it? This may be a paradox for the understanding, full of metaphysical puzzles and cobwebs, but for the heart that knows Christ, most true and precious. God is gathered into Jesus Christ, and all the fulness of God, whatever that may mean, is embodied in the Man Christ Jesus, that from Him it may be communicated to every soul that will.

For, to quote other words of another of the New Testament teachers, ‘Of His fulness have all we received, and grace for grace,’ and to quote words in another part of the same epistle, we may ‘all come to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.’ High above us, then, and inaccessible though that awful thought, ‘the fulness of God,’ may seem, as the zenith of the unscaleable heavens seems to us poor creatures creeping here upon the flat earth, it comes near, near, near, ever nearer, and at last tabernacles among us, when we think that in Him all the fulness dwells, and it comes nearer yet and enters into our hearts when we think that ‘of His fulness have we all received.’

Then, still further, observe another of the words in this petition:-’That ye may be filled.’ That is to say, Paul’s prayer and God’s purpose and desire concerning us is, that our whole being may be so saturated and charged with an indwelling divinity as that there shall be no room in our present stature and capacity for more, and no sense of want or aching emptiness.

Ah, brethren! when we think of how eagerly we have drunk at the stinking puddles of earth, and how after every draught there has yet been left a thirst that was pain, it is something for us to hear Him say:-’The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life,’- and ‘he that drinketh of this water shall never thirst.’ Our empty hearts, with their experiences of the insufficiency and the vanity of all earthly satisfaction, stand there like the water-pots at the rustic marriage, and the Master says, ‘Fill them to the brim.’ And then, by His touch, the water of our poor savourless, earthly enjoyments is transmuted and elevated into the new wine of His Kingdom. We may be filled, satisfied with the fulness of God.

There is another point as to the significance of this prayer, on which I must briefly touch. As our Revised Version will tell you, the literal rendering of my text is, ‘filled unto’ [not exactly with] ‘all the fulness of God’; which suggests the idea not of a completed work but of a process, and of a growing process, as if more and more of that great fulness might pass into a man. Suppose a number of vessels, according to the old illustration about degrees of glory in heaven; they are each full, but the quantity that one contains is much less than that which the other may hold. Add to the illustration that the vessels can grow, and that filling makes them grow; as a shrunken bladder when you pass gas into it will expand and round itself out, and all the creases will be smoothed away. Such is the Apostle’s idea here, that a process of filling goes on which may satisfy the then desires, because it fills us up to the then capacities of our spirits; but in the very process of so filling and satisfying makes those spirits capable of containing larger measures of His fulness, which therefore flow into it. Such, as I take it, in rude and faint outline, is the significance of this great prayer.

II. Now turn, in the next place, to consider briefly the possibility of the accomplishments of this petition.

As I said, it sounds as if it were too much to desire. Certainly no wish can go beyond this wish. The question is, can a sane and humble wish go as far as this; and can a man pray such a prayer with any real belief that he will get it answered here and now? I say yes!

There are two difficulties that at once start up.

People will say, does such a prayer as this upon man’s lips not forget the limits that bound the creature’s capacity? Can the finite contain the Infinite?

Well, that is a verbal puzzle, and I answer, yes! The finite can contain the Infinite, if you are talking about two hearts that love, one of them God’s and one of them mine. We have got to keep very clear and distinct before our minds the broad, firm line of demarcation between the creature and the Creator, or else we get into a pantheistic region where both creature and Creator expire. But there is a Christian as well as an atheistic pantheism, and as long as we retain clearly in our minds the consciousness of the personal distinction between God and His child, so as that the child can turn round and say, ‘I love Thee’ and God can look down and say, ‘I bless thee’; then all identification and mutual indwelling and impartation from Him of Himself are possible, and are held forth as the aim and end of Christian life.

Of course in a mere abstract and philosophical sense the Infinite cannot be contained by the finite; and attributes which express infinity, like omnipresence and omniscience and omnipotence and so on, indicate things in God that we can know but little about, and that cannot be communicated. But those are not the divinest things in God. ‘God is love.’ Do you believe that that saying unveils the deepest things in Him? God is light, ‘and in Him is no darkness at all.’ Do you believe that His light and His love are nearer the centre than these attributes of power and infinitude? If we believe that, then we can come back to my text and say, ‘The love, which is Thee, can come into me; the light, which is Thee, can pour itself into my darkness; the holiness, which is Thee, can enter into my impurity. The heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee. Thou dwellest in the humble and in the contrite heart.’

So, dear brethren, the old legends about mighty forms that contracted their stature and bowed their divine heads to enter into some poor man’s hut, and sit there, are simple Christian realities. And instead of puzzling ourselves with metaphysical difficulties which are mere shadows, and the work of the understanding or the spawn of words, let us listen to the Christ when He says, ‘We will come unto him and make our abode with him’ and believe that it was no impossibility which fired the Apostle’s hope when he prayed, and in praying prophesied, that we might be filled with all the fulness of God.

Then there is another difficulty that rises before our minds; and Christian men say, ‘How is it possible, in this region of imperfection, compassed with infirmity and sin as we are, that such hopes should be realised for us here?’ Well, I would rather answer that question by retorting and saying: ‘How is it possible that such a prayer should have come from inspired lips unless the thing that Paul was asking might be?’ Did he waste his breath when he thus prayed? Are we not as Christian men bound, instead of measuring our expectations by our attainments, to try to stretch our attainments to what are our legitimate expectations, and to hear in these words the answer to the faithless and unbelieving doubt whether such a thing is possible, and the assurance that it is possible.

An impossibility can never be a duty, and yet we are commanded: ‘Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect.’ An impossibility can never be a duty, and yet we are commanded to let Christ abide in our hearts.

Oh! if we believed less in the power of our sin it would have less power upon us. If we believed more in the power of an indwelling Christ He would have more power within us. If we said to ourselves, ‘It is possible,’ we should make it possible. The impossibility arises only from our own weakness, from our own sinful weakness; and though it may be true, and is true, that none of us will live without sin as long as we abide here, it is also true that each moment of interruption of our communion with Christ and therefore each moment of interruption of that being ‘filled with the fulness of God,’ might have been avoided. We know about every such time that we could have helped it if we had liked, and it is no use bringing any general principles about sin cleaving to men in order to break the force of that conviction. But if that conviction be a real one, and if whenever a Christian man loses the consciousness of God in his heart, making him blessed, he is obliged to say: ‘It was my own fault and Thou wouldst have stayed if I had chosen,’ then there follows from this, that it is possible, notwithstanding all the imperfection and sin of earth, that we may be ‘filled with all the fulness of God.’

So, dear brethren, take you this prayer as the standard of your expectations; and oh! take it as we must all take it, as the sharpest of rebukes to our actual attainments in holiness and in likeness to our Master. Set by the side of these wondrous and solemn words-’filled with the fulness of God,’ the facts of the lives of the average professing Christians of this generation, and of this congregation; their emptiness, their ignorance of the divine indwelling, their want of anything in their experience that corresponds in the least degree to such words as these. Judge whether a man is not more likely to be bowed down in wholesome sense of his own sinfulness and unworthiness, if he has before him such an ideal as this of my text, than if it, too, has faded out of his life. I believe, for my part, that one great cause of the worldliness and the sinfulness and mechanical formalities that are eating the life out of the Christianity of this generation is the fact of the Church having largely lost any real belief in the possibility that Christian men may possess the fulness of God as their present experience. And so, when they do not find it in themselves they say: ‘Oh! it is all right; it is the necessary result of our imperfect fleshly condition.’ No! It is all wrong; and His purpose is that we should possess Him in the fulness of His gladdening and hallowing power, at every moment in our happy lives.

III. One word to close with, as to the means by which this prayer may be fulfilled.

Remember, it comes as the last link in a chain. I shall have wasted my breath for a month, as far as you are concerned, if you do not feel that the preceding links are needful before this can be attained.

But I only touch upon the nearest of them and remind you that it must be Christ dwelling in our hearts, that fills them with the fulness of God. Where He comes God comes. And where does He come? He comes where faith opens the door for Him. If you will trust Jesus Christ, if you will distrust yourselves, if you will turn your thoughts and your hearts to Him, if you will let Him come into your souls, and not shut Him out because your souls are so full that there is no room for Him there, then when He comes He will not come empty-handed, but will bring the full Godhead with Him.

There must be the emptying of self, if there is to be the filling with God. And the emptying of self is realised in that faith which forsakes self-confidence, self-righteousness, self-dependence, self-control, self-pleasing, and yields itself wholly to the dear Lord.

There is another condition that is required, and that is the previous link in this braided chain. The conscious experience of the love which is in Christ will bring to us 'the fulness of God.' Love is power; love is God; and when we live in the sense and experience of God's love to us then we have the power and we have the God. It is as in some of these petrifying streams, the water is charged with particles which it deposits upon everything that is laid in its course. So, if we plunge our hearts into that fountain of the love of Christ, as it flows it will clothe us with all the divine energies which are held in solution in the divinest thing in God-His own love. Plunged into the love we are filled with the fulness.

Then keep near your Master. It all comes to that. Meditate upon Him; do not let days pass, as they do pass, without a thought being turned to Him. Do not go about your daily work without a remembrance of Him. Keep yourselves in Christ. Seek to experience His love, that love which passeth knowledge, and is only known by them who possess it. And then, as the old painters with deep truth used to paint the Apostle of Love with a face like his Master, living near Christ and looking upon Him you will receive of His fulness, and ‘we all, with open face, beholding the glory, shall be changed into the glory.’

21)Ephesians 3:20

EPHESIANS

MEASURELESS POWER AND ENDLESS GLORY

Eph. 3:20

One purpose and blessing of faithful prayer is to enlarge the desires which it expresses, and to make us think more loftily of the grace to which we appeal. So the Apostle, in the wonderful series of supplications which precedes the text, has found his thought of what he may hope for his brethren at Ephesus grow greater with every clause. His prayer rises like some songbird, in ever-widening sweeps, each higher in the blue, and nearer the throne; and at each a sweeter, fuller note.

‘Strengthened with might by His Spirit’; ‘that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith’; ‘that ye may be able to know the love of Christ’; ‘that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.’ Here he touches the very throne. Beyond that nothing can be conceived. But though that sublime petition may be the end of thought, it is not the end of faith. Though God can give us nothing more than it is, He can give us more than we think it to be, and more than we ask, when we ask this. Therefore the grand doxology of our text crowns and surpasses even this great prayer. The higher true prayer climbs, the wider is its view; and the wider is its view, the more conscious is it that the horizon of its vision is far within the borders of the goodly land. And as we gaze into what we can discern of the fulness of God, prayer will melt into thanksgiving and the doxology for the swift answer will follow close upon the last words of supplication. So is it here; so it may be always.

The form of our text then marks the confidence of Paul’s prayer. The exuberant fervour of his faith, as well as his natural impetuosity and ardour, comes out in the heaped-up words expressive of immensity and duration. He is like some archer watching, with parted lips, the flight of his arrow to the mark. He is gazing on God confident that he has not asked in vain. Let us look with him, that we, too, may be heartened to expect great things of God. Notice then-

I. The measure of the power to which we trust.

This epistle is remarkable for its frequent references to the divine rule, or standard, or measure, in accordance with which the great facts of redemption take place. The 'things on the earth'-the historical processes by which salvation is brought to men and works in men-are ever traced up to the 'things in heaven'; the divine counsels from which they have come forth. That phrase, 'according to,' is perpetually occurring in this connection in the epistle. It is applied mainly in two directions. It serves sometimes to bring into view the ground, or reason, of the redemptive facts, as, for instance, in the expression that these take place 'according to His good pleasure which He hath purposed in Himself' It serves sometimes to bring into view the measure by which the working of these redemptive facts is determined; as in our text, and in many other places.

Now there are three main forms under which this standard, or measure, of the Redeeming Power is set forth in this epistle, and it will help us to grasp the greatness of the Apostle's thought if we consider these.

Take, then, first, that clause in the earlier portion of the preceding prayer, 'that He would grant you according to the riches of His glory.' The measure, then, of the gift that we may hope to receive is the measure of God's own fulness. The 'riches of His glory' can be nothing less than the whole uncounted abundance of that majestic and far-shining Nature, as it pours itself forth in the dazzling perfectness of its own Self-manifestation. And nothing less than this great treasure is to be the limit and standard of His gift to us. We are the sons of the King, and the allowance which He makes us even before we come to our inheritance is proportionate to our Father's wealth. The same stupendous thought is given us in that prayer, heavy with the blessed weight of unspeakable gifts, 'that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.' This, then, is the measure of the grace that we may possess.

This limitless limit alone bounds the possibilities for every man, the certainties for every Christian.

The effect must be proportioned to the cause. And what effect will be adequate as the outcome of such a cause as ‘the riches of His glory’? Nothing short of absolute perfectness, the full transmutation of our dark, cold being into the reflected image of His own burning brightness, the ceaseless replenishing of our own spirits with all graces and gladnesses akin to His, the eternal growth of the soul upward and Godward. Perfection is the sign manual of God in all His works, just as imperfection and the falling below our thought and wish is our ‘token in every epistle’ and deed of ours. Take the finest needle, and put it below a microscope, and it will be all ragged and irregular, the fine, tapering lines will be broken by many a bulge and bend, and the point blunt and clumsy. Put the blade of grass to the same test, and see how regular its outline, how delicate and true the spear-head of its point. God’s work is perfect, man’s is clumsy and incomplete. God does not leave off till He has finished. When He rests, it is because, looking on His work, He sees it all ‘very good.’ His Sabbath is the Sabbath of an achieved purpose, of a fulfilled counsel. The palaces which we build are ever like that one in the story, where one window remains dark and unjewelled, while the rest blaze in beauty. But when God builds, none can say, ‘He was not able to finish.’ In His great palace He makes her ‘windows of agates’ and all her ‘borders of pleasant stones.’

So we have a right to enlarge our desires and stretch our confidence of what we may possess and become to this, His boundless bound-’The riches of glory.’

But another form in which the standard, or measure, is stated in this letter is: ‘The working of His mighty power, which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead’ [i.19, 20]; or, as it is put with a modification, ‘grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ’ [iv.7]. That is to say, we have not only the whole riches of the divine glory as the measure to which we may lift our hopes, but lest that celestial brightness should seem too high above us, and too far from us, we have Christ in His human-divine manifestation, and especially in the great fact of the Resurrection, set before us, that by Him we may learn what God wills we should become. The former phase of the standard may sound abstract, cloudy, hard to connect with any definite anticipations; and so this form of it is concrete, historical, and gives human features to the fair ideal. His Resurrection is the high-water mark of the divine power, and to the same level it will rise again in regard to every Christian. The Lord, in the glory of His risen life, and in the riches of the gifts which He received when He ascended up on high, is the pattern for us, and the power which fulfils its own pattern. In Him we see what man may become, and what His followers must become. The limits of that power will not be reached until every Christian soul is perfectly assimilated to that likeness, and bears all its beauty in its face, nor till every Christian soul is raised to participation in Christ's dignity and sits on His throne. Then, and not till then, shall the purpose of God be fulfilled and the gift which is measured by the riches of the Father's glory, and the fulness of the Son's grace, be possessed or conceived in its measureless measure.

But there is a third form in which this same standard is represented. That is the form which is found in our text, and in other places of the epistle: 'According to the power that worketh in us.'

What power is that but the power of the Spirit of God dwelling in us? And thus we have the measure, or standard, set forth in terms respectively applying to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. For the first, the riches of His glory; for the second, His Resurrection and Ascension; for the third, His energy working in Christian souls. The first carries us up into the mysteries of God, where the air is almost too subtle for our gross lungs; the second draws nearer to earth and points us to an historical fact that happened in this everyday world; the third comes still nearer to us, and bids us look within, and see whether what we are conscious of there, if we interpret it by the light of these other measures, will not yield results as great as theirs, and open before us the same fair prospect of perfect holiness and conformity to the divine nature.

There is already a Power at work within us, if we be Christians, of whose workings we may be aware, and from them forecast the measure of the gifts which it can bestow upon us. We may estimate what will be by what we know has been, and by what we feel is. That is to say, in other words, the effects already produced, and the experiences we have already had, carry in them the pledge of completeness.

I suppose that if the mediaeval dream had ever come true, and an alchemist had ever turned a grain of lead into gold, he could have turned all the lead in the world in time, and with crucibles and furnaces enough. The first step is all the difficulty, and if you and I have been changed from enemies into sons, and had one spark of love to God kindled in our hearts, that is a mightier change than any that remains to be effected in order to make us perfect. One grain has been changed, the whole mass will be so in due time.

The present operations of that power carry in them the pledge of their own completion. The strange mingling of good and evil in our present nature, our aspirations so crossed and contradicted, our resolution so broken and falsified, the gleams of light, and the eclipses that follow-all these in their opposition to each other, are plainly transitory, and the workings of that Power within us, though they be often overborne, are as plainly the stronger in their nature, and meant to conquer and to endure. Like some half-hewn block, such as travellers find in long abandoned quarries, whence Egyptian temples, that were destined never to be completed, were built, our spirits are but partly ‘polished after the similitude of a palace,’ while much remains in the rough. The builders of these temples have mouldered away and their unfinished handiwork will lie as it was when the last chisel touched it centuries ago, till the crack of doom; but stones for God’s temple will be wrought to completeness and set in their places. The whole threefold divine cause of our salvation supplies the measure, and lays the foundation for our hopes, in the glory of the Father, the grace of the Son, the power of the Holy Ghost. Let us lift up our cry: ‘Perfect that which concerneth me, forsake not the works of thine own hands,’ and we shall have for answer the ancient word, fresh as when it sounded long ago from among the stars to the sleeper at the ladder’s foot, ‘I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.’

II. Notice the relation of the divine working to our thoughts and desires.

The Apostle in his fervid way strains language to express how far the possibility of the divine working extends. He is able, not only to do all things, but ‘beyond all things’-a vehement way of putting the boundless reach of that gracious power. And what he means by this ‘beyond all things’ is more fully expressed in the next words, in which he labours by accumulating synonyms to convey his sense of the transcendent energy which waits to bless: ‘exceeding abundantly above what we ask.’ And as, alas! our desires are but shrunken and narrow beside our thoughts, he sweeps a wider orbit when he adds ‘above what we think.’ He has been asking wonderful things, and yet even his farthest-reaching petitions fall far on this side of the greatness of God’s power. One might think that even it could go no further than filling us ‘with all the fulness of God.’ Nor can it; but it may far transcend our conceptions of what that is, and astonish us by its surpassing our thoughts, no less than it shames us by exceeding our prayers.

Of course, all this is true, and is meant to apply, only about the inward gifts of God’s grace. I need not remind you that, in the outer world of Providence and earthly gifts, prayers and wishes often surpass the answers; that there a deeper wisdom often contradicts our thoughts and a truer kindness refuses our petitions, and that so the rapturous words of our text are only true in a very modified and partial sense about God’s working for us in the world. It is His work in us concerning which they are absolutely true.

Of course we know that in all regions of His working He is able to surpass our poor human conceptions, and that, properly speaking, the most familiar, and, as we insolently call them, ‘smallest’ of His works holds in it a mystery-were it none other than the mystery of Being-against which Thought has been breaking its teeth ever since men began to think at all.

But as regards the working of God on our spiritual lives, this passing beyond the bounds of thought and desire is but the necessary result of the fact already dealt with, that the only measure of the power is God Himself, in that Threefold Being. That being so, no plummet of our making can reach to the bottom of the abyss; no strong-winged thought can fly to the outermost bound of the encircling heaven. Widely as we stretch our reverent conceptions, there is ever something beyond. After we have resolved many a dim nebula in the starry sky, and found it all ablaze with suns and worlds, there will still hang, faint and far before us, hazy magnificences which we have not apprehended. Confidently and boldly as we may offer our prayers, and largely as we may expect, the answer is ever more than the petition. For indeed, in every act of His quickening grace, in every God-given increase of our knowledge of God, in every bestowment of His fulness, there is always more bestowed than we receive, more than we know even while we possess it. Like some gift given in the dark, its true preciousness is not discerned when it is first received. The gleam of the gold does not strike our eye all at once. There is ever an unknown margin felt by us to be over after our capacity of receiving is exhausted. 'And they took up of the fragments that remained, twelve baskets full.'

So, then, let us remember that while our thoughts and prayers can never reach to the full perception, or reception either, of the gift, the exuberant amplitude with which it reaches far beyond both is meant to draw both after it. And let us not forget either that, while the grace which we receive has no limit or measure but the fulness of God, the working limit, which determines what we receive of the grace, is these very thoughts and wishes which it surpasses. We may have as much of God as we can hold, as much as we wish. All Niagara may roar past a man's door, but only as much as he diverts through his own sluice will drive his mill, or quench his thirst. God's grace is like the figures in the Eastern tales, that will creep into a narrow room no bigger than a nutshell, or will tower heaven high. Our spirits are like the magic tent whose walls expanded or contracted at the owner's wish-we may enlarge them to enclose far more of the grace than we have ever possessed. We are not straitened in God, but in ourselves. He is 'able to do exceeding abundantly above what we ask or think.' Therefore let us stretch desires and thoughts to their utmost, remembering that, while they can never reach the measure of His grace in itself, they make the practical measure of our possession of it. 'According to thy faith' is the real measure of the gift received, even though 'according to the riches of His glory' be the measure of the gift bestowed. Note, again,

III. The glory that springs from the divine work.

'The glory of God' is the lustre of His own perfect character, the bright sum total of all the blended brilliances that compose His name. When that light is welcomed and adored by men, they are said to 'give glory to God,' and this doxology is at once a prophecy that the working of God’s power on His redeemed children will issue in setting forth the radiance of His Name yet more, and a prayer that it may. So we have here the great thought expressed in many places of Scripture, that the highest exhibition of the divine character for the reverence and love-of the whole universe, shall we say?-lies in His work on Christian souls, and the effect produced thereby on them. God takes His stand, so to speak, on this great fact in His dealings, and will have His creatures estimate Him by it. He reckons it His highest praise that He has redeemed men, and by His dwelling in them fills them with His own fulness. And this chiefest praise and brightest glory accrues to Him ‘in the Church in Christ Jesus.’ The weakening of the latter word into by Christ Jesus,’ as in the English version, is to be regretted, as substituting another thought, Scriptural no doubt and precious, for the precise shade of meaning in the Apostle’s mind here. As has been well said, ‘the first words denote the outward province; the second, the inward and spiritual sphere in which God was to be praised.’ His glory is to shine in the Church, the theatre of His power, the standing demonstration of the might of redeeming love. By this He will be judged, and this He will point to if any ask what is His divinest work, which bears the clearest imprint of His divinest self. His glory is to be set forth by men on condition that they are ‘in Christ,’ living and moving in Him, in that mysterious but most real union without which no fruit grows on the dead branches, nor any music of praise breaks from the dead lips.

So, then, think of that wonder that God sets His glory in His dealings with us. Amid all the majesty of His works and all the blaze of His creation, this is what He presents as the highest specimen of His power-the Church of Jesus Christ, the company of poor men, wearied and conscious of many evils, who follow afar off the footsteps of their Lord. How dusty and toil-worn the little group of Christians that landed at Puteoli must have looked as they toiled along the Appian Way and entered Rome! How contemptuously emperor and philosopher and priest and patrician would have curled their lips, if they had been told that in that little knot of Jewish prisoners lay a power before which theirs would cower and finally fade! Even so is it still. Among all the splendours of this great universe, and the mere obtrusive tawdrinesses of earth, men look upon us Christians as poor enough; and yet it is to His redeemed children that God has entrusted His praise, and in their hands that He has lodged the sacred deposit of His own glory.

Think loftily of that office and honour, lowly of yourselves who have it laid upon you as a crown. His honour is in our hands. We are the ‘secretaries of His praise.’ This is the highest function that any creature can discharge. The Rabbis have a beautiful bit of teaching buried among their rubbish about angels. They say that there are two kinds of angels-the angels of service and the angels of praise, of which two orders the latter is the higher, and that no angel in it praises God twice, but having once lifted up his voice in the psalm of heaven, then perishes and ceases to be. He has perfected his being, he has reached the height of his greatness, he has done what he was made for, let him fade away. The garb of legend is mean enough, but the thought it embodies is that ever true and solemn one, without which life is nought-’Man’s chief end is to glorify God.’

And we can only fulfil that high purpose in the measure of our union with Christ. ‘In Him’ abiding, we manifest God’s glory, for in Him abiding we receive God’s grace. So long as we are joined to Him, we partake of His life, and our lives become music and praise. The electric current flows from Him through all souls that are ‘in Him’ and they glow with fair colours which they owe to their contact with Jesus. Interrupt the communication, and all is darkness. So, brethren, let us seek to abide in Him, severed from whom we are nothing. Then shall we fulfil the purpose of His love, who ‘hath shined in our hearts’ that we might give to others ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ Notice, lastly,

IV. The eternity of the work and of the praise.

As in the former clauses the idea of the transcendent greatness of the power of God was expressed by accumulated synonyms, so here the kindred thought of its eternity, and consequently of the ceaseless duration of the resulting glory, is sought to be set forth by a similar aggregation. The language creaks and labours, as it were, under the weight of the great conception. Literally rendered, the words are-’to all generations of the age of the ages’-a remarkable fusing together of two expressions for unbounded duration, which are scarcely congruous. We can understand ‘to all generations’ as expressive of duration as long as birth and death shall last.

We can understand ‘the age of the ages’ as pointing to that endless epoch whose moments are ‘ages’; but the blending of the two is but an unconscious acknowledgment that the speech of earth, saturated, as it is, with the colouring of time, breaks down in the attempt to express the thought of eternity. Undoubtedly that solemn conception is the one intended by this strange phrase.

The work is to go on for ever and ever, and with it the praise. As the ages which are the beats of the pendulum of eternity come and go, more and more of God’s power will flow out to us, and more and more of God’s glory will be manifested in us. It must be so; for God’s gift is infinite, and man’s capacity of reception is indefinitely capable of increase. Therefore eternity will be needful in order that redeemed souls may absorb all of God which He can give or they can take. The process has no limits, for there is no bound to be set to the possible approaches of the human spirit to the divine, and none to the exuberant abundance of the beauty and glory which God will give to His child. Therefore we shall live for ever: and for ever show forth His praise and blaze out like the sun with the irradiation of His glory. We cannot die till we have exhausted God. Till we comprehend all His nature in our thoughts, and reflect all His beauty in our character; till we have attained all the bliss that we can think, and received all the good that we can ask; till Hope has nothing before her to reach towards, and God is left behind: we ‘shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.’

Let His grace work on you, and yield yourselves to Him, that His fulness may fill your emptiness. So on earth we shall be delivered from hopes which mock and wishes that are never fulfilled. So in heaven, after ‘ages of ages’ of growing glory, we shall have to say, as each new wave of the shoreless, sunlit sea bears us onward, ‘It doth not yet appear what we shall be.’

22)Ephesians 4:1

EPHESIANS

THE CALLING AND THE KINGDOM

Eph. 4:1; Rev. 3:4

The estimate formed of a centurion by the elders of the Jews was, ‘He is worthy for whom Thou shouldst do this’ and in contrast therewith the estimate formed by himself was, ‘I am not worthy that Thou shouldst come under my roof.’ From these two statements we deduce the thought that merit has no place in the Christian’s salvation, but all is to be traced to undeserved, gracious love. But that principle, true and all-important as it is, like every other great truth, may be exaggerated, and may be so isolated as to become untrue and a source of much evil. And so I desire to turn to the other side of the shield, and to emphasise the place that worthiness has in the Christian life, and its personal results both here and hereafter. To say that character has nothing to do with blessedness is untrue, both to conscience and to the Christian revelation; and however we trace all things to grace, we must also remember that we get what we have fitted ourselves for.

Now, my two texts bring out two aspects which have to be taken in conjunction. The one of them speaks about the present life, and lays it as an imperative obligation on all Christian people to be worthy of their Christianity, and the other carries us into the future and shows us that there it is they who are ‘worthy’ who attain to the Kingdom. So I think I shall best bring out what I desire to emphasise if I just take these two points-the Christian calling and the life that is worthy of it, and the Christian heaven and the life that is worthy of it.

I. The Christian calling and the life that is worthy of it.

‘I beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.’ Now, that thought recurs in other places in the Apostle’s writings, somewhat modified in expression. For instance, in one passage he speaks of ‘walking worthily of the God who has called us to His kingdom and glory,’ and in another of the Christian man’s duty to ‘walk worthily of the Lord unto all pleasing.’ There is a certain vocation to which a Christian man is bound to make his life correspond, and his conduct should be in some measure worthy of the ideal that is set before it. Now, we shall best understand what is involved in such worthiness if we make clear to ourselves what the Apostle means by this ‘calling’ to which he appeals as containing in itself a standard to which our lives are to be conformed.

Suppose we try to put away the technical word ‘calling’ and instead of ‘calling’ say ‘summons,’ which is nearer the idea, because it conveys the notions more fully of the urgency of the voice, and of the authority of the voice, which speaks to us. And what is that summons? How do we hear it? One of the other Apostles speaks of God as calling us ‘by His own glory and virtue,’ that is to say, wherever God reveals Himself in any fashion, and by any medium, to a man, the man fails to understand the deepest meaning of the revelation unless his purged ear hears in it the great voice saying, ‘Come up hither.’ For all God’s self-manifestation, in the creatures around us, in the deep voice of our own souls, in the mysteries of our own personal lives, and in the slow evolution of His purpose through the history of the world, all these revelations of God bear in them the summons to us that hear and see them to draw near to Him, and to mould ourselves into His likeness. And thus, just as the sun by the effluence of its beams gathers all the ministering planets, as it were, round its feet, and draws them to itself, so God, raying Himself out into the waste, fills the waste with magnetic influences which are meant to draw men to nobleness, goodness, God-pleasingness, and God-likeness.

But in another place in this Apostle’s writings we read of ‘the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.’ Yes, there, as focussed into one strong voice, all the summonses are concentrated and gathered. For in Jesus Christ we see the possibilities of humanity realised, and we have the pattern of what we ought to be, and are called thereby to be. And in Christ we get the great motives which make this summons, as it comes mended from His lips, no longer the mere harsh voice of an authoritative legislator, but the gentle invitation, ‘Come unto Me, ... and ye shall find rest unto your souls.’ The summons is honeyed, sweetened, and made infinitely mightier when we hear it from His gracious lips. It is the blessed peculiarity of the Christian ideal, that the manifestation of the ideal carries with it the power to realise it. And just as the increasing strength of the spring sunshine summons the buds from out of their folds, and the snowdrops hear the call and force themselves through the frozen soil, so when Christ summons He inclines the ears that hear, and enables the men that own them to obey the summons, and to be what they are commanded. And thus we have ‘the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.’

Now, if that is the call, if the life of Christ is that to which we are summoned, and the death of Christ is that by which we are inclined to obey the summons, and the Spirit of Christ is that by which we are enabled to do so, what sort of a life will be worthy of these? Well, the context supplies part of the answer. ‘I beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation ... with all meekness and lowliness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love.’ That is one side of the vocation, and the life that is worthy of it will be a life emancipated from the meanness of selfishness, and delivered from the tumidities of pride and arrogance, and changed into the sweetness of gentleness and the royalties of love.

And then, on the other side, in one of the other texts where the same general set of ideas is involved, we get a yet more wondrous exhibition of the life which the Apostle considered to be worthy. I simply signalise its points of detail without venturing to dwell upon them. ‘Unto all pleasing’; the first characteristic of life that is ‘worthy of our calling’ and to which, therefore, every one of us Christian people is imperatively bound, is that it shall, in all its parts, please God, and that is a large demand. Then follow details: ‘Fruitful in every good work’-a many-sided fruitfulness, an encyclopaediacal beneficent activity, covering all the ground of possible excellence; and that is not all; ‘increasing in the knowledge of God,’-a life of progressive acquaintance with Him; and that is not all:-’strengthened with all might unto all patience and long-suffering’; nor is that all, for the crown of the whole is ‘giving thanks unto the Father.’ So, then, ‘ye see your calling, brethren.’ A life that is ‘worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called’ is a life that conforms to the divine will, that is ‘fruitful in all good,’ that is progressive in its acquaintance with God, that is strengthened for all patience and long-suffering, and that in everything is thankful to Him. That is what we are summoned to be, and unless we are in some measure obeying the summons, and bringing out such a life in our conduct, then, notwithstanding all that we have to say about unmerited mercy, and free grace, and undeserved love, and salvation being not by works but by faith, we have no right to claim the mercy to which we say we trust.

Now, this necessity of a worthy life is perfectly harmonious with the great truth that, after all, every man owes all to the undeserved mercy of God. The more nearly we come to realise the purpose of our calling, the more ‘worthy’ of it we are, the deeper will be our consciousness of our unworthiness. The more we approximate to the ideal, and come closer up to it, and so see its features the better, the more we shall feel how unlike we are to it. The law for Christian progress is that the sense of unworthiness increases in the precise degree in which the worthiness increases. The same man that said, ‘Of whom [sinners] I am chief,’ said to the same reader, ‘I have kept the faith, henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.’ And so the two things are not contradictory but complementary. On the one side ‘worthy’ has nothing to do with the outflow of Christ’s love to us; on the other side we are to ‘walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called.’

II. And now, let us turn to the other thought, the Christian heaven and the life that is worthy of it.

Some of you, I have no doubt, would think that that was a tremendous heresy if there were not Scriptural words to buttress it. Let us see what it means. My text out of the Revelation says, ‘They shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.’ And the same voice that spake these, to some of us, astounding, words, said, when He was here on earth, ‘They which shall be counted worthy to attain to the life of the resurrection from the dead,’ etc. The text brings out very clearly the continuity and congruity between the life on earth and the life in heaven. Who is it of whom it is said that ‘they are worthy’ to ‘walk in white’? It is the ‘few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments.’ You see the connection; clean robes here and shining robes hereafter; the two go together, and you cannot separate them. And no belief that salvation, in its incipient germ here, and salvation in its fulness hereafter, are the results ‘not of works of righteousness which we have done, but of His mercy,’ is to be allowed to interfere with that other truth that they who are worthy attain to the Kingdom.

I must not be diverted from my main purpose, tempting as the theme would be, to say more than just a sentence about what is included in that great promise, ‘They shall walk with Me in white’ And if I do touch upon it at all, it is only in order to bring out more clearly that the very nature of the heavenly reward demands this worthiness which the text lays down as the condition of possessing it. ‘They shall walk’-activity on an external world. That opens a great door, but perhaps we had better be contented just with looking in. ‘They shall walk’-progress; ‘with me’-union with Jesus Christ; ‘in white’-resplendent purity of character. Now take these four things-activity on an outward universe, progress, union with Christ, resplendent purity of character, and you have almost all that we know of the future; the rest is partly doubtful and is mostly symbolical or negative, and in any case subordinate. Never mind about ‘physical theories of another life’; never mind about all the questions-to some of us how torturing they sometimes are!-concerning that future life. The more we keep ourselves within the broad limits of these promises that are intertwined and folded up together in that one saying, ‘They shall walk with Me in white,’ the better, I think, for the sanity and the spirituality of our conception of a future life.

That being understood, the next thing clearly follows, that only those who in the sense of the word as it is used here, are ‘worthy,’ can enter upon the possession of such a heaven. From the nature of the gift it is clear that there must be a moral and religious congruity between the gift and the recipient, or, to put it into plainer words, you cannot get heaven unless your nature is capable of receiving these great gifts which constitute heaven. People talk about the future state as being ‘a state of retribution.’ Well! that is not altogether a satisfactory form of expression, for retribution may convey the idea, such as is presented in earthly rewards and punishments, of there being no natural correspondence between the crime and its punishment, or the virtue and its reward. A bit of bronze shaped into the form of a cross may be the retribution ‘For Valour,’ and a prison cell may be the retribution by legal appointment for a certain crime. But that is not the way that God deals out rewards and punishments in the life which is to come. It is not a case of retribution, meaning thereby the arbitrary bestowment of a certain fixed gift in response to certain virtues, but it is a case of outcome, and the old metaphor of sowing and reaping is the true one. We sow here and we reap yonder. We pass into that future, ‘bringing our sheaves with us,’ and we have to grind the corn and make bread of it, and we have to eat the work of our own hands. They drink as they have brewed. ‘Their works do follow them,’ or they go before them and ‘receive them into everlasting habitations.’ Outcome, the necessary result, and not a mere arbitrary retribution, is the relation which heaven bears to earth.

That is plain, too, from our own nature. We carry ourselves with us wherever we go. The persistence of character, the continuity of personal being, the continuity of memory, the unobliterable-if I may coin a word-results upon ourselves of our actions, all these things make it certain that what looks to us a cleft, deep and broad, between the present life and the next, is to those that have passed it, and see it from the other side, but a little crack in the soil scarcely observable, and that we carry on into another world the selves that we have made here. Whatever death does-and it does a great deal that we do not know of-it does not alter, it only brings out, and, as I suppose, intensifies, the main drift and set of a character. And so they who ‘have not defiled their garments shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.’

Ah, brethren! how solemn that makes life; the fleeting moment carries Eternity in its bosom. It passes, and the works pass, but nothing human ever dies, and we bear with us the net results of all the yesterdays into that eternal to-day. You write upon a thin film of paper and there is a black leaf below it. Yes, and below the black leaf there is another sheet, and all that you write on the top one goes through the dark interposed page, and is recorded on the third, and one day that will be taken out of the book, and you will have to read it and say, ‘What I have written I have written.’

So, dear friends, whilst we begin with that unmerited love, and that same unmerited love is the sole ground on which the gates of the kingdom of heaven are by the Death and Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ opened to believers, their place there depends not only on faith but on the work which is the fruit of faith. There is such a thing as being ‘saved yet so as by fire,’ and there is such a thing as ‘having an entrance ministered abundantly unto us’; we have to make the choice. There is such a thing as the sore punishment of which they are thought worthy who have rejected the Son of God, and counted the blood of the Covenant an unholy thing; and there is such a thing as a man saying, ‘I am not worthy that Thou shouldest come unto me,' and Christ answering, 'He shall walk with Me in white, for he is worthy' and we have to make that choice also.

23)Ephesians 4:5

EPHESIANS

THE THREEFOLD UNITY

Eph. 4:5

The thought of the unity of the Church is very prominent in this epistle. It is difficult for us, amidst our present divisions, to realise how strange and wonderful it then was that a bond should have been found which drew together men of all nations, ranks, and characters. Pharisee and philosopher, high-born women and slaves, Roman patricians and gladiators, Asiatic Greeks and Syrian Jews forgot their feuds and sat together as one in Christ. It is no wonder that Paul in this letter dwells so long and earnestly on that strange fact. He is exhorting here to a unity of spirit corresponding to it, and he names a seven-fold oneness-one body and one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. The outward institution of the Church, as a manifest visible fact, comes first in the catalogue. One Father is last, and between these there lie the mention of the one Spirit and the one Lord. The 'body' is the Church. 'Spirit, Lord, God,' are the triune divine personality. Hope and faith are human acts by which men are joined to God; Baptism is the visible symbol of their incorporation into the one body. These three clauses of our text may be considered as substantially including all the members of the series. We deal with them quite simply now, and consider them in the order in which they stand here.

I. The one Lord.

The deep foundation of Christian unity is laid in the divine Christ. Here, as generally in the New Testament, the name 'Lord' designates Christ in His authority as ruler of men and in His divinity as Incarnation of God. It would not be going too far to suggest that we have in the name, standing as it does, for the most part, in majestic simplicity, a reference to the Old Testament name of Jehovah, which in the Greek translation familiar to Paul is generally rendered by this same word. Nor can we ignore the fact that in this great catalogue of the Christian unities the Lord stands in the centre of the three personalities named, and is regarded as being at once the source of the Spirit and the manifestation of the Father. The place which this name occupies in relation to the Faith which is next named suggests that the living personal Christ is the true uniting principle amongst men. The one body realises its oneness in its common relation to the one Lord. It is one, not because of identity in doctrine, not because of any of the bonds which hold men together in human associations, precious and sacred as many of these are, but 'we being many are one bread, for we are all partakers of that one bread.' The magnet draws all the particles to itself and holds them in a mysterious unity.

II. One faith.

The former clause set forth in one great name all the objective elements of the Church's oneness; this clause sets forth, with equally all-comprehending simplicity, the subjective element which makes a Christian. The one Lord, in the fulness of His nature and the perfectness of His work, is the all-inclusive object of faith. He, in His own living person, and not any dogmas about Him, is regarded as the strong support round which the tendrils of faith cling and twine and grow. True, He is made known to us as possessing certain attributes and as doing certain things which, when stated in words, become doctrines, and a Christ without these will never be the object of faith. The antithesis which is so often drawn between Christ's person and Christian doctrines is by no means sound, though the warning not to substitute the latter for the former is only too necessary at all times.

The subjective act which lays hold of Christ is faith, which in our text has its usual meaning of saving trust, and is entirely misconceived if it is taken, as it sometimes is, to mean the whole body of beliefs which make up the Christian creed. That which unites us to Jesus Christ is an infinitely deeper thing than the acceptance of any creed. A man may believe thirty-nine or thirty-nine hundred articles without having any real or vital connection with the one Lord. The faith which saves is the outgoing of the whole self towards Christ. In it the understanding, the emotions, and the will are all in action. The New Testament faith is absolutely identical with the Old Testament trust, and the prophet who exhorted Israel, ‘Trust ye in the Lord for ever, for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength,’ was preaching the very same message as the Apostle who cried, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.’

That ‘saving faith’ is the same in all Christians, however different they may be in condition and character and general outlook and opinion upon many points of Christian knowledge. The things on which they differ are on the surface, and sometimes by reason of their divergencies Christians stand like frowning cliffs that look threateningly at one another across a narrow gorge, but deep below ground they are continuous and the rock is unbroken. In many and melancholy ways ‘the unity of faith and knowledge’ is contradicted in the existing organisations of the Church, and we are tempted to postpone its coming to the day of the new Jerusalem which is compact together; but the clarion note of this great text may encourage us to hope, and to labour in our measure for the fulfilment of the hope, that all, who by one faith have been joined to the one Lord, may yet know themselves to be one in Him, and present to the world the fair picture of one body animated by one spirit.

III. One baptism.

Obviously in Paul’s mind baptism here means, not the baptism with the Spirit, but the rite, one and the same for all, by which believers in Christ enter into the fellowship of the Church. It was then a perpetual rite administered as a matter of course to all who professed to have been joined to the one Lord by their one faith. The sequence in the three clauses of our text is perfectly clear. Baptism is the expression and consequence of the faith which precedes it. Surely there is here a most distinct implication that it is a declaration of personal faith. Without enlarging on the subject, I venture to think that the order of the Apostle’s thought negatives other conceptions of Christian baptism, such as, that it is a communication of Grace, or an expression of the feelings and desires of parents, or a declaration of some truth about redeemed humanity. Paul’s order is Christ’s when He said, ‘He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.’

It is very remarkable and instructive that whilst thus our text shows that baptism was a matter of course and universally practised, the references to it in the epistles are so few. The inference is not that it was neglected, but that, as being a rite, it could not be as important as were Christian truths and Christian character. May we, in a word, suggest the contrast between the frequency and tone of the Apostolic references to baptism and those which we find in many quarters to-day?

It is remarkable that here the Lord's Supper is not mentioned, and all the more so, that in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the passage which we have already quoted does put emphasis upon it as a token of Christian unity. The explanation of the omission may be found in the fact that, in these early days, the Lord's Supper was not a separate rite, but was combined with ordinary meals, or perhaps more probably in the consideration that baptism was what the Lord's Supper was not-an initial rite which incorporated the possessors of one faith into the one body.

24)Ephesians 4:7

EPHESIANS

'THE MEASURE OF GRACE'

Eph. 4:7

The Apostle here makes a swift transition from the thought of the unity of the Church to the variety of gifts to the individual. 'Each' is contrasted with 'all.' The Father who stands in so blessed and gracious a relationship to the united whole also sustains an equally gracious and blessed relationship to each individual in that whole. It is because each receives His individual gift that God works in all. The Christian community is the perfection of individualism and of collectivism, and this rich variety of the gifts of grace is here urged as a reason additional to the unity of the one body, for the exhortation to the endeavour to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

I. Each Christian soul receives grace through Christ.

The more accurate rendering of the Revised Version reads ‘the grace,’ and the definite article points to it as a definite and familiar fact in the Ephesian believers to which the Apostle could point with the certainty that their own consciousness would confirm his statement. The wording of the Greek further implies that the grace was given at a definite point in the past, which is most naturally taken to have been the moment in which each believer laid hold on Jesus by faith. It is further to be noted that the content of the gift is the grace itself and not the graces which are its product and manifestation in the Christian life. And this distinction, which is in accordance with Paul’s habitual teaching, leads us to the conclusion, that the essential character of the grace given through the act of our individual faith is that of a new vital force, flowing into and transforming the individual life. From that unspeakable gift which Paul supposed to be verifiable by the individual experience of every Christian, there would follow the graces of Christian character in which would be included the deepening and purifying of all the natural capacities of the individual self, and the casting out from thence of all that was contrary to the transforming power of the new life.

Such an utterance as this, so quietly and confidently taking for granted that the experience of every believer verifies it in his own case, may well drive us all to look more earnestly into our own hearts, to see whether in them are any traces of a similar experience. If it be true, that to every one of us is given the grace, how comes it that so many of us dare not profess to have any vivid remembrance of possessing it, of having possessed it, or of any clear consciousness of possessing it now? There may be gifts bestowed upon unconscious receivers, but surely this is not one of these. If we do not know that we have it, it must at least remain very questionable whether we do have it at all, and very certain that we have it in scant and shrivelled fashion.

The universality of the gift was a startling thing in a world which, as far as cultivated heathenism was concerned, might rightly be called aristocratic, and by the side of a religion of privilege into which Judaism had degenerated. The supercilious sarcasm in the lips of Pharisees, ‘This people which knoweth not the law are cursed,’ but too truly expresses the gulf between the Rabbis and the ‘folk of the earth’ as the masses were commonly and contemptuously designated by the former. Into the midst of a society in which such distinctions prevailed, the proclamation that the greatest gift was bestowed upon all must have come with revolutionary force, and been hailed as emancipation. Peter had penetrated to grasp the full meaning and wondrous novelty of that universality, when on Pentecost he pointed to 'that which had been spoken by the prophet Joel' as fulfilled on that day, 'I will pour forth of my Spirit upon all flesh ... Yea, and on my servants and handmaidens ... will I pour forth of my Spirit.' The rushing, mighty wind of that day soon dropped. The fiery tongues ceased to quiver on the disciples' heads, and the many voices that spoke were silenced, but the gift was permanent, and is poured out now as it was then, and now, as then, it is true that the whole company of believers receive the Spirit, though alas! by their own faults it is not true that 'they are all filled with the Holy Spirit.'

Christ is the giver. He has 'power over the Spirit of Holiness' and as the Evangelist has said in his comment on our Lord's great words, when 'He stood and cried,' 'If any man thirst let him come unto Me and drink,' 'This spake He of the Spirit which they that believed on Him were to receive.' We cannot pierce into the depth of the mutual relations of the three divine Persons mentioned in the context, but we can discern that Christ is for us the self-revealing activity of the divine nature, the right arm of the Father, or, to use another metaphor, the channel through which the else 'closed sea' of God flows into the world of creatures. Through that channel is poured into believing hearts the river of the water of life, which proceeds out of the one 'throne of God and of the Lamb.' This gift of the Spirit of Holiness to all believers is the deepest and truest conception of Christ's gifts to His Church. His past work of sacrifice for the sins of the world was finished, as with a parting cry He proclaimed on Calvary, and the power of that sacrifice will never be exhausted, but the taking away of the sins of the world is but the initial stage of the work of Christ, and its further stages are carried on through all the ages. He 'worketh hitherto,' and His present work, in so far as believers are concerned, is not only the forthputting of divine energy in regard to outward circumstances, but the imparting to them of the Divine Spirit to be the very life of their lives and the Lord of their spirits. Christian people are but too apt to give undue prominence to what Christ did for them when He died, and to lose sight, in the overwhelming lustre of His unspeakable sacrifice, of what He is doing for them whilst He lives. It would tend to restore the proportions of Christian truth and to touch our hearts into a deeper and more continuous love to Him, if we more habitually thought of Him, not only as the Christ who died, but also as the Christ who rather is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.

II. The gift of this grace is in itself unlimited.

Our text speaks of it as being according to the measure of the gift of Christ, and that phrase may either mean the gift which Christ receives or that which He gives. Probably the latter is the Apostle’s meaning here, as seems to be indicated by the following words that ‘when He ascended on high, He gave gifts unto men,’ but what He gives is what He possesses, and the Apostle goes on to point out that the ultimate issue of His giving to the Church is that it attains to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

It may cast some light on this point if we note the remarkable variety of expressions in this epistle for the norm or standard or limit of the gift. In one place the Apostle speaks of the gift bestowed upon believers as being according to the riches of the Father’s glory; then it has no limit short of a participation in the divine fulness. God’s glory is the transcendent lustre of His own infinite character in its self-manifestation. The Apostle labours to flash through the dim medium of words the glory of that light by blending incongruously, but effectively, the other metaphor of riches, and the two together suggest a wonderful, though vague thought of the infinite wealth and the exhaustless brightness which we call Abba, Father. The humblest child may lift longing and confident eyes and believe that he has received in very deed, through his faith in Jesus Christ, a gift which will increase in riches and in light until it makes him perfect as his Father in heaven was perfect. It was an old faith, based upon insight far inferior to ours, which proclaimed with triumph over the frowns of death. ‘I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness.’ Would that those who have so much more for faith to build on, built as nobly as did these!

The gift has in itself no limit short of participation in the likeness of Christ. In another place in this letter the measure of that might which is the guarantee of Christian hope is set forth with an abundance of expression which might almost sound as an unmeaning accumulation of synonyms, as being ‘according to the working of the strength of His might which He wrought in Christ’; and what is the range of the working of that might is disclosed to our faith in the Resurrection of Jesus, and the setting of Him high above all rule and authority and power and lordship and every creature in the present or in any future. Paul’s continual teaching is that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was wrought in Him, not as a mere human individual but as our head and representative. Through Him we rise, not only from an ethical death of sin and separation from God, but we shall rise from physical death, and in Him the humblest believer possessing a vital union with the Lord of life has a share in His dominion, and, as His own faithful word has promised, sits with Him on His throne, even as He is set down with the Father on His throne.

That gift has in itself no limit short of its own energy. In another part of this epistle the Apostle indicates the measure up to which our being filled is to take effect, as being ‘all the fulness of God’ and in such an overwhelming vision breaks forth into fervent praise of Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, and then supplies us with a measure which may widen and heighten our petitions and expectations when He tells us that we are to find the measure of God’s working for us, not in the impoverishment of our present possessions, but in the exceeding riches of the power that worketh in us-that is to say, that we are to look for the limit of the limitless gift in nothing short of the boundless energy of God Himself. In the Epistle to the Colossians Paul uses the same illustration with an individual reference to his own labours. In our text he associates with himself all believers, as being conscious of a power working in them, which is really the limitless power of God, and heartens them to anticipate that whatever limitless power can effect in them will certainly be theirs. God does not leave off till He has done and till He can look upon His completed work and pronounce it very good.

III. This boundless grace is in each individual case bounded for the time by our own faith.

When I lived near the New Forest I used to hear much of what they called ‘rolling fences.’ A man received or took a little piece of Crown land on which he built a house and put round it a fence which could be judiciously and silently pushed outwards by slow degrees and enclosed, year by year, a wider area. We Christian people have, as it were, our own small, cultivated plot on the boundless prairie, the extent of which we measure for ourselves and which we can enlarge as we will. We have been speaking of the various aspects under which the boundlessness of the gift is presented by the Apostle, but there is another ‘according to’ in Christ’s own words, ‘According to your faith be it unto you,’ and that statement lays down the practical limits of our present possession of the boundless gift. We have as much as we desire; we have as much as we take; we have as much as we use; we have as much as we can hold. We are admitted into the treasure house, and all around us lie ingots of gold and vessels full of coins; we ourselves determine how much of the treasure should be ours, and if at any time we feel like empty-handed paupers rather than like possible millionaires, the reason lies in our own slowness to take that which is freely given to us of God. His word to us all is, ‘Ye are not straitened in Me, ye are straitened in yourselves.’ It is well for us to keep ever before us the boundlessness of the gift in itself and the working limit in ourselves which conditions our actual possession of the riches. For so, on the one hand, should we be encouraged to expect great things from God, and, on the other hand, be humbled by the contrast between what we might be and what we are. The river that rushes full of water from the throne can send but a narrow and shallow trickle through the narrow channel choked with much rubbish, which we provide for it. It is of little avail that the sun in the heavens pours down its flood of light and warmth if the windows of our hearts are by our own faults so darkened that but a stray beam, shorn of its brightness and warmth, can find its way into our darkness. The first lesson which we have to draw from the contrast between the boundlessness of the gift and the narrow limits of our individual possession and experience of it, is the lesson of penitent recognition and confession of the unbelief which lurks in our strongest faith. ‘Lord I believe, help Thou mine unbelief,’ should be the prayer of every Christian soul.

Not less surely will the recognition that the form and amount of the grace of God, which is possessed by each, is determined by the faith of each, lead to tolerance of the diversity of gifts. We have received our own proper gift of God, that which the strength and purity of our faith is capable of possessing, and it is not for us to carp at our brethren, either at those in advance of us or at those behind us. We have to remember that as it takes all sorts of people to make up a world, so it takes all varieties of Christian character to make a church. It is the body and not the individual members which represents Christ to the world. The firmest adherence to our own form of the universal gift will combine with the widest toleration of the gifts of others. The white light appears when red, green, and blue blend together, not when each tries to be the other. 'Every man hath his own proper gift of God, one after this fashion and another after that,' and we shall be true to the boundlessness of the gift and to the limitations of our own possession of it, in the measure of which we combine obedience to the light which shines in us, with thankful recognition of that which is granted to others.

The contrast between these two must be kept vivid if we would live in the freedom of the hope of the glory of God, for in the contrast lies the assurance of endless growth. A process is begun in every Christian soul of which the only natural end is the full possession of God in Christ, and that full possession can never be reached by a finite creature, but that does not mean that the ideal mocks us and retreats before us like the pot of gold, which the children fancy is at the end of the rainbow. Rather it means a continuous succession of our realisations of the ideal in ever fuller and more blessed reality. In this life we may, on condition of our growth in faith, grow in the possession of the fulness of God, and yet at each moment that possession will be greater, though at all moments we may be filled. In the Christian life to-morrow may be safely reckoned as destined to be 'as yesterday and much more abundant,' and when we pass from the imperfections of the most perfect earthly life, there will still remain ever before us the glory, which, according to the measure of our capacity, is also in us, and we shall draw nearer and nearer to it, and be for ever receiving into our expanding spirits more and more of the infinite fulness of God.

25)Ephesians 4:13

EPHESIANS

THE GOAL OF PROGRESS

Eph. 4:13

The thought of the unity of the Church is much in the Apostle's mind in this epistle. It is set forth in many places by his two favourite metaphors of the body and the temple, by the relation of husband and wife and by the family. It is contemplated in its great historical realisation by the union of Jew and Gentile in one whole. In the preceding context it is set forth as already existing, but also as lying far-off in the future. The chapter begins with an earnest exhortation to preserve this unity and with an exhibition of the oneness which does really exist in body, spirit, hope, lord, faith, baptism. But the Apostle swiftly passes to the corresponding thought of diversity. There are varieties in the gifts of the one Spirit; whilst each individual in the one whole receives his due portion, there are broad differences in spiritual gifts. These differences do not break the oneness, but they may tend to do so; they are not causes of separation and do not necessarily interfere with unity, but they may be made so. Their existence leaves room for brotherly helpfulness, and creates a necessity for it. The wiser are to teach; the more advanced are to lead; the more largely gifted are to encourage and stimulate the less richly endowed. Such outward helps and brotherly impartations of gifts is, on the one hand, a result of the one gift to the whole body, and is on the other a sign of, because a necessity arising from, the imperfect degree in which each individual has received of Christ's fulness; and these helps of teaching and guidance have for their sole object to make Christian men able to do without them, and are, as the text tells us, to cease when, and to last till, we all attain to the fulness of Christ. To Paul, then, the manifest unity of the Church was to be the end of its earthly course, but it also was real, though incomplete, in the present, and the emphasis of our text is not so much laid on telling us when this oneness was to be manifested as in showing us in what it consists. We have here a threefold expression of the true unity, as consisting in a oneness of relation to Christ, a consequent maturity of manhood and a perfect possession of all which is in Christ.

I. The true unity is oneness of relation to Christ.

The Revised Version is here to be preferred, and its 'attain unto' brings out the idea which the Authorised Version fails to express, that the text is intended to point to the period at which Christ's provision of helpful gifts to the growing Church is to cease, when the individuals composing it have come to their destined unity and maturity in Him. The three clauses of our text are each introduced by the same preposition, and there is no reason why in the second and third it should be rendered 'unto' and in the first should be watered down to 'in.'

There are then two regions in which this unity is to be realised. These are expressed by the great words, 'the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God.' These words are open to a misunderstanding, as if they referred to a unity as between faith and knowledge; but it is obvious to the slightest reflection that what is meant is the unity of all believers in regard to their faith, and in regard to their knowledge. It is to be noted that the Apostle has just said that there is one faith, now he points to the realisation of that oneness as the very end and goal of all discipline and growth. I suppose that we have to think here of the manifold and sad differences existing in Christian men, in regard to the depth and constancy and formative power of their faith. There are some who have it so strong and vigorous that it is a vision rather than a faith, a trust, deep and firm and settled, to which the present is but the fleeting shadow, and the unseen the eternal and only reality; but, alas! there are others in whom the light of faith burns feebly and flickers. Nor are these differences the attributes of different men, but the same man varies in the power of his faith, and we all of us know what it is to have it sometimes dominant over our whole selves, and sometimes weak and crushed under the weight of earthly passions. To-day we may be all flame, to-morrow all ice. Our faith may seem to us to be strong enough to move mountains, and before an hour is past we may find it, by experience, to be less than a grain of mustard seed. 'Action and reaction are always equal and contrary,' and that law is as true in reference to our present spiritual life as it is true in regard to physical objects. We have, then, the encouragement of such a word as that of our text for looking forward to and straining towards the reversal of these sad alterations in a fixed and continuous faith which should grasp the whole Christ and should always hold Him. There may still be diversities and degrees, but each should have his measure always full. 'Thy Sun shall no more go down'; there will no longer be the contrast between the flashing waters of a flood-tide and the dreary mud-banks disclosed at low water. We shall stand at different points, but the faces of all will be turned to Him who is the Light of all, and every face will shine with the likeness of His, when we see Him as He is.

But our text points us to another form of unity-the oneness of the knowledge of the Son of God.

The Apostle uses an emphatic term which is very familiar on his lips to designate this knowledge. It means not a mere intellectual apprehension, but a profound and vital acquaintance, dependent indeed upon faith, and realised in experience. It is the knowledge for which Paul was ready to 'count all things but loss' that he might know Jesus, and winning which he would count himself to 'have apprehended.' The unity in this deep and blessed knowledge has nothing to do with identity of opinion on the points which have separated Christians. It is not to be sought by outward unanimity, nor by aggregation in external communities. The Apostle's great thought is made small and the truth of it is falsified when it is over-hastily embodied in institutions. It has been sought in a uniformity which resembles unity as much as a bundle of faggots, all cut to the same length, and tied together with a rope, resemble the tree from which they were chopped, waving in the wind and living one life to the tips of its furthest branches. Men have made out of the Apostle's divine vision of a unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God 'a staunch and solid piece of framework as any January could freeze together,' and few things have stood more in the way of the realisation of his glowing anticipations than the formation of the great Corporation, imposing from its bulk and antiquity, to part from which was branded as breaking the unity of the spirit.

Paul gives no clear definition here of the time when the one body of Christian believers should have attained to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, and the question may not have presented itself to him. It may appear that in view of the immediate context he regards the goal as one to be reached in our present life, or it may be that he is thinking rather of the Future, when the Master 'should bring together every joint and member and mould them into an immortal feature of loveliness and perfection.' But the time at which this great ideal should be attained is altogether apart from the obligation pressing upon us all, at all times, to work towards it. Whensoever it is reached it will only be by our drawing 'nearer, day by day, each to his brethren, all to God,' or rather, each to God and so all to his brethren. Take twenty points in a great circle and let each be advanced by one half of its distance to the centre, how much nearer will each be to each? Christ is our unity, not dogmas, not polities, not rituals: our oneness is a oneness of life. We need for our centre no tower with a top reaching to heaven, we have a living Lord who is with us, and in Him, we being many, are one.

II. Oneness in faith and knowledge knits all into a 'perfect man.'

'Perfect,' the Apostle here uses in opposition to the immediately following expression in the next verse, of 'children.' It therefore means not so much moral perfection as maturity or fulness of growth. So long as we fall short of the state of unity we are in the stage of immaturity. When we come to be one in faith and knowledge we have reached full-grown manhood. The existence of differences belongs to the infancy and boyhood of the Church, and as we grow one we are putting away childish things. What a contrast there is between Paul's vision here and the tendency which has been too common among Christians to magnify their differences, and to regard their obstinate adherence to these as being 'steadfastness in the faith'! How different would be the relations between the various communities into which the one body has been severed, if they all fully believed that their respective shibboleths were signs that they had not yet attained, neither were already perfect! When we began to be ashamed of these instead of glorying in them we should be beginning to grow into the maturity of our Christian life.

But the Apostle speaks of 'a perfect man' in the singular and not of 'men' in the plural, as he has already described the result of the union of Jew and Gentile as being the making 'of twain one new man.' This remarkable expression sets forth, in the strongest terms, the vital unity which connects all members of the one body so closely that there is but one life in them all. There are many members, but one body. Their functions differ, but the life in them all is identical. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of thee,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' Each is necessary to the completeness of the whole, and all are necessary to make up the one body of Christ. It is His life which manifests itself in every member and which gives clearness of vision to the eye, strength and deftness to the hand. He needs us all for His work on the world and for His revelation to the world of the fulness of His life. In some parts of England there are bell-ringers who stand at a table on which are set bells, each tuned to one note, and they can perform most elaborate pieces of music by swiftly catching up and sounding each of these in the right place. All Christian souls are needed for the Master's hand to bring out the note of each in its place. In the lowest forms of life all vital functions are performed by one simple sac, and the higher the creature is in the scale the more are its organs differentiated. In the highest form of all, 'as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.'

III. This perfect manhood is the possession of all who are in Christ.

The fulness of Christ is the fulness which belongs to Him, or that of which He is full. All which He is and has is to be poured into His servants, and when all this is communicated to them the goal will be reached. We shall be full-grown men, and more wonderful still, we all shall make one perfect man, and individual completenesses will blend into that which is more complete than any of these, the one body, which corresponds to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

This is the goal of humanity in which, and in which alone, the dreams of thinkers about perfectibility will become facts, and the longings that are deeply rooted in every soul will find their fulfilment. By our personal union with Jesus Christ through faith, our individual perfection, both in the sense of maturity and in that of the realisation of ideal manhood, is assured, and in Him the race, as well as the individual, is redeemed, and will one day be glorified. The Utopias of many thinkers are but partial and distorted copies of the kingdom of Christ. The reality which He brings and imparts is greater than all these, and when the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven, and is planted on the common earth, it will outvie in lustre and outlast in permanence all forms of human association. The city of wisdom which was Athens, the city of power which was Rome, the city of commerce which is

London, the city of pleasure which is Paris, ‘pale their ineffectual fires’ before the city in the light whereof the nations should walk.

The beginning of the process, of which the end is this inconceivable participation in the glory of Jesus, is simple trust in Him. ‘He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit,’ and he who trusts in Him, loves Him, and obeys Him, is joined to Him, and thereby is started on a course which never halts nor stays so long as the faith which started him abides, till he ‘grows up into Him in all things which is the head, even Christ.’ The experience of the Christian life as God means it to be, and by the communication of His grace makes it possible for it to become, is like that of men embarked on some sun-lit ocean, sailing past shining headlands, and ever onwards, over the boundless blue, beneath a calm sky and happy stars. The blissful voyagers are in full possession at every moment of all which they need and of all of His fulness which they can contain, but the full possession at every moment increases as they, by it, become capable of fuller possession. Increasing capacity brings with it increasing participation in the boundless fulness of Him who filleth all in all.

26)Ephesians 4:20-21

EPHESIANS

CHRIST OUR LESSON AND OUR TEACHER

Eph. 4:20-21

The Apostle has been describing in very severe terms the godlessness and corruption of heathenism. He reckons on the assent of the Ephesian Christians when he paints the society in which they lived as alienated from God, insensible to the restraints of conscience, and foul with all uncleanness. That was a picture of heathenism drawn from the life and submitted to the judgment of those who knew the original only too well. It has been reserved for modern eulogists to regard such statements as exaggerations. Those who knew heathenism from the inside knew that they were sober truth. The colonnades of the stately temple of Ephesus stank with proofs of their correctness.

Out of that mass of moral putridity these Ephesian Christians had been dragged. But its effects still lingered in them, and it was all about them with its pestilential miasma. So the first thing that they needed was to be guarded against it. The Apostle, in the subsequent context, with great earnestness gives a series of moral injunctions of the most elementary kind. Their very simplicity is eloquent. What sort of people must they have formerly been who needed to be bade not to steal and not to lie?

But before he comes to the specific duties, he lays down the broad general principle of which all these are to be but manifestations-viz. that they and we need, as the foundation of all noble conduct and of all theoretical ethics, the suppression and crucifixion of the old self and the investiture with a new self. And this double necessity, says the Apostle in my text, is the plain teaching of Jesus Christ to all His disciples.

Now the words which I have selected as my text are but a fragment of a closely concatenated whole, but I may deal with them separately at this time. They are very remarkable. They lay, as it seems to me, the basis for all Christian conduct; and they teach us how there is no real knowledge of Jesus Christ which does not effloresce into the practice of these virtues and graces which the Apostle goes on to describe.

I. First, Christ our Lesson and Christ our Teacher.

Mark the singular expression with which this text begins. ‘Ye have not so learned Christ.’ Now, we generally talk about learning a subject, a language, a science, or an art; but we do not talk about learning people. But Paul says we are Christ’s disciples, not only in the sense that we learn of Him as Teacher-which follows in the next clause-but that we learn Him as the theme of our study.

That is to say, the relation of the person of Jesus Christ to all that He has to teach and reveal to the world is altogether different from that of all other teachers of all sorts of truth, to the truth which they proclaim. You can accept the truths and dismiss into oblivion the men from whom you got them. But you cannot reject Christ and take Christianity. The two are inseparably united. For, in regard to all spiritual and to all moral truth-truth about conduct and character-Jesus Christ is what He teaches. So we may say, turning well-known words of a poet in another direction: ‘My lesson is in Thee.’

But that is not all. My text goes on to speak about another thing: ‘Ye have learned Christ if so be that ye have heard Him and been taught.’ Now that ‘If so be’ is not the ‘if’ of uncertainty or doubt, but it is equivalent to ‘if, as I know to be the case,’ or ‘since ye have heard Him.’ Away there in Ephesus, years and years after the crucifixion, these people who had never seen Christ in the flesh, nor heard a word from the lips ‘into which grace was poured,’ are yet addressed by the Apostle as those who had listened to Him and heard Him speak. They had ‘heard Him and been taught.’ So He was Lesson and He was Teacher. And that is as true about us as it was about them. Let me say only a word or two about each of these two thoughts.

I have already suggested that the underlying truth which warrants the first of them is that Jesus Christ’s relation to His message and revelation is altogether different from that of other teachers to what they have to communicate to the world. Of course we all know that, in regard to the wider sphere of religious and Christian truth, it is not only what Christ said, but even more what He did and was, that makes His revelation of the Father’s heart. Precious as are the words which drop from His lips, which are spirit and are life, His life itself is more than all His teachings; and it is when we learn, not from Him, but when we learn Him, that we see the Father. But my text has solely reference to conduct, and in that aspect it just implies this thought, that the sum of all duty, the height of all moral perfectness, the realised ideal of humanity, is in Christ, and that the true way to know what a man or a nation ought to do is to study Him.

How strange it is, when one comes to consider it, that the impression of absolute perfection, free from all limitations of race or country or epoch or individual character-and yet not a vague abstraction but a true living Person-has been printed upon the minds and hearts of the world by these four little pamphlets which we call gospels! I do not think that there is anything in the whole history of literature to compare with the impression of veracity and historical reality and individual personality which is made by these fragmentary narratives. And although it has nothing to do with my present subject, I may just say in a sentence that it seems to me that the character of Jesus Christ as painted in the Gospels, in its incomparable vividness and vitality, is one of the strongest evidences for the simple faithfulness as biographies, of these books. Nothing else but the Man seen could have resulted in such compositions.

But apart altogether from that, how blessed it is that we have not to enter upon any lengthened investigations, far beyond the power of average minds, in order to get hold of the fundamental laws of moral conduct! How blessed it is that all the harshness of ‘Obey this law or die’ is by His life changed into ‘Look at Me, and, for My love’s sake, study Me and be like Me!’ This is the blessed peculiarity which gives all its power and distinctive characteristic to the morality of the Gospel, that law is changed from a statuesque white ideal, pure as marble and cold and lifeless as it, into a living Person with a throbbing heart of love, and an outstretched hand of help, whose word is, ‘If ye love Me, keep My commandments, and be like Me.’

Christian men and women! study Jesus Christ. That is the Alpha and Omega of all right knowledge of duty and of all right practice of it. Learn Him, His self-suppression, His self-command, His untroubled calmness, His immovable patience, His continual gentleness, His constant reference of all things to the Father’s will. Study these. To imitate Him is blessedness; to resemble Him is perfection. ‘Ye have learned Christ’ if you are Christians at all. You have at least begun the alphabet, but oh! in Him ‘are hid all the treasures,’ not only ‘of wisdom and knowledge,’ but of ‘whatsoever things are lovely and of good report’; and ‘if there is any virtue, and if there is any praise,’ we shall find them in Him who is our Lesson, our perfect Lesson.

But that is not all. Lessons are very well, but-dear me!-the world wants something besides lessons. It has had plenty of teaching. The trouble is not that we are not instructed, but that we do not take the lessons that are laid before us. And so my text suggests another thing besides the wholly inadequate conception, as it would be if it stood alone, of a mere exhibition of what we ought to be.

‘If so be that ye have heard Him.’ As I said, these Ephesian Christians, far away in Asia Minor, with seas and years between them and the plains of Galilee and the Cross of Calvary, are yet regarded by the Apostle as having listened to Jesus Christ. We, far away down the ages, and in another corner of the world, as really, without metaphor, in plain fact, may have Jesus Christ speaking to us, and may hear His voice. These Ephesians had heard Him, not only because they had heard about Him, nor because they had heard Him speaking through His servant Paul and others, but because, as Paul believed, that Lord, who had spoken with human lips words which it was possible for a man to utter when He was here on earth, when caught up into the third heaven was still speaking to men, even according to His own promise, which He gave at the very close of His career, ‘I have declared Thy name unto My brethren, and will declare it.’ So, though ‘He began both to do and to teach’ before He was taken up, after His Ascension He continues both the doing and the tuition. And, in verity, we all may hear His voice speaking in the depths of our hearts; speaking through the renewed conscience; speaking by that Spirit who will guide us into all the truth that we need; speaking through the ages to all who will listen to His voice.

The conception of Christ as a Teacher, which is held by many who deny His redeeming work and dismiss as incredible His divinity, seems to me altogether inadequate, unless it be supplemented by the belief that He now has and exercises the power of communicating wisdom and knowledge and warning and stimulus to waiting hearts; and that when we hear within the depth of our souls the voice saying to us, ‘This is the way, walk ye in it,’ or saying to us, ‘Pass not by, enter not into it,’ if we have waited for Him, and studied His example and character, and sought, not to please ourselves, but to be led by His wisdom, we may be sure that it is Christ Himself who speaks. Reverence the inward monitor, and when He within thy heart, by His Spirit, calls thee, do thou answer, ‘Speak, Lord! Thy servant heareth.’ ‘Ye have learned Christ if so be that ye have hearkened to Him.’

II. Secondly, mark the condition of learning the Lesson and hearing the Teacher.

Our Authorised Version, in accordance with its very frequent practice, has evacuated the last words of my text of their true force by the substitution of the more intelligible ‘by Him’ for what the Apostle writes-’in Him.’ The true rendering gives us the condition on which we learn our Lesson and hear our Teacher. ‘In Him,’ is no mere surplusage, and is not to be weakened down, as this translation of ours does, into a mere ‘by Him’ but it declares that, unless we keep ourselves in union with Jesus Christ, His voice will not be heard in our hearts, and the lesson will pass unlearned.

You know, dear brother, how emphatically and continually in the New Testament this doctrine of the dwelling of the believing soul in Christ, and the reciprocal dwelling of Christ in the believing soul, is insisted upon. And I, for my part, believe that one great cause of the unsatisfactory condition of the average Christianity of this day is the slurring over and minimising of these twin great and solemn truths. I would fain bring you back to the Master’s words, as declaring the deepest truths in relation to the connection between the believing soul and the Christ in whom it believes:-’Abide in Me, and I in you.’ I wish you would go home and take this Epistle to the Ephesians and read it over, putting a pencil mark below each place in which occurs the words ‘in Christ Jesus.’ I think you would learn something if you would do it.

But all that I have to say at present is that, if we would keep ourselves, by faith, by love, by meditation, by aspiration, by the submission of the will, and by practical obedience, in Jesus Christ, enclosed in Him as it were-then, and then only, should we learn His lesson, and then, and then only, should we hear Him speak. Why! if you never think about Him, how can you learn Him? If you seldom, or sleepily, take up your Bibles and read the Gospels, of what good is His example to you? If you wander away into all manner of regions of thought and enjoyment instead of keeping near to Him, how can you expect that He will communicate Himself to you? If we keep ourselves in touch with that Lord, if we bring all our actions to Him, and measure our conduct by His pattern, then we shall learn His lesson. What does a student in a school of design do? He puts his feeble copy of some great picture beside the original, and compares it touch for touch, line for line, shade for shade, and so corrects its errors. Take your lives to the Exemplar in that fashion, and go over them bit by bit. Is this like Jesus Christ; is that what He would have done? Then ‘in Him,’ thus in contact with Him, thus correcting our daubs by the perfect picture, we shall learn our lesson and listen to our Teacher.

Still your passions, muzzle your inclinations, clap a bridle on your will, and, as some tumultuous crowd would be hushed into silence that they might listen to the king speaking to them, make a great silence in your hearts, and you will ‘hear Him’ and be taught ‘in Him’.

III. Lastly, the test and result of having learned the Lesson and listened to the Teacher is unlikeness to surrounding corruption.

‘Ye have not so learned Christ.’ Of course the hideous immoralities of Ephesus are largely, but by no means altogether, gone from Manchester. Of course, nineteen centuries of Christianity have to a very large extent changed the tone of society and influenced the moral judgments and practices even of persons who are not Christians. But there still remains a world, and there still remains unfilled up the gulf between the worldly and the godly life. And I believe it is just as needful as ever it was, though in different ways, for Christians to exhibit unlikeness to the world. ‘Not so,’ must be our motto; or, as the Jewish patriot said, ‘So did not I, because of the fear of the Lord.’

I do not wish you to make yourselves singular; I do not wish you to wear conventional badges of unlikeness to certain selected evil habits. A Christian man’s unlikeness to the world consists a great deal more in doing or being what it does not do and is not than in not doing or being what it does and is. It is easy to abstain from conventional things; it is a great deal harder to put in practice the unworldly virtues of the Christian character.

There are wide regions of life in which all men must act alike, be they saints or sinners, be they believers, Agnostics, Mohammedans, Turks, Jews, or anything else. There are two ways of doing the same thing. If two women were sitting at a grindstone, one of them a Christian and the other not, the one that pushed her handle half round the circle for Christ’s sake would do it in a different fashion from the other one who took it from her hand and brought it round to the other side of the stone, and did it without reference to God.

Brethren, be sure of this, that if you and I do not find in ourselves the impulse to abstain from coarse enjoyments, to put our feet upon passions and desires, appetites and aims, which godless men recognise and obey without qualm or restraint, we need to ask ourselves: ‘In what sense am I a Christian, or in what sense have I heard Christ?’ It is a poor affair to fling away our faithful protest against the world’s evils for the sake of receiving the world’s smile. Modern Christianity is often not vital enough to be hated by a godless world; and it is not hated because it only deserves to be scorned. Keep near Jesus Christ, live in the light of His face, drink in the inspiration and instruction of His example, and the unlikeness will come, and no mistake. Dwell near Him, keep in Him, and the likeness will come, as it always comes to lovers, who grow to resemble that or those whom they love. ‘It is enough for the disciple to be as his Teacher, and for the slave to be like his Lord.’

27)Ephesians 4:22

EPHESIANS

A DARK PICTURE AND A BRIGHT HOPE

Eph. 4:22

If a doctor knows that he can cure a disease he can afford to give full weight to its gravest symptoms. If he knows he cannot he is sorely tempted to say it is of slight importance, and, though it cannot be cured, can be endured without much discomfort.

And so the Scripture teachings about man’s real moral condition are characterised by two peculiarities which, at first sight, seem somewhat opposed, but are really harmonious and closely connected. There is no book and no system in the whole world that takes such a dark view of what you and I are; there is none animated with so bright and confident a hope of what you and I may become. And, on the other hand, the common run of thought amongst men minimises the fact of sin, but when you say, ‘Well, be it big or little, can I get rid of it anyhow?’ there is no answer to give that is worth listening to. Christ alone can venture to tell men what they are, because Christ alone can radically change their whole nature and being. There are certain diseases of which a constant symptom is unconsciousness that there is anything the matter. A deep-seated wound does not hurt much.

The question is not whether Christian thoughts about a man's condition are gloomy or not, but whether they are true. As to their being gloomy, it seems to me that the people who complain of our doctrine of human nature, as giving a melancholy view of men, do really take a far more melancholy one. We believe in a fall, and we believe in a possible and actual restoration. The man to whom evil is not an intrusive usurper can have no confidence that it will ever be expelled. Which is the gloomy system-that which paints in undisguised blackness the facts of life, and over against their blackest darkness, the radiant light of a great hope shining bright and glorious, or one that paints humanity in a uniform monotone of indistinguishable grey involving the past, the present, and the future-which, believing in no disease, hopes for no cure? My text, taken in conjunction with the grand words which follow, about 'The new man, which, after God, is created in righteousness and true holiness,' brings before us some very solemn views [which the men that want them most realise the least] with regard to what we are, what we ought to be and cannot be, and what, by God's help, we may become. The old man is 'corrupt according to the deceitful lusts,' says Paul. There are a set of characteristics, then, of the universal sinful human self. Then there comes a hopeless commandment-a mockery-if we are to stop with it, 'put it off.' And then there dawns on us the blessed hope and possibility of the fulfilment of the injunction, when we learn that 'the truth in Jesus' is, that we put off the old man with his deeds. Such is a general outline of the few thoughts I have to suggest to you.

I. I wish to fix, first of all, upon the very significant, though brief, outline sketch of the facts of universal sinful human nature which the Apostle gives here.

These are three, upon which I dilate for a moment or two. 'The old man' is a Pauline expression, about which I need only say here that we may take it as meaning that form of character and life which is common to us all, apart from the great change operated through faith in Jesus Christ. It is universal, it is sinful. There is a very remarkable contrast, which you will notice, between the verse upon which I am now commenting and the following one. The old man is set over against the new. One is created, the other is corrupted, as the word might be properly rendered. The one is created after God, the other is rotting to pieces under the influence of its lusts. The one consists of righteousness and holiness, which have their root in truth; the other is under the dominion of passions and desires, which, in themselves evil, are the instruments of and are characterised by deceit.

The first of the characteristics, then, of this sinful self, to which I wish to point for a moment is, that every Christless life, whatsoever the superficial differences in it, is really a life shaped according to and under the influence of passionate desires. You see I venture to alter one word of my text, and that for this simple reason; the word 'lusts' has, in modern English, assumed a very much narrower signification than either that of the original has, or than itself had in English when this translation was made. It is a very remarkable testimony, by the by, to the weak point in the bulk of men-to the side of their nature which is most exposed to assaults-that this word, which originally meant strong desire of any kind, should, by the observation of the desires that are strongest in the mass of people, have come to be restricted and confined to the one specific meaning of strong animal, fleshly, sensuous desires. It may point a lesson to some of my congregation, and especially to the younger portion of the men in it. Remember, my brother, that the part of your nature which is closest to the material is likewise closest to the animal, and is least under dominion [without a strong and constant effort] of the power which will save the flesh from corruption, and make the material the vehicle of the spiritual and divine. Many a young man comes into Manchester with the atmosphere of a mother's prayers and a father's teaching round about him; with holy thoughts and good resolutions beginning to sway his heart and spirit; and flaunting profligacy and seducing tongues beside him in the counting-house, in the warehouse, and at the shop counter, lead him away into excesses that banish all these, and, after a year or two of riot and sowing to the flesh, he 'of the flesh reaps corruption,' and that very literally-in sunken eye, and trembling hand, and hacking cough, and a grave opened for him before his time. Ah, my dear young friends! 'they promise them liberty.' It is a fine thing to get out of your father's house, and away from the restrictions of the society where you are known, and loving eyes-or unloving ones-are watching you. It is a fine thing to get into the freedom and irresponsibility of a big city! 'They promise them liberty,' and 'they themselves become the bond slaves of corruption.'

But, then, that is only the grossest and the lowest form of the truth that is here. Paul's indictment against us is not anything so exaggerated and extreme as that the animal nature predominates in all who are not Christ's. That is not true, and is not what my text says. But what it says is just this: that, given the immense varieties of tastes and likings and desires which men have, the point and characteristic feature of every godless life is that, be these what they may, they become the dominant power in that life. Paul does not, of course, deny that the sway and tyranny of such lusts and desires are sometimes broken by remonstrances of conscience; sometimes suppressed by considerations of prudence; sometimes by habit, by business, by circumstances that force people into channels into which they would not naturally let their lives run. He does not deny that often and often in such a life there will be a dim desire for something better-that high above the black and tumbling ocean of that life of corruption and disorder, there lies a calm heaven with great stars of duty shining in it. He does not deny that men are a law to themselves, as well as a bundle of desires which they obey; but what he charges upon us, and what I venture to bring as an indictment against you, and myself too, is this: that apart from Christ it is not conscience that rules our lives; that apart from Christ it is not sense of duty that is strongest; that apart from Christ the real directing impulse to which the inward proclivities, if not the outward activities, do yield in the main and on the whole, is, as this text says, the things that we like, the passionate desires of nature, the sensuous and godless heart.

And you say, 'Well, if it is so, what harm is it? Did not God make me with these desires, and am not I meant to gratify them?' Yes, certainly. The harm of it is, first of all, this, that it is an inversion of the true order. The passionate desires about which I am speaking, be they for money, be they for fame, or be they for any other of the gilded baits of worldly joys-these passionate dislikes and likings, as well as the purely animal ones-the longing for food, for drink, for any other physical gratification-these were never meant to be men's guides. They are meant to be impulses. They have motive power, but no directing power. Do you start engines out of a railway station without drivers or rails to run upon? It would be as reasonable as that course of life which men pursue who say, 'Thus I wish; thus I command; let my desire stand in the place of other argumentation and reason.' They take that part of their nature that is meant to be under the guidance of reason and conscience looking up to God, and put it in the supreme place, and so, setting a beggar on horseback, ride where we know such equestrians are said in the end to go! The desires are meant to be impelling powers. It is absurdity and the destruction of true manhood to make them, as we so often do, directing powers, and to put the reins into their hand. They are the wind, not the helm; the steam, not the driver. Let us keep things in their right places. Remember that the constitution of human nature, as God has meant it, is this: down there, under hatches, under control, the strong impulses; above them, the enlightened understanding; above that, the conscience, which has a loftier region than that of thought to move in, the moral region; and above that, the God, whose face, shining down upon the apex of the nature thus constituted, irradiates it with light which filters through all the darkness, down to the very base of the being; and sanctifies the animal, and subdues the impulses, and enlightens the understanding, and calms and quickens the conscience, and makes ductile and pliable the will, and fills the heart with fruition and tranquillity, and orders the life after the image of Him that created it.

I cannot dwell any longer on this first point; but I hope that I have said enough, not to show that the words are true-that is a very poor thing to do, if that were all that I aimed at-but to bring them home to some of our hearts and consciences. I pray God to impress the conviction that, although there be in us all the voice of conscience, which all of us more or less have tried at intervals to follow; yet in the main it abides for ever true-and it is true, my dear brethren, about you-a Christless life is a life under the dominion of tyrannous desires. Ask yourself what I cannot ask for you, Is it I? My hand fumbles about the hinges and handle of the door of the heart. You yourself must open it and let conviction come in!

Still further, the words before us add another touch to this picture. They not only represent the various passionate desires as being the real guides of ‘the old man’ but they give this other characteristic-that these desires are in their very nature the instruments of deceit and lies.

The words of my text are, perhaps, rather enfeebled by the form of rendering which our translators have here, as in many cases, thought proper to adopt. If, instead of reading ‘corrupt according to the deceitful lusts,’ we read ‘corrupt according to the desires of deceit,’ we should have got not only the contrast between the old man and the new man, ‘created in righteousness and holiness of truth’-but we should have had, perhaps, a clearer notion of the characteristic of these lusts, which the Apostle meant to bring into prominence. These desires are, as it were, the tools and instruments by which deceit betrays and mocks men; the weapons used by illusions and lies to corrupt and mar the soul. They are strong, and their nature is to pursue after their objects without regard to any consequences beyond their own gratification; but, strong as they are, they are like the blinded Samson, and will pull the house down on themselves if they be not watched. Their strength is excited on false pretences. They are stirred to grasp what is after all a lie. They are ‘desires of deceit.’

That just points to the truth of all such life being hollow and profitless. If regard be had to the whole scope of our nature and necessities, and to the true aim of life as deduced therefrom, nothing is more certain than that no man will get the satisfaction that his ruling passions promise him, by indulging them. It is very sure that the way never to get what you need and desire is always to do what you like.

And that for very plain reasons. Because, for one thing, the object only satisfies for a time. Yesterday’s food appeased our hunger for the day, but we wake hungry again. And the desires which are not so purely animal have the same characteristic of being stilled for the moment, and of waking more ravenous than ever. ‘He that drinketh of this water shall thirst again.’ Because, further, the desire grows and the object of it does not. The fierce longing increases, and, of course, the power of the thing that we pursue to satisfy it decreases in the same proportion. It is a fixed quantity; the appetite is indefinitely expansible. And so, the longer I go on feeding my desire, the more I long for the food; and the more I long for it, the less taste it has when I get it. It must be more strongly spiced to titillate a jaded palate. And there soon comes to be an end of the possibilities in that direction. A man scarcely tastes his brandy, and has little pleasure in drinking it, but he cannot do without it, and so he gulps it down in bigger and bigger draughts till delirium tremens comes in to finish all. Because, for another thing, after all, these desires are each but a fragment of one’s whole nature, and when one is satisfied another is baying to be fed. The grim brute, like the watchdog of the old mythology, has three heads, and each gaping for honey cakes. And if they were all gorged, there are other longings in men's nature that will not let them rest, and for which all the leeks and onions of Egypt are not food. So long as these are unmet, you 'spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not.'

So we may lay it down as a universal truth, that whoever takes it for his law to do as he likes will not for long like what he does; or, as George Herbert says,

> *'Shadows well mounted, dreams in a career,*
> *Embroider'd lies, nothing between two dishes-*
> *These are the pleasures here.'*

Do any of you remember the mournful words with which one of our greatest modern writers of fiction closes his saddest, truest book: 'Ah! vanitas vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world? which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?' No wonder that with such a view of human life as that the next and last sentence should be, 'Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for the play is played out.' Yes! if there be nothing more to follow than the desires which deceive, man's life, with all its bustle and emotion, is a subject for cynical and yet sad regard, and all the men and women that toil and fret are 'merely players.'

Then, again, one more point in this portraiture of 'the old man,' is that these deceiving desires corrupt. The language of our text conveys a delicate shade of meaning which is somewhat blurred in our version. Properly, it speaks of 'the old man which is growing corrupt,' rather than 'which is corrupt,' and expresses the steady advance of that inward process of decay and deterioration which is ever the fate of a life subordinated to these desires. And this growing evil, or rather inward eating corruption which disintegrates and destroys a soul, is contrasted in the subsequent verse with the 'new man which is created in righteousness.' There is in the one the working of life, in the other the working of death. The one is formed and fashioned by the loving hands and quickening breath of God; the other is gradually and surely rotting away by the eating leprosy of sin. For the former the end is eternal life; for the latter, the second death.

And the truth that underlies that awful representation is the familiar one to which I have already referred in another connection, that, by the very laws of our nature, by the plain necessities of the case, all our moral qualities, be they good or bad, tend to increase by exercise. In whatever direction we move, the rate of progress tends to accelerate itself. And this is preeminently the case when the motion is downwards. Every day that a bad man lives he is a worse man. My friend! you are on a sloping descent. Imperceptibly-because you will not look at the landmarks-but really, and not so very slowly either; convictions are dying out, impulses to good are becoming feeble, habits of neglect of conscience are becoming fixed, special forms of sin-avarice, or pride, or lust-are striking their claws deeper into your soul, and holding their bleeding booty firmer. In all regions of life exercise strengthens capacity. The wrestler, according to the old Greek parable, who began by carrying a calf on his shoulders, got to carry an ox by and by.

It is a solemn thought this of the steady continuous aggravation of sin in the individual character. Surely nothing can be small which goes to make up that rapidly growing total. Beware of the little beginnings which ‘eat as doth a canker.’ Beware of the slightest deflection from the straight line of right. If there be two lines, one straight and the other going off at the sharpest angle, you have only to produce both far enough, and there will be room between them for all the space that separates hell from heaven! Beware of lading your souls with the weight of small single sins. We heap upon ourselves, by slow, steady accretion through a lifetime, the weight that, though it is gathered by grains, crushes the soul. There is nothing heavier than sand. You may lift it by particles. It drifts in atoms, but heaped upon a man it will break his bones, and blown over the land it buries pyramid and sphynx, the temples of gods and the homes of men beneath its barren solid waves. The leprosy gnaws the flesh off a man’s bones, and joints and limbs drop off-he is a living death. So with every soul that is under the dominion of these lying desires-it is slowly rotting away piecemeal, ‘waxing corrupt according to the lusts of deceit.’

II. Note how, this being so, we have here the hopeless command to put off the old man.

That command 'put it off' is the plain dictate of conscience and of common sense. But it seems as hopeless as it is imperative. I suppose everybody feels sometimes, more or less distinctly, that they ought to make an effort and get rid of these beggarly usurpers that tyrannise over will, and conscience, and life. Attempts enough are made to shake off the yoke. We have all tried some time or other. Our days are full of foiled resolutions, attempts that have broken down, unsuccessful rebellions, ending like the struggles of some snared wild creature, in wrapping the meshes tighter round us. How many times, since you were a boy or a girl, have you said-'Now I am determined that I will never do that again. I have flung away opportunities. I have played the fool and erred exceedingly-but I now turn over a new leaf!' Yes, and you have turned it-and, if I might go on with the metaphor, the first gust of passion or temptation has blown the leaf back again, and the old page has been spread before you once more just as it used to be. The history of individual souls and the tragedy of the world's history recurring in every age, in which the noblest beginnings lead to disastrous ends, and each new star of promise that rises on the horizon leads men into quagmires and sets in blood, sufficiently show how futile the attempt in our own strength to overcome and expel the evils that are rooted in our nature.

Moralists may preach, 'Unless above himself he can erect himself, how mean a thing is man'; but all the preaching in the world is of no avail. The task is an impossibility. The stream cannot rise above its source, nor be purified in its flow if bitter waters come from the fountain. 'Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?' There is no power in human nature to cast off this clinging self. As in the awful vision of the poet, the serpent is grown into the man. The will is feeble for good, the conscience sits like a discrowned king issuing empty mandates, while all his realm is up in rebellion and treats his proclamations as so much waste paper. How can a man re-make himself? how cast off his own nature? The means at his disposal themselves need to be cleansed, for themselves are tainted. It is the old story-who will keep the keepers?-who will heal the sick physicians? You will sometimes see a wounded animal licking its wounds with its own tongue. How much more hopeless still is our effort by our own power to stanch and heal the gashes which sin has made! 'Put off the old man'-yes-and if it but clung to the limbs like the hero's poisoned vest, it might be possible. But it is not a case of throwing aside clothing, it is stripping oneself of the very skin and flesh-and if there is nothing more to be said than such vain commonplaces of impossible duty, then we must needs abandon hope, and wear the rotting evil till we die.

But that is not all. ‘What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh,’ God sending His own Son did-He condemned sin in the flesh. So we come to

III. The possibility of fulfilling the command.

The context tells us how this is possible. The law, the pattern, and the power for complete victory over the old sinful self, are to be found, ‘as the truth is-in Jesus.’ Union with Christ gives us a real possession of a new principle of life, derived from Him, and like His own. That real, perfect, immortal life, which hath no kindred with evil, and flings off pollution and decay from its pure surface, will wrestle with and finally overcome the living death of obedience to the deceitful lusts. Our weakness will be made rigorous by His inbreathed power. Our gravitation to earth and sin will be overcome by the yearning of that life to its source. An all-constraining motive will be found in love to Him who has given Himself for us. A new hope will spring as to what may be possible for us, when we see Jesus, and in Him recognise the true Man, whose image we may bear. We shall die with Him to sin, when, resting by faith on Him who has died for sin, we are made conformable to His death, that we may walk in newness of life. Faith in Jesus gives us a share in the working of that mighty power by which He makes all things new. The renovation blots out the past, and changes the direction of the future. The fountain in our hearts sends forth bitter waters that cannot be healed. ‘And the Lord showed him a tree,’ even that Cross whereon Christ was crucified for us, ‘which, when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet.’

I remember a rough parable of Luther’s, grafted on an older legend, on this matter, which runs somewhat in this fashion: A man’s heart is like a foul stable. Wheelbarrows and shovels are of little use, except to remove some of the surface filth, and to litter all the passages in the process. What is to be done with it? ‘Turn the Elbe into it,’ says he. The flood will sweep away all the pollution. Not my own efforts, but the influx of that pardoning, cleansing grace which is in Christ will wash away the accumulations of years, and the ingrained evil which has stained every part of my being. We cannot cleanse ourselves, we cannot 'put off' this old nature which has struck its roots so deep into our being; but if we turn to Him with faith and say-Forgive me, and cleanse, and strip from me the foul and ragged robe fit only for the swine-troughs in the far-off land of disobedience, He will receive us and answer all our desires, and cast around us the pure garment of His own righteousness. 'The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus shall make us free from the law of sin and death.'

28)Ephesians 4:24

EPHESIANS

THE NEW MAN

Eph. 4:24

We had occasion to remark in a former sermon that Paul regards this and the preceding clauses as the summing up of 'the truth in Jesus'; or, in other words, he considers the radical transformation and renovation of the whole moral nature as being the purpose of the revelation of God in Christ. To this end they have 'heard Him.' To this end they have 'learned Him.' To this end they have been 'taught in Him,' receiving, by union with Him, all the various processes of His patient discipline. This is the inmost meaning of all the lessons in that great school in which all Christians are scholars, and Christ is the teacher and the theme, and union to Him the condition of entrance, and the manifold workings of His providence and His grace the instruments of training, and heaven the home when school time is over-that we should become new men in Christ Jesus.

This great practical issue is set forth here under three aspects-one negative, two positive. The negative process is single and simple-'put off the old man.' The positive is double-a spiritual 'renewal' effected in our spirits, in the deep centre of our personal being, by that Divine Spirit who, dwelling in us, is 'the spirit of our minds'; and then, consequent upon that inward renewal, a renovation of life and character, which is described as being the ‘putting on,’ as if it were a garment, of ‘the new man,’ created by a divine act, and consisting in moral and spiritual likeness to God. It is not necessary to deal, except incidentally, with the two former, but I desire to consider the last of these-the putting on of the new man-a little more closely, and to try to bring out the wealth and depth of the Apostle’s words in this wonderful text.

The ideas contained seem to me in brief to be these-the great purpose of the Gospel is our moral renewal; that moral renewal is a creation after God’s image; that new creation has to be put on or appropriated by us; the great means of appropriating it is contact with God’s truth. Let us consider these points in order.

I. The great purpose of the Gospel is our moral renewal; ‘the new man ... created in righteousness and ... holiness.’

Now, of course, there are other ways of stating the end of the Gospel. This is by no means an exhaustive setting forth of its purpose. We may say that Christ has come in order that men may know God. We may say that He comes in order that the Divine Love, which ever delights to communicate, may bestow itself, and may conceive of the whole majestic series of acts of self-revelation from the beginning as being-if I may so say-for the gratification of that impulse to impart itself, which is the characteristic of love in God and man. We may say that the purpose of the whole is the deliverance of men from the burden and guilt of sin. But whether we speak of the end of the Gospel as the glory of God, or the blessedness of man, or as here, as being the moral perfection of the individual or of the race, they are all but various phrases of the one complete truth. The Gospel is the consequence and the manifestation of the love of God, which delights to be known and possessed by loving souls, and being known, changes them into its own likeness, which to know is to be happy, which to resemble is to be pure.

The first thing that strikes me about this representation of our text is the profound sense of human sinfulness which underlies it.

The language is utterly unmeaning-or at all events grossly exaggerated-unless all have sinned, and the nature which belongs to men universally, apart from the transforming power of Christ’s Spirit, be corrupt and evil. And that it is so is the constant view of Scripture. The Bible notion of what men need in order to be pure and good is very different from the superficial notions of worldly moralists and philanthropists. We hear a great deal about ‘culture,’ as if all that were needed were the training and strengthening of the nature, as if what was mainly needed was the development of the understanding. We hear about ‘reformation’ from some who look rather deeper than the superficial apostles of culture. And how singularly the very word proclaims the insufficiency of the remedy which it suggests! ‘Re-formation’ affects form and not substance. It puts the old materials into a new shape. Exactly so-and much good may be expected from that! They are the old materials still, and it matters comparatively little how they are arranged. It is not re-formation, but re-novation, or, to go deeper still, re-generation, that the world needs; not new forms, but a new life; not the culture and development of what it has in itself, but extirpation of the old by the infusion of something now and pure that has no taint of corruption, nor any contact with evil. ‘Verily, I say unto you, ye must be born again.’

All slighter notions of the need and more superficial diagnoses of the disease lead to a treatment with palliatives which never touch the true seat of the mischief, The poison flowers may be plucked, but the roots live on. It is useless to build dykes to keep out the wild waters. Somewhere or other they will find a way through. The only real cure is that which only the Creating hand can effect, who, by slow operation of some inward agency, can raise the level of the low lands, and lift them above the threatening waves. What is needed is a radical transformation, going down to the very roots of the being; and that necessity is clearly implied in the language of this text, which declares that a nature possessing righteousness and holiness is ‘a new man’ to be ‘put on’ as from without, not to be evolved as from within.

It is to be further noticed what the Apostle specifies as the elements, or characteristics of this new nature-righteousness and holiness.

The proclamation of a new nature in Christ Jesus, great and precious truth as it is, has often been connected with teaching which has been mystical in the bad sense of that word, and has been made the stalking horse of practical immorality. But here we have it distinctly defined in what that new nature consists. There is no vague mystery about it, no tampering with the idea of personality. The people who put on the new man are the same people after as before. The newness consists in moral and spiritual characteristics. And these are all summed up in the two-righteousness and holiness. To which is added in the substantially parallel passage in Colossians, 'Renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created Him,' where, I suppose, we must regard the 'knowledge' as meaning that personal knowledge and acquaintance which has its condition in love, and is the foundation of the more purely moral qualities of which our text speaks.

Is there, then, any distinction between these two? I think there is very obviously so. 'Righteousness' is, I suppose, to be understood here in its narrower meaning of observance of what is right, the squaring of conduct according to a solemn sovereign law of duty. Substantially it is equivalent to the somewhat heathenish word 'morality,' and refers human conduct and character to a law or standard. What, then, is 'holiness'? It is the same general conduct and character, considered, however, under another aspect, and in another relation. It involves the reference of life and self to God, consecration to, and service of Him. It is not a mere equivalent of purity, but distinctly carries the higher reference. The obedience now is not to a law but to a Lord. The perfection now does not consist in conformity to an ideal standard, but in likeness and devotion to God. That which I ought to do is that which my Father in heaven wills. Or, if the one word may roughly represent the more secular word 'morality,' the other may roughly represent the less devout phrase, 'practical religion.'

These are 'new,' as actually realised in human nature. Paul thinks that we shall not possess them except as a consequence of renovation. But they are not 'new' in the sense that the contents of Christian morality are different from the contents of the law written on men's hearts. The Gospel proclaims and produces no fantastic ethics of its own. The actions which it stamps in its mint are those which pass current in all lands-not a provincial coinage, but recognised as true in ring, and of full weight everywhere. Do not fancy that Christian righteousness is different from ordinary 'goodness,' except as being broader and deeper, more thorough-going, more imperative.

Divergences there are, for our law is more than a republication of the law written on men's hearts. Though the one agrees with the other, yet the area which they cover is not the same. The precepts of the one, like some rock-hewn inscriptions by forgotten kings, are weathered and indistinct, often illegible, often misread, often neglected. The other is written in living characters in a perfect life. It includes all that the former attempts to enjoin, and much more besides. It alters the perspective, so to speak, of heathen morals, and brings into prominence graces overlooked or despised by them. It breathes a deeper meaning and a tenderer beauty into the words which express human conceptions of virtue, but it does take up these into itself. And instead of setting up a 'righteousness' which is peculiar to itself, and has nothing to do with the world's morality, Christianity says, as Christ has taught us, 'Except your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of God.' The same apostle who here declares that actual righteousness and holiness are new things on the earth, allows full force to whatsoever weight may be in the heathen notion of 'virtue,' and adopts the words and ideas which he found ready made to his hands, in that notion-as fitly describing the Christian graces which he enjoined. Grecian moralists supplied him with the names true, honest, just, and pure. His 'righteousness' accepted these as included within its scope. And we have to remember that we are not invested with that new nature, unless we are living in the exercise of these common and familiar graces which the consciences and hearts of all the world recognise for 'lovely' and 'of good report,' hail as 'virtue,' and crown with 'praise.'

So, then, let me pause here for a moment to urge you to take these thoughts as a very sharp and salutary test. You call yourselves Christian people. The purpose of your Christianity is your growth and perfecting in simple purity, and devotion to, and dependence on, our loving Father. Our religion is nothing unless it leads to these. Otherwise it is like a plant that never seeds, but may bear some feeble blossoms that drop shrunken to the ground before they mature. To very many of us the old solemn remonstrance should come with awakening force-'Ye did run well, what did hinder you?' You have apprehended Christ as the revealer and bringer of the great mercy of God, and have so been led in some measure to put your confidence in Him for your salvation and deliverance. But have you apprehended Him as the mould into which your life is to be poured, that life having been made fluent and plastic by the warmth of His love? You have apprehended Him as your refuge; have you apprehended Him as your inward sanctity? You have gone to Him as the source of salvation from the guilt and penalties of sin; have you gone to Him, and are you daily growing in the conscious possession of Him, as the means of salvation from the corruption and evil of sin? He comes to make us good. What has He made you? Anything different from what you were twenty years ago? Then, if not, and in so far as you are unchanged and unbettered, the Gospel is a failure for you, and you are untrue to it. The great purpose of all the work of Christ-His life, His sorrows, His passion, His resurrection, His glory, His continuous operation by the Spirit and the word is to make new men who shall be just and devout, righteous and holy.

II. A second principle contained in these words, is that this moral Renewal is a Creation in the image of God.

The new man is 'created after the image of God'-that is, of course, according to or in the likeness of God. There is evident reference here to the account of man's creation in Genesis, and the idea is involved that this new man is the restoration and completion of that earlier likeness, which, in some sense, has faded out of the features and form of our sinful souls. It is to be remembered, however, that there is an image of God inseparable from human nature, and not effaceable by any obscuring or disturbance caused by sin. Man's likeness to God consists in his being a person, possessed of a will and self-consciousness, and that mysterious gift of personality abides whatever perishes. But beyond that natural image of God, as we may call it, there is something else which fades wholly with the first breath of evil, like the reflexion of the sky on some windless sea. The natural likeness remains, and without it no comparison would be possible. We should not think of saying that a stone or an eagle were unlike God. But while the personal being makes comparison fitting, what makes the true contrast? In what respect is man unlike God? In moral antagonism. What is the true likeness? Moral harmony. What separates men from their Father in heaven? Is it that His 'years are throughout all generations,' and 'my days are as an handbreadth'? Is it that His power is infinite, and mine all thwarted by other might and over tending to weakness and extinction? Is it that His wisdom, sunlike, waxes not nor wanes, and there is nothing hid from its beams, while my knowledge, like the lesser light, shines by reflected radiance, serves but to make the night visible, and is crescent and decaying, changeful and wandering? No. All such distinctions based upon what people call the sovereign attributes of God-the distinctions of creator and created, infinite and finite, omnipotent and weak, eternal and transient-make no real gulf between God and man. If we have only to say, ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are’ His ‘ways higher than’ our ‘ways,’ that difference is not unlikeness, and establishes no separation; for low and flat though the dull earth be, does not heaven bend down round it, and send rain and sun, dew and blessing? But it is because ‘your ways are not as my ways’-because there is actual opposition, because the directions are different-that there is unlikeness. The image of God lies not only in that personality which the ‘Father of Lies’ too possesses, but in ‘righteousness and holiness.’

But besides this reference to the original creation of man, there is another reason for the representation of the new nature as being a work of divine creative power. It is in order to give the most emphatic expression possible to the truth that we do not make our righteousness for ourselves, but receive it as from Him. The new man is not our work, it is God’s creation. As at the beginning, the first human life is represented as not originated in the line of natural cause and effect, but as a new and supernatural commencement, so in every Christian soul the life which is derived from God, and will unfold itself in His likeness, comes from His own breath inbreathed into the nostrils. It too is out of the line of natural causes. It too is a direct gift from God. It too is a true supernatural being-a real and new creation.

May I venture a step further? ‘The new man’ is spoken of here as if it had existence ere we ‘put it on.’ I do not press that, as if it necessarily involved the idea which I am going to suggest, for the peculiar form of expression is probably only due to the exigencies of the metaphor. Still it may not be altogether foreign to the whole scope of the passage, if I remind you that the new man, the true likeness of God, has, indeed, a real existence apart from our assumption of it. Of course, the righteousness and holiness which make that new nature in me have no being till they become mine. But we believe that the righteousness and holiness which we make ours come from another, who bestows them on us. ‘The new man’ is not a mere ideal, but has a historical and a present existence. The ideal has lived and lives, is a human person, even Jesus Christ the express image of the Father, who is the beginning of the new creation, who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness. That fair vision of a humanity detached from all consequences of sin, renewed in perfect beauty, stainless and Godlike, is no unsubstantial dream, but a simple fact. He ever liveth. His word to us is, ‘I counsel thee to buy of me-white raiment.’ And a full parallel to the words of our text, which bid us ‘put on the new man, created after God in righteousness and holiness,’ is found in the other words of the same Apostle-’Let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ.’

In accordance with this-

III. It is further to be noticed that this new creation has to be put on and appropriated by us.

The same idea which, as I have already remarked, is conveyed by the image of a new creation, is reiterated in this metaphor of putting on the new nature, as if it were a garment. Our task is not to weave it, but to wear it. It is made and ready.

And that process of assumption or putting on has two parts. We are clothed upon with Christ in a double way, or rather in a double sense. We are ‘found in Him not having our own righteousness,’ but invested with His for our pardon and acceptance. We are clothed with His righteousness for our purifying and sanctifying.

Both are the conditions of our being like God. Both are the gifts of God. The one, however, is an act; the other a process. Both are received. The one is received on condition of simple faith; the other is received by the medium of faithful effort. Both are included in the wide conception of salvation, but the law for the one is ‘Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us’; and the law for the other is-’Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.’ Both come from Christ, but for the one we have the invitation, ‘Buy of Me white raiment that thou mayest be clothed’; and for the other we have the command, ‘Put on the Lord Jesus

Christ, and make not provision for the flesh.' There is the assumption of His righteousness which makes a man a Christian, and has for its condition simple faith. There is the assumption of His righteousness sanctifying and transforming us which follows in a Christian course, as its indispensable accompaniment and characteristic, and that is realised by daily and continuous effort.

And one word about the manner, the effort as set forth here; twofold, as I have already pointed out-a negative and positive. We are not concerned here with the relations of these amongst themselves, but I may remark that there is no growth in holiness possible without the constant accompanying process of excision and crucifixion of the old. If you want to grow purer and liker Christ, you must slay yourselves. You cannot gird on 'righteousness' above the old self, as some beggar might buckle to himself royal velvet with its ermine over his filthy tatters. There must be a putting off in order to and accompanying the putting on. Strip yourselves of yourselves, and then you 'shall not be found naked,' but clothed with the garments of salvation, as the bride with the robe which is the token of the bridegroom's love, and the pledge of her espousals to him.

And let nobody wonder that the Apostle here commands us, as by our own efforts, to put on and make ours what is in many other places of Scripture treated as God's gift. These earnest exhortations are perfectly consistent with the belief that all comes from God. Our faithful adherence to our Lord and Master, our honest efforts in His strength to secure more and more of His likeness, determine the extent to which we shall possess that likeness. The new nature is God's gift, and it is given to us according to His own fulness indeed, but also according to the measure of our faith. Blessed be His name! we have nothing to do but to accept His gift. The garment with which He clothes our nakedness and hides our filth is woven in no earthly looms. As with the first sinful pair, so with all their children since, 'the Lord God made them' the covering which they cannot make for themselves. But we have to accept it, and we have by daily toil, all our lives long, to gather it more and more closely around us, to wrap ourselves more and more completely in its ample folds. We have by effort and longing, by self-abnegation and aspiration, by prayer and work, by communion and service, to increase our possession of that likeness to God which lives in Jesus

Christ, and from Him is stamped ever more and more deeply on the heart. For the strengthening of our confidence and our gratitude, we have to remember with lowly trust that it is true of us, 'If any man be in Christ he is a new creature.' For the quickening of our energy and faithful efforts we have to give heed to the command, and fulfil it in ourselves-'Be ye renewed in the Spirit of your minds, and put on the new man.'

IV. And, finally, the text contains the principle that the means of appropriating this new nature is contact with the truth.

If you will look at the margins of some Bibles you will see that our translators have placed there a rendering, which, as is not unfrequently the case, is decidedly better than that adopted by them in the text. Instead of 'true holiness,' the literal rendering is 'holiness of truth'-and the Apostle's purpose in the expression is not to particularise the quality, but the origin of the 'holiness.' It is 'of truth,' that is, produced by the holiness which flows from the truth as it is in Jesus, of which he has been speaking a moment before.

And we come, therefore, to this practical conclusion, that whilst the agent of renovation is the Divine Spirit, and the condition of renovation is our cleaving to Christ, the medium of renovation and the weapon which transforming grace employs is 'the word of the truth of the Gospel' whereby we are sanctified. There we get the law, and there we get the motive and the impulse. There we get the encouragement and the hope. In it, in the grand simple message-'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them,' lie the germs of all moral progress. And in proportion as we believe that-not with the cold belief of our understandings, but with the loving affiance of our hearts and our whole spiritual being-in proportion as we believe that, in that proportion shall we grow in 'knowledge,' shall we grow in 'righteousness,' in the 'image of Him that created us.' The Gospel is the great means of this change, because it is the great means by which He who works the change comes near to our understandings and our hearts.

So let us learn how impossible are righteousness and holiness, morality and religion in men, unless they flow from this source. It is the truth that sanctifies. It is the Spirit who wields that truth who sanctifies. It is Christ who sends the Spirit who sanctifies. But, brethren, beyond the range of this light is only darkness, and that nature which is not cleansed by His priestly hand laid upon it remains leprous, and he who is clothed with any other garment than His righteousness will find ‘the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it.’ And let us learn, on the other hand, the incompleteness and monstrosity of a professed belief in ‘the truth’ which does not produce this righteousness and holiness. It may be real-God forbid that we should step into His place and assume His office of discerning the thoughts of the heart, and the genuineness of Christian professions! But, at any rate, it is no exaggeration nor presumption to say that a professed faith which is not making us daily better, gentler, simpler, purer, more truthful, more tender, more brave, more self-oblivious, more loving, more strong-more like Christ-is wofully deficient either in reality or in power-is, if genuine, ready to perish-if lit at all, smouldering to extinction. Christian men and women! is ‘the truth’ moulding you into Christ’s likeness? If not, see to it whether it be the truth which you are holding, and whether you are holding the truth or have unconsciously let it slip from a grasp numbed by the freezing coldness of the world.

And for us all, let us see that we lay to heart the large truths of this text, and give them that personal bearing without which they are of no avail. I need renovation in my inmost nature. Nothing can renew my soul but the power of Christ, who is my life. I am naked and foul. Nothing can cleanse and clothe me but He. The blessed truth which reveals Him calls for my individual faith. And if I put my confidence in that Lord, He will dwell in my inmost spirit, and so sway my affections and mould my will that I shall be transformed unto His perfect likeness. He begins with each one of us by bringing the best robe to cast over the rags of the returning prodigal. He ends not with any who trust Him, until they stand amid the hosts of the heavens who follow Him, clothed with fine linen clean and white, which is the righteousness of His Holy ones.

29)Ephesians 4:30

EPHESIANS

GRIEVING THE SPIRIT

Eph. 4:30

The miracle of Christianity is the Incarnation. It is not a link in a chain, but a new beginning, the entrance into the cosmic order of a Divine Power. The sequel of Bethlehem and Calvary and Olivet is the upper room and the Pentecost. There is the issue of the whole mission and work of Christ-the planting in the heart of humanity of a new and divine life. All Christendom is professing to commemorate that fact to-day, [Preached on Whitsunday] but a large portion of us forget that it was but a transient sign of a perpetual reality. The rushing mighty wind has died down into a calm; the fiery tongues have ceased to flicker on the disciples' heads, but the miracle, which is permanent, and is being repeated from day to day, in the experience of every believing soul, is the inrush of the very breath of God into their lives, and the plunging of them into a fiery baptism which melts their coldness and refines away their dross. Now, my text brings before us some very remarkable thoughts as to the permanent working of the Divine Spirit upon Christian souls, and upon this it bases a very tender and persuasive exhortation to conduct. And I desire simply to try to bring out the fourfold aspect in those words. There is, first, a wondrous revelation; second, a plain lesson as to what that Divine Spirit chiefly does; third, a solemn warning as to man's power and freedom to thwart it; and, lastly, a tender motive for conduct. 'Grieve not the Holy Spirit, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.'

Now let us look briefly at these four thoughts: Here we have-

I. A wonderful revelation.

Wonderful to all, startling to some. If you can speak of grief, you must be speaking of a person. An influence cannot be sorry, whatever may happen to it. And that word of my text is no more violent metaphor or exaggeratedly strong way of suggesting a motive, but it keeps rigidly within the New Testament limits, in reference to that Divine Spirit, when to Him it attributes this personal emotion of sorrow with its correlation of possible joy.

Now, I do not need to dwell upon the thought here, but I do desire to emphasise it, especially in view of the strangely hazy and defective conceptions which so many Christian people have upon this matter. And I desire to remind you that the implied assumption of a personal Spirit, capable of being ‘grieved,’ which is in this text, is in accordance with all the rest of the New Testament teaching.

What did Jesus Christ mean when He spoke of one who ‘will guide you into all truth’; of one who ‘whatsoever He shall hear, those things shall He speak’? What does the book of the Acts mean when it says that the Spirit said to the believers in Antioch, ‘Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them’? What did Paul mean when he said, ‘In every city the Holy Ghost testifieth that bonds and afflictions await me’? What does the minister officiating in baptism mean when he says, ‘I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost’? That form presents, according to many interpretations, a Divine Person, a Man, and an Influence. Why are these bracketed together? And what do we mean when, at the end of every Christian service, we invoke ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit’? A Man, and God, and an Influence-is that the interpretation? You cannot get rid from the New Testament teaching, whether you accept it or not-you cannot eliminate from it this, that the divine causality of our salvation is threefold and one, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Now, brethren, I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that practically the average orthodox believer believes in a duality, and not a Trinity, in the divine nature. I do not care about the scholastic words, but what I would insist upon is that the course of Christian thinking has been roughly this. First of all, in the early Church, the question of the Divine nature came into play, mainly in reference to the relation of the Eternal Word to the Eternal Father, and of the Incarnation to both. And then, when that was roughly settled, there came down through many ages, and there still subsists, the endeavour to cast into complete and intelligible forms the doctrine, if I must use the word, of Christ’s nature and work. And now, as I believe, to a very large extent, the foremost and best thinking of the Christian Church is being occupied with that last problem, the nature and work of that Divine Spirit. I believe that we stand on the verge of a far clearer perception of, and of a far more fervent and realising faith in, the Spirit of God, than ever the Churches have seen before. And I pray you to remember that however much your Christian thought and Christian faith may be centred upon, and may be drawing its nourishment and its joy from, the work of Jesus Christ who died on the Cross for our salvation, and lives to be our King and Defender, there is a gap-not only in your Christian Creed, but also in your Christian experiences and joys and power, unless you have risen to this thought, that the Divine Spirit is not only an influence, a wind, a fire, an oil, a dove, a dew, but a Divine Person. We have to go back to the old creed-'I believe in God the Father Almighty ... and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord ... I believe in the Holy Ghost.'

But further, this same revelation carries with it another, and to some of us a startling thought. 'Grieve not the Holy Spirit': that Divine Person is capable of grief. I do not believe that is rhetorical exaggeration. Of course I know that we should think of God as the ever-blessed God, but we also in these last days begin to think more boldly, and I believe more truly, that if man is in the image of God, and there is a divine element in humanity, there must be a human element in divinity. And though I know that it is perilous to make affirmations about a matter so far beyond our possibility of verification by experience, I venture to think that perhaps the doctrine that God is lifted up high above all human weaknesses and emotions does not mean that there can be no shadow cast on the divine blessedness by the dark substance of human sin. I do not venture to assert: I only suggest; and this I know, that He who said to us, 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father,' had His eyes filled with tears, even in His hour of triumph, as He looked across the valley and saw the city sparkling in the rays of the morning sun. May we venture to see there an unveiling of the divine heart? Love has an infinite capacity of sorrow as of joy. But I leave these perhaps too presumptuous and lofty thoughts, to turn to the other points involved in the words before us.

I said, in the second place, there was-

II. A plain lesson here, as to the great purpose for which the Divine Spirit has been lodged in the heart of humanity.

I find that in the two words of my text, ‘the Holy Spirit,’ and ‘ye were thereby sealed unto the day of redemption.’ If the central characteristic which it imports us to know and to keep in mind is that implied by the name, ‘the Holy Spirit’ then, of course, the great work that He has to perform upon earth is to make men like Himself. And that is further confirmed by the emblem of the seal which is here; for the seal comes in contact with the thing sealed, and leaves the impression of its own likeness there. And whatever else-and there is a great deal else that I cannot touch now-may be included in that great thought of the sealing by the Divine Spirit, these things are inseparably connected with, and suggested by it, viz. the actual contact of the Spirit of God with our spirits, which is expressed, as you may remember, in the other metaphors of being baptized in and anointed with, and yet more important, the result purposed by that contact being mainly to make us holy.

Now, I pray you to think of how different that is from all other notions of inspiration that the world has ever known, and how different it is from a great many ideas that have had influence within the Christian Church. People say there are not any miracles now, and say we are worse off than when there used to be. That Divine Spirit does not come to give gifts of healing, interpretations of tongues, and all the other abnormal and temporary results which attended the first manifestations. These, when they were given, were but means to an end, and the end subsists whilst the means are swept away. It is better to be made good than to be filled with all manner of miraculous power. ‘In this rejoice, not that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.’ All the rest is transient. It is gone; let it go, we are not a bit the poorer for want of it. This remains-not tongues, nor gifts of healing, nor any other of these miraculous and extraordinary and external powers-but the continual operation of a divine influence, moulding men into its own likeness.

Christianity is intensely ethical, and it sets forth, as the ultimate result of all its machinery, changing men into the likeness of God. Holiness is that for which Christ died, that for which the Divine Spirit works. Unless we Christian people recognise the true perspective of the Spirit’s gifts, and put at the base the extraordinary, and higher than these, but still subordinate, the intellectual, and on top of all the spiritual and moral, we do not understand the meaning of the central gift and possible blessing of Christianity, to make us holy, or, if you do not like the theological word, let us put it into still plainer and more modern English, to make you and me good men and women, like God. That is the mightiest work of that Divine Spirit.

We have here-

III. A plain warning as to the possibility of thwarting these influences.

Nothing here about irresistible grace; nothing here about a power that lays hold upon a man, and makes him good, he lying passive in its hands like clay in the hands of the potter! You will not be made holy without the Divine Spirit, but you will not be made holy without your working along with it. There is a possibility of resisting, and there is a possibility of co-operating. Man is left free. God does not lay hold of any one by the hair of his head, and drag him into paths of righteousness whether he will or no. But whilst there is the necessity for co-operation, which involves the possibility of resistance, we must also remember that that new life which comes into a man, and moulds his will as well as the rest of his nature, is itself the gift of God. We do not get into a contradiction when we thus speak, we only touch the edge of a great ocean in which our plummets can find no bottom. The same unravellable knot as to the co-operation of the divine and the creatural is found in the natural world, as in the experiences of the Christian soul. You have to work, and your work largely consists in yielding yourselves to the work of God upon you. ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you.’ Brethren! If you and I are Christian people, we have put into our hearts and spirits the talent. It depends on us whether we wrap it in a napkin, and stow it away underground somewhere, or whether we use it, and fructify and increase it. If you wrap it in a napkin and put it away underground, when you come to take it out, and want to say, ‘Lo! there Thou hast that is Thine,’ you will find that it was not solid gold, which could not rust or diminish, but that it has been like some volatile essence, put away in an unventilated place, and imperfectly secured: the napkin is there, but the talent has vanished. We have to work with God, and we can resist. Ay, and there is a deeper and a sadder word than that applied by the same Apostle in another letter to the same subject. We can ‘quench’ the light and extinguish the fire.

What extinguishes it? Look at the catalogue of sins that lie side by side with this exhortation of my text! They are all small matters-bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil-speaking, malice, stealing, lying, and the like; very 'homely' transgressions, if I may so say. Yes, and if you pile enough of them upon the spark that is in your hearts you will smother it out. Sin, the wrenching of myself away from the influences, not attending to the whispers and suggestions, being blind to the teaching of the Spirit through the Word and through Providence: these are the things that 'grieve the Holy Spirit of God.'

And so, lastly, we have here-

IV. A Tender Motive, a dissuasive from sin, a persuasive to yielding and to righteousness.

Many a man has been kept from doing wrong things by thinking of a sad pale face sitting at home waiting for him. Many a boy has been kept from youthful transgressions which war against his soul here, on the streets of Manchester, full as they are of temptations, by thinking that it would grieve the poor old mother in her cottage, away down in the country somewhere. We can bring that same motive to bear, with infinitely increased force, in regard to our conduct as Christian people. 'Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God.' A father feels a pang if he sees that his child makes no account of some precious gift that he has bestowed upon him, and leaves it lying about anywhere. A loving friend, standing on the margin of the stream, and calling to his friends in a boat when they are drifting to the rapids, turns away sad if they do not attend to his voice. That Divine Spirit pleads with us, and proffers its gifts to us, and turns away-I was going to use too strong a word, perhaps-sick at heart, not because of wounded authority, but because of wounded love and baffled desire to help, when we, in spite of It, will take our own way, neglect the call that warns us of our peril, and leave untouched the gifts that would have made us safe.

Dear brethren, surely such a dissuasive from evil, and such a persuasive to good, is mightier than all abstractions about duty and conscience and right, and the like. 'Do it rightly' says Paul, 'and you will please Him that hath called you'; leave the evil thing undone, 'and my heart shall be glad, even mine.' You and I can grieve the Christ whose Spirit is given to us. You and I can add something to 'the joy of our Lord.'

30)Ephesians 5:1

EPHESIANS

GOD'S IMITATORS

Eph. 5:1

The Revised Version gives a more literal and more energetic rendering of this verse by reading, 'Be ye, therefore, imitators of God, as beloved children.' It is the only place in the Bible where that bold word 'imitate' is applied to the Christian relation to God. But, though the expression is unique, the idea underlies the whole teaching of the New Testament on the subject of Christian character and conduct. To be like God, and to set ourselves to resemble Him, is the sum of all duty; and in the measure in which we approximate thereto, we come to perfection. So, then, there are here just two points that I would briefly touch upon now-the one is the sublime precept of the text, and the other the all-sufficient motive enforcing it. 'Be ye imitators of God as'-because you are, and know yourselves to be-'beloved children,' and it therefore behoves you to be like your Father.

I. First, then, this sublime precept.

Now notice that, broad as this precept is, and all-inclusive of every kind of excellence and duty as it may be, the Apostle has a very definite and specific meaning in it. There is one feature, and only one, in which, accurately speaking, a man may be like God. Our limited knowledge can never be like the ungrowing perfect wisdom of God. Our holiness cannot be like His, for there are many points in our nature and character which have no relation or correspondence to anything in the divine nature. But what is left? Love is left. Our other graces are not like the God to whom they cleave. My faith is not like His faithfulness. My obedience is not like His authority. My submission is not like His autocratic power. My emptiness is not like His fulness. My aspirations are not like His gratifying of them.

They correspond to God, but correspondence is not similarity; rather it presupposes unlikeness. Just as a concavity will fit into a convexity, for the very reason that it is concave and not convex, so the human unlikenesses, which are correspondent to God, are the characteristics by which it becomes possible that we should cleave to Him and inhere in Him. But whilst there is much in which He stands alone and incomparable, and whilst we have all to say, 'Who is like unto Thee, O Lord?' or what likeness shall we compare unto Him? we yet can obey in reference to one thing,-and to one thing only, as it seems to me-the commandment of my text, 'Be ye imitators of God.' We can be like Him in nothing else, but our love not only corresponds to His, but is of the same quality and nature as His, howsoever different it may be in sweep and in fervour and in degree. The tiniest drop that hangs upon the tip of a thorn will be as perfect a sphere as the sun, and it will have its little rainbow on its round, with all the prismatic colours, the same in tint and order and loveliness, as when the bow spans the heavens. The dew-drop may imitate the sun, and we are to be imitators of God; knit to Him by the one thing in us which is kindred to Him in the deepest sense-the love that is the life of God and the perfecting of man.

Well, then, notice how the Apostle in the context fastens upon a certain characteristic of that divine love which we are to imitate in our lives; and thereby makes the precept a very practical and a very difficult one. Godlike love will be love that gives as liberally as His does. What is the very essence of all love? Longing to be like. And the purest and deepest love is love which desires to impart itself, and that is God's love. The Bible seems to teach us that in a very mysterious sense, about which the less we say the less likely we are to err, there is a quality of giving up, as well as of giving, in God's love; for we read of the Father that 'spared not His Son,' by which is meant, not that He did not shrink from inflicting something upon the Son, but that He did not grudgingly keep that Son for Himself. 'He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up to the death for us all.' And if we can say but little about that surrender on the part of the infinite Fountain of all love, we can say that Jesus Christ, who is the activity of the Father's love, spared not Himself, but, as the context puts it, 'gave Himself up for us.'

And that is the pattern for us. That thought is not a subject to be decorated with tawdry finery of eloquence, or to be dealt with as if it were a sentimental prettiness very fit to be spoken of, but impossible to be practised. It is the duty of every Christian man and woman, and they have not done their duty unless they have learned that the bond which unites them to men is, in its nature, the very same as the bond which unites men to God; and that they will not have lived righteously unless they learn to be 'imitators of God,' in the surrender of themselves for their brother's good.

Ah, friend, that grips us very tight-and if there were a little more reality and prose brought into our sentimental talk about Christian love, and that love were more often shown in action, in all the self-suppression and taking a lift of a world's burdens, which its great Pattern demands, the world would be less likely to curl a scornful lip at the Church's talk about brotherly love.

You say that you are a Christian-that is to say a child of God. Do you know anything, and would anybody looking at you see that you knew anything, about the love which counts no cost and no sacrifice too great to be lavished on the unworthy and the sinful?

But that brings me to another point. The Apostle here, in the context, not for the sake of saying pretty things, but for the sake of putting sharp points on Christian duty, emphasises another thought, that Godlike love will be a forgiving love. Why should we be always waiting for the other man to determine our relations to him, and consider that if he does not like us we are absolved from the duty of loving him? Why should we leave him to settle the terms upon which we are to stand? God has love, as the Sermon on the Mount puts it, 'to the unthankful and the evil,' and we shall not be imitating His example unless we carry the same temper into all our relationships with our fellows.

People sit complacently and hear all that I am now trying to enforce, and think it is the right thing for me to say, but do you think it is the right thing for you to do? When a man obviously does not like you, or perhaps tries to harm you, what then? How do you meet him? 'He maketh His sun to shine, and sendeth His rain, on the unthankful and the evil.' 'Be ye imitators of God, as beloved children.'

Now note the all-sufficient motive for this great precept.

The sense of being loved will make loving, and nothing else will. The only power that will eradicate, or break without eradicating, our natural tendency to make ourselves our centres, is the recognition that there, at the heart, and on the central throne of the universe, and the divinest thing in it, there sits perfect and self-sacrificing Love, whose beams warm even us. The only flame that kindles love in a man’s heart, whether it be to God or to man, is the recognition that he himself stands in the full sunshine of that blaze from above, and that God has loved him. Our hearts are like reverberating furnaces, and when the fire of the consciousness of the divine love is lit in them, then from sides and roof the genial heat is reflected back again to intensify the central flame. Love begets love, and according to Paul, and according to John, and according to the Master of both of them, if a man loves God, then that glowing beam will glow whether it is turned to earth or turned to heaven.

The Bible does not cut love into two, and keep love to God in one division of the heart and love to man in another, but regards them as one and the same; the same sentiment, the same temper, the same attitude of heart and mind, only that in the one case the love soars, and in the other it lives along the level. The two are indissolubly tied together.

It is because a man knows himself to be beloved that therefore he is stimulated and encouraged to be an ‘imitator of God’ and, on the other hand, the sense of being God’s child underlies all real imitation of Him. Imitation is natural to the child. It is a miserable home where a boy does not imitate his father, and it is the father’s fault in nine cases out of ten if he does not. Whoever feels himself to be a beloved child is thereby necessarily drawn to model himself on the Father that he loves, because he knows that the Father loves him.

So I come to the blessed truth that Christian morality does not say to us, ‘Now begin, and work, and tinker away at yourselves, and try to get up some kind of excellence of character, and then come to God, and pray Him to accept you.’ That is putting the cart before the horse. The order is reversed. We are to begin with taking our personal salvation and God’s love to us for granted, and to work from that. Realise that you are beloved children, and then set to work to live accordingly. If we are ever to do what is our bounden duty to do, in all the various relations of life, we must begin with recognising, with faithful and grateful hearts, the love wherewith God has loved us. We are to think much and confidently of ourselves as beloved of God, and that, and only that, will make us loving to men.

The Nile floods the fields of Egypt and brings greenness and abundance wherever its waters are carried, because thousands of miles away, close up to the Equator, the snows have melted and filled the watercourses in the far-off wilderness. And so, if we are to go out into life, living illustrations and messengers of a love that has redeemed even us, we must, in many a solitary moment, and in the depths of our quiet hearts, realise and keep fast the conviction that God hath loved us, and Christ hath died for us.

But a solemn consideration has to be pressed on all our consciences, and that is that there is something wrong with a man’s Christian confidence whose assurance that he himself possesses a share in the love of God in Christ, is not ever moving him to imitation of the love in which he trusts. It is a shame that any one without Christian faith and love should be as charitable, as open to pity and to help, as earnest in any sort of philanthropic work, as Christian men and women are. But godless and perfectly secular philanthropy treads hard on the heels of Christian charity to-day. The more shame to us if we have been eating our morsels alone, and hugging ourselves in the possession of the love which has redeemed us; and if it has not quickened us to the necessity of copying it in our relations to our fellows. There is something dreadfully wrong about such a Christian character. ‘He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how shall he love God whom he hath not seen?’

Take these plain principles, and honestly fit them to your characters and lives, and you will revolutionise both.

31)Ephesians 5:8

EPHESIANS

WHAT CHILDREN OF LIGHT SHOULD BE

Eph. 5:8

It was our Lord who coined this great name for His disciples. Paul’s use of it is probably a reminiscence of the Master’s, and so is a hint of the existence of the same teachings as we now find in the existing Gospels, long before their day. Jesus Christ said, ‘Believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light’; and Paul gives substantially the same account of the way by which a man becomes a Son of the Light when he says, in the words preceding my text, ‘Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord.’

Union with Him makes light, just as the bit of carbon will glow as long as it is in contact with the electric force, and subsides again into darkness when that is switched off. To be in Christ is to be a child of light, and to believe in Christ is to be in Him.

But the intense moral earnestness of our Apostle is indicated by the fact that on both occasions in which he uses this designation he does so, not for the purpose of heightening the sense of the honour and prerogative attached to it, but for the sake of deducing from it plain and stringent moral duties, and heightening the sense of obligation to holy living.

‘Walk as children of light.’ Be true to your truest, deepest self. Manifest what you are. Let the sweet, sacred secrets of inward communion come out in the trivialities of ordinary conduct; make of your every thought a deed, and see to it that every deed be vitalised and purified by its contact with the great truths and thoughts that lie in this name. These are various ways of putting this one all-sufficient directory of conduct.

Now, in the context, the Apostle expands this concentrated exhortation in three or four different directions, and perhaps we may best set forth its meaning if we shape our remarks by these, I venture to cast them, for the sake of emphasis, into a hortatory form.

I. Aim at an all-round productiveness of the natural fruits of the light.

The true reading is, ‘Walk as children of light, for the fruit of the light’ [not spirit, as the Authorised Version reads it] ‘is in all goodness and righteousness and truth.’ Now, it is obvious that the alteration of ‘light’ instead of ‘spirit’ brings the words into connection with the preceding and the following. The reference to the ‘fruits of the spirit’ would be entirely irrelevant in this place; a reference to the ‘fruit of the light,’ as being every form of goodness and righteousness and truth, is altogether in place.

There is, then, a natural tendency in the light to blossom out into all forms and types of goodness. ‘Fruit’ suggests the idea of natural, silent, spontaneous, effortless growth. And, although that is by no means a sufficient account of the process by which bad men become good men, it is an inseparable element, in all true moral renovation, that it be the natural outcome and manifestation of an inward principle; otherwise it is mere hypocritical adornment, or superficial appearance. If we are to do good we must first of all be good. If from us there are to come righteousness and truth, and all other graces of character, there must, first of all, be the radical change which is involved in passing from separateness in the darkness to union with Jesus Christ in the light. The Apostle’s theory of moral renovation is that you must begin with the implantation in the spirit of the source of all moral goodness-viz. Jesus Christ-brought into the heart by the uniting power of humble faith. And then there will be lodged in our being a vital power, of which the natural outcome will be all manner of fair and pure things. Effort is needed, as I shall have to say; but prior to effort there must be union with Jesus Christ.

This wide, general commandment of our text is sufficiently definite, thinks Paul; for if the light be in you it will naturally effloresce into all forms of beauty. Light is the condition of fruitfulness. Everywhere the vital germ is only acted upon by the light. No sunshine, no flowers; darkness produces thin, etiolated, whitened, and feeble shoots at the best. Let the light blaze in, and the blanched feebleness becomes vigorous and unfolds itself. How much more will light be the condition of fruitfulness when the very light itself is the seed from which all fruit is developed.

But, still further, mark how there must be an all-round completeness in order that we shall fairly set forth the glory and power of the light of which our faith makes us children and partakers. The fruit ‘is in all goodness and righteousness and truth.’ These three aspects-the good, the right, the true-may not be a scientific, ethical classification, but they give a sufficiently plain and practical distinction. Goodness, in which the prevailing idea is beneficence and the kindlier virtues; righteousness, which refers to the sterner graces of justice; truth, in which the prevalent idea is conformity in action with facts and the conditions of man’s life and entire sincerity-these three do cover, with sufficient completeness, the whole ground of possible human excellence. But the Apostle widens them still further by that little word all.

We all tend to cultivate those virtues which are in accordance with our natural dispositions, or are made most easy to us by our circumstances. And there is nothing in which we more need to seek comprehensiveness than in the effort to educate ourselves into, and to educe from ourselves, kinds of goodness and forms of excellence which are not naturally in accordance with our dispositions, or facilitated by our circumstances. The tree planted in the shrubbery will grow all lopsided; the bushes on the edge of the cliff will be shorn away on the windward side by the teeth of the south-western gale, and will lean over northwards, on the side of least resistance. And so we all are apt to content ourselves with doing the good things that are easiest for us, or that fit into our temperament and character. Jesus Christ would have us to be all-round men, and would that we should seek to aim after and possess the kinds of excellence that are least cognate to our characters. Are you strong, and do you pride yourself upon your firmness? Cultivate gentleness. Are you amiable, and pride yourself, perhaps, upon your sympathetic tenderness? Try to get a little iron and quinine into your constitution. Seek to be the man that you are least likely to be, and aim at a comprehensive development of ‘all righteousness and goodness and truth.’

Further, remember that this all-round completeness is not attained as the result of an effortless growth. True, these things are the fruits of the light, but also true, they are the prizes of struggle and the trophies of warfare. No man will ever attain to the comprehensive moral excellence which it is in his own power to win; no Christian will ever be as all-round a good man as he has the opportunities of being, unless he makes it his business, day by day, to aim after the conscious increase of gifts that he possesses, and the conscious appropriation and possession of those of which he is still lacking. ‘Nothing of itself will come,’ or very little. True, the light will shine out in variously tinted ray if it be in a man, as surely as from the seed come the blade and the ear and the full corn in the ear, but you will not have nor keep the light which thus will unfold itself unless you put forth appropriate effort. Christ comes into our hearts, but we have to bring Him there. Christ dwells in our hearts, but we have to work into our nature, and work out in action, the gifts that He bestows. They will advance but little in the divine life who trust to the natural unfolding of the supernatural life within them, and do not help its unfolding by their own resolute activity. ‘Walk as children of the light.’ There is your duty, for ‘the fruit of the light is all righteousness.’ One might have supposed that the commandments would be, ‘Be passive as children of the light, for the light will grow.’ But the Apostle binds together, as always, the two things, the divine working and the human effort at reception, retention, and application of that divine work, just as he does in the great classical passage, ‘Work out your own salvation, for it is God that worketh in you.’

II. Secondly, the general exhortation of my text widens out itself into this-test all things by Christ’s approval of them.

‘Proving what is well pleasing unto the Lord.’ That, according to the natural construction of the Greek, is the main way by which the Apostle conceives that his general commandment of ‘walking as children of the light’ is to be carried out. You do it if, step by step, and moment by moment, and to every action of life, you apply this standard-Does Christ like it? Does it please Him? When that test is rigidly applied, then, and only then, will you walk as becomes the children of the light.

So, then, there is a standard-not what men approve, not what my conscience, partially illuminated, may say is permissible, not what is recognised as allowable by the common maxims of the world round about us, but Christ’s approval. How different the hard, stern, and often unwelcome prescriptions of law and rigidity of some standards of right become when they are changed into that which pleases the Divine Lord and Lover! Surely it is something blessed that the hard, cold, and to such a large extent powerless conceptions of duty or obligation shall be changed into pleasing Jesus Christ; and that so our hearts shall be enlisted in the service of our consciences, and love shall be glad to do the Beloved’s will. There are many ways by which the burden of life’s obligations is lightened to the Christian. I do not know that any of them is more precious than the fact that law is changed into His will, and that we seek to do what is right because it pleases the Master. There is the standard.

It will be easy for us to come to the right appreciation of individual actions when we are living in the light. Union with Jesus Christ will make us quick to discern His will. We have a conscience;-well, that needs educating and enlightening, and very often correcting. We have the Word of God;-well, that needs explanation, and needs to be brought close to our hearts. If we have Christ dwelling in us, in the measure in which we are in sympathy with Him, we shall be gifted with clear eyes, not indeed to discern the expedient-that belongs to another region altogether-but we shall be gifted with very clear eyes to discern right from wrong, and there will be an instinctive recoil from the evil, and an instinctive attachment of ourselves to the good. If we are in the Lord we shall easily be able to prove what is acceptable and well-pleasing to Him.

We shall never walk as the children of the light, unless we have the habit of referring everything, trifles and great things, to His arbitrament, and seeking in them all to do what is pleasing in His sight. The smallest deed may be brought under the operation of the largest principles. Gravitation influences the microscopic grain of sand as well as planets and sun. There is nothing so small but you can bring it into this category-it either pleases or displeases Jesus Christ. And the faults into which Christian men fall and in which they continue are very largely owing to their carelessness in applying this standard to the small things of their daily lives. The sleepy Custom House officers let the contraband article in because it seems to be of small bulk. There are old stories about how strong castles were taken by armed men hidden in an innocent-looking cart of forage. Do you keep up a rigid inspection at the frontier, and see to it that everything vindicates its right to enter because it is pleasing to Jesus Christ.

III. Thirdly, we have here another expansion of the general command, and that is-keep well separate from the darkness.

Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.' Now, your time will not allow me to dwell, as I had hoped to do, upon the considerations to be suggested here. The very briefest possible mention of them is all that I can afford.

'The unfruitful works of darkness';-well, then, the darkness has its works, but though they be works they are not worth calling fruit. That is to say, nothing except the conduct which flows from union with Jesus Christ so corresponds to the man’s nature and relations, or has any such permanence about it as to entitle it to be called fruit. Other acts may be ‘works’ but Paul will not dishonour the great word ‘fruit’ by applying it to such rubbish as these, and so he brands them as ‘unfruitful works of darkness.’

Keep well clear of them, says the Apostle. He is not talking here about the relations between Christians and others, but about the relations between Christian men and the works of darkness. Only, of course, in order to avoid fellowship with the works you will sometimes have to keep yourselves well separate from their doers. Much association with such men is forced upon us by circumstances, and much is the imperative duty of Christian beneficence and charity. But I venture to express the strong and growing conviction that there are few exhortations that the secularised Church of this generation needs more than this commandment of my text: ‘Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness’ ‘What communion hath light with darkness?’ Ah! we see plenty of it, unnatural as it is, in the so-called Church of to-day. ‘What concord hath Christ with Belial? What part hath he that believeth with an infidel? Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate.’

And, brethren, remember, a part of the separation is that your light shall be a constant condemnation of the darkness. ‘But rather reprove them,’ says my text; that is a work that devolves upon all Christians. It is to be done, no doubt, by the silent condemnation of evil which ever comes from the quiet doing of good. As an old preacher has it, ‘The presence of a saint hinders the devil of elbow-room for doing his tricks.’ The old legend told us that the fire-darting Apollo shot his radiant arrows against the pythons and ‘dragons of the slime.’ The sons of light have the same office-by their light of life to make the darkness aware of itself, and ashamed of itself; and to change it into light.

But silent reproving is not all our duty. The Christian Church has wofully fallen beneath its duty, not only in regard to its complicity with the social crimes of each generation, but in regard to its cowardly silence towards them; especially when they flaunt and boast themselves in high places. What has the Church said worthy of itself in regard to war? What has the

Church said worthy of itself in regard to impurity? What has the Church said worthy of itself in regard to drunkenness? What has the Church said worthy of itself in regard to the social vices that are honeycombing society and this city to-day? If you are the sons of light, walk as the sons of light, and have ‘no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness’; but set the trumpet to your lips, and ‘declare unto My people their transgressions, and to the house of Israel their sin.’

32)Ephesians 5:9

EPHESIANS

THE FRUIT OF THE LIGHT

Eph. 5:9

This is one of the cases in which the Revised Version has done service by giving currency to an unmistakably accurate and improved reading. That which stands in our Authorised Version, ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ seems to have been a correction made by some one who took offence at the violent metaphor, as he conceived it, that ‘light’ should bear ‘fruit’ and desired to tinker the text so as to bring it into verbal correspondence with another passage in the Epistle to the Galatians, where ‘the fruits of the Spirit’ are enumerated. But the reading, ‘the fruit of the light,’ has not only the preponderance of manuscript authority in its favour, but is preferable because it preserves a striking image, and is in harmony with the whole context.

The Apostle has just been exhorting his Ephesian friends to walk as ‘children of the light’ and before he goes on to expand and explain that injunction he interjects this parenthetical remark, as if he would say, To be true to the light that is in you is the sum of duty, and the condition of perfectness, ‘for the fruit of the light is in all goodness and righteousness and truth’ That connection is entirely destroyed by the substitution of ‘spirit.’ The whole context, both before and after my text, is full of references to the light as working in the life; and a couple of verses after it we read about ‘the unfruitful works of darkness’ an expression which evidently looks back to my text.

So please do understand that our text in this sermon is-’The fruit of the light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth.’

I. Now, first of all, I have just a word to say about this light which is fruitful.

Note-for it is, I think, not without significance-a minute variation in the Apostle’s language in this verse and in the context. He has been speaking of ‘light,’ now he speaks of ‘the light’; and that, I think, is not accidental. The expression, ‘walk as children of light,’ is more general and vague. The expression, ‘the fruit of the light,’ points to some specific source from which all light flows. And observe, also, that we have in the previous context, ‘Ye were sometime darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord,’ which evidently implies that the light of which my text speaks is not natural to men, but is the result of the entrance into their darkness of a new element.

Now I do not suppose that we should be entitled to say that Paul here is formally anticipating the deep teaching of the Apostle John that Jesus Christ is ‘the Light of men,’ and especially of Christian men. But he is distinctly asserting, I think, that the light which blesses and hallows humanity is no diffused glow, but is all gathered and concentrated into one blazing centre, from which it floods the hearts of men. Or, to put away the metaphor, he is here asserting that the only way by which any man can cease to be, in the doleful depths of his nature, darkness in its saddest sense is by opening his heart through faith, that into it there may rush, as the light ever does where an opening-be it only a single tiny cranny-is made, the light which is Christ, and without whom is darkness.

I know, of course, that, apart altogether from the exercise of faith in Jesus Christ, there do shine in men’s hearts rays of the light of knowledge and of purity; but if we believe the teaching of Scripture, these, too, are from Christ, in His universally-diffused work, by which, apart altogether from individual faith, or from a knowledge of revelation, He is ‘the light that lighteth every man coming into the world.’ And I hold that, wheresoever there is conscience, wheresoever there is judgment and reason, wheresoever there are sensitive desires after excellence and nobleness, there is a flickering of a light which I believe to be from Christ Himself. But that light, as widely diffused as humanity, fights with, and is immersed in, darkness. In the physical world, light and darkness are mutually exclusive: where the one is the other comes not; but in the spiritual world the paradox is true that the two co-exist. Apart from revelation and the acceptance of Jesus Christ's person and work by our humble faith, the light struggles with the darkness, and the darkness obstinately refuses to admit its entrance, and 'comprehendeth it not.' And so, ineffectual but to make restless and to urge to vain efforts and to lay up material for righteous judgment, is the light that shines in men whose hearts are shut against Christ. The fruitful light is Christ within us, and, unless we know and possess it by the opening of heart and mind and will, the solemn words preceding my text are true of us: 'Ye were sometime darkness.' Oh, brother! do you see to it that the subsequent words are true of you: 'Now are ye light in the Lord.' Only if you are in Christ are you truly light.

II. Now, secondly, notice the fruitfulness of this indwelling light.

Of course the metaphor that light, like a tree, grows and blossoms and puts forth fruit, is a very strong one. And its very violence and incongruity help its force. Fruit is generally used in Scripture in a good sense. It conveys the notion of something which is the natural outcome of a vital power, and so, when we talk about the light being fruitful, we are setting, in a striking image, the great Christian thought that, if you want to get right conduct, you must have renewed character; and that if you have renewed character you will get right conduct. This is the principle of my text. The light has in it a productive power; and the true way to adorn a life with all things beautiful, solemn, lovely, is to open the heart to the entrance of Jesus Christ.

God's way is-first, new life, then better conduct. Men's way is, 'cultivate morality, seek after purity, try to be good.' And surely conscience and experience alike tell us that that is a hopeless effort. To begin with what should be second is an anachronism in morals, and will be sure to result in failure in practice. He is not a wise man that tries to build a house from the chimneys downwards. And to talk about making a man's doings good before you have secured a radical change in the doer, by the infusion into him of the very life of Jesus Christ Himself, is to begin at the top story, instead of at the foundation. Many of us are trying to put the cart before the horse in that fashion. Many of us have made the attempt over and over again, and the attempt always has failed and always will fail. You may do much for the mending of your characters and for the incorporation in your lives of virtues and graces which do not grow there naturally and without effort. I do not want to cut the nerves of any man’s stragglings, I do not want to darken the brightness of any man’s aspirations, but I do say that the people who, apart from Jesus Christ, and the entrance into their souls by faith of His quickening power, are seeking, some of them nobly, some of them sadly, and all of them vainly, to cure their faults of character, will never attain anything but a superficial and fragmentary goodness, because they have begun at the wrong end.

But ‘make the tree good’ and its fruit will be good. Get Christ into your heart, and all fair things will grow as the natural outcome of His indwelling. The fruitfulness of the light is not put upon its right basis until we come to understand that the light is Christ Himself, who, dwelling in our hearts by faith, is made in us as well as ‘unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and salvation, and redemption.’ The beam that is reflected from the mirror is the very beam that falls on the mirror, and the fair things in life and conduct which Christian people bring forth are in very deed the outcome of the vital power of Jesus Christ which has entered into them. ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,’ is the Apostle’s declaration in the midst of his struggles; and the perfected saints before the throne cast their crowns at His feet, and say, ‘Not unto us! not unto us, but unto Thy name be the glory.’ The talent is the Lord’s, only the spending of it is the servant’s. And so the order of the Divine appointment is, first, the entrance of the light, and then the conduct that flows from it.

Note, too, how this same principle of the fruitfulness of the light gives instruction as to the true place of effort in the Christian life. The main effort ought to be to get more of the light into ourselves. ‘Abide in Me, and I in you.’ And so, and only so, will fruit come.

And such an effort has to take in hand all the circumference of our being, and to fix thoughts that wander, and to still wishes that clamour, and to empty hearts that are full of earthly loves, and to clear a space in minds that are crammed with thoughts about the transient and the near, in order that the mind may keep in steadfast contemplation of Jesus, and the heart may be bound to Him by cords of love that are not capable of being snapped, and scarcely of being stretched, and the will may in patience stand saying, ‘Speak, Lord! for Thy servant heareth’; and the whole tremulous nature may be rooted and built up in and on Him. Ah, brother! if we understand all that goes to the fulfilment of that one sweet and merciful injunction, ‘Abide in Me,’ we shall recognise that there is the field on which Christian effort is mainly to be occupied.

But that is not all. For there must be likewise the effort to appropriate, and still more to manifest in conduct, the fruit-bringing properties of that indwelling light. ‘Giving all diligence add to your faith.’ ‘Having these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord.’ We are often told that just as we trust Christ for our forgiveness and acceptance, so we are to trust Him for our sanctifying and perfecting. It is true, and yet it is not true. We are to trust Him for our sanctifying and our perfecting. But the faith which trusts Him for these is not a substitute for effort, but it is the foundation of effort. And the more we rely on His power to cleanse us from all evil, the more are we bound to make the effort in His power and in dependence on Him, to cleanse ourselves from all evil, and to secure as our own the natural outcomes of His dwelling within us, which are ‘the fruits of the light.’

III. And so, lastly, notice the specific fruits which the Apostle here dwells upon.

They consist, says he, in all goodness and righteousness and truth. Now ‘goodness’ here seems to me to be used in its narrower sense, just as the same Apostle uses it in the Epistle to the Romans, in contrast with ‘righteousness,’ where he says, ‘for a good man some would even dare to die.’ There he means by ‘good,’ as he does here by ‘goodness,’ not the general expression for all forms of virtue and gracious conduct, but the specific excellence of kindliness, amiability, or the like. ‘Righteousness’ again, is that which rigidly adheres to the strict law of duty, and carefully desires to give to every man what belongs to him, and to every relation of life what it requires. And 'truth' is rather the truth of sincerity, as opposed to hypocrisy and lies and shams, than the intellectual truth as opposed to error.

Now, all these three types of excellence-kindliness, righteousness, truthfulness-are apt to be separated. For the first of them-amiability, kindliness, gentleness-is apt to become too soft, to lose its grip of righteousness, and it needs the tonic of the addition of those other graces, just as you need lime in water if it is to make bone. Righteousness, on the other hand, is apt to become stern, and needs the softening of goodness to make it human and attractive. The rock is grim when it is bare; it wants verdure to drape it if it is to be lovely. Truth needs kindliness and righteousness, and they need truth. For there are men who pride themselves on 'speaking out,' and take rudeness and want of regard for other people's sensitive feelings to be sincerity. And, on the other hand, it is possible that amiability may be sweeter than truth is, and that righteousness may be hypocritical and insincere. So Paul says, 'Let this white light be resolved in the prism of your characters into the threefold rays of kindliness, righteousness, truthfulness.'

And then, again, he desires that each of us should try to make our own a fully developed, all-round perfection-all goodness and righteousness and truth; of every sort, that is, and in every degree. We are all apt to cultivate graces of character which correspond to our natural disposition and make. We are all apt to become torsos, fragmentary, one-sided, like the trees that grow against a brick wall, or those which stand exposed to the prevailing blasts from one quarter of the sky. But we should seek to appropriate types of excellence to which we are least inclined, as well as those which are most in harmony with our natural dispositions. If you incline to kindliness, try to brace yourselves with righteousness; if you incline to righteousness, to take the stern, strict view of duty, and to give to every man what he deserves, remember that you do not give men their dues unless you give them a great deal more than their deserts, and that righteousness does not perfectly allot to our fellows what they ought to receive from us, unless we give them pity and indulgence and forbearance and forgiveness when it is needed. The one light breaks into all colours-green in the grass, purple and red in the flowers, flame-coloured in the morning sky, blue in the deep sea. The light that is in us ought, in like manner, to be analysed into, and manifested in, ‘whatsoever things are lovely and of good report.’

And so, dear friends, here is a test for us all. Devout emotion, orthodox creed, practical diligence in certain forms of benevolence and philanthropic work, are all very well; but Jesus Christ came to make us like Himself, and to turn our darkness into light that betrays its source by its resemblance, though it be a weakened one, to the sun from which it came. We have no right to call ourselves Christ’s followers unless we are, in some measure, Christ’s pictures.

Here is a message of cheer and hope for us all. We have all tried, and tried, and tried, over and over again, to purge and mend these poor characters of ours. How long the toil, how miserable and poor the results! A million candles will not light the night; but when God’s mercy of sunrise comes above the hills, beasts of prey slink to their dens and birds begin to sing, and flowers open, and growth resumes again. We cannot mend ourselves except partially and superficially; but we can open will, heart, and mind, by faith, for His entrance; and where He comes, there He slays the evil creatures that live in and love the dark, and all gracious things will blossom into beauty. If we are in the Lord we shall be light; and if the Lord, who is the Light, is in us, we, too, shall bear fruits of ‘all righteousness and goodness and truth.’

33)Ephesians 5:10

EPHESIANS

PLEASING CHRIST

Eph. 5:10

These words are closely connected with those which precede them in the 8th verse-’Walk as children of light.’ They further explain the mode by which that commandment is to be fulfilled. They who, as children of light, mindful of their obligations and penetrated by its brightness, seek to conform their active life to the light to which they belong, are to do so by making experiment of, or investigating and determining, what is ‘acceptable to the Lord.’ It is the sum of all Christian duty, a brief compendium of conduct, an all-sufficient directory of life.

There need only be two remarks made by way of explanation of my text. One is that the expression rendered ‘acceptable’ is more accurately and forcibly given, as in the Revised Version, by the plainer word ‘well-pleasing.’ And the other is that ‘the Lord’ here, as always in the New Testament-unless the context distinctly forbids it-means Jesus Christ. Here the context distinctly demands it. For only a sentence or two before, the Apostle has been speaking about ‘those who were sometime darkness having been made light in the Lord’-which is obviously in Jesus Christ.

And here, therefore, what pleases Christ is the Christian’s highest duty, and the one prescription which is required to be obeyed in order to walk in the light is, to do that which pleases Him.

I. So, then, in these brief words, so comprehensive, and going so deep into the secrets of holy and noble living, I want you to notice that we have, first, the only attitude which corresponds to our relations to Christ.

How remarkable it is that this Apostle should go on the presumption that our conduct affects Him, that it is possible for us to please, or to displease Jesus Christ now. We often wonder whether the beloved dead are cognisant of what we do; and whether any emotions of something like either our earthly complacency or displeasure, can pass across the undisturbed calm of their hearts, if they are aware of what their loved ones here are doing. That question has to be left very much in the dark, however our hearts may sometimes seek to enforce answers. But this we know, that that loving Lord, not merely by the omniscience of His divinity, but by the perpetual knowledge and sympathy of His perfect manhood, is not only cognizant of, but is affected by, the conduct of His professed followers here on earth. And since it is true that He now is not swept away into some oblivious region where the dead are, but is close beside us all, cognizant of every act, watching every thought, and capable of having something like a shadow of a pang passing across the Divine depth of His eternal joy and repose at the right hand of God, then, surely, the only thing that corresponds to such a relationship as at present subsists between the Christian soul and the Lord is that we should take as our supreme and continual aim that, 'whether present or absent, we should be well-pleasing to Him.' Nor does that demand rest only upon the realities of our present relation to that Lord, but it goes back to the past facts on which our present relation rests. And the only fitting response to what He has been and done for us is that we should, each of us, in the depth of our hearts, and in the widest circumference of the surface of our lives, enthrone Him as absolute Lord, and take His good pleasure as our supreme law. Jesus Christ is King because He is Redeemer. The only adequate response to what He has done for me is that I should absolutely submit myself to Him, and say to Him, 'O Lord! truly I am Thy servant! Thou hast loosed my bonds.' The one fitting return to make for that Cross and Passion is to enthrone His will upon my will, and to set Him as absolute Monarch over the whole of my nature. Thoughts, affections, purposes, efforts, and all should crown Him King, because He has died for me. The conduct which corresponds to the relations which we bear to Christ as the present Judge of our work, and the Redeemer of our souls by His mighty deed in the past, is this of my text, to make my one law His will, and to please Him that hath called me to be His soldier.

The meaning of being a Christian is that, in return for the gift of a whole Christ, I give my whole self to Him. 'Why call ye me Lord! Lord! and do not the things which I say?' If He is what He assuredly is to every one of us, nothing can be plainer than that we are thereby bound by obligations which are not iron, but are more binding than if they were, because they were woven out of the cords of love and the bands of a man, bound to serve Him supremely, Him only, Him always, Him by the suppression of self, and the making His pleasure our law.

II. Now, secondly, let me ask you to notice that we have here the all-sufficient guide for practical life.

It sounds very mystical, and a trifle vague, to say, Do everything to please Jesus Christ. It is all-comprehensive; it is mystical in the sense that it goes down below the mere surface of prescriptions about conduct. But it is not vague, and it is capable of immediate application to every part, and to every act, of every man’s life.

For what is it that pleases Jesus Christ? His own likeness; as, according to the old figure-which is, I suppose, true to spiritual facts, whether to external facts or not-the refiner knows that the metal is ready to flow when he can see his own face in it. Jesus Christ desires most that we should all be like Him. That we are to bear His image is as comprehensive, and at the same time as specific, a way of setting forth the sum of Christian duty, as are the words of my text. The two phrases mean the same thing.

And what is the likeness to Jesus Christ which it is thus our supreme obligation and our truest wisdom and perfection to bear? Well! we can put it all into two words-self-suppression and continual consciousness of obedience to the Divine will. The life of Jesus Christ, in its brief records in Scripture, is felt by every thoughtful man to contain within its narrow compass adequate direction for, and to set forth the ideal of, human life. That is not because He went through all varieties of earthly experience, for He did not. The life of a Jewish peasant nineteen centuries ago was extremely unlike the life of a Manchester merchant, of a college professor, of a successful barrister, of a struggling mother, in this present day. But in the narrow compass of that life there are set forth these two things, which are the basis of all human perfection-the absolute annihilation of self-regard, and the perpetual recognition of a Divine will. These are the things which every Christian man and woman is bound by the power of Christ’s Cross to translate into the actions correspondent with their particular circumstances. And so the student at his desk and the sailor on his deck, the miner in his pit, the merchant on ‘Change, the worker in various handicrafts, may each be sure that they are doing what is pleasing to Christ if, in their widely different ways, they seek to do what they can do in all the varieties of life-crucify self, and commune with God.

That is not easy. Whatever may be the objections to be brought against this summary of Christian duty, the objection that it is vague is the last that can be sustained. Try it, and you will find out that it is anything but vague. It will grip tight enough, depend upon it. It will go deep enough down into all the complexities of our varying circumstances. If it has a fault [which it has not] it is in the direction of too great stringency for unaided human nature. But the stringency is not too great when we depend upon Him to help us, and an impossible ideal is a certain prophet of its own fulfilment some day.

So, brethren, here is the sufficient guide, not because it cumbers us with a mass of wretched little prescriptions such as a martinet might give, about all sorts of details of conduct. That is left to profitless casuists like the ancient rabbis. But the broad principles will effloresce into all manner of perfectnesses and all fruits. He that has in his heart these thoughts, that the definition of virtue is pleasing Jesus Christ, that the concrete form of goodness is likeness to Him, and that the elements of likeness to Him are these two, that I should never think about myself, and always think about God, needs no other guide or instructor to fill his life with 'whatsoever things are lovely and of good report,' and to make his own all that the world calls virtue, and all which the consciences of good men have conspired to praise.

But not only does this guide prove its sufficiency by reason of its comprehensiveness, but also because there is no difficulty in ascertaining what at each moment it prescribes. Of course, I know that such a precept as this cannot contain in itself guidance in matters of mere practical expediency. But, apart from these-which are to be determined by the ordinary exercise of prudence and common sense-in regard to the right and the wrong of our actions, I believe that if a man wants to know Christ's will, and takes the way of knowing it which Christ has appointed, he shall not be left in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

For love has a strange power of divining love's wishes, as we all know, and as many a sweetness in the hearts and lives of many of us has shown us. If we cherish sympathy with Jesus Christ we shall look on things as He looks on them, and we shall not be left without the knowledge of what His pleasure is. If we keep near enough to Him the glance of His eye will do for guidance, as the old psalm has it. They are rough animal natures that do not understand how to go, unless their instructors be the crack of the whip or the tug of the bridle. 'I will guide thee with Mine eye.' A glance is enough where there are mutual understanding and love. Two musical instruments in adjoining rooms, tuned to the same pitch, have a singular affinity, and if a note be struck on the one the other will vibrate to the sound. And so hearts here that love Jesus Christ and keep in unison with Him, and are sympathetic with His desires, will learn to know His will, and will re-echo the music that comes from Him. And if our supreme desire is to know what pleases Jesus Christ, depend upon it the desire will not be in vain, ‘If any man wills to do His will he shall know of the doctrine.’ Ninety per cent. of all our perplexities as to conduct come from our not having a pure and simple wish to do what is right in His sight, clearly supreme above all others. When we have that wish it is never left unsatisfied.

And even if sometimes we do make a mistake as to what is Christ’s pleasure, if our supreme wish and honest aim in the mistake have been to do His pleasure, we may be sure that He will be pleased with the deed. Even though its body is not that which He willed us to do, its spirit is that which He does desire. And if we do a wrong thing, a thing in itself displeasing to Him, whilst all the while we desired to please Him, we shall please Him in the deed which would otherwise have displeased Him. And so two Christian men, for instance, who take opposite sides in a controversy, may both of them be doing what is well-pleasing in His sight, whilst they are contradicting one another, if they are doing it for His sake. And it is possible that the inquisitor and his victim may both have been serving Christ. At all events, let us be sure of this, that whensoever we desire to please Him, He will help us to do it, and ordinarily will help us by making clear to us the path on which His smile rests.

III. Again, notice that we have here an all-powerful motive for Christian life.

The one thing which all other summaries of duty lack is motive power to get themselves carried into practice. But we all know, from our own happy human experience, that no motive which can be brought to bear upon men is stronger, when there are loving hearts concerned, than this simple one, ‘Do it to please me.’ And that is what Jesus Christ really says. That is no piece of mere sentiment, brethren, nor of mere pulpit rhetoric. That is the deepest thought of Christian morality, and is the distinctive peculiarity which gives the morality of the New Testament its clear supremacy over all other. There are precepts in it far nobler and loftier than can be found elsewhere. The perspective of virtues and graces in it is different from that which ordinarily prevails amongst men. But I do not think that it is in the details of its precepts so much as in the communication of power to obey them, and in the suggestion of the motive which makes them all easy, that the difference of Christ's ethics from all the teaching of the world beside is most truly to be found.

And here lies the excellence thereof. It is a poor, cold thing to say to a man, 'Do this because it is right.' It is a still more powerless thing to say to him, 'Do this because it is expedient' 'Do this because, in the long run, it leads to happiness.' It is all different when you say, 'Do this to please Jesus Christ, to please that Christ who pleased not Himself but gave Himself for you.' That is the fire that melts the ore. That is the heat that makes flexible the hard, stiff material. That is the motive which makes duty delight, which makes 'the rough places plain' and 'the crooked things straight.' It does not abolish natural tastes, it does not supersede natural disinclinations, but it does smooth and soften unwelcome and hard tasks, and it invests service with a halo of glory, and changes the coldness of duty into rosy light; as when the sunrise strikes on the peaks of the frozen mountains. The one motive which impels men, and can be trusted to secure in them whatsoever things are noble, is to please Him.

So we have the secret of blessedness in these words. For self-submission and suppression are blessedness. Our miseries come from our unbridled wills, far more than from our sensitive organisations. It is because we do not accept providences that providences hurt. It is because we do not accept the commandments that the commandments are burdensome. Those who have no will, except as it is vitalised by God's will, have found the secret of blessedness, and have entered into rest. In the measure in which we approximate to that condition, our wills will be strengthened as well as our hearts set at ease.

And blessedness comes, too, because the approbation of the Master, which is the aim of the servant, is reflected in the satisfaction of an approving conscience, which points onwards to the time when the Master's approval shall be revealed in the servant's glory.

I was reading the other day about a religious reformer who arose in Eastern lands a few years since, and gathered many disciples. He and his principal follower were seized and about to be martyred. They were suspended by cords from a gibbet, to be fired at by a platoon of soldiers. And as they hung there, the disciple turned to his teacher, and as his last word on earth said, 'Master! are you satisfied with me?' His answer was a silent smile; and the next minute a bullet was in his heart. Dear brethren, do you turn to Jesus Christ with the same question, 'Master! art Thou satisfied with me?' and you will get His smile here; and hereafter, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'

34)Ephesians 5:11

EPHESIANS

UNFRUITFUL WORKS OF DARKNESS

Eph. 5:11

We have seen in a former sermon that 'the fruit,' or outcome, 'of the Light' is a comprehensive perfection, consisting in all sorts and degrees of goodness and righteousness and truth. Therefore, the commandment, 'Walk as children of the light,' sums up all Christian morality. Is there need, then, for any additional precept? Yes; for Christian people do not live in an empty world. If there were no evil round them, and no proclivity to evil within them, it would be amply sufficient to say to them, 'Be true to the light which you behold.' But since both these things are, the commandment of my text is further necessary. We do not work in vacuo, and therefore friction and atmosphere have to be taken account of; and an essential part of 'walking as children of the light' is to know how to behave ourselves when confronted with 'the works of darkness.'

These Ephesian Christians lived in a state of society honeycombed with hideous immorality, the centre of which was the temple, which was their city's glory and shame. It was all but impossible for them to have nothing to do with the works of evil, unless, indeed, they went out of the world. But the difficulty of obedience does not affect the duty of obedience, nor slacken in the smallest degree the stringency of a command. This obligation lies upon us as fully as it did upon them, and the discharge of it by professing Christians would bring new life to moribund churches.

I. Let me ask you to note with me, first, the fruitlessness inherent in all the works of darkness.

You may remember that I pointed out, in a former discourse on the context, that the Apostle, here and elsewhere, draws a very significant distinction between ‘works’ and ‘fruit,’ and that distinction is put very strikingly in the words of my text. There are works which are barren. It is a grim thought that there may be abundant activity which, in the eyes of God, comes to just nothing; and that pages and pages of laborious calculations, when all summed up, have for result a great round 0. Men are busy, and hosts of them are doing what the old fairy stories tell us that evil spirits were condemned to do-spinning ropes out of sea-sand; and their life-work is nought when they come to reckon it up.

I have no time to dwell upon this thought, but I wish, just for a moment or two, to illustrate it.

All godless life is fruitless, inasmuch as it has no permanent results. Permanent results of a sort, indeed, follow everything that men do, for all our actions tend to make character, and they all have a share in fixing that which depends upon character-viz. destiny, both here and yonder. And thus the most fleeting of our deeds, which in one aspect is as transitory as the snow upon the great plains when the sun rises, leaves everlasting traces upon ourselves and upon our condition. But yet acts concerned with transitory things may have permanent fruit, or may be as transient as the things with which they are concerned. And the difference depends on the spirit in which they are done. If the roots are only in the surface-skin of soil, when that is pared off the plant goes. A life that is to be eternal must strike its roots through all the superficial humus down to the very heart of things. When its roots twine themselves round God then the deeds which blossom from them will blossom unfading for ever.

Think of men going empty-handed into another world, and saying, ‘O Lord! I made a big fortune in Manchester when I lived there, and I left it all behind me'; or, 'I mastered a science, and one gleam of the light of eternity has antiquated it'; or, 'I gained prizes, won my aims, and they have all dropped from my hands, and here I stand, having to say in the most tragic sense: Nothing in my hands I bring.' And another man dies in the Lord, and his 'works do follow' him. It is not every vintage that bears exportation. Some wines are mellowed by crossing the ocean; some are turned into vinegar. The works of darkness are unfruitful because they are transient.

And they are unfruitful because, whilst they last, they yield no real satisfaction. The Apostle could say to another Church with a certainty as to what the answer would be, 'What fruit had ye then'-when ye were doing them-'in the things whereof ye are now ashamed?' And the answer is 'None!' Of course, it is true that men do bad things because they like them better than good. Of course, it is true that the misery of mankind is that they have no appetite in the general for the only real satisfaction. But it is also true that no man who feeds his heart and mind on anything short of God is really at rest in anything that he does or possesses. Occasional twinges of conscience, dim perceptions that after all they are walking in a vain show; glimpses of nobler possibilities, a vague unrest, an unwillingness to reflect and look the facts of their condition in the face, like men that will not take stock because they half suspect that they are insolvent-these are the conditions that attach to all godless men's lives. There is no real fruit for their thirsty lips to feed upon. The smallest man is too large to be satisfied with anything short of Infinity, The human heart is like some narrow opening on a hill-side, so narrow that it looks as if a glassful of water would fill it. But it goes away down, down, down into the depths of the mountain, and you may pour in hogsheads and no effect is visible. God, and God alone, brings to the thirsty heart the fruit that it needs.

Another solemn thought illustrates the unfruitfulness of a godless life. There is no correspondence between what such a man does and what he is intended to do. Think of what the most degraded and sensuous wretch that shambles about the slums of a city, sodden with beer and rotten with profligacy, could be. Think of the raptures of devout contemplation and the energies of holy work which are possible for that soul, and then say-though it is an extreme case, the principle holds in less extreme cases-Are these things that men do apart from God, however shining, noble, illustrious they may be in the eyes of the world, and trumpeted forth by the mouthpieces of popular opinion, are these things worth calling fruits fit to be borne by such a tree? No more than the cankers on a rose-bush or the galls on an oak-tree are worthy of being called fruit are these works that some of you have as the only products of a life's activity. 'Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?'

II. And now, secondly, notice the plain Christian duty of abstinence.

'Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness.' Now, the text, as it stands in our version, seems to suggest that these dark works are personified as companions whom a good man ought to avoid; and that, therefore, the bearing of the exhortation is, 'Have nothing to do, in your own individual lives, with evil things that one man can commit.' But I take it that, important as that injunction and prohibition is, the Apostle's meaning is somewhat different, and that my text would perhaps be more accurately translated if another word were substituted for 'have no fellowship with.' The original expression seems rather to mean, 'Do not go partners with other people in works of darkness, which it takes more than one to commit.' Or, to put it into another language, the Apostle is regarding Christian people here as members of society, and exhorting them to a certain course of conduct in reference to plain and palpable existing evils around them. And such an exhortation to the duty of plain abstinence from things that the opinion of the world around us has no objection to, but which are contrary to the light, is addressed to all Christian people.

The need of it I do not require to illustrate at any length. But let me remind you that the devil has no more cunning way of securing a long lease of life for any evil than getting Christian people and Christian Churches to give it their sanction. What was it that kept slavery alive for centuries? Largely, that Christian men solemnly declared that it was a divine institution. What is it that has kept war alive for all these centuries? Largely, that bishops and preachers have always been ready to bless colours, and to read a Christening service over a man-of-war-and, I suppose, to ask God that an eighty-ton gun might be blessed to smash our enemies to pieces, and not to blow our sailors to bits. And what is it that preserves the crying evils of our community, the immoralities, the drunkenness, the trade dishonesty, and all the other things that I do not need to remind you of in the pulpit? Largely this, that professing Christians are mixed up with them. If only the whole body of those who profess and call themselves Christians would shake their hands clear of all complicity with such things, they could not last. Individual responsibility for collective action needs to be far more solemnly laid to heart by professing Christians than ever it has been.

Nor need I remind you, I suppose, with what fatal effects on the Gospel and the Church itself all such complicity is attended. Even the companions of wrongdoers despise, whilst they fraternise with, the professing Christian who has no higher standard than their own. What was it that made the Church victorious over the combined forces of imperial persecution, pagan superstition, and philosophic speculation? I believe that among all the causes that a well-known historian has laid down for the triumph of Christianity, what was as powerful as-I was going to say even more than-the Gospel of peace and love which the Church proclaimed was the standard of austere morality which it held up to a world rotting in its own filth. And sure I am that wherever the Church says, ‘So do not I, because of the fear of the Lord,’ it will gain a power, and will be regarded with a possibly reluctant, but a very real, respect which no easy-going coming down to the level of popular moralities will ever secure for a silver-slippered Christianity. And so, brethren, I would say to you, Do not be afraid of the old name Puritan. Ignorant people use it as a scoff. It should be a crown of glory. ‘Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness.’

But how is this to be done? Well, of course, there is only one way of abstaining, and that is, to abstain. But there are a great many different ways of abstaining. Light is not fire. And the more that Christian people feel themselves bound to stand aloof from common evils, the more are they bound to see that they do it in the spirit of the Master, which is meekness. It is always an invidious position to take up. And if we take it up with any heat and temper, with any lack of moderation, with any look of ostentation of superior righteousness, or with any trace of the Boanerges spirit which says, ‘Let us call down fire from heaven and consume them,’ our testimony will be weakened, and the world will have a right to say to us, ‘Jesus we know, and Paul we know; but who are ye?’ ‘Who made this man a judge and a divider over us?’ ‘In meekness instructing them that oppose themselves.’

III. Lastly, note the still harder Christian duty of vigorous protest.

The further duty beyond abstinence which the text enjoins is inadequately represented by our version, ‘but rather reprove them.’ For the word rendered in our version ‘reprove’ is the same which our Lord employed when He spoke of the mission of the Comforter as being to ‘convince [or convict] the world of sin.’ And it does not merely mean ‘reprove,’ but so to reprove as to produce the conviction which is the object of the reproof.

This task is laid on the shoulders of all professing Christians. A silent abstinence is not enough. No doubt, the best way, in some circumstances, to convict the darkness is to shine. Our holiness will convict sin of its ugliness. Our light will reveal the gloom. The presentation of a Christian life is the Christian man’s mightiest weapon in his conflict with the world’s evil. But that is not all. And if Christian people think that they have done all their duty, in regard to clamant and common iniquities, by simply abstaining from them and presenting a nobler example, they have yet to learn one very important chapter of their duty. A dumb Church is a dying Church, and it ought to be; for Christ has sent us here in order, amongst other things, that we may bring Christian principles to bear upon the actions of the community; and not be afraid to speak when we are called upon by conscience to do so.

Now I am not going to dwell upon this matter, but I want just to point out to you how, in the context here, there are two or three very important principles glanced at which bear upon it. And one of them is this, that one reason for speaking out is the very fact that the evils are so evil that a man is ashamed to speak about them. Did you ever notice this context, in which the Apostle, in the next verse to my text, gives the reason for his commandment to ‘reprove’ thus-’For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret’? Did you ever hear of a fantastic tenderness for morality so very sensitive that it is not at all shocked when the immoral things are done, but glows with virtuous indignation when a Christian man speaks out about them? There are plenty of people nowadays who tell us that it is ‘indelicate’ and ‘indecent’ and ‘improper,’ and I do not know how much else, for a Christian teacher or minister to say a word about certain moral scandals. But they do not say anything about the immorality and the indelicacy and the indecency of doing them. Let us have done with that hypocrisy, brethren. I am arguing for no disregard for proprieties; I want all fitting reticence observed, and I do not wish indiscriminate rebukes to be flung at foul things; but it is too much to require that, by reason of the very inky cloud of filth that they fling up like cuttlefish, they should escape censure. Let us remember Paul's exhortation, and reprove because the things are too bad to be spoken about.

Further, note in the context the thought that the conviction of the darkness comes from the flashing upon it of the light. 'All things when they are reproved are made manifest by the light.' Which, being translated into other words, is this:-Be strong in your brave protest, because it only needs that the thing should be seen as it is, and called by its right name, in order to be condemned.

The Assyrians had a belief that if ever, by any chance, a demon saw himself in a mirror, he was frightened at his own ugliness and incontinently fled. And if Christian people would only hold up the mirror of Christian principle to the hosts of evil things that afflict our city and our country, they would vanish like ghosts at sunrise. They cannot stand the light, therefore let us cast the light upon them.

And do not forget the other final principle here, which is imperfectly represented by our translation. We ought to read, 'Whatever is made manifest is light.' Yes. In the physical world when light falls upon a thing, you see it because there is on it a surface of light. And in the moral world the intention of all this conviction is that the thing disclosed to be darkness should, in the very disclosure, cease to be dark, should forsake its nature and be transformed into light. Such transformation is not always the case. Alas! There are evil deeds on which the light falls, and it does nothing. But the purpose in all cases should be, and the issue in many will be, that the merciful conviction by the light will be followed by the conversion of darkness into light.

And so, dear brethren, I bring this text to your hearts, and lay it upon your consciences. We may not all be called upon to speak; we are all called upon to be. You can shine, and by shining show how dark the darkness is. The obligation is laid upon us all; the commandment still comes to every Christian which was given to the old prophet, ‘Declare unto My people their transgression, and to the house of Jacob their sin.’ A quaint old writer says that the presence of a saint ‘hinders the devil of elbow room to do his tricks.’ We can all rebuke sin by our righteousness, and by our shining reveal the darkness to itself. We do not walk as children of the light unless we keep ourselves from all connivance with works of darkness, and by all means at our disposal reprove and convict them. ‘Come out from among them, and be ye separate, and touch no unclean thing, saith the Lord.’

35)Ephesians 5:12

EPHESIANS

PAUL’S REASONS FOR TEMPERANCE

Eph. 5:11-21

There are three groups of practical exhortations in this passage, of which the first deals with the Christian as a reproving light in darkness; the second, with the Christian life as wisdom in the midst of folly; and the third with Christian sobriety and inspiration as the true exhilaration in contrast with riotous drunkenness. Probably such intoxication was prevalent in Ephesus in connection with the worship of ‘Diana of the Ephesians,’ for Paul was not the man to preach vague warnings against vices to which his hearers were not tempted. An under-current of allusion to such orgies accompanying the popular cult may be discerned in his words.

These two preceding sets of precepts can only be briefly touched on now. They lead up to the third, and the second is built on the first by a ‘therefore’ [ver.15]. The Apostle has just been saying that Christians were ‘darkness, but are now light in the Lord,’ and thence drawing the law for their life, to walk as ‘children of light.’ A very important part of such walk is recoiling from all share in ‘the unfruitful works of darkness,’-a significant expression branding such deeds as being both bad in their source and in their results.

Dark doings have consequences tragic enough and certain enough, but they are barren of all such issues as correspond to men’s obligations and capacities. Their outcome is like the growths on a tree, which are not fruit, but products of disease. There is no fruit grown in the dark; there is no worthy product from us unless Christ is our light. If He is, and we are therefore ‘light in the Lord,’ we shall ‘reprove’ or ‘convict’ the Christless life. Its sinfulness will be shown by the contrast with the Christ-life. A thunder-cloud never looks so lividly black as when smitten by sunshine.

Our lives ought to make evil things ashamed to show their ugly faces. Christians should be, as it were, the incarnate conscience of a community. The Apostle is not thinking so much of words as of deeds, though words are not to be withheld when needful. The agent of reproof is ‘the light,’ which here is the designation of character as transformed by Jesus, and the process of reproof or conviction is simply the manifestation of the evil in its true nature, which comes from setting it in the beams of the light. To show sin as it is, is to condemn it; ‘for everything that is made manifest is light.’ Observe that Paul here speaks of ‘light,’ not ‘the light,’-that is, he is speaking now not of Christian character, which he had likened to light, but of physical light to which he had likened it, and is backing up his figurative statement as to the reproving and manifesting effects of the former, by the plain fact as to the latter, that, when daylight shines on anything, it is revealed, and, as it were, becomes light. He clenches his exhortation by quoting probably an early Christian hymn, which regards Christ as the great illuminator, ready to shine on all drowsy, dark souls as soon as they stir and rouse themselves from drugged and fatal sleep.

The second set of exhortations here is connected with the former by a ‘therefore,’ which refers to the whole preceding precept. Because the Christian is to shake himself free from complicity with works of darkness, and to be their living condemnation, he must take heed to his goings. A climber on a glacier has to look to his feet, or he will slip and fall down a crevasse, perhaps, from which he will never be drawn up. Heedlessness is folly in such a world as this. ‘"Don’t care" comes to the gallows.’ The temptation to ‘go as you please’ is strong in youth, and it is easy to scoff at ‘cold-blooded folks who live by rule,’ but they are the wise people, after all. A great element in that heedfulness is a quick insight into the special duty and opportunity of the moment, for life is not merely made up of hours, but each has its own particular errand for us, and has some possibility in it which, neglected, may be lost for ever.

The mystic solemnity of time is that it is made up of 'seasons.' We shall walk heedfully in the degree in which we are awake to the moment's meaning, and grasp opportunity by the forelock, or, as Paul says, 'buy up the opportunity.' But wise heed to our walk is not enough, unless we have a sure standard by which to regulate it. A man may take great care of his watch, but unless he can compare it with a chronometer, or, as they do in Edinburgh, pull out their watches when the one o'clock gun is fired on a signal from Greenwich, he may be far out and not know it. So the Apostle adds the one way to keep our lives right, and the one source of true, practical wisdom-the 'understanding what the will of the Lord is.' He will not go far wrong whose instinctive question, as each new moment, with its solemn, animating possibilities, meets him, is, 'What wilt Thou have me to do?' He will not be nearly right who does not first of all ask that.

Then Paul comes to his precept of temperance. It naturally flows from the preceding, inasmuch as a drunken man is as sure to be incapable of taking heed to his conduct as of walking straight. He reels in both. He is stone-blind to the meaning of the moments. He hears no call, though the 'voice of the trumpet' may be 'exceeding loud,' and as for understanding what the will of the Lord is, that is far beyond him. The intoxication of an hour or the habit of drinking makes obedience to the foregoing precepts impossible. This master vice carries all other vices in its pocket.

Paul makes a daring, and, as some would think, an irreverent, comparison, when he proposes being 'filled with the Spirit' as the Christian alternative or substitute to being 'drunken with wine.' But the daring comparison suggests deep truth. The spurious exhilaration, the loosening of the bonds of care, the elevation above the pettiness and monotony of daily life, which the drunkard seeks, and is degraded and deceived in proportion as he momentarily finds, are all ours, genuinely, nobly, and to our infinite profit, if we have our empty spirits filled with that Divine Life. That exhilaration does not froth away, leaving bitter dregs in the cup. That loosening of the bonds of care, and elevation above life's sorrows, does not flow from foolish oblivion of facts, nor end in their being again roughly forced on us. ‘Riot’ bellows itself hoarse, and is succeeded by corresponding depression; but the calm joys of the Spirit-filled spirit last, grow, and become calmer and more joyful every day.

The boisterous songs of boon companions are set in contrast with the Christian ‘psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,’ which were already in use, and a snatch from one of which Paul has just quoted. Good-fellowship tempts men to drink together, and a song is a shoeing-horn for a glass; but the camaraderie is apt to end in blows, and is a poor caricature of the bond knitting all who are filled with the Spirit to one another, and making them willing to serve one another. The roystering or maudlin geniality cemented by drink generally ends in quarrels, as everybody knows that the truculent stage of intoxication succeeds the effusively affectionate one. But they who have the Spirit in them, and not only ‘live in the Spirit,’ but ‘walk in the Spirit,’ esteem each the other better than themselves. In a word, to be filled with the Spirit is the way to possess all the highest forms of the good which men are tempted to intoxication to secure, and which in it they find only for a moment, and which is coarse and unreal.

Eph. 5:14

EPHESIANS

SLEEPERS AT NOONDAY

Eph. 5:14

This is the close of a short digression about ‘light.’ The ‘wherefore’ at the beginning of my text seems to refer to the whole of the verses that deal with that subject. It is as if the Apostle had said, ‘I have been telling you about light and its blessed effects. Now I tell you how you may win it for yours. The condition on which it is to be received by men is that they awake and arise from the dead.’

‘He saith.’ Who? The speaker whose words are quoted is not named, but this is the common formula of quotation from the Old Testament. It is, therefore, probable that the word ‘Creator’ or ‘God’ is to be supplied. But there is no Old Testament passage which exactly corresponds to the words before us; the nearest approach to such being the ringing exhortation of the prophet to the Messianic Church, ‘Arise! Shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.’ And it is probable that the Apostle is here quoting, without much regard either to the original connection or the primary purpose of the word, a well-known old saying which seemed to him appropriately to fall in with the trend of his thoughts. Like other writers he often adorns his own words with the citation of those of others without being very careful as to whether he, in some measure, diverts these from their original intention. But the words of my text fairly represent the prophetic utterance, in so far as they echo the call to the sleepers to wake, and share the prophet’s confidence that light is streaming out for all those whose eyes are opened.

The want of precise correspondence between our text and the prophetic passage has led some to suppose that we have here the earliest recorded fragment of a Christian hymn. It would be interesting if that were so, but the formula of citation seems to oblige us to look to Scripture for the source from which my text is taken. However, let us leave these thoughts, and come to the text itself. It is an earnest call from God. It describes a condition, peals forth a summons, and gives a promise. Let us listen to what ‘He saith’ in all these regards.

I. First of all, then, the condition of the persons addressed.

The two sad metaphors, slumberers and dead, are applied to the same persons. There must, therefore, be some latitude in the application of the figures and they must be confined in their interpretation to some one or more points in which sleep and death are alike.

Now we all know that, as the proverb says, ‘sleep is the image of death.’ And what is the point of comparison? Mainly this, that the sleeper and the corpse are alike unconscious of an external world, unable to receive impressions from it, or to put forth action on it; and there, as I take it, is especially the point which is in the Apostle’s view.

The sleeper and the dead man alike are in the midst of an order of things of which they are all unaware. And you and I live in two worlds, one, this low, fleeting, material one; and the other the white, snowy peaks that girdle it as do the Alps the Lombard plains; and men live all unconscious of that which lies on their horizon. But the metaphor of a level ground encircled by mountains does not fully represent the closeness of the connection between these two worlds, of both of which every one of us is a denizen. For on all sides, pressing in upon us, enfolding us like an atmosphere, penetrating into all the material, underlying all which is visible, all of which has its roots in the unseen, is that world which the mass of men are in a conspiracy to ignore and forget. And just as the sleeper is unconscious of all around him in his chamber, and of all the stir and beauty of the world in which he lives, so the bulk of us go blind and darkling through life, absorbed in the things seen, and never lift even a momentary and lack-lustre glance to the august realities which lie behind these, and give them all their significance and beauty.

Yes; and just as in a dream men are busy with baseless phantoms that vanish and are forgotten, and seem to themselves to be occupied, whilst all the while they are lying prone and passive, so the mass of us are sleep-walkers. What are many men who will be hurrying on to the Manchester Exchange on Tuesday? What are they but men who are dreaming that they are at work, but are only at work on dreams which will vanish when the eyes are opened? Practical men, who are busy and absorbed with affairs and with the things of this present, curl their lips about ‘idealists’ of all sorts, be they idealists of thought, or of art, or of benevolence, or of religion, and call them dreamers. The boot is on the other leg. It is the idealists that are awake, and it is you people that live for to-day, and have not learned that to-day is a little fragment and sliver of eternity-it is you who are dreamers, and all these things round about us-the solid-seeming realities-are illusions, and

‘Like the bubbles on a river,
Sparkling, bursting, borne away,’

they will disappear. There is only one reality, and that is God, and the only lives that lay hold of the substance are those which grasp Him. The rest of you are shadows hunting for shadows.

The two metaphors of my text coincide in suggesting another thing, and that is the awful contrast in the average life between what is in a man and what comes out of him. ‘Dormant power,’ we talk about. Ah, how tragically the true man is dormant in all the work of worldly hearts! God has made a great mistake in making you what you are, if there is no place for you to exercise your powers in but this present world, and nothing to exercise them on except the things that pass and perish. Travellers in lands where civilisation used to be, and barbarism now is, find sculptured stones from temples turned into fences for cattle-sheds and walls round pigstyes. And that is something like what men do with the faculties that God has given them. Why, the best part of you, brother, if you are not a Christian, and living a Christian life-the best part of you is asleep, and it is only the lower nature of you that is awake! Sometimes the sleepers stir uneasily. It used to be said that earthquakes were caused by a giant rolling himself from side to side in his troubled slumber. And there are earthquakes in your heart and spirit caused by the half-waking of the dormant self, the true man, who is immersed and embruted in sense and the things of time. Some of you by earthly lusts, some of you by over-indulgence in fleshly appetites, eating and drinking and the like; some of you by absorption in the mere externals of trade and profession and occupation to the entire neglect of the inward thing which would glorify and exalt these-but all of us somehow, unless we are living for God, have lulled our best, true, central self into slumber, and lie as if dead.

Now, brethren, do not forget that this exhortation of my text, and therefore this description, is addressed to a community of professing Christians. I hope you will not misunderstand me as if I thought that such a picture as I have been trying to draw applies only to men that have no religion in them at all. It applies in varying degrees to men that have, as-I was going to say the bulk, but perhaps that is exaggeration, let me say a tragically large number-of professing Christians, and a proportionate number of the professing Christians in this audience have, a little life and a great circumference of death. Dear brethren, you may call yourselves, and may be Christian people, and have somewhat shaken off the torpor, and roused yourself from the slumbering death of which I have been speaking. Remember that it still hangs to you, and that it was of Christians that the Master said: ‘Whilst the Lord was away they all slumbered and slept’; and that it was of a Christian Church, and not of a pagan world, that the same voice from heaven said: ‘Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.’ And so I beseech you, bear with me, and do not think I am scolding, or flinging about wild words at random, when I make a very earnest appeal to each individual professing, and real, Christian in this congregation, and ask them to consider, each for themselves, how much of sleep is still in their drowsy eyes, and how far it is true that the quickening life of Jesus Christ has penetrated, as the sunbeams into the darkness, into the heavy mass of their natural death.

II. Secondly, let me ask you to look at the summons to awake.

It comes like the morning bugle to an army, ‘Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead.’ Now, I am not going to waste your time by talking about the old, well-worn, interminable, and unprofitable controversy as to God’s part and man’s in this awaking, but I do wish to insist upon this plain fact, that the command here presupposes upon our parts, whether we be Christian people or not, the ability to obey. God would not mock a man by telling him to do what he cannot do. And it is perfectly clear that the one attitude in which we may be sure of God’s help to keep any of His commandments, and this amongst the rest, is when we are trying to keep them. ‘Stretch out thy hand,’ said Christ to the man whose disease was that he could not stretch it out. ‘Arise and walk,’ said Christ to the man whose lifelong sadness it was that his limbs had no power. ‘Lazarus, come forth,’ said Christ unto the dull, cold ear of death. And Lazarus heard, wherever he was, and, though his feet were tangled with the graveclothes, he came stumbling out, because the power to do what he was bid had come wrapped in the command to do it. And if these other two men had turned to Jesus and said, ‘What is the use of telling me to stretch out my hand, or me to move my limbs? Thou knowest that I can not,’ they would have lain there paralysed till they died. But when they heard the command there came a tingling sense of new ability into the withered limb. ‘And he stretched forth his hand, and it was restored whole as the other.’ Ay, but the process of restoration began when he willed to stretch it out in obedience to the command, which was a promise as much as a command. So we need not trouble ourselves with the question how the dead man can arise, or how the sleeper can wake himself.

This, at all events, is clear, that if what I have been saying is true as to the main point in view in both the metaphors, viz. the unconsciousness of the unseen world, and the slumbering powers that we have within us, then the remedy for that is in our own hands. There are scarcely any limits to be put to a man's capacity of determining for himself what shall be the object of his thought, his interest, his affection, or his pursuits. You can withdraw your desires and contemplations from the intrusive and absorbing present. You can coerce yourselves to concentrate more thought than you do, more interest, affection, and effort than you have ever done, upon the things that are unseen. You can turn your gaze thither. You cannot directly and immediately regulate your feelings, but you can settle the thoughts which shall guide the feelings, and you can, and you do, fix for yourselves, though not consciously, the things which shall be uppermost in your regard, and supreme in the ordering of your life.

And so the commandment of my text is but this, 'Wake from the illusions; rouse yourselves to the contemplation of the things unseen and eternal. Let the Lord always be before your face.' And you will be awake and alive.

III. And so my last point is the promise of the morning light which gladdens the wakeful eye. 'Christ shall give thee light.'

Now, if the words of my text are an allusion to the prophecy to which I have already referred, it is striking to observe, though I cannot dwell upon the thought, that Paul here unhesitatingly ascribes to Jesus Christ an action which, in the source of his quotation, is ascribed to Jehovah. 'Arise, shine, for thy light has come, and the glory of Jehovah is risen upon thee,' says the prophet. 'Arise! thou that sleepest,' says Paul, 'and Christ shall give thee light.' As always, he regards his Lord as possessed of fully divine attributes; and he has learned the depth of the Master's own saying, 'Whatsoever things the Father doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.' But I turn from that to the main point to be insisted upon here, that the Apostle is setting forth this as a certainty, that if a man will open his eyes he will have light enough. The sunshine is flooding the world. It falls upon the closed eyelids of the sleepers, and would fain gently lift them, that it might enter. A man needs nothing more than to shake off the slumber, and bring himself into the conscious presence of the unseen glories that surround us, in order to get light enough and to spare-whether you mean by light knowledge for guidance on the path of life, or whether you mean by it purity that shall scatter the darkness of evil from the heart, or whether you mean by it the joy that comes in the morning, radiant and fresh as the sunrise over the Eastern hills. ‘Awake, and Christ shall give thee light.’

The miracle of Goshen is reversed, in the case of many of us, the land is flashing in the sunshine, but within our houses there is midnight darkness, not because there is not light around, but because the shutters are shut. Oh, brethren, it is a solemn thing to choose the darkness rather than the light. And you do that-though not consciously, and in so many words, making your election-by indifference, by neglect, by the direction of the main current of your thoughts and desires and aims to perishable things, and by the deeds that follow from such a disposition. These choose for you, and you, in effect, choose by them.

I beseech you, do not let Christ’s own trumpet-call fall upon your ears, as if faint and far away, like the unwelcome summons that comes to a drowsy man in the morning. You know that if, having been called, he makes up his mind to lie a little longer, he is almost sure to fall more dead asleep than he was before. And if you hear, however dim, distantly, and through my poor words, Christ’s voice saying to you, ‘Awake! thou that sleepest,’ do not neglect it. The only safe course is to spring up at once. If thou dost, ‘Christ shall give thee light,’ never fear. The light is all about you. You only need to open your eyes, and it will pour in. If you do not, you surround yourself with darkness that may be felt here, and ensures for yourself a horror of great darkness in the death hereafter.

36)Ephesians 5:15-16

EPHESIANS

REDEEMING THE TIME

Eph. 5:15-16

Some of us have, in all probability, very little more ‘time’ to ‘redeem.’ Some of us have, in all probability, the prospect of many years yet to live. For both classes my text presents the best motto for another year. The most frivolous among us, I suppose, have some thoughts when we step across the conventional boundary that seems to separate the unbroken sequence of moments into periods; and as you in your business take stock and see how your accounts stand, so I would fain, for you and myself, make this a moment in which we may see where we are going, what we are doing, and how we are using this great gift of life.

My text gives us the true Christian view of time. It tells us what to do with it, and urges by implication certain motives for the conduct.

I. We have, first, what we ought to think about ‘the time.’

There are two words in the New Testament, both of which are translated time, but they mean very different things. One of them, the more common, simply implies the succession of moments or periods; the other, which is employed here, means rather a definite portion of time to which some definite work or occurrence belongs. It is translated sometimes season, sometimes opportunity. Both these renderings occur in immediate proximity in the Epistle to the Galatians, where the Apostle says: ‘As we have therefore opportunity let us do good to all men, for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not....’ And, again, it is employed side by side with the other word to which I have referred, in the Acts of the Apostles, where we read, ‘It is not for you to know the times or the seasons’-the former word simply indicating the succession of moments, the latter word indicating epochs or crises to which special work or events belong.

And so here ‘redeeming the time’ does not merely mean making the most of moments, but means laying hold of, and understanding the special significance of, life as a whole, and of each succeeding instant of it as the season for some specific duty. It is not merely ‘time,’ it is ‘the time’; not merely the empty succession of beats of the pendulum, but these moralised, as it were, heightened, and having significance, because each is apprehended as having a special mission, and affording an opportunity for a special work.

Now, there are two aspects of that general thought, on each of which I would touch. The Apostle here uses the singular number, and speaks not of the times, but of ‘the time’; as if the whole of life were an opportunity, a season for some one clear duty which manifestly belongs to it, and is meant to be done in it.

What is that? There are a great many ways of answering that question, but even more important perhaps than the way of answering is the mood of mind which asks it. If we could only get into this, as our habitual temper and disposition, asking ourselves what life is for, then we should have conquered nine-tenths of our temptations, and all but secured that we shall aim at the purpose which thus clearly and constantly shines before us. Oh! if I could get some of my friends here this morning, who have never really looked this solemn question in the face, to rise above the mere accidents of their daily occupations, and to take their orders, not from circumstances, or from the people whom they admire and imitate, but at first hand from considering what they really are here for, and why their days in their whole sweep are given them, I should not have spoken in vain. The sensualist answers the question in one way, the busy Manchester man in another, the careful, burdened mother in another, the student in another, the moralist in another. But all that is good in each answer is included in the wider one, that the end of life, the purpose for which ‘the season’ is granted us, is that ‘we should glorify God and enjoy Him for ever.’

I do not care whether you say that the end for which we live is the salvation of our souls, or whether you put it in other words, and say that it is the cultivation and perfecting of a Christ-like and God-pleasing character, or whether you admit still another aspect, and say that it is the intention of time to prepare us for that which lies beyond time. Time is the lackey of eternity, and the chamberlain that opens the gates of the Kingdom of God. All these various answers are at bottom one. Life is ours mainly in order that, by faith in Jesus Christ, we should struggle, and do, and by struggles, by sorrows, and by all that befalls us, should grow liker Him, and so fitter for the calm joys of that place where the throb of the pendulum has ceased, and the hours are stable and eternal. We live here in order to get ready for living yonder. And we get ready for living yonder, when here we understand that every moment of life is granted us for the one purpose, which can be pursued through all life-viz. the becoming liker our dear Lord, and the drinking in to our own hearts more of His Spirit, and moulding our characters more in conformity with His image. That is what my life and yours are given us for. If we succeed in that, we succeed all round. If we fail in that, whatever else we succeed in, we have failed altogether.

But then, remember, still further, the other aspect in which we can look at this thought. That ultimate, all-embracing end is reached through a multitude of nearer and intermediate ones. Whilst life, as a whole, is the season for learning to know and for possessing God, life is broken up into smaller portions and periods, each of which has some special duty appropriate to it and a 'lesson for the day.'

Now many of us, who entirely agree, theoretically, in saying that all life is granted for this highest purpose, go wrong here and fail to discern the significance of single moments. To-day is always commonplace; it is yesterday that is beautiful, and to-morrow that is full of possibilities, to the vulgar mind. But to-day is common and low. There are mountains ahead and mountains behind, purple with distance and radiant with sunshine, and the sky bends over them and seems to touch their crests. But here, on the spot where we stand, life seems flat and mean, and far away from the heavens. We admit the meaning of life taken altogether, but it is very hard to break up that recognition into fragments, and to feel the worth of these fleeting moments which, just because they are here, seem to be of small account. So we forget that life is only the aggregate of small present instants, and that the hour is sixty times sixty insignificant seconds, and the day twenty-four brief hours, and the year 365 commonplace days, and the life threescore years and ten. Brethren, carry your theoretical recognition of the greatness and solemnity of the purposes for which life has been given here into each of the moments of the passing day, and you will find that there is nothing so elastic as time; and that you can crowd into a day as much as a languid thousand years do sometimes hold, of sacrifice and service, of holy joys, and of likeness to Jesus Christ. He who has learned that all the moments are heavy with significance, and pregnant with immortal issues, he, too, in some measure may share in the prerogative of the timeless God, and to Him 'one day may be as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.' It is not the beat of the pendulum or the tick of the clock that measure time, but it is the deeds which we crowd into it, and the feelings and thoughts which it ministers to us. This passing life draws all its importance from the boundless eternal issues to which it leads. Every little puddle on the paving-stones this morning, a quarter of an inch broad and a film deep, will be mirroring bright sunshine, and blue with the reflected heaven. And so we may make the little drop of our lives radiant with the image of God, and bright with the certainties of immortality.

II. Now, note secondly, how to make the most of the season.

‘Redeeming the time,’ says the Apostle. The figure is very simple and natural, and has only been felt to be difficult and obscure, because people have tried to ride the metaphor further than it was meant. The questions of who is the seller and what is the price do not enter into the Apostle’s mind at all. Metaphors are not to be driven so far as that. We have to confine ourselves to the simple thought that there is a need for making the opportunity which is given truly our own; and that that can only be done by giving something in exchange for it. That is the notion of purchase, is it not? Acquisition, by giving something else. Thus, says Paul, you have to buy the opportunity which time affords us.

That is to say, to begin with, life gives us opportunities and no more. We may, in and through it, become wise, good, pure, happy, noble, Christ-like, or we may not. The opportunity is there, swinging, as it were, in vacuo. Lay hold of it, says he, and turn it into more than an opportunity-even an actuality and a fact.

And how is that to be done? We have to give something away, if we get the opportunity for our very own. What have we to give away? Well, mainly the lower ends for which the moment might serve. These have to be surrendered-sometimes abandoned altogether, always rigidly restricted and kept in utter subordination to the highest purposes. To-day is given us mainly that we may learn to know God better, and to love Him more, and to serve Him more joyfully. Our daily duties are given us for the same purpose. But if we go about them without thinking of God or the highest ends which life is meant to serve, then we shall certainly lose the highest ends, and an opportunity will go past us unimproved. But if, on the other hand, whilst we follow our daily business for the sake of legitimate temporal gain, we see, above that, the aspect of daily life as educating in all Christian nobleness and lofty thoughts and purposes, then we shall have given away the lower ends for the sake of attaining the higher. You live, suppose, to found a business, to become masters of your trade, to gain wisdom and knowledge, to establish for yourselves a position amongst your fellow-men, to cultivate your character so as to grow in wisdom and purity, apart from God. Or you live in order to win affection and move thankfully in the heaven of loving associations in your home, amongst your children. Or you live for the sake of carrying some lower but real good amongst men. Many of these ends are beautiful and noble, and necessary for the cultivation and discharge of the various duties and relationships of life; but unless they are all kept secondary, and there towers above them this other, life is wasted. If life is not to be wasted, they must be bartered for the higher, and we must recognise that to give all things for the sake of Christ and His love is wise merchandise and good exchange. ‘What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea! doubtless, and I count all things but loss that I may win Him and be found of Him.’ You must barter the lower if you are to secure the higher ends for which life is the appointed season.

And then, still more minutely, my text gives us another suggestion about this ‘redeeming the time.’ ‘See, then,’ says the Apostle, ‘that ye walk circumspectly.’ The word rendered circumspectly might better, perhaps, be translated in some such way as ‘strictly,’ ‘rigidly,’ ‘accurately,’ ‘punctiliously.’ As I take it, it is to be connected with the ‘walk,’ and not with the ‘see, then,’ as the Revised Version does.

So here is a practical direction, walk strictly, accurately, looking to your feet; as a man would do who was upon what they call in the Alps an arrete. Suppose a narrow ridge of snow piled on the top of a ledge of rock, with a precipice of 5000 feet on either side, and a cornice of snow hanging over empty space. The climber puts his alpenstock before his foot, he tests with his foot before he rests his weight, for a false step and down he goes!

‘See that you walk circumspectly,’ rigidly, accurately, punctiliously. Live by law-that is to say, live by principles which imply duties; for to live by inclination is ruin. The only safety is, look to your feet and look to your road, and restrain yourselves, ‘and so redeem the time.’

There is something else to look to. Feet? Yes! Road? Yes! But also look to your guide. Tread in Christ’s footsteps, ‘follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.’ Make Him the pattern and example, and then you shall walk safely; and the path will carry you right into ‘His presence where there is fulness of joy.’ No great, noble, right, blessed life is lived without rigid self-control, self-denial, and self-crucifixion. Do not fancy that that means the absence of joy and spontaneity. ‘I will walk at liberty for I keep Thy precepts.’ Hedges are blessings when, on the other side, there are bottomless swamps of poisonous miasma, into which if a man ventures he will either drown or be plague-stricken. The narrow way that leads to life is the way of peace, just because it is a way of restrictions. Better to walk on the narrowest path that leads to the City than to be chartered libertines, wandering anywhere at our own bitter wills, and finding ‘no end, in devious mazes lost.’ Freedom consists in obeying from the heart the restriction of love; and walking punctiliously.

III. Lastly, note the motives for this course.

The Apostle says, ‘see that ye walk strictly, not as fools but as wise.’ That is to say, such limitation, which buys the opportunity and uses it for the highest purposes, is the only true wisdom. If you take the mean, miserable, partial, fleeting purposes for which some of us, alas, are squandering our lives, and contrast these with the great, perfect, all-satisfying, blessed, and eternal end for which it was given us, how can we escape being convicted of folly? One day, dear friends, it will be found out that the virgins that were not ready when the Lord came were the foolish ones. One day it will be asked of you and of me, ‘What did you do with the life which I gave you, that you might know Me?’ And if we have only the answer, ‘O Lord! I founded a big business in Manchester-I made a fortune-I wrote a clever book, that was most favourably reviewed-I brought up a family’-the only thing fit to be said to us is, ‘Thou fool!’ The only wisdom is the wisdom that secures the end for which life was given.

Then there is another motive here. ‘Redeeming the time because the days are evil.’ That is singular. ‘The days’ are ‘the time,’ and yet they are ‘evil’ days, which being translated into other words is just this-we are to make a definite effort to keep in view, and to effect, the purposes for which all the days of our lives are given us, because these days have in themselves a tendency to draw us away from the true path and to blind us as to their real meaning. The world is full of possibilities of good and evil, and the same day which, in one aspect, is the ‘season’ for serving God is, in another aspect, an ‘evil’ day which may draw us away from Him. And if we do not put out manly effort, it certainly will do so. The ocean is meant to bear the sailor to his port, but from the waves rise up fair forms, siren voices, with sweet harps and bright eyes that tempt the weary mariner to his destruction. And the days which may be occasions for our getting nearer God, if we let them work their will upon us, will be evil days which draw us away from Him.

Let me add one last motive which is not stated in my text, but is involved in the very idea of opportunity or season-viz. that the time for the high and noble purposes of which I have been speaking is rigidly limited and bounded; and once past is irrevocable. The old, wise mythological story tells us that Occasion is bald behind, and is to be grasped by the forelock. The moment that is past had in it wonderful possibilities for us. If we did not grasp them with promptitude and decision they have gone for ever. You may as well try to bring back the water that has been sucked over Niagara, and churned into white foam at its base, as to recall the wasted opportunities. They stand all along the course of our years, solemn monuments of our unfaithfulness, and none of them can ever return again. Life is full of too-lates; that sad sound that moans through the roofless ruins of the past, like the wind through some deserted temple. ‘Too late, too late; ye cannot enter now.’ ‘The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold, therefore he shall beg in harvest and have nothing.’ Oh! let us see to it that we wring out of the passing moments their highest possibilities of noblest good. Let us begin to live; for only he who lives to God really lives. Life is given to us that we may know Jesus Christ-trust Him, love Him, serve Him, be like Him. That is the pearl which, if we bring up from the sea of time, we shall not have been cast in vain into its stormy waves. Do you take care that this new year which is dawning upon us go not to join the many wasted years that lie desolate behind us, but let us all see to it that the flood which sweeps us and it away bears us straight to God, Who is our home. ‘Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.’

37)Ephesians 6:13

EPHESIANS

THE PANOPLY OF GOD

Eph. 6:13

The military metaphor of which this verse is the beginning was obviously deeply imprinted on Paul’s mind. It is found in a comparatively incomplete form in his earliest epistle, the first to the Thessalonians, in which the children of the day are exhorted to put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. It reappears, in a slightly varied form, in the Epistle to the Romans, where those whose salvation is nearer than when they believed, are exhorted, because the day is at hand, to cast off, as it were, their night-gear, and to put on the ‘armour of light’; and here, in this Epistle of the Captivity, it is most fully developed. The Roman legionary, to whom Paul was chained, here sits all unconsciously for his portrait, every detail of which is pressed by Paul into the service of his vivid imagination; the virtues and graces of the Christian character, which are ‘the armour of light,’ are suggested to the Apostle by the weapon which the soldier by his side wore. The vulgarest and most murderous implements assume a new character when looked upon with the eyes of a poet and a Christian. Our present text constitutes the general introduction to the great picture which follows, of ‘the panoply of God.’

I. We must be ready for times of special assaults from evil.

Most of us feel but little the stern reality underlying the metaphor, that the whole Christian life is warfare, but that in that warfare there are crises, seasons of special danger. The interpretation which makes the ‘evil day’ co-extensive with the time of life destroys the whole emphasis of the passage: whilst all days are days of warfare, there will be, as in some prolonged siege, periods of comparative quiet; and again, days when all the cannon belch at once, and scaling ladders are reared on every side of the fortress. In a long winter there are days sunny and calm followed, as they were preceded, by days when all the winds are let loose at once. For us, such times of special danger to Christian character may arise from temporal vicissitudes. Joy and prosperity are as sure to occasion them as are sorrows, for to Paul the ‘evil day’ is that which especially threatens moral and spiritual character, and these may be as much damaged by the bright sunshine of prosperity as by the midwinter of adversity, just as fierce sunshine may be as fatal as killing frost. They may also arise, without any such change in circumstances, from some temptation coming with more than ordinary force, and directed with terrible accuracy to our weakest point.

These evil days are ever wont to come on us suddenly; they are heralded by no storm signals and no falling barometer. We may be like soldiers sitting securely round their camp fire, till all at once bullets begin to fall among them. The tiger’s roar is the first signal of its leap from the jungle. Our position in the world, our ignorance of the future, the heaped-up magazines of combustibles within, needing only a spark, all lay us open to unexpected assaults, and the temptation comes stealthily, ‘as a thief in the night.’ Nothing is so certain as the unexpected. For these reasons, then, because the ‘evil day’ will certainly come, because it may come at any time, and because it is most likely to come ‘when we look not for it,’ it is the dictate of plain common sense to be prepared. If the good man of the house had known at what hour the thief would have come, he would have watched; but he would have been a wiser man if he had watched all the more, because he did not know at what hour the thief would come.

II. To withstand these we must be armed against them before they come.

The main point of the exhortation is this previous preparation. It is clear enough that it is no time to fly to our weapons when the enemy is upon us. Aldershot, not the battlefield, is the place for learning strategy. Belshazzar was sitting at his drunken feast while the Persians were marching on Babylon, and in the night he was slain. When great crises arise in a nation’s history, some man whose whole life has been preparing him for the hour starts to the front and does the needed work. If a sailor put off learning navigation till the wind was howling and a reef lay ahead, his corpse would be cast on the cruel rocks. It is well not to be ‘over-exquisite,’ to cast the fashion of ‘uncertain evils,’ but certain ones cannot be too carefully anticipated, nor too sedulously prepared for.

The manner in which this preparation is to be carried out is distinctly marked here. The armour is to be put on before the conflict begins. Now, without anticipating what will more properly come in considering subsequent details, we may notice that such a previous assumption implies mainly two things-a previous familiarity with God’s truth, and a previous exercise of Christian virtues. As to the former, the subsequent context speaks of taking the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, and of having the loins girt with truth, which may be objective truth. As to the latter, we need not elaborate the Apostle’s main thought that resistance to sudden temptations is most vigorous when a man is accustomed to goodness. One of the prophets treats it as being all but impossible that they who have been accustomed to evil shall learn to do well, and it is at least not less impossible that they who have been accustomed to do well shall learn to do evil. Souls which habitually walk in the clear spaces of the bracing air on the mountains of God will less easily be tempted down to the shut-in valleys where malaria reigns. The positive exercise of Christian graces tends to weaken the force of temptation. A mind occupied with these has no room for it. Higher tastes are developed which makes the poison sweetness of evil unsavoury, and just as the Israelites hungered for the strong, coarse-smelling leeks and garlic of Egypt, and therefore loathed ‘this light bread,’ so they whose palates have been accustomed to manna will have little taste for leeks and garlic. The mental and spiritual activity involved in the habitual exercise of Christian virtues will go far to make the soul unassailable by evil. A man, busily occupied, as the Apostle would have us to be, may be tempted by the devil, though less frequently the more he is thus occupied; but one who has no such occupations and interests tempts the devil. If our lives are inwardly and secretly honeycombed with evil, only a breath will be needed to throw down the structure. It is possible to become so accustomed to the calm delights of goodness, that it would need a moral miracle to make a man fall into sin.

III. To be armed with this armour, we must get it from God.

Though it consists mainly of habitudes and dispositions of our own minds, none the less have we to receive these from above. It is ‘the panoply of God,’ therefore we are to be endued with it, not by exercises in our own strength, but by dependence on Him. In old days, before a squire was knighted, he had to keep a vigil in the chapel of the castle, and through the hours of darkness to watch his armour and lift his soul to God, and we shall never put on the armour of light unless in silence we draw near to Him who teaches our hands to war and our fingers to fight. Communion with Christ, and only communion with Christ, receives from Him the life which enables us to repel the diseases of our spirits. What He imparts to those who thus wait upon Him, and to them only, is the Spirit which helps their infirmities and clothes their undefended nakedness with a coat of mail. If we go forth to war with evil, clothed and armed only with what we can provide, we shall surely be worsted in the fray. If we go forth into the world of struggle from the secret place of the Most High, ‘no weapon that is formed against us shall prosper,’ and we shall be more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

But waiting on God to receive our weapons from Him is but part of what is needful for our equipment. It is we who have to gird our loins and put on the breastplate, and shoe our feet, and take the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. The cumbrous armour of old days could only be put on by the help of another pulling straps, and fixing buckles, and lifting and bracing heavy shields on arms, and fastening helmets upon heads; but we have, by our own effort, to clothe ourselves with God’s great gift, which is of no use to us, and is in no real sense ours, unless we do. It takes no small effort to keep ourselves in the attitude of dependence and receptivity, without which none of the great gifts of God come to us, and, least of all, the habitual practice of Christian virtues. The soldier who rushed into the fight, leaving armour and arms huddled together on the ground, would soon fall, and God’s giving avails nothing for our defence unless there is also our taking. It is the woful want of taking the things that are freely given to us of God, and of making our own what by His gift is our own, that is mainly responsible for the defeats of which we are all conscious. Looking back on our own evil days, we must all be aware that our defeats have mainly come from one or other of the two errors which lie so near us all, and which are intimately connected with each other-the one being that of fighting in our own strength, and the other being that of leaving unused our God-given power.

IV. The issue of successful resistance is increased firmness of footing.

If we are able to ‘withstand in the evil day,’ we shall ‘stand’ more securely when the evil day has stormed itself away. If we keep erect in the shock of battle, we shall stand more secure when the wild charge has been beaten back. The sea hurls tons of water against the slender lighthouse on the rock, and if it stands, the smashing of the waves consolidates it. The reward of firm resistance is increased firmness. As the Red Indians used to believe that the strength of the slain enemies whom they had scalped passed into their arms, so we may have power developed by conflict, and we shall more fully understand, and more passionately believe in, the principles and truths which have served us in past fights. David would not wear Saul’s armour because, as he said, ‘I have not proved it,’ and the Christian who has come victoriously through one struggle should be ready to say, ‘I have proved it’; we have the word of the Lord, which is tried, to trust to, and not we only, but generations, have tested it, and it has stood the tests. Therefore, it is not for us to hesitate as to the worth of our weapons, or to doubt that they are more than sufficient for every conflict which we may be called upon to wage.

The text plainly implies that all our life long we shall be in danger of sudden assaults. It does contemplate victory in the evil day, but it also contemplates that after we have withstood, we have still to stand and be ready for another attack to-morrow. Our life here is, and must still be, a continual warfare. Peace is not bought by any victories; ‘There is no discharge in that war.’ Like the ten thousand Greeks who fought their way home through clouds of enemies from the heart of Asia, we are never safe till we come to the mountain-top, where we can cry, ‘The Sea!’ But though all our paths lead us through enemies, we have Jesus, who has conquered them all, with us, and our hearts should not fail so long as we can hear His brave voice encouraging us: ‘In the world ye have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.’

38)Ephesians 6:14

EPHESIANS

‘THE GIRDLE OF TRUTH’

Eph. 6:14

The general exhortation here points to the habitual attitude of the Christian soldier. However many conflicts he may have waged, he is still to be ever ready for fresh assaults, for in regard to them he may be quite sure that to-morrow will bring its own share of them, and that the evil day is never left behind so long as days still last. That general exhortation is followed by clauses which are sometimes said to be cotemporaneous with it, and to be definitions of the way in which it is to be accomplished, but they are much rather statements of what is to be done before the soldier takes his stand. He is to be fully equipped first: he is to take up his position second. We may note that, in all the list of his equipment, there is but one weapon of offence-the sword of the Spirit; all the rest are defensive weapons. The girdle, which is the first specified, is not properly a weapon at all, but it comes first because the belt keeps all the other parts of the armour in place, and gives agility to the wearer. Having girded your loins [R.V.] is better than having your loins girded [A.V.], as bringing out more fully that the assumption of the belt is the soldier’s own doing.

I. We must be braced up if we are to fight.

Concentration and tension of power is an absolute necessity for any effort, no matter how poor may be the aims to which it is directed, and what is needed for the successful prosecution of the lowest transient successes will surely not be less indispensable in the highest forms of life. If a poor runner for a wreath of parsley or of laurel cannot hope to win the fading prize unless all his powers are strained to the uttermost, the Christian athlete has still more certainly to run, so as the racer has to do, ‘that he may obtain.’ Loose-flowing robes are caught by every thorn by the way, and a soul which is not girded up is sure to be hindered in its course. ‘This one thing I do’ is the secret of all successful doing, and obedience to the command of

Jesus, ‘let your loins be girded about,’ is indispensable, if we would avoid polluting contact with evil. His other command associated with it will never be accomplished without it. The lamps will not be burning unless the loins are girt. The men who scatter their loves and thoughts over a wide space, and to whom the discipline which confines their energies within definite channels is distasteful, are destined to be failures in the struggle of life. It is better to have our lives running between narrow banks, and so to have a scour in the stream, than to have them spreading wide and shallow, with no driving force in all the useless expanse. Such concentration and bracing of oneself up is needful, if any of the rest of the great exhortations which follow are to be fulfilled.

It may be that Paul here has haunting his memory our Lord’s words which we have just quoted; and, in any case, he is in beautiful accord with his brother Peter, who begins all the exhortations of his epistle with the words, ‘Wherefore, girding up the loins of your mind, be sober, and set your minds perfectly upon the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.’ Peter, indeed, is not thinking of the soldier’s belt, but he is, no doubt, remembering many a time when, in the toils of the fishing-boat, he had to tighten his robes round his waist to prepare for tugging at the oar, and he feels that such concentration is needful if a Christian life is ever to be sober, and to have its hope set perfectly on Christ and His grace.

II. The girdle is to be truth.

The question immediately arises as to whether truth here means objective truth-the truth of the Gospel, or subjective truth, or, as we are accustomed to say, truthfulness. It would seem that the former signification is rather included in the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, and it is best to regard the phrase ‘with [literally "in"] truth’ here as having its ordinary meaning, of which we may take as examples the phrases, ‘the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth’; ‘love rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth’; ‘whom I love in truth.’ Absolute sincerity and transparent truthfulness may well be regarded as the girdle which encloses and keeps secure every other Christian grace and virtue.

We do not need to go far to find a slight tinge of unreality marring the Christian life: we have only to scrutinise our own experiences to detect some tendency to affectation, to saying a little more than is quite true, even in our sincerest worship. And we cannot but recognise that in all Christian communities there is present an element of conventionalism in their prayers, and that often the public expression of religious emotions goes far beyond the realities of feeling in the worshippers. In fact, terrible as the acknowledgment may be, we shall be blind if we do not recognise that the average Christianity of this day suffers from nothing more than it does from the lack of this transparent sincerity, and of absolute correspondence between inward fact and outward expression. Types of Christianity which make much of emotion are, of course, specially exposed to such a danger, but those which make least of it are not exempt, and we all need to lay to heart, far more seriously than we ordinarily do, that God 'desires truth in the outward parts.' The sturdy English moralist who proclaimed 'Clear your mind of cant' as the first condition of attaining wisdom, was not so very far from Paul's point of view in our text, but his exhortation covered but a small section of the Apostle's.

This absolute sincerity is hard to attain, and still harder to retain. Hideous as the fact of posing or attitudinising in our religion may be, it is one that comes very easily to us all, and, when it comes, spreads fast and spoils everything. Just as the legionary's armour was held in its place by the girdle, and if that worked loose or was carelessly fastened, the breastplate would be sure to get out of position, so all the subsequent graces largely depend for their vigorous exercise on the prime virtue of truthfulness. Righteousness and faith will be weakened by the fatal taint of insincerity, and, on the other hand, conscious truthfulness will give strength to the whole man. Braced up and concentrated, our powers for all service and for all conflict will be increased. 'The bond of perfectness' is, no doubt, 'Love,' but that perfect bond will not be worn by us, unless we have girded our loins with truthfulness.

It may be that in Paul's memory there is floating Isaiah's great vision of the 'Branch' out of the stock of Jesse, on whom the Spirit of the Lord was to rest, and on whom it was proclaimed that faithfulness [or as it is rendered in the Septuagint, by the same phrase which the Apostle here employs, 'in truth'] was to be the girdle of his reins; but, at all events, that which the prophet saw to be in the ideal Messiah, the Apostle sees as essential to all the subjects of that King.

III. Our truthfulness is the work of God’s truth.

We have already pointed out that the expression in the text may either be taken as referring to the subjective quality of truthfulness, or to the objective truth of God as contained in the Gospel, but these two interpretations may be united, for the main factor in producing the former is the faithful use of the latter and an honest submission to its operation. The Psalmist of old had learned that the great safeguard against sin was the resolve, ‘Thy word have I hid in my heart.’ That word brings to bear the mightiest motives that can sway life. It moves by love, by fear, by hope: it proposes the loftiest aim, even to imitate God as dear children; it gives clear directions, and draws straight and plain the pilgrim’s path; it holds out the largest promises, and in a measure fulfils them, even in the narrowest and most troubled lives. If we have made God’s truth our own, and are faithfully applying it to the details of daily life and submitting our whole selves to its operation, we shall be truthful and shall instinctively shrink from all unreality. If we know the truth as it is in Jesus, and walk in it, that ‘truth will make us free,’ and if thus ‘we are in Him that is true, even in His Son, Jesus Christ,’ that truth abiding in us, and with us, for ever, will make us truthful. In a heart so occupied and filled there is no room for the make-believes which are but too apt to creep into religious experience. Such a soul will recoil with an instinct of abhorrence from all that savours of ostentation, and will feel that its truest treasure cannot be shown. It is our duty not to hide God’s righteousness within our hearts, but it is equally our duty to hide His word there. We have to seek to make manifest the ‘savour of His knowledge in every place,’ but we have also to remember that in our hearts there is a secret place, and that ‘not easily forgiven are they who draw back the curtains,’ and let a careless world look in. It is not for others to pry into the hidden mysteries of the fellowship of a soul with the indwelling Christ, however it may be the Christian duty to show to all and sundry the blessed and transforming effects of that fellowship.

But God’s truth must be received and its power submitted to, if it is to implant in us the supreme grace of perfect truthfulness. Our minds and hearts must be saturated with it by many an hour of solitary reflection, by meditation which will diffuse its aroma like a fragrant perfume through our characters, and by the habit of bringing all circumstances, moods, and desires to be tested by its infallible criterion, and by the unreluctant acceptance of its guidance at every moment of our lives. There are many of us who, in a real though terribly imperfect sense, hold the truth, but who know nothing, or next to nothing, of its power to make us truthful. If it is to be of any use to us, we must make it ours in a far deeper sense than it is ours now; for many of us the girdle has been but carelessly fastened and has worked loose, and because, by our own faults, we have not 'abode in the truth,' it has come to pass that there is 'no truth in us.' We have set before us in the text the one condition on which all Christian progress depends, and if by any slackness we loosen the girdle of truthfulness, and admit into our religious life any taint of unreality, if our prayers say just a little more than is quite true, and our penitence a little less, we shall speedily find that hypocrisy and trivial insincerity are separated by very narrow limits. God's truth in the Gospel cleanses the inner man, but not without his own effort, and, therefore, we are commanded to 'cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness, in the fear of the Lord.'

39)Ephesians 6:14

EPHESIANS

'THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS'

Eph. 6:14

There can be no doubt that in this whole context the Apostle has in mind the great passage in Isaiah 59 where the prophet, in a figure of extreme boldness, describes the Lord as arming Himself to deliver the oppressed faithful, and coming as a Redeemer to Zion. In that passage the Lord puts on righteousness as a breastplate-that is to say, God, in His manifestation of Himself for the deliverance of His people, comes forth as if arrayed in the glittering armour of righteousness. Paul does not shrink from applying the same metaphor to those who are to be 'imitators of God as beloved children,’ and from urging upon them that, in their humble degree and lowly measure, they too are to be clothed in the bright armour of moral rectitude. This righteousness is manifested in character and in conduct, and as the breastplate guards the vital organs from assault, it will keep the heart unwounded.

We must note that Paul here gathers up the whole sum of Christian character and conduct into one word. All can be expressed, however diversified may be the manifestations, by the one sovereign term ‘righteousness,’ and that is not merely a hasty generalisation, or a too rapid synthesis. As all sin has one root and is genetically one, so all goodness is at bottom one. The germ of sin is living to oneself: the germ of goodness is living to God. Though the degrees of development of either opposite are infinite, and the forms of its expression innumerable, yet the root of each is one.

Paul thinks of righteousness as existent before the Christian soldier puts it on. In this thought we are not merely relying on the metaphor of our text, but bringing it into accord with the whole tone of New Testament teaching, which knows of only one way in which any soul that has been living to self, and therefore to sin, can attain to living to God, and therefore can be righteous. We must receive, if we are ever to possess, the righteousness which is of God, and which becomes ours through Jesus Christ. The righteousness which shines as a fair but unattainable vision before sinful men, has a real existence, and may be theirs. It is not to be self-elaborated, but to be received.

That existent righteousness is to be put on. Other places of Scripture figure it as the robe of righteousness; here it is conceived of as the breastplate, but the idea of assumption is the same. It is to be put on, primarily, by faith. It is given in Christ to simple belief. He that hath faith thereby has the righteousness which is through faith in Christ, for in his faith he has the one formative principle of reliance on God, which will gradually refine character and mould conduct into whatsoever things are lovely and of good report. That righteousness which faith receives is no mere forensic treating of the unjust as just, but whilst it does bring with it pardon and oblivion from past transgressions, it makes a man in the depths of his being righteous, however slowly it may afterwards transform his conduct. The faith which is a departure from all reliance on works of righteousness which we have done, and is a single-eyed reliance on the work of Jesus Christ, opens the heart in which it is planted to all the influences of that life which was in Jesus, that from Him it may be in us. If Christ be in us [and if He is not, we are none of His], ‘the spirit is life because of righteousness,’ however the body may still be ‘dead because of sin.’

But the putting on of the breastplate requires effort as well as faith, and effort will be vigorous in the measure in which faith is vivid, but it should follow, not precede or supplant, faith. There is no more hopeless and weary advice than would be the exhortation of our text if it stood alone. It is a counsel of despair to tell a man to put on that breastplate, and to leave him in doubt where he is to find it, or whether he has to hammer it together by his own efforts before he can put it on. There is no more unprofitable expenditure of breath than the cry to men, Be good! Be good! Moral teaching without Gospel preaching is little better than a waste of breath.

This injunction is continuously imperative upon all Christian soldiers. They are on the march through the enemy’s country, and can never safely lay aside their armour. After all successes, and no less after all failures, we have still to arm ourselves for the fight, and it is to be remembered that the righteousness of which Paul speaks differs from common earthly moralities only as including and transcending them all. It is, alas, too true that Christian righteousness has been by Christians set forth as something fantastic and unreal, remote from ordinary life, and far too heavenly-minded to care for common virtues. Let us never forget that Jesus Himself has warned us, that except our righteousness exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, we shall in no wise enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The greater orbit encloses the lesser within itself.

The breastplate of righteousness is our defence against evil. The opposition to temptation is best carried on by the positive cultivation of good. A habit of righteous conduct is itself a defence against temptation. Untilled fields bear abundant weeds. The used tool does not rust, nor the running water gather scum. The robe of righteousness will guard the heart as effectually as a coat of mail. The positive employment with good weakens temptation, and arms us against evil. But so long as we are here our righteousness must be militant, and we must be content to live ever armed to meet the enemy which is always hanging round us, and watching for an opportunity to strike. The time will come when we shall put off the breastplate and put on the fine linen 'clean and white,' which is the heavenly and final form of the righteousness of Saints.

40)Ephesians 6:15

EPHESIANS

A SOLDIER'S SHOES

Eph. 6:15

Paul drew the first draft of this picture of the Christian armour in his first letter. It is a finished picture here. One can fancy that the Roman soldier to whom he was chained in his captivity, whilst this letter was being written, unconsciously sat for his likeness, and that each piece of his accoutrements was seized in succession by the Apostle's imagination and turned to a Christian use. It is worth noticing that there is only one offensive weapon mentioned-'the sword of the Spirit.' All the rest are defensive-helmet, breastplate, shield, girdle, and shoes. That is to say, the main part of our warfare consists in defence, in resistance, and in keeping what we have, in spite of everybody, men and devils, who attempt to take it from us. 'Hold fast that thou hast; let no man take thy crown.'

Now, it seems to me that the ordinary reader does not quite grasp the meaning of our text, and that it would be more intelligible if, instead of 'preparation,' which means the process of getting a thing ready, we read 'preparedness,' which means the state of mind of the man who is ready. Then we have to notice that the little word 'of' does duty to express two different relations, in the two instances of its use here. In the first case-'the preparedness of the Gospel'-it states the origin of the thing in question. That condition of being ready comes from the good news of Christ. In the second case-'the Gospel of peace'-it states the result of the thing in question. The good news of Christ gives peace. So, taking the whole clause, we may paraphrase it by saying that the preparedness of spirit, the alacrity which comes from the possession of a Gospel that sheds a calm over the heart and brings a man into peace with God, is what the Apostle thinks is like the heavy hob-nailed boots that the legionaries wore, by which they could stand firm, whatever came against them.

I. The first thing that I would notice here is that the Gospel brings peace.

I suppose that there was ringing in Paul's head some echoes of the music of Isaiah's words, 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of Him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace, that bringeth good tidings of good!' But there is a great deal more than an unconscious quotation of ancient words here; for in Paul's thought, the one power which brings a man into harmony with the universe and to peace with himself, is the power which proclaims that God is at peace with him. And Jesus Christ is our peace, because He has swept away the root and bitter fountain of all the disquiet of men's hearts, and all their chafing at providences-the consciousness that there is discord between themselves and God. The Gospel brings peace in the deepest sense of that word, and, primarily, peace with God, from out of which all other kinds of tranquillity and heart-repose do come-and they come from nothing besides.

But what strikes me most here is not so much the allusion to the blessed truth that was believed and experienced by these Ephesian Christians, that the Gospel brought peace, and was the only thing that did, as the singular emergence of that idea that the Gospel was a peace-bringing power, in the midst of this picture of fighting. Yes, it brings both. It brings us peace first, and then it says to us, 'Now, having got peace in your heart, because peace with God, go out and fight to keep it.' For, if we are warring with the devil we are at peace with God; and if we are at peace with the devil we are warring with God. So the two states of peace and war go together. There is no real peace which has not conflict in it, and the Gospel is 'the Gospel of peace,' precisely because it enlists us in Christ's army and sends us out to fight Christ's battles.

So, then, dear brother, the only way to realise and preserve 'the peace of God which passes understanding' is to fling ourselves manfully into the fight to which all Christ’s soldiers are pledged and bound. The two conditions, though they seem to be opposite, will unite; for this is the paradox of the Christian life, that in all regions it makes compatible apparently incompatible and contradictory emotions. ‘As sorrowful’-and Paul might have said ‘therefore’ instead of ‘yet’-’as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as having nothing yet’-therefore-’possessing all things’; as in the thick of the fight, and yet kept in perfect peace, because the soul is stayed on God. The peace that comes from friendship with Him, the peace that fills a heart tranquil because satisfied, the peace that soothes a conscience emptied of all poison and robbed of all its sting, the peace that abides because, on all the horizon in front of us nothing can be seen that we need to be afraid of-that peace is the peace which the Gospel brings, and it is realised in warfare and is consistent with it. All the armies of the world may camp round the fortress, and the hurtling noise of battle may be loud in the plains, but up upon the impregnable cliff crowned by its battlements there is a central citadel, with a chapel in the heart of it; and to the worshippers there none of the noise ever penetrates. The Gospel which laps us in peace and puts it in our hearts makes us soldiers.

II. Further, this Gospel of peace will prepare us for the march.

A wise general looks after his soldiers’ boots. If they give out, nothing else is of much use. The roads are very rough and very long, and there need to be strong soles and well-sewed uppers, and they will be none the worse for a bit of iron on the heels and the toes, in order that they may not wear out in the midst of the campaign. ‘Thy shoes shall be iron and brass,’ and these metals are harder than any of the rock that you will have to clamber over. Which being translated into plain fact is just this-a tranquil heart in amity with God is ready for all the road, is likely to make progress, and is fit for anything that it may be called to do.

A calm heart makes a light foot; and he who is living at peace with God, and with all disturbance within hushed to rest, will, for one thing, be able to see what his duty is. He will see his way as far as is needful for the moment. That is more than a good many of us can do when our eyes get confused, because our hearts are beating so loudly and fast, and our own wishes come in to hide from us God’s will. But if we are weaned from ourselves, as we shall be if we are living in possession of the peace of God which passes understanding, the atmosphere will be transparent, as it is on some of the calm last days of autumn, and we shall see far ahead and know where we ought to go.

The quiet heart will be able to fling its whole strength into its work. And that is what troubled hearts never can do, for half their energy is taken up in steadying or quieting themselves, or is dissipated in going after a hundred other things. But when we are wholly engaged in quiet fellowship with Jesus Christ we have the whole of our energies at our command, and can fling ourselves wholly into our work for Him. The steam-engine is said to be a very imperfect machine which wastes more power than it utilises. That is true of a great many Christian people; they have the power, but they are so far away from that deep sense of tranquillity with God, of which my text speaks, that they waste much of the power that they have. And if we are to have for our motto 'Always Ready.' as an old Scottish family has, the only way to secure that is by having 'our feet shod with the preparedness' that comes from the Gospel that brings us peace. Brethren, duty that is done reluctantly, with hesitation, is not done. We must fling ourselves into the work gladly and be always 'ready for all Thy perfect will.'

There was an English commander, who died some years ago, who was sent for to the Horse Guards one day and asked, 'How long will it take for you to be ready to go to Scinde?' 'Half an hour,' said he; and in three-quarters he was in the train, on his road to reconquer a kingdom. That is how we ought to be; but we never shall be, unless we live habitually in tranquil communion with God, and in the full faith that we are at peace with Him through the blood of His Son. A quiet heart makes us ready for duty.

III. Again, the Gospel of peace prepares us for combat.

In ancient warfare battles were lost or won very largely according to the weight of the masses of men that were hurled against each other; and the heavier men, with the firmer footing, were likely to be the victors. Our modern scientific way of fighting is different from that. But in the old time the one thing needful was that a man should stand firm and resist the shock of the enemies as they rushed upon him. Unless our footing is good we shall be tumbled over by the onset of some unexpected antagonist. And for good footing there are two things necessary. One is a good, solid piece of ground to stand on, that is not slippery nor muddy, and the other is a good, strong pair of soldier's boots, that will take hold on the ground and help the wearer to steady himself. Christ has set our feet on the rock, and so the first requisite is secured. If we, for our part, will keep near to that Gospel which brings peace into our hearts, the peace that it brings will make us able to stand and bear unmoved any force that may be hurled against us. If we are to be 'steadfast, unmovable,' we can only be so when our feet are shod with the preparedness of the Gospel of peace.

The most of your temptations, most of the things that would pluck you away from Jesus Christ, and upset you in your standing will come down upon you unexpectedly. Nothing happens in this world except the unexpected; and it is the sudden assaults that we were not looking for that work most disastrously against us. A man may be aware of some special weakness in his character, and have given himself carefully and patiently to try to fortify himself against it, and, lo! all at once a temptation springs up from the opposite side; the enemy was lying in hiding there, and whilst his face was turned to fight with one foe, a foe that he knew nothing about came storming behind him. There is only one way to stand, and that is not merely by cultivating careful watchfulness against our own weaknesses, but by keeping fast hold of Jesus Christ manifested to us in His Gospel. Then the peace that comes from that communion will itself guard us.

You remember what Paul says in one of his other letters, where he has the same beautiful blending together of the two ideas of peace and warfare: 'The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall garrison your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' It will be, as it were, an armed force within your heart which will repel all antagonism, and will enable you to abide in that Christ, through whom and in whom alone all peace comes. So, because we are thus liable to be overwhelmed by a sudden rush of unexpected temptation, and surprised into a sin before we know where we are, let us keep fast hold by that Gospel which brings peace, which will give us steadfastness, however suddenly the masked battery may begin to play upon us, and the foe may steal out of his ambush and make a rush against our unprotectedness. That is the only way, as I think, by which we can walk scatheless through the world.

Now, dear brethren, remember that this text is part of a commandment. We are to put on the shoes. How is that to be done? By a very simple way: a way which, I am afraid, a great many Christian people do not practise with anything like the constancy that they ought. For it is the Gospel that brings the peace, and if its peace brings the preparedness, then the way to get the preparedness is by soaking our minds and hearts in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

You hear a good deal nowadays about deepening the spiritual life, and people hold conventions for the purpose. All right; I have not a word to say against that. But, conventions or no conventions, there is only one thing that deepens the spiritual life, and that is keeping near the Christ from whom all the fulness of the spiritual life flows. If we will hold fast by our Gospel, and let its peace lie upon our minds, as the negative of a photograph lies upon the paper that it is to be printed upon, until the image of Jesus Christ Himself is reproduced in us, then we may laugh at temptation. For there will be no temptation when the heart is full of Him, and there will be no sense of surrendering anything that we wish to keep when the superior sweetness of His grace fills our souls. It is empty vessels into which poison can be poured. If the vessel is full there will be no room for it. Get your hearts and minds filled with the wine of the kingdom, and the devil's venom of temptation will have no space to get in. It is well to resist temptation; it is better to be lifted above it, so that it ceases to tempt. And the one way to secure that is to live near Jesus Christ, and let the Gospel of His grace take up more of our thoughts and more of our affections than it has done in the past. Then we shall realise the fulfilment of the promise: 'He will not suffer thy foot to be moved.'

41)Ephesians 6:16

EPHESIANS

THE SHIELD OF FAITH

Eph. 6:16

There were two kinds of shields in use in ancient warfare-one smaller, carried upon the arm, and which could be used, by a movement of the arm, for the defence of threatened parts of the body in detail; the other large, planted in front of the soldier, fixed in the ground, and all but covering his whole person. It is the latter which is referred to in the text, as the word which describes it clearly shows. That word is connected with the Greek word meaning 'door,' and gives a rough notion of the look of the instrument of defence-a great rectangular oblong, behind which a man could stand untouched and untouchable. And that is the kind of shield, says Paul, which we are to have-no little defence which may protect some part of the nature, but a great wall, behind which he who crouches is safe.

'Above all' does not mean here, as superficial readers take it to mean, most especially and primarily, as most important, but it simply means in addition to all these other things. Perhaps with some allusion to the fact that the shield protected the breastplate, as well as the breastplate protected the man, there may be a reference to the kind of double defence which comes to him who wears that breastplate and lies behind the shelter of a strong and resolute faith.

I. Now, looking at this metaphor from a practical point of view, the first thing to note is the missiles, 'the fiery darts of the wicked.'

Archaeologists tell us that there were in use in ancient warfare javelins tipped with some kind of combustible, which were set on fire, and flung, so that they had not only the power of wounding but also of burning; and that there were others with a hollow head, which was in like manner filled, kindled, and thrown into the ranks of the enemy. I suppose that the Apostle's reason for specifying these fiery darts was simply that they were the most formidable offensive weapons that he had ever heard of. Probably, if he had lived to-day, he would have spoken of rifle-bullets or explosive shells, instead of fiery darts. But, though probably the Apostle had no further meaning in the metaphor than to suggest that faith was mightier than the mightiest assaults that can be hurled against it, we may venture to draw attention to two particulars in which this figure is specially instructive and warning. The one is the action of certain temptations in setting the soul on fire; the other is the suddenness with which they assail us.

‘The fiery darts.’ Now, I do not wish to confine that metaphor too narrowly to any one department of human nature, for our whole being is capable of being set on fire, and ‘set on fire of hell,’ as James says. But there are things in us all to which the fiery darts do especially appeal: desires, appetites, passions; or-to use the word which refined people are so afraid of, although the Bible is not, ‘lusts-which war against the soul,’ and which need only a touch of fire to flare up like a tar-barrel, in thick foul smoke darkening the heavens. There are fiery darts that strike these animal natures of ours, and set them all aflame.

But, there are other fiery darts than these. There are plenty of other desires in us: wishes, cowardices, weaknesses of all sorts, that, once touched with the devil’s dart, will burn fiercely enough. We all know that.

Then there is the other characteristic of suddenness. The dart comes without any warning. The arrow is invisible until it is buried in the man’s breast. The pestilence walks in darkness, and the victim does not know until its poison fang is in him. Ah! yes! brethren, the most dangerous of our temptations are those that are sprung upon us unawares. We are going quietly along the course of our daily lives, occupied with quite other thoughts, and all at once, as if a door had opened, not out of heaven but out of hell, we are confronted with some evil thing that, unless we are instantaneously on our guard, will conquer us almost before we know. Evil tempts us because it comes to us, for the most part, without any beat of drum or blast of trumpet to say that it is coming, and to put us upon our guard. The batteries that do most harm to the advancing force are masked until the word of command is given, and then there is a flash from every cannon’s throat and a withering hail of shot that confounds by its unexpectedness as well as kills by its blow. The fiery darts that light up the infernal furnace in a man’s heart, and that smite him all unawares and unsuspecting, these are the weapons that we have to fear most.

II. Consider next, the defence: ‘the shield of faith.’

Now, the Old Testament says things like this: ‘Fear not, Abraham; I am thy Shield.’ The psalmist invoked God, in a rapturous exuberance of adoring invocations, as his fortress, and his buckler, and the horn of his salvation, and his high tower. The same psalm says, ‘The Lord is a shield to all them that put their trust in Him'; and the Book of Proverbs, which is not given to quoting psalms, quotes that verse. Another psalm says, 'The Lord God is a sun and shield.'

And then Paul comes speaking of 'the shield of faith.' What has become of the other one? The answer is plain enough. My faith is nothing except for what it puts in front of me, and it is God who is truly my shield; my faith is only called a shield, because it brings me behind the bosses of the Almighty's buckler, against which no man can run a tilt, or into which no man can strike his lance, nor any devil either. God is a defence; and my trust, which is nothing in itself, is everything because of that with which it brings me into connection. Faith is the condition, and the only condition, of God's power flowing into me, and working in me. And when that power flows into me, and works in me, then I can laugh at the fiery darts, because 'greater is He that is with us than all they that are with them.'

So all the glorification which the New Testament pours out upon the act of faith properly belongs, not to the act itself, but to that with which the act brings us into connection. Wherefore, in the first Epistle of John, the Apostle, who recorded Christ's saying, 'Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world,' translates it into, 'This is the victory that overcometh the world'-not, our Christ, but-'even our faith.' And it overcomes because it binds us in deep, vital union with Him who has overcome; and then all His conquering power comes into us.

That is the explanation and vindication of the turn which Paul gives to the Old Testament metaphor here, when he makes our shield to be faith. Suppose a man was exercising trust in one that was unworthy of it, would that trust defend him from anything? Suppose you were in peril of some great pecuniary loss, and were saying to yourself, 'Oh! I do not care. So-and-so has guaranteed me against any loss, and I trust to him,' and suppose he was a bankrupt, what would be the good of your trust? It would not bring the money back into your pocket. Suppose a man is leaning upon a rotten support; the harder he leans the sooner it will crumble. So there is no defence in the act of trust except what comes into it from the object of trust; and my faith is a shield only because it grasps the God who is the shield.

But, then, there is another side to that thought. My faith will quench, as nothing else will, these sudden impulses of fiery desires, because my faith brings me into the conscious presence of God, and of the unseen realities where He dwells. How can a man sin when God's eye is felt to be upon him? Suppose conspirators plotting some dark deed in a corner, shrouded by the night, as they think; and suppose, all at once, the day were to blaze in upon them, they would scatter, and drop their designs. Faith draws back the curtain which screens off that unseen world from so many of us, and lets in the light that shines down from above and shows us that we are compassed about by a cloud of witnesses, and the Captain of our Salvation in the midst of them. Then the fiery darts fizzle out, and the points drop off them. No temptation continues to flame when we see God.

They have contrivances in mills that they call 'automatic sprinklers.' When the fire touches them it melts away a covering, and a gas is set free that puts the fire out. And if we let in the thought of God, it will extinguish any flame. 'The sun puts out the fire in our grates,' the old women say. Let God's sun shine into your heart, and you will find that the infernal light has gone out. The shield of faith quenches the fiery darts of the 'wicked.'

Yes! and it does it in another way. For, according to the Epistle to the Hebrews, faith realises 'the things hoped for,' as well as 'unseen.' And if a man is walking in the light of the great promises of Heaven, and the great threatenings of a hell, he will not be in much danger of being set on fire, even by 'the fiery darts of the wicked.' He that receives into his heart God's strength; he that by faith is conscious of the divine presence in communion with him; he that by faith walks in the light of eternal retribution, will triumph over the most sudden, the sharpest, and the most fiery of the darts that can be launched against him.

III. The Grasp of the Shield.

'Taking the shield,' then, there is something to be done in order to get the benefit of that defence. Now, there are a great many very good people at present who tell Christian men that they ought to exercise faith for sanctifying, as they exercise it for justifying and acceptance. And some of them-I do not say all-forget that there is effort needed to exercise faith for sanctifying; and that our energy has to be put forth in order that a man may, in spite of all resistance, keep himself in the attitude of dependence. So my text, whilst it proclaims that we are to trust for defence against, and victory over, recurring temptations, just as we trusted for forgiveness and acceptance at the beginning, proclaims also that there must be effort to grasp the shield, and to realise the defence which the shield gives to us.

For to trust is an act of the heart and will far more than of the head, and there are a great many hindrances that rise in the way of it; and to keep behind the shield, and not depend at all upon our own wit, our wisdom, or our strength, but wholly upon the Christ who gives us wit and wisdom, and strengthens our fingers to fight-that will take work! To occupy heart and mind with the object of faith is not an easy thing.

So, brethren, effort to compel the will and the heart to trust; effort to keep the mind in touch with the verities and the Person who are the objects of our faith; and effort to keep ourselves utterly and wholly ensconced behind the Shield, and never to venture out into the open, where our own arm has to keep our own heads, but to hang wholly upon Him-these things go to ‘taking’ the shield of faith. And it is because we fail in these, and not because there are any holes or weak places in the shield, that so many of the fiery darts find their way through, and set on fire and wound us. The Shield is impregnable, beaten as we have often been. ‘This is the victory that overcometh the world’-and the devil and his darts-’even our faith.’

42)Ephesians 6:17

EPHESIANS

‘THE HELMET OF SALVATION’

Eph. 6:17

We may, perhaps, trace a certain progress in the enumeration of the various pieces of the Christian armour in this context. Roughly speaking, they are in three divisions. There are first our graces of truth, righteousness, preparedness, which, though they are all conceived as given by God, are yet the exercises of our own powers. There is next, standing alone, as befits its all-comprehensive character, faith which is able to ward against and overcome not merely this and that temptation, but all forms of evil. That faith is the root of the three preceding graces, and makes the transition to the two which follow, because it is the hand by which we lay hold of God's gifts. The two final parts of the Christian armour are God's gifts, pure and simple-salvation and the word of God. So the progress is from circumference to centre, from man to God. From the central faith we have on the one hand that which it produces in us; on the other, that which it lays hold of from God. And these two last pieces of armour, being wholly God's gift, we are bidden with especial emphasis which is shown by a change in construction, to take or receive these.

I. The Salvation.

Once more Old Testament prophecy suggests the words of this exhortation. In Isaiah's grand vision of God, arising to execute judgment which is also redemption, we have a wonderful picture of His arraying Himself in armour. Righteousness is His flashing breastplate: on His head is an helmet of salvation. The gleaming steel is draped by garments of retributive judgment, and over all is cast, like a cloak, the ample folds of that 'zeal' which expresses the inexhaustible energy and intensity of the divine nature and action. Thus arrayed He comes forth to avenge and save. His redeeming work is the manifestation and issue of all these characteristics of His nature. It flames with divine fervour: it manifests the justice which repays, but its inmost character is righteousness, and its chief purpose is to save. His helmet is salvation; the plain, prose meaning of which would appear to be that His great purpose of saving men is its own guarantee that His purpose should be effected, and is the armour by which His work is defended.

The Apostle uses the old picture with perfect freedom, quoting the words indeed, but employing them quite differently. God's helmet of salvation is His own purpose; man's helmet of salvation is God's gift. He is strong to save because He wills to save; we are strong and safe when we take the salvation which He gives.

It is to be further noticed that the same image appears in Paul's rough draft of the Christian armour in Thessalonians, with the significant difference that there the helmet is 'the hope of salvation,' and here it is the salvation itself. This double representation is in full accord with all Scripture teaching, according to which we both possess and hope for salvation, and our possession determines the measure of our hope. That great word negatively implies deliverance from evil of any kind, and in its lower application, from sickness or peril of any sort. In its higher meaning in Scripture the evil from which we are saved is most frequently left unexpressed, but sometimes a little glimpse is given, as when we read that ‘we are saved from wrath through Him’ or ‘saved from sin.’ What Christ saves us from is, first and chiefly, from sin in all aspects, its guilt, its power, and its penalty; but His salvation reaches much further than any mere deliverance from threatening evil, and positively means the communication to our weakness and emptiness of all blessings and graces possible for men. It is inward and properly spiritual, but it is also outward, and it is not fully possessed until we are clothed with ‘salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.’

Hence, in Scripture our salvation is presented as past, as present, and as future. As past it is once for all received by initial faith in Christ; and, in view of their faith, Paul has no scruples as to saying to the imperfect Christians whose imperfections he scourges, ‘Ye have been saved,’ or in building upon that past fact his earnest exhortations and his scathing rebukes. The salvation is present if in any true sense it is past. There will be a daily growing deliverance from evil and a daily growing appropriation and manifestation of the salvation which we have received. And so Paul more than once speaks of Christians as ‘being saved.’ The process begun in the past is continued throughout the present, and the more a Christian man is conscious of its reality even amidst flaws, failures, stagnation, and lapses, the more assured will be his hope of the perfect salvation in the future, when all that is here, tendency often thwarted, and aspirations often balked, and sometimes sadly contradicted, will be completely, uninterruptedly, and eternally realised. If that hope flickers and is sometimes all but dead, the reason mainly lies in its flame not being fed by present experience.

II. The helmet of salvation.

This salvation in its present form will keep our heads in the day of battle. Its very characteristic is that it delivers us from evil, and all the graces with which Paul equips his ideal warrior are parts of the positive blessings which our salvation brings us. The more assured we are in our own happy consciousness of possessing the salvation of God, the more shall we be defended from all the temptations that seek to stir into action our lower selves. There will be no power in our fears to draw us into sin, and the possible evils that appeal to earthly passions of whatever sort will lose their power to disturb us, in the precise measure in which we know that we are saved in Christ. The consciousness of salvation will tend to damp down the magazine of combustibles that we all carry within us, and the sparks that fall will be as innocuous as those that light on wet gunpowder. If our thoughts are occupied with the blessings which we possess they will be guarded against the assaults of evil. The full cup has no room for poison. The eye that is gazing on the far-off white mountains does not see the filth and frivolities around. If we are living in conscious possession and enjoyment of what God gives us, we shall pass scatheless through the temptations which would otherwise fall on us and rend us. A future eagerly longed for, and already possessed in germ, will kill a present that would otherwise appeal to us with irresistible force.

III. Take the helmet.

We might perhaps more accurately read receive salvation, for that salvation is not won by any efforts of our own, but if we ever possess it, our possession is the result of our accepting it as a gift from God. The first word which the Gospel speaks to men and which makes it a Gospel, is not Do this or that, but Take this from the hands that were nailed to the Cross. The beginning of all true life, of all peace, of all self-control, of all hope, lies in the humble and penitent acceptance by faith of the salvation which Christ brings, and with which we have nothing to do but to accept it.

But Paul is here speaking to those whom he believes to have already exercised the initial faith which united them to Christ, and made His salvation theirs, and to these the exhortation comes with special force. To such it says, ‘See to it that your faith ever grasps and feeds upon the great facts on which your salvation reposes-God’s changeless love, Christ’s all-sufficient sacrifice and ascended life, which He imparts to us if we abide in Him. Hold fast and prolong by continual repetition the initial act by which you received that salvation. It is said that on his death-bed Oliver Cromwell asked the Puritan divine who was standing by it whether a man who had once been in the covenant could be lost, and on being assured that he could not, answered, ‘I know that I was once in it’; but such a building on past experiences is a building on sand, and nothing but continuous faith will secure a continuous salvation. A melancholy number of so-called Christians in this day have to travel far back through the years before they reach the period when they took the helmet of salvation. They know that they were far better men, and possessed a far deeper apprehension of Christ and His power in the old days than is theirs now, and they need not wonder if God’s great gift has unnoticed slipped from their relaxed grasp. A hand that clings to a rock while a swollen flood rushes past needs to perpetually be tightening its grip, else the man will be swept away; and the present salvation, and, still more, the hope of a future salvation, are not ours on any other terms than a continual repetition of the initial act by which we first received them. But there must also be a continually increased appropriation and manifestation in our lives of a progressive salvation that will come as a result of a constantly renewed faith; but it will not come unless there be continuous effort to work into our characters, and to work out in our lives, the transforming and vitalising power of the life given to us in Jesus Christ. If our present experience yields no sign of growing conformity to the image of our Saviour, there is only too abundant reason for doubting whether we have experienced a past salvation or have any right to anticipate a perfect future salvation.

The last word to be said is, Live in frequent anticipation of that perfect future. If that anticipation is built on memory of the past and experience of the present, it cannot be too confident. That hope maketh not ashamed. In the region of Christian experience alone the weakest of us has a right to reckon on the future, and to be sure that when that great to-morrow dawns for us, it ‘shall be as this day and much more abundant.’ With this salvation in its imperfect form brightening the present, and in its completeness filling the future with unimaginable glory, we can go into all the conflicts of this fighting world and feel that we are safe because God covers our heads in the day of battle. Unless so defended we shall go into the fight as the naked Indians did with the Spanish invaders, and be defeated as they were. The plumes may be shorn off the helmet, and it may be easily dinted, but the head that wore it will be unharmed. And when the battle and the noise of battle are past, the helmet will be laid aside, and we shall be able to say, ‘I have fought a good fight, henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.’

43)Ephesians 6:18

EPHESIANS

‘THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT’

Eph. 6:18

We reach here the last and only offensive weapon in the panoply. The ‘of’ here does not indicate apposition, as in the ‘shield of faith,’ or ‘the helmet of salvation,’ nor is it the ‘of’ of possession, so that the meaning is to be taken as being the sword which the Spirit wields, but it is the ‘of’ expressing origin, as in the ‘armour of God’; it is the sword which the Spirit supplies. The progress noted in the last sermon from subjective graces to objective divine facts, is completed here, for the sword which is put into the Christian soldier’s hand is the gift of God, even more markedly than is the helmet which guards his head in the day of battle.

I. Note what the word of God is.

The answer which would most commonly and almost unthinkingly be given is, I suppose, the Scriptures; but while this is on the whole true, it is to be noted that the expression employed here properly means a word spoken, and not the written record. Both in the Old and in the New Testaments the word of God means more than the Bible; it is the authentic utterance of His will in all shapes and applying to all the facts of His creation. In the Old Testament ‘God said’ is the expression in the first chapter of Genesis for the forthputting of the divine energy in the act of creation, and long ages after that divine poem of creation was written a psalmist re-echoed the thought when he said ‘For ever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in the heavens. Thou hast established the earth and it abideth.’

But, further, the expression designates the specific messages which prophets and others received. These are not in the Old Testament spoken of as a unity: they are individual words rather than a word. Each of them is a manifestation of the divine will and purpose; many of them are commandments; some of them are warnings; and all, in some measure, reveal the divine nature.

That self-revelation of God reaches for us in this life its permanent climax, when He who 'at sundry times and in divers manner spake unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by a Son.' Jesus is the personal 'word of God' though that name by which He is designated in the New Testament is a different expression from that employed in our text, and connotes a whole series of different ideas.

The early Christian teachers and apostles had no hesitation in taking that sacred name-the word of the Lord-to describe the message which they spoke. One of their earliest prayers when they were left alone was, that with all boldness they might speak Thy word; and throughout the whole of the Acts of the Apostles the preached Gospel is designated as the word of God, even as Peter in his epistle quotes one of the noblest of the Old Testament sayings, and declares that the 'word of the Lord' which 'abideth for ever' is 'the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.'

Clearly, then, Paul here is exhorting the Ephesian Christians, most of whom probably were entirely ignorant of the Old Testament, to use the spoken words which they had heard from him and other preachers of the Gospel as the sword of the Spirit. Since he is evidently referring to Christian teaching, it is obvious that he regards the old and the new as one whole, that to him the proclamation of Jesus was the perfection of what had been spoken by prophets and psalmists. He claims for his message and his brethren's the same place and dignity that belonged to the former messengers of the divine will. He asserts, and all the more strongly, because it is an assertion by implication only, that the same Spirit which moved in the prophets and saints of former days is moving in the preachers of the Gospel, and that their message has a wider sweep, a deeper content, and a more radiant light than that which had been delivered in the past. The word of the Lord had of old partially declared God's nature and His will: the word of God which

Paul preached was in his judgment the complete revelation of God’s loving heart, the complete exhibition to men of God’s commandments of old; longing eyes had seen a coming day and been glad and confidently foretold it, now the message was ‘the coming one has come.’

It is as the record and vehicle of that spoken Gospel, as well as of its earlier premonitions, that the Bible has come to be called the word of God, and the name is true in that He speaks in this book. But much harm has resulted from the appropriation of the name exclusively to the book, and the forgetfulness that a vehicle is one thing and that which it carries quite another.

II. The purpose and power of the word.

The sword is the only offensive weapon in the list. The spear which played so great a part in ancient warfare is not named. It may well be noted that only a couple of verses before our text we read of the Gospel of peace, and that here with remarkable freedom of use of his metaphors, Paul makes the word of God, which as we have seen is substantially equivalent to the preached Gospel, the one weapon with which Christian men are to cut and thrust. Jesus said ‘I come not to send peace, but a sword,’ but Paul makes the apparent contradiction still more acute when he makes the very Gospel itself the sword. We may recall as a parallel, and possibly a copy of our text, the great words of the Epistle to the Hebrews which speak of the word of God as ‘living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword.’ And we cannot forget the magnificent symbolism of the Book of Revelation which saw in the midst of the candlestick one like unto a Son of Man, and ‘out of His mouth proceeded a sharp, two-edged sword.’ That image is the poetic embodiment of our Lord’s own words which we have just quoted, and implies the penetrating power of the word which Christ’s gentle lips have uttered. Gracious and healing as it is, a Gospel of peace, it has an edge and a point which cut down through all sophistications of human error, and lay bare the ‘thoughts and intents of the heart.’ The revelation made by Christ has other purposes which are not less important than its ministering of consolation and hope. It is intended to help us in our fight with evil, and the solemn old utterance, ‘with the breath of His mouth He will slay the wicked,’ is true in reference to the effect of the word of Christ on moral evil. Such slaying is but the other side of the life-giving power which the word exercises on a heart subject to its influence. For the Christian soldier’s conflict with evil as threatening the health of his own Christian life, or as tyrannising over the lives of others, the sword of the Spirit is the best weapon.

We are not to take the rough-and-ready method, which is so common among good people, of identifying this spirit-given sword with the Bible. If for no other reason, yet because it is the Spirit which supplies it to the grasp of the Christian soldier, our possession of it is therefore a result of the action of that Spirit on the individual Christian spirit; and what He gives, and we are to wield, is ‘the engrafted word which is able to save our souls.’ That word, lodged in our hearts, brings to us a revelation of duty and a chart of life, because it brings a loving recognition of the character of our Father, and a glad obedience to His will. If that word dwell in us richly, in all wisdom, and if we do not dull the edge of the sword by our own unworthy handling of it, we shall find it pierce to the ‘dividing asunder of joints and marrow,’ and the evil within us will either be cast out from us, or will shrivel itself up, and bury itself deep in dark corners.

Love to Christ will be so strong, and the things that are not seen will so overwhelmingly outweigh the things that are seen, that the solemn majesty of the eternal will make the temporal look to our awed eyes the contemptible unreality which it really is. They who humbly receive and faithfully use that engrafted word, have in it a sure touchstone against which their own sins and errors are shivered. It is for the Christian consciousness the true Ithuriel’s spear, at the touch of which ‘upstarts in his own shape the fiend’ who has been pouring his whispered poison into an unsuspicious ear. The standard weights and measures are kept in government custody, and traders have to send their yard measures and scales thither if they wish them tested; but the engrafted word, faithfully used and submitted to, is always at hand, and ready to pronounce its decrees, and to cut to the quick the evil by which the understanding is darkened and conscience sophisticated.

III. The manner of its use.

Here that is briefly but sufficiently expressed by the one commandment, ‘take,’ or perhaps more accurately, ‘receive.’ Of course, properly speaking, that exhortation does not refer to our manner of fighting with the sword, but to the previous act by which our hand grasps it. But it is profoundly true that if we take it in the deepest sense, the possession of it will teach the use of it. No instruction will impart the last, and little instruction is needed for the first. What is needed is the simple act of yielding ourselves to Jesus Christ, and looking to Him only, as our guide and strength. Before all Christian warfare must come the possession of the Christian armour, and the commandment that here lies at the beginning of all Paul’s description of it is ‘Take.’ Our fitness for the conflict all depends on our receiving God’s gift, and that reception is no mere passive thing, as if God’s grace could be poured into a human spirit as water is into a bucket. Hence, the translation of this commandment of Paul’s by ‘take’ is better than that by ‘receive,’ inasmuch as it brings into prominence man’s activity, though it gives too exclusive importance to that, to the detriment of the far deeper and more essential element of the divine action. The two words are, in fact, both needed to cover the whole ground of what takes place when the giving God and the taking man concur in the great act by which the Spirit of God takes up its abode in a human spirit. God’s gift is to be received as purely His gift, undeserved, unearned by us. But undeserved and unearned as it is, and given ‘without money and without price,’ it is not ours unless our hand is stretched out to take, and our fingers closed tightly over the free gift of God. There is a dead lift of effort in the reception; there is a still greater effort needed for the continued possession, and there is a life-long discipline and effort needed for the effective use in the struggle of daily life of the sword of the Spirit.

If that engrafted word is ever to become sovereign in our lives, there must be a life-long attempt to bring the tremendous truths as to God’s will for human conduct which it plants in our minds into practice, and to bring all our practice under their influence. The motives which it brings to bear on our evils will be powerless to smite them, unless these motives are made sovereign in us by many an hour of patient meditation and of submission to their sweet and strong constraint. One sometimes sees on a wild briar a graft which has been carefully inserted and bandaged up, but which has failed to strike, and so the strain of the briar goes on and no rosebuds come.

Are there not some of us who profess to have received the engrafted word and whose daily experience has proved, by our own continual sinfulness, that it is unable to ‘save our souls’?

There are in the Christian ranks some soldiers whose hands are too nerveless or too full of worldly trash to grasp the sword which they have received, much less to strike home with it at any of the evils that are devastating their own lives or darkening the world. The feebleness of the Christian conflict with evil, in all its forms, whether individual or social, whether intellectual or moral, whether heretical or grossly and frankly sensual, is mainly due to the feebleness with which the average professing Christians grasp the sword of the Spirit. When David asked the priests for weapons, and they told him that Goliath’s sword was lying wrapt in a cloth behind the ephod, and that they had none other, he said, ‘There is none like that, give it me.’ If we are wise, we will take the sword that lies in the secret place, and, armed with it, we shall not need to fear in any day of battle.

We do well that we take heed to the word of God, ‘as unto a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawn,’ when swords will be no more needed, and the Word will no longer shine in darkness but be the Light that makes the Sun needless for the brightness of the New Jerusalem.

44)Ephesians 6:23

EPHESIANS

PEACE, LOVE, AND FAITH

Eph. 6:23

The numerous personal greetings usually found at the close of Paul’s letters are entirely absent from this Epistle. All which we have in their place is this entirely general good wish, and the still more general and wider one in the subsequent verse.

There is but one other of the Apostle’s letters similarly devoid of personal messages, viz. the Epistle to the Galatians, and their absence there is sufficiently accounted for by the severe and stern tone of that letter. But it is very difficult to understand how they should not appear in a letter to a church with which the Apostle had such prolonged and cordial relations as he had with the church at Ephesus. And hence the absence of these personal greetings is a strong confirmation of the opinion that this Epistle was not originally addressed to the church at Ephesus, but was a kind of circular intended to go round the various churches in Asia Minor, and only sent first to that at Ephesus. That opinion is further confirmed by the fact known to many of you that in some good ancient manuscripts the words ‘at Ephesus’ are omitted from the first verse of the letter; which thus stands without any specific address.

Be that as it may, this trinity of inward graces is Paul’s highest and best wish for his friends. He has no earthly prosperity to wish for them. His ambition soars higher than that; he desires for them peace, love, faith.

Now, will you take the lesson? There is no better test of a man than the things that he wishes for the people that he loves most. He desires for them, of course, his own ideal of happiness. What do you desire most for those that are dearest to you? You parents, do you train up your children, for instance, so as to secure, or to do your best to secure, not outward prosperity, but these loftier gifts; and for yourselves, when you are forming your wishes, are these the things that you want most? ‘Set your affections on things above,’ and remember that whoso has that trinity of graces, peace, love, faith, is rich and blessed, whatsoever else he has or needs. And whoso has them not is miserable and poor.

But I wish especially to look a little more closely at these three things in themselves and in their relation to one another. I take it that the Apostle is here tracking the stream to its fountain; that he is beginning with effects and working backwards and downwards to causes; so that to get the order of nature and of time we must reverse the order here, and begin where he ends and end where he begins. The Christian life in its higher vigour and excellence is rooted in faith. That faith associates to itself, and is inseparably connected with love, and the faith and love together issue in a deep restful tranquillity which nothing can break.

Now, let us look at these three things as the three greatest blessings that any can bear in their hearts, and wring out of time, sorrow, and change.

I. First, the root of everything is a continuous and growing trust.

Remember that this prayer or wish of my text was spoken in reference to brethren; that is to say, to those who, by the hypothesis, already possessed Christian faith. And Paul wishes for them, and can wish for them, nothing better and more than the increase and continuousness of that which they already possess. The highest blessing that the brethren can receive is the enlargement and the strengthening of their faith.

Now we talk so much in Christian teaching about this ‘faith’ that, I fancy, like a worn sixpence in a man’s pocket, its very circulation from hand to hand has worn off the lettering. And many of us, from the very familiarity of the word, have only a dim conception of what it means. It may not be profitless, then, to remind you, first of all, that this faith is neither more nor less than a very familiar thing which you are constantly exercising in reference to one another-that is to say, simple confidence. You trust your husband, your wife, your child, your parent, your friend, your guide, your lawyer, your doctor, your banker. Take that very same emotion and attitude of the mind by which you put your well-being, in different aspects and provinces, into the hands of men and women round about you; lift the trailing flowers that go all straggling along the ground, and twine them round the pillars of God's throne, and you get the confidence, the trust, of the praises and glories of which the New Testament is full. There is nothing mysterious in it, it is simply the exercise of confidence, the familiar cement that binds all human relationship together, and makes men brotherly and kindred with their kind. Faith is trust, and trust saves a man's soul.

Then, remember further that the faith which is the foundation of everything is essentially personal trust reposing upon a person, upon Jesus Christ. You cannot get hold of a man in any other way than by that. The only real bond that binds people together is the personal bond of confidence, manifesting itself in love. And it is no mere doctrine that we present for a man's faith, but it is the person about whom the doctrine speaks. We say, indeed, that we can only know the person on whom we must trust by the revelation of the truths concerning Him which make the Christian doctrines; but a man may believe the whole of them, and have no faith. And what is the step in advance which is needed in order to turn credence into faith-belief in a doctrine into trust? In one view it is the step from the doctrine to the person. When you grasp Christ, the living Christ, and not merely the doctrine, for yours, then you have faith.

Only remember, my brother, if you say you trust Christ, the question has immediately to be asked: What Christ is it that you are trusting? Is it the Christ that died for your sins on the Cross, or is it a Christ that taught you some great moral truths and set you a lovely example of life and conduct? Which of the two is it? for these two Christs are very different, and the faith that grasps the one is extremely unlike the faith that grasps the other. And so I press upon you this question: What Christ is it to Whom your confidence turns, and for what is it that you are looking to Him? Is it for help and guidance of some vague kind; is it for pattern or example, or is it for the salvation of your sinful souls, by the might of His great sacrifice?

Then, remember still further, that this personal outgoing of confidence, which is the action both of a man's will and of a man's intellect, to the person revealed to us in the great doctrines of the Gospel-that this faith, if it is to be worth anything, must be continuous. Paul could desire nothing better for his Ephesian friends than that they should have that which they had-faith; that they should continue to have it, and that it should be perennial and increasing all through their lives. You can no more get present good from past faith than the breath you drew yesterday into your lungs will be sufficient to oxygenate your blood at this moment. As soon as you break the electric contact, the electric light goes out, and no matter how long a man has been living a life of faith, that past life will not in the smallest degree help him at the present moment unless the faith is continuous. Remember this, then, a broken faith is a broken peace; a broken faith is a broken salvation; and so long, and only so long, as you are knit to Jesus Christ by the conscious exercise of a faith realised at the moment, are you in the reception of blessing from Him at the moment.

And, still further, this faith ought to be progressive. So Paul desired it to be with these people. If there is no growth, do you think there is much life? I know I am speaking to plenty of people who call themselves Christians, whose faith is not one inch better to-day than it was when it was born-perhaps a little less rather than more. Oh! the hundreds and thousands of professing Christians, average Christians, that clog and weaken all churches, whose faith has no progressive element in it, and is not a bit stronger by all the discipline of life and by their experience of its power. Brethren! is it so with us? Let us ask ourselves that; and let us ask very solemnly this other question: If my faith has no growth, how do I know that it has got any life?

And so let me remind you further that this faith, the personal outgoing of a man's intellect and will to the personal Saviour revealed in the Scriptures as the sacrifice for our sins, and the life of our spirits, which ought to be continuous and progressive, is the foundation of all strength, blessedness, goodness, in a human character; and if we have it we have the germ of all possible excellence and growth, not because of what it is in itself, for in itself it is nothing more than the opening of the heart to the reception of the celestial influences of grace and righteousness that He pours down. And, therefore, this is the thing that a wise man will most desire for himself, and for those that are dearest to him.

Depend upon it, whether it is what we want most or not, it is what God wants most for us. He does not care nearly so much that our lives should be joyful as that they should be righteous and full of faith; and He subjects us to many a sorrow and loss and disappointment in order that the life of nature may be broken and the life of faith may be strong. If we rightly understand the relative value of outward and of inward things, we shall be thankful for the storms that drive us nearer to Him; for the darkening earth that may make the pillar of cloud glow at the heart into a pillar of fire, and for all the discipline, painful though it may be, with which God answers the prayer, ‘Lord, increase our faith.’

II. And now, next, notice how inseparably associated with a true faith is love.

The one is effect that never is found without its cause; the other is cause which never but produces its effect. These two are braided together by the Apostle as inseparable in reality and inseparable in thought. And that it is so is plain enough, and there follow from it some practical lessons that I desire to lay upon your hearts and my own.

There are, then, here two principles, or rather two sides of one thought; no faith without love, no love without faith.

No faith is genuine and deep which does not at once produce in the heart where it is lodged an answering love to God. That is clear enough. Faith is, as I have said, the recognition and the reception of the divine love into the heart; and we are so constituted as that if a man once knows and believes in any real sense the love that God has to him, he answers it back again with his love as certainly as an echo which gives back the sound that reaches it.

Our faith is, if I may so say, like a burning-glass, which concentrates the rays of the divine love upon our hearts, and focuses them into a point that kindles our hearts into flame. If we have the confidence that God loves us, in any real depth, we shall answer by the gush of our love to Him.

And so here is a test for men’s faith. You call yourselves Christians. If I were to come to you and ask you, ‘Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?’ most of you would say, ‘Yes!’ Try your faith, my friend, by this test: Does it make you love Him at all? If it does not, it is more words than anything else; and it needs a wonderful deepening before it can have any real power in your hearts. There is no faith worthy the name unless its child, all but as old as itself, be the answer of the heart to Him, pouring itself out in thankful gratitude.

No love without faith; ‘we love Him because He first loved us.’ God must begin, we can only come second. Man’s natural selfishness is only overcome by the clearest demonstration of the love of God to him; and until that love, in its superbest because its lowliest form, the form of the sacrifice on the Cross, has penetrated into a man’s heart through his faith, there will be no love.

So then, dear friends, there is a test for your love. We hear a great deal said nowadays, as there has always been a great deal said, about the essence of all religion consisting in love to God; and about men ‘rejecting the cumbrous dogmas of the New Testament, and falling back upon the great and simple truths, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength; and thy neighbour as thyself,’ and saying ‘that is their religion.’ Well, I venture to say that without the faith of the heart in, not the cumbrous dogmas, but the central fact of the New Testament, that Christ died on the Cross for me, you will never get the old commandment of love to God with heart and soul and strength and mind really kept and carried out; and that if you want men to have their hearts and wills bound into loving fellowship with God, it is only by the path of faith in Him who is the sacrifice for sin that such fellowship is reached. Hence there follows a very plain, practical advice. Do you want your heart’s love to be increased? Learn the way to do it. You cannot work yourselves into a fervour of religious emotion of any valuable kind. A man cannot get to love more by saying, ‘I am determined I will.’ We have no direct control over our affections in that fashion. You cannot make water boil except by one way, and that is by putting plenty of fire under it; and you cannot make your affections melt and flow except by heating them by the contemplation of the truth which is intended to bring them out. That is to say, the more we exercise our minds on the contemplation of Christ's great love to us, and the more we put forth the energies of our souls in the act of simple self-distrust and reliance upon Him, the more will our love be fervent and strong. You can only increase love by increasing the faith from which it comes. So do you see to it, if you call yourselves Christians, that you try to deepen all your Christian affections by an honest, meditative, prayerful contemplation and grasp of the great love of God in Jesus Christ. And do not wonder if your Christian life be, as it is in so many of us, stunted, not progressive, bringing no blessing to ourselves and little good to anybody else. The explanation is easy enough. You do not look at the Cross of Christ, nor live in the contemplation and reception of His great grace.

III. And now, lastly, these two inseparably associated graces of faith and love bring with them, and lead to, the third-peace.

It seems to be but a very modest, sober-tinted wish which the Apostle here has for his brethren that the highest and best thing he can ask for them is only quiet. Very modest by the side of joy and excitement, in their coats of many colours, and yet the deepest and truest blessing that any of us can have-peace. It comes to us by one path, and that is by the path of faith and love.

These two bring peace with God, peace in our inmost spirits, the peace of self-annihilation and submission, the peace of obedience, the peace of ceasing from our own works, and entering, therefore, into the rest of God. Trust is peace. There is no tranquillity like that of feeling 'I am not responsible for this: He is; and I rest myself on Him.'

Love is peace. There is no rest for our hearts but on the bosom of some one that is dear to us, and in whom we can confide. But ah, brother! every tree in which the dove nestles is felled down sooner or later, and the nest torn to pieces, and the bird flies away. But if we turn ourselves to the undying Christ, the perpetual revelation of the eternal God, then, then our love and our faith will bring us rest. There will be peace in trusting Him whom we never can trust and be put to shame. There will be peace in loving Him who is more than worthy of and able to repay the deep and perennial love of all hearts.

Self-surrender is peace. It is our wills that trouble us. Disturbance comes, not from without, but from within. When the will bows, when I say, ‘Be it then as Thou wilt,’ when in faith and love I cease to strive, to murmur, to rebel, to repine, and enter into His loving purposes, then there is peace.

Obedience is peace. To recognise a great will that is sovereign, and to bow myself to it, not because it is sovereign, but because it is sweet, and sweet because I love it, and love Him whose it is-that is peace. And then, whatever may be outward circumstances, there shall be ‘peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation’; and deep in my soul I may be tranquil, though all about me may be the hurly-burly of the storm.

The Christian peace is an armed peace, paradoxical as it appears; and according to the great word of the Apostle, is a sentry which garrisons the beleaguered heart and mind, surrounded by many foes, and keeps them in Christ Jesus.

‘There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked,’ he is ‘as a troubled sea which cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt’; but over the wildest commotion one Voice, low, gentle, omnipotent, says: ‘Peace! be still!’ and the heart quiets itself, though there may be a ground swell, and the weather clears. He is your peace, trust Him, love Him, and you cannot but possess the ‘peace of God which passeth understanding.’

45)Ephesians 6:24

EPHESIANS

THE WIDE RANGE OF GOD’S GRACE

Eph. 6:24

In turning to the great words which I have read as a text, I ask you to mark their width and their simplicity. They are wide; they follow a very comprehensive benediction, with which, so to speak, they are concentric. But they sweep a wider circle. The former verse says, ‘Peace be to the brethren.’ But beyond the brethren in these Asiatic churches [as a kind of circular letter to whom this epistle was probably sent] there rises before the mind of the Apostle a great multitude, in every nation, and they share in his love, and in the promise and the prayer of my text. Mark its simplicity: everything is brought down to its most general expression. All the qualifications for receiving the divine gift are gathered up in one-love. All the variety of the divine gifts is summed up in that one comprehensive expression-’grace.’

I. So then, note, first, the comprehensive designation of the recipients of grace.

They are ‘all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in incorruption.’ Little need be said explanatory of the force of this general expression. We usually find that where Scripture reduces the whole qualification for the reception of the divine gift, and the conditions which unite to Jesus Christ, to one, it is faith, not love, that is chosen. But here the Apostle takes the process at the second stage, and instead of emphasising the faith which is the first step, he dwells upon the love which is its uniform consequence. This love rests upon the faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Then note the solemn fulness of the designations of the object of this faith-born love. ‘Jesus Christ our Lord’-the name of His humanity; the name of His office; the designation of His dominion. He is Jesus the Man. Jesus is the Christ, the Fulfiller of all prophecy; the flower of all previous revelation; the Anointed of God with the fulness of His Divine Spirit as Prophet, Priest, and King. Jesus Christ is the Lord-which, at the lowest, expresses sovereignty, and if regard be had to the Apostolic usage, expresses something more, even participation in Deity. And it is this whole Christ, the Jesus, the Christ, the Lord; the love to whom, built upon the faith in Him in all these aspects and characteristics, constitutes the true unity of the true Church.

That Church is not built upon a creed, but it is built upon a whole Christ, and not a maimed one. And so we must have a love which answers to all those sides of that great revealed character, and is warm with human love to

Jesus; and is trustful with confiding love to the Christ; and is lowly with obedient love to the Lord. And I venture to go a step further, and say,-and is devout with adoring love to the eternal Son of the Father. This is the Apostle's definition of what makes a Christian: Faith that grasps the whole Christ and love that therefore flows to Him. It binds all who possess it into one great unity. As against a spurious liberalism which calls them Christians who lay hold of a fragment of the one entire and perfect chrysolite, we must insist that a Christian is one who knows Jesus, who knows Christ, who knows the Lord, and who loves Him in all these aspects. Only we must remember, too, that many a time a man's heart outruns his creed, and that many a soul glows with truer, deeper, more saving devotion and trust to a Christ whom the intellect imperfectly apprehends, than are realised by unloving hearts that are associated with clearer heads. Orchids grow in rich men's greenhouses, fastened to a bit of stick, and they spread a fairer blossom that lasts longer than many a plant that is rooted in a more fertile soil. Let us be thankful for the blessed inconsistencies which knit some to the Christ who is more to them than they know.

There is also here laid down for us the great principle, as against all narrowness and all externalism, and all so-called ecclesiasticism, that to be joined to Jesus Christ is the one condition which brings a man into the blessed unity of the Church. Now it seems to me that, however they may be to be lamented on other grounds, and they are to be lamented on many, the existence of diverse Churches does not necessarily interfere with this deep-seated and central unity. There is a great deal said to-day about the reunion of Christendom, by which is meant the destruction of existing communions and the formation of a wider one. I do not believe, and I suppose you do not, that our existing ecclesiastical organisations are the final form of the Church of the living God. But let us remember that the two things are by no means contradictory, the belief in, and the realising of, the essential unity of the Church, and the existence of diverse communions. You will see on the side of many a Cumberland hill a great stretch of limestone with clefts a foot or two deep in it-there are flowers in the clefts, by the bye-but go down a couple of yards and the divisions have all disappeared, and the base-rock stretches continuously. The separations are superficial; the unity is fundamental. Do not let us play into the hands of people whose only notion of unity is that of a mechanical juxtaposition held together by some formula or orders; but let us recognise that the true unity is in the presence of Jesus Christ in the midst, and in the common grasp of Him by us all.

There is a well-known hymn which was originally intended as a High Church manifesto, which thrusts at us Nonconformists when it sings:

'We are not divided,
All one body we.'

And oddly enough, but significantly too, it has found its way into all our Nonconformist hymn-books, and we, 'the sects,' are singing it, with perhaps a nobler conception of what the oneness of the body, and the unity of the Church is, than the writer of the words had. 'We are not divided,' though we be organised apart. 'All one body we,' for we all partake of that one bread, and the unifying principle is a common love to the one Jesus Christ our Lord.

II. Mark the impartial sweep of the divine gifts.

My text is a benediction, or a prayer; but it is also a prophecy, or a statement, of the inevitable and uniform results of love to Jesus Christ. The grace will follow that love, necessarily and certainly, and the lovers will get the gift of God because their love has brought them into living contact with Jesus Christ; and His life will flow over into theirs. I need not remind you that the word 'grace' in Scripture means, first of all, the condescending love of God to inferiors, to sinners, to those who deserved something else; and, secondly, the whole fulness of blessing and gift that follow upon that love. And, says Paul, these great gifts from heaven, the one gift in which all are comprised, will surely follow the opening of the heart in love to Jesus Christ.

Ah, brethren! God's grace makes uncommonly short work of ecclesiastical distinctions. The great river flows through territories that upon men's maps are painted in different colours, and of which the inhabitants speak in different tongues. The Rhine laves the pine-trees of Switzerland, and the vines of Germany, and the willows of Holland; and God's grace flows through all places where the men that love Him do dwell. It rises, as it were, right over the barriers that they have built between each other. The little pools on the sea-shore are separate when the tide is out, but when it comes up it fills all the pot-holes that the pebbles have made, and unifies them in one great flashing, dancing mass; and so God's grace comes to all that love Him, and confirms their unity.

Surely that is the true test of a living Church. 'When Barnabas came, and saw the grace of God, he was glad.' It was not what he had expected, but he was open to conviction. The Church where he saw it had been very irregularly constituted; it had no orders and no sacraments, and had been set a-going by the spontaneous efforts of private Christians, and he came to look into the facts. He asked for nothing more when he saw that the converts had the life within them. And so we, with all our faults-and God forbid that I should seem to minimise these-with all our faults, we poor Nonconformists, left to the uncovenanted mercies, have our share of that gift of grace as truly, and, if our love be deeper, more abundantly, than the Churches that are blessed with orders and sacraments, and an 'unbroken historical continuity.' And when we are unchurched for our lack of these, let us fall back upon St. Augustine's 'Where Christ is, there the Church is'; and believe that to us, even to us also, the promise is fulfilled, 'Lo! I am with you always, even to the end of the world.'

III. Lastly, note the width to which our sympathies should go.

The Apostle sends out his desires and prayers so as to encircle the same area as the grace of God covers and as His love enfolds. And we are bound to do the same.

I am not going to talk about organic unity. The age for making new denominations is, I suppose, about over. I do not think that any sane man would contemplate starting a new Church nowadays. The rebound from the iron rigidity of a mechanical unity that took place at the Reformation naturally led to the multiplication of communities, each of which laid hold of something that to it seemed important. The folly of ecclesiastical rulers who insisted upon non-essentials lays the guilt of the schism at their doors, and not at the doors of the minority who could not, in conscience, accept that which never should have been insisted upon as a condition. But whilst we must all feel that power is lost, and much evil ensues from the isolation, such as it is, of the various Churches, yet we must remember that re-union is a slow process; that an atmosphere springs up round each body which is a very subtle, but none the less a very powerful, force, and that it will take a very, very long time to overcome the difficulties and to bring about any reconstruction on a large scale. But why should there be three Presbyterian Churches in Scotland, with the same creed, confessions of faith, and ecclesiastical constitution? Why should there be half a dozen Methodist bodies in England, of whom substantially the same thing may be said? Will it always pass the wit of man for Congregationalists and Baptists to be one body, without the sacrifice of conviction upon either side? Surely no! You young men may see these fair days; men like me can only hope that they will come and do a little, such as may be possible in a brief space, to help them on.

Putting aside, then, all these larger questions, I want, in a sentence or two, to insist with you upon the duty that lies on us all, and which every one of us may bear a share in discharging. There ought to be a far deeper consciousness of our fundamental unity. They talk a great deal about ‘the rivalries of jarring sects.’ I believe that is such an enormous exaggeration that it is an untruth. There is rivalry, but you know as well as I do that, shabby and shameful as it is, it is a kind of commercial rivalry between contiguous places of worship, be they chapels or churches, be they buildings belonging to the same or to different denominations. I, for my part, after a pretty long experience now, have seen so little of that said bitter rivalry between the Nonconformist sects, as sects, that to me it is all but non-existent. And I believe the most of us ministers, going about amongst the various communities, could say the same thing. But in the face of a cultivated England laughing at your creed of Jesus, the Christ, the Lord; and in the face of a strange and puerile recrudescence of sacerdotalism and sacramentarianism, which shoves a priest and a rite into the place where Christ should stand, it becomes us Nonconformists who believe that we know a more excellent way to stand shoulder to shoulder, and show that the unities that bind us are far more than the diversities that separate.

It becomes us, too, to further conjoint action in social matters. Thank God we are beginning to stir in that direction in Manchester-not before it was time. And I beseech you professing Christians, of all Evangelical communions, to help in bringing Christian motives and principles to bear on the discussion of social and municipal and economical conditions in this great city of ours.

And there surely ought to be more concert than we have had in aggressive work; that we should a little more take account of each other’s action in regulating our own; and that we should not have the scandal, which we too often have allowed to exist, of overlapping one another in such a fashion as that rivalry and mere trade competition is almost inevitable.

These are very humble, prosaic suggestions, but they would go a long way, if they were observed, to sweeten our own tempers, and to make visible to the world our true unity. Let us all seek to widen our sympathies as widely as Christ’s grace flows; to count none strangers whom He counts friends; to discipline ourselves to feel that we are girded with that electric chain which makes all who grasp it one, and sends the same keen thrill through them all. If a circle were a mile in diameter, and its circumference were dotted with many separate points, how much nearer each of these would be if it were moved inwards, on a straight line, closer to the centre, so as to make a circle a foot across. The nearer we come to the One Lord, in love, communion, and likeness, the nearer shall we be to one another.

PHILIPPIANS

1) PHILIPPIANS 1:1-8
2) PHILIPPIANS 1:9-11
3) PHILIPPIANS 1:12-20
4) PHILIPPIANS 1:21-25
5) PHILIPPIANS 1:27-28
6) PHILIPPIANS 2:1-4
7) PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8
8) PHILIPPIANS 2:9-11
9) PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13
10) PHILIPPIANS 2:14-16
11) PHILIPPIANS 2:16-18
12) PHILIPPIANS 2:19-24
13) PHILIPPIANS 2:25-30
14) PHILIPPIANS 3:1-3
15) PHILIPPIANS 3:4-8

16) PHILIPPIANS 3:8-9
17) PHILIPPIANS 3:10-11
18) PHILIPPIANS 3:12
19) PHILIPPIANS 3:13-14
20) PHILIPPIANS 3:15
21) PHILIPPIANS 3:16
22) PHILIPPIANS 3:17-21
23) PHILIPPIANS 4:1
24) PHILIPPIANS 4:3
25) PHILIPPIANS 4:4
26) PHILIPPIANS 4:6
27) PHILIPPIANS 4:7
28) PHILIPPIANS 4:8
29) PHILIPPIANS 4:10-14
30) PHILIPPIANS 4:15-19
31) PHILIPPIANS 4:20-23

1) Philippians 1:1-8

PHILIPPIANS

LOVING GREETINGS

Php. 1:1-8 [R.V.].

The bond between Paul and the church at Philippi was peculiarly close. It had been founded by himself, as is narrated at unusual length in the book of Acts. It was the first church established in Europe. Ten years had elapsed since then, possibly more. Paul is now a prisoner in Rome, not suffering the extremest rigour of imprisonment, but still a prisoner in his own hired house, accessible to his friends and able to do work for God, but still in the custody of soldiers, chained and waiting till the tardy steps of Roman law should come up to him, or perhaps till the caprice of Nero should deign to hear his cause. In that imprisonment we have his letters to the Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, which latter three are closely connected in time, the two former in subject, and the two latter in destination. This letter stands apart from those to the great Asiatic churches.

Its tone and general cast are unlike those of most of his letters. It contains no doctrinal discussions and no rebukes of evil, but is an outpouring of happy love and confidence. Like all Paul's epistles it begins with salutations, and like most of them with prayer, but from the very beginning is a long gush of love. These early verses seem to me very beautiful if we regard them either as a revelation of the personal character of the Apostle, or as a picture of the relation between teacher and taught in its most blessed and undisturbed form, or as a lovely ideal of friendship and love in any relation, hallowed and solemnised by Christian feeling.

Verses one and two contain the apostolic greeting. In it we note the senders. Timothy is associated with Paul, according to his custom in all his letters even when he goes on immediately to speak in the singular. He ever sought to hide his own supremacy and to bring his friends into prominence. He was a great, lowly soul, who had no pride in the dignity of his position but felt the weight of its responsibility and would fain have had it shared. He calls Timothy and himself the slaves of Christ. He regarded it as his highest honour to be Christ's born servant, bound to absolute submission to the all-worthy Lord who had died to win him. It is to be noted that there is no reference here to apostolic authority, and the contrast is very remarkable in this respect with the Epistle to the Galatians, where with scornful emphasis he asserts it as bestowed 'not from men, neither through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father.' In this designation of himself, we have already the first trace of the intimate and loving relationship in which Paul stood to the Philippians. There was no need for him to assert what was not denied, and he did not wish to deal with them officially, but rather personally. There is a similar omission in Philemon and a pathetic substitution there of the 'prisoner of Jesus Christ' for the 'slave of Christ Jesus.'

The persons addressed are 'all the saints in Christ Jesus.' As he had not called himself an apostle, so he does not call them a church. He will not lose in an abstraction the personal bond which unites them. They are saints, which is not primarily a designation of moral purity, but of consecration to

God, from whom indeed purity flows. The primitive meaning of the word is separation ; the secondary meaning is holiness , and the connection between these two meanings contains a whole ethical philosophy. They are saints in Christ Jesus; union with Him is the condition both of consecration and of purity.

The Philippian community had an organisation primitive but sufficient. We do not enter on the discussion of its two offices further than to note that the bishops are evidently identical with the elders, in the account in Acts 20: of Paul's parting with the Ephesian Christians, where the same persons are designated by both titles, as is also the case in Tit. 1:5; Tit. 1:7; the one name [elder] coming from the Hebrew and designating the office on the side of dignity, the other [bishop] being of Greek origin and representing it in terms of function. We note that there were several elders then in the Philippian church, and that their place in the salutation negatives the idea of hierarchical supremacy.

The benediction or prayer for grace and peace is couched in the form which it assumes in all Paul's letters. It blends Eastern and Western forms of greeting. 'Grace' being the Greek and 'Peace' the Hebrew form of salutation. So Christ fuses and fulfils the world's desires. The grace which He gives is the self-imparting love of God, the peace which He gives is its consequence, and the salutation is an unmistakable evidence of Paul's belief in Christ's divinity.

This salutation is followed by a great burst of thankful love, for the full apprehension of which we must look briefly at the details of these verses. We have first Paul's thankfulness in all his remembrance of the Philippians, then he further defines the times of his thankfulness as 'always in every supplication of mind on behalf of you all making my supplication with joy.' His gratitude for them is expressed in all his prayers which are all thank-offerings. He never thinks of them nor prays for them without thanking God for them. Then comes the reason for his gratitude--their fellowship in furtherance of the gospel, from the first day when Lydia constrained him to come into her house, until this moment when now at the last their care of him had flourished again. The Revised Version's rendering 'fellowship in furtherance of' instead of 'fellowship in' conveys the great lesson which the other rendering obscures--that the true fellowship is not in enjoyment but in service, and refers not so much to a common participation in the blessedness as in the toils and trials of Christian work. This is apparent in an immediately following verse where the Philippians' fellowship with Christ is again spoken of as consisting in sharing both in His bonds and in the double work of defending the gospel from gainsayers and in positively proclaiming it. Very beautifully in this connection does he designate that work and toil as 'my grace.'

The fellowship which thus is the basis of his thanksgiving leads on to a confidence which he cherishes for them and which helps to make his prayers joyful thanksgivings. And such confidence becomes him because he has them in his heart, and 'love hopeth all things' and delights to believe in and anticipate all good concerning its object. He has them in his heart because they faithfully share with him his honourable, blessed burdens. But that is not all, it is 'in the tender mercies' of Christ that he loved them. His love is the love of Christ in him; his being is so united to Jesus that his heart beats with the same emotion as throbs in Christ's, and all that is merely natural and of self in his love is changed into a solemn participation in the great love which Christ has to them. This, then, being the general exposition of the words, let us now dwell for a little while on the broad principles suggested by them.

I. Participation in the work of Christ is the noblest basis for love and friendship.

Paul had tremendous courage and yet hungered for sympathy. He had no outlets for his love but his fellow Christians. There had, no doubt, been a wrenching of the ties of kindred when he became a Christian, and his love, dammed back and restrained, had to pour itself on his brethren.

The Church is a workshop, not a dormitory, and every Christian man and woman is bound to help in the common cause. These Philippians help Paul by sympathy and gifts, indeed, but by their own direct work as well, and things are not right with us unless leaders can say, 'Ye all are partakers of my grace.' There are other real and sweet bonds of love and friendship, but the most real and sweetest is to be found in our common relation to Jesus

Christ and in our co-operation in the work which is ours because it is His and we are His.

II. Thankful, glad prayer flows from such co-operation.

The prisoner in his bonds in the alien city had the remembrance of his friends coming into his chamber like fresh, cool air, or fragrance from far-off gardens. A thrill of gladness was in his soul as often as he thought on them. It is blessed if in our experience teacher and taught are knit together thus; without some such bond of union no good will be done. The relation of pastor and people is so delicate and spiritual, the purpose of it so different from that of mere teaching, the laws of it so informal and elastic, the whole power of it, therefore, so dependent on sympathy and mutual kindliness that, unless there be something like the bond which united Paul and the Philippians, there will be no prosperity or blessing. The thinnest film of cloud prevents deposition of dew. If all men in pulpits could say what Paul said of the Philippians, and all men in pews could deserve to have it said of them, the world would feel the power of a quickened Church.

III. Confidence is born of love and common service.

Paul delights to think that God will go on because God has already begun a good work in them, and Paul delights to think of their perfection because he loves them. ‘God is not a man that He should lie, or the son of man that He should repent.’ His past is the guarantee for His future; what He begins He finishes.

IV. Our love is hallowed and greatened in the love of Christ.

Paul lived, yet not he, but Christ lived in him. It is but one illustration of the principle of his being that Christ who was the life of his life, is the heart of his love. He longed after his Philippian friends in the tender mercies of Christ Jesus. This and this only is the true consecration of love when we live and love in the Lord; when we will as Christ does, think as He does, love as He does, when the mind that was in Christ Jesus was in us. It is needful to guard against the intrusion of mere human affection and regard into our sacred relations in the Church; it is needful to guard against it in our own personal love and friendship. Let us see that we ourselves know and believe the love wherewith Christ hath loved us, and then let us see that that love dwells in us informing and hallowing our hearts, making them tender with His great tenderness, and turning all the water of our earthly affections into the new wine of His kingdom. Let the law for our hearts, as well as for our minds and wills, be ‘I live, yet not I but Christ liveth in me.’

2) **Philippians 1:9-11**

PHILIPPIANS

A COMPREHENSIVE PRAYER

Php. 1:9-11 [R.V.].

What a blessed friendship is that of which the natural language is prayer! We have many ways, thank God, of showing our love and of helping one another, but the best way is by praying for one another. All that is selfish and low is purged out of our hearts in the act, suspicions and doubts fade away when we pray for those whom we love. Many an alienation would have melted like morning mists if it had been prayed about, added tenderness and delicacy come to our friendships so like the bloom on ripening grapes. We may test our loves by this simple criterion--Can we pray about them? If not, should we have them? Are they blessings to us or to others?

This prayer, like all those in Paul’s epistles, is wonderfully full. His deep affection for, and joy in, the Philippian church breathes in every word of it. Even his jealous watchfulness saw nothing in them to desire but progress in what they possessed. Such a desire is the highest that love can frame. We can wish nothing better for one another than growth in the love of God. Paul’s estimate of the highest good of those who were dearest to him was that they should be more and more completely filled with the love of God and with its fruits of holiness and purity, and what was his supreme desire for the Philippians is the highest purpose of the gospel for us all, and should be the aim of our effort and longing, dominating all others as some sovereign mountain peak towers above the valleys. Looking then at this prayer as containing an outline of true progress in the Christian life, we may note:

I. The growth in keenness of conscience founded on growth in love.

Paul does not merely desire that their love may abound, but that it may become more and more ‘rich in knowledge and all discernment.’ The former is perhaps accurate knowledge, and the latter the application of it. ‘Discernment’ literally means ‘sense,’ and here, of course, when employed about spiritual and moral things it means the power of apprehending good and bad as such. It is, I suppose, substantially equivalent to conscience, the moral tact or touch of the soul by which, in a manner analogous to bodily sense, it ascertains the moral character of things. This growth of love in the power of spiritual and moral discernment is desired in order to its exercise in ‘proving things that differ.’ It is a process of discrimination and testing that is meant, which is, I think, fairly represented by the more modern expression which I have used--keenness of conscience.

I need spend little time in remarking on the absolute need of such a process of discrimination. We are surrounded by temptations to evil, and live in a world where maxims and principles not in accordance with the gospel abound. Our own natures are but partially sanctified. The shows of things must be tested. Apparent good must be proved. The Christian life is not merely to unfold itself in peace and order, but through conflict. We are not merely to follow impulses, or to live as angels do, who are above sin, or as animals do who are beneath it. When false coin is current it is folly to accept any without a test. All around us there is glamour, and so within us there is need for careful watchfulness and quick discrimination.

This keenness of conscience follows on the growth of love. Nothing makes a man more sensitive to evil than a hearty love to God. Such a heart is keener to discern what is contrary to its love than any ethical maxims can make it. A man who lives in love will be delivered from the blinding influence of his own evil tastes, and a heart steadfast in love will not be swayed by lower temptations. Communion with God will, from its very familiarity with Him, instinctively discern the evil of evil, as a man coming out of pure air is conscious of vitiated atmosphere which those who dwell in it do not perceive. It used to be said that Venice glass would shiver into fragments if poison were poured into the cup. As evil spirits were supposed to be cast out by the presence of an innocent child or a pure virgin, so the ugly shapes that sometimes tempt us by assuming fair disguises will be shown in their native hideousness when confronted with a heart filled with the love of God.

Such keenness of judgment is capable of indefinite increase. Our consciences should become more and more sensitive: we should always be advancing in our discovery of our own evils, and be more conscious of our sins, the fewer we have of them. Twilight in a chamber may reveal some foul things, and the growing light will disclose more. ‘Secret faults’ will cease to be secret when our love abounds more and more in knowledge, and in all discernment.

II. The purity and completeness of character flowing from this keenness of conscience.

The Apostle desires that the knowledge which he asks for his Philippian friends may pass over into character, and he describes the sort of men which he desires them to be in two clauses, ‘sincere and void of offence’ being the one, ‘filled with the fruits of righteousness’ being the other. The former is perhaps predominantly negative, the latter positive. That which is sincere is so because when held up to the light it shows no flaws, and that which is without offence is so because the stones in the path have been cleared away by the power of discrimination, so that there is no stumbling. The life which discerns keenly will bring forth the fruit which consists of righteousness, and that fruit is to fill the whole nature so that no part shall be without it.

Nothing lower than this is the lofty standard towards which each Christian life is to aim, and to which it can indefinitely approximate. It is not enough to aim at the negative virtue of sincerity so that the most searching scrutiny of the web of our lives shall detect no flaws in the weaving, and no threads dropped or broken. There must also be the actual presence of positive righteousness filling life in all its parts. That lofty standard is pressed upon us by a solemn motive, ‘unto the day of Christ.’ We are ever to keep before us the thought that in that coming day all our works will be made manifest, and that all of them should be done, so that when we have to give account of them we shall not be ashamed.

The Apostle takes it for granted here that if the Philippian Christians know what is right and what is wrong, they will immediately choose and do the right. Is he forgetting the great gulf between knowledge and practice? Not so, but he is strong in the faith that love needs only to know in order to do. The love which abounds more and more in knowledge and in all discernment will be the soul of obedience, and will delight in fulfilling the law which it has delighted in beholding. Other knowledge has no tendency to lead to practice, but this knowledge which is the fruit of love has for its fruit righteousness.

III. The great Name in which this completeness is secured.

The Apostle's prayer dwells not only on the way by which a Christian life may increase itself, but in its close reaches the yet deeper thought that all that growth comes 'through Jesus Christ.' He is the Giver of it all, so that we are not so much called to a painful toil as to a glad reception. Our love fills us with the fruits of righteousness, because it takes all these from His hands. It is from His gift that conscience derives its sensitiveness. It is by His inspiration that conscience becomes strong enough to determine action, and that even our dull hearts are quickened into a glow of desiring to have in our lives, the law of the spirit of life, that was in Christ Jesus, and to make our own all that we see in Him of 'things that are lovely and of good report.'

The prayer closes with a reference to the highest end of all our perfecting--the glory and praise of God; the former referring rather to the transcendent majesty of God in itself, and the latter to the exaltation of it by men. The highest glory of God comes from the gradual increase in redeemed men's likeness to Him. They are 'the secretaries of His praise,' and some portion of that great honour and responsibility lies on each of us. If all Christian men were what they all might be and should be, swift and sure in their condemnation of evil and loyal fidelity to conscience, and if their lives were richly hung with ripened clusters of the fruits of righteousness, the glory of God would be more resplendent in the world, and new tongues would break into praise of Him who had made men so like Himself.

3) Philippians 1:12-20

A PRISONER’S TRIUMPH

Php. 1:12-20 [R.V.]

Paul’s writings are full of autobiography, that is partly owing to temperament, partly to the profound interpenetration of his whole nature with his religion. His theology was but the generalisation of his experience. He has felt and verified all that he has to say. But the personal experiences of this sunny letter to his favourite church have a character all their own. In that atmosphere of untroubled love and sympathy a shyer heart than Paul’s would have opened: his does so in tenderness, gladness, and trust. We have here the unveiling of his inmost self in response to what he knew would be an eager desire for news of his welfare. This whole section appears to me to be a wonderful revelation of his prison thoughts, an example of what we may call the ennobling power of a passionate enthusiasm for Christ. Remember that he is a prisoner, shut out from his life’s work, waiting to be tried before Nero, whose reign had probably, by this time, passed from its delusive morning of dewy promise to its lurid noon. The present and the future were dark for him, and yet in spite of them all comes forth this burst of undaunted courage and noble gladness. We simply follow the course of the words as they lie, and we find in them,

I. An absorbing purpose which bends all circumstances to its service and values them only as instruments.

The things which happened unto me; that is Paul’s minimising euphemism for the grim realities of imprisonment, or perhaps for some recent ominous turns in his circumstances. To him they are not worth dwelling on further, nor is their personal incidence worth taking into account; the only thing which is important is to say how these things have affected his life’s work. It is enough for him, and he believes that it will be enough even for his loving friends at Philippi to know that, instead of their being as they might have feared, and as he sometimes when he was faithless expected, hindrances to his work, they have turned out rather to ‘the furtherance of the gospel.’ Whether he has been comfortable or not is a matter of very small importance, the main thing is that Christ’s work has been helped, and then he goes on to tell two ways in which his imprisonment had conduced to this end.

‘My bonds became manifest in Christ.’ It has been clearly shown why I was a prisoner; all the Prætorian guard had learned what Paul was there for. We know from Acts that he was ‘suffered to abide by himself with the soldier that kept him.’ He has no word to say of the torture of compulsory association, night and day, with the rude legionaries, or of the horrors of such a presence in his sweetest, sacredest moments of communion with his Lord. These are all swallowed up in the thought as they were in the fact, that each new guard as he came to sit there beside Paul was a new hearer, and that by this time he must have told the story of Christ and His love to nearly the whole corps. That is a grand and wonderful picture of passionate earnestness and absorbed concentration in one pursuit. Something of the same sort is in all pursuits, the condition of success and the sure result of real interest. We have all to be specialists if we would succeed in any calling. The river that spreads wide flows slow, and if it is to have a scour in its current it must be kept between high banks. We have to bring ourselves to a point and to see that the point is red-hot if we mean to bore with it. If our limitations are simply enforced by circumstances, they may be maiming, but if they come of clear insight and free choice of worthy ends, they are noble. The artist, the scholar, the craftsman, all need to take for their motto ‘This one thing I do.’ I suppose that a man would not be able to make a good button unless he confined himself to button-making. We see round us abundant examples of men who, for material aims and almost instinctively, use all circumstances for one end and appraise them according to their relations to that, and they are quoted as successful, and held up to young souls as patterns to be imitated. Yes! But what about the man who does the same in regard to Christ and His work? Is he thought of as an example to be imitated or as a warning to be avoided? Is not the very same concentration when applied to Christian work and living thought to be fanatical, which is welcomed with universal applause when it is directed to lower pursuits? The contrast of our eager absorption in worldly things and of the ease with which any fluttering butterfly can draw us away from the path which leads us to God, ought to bring a blush to all cheeks and penitence to all hearts. There was no more obligation on Paul to look at the circumstances of his life thus than there is on every Christian to do so. We do not desire that all should be apostles, but the Apostle's temper and way of looking at 'the things which happened unto' him should be our way of looking at the things which happen unto us. We shall estimate them rightly, and as God estimates them, only when we estimate them according to their power to serve our souls and to further Christ's kingdom.

II. The magnetism or contagion of enthusiasm.

The second way by which Paul's circumstances furthered the gospel was 'that most of the brethren, being confident through my bonds, are more abundantly bold to speak the word of God.' His constancy and courage stirred them up. Moved by good-will and love, they were heartened to preach because they saw in him one 'appointed by God for the defence of the gospel.' A soul all on flame has power to kindle others. There is an old story of a Scottish martyr whose constancy at the stake touched so many hearts that 'a merry gentleman' said to Cardinal Beaton, 'If ye burn any more you should burn them in low cellars, for the reek [smoke] of Mr. Patrick Hamilton has infected as many as it blew upon.'

It is not only in the case of martyrs that enthusiasm is contagious. However highly we may estimate the impersonal forces that operate for 'the furtherance of the gospel' we cannot but see that in all ages, from the time of Paul down to to-day, the main agents for the spread of the gospel have been individual souls all aflame with the love of God in Christ Jesus and filled with the life of His Spirit. The history of the Church has largely consisted in the biographies of its saints, and every great revival of religion has been the flame kindled round a flaming heart. Paul was impelled by his own love; the brethren in Rome were in a lower state as only reflecting his, and it ought to be the prerogative of every Christian to be a centre and source of kindling influence rather than a mere recipient of it. It is a question which may well be asked by each of us about ourselves--would anybody find quickening impulses to divine life and Christian service coming from us, or do we simply serve to keep others' coldness in countenance? It was said of old of Jesus Christ, 'He shall baptize you in the Holy Ghost and in fire,' and that promise remains effective to-day, however little one looking on the characters of the mass of so-called Christians would believe it. They seem rather to have been plunged into ice-cold water than into fire, and their coldness is as contagious as Paul’s radiant enthusiasm was. Let us try, for our parts, to radiate out the warmth of the love of God, that it may kindle in others the flame which it has lighted in ourselves, and not be like icebergs floating southwards and bringing down the temperature of even the very temperate seas in which we find ourselves.

III. The wide tolerance of such enthusiasm.

It is stigmatized as ‘narrow,’ which to-day is the sin of sins, but it is broad with the true breadth. Such enthusiasm lifts a man high enough to see over many hedges and to be tolerant even of intolerance, and of the indifference which tolerates everything but earnestness. Paul here deals with a class amongst the Roman Christians who were ‘preaching of envy and strife,’ with the malicious calculation that so they would annoy him and ‘add affliction’ to his bonds. It is generally supposed that these were Judaising Christians against whom Paul fulminates in all his letters, but I confess that, notwithstanding the arguments of authoritative commentators, I cannot believe that they are the same set of men preaching the same doctrines which in other places he treats as destructive of the whole gospel. The change of tone is so great as to require the supposition of a change of subjects, and the Judaisers with whom the Apostle waged a never ending warfare, never did evangelistic work amongst the heathen as these men seem to have done, but confined themselves to trying to pervert converts already made. It was not their message but their spirit that was faulty. With whatever purpose of annoyance they were animated, they did ‘preach Christ,’ and Paul superbly brushes aside all that was antagonistic to him personally, in his triumphant recognition that the one thing needful was spoken, even from unworthy motives and with a malicious purpose. The situation here revealed, strange though it appears with our ignorance of the facts, is but too like much of what meets us still. Do we not know denominational rivalries which infuse a bitter taint of envy and strife into much evangelistic earnestness, and is the spectacle of a man preaching Christ with a taint of sidelong personal motives quite unknown to this day? We may press the question still more closely home and ask ourselves if we are entirely free from the influence of such a spirit. No man who knows himself and has learned how subtly lower motives blend themselves with the highest will be in haste to answer these questions with an unconditional

‘No,’ and no man who looks on the sad spectacle of competing Christian communities and knows anything of the methods of competition that are in force, will venture to deny that there are still those who preach Christ of envy and strife.

It comes, then, to be a testing question for each of us, have we learned from Paul this lesson of tolerance, which is not the result of cold indifference, but the outcome of fiery enthusiasm and of a clear recognition of the one thing needful? Granted that there is preaching from unworthy motives and modes of work which offend our tastes and prejudices, and that there are types of evangelistic earnestness which have errors mixed up with them, are we inclined to say ‘Nevertheless Christ is proclaimed, and therein I rejoice, Yea, and will rejoice’? Much chaff may be blended with the seeds sown; the chaff will lie inert and the seed will grow. Such tolerance is the very opposite of the carelessness which comes from languid indifference. The one does not mind what a man preaches because it has no belief in any of the things preached, and to it one thing is as good as another, and none are of any real consequence. The other proceeds from a passionate belief that the one thing which sinful men need to hear is the great message that Christ has lived and died for them, and therefore, it puts all else on one side and cares nothing for jangling notes that may come in, if only above them the music of His name sounds out clear and full.

IV. The calm fronting of life and death as equally magnifying Christ.

The Apostle is sure that all the experiences of his prison will turn to his ultimate salvation, because he is sure that his dear friends in Philippi will pray for him, and that through their prayers he will receive a ‘supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,’ which shall be enough to secure his steadfastness. His expectation is not that he will escape from prison or from martyrdom, both of which stand only too clearly before him, but that whatever may be waiting for him in the future, ‘all boldness’ will be granted him, so that whether he lives he will live to the Lord, or whether he dies, he will die to the Lord. He had so completely accepted it as his life’s purpose to magnify Jesus, that the extremest possible changes of condition came to be insignificant to him. He had what we may have, the true anæsthetic which will give us a ‘solemn scorn of ills’ and make even the last and greatest change from life to death of little account. If we magnify Christ in our lives with the same passionate earnestness and concentrated absorption as Paul had, our lives like some train on well-laid rails will enter upon the bridge across the valley with scarce a jolt. With whatever differences--and the differences are to us tremendous--the same purpose will be pursued in life and in death, and they who, living, live to the praise of Christ, dying will magnify Him as their last act in the body which they leave. What was it that made possible such a passion of enthusiasm for a man whom Paul had never seen in the flesh? What changed the gloomy fuliginous fanaticism of the Pharisee, at whose feet were laid the clothes of the men who stoned Stephen, into this radiant light, all aflame with a divine splendour? The only answer is in Paul's own words, 'He loved me and gave Himself for me.' That answer is as true for each of us as it was for him. Does it produce in us anything like the effects which it produced in him?

4) Philippians 1:21-25

Philippians

A STRAIT BETWIXT TWO

Php. 1:21-25.

A preacher may well shrink from such a text. Its elevation of feeling and music of expression make all sermons on it sound feeble and harsh, like some poor shepherd's pipe after an organ. But, though this be true, it may not be useless to attempt, at least, to point out the course of thought in these grand words. They flow like a great river, which springs at first with a strong jet from some deep cave, then is torn and chafed among dividing rocks, and after a troubled middle course, moves at last with stately and equable current to the sea. The Apostle's thoughts and feelings have here, as it were, a threefold bent in their flow. First, we have the clear, unhesitating statement of the comparative advantages of life and death to a Christian man, when thought of as affecting himself alone. The one is Christ, the other gain. But we neither live nor die to ourselves; and no man has a right to think of life or death only from the point of view of his own advantage. So the problem is not so simple as it looked. Life here is the condition of fruitful labour here. There are his brethren and his work to think of. These bring him to a stand, and check the rising wish. He knows not which state to prefer. The stream is dammed back between rocks, and it chafes and foams and seems to lose its way among them. Then comes a third bend in the flow of thought and feeling, and he gladly apprehends it as his present duty to remain at his work. If his own joy is thereby less, his brethren's will be more. If he is not to depart and be with Christ, he will remain and be with Christ's friends, which is, in some sort, being with Him too. If he may not have the gain of death, he will have the fruit of work in life.

Let us try to fill up, somewhat, this meagre outline of the warm stream that pours through these great words.

I. The simplicity of the comparison between life and death to a Christian thinking of himself alone.

'To me' is plainly emphatic. It means more than 'in my judgment' or even 'in my case.' It is equal to 'To me personally, if I stood alone, and had no one to consider but myself.' 'To live' refers mainly here to outward practical life of service, and 'to die' should, perhaps, rather be 'to be dead,' referring, not to the act of dissolution, but to the state after; not to the entrance chamber, but to the palace to which it admits.

So we have here grandly set forth the simplicity and unity of the Christian life. While the words probably refer mainly to outward life, they presuppose an inward, of which that outward is the expression. In every possible phase of the word 'life,' Christ is the life of the Christian. To live is Christ, for He is the mystical source from whom all ours flows. 'With Thee is the fountain of life,' and all life, both of body and spirit, is from Him, by Him, and in Him. 'To live is Christ,' for He is the aim and object, as well as the Lord, of it all, and no other is worth calling life, but that which is for Him by willing consecration, as well as from Him by constant derivation. 'To live is Christ,' for He is the model of all our life, and the one all-sufficient law for us is to follow Him.

Life is to be as Christ, for Christ, by , in , and from Christ. So shall there be strength, peace, and freedom in our days. The unity brought into life thereby will issue in calm blessedness, contrasted wondrously with the divided hearts and aims which fritter our days into fragments, and make our lives heaps of broken links instead of chains.

Surely this is the charm which brings rest into the most troubled history, and nobleness into the lowliest duties. There is nothing so grand as the unity breathed into our else distracted days by the all-pervading reference to and presence of Christ. Without that, we are like the mariners of the old world, who crept timidly from headland to headland, making each their aim for a while, and leaving each inevitably behind, never losing sight of shore, nor ever knowing the wonders of the deep and all the majesty of mid-ocean, nor ever touching the happy shores beyond, which they reach who carry in their hearts a compass that ever points to the unseen pole.

Then comes the other great thought, that where life is simply Christ, death will be simply gain.

Paul, no doubt, shrank from the act of death, as we all do. It was not the narrow passage which attracted him, but the broad land beyond. Every other aspect of that was swallowed up in one great thought, which will occupy us more at length presently. But that word ‘gain’ suggests that to Paul’s confident faith death was but an increase and progression in all that was good here. To him it was no loss to lose flesh and sense and all the fleeting joys with which they link us. To him death was no destruction of his being, and not even an interruption of its continuity. Everything that was of any real advantage to him was to be his after as before. The change was clear gain. Everything good was to be just as it had been, only better. Nothing was to be dropped but what it was progress to lose, and whatever was kept was to be heightened.

How strongly does that view express the two thoughts of the continuity and intensifying of the Christian life beyond the grave! And what a contrast does that simple, sublime confidence present to many another thought of death! To how many men its blackness seems to be the sudden swallowing up of the light of their very being! To how many more does it seem to put an end to all their occupations, and to shear their lives in twain, as remorselessly as the fall of the guillotine severs the head from the body. How are the light butterfly wings of the trivialities in which many men and women spend their days to carry them across the awful gulf? What are the people to do on the other side whose lives have all been given to purposes and tasks that stop on this side? Are there shops and mills, or warehouses and drawing-rooms, or studies and lecture-halls, over there? Will the lives which have not struck their roots down through all the surface soil to the rock, bear transplanting? Alas! for the thousands landed in that new country, as unfit for it by the tenor of their past occupations, as some pale artisan, with delicate fingers and feeble muscles, set down as a colonist to clear the forest!

This Paul had a work here which he could carry on hereafter. There would be no reversal of view, no change in the fundamental character of his occupations. True, the special forms of work which he had pursued here would be left behind, but the principle underlying them would continue. It matters very little to the servant whether he is out in the cold and wet ‘ploughing and tending cattle,’ or whether he is waiting on his master at table. It is service all the same, only it is warmer and lighter in the house than in the field, and it is promotion to be made an indoor servant.

So the direction of the life, and the source of the life, and the fundamentals of the life continue unchanged. Everything is as it was, only in the superlative degree. To other men the narrow plain on which their low-lying lives are placed is rimmed by the jagged, forbidding white peaks. It is cold and dreary on these icy summits where no creature can live. Perhaps there is land on the other side; who knows? The pale barrier separates all here from all there; we know not what may be on the other side. Only we feel that the journey is long and chill, that the ice and the barren stone appal, and that we never can carry our household goods, our tools, or our wealth with us up to the black jaws of the pass.

But for this man the Alps were tunnelled. There was no interruption in his progress. He would go, he believed, without ‘break of gauge,’ and would pass through the darkness, scarcely knowing when it came, and certainly unchecked for even a moment, right on to the other side where he would come out, as travellers to Italy do, to fairer plains and bluer skies, to richer harvests and a warmer sun. No jolt, no pause, no momentary suspension of consciousness, no reversal, nor even interruption in his activity, did Paul expect death to bring him, but only continuance and increase of all that was essential to his life.

He has calmness in his confidence. There is nothing hysterical or overwrought or morbid in these brief words, so peaceful in their trust, so moderate and restrained in their rapture. Are our anticipations of the future moulded on such a pattern? Do we think of it as quietly as this man did? Are we as tranquilly sure about it? Is there as little mist of uncertainty about the clearly defined image to our eye as there was to his? Is our confidence so profound that these brief monosyllables are enough to state it? Above all, do we know that to die will be gain, because we can honestly say that to live is Christ? If so, our hope is valid, and will not yield when we lean heavily upon it for support in the ford over the black stream. If our hope is built on anything besides, it will snap then like a rotten pole, and leave us to stumble helpless among the slippery stones and the icy torrent.

II. The second movement of thought here, which troubles and complicates this simple decision, as to what is the best for Paul himself, is the hesitation springing from the wish to help his brethren.

As we said, no man has a right to forget others in settling the question whether he would live or die. We see the Apostle here brought to a stand by two conflicting currents of feelings. For himself he would gladly go, for his friends' sake he is drawn to the opposite choice. He has 'fallen into a place where two seas meet,' and for a minute or two his will is buffeted from side to side by the 'violence of the waves.' The obscurity of his language, arising from its broken construction, corresponds to the struggle of his feelings. As the Revised Version has it, 'If to live in the flesh--if this is the fruit of my work, then what I shall choose, I wot not.' By which fragmentary sentence, rightly representing as it does the roughness of the Greek, we understand him to mean that if living on in this life is the condition of his gaining fruit from his toil, then he has to check the rising wish, and is hindered from decisive preference either way. Both motives act upon him, one drawing him deathward, the other holding him firmly here. He is in a dilemma, pinned in, as it were, between the two opposing pressures. On the one hand he has the desire [not 'a desire,' as the English Bible has it, as if it were but one among many] turned towards departing to be with Christ; but on the other, he knows that his remaining here is for the present all but indispensable for the immature faith of the churches which he has founded. So he stands in doubt for a moment, and the picture of his hesitation may well be studied by us.

Such a reason for wishing to die in conflict with such a reason for wishing to live, is as noble as it is rare, and, thank God, as imitable as it is noble.

Notice the aspect which death wore to his faith. He speaks of it as ‘departing,’ a metaphor which does not, like many of the flattering appellations which men give that last enemy, reveal a quaking dread which cannot bear to look him in his ashen, pale face. Paul calls him gentle names, because he fears him not at all. To him all the dreadfulness, the mystery, the pain and the solitude have melted away, and death has become a mere change of place. The word literally means to unloose , and is employed to express pulling up the tent-pegs of a shifting encampment, or drawing up the anchor of a ship. In either case the image is simply that of removal. It is but striking the earthly house of this tent; it is but one more day’s march, of which we have had many already, though this is over Jordan. It is but the last day’s journey, and to-morrow there will be no packing up in the morning and resuming our weary tramp, but we shall be at home, and go no more out. So has the awful thing at the end dwindled, and the brighter and greater the land behind it shines, the smaller does it appear.

The Apostle thinks little of dying because he thinks so much of what comes after. Who is afraid of a brief journey if a meeting with dear friends long lost is at the end of it? The narrow avenue seems short, and its roughness and darkness are nothing, because Jesus Christ stands with outstretched arms at the other end, beckoning us to Himself, as mothers teach their children to walk. Whosoever is sure that he will be with Christ can afford to smile at death, and call it but a shifting of place. And whosoever feels the desire to be with Christ will not shrink from the means by which that desire is fulfilled, with the agony of revulsion that it excites in many an imagination. It will always be solemn, and its physical accompaniments of pain and struggle will always be more or less of a terror, and the parting, even for a time, from our dear ones, will always be loss, but nevertheless if we see Christ across the gulf, and know that one struggle more and we shall clasp Him with ‘inseparable hands with joy and bliss in over measure for ever,’ we shall not dread the leap.

One thought about the future should fill our minds, as it did Paul’s, that it is to be with Christ. How different that nobly simple expectation, resolving all bliss into the one element, is from the morbid curiosity as to details, which vulgarises and weakens so much of even devout anticipation of the future. To us as to him Heaven should be Christ, and Christ should be Heaven. All the rest is but accident. Golden harps and crowns, and hidden manna and white robes and thrones, and all the other representations, are but symbols of the blessedness of union with Him, or consequences of it. Immortal life and growth in perfection, both of mind and heart, and the cessation of all that disturbs, and our investiture with glory and honour, flung around our poor natures like a royal robe over a naked body, are all but the many-sided brightnesses that pour out from Him, and bathe in their rainbowed light those who are with Him.

To be with Christ is all we need. For the loving heart to be near Him is enough.

> ‘I shall clasp thee again, O soul of my soul, And with God be the rest.’

Let us not fritter away our imaginations and our hopes on the subordinate and non-essential accompaniments, but concentrate all their energy on the one central thought. Let us not lose this gracious image in a maze of symbols, that, though precious, are secondary. Let us not inquire, with curiosity that will find no answer, about the unrevealed wonders and staggering mysteries of that transcendent thought, life everlasting. Let us not acquire the habit of thinking of the future as the perfecting of our humanity, without connecting all our speculations with Him, whose presence will be all of heaven to us all. But let us keep His serene figure ever clear before our imaginations in all the blaze of the light, and try to feed our hopes and stay our hearts on this aspect of heavenly blessedness as the all-embracing one, that all, each for himself, shall be for ever conscious of Christ’s loving presence, and of the closest union with Him, a union in comparison with which the dearest and sacredest blendings of heart with heart and life with life are cold and distant. For the clearness of our hope the fewer the details the better: for the willingness with which we turn from life and face the inevitable end, it is very important that we should have that one thought disengaged from all others. The one full moon, which dims all the stars, draws the tides after it. These lesser lights may gem the darkness, and dart down white shafts of brilliance in quivering reflections on the waves, but they have no power to move their mass. It is Christ and Christ only who draws us across the gulf to be with Him, and reduces death to a mere shifting of our encampment.

This is a noble and worthy reason for wishing to die; not because Paul is disappointed and sick of life, not because he is weighed down with sorrow, or pain, or loss, or toil, but because he would like to be with his Master. He is no morbid sentimentalist, he is cherishing no unwholesome longing, he is not weary of work, he indulges in no hysterical raptures of desire. What an eloquent simplicity is in that quiet 'very far better!' It goes straight to one's heart, and says more than paragraphs of falsetto yearnings. There is nothing in such a wish to die, based on such a reason, that the most manly and wholesome piety need be ashamed of. It is a pattern for us all.

The attraction of life contends with the attraction of heaven in these verses. That is a conflict which many good men know something of, but which does not take the shape with many of us which it assumed with Paul. Drawn, as he is, by the supreme desire of close union with his Master, for the sake of which he is ready to depart, he is tugged back even more strongly by the thought that, if he stays here, he can go on working and gaining results from his labour. It does not follow that he did not expect service if he were with Christ. We may be very sure that Paul's heaven was no idle heaven, but one of happy activity and larger service. But he will not be able to help these dear friends at Philippi and elsewhere who need him, as he knows. So love to them drags at his skirts, and ties him here.

One can scarcely miss the remarkable contrast between Paul's 'To abide in the flesh is more needful for you,' and the saying of Paul's Master to people who assuredly needed His presence more than Philippi needed Paul's, 'It is expedient for you that I go away.' This is not the place to work out the profound significance of the contrast, and the questions which it raises as to whether Christ expected His work to be finished and His helpfulness ended by His death, as Paul did by his. It must suffice to have suggested the comparison.

Returning to our text, such a reason for wishing to die, held in check and overcome by such a reason for wishing to live, is great and noble. There are few of us who would not own to the mightier attraction of life; but how few of us who feel that, for ourselves personally, if we were free to think only of ourselves, we should be glad to go, because we should be closer to Christ, but that we hesitate for the sake of others whom we think we can help! Many of us cling to life with a desperate clutch, like some poor wretch pushed over a precipice and trying to dig his nails into the rock as he falls. Some of us cling to it because we dread what is beyond, and our longing to live is the measure of our dread to die. But Paul did not look forward to a thick darkness of judgment, or to nothingness. He saw in the darkness a great light, the light in the windows of his Father's house, and yet he turned willingly away to his toil in the field, and was more than content to drudge on as long as he could do anything by his work. Blessed are they who share his desire to depart, and his victorious willingness to stay here and labour! They shall find that such a life in the flesh, too, is being with Christ.

III. Thus the stream of thought passes the rapids and flows on smoothly to its final phase of peaceful acquiescence.

That is expressed very beautifully in the closing verse, 'Having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all, for your furtherance and joy in faith.' Self is so entirely overcome that he puts away his own desire to enter into their joy, and rejoices with them. He cannot yet have for himself the blessedness which his spirit seeks. Well, be it so; he will stop here and find a blessedness in seeing them growing in confidence and knowledge of Christ and in the gladness that comes from it. He gives up the hope of that higher companionship with Jesus which drew him so mightily. Well, be it so; he will have companionship with his brethren, and 'abiding with you all' may haply find, even before the day of final account, that to 'visit' Christ's little ones is to visit Christ. Therefore he fuses his opposing wishes into one. He is no more in a strait betwixt two, or unwitting what he shall choose. He chooses nothing, but accepts the appointment of a higher wisdom. There is rest for him, as for us, in ceasing from our own wishes, and laying our wills silent and passive at His feet.

The true attitude for us in which to face the unknown future, with its dim possibilities, and especially the supreme alternative of life or death, is neither desire nor reluctance, nor a hesitation compounded of both, but trustful acquiescence. Such a temper is far from indifference, and as far from agitation. In all things, and most of all in regard to these matters, it is best to hold desire in equilibrium till God shall speak. Torture not yourself with hopes or fears. They make us their slaves. Put your hand in God's hand, and let Him guide you as He will. Wishes are bad steersmen. We are only at peace when desires and dreads are, if not extinct, at all events held tightly in. Rest, and wisdom, and strength come with acquiescence. Let us say with Richard Baxter, in his simple, noble words:

> 'Lord, it belongs not to my care Whether I die or live; To love and serve Thee is my share, And that Thy grace must give.'

We may learn, too, that we may be quite sure that we shall be left here as long as we are needed. Paul knew that his stay was needful, so he could say, 'I know that I shall abide with you.' We do not, but we may be sure that if our stay is needful we shall abide. We are always tempted to think ourselves indispensable, but, thank God, nobody is necessary. There are no irreparable losses, hard as it is to believe it. We look at our work, at our families, our business, our congregations, our subjects of study, and we say to ourselves, 'What will become of them when I am gone? Everything would fall to pieces if I were withdrawn.' Do not be afraid. Depend on it, you will be left here as long as you are wanted. There are no incomplete lives and no premature removals. To the eye of faith the broken column in our cemeteries is a sentimental falsehood. No Christian life is broken short off so, but rises in a symmetrical shaft, and its capital is garlanded with amaranthine flowers in heaven. In one sense all our lives are incomplete, for they and their issues are above, out of our sight here. In another none are, for we are 'immortal till our work is done.'

The true attitude, then, for us is patient service till He withdraws us from the field. We do not count him a diligent servant who is always wearying for the hour of leaving off to strike. Be it ours to labour where He puts us, patiently waiting till ‘death’s mild curfew’ sets us free from the long day’s work, and sends us home.

Brethren! there are but two theories of life; two corresponding aspects of death. The one says, ‘To me to live is Christ, and to die gain’; the other, ‘To me to live is self, and to die is loss and despair.’ One or other must be your choice. Which?

5) Philippians 1:27-28

Philippians

CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

Php. 1:27-28

We read in the Acts of the Apostles that Philippi was the chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a ‘colony.’ Now, the connection between a Roman colony and Rome was a great deal closer than that between an English colony and England. It was, in fact, a bit of Rome on foreign soil.

The colonists and their children were Roman citizens. Their names were enrolled on the lists of Roman tribes. They were governed not by the provincial authorities, but by their own magistrates, and the law to which they owed obedience was not that of the locality, but the law of Rome.

No doubt some of the Philippian Christians possessed these privileges. They knew what it was to live in a community to which they were less closely bound than to the great city beyond the sea. They were members of a mighty polity, though they had never seen its temples nor trod its streets. They lived in Philippi, but they belonged to Rome. Hence there is a peculiar significance in the first words of our text. The rendering, ‘conversation,’ was inadequate even when it was made. It has become more so now. The word then meant ‘conduct.’ It now means little more than words. But though the phrase may express loosely the Apostle’s general idea, it loses entirely the striking metaphor under which it is couched. The Revised Version gives the literal rendering in its margin--’Behave as citizens’--though it adopts in its text a rendering which disregards the figure in the word, and contents itself with the less picturesque and vivid phrase--'let your manner of life be worthy.' But there seems no reason for leaving out the metaphor; it entirely fits in with the purpose of the Apostle and with the context.

The meaning is, Play the citizen in a manner worthy of the Gospel. Paul does not, of course, mean, Discharge your civic duties as Christian men, though some Christian Englishmen need that reminder; but the city of which these Philippians were citizens was the heavenly Jerusalem, the metropolis, the mother city of us all. He would kindle in them the consciousness of belonging to another order of things than that around them. He would stimulate their loyalty to obedience to the city's laws. As the outlying colonies of Rome had sometimes entrusted to them the task of keeping the frontiers and extending the power of the imperial city, so he stirs them up to aggressive warfare; and as in all their conflicts the little colony felt that the Empire was at its back, and therefore looked undaunted on shoals of barbarian foes, so he would have his friends at Philippi animated by lofty courage, and ever confident of final victory.

Such seems to be a general outline of these eager exhortations to the citizens of heaven in this outlying colony of earth. Let us think of them briefly in order now.

I. Keep fresh the sense of belonging to the mother city.

Paul was not only writing to Philippi, but from Rome, where he might see how, even in degenerate days, the consciousness of being a Roman gave dignity to a man, and how the idea became almost a religion. He would kindle a similar feeling in Christians.

We do belong to another polity or order of things than that with which we are connected by the bonds of flesh and sense. Our true affinities are with the mother city. True, we are here on earth, but far beyond the blue waters is another community, of which we are really members, and sometimes in calm weather we can see, if we climb to a height above the smoke of the valley where we dwell, the faint outline of the mountains of that other land, lying bathed in sunlight and dreamlike on the opal waves.

Therefore it is a great part of Christian discipline to keep a vivid consciousness that there is such an unseen order of things at present in existence. We speak popularly of ‘the future life,’ and are apt to forget that it is also the present life to an innumerable company. In fact, this film of an earthly life floats in that greater sphere which is all around it, above, beneath, touching it at every point.

It is, as Peter says, ‘ready to be unveiled.’ Yes, behind the thin curtain, through which stray beams of the brightness sometimes shoot, that other order stands, close to us, parted from us by a most slender division, only a woven veil, no great gulf or iron barrier. And before long His hand will draw it back, rattling with its rings as it is put aside, and there will blaze out what has always been, though we saw it not. It is so close, so real, so bright, so solemn, that it is worth while to try to feel its nearness; and we are so purblind, and such foolish slaves of mere sense, shaping our lives on the legal maxim that things which are non-apparent must be treated as non-existent, that it needs a constant effort not to lose the feeling altogether.

There is a present connection between all Christian men and that heavenly City. It not merely exists, but we belong to it in the measure in which we are Christians. All these figurative expressions about our citizenship being in heaven and the like, rest on the simple fact that the life of Christian men on earth and in heaven is fundamentally the same. The principles which guide, the motives which sway, the tastes and desires, affections and impulses, the objects and aims, are substantially one. A Christian man’s true affinities are with the things not seen, and with the persons there, however his surface relationship knit him to the earth. In the degree in which he is a Christian, he is a stranger here and a native of the heavens. That great City is, like some of the capitals of Europe, built on a broad river, with the mass of the metropolis on the one bank, but a wide-spreading suburb on the other. As the Trastevere is to Rome, as Southwark to London, so is earth to heaven, the bit of the city on the other side the bridge. As Philippi was to Rome, so is earth to heaven, the colony on the outskirts of the empire, ringed round by barbarians, and separated by sounding seas, but keeping open its communications, and one in citizenship.

Be it our care, then, to keep the sense of that city beyond the river vivid and constant. Amid the shows and shams of earth look ever onward to the realities 'the things which are ,' while all else only seems to be. The things which are seen are but smoke wreaths, floating for a moment across space, and melting into nothingness while we look. We do not belong to them or to the order of things to which they belong. There is no kindred between us and them. Our true relationships are elsewhere. In this present visible world all other creatures find their sufficient and homelike abode. 'Foxes have holes, and birds their roosting-places'; but man alone has not where to lay his head, nor can he find in all the width of the created universe a place in which and with which he can be satisfied. Our true habitat is elsewhere. So let us set our thoughts and affections on things above. The descendants of the original settlers in our colonies talk still of coming to England as going 'home,' though they were born in Australia, and have lived there all their lives. In like manner we Christian people should keep vigorous in our minds the thought that our true home is there where we have never been, and that here we are foreigners and wanderers.

Nor need that feeling of detachment from the present sadden our spirits, or weaken our interest in the things around us. To recognise our separation from the order of things in which we 'move,' because we belong to that majestic unseen order in which we really 'have our being,' makes life great and not small. It clothes the present with dignity beyond what is possible to it if it be not looked at in the light of its connection with 'the regions beyond.' From that connection life derives all its meaning. Surely nothing can be conceived more unmeaning, more wearisome in its monotony, more tragic in its joy, more purposeless in its efforts, than man's life, if the life of sense and time be all. Truly it is 'like a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.' 'The white radiance of eternity,' streaming through it from above, gives all its beauty to the 'dome of many-coloured glass' which men call life. They who feel most their connection with the city which hath foundations should be best able to wring the last drop of pure sweetness out of all earthly joys, to understand the meaning of all events, and to be interested most keenly, because most intelligently and most nobly, in the homeliest and smallest of the tasks and concerns of the present.

So, in all things, act as citizens of the great Mother of heroes and saints beyond the sea. Ever feel that you belong to another order, and let the thought, ‘Here we have no continuing city,’ be to you not merely the bitter lesson taught by the transiency of earthly joys and treasures and loves, but the happy result of ‘seeking for the city which hath the foundations.’

II. Another exhortation which our text gives is, Live by the laws of the city.

The Philippian colonists were governed by the code of Rome. Whatever might be the law of the province of Macedonia, they owed no obedience to it. So Christian men are not to be governed by the maxims and rules of conduct which prevail in the province, but to be governed from the capital. We ought to get from on-lookers the same character that was given to the Jews, that we are ‘a people whose laws are different from all people that be on earth,’ and we ought to reckon such a character our highest praise. Paul would have these Philippian Christians act ‘worthy of the gospel .’ That is our law.

The great good news of God manifest in the flesh, and of our salvation through Christ Jesus, is not merely to be believed, but to be obeyed. The gospel is not merely a message of deliverance, it is also a rule of conduct. It is not merely theology, it is also ethics. Like some of the ancient municipal charters, the grant of privileges and proclamation of freedom is also the sovereign code which imposes duties and shapes life. A gospel of laziness and mere exemption from hell was not Paul’s gospel. A gospel of doctrines, to be investigated, spun into a system of theology, and accepted by the understanding, and there an end, was not Paul’s gospel. He believed that the great facts which he proclaimed concerning the self-revelation of God in Christ would unfold into a sovereign law of life for every true believer, and so his one all-sufficient precept and standard of conduct are in these simple words, ‘worthy of the gospel.’

That law is all-sufficient. In the truths which constituted Paul’s gospel, that is to say, in the truths of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, lies all that men need for conduct and character. In Him we have the ‘realised ideal,’ the flawless example, and instead of a thousand precepts, for us all duty is resolved into one--be like Christ. In Him we have the mighty motive, powerful enough to overcome all forces that would draw us away, and like some strong spring to keep us in closest contact with right and goodness. Instead of a confusing variety of appeals to manifold motives of interest and conscience, and one knows not what beside, we have the one all-powerful appeal, ‘If ye love Me, keep My commandments,’ and that draws all the agitations and fluctuations of the soul after it, as the rounded fulness of the moon does the heaped waters in the tidal wave that girdles the world. In Him we have all the helps that weakness needs, for He Himself will come and dwell with us and in us, and be our righteousness and our strength.

Live ‘worthy of the gospel,’ then. How grand the unity and simplicity thus breathed into our duties and through our lives! All duties are capable of reduction to this one, and though we shall still need detailed instruction and specific precepts, we shall be set free from the pedantry of a small scrupulous casuistry, which fetters men’s limbs with microscopic bands, and shall joyfully learn how much mightier and happier is the life which is shaped by one fruitful principle, than that which is hampered by a thousand regulations.

Nor is such an all-comprehensive precept a mere toothless generality. Let a man try honestly to shape his life by it; and he will find soon enough how close it grips him, and how wide it stretches, and how deep it goes. The greatest principles of the gospel are to be fitted to the smallest duties. Indeed that combination--great principles and small duties--is the secret of all noble and calm life, and nowhere should it be so beautifully exemplified as in the life of a Christian man. The tiny round of the dew-drop is shaped by the same laws that mould the giant sphere of the largest planet. You cannot make a map of the poorest grass-field without celestial observations. The star is not too high nor too brilliant to move before us and guide simple men’s feet along their pilgrimage. ‘Worthy of the gospel’ is a most practical and stringent law.

And it is an exclusive commandment too, shutting out obedience to other codes, however common and fashionable they may be. We are governed from home, and we give no submission to provincial authorities. Never mind what people say about you, nor what may be the maxims and ways of men around you. These are no guides for you. Public opinion [which only means for most of us the hasty judgments of the half-dozen people who happen to be nearest us], use and wont, the customs of our set, the notions of the world about duty, with all these we have nothing to do. The censures or the praise of men need not move us. We report to headquarters, and subordinates' estimate need be nothing to us. Let us then say, 'With me it is a very small matter that I should be judged of men's judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord.' When we may be misunderstood or harshly dealt with, let us lift our eyes to the lofty seat where the Emperor sits, and remove ourselves from men's sentences by our 'appeal unto Cæsar'; and, in all varieties of circumstances and duty, let us take the Gospel which is the record of Christ's life, death, and character, for our only law, and labour that, whatever others may think of us, we 'may be well pleasing to Him.'

III. Further, our text bids the colonists fight for the advance of the dominions of the City.

Like the armed colonists whom Russia and other empires had on their frontier, who received their bits of land on condition of holding the border against the enemy, and pushing it forward a league or two when possible, Christian men are set down in their places to be 'wardens of the marches,' citizen soldiers who hold their homesteads on a military tenure, and are to 'strive together for the faith of the gospel.'

There is no space here and now to go into details of the exposition of this part of our text. Enough to say in brief that we are here exhorted to 'stand fast'; that is, as it were, the defensive side of our warfare, maintaining our ground and repelling all assaults; that this successful resistance is to be 'in one spirit,' inasmuch as all resistance depends on our poor feeble spirits being ingrafted and rooted in God's Spirit, in vital union with whom we may be knit together into a unity which shall oppose a granite breakwater to the onrushing tide of opposition; that in addition to the unmoved resistance which will not yield an inch of the sacred soil to the enemy, we are to carry the war onwards, and, not content with holding our own, are with one mind to strive together for the faith of the gospel. There is to be discipline, then, and compact organisation, like that of the legions whom Paul, from his prison among the Prætorian guards, had often seen shining in steel, moving like a machine, grim, irresistible. The cause for which we are to fight is the faith of the gospel, an expression which almost seems to justify the opinion that ‘the faith’ here means, as it does in later usage, the sum and substance of that which is believed. But even here the word may have its usual meaning of the subjective act of trust in the gospel, and the thought may be that we are unitedly to fight for its growing power in our own hearts and in the hearts of others. In any case, the idea is plainly here that Christian men are set down in the world, like the frontier guard, to push the conquests of the empire, and to win more ground for their King.

Such work is ever needed, never more needed than now. In this day when a wave of unbelief seems passing over society, when material comfort and worldly prosperity are so dazzlingly attractive to so many, the solemn duty is laid upon us with even more than usual emphasis, and we are called upon to feel more than ever the oneness of all true Christians, and to close up our ranks for the fight. All this can only be done after we have obeyed the other injunctions of this text. The degree in which we feel that we belong to another order of things than this around us, and the degree in which we live by the Imperial laws, will determine the degree in which we can fight with vigour for the growth of the dominion of the City. Be it ours to cherish the vivid consciousness that we are here dwelling not in the cities of the Canaanites, but, like the father of the faithful, in tents pitched at their gates, nomads in the midst of a civic life to which we do not belong, in order that we may breathe a hallowing influence through it, and win hearts to the love of Him whom to imitate is perfection, whom to serve is freedom.

IV. The last exhortation to the colonists is, Be sure of victory.

‘In nothing terrified by your adversaries,’ says Paul. He uses a very vivid, and some people might think, a very vulgar metaphor here. The word rendered terrified properly refers to a horse shying or plunging at some object. It is generally things half seen and mistaken for something more dreadful than themselves that make horses shy; and it is usually a half-look at adversaries, and a mistaken estimate of their strength, that make Christians afraid. Go up to your fears and speak to them, and as ghosts are said to do, they will generally fade away. So we may go into the battle, as the rash French minister said he did into the Franco-German war, ‘with a light heart,' and that for good reasons. We have no reason to fear for ourselves. We have no reason to fear for the ark of God. We have no reason to fear for the growth of Christianity in the world. Many good men in this time seem to be getting half-ashamed of the gospel, and some preachers are preaching it in words which sound like an apology rather than a creed. Do not let us allow the enemy to overpower our imaginations in that fashion. Do not let us fight as if we expected to be beaten, always casting our eyes over our shoulders, even while we are advancing, to make sure of our retreat, but let us trust our gospel, and trust our King, and let us take to heart the old admonition, 'Lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid.'

Such courage is a prophecy of victory. Such courage is based upon a sure hope. 'Our citizenship is in heaven, from whence also we look for the Lord Jesus as Saviour.' The little outlying colony in this far-off edge of the empire is ringed about by wide-stretching hosts of dusky barbarians. Far as the eye can reach their myriads cover the land, and the watchers from the ramparts might well be dismayed if they had only their own resources to depend on. But they know that the Emperor in his progress will come to this sorely beset outpost, and their eyes are fixed on the pass in the hills where they expect to see the waving banners and the gleaming spears. Soon, like our countrymen in Lucknow, they will hear the music and the shouts that tell that He is at hand. Then when He comes, He will raise the siege and scatter all the enemies as the chaff of the threshing-floor, and the colonists who held the post will go with Him to the land which they have never seen, but which is their home, and will, with the Victor, sweep in triumph 'through the gates into the city.'

6) Philippians 2:1-4

Philippians

A PLEA FOR UNITY

Php. 2:1-4 [R.V.].

There was much in the state of the Philippian church which filled Paul's heart with thankfulness, and nothing which drew forth his censures, but these verses, with their extraordinary energy of pleading, seem to hint that there was some defect in the unity of heart and mind of members of the community. It did not amount to discord, but the concord was not as full as it might have been. There is another hint pointing in the same direction in the appeal to Paul's true yoke-fellow, in chapter 4:, to help two good women who, though they had laboured much in the gospel, had not managed to keep 'of the same mind in the Lord,' and there is perhaps a still further indication that Paul's sensitive heart was conscious of the beginnings of strife in the air, in the remarkable emphasis with which, at the very outset of the letter, he over and over again pours out his confidence and affection on them 'all,' as if aware of some incipient rifts in their brotherhood. There are always forces at work which tend to part the most closely knit unities even when these are consecrated by Christian faith. Where there are no dogmatical grounds of discord, nor any open alienation, there may still be the beginnings of separation, and a chill breeze may be felt even when the sun is shining with summer warmth. Wasps are attracted by the ripest fruit.

The words of our text present no special difficulty, and bring before us a well-worn subject, but it has at least this element of interest, that it grips very tightly the deepest things in Christian life, and that none of us can truly say that we do not need to listen to Paul's pleading voice. We may notice the general division of his thoughts in these words, in that he puts first the heart-touching motives for listening to his appeal, next describes with the exuberance of earnestness the fair ideal of unity to which he exhorts, and finally touches on the hindrances to its realisation, and the victorious powers which will overcome these.

I. The motives and bonds of Christian unity.

It is not a pedantic dissection [and vivisection] of the Apostle's earnest words, if we point out that they fall into four clauses, of which the first and third ['any comfort in Christ, any fellowship of the Spirit'] urge the objective facts of Christian revelation, and the second and fourth ['any consolation of love, any tender mercies and compassions'] put emphasis on the subjective emotions of Christian experience. We may lay the warmth of all of these on our own hearts, and shall find that these hearts will be drawn into the blessedness of Christian unity in the precise measure in which they are affected by them.

As to the first of them, it may be suggested that here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, the true idea of the word rendered ‘comfort’ is rather ‘exhortation.’ The Apostle is probably not so much pointing to the consolations for trouble which come from Jesus, as to the stimulus to unity which flows from Him. It would rather weaken the force of Paul’s appeal, if the two former grounds of it were so nearly identical as they are, if the one is based upon ‘comfort’ and the other on ‘consolation.’ The Apostle is true to his dominant belief, that in Jesus Christ there lies, and from Him flows, the sovereign exhortation that rouses men to ‘whatsoever things are lovely and of good report.’ In Him we shall find in the measure in which we are in Him, the most persuasive of all exhortations to unity, and the most omnipotent of all powers to enforce it. Shall we not be glad to be in the flock of the Good Shepherd, and to preserve the oneness which He gave His life to establish? Can we live in Him, and not share His love for His sheep? Surely those who have felt the benediction of His breath on their foreheads when He prayed ‘that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee,’ cannot but do what is in them to fulfil that prayer, and to bring a little nearer the realisation of their Lord’s purpose in it, ‘that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me.’ Surely if we lay to heart, and enter into sympathy with, the whole life and death of Jesus Christ, we shall not fail to feel the dynamic power fusing us together, nor fail to catch the exhortation to unity which comes from the lips that said, ‘I am the vine, ye are the branches.’

The Apostle next bases his appeal for unity on the experiences of the Philippian Christians, and on their memories of the comfort which they have tasted in the exercise of mutual love. Our hearts find it hard to answer the question whether they are more blessed when their love passes out from them in a warm stream to others, or when the love of others pours into them. To love and to be loved equally elevate courage, and brace the weakest for calm endurance and high deeds. The man who loves and knows that he is loved will be a hero. It must always seem strange and inexplicable that a heart which has known the enlargement and joy of love given and received, should ever fall so far beneath itself as to be narrowed and troubled by nourishing feelings of separation and alienation from those whom it might have gathered into its embrace, and thereby communicated, and in communicating acquired, courage and strength. We have all known the comfort of love; should it not impel us to live in ‘the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace’? Men around us are meant to be our helpers, and to be helped by us, and the one way to secure both is to walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us.

But Paul has still further heart-melting motives to urge. He turns the Philippians’ thoughts to their fellowship in the Spirit. All believers have been made to drink into one spirit, and in that common participation in the same supernatural life they partake of a oneness, which renders any clefts or divisions unnatural, and contradictory of the deepest truths of their experience. The branch can no more shiver itself off from the tree, or keep the life sap enclosed within itself, than one possessor of the common gift of the Spirit can separate himself from the others who share it. We are one in Him; let us be one in heart and mind. The final appeal is connected with the preceding, inasmuch as it lays emphasis on the emotions which flow from the one life common to all believers. That participation in the Spirit naturally leads in each participant to ‘tender mercies and compassions’ directed to all sharers in it. The very mark of truly possessing the Spirit’s life is a nature full of tenderness and swift to pity, and they who have experienced the heaven on earth of such emotions should need no other motive than the memory of its blessedness, to send them out among their brethren, and even into a hostile world, as the apostles of love, the bearers of tender mercies, and the messengers of pity.

II. The fair ideal which would complete the Apostle’s joy.

We may gather from the rich abundance of motives which the Apostle suggests before he comes to present his exhortation, that he suspected the existence of some tendencies in the opposite direction in Philippi, and possibly the same conclusion may be drawn from the exuberance of the exhortation itself, and from its preceding the dehortation which follows. He does not scold, he scarcely even rebukes, but he begins by trying to melt away any light frost that had crept over the warmth of the Philippians’ love; and having made that preparation, he sets before them with a fulness which would be tautological but for the earnestness that throbs in it, the ideal of unity, and presses it upon them still more meltingly, by telling them that their realisation of it will be the completion of his joy. The main injunction is ‘that ye be of the same mind,’ and that is followed by three clauses which are all but exactly synonymous with it, ‘having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.’ The resemblance of the latter clause to the main exhortation is still more complete, if we read with Revised Version [margin] ‘of the same mind,’ but in any case the exhortations are all practically the same. The unity which Paul would fain see, is far deeper and more vital than mere unanimity of opinion, or identity of polity, or co-operation in practice. The clauses which expand it guard us against the mistake of thinking that intellectual or practical oneness is all that is meant by Christian unity. They are ‘of the same mind,’ who have the same wishes, aims, outlooks, the same hopes and fears, and who are one in the depths of their being. They have ‘the same love,’ all similarly loving and being loved, the same emotion filling each heart. They are united in soul, or ‘with accordant souls’ having, and knowing that they have them, akin, allied to one another, moving to a common end, and aware of their oneness. The unity which Christian people have hitherto reached is at its best but a small are of the great circle which the Apostle drew, and none of us can read these fervid words without shame. His joy is not yet fulfilled.

That exhortation to be ‘of the same mind,’ not only points to a deep and vital unity, but suggests that the ground of the unity is to be found without us, in the common direction of our ‘minds,’ which means far more than popular phraseology means by it, to an external object. It is having our hearts directed to Christ that makes us one. He is the bond and centre of unity. We have just said that the object is external, but that has to be taken with a modification, for the true basis of unity is the common possession of ‘Christ in us.’ It is when we have this mind in us ‘which was also in Christ Jesus,’ that we have ‘the same mind’ one with another.

The very keynote of the letter is joy, as may be seen by a glance over it. He joys and rejoices with them all, but his cup is not quite full. One more precious drop is needed to make it run over. Probably the coldness which he had heard of between Euodias and Syntyche had troubled him, and if he could be sure of the Philippians’ mutual love he would rejoice in his prison.

We cannot tell whether that loving and careful heart is still aware of the fortunes of the Church, but we know of a more loving and careful heart which is, and we cannot but believe that the alienations and discords of His professed followers bring some shadow over the joy of Christ. Do we not hear His voice again asking, ‘what was it that you disputed among yourselves by the way?’ and must we not, like the disciples, ‘hold our peace’ when that question is asked? May we not hear a voice sweeter in its cadence, and more melting in its tenderness than Paul’s, saying to us ‘Fulfil ye My joy that ye be of the same mind.’

III. The hindrances and helps to being of the same mind.

The original has no verb in front of ‘nothing’ in verse 3, and it seems better to supply the one which has been so frequently used in the preceding exhortation than ‘doing,’ which carries us too abruptly into the outer region of action. Paul indicates two main hindrances to being of the same mind, namely, faction and vainglory on the one hand, and self-absorption on the other, and opposed to each the tone of mind which is its best conqueror. Faction and vainglory are best defeated by humility and unselfishness. As to the former, the love of making or heading little cliques in religion or politics or society, has oftenest its roots in nothing loftier than vanity or pride. Many a man who poses as guided by staunch adherence to conviction is really impelled only by a wish to make himself notorious as a leader, and loves to talk of ‘those with whom I act.’ There is a strong admixture of a too lofty estimate of self in most of the disagreements of Christian people. They expect more deference than they get, or their judgment is not taken as law, or their place is not so high as they think is their due, or in a hundred different ways self-love is wounded, and self-esteem is inflamed. All this is true in reference to the smaller communities of congregations, and with the necessary modifications it is quite as true in reference to the larger aggregations which we call churches or denominations. If all in their work that is directly due to faction and vainglory were struck out there would be great gaps in their activities, and many a flourishing scheme would fall dead.

The cure for all these evils is lowliness of mind. That is a Christian word. Used by Greek thinkers, it meant abjectness; and it is one conspicuous instance of the change effected in morals by Christian teaching that it has become the name of a virtue. We are to dwell not on our gifts but on our imperfections, and if we judge ourselves with constant reference to the standard in Christ's life, we shall need little more to bring us to our knees in true lowliness of mind. The man who has been forgiven so many talents will not be in a hurry to take his brother by the throat and leave the marks of his fingers for tenpence.

Christian unity is further broken by selfishness. To be absorbed in self is of course to have the heart shut to others. Our own interests, inclinations, possessions, when they assert themselves in our lives, build up impassable barriers between us and our fellows. To live to self is the real root of every sin as it is of all loveless life. The Apostle uses careful language: he admits the necessity for attention to our 'own things,' and only requires that we should look 'also' on the things of others. His cure for the hindrances to Christian unity is very complete, very practical, and very simple. Each counting other better than himself, and each 'looking also to the things of others' seem very homely and pedestrian virtues, but homely as they are we shall find that they grip us tight, if we honestly try to practise them in our daily lives, and we shall find also that the ladder which has its foot on earth has its top in the heavens, and that the practice of humility and unselfishness leads straight to having 'the mind which was also in Christ Jesus.'

7) **Philippians 2:5-8**

Philippians

THE DESCENT OF THE WORD

Php. 2:5-8 [R.V.].

The purpose of the Apostle in this great passage must ever be kept clearly in view. Our Lord's example is set forth as the pattern of that unselfish disregard of one's own things, and devotion to the things of others, which has just been urged on the Philippians, and the mind which was in Him is presented as the model on which they are to fashion their minds. This purpose in some measure explains some of the peculiarities of the language here, and may help to guide us through some of the intricacies and doubtful points in the interpretation of the words. It explains why Christ's death is looked at in them only in its bearing upon Himself, as an act of obedience and of condescension, and why even that death in which Jesus stands most inimitable and unique is presented as capable of being imitated by us. The general drift of these verses is clear, but there are few Scripture passages which have evoked more difference of opinion as to the precise meaning of nearly every phrase. To enter on the subtle discussions involved in the adequate exposition of the words would far exceed our limits, and we must perforce content ourselves with a slight treatment of them, and aim chiefly at bringing out their practical side.

The broad truth which stands sun-clear amid all diverse interpretations is--that the Incarnation, Life, and Death are the great examples of living humility and self-sacrifice. To be born was His supreme act of condescension. It was love which made Him assume the vesture of human flesh. To die was the climax of His voluntary obedience, and of His devotion to us.

I. The height from which Jesus descended.

The whole strange conception of birth as being the voluntary act of the Person born, and as being the most stupendous instance of condescension in the world's history, necessarily reposes on the clear conviction that He had a prior existence so lofty that it was an all but infinite descent to become man. Hence Paul begins with the most emphatic assertion that he who bore the name of Jesus lived a divine life before He was born. He uses a very strong word which is given in the margin of the Revised Version, and might well have been in its text. 'Being originally' as the word accurately means, carries our thoughts back not only to a state which preceded Bethlehem and the cradle, but to that same timeless eternity from which the prologue of the Gospel of John partially draws the veil when it says, 'In the beginning was the Word,' and to which Jesus Himself more obscurely pointed when He said, 'Before Abraham was I am.'

Equally emphatic in another direction is Paul's next expression, 'In the form of God,' for 'form' means much more than 'shape.' I would point out the careful selection in this passage of three words to express three ideas which are often by hasty thought regarded as identical. We read of 'the form of God' [verse 6], 'the likeness of men' [verse 7], and 'in fashion as a man.' Careful investigation of these two words 'form' and 'fashion' has established a broad distinction between them, the former being more fixed, the latter referring to that which is accidental and outward, which may be fleeting and unsubstantial. The possession of the form involves participation in the essence also. Here it implies no corporeal idea as if God had a material form, but it implies also much more than a mere apparent resemblance. He who is in the form of God possesses the essential divine attributes. Only God can be 'in the form of God': man is made in the likeness of God, but man is not 'in the form of God.' Light is thrown on this lofty phrase by its antithesis with the succeeding expression in the next verse, 'the form of a servant,' and as that is immediately explained to refer to Christ's assumption of human nature, there is no room for candid doubt that 'being originally in the form of God' is a deliberately asserted claim of the divinity of Christ in His pre-existent state.

As we have already pointed out, Paul soars here to the same lofty height to which the prologue of John's Gospel rises, and he echoes our Lord's own words about 'the glory which I had with Thee before the foundation of the world.' Our thoughts are carried back before creatures were, and we become dimly aware of an eternal distinction in the divine nature which only perfects its eternal oneness. Such an eternal participation in the divine nature before all creation and before time is the necessary pre-supposition of the worth of Christ's life as the pattern of humility and self-sacrifice. That pre-supposition gives all its meaning, its pathos, and its power, to His gentleness, and love, and death. The facts are different in their significance, and different in their power to bless and gladden, to purge and sway the soul, according as we contemplate them with or without the background of His pre-existent divinity. The view which regards Him as simply a man, like all the rest of us, beginning to be when He was born, takes away from His example its mightiest constraining force. Only when we with all our hearts believe 'that the Word became flesh,' do we discern the overwhelming depths of condescension manifested in the Birth. If it was not the incarnation of God, it has no claim on the hearts of men.

II. The wondrous act of descent.

The stages in that long descent are marked out with a precision and definiteness which would be intolerable presumption, if Paul were speaking only his own thoughts, or telling what he had seen with his own eyes. They begin with what was in the mind of the eternal Word before He began His descent, and whilst yet He is ‘in the form of God.’ He stands on the lofty level before the descent begins, and in spirit makes the surrender, which, stage by stage, is afterwards to be wrought out in act. Before any of these acts there must have been the disposition of mind and will which Paul describes as ‘counting it not a thing to be grasped to be on an equality with God.’ He did not regard the being equal to God as a prey or treasure to be clutched and retained at all hazards. That sweeps our thoughts into the dim regions far beyond Calvary or Bethlehem, and is a more overwhelming manifestation of love than are the acts of lowly gentleness and patient endurance which followed in time. It included and transcended them all.

It was the supreme example of not ‘looking on one’s own things.’ And what made Him so count? What but infinite love. To rescue men, and win them to Himself and goodness, and finally to lift them to the place from which He came down for them, seemed to Him to be worth the temporary surrender of that glory and majesty. We can but bow and adore the perfect love. We look more deeply into the depths of Deity than unaided eyes could ever penetrate, and what we see is the movement in that abyss of Godhead of purest surrender which, by beholding, we are to assimilate.

Then comes the wonder of wonders, ‘He emptied Himself.’ We cannot enter here on the questions which gather round that phrase, and which give it a factitious importance in regard to present controversies. All that we would point out now is that while the Apostle distinctly treats the Incarnation as being a laying aside of what made the Word to be equal with God, he says nothing, on which an exact determination can be based, of the degree or particulars in which the divine nature of our Lord was limited by His humanity. The fact he asserts, and that is all. The scene in the Upper Chamber was but a feeble picture of what had already been done behind the veil. Unless He had laid aside His garments of divine glory and majesty, He would have had no human flesh from which to strip the robes. Unless He had willed to take the ‘form of a servant,’ He would not have had a body to gird with the slave’s towel. The Incarnation, which made all His acts of lowly love possible, was a greater act of lowly love than those which flowed from it. Looking at it from earth, men say, ‘Jesus was born.’ Looking at it from heaven, Angels say, ‘He emptied Himself.’

But how did He empty Himself? By taking the form of a slave, that is to God. And how did He take the form of a slave? By ‘becoming in the likeness of men.’ Here we are specially to note the remarkable language implying that what is true of none other in all the generations of men is true of Him. That just as ‘emptying Himself’ was His own act, also the taking the form of a slave by His being born was His own act, and was more truly described as a ‘becoming.’ We note, too, the strong contrast between that most remarkable word and the ‘being originally’ which is used to express the mystery of divine pre-existence.

Whilst His becoming in the likeness of men stands in strong contrast with ‘being originally’ and energetically expresses the voluntariness of our Lord’s birth, the ‘likeness of men’ does not cast any doubt on the reality of His manhood, but points to the fact that ‘though certainly perfect man, He was by reason of the divine nature present in Him not simply and merely man.’

Here then the beginning of Christ’s manhood is spoken of in terms which are only explicable, if it was a second form of being, preceded by a pre-existent form, and was assumed by His own act. The language, too, demands that that humanity should have been true essential manhood. It was in ‘the form’ of man and possessed of all essential attributes. It was in ‘the likeness’ of man possessed of all external characteristics, and yet was something more. It summed up human nature, and was its representative.

III. The obedience which attended the descent.

It was not merely an act of humiliation and condescension to become man, but all His life was one long act of lowliness. Just as He ‘emptied Himself’ in the act of becoming in the ‘likeness of men,’ so He ‘humbled Himself,’ and all along the course of His earthly life He chose constant lowliness and to be ‘despised and rejected of men.’ It was the result moment by moment of His own will that to the eyes of men He presented ‘no form nor comeliness,’ and that will was moment by moment steadied in its unmoved humility, because He perpetually looked ‘not on His own things, but on the things of others.’ The guise He presented to the eyes of men was ‘the fashion of a man.’ That word corresponds exactly to Paul’s carefully selected term, and makes emphatic both its superficial and its transitory character.

The lifelong humbling of Himself was further manifested in His becoming ‘obedient.’ That obedience was, of course, to God. And here we cannot but pause to ask the question, How comes it that to the man Jesus obedience to God was an act of humiliation? Surely there is but one explanation of such a statement. For all men but this one to be God’s slaves is their highest honour, and to speak of obedience as humiliation is a sheer absurdity.

Not only was the life of Jesus so perfect an example of unbroken obedience that He could safely front His adversaries with the question, ‘Which of you convinceth Me of sin?’ and with the claim to ‘do always the things that pleased Him,’ but the obedience to the Father was perfected in His death. Consider the extraordinary fact that a man’s death is the crowning instance of his humility, and ask yourselves the question, Who then is this who chose to be born, and stooped in the act of dying? His death was obedience to God, because by it He carried out the Father’s will for the salvation of the world, His death is the greatest instance of unselfish self-sacrifice, and the loftiest example of looking on the ‘things of others’ that the world has ever seen. It dwindles in significance, in pathos, and in power to move us to imitation unless we clearly see the divine glory of the eternal Lord as the background of the gentle lowliness of the Man of Sorrows, and the Cross. No theory of Christ’s life and death but that He was born for us, and died for us, either explains the facts and the apostolic language concerning them, or leaves them invested with their full power to melt our hearts and mould our lives. There is a possibility of imitating Him in the most transcendent of His acts. The mind may be in us which was in Christ Jesus. That it may, His death must first be the ground of our hope, and then we must make it the pattern of our lives, and draw from it the power to shape them after His blessed Example.

8) **Philippians 2:9-11**

Philippians

THE ASCENT OF JESUS

Php. 2:9-11 [R.V.].

‘He that humbleth himself shall be exalted,’ said Jesus. He is Himself the great example of that law. The Apostle here goes on to complete his picture of the Lord Jesus as our pattern. In previous verses we had the solemn steps of His descent, and the lifelong humility and obedience of the incarnate Son, the man Christ Jesus. Here we have the wondrous ascent which reverses all the former process. Our text describes the reflex motion by which Jesus is borne back to the same level as that from which the descent began.

We have

I. The act of exaltation which forms the contrast and the parallel to the descent.

‘God highly exalted Him.’ The Apostle coins an emphatic word which doubly expresses elevation, and in its grammatical form shows that it indicates a historical fact. That elevation was a thing once accomplished on this green earth; that is to say it came to pass in the fact of our Lord’s ascension when from some fold of the Mount of Olives He was borne upwards and, with blessing hands, was received into the Shechinah cloud, the glory of which hid Him from the upward-gazing eyes.

It is plain that the ‘Him’ of whom this tremendous assertion is made, must be the same as the ‘He’ of whom the previous verses spoke, that is, the Incarnate Jesus. It is the manhood which is exalted. His humiliation consisted in His becoming man, but His exaltation does not consist in His laying aside His humanity. It is not a transient but an eternal union into which in the Incarnation it entered with divinity. Henceforward we have to think of Him in all the glory of His heavenly state as man, and as truly and completely in the ‘likeness of men’ as when He walked with bleeding feet on the flinty road of earthly life. He now bears for ever the ‘form of God’ and ‘the fashion of a man.’

Here I would pause for a moment to point out that the calm tone of this reference to the ascension indicates that it was part of the recognised Christian beliefs, and implies that it had been familiar long before the date of this Epistle, which itself dates from not more than at the most thirty years from the death of Christ. Surely that lapse of time is far too narrow to allow of such a belief having sprung up, and been universally accepted about a dead man, who all the while was lying in a nameless grave.

The descent is presented as His act, but decorum and truth required that the exaltation should be God’s act. ‘He humbled Himself,’ but ‘God exalted Him.’ True, He sometimes represented Himself as the Agent of His own Resurrection and Ascension, and established a complete parallel between His descent and His ascent, as when He said, ‘I came out from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go unto the Father.’ He was no less obedient to the Father’s will when He ascended up on high, than He was when He came down to earth, and whilst, from one point of view, His Resurrection and Ascension were as truly His own acts as were His birth and His death, from another, He had to pray, ‘And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine own self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was.’ The Titans presumptuously scaled the heavens, according to the old legend, but the Incarnate Lord returned to ‘His own calm home, His habitation from eternity,’ was exalted thither by God, in token to the universe that the Father approved the Son’s descent, and that the work which the Son had done was indeed, as He declared it to be, ‘finished.’ By exalting Him, the Father not merely reinstated the divine Word in its eternal union with God, but received into the cloud of glory the manhood which the Word had assumed.

II. The glory of the name of Jesus.

What is the name ‘which is above every name’? It is the name Jesus. It is to be noted that Paul scarcely ever uses that simple appellative. There are, roughly speaking, about two hundred instances in which he names our Lord in his Epistles, and there are only four places, besides this, in which he uses this as his own, and two in which he, as it were, puts it into the mouth of an enemy. Probably then, some special reason led to its occurrence here, and it is not difficult, I think, to see what that reason is. The simple personal name was given indeed with reference to His work, but had been borne by many a Jewish child before Mary called her child Jesus, and the fact that it is this common name which is exalted above every name, brings out still more strongly the thought already dwelt upon, that what is thus exalted is the manhood of our Lord. The name which expressed His true humanity, which showed His full identification with us, which was written over His Cross, which perhaps shaped the taunt 'He saved others, Himself He cannot save,'--that name God has lifted high above all names of council and valour, of wisdom and might, of authority and rule. It is shrined in the hearts of millions who render to it perfect trust, unconditional obedience, absolute loyalty. Its growing power, and the warmth of personal love which it evokes, in centuries and lands so far removed from the theatre of His life, is a unique thing in the world's history. It reigns in heaven.

But Paul is not content with simply asserting the sovereign glory of the name of Jesus. He goes on to set it forth as being what no other name borne by man can be, the ground and object of worship, when he declares, that 'in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.' The words are quoted from the second Isaiah, and occur in one of the most solemn and majestic utterances of the monotheism of the Old Testament. And Paul takes these words, undeterred by the declaration which precede them, 'I Am am God and there is none else,' applies them to Jesus, to the manhood of our Lord. Bowing the knee is of course prayer, and in these great words the issue of the work of Jesus is unmistakably set forth, as not only being that He has declared God to men, who through Him are drawn to worship the Father, but that their emotions of love, reverence, worship, are turned to Him , though as the Apostle is careful immediately to note, they are not thereby intercepted from, but directed to, the glory of God the Father. In the eternities before His descent, there was equality with God, and when He returns, it is to the Father, who in Him has become the object of adoration, and round whose throne gather with bended knees all those who in Jesus see the Father.

The Apostle still further dwells on the glory of the name as that of the acknowledged Lord. And here we have with significant variation in strong contrast to the previous name of Jesus, the full title 'Jesus Christ Lord.'

That is almost as unusual in its completeness as the other in its simplicity, and it comes in here with tremendous energy, reminding us of the great act to which we owe our redemption, and of all the prophecies and hopes which, from of old, had gathered round the persistent hope of the coming Messiah, while the name of Lord proclaims His absolute dominion. The knee is bowed in reverence, the tongue is vocal in confession. That confession is incomplete if either of these three names is falteringly uttered, and still more so, if either of them is wanting. The Jesus whom Christians confess is not merely the man who was born in Bethlehem and known among men as 'Jesus the carpenter.' In these modern days, His manhood has been so emphasised as to obscure His Messiahship and to obliterate His dominion, and alas! there are many who exalt Him by the name that Mary gave Him, who turn away from the name of Jesus as 'Hebrew old clothes,' and from the name of Lord as antiquated superstition. But in all the lowliness and gentleness of Jesus there were not wanting lofty claims to be the Christ of whom prophets and righteous men of old spake, and whose coming many a generation desired to see and died without the sight, and still loftier and more absolute claims to be invested with 'all power in heaven and earth,' and to sit down with the Father on His throne. It is dangerous work to venture to toss aside two of these three names, and to hope that if we pronounce the third of them, Jesus, with appreciation, it will not matter if we do not name Him either Christ or Lord.

If it is true that the manhood of Jesus is thus exalted, how wondrous must be the kindred between the human and the divine, that it should be capable of this, that it should dwell in the everlasting burnings of the Divine Glory and not be consumed! How blessed for us the belief that our Brother wields all the forces of the universe, that the human love which Jesus had when He bent over the sick and comforted the sorrowful, is at the centre. Jesus is Lord, the Lord is Jesus!

The Psalmist was moved to a rapture of thanksgiving when he thought of man as 'made a little lower than the angels, and crowned with glory and honour,' but when we think of the Man Jesus 'sitting at the right hand of God,' the Psalmist's words seem pale and poor, and we can repeat them with a deeper meaning and a fuller emphasis, 'Thou madest Him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands, Thou hast put all things under His feet.'

III. The universal glory of the name.

By the three classes into which the Apostle divides creation, 'things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth,' he simply intends to declare, that Jesus is the object of all worship, and the words are not to be pressed as containing dogmatic assertions as to the different classes mentioned. But guided by other words of Scripture, we may permissibly think that the 'things in heaven' tell us that the angels who do not need His mediation learn more of God by His work and bow before His throne. We cannot be wrong in believing that the glory of His work stretches far beyond the limits of humanity, and that His kingdom numbers other subjects than those who draw human breath. Other lips than ours say with a great voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that hath been slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.'

The things on earth are of course men, and the words encourage us to dim hopes about which we cannot dogmatise of a time when all the wayward self-seeking and self-tormenting children of men shall have learned to know and love their best friend, and 'there shall be one flock and one shepherd.'

'Things under the earth' seems to point to the old thought of 'Sheol' or 'Hades' or a separate state of the dead. The words certainly suggest that those who have gone from us are not unconscious nor cut off from the true life, but are capable of adoration and confession. We cannot but remember the old belief that Jesus in His death 'descended into Hell,' and some of us will not forget Fra Angelico's picture of the open doorway with a demon crushed beneath the fallen portal, and the crowd of eager faces and outstretched hands swarming up the dark passage, to welcome the entering Christ. Whatever we may think of that ancient representation, we may at least be sure that, wherever they are, the dead in Christ praise and reverence and love.

IV. The glory of the Father in the glory of the name of Jesus.

Knees bent and tongues confessing the absolute dominion of Jesus Christ could only be offence and sin if He were not one with the Father. But the experience of all the thousands since Paul wrote, whose hearts have been drawn in reverent and worshipping trust to the Son, has verified the assertion, that to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord diverts no worship from God, but swells and deepens the ocean of praise that breaks round the throne. If it is true, and only if it is true, that in the life and death of Jesus all previous revelations of the Father's heart are surpassed, if it is true and only if it is true, as He Himself said, that 'I and the Father are one,' can Paul's words here be anything but an incredible paradox. But unless these great words close and crown the Apostle's glowing vision, it is maimed and imperfect, and Jesus interposes between loving hearts and God. One could almost venture to believe that at the back of Paul's mind, when he wrote these words, was some remembrance of the great prayer, 'I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou gavest Me to do.' When the Son is glorified we glorify the Father, and the words of our text may well be remembered and laid to heart by any who will not recognise the deity of the Son, because it seems to them to dishonour the Father. Their honour is inseparable and their glory one.

There is a sense in which Jesus is our example even in His ascent and exaltation, just as He was in His descent and humiliation. The mind which was in Him is for us the pattern for earthly life, though the deeds in which that mind was expressed, and especially His 'obedience to the death of the Cross,' are so far beyond any self-sacrifice of ours, and are inimitable, unique, and needing no repetition while the world lasts. And as we can imitate His unexampled sacrifice, so we may share His divine glory, and, resting on His own faithful word, may follow the calm motion of His Ascension, assured that where He is there we shall be also, and that the manhood which is exalted in Him is the prophecy that all who love Him will share His glory. The question for us all is, have we in us 'the mind that was in Christ'? and the other question is, what is that name to us? Can we say, 'Thy mighty name salvation is'? If in our deepest hearts we grasp that name, and with unfaltering lips can say that 'there is none other name under heaven given amongst men whereby we must be saved but the name of Jesus,' then we shall know that

‘To us with Thy dear name are given, Pardon, and holiness, and heaven.’

9) **Philippians 2:12-13**

Philippians

WORK OUT YOUR OWN SALVATION

Php. 2:12-13.

‘What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder!’ Here are, joined together, in the compass of one practical exhortation, the truths which, put asunder, have been the war-cries and shibboleths of contending sects ever since. Faith in a finished salvation, and yet work ; God working all in me, and yet I able and bound to work likewise; God upholding and sustaining His child to the very end; ‘perfecting that which concerns him,’ making his salvation certain and sure, and yet the Christian working ‘with fear and trembling,’ lest he should be a castaway and come short of the grace of God;--who does not recognise in these phrases the mottoes that have been written on the opposing banners in many a fierce theological battle, waged with much harm to both sides, and ending in no clear victory for either? Yet here they are blended in the words of one who was no less profound a thinker than any that have come after, and who had the gift of a divine inspiration to boot.

Not less remarkable than the fusion here of apparent antagonisms, the harmonising of apparent opposites, is the intensely practical character of the purpose for which they are adduced at all. Paul has no idea of giving his disciples a lesson in abstract theology, or laying for them a foundation of a philosophy of free will and divine sovereignty; he is not merely communicating to these Philippians truths for their creed, but precepts for their deeds. The Bible knows nothing of an unpractical theology, but, on the other hand, the Bible knows still less of an untheological morality. It digs deep, bottoming the simplest right action upon right thinking, and going down to the mountain bases on which the very pillars of the universe rest, in order to lay there, firm and immovable, the courses of the temple of a holy life. Just as little as Scripture gives countenance to the error that makes religion theology rather than life, just so little does it give countenance to the far more contemptible and shallower error common in our day, which says , Religion is not theology, but life; and means , 'Therefore, it does not matter what theology you have, you can work a good life out with any creed!' The Bible never teaches unpractical speculations, and the Bible never gives precepts which do not rest on the profoundest truths. Would God, brethren, that we all had souls as wide as would take in the whole of the many-sided scriptural representation of the truths of the Gospel, and so avoid the narrowness of petty, partial views of God's infinite counsel; and that we had as close, direct, and as free communication between head, and heart, and hand, as the Scripture has between precept and practice!

But in reference more especially to my text. Keeping in view these two points I have already suggested, namely,--that it is the reconciling of apparent opposites, and that it is intensely practical, I find in it these three thoughts;--First, a Christian has his whole salvation accomplished for him, and yet he is to work it out. Secondly, a Christian has everything done in him by God, and yet he is to work. Lastly, a Christian has his salvation certainly secured, and yet he is to fear and tremble.

I. In the first place, A Christian man has his whole salvation already accomplished for him in Christ, and yet he is to work it out.

There are two points absolutely necessary to be kept in view in order to a right understanding of the words before us, for the want of noticing which it has become the occasion of terrible mistakes. These are--the persons to whom it is addressed, and the force of the scriptural expression 'salvation.' As to the first, this exhortation has been misapplied by being addressed to those who have no claim to be Christians, and by having such teaching deduced from it as, You do your part, and God will do His; You work, and God will certainly help you; You co-operate in the great work of your salvation, and you will get grace and pardon through Jesus Christ. Now let us remember the very simple thing, but very important to the right understanding of these words, that none but Christian people have anything to do with them. To all others, to all who are not already resting on the finished salvation of Jesus Christ, this injunction is utterly inapplicable. It is addressed to the ‘beloved, who have always obeyed’; to the ‘saints in Christ Jesus, which are at Philippi.’ The whole Epistle is addressed, and this injunction with the rest, to Christian men. That is the first thing to be remembered. If there be any of you, who have thought that these words of Paul’s to those who had believed on Christ contained a rule of action for you, though you have not rested your souls on Him, and exhorted you to try to win salvation by your own doings, let me remind you of what Christ said when the Jews came to Him in a similar spirit and asked Him, ‘What shall we do that we may work the works of God?’ His answer to them was, and His answer to you, my brother, is, ‘This is the work of God, that ye should believe in Him whom He hath sent.’ That is the first lesson: Not work, but faith; unless there be faith, no work. Unless you are a Christian, the passage has nothing to do with you.

But now, if this injunction be addressed to those who are looking for their salvation only to the perfect work of Christ, how can they be exhorted to work it out themselves? Is not the oft-recurring burden of Paul’s teaching ‘not by works of righteousness, which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us’? How does this text harmonise with these constantly repeated assertions that Christ has done all for us, and that we have nothing to do, and can do nothing? To answer this question, we have to remember that that scriptural expression, ‘salvation,’ is used with considerable width and complexity of signification. It sometimes means the whole of the process, from the beginning to the end, by which we are delivered from sin in all its aspects, and are set safe and stable at the right hand of God. It sometimes means one or other of three different parts of that process--either deliverance from the guilt, punishment, condemnation of sin; or secondly, the gradual process of deliverance from its power in our own hearts; or thirdly, the completion of that process by the final and perfect deliverance from sin and sorrow, from death and the body, from earth and all its weariness and troubles, which is achieved when we are landed on the other side of the river. Salvation, in one aspect, is a thing past to the Christian; in another, it is a thing present; in a third, it is a thing future. But all these three are one; all are elements of the one deliverance--the one mighty and perfect act which includes them all.

These three all come equally from Christ Himself. These three all depend equally on His work and His power. These three are all given to a Christian man in the first act of faith. But the attitude in which he stands in reference to that accomplished salvation which means deliverance from sin as a penalty and a curse, and that in which he stands to the continuing and progressive salvation which means deliverance from the power of evil in his own heart, are somewhat different. In regard to the one, he has only to take the finished blessing. He has to exercise faith and faith alone. He has nothing to do, nothing to add, in order to fit himself for it, but simply to receive the gift of God, and to believe on Him whom He hath sent. But then, though that reception involves what shall come after it, and though every one who has and holds the first thing, the pardon of his transgression, has and holds thereby and therein his growing sanctifying and his final glory, yet the salvation which means our being delivered from the evil that is in our hearts, and having our souls made like unto Christ, is one which--free gift though it be--is not ours on the sole condition of an initial act of faith, but is ours on the condition of continuous faithful reception and daily effort, not in our own strength, but in God's strength, to become like Him, and to make our own that which God has given us, and which Christ is continually bestowing upon us.

The two things, then, are not inconsistent--an accomplished salvation, a full, free, perfect redemption, with which a man has nothing to do at all, but to take it;--and, on the other hand, the injunction to them who have received this divine gift: 'Work out your own salvation.' Work, as well as believe, and in the daily practice of faithful obedience, in the daily subjugation of your own spirits to His divine power, in the daily crucifixion of your flesh with its affections and lusts, in the daily straining after loftier heights of godliness and purer atmospheres of devotion and love--make more thoroughly your own that which you possess. Work into the substance of your souls that which you have . Apprehend that for which you are apprehended of Christ. 'Give all diligence to make your calling and election sure'; and remember that not a past act of faith, but a present and continuous life of loving, faithful work in Christ, which is His and yet yours, is the 'holding fast the beginning of your confidence firm unto the end.'

II. In the second place, God works all in us, and yet we have to work.

There can be no mistake about the good faith and firm emphasis--as of a man who knows his own mind, and knows that his word is true--with which the Apostle holds up here the two sides of what I venture to call the one truth; ‘Work out your own salvation--for God works in you.’ Command implies power. Command and power involve duty. The freedom of the Christian’s action, the responsibility of the believer for his Christian growth in grace, the committal to the Christian man’s own hands of the means of sanctifying, lie in that injunction, ‘Work out your own salvation.’ Is there any faltering, any paring down or cautious guarding of the words, in order that they may not seem to clash with the other side of the truth? No: Paul does not say, ‘Work it out; yet it is God that worketh in you’; not ‘Work it out although it is God that worketh in you’; not ‘Work it out, but then it must always be remembered and taken as a caution that it is God that worketh in you!’ He blends the two things together in an altogether different connection, and sees--strangely to some people, no contradiction, nor limitation, nor puzzle, but a ground of encouragement to cheerful obedience. Do you work, ‘ for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.’ And does the Apostle limit the divine operation? Notice how his words seem picked out on purpose to express most emphatically its all-pervading energy. Look how his words seem picked out on purpose to express with the utmost possible emphasis that all which a good man is, and does, is its fruit. It is God that worketh in you. That expresses more than bringing outward means to bear upon heart and will. It speaks of an inward, real, and efficacious operation of the Indwelling Spirit of all energy on the spirit in which He dwells. ‘Worketh in you to will ‘; this expresses more than the presentation of motives from without, it points to a direct action on the will, by which impulses are originated within. God puts in you the first faint motions of a better will. ‘Worketh in you, doing as well as willing’; this points to all practical obedience, to all external acts as flowing from His grace in us, no less than all inward good thoughts and holy desires.

It is not that God gives men the power, and then leaves them to make the use of it. It is not that the desire and purpose come forth from Him, and that then we are left to ourselves to be faithful or unfaithful stewards in carrying it out. The whole process, from the first sowing of the seed until its last blossoming and fruiting, in the shape of an accomplished act, of which God shall bless the springing--it is all God's together! There is a thorough-going, absolute attribution of every power, every action, all the thoughts words, and deeds of a Christian soul, to God. No words could be selected which would more thoroughly cut away the ground from every half-and-half system which attempts to deal them out in two portions, part God's and part mine. With all emphasis Paul attributes all to God.

And none the less strongly does he teach, by the implication contained in his earnest injunction, that human responsibility, that human control over the human will, and that reality of human agency which are often thought to be annihilated by these broad views of God as originating all good in the soul and life. The Apostle thought that this doctrine did not absorb all our individuality in one great divine Cause which made men mere tools and puppets. He did not believe that the inference from it was, 'Therefore do you sit still, and feel yourselves the cyphers that you are.' His practical conclusion is the very opposite. It is--God does all, therefore do you work. His belief in the power of God's grace was the foundation of the most intense conviction of the reality and indispensableness of his own power, and was the motive which stimulated him to vigorous action. Work, for God works in you.

Each of these truths rests firmly on its own appropriate evidence. My own consciousness tells me that I am free, that I have power, that I am therefore responsible and exposed to punishment for neglect of duty. I know what I mean when I speak of the will of God, because I myself am conscious of a will. The power of God is an object of intelligent thought to me, because I myself am conscious of power. And on the other hand, that belief in a God which is one of the deep and universal beliefs of men contains in it, when it comes to be thought about, the belief in Him as the source of all power, as the great cause of all. If I believe in a God at all, I must believe that He whom I so call, worketh all things after the counsel of His own will. These two convictions are both given to us in the primitive beliefs which belong to us all. The one rests on consciousness, and underlies all our moral judgments. The other rests on an original belief, which belongs to man as such. These two mighty pillars on which all morality and all religion repose have their foundations down deep in our nature, and tower up beyond our sight. They seem to stand opposite to each other, but it is only as the strong piers of some tall arch are opposed. Beneath they repose on one foundation, above they join together in the completing keystone and bear the whole steady structure.

Wise and good men have toiled to harmonise them, in vain. The task transcends the limits of human faculties, as exercised here, at all events. Perhaps the time may come when we shall be lifted high enough to see the binding arch, but here on earth we can only behold the shafts on either side. The history of controversy on the matter surely proves abundantly what a hopeless task they undertake who attempt to reconcile these truths. The attempt has usually consisted in speaking the one loudly and the other in a whisper, and then the opposite side has thundered what had been whispered, and has whispered very softly what had been shouted very loudly. One party lays hold of the one pole of the ark, and the other lays hold of that on the other side. The fancied reconciliation consists in paring down one half of the full-orbed truth to nothing, or in admitting it in words while every principle of the reconciler's system demands its denial. Each antagonist is strong in his assertions, and weak in his denials, victorious when he establishes his half of the whole, easily defeated when he tries to overthrow his opponent's.

This apparent incompatibility is no reason for rejecting truths each commended to our acceptance on its own proper grounds. It may be a reason for not attempting to dogmatise about them. It may be a warning to us that we are on ground where our limited understandings have no firm footing, but it is no ground for suspecting the evidence which certifies the truths. The Bible admits and enforces them both. It never tones down the emphasis of its statement of the one for fear of clashing against the other, but points to us the true path for thought, in a firm grasp of both, in the abandonment of all attempts to reconcile them, and for practical conduct, in the peaceful trust in God who hath wrought all our works in us, and in strenuous working out of our own salvation. Let us, as we look back on that battlefield where much wiser men than we have fought in vain, doing little but raising up 'a little dust that is lightly laid again,' and building trophies that are soon struck down, learn the lesson it teaches, and be contented to say, The short cord of my plummet does not quite go down to the bottom of the bottomless, and I do not profess either to understand God or to understand man, both of which I should want to do before I understood the mystery of their conjoint action. Enough for me to believe that,

> ‘If any force we have, it is to ill, And all the power is God’s, to do and eke to will.’

Enough for me to know that I have solemn duties laid upon me, a life’s task to be done, my deliverance from mine own evil to work out, and that I shall only accomplish that work when I can say with the Apostle, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’

God is all, but thou canst work! My brother, take this belief, that God worketh all in you, for the ground of your confidence, and feel that unless He do all, you can do nothing. Take this conviction, that thou canst work, for the spur and stimulus of thy life, and think, These desires in my soul come from a far deeper source than the little cistern of my own individual life. They are God’s gift. Let me cherish them with the awful carefulness which their origin requires, lest I should seem to have received the grace of God in vain. These two streams of truth are like the rain-shower that falls upon the watershed of a country. The one half flows down the one side of the everlasting hills, and the other down the other. Falling into rivers that water different continents, they at length find the sea, separated by the distance of half the globe. But the sea into which they fall is one, in every creek and channel. And so, the truth into which these two apparent opposites converge, is ‘the depth of the wisdom and the knowledge of God,’ whose ways are past finding out--the Author of all goodness, who, if we have any holy thought, has given it us; if we have any true desire, has implanted it; has given us the strength to do the right and to live in His fear; and who yet, doing all the willing and the doing, says to us, ‘Because I do everything, therefore let not thy will be paralysed, or thy hand palsied; but because I do everything, therefore will thou according to My will, and do thou according to My commandments!’

III. Lastly: The Christian has his salvation secured, and yet he is to fear and tremble.

‘Fear and trembling.’ ‘But,’ you may say, ‘perfect love casts out fear.’ So it does. The fear which has torment it casts out. But there is another fear in which there is no torment, brethren; a fear and trembling which is but another shape of confidence and calm hope! Scripture does tell us that the believing man’s salvation is certain. Scripture tells us it is certain since he believes. And your faith can be worth nothing unless it have, bedded deep in it, that trembling distrust of your own power which is the pre-requisite and the companion of all thankful and faithful reception of God’s infinite mercy. Your horizon ought to be full of fear, if your gaze be limited to yourself; but oh! above our earthly horizon with its fogs, God’s infinite blue stretches untroubled by the mist and cloud which are earth-born. I, as working, have need to tremble and to fear, but I, as wrought upon, have a right to confidence and hope, a hope that is full of immortality, and an assurance which is the pledge of its own fulfilment. The worker is nothing, the Worker in him is all. Fear and trembling, when the thoughts turn to mine own sins and weaknesses, hope and confidence when they turn to the happier vision of God! ‘Not I’--there is the tremulous self-distrust; ‘the grace of God in me’--there is the calm assurance of victory. Forasmuch, then, as God worketh all things, be you diligent, faithful, prayerful, confident. Forasmuch as Christ has perfected the work for you, do you ‘go on unto perfection.’ Let all fear and trembling be yours, as a man; let all confidence and calm trust be yours as a child of God. Turn your confidence and your fears alike into prayer. ‘Perfect, O Lord, that which concerneth me; forsake not the work of Thine own hands!’--and the prayer will evoke the merciful answer, ‘I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee God is faithful, who hath called you unto the Gospel of His Son; and will keep you unto His everlasting kingdom of glory.’

10)Philippians 2:14-16

Philippians

COPIES OF JESUS

Php. 2:14-16 [R.V.].

We are told by some superfine modern moralists, that to regard one's own salvation as the great work of our lives is a kind of selfishness, and no doubt there may be a colour of truth in the charge. At least the meaning of the injunction to work out our own salvation may have been sometimes so misunderstood, and there have been types of Christian character, such as the ascetic and monastic, which have made the representation plausible. I do not think that there is much danger of anybody so misunderstanding the precept now. But it is worthy of notice that there stand here side by side two paragraphs, in the former of which the effort to work out one's own salvation is urged in the strongest terms, and in the other of which the regard for others is predominant. We shall see that the connection between these two is not accidental, but that one great reason for working out our salvation is here set forth as being the good we may thereby do to others.

I. We note the one great duty of cheerful yielding to God's will.

It is clear, I think, that the precept to do 'all things without murmurings and disputings' stands in the closest connection with what goes before. It is, in fact, the explanation of how salvation is to be wrought out. It presents the human side which corresponds to the divine activity, which has just been so earnestly insisted on. God works in us 'willing and doing,' let us on our parts do with ready submission all the things which He so inspires to will and to do.

The 'murmurings' are not against men but against God. The 'disputings' are not wrangling with others but the division of mind in one's self-questionings, hesitations, and the like. So the one are more moral, the other more intellectual, and together they represent the ways in which Christian men may resist the action on their spirits of God's Spirit, 'willing,' or the action of God's providence on their circumstances, 'doing.' Have we never known what it was to have some course manifestly prescribed to us as right, from which we have shrunk with reluctance of will? If some course has all at once struck us as wrong which we had been long accustomed to do without hesitation, has there been no 'murmuring' before we yielded? A voice has said to us, 'Give up such and such a habit,' or 'such and such a pursuit is becoming too engrossing': do we not all know what it is not only to feel obedience an effort, but even to cherish reluctance, and to let it stifle the voice?

There are often 'disputings' which do not get the length of 'murmurings.' The old word which tried to weaken the plain imperative of the first command by the subtle suggestion, 'Yea, hath God said?' still is whispered into our ears. We know what it is to answer God's commands with a 'But, Lord.' A reluctant will is clever to drape itself with more or less honest excuses, and the only safety is in cheerful obedience and glad submission. The will of God ought not only to receive obedience, but prompt obedience, and such instantaneous and whole-souled submission is indispensable if we are to 'work out our own salvation,' and to present an attitude of true, receptive correspondence to that of God, who 'works in us both to will and to do of His own good pleasure.' Our surrender of ourselves into the hands of God, in respect both to inward and outward things, should be complete. As has been profoundly said, that surrender consists 'in a continual forsaking and losing all self in the will of God, willing only what God from eternity has willed, forgetting what is past, giving up the time present to God, and leaving to His providence that which is to come, making ourselves content in the actual moment seeing it brings along with it the eternal order of God concerning us' [Madame Guyon].

II. The conscious aim in all our activity.

What God works in us for is that for which we too are to yield ourselves to His working, 'without murmurings and disputings,' and to co-operate with glad submission and cheerful obedience. We are to have as our distinct aim the building up of a character 'blameless and harmless, children of God without rebuke.' The blamelessness is probably in reference to men's judgment rather than to God's, and the difficulty of coming untarnished from contact with the actions and criticisms of a crooked and perverse generation is emphasised by the very fact that such blamelessness is the first requirement for Christian conduct. It was a feather in Daniel's cap that the president and princes were foiled in their attempt to pick holes in his conduct, and had to confess that they would not 'find any occasion against him, except we find it concerning the laws of his God.' God is working in us in order that our lives should be such that malice is dumb in their presence. Are we co-operating with Him? We are bound to satisfy the world's requirements of Christian character. They are sharp critics and sometimes unreasonable, but on the whole it would not be a bad rule for Christian people, 'Do what irreligious men expect you to do.' The worst man knows more than the best man practises, and his conscience is quick to decide the course for other people. Our weaknesses and compromises, and love of the world, might receive a salutary rebuke if we would try to meet the expectations which 'the man in the street' forms of us.

'Harmless' is more correctly pure, all of a piece, homogeneous and entire. It expresses what the Christian life should be in itself, whilst the former designation describes it more as it appears. The piece of cloth is to be so evenly and carefully woven that if held up against the light it will show no flaws nor knots. Many a professing Christian life has a veneer of godliness nailed thinly over a solid bulk of selfishness. There are many goods in the market finely dressed so as to hide that the warp is cotton and only the weft silk. No Christian man who has memory and self-knowledge can for a moment claim to have reached the height of his ideal; the best of us, at the best, are like Nebuchadnezzar's image, whose feet were iron and clay, but we ought to strain after it and to remember that a stain shows most on the whitest robe. What made David's sin glaring and memorable was its contradiction of his habitual nobler self. One spot more matters little on a robe already covered with many. The world is fully warranted in pointing gleefully or contemptuously at Christians' inconsistencies, and we have no right to find fault with their most pointed sarcasms, or their severest judgments. It is those 'that bear the vessels of the Lord' whose burden imposes on them the duty 'be ye clean,' and makes any uncleanness more foul in them than in any other.

The Apostle sets forth the place and function of Christians in the world, by bringing together in the sharpest contrast the 'children of God' and a 'crooked and perverse generation.' He is thinking of the old description in Deuteronomy, where the ancient Israel is charged with forgetting 'Thy Father that hath bought thee,' and as showing by their corruption that they are a 'perverse and crooked generation.' The ancient Israel had been the Son of God, and yet had corrupted itself; the Christian Israel are 'sons of God' set among a world all deformed, twisted, perverted. ‘Perverse’ is a stronger word than ‘crooked,’ which latter may be a metaphor for moral obliquity, like our own right and wrong, or perhaps points to personal deformity. Be that as it may, the position which the Apostle takes is plain enough. He regards the two classes as broadly separated in antagonism in the very roots of their being. Because the ‘sons of God’ are set in the midst of that ‘crooked and perverse generation’ constant watchfulness is needed lest they should conform, constant resort to their Father lest they should lose the sense of sonship, and constant effort that they may witness of Him.

III. The solemn reason for this aim.

That is drawn from a consideration of the office and function of Christian men. Their position in the midst of a ‘crooked and perverse generation’ devolves on them a duty in relation to that generation. They are to ‘appear as lights in the world.’ The relation between them and it is not merely one of contrast, but on their parts one of witness and example. The metaphor of light needs no explanation. We need only note that the word, ‘are seen’ or ‘appear,’ is indicative, a statement of fact, not imperative, a command. As the stars lighten the darkness with their myriad lucid points, so in the divine ideal Christian men are to be as twinkling lights in the abyss of darkness. Their light rays forth without effort, being an involuntary efflux. Possibly the old paradox of the Psalmist was in the Apostle’s mind, which speaks of the eloquent silence, in which ‘there is no speech nor language, and their voice is not heard,’ but yet ‘their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words unto the end of the world.’

Christian men appear as lights by ‘holding forth the word of life.’ In themselves they have no brightness but that which comes from raying out the light that is in them. The word of life must live, giving life in us, if we are ever to be seen as ‘lights in the world.’ As surely as the electric light dies out of a lamp when the current is switched off, so surely shall we be light only when we are ‘in the Lord.’ There are many so-called Christians in this day who stand tragically unaware that their ‘lamps are gone out.’ When the sun rises and smites the mountain tops they burn, when its light falls on Memnon’s stony lips they breathe out music, ‘Arise, shine, for thy light has come.’

Undoubtedly one way of ‘holding forth the word of life’ must be to speak the word, but silent living ‘blameless and harmless’ and leaving the secret of the life very much to tell itself is perhaps the best way for most Christian people to bear witness. Such a witness is constant, diffused wherever the witness-bearer is seen, and free from the difficulties that beset speech, and especially from the assumption of superiority which often gives offence. It was the sight of ‘your good deeds’ to which Jesus pointed as the strongest reason for men’s ‘glorifying your Father.’ If we lived such lives there would be less need for preachers. ‘If any will not hear the word they may without the word be won.’ And reasonably so, for Christianity is a life and cannot be all told in words, and the Gospel is the proclamation of freedom from sin, and is best preached and proved by showing that we are free. The Gospel was lived as well as spoken. Christ’s life was Christ’s mightiest preaching.

> ‘*The word was flesh and wrought With human hands the creed of creeds.*’

If we keep near to Him we too shall witness, and if our faces shine like Moses’ as he came down from the mountain, or like Stephen’s in the council chamber, men will ‘take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus.’

11)Philippians 2:16-18

Philippians

A WILLING SACRIFICE

Php. 2:16-18 [R.V.].

We come here to another of the passages in which the Apostle pours out all his heart to his beloved Church. Perhaps there never was a Christian teacher [always excepting Christ] who spoke more about himself than Paul. His own experience was always at hand for illustration. His preaching was but the generalisation of his life. He had felt it all first, before he threw it into the form of doctrine. It is very hard to keep such a style from becoming egotism.

This paragraph is remarkable, especially if we consider that this is introduced as a motive to their faithfulness, that thereby they will contribute to his joy at the last great testing. There must have been a very deep love between Paul and the Philippians to make such words as these true and appropriate. They open the very depths of his heart in a way from which a less noble and fervid nature would have shrunk, and express his absolute consecration in his work, and his eager desire for their spiritual good, with such force as would have been exaggeration in most men.

We have here a wonderful picture of the relation between him and the church at Philippi which may well stand as a pattern for us all. I do not mean to parallel our relations with that between him and them, but it is sufficiently analogous to make these words very weighty and solemn for us.

I. The Philippians' faithfulness Paul's glory in the day of Christ.

The Apostle strikes a solemn note, which was always sounding through his life, when he points to that great Day of Christ as the time when his work was to be tested. The thought of that gave earnestness to all his service, and in conjunction with the joyful thought that, however his work might be marred by failures and flaws, he himself was 'accepted in the beloved,' was the impulse which carried him on through a life than which none of Christ's servants have dared, and done, and suffered more for Him. Paul believed that, according to the results of that test, his position would in some sort be determined. Of course he does not here contradict the foundation principle of his whole Gospel, that salvation is not the result of our own works, or virtues, but is the free unmerited gift of Christ's grace. But while that is true, it is none the less true, that the degree in which believers receive that gift depends on their Christian character, both in their life on earth and in the day of Christ. One element in that character is faithful work for Jesus. Faithful work indeed is not necessarily successful work, and many who are welcomed by Jesus, the judge, will have the memory of many disappointments and few harvested grains. It was not a reaper, 'bringing his sheaves with him,' who stayed himself against the experience of failure, by the assurance, 'Though Israel be not gathered yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the Lord.' If our want of success, and others' lapse, and apostasy or coldness has not been occasioned by any fault of ours, there will be no diminution of our reward. But we can so seldom be sure of that, and even then there will be an absence of what might have added to gladness.

We need not do more than note that the text plainly implies, that at that testing time men's knowledge of all that they did, and the results of it, will be complete. Marvellous as it seems to us, with our fragmentary memories, and the great tracts of our lives through which we have passed mechanically, and which seem to have left no trace on the mirror of our consciousness, we still, all of us, have experiences which make that all-recovering memory credible. Some passing association, a look, a touch, an odour, a sun-set sky, a chord of music will bring before us some trivial long-forgotten incident or emotion, as the chance thrust of a boat-hook will draw to the surface by its hair, a long-drowned corpse. If we are, as assuredly we are, writing with invisible ink our whole life's history on the pages of our own minds, and if we shall have to read them all over again one day, is it not tragic that most of us scribble the pages so hastily and carelessly, and forget that, 'what I have written I have written,' and what I have written I must read.

But there is another way of looking at Paul's words as being an indication of his warm love for the Philippians. Even among the glories, he would feel his heart filled with new gladness when he found them there. The hunger for the good of others which cannot bear to think even of heaven without their presence has been a master note of all true Christian teachers, and without it there will be little of the toil, of which Paul speaks in the context, 'running and labouring.' He that would win men's hearts for any great cause must give his heart to them.

That Paul should have felt warranted in using such a motive with the Philippians tells how surely he reckoned on their true and deep love. He believes that they care enough for him to feel the power as a motive with them, that their faithfulness will make Paul more blessed amidst the blessings of heaven. Oh! if such love knit together all Christian teachers and their hearers in this time, and if the 'Day of Christ' burned before them, as it did before him, and if the vision stirred to such running and labouring as his, teachers and taught would oftener have to say, 'We are your rejoicing, even as ye are also ours in the Day of our Lord Jesus.' The voice of the man who is in the true ‘Apostolic Succession’ will dare to make the appeal, knowing that it will call forth an abundant answer, ‘Look to yourselves that we lose not the things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward.’

II. Paul’s death an aid to the Philippians’ faith.

The general meaning of the Apostle’s words is, ‘If I have not only to run and labour, but to die in the discharge of my Apostolic Mission, I joy and rejoice, and I bid you rejoice with me.’ We need only note that the Apostle here casts his language into the forms consecrated for sacrifice. He will not speak of death by its own ugly and threadbare name, but thinks of himself as a devoted victim, and of his death as making the sacrifice complete. In the figure there is a solemn scorn of death, and at the same time a joyful recognition that it is the means of bringing him more nearly to God, with whom he would fain be. It is interesting, as showing the persistence of these thoughts in the Apostle’s mind, that the word rendered in our text ‘offered,’ which fully means ‘poured out as a drink offering,’ occurs again in the same connection in the great words of the swan song in II. Timothy, ‘I am already being offered, and the time of my departure is come.’ Death looked to him, when he looked it in the eyes, and the block was close by him, as it had done when he spoke of it to his Philippian friends.

It is to be noted, in order to bring out more vividly the force of the figure, that Paul here speaks of the libation being poured ‘ on ‘ the sacrifice, as was the practice in heathen ritual. The sacrifice is the victim, ‘service’ is the technical word for priestly ministration, and the general meaning is, ‘If my blood is poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice ministered by you, which is your faith, I joy with you all.’ This man had no fear of death, and no shrinking from ‘leaving the warm precincts of the cheerful day.’ He was equally ready to live or to die as might best serve the name of Jesus, for to him ‘to live was Christ,’ and therefore to him it could be nothing but ‘gain’ to die. Here he seems to be treating his death as a possibility, but as a possibility only, for almost immediately afterwards he says, that he ‘trusts in the Lord that I myself will come shortly.’ It is interesting to notice the contrast between his mood of mind here and that in the previous chapter [i. 25] where the ‘desire to depart and to be with Christ’ is deliberately suppressed, because his continuous life is regarded as essential for the Philippians' 'progress and joy in faith.' Here he discerns that perhaps his death would do more for their faith than would his life, and being ready for either alternative he welcomes the possibility. May we not see in the calm heart, which is at leisure to think of death in such a fashion, a pattern for us all? Remember how near and real his danger was. Nero was not in the habit of letting a man, whose head had been in the mouth of the lion, take it out unhurt. Paul is no eloquent writer or poet playing with the idea of death, and trying to say pretty things about it, but a man who did not know when the blow would come, but did know that it would come before long.

We may point here to the two great thoughts in Paul's words, and notice the priesthood and sacrifice of life, and the sacrifice and libation of death. The Philippians offered as their sacrifice their faith, and all the works which flow therefrom. Is that our idea of life? Is it our idea of faith? We have no gifts to bring, we come empty-handed unless we carry in our hands the offering of our faith, which includes the surrender of our will, and the giving away of our hearts, and is essentially laying hold of Christ's sacrifice. When we come empty, needy, sinful, but cleaving wholly to that perfect sacrifice of the Great Priest, we too become priests and our poor gift is accepted.

But another possibility than that of a life of running and labour presented itself to Paul, and it is a revelation of the tranquillity of his heart in the midst of impending danger, all the more pathetic because it is entirely unconscious, that he should be free to cast his anticipations into that calm metaphor of being, 'offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith.' His heart beats no faster, nor does the faintest shadow of reluctance cross his will, when he thinks of his death. All the repulsive accompaniments of a Roman execution fade away from his imagination. These are but negligible accidents; the substantial reality which obscures them all is that his blood will be poured out as a libation, and that by it his brethren's faith will be strengthened. To this man death had finally and completely ceased to be a terror, and had become what it should be to all Christians, a voluntary surrender to God, an offering to Him, an act of worship, of trust, and of thankful praise. Seneca, in his death, poured out a libation to Jupiter the Liberator, and if we could only know beforehand what death delivers us from, and admits us to, we should not be so prone to call it ‘the last enemy.’ What Paul’s death was for himself in the process of his perfecting called forth, and warranted, the ‘joy’ with which he anticipated it. It did no more for him than it will do for each of us, and if our vision were as clear, and our faith as firm as his, we should be more ready than, alas! we too often are, to catch up the exulting note with which he hails the possibility of its coming.

But it is not the personal bearing only of his death that gives him joy. He thinks of it mainly as contributing to the furtherance of the faith of others. For that end he was spending the effort and toil of an effortful and toilsome life, and was equally ready to meet a violent and shameful death. He knew that ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church,’ and rejoiced, and called upon his brethren also to ‘joy and rejoice’ with him in his shedding of his martyr’s blood.

The Philippians might well have thought, as we all are tempted to think, that the withdrawal of those round whom our hearts desperately cling, and who seem to us to bring love and trust nearer to us, can only be loss, but surely the example in our text may well speak to our hearts of the way in which we should look at death for ourselves, and for our dearest. Their very withdrawal may send us nearer to Christ. The holy memories which linger in the sky, like the radiance of a sunken sun, may clothe familiar truths with unfamiliar power and loveliness. The thought of where the departed have gone may lift our thoughts wistfully thither with a new feeling of home. The path that they have trodden may become less strange to us, and the victory that they have won may prophesy that we too shall be ‘more than conquerors through Him that loveth us.’ So the mirror broken may turn us to the sun, and the passing of the dearest that can die may draw us to the Dearer who lives.

Paul, living, rejoiced in the prospect of death. We may be sure that he rejoiced in it no less dead than living. And we may permissibly think of this text as suggesting how

‘*The saints on earth and all the dead But one communion make*,’ and are to be united in one joy. They rejoice for their own sakes, but their joy is not self-absorbed, and so putting them farther away from us. They look back upon earth, the runnings and labourings of the unforgotten life here; and are glad to bear in their hearts the indubitable token that they have 'not run in vain neither laboured in vain.' But surely the depth of their own repose will not make them indifferent to those who are still in the midst of struggle and toil, nor the fulness of their own felicity make them forget those whom they loved of old, and love now with the perfect love of Heaven. It is hard for us to rise to complete sympathy with these serenely blessed spirits, but yet we too should rejoice. Not indeed to the exclusion of sorrow, nor to the neglect of the great purpose to be effected in us by the withdrawal, as by the presence of dear ones, the furtherance of our faith, but having made sure that that purpose has been effected in us, we should then give solemn thanksgivings if it has. It is sad and strange to think of how opposite are the feelings about their departure, of those who have gone and of those who are left. Would it not be better that we should try to share theirs and so bring about a true union? We may be sure that their deepest desire is that we should. If some lips that we shall never hear any more, till we come where they are, could speak, would not they bring to us as their message from Heaven, Do 'ye also joy and rejoice with me'?

12)Philippians 2:19-24

Philippians

PAUL AND TIMOTHY

Php. 2:19-24 [R.V.].

Like all great men Paul had a wonderful power of attaching followers to himself. The mass of the planet draws in small aerolites which catch fire as they pass through its atmosphere. There is no more beautiful page in the history of the early Church than the story of Paul and his companions. They gathered round him with such devotion, and followed him with such love. They were not small men. Luke and Aquila were among them, and they would have been prominent in most companies, but gladly took a place second to Paul. He impressed his own personality and his type of teaching on his followers as Luther did on his, and as many another great teacher has done.

Among all these Timothy seems to have held a special place. Paul first found him on his second journey either at Derbe or Lystra. His mother, Eunice, was already a believer, his father a Greek. Timothy seems to have been converted on Paul's first visit, for on his second he was already a disciple well reported of, and Paul more than once calls him his 'son in the faith.' He seems to have come in to take John Mark's place as the Apostle's 'minister,' and from that time to have been usually Paul's trusted attendant. We hear of him as with the Apostle on his first visit to Philippi, and to have gone with him to Thessalonica and Beroea, but then to have been parted until Corinth. Thence Paul went quickly up to Jerusalem and back to Antioch, from which he set out again to visit the churches, and made a special stay in Ephesus. While there he planned a visit to Macedonia and Achaia, in preparation for one to Jerusalem, and finally to Rome. So he sent Timothy and Erastus on ahead to Macedonia, which would of course include Philippi. After that visit to Macedonia and Greece Paul returned to Philippi, from which he sailed with Timothy in his company. He was probably with him all the way to Rome, and we find him mentioned as sharer in the imprisonment both here and in Colossians.

The references made to him point to a very sweet, good, pure and gracious character without much strength, needing to be stayed and stiffened by the stronger character, but full of sympathy, unselfish disregard of self, and consecrated love to Christ. He had been surrounded with a hallowed atmosphere from his youth, and 'from a child had known the holy Scriptures,' and 'prophecies' like fluttering doves had gone before on him. He had 'often infirmities' and 'tears.' He needed to be roused to 'stir up the gift that was in him,' and braced up 'not to be ashamed,' but to fight against the disabling 'spirit of fear,' and to be 'strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.'

The bond between these two was evidently very close, and the Apostle felt something of a paternal interest in the very weakness of character which was in such contrast to his own strength, and which obviously dreaded the discouragement which was likely to be produced by his own martyrdom.

This favourite companion he will now send to his favourite church. The verses of our text express that intention, and give us a glimpse into the Apostle's thoughts and feelings in his imprisonment.

I. The prisoner's longing and hope.

The first point which strikes us in this self-revelation of Paul's is his conscious uncertainty as to his future. In the previous chapter [ver. 25] he is confident that he will live. In the verses immediately preceding our text he faces the possibility of death. Here he recognises the uncertainty but still 'trusts' that he will be liberated, but yet he does not know 'how it may go with' him. We think of him in his lodging sometimes hoping and sometimes doubting. He had a tyrant's caprice to depend on, and knew how a moment's whim might end all. Surely his way of bearing that suspense was very noteworthy and noble. It is difficult to keep a calm heart, and still more difficult to keep on steadily at work, when any moment might bring the victor's axe. Suspense almost enforces idleness, but Paul crowded these moments of his prison time with letters, and Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are the fruits for which we are indebted to a period which would have been to many men a reason for throwing aside all work.

How calmly too he speaks of the uncertain issue! Surely never was the possibility of death more quietly spoken of than in 'so soon as I shall see how it will go with me.' That means--'as soon as my fate is decided, be it what it may, I will send Timothy to tell you.' What a calm pulse he must have had! There is no attitudinising here, all is perfectly simple and natural. Can we look, do we habitually look, into the uncertain future with such a temper--accepting all that may be in its grey mists, and feeling that our task is to fill the present with strenuous loving service, leaving tomorrow with all its alternatives, even that tremendous one of life and death, to Him who will shape it to a perfect end?

We note, further, the purpose of Paul's love. It is beautiful to see how he yearns over these Philippians and feels that his joy will be increased when he hears from them. He is sure, as he believes, to hear good, and news which will be a comfort. Among the souls whom he bore on his heart were many in the Macedonian city, and a word from them would be like ‘cold water to a thirsty soul.’

What a noble suppression of self; how deep and strong the tie that bound him to them must have been! Is there not a lesson here for all Christian workers, for all teachers, preachers, parents, that no good is to be done without loving sympathy? Unless our hearts go out to people we shall never reach their hearts. We may talk to them for ever, but unless we have this loving sympathy we might as well be silent. It is possible to pelt people with the Gospel, and to produce the effect of flinging stones at them. Much Christian work comes to nothing mainly for that reason.

And how deep a love does he show in his depriving himself of Timothy for their sakes, and in his reason for sending him! Those reasons would have been for most of us the strongest reason for keeping him. It is not everybody who will denude himself of the help of one who serves him ‘as a child serveth a father,’ and will part with the only like-minded friend he has, because his loving eye will clearly see the state of others.

Paul’s expression of his purpose to send Timothy is very much more than a piece of emotional piety. He ‘hopes in the Lord’ to accomplish his design, and that hope so rooted and conditioned is but one instance of the all-comprehending law of his life, that, to him, to ‘live is Christ.’ His whole being was so interpenetrated with Christ’s that all his thoughts and feelings were ‘in the Lord Jesus.’ So should our purposes be. Our hopes should be derived from union with Him. They should not be the play of our own fancy or imagination. They should be held in submission to him, and ever with the limitation, ‘Not as I will, but as Thou wilt.’ We should be trusting to Him to fulfil them. If thus we hope, our hopes may lead us nearer to Jesus instead of tempting us away from Him by delusive brightnesses. There is a religious use of hope not only when it is directed to heavenly certainties, and ‘enters within the veil,’ but even when occupied about earthly things. Spenser twice paints for us the figure of Hope, one has always something of dread in her blue eyes, the other, and the other only, leans on the anchor, and ‘maketh not ashamed’; and her name is ‘Hope in the Lord.’

II. The prisoner solitary among self-seeking men.

With wonderful self-surrender the Apostle thinks of his lack of like-minded companions as being a reason for depriving himself of the only like-minded one who was left with him. He felt that Timothy’s sympathetic soul would truly care for the Philippians’ condition, and would minister to it lovingly. He could rely that Timothy would have no selfish by-ends to serve, but would seek the things of Jesus Christ. We know too little of the circumstances of Paul’s imprisonment to know how he came to be thus lonely. In the other Epistles of the Captivity we have mention of a considerable group of friends, many of whom would certainly have been included in a list of the ‘like-minded.’ We hear, for example, of Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, John Mark, Epaphras, and Luke. What had become of them all we do not know. They were evidently away on Christian service, somewhere or other, or some of them perhaps had not yet arrived. At all events for some reason Paul was for the time left alone but for Timothy. Not that there were no Christian men in Rome, but of those who could have been sent on such an errand there were none in whom love to Christ and care for His cause and flock were strong enough to mark them as fit for it.

So then we have to take account of Paul’s loneliness in addition to his other sorrows, and we may well mark how calmly and uncomplainingly he bears it. We are perpetually hearing complaints of isolation and the difficulty of finding sympathy, or ‘people who understand me.’ That is often the complaint of a morbid nature, or of one which has never given itself the trouble of trying to ‘understand’ others, or of showing the sympathy for which it says that it thirsts. And many of these complaining spirits might take a lesson from the lonely Apostle. There never was a man, except Paul’s Master and ours, who cared more for human sympathy, had his own heart fuller of it, and received less of it from others than Paul. But he had discovered what it would be blessedness for us all to lay to heart, that a man who has Christ for his companion can do without others, and that a heart in which there whispers, ‘Lo, I am with you always,’ can never be utterly solitary.

May we not take the further lesson that the sympathy which we should chiefly desire is sympathy and fellow-service in Christian work? Paul did not want like-minded people in order that he might have the luxury of enjoying their sympathy, but what he wanted was allies in his work for

Christ. It was sympathy in his care for the Philippians that he sought for in his messenger. And that is the noblest form of like-mindedness that we can desire--some one to hold the ropes for us.

Note, too, that Paul does not weakly complain because he had no helpers. Good and earnest men are very apt to say much about the half-hearted way in which their brethren take up some cause in which they are eagerly interested, and sometimes to abandon it altogether for that reason. May not such faint hearts learn a lesson from him who had 'no man like-minded,' and yet never dreamt of whimpering because of it, or of flinging down his tools because of the indolence of his fellow-workers?

There is another point to be observed in the Apostle's words here. He felt that their attitude to Christ determined his affinities with men. He could have no deep and true fellowship with others, whatever their name to live, who were daily 'seeking their own,' and at the same time leaving unsought 'the things of Jesus Christ.' They who are not alike in their deepest aims can have no real kindred. Must we not say that hosts of so-called Christian people do not seem to feel, if one can judge by the company they affect, that the deepest bond uniting men is that which binds them to Jesus Christ? I would press the question, Do we feel that nothing draws us so close to men as common love to Jesus, and that if we are not alike on that cardinal point there is a deep gulf of separation beneath a deceptive surface of union, an unfathomable gorge marked by a quaking film of earth?

It is a solemn estimate of some professing Christians which the Apostle gives here, if he is including the members of the Roman Church in his judgment that they are not 'like-minded' with him, and are 'seeking their own, not the things of Jesus Christ.' We may rather hope that he is speaking of others around him, and that for some reason unknown to us he was at the time secluded from the Roman Christians. He brings out with unflinching precision the choice which determines a life. There is always that terrible 'either--or.' To live for Christ is the antagonist, and only antagonist of life for self. To live for self is death. To live for Jesus is the only life. There are two centres, heliocentric and geocentric as the scientists say. We can choose round which we shall draw our orbit, and everything depends on the choice which we make. To seek 'the things of Jesus Christ' is sure to lead to, and is the only basis of, care for men. Religion is the parent of compassion, and if we are looking for a man who will care truly for the state of others, we must do as Paul did, look for him among those who ‘seek the things of Jesus Christ.’

III. The prisoner’s joy in loving co-operation.

The Apostle’s eulogium on Timothy points to his long and intimate association with Paul and to the Philippians’ knowledge of him as well as to the Apostle’s clinging to him. There is a piece of delicate beauty in the words which we may pause for a moment to point out. Paul writes as ‘a child serveth a father,’ and the natural sequence would have been ‘so he served me,’ but he remembers that the service was not to him, Paul, but to another, and so he changes the words and says he ‘served with me in furtherance of the Gospel.’ We are both servants alike--Christ’s servants for the Gospel.

Paul’s joy in Timothy’s loving co-operation was so deep because Paul’s whole heart was set on ‘the furtherance of the Gospel.’ Help towards that end was help indeed. We may measure the ardour and intensity of Paul’s devotion to his apostolic work by the warmth of gratitude which he shows to his helper. They who contribute to our reaching our chief desire win our warmest love, and the catalogue of our helpers follows the order of the list of our aims. Timothy brought to Paul no assistance to procure any of the common objects of human desires. Wealth, reputation, success in any of the pursuits which attract most men might have been held out to the Apostle and not been thought worth stooping to take, nor would the offerer have been thanked, but any proffered service that had the smallest bearing on that great work to which Paul’s life was given, and which his conscience told him there would be a curse on himself if he did not fulfil, was welcomed as a priceless gift. Do we arrange the lists of our helpers on the same fashion, and count that they serve us best who help us to serve Christ? It should be as much the purpose of every Christian life as it was that of Paul to spread the salvation and glory of the ‘name that is above every name.’ If we lived as continually under the influence of that truth as he did, we should construe the circumstances of our lives, whether helpful or hindering, very differently, and we could shake the world.

Christian unity is very good and infinitely to be desired, but the true field on which it should display itself is that of united work for the common Lord. The men who have marched side by side through a campaign are knit together as nothing else would bind them. Even two horses drawing one carriage will have ways and feelings and a common understanding, which they would never have attained in any other way. There is nothing like common work for clearing away mists. Much so-called Christian sympathy and like-mindedness are something like the penal cranks that used to be in jails, which generated immense power on this side of the wall but ground out nothing on the other.

Let us not forget that in the field of Christian service there is room for all manner of workers, and that they are associated, however different their work. Paul often calls Timothy his 'fellow-labourer,' and once gives him the eulogium, 'he worketh the work of the Lord as I also do.' Think of the difference between the two men in age, endowment, and sphere! Apparently Timothy at first had very subordinate work taking John Mark's place, and is described as being one of those who 'ministered' to Paul. It is the cup of cold water over again. All work done for the same Lord, and with the same motive is the same; 'he that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward.' When Paul associates Timothy with himself he is copying from afar off his Lord, who lets us think of even our poor deeds as done by those whom He does not disdain to call His fellow-workers. It would be worth living for if, at the last, He should acknowledge us, and say even of us, 'he hath served with Me in the Gospel.'

13)Philippians 2:25-30

Philippians

PAUL AND EPAPHRODITUS

Php. 2:25-30 [R.V.].

Epaphroditus is one of the less known of Paul's friends. All our information about him is contained in this context, and in a brief reference in Chapter 4: His was a singular fate--to cross Paul's path, and for one short period of his life to be known to all the world, and for all the rest before and after to be utterly unknown. The ship sails across the track of the moonlight, and then vanishes ghost-like into darkness. Of all the inhabitants of Philippi at that time we know the names of but three, Euodias, Syntiche, and Epaphroditus, and we owe them all to Paul. The context gives us an interesting miniature of the last, and pathetic glimpses into the private life of the Apostle in his imprisonment, and it is worth our while to try to bring our historic imagination to bear on Epaphroditus, and to make him a living man.

The first fact about him is, that he was one of the Philippian Christians, and sent by them to Rome, with some pecuniary or material help, such as comforts for Paul's prison-house, food, clothing, or money. There was no reliable way of getting these to Paul but to take them, and so Epaphroditus faced the long journey across Greece to Brindisi and Rome, and when arrived there threw himself with ardour into serving Paul. The Apostle's heartfelt eulogium upon him shows two phases of his work. He was in the first place Paul's helper in the Gospel, and his faithfulness there is set forth in a glowing climax, 'My brother and fellow-worker and fellow-soldier.' He was in the second place the minister to Paul's needs. There would be many ways of serving the captive, looking after his comfort, doing his errands, procuring daily necessaries, managing affairs, perhaps writing his letters, easing his chain, chafing his aching wrists, and ministering in a thousand ways which we cannot and need not specify. At all events he gladly undertook even servile work for love of Paul.

He had an illness which was probably the consequence of his toil. Perhaps over-exertion in travel, or perhaps his Macedonian constitution could not bear the enervating air of Rome, or perhaps Paul's prison was unhealthy. At any rate he worked till he made himself ill. The news reached Philippi in some round-about way, and, as it appears, the news of his illness only, not of his recovery. The difficulty of communication would sufficiently account for the partial intelligence. Then the report found its way back to Rome, and Epaphroditus got home-sick and was restless, uneasy, 'sore troubled,' as the Apostle says, because they had heard he had been sick. In his low, nervous state, barely convalescent, the thought of home and of his brethren's anxiety about him was too much for him. It is a pathetic little picture of the Macedonian stranger in the great city--pallid looks, recent illness, and pining for home and a breath of pure mountain air, and for the friends he had left. So Paul with rare abnegation sent him away at once, though Timothy was to follow shortly, and accompanied him with this outpouring of love and praise in his long homeward journey. Let us hope he got safe back to his friends, and as Paul bade them, they received him in the Lord with all joy, the echoes of which we almost hear as he passes out of our knowledge.

In the remainder of this sermon we shall simply deal with the two figures which the text sets before us, and we may look first at the glimpses of Paul's character which we get here.

We may note the generous heartiness of his praise in his associating Epaphroditus with himself as on full terms of equality, as worker and soldier, and the warm generosity of the recognition of all that he had done for the Apostle's comfort. Paul's first burst of gratitude and praise does not exhaust all that he has to say about Epaphroditus. He comes back to the theme in the last words of the context, where he says that the Philippian messenger had 'hazarded' his life, or, as we might put it with equal accuracy and more force, had 'gambled' his life, or 'staked it on the die' for Paul's sake. No wonder that men were eager to risk their lives for a leader who lavished such praise and such love upon them. A man who never opens his lips but to censure or criticise, who fastens on faults as wasps do on blemished fruit, will never be surrounded by loyal love. Faithful service is most surely bought by hearty praise. A caressing hand on a horse's neck is better than a whip.

We may further note the intensity of Paul's sympathy. He speaks of Epaphroditus' recovery as a mercy to himself 'lest he should have the sorrow of imprisonment increased by the sorrow of his friend's death.' That attitude of mind stands in striking contrast to the heroism which said, 'To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain,' but the two are perfectly consistent, and it was a great soul which had room for them both.

We must not leave unnoticed the beautiful self-abnegation which sends off Epaphroditus as soon as he was well enough to travel, as a gift of the Apostle's love, in order to repay them for what they had done for him. He says nothing of his own loss or of how much more lonely he would be when the brother whom he had praised so warmly had left him alone. But he suns himself in the thought of the Philippians' joy, and in the hope that some reflection of it will travel across the seas to him, and make him, if not wholly glad, at any rate 'the less sorrowful.'

We have also to notice Paul's delicate recognition of all friendly help. He says that Epaphroditus risked his life to 'supply that which was lacking in your service toward me.' That implies that all which the Philippians' ministration lacked was their personal presence, and that Epaphroditus, in supplying that, made his work in a real sense theirs. All the loving thoughts, and all the material expressions of them which Epaphroditus brought to Paul were fragrant with the perfume of the Philippians' love, 'an odour of a sweet smell, acceptable' to Paul as to Paul's Lord.

We briefly note some general lessons which may be suggested by the picture of Epaphroditus as he stands by the side of Paul.

The first one suggested is the very familiar one of the great uniting principle which a common faith in Christ brought into action. Think of the profound clefts of separation between the Macedonian and the Jew, the antipathies of race, the differences of language, the dissimilarities of manner, and then think of what an unheard-of new thing it must have been that a Macedonian should 'serve' a Jew! We but feebly echo Paul's rapture when he thought that there was 'neither Barbarian or Scythian, bond or free, but all were one in Christ Jesus,' and for all our talk about the unity of humanity and the like, we permit the old gulfs of separation to gape as deeply as ever. Dreadnoughts are a peculiar expression of the brotherhood of men after nineteen centuries of so-called Christianity.

The terms in which the work of Epaphroditus is spoken of by Paul are very significant. He has no hesitation in describing the work done for himself as 'the work of Christ,' nor in using, as the name for it, the word ['service'], which properly refers to the service rendered by priestly hands. Work done for Paul was done for Jesus, and that, not because of any special apostolic closeness of relation of Paul to Jesus, but because, like all other Christians, he was one with his Lord. 'The cup of cold water' given 'in the name of a disciple' is grateful to the lips of the Master. We have no reason to suppose that Epaphroditus took part with Paul in his more properly apostolic work, and the fact that the purely material help, and pecuniary service which most probably comprised all his ‘ministering,’ is honoured by Paul with these lofty designations, carries with it large lessons as to the sanctity of common life. All deeds done from the same motive are the same, however different they may be in regard to the material on which they are wrought. If our hearts are set to ‘hallow all we find,’ the most secular duties will be acts of worship. It is possible for us in the ordering of our own lives to fulfil the great prophecy with which Zechariah crowned his vision of the Future, ‘In that day shall there be on the bells of the horses Holiness unto the Lord’; and the ‘pots in the Lord’s house shall be like the bowls before the altar.’

May we not further draw from Paul’s words here a lesson as to the honour due to Christian workers? It was his brethren who were exhorted to receive their own messenger back again ‘in the Lord with all joy, and to hold him in honour.’ Possibly there were in Philippi some sharp tongues and envious spirits, who needed the exhortation. Whether there were so or no, the exhortation itself traces lightly but surely the lines on which Christians should render, and their fellow-Christians can rightly receive, even praise from men. If Epaphroditus were ‘received in the Lord,’ there would be no foolish and hurtful adulation of him, nor prostration before him, but he would be recognised as but the instrument through which the true Helper worked, and not he, but the Grace of Christ in him would finally receive the praise. There are very many Christian workers who never get their due of recognition and welcome from their brethren, and there are many who get far more of both than belongs to them, and both they and the crowds who bring them adulation would be freed from dangers, which can scarcely be over-stated, if the spirit of Paul’s warm-hearted praise of Epaphroditus were kept in view.

Epaphroditus but passes across the illuminated disc of the lantern for a moment, and we have scarcely time to catch a glimpse of his face before it is lost to us. He and all his brethren are gone, but his name lives for ever, and Paul’s praise of him and of his work outshines all else remembered of the city, where conquerors once reigned, and outside whose walls was fought a battle that decided for a time the fate of the world.

14)Philippians 3:1-3

PREPARING TO END

Php. 3:1-3 [R.V.].

The first words of the text show that Paul was beginning to think of winding up his letter, and the preceding context also suggests that. The personal references to Timothy and Epaphroditus would be in their appropriate place near the close, and the exhortation with which our text begins is also most fitting there, for it is really the key-note of the letter. How then does he come to desert his purpose? The answer is to be found in his next advice, the warning against the Judaising teachers who were his great antagonists all his life. A reference to them always roused him, and here the vehement exhortation to mark them well and avoid them opens the flood-gates. Forgetting all about his purpose to come to an end, he pours out his soul in the long and precious passage which follows. Not till the next chapter does he get back to his theme in the reiterated exhortation [iv. 4], 'Rejoice in the Lord alway; again I will say, rejoice.' This outburst is very remarkable, for its vehemence is so unlike the tone of the rest of the letter. That is calm, joyous, bright, but this is stormy and impassioned, full of flashing and scathing words, the sudden thunder-storm breaks in on a mellow, autumn day, but it hurtles past and the sun shines out again, and the air is clearer.

Another question suggested is the reference of the second half of verse 1. What are 'the same things' to write which is 'safe' for the Philippians? Are they the injunctions preceding to 'rejoice in the Lord,' or that following, the warning against the Judaisers? The former explanation may be recommended by the fact that 'Rejoice' is in a sense the key-note of the Epistle, but on the other hand, the things where repetition would be 'safe' would most probably be warnings against some evil that threatened the Philippians' Christian standing.

There is no attempt at unity in the words before us, and I shall not try to force them into apparent oneness, but follow the Apostle's thoughts as they lie. We note--

I. The crowning injunction as to the duty of Christian gladness.

A very slight glance over the Epistle will show how continually the note of gladness is struck in it. Whatever in Paul’s circumstances was ‘at enmity with joy’ could not darken his sunny outlook. This bird could sing in a darkened cage. If we brought together the expressions of his joy in this letter, they would yield us some precious lessons as to what were the sources of his, and what may be the sources of ours. There runs through all the instances in the Epistle the implication which comes out most emphatically in his earnest exhortation, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.’ The true source of true joy lies in our union with Jesus. To be in Him is the condition of every good, and, just as in the former verses ‘trust in the Lord ‘ is set forth, so the joy which comes from trust is traced to the same source. The joy that is worthy, real, permanent, and the ally of lofty endeavour and noble thoughts has its root in union with Jesus, is realised in communion with Him, has Him for its reason or motive, and Him for its safeguard or measure. As the passages in question in this Epistle show, such joy does not shut out but hallows other sources of satisfaction. In our weakness creatural love and kindness but too often draw us away from our joy in Him. But with Paul the sources which we too often find antagonistic were harmoniously blended, and flowed side by side in the same channel, so that he could express them both in the one utterance, ‘I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again.’

We do not sufficiently realise the Christian duty of Christian joy, some of us even take mortified countenances and voices in a minor key as marks of grace, and there is but little in any of us of ‘the joy in the Lord’ which a saint of the Old Testament had learned was our ‘strength.’ There is plenty of gladness amongst professing Christians, but a good many of them would resent the question, is your gladness ‘in the Lord’? No doubt any deep experience in the Christian life makes us aware of much in ourselves that saddens, and may depress, and our joy in Him must always be shaded by penitent sorrow for ourselves. But that necessary element of sadness in the Christian life is not the cause why so many Christian lives have little of the buoyancy and hope and spontaneity which should mark them. The reason rather lies in the lack of true union with Christ, and habitual keeping of ourselves ‘in the love of God.’

II. Paul’s apology for reiteration.

He is going to give once more old and well-worn precepts which are often very tedious to the hearer, and not much less so to the speaker. He can only say that to him the repetition of familiar injunctions is not ‘irksome,’ and that to them it is ‘safe.’ The diseased craving for ‘originality’ in the present day tempts us all, hearers and speakers alike, and we ever need to be reminded that the staple of Christian teaching must be old truths reiterated, and that it is not time to stop proclaiming them until all men have begun to practise them. But a speaker must try to make the thousandth repetition of a truth fresh to himself, and not a wearisome form, or a dead commonplace, by freshening it to his own mind and by living on it in his own practice, and the hearers must remember that it is only the completeness of their obedience that antiquates the commandment. The most threadbare commonplace becomes a novelty when occasions for its application arise in our own lives, just as a prescription may lie long unnoticed in a drawer, but when a fever attacks its possessor it will be quickly drawn out and worth its weight in gold.

III. Paul’s warning against teachers of a ceremonial religion.

It scarcely seems congruous with the tone of the rest of this letter that the preachers whom Paul so scathingly points out here had obtained any firm footing in the Philippian Church, but no doubt there, as everywhere, they had dogged Paul’s footsteps, and had tried as they always did to mar his work. They had not missionary fervour or Christian energy enough to initiate efforts amongst the Gentiles so as to make them proselytes, but when Paul and his companions had made them Christians, they did their best, or their worst, to insist that they could not be truly Christians, unless they submitted to the outward sign of being Jews. Paul points a scathing finger at them when he bids the Philippians ‘beware,’ and he permits himself a bitter retort when he lays hold of the Jewish contemptuous word for Gentiles which stigmatised them as ‘dogs,’ that is profane and unclean, and hurls it back at the givers. But he is not indulging in mere bitter retorts when he brings against these teachers the definite charge that they are ‘evil workers.' People who believed that an outward observance was the condition of salvation would naturally be less careful to insist upon holy living. A religion of ceremonies is not a religion of morality. Then the Apostle lets himself go in a contemptuous play of words, and refuses to recognise that these sticklers for circumcision had themselves been circumcised. 'I will not call them the circumcision, they have not been circumcised, they have only been gashed and mutilated, it has been a mere fleshly maiming.' His reason for denying the name to them is his profound belief that it belonged to true Christians. His contemptuous reference puts in a word, the principle which he definitely states in another place, 'He is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh.'

The Apostle here is not only telling us who are the truly circumcised, but at the same time he is telling us what makes a Christian, and he states three points in which, as I take it, he begins at the end and works backwards to the beginning. 'We are the circumcision who worship in the Spirit of God'--that is the final result--'and glory in Christ Jesus'--'and have no confidence in the flesh'--that is the starting-point. The beginning of all true Christianity is distrust of self. What does Paul mean by 'flesh'? Body? Certainly not. Animal nature, or the passions rooted in it? Not only these, as may be seen by noting the catalogue which follows of the things in the flesh, in which he might have trusted. What are these? 'Circumcised the eighth day, of the tribe of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews'--these belong to ritual and race; 'as touching the law a Pharisee'--that belongs to ecclesiastical standing; 'concerning zeal persecuting the church'--that has nothing to do with the animal nature: 'touching the righteousness which is in the law blameless'--that concerns the moral nature. All these come under the category of the 'flesh,' which, therefore, plainly includes all that belongs to humanity apart from God. Paul's old-fashioned language translated into modern English just comes to this--it is vain to trust in external connection with the sacred community of the Church, or in participation in any of its ordinances and rites. To Paul, Christian rites and Jewish rites were equally rites and equally insufficient as bases of confidence. Do not let us fancy that dependence on these is peculiar to certain forms of Christian belief. It is a very subtle all-pervasive tendency, and there is no need to lift up Nonconformist hands in holy horror at the corruptions of Romanism and the like. Their origin is not solely priestly ambition, but also the desires of the so-called laity. Demand creates a supply, and if there were not people to think, ‘Now it shall be well with me because I have a Levite for my priest,’ there would be no Levites to meet their wishes.

Notice that Paul includes amongst the things belonging to the flesh this ‘touching the righteousness which is in the law blameless.’ Many of us can say the same. We do our duties so far as we know them, and are respectable law-abiding people, but if we are trusting to that, we are of the ‘flesh.’ Have we estimated what God is, and what the real worth of our conduct is? Have we looked not at our actions but at our motives, and seen them as they are seen from above or from the inside? How many ‘blameless’ lives are like the scenes in a theatre, effective and picturesque, when seen with the artificial glory of the footlights? But go behind the scenes and what do we find? Dirty canvas and cobwebs. If we know ourselves we know that a life may have a fair outside, and yet not be a thing to trust to.

The beginning of our Christianity is the consciousness that we are ‘naked and poor, and blind, and in need of all things.’ Men come to Jesus Christ by many ways, thank God, and I care little by what road they come so long as they get there, nor do I insist upon any stereotyped order of religious experience. But of this I am very sure: that unless we abandon confidence in ourselves, because we have seen ourselves in the light of God’s law, we have not learned all that we need nor laid hold of all that Christ gives. Let us measure ourselves in the light of God, and we shall learn that we have to take our places beside Job, when the vision of God silenced his protestations of innocence. ‘I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee; wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.’

That self-distrust should pass into glorying in Christ Jesus. If a man has learned his emptiness he will look about for something to fill it. Unless I know myself to be under condemnation because of my sin, and fevered, disturbed, and made wretched, by its inward consequences which forbid repose, the sweetest words of Gospel invitation will pass by me like wind whistling through an archway. But if once I have been driven from self-confidence, then like music from heaven will come the word, ‘Trust in

Jesus.’ The seed dropped into the ground puts out a downward-going shoot, which is the root, and an upward-growing one, which is the stalk. The downward-going shoot is ‘no confidence in the flesh,’ the upward-going is ‘glorying in Christ Jesus.’

But that word suggests the blessed experience of triumph in the possession of the Person known and felt to be all, and to give all that life needs. A true Christian should ever be triumphant in a felt experience, in a Name proved to be sufficient, in a power which infuses strength into his weakness, and enables him to do the will of God. It is for want of utter self-distrust and absolute faith in Christ that ‘glorying’ in Him is so far beyond the ordinary mood of the average Christian. You say, ‘I hope, sometimes I doubt, sometimes I fear, sometimes I tremblingly trust.’ Is that the kind of experience that these words shadow? Why do we continue amidst the mist when we might rise into the clear blue above the obscuring pall? Only because we are still in some measure clinging to self, and still in some measure distrusting our Lord. If our faith were firm and full our ‘glorying’ would be constant. Do not be contented with the prevailing sombre type of Christian life which is always endeavouring, and always foiled, which is often doubting and often indifferent, but seek to live in the sunshine, and expatiate in the light, and ‘rejoice in the Lord always.’

‘Glorying’ not only describes an attitude of mind, but an activity of life. Many things to-day tempt Christian people to speak of their religion and of their Lord in an apologetic tone, in the face of strong and educated unbelief; but if we have within us, as we all may have, and ought to have, the triumphant assurance of His sufficiency, nearness, and power, it will not be with bated breath that we shall speak of our Master, or apologise for our Christianity, but we shall obey the commandment, ‘Lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid.’ Ring out the name and be proud that you can ring it out, as the Name of your Lord, and your Saviour, and your all-sufficient Friend. Whatever other people say, you have the experience, if you are a Christian, which more than answers all that they can say.

We have said that the final result set forth here by Paul is, ‘We worship by the Spirit of God.’ The expression translated worship is the technical word for rendering priestly service. Just as Paul has asserted that uncircumcised

Christians, not circumcised Jews, are the true circumcision, so he asserts that they are the true priests, and that these officials in the outward temple at Jerusalem have forfeited the title, and that it has passed over to the despised followers of the despised Nazarene. If we have ‘no confidence in the flesh,’ and are ‘glorying in Christ Jesus,’ we are all priests of the most high God. ‘Worship in the Spirit’ is our function and privilege. The externals of ceremonial worship dwindle into insignificance. They may be means of helping, or they may be means of hindering, the ‘worship in the Spirit,’ which I venture to think all experience shows is the more likely to be pure and real, the less it invokes the aid of flesh and sense. To make the senses the ladder for the soul by which to climb to God is quite as likely to end in the soul’s going down the ladder as up it. Aesthetic aids to worship are crutches which keep a lame soul lame all its days.

Such worship is the obligation as well as the prerogative of the Christian. We have no right to say that we have truly forsaken confidence in ourselves, and are truly ‘glorying’ in Christ Jesus, unless our daily life is communion with God, and all your work ‘worshipping by the Spirit of God.’ Such communion and worship are possible for those, and for those only, who have ‘no confidence in the flesh’ and who ‘glory in Christ Jesus.’

15)Philippians 3:4-8

Philippians

THE LOSS OF ALL

Php. 3:4-8 [R.V.].

We have already noted that in the previous verses the Apostle is beginning to prepare for closing his letter, but is carried away into the long digression of which our text forms the beginning. The last words of the former verse open a thought of which his mind is always full. It is as when an excavator strikes his pickaxe unwittingly into a hidden reservoir and the blow is followed by a rush of water, which carries away workmen and tools. Paul has struck into the very deepest thoughts which he has of the Gospel and out they pour. That one antithesis, ‘the loss of all, the gain of Christ,’ carried in it to him the whole truth of the Christian message. We may well ask ourselves what are the subjects which lie so near our hearts, and so fill our thoughts, that a chance word sets us off on them, and we cannot help talking of them when once we begin.

The text exemplifies another characteristic of Paul's, his constant habit of quoting his own experience as illustrating the truth. His theology is the generalisation of his own experience, and yet that continual autobiographical reference is not egotism, for the light in which he delights to present himself is as the recipient of the great grace of God in pardoning sinners. It is a result of the complete saturation of himself with the Gospel. It was to him no mere body of principles or thoughts, it was the very food and life of his life. And so this characteristic reveals not only his natural fervour of character, but the profound and penetrating hold which the Gospel had on his whole being.

In our text he presents his own experience as the type to which ours must on the whole be conformed. He had gone through an earthquake which had shattered the very foundations of his life. He had come to despise all that he had counted most precious, and to clasp as the only true treasures all that he had despised. With him the revolution had turned his whole life upside down. Though the change cannot be so subversive and violent with us, the forsaking of self-confidence must be as real, and the clinging to Jesus must be as close, if our Christianity is to be fervid and dominant in our lives.

I. The treasures that were discovered to be worthless.

We have already had occasion in the previous sermon to refer to Paul's catalogue of 'things that were gain' to him, but we must consider it a little more closely here. We may repeat that it is important for understanding Paul's point of view to note that by 'flesh' he means the whole self considered as independent of God. The antithesis to it is 'spirit,' that is humanity regenerated and vitalised by Divine influence. 'Flesh,' then, is humanity not so vitalised. That is to say, it is 'self,' including both body and emotions, affections, thoughts, and will.

As to the points enumerated, they are those which made the ideal to a Jew, including purity of race, punctilious orthodoxy, flaming zeal, pugnacious antagonism, and blameless morality. With reference to race, the Jewish pride was in ‘circumcision on the eighth day,’ which was the exclusive privilege of one of pure blood. Proselytes might be circumcised in later life, but one of the ‘stock of Israel’ only on the ‘eighth day.’ Saul of Tarsus had in earlier days been proud of his tribal genealogy, which had apparently been carefully preserved in the Gentile home, and had shared ancestral pride in belonging to the once royal tribe, and perhaps in thinking that the blood of the king after whom he was named flowed in his veins. He was a ‘Hebrew of the Hebrews,’ which does not mean, as it is usually taken to do, intensely, superlatively Hebrew, but simply is equivalent to ‘myself a Hebrew, and come from pure Hebrew ancestors on both sides.’ Possibly also the phrase may have reference to purity of language and customs as well as blood. These four items make the first group. Paul still remembers the time when, in the blindness which he shared with his race, he believed that these wholly irrelevant points had to do with a man’s acceptance before God. He had once agreed with the Judaisers that ‘circumcision’ admitted Gentiles into the Jewish community, and so gave them a right to participate in the blessings of the Covenant.

Then follow the items of his more properly religious character, which seem in their three clauses to make a climax. ‘As touching the law a Pharisee,’ he was of the ‘straitest sect,’ the champions and representatives of the law. ‘As touching zeal persecuting the Church,’ it was not only in Judaism that the mark of zeal for a cause has been harassing its opponents. We can almost hear a tone of sad irony as Paul recalls that past, remembering how eagerly he had taken charge of the clothes trusted to his care by the witnesses who stoned Stephen, and how he had ‘breathed threatening and slaughter’ against the disciples. ‘As touching the righteousness which is in the law found blameless,’ he is evidently speaking of the obedience of outward actions and of blamelessness in the judgment of men.

So we get a living picture of Paul and of his confidence before he was a Christian. All these grounds for pride and self-satisfaction were like triple armour round the heart of the young Pharisee, who rode out of Jerusalem on the road to Damascus. How little he thought that they would all have been pierced and have dropped from him before he got there! The grounds of his confidence are antiquated in form, but in substance are modern. At bottom the things in which Paul’s ‘flesh’ trusted are exactly the same as those in which many of us trust. Even his pride of race continues to influence some of us. We have got the length of separating between our nationality and our acceptance with God, but we have still a kind of feeling that ‘God’s Englishmen,’ as Milton called them, have a place of their own, which is, if not a ground of confidence before God, at any rate a ground for carrying ourselves with very considerable complacency before men. It is not unheard of that people should rely, if not on ‘circumcision on the eighth day,’ on an outward rite which seems to connect them with a visible Church. Strict orthodoxy takes the place among us which Pharisaism held in Paul’s mind before he was a Christian, and it is easier to prove our zeal by pugnacity against heretics, than by fervour of devotion. The modern analogue of Paul’s, ‘touching the righteousness which is in the law blameless,’ is ‘I have done my best, I have lived a decent life. My religion is to do good to other people.’ All such talk, which used to be a vague sentiment or excuse, is now put forward in definite theoretical substitution for the Christian Truth, and finds numerous teachers and acceptors. But how short a way all such grounds of confidence go to satisfy a soul that has once seen the vision that blazed in on Paul’s mind on the road to Damascus!

II. The discovery of their worthlessness.

‘These have I counted loss for Christ.’ There is a possibility of exaggeration in interpreting Paul’s words. The things that were ‘gain’ to him were in themselves better than their opposites. It is better to to be ‘blameless’ than to have a life all stained with foulness and reeking with sins. But these ‘gains’ were ‘losses,’ disadvantages, in so far as they led him to build upon them, and trust in them as solid wealth. The earthquake that shattered his life had two shocks: the first turned upside down his estimate of the value of his gains, the second robbed him of them. He first saw them to be worthless, and then, so far as others’ judgment went, he was stripped of them. Actively he ‘counted them loss,’ passively he ‘suffered the loss of all things.’ His estimate came, and was followed by the practical outcome of his brethren’s excommunication.

What changed his estimate? In our text he answers the question in two forms: first he gives the simple, all-sufficient monosyllabic reason for his whole life--'for Christ,' and then he enlarges that motive into 'the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.' The former carries us back straight to the vision which revolutionised Paul's life, and made him abjure all which he had trusted, and adore what he had abhorred. The latter dwells a little more upon the subjective process which followed on the vision, but the two are substantially the same, and we need only note the solemn fulness of the name of 'Jesus Christ,' and the intense motion of submission and of personal appropriation contained in the designation, 'my Lord.' It was not when he found his way blinded into Damascus that he had learned that knowledge, or could apprehend its 'excellency.' The words are enriched and enlarged by later experiences. The sacrifice of his earlier 'gains' had been made before the 'excellency of the knowledge' had been discerned. It was no mere intellectual perception which could be imparted in words, or by eyesight, but here as always Paul by 'knowledge' means experience which comes from possession and acquaintance, and which therefore gleams ever before us as we move, and is capable of endless increase, in the measure in which we are true to the estimate of 'gains' and 'losses' to which our initial vision of Him has led us. At first we may not know that that knowledge excels all others, but as we grow in acquaintance with Jesus, and in experience of Him, we shall be sure that it transcends all others, because He does and we possess Him.

The revolutionising motive may be conceived of in two ways. We have to abandon the lower 'gains' in order to gain Christ, or to abandon these because we have gained Him. Both are true. The discernment of Christ as the one ground of confidence is ever followed by the casting away of all others. Self-distrust is a part of faith. When we feel our feet upon the rock, the crumbling sands on which we stood are left to be broken up by the sea. They who have seen the Apollo Belvedere will set little store by plaster of Paris casts. In all our lives there come times when the glimpse of some loftier ideal shows up our ordinary as hollow and poor and low. And when once Christ is seen, as Scripture shows Him, our former self appears poor and crumbles away.

We are not to suppose that the act of renunciation must be completed before a second act of possession is begun. That is the error of many ascetic books. The two go together, and abandonment in order to win merges into abandonment because we have won. The strongest power to make renunciation possible is ‘the expulsive power of a new affection.’ When the heart is filled with love to Christ there is no sense of ‘loss,’ but only of ‘exceeding gain,’ in casting away all things for Him.

III. The continuous repetition of the discovery.

Paul compares his present self with his former Christian self, and with a vehement ‘Yea, verily,’ affirms his former judgment, and reiterates it in still more emphatic terms. It is often easy to depreciate the treasures which we possess. They sometimes grow in value as they slip from our hands. It is not usual for a man who has ‘suffered the loss of all things’ to follow their disappearance by counting them ‘but dung.’ The constant repetition through the whole Christian course of the depreciatory estimate of grounds of confidence is plainly necessary. There are subtle temptations to the opposite course. It is hard to keep perfectly clear of all building on our own blamelessness or on our connection with the Christian Church, and we have need ever to renew the estimate which was once so epoch-making, and which ‘cast down all our imaginations and high things.’ If we do not carefully watch ourselves, the whispering tempter that was silenced will recover his breath again, and be once more ready to drop into our ears his poisonous suggestions. We have to take pains and ‘give earnest heed’ to the initial, revolutionary estimate, and to see that it is worked out habitually in our daily lives. It is a good exchange when we count ‘all but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord.’

16)Philippians 3:8-9

Philippians

THE GAIN OF CHRIST

Php. 3:8-9 [R.V.].

It is not everybody who can say what is his aim in life. Many of us have never thought enough about it to have one beyond keeping alive. We lose life in seeking for the means of living. Many of us have such a multitude of aims, each in its turn drawing us, that no one of them is predominant and rules the crowd. There is no strong hand at the tiller, and so the ship washes about in the trough of the waves.

It is not everybody who dares to say what is his aim in life. We are ashamed to acknowledge even to ourselves what we are not at all ashamed to do. Paul knew his aim, and was not afraid to speak it. It was high and noble, and was passionately and persistently pursued. He tells us it here, and we can see his soul kindling as he speaks. We may note how there is here the same double reference as we found in the previous verses, gaining Christ corresponding to the previous loss for Christ, and the later words of our text being an expansion of the 'excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus.' No man will ever succeed in any life's purpose, unless like Paul he is enthusiastic about it. If his aim does not rouse his fervour when he speaks of it, he will never accomplish it. We may just remark that Paul does not suppose his aim to be wholly unattained, even although he does not count himself to 'have apprehended.' He knows that he has gained Christ, and is 'found in Him,' but he knows also that there stretch before him the possibilities of infinite increase.

I. His life's aim was to have the closest possession of, and incorporation in, Christ.

His two expressions, 'that I may gain Christ and be found in Him,' are substantially identical in meaning, though they put the same truth from different sides, and with some variety of metaphor. We may deal with them separately.

The 'gain' is of course the opposite of the 'loss.' His balance-sheet has on one side 'all things lost,' on the other 'Christ gained,' and that is profitable trading. But we have to go deeper than such a metaphor, and to give full scope to the Scriptural truth, that Christ really imparts Himself to the believing soul. There is a real communication of His own life to us, and thereby we live, as He Himself declared, 'He that hath the Son hath life.' The true deep sense in which we possess Christ is not to be weakened down, as it, alas! so often is in our shallow Christianity, which is but the echo of a shallow experience, and a feeble hold of that possession of the Son to which Jesus called us, as the condition of our possession of life. Christ is thus Himself possessed by all our faculties, each after its kind;

head and heart, passions and desires, hopes and longings, may each have Him abiding in them, guiding them with His strong and gentle hand, animating them into nobler life, restraining and controlling, gradually transforming and ultimately conforming them to His own likeness. Till that Divine Indweller enters in, the shrine is empty, and unclean things lurk in its hidden corners. To be a man full summed in all his powers, each of us must 'gain Christ.'

The other expression in the text, 'be found in Him,' presents the same truth from the completing point of view. We gain Christ in us when we are 'found in Him.' We are to be incorporated as members are in the body, or imbedded as a stone in the foundation, or to go back to the sweetest words, which are the source of all these representations, included as 'a branch in the vine.' We are to be in Him for safety and shelter, as fugitives take refuge in a strong tower when an enemy swarms over the land.

> '*And lo! from sin and grief and shame, I hide me, Jesus, in Thy name.*'

We are to be in Him that the life sap may freely flow through us. We are to be in Him that the Divine Love may fall on us, and that in Jesus we may receive our portion of all which is His heritage.

This mutual possession and indwelling is possible if Jesus be the Son of God, but the language is absurd in any other interpretation of His person. It is clearly in its very nature capable of indefinite increase, and as containing in itself the supply of all which we need for life and blessedness, is fitted to be what nothing else can pretend to be, without wrecking the lives that are unwise enough to pursue it--the sovereign aim of a human life. In following it, and only in following it, the highest wisdom says Amen to the aspiration of the lowliest faith. 'This one thing I do.'

II. Paul's life's aim was righteousness to be received.

He goes on to present some of the consequences which follow on his gaining Christ and being 'found in Him,' and before all others he names as his aim the possession of 'righteousness.' We must remember that Paul believed that righteousness in the sense of 'justification' had been his from the moment when Ananias came to where he was sitting in darkness, and bid him be baptized and wash away his sins. The word here must be taken in its full sense of moral perfectness; even if we included only this in our thoughts of his life's aim, how high above most men would he tower! But his statement carries him still higher above, and farther away from, the common ideas of moral perfection, and what he means by righteousness is widely separated from the world's conception, not only in regard to its elements, but still more in regard to its source.

It is possible to lose oneself in a dreamy mysticism which has had much to say of 'gaining Christ and being found in Him,' and has had too little to say about 'having righteousness,' and so has turned out to be an ally of indifference and sometimes of unrighteousness. Buddhism and some forms of mystical Christianity have fallen into a pit of immorality from which Paul's sane combination here would have saved them. There is no danger in the most mystical interpretation of the former statement of his aim, when it is as closely connected as it is here with the second form in which he states it. I have just said that Paul differed from men who were seeking for righteousness, not only because his conceptions of what constituted it were not the same as theirs, though he in this very letter endorses the Greek ideals of 'virtue and praise,' but also and more emphatically because he looked for it as a gift, and not as the result of his own efforts. To him the only righteousness which availed was one which was not 'my own,' but had its source in, and was imparted by, God. The world thought of righteousness as the general designation under which were summed up a man's specific acts of conformity to law, the sum total reached by the addition of many specific instances of conformity to a standard of duty. Paul had learned to think of it as preceding and producing the specific acts. The world therefore said, and says, Do the deeds and win the character; Paul says, Receive the character and do the deeds. The result of the one conception of righteousness is in the average man spasmodic efforts after isolated achievements, with long periods between in which effort subsides into torpor. The result in Paul's case was what we know: a continuous effort to keep his mind and heart open for the influx of the power which, entering into him, would make him able to do the specific acts which constitute righteousness. The one road is a weary path, hard to tread, and, as a matter of fact, not often trodden. To pile up a righteousness by the accumulation of individual righteous acts is an endeavour less hopeful than that of the coral polypes slowly building up their reef out of the depths of the Pacific, till it rises above the waves. He who assumes to be righteous on the strength of a succession of righteous acts, not only needs a profounder idea of what makes his acts righteous, but should also make a catalogue of his unrighteous ones and call himself wicked. The other course is the final deliverance of a man from dependence upon his own struggles, and substitutes for the dreary alternations of effort and torpor, and for the imperfect harvest of imperfectly righteous acts, the attitude of receiving, which supersedes painful strife and weary endeavour. To seek after a righteousness which is 'my own,' is to seek what we shall never find, and what, if found, would crumble beneath us. To seek the righteousness which is from God, is to seek what He is waiting to bestow, and what the blessed receivers blessedly know is more than they dreamed of.

But Paul looked for this great gift as a gift in Christ. It was when he was 'found in Him' that it became his, and he was found 'blameless.' That gift of an imparted life, which has a bias towards all goodness, and the natural operation of which is to incline all our faculties towards conformity with the will of God, is bestowed when we 'win Christ.' Possessing Him, we possess it. It is not only 'imputed,' as our fathers delighted to say, but it is 'imparted.' And because it is the gift of God in Christ, it was in Paul's view received by faith. He expresses that conviction in a double form in our text. It is 'through faith' as the channel by which it passes into our happy hands. It is 'by faith,' or, more accurately, 'upon faith,' as the foundation on which it rests, or the condition on which it depends. Our trust in Christ does bring His life to us to sanctify us, and the plain English of all this blessed teaching is--if we wish to be better let us trust Christ and get Him into the depths of our lives, and righteousness will be ours. That transforming Presence laid up in 'the hidden man of the heart,' will be like some pungent scent in a wardrobe which keeps away moths, and gives out a fragrance that perfumes all that hangs near it.

But all which we have been saying is not to be understood as if there was no effort to be made, in order to receive, and to live manifesting, the 'righteousness which is of God.' There must be the constant abandonment of self, and the constant utilising of the grace given. The righteousness is bestowed whenever faith is exercised. The hand is never stretched out and the gift not lodged in it. But it is a life's aim to possess the 'righteousness which is of God by faith,' because that gift is capable of indefinite increase, and will reward the most strenuous efforts of a believing soul as long as life continues.

III. Paul's life's aim stretches beyond this life.

Shall we be chargeable with crowding too much meaning into his words, if we fix on his remarkable expression, 'be found in Him,' as containing a clear reference to that great day of final judgment? We recall other instances of the use of the same expression in connections which unmistakably point to that time. Such as 'being clothed we shall not be found naked,' or 'the proof of your faith . . . might be found unto praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ,' or 'found of Him in peace without spot, blameless.' In the light of these and similar passages, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that this 'being found' does include a reference to the Apostle's place after death, though it is not confined to that. He thinks of the searching eye of the Judge taking keen account, piercing through all disguises, and wistfully as well as penetratingly scrutinising characters, till it finds that for which it seeks. They who are 'found in Him' in that day, are there and thus for ever. There is no further fear of falling out of union with Him, or of being, by either gradual and unconscious stages, or by sudden and overmastering assaults, carried out of the sacred enclosure of the City of Refuge in which they dwell henceforth for ever. A dangerous presumptuousness has sometimes led to the over-confident assertion, 'Once in Christ always in Christ.' But Paul teaches us that that security of permanent dwelling in Him is to be for ever in this life the aim of our efforts, rather than an accomplished fact. So long as we are here, the possibility of falling away cannot be shut out, and there must always rise before us the question, Am I in Christ? Hence there is need for continual watchfulness, self-control, and self-distrust, and the life's aim has to be perpetual, not only because it is capable of indefinite expansion, but because our weakness is capable of deserting it. It is only when at the last we are found by Him, in Him, that we are there for ever, with all dangers of departure from Him at an end. In that City of Refuge, and there only, 'the gates shall not be shut at all,' not solely because no enemies shall attempt to come in, but also because no citizens shall desire to go out.

We should ever have before us that hour, and our life's aim should ever definitely include the final scrutiny in which many a hidden thing will come to light, many a long-lost thing be found, and each man's ultimate place in relation to Jesus Christ will be freed from uncertainties, ambiguities, hypocrisies, and disguises, and made plain to all beholders. In that great day of 'finding,' some of us will have to ask with sinking hearts, 'Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?' and others will break forth into the glad acclaim, 'I have found Him,' or rather 'been found of Him.'

So we have before us the one reasonable aim for a man to have Christ, to be found in Him, to have His righteousness. It is reasonable, it is great enough to absorb all our energies, and to reward them. It will last a lifetime, and run on undisturbed beyond life. Following it, all other aims will fall into their places. Is this my aim?

17)Philippians 3:10-11

Philippians

SAVING KNOWLEDGE

Php. 3:10-11 [R.V.].

We have seen how the Apostle was prepared to close his letter at the beginning of this chapter, and how that intention was swept away by the rush of new thoughts. His fervid faith caught fire when he turned to think of what he had lost, and how infinitely more he had gained in Christ. His wealth is so great that it cannot be crowded into the narrow space of one brief sentence, and after all the glowing words which precede our text, he feels that he has not yet adequately set forth either his present possessions or his ultimate aims. So here he continues the theme which might have seemed most fully dealt with in the great thoughts that occupied us in the former sermon, but which still wait to be completed here. They are most closely connected with the former, and the unity of the sentence is but a parallel to the oneness of the idea. The elements of our present text constitute a part of the Apostle’s aim in life, and may be dealt with as such.

I. Paul’s life’s aim was the knowledge of Christ.

That sounds an anti-climax after ‘Gain’ and ‘Be in Him.’ These phrases seem to express a much more intimate relation than this, but we must note that it is no mere theoretical or intellectual knowledge which is intended. Such knowledge would need no surrender or suffering ‘the loss of all things.’ We can only buy the knowledge of Christ at such a rate, but we can buy knowledge about Him very much cheaper. Such knowledge would not be worth the price; it lies on the surface of the soul, and does nothing. Many a man amongst us has it, and it is of no use to him. If Paul had undergone all that he had undergone and sacrificed all that he had given up, and for his reward had only gained accurate knowledge about Christ, he had certainly wasted his life and made a bad bargain. But as always, so here, to know means knowledge based upon experience. Did Christ mean that a correct creed was eternal life when He said, ‘This is life eternal to know Thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent?’ Did Paul mean the dry light of the understanding when he prayed that the Ephesians might know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, in order to be filled with all the fulness of God? Clearly we have to go much deeper down than that superficial interpretation in order to reach the reality of the New Testament conception of knowledge. It is co-extensive with life, and is built upon inward experience. In a word, it is one aspect of winning Jesus. It is consciousness contemplating its riches, counting its gains. As a man knows the bliss of parental or wedded love only by having it, or as he knows the taste of wine only by drinking it, or the glory of music only by hearing it, and the brightness of the day only by seeing it, so we know Christ only by winning Him. There must first be the perception and possession by sense or emotion, and then the reflection on the possession by understanding. This applies to all religious truth. It must be possessed ere it be fully known. Like the new name written upon the Apocalyptic stone, ‘No one knoweth but he that receiveth it.’

The knowledge which was Paul’s life’s aim was knowledge of a Person: the object determines the nature of the knowledge. The mental act of knowing a proposition or a science or even of knowing about a person by hearing of him is different from that of knowing people when we have lived beside them. We need not be afraid of attaching too familiar a meaning to this word of our text, if we say that it implies personal acquaintance with the Christ whom we know. Of course we come to know Him in the first instance through the medium of statements about Him, and we cannot too strongly insist, in these days of destructive criticism, on the absolute necessity of accepting the Gospel statements as to the life of Jesus as the only possible method of knowing Him. But then, beyond that acceptance of the record must come the application and appropriation of it, and the transmutation of a historical fact into a personal experience. We may take an illustration from any of the Scriptural truths about Jesus:--For instance, Scripture declares Him to be our Redeemer. One man believes Him to be so, welcomes Him into his life as such, and finds Him to be such. Another man believes Him to be so, but never puts His redeeming power to the proof. Is the knowledge of these two rightly called by the same name? That which comes after experience is surely not rightly designated by the same title as that which has no vivification nor verification of such a sort to build on, and is the mere product of the understanding. There is nothing which the great mass of so-called Christians need more than to have forced into their thoughts the difference between these two kinds of knowledge of Christ. There are thousands of them who, if asked, are ready to profess that they know Jesus, but to whom He has never been anything more than a partially understood article of an uncared for creed, and has never been in living contact with their needs, nor known for their strength in weakness, their comforter in sorrow, ‘their life in death,’ their all in all.

To deepen that experimental knowledge of Jesus is a worthy aim for the whole life, and is a process that may go on indefinitely through it all. To know Him more and more is to have more of heaven in us. To be penetrating ever deeper into His fulness, and finding every day new depths to penetrate is to have a fountain of freshness in our dusty days that will never fail or run dry. There is only one inexhaustible person, and that is Jesus Christ. We have all fulness in our Lord: we have already received all when we received Him. Are we advancing in the experience that is the parent of knowing Him? Do new discoveries meet us every day as if we were explorers in a virgin land? To have this for our aim is enough for satisfaction, for blessedness, and for growth. To know Him is a liberal education.

II. That knowledge involves knowing the power of His Resurrection.

The power of His Resurrection is an expression which covers a wide ground. There are several distinct and well-marked powers ascribed to it in Paul's writings. It has a demonstrative force in reference to our Lord's person and work. For He is by it 'declared to be the Son of God with power.' That rising again from the dead, taken in conjunction with the fact that He dieth no more, but is ascended up on high, and in conjunction with His own words concerning Himself and His Resurrection, sets Him forth before the world as the Son of God, and is the solemn divine approval and acceptance of His work.

It has a revealing power in regard to the condition of humanity in death. It is the one fact which establishes immortality, and which not only establishes it, but casts some light on the manner of it. The possibility of personal life after, and therefore, in death, the unbroken continuity of being, the possibility of a resurrection, and a glorifying of this corporeal frame, with all the far-reaching consequences of these truths in the triumph they give over death, in the support and substance they afford to the else-shadowy idea of immortality, in the lofty place which they assign to the bodily frame, and the conception which they give of man's perfection as consisting of body, soul, and spirit--these thoughts have flashed light into all the darkness of the grave, have narrowed to a mere strip of coast-line the boundaries of the kingdom of death, have proclaimed love as the victor in her contest with that shrouded horror. The basis of them all is Christ's Resurrection; its power in this respect is the power to illuminate, to console, to certify, to wrench the sceptre from the hands of death, and to put it in the pierced hands of the Living One that was dead, and is Lord both of the dead and the living.

Further, the Resurrection is treated by Paul as having a power for our justification, in so far as the risen Lord bestows upon us by His risen life the blessings of His righteousness. Paul also represents the Resurrection of Christ as having the power of quickening our Spiritual life. I need not spend time in quoting the many passages where His rising from the dead, and His life after the Resurrection, are treated as the type and pattern of our lives: and are not only regarded as pattern, but are also regarded as the power by which that new life of ours is brought about. It has the power of raising us from the death of sin, and bringing us into a new life of the Spirit. And finally, the Resurrection of Christ is regarded as having the power of raising His servants from the grave to the full possession of His own glorious life, and so it is the power of our final victory over death.

Now I do not know that we are entitled to exclude any of these powers from view. The broad words of the text include them all, but perhaps the two last are mainly meant, and of these chiefly the former.

The risen life of Christ quickens and raises us, and that not merely as a pattern, but as a power. It is only if we are in Him that there is so real a unity of life between Him and us that there enters into us some breath of His own life.

That risen life of the Saviour which we share if we have Him, enters into our nature as leaven into the three measures of meal; transforming and quickening it, gives new directions, tastes, motives, impulses, and power. It bids and inclines us to seek the things that are above, and its great exhortation to the hearts in which it dwells, to fix themselves there, and to forsake the things that are on the earth, is based upon the fact that they have died, and 'their life is hid with Christ in God.' Without that leaven the life that we live is a death, because it is lived in the 'lusts of the flesh,' doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind. There is no real union with Jesus Christ, of which the direct issue is not a living experience of the power of His Resurrection in bringing us to the likeness of itself in regard to our freedom from the bondage to sin, and to our presenting ourselves unto God as alive from the dead, and our members as instruments of righteousness unto God. It is a solemn thought which we all need to press upon our consciences, that the only infallible sign that we have been in any measure quickened together with Christ and raised up with Him is that we have ceased to live in the lusts of our flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind. The risen life of Jesus may indefinitely increase, and will do so in the measure in which we honestly make it our life's aim to know Him and the power of His Resurrection.

III. The experience of the power of Christ’s Resurrection is inseparable from the fellowship of His sufferings.

We must not suppose that Paul’s solemn and awful words here trench in the smallest degree on the solitary unapproachableness of Christ’s death. He would have answered, as in fact he does answer, the appeal of the prophetic sufferer, ‘Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow’ with the strongest negative. No other human lips have ever tasted, or can ever taste, a cup of such bitterness as He drained for us all, and no other human lips have ever been so exquisitely sensitive to the bitterness which they have drunk. The identification of Himself with a sinful world, the depth and closeness of His community of feeling with all sorrow, the consciousness of the glory which He had left, and the perpetual sense of the hostility into which He had come, set Christ’s sufferings by themselves as surely as the effects that flow from them declare that they need no repetition, and cannot be degraded by any parallel whilst the world lasts.

But yet His Death, like His Resurrection, is set forth in Scripture as being a type and power of ours. We have to die to the world by the power of the Cross. If we truly trust in His sacrifice there will operate upon us motives which separate and detach us from our old selves and the old world. A fundamental, ethical, and spiritual change is effected on us through faith. We were dead in sin, we are dead to sin. We have to blend the two thoughts of the Christian life as being a daily dying and a continual resurrection in order to get the whole truth of the double aspect of it.

It may be a question whether the Apostle is here referring to outward or inward and ethical sorrows, but perhaps we should not do justice to the thought unless we extend it to cover both of these. Certainly if his theology was but the generalising of his experience, he had ample material in his daily life for knowing the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings. One of his most frequently recurring and most cherished thoughts is, that to suffer for Christ is to suffer with Christ, and in it he found and teaches us to find strength to endure, and patience to outlast any sorrows that may swoop upon us like birds of prey because we are Christians. Happy shall we be if Christ’s sufferings are ours, because it is our union with Him and our likeness to Him, not to ourselves, our sins, or our worldliness, that is their occasion.

There is an old legend that Peter was crucified head downwards, because he felt himself unworthy to be as his Master. We may well feel that nothing which we can ever bear for Him is worthy to be compared with what He has borne for us, and be the more overwhelmed with the greatness of the condescension, and the humility of the love which reckon our light affliction, which is but for a moment, along with the heavy weight which He bore, and the blessed issue of which outlasts time and enriches eternity.

But there is another sense in which it is a worthy aim of our lives that our sufferings may be felt to be fellowship with His. That is a blessed sorrow which brings us closer to our Lord. That is a wholesome sorrow of which the issue is an intenser faith in Him, a fuller experience of His sufficiency. The storm blows us well when it blows us to His breast, and sorrow enriches us, whatever it may take away, which gives us fuller and more assured possession of Jesus.

But when we are living in fellowship with Jesus, that union works in two directions, and while on the one hand we may then humbly venture to feel that our sufferings for Him are sufferings with Him, we may thankfully feel, too, that in all our affliction He is afflicted. If His sufferings are ours we may be sure that ours are His. And how different they all become when we are certain of His sympathy! It is possible that we may have a kind of common consciousness with our Lord, if our whole hearts and wills are kept in close touch with Him, so that in our experience there may be a repetition in a higher form of that strange experience alleged to be familiar in hypnotism, where the bitter in one mouth is tasted in another.

So, what we ought to make our aim is that in our lives our growing knowledge of Christ should lead to the two results, so inexorably intertwined, of daily death and daily resurrection, and that we may be kept faithful to Him so that our outward sufferings may be caused by our union with Him, and not by our own faithlessness, and may be discerned by us to be fellowship with His. Then we shall also feel that He bears ours with us, and sorrow itself will be calmed and beautified into a silent bliss, as the chill peaks when the morning strikes them glow with tender pink, and seem soft and warm, though they are grim rock and ice-cold snow. Then some faint echo of His history 'who was acquainted with grief' may be audible in our outward lives and we, too, may have our Gethsemane and our Calvary. It may not be presumption in us to say ‘We are able’ when He asks ‘Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of’? nor terror to hear Him prophesy ‘Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of,’ for we shall remember ‘joint-heirs in Christ, if so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified together.’

IV. The end attained.

The Christian life as here manifested is even in its highest forms manifestly incomplete. It is a reflected light, and like the reflected light in the heavens, advances by imperceptible degrees to fill the whole silver round. It may be ‘e’en in its imperfections beautiful,’ but it assuredly has ‘a ragged edge.’ The hypothetical form of the last words of our text does not so much imply a doubt of the possibility of attaining the result as the recognition of the indispensable condition of effort on the part of him who attains it. That effort forthcoming, the attainment is certain.

The Revised Version makes a slight correction which involves a great matter, in reading ‘the resurrection from the dead.’ It is necessary to insist on this change in rendering, not because it implies that only saints are raised, but because Paul is thinking of that first resurrection of which the New Testament habitually speaks. ‘The dead in Christ shall rise first’ as he himself declared in his earliest epistle, and the seer in the Apocalypse shed a benediction on ‘him that hath part in the first resurrection.’ Our knowledge of that solemn future is so fragmentary that we cannot venture to draw dogmatic inferences from the little that has been declared to us, but we cannot forget the distinct words of Jesus in which He not only plainly declares a universal resurrection, but as plainly proclaims that it falls into two parts, one a ‘resurrection of life,’ and one a ‘resurrection of judgment.’ The former may well be the final aim of a Christian life: the latter is a fate which one would think no sane man would deliberately provoke. Each carries in its name its dominant characteristic, the one full of attractiveness, the other partially unveiling depths of shame and punitive retributions which might appal the stoutest heart.

This resurrection of life is the last result of the power of Christ’s Resurrection received into and working on the human spirit. It is plain enough that if the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in us there is no term to its operations until our mortal bodies also are quickened by His Spirit that dwelleth in us. The ethical and spiritual resurrection in the present life finds its completion in the bodily resurrection in the future. It cannot be that the transformation wrought in a human life shall be complete until it has flowed outwards into and permeated the whole of manhood, body, soul, and spirit. The three measures of meal have each to be influenced before 'the whole is leavened.' If we duly consider the elements necessary to a perfect realisation of the divine ideal of humanity, we shall discern that redemption must have a gospel to bring to the body as well as to the spirit. Whatever has been devastated by sin must be healed by Jesus. It is not necessary to suppose that the body which dies is the body which rises again, rather the Apostle's far-reaching series of antitheses between that which is sown and that which is raised leads us to think that the natural body, which has passed through corruption, and the particles of which have been gathered into many different combinations, does not become the spiritual body. The person who dies is the person who lives through death, and who assumes the body of the resurrection, and it is the person, not the elements which make up the personality, who is spoken of as risen from the dead. The vesture may be different, but the wearer is the same.

So that resurrection from the dead is the end of a supernatural life begun here and destined to culminate hereafter. It is the last step in the manifestation of our being in Christ, and so is being prepared for here by every step in advance in gaining Jesus. It should ever be before every Christian soul that participation in Christ hereafter is conditioned by its progress in likeness to Him here. The Resurrection from the dead is not a gift which can be bestowed apart from a man's moral state. If he dies having had no knowledge by experience of the power of Christ's Resurrection, there is nothing in the fact of death to give him that knowledge, and it is impossible to bring 'any means' to bear on him by which he will attain unto the 'resurrection from the dead.' If God could give that gift irrespective of a man's relations to Jesus, He would give it to all. Let us ask ourselves, then, is it not worth making the dominant aim of our lives the same as that of Paul's? How stands our account then? Are we not wise traders presenting a good balance-sheet when we show entered on the one side the loss of all things, and on the other the gaining of Christ, and the attaining the resurrection from the dead, the perfect transformation of body, soul, and spirit, into the perfect likeness of the perfect Lord? Does the other balance-sheet show the man as equally solvent who enters on one side the gain of a world, and on the other a Christless life, to be followed by a resurrection in which is no joy, no advance, no life, but which is a resurrection of judgment? May we all be found in Him, and attain to the resurrection from the dead!

18)Philippians 3:12

Philippians

LAID HOLD OF AND LAYING HOLD

Php. 3:12.

‘I was laid hold of by Jesus Christ.’ That is how Paul thinks of what we call his conversion. He would never have ‘turned’ unless a hand had been laid upon him. A strong loving grasp had gripped him in the midst of his career of persecution, and all that he had done was to yield to the grip, and not to wriggle out of it. The strong expression suggests, as it seems to me, the suddenness of the incident. Possibly impressions may have been working underground, ever since the martyrdom of Stephen, which were undermining his convictions, and the very insanity of his zeal may have been due to an uneasy consciousness that the ground was yielding beneath his feet. That may have been so, but, whether it were so or not, the crisis came like a bolt out of the blue, and he was checked in full career, as if a voice had spoken to the sea in its wildest storm, and frozen its waves into immobility.

There is suggested in the word, too, distinctly, our Lord’s personal action in the matter. No doubt, the fact of His supernatural appearance gives emphasis to the phrase here. But every Christian man and woman has been, as truly as ever Paul was, laid hold of by the personal action of Jesus Christ. He is present in His Word, and, by multitudes of inward impulses and outward providences, He is putting out a gentle and a firm hand, and laying it upon the shoulders of all of us. Have we yielded? Have we resisted, when we were laid hold of? Did we try to get away? Did we plant our feet and say, ‘I will not be drawn,’ or did we simply neglect the pressure? If we have yielded, my text tells us what we have to do next. For that hand is laid upon a man for a purpose, and that purpose is not secured by the hand being laid upon him, unless he, in his turn, will put out a hand and grasp. Our activity is needed; that activity will not be put forth without very distinct effort, and that effort has to be life-long, because our grasp at the best is incomplete. So then, we have here, first of all, to consider--

I. What Christ has laid His grip on us for.

Now, the immediate result of that grasp, when it is yielded to, is the sense of the removal of guilt, forgiveness of sins, acceptance with God. But these, the immediate results, are by no means the whole results, although a great many of us live as if we thought that the only thing that Christianity is meant to do to us is that it bars the gates of some future hell, and brings to us the message of forgiveness. We cannot think too nobly or too loftily of that gift of forgiveness, the initial gift that is laid in every Christian man’s hands, but we may think too exclusively of it, and a great many of us do think of it as if it were all that was to be given. A painter has to clear away the old paint off a door, or a wall, before he lays on the new. The initial gift that comes from being laid hold of by Jesus Christ is the burning off of the old coat of paint. But that is only the preliminary to the laying on of the new. A man away in the backwoods will spend a couple of years after he has got his bit of land in felling and burning the trees, and rooting out and destroying the weeds. But is that what he got the clearing for? That is only a preliminary to sowing the seed. My friend! If Jesus Christ has laid hold of you, and you have let Him keep hold of you, it is not only that you may be forgiven, not only that you may sun yourself in the light of God’s countenance, and feel that a new blessed relation is set up between you and Him, but there are great purposes lying at the back of that, of which all that is only the preliminary and the preparation.

Conversion. Yes; but what is the good of turning a man round unless he goes in the direction in which his face is turned? And so here the Apostle having for years lived in the light of that great thought, that God was reconciled in Jesus Christ, and that he was God’s friend, discerns far beyond that, in dim perspective, towering high above the land in the front, the snowy sunlit summits of a great range to which he has yet to climb, and says, ‘I press on to lay hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Jesus Christ.’

And what was that? On the road to Damascus Paul was only told one thing, that Christ had grasped him and drawn him to Himself in order that He might make him a chosen vessel to bear the Word far hence amongst the Gentiles. The bearing of His conversion upon Paul himself was never mentioned. The bearing of His conversion on the world was the only subject that Jesus spoke of at first. But here Paul has nothing to say about his world-wide mission. He does not think of himself as being called to be an Apostle, but as being summoned to be a Christian. And so, forgetting for the time all the glorious and yet burdensome obligations which were laid upon him, and the discharge of which was the very life of his life, he thinks only of what affects his own character, the perfecting of which he regards as being the one thing for which he was ‘laid hold of by Christ Jesus.’ The purpose is twofold. No Christian man is made a Christian only in order that he may secure his own salvation; there is the world to think of. No Christian man is made a Christian only in order that he may be Christ’s instrument for carrying the Word to other people; there is himself to think of. And these two phases of the purpose for which Jesus Christ lays hold upon us are very hard to unite in practice, giving to each its due place and prominence, and they are often separated, to the detriment of both the one that is attended to, and the one that is neglected. The monastic life has not produced the noblest Christians; and there are pitfalls lying in the path of every man who, like me, has for his profession to preach the Gospel, which, if they are fallen into, the inward life is utterly wrecked.

The two sides of Christ’s purpose have, in our practice, to be held together, but for the present I only wish to say a word or two about that which, as I have indicated, is but one hemisphere of the completed orb, and that is our personal culture and growth in the divine life. What did Christ lay hold of me for? Paul answers the question very strikingly and beautifully in a previous verse. Here is his conception of the purpose, ‘that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death, if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.' That is what you were forgiven for; that is what you have 'passed from death unto life' for; that is what you have come into the sweet fellowship of God, and can think of Him as your Friend and Helper for.

Let us take the clauses seriatim , and say a word about each of them. 'That I may know Him.' Ah! there is a great deal more in Jesus Christ than a man sees when he first sees Him through his tears and his fears, and apprehends Him as the Saviour of his soul, and the sacrifice on whom the burden and the guilt of his sins were laid. We must begin there, as I believe. But woe to us if we stop there. There is far more in Christ than that; although all that is in Him is included in that, yet you have to dig deep before you find all that is included in it. You have to live with Him day by day, and year by year, and to learn to know Him as we learn to know husbands and wives, by continual intercourse, by continual experience of a sweet and unfailing love, by many a sacred hour of interchange of affection and reception of gifts and counsels. It is only thus that we learn to know what Jesus Christ is. When He lays hold of us, He comes like the angel that came to Peter in the prison in the dark and awoke him out of his sleep and said 'Rise! and follow me.' It is only when we get out into the street, and have been with Him for awhile, and the daylight begins to stream in, that we see clearly the face of our Deliverer, and know Him for all that He is. This knowledge is not the sort of knowledge that you can get by thinking, or out of a book. It is the knowledge of experience. It is the knowledge of love, it is the knowledge of union, and it is in order that we may know Christ that He lays his hand upon us.

'The power of His Resurrection.' Now, by that I understand a similar knowledge, by experience, of the risen life of Jesus Christ flowing into us, and filling our hearts and minds with its own power. The risen life of Jesus is the nourishment and strengthening and blessing and life of a Christian. Our daily experience ought to be that there comes, wavelet by wavelet, that silent, gentle, and yet omnipotent influx into our empty hearts, the very life of Christ Himself.

I know that this generation says that that is mysticism. I do not know whether it is mysticism or not. I am sure it is truth; and I do not understand Christianity at all, unless there is that kind of mysticism, perfectly wholesome and good, in it. You will never know Jesus Christ until you know Him as pouring into your hearts the power of an endless life, His own life. Christ for us by all means,--Christ's death the basis of our hope, but Christ in us, and Christ's life as the true gift to His Church. Have you got that? Do you know the power of His Resurrection?

'The fellowship of His sufferings.' Has Paul made a mistake, and deserted the chronological order? Why does he put the 'fellowship of the sufferings' after the 'power of the Resurrection'? For this plain reason, that if we get Christ's life into our hearts, in the measure in which we get it we shall bear a similar relation to the world which He bore to it, and in our measure will 'fill up that which is behind in the sufferings of Christ,' and will understand how true it is that 'if they hate Me they will hate you also.' Brethren, the test of us who have the life of Christ in our hearts is that we shall, in some measure, suffer with Him, because 'as He is, so are we, in this world,' and because we must in that case look upon the world, its sins and its sorrows, with something of the sad gaze with which He looked across the valley to the Temple sparkling in the morning light, and wept over it. So if we know the power of His Resurrection we shall know the fellowship of His sufferings.

And then Paul goes on, in his definition of the purpose for which Christ lays hold upon men, apparently to say the same thing over again, only in the opposite order, 'that I may be conformable to His death, if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.' Both of these clauses, I think, refer to the future, to the actual dying of the body, and the actual future resurrection of the same. And the thought is this, that if here, through our earthly lives, we have been recipients of the risen life of Jesus Christ, and so have stood to the world in our degree as He stood to it, then when the moment of death comes to us, we shall, in so far, have our departure shaped after His as that we shall be able to say, 'Into Thy hands I commit my spirit,' and die willingly, and at last shall be partakers of that blessed Resurrection unto life eternal which closes the vista of our earthly history. Stephen's death was conformed to Christ's in outward fashion, in so far as it echoed the Master’s prayer, ‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do,’ and in so far as it echoed the Master’s last words, with the significant alteration that, whilst Jesus commended His spirit to the Father, the first martyr commended his to Jesus Christ.

These, then, are the purposes for which Christ laid His hand upon us, that we might know Him, the power of His Resurrection, the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable to His death yet by attaining the resurrection of the dead.

II. Notice, again, our laying hold because we have been laid hold of.

Christ’s laying hold of me, blessed and powerful as it is, does not of itself secure that I shall reach the end which He had in view in His arresting of me. What more is wanted? My effort. ‘I follow after if I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended.’ Now, notice, in the one case, the Apostle speaks of himself, not as passive, but certainly not as active. ‘I was laid hold of.’ What did he do? As I have said, he simply yielded to the grasp. But ‘I may lay hold of’ conveys the idea of personal effort; and so these two expressions, ‘I was apprehended,’ and ‘I apprehend,’ suggest this consideration, that, for the initial blessings of the Christian life, forgiveness, acceptance, the sense of God’s favour, and of reconciliation with him, nothing is needed but the simple faith that yields itself altogether to the grasp of Christ’s hand, but that for my possessing what Christ means that I should possess when He lays His hand on me, there is needed not only faith but effort. I have to put out my hand and tighten my fingers round the thing, if I would make it my own, and keep it.

So--faith, to begin with, and work based on faith, to go on with. It is because a man is sure that Jesus Christ has laid His hand upon him, and meant something when He did it, that he fights on with all his might to realise Christ’s purpose, and to get and keep the thing which Christ meant him to have. There is stimulus in the thought, I was laid hold of by Him for a purpose. There is all the difference between striving, however eagerly, however nobly, however strenuously, however constantly, after self-improvement, by one’s own effort only, and striving after it because one knows that he is therein fulfilling the purpose for which Jesus Christ drew him to Himself.

And if that be so, then the nature of the thing to be laid hold of determines what we are to do to lay hold of it. And since to know Christ, and the power of His Resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, is the aim and end of our conversion, the way to secure it must be keeping in continual touch with Jesus by meditating upon Him, by holding many a moment of still, sacred, sweet communion with Him, by carefully avoiding whatever might come between us and our knowledge of Him, and the influx of His life into us, and by yielding ourselves, day by day, to the continual influence of His divine grace upon us and by the discipline which shall make our inward natures more and more capable of receiving more and more of that dear Lord. These being the things to do, in regard to the inward life, there must be effort too, in regard to the outward; for we must, if we are to lay hold of that for which we are laid hold of by Jesus Christ, bring all the outward life under the dominion of this inward impulse, and when the flood pours into our hearts we must, by many a sluice and trench, guide it into every corner of the field, that all may be irrigated. The first thing they do when they are going to sow rice in an Eastern field is to flood it, and then they cast in the seed, and it germinates. Flood your lives with Christ, and then sow the seed and you will get a crop.

III. Lastly, the text suggests the incompleteness of our grasp.

‘I follow that,’ says Paul, ‘if that I may apprehend.’ This letter was written far on in his career, in the time of his imprisonment in Rome, which all but ended his ministerial activity; and was many years after that day on the road to Damascus. And yet, matured Christian and exercised Apostle as he was, with all that past behind him, he says, ‘I follow after, that I may apprehend.’ Ah, brother, our experience must be incomplete, for we have an infinite aim set before us, and there is no end to the possibilities of plunging deeper and deeper and deeper into the knowledge of Christ, and having larger and larger and larger draughts of the fulness of His life. We have only been like goldseekers, who have contented themselves as yet with washing the precious grains out of the gravel of the river. There are great reefs filled with the ore that we have not touched. Thank God for the necessary incompleteness of our ‘apprehending.’ It is the very salt of life. To have realised our aims, to have fulfilled our ideals, to have sucked dry the cluster of the grapes is the death of aspiration, of hope, of blessedness; and to have the distance beckoning, and all experience 'an arch, wherethro' gleams the untravelled world to which we move,' is the secret of perpetual youth and energy.

Because incomplete, our experience should be progressive; and that is a truth that needs hammering into Christian people to-day. About how many of us can it be said that our light 'shineth more and more unto the noonday.' Alas! about an enormous number of us it must be said, 'When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you.' All our churches have many grown babies, and cases of arrested development--people that ought to be living on strong meat, and are unable to masticate or digest it, and by their own fault have still need of the milk of infancy. There is an old fable about a strange animal that fastened itself to the keel of sailing ships, and by some uncanny power was able to arrest them in mid-ocean, though the winds were filling all their sails. There is a remora, as they called it, of that sort adhering to a great many Christian people, and keeping them fixed on one spot, instead of 'following after, if that they may apprehend.'

Dear friends--and especially you younger Christians--Christ has laid hold of you. Well and good! that is the beginning. He has laid hold of you for an end. That end will not be reached without your effort, and that effort must be perpetual. It is a life-long task. Ay! and even up yonder the apprehending will be incomplete. Like those mathematical lines that ever approximate to a point which they never reach, we shall through Eternity be, as it were, rising, in ascending and ever-closer drawing spirals, to that great Throne, and to Him that sits upon it. So that, striking out the humble 'may' from our text, the rest of it describes the progressive blessedness of the endless life in the heavens, as truly as it does the progressive duty of the Christian life here, and the glorified flock that follows the Lamb in the heavenly pastures may each say: I follow after in order to apprehend that 'for which,' long ago and down amidst the dim shadows of earth, 'I was apprehended of Christ Jesus.'

19)Philippians 3:13-14

Philippians

THE RACE AND THE GOAL

Php. 3:13-14.

This buoyant energy and onward looking are marvellous in 'Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.' Forgetfulness of the past and eager anticipation for the future are, we sometimes think, the child's prerogatives. They may be ignoble and puerile, or they may be worthy and great. All depends on the future to which we look. If it be the creation of our fancies, we are babies for trusting it. If it be, as Paul's was, the revelation of God's purposes, we cannot do a wiser thing than look.

The Apostle here is letting us see the secret of his own life, and telling us what made him the sort of Christian that he was. He counsels wise obliviousness, wise anticipation, strenuous concentration, and these are the things that contribute to success in any field of life. Christianity is the perfection of common sense. Men become mature Christians by no other means than those by which they become good artisans, ripe scholars, or the like. But the misery is that, though people know well enough that they cannot be good carpenters, or doctors, or fiddlers without certain habits and practices, they seem to fancy that they can be good Christians without them.

So the words of my text may suggest appropriate thoughts on this first Sunday of a new year. Let us listen, then, to Paul telling us how he came to be the sort of Christian man he was.

I. First, then, I would say, make God's aim your aim.

Paul distinguishes here between the 'mark' and the 'prize.' He aims at the one for the sake of the other. The one is the object of effort; the other is the sure result of successful effort. If I may so say, the crown hangs on the winning post; and he who touches the goal clutches the garland.

Then, mark that he regards the aim towards which he strains as being the aim which Christ had in view in his conversion. For he says in the preceding context, 'I labour if that I may lay hold of that for which also I have been laid hold of by Jesus Christ.' In the words that follow the text he speaks of the prize as being the result and purpose of the high calling of

God ‘in Christ Jesus.’ So then he took God’s purpose in calling, and Christ’s purpose in redeeming him, as being his great object in life. God’s aims and Paul’s were identical.

What, then, is the aim of God in all that He has done for us? The production in us of God-like and God-pleasing character. For this suns rise and set; for this seasons and times come and go; for this sorrows and joys are experienced; for this hopes and fears and loves are kindled. For this all the discipline of life is set in motion. For this we were created; for this we have been redeemed. For this Jesus Christ lived and suffered and died. For this God’s Spirit is poured out upon the world. All else is scaffolding; this is the building which it contemplates, and when the building is reared the scaffolding may be cleared away. God means to make us like Himself, and so pleasing to Himself, and has no other end in all the varieties of His gifts and bestowments but only this, the production of character.

Such is the aim that we should set before us. The acceptance of that aim as ours will give nobleness and blessedness to our lives as nothing else will. How different all our estimates of the meaning and true nature of events would be, if we kept clearly before us that their intention was not merely to make us blessed and glad, or to make us sorrowful, but that, through the blessedness, through the sorrow, through the gift, through the withdrawal, through all the variety of dealings, the intention was one and the same, to mould us to the likeness of our Lord and Saviour! There would be fewer mysteries in our lives, we should seldomer have to stand in astonishment, in vain regret, in miserable and weakening looking back upon vanished gifts, and saying to ourselves, ‘Why has this darkness stooped upon my path?’ if we looked beyond the darkness and the light to that for which both were sent. Some plants require frost to bring out their savour, and men need sorrow to test and to produce their highest qualities. There would be fewer knots in the thread of our lives, and fewer mysteries in our experience, if we made God’s aim ours, and strove through all variations of condition to realise it.

How different all our estimate of nearer objects and aims would be, if once we clearly recognised what we are here for! The prostitution of powers to obviously unworthy aims and ends is the saddest thing in humanity. It is like elephants being set to pick up pins; it is like the lightning being harnessed to carry all the gossip and filth of one capital of the world to the prurient readers in another. Men take these great powers which God has given them, and use them to make money, to cultivate their intellects, to secure the gratification of earthly desires, to make a home for themselves here amidst the illusions of time; and all the while the great aim which ought to stand out clear and supreme is forgotten by them.

There is nothing that needs more careful examination by us than our accepted schemes of life for ourselves; the roots of our errors mostly lie in these things that we take to be axioms, and that we never examine into. Let us begin this new year by an honest dealing with ourselves, asking ourselves this question, ‘What am I living for?’ And if the answer, first of all, be, as, of course, it will be, the accomplishment of the nearer and necessary aims, such as the conduct of our business, the cultivating of our understandings, the love and peace of our homes, then let us press the investigation a little further, and say, What then? Suppose I make a fortune, what then? Suppose I get the position I am striving for, what then? Suppose I cultivate my understanding and win the knowledge that I am nobly striving after, what then? Let us not cease to ask the question until we can say, ‘Thy aim, O Lord, is my aim, and I press toward the mark,’ the only mark which will make life noble, elastic, stable, and blessed, that I ‘may be found in Christ, not having mine own righteousness, but that which is of God by faith.’ For this we have all been made, guided, redeemed. If we carry this treasure out of life we shall carry all that is worth carrying. If we fail in this we fail altogether, whatever be our so-called success. There is one mark, one only, and every arrow that does not hit that target is wasted and spent in vain.

II. Secondly, let me say, concentrate all effort on this one aim.

‘This one thing I do,’ says the Apostle, ‘I press toward the mark.’ That aim is the one which God has in view in all circumstances and arrangements. Therefore, obviously, it is one which may be pursued in all of these, and may be sought whatsoever we are doing. All occupations of life except only sin are consistent with this highest aim. It needs not that we should seek any remote or cloistered form of life, nor sheer off any legitimate and common interests and occupations, but in them all we may be seeking for the one thing, the moulding of our characters into the shapes that are pleasing to Him. ‘One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life’; wheresoever the outward days of my life may be passed. Whatsoever we are doing in business, in shop, at a study table, in the kitchen, in the nursery, by the road, in the house, we may still have the supreme aim in view, that from all occupations there may come growth in character and in likeness to Jesus Christ.

Only, to keep this supreme aim clear there will require far more frequent and resolute effort of what the old mystics used to call ‘recollection’ than we are accustomed to put forth. It is hard, amidst the din of business, and whilst yielding to other lower, legitimate impulses and motives, to set this supreme one high above them all. But it is possible if only we will do two things: keep ourselves close to God, and be prepared to surrender much, laying our own wills, our own fancies, purposes, eager hopes and plans in His hands, and asking Him to help us, that we may never lose sight of the harbour light because of any tossing waves that rise between us and it, nor may ever be so swallowed up in ends, which are only means after all, as to lose sight of the only end which is an end in itself. But for the attainment of this aim in any measure, the concentration of all our powers upon it is absolutely needful. If you want to bore a hole you take a sharp point; you can do nothing with a blunt one. Every flight of wild ducks in the sky will tell you the form that is most likely to secure the maximum of motion with the minimum of effort. The wedge is that which pierces through all the loosely-compacted textures against which it is pressed. The Roman strategy forced the way of the legion through the loose-ordered ranks of barbarian foes by arraying it in that wedge-like form. So we, if we are to advance, must gather ourselves together and put a point upon our lives by compaction and concentration of effort and energy on the one purpose. The conquering word is, ‘This one thing I do.’ The difference between the amateur and the artist is that the one pursues an art at intervals by spurts, as a parergon --a thing that is done in the intervals of other occupations--and that the other makes it his life’s business. There are a great many amateur Christians amongst us, who pursue the Christian life by spurts and starts. If you want to be a Christian after God’s pattern--and unless you are you are scarcely a Christian at all--you have to make it your business, to give the same attention, the same concentration, the same unwavering energy to it which you do to your trade. The man of one book, the man of one idea, the man of one aim is the formidable and the successful man. People will call you a fanatic; never mind. Better be a fanatic and get what you aim at, which is the highest thing, than be so broad that, like a stream spreading itself out over miles of mud, there is no scour in it anywhere, no current, and therefore stagnation and death. Gather yourselves together, and amidst all the side issues and nearer aims keep this in view as the aim to which all are to be subservient--that, ‘whether I eat or drink, or whatsoever I do, I may do all to the glory of God.’ Let sorrow and joy, and trade and profession, and study and business, and house and wife and children, and all home joys, be the means by which you may become like the Master who has died for this end, that we may become partakers of His holiness.

III. Pursue this end with a wise forgetfulness.

‘Forgetting the things that are behind.’ The art of forgetting has much to do with the blessedness and power of every life. Of course, when the Apostle says ‘Forgetting the things that are behind,’ he is thinking of the runner, who has no time to cast his eye over his shoulder to mark the steps already trod. He does not mean, of course, either, to tell us that we are so to cultivate obliviousness as to let God’s mercies to us ‘lie forgotten in unthankfulness, or without praises die.’ Nor does he mean to tell us that we are to deny ourselves the solace of remembering the mercies which may, perhaps, have gone from us. Memory may be like the calm radiance that fills the western sky from a sun that has set, sad and yet sweet, melancholy and lovely. But he means that we should so forget as, by the oblivion, to strengthen our concentration.

So I would say, let us remember, and yet forget, our past failures and faults. Let us remember them in order that the remembrance may cultivate in us a wise chastening of our self-confidence. Let us remember where we were foiled, in order that we may be the more careful of that place hereafter. If we know that upon any road we fell into ambushes, ‘not once nor twice,’ like the old king of Israel, we should guard ourselves against passing by that road again. He who has not learned, by the memory of his past failures, humility and wise government of his life, and wise avoidance of places where he is weak, is an incurable fool.

But let us forget our failures in so far as these might paralyse our hopes, or make us fancy that future success is impossible where past failures frown. Ebenezer was a field of defeat before it rang with the hymns of victory. And there is no place in your past life where you have been shamefully baffled and beaten, but there, and in that, you may yet be victorious. Never let the past limit your hopes of the possibilities and your confidence in the certainties and victories of the future. And if ever you are tempted to say to yourselves, ‘I have tried it so often, and so often failed, that it is no use trying it any more. I am beaten and I throw up the sponge,’ remember Paul’s wise exhortation, and ‘forgetting the things that are behind . . . press toward the mark.’

In like manner I would say, remember and yet forget past successes and achievements. Remember them for thankfulness, remember them for hope, remember them for counsel and instruction, but forget them when they tend, as all that we accomplish does tend, to make us fancy that little more remains to be done; and forget them when they tend, as all that we accomplish ever does tend, to make us think that such and such things are our line, and of other virtues and graces and achievements of culture and of character, that these are not our line, and not to be won by us.

‘Our line!’ Astronomers take a thin thread from a spider’s web and stretch it across their object glasses to measure stellar magnitudes. Just as is the spider’s line in comparison with the whole shining surface of the sun across which it is stretched, so is what we have already attained to the boundless might and glory of that to which we may come. Nothing short of the full measure of the likeness of Jesus Christ is the measure of our possibilities.

There is a mannerism in Christian life, as there is in everything else, which is to be avoided if we would grow into perfection. There was a great artist in the last century who never could paint a picture without sticking a brown tree in the foreground. We have all got our ‘brown trees,’ which we think we can do well, and these limit our ambition to secure other gifts which God is ready to bestow upon us. So ‘forget the things that are behind.’ Cultivate a wise obliviousness of past sorrows, past joys, past failures, past gifts, past achievements, in so far as these might limit the audacity of our hopes and the energy of our efforts.

IV. So, lastly, pursue the aim with a wise, eager reaching forward.

The Apostle employs a very graphic word here, which is only very partially expressed by that 'reaching forth.' It contains a condensed picture which it is scarcely possible to put into any one expression. 'Reaching out over' is the full though clumsy rendering of the word, and it gives us the picture of the runner with his whole body thrown forward, his hand extended, and his eye reaching even further than his hand, in eager anticipation of the mark and the prize. So we are to live, with continual reaching out of confidence, clear recognition, and eager desire to make our own the unattained.

What is that which gives an element of nobleness to the lives of great idealists, whether they be poets, artists, students, thinkers, or what not? Only this, that they see the unattained burning ever so clearly before them that all the attained seems as nothing in their eyes. And so life is saved from commonplace, is happily stung into fresh effort, is redeemed from flagging, monotony, and weariness.

The measure of our attainments may be fairly estimated by the extent to which the unattained is clear in our sight. A man down in the valley sees the nearer shoulder of the hill, and he thinks it the top. The man up on the shoulder sees all the heights that lie beyond rising above him. Endeavour is better than success. It is more to see the Alpine heights unscaled than it is to have risen so far as we have done. They who thus have a boundless future before them have an endless source of inspiration, of energy, of buoyancy granted to them.

No man has such an absolutely boundless vision of the future which may be his as we have, if we are Christian people, as we ought to be. We only can thus look forward. For all others a blank wall stretches at the end of life, against which hopes, when they strike, fall back stunned and dead. But for us the wall may be overleaped, and, living by the energy of a boundless hope, we, and only we, can lay ourselves down to die, and say then, 'Reaching forth unto the things that are before.'

So, dear friends, make God's aim your aim; concentrate your life's efforts upon it; pursue it with a wise forgetfulness; pursue it with an eager confidence of anticipation that shall not be put to shame. Remember that God reaches His aim for you by giving to you Jesus Christ, and that you can only reach it by accepting the Christ who is given and being found in Him. Then the years will take away nothing from us which it is not gain to lose. They will neither weaken our energy nor flatten our hopes, nor dim our confidence, and, at the last we shall reach the mark, and, as we touch it, we shall find dropping on our surprised and humble heads the crown of life which they receive who have so run, not as uncertainly, but doing this one thing, pressing towards the mark for the prize.

20)Philippians 3:15

Philippians

THE SOUL'S PERFECTION

Php. 3:15.

'As many as be perfect'; and how many may they be? Surely a very short bede-roll would contain their names; or would there be any other but the Name which is above every name upon it? Part of the answer to such a question may be found in observing that the New Testament very frequently uses the word to express not so much the idea of moral completeness as that of physical maturity. For instance, when Paul says that he would have his converts to be ' men in understanding,' and when the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of 'them that are of full age,' the same word is used as this 'perfect' in our text. Clearly in such cases it means 'full grown,' as in contrast with 'babes,' and expresses not absolute completeness, but what we may term a relative perfection, a certain maturity of character and advanced stage of Christian attainment, far removed from the infantile epoch of the Christian life.

Another contribution to the answer may be found in observing that in this very context these 'perfect' people are exhorted to cultivate the sense of not having 'already attained,' and to be constantly reaching forth to unattained heights, so that a sense of imperfection and a continual effort after higher life are parts of Paul’s ‘perfect man.’ And it is to be still further noticed that on the same testimony ‘perfect’ people may probably be ‘otherwise minded’; by which we understand not divergently minded from one another, but ‘otherwise’ than the true norm or law of life would prescribe, and so may stand in need of the hope that God will by degrees bring them into conformity with His will, and show them ‘this,’ namely, their divergence from His Pattern for them.

It is worth our while to look at these large thoughts thus involved in the words before us.

I. Then there are people whom without exaggeration the judgment of truth calls perfect .

The language of the New Testament has no scruple in calling men ‘saints’ who had many sins, and none in calling men perfect who had many imperfections; and it does so, not because it has any fantastic theory about religious emotions being the measure of moral purity, but partly for the reasons already referred to, and partly because it wisely considers the main thing about a character to be not the degree to which it has attained completeness in its ideal, but what that ideal is. The distance a man has got on his journey is of less consequence than the direction in which his face is turned. The arrow may fall short, but to what mark was it shot? In all regions of life a wise classification of men arranges them according to their aims rather than their achievements. The visionary who attempts something high and accomplishes scarcely anything of it, is often a far nobler man, and his poor, broken, foiled, resultless life far more perfect than his who aims at marks on the low levels and hits them full. Such lives as these, full of yearning and aspiration, though it be for the most part vain, are

> ‘*Like the young moon with a ragged edge E’en in its imperfection beautiful.*’

If then it be wise to rank men and their pursuits according to their aims rather than their accomplishments, is there one class of aims so absolutely corresponding to man’s nature and relations that to take them for one’s own, and to reach some measure of approximation to them, may fairly be called the perfection of human nature? Is there one way of living concerning which we may say that whosoever adopts it has, in so far as he does adopt it, discerned and attained the purpose of his being? The literal force of the word in our text gives pertinence to that question, for it distinctly means 'having reached the end.' And if that be taken as the meaning, there need be no doubt about the answer. Grand old words have taught us long ago 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever.' Yes, he who lives for God has taken that for his aim which all his nature and all his relations prescribe, he is doing what he was made and meant to do; and however incomplete may be its attainments, the lowest form of a God-fearing, God-obeying life is higher and more nearly 'perfect' than the fairest career or character against which, as a blight on all its beauty, the damning accusation may be brought, 'The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, thou hast not glorified.'

People sneer at 'saints' and point at their failings. They remind us of the foul stains in David's career, for instance, and mock as they ask, 'Is this your man after God's own heart?' Yes, he is; not because religion has a morality of its own different from that of the world [except as being higher], nor because 'saints' make up for adultery and murder by making or singing psalms, but because the main set and current of the life was evidently towards God and goodness, and these hideous sins were glaring contradictions, eddies and backwaters, as it were, wept over with bitter self-abasement and conquered by strenuous effort. Better a life of Godward aspiration and straining after purity, even if broken by such a fall, so recovered, than one of habitual earthward grubbing, undisturbed by gross sin.

And another reason warrants the application of the word to men whose present is full of incompleteness, namely, the fact that such men have in them the germ of a life which has no natural end but absolute completeness. The small seed may grow very slowly in the climate and soil which it finds here, and be only a poor little bit of ragged green, very shabby and inconspicuous by the side of the native flowers of earth flaunting around it, but it has a divine germinant virtue within, and waits but being carried to its own clime and 'planted in the house of the Lord' above, to 'flourish in the courts of our God,' when these others with their glorious beauty have faded away and are flung out to rot.

II. We have set forth here very distinctly two of the characteristics of this perfection.

The Apostle in our text exhorts the perfect to be ' thus minded.' How is that? Evidently the word points back to the previous clauses, in which he has been describing his own temper and feeling in the Christian race. He sets that before the Philippians as their pattern, or rather invites them to fellowship with him in the estimate of themselves and in their efforts after higher attainments. 'Be thus minded' means, Think as I do of yourselves, and do as I do in your daily life.

How did he think of himself? He tells us in the sentence before, 'Not as though I were already perfect. I count not myself to have apprehended.' So then a leading characteristic of this true Christian perfection is a constant consciousness of imperfection. In all fields of effort, whether intellectual, moral, or mechanical, as faculty grows, consciousness of insufficiency grows with it. The farther we get up the hill, the more we see how far it is to the horizon. The more we know, the more we know our ignorance. The better we can do, the more we discern how much we cannot do. Only people who never have done and never will do anything, or else raw apprentices with the mercifully granted self-confidence of youth, which gets beaten out of most of us soon enough, think that they can do everything.

In morals and in Christian life the same thing is true. The measure of our perfection will be the consciousness of our imperfection--a paradox, but a great truth. It is plain enough that it will be so. Conscience becomes more sensitive as we get nearer right. The worse a man is the less it speaks to him, and the less he hears it. When it ought to thunder it whispers; when we need it most it is least active. The thick skin of a savage will not be disturbed by lying on sharp stones, while a crumpled rose-leaf robs the Sybarite of his sleep. So the practice of evil hardens the cuticle of conscience, and the practice of goodness restores tenderness and sensibility; and many a man laden with crime knows less of its tingling than some fair soul that looks almost spotless to all eyes but its own. One little stain of rust will be conspicuous on a brightly polished blade, but if it be all dirty and dull, a dozen more or fewer will make little difference. As men grow better they become like that glycerine barometer recently introduced, on which a fall or a rise that would have been invisible with mercury to record it takes up inches, and is glaringly conspicuous. Good people sometimes wonder, and sometimes are made doubtful and sad about themselves, by this abiding and even increased consciousness of sin. There is no need to be so. The higher the temperature the more chilling would it be to pass into an ice-house, and the more our lives are brought into fellowship with the perfect life, the more shall we feel our own shortcomings. Let us be thankful if our consciences speak to us more loudly than they used to do. It is a sign of growing holiness, as the tingling in a frost-bitten limb is of returning life. Let us seek to cultivate and increase the sense of our own imperfection, and be sure that the diminution of a consciousness of sin means not diminished power of sin, but lessened horror of it, lessened perception of right, lessened love of goodness, and is an omen of death, not a symptom of life. Painter, scholar, craftsman all know that the condition of advance is the recognition of an ideal not attained. Whoever has not before him a standard to which he has not reached will grow no more. If we see no faults in our work we shall never do any better. The condition of all Christian, as of all other progress, is to be drawn by that fair vision before us, and to be stung into renewed effort to reach it, by the consciousness of present imperfection.

Another characteristic to which these perfect men are exhorted is a constant striving after a further advance. How vigorously, almost vehemently, that temper is put in the context--'I follow after'; 'I press toward the mark'; and that picturesque 'reaching forth,' or, as the Revised Version gives it, 'stretching forward.' The full force of the latter word cannot be given in any one English equivalent, but may be clumsily hinted by some such phrase as 'stretching oneself out over,' as a runner might do with body thrown forward and arms extended in front, and eagerness in every strained muscle, and eye outrunning foot, and hope clutching the goal already. So yearning forward, and setting all the current of his being, both faculty and desire, to the yet unreached mark, the Christian man is to live. His glances are not to be bent backwards, but forwards. He is not to be a 'praiser of the past,' but a herald and expectant of a nobler future. He is the child of the day and of the morning, forgetting the things which are behind, and ever yearning towards the things which are before, and drawing them to himself. To look back is to be stiffened into a living death; only with faces set forward are we safe and well.

This buoyant energy of hope and effort is to be the result of the consciousness of imperfection of which we have spoken. Strange to many of us, in some moods, that a thing so bright should spring up from a thing so dark, and that the more we feel our own shortcomings, the more hopeful should we be of a future unlike the past, and the more earnest in our effort to make that future the present! There is a type of Christian experience not uncommon among devout people, in which the consciousness of imperfection paralyses effort instead of quickening it; men lament their evil, their slow progress and so on, and remain the same year after year. They are stirred to no effort. There is no straining onwards. They almost seem to lose the faith that they can ever be any better. How different this from the grand, wholesome completeness of Paul's view here, which embraces both elements, and even draws the undying brightness of his forward-looking confidence from the very darkness of his sense of present imperfection!

So should it be with us, 'as many as be perfect.' Before us stretch indefinite possibilities of approximating to the unattainable fulness of the divine life. We may grow in knowledge and in holiness through endless ages and grades of advance. In a most blessed sense we may have that for our highest joy which in another meaning is a punishment of unfaithfulness and indocility, that we shall be 'ever learning, and never coming to the full knowledge of the truth.' No limit can be put to what we may receive of God, nor to the closeness, the fulness of our communion with Him, nor to the beauty of holiness which may pass from Him into our poor characters, and irradiate our homely faces. Then, brethren, let us cherish a noble discontent with all that we at present are. Let our spirits stretch out all their powers to the better things beyond, as the plants grown in darkness will send out pale shoots that feel blindly towards the light, or the seed sown on the top of a rock will grope down the bare stone for the earth by which it must be fed. Let the sense of our own weakness ever lead to a buoyant confidence in what we, even we, may become if we will only take the grace we have. To this touchstone let us bring all claims to higher holiness--they who are perfect are most conscious of imperfection, and most eager in their efforts after a further progress in the knowledge, love, and likeness of God in Christ.

III. We have here also distinctly brought out the co-existence with these characteristics of their opposites.

‘If in anything ye are otherwise minded,’ says Paul. I have already suggested that this expression evidently refers not to difference of opinion among themselves, but to a divergence of character from the pattern of feeling and life which he has been proposing to them. If in any respects ye are unconscious of your imperfections, if there be any ‘witch’s mark’ of insensibility in some spot of your conscience to some plain transgressions of law, if in any of you there be some complacent illusion of your own stainlessness, if to any of you the bright vision before you seem faint and unsubstantial, God will show you what you do not see. Plainly then he considers that there will be found among these perfect men states of feeling and estimates of themselves opposed to those which he has been exhorting them to cherish. Plainly he supposes that a good man may pass for a time under the dominion of impulses and theories which are of another kind from those that rule his life.

He does not expect the complete and uninterrupted dominion of these higher powers. He recognises the plain facts that the true self, the central life of the soul, the higher nature, ‘the new man,’ abides in a self which is but gradually renewed, and that there is a long distance, so to speak, from the centre to the circumference. That higher life is planted, but its germination is a work of time. The leaven does not leaven the whole mass in a moment, but creeps on from particle to particle. ‘Make the tree good’ and in due time its fruit will be good. But the conditions of our human life are conflict, and these peaceful images of growth and unimpeded natural development, ‘first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear,’ are not meant to tell all the truth. Interruptions from external circumstances, struggles of flesh with spirit, and of imagination and heart and will against the better life implanted in the spirit, are the lot of all, even the most advanced here, and however a man may be perfect, there will always be the possibility that in something he may be ‘otherwise minded.’

Such an admission does not make such interruptions less blameworthy when they occur. The doctrine of averages does not do away with the voluntary character of each single act. The same number of letters are yearly posted without addresses. Does anybody dream of not scolding the errand boy who posted them, or the servant who did not address them, because he knows that? We are quite sure that we could have resisted each time that we fell. That piece of sharp practice in business, or that burst of bad temper in the household which we were last guilty of--could we have helped it or not? Conscience must answer that question, which does not depend at all on the law of averages. Guilt is not taken away by asserting that sin cleaves to men, 'perfect men.'

But the feelings with which we should regard sin and contradictions of men's truest selves in ourselves and others should be so far altered by such thoughts that we should be very slow to pronounce that a man cannot be a Christian because he has done so and so. Are there any sins which are clearly incompatible with a Christian character? All sins are inconsistent with it, but that is a very different matter. The uniform direction of a man's life being godless, selfish, devoted to the objects and pursuits of time and sense, is incompatible with his being a Christian--but, thank God, no single act, however dark, is so, if it be in contradiction to the main tendency impressed upon the character and conduct. It is not for us to say that any single deed shows a man cannot be Christ's, nor to fling ourselves down in despair saying, 'If I were a Christian, I could not have done that.' Let us remember that 'all unrighteousness is sin,' and the least sin is in flagrant opposition to our Christian profession; but let us also remember, and that not to blunt our consciences or weaken our efforts, that Paul thought it possible for perfect men to be 'otherwise minded' from their deepest selves and their highest pattern.

IV. The crowning hope that lies in these words is the certainty of a gradual but complete attainment of all the Christian aspirations after God and goodness.

The ground of that confidence lies in no natural tendencies in us, in no effort of ours, but solely in that great name which is the anchor of all our confidence, the name of God. Why is Paul certain that 'God will reveal even this unto you'? Because He is God. The Apostle has learned the infinite depth of meaning that lies in that name. He has learned that God is not in the way of leaving off His work before He has done His work, and that none can say of Him, that 'He began to build, and was not able to finish.' The assurances of an unchangeable purpose in redemption, and of inexhaustible resources to effect it; of a love that can never fade, and of a grace that can never be exhausted--are all treasured for us in that mighty name. And such confidence is confirmed by the manifest tendency of the principles and motives brought to bear on us in Christianity to lead on to a condition of absolute perfection, as well as by the experience which we may have, if we will, of the sanctifying and renewing power of His Spirit in our Spirit.

By the discipline of daily life, by the ministry of sorrow and joy, by merciful chastisements dogging our steps when we stray, by duties and cares, by the teaching of His word coming even closer to our hearts and quickening our consciences to discern evil where we had seen none, as well as kindling in us desires after higher and rarer goodness, by the reward of enlarged perceptions of duty and greater love towards it, with which He recompenses lowly obedience to the duty as yet seen, by the secret influences of His Spirit of Power and of Love and of a sound Mind breathed into our waiting spirits, by the touch of His own sustaining hand and glance of His own guiding eye, He will reveal to the lowly soul all that is yet wanting in its knowledge, and communicate all that is lacking in character.

So for us, the true temper is confidence in His power and will, an earnest waiting on Him, a brave forward yearning hope blended with a lowly consciousness of imperfection, which is a spur not a clog, and vigorous increasing efforts to bring into life and character the fulness and beauty of God. Presumption should be as far from us as despair--the one because we have not already attained, the other because 'God will reveal even this unto us.' Only let us keep in mind the caution which the Apostle, knowing the possible abuses which might gather round His teaching, has here attached to it, 'Nevertheless'--though all which I have been saying is true, it is only on this understanding--'Whereto we have already attained, by the same let us walk.' God will perfect that which concerneth you if--and only if--you go on as you have begun, if you make your creed a life, if you show what you are. If so, then all the rest is a question of time. A has been said, and Z will come in its proper place. Begin with humble trust in Christ, and a process is commenced which has no natural end short of that great hope with which this chapter closes, that the change which begins in the deepest recesses of our being, and struggles slowly and with many interruptions, into partial visibility in our character, shall one day triumphantly irradiate our whole nature out to the very finger-tips, and 'even the body of our humiliation shall be fashioned like unto the body of Christ's glory, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.'

21)Philippians 3:16

Philippians

THE RULE OF THE ROAD

Php. 3:16.

Paul has just been laying down a great principle--viz. that if the main direction of a life be right, God will reveal to a man the points in which he is wrong. But that principle is untrue and dangerous, unless carefully guarded. It may lead to a lazy tolerance of evil, and to drawing such inferences as, 'Well! it does not much matter about strenuous effort, if we are right at bottom it will all come right by-and-by,' and so it may become a pillow for indolence and a clog on effort. This possible abuse of a great truth seems to strike the Apostle, and so he enters here, with this 'Nevertheless,' a caveat against that twist of his meaning. It is as if he said, 'Now mind! while all that is perfectly true, it is true on conditions; and if they be not attended to, it is not true.' God will reveal to a man the things in which he is wrong if, and only if, he steadfastly continues in the course which he knows and sees to be right. Present attainments, then, are in some sense a standard of duty, and if we honestly and conscientiously observe that standard we shall get light as we journey. In this exhortation of the Apostle's there are many exhortations wrapped up; and in trying to draw them out I venture to adhere to the form of exhortation for the sake of impressiveness and point.

I. First, then, I would say the Apostle means, 'Live up to your faith and your convictions.'

It may be a question whether 'that to which we have already attained' means the amount of knowledge which we have won or the amount of practical righteousness which we have made our own. But I think that, instead of sharply dividing between these two, we shall follow more in the course of the Apostle's thought if we unite them together, and remember that the Bible does not make the distinct separation which we sometimes incline to make between knowledge on the one side and practice on the other, but regards the man as a living unity. And thus, both aspects of our attainments come into consideration here.

So, then, there are two main thoughts--first, live out your creed, and second, live up to your convictions.

Live out your creed. Men are meant to live, not by impulse, by accident, by inclination, but by principle. We are not intended to live by rule, but we are intended to live by law. And unless we know why we do as well as what we do, and give a rational account of our conduct, we fall beneath the height on which God intends us to walk. Impulse is all very well, but impulse is blind and needs a guide. The imitation of those around us, or the acceptance of the apparent necessities of circumstances, are, to some extent, inevitable and right. But to be driven merely by the force of externals is to surrender the highest prerogative of manhood. The highest part of human nature is the reason guided by conscience, and a man's conscience is only then rightly illuminated when it is illuminated by his creed, which is founded on the acceptance of the revelation that God has made of Himself.

And whilst we are clearly meant to be guided by the intelligent appropriation of God's truth, that truth is evidently all meant for guidance. We are not told anything in the Bible in order that we may know as an ultimate object, but we are told it all in order that, knowing, we may be, and, being, we may do, according to His will.

Just think of the intensely practical tendency of all the greatest truths of Christianity. The Cross is the law of life. The revelation that was made there was made, not merely that we might cling to it as a refuge from our sins, but that we might accept it as the rule of our conduct. All our duties to mankind are summed up in the word ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’ We say that we believe in the divinity of Christ; we say that we believe in the great incarnation and sacrificial death and eternal priesthood of the loving Son of God. We say that we believe in a judgment to come and a future life. Well, then, do these truths produce any effect upon my life? have they shaped me in any measure into conformity with their great principles? Does there issue from them constraining power which grasps me and moulds me as a sculptor would a bit of clay in his hands? Am I subject to the Gospel’s authority, and is the word in which God has revealed Himself to me the word which dominates and impels all my life? ‘Whereunto we have already attained, by the same let us walk.’

But we shall not do that without a distinct effort. For it is a great deal easier to live from hand to mouth than to live by principle. It is a great deal easier to accept what seems forced upon us by circumstances than to exercise control over the circumstances, and make them bend to God’s holy will. It is a great deal easier to take counsel of inclination, and to put the reins in the hands of impulses, passions, desires, tastes, or even habits, than it is, at each fresh moment, to seek for fresh impulses from a fresh illumination from the ancient and yet ever fresh truth. The old kings of France used to be kept with all royal state in the palace, but they were not allowed to do anything. And there was a rough, unworshipped man that stood by their side, and who was the real ruler of the realm. That is what a great many professing Christians do with their creeds. They instal them in some inner chamber that they very seldom visit, and leave them there, in dignified idleness, and the real working ruler of their lives is found elsewhere. Let us see to it, brethren, that all our thoughts are incarnated in our deeds, and that all our deeds are brought into immediate connection with the great principles of God’s word. Live by that law, and we live at liberty.

And, then, remember that this translating of creed into conduct is the only condition of growing illumination. When we act upon a belief, the belief grows. That is the source of a great deal of stupid obstinacy in this world, because men have been so long accustomed to go upon certain principles that it seems incredible to them but that these principles should be true. But that, too, is at the bottom of a great deal of intelligent and noble firmness of adherence to the true. A man who has tested a principle because he has lived upon it has confidence in it that nobody else can have.

Projectors may have beautiful specifications with attractive pictures of their new inventions; they look very well upon paper, but we must see them working before we are sure of their worth. And so, here is this great body of Divine truth, which assumes to be sufficient for guidance, for conduct, for comfort, for life. Live upon it, and thereby your grasp of it and your confidence in it will be immensely increased. And no man has a right to say ‘I have rejected Christianity as untrue,’ unless he has put it to the test by living upon it; and if he has, he will never say it. A Swiss traveller goes into a shop and buys a brand-new alpenstock. Does he lean upon it with as much confidence as another man does, who has one with the names of all the mountains that it has helped him up branded on it from top to bottom? Take this staff and lean on it. Live your creed, and you will believe your creed as you never will until you do. Obedience takes a man up to an elevation from which he sees further into the deep harmonies of truth. In all regions of life the principle holds good: ‘To him that hath shall be given.’ And it holds eminently in reference to our grasp of Christian principles. Use them and they grow; neglect them and they perish. Sometimes a man dies in a workhouse who has a store of guineas and notes wrapped up in rags somewhere about him; and so they have been of no use to him. If you want your capital to increase, trade with it. As the Lord said when He gave the servants their talents: ‘Trade with them till I come.’ The creed that is utilised is the creed that grows. And that is why so many of you Christian people have so little real intellectual grasp of the principles of Christianity, because you have not lived upon them, nor tried to do it.

And, in like manner, another side of this thought is, be true to your convictions. There is no such barrier to a larger and wholesomer view of our duty as the neglect of anything that plainly is our duty. It stands there, an impassable cliff between us and all progress. Let us live and be what we know we ought to be, and we shall know better what we ought to be at the next moment.

II. Secondly, let me put the Apostle’s meaning in another exhortation, Go on as you have begun.

‘Whereunto we have already attained, by the same let us walk.’ The various points to which the men have reached are all points in one straight line; and the injunction of my text is ‘Keep the road.’ There are a great many temptations to stray from it. There are nice smooth grassy bits by the side of it where it is a great deal easier walking. There are attractive things just a footstep or two out of the path--such a little deviation that it can easily be recovered. And so, like children gathering daisies in the field, we stray away from the path; and, like men on a moor, we then look round for it, and it is gone. The angle of divergence may be the acutest possible; the deviation when we begin may be scarcely visible, but if you draw a line at the sharpest angle and the least deviation from a straight line, and carry it out far enough, there will be space between it and the line from which it started ample to hold a universe. Then, let us take care of small deviations from the plain straight path, and give no heed to the seductions that lie on either side, but ‘whereunto we have already attained, by the same let us walk.’

There are temptations, too, to slacken our speed. The river runs far more slowly in its latter course than when it came babbling and leaping down the hillside. And sometimes a Christian life seems as if it crept rather than ran, like those sluggish streams in the Fen country, which move so slowly that you cannot tell which way the water is flowing. Are not there all round us, are there not amongst ourselves instances of checked growth, of arrested development? There are people listening to me now, calling themselves--and I do not say that they have not a right to do so--Christians, who have not grown a bit for years, but stand at the very same point of attainment, both in knowledge and in purity and Christlikeness, as they were many, many days ago. I beseech you, listen to this exhortation of my text, ‘Whereunto we have already attained, by the same let us walk,’ and continue patient and persistent in the course that is set before us.

III. The Apostle’s injunction may be cast into this form, Be yourselves.

The representation which underlies my text, and precedes it in the context, is that of the Christian community as a great body of travellers all upon one road, all with their faces turned in one direction, but at very different points on the path. The difference of position necessarily involves a difference in outlook. They see their duties, and they see the Word of God, in some respects diversely. And the Apostle’s exhortation is: ‘Let each man follow his own insight, and whereunto he has attained, by that, and not by his brother’s attainment, by that let him walk.’ From the very fact of the diversity of advancement there follows the plain duty for each of us to use our own eyesight, and of independent faithfulness to our own measure of light, as the guide which we are bound to follow.

There is a dreadful want, in the ordinary Christian life, of any appearance of first-hand communication with Jesus Christ, and daring to be myself, and to act on the insight into His will which Christ has given me .

Conventional Godliness, Christian people cut after one pattern, a little narrow round of certain statutory duties and obligations, a parrot-like repetition of certain words, a mechanical copying of certain methods of life, an oppressive sameness, mark so much of modern religion. What a freshening up there would come into all Christian communities if every man lived by his own perception of truth and duty! If a musician in an orchestra is listening to his neighbour’s note and time, he will lose many an indication from the conductor that would have kept him far more right, if he had attended to it. And if, instead of taking our beliefs and our conduct from one another, or from the average of Christian men round us, we went straight to Jesus Christ and said to Him, ‘What wouldst Thou have me to do?’ there would be a different aspect over Christendom from what there is to-day. The fact of individual responsibility, according to the measure of our individual light, and faithful following of that, wheresoever it may lead us, are the grand and stirring principles that come from these words. ‘Whereunto we have already attained,’ by that--and by no other man’s attainment or rule--let us walk.

But do not let us forget that that same faithful independence and independent faithfulness because Christ speaks to us, and we will not let any other voice blend with His, are quite consistent with, and, indeed, demand, the frank recognition of our brother’s equal right. If we more often thought of all the great body of Christian people as an army, united in its diversity, its line of march stretching for leagues, and some in the van, and some in the main body, and some in the rear, but all one, we should be more tolerant of divergences, more charitable in our judgment of the laggards, more patient in waiting for them to come up with us, and more wise and considerate in moderating our pace sometimes to meet theirs. All who love Jesus Christ are on the same road and bound for the same home. Let us be contented that they shall be at different stages on the path, seeing that we know that they will all reach the Temple above.

IV. Lastly, cherish the consciousness of imperfection and the confidence of success.

'Whereunto we have attained' implies that that is only a partial possession of a far greater whole. The road is not finished at the stage where we stand. And, on the other hand, 'by the same let us walk,' implies that beyond the present point the road runs on equally patent and pervious to our feet. These two convictions, of my own imperfection and of the certainty of my reaching the great perfectness beyond, are indispensable to all Christian progress. As soon as a man begins to think that he has realised his ideal, Good-bye! to all advance. The artist, the student, the man of business, all must have gleaming before them an unattained object, if they are ever to be stirred to energy and to run with patience the race that is set before them.

The more distinctly that a man is conscious of his own imperfection in the Christian life, the more he will be stung and stirred into earnestness and energy of effort, if only, side by side with the consciousness of imperfection, there springs triumphant the confidence of success. That will give strength to the feeble knees; that will lift a man buoyant over difficulties; that will fire desire; that will stimulate and solidify effort; that will make the long, monotonous stretches of the road easy, the rough places plain, the crooked things straight. Over all reluctant, repellent duties it will bear us, in all weariness it will re-invigorate us. We are saved by hope, and the more brightly there burns before us, not as a tremulous hope, but as a future certainty, the thought, 'I shall be like Him, for I shall see Him as He is,' the more shall I set my face to the loved goal and my feet to the dusty road, and 'press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God.' Christian progress comes out of the clash and collision of these two things, like that of flint and steel--the consciousness of imperfection and the confidence of success. And they who thus are driven by the one and drawn by the other, in all their consciousness of failure are yet blessed, and are crowned at last with that which they believed before it came.

‘Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house’--the prize won is heaven. But ‘blessed are they in whose hearts are the ways’--the prize desired and strained after is heaven upon earth. We may all live a life of continual advancement, each step leading upwards, for the road always climbs, to purer air, grander scenery, and a wider view. And yonder, progress will still be the law, for they who here have followed the Lamb, and sought to make Him their pattern and Commander, will there ‘follow Him whithersoever He goeth.’ If here we walk according to that ‘whereunto we have attained,’ there He shall say, ‘They will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.’

22)Philippians 3:17-21

Philippians

WARNINGS AND HOPES

Php. 3:17-21 [R.V.].

There is a remarkable contrast in tone between the sad warnings which begin this section and the glowing hopes with which it closes, and that contrast is made the more striking when we notice that the Apostle binds the gloom of the one and the radiance of the other by ‘For,’ which makes the latter the cause of the former.

The exhortation in which the Apostle begins by proposing himself as an example sounds strange on any lips, and, most of all, on his, but we have to note that the points in which he sets himself up as a pattern are obviously those on which he touched in the preceding outpouring of his heart, and which he has already commended to the Philippians in pleading with them to be ‘thus minded.’ What he desires them to copy is his self-distrust, his willingness to sacrifice all things to win Christ, his clear sense of his own shortcomings, and his eager straining towards as yet unreached perfection. His humility is not disproved by such words, but what is remarkable in them is the clear consciousness of the main direction and set of his life. We may well hesitate to take them for ours, but every Christian man and woman ought to be able to say this much. If we cannot in some degree declare that we are so walking, we have need to look to our foundations. Such words are really in sharp contrast to those in which Jesus is held forth as an example. Notice, too, how quickly he passes to associate others with him, and to merge the ‘Me’ into ‘Us.’ We need not ask who his companions were, since Timothy is associated with him at the beginning of the letter.

The exhortation is enforced by pointing to others who had gone far astray, and of whom he had warned the Philippians often, possibly by letter. Who these unworthy disciples were remains obscure. They were clearly not the Judaisers branded in verse 2, who were teachers seeking to draw away the Philippians, while these others seem to have been ‘enemies of the Cross of Christ,’ not by open hostility nor by theoretical errors, but by practical worldliness, and that in these ways; they make sense their God, they are proud of what is really their disgrace, namely, they are shaking off the restraints of morality; and, most black though it may seem least so, they ‘mind earthly things’ on which thought, feeling, and interest are concentrated. Let us lay to heart the lesson that such direction of the current of a life to the things of earth makes men ‘enemies of the Cross of Christ,’ whatever their professions, and will surely make their end perdition, whatever their apparent prosperity. Paul’s life seemed loss and was gain; these men’s lives seemed gain and was loss.

From this dark picture charged with gloom, and in one corner showing white waves breaking far out against an inky sky, and a vessel with torn sails driving on the rocks, the Apostle turns with relief to the brighter words in which he sets forth the true affinities and hopes of a Christian. They all stand or fall with the belief in the Resurrection of Christ and His present life in His glorified corporeal manhood.

I. Our true metropolis.

The Revised Version puts in the margin as an alternative rendering for ‘citizenship’ commonwealth, and there appears to be a renewed allusion here to the fact already noted that Philippi was a ‘colony,’ and that its inhabitants were Roman citizens. Paul uses a very emphatic word for ‘is’ here which it is difficult to reproduce in English, but which suggests essential reality.

The reason why that heavenly citizenship is ours in no mere play of the imagination but in most solid substance, is because He is there for whom we look. Where Christ is, is our Mother-country, our Fatherland, according to His own promise, ‘I go to prepare a place for you.’ His being there draws our thoughts and sets our affections on Heaven.

II. The colonists looking for the King.

The Emperors sometimes made a tour of the provinces. Paul here thinks of Christians as waiting for their Emperor to come across the seas to this outlying corner of His dominions. The whole grand name is given here, all the royal titles to express solemnity and dignity, and the character in which we look for Him is that of Saviour. We still need salvation, and though in one sense it is past, in another it will not be ours until He comes the second time without sin unto salvation. The eagerness of the waiting which should characterise the expectant citizens is wonderfully described by the Apostle’s expression for it, which literally means to look away out--with emphasis on both prepositions--like a sentry on the walls of a besieged city whose eyes are ever fixed on the pass amongst the hills through which the relieving forces are to come.

It may be said that Paul is here expressing an expectation which was disappointed. No doubt the early Church looked for the speedy return of our Lord and were mistaken. We are distinctly told that in that point there was no revelation of the future, and no doubt they, like the prophets of old, ‘searched what manner of time the spirit of Christ which was in them did signify.’ In this very letter Paul speaks of death as very probable for himself, so that he had precisely the same double attitude which has been the Church’s ever since, in that he looked for Christ’s coming as possible in his own time, and yet anticipated the other alternative. It is difficult, no doubt, to cherish the vivid anticipation of any future event, and not to have any certainty as to its date. But if we are sure that a given event will come sometime and do not know when it may come, surely the wise man is he who thinks to himself it may come any time, and not he who treats it as if it would come at no time. The two possible alternatives which Paul had before him have in common the same certainty as to the fact and uncertainty as to the date, and Paul had them both before his mind with the same vivid anticipation.

The practical effect of this hope of the returning Lord on our ‘walk’ will be all to bring it nearer Paul’s. It will not suffer us to make sense our God, nor to fix our affections on things above; it will stimulate all energies in pressing towards the goal, and will turn away our eyes from the trivialities and transiencies that press upon us, away out toward the distance where ‘far off His coming shone.’

III. The Christian sharing in Christ’s glory.

The same precise distinction between ‘fashion’ and ‘form,’ which we have had occasion to notice in Chapter II., recurs here. The ‘fashion’ of the body of our humiliation is external and transient; the ‘form’ of the body of His glory to which we are to be assimilated consists of essential characteristics or properties, and may be regarded as being almost synonymous with ‘Nature.’ Observing the distinction which the Apostle draws by the use of these two words, and remembering their force in the former instance of their occurrence, we shall not fail to give force to the representation that in the Resurrection the fleeting fashion of the bodily frame will be altered, and the glorified bodies of the saints made participant of the essential qualities of His.

We further note that there is no trace of false asceticism or of gnostic contempt for the body in its designation as ‘of our humiliation.’ Its weaknesses, its limitations, its necessities, its corruption and its death, sufficiently manifest our lowliness, while, on the other hand, the body in which Christ’s glory is manifested, and which is the instrument for His glory, is presented in fullest contrast to it.

The great truth of Christ’s continual glorified manhood is the first which we draw from these words. The story of our Lord’s Resurrection suggests indeed that He brought the same body from the tomb as loving hands had laid there. The invitation to Thomas to thrust his hands into the prints of the nails, the similar invitation to the assembled disciples, and His partaking of food in their presence, seemed to forbid the idea of His rising changed. Nor can we suppose that the body of His glory would be congruous with His presence on earth. But we have to think of His ascension as gradual, and of Himself as ‘changed by still degrees’ as He ascended, and so as returned to where the ‘glory which He had with the Father before the world was,’ as the Shechinah cloud received Him out of the sight of the gazers below. If this be the true reading of His last moments on earth, He united in His own experience both the ways of leaving it which His followers experience--the way of sleep which is death, and the way of ‘being changed.’

But at whatever point the change came, He now wears, and for ever will wear, the body of a man. That is the dominant fact on which is built the Christian belief in a future life, and which gives to that belief all its solidity and force, and separates it from vague dreams of immortality which are but a wish tremblingly turned into a hope, or a dread shudderingly turned into an expectation. The man Christ Jesus is the pattern and realised ideal of human life on earth, the revelation of the divine life through a human life, and in His glorified humanity is no less the pattern and realised ideal of what human nature may become. The present state of the departed is incomplete in that they have not a body by which they can act on, and be acted on by, an external universe. We cannot indeed suppose them lapped in age-long unconsciousness, and it may be that the ‘dead in Christ’ are through Him brought into some knowledge of externals, but for the full-summed perfection of their being, the souls under the altar have to wait for the resurrection of the body. If resurrection is needful for completion of manhood, then completed manhood must necessarily be set in a locality, and the glorified manhood of Jesus must also now be in a place. To think thus of it and of Him is not to vulgarise the Christian conception of Heaven, but to give it a definiteness and force which it sorely lacks in popular thinking. Nor is the continual manhood of our Lord less precious in its influence in helping our familiar approach to Him. It tells us that He is still and for ever the same as when on earth, glad to welcome all who came and to help and heal all who need Him. It is one of ourselves who ‘sitteth at the right hand of God.’ His manhood brings Him memories which bind Him to us sorrowing and struggling, and His glory clothes Him with power to meet all our needs, to stanch all our wounds, to satisfy all our desires.

Our text leads us to think of the wondrous transformation into Christ’s likeness. We know not what are the differences between the body of our humiliation and the body of His glory, but we must not be led away by the word Resurrection to fall into the mistake of supposing that in death we ‘sow that body which shall be.’ Paul’s great chapter in I. Corinthians should have destroyed that error for ever, and it is a singular instance of the persistency of the most unsupported mistakes that there are still thousands of people who in spite of all that they know of what befalls our mortal bodies, and of how their parts pass into other forms, still hold by that crude idea. We have no material by which to construct any, even the vaguest, outline of that body that shall be. We can only run out the contrasts as suggested by Paul in 1st Corinthians, and let the dazzling greatness of the positive thought which he gives in the text lift our expectations. Weakness will become power, corruption incorruption, liability to death immortality, dishonour glory, and the frame which belonged and corresponded to ‘that which was natural,’ shall be transformed into a body which is the organ of that which is spiritual. These things tell us little, but they may be all fused into the great light of likeness to the body of His glory; and though that tells us even less, it feeds hope more and satisfies our hearts even whilst it does not feed our curiosity. We may well be contented to acknowledge that ‘it doth not yet appear what we shall be,’ when we can go on to say, ‘We know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him.’ It is enough for the disciple that he be as his Master.

But we must not forget that the Apostle regards even this overwhelming change as but part of a mightier process, even the universal subjection of all things unto Christ Himself. The Emperor reduces the whole world to subjection, and the glorifying of the body as the climax of the universal subjugation represents it as the end of the process of assimilation begun in this mortal life. There is no possibility of a resurrection unto life unless that life has been begun before death. That ultimate glorious body is needed to bring men into correspondence with the external universe. As is the locality so is the body. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. This whole series of thoughts makes our glorious resurrection the result not of death, but of Christ's living power on His people. It is only in the measure in which He lives in us and we in Him, and are partaking by daily participation in the power of His Resurrection, that we shall be made subjects of the working whereby He is able even to subject all things unto Himself, and finally be conformed to the body of His glory.

23)Philippians 4:1

Philippians

A TENDER EXHORTATION

Php. 4:1.

The words I have chosen set forth very simply and beautifully the bond which knit Paul and these Philippian Christians together, and the chief desire which his Apostolic love had for them. I venture to apply them to ourselves, and I speak now especially to the members of my own church and congregation.

I. Let us note, then, first, the personal bond which gives force to the teacher's words.

That Church at Philippi was, if Paul had any favourites amongst his children, his favourite child. The circumstances of its formation may have had something to do with that. It was planted by himself; it was the first Church in Europe; perhaps the Philippian gaoler and Lydia were amongst the 'beloved' and 'longed for' ones who were 'his joy and crown.' But be that as it may, all through the letter we can feel the throbbing of a very loving heart, and the tenderness of a strong man, which is the most tender of all things.

Note how he addresses them. There is no assumption of Apostolic authority, but he puts himself on their level, and speaks to them as brethren. Then he lets his heart out, and tells them how they lived in his love, and how, of course, when he was parted from them, he had desired to be with them. And then he touches a deeper and a sacreder chord when he contemplates the results of the relation between them, if he on his side, and they on theirs, were faithful to it. It says much for the teacher, and for the taught, if he can truly say ‘My joy,’--’I have no greater joy than to know that my children walk in the truth.’ And not only were they his joy, but they who, by their faithfulness, have become his joy, will on that one day in the far future, be his ‘crown.’ That metaphor carries on the thoughts to the great Judgment Day, and introduces a solemn element, which is as truly present, dear friends, in our relation to one another, little of an Apostle as I am, as it was in the relation between Paul and the Philippians. They who ‘turn many to righteousness shine as the brightness of the firmament,’ because those whom they have turned, ‘shine as lights in the world.’ And at that last august and awful tribunal, where you will have to give an account for your listening, as I for my speaking, the crown of victory laid on the locks of a faithful teacher is the characters of those whom he has taught. ‘Who is my joy and hope, and crown of rejoicing?’ Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming?

Now, notice, further, how such mutual affection is needed to give force to the teacher’s exhortation. Preaching from unloved lips never does any good. It irritates, or leaves untouched. Affection melts and opens the heart to the entrance of the word. And preaching from unloving lips does very little good either. So speaking, I condemn myself. There are men who handle God’s great, throbbing message of love so coldly as that they ice even the Gospel. There are men who have a strange gift of taking all the sap and the fervour out of the word that they proclaim, making the very grapes of Eshcol into dried raisins. And I feel for myself that my ministry may well have failed in this respect. For who is there that can modulate his voice so as to reproduce the music of that great message, or who can soften and open his heart so as that it shall be a worthy vehicle of the infinite love of God?

But, dear brethren, though conscious of many failures in this respect, I yet thank God that here, at the end of nearly forty years of a ministry, I can look you in the face and believe that your look responds to mine, and that I can take these words as the feathers for my arrow, as that which will make words otherwise weak go further, and may help to write the precepts upon hearts, and to bring them to bear in practice--'My beloved and longed for'; 'my joy and my crown.'

Such feelings do not need to be always spoken. There is very little chance of us Northerners erring on the side of letting our hearts speak too fully and frequently. Perhaps we should be all the better if we were a little less reticent, but at any rate you and I can surely trust each other after so many years, and now and then, as to-day, let our hearts speak.

II. Secondly, notice the all-sufficient precept which such love gives. 'So stand fast in the Lord.'

That is a very favourite figure of Paul's, as those of you who have any reasonable degree of familiarity with his letters will know. Here it carries with it, as it generally does, the idea of resistance against antagonistic force. But the main thought of it is that of continuous steadfastness in our union with Jesus Christ. It applies, of course, to the intellect, but not mainly, and certainly not exclusively to intellectual adherence to the truths spoken in the Gospel. It covers the whole ground of the whole man; will, conscience, heart, practical effort, as well as understanding. And it is really Paul's version, with a characteristic dash of pugnacity in it, of our Lord's yet deeper and calmer words, 'Abide in Me and I in you.' It is the same exhortation as Barnabas gave to the infantile church at Antioch, when, to these men just rescued from heathenism and profoundly ignorant of much which we suppose it absolutely necessary that Christians should know, he had only one thing to say, exhorting them all, that 'with purpose of heart they should cleave to the Lord.'

Steadfast continuance of personal union with Jesus Christ, extending through all the faculties of our nature, and into every corner of our lives, is the kernel of this great exhortation. And he who fulfils it has little left unfulfilled. Of course, as I said, there is a very strong suggestion that such 'standing' is by no means an easy thing, or accomplished without much antagonism; and it may help us if, just for a moment, we run over the various forms of resistance which they have to overcome who stand fast. Nothing stands where it is without effort. That is true in the moral world, although in the physical world the law of motion is that nothing moves without force being applied to it.

What are the things that would shake our steadfastness, and sweep us away? Well, there are, first, the tiny, continuously acting, and therefore all but omnipotent forces of daily life--duties, occupations, distractions of various kinds--which tend to move us imperceptibly away, as by the slow sliding of a glacier, from the hope of the Gospel. There is nothing so strong as a gentle pressure, equably and unintermittently applied. It is far mightier than thrusts and hammerings and sudden assaults. I stood some time ago looking at the Sphinx. The hard stone--so hard that it turns the edge of a sculptor's chisel--has been worn away, and the solemn features all but obliterated. What by? The continual attrition of multitudinous grains of sand from the desert. The little things that are always at work upon us are the things that have most power to sweep us away from our steadfastness in Jesus Christ.

Then there are, besides, the sudden assaults of strong temptations, of sense and flesh, or of a more subtle and refined character. If a man is standing loosely, in some careless dégagé attitude, and a sudden impact comes upon him, over he goes. The boat upon a mountain-locked lake encounters a sudden gust when opposite the opening of a glen, and unless there be a very strong hand and a watchful eye at the helm, is sure to be upset. Upon us there come, in addition to that silent continuity of imperceptible but most real pressure, sudden gusts of temptation which are sure to throw us over, unless we are well and always on our guard against them.

In addition to all these, there are ups and downs of our own nature, the fluctuations which are sure to occur in any human heart, when faith seems to ebb and falter, and love to die down almost into cold ashes. But, dear brethren, whilst we shall always be liable to these fluctuations of feeling, it is possible for us to have, deep down below these, a central core of our personality, in which unchanging continuity may abide. The depths of the ocean know nothing of the tides on the surface that are due to the mutable moon. We can have in our inmost hearts steadfastness, immovableness, even though the surface may be ruffled. Make your spirits like one of those great cathedrals whose thick walls keep out the noises of the world, and in whose still equability there is neither excessive heat nor excessive cold, but an approximately uniform temperature, at midsummer and at midwinter. 'Stand fast in the Lord.'

Now, my text not only gives an exhortation, but, in the very act of giving it, suggests how it is to be fulfilled. For that phrase 'in the Lord' not only indicates where we are to stand, but also how . That is to say--it is only in proportion as we keep ourselves in union with Christ, in heart and mind, and will, and work, that we shall stand steadfast. The lightest substances may be made stable, if they are glued on to something stable. You can mortice a bit of thin stone into the living rock, and then it will stand 'four-square to every wind that blows.' So it is only on condition of our keeping ourselves in Jesus Christ, that we are able to keep ourselves steadfast, and to present a front of resistance that does not yield one foot, either to imperceptible continuous pressure, to sudden assaults, or to the fluctuations of our own changeful dispositions and tempers. The ground on which a man stands has a great deal to do with the firmness of his footing. You cannot stand fast upon a bed of slime, or upon a sand-bank which is being undermined by the tides. And if we, changeful creatures, are to be steadfast in any region, our surest way of being so is to knit ourselves to Him 'who is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever,' and from whose immortality will flow some copy and reflection of itself into our else changeful natures.

Still further, in regard to this commandment, I would pray you to notice that very eloquent little word which stands at the beginning of it. ' So stand fast in the Lord.' 'So.' How? That throws us back to what the Apostle has been saying in the previous context. And what has he been saying there? The keynote of the previous chapter is progress--'I follow after; I press toward the mark, forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching forth to the things that are before.' To these exhortations to progress he appends this remarkable exhortation: 'So'--that is, by progress--'stand fast in the Lord,' which being turned into other words is just this--if you stand still, you will not stand fast. There can be no steadfastness without advancement. If a man is not going forward, he is going backward. The only way to ensure stability is 'pressing toward the mark.' Why, a child's top only stands straight up as long as it is revolving. If a man on a bicycle stops, he tumbles. And so, in the depths of a Christian life, as in all science, and all walks of human activity, the condition of steadfastness is advance. Therefore, dear brethren, let no man deceive himself with the notion that he can keep at the same point of religious experience and of Christian character. You are either more of a Christian, or less of one, than you were at a past time. ‘ So , stand fast,’ and remember that to stand still is not to stand fast .

Now, whilst all these things that I have been trying to say have reference to Christian people at all stages of their spiritual history, they have a very especial reference to those in the earlier part of Christian life.

And I want to say to those who have only just begun to run the Christian life, very lovingly and very earnestly, that this is a text for them. For, alas! there is nothing more frequent than that, after the first dawnings of a Christian life in a heart, there should come a period of overclouding; or that, as John Bunyan has taught us, when Christian has gone through the wicket-gate, he should fall very soon into the Slough of Despond. One looks round, and sees how many professing Christians there are who, perhaps, were nearer Jesus Christ on the day of their conversion than they have ever been since, and how many cases of arrested development there are amongst professing and real Christians; so that when for the ‘time they ought to be teachers, they have need’ to be taught again; and when, after the number of years that have passed, they ought to be full-grown men, they are but babes yet. And so I say to you, dear young friends, stand fast. Do not let the world attract you again. Keep near to Jesus. ‘Hold fast that thou hast; let no man take thy crown.’

III. Lastly, we have here a great motive which encourages obedience to this command.

People generally pass over that ‘Therefore’ which begins my text, but it is full of significance and of importance. It links the precept which we have been considering with the immediately preceding hope which the Apostle has so triumphantly proclaimed, when he says that ‘we look for the Saviour from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change the body of our humiliation that it may be fashioned like unto the body of His glory, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.’

So there rises before us that twofold great hope; that the Master Himself is coming to the succour of His servants, and that when He comes, He will perfect the incomplete work which has been begun in them by their faith and steadfastness, and will change their whole humanity so that it shall become participant of, and conformed to, the glory of His own triumphant manhood.

That hope is presented by the Apostle as having its natural sequel in the ‘steadfastness’ of my text, and that ‘steadfastness’ is regarded by the Apostle as drawing its most animating motives from the contemplation of that great hope. Blessed be God! The effort of the Christian life is not one which is extorted by fear, or by the cold sense of duty. There are no taskmasters with whips to stand over the heart that responds to Christ and to His love. But hope and joy, as well as love, are the animating motives which make sacrifices easy, soften the yoke that is laid upon our shoulders, and turn labour into joy and delight.

So, dear brethren, we have to set before us this great hope, that Jesus Christ is coming, and that, therefore, our labour on ourselves is sure not to be in vain. Work that is done hopelessly is not done long, and there is no heart in it whilst it is being done. But if we know that Christ will appear, ‘and that when He who is our life shall appear, we also shall appear with Him in glory,’ then we may go to work in keeping ourselves steadfast in Him, with cheery hearts, and with full assurance that what we have been doing will have a great result.

You have read, no doubt, about some little force in North-West India, hemmed in by enemies. They may well hold out resolutely and hopefully when they know that three relieving armies are converging upon their stronghold. And we, too, know that our Emperor is coming to raise the siege. We may well stand fast with such a prospect. We may well work at our own sanctifying when we know that our Lord Himself--like some master-sculptor who comes to his pupil’s imperfectly blocked-out work, and takes his chisel in his hand, and with a touch or two completes it--will come and finish what we, by His grace, imperfectly began. ‘So stand fast in the Lord,’ because you have hope that the Lord is about to come, and that when He comes you will be like Him.

One last word. That steadfastness is the condition without which we have no right to entertain that hope.

If we keep ourselves near Christ, and if by keeping ourselves near Him, we are becoming day by day liker Him, then we may have calm confidence that He will perfect that which concerns us. But I, for my part, can find nothing, either in Scripture or in the analogy of God’s moral dealings with us in the world, to warrant the holding out of the expectation to a man that, if he has kept himself apart from Jesus Christ and his quickening and cleansing power all his life long, Jesus Christ will take him in hand after he dies, and change him into His likeness. Don’t you risk it! Begin by ‘standing fast in the Lord.’ He will do the rest then, not else. The cloth must be dipped into the dyer’s vat, and lie there, if it is to be tinged with the colour. The sensitive plate must be patiently kept in position for many hours, if invisible stars are to photograph themselves upon it. The vase must be held with a steady hand beneath the fountain, if it is to be filled. Keep yourselves in Jesus Christ. Then here you will begin to be changed into the same image, and when He comes He will come as your Saviour, and complete your uncompleted work, and make you altogether like Himself.

> ‘*Therefore, my brethren, dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, dearly beloved.*’

24)Philippians 4:3

Philippians

NAMES IN THE BOOK OF LIFE

Php. 4:3.

Paul was as gentle as he was strong. Winsome courtesy and delicate considerateness lay in his character, in beautiful union with fiery impetuosity and undaunted tenacity of conviction. We have here a remarkable instance of his quick apprehension of the possible effects of his words, and of his nervous anxiety not to wound even unreasonable susceptibilities.

He had had occasion to mention three of his fellow-workers, and he wishes to associate with them others whom he does not purpose to name. Lest any of these should be offended by the omission, he soothes them with this graceful, half-apologetic reminder that their names are inscribed on a better page than his. It is as if he had said, ‘Do not mind though I do not mention you individually. You can well afford to be anonymous in my letter since your names are inscribed in the Book of Life.’

There is a consolation for obscure good people, who need not expect to live except in two or three loving hearts; and whose names will only be preserved on mouldering tombstones that will convey no idea to the reader. We may well dispense with other commemoration if we have this.

Now, this figure of the Book of Life appears in Scripture at intervals, almost from the beginning to the very end. The first instance of its occurrence is in that self-sacrificing, intercessory prayer of Moses, when he expressed his willingness to be ‘blotted out of Thy book’ as an atonement for the sin of Israel. Its last appearance is when the Apocalyptic Seer is told that none enter into the City of God come down from Heaven ‘save those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.’ Of course in plain English the expression is just equivalent to being a real disciple of Jesus Christ. But then it presents that general notion under a metaphor which, in its various aspects, has a very distinct and stringent bearing upon our duties as well as upon our blessings and our hopes. I, therefore, wish to work out, as well as I can, the various thoughts suggested by this emblem.

I. The first of them is Citizenship.

The figure is, of course, originally drawn from the registers of the tribes of Israel. In that use, though not without a glance at some higher meaning, it appears in the Old Testament, where we read of ‘those who are written among them living in Jerusalem’; or ‘are written in the writing of the house of Israel.’ The suggestion of being inscribed on the burgess-rolls of a city is the first idea connected with the word. In the New Testament, for instance, we find in the great passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews the two notions of the city and the census brought into immediate connection, where the writer says, ‘Ye are come unto the city of the living God . . . and to the church of the first-born whose names are written in heaven.’ In this very letter we have, only a verse or two before my text, the same idea of citizenship cropping up. ‘Our citizenship is in Heaven, from whence also we look for the Saviour.’ That, no doubt, helped to suggest to the Apostle the words of my text. And there is another verse in the same letter where the same idea comes out. ‘Only act the citizen as becometh the Gospel of Christ.’ Now, you will remember, possibly, that Philippi was, as the Acts of the Apostles tells us, a Roman colony. And the reference is exquisitely close-fitting to the circumstances of the people of that city. For a Roman colony was a bit of Rome in another land, and the citizens of Philippi had their names inscribed on the registers of the tribes of Rome. The writer himself was another illustration of the same thing, of living in a community to which he did not belong and of belonging to a community in which he did not live. For Paul was a native of Tarsus; and Paul, the native of the Asiatic Tarsus, was a Roman.

So, then, the first thought that comes out of this great metaphor is that all of us, if we are Christian people, belong to another polity, another order of things than that in which our outward lives are spent. And the plain, practical conclusion that comes from it is, cultivate the sense of belonging to another order. Just as it swelled the heart of a Macedonian Philippian with pride, when he thought that he did not belong to the semi-barbarous people round about him, but that his name was written in the books that lay in the Capitol of Rome, so should we cultivate that sense of belonging to another order. It will make our work here none the worse, but it will fill our lives with the sense of nobler affinities, and point our efforts to grander work than any that belongs to ‘the things that are seen and temporal.’ Just as the little groups of Englishmen in treaty-ports own no allegiance to the laws of the country in which they live, but are governed by English statutes, so we have to take our orders from headquarters to which we have to report. Men in our colonies get their instructions from Downing Street. The officials there, appointed by the Home Government, think more of what they will say about them at Westminster than of what they say about them at Melbourne. So we are citizens of another country, and have to obey the laws of our own kingdom, and not those of the soil on which we dwell. Never mind about the opinions of men, the babblements of the people in the land you live in. To us, the main thing is that we be acceptable, well-pleasing unto Him. Are you solitary? Cultivate the sense of, in your solitude, being a member of a great community that stretches through all the ages, and binds into one the inhabitants of eternity and of time.

Remember that this citizenship in the heavens is the highest honour that can be conferred upon a man. The patricians of Venice used to have their names inscribed upon what was called the ‘golden book’ that was kept in the Doge’s Palace. If our names are written in the book of gold in the heavens, then we have higher dignities than any that belong to the fleeting chronicles of this passing, vain world. So we can accept with equanimity evil report or good report, and can acquiesce in a wholesome obscurity, and be careless though our names appear on no human records, and fill no trumpet of fame blown by earthly cheeks. Intellectual power, wealth, gratified ambition, and all the other things that men set before them, are small indeed compared with the honour, with the blessedness, with the repose and satisfaction that attend the conscious possession of citizenship in the heavens. Let us lay to heart the great words of the Master which put a cooling hand on all the feverish ambitions of earth. ‘In this rejoice, not that the spirits are subject unto you, but rather rejoice that your names are written in heaven.’

II. Then the second idea suggested by these words is the possession of the life which is life indeed.

The ‘Book of Life,’ it is called in the New Testament. Its designation in the Old might as well be translated ‘the book of living’ as ‘the book of life.’ It is a register of the men who are truly alive.

Now, that is but an imaginative way of putting the commonplace of the New Testament, that anything which is worth calling life comes to us, not by creation or physical generation, but by being born again through faith in Jesus Christ, and by receiving into our else dead spirits the life which He bestows upon all them that trust Him.

In the New Testament ‘life’ is far more than ‘being’; far more than physical existence; removed by a whole world from these lower conceptions, and finding its complete explanation only in the fact that the soul which is knit to God by conscious surrender, love, aspiration, and obedience, is the only soul that really lives. All else is death--death! He ‘that liveth in pleasure is dead while he liveth.’ The ghastly imagination of one of our poets, of the dead man standing on the deck pulling at the ropes by the side of the living, is true in a very deep sense. In spite of all the feverish activities, the manifold vitalities of practical and intellectual life in the world, the deepest, truest, life of every man who is parted from God by alienation of will, by indifference, and neglect of love, lies sheeted and sepulchred in the depths of his own heart. Brethren, there is no life worth calling life, none to which that august name can without degradation be applied, except the complete life of body, soul, and spirit, in lowly obedience to God in Christ. The deepest meaning of the work of the Saviour is that He comes into a dead world, and breathes into the bones--very many and very dry--the breath of His own life. Christ has died for us; Christ will live in us if we will; and, unless He does, we are twice dead.

Do not put away that thought as if it were a mere pulpit metaphor. It is a metaphor, but yet in the metaphor there lies this deepest truth, which concerns us all, that only he is truly himself, and lives the highest, best, and noblest life that is possible for him, who is united to Jesus Christ, and drawing from Christ his own life. 'He that hath the Son hath life; he that hath not the Son hath not life.' Either my name and yours are written in the Book of Life, or they are written in the register of a cemetery. We have to make our choice which.

III. Another idea suggested by this emblem is experience of divine individualising knowledge and care.

In the Old Testament the book is called 'Thy book,' in the New it is called 'the Lamb's book.' That is of a piece with the whole relation of the New to the Old, and of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word and Manifestor of God, to the Jehovah revealed in former ages. For, unconditionally, and without thought of irreverence or idolatry, the New Testament lifts over and confers upon Jesus Christ the attributes which the Old jealously preserved as belonging only to Jehovah. And thus Christ the Manifestor of God, and the Mediator to us of all divine powers and blessings, takes the Book and makes the entries in it. Each man of us, as in your ledgers, has a page to himself. His account is opened, and is not confused with other entries. There is individualising love and care, and as the basis of both, individualising knowledge. My name, the expression of my individual being, stands there. Christ does not deal with me as one of a crowd, nor fling out blessings broadcast, that I may grasp them in the midst of a multitude, if I choose to put out a hand, but He deals with each of us singly, as if there were not any beings in the world but He and I, our two selves, all alone.

It is hard to realise the essentially individualising and isolating character of our relation to Jesus Christ. But we shall never come to the heart of the blessedness and the power of His Gospel unless we translate all ‘us’-es and ‘every ones’ and ‘worlds’ in Scripture into ‘I’ and ‘me,’ and can say not only He gives Himself to be ‘the propitiation for the sins of the whole world,’ but ‘He loved me and gave Himself for me.’ The same individualising love which is manifested in that mighty universal Atonement, if we rightly understand it, is manifested in all His dealings with us. One by one we come under His notice; the Shepherd tells His sheep singly as they pass out through the gate or into the fold. He knows them all by name. ‘I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.’

Lift up your eyes and behold who made all these; the countless host of the nightly stars. What are nebulæ to our eyes are blazing suns to His. ‘He telleth the number of the stars; He calleth them all by name by the greatness of His power, for that He is strong in might not one faileth.’ So we may nestle in the protection of His hand, sure of a separate place in His knowledge and His heart.

Deliverance and security are the results of that individualising care. In one of the Old Testament instances of the use of this metaphor, we read that in the great day of calamity and sorrow ‘Thy people shall be delivered, even every one that is written in Thy Book.’ So we need not dread anything if our names are there. The sleepless King will read the Book, and will never forget, nor forget to help and succour His poor servants.

But there are two other variations of this thought in the Old Testament even more tenderly suggestive of that individualising care and strong sufficient love than the emblem of my text. We read that when, in the exercise of his official functions, the high priest passed into the Tabernacle he wore, upon his breast, near the seat of personality, and the home of love--the names of the tribes graven, and that the same names were written on his shoulders, as if guiding the exercise of his power. So we may think of ourselves as lying near the beatings of His heart, and as individually the objects of the work of His almighty arm. Nor is this all. For there is yet another, and still tenderer, application of the figure, when we read of the Divine voice as saying to Israel, ‘I have graven thee on the palms of My hands.’ The name of each who loves and trusts and serves is written there; printed deep in the flesh of the Sovereign Christ. We bear in our bodies the marks, the stigmata that tell whose slaves we are--’the marks of the Lord Jesus.’ And He bears in His body the marks that tell who His servants are.

IV. Lastly, there is suggested by this text the idea of future entrance into the land of the living.

The metaphor occurs three times in the final book of Scripture, the book which deals with the future and with the last things. And it occurs in all these instances in very remarkable connection. First we read, in the highly imaginative picture of the final judgment, that when the thrones are set two books are opened, one the Book of Life, the other the book in which are written the deeds of men, and that by these two books men are judged. There is a judgment by conduct. There is also a judgment by the Book of Life. That is to say, the question at last comes to be, ‘Is this man’s name written in that book?’ Is he a citizen of the kingdom, and therefore capable of entering into it? Has he the life from Christ in his heart? Or, in other words, the question is, first, has the man who stands at the bar faith in Jesus Christ; and, second, has he proved that his faith is genuine and real by the course of his earthly conduct? These are the books from which the judgment is made.

Further, we read, in that blessed vision which stands at the far-off end of all the knowledge of the future which is given to humanity, the vision of the City of God ‘that came down from heaven as a bride adorned for her husband,’ that only they enter in there who are ‘written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.’ Only citizens are capable of entrance into the city. Aliens are necessarily shut out. The Lord, when He writeth up His people, shall count that this man was born there, though he never trod its streets while on earth, and, therefore, can enter into his native home.

Further, in one of the letters to the seven churches our Lord gives as a promise to him that overcometh, ‘I will not blot his name out of the Book of Life, but I will confess his name.’

What need we care what other people may think about us, or whether the ‘hollow wraith of dying fame’ that comes like a nimbus round some men may fade wholly or no, so long as we may be sure of acknowledgment and praise from Him from whom acknowledgment and praise are precious indeed.

I have but one or two more words to add. Remember that Paul had no hesitation in taking upon himself to declare that the names of these anonymous saints in Philippi were written in the Book of Life. What business had he to do that? Had he looked over the pages, and marked the entries? He had simply the right of estimating their state by their conduct. He saw their works; he knew that these works were the fruit of their faith; and he knew that, therefore, their faith had united them to Jesus Christ. So, Christian men and women, two things: show your faith by your works, and make it impossible for anybody that looks at you to doubt what King you serve, and to what city you belong. Again, do not ask, ‘Is my name there?’ Ask, ‘Have I faith, and does my faith work the works that belong to the Kingdom of Heaven?’

Remember that names can be blotted out of the book. The metaphor has often been pressed into the service of a doctrine of unconditional and irreversible predestination. But rightly looked at, it points in the opposite direction. Remember Moses’s agonised cry, ‘Blot me out of Thy book’; and the Divine answer, ‘Him that sinneth against Me, his name will I blot out of My book.’ And remember that it is only to ‘him that overcometh’ that the promise is made, ‘I will not blot him out.’ We are made partakers of Christ if we ‘hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end.’

Remember that it depends upon ourselves whether our names are there or not. John Bunyan describes the armed man who came up to the table, where the man with the book and the inkhorn was seated, and said: ‘Set down my name.’ And you and I may do that. If we cast ourselves on Jesus Christ and yield our wills to be guided by Him, and give our lives for His service, then He will write our names in His book. If we trust Him we shall be citizens of the City of God; shall be filled with the life of Christ; shall be objects of an individualising love and care; shall be accepted in that Day; and shall enter in through the gates into the city. ‘They that forsake me shall be written on the earth'; and there wiped out as are the children's scribbles on the sand when the ocean come up. They that trust in Jesus Christ shall have their names written in the Book of Life; graven on the High Priest's breastplate, and inscribed on His mighty hand and His faithful heart.

25)Philippians 4:4

Philippians

REJOICE EVERMORE

Php. 4:4.

It has been well said that this whole epistle may be summed up in two short sentences: 'I rejoice'; 'Rejoice ye!' The word and the thing crop up in every chapter, like some hidden brook, ever and anon sparkling out into the sunshine from beneath the shadows. This continual refrain of gladness is all the more remarkable if we remember the Apostle's circumstances. The letter shows him to us as a prisoner, dependent on Christian charity for a living, having no man like-minded to cheer his solitude; uncertain as to 'how it shall be with me,' and obliged to contemplate the possibility of being 'offered,' or poured out as a libation, 'on the sacrifice and service of your faith.' Yet out of all the darkness his clear notes ring jubilant; and this sunny epistle comes from the pen of a prisoner who did not know but that to-morrow he might be a martyr.

The exhortation of my text, with its urgent reiteration, picks up again a dropped thread which the Apostle had first introduced in the commencement of the previous chapter. He had there evidently been intending to close his letter, for he says: 'Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord'; but he is drawn away into that precious personal digression which we could so ill spare, in which he speaks of his continual aspiration and effort towards things not yet attained. And now he comes back again, picks up the thread once more, and addresses himself to his parting counsels. The reiteration in the text becomes the more impressive if we remember that it is a repetition of a former injunction. 'Rejoice in the Lord alway'; and then he seems to hear one of his Philippian readers saying: 'Why! you told us that once before!' 'Yes,' he says, 'and you shall hear it once again; so important is my commandment that it shall be repeated a third time. So I again say, "rejoice!"' Christian gladness is an important element in Christian duty; and the difficulty and necessity of it are indicated by the urgent repetition of the injunction.

I. So, then, the first thought that suggests itself to me from these words is this, that close union with Jesus Christ is the foundation of real gladness.

Pray note that 'the Lord' here, as is usually the case in Paul's Epistles, means, not the Divine Father, but Jesus Christ. And then observe, again, that the phrase 'Rejoice in the Lord' has a deeper meaning than we sometimes attach to it. We are accustomed to speak of rejoicing in a thing or a person, which, or who, is thereby represented as being the occasion or the object of our gladness. And though that is true, in reference to our Lord, it is not the whole sweep and depth of the Apostle's meaning here. He is employing that phrase, 'in the Lord,' in the profound and comprehensive sense in which it generally appears in his letters, and especially in those almost contemporaneous with this Epistle to the Philippians. I need only refer you, in passing, without quoting passages, to the continual use of that phrase in the nearly contemporaneous letter to the Ephesians, in which you will find that 'in Christ Jesus' is the signature stamped upon all the gifts of God, and upon all the possible blessings of the Christian life. 'In Him' we have the inheritance; in Him we obtain redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins; in Him we are 'blessed with all spiritual blessings.' And the deepest description of the essential characteristic of a Christian life is, to Paul, that it is a life in Christ.

It is this close union which the Apostle here indicates as being the foundation and the source of all that gladness which he desires to see spreading its light over the Christian life. 'Rejoice in the Lord'--being in Him be glad.

Now that great thought has two aspects, one deep and mysterious, one very plain and practical. As to the former, I need not spend much time upon it. We believe, I suppose, in the superhuman character and nature of Jesus Christ. We believe in His divinity. We can therefore believe reasonably in the possibility of a union between Him and us, transcending all the forms of human association, and being really like that which the creature holds to its Creator in regard to its physical being. ‘In him we live, and move, and have our being’ is the very foundation truth in regard to the constitution of the universe. ‘In Him we live, and move, and have our being’ is the very foundation truth in regard to the relation of the Christian soul to Jesus Christ. All earthly unions are but poor adumbrations from afar of that deep, transcendent, mysterious, but most real union, by which the Christian soul is in Christ, as the branch is in the vine, the member in the body, the planet in its atmosphere, and by which Christ is in the Christian soul as the life sap is in every twig, as the mysterious vital power is in every member. Thus abiding in Him, in a manner which admits of no parallel nor of any doubt, we may, and we shall, be glad.

But then, passing from the mysterious, we come to the plain. To be ‘in Christ’ which is commended to us here as the basis of all true blessedness, means that the whole of our nature shall be occupied with, and fastened upon, Him; thought turning to Him, the tendrils of the heart clinging and creeping around Him, the will submitting itself in glad obedience to His beloved and supreme commandments, the aspirations, and desires feeling out after Him as the sufficient and eternal good, and all the current of our being setting towards Him in earnestness of desire, and resting in Him in tranquillity of possession. Thus ‘in Christ’ we may all be.

And, says Paul, in the great words of my text, such a union, reciprocal and close, is the secret of all blessedness. If thus we are wedded to that Lord, and His life is in us and ours enclosed in Him, then there is such correspondence between our necessities and our supplies as that there is no room for aching emptiness; no gnawing of unsatisfied longings, but the blessedness that comes from having found that which we seek, and in the finding being stimulated to a still closer, happier, and not restless search after fuller possession. The man that knows where to get anything and everything that he needs, and to whom desires are but the prophets of instantaneous fruition; surely that man has in his possession the talismanic secret of perpetual gladness. They who thus dwell in Christ by faith, love, obedience, imitation, aspiration, and enjoyment, are like men housed in some strong fortress, who can look out over all the fields alive with enemies, and feel that they are safe. They who thus dwell in Christ gain command over themselves; and because they can bridle passions, and subdue hot and impossible desires, and keep themselves well in hand, have stanched one chief source of unrest and sadness, and have opened one pure and sparkling fountain of unfailing gladness. To rule myself because Christ rules me is no small part of the secret of blessedness. And they who thus dwell in Christ have the purest joy, the joy of self-forgetfulness. He that is absorbed in a great cause; he whose pitiful, personal individuality has passed out of his sight; he who is swallowed up by devotion to another, by aspiration after 'something afar from the sphere of our sorrow,' has found the secret of gladness. And the man who thus can say, 'I live: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,' this is the man who will ever rejoice. The world may not call such a temper gladness. It is as unlike the sputtering, flaring, foul-smelling joys which it prizes--like those filthy but bright 'Lucigens' that they do night work by in great factories--it is as unlike the joy of the world as these are to the calm, pure moonlight which they insult. The one is of heaven, and the other is the foul product of earth, and smokes to extinction swiftly.

II. So, secondly, notice that this joy is capable of being continuous.

'Rejoice in the Lord always,' says Paul. That is a hard nut to crack. I can fancy a man saying, 'What is the use of giving me such exhortations as this? My gladness is largely a matter of temperament, and I cannot rule my moods. My gladness is largely a matter of circumstances, and I do not determine these. How vain it is to tell me, when my heart is bleeding, or beating like a sledge-hammer, to be glad!' Yes! Temperament has a great deal to do with joy; and circumstances have a great deal to do with it; but is not the mission of the Gospel to make us masters of temperament, and independent of circumstances? Is not the possibility of living a life that has no dependence upon externals, and that may persist permanently through all varieties of mood, the very gift that Christ Himself has come to bestow upon us--bringing us into communion with Himself, and so making us lords of our own inward nature and of externals: so that 'though the fig-tree shall not blossom, and there be no fruit in the vine,' yet we may 'rejoice in the Lord, and be glad in the God of our salvation.' If a ship has plenty of water in its casks or tanks in its hold, it does not matter whether it is sailing through fresh water or salt. And if you and I have that union with Jesus Christ of which my text speaks, then we shall be, not wholly, but with indefinite increase of approximation towards the ideal, independent of circumstances and masters of our temperaments. And so it is possible, if not absolutely to reach this fair achievement of an unbroken continuity of gladness, at least to bring the lucent points so close to one another as that the intervals of darkness between shall be scarcely visible, and the whole will seem to form one continuous ring of light.

Brother, if you and I can keep near Jesus Christ always--and I suppose we can do that in sorrow as in joy--He will take care that our keeping near Him will not want its reward in that blessed continuity of felt repose which is very near the sunniness of gladness. For, if we in the Lord sorrow, we may, then, simultaneously, in the Lord rejoice. The two things may go together, if in the one mood and the other we are in union with Him. The bitterness of the bitterest calamity is taken away from it when it does not separate us from Jesus Christ. And just as the mother is specially tender with her sick child, and just as we have often found that the sympathy of friends comes to us, when need and grief are upon us, in a fashion that would have been incredible beforehand, so it is surely true that Jesus Christ can, and does, soften His tone, and select the tokens of His presence with especial tenderness for a wounded heart; so as that sorrow in the Lord passes into joy in the Lord. And if that be so, then the pillar which was cloud in the sunshine brightens into fire as night falls on the desert.

But it is not only that this divine gladness is consistent with the sorrow that is often necessary for us, but also that the continuity of such gladness is secured, because in Christ there are open for us sources of blessedness in what is else a dry and thirsty land. If you would take this epistle at your leisure, and run over it in order to note the various occasions of joy which the Apostle expresses for himself, and commends to his brethren, you would see how beautifully they reveal to us the power of communion with Jesus Christ, to find honey in the rock, good in everything, and a reason for thankful gladness in all events.

I have not time, at this stage of my sermon, to do more than just glance at these. We find, for instance, that a very large portion of the joy which he declares fills his own heart, and which he commends to these Philippians, arises from the recognition of good in others. He speaks to them of being his ‘joy and crown.’ He tells them that in his sorrows and imprisonment, their ‘fellowship in the Gospel, from the first day until now,’ had brought a whiff of gladness into the close air of the prison cell. He begs them to be Christlike in order that they may ‘fulfil his joy’; and he may lose himself in others’ blessings, and therein find gladness. A large portion of his joy came from very common things. A large portion of the joy that he commends to them he contemplates as coming to them from small matters. They were to be glad because Timothy came with a message from the Apostle. He is glad because he hears of their well-being, and receives a little contribution from them for his daily necessities. A large portion of his gladness came from the spread of Christ’s kingdom. ‘Christ is preached,’ says he, with a flash of triumph, ‘and I therein do rejoice; yea, and will rejoice.’ And, most beautiful of all, no small portion of his gladness came from the prospect of martyrdom. ‘If I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all; and do ye joy and rejoice with me.’

Now, put all these things together and they just come to this, that a heart in union with Jesus Christ can find streams in the desert, joys blossoming as the rose, in places that to the un-Christlike eye are wilderness and solitary, and out of common things it can bring the purest gladness and draw a tribute and revenue of blessedness even from the prospect of God-sent sorrows. Dear brethren, if you and I have not learned the secret of modest and unselfish delights, we shall vainly seek for joy in the vulgar excitements and coarse titillations of appetites and desires which the world offers. ‘Calm pleasures there abide’ in Christ. The northern lights are weird and bright, but they belong to midwinter, and they come from electric disturbances, and portend rough weather afterwards. Sunshine is silent, steadfast, pure. Better to walk in that light than to be led astray by fantastic and perishable splendours. ‘Rejoice in the Lord always.’

III. Lastly, such gladness is an important part of Christian duty.

As I have said, the urgency of the command indicates both its importance and its difficulty. It is important that professing Christians should be glad Christians [with the joy that is drawn from Jesus Christ, of course, I mean], because they thereby become walking advertisements and living witnesses for Him. A gloomy, melancholy, professing Christian is a poor recommendation of his faith. If you want to ‘adorn the doctrine of Christ’ you will do it a great deal more by a bright face, that speaks of a calm heart, calm because filled with Christ, than by many more ambitious efforts. This gladness is important because, without it, there will be little good work done, and little progress made. It is important, surely, for ourselves, for it can be no small matter that we should be able to have travelling with us all through the desert that mystical rock which follows with its streams of water, and ever provides for us the joys that we need. In every aspect, whether as regards men who take their notions of Christ and of Christianity, a great deal more from the concrete examples of both in human lives than from books and sermons, or from the Bible itself--or as regards the work which we have to do, or as regards our own inward life, it is all-important that we should have that close union with Jesus Christ which cannot but result in pure and holy gladness.

But the difficulty, as well as the importance, of the obligation, are expressed by the stringent repetition of the commandment, ‘And again I say, Rejoice.’ When objections arise, when difficulties present themselves, I repeat the commandment again, in the teeth of them all; and I know what I mean when I am saying it. Thus, thought Paul, we need to make a definite effort to keep ourselves in touch with Jesus Christ, or else gladness, and a great deal besides, will fade away from our grasp.

And there are two things that you have to do if you would obey the commandment. The one is the direct effort at fostering and making continuous your fellowship with Jesus Christ, through your life; and the other is looking out for the bright bits in your life, and making sure that you do not sullenly and foolishly, perhaps with vain regrets after vanished blessings, or perhaps with vain murmurings about unattained good, obscure to your sight the mercies that you have, and so cheat yourselves of the occasions for thankfulness and joy. There are people who, if there be ever such a little bit of a fleecy film of cloud low down on their horizon, can see nothing of the sparkling blue arch above them for looking at that, and who behave as if the whole sky was one roof of doleful grey. Do not you do that!

There is always enough to be thankful for. Lay hold of Christ, and be sure that you open your eyes to His gifts.

Surely, dear friends, if there be offered to us, as there is, a gladness which is perfect in the two points in which all other gladness fails, it is wise for us to take it. The commonplace which all men believe, and most men neglect, is that nothing short of an infinite Person can fill a finite soul. And if we look for our joys anywhere but to Jesus Christ, there will always be some bit of our nature which, like the sulky elder brother in the parable, will scowl at the music and dancing, and refuse to come in. All earthly joys are transient as well as partial. Is it not better that we should have gladness that will last as long as we do, that we can hold in our dying hands, like a flower clasped in some cold palm laid in the coffin, that we shall find again when we have crossed the bar, that will grow and brighten and broaden for evermore? My joy shall remain . . . full.

26)Philippians 4:6

Philippians

HOW TO OBEY AN IMPOSSIBLE INJUNCTION

Php. 4:6.

It is easy for prosperous people, who have nothing to trouble them, to give good advices to suffering hearts; and these are generally as futile as they are easy. But who was he who here said to the Church at Philippi, 'Be careful for nothing?' A prisoner in a Roman prison; and when Rome fixed its claws it did not usually let go without drawing blood. He was expecting his trial, which might, so far as he knew, very probably end in death. Everything in the future was entirely dark and uncertain. It was this man, with all the pressure of personal sorrows weighing upon him, who, in the very crisis of his life, turned to his brethren in Philippi, who had far fewer causes of anxiety than he had, and cheerfully bade them 'be careful for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, make their requests known unto God.' Had not that bird learned to sing when his cage was darkened? And do you not think that advice of that sort, coming not from some one perched up on a safe hillock to the strugglers in the field below, but from a man in the thick of the fight, would be like a trumpet-call to them who heard it?

Now, here are two things. There is an apparently perfectly impossible advice, and there is the only course that will make it possible.

I. An apparently impossible advice.

‘Be careful for nothing.’ I do not need to remind you--for I suppose that we all know it--that that word ‘careful,’ in a great many places in the New Testament, does not mean what, by the slow progress of change in the significance of words, it has come to mean to-day; but it means what it should still mean, ‘full of care,’ and ‘care’ meant, not prudent provision, forethought, the occupation of a man’s common-sense with his duty and his work and his circumstances, but it meant the thing which of all others unfits a man most for such prudent provision, and that is, the nervous irritation of a gnawing anxiety which, as the word in the original means, tears the heart apart and makes a man quite incapable of doing the wise thing, or seeing the wise thing to do, in the circumstances. We all know that; so that I do not need to dwell upon it. ‘Careful’ here means neither more nor less than ‘anxious.’

But I may just remind you how harm has been done, and good has been lost and missed, by people reading that modern meaning into the word. It is the same word which Christ employed in the exhortation ‘Take no thought for to-morrow.’ It is a great pity that Christian people sometimes get it into their heads that Christ prohibited what common-sense demands, and what everybody practises. ‘Taking thought for the morrow’ is not only our duty, but it is one of the distinctions which make us ‘much better than’ the fowls of the air, that have no barns in which to store against a day of need. But when our Lord said, ‘Take no thought for the morrow,’ he did not mean ‘Do not lay yourselves out to provide for common necessities and duties,’ but ‘Do not fling yourselves into a fever of anxiety, nor be too anxious to anticipate the "fashion of uncertain evils."‘

But even with that explanation, is it not like an unreachable ideal that Paul puts forward here? ‘Be anxious about nothing’--how can a man who has to face the possibilities that we all have to face, and who knows himself to be as weak to deal with them as we all are: how can he help being anxious? There is no more complete waste of breath than those sage and reverend advices which people give us, not to do the things, nor to feel the emotions, which our position make absolutely inevitable and almost involuntary. Here, for instance, is a man surrounded by all manner of calamity and misfortune; and some well-meaning but foolish friend comes to him, and, without giving him a single reason for the advice, says, 'Cheer up! my friend.' Why should he cheer up? What is there in his circumstances to induce him to fall into any other mood? Or some unquestionable peril is staring him full in the face, coming nearer and nearer to him, and some well-meaning, loose-tongued friend, says to him, 'Do not be afraid!'--but he ought to be afraid. That is about all that worldly wisdom and morality have to say to us, when we are in trouble and anxiety. 'Shut your eyes very hard, and make believe very much, and you will not fear.' An impossible exhortation! Just as well bid a ship in the Bay of Biscay not to rise and fall upon the wave, but to keep an even keel. Just as well tell the willows in the river-bed that they are not to bend when the wind blows, as come to me, and say to me, 'Be careful about nothing.' Unless you have a great deal more than that to say, I must be, and I ought to be, anxious, about a great many things. Instead of anxiety being folly, it will be wisdom; and the folly will consist in not opening our eyes to facts, and in not feeling emotions that are appropriate to the facts which force themselves against our eyeballs. Threadbare maxims, stale, musty old commonplaces of unavailing consolation and impotent encouragement say to us, 'Do not be anxious.' We try to stiffen our nerves and muscles in order to bear the blow; or some of us, more basely still, get into a habit of feather-headed levity, making no forecasts, nor seeing even what is plainest before our eyes. But all that is of no use when once the hot pincers of real trouble, impending or arrived, lay hold of our hearts. Then of all idle expenditures of breath in the world there is none to the wrung heart more idle and more painful than the one that says, Be anxious about nothing.

II. So we turn to the only course that makes the apparent impossibility possible.

Paul goes on to direct to the mode of feeling and action which will give exemption from the else inevitable gnawing of anxious forethought. He introduces his positive counsel with an eloquent 'But,' which implies that what follows is the sure preservative against the temper which he deprecates; 'But in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.'

There are, then, these alternatives. If you do not like to take the one, you are sure to have to take the other. There is only one way out of the wood, and it is this which Paul expands in these last words of my text. If a man does not pray about everything, he will be worried about most things. If he does pray about everything, he will not be troubled beyond what is good for him, about anything. So there are these alternatives; and we have to make up our minds which of the two we are going to take. The heart is never empty. If not full of God, it will be full of the world, and of worldly care. Luther says somewhere that a man's heart is like a couple of millstones; if you don't put something between them to grind, they will grind each other. It is because God is not in our hearts that the two stones rub the surface off one another. So the victorious antagonist of anxiety is trust, and the only way to turn gnawing care out of my heart and life is to usher God into it, and to keep him resolutely in it.

'In everything.' If a thing is great enough to threaten to make me anxious, it is great enough for me to talk to God about. If He and I are on a friendly footing, the instinct of friendship will make me speak. If so, how irrelevant and superficial seem to be discussions whether we ought to pray about worldly things, or confine our prayers entirely to spiritual and religious matters. Why! if God and I are on terms of friendship and intimacy of communication, there will be no question as to what I am to talk about to Him; I shall not be able to keep silent as to anything that interests me. And we are not right with God unless we have come to the point that entire openness of speech marks our communications with Him, and that, as naturally as men, when they come home from business, like to tell their wives and children what has happened to them since they left home in the morning, so naturally we talk to our Friend about everything that concerns us. 'In everything let your requests be made known unto God.' That is the wise course, because a multitude of little pimples may be quite as painful and dangerous as a large ulcer. A cloud of gnats may put as much poison into a man with their many stings as will a snake with its one bite. And if we are not to get help from God by telling Him about little things, there will be very little of our lives that we shall tell Him about at all. For life is a mountain made up of minute flakes. The years are only a collection of seconds. Every man's life is an aggregate of trifles. 'In everything make your requests known.'

'By prayer'--that does not mean, as a superficial experience of religion is apt to suppose it to mean, actual petition that follows. For a great many of us, the only notion that we have of prayer is asking God to give us something that we want. But there is a far higher region of communion than that, in which the soul seeks and finds, and sits and gazes, and aspiring possesses, and possessing aspires. Where there is no spoken petition for anything affecting outward life, there may be the prayer of contemplation such as the burning seraphs before the Throne do ever glow with. The prayer of silent submission, in which the will bows itself before God; the prayer of quiet trust, in which we do not so much seek as cleave; the prayer of still fruition--these, in Paul's conception of the true order, precede 'supplication.' And if we have such union with God, by realising His presence, by aspiration after Himself, by trusting Him and submission to Him, then we have the victorious antagonist of all our anxieties, and the 'cares that infest the day shall fold their tents' and 'silently steal away.' For if a man has that union with God which is effected by such prayer as I have been speaking about, it gives him a fixed point on which to rest amidst all perturbations. It is like bringing a light into a chamber when thunder is growling outside, which prevents the flashing of the lightning from being seen.

Years ago an ingenious inventor tried to build a vessel in such a fashion as that the saloon for passengers should remain upon one level, howsoever the hull might be tossed by waves. It was a failure, if I remember rightly. But if we are thus joined to God, He will do for our inmost hearts what the inventor tried to do with the chamber within his ship. The hull may be buffeted, but the inmost chamber where the true self sits will be kept level and unmoved. Brethren! prayer in the highest sense, by which I mean the exercise of aspiration, trust, submission--prayer will fight against and overcome all anxieties.

‘By prayer and supplication.’ Actual petition for the supply of present wants is meant by ‘supplication.’ To ask for that supply will very often be to get it. To tell God what I think I need goes a long way always to bringing me the gift that I do need. If I have an anxiety which I am ashamed to speak to Him, that silence is a sign that I ought not to have it; and if I have a desire that I do not feel I can put into a prayer, that feeling is a warning to me not to cherish such a desire.

There are many vague and oppressive anxieties that come and cast a shadow over our hearts, that if we could once define, and put into plain words, we should find that we vaguely fancied them a great deal larger than they were, and that the shadow they flung was immensely longer than the thing that flung it. Put your anxieties into definite speech. It will reduce their proportions to your own apprehension very often. Speaking them, even to a man who may be able to do little to help, eases them wonderfully. Put them into definite speech to God; and there are very few of them that will survive.

‘By prayer and supplication with thanksgiving.’ That thanksgiving is always in place. If one only considers what he has from God, and realises that whatever he has he has received from the hands of divine love, thanksgiving is appropriate in any circumstances. Do you remember when Paul was in gaol at the very city to which this letter went, with his back bloody with the rod, and his feet fast in the stocks, how then he and Silas ‘prayed and sang praises to God.’ Therefore the obedient earthquake came and set them loose. Perhaps it was some reminiscence of that night which moved him to say to the Church that knew the story--of which perhaps the gaoler was still a member--’By prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make your requests known unto God.’

One aching nerve can monopolise our attention and make us unconscious of the health of all the rest of the body. So, a single sorrow or loss obscures many mercies. We are like men who live in a narrow alley in some city, with great buildings on either side, towering high above their heads, and only a strip of sky visible. If we see up in that strip a cloud, we complain and behave as if the whole heavens, right away round the three hundred and sixty degrees of the horizon, were black with tempest. But we see only a little strip, and there is a great deal of blue in the sky; however, there may be a cloud in the patch that we see above our heads, from the alley where we live. Everything, rightly understood, that God sends to men is a cause of thanksgiving; therefore, 'in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.'

'Casting all your anxieties upon him,' says Peter, 'for He'--not is anxious ; that dark cloud does not rise much above the earth--but, 'He careth for you.' And that loving guardianship and tender care is the one shield, armed with which we can smile at the poisoned darts of anxiety which would else fester in our hearts and, perhaps, kill. 'Be careful for nothing'--an impossibility unless 'in everything' we make 'our requests known unto God.'

27)Philippians 4:7

Philippians

THE WARRIOR PEACE

Php. 4:7.

The great Mosque of Constantinople was once a Christian church, dedicated to the Holy Wisdom. Over its western portal may still be read, graven on a brazen plate, the words, 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.' For four hundred years noisy crowds have fought, and sorrowed, and fretted, beneath the dim inscription in an unknown tongue; and no eye has looked at it, nor any heart responded. It is but too sad a symbol of the reception which Christ's offers meet amongst men, and--blessed be His name!--its prominence there, though unread and unbelieved, is a symbol of the patient forbearance with which rejected blessings are once and again pressed upon us, and He stretches out His hand though no man regards, and calls though none do hear. My text is Christ's offer of peace. The world offers excitement, Christ promises repose.

I. Mark, then, first, this peace of God.

What is it? What are its elements? Whence does it come? It is of God, as being its Source, or Origin, or Author, or Giver, but it belongs to Him in a yet deeper sense, for Himself is Peace. And in some humble but yet real fashion our restless and anxious hearts may partake in the divine tranquillity, and with a calm repose, kindred with that rest from which it is derived, may enter into His rest.

If that be too high a flight, at all events the peace that may be ours was Christ's, in the perfect and unbroken tranquillity of His perfect Manhood. What, then, are its elements? The peace of God must, first of all, be peace with God. Conscious friendship with Him is indispensable to all true tranquillity. Where that is absent there may be the ignoring of the disturbed relationship; but there will be no peace of heart. The indispensable requisite is 'a conscience like a sea at rest.' Unless we have made sure work of our relationship with God, and know that He and we are friends, there is no real repose possible for us. In the whirl of excitement we may forget, and for a time turn away from, the realities of our relation to Him, and so get such gladness as is possible to a life not rooted in conscious friendship with Him. But such lives will be like some of those sunny islands in the Eastern Pacific, extinct volcanoes, where nature smiles and all things are prodigal and life is easy and luxuriant; but some day the clouds gather, and the earth shakes, and fire pours forth, and the sea boils, and every living thing dies, and darkness and desolation come. You are living, brother, upon a volcano's side, unless the roots of your being are fixed in a God who is your friend.

Again, the peace of God is peace within ourselves. The unrest of human life comes largely from our being torn asunder by contending impulses. Conscience pulls this way, passion that. Desire says, 'Do this'; reason, judgment, prudence say, 'It is at your peril if you do!' One desire fights against another, and so the man is rent asunder. There must be the harmonising of all the Being if there is to be real rest of spirit. No longer must it be like the chaos ere the creative word was spoken, where, in gloom, contending elements strove.

Again, men have not peace, because in most of them everything is topmost that ought to be undermost, and everything undermost that ought to be uppermost. 'Beggars are on horseback' [and we know where they ride], ‘and princes walking.’ The more regal part of the man’s nature is suppressed, and trodden under foot; and the servile parts, which ought to be under firm restraint, and guided by a wise hand, are too often supreme, and wild work comes of that. When you put the captain and the officers, and everybody on board that knows anything about navigation, into irons, and fasten down the hatches on them, and let the crew and the cabin boys take the helm and direct the ship, it is not likely that the voyage will end anywhere but on the rocks. Multitudes are living lives of unrestfulness, simply because they have set the lowest parts of their nature upon the throne, and subordinated the highest to these.

Our unrest comes from yet another source. We have not peace, because we have not found and grasped the true objects for any of our faculties. God is the only possession that brings quiet. The heart hungers until it feeds upon Him. The mind is satisfied with no truth until behind truth it finds a Person who is true. The will is enslaved and wretched until in God it recognises legitimate and absolute authority, which it is blessing to obey. Love puts out its yearnings, like the filaments that gossamer spiders send out into the air, seeking in vain for something to fasten upon, until it touches God, and clings there. There is no rest for a man until he rests in God. The reason why this world is so full of excitement is because it is so empty of peace, and the reason why it is so empty of peace is because it is so void of God. The peace of God brings peace with Him, and peace within. It unites our hearts to fear His name, and draws all the else turbulent and confusedly flowing impulses of the great deep of the spirit after itself, in a tidal wave, as the moon draws the waters of the gathered ocean. The peace of God is peace with Him, and peace within.

I need not, I suppose, do more than say one word about that descriptive clause in my text, It ‘passeth understanding.’ The understanding is not the faculty by which men lay hold of the peace of God any more than you can see a picture with your ears or hear music with your eyes. To everything its own organ; you cannot weigh truth in a tradesman’s scales or measure thought with a yard-stick. Love is not the instrument for apprehending Euclid, nor the brain the instrument for grasping these divine and spiritual gifts. The peace of God transcends the understanding, as well as belongs to another order of things than that about which the understanding is concerned. You must experience it to know it; you must have it in order that you may feel its sweetness. It eludes the grasp of the wisest, though it yields itself to the patient and loving heart.

II. So notice, in the next place, what the peace of God does.

It ‘shall keep your hearts and minds.’ The Apostle here blends together, in a very remarkable manner, the conceptions of peace and of war, for he employs a purely military word to express the office of this Divine peace. That word, ‘shall keep,’ is the same as is translated in another of his letters kept with a garrison --and, though, perhaps, it might be going too far to insist that the military idea is prominent in his mind, it will certainly not be unsafe to recognise its presence.

So, then, this Divine peace takes upon itself warlike functions, and garrisons the heart and mind. What does he mean by ‘the heart and mind’? Not, as the English reader might suppose, two different faculties, the emotional and the intellectual--which is what we usually roughly mean by our distinction between heart and mind--but, as is always the case in the Bible, the ‘heart’ means the whole inner man, whether considered as thinking, willing, purposing, or doing any other inward act; and the word rendered ‘mind’ does not mean another part of human nature, but the whole products of the operations of the heart. The Revised Version renders it by ‘thoughts,’ and that is correct if it be given a wide enough application, so as to include emotions, affections, purposes, as well as ‘thoughts’ in the narrower sense. The whole inner man, in all the extent of its manifold operations, that indwelling peace of God will garrison and guard.

So note, however profound and real that Divine peace is, it is to be enjoyed in the midst of warfare. Quiet is not quiescence. God’s peace is not torpor. The man that has it has still to wage continual conflict, and day by day to brace himself anew for the fight. The highest energy of action is the result of the deepest calm of heart; just as the motion of this solid, and, as we feel it to be, immovable world, is far more rapid through the abysses of space, and on its own axis, than any of the motions of the things on its surface. So the quiet heart, ‘which moveth altogether if it move at all,’ rests whilst it moves, and moves the more swiftly because of its unbroken repose. That peace of God, which is peace militant, is unbroken amidst all conflicts. The wise old Greeks chose for the protectress of Athens the goddess of Wisdom, and whilst they consecrated to her the olive branch, which is the symbol of peace, they set her image on the Parthenon, helmed and spear-bearing, to defend the peace, which she brought to earth. So this heavenly Virgin, whom the Apostle personifies here, is the 'winged sentry, all skilful in the wars,' who enters into our hearts and fights for us to keep us in unbroken peace.

It is possible day by day to go out to toil and care and anxiety and change and suffering and conflict, and yet to bear within our hearts the unalterable rest of God. Deep in the bosom of the ocean, beneath the region where winds howl and billows break, there is calm, but the calm is not stagnation. Each drop from these fathomless abysses may be raised to the surface by the power of the sunbeams, expanded there by their heat, and sent on some beneficent message across the world. So, deep in our hearts, beneath the storm, beneath the raving winds and the curling waves, there may be a central repose, as unlike stagnation as it is unlike tumult; and the peace of God may, as a warrior, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

What is the plain English of that metaphor? Just this, that a man who has that peace as his conscious possession is lifted above the temptations that otherwise would drag him away. The full cup, filled with precious wine, has no room in it for the poison that otherwise might be poured in. As Jesus Christ has taught us, there is such a thing as cleansing a heart in some measure, and yet because it is 'empty,' though it is 'swept and garnished,' the demons come back again. The best way to be made strong to resist temptation, is to be lifted above feeling it to be a temptation, by reason of the sweetness of the peace possessed. Oh! if our hearts were filled, as they might be filled, with that divine repose, do you think that the vulgar, coarse-tasting baits which make our mouths water now would have any power over us? Will a man who bears in his hands jewels of priceless value, and knows them to be such, find much temptation when some imitation stone, made of coloured glass and a tinfoil backing, is presented to him? Will the world draw us away if we are rooted and grounded in the peace of God? Geologists tell us that climates are changed and creatures are killed by the slow variation of level in the earth. If you and I can only heave our lives up high enough, the foul things that live down below will find the air too pure and keen for them, and will die and disappear; and all the vermin that stung and nestled down in the flats will be gone when we get up to the heights. The peace of God will keep our hearts and thoughts.

III. Now, lastly, notice how we get the peace of God.

My text is an exuberant promise, but it is knit on to something before, by that ‘and’ at the beginning of the verse. It is a promise, as all God’s promises are, on conditions. And here are the conditions. ‘Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God.’ That defines the conditions in part; and the last words of the text itself complete the definition. ‘In Christ Jesus’ describes, not so much where we are to be kept, as a condition under which we shall be kept. How, then, can I get this peace into my turbulent, changeful life?

I answer, first, trust is peace. It is always so; even when it is misplaced we are at rest. The condition of repose for the human heart is that we shall be ‘in Christ,’ who has said, ‘In the world ye shall have tribulation, but in Me ye shall have peace.’ And how may I be ‘in Him’? Simply by trusting myself to Him. That brings peace with God.

The sinless Son of God has died on the Cross, a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, for yours and for mine. Let us trust to that, and we shall have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. And ‘in Him’ we have, by trust, inward peace, for He, through our faith, controls our whole natures, and Faith leads the lion in a silken leash, like Spenser’s Una. Trust in Christ brings peace amid outward sorrows and conflicts. When the pilot comes on board the captain does not leave the bridge, but stands by the pilot’s side. His responsibility is past, but his duties are not over. And when Christ comes into my heart, my effort, my judgment, are not made unnecessary, or put on one side. Let Him take the command, and stand beside Him, and carry out His orders, and you will find rest to your souls.

Again, submission is peace. What makes our troubles is not outward circumstances, howsoever afflictive they may be, but the resistance of our spirits to the circumstances. And where a man’s will bends and says, ‘Not mine but Thine be done,’ there is calm. Submission is like the lotion that is applied to mosquito bites--it takes away the irritation, though the puncture be left. Submission is peace, both as resignation and as obedience.

Communion is peace. You will get no quiet until you live with God. Until He is at your side you will always be moved.

So, dear friend, fix this in your minds: a life without Christ is a life without peace. Without Him you may have excitement, pleasure, gratified passions, success, accomplished hopes, but peace never! You never have had it, have you? If you live without Him, you may forget that you have not Him, and you can plunge into the world, and so lose the consciousness of the aching void, but it is there all the same. You never will have peace until you go to Him. There is only one way to get it. The Christless heart is like the troubled sea that cannot rest. There is no peace for it. But in Him you can get it for the asking. ‘The chastisement of our peace was laid upon Him.’ For our sakes He died on the Cross, so making peace. Trust Him as your only hope, Saviour and friend, and the God of peace will ‘fill you with all joy and peace in believing.’ Then bow your wills to Him in acceptance of His providence, and in obedience to His commands, and so, ‘your peace shall be as a river, and your righteousness as the waves of the sea.’ Then keep your hearts in union and communion with Him, and so His presence will keep you in perfect peace whilst conflicts last, and, with Him at your side, you will pass through the valley of the shadow of death undisturbed, and come to the true Salem, the city of peace, where they beat their swords into ploughshares, and learn and fear war no more.

28)Philippians 4:8

Philippians

THINK ON THESE THINGS

Php. 4:8.

I am half afraid that some of you may think, as I have at times thought, that I am too old to preach to the young. You would probably listen with more attention to one less remote from you in years, and may be disposed to discount my advices as quite natural for an old man to give, and quite unnatural for a young man to take. But, dear friends, the message which I have to bring to you is meant for all ages, and for all sorts of people. And, if I may venture a personal word, I proved it, when I stood where you stand, and it is fresher and mightier to me to-day than it ever was.

You are in the plastic period of your lives, with the world before you, and the mightier world within to mould as you will; and you can be almost anything you like, I do not mean in regard to externals, or intellectual capacities, for these are only partially in our control, but in regard to the far more important and real things--viz. elevation and purity of heart and mind. You are in the period of life to which fair dreams of the future are natural. It is, as the prophet tells us, for ‘the young man’ to ‘see visions,’ and to ennoble his life thereafter by turning them into realities. Generous and noble ideas ought to belong to youth. But you are also in the period when there is a keen joy in mere living, and when some desires, which get weaker as years go on, are very strong, and may mar youthful purity. So, taking all these into account, I have thought that I could not do better than press home upon you the counsels of this magnificent text, however inadequately my time may permit of my dealing with them; for there are dozens of sermons in it, if one could expand it worthily.

But my purpose is distinctly practical, and so I wish just to cast what I have to say to you into the answer to three questions, the three questions that may be asked about everything. What? Why? How?

I. What, then, is the counsel here?

‘Think on these things.’ To begin with, that advice implies that we can, and, therefore, that we should, exercise a very rigid control over that part of our lives which a great many of us never think of controlling at all. There are hosts of people whose thoughts are just hooked on to one another by the slightest links of accidental connection, and who scarcely ever have put a strong hand upon them, or coerced them into order, or decided what they are going to let come into their minds, and what to keep out. Circumstances, the necessities of our daily occupations, the duties that we owe to one another, all these make certain streams of thought very necessary, and to some of us very absorbing. And for the rest--well! ‘He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls’; anybody can go in, and anybody can come out. I am sure that amongst young men and women there are multitudes who have never realised how responsible they are for the flow of the waves of that great river that is always coming from the depths of their being, and have never asked whether the current is bringing down sand or gold. Exercise control, as becomes you, over the run and drift of your thoughts. I said that many of us had minds like cities broken down. Put a guard at the gate, as they do in some Continental countries, and let in no vagrant that cannot show his passport, and a clear bill of health. Now, that is a lesson that some of you very much want.

But, further, notice that company of fair guests that you may welcome into the hospitalities of your heart and mind. ‘Think on these things’--and what are they? It would be absurd of me to try to exhaust the great catalogue which the Apostle gives here, but let me say a word or two about it.

‘Whatsoever things are true . . . think on these things.’ Let your minds be exercised, breathed, braced, lifted, filled by bringing them into contact with truth, especially with the highest of all truths, the truths affecting God and your relations to Him. Why should you, like so many of us, be living amidst the small things of daily life, the trifles that are here, and never coming into vital contact with the greatest things of all, the truths about God and Christ, and what you have to do with them, and what they have to do with you? ‘Whatsoever things are true . . . think on these things.’

‘Whatsoever things are honest,’ or, as the word more properly and nobly means, ‘Whatsoever things are reverent , or venerable ‘--let grave, serious, solemn thought be familiar to your minds, not frivolities, not mean things. There is an old story in Roman history about the barbarians breaking into the Capitol, and their fury being awed into silence, and struck into immobility, as they saw, round and round in the hall, the august Senators, each in his seat. Let your minds be like that, with reverent thoughts clustering on every side; and when wild passions, and animal desires, and low, mean contemplations dare to cross the threshold, they will be awed into silence and stillness. ‘Whatsoever things are august . . . think on these things.’

‘Whatsoever things are just’--let the great, solemn thought of duty, obligation, what I ought to be and do, be very familiar to your consideration and meditation. ‘Whatsoever things are just . . . think on these things.’

‘Whatsoever things are pure’--let white-robed angels haunt the place. Let there be in you a shuddering recoil from all the opposite; and entertain angels not unawares. ‘Whatsoever things are pure . . . think on these things.’

Now, these characteristics of thoughts which I have already touched upon all belong to a lofty region, but the Apostle is not contented with speaking austere things. He goes now into a region tinged with emotion, and he says, ‘whatsoever things are lovely’; for goodness is beautiful, and, in effect, is the only beautiful. ‘Whatsoever things are lovely . . . think on these things.’ And ‘whatsoever things are of good report’--all the things that men speak well of, and speak good in the very naming of, let thoughts of them be in your minds.

And then he gathers all up into two words. ‘If there be any virtue’--which covers the ground of the first four, that he has already spoken about--viz. true, venerable, just, pure; and ‘if there be any praise’--which resumes and sums up the two last: ‘lovely and of good report,’ ‘think on these things.’

Now, if my purpose allowed it, one would like to point out here how the Apostle accepts the non-Christian notions of the people in whose tongue he was speaking; and here, for the only time in his letters, uses the great Pagan word ‘virtue,’ which was a spell amongst the Greeks, and says, ‘I accept the world’s notion of what is virtuous and praiseworthy, and I bid you take it to your hearts.’

Dear brethren, Christianity covers all the ground that the noblest morality has ever attempted to mark out and possess, and it covers a great deal more. ‘If there be any virtue, as you Greeks are fond of talking about, and if there be any praise, if there is anything in men which commends noble actions, think on these things.’

Now, you will not obey this commandment unless you obey also the negative side of it. That is to say, you will not think on these fair forms, and bring them into your hearts, unless you turn away, by resolute effort, from their opposites. There are some, and I am afraid that in a congregation as large as this there must be some representatives of the class, who seem to turn this apostolic precept right round about, and whatsoever things are illusory and vain, whatsoever things are mean, and frivolous, and contemptible, whatsoever things are unjust, and whatsoever things are impure, and whatsoever things are ugly, and whatsoever things are branded with a stigma by all men they think on these things. Like the flies that are attracted to a piece of putrid meat, there are young men who are drawn by all the lustful, the lewd, the impure thoughts; and there are young women who are too idle and uncultivated to have any pleasure in anything higher than gossip and trivial fiction. 'Whatsoever things are noble and lovely, think on these things,' and get rid of all the others.

There are plenty of occasions round about you to force the opposite upon your notice; and, unless you shut your door fast, and double-lock it, they will be sure to come in:--Popular literature, the scrappy trivialities that are put into some periodicals, what they call 'realistic fiction'; modern Art, which has come to be largely the servant of sense; the Stage, which has come--and more is the pity! for there are enormous possibilities of good in it--to be largely a minister of corruption, or if not of corruption at least of frivolity--all these things are appealing to you. And some of you young men, away from the restraints of home, and in a city, where you think nobody could see you sowing your wild oats, have got entangled with them. I beseech you, cast out all this filth, and all this meanness and pettiness from your habitual thinkings, and let the august and the lovely and the pure and the true come in instead. You have the cup in your hand, you can either press into it clusters of ripe grapes, and make mellow wine, or you can squeeze into it wormwood and gall and hemlock and poison-berries; and, as you brew, you have to drink. You have the canvas, and you are to cover it with the figures that you like best. You can either do as Fra Angelico did, who painted the white walls of every cell in his quiet convent with Madonnas and angels and risen Christs, or you can do like some of those low-toned Dutch painters, who never can get above a brass pan and a carrot, and ugly boors and women, and fill the canvas with vulgarities and deformities. Choose which you will have to keep you company.

II. Now, let me ask you to think for a moment why this counsel is pressed upon you.

Let me put the reasons very briefly. They are, first, because thought moulds action. ‘As a man thinketh in his heart so is he.’ One looks round the world, and all these solid-seeming realities of institutions, buildings, governments, inventions and machines, steamships and electric telegrams, laws and governments, palaces and fortresses, they are all but embodied thoughts. There was a thought at the back of each of them which took shape. So, in another sense than the one in which the saying was originally meant, but yet an august and solemn sense, ‘the word is made flesh,’ and our thoughts became visible, and stand round us, a ghastly company. Sooner or later what has been the drift and trend of a man’s life comes out, flashes out sometimes, and dribbles out at other times, into visibility in his actions; and, just as the thunder follows on the swift passage of the lightning, so my acts are neither more nor less than the reverberation and after-clap of my thoughts.

So if you are entertaining in your hearts and minds this august company of which my text speaks, your lives will be fair and beautiful. For what does the Apostle immediately go on to add to our text? ‘These things do’--as you certainly will if you think about them, and as you certainly will not unless you do.

Again, thought and work make character. We come into the world with certain dispositions and bias. But that is not character, it is only the raw material of character. It is all plastic, like the lava when it comes out of the volcano. But it hardens, and whatever else my thought may do, and whatever effects may follow upon any of my actions, the recoil of them on myself is the most important effect to me. And there is not a thought that comes into, and is entertained by a man, or rolled as a sweet morsel under his tongue, but contributes its own little but appreciable something to the making of the man’s character. I wonder if there is anybody in this chapel now who has been so long accustomed to entertain these angels of whom my text speaks as that to entertain their opposites would be an impossibility. I hope there is. I wonder if there is anybody in this chapel to-night who has been so long accustomed to live amidst the thoughts that are small and trivial and frivolous, if not amongst those that are impure and abominable, as that to entertain their opposites seems almost an impossibility. I am afraid there are some. I remember hearing about a Maori woman who had come to live in one of the cities in New Zealand, in a respectable station, and after a year or two of it she left husband and children, and civilisation, and hurried back to her tribe, flung off the European garb, and donned the blanket, and was happy crouching over the embers on the clay hearth. Some of you have become so accustomed to the low, the wicked, the lustful, the impure, the frivolous, the contemptible, that you cannot, or, at any rate, have lost all disposition to rise to the lofty, the pure, and the true.

Once more; as thought makes deeds, and thought and deeds make character, so character makes destiny, here and hereafter. If you have these blessed thoughts in your hearts and minds, as your continual companions and your habitual guests, then, my friend, you will have a light within that will burn all independent of externals; and whether the world smiles or frowns on you, you will have the true wealth in yourselves; 'a better and enduring substance.' You will have peace, you will be lords of the world, and having nothing yet may have all. No harm can come to the man who has laid up in his youth, as the best treasure of old age, this possession of these thoughts enjoined in my text.

And character makes destiny hereafter. What is a man whose whole life has been one long thought about money-making, or about other objects of earthly ambition, or about the lusts of the flesh, and the lusts of the eye, and the pride of life, to do in heaven? What would one of those fishes in the sunless caverns of America, which, by long living in the dark, have lost their eyes, do, if it were brought out into the sunshine? A man will go to his own place, the place for which he is fitted, the place for which he has fitted himself by his daily life, and especially by the trend and the direction of his thoughts.

So do not be led away by talk about 'seeing both sides,' about 'seeing life,' about 'knowing what is going on.' 'I would have you simple concerning evil, and wise concerning good.' Do not be led away by talk about having your fling, and sowing your wild oats. You may make an indelible stain on your conscience, which even forgiveness will not wipe out; and you may sow your wild oats, but what will the harvest be? 'Whatsoever a man soweth that'-- that --'shall he also reap.' Would you like all your low thoughts, all your foul thoughts, to return and sit down beside you, and say, ‘We have come to keep you company for ever’? ‘If there be any virtue . . . think on these things.’

III. Now, lastly, how is this precept best obeyed?

I have been speaking to some extent about that, and saying that there must be real, honest, continuous effort to keep out the opposite, as well as to bring in the ‘things that are lovely and of good report.’ But there is one more word that I must say in answer to the question how this precept can be observed, and it is just this. All these things, true, venerable, just, pure, lovely, and of good report, are not things only; they are embodied in a Person. For whatever things are fair meet in Jesus Christ, and He, in His living self, is the sum of all virtue and of all praise. So that if we link ourselves to Him by faith and love, and take Him into our hearts and minds, and abide in Him, we have them all gathered together into that One. Thinking on these things is not merely a meditating upon abstractions, but it is clutching and living in and with and by the living, loving Lord and Saviour of us all. If Christ is in my thoughts, all good things are there.

If you trust Him, and make him your Companion, He will help you, He will give you His own life, and in it will give you tastes and desires which will make all these fair thoughts congenial to you, and will deliver you from the else hopeless bondage of subjection to their very opposites.

Brethren, our souls cleave to the dust, and all our efforts will be foiled, partially or entirely, to obey this precept, unless we remember that it was spoken to people who had previously obeyed a previous commandment, and had taken Christ for their Saviour. We gravitate earthwards, alas! after all our efforts, but if we will put ourselves in His hands, then He will be as a Magnet drawing us upwards, or rather He will give us wings of love and contemplation by which we can soar above that dim spot that men call Earth, and walk in the heavenly places. The way by which this commandment can be obeyed is by obeying the other precept of the same Apostle, ‘Set your minds on things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.’

I beseech you, take Christ and enthrone Him in the very sanctuary of your minds. Then you will have all these venerable, pure, blessed thoughts as the very atmosphere in which you move. ‘Think on these things . . . these things do! . . . and the God of Peace shall be with you.’

29)Philippians 4:10-14

Philippians

HOW TO SAY ‘THANK YOU’

Php. 4:10-14 [R.V.].

It is very difficult to give money without hurting the recipient. It is as difficult to receive it without embarrassment and sense of inferiority. Paul here shows us how he could handle a delicate subject with a feminine fineness of instinct and a noble self-respect joined with warmest gratitude. He carries the weight of obligation, is profuse in his thanks, and yet never crosses the thin line which separates the expression of gratitude from self-abasing exaggeration, nor that other which distinguishes self-respect in the receiver of benefits from proud unwillingness to be obliged to anybody. Few words are more difficult to say rightly than ‘Thank you.’ Some people speak them reluctantly and some too fluently: some givers are too exacting in the acknowledgments they expect, and do not so much give as barter so much help for so much recognition of superiority.

The Philippians had sent to Paul some money help by Epaphroditus as we heard before in Chapter II., and this gift he now acknowledges in a paragraph full of autobiographical interest which may be taken as a very model of the money relations between teachers and taught in the church. It is besides an exquisite illustration of the fineness and delicacy of Paul’s nature, and it includes large spiritual lessons.

The stream of the Apostle’s thoughts takes three turns here. There is first the exuberant and delicate expression of his thanks, then, as fearing that they might misunderstand his joy in their affection as if it were only selfish gladness that his wants had been met, he gives utterance to his triumphant and yet humble consciousness of his Christ-given independence in, and of, all circumstances, and then feeling in a moment that such words, if they stood alone, might sound ungrateful, he again returns to thanks, but not for their gift so much as for the sympathy expressed in it. We may follow these movements of feeling now.

I. The exuberant expression of thanks, ‘I rejoice in the Lord greatly.’

There is an instance of his following his own twice-given precept, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always.’ The Philippians’ care of him was the source of the joy, and yet it was joy in the Lord. So we learn the perfect consistency of that joy in Christ with the full enjoyment of all other sources of joy, and especially of the joy that arises from Christian love and friendship. Union with Christ heightens and purifies all earthly relations. Nobody should be so tender and so sweet in these as a Christian. His faith should be like the sunshine blazing out over the meadows making them greener. It should, and does in the measure of its power, destroy selfishness and guard us against the evils which sap love and the anxieties which torment it, against the dread that it may end, and our hopeless desolation when it does. There is a false ascetic idea of Christian devotion as if it were a regard to Christ which made our hearts cold to others, which is clean against Paul’s experience here. His joy went out in fuller stream towards the Philippians because it was ‘joy in the Lord.’

We may just note in passing the tender metaphor by which the Philippians’ renewed thought of him is likened to a tree’s putting forth its buds in a gracious springtide, and may link with it the pretty fancy of an old commentator whom some people call prosaic and puritanical [Bengel], that the stormy winter had hindered communication, and that Epaphroditus and the gifts came with the opening spring.

Paul’s inborn delicacy and quick considerateness comes beautifully forward in his addition, to remove any suspicion of his thinking that his friends in Philippi had been negligent or cold. Therefore he adds that he knew that they had always had the will. What had hindered them we do not know. Perhaps they had no one to send. Perhaps they had not heard that such help would be welcome, but whatever frost had kept the tree from budding, he knew that the sap was in it all the same.

We may note that trait of true friendship, confidence in a love that did not express itself. Many of us are too exacting in always wanting manifestations of our friend’s affection. What cries out for these is not love so much as self-importance which has not had the attention which it thinks its due. How often there have been breaches of intimacy which have no better reason than ‘He didn’t come to see me often enough’; ‘He hasn’t written to me for ever so long’; ‘He does not pay me the attention I expect.’ It is a poor love which is always needing to be assured of another’s. It is better to err in believing that there is a store of goodwill in our friends’ hearts to us which only needs occasion to be unfolded. One often hears people say that they were quite surprised at the proofs of affection which came to them when they were in trouble. They would have been happier and more nearly right if they had believed in them when there was no need to show them.

II. Consciousness of Christ-given independence and of ‘content’ is scarcely Paul’s whole idea here, though that, no doubt, is included. We have no word which exactly expresses the meaning. ‘Self-sufficient’ is a translation, but then it has acquired a bad meaning as connoting a false estimate of one’s own worth and wisdom. What Paul means is that whatever be his condition he has in himself enough to meet it. He does not depend on circumstances, and he does not depend on other people for strength to face them. Many words are not needed to insist that only the man of whom these things are true is worth calling a man at all. It is a miserable thing to be hanging on externals and so to be always exposed to the possibility of having to say, ‘They have taken away my Gods.’ It is as wretched to be hanging on people. ‘The good man shall be satisfied for himself.’ The fortress that has a deep well in the yard and plenty of provisions within, is the only one that can hold out.

This independence teaches the true use of all changing circumstances. The consequence of ‘learning’ therewith to be content is further stated by the Apostle in terms which perhaps bear some reference to the mysteries of Greek religion, since the word rendered ‘I have learned the secret’ means I have been initiated. He can bear either of the two extremes of human experience, and can keep a calm and untroubled mind whichever of them he has to front. He has the same equable spirit when abased and when abounding. He is like a compensation pendulum which corrects expansions and contractions and keeps time anywhere. I remember hearing of a captain in an Arctic expedition who had been recalled from the Tropics and sent straight away to the North Pole. Sometimes God gives His children a similar experience.

It is possible for us not only to bear with equal minds both extremes, but to get the good out of both. It is a hard lesson and takes much conning, to learn to bear sorrow or suffering or want. They have great lessons to teach us all, and a character that has not been schooled by one of these dwellers in the dark is imperfect as celery is not in season till frost has touched it. But it is not less difficult to learn how to bear prosperity and abundance, though we think it a pleasanter lesson. To carry a full cup without spilling is proverbially difficult, and one sees instances enough of men who were far better men when they were poor than they have ever been since they were rich, to give a terrible significance to the assertion that it is still more difficult to live a Christian life in prosperity than in sorrow. But while both threaten, both may minister to our growth. Sorrow will drive, and joy will draw, us nearer to God. If we are not tempted by abundance to plunge our desires into it, nor tempted by sorrow to think ourselves hopelessly harmed by it, both will knit us more closely to our true and changeless good. The centrifugal and centripetal forces both keep the earth in its orbit.

It is only when we are independent of circumstances that we are able to get the full good of them. When there is a strong hand at the helm, the wind, though it be almost blowing directly against us, helps us forward, but otherwise the ship drifts and washes about in the trough. We all need the exhortation to be their master, for we can do without them and they serve us.

Paul here lets us catch a glimpse of the inmost secret of his power without which all exhortations to independence are but waste words. He is conscious of a living power flowing through him and making him fit for anything, and he is not afraid that any one who studies him will accuse him of exaggeration even when he makes the tremendous claim ‘I can do all things in Him that strengtheneth me.’ That great word is even more emphatic in the original, not only because, as the Revised Version shows, it literally is in and not through , and so suggests again his familiar thought of a vital union with Jesus, but also because he uses a compound word which literally means ‘strengthening within,’ so then the power communicated is breathed into the man, and in the most literal sense he is ‘strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.’ This inward impartation of strength is the true and only condition of that self-sufficingness which Paul has just been claiming. Stoicism breaks down because it tries to make men apart from God sufficient for themselves, which no man is. To stand alone without Him is to be weak. Circumstances will always be too strong for me, and sins will be too strong. A Godless life has a weakness at the heart of its loneliness, but Christ and I are always in the majority, and in the face of all foes, be they ever so many and strong, we can confidently say, ‘They that be with us are more than they that be with them.’ The old experience will prove true in our lives, and though ‘they compass us about like bees,’ the worst that they can do is only to buzz angrily round our heads, and their end is in the name of the Lord to be destroyed. In ourselves we are weak, but if we are ‘rooted, grounded, built’ on Jesus, we partake of the security of the rock of ages to which we are united, and cannot be swept away by the storm, so long as it stands unmoved. I have seen a thin hair-stemmed flower growing on the edge of a cataract and resisting the force of its plunge, and of the wind that always lives in its depths, because its roots are in a cleft of the cliff. The secret of strength for all men is to hold fast by the ‘strong Son of God,’ and they only are sufficient in whatsoever state they are, to whom this loving and quickening voice has spoken the charter ‘My grace is sufficient for thee.’

III. The renewed thanks for the loving sympathy expressed in the gift.

We have here again an eager anxiety not to be misunderstood as undervaluing the Philippians’ gift. How beautifully the sublimity of the previous words lies side by side with the lowliness and gentleness of these.

We note here the combination of that grand independence with loving thankfulness for brotherly help. The self-sufficingness of Stoicism is essentially inhuman and isolating. It is contrary to God’s plan and to the fellowship which is meant to knit men together. So we have always to take heed to blend with it a loving welcome to sympathy, and not to fancy that human help and human kindness is useless. We should be able to do without it, but that need not make it the less sweet when it comes. We may be carrying water for the march, but shall not the less prize a brook by the way. Our firm souls should be like the rocking stones in Cornwall, poised so truly that tempests cannot shake them, and yet vibrating at the touch of a little child’s soft hand. That lofty independence needs to be humanised by grateful acceptance of the refreshment of human sympathy even though we can do without it.

Paul shows us here what is the true thing in a brother’s help for which to be thankful. The reason why he was glad of their help was because it spoke to his heart and told him that they were making themselves sharers with him in his troubles. As he tells us in the beginning of the letter, their fellowship in his labours had been from the beginning a joy to him. It was not so much their material help as their true sympathy that he valued. The high level to which he lifts what was possibly a very modest contribution, if measured by money standards, carries with it a great lesson for all receivers and for all givers of such gifts, teaching the one that they are purely selfish if they are glad of what they get, and bidding the other remember that they may give so as to hurt by a gift more than by a blow, that they may give infinitely more by loving sympathy than by much gold, and that a £5 note does not discharge all their obligations. We have to give after His pattern who does not toss us our alms from a height, but Himself comes to bestow them, and whose gift, though it be the unspeakable gift of eternal life, is less than the love it speaks, in that He Himself has in wondrous manner become partaker of our weakness. The pattern of all sympathy, the giver of all our possessions, is God. Let us hold to Him in faith and love, and all earthly love will be sweeter and sympathy more precious. Our own hearts will be refined and purified to a delicacy of consideration and a tenderness beyond their own. Our souls will be made lords of all circumstances and strengthened according to our need. He will say to us ‘My grace is sufficient for thee,’ and we, as we feel His strength being made perfect in our weakness, shall be able to say with humble confidence, ‘I can do all things in Christ who strengtheneth me within.’

30)Philippians 4:15-19

GIFTS GIVEN, SEED SOWN

Php. 4:15-19 [R.V.].

Paul loved the Philippians too well and was too sure of their love to be conscious of any embarrassment in expressing his thanks for money help. His thanks are profuse and long drawn out. Our present text still strikes the note of grateful acknowledgment. It gives us a little glimpse into earlier instances of their liberality, and beautifully suggests that as they had done to him so God would do to them, and that their liberality was in a fashion a prophecy, because it was in some measure an imitation, of God's liberality. He had just said 'I am full, having received the things which were sent from you,' and now he says, 'My God shall fill full all your needs.' The use of the same word in these two connections is a piece of what one would call the very ingenuity of graceful courtesy, if it were not something far deeper, even the utterance of a loving and self-forgetting heart.

I. We may note here Paul's money relations with the churches.

We know that he habitually lived by his own labour. He could call to witness the assembled elders at Ephesus, when he declared that 'these hands ministered unto my necessities,' and could propose himself as an illustration of the words of the Lord Jesus, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' He firmly holds the right of Christian teachers to be supported by the churches, and vehemently insists upon it in the First Epistle to the Corinthians. But he waives the right in his own case, and passionately insists that it were better for him rather to die than that any man should make his glorying void. He will not use to the full his right in the Gospel 'that he may make a Gospel without charge,' but when needed he gladly accepted money gifts, as he did from the Philippians. In our text he points back to an earlier instance of this. The history of that instance we may briefly recall. After his indignities and imprisonment in Philippi he went straight to Thessalonica, stayed there a short time till a riot drove him to take refuge in Berea, whence again he had to flee, and guided by brethren reached Athens. There he was left alone, and his guides went back to Macedonia to send on Silas and Timothy. From Athens he went to Corinth, and there was rejoined by them. According to our text, 'in the beginning of the Gospel,' that is, of course, its beginning in Philippi, they relieved him twice in Thessalonica, and if the words in our text which date the Philippians' gift may be read 'when I had departed from Macedonia,' we should have here another reference to the same incident mentioned in 2 Corinthians, chap. 11: 8-9, where he speaks of being in want there, and having 'the measure of my want' supplied by the brethren who came from Macedonia. The coincidence of these two incidental references hid away, as it were, confirms the historical truthfulness of both Epistles. And if we take into view the circumstances in which he was placed in Thessalonica and at the beginning of his stay in Corinth, his needing and receiving such aid is amply accounted for. Once again, after a long interval, when he was a prisoner in Rome, and probably unable to work for his maintenance, their care of him flourished again.

In the present circumstances of our churches, it seems necessary that the right which Paul so strongly asserted should, for the most part, not be waived, but the only true way of giving and receiving as between minister and people is when it is a matter not of payment but a gift. When it is an expression of sympathy and affection on both sides, the relationship is pleasant and may be blessed. When it comes to be a business transaction, and is to be measured by the rules applicable to such, it goes far to destroy some of the sweetest bonds, and to endanger a preacher's best influence.

II. The lofty view here taken of such service.

It is 'the fruit that increaseth to your account.' Fruit, which as it were is put to their credit in the account-book of heaven, but it is called by Paul by a sacreder name as being an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing to God, in which metaphor all the sacred ideas of yielding up precious things to God and of the sacred fire that consumed the offering or brought to bear on the prosaic material gift.

The principle which the Apostle here lays down in reference to a money gift has, of course, a much wider application, and is as true about all Christian acts. We need not be staggered at the emphasis with which Paul states the truths of their acceptableness and rewardableness, but in order fully to understand the ground of his assurance we must remember that in his view the root of all such fruit increasing to our account, and of everything which can claim to be an odour of a sweet smell well pleasing to God, is love to

Christ, and the renewal of our nature by the spirit of God dwelling in us. In us there dwells no good thing. It is only as we abide in Him and His words abide in us that we bear much fruit. Separate from Him we can do nothing. If our works are ever to smell sweet to God, they must be done for Christ, and in a very profound and real sense, done by Him.

The essential character of all work which has the right to be called good, and which is acceptable to God, is sacrifice. The one exhortation which takes the place and more than fills the place of all other commandments, and is enforced by the motive which takes the place, and more than takes the place of all other motives, is, ‘I beseech you by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice.’ It is works which in the intention of the doer are offered to Him, and in which therefore there is a surrender of our own wills, or tastes, or inclinations, or passions, or possessions, that yield to Him an odour of a sweet smell. The old condition which touched the chivalrous heart of David has to be repeated by us in regard to any work which we can ever hope to make well pleasing to God; ‘I will not offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God which cost me nothing.’

There is a spurious humility which treats all the works of good men as filthy rags, but such a false depreciation is contradicted by Christ’s ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’ It is true that all our deeds are stained and imperfect, but if they are offered on the altar which He provides, it will sanctify the giver and the gift. He is the great Aaron who makes atonement for the iniquity of our holy things. And whilst we are stricken silent with thankfulness for the wonderful mercy of His gracious allowance, we may humbly hope that His ‘Well done’ will be spoken of us, and may labour, not without a foretaste that we do not labour in vain, that ‘whether present or absent we may be well pleasing to Him.’

The fruit is here supposed to be growing, that is, of course, in another life. We need not insist that the service and sacrifice and work of earth, if the motive be right, tell in a man’s condition after death. It is not all the same how Christian men live; some gain ten talents, some five, and some two, and the difference between them is not always as the parable represents it, a difference in the original endowment. An entrance may be given into the eternal kingdom, and yet it may not be an abundant entrance.

III. The gift that supplies the givers.

Paul has nothing to bestow, but he serves a great God who will see to it that no man is the poorer by helping His servants. The king’s honour is concerned in not letting a poor man suffer by lodging and feeding his retainers. The words here suggest to us the source from which our need may be filled full, as an empty vessel might be charged to the brim with some precious liquid, the measure or limit of the fulness, and the channel by which we receive it.

Paul was so sure that the Philippians’ needs would all be satisfied, because he knew that his own had been; he is generalising from his own case, and that, I think, is at all events part of the reason why he says with much emphasis, ‘ My God. As He has done to me He will do to you,’ but even without the ‘my,’ the great name contains in itself a promise and its seal. ‘God will supply just because He is God’; that is what His name means--infinite fulness and infinite self-communicativeness and delight in giving. But is not so absolutely unlimited a promise as this convicted of complete unreality when contrasted with the facts of any life, even of the most truly Christian or the most outwardly happy? Its contradiction of the grim facts of experience is not to be slurred over by restricting it to religious needs only. The promise needs the eye of Faith to interpret the facts of experience, and to let nothing darken the clear vision that if any seeming need is left by God unfilled, it is not an indispensable need. If we do not get what we want we may be quite sure that we do not need it. The axiom of Christian faith is that whatever we do not obtain we do not require. Very desirable things may still not be necessary. Let us limit our notions of necessity by the facts of God’s giving, and then we, too, shall have learned, in whatsoever state we are, therein to be content. When the Apostle says that God shall fill all our need full up to the brim, was he contemplating only such necessities as God could supply through outward gifts? Surely not. God Himself is the filler and the only filler of a human heart, and it is by this impartation of Himself and by nothing else that He bestows upon us the supply of our needs.

Unless we have been initiated into this deepest and yet simplest secret of life, it will be full of gnawing pain and unfulfilled longings. Unless we have learned that our needs are like the cracks in the parched ground, cups to hold the rain from heaven, doors by which God Himself can come to us, we shall dwell for ever in a dry and thirsty land. God Himself is the only satisfier of the soul. ‘Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and there is none upon earth that’--if I am not a fool--’I desire side by side with Thee?’

But Paul here sets forth in very bold words the measure or limits of the divine supply of our need. It is ‘according to His riches in glory.’ Then, all of God belongs to me, and the whole wealth of His aggregated perfections is available for stopping the crannies of my heart and filling its emptiness. My emptiness corresponds with His fulness as some concavity does with the convexity that fits into it, and the whole that He is waits to fill and to satisfy me. There is no limit really to what a man may have of God except the limitless limit of the infinite divine nature, but on the other hand this great promise is not fulfilled all at once, and whilst the actual limit is the boundlessness of God, there is a working limit, so to speak, a variable one, but a very real one. The whole riches of God’s glory are available for us, but only so much of the boundless store as we desire and are at present capable of taking in will belong to us now. What is the use of owning half a continent if the owner lives on an acre of it and grows what he wants there, and has never seen the broad lands that yet belong to him? Nothing hinders a man from indefinitely increased possession of a growing measure of God, except his own arbitrarily narrowed measure of desire and capacity. Therefore it becomes a solemn question for each of us, Am I day by day becoming more and more fit to possess more of God, and enjoy more of the God whom I possess? In Him we have each ‘a potentiality of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice.’ Do we growingly realise that boundless possibility?

The channel by which that boundless supply is to reach us is distinctly set forth here. All these riches are stored up ‘in Christ Jesus.’ A deep lake may be hidden away in the bosom of the hills that would pour blessing and fertility over a barren land if it could find a channel down into the plains, but unless there be a river flowing out of it, its land-locked waters might as well be dried up. When Paul says ‘riches in glory,’ he puts them up high above our reach, but when he adds ‘in Christ Jesus,’ he brings them all down amongst us. In Him is ‘infinite riches in a narrow room.’ If we are in Him then we are beside our treasure, and have only to put out our hands and take the wealth that is lying there. All that we need is ‘in Christ,’ and if we are in Christ it is all close at our sides.

Then the question comes to be, ‘Am I thus near my wealth, and can I get at it whenever I want it, as I want it, and as much as I want of it?’ We can if we will. The path is easy to define, though our slothfulness find it hard to tread. That man is in Christ who dwells with Him by faith, whose heart is by love plunged in His love, who daily seeks to hold communion with Him amid the distractions of life, and who in practical submission obeys His will. If thus we trust, if thus we love, if thus we hold fast to Him, and if thus we link Him with all our activities in the world, need will cease to grow, and will only be an occasion for God’s gift. ‘Delight thyself in the Lord,’ and then the heart’s desires being set upon Him, ‘He will give thee the desire of thy heart.’

Paul says to us ‘My God shall supply all your need.’ Let us answer, ‘The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.’

31)Philippians 4:20-23

Philippians

FAREWELL WORDS

Php. 4:20-23 [R.V.].

These closing words fall into three unconnected parts, a doxology, greetings, and a benediction. As in all his letters, the Apostle follows the natural instinct of making his last words loving words. Even when he had to administer a bitter draught, the last drops in the cup were sweetened, and to the Philippians whom he loved so well, and in whose loyal love he confided so utterly, his parting was tender as an embrace. Taking together the three elements of this farewell, they present to us a soul filled with desire for the glory of God and with loving yearning for all His brethren. We shall best deal with them by simply taking them in order.

I. The Doxology.

It is possibly evoked by the immediately preceding thought of God’s infinite supply of all human need ‘according to his riches in glory ‘; but the glory which is so richly stored in Christ, and is the full storehouse from which our emptiness is to be filled, is not the same as the glory here ascribed to Him. The former is the sum of His divine perfections, the light of His own infinite being: the latter is the praise rendered to Him when we know Him for what He is, and exalt Him in our thankful thoughts and adoration. As this doxology is the last word of this whole letter, we may say that it gathers into one all that precedes it. Our ascription of glory to God is the highest object of all His self-manifestation, and should be the end of all our contemplations of Him and of His acts. The faith that God does ‘all for His glory’ may be and often has been so interpreted as to make his character repellent and hideous, but in reality it is another way of saying that God is love. He desires that all men should be gladdened and elevated by knowing Him as He is. His glory is to give. That to which He has committed the charge of interpreting Him to our dim eyes and disordered natures is not the attributes of sovereign power, or creative wisdom, or administrative providence, or any other elements which men lay hold of in their conceptions of deity. When men make gods they make them in their own image: when God reveals God, the emphasis is put on an altogether different aspect of His nature. It is His self-communicating and paternal love revealed to the heart of a son which will kindle the highest aspiration of praise, and that fatherhood is not found in the fact that God has made us, but in the higher fact that He has redeemed us and has sent the spirit of His Son into our hearts. The doxology of our text is a distinctively Christian doxology which Paul conceives can only be uttered by lips which have learned to say ‘Abba, Father,’ ‘and have received the adoption of sons’ through the eternal Son.

Mark, too, that this glad ascription of glory to God is conceived of as sounded forth for ever and ever, or literally through ‘ages and ages, as long as successive epochs shall unfold.’ It is not as if the revelation of the divine character were in the past, and the light of it continued to touch stony lips to music, but it fills in continuous forthcoming every age, and in every age men receive the fulness of God, and in every age redeemed hearts bring back their tribute of praise and love to Him.

II. The Greetings.

The Apostle's habit of closing all his letters with kindly messages is, of course, more than a habit. It is the natural instinct to which all true hearts have a hundred times yielded. It is remarkable that in this letter there are no individual greetings, but that instead of such there is the emphatic greeting to every saint in Christ Jesus. He will not single out any where all are so near His heart, and He will have no jealousies to be fed by His selection of more favoured persons. It may be too, that the omission of individual messages is partly occasioned by some incipient tendencies to alienation and faction of which we see some traces in His earnest exhortations to stand fast in one spirit, and to be of the same mind, having the same love, and being of one accord, as well as in his exhortation to two Philippian women to be of the same mind in the Lord. The all-embracing word at parting singularly links the end of the letter with its beginning, where we find a remarkable sequence of similar allusions to 'all' the Philippian Christians. He has them all in His heart; they are all partakers with Him of grace; He longs after them all.

The designation by which Paul describes the recipients of his greeting carries in it a summons as well as a promise. They are saints, and they are so as being 'in Christ.' That name is often used as a clumsy sarcasm, but it goes to the very root of Christian character. The central idea contained in it is that of consecration to God, and that which is often taken to be its whole meaning is but a secondary one, a result of that consecration. The true basis of all real purity of conduct lies in devotion of heart and life to God, and for want of discerning the connection of these two elements the world's ethics fail in theory and in practice. A 'saint' is not a faultless monster, and the persistence of failures and inconsistencies, whilst affording only too sad an occasion for penitence and struggle, afford no occasion for a man's shrinking from taking to himself the humble claim to be a saint. Both the elements of consecration to God and of real and progressive, though never complete perfection of personal character, are realised only in Christ; in and only in fellowship with Him whose life was unbroken fellowship with the Father, and whose will was completely accordant with the Father's, do we rise to the height of belonging to God. And only in Him who could challenge a world to convict Him of sin shall we make even a beginning of personal righteousness. If we are in Christ we should be saints to-day however imperfect our holiness, and shall be ‘as the angels of God’ in the day that is coming--nay, rather as the Lord of the Angels, ‘not having spot or blemish or any such thing.’

The New Testament has other names for believers, each of which expresses some great truth in regard to them; for example, the earliest name by which they knew themselves was the simple one of ‘brethren,’ which spoke of their common relation to a Father and pledged them to the sweetness and blessedness of a family. The sarcastic wits of Antioch called them Christians as seeing nothing in them other than what they had many a time seen in the adherents of some founder of a school or a party. They called themselves disciples or believers, revealing by both names their humble attitude and their Lord’s authority, and by the latter disclosing to seeing eyes the central bond which bound them to Him. But the name of Saint declares something more than these in that it speaks of their relation to God, the fulfilment of the Old Testament ideal, and carries in it a prophecy of personal character.

The sharers in Paul’s salutation call for some notice. We do not know who ‘the brethren that are with me’ were. We might have supposed from Paul’s pathetic words that he had no man like-minded with him, that the faithful band whom we find named in the other epistles of the captivity were dispersed. But though there were none ‘like-minded who will care truly for your state,’ there were some recognised as brethren who were closely associated with him, and who, though they had no such warm interest in the Philippians as he had, still had a real affection for them, drawn no doubt from him. Distinct from these was the whole body of the Roman Christians, from the mention of whom we may gather that his imprisonment did not prevent his intercourse with them. Again, distinct from these, though a part of them, were the saints of Cæsar’s household. He had apparently special opportunities for intercourse with them, and probably his imprisonment brought him through the prætorian guards into association with them, as Cæsar’s household included all the servants and retainers of Nero.

May we not see in this union of members of the most alien races a striking illustration of the new bond which the Gospel had woven among men?

There was a Jew standing in the midst between Macedonian Greeks and proud Roman citizens, including members of that usually most heartless and arrogant of all classes, the lackeys of a profligate court, and they are all clasping one another’s hands in true brotherly love. Society was falling to pieces. We know the tragic spectacle that the empire presented then. Amidst universal decay of all that held men together, here was a new uniting principle; everywhere else dissolution was at work; here was again crystallising. A flower was opening its petals though it grew on a dunghill. What was it that drew slaves and patricians, the Pharisee of Tarsus, rude Lycaonians, the ‘barbarous’ people of Melita, the Areopagite of Athens, the citizens of Rome into one loving family? How came Lydia and her slave girl, Onesimus and his master, the prætorian guard and his prisoner, the courtier in Nero’s golden house and the jailer at Philippi into one great fellowship of love? They were all one in Christ Jesus.

And what lessons the saints in Cæsar’s household may teach us! Think of the abyss of lust and murder there, of the Emperor by turns a buffoon, a sensualist, and a murderer. A strange place to find saints in that sty of filth! Let no man say that it is impossible for a pure life to be lived in any circumstances, or try to bribe his conscience by insisting on the difficulties of his environment. It may be our duty to stand at our post however foul may be our surroundings and however uncongenial our company, and if we are sure that He has set us there, we may be sure that He is with us there, and that there we can live the life and witness to His name.

III. The Parting Benediction.

The form of the benediction seems to be more correctly given in the Revised Version, which reads ‘with your spirit’ instead of ‘with you all.’ That form reappears in Galatians and in Philemon. What Paul especially desires of his favourite church is that they may possess ‘the grace.’ Grace is love exercising itself to inferiors, and to those who deserve something sadder and darker. The gifts of that one grace are manifold. They comprise all blessings that man can need or receive. This angel comes with her hands and her lap full of good. Her name is shorthand for all that God can bestow or man can ask or think.

And it needs all the names by which Christ is known among men to describe the encyclopædiacal Person who can bestow the encyclopædiacal gift. Here we have them all gathered, as it were, into one great diadem, set on His head where once the crown of thorns was twined. He is Lord, the name which implies at least absolute authority, and is most probably the New Testament translation of the Old Testament name of Jehovah. He is our Lord as supreme over us, and wonderful as it is, as belonging to us. He holds the keys of the storehouse of grace. The river of the water of life flows where He turns it on. He is Jesus--the personal name which He bore in the days of His flesh, and by which men who knew Him only as one of themselves called Him. It is the token of His brotherhood and the guarantee of the sympathy which will ever bestow 'grace for grace.' He is the Christ, the Messiah, the name which points back to the Old Testament ideas and declares His office, realising all the rapturous anticipations of prophets, and the longings of psalmists, and more than fulfilling them all by giving Himself to men.

That great gift is to be the companion of every spirit which looks to that Jesus in the reality of His humanity, in the greatness of His office, in the loftiness of His divinity, and finds in each of His names an anchor for its faith and an authoritative claim for its obedience.

Such a wish as this benediction is the truest expression of human friendship; it is the highest desire any of us can form for ourselves or for those dearest to us. Do we keep it clear before us in our intercourse with them so that the end of that intercourse will naturally be such a prayer?

Our human love has its limitations. We can but wish for others the grace which Christ can give, but neither our wishes nor His giving can make the grace ours unless for ourselves we take the great gift that is freely given to us of God. It is no accident that all his letters close thus. This benediction is the last word of God's revelation to man, the brightness in the clear west, the last strain of the great oratorio. The last word or last book of Scripture is 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.' Let us take up the solemn Amen in our lips and in our hearts.

Colossians

1) COLOSSIANS 1:1-2
2) COLOSSIANS 1:5
3) COLOSSIANS 1:11
4) COLOSSIANS 1:12
5) COLOSSIANS 1:29
6) COLOSSIANS 2:6-7
7) COLOSSIANS 2:14
8) COLOSSIANS 3:1-2
9) COLOSSIANS 3:3-15
10) COLOSSIANS 4:5

1) Colossians 1:1-2

Colossians

SAINTS, BELIEVERS, BRETHREN

Col. 1:2

‘The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch,’ says the Acts of the Apostles. It was a name given by outsiders, and like most of the instances where a sect, or school, or party is labelled with the name of its founder, it was given in scorn. It hit and yet missed its mark. The early believers were Christians, that is, Christ’s men, but they were not merely a group of followers of a man, like many other groups of whom the Empire at that time was full. So they never used that name themselves. It occurs twice only in Scripture, once when King Agrippa was immensely amused at the audacity of Paul in thinking that he would easily make ‘a Christian’ of him; and once when Peter speaks of ‘suffering as a Christian,’ where he is evidently quoting, as it were, the indictment on which the early believers were tried and punished. What did they call themselves then?

I have chosen this text not for the purpose of speaking about it only, but because it gathers together in brief compass the three principal designations by which the early believers knew themselves. ‘Saints’--that tells their relation to God, as well as their character, for it means ‘consecrated,’ set apart for Him, and therefore pure; ‘faithful’--that means ‘full of faith’ and is substantially equivalent to the usual ‘believers,’ which defines their relation to Jesus Christ as the Revealer of God; ‘brethren’--that defines their relation and sentiment towards their fellows. These terms go a great deal deeper than the nickname which the wits of Antioch invented. The members of the Church were not content with the vague ‘Christian,’ but they called themselves ‘saints,’ ‘believers,’ ‘brethren.’ One designation does not appear here, which we must take into account for completeness: the earliest of all--disciples. Now, I purpose to bring together these four names, by which the early believers thought and spoke of themselves, in order to point the lessons as to our position and our duty, which are wrapped up in them. And I may just say that, perhaps, it is no sign of advance that the Church, as years rolled on, accepted the world’s name for itself, and that people found it easier to call themselves ‘Christians’--which did not mean very much--than to call themselves ‘saints’ or ‘believers.’

Now then, to begin with,

I. They were ‘Disciples’ first of all.

The facts as to the use of that name are very plain, and as instructive as they are plain. It is a standing designation in the Gospels, both in the mouths of friends and of outsiders; it is sometimes, though very sparingly, employed by Jesus Christ Himself. It persists on through the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and then it stops dead, and we never hear it again.

Now its existence at first, and its entire abandonment afterwards, both seem to me to carry very valuable lessons. Let me try to work them out. Of course, ‘disciple’ or ‘scholar’ has for its correlative--as the logicians call it--’teacher.’ And so we find that as the original adherents of Jesus called themselves ‘disciples,’ they addressed Him as ‘Master,’ which is the equivalent of ‘Rabbi.’ That at once suggests the thought that to themselves, and to the people who saw the origination of the little Christian community, the Lord and His handful of followers seemed just to be like John and his disciples, the Pharisees and their disciples, and many another Rabbi and his knot of admiring adherents. Therefore whilst the name was in one view fitting, it was conspicuously inadequate, and as time went on, and the Church became more conscious of the uniqueness of the bond that knit it to

Jesus Christ, it instinctively dropped the name ‘disciple,’ and substituted others more intimate and worthy.

But yet it remains permanently true, that Christ’s followers are Christ’s scholars, and that He is their Rabbi and Teacher. Only the peculiarity, the absolute uniqueness, of His attitude and action as a Teacher lies in two things: one, that His main subject was Himself, as He said, ‘I am the Truth,’ and consequently His characteristic demand from His scholars was not, as with other teachers, ‘Accept this, that, or the other doctrine which I propound,’ but ‘Believe in Me’; and the other, that He seldom if ever argues, or draws conclusions from previous premises, that He never speaks as if He Himself had learnt and fought His way to what He is saying, or betrays uncertainty, limitation, or growth in His opinions, and that for all confirmation of His declarations, He appeals only to the light within and to His own authority: ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you.’ No wonder that the common people were astonished at His teaching, and felt that here was an authority in which the wearisome citations of what Rabbi So-and-So had said, altogether lacked.

That teaching abides still, and, as I believe, opens out into, and is our source of, all that we know--in distinction and contrast from, ‘imagine,’ ‘hope,’ ‘fear’--of God, and of ourselves, and of the future. It casts the clearest light on morals for the individual and on politics for the community. Whatever men may say about Christianity being effete, it will not be effete till the world has learnt and absorbed the teaching of Jesus Christ; and we are a good long way from that yet!

If He is thus the Teacher, the perpetual Teacher, and the only Teacher, of mankind in regard to all these high things about God and man and the relation between them, about life and death and the world, and about the practice and conduct of the individual and of the community, then we, if we are His disciples, build houses on the rock, in the degree in which we not only hear but do the things that He commands. For this Teacher is no theoretical handler of abstract propositions, but the authoritative imposer of the law of life, and all His words have a direct bearing upon conduct. Therefore it is vain for us to say: ‘Lord, Lord, Thou hast taught in our streets and we have accepted Thy teaching.’ He looks down upon us from the Throne, as He looked upon the disciples in that upper room, and He says to each of us: ‘If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.’

But the complete disappearance of the name as the development of the Church advanced, brings with it another lesson, and that is, that precious and great as are the gifts which Jesus Christ bestows as a Teacher, and unique as His act and attitude in that respect are, the name either of teacher or of disciple fails altogether to penetrate to the essence of the relation which knits us together. It is not enough for our needs that we shall be taught. The worst man in the world knows a far nobler morality than the best man practises. And if it were true, as some people superficially say is the case, that evil-doing is the result of ignorance, there would be far less evil-doing in the world than, alas! there is. It is not for the want of knowing, that we go wrong, as our consciences tell us; but it is for want of something that can conquer the evil tendencies within, and lift off the burden of a sinful past which weighs on us. As in the carboniferous strata what was pliant vegetation has become heavy mineral, our evil deeds lie heavy on our souls. What we need is not to be told what we ought to be, but to be enabled to be it. Electricity can light the road, and it can drive the car along it; and that is what we want, a dynamic as well as an illuminant, something that will make us able to do and to be what conscience has told us we ought to be and do.

Teacher? Yes. But if only teacher, then He is nothing more than one of a multitude who in all generations have vainly witnessed to sinful men of the better path. There is no reformation for the individual, and little hope for humanity, in a Christ whom you degrade to the level of a Rabbi, or in a Church which has not pressed nearer to Him than to feel itself His disciples.

There was a man who came to Jesus by night, and was in the dark about the Jesus to whom he came, and he said, ‘We know that Thou art a Teacher come from God.’ But Jesus did not accept the witness, though a young teacher fighting for recognition might have been glad to get it from an authoritative member of the Sanhedrim. But He answered, ‘Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.’ If we need to be born again before we see it, it is not teachers of it that will serve our turn, but One who takes us by the hand, and translates us out of the tyranny of the darkness into the Kingdom of the Son of God's love. So much, then, for the first of these names and lessons.

Now turn to the second--

II. The Disciples must be Believers.

That name begins to appear almost immediately after Pentecost, and continues throughout. It comes in two forms, one which is in my text, 'the faithful,' meaning thereby not the reliable, but the people that are full of faith; the other, meaning the same thing, they who believe, the 'believers.' The Church found that 'disciple' was not enough. It went deeper; and, with a true instinct, laid hold of the unique bond which knits men to their Lord and Saviour. That name indicates that Jesus Christ appears to the man who has faith in a new character. He is not any longer the Teacher who is to be listened to, but He is the Object of trust. And that implies the recognition, first, of His Divinity, which alone is strong enough to bear up the weight of millions of souls leaning hard upon it; and, second, of what He has done and not merely of what He has said. We accept the Teacher's word; we trust the Saviour's Cross. And in the measure in which men learned that the centre of the work of the Rabbi Jesus was the death of the Incarnate Son of God, their docility was sublimed into faith.

That faith is the real bond that knits men to Jesus Christ. We are united to Him, and become recipient of the gifts that He has to bestow, by no sacraments, by no externals, by no reverential admiration of His supreme wisdom and perfect beauty of character, not by assuming the attitude of the disciple, but by flinging our whole selves upon Him, because He is our Saviour. That unites us to Jesus Christ; nothing else does. Faith is the opening of the heart, by which all His power can be poured into us. It is the grasping of His hand, by which, even though the cold waters be above our knees and be rising to our hearts, we are lifted above them and they are made a solid pavement for our feet. Faith is the door opened by ourselves, and through which will come all the Glory that dwelt between the cherubim, and will fill the secret place in our hearts. To be the disciple of a Rabbi is something; to be the 'faithful' dependent on the Saviour is to be His indeed.

And then there is to be remembered, further, that this bond, which is the only vital link between a man and Christ, is therefore the basis of all virtue, of all nobility, of all beauty of conduct, and that ‘whatsoever things are lovely and of good report’ are its natural efflorescence and fruit. And so that leads us to the third point--

III. The believing Disciple is a ‘Saint.’

That name does not appear in the Gospels, but it begins to show in the Acts of the Apostles, and it becomes extremely common throughout the Epistles of Paul. He had no hesitation in calling the very imperfect disciples in Corinth by this great name. He was going to rebuke them for some very great offences, not only against Christian elevation of conduct, but against common pagan morality; but he began by calling them ‘saints.’

What is a saint? First and foremost, a man who has given himself to God, and is consecrated thereby. Whoever has cast himself on Christ, and has taken Christ for his, therein and in the same degree as he is exercising faith, has thus yielded himself to God. If your faith has not led you to such a consecration of will and heart and self, you had better look out and see whether it is faith at all. But then, because faith involves the consecration of a man to God, and consecration necessarily implies purity, since nothing can be laid on God’s altar which is not sanctified thereby, the name of saint comes to imply purity of character. Sanctity is the Christian word which means the very flower and fragrant aroma of what the world calls virtue.

But sanctity is not emotion, A man may luxuriate in devout feeling, and sing and praise and pray, and be very far from being a saint; and there is a great deal of the emotional Christianity of this day which has a strange affinity for the opposite of saintship. Sanctity is not aloofness. ‘There were saints in Cæsar’s household’--a very unlikely place; they were flowers on a dunghill, and perhaps their blossoms were all the brighter because of what they grew on, and which they could transmute from corruption into beauty. So sanctity is no blue ribbon of the Christian profession, to be given to a few select [and mostly ascetic] specimens of consecration, but it is the designation of each of us, if we are disciples who are more than disciples, that is, ‘believers.’ And thus, brethren, we have to see to it that, in our own cases, our faith leads to surrender, and our self-surrender to purity of life and conduct. Faith, if real, brings sanctity; sanctity, if real, is progressive. Sanctity, though imperfect, may be real.

IV. The believing Saints are 'Brethren.'

That is the name that predominates over all others in the latter portions of the New Testament, and it is very natural that it should do so. It reposes upon and implies the three preceding. Its rapid adoption and universal use express touchingly the wonder of the early Church at its own unity. The then world was rent asunder by deep clefts of misunderstanding, alienation, animosity, racial divisions of Jew and Greek, Parthian, Scythian; by sexual divisions which flung men and women, who ought to have been linked hand in hand, and united heart to heart, to opposite sides of a great gulf; by divisions of culture which made wise men look down on the unlearned, and the unlearned hate the wise men; by clefts of social position, and mainly that diabolical one of slave and free. All these divisive and disintegrating forces were in active operation. The only thing except Christianity, which produced even a semblance of union, was the iron ring of the Roman power which compressed them all into one indeed, but crushed the life out of them in the process. Into that disintegrating world, full of mutual repulsion, came One who drew men to Himself and said, 'One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren.' And to their own astonishment, male and female, Greek and Jew, bond and free, philosopher and fool, found themselves sitting at the same table as members of one family; and they looked in each other's eyes and said, 'Brother!' There had never been anything like it in the world. The name is a memorial of the unifying power of the Christian faith.

And it is a reminder to us of our own shortcomings. Of course, in the early days, the little band were driven together, as sheep that stray over a pasture in the sunshine will huddle into a corner in a storm, or when the wolves are threatening. There are many reasons to-day which make less criminal the alienation from one another of Christian communities and Christian individuals. I am not going to dwell on the evident signs in this day, for which God be thanked, that Christian men are beginning, more than they once did, to realise their unity in Jesus Christ, and to be content to think less of the things that separate than of the far greater things that unite. But I would lay upon your hearts, as individual parts of that great whole, this, that whatever may be the differences in culture, outlook, social position, or the like, between two Christian men, they each, the rich man and the poor, the educated man and the unlettered one, the master and the servant, ought to feel that deep down in their true selves they are nearer one another than they are to the men who, differing from them in regard to their faith in Jesus Christ, are like them in all these superficial respects. Regulate your conduct by that thought.

That name, too, speaks to us of the source from which Christian brotherhood has come. We are brethren of each other because we have one Father, even God, and the Fatherhood which makes us brethren is not that which communicates the common life of humanity, but that which imparts the new life of sonship through Jesus Christ. So the name points to the only way by which the world's dream of a universal brotherhood can ever be fulfilled. If there is to be fraternity there must be fatherhood, and the life which, possessed by each, makes a family of all, is the life which He gives, who is 'the first-born among many brethren,' and who, to them who believe on Him, gives power to become the sons of God, and the brethren of all the other sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty.

So, dear friends, take these names, ponder their significance and the duties they impose. Let us make sure that they are true of us. Do not be content with the vague, often unmeaning name of Christian, but fill it with meaning by being a believer on Christ, a saint devoted to God, and a brother of all who, 'by like precious faith,' have become Sons of God.

2) Colossians 1:5

Colossians

THE GOSPEL-HOPE

Col. 1:5.

'God never sends mouths but He sends meat to feed them,' says the old proverb. And yet it seems as if that were scarcely true in regard to that strange faculty called Hope. It may well be a question whether on the whole it has given us more pleasure than pain. How seldom it has been a true prophet! How perpetually its pictures have been too highly coloured! It has cast illusions over the future, colouring the far-off hills with glorious purple which, reached, are barren rocks and cold snow. It has held out prizes never won. It has made us toil and struggle and aspire and fed us on empty husks. Either we have not got what we expected or have found it to be less good than it appeared from afar.

If we think of all the lies that hope has told us, of all the vain expenditure of effort to which it has tempted us, of the little that any of us have of what we began by thinking we should surely attain, hope seems a questionable good, and yet how obstinate it is, living on after all disappointments and drawing the oldest amongst us onwards. Surely somewhere there must be a reason for this great and in some respects awful faculty, a vindication of its existence in an adequate object for its grasp.

The New Testament has much to say about hope. Christianity lays hold of it and professes to supply it with its true nourishment and support. Let us look at the characteristics of Christian hope, or, as our text calls it, the hope of the Gospel, that is, the hope which the Gospel creates and feeds in our souls.

I. What does it hope for?

The weakness of our earthly hopes is that they are fixed on things which are contingent and are inadequate to make us blessed. Even when tinted with the rainbow hues, which it lends them, they are poor and small. How much more so when seen in the plain colourless light of common day. In contrast with these the objects of the Christian hope are certain and sufficient for all blessedness. In the most general terms they may be stated as ‘That blessed hope, even the appearing of the Great God and our Saviour.’ That is the specific Christian hope, precise and definite, a real historical event, filling the future with a certain steadfast light. Much is lost in the daily experience of all believers by the failure to set that great and precise hope in its true place of prominence. It is often discredited by millenarian dreams, but altogether apart from these it has solidity and substance enough to bear the whole weight of a world rested upon it.

That appearance of God brings with it the fulfilment of our highest hopes in the ‘grace that is to be brought to us at His appearing.’ All our blessedness of every kind is to be the result of the manifestation of God in His unobscured glory. The mirrors that are set round the fountain of light flash into hitherto undreamed-of brightness. It is but a variation in terms when we describe the blessedness which is to be the result of God’s appearing as being the Hope of Salvation in its fullest sense, or, in still other words, as being the Hope of Eternal Life. Nothing short of the great word of the Apostle John, that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, exhausts the greatness of the hope which the humblest and weakest Christian is not only allowed but commanded to cherish. And that great future is certainly capable of, and in Scripture receives, a still more detailed specification. We hear, for example, of the hope of Resurrection, and it is most natural that the bodily redemption which Paul calls the adoption of the body should first emerge into distinct consciousness as the principal object of hope in the earliest Christian experience, and that the mighty working whereby Jesus is able to subdue all things unto Himself, should first of all be discerned to operate in changing the body of our humiliation into the body of His glory.

But equally natural was it that no merely corporeal transformation should suffice to meet the deep longings of Christian souls which had learned to entertain the wondrous thought of likeness to God as the certain result of the vision of Him, and so believers ‘wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.’ The moral likeness to God, the perfecting of our nature into His image, will not always be the issue of struggle and restraint, but in its highest form will follow on sight, even as here and now it is to be won by faith, and is more surely attained by waiting than by effort.

The highest form which the object of our hope takes is, the Hope of the Glory of God. This goes furthest; there is nothing beyond this. The eyes that have been wearied by looking at many fading gleams and seen them die away, may look undazzled into the central brightness, and we may be sure that even we shall walk there like the men in the furnace, unconsumed, purging our sight at the fountain of radiance, and being ourselves glorious with the image of God. This is the crown of glory which He has promised to them that love Him. Nothing less than this is what our hope has to entertain, and that not as a possibility, but as a certainty. The language of Christian hope is not perhaps this may be, but verily it shall be. To embrace its transcendent certainties with a tremulous faith broken by much unbelief, is sin.

II. The grounds on which the hope of the Gospel rests.

The grounds of our earthly hopes are for the most part possibilities, or, at the best, probabilities turned by our wishes into certainties. We moor our ships to floating islands which we resolve to think continents. So our earthly hopes vary indefinitely in firmness and substance. They are sometimes but wishes turned confident, and can never rise higher than their source, or be more certain than it is. At the best they are building on sand. At the surest there is an element of risk in them. One singer indeed may take for his theme ‘The pleasures of Hope,’ but another answers by singing of ‘The fallacies of Hope.’ Earth-born hopes carry no anchor and have always a latent dread looking out of their blue eyes.

But it is possible for us to dig down to and build on rock, to have a future as certain as our past, to escape in our anticipations from the region of the Contingent, and this we assuredly do when we take the hope of the Gospel for ours, and listen to Paul proclaiming to us ‘Christ which is our Hope,’ or ‘Christ in you the Hope of glory.’ If our faith grasps Jesus Christ risen from the dead and for us entered into the heavenly state as our forerunner, our hope will see in Him the pattern and the pledge of our manhood, and will begin to experience even here and now the first real though faint accomplishments of itself. The Gospel sets forth the facts concerning Christ which fully warrant and imperatively require our regarding Him as the perfect realised ideal of manhood as God meant it to be, and as bearing in Himself the power to make all men even as He is. He has entered into the fellowship of our humiliation and become bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh that we might become life of His Life and spirit of His Spirit. As certain as it is that ‘we have borne the image of the earthy,’ so certain is it that ‘we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.’

What cruel waste of a divine faculty it is, then, of which we are all guilty when we allow our hopes to be frittered away and dissipated on uncertain and transient goods which they may never secure, and which, even if secured, would be ludicrously or rather tragically insufficient to make us blessed, instead of withdrawing them from all these and fixing them on Him who alone is able to satisfy our hungry souls in all their faculties for ever!

The hope of the Gospel is firm enough to rest our all upon because in it, by ‘two immutable things in which it is impossible that God should lie,’ His counsel and His oath, He has given strong encouragement to them who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before them. Well may the hope for which God’s own eternal character is the guarantee be called ‘sure and steadfast.’ The hope of the Gospel rests at last on the Being and Heart of God. It is that which God ‘who cannot lie hath promised before the world was’ is working towards whilst the world lasts, and will accomplish when the world is no more. He has made known His purpose and has pledged all the energies and tendernesses of His Being to its realisation. Surely on this rock-foundation we may rest secure. The hopes that grow on other soils creep along the surface. The hope of the Gospel strikes its roots deep into the heart of God.

III. What the hope of the Gospel is and does for us.

We cannot do better than to lay hold of some of the New Testament descriptions of it. We recall first that great designation ‘A good hope through grace.’ This hope is no illusion; it does not come from fumes of fancy or the play of imagination. The wish is not father to the thought. We do not make bricks without straw nor spin ropes of sand on the shore of the great waste sea that waits to swallow us up. The cup of Tantalus has had its leaks stopped; the sieve carries the treasure unspilled. The rock can be rolled to the hill-top. All the disappointments, fallacies, and torments of hope pass away. It never makes ashamed. We have a solid certainty as solid as memory. The hope which is through grace is the full assurance of hope, and that full assurance is just what every other hope lacks. In that region and in that region only we can either say I hope or I know.

Another designation is ‘A lively hope.’ It is no poor pale ghost brightening and fading, fading and brightening, through which one can see the stars shine, and of little power in practical life, but strong and vigorous and not the least active amongst the many forces that make up the sum of our lives.

It is most significantly designated as ‘The blessed hope.’ All others quickly pass into sorrows. This alone gives lasting joys, for this alone is blessed whilst it is only anticipation, and still more blessed when its blossoms ripen into full fruition. In all earthly hopes there is an element of unrest, but the hope of the Gospel is so remote, so certain, and so satisfying, that it works stillness, and they who most firmly grasp it ‘do with patience wait for it.’ Earthly hopes have little moral effect and often loosen the sinews of the soul, and are distinctly unfavourable to all strenuous effort. But ‘every man that hath this hope in Jesus purifieth himself even as He is pure,’ and the Apostle, whose keen insight most surely discerns the character-building value of the fundamental facts of Christian experience, was not wrong when he bid us find in the hope of the Gospel deeply rooted within us the driving force of the most strenuous efforts after purity like His whom it is our deepest desire and humble hope to become like.

Let us remember the double account which Scripture gives of the discipline by which the hope of the Gospel is won for our very own. On the one hand, we have ‘joy and peace in believing, that we may abound in hope.’ Our faith breeds hope because it grasps the divine facts concerning Jesus from which hope springs. And faith further breeds hope because it kindles joy and peace, which are the foretastes and earnests of the future blessedness. On the other hand, the very opposite experiences work to the same end, for ‘tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope.’ Sorrow rightly borne tests for us the power of the Gospel and the reality of our faith, and so gives us a firmer grip of hope and of Him on whom in the last result it all depends. Out of this collision of flint and steel the spark springs. The water churned into foam and tortured in the cataract has the fair bow bending above it.

But this discipline will not achieve its result, therefore comes the exhortation to us all, ‘Gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end.’ The hope of the Gospel is the one thing that we need. Without it all else is futile and frail. God alone is worthy to have the whole weight and burden of a creature’s hope fixed on Him, and it is an everlasting truth that they who are ‘without God in the world’ also ‘have no hope.’ Saints of old held fast by an assurance, which they must often have felt left many questions still to be asked, and because they were sure that they were continually with Him, were also sure of His guidance through life and of His afterwards receiving them to glory. But for us the twilight has broadened into day, and we shall be wise if, knowing our defencelessness, and forsaking all the lies and illusions of this vain present, we flee for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before us in the Gospel.

3) Colossians 1:11

Colossians

‘ALL POWER’

Col. 1:11 [R.V.].

There is a wonderful rush and fervour in the prayers of Paul. No parts of his letters are so lofty, so impassioned, so full of his soul, as when he rises from speaking of God to men to speaking to God for men. We have him here setting forth his loving desires for the Colossian Christians in a prayer of remarkable fulness and sweep. Broadly taken, it is for their perfecting in religious and moral excellence, and it is very instructive to note the idea of what a good man is which is put forth here.

The main petition is for wisdom and spiritual understanding applied chiefly, as is to be carefully noted, to the knowledge of God's will . The thought is that what it most imports us to know is the Will of God, a knowledge not of merely speculative points in the mysteries of the divine nature, but of that Will which it concerns us to know because it is our life to do it. The next element in Paul's desires, as set forth in the ideal here, is a worthy walk, a practical life, or course of conduct which is worthy of Jesus Christ, and in every respect pleases Him. The highest purpose of knowledge is a good life. The surest foundation for a good life is a full and clear knowledge of the Will of God.

Then follow a series of clauses which seem to expand the idea of the worthy walk and to be co-ordinate or perhaps slightly causal, and to express the continuous condition of the soul which is walking worthily. Let us endeavour to gather from these words some hints as to what it is God's purpose that we should become.

I. The many-sided strength which may be ours.

The form of the word 'strengthened' here would be more fully represented by 'being strengthened,' and suggests an unintermitted process of bestowal and reception of God's might rendered necessary by our continuous human weakness, and by the tear and wear of life. As in the physical life there must be constant renewal because there is constant waste, and as every bodily action involves destruction of tissue so that living is a continual dying, so is it in the mental and still more in the spiritual life. Just as there must be a perpetual oxygenation of blood in the lungs, so there must be an uninterrupted renewal of spiritual strength for the highest life. It is demanded by the conditions of our human weakness. It is no less rendered necessary by the nature of the divine strength imparted, which is ever communicating itself, and like the ocean cannot but pour so much of its fulness as can be received into every creek and crack on its shore.

The Apostle not merely emphasises the continuousness of this communicated strength, but its many-sided variety, by designating it 'all power.' In this whole context that word 'all' seems to have a charm for him. We read in this prayer of ' all spiritual wisdom,' of 'walking worthily of the Lord unto all pleasing,' of 'fruit in every good work,' and now of ' all power,' and lastly of ' all patience and longsuffering.' These are not instances of being obsessed with a word, but each of them has its own appropriate force, and here the comprehensive completeness of the strength available for our many-sided weakness is marvellously revealed. There is 'infinite riches in a narrow room.' All power means every kind of power, be it bodily or mental, for all variety of circumstances, and, Protean, to take the shape of all exigencies. Most of us are strong only at points, and weak in others. In all human experience there is a vulnerable spot on the heel. The most glorious image, though it has a head of gold, ends in feet, 'part of iron and part of clay.'

And if this ideal of many-sided power stands in contrast with the limitations of human strength, how does it rebuke and condemn the very partial manifestations of a very narrow and one-sided power which we who profess to have received it set forth! We have access to a source which can fill our whole nature, can flower into all gracious forms, can cope with all our exigencies, and make us all-round men, complete in Jesus Christ, and, having this, what do we make of it, what do we show for it? Does not God say to us, 'Ye are not straitened in me, ye are straitened in yourselves; I beseech you be ye enlarged.'

The conditions on our part requisite for possessing 'all might' are plain enough. The earlier portion of the prayer plainly points to them. The knowledge of God's Will and the 'walk worthy of the Lord' are the means whereby the power which is ever eager to make its dwelling in us, can reach its end. If we keep the channel unchoked, no doubt 'the river of the water of life which proceedeth from the throne of God and the Lamb' will rejoice to fill it to the brim with its flashing waters. If we do not wrench away ourselves from contact with Him, He will ‘strengthen us with all might.’ If we keep near Him we may have calm confidence that power will be ours that shall equal our need and outstrip our desires.

II. The measure of the strength.

It is ‘according to the power of His glory.’ The Authorised Version but poorly represents the fulness of the Apostle’s thought, which is more adequately and accurately expressed in the Revised Version. ‘His glory’ is the flashing brightness of the divine self-manifestation, and in that Light resides the strength which is the standard or measure of the gift to us. The tremendous force of the sunbeam which still falls so gently on a sleeper’s face as not to disturb the closed eyes is but a parable of the strength which characterises the divine glory. And wonderful and condemnatory as the thought is, that power is the unlimited limit of the possibilities of our possession. His gifts are proportioned to His resources. While He is rich, can I be poor? The only real limit to His bestowal is His own fulness. Of course, at each moment, our capacity of receiving is for the time being the practical limit of our possession, but that capacity varies indefinitely, and may be, and should be, indefinitely and continuously increasing. It is an elastic boundary, and hence we may go on making our own as much as we will, and progressively more and more, of God’s strength. He gives it all, but there is a tragical difference between the full cup put into our hands and the few drops carried to our lips. The key of the treasure-chamber is in our possession, and on each of us His gracious face smiles the permission which His gracious lips utter in words, ‘Be it unto thee even as thou wilt.’ If we are conscious of defect, if our weakness is beaten by the assaults of temptation, or crushed by sorrows that ride it down in a fierce attack, the fault is our own. We have, if we choose to make it our own and to use it as ours, more than enough to make us ‘more than conquerors’ over all sins and all sorrows.

But when we contrast what we have by God’s gift and what we have in our personal experience and use in our daily life, the contrast may well bring shame, even though the contrast brings to us hope to lighten the shame. The average experience of present-day Christians reminds one of the great tanks that may be seen in India, that have been suffered to go to ruin, and so an elaborate system of irrigation comes to nothing, and the great river that should have been drawn off into them runs past them, all but unused. Repair them and keep the sluices open, and all will blossom again.

III. The great purpose of this strength.

‘Patience and longsuffering with joyfulness’ seems at first but a poor result of such a force, but it comes from a heart that was under no illusions as to the facts of human life, and it finds a response in us all. It may be difficult to discriminate ‘patience’ from ‘longsuffering,’ but the general notion here is that one of the highest uses for which divine strength is given to us, is to make us able to meet the antagonism of evil without its shaking our souls. He who patiently endures without despondency or the desire to ‘recompense evil for evil,’ and to whom by faith even ‘the night is light about him,’ is far on the way to perfection. God is always near us, but never nearer than when our hearts are heavy and our way rough and dark. Our sorrows make rents through which His strength flows. We can see more of heaven when the leaves are off the trees. It is a law of the Divine dealings that His strength is ‘made perfect in weakness.’ God leads us in to a darkened room to show us His wonders.

That strength is to be manifested by us in ‘patience and longsuffering,’ both of which are to have blended with them a real though apparently antagonistic joy. True and profound grief is not opposed to such patience, but the excess of it, the hopeless and hysterical outbursts certainly are. We are all like the figures in some old Greek temples which stand upright with their burdens on their heads. God’s strength is given that we may bear ours calmly, and upright like these fair forms that hold up the heavy architecture as if it were a feather, or like women with water-jars on their heads, which only make their carriage more graceful and their step more firm.

How different the patience which God gives by His own imparted strength, from the sullen submission or hysterical abandonment to sorrow, or the angry rebellion characterising Godless grief! Many of us think that we can get on very well in prosperity and fine weather without Him. We had better ask ourselves what we are going to do when the storm comes, which comes to all some time or other.

The word here rendered ‘patience’ is more properly ‘perseverance.’ It is not merely a passive but an active virtue. We do not receive that great gift of divine strength to bear only, but also to work, and such work is one of the best ways of bearing and one of the best helps to doing so. So in our sorrows and trials let us feel that God’s strength is not all given us to be expended in our own consolation, but also to be used in our plain duties. These remain as imperative though our hearts are beating like hammers, and there is no more unwise and cowardly surrender to trouble than to fling away our tools and fold our hands idly on our laps.

But Paul lays a harder duty on us even in promising a great gift to us, when he puts before us an ideal of joy mingling with patience and longsuffering. The command would be an impossible one if there were not the assurance that we should be ‘strengthened with all might.’ We plainly need an infusion of diviner strength than our own, if that strange marriage of joy and sorrow should take place, and they should at once occupy our hearts. Yet if His strength be ours we shall be strong to submit and acquiesce, strong to look deep enough to see His will as the foundation of all and as ever busy for our good, strong to hope, strong to discern the love at work, strong to trust the Father even when He chastens. And all this will make it possible to have the paradox practically realised in our own experience, ‘As sorrowful yet always rejoicing.’ One has seen potassium burning underwater. Our joy may burn under waves of sorrow. Let us bring our weakness to Jesus Christ and grasp Him as did the sinking Peter. He will breathe His own grace into us, and speak to our feeble and perchance sorrowful hearts, as He had done long before Paul’s words to the Colossians, ‘My grace is sufficient for thee, and my strength is made perfect in weakness.’

4) Colossians 1:12

Colossians

THANKFUL FOR INHERITANCE

Col. 1:12 [R.V.]

It is interesting to notice how much the thought of inheritance seems to have been filling the Apostle’s mind during his writing of Ephesians and Colossians. Its recurrence is one of the points of contact between them. For example, in Ephesians, we read, ‘In whom also were made a heritage’ [i. 11]; ‘An earnest of our inheritance’ [i. 14]; ‘His inheritance in the saints’ [i. 18]; ‘Inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ’ [v. 5]. We notice too that in the address to the Elders of the Church at Ephesus, we read of ‘the inheritance among all them that are sanctified’ [Acts 20-32].

In the text the climax of the Apostle’s prayer is presented as thankfulness, the perpetual recognition of the Divine hand in all that befalls us, the perpetual confidence that all which befalls us is good, and the perpetual gushing out towards Him of love and praise. The highest diligence, the most strenuous fruit-bearing, and the most submissive patience and longsuffering would be incomplete without the consecration of a grateful heart, and the noblest beauty of a Christian character would lack its rarest lustre. This crown of Christian perfectness the Apostle regards as being called into action mainly by the contemplation of that great act and continuous work of God’s Fatherly love by which he makes us fit for our portion of the inheritance which the same love has prepared for us. That inheritance is the great cause for Christian thankfulness; the more immediate cause is His preparation of us for it. So we have three points here to consider; the inheritance; God’s Fatherly preparation of His children for it; the continual temper of thankfulness which these should evoke.

I. The Inheritance.

The frequent recurrence of this idea in the Old Testament supplies Paul with a thought which he uses to set forth the most characteristic blessings of the New. The promised land belonged to Israel, and each member of each tribe had his own little holding in the tribal territory. Christians have in common the higher spiritual blessings which Christ brings, and Himself is, and each individual has his own portion of, the general good.

We must begin by dismissing from our minds the common idea, which a shallow experience tends to find confirmed by the associations ordinarily attached to the word ‘inheritance,’ that it is entered upon by death. No doubt, that great change does effect an unspeakable change in our fitness for, and consequently in our possession of, the gifts which we receive from Christ’s pierced hands, and, as the Apostle has told us, the highest of these possessed on earth is but the ‘earnest of the inheritance’; but we must ever bear in mind that the distinction between a Christian life on earth and one in heaven is by no means so sharply drawn in Scripture as it generally is by us, and that death has by no means so great importance as we faithlessly attribute to it. The life here and hereafter is like a road which passes the frontiers of two kingdoms divided by a bridged river, but runs on in the same direction on both sides of the stream. The flood had to be forded until Jesus bridged it. The elements of the future and the present are the same, as the apostolic metaphor of the ‘earnest of the inheritance’ teaches us. The handful of soil which constitutes the ‘arles’ is part of the broad acres made over by it.

We should be saved from many unworthy conceptions of the future life, if we held more steadfastly to the great truth that God Himself is the portion of the inheritance. The human spirit is too great and too exacting to be satisfied with anything less than Him, and the possession of Him opens out into every blessedness, and includes all the minor joys and privileges that can gladden and enrich the soul. We degrade the future if we think of it only, or even chiefly, as a state in which faculties are enlarged, and sorrows and sins are for ever ended. Neither such negatives as ‘no night there,’ ‘neither sorrow nor crime,’ ‘no more pain,’ nor such metaphors as ‘white robes’ and ‘golden crowns’ and ‘seats on thrones’ are enough. We are ‘heirs of God,’ and only as we possess Him, and know that we are His, and He is ours, are we ‘rich to all intents of bliss.’ That inheritance is here set forth as being ‘in light’ and as belonging to saints. Light is the element and atmosphere of God. He is in light. He is the fountain of all light. He is light; perfect in wisdom, perfect in purity. The sun has its spots, but in Him is no darkness at all. Moons wax and wane, shadows of eclipse fall, stars have their time to set, but ‘He is the Father of lights with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning.’ All that light is focussed in Jesus the Light of the world. That Light fills the earth, but here it shineth in darkness that obstructs its rays. But there must be a place and a time where the manifestation of God corresponds with the reality of God, where His beams pour out and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof, nothing which they do not bless, nothing which does not flash them back rejoicing.

There is a land whereof the Lord God is the Light. In it is the inheritance of the ‘saints,’ and in its light live the nations of the saved, and have God for their companion. All darkness of ignorance, of sorrow, and of sin will fade away as the night flees and ceases to be, before the rising sun.

The phrase ‘to be partakers’ is accurately rendered ‘for the portion,’ and carries a distinct allusion to the partition of the promised land to Israel by which each man had his lot or share in the common inheritance. So the one word inheritance brings with it blessed thoughts of a common possession of a happy society in which no man’s gain is another’s loss, and all envyings, rivalries, and jealousies have ceased to be, and the other word, ‘the portion,’ suggests the individual possession by each of his own vision and experience. Each man’s ‘portion’ is capable of growth; each has as much of God as he can hold. The measure of his desire is the measure of his capacity. There are infinite differences in the ‘portions’ of the saints on earth, and heaven is robbed of one of its chief charms unless we recognise that there are infinite differences among the saints there. For both states the charter by which the portion is held is ‘Be it unto thee even as thou wilt,’ and in both the law holds ‘To him that hath shall be given.’

II. The Fatherly preparation for the Inheritance.

It is obvious from all which we have been saying that without holiness no man shall see the Lord. The inheritance being what it is, the possession, the enjoyment of communion with a Holy God, it is absolutely incapable of being entered upon by any who are unholy. That is true about both the partial possession of the earnest of it here and of its fulness hereafter. In the present life all tolerated sin bars us out from enjoying God, and in the future nothing can enter that defileth nor whatsoever worketh or maketh a lie. There are many people who think that they would like ‘to go to heaven,’ but who would find it difficult to answer such questions as these: Do you like to think of God? Do you find any joy in holy thoughts? What do you feel about prayer? Does the name of Christ make your heart leap? Is righteousness your passion? If you have to answer these questions with a silence which is the saddest negative, what do you think you would do in heaven? I remember that the Greenlanders told the Moravian missionaries who were trying to move them by conventional pictures of its delights, that the heaven which these pious souls had painted would not do for them, for there were no seals there. There are thousands of us who, if we spoke the truth, would say the same thing, with the necessary variations arising from our environment. There is not a spinning-mill in it all. How would some of us like that? There is not a ledger, nor a theatre, no novels, no amusements. Would it not be intolerable ennui to be put down in such an order of things? You would be like the Israelites, loathing 'this light bread' and hungering for the strong-smelling and savoury-tasting leeks and garlic, even if in order to taste them you had to be slaves again.

Heaven would be no heaven to you if you could go there and be thus minded. But you could not. God Himself cannot carry men thither but by fitting them for it. It is not a place so much as a state, and the mighty hand that works on one side of the thick curtain preparing the inheritance in light for the saints, is equally busy on this side making the saints meet for the inheritance.

I do not wish to enter here on grammatical niceties, but I must point out that the form of the word which the Apostle employs to express it points to an act in the past which still runs on.

The Revised Version's rendering, 'made us meet,' is preferable to the Authorised Version's, because of its omission of the 'hath' which relegates the whole process of preparation to the past. And it is of importance to recognise that the difference between these two representations of the divine preparation is not a piece of pedantry, for that preparation has indeed its beginnings in the past of every Christian soul, but is continuous throughout its whole earthly experience. There is the great act of forgiveness and justifying which is cotemporaneous with the earliest and most imperfect faith, and there is the being born again, the implanting of a new life which is the life of Christ Himself, and has no spot nor wrinkle nor any such thing. That new life is infantile, but it is there, the real man, and it will grow and conquer. Take an extreme case and suppose a man who has just received forgiveness for his past and the endowment of a new nature. Though he were to die at that moment he would still in the basis of his being and real self be meet for the inheritance. He who truly trusts in Jesus is passed from death unto life, though the habits of sins which are forgiven still cling to him, and his new life has not yet exercised a controlling power or begun to build up character. So Christians ought not to think that, because they are conscious of much unholiness, they are not ready for the inheritance. The wild brigand through whose glazing eyeballs faith looked out to his fellow-sufferer on the central cross was adjudged meet to be with him in Paradise, and if all his deeds of violence and wild outrages on the laws of God and man did not make him unmeet, who amongst us need write bitter things against himself? The preparation is further effected through all the future earthly life. The only true way to regard everything that befalls us here is to see in it the Fatherly discipline preparing us for a fuller possession of a richer inheritance. Gains and losses, joys and sorrows, and all the endless variety of experiences through which we all have to pass, are an unintelligible mystery unless we apply to them this solution, 'He for our profit that we might be partakers of His holiness.' It is not a blind Fate or a still blinder Chance that hurtles sorrows and changes at us, but a loving Father; and we do not grasp the meaning of our lives unless we feel, even about their darkest moments, that the end of them all is to make us more capable of possessing more of Himself.

III. The thankfulness which these thoughts should evoke.

Thankfulness ought to be a sweet duty. It is a joy to cherish gratitude. Generous hearts do not need to be told to be thankful, and they who are only thankful to order are not thankful at all. In nothing is the ordinary experience of the ordinary Christian more defective, and significant of the deficiencies of their faith, than in the tepidness and interruptedness of their gratitude. The blessings bestowed are continuous and unspeakable. The thanks returned are grudging and scanty. The river that flows from God is 'full of water' and pours out unceasingly, and all that we return is a tiny trickle, often choked and sometimes lost in the sands.

Our thankfulness ought to be constant. The fire on the altar should never be quenched. The odour of the sweet-smelling incense should ever ascend. Why is it that we have so little of this grace which the Apostle in our text regards as the precious stone that binds all Christian graces together, the sparkling crest of the wave of a Christian life? Mainly because we have so little of the habit of regarding all things as God's Fatherly discipline and meditating on that for which they are making us meet. We need a far more habitual contemplation of our inheritance, of our experience as lovingly given by God to fit us for it and of the darkest hours which would otherwise try our faith and silence our praise as necessary parts of that preparation. If this be our habitual attitude of mind, and these be ever present to us, our song will be always of His mercy and our whole lives a thank-offering.

The text is a prophecy describing the inheritance in its perfect form. Earthly life must be ended before it is fully understood. Down in the valleys we praised God, but tears and mysteries sometimes saddened our songs; but now on the summit surveying all behind, and knowing by a blessed eternity of experience to what it has led, even an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away, we shall praise Him with a new song for ever.

Thankfulness is the one element of worship common to earth and heaven, to angels and to us. Whilst they sing, ‘Bless the Lord all ye His hosts,’ redeemed men have still better reason to join in the chorus and answer, ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul.’

5) Colossians 1:29

Colossians

CHRISTIAN ENDEAVOUR

Col. 1:29.

I have chosen this text principally because it brings together the two subjects which are naturally before us to-day. All ‘Western Christendom,’ as it is called, is to-day commemorating the Pentecostal gift. My text speaks about that power that ‘worketh in us mightily.’ True, the Apostle is speaking in reference to the fiery energy and persistent toil which characterised him in proclaiming Christ, that he might present men perfect before Him. But the same energy which he expended on his apostolic office he expended on his individual personality. And he would not have discharged the one unless he had first laboured on the other. And although in a letter contemporary with this one from which my text is taken he speaks of himself as no longer young, but ‘such an one as Paul the aged, and likewise, also a prisoner of Jesus Christ,’ the young spirit was in him, and the continual pressing forward to unattained heights. And that is the spirit, not only of a section of the Church divided from the rest by youth and by special effort, but of the whole Church if it is worth calling a Church, and unless it is thus instinct, it is a mere dead organisation.

So I hope that what few things I have to say may apply to, and be felt to be suitable by all of us, whether we are nominally Christian Endeavourers or not. If we are Christian people, we are such. If we are not endeavouring, shall I venture to say we are not Christians? At any rate, we are very poor ones.

Now here, then, are two plain things, a great universal Christian duty and a sufficient universal Christian endowment. ‘I work striving’; that is the description of every true Christian. ‘I work striving, according to His working, who worketh in me mightily’: there is the great gift which makes the work and the striving possible. Let me briefly deal, then, with these two.

I. The solemn universal Christian obligation.

Now the two words which the Apostle employs here are both of them very emphatic. ‘His words were half battles,’ was said about Luther. It may be as truly said about Paul. And that word ‘work’ which he employs, means, not work with one hand, or with a delicate forefinger, but it means toil up to the verge of weariness. The notion of fatigue is almost, I might say, uppermost in the word as it is used in the New Testament. Some people like to ‘labour’ so as never to turn a hair, or bring a sweat-drop on to their foreheads. That is not Christian Endeavour. Work that does not ‘take it out of you’ is not worth doing. The other word ‘striving’ brings up the picture of the arena with the combatants’ strain of muscle, their set teeth, their quick, short breathing, their deadly struggle. That is Paul’s notion of Endeavour. Now ‘Endeavour,’ like a great many other words, has a baser and a nobler side to it. Some people, when they say, ‘I will endeavour,’ mean that they are going to try in a half-hearted way, with no prospect of succeeding. That is not Christian Endeavour. The meaning of the word--for the expression in my text might just as well be rendered ‘endeavouring’ as ‘striving’--is that of a buoyant confident effort of all the concentrated powers, with the certainty of success. That is the endeavour that we have to cultivate as Christian men. And there is only one field of human effort in which that absolute confidence that it shall not be in vain is anything but presumptuous arrogance; namely, in the effort after making ourselves what God means us to be, what Jesus Christ longs for us to be, what the Spirit of God is given to us in order that we should be. 'We shall not fail,' ought to be the word of every man and woman when they set themselves to the great task of working out, in their own characters and personalities, the Divine intention which is made a Divine possibility by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Divine Spirit.

So then what we come to is just this, dear brethren, if we are Christians at all, we have to make a business of our religion; to go about it as if we meant work. Ah! what a contrast there is between the languid way in which Christian men pursue what the Bible designates their 'calling' and that in which men with far paltrier aims pursue theirs! And what a still sadder contrast there is between the way in which we Christians go about our daily business, and the way in which we go about our Christian life! Why, a man will take more pains to learn some ornamental art, or some game, than he will ever take to make himself a better Christian. The one is work. What is the other? To a very large extent dawdling and make-believe.

You remember the old story,--it may raise a smile, but there should be a deep thought below the smile,--of the little child that said as to his father that 'he was a Christian, but he had not been working much at it lately.' Do not laugh. It is a great deal too true of--I will not venture to say what percentage of--the professing Christians of this day. Work at your religion. That is the great lesson of my text. Endeavour with confidence of success. The Book of Proverbs says: 'He that is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great waster,' and that is true. A man that does 'the work of the Lord negligently' is scarcely to be credited with doing it at all. Dear friends, young or old, if you name the name of Christ, be in earnest, and make earnest work of your Christian character.

And now may I venture two or three very plain exhortations? First, I would say--if you mean to make your Christian life a piece of genuine work and striving, the first thing that you have to do is to endeavour in the direction of keeping its aim very clear before you. There are many ways in which we may state the goal of the Christian life, but let us put it now into the all-comprehensive form of likeness to Jesus Christ, by entire conformity to His Example and full interpretation of His life. I do not say 'Heaven'; I say 'Christ.'

That is our aim, the loftiest idea of development that any human spirit can grasp, and rising high above a great many others which are noble but incomplete. The Christian ideal is the greatest in the universe. There is no other system of thought that paints man as he is, so darkly; there is none that paints man as he is meant to be, in such radiant colours. The blacks upon the palette of Christianity are blacker, and the whites are whiter, and the golden is more radiant, than any other painter has ever mixed. And so just because the aim which lies before the least and lowest of us, possessing the most imperfect and rudimentary Christianity, is so transcendent and lofty, it is hard to keep it clear before our eyes, especially when all the shabby little necessities of daily life come in to clutter up the foreground, and hide the great distance. Men may live up at Darjeeling there on the heights for weeks, and never see the Himalayas towering opposite. The lower hills are clear; the peaks are wreathed in cloud. So the little aims, the nearer purposes, stand out distinct and obtrusive, and force themselves, as it were, upon our eyeballs, and the solemn white Throne of the Eternal away across the marshy levels, is often hid, and it needs an effort for us to keep it clear before us. One of the main reasons for much that is unsatisfactory in the spiritual condition of the average Christian of this day is precisely that he has not burning ever before him there, the great aim to which he ought to be tending. So he gets loose and diffused, and vague and uncertain. That is what Paul tells you when he proposes himself as an example: 'So run I, not as uncertainly,' The man who knows where he is running makes a bee-line for the goal. If he is not sure of his destination, of course he zigzags. 'So fight I, not as one that beateth the air'--if I see my antagonist I can hit him. If I do not see him clearly I strike like a swordsman in the dark, at random, and my sword comes back unstained. If you want to make the harbour, keep the harbour lights always clear before you, or you will go yawing about, and washing here and there, in the trough of the wave, and the tempest will be your master. If you do not know where you are going you will have to say, like the men in the old story in the Old Book, 'Thy servant went no whither.' If you are going to endeavour, endeavour first to keep the goal clear before you.

And endeavour next to keep up communion with Jesus Christ, which is the secret of all peaceful and of all noble living. And endeavour next after concentration. And what does that mean? It means that you have to detach yourself from hindrances. It means that you have to prosecute the Christian aim all through the common things of Christian life. If it were not possible to be pursuing the great aim of likeness to Jesus Christ, in the veriest secularities of the most insignificant and trivial occupations, then it would be no use talking about that being our aim. If we are not making ourselves more like Jesus Christ by the way in which we handle our books, or our pen, or our loom, or our scalpel, or our kitchen utensils, then there is little chance of our ever making ourselves like Jesus Christ. For it is these trifles that make life, and to concentrate ourselves on the pursuit of the Christian aim is, in other words, to carry that Christian aim into every triviality of our daily lives.

There are three Scripture passages which set forth various aspects of the aim that we have before us, and from each of these aspects deduce the one same lesson. The Apostle says 'giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue,' etc., 'for if ye do these things ye shall never fail.' He also exhorts: 'Give diligence to make your calling and election sure.' And finally he says: 'Be diligent, that ye may be found of Him in peace, without spot, blameless.' There are three aspects of the Christian course, and the Christian aim, the addition to our faith of all the clustering graces and virtues and powers that can be hung upon it, like jewels on the neck of a queen; the making our calling and election sure, and the being found at last tranquil, spotless, stainless, and being found so by Him. These great aims are incumbent on all Christians, they require diligence, and ennoble the diligence which they require.

So, brethren, we have all to be Endeavourers if we are Christians, and that to the very end of our lives. For our path is the only path on which men tread that has for its goal an object so far off that it never can be attained, so near that it can ever be approached. This infinite goal of the Christian Endeavour means inspiration for youth, and freshness for old age, and that man is happy who can say: ‘Not as though I had already attained’ at the end of a long life, and can say it, not because he has failed, but because in a measure he has succeeded. Other courses of life are like the voyages of the old mariners which were confined within the narrow limits of the Mediterranean, and steered from headland to headland. But the Christian passes through the jaws of the straits, and comes out on a boundless sunlit ocean where, though he sees no land ahead, he knows there is a peaceful shore, beyond the western waves. ‘I work striving.’

Now one word as to the other thought that is here, and that is

II. The all-sufficient Christian gift.

‘According to His working, which worketh in me mightily.’ I need not discuss whether ‘His’ in my text refers to God or to Christ. The thing meant is the operation upon the Christian spirit, of that Divine Spirit whose descent the Church to-day commemorates. At this stage of my sermon I can only remind you in a word, first of all, that the Apostle here is arrogating to himself no special or peculiar gift, is not egotistically setting forth something which he possessed and other Christian people did not--that power which, ‘working in him mightily,’ worked in all his brethren as well. It was his conviction and his teaching--would that it were more operatively and vitally the conviction of all professing Christians to-day, and would that it were more conspicuously, and in due proportion to the rest of Christian truth, the teaching of all Christian teachers to-day!--that that Divine power is in the very act of faith received and implanted in every believing soul. ‘Know ye not,’ the Apostle could say to his hearers, ‘that ye have the Spirit of God, except ye be reprobates.’ I doubt whether the affirmative response would spring to the lips of all professing or real Christians to-day as swiftly as it would have done then. And I cannot help feeling, and feeling with increasing gravity of pressure as the days go on, that the thing that our churches, and we as individuals, perhaps need most to-day, is the replacing of that great truth--I do not call it a ‘doctrine,’ that is cold, it is experience--in its proper place. They who believe on Him do receive a new life, a supernatural communication of the new Spirit, to be the very power that rules in their lives.

It is an inward gift. It is not like the help that men can render us, given from without and apprehended and incorporated with ourselves through the medium of the understanding or of the heart. There is an old story in the history of Israel about a young king that was bid by the prophet to bend his bow against the enemies of Israel, as a symbol; and the old prophet put his withered, skinny brown hand on the young man's fleshy one, and then said to him, 'Shoot.' But this Divine Spirit comes to strengthen us in a more intimate and blessed fashion than that, for it glides into our hearts and dwells in our spirits, and our work, as my text says, is His working. This 'working within' is stated in the original of my text most emphatically, for it is literally 'the inworking which inworketh in me mightily.'

So, dear brethren, the first direct aim of all our endeavour ought to be to receive and to keep and to increase our gift of that Divine Spirit. The work and the striving of which my text speaks would be sheer slavery unless we had that help. It would be impossible of accomplishment unless we had it.

> '*If any power we have, it is to ill, And all the power is Thine, to do and eke to will.*'

Let us, then, begin our endeavour, not by working, but by receiving. Is not that the very meaning of the doctrine that we are always talking about, that men are saved, not by works but by faith? Does not that mean that the first step is reception, and the first requisite is receptiveness, and that then, and after that, second and not first, come working and striving? To keep our hearts open by desire, to keep them open by purity, are the essentials. The dove will not come into a fouled nest. It is said that they forsake polluted places. But also we have to use the power which is inwrought. Use is the way to increase all gifts, from the muscle in your arm to the Christian life in your spirit. Use it, and it grows. Neglect it, and it vanishes, and like the old Jewish heroes, a man may go forth to exercise himself as of old time, and know not that the Spirit of God hath departed from him. Dear friends, do not bind yourselves to the slavery of Endeavour, until you come into the liberty and wealth of receiving. He gives first, and then says to you, 'Now go to work, and keep that good thing which is committed unto thee.'

There is but one thought more in this last part of my text, which I must not leave untouched, and that is that this sufficient and universal gift is not only the means by which the great universal duty can be discharged, but it ought to be the measure in which it is discharged. ‘I work according to the working in me.’ That is, all the force that came into Paul by that Divine Spirit, came out of Paul in his Christian conduct, and the gift was not only the source, but also the measure, of this man’s Christian Endeavour. Is that true about us? They say that the steam-engine is a most wasteful application of power, that a great deal of the energy which is generated goes without ever doing any work. They tell us that one of the great difficulties in the way of economic application of electricity is the loss which comes through using accumulators. Is not that like a great many of us? So much power poured into us; so little coming out from us and translated into actual work! Such a ‘rushing mighty wind,’ and the air about us so heavy and stagnant and corrupt! Such a blaze of fire, and we so cold! Such a cataract of the river of the water of life, and our lips parched and our crops seared and worthless! Ah, brethren! when we look at ourselves, and when we think of the condition of so many of the churches to which we belong, the old rebuke of the prophet comes back to us in this generation, ‘Thou that art named the House of Israel, is the Spirit of the Lord straitened? Are these His doings?’ We have an all-sufficient power. May our working and striving be according to it, and may we work mightily, being ‘strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might!’

6) Colossians 2:6-7

Colossians

CHRISTIAN PROGRESS

Col. 2:6-7 [R.V.].

It is characteristic of Paul that he should here use three figures incongruous with each other to express the same idea, the figures of walking, being rooted, and built up. They, however, have in common that they all suggest an initial act by which we are brought into connection with Christ, and a subsequent process flowing from and following on it. Receiving Christ, being rooted in Him, being founded on Him, stand for the first; walking in Him, growing up from the root in Him, being built up on Him as foundation, stand for the second. Fully expressed then, the text would run, ‘As ye have received Christ, so walk in Him; as ye have been rooted in Him, so grow up in Him; as ye have been founded on Him, so be builded up.’ These three clauses present the one idea in slightly different forms. The first expresses Christian progress as the manifestation before the world of an inward possession, the exhibition in the outward life of a treasure hid in the heart. The second expresses the same progress as the development by its own vital energy of the life of Christ in the soul. The third expresses the progress as the addition, by conscious efforts, of portion after portion to the character, which is manifestly incomplete until the headstone crowns the structure. We may then take the passage before us as exhibiting the principles of Christian progress.

I. The origin of all, or how Christian progress begins.

These three figures, receiving, rooted, founded, all express a great deal more than merely accepting certain truths about Him. The acceptance of truths is the means by which we come to what is more than any belief of truths. We possess Christ when we believe with a true faith in Him. We are rooted in Him. His life flows into us. We draw nourishment from that soil. We are built on Him, and in our compact union find a real support to a life which is otherwise baseless and blown about like thistledown by every breath. The union which all these metaphors presupposes is a vital connection; the possession which is the first step in the Christian life is a real possession.

There is no progress without that initial step. Our own experience tells us but too plainly and loudly that we need the impartation of a new life, and to be set on a new foundation, if we are ever to be anything else than failures and blots.

There is sure to be progress if the initial step has been taken. If Christ has been received, the life possessed will certainly manifest itself. It will go on to perfection. The union effected will work on through the whole character and nature. It is the beginning of all; it is only the beginning.

II. The manner of Christian progress or in what it consists.

It consists in a more complete possession of Him, in a more constant approximation to Him, and a more entire appropriation of Him. Christian progress is not a growing up from Christ as starting-point, but into Christ as goal. All is contained in the first act by which He is first received; the remainder is but the working out of that. All our growth in knowledge and wisdom consists in our knowing what we have when we receive Christ. We grow in proportion as we learn to see in Him the centre of all truth, as the Revealer of God, as the Teacher of man, as the Interpreter of nature, as the meaning and end of history, as the Lord of life and death. Morals, politics, and philosophy flow from Him. His lips and His life and death proclaim all truth, human and divine.

As in wisdom so in character, all progress consists in coming closer to Jesus and receiving more and more of His many-sided grace. He is the pattern of all excellence, the living ideal of whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, virtue incarnate, praise embodied. He is the power by which we become gradually and growingly moulded into His likeness. Every part of our nature finds its best stimulus in Jesus for individuals and for societies. Christ and growth into Him is progress, and the only way by which men can be presented perfect, is that they shall be presented ‘perfect in Christ,’ whereunto every man must labour who would that his labour should not be in vain. That progress must follow the threefold direction in the text. There must first be the progressive manifestation in act and life of the Christ already possessed, ‘As ye received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.’ There must also be the completer growth in the soul of the new life already received. As the leaf grows green and broad, so a Christlike character must grow not altogether by effort. And there must be a continual being builded up in Him by constant additions to the fabric of graces set on that foundation.

III. The means, or how it is accomplished.

The first words of our text tell us that ‘Ye have received Christ Jesus as Lord,’ and all depends on keeping the channels of communication open so that the reception may be continuous and progressive. We must live near and ever nearer to the Lord, and seek that our communion with Him may be strengthened. On the other hand, it is not only by the spontaneous development of the implanted life, but by conscious and continuous efforts which sometimes involve vigorous repression of the old self that progress is realised. The two metaphors of our text have to be united in our experience. Neither the effortless growth of the tree nor the toilsome work of the builder suffice to represent the whole truth. The two sides of deep and still communion, and of strenuous effort based on that communion, must be found in the experience of every Christian who has received Christ, and is advancing through the imperfect manifestations of earth to the perfect union with, and perfect assimilation to, the Lord.

To all men who are ready to despair of themselves, here is the way to realise the grandest hopes. Nothing is too great to be attained by one who, having received Christ Jesus as Lord, walks in Him, rooted and builded up in Him, ‘a holy temple to the Lord.’

7) Colossians 2:14

Jeremiah

SIN’S WRITING AND ITS ERASURE

Jer. 17:1. - 2Co. 3:3. - Col. 2:14.

I have put these verses together because they all deal with substantially the same metaphor. The first is part of a prophet’s solemn appeal. It describes the sin of the nation as indelible. It is written in two places. First, on their hearts, which reminds us of the promise of the new covenant to be written on the heart. The ‘red-leaved tablets of the heart’ are like waxen tables on which an iron stylus makes a deep mark, an ineradicable scar. So Judah’s sin is, as it were, eaten into their heart, or, if we might so say, tattooed on it. It is also written on the stone horns of the altar, with a diamond which can cut the rock [an illustration of ancient knowledge of the properties of the diamond]. That sounds a strange place for the record of sin to appear, but the image has profound meaning, as we shall see presently.

Then the two New Testament passages deal with other applications of the same metaphor. Christ is, in the first, represented as writing on the hearts of the Corinthians, and in the second, as taking away ‘the handwriting contrary to us.' The general thought drawn from all is that sin's writing on men's hearts is erased by Christ and a new inscription substituted.

I. The handwriting of sin.

Sin committed is indelibly written on the heart of the doer.

'The heart,' of course, in Hebrew means more than merely the supposed seat of the affections. It is figuratively the centre of the spiritual life, just as physically it is the centre of the natural. Thoughts and affections, purposes and desires are all included, and out of it are 'the issues of life,' the whole outgoings of the being. It is the fountain and source of all the activity of the man, the central unity from which all comes. Taken in this wide sense it is really the whole inner self that is meant, or, as is said in one place, 'the hidden man of the heart.' And so the thought in this vigorous metaphor may be otherwise put, that all sin makes indelible marks on the whole inward nature of the man who does it.

Now to begin with, think for a moment of that truth that everything which we do reacts on us the doers.

We seldom think of this. Deeds are done, and we fancy that when done, they are done *with*. They pass, as far as outward seeming goes, and their distinguishable consequences in the outward world, in the vast majority of cases, soon apparently pass. All seems evanescent and irrecoverable as last year's snows, or the water that flowed over the cataract a century ago. But there is nothing more certain than that all which we do leaves indelible traces on ourselves. The mightiest effect of a man's actions is on his own inward life. The recoil of the gun is more powerful than the blow from its shot. Our actions strike inwards and there produce their most important effects. The river runs ceaselessly and its waters pass away, but they bring down soil, which is deposited and makes firm land, or perhaps they carry down grains of gold.

This is the true solemnity of life, that in all which we do we are carrying on a double process, influencing others indeed, but influencing ourselves far more.

Consider the illustrations of this law in regard to our sins.

Now the last thing people think of when they hear sermons about ‘sin’ is that what is meant is the things that they are doing every day. I can only ask you to try to remember, while I speak, that I mean those little acts of temper, or triflings with truth, or yieldings to passion or anger, or indulgence in sensuality, and above all, the living without God, to which we are all prone.

> [a] All wrong-doing makes indelible marks on character. It makes its own repetition easier. Habit strengthens inclination. Peter found denying his Lord three times easier than doing it once. It weakens resistance. In going downhill the first step is the only one that needs an effort; gravity will do the rest.

It drags after it a tendency to other evil. All wrong things have so much in common that they lead on to one another. A man with only one vice is a rare phenomenon. Satan sends his apostles forth two by two. Sins hunt in couples, or more usually in packs, like wolves, only now and then do they prey alone like lions. Small thieves open windows for greater ones. It requires continually increasing draughts, like indulgence in stimulants. The palate demands cayenne tomorrow, if it has had black pepper to-day.

So, whatever else we do by our acts, we are making our own characters, either steadily depraving or steadily improving them. There will come a slight slow change, almost unnoticed but most certain, as a dim film will creep over the peach, robbing it of all its bloom, or some microscopic growth will steal across a clearly cut inscription, or a breath of mist will dim a polished steel mirror.

> [b] All wrong-doing writes indelible records on the memory, that awful and mysterious power of recalling past things out of the oblivion in which they seem to lie. How solemn and miserable it is to defile it with the pictures of things evil! Many a man in his later years has tried to ‘turn over a new leaf,’ and has never been able to get the filth out of his memory, for it has been printed on the old page in such strong colours that it shines through. I beseech you all, and especially you young people, to keep yourselves ‘innocent of much transgression,’

> and 'simple concerning evil'-to make your memories like an illuminated missal with fair saints and calm angels bordering the holy words, and not an *Illustrated* Police News. Probably there is no real oblivion. Each act sinks in as if forgotten, gets overlaid with a multitude of others, but it is there, and memory will one day bring it to us.

And all sin pollutes the imagination. It is a miserable thing to have one's mind full of ugly foul forms painted on the inner walls of our chamber of imagery, like the hideous figures in some heathen temple, where gods of lust and murder look out from every inch of space on the walls.

> [c] All wrong-doing writes indelible records on the conscience. It does so partly by sophisticating it-the sensibility to right and wrong being weakened by every evil act, as a cold in the head takes away the sense of smell. It brings on colour-blindness to some extent. One does not know how far one may go towards 'Evil! be thou my good'-or how far towards incapacity of distinguishing evil. But at all events the tendency of each sin is in that direction. So conscience may become seared, though perhaps never so completely as that there are no intervals when it speaks. It may long lie dormant, as Vesuvius did, till great trees grow on the floor of the crater, but all the while the communication with the central fires is open, and one day they will burst out.

The writing may be with invisible ink, but it will be legible one day. So, then, all this solemn writing on the heart is done by ourselves. What are you writing? There is a presumption in it of a future retribution, when you will have to read your autobiography, with clearer light and power of judging yourselves. At any rate there is retribution now, which is described by many metaphors, such as sowing and reaping, drinking as we have brewed, and others-but this one of indelible writing is not the least striking.

Sin is graven deep on sinful men's worship.

The metaphor here is striking and not altogether clear. The question rises whether the altars are idolatrous altars, or Jehovah's. If the former, the expression may mean simply that the Jews' idolatry, which was their sin, was conspicuously displayed in these altars, and had, as it were, its most flagrant record in their sacrifices. The altar was the centre point of all heathen and Old Testament worship, and altars built by sinners were the most conspicuous evidences of their sins.

So the meaning would be that men’s sin shapes and culminates in their religion; and that is very true, and explains many of the profanations and abominations of heathenism, and much of the formal worship of so-called Christianity.

For instance, a popular religion which is a mere Deism, a kind of vague belief in a providence, and in a future state where everybody is happy, is but the product of men’s sin, striking out of Christianity all which their sin makes unwelcome in it. The justice of God, punishment, sinfulness of sin, high moral tone, are all gone. And the very horns of their altars are marked with the signs of the worshippers’ sin.

But the ‘altars’ may be God’s altars, and then another idea will come in. The horns of the altar were the places where the blood of the sacrifice was smeared, as token of its offering to God. They were then a part of the ritual of propitiation. They had, no doubt, the same meaning in the heathen ritual. And so regarded, the metaphor means that a sense of the reality of sin shapes sacrificial religion.

There can be no doubt that a very real conviction of sin lies at the foundation of much, if not all, of the system of sacrifices. And it is a question well worth considering whether a conviction so widespread is not valid, and whether we should not see in it the expression of a true human need which no mere culture, or the like, will supply.

At all events, altars stand as witnesses to the consciousness of sin. And the same thought may be applied to much of the popular religion of this day. It may be ineffectual and shallow but it bears witness to a consciousness of evil. So its existence may be used in order to urge profounder realisation of evil on men. You come to worship, you join in confessions, you say ‘miserable sinners’-do you mean anything by it? If all that be true, should it not produce a deeper impression on you?

But another way of regarding the metaphor is this. The horns of the altar were to be touched with the blood of propitiation. But look! the blood flows down, and after it has trickled away, there, deep carven on the horns, still appears the sin, *i.e.* the sin is not expiated by the sinner's sacrifice. Jeremiah is then echoing Isaiah's word, 'Bring no more vain oblations.' The picture gives very strikingly the hopelessness, so far as men are concerned, of any attempt to blot out this record. It is like the rock-cut cartouches of Egypt on which time seems to have no effect. There they abide deep for ever. Nothing that we can do can efface them. 'What I have written, I have written.' Pen-knives and detergents that we can use are all in vain.

II. Sin's writing may be erased, and another put in its place.

The work of Christ, made ours by faith, blots it out.

> [a] Its influence on conscience and the sense of guilt. The accusations of conscience are silenced. A red line is drawn across the indictment, or, as Colossians has it, it is 'nailed to the cross.' There is power in His death to set us free from the debt we owe.
>
> [b] Its influence on memory. Christ does not bring oblivion, but yet takes away the remorse of remembrance. Faith in Christ makes memory no longer a record which we blush to turn over, or upon which we gloat with imaginative delight in guilty pleasures past, but a record of our shortcomings that humbles us with a penitence which is not pain, but serves as a beacon and warning for the time to come. He who has a clear beam of memory on his backward track, and a bright light of hope on his forward one, will steer right.
>
> [c] Its influence on character.

We attain new hopes and tastes. 'We become epistles of Christ known and read of all men,' like palimpsests, Homer or Ovid written over with the New Testament gospels or epistles.

Christ's work is twofold, erasure and rewriting. For the one, 'I will blot out as a cloud their transgressions.' None but He can remove these. For the other, 'I will put My law into their minds and will write it on their hearts.'

He can impress all holy desires on, and can put His great love and His mighty spirit into, our hearts.

So give your hearts to Him. They are all scrawled over with hideous and wicked writing that has sunk deep into their substance. Graven as if on rock are your sins in your character. Your worship and sacrifices will not remove them, but Jesus Christ can. He died that you might be forgiven, He lives that you may be purified. Trust yourself to Him, and lean all your sinfulness on His atonement and sanctifying power, and the foul words and bad thoughts that have been scored so deep into your nature will be erased, and His own hand will trace on the page, poor and thin though it be, which has been whitened by His blood, the fair letters and shapes of His own likeness. Do not let your hearts be the devil's copybooks for all evil things to scrawl their names there, as boys do on the walls, but spread them before Him, and ask Him to make them clean and write upon them His new name, indicating that you now belong to another, as a new owner writes his name on a book that he has bought.

8) Colossians 3:1-2

Colossians

RISEN WITH CHRIST

Col. 3:1-2.

There are three aspects in which the New Testament treats the Resurrection, and these three seem to have successively come into the consciousness of the Church. First, as is natural, it was considered mainly in its bearing on the person and work of our Lord. We may point for illustration to the way in which the Resurrection is treated in the earliest of the apostolic discourses, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Then it came, with further reflection and experience, to be discerned that it had a bearing on the hope of the immortality of man. And last of all, as the Christian life deepened, it came to be discerned that the Resurrection was the pattern of the life of the Christian disciples. It was regarded first as a witness, then as a prophecy, then as a symbol. Three fragments of Scripture express these three phases:

for the first, ‘Declared to be the Son of God with power by the Resurrection from the dead’; for the second, ‘Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept’; for the third, ‘God hath raised us up together with Him, and made us sit together in the heavenly places.’ I have considered incidentally the two former aspects in the course of previous sermons; I wish to turn at present to that final third one.

One more observation I must make by way of introduction, and that is, that the way in which the Apostle here glides from ‘being risen with Christ’ to where ‘Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God,’ confirms what I have pointed out in former discourses, that the Ascension of Jesus Christ is always considered in Scripture as being nothing more than the necessary outcome and issue of the process which began in the Resurrection. They are not separate facts, but they are two ends of one process. And so with these thoughts, that Resurrection develops into Ascension, and that in both Jesus Christ is the pattern for His followers, let us turn to the words before us.

Then we have here

I. The Christian life considered as a risen life.

Now, we are all familiar with the great evangelical point of view from which the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ are usually contemplated. To many of us Christ’s sacrifice is nothing more or less than the means by which the world is reconciled to God, and Christ’s Resurrection nothing more than the seal which was set by Divinity upon that work. ‘Crucified for our offences, and raised again for our justification,’ as Paul has it--that is the point of view from which most evangelical or orthodox Christian people are contented to regard the solemn fact of the Death and the radiant fact of the Resurrection. You cannot be too emphatic about these truths, but you may be too exclusive in your contemplation of them. You do well when you say that they are the Gospel; you do not well when you say, as some of you do, that they are the whole Gospel. For there is another stream of teaching in the New Testament, of which my text is an example, and a multitude of other passages that I cannot refer to now are equally conspicuous instances, in which that death and that Resurrection are regarded, not so much in respect to the power which they exercise in the reconciliation of the world to God, as in their aspect as the type of all noble and true Christian life. You remember how, when our Lord Himself touched upon the fruitful issues of His death, and said: ‘Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit,’ He at once went on to say that a man that loved his life would lose it; and that a man that lost his life would find it, and proceeded to point, even then, and in that connection, to His Cross as our pattern, declaring: ‘If any man serve Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall also My servant be.’

> ‘*Made like Him, like Him we rise; Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.*’

So, then, a risen life is the type of all noble life, and before there can be a risen life there must have been a death. True, we may say that the spiritual facts in a man’s experience, which are represented by these two great symbols of a death and a rising, are but like the segment of a circle which, seen from the one side is convex and from the other is concave. But however loosely we may feel that the metaphors represent the facts, this is plain, that unless a man dies to flesh, to self-will, to the world, he never will live a life that is worth calling life. The condition of all nobleness and all growth upwards is that we shall die daily, and live a life that has sprung victorious from the death of self. All lofty ethics teach that; and Christianity teaches it, with redoubled emphasis, because it says to us, that the Cross and the Resurrection are not merely imaginative emblems of the noble and the Christian life, but are a great deal more than that. For, brethren, do not forget--if you do, you will be hopelessly at sea as to large tracts of blessed Christian truth--that by faith in Jesus Christ we are brought into such a true deep union with Him as that, in no mere metaphorical or analogous sense, but in most blessed reality, there comes into the believing heart a spark of the life that is Christ’s own, so that with Him we do live, and from Him we do live a life cognate with His, who, having risen from the dead, dieth no more, and over whom death hath no dominion. So it is not a metaphor only, but a spiritual truth, when we speak of being risen with Christ, seeing that our faith, in the measure of its genuineness, its depth and its operative power upon our characters, will be the gate through which there shall pass into our deadness the life that truly is, the life that has nought to do with death or sin. And this unity with Jesus, brought about by faith, brings about that the depths of the Christian life are hid with Christ in God, and that we, risen with Him, do even now sit ‘at the right hand in heavenly places,’ whilst our feet, dusty and sometimes blood-stained, are journeying along the paths of life. This is the great teaching of my text, and of a multitude of other places; and this is the teaching which modern Christianity, in its exclusive, or all but exclusive, contemplation of the Cross as the sacrifice for sin, has far too much forgotten. ‘Ye are risen with Christ.’

Let me remind you that this veritable death and rising again, which marks the Christian life, is set forth before us in the initial rite of the Christian Church. Some of you do not agree with me in my view, either of what is the mode or of who are the subjects of that ordinance, but if you know anything about the question, you know that everybody that has a right to give a judgment agrees with us Baptists in saying--although they may not think that it carries anything obligatory upon the practice of to-day--that the primitive Church baptized by immersion. Now, the meaning of baptism is to symbolise these two inseparable moments, dying to sin, to self, to the world, to the old past, and rising again to newness of life. Our sacramentarian friends say that, in my text, it was in baptism that these Colossian Christians rose again with Christ. I, for my part, do not believe that, but that baptism was the speaking sign of what lies at the gate of a true Christian life I have no manner of doubt.

So the first thought of our text is not only taught us in words, but it stands manifest in the ritual of the Church as it was from the beginning. We die, and we rise again, through faith and by union through faith, with Christ ‘that died, yea, rather that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God.’

Let me turn, secondly, to

II. The consequent aims of the Christian life.

‘If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above.’ ‘To seek’ implies the direction of the external life toward certain objects. It is not to seek as if perhaps we might not find; it is not even to seek in the sense of searching for, but it is to seek in the sense of aiming at. And now do you not think that if we had burning in our hearts, and conscious to our experiences, the sense of union with Jesus Christ the risen Saviour, that would shape the direction and dictate the aims of our earthly life? As surely as the elevation of the rocket tube determines the flight of the projectile that comes from it, so surely would the inward consciousness, if it were vivid as it ought to be in all Christian people, of that risen life throbbing within the heart, shape all the external conduct. It would give us wings and make us soar. It would make us buoyant, and lift us above the creeping aims that constitute the objects of life for so many men.

But you say, ‘Things above: that is an indefinite phrase. What do you mean by it?’ I will tell you what the Bible means by it. It means Jesus Christ. All the nebulous splendours of that firmament are gathered together into one blazing sun. It is a vague direction to tell a man to shoot up, into an empty heaven. It is not a vague direction to tell him to seek the ‘things above’; for they are all gathered into a person. ‘Where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God,’--that is the meaning of ‘things above,’ which are to be the continual aim of the man who is conscious of a risen life. And of course they will be, for if we feel, as we ought to feel habitually, though with varying clearness, that we do carry within us a spark, if I might use that phrase, of the very life of Jesus Christ, so surely as fire will spring upwards, so surely as water will rise to the height of its source, so surely will our outward lives be directed towards Him, who is the life of our inward lives, and the goal therefore of our outward actions?

Jesus Christ is the summing up of ‘the things that are above’; therefore there stands out clear this one great truth, that the only aim for a Christian soul, consistent with the facts of its Christian life, is to be like Christ, to be with Christ, to please Christ.

Now, how does that aim--’whether present or absent we labour that we may be well pleasing to Him’--how does that aim bear upon the multitude of inferior and nearer aims which men pursue, and which Christians have to pursue along with other men? How does it bear upon them?--Why thus--as the culminating peak of a mountain-chain bears on the lower hills that for miles and miles buttress it, and hold it up, and aspire towards it, and find their perfection in its calm summit that touches the skies. The more we have in view, as our aim in life, Christ who is ‘at the right hand of God,’ and assimilation, communion with Him, approbation from Him, the more will all immediate aims be ennobled and delivered from the evils that else cleave to them. They are more when they are second than when they are first. ‘Seek ye first the Kingdom of God,’ and all your other aims--as students, as thinkers, as scientists, as men of business, as parents, as lovers, or anything else--will be greatened by being subordinated to the conscious aim of pleasing Him. That aim should persist, like a strain of melody, one long, holden-down, diapason note, through all our lives. Perfume can be diffused into the air, and dislodge no atom of that which it makes fragrant. This supreme aim can be pursued through, and by means of, all nearer ones, and is inconsistent with nothing but sin. ‘Seek the things that are above.’

Lastly, we have here--

III. The discipline which is needed to secure the right direction of the life.

The Apostle does not content himself with pointing out the aims. He adds practical advice as to how these aims can be made dominant in our individual cases, when he says, ‘Set your affections on things above.’ Now, many of you will know that ‘affections’ is not the full sense of the word that is here employed, and that the Revised Version gives a more adequate rendering when it says, ‘Set your minds on the things that are above.’ A man cannot do with his love according to his will. He cannot say: ‘ Resolved , that I love So-and-So’; and then set himself to do it. But though you cannot act on the emotions directly by the will, you can act directly on your understandings, on your thoughts, and your thoughts will act on your affections. If a man wants to love Jesus Christ he must think about Him. That is plain English. It is vain for a man to try to coerce his wandering affections by any other course than by concentrating his thoughts. Set your minds on the things that are above, and that will consolidate and direct the emotions; and the thoughts and the emotions together will shape the outward efforts. Seeking the things that are above will come, and will only come, when mind and heart and inward life are occupied with Him. There is no other way by which the externals can be made right than by setting a watch on the door of our hearts and minds, and this inward discipline must be put in force before there will be any continuity or sureness in the outward aim. We want, for that direction of the life of which I have been speaking, a clear perception and a concentrated purpose, and we shall not get either of these unless we fall back, by thought and meditation, upon the truths which will provide them both.

Brethren, there is another aspect of the connection between these two parts of our text, which I can only touch. Not only is the setting of our thoughts on the things above, the way by which we can make these the aim of our lives. They are not only aims to be reached at some future stage of our progress, but they are possessions to be enjoyed at the present. We may have a present Christ and a present Heaven. The Christian life is not all aspiration; it is fruition as well. We have to seek, but even whilst we seek, we should be conscious that we possess what we are seeking, even whilst we seek it. Do you know anything of that double experience of having the things that are above, here and now, as well as reaching out towards them?

I am afraid that the Christian life of this generation suffers at a thousand points, because it is more concerned with the ordering of the outward life, and the manifold activities which this busy generation has struck out for itself, than it is with the quiet setting of the mind, in silent sunken depths of contemplation, on the things that are above. Oh, if we would think more about them we should aim more at them; and if we were sure that we possessed them to-day we should be more eager for a larger possession to-morrow.

Dear brethren, we may all have the risen life for ours, if we will knit ourselves, in humble dependence and utter self-surrender, to the Christ who died for us that we might be dead to sin, and rose again that we might rise to righteousness. And if we have Him, in any deep and real sense, as the life of our lives, then we shall be blessed, amid all the divergent and sometimes conflicting nearer aims, which we have to pursue, by seeing clear above them that to which they all may tend, the one aim which corresponds to a man’s nature, which meets his condition, which satisfies his needs, which can always be attained if it is followed, and which, when secured, never disappoints. God help us all to say, ‘This one thing I do, and all else I count but dung, that I may know Him, and the power of His Resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death, if by any means I may attain unto the Resurrection from the dead!’

9) Colossians 3:3-15

Colossians

RISEN WITH CHRIST

Col. 3:1-15.

The resurrection is regarded in Scripture in three aspects--as a fact establishing our Lord's Messiahship, as a prophecy of our rising from the dead, and as a symbol of the Christian life even now. The last is the aspect under which Paul deals with it here.

I. Verses 1-4 set forth the wonderful but most real union of the believer with the risen Christ.

We have said that the Lord's resurrection is regarded as a symbol, but that is an incomplete representation of the truth here taught, for Paul believed that the Christian is so joined to Jesus as that he has, not in symbol only, but in truth, risen with him. Mark the emphasis and depth of the expressions setting forth the believer's unity with his Lord: 'Ye were raised together with Christ'; 'Ye died, and your life is hid with Christ.' And these wonderful statements do not go to the bottom of the fact, for Paul goes beyond even them, and does not scruple to say that Christ ' is our life.'

The ground of these great declarations is found in the fact that faith joins us in most real and close union to Jesus Christ, so that in His death we die to sin and the world, and that, even while we live the bodily life of men here, we have in us another life, derived from Jesus. Unless our Christianity has grasped that great truth, it has not risen to the height of New Testament teaching and Christian privilege. We cannot make too much of 'Christ our sacrifice,' but some of us make too little of 'Christ our life,' and thereby fail to understand in all its fulness that other truth on which they fasten so exclusively. Union with Christ in the possession of His life in us, and the consequent rooting of our lives in Him, is a truth which much of the evangelical Christianity of this day needs to see more clearly.

The life is ‘hid,’ as being united with Jesus, and consequently withdrawn from the world, which neither comprehends nor sustains it. A Christian man is bound to manifest to the utmost of his power what is the motive and aim of his life; but the devout life is, like the divine life, a mystery, unrevealed after all revelation.

The practical conclusion from this blessed union with Jesus is that we are, as Christians, bound to be true in our conduct to the facts of our spiritual life, and to turn away from the world, which is now not our home, and set our mind [not only our ‘affections’] on things above. Surely the Christ, ‘seated on the right hand of God,’ will be as a magnet to draw our conscious being upwards to Himself. Surely union with Him in His death will lead us to die to the world which is alien to us, and to live in aspiration, thought, desire, love, and obedience with Him in His calm abode, whence He rules and blesses the souls whom, through their faith, He has made to live the new life of heaven on earth.

II. The first consequence of the risen life is negative, the death or ‘putting off’ of the old nature, the life which belongs to and is ruled by earth.

Verses 5-9 solemnly lay on the Christian the obligation to put this to death. The ‘therefore’ in verse 5 teaches a great lesson, for it implies that the union with Jesus by faith must precede all self-denial which is true to the spirit of the Gospel. Asceticism of any sort which is not built on the evangelical foundation is thereby condemned, whether it is practised by Buddhist, or monk, or Protestant. First be partaker of the new life, and then put off the old man with his deeds. The withered fronds of last year are pushed off the fern by the new ones as they uncurl. That doctrine of life in Christ is set down as mystical; but it is mysticism of the wholesome sort, which is intensely practical, and comes down to the level of the lowest duties,--for observe what homely virtues are enjoined, and how the things prohibited are no fantastic classifications of vices, but the things which all the world owns to be ugly and wrong.

We cannot here enlarge on Paul’s grim catalogue, but only point out that it is in two parts, the former [verses 5, 6] being principally sins of impurity and unregulated passion, to which is added ‘covetousness,’ as the other great vice to which the old nature is exposed. Lust and greed between them are the occasions of most of the sins of men. Stop these fountains, and the streams of evil would shrink to very small trickles. These twin vices attract the lightning of God's wrath, which 'cometh' on their perpetrators, not only in some final future judgment, but here and now. If we were not blind, we should see that thundercloud steadily drawing nearer, and ready to launch its terrors on impure and greedy men. They have set it in motion, and they are right in the path of the avalanche which they have loosened.

The possessors of the risen life are exhorted to put off these things, not only because of the coming wrath, but because continuance in them is inconsistent with their present standing and life [v. 7]. They do not now 'live in them,' but in the heavenly places with the risen Lord, therefore to walk in them is a contradiction. Our conduct should correspond to our real affinities, and the surface of our lives should be true to their depths and roots.

The second class of vices are those which mar our intercourse with our fellows,--the more passionate anger and wrath and the more cold-blooded and deadly malice, with the many sins of speech.

III. In verse 9 Paul appends the great reason for all the preceding injunctions; namely, the fact, already enlarged on in verses 1-4, of the Christian's death and new life by union with Jesus.

He need only have stated the one-half of the fact here, but he never can touch one member of the antithesis without catching fire, as it were, and so he goes on to dwell on the new life in Christ, and thus to prepare for the transition to the exhortation to 'put on' its characteristic excellences. We note how true to fact, though apparently illogical, his representation is. He bases the command to put off the old man on the fact that Christians have put it off. They are to be what they are, to work out in daily acts what they did in its full ideal completeness when by faith they died to self and were made alive in and to Christ. A strong motive for a continuous Christian life is the recollection of the initial Christian act.

But Paul's fervent spirit blazes up as he thinks of that new nature which union with Jesus has brought, and he turns aside from his exhortations to gaze on that great sight. He condenses volumes into a sentence. That new man is not only new, but is perpetually being renewed with a renovation penetrating more and more deeply, and extending more and more widely, in the Christian's nature. It is continually advancing in knowledge, and tending towards perfect knowledge of Christ. It is being fashioned, by a better creation than that of Adam, into a more perfect likeness of God than our first father bore in his sinless freshness. The possession of it gathers all Christians into a unity in which all distinctions of nationality, religious privilege, culture, or social condition, are lost. Paul the Pharisee and the Colossian brethren, Onesimus the slave and Philemon his master, are one in Jesus. The new life is one in all its recipients, and makes them one. The phenomena of the lowest forms of life are almost repeated in the highest, and, just as in a coral reef the myriads of workers are not individuals so much as parts of one living whole, 'so also is Christ.' The union is the closest possible without destruction of our individuality.

IV. The final, positive consequence of the risen life follows in verses 12-15.

Again the Apostle reminds Christians of what they are, as the great motive for putting on the new man. The contemplation of privileges may tend to proud isolation and neglect of duty to our fellows, but the true effect of knowing that we are 'God's elect, holy and beloved,' is to soften our hearts, and to lead us to walk among men as mirrors and embodiments of God's mercy to us. The only virtues touched on here are the various manifestations of love, such as quick susceptibility to others' sorrows; readiness to help by act as well as to pity in word; lowliness in estimating one's own claims, which will lead to bearing evils without resentment or recompensing the like; and patient forgiveness, after the pattern and measure of the forgiveness we have received. All these graces, which would make earth an Eden, and our hearts temples, and our lives calm, are outcomes of love, and must never be divorced from it. Paul uses a striking image to express this thought of their dependence on it. He likens them to the various articles of dress, and bids us hold them all in place with love as a girdle, which keeps together all the various graces that make up 'perfectness.'

Thus living in love, we shall be free from the tumult of spirit which ever attends a selfish life; for nothing is more certain to stuff a man’s pillow with thorns, and to wreck his tranquillity, than to live in hate and suspicion, or self-absorbed. ‘The peace of Christ’ is ours in the measure in which we live the risen life and put on the new man, and that peace in our hearts will rule, that is, will sit there as umpire; for it will instinctively draw itself into itself, as it were, like the leaves of a sensitive plant, at the approach of evil, and, if we will give heed to its warnings, and have nothing to do with what disturbs it, we shall be saved from falling into many a sin. That peace gathers all the possessors of the new life into blessed harmony. It is peace with God, with ourselves, and with all our brethren; and the fact that all Christians are, by their common life, members of the one body, lays on them all the obligation to keep the unity in the bond of peace. And for all these great blessings, especially for that union with Jesus which gives us a share in his risen life, thankfulness should ever fill our hearts and make all our days and deeds the sacrifice of praise unto him continually.

10)Colossians 4:5

Colossians

WITHOUT AND WITHIN

Col. 4:5.

That is, of course, an expression for the non-Christian world; the outsiders who are beyond the pale of the Church. There was a very broad line of distinction between it and the surrounding world in the early Christian days, and the handful of Christians in a heathen country felt a great gulf between them and the society in which they lived. That distinction varies in form, and varies somewhat in apparent magnitude according as Christianity has been rooted in a country for a longer or a shorter time, but it remains, and is as real to-day as it ever was, and there is neither wisdom nor kindness in ignoring the distinction.

The phrase of our text may sound harsh, and might be used, as it was by the Jews, from whom it was borrowed, in a very narrow and bitter spirit. Close corporations of any sort are apt to generate, not only a wholesome esprit de corps , but a hostile contempt for outsiders, and Christianity has too often been misrepresented by its professors, who have looked down upon those that are without with supercilious and unchristian self-complacency.

There is nothing of that sort in the words themselves; the very opposite is in them. They sound to me like the expression of a man conscious of the security and comfort and blessedness of the home where he sat, and with his heart yearning for all the houseless wanderers that were abiding the pelting of the pitiless storm out in the darkness there. The spirit and attitude of Christianity to such is one of yearning pity and urgent entreaty to come in and share in the blessings. There is deep pathos in the words, as well as solemn earnestness, and in such a spirit I wish to dwell upon them now for a short time.

I. I begin with the question: Who are they that are outside? And what is it of which they are outside?

As I have already remarked, the phrase was apparently borrowed from Judaism, where it meant, ‘outside the Jewish congregation,’ and its primary application, as used here, is no doubt to those who are outside the Christian Church. But do not let us suppose that that explanation gets to the bottom of the meaning of the words. It may stand as a partial answer, but only as partial. The evil tendency which attends all externalising of truth in the concrete form of institutions works in full force on the Church, and ever tempts us to substitute outward connection with the institution for real possession of the truth of which the institution is the outgrowth. Therefore I urge upon you very emphatically--and all the more earnestly because of the superstitious overestimate of outward connection with the outward institution of the Church which is eagerly proclaimed all around us to-day--that connection with any organised body of believing men is not ‘being within,’ and that isolation from all these is not necessarily ‘being without.’ Many a man who is within the organisation is not ‘in the truth,’ and, blessed be God, a man may be outside all churches, and yet be one of God’s hidden ones, and may dwell safe and instructed in the very innermost shrine of the secret place of the Most High. We hear from priestly lips, both Roman Catholic and Anglican, that there is ‘no safety outside the Church.’ The saying is true when rightly understood. If by the Church be meant the whole company of those who are trusting to Jesus Christ, of course there is no safety outside, because to trust in Jesus is the one condition of safety, and unless we belong to those who so trust we shall not possess the blessing. So understood, the phrase may pass, and is only objectionable as a round-about and easily misunderstood way of saying what is much better expressed by 'Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

But that is not the meaning of the phrase in the mouths of those who use it most frequently. To them the Church is a visible corporation, and not only so, but as one of the many organisations into which believers are moulded, it is distinguished from the others by certain offices and rites, bishops, priests, and sacraments, through whom and which certain grace is supposed to flow, no drop of which can reach a community otherwise shaped and officered!

Nor is it only Roman Catholics and Anglicans who are in danger of externalising personal Christianity into a connection with a church. The tendency has its roots deep in human nature, and may be found flourishing quite as rankly in the least sacerdotal of the 'sects' as in the Vatican itself. There is very special need at present for those who understand that Christianity is an immensely deeper thing than connection with any organised body of Christians, to speak out the truth that is in them, and to protest against the vulgar and fleshly notion which is forcing itself into prominence in this day when societies of all sorts are gaining such undue power, and religion, like much else, is being smothered under forms, as was the maiden in the old story, under the weight of her ornaments. External relationships and rites cannot determine spiritual conditions. It does not follow because you have passed through certain forms, and stand in visible connection with any visible community, that you are therefore within the pale and safe. Churches are appointed by Christ. Men who believe and love naturally draw together. The life of Christ is in them. Many spiritual blessings are received through believing association with His people. Illumination and stimulus, succour and sympathy pass from one to another, each in turn experiencing the blessedness of receiving, and the greater blessedness of giving. No wise man who has learned of Christ will undervalue the blessings which come through union with the outward body which is a consequence of union with the unseen Head. But men may be in the Church and out of Christ. Not connection with it, but connection with Him, brings us ‘within.’ ‘Those that are without’ may be either in or out of the pale of any church.

We may put the answer to this question in another form, and going deeper than the idea of being within a visible church, we may say, ‘those that are without’ are they who are outside the Kingdom of Christ.

The Kingdom of Christ is not a visible external community. The Kingdom of Christ, or of God, or of Heaven, is found wherever human wills obey the Law of Christ, which is the will of God, the decrees of Heaven; as Christ himself put it, in profound words--profound in all their simplicity--when He said, ‘Not every man that saith unto Me Lord! Lord! shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he that doeth the will of My Father, which is in Heaven.’ ‘Them that are without’ are they whose wills are not bent in loving obedience to the Lord of their spirit.

But we must go deeper than that. In the Church? Yes! In the Kingdom? Yes! But I venture to take another Scripture phrase as being the one satisfactory fundamental answer to the question: What is it that these people are outside of? and I say Christ, Christ. If you will take your New Testament as your guide, you will find that the one question upon which all is suspended is the, Am I, or Am I not, in Jesus Christ? Am I in Him, or Am I outside of Him? And the answer to that question is the answer to this other: Who are they that are without?

They that are outside are not the ‘non-Christian world’ who are not church members; they that are inside are not the ‘Christian world’ who make an outward profession of being in the Kingdom. It is not going down to the foundation to explain the antithesis so; but ‘those that are within’ are those who have simple trust upon Jesus Christ as the sole and all-sufficient Saviour of their sinful spirits and the life of their life, and having entered into that great love, have plunged themselves, as it were, into the very heart of Jesus; have found in Him righteousness and peace, forgiveness and love, joy and salvation. Are you in Christ because you love Him and trust your soul to Him? If not, if not, you are amongst those ‘that are without,’ though you be ever so much joined to the visible Church of the living God.

And then there is one more remark that I must drop in here before I go on, namely, that whilst I thankfully admit, and joyfully preach, that the most imperfect, rudimentary faith knits a man to Jesus Christ, even if in this life it may be found covered over with a great deal that is contradictory and inconsistent; on the other hand there are some people who stand like the angel in the Apocalypse, with one foot on the solid land and one upon the restless sea, half in and half out, undecided, halting--that is, ‘limping’--between two opinions. Some people of that sort are listening to me now, who have been like that for years. Now I want them to remember this plain piece of common-sense--half in is altogether out! So that is my answer to the first question: Who are they that are outside, and what is it that they are outside of?

I cannot carry round these principles and lay them upon the conscience of each hearer, but I pray you to listen to your own inmost voice speaking, and I am mistaken if many will not hear it saying: ‘Thou art the man!’ Do not stop your ears to that voice!

II. Notice next the force of this phrase as implying the woeful condition of those without.

I have said that it is full of pathos. It is the language of a man whose heart yearns as, in the midst of his own security, he thinks of the houseless wanderers in the dark and the storm. He thinks pityingly of what they lose, and of that to which they are exposed.

There are two or three ways in which I may illustrate that condition, but perhaps the most graphic and impressive may be just to recall for a moment three or four of the Scripture metaphors that fit into this representation: ‘Those that are without’; and thus to gain some different pictures of what the inside and the outside means in these varying figures.

First, then, there is a figure drawn from the Old Testament which is often applied, and correctly applied, to this subject--Noah’s Ark.

Think of that safe abode floating across the waters, whilst all without it was a dreary waste. Without were death and despair, but those that were within sat warm and dry and safe and fed and living. The men that were without, high as they might climb upon rocks and hills, strong as they might be--when the dreary rainstorm wept itself dry, ‘they were all dead corpses.’ To be in was life, to be out was death.

That is the first metaphor. Take another. That singular institution of the old Mosaic system, in which the man who inadvertently, and therefore without any guilt or crime of his own, had been the cause of death to his brother, had provided for him, half on one side Jordan and half on the other, and dotted over the land, so that it should not be too far to run to one of them, Cities of Refuge. And when the wild vendetta of those days stirred up the next of kin to pursue at his heels, if he could get inside the nearest of these he was secure. They that were within could stand at the city gates and look out upon the plain, and see the pursuer with his hate glaring from his eyes, and almost feel his hot breath on their cheeks, and know that though but a yard from him, his arm durst not touch them. To be inside was to be safe, to be outside was certain bloody death.

That is the second figure; take a third; one which our Lord Himself has given us. Here is the picture--a palace, a table abundantly spread, lights and music, delight and banqueting, gladness and fulness, society and sustenance. The guests sit close and all partake. To be within means food, shelter, warmth, festivity, society; to be without, like Lear on the moor, is to stand the pelting of the storm, weary, stumbling in the dark, starving, solitary, and sad. Within is brightness and good cheer; without is darkness, hunger, death.

That is the third figure. Take a fourth, another of our Master’s. Picture a little rude, stone-built enclosure with the rough walls piled high, and a narrow aperture at one point, big enough for one creature to pass through at a time. Within, huddled together, are the innocent sheep; without, the lion and the bear. Above, the vault of night with all its stars, and watching all, the shepherd, with unslumbering eye. In the fold is rest for the weary limbs that have been plodding through valleys of the shadow of death, and dusty ways; peace for the panting hearts that are trembling at every danger, real and imaginary. Inside the fold is tranquillity, repose for the wearied frame, safety, and the companionship of the Shepherd; and without, ravening foes and a dreary wilderness, and flinty paths and sparse herbage and muddy pools. Inside is life; without is death. That is the fourth figure.

In the Ark no Deluge can touch; in the City of Refuge no avenger can smite; in the banqueting-hall no thirst nor hunger but can be satisfied; in the fold no enemy can come and no terror can live.

Brethren! are you amongst ‘them that are without,’ or are you within?

III. Lastly--why is anybody outside? Why?

It is no one’s fault but their own. It is not God’s. He can appeal with clean hands and ask us to judge what more could have been done for His vineyard that He has not done for it. The great parable which represents Him as sending out His summons to the feast in His palace puts the wonderful words in the mouth of the master of the house, after his call by his servants had been refused. ‘Go out into the highways and hedges,’ beneath which the beggars squat, ‘and compel them to come in, that my house may be full.’ ‘Nature abhors a vacuum,’ the old natural philosophers used to say. So does grace; so does God’s love. It hates to have His house empty and His provisions unconsumed. And so He has done all that He could do to bring you and me inside. He has sent His Son, He beckons us, He draws us by countless mercies day by day. He appeals to our hearts, and would have us gathered into the fold. And if we are outside it is not because He has neglected to do anything which He can do in order to bring us in.

But why is it that any of us resist such drawing, and make the wretched choice of perishing without, rather than find safety within? The deepest reason is an alienated heart, a rebellious will. But the reason for alienation and rebellion lie among the inscrutable mysteries of our awful being. All sin is irrational. The fact is plain, the temptations are obvious; excuses there are in plenty, but reasons there are none. Still we may touch for a moment on some of the causes which operate with many hearers of God’s merciful call to enter in, and keep them without.

Many remain outside because they do not really believe in the danger. No doubt there was a great deal of brilliant sarcasm launched at Noah for his folly in thinking that there was anything coming that needed an ark. It seemed, no doubt, food for much laughter, and altogether impossible to think of gravely, that this flood which he talked about should ever come. So they had their laughter out as they saw him working away at his ludicrous task ‘until the day when the flood came and swept them all away,’ and the laughter ended in gurgling sobs of despair.

If a manslayer does not believe that the next of kin is on his track, he will not flee to the City of Refuge. If the sheep has no fear of wolves, it will choose to be outside the fold among the succulent herbage. Did you ever see how, in a Welsh slate-quarry, before a blast, a horn is blown, and at its sound all along the face of the quarry the miners run to their shelters, where they stay until the explosion is over? What do you suppose would become of one of them who stood there after the horn had blown, and said: ‘Nonsense! There is nothing coming! I will take my chance where I am!’ Very likely a bit of slate would end him before he had finished his speech. At any rate, do not you, dear friend, trifle with the warning that says: ‘Flee for refuge to Christ and shelter yourself in Him.’

There are some people, too, who stop outside because they do not much care for the entertainment that they will get within. It does not strike them as being very desirable. They have no appetite for it. We preachers seek to draw hearts to Jesus by many motives--and among others by setting forth the blessings which he bestows. But if a man does not care about pardon, does not fear judgment, does not want to be good, has no taste for righteousness, is not attracted by the pure and calm pleasures which Christ offers, the invitation falls flat upon his ear. Wisdom cries aloud and invites the sons of men to her feast, but the fare she provides is not coarse and high spiced enough, and her table is left unfilled, while the crowd runs to the strong-flavoured meats and foaming drinks which her rival, Folly, offers. Many of us say, like the Israelites ‘Our souls loathe this light bread,’ this manna, white and sweet, and Heaven-descended, and angels’ food though it be, and we hanker after the reeking garlic and leeks and onions of Egypt.

Some of us again, would like well enough to be inside, if that would keep us from dangers which we believe to be real, but we do not like the doorway. You may see in some remote parts of the country strange, half-subterranean structures which are supposed to have been the houses of a vanished race. They have a long, narrow, low passage, through which a man has to creep with his face very near the ground. He has to go low and take to his knees to get through; and at the end the passage opens out into ampler, loftier space, where the dwellers could sit safe from wild weather and wilder beasts and wildest men. That is like the way into the fortress home which we have in Jesus Christ. We must stoop very low to enter there. And some of us do not like that. We do not like to fall on our knees and say, I am a sinful man, O Lord. We do not like to bow ourselves in penitence. And the passage is narrow as well as low. It is broad enough for you, but not for what some of you would fain carry in on your back. The pack which you bear, of earthly vanities and loves, and sinful habits, will be brushed off your shoulders in that narrow entrance, like the hay off a cart in a country lane bordered by high hedges. And some of us do not like that. So, because the way is narrow, and we have to stoop, our pride kicks at the idea of having to confess ourselves sinners, and of having to owe all our hope and salvation to God's undeserved mercy, therefore we stay outside. And because the way is narrow, and we have to put off some of our treasures, our earthward-looking desires shrink from laying these aside, and therefore we stop outside. There was room in the boat for the last man who stood on the deck, but he could not make up his mind to leave a bag of gold. There was no room for that. Therefore he would not leap, and went down with the ship.

The door is open. The Master calls. The feast is spread. Dangers threaten. The flood comes. The avenger of blood makes haste. 'Why standest thou without?' Enter in, before the door is shut. And if you ask, How shall I pass within?--the answer is plain: 'They could not enter in because of unbelief. We which have believed do enter into rest.'

1 Thessalonians

1) 1 THESSALONIANS 1:3
2) 1 THESSALONIANS 1:8
3) 1 THESSALONIANS 2:12
4) 1 THESSALONIANS 4:9-18
5) 1 THESSALONIANS 4:14
6) 1 THESSALONIANS 5:8
7) 1 THESSALONIANS 5:10

8) 1 THESSALONIANS 5:11
9) 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18
10) 1 THESSALONIANS 5:27
11) 2 THESSALONIANS 1:10
12) 2 THESSALONIANS 1:11-12
13) 2 THESSALONIANS 2:16-17
14) 2 THESSALONIANS 3:5
15) 2 THESSALONIANS 3:16

1) 1 Thessalonians 1:3

1 Thessalonians

FAITH, LOVE, HOPE, AND THEIR FRUITS

1Th. 1:3.

This Epistle, as I suppose we all know, is Paul’s first letter. He had been hunted out of Thessalonica by the mob, made the best of his way to Athens, stayed there for a very short time, then betook himself to Corinth, and at some point of his somewhat protracted residence there, this letter was written. So that we have in it his first attempt, so far as we know, to preach the Gospel by the pen. It is interesting to notice how, whatever changes and developments there may have been in him thereafter, all the substantial elements of his latest faith beam out in this earliest letter, and how even in regard to trifles we see the germs of much that came afterwards. This same triad, you remember, ‘faith, hope, charity,’ recurs in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, though with a very significant difference in the order, which I shall have to dwell upon presently.

The letter is interesting on another account. Remembering that it was only a very short time since these Thessalonians had turned from idols to serve the living God, there is something very beautiful in the overflowing generosity of commendation, which never goes beyond veracity, with which he salutes them. Their Christian character, like seeds sown in some favoured tropical land, had sprung up swiftly; yet not with the dangerous kind of swiftness which presages decay of the growth. It was only a few days since they had been grovelling before idols, but now he can speak of ‘your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope’ . . . and declare that the Gospel ‘sounded out’ from them--the word which he employs is that which is technically used for the blast of a trumpet--’so that we need not to speak anything.’ Rapid growth is possible for us all, and is not always superficial.

I desire now to consider that pair of triads--the three foundation-stones, and the three views of the fair building that is reared upon them.

I. The three foundation-stones.

That is a natural metaphor to use, but it is not quite correct, for these three--faith, love, hope--are not to be conceived of as lying side by side. Rather than three foundations we have three courses of the building here; the lowest one, faith; the next one, love; and the top one, hope. The order in 1 Corinthians is different, ‘faith, hope, charity,’ and the alteration in the sequence is suggested by the difference of purpose. The Apostle intended in 1 Corinthians to dwell at some length thereafter on ‘charity,’ or ‘love.’ So he puts it last to make the link of connection with what he is going to say. But here he is dealing with the order of production, the natural order in which these three evolve themselves. And his thought is that they are like the shoots that successive springs bring upon the bough of a tree, where each year has its own growth, and the summit of last year’s becomes the basis of next. Thus we have, first, faith; then, shooting from that, love; and then, sustained by both, hope. Now let us look at that order.

It is a well-worn commonplace, which you may think it not needful for me to dwell upon here, that in the Christian theory, both of salvation and of morals, the basis of everything is trust. And that is no arbitrary theological arrangement, but it is the only means by which the life that is the basis both of salvation and of righteousness can be implanted in men. There is no other way by which Jesus Christ can come into our hearts than by what the New Testament calls ‘trust,’ which we have turned into the hard, theological concept which too often glides over people’s minds without leaving any dint at all--’faith.’ Distrust is united with trust. There is no trust without, complementary to it, self-distrust. Just as the sprouting seed sends one little radicle downwards, and that becomes the root, and at the same time sends up another one, white till it reaches the light, and it becomes the stem, so the underside of faith is self-distrust, and you must empty yourselves before you can open your hearts to be filled by Jesus. That being so, this self-distrustful trust is the beginning of everything. That is the alpha of the whole alphabet, however glorious and manifold may be the words into which its letters are afterwards combined. Faith is the hand that grasps. It is the means of communication, it is the channel through which the grace which is the life, or, rather, I should say, the life which is the grace, comes to us. It is the open door by which the angel of God comes in with his gifts. It is like the petals of the flowers, opening when the sunshine kisses them, and, by opening, laying bare the depths of their calyxes to be illuminated and coloured, and made to grow by the sunshine which itself has opened them, and without the presence of which, within the cup, there would have been neither life nor beauty. So faith is the basis of everything; the first shoot from which all the others ascend. Brethren, have you that initial grace? I leave the question with you. If you have not that, you have nothing else.

Then again, out of faith rises love. No man can love God unless he believes that God loves him. I, for my part, am old-fashioned and narrow enough not to believe that there is any deep, soul-cleansing or soul-satisfying love of God which is not the answer to the love that died on the Cross. But you must believe that, and more than believe it; you must have trusted and cast yourselves on it, in the utter abandonment of self-distrust and Christ-confidence, before there will well up in your heart the answering love to God. First faith, then love. My love is the reverberation of the primeval voice, the echo of God’s. The angle at which the light falls on the mirror is the same as the angle at which it is reflected from it. And though my love at its highest is low, at its strongest is weak: yet, like the echo that is faint and far, feeble though it be, it is pitched on the same key, and is the prolongation of the same note as the mother-sound. So my love answers God’s love, and it will never answer it unless faith has brought me within the auditorium, the circle wherein the voice that proclaims ‘I love thee, my child,’ can be heard.

Now, we do not need to ask ourselves whether Paul is here speaking of love to God or love to man. He is speaking of both, because the New Testament deals with the latter as being a part of the former, and sure to accompany it.

But there is one lesson that I wish to draw. If it be true that love in us is thus the result of faith in the love of God, let us learn how we grow in love. You cannot say, ‘Now I will make an effort to love.’ The circulation of the blood, the pulsations of the heart, are not within the power of the will. But you can say, ‘Now I will make an effort to trust.’ For faith is in the power of the will, and when the Master said, ‘Ye will not come unto me,’ He taught us that unbelief is not a mere intellectual deficiency or perversity, but that it is the result, in the majority of cases--I might almost say in all-of an alienated will. Therefore, if you wish to love, do not try to work yourself into a hysteria of affection, but take into your hearts and minds the Christian facts, and mainly the fact of the Cross, which will set free the frozen and imprisoned fountains of your affections, and cause them to flow out abundantly in sweet water. First faith, then love; and get at love through faith. That is a piece of practical wisdom that it will do us all good to keep in mind.

Then the third of the three, the topmost shoot, is hope. Hope is faith directed to the future. So it is clear enough that, unless I have that trust of which I have been speaking, I have none of the hope which the Apostle regards as flowing from it. But love has to do with hope quite as much, though in a different way, as faith has to do with it. For in the direct proportion in which we are taking into our hearts Christ and His truth, and letting our hearts go out in love towards Him and communion with Him, will the glories beyond brighten and consolidate and magnify themselves in our eyes. The hope of the Christian man is but the inference from his present faith, and the joy and sweetness of his present love. For surely when we rise to the heights which are possible to us all, and on which I suppose most Christian people have been sometimes, though for far too brief seasons; when we rise to the heights of communion with God, anything seems more possible to us than that death, or anything that lies in the future, should have power over a tie so sweet, so strong, so independent of externals, and so all-sufficing in its sweetness. Thus we shall be sure that God is our portion for ever, in the precise degree in which, by faith and love, we feel that ‘He is the strength of our hearts,’ to-day and now. So, then, we have the three foundation-stones.

And now a word or two, in the second place, about

II. The fair building which rises on them.

I have already half apologised for using the metaphor of a foundation and a building. I must repeat the confession that the symbol is an inadequate one. For the Apostle does not conceive of the work and labour and patience which are respectively allocated to these three graces as being superimposed upon them, as it were, by effort, so much as he thinks of them as growing out of them by their inherent nature. The work is 'the work of faith,' that which characterises faith, that which issues from it, that which is its garment, visible to the world, and the token of its reality and its presence. Faith works. It is the foundation of all true work; even in the lowest sense of the word we might almost say that. But in the Christian scheme it is eminently the underlying requisite for all work which God does not consider as busy idleness. I might here make a general remark, which, however, I need not dwell upon, that we have here the broad thought which Christian people in all generations need to have drummed into their heads over and over again, and that is that inward experiences and emotions, and states of mind and heart, however good and precious, are so mainly as being the necessary foundations of conduct. What is the good of praying and feeling comfortable within, and having 'a blessed assurance,' a 'happy experience,' 'sweet communion,' and so on? What is the good of it all, if these things do not make us 'live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world'? What is the good of the sails of a windmill going whirling round, if the machinery has been thrown out of gear, and the great stones which it ought to actuate are not revolving? What is the good of the screw of a steamer revolving, when she pitches, clean above the waves? It does nothing then to drive the vessel onwards, but will only damage the machinery. And Christian emotions and experiences which do not drive conduct are of as little use, often as perilous, and as injurious. If you want to keep your 'faith, love, hope,' sound and beneficial, set them to work. And do not be too sure that you have them, if they do not crave for work, whether you set them to it or not.

'Your work of faith.' There is the whole of the thorny subject of the relation of faith and works packed into a nutshell. It is exactly what James said and it is exactly what a better than James said. When the Jews came to Him with their externalism, and thought that God was to be pleased by a whole rabble of separate good actions, and so said, ‘What shall we do that we might work the works of God?’ Jesus said, ‘Never mind about works. This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent,’ and out of that will come all the rest. That is the mother-tincture; everything will flow from that. So Paul says, ‘Your work of faith.’

Does your faith work? Perhaps I should ask other people rather than you. Do men see that your faith works; that its output is different from the output of men who are not possessors of a ‘like precious faith’? Ask yourselves the question, and God help you to answer it.

Love labours. Labour is more than work, for it includes the notion of toil, fatigue, difficulty, persistence, antagonism. Ah! the work of faith will never be done unless it is the toil of love. You remember how Milton talks about the immortal garland that is to be run for, ‘not without dust and sweat.’ The Christian life is not a leisurely promenade. The limit of our duty is not ease of work. There must be toil. And love is the only principle that will carry us through the fatigues, and the difficulties, and the oppositions which rise against us from ourselves and from without. Love delights to have a hard task set it by the beloved, and the harder the task the more poignant the satisfaction. Loss is gain when it brings us nearer the beloved. And whether our love be love to God, or its consequence, love to man, it is the only foundation on which toil for either God or man will ever permanently be rested. Do not believe in philanthropy which has not a bottom of faith, and do not believe in work for Christ which does not involve in toil. And be sure that you will do neither, unless you have both these things: the faith and the love.

And then comes the last. Faith works, love toils, hope is patient. Is that all that ‘hope’ is? Not if you take the word in the narrow meaning which it has in modern English; but that was not what Paul meant. He meant something a great deal more than passive endurance, great as that is. It is something to be able to say, in the pelting of a pitiless storm, ‘Pour on! I will endure.’ But it is a great deal more to be able, in spite of all, not to bate one jot of heart or hope, but ‘still bear up and steer right onward’; and that is involved in the true meaning of the word inadequately rendered ‘patience’ in the New Testament. For it is no passive virtue only, but it is a virtue which, in the face of the storm, holds its course; brave persistence, active perseverance, as well as meek endurance and submission.

‘Hope’ helps us both to bear and to do. They tell us nowadays that it is selfish for a Christian man to animate himself, either for endurance or for activity, by the contemplation of those great glories that lie yonder. If that is selfishness, God grant we may all become a great deal more selfish than we are! No man labours in the Christian life, or submits to Christian difficulty, for the sake of going to heaven. At least, if he does, he has got on the wrong tack altogether. But if the motive for both endurance and activity be faith and love, then hope has a perfect right to come in as a subsidiary motive, and to give strength to the faith and rapture to the love. We cannot afford to throw away that hope, as so many of us do--not perhaps, intellectually, though I am afraid there is a very considerable dimming of the clearness, and a narrowing of the place in our thoughts, of the hope of a future blessedness, in the average Christian of this day--but practically we are all apt to lose sight of the recompense of the reward. And if we do, the faith and love, and the work and toil, and the patience will suffer. Faith will relax its grasp, love will cool down its fervour; and there will come a film over Hope’s blue eye, and she will not see the land that is very far off. So, dear brethren, remember the sequence, ‘faith, love, hope,’ and remember the issues, ‘work, toil, patience.’

2) 1 Thessalonians 1:8

1 Thessalonians

GOD’S TRUMPET

1Th. 1:8.

This is Paul’s first letter. It was written very shortly after his first preaching of the Gospel in the great commercial city of Thessalonica. But though the period since the formation of the Thessalonian Church was so brief, their conversion had already become a matter of common notoriety; and the consistency of their lives, and the marvellous change that had taken place upon them, made them conspicuous in the midst of the corrupt heathen community in which they dwelt. And so says Paul, in the text, by reason of their work of faith and labour of love and patience of hope, they had become ensamples to all that believe, and loud proclaimers and witnesses of the Gospel which had produced this change.

The Apostle employs a word never used anywhere else in the New Testament to describe the conspicuous and widespread nature of this testimony of theirs. He says, ‘The word of the Lord sounded out ‘ from them. That phrase is one most naturally employed to describe the blast of a trumpet. So clear and ringing, so loud, penetrating, melodious, rousing, and full was their proclamation, by the silent eloquence of their lives, of the Gospel which impelled and enabled them to lead such lives. A grand ideal of a community of believers! If our churches to-day were nearer its realisation there would be less unbelief, and more attraction of wandering prodigals to the Father’s house. Would that this saying were true of every body of professing believers! Would that from each there sounded out one clear accordant witness to Christ, in the purity and unworldliness of their Christlike lives!

I. This metaphor suggests the great purpose of the Church.

It is God’s trumpet, His means of making His voice heard through all the uproar of the world. As the captain upon the deck in the gale will use his speaking-trumpet, so God’s voice needs your voice. The Gospel needs to be passed through human lips in order that it may reach deaf ears. The purpose for which we have been apprehended of Christ is not merely our own personal salvation, whether we understand that in a narrow and more outward, or in a broader and more spiritual sense. No man is an end in himself, but every man, though he be partially and temporarily an end, is also a means. And just as, according to the other metaphor, the Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven, each particle of the dead dough, as soon as it is leavened and vitalised, becoming the medium for transmitting the strange, transforming, and living influence to the particle beyond, so all of us, if we are Christian people, have received that grace into our hearts, for our own sakes indeed, but also that through us might be manifested to the darkened eyes beyond, and through us might drop persuasively on the dull, cold ears that are further away from the Divine Voice, the great message of God’s mercy. The Church is God’s trumpet, and the purpose that He has in view in setting it in the world is to make all men know the fellowship of the mystery, and that through it there may ring out, as by some artificial means a poor human voice will be flung to a greater distance than it would otherwise reach, the gentle entreaties, and the glorious proclamation, and the solemn threatenings of the Word, the Incarnate as well as the written Word, of God.

Of course all this is true, not only about communities, but it is true of a community, just because it is true of each individual member of it. The Church is worse than as ‘sounding brass,’ it is as silent brass and an untinkling cymbal, unless the individuals that belong to it recognise God’s meaning in making them His children, and do their best to fulfil it. ‘Ye are my witnesses,’ saith the Lord. You are put into the witness-box; see that you speak out when you are there.

II. Another point that this figure may suggest is, the sort of sound that should come from the trumpet.

A trumpet note is, first of all, clear. There should be no hesitation in our witness; nothing uncertain in the sound that we give. There are plenty of so-called Christian people whose lives, if they bear any witness for the Master at all, are like the notes that some bungling learner will bring out of a musical instrument: hesitating, uncertain, so that you do not know exactly what note he wants to produce. How many of us, calling ourselves Christian people, testify on both sides; sometimes bearing witness for Christ; and alas! alas! oftener bearing witness against Him. Will the trumpet, the instrument of clear, ringing, unmistakable sounds, be the emblem of your Christian testimony? Would not some poor scrannel-pipe, ill-blown, be nearer the mark? The note should be clear.

The note should be penetrating. There is no instrument, I suppose, that carries further than the ringing clarion that is often heard on the field of battle, above all the strife; and this little church at Thessalonica, a mere handful of people, just converted, in the very centre of a strong, compact, organised, self-confident, supercilious heathenism, insisted upon being heard, and got itself made audible, simply by the purity and the consistency of the lives of its members. So that Paul, a few weeks, or at most a few months, after the formation of the church, could say, ‘From you sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia,’ your own province and the one next door to it, ‘but also in every place your faith to Godward is spread abroad.’ No man knows how far his influence will go. No man can tell how far his example may penetrate. Thessalonica was a great commercial city. So is Manchester. Hosts of people of all sorts came into it as they come here. There were many different circles which would be intersected by the lives of this Christian church, and wherever its units went they carried along with them the conviction that they had turned from idols to serve the living God, and to wait for His Son from heaven.

And so, dear brethren, if our witness is to be worth anything it must have this penetrating quality. There is a difference in sounds as there is a difference in instruments. Some of them carry further than others. A clear voice will fling words to a distance that a thick, mumbling one never can attain. One note will travel much further than another. Do you see to it that your notes are of the penetrating sort.

And then, again, the note should be a musical one. There is nothing to be done for God by harshness; nothing to be done by discords and gangling; nothing to be done by scolding and rebuke. The ordered sequence of melodious sound will travel a great deal further than unmusical, plain speech. You can hear a song at a distance at which a saying would be inaudible. Which thing is an allegory, and this is its lesson,--Music goes further than discord; and the witness that a Christian man bears will travel in direct proportion as it is harmonious, and gracious and gentle and beautiful.

And then, again, the note should be rousing. You do not play on a trumpet when you want to send people to sleep; dulcimers and the like are the things for that purpose. The trumpet means strung-up intensity, means a call to arms, or to rejoicing; means at any rate, vigour, and is intended to rouse. Let your witness have, for its utmost signification, ‘Awake! thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead; and Christ shall give thee light.’

III. Then, still further, take another thought that may be suggested from this metaphor, the silence of the loudest note.

If you look at the context, you will see that all the ways in which the word of the Lord is represented as sounding out from the Thessalonian Church were deeds, not words. The context supplies a number of them. Such as the following are specified in it: their work; their toil, which is more than work; their patience; their assurance; their reception of the word, in much affliction with joy in the Holy Ghost; their faith to Godward; their turning to God from idols, to serve and to wait.

That is all. So far as the context goes there might not have been a man amongst them who ever opened his mouth for Jesus Christ. We know not, of course, how far they were a congregation of silent witnesses, but this we know, that what Paul meant when he said, ‘The whole world is ringing with the voice of the word of God sounding from you,’ was not their going up and down the world shouting about their Christianity, but their quiet living like Jesus Christ. That is a louder voice than any other.

Ah! dear friends! it is with God’s Church as it is with God’s heavens; the ‘stars in Christ’s right hand’ sparkle in the same fashion as the stars that He has set in the firmament. Of them we read: ‘There is neither voice nor language, their speech is not heard’; and yet, as man stands with bared head and hushed heart beneath the violet abysses of the heavens, ‘their line’ [or chord, the metaphor being that of a stringed instrument] ‘is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.’ Silent as they shine, they declare the glory of God, and proclaim His handiwork. And so you may speak of Him without speaking, and though you have no gift of tongues the night may be filled with music, and your lives be eloquent of Christ.

I do not mean to say that Christian men and women are at liberty to lock their lips from verbal proclamation of the Saviour they have found, but I do mean to say that if there was less talk and more living, the witness of God’s Church would be louder and not lower; ‘and men would take knowledge of us, that we had been with Jesus’; and of Jesus, that He had made us like Himself.

IV. And so, lastly, let me draw one other thought from this metaphor, which I hope you will not think fanciful playing with a figure; and that is the breath that makes the music.

If the Church is the trumpet, who blows it? God! It is by His Divine Spirit dwelling within us, and breathing through us, that the harsh discords of our natural lives become changed into melody of praise and the music of witness for Him. Keep near Christ, live in communion with God, let Him breathe through you, and when His Spirit passes through your spirits their silence will become harmonious speech; and from you 'will sound out the word of the Lord.'

In a tropical country, when the sun goes behind a cloud, all the insect life that was cheerily chirping is hushed. In the Christian life, when the Son of Righteousness is obscured by the clouds born of our own carelessness and sin, all the music in our spirit ceases, and no more can we witness for Him. A scentless substance lying in a drawer, with a bit of musk, will become perfumed by contact, and will bring the fragrance wherever it is carried. Live near God, and let Him speak to you and in you; and then He will speak through you. And if He be the breath of your spiritual lives, and the soul of your souls, then, and only then, will your lives be music, the music witness, and the witness conviction. And only then will there be fulfilled what I pray there may be more and more fulfilled in us as a Christian community, this great word of our text, 'from you sounded out,' clear, rousing, penetrating, melodious, 'the word of the Lord,' so that we, with our poor preaching, need not to speak anything.

3) 1 Thessalonians 2:12

1 Thessalonians

WALKING WORTHILY

1Th. 2:12.

Here we have the whole law of Christian conduct in a nutshell. There may be many detailed commandments, but they can all be deduced from this one. We are lifted up above the region of petty prescriptions, and breathe a bracing mountain air. Instead of regulations, very many and very dry, we have a principle which needs thought and sympathy in order to apply it, and is to be carried out by the free action of our own judgments.

Now it is to be noticed that there are a good many other passages in the New Testament in which, in similar fashion, the whole sum of Christian conduct is reduced to a ‘walking worthy’ of some certain thing or other, and I have thought that it might aid in appreciating the many-sidedness and all-sufficiency of the great principles into which Christianity crystallises the law of our life, if we just gather these together and set them before you consecutively.

They are these: we are told in our text to ‘walk worthy of God.’ Then again, we are enjoined, in other places, to ‘walk worthy of the Lord,’ who is Christ. Or again, ‘of the Gospel of Christ.’ Or again, ‘of the calling wherewith we were called.’ Or again, of the name of ‘saints.’ And if you put all these together, you will get many sides of one thought, the rule of Christian life as gathered into a single expression--correspondence with, and conformity to, a certain standard.

I. And first of all, we have this passage of my text, and the other one to which I have referred, ‘Walking worthy of the Lord,’ by whom we are to understand Christ. We may put these together and say that the whole sum of Christian duty lies in conformity to the character of a Divine Person with whom we have loving relations.

The Old Testament says: ‘Be ye holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.’ The New Testament says: ‘Be ye imitators of God, and walk in love.’ So then, whatever of flashing brightness and infinite profundity in that divine nature is far beyond our apprehension and grasp, there are in that divine nature elements--and those the best and divinest in it--which it is perfectly within the power of every man to copy.

Is there anything in God that is more Godlike than righteousness and love? And is there any difference in essence between a man’s righteousness and God’s;--between a man’s love and God’s? The same gases make combustion in the sun and on the earth, and the spectroscope tells you that it is so. The same radiant brightness that flames burning in the love, and flashes white in the purity of God, even that may be reproduced in man.

Love is one thing, all the universe over. Other elements of the bond that unites us to God are rather correspondent in us to what we find in Him. Our concavity, so to speak, answers to His convexity; our hollowness to His fulness; our emptiness to His all-sufficiency. So our faith, for instance, lays hold upon His faithfulness, and our obedience grasps, and bows before, His commanding will. But the love with which I lay hold of Him is like the love with which He lays hold on me; and righteousness and purity, howsoever different may be their accompaniments in an Infinite and uncreated Nature from what they have in our limited and bounded and progressive being, in essence are one. So, 'Be ye holy, for I am holy'; 'Walk in the light as He is in the light,' is the law available for all conduct; and the highest divine perfections, if I may speak of pre-eminence among them, are the imitable ones, whereby He becomes our Example and our Pattern.

Let no man say that such an injunction is vague or hopeless. You must have a perfect ideal if you are to live at all by an ideal. There cannot be any flaws in your pattern if the pattern is to be of any use. You aim at the stars, and if you do not hit them you may progressively approach them. We need absolute perfection to strain after, and one day--blessed be His name--we shall attain it. Try to walk worthy of God and you will find out how tight that precept grips, and how close it fits.

The love and the righteousness which are to become the law of our lives, are revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Whatever may sound impracticable in the injunction to imitate God assumes a more homely and possible shape when it becomes an injunction to follow Jesus. And just as that form of the precept tends to make the law of conformity to the divine nature more blessed and less hopelessly above us, so it makes the law of conformity to the ideal of goodness less cold and unsympathetic. It makes all the difference to our joyfulness and freedom whether we are trying to obey a law of duty, seen only too clearly to be binding, but also above our reach, or whether we have the law in a living Person whom we have learned to love. In the one case there stands upon a pedestal above us a cold perfection, white, complete, marble; in the other case there stands beside us a living law in pattern, a Brother, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh; whose hand we can grasp; whose heart we can trust, and of whose help we can be sure. To say to me: 'Follow the ideal of perfect righteousness,' is to relegate me to a dreary, endless struggling; to say to me, 'Follow your Brother, and be like your Father,' is to bring warmth and hope and liberty into all my effort. The word that says, ‘Walk worthy of God,’ is a royal law, the perfect law of perfect freedom.

Again, when we say, ‘Walk worthy of God,’ we mean two things--one, ‘Do after His example,’ and the other, ‘Render back to Him what He deserves for what He has done to you.’ And so this law bids us measure, by the side of that great love that died on the Cross for us all, our poor imperfect returns of gratitude and of service. He has lavished all His treasure on you; what have you brought him back? He has given you the whole wealth of His tender pity, of His forgiving mercy, of His infinite goodness. Do you adequately repay such lavish love? Has He not ‘sown much and reaped little’ in all our hearts? Has He not poured out the fulness of His affection, and have we not answered Him with a few grudging drops squeezed from our hearts? Oh! brethren! ‘Walk worthy of the Lord,’ and neither dishonour Him by your conduct as professing children of His, nor affront Him by the wretched refuse and remnants of your devotion and service that you bring back to Him in response to His love to you.

II. Now a word about the next form of this all-embracing precept. The whole law of our Christian life may be gathered up in another correspondence, ‘Walk worthy of the Gospel’ [Php. 1:27], in a manner conformed to that great message of God’s love to us.

That covers substantially the same ground as we have already been going over, but it presents the same ideas in a different light. It presents the Gospel as a rule of conduct. Now people have always been apt to think of it more as a message of deliverance than as a practical guide, as we all need to make an effort to prevent our natural indolence and selfishness from making us forget that the Gospel is quite as much a rule of conduct as a message of pardon.

It is both by the same act. In the very facts on which our redemption depends lies the law of our lives.

What was Paul’s Gospel? According to Paul’s own definition of it, it was this: ‘How that Jesus Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.’ And the message that I desire now to bring to all you professing Christians is this: Do not always be looking at Christ’s Cross only as your means of acceptance. Do not only be thinking of Christ's Passion as that which has barred for you the gates of punishment, and has opened for you the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven. It has done all that; but if you are going to stop there you have only got hold of a very maimed and imperfect edition of the Gospel. The Cross is your pattern , as well as the anchor of your hope and the ground of your salvation, if it is anything at all to you. And it is not the ground of your salvation and the anchor of your hope unless it is your pattern. It is the one in exactly the same degree in which it is the other.

So all self-pleasing, all harsh insistence on your own claims, all neglect of suffering and sorrow and sin around you, comes under the lash of this condemnation: 'They are not worthy of the Gospel.' And all unforgivingness of spirit and of temper in individuals and in nations, in public and in private matters, that, too, is in flagrant contradiction to the principles that are taught on the Cross to which you say you look for your salvation. Have you got forgiveness, and are you going out from the presence-chamber of the King to take your brother by the throat for the beggarly coppers that he owes you, and say: 'Pay me what thou owest!' when the Master has forgiven you all that great mountain of indebtedness which you owe Him? Oh, my brother! if Christian men and women would only learn to take away the scales from their eyes and souls; not looking at Christ's Cross with less absolute trustfulness, as that by which all their salvation comes, but also learning to look at it as closely and habitually as yielding the pattern to which their lives should be conformed, and would let the heart-melting thankfulness which it evokes when gazed at as the ground of our hope prove itself true by its leading them to an effort at imitating that great love, and so walking worthy of the Gospel, how their lives would be transformed! It is far easier to fetter your life with yards of red-tape prescriptions--do this, do not do that--far easier to out-pharisee the Pharisees in punctilious scrupulosities, than it is honestly, and for one hour, to take the Cross of Christ as the pattern of your lives, and to shape yourselves by that.

One looks round upon a lethargic, a luxurious, a self-indulgent, a self-seeking, a world-besotted professing Church, and asks: 'Are these the people on whose hearts a cross is stamped?' Do these men--or rather let us say, do we live as becometh the Gospel which proclaims the divinity of self-sacrifice, and that the law of a perfect human life is perfect self-forgetfulness, even as the secret of the divine nature is perfect love? ‘Walk worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.’

III. Then again, there is another form of this same general prescription which suggests to us a kindred and yet somewhat different standard. We are also bidden to bring our lives into conformity to, and correspondence with, or, as the Bible has it, ‘to walk worthy of the calling wherewith we are called’ [Eph. 4:1].

God summons or invites us, and summons us to what? The words which follow our text answer, ‘Who calleth you into His own kingdom and glory.’ All you Christian people have been invited, and if you are Christians you have accepted the invitation; and all you men and women, whether you are Christians or not, have been and are being invited and summoned into a state and a world [for the reference is to the future life], in which God’s will is supreme, and all wills are moulded into conformity with that, and into a state and a world in which all shall--because they submit to His will--partake of His glory, the fulness of His uncreated light.

That being the aim of the summons, that being the destiny that is held out before us all, ought not that destiny and the prospect of what we may be in the future, to fling some beams of guiding brightness on to the present?

Men that are called to high functions prepare themselves therefor. If you knew that you were going away to Australia in six months, would you not be beginning to get your outfit ready? You Christian men profess to believe that you have been called to a condition in which you will absolutely obey God’s will, and be the loyal subjects of His kingdom, and in which you will partake of God’s glory. Well then, obey His will here, and let some scattered sparklets of that uncreated light that is one day going to flood your soul lie upon your face to-day. Do not go and cut your lives into two halves, one of them all contradictory to that which you expect in the other, but bring a harmony between the present, in all its weakness and sinfulness, and that great hope and certain destiny that blazes on the horizon of your hope, as the joyful state to which you have been invited. ‘Walk worthy of the calling to which you are called.’

And again, that same thought of the destiny should feed our hope, and make us live under its continual inspiration. A walk worthy of such a calling and such a caller should know no despondency, nor any weary, heartless lingering, as with tired feet on a hard road. Brave good cheer, undimmed energy, a noble contempt of obstacles, a confidence in our final attainment of that purity and glory which is not depressed by consciousness of present failure--these are plainly the characteristics which ought to mark the advance of the men in whose ears such a summons from such lips rings as their marching orders.

And a walk worthy of our calling will turn away from earthly things. If you believe that God has summoned you to His kingdom and glory, surely, surely, that should deaden in your heart the love and the care for the trifles that lie by the wayside. Surely, surely, if that great voice is inviting, and that merciful hand is beckoning you into the light, and showing you what you may possess there, it is not walking according to that summons if you go with your eyes fixed upon the trifles at your feet, and your whole heart absorbed in this present fleeting world. Unworldliness, in its best and purest fashion--by which I mean not only a contempt for material wealth and all that it brings, but the sitting loose by everything that is beneath the stars--unworldliness is the only walk that is ‘worthy of the calling wherewith ye are called.’

And if you hear that voice ringing like a trumpet call, or a commander’s shout on the battlefield, into your ears, ever to stimulate you, to rebuke your lagging indifference; if you are ever conscious in your inmost hearts of the summons to His kingdom and glory, then, no doubt, by a walk worthy of it, you will make your calling sure; and there shall ‘an entrance be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom.’

IV. And the last of the phases of this prescription which I have to deal with is this. The whole Christian duty is further crystallised into the one command, to walk in a manner conformed to, and corresponding with, the character which is impressed upon us.

In the last chapter of the Epistle to the Romans [verse 2], we read about a very small matter, that it is to be done ‘worthily of the saints.’ It is only about the receiving of a good woman who was travelling from Corinth to

Rome, and extending hospitality to her in such a manner as became professing Christians; but the very minuteness of the details to which the great principle is applied points a lesson. The biggest principle is not too big to be brought down to the narrowest details, and that is the beauty of principles as distinguished from regulations. Regulations try to be minute, and, however minute you make them, some case always starts up that is not exactly provided for in them, and so the regulations come to nothing. A principle does not try to be minute, but it casts its net wide and it gathers various cases into its meshes. Like the fabled tent in the old legend that could contract so as to have room for but one man, or expand wide enough to hold an army, so this great principle of Christian conduct can be brought down to giving 'Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church at Cenchrea,' good food and a comfortable lodging, and any other little kindnesses, when she comes to Rome. And the same principle may be widened out to embrace and direct us in the largest tasks and most difficult circumstances.

'Worthily of saints'--the name is an omen, and carries in it rules of conduct. The root idea of 'saint' is 'one separated to God,' and the secondary idea which flows from that is 'one who is pure.'

All Christians are 'saints.' They are consecrated and set apart for God's service, and in the degree in which they are conscious of and live out that consecration, they are pure.

So their name, or rather the great fact which their name implies, should be ever before them, a stimulus and a law. We are bound to remember that we are consecrated, separated as God's possession, and that therefore purity is indispensable. The continual consciousness of this relation and its resulting obligations would make us recoil from impurity as instinctively as the sensitive plant shuts up its little green fingers when anything touches it; or as the wearer of a white robe will draw it up high above the mud on a filthy pavement. Walk 'worthily of saints' is another way of saying, Be true to your own best selves. Work up to the highest ideal of your character. That is far more wholesome than to be always looking at our faults and failures, which depress and tempt us to think that the actual is the measure of the possible, and the past or present of the future. There is no fear of self-conceit or of a mistaken estimate of ourselves. The more clearly we keep our best and deepest self before our consciousness, the more shall we learn a rigid judgment of the miserable contradictions to it in our daily outward life, and even in our thoughts and desires. It is a wholesome exhortation, when it follows these others of which we have been speaking [and not else], which bids Christians remember that they are saints and live up to their name.

A Christian's inward and deepest self is better than his outward life. We have all convictions in our inmost hearts which we do not work out, and beliefs that do not influence us as we know they ought to do, and sometimes wish that they did. By our own fault our lives but imperfectly show their real inmost principle. Friction always wastes power before motion is produced.

So then, we may well gather together all our duties in this final form of the all-comprehensive law, and say to ourselves, 'Walk worthily of saints.' Be true to your name, to your best selves, to your deepest selves. Be true to your separation for God's service, and to the purity which comes from it. Be true to the life which God has implanted in you. That life may be very feeble and covered by a great deal of rubbish, but it is divine. Let it work, let it out. Do not disgrace your name.

These are the phases of the law of Christian conduct. They reach far, they fit close, they penetrate deeper than the needle points of minute regulations. If you will live in a manner corresponding to the character, and worthy of the love of God, as revealed in Christ, and in conformity with the principles that are enthroned upon His Cross, and in obedience to the destiny held forth in your high calling, and in faithfulness to the name that He Himself has impressed upon you, then your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the painful and punctilious pharisaical obedience to outward commands, and all things lovely and of good report will spring to life in your hearts and bear fruit in your lives.

One last word--all these exhortations go on the understanding that you are a Christian, that you have taken Christ for your Saviour, and are resting upon Him, and recognising in Him the revelation of God, and in His Cross the foundation of your hope; that you have listened to, and yielded to, the divine summons, and that you have a right to be called a saint. Is that presumption true about you, my friend? If it is not, Christianity thinks that it is of no use wasting time talking to you about conduct.

It has another word to speak to you first, and after you have heard and accepted it, there will be time enough to talk to you about rules for living. The first message which Christ sends to you by my lips is, Trust your sinful selves to Him as your only all-sufficient Saviour. When you have accepted Him, and are leaning on Him with all your weight of sin and suffering, and loving Him with your ransomed heart, then, and not till then, will you be in a position to hear His law for your life, and to obey it. Then, and not till then, will you appreciate the divine simplicity and breadth of the great command to walk worthy of God, and the divine tenderness and power of the motive which enforces it, and prints it on yielding and obedient hearts, even the dying love and Cross of His Son. Then, and not till then, will you know how the voice from heaven that calls you to His kingdom stirs the heart like the sound of a trumpet, and how the name which you bear is a perpetual spur to heroic service and priestly purity. Till then, the word which we would plead with you to listen to and accept is that great answer of our Lord's to those who came to Him for a rule of conduct, instead of for the gift of life: 'This is the work of God, that ye should believe on Him whom He hath sent.'

4) 1 Thessalonians 4:9-18

1 Thessalonians

SMALL DUTIES AND THE GREAT HOPE

1Th. 4:9-18.

'But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. 2. For yourselves know perfectly, that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.'-- 1Th. 5:1-2.

This letter was written immediately on the arrival of Silas and Timothy in Corinth [1Th. 3:6, 'even now'], and is all flushed with the gladness of relieved anxiety, and throbs with love. It gains in pathetic interest when we remember that, while writing it, the Apostle was in the thick of his conflict with the Corinthian synagogue. The thought of his Thessalonian converts came to him like a waft of pure, cool air to a heated brow.

The apparent want of connection in the counsels of the two last chapters is probably accounted for by supposing that he takes up, as they occurred to him, the points reported by the two messengers. But we may note that the plain, prosaic duties enjoined in verses 7-12 lead on to the lofty revelations of the rest of the context without any sense of a gap, just because to Paul the greatest truths had a bearing on the smallest duties, and the vision of future glory was meant to shape the homely details of present work.

I. We need to make an effort to realise the startling novelty of 'love of the brethren' when this letter was written.

The ancient world was honeycombed with rents and schisms, scarcely masked by political union. In the midst of a world of selfishness this new faith started up, and by some magic knit warring nationalities and hostile classes and wide diversities of culture and position into a strange whole, transcending all limits of race and language. The conception of brotherhood was new, and the realisation of it in Christian love was still more astonishing. The world wondered; but to the Christians the new affection was, we might almost say, instinctive, so naturally and spontaneously did it fill their hearts.

Paul's graceful way of enjoining it here is no mere pretty compliment. The Thessalonians did not need to be bidden to love the brethren, for such love was a part of their new life, and breathed into their hearts by God Himself. They were drawn together by common relation to Jesus, and driven together by common alienation from the world. Occasions of divergence had not yet risen. The world had not yet taken on a varnish of Christianity. The new bond was still strong in its newness. So, short as had been the time since Paul landed at Neapolis, the golden chain of love bound all the Macedonian Christians together, and all that Paul had to exhort was the strengthening of its links and their tightening.

That fair picture faded soon, but it still remains true that the deeper our love to Jesus, the warmer will be our love to all His lovers. The morning glow may not come back to the prosaic noonday, but love to the brethren remains as an indispensable token of the Christian life. Let us try ourselves thereby.

II. What have exhortations to steady work to do with exhortations to increasing love?

Not much, apparently; but may not the link be, ‘Do not suppose that your Christianity is to show itself only in emotions, however sweet; the plain humdrum tasks of a working man’s life are quite as noble a field as the exalted heights of brotherly love.’ A loving heart is good, but a pair of diligent hands are as good. The juxtaposition of these two commands preaches a lesson which we need quite as much as the Thessalonians did. Possibly, too, as we see more fully in the second Epistle, the new truths, which had cut them from their old anchorage, had set some of them afloat on a sea of unquiet expectation. So much of their old selves had been swept away, that it would be hard for some to settle down to the old routine. That is a common enough experience in all ‘revivals,’ and at Thessalonica it was intensified by speculations about Christ’s coming.

The ‘quiet’ which Paul would have us cultivate is not only external, but the inward tranquillity of a spirit calm because fixed on God and filled with love. The secret place of the Most High is ever still, and, if we dwell there, our hearts will not be disturbed by any tumults without. To ‘do our own business’ is quite a different thing from selfish ‘looking on our own things,’ for a great part of our business is to care for others, and nothing dries up sympathy and practical help more surely than a gossiping temper, which is perpetually buzzing about other people’s concerns, and knows everybody’s circumstances and duties better than its own. This restless generation, whose mental food is so largely the newspaper, with its floods of small-talk about people, be they politicians, ministers, or murderers, sorely needs these precepts. We are all so busy that we have no time for quiet meditation, and so much occupied with trivialities about others that we are strangers to ourselves. Therefore religious life is low in many hearts.

The dignity of manual labour was a new doctrine to preach to Greeks, but Paul lays stress on it repeatedly in his letters to Thessalonica. Apparently most of the converts there were of the labouring class, and some of them needed the lesson of Paul’s example as well as his precept. A Christian workman wielding chisel or trowel for Christ’s sake will impress ‘them that are without.’ Dignity depends, not on the nature, but on the motive, of our work. ‘A servant with this clause makes drudgery divine.’ It is permissible to take the opinion of those who are not Christians into account, and to try to show them what good workmen Christ can turn out. It is right, too, to cultivate a spirit of independence, and to prefer a little earned to abundance given as a gift or alms. Perhaps some of the Thessalonians were trying to turn brotherly love to profit, and to live on their richer brethren. Such people infest the Church at all times.

III. With what ease, like a soaring song-bird, the letter rises to the lofty height of the next verses, and how the note becomes more musical, and the style richer, more sonorous and majestic, with the changed subject!

From the workshop to the descending Lord and the voice of the trumpet and the rising saints, what a leap, and yet how easily it is made! Happy we if we keep the future glory and the present duty thus side by side, and pass without jar from the one to the other!

The special point which Paul has in view must be kept well in mind. Some of the Thessalonians seem to have been troubled, not by questions about the Resurrection, as the Corinthians afterwards were, but by a curious difficulty, namely, whether the dead saints would not be worse off at Christ's coming than the living, and to that one point Paul addresses himself. These verses are not a general revelation of the course of events at that coming, or of the final condition of the glorified saints, but an answer to the question, What is the relation between the two halves of the Church, the dead and the living, in regard to their participation in Christ's glory when He comes again? The question is answered negatively in verse 15, positively in verses 16 and 17.

But, before considering them, note some other precious lessons taught here. That sweet and consoling designation for the dead, 'them who sleep in Jesus,' is Christ's gift to sorrowing hearts. No doubt, the idea is found in pagan thinkers, but always with the sad addition, 'an eternal sleep.' Men called death by that name in despair. The Christian calls it so because he knows that sleep implies continuous existence, repose, consciousness, and awaking. The sleepers are not dead, they will be roused to refreshed activity one day.

We note how emphatically verse 14 brings out the thought that Jesus died, since He suffered all the bitterness of death, not only in physical torments, but in that awful sense of separation from God which is the true death in death, and that, because He did, the ugly thing wears a softened aspect to believers, and is but sleep. He died that we might never know what the worst sting of death is.

We note further that, in order to bring out the truth of the gracious change which has passed on death physical for His servants, the remarkable expression is used, in verse 14, ‘fallen asleep through Jesus’; His mediatorial work being the reason for their death becoming sleep. Similarly, it is only in verse 16 that the bare word ‘dead’ is used about them, and there it is needed for emphasis and clearness. When we are thinking of Resurrection we can afford to look death in the face.

We note that Paul here claims to be giving a new revelation made to him directly by Christ. ‘By [or, "in"] the word of the Lord’ cannot mean less than that. The question arises, in regard to verse 15, whether Paul expected that the advent would come in his lifetime. It need not startle any if he were proved to have cherished such a mistaken expectation; for Christ Himself taught the disciples that the time of His second coming was a truth reserved, and not included in His gifts to them. But two things may be noted. First, that in the second Epistle, written very soon after this, Paul sets himself to damp down the expectation of the nearness of the advent, and points to a long course of historical development of incipient tendencies which must precede it; and, second, that his language here does not compel the conclusion that he expected to be alive at the second coming. For he is distinguishing between the two classes of the living and the dead, and he naturally puts himself in the class to which, at that time, he and his hearers belonged, without thereby necessarily deciding, or even thinking about, the question whether he and they would or would not belong to that class at the actual time of the advent.

The revelation here reveals much, and leaves much unrevealed. It is perfectly clear on the main point. Negatively, it declares that the sleeping saints lose nothing, and are not anticipated or hindered in any blessedness by the living. Positively, it declares that they precede the living, inasmuch as they ‘rise first’; that is, before the living saints, who do not sleep, but are changed [1Co. 15:51], are thus transfigured. Then the two great companies shall unitedly rise to meet the descending Lord; and their unity in Him, and, therefore, their fellowship with one another, shall be eternal.

That great hope helps us to bridge the dark gorge of present separation. It leaves unanswered a host of questions which our lonely hearts would fain have cleared up; but it is enough for hope to hold by, and for sorrow to be changed into submission and anticipation. As to the many obscurities that still cling to the future, the meaning and the nature of the accompaniments, the shout, the trumpet, and the like, the way of harmonising the thought that the departed saints attend the descending Lord, with whom they dwell now, with the declaration here that they rise from the earth to meet Him, the question whether these who are thus caught up from earth to meet the Lord in the air come back again with Him to earth,--all these points of curious speculation we may leave. We know enough for comfort, for assurance of the perfect reunion of the saints who sleep in Jesus and of the living, and of the perfect blessedness of both wings of the great army. We may be content with what is clearly revealed, and be sure that, if what is unrevealed would have been helpful to us, He would have told us. We are to use the revelation for comfort and for stimulus, and we are to remember that ‘times and seasons’ are not told us, nor would the knowledge of them profit us.

Paul took for granted that the Thessalonians remembered the Lord’s word, which he had, no doubt, told them, that He would come ‘as a thief in the night.’ So he discourages a profitless curiosity, and exhorts to a continual vigilance. When He comes, it will be suddenly, and will wake some who live from a sinful sleep with a shock of terror, and the dead from a sweet sleep in Him with a rush of gladness, as in body and spirit they are filled with His life, and raised to share in His triumph.

5) 1 Thessalonians 4:14

1 Thessalonians

SLEEPING THROUGH JESUS

1Th. 4:14.

That expression is not unusual, in various forms, in the Apostle’s writings. It suggests a very tender and wonderful thought of closeness and union between our Lord and the living dead, so close as that He is, as it were, the atmosphere in which they move, or the house in which they dwell. But, tender and wonderful as the thought is, it is not exactly the Apostle’s idea here. For, accurately rendered--and accuracy in regard to Scripture language is not pedantry--the words run, ‘Them which sleep through Jesus.’

Now, that is a strange phrase, and, I suppose, its strangeness is the reason why our translators have softened it down to the more familiar and obvious ‘in Jesus.’ We can understand living through Christ, on being sacred through Christ, but what can sleeping through Christ mean? I shall hope to answer the question presently, but, in the meantime, I only wish to point out what the Apostle does say, and to plead for letting him say it, strange though it sounds. For the strange and the difficult phrases of Scripture are like the hard quartz reefs in which gold is, and if we slur them over we are likely to loose the treasure. Let us try if we can find what the gold here may be.

Now, there are only two thoughts that I wish to dwell upon as suggested by these words. One is the softened aspect of death, and of the state of the Christian dead; and the other is the ground or cause of that softened aspect.

I. First, then, the softened aspect of death, and of the state of the Christian dead.

It is to Jesus primarily that the New Testament writers owe their use of this gracious emblem of sleep. For, as you remember, the word was twice upon our Lord’s lips; once when, over the twelve-years-old maid from whom life had barely ebbed away, He said, ‘She is not dead, but sleepeth’; and once when in regard of the man Lazarus, from whom life had removed further, He said, ‘Our friend sleepeth, but I go that I may awake him out of sleep.’ But Jesus was not the originator of the expression. You find it in the Old Testament, where the prophet Daniel, speaking of the end of the days and the bodily Resurrection, designates those who share in it as ‘them that sleep in the dust of the earth.’ And the Old Testament was not the sole origin of the phrase. For it is too natural, too much in accordance with the visibilities of death, not to have suggested itself to many hearts, and been shrined in many languages. Many an inscription of Greek and Roman date speaks of death under this figure; but almost always it is with the added, deepened note of despair, that it is a sleep which knows no waking, but lasts through eternal night.

Now, the Christian thought associated with this emblem is the precise opposite of the pagan one. The pagan heart shrank from naming the ugly thing because it was so ugly. So dark and deep a dread coiled round the man, as he contemplated it, that he sought to drape the dreadfulness in some kind of thin, transparent veil, and to put the buffer of a word between him and its hideousness. But the Christian's motive for the use of the word is the precise opposite. He uses the gentler expression because the thing has become gentler.

It is profoundly significant that throughout the whole of the New Testament the plain, naked word 'death' is usually applied, not to the physical fact which we ordinarily designate by the name, but to the grim thing of which that physical fact is only the emblem and the parable, viz., the true death which lies in the separation of the soul from God; whilst predominately the New Testament usage calls the physical fact by some other gentler form of expression, because, as I say, the gentleness has enfolded the thing to be designated.

For instance, you find one class of representations which speak of death as being a departing and a being with Christ; or which call it, as one of the apostles does, an 'exodus,' where it is softened down to be merely a change of environment, a change of locality. Then another class of representations speak of it as 'putting off this my tabernacle,' or, the dissolution of the 'earthly house'--where there is a broad, firm line of demarcation drawn between the inhabitant and the habitation, and the thing is softened down to be a mere change of dwelling. Again, another class of expressions speak of it as being an 'offering,' where the main idea is that of a voluntary surrender, a sacrifice or libation of myself, and my life poured out upon the altar of God. But sweetest, deepest, most appealing to all our hearts, is that emblem of my text, 'them that sleep.' It is used, if I count rightly, some fourteen times in the New Testament, and it carries with it large and plain lessons, on which I touch but for a moment. What, then, does this metaphor say to us?

Well, it speaks first of rest. That is not altogether an attractive conception to some of us. If it be taken exclusively it is by no means wholesome. I suppose that the young, and the strong, and the eager, and the ambitious, and the prosperous rather shrink from the notion of their activities being stiffened into slumber. But, dear friends, there are some of us like tired children in a fair, who would fain have done with the weariness, who have made experience of the distractions and bewildering changes, whose backs are stiffened with toil, whose hearts are heavy with loss. And to all of us, in some moods, the prospect of shuffling off this weary coil of responsibilities and duties and tasks and sorrows, and of passing into indisturbance and repose, appeals. I believe, for my part, that, after all, the deepest longing of men--though they search for it through toil and effort--is for repose. As the poet has taught us, 'there is no joy but calm.' Every heart is weary enough, and heavy laden, and labouring enough, to feel the sweetness of a promise of rest:--

'Sleep, full of rest from head to foot, Lie still, dry dust, secure of change.'

Yes! but the rest of which our emblem speaks is, as I believe, only applicable to the bodily frame. The word 'sleep' is a transcript of what sense enlightened by faith sees in that still form, with the folded hands and the quiet face and the closed eyes. But let us remember that this repose, deep and blessed as it is, is not, as some would say, the repose of unconsciousness. I do not believe, and I would have you not believe, that this emblem refers to the vigorous, spiritual life, or that the passage from out of the toil and moil of earth into the calm of the darkness beyond has any power in limiting or suspending the vital force of the man.

Why, the very metaphor itself tells us that the sleeper is not unconscious. He is parted from the outer world, he is unaware of externals. When Stephen knelt below the old wall, and was surrounded by howling fanatics that slew him, one moment he was gashed with stones and tortured, and the next 'he fell on sleep.' They might howl, and the stones fly as they would, and he was all unaware of it. Like Jonah sleeping in the hold, what mattered the roaring of the storm to him? But separation from externals does not mean suspense of life or of consciousness, and the slumberer often dreams, and is aware of himself persistently throughout his slumber. Nay! some of his faculties are set at liberty to work more energetically, because his connection with the outer world is for the time suspended.

And so I say that what on the hither side is sleep, on the further side is awaking, and that the complex whole of the condition of the sainted dead may be described with equal truth by either metaphor; ‘they sleep in Jesus’; or, ‘when I awake I shall be satisfied with Thy likeness.’

Scripture, as it seems to me, distinctly carries this limitation of the emblem. For what does it mean when the Apostle says that to depart and to be with Christ is far better? Surely he who thus spoke conceived that these two things were contemporaneous, the departing and the being with Him. And surely he who thus spoke could not have conceived that a millennium-long parenthesis of slumberous unconsciousness was to intervene between the moment of his decease and the moment of his fellowship with Jesus. How could a man prefer that dormant state to the state here, of working for and living with the Lord? Surely, being with Him must mean that we know where we are, and who is our companion.

And what does that text mean: ‘Ye are come unto the spirits of just men made perfect,’ unless it means that of these two classes of persons who are thus regarded as brought into living fellowship, each is aware of the other? Does perfecting of the spirit mean the smiting of the spirit into unconsciousness? Surely not, and surely in view of such words as these, we must recognise the fact that, however limited and imperfect may be the present connection of the disembodied dead, who sleep in Christ, with external things, they know themselves, they know their home and their companion, and they know the blessedness in which they are lapped.

But another thought which is suggested by this emblem is, as I have already said, most certainly the idea of awaking. The pagans said, as indeed one of their poets has it, ‘Suns can sink and return, but for us, when our brief light sinks, there is but one perpetual night of slumber.’ The Christian idea of death is, that it is transitory as a sleep in the morning, and sure to end. As St. Augustine says somewhere, ‘Wherefore are they called sleepers, but because in the day of the Lord they will be reawakened?’

And so these are the thoughts, very imperfectly spoken, I know, which spring like flowers from this gracious metaphor 'them that sleep'--rest and awaking; rest and consciousness.

II. Note the ground of this softened aspect.

They 'sleep through Him.' It is by reason of Christ and His work, and by reason of that alone, that death's darkness is made beautiful, and death's grimness is softened down to this. Now, in order to grasp the full meaning of such words as these of the Apostle, we must draw a broad distinction between the physical fact of the ending of corporeal life and the mental condition which is associated with it by us. What we call death, if I may so say, is a complex thing--a bodily phenomenon plus conscience, the sense of sin, the certainty of retribution in the dim beyond. And you have to take these elements apart. The former remains, but if the others are removed, the whole has changed its character and is become another thing, and a very little thing.

The mere physical fact is a trifle. Look at it as you see it in the animals; look at it as you see it in men when they actually come to it. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it is painless and easy, and men sink into slumber. Strange, is it not, that so small a reality should have power to cast over human life so immense and obscuring a shadow! Why? Because, as the Apostle says, 'the sting of death is sin,' and if you can take the sting out of it, then there is very little to fear, and it comes down to be an insignificant and transient element in our experience.

Now, the death of Jesus Christ takes away, if I may so say, the nimbus of apprehension and dread arising from conscience and sin, and the forecast of retribution. There is nothing left for us to face except the physical fact, and any rough soldier, with a coarse, red coat upon him, will face that for eighteenpence a day, and think himself well paid. Jesus Christ has abolished death, leaving the mere shell, but taking all the substance out of it. It has become a different thing to men, because in that death of His He has exhausted the bitterness, and has made it possible that we should pass into the shadow, and not fear either conscience or sin or judgment.

In this connection I cannot but notice with what a profound meaning the Apostle, in this very verse, uses the bare, naked word in reference to Him, and the softened one in reference to us. ‘If we believe that Jesus Christ died and rose again, even so them also which sleep.’ Ah! yes! He died indeed, bearing all that terror with which men’s consciences have invested death. He died indeed, bearing on Himself the sins of the world. He died that no man henceforward need ever die in that same fashion. His death makes our deaths sleep, and His Resurrection makes our sleep calmly certain of a waking.

So, dear ‘brethren, I would not have you ignorant concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not even as others which have no hope.’ And I would have you to remember that, whilst Christ by His work has made it possible that the terror may pass away, and death may be softened and minimised into slumber, it will not be so with you--unless you are joined to Him, and by trust in the power of His death and the overflowing might of His Resurrection, have made sure that what He has passed through, you will pass through, and where He is, and what He is, you will be also.

Two men die by one railway accident, sitting side by side upon one seat, smashed in one collision. But though the outward fact is the same about each, the reality of their deaths is infinitely different. The one falls asleep through Jesus, in Jesus; the other dies indeed, and the death of his body is only a feeble shadow of the death of his spirit. Do you knit yourself to the Life, which is Christ, and then ‘he that believeth on Me shall never die.’

6) 1 Thessalonians 5:8

1 Thessalonians

THE WORK AND ARMOUR OF THE CHILDREN OF THE DAY

1Th. 5:8.

This letter to the Thessalonians is the oldest book of the New Testament. It was probably written within something like twenty years of the Crucifixion; long, therefore, before any of the Gospels were in existence. It is, therefore, exceedingly interesting and instructive to notice how this whole context is saturated with allusions to our Lord’s teaching, as it is preserved in these Gospels; and how it takes for granted that the Thessalonian Christians were familiar with the very words.

For instance: ‘Yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night’ [ver. 2]. How did these people in Thessalonica know that? They had been Christians for a year or so only; they had been taught by Paul for a few weeks only, or a month or two at the most. How did they know it? Because they had been told what the Master had said: ‘If the goodman of the house had known at what hour the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up.’

And there are other allusions in the context almost as obvious: ‘The children of the light.’ Who said that? Christ, in His words: ‘The children of this world are wiser than the children of light.’ ‘They that sleep, sleep in the night, and if they be drunken, are drunken in the night.’ Where does that metaphor come from? ‘Take heed lest at any time ye be overcharged with surfeiting and drunkenness, and the cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares.’ ‘Watch, lest coming suddenly He find you sleeping!’

So you see all the context reposes upon, and presupposes the very words, which you find in our present existing Gospels, as the words of the Lord Jesus. And this is all but contemporaneous, and quite independent, evidence of the existence in the Church, from the beginning, of a traditional teaching which is now preserved for us in that fourfold record of His life.

Take that remark for what it is worth; and now turn to the text itself with which I have to deal in this sermon. The whole of the context may be said to be a little dissertation upon the moral and religious uses of the doctrine of our Lord’s second coming. In my text these are summed up in one central injunction which has preceding it a motive that enforces it, and following it a method that ensures it. ‘Let us be sober’; that is the centre thought; and it is buttressed upon either side by a motive and a means. ‘Let us who are of the day,’ or ‘since we are of the day,--be sober.’ And let us be it by ‘putting on the breastplate and helmet of faith, love, and hope.’ These, then, are the three points which we have to consider.

I. First, this central injunction, into which all the moral teaching drawn from the second coming of Christ is gathered--'Let us be sober.'

Now, I do not suppose we are altogether to omit any reference to the literal meaning of this word. The context seems to show that, by its reference to night as the season for drunken orgies. Temperance is moderation in regard not only to the evil and swinish sin of drunkenness, which is so manifestly contrary to all Christian integrity and nobility of character, but in regard to the far more subtle temptation of another form of sensual indulgence--gluttony. The Christian Church needed to be warned of that, and if these people in Thessalonica needed the warning I am quite sure that we need it. There is not a nation on earth which needs it more than Englishmen. I am no ascetic, I do not want to glorify any outward observance, but any doctor in England will tell you that the average Englishman eats and drinks a great deal more than is good for him. It is melancholy to think how many professing Christians have the edge and keenness of their intellectual and spiritual life blunted by the luxurious and senseless table-abundance in which they habitually indulge. I am quite sure that water from the spring and barley-bread would be a great deal better for their souls, and for their bodies too, in the case of many people who call themselves Christians. Suffer a word of exhortation, and do not let it be neglected because it is brief and general. Sparta, after all, is the best place for a man to live in, next to Jerusalem.

But, passing from that, let us turn to the higher subject with which the Apostle is here evidently mainly concerned. What is the meaning of the exhortation 'Be sober'? Well, first let me tell you what I think is not the meaning of it. It does not mean an unemotional absence of fervour in your Christian character.

There is a kind of religious teachers who are always preaching down enthusiasm, and preaching up what they call a 'sober standard of feeling' in matters of religion. By which, in nine cases out of ten, they mean precisely such a tepid condition as is described in much less polite language, when the voice from heaven says, 'Because thou art neither cold nor hot I will spue thee out of My mouth.' That is the real meaning of the 'sobriety' that some people are always desiring you to cultivate. I should have thought that the last piece of furniture which any Christian Church in the twentieth century needed was a refrigerator! A poker and a pair of bellows would be very much more needful for them. For, dear brethren, the truths that you and I profess to believe are of such a nature, so tremendous either in their joyfulness and beauty, or in their solemnity and awfulness, that one would think that if they once got into a man's head and heart, nothing but the most fervid and continuous glow of a radiant enthusiasm would correspond to their majesty and overwhelming importance. I venture to say that the only consistent Christian is the enthusiastic Christian; and that the only man who will ever do anything in this world for God or man worth doing is the man who is not sober , according to that cold-blooded definition which I have been speaking about, but who is all ablaze with an enkindled earnestness that knows no diminution and no cessation.

Paul, the very man that is exhorting here to sobriety, was the very type of an enthusiast all his life. So Festus thought him mad, and even in the Church at Corinth there were some to whom in his fervour, he seemed to be 'beside himself' [2Co. 5:13].

Oh! for more of that insanity! You may make up your minds to this; that any men or women that are in thorough earnest, either about Christianity or about any other great, noble, lofty, self-forgetting purpose, will have to be content to have the old Pentecostal charge flung at them:--'These men are full of new wine!' Well for the Church, and well for the men who deserve the taunt; for it means that they have learned something of the emotion that corresponds to such magnificent and awful verities as Christian faith converses with.

I did not intend to say so much about that; I turn now for a moment to the consideration of what this exhortation really means. It means, as I take it, mainly this: the prime Christian duty of self-restraint in the use and the love of all earthly treasures and pleasures.

I need not do more than remind you how, in the very make of a man's soul, it is clear that unless there be exercised rigid self-control he will go all to pieces. The make of human nature, if I may say so, shows that it is not meant for a democracy but a monarchy.

Here are within us many passions, tastes, desires, most of them rooted in the flesh, which are as blind as hunger and thirst are. If a man is hungry, the bread will satisfy him all the same whether he steals it or not; and it will not necessarily be distasteful even if it be poisoned. And there are other blind impulses and appetites in our nature which ask nothing except this:--'Give me my appropriate gratification, though all the laws of God and man be broken in order to get it!'

And so there has to be something like an eye given to these blind beasts, and something like a directing hand laid upon these instinctive impulses. The true temple of the human spirit must be built in stages, the broad base laid in these animal instincts; above them, and controlling them, the directing and restraining will; above it the understanding which enlightens it and them; and supreme over all the conscience with nothing between it and heaven. Where that is not the order of the inner man you get wild work. You have set 'beggars on horseback,' and we all know where they go! The man who lets passion and inclination guide is like a steam-boat with all the furnaces banked up, with the engines going full speed, and nobody at the wheel. It will drive on to the rocks, or wherever the bow happens to point, no matter though death and destruction lie beyond the next turn of the screw. That is what you will come to unless you live in the habitual exercise of rigid self-control.

And that self-control is to be exercised mainly, or at least as one very important form of it, in regard to our use and estimate of the pleasures of this present life. Yes! it is not only from the study of a man's make that the necessity for a very rigid self-government appears, but the observation of the conditions and circumstances in which he is placed points the same lesson. All round about him are hands reaching out to him drugged cups. The world with all its fading sweet comes tempting him, and the old fable fulfils itself--Whoever takes that Circe's cup and puts it to his lips and quaffs deep, turns into a swine, and sits there imprisoned at the feet of the sorceress for evermore!

There is only one thing that will deliver you from that fate, my brother. 'Be sober,' and in regard to the world and all that it offers to us--all joy, possession, gratification--'set a knife to thy throat if thou be a man given to appetite.’ There is no noble life possible on any other terms--not to say there is no Christian life possible on any other terms--but suppression and mortification of the desires of the flesh and of the spirit. You cannot look upwards and downwards at the same moment. Your heart is only a tiny room after all, and if you cram it full of the world, you relegate your Master to the stable outside. ‘Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.’ ‘Be sober,’ says Paul, then, and cultivate the habit of rigid self-control in regard to this present. Oh! what a melancholy, solemn thought it is that hundreds of professing Christians in England, like vultures after a full meal, have so gorged themselves with the garbage of this present life that they cannot fly, and have to be content with moving along the ground, heavy and languid. Christian men and women, are you keeping yourselves in spiritual health by a very sparing use of the dainties and delights of earth? Answer the question to your own souls and to your Judge.

II. And now let me turn to the other thoughts that lie here. There is, secondly, a motive which backs up and buttresses this exhortation. ‘Let us who are of the day’--or as the Revised Version has it a little more emphatically and correctly, ‘Let us, since we are of the day, be sober.’

‘The day’; what day? The temptation is to answer the question by saying--’of course the specific day which was spoken about in the beginning of the section, "the day of the Lord," that coming judgment by the coming Christ.’ But I think that although, perhaps, there may be some allusion here to that specific day, still, if you will look at the verses which immediately precede my text, you will see that in them the Apostle has passed from the thought of ‘the day of the Lord’ to that of day in general. That is obvious, I think, from the contrast he draws between the ‘day’ and the ‘night,’ the darkness and the light. If so, then, when he says ‘the children of the day’ he does not so much mean--though that is quite true--that we are, as it were, akin to that day of judgment, and may therefore look forward to it without fear, and in quiet confidence, lifting up our heads because our redemption draws nigh; but rather he means that Christians are the children of that which expresses knowledge, and joy, and activity. Of these things the day is the emblem, in every language and in every poetry. The day is the time when men see and hear, the symbol of gladness and cheer all the world over.

And so, says Paul, you Christian men and women belong to a joyous realm, a realm of light and knowledge, a realm of purity and righteousness. You are children of the light; a glad condition which involves many glad and noble issues. Children of the light should be brave, children of the light should not be afraid of the light, children of the light should be cheerful, children of the light should be buoyant, children of the light should be transparent, children of the light should be hopeful, children of the light should be pure, and children of the light should walk in this darkened world, bearing their radiance with them; and making things, else unseen, visible to many a dim eye.

But while these emblems of cheerfulness, hope, purity, and illumination are gathered together in that grand name--'Ye are the children of the day,' there is one direction especially in which the Apostle thinks that that consideration ought to tell, and that is the direction of self-restraint. ' Noblesse oblige! '--the aristocracy are bound to do nothing low or dishonourable. The children of the light are not to stain their hands with anything foul. Chambering and wantonness, slumber and drunkenness, the indulgence in the appetites of the flesh,--all that may be fitting for the night, it is clean incongruous with the day.

Well, if you want that turned into pedestrian prose--which is no more clear, but a little less emotional--it is just this: You Christian men and women belong--if you are Christians--to another state of things from that which is lying round about you; and, therefore, you ought to live in rigid abstinence from these things that are round about you.

That is plain enough surely, nor do I suppose that I need to dwell on that thought at any length. We belong to another order of things, says Paul; we carry a day with us in the midst of the night. What follows from that? Do not let us pursue the wandering lights and treacherous will-o'-the-wisps that lure men into bottomless bogs where they are lost. If we have light in our dwellings whilst Egypt lies in darkness, let it teach us to eat our meat with our loins girded, and our staves in our hands, not without bitter herbs, and ready to go forth into the wilderness. You do not belong to the world in which you live, if you are Christian men and women; you are only camped here. Your purposes, thoughts, hopes, aspirations, treasures, desires, delights, go up higher. And so, if you are children of the day, be self-restrained in your dealings with the darkness.

III. And, last of all, my text points out for us a method by which this great precept may be fulfilled:--'Putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and for an helmet the hope of salvation.'

That, of course, is the first rough draft occurring in Paul's earliest Epistle, of an image which recurs at intervals, and in more or less expanded form in other of his letters, and is so splendidly worked out in detail in the grand picture of the Christian armour in the Epistle to the Ephesians.

I need not do more than just remind you of the difference between that finished picture and this outline sketch. Here we have only defensive and not offensive armour, here the Christian graces are somewhat differently allocated to the different parts of the armour. Here we have only the great triad of Christian graces, so familiar on our lips--faith, hope, charity. Here we have faith and love in the closest possible juxtaposition, and hope somewhat more apart. The breastplate, like some of the ancient hauberks, made of steel and gold, is framed and forged out of faith and love blended together, and faith and love are more closely identified in fact than faith and hope, or than love and hope. For faith and love have the same object--and are all but contemporaneous. Wherever a man lays hold of Jesus Christ by faith, there cannot but spring up in his heart love to Christ; and there is no love without faith. So that we may almost say that faith and love are but the two throws of the shuttle, the one in the one direction and the other in the other; whereas hope comes somewhat later in a somewhat remoter connection with faith, and has a somewhat different object from these other two. Therefore it is here slightly separated from its sister graces. Faith, love, hope--these three form the defensive armour that guard the soul; and these three make self-control possible. Like a diver in his dress, who is let down to the bottom of the wild, far-weltering ocean, a man whose heart is girt by faith and charity, and whose head is covered with the helmet of hope, may be dropped down into the wildest sea of temptation and of worldliness, and yet will walk dry and unharmed through the midst of its depths, and breathe air that comes from a world above the restless surges.

And in like manner the cultivation of faith, charity, and hope is the best means for securing the exercise of sober self-control.

It is an easy thing to say to a man, ‘Govern yourself!’ It is a very hard thing with the powers that any man has at his disposal to do it. As somebody said about an army joining the rebels, ‘It’s a bad job when the extinguisher catches fire!’ And that is exactly the condition of things in regard to our power of self-government. The powers that should control are largely gone over to the enemy, and become traitors.

‘Who shall keep the very keepers?’ is the old question, and here is the answer:--You cannot execute the gymnastic feat of ‘erecting yourself above yourself’ any more than a man can take himself by his own coat collar and lift himself up from the ground with his own arms. But you can cultivate faith, hope, and charity, and these three, well cultivated and brought to bear upon your daily life, will do the governing for you. Faith will bring you into communication with all the power of God. Love will lead you into a region where all the temptations round you will be touched as by an Ithuriel spear, and will show their foulness. And hope will turn away your eyes from looking at the tempting splendours around, and fix them upon the glories that are above.

And so the reins will come into your hands in an altogether new manner, and you will be able to be king over your own nature in a fashion that you did not dream of before, if only you will trust in Christ, and love Him, and fix your desires on the things above.

Then you will be able to govern yourself when you let Christ govern you. The glories that are to be done away, that gleam round you like foul, flaring tallow-candles, will lose all their fascination and brightness, by reason of the glory that excelleth, the pure starlike splendour of the white inextinguishable lights of heaven.

And when by faith, charity, and hope you have drunk of the new wine of the kingdom, the drugged and opiate cup which a sorceress world presents, jewelled though it be, will lose its charms, and it will not be hard to turn from it and dash it to the ground.

God help you, brother, to be ‘sober,’ for unless you are ‘you cannot see the kingdom of God!’

7) 1 Thessalonians 5:10

1 Thessalonians

WAKING AND SLEEPING

1Th. 5:10.

In these words the Apostle concludes a section of this, his earliest letter, in which he has been dealing with the aspect of death in reference to the Christian. There are two very significant usages of language in the context which serve to elucidate the meaning of the words of our text, and to which I refer for a moment by way of introduction.

The one is that throughout this portion of his letter the Apostle emphatically reserves the word ‘died’ for Jesus Christ, and applies to Christ’s followers only the word ‘sleep.’ Christ’s death makes the deaths of those who trust Him a quiet slumber. The other is that the antithesis of waking and sleep is employed in two different directions in this section, being first used to express, by the one term, simply physical life, and by the other, physical death; and secondly, to designate respectively the moral attitude of Christian watchfulness and that of worldly apathy to things unseen and drowsy engrossment with the present.

So in the words immediately preceding my text, we read, ‘let us not sleep, as do others, but let us watch and be sober.’ The use of the antithesis in our text is chiefly the former, but there cannot be discharged from one of the expressions, ‘wake,’ the ideas which have just been associated with it, especially as the word which is translated ‘wake’ is the same as that just translated in the sixth verse, ‘let us watch.’ So that here there is meant by it, not merely the condition of life but that of Christian life--sober-minded vigilance and wide-awakeness to the realities of being. With this explanation of the meanings of the words before us, we may now proceed to consider them a little more minutely.

I. Note the death which is the foundation of life.

Recalling what I have said as to the precision and carefulness with which the Apostle varies his expressions in this context; speaking of Christ's death only by that grim name, and of the death of His servants as being merely a slumber, we have for the first thought suggested in reference to Christ's death, that it exhausted all the bitterness of death. Physically, the sufferings of our Lord were not greater, they were even less, than that of many a man. His voluntary acceptance of them was peculiar to Himself. But His death stands alone in this, that on His head was concentrated the whole awfulness of the thing. So far as the mere external facts go, there is nothing special about it. But I know not how the shrinking of Jesus Christ from the Cross can be explained without impugning His character, unless we see in His death something far more terrible than is the common lot of men. To me Gethsemane is altogether mysterious, and that scene beneath the olives shatters to pieces the perfectness of His character, unless we recognise that there it was the burden of the world's sin, beneath which, though His will never faltered, His human power tottered. Except we understand that, it seems to me that many who derived from Jesus Christ all their courage, bore their martyrdom better than He did; and that the servant has many a time been greater than his Lord. But if we take the Scripture point of view, and say, 'The Lord has made to meet upon Him the iniquity of us all,' then we can understand the agony beneath the olives, and the cry from the Cross, 'Why hast Thou forsaken Me?'

Further, I would notice that this death is by the Apostle set forth as being the main factor in man's redemption. This is the first of Paul's letters, dating long before the others with which we are familiar. Whatever may have been the spiritual development of St. Paul in certain directions after his conversion--and I do not for a moment deny that there was such--it is very important to notice that the fundamentals of his Christology and doctrine of salvation were the same from the beginning to the end, and that in this, his first utterance, he lays down, as emphatically and clearly as ever afterwards he did, the great truth that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died on the Cross, thereby secured man's redemption. Here he isolates the death from the rest of the history of Christ, and concentrates the whole light of his thought upon the Cross, and says, There! that is the power by which men have been redeemed. I beseech you to ask yourselves whether these representations of Christian truth adhere to the perspective of Scripture, which do not in like manner set forth in the foreground of the whole the atoning death of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Then note, further, that this death, the fountain of life, is a death for us. Now I know, of course, that the language here does not necessarily involve the idea of one dying instead of, but only of one dying on behalf of, another. But then I come to this question, In what conceivable sense, except the sense of bearing the world's sins, and, therefore, mine, is the death of Jesus Christ of advantage to me? Take the Scripture narratives. He died by the condemnation of the Jewish courts as a blasphemer; by the condemnation of the supercilious Roman court--cowardly in the midst of its superciliousness--as a possible rebel, though the sentencer did not believe in the reality of the charges. I want to know what good that is to me? He died, say some people, as the victim of a clearer insight and a more loving heart than the men around Him could understand. What advantage is that to me?

Oh, brethren! there is no meaning in the words 'He died for us' unless we understand that the benefit of His death lies in the fact that it was the sacrifice and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world; and that, therefore, He died for us.

But then remember, too, that in this expression is set forth, not only the objective fact of Christ's death for us, but much in reference to the subjective emotions and purposes of Him who died. Paul was writing to these Thessalonians, of whom none, I suppose, except possibly a few Jews who might be amongst them, had ever seen Jesus Christ in the flesh, or known anything about Him. And yet he says to them, 'Away across the ocean there, Jesus Christ died for you men, not one of whom had ever appealed to His heart through His eyes.'

The principle involved is capable of the widest possible expansion. When Christ went to the Cross there was in His heart, in His purposes, in His desires, a separate place for every soul of man whom He embraced, not with the dim vision of some philanthropist, who looks upon the masses of unborn generations as possibly beneficially affected by some of his far-reaching plans, but with the individualising and separating knowledge of a divine eye, and the love of a divine heart. Jesus Christ bore the sins of the world because He bore in His sympathies and His purposes the sins of each single soul. Yours and mine and all our fellows' were there. Guilt and fear and loneliness, and all the other evils that beset men because they have departed from the living God, are floated away

'By the water and the blood From Thy wounded side which flowed';

and as the context teaches us, it is because He died for us that He is our Lord, and because He died for every man that He is every man's Master and King.

II. Note, secondly, the transformation of our lives and deaths affected thereby.

You may remember that, in my introductory remarks, I pointed out the double application of that antithesis of waking or sleeping in the context as referring in one case to the fact of physical life or death, and in the other to the fact of moral engrossment with the slumbering influences of the present, or of Christian vigilance. I carry some allusion to both of these ideas in the remarks that I have to make.

Through Jesus Christ life may be quickened into watchfulness. It is not enough to take waking as meaning living, for you may turn the metaphor round and say about a great many men that living means dreamy sleeping. Paul speaks in the preceding verses of 'others' than Christians as being asleep, and their lives as one long debauch and slumber in the night. Whilst, in contrast with physical death, physical life may be called 'waking'; the condition of thousands of men, in regard to all the higher faculties, activities, and realities of being, is that of somnambulists--they are walking indeed, but they are walking in their sleep. Just as a man fast asleep knows nothing of the realities round him; just as he is swallowed up in his own dreams, so many walk in a vain show. Their highest faculties are dormant; the only real things do not touch them, and their eyes are closed to these. They live in a region of illusions which will pass away at cock-crowing, and leave them desolate. For some of us here living is only a distempered sleep, troubled by dreams which, whether they be pleasant or bitter, equally lack roots in the permanent realities to which we shall wake some day. But if we hold by Jesus Christ, who died for us, and let His love constrain us, His Cross quicken us, and the might of His great sacrifice touch us, and the blood of sprinkling be applied to our eyeballs as an eye-salve, that we may see, we shall wake from our opiate sleep--though it may be as deep as if the sky rained soporifics upon us--and be conscious of the things that are, and have our dormant faculties roused, and be quickened into intense vigilance against our enemies, and brace ourselves for our tasks, and be ever looking forward to that joyful hope, to that coming which shall bring the fulness of waking and of life. So, you professing Christians, do you take the lessons of this text? A sleeping Christian is on the high road to cease to be a Christian at all. If there be one thing more comprehensively imperative upon us than another, it is this, that, belonging, as we do by our very profession, to the day, and being the children of the light, we shall neither sleep nor be drunken, but be sober, watching as they who expect their Lord. You walk amidst realities that will hide themselves unless you gaze for them; therefore, watch. You walk amidst enemies that will steal subtly upon you, like some gliding serpent through the grass, or some painted savage in the forest; therefore, watch. You expect a Lord to come from heaven with a relieving army that is to raise the siege and free the hard-beset garrison from its fears and its toilsome work; therefore, watch. ‘They that sleep, sleep in the night.’ They who are Christ’s should be like the living creatures in the Revelation, all eyes round about, and every eye gazing on things unseen and looking for the Master when He comes.

On the other hand, the death of Christ will soften our deaths into slumber. The Apostle will not call what the senses call death, by that dread name, which was warranted when applied to the facts of Christ’s death. The physical fact remaining the same, all that is included under the complex whole called death which makes its terrors, goes, for a man who keeps fast hold of Christ who died and lives. For what makes the sting of death? Two or three things. It is like some poisonous insect’s sting, it is a complex weapon. One side of it is the fear of retribution. Another side of it is the shrinking from loneliness. Another side of it is the dread of the dim darkness of an unknown future. And all these are taken clean away. Is it guilt, dread of retribution? ‘Thou shalt answer, Lord, for me.’ Is it loneliness? In the valley of darkness ‘I will be with thee. My rod and My staff will comfort thee.’ Is it a shrinking from the dim unknown and all the familiar habitudes and occupations of the warm corner where we have lived? ‘Jesus Christ has brought immortality to light by the Gospel.’ We do not , according to the sad words of one of the victims of modern advanced thought, pass by the common road into the great darkness, but by the Christ-made living Way into the everlasting light. And so it is a misnomer to apply the same term to the physical fact plus the accompaniment of dread and shrinking and fear of retribution and solitude and darkness, and to the physical fact invested with the direct and bright opposites of all these.

Sleep is rest; sleep is consciousness; sleep is the prophecy of waking. We know not what the condition of those who sleep in Jesus may be, but we know that the child on its mother’s breast, and conscious somehow, in its slumber, of the warm place where its head rests, is full of repose. And they that sleep in Jesus will be so . Then, whether we wake or sleep does not seem to matter so very much.

III. The united life of all who live with Christ.

Christ’s gift to men is the gift of life in all senses of that word, from the lowest to the highest. That life, as our text tells us, is altogether unaffected by death. We cannot see round the sharp angle where the valley turns, but we know that the path runs straight on through the gorge up to the throat of the pass--and so on to the ‘shining table-lands whereof our God Himself is Sun and Moon.’ There are some rivers that run through stagnant lakes, keeping the tinge of their waters, and holding together the body of their stream undiverted from its course, and issuing undiminished and untarnished from the lower end of the lake. And so the stream of our lives may run through the Dead Sea, and come out below none the worse for the black waters through which it has forced its way. The life that Christ gives is unaffected by death. Our creed is a risen Saviour, and the corollary of that creed is, that death touches the circumference, but never gets near the man. It is hard to believe, in the face of the foolish senses; it is hard to believe, in the face of aching sorrow. It is hard to-day to believe, in the face of passionate and ingenious denial, but it is true all the same. Death is sleep, and sleep is life.

And so, further, my text tells us that this life is life with Christ. We know not details, we need not know them. Here we have the presence of Jesus

Christ, if we love Him, as really as when He walked the earth. Ay! more really, for Jesus Christ is nearer to us who, having not seen Him, love Him, and somewhat know His divinity and His sacrifice, than He was to the men who companied with Him all the time that He went in and out amongst them, whilst they were ignorant of who dwelt with them, and entertained the Lord of angels and men unawares. He is with us, and it is the power and the privilege and the joy of our lives to realise His presence. That Lord who, whilst He was on earth, was the Son of Man which is in heaven, now that He is in heaven in His corporeal humanity is the Son of God who dwells with us. And as He dwells with us, if we love Him and trust Him, so, but in fashion incapable of being revealed to us, now does He dwell with those of whose condition this is the only and all-sufficing positive knowledge which we have, that they are ‘absent from the body; present with the Lord.’

Further, that united life is a social life. The whole force of my text is often missed by English readers, who run into one idea the two words ‘together with.’ But if you would put a comma after ‘together,’ you would understand better what Paul meant. He refers to two forms of union. Whether we wake or sleep we shall live all aggregated together, and all aggregated ‘together’ because each is ‘with Him.’ That is to say, union with Jesus Christ makes all who partake of that union, whether they belong to the one side of the river or the other, into a mighty whole. They are together because they are with the Lord.

Suppose a great city, and a stream flowing through its centre. The palace and all pertaining to the court are on one side of the water; there is an outlying suburb on the other, of meaner houses, inhabited by poor and humble people. But yet it is one city. ‘Ye are come unto the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.’ We are knit together by one life, one love, one thought; and the more we fix our hearts on the things which those above live among and by, the more truly are we knit to them. As a quaint old English writer says, ‘They are gone but into another pew in the same church.’

We are one in Him, and so there will be a perfecting of union in reunion; and the inference so craved for by our hearts seems to be warranted to our understandings, that that society above, which is the perfection of society, shall not be lacking in the elements of mutual recognition and companionship, without which we cannot conceive of society at all. ‘And so we shall ever be with the Lord.’

Dear friends, I beseech you to trust your sinful souls to that dear Lord who bore you in His heart and mind when He bore His cross to Calvary and completed the work of your redemption. If you will accept Him as your sacrifice and Saviour, when He cried ‘It is finished,’ united to Him your lives will be quickened into intense activity and joyful vigilance and expectation, and death will be smoothed into a quiet falling asleep. ‘The shadow feared of man,’ that strikes threateningly across every path, will change as we approach it, if our hearts are anchored on Him who died for us, into the Angel of Light to whom God has given charge concerning us to bear up our feet upon His hands, and land us in the presence of the Lord and in the perfect society of those who love Him. And so shall we live together, and all together, with Him.

8) 1 Thessalonians 5:11

1 Thessalonians

EDIFICATION

1Th. 5:11.

I do not intend to preach about that clause only, but I take it as containing, in the simplest form, one of the Apostle’s favourite metaphors which runs through all his letters, and the significance of which, I think, is very little grasped by ordinary readers.

‘Edify one another.’ All metaphorical words tend to lose their light and colour, and the figure to get faint, in popular understanding. We all know that ‘edifice’ means a building; we do not all realise that ‘edify’ means to build up . And it is a great misfortune that our Authorised Version, in accordance with the somewhat doubtful principle on which its translators proceeded, varies the rendering of the one Greek word so as to hide the frequent recurrence of it in the apostolic teaching. The metaphor that underlies it is the notion of building up a structure. The Christian idea of the structure to be built up is that it is a temple. I wish in this sermon to try to bring out some of the manifold lessons and truths that lie in this great figure, as applied to the Christian life.

Now, glancing over the various uses of the phrase in the New Testament, I find that the figure of ‘building,’ as the great duty of the Christian life, is set forth under three aspects; self-edification, united edification, and divine edification. And I purpose to look at these in order.

I. First, self-edification.

According to the ideal of the Christian life that runs through the New Testament, each Christian man is a dwelling-place of God’s, and his work is to build himself up into a temple worthy of the divine indwelling. Now, I suppose that the metaphor is such a natural and simple one that we do not need to look for any Scriptural basis of it. But if we did, I should be disposed to find it in the solemn antithesis with which the Sermon on the Mount is closed, where there are the two houses pictured, the one built upon the rock and standing firm, and the other built upon the sand. But that is perhaps unnecessary.

We are all builders; building up--what? Character, ourselves. But what sort of a thing is it that we are building? Some of us pigsties, in which gross, swinish lusts wallow in filth; some of us shops; some of us laboratories, studies, museums; some of us amorphous structures that cannot be described. But the Christian man is to be building himself up into a temple of God. The aim which should ever burn clear before us, and preside over even our smallest actions, is that which lies in this misused old word, ‘edify’ yourselves.

The first thing about a structure is the foundation. And Paul was narrow enough to believe that the one foundation upon which a human spirit could be built up into a hallowed character is Jesus Christ. He is the basis of all our certitude. He is the anchor for all our hopes. To Him should be referred all our actions; for Him and by Him our lives should be lived. On Him should rest, solid and inexpugnable, standing four-square to all the winds that blow, the fabric of our characters. Jesus Christ is the pattern, the motive which impels, and the power which enables, me to rear myself into a habitation of God through the Spirit. Whilst I gladly acknowledge that very lovely structures may be reared upon another foundation than Him, I would beseech you all to lay this on your hearts and consciences, that for the loftiest, serenest beauty of character there is but one basis upon which it can be rested. ‘Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.’

Then there is another aspect of this same metaphor, not in Paul’s writings but in another part of the New Testament, where we read: ‘Ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith.’ So that, in a subordinate sense, a man’s faith is the basis upon which he can build such a structure of character; or, to put it into other words--in regard to the man himself, the first requisite to the rearing of such a fabric as God will dwell in is that he, by his own personal act of faith, should have allied himself to Jesus Christ, who is the foundation; and should be in a position to draw from Him all the power, and to feel raying out from Him all the impulses, and lovingly to discern in Him all the characteristics, which make Him a pattern for all men in their building.

The first course of stone that we lay is Faith; and that course is, as it were, mortised into the foundation, the living Rock. He that builds on Christ cannot build but by faith. The two representations are complementary to one another, the one, which represents Jesus Christ as the foundation, stating the ultimate fact, and the other, which represents faith as the foundation, stating the condition on which we come into vital contact with Christ Himself.

Then, further, in this great thought of the Christian life being substantially a building up of oneself on Jesus is implied the need for continuous labour. You cannot build up a house in half an hour. You cannot do it, as the old fable told us that Orpheus did, by music, or by wishing. There must be dogged, hard, continuous, life-long effort if there is to be this building up. No man becomes a saint per saltum . No man makes a character at a flash. The stones are actions; the mortar is that mystical, awful thing, habit; and deeds cemented together by custom rise into that stately dwelling-place in which God abides. So, there is to be a life-long work in character, gradually rearing it into His likeness.

The metaphor also carries with it the idea of orderly progression. There are a number of other New Testament emblems which set forth this notion of the true Christian ideal as being continual growth. For instance, ‘first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear,’ represents it as resembling vegetable growth, while elsewhere it is likened to the growth of the human body. Both of these are beautiful images, in that they suggest that such progressive advancement is the natural consequence of life; and is in one aspect effortless and instinctive.

But then you have to supplement that emblem with others, and there comes in sharp contrast to it the metaphor which represents the Christian progress as being warfare. There the element of resistance is emphasised, and the thought is brought out that progress is to be made in spite of strong antagonisms, partly to be found in external circumstances, and partly to be found in our own treacherous selves. The growth of the corn or of the body does not cover the whole facts of the case, but there must be warfare in order to growth.

There is also the other metaphor by which this Christian progress, which is indispensable to the Christian life, and is to be carried on, whatever may oppose it, is regarded as a race. There the idea of the great, attractive, but far-off future reward comes into view, as well as the strained muscles and the screwed-up energy with which the runner presses towards the mark. But we have not only to fling the result forward into the future, and to think of the Christian life as all tending towards an end, which end is not realised here; but we have to think of it, in accordance with this metaphor of my text, as being continuously progressive, so as that, though unfinished, the building is there; and much is done, though all is not accomplished, and the courses rise slowly, surely, partially realising the divine Architect’s ideal, long before the headstone is brought out with shoutings and tumult of acclaim. A continuous progress and approximation towards the perfect ideal of the temple completed, consecrated, and inhabited by God, lies in this metaphor.

Is that you, Christian man and woman? Is the notion of progress a part of your working belief? Are you growing, fighting, running, building up yourselves more and more in your holy faith? Alas! I cannot but believe that the very notion of progress has died out from a great many professing Christians.

There is one more idea in this metaphor of self-edification, viz., that our characters should be being modelled by us on a definite plan, and into a harmonious whole. I wonder how many of us in this chapel this morning have ever spent a quiet hour in trying to set clearly before ourselves what we want to make of ourselves, and how we mean to go about it. Most of us live by haphazard very largely, even in regard to outward things, and still more entirely in regard to our characters. Most of us have not consciously before us, as you put a pattern-line before a child learning to write, any ideal of ourselves to which we are really seeking to approximate. Have you? And could you put it into words? And are you making any kind of intelligent and habitual effort to get at it? I am afraid a great many of us, if we were honest, would have to say, No! If a man goes to work as his own architect, and has a very hazy idea of what it is that he means to build, he will not build anything worth the trouble. If your way of building up yourselves is, as Aaron said his way of making the calf was, putting all into the fire, and letting chance settle what comes out, nothing will come out better than a calf. Brother! if you are going to build, have a plan, and let the plan be the likeness of Jesus Christ. And then, with continuous work, and the exercise of continuous faith, which knits you to the foundation, 'build up yourselves for an habitation of God.'

II. We have to consider united edification.

There are two streams of representation about this matter in the Pauline Epistles, the one with which I have already been dealing, which does not so often appear, and the other which is the habitual form of the representation, according to which the Christian community, as a whole, is a temple, and building up is a work to be done reciprocally and in common. We have that representation with special frequency and detail in the Epistle to the Ephesians, where perhaps we may not be fanciful in supposing that the great prominence given to it, and to the idea of the Church as the temple of God, may have been in some degree due to the existence, in that city, of one of the seven wonders of the world, the Temple of Diana of the Ephesians.

But, be that as it may, what I want to point out is that united building is inseparable from the individual building up of which I have been speaking.

Now, it is often very hard for good, conscientious people to determine how much of their efforts ought to be given to the perfecting of their own characters in any department, and how much ought to be given to trying to benefit and help other people. I wish you to notice that one of the most powerful ways of building up myself is to do my very best to build up others. Some, like men in my position, for instance, and others whose office requires them to spend a great deal of time and energy in the service of their fellows, are tempted to devote themselves too much to building up character in other people, and to neglect their own. It is a temptation that we need to fight against, and which can only be overcome by much solitary meditation. Some of us, on the other hand, may be tempted, for the sake of our own perfecting, intellectual cultivation, or improvement in other ways, to minimise the extent to which we are responsible for helping and blessing other people. But let us remember that the two things cannot be separated; and that there is nothing that will make a man more like Christ, which is the end of all our building, than casting himself into the service of his fellows with self-oblivion.

Peter said, ‘Master! let us make here three tabernacles.’ Ay! But there was a demoniac boy down below, and the disciples could not cast out the demon. The Apostle did not know what he said when he preferred building up himself, by communion with God and His glorified servants, to hurrying down into the valley, where there were devils to fight and broken hearts to heal. Build up yourselves, by all means; if you do you will have to build up your brethren. ‘The edifying of the body of Christ’ is a plain duty which no Christian man can neglect without leaving a tremendous gap in the structure which he ought to rear.

The building resulting from united edification is represented in Scripture, not as the agglomeration of a number of little shrines, the individuals, but as one great temple. That temple grows in two respects, both of which carry with them imperative duties to us Christian people. It grows by the addition of new stones. And so every Christian is bound to seek to gather into the fold those that are wandering far away, and to lay some stone upon that sure foundation. It grows, also, by the closer approximation of all the members one to another, and the individual increase of each in Christlike characteristics. And we are bound to help one another therein, and to labour earnestly for the advancement of our brethren, and for the unity of God's Church. Apart from such efforts our individual edifying of ourselves will become isolated, the results one-sided, and we ourselves shall lose much of what is essential to the rearing in ourselves of a holy character. 'What God hath joined together let not man put asunder.' Neither seek to build up yourselves apart from the community, nor seek to build up the community apart from yourselves.

III. Lastly, the Apostle, in his writings, sets forth another aspect of this general thought, viz., divine edification.

When he spoke to the elders of the church of Ephesus he said that Christ was able 'to build them up.' When he wrote to the Corinthians he said, 'Ye are God's building.' To the Ephesians he wrote, 'Ye are built for an habitation of God through the Spirit .' And so high above all our individual and all our united effort he carries up our thoughts to the divine Master-builder, by whose work alone a Paul, when he lays the foundation, and an Apollos, when he builds thereupon, are of any use at all.

Thus, dear brethren, we have to base all our efforts on this deeper truth, that it is God who builds us into a temple meet for Himself, and then comes to dwell in the temple that He has built.

So let us keep our hearts and minds expectant of, and open for, that Spirit's influences. Let us be sure that we are using all the power that God does give us. His work does not supersede mine. My work is to avail myself of His. The two thoughts are not contradictory. They correspond to, and fill out, each other, though warring schools of one-eyed theologians and teachers have set them in antagonism. 'Work out . . . for it is God that worketh in .' That is the true reconciliation. 'Ye are God's building; build up yourselves in your most holy faith.'

If God is the builder, then boundless, indomitable hope should be ours. No man can look at his own character, after all his efforts to mend it, without being smitten by a sense of despair, if he has only his own resources to fall back upon. Our experience is like that of the monkish builders, according to many an old legend, who found every morning that yesterday's work had been pulled down in the darkness by demon hands. There is no man whose character is anything more than a torso, an incomplete attempt to build up the structure that was in his mind--like the ruins of half-finished palaces and temples which travellers came across sometimes in lands now desolate, reared by a forgotten race who were swept away by some unknown calamity, and have left the stones half-lifted to their courses, half-hewed in their quarries, and the building gaunt and incomplete. But men will never have to say about any of God's architecture, He 'began to build and was not able to finish.' As the old prophecy has it, 'His hands have laid the foundation of the house, His hands shall also finish it.' Therefore, we are entitled to cherish endless hope and quiet confidence that we, even we, shall be reared up into an habitation of God through the Spirit.

What are you building? 'Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone.' Let every man take heed what and how and that he buildeth thereon.

9) 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

1 Thessalonians

CONTINUAL PRAYER AND ITS EFFECTS

1Th. 5:16-18.

The peculiarity and the stringency of these three precepts is the unbroken continuity which they require. To rejoice, to pray, to give thanks, are easy when circumstances favour, as a taper burns steadily in a windless night; but to do these things always is as difficult as for the taper's flame to keep upright when all the winds are eddying round it. 'Evermore'--'without ceasing'--'in everything'--these qualifying words give the injunctions of this text their grip and urgency. The Apostle meets the objections which he anticipates would spring to the lips of the Thessalonians, to the effect that he was requiring impossibilities, by adding that, hard and impracticable as they might think such a constant attitude of mind and heart, 'This is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.' So, then, a Christian life may be lived continuously on the high level; and more than that, it is our duty to try to live ours thus.

We need not fight with other Christian people about whether absolute obedience to these precepts is possible. It will be soon enough for us to discuss whether a completely unbroken uniformity of Christian experience is attainable in this life, when we have come a good deal nearer to the attainable than we have yet reached. Let us mend our breaches of continuity a good deal more, and then we may begin to discuss the question whether an absolute absence of any cessation of the continuity is consistent with the conditions of Christian life here.

Now it seems to me that these three exhortations hold together in a very striking way, and that Paul knew what he was about when he put in the middle, like the strong central pole that holds up a tent, that exhortation, 'Pray without ceasing.' For it is the primary precept, and on its being obeyed the possibility of the fulfilment of the other two depends. If we pray without ceasing, we shall rejoice evermore and in everything give thanks. So, then, the duty of continual prayer, and the promise, as well as the precept, that its results are to be continual joy and continual thanksgiving, are suggested by these words.

I. The duty of continual prayer.

Roman Catholics, with their fatal habit of turning the spiritual into material, think that they obey that commandment when they set a priest or a nun on the steps of the altar to repeat Ave Marias day and night. That is a way of praying without ceasing which we can all see to be mechanical and unworthy. But have we ever realised what this commandment necessarily reveals to us, as to what real prayer is? For if we are told to do a thing uninterruptedly, it must be something that can run unbroken through all the varieties of our legitimate duties and necessary occupations and absorptions with the things seen and temporal. Is that your notion of prayer? Or do you fancy that it simply means dropping down on your knees, and asking God to give you some things that you very much want? Petition is an element in prayer, and that it shall be crystallised into words is necessary sometimes; but there are prayers that never get themselves uttered, and I suppose that the deepest and truest communion with God is voiceless and wordless.

‘Things which it was not possible for a man to utter,’ was Paul’s description of what he saw and felt, when he was most completely absorbed in, and saturated with, the divine glory. The more we understand what prayer is, the less we shall feel that it depends upon utterance. For the essence of it is to have heart and mind filled with the consciousness of God’s presence, and to have the habit of referring everything to Him, in the moment when we are doing it, or when it meets us. That, as I take it, is prayer. The old mystics had a phrase, quaint, and in some sense unfortunate, but very striking, when they spoke about ‘the practice of the presence of God.’ God is here always, you will say; yes, He is, and to open the shutters, and to let the light always in, into every corner of my heart, and every detail of my life--that is what Paul means by ‘Praying without ceasing.’ Petitions? Yes; but something higher than petitions--the consciousness of being in touch with the Father, feeling that He is all round us. It was said about one mystical thinker that he was a ‘God-intoxicated man.’ It is an ugly word, but it expresses a very deep thing; but let us rather say a God-filled man. He who is such ‘prays always.’

But how may we maintain that state of continual devotion, even amidst the various and necessary occupations of our daily lives? As I said, we need not trouble ourselves about the possibility of complete attainment of that ideal. We know that we can each of us pray a great deal more than we do, and if there are regions in our lives into which we feel that God will not come, habits that we have dropped into which we feel to be a film between us and Him, the sooner we get rid of them the better. But into all our daily duties, dear friends, however absorbing, however secular, however small, however irritating they may be, however monotonous, into all our daily duties it is possible to bring Him.

> ‘*A servant with this clause Makes drudgery divine, Who sweeps a room, as by Thy laws, Makes that and the calling fine.*’

But if that is our aim, our conscious aim, our honest aim, we shall recognise that a help to it is words of prayer. I do not believe in silent adoration, if there is nothing but silent; and I do not believe in a man going through life with the conscious presence of God with him, unless, often, in the midst of the stress of daily life, he shoots little arrows of two-worded prayers up into the heavens, ‘Lord! be with me.’ ‘Lord! help me.’ ‘Lord! stand by me now’; and the like. ‘They cried unto God in the battle,’ when some people would have thought they would have been better occupied in trying to keep their heads with their swords. It was not a time for very elaborate supplications when the foemen’s arrows were whizzing round them, but ‘they cried unto the Lord, and He was entreated of them.’ ‘Pray without ceasing.’

Further, if we honestly try to obey this precept we shall more and more find out, the more earnestly we do so, that set seasons of prayer are indispensable to realising it. I said that I do not believe in silent adoration unless it sometimes finds its tongue, nor do I believe in a diffused worship that does not flow from seasons of prayer. There must be, away up amongst the hills, a dam cast across the valley that the water may be gathered behind it, if the great city is to be supplied with the pure fluid. What would become of Manchester if it were not for the reservoirs at Woodhead away among the hills? Your pipes would be empty. And that is what will become of you Christian professors in regard to your habitual consciousness of God’s presence, if you do not take care to have your hours of devotion sacred, never to be interfered with, be they long or short, as may have to be determined by family circumstances, domestic duties, daily avocations, and a thousand other causes. But, unless we pray at set seasons, there is little likelihood of our praying without ceasing.

II. The duty of continual rejoicing.

If we begin with the central duty of continual prayer, then these other two which, as it were, flow from it on either side, will be possible to us; and of these two the Apostle sets first, ‘Rejoice evermore.’ This precept was given to the Thessalonians, in Paul’s first letter, when things were comparatively bright with him, and he was young and buoyant; and in one of his later letters, when he was a prisoner, and things were anything but rosy coloured, he struck the same note again, and in spite of his ‘bonds in Christ’ bade the Philippians ‘Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice.’ Indeed, that whole prison-letter might be called the Epistle of Joy, so suffused with sunshine of Christian gladness is it. Now, no doubt, joy is largely a matter of temperament. Some of us are constitutionally more buoyant and cheerful than others. And it is also very largely a matter of circumstances.

I admit all that, and yet I come back to Paul's command: 'Rejoice evermore.' For if we are Christian people, and have cultivated what I have called 'the practice of the presence of God' in our lives, then that will change the look of things, and events that otherwise would be 'at enmity with joy' will cease to have a hostile influence over it. There are two sources from which a man's gladness may come, the one his circumstances of a pleasant and gladdening character; the other his communion with God. It is like some river that is composed of two affluents, one of which rises away up in the mountains, and is fed by the eternal snows; the other springs on the plain somewhere, and is but the drainage of the surface-water, and when hot weather comes, and drought is over all the land, the one affluent is dry, and only a chaos of ghastly white stones litters the bed where the flashing water used to be. What then? Is the stream gone because one of its affluents is dried up, and has perished or been lost in the sands? The gushing fountains away up among the peaks near the stars are bubbling up all the same, and the heat that dried the surface stream has only loosened the treasures of the snows, and poured them more abundantly into the other's bed. So 'Rejoice in the Lord always'; and if earth grows dark, lift your eyes to the sky, that is light. To one walking in the woods at nightfall 'all the paths are dim,' but the strip of heaven above the trees is the brighter for the green gloom around. The organist's one hand may be keeping up one sustained note, while the other is wandering over the keys; and one part of a man's nature may be steadfastly rejoicing in the Lord, whilst the other is feeling the weight of sorrows that come from earth. The paradox of the Christian life may be realised as a blessed experience of every one of us: a surface troubled, a central calm; an ocean tossed with storm, and yet the crest of every wave flashing in the sunshine. 'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice.'

III. Lastly, the duty of continual thankfulness.

That, too, is possible only on condition of continual communion with God. As I said in reference to joy, so I say in reference to thankfulness; the look of things in this world depends very largely on the colour of the spectacles through which you behold them.

> '*There's nothing either good or bad But thinking makes it so.*'

And if a man in communion with God looks at the events of his life as he might put on a pair of coloured glasses to look at a landscape, it will be tinted with a glory and a glow as he looks. The obligation to gratitude, often neglected by us, is singularly, earnestly, and frequently enjoined in the New Testament. I am afraid that the average Christian man does not recognise its importance as an element in his Christian experience. As directed to the past it means that we do not forget, but that, as we look back, we see the meaning of these old days, and their possible blessings, and the loving purposes which sent them, a great deal more clearly than we did whilst we were passing through them. The mountains that, when you are close to them, are barren rock and cold snow, glow in the distance with royal purples. And so if we, from our standing point in God, will look back on our lives, losses will disclose themselves as gains, sorrows as harbingers of joy, conflict as a means of peace, the crooked things will be straight, and the rough places plain; and we may for every thing in the past give thanks, if only we 'pray without ceasing.' The exhortation as applied to the present means that we bow our wills, that we believe that all things are working together for our good, and that, like Job in his best moments, we shall say, 'The Lord gave, the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the Name of the Lord.' Ah, that is hard. It is possible, but it is only possible if we 'pray without ceasing,' and dwell beside God all the days of our lives, and all the hours of every day. Then, and only then, shall we be able to thank Him for all the way by which He hath led us these many years in the wilderness, that has been brightened by the pillar of cloud by day, and the fire by night.

10)1 Thessalonians 5:27

1 Thessalonians

PAUL'S EARLIEST TEACHING

1Th. 5:27.

If the books of the New Testament were arranged according to the dates of their composition, this epistle would stand first. It was written somewhere about twenty years after the Crucifixion, and long before any of the existing Gospels. It is, therefore, of peculiar interest, as being the most venerable extant Christian document, and as being a witness to Christian truth quite independent of the Gospel narratives.

The little community at Thessalonica had been gathered together as the result of a very brief period of ministration by Paul. He had spoken for three successive Sabbaths in the synagogue, and had drawn together a Christian society, mostly consisting of heathens, though with a sprinkling of Jews amongst them. Driven from the city by a riot, he had left it for Athens, with many anxious thoughts, of course, as to whether the infant community would be able to stand alone after so few weeks of his presence and instruction. Therefore he sent back one of his travelling companions, Timothy by name, to watch over the young plant for a little while. When Timothy returned with the intelligence of their steadfastness, it was good news indeed, and with a sense of relieved anxiety, he sits down to write this letter, which, all through, throbs with thankfulness, and reveals the strain which the news had taken off his spirit.

There are no such definite doctrinal statements in it as in the most of Paul’s longer letters; it is simply an outburst of confidence and love and tenderness, and a series of practical instructions. It has been called the least doctrinal of the Pauline Epistles. And in one sense, and under certain limitations, that is perfectly true. But the very fact that it is so makes its indications and hints and allusions the more significant; and if this letter, not written for the purpose of enforcing any special doctrinal truth, be so saturated as it is with the facts and principles of the Gospel, the stronger is the attestation which it gives to the importance of these. I have, therefore, thought it might be worth our while now, and might, perhaps, set threadbare truth in something of a new light, if we put this--the most ancient Christian writing extant, which is quite independent of the four Gospels--into the witness-box, and see what it has to say about the great truths and principles which we call the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is my simple design, and I gather the phenomena into three or four divisions for the sake of accuracy and order.

I. First of all, then, let us hear its witness to the divine Christ.

Look how the letter begins. ‘Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians, which is in God the Father, and in the Lord

Jesus Christ.' What is the meaning of that collocation, putting these two names side by side, unless it means that the Lord Jesus Christ sits on the Father's throne, and is divine?

Then there is another fact that I would have you notice, and that is that more than twenty times in this short letter that great name is applied to Jesus, 'the Lord.' Now mark that that is something more than a mere title of human authority. It is in reality the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament Jehovah, and is the transference to Him of that incommunicable name.

And then there is another fact which I would have you weigh, viz., that in this letter direct prayer is offered to our Lord Himself. In one place we read the petition, 'May our God and Father Himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way unto you,' where the petition is presented to both, and where both are supposed to be operative in the answer. And more than that, the word 'direct,' following upon this plural subject, is itself a singular verb. Could language more completely express than that grammatical solecism does, the deep truth of the true and proper divinity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ? There is nothing in any part of Scripture more emphatic and more lofty in its unfaltering proclamation of that fundamental truth of the Gospel than this altogether undoctrinal Epistle.

The Apostle does not conceive himself to be telling these men, though they were such raw and recent Christians, anything new when he presupposes the truth that to Him desires and prayers may go. Thus the very loftiest apex of revealed religion had been imparted to that handful of heathens in the few weeks of the Apostle's stay amongst them. And nowhere upon the inspired pages of the fourth Evangelist, nor in that great Epistle to the Colossians, which is the very citadel and central fort of that doctrine in Scripture, is there more emphatically stated this truth than here, in these incidental allusions.

This witness, at any rate, declares, apart altogether from any other part of Scripture, that so early in the development of the Church's history, and to people so recently dragged from idolatry, and having received but such necessarily partial instruction in revealed truth, this had not been omitted, that the Christ in whom they trusted was the Everlasting Son of the Father.

And it takes it for granted that, so deeply was that truth embedded in their new consciousness that an allusion to it was all that was needed for their understanding and their faith. That is the first part of the testimony.

II. Now, secondly, let us ask what this witness has to say about the dying Christ.

There is no doctrinal theology in the Epistle to the Thessalonians, they tell us. Granted that there is no articulate argumentative setting forth of great doctrinal truths. But these are implied and involved in almost every word of it; and are definitely stated thus incidentally in more places than one. Let us hear the witness about the dying Christ.

First, as to the fact, ‘The Jews killed the Lord Jesus.’ The historical fact is here set forth distinctly. And then, beyond the fact, there is as distinctly, though in the same incidental fashion, set forth the meaning of that fact--’God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us.’

Here are at least two things--one, the allusion, as to a well-known and received truth, proclaimed before now to them, that Jesus Christ in His death had died for them; and the other, that Jesus Christ was the medium through whom the Father had appointed that men should obtain all the blessings which are wrapped up in that sovereign word ‘salvation.’ I need but mention in this connection another verse, from another part of the letter, which speaks of Jesus as ‘He that delivereth us from the wrath to come.’ Remark that there our Authorised Version fails to give the whole significance of the words, because it translates delivered , instead of, as the Revised Version correctly does, delivereth . It is a continuous deliverance, running all through the life of the Christian man, and not merely to be realised away yonder at the far end; because by the mighty providence of God, and by the automatic working of the consequences of every transgression and disobedience, that ‘wrath’ is ever coming, coming, coming towards men, and lighting on them, and a continual Deliverer, who delivers us by His death, is what the human heart needs. This witness is distinct that the death of Christ is a sacrifice, that the death of Christ is man’s deliverance from wrath, that the death of Christ is a present deliverance from the consequences of transgression.

And was that Paul’s peculiar doctrine? Is it conceivable that, in a letter in which he refers--once, at all events--to the churches in Judea as their ‘brethren,’ he was proclaiming any individual or schismatic reading of the facts of the life of Jesus Christ? I believe that there has been a great deal too much made of the supposed divergencies of types of doctrine in the New Testament. There are such types, within certain limits. Nobody would mistake a word of John’s calm, mystical, contemplative spirit for a word of Paul’s fiery, dialectic spirit. And nobody would mistake either the one or the other for Peter’s impulsive, warm-hearted exhortations. But whilst there are diversities in the way of apprehending, there are no diversities in the declaration of what is the central truth to be apprehended. These varyings of the types of doctrine in the New Testament are one in this, that all point to the Cross as the world’s salvation, and declare that the death there was the death for all mankind.

Paul comes to it with his reasoning; John comes to it with his adoring contemplation; Peter comes to it with his mind saturated with Old Testament allusions. Paul declares that the ‘Christ died for us’; John declares that He is ‘the Lamb of God’; Peter declares that ‘Christ bare our sins in His own body on the tree.’ But all make one unbroken phalanx of witness in their proclamation, that the Cross, because it is a cross of sacrifice, is a cross of reconciliation and peace and hope. And this is the Gospel that they all proclaim, ‘how that Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,’ and Paul could venture to say, ‘Whether it were they or I, so we preach, and so ye believed.’

That was the Gospel that took these heathens, wallowing in the mire of sensuous idolatry, and lifted them up to the elevation and the blessedness of children of God.

And if you will read this letter, and think that there had been only a few weeks of acquaintance with the Gospel on the part of its readers, and then mark how the early and imperfect glimpse of it had transformed them, you will see where the power lies in the proclamation of the Gospel. A short time before they had been heathens; and now says Paul, ‘From you sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to Godward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak anything.’ We do not need to talk to you about ‘love of the brethren,’ for ‘yourselves are taught of God to love one another, and my heart is full of thankfulness when I think of your work of faith and labour of love and patience of hope.’ The men had been transformed. What transformed them? The message of a divine and dying Christ, who had offered up Himself without spot unto God, and who was their peace and their righteousness and their power.

III. Thirdly, notice what this witness has to say about the risen and ascended Christ. Here is what it has to say: ‘Ye turned unto God . . . to wait for His Son from heaven whom He raised from the dead.’ And again: ‘The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout.’

The risen Christ, then, is in the heavens, and Paul assumes that these people, just brought out of heathenism, have received that truth into their hearts in the love of it, and know it so thoroughly that he can take for granted their entire acquiescence in and acceptance of it.

Remember, we have nothing to do with the four Gospels here. Remember, not a line of them had yet been written. Remember, that we are dealing here with an entirely independent witness. And then tell us what importance is to be attached to this evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Twenty years after His death here is this man speaking about that Resurrection as being not only something that he had to proclaim, and believed, but as being the recognised and notorious fact which all the churches accepted, and which underlay all their faith.

I would have you remember that if, twenty years after this event, this witness was borne, that necessarily carries us back a great deal nearer to the event than the hour of its utterance, for there is no mark of its being new testimony at that instant, but every mark of its being the habitual and continuous witness that had been borne from the instant of the alleged Resurrection to the present time. It at least takes us back a good many years nearer the empty sepulchre than the twenty which mark its date. It at least takes us back to the conversion of the Apostle Paul; and that necessarily involves, as it seems to me, that if that man, believing in the Resurrection, went into the Church, there would have been an end of his association with them, unless he had found there the same faith. The fact of the matter is, there is not a place where you can stick a pin in, between the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the date of this letter, wide enough to admit of the rise of the faith in a Resurrection. We are necessarily forced by the very fact of the existence of the Church to the admission that the belief in the Resurrection was contemporaneous with the alleged Resurrection itself.

And so we are shut up--in spite of the wriggling of people that do not accept that great truth--we are shut up to the old alternative, as it seems to me, that either Jesus Christ rose from the dead, or the noblest lives that the world has ever seen, and the loftiest system of morality that has ever been proclaimed, were built upon a lie. And we are called to believe that at the bidding of a mere unsupported, bare, dogmatic assertion that miracles are impossible. Believe it who will, I decline to be coerced into believing a blank, staring psychological contradiction and impossibility, in order to be saved the necessity of admitting the existence of the supernatural. I would rather believe in the supernatural than the ridiculous. And to me it is unspeakably ridiculous to suppose that anything but the fact of the Resurrection accounts for the existence of the Church, and for the faith of this witness that we have before us.

And so, dear friends, we come back to this, the Christianity that flings away the risen Christ is a mere mass of tatters with nothing in it to cover a man’s nakedness, an illusion with no vitality in it to quicken, to comfort, to ennoble, to raise, to teach aspiration or hope or effort. The human heart needs the ‘Christ that died, yea, rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.’ And this independent witness confirms the Gospel story: ‘Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first-fruits of them that slept.’

IV. Lastly, let us hear what this witness has to say about the returning Christ.

That is the characteristic doctrinal subject of the letter. We all know that wonderful passage of unsurpassed tenderness and majesty, which has soothed so many hearts and been like a gentle hand laid upon so many aching spirits, about the returning Jesus ‘coming in the clouds,’ with the dear ones that are asleep along with Him, and the reunion of them that sleep and them that are alive and remain, in one indissoluble concord and concourse, when we shall ever be with the Lord, and ‘clasp inseparable hands with joy and bliss in over-measure for ever.’ The coming of the Master does not appear here with emphasis on its judicial aspect. It is rather intended to bring hope to the mourners, and the certainty that bands broken here may be re-knit in holier fashion hereafter. But the judicial aspect is not, as it could not be, left out, and the Apostle further tells us that ‘that day cometh as a thief in the night.’ That is a quotation of the Master’s own words, which we find in the Gospels; and so again a confirmation, so far as it goes, from an independent witness, of the Gospel story. And then he goes on, in terrible language, to speak of ‘sudden destruction, as of travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.’

These, then, are the points of this witness’s testimony as to the returning Lord--a personal coming, a reunion of all believers in Him, in order to eternal felicity and mutual gladness, and the destruction that shall fall by His coming upon those who turn away from Him.

What a revelation that would be to men who had known what it was to grope in the darkness of heathendom, and to have new light upon the future!

I remember once walking in the long galleries of the Vatican, on the one side of which there are Christian inscriptions from the catacombs, and on the other heathen inscriptions from the tombs. One side is all dreamy and hopeless; one long sigh echoing along the line of white marbles--’Vale! vale! in aeternum vale!’ [Farewell, farewell, for ever farewell.] On the other side--’In Christo, in pace, in spe.’ [In Christ, in peace, in hope.] That is the witness that we have to lay to our hearts. And so death becomes a passage, and we let go the dear hands, believing that we shall clasp them again.

My brother! this witness is to a gospel that is the gospel for Manchester as well as for Thessalonica. You and I want just the same as these old heathens there wanted. We, too, need the divine Christ, the dying Christ, the risen Christ, the ascended Christ, the returning Christ. And I beseech you to take Him for your Christ, in all the fulness of His offices, the manifoldness of His power, and the sweetness of His love, so that of you it may be said, as this Apostle says about these Thessalonians, ‘Ye received it not as the word of man, but, as it is in truth, as the word of God.’

11)2 Thessalonians 1:10

2 Thessalonians

CHRIST GLORIFIED IN GLORIFIED MEN

2Th. 1:10.

The two Epistles to the Thessalonians, which are the Apostle’s earliest letters, both give very great prominence to the thought of the second coming of our Lord to judgment. In the immediate context we have that coming described, with circumstances of majesty and of terror. He ‘shall be revealed . . . with the angels of His power.’ ‘Flaming fire’ shall herald His coming; vengeance shall be in His hands, punishment shall follow His sentence; everlasting destruction shall be the issue of evil confronted with ‘the face of the Lord’--for so the words in the previous verse rendered ‘the presence of the Lord’ might more accurately be translated.

And all these facts and images are, as it were, piled up in one half of the Apostle’s sky, as in thunderous lurid masses; and on the other side there is the pure blue and the peaceful sunshine. For all this terror and destruction, and flashing fire, and punitive vengeance come to pass in the day when ‘He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be wondered at in all them that believe.’

There be the two halves--the aspect of that day to those to whom it is the revelation of a stranger, and the aspect of that day to those to whom it is the glorifying of Him who is their life.

I. The remarkable words which I have taken for my text suggest to us, first of all, some thoughts about that striking expression that Christ is glorified in the men who are glorified in Christ.

If you look on a couple of verses you will find that the Apostle returns to this thought, and expresses in the clearest fashion the reciprocal character of that ‘glorifying’ of which he has been speaking. ‘The name of our Lord Jesus Christ,’ says he, ‘may be glorified in you, and ye in Him.’

So, then, glorifying has a double meaning. There is a double process involved. It means either ‘to make glorious’ or ‘to manifest as being glorious.’ And men are glorified in the former sense in Christ, that Christ in them may, in the latter sense, be glorified. He makes them glorious by imparting to them of the lustrous light and flashing beauty of His own perfect character, in order that that light, received into their natures, and streaming out at last conspicuously manifest from their redeemed perfectness, may redound to the praise and the honour, before a whole universe, of Him who has thus endued their weakness with His own strength, and transmuted their corruptibility into His own immortality. We are glorified in Christ in some partial, and, alas! sinfully fragmentary, manner here; we shall be so perfectly in that day. And when we are thus glorified in Him, then--wondrous thought!--even we shall be able to manifest Him as glorious before some gazing eyes, which without us would have seen Him as less fair. Dim, and therefore great and blessed thoughts about what men may become are involved in such words. The highest end, the great purpose of the Gospel and of all God’s dealings with us in Christ Jesus is to make us like our Lord. As we have borne the image of the earthly we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. ‘We, beholding the glory, are changed into the glory.’

And that glorifying of men in Christ, which is the goal and highest end of Christ’s Cross and passion and of all God’s dealings, is accomplished only because Christ dwells in the men whom He glorifies. We read words applying to His relation to His Father which need but to be transferred to our relation to Him, in order to teach us high and blessed things about this glorifying. The Father dwelt in Christ, therefore Christ was glorified by the indwelling divinity, in the sense that His humanity was made partaker of the divine glory, and thereby He glorified the divinity that dwelt in Him, in the sense that He conspicuously displayed it before the world as worthy of all admiration and love.

And, in like manner, as is the Son with the Father, participant of mutual and reciprocal glorification, so is the Christian with Christ, glorified in Him and therefore glorifying Him.

What may be involved therein of perfect moral purity, of enlarged faculties and powers, of a bodily frame capable of manifesting all the finest issues of a perfect spirit, it is not for us to say. These things are great, being hidden; and are hidden because they are great. But whatever may be the lofty heights of Christlikeness to which we shall attain, all shall come from the indwelling Lord who fills us with His own Spirit.

And, then, according to the great teaching here, this glorified humanity, perfected and separated from all imperfection, and helped into all symmetrical unfolding of dormant possibilities, shall be the highest glory of Christ even in that day when He comes in His glory and sits upon the throne of His glory with His holy angels with Him. One would have thought that, if the Apostle wanted to speak of the glorifying of Jesus Christ, he would have pointed to the great white throne, His majestic divinity, the solemnities of His judicial office; but he passes by all these, and says, ‘Nay! the highest glory of the Christ lies here, in the men whom He has made to share His own nature.’

The artist is known by his work. You stand in front of some great picture, or you listen to some great symphony, or you read some great book, and you say, ‘This is the glory of Raphael, Beethoven, Shakespeare.’ Christ points to His saints, and He says, ‘Behold My handiwork! Ye are my witnesses. This is what I can do.’

But the relation between Christ and His saints is far deeper and more intimate than simply the relation between the artist and his work, for all the flashing light of moral beauty, of intellectual perfectness which Christian men can hope to receive in the future is but the light of the Christ that dwells in them, ‘and of whose fulness all they have received.’ Like some poor vapour, in itself white and colourless, which lies in the eastern sky there, and as the sun rises is flushed up into a miracle of rosy beauty, because it has caught the light amongst its flaming threads and vaporous substance, so we, in ourselves pale, ghostly, colourless as the mountains when the Alpine snow passes off them, being recipient of an indwelling Christ, shall blush and flame in beauty. ‘Then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun in my Father’s kingdom.’ Or, rather they are not suns shining by their own light, but moons reflecting the light of Christ, who is their light.

And perchance some eyes, incapable of beholding the sun, may be able to look undazzled upon the sunshine in the cloud, and some eyes that could not discern the glory of Christ as it shines in His face as the sun shineth in its strength, may not be too weak to behold and delight in the light as it is reflected from the face of His servants. At all events, He shall come to be glorified in the saints whom He has made glorious.

II. And now, notice again, out of these full and pregnant words the other thought, that this transformation of men is the great miracle and marvel of Christ's power.

'He shall come to be admired'--which word is employed in its old English signification, 'to be wondered at'--'in all them that believe.' So fair and lovely is He that He needs but to be recognised for what He is in order to be glorified. So great and stupendous are His operations in redeeming love that they need but to be beheld to be the object of wonder. 'His name shall be called Wonderful,' and wonderfully the energy of His redeeming and sanctifying grace shall then have wrought itself out to its legitimate end. There you get the crowning marvel of marvels, and the highest of miracles. He did wonderful works upon earth which we rightly call miraculous,--things to be wondered at--but the highest of all His wonders is the wonder that takes such material as you and me, and by such a process, and on such conditions, simply because we trust Him, evolves such marvellous forms of beauty and perfectness from us. 'He is to be wondered at in all them that believe.'

Such results from such material! Chemists tell us that the black bit of coal in your grate and the diamond on your finger are varying forms of the one substance. What about a power that shall take all the black coals in the world and transmute them into flashing diamonds, prismatic with the reflected light that comes from His face, and made gems on His strong right hand? The universe will wonder at such results from such material.

And it will wonder, too, at the process by which they were accomplished, wondering at the depth of His pity revealed all the more pathetically now from the great white throne which casts such a light on the Cross of Calvary; wondering at the long, weary path which He who is now declared to be the Judge humbled Himself to travel in the quest of these poor sinful souls whom He has redeemed and glorified. The miracle of miracles is redeeming love; and the high-water mark of Christ's wonders is touched in this fact, that out of men He makes saints; and out of saints He makes perfect likenesses of Himself.

III. And now a word about what is not expressed, but is necessarily implied in this verse, viz., the spectators of this glory.

The Apostle does not tell us what eyes they are before which Christ is thus to be glorified. He does not summon the spectators to look upon this wonderful exhibition of divine judgment and divine glory; but we may dwell for a moment on the thought that to whomsoever in the whole universe Christ at that great day shall be manifested, to them, whoever they be, will His glory, in His glorified saints, be a revelation beyond what they have known before. 'Every eye shall see Him.' And whatsoever eyes look upon Him, then on His throne, they shall behold the attendant courtiers and the assessors of His judgment, and see in them the manifestation of His own lustrous light.

We read that 'unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places shall be made known' in future days, 'by the Church, the manifold wisdom of God.' We hear that, after the burst of praise which comes from redeemed men standing around the throne, every creature in the earth and in the heavens, and in the sea and all that are therein were heard saying, 'Blessing and honour and glory and power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.'

We need not speculate, it is better not to enter into details, but this, at least, is clear, that that solemn winding up of the long, mysterious, sad, blood and tear-stained history of man upon the earth is to be an object of interest and a higher revelation of God to other creatures than those that dwell upon the earth; and we may well believe that for that moment, at all events, the centre of the universe, which draws the thoughts of all thinking, and the eyes of all seeing, creatures to it, shall be that valley of judgment wherein sits the Man Christ and judges men, and round Him the flashing reflectors of His glory in the person of His saints.

IV. And lastly, look at men's path to this glorifying.

‘He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be wondered at in all them that believed ‘; as that word ought to be rendered. That is to say, they who on earth were His, consecrated and devoted to Him, and in some humble measure partaking even here of His reflected beauty and imparted righteousness--these are they in whom He shall be glorified. They who ‘believed’; poor, trembling, struggling, fainting souls, that here on earth, in the midst of many doubts and temptations, clasped His hand; and howsoever tremulously, yet truly put their trust in Him, these are they in whom He shall ‘be wondered at.’

The simple act of faith knits us to the Lord. If we trust Him He comes into our hearts here, and begins to purify us, and to make us like Himself; and, if that be so, and we keep hold of Him, we shall finally share in His glory.

What a hope, what an encouragement, what a stimulus and exhortation to humble and timorous souls there is in that great word, ‘In all them that believed’! Howsoever imperfect, still they shall be kept by the power of God unto that final salvation. And when He comes in His glory, not one shall be wanting that put their trust in Him.

It will take them all, each in his several way reflecting it, to set forth adequately the glory. As many diamonds round a central light, which from each facet give off a several ray and a definite colour; so all that circle round Christ and partaking of His glory, will each receive it, transmit it, and so manifest it in a different fashion. And it needs the innumerable company of the redeemed, each a several perfectness, to set forth all the fulness of the Christ that dwells in us.

So, dear brethren, beginning with simple faith in Him, partially receiving the beauty of His transforming spirit, seeking here on earth by assimilation to the Master in some humble measure to adorn the doctrine and to glorify the Christ, we may hope that each blackness will be changed into brightness, our limitations done away with, our weakness lifted into rejoicing strength; and that we shall be like Him, seeing Him as He is, and glorified in Him, shall glorify Him before the universe.

You and I will be there. Choose which of the two halves of that sky that I was speaking about in my introductory remarks will be your sky; whether

He shall be revealed, and the light of His face be to you like a sword whose flashing edge means destruction, or whether the light of His face shall fall upon your heart because you love Him and trust Him, like the sunshine on the Alpine snow, lifting it to a more lustrous whiteness, and tingeing it with an ethereal hue of more than earthly beauty, which no other power but an indwelling Christ can give. He shall come with 'everlasting destruction from the face'; and 'He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be wondered at in all them that believed.' Do you choose which of the two shall be your portion in that day.

12)2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

2 Thessalonians

WORTHY OF YOUR CALLING

2Th. 1:11-12.

In the former letter to the Church of Thessalonica, the Apostle had dwelt, in ever-memorable words--which sound like a prelude of the trump of God--on the coming of Christ at the end to judge the world, and to gather His servants into His rest. That great thought seems to have excited some of the hotter heads in Thessalonica, and to have led to a general feverishness of unwholesome expectancy of the near approach or actual dawn of the day. This letter is intended as a supplement to the former Epistle, and to damp down the fire which had been kindled. It, therefore, dwells with emphasis on the necessary preliminaries to the dawning of that day of the Lord, and throughout seeks to lead the excited spirits to patience and persistent work, and to calm their feverish expectations. This purpose colours the whole letter.

Another striking characteristic of it is the frequent gushes of short prayer for the Thessalonians with which the writer turns aside from the main current of his thoughts. In its brief compass there are four of these prayers, which, taken together, present many aspects of the Christian life, and hold out much for our hopes and much for our efforts. The prayer which I have read for our text is the first of these. The others, the consideration of which will follow on subsequent occasions, are these:--'Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and stablish you in every good word and work.' And, again, 'The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ.' And, finally, summing up all, 'The Lord of peace Himself give you peace always, by all means.' So full, so tender, so directed to the highest blessings, and to those only, are the wishes of a true Christian teacher, and of a true Christian friend, for those to whom He ministers and whom He loves. It is a poor love that cannot express itself in prayer. It is an earthly love which desires for its objects anything less than the highest of blessings.

I. Notice, first, here, the divine test for Christian lives: 'We pray for you, that God would count you worthy of your calling.'

Now, it is to be observed that this 'counting worthy' refers mainly to a future estimate to be made by God of the completed career and permanent character brought out of earth into another state by Christian souls. That is obvious from the whole strain of the letter, which I have already pointed out as mainly being concerned with the future coming to judgment of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is also, I think, made probable by the fact that the same expression, 'counting worthy,' occurs in an earlier verse of this chapter, where the reference is exclusively to the future judgment.

So, then, we are brought face to face with this thought of an actual, stringent judgment which God will apply in the future to the lives and characters of professing Christians. Now, that is a great deal too much forgotten in our popular Christian teaching and in our average Christian faith. It is perfectly true that he who trusts in Jesus Christ will 'not come into condemnation, but has passed from death unto life.' But it is just as true that 'judgment shall begin at the house of God,' and that, 'the Lord will judge His people.' And therefore, it becomes us to lay to heart this truth, that we, just because, if we are Christians, we stand nearest to God, are surest to be searched through and through by the light that streams from Him, and to have every flaw and corrupt speck and black spot brought out into startling prominence. Let no Christian man fancy that he shall escape the righteous judgment of God. The great doctrine of forgiveness does not mean that He suffers our sin to remain upon us unjudged, ay! or unavenged. But just as, day by day, there is an actual estimate in the divine mind, according to truth, of what we really are, so, at the last, God's servants will be gathered before His throne. 'They that have made a covenant with Him by sacrifice' shall be assembled there--as the Psalm has it--'that the Lord may judge His people.'

Then, if the actual passing of a divine judgment day by day, and a future solemn act of judgment after we have done with earth, and our characters are completed, and our careers rounded into a whole, is to be looked for by Christians, what is the standard by which their worthiness is to be judged?

'Your calling.' The 'this' of my text in the Authorised Version is a supplement, and a better supplement is that of the Revised Version, 'your calling.' Now calling does not mean 'avocation' or 'employment,' as I perhaps need scarcely explain, but the divine fact of our having been summoned by Him to be His. Consider who calls. God Himself. Consider how He calls. By the Gospel, by Jesus Christ, or, as another apostle has it, 'by His own glory and virtue' manifested in the world. That great voice which is in Jesus Christ, so tender, so searching, so heart-melting, so vibrating with the invitation of love and the yearning of a longing heart, summons or calls us. Consider, also, what this calling is to. 'God hath not called us to uncleanness, but to holiness,' or, as this letter has it, in another part, 'unto salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.' By all the subduing and animating and restraining and impelling tones in the sacrifice and life of Jesus Christ we are summoned to a life of self-crucifixion, of subjection of the flesh, of aspiration after God, of holy living according to the pattern that was showed us in Him. We are summoned here and now to a life of purity and righteousness and self-sacrifice. But also 'He hath called us to His everlasting kingdom and glory.' That voice sounds from above now. From the Cross it said to us, 'I die that ye may live'; from the throne it says to us, 'Live because I live, and come to live where I live.' The same invitation, which calls us to a life of righteousness and self-suppression and purity, also calls us, with the sweet promise that is firm as the throne of God, to the everlasting felicities of that perfect kingdom in which, because the obedience is entire, the glory shall be untremulous and unstained. Therefore, considering who summons, by what He summons, and to what He calls us, do there not lie in the fact of that divine call to which we Christians say that we have yielded, the solemnest motives, the loftiest standard, the most stringent obligations for life? What sort of a life will that be which is worthy of that voice? Is yours? Is mine? Are there not the most flagrant examples of professing Christians, whose lives are in the most outrageous discordance with the lofty obligations and mighty motives of the summons which they profess to have obeyed? ‘Worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called!’ Have I made my own the things which I am invited to possess? Have I yielded to the obligations which are enwrapped in that invitation? Does my life correspond to the divine purpose in calling me to be His? Can I say, ‘Lord, Thou art mine, and I am Thine, and here my life witnesses to it, because self is banished from it, and I am full of God, and the life which I live in the flesh I live not to myself, but to Him that died for me?’

An absolute correspondence, a complete worthiness or perfect desert, is impossible for us all, but a worthiness which His merciful judgment who makes allowance for us all may accept, as not too flagrantly contradictory of what He meant us to be, is possible even for our poor attainments and our stained lives. If it were Paul’s supreme prayer, should it not be our supreme aim, that we may be worthy of Him that hath called us, and ‘walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called’?

II. Note, here, the divine help to meet the test.

If it were a matter of our own effort alone, who of us could pretend to reach to the height of conformity with the great design of the loving Father in summoning us, or with the mighty powers that are set in motion by the summons for the purifying of men’s lives? But here is the great characteristic and blessing of God’s Gospel, that it not only summons us to holiness and to heaven, but reaches out a hand to help us thither. Therein it contrasts with all other voices--and many of them are noble and pathetic in their insistence and vehemence--which call men to lofty lives. Whether it be the voice of conscience, or of human ethics, or of the great ones, the elect of the race, who, in every age, have been as voices crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord’--all these call us, but reach no hand out to draw us. They are all as voices from the heights and are of God, but they are voices only; they summon us to noble deeds, and leave us floundering in the mire.

But we have not a God who tells us to be good, and then watches to see if we will obey, but we have a God who, with all His summonses, brings to us the help to keep His commandments. Our God has more than a voice to enjoin, He has a hand to lift, ‘Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt,’ said Augustine. There is the blessing and glory of the Gospel, that its summons has in it an impelling power which makes men able to be what it enjoins them to become. My text, therefore, follows the prayer ‘that God would count you worthy,’ which contemplates God simply as judging men’s correspondence with the ideal revealed in their calling, and is the cry of faith to the giving God, who works in us, if we will let Him, that which He enjoins on us. There are two directions of that divine working specified in the text. Paul asks that God would fulfil ‘every desire of goodness and every work of faith,’ as the Revised Version renders the words. Two things, then, we may hope that God will do for us--He will fulfil every yearning after righteousness and purity in our hearts, and will perfect the active energy which faith puts forth in our lives.

Paul says, in effect, first, that God will fulfil every desire that longs for goodness. He is scarcely deserving of being called good who does not desire to be better. Aspiration must always be ahead of performance in a growing life, such as every Christian life ought to be. To long for any righteousness and beauty of goodness is, in some imperfect and incipient measure, to possess the good for which we long. This is the very signature of a Christian life--yearning after unaccomplished perfection. If you know nothing of that desire that stings and impels you onwards; if you do not know what it is to say, ‘Oh! wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’ if you do not know what it is to follow the fair ideal realised in Jesus Christ with infinite longing, what right have you to call yourself a Christian? The very essence of the Christian life is yearning for completeness, and restlessness as long as sin has any power over us. We live not only by admiration, faith, and love, but we live by hope; and he who does not hunger and thirst after righteousness has yet to learn what are the first principles of the Gospel of Christ.

If there be not the desire after goodness, the restlessness and dissatisfaction with every present good, the brave ambition that says, ‘Forgetting the things that are behind, I reach forth unto the things that are before,’ there is nothing in a man to which God’s grace can attach itself. God cannot make you better if you do not wish to be better. There is no point upon which His hallowing and ennobling grace can lay hold in your hearts without such desire. ‘Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it.’ If, as is too often the case with hosts of professing Christians, you shut your mouths tight and lock your teeth, how can God put any food between your lips? There must, first of all, be the aspiration, and then there will be the satisfaction.

I look out upon my congregation, or, better still, I look into my own heart, and I say, If I, if you, dear brethren, are not worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called, we have not because we ask not. If there be no desire after goodness in our hearts, God cannot make us good. Our wishes are the mould into which the molten metal from the great furnace of His love will run. If we bring but a little vessel we cannot get a large supply. The manna lies round our tents; it is for us to determine how much we will gather.

And in like manner, says Paul, God will fulfil every work of faith. Our faith in Jesus Christ will naturally tend to influence our lives, and to manifest itself as a driving power which will set all the wheels of conduct in motion. Paul is quite sure that if we trust ourselves to God, all the beneficent and holy work that flows from such confidence will by Him be fully perfected.

God’s fulfilment is to be done with power . That is to say, He will fit us to be worthy of our calling, He will answer our desires, He will give energy to our faith, and complete in number and in quality its operations in our lives, by reason of His dwelling with us and in us by that spirit of power and of love and of a sound mind which works all righteousness in believing hearts, and sheds divine beauty and goodness over character and life.

III. Lastly, note the divine glory of the worthy.

This fulfilment of every desire of goodness and work of faith is in order ‘that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you and ye in Him.’

Here, again, as in the first clause of our text, I take, in accordance with the prevailing tone of this letter, the reference to be mainly, though perhaps not exclusively, to a future transcendent glorifying of the name of Christ in perfected saints, and glorifying of perfected saints in Jesus Christ.

We have, then, set forth, first, as the result of the fulfilling of Christian men's desires after goodness, and the work of their faith, the glory that accrues to Christ from perfected saints. They are His workmanship. You remember the old story of the artist who went into a fellow-artist's studio and left upon the easel one complete circle, swept with one master-whirl of the brush. Jesus Christ presents perfected men to an admiring universe as specimens of what He can do. His highest work is the redeeming of poor creatures like you and me, and the making of us perfect in goodness and worthy of our calling. We are His chefs-d'oeuvre , the master work of the great divine artist.

Think, then, brethren, how, here and now, Christ's reputation is in our hands. Men judge of Him by us. The name of the Lord Jesus is glorified in you if you live 'worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,' and people will think better of the Master if His disciples are faithful. Depend upon it, if we of this church, for instance, and the Christian people within these walls now, lived the lives that they ought to do, and manifested the power of the Gospel as they might, there would be many who would say, 'They have been with Jesus, and the Jesus that has made them what they are must be mighty and great.' The best evidence of the power of the Gospel is your consistent lives.

Think, too, of that strange dignity that in the future, in manners and in regions all undiscernible by us, Christians, who have been made out of stones into children of God, will make known 'unto principalities and powers in heavenly places' the wisdom and the love and the energy of the redeeming God. Who knows to what regions the commission of the perfected saints to make Christ known may carry them? Light travels far, and we cannot tell into what remote corners of the universe this may penetrate. This only we know, that they who shall be counted worthy to attain that life and the Resurrection from the dead shall bear the image of the heavenly, and perhaps to creations yet uncreated, and still to be evolved through the ages of eternity, it may be their part to carry the lustre of the light of the glory of God who redeemed and purified them.

On the other hand, there is glory accruing to perfected saints in Christ. ‘And ye in Him.’ There will be a union so close as that nothing closer is possible, personality being preserved, between Christ and the saints above, who trust Him and love Him and serve Him there. And that union will lead to a participation in His glory which shall exalt their limited, stained, and fragmentary humanity into ‘the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.’ Astronomers tell us that dead, cold matter falls from all corners of the system into the sun, drawn by its magic magnetism from farthest space, and, plunging into that great reservoir of fire, the deadest and coldest matter glows with fervid heat and dazzling light. So you and I, dead, cold, dull, opaque, heavy fragments, drawn into mysterious oneness with Christ, the Sun of our souls, shall be transformed into His own image, and like Him be light and heat which shall radiate through the universe.

Brethren, meditate on your calling, the fact, its method, its aim, its obligations, and its powers. Cherish hopes and desires after goodness, the only hopes and desires that are certain to be fulfilled. Cultivate the life of faith working by love, and let us all live in the light of that solemn expectation that the Lord will judge His people. Then we may hope that the voice which summoned us will welcome us, and proclaim even of us, stained and undeserving as we rightly feel ourselves to be: ‘They have not defiled their garments, therefore they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.’

13)2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

2 Thessalonians

EVERLASTING CONSOLATION AND GOOD HOPE

2Th. 2:16-17.

This is the second of the four brief prayers which, as I pointed out in my last sermon, break the current of Paul’s teaching in this letter, and witness to the depth of his affection to his Thessalonian converts. We do not know the special circumstances under which these then were, but there are many allusions, both in the first and second epistles, which seem to indicate that they specially needed the gift of consolation.

They were a young Church, just delivered from paganism. Like lambs in the midst of wolves, they stood amongst bitter enemies, their teacher had left them alone, and their raw convictions needed to be consolidated and matured in the face of much opposition. No wonder then that over and over again, in both letters, we have references to the persecutions and tribulations which they endured, and to the consolations which would much more abound.

But whatever may have been their specific circumstances, the prayer which puts special emphasis on comfort is as much needed by each of us as it could ever have been by any of them. For there are no eyes that have not wept, or will not weep; no breath that has not been, or will not be, drawn in sighs; and no hearts that have not bled, or will not bleed. So, dear friends, the prayer that went up for these long since comforted brothers, in their forgotten obscure sorrows, is as needful for each of us--that the God who has given everlasting consolation may apply the consolations which He has supplied, and 'comfort our hearts and stablish them in every good word and work.'

The prayer naturally falls, as all true prayer will, into three sections--the contemplation of Him to whom it is addressed, the grasping of the great act on which it is based, and the specification of the desires which it includes. These three thoughts may guide us for a few moments now.

I. First of all, then, note the divine hearers of the prayer.

The first striking thing about this prayer is its emphatic recognition of the divinity of Jesus Christ as a truth familiar to these Thessalonian converts. Note the solemn accumulation of His august titles, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.' Note, further, that extraordinary association of His name with the Father's. Note, still further, the most remarkable order in which these two names occur--Jesus first, God second. If we were not so familiar with the words, and with their order, which reappears in Paul's well-known and frequently-used Benediction, we should be startled to find that Jesus Christ was put before God in such a solemn address. The association and the order of mention of the names are equally outrageous, profane, and inexplicable, except upon one hypothesis, and that is that Jesus Christ is divine.

The reason for the order may be found partly in the context, which has just been naming Christ, but still more in the fact that whilst he writes, the Apostle is realising the mediation of Christ, and that the order of mention is the order of our approach. The Father comes to us in the Son; we come to the Father by the Son; and, therefore, it is no intercepting of our reverence, nor blasphemously lifting the creature to undue elevation, when in one act the Apostle appeals to 'our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God our Father.'

Note, still further, the distinct address to Christ as the Hearer of Prayer. And, note, last of all, about this matter, the singular grammatical irregularity in my text, which is something much more than a mere blunder or slip of the pen. The words which follow, viz., 'comfort' and 'stablish,' are in the singular, whilst these two mighty and august names are their nominatives, and would therefore, by all regularity, require a plural to follow them. That this peculiarity is no mere accident, but intentional and deliberate, is made probable by the two instances in our text, and is made certain, as it seems to me, by the fact that the same anomalous and eloquent construction occurs in the previous epistle to the same church, where we have in exact parallelism with our text, 'God Himself, our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ,' with the singular verb, 'direct our way unto you.' The phraseology is the expression, in grammatical form, of the great truth, 'Whatsoever things the Father doeth, these also doth the Son likewise.' And from it there gleam out unmistakably the great principles of the unity of action and the distinction of person between Father and Son, in the depths of that infinite and mysterious Godhead.

Now all this, which seems to me to be irrefragable, is made the more remarkable and the stronger as a witness of the truth, from the fact that it occurs in this perfectly incidental fashion, and without a word of explanation or apology, as taking for granted that there was a background of teaching in the Thessalonian Church which had prepared the way for it, and rendered it intelligible, as well as a background of conviction which had previously accepted it.

And, remember, these two letters, thus full-toned in their declaration, and taking for granted the previous acceptance of the great doctrine of the divinity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, are the earliest portions of the New Testament, and are often spoken about as being singularly undogmatic. So they are, and therefore all the more eloquent and all the more conclusive is such a testimony as this to the sort of teaching which from the beginning the Apostle addressed to his converts.

Now is that your notion of Jesus Christ? Do you regard Him as the sharer in the divine attributes and in the divine throne? It was a living Christ that Paul was thinking about when he wrote these words, who could hear him praying in Corinth, and could reach a helping hand down to these poor men in Thessalonica. It was a divine Christ that Paul was thinking about when he dared to say, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, and God our Father.' And I beseech you to ask yourself the question whether your faith accepts that great teaching, and whether to you He is far more than 'the Man Christ Jesus'; and just because He is the man, is therefore the Son of God. Brethren! either Jesus lies in an unknown grave, ignorant of all that is going on here, and the notion that He can help is a delusion and a dream, or else He is the ever-living because He is the divine Christ, to whom we poor men can speak with the certainty that He hears us, and who wields the energies of Deity, and works the same works as the Father, for the help and blessing of the souls that trust Him.

II. Secondly, note the great fact on which this prayer builds itself.

The form of words in the original, 'loved' and 'given,' all but necessarily requires us to suppose that their reference is to some one definite historical act in which the love was manifested, and, as love always does, found voice in giving. Love is the infinite desire to bestow, and its language is always a gift. Then, according to the Apostle's thought, there is some one act in which all the fulness of the divine love manifests itself; some one act in which all the treasures which God can bestow upon men are conveyed and handed over to a world.

The statement that there is such renders almost unnecessary the question what such an act is. For there can be but one in all the sweep of the magnificent and beneficent divine deeds, so correspondent to His love, and so inclusive of all His giving, as that it shall be the ground of our confidence and the warrant for our prayers. The gift of Jesus Christ is that in which everlasting consolation and good hope are bestowed upon men. When our desires are widened out to the widest they must be based upon the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ; and when we would think most confidently and most desiringly of the benefits that we seek, for ourselves or for our fellows, we must turn to the Cross. My prayer is then acceptable and prevalent when it foots itself on the past divine act, and looking to the life and death of Jesus Christ, is widened out to long for, ask for, and in the very longing and asking for to begin to possess, the fulness of the gifts which then were brought to men in Him.

'Everlasting consolation and good hope.' I suppose the Apostle's emphasis is to be placed quite as much on the adjectives as on the nouns; for there are consolations enough in the world, only none of them are permanent; and there are hopes enough that amuse and draw men, but one of them only is 'good.' The gift of Christ, thinks Paul, is the gift of a comfort which will never fail amidst all the vicissitudes and accumulated and repeated and prolonged sorrows to which flesh is heir, and is likewise the gift of a hope which, in its basis and in its objects, is equally noble and good.

Look at these two things briefly. Paul thinks that in Jesus Christ you and I, and all the world, if it will have it, has received the gift of an everlasting comfort. Ah! sorrow is more persistent than consolation. The bandaged wounds bleed again; the fire damped down for a moment smoulders, even when damped, and bursts out again. But there is one source of comfort which, because it comes from an unchangeable Christ, and because it communicates unfailing gifts of patience and insight, and because it leads forward to everlasting blessedness and recompenses, may well be called 'eternal consolation.' Of course, consolation is not needed when sorrow has ceased; and when the wiping away of all tears from off all faces, and the plunging of grief into the nethermost fires, there to be consumed, have come about, there is no more need for comfort. Yet that which made the comfort while sorrow lasts, makes the triumph and the rapture when sorrow is dead, and is everlasting, though its office of consolation determines with earth.

‘Good hope through grace.’ This is the weakness of all the hopes which dance like fireflies in the dark before men, and are often like will-o’-the-wisps in the night tempting men into deep mire, where there is no standing--that they are uncertain in their basis and inadequate in their range. The prostitution of the great faculty of hope is one of the saddest characteristics of our feeble and fallen manhood; for the bulk of our hopes are doubtful and akin to fears, and are mean and low, and disproportioned to the possibilities, and therefore the obligations, of our spirits. But in that Cross which teaches us the meaning of sorrows, and in that Christ whose presence is light in darkness, and the very embodied consolation of all hearts, there lie at once the foundation and the object of a hope which, in consideration both of object and foundation, stands unique in its excellence and sufficient in its firmness. ‘A good hope’; good because well founded; and good because grasping worthy objects; eternal consolation outlasting all sorrows--these things were given once for all, to the whole world when Jesus Christ came and lived and died. The materials for a comfort that shall never fail me, and for the foundation and the object of a hope that shall never be ashamed, are supplied in Jesus Christ our Lord. And so these gifts, already passed under the great seal of heaven, and confirmed to us all, if we choose to take them for ours, are the ground upon which the largest prayers may be rested, and the most ardent desires may be unblamably cherished, in the full confidence that no petitions of ours can reach to the greatness of the divine purpose, and that the widest and otherwise wildest of our hopes and wishes are sober under-estimates of what God has already given to us. For if He has given the material, He will apply what He has supplied. And if He has thus in the past bestowed the possibilities of comfort and hope upon the world, He will not slack His hand, if we desire the possibility to be in our hearts turned into the actuality.

God has given, therefore God will give. That in heaven’s logic, but it does not do for men. It presupposes inexhaustible resources, unchangeable purposes of kindness, patience that is not disgusted and cannot be turned away by our sin. These things being presupposed it is true; and the prayer of my text, that God would comfort, can have no firmer foundation than the confidence of my text, that God has given ‘everlasting consolation and good hope through grace.’ ‘Thou hast helped us; leave us not, neither forsake us, O God of our salvation.’

III. The last thing here is the petitions based upon the contemplation of the divine hearers of the prayer, and of the gift already bestowed by God.

May He ‘comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work.’ I have already said all that perhaps is necessary in regard to the connection between the past gift of everlasting consolation and the present and future comforting of hearts which is here desired. It seems to me that the Apostle has in his mind the distinction between the great work of Christ, in which are supplied for us the materials for comfort and hope, and the present and continuous work of that Divine Spirit, by which God dwelling in our hearts in Jesus Christ makes real for each of us the universal gift of consolation and of hope. God has bestowed the materials for comfort; God will give the comfort for which He has supplied the materials. It were a poor thing if all that we could expect from our loving Father in the heavens were that He should contribute to us what might make us peaceful and glad and calm in sorrow, if we chose to use it. Men comfort from without; God steals into the heart, and there diffuses the aroma of His presence. Christ comes into the ship before He says, ‘Peace! be still!’ It is not enough for our poor troubled heart that there should be calmness and consolation twining round the Cross if we choose to pluck the fruit. We need, and therefore we have, an indwelling God who, by that Spirit which is the Comforter, will make for each of us the everlasting consolation which He has bestowed upon the world our individual possession. God’s husbandry is not merely broadcast sowing of the seed, but the planting in each individual heart of the precious germ. And the God who has given everlasting consolation to a whole world will comfort thy heart.

Then, again, the comforted heart will be a stable heart. Our fixedness and stability are not natural immobility, but communicated steadfastness. There must be, first, the consolation of Christ before there can be the calmness of a settled heart. We all know how vacillating, how driven to and fro by gusts of passion and winds of doctrine and forces of earth our resolutions and spirits are. But thistledown glued to a firm surface will be firm, and any light thing lashed to a solid one will be solid; and reeds shaken with the wind may be turned into brazen pillars that cannot be moved. If we have Christ in our hearts, He will be our consolation first and our stability next.

Why should it be that we are spasmodic and fluctuating, and the slaves of ups and downs, like some barometer in stormy weather; now at ‘set fair,’ and then away down where ‘much rain’ is written? There is no need for it. Get Christ into your heart, and your mercury will always stand at one height. Why should it be that at one hour the flashing waters fill the harbour, and that six hours afterwards there is a waste of ooze and filth? It need not be. Our hearts may be like some landlocked lake that knows no tide. ‘His heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord.’

The comforted and stable heart will be a fruitful heart. ‘In every good word and work.’ Ah! how fragmentary is our goodness, like the broken torsos of the statues of fair gods dug up in some classic land. There is no reason why each of us should not appropriate and make our own the forms of goodness to which we are least naturally inclined, and cultivate and possess a symmetrical, fully-developed, all-round goodness, in some humble measure after the pattern of Jesus Christ our Lord. Practical righteousness, ‘in every good word and work,’ is the outcome of all the sacred and secret consolations and blessings that Jesus Christ imparts. There are many Christian people who are like those swallow-holes, as they call them, characteristic of limestone countries, where a great river plunges into a cave and is no more heard of. You do not get your comforts and your blessing for that, brother, but in order that all the joy and peace, all the calmness and the communion, which you realise in the secret place of the Most High, may be translated into goodness and manifest righteousness in the market-place and the street. We get our goodness where we get our consolation, from Jesus Christ and His Cross.

And so, dear friends, all your comforts will die, and your sorrows will live, unless you have Christ for your own. The former will be like some application that is put on a poisoned bite, which will soothe it for a moment, but as soon as the anodyne dries off the skin, the poison will tingle and burn again, and will be working in the blood, whilst the remedy only touched the surface of the flesh. All your hopes will be like a child’s castles on the sand, which the next tide will smooth out and obliterate, unless your hope is fixed on Him. You may have everlasting consolation, you may have a hope which will enable you to look serenely on the ills of life, and on the darkness of death, and on what darkly looms beyond death. You may have a calmed and steadied heart; you may have an all-round, stable, comprehensive goodness. But there is only one way to get these blessings, and that is to grasp and make our own, by simple faith and constant clinging, that great gift, given once for all in Jesus Christ, the gift of comfort that never dies, and of hope that never deceives, and then to apply that gift day by day, through God's good Spirit, to sorrows and trials and duties as they emerge.

14)2 Thessalonians 3:5

2 Thessalonians

THE HEART'S HOME AND GUIDE

2Th. 3:5.

A word or two of explanation of terms may preface our remarks on this, the third of the Apostle's prayers for the Thessalonians in this letter. The first point to be noticed is that by 'the Lord' here is meant, as usually in the New Testament, Jesus Christ. So that here again we have the distinct recognition of His divinity, and the direct address of prayer to Him.

The next thing to notice is that by 'the love of God' is here meant, not God's to us, but ours to Him; and that the petition, therefore, respects the emotions and sentiments of the Thessalonians towards the Father in heaven.

And the last point is that the rendering of the Authorised Version, 'patient waiting for Christ,' is better exchanged for that of the Revised Version, 'the patience of Christ,' meaning thereby the same patience as He exhibited in His earthly life, and which He is ready to bestow upon us.

It is not usual in the New Testament to find Jesus Christ set forth as the great Example of patient endurance; but still there are one or two instances in which the same expression is applied to Him. For example, in two contiguous verses in the Epistle to the Hebrews, we read of His 'enduring contradiction of sinners against Himself,' and 'enduring the Cross, despising the shame,' in both of which cases we have the verb employed of which the noun is here used. Then in the Apocalypse we have such expressions as 'the patience of Christ,' of which John says that he and his brethren whom he is addressing are 'participators,' and, again, 'thou hast kept the word of my patience.'

So, though unusual, the thought of our text as presented in the amended version is by no means singular. These things, then, being premised, we may now look at this petition as a whole.

I. The first thought that it suggests to me is, the home of the heart.

'The Lord direct you into the love of God and the patience of Christ.' The prayers in this letter with which we have been occupied for some Sundays present to us Christian perfection under various aspects. But this we may, perhaps, say is the most comprehensive and condensed of them all. The Apostle gathers up the whole sum of his desires for his friends, and presents to us the whole aim of our efforts for ourselves, in these two things, a steadfast love to God, and a calm endurance of evil and persistence in duty, unaffected by suffering or by pain. If we have these two we shall not be far from being what God wishes to see us.

Now the Apostle's thought here, of 'leading us into' these two seems to suggest the metaphor of a great home with two chambers in it, of which the inner was entered from the outer. The first room is 'the love of God,' and the second is 'the patience of Christ.' It comes to the same thing whether we speak of the heart as dwelling in love, or of love as dwelling in the heart. The metaphor varies, the substance of the thought is the same, and that thought is that the heart should be the sphere and subject of a steadfast, habitual, all-pleasing love, which issues in unbroken calmness of endurance and persistence of service, in the face of evil.

Let us look, then, for a moment at these two points. I need not dwell upon the bare idea of love to God as being the characteristic of the Christian attitude towards Him, or remind you of how strange and unexampled a thing it is that all religion should be reduced to this one fruitful germ, love to the Father in heaven. But it is more to the purpose for me to point to the constancy, the unbrokenness, the depth, which the Apostle here desires should be the characteristics of Christian love to God. We sometimes cherish such emotion; but, alas, how rare it is for us to dwell in that calm home all the days of our lives! We visit that serene sanctuary at intervals, and then for the rest of our days we are hurried to and fro between contending affections, and wander homeless amidst inadequate loves. But what Paul asked, and what should be the conscious aim of the Christian life, is, that we should ‘dwell all our days in the house of the Lord, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to enquire in His temple.’

Alas, when we think of our own experiences, how fair and far seems that other, contemplated as a possibility in my text, that our hearts should ‘abide in the love of God’!

Let me remind you, too, that steadfastness of habitual love all round our hearts, as it were, is the source and germ of all perfectness of life and conduct. ‘Love and do as Thou wilt,’ is a bold saying, but not too bold. For the very essence of love is the smelting of the will of the lover into the will of the beloved. And there is nothing so certain as that, in regard to all human relations, and in regard to the relations to God which in many respects follow, and are moulded after the pattern of, our earthly relations of love, to have the heart fixed in pure affection is to have the whole life subordinated in glad obedience. Nothing is so sweet as to do the beloved’s will. The germ of all righteousness, as well as the characteristic spirit of every righteous deed, lies in love to God. This is the mother tincture which, variously coloured and with various additions, makes all the different precious liquids which we can pour as libations on His altar. The one saving salt of all deeds in reference to Him is that they are the outcome and expression of a loving heart. He who loves is righteous, and doeth righteousness. So, ‘love is the fulfilling of the law.’

That the heart should be fixed in its abode in love to God is the secret of all blessedness, as it is the source of all righteousness. Love is always joy in itself; it is the one deliverance from self-bondage to which self is the one curse and misery of man. The emancipation from care and sorrow and unrest lies in that going out of ourselves which we call by the name of love. There be things masquerading about the world, and profaning the sacred name of love by taking it to themselves, which are only selfishness under a disguise. But true love is the annihilation, and therefore the apotheosis and glorifying, of self; and in that annihilation lies the secret charm which brings all blessedness into a life.

But, then, though love in itself be always bliss, yet, by reason of the imperfections of its objects, it sometimes leads to sorrow. For limitations and disappointments and inadequacies of all sorts haunt our earthly loves whilst they last; and we have all to see them fade, or to fade away from them. The thing you love may change, the thing you love must die; and therefore love, which in itself is blessedness, hath often, like the little book that the prophet swallowed, a bitter taste remaining when the sweetness is gone. But if we set our hearts on God, we set our hearts on that which knows no variableness, neither the shadow of turning. There are no inadequate responses, no changes that we need fear. On that love the scythe of death, which mows down all other products of the human heart, hath no power; and its stem stands untouched by the keen edge that levels all the rest of the herbage. Love God, and thou lovest eternity; and therefore the joy of the love is eternal as its object. So he who loves God is building upon a rock, and whosoever has this for his treasure carries his wealth with him whithersoever he goes. Well may the Apostle gather into one potent word, and one mighty wish, the whole fulness of his desires for his friends. And wise shall we be if we make this the chiefest of our aims, that our hearts may have their home in the love of God.

Still further, there is another chamber in this house of the soul. The outer room, where the heart inhabits that loves God, leads into another compartment, ‘the patience of Christ.’

Now, I suppose I need not remind many of you that this great New Testament word ‘patience’ has a far wider area of meaning than that which is ordinarily covered by that expression. For patience , as we use it, is simply a passive virtue. But the thing that is meant by the New Testament word which is generally so rendered has an active as well as a passive side. On the passive side it is the calm, unmurmuring, unreluctant submission of the will to whatsoever evil may come upon us, either directly from God’s hand, or through the ministration and mediation of men who are His sword. On the active side it is the steadfast persistence in the path of duty, in spite of all that may array itself against us. So there are the two halves of the virtue which is here put before us--unmurmuring submission and bold continuance in well-doing, whatsoever storms may hurtle in our faces.

Now, in both of these aspects, the life of Jesus Christ is the great pattern. As for the passive side, need I remind you how, ‘as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth’? ‘When He was reviled He reviled not again, but committed Himself unto Him that judgeth uprightly.’ No anger ever flushed His cheek or contracted His brow. He never repaid scorn with scorn, nor hate with hate. All men’s malice fell upon Him, like sparks upon wet timber, and kindled no conflagration.

As for the active side, I need not remind you how ‘He set His face to go to Jerusalem’--how the great solemn ‘ must ‘ which ruled His life bore Him on, steadfast and without deflection in His course, through all obstacles. There never was such heroic force as the quiet force of the meek and gentle Christ, which wasted no strength in displaying or boasting of itself, but simply, silently, unconquerably, like the secular motions of the stars, dominated all opposition, and carried Him, unhasting and unresting, on His path. That life, with all its surface of weakness, had an iron tenacity of purpose beneath, which may well stand for our example. Like some pure glacier from an Alpine peak, it comes silently, slowly down into the valley; and though to the eye it seems not to move, it presses on with a force sublime in its silence and gigantic in its gentleness, and buries beneath it the rocks that stand in its way. The patience of Christ is the very sublimity of persistence in well-doing. It is our example, and more than our example--it is His gift to us.

Such passive and active patience is the direct fruit of love to God. The one chamber opens into the other. For they whose hearts dwell in the sweet sanctities of the love of God will ever be those who say, with a calm smile, as they put out their hand to the bitterest draught, ‘the cup which My Father hath given Me, shall I not drink it?’

Love, and evil dwindles; love, and duty becomes supreme; and in the submission of the will, which is the true issue of love, lies the foundation of indomitable and inexhaustible endurance and perseverance.

Nor need I remind you, I suppose, that in this resolve to do the will of God, in spite of all antagonism and opposition, lies a condition at once of moral perfection and of blessedness. So, dear friends, if we would have a home for our hearts, let us pass into that sweet, calm, inexpugnable fortress provided for us in the love of God and the patience of Christ.

II. Now notice, secondly, the Guide of the heart to its home.

‘The Lord direct you.’ I have already explained that we have here a distinct address to Jesus Christ as divine, and the hearer of prayer. The Apostle evidently expects a present, personal influence from Christ to be exerted upon men’s hearts. And this is the point to which I desire to draw your attention in a word or two. We are far too oblivious of the present influence of Jesus Christ, by His Spirit, upon the hearts of men that trust Him. We have very imperfectly apprehended our privileges as Christians if our faith do not expect, and if our experience have not realised, the inward guidance of Christ moment by moment in our daily lives. I believe that much of the present feebleness of the Christian life amongst its professors is to be traced to the fact that their thoughts about Jesus Christ are predominantly thoughts of what He did nineteen centuries ago, and that the proportion of faith is not observed in their perspective of His work, and that they do not sufficiently realise that to-day, here, in you and me, if we have faith in Him, He is verily and really putting forth His power.

Paul’s prayer is but an echo of Christ’s promise. The Master said, ‘He shall guide you into all truth.’ The servant prays, ‘The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God.’ And if we rightly know the whole blessedness that is ours in the gift of Jesus Christ, we shall recognise His present guidance as a reality in our lives.

That guidance is given to us mainly by the Divine Spirit laying upon our hearts the great facts which evoke our answering love to God. ‘We love Him because He first loved us’; and the way by which Jesus directs our hearts into the love of God is mainly by shedding abroad God’s love to us in our spirits by the Holy Spirit which is given to us.

But, besides that, all these movements in our hearts so often neglected, so often resisted, by which we are impelled to a holier life, to a deeper love, to a more unworldly consecration--all these, rightly understood, are Christ’s directions. He leads us, though often we know not the hand that guides; and every Christian may be sure of this--and he is sinful if he does not live up to the height of his privileges--that the ancient promises are more than fulfilled in his experience, and that he has a present Christ, an indwelling Christ, who will be his Shepherd, and lead him by green pastures and still waters sometimes and through valleys of darkness and rough defiles sometimes, but always with the purpose of bringing him nearer and nearer to the full possession of the love of God and the patience of Christ.

The vision which shone before the eyes of the father of the forerunner, was that ‘the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to guide our feet into the way of peace.’ It is fulfilled in Jesus who directs our hearts into love and patience, which are the way of peace.

We are not to look for impressions and impulses distinguishable from the operations of our own inward man. We are not to fall into the error of supposing that a conviction of duty or a conception of truth is of divine origin because it is strong. But the true test of their divine origin is their correspondence with the written word, the standard of truth and life. Jesus guides us to a fuller apprehension of the great facts of the infinite love of God in the Cross. Shedding abroad a Saviour’s love does kindle ours.

III. Lastly, notice the heart’s yielding to its guide.

If this was Paul’s prayer for his converts, it should be our aim for ourselves. Christ is ready to direct our hearts, if we will let Him. All depends on our yielding to that sweet direction, loving as that of a mother’s hand on her child’s shoulder.

What is our duty and wisdom in view of these truths? The answer may be thrown into the shape of one or two brief counsels.

First, desire it. Do you Christian people want to be led to love God more? Are you ready to love the world less, which you will have to do if you love God more? Do you wish Christ to lay His hand upon you, and withdraw you from much, that He may draw you into the sanctities and sublimities of His own experienced love? I do not think the lives of some of us look very like as if we should welcome that direction. And it is a sharp test, and a hard commandment to say to a Christian professor, ‘Desire to be led into the love of God.’

Again, expect it. Do not dismiss all that I have been saying about a present Christ leading men by their own impulses, which are His monitions, as fanatical and mystical and far away from daily experience. Ah! it is not only the boy Samuel whose infancy was an excuse for his ignorance, who takes God’s voice to be only white-bearded Eli’s. There are many of us who, when Christ speaks, think it is only a human voice. Perhaps His deep and gentle tones are thrilling through my harsh and feeble voice; and He is now, even by the poor reed through which He breathes His breath, saying to some of you, ‘Come near to Me.’ Expect the guidance.

Still your own wills that you may hear His voice. How can you be led if you never look at the Guide? How can you hear that still small voice amidst the clattering of spindles, and the roar of wagons, and the noises in your own heart? Be still, and He will speak.

Follow the guidance, and at once, for delay is fatal. Like a man walking behind a guide across some morass, set your feet in the print of the Master’s and keep close at His heels, and then you will be safe. And so, dear friends, if we want to have anchorage for our love, let us set our love on God, who alone is worthy of it, and who alone of all its objects will neither fail us nor change. If we would have the temper which lifts us above the ills of life and enables us to keep our course unaffected by them all, as the gentle moon moves with the same silent, equable pace through piled masses of cloud and clear stretches of sky, we must attain submission through love, and gain unreluctant endurance and steadfast wills from the example and source of both, the gentle and strong Christ. If we would have our hearts calm, we must let Him guide them, sway them, curb their vagrancies, stimulate their desires, and satisfy the desires which He has stimulated. We must abandon self, and say, ‘Lord, I cannot guide myself. Do Thou direct my wandering feet.’ The prayer will not be in vain. He will guide us with His eye, and that directing of our hearts will issue in experiences of love and patience, whose ‘very sweetness yieldeth proof that they were born for immortality.’ The Guide and the road foreshadow the goal. The only natural end to which such a path can lead and such guidance point is a heaven of perfect love, where patience has done its perfect work, and is called for no more. The experience of present direction strengthens the hope of future perfection. So we may take for our own the triumphant confidence of the Psalmist, and embrace the nearest and the remotest future in one calm vision of faith that ‘Thou wilt guide me with Thy counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory.’

15)2 Thessalonians 3:16

2 Thessalonians

THE LORD OF PEACE AND THE PEACE OF THE LORD

2Th. 3:16.

We have reached here the last of the brief outbursts of prayer which characterise this letter, and bear witness to the Apostle’s affection for his Thessalonian converts. It is the deepening of the ordinary Jewish formula of meeting and parting. We find that, in most of his letters, the Apostle begins with wishing ‘grace and peace,’ and closes with an echo of the wish. ‘Peace be unto you’ was often a form which meant nothing. But true religion turns conventional insincerities into real, heartfelt desires. It was often a wish destined to remain unfulfilled. But loving wishes are potent when they are changed into petitions.

The relation between the two clauses of my text seems to be that the second, ‘The Lord be with you all,’ is not so much a separate, additional supplication as rather the fuller statement, in the form of prayer, of the means by which the former supplication is to be accomplished. ‘The Lord of Peace’ gives peace by giving His own presence. This, then, is the supreme desire of the Apostle, that Christ may be with them all, and in His presence they may find the secret of tranquillity.

I. The deepest longing of every human soul is for peace.

There are many ways in which the supreme good may be represented, but perhaps none of them is so lovely, and exercises such universal fascination of attraction, as that which presents it in the form of rest. It is an eloquent testimony to the unrest which tortures every heart that the promise of peace should to all seem so fair. It may be presented and aimed at in very ignoble and selfish ways. It may be sought for in cowardly shirking of duty, in sluggish avoidance of effort, in selfish absorption, apart from all the miseries of mankind. It may be sought for in the ignoble paths of mere pleasure, amidst the sanctities of human love, amidst the nobilities of intellectual effort and pursuit. But all men in their workings are aiming at rest of spirit, and only in such rest does blessedness lie. ‘There is no joy but calm.’ It is better than all the excitements of conflict, and better than the flush of victory. Best which is not apathy, rest which is not indolence, rest which is contemporaneous with, and the consequence of, the full wholesome activity of the whole nature in its legitimate directions, that is the good that we are all longing for. The sea is not stagnant, though it be calm. There will be the slow heave of the calm billow, and the wavelets may sparkle in the sunlight, though they be still from all the winds that rave. Deep in every human heart, in yours and mine, brother, is this cry for rest and peace. Let us see to it that we do not mistranslate the meaning of the longing, or fancy that it can be found in the ignoble, the selfish, the worldly ways to which I have referred. We want, most of all, peace in our inmost hearts.

II. Then the second thing to be suggested here is that the Lord of Peace Himself is the only giver of peace.

I suppose I may take for granted, on the part at least of the members of my own congregation, some remembrance of a former discourse upon another of these petitions, in which I pointed out how, in phraseology analogous to that of my text, there were the distinct reference to the divinity of Jesus Christ, the distinct presentation of prayer to Him, the implication of His present activity upon Christian hearts.

And here again we have the august and majestic ‘Himself.’ Here again we have the distinct reference of the title ‘Lord’ to Jesus. And here again we have plainly prayer to Him.

But the title by which He is addressed is profoundly significant, ‘The Lord of Peace.’ Now we find, in another of Paul’s letters, in immediate conjunction with His teaching, that casting all our care upon God is the sure way to bring the peace of God into our hearts, the title ‘the God of Peace’; and he employs the same phraseology in another of his letters, when he prays that the ‘God of Peace’ would fill the Roman Christians ‘with all joy and peace in believing.’

So, then, here is a title which is all but distinctively divine. ‘The Lord of Peace’ is brought into parallelism and equality with ‘the God of Peace’; which were blasphemy unless the underlying implication was that Jesus Christ Himself was divine.

He is the ‘Lord of Peace’ because that tranquillity of heart and spirit, that unruffled calm which we all see from afar, and long to possess, was verily His, in His manhood, during all the calamities and changes and activities of His earthly life. I have said that ‘peace’ is not apathy, that it is not indifference, that it is not self-absorption. Look at the life of the ‘Lord of Peace.’ In Him there were wholesome human emotions. He sorrowed, He wept, He wondered, He was angry, He pitied, He loved. And yet all these were perfectly consistent with the unruffled calm which marked His whole career. So peace is not stolid indifference, nor is it to be found in the avoidance of difficult duties, or the cowardly shirking of sacrifices and pains and struggles; but rather it is ‘peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation,’ of which the great example stands in Him who was ‘the Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief,’ and who yet, in it all, was ‘the Lord of Peace.’

Why was Christ’s manhood so perfectly tranquil? The secret lies here. It was a manhood in unbroken communion with the Father. And what was the secret of that unbroken communion with the Father? It lies here, in the perfect submission of His will. Resignation is peace. The surrender of self-will is peace. Obedience is peace. Trust is peace, and fellowship with the divine is peace. So Christ has taught us in His life--’The Father hath not left Me alone, because I do always the things that please Him.’ And therein He has marked out for us the path of righteousness and communion, which is ever the path of peace. ‘Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusteth in Thee.’ That is the secret of the tranquillity of the ever-calm Christ.

Being thus the Lord of Peace, inasmuch as it was His own constant and unbroken possession, He is the sole giver of it to others.

Ah! brethren, our hearts want far more, for their stable restfulness, than we can find in any hand, or in any heart, except those of Jesus Christ Himself. For what do we need? We need, in order that we should know the sweetness of repose, an adequate object for every part of our nature. If we find something that is good and sweet and satisfying for some portion of this complex being of ours, all its other hungry desires are apt to be left unappeased. So we are shuttle-cocked from one wish to another, and bandied about from one partial satisfaction to another, and in them all it is but segments of our being that are satisfied, whilst all the rest of the circumference remains disquieted. We need that, in one attainable and single object, there shall be at once that which will subjugate the will, that which will illuminate and appease the conscience, that which will satisfy the seeking intellect, and hold forth the promise of endless progress in insight and knowledge, that which will meet all the desires of our ravenous clamant nature, and that which will fill every creek and cranny of our empty hearts as with the flashing brightness of an inflowing tide.

And where shall we find all these, but in one dear heart, and where shall we discern the one object, whom, possessing, we have enough; and without whom, possessing all beside, we are mendicants and starving? Where, but in that dear Lord, who Himself will supply all our needs, and will minister to us peace, because for will and conscience and intellect and affections and desires He supplies the pabulum that they require, and gives more than enough for their satisfaction?

We want, if we are to be at rest, that there shall be some absolute control over our passions, lusts, desires, which torture us for ever, as long as they are ungoverned. There is only one hand which will take the wild beasts of our nature, bind them in the silken leash of His love, and lead them along, tamed and obedient.

We want, for our peace, that all our relations with circumstances and men around us shall be rectified. And who is there that can bring about such harmony between us and our surroundings that calamities shall not press upon us with their heaviest weight, nor opposing circumstances kindle angry resistance, but only patient perseverance and thankful persistence in the path of duty? It is only Christ that can regulate our relations to the things and the men around us, and make all things work together to our consciousness for our good.

Further, if we are to be at rest, and possess any true, fundamental, and stable tranquillity, we want that our relations with God shall consciously be rectified and made blessed. And I, for my part, do not believe that any man comes into the full sweetness of an assured friendship with God, unless he comes to it by the road of faith in that Saviour in whom God draws near to us with tenderness in His heart, and blessings dropping from His open Hands. To be at peace with God is the beginning of all true tranquillity, and that can be secured only by faith in Jesus Christ.

So, because He brings the reconciliation between man and God, because He brings the rectification of our relation to circumstances and men, because He brings the control of desires and passions and inclinations, and because He satisfies all the capacities of our natures, in Him, and in Him only, is there peace for us.

III. So note, thirdly, that the peace of the Lord of Peace is perfect.

‘Give you peace always,’ that points to perpetual, unbroken duration in time, and through all changing circumstances which might threaten a less stable and deeply-rooted tranquillity. And then, ‘by all means,’ as our Authorised Version has it, or, better, ‘in all ways,’ as the Revised Version reads, the reference being, not so much to the various manners in which the divine peace is to be bestowed, as to the various aspects which that peace is capable of assuming. Christ’s peace, then, is perpetual and multiform, unbroken, and presenting itself in all the aspects in which tranquillity is possible for a human spirit.

It is possible, then, thinks Paul, that there shall be in our hearts a deep tranquillity, over which disasters, calamities, sorrows, losses, need have no power. There is no necessity why, when my outward life is troubled, my inward life should be perturbed. There may be light in the dwellings of Goshen, while darkness lies over all the land of Egypt. The peace which Christ gives is no exemption from warfare, but is realised in the midst of warfare. It is no immunity from sorrows, but is then most felt when the storm of sorrow beating upon us is patiently accepted. The rainbow steadfastly stands spanning the tortured waters of the cataract. The fire may burn, like that old Greek fire, beneath the water. The surface may be agitated, but the centre may be calm. It is not calamity that breaks our peace, but it is the resistance of our wills to calamity which troubles us. When we can bow and submit and say, ‘Thy will be done,’ ‘it seemeth good to Thee, do as Thou wilt,’ then nothing can break the peace of God in our hearts. We seek in the wrong quarter for peace when we seek it in the disposition of outward things according to our wills. We seek in the right way when we seek it in the disposition of our wills according to the will of the Father manifest in our circumstances. There may be peace always, even whilst the storms, efforts, and calamities of life are in full operation around us and on us. That peace may be uninterrupted and uniform, extended on one high level, as it were through all our lives. It is not so with us, dear brethren; there are ups and downs which are our own fault. The peace of God may be permanent, but, in order that it should be, there must be permanent communion and permanent obedience.

Further, says the Apostle, Christ’s peace will not manifest itself in one form only, but in all the shapes in which peace is possible. There are many enemies that beset this calmness of spirit; for them all there is the appropriate armour and defence in the peace of God, I have already enumerated in part some of the requirements for true and permanent tranquillity of soul. All these are met in the peace of Christ. Whatever it is that disturbs men, He has His anodyne that will soothe. If circumstances threaten, if men array themselves against us, if our own evil hearts rise up in rebellion, if our passions disturb us, if our consciences accuse: for all these Christ brings tranquillity and calm. In every way in which men can be disturbed, and in every way, therefore, in which peace can be manifest, Christ’s gift avails. ‘Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’

IV. Lastly, ‘the Lord of Peace’ gives it by giving His own presence.

The Thessalonians, as they listened to Paul’s first prayer, might think to themselves, ‘Always, by all means.’ That is a large petition! Can it be fufilled? And so the Apostle adds, ‘The Lord be with you all.’ You cannot separate Christ’s gifts from Christ. The only way to get anything that He gives is to get Him. It is His presence that does everything. If He is with me, the world’s annoyances will seem very small. If I hold His hand I shall not be much troubled. If I can only nestle close to His side, and come under His cloak, He will shield me from the cold blast, from whatever side it blows. If my heart is twined around Him it will partake of the stability and calm of the great heart on which it rests.

The secret of tranquillity is the presence of Christ. When He is in the vessel the waves calm themselves. So, Christian men and women, if you and I are conscious of breaches of our restfulness, interruptions of our tranquillity by reason of surging, impatient passions, and hot desires within ourselves, or by reason of the pressure of outward circumstances, or by reason of our having fallen beneath our consciences, and done wrong things, let us understand that the breaches of our peace are not owing to Him, but only to our having let go His hand. It is our own faults if we are ever troubled; if we kept close to Him we should not be. It is our own faults if the world ever agitates us beyond the measure that is compatible with central calm. Sorrow should not have the power to touch the citadel of our lives. Effort should not have the power to withdraw us from our trustful repose in Him. And nothing here would have the power, if we did not let our hand slip out of His, and break our communion with Him.

So, dear brethren, ‘in the world ye shall have tribulation, in Me ye shall have peace.’ Keep inside the fortress and nothing will disturb. ‘He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.’ The only place where that hungry, passion-ridden heart of yours, conscious of alienation from God, can find rest, is close by Jesus Christ. ‘The Lord be with us all,’ and then the peace of that Lord shall clothe and fill our hearts in Christ Jesus.

1 Timothy

1) 1 TIMOTHY 1:6
2) 1 TIMOTHY 1:11
3) 1 TIMOTHY 1:15
4) 1 TIMOTHY 1:15
5) 1 TIMOTHY 1:16
6) 1 TIMOTHY 1:17
7) 1 TIMOTHY 2:8
8) 1 TIMOTHY 4:7
9) 1 TIMOTHY 6:12-14
10) 1 TIMOTHY 6:19

1) 1 Timothy 1:6

1 Timothy

THE END OF THE COMMANDMENT

1Ti. 1:6.

The Apostle has just said that he left Timothy in Ephesus, in order to check some tendencies there which were giving anxiety. Certain teachers had appeared, the effect of whose activity was to create parties, to foster useless speculations, and to turn the minds of the Ephesian Christians away from the practical and moral side of Christianity. In opposition to these, the Apostle here lays down the broad principle that God has spoken, not in order to make acute theologians, or to provide materials for controversy, but in order to help us to love. The whole of these latest letters of the Apostle breathe the mellow wisdom of old age, which has learned to rate brilliant intellectualism, agility, incontroversial fence and the like, far lower than homely goodness. And so, says Paul, ‘the end of the commandment is love.’

Now he here states, not only the purpose of the divine revelation, but gives us a summary, but yet sufficient, outline of the method by which God works towards that purpose. The commandment is the beginning, love is the end or aim. And between these two there are inserted three things, a ‘pure heart,’ a ‘good conscience,’ ‘faith unfeigned.’ Now of these three the two former are closely connected, and the third is the cause, or condition, of both of them. It is, therefore, properly named last as being first in order, and therefore last reached in analysis. When you track a stream from its mouth to its source, the fountain-head is the last thing that you come to. And here we have, as in these great lakes in Central Africa--out of which finally the Nile issues--the stages of the flow. There are the twin lakes, a ‘good conscience’ and a ‘pure heart.’ These come from ‘unfeigned faith,’ which lies higher up in the hills of God; and they run down into the love which is the ‘end of the commandment.’ The faith lays hold on the commandment, and so the process is complete. Or, if you begin at the top, instead of at the bottom, God gives the word; faith grasps the word, and thereby nourishes a ‘pure heart’ and a ‘good conscience,’ and thereby produces a universal love. So, then, we have three steps to look at here.

I. First of all, what God speaks to us for.

‘The end of the commandment is love.’

Now, I take it that the word ‘commandment’ here means, not this or that specific precept, but the whole body of Christian revelation, considered as containing laws for life. And to begin with, and only to mention, it is something to get that point of view, that all which God says, be it promise, be it self-manifestation, be it threatening, or be it anything else, has a preceptive bearing, and is meant to influence life and conduct. I shall have a word or two more to say about that presently, but note, just as we go on, how remarkable it is, and how full of lessons, if we will ponder it, that one name for the Gospel on the lips of the man who had most to say about the contrast between Gospel and Law is ‘commandment.’ Try to feel the stringency of that aspect of evangelical truth and of Christian revelation.

Then I need not remind you how here the indefinite expression ‘love’ must be taken, as I think is generally the case in the New Testament, when the object on which the love rests is not defined, as including both of the twin commandments, of which the second, our Master says, is like unto the first, love to God and love to man. In the Christian idea these two are one. They are shoots from the one root. The only difference is that the one climbs and the other grows along the levels of earth. There is no gulf set in the New Testament teaching, and there ought to be none in the practice and life of a

Christian man, between the love of God and the love of man. They are two aspects of one thing.

Then, if so, mark how, according to the Apostle’s teaching here, in this one thought of a dual-sided love, one turned upwards, one turned earthwards, there lies the whole perfection of a human soul. You want nothing more if you are ‘rooted and grounded in love.’ That will secure all goodness, all morality, all religion, everything that is beautiful, and everything that is noble. And all this is meant to be the result of God’s speech to us.

So, then, two very plain practical principles may be deduced and enforced from this first thought. First, the purpose of all revelation and the test of all religion is--character and conduct.

It is all very well to know about God, to have our minds filled with true thoughts about Him, His nature, and dealings with us. Orthodoxy is good, but orthodoxy is a means to an end. There should be nothing in a man’s creed which does not act upon his life. Or, if I may put it into technical words, all a man’s credenda should be his agenda ; and whatsoever he believes should come straight into his life to influence it, and to shape character. Here, then, is the warning against a mere notional orthodoxy, and against regarding Christian truth as being intended mainly to illuminate the understanding, or to be a subject of speculation and discussion. There are people in all generations, and there are plenty of them to-day, who seem to think that the great verities of the Gospel are mainly meant to provide material for controversy--

‘*As if religion were intended For nothing else but to be mended*’;

and that they have done all that can be expected when they have tried to apprehend the true bearing of this revelation, and to contend against misinterpretations. This is the curse of religious controversy, that it blinds men to the practical importance of the truths for which they are fighting. It is as if one were to take some fertile wheat-land, and sand it all over, and roll it down, and make it smooth for a gymnasium, where nothing would grow. So the temper which finds in Christian truth simply a ‘ministration of questions,’ as my text says, mars its purpose, and robs itself of all the power and nourishment that it might find there.

No less to be guarded against is the other misconception which the clear grasp of our text would dismiss at once, that the great purpose for which God speaks to us men, in the revelation of Jesus Christ, is that we may, as we say, be ‘forgiven,’ and escape any of the temporal or eternal consequences of our wrongdoing. That is a purpose, no doubt, and men will never rise to the apprehension of the loftiest purposes, nor penetrate to a sympathetic perception of the inmost sweetness of the Gospel, unless they begin with its redemptive aspect, even in the narrowest sense of that word. But there are a miserable number of so-called and of real Christians in this world, and in our churches to-day, who have little conception that God has spoken to them for anything else than to deliver them from the fear of death, and from the incidence on them of future condemnation. He has spoken for this purpose, but the ultimate end of all is that we may be helped to love Him, and so to be like Him. The aim of the commandment is love, and if you ever are tempted to rest in intellectual apprehensions, or to pervert the truth of God into a mere arena on which you can display your skill of fence and your intellectual agility, or if ever you are tempted to think that all is done when the sweet message of forgiveness is sealed upon a man’s heart, remember the solemn and plain words of my text--the final purpose of all is that we may love God and man.

But then, on the other side, note that no less distinctly is the sole foundation of this love laid in God’s speech. My text, in its elevation of sentiment and character and conduct above doctrine, falls in with the prevailing tendencies of this day; but it provides the safeguards which these tendencies neglect. Notice that this favourite saying of the most advanced school of broad thinkers, who are always talking about the decay of dogma, and the unimportance of doctrine as compared with love, is here uttered by a man who was no sentimentalist, but to whom the Christian system was a most distinct and definite thing, bristling all over with the obnoxious doctrines which are by some of us so summarily dismissed as of no importance. My very text protests against the modern attempt to wrench away the sentiments and emotions produced in men, by the reception of Christian truth, from the truth which it recognises as the only basis on which they can be produced. It declares that the ‘commandment’ must come first, before love can follow; and the rest of the letter, although, as I say, it decisively places the end of revelation as being the moral and religious perfecting of men into assimilation with the divine love, no less decisively demands that for such a perfecting there shall be laid the foundation of the truth as it is revealed in Jesus Christ.

And that is what we want to-day in order to make breadth wholesome, and if only we will carry with us the two thoughts, the commandment and love, we shall not go far wrong. But what would you think of a man that said, ‘I do not want any foundations. I want a house to live in’? And pray how are you going to get your house without the foundations? Or would he be a wise man who said, ‘Oh, never mind about putting grapes into the vine vat, and producing fermentation; give me the wine!’ Yes! But you must have the fermentation first. The process is not the result, of course, but there is no result without the process. And according to New Testament teaching, which, I am bold to say, is verified by experience, there is no deep, all-swaying, sovereign, heart-uniting love to God which is not drawn from the acceptance of the truth as it is in Jesus Christ.

II. And so I come, secondly, to note the purifying which is needed prior to such love.

Our text, as I said, divides the process into stages; or, if I may go back to a former illustration, into levels. And on the level immediately above the love, down into which the waters of the twin lakes glide, are a pure heart and a good conscience. These are the requisites for all real and operative love. Now they are closely connected, as it seems to me, more closely so than with either the stage which precedes or that which follows. They are, in fact, two twin thoughts, very closely identified, though not quite identical.

A pure heart is one that has been defecated and cleansed from the impurities which naturally attach to human affections. A ‘good conscience’ is one which is void of offence towards God and man, and registers the emotions of a pure heart. It is like a sheet of sensitive paper that, with a broken line, indicates how many hours of sunshine in the day there have been. We need not discuss the question as to which of these two great gifts and blessings which sweeten a whole life come first. In the initial stages of the Christian life I suppose the good conscience precedes the pure heart. For forgiveness which calms the conscience and purges it of the perilous stuff which has been injected into it by our corruptions--forgiveness comes before cleansing, and the conscience is calm before the heart is purified. But in the later stages of the Christian life the order seems to be reversed, and there cannot be in a man a conscience that is good unless there is a heart that is pure.

But however that may be--and it does not affect the general question before us--mark how distinctly Paul lays down here the principle that you will get no real love of God or man out of men whose hearts are foul, and whose consciences are either torpid or stinging them. I need not dwell upon that, for it is plain to anybody that will think for a moment that all sin separates between a man and God; and that from a heart all seething and bubbling, like the crater of a volcano, with foul liquids, and giving forth foul odours, there can come no love worth calling so to God, nor any benevolence worth calling so to man. Wherever there is sin, unrecognised, unconfessed, unpardoned, there there is a black barrier built up between a man's heart and the yearning heart of God on the other side. And until that barrier is swept away, until the whole nature receives a new set, until it is delivered from the love of evil, and from its self-centred absorption, and until conscience has taken into grateful hands, if I might so say, the greatest of all gifts, the assurance of the divine forgiveness, I, for one, do not believe that deep, vital, and life-transforming love to God is possible. I know that it is very unfashionable, I know it is exceedingly narrow teaching, but it seems to me that it is Scriptural teaching; and it seems to me that if we will strip it of the exaggerations with which it has often been surrounded, and recognise that there may be a kind of instinctive and occasional recognition of a divine love, there may be a yearning after a clear light, and fuller knowledge of it, and yet all the while no real love to God, rooted in and lording over and moulding the life, we shall not find much in the history of the world, or in the experience of ourselves or of others, to contradict the affirmation that you need the cleansing of forgiveness, and the recognition of God's love in Jesus Christ, before you can get love worth calling so in return to Him in men's hearts.

Brethren, there is much to-day to shame Christian men in the singular fact which is becoming more obvious daily, of a divorce between human benevolence and godliness. It is a scandal that there should be so many men in the world who make no pretensions to any sympathy with your Christianity, and who set you an example of benevolence, self-sacrifice, enthusiasm for humanity, as it is called. I believe that the one basis upon which there can be solidly built benevolence to men is devotion to God, because of God's great love to us in Jesus Christ. But I want to stir, if I might not say sting, you and myself into a recognition of our obligations to mankind, more stringent and compelling than we have ever felt it, by this phenomenon of modern life, that a divorce has been proclaimed between philanthropy and religion. The end of the commandment is love, out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience.

III. Lastly, notice the condition of such purifying.

To recur to my former illustration, we have to go up country to a still higher level. What feeds the two reservoirs that feed the love? What makes the heart pure and the conscience good? Paul answers, 'faith unfeigned'; not mere intellectual apprehension, not mere superficial or professed, but deep, genuine, and complete faith which has in it the element of reliance as well as the element of credence. Belief is not all that goes to make faith. Trust is not all that goes to make faith. Belief and trust are indissolubly wedded in the conception of it. Such a faith, which knows what it lays hold of--for it lays hold upon definite truth, and lays hold on what it knows, for it trusts in Him whom the truth reveals--such a faith makes the heart pure and the conscience good.

And how does it do so? By nothing in itself. There is no power in my faith to make me one bit better than I am. There is no power in it to still one accusation of conscience. It is only the condition on which the one power that purges and that calms enters into my heart and works there. The power of faith is the power of that which faith admits to operate in my life. If we open our hearts the fire will come in, and it will thaw the ice, and melt out the foulness from my heart. It is important for practice that we should clearly understand that the great things which the Bible says of faith it says of it only because it is the channel, the medium, the condition, by and on which the real power, which is Jesus Christ Himself, acts upon us. It is not the window, but the sunshine, that floods this building with light. It is not the opened hand, but the gift laid in it, that enriches the pauper. It is not the poor leaden pipe, but the water that flows through it, that fills the cistern, and cleanses it, whilst it fills. It is not your faith, but the Christ whom your faith brings into your heart and conscience, that purges the one, and makes the other void of offence towards God and man.

So, brethren, let us learn the secret of all nobility, of all power, of all righteousness of character and conduct. Put your foot on the lowest round of the ladder, and then aspire and climb, and you will reach the summit. Take the first step, and be true to it after you have taken it, and the last will surely come. He that can say, ‘We have known and believed the love that God hath to us,’ will also be able to say, ‘We love Him because He first loved us.’ ‘And this commandment have we of God, that he who loves God loves his brother also.’

2) 1 Timothy 1:11

1 Timothy

‘THE GOSPEL OF THE GLORY OF THE HAPPY GOD’

1Ti. 1:11.

Two remarks of an expository character will prepare the way for our consideration of this text. The first is, that the proper rendering is that which is given in the Revised Version--’the gospel of the glory,’ not the ‘glorious gospel.’ The Apostle is not telling us what kind of thing the Gospel is, but what it is about. He is dealing not with its quality, but with its contents. It is a Gospel which reveals, has to do with, is the manifestation of, the glory of God.

Then the other remark is with reference to the meaning of the word ‘blessed.’ There are two Greek words which are both translated ‘blessed’ in the New Testament. One of them, the more common, literally means ‘well spoken of,’ and points to the action of praise or benediction; describes what a man is when men speak well of him, or what God is when men praise and magnify His name. But the other word, which is used here, and is only applied to God once more in Scripture, has no reference to the human attribution of blessing and praise to Him, but describes Him altogether apart from what men say of Him, as what He is in Himself, the ‘blessed,’ or, as we might almost say, the ‘happy’ God. If the word happy seems too trivial, suggesting ideas of levity, of turbulence, of possible change, then I do not know that we can find any better word than that which is already employed in my text, if only we remember that it means the solemn, calm, restful, perpetual gladness that fills the heart of God.

So much, then, being premised, there are three points that seem to me to come out of this remarkable expression of my text. First, the revelation of God in Christ, of which the Gospel is the record, is the glory of God. Second, that revelation is, in a very profound sense, an element in the blessedness of God. And, lastly, that revelation is the good news for men. Let us look at these three points, then, in succession.

I. Take, first, that striking thought that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the glory of God.

The theme, or contents, or purpose of the whole Gospel, is to set forth and make manifest to men the glory of God.

Now what do we mean by ‘the glory’? I think, perhaps, that question may be most simply answered by remembering the definite meaning of the word in the Old Testament. There it designates, usually, that supernatural and lustrous light which dwelt between the Cherubim, the symbol of the presence and of the self-manifestation of God. So that we may say, in brief, that the glory of God is the sum-total of the light that streams from His self-revelation, considered as being the object of adoration and praise by a world that gazes upon Him.

And if this be the notion of the glory of God, is it not a startling contrast which is suggested between the apparent contents and the real substance of that Gospel? Suppose a man, for instance, who had no previous knowledge of Christianity, being told that in it he would find the highest revelation of the glory of God. He comes to the book, and finds that the very heart of it is not about God, but about a man; that this revelation of the glory of God is the biography of a man; and more than that, that the larger portion of that biography is the story of the humiliations, and the sufferings, and the death of the man. Would it not strike him as a strange paradox that the history of a man’s life was the shining apex of all revelations of the glory of God? And yet so it is, and the Apostle, just because to him the Gospel was the story of the Christ who lived and died, declares that in this story of a human life, patient, meek, limited, despised, rejected, and at last crucified, lies, brighter than all other flashings of the divine light, the very heart of the lustre and palpitating centre and fontal source of all the radiance with which God has flooded the world. The history of Jesus Christ is the glory of God. And that involves two or three considerations on which I dwell briefly.

One of them is this: Christ, then, is the self-revelation of God. If, when we deal with the story of His life and death, we are dealing simply with the biography of a man, however pure, lofty, inspired he may be, then I ask what sort of connection there is between that biography which the four Gospels gives us, and what my text says is the substance of the Gospel? What force of logic is there in the Apostle’s words: ‘God commendeth His love toward us in that whilst we were yet sinners Christ died for us,’ unless there is some altogether different connection between the God who commends His love and the Christ who dies to commend it, than exists between a mere man and God? Brethren! to deliver my text, and a hundred other passages of Scripture, from the charge of being extravagant nonsense, and clear, illogical non sequiturs, you must believe that in that man Christ Jesus ‘we behold His glory--the glory of the only begotten of the Father’; and that when we look--haply not without some touch of tenderness and awed admiration in our hearts--upon His gentleness, we have to say, ‘the patient God’; when we look upon His tears we have to say, ‘the pitying God’; when we look upon His Cross we have to say, ‘the redeeming God’; and gazing upon the Man, to see in Him the manifest divinity. Oh! listen to that voice, ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father,’ and bow before the story of the human life as being the revelation of the indwelling God.

And then, still further, my text suggests that this self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the very climax and highest point of all God’s revelations to men. I believe that the loftiest exhibition and conception of the divine character which is possible to us must be made to us in the form of a man. I believe that the law of humanity, for ever, in heaven as on earth, is this, that the Son is the revealer of God; and that no loftier--yea, at bottom, no other--

communication of the divine nature can be made to man than is made in Jesus Christ.

But be that as it may, let me urge upon you this thought, that in that wondrous story of the life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ the very high-water mark of divine self-communication has been touched and reached. All the energies of the divine nature are embodied there. The ‘riches, both of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God,’ are in the Cross and Passion of our Saviour. ‘To declare at this time His righteousness ‘ Jesus Christ came to die. The Cross is ‘the power of God unto salvation.’ Or, to put it into other words, and avail oneself of an illustration, we know the old story of the queen who, for the love of an unworthy human heart, dissolved pearls in the cup and gave them to him to drink. We may say that God comes to us, and for the love of us, reprobate and unworthy, has melted all the jewels of His nature into that cup of blessing which He offers to us, saying: ‘Drink ye all of it.’ The whole Godhead, so to speak, is smelted down to make that rushing river of molten love which flows from the Cross of Christ into the hearts of men. Here is the highest point of God’s revelation of Himself.

And my text implies, still further, that the true living, flashing centre of the glory of God is the love of God. Christendom is more than half heathen yet, and it betrays its heathenism not least in its vulgar conceptions of the divine nature and its glory. The majestic attributes which separate God from man, and make Him unlike His creatures, are the ones which people too often fancy belong to the glorious side of His character. They draw distinctions between ‘grace’ and ‘glory,’ and think that the latter applies mainly to what I might call the physical and the metaphysical, and less to the moral, attributes of the divine nature. We adore power, and when it is expanded to infinity we think that it is the glory of God. But my text delivers us from all such misconceptions. If we rightly understand it, then we learn this, that the true heart of the glory is tenderness and love. Of power that weak man hanging on the Cross is a strange embodiment; but if we learn that there is something more godlike in God than power, then we can say, as we look upon Jesus Christ: ‘Lo! this is our God. We have waited for Him, and He will save us.’ Not in the wisdom that knows no growth, not in the knowledge which has no border-land of ignorance ringing it round about, not in the unwearied might of His arm, not in the exhaustless energy of His being, not in the unslumbering watchfulness of His all-seeing eye, not in that awful presence wheresoever creatures are; not in any or in all of these lies the glory of God, but in His love. These are the fringes of the brightness; this is the central blaze. The Gospel is the Gospel of the glory of God, because it is all summed up in the one word--'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.'

II. Now, in the next place, the revelation of God in Christ is an element in the blessedness of God.

We are come here into places where we see but very dimly, and it becomes us to speak very cautiously. Only as we are led by the divine teaching may we affirm at all. But it cannot be unwise to accept in simple literality utterances of Scripture, however they may seem to strike us as strange. And so I would say--the philosopher's God may be all-sufficient and unemotional, the Bible's God 'delighteth in mercy,' rejoiceth in His gifts, and is glad when men accept them. It is something, surely, amid all the griefs and sorrows of this sorrow-haunted and devil-hunted world, to rise to this lofty region and to feel that there is a living personal joy at the heart of the universe. If we went no further, to me there is infinite beauty and mighty consolation and strength in that one thought--the happy God. He is not, as some ways of representing Him figure Him to be, what the older astronomers thought the sun was, a great cold orb, black and frigid at the heart, though the source and centre of light and warmth to the system. But He Himself is joy, or if we dare not venture on that word, which brings with it earthly associations, and suggests the possibility of alteration--He is the blessed God. And the Psalmist saw deeply into the divine nature, who, not contented with hymning His praise as the possessor of the fountain of life, and the light whereby we see light, exclaimed in an ecstasy of anticipation, 'Thou makest us to drink of the rivers of Thy pleasures.'

But there is a great deal more than that here, if not in the word itself, at least in its connection, which connection seems to suggest that, howsoever the divine nature must be supposed to be blessed in its own absolute and boundless perfectness, an element in the blessedness of God Himself arises from His self-communication through the Gospel to the world. All love delights in imparting. Why should not God's? On the lower level of human affection we know that it is so, and on the highest level we may with all reverence venture to say, The quality of that mercy . . . ‘is twice blest,’ and that divine love ‘blesseth Him that gives and them that take.’

He created a universe because He delights in His works, and in having creatures on whom He can lavish Himself. He ‘rests in His love, and rejoices over us with singing’ when we open our hearts to the reception of His light, and learn to know Him as He has declared Himself in His Christ. The blessed God is blessed because He is God. But He is blessed too because He is the loving and, therefore, the giving God.

What a rock-firmness such a thought as this gives to the mercy and the love that He pours out upon us! If they were evoked by our worthiness we might well tremble, but when we know, according to the grand words familiar to many of us, that it is His nature and property to be merciful, and that He is far gladder in giving than we can be in receiving, then we may be sure that His mercy endureth for ever, and that it is the very necessity of His being--and He cannot turn His back upon Himself--to love, to pity, to succour, and to bless.

III. And so, lastly, the revelation of God in Christ is good news for us all.

‘The Gospel of the glory of the blessed God.’ How that word ‘Gospel’ has got tarnished and enfeebled by constant use and unreflective use, so that it slips glibly off my tongue and falls without producing any effect upon your hearts! It needs to be freshened up by considering what really it means. It means this: here are we like men shut up in a beleaguered city, hopeless, helpless, with no power to break out or to raise the siege; provisions failing, death certain. Some of you older men and women remember how that was the case in that awful siege of Paris, in the Franco-German War, and what expedients were adopted in order to get some communication from without. And here to us, prisoned, comes, as it did to them, a despatch borne under a dove’s wing, and the message is this:--God is love; and that you may know that He is, He has sent you His Son who died on the Cross, the sacrifice for a world’s sin. Believe it, and trust it, and all your transgressions will pass away.

My brother, is not that good news? Is it not the good news that you need--the news of a Father, of pardon, of hope, of love, of strength, of purity, of heaven? Does it not meet our fears, our forebodings, our wants at every point? It comes to you. What do you do with it? Do you welcome it eagerly, do you clutch it to your hearts, do you say, 'This is my Gospel'? Oh! let me beseech you, welcome the message; do not turn away from the word from heaven, which will bring life and blessedness to all your hearts! Some of you have turned away long enough, some of you, perhaps, are fighting with the temptation to do so again even now. Let me press that ancient Gospel upon your acceptance, that Christ the Son of God has died for you, and lives to bless and help you. Take it and live! So shall you find that, 'as cold water to a thirsty soul,' so is this best of all news from the far country.

3) 1 Timothy 1:15

1 Timothy

THE GOSPEL IN SMALL

1Ti. 1:15.

Condensation is a difficult art. There are few things drier and more unsatisfactory than small books on great subjects, abbreviated statements of large systems. Error lurks in summaries, and yet here the whole fulness of God's communication to men is gathered into a sentence; tiny as a diamond, and flashing like it. My text is the one precious drop of essence, distilled from gardens full of fragrant flowers. There is an old legend of a magic tent, which could be expanded to shelter an army, and contracted to cover a single man. That great Gospel which fills the Bible and overflows on the shelves of crowded libraries is here, without harm to its power, folded up into one saying, which the simplest can understand sufficiently to partake of the salvation which it offers.

There are five of these 'faithful sayings' in the letters of Paul, usually called 'the pastoral epistles.' It seems to have been a manner with him, at that time of his life, to underscore anything which he felt to be especially important by attaching to it this label. They are all, with one exception, references to the largest truths of the Gospel. I turn to this one, the first of them now, for the sake of gathering some lessons from it.

I. Note, then, first, here the Gospel in a nutshell.

‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.’ Now, every word there is weighty, and might be, not beaten out, but opened out into volumes. Mark who it is that comes--the solemn double name of that great Lord, ‘Christ Jesus.’ The former tells of His divine appointment and preparation, inasmuch as the Spirit of the Lord God is upon Him, anointing Him to proclaim good tidings to the poor, and to open the prison doors to all the captives, and asserts that it is He to whom prophets and ritual witnessed, and for whose coming prophets and kings looked wearily through the ages, and died rejoicing even to see afar off the glimmer of His day. The name of Jesus tells of the child born in Bethlehem, who knows the experience of our lives by His own, and not only bends over our griefs with the pity and omniscience of a God, but with the experience and sympathy of a man.

‘Christ Jesus came.’ Then He was before He came. His own will impelled His feet, and brought Him to earth.

‘Christ Jesus came to save.’ Then there is disease, for saving is healing; and there is danger, for saving is making secure.

‘Christ Jesus came to save sinners’--the universal condition, co-extensive with the ‘world’ into which, and for which, He came. And so the essence of the Gospel, as it lay in Paul’s mind, and had been verified in his experience, was this--that a divine person had left a life of glory, and in wonderful fashion had taken upon Himself manhood in order to deliver men from the universal danger and disease. That is the Gospel which Paul believed, and which he commends to us as ‘a faithful saying.’

Well, then, if that be so, there are two or three things very important for us to lay to heart. The first is the universality of sin. That is the thing in which we are all alike, dear friends. That is the one thing about which any man is safe in his estimate of another. We differ profoundly. The members of this congregation, gathered accidentally together, and perhaps never to be all together again, may be at the antipodes of culture, of condition, of circumstances, of modes of life; but, just as really below all the diversities there lies the common possession of the one human heart, so really and universally below all diversities there lies the black drop in the heart, and 'we all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' It is that truth which I want to lay on your hearts as the first condition to understanding anything about the power, the meaning, the blessedness of the Gospel which we say we believe.

And what does Paul mean by this universal indictment? If you take the vivid autobiographical sketch in the midst of which it is embedded, you will understand. He goes on to say, 'of whom I am chief.' It was the same man that said, without supposing that he was contradicting this utterance at all, 'touching the righteousness which is in the law' I was 'blameless.' And yet, 'I am chief.' So all true men who have ever shown us their heart, in telling their Christian faith, have repeated Paul's statement; from Augustine in his wonderful Confessions , to John Bunyan in his Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners . And then prosaic men have said, 'What profligates they must have been, or what exaggerators they are now!' No. Sewer gas of the worst sort has no smell; and the most poisonous exhalations are only perceptible by their effects. What made Paul think himself the chief of sinners was not that he had broken the commandments, for he might have said, and in effect did say, 'All these have I kept from my youth up,' but that, through all the respectability and morality of his early life there ran this streak--an alienation of heart, in the pride of self-confidence, from God, and an ignorance of his own wretchedness and need. Ah! brethren, I do not need to exaggerate, nor to talk about 'splendid vices,' in the untrue language of one of the old saints, but this I seek to press on you: that the deep, universal sin does not lie in the indulgence of passions, or the breach of moralities, but it lies here--'thou hast left Me, the fountain of living water.' That is what I charge on myself, and on every one of you, and I beseech you to recognise the existence of this sinfulness beneath all the surface of reputable and pure lives. Beautiful they may be; God forbid that I should deny it: beautiful with many a strenuous effort after goodness, and charming in many respects, but yet vitiated by this, 'The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, thou hast not glorified.' That is enough to make a man brush away all the respectabilities and proprieties and graces, and look at the black reality beneath, and wail out ‘of whom I am chief.’

But, further, Paul’s condensed summary of the Gospel implies the fatal character of this universal sin. ‘He comes to save,’ says he. Now what answers to ‘save’ is either disease or danger. The word is employed in the original in antithesis to both conditions. To save is to heal and to make safe. And I need not remind you, I suppose, of how truly the alienation from God, and the substitution for Him of self or of creature, is the sickness of the whole man. But the end of sickness uncured is death. We ‘have no healing medicine,’ and the ‘wound is incurable’ by the skill of any earthly chirurgeon. The notion of sickness passes, therefore, at once into that of danger: for unhealed sickness can only end in death. Oh! that my words could have the waking power that would startle some of my complacent hearers into the recognition of the bare facts of their lives and character, and of the position in which they stand on a slippery inclined plane that goes straight down into darkness!

You do not hear much about the danger of sin from some modern pulpits. God forbid that it should be the staple of any; but God forbid that it should be excluded from any! Whilst fear is a low motive, self-preservation is not a low one; and it is to that that I now appeal. Brethren, the danger of every sin is, first, its rapid growth; second, its power of separating from God; third, the certainty of a future--ay! and present --retribution.

To me, the proof of the fatal effect of sin is what God had to do in order to stop it. Do you think that it would be a small, superficial cut which could be stanched by nothing else but the pierced hand of Jesus Christ? Measure the intensity of danger by the cost of deliverance, and judge how grave are the wounds for the healing of which stripes had to be laid on Him. Ah! if you and I had not been in danger of death, Jesus Christ would not have died. And if it be true that the Son of God laid aside His glory, and came into the world and died on the Cross for men, out of the very greatness of the gift, and the marvellousness of the mercy, there comes solemn teaching as to the intensity of the misery and the reality and awfulness of the retribution from which we were delivered by such a death. Sin, the universal condition, brings with it no slight disease and no small danger.

Further, we may gather from this condensed summary where the true heart and essence of the Christian revelation is. You will never understand it until you are contented to take the point of view which the New Testament takes, and give all weight and gravity to the fact of man’s transgression and the consequences thereof. We shall never know what the power and the glory of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is until we recognise that, first and foremost, it is the mighty means by which man’s ruin is repaired, man’s downrush is stopped, sin is forgiven and capable of being cleansed. Only when we think of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as being, first and foremost, the redemption of the world by the great act of incarnation and sacrifice, do we come to be in a position in any measure to estimate its superlative worth.

And, for my part, I believe that almost all the mistakes and errors and evaporations of Christianity into a mere dead nothing which have characterised the various ages of the Church come mainly from this, that men fail to see how deep and how fatal are the wounds of sin, and so fail to apprehend the Gospel as being mainly and primarily a system of redemption. There are many other most beautiful aspects about it, much else in it, that is lovely and of good report, and fitted to draw men’s hearts and admiration; but all is rooted in this, the life and death of Jesus Christ, the sacrifice by whom we are forgiven, and in whom we are healed. And if you strike that out, you have a dead nothing left--an eviscerated Gospel.

I believe that we all need to be reminded of that to-day, as we always do, but mainly to-day, when we hear from so many lips estimates, favourable or unfavourable to Christianity and its mission in the world, which leave out of sight, or minimise into undue insignificance, or shove into a backward place, its essential characteristic, that it is the power of God through Christ, His Son Incarnate, dying and rising again for the salvation of individual souls from the penalty, the guilt, the habit, and the love of their sins, and only secondarily is it a morality, a philosophy, a social lever. I take for mine the quaint saying of one of the old Puritans, ‘When so many brethren are preaching to the times, it may be allowed one poor brother to preach for eternity.’

'This is a faithful saying, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.'

II. Now, secondly, note the reliableness of this condensed Gospel.

When a man in the middle of some slight plank, thrown across a stream, tests it with a stamp of his foot, and calls to his comrades, 'It is quite firm,' there is reason for their venturing upon it too. That is exactly what Paul is doing here. How does he know that it is 'a faithful saying'? Because he has proved it in his own experience, and found that in his case the salvation which Jesus Christ was said to effect has been effected. Now there are many other grounds of certitude besides this, but, after all, it is worth men's while to consider how many millions there have been from the beginning who would be ready to join chorus with the Apostle here, and to say, 'One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see.' My experience cannot be your certitude; but if you and I are suffering from precisely the same disease, and I have tested a cure, my experiences should have some weight with you. And so, brethren, I point you to all the thousands who are ready to say, 'This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him.' Are there any who give counter-evidence; that say, 'We have tried it. It is all a sham and imagination. We have asked this Christ of yours to forgive us, and He has not. We have asked Him to cleanse us, and He has not. We have tried Him, and He is an impostor, and we will have no more to do with Him.' There are people, alas! who have gone back to their wallowing in the mire, but it was not because Christ had failed in His promises, but because they did not care to have them fulfilled any more. Jesus Christ does not promise that His salvation shall work against the will of men who submit themselves to it.

But it is not only because of that consentient chorus of many voices--the testimony of which wise men will not reject--that the word is 'a faithful saying.' This is no place or time to enter upon anything like a condensation of the Christian evidence; but, in lieu of everything else, I point to one proof. There is no fact in the history of the world better attested, and the unbelief of which is more unreasonable, than the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. And if Christ rose from the dead--and you cannot understand the history of the world unless He did, nor the existence of the Church either--if

Jesus Christ rose from the dead, it seems to me that almost all the rest follows of necessity: the influx of the supernatural, the unique character of His career, the correspondence of the end with the beginning, the broad seal of the divine confirmation stamped upon His claims to be the Son of God and the Redeemer of the world. All these things seem to me to come necessarily from that fact. And I say, given the consentient witness of nineteen centuries, given the existence of the Church, given the effects of Christianity in the world, given that upon which they repose--the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead--the conclusion is sound, ‘This is a faithful saying . . . that He came into the world to save sinners.’

Men talk, nowadays, very often as if the progress of science and new views as to the evolution of creatures or of mankind had effected the certitude of the Gospel. It does not seem to me that they have in the smallest degree. ‘The foundation of God standeth sure,’ whatever may become of some of the superstructures which men have built upon it. They may very probably be blown away. So much the better if we get the rock to build upon once more. A great deal is going, but not the Gospel. Do not let us be afraid, or suppose that it will suffer. Do not let us dread every new speculation as if it was going to finish Christianity, but recognise this--that the fact of man’s sin and, blessed be God! the fact of man’s redemption stands untouched by them all; and to-day, as of old, Jesus Christ is, and is firmly manifested to be, the world’s Saviour. Whatsoever refuge may be swept away by any storms, ‘Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation, a stone, a tried corner-stone, a sure foundation: He that believeth shall not be confounded.’

III. Lastly, notice the consequent wisdom and duty of acceptance.

‘Worthy of all acceptation,’ says Paul. Yes, of course, if it is reliable. That word of the Lord which is ‘sure, making wise the simple,’ deserves to be received. Now this phrase, ‘all acceptation,’ may mean either of two things: it may either mean worthy of being welcomed by all men, or by the whole of each man.

This Gospel deserves to be welcomed by every man, for it is fitted for every man, since it deals with the primary human characteristic of transgression. Brethren! we need different kinds of intellectual nutriment, according to education and culture. We need different kinds of treatment, according to condition and circumstance. The morality of one age is not the morality of another. Much, even of right and wrong, is local and temporary; but black man and white, savage and civilised, philosopher and fool, king and clown, all need the same air to breathe, the same water to drink, the same sun for light and warmth, and all need the same Christ for redemption from the same sin, for safety from the same danger, for snatching from the same death. This Gospel is a Gospel for the world, and for every man in it. Have you taken it for yours? If it is 'worthy of all acceptation,' it is worthy of your acceptation. If you have not, you are treating Him and it with indignity, as if it was a worthless letter left in the post-office for you, which you knew was there, but which you did not think valuable enough to take the trouble to go for. The gift lies at your side. It is less than truth to say that it is ' worthy of being accepted.' Oh! it is infinitely more than that.

It is, also, 'worthy of all acceptation' in the sense of worthy of being accepted into all a man's nature, because it will fit it all and bless it all. Some of us give it a half welcome. We take it into our heads, and then we put a partition between them and our hearts, and keep our religion on the other side, so that it does not influence us at all. It is worthy of being received by the understanding, to which it will bring truth absolute; of being received by the will, to which it will bring the freedom of submission; of being received by the conscience, to which it will bring quickening; of being received by the affections, to which it will bring pure and perfect love. For hope, it will bring a certainty to gaze upon; for passions, a curb; for effort, a spur and a power; for desires, satisfaction; for the whole man, healing and light.

Brother! take it. And, if you do, begin where it begins, with your sins; and be contented to be saved as a sinner in danger and sickness, who can neither defend nor heal yourself. And thus coming, you will test the rope and find it hold; you will take the medicine and know that it cures; and, by your own experience, you will be able to say, 'This is a faithful saying, Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.'

4) 1 Timothy 1:15

THE CHIEF OF SINNERS

1Ti. 1:15.

The less teachers of religion talk about themselves the better; and yet there is a kind of personal reference, far removed from egotism and offensiveness. Few such men have ever spoken more of themselves than Paul did, and yet none have been truer to his motto: ‘We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus.’ For the scope of almost all his personal references is the depreciation of self, and the magnifying of the wonderful mercy which drew him to Jesus Christ. Whenever he speaks of his conversion it is with deep emotion and with burning cheeks. Here, for instance, he adduces himself as the typical example of God’s long-suffering. If he were saved none need despair.

I take it that this saying of the Apostle’s, ‘Of whom I am chief,’ paradoxical and exaggerated as it seems to many men, is in spirit that which all who know themselves ought to re-echo; and without which there is little strength in Christian life.

I. And so I ask you to note, first, what this man thinks of himself.

‘Of whom I am chief.’ Now, if we set what we know of the character of Saul of Tarsus before he was a Christian by the side of that of many who have won a bad supremacy in wickedness, the words seem entirely strange and exaggerated. But, as I have often had to say, the principle of the Apostle’s estimate is to be found in his belief that, not the outward manifestation of evil in specific acts of immorality, or flagrant breaches of commandment, but the inward principle from which the deeds flowed, is the measure of a man’s criminality, and that, according to the uniform teaching of Scripture, the very root of sin, and that which is common to all the things that the world’s conscience and ordinary morality designate as wrong, is to be found here, that self has become the centre, the aim, and the law instead of God. ‘This is the condemnation,’ said Paul’s Master-- not that men have done so-and-so and so-and-so, but--’that light is come into the world, and men love darkness.’ That is the root of evil. ‘When the Comforter is come,’ said Paul’s Master, ‘He will convince the world of sin.’ Because they have broken the commandments? Because they have been lustful, ambitious, passionate, murderous, profligate, and so on? No! ‘Because they believe not in Me.’

The common root of all sin is alienation of heart and will from God. And it is by the root, and not by the black clusters of poisonous berries that have come from it, that men are to be judged. Here is the mother-tincture. You may colour it in different ways, and you may flavour it with different essences, and you will get a whole pharmacopoeia of poisons out of it. But the mother-poison of them all is this, that men turn away from the light, which is God; and for you and me is God in Christ.

So this man, looking back from the to-day of his present devotion and love to the yesterdays of his hostility, avails himself indeed of the palliation, ‘I did it ignorantly, in unbelief,’ but yet is smitten with the consciousness that whilst as touching the righteousness that is of the law he was blameless, his attitude to that incarnate love was such as now, he thinks, stamps him as the worst of men.

Brethren, there is the standard by which we have to try ourselves. If we get down below the mere surface of acts, and think, not of what we do, but of what we are, we shall then, at any rate, have in our hands the means by which we can truly estimate ourselves.

But what have we to say about that word ‘chief’? Is not that exaggeration? Well, yes and no. For every man ought to know the weak and evil places of his own heart better than he does those of any besides. And if he does so know them, he will understand that the ordinary classification of sin, according to the apparent blackness of the deed, is very superficial and misleading. Obviously, the worst of acts need not be done by the worst of men, and it does not at all follow that the man who does the awful deed stands out from his fellows in the same bad pre-eminence in which his deed stands out from theirs.

Take a concrete case. Go into the slums of Manchester, and take some of the people there, battered almost out of the semblance of humanity, and all crusted over and leprous with foul-smelling evils that you and I never come within a thousand miles of thinking it possible that we should do. Did you ever think that it is quite possible that the worst harlot, thief, drunkard, profligate in your back streets may be more innocent in their profligacy than you are in your respectability; and that we may even come to this paradox, that the worse the act, as a rule, the less guilty the doer? It is not such a paradox as it looks, because, on the one hand, the presence of temptation, and, on the other hand, the absence of light, make all the difference. And these people, who could not have been anything else, are innocent in degradation as compared with you, with all your education and culture, and opportunities of going straight, and knowledge of Christ and His love. The little transgressions that you do are far greater than the gross ones that they do. 'But for the grace of God, there goes John Bradford,' said the old preacher, when he saw a man going to the scaffold. And you and I, if we know ourselves, will not think that we have an instance of exaggeration, but only of the object nearest seeming the largest, when Paul said 'Of whom I am chief.'

Only go and look for your sin in the way they look for Guy Fawkes at the House of Commons before the session. Take a dark lantern, and go down into the cellars. And If you do not find something there that will take all the conceit out of you, it must be because you are very short-sighted, or phenomenally self-complacent.

What does it matter though there be vineyards on the slopes of Vesuvius, and bright houses nestling at its base, and beauty lying all around like the dream of a god, if, when a man cranes his neck over the top of the crater, he sees that that cone, so graceful on the outside, is seething with fire and sulphur? Let us look down into the crater of our own hearts, and what we see there may well make us feel as Paul did when he said, 'Of whom I am chief.'

Now, such an estimate is perfectly consistent with a clear recognition of any good that may be in the character and manifest in life. For the same Paul who says, 'Of whom I am chief,' says, in the almost contemporaneous letter sent to the same person, 'I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith'; and he is the same man who asserted, 'In nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing.' The true Christian estimate of one's own evil and sin does not in the least interfere with the recognition of what God strengthens one to do, or of the progress which, by God’s grace, may have been made in holiness and righteousness. The two things may lie side by side with perfect harmony, and ought to do so, in every Christian heart.

But notice one more point. The Apostle does not say ‘I was,’ but ‘I am chief.’ What! A man who could say, in another connection, ‘If any man be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature; old things are passed away’--the man who could say, in another connection, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God’--does he also say, ‘I am chief’? Is he speaking about his present? Are old sins bound round a man’s neck for evermore? If they be, what is the meaning of the Gospel that Jesus Christ redeems us from our sins? Well, he means this. No lapse of time, nor any gift of divine pardon, nor any subsequent advancement in holiness and righteousness, can alter the fact that I, the very same I that am now rejoicing in God’s salvation, am the man that did all these things; and, in a very profound sense, they remain mine through all eternity. I may be a forgiven sinner, and a cleansed sinner, and a sanctified sinner, but I am a sinner--not I was. The imperishable connection between a man and his past, which may be so tragical, and, thank God, may be so blessed, even in the case of remembered and confessed sin, is solemnly hinted at in the words before us. We carry with us ever the fact of past transgression, and no forgiveness, nor any future ‘perfecting of holiness in the fear’ and by the grace ‘of the Lord’ can alter that fact. Therefore, let us beware lest we bring upon our souls any more of the stains which, though they be in a blessed and sufficient sense blotted out, do yet leave the marks where they have fallen for ever.

II. Note how this man comes to such an estimate of himself.

He did not think so deeply and penitently of his past at the beginning of his career, true and deep as his repentance, and valid and genuine as his conversion were. But as he advanced in the love of Jesus Christ, his former active hostility became more monstrous to him, and the higher he rose, the clearer was his vision of the depth from which he had struggled; for growth in Christian holiness deepens the conviction of prior imperfection.

If God has forgiven my sin the more need for me to remember it. ‘Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy transgressions, when I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done.’ If you, my brother, have any real and genuine hold of God’s pardoning mercy, it will bow you down the more completely on your knees in the recognition of your own sin. The man who, as soon as the pressure of guilt and danger which is laid upon him seems to him to be lifted off, springs up like some elastic figure of indiarubber, and goes on his way in jaunty forgetfulness of his past evil, needs to ask himself whether he has ever passed from death unto life. Not to remember the old sin is to be blind. The surest sign that we are pardoned is the depth of our habitual penitence. Try yourselves, you Christian people who are so sure of your forgiveness, try yourselves by that test, and if you find that you are thinking less of your past evil, be doubtful whether you have ever entered into the genuine possession of the forgiving mercy of your God.

And then, still further, this penitent retrospect is the direct result of advancement in Christian characteristics. We are drawn to begin some study or enterprise by the illusion that there is but a little way to go. ‘Alps upon alps arise’ when once we have climbed a short distance up the hill, and it has become as difficult to go back as to go forward.

So it is in the Christian life--the sign of growing perfection is the growing consciousness of imperfection. A spot upon a clean palm is more conspicuous than a diffuse griminess over all the hand. One stain upon a white robe spoils it which would not be noticed upon one less lustrously clean. And so the more we grow towards God in Christ, and the more we appropriate and make our own His righteousness, the more we shall be conscious of our deficiencies, and the less we shall be prepared to assert virtues for ourselves.

Thus it comes to pass that conscience is least sensitive when it is most needed, and most swift to act when it has least to do. So it comes to pass, too, that no man’s acquittal of himself can be accepted as sufficient; and that he is a fool in self-knowledge who says, ‘I am not conscious of guilt, therefore I am innocent.’ ‘I know nothing against myself, yet am I not hereby justified: but He that judgeth me is the Lord.’ The more you become like Christ the more you will find out your unlikeness to Him.

III. Lastly, note what this judgment of himself did for this man.

I said in the beginning of my remarks that it seemed to me that without the reproduction of this estimate of ourselves there would be little strong Christian life in us. It seems to me that that continual remembrance which Paul carried with him of what he had been, and of Christ's marvellous love in drawing him to Himself, was the very spring of all that was noble and conspicuously Christian in his career. And I venture to say, in two or three words, what I think you and I will never have unless we have this lowly self-estimate.

Without it there will be no intensity of cleaving to Jesus Christ. If you do not know that you are ill, you will not take the medicine. If you do not believe that the house is on fire, you will not mind the escape. The life-buoy lies unnoticed on the shelf above the berth as long as the sea is calm and everything goes well. Unless you have been down into the depths of your own heart, and seen the evil that is there, you will not care for the redeeming Christ, nor will you grasp Him as a man does who knows that there is nothing between him and ruin except that strong hand. We must be driven to the Saviour as well as drawn to Him if there is to be any reality or tightness in the clutch with which we hold Him. And if you do not hold Him with a firm clutch you do not hold Him at all.

Further, without this lowly estimate there will be no fervour of grateful love. That is the reason why so much both of orthodox and heterodox religion amongst us to-day is such a tepid thing as it is. It is because men have never felt either that they need a Redeemer, or that Jesus Christ has redeemed them. I believe that there is only one power that will strike the rock of a human heart, and make the water of grateful devotion flow out, and that is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of mankind, and as my Saviour. Unless that be your faith, which it will not be except you have this conviction of my text in its spirit and essence, there will not be in your hearts the love which will glow there, an all-transforming power.

And is there anything in the world more obnoxious, more insipid, than lukewarm religion? If, with marks of quotation, I might use the coarse, strong expression of John Milton--'It gives a vomit to God Himself.' 'Because thou art neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.'

And without it there will be little pity of, and love for, our fellows. Unless we feel the common evil, and estimate by the intensity of its working in ourselves how sad are its ravages in others, our charity to men will be as tepid as our love to God. Did you ever notice that, historically, the widest benevolence to men goes along with what some people call the 'narrowest' theology? People tell us, for instance, to mark the contrast between the theology which is usually called evangelical and the wide benevolence usually accompanying it, and ask how the two things agree. The 'wide' benevolence comes directly from the 'narrow' theology. He that knows the plague of his own heart, and how Christ has redeemed him, will go, with the pity of Christ in his heart, to help to redeem others.

So, dear friends, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.' 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

5) 1 Timothy 1:16

1 Timothy

A TEST CASE

1Ti. 1:16.

The smallest of God's creatures, if it were only a gnat dancing in a sunbeam, has a right to have its well-being considered as an end of God's dealings. But no creature is so isolated or great as that it has a right to have its well-being regarded as the sole end of God's dealings. That is true about all His blessings and gifts; it is eminently true about His gift of salvation. He saves men because He loves them individually, and desires to make them blessed; but He also saves them because He desires that through them others shall be brought into the living knowledge of His love. It is most especially true about great religious teachers and guides.

Paul's humility is as manifest as his self-consciousness when he says in my text, 'This is what I was saved for. Not merely, not even principally, for the blessings that thereby accrue to myself, but that in me, as a crucial instance, there should be manifested the whole fulness of the divine love and saving power.' So he puts his own experience as giving no kind of honour or glory to himself, but as simply showing the grace and infinite love of Jesus Christ. Paul disappears as but a passive recipient; and Christ strides into the front as the actor in his conversion and apostleship.

So we may take this point of view of my text, and look at the story of what befell the great Apostle as being in many different ways an exhibition of the great verities of the Gospel. I desire to signalise, especially, three points here. We see in it the demonstration of the life of Christ; an exhibition of the love of the living Christ; and a marvellous proof of the power of that loving and living Lord.

I. First, then, take the experience of this Apostle as a demonstration of the exalted life, and continuous energy in the world, of Jesus Christ.

What was it that turned the brilliant young disciple of Gamaliel, the rising hope of the Pharisaic party, the hammer of the heretics, into one of themselves? The appearance of Jesus Christ. Paul rode out of Jerusalem believing Him to be dead, and His Resurrection a lie. He staggered into Damascus, blind but seeing, and knowing that Jesus Christ lived and reigned. Now if you will let the man tell you himself what he saw, or thought he saw, you will come to this, that it was a visible, audible manifestation of a corporeal Christ. For it is extremely noteworthy that the Apostle ranks the appearance to himself, on the road to Damascus, as in the same class with the appearances to the other apostles which he enumerates in the great chapter in the Epistle to the Corinthians. He draws no distinction, as far as evidential force goes, between the appearance to Simon and to the five hundred brethren and to the others, and that which flashed upon him and made a Christian of him. Other men that were with him saw the light. He saw the Christ within the blaze. Other men heard a noise; he heard audible and intelligible words in his own speech. This is his account of the phenomenon. What do you think of his account?

There are but three possible answers! It was imposture; it was delusion; it was truth. The theory of imposture is out of court. 'Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?' Such a life as followed is altogether incongruous with the notion that the man who lived it was a deceiver. A fanatic he may have been; self-deceived he may have been; but transparently sincere he undeniably was. It is not given to impostors to move the world, as Paul did and does.

Was it delusion? Well it is a strange kind of hallucination which has such physical accompaniments and consequences as those in the story--not wanting confirmation from witnesses--which has come to us.

‘At midday, O king’--in no darkness; in no shut-up chamber, ‘at midday, O king--I heard . . . I saw . . .’ ‘The men that were with me’ partly shared in the vision. There was a lengthened conversation; two senses at least were appealed to, vision and hearing, and in both vision and hearing there were partial participators. Physical consequences that lasted for three days accompanied the hallucination; and the man ‘was blind, not seeing the sun, and neither did eat nor drink.’ There must be some soil beforehand in which delusions of such a sort can root themselves. But, if we take the story in the Acts of the Apostles, there is not the smallest foothold for the fashionable notion, which is entirely due to men’s dislike of the supernatural, that there was any kind of misgiving in the young Pharisee, springing from the influence of Stephen’s martyrdom, as he went forth breathing out threatenings and slaughter. The plain fact is that, at one moment he hated Jesus Christ as a bad man, and believed that the story of the Resurrection was a gross falsehood; and that at the next moment he knew Him to be living and reigning, and the Lord of his life and of the world. Hallucinations do not come thus, like a thunderclap on unprepared minds. Nor is there anything in the subsequent history of the man that seems to confirm, but everything that contradicts, the idea that such a revolutionary change as upset all his mental furniture, and changed the whole current of his life, and slammed in his face the door that was wide open to advancement and reputation, came from a delusion.

I think the hallucination theory is out of court, too, and there is nothing left but the old-fashioned one, that what he said he saw, he saw , and did not fancy; and that which he said he heard, he heard ; and that it was not a buzzing of a diseased nerve in his own ears, but the actual speech of the glorified Christ. Very well, then; if that be true, what then? The old-fashioned belief--Jesus who died on the Cross is living, Jesus who died on the Cross is glorified, Jesus who died on the Cross is exalted to the throne of the universe, puts His hand into the affairs of the world as a power amongst them. Paul's Christology is but the rationale of the vision that led to Paul's conversion. It was in part because he 'saw that Just One, and heard the words of His mouth,' that he declares, 'God hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.' I do not say that the vision to Paul is a demonstration of the reality of the Resurrection, but I do say that it is a very strong confirmatory evidence, which the opponents of that truth will have much difficulty in legitimately putting aside.

II. Secondly, let me ask you to consider how this man's experience is an exhibition of the love of the living Lord.

That is the main point on which the Apostle dwells in my text, in which he says that in him Jesus Christ 'shows forth all long-suffering.' The whole fulness of His patient, pitying grace was lavished upon him. He says this because he puts side by side his hostility and Christ's love, what he had believed of Jesus, and how Jesus had borne with him and loved him through all, and had drawn him to Himself and received him. So he established by his own experience this great truth, that the love of Jesus Christ is never darkened by one single speck of anger, that He 'suffereth long, and is kind'; that He meets hostility with patient love, hatred with a larger outpouring of His affection, and that His only answer to men's departures from Him in heart and feeling is more mightily to seek to draw them to Himself. 'Long-suffering' means, in its true and proper sense, the patient acceptance, without the smallest movement of indignation, of unworthy treatment. And just as Christ on earth 'gave His back to the smiter, and His cheeks to them that pulled off the hair'; and let the lips of Judas touch His, nor withdrew His face from 'shame and spitting'; and was never stirred to one impatient or angry word by any opposition, so now, and to us all, with equal boundlessness of endurance, He lets men hate Him, and revile Him, and forget Him, and turn their backs upon Him; and for only answer has, 'Come unto Me all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'

Oh, dear brethren, we can weary out all loves except one. By carelessness, rebelliousness, the opposition of indifference, we can chill the affection of those to whom we are dearest. 'Can a mother forget? Yea, she may forget,' but you cannot provoke Jesus Christ to cease His love. Some of you have been trying it all your days, but you have not done it yet. There does come a time when ‘the wrath of the Lamb’--which is a very terrible paradox--is kindled, and will fall, I fear, on some men and women who are listening now. But not yet. You cannot make Christ angry. ‘For this cause I obtained mercy, that in me Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering, for a pattern ‘--for the same long-suffering is extended to us all.

And then, in like manner, I may remind you that out of Paul’s experience, as a cardinal instance and standing example of Christ’s heart and dealings, comes the thought that that long-suffering is always wooing men to itself, and making efforts to draw them away from their own evil. In Paul’s case there was a miracle. That difference is of small consequence. As truly as ever Christ spoke to Paul from the heavens, so truly, and so tenderly, does He speak to every one of us. He is drawing us all--you that yield and you that do not yield to His attractions, by the kindliest gifts of His love, by the revelations of His grace, by the movements of His Spirit, by the providences of our days, by even my poor lips addressing you now--for, if I be speaking His truth, it is not I that speak, but He that speaks in me. I beseech you, dear friends, recognise in this old story of the persecutor turned apostle nothing exceptional, though there be something miraculous, but only an exceptional form of manifestation of the normal activity of the love of Christ towards every soul. He loves, He draws, He welcomes all that come to Him. His servant, who stood over the blind, penitent persecutor, and said to him, ‘ Brother Saul!’ was only faintly echoing the glad reception which the elder Brother of the family gives to this and to every prodigal who comes back; because He Himself has drawn Him.

If we will only recognise the undying truth for all of us that lies beneath the individual experience of this apostle, we, too, may share in the attraction of His love, in the constraining and blessed influences of that love received, and in the welcome with which He hails us when we turn. If this man were thus dealt with, no man need despair.

III. Lastly, we may notice how this experience is a manifestation of the power of the living, loving Lord.

The first and plainest thing that it teaches us about that power is that Jesus Christ is able in one moment to revolutionise a life. There is nothing more striking than the suddenness and completeness of the change which passed. ‘One day is with the Lord as a thousand years’; and there come moments in every life into which there is crammed and condensed a whole world of experience, so as that a man looks back from this instant to that before, and feels that a gulf, deep as infinity, separates him from his old self.

Now, it is very unfashionable in these days to talk about conversion at all. It is even more unfashionable to talk about sudden conversions. I venture to say that there are types of character and experience which will never be turned to good, unless they are turned suddenly; while there are others, no doubt, to whom the course is a gradual one, and you cannot tell where the dawn broadens into perfect day. But, in the case of men who have grown up to some degree of maturity of life, either in sensuous sin or crusted over with selfish worldliness, or in any other way, by reason of intellectual pursuits, or others have become forgetful of God and careless of religion--unless such men are in a moment arrested and wheeled round at once, there is very little chance of their ever being so at all.

I am sure I am speaking to some now who, unless the truth of Christ comes into their minds with arresting flash, and unless they are in one moment, into which an eternity is condensed, changed in their purposes, will never be changed.

Do not, my friend, listen to the talk that sudden conversion is impossible or unlikely. It is the only kind of conversion that some of you are capable of. I remember a man, one of the best Christian men in a humble station in life that I ever knew--he did not live in Manchester--he had been a drunkard up to his fortieth or fiftieth year. One day he was walking across an open field, and a voice, as he thought, spoke to him and said, naming him, ‘If you don’t sign the pledge to-day you will be damned!’ He turned on his heel, and walked straight down the street to the house of a temperance friend, and said, ‘I have come to sign the pledge.’ He signed it, and from that day to the day of his death ‘adorned the doctrine of Jesus Christ’ his Saviour. If that man had not been suddenly converted he would never have been converted. So I say that this story of the text is a crucial instance of Christ’s power to lay hold upon a man, and wheel him right round all in a moment, and send him on a new path. He wants to do that with all of you to whom He has not already done it. I beseech you, do not stick your heels into the ground in resistance, nor when He puts His hand on your shoulder stiffen your back that He may not do what He desires with you.

May we not see here, too, a demonstration of Christ's power to make a life nobly and blessedly new, different from all its past, and adorned with strange and unexpected fruits of beauty and wisdom and holiness? This man's account of his future, from the moment of that incident on the Damascus road to the headman's block outside the walls of Rome, is this: 'If any man be in Christ he is a new creature'; 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.' Christ will do that for us all; for long-suffering was shown on the Apostle for a pattern to them who should hereafter believe.

So, you Christian people, it is as much your business as it was Paul's, to be visible rhetoric, manifest demonstrations in your lives of the truth of the Gospel. Men ought to say about us, 'There must be something in the religion that has done that for these people.' We ought to be such that our characters shall induce the thought that the Christ who has made men like us cannot be a figment. Do you show, Christian men, that you are grafted upon the true Vine by the abundance of the fruit that you bring forth? Can you venture to say, as Paul said, If you want to know what Jesus Christ's love and power are, look at me? Do not venture adducing yourself as a specimen of His power unless you have a life like Paul's to look back upon.

For us all the fountain to which Paul had recourse is open. Why do we draw so little from it? The fire which burned, refining and illuminating, in him may be kindled in all our hearts. Why are we so icy? His convictions are of some value, as subsidiary evidence to Gospel facts; his experience is of still more value as an attestation and an instance of Gospel blessings. Believe like Paul and you will be saved like Paul. Jesus Christ will show to you all long-suffering. For though Paul received it all he did not exhaust it, and the same long-suffering which was lavished on him is available for each of us. Only you too must say like him, 'I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.'

6) 1 Timothy 1:17

1 Timothy

THE GLORY OF THE KING

1Ti. 1:17.

With this burst of irrepressible praise the Apostle ends his reference to his own conversion as a transcendent, standing instance of the infinite love and transforming power of God. Similar doxologies accompany almost all his references to the same fact. This one comes from the lips of ‘Paul the aged,’ looking back from almost the close of a life which owed many sorrows and troubles to that day on the road to Damascus. His heart fills with thankfulness that overflows into the great words of my text. He had little to be thankful for, judged according to the rules of sense; but, though weighed down with care, having made but a poor thing of the world because of that vision which he saw that day, and now near martyrdom, he turns with a full heart to God, and breaks into this song of thanksgiving. There are lives which bear to be looked back upon. Are ours of that kind?

But my object is mainly to draw your attention to what seems to me a remarkable feature in this burst of thanksgiving. And perhaps I shall best impress the thought which it has given to me if I ask you to look, first, at the character of the God who is glorified by Paul’s salvation; second, at the facts which glorify such a God; and, last, at the praise which should fill the lives of those who know the facts.

I. First, then, notice the God who is glorified by Paul’s salvation.

Now what strikes me as singular about this great doxology is the characteristics, or, to use a technical word, the attributes, of the divine nature which the Apostle selects. They are all those which separate God from man; all those which present Him as arrayed in majesty, apart from human weaknesses, unapproachable by human sense, and filling a solitary throne. These are the characteristics which the Apostle thinks receive added lustre, and are lifted to a loftier height of ‘honour and glory,’ by the small fact that he, Paul, was saved from sins as he journeyed to Damascus.

It would be easy to roll out oratorical platitudes about these specific characteristics of the divine nature, but that would be as unprofitable as it would be easy. All that I want to do now is just to note the force of the epithets; and, if I can, to deepen the impression of the remarkableness of their selection.

With regard, then, to the first of them, we at once feel that the designation of 'the King' is unfamiliar to the New Testament. It brings with it lofty ideas, no doubt; but it is not a name which the writers of the New Testament, who had been taught in the school of love, and led by a Son to the knowledge of God, are most fond of using. 'The King' has melted into 'the Father.' But here Paul selects that more remote and less tender name for a specific purpose. He is 'the King'--not ' eternal ,' as our Bible renders it, but more correctly 'the King of the Ages.' The idea intended is not so much that of unending existence as that He moulds the epochs of the world's history, and directs the evolution of its progress. It is the thought of an overruling Providence, with the additional thought that all the moments are a linked chain, through which He flashes the electric force of His will. He is 'King of the Ages.'

The other epithets are more appropriately to be connected with the word 'God' which follows than with the word 'King' which precedes. The Apostle's meaning is this: 'The King of the ages, even the God who is,' etc. And the epithets thus selected all tend in the same direction. 'Incorruptible.' That at once parts that mystic and majestic Being from all of which the law is decay . There may be in it some hint of moral purity, but more probably it is simply what I may call a physical attribute, that that immortal nature not only does not, but cannot , pass into any less noble forms. Corruption has no share in His immortal being.

As to 'invisible,' no word need be said to illustrate that. It too points solely to the separation of God from all approach by human sense.

And then the last of the epithets, which, according to the more accurate reading of the text, should be, not as our Bible has it, 'the only wise God,' but 'the only God,' lifts Him still further above all comparison and contact with other beings.

So the whole set forth the remote attributes which make a man feel, 'The gulf between Him and me is so great that thought cannot pass across it, and I doubt whether love can live half-way across that flight, or will not rather, like some poor land bird with tiny wings, drop exhausted, and be drowned in the abyss before it reaches the other side.' We expect to find a hymn to the infinite love. Instead of that we get praise, which might be upon the lips of many a thinker of Paul's day and of ours, who would laugh the idea of revelation, and especially of a revelation such as Paul believed in, to absolute scorn. And yet he knew what he was saying when he did not lift up his praise to the God of tenderness, of pity, of forgiveness, of pardoning love, but to 'the King of the ages; the incorruptible, invisible, only God'; the God whose honour and glory were magnified by the revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ.

II. And so that brings me, in the second place, to ask you to look at the facts which glorify even such a God.

Paul was primarily thinking of his own individual experience; of what passed when the voice spoke to him, 'Why persecutest thou Me?' and of the transforming power which had changed him, the wolf, with teeth red with the blood of the saints, into a lamb. But, as he is careful to point out, the personal allusion is lost in his contemplation of his own history, as being a specimen and test-case for the blessing and encouragement of all who 'should hereafter believe upon Him unto life everlasting.' So what we come to is this--that the work of Jesus Christ is that which paints the lily and gilds the refined gold of the divine loftinesses and magnificence, and which brings honour and glory even to that remote and inaccessible majesty. For, in that revelation of God in Jesus Christ, there is added to all these magnificent and all but inconceivable attributes and excellences, something that is far diviner and nobler than themselves.

There be two great conceptions smelted together in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, of which neither attains its supremest beauty except by the juxtaposition of the other. Power is harsh, and scarcely worthy to be called divine, unless it be linked with love. Love is not glorious unless it be braced and energised by power. And, says Paul, these two are brought together in Jesus; and therefore each is heightened by the other. It is the love of God that lifts His power to its highest height; it is the revelation of Him as stooping that teaches us His loftiness. It is because He has come within the grasp of our humanity in Jesus Christ that we can hymn our highest and noblest praises to ‘the King eternal, the invisible God.’

The sunshine falls upon the snow-clad peaks of the great mountains and flushes them with a tender pink that makes them nobler and fairer by far than when they were veiled in clouds. And so all the divine majesty towers higher when we believe in the divine condescension, and there is no god that men have ever dreamed of so great as the God who stoops to sinners and is manifest in the flesh and Cross of the Man of Sorrows.

Take these characteristics of the divine nature as get forth in the text one by one, and consider how the Revelation in Jesus Christ, and its power on sinful men, raises our conceptions of them. ‘The King of the ages’--and do we ever penetrate so deeply into the purpose which has guided His hand, as it moulded and moved the ages, as when we can say with Paul that His ‘good pleasure’ is that, ‘in the dispensation of the fulness of times, He might gather together in one all things in Christ.’ The intention of the epochs as they emerge, the purpose of all their linked intricacies and apparently diverse movements, is this one thing, that God in Christ may be manifest to men, a nd that humanity may be gathered, like sheep round the Shepherd, into the one fold of the one Lord. For that the world stands; for that the ages roll, and He who is the King of the epochs hath put into the hands of the Lamb that was slain the Book that contains all their events; and only His hand, pierced upon Calvary, is able to open the seals, to read the Book. The King of the ages is the Father of Christ.

And in like manner, that incorruptible God, far away from us because He is so, and to whom we look up here doubtingly and despairingly and often complainingly and ask, ‘Why hast Thou made us thus, to be weighed upon with the decay of all things and of ourselves?’ comes near to us all in the Christ who knows the mystery of death, and thereby makes us partakers of an inheritance incorruptible. Brethren, we shall never adore, or even dimly understand, the blessedness of believing in a God who cannot decay nor change, unless from the midst of graves and griefs we lift our hearts to Him as revealed in the face of the dying Christ. He, though He died, did not see corruption, and we through Him shall pass into the same blessed immunity.

‘The King . . . the God invisible.’ No man hath seen God ‘at any time, nor can see Him.’ Who will honour and glorify that attribute which parts Him wholly from our sense, and so largely from our apprehension, as will he who can go on to say, ‘the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.’ We look up into a waste Heaven; thought and fear, and sometimes desire, travel into its tenantless spaces. We say the blue is an illusion; there is nothing there but blackness. But ‘he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.’ And we can lift thankful praise to Him, the King invisible, when we hear Jesus saying, ‘thou hast both seen Him, and it is He that talketh with thee.’

‘The only God.’ How that repels men from His throne! And yet, if we apprehend the meaning of Christ’s Cross and work, we understand that the solitary God welcomes my solitary soul into such mysteries and sacred sweetnesses of fellowship with Himself that, the humanity remaining undisturbed, and the divinity remaining unintruded upon, we yet are one in Him, and partakers of a divine nature. Unless we come to God through Jesus Christ, the awful attributes in the text spurn a man from His throne, and make all true fellowship impossible.

So let me remind you that the religion which does not blend together in indissoluble union these two, the majesty and the lowliness, the power and the love, the God inaccessible and the God who has tabernacled with us in Jesus Christ, is sure to be almost an impotent religion. Deism in all its forms, the religion which admits a God and denies a revelation; the religion which, in some vague sense, admits a revelation and denies an incarnation; the religion which admits an incarnation and denies a sacrifice; all these have little to say to man as a sinner; little to say to man as a mourner; little power to move his heart, little power to infuse strength into his weakness. If once you strike out the thought of a redeeming Christ from your religion, the temperature will go down alarmingly, and all will soon be frost bound.

Brethren, there is no real adoration of the loftiness of the King of the ages, no true apprehension of the majesty of the God incorruptible, invisible, eternal, until we see Him in the face and in the Cross of Jesus Christ. The truths of this gospel of our salvation do not in the smallest degree impinge upon or weaken, but rather heighten, the glory of God. The brightest glory streams from the Cross. It was when He was standing within a few hours of it, and had it full in view, that Jesus Christ broke out into that strange strain of triumph, ‘Now is God glorified.’ ‘The King of the ages, incorruptible, invisible, the only God,’ is more honoured and glorified in the forgiveness that comes through Jesus Christ, and in the transforming power which He puts forth in the Gospel, than in all besides.

III. Lastly, let me draw your attention to the praise which should fill the lives of those who know these facts.

I said that this Apostle seems always, when he refers to his own individual conversion, to have been melted into fresh outpourings of thankfulness and of praise. And that is what ought to be the life of all of you who call yourselves Christians; a continual warmth of thankfulness welling up in the heart, and not seldom finding utterance in the words, but always filling the life.

Not seldom, I say, finding utterance in the words. It is a delicate thing for a man to speak about himself, and his own religious experience. Our English reticence, our social habits, and many other even less worthy hindrances rise in the way; and I should be the last man to urge Christian people to cast their pearls before swine, or too fully to

‘*Open wide the bridal chamber of the heart,*’

to let in the day. There is a wholesome fear of men who are always talking about their own religious experiences. But there are times and people to whom it is treason to the Master for us not to be frank in the confession of what we have found in Him. And I think there would be less complaining of the want of power in the public preaching of the Word if more professing Christians more frequently and more simply said to those to whom their words are weighty, ‘Come and hear and I will tell you what God hath done for my soul.’ ‘Ye are my witnesses,’ saith the Lord. It is a strange way that Christian people in this generation have of discharging their obligations that they should go, as so many of them do, from the cradle of their Christian lives to their graves, never having opened their lips for the Master who has done all for them.

Only remember, if you venture to speak you will have to live your preaching. ‘There is no speech nor language, their voice is not heard, their sound is gone out through all the earth.’ The silent witness of life must always accompany the audible proclamation, and in many cases is far more eloquent than it. Your consistent thankfulness manifested in your daily obedience, and in the transformation of your character, will do far more than all my preaching, or the preaching of thousands like me, to commend the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

One last word, brethren. This revelation is made to us all. What is God to you, friend? Is He a remote, majestic, unsympathising, terrible Deity? Is He dim, shadowy, unwelcome; or is He God whose love softens His power; Whose power magnifies his love? Oh! I beseech you, open your eyes and your hearts to see that that remote Deity is of no use to you, will do nothing for you, cannot help you, may probably judge you, but will never heal you. And open your hearts to see that ‘the only God’ whom men can love is God in Christ. If here we lift up grateful praise ‘unto Him that loveth us and hath loosed us from our sins in His blood,’ we, too, shall one day join in that great chorus which at last will be heard saying, ‘Blessing and honour and glory and power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.’

7) 1 Timothy 2:8

1 Timothy

WHERE AND HOW TO PRAY

1Ti. 2:8.

The context shows that this is part of the Apostle’s directory for public worship, and that, therefore, the terms of the first clause are to be taken somewhat restrictedly. They teach the duty of the male members of the Church to take public, audible part in its worship.

Everywhere, therefore, must here properly be taken in the restricted signification of ‘every place of Christian assembly.’ And from the whole passage there comes a picture of what sort of thing a meeting of the primitive Church for worship was, very different from anything that we see nowadays. ‘Every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath an exhortation.’ I fancy that some of the eminently respectable and utterly dead congregations which call themselves Christian Churches would be very much astonished if they could see what used to be the manner of Christian worship nineteen hundred years ago, and would get a new notion of what was meant by ‘decently, and in order.’

But we may fairly, I suppose, if once we confess that this is so, widen somewhat the scope of these words, and take them rather as expressive of the Apostle’s desire and injunction, for the word that he used here, ‘I will,’ is a very strong one, to all Christian people, be they men or women, that they pray ‘everywhere,’ in the widest sense of that expression, ‘lifting up holy hands without wrath or doubting.’

I do not attempt anything more than just to go, step by step, through the Apostle’s words and gather up the duties which each enjoins.

‘I will that men pray everywhere.’ That is the same in spirit as the Apostle’s other command: ‘Pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks.’ A very high ideal, but a very reasonable one, for unless we can find some place where God is not, and where the telegraph between heaven and earth is beyond our reach, there is no place where we should not pray. And unless we can find a place where we do not want God, nor need Him, there is no place where we should not pray. Because, then, ‘everywhere’ is equally near Him, and the straight road to His throne is of the same length from every hole and corner of the world; therefore, wherever men are, they ought to be clinging to His skirts, and reaching out their open hands for His benefits; and because, wherever a man is, there he utterly depends upon God, and needs the actual intervention of His love, and the energising of His power for everything, even for his physical life, so that he cannot wink his eyelashes without God’s help, therefore, ‘In every place I will that men pray.’

And how is that to be done? First of all, by keeping out of all places where it is impossible that we should pray; for although He is everywhere, and we want Him everywhere, there are places--and some of us know the roads to them but too well, and are but too often in them--where prayer would be a strange incongruity. A man will not pray over the counter of a public-house. A man will not pray over a sharp bargain. A man will not pray that God may bless his outbursts of anger, or sensuality and the like. A man will not pray when he feels that he is deep down in some pit of self-caused alienation from God. The possibility of praying in given circumstances is a sharp test, although a very rough and ready one, whether we ought to be in these circumstances or not. Do not let us go where we cannot take God with us; and if we feel that it would be something like blasphemy to call to Him from such a place, do not let us trust ourselves there. Jonah could pray out of the belly of the fish, and there was no incongruity in that; but many a professing Christian man gets swallowed up by monsters of the deep, and durst not for very shame send up a prayer to God. Get out of all such false positions.

But if the Apostle wills 'that men pray alway,' it must be possible while going about business, study, daily work, work at home amongst the children, work in the factory amongst spindles, work in the counting-house amongst ledgers, work in the study amongst lexicons, not only to pray whilst we are working, but to make work prayer, which is even better. The old saying that is often quoted with admiration, 'work is worship,' is only half true. There is a great deal of work that is anything but worship. But it is true that if, in all that I do, I try to realise my dependence on God for power; to look to Him for direction, and to trust to Him for issue, then, whether I eat, or drink, or pray, or study, or buy and sell, or marry or am given in marriage, all will be worship of God. 'I will that men pray everywhere.' What a noble ideal, and not an impossible or absurd one! This was not the false ideal of a man that had withdrawn himself from duty in order to cultivate his own soul, but the true ideal of one of the hardest workers that ever lived. Paul could say 'I am pressed above measure, insomuch that I despair of life, and that which cometh upon me daily is the care of all the churches,' and yet driven, harassed beyond his strength with business and cares as he was, he did himself what he bids us do. His life was prayer, therefore his life was Christ, therefore he was equal to all demands. None of us are as hard-worked, as heavily pressed, as much hunted by imperative and baying dogs of duties as Paul was. It is possible for us to obey this commandment and to pray everywhere. A servant girl down on her knees doing the doorsteps may do that task from such a motive, and with such accompaniments, as she dips her cloth into the hot-water bucket, as to make even it prayer to God. We each can lift all the littlenesses of our lives into a lofty region, if only we will link them on to the throne of God by prayer.

There is another way by which this ideal can be attained, and that is to cultivate the habit, which I think many Christian people do not cultivate, of little short swallow-flights of prayer in the midst of our daily work. ‘They cried unto God in the battle, and He was entreated of them.’ If a Philistine sword was hanging over the man’s head, do you think he would have much time to drop down upon his knees, to make a petition, divided into all the parts which divines tell us go to make up the complete idea of prayer? I should think not; but he could say, ‘Save me, O Lord!’ ‘They cried to God in the battle--little, sharp, short shrieks of prayer--and He was entreated of them.’ If you would cast swift electric flashes of that kind more frequently up to heaven, you would bring down the blessings that very often do not come after the most elaborate and proper and formal petitions. ‘Lord, save or I perish!’ It did not take long to say that, but it made the difference between drowning and deliverance.

Still further, notice the conditions of true prayer that are here required. I will that men pray everywhere ‘lifting up holy hands.’ That is a piece of symbolism, of course. Apparently the Jewish attitude of prayer was unlike ours. They seem to have stood during devotion and to have elevated their hands with open, empty, upturned palms to heaven. We clasp ours in entreaty, or fold them as a symbol of resignation and submission. They lifted them, with the double idea, I suppose, of offering themselves to God thereby, and of asking Him to put something into the empty hand, just as a beggar says nothing, but holds out a battered hat, in order to get a copper from a passer-by. The psalmist desired that the lifting up of his hands might be as the ‘evening sacrifice.’

If a man stands with his open, empty palm held up to God, it is as much as to say ‘I need, I desire, I expect.’ And these elements are what we must have in our prayers; the sense of want, the longing for supply, the anticipation of an answer. What do you hold out your hand for? Because you expect me to drop something into it, because you want to get something. How do you hold out your hand? Empty. And if I am clasping my five fingers round some earthly good it is of no use to hold up that hand to God. Nothing will come into it. How can it? He must first take the imitation diamonds out of it or we must turn it round and shake them out before He can fill it with real jewels. As for him who continues to clutch worldly goods, 'let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord.' Empty the palm before you lift it.

Still further, says Paul, 'lifting up holy hands.' That, of course, needs no explanation. One of the psalms, you may remember, says 'I will wash mine hands in innocency, so will I compass Thine altar.' The psalmist felt that unless there was a previous lustration and cleansing, it was vain for him to go round the altar. And you may remember how sternly and eloquently the prophet Isaiah rebukes the hypocritical worshippers in Jerusalem when he says to them, 'Your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings,' and then come and pray. A foul hand gets nothing from God. How can it? God's best gift is of such a sort as cannot be laid upon a dirty palm. A little sin dams back the whole of God's grace, and there are too many men that pray, pray, pray, and never get any of the things that we pray for, because there is something stopping the pipe, and they do not know what it is, and perhaps would be very sorry to clear it out if they did. But all the same, the channel of communication is blocked and stopped, and it is impossible that any blessing should come. Geographers tell us that a microscopic vegetable grows rapidly in one of the upper affluents of the Nile, and makes a great dam across the river which keeps back the water, and so makes one of the lakes which have recently been explored; and then, when the dam breaks, the rising of the Nile fertilises Egypt. Some of us have growing, unchecked, and unnoticed, in the innermost channels of our hearts, little sins that mat themselves together and keep increasing until the grace of God is utterly kept from permeating the parched recesses of our spirits. 'I will that men pray, lifting up holy hands,' and unless we do, alas! for us.

If these are the requirements, you will say, ‘How can I pray at all?’ Well, do you remember what the Psalmist says? ‘If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me,’ but then he goes on, ‘Blessed be God, who hath not turned away my prayer nor His mercy from me.’ It is always true that if we regard iniquity in our hearts, if in our inmost nature we love the sin, that stops the prayer from being answered. But, blessed be God, it is not true that our having done the sin prevents our petitions being granted. For the sin that is not regarded in the heart, but is turned away from with loathing hath no intercepting power. So, though the uplifted hands art stained, He will cleanse them if, as we lift them to Him, we say, ‘Lord, they are foul, if thou wilt Thou canst make them clean.’

But the final requirement is: ‘Without wrath or doubting.’ I do not think that Christian people generally recognise with sufficient clearness the close and inseparable connection which subsists between their right feelings towards their fellow-men and the acceptance of their prayers with God. It is very instructive that here, alongside of requirements which apply to our relations to God, the Apostle should put so emphatically and plainly one which refers to our relations to our fellows. An angry man is a very unfit man to pray, and a man who cherishes in his heart any feelings of that nature towards anybody may be quite sure that he is thereby shutting himself out from blessings which otherwise might be his. We do not sufficiently realise, or act on the importance, in regard to our relations with God, of our living in charity with all men. ‘First, go and be reconciled to thy brother,’ is as needful to-day as when the word was spoken.

‘Without . . . doubting.’ Have I the right to be perfectly sure that my prayer will be answered? Yes and no. If my prayer is, as all true prayer ought to be, the submission of my will to God’s and not the forcing of my will upon God, then I have the right to be perfectly sure. But if I am only asking in self-will, for things that my own heart craves, that is not prayer; that is dictation. That is sending instructions to heaven; that is telling God what He ought to do. That is not the kind of prayer that may be offered ‘without doubting.’ It might, indeed, be offered, if offered at all, with the certainty that it will not be answered. For this is the assurance on which we are to rest--and some of us may think it is a very poor one--’we know that, if we ask anything according to His will , He heareth us.’ To get what we want would often be our ruin. God loves His children a great deal too well to give them serpents when they ask for them, thinking they are fish, or to give them stones when they beseech Him for them, believing them to be bread. He will never hand you a scorpion when you ask Him to give it you, because, with its legs and its sting tucked under its body, it is like an egg.

We make mistakes in our naming of things and in our desires after things, and it is only when we have learned to say ‘Not my will but Thine be done,’ that we have the right to pray, ‘without doubting.’ If we do so pray, certainly we receive. But a tremulous faith brings little blessing, and small answer. An unsteady hand cannot hold the cup still for Him to pour in the wine of His grace, but as the hand shakes, the cup moves, and the precious gift is spilled. The still, submissive soul will be filled, and the answer to its prayer will be, ‘Whatsoever things ye desire believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.’

8) 1 Timothy 4:7

1 Timothy

SPIRITUAL ATHLETICS

1Ti. 4:7.

Timothy seems to have been not a very strong character: sensitive, easily discouraged, and perhaps with a constitutional tendency to indolence. At all events, it is very touching to notice how the old Apostle--a prisoner, soon to be a martyr--forgot all about his own anxieties and burdens, and, through both of his letters to his young helper, gives himself to the task of bracing him up. Thus he says to him, in my text, amongst other trumpet-tongued exhortations, ‘Exercise thyself unto godliness.’

If I were preaching to ministers, I should have a good deal to say about the necessity of this precept for them, and to remind them that it was first spoken, not to a private member of the Church, as an injunction for the Christian life in general, but as having a special bearing on the temptations and necessities of those who stand in official positions in the Church. For there is nothing that is more likely to sap a man’s devotion, and to eat out the earnestness and sincerity of a Christian life, than that he should be--as I, for instance, and every man in my position has to be--constantly occupied with presenting God's Word to other people. We are apt to look upon it as, in some sense, our stock-in-trade, and to forget to apply it to ourselves. So it was with a very special bearing on the particular occupation and temptation of his correspondent that Paul said 'Exercise thyself unto godliness' before you begin to talk to other people.

But that would not be appropriate to my present audience. And I take this injunction as one of universal application.

I. Notice, then, here expressed the ever-present and universal aim of the Christian life.

Paul does not say 'be godly'; but 'exercise thyself unto'--with a view towards--'godliness.' In other words, to him godliness is the great aim which every Christian man should set before him as the one supreme purpose of his life.

Now I am not going to spend any time on mere verbal criticism, but I must point to the somewhat unusual word which the Apostle here employs for 'godliness.' It is all but exclusively confined to these last letters of the Apostle. It was evidently a word that had unfolded the depth and fulness and comprehensiveness of its meaning to him in the last stage of his religious experience. For it is only once employed in the Acts of the Apostles, and some two or three times in the doubtful second Epistle of St. Peter. And all the other instances of its use lie in these three letters--the one to Titus and two to Timothy; and eight of them are in this first one. The old Apostle keeps perpetually recurring to this one idea of 'godliness.' What does he mean by it? The etymological meaning of the word is 'well-directed reverence,' but it is to be noticed that the context specifically points to one form of well-directed reverence, viz. as shown in conduct. 'Active godliness' is the meaning of the word; religion embodied in deeds, emotions, and sentiments, and creeds, put into fact.

This noble and pregnant word teaches us, first of all, that all true religion finds its ultimate sphere and best manifestation in the conduct of daily life. That sounds like a platitude. I wish it were. If we believed that, and worked it out, we should be very different people from what the most of us are; and our chapels would be very different places, and the professing Church would have a new breath of life over it. Religion must have its foundation laid deep in the truths revealed by God for our acceptance. And does God tell us anything simply that we may believe it, and there an end? What is the purpose of all the principles and facts which make up the body of the Christian revelation? To enlighten us? Yes! To enlighten us only? A hundred times no! The destination of a principle, of a truth, is to pass out from the understanding into the whole nature of man.

And if, as I said, the foundation of religion is laid in truths, principles, facts, the second story of the building is certain emotions, sentiments, feelings, desires, and affections, and 'experiences'--as people call them--which follow from the acceptance of these truths and principles. And is that all? A thousand times no! What do we get the emotions for? What does God give you a Revelation of Himself for, that kindles your love if you believe it? That you may love? Yes! Only that you may love? Certainly not. And so the top story is conduct, based upon the beliefs, and inspired by the emotions.

In former centuries, the period between the Reformation and our fathers' time, the tendency of the Protestant Church was very largely to let the conception of religion as a body of truths overshadow everything else. And nowadays, amongst a great many people, the temptation is to take the second story for the main one, and to think that if a man loves, and has the glow at his heart of the conscious reception of God's love, and has longings and yearnings, and Christian hopes and desires, and passes into the sweetnesses of communion with God, in his solitary moments, and plunges deep into the truths of God's Word, that is godliness. But the true exhortation to us is--Do not stop with putting in the foundations of a correct creed, nor at the second stage of an emotional religion. Both are needful. Number one and number two are infinitely precious, but both exist for number three. And true religion has its sphere in conduct. 'Exercise thyself unto godliness.' That does not mean only --for it does include that--cultivate devout emotions, or realise the facts and the principles of the Gospel, but it means, take these along with you into your daily life, and work them out there. Bring all the facts and truths of your creed, and all the sweet and select, the secret and sacred, emotions which you have felt, to bear upon your daily life. The soil in which the tree grows, and the roots of the tree, its stem and its blossoms, are all means to the end--fruit. What is the use of the clearest conceptions, and of the most tender, delicate, holy emotions, if they do not drive the wheels of action? God does not give us the Gospel to make us wise, nor even to make us blessed, but He gives it to us to make us good men and women, working His work in our daily tasks. All true religion has its sphere in conduct.

But then there is another side to that. All true conduct must have its root in religion, and I, for my part--though of course it is extremely ‘narrow’ and ‘antiquated’ to profess it--I, for my part, do not believe that in the long-run, and in general, you will get noble living apart from the emotions and sentiments which the truths of Christianity, accepted and fed upon, are sure to produce. And so this day, with its very general depreciation of the importance of accurate conceptions of revealed truth, and its exaltation of conduct, is on the verge of a very serious error. Godliness, well-directed reverence, is the parent of all noble living, and the one infallible way to produce a noble life is faith in Christ, and love which flows from the faith.

If all that is so, if godliness is, not singing psalms, not praying, not saying ‘How sweet it is to feel the love of God,’ still less saying ‘I accept the principles of Christianity as they are laid down in the Bible’; but carrying out beliefs and emotions in deeds, then the true aim which we should have continually before us as Christians is plain enough. We may not reach it completely, but we can approximate indefinitely towards it. Aim is more important than achievement. Direction is more vital in determining the character of a life than progress actually made. Note the form of the exhortation, ‘exercise thyself towards godliness,’ which involves the same thought as is expressed in Paul’s other utterance of irrepressible aspiration and effort, ‘Not as if I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I follow after,’ or as he had just said, ‘press towards the mark,’ in continual approximation to the ideal. A complete penetration of all our actions by the principles and emotions of the Gospel is what is set before us here.

And that is the only aim that corresponds to what and where I am and to what I need. I fall back upon the grandly simple old words, very dear to some of us, perhaps, by boyish associations, ‘Man’s chief end is to glorify

God, and [so] to enjoy Him for ever.' 'Unto Godliness' is to be the aim of every true life, and it is the only aim which corresponds to our circumstances and our relations, our powers and possibilities.

II. Notice the discipline which such an aim demands.

'Exercise thyself.' Now, I have no doubt that the bulk of my hearers know that the word here rendered 'exercise' is drawn from the athlete's training-ground, and is, in fact, akin to the word which is transported into English under the form 'gymnasium.' The Apostle's notion is that, just as the athlete, racer, or boxer goes through a course of training, so there is a training as severe, necessary for the godliness which Paul regards as the one true aim of life.

You Christian people ought to train your spirits at least as carefully as the athlete does his muscles. There are plenty of people, calling themselves Christians, who never give one-hundredth part as much systematic and diligent pains to fulfil the ideal of their Christian life as men will take to learn to ride a bicycle or to pull the stroke oar in a college boat. The self-denial and persistence and concentration which are freely spent upon excellence in athletic pursuits might well put to shame the way in which Christians go about the task of 'doing' their religion.

I suppose there never was a time, in England's history at any rate, whatever it may have been in Greece, when modern instances might give more point to an old saw than to-day does for this text, when athletic sports of all kinds are taking up so much of the time and the energy of our young men. I do not want to throw cold water on that, but I do say it is a miserable thing to think that so many professing Christians will give a great deal more pains to learn to play lawn tennis than ever they did to learn to be good, Christian people.

'Exercise thyself unto godliness.' Make a business of living your Christianity. Be in earnest about it. A tragically large number of professing Christians never were in earnest about mending themselves. And that is why they are so far, far behind. 'Exercise thyself.' You say, How?

'Well, I say, first of all, concentration. 'This one thing I do.' That does not mean narrowing, because this 'one thing' can be done by means of all the legitimate things that we have to do in the world. Next Friday, when you go on 'Change, you can be exercising yourself to godliness there. Whatever may be the form of our daily occupation, it is the gymnasium where God has put us to exercise our muscles in, and so to gain 'the wrestling thews that throw the world.' 'Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.' The concentration for which I plead does not shut us out from any place but the devil's wrestling-ground. All that is legitimate, all that is innocent, may be made a means for manifesting and for increasing our godliness. Only you have to take God with you into your life, and to try, more and more consciously, to make Him the motive-power of all that you do. Then the old saying which is profoundly true as it was originally meant, and has of late years been so misused as to become profoundly false, will be true again, ' Laborare est orare .' Yes! it is; if worship underlies the work, but not else.

Again I say, exercise yourselves by abstinence. How many things did the athlete at Corinth do without in his training? How many things do prizefighters and rowing men do without when in training to-day? How rigidly, for a while at any rate, they abstain--whether they recompense themselves afterwards or not has nothing to do with my present purpose. And is it not a shame that some sensual man shall, for the sake of winning a medal or a cup, be able gladly to abandon the delights of sense--eating, drinking, and the like--and content himself with a hermit's Spartan fare, and that Christian people so seldom, and so reluctantly, and so partially turn away from the poisoned cups and the indigestible dainties which the world provides for them? I think that any Christian man who complains of the things which he is shut out from doing if he is to cultivate the godliness which should be his life need only go to any place where horse-jockeys congregate to get a lesson that he may well lay to heart. 'Exercise thyself,' for it is unto godliness.

And then what I said in a former part of this sermon about the various stages of religion may suggest another view of the method of discipline proper to the Christian life. The strenuous exercise of all our powers is called for. But if it is true that the godliness of my text is the last outcome of the emotions which spring from the reception of certain truths, then if we work backwards, as it were, we shall get the best way of producing the godliness. That is to say, the main effort for all men who are in earnest in regard to their own growth in Christlikeness is to keep themselves in touch with the truths of the Gospel, and in the exercise of the sentiments and emotions which flow from these. Or, to put it into other words, the ‘gymnastic’ is to be, mainly, the man’s clinging, with all his might of mind and heart, to Christ, and the truths that are wrapped up in Him; and the cultivation of the habit of continual faith and love turned to that Lord. If I see to number one--the creed, and to number two--the emotions, they will see to number three--the conduct. Keep the truths of the Gospel well in your minds, and keep yourselves well in the attitude of contact with Jesus Christ, and power for life will come into you. But if the fountain is choked, the bed of the stream will be dry. They tell us that away up in Abyssinia there form across the bed of one of the branches of the Nile great fields of weed. And as long as they continue unbroken the lower river is shrunken. But when the stream at the back of them bursts its way through them, then come the inundations down in Egypt, and bring fertility. And there are hundreds of professing Christians whose fields lie barren and baked in the sunshine, because they have stopped with weeds, far away up amongst the hills, the stream that would water them. Clear out the weeds, and the water will do the rest.

And ‘exercise thyself unto godliness’ by keeping the crown and the prize often and clear in view. ‘Paul the aged’ in this very letter says: ‘I have finished my course, henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of glory.’ He had said, in the midst of the strife: ‘Not as though I had already attained--I press toward the mark for the prize.’ And the prize which gleamed before him through all the dust of the arena now shone still more brightly when his hand had all but clasped it. If we desire to ‘run with perseverance the race that is set before us’ we must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and see in Him, not only the Rewarder, but the Reward, of the ‘exercise unto godliness.’

9) 1 Timothy 6:12-14

1 Timothy

ONE WITNESS, MANY CONFESSORS

1Ti. 6:12-14.

You will observe that ‘a good confession,’ or rather ‘the good confession,’ is said here to have been made both by Timothy and by Christ. But you will observe also that whilst the subject-matter is the same, the action of Timothy and Jesus respectively is different. The former professes, or rather confesses, the good confession; the latter witnesses. There must be some reason for the significant variation of terms to indicate that the relation of Timothy and Jesus to the good confession which they both made was, in some way, a different one, and that though what they said was identical, their actions in saying it were different.

Then there is another point of parallelism to be noticed. Timothy made his profession ‘before many witnesses,’ but the Apostle calls to his remembrance, and summons up before the eye of his imagination, a more august tribunal than that before which he had confessed his faith, and says that he gives him charge ‘before God’ [for the same word is used in the original in both verses], ‘who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus.’ So the earthly witnesses of the man’s confession dwindle into insignificance when compared with the heavenly ones. And upon these thoughts is based the practical exhortation, ‘Keep the commandment without spot.’ So, then, we have three things: the great Witness and His confession, the subordinate confessors who echo His witness, and the practical issue that comes out of both thoughts.

I. We have the great Witness and His confession.

Now, you will remember, perhaps, that if we turn to the Gospels, we find that all of them give the subject-matter of Christ’s confession before Pilate, as being that He was the King of the Jews. But the Evangelist John expands that conversation, and gives us details which present a remarkable verbal correspondence with the words of the Apostle here, and must suggest to us that, though John’s Gospel was not written at the date of this Epistle, the fact that is enshrined for us in it was independently known by the Apostle Paul.

For, if I may for a moment recall the incident to you, you will remember that when Pilate put to the Saviour the question, ‘Art Thou a King?’ our

Lord, before He would answer, took pains to make quite clear the sense in which the judge asked Him of His royal state. For He said, ‘Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of Me? If it is your Roman idea of a king, the answer must be, "No." If it is the Jewish Messianic idea, the answer must be, "Yes." I must know first what the question means, in the mind of the questioner, before I answer it.’ And when Pilate brushes aside Christ’s question, with a sort of impatient contempt, and returns to the charge, ‘What hast Thou done?’ our Lord, whilst He makes the claim of sovereignty, takes care to make it in such a way as to show that Rome need fear nothing from Him, and that His dominion rested not upon force. ‘My Kingdom is not of this world.’ And then, when Pilate, like a practical Roman, bewildered with all these fine-spun distinctions, sweeps them impatiently out of the field, and comes back to ‘Yes, or No; are you a King?’ our Lord gives a distinct affirmative answer, but at once soars up into the region where Pilate had declined to follow Him: ‘To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I might bear witness to the truth.’ ‘Before Pontius Pilate he witnessed the good confession.’ And His confession was His royalty, His relation to the truth, and His pre-existence. ‘To this end was I born,’ and the next clause is no mere tautology, nor a non-significant parallelism, ‘and for this cause came I into the world.’ Then He was before He came, and birth to Him was not the beginning of being, but the beginning of a new relation.

So, then, out of this great word of our text, which falls into line with a great many other words of the New Testament, we may gather important and significant truths with regard to two things, the matter and the manner of Christ’s witnessing. You remember how the same Apostle John--for whom that word ‘witness’ has a fascination in all its manifold applications--in that great vision of the Apocalypse, when to his blessed sight the vision of the Master was once given, extols Him as ‘the faithful witness, and the First-begotten from the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth.’ And you may remember how our Lord Himself, after His conversation with Nicodemus, says, ‘We speak that we do know, and bear witness to that we have seen,’ and how again, in answer to the taunts of the Jews, He takes the taunt as the most intimate designation of the peculiarity of His person and of His work, when He says, ‘I am one that bear witness of Myself.’ So, then, we have to interpret his declaration before Pilate in the light of all these other sayings, and to remember that He who said that He came to bear witness to the truth, said also, ‘I am the truth,’ and therefore that his great declaration that He was the witness-bearer to the truth is absolutely synonymous with His other declaration that He bears witness of Himself.

Now, here we come upon one of the great peculiarities of Christ as a religious teacher. The new thing, the distinctive peculiarity, the differentia between Him and all other teachers, lies just here, that His theme is not so much moral or religious principles, as His own nature and person. He was the most egotistical man that ever lived on the face of the earth, with an egotism only to be accounted for, if we believe, as He Himself said, that in His person was the truth that He proclaimed, and that when He witnessed to Himself He revealed God. And thus He stands, separate from all other teachers, by this, that He is His own theme and His own witness.

So much for the matter of the good confession to which we need only add here its pendant in the confession before the High Priest. To the representative of the civil government He said, ‘I am a king,’ and then, as I remarked, He soared up into regions where no Roman official could rise to follow Him, and to the representative of the Theocratic government He said, ‘Hereafter ye shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God, and coming in the clouds of heaven.’ These two truths, that He is the Son of God, who by His witness to the truth, that is, Himself, lays the foundations of a Monarchy which shall stretch far further than the pinions of the Roman eagles could ever fly, and that he is the Son of Man who, exalted to the right hand of God, is to be the Judge of mankind--these are the good confessions to which the Lord witnessed.

Then with regard to the manner of His witness. That brings us to another of the peculiarities of Christ’s teaching. I have said that He was the most egotistical of men. I would say, too, that there never was another who clashed down in the front of humanity such tremendous assertions, with not the faintest scintilla of an attempt to prove them to our understandings, or commend them by any other plea than this, ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you!’

A witness does not need to argue. A witness is a man who reports what he has seen and heard. The whole question is as to his veracity and competency. Jesus Christ states it for the characteristic of His work, ‘We speak that we do know, and bear witness to that we have seen.' His relation to the truth which He brings to us is not that of a man who has thought it out, who has been brought to it by experience, or by feeling, or by a long course of investigation; still less is it the relation which a man would bear to a truth that he had learnt from others originally, however much he had made it his own thereafter: but it is that of one who is not a thinker, or a learner, or a reasoner, but who is simply an attester, a witness. And so He stands before us, and says, 'The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, they are life. Believe Me, and believe the words, for no other reason, primarily, than because I speak them.' In these two respects, then, the matter and the manner of His witness, He stands alone, and we have to bow before Him and say, 'Speak, Lord! for thy servant heareth.' 'Before Pontius Pilate He witnessed a good confession.'

II. We have here suggested to us the subordinate confessors who echo the Lord's witness.

It is a matter of no consequence when, and before whom, this Timothy professed his good profession. It may have been at his baptism. It may have been when he was installed in his office. It may have been before some tribunal of which we know nothing. That does not matter. The point is that a Christian man is to be an echo of the Lord's good confession, and is to keep within the lines of it, and to be sure that all of it is echoed in his life. Christ has told us what to say, and we are here to say it over again. Christ has witnessed; we are to confess. Our relation to that truth is different from His. We hear it; He speaks it. We accept it; He reveals it. We are influenced by it; He is it. He brings it to the world on His own authority; we are to carry it to the world on His.

Be sure that you Christian men are echoes of your Master. Be sure that you reverberate the note that He struck. Be sure that all its music is repeated by you And take care that you neither fall short of it, nor go beyond it, in your faith and in your profession. Echoes of Christ--that is the highest conception of a Christian life.

But though there is all the difference between the Witness and the confessors, do not let us forget that, if we are truly Christian, there is a very deep and blessed sense in which we, too, may witness what we have seen and heard. A Christian preacher of any sort--and by that I mean, not merely a man who stands in a pulpit, as I do, but all Christian people, in their measure and degree--will do nothing by professing the best profession, unless that profession sounds like the utterance of a man who speaks that he knows, and who can say, ‘that which our eyes have beheld, that which we have handled, of the Word of life, we make known unto you.’ And so, by the power of personal experience speaking out in our lives, and by the power of it alone, as I believe, will victories be won, and the witness of Jesus Christ be repeated in the world. Christian men and women, the old saying which was addressed by a prophet to Israel is more true, more solemnly true of us, and presses on us with a heavier weight of obligation, as well as lifts us up into a position of greater blessedness: ‘Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord.’ That is what you and I are here for--to bear witness, different and yet like to, the witness borne by the Lord. We have all to do that, by words, though not only by them. That is the obligation that a great many Christian people take very lightly. That yoke of Jesus Christ many of us slip our necks out of. If He has witnessed, you have to confess. But some of you carry your Christianity in secret, and button your coats over the cockade that should tell whose soldiers you are, and are ashamed, or too shy, or too nervous, or too afraid of ridicule, or not sufficiently sure of your own grip of the Master, to confess Him before men. I beseech you remember that a Christian man is no Christian unless ‘with the mouth confession is made unto salvation,’ as well as ‘with the heart’ belief is exercised unto righteousness.

III. Lastly, we have here the practical issue of all this.

‘I charge thee before God, who quickeneth all things, and before Jesus Christ, that thou keep the commandment without spot.’ The ‘commandment,’ of course, may be used in a specific sense, referring to what has just been enjoined, but more probably we are to regard the same thing which, considered in its relation to Jesus Christ, is His testimony, as being, in its relation to us, His commandment. For all Christ’s gospel of revelation that He has made of Himself to the world, is meant to influence, not only belief and feeling, but conduct and character as well. All the New Testament, in so far as it is a record of what Christ is, and thereby a declaration of what God is, is also for us an injunction as to what we ought to be. The whole Gospel is law, and the testimony is commandment, and we have to keep it, as well as to confess it. Let me put the few things that I have to say, under this last division of my subject, the practical issue, into the shape of three exhortations, not for the sake of seeming to arrogate any kind of superiority, but for the sake of point and emphasis.

Let the life bear witness to the confession. What is the use of Timothy's standing there, and professing himself a Christian before many witnesses if, when he goes out into the world, his conduct gives the lie to his creed, and he lives like the men that are not Christians? Back up your confession by your conduct, and when you say 'I believe in Jesus Christ,' let your life be as true an echo of His life as your confession is of His testimony. Else we shall come under the condemnation, 'Nothing but leaves,' and shall fall under the punishment of the continuance of unfruitfulness, which is our crime as well as our punishment. There is a great deal more done by consistent living for, and by inconsistent living against, the truth of the Gospel, than by all the words of all the preachers in the world. Your faults go further, and tell more, than my sermons, and your Christian characters will go further than all the eloquence of the most devoted preachers. 'There is no voice nor language, where their sound is not heard. Their line is gone out into all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.'

Again, let the thought of the Great Witness stimulate us. He, too, took His place by our sides, though with the differences that I have pointed out, yet with resemblances which bring Him very near us. He, too; knew what it was to stand amongst those who shrugged their shoulders, and knit their brows at His utterances, and turned away from Him, calling Him sometimes 'dreamer,' sometimes 'revolutionary,' sometimes 'blasphemer,' and now and then a messenger of good tidings and a preacher of the gospel of peace. He knows all our hesitations, all our weaknesses, all our temptations. He was the first of the martyrs, in the narrower sense of the word. He is the leader of the great band of witnesses for God. Let us stand by His side, and be like Him in our bearing witness in this world.

Again, let the thought of the great tribunal stimulate us. 'I give thee charge before God, who quickeneth all things--and who therefore will quicken you--and before Jesus Christ, that thou keep this commandment.' Jesus, who witnessed to the truth, witnesses, in the sense of beholding and watching, us, knowing our weakness and ready to help us. ‘The faithful witness, and the first begotten from the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth,’ is by us, as we witness for Him. And so, though we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, the saints in the past who have witnessed for God, and been witnessed to by Him, we have to turn away from them, and ‘look off’ from all others, ‘unto Jesus.’ And we may, like the first of the noble army of martyrs, see the heavens opened, and Jesus ‘standing’--started to His feet, to see and to help Stephen--’at the right hand of God.’

Brethren, let us listen to His witness, let us accept it, setting to our seals that God is true. Then let us try to echo it back by word, and to attest our confession by our conduct, and then we may comfort ourselves with the great word, ‘He that confesseth Me before men, Him will I also confess before My Father which is in Heaven.’

10)1 Timothy 6:19

1 Timothy

THE CONDUCT THAT SECURES THE REAL LIFE

1Ti. 6:19.

In the first flush of the sense of brotherhood, the Church of Jerusalem tried the experiment of having all things in common. It was not a success, it was soon abandoned, it never spread. In the later history of the Church, and especially in these last Pauline letters, we see clearly that distinctions of pecuniary position were very definitely marked amongst the believers. There were ‘rich men’ in the churches of which Timothy had charge. No doubt they were rich after a very modest fashion, for Paul’s standard of opulence is not likely to have been a very high one, seeing that he himself ministered with his own hands to his necessities, and had only one cloak to keep him warm in winter time. But great or small as were the resources of these men, they were rich in comparison with some of their brethren. The words of my text are the close of the very plain things which Paul commands Timothy to tell them. He assures them that if they will be rich in good works, and ready to distribute, they will lay up for themselves a good ‘foundation against the time to come.’

The teaching in the text is, of course, a great deal wider than any specific application of it. It is very remarkable, especially as coming from Paul. ‘Lay up a good foundation’--has he not said, ‘Other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ’? ‘That they may lay hold on eternal life’--has he not said, ‘The gift of God is eternal life’? Is he not going dead in the teeth of his own teaching, ‘Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy He saved us’? I think not. Let us see what he does say.

I. First, then, he says that the real life is the future life.

Those of you who use the Revised Version will see that it makes an alteration in the last clause of our text, and instead of ‘eternal life’ it reads ‘the life which is life indeed,’ the true life; not simply designating it as eternal, but designating it as being the only thing that is worth calling by the august name of life.

Now it is quite clear that Paul here is approximating very closely to the language of his brother John, and using this great word ‘life’ as being, in substance, equivalent to his own favourite word of ‘salvation,’ as including in one magnificent generalisation all that is necessary for the satisfaction of man’s needs, the perfection of his blessedness, and the glorifying of his nature. Paul’s notion of life, like John’s, is that it is the one all-comprehensive good which men need and seek.

And here he seems to relegate that ‘life which is life indeed’ to the region of the future, because he contemplates it as being realised ‘in the time to come,’ and as being the result of the conduct which is here enjoined. But you will find that substantially the same exhortation is given in the 12th verse of this chapter, ‘Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on the life eternal’--where the process of grasping this ‘life,’ and therefore the possession of it, are evidently regarded as possible here, and the duty of every Christian man in this present world. That is to say, there is a double aspect of this august conception of the ‘life which is life indeed.’ In one aspect it is present, may be and ought to be ours, here and now; in another aspect it lies beyond the flood, and is the inheritance reserved in the heavens. That double aspect is parallel with the way in which the New Testament deals with the other cognate conception of salvation, which it sometimes regards as past, sometimes as present, sometimes as future. The complete idea is that the life of the Christian soul here and yonder, away out into the furthest extremities of eternity, and up to the loftiest climax of perfectness, is in essence one, whilst yet the differences between the degree in which its germinal possession here and its full-fruited enjoyment hereafter differ is so great as that, in comparison with the completion that is waiting the Christian soul beyond the grave, all of the same life that is here enjoyed dwindles into nothingness. It appears to me that these two sides of the truth, the essential identity of the life of the Christian soul beyond and here, and the all but infinite differences and progresses which separate the two, are both needful, very needful, to be kept in view by us.

There is here on earth, amidst all our imperfections and weakness and sin, a root in the heart that trusts in Christ, which only needs to be transplanted into its congenial soil to blossom and burgeon into undreamed of beauty, and to bear fruit the savour of which no mortal lips can ever taste. The dwarfed rhododendrons in our shrubberies have in them the same nature as the giants that adorn the slopes of the Himalayas. Transplant these exotics to their native soil, and you would see what it was in them to be. Think of the life that is now at its best; its weakness, its blighted hopes, its thwarted aims, its foiled endeavours; think of its partings, its losses, its conflicts. Think of its disorders, its sins, and consequent sufferings; think of the shadow at its close, which flings long trails of blackness over many preceding years. Think of its swift disappearance, and then say if such a poor, fragmentary thing is worthy of the name of life, if that were all that the man was for.

But it is not all. There is a ‘life which is life indeed,’ over which no shadow can pass, nor any sorrow darken the blessed faces or clog the happy hearts of those who possess it. They ‘have all and abound.’ They know all and are at rest. They dread nothing, and nothing do they regret. They leave nothing behind as they advance, and of their serenity and their growth there is no end. That is worth calling life. It lies beyond this dim spot of earth. It is ‘hid with Christ in God.’

II. Secondly, notice that conduct here determines the possession of the true life.

Paul never cares whether he commits the rhetorical blunder of mixing up metaphors or not. That matters very little, except to a pedant and a rhetorician. In his impetuous way he blends three here, and has no time to stop to disentangle them. They all mean substantially the same thing which I have stated in the words that conduct here determines the possession of life hereafter; but they put it in three different figurative fashions which we may separate and look at one by one.

The first of them is this, that by our actions here we accumulate treasure hereafter. 'Laying up in store for themselves' is one word in the original, and it contains even more than is expressed in our paraphrase, for it is really 'treasuring off.' And the idea is that the rich man is bade to take a portion of his worldly goods, and, by using these for beneficent purposes, out of them to store a treasure beyond the grave. What is employed thus, and from the right motives and in the right way, is not squandered, but laid up in store. You remember the old epitaph,

'*What I spent I lost; What I gave I have.*'

Now that is Christ's teaching, for did He not say: 'Sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven'? Did He not say: 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth, . . . but lay up treasures in heaven'? And if anybody's theology finds it difficult to incorporate these solemn teachings of our Lord with the rest of it, so much the worse for the theology.

I have no doubt at all that Christianity has yet a great deal to teach the Christian Church and the world about the acquisition of money and the disposal of money; and, though I do not want to dwell now upon that specific application of the general principle of my text, I cannot help reminding you, dear friends, that for a very large number of us, almost the most important influence shaping our characters is the attitude that we take in regard to these things--the getting and the distribution of worldly wealth. For the bulk of Christian people there are few things more important as sharp tests of the reality of their religion, or more effective in either ennobling or degrading their whole character, than what they do about these two plain matters.

But then my text goes a great deal further than that; and whilst it applies unflinchingly this principle to the one specific case, it invites us to apply it all round the circumference of our earthly conduct. What you are doing here is piling up for you, on the other side of the wall, what you will have to live with, and either get good or evil out of, through all eternity. A man who is going to Australia pays some money into a bank here, and when he gets to Melbourne it is punctually paid out to him across the counter. That is what we are doing here, lodging money on this side that we are going to draw on that. And it is this which gives to the present its mystical significance and solemnity, that all our actions are piling up for us future possessions: ‘treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath’; or, contrariwise, ‘glory, immortality, honour, eternal life.’ We are like men digging a trench on one side of a hedge and flinging the spadefuls over to the other. They are all being piled up behind the barrier, and when we go round the end of it we shall find them all waiting for us.

Then the Apostle superimposes upon this another metaphor. He does not care to unravel it. ‘Laying up in store for themselves a store,’ he would have said if he had been a pedant, ‘which is also a good foundation.’ Now I take it that that does not mean a basis for hope, or anything of that sort, but that it conveys this thought, that our actions here are putting in the foundations on which the eternal building of our future life shall be reared. When a man excavates and lays the first courses of the stones of his building, he thereby determines every successive stage of it, until the headstone is brought forth with rejoicing. We are laying foundations in that profound sense in this world. Our nature takes a set here, and I fail to see any reason cognisable by us why that ply of the nature should ever be taken out of it in any future. I do not dogmatise; but it seems to me that all that we do know of life and of God’s dealings in regard to man leads us to suppose that the next world is a world of continuations, not of beginnings; that it is the second volume of the book, and hangs logically and necessarily upon the first that was finished when a man died. Our lives here and hereafter appear to me to be like some geometrical figure that wants two sheets of paper for its completion: on the first the lines run up to the margin, and on the second they are carried on in the direction which was manifest in the section that was visible here.

And so, dear friends, let us remember that this is the reason why our smallest acts are so tremendous that by our actions we are making character, and that character is destiny, here and hereafter. You are putting in the foundations of the building that you have to live in; see that they are of such a sort as will support a house eternal in the heavens.

The last of the metaphors under which the Apostle suggests the one idea is that our conduct here determines our capacity to lay hold of the prize. It seems to me that the same allusion is lingering in his mind which is definitely stated in the previous verse to which I have already referred, where the eternal life which Timothy is exhorted to lay hold of is regarded as being the prize of the good fight of faith, which he is exhorted to fight. And so the third metaphor here is that which is familiar in Paul’s writings, where eternal life is regarded as a garland or prize, given to the victor in race or arena. It is exactly the same notion as he otherwise expresses when he says that he follows after if that he may ‘lay hold of that for which also he is laid hold of by Jesus Christ.’ This is the underlying thought, that according to a Christian man’s acts here is his capacity of receiving the real life yonder.

That is not given arbitrarily. Each man gets as much of it when he goes home as he can hold. The tiniest vessel is filled, the largest vessel is filled. But the little vessel may, and will, grow bigger if that which is deposited in it be rightly employed. Let us lay this to heart, that Christian men dare not treat it as a matter of indifference whether to the full they live lives consistent with their profession, and do the will of their Master or no. It is not all the same, and it will not be all the same yonder, whether we have adorned the teaching, or whether our lives have habitually and criminally fallen beneath the level of our professions. Brethren, we are too apt to forget that there is such a thing as being ‘saved, yet so as by fire’; and that there is such a thing as ‘having an entrance ministered abundantly into the Kingdom.’ Be you sure of this, that if the hands of your spirits are ever to be capable of grasping the prize, it must be as the result of conduct here on earth, which has been treasuring up treasures yonder, and laying a foundation on which the incorruptible house may solidly rest.

III. And now the last word that I have to say is that these principles are perfectly compatible with the great truth of salvation by faith.

For observe to whom the text is spoken. It is to men who have professed to be believers, and it is on the ground of their faith that these rich men in Timothy’s churches are exhorted to this conduct. There is no incompatibility between the doctrine that eternal life is the gift of God, and the placing of those who have received that gift under a strict law of recompense.

That is the teaching of the whole New Testament. It was to Christian men that it was said: ‘Be not deceived; God is not mocked, whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.’ It is the teaching of Jesus Christ Himself.

But there is a dreadful danger that we, with our partial vision, shall see one side of the truth so clearly that we do not see the other; and so you get two antagonistic schools of Christian teaching who have torn the one word into halves. One of them says, ‘Man is saved by faith only,’ and forgets ‘faith without works is dead’; and the other says, ‘Do your duty, and never mind about your belief,’ and forgets that the belief--the trust--is the only sure foundation on which conduct can be based, and the only source from which it is certain to flow.

Now, if I should not be misunderstood by that same narrow and contracted vision of which I have been speaking, I would venture to say that salvation by faith alone may be so held as to be a very dangerous doctrine, and that there is a very real sense in which a man is saved by works. And if you do not like that, go home and read the Epistle of James, and see what you make of his teaching: ‘Ye see, brethren, how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.’ ‘Faith wrought with his works, and by his works was his faith made perfect.’

Only let us understand where the exhortation of the text comes in. We have to begin with absolute departure from all merit in work, and the absolute casting of ourselves on Jesus Christ. If you have not done that, my brother, the teaching ‘Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation’ has no application to you, but this teaching has, ‘Other foundation can no man lay. Behold, I lay in Zion a tried corner-stone. Whosoever believeth in Him shall not make haste.’ If you have not committed your souls and selves and lives and hopes to Jesus Christ, the teaching ‘Lay hold on eternal life’ has only a very modified application to you, because the only hand that can grasp that life is the hand of faith that is content to receive it from His hands with the prints of the nails in them. But if you have given yourselves to that Saviour, and received the germinal gift of eternal life from Him, then, take my text as absolutely imperative for you. Remember that it is for you, resting on Christ, to treasure up eternal life; for you to build on that sure foundation gold and silver and precious stones which may stand the fire; for you, by faithful continuance in well-doing, to lay hold of that for which you have been laid hold of by Jesus Christ. May it be true of all of us that ‘our works do follow us’!

> *‘Thy works, thine alms, and all thy good endeavour Stayed not behind, nor in the grave were trod,*
>
> *But, as Faith pointed with her golden rod, Followed thee up to joy and bliss for ever.’*

2 Timothy

1) 2 TIMOTHY 1:1-6
2) 2 TIMOTHY 1:7
3) 2 TIMOTHY 1:12
4) 2 TIMOTHY 1:13
5) 2 TIMOTHY 1:14
6) 2 TIMOTHY 2:4
7) 2 TIMOTHY 2:13
8) 2 TIMOTHY 2:19
9) 2 TIMOTHY 2:20-21
10) 2 TIMOTHY 3:5
11) 2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5
12) 2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8
13) 2 TIMOTHY 4:7
14) 2 TIMOTHY 4:10-11
15) 2 TIMOTHY 4:13

1) 2 Timothy 1:1-6

2 Timothy

A VETERAN’S COUNSELS TO A YOUNG SOLDIER

2Ti. 1:1-7 2Ti. 3:14-17

PAUL’S heart had been drawn to Timothy long before this letter was written, as far back as the beginning of his second missionary journey, and Timothy had cherished the enthusiastic devotion of a young man for his great leader. He seems to have been the best beloved of the circle which the magnetism of Paul’s character bound to him.

The tone of the two epistles suggests that Timothy needed to be braced up, and have a tonic administered. Probably he inclined to be too much affected by difficulties and opposition, and required the ‘ soul-animating strains’ which Paul sounded in his ears. Possibly the Apostle’s imprisonment and evidently impending death had discouraged and saddened the younger and weaker man. At all events, it is beautiful and pathetic that the words of cheer and brave trust should come from the martyr, and not from the sorrowing friend. Timothy should have been the encourager of Paul, but Paul was the encourager of Timothy.

The verses of this passage embody mainly two counsels. Verse 6 exhorts Timothy to ‘stir up the gift’ that was in him; 2Ti. 3:14 bids him ‘abide in the things which’ he has learned. These two - diligent effort to increase his spiritual force and persistent holding by the teaching already received - are based on Paul’s knowledge of his faith and on Timothy’s knowledge of the saving power of that truth. But Paul loved him too ardently to give him cold counsels. The advices are wrapped in the softest covering of gracious affection and recognition of Timothy’s inherited faith and personal devotion to Paul.

I. Before dealing with the advices, look at the lovely prelude in verses 1-5.

Paul does not lay aside his apostolic authority, but he uses it to make his greeting more sweet and strong. What had he been made an apostle by? The will of God. What had he been made an apostle for? To make known the promise of the life which is in Christ. Thus clothed with authority, and bearing the great gift of life, he takes Timothy to his heart as his beloved child. The captain stoops to embrace the private. Christ’s apostle pours his love and benediction over the young servant, and when such lips wish’ grace, mercy, and peace,’ the wish is a prophecy as much as a prayer.

The flow of Paul's love outstrips that of his words, and there is some verbal obscurity in verses 3-5, but the meaning is plain. Paul's thankfulness was for Timothy's 'unfeigned faith,' but when he is about to say that, other tender thoughts start up, and insist on being uttered. The language of love in absence is the same all the world over. It comes across all the intervening centuries like the speech of today: 'I never forget you.' But love should be sublimed by religion, and find its best expression in 'supplications.' Think of the prisoner in Rome, expecting a near death by violence, and yet telling his young friend that he was always thinking about him, Timothy, and wearying for him with a great yearning.

How beautiful is that touch, too, that the remembrance of Timothy's tears, when he had had to part from Paul, fed the Apostle's desire to see him again! And how graceful, and evidently more than graceful, is the contrast between the tears of Timothy at parting and the hoped-for joy of Paul at meeting! No wonder that such a leader kindled passionate enthusiasm.

One can fancy the throb of pleasure with which Timothy would read the recognition of his 'unfeigned faith.' It is always a memorable moment to a young beginner when a veteran lays his hand on his shoulder and acknowledges his devotion. Nor less fitted to warm Timothy's heart was the praise of his grandmother and mother. It would not only do that, but would make him feel that his descent added force to the exhortation which followed. Whoever might become careless, one who had such blood in his veins was called on to be true to his ancestral faith. One can well understand how such a beginning prepared Timothy for the succeeding counsels. But this was not art or rhetorical advice on Paul's part, but deep affection. The soil thus watered by love was ready for the seed.

II. The counsel thus delicately introduced is delicately expressed, as putting in remembrance rather than as enjoining authoritatively.

Paul gives Timothy credit for having already recognised the duty. The 'gift of God' is the whole bestowments which fitted him for his work, and which were given from the Holy Spirit, through the imposition of the hands of Paul and of the elders [1Ti. 4:14].

But whilst there was a special force in the command to Timothy, the principle involved applies to all Christians, and in a wider aspect to all men; for every Christian has received the gift of that self-same Spirit, and every man is endowed with some gifts from God. All God's gifts are held on similar conditions. They may be neglected, and, if so, will cease as surely as an untended fire dies down into grey ashes. The highest and the lowest are alike in this. An unused muscle atrophies, an uncultivated capacity diminishes. The grace of God itself wanes if we are unfaithful stewards. The gift of the Spirit is not a substitute for our own activity, and the extent to which we possess it is determined by our rousing ourselves to tend the sacred flame.

Timothy had probably been depressed by Paul's imprisonment and the prospect of his death. He had been accustomed to lean upon the Apostle, and now the strong prop was to be withdrawn, and he was to stand alone, and, worst of all, to take up some of the tasks dropped by Paul. Therefore the Apostle tries to brace up his drooping spirit with his clear clarion note. The message comes to us all, that discouraging circumstances and heavy responsibilities are reasons for gathering ourselves up to our work, and for 'stirring up' smouldering fires kindled by God in our hearts, and too often left untended by us.

Paul points to the proper effects of the gift of God, as the ground of his counsel That Spirit does not infuse cowardice, which blenches at danger or shrinks from duty, as probably Timothy was tempted to do; but it breathes 'power' into the weak, enabling them to do and bear all things, and 'love,' which makes eager for service to God and man, at whatever cost, and 'self-control,' which curbs the tendencies to seek easy tasks and to listen to the voices within or without whispering ignoble avoidance of the narrow way. Surely this exhortation in its most general form should come to all young hearts, and summon them to open their doors for the entrance of that Divine Helper who will make them strong, loving, and masters of themselves.

III. The second exhortation in 2Ti. 3:14-17, like the first, presupposes Timothy's previous Christian character, and draws some of its persuasive force from his home and the dear ones there - an argument

which, no doubt, Paul knew would tell on such a clinging, affectionate nature.

We note the double reason for steadfastness-the teachers, and the early beginning of the knowledge of the truth. It is thought a sign of independence and advancement by many young people nowadays to fling away their mother's faith, just because it was hers, and taught them by her when they were infants. The fact that it was is no bar against investigation, nor against the adoption of other conclusions, if needful; but in the present temper of men, it is well to remember that it creates no presumption against a creed that some white-haired Lois, or some tender mother Eunice has striven to engrave it on the young heart.

But the great reason adduced for steadfast grip of the truth is that the 'sacred writings' [by which are to be understood the Old Testament] have power, as Timothy had experience, to give a wisdom which led to salvation, and to 'furnish' a Christian, especially. the Christian teacher, for 'every good work.' In either of the two usually adopted renderings of verse 16, the divine origin of Scripture and its value for the manifold processes for perfecting character are broadly asserted. That origin and these uses are unaffected by variety of view as to the methods of inspiration or by critical researches. It will always be true that the Bible is the chief instrument employed by the Spirit of power and of love and of self-control to mould our characters into beauty of holiness. He who has that Spirit in his heart and the Scriptures in his hands has all he needs.

The one exhortation for such is to 'abide in' what he has received. That counsel as given to Timothy was probably directed chiefly against temptations very unlike those which attack us. But the spirit of it applies to us. It enjoins no irrational conservatism, scowling at all new thoughts, but it bids us aim at keeping up our personal hold of the central truths of Christ's incarnation, sacrifice, and gift of the Divine Spirit, which hold is

slackened by worldliness and carelessness twenty times for once that it is so from intellectual dissatisfaction with the principles of Christianity.

Timothy was relegated, not only to his early memoriam, but to his own experience. He had not only learned these things from revered lips, but had been ‘assured of’ them by the response they had found and the effects they had produced in himself. That is the deepest ground of our holding fast by the gospel, and it is one we may all have. ‘He that believeth hath the witness in himself,’ and may wait with equanimity while the dust of controversy clears off, for he ‘knows in whom he has believed,’ and what that Saviour has done for and in him;

2) 2 Timothy 1:7

2 Timothy

WHAT KIND OF MEN CHRIST MAKES

2Ti. 1:7

THE parts which we should naturally have expected Paul and Timothy to fill are reversed in this letter. ‘Paul the aged,’ a prisoner, and soon to be a martyr, might have been expected to receive encouragement and consolation. But Timothy seems to have been of a somewhat weak and timid nature, and this letter of the dying man is one long trumpet-blast to stir his courage. My text is the first of the ‘soul-animating strains’ which he blows. In it the Apostle would have his down-hearted young companion and helper remember what God has given him by the laying on of Paul’s hands. Whether the word ‘spirit’ in my text be regarded as meaning the Divine Spirit which is given, or the human spirit in which that divine gift is received, the qualities enumerated in the text are those which that Divine Giver creates in that human recipient by His indwelling presence; or to put it into shorter words, my text tells us what sort of people Christianity has a tendency to make, and it tells us, too, how it sets about making them.

The enumeration is by no means intended to be either complete or scientific. It is meant to embrace, mainly, the points which Timothy wanted most. And so it dwells predominantly on the stronger, ‘manly virtues,’ as men complacently call them.’ ‘God hath not given us the spirit of cowardice, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind,’ which last word does not stand precisely upon a level with the other three, hut rather expresses the notion of self-control.

I think I shall best, in the few remarks that I offer you, bring out the meaning of the words before us if I simply follow the Apostle’s rough and ready enumeration, and try to learn what he says about each of these points.

I. The first thing, then, that he would have us understand is that Christ makes fearless men.

‘God hath not given us the spirit of cowardice.’ Now, of course, courage or timidity are very largely matters of temperament. But then, you know, the very purpose of the gospel is to mend temperaments, to restrain, and to stimulate, so as that natural defects may become excellences, and

excellences may never run to seed and become defects. So whilst we have to admit that religion is not meant to obliterate natural distinctions in character, we must also remember that we insufficiently grasp the intention of the gospel which we say we believe unless we realise that it is meant to deal with the most deeply rooted defects in character, to make the crooked things straight, and the rough places plain.

So I venture to say that any man who lives in the realisation of the truths which the gospel reveals, and in the use of the gifts which the gospel communicates, will [whatever his natural disposition of apprehensiveness] be stiffened into a fearless man; and be no longer a reed shaken with the wind, but a brazen pillar, and an iron wall, amidst all dangers and enemies.

One sometimes feels as if nothing but clearsightedness were needed to drive men into insanity. When you think of the possibilities of every life, and of the certainties of every life, of what may come .to any of us, any time, and of what must come to all of us one time, the wonder is that men live without a perpetual tremor of heart, and do so largely manage to ignore the evils that ring them round. Think of our relation to God, think of what must be the result of the collision of the perfectly righteous will of His with our wayward rebellions; of what must be the consequence - if there be a God at all, and if there be such a thing as retributive acts on His part - when He sets us down to drink of the brewst that we have brewed, and to reap the harvest that we have sown. Surely, ‘he troubled, ye careless ones,’ is His exhortation of wisdom to men.

And then if we bring in all the other possibilities which to many of us have become in some measure past experiences, but still hang threatening on our horizon, like the half-emptied clouds of a thunderstorm, that is sure to come back again, dread seems to be wisdom. For what have we that we shall not have to part with? What do we that will not disappoint in the fruit? What dangers are there possible to humanity, concerning which you and I can say we know that ‘when the overflowing scourge passes by it will not reach us’? None! none!

You may remember having seen a gymnast that used to roll a ball up a spiral with the motion of his feet. That is how we are set to roll the ball of our fortunes and prosperities up the twisting ascent, and at every moment there is the possibility of its hurtling down in ruin, and one day it certainly will. So is there anything more empty and foolish than to say to a man whose relations with God are not right, whose command of the world is so uncertain, as it-surely is, and who has frowning before him the grim certainties of loss and sorrow and broken ties, and empty houses and empty hearts, and disappointments, and pillow stuffed with thorns, and souls wounded to the very quick, and, last of all, a death which has a dim some. thing behind it that touches all consciences - to say to such a man ‘Don’t be afraid’? If he is not a fool he ought to be.

But then Paul comes in and says, ‘God hath not given us the spirit of cowardice.’ No, because He has given us the only thing that can exorcise that demon. He has given us the good news of Himself, whereby His name becomes our dearest hope instead of our ghastliest doubt. He has given us the assurance of forgiveness and acceptance and hallowing in Jesus Christ, whereby all the things whereof our consciences - which do ‘make cowards of us all’ - are afraid, are rectified, and some of them swept out of existence. He has given us truths which only need to be. grappled and laid upon our hearts and minds to make us brave. He has assured us that ‘all things work together for good,’ that He Himself will never leave us. And the Master who spoke on earth so often, and in so many connections, His meek and sovereign encouragement, ‘Fear not!’ speaks it from the heavens to all that trust Him. ‘He laid His hand upon me, and said, "Fear not!" I am the first and the last,’ from whom all changes originate, by whom all events are directed, unto whom all things tend. Therefore, whosoever is wedded to Him need fear no evil, for nothing that does not hurt Christ can ham Him,

II. Christ makes strong men.

‘He hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power.’ Again we have to remember a previous remark as to temperament. There are differences among us in this respect. Some of us, of course, are naturally far more facile, sensitive and yielding than others; some of us have natural force denied to our brethren. These differences will remain, and yet ‘the weakest may be as David,’ and although the weakest shall be made strong, the strongest shall be stronger still, ‘as the angel of God.’ The difference between the hind and front ranks will remain, but the whole battalion, as it were, will be shifted forwards.

Let me remind you how a condition of all that is worth doing and being is the cultivation of strength of will and of moral nature. To be weak is to be wicked nine times out of ten. I believe that the bulk of men that go wrong, that ‘go to the devil,’ as you say, do it, not so much because of a bias towards evil as of a fatal feebleness that is incapable of resistance; and I know of nothing that is more needed to be dinned into the ears - especially of the young who have their chances before them yet - than this truth: the man that cannot say ‘No!’ is doomed to say ‘Yes!’ to all bad things that may solicit him. To be weak is to be wicked in such a world as we live in; and many of you know how fatally, facilely, and feebly you have yielded, for no other reason than because the temptation was there and you were not man enough to stop your ears to it, and let it hum past you without touching you. What is the reason why half the men in the world that are drunkards are so?

Pure weakness. And so you may go all round the circle of vices and you will find that weakness is ordinarily wickedness, and it is, always misery. As Milton’s Satan tells us, to be ‘weak is to be miserable, doing or suffering.’ And it is generally failure, as witness the experience of thousands of men who have come into this city and been beaten in the race.

How then is a man to get strength? Brethren, I do not want to exalt the gospel of Jesus Christ by depreciating other and lower means by which feeble natures may get a dose of steel into their system. There are such ways, and they do help men. But if you want to have a power within you that will enable you to ‘stand foursquare to every wind that blows,’ believe me the surest way of getting it is by faith in Jesus Christ, to open your hearts to the entrance into them of that ‘strong Son of God’ who sends His mighty Spirit into every spirit that will accept it, to be the source of uncreated and triumphant strength. If we would only keep near to Jesus Christ, and live with hearts open for the influx of His great communications, we should need nothing else to make us strong for all service, against all temptation, in the midst of all suffering. There is a gift offered to every one of us in the gospel of Jesus Christ which will make our weakness into strength. A piece of sponge put into a so-called petrifying well is turned into a mass solid as iron by the infiltration of stony particles. So our yielding softness may be converted into firmness which will resist every pressure if we receive into our hearts the grace which Christ gives. He who is strong in the Lord and in the power of His might, and he only, is truly strong. If then you want power learn where it is stored. -

> *‘His strength was as the strength of ten,*
> *Because his heart was pure.’*

There is part of the secret. But how is the heart to be made pure? By the entrance into it of the purifying Christ. Christ makes fearless and strong men.

III. Christ makes loving men.

> ‘*Tis excellent to have a giant’s strength ‘Tis tyrannous to use it like a giant!*’

And power ever tends to be tyrannous. The consciousness of strength is ever. apt to degenerate into insolence, uncharitableness, want of sympathy with, and contempt for, weakness. And so, very beautifully, side by side with power, Paul puts love. There are some great moral teachers of this generation, and of the last, whose whole teaching has been fatally vitiated, for this amongst other reasons, because they lost sight of the fact that the strongest thing in the universe is love. But Paul, not a philosopher, and not in the least degree trying to set forth scientifically the relations or the limitations of the virtues that he speaks about, like a skilful painter, instinctively knows what tint will best bring up the one that is laid beside it, or like some jeweller with an eye to effect, understands how to dispose the stones in his bracelet, that the cool green of the emerald may be set off by, and set off, the flashing red of the ruby and the deep blue of the sapphire. So he says, Christ makes strong men, but He makes loving men too. 'Quit you like men, be strong. Let all your deeds be done in charity.' And cultivate no strength for yourselves, nor admire any in others, in which power is divorced from pity and tenderness.

I need not remind you of the one sovereign way by which Jesus Christ in His gospel wins men from that self-centred absorption in which they live, and which is the root of all sin, into that love which is the child of faith and the parent' of all virtue. There is only one thing that makes men loving, and that is that they should be loved. And Jesus Christ, the incarnate Love, and Lover of all our souls, comes to us and shows us His hands and His side, and says,' God - I in Him and He in Me - so loved the world, as these wounds tell.' We have known and believed the love that God hath to us. Christ makes us love Him because He assures us that we are loved by Him.

IV. And lastly, Jesus Christ makes self-governing men.

I need not trouble you with any vindication of the rendering which for 'sound mind,' substitutes 'self-control.' I need only, in a word, ask you to consider how manifestly we are made so as to need the exercise continually of firm and resolute self-government. We have tastes and desires rooted in the flesh, and others, of which the gratification is perfectly legitimate, but which to make the guides of life, or to gratify without stint and without restraint, is ruinous. Blind passions are not meant to guide seeing reason; but if reason be the eye it is meant to guide the blind. And the men who live 'by nature,' which is a polite way of saying 'live by the worst half of their nature, and their animal passions,' are sure to land before long in the ditch.

We have only to look at ourselves and see how there are in us a whole clamorous mob of desires, like nine-days' kittens, with their eyes shut and their mouths open, yelping for their sustenance; and, further, to mark how in each man there is a voice that says, ‘Thou shalt, thou shalt not; thou oughtest, thou oughtest not’ - we need only, I say, look at ourselves to know that he is meant to coerce and keep well down under hatches all these blind propensions and desires, and to set sovereign above them a will that cannot be bribed, a reason that will not be deceived, and a conscience that will be true to God. Govern yourselves, or you will come all to pieces.

Yes, and what is the use of saying that to men who cannot govern themselves, whose very disease is that they cannot; and who cry out often and often, sometimes before they have gone wrong and sometimes afterwards,’ Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’ It is no use to tell a discrowned and deposed monarch to rule his kingdom. The mischief is that it is in full revolt, and he has no soldiers behind him. As Bishop Butler says, ‘If conscience had power, as it has authority, it would govern the world.’ But authority without power is but a jest. So it is no good for conscience to give forth proclamations that are worth no more than the paper that they are written on, when my will has been talked over or enfeebled, and my desires and passions have got the bit between their teeth, and are tearing down the road to the inevitable collision.

Brethren, there is only one thing that will give complete self-command. If you make trial, I will guarantee that it will not fail. Trust to Jesus Christ; ask Him to govern, and He will help you to control yourselves. That is the noblest conquest that any man can make. ‘Every man is a king, and crowns himself when he puts on his own hat,’ says our quaint moralist. Wherever you are master, be you master inside your own soul. And that you may, be the servant of Him who alone will make you master of yourself and of the world. In Christ the most timid may ‘wax valiant in fight,’ the’ weakest may be made strong,’ the most self-centred heart be opened for love which is peace and joy, and the wildest revolt in the little kingdom within may be subdued. If we will only go to Him, and trust Him with ourselves, and live in true communion with Him, and in patient exercise of the gifts that He bestows, then He will say to us as of old, ‘Fear not! My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ His love will kindle answering flames in us; and He who brought the raging maniac, whom no chains could bind, to sit quietly at His feet, will give us authority over the one city which we have to govern, and will make the flesh the servant of the emancipated and enfranchised spirit.

3) 2 Timothy 1:12

2 Timothy

A QUIET HEART

2Ti. 1:12

THERE is some ambiguity in the original words of this text, lying in that clause which is translated in our Bibles - both Authorised and Revised - ‘that which I have committed unto Him.’ The margin of the Revised Version gives as an alternative reading, ‘that which He hath committed unto me.’ To a mere English reader it may be a puzzle how any words whatever could be susceptible of these two different interpretations. But the mystery is solved by the additional note which the same Revised Version gives, which tells us that the Greek is ‘ my deposit,’ or I might add another synonymous word, ‘my trust.’

Now you can see that ‘my trust’ may mean either something with which I trust another, or something with which another trusts me. So the possibility of either rendering arises. It is somewhat difficult to decide between the two. I do not purpose to trouble you with reasons for my preference here. Suffice it to say that, whilst there are strong arguments in favour of the reading ‘that which He has committed unto me,’ I am inclined to think that the congruity of the whole representation, and especially the thought that this ‘trust,’ whatever it is, is something which God has to keep, rather than which Paul has to keep, shuts us up to the adoption of the rendering which stands in our Bibles.

Adopting it, therefore, though with some hesitation, the next question arises, What is it that Paul committed to God? The answer to that is, himself, in all his complex being, with all his fears and anxieties, during the whole duration of his existence. He has done what another Apostle exhorts us to do, ‘committed the keeping of his soul to Him in well-doing, as unto a faithful Creator.' Now that was a long past act at the time when Paul wrote this letter. And here he looks back upon life, and sees that all the experiences through which he has passed have but confirmed the faith which he rested in God before the experiences, and that, with the axe and the block almost in sight, he is neither ashamed of his faith, nor dissatisfied with what it has brought him.

I. Notice, then, in the first place, 'the deposit' of faith.

You observe that the two clauses of my text refer to the same act, which in the one is described as 'In whom I have trusted'; and in the other as 'committing something to Him.' The metaphor is a plain enough one. A man has some rich treasure. He is afraid of losing it, he is doubtful of his own power to keep it; he looks about for some reliable person and trusted hands, and he deposits it there. That is about as good a description of what the New Testament means by ' faith' as you will get anywhere.

You and I have one treasure, whatever else we may have or not have; and that is ourselves. The most precious of our possessions is our own individual being.

We cannot 'keep' that. There are dangers all round us. We are like men travelling in a land full of pickpockets and highwaymen, laden with gold and precious stones. On every side there are enemies that seek to rob us of that which is our true treasure - our own souls. We cannot keep ourselves. Slippery paths and weak feet go ill together. The tow in our hearts, and the fiery sparks of temptation that are flying all round about us, are sure to come together and make a blaze. We shall certainly come to ruin if we seek to get through life, to do its work, to face its difficulties, to cope with its struggles, to master its temptations, in our own poor, puny strength. So we must look for trusty hands and lodge our treasure there, where it is safe.

And how am I to do that? By humble dependence upon God revealed, for our faith's feeble fingers to grasp, in the person and work of His dear Son, who has died on the Cross for us all; by constant realisation of His divine presence and implicit reliance on the realities of His sustaining hand in all our difficulties, and His shielding protection in all our struggles, and His sanctifying spirit in all our conflicts with evil. And not only by the realisation of His presence and of our dependence upon Him, nor only by the consciousness of our own insufficiency, and the departing from all self-reliance, but as an essential part of our committing ourselves to God, by bringing our wills into harmony with His will. To commit includes to submit.

‘And, oh, brother! if thus knowing your weakness, you will turn to Him for strength, if the language of your hearts be

‘Myself I cannot save,
Myself I cannot keep,
But strength in Thee I surely have,
Whose eyelids never sleep.’

And if thus, hanging upon Him, you believe that when you fling yourself into necessary temptations, and cope with appointed heavy tasks, and receive on your hearts the full blow of sent sorrows, He will strengthen you and hold you up; and if with all your hearts you bow, and you say,’ Lord! keeping me is Thy business far more than mine; into Thy hands I commit my spirit,’ be sure that your trust will not be disappointed.

Notice, further, about this deposit of faith, how Paul has no doubt that he has made it, and is not at all afraid to say that he has. Ay! there are plenty of you professing Christians who have never got the length which all Christian people should arrive at, of a calm certainty in the reality of your own faith. Do you feel, my brother, that there is no doubt about it, that you are trusting upon Jesus Christ? If you do, well; if the life confirms the confidence. But whilst the deepened certitude of professing Christians as to the reality of their own faith is much to be desired, there is also much to be dreaded the easy-going assurance which a great many people who call themselves Christians have of the reality of their trust, though it neither bows their wills to God’s purposes, nor makes them calm and happy in the assurance of His presence. The question for us all is, have we the right to say ‘I have committed myself to Him’? If you have not, you have missed the blessedness of life, and will never carry your treasure safely through the hordes of robbers that lurk upon the road, but some day you will be found there, lying beggared, bleeding, bruised. May it be that you are found there before the end, by the merciful Samaritan who alone can bind up and lead to safety.

II. Now note, secondly, the serenity of faith.

What a grand picture of a peaceful heart comes out of this letter, and its companion one to the same friend, written a little before, but under substantially the same circumstances! They are both full of autobiographical details, on which some critics look with suspicion, but which seem to me to bear upon their very front the token of their own genuineness.

And what a picture it is that they give! He is ‘Paul the aged’; old, if not in years - and he probably was not an old man by years - yet old in thought and care and hardships and toils. He is a prisoner, and the compulsory cessation of activity, when so much was to be done, might well have fretted a less eager spirit than that which burned in his puny frame. He is alone, but for one faithful friend; and the bitterness of his solitude is increased by the apostasy of some and the negligence of many. He is poor and thinly clad; and he wants his one cloak ‘before winter.’ He has been before the emperor once, and though he ‘was delivered from the mouth of the lion’ then, he knows that he cannot expect to put his head into the lion’s mouth a second time with impunity, and that his course is run. He has made but a poor thing of life; he has disappointed all the hopes that were formed of the brilliant young disciple of Gamaliel, who was bidding fair to be the hammer of these heretical Christians. And yet there is no tremor nor despondency in this, his swan-song. It goes up in a clear burst of joyful music. It is the same spirit as that of the Psalmist: ‘There be many that say, Who will show us any good? Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us.’ And serenely he sits there, in the midst of dangers, disappointments, difficulties, and struggles, with a life behind him stuffed full of thorns and hard work and many a care, and close before him the martyr’s death, yet he says, with a flash of legitimate pride, ‘I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have trusted, and that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.’

My brother, you must have Paul’s faith if you are to have Paul’s serenity. A quiet committal of yourself to God, in all the ways in which I have already described that committal as carried out, is the only thing which will give us quiet hearts, amidst the dangers and disappointments and difficulties and conflicts which we have all to encounter in this world. That trust in Him will bring, in the measure of its own depth and constancy, a proportionately deep and constant calm in our hearts.

For even though my faith brought me nothing from God, the very fact that I have rolled my care off my shoulders on to His, though I had made a mistake in doing it, would bring me tranquillity, as long as I believed that the burden was on His shoulders and not on mine. Trust is always quiet. When I can say, ‘I am not the master of the caravan, and it is no part of my business to settle the route, I have no responsibility for providing food, or watching, or anything else. All my business is to obey orders, and to take the step nearest me and wait for the light,’ then I can be very quiet whatever comes. And if I have cast my burden upon the Lord, I am not delivered from responsibility, but I am delivered from harassment. I have still tasks and duties, but they are all different when I think of them as His appointing. I have still difficulties and dangers, but I can meet them all with a new peacefulness if I say, ‘God is Master here, and I am in His hands, and He will do what He likes with me.’ That is not the abnegation of will, it is the vitalising of will And no man is ever so strong as the man who feels ‘it is God’s business to take care of me; it is my business to do what He tells me.’

That, dear friends, is the only armour that will resist the cuts and blows that are sure to be aimed at you. What sort of armour do you wear? Is it of pasteboard painted to look like steel, like the breastplates and helmets of actors upon the stage in a theatre? A great deal of our armour is. Do you get rid of all that make-believe, and put on the breastplate of righteousness, and for a helmet the hope of salvation, and, above all, take the shield of faith; and trust in the Lord whate’er betide, and you will stand against all assaults. Paul’s faith is the only recipe for securing Paul’s serenity.

And then, further, note how this same quiet committal of himself into the loving hands of his Father - whom he had learned to know because he had learned to trust His Son - is not only the armour against all the dangers and difficulties in life, but is also the secret of serene gazing into the eyes of close death. Paul knew that his days were nearly at an end; he was under no illusions as to that, for you remember the grand burst of confidence, even grander than this of my text, in this same letter, with which he seems to greet the coming of the end, and exclaims, with a kind of Hallelujah! in his tone, ‘I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. And there is nothing left for me now, now when the struggles are over and the heat and dust of the arena are behind me, but, panting and victorious, to receive the crown.’ He knows that death is sure and near; and yet in this same letter he says, ‘I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion, and the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and save me into His everlasting kingdom.’ Did he, then, expect to escape from the headsman’s block? Was he beginning to falter in his belief that martyrdom was certain? By no means. The martyrdom was the deliverance. The striking off of his head by the sharp axe was the ‘saving of him into the everlasting kingdom.’ His faith, grasping Jesus Christ, who abolished death, changes the whole aspect of death to him; and instead of ,a terror it becomes God’s angel that will come to the prisoner and touch him, and say, ‘Arise!’ and the fetters will fall from off his feet, and the angel will lead him through ‘the gate that opens of its own accord,’ and presently he will find himself in the city. That is to say, true confidence in God revealed in Jesus Christ is the armour, not only against the ills of life, but against the inevitable ill of death. It changes the whole aspect of the ‘shadow feared of man’

Now I know that there is a danger in urging the reception of the gospel of Jesus Christ on the ground of its preparing us for death. And I know that the main reasons for being Christians would continue in full force if there were no death; but I know also that we are all of us far too apt to ignore that grim certainty that lies gaping for us, somewhere on the road. And if we have certainly to go down into the common darkness, and to tread with our feet the path that all but two of God’s favourites have trod, it is as well to look the fact in the face, and be ready. I do not want to frighten any man into being a Christian, but I do beseech each of you, brethren, to lay to heart that you will have to grapple with that last enemy, and I ask you, as you love your own souls, to make honest work of this question, Am I ready for that summons when it comes, because I have committed my soul, body, and spirit into His hands, and I can quietly say, ‘ Thou wilt not leave my soul in the grave, nor wilt Thou suffer Thy servant to see corruption’?

Paul’s faith made him serene in life and victorious over death; and it will do the same for you.

III. So note, further, the experience of faith.

In the first clause of our text the Apostle says: - ‘I know whom I have trusted.’ And it is because he knows Him that therefore he is persuaded that ‘He is able to keep.’

How did Paul know Him? By experience. By the experience of his daily life. By all these years of trial and yet of blessedness through which he had passed; by all the revelations that had been made to his waiting heart as the consequence and as the reward of the humble faith that rested upon God. And so the whole past had confirmed to him the initial confidence which knit him to Jesus Christ.

If you want to know the worth of Christian faith, exercise it. We must trust, to begin with, before experience. But the faith that is built upon a lifetime is a far stronger thing than the tremulous faith that, out of darkness, stretches a groping hand, and for the first time lays hold upon God’s outstretched hand. We hope then, we tremblingly trust, we believe on the authority of His word. But after years have passed, we can say, ‘We have heard Him ourselves, and we know that this is the Christ, the Saviour of the world.’

Further, none who truly commit themselves to God ever regret it. Is there anything else of which you can say that? Is there any other sort of life that never turns out a disappointment and bitterness and ashes in the mouth of the man that feeds upon it? And is it not something of an evidence of the reality of, the Christian’s faith that millions of men are able to stand up and say,’ Lo! we have put our confidence in Him and we are not ashamed?’ ‘This poor man cried and the Lord heard him, and delivered him out of all his troubles. They looked unto God and were lightened, and their faces were not ashamed.’ You cannot share in the conviction, the issue of experience which a Christian man has, if you are not a Christian. My inward evidence of the reality of the Gospel truth, which I have won because I trusted Him when I had not the experience, cannot be shared with anybody besides. You must ‘taste’ before you ‘see that the Lord is good’ But the fact that there is such a conviction, and the fact that there is nothing on the other side of the sheet to contradict it, ought to weigh something in the scale. Try Him and trust Him, and your experience will be, as that of all who have trusted Him has been, ‘that this hope maketh not ashamed.’

IV. Lastly, note here the goal of faith.

‘Against that day.’ The Apostle has many allusions to that day in this final letter. It was evidently, as was natural under the circumstances, much in his mind. And the tone of the allusions is remarkable. Remember what Paul believed that day was - a day when he ‘and all men would stand before the judgment’ bar of an omniscient and all-righteous, Divine Judge, to receive ‘the deeds done in the body.’ A solemn thought and a firm conviction, and a profound impression as to that day, were in his mind. And in the face of all this, he says, ‘I know that He will keep this poor soul of mine against that day.’

Ah, my brother! it is easy for you to shuffle out of your thoughts the judgment-seat before which we must all stand, and so to be quiet. It is easy for you to question, in a so-called intellectual scepticism, the New Testament revelations as to the future, and so to be quiet. It is easy for you to persuade yourselves of the application there of another standard of judgment than that which Scripture reveals, and to say, ‘If I have done my best God will not be hard upon me,’ and so to be quiet. But, supposing that that certain tribunal blazed upon you; supposing that you could not get rid of the thought that you were to stand there, and supposing that you realised, further, the rigidity of that judgment, and how it penetrates to the discerning of the thoughts and intents of the heart, would you be quiet then? Should you be quiet then?

This man was. How? Why? Because, in patient trust, he had put his soul into God’s hands, and a lifetime had taught him that his trust was not in vain.

If you want like peace in life, like victory in death, like boldness in the Day of Judgment, oh, dear friend! - friend though unknown - let me plead with you to seek it where Paul found it, and where you will find it, in simple faith on God manifest in His Son.

4) 2 Timothy 1:13

2 Timothy

‘SOUND WORDS’

2Ti. 1:13

ANY great author or artist passes, in the course of his work, from one manner to another; so that a person familiar with him can date pretty accurately his books or pictures as being in his ‘earlier’ or ‘later’ style So there is nothing surprising in the fact that there are great differences between Paul’s last writings and his previous ones. The surprising thing would have been if there had not been such differences. The peculiarities of the so-called three pastoral Epistles [the two to Timothy, and the one to Titus] are not greater than can fairly be accounted for by advancing years, changed circumstances, and the emergence of new difficulties and enemies.

Amongst them there are certain expressions, very frequent in these letters and wholly unknown in any of Paul’s other work. These have been pounced upon as disproving the genuineness of these letters, hut they only do so if you assume that a man, when he gets old, must never use any words that he did not use when he was young, whatever new ideas may have come to him. Now, in this text of mine is one of these phrases peculiar to these later letters - ‘sound words.’ That phrase and its parallel one, ‘sound doctrine,’ occur in all some half-dozen times in these letters, and never anywhere else. The expression has become very common among us. It is more often used than understood; and the popular interpretation of it hides its real meaning and obscures the very important lessons which are to be drawn from the true understanding of it, lessons which, I take leave to think, modern Christianity stands very sorely in need of. I desire now to try to unfold the thoughts and lessons con-rained in this phrase.

I. What does Paul mean by a ‘form of sound words’?

I begin the answer by saying that he does not mean a doctrinal formula. The word here rendered ‘form’ is the same which he employs in the first of the letters to Timothy, when he speaks of himself and his own conversion as being ‘a pattern to them that should hereafter believe.’ The notion intended here is not a cut-and-dried creed, but a body of teaching winch will not be compressed within the limits of an iron form, but will be a pattern for the lives of the men to whom it is given. The Revised Version has ‘the pattern; and not ‘the form.’ I take leave to think that there were no creeds in the

apostolic time, and that the Church would probably have had a firmer grasp of God’s truth if there had never been any. At all events the idea of a cast-iron creed, into which the whole magnificence of the Christian faith is crushed, is by no means Paul’s idea in the word here. Then, with regard to the other part of the phrase - ‘sound words’ - we all know how that is generally understood by people. Words are supposed to be ‘sound,’ when they are in conformity with the creed of the critic. A sound High Churchman is an entirely different person from a sound Nonconformist. Puritan and Sacramentarian differ with regard to the standard which they set up, but they use the word in the same way, to express theological statements in conformity with that standard. And we all know how harshly the judgment is sometimes made, and how easy it is to damn a man by a solemn shake of the head or a shrug of the shoulders, and the question whether he is ‘sound.’

Now, all that is clean away from the apostolic notion of the word in question. If we turn to the other form of this phrase, which occurs frequently in these letters, ‘sound doctrine,’ there is another remark to be made. ‘Doctrine’ conveys to the ordinary reader the notion of an abstract, dry, theological statement of some truth. Now, what the Apostle means is not ‘doctrine’ so much as ‘teaching’; and if you will substitute ‘teaching’ for ‘doctrine’ you get much nearer his thought just as you will get nearer it if for ‘sound,’ with its meaning of conformity to a thee-logical standard, you substitute what the word really means, ‘healthy,’ wholesome, health-giving, healing. All these ideas run into each other. That which is in itself healthy is health-giving as food, and as a medicine is healing. The Apostle is not describing the teaching that he had given to Timothy by its conformity with any standard, but is pointing to its essential nature as being wholesome, sound in a physical sense; and to its effect as being healthy and health-giving. Keep hold of that thought and the whole aspect of this saying changes at once.

There is only one other point that I would suggest in this first part of my sermon, as to the Apostolic meaning of these words, and it is this: ‘healing’ and ‘holy’ are etymologically connected, they tell us. The healing properties of the teaching to which Paul refers are to be found entirely in this - its tendency to make men better, to produce a purer morality, a loftier goodness, a more unselfish love, and so to bring harmony and health into the diseased nature. The one healing for a man is to be holy; and, says Paul, the way to be holy is to keep a firm hold of that body of teaching which I have presented.

Now, that this tendency to produce nobler manners and purer conduct and holier character is the true meaning of the word ‘ sound’ here, and not ‘ orthodox’ as we generally take it, will be quite clear, I think, if you will notice how, in another part of these same letters, the Apostle gives a long catalogue of the things which are contrary to the health-giving doctrine. If the ordinary notion of the expression were correct, that catalogue ought to be a list of heresies. But what is it? A black list of vices - ‘deceivers,’ ‘ungodly, sinners, ‘unholy,’ profane,’ ‘murderers,’ ‘man-slayers,’ ‘whoremongers,’ ‘man-stealers,’ ‘liars,’ ‘perjured’ persons. Not one of these refers to aberration of opinion; all of them point to divergences of conduct, and these are the things that are contrary to the healing doctrine. But they are not contrary, often, to sound orthodoxy. For there have been a great many imitators of that king of France, who carried little leaden images of saints and the Virgin in his hat and the devil in his heart. ‘The form of sound words’ is the pattern of healing teaching, which proves itself healing because it makes holy. Now, that is my first question answered.

II. Where Paul thought these healing words were to be found.

He had no doubt whatever as to that. They were in the message that he preached of Jesus Christ and His salvation. There and there only, in his estimation and inspired teaching, are such words to be found. The truth of Christ, His incarnation, His sacrifice, His resurrection, His ascension, the gift of His Divine Spirit, with all the mighty truths on which these great facts rest, and all which flow from these great facts, these, in the aggregate, are the health-giving words for the sickly world.

Now, historically, it is proved to Be so. I do not need to defend, as if it were in full conformity with the dictates and principles of Christianity, the life and practice of any generation of Christian people. But this I do venture to say, that the world has been slowly lifted, all through the generations, by the influence, direct and indirect, of the great truths of Christianity, and that today the very men who, in the name of certain large principles which they have learned from the gospel, are desirous of brushing aside the old-fashioned gospel, are kicking down the ladder by which they climbed, and that, with all the imperfections, for which we have to take shame to ourselves before God, still the reflection of the perfect Imago which is east into the world from the mirror of the collective

Christian conduct and character, though it be distorted by many a flaw in the glass, and imperfect by reason of many a piece of the reflecting medium having dropped away, is still the fairest embodiment of character that the world has ever seen. Why, what is the meaning of the sarcasms that we have all heard, till we are wearied of them, about ‘the Nonconformist conscience’? The adjective is wrong; it should be ‘the Christian conscience.’ But with that correction I claim the sarcasms as unconscious testimony to the fact that the Christian ideal of character and conduct set forth, and approximately realised, by religious people, is far above the average morality of even a so-called Christian nation. And all that is duo to the ‘pattern of health-giving words.’

Now, the historical confirmation of Paul’s claim that these health-giving words were to be found in his gospel is no more than is to be expected, if we look at the contents of that gospel to which he thus appeals. For there never has been such an instrument for regenerating individuals and society as lies in the truths of Christianity, firmly grasped and honestly worked out. Their healing power comes, first, from their giving the sense of pardon and acceptance. Brethren, there is nothing, as I humbly venture to affirm, that will go down to the fountain and origin of all the ills of man, except that teaching ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing unto them their trespasses.’ That reality of guilt, that schism and alienation between man and God, must be dealt with first before you can produce high morality. Unless you deal with that central disease you do very little. Something you do; but the cancer is deep-seated, and the world's remedies for it may cure pimples on the surface, but are powerless to extirpate the malignant tumour that has laid hold of the vitals. You must begin by dealing with the disease of sin, not only in its aspect as habit, but in its consequence of guilt and responsibility and separation from God, before you can bring health to the sick man.

And then, beyond that, I need not remind you of how a higher and more wholesome morality is made possible by these health-giving words, inasmuch as they set forth for us the perfect example of Jesus Christ, inasmuch as they bring into operation love, the mightiest of all powers to mould a life, inasmuch as they open up for us, far more solemnly and certainly than ever else has been revealed, the solemn thought of judgment, and of every man giving account of himself to God, and the assurance that 'whatsoever a man soweth here, that,' a thousand-fold increased in the crop, 'shall he also reap' in the eternities. In addition to the example of perfection in the beloved Christ, the mighty motive of love, the solemn urgency of judgment and retribution, the health-giving words bring to us the assurance of a divine power dwelling within us, to lift us to heights of purity and goodness to which our unaided feet can never, never climb. And for all these reasons the message of Christ's incarnation and death is the health-giving word for the world.

But, further, let me remind you that, according to the apostolic teaching, these healing and health-giving effects will not be produced except by that gospel. Some of you, perhaps, may have listened to the first part of my sermon with approbation, because it seemed to fit in with the general disparagement of doctrine prevalent in this day. Will you listen to this part too? I venture to assert that, although there are many men apart from Christ who have as clear a conception of what they ought to be and to do as any Christian, and some men apart from Christ who do aim after high and pure, noble lives, not altogether unsuccessfully, yet on the whole, on the wide scale, and in the long-run, if you change the 'pattern of health-giving words' you lower the health of the world. It seems to me that this generation is an object-lesson in that matter. Why is it that these two things are running side by side in the literature of these closing years of the century - viz., a rejection of the plain laws of morality, especially in regard of the relations of the sexes, and a rejection of the old-fashioned gospel of Jesus Christ? I venture to think that the two things stand to each other very largely in the relation of cause and effect, and that, if you want to bring back the world to Puritan morality, you will have to go back in the main to Puritan theology. I do not mean to insist upon any pinning of faith to any theological system, but this I am bound to say, and I beseech you to consider, that if you strike out from the 'pattern of health-giving words' the truth of the Incarnation, the sacrifice on the Cross, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the gift of the Spirit, the 'health-giving words' that you have left are not enough to give health to a fly.

III. Lastly, notice what Paul would have us do with these' health-giving words.'

'Hold fast the form.., in faith and love, which is in Christ Jesus.' Now that exhortation includes three things. Your time will not allow me to do more than just touch them. First it applies to the understanding. 'Hold fast the teaching' by letting it occupy your minds Brethren, I am unwillingly bound to acknowledge my suspicion that a very large number of Christian people scarcely ever occupy their thoughts with the facts and principles of the gospel, and that they have no firm and intelligent grasp of these, either singly or in their connection. I would plead for less newspaper and more Bible; for less novel and more gospel. I know how hard it is for busy men to have spare energy for anything beyond their business and the necessary claims of society, but I would even venture to advise a little less of what is called Christian work, in order to get a little more Christian knowledge. 'Come ye yourselves apart into a solitary place,' said the Master; and all busy workers need that. 'Hold fast the health-giving words' by meditation, a lost art among so many Christians.

The exhortation applies next to the heart. 'Hold in faith and love.' If that notion of the expression, which I have been trying to combat, were the correct one, there would be no need for anything beyond familiarising the understanding with the bearings of the doctrinal truths. But Paul sees need for a great deal more. The understanding brings to the emotions that on which they fasten and feed. Faith - which is more than credence, being an act of the will - casts itself on the truth believed, or rather on the Person revealed in the truth; and love, kindled by faith, and flowing out in grateful response, and self-abandonment, are as needful as orthodox belief, in order to hold fast the health-giving words.

The exhortation applies, finally, to Character and conduct. Emotion, even when it takes the shape of faith and love, is as little the end of God's revelation as is knowledge. He makes Himself known to us in all the greatness of His grace and love in Jesus Christ, not that we may know, and there an end, nor even that knowing, we may feel, and there an end, though a great many emotional Christians seem to think that is all; but that knowing, we may feel, and knowing and feeling, we may be and do what He would have us do and be. We have the great river flowing past our doors. It is not only intended that we should fill our cisterns by knowledge, nor only bathe our parched lips by faith and love, but that we should use it to drive all the wheels of the mill of life. Not he that understands, nor he that glows, but he that does, is the man who holds fast the pattern of sound health-giving words.

The world is like that five-porched pool in which were gathered a great multitude of sick folks. Its name is the 'House of Mercy,' for so Bethesda means, tragically as the title seems to be contradicted by the condition of the cripples and diseased lying there. But this fountain once moved gushes up for ever; and whosoever will may step into it, and immediately be made whole of whatsoever disease he has.

5) 2 Timothy 1:14

2 Timothy

GOD'S STEWARDS

2Ti. 1:14

THE Apostle has just been expressing his confidence for himself that 'God is able to keep that which I have committed' unto him 'against that day.'

Here, with intentional parallelism, he repeats the leading ideas and key-words of that great confidence, but in a wholly different connection. Whether we suppose that the rendering of our version in the twelfth verse is correct or no, there still remains the intentional parallelism between the two verses. In discoursing upon that twelfth verse, I gave reasons for adhering to the translation of our version and regarding the parallel as double. There are two committals. God commits something to us; we commit something to God. But whether that be so or no, there are, at all events, two keepings. God keeps, and we have to keep. And if, on the other hand, in both verses the Apostle speaks of a charge committed to men by God, then the contrasted parallel between the two keepings remains and is even increased, because then it is the same thing which God keeps and which we keep. So the whole connection between man's faithfulness and God's protection is suggested here. The true Christian life in its entirety may either be regarded as God's work or the believer's. We keep ourselves when we let God keep us, and God keeps us by making us able to keep ourselves.

I. Note then, first, our charge.

The Apostle is evidently thinking mainly of the gospel message which was entrusted to Himself and to Timothy. That is shown by the whole context. The previous verse is, ' Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.' And the same connection appears in the First Epistle to Timothy, where the same exhortation is repeated: 'Keep that. which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, 'which some professing have erred concerning the faith.' The same idea of the gospel as the deposit committed to the trust of Christian men lies in other words of the first epistle, where the Apostle speaks of the 'gospel of the glory of the blessed God which was committed to my trust.' And it crops up in other expressions of his, such as that he was 'put in trust of the gospel.' It also underlies the very common representation of himself and his colleagues as being 'stewards of the mysteries of God.' But all these expressions describe no prerogative of an apostle, or of a teaching office or order in the Church, but declare the solemn responsibility laid by the great gift bestowed upon all Christian men. Whosoever has accepted the message of salvation for himself is, ipso facto, put in charge of that message for carrying it to others. The trust which

I place in the gospel makes the gospel a trust which is committed to me. And every believer, howsoever imperfect may be his grasp of the truth, howsoever narrow may be the sphere of his agency, has given into his hands this great charge, that the Word of God is committed to his trust.

You Christian people are responsible in this connection for two things, for the preservation of the truth and for the diffusion of the truth.

You are responsible for its preservation. Some of us, in a special manner, have it given to us in charge to oppose prevailing tendencies which rob the gospel of its glory and of its power, to try to preach it to men, whether they will hear or forbear, in its simplicity and its unwelcomeness, as well as in its sweetness and its graciousness. But for most of us, the responsibility for the preservation of the truth lies mainly in another direction, and we are bound to keep it for the food of our own souls, and to see that the atmosphere in which we live, and the prevailing tendencies around us, the worldliness, the selfishness, the absorption in the things seen to the exclusion of the things that axe unseen and eternal, do not rob us of the treasure which we say that we value. See to it that you keep it as what you profess that it is, the anchor of your hope and the guide of all your lives, binding it upon the palms of your hands that all your work may be sanctified; writing it between your eyes that all your thoughts may be enlightened; and inscribing it on the posts of your doors and your gates that, whensoever you go forth to work, you may go out under its guidance, and when you come back to rest and solitude, you may bear it with you for your meditation and refreshment. The charge that is given to us is the preservation of God’s Word, and the gospel which we have received we have received with this written upon it, ‘Hold fast that which thou hast; let no man take thy crown.’

And then, further, all of us Christian people are responsible for the diffusion of that Word. It is given to us that we may spread it, and this is no exclusive prerogative of an apostolic class, or of an order of ministers or clergy in God’s Church, but every Christian man and woman who has the Word is thereby bound to tell the Word faithfully.

And then, subordinately and connected with this, I may put another thought, that the reputation and character of our Master are committed to us to keep. People take their notions of Jesus Christ a great deal more from you than from the Bible, and the Christian Church is the true scripture which most men know best. The written revelation is often negatived, or at all events neutralised, by the representation which we Christians make of Christ. He has given into our hands His reputation, as if He said: ‘Live so that men may know what sort of a Christ I am; and so set forth the spirit of life that was in Me that men may be led to believe that there is something in the truths and principles which make men like you.’

But there is a wider application legitimately to be given to the words of my text, on which I touch for a moment. The great trust which is committed to us all is ourselves; and in connection therewith we are responsible for two things - first, for the development of character; and second, for the exercise of capacity.

We are responsible for the development of character. We have to cut off and suppress, or, at least, to subordinate and regulate, a great deal within us in order that the true self may rise into sovereign majesty and power. We have to cultivate shy graces, unwelcome duties, sides of our character which are not naturally prominent. The faults that we have are not to be cured simply by the repression of them, but by the cultivation of their opposites. All this is given to us to do, and nobody can do it for us. We are stewards of many things, but the most precious gift of which we are stewards is this awful nature of ours, with possibilities that tower heaven-high, and evils that go down to the depths of hell, shut up within the narrow room of our hearts. The man who has himself put into his own hands can never want a field for diligent cultivation. And we are responsible for the use of capacities. God gives these to us that we may by exercise strengthen them. And so, brother, as a man, your natural self is your charge; as a Christian, the word which brings your’ better self, is that which is committed to you to keep.

II. Now, secondly, notice our keeping of our charge.

The word rendered here ‘to keep’ rather means ‘to guard’ than to keep in the sense of preserving. ‘Keeping’ is the consequence of the ‘guarding’ which my text enjoins. We may get a picture which may help us to understand the drift of the apostolic exhortation, if I remind you of two of the uses of the word in its non-metaphorical sense in Scripture. It is the expression employed to describe the occupation of the shepherds on the upland slopes of Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. They were ‘keeping watch over their flocks by night.’ That is how you have to watch yourselves and the word that is committed to your care. Again, it is the word employed to describe the vigilant watchfulness of the sentry outside the prison gates where the apostles lay immured; or of the four quaternions of soldiers that had to take charge of Peter when he was chained to them. And that is how we have to watch, as the shepherd over his flock, as the sentry over the prison house, or as the guard over some treasure. So Christian men and women have to live, exercising all the care needful to prevent the stealing away some of the flock, the escape of some of the prisoners, the filching from them of some of their treasure. Let me expand the apostolic exhortation into two of three precepts.

Cultivate the sense of stewardship. It is a very hard thing for us to keep fresh the feeling that all which we are and have is given to us, and that not for ourselves, but for God. The beginning of evil is the weakening of that sense of responsibility, and the dawning of the dream that we are our own. The prodigal son’s downfall began with saying, ‘Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.’

And the next step came naturally after that: ‘He gathered all together and went away into a far country.’ And the next step came just as naturally after that: ‘He wasted his substance in riotous living.’

If sense of stewardship and responsibility is weakened within us, the mainspring of all good is weakened within us, and we shall become self-willed, self-indulgent, self-asserting, God-forgetting. If we think that the talent or the pound is ours, we shall spend it for our own purposes, and that is ‘waste.’

And is it not a sad commentary on the tendency of human nature to forget stewardship, and to lose the impression of responsibility, that that very word ‘talents,’ which is borrowed from Christ’s parable, is used in common speech without the slightest sense that it suggests anything about stewardship, faithfulness, or reckoning? Let us, then, take care to cultivate the sense of responsibility.

Again, let us exercise unslumbering vigilance. A great political thinker says, ‘The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.’ The price of keeping the treasure that God has given us is the same. There are old legends of fabulous riches hid away in some rocky cave amongst the mountains, guarded by mythological creatures, of whom it is said that their eyes have no lids. They cannot shut them, and they never sleep. And that is what Christians need to be, with lidless, wide-opened, vigilant eyes; watching ever against the evils that are ever around us, and the robbers who are ever seeking to drag the precious deposit from our hands. Live to watch, and watch that you may live.

Then, again, familiarise yourselves with the truth which you have in charge. I am not half so much afraid that intellectual doubts and the formulated conscious disbelief of this generation will affect Christian people, as I am afraid of the unconscious drift sweeping them away before they know. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews has a solemn figure in regard of this matter. He says: ‘Let us take the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should drift past them.’ And that is exactly what befalls Christian men and women who do not continually renew their familiarity with God’s Word and the gospel to which they trust. Before they know where they are, the silent-flowing, swift stream has swept them down, and the truths to which they fancied they were anchored are almost invisible on the far horizon. For one man who loses his Christianity by yielding to the arguments of the other side there are ten who lose it by evaporation. ‘As thy servant was busy here and there,’ was the lame excuse of the man in the Old Testament for letting his prisoner run away, ‘he was gone!’ And God knows how he has gone and Where he went.

That is true about a great many who are professing Christian people. The Word has slipped out of their hands, and they do not know how, nor exactly when it escaped from their slack fingers. If you will put plucked flowers into a glass without any water you cannot but expect them to wither; and if you will refrain from refreshing your belief and your trust by familiarity with the truths of the gospel, and by meditating upon these, you cannot wonder that they should shrivel up and lose their sweetness for you. Keep that word hid in your hearts that you sin not against Him and it.

And then, further, exercise your gifts. The very worst way to keep the talent is to keep it in a napkin. The man who buried it in the earth, and then dug it up and presented it to his lord, did not know how much weight it

had lost by rust and decay while it was hidden away. For though gold does not rust, the gold of the talent that we possess does; and the sure way to make our gifts dwindle is that we neglect to use them. It seems an odd way to keep corn, to fling it broadcast out of a basket over the fields, but ‘there is that scattereth, and yet increaseth.’ Live your faith; let what you believe be the guide of your practice; increase your grasp upon it by meditation and by prayer, use your capacities, exercise your faculties, and they will grow, and you will be strong.

III. Lastly, note our Ally in our keeping of our charge.

‘Through the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us.’ Then all is to be done, not in our own strength, but in the strength of the great indwelling Guest and Helper. So, then, there arise two thoughts from this.

The one is that we keep ourselves best when we give ourselves to God to keep us. The Apostle has just been doing that for himself, and he now would exhort Timothy to do the same. Our faith brings this great Ally into the field. If we commit to God what God has committed to us, then, as the patriarch, upon his dangerous and doubtful path, beheld in the heavens above him the camp of the angels hovering over his little camp, so, if we commit the keeping of ourselves and of all our responsibility in connection with God’s work, to Him, we too may be sure that ‘the angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him,’ and that He will keep us. Then there will be a fourth in the furnace like unto the Son of Man, and no fire shall consume anything but the bonds of those who, in the very fire, trust themselves to the strong hands of God. We best keep ourselves when we give ourselves to God to keep.

But another thought here is that God keeps us by enabling us to keep ourselves. ‘Through the Holy Spirit that dwelleth in us’ - so His protection is no mere outward wall of defence around us, nor any change of circumstances which may avert danger, but it is the putting within us of a divine life-principle which shall mould our thoughts, regulate our desires, reinforce our weakness, and be in us a power that shall preserve us from all evil. God fights for us, not in the sense of fighting instead of us, but in the sense of fighting by our sides when we fight. A faith which says, ‘God will take care of me,’ and does not take care of itself, is no faith, but either hypocrisy or self-deceived presumption. Faith will intensify effort instead of leading to shirk it; and the more we trust Him, the more we should ourselves work. We keep ourselves when God keeps us; God keeps us

when we keep ourselves. Both things are true, and therefore our fitting temper is the double one of self-distrusting confidence and of earnest diligence.

Dear brother, we travel on a dangerous road. We never can tell from behind what rock a gun barrel may be levelled at us, or where the highwayman may swoop down upon us to rob us of our treasure. That is no country to travel through carelessly, in loose order, with our gun upon another horse away at the back of the caravan, and we ourselves straying hither and thither gathering flowers, or seeking easy places to walk in; but it is a land in which we must be unslumberlngly vigilant, and screw ourselves up to all effort. And it is a country in which we shall certainly be robbed unless we commit ourselves unto Him who alone is able to keep us from falling.

> *‘Still let me guard the holy fire, And still stir up Thy gift in me.’*

If we say, in life and in death, ‘Father! into Thy hands I commit my spirit,’ then we may be humbly, but not idly confident that the old promise will be fulfilled to us:

‘The Lord will keep thee ever more.’

6) 2 Timothy 2:4

2 Timothy

THE TRUE AIM OF LIFE - PLEASING CHRIST

2Ti. 2:4.

PAUL had enough to do to infuse some of his own vigour into the feebler nature of Timothy. If we may judge from the prevailing tone of the Apostle’s letters to him, his young assistant lacked courage and energy; was easily beaten down, needed tonics for the ‘often infirmities’ of his mind as well as of his body. The delicate ingenuity with which this letter accumulates all conceivable encouragements for the drooping heart that was to take up the old lion-heart’s nearly finished work, is very beautiful. One topic of encouragement is conspicuous by its absence. There is no rosy painting of the Christian life, or of a Christian teacher’s life, as easy or pleasant to flesh and blood. On the contrary, none of Paul’s letters give more emphatic utterance to the fact that suffering is the law of both.

That is wise; for the best way to-brace people for difficult work and hardship is to tell them fairly what they will have to face. It will act as a filter and Gideon’s test, no doubt, but it will only filter out impure matter, and it will evoke latent enthusiasm; for there is always fascination to generous natures or fervent disciples in the thought of danger and toil, undertaken for a beloved cause or favourite pursuit. Boys are made sailors by the stories of wreck and hardship told them to keep them ashore. So Paul encourages’ son Timothy’ by putting before him all the toil and the peril which are the conditions of the work to which he has set his hand. In this context we have a number of illustrations and analogies, according to all of which self-denial and persistent work are indispensable. The wrestler has not only to brace every limb in his struggle till the muscles stand out like whipcord, but he has to abide by the laws of the arena. The farmer has to exercise long patience, and to labour hard in the field and wild weather, before he can sit down and eat of the fruit of the harvest. The soldier has not only to take his life in hand, but to abandon his civil pursuits and make the pleasure of his commander the law of his life. The diligence of other people in their worldly callings may well put us to shame; and if that is not enough, our own diligence in the one half of our life may shame our laziness in the other. All fire there, and all ice here !

Ready for any sacrifice of time and pains in that, grudging every such sacrifice in this!

Our text constitutes the first of that series of illustrative metaphors, each of which adds something of its own to the general idea. In it we have a whole series of striking thoughts suggested, which can be but very imperfectly worked out in the brief space at our disposal.

I. The first thing that strikes one in the words is their grand statement of the all-comprehensive life’s aim of the Christian soldier.

There is savagery and devilry enough about the soldiers’ trade to make it remarkable that it should be so constantly chosen to illustrate the life of the servants of the Prince of Peace. But there are grand qualities brought out in warfare, which need but to be transferred to their most worthy object; and for the sake of these, the metaphor is used here. The one great peculiarity of military discipline is prompt, unquestioning obedience. Wheresoever inferiors may discuss their superiors’ will, or reason on the limits of obedience, or allow themselves a margin of delay, all that is mutiny in the army, and short and sharp work will be made of it, if it appear. ‘Their’s not to reason why,’ but to do what they are bid, when they are bid, as they are bid. Their only standard of duty is their commander’s will, and men have been shot as mutineers for doing grand deeds of heroism contrary to orders. The highest guerdon of courage and faithfulness is the general’s praise, and men have gladly flung away their lives for a smile or a ‘well done’ from some Alexander or Napoleon, counting the gain far greater than the price paid.

Such an attitude towards a fellow-man makes men machines, and yet there is something in that absolute obedience and out-and-out submission to authority very noble in itself, and going a long way to ennoble even warfare. To obey may he bad or good, according to the master and the service; but obedience is fitting for a man, and there can be no attainment of the highest dignity, beauty, or force of character in lawless ‘self-pleasing, but only in willing submission to a law and a lawgiver, discerned by the will to be authoritative, by the conscience to be morally good, and by the heart to be love-worthy. If, then, we can find one ruler, leader, and commander of the people, whose authority is rightfully supreme, whose commands coincide with our highest wisdom and lead to our purest felicity, to obey him must lift a life into dignity. Then we have found the secret which will make little things great, and great things small; which will dignify all life, and make the most absolute service the truest freedom, the kingliest rule.

So our text lays hold of the great central peculiarity of Christian morals, when it makes pleasing Christ to be the great, all-comprehensive aim of the Christian soldier. It is this which makes the law of morality, as re-fashioned by Christianity, altogether new and blessed. How entirely different a thing it is to give a poor, feeble, solitary man a living, loving Lord to serve and to please, and to set him down before a cold, impersonal 'ideal'; and say to him, 'There! live up to that, or it will be the worse for you.' The gospel sets forth Jesus Christ as the Pattern and Law of duty, in whom all the statuesque purity of the marble is changed into the warm, breathing flesh and blood of a brother. It sets Him forth as the power for duty, who stoops down from His height to reach forth a helping hand to us poor strugglers in the bogs at the mountain's foot, while Law but looks on with pure and icy eyes at our flounderings, and counts the splashes on our dress. It sets Him forth as the Motive for duty, who draws us to what is right by 'the cords of love and the bands of a man,' while the world's morality knows only how to appeal either to low motives of whips and pay, or to fine-spun considerations of right and obligation that melt like October's morning ice before the faintest heat of temptation. Finally, it sets Him forth as the Reward of obedience, teaching us that the true recompense of well-doing lies in pleasing Him, and that to win a smile, an 'honourable mention,' from the General, life itself would be wisely paid.

Such are the great characteristics of Christian morality. Everything clusters round a living Person. All the coldness and remoteness and powerlessness which incurably weaken all law, whether it be that of a statute-book, or of conscience, or of moralists, are changed into their very opposites. Christ is duty; Love is law. Christ is power; Christ is impulse. Christ is motive; Christ is reward. Therefore the hearts and wills that found no attraction, nor owned any constraining authority in any tables of stone or any voice of conscience or any systems of ethics, yield glad obedience to Him who makes His law love; and feeble hands are strengthened to do His will by His own power breathed into them; and the hope of recompense is freed from selfishness when its highest object is His word of praise and His look of pleasure? This, and this alone, is the morality that will work. This is the new thing in Christianity, not so much the contents of the conception of duty, though even these have been changed, but the new form in which Duty appears, in a Person who being what all men should be, is the new power for its fulfilment which He brings, and the new motive whose touch moves all our conduct.

How much more powerful this thought of pleasing Christ is, as a motive, than that of a bare Theism, needs scarcely be named. ‘Thou, God, seest me’ grandly restraining and stimulating as it is, may easily become a trembling before ‘the great Taskmaster’s eye,’ or may fade into a very dim thought of a very far-off God. But when we think that the divine eye which rests upon us wept over the sinful city, and sought the denier with the look of sorrowing reproach, untarnished by one glitter of anger, we need not fear His knowledge, nor doubt that He is as near to each of us, as glad at our obedience, and as grieved by our hardness of heart, as ever He was to the little group that lived on His smile long ago. It is no remote God whom we have to please, but our very Brother, the Captain of the Lord’s host, who knows all the conditions of the fight.

The thought implies the reality of Christ’s present knowledge of each of us. Who, then, is this, who is supposed to know so accurately the true characters - not only the actions, but the motives which determine the worth of the actions - of men in every age and country to the world’s end? Who can exercise such an office, and be the centre of such observance, but One only? This must be God manifest in the flesh. Else it is stark nonsense for people, nineteen centuries after His death, to think of pleasing Him; and it is blasphemy worse than nonsense, to set aside all other law and commandments in order to take our duty from His life, and our reward from His approbation. But when we see in Christ the Word made flesh, then it is reasonable to believe that He knoweth the hearts of all men, and reasonable to ‘labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him.’

Such singleness of aim contributes in many ways to make life blessed and noble. It simplifies motives and aims, because, instead of being dragged hither and thither by smaller attractions, and so having our days broken up into fragments, we have one great object which can be pursued through all the variety of our occupations, making them all co-operant to one end - and there is blessedness in that. It lifts us above many temptations, which cease to be temptations to a heart intent on pleasing Christ, as glacial plants and animals fled to the north when cosmic changes put an end to the ice age in England. It delivers from care for men's judgment, for the opinion of the crowd matters very little to the soldier whose fame is to be praised by his commander. It gives energy for work, and turns hard, dry duty into a joy, for it is ever blessed to toil for One we love, and the work that is done with love for its motive, and with the hope of giving Him pleasure for its inspiration, will not be wearisome, though it may be long; nor grievous, though it may be hard. Freedom and dignity, and happiness and buoyancy, all flow from this one transfiguring thought, that the one all-sufficient aim for life is - pleasing Christ, the Captain of the Lord's host.

II. But our text employs a significant form of speech to designate Jesus Christ: 'Him who hath called him to be a soldier'; or as the Revised Version has it, 'enrolled him as a soldier.'

And that phrase is used, I suppose, instead of the simple name, in order to bring out the reference to the great act of Christ's, on which the duty of making His pleasure our sovereign aim rests.

In old-world times when war broke out each chief would summon his clansmen to his standard and enrol them as his force. To raise a troop was the act of the leader, who then took command of the men he had raised, and did so because he had raised them. Christ has enrolled us as His soldiers, and because He has done so, he has the right of command.

Now, while there are many ways by which our Lord summons us to His service, we shall, I think, be true to the usual current of New Testament representations, if we see here mainly a reference to the great act by which He draws us to Himself. The fiery cross used to be the signal which summoned the tribesmen to the fray. So Christ's men are summoned by the Cross. His great work for us, His life of sympathy and sorrow, His death of sacrifice and shame, His resurrection of glory - these are the call which He sends out to all the world, to gather loving souls to His side whom He may honour by using as His servants and soldiers. The Cross is the magnet by which He will 'draw all men unto Him'; or in other words, the one power which will draw men away from a life of self and sin, and hearten them to fight against the evils in themselves and the world which they used to serve, is the fact of Christ's death, believed and rested on. This, and this alone, changes our tastes and makes us deserters from our old colours, to take service under a new Commander. That mighty and unspeakable proof of Love will bend our hearts to obedience when nothing else will, and the voice of endless pity for us, and awful suffering for our sake, which sounds out from Christ on the Cross, is His heart-reaching call to us all to enlist in His service. The message of the Cross is not only a message of forgiveness and blessedness for ourselves, but it is as a trumpet-note of defiance to all the powers of evil, and a call to us to take our part in the fight, which in one aspect was finished when He overcame by death, but in another will last till that far-off future day when He that is called King of kings shall ride forth, followed by all the armies of those who on earth were his soldiers, to fight the last fight, and win the final victory.

He has given Himself wholly for us, therefore He has absolute right of authority over us. Not merely because of His divine nature, not merely because, as we believe, He has been from the beginning the divine agent of all creation and of all providence, but because of His great love and of His utter and bitter sacrifice for us men, does He possess the right to their absolute obedience. His dominion is a dominion founded on suffering; the many crowns are twined round the crown of thorns, as the iron crown of Monza has for foundation a bit of iron said to be a nail of the cross beaten into a circlet, and covered now with gold and jewels. Nothing but entire self-surrender for us can warrant entire authority over us, and only He who tasted death for every man has the right to assume the captainship over men. He gave Himself for us, therefore are we to give ourselves to Him. He dies for us, and then living, turns to us with,' Will you not serve Me?' We owe Him lives, souls - all. They are ours by the purchase of His exceeding bitter pains and death. Surely we shall not refuse His summons to service, which is also a merciful invitation to joy and blessing, but yield ourselves to the attraction of His cross and the magic of His love. Let Him take the command of your lives, and give Him all the secret springs of nature and desire to control. He has called you to be His soldiers, and your plain duty is to please Him. 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God,' and most chiefly by that chiefest mercy, the sacrifice of Christ, ‘that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, acceptable unto God.’

III. Finally, the text brings prominently forward the discipline of abstinence which this warfare requires.

In Paul’s time there were no standing armies, but men were summoned from their ordinary avocations and sent into the field. When the hasty call went forth, the plough was left in the furrow, and the web in the loom; the bridegroom hurried from his bride, and the mourner from the bier. All home industries were paralysed while the manhood of the nation were in the field. That state of things suggests the language here. The word rendered ‘that warreth’ might be more vividly translated, as the Revised Version has it, ‘on service’ - the idea being that as long as a man is on a campaign, he can do nothing else but soldiering. When peace is proclaimed, he may go back to farm or merchandise; but in the field, he has but one thing to do - and that is to fight, He will scarcely win the general’s good word on other things.

What, then, is the corresponding Christian duty? Of course our text, though originally spoken in reference to Christian teachers’ devotion to their work, is not to be confined to them. The sort of work which a Timothy or a Paul may have to do may be peculiar to their offices, but the spirit in which it is to be done, and the conditions of faithfulness, are the same for all doers of all sorts of work for Christ. If the apostle and the teacher need non-entanglement ‘with the affairs of this life,’ all Christians need it just as much.

Now it is to be noticed that the parallel of the soldier on service and the Christian in his warfare fails in this one respect: that the soldier had to abandon entirely all other occupation, even the most needful and praiseworthy, because he could not both do them and fight; but the abandonment of the affairs of this life is not necessary for us, because occupation with them is not incompatible with our Christian warfare. Nay, so far from that, these ‘affairs’ furnish the very fields on which a large part of that warfare to be waged. If these are abandoned, what is left to fight about? What is our Christian warfare but the constant struggle with evil in ourselves and temptation in the world; the constant effort to bring all the activities of our spirits and hands under the power of Christ's law, and to yield our whole selves, in heart, mind, will, and deed, to Him? How then can that warfare be waged, and that ennobling self-surrender achieved, but by the heroic, patient effort to deal with all the affairs of this life in a Christ-like temper, and to Christ-pleasing ends? The Christian who abandons any of these is much liker the frightened deserter who runs from his post, and may expect a stern rebuke, if nothing worse, than the faithful soldier, whose face will one day brighten beneath the smile of his chief.

We must put stress on that word 'entangled,' if we would rightly understand this saying. It is not occupation with the things of life, but entanglement in them, that is fatal to the possibility of pleasing the King. The metaphor is plain enough, and vivid enough. As some poor struggling fish in the meshes of a net vainly beats its silver scales off, and gasps out its life, and swims no more in the free deep; or as some panting forest creature is checked in its joyous bounding, and, tangled in the half-seen snares, only tightens the cords by its wild plunging; or as some strong swimmer is caught in the long, brown seaweed which clings to his limbs till it drags him under and drowns; so men are snared and caught and strangled by these multitudinous cords and filaments of earthly things. The fate of Jonah befall, many a professing Christian, who, if he know what had really come to him, might cry with him, 'The weeds are wrapped about my head.'

We are not bound to abandon the affairs of this life, but we are called upon to prevent their interfering with our warfare. If we are caught in the thicket whilst we are pressing on to the fight, out with the billhooks and hew it down. It may be full of pretty peeps, where there are shade and singing-birds; but if it stands in our way, it has to be grubbed up. 'If thy right eye cause thee to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for thee.'

And that interference can easily be detected, if we honestly wish to do so. Does a certain thing - some legitimate, or even praiseworthy occupation, or possession, the exercise of some taste or accomplishment, some recreation, some companionship-clog my feet when I ought to march; clip my wings when I ought to soar; dim my eyes when I ought to gaze on God? Then no matter what others may do about it, my plain duty is to give it up. It is entangling me. It is interfering with my warfare, and I must cut the cords. I can only do so by entire abstinence. Perhaps I may get stronger some day, and be able to use it as not abusing it; but I cannot venture on that at present. So go it must. I judge nobody else, but whoever may be able to retain that thing, whatever it be, without slackening hold on Christ, I cannot.

So, brethren, if you find that legitimate occupation and affairs are absorbing your interests, and interfering with your clear vision of God, and making you less inclined and less apt to high thoughts and noble purposes, to lowly service and to Christ-like life, your safety lies in at once shaking off the venomous beast that has fastened on you into the fire. Unless the occupation be a plain duty, a post where the Captain has set you as sentry, and which it would be fiat disobedience to forsake, leave it at any cost, if you would kept your Christian integrity.

But if you have to stand to your post, perilous though it be, lift your heart to Him who can neutralise the poison, and who will so pour health into the veins of His servants, that, in the execution of His commands, ‘they shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them.’

The affairs of this life must not entangle us; that is the one indispensable condition to pleasing Him. That they may not, they must always be rigidly subordinated, and used as helps to our higher life. Sometimes, when they cannot be so used, they must be abandoned altogether. Each must settle that for himself. Only let us make it our one great purpose in life that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him; and that single, lofty motive will breathe unity into our life, and giving us clear, sure insight into good and evil, will instruct us, by the instinct of hearts and wills tuned to harmony to His, to shun the evil and cleave strenuously to the good. So living, ever looking to His face to catch His smile as our highest reward, it will not be hard to give up anything that hinders the light of His countenance shining upon us. So surrendering, we may hope to be His obedient, and therefore in highest reality, His victorious soldiers. So fighting, we may possess in our hearts the assurance that His wonderful mercy accepts even our poor service as well-pleasing in His sight, and may lay ourselves How, in peace on the field where we seem to ourselves to have berne ourselves so badly and been so often beaten, with the wondrous hope to keep us company in the grave, that when the triumph comes, and our King goes up as conqueror, we, even we, shall follow, and receive from His lips the praise, and from His face the smile, which make the highest heaven of reward for all Christ's soldiers.

7) 2 Timothy 2:13

2 Timothy

A FAITHFUL GOD

2Ti. 2:13.

I HAVE chosen this text, not as intending to deal with it only, so much as with the great thought to which it gives such emphatic expression. The faithfulness of God is a familiar enough phrase, but I suspect that the depth and scope of the thought are not as familiar as the words. It is employed in Scripture in many ways, and with many different applications of exhortation and encouragement. Like a prism held at right angles to the light, the thought flashes out different tints according as the rays impinge upon it. It is a favourite with Paul He speaks it in his very first letter, and here, in his last, after a lifetime spent in testing God, he comes back to it. He had proved it in a thousand dangers and struggles, and now, when he has all but done with earth, he' sets to his seal that God is true. But all the other New Testament writers employ the expression likewise, and I have thought that it may be profitable to gather together the various aspects and applications of this great truth in Scripture, and so to draw out, if we may, some of .the lofty thoughts and treasures of strength and hope which are shrined in it.

I. Let me ask the question what the faithfulness of God means.

Now when we speak of one another as 'faithful,' we mean that we adhere to our word; that we keep faith with men, that we discharge the obligations of our office or position, and that so we are trustworthy. We mean just the same things when we speak about the faithful God.

I suppose that the first thought that occurs to most of us when God is called faithful is that it means that He keeps His promise. That, of course, is included in the idea, but it is very noteworthy that this, which to most of us is the only meaning of the expression, is rarely its meaning in the New Testament. Out of all the cases in which the phrase occurs it only twice has reference to God's fulfilment of His spoken words; and these two instances both occur in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where we read: 'He is faithful that promised,' and 'She judged Him faithful that promised.' Now it is a great truth that out of the darkness God has spoken; that, like some constitutional monarch, He has declared the principles of His government, and so has bound Himself by articulate expressions to follow out these in His dealings. He is not a despot; He is a King who has laid down the law to which He Himself will adhere. His promises hang out over the troubled stream of life, like boughs from the trees on the bank, for His half-drowned children to grasp at and to hold by.

But great as that thought of our God's fulfilment of His every word is, it does not go half way down to the depths of meaning in the New Testament use of the expression 'the faithful God.' For my text witnesses to a deeper meaning. He cannot deny Himself.' That is Paul's notion of the faithfulness of God; that His nature and character constitute for Him, if I may so say, a solemn obligation; that He is His own law; that He is bound by what He is, and that He never can be, in the smallest degree, anything contradictory to, or falling beneath, the level of His own equable, consistent, and uniform Self. As God, He must be true to the character of goodness and wisdom which the very name of God brings with it. We drop below our best selves; contradictory impulses and thoughts fight in our nature; the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. No man is always himself; God is always Himself. We are like the little brooks that are dried in drought and swelled in spate, are parched in summer and frozen in winter, but this great river is always bank-full, and always clear and always flowing. This ocean is tideless and has no ebb or flood; and you can look down into its deepest depths, and as far as the vision of the eye can go, all is clear and pure, and where vision fails, it is not that the ocean is dark but that the sense is limited. So John says, in his infantile-angelic way, with a simplicity that is sublime, 'God is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all.' The sun has spots; it has, as astronomers tell us, a photosphere, an envelope that gives light, but possibly its core is black and dark. But that is not so with the true Light. ‘God is faithful; He cannot deny Himself.’

Then there is another deep thought in the word which is recurrent in the various applications of the expression throughout the New Testament - that God’s faithfulness implies that He is true, not only to His words, not only to Himself, but also to the trend and drift, so to speak, of His past acts. That thought is applied in the New Testament in two different ways. Peter says to the troubled disciples to whom he was writing, ‘Commit the keeping of your souls to Him in well-doing, as unto a faithful Creator.’ The fact of having made creatures binds God to certain obligations in regard to them, and He will discharge them. The other application of the idea of God’s faithfulness is in reference to His past acts bearing on man’s redemption. We find verses like these: ‘Faithful is He that calleth you’; ‘God is faithful by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son; The thought there is that, by the fact of His redeeming work, God has come under certain obligations to the persons who yield to the invitation that is wrapped up in the message and gifts of Christ and of Christ’s Spirit, and that He will faithfully discharge these.

II. Now, then, carry these three simple thoughts with you - faithful to His word, faithful to Himself, faithful to His past-and let us ask, in the second place, what does this faithfulness guarantee?

What does His faithfulness as Creator guarantee to the creature whom He has made?

It guarantees, first, that the faithful Creator will care for His creature’s well-being. Creation is not merely a work of power, nor merely a necessary process, as some people seem to think. It is the outcome of the love of God, and so the wise psalmist says, ‘To Him that made great lights; for His mercy endureth for ever.’ He came forth, and poured Himself, as it were, into beings because His name is Love, and having thus created, He recognises the obligations under which He has thereby come. The smallest microscopic animal, because it has the mysterious gift of life, has a claim on God; and He is bound - I was going to say to do His utmost, but all that He does is His utmost - to care for that creature’s well-being. The birds lay their eggs, and hatch their young, and then let these go as they will Men sometimes forget the duties of parents and the responsibilities that are involved therein; but God the Creator lets us plead His faithfulness with Him, and turn round to Him and say, ‘Thou hast made me; therefore-I bring in ‘my hand Thine own bill, with Thine own name to it. Pay it, O God!’ ‘Commit the keeping of your souls to Him as to a faithful Creator.’

Especially does this conception of His faithfulness to His past in creation guarantee to us that all desires implanted by Him will be satisfied, and all needs created by Him will be supplied. Our wishes, when they are right, are prophecies of our possessions. God has put no craving in a man’s heart which He does not mean to fill. Remember the homely old proverb: ‘He never sends mouths but He sends meat to fill them.’ And if in thy heart there are longings which thou knowest are not sinful, be sure that these are veiled prophets of a divine gift. All these necessities of ours, all these hungry desires, all these sometimes painful thirsts of the soul that we try to slake at muddy and broken cisterns - all these are meant to take us straight to God. They are like the long indentations of the coast on our western shores, openings by which the flashing waters may run far inland and bathe the roots of the everlasting hills. So when God gives us a desire, He binds Himself to fulfil it. The world is a bewildering and unanswerable riddle and mystery, and human life is one long misery, unless we believe and know that because He is the faithful Creator no man need hunger with a ravening desire after food that is not provided, nor need any man thirst with a thirst that there is no water anywhere to slake.

Again, his great thought of the divine faithfulness as Creator guarantees that our tasks shall be proportioned to our strength. So Paul uses the thought in one tender sentence, when he says ‘God is faithful; who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able.’ Or as the psalmist has it in his sweet words, ‘He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust.’ Nothing above our power will ever be laid upon us. Careless and cruel drivers load their horses beyond their strength, and the patient drudge pulls until it drops. Unwise engineers put too much pressure on their boilers, or try to get too much work out of their engine. But God knows how much pressure the hearts that He makes can stand, and what is the utmost weight of the load that we can lift; and He will not be less merciful and faithful to His creatures than is the merciful man to his Beast. He is the faithful Creator who recognises His obligations to care for the works of His own hands, who will satisfy their desires, and supply the needs that He has made, who will shape their burdens according to the strength of their shoulders.

And if we turn to the other side of the thought, and ask what is guaranteed by God's calling of us in Christ Jesus, then we get three answers.

The first thing that is guaranteed is forgiveness. The Apostle John, in words that are often misunderstood, grasps the thought of God's faithfulness in this application when he says, 'He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' Since Christ has come, and has died in order that men might be pardoned and cleansed, God's faithfulness is implicated in God's pardoning mercy; and He would neither be faithful to His promises, nor to His past act in Christ's mission, nor to the invitation and call that He has sounded in our ears, unless, when we obeyed that call, we entered into the full possession of His pardoning grace. So the gentle, tender attribute of Mercy becomes solemn, and stately, and eternal, when it is regarded as the outcome of His faithfulness. In some tropical forests yon will find strong tree-trunks out of which spring the most radiant and ethereal-looking blossoms. So the fair flower of forgiving mercy springs from the steadfast bole of the divine faithfulness. He is 'Just, and the Justifier of him that believeth in Jesus'

Again, God's faithfulness guarantees the progressive perfecting of Christian character. That is the application of the thought which is most frequent in Paul's letters. We find it, for instance, in the passage Where the prayer that the saints in Thessalonica might be 'preserved, body, soul, and spirit, blameless unto the coming of the Lord Jesus,' is, by the Apostle, based on the words 'faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it.' And a similar collocation of ideas is found in other passages, which I need not quote to you now. The progressive perfecting of the Christian life is guaranteed by the thought of the faithfulness of God. He does not begin a work and then get disgusted with it, or turn to something else, or find that His resources will not avail to work it out to completion-That is how we do. He never stops till He ends. As the prophet says about another matter, 'His hands have laid the foundation of the house; His hands shall also finish it. '

I remember a place on our coasts where some man,. who had not calculated his resources, nor the strength of the ocean, began to build a breakwater' and sea-walls, and to-day the blocks of dislodged concrete are lying in wild confusion on the beach, and the victorious waves break over them at every tide, and laugh at the abortive design. None that look on God's work will ever have the right to say, 'This man began to build, and was not able to finish.' There are no half-completed failures in God's workshop. Only you have to keep yourself under His influences. It is useless to talk about the 'final perseverance of the saints, ' unless you remember that only they who continuously yield themselves to God are continuously the subjects of His cleansing and hallowing grace, If they do, the progressive perfecting of those upon whom He has begun to work is sure. Like some patient artist, He lays touch upon touch on the canvas, or smites piece after piece off the marble, till the ideal is realised, and stands there before Him. Like some patient seamstress, He works needleful after needleful of varying colours of silk on the tapestry, until the whole pattern is accomplished. 'He is faithful; He also will do it.'

But again, that conception of the divine faithfulness guarantees ultimate blessedness. That thought is always taken in connection with the preceding one, in the various passages to which reference has just been made. Paul says in another place, basing his assurance on the same thought of the divine faithfulness; 'He will confirm you unto the day of the Lord Jesus.' And so we have to think that just because God is faithful, therefore the Christian life here on earth, because it is so much and because it is so little, because of its devotion and because of its selfishness, bears in itself the prophecy of a time when all that is here checked tendency shall become triumphant realisation; and when the plant that here was an exotic, and did put forth buds, though poor and pale compared with what it would give in its natural soil, shall be transplanted into the higher house, and there shall blossom for evermore. God is a liar unless heaven is to complete the experiences of earth. If these poor natures of ours at their best here were all that Christ had won by the travail of His soul, do you think He would be satisfied? Certainly not. We need heaven to vindicate the faithfulness of God.

III. And now one word is all that I can spare on what I meant to make the last point of my sermon, and that is, what attitude in us corresponds to the faithfulness of God?

I need only quote one of the expressions in the Epistle to the Hebrews to give the answer, 'Hold fast the profession of your faith without wavering, for He is faithful that promised.' Our faith corresponds with and is the answer to God's faithfulness. As with two instruments tuned to the same pitch, when a note is struck on the one, the chords of the other vibrate it back again, so God's faithfulness should awake the music of answering faith in our responsive and vibrating hearts. If He is worth trusting let us trust Him.

But, further, unwavering faith is the only thing that truly corresponds to unchanging faithfulness. Build rock upon rock, and since He is faithful, do not answer his steadfast faithfulness with a tremulous and vacillating confidence. What would you think of a man that had given to him some magnificent site on which to rear a fortress; some impregnable crag which he might crown with a sure defence; if, on the top of it, instead of rearing granite walls that might match their foundation, he should run up some hasty shelter of lath and plaster, or of fluttering canvas, and so think that he had adorned, when he had insulted the rock on which he built. Make your faith to match God's faithfulness, and 'commit the keeping of your souls to Him in welldoing, as unto a faithful Creator, leaving all things in His hands, and trusting them absolutely unto Him.

Imitate the faithfulness in such fashion as you may. Paul in one place says, 'As God is faithful, our word to you was not yea and nay.' It does not become a man who is trusting to the faithful God to be shifty and unreliable in his own utterances and manifeststions to men.

Let us turn away from the illusions of vain hope, from all doubtful refuges, from all the fleeting defences and treasures that earth can give. Why should we build upon a sandbank when we can build on the Rock of Ages? Why should we trust mere wealth, creatural love, success, to do for us what only the faithful God can do? All these deceive or betray or fail or pass. They are unworthy of trust. 'God is faithful'; Christ is 'the faithful and true witness.'

‘This is the faithful saying... that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.’ If we will join ourselves to the faithful God and accept the faithful saying of His faithful witness, our hearts will be calm, our lives will be steadied, we shall be delivered from the misery of leaning on props which, like rotten branches, break beneath our weight. On earth we shall attain growing completeness, and shall pass thence to that per-letting in the day of the Lord Jesus which the faithful God, by His words, by His great redeeming act, and by His present workings on us, has bound Himself to give us. There we may hope to hear the wondrous welcome, which points to our assimilation to Him in whom we trust: ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’

8) 2 Timothy 2:19

2 Timothy

THE FOUNDATION AND THE SEAL

2Ti. 2:19

THERE was a great deal in the Apostle Paul’s last days to excuse despondency and sadness. For himself he was poor, and a prisoner, lonely and old, looking forward to the near approach of a bloody death. For the gospel and the Church the outlook was black too. Evil had already begun to lift its head, and was threatening to increase. So this, his last letter, is full of gloomy vaticinations, but in it there is none of the pessimism that belongs to old people, none of the despondency which so often seizes upon leaders of thought and action when they come to the end of their lives, and see how little they have done, and how threateningly the clouds are gathering. But throughout, side by side with the clearest perception of evil symptoms and growing dangers, there is unconquerable confidence.

This text is a remarkable illustration of that. He has just been speaking about errors that are threatening to flood the Church, and he speaks with very grave and vehement words. And then all at once with this ‘nevertheless’ he, as it were, swings right round, and his whole soul leaps up in the glad confidence that, whatever may happen, and whatever has to be abandoned, and whoever may go away, ‘the foundation of God stands sure.’ So he heartens up his young brother Timothy, who seems to have been of a great deal softer stuff than the old man, and bids him be of good cheer and quit himself like a man.

The words of my text, then, seem to me to be very precious to us in regard to the widest interests of Christianity, and in regard to our own individual standing, especially in times like those in which our lot is east; times of transition, when a great deal is going that past generations used to think sacred, and a great many timid people are trembling for the Ark of God; and a great many old people like me are thinking that the old gospel is in danger of passing away from the face of the earth. ‘Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure.’ So let me just say a word or two about this text.

I. Look at this joyous confidence of the old man, side by side with the clearest perceptions of encircling dangers.

The ‘foundation,’ in the New Testament, is generally Jesus Christ Himself. Here the metaphor is used in a somewhat different fashion. The ‘foundation’ in the present case is not a part of a building, but the whole building, conceived of as being founded by God. ‘The foundation of God’ is, in other words, that which is founded by God - that is to say, the whole house, whatever that may be, which he himself has ‘established on the tops of the mountains.’ And you will find that that explanation is borne out by the fact that in the very next verse the Apostle speaks about ‘the house,’ which he also meant when he spoke of the foundation of God. Of course that ‘house’ is, in one aspect, the Church, but the Church not as a mere institution or external organisation, but as being the witness to the gospel It is that, and the Christ who is the gospel, which stands firm, whatever may happen. There is a great deal of idolatry of the Church. What makes it precious, and what makes it eternal, is the message that is committed to its charge.

Now it seems to me to be of very prime importance that this joyous confidence, calm and assured, should be the habitual temper of us all. The more distinctly and clearly we apprehend, and the more painfully we feel the perils, the imperfections, and the threatening errors of the present, the more should we take our stand upon this one truth, that what God has founded is indestructible, and, standing there, we may look all round the three hundred and sixty degrees of the horizon, and no matter what formidable dangers may arise, and hurry across, darkening the sea like the thunder-clouds in the heavens, we may be sure that no tempest can break which will damage the ship that carries Christ and His fortunes. Man may go, 'nevertheless'; errors may arise, 'nevertheless'; Churches, individuals, may become unfaithful, 'nevertheless'; candlesticks may be removed, lights quenched, communities may be honeycombed by worldliness, if the salt may lose its savour, 'nevertheless that which is founded by God stands sure.' The history of the past tells us that. Why, it is the miracle of miracles that Christian people having been what they have been, and being what they are, the Church of God has not been annihilated long, long ago. Why is it? Only because that which it bears and He who is in it are indestructible, and whilst the envelope may be changed, the central Truth and the living Person who is in the Church, in spite of all its corruptions and infirmities, cannot die, nor be suppressed nor removed.

So, brethren, standing firmly as we may upon this rock of a Church indestructible, because of the immortal Christ who is in it and the eternal gospel which is committed to it, it does not become us to have our hearts in our mouths at every change that may be passing, and that must necessarily pass, upon the external organisation, which is subject, like other institutions, to time and change. What can go, let it go. It is the dead leaves that are blown off the trees. Men make breakwaters with endless pains, and deposit great blocks of concrete that they think will fling back the wildest waves in vain spray, and a winter storm comes, and one wave puts out its tongue and licks up the whole structure, and it is a mass of ruins. Yes; and the same storm that smashed the breakwater runs up harmlessly on the humble sand which God has made to be His breakwater, and which has the power to say to the wildest tempest: 'Here shall thy proud waves be stayed.' Much may go, 'nevertheless the foundation of God stands sure.' So do not be frightened out of your wits - that is to say, out of your confidence - by 'higher criticism' and 'advanced views, ' and right-hand defections and left-hand corruptions, and the failures of communities that call themselves churches to live up to the height of their responsibilities, or at the approach of new ways of looking at old truths. And do not fancy that because the cart that carries the ark jogs, and the oxen stumble, there is any harm coming to the ark. 'The foundation of God standeth sure.' So let us welcome change of all that is human in the doctrine, and polity, and practice of God's Church, and never mind what becomes of men-made creeds, and men-made ceremonies, and men-made churches. What is of God will stand. Let us be glad when 'the things that can be shaken' are 'removed,' that 'the things which cannot be shaken' may stand all the more firmly.

II. Notice here the divine side of the guarantee of this confidence.

'The firm foundation of God stands'; and then the Apostle goes on, in a very picturesque fashion, 'having this seal.' That is a mixture of metaphors which makes a rhetorician's hair stand on end. Paul does not mind about mingling metaphors. You cannot very well seal a foundation, but the idea in his mind is that of the confirmation, the guarantee, the pledge of the confidence that he has just been expressing. He goes on to expand the metaphor. The seal has two inscriptions on it, like the obverse and reverse of a coin, or like two sentences which might be written on the two lintels of a door. The one gives the divine and the other the human sides of the guarantee.

As for the former, the divine, it is, 'The Lord knoweth them that are His.' 'The Lord' here is, I take it, Christ. And what is the guarantee that is contained in these words? If you seek for the explanation of that phrase in its deepest, most blessed, most courage-giving sense, listen to diviner words than Paul's. 'I know My sheep, and am known of Mine, as the Father knoweth Me, and I know the Father.' That knowledge is not the mere divine attribute of omniscience, which may have in it consolation, or may not, but it is something far more tender, close, gracious, and strength-giving than the bare thought of an all-seeing eye. The 'knowledge' which Jesus has of His sheep is a knowledge based upon, and perfected in, closest love and tenderest sympathy, and of which that ineffable communion from the depths of eternity, in which the Father knoweth the Son, and the Son knoweth the Father, and the two knowledges intertwine and interflow into one sacred, and, to us, inconceivable bond, is the example. Thus close, though we cannot say so close; thus tender, though we cannot say so tender; thus loving, though we cannot say so loving, is the bond of that knowledge which unites Jesus Christ to every soul that belongs to Him. And with that guarantee of a knowledge which means the closest union that is possible, the individuality of the two united persons being preserved, surely there comes, floated, as it were, like some precious treasure in a cedar ark upon the surface of that ocean of divine knowledge, the assurance that such a knowledge will guard against all evil and all danger its peaceful and happy objects. If the Lord thus 'knows them that are His,' the knowledge will be a wall of fire round about them, as well as a glory in the midst of them.

That knowledge means, then, protection and care. He will not lose what belongs to Him. He is not such a careless Owner as that a sheep may stray out of the fold and the Shepherd never notice it. He is not such a careless Householder as that from His purse there may drop, and into some dusty corner may roll away, a coin, and He not know that He has lost one of the pieces. He is not such a heartless Brother as that the younger brother may go away into the far-off land and there be starving, and the Brother's heart at home have no pangs and no sense of separation. But He 'knows them that are His,' and, knowing them, He holds them with the grip of tenacious possession as well as of tender love.

So there is the deep, the sure, the divine guarantee that the foundation standeth firm. So, brethren, it is wise for us to look at the dangers, to be fully aware of the perils, to be tremblingly conscious of our own weakness, but it is folly and faithlessness to look at the danger so exclusively, or to feel our own weakness so keenly as that either one or the other, or both of them combined, shall obscure to our sight the far greater and confidence-giving truth of the knowledge, the sympathy, and the extended protecting hand, of our Brother and our Lord. We belong to Him if we have yielded our hearts to Him, and He will not 'suffer His Holy One to see corruption,' here or hereafter. If you look down from the narrow ledge of the Alpine arrete to the thousand feet of precipice on either side of the two or three inches where you have your footing you will get giddy and fall. If you look up you will walk steadily. Do not ignore the danger, nor pro-sumptuously forget your own weakness, but remember 'when I said my foot slippeth Thy mercy held me up.' Recognise the slippery ice and the feeble foot, and couple with them the other thought, 'The Lord knoweth them that are His. '

III. Now, lastly, here we have the human side of the guarantee.

The reverse of the coin, the other side of the foundation bears, deep-cut, this inscription: ‘Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity,’ and the two inscriptions are always to be held together. Look how they fit one another. The one is a promise; the other is a commandment. The one says a deep thing about God; the other says a plain thing about us. It is of no use going up into the heights of ‘the Lord knoweth them that are His,’ unless you also come down to the simple teaching,’ Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. The Jews believed the first of these two inscriptions, and it was all their religion; look what wild work it made of them and their morality, and their whole nation. There have been plenty of Christian people who have been so absorbed in the contemplation of ‘unconditional election,’ ‘eternal predestination,’ ‘final perseverance,’ and all the rest of the theological formularies that have been spun out of these words, that they have forgotten the other side altogether. And so there has been licence, and a presumptuous building upon a supposed past; there has been a contempt for the ‘outsiders,’ and the driving of a coach and six through the plainest teachings of common righteousness and morality. And the only way to keep ‘the Lord knoweth them that are His’ from being a minister of sin is, in the same breath, to say, ‘Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.’

To name the Name of Christ is the same as to say that you are His. And if you are, the best proof that you do belong to Jesus Christ is your living the life of plain, practical righteousness, and putting away from yourself everything that is evil. People talk about looking into themselves for evidences of their being ‘saved,’ as they say. I would rather take your neighbour’s opinion as to whether you are saved or not than yours; and you will be far more likely to come to the possession of calm assurance that you do belong to Jesus Christ, if your assurance is based upon this, ‘I am living as He would have me to do.’ That is the infallible sign that you are His. That homely, pedestrian righteousness, down amongst the commonplaces of daily life, and the little things of it, that, and not emotions, however soaring; not aspirations, however ardent; not the consciousness of communion apart, however deep and sweet, is the sign that we are Christ’s. However necessary all these things are, still they are necessary mainly as means to an end, and the end of all the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and of all these joys and experiences of the individual Christian soul, is to make us live righteously, soberly, godly, in this present world. And the more we do thus live, the more we shall get, not only the consciousness of belonging to Jesus Christ, but the help by which we shall be able to stand.

So, dear brethren, my one last word to you is, hold these two things ever together in your minds and thoughts. ‘What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.’ You have a right to be confident, because, far deeper than, and prior to, anything that you do, there are the knowledge, the love, the sympathy, and the outstretched hand of the loving and upholding Saviour. But you have only the right to the confidence based upon his knowledge of you, if that confidence is working in you a departing from iniquity. If you know that you are trying, in your poor way, to do that, and that you are trying to do it for His sake, and because you think that you are His, then, whatever may happen to others, whatever may befall some of the outworks of your faith or belief, whatever changes may impend, you may be sure of this, that ‘the foundation of God standeth sure,’ and that, weak as we are, building upon Him who is the foundation, we shall be able to resist all the assaults of evil

Only remember, that Christ Himself has told us that many would come to Him and say, ‘Lord! Lord! have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name done many wonderful works?’ And He will say unto them,

> ‘*Depart from Me, I never knew you,’ and the proof that He never did is that He has to address them as ‘Ye that work iniquity’*

9) 2 Timothy 2:20-21

2 Timothy

THE GREAT HOUSE AND ITS VESSELS

2Ti. 2:20-21

OUR text begins with a ‘but.’ It, therefore, suggests something which may seem to contradict or to modify what has gone before. The Apostle has been speaking about what he calls the ‘foundation of God,’ or the building founded by God, whereby he means the Church. He has been expressing triumphant confidence that, as thus founded, it is indestructible, whatever dangers may threaten or defections may weaken it. But the very contemplation of that grand ideal suggests darker thoughts. He carries on his metaphor, for the ‘great house’ is suggested by ‘the foundation of God,’ and yet the two things do not refer to precisely the same object. The building founded by God which stands fast, whatever happens, is what we call in our abstract way, the ‘invisible Church,’ the ideal community or aggregate of all who are truly joined to Jesus Christ. The great house is what we call the visible Church, the organisation, institution, or institutions comprising those who profess to be thus joined. The one is indestructible, as founded by God; the other is not, being made by men, and composed of heterogeneous elements.

This heterogeneousness of its elements is suggested by the further metaphor, of the vessels of different materials, value, and use. The members of the Church are the various vessels. When we come down from the heights of ideal contemplation to face the reality of the Church as an organisation in the world, we are confronted with this grave fact, that its members are some of them ‘gold and silver,’ some of them ‘wood’ and ‘earth.’ And that fact modifies the triumphant confidence already uttered, and imposes upon us all very plain duties. So I wish to look now at the three things that are suggested to me here. First, a grave fact as to the actual condition of the Church as an organised institution; second, an inspiring possibility open to us all; and, lastly, a plain direction as to the way by which the possibility may become a reality.

I. Then we have here a grave fact as to the actual condition of the Church as an organised institution.

‘In a great house there are vessels of gold and silver.’ There they stand, ranged on some bufet, precious and sparkling, and taken care of; and away down in kitchens or sculleries there are vessels of wood, or of cheap common crockery and pottery. Now, says Paul, that is like the Church as we have to see it in the world. What is the principle of the distinction here? At first sight one might suppose that it refers to the obvious inequality of intellectual and spiritual and other gifts or graces bestowed upon men; that the gold and silver are the more brilliantly endowed in the Christian community, and the wood and the earth are humbler members who have less conspicuous and less useful service to perform. But that is not so. The Bible never recognises that distinction which the world makes so much of, between the largely and slenderly endowed, between the men who do what are supposed to be great things, and those who have to be content with humbler service. Its principle is, ‘small service is true service whilst it lasts,’ and although there are-diversities of operation, the man who has the largest share of gifts stands, in Heaven’s estimate, no whit above the man who has the smallest. All are on the one level; in God’s great army the praise and the honours do not get monopolised by the general officers, but they come down to the privates just as abundantly, if they are equally faithful.

And then another consideration which shows us that it will not do to take gold and silver on the one hand, and wood and earth on the other, as marking the cleavage between the largely and the slenderly endowed members of the Church, is the fact that the way to get out of the one class and into the other, as we shall have to see presently, is by moral purity and not by the increase of intellectual or other endowments. The man that cleanses himself comes out of the category of ‘wood’ and ‘earth,’ and passes into that of ‘gold and silver.’ Thus the basis of the distinction, the ground of classification, lies altogether in goodness or badness, purity or impurity, worthiness or unworthiness. They who are in the highest degree pure are the ‘gold and silver.’ They who are less so, or not at all so, are the ‘wooden’ and the ‘earthen’ vessels. The same line of demarcation is suggested in another passage which employs several of the same phrases and ideas that are found in my text. We read in it about the foundation which is laid, and about the teachers building upon it various elements. Now these elements, on the one hand ‘gold, silver, and precious stones,’ and on the other hand ‘wool, hay, and stubble,’ may be the doctrines that these teachers proclaimed, or perhaps they may be the converts that they brought in. But in any case notice the parallelism, not only in regard to the foundation, but in regard to the distinction of the component parts of the structure - ‘gold and silver,’ as here, and the less valuable list headed, as here, by ‘wood; and then, by reason of the divergence of the metaphor, ‘hay and stubble,’ in the one ease, and ‘earthenware’ in the other. But the suggestion of both passages is that the Church, the visible institution, has in it, and will always have in it, those who, by their purity and consistency of Christian life, answer to the designation of the gold and the silver, and those who, by their lack of that, fail into the other class, of wooden and earthen vessels.

Of course it must be so. ‘What act is all its thought had been?’ Every ideal, when it becomes embodied in an institution, becomes degraded; just as, when you expose quicksilver to the air, a non-transparent film and scum creeps across the surface. The ‘drag-net’ in one of Christ’s parables suggests the same ides, There are no meshes that ever man’s knitting-needle has formed that are fine enough to keep out the bad, as the Church necessarily includes both sets of people.

I do not need to dwell upon the question as to whether in these least worthy members of that community are included people that have some faint flickering light of God in their hearts, real though very imperfect Christians, or whether it means only those who are nominally, and not at all really, joined to the Lord. The parting lines between these two classes are very evanescent and very slight; and it is scarcely worth while calling them two classes at all. But only let me remind you that this recognition of the necessary intermingling of unworthy and worthy professors in every Christian Church is no reason for us Nonconformists departing from our fundamental principle that we should try to keep Christ’s Church clear, as far as may be, of the intrusion of unworthy members. The Apostle is not speaking about the conditions that ought to be imposed as precedent to connection with the visible Church, but he is speaking about the evil, whatever the conditions may be, that is sure to attach to it. It attaches to this community of ours here, which, in accordance with New Testament usage, we have no hesitation in calling a Church. We try to keep our communion pure; we do not succeed; we never shall succeed. That is no reason why we should give up trying. But in this little house there are ‘vessels of gold and silver,' and 'vessels of wood and earth, and-some to honour and some to dishonour.'

But whilst this necessity is no reason for indiscriminate admission of all manner of people into the Christian Church, it is a reason for you that are in it not to make so much as some of you do of the fact that you are in, and not to trust, as some of you do, to the mere nominal, external connection with the 'great house.' You may be in it, but you may be down in the back premises, and one of the vessels that have no honourable use. Lay that to heart, dear friends. It is not for me to apply general principles to individual cases, but I may venture to say that, like every true pastor of a Christian community, I cannot help seeing that there are names of people on Our rolls who have a name to live and are dead.

II. Now, secondly, here we have an inspiring possibility open to us all.

On certain conditions any man may be 'a vessel unto honour,' by which, of course, is meant that the vessel - that is to say, the man - gets honour.

And how does he get it? By service. If you will look at the passage carefully, you will see that after this general designation of 'a vessel unto honour,' there follow three characteristics of the vessel, which taken together make its honour. I shall speak about them in detail presently, but in the meantime let me point out how here there is embodied the great principle of the New Testament that the true honour is service. 'It shall not be so among you; he that is chief amongst you let him be your servant.' Just as Jesus Christ, 'knowing that He came from God and went to God, and that the Father had given all things into His hand, laid aside His garments, and took a towel, and girded Himself, and washed the disciples' feet,' so we, if we desire honour and prominence, must find it in service; and if we have by God's gift, and the concurrence of circumstances, possessions or resources of mind, body, or estate, which make us prominent and above our brethren, we are thereby the more bound to utilise all that we have, and all that we are, for His service. If a man is ambitious let him remember this that service is honour, use is dignity, and there are none other.

But now turn for a moment to these three characteristics which are here set forth as constituting the honour of the vessels of gold and silver. The first is ‘sanctified,’ or as it might perhaps better be expressed, consecrated. For, as I suppose many of us know, the foot, idea of sanctification or holiness is not the moral purity which goes along with the expression in our thoughts, but that which is the root of all evangelical purity - via, the yielding of ourselves to God. Consecration is the beginning of purity, and consecration is honour. No man stands higher, in the true Legion of Honour of the Heavens, than he who bears on his breast and in his heart, not a knot of ribbon, but the imprint of a bloody Cross, and for the sake of that yields himself, body, soul, and spirit to God’s service. The vessels that are devoted are the sacrificial vessels of the Temple, which are sacred beyond the golden cups of household use, and yet the commonest domestic utensils may become honourable by virtue of their being thus consecrated. So one of the old prophets. using the same metaphor as my text, with a slightly different application, says that in the day when the Kingdom of God assumes its perfect form upon earth, every pot in Jerusalem shall be as the bowls of the altar, and on the very horse-bells shall be written, ‘Consecrated to the Lord.’ The vessel unto honour must be sanctified.

Then again, ‘meet for the master’s use.’ On the great buffet in the banqueting hall, the cup in the centre, that belongs to the householder, and is lifted to his glowing lips, is the most honourable of all. Every Christian man amongst us may be used by the Christ, and may - more wonderful still! - be useful to Christ. That is condescension, is it not? You remember how, when He would, in modest prophetic pomp, once for all assert in public His claim to be the King of Israel, He sent two of His servants ‘into the village over against’ them with this message, ‘The Lord hath need of him,’ the humble ass. Jesus Christ needs you to carry out His purposes, to be His representatives and the executors of His will, His viceroys and servants in this world. And there is no honour higher than that I, for all my imperfections and limitations, with all my waywardness and slothfulness, should yet be taken by Him, and made use of by Him. Brother l have you any ambition to be used by Jesus, and to be useful to Jesus? And are you of any use to Him? Have you ever been? The questions are for our own hearts, in the privacy of communion with God. I leave them with you.

‘Ready for every good work.’ The habit of service will grow. A man that is consecrated, and being used by Jesus Christ, will become more and more useful all round. It ought to be our ambition to be men-of-all-work to our Lord. There is great danger of our all yielding to natural limitations, as we suppose them, and confining ourselves to what we take to be our role. It is all right that that should be the prominent part of our ministry in the world. But let us beware of the limitations and the onesidedness that attaches to us, and be ready for the distasteful work, for the uncongenial work, for the work to which our natural fastidiousness and temperaments do not call us. Let us, as I say, try to be many-sided, and to stand with our loins girt and our lamps burning, and our wills held well down, and say ‘ Lord! what wouldst Thou have me to do? Here am I; send me.’

III. Now a word about the last point that is here, and that is the plain direction as to the way in which this possibility may become a reality for us all.

‘If a man purge himself from these.’ These; whom? The’ vessels to dishonour.’ Get out of that class. And how? By purifying yourselves. So, then, there is no necessity of any sort which determines the class to which we belong except our own earnestness and effort. You remember our Lord’s other parable of the four sowings in four different soils. Was there any unconquerable necessity which compelled the wayside soil to be hard and beaten, or the rocky one to be impermeable, or the thorny one to be productive only of thorns and briars? Could they not all have become good soil? And why did they not? Because the men that they represented did not care to become so. And in like manner there is no reason why the earthen pot should not become gold, or the wooden one silver, or the silver one gold - ay! or the gold silver, or the silver wood, or the wood earth. Paul was an earthen vessel, and he became ‘a chosen vessel’ of gold. Judas was a vessel of silver, and he became s vessel of earth, and was dashed in pieces like a potter’s vessel. So you can settle your place. How do you settle it? By purity. Character makes us serviceable. Christ’s kingdom is more helped, His purposes advanced, His will furthered, by holy lives than by shining gifts. And whether you can do much for Him by the latter or no, you can do more for Him by far by means of the former. And you can all have that if you will.

Only notice that purity which makes serviceable, and therefore honourable, and is capable of degrees as between silver and gold, is to be won by our own efforts. ‘If a man therefore shall purify himself.’ I know, of course, that whoever has honestly set himself, for Christ’s sake, to the task of purifying himself, very soon finds out that he, with his ten thousand, cannot beat the king that comes against him with twenty thousand; and if he is a wise man he sends an embassage, not to the enemy, but to the Emperor, and says, ‘Come Thou and help me.’ If we try to purify ourselves, we are necessarily thrown back upon God’s help to do it. But there must be the personal effort, and that effort must go mainly, I think, in the direction of effort to grasp and hold by faith and obedience the Divine Life which come into us and purifies us; and in the other direction of effort to apply to every part of our character and conduct the divine help which we bring to our aid by our humble faith.

So, brethren, we can, if we will, purify ourselves, and we shall do it most surely when we fall back upon him, and say, ‘Give me the power - that I may perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord.’

Some of us are vessels in another house. But Christ has bound the strong man and spoiled his goods, and taken from him all the armour in which he trusted, and the vessels which he used. And if we will only take Christ’s liberation, and cast ourselves on His grace and power, then we shall be lifted from the dark and doleful house of the strong man, and set in the great house of the great Lord. Yield not your members as instruments of unrighteousness, but yield yourselves unto God, and your members as instruments of righteousness to Him.

10)2 Timothy 3:5

2 Timothy

FORM AND POWER

2Ti. 3:5

IN this, his last letter and legacy, the Apostle Paul is much occupied with the anticipation of coming evils. It is most natural that the faithful watchman, knowing that the hour of relieving guard was very near at hand, should eagerly scan the horizon in quest of the enemies that might approach when he was no longer there to deal with them. Old men are apt to take a gloomy view of coming days, but the frequent references to the corruptions of the Church which occur in this letter are a great deal more than an old man's pessimism. They were warnings, which were amply vindicated by the history of the post-apostolic age of the Church, which was the seed-bed of all manner of corruptions, and they point to permanent dangers, the warning against which is as needful for us as for any period.

The Apostle draws here a very dark picture of the corrupt forms of Christianity, the advent of which he tremblingly anticipated. I do not mean to enter at all upon the dark catalogue of the vices which he enumerates, except to point out that its beginning and the middle and the end are very significant. It begins with 'lovers of self' - that is the root of all forms of sin. In the centre there stands 'lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God'; and at the end, summing up the whole, are the words of our text, 'having the form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.'

I do not suppose that these words need much explanation. 'Godliness,' in the New Testament, means not only the disposition which we call piety, but the conduct which flows from it, and which we may call practical religion. The form or outward appearance of that we all understand. But what is the 'denying the power thereof?' It does not consist in words, but in deeds. In these latter epistles we find 'denying' frequently used as equivalent to abjuring, renouncing, casting off. For instance, in a passage singularly and antithetically parallel to that of my text, we read 'denying ungodliness and worldly lusts,' which simply means throwing off their dominion. And in like manner the denial here is no verbal rejection of the principles of the gospel, which would be inconsistent with the notion of still retaining the form of godliness; but it is the practical renunciation of the power, which is inherent in all true godliness, of moulding the life and character - the practical renunciation of that even whilst preserving a superficial, unreal appearance of being subject to it.

This, then, being the explanation, and the rough out. line of the state of things which the Apostle contemplates as hurrying onwards to corrupt the Church after his departure, let us look at some of the thoughts connected with it.

I. Observe the sad frequency of such a condition.

Wherever any great cause or principle is first launched into the world, it evokes earnest enthusiasm, and brings men to heroisms of consecration and service. And so when Christianity was first launched, there was less likelihood of its attracting to itself men who were not in earnest, and who were mere formalists. But even in the Apostolic Church there were an Ananias and a Sapphira, a Simon Magus, and a Demas. As years go on, and primitive enthusiasms die out, and the cause which was once all freshly radiant and manifestly heaven-born becomes an earthly institution, there is a growing tendency to gather round it superficial, half-and-half adherents. What. soever is respectable, and whatsoever is venerable, and whatsoever is customary will be sure to have attached to it a mass of loose and nominal adherents; and the gospel has had its full share of such. I was talking not very long ago to a leading man belonging to another denomination than my own; and he quietly, as a matter of course said, ‘Our communicants are so many hundred thousands. I reckon that a quarter of them, or thereabouts, are truly spiritual men!’ and he seemed to think that nobody Would question the correctness of the calculation and the proportion. Why, ‘Christendom’ is largely a mass of pagans masquerading as Christians.

And every church has its full share of such people; loose adherents, clogs upon all movement, who bring down the average of warmth like the great icebergs that float in the Atlantic and lower the temperature of the summer all over Europe. They make consecration ‘eccentric’; they make consistent, out-and-out Christian living ‘odd,’ ‘unlike the ordinary thing,’ and they pull down the spirituality of the Church almost to the level of the world. Every communion of so-called Christian men has its full share of these. The same thing applies to us, and every Church of God on the face of the earth has a little core of earnest Christians, who live the life, and a great envelope and surrounding of men who, as my text says, have the form of godliness, and practically deny the power thereof. Widespread, and all but universal, this condition of things is. And so let each of us say, 'Lord! Is it I?'

II. Think, next, of the underground working of this evil

These people about whom Paul is speaking in my text were, I suppose, mostly, though by no means exclusively, conscious pretenders to what they did not possess. But the number of hypocrites, in the full sense of the word, is amazingly small, and the men whom you would brand as most distinctly so, if you came to talk to them, would amaze you to find how entirely ignorant they were of the fact that they were dramatising and pretending to piety, and that there was next to no reality of it in them. A very little bit of gold, beaten out very thin, will cover over, with a semblance of value, an enormous area. And men beat out the little modicum of sincerity that they have so very thin that it covers, and gives a deceptive appearance of brilliancy and solidity to an enormous amount of windy flatulence and mere pretence. Hypocrites, in the rude, vulgar sense of the word, are, I was going to say, as rare as, but I will say a great deal rarer than, thoroughgoing and intensely earnest and sincere Christians. These men, the precursors of Gnostic heresies and a hundred others, had no notion that their picture was like this, and if they had been shown Paul's grim catalogue they would have said, 'Oh! a gross caricature, and not the least like me.' And that is what a great many other men do as well.

But it is an unconscious hypocrisy, an unconscious sliding away from the basis of reality on to the slippery basis of pretence and appearance that I want to say a word or two about. The worse a man is, the less he knows it. The more completely a professing Christian has lost his hold of the substance and is clinging only to the form, the less does he suspect that this indictment has any application to him. The very sign and symptom of spiritual degeneracy and corruption is unconsciousness, as the great champion of Israel, when his locks were cropped in Delilah's lap, went out to exercise his mighty limbs as at other times, and knew not, till he vainly tried feats which their ebbing strength was no longer equal to perform, that the Spirit of the Lord had departed from him. The more completely a man's limbs are frost-bitten the more comfortable and warm they are, and the less does he know it. If a man says, 'Your text has no sort of application to me,' he thereby shows that it has a very close application to him.

I need say little about the reasons for this unconsciousness. We are all accustomed to take very lenient views, when we take any at all, of our own character; and the tendency of all conduct is to pull down conscience to the level of conduct, and to vindicate that conduct by biased decisions of a partial conscience. And so I have no doubt that there are people thinking how well my words fit some other man from whom there has, without there knowing it, ebbed away, by slow, sad drops, almost all the lifeblood of their Christianity, like some great tree that stands in the woods, fair to appearance, with solid bole and widespread leafage, and expanded branches, and yet the heart is out of it; and when the tempest comes and it falls, everybody can look into the hollow trunk and see that for years it has been rotten.

Brethren, the underground enemies of our Christian earnestness are far more dangerous than the apparent and manifest antagonists; and there are many men amongst us who would repel with indignation a manifest assault against their godliness, who yield without resistance, and almost without consciousness, to the sly seductions of unsuspected evil. The arrow that flies in darkness is more deadly than the pestilence that wasteth at noonday.

III. Further, notice the ever-operating causes that produce this condition.

I suppose that one, at any rate, of the main examples of this ‘form’ was participation in the simple worship of the primitive Church And although the phrase by no means refers merely to acts of worship, still that is one of the main fields in which this evil is manifest. Many of us substitute outward connection with the Church for inward union with Jesus Christ. All external forms have a tendency to assert themselves, and to detain in themselves, instead of helping to rise above themselves, our poor sense-ridden natures. How many of us are there whose religion consists very largely in coming to this place, standing up when other people sing, seeming to unite in prayer and praise, perhaps participating in the sacred rites of the Church; but having most of their religion safely locked up in their pews along with their hymn-books when they leave the chapel, and waiting for them quietly, without troubling them, until next Sunday! We need outward forms of worship. It is a sign of our weakness that we do, but they are so full of danger that one sometimes wishes that they could be broken up and made fluent, and, at least for a time, that something else could be substituted for them.

Seeing that the purest and the simplest of forms may become like a dirty window, an obscuring medium which shuts out instead of lets in the light, it seems to me that the Churches are wisest which admit least of the dangerous element into their external worship, and try to have as little of form as may keep the spirit. I know that simple forms may be abused quite as much am elaborate ones. I know that a Quakers’ meetinghouse is often quite as much a house of formal and not of real communion as a Roman Catholic cathedral. Let us remember how full of dangers they all, and always are. And let us be very sure that we do not substitute church membership, coming to church or chapel, going to prayer-meeting, teaching in Sunday-schools, reading devout books, and the like, for inward submission to the power.

Another cause always operating is the tendency which all action of every kind has to escape from the dominion of its first motives, and to become merely mechanical and habitual Habit is a most precious ally of goodness, but habitual goodness tends to become involuntary and mechanical goodness, and so to cease to be goodness at all And the more that we can, in each given case, make each individual act of godliness, whether it be in worship or in practical life, the result of a fresh approach to the one central and legitimate impulse of the Christian life, the better it will be for ourselves. All great causes, as I was saying a moment or two ago, tend to pass from the dominion of impulse into that of use and wont and mere routine, and our religion and practical godliness in daily life is apt to do that, as well as all our other actions.

And then, still further, there is the constant operation of earth and sense and daily duties and pressing cares, which war against the reality and completeness of our submission to the power of godliness. Grains of sand, microscopically minute in the aggregate, bury the temples and the images of the gods in the Nile Valley. The multitude of small cares and duties which are blown upon us by every wind have the effect of withdrawing us, unless we are continually watchful, from that one foundation of all, the love of Jesus Christ felt in our daily lives. Unless we perpetually tighten our hold, it will loosen, by very weariness of the muscles. Unless the boat be firmly anchored it will be drifted down the stream. Unless we take care, our Christian life and earnestness will ooze out at our finger-tips, and we shall never know that it is gone. The world, our own weakness, our very tasks and duties, the pressure of circumstances, the sway of our senses, and the very habit of doing right - all of these may tend to make us mechanical and formal participators in the religious life, and unconscious hypocrites.

IV. So, lastly, let me point you to the discipline which may avert this evil.

First and foremost, I would say, let us cherish a clear and continual recognition of the reality of 'the danger Forewarned is forearmed. He that will take counsel of his own weakness, and be taught by God's Word how unreliable he himself is, and how strong the forces are which tend to throw his religion all to the surface, will thereby be, if not insured against the danger, at least made a great deal more competent to deal with it. 'Blessed is the man that feareth always,' and that knows how likely he is to go wrong unless he carefully seeks to keep himself right.

Rigid, habitual self-inspection, in the light of God's Word, is an all-important help to prevent this sliding of our Christian life into superficiality. If what I was saying about the unconsciousness of decline be at all true, then most eloquently and impressively does it say to us all, 'Watch! for we know not what may be going on underground unless we have a continual carefulness of inspection.' We should watch our own characters, the movement of our spiritual nature, and the effect and operation of our habits and of our participation in outward forms of Christianity; we should watch these as carefully as men in the tropics look into their beds and their clothing before they put them on, or get into them, for snakes and scorpions. In a country which is only preserved by the dykes from Being swallowed up by the sea, the minutest inspection of the rampart is the condition of security, and if there be a hole big enough for a mouse to creep through, the water will come in and make a gap wide enough to drown a province in a little while. And so, brethren, seeing that we have such dangers round about us, and that the most formidable of them all are powers that work in the dark, let us be very sure that our eyes have searched, as well as we can, the inmost corners of our lives, and that no lurking vermin lie beneath the unturned up stones.

And then, lastly, and as that without which all else is vain, let us make continual and earnest and contrite efforts day by day to renew and deepen our personal communion with Jesus Christ. He is the source of the power which godliness operates in our lives, and the closer we keep to Him the more it will flood our hearts and make us real, out-and-out Christians, and not shallow and self-deceived pretenders.

The tree that had nothing but leaves upon it hid its absence of fruit by its abundance of foliage. The Master came, as He comes to you and to me, seeking fruit, and if He finds it not He will perpetuate the barrenness by His blasting word, ‘No fruit grow upon thee henceforward for ever.’

11)2 Timothy 4:1-5

2 Timothy

LIGHT AT EVENTIDE

2Ti. 4:1-5; 2Ti. 4:16-18.

TIMOTHY does not appear to have been a strong man, either in body or mind, if we may judge from the exhortations and tonics which Paul felt it needful to administer in this letter. The young, gentle soul was more overwhelmed by Paul’s trial and impending death than the heroic martyr himself was. Nothing shook that steadfast heart, and from the very grave’s mouth he spoke brave encouragement.

Verses 1-5 are a rousing appeal to Timothy to fulfil his ministry. Embedded in it there is a sad prophecy of coming dark days for the Church, which constitutes, not a reason for despondency or for abandoning the work, but for doing it with all one’s might. But the all-powerful motive for every Christian teacher, whether of old or young, is pressed on Timothy in the solemn thoughts that he works in the sight of God and of Jesus, and that he and those to whom he speaks, and whose blood may be laid to his charge, are to see him when he appears, and to stand at his judgment bar.

The master’s eye makes diligent servants; the tremendous issues for speaker and hearer suspended on the preaching of the gospel, if they were ever burning before our inward vision, would make superfluous all other motives for straining every nerve and using every opportunity and power. How we should preach and teach and live if the great white throne and He who will sit on it were ever shining before us! Would not that sight burn up slothfulness, cowardice, perfunctory discharge of duty, mechanical repetition of scarcely felt words, and all the other selfishnesses and worldlinesses which sap our earnestness in our work.

The special duties enjoined are, first and foremost, the most general one to ‘preach the word,’ which is, indeed, a duty incumbent on all Christians; and then, subordinate to it, and descriptive of how it is to be done, the duty of persevering attention to that great life task - ‘be instant’; that is, be at it, be always at it. But is not ‘in season, out of season’ an unwise and dangerous precept? Do we not do more harm than good by thrusting gospel teaching down people’s throats at unfitting times? No doubt tact and prudence are as needful as zeal, but perhaps they are rather more abundant at present than it, and at a time that looks out of season to a man who does not wish to hear of Christ at any time, or to one who does not wish to speak of Him at any time, may be ‘in season’ for the very reason that it seems out of season. Felix is not an infallible judge of ‘a convenient season.’ It would do no harm if Christian people ‘obtruded’ their religion a little more.

But the general work of ‘preaching the word’ is to be accompanied with special care over the life of believers, which is to be active in three closely connected forms. Timothy is, where needful, to ‘convict’ of sin; for so the word rendered ‘reprove’ means, as applied to the mission of the Comforter in <431608>Joh. 16:8. ‘Rebuke’ naturally follows conviction, and exhortation, or, rather, consolation or encouragement, as naturally follows rebuke. If the faithful teacher has sometimes to use the lancet, he must have the balm and the Bandage at hand. And this triple ministry is to be ‘with all longsuffering’ and ‘teaching.’ Chry-sostom beautifully comments, ‘Not as in anger, not as in hatred, not as insulting over him,... as loving, as sympathising, as more distressed than himself at his grief.’ And we may add, as letting ‘the teaching’ do the convicting and rebuking, not the teacher’s judgment or tongue.

The prospect of dark days coming, which so often saddens the close of a strenuous life for Christ and the Church, shadowed Paul’s spirit, and .added to his burdens. At Ephesus he had spoken forebodings of ‘grievous wolves’ entering in after his death, and now he feels that he will be powerless to check the torrent of corruption, and is eager that, when he is gone, Timothy and others may be wise and brave to cope with the tendencies to turn from the simple truth and to prefer ‘fables.’

The picture which he draws is true to-day. Healthful teaching is distasteful Men’s ears itch, and want to be tickled. The desire of the multitude is to have teachers who will reflect their own opinions and prejudices, who will not go against the grain or rub them the wrong way, who will flatter the mob which itself the people, and will keep ‘conviction’ and ‘rebuke’ well in the background. That is no reason for any Christian teacher’s being cast down, but is a reason for his buckling to his work, and not shunning to declare the whole counsel of God.

The true way to front and conquer these tendencies is by the display of an unmistakable self-sacrifice in the life, by sobriety in all things and willing endurance of hardship where needful, and by redoubled earnestness in proclaiming the gospel, which men need whether they want it or not, and by filling to the full the sphere of our work, and discharging all its obligations.

The final words in verses 16-18 carry on the triumphant strain. There had been some previous stage of Paul’s trial, in his second imprisonment, of which we have no details except those here - when the Roman Christians and all his friends had deserted him, and that he had thus been conformed unto Christ’s sufferings, and tasted the bitterness of friendship failing when needed most. But no trace of bitterness remained in his spirit, and, like his Lord, he prayed for them who had thus deserted him. He was left alone, but the Christ, who had borne his burden alone, died that none of His servants might ever have to know the same dreary solitude, and the absence of other comforters had made the more room, as well as need, for Him.

Paul’s predecessor, Stephen, had seen Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Paul had an even more blessed experience; for Jesus stood by him, there in the Roman court, in which, perhaps, the emperors ate on the tribunal What could terrify him with that Advocate at his side?

But it is beautiful that the Apostle does not first think of his Lord’s presence as ministering to his comfort, but as nerving him to ‘fulfil His message.’ The trial was to him, first, a crowning opportunity of preaching the gospel, and, no doubt, it gave him an audience of such a sort as he had never had. What did it matter even to himself what became of him, if ‘ all the Gentiles,’ and among them, no doubt, senators, generals, statesmen, and possibly Nero, ‘might bear’? Only as a second result of Christ’s help does he add that he was rescued, as from between the very teeth of the lion. The peril was extreme; his position seemed hopeless, the jaws were wide open, and he was held by the sharp fangs, but Christ dragged him out. The true David delivered his lamb out of the lion’s mouth.

The past is the prophecy of the future to those that trust in a changeless Christ, who has all the resources of the universe at command. ‘That which hath been is that which shall be,’ and he who can say ‘he hath delivered from so great a death’ ought to have no hesitation in adding’ in whom I trust that He will yet deliver me.’ That was the use that Paul made of his experience, and so his last words are an utterance of unfaltering faith and a doxology.

There appears to be an interesting echo of the Lord’s Prayer in verse 18. Observe the words ‘deliver,’ ‘from evil,’ ‘kingdom,’ ‘glory.’ Was Paul’s confidence disappointed? No; for surely he was delivered from every evil work, when the sharp sword struck off his head as he knelt outside thewalls of Rome. And Death was Christ’s last messenger, sent to ‘save him unto His heavenly kingdom,’ that there he might, with loftier words than even he could utter on earth, ascribe to Him ‘glory for ever. Amen.’

12)2 Timothy 4:6-8

2 Timothy

A PRISONER’S DYING THOUGHTS

2Ti. 4:6-8

PAUL’S long day’s work is nearly done. He is a prisoner in Rome, all but forsaken by his friends, in hourly expectation of another summons before Nero. To appear before him was, he says, like putting his head into ‘the mouth of the lion.’ His horizon was darkened by sad anticipations of decaying faith and growing corruptions in the Church. What a road he had travelled since that day when, on the way to Damascus, he saw the living Christ, and heard the words of His mouth!

It had been but a failure of a life, if judged by ordinary standards. He had suffered the loss of all things, had thrown away position and prospects, had exposed himself to sorrows and toils, had been all his days a poor man and solitary, had been hunted, despised, laughed at by Jew and Gentile, worried and badgered even by so-called brethren, loved the less, the more he loved. And now the end is near. A prison-and the-headsman's sword are the world's wages to its best teacher. When Nero is on the throne, the only possible place for Paul is a dungeon opening on to the scaffold. Better to be the martyr than the Caesar!

These familiar words of our text bring before us a very sweet and wonderful picture of the prisoner, so near his end. How beautifully they show his calm waiting for the last hour and the bright forms which lightened for him the darkness of his cell! Many since have gone to their rest with their hearts stayed On the same thoughts, though their lips could not speak them to our listening ears. Let us be thankful for them, and pray that for ourselves, when we come to that hour, the same quiet heroism and the same sober hope mounting to calm certainty may be ours.

These words refer to the past, the present, the future. 'I have fought - the time of my departure is come - henceforth there is laid up.'

I. So we notice, first, the quiet courage which looks death full in the face without a tremor.

The language implies that Paul knows his death hour is all but here. As the Revised Version more accurately gives it, 'I am already being offered' - the process is begun, his sufferings at the moment are, as it were, the initial steps of his sacrifice - 'and the time of my departure is come.' The tone in which he tells Timothy this is very noticeable. There is no sign of excitement, no tremor of emotion, no affectation of stoicism in the simple sentences. He is not playing up to a part, nor pretending to be anything which he is not. If ever language sounded perfectly simple and genuine, this does.

And the occasion of the .whole section is as remarkable as the tone. He is led to speak about himself at all, only in order to enforce his exhortation to Timothy to put his shoulder to the wheel, and do his work for Christ with all his might. All he wishes to say is simply, do your work with all your might, for I am going off the field. But having begun on that line of thought, he is carried on to say more than was needed for his immediate purpose, and thus inartificially to let us see what was filling his mind.

And the subject into which he subsides after these lofty thoughts is as remarkable as either tone or occasion. Minute directions about such small matters as books and parchments, and perhaps a warm cloak for winter, and homely details about the movements of the little group of his friends immediately follow. All this shows with what a perfectly unforced courage Paul fronted his fate, and looked death in the eyes. The anticipation did not dull his interest in God's work in the world, as witness the warnings and exhortations of the context. It did not withdraw his sympathies from his companions. It did not hinder him from pursuing his studies and pursuits, nor from providing for small matters of daily convenience. If ever a man was free from any taint of fanaticism or morbid enthusiasm, it was this man waiting so calmly in his prison for his death.

There is great beauty and force in the expressions which he uses for death here. He will not soil his lips with its ugly name, but calls it an offering and a departure. There is a widespread unwillingness to say the word ' Death.' It falls on men's hearts like clods on a coffin. So all people and languages have adopted euphemisms for it, fair names which wrap silk round its dart and somewhat hide its face. But there are two opposite reasons for their use - terror and confidence. Some men dare not speak of death because they dread it so much, and try to put some kind of shield between themselves and the very thought of it, by calling it something less dreadful to them than itself. Some men, on the other hand, are familiar with the thought, and though it is solemn, it is not altogether repellent to them.

Gazing on death with the thoughts and feelings which Jesus Christ has given them concerning it, they see it in new aspects, which take away much of its blackness. And so they do not feel inclined to use the ugly old name, but had rather call it by some which reflect the gentler aspect that it now wears to them. So ‘sleep,’ and ‘rest’ and the like are the names which have almost driven the other out of the New Testament - witness of the fact that in inmost reality Jesus Christ ‘has abolished death,’ however the physical portion of it may still remain master of our bodies.

But looking for a moment at the specific metaphors used here, we have first, that of an offering, or more particularly of a drink offering, or libation, ‘I am already being poured out.’ No doubt the special reason for the selection of this figure here is Paul’s anticipation of a violent death. The shedding of his blood was to be an offering poured out like some costly wine upon the altar, but the power of the figure reaches far beyond that special application of it. We may all make our deaths a sacrifice, an offering to God, for we may yield up our will to God’s will, and so turn that last struggle into an act of worship and self surrender. When we recognise His hand, when we submit our wills to His purposes, when ‘we live unto the Lord,’ if we live, and ‘die unto Him,’ if we die, then Death will lose all its terror and most of its pain, and will become for us what it was to Paul, a true offering up of self in thankful worship. Nay, we may even say, that so we shall in a certain subordinate sense be ‘made conformable unto His death’ who committed His spirit into His Father’s hands, and laid down His life, of His own will. The essential character and far-reaching effects of this sacrifice we cannot imitate, but we can so yield up our wills to God and leave life so willingly and trustfully as that death shall make our sacrifice complete.

Another more familiar and equally striking figure is next used, when Paul speaks of the time of his ‘departure.’ The thought is found in most tongues. Death is a going away, or, as Peter calls it [with a glance, possibly, at the special meaning of the word in the Old Testament, as well as at its use in the solemn statement of the theme of converse on the Mountain of Transfiguration], an Exodus. But the well-worn image receives new depth and sharpness of outline in Christianity. To those who have learned the meaning of Christ’s resurrection, and feed their souls on the hopes which it warrants, Death is merely a change of place or state, an accident affecting locality, and little more. We have had plenty of changes before. Life has been one long series of departures. This is different from the others mainly in that it is the last, and that to go away from this visible and fleeting show, where we wander aliens among things which have no true kindred with us, is to go home, where there will be no more pulling up the tent-pegs, and toiling across the deserts in monotonous change. How strong is the conviction, spoken in this name for death, that the essential life lasts on quite unaltered through it all! How slight the else formidable thing is made! We may change climates, and for the stormy bleakness of life may have the long still days of heaven, but we do not change ourselves. We lose nothing worth keeping when we leave behind the body, as a dress not fitted for home, where we are going. We but travel one more stage, though it be the last, and part of it be in pitchy darkness. Some pass over it as in a fiery chariot, like Paul and many a martyr. Some have to toil through it with slow steps and bleeding feet and fainting heart; but all may have a Brother with them, and, holding His hand, may find that the journey is not so hard as they feared, and the home from which they shall remove no more, better than they hoped when they hoped the most.

II. We have here, too, the peaceful look backwards. There is something very noteworthy in the threefold aspect under which his past life presents itself to the Apostle who is so soon to leave it. He thinks of it as a contest, as a race, as a stewardship. The first image suggests the tension of a long struggle with opposing wrestlers who have tried to throw him, but in vain. The world, both of men and things, has had to be grappled with and mastered. His own sinful nature and especially his animal nature has had to be kept under by sheer force, and every moment has been resistance to subtle omnipresent forces that have sought to thwart his aspirations and hamper his performances. His successes have had to be fought for, and everything that he has done has been done after a struggle. So is it with all noble life; so will it be to the end.

He thinks of life as a race. That speaks of continuous advance in one direction, and more emphatically still, of effort that sets the lungs panting and strains every muscle to the utmost. He thinks of it as a stewardship. He has kept the faith [whether by that word we are to understand the body of truth believed or the act of believing] as a sacred deposit committed to him, of which he has been a good steward, and which he is now ready to return to his Lord. There is much in these letters to Timothy about keeping treasures entrusted to one’s care. Timothy is bid to ‘keep that good thing which is committed to thee,’ as Paul here declares that he has done. Nor is such guarding of a precious deposit confined to us stewards on earth, but the Apostle is sure that his loving Lord, to whom he has entrusted himself, will with like tenderness and carefulness ‘keep that which he has committed unto Him against that day.’ The confidence in that faithful Keeper made it possible for Paul to be faithful to his trust, and as a steward who was bound by all ties to his Lord, to guard His possessions and administer His affairs. Life was full of voices urging him to give up the faith. Bribes and threats, and his own sense-bound nature, and the constant whispers of the world had tempted him all along the road to fling it away as a worthless thing, but he had kept it safe; and now, nearing the end and the account, he can put his hand on the secret place near his heart where it lies, and feel that it is there, ready to be restored to his Lord, with the thankful confession, ‘Thy pound hath gained ten pounds.’

So life looks to this man in his retrospect as mainly a field for struggle, effort, and fidelity. This world is not to be for us an enchanted garden of delights, any more than it should appear a dreary desert of disappointment and woe. But it should be to us mainly a palaestra, or gymnasium and exercising ground. You cannot expect many flowers or much grass in the place where men wrestle and run. We need not much mind though it be bare, if we can only stand firm on the hard earth, nor lament that there are so few delights to stay our eyes from the goal. We are here for serious work; let us not be too eager for pleasures that may hinder our efforts and weaken our vigour, but be content to lap up a hasty draught from the brooks by the way, and then on again to the fight.

Such a view of life makes it radiant and fair while it lasts, and makes the heart calm when the hour comes to leave it all behind. So thinking of the past, there may be a sense of not unwelcome lightening from a load of responsibility when we have got all the stress and strain of the conflict behind us, and have at any rate not been altogether beaten. We may feel like a captain who has brought his ship safe across the Atlantic, through foul weather and past many an iceberg, and gives a great sigh of relief as he hands over the charge to the pilot, who will take her across the harbour bar and bring her to her anchorage in the landlocked bay where no tempests rave any more forever.

Prosaic theologians have sometimes wondered at the estimate which Paul here makes of his past services and faithfulness, but the wonder is surely unnecessary. It is very striking to notice the difference between his judgment of himself while he was still in the thick of the conflict, and now when he is nearing the end. Then one main hope which animated all his toils and nerved him for the sacrifice of life itself was ‘that I might finish my course with joy.’ Now in the quiet of his dungeon, that hope is fulfilled, and triumphant thoughts, like shining angels, keep him company in his solitude. Then he struggled, and wrestled, touched by the haunting fear lest after that he has preached to others he himself should be rejected. Now the dread has passed, and a meek hope stands by his side.

What is this change of feeling but an instance of what, thank God, we so often see, that at the end the heart, which has been bowed with fears and self-depreciation, is filled with peace? They who tremble most during the conflict are most likely to look back with solid satisfaction, while they who never knew a fear all along the course will often have them surging in upon their souls too late, and will see the past in a new lurid light, when they are powerless to change it. Blessed is the man who thus feareth always. At the end he will have hope. The past struggles are joyful in memory, as the mountain ranges, which were all black reek and white snow while we toiled up their inhospitable steeps, lie purple in the mellowing distance, and burn like fire as the sunset strikes their peaks. Many a wild winter’s day has a fair, cloudless close, and lingering opal hues diffused through all the quiet sky. ‘At eventide it shall be light.’ Though we go all Our lives mourning and timid, there may yet be granted us ere the end some vision of the true significance of these lives, and some humble hope that they have not been wholly in vain.

Such an estimate has nothing in common with self-complacency. It co-exists with a profound consciousness of many a sin, many a defeat, and much unfaithfulness. It belongs only to a man who, conscious of these, is ‘looking for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life,’ and is the direct result, not the antagonist, of lowly self-abasement, and contrite faith in Him by whom alone our stained selves and poor broken services can ever be acceptable. Let us learn too that the only life that bears being looked back upon is a life of Christian devotion and effort. It shows fairer when seen in the strange cross lights that come when we stand on the boundary of two worlds, with the white radiance of eternity beginning to master the vulgar oil lamps of earth, than when seen by these alone. All others have their shabbiness and their selfishness disclosed then. I remember ones seeing a mob of revellers streaming out from a masked ball in a London theatre in the early morning sunlight; draggled and heavy-eyed, the rouge showing on the cheeks, and the shabby tawdriness of the foolish costumes pitilessly revealed by the pure light. So will many a life look when the day dawns, and the wild riot ends in its unwelcome beams.

The one question for us all, then, will be, Have I lived for Christ, and by Him? Let it be the one question for us now, and let it be answered, Yes. Then we shall have at the last a calm confidence, equally far removed from presumption and from dread, which will let us look back on life with peace, though it be full of failures and sins, and forward with humble hope of the reward which we shall receive from His mercy.

III. The climax of all is the triumphant look forward. ‘Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.’

In harmony with the images of the conflict and the race, the crown here is not the emblem of sovereignty, but of victory, as indeed is almost without exception the case in the New Testament. The idea of the royal dignity of Christians in the future is set forth rather under the emblem of association with Christ on His throne, while the wreath on their brows is the coronal of laurel, ‘meed of mighty conquerors,’ or the twine of leaves given to him who, panting, touched the goal. The reward, then, which is meant by the emblem, whatever be its essence, comes through effort and conflict. ‘A man is not crowned, except he strive.’

That crown, according to other words of Scripture, consists of ‘life,’ or ‘glory’ - that is to say, the issue and outcome of believing service and faithful stewardship here is the possession of the true life, which stands in union with God, in measure so great, and in quality so wondrous that it lies on the pure locks of the victors like a flashing diadem, all ablaze with light in a hundred jewels. The completion and exaltation of our nature and characters by the illapse of ‘life’ so sovereign and transcendent that it is ‘glory’ is the consequence of all Christian effort here in the lower levels, where the natural life is always weakness and sometimes shame, and the spiritual life is at the best but a hidden glory and a struggling spark. There is no profit in seeking to gaze into that light of glory so as to discern the shapes of those who walk in it, or the elements of its lambent flames. Enough that in its gracious beauty transfigured souls move as in their native atmosphere. Enough that even our dim vision can see that they have for their companion ‘One like unto the Son of Man.’ It is Christ’s own life which they share; it is Christ’s own glory which irradiates them.

That crown is ‘a crown of righteousness’ in another sense from that in which it is ‘a crown of life.’ The latter expression indicates the material, if we may say so, of which it is woven, but the former rather points to the character to which it belongs or is given. Righteousness alone can receive that reward. It is not the struggle or the conflict which wins it, but the character evolved in the struggle, not the works of strenuous service, but the moral nature expressed in these. There is such a congruity between righteousness and the crown of life, that it can be laid on none other head but that of a righteous man, and if it could, all its amaranthine flowers would shrivel and fall when they touched an impure brow. It is, then, the crown of righteousness, as belonging by its very nature to such characters alone.

But whatever is the essential congruity between the character and the crown, we have to remember too that, according to this Apostle’s constant teaching, the righteousness which clothes us in fair raiment, and has a natural right to the wreath of victory, is a gift, as truly as the crown itself, and is given to us all on condition of our simple trust in Jesus Christ, If we are to be ‘found of Him in peace, without spot and blameless,’ we must be ‘found in Him, not having our own righteousness, but that which is ours through faith in Christ.’ Toil and conflict and anxious desire to be true to our responsibilities will do much for a man, but they will not bring him that righteousness which brings down on the head the crown of life. We must trust to Christ to give us the righteousness in which we are justified, and to give us the righteousness by the working out of which in our life and character we are fitted for that great reward. He crowns our works and selves with exuberant and unmerited honours, but what he crowns is His Own gift to us, and His great love must bestow both the righteousness and ‘the crown.’

The crown is given at a time called - by Paul ‘at that day,’ which is not the near day of his martyrdom, but that of His Lord’s appearing. He does not speak of the fulness of the reward as being ready for him at death, but as being ‘henceforth laid up for him in heaven.’ So he looks forward beyond the grave. The immediate future after death was to his view a period of blessedness indeed, but not yet full. The state of the dead in Christ was a state of consciousness, a state of rest, a state of felicity, hut also a state of expectation- To the full height of their present capacity they who sleep in Jesus are blessed, being still in His embrace, and their spirits pillowed on His heart, nor so sleeping that, like drowsy infants, they know not where they lie so safe, but only sleeping in so much as they rest from weariness, and have closed their eyes to the ceaseless turmoil of this fleeting world, and are lapped about for ever with the sweet, unbroken consciousness that they are ‘present with the Lord.’ What perfect repose, perfect fruition of all desires, perfect union with the perfect End and Object of all their being, perfect exemption from all sorrow, tumult, and sin can bring of blessedness, that they possess in over measure unfailingly. And, in addition, they still know the joy of hope, and have carried that jewel with them into another world, for they wait for ‘the redemption of the body,’ in the reception of which, ‘at that day,’ their life will be filled up to a yet fuller measure, and gleam with a more lustrous ‘glory.’ Now they rest and wait. Then shall they be crowned.

Nor must self-absorbed thoughts be allowed to bound our anticipations of that future. It is no solitary blessedness to which Paul looked forward Alone in his dungeon, alone before his judge when ‘no man stood by’ him, soon to be alone in his martyrdom, he leaps up in spirit at the thought of the mighty crowd among whom he will stand in that day, on every head a crown, in every heart the same love to the Lord whose life is in them all and makes them all one. So we may cherish the hope of a social heaven. Man’s course begins in a garden, but it ends in a city. The final condition will be the perfection of human society. There all who love Christ will be drawn together, and old ties, broken for a little while here, be reknit in yet holier form, never to be sundered more.

Ah, friends, the all-important question for each of us is how may we have such a hope, like a great sunset light shining into the western windows of our souls? There is but one answer - Trust Christ. That is enough. Nothing else is. Is your life built on Jesus Christ? Are you trusting your salvation to Him? Are you giving Him your love and service? Does your life bear looking at to-day? Will it bear looking at in death? Will it bear His looking at in Judgment?

If you can humbly say, To me to live is Christ, then is it well Living by Him we may fight and conquer, may win and obtain. Living by Him, we may be ready quietly to lie down when the time comes, and may have all the future filled with the blaze of a great hope that glows brighter as the darkness thickens. That peaceful hope will not leave us till consciousness fails, and then, when it has ceased to guide us, Christ Himself will lead us, scarcely knowing where we are, through the waters, and when we open our half-bewildered eyes in brief wonder, the first thing we see will be his welcoming smile, and His voice will say, as a tender surgeon might to a little Child waking after an operation, 'It is all over.' We lift our hands wondering and find wreaths on our poor brows. We lift our eyes, and lo! all about us a crowned crowd of conquerors,

'And with the morn those angel faces smile
Which we have loved long since, and lost awhile,'

13)2 Timothy 4:7

Acts

A FULFILLED ASPIRATION

Act. 20:24. - 2Ti. 4:7.

I do not suppose that Paul in prison, and within sight of martyrdom, remembered his words at Ephesus. But the fact that what was aspiration whilst he was in the very thick of his difficulties came to be calm retrospect at the close is to me very beautiful and significant. ‘So that I may finish my course,’ said he wistfully; whilst before him there lay dangers clearly discerned and others that had all the more power over the imagination because they were but dimly discerned-’Not knowing the things that shall befall me there,’ said he, but knowing this, that ‘bonds and afflictions abide me.’ When a man knows exactly what he has to be afraid of he can face it. When he knows a little corner of it, and also knows that there is a great stretch behind that is unknown, that is a state of things that tries his mettle. Many a man will march up to a battery without a tremor who would not face a hole where a snake lay. And so Paul’s ignorance, as well as Paul’s knowledge, made it very hard for him to say ‘None of these things move me’ if only ‘I might finish my course.’

Now there are in these two passages, thus put together, three points that I touch for a moment. These are, What Paul thought that life chiefly was; what Paul aimed at; and what Paul won thereby.

I. What he thought that life chiefly was.

‘That I may finish my course.’ Now ‘course,’ in our modern English, is far too feeble a word to express the Apostle’s idea here. It has come to mean with us a quiet sequence or a succession of actions which, taken together, complete a career; but in its original force the English word ‘course,’ and still more the Greek, of which it is a translation, contain a great deal more than that. If we were to read ‘race,’ we should get nearer to at least one side of the Apostle’s thought. This was the image under which life presented itself to him, as it does to every man that does anything in the world worth doing, whether he be Christian or not-as being not a place for enjoyment, for selfish pursuits, making money, building family, satisfying love, seeking pleasure, or the like; but mainly as being an appointed field for a succession of efforts, all in one direction, and leading progressively to an end. In that image of life as a race, threadbare as it is, there are several grave considerations involved, which it will contribute to the nobleness of our own lives to keep steadily in view.

To begin with, the metaphor regards life as a track or path marked out and to be kept to by us. Paul thought of his life as a racecourse, traced for him by God, and from which it would be perilous and rebellious to diverge. The consciousness of definite duties loomed larger than anything else before him. His first waking thought was, ‘What is God’s will for me to-day? What stage of the course have I to pass over to-day?’ Each moment brought to him an appointed task which at all hazards he must do. And this elevating, humbling, and bracing ever-present sense of responsibility, not merely to circumstances, but to God, is an indispensable part of any life worth the living, and of any on which a man will ever dare to look back.

‘My course.’ O brethren! if we carried with us, always present, that solemn, severe sense of all-pervading duty and of obligation laid upon us to pursue faithfully the path that is appointed us, there would be less waste, less selfishness, less to regret, and less that weakens and defiles, in the lives of us all. And blessed be His name! however trivial be our tasks, however narrow our spheres, however secular and commonplace our businesses or trades, we may write upon them, as on all sorts of lives, except weak and selfish ones, this inscription, ‘Holiness to the Lord.’

The broad arrow stamped on Crown property gives a certain dignity to whatever bears it, and whatever small duty has the name of God written across it is thereby ennobled. If our days are to be full-fraught with the serenity and purity which it is possible for them to attain, and if we ourselves are to put forth all our powers and make the most of ourselves, we must cultivate the continual sense that life is a course-a series of definite duties marked out for us by God.

Again, the image suggests the strenuous efforts needed for discharge of our appointed tasks. The Apostle, like all men of imaginative and sensitive nature, was accustomed to speak in metaphors, which expressed his fervid convictions more adequately than more abstract expressions would have done. That vigorous figure of a ‘course’ speaks more strongly of the stress of continual effort than many words. It speaks of the straining muscles, and the intense concentration, and the forward-flung body of the runner in the arena. Paul says in effect, ‘I, for my part, live at high pressure. I get the most that I can out of myself. I do the very best that is in me.’ And that is a pattern for us.

There is nothing to be done unless we are contented to live on the stretch. Easygoing lives are always contemptible lives. A man who never does anything except what he can do easily never comes to do anything greater than what he began with, and never does anything worth doing at all. Effort is the law of life in all departments, as we all of us know and practise in regard to our daily business. But what a strange thing it is that we seem to think that our Christian characters can be formed and perfected upon other conditions, and in other fashions, than those by which men make their daily bread or their worldly fortunes!

The direction which effort takes is different in these two regions. The necessity for concentration and vigorous putting into operation of every faculty is far more imperative in the Christian course than in any other form of life.

I believe most earnestly that we grow Christlike, not by effort only, but by faith. But I believe that there is no faith without effort, and that the growth which comes from faith will not be appropriated and made ours without it. And so I preach, without in the least degree feeling that it impinges upon the great central truth that we are cleansed and perfected by the power of God working upon us, the sister truth that we must ‘work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.’

Brethren, unless we are prepared for the dust and heat of the race, we had better not start upon the course. Christian men have an appointed task, and to do it will take all the effort that they can put forth, and will assuredly demand continuous concentration and the summoning of every faculty to its utmost energy.

Still further, there is another idea that lies in the emblem, and that is that the appointed task which thus demands the whole man in vigorous exercise ought in fact to be, and in its nature is, progressive. Is the Christianity of the average church member and professing Christian a continuous advance? Is to-day better than yesterday? Are former attainments continually being left behind? Does it not seem the bitterest irony to talk about the usual life of a Christian as a course? Did you ever see a squad of raw recruits being drilled in the barrack-yard? The first thing the sergeants do is to teach them the ‘goose-step,’ which consists in lifting up one foot and then the other, *ad* *infinitum*, and yet always keeping on the same bit of ground. That is the kind of ‘course’ which hosts of so-called Christians content themselves with running-a vast deal of apparent exercise and no advance. They are just at the same spot at which they stood five, ten, or twenty years ago; not a bit wiser, more like Christ, less like the devil and the world; having gained no more mastery over their characteristic evils; falling into precisely the same faults of temper and conduct as they used to do in the far-away past. By what right can *they* talk of running the Christian race? Progress is essential to real Christian life.

II. Turn now to another thought here, and consider what Paul aimed at.

It is a very easy thing for a man to say, ‘I take the discharge of my duty, given to me by Jesus Christ, as my great purpose in life,’ when there is nothing in the way to prevent him from carrying out that purpose. But it is a very different thing when, as was the case with Paul, there lie before him the certainties of affliction and bonds, and the possibilities which very soon consolidated themselves into certainties, of a bloody death and that swiftly. To say *then*, without a quickened pulse or a tremor in the eyelid, or a quiver in the voice, or a falter in the resolution, to say then, ‘none of these things move me, if only I may do what I was set to do’-that is to be in Christ indeed; and that is the only thing worth living for.

Look how beautifully we see in operation in these heartfelt and few words of the Apostle the power that there is in an absolute devotion to God-enjoined duty, to give a man ‘a solemn scorn of ills,’ and to lift him high above everything that would bar or hinder his path. Is it not bracing to see any one actuated by such motives as these? And why should they not be motives for us all? The one thing worth our making our aim in life is to accomplish our course.

Now notice that the word in the original here, ‘finish,’ does not merely mean ‘end,’ which would be a very poor thing. Time will do that for us all. It will end our course. But an ended course may yet be an unfinished course. And the meaning that the Apostle attaches to the word in both of our texts is not merely to scramble through anyhow, so as to get to the last of it; but to complete, accomplish the course, or, to put away the metaphor, to do all that it was meant by God that he should do.

Now some very early transcriber of the Acts of the Apostles mistook the Apostle’s meaning, and thought that he only said that he desired to end his career; and so, with the best intentions in the world, he inserted, probably on the margin, what he thought was a necessary addition-that unfortunate ‘with joy,’ which appears in our Authorised Version, but has no place in the true text. If we put it in we necessarily limit the meaning of the word ‘finish’ to that low, superficial sense which I have already dismissed. If we leave it out we get a far nobler thought. Paul was not thinking about the joy at the end. What he wanted was to do his work, all of it, right through to the very last. He knew there would be joy, but he does not speak about it. What he wanted, as all faithful men do, was to do the work, and let the joy take care of itself.

And so for all of us, the true anaesthetic or ‘painkiller’ is that all-dominant sense of obligation and duty which lays hold upon us, and grips us, and makes us, not exactly indifferent to, but very partially conscious of, the sorrows or the hindrances or the pains that may come in our way. You cannot stop an express train by stretching a rope across the line, nor stay the flow of a river with a barrier of straw. And if a man has once yielded himself fully to that great conception of God’s will driving him on through life, and prescribing his path for him, it is neither in sorrow nor in joy to arrest his course. They may roll all the golden apples out of the garden of the Hesperides in his path, and he will not stop to pick one of them up; or Satan may block it with his fiercest flames, and the man will go into them, saying, ‘When I pass through the fires He will be with me.’

III. Lastly, what Paul won thereby.

‘That I *may* finish my course . . . I *have* finished my course’; in the same lofty meaning, not merely *ended*, though that was true, but ‘completed, accomplished, perfected.’

Now some hyper-sensitive people have thought that it was very strange that the Apostle, who was always preaching the imperfection of all human obedience and service, should, at the end of his life, indulge in such a piece of what they fancy was self-complacent retrospect as to say ‘I have kept the faith; I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course.’ But it was by no means complacent self-righteousness. Of course he did not mean that he looked back upon a career free from faults and flecks and stains. No. There is only one pair of human lips that ever could say, in the full significance of the word, ‘It is finished! . . . I have completed the work which Thou gavest Me to do.’ Jesus Christ’s retrospect of a stainless career, without defect or discordance at any point from the divine ideal, is not repeated in any of His servants’ experiences. But, on the other hand, if a man in the middle of his difficulties and his conflict pulls himself habitually together and says to himself, ‘Nothing shall move me, so that I may complete this bit of my course,’ depend upon it, his effort, his believing effort, will not be in vain; and at the last he will be able to look back on a career which, though stained with many imperfections, and marred with many failures, yet on the whole has realised the divine purpose, though not with absolute completeness, at least sufficiently to enable the faithful servant to feel that all his struggle has not been in vain.

Brethren, no one else can. And oh! how different the two ‘courses’ of the godly man and the worldling look, in their relative importance, when seen from this side, as we are advancing towards them, and from the other as we look back upon them! Pleasures, escape from pains, ease, comfort, popularity, quiet lives-all these things seem very attractive; and God’s will often seems very hard and very repulsive, when we are advancing towards some unwelcome duty. But when we get beyond it and look back, the two careers have changed their characters; and all the joys that could be bought at the price of the smallest neglected duty or the smallest perpetrated sin, dwindle and dwindle and dwindle, and the light is out of them, and they show for what they are-nothings, gilded nothings, painted emptinesses, lies varnished over. And on the other hand, to do right, to discharge the smallest duty, to recognise God’s will, and with faithful effort to seek to do it in dependence upon Him, that towers and towers and towers, and there seems to be, as there really is, nothing else worth living for.

So let us live with the continual remembrance in our minds that all which we do has to be passed in review by us once more, from another standpoint, and with another illumination falling upon it. And be sure of this, that the one thing worth looking back upon, and possible to be looked back upon with peace and quietness, is the humble, faithful, continual discharge of our appointed tasks for the dear Lord’s sake. If you and I, whilst work and troubles last, do truly say, ‘None of these things move me, so that I *might* finish my course,’ we too, with all our weaknesses, may be able to say at the last, ‘Thanks be to God! I *have* finished my course.’

14)2 Timothy 4:10-11

2 Timothy

DEMAS, LUKE, MARK

2Ti. 4:10-11

THIS last of Paul’s letters is written, as is generally supposed, in his second imprisonment, and very near his martyrdom. The condition in which it represents him is remarkably contrasted, in several respects, with the conditions of his first imprisonment, as shown in the letters dating from that period. In these - in two of them, at all events - we find him surrounded by troops of friends, among whom the same three names as occur in my text appear as united with him in loyal confidence, and joining with him in greetings to his correspondents. Here they are again, but under what different circumstances! ‘Demas hath forsaken me... Only Luke is with me. Take Mark’ - who is also absent - ‘and bring him with thee.’ The lonely Apostle has none of the Old Guard around him, except the faithful Luke, and he longs, before he dies, to see once more the familiar faces, and to be ministered to once more by accustomed and tender hands. That touch of humanity brings him very near us.

But what I have chosen my texts for is the sharp contrast which the three prominent names in them present in their attitude to the Apostle - Demas the renegade, Mark the restored runaway, Luke, the ever steadfast and faithful companion- Now of course these three men’s relation to Jesus Christ was not identical with their relation to Paul. But at the same time their relation to Paul, one has little doubt, fluctuated with their relation to Jesus. It is scarcely possible to believe that the first of them would have done so base an act as to abandon the Apostle at the very crisis of his fate, unless his attachment to Jesus had become slender, nor that Mark’s love to his Lord had not cooled when he ‘went not with Paul and Barnabas to the work.’ I take these three names as representations of three different types of character and spiritual experience, and I wish to look at the three portraits in succession; only I venture to alter the order in which they appear in the text. First, then -

I. Demas the renegade.

We know nothing of him except that in the letters of the earlier imprisonment his name appears, honoured by Paul with the designation of his ‘fellow-worker,’ evidently admitted into the inner circle, living in amity and close communion with the other members of it, trusted and honoured, a man of some maturity and advancement, and now guilty of the base act of leaving the Apostle. How deeply that wounded Paul’s sensitive heart the language of our text sufficiently shows. It is a sad fate that all the world should know that fact, and only that, about Demas, that he should be cursed and condemned to such an immortality, and go down through the ages branded with ‘ he hath forsaken me, having loved this present world.’ He was not a monster, but just a man like the rest of us; and he came to his bad eminence by a very well-trodden and familiar path. He ‘hath forsaken me, having loved this present world’ - that is to say, he was a religious man who had not religion enough to resist the constant attractions and seductions of this present, and because he loved it, in one or other of its forms - wealth, ease, comfort, a whole skin, reputation, or whatever it may have been - more than he loved Paul’s Master, he turned his back upon principle, friendship, honour, duty, everything noble, and buried himself in the far-off Thessalonica. There are a great many Demases amongst us, and a great many different kinds of Thessalonicas to which we run. But we are all exposed to that same danger, and so we may well look at this one soul that fell under its spell, and was too weak to resist its pertinacious solicitations, and say to ourselves: ‘Lord, is it I?’

For there is nothing in human sin that is alien from any of us, and no depth of lapse and apostasy is so profound but that the tendencies towards it, and the possibilities of it, are in us, even us also. So let me translate into less well-worn words the language of the text which, for all its force, is so familiar that it does not appeal to us as it ought to do.

‘This present world,’ what is that? Well, it is Protean, as I have already hinted, in its shapes, and all manner of solicitations come from it, but we may say in general terms that it is the aggregate of ‘things seen and temporal’ which, subtle, and certainly corresponding to our own weakest sides, appealing to some of us in the shape of wealth, to some of us in the shape of earthly loves, to some of us in the shape of material advantages, to some of us in the form of the ‘hollow wraith of dying fame,’ to some of us in the nobler guise of scientific pursuits, lie confined within the limits of the phenomenal and the material, but to all of us being essentially the presentation of the visible, the material, the transient as the aim to strain after, and the good to count as our treasure.

Let us remember how persistent and how terribly strong the appeal of ‘this present world’ is to us all Its operation is continual upon us. Here it is, and we are in necessary connection with it, and it is our duty to be occupied with it, and it is cowardice to shirk the duty because of the peril that lies in it. You have to go to your business to-morrow morning, and I have to go to my books or my work; and the task for each of us is - and God knows how hard a task it is - to have our hearts in heaven whilst our hands are busy with the things around us. Christianity enjoins no false asceticism. There is little need to preach that to-day, but still it is to be remembered that it is duty to be occupied with the world, and fatal sin to love it, And just because it is so difficult to keep upon that knife-edge, so difficult to put all our pith and power into our occupation with material things, and yet never to be tempted into the love of them which fights against all nobleness of life, is it incumbent on me, over and over again, to reiterate to you and to myself the old threadbare commonplace,’ Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.’ Leave your mark on them, work on them diligently, and with all your heart, bend them to be your servants, and to help you to rise to the things above them, but on your soul’s peril keep clear of that bowing down before them, that trusting in them, that longing for them, that despair if you lose them, which together make up the love of the world, and the lust thereof which passes away. There is an enemy within the fortress who is always ready and eager to fling open the gates to the besiegers. For the things ‘seen and temporal’ correspond with, and have their ally in, the senses by which we are brought into contact with them. And unless there is a very strong religious impulse dominant in our minds, or to put it into more

Christian words, unless ‘the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given to us,’ it cannot be but that we shall follow Demas, and run away to our Thessalonica, and leave Paul, and duty, and, Paul’s Master, and duty’s Source, behind us.

For, brethren, if once this love of the world, which is always soliciting each of us, gets a footing in our hearts, it is impossible - as impossible as it is for two bodies to occupy the same place at the same time - for the love of Christ, which is the love of God, to continue dominant there. There cannot be two masters. That is plain common sense. If my head is full of thoughts and schemes, concerned only with the fleeting illusory present, then there is no room in it for His serene, ennobling presence. If my hands are laden with pebbles, I cannot clasp the diamonds that are offered to me.

Unless you fling out the sand-bags the balloon will cleave to the earth, and unless we turn the world out of our hearts, it is no use to say to Him, ‘Come! Lord Jesus.’ There is no room for Him. And though He comes through the narrowest opening of the door of the soul, He will not come unless we have to some extent conquered the world, and the love of the world.

If I could get you to translate for yourselves the threadbare theological terminology of this text into the vital facts that it represents, I should thank God. Only, dear brethren, take this with you, either we forsake Christ because we love the world, or we forsake the world because we love Christ. On the one alternative we choose restlessness and feverish desires unsatisfied, and craving, all the misery of mistaking mist for land and cloud-wrack for solid ground; on the other, we choose all the blessedness of having set our love on that which satisfies, of having loved the worthiest, the best, the most loving. Which of the two shall we choose? It may be that the one choice shall mean, as it did for Paul, a prison cell and a martyrdom, and that the other may mean, as it did for Demas, comfort and safety, and many an unmistakably good thing, in some Thessalonica or other. But are we going to vote with Demas, or is it going to be Paul? Whether is it better to love the world, and get what the renegade presumably got for a time, or is it better to get what Paul speaks of in the words before my text, ‘a crown of righteousness laid up for all them that love' - not the world - 'but His appearing.' like the martyr Apostle.

II. Now look at that other portrait, Mark, the restored runaway.

You remember the little that Scripture tells us about him, how he was chosen to be the personal attendant, private secretary, factotum, travelling agent, of Paul and Barnabas on their first journey, how his courage and faith lasted as long as the two missionaries were on familiar ground, on his native soil, in the island of Cyprus; and how when they crossed to the mainland both courage and faith oozed out at his finger ends, and he hurried back to his mother's house in Jerusalem. When Paul would go again with Barnabas, to visit the churches, the latter, with a relative's too great kindness which was cruelty, insisted on taking the runaway with them, and Paul, with hot indignation which was kinder than the misplaced affection of the uncle, steadfastly refused his consent. Then Barnabas and Mark slip out of the narrative and disappear, and long years pass during which we know nothing about them. But in time, somehow or other, things are made up; no doubt Mark was penitent. Therefore it was as right for Paul to forgive then, as it had been right for him before not to forgive.

It is very beautiful to notice that here he desires to have Mark for the very office which he had, in such shameful and cowardly fashion, flung up long years ago. For the book of Acts says, 'They had also John [Mark] to their minister,' and here Paul says, 'Bring him with thee, for he is profitable to me for. the ministry.' He was reinstating him in the very position which he had once abandoned.

Now what does Mark's restoration teach us? This great gospel, that from any departure, no matter how far, no matter with what aggravations attended, no matter for how long it has lasted, from any departure from duty and from Christ a man can come back. Those of us professing Christians who know ourselves best, and who fight most vigorously against the creeping encroachments of the love of the world, know best how often and how far we have yielded to them, and gone away from them. Brother, no matter how remote we have made ourselves from Him, we cannot travel beyond the reach of His seeking love. And the wisest thing we can do-and it is a possible thing for us all - is to go back to the beginning, and at the

Cross to receive, what is never withheld, pardon for our lapses. Christ laid down the measure of human forgiveness when He said ‘seventy times seven’ - the two perfect numbers multiplied into themselves, and their product again multiplied by perfection; and are His love, and His placability, and His pardoning mercy less than that which He prescribed for us? Surely not. So we all may go back again, however far we have wandered, and must go back if we would not be swept into outer darkness for ever. The possibility of return, and, therefore, the blessed duty of repentance, is preached to all us imperfect Christians by this example before us.

I would also remind you how in the restored runaway, or rather in the Apostle’s conduct to him, we sea as ! have already hinted, an adumbration, because a consequence of the divine forgiveness. Paul trusted this unreliable man at last. As the Acts of the Apostles says, ‘He thought it not good to take him with them who had departed from the work,’ and his severity was an instrument of cure far more effectual than Barnabas’ flaccid good nature. The shrug of the shoulders that overlooks transgression and says, ‘Oh! it does not matter,’ is a much more cruel and a much less curative thing than the hot indignation which says, ‘No, you have been unworthy, and until you repent there is no restoration possible.’ That is how God does with us, not because He loves us less, but because He loves us more, and because He seeks to make thorough work, and to purge the bosom of the perilous stuff which, unless it is purged, will ever keep us from union with Him. Inasmuch as the law of the divine forgiveness is here set forth in the severity towards the impenitent, and in the generous confidence towards the penitent, and the restoration to his old office, let us Christian people learn our duty to those who have gone astray, and how there is no surer way of helping them to be reliable and profitable than showing them that we trust them to be both.

Still further, from out of this second of our portraits, there comes the other lesson, that failure in a task may tend to make us successful in it hereafter. Mark shirked the ministry; he became ‘profitable for the ministry.’ That is to say, though all sin weakens, yet sin repented and sin east out may strengthen, because it may drive us nearer to God, because it may lead us to deeper humility, because it may kindle a livelier flame of gratitude, the gas that drives the engine, and because it may set us upon closer examination of our own selves, and putting up barriers at the weak places where the enemy poured in like a flood. So for all these reasons, in a far higher sense than the poet meant it, we may make stepping-stones of our dead selves to higher things. There is no fatal entail of sin upon us, by which the past is always to set the time and prescribe the measure for the future. The Israelites fought two battles, on the same field, against the same foes, the fights at Aphek against the Philistines. In one of them they were ignominiously routed and beaten from the field; and in the other, on the same spot, against the same enemy, with the same weapons, the same men triumphed; and reared upon the field a memorial alike of their present victory and of their past defeat, and called it the Stone of Help, saying, ‘Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.’

III. Lastly, we have here a third picture, that of the steadfast companion, Luke.

‘Only Luke is with me,’ and he had been with Paul for years, having joined him first at Troas, on the eve of his first missionary enterprise in Europe, having remained, as it appears, at Philippi whilst the Apostle traversed Greece, having rejoined him at Philippi on his return journey, travelled with him to Jerusalem, Caesarea, in a shipwreck, in Rome in the first imprisonment, presumably during .the interval; and now again we find him Paul’s only companion, in the second imprisonment. He is a type of the steadfast souls who never stray, but by patient continuance in communion with Paul’s Lord, ‘go from strength to strength,’ until ‘every one of them in Zion appeareth before God.’ ‘Abide with me,’ says Paul’s Master, and if we keep ourselves in the love of God, and resist the temptations to be drawn aside, steadfastly cleave unto the Lord, then the world will not have power over us, and we shall neither repeat the experience of the renegade, nor of the restored runaway, but find that day by day we grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord, and run with unwearied patience and perseverance the race that is set before us. A continuous development as the result of a quiet constancy of abiding with Jesus Christ is possible for us all And if we do not come to it absolutely and with the completeness of the ideal, in our earthly experience, still we may approximate indefinitely towards it, and interruptions may become fewer and fewer and shorter and shorter, until what were broken dots, as it were, run into a continuous line, and we dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of our lives.

Brethren! are we to be Demas? Are we to be Mark? Are we to be Luke? We may be all three. We have run away; we can go back; and thenceforward we can continue steadfast and immovable, cleaving to the Lord, and ‘loving’ - not the world, but - ‘His appearing.’

15)2 Timothy 4:13

2 Timothy

PAUL’S DYING CONFIDENCE

2Ti. 4:13.

If we leave out of notice for a moment the two or three salutations and personal messages which follow, these are the last words of Paul’s last letter. So he disappears from history with this ringing cry of confidence upon his lips. There was enough in his circumstances to breed the very opposite disposition. He was half-way through his trial before Nero, and suspense, we all know, gnaws at the very roots of courage. He was all but absolutely certain that death was near, as he had said a minute before: ‘I have finished my course; I have kept the faith; henceforth there is’ nothing but the crown to look for. His heart was wrung by the desertion of friends; Demas had forsaken him, and when the pinch of his trial came, and his head was, as it were, in the lion’s open mouth, none of his friends plucked up heart of grace to stand beside him. But in spite of all, indomitable courage and a bright flame of hope, that nothing could blow or batter out, burned in the Apostle’s heart still Therefore he rays, even while facing the block, ‘the Lord will deliver me from every evil work, and preserve me unto His everlasting Kingdom.’ He is so sure of this that he beings his thanks beforehand - ‘to whom be glory for ever and ever. The thing is as good as done; and so I render my praise.’

Note here a very striking trace and echo of -

I. Christ’s words. I suppose you will often have observed that my text is a variation on the theme of the Lord’s Prayer.

That said, ‘Deliver us from evil’; Paul says, ‘The Lord shall deliver me from every evil work.’ That, according to one form of Matthew’s version, ends with the doxology: ‘Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory for ever. Amen’ Paul echoes that ascription of praise with his ‘to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.’ So we have here a little window through which we can see a wide prospect. For the gospels are later in date than Paul’s letters, and the text shows that long before they were in existence the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ was familiar, so that allusions to it were made tacitly, and would be recognised. This allusion is interesting in another point of view, in so far as it seems to prove that, in Paul’s time, at any rate, the doxology was appended to the Lord’s Prayer; and that, therefore, the fuller form of that prayer with the doxology is more original than the truncated form without it.

But passing from such considerations, let us note this word of Paul’s as an instance of how his mind was saturated with the Lord’s utterances. So it should be with us. Christ’s words should have so entered into the very substance of our minds and thoughts as that we give them freely forth again, in other shapes and in other connections; and the sweetness of them, like that of some perfume diffused through else scentless air, shall make all our words and thoughts fragrant, Do you so summer and winter with the Master’s words that they suggest themselves spontaneously to you often when you scarcely know that they are His, and that you speak them, not with formal quotation marks in front and behind, but in that allusive fashion, which indicates familiarity and the free use, in other combinations, of the great truths which He has spoken?

Notice, too, that Paul turned the prayer into confidence. In the prayer his Master had taught him to say, ‘Deliver us from evil.’ He had offered the petition, and therefore he had no more doubt than he had of his own existence or of Timothy’s, that, having asked, he would receive. Therefore he is sure that ‘the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work.’ Is that how you treat your prayers? Are they worth treating so? Are they offered with such confidence as that you have any right to be sure that they will be answered? Are they offered with such submission as that you may well be certain of it; and do you wait, as this Apostle did, quietly expecting to have the answers? And are your eyes anointed to see the answers in things that some people might take to be the contradictions of them? Unless we have so moulded our petitions into assurances there is something wrong with them. If we pray aright, 'Deliver us from evil,' there will rise up in our hearts the quiet confidence, 'the Lord will deliver me from every evil work.'

Here we have a beautiful illustration of the true use of -

II. Past experience.

Paul links two clauses together. He says, describing how these faint-hearted if not faithless friends had run away from him when the pinch of peril came, 'They all forsook me, but the Lord stood with me; and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.' He looks back to that recent instance of Christ's protecting care and delivering might, and so he changes his tenses, and brings the light of the past to flood the darkness of the present, and to flash into the obscurity of the future, and he says, 'I was delivered.., and the Lord will deliver me, from every evil.'

He has the same collocation of thoughts, as you may remember in another place where, speaking of other kinds of deliverances, he says that the Lord 'delivered him from so great a death' - that was in the past - 'and doth deliver' - that is the thrilling consciousness that the same power is in the present as in the past; that to-day is no more prosaic and devoid of God than any yesterday; and then he adds, 'In whom we trust that He will deliver us.' Such is the true attitude for a Christian man. Experience is not meant only, as is too often its sole effect, to throw light upon the past, but also to flash a cheery beam on the else dim. future; just as the eastern sky will sometimes throw a hint of its own glory upon the western heaven. To a Christian, every yesterday is a prophecy of a to-morrow that will be like it, and God's past is a pledge for God's future.

If we, if we are truly trusting in Him, may have the prerogative which belongs to His children alone, of being absolutely certain that 'to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant,' For there is nothing in the past, nothing in the miracles of former generations, nothing in the great deeds by which God has vindicated HIS protecting care over His people in the days that are gone, and nothing in the mercies and blessings and deliverances and immunities which we ourselves have received that is not available for to-morrow's consumption. The psalmist said, 'As we have heard so have we seen, in the City of our God.' The deeds of ancient days were repeated in the prosaic present.

And that is as true about the individual life as it is about the corporate life of the community. All of us, looking back to what God has done for us, may find therein the basis of the surest confidence that all that is but a specimen and pledge of what He will do. Nobody else but a Christian has the right to say, 'I have had this, that, and the other good; therefore I shall have it.' Rather, alas! a man that has wrenched himself away from God has to say sadly, 'I have had; therefore the likelihood is that I shall not have any more.'

Have you ever thought that the belief which we all have, and cannot get rid of, in the uniformity of nature, has no scientific basis? Everybody expects that the sun will rise to-morrow, and for a great many millions of years, perhaps the expectation is right; but there is coming a day when it will not rise. There is a last time - 'positively the very last' - for everything in the world, and in the order of nature, and the expectation of permanence by which we guide our lives is, at bottom, absolutely unfounded, and yet there it is, and we have to act upon it. But you can give no rational explanation of it, and it will not always serve., There was once made a calculating machine. You turned a handle, and ground out a succession of numbers, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, etc., each increasing on the preceding by one. And after that had gone on for a long series the sequence was broken, and there came out a number which did not stand in the series at all. That is how God has made nature; grinding away for millions of years, and everything going in regular sequence; but then there comes a break, and the old order changeth. A day will come which is the last day. The sun will set and not rise again, and the world, and all there is in it, shall cease to be.

And as with nature, so with our little lives, and with the men that we trust to. We have no right to say, 'I have been delivered, and therefore shall be delivered,' unless we have the Lord, who is the same yesterday and to-day and for ever at the back of our confidence. For men's resources fail and men's dispositions change. If I have helped a man a hundred times, that is not a reason for my helping him the hundred and first time. I may get tired, or perhaps I have not the wherewithal, or circumstances alter. Continuity does not guarantee permanence. You can weary out the most patient patience, and chill the warmest love. And so we have to turn from all the limited and changeful grounds of confidence in ourselves, in others, in the order of things about us, and to acknowledge that we do not know what to-morrow is going to do for us. We have had a great many blessings, but the future may be beggared and bankrupt of them all, unless we can say, like Paul, 'the Lord delivered me, and the Lord will deliver me.' For His past is the parent and the prophecy of His present, and He does not let His resources be exhausted or His patience wearied or His love disgusted. Thou hast been with me in six troubles, says Job-art Thou tired of being with me? - 'in the seventh Thou wilt not forsake me.' Thy past is the revelation of Thine eternal Self, and as Thou bast been so Thou wilt be. Christ, as the Incarnation of Divinity, lives, if I might use such a phrase, in a region that is high above the tenses of our verbs, in one eternal now, far below which, Past, Present, and Future, as we know them, are like the little partitions in our fields, which from the mountain-top melt away into invisibility, and do not divide the far-reaching plain.

Travellers see, in deserted, ancient cities, half-hewn statues, with one part polished and the rest rough, and the block not detached from the native rock. They were meant to be carried by 'the subjects of some forgotten king to build up some unfinished and never-to-be-finished temple or palace. There are no half-finished works in God's workshop; no pictures begun and uncompleted in Christ's studio: and so we can go to Him with the old prayer of the psalmist: 'The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me. Thy mercy, O Lord, endureth for ever; forsake not the work of Thine own hands.'

Lastly, we have here a great lesson of how -

III. A man close to death may think of it, 'The Lord will deliver me.'

Did He? ‘The Lord will save me... into His everlasting kingdom.’ Was that a mistake on Paul’s part? Very soon after he wrote these words, perhaps even before the winter against the cold of which he asked Timothy to bring his one cloak that he had left at Troas, he was again brought before the Emperor, and then was led outside the walls of Rome, where a gorgeous church now bears his name, and there, according to tradition was decapitated. Yes; that was just what he expected. For, as I have already pointed out, a verse or two before my text says, ‘I have finished my course.’ And yet, with the certainty that Death was close by him, he lifts up this ringing song Of triumph, ‘The Lord will deliver me from every evil work, and will save me into His heavenly Kingdom,’ He expected that deliverance and saving into the Kingdom to be accomplished precisely by the fact of his death.

A man who has a firm grip of Christ’s hand sees all things differently from him who has no such stay. If Jesus is standing by us, and strengthening us, we can look with a smile at the worst that Nero can do, and can tell even the executioner: You do not mean it; do you know what you are doing? You think you are inflicting evil upon me. You are delivering me from every evil.’ Death is the great emancipator from all manner of evil, be it the evil of sorrows or the evil of their parent sins. And he who rightly understands the operation of that, the last of earthly incidents, understands that it is, in the fullest sense, the smiting off of his chains, and the lifting of him up high into a region where no malaria of evil can ever rise.

Death is not merely to be looked at on the side of what it takes a man away from, but on the side of what it introduces him to. ‘He shall deliver me from every evil’; that is much, but it might be effected by crushing the man’s consciousness and annihilating him. Bare exemption and escape from the ills that flesh is heir to are not all the choice gifts with which Death-comes laden. In his bony left hand is the gift of deliverance from all evil. In his right there is the positive gift of participation in all good. ‘He shall deliver me from evil, and shall save me into His everlasting Kingdom.’ And so that grim form is the porter at the gate, who ushers the man who has hoped in Christ into the royalty of His presence.

Mark that here, for the only time in Scripture, we have the expression, the 'heavenly Kingdom.' Why? Because Paul knew and felt that he was in the Kingdom already, and so he could not say barely that Christ through death was going to save him into the Kingdom. He was already there, but just because he was, therefore the last enemy assumed this friendly and familiar form to him, and was sure to bring him into the heavenly form of the Kingdom, of whose earthly form he was already a subject. If - and only if - you are in the Kingdom here, can you quietly look forward and be sure that the Lord, when He sends His messenger, will send Him to do the double work of delivering you out of all evil, and ushering you into all glory of good.

Titus

1) TITUS 2:10
2) TITUS 2:11-12
3) TITUS 2:12
4) TITUS 2:13
5) TITUS 2:14
6) TITUS 2:14
7) TITUS 2:14
8) TITUS 3:8

1) Titus 2:10

Titus

CHRISTIANS MAKING THE GOSPEL BEAUTIFUL

Tit. 2:10

THAT is a wonderful hope to hold forth before any man, that he may add beauty to the gospel. And it is still more wonderful when we remember that these words were originally addressed to a handful of slaves - the lowest of the population, whose lives were passed in sordid squalor; whose duties Were narrow and often repulsive, and yet they in their limited sphere and lowly lot might make fairer the truth which is already beautiful with all the beauty of God.

I. Let us then think for a moment of this wonderful possibility that is opened out here before every Christian, that he may add beauty to the gospel.

He may paint the lily and gild the refined gold; for men do quite rightly and legitimately, judge of systems by their followers. It would not be a fair thing to test a philosophy or a body of political or scientific truth by the conduct and character of the men who professed it; but it is a perfectly fair thing, under certain conditions and in certain limits, to test a system of practical morality, which professes to do certain things with people's character and conduct, by its professors. It is just as fair, when a creed comes before our notice which assumes to influence men's conduct, to say:

'Well, I should like to see it working,' as it is for any of you mill-owners to say, when a man comes to you with a fine invention upon paper, 'Have you got a working model of it? Has it ever been tried? What have been the results that have been secured by it?' Or as it would be to say to anybody that claimed to have got a 'medicine that will cure consumption,' to say:

'Have you any cases? Can you quote any cures?' So when we Christians stand up and say, 'We have a faith which is able to deaden men's minds to the world; which is able to make them unselfish; which is able to lift them up above cares and sorrows; which is able to take men and transform their whole nature, and put new desires and hopes and joys into them'; it is quite fair for the world to say: 'Have you? Does it? Does it do so with you? Can you produce your lives as working models of Christianity? Can you produce your cure as a proof of the curative power of the gospel that you profess?'

So, dear friends, this possibility does lie before all Christian men, that they may by their lives conciliate prejudices, prepare people to listen favourably to the message of God's love, win over men from their aura-gonism, and make them say: 'Well, after all, there is something in that Christianity.'

It is not altogether and without limitation a fair thing to do to argue back from the lives of disciples to the truth of the creed, because all men are worse than their principles; and because, too, though a Christian man's goodness ought to be put down to the credit of his creed, a Christian man's badness ought to be put down to the debit of himself. But somehow or other the world, when it sees Christian people that do not live up to the level of their profession, does say, however illogically, both of two things, both of which cannot be true; first of all, 'A pretty kind of Christians these are!' and second, 'There cannot be much in the system that produces such!' One or other of the two things they ought to say. They ought either to say: 'You are a hypocrite!' or they ought to say: 'Your Christianity is not worth much!' But, illogically enough, they generally say both. And so you both damage yourselves in their eyes, and damage the religion you profess, by your inconsistencies and your faults.

Our lives ought to be like the mirror of a reflecting telescope. The astronomer does not look directly up into the sky when he wants to watch the heavenly bodies, but down into the mirror on which their reflection is cast. And so our little, low lives down here upon earth should so give back the starry bodies and infinitudes above us that some dim eyes, which peradventure could not gaze into the violet abysses with their lustrous points, may behold them reflected in the beauty of our life. The doctrines of Christianity, when they are only in words, are less fair than the same truths when they are embodied in a life. It is beautiful to say: 'If ye love Me keep My commandments'; but the beauty of the words is less than when they are illustrated in a life. Our lives should be like the old missals, where you find the loving care of the monastic scribe has illuminated and illustrated the holy text, or has rubricated and gilded some of the letters. The best Illustrated Bible is the conduct of the people who profess to take it for their guide and law.

II. So much, then, for the first point, the wondrous possibility that is opened in this text. Now let me say a word about the other side the solemn alternative.

If you look at the context you will see that a set of exhortations preceding these to the slaves, which are addressed to the wives, end with urging as the great motive to the conduct enjoined, ‘that the Word of God be not blasphemed.’ That is the other side of the same thought as is in my text. The issues of the conduct of professing Christians are the one or other of these two, either to add beauty to the gospel or to cause the Word of God to be blasphemed. If you do not the one you will be doing the other. If my life is not throwing back honour upon the gospel from which it manifestly flows, and by which it is manifestly molded, it will be throwing back discredit. Your lives, professing Christians, are not neutral in their effect upon men’s estimate of your creed. Either you attract or repel. The one pole of the magnet or the other you do present. Either you make men think better of God’s truth, or you make them think worse of it. There are no worse enemies of the gospel than its inconsistent friends. That is especially true in lands where the Christian Church is a little band amongst heathens, as was the case with the churches of which Titus had charge. Who is it that thwarts missionary work in India? Englishmen. Who is it that, wherever they go with their ships, put a taunt into the lips of the enemy which Christian workers find it hard to meet? English sailors. The notorious dissipation and immorality amongst the representatives of English commerce in the various Eastern centers of trade puts a taunt into the mouth of the abstemious Hindu and of the Chinaman. ‘These are your Christians, are they?’ England, that sends out missionaries in the cabin, and Bibles and rum side by side amongst the cargo, has to listen, and her people have to take to themselves the awful words with which the ancient Jewish inconsistencies were rebuked: ‘Through you the name of God is blasphemed amongst the Gentiles.’

And in less solemn manner perhaps, but just truly, here, in a so-called Christian land, the inconsistencies, the selfishness, the worldliness of professing Christian people, the absolute absence of all apparent difference between them and the most godless man in the same circumstances, are the things which perhaps more than anything else counteract the evangelistic efforts of the Christian Church. What is the good of my one voice preaching, if so many live in diametrical opposition to that which has been preached? One man pulls one way for twenty-five minutes, and hundreds pull the other way for a week; which will pull the most? If the Christian Church, and we as members of it, were living as we ought to do, and as we might do, far more than all eloquent teaching would be the result of our simple lives of transparent godliness. My brother! I bring to each of you the very solemn question: Do you repel or attract? You have, perhaps, children. Are they favourably disposed to Christianity because of what they see in the lives of their father and mother? or do your inconsistencies, which the sharp eyes that see you in your easy moments at home cannot hut notice however loving they may be, drive them away and disgust them with a profession of religion, and with religion itself?

You have friends and acquaintances, and a circle whom you influence. Do you influence them to look with favour upon that Word which has made you what you are? Or do you turn them away from it?

Remember, remember,
either you beautify or
you blaspheme the gospel by your conduct.

III. Once more, let me ask you to consider the sort of life that will thus commend and adorn the gospel

First of all it must be a life conspicuously and uniformly under the influence of Christian principles. I put emphasis upon these two words ‘conspicuously’ and ‘uniformly.’ You will be of very little use if your Christian principle is so buried in your life, embedded beneath a mass of selfishness and worldliness and indifference as that it takes a microscope, and a week’s looking for to find it. And you will be of very little use, either, if your life is by fits and starts under the influence of Christian principle; a minute guided by that and ten minutes guided by the other thing ; - if here and there, sprinkled thinly over the rotting mass, there be a handful of the saving salt. We want uniformity and we want conspicuousness of Christian principle in our lives if they are to be a power to witness for our Master.

And remember, too, as the context teaches us, that the lives which commend and adorn the doctrine must be such as manifest Christian principle in the smallest details. These slaves, in their smoky huts, with their little tasks, and by the exercise of very homely virtues, were to ‘adorn the doctrine.' Do you ever notice what it is that Paul tells them to 'do that they may' adorn the doctrine'? Here is the list - 'Obedient to their masters, not answering again, not purloining but showing all good fidelity.' Very homely virtues; there is nothing at all lofty or transcendent or above the pedestrian level of a prosaic life in that. Obedience, keeping a civil tongue in their heads in the midst of provocation, not indulging in petty pilfering, being true to the trust that was given to them. 'That is no great thing,' you may say, but in these little things they were to adorn the great doctrine of God their Saviour. Ay! the smallest duties are in some sense the largest sphere for the operation of great principles. For it is the little duties which by their minuteness tempt men to think that they can do them without calling in the great principles of conduct, that give the colour to every life after all. You can write the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in the space of a three penny bit; you can make all the beauty and all the sanctifying power of the gospel visible and manifest within the narrow circle of the smallest duties that the lowest station has to perform. The little banks of mud in the wheel-tracks in the road are shaped upon the same slopes, and moulded by the same law that carves the mountains and lifts the precipices of the Himalayas. And a handful of snow in the hedge in the winter time will fall into the same curves, and be obedient to the same great physical laws which shape the glaciers that lie on the sides of the Alps. You do not want big things in order, largely and nobly, to manifest big principles. The smallest duties, distinctly done for Christ's sake, will adorn the doctrine: -

'A servant, with this clause, Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a house as by Thy laws
Makes that and the calling fine.'

'Adorn the doctrine of God in all things.' And then again, I may say that the manner of life which commends the gospel will be one conspicuously above the level of the morality of the class to which you belong. These slaves were warned not to fall into the vices that were proper to their class, in order that by not falling into them, and so being unlike their fellows, they might glorify the gospel For the things that Paul warns them not to do are the faults which all history and experience tell us are exactly the vices of the slave - petty pilfering, a rank tongue blossoming into insolent speech, a disregard of the master’s interests, sulky disobedience or sly evasion of the command. These are the kind of things that the devilish institution of slavery makes almost necessary on the part of the slave, unless some higher motive and loftier principle come in to counteract the effects.

And in like manner all of us have, in the class to which we belong, and the sort of life which we have to live, certain evils natural to our position; and unless you are unlike the non-Christian men of your own profession and the people that are under the same worldly influence as you are - unless you are unlike them in that your righteousness exceeds their righteousness, ‘Ye shall in no wise enter the Kingdom of Heaven.’ My brother, if you and the godless man whose warehouse is up the same staircase pursue your business on the same maxims, have the same ideas as to what is desirable, press towards the same end, take the same short cuts through some morality in order to reach it, what is the good of your saying you are a Christian? If there is no difference between you and them, to your advantage and to the advantage of the gospel that you profess, say no more about your being dead to the world by the Cross of Christ, and living for higher and other motives.

If you are to adorn the doctrine you must conspicuously and uniformly, in great things and in small things, be living by other laws than those obey who believe not the doctrine. Unless it can be said of us: ‘There is a people here whose laws are different from all people that be on the earth,’ we shall never beautify the gospel of Christ.

And now one last word. How is such a manner of life to be attained? I know of only one way, and that is by continually living near Jesus Christ. If we are to beautify Him, He must first beautify us. If we are to adorn the doctrine, the doctrine must adorn us. That is to say, it is only when we live near Him, are in constant touch of His hand, and communion with His spirit, it is only then that His beauty shall pass into our faces, and that beholding the glory of the Lord ‘we shall be changed into the same image from glory to glory.’ We must be on the mountain like Moses in fellowship with our Master, if we are to come down and walk amongst men with radiance streaming from our countenance, so as that all that look upon us shall behold our face 'as it had been the face of an angel.' 'Ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord; this people have I formed for Myself, they shall show forth My praise'

2) Titus 2:11-12

Titus

THE SCHOOL OF GRACE

Tit. 2:11-12.

THE Apostle has been giving fatherly admonitions as to very elementary pieces of morality, addressed to both sexes, and to all ages. He winds up with inculcating on Christian slaves some obvious duties, such as obedience and honesty. In my text he bases all these on what was to him the motive and the power for all sorts of righteous living - viz., the fact of Christ's mission. The 'for' with which my text begins carries with it the whole relation between Christian thinking and Christian action, and shows us that the loftiest truths are then most honoured when they are brought to bear on the lowliest duties. Slaves are not to pilfer nor wrangle, 'for the grace that brings salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching.'

Now there are two remarks that I must make of an expository kind in order to come to the understanding of the words before us. One is that the collocation in our Authorised Version, 'hath appeared to all men,' is not what Paul means, but these last words, 'to all men,' should be connected with the previous ones, 'that bringeth salvation.' It is not part of his purpose to declare, what was not in fact true then, and is not true now, that the grace of God has appeared to all men, but it was part of his purpose to declare that that grace brings salvation to all men, howsoever the present range of its manifestation may historically be contracted. The other remark that I would make is that 'teaching' is by no means a sufficiently comprehensive expression to cover the Apostle's thought, for the word which he employs, whilst it does mean the communication of instruction, carries with it inseparably the other ideas of correcting faults and of chastisement. It is the same which is used in the well-known words, ‘Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.’ So that what the Apostle says here is that the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, schooling, or training, or disciplining.

I. Let us, then, first look at the appearance of the grace.

Now that word ‘grace’ played a much larger part in the thoughts of our fathers than it does in ours; and I am not sure that many things are more needed by the ordinary Christian of this generation than that he should rediscover the amplitude and the majesty of that old-fashioned and unfashionable word. For what does ‘grace’ mean? It means a self-originated love. Grace is love that has no motive but itself. Grace is a self-motived love that is in full energetic exercise. Grace is a self-motived, ever-acting love that delights to impart. Grace is a self-motived, ever-acting, communicating love which bends in tenderness over and floods with gifts those that stand far beneath itself. Grace is a self-motived, ever-acting, communicating, and stooping love which brings in its hands the gift of forgiveness, and deals with those on whom it lavishes this tenderness, not according to their merits, but according to the pulsations of its own heart. And thus grace is the shorthand word for the self-motived, ever-acting, communicating, stooping, and pardoning mercy which has its very home and throne in the heart of God Himself. It is this galaxy of stars blended into one diffused light, and yet capable of being resolved into so many suns, which the Apostle here says ‘hath appeared.’ He uses a most significant and picturesque word, for it is the expression which is proper to describe the raying out in the heavens of its great lights, and in the only place in Scripture in which it is applied to physical things is in reference to the sun and stars which, clouded by tempest, for many days did not ‘appear,’ nor could beam their sweet light on the darkened earth. In all other cases where the word is employed it has a definite and plain meaning. It always refers to the coming of Jesus Christ, either his first coming in the Incarnation, or his second coming to Judgment. That manifestation is the raying out, as it were, of a sun, which has been obscured by the mists of sin, rising from the undrained swamps of our own hearts, and it pours itself down upon the mists; and thins them away until its radiant light is spread over all the glittering and rejoicing earth.

So the Apostle has a definite meaning, and points to a definite historical fact, when he declares that, in the Person and life of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, all this self-originated, active, communicating stooping, pardoning love finds its highest manifestation. The fire-mist, if I might so say, which was diffused through a chaotic universe, is gathered together into a sun, and it blazes down upon the world.

Now, of course, that conception of the life of Jesus Christ as the appearance of the grace of God rests upon the other belief that Jesus Christ has a special and unique relation to the God whose love He manifests. And this is the point of view from which the approaching Christmas festival has to be regarded by Christian people. Unless we can say, ‘the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,’ we cannot go on to say, ‘We beheld his glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.’ Christmas celebrates not merely the birth of a man: but the Incarnation of a God. The ‘grace that bringeth salvation to all men hath appeared.’ Ay, there is the great peculiarity, there are the power and the blessedness of Christianity in its teaching, that now we no longer need to grope after God, searching painfully for traces of His footsteps in the maze of the world’s history, or consulting the ambiguous oracles of nature, or looking for Him in the intuitions of our own hearts, our hopes and fears, but that we can turn to historical facts and say, ‘Lo! this is our God. We have waited for Him, and He will save us.’ The day of peradventures is past, when we listen to his ‘Verily! verily! I say unto you... he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.’

And so the Word was flesh, and wrought With ‚human hands the creed of creeds In loveliness of perfect deeds, Higher than all poetic thought.’

‘The grace of God hath appeared.’

II. Note the gift of the grace.

It ‘bringeth salvation to all men.’ Now I suppose one reason which recommended what I have already designated as an erroneous connection of words in our Authorised Version is the difficulty of believing in the face of facts that Christ, in His character of the embodied grace of God, did bring salvation to all men. But the explanation of the seeming difficulty is not to be found in twisting the words out of their proper order, but in understanding the words in the order in which they occur. For when the Apostle says that this grace brings salvation unto all, he does not say that all receive the salvation which is brought to them. There is a whole world of difference between the two expressions. And the word that he employs - for it is one word in the original which is rendered in our Version by the three ‘that bringeth salvation’ - does not describe an actuality, but a potentiality and a possibility. The aim and purpose, not the realised effect, is what is pointed out in this great word of our text.

For there is a condition necessary from the very nature of the case. If God could save all men, be sure that He would do it; the love that thus takes its rise in the councils of Eternity, and flows on for ever through the waste and barren ages of human history, and is ever waiting to bestow itself, in its tenderness and in its liberality upon all men, is not made leas universal, but it is conditioned by the nature of the gift that it brings. Salvation cannot be flung broadcast and indiscriminately upon all men of all sorts, whatever their relation to God. If it could, be sure that it would be. But just because it is a deep and inward thing, affecting men’s moral and religious state, and not only their position in regard to some future hell, it cannot be given thus broadcast, it must be sown in the fitting places. The one thing that is requisite, and it is indispensably requisite, is that I shall trust Him who brings salvation, and, trusting Him, shall take it out of His hand. If the medicine stands on the shelf, in the bottle with the stopper in, the sick man will not be cured. That is not the fault of the medicine; it is a panacea, but no remedy can work where it is not applied. This great ocean of the divine love goes, as it were, feeling along the black cliffs that front it, for some cranny into which it may pour itself, but the obstinate rock can fling it all back in impotent spray. Though the whole Atlantic surges against the cliff, it is dry an inch inwards. Thus the universality of the gift, the universal potency of the gift, is not in the slightest degree affected by the fact that, where it is not taken, its benefits are not realised. Have you shut your hearts to it, or have you opened them?

Paul recognised that this grace of God came with a gift that was meant for everybody, mainly because he knew that it had come with a gift that had done what it aimed at for him. Like every true Christian man, he felt, as you and I ought to feel, that if it were able to save me it is able to save anybody, and that if it can cast out my faults and sins, though I may not have fallen into gross sins, or what the world calls crimes, there is no man whose iniquities will foil it. ‘Of whom I am chief’ is not an exaggeration, but it is the verdict of an honest conscience that knows the inside of one man, at all events, and knows how much of his surface innocence is deceptive, and how much of it is due not to himself, but to circumstances.

‘The arms of love that compassed me
Would all mankind embrace.’

You know, some of you, that He has cleansed you. You know that He would have cleansed you more completely if you had let Him; and, knowing that, can you doubt that He would cleanse everybody?

The universality of the gift is manifest in the fact that it addresses itself only to needs which belong to every man, for the deepest of all needs is the need that our relations to God shall be set right, and that we shall be delivered from the bondage and the tyranny of our sins.

And that universal potentiality and universal aim are still further written in unmistakable characters upon the mission and work of Jesus Christ, inasmuch as it requires only, as its condition, that which all men can render. For if it had been meant for sections it would have called for qualifications which only classes can possess. If our understanding had been the organ for receiving the truth, it would have been a gospel for the wise men of the world, and the wayfaring man, the fool, would have been shut out. But now there is but the one condition of trust in the one omnipotent grace, and since all men, if they would, could put forth a believing hand, the very condition, instead of being a limitation, is a demonstration of the universality of the gift.

We have to look out over all the world, the outcasts, the slum-dwellers, the barbarian races, and as the main thought about them, to cherish the undying assurance that not one of them but is capable of being lifted by the grace of God from the depths into which they have fallen. That is not the way in which people look at ‘the dangerous classes’ of civilisation and at the savage races outside its pale. Some of us are looking now at the latter mainly as beasts of burden, and hoping to exploit their muscles in the search after wealth and glory. Jesus Christ looks at them, and you and I ought to look at them, as possible candidates for the elevating influences of His grace. There is no metal so hard but, cast into that furnace of love, it will melt and flow. There is no reed so broken and trampled into the mud but that His gracious hands, with His deft and loving gentleness of touch, can bind it up and make it whole, and make it blossom. And there is no foulness so black but that this detergent can wash it white. There is no man on the face of the earth, nor ever has been, so brutalised but that, by the grace of God, he may be deified, made ‘ partaker of a divine nature.’ Grace ‘brings salvation to all men.’

III. Lastly, let me point you to the discipline of the Grace.

As I have already said, ‘teaching’ here implies not only the communication of instruction, either outwardly or inwardly, but also a disciplinary process of correction that includes necessarily chastisement. Jesus Christ comes to us, and brings the external means of communicating instruction in the record of His life in this book. And He comes to us, also doing what no other teacher can do, for He passes into our spirits, and communicates not only instruction but the Spirit which teaches them in whom it abides, and guides them with gentle illumination into ‘all truth! concerning God, Christ, and themselves, which it is needful for them to know.

Nor does His work stop there, for He corrects and rebukes.

Nor does His work stop there, for as He Himself has said, ‘As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten’ He comes ‘with a rod’ sometimes, but always ‘in the spirit of meekness.’ He uses not only inward but also outward chastisements. The knife mercilessly cuts away the tender, pliant tendrils of the vine, and the sap bleeds out at the wound, but the life does not; and the result of the pruning is larger and mellower clusters, ruddy in the sunlight and full of generous juice. So be sure of two things, dear friends, that it is grace which chastens, that the knife is held by a loving hand, and that the purpose of our outward sorrows, as well as of our inward discipline, is ‘that we may be partakers of His holiness.’ That grace is not like some unskilful surgeon, who cuts so deep that, in the effort to remove the tumour, he kills the sufferer; but His surgery knows to a hairsbreadth where to stop, and when the incision has Served its purpose.

‘The grace of God hath appeared disciplining.’ Disciplining? What for? Is the discipline to be sedulously carried on for threescore years and ten, and there an end? If we will only think of life as Christ’s school, we shall understand it better than from any other point of view; and be certain that all these capacities, which are imparted and unfolded and trained by us, exercised here, will find a better field beyond. Jesus Christ, the embodied Grace, has appeared to us. He prays us with much entreaty to receive His gift. If we will enroll ourselves in His school, and learn His lessons, and accept His corrections, and submit to His chastisements as tokens of His love and of His desire that we shall bear better fruit, then, as schoolboys say, we shall ‘get our remove’ when we are ready for it, and go up into the top form. And there not only Grace but Glory will be our teacher, and we shall learn from the Glory more than ever on earth we learned from the Grace.

3) Titus 2:12

Titus

THE PURPOSE OF GRACE

Tit. 2:12.

To appreciate the full force of these words, we must observe that they are the Apostle’s statement of the ultimate design of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and of all the wonderful powers and gifts which Christ brought with Him. In our text, the end for which that grace has appeared and exercises its corrective discipline is defined. It comes in order that, denying ungodliness, and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly.

Now, remember that Paul thought that the life and the death of Jesus Christ were the most stupendous of miracles, nothing less than the entrance of divinity in a human form into the limitations of our lives, and His participation in the darkness of our deaths.

Remember that he believed that Jesus Christ’s coming had led to a continual gift of an actual divine life to men who trusted Him; then you will see the grandeur and significance of the words of my text. What has this divine miracle of mercy been for? Nothing but this, to help men here to-day to live good lives. If there were no future at all, says Paul, the expenditure of the divine love is amply vindicated. The sun does not disdain to shine in order to ripen the vegetables in the humble cottage garden, and the love of God did not conceive that it had too small an object to warrant all that lavish gift which is in Christ, in helping us to live as becomes us. How dear we must be to God, and how infinitely important in His eyes must conduct and character be if such an abundance and variety of divine influences were set in motion to produce such an effect! Now, the first thing that strikes me about these words is the fair picture that they draw of what every life should be; and next, the hard conditions which they impose upon men who would live so; and then, what God has given us to make such lives possible. So I ask you to look at these three points.

I. The fair picture of what our lives should be.

Paul is saying nothing more than conscience, reason, the instincts of men everywhere endorse. His requirements in the rough division of virtues which he adopts, not for scientific accuracy but for practical force, are really said ‘Amen!’ to by every honest conscience ‘Soberly, righteously, godly’ - that is what everybody, if he will be fair with himself, feels to be the sort of life he ought to live. Let me just touch upon these three things very briefly. They may be said, roughly, though not very accurately, perhaps, to cover the ground of a man’s duties to himself, to his neighbours, and to God.

‘Soberly’ - that is what you owe to your own nature. ‘Righteously’ - that is what you owe to people round you. ‘Godly’ - that is what you owe to Him. I need not explain, I suppose, that the word ‘soberly’ has by no means the narrow signification which the besetting vice of England has given to it now - viz., abstinence from, or a very restrained use of, intoxicating liquors, nor even the wider one of a curbing of the desires of sense. But the meaning may be better represented by self-control than by any other rendering. Now if there were no man in the world but myself, and if I had no thought or knowledge of God, and if there were no other standard to which I ought to conform, I should have, in my own nature, with its crowd of desires, tastes, inclinations, and faculties, plain indication that self-government was essential. For human nature is not constituted on the plan of a democracy or an ochlocracy - a mob rule - but there is a clear hierarchy and order of predominance in it; and, as plainly as a ship is made to need a rudder, so plainly on your make is there stamped the necessity for rigid self-control.

For we all carry with us desires, inclinations, appetites - some of them directly connected with our physical frame, and some of them a little more refined - which are mere blind inclinations to a given specific good, and will be stirred up, apart altogether from the question of whether it is expedient or right to gratify them. To a hungry man the odour of food is equally enticing, whether the food belongs to himself or his neighbour; and if he had to steal for it, it would still tempt him. Because, then, we are to a large extent made up of blind desires which take no account of anything except their appropriate food, the commandment comes from the deepest recesses of each nature, as well as from the great throne in the heavens -’Live soberly.’

The engines will work on all the same, though the bows of the ship be turned to the rocks, and driving straight on the reef. It is the engineer’s business to start them and keep them going; it is their business to turn the screw; it is somebody else’s business to look after the navigation. We have our ‘humours under lock and key’ in order that we may control them. And if we do not, we shall go all to rack and ruin. So, ‘live soberly,’ says Paul.

The next requirement is, ‘righteously.’ Now, I said that that might, perhaps, be roughly explained as referring mainly to our duties to one another. But that is not by any means an exhaustive - and perhaps, a scarcely approximate - description. For the attitude expressed in ‘righteously’ does not so much point to other people as to the existence of a certain standard, external to ourselves, to which it is our business and wisdom to conform. I said that, if there were nothing in the world except a man and his own nature, the duty of sober self-government would necessarily arise. But the supposed isolation does not exist. We stand in certain relations to a whole universe of things and of people, and there does rise before every man, however it may be accounted for, or explained away, or tampered with, or neglected, a standard of right and wrong. And what Paul here, means by ‘live righteously’ is, ‘Do as you know you ought to do,’ and in shaping your character, have reference not merely to its constitution, but to its relations to all this universe of outside facts.

So far as the word may include our duty to others, I may just remind you that ‘righteousness’ in reference to our fellows demands mercy. The common antithesis which is drawn between a just man who will give everybody what they deserve, and not one scrap more nor less if he can help it, and a kindly man is erroneous, because every man has a claim upon every other man for lenient judgment and undeserved help. He may not deserve it, being such a man as he is; but he has a right to it, being a man at all. And no man is righteous who is not merciful We do not fulfil the prophet’s exhortation, ‘do justice,’ unless we fulfil his other, ‘love mercy.’ For mercy is the right of all men.

The last of the phases under which the perfect life is represented here takes us up at once into another region. If there were nobody but myself in the world, it must be my duty to live controlling myself; since I stand in relations manifold to creatures manifold and to the whole order of things, it is my duty to conform to the standard, and to do what is right. And just as plainly as the obligations to sobriety and righteousness press on every man, so plainly is godliness necessary to his perfection. For I am not only Bound by ties which knit me to my fellows, or to this visible order, but the closest of all bonds, the most real of all relations, is that which hinds us each to God.

And if ‘man’s chief end be to glorify God,’ and then and thus, ‘to enjoy Him for ever,’ then that end, in its very nature, must be all pervasive, and diffuse its sweetness into the other two. For you cannot sliver up the unity of life into little sections and say, ‘This deed has to be done soberly, and that one righteously, and this one godly,’ but godliness must cover the whole life, and be the power of self-control and of righteousness. ‘All in all or not at all.’ Godliness must Be uniform and universal. Lacking their supreme beauty are the lives of all who endeavour to keep these other two departments of duty and forget this third. There are many men - I have no doubt there are some of them among us - punctiliously trying to control their natures, and to live righteously; but all their thoughts run along the low levels, and they are absolutely blind and deaf to voices and sights from heaven-They are like some of those truncated pyramids, broad-based upon the solid earth, and springing with firm lines to a certain height, and then coming to a dead stop, and so being but stumps, which leave a sense of incompleteness, because all the firm lines have not gathered themselves up into the sky-piercing point which aspires still higher than it has reached.

‘Soberly,’ that is much; ‘ righteously,’ that is more; ‘godly,’ that is, not most, but all.

II. Secondly, notice what a hard task the man has who will live so.

The Apostle, very remarkably, puts first, in my text, a negative clause. The things that he says we are to deny are the exact opposites of the characteristics that he says we are to aim after. ‘Denying ungodliness’ - that is clearly the opposite of ‘godly’; and ‘worldly lusts,’ though perhaps not so obviously, yet certainly is the antithesis of ‘soberly’ and ‘righteously.’ I need not remind you, I suppose, that the word ‘lusts’ here has not the carnal associations cleaving to it which have gradually accrued to it in the changes of language since our translation was made, but that it implies simply ‘ desires,’ longings, of however refined and incorporeal a sort, which attach themselves to the fleeting things of this life. Pride, ambition, and all the more refined and less sensual desires are as much included as the grossest animalism in which any swine of a man can wallow. Worldly lusts are desires which say to earth, and to what earth can give, in any of its forms, ‘Thou art my god, and having thee I am satisfied.’ Now, says Paul, there is no good to be done in the matter of acquiring these positive graces, without which a life is contemptible and poor, unless, side by side with the continual effort at the acquisition of the one, there be the continual and resolute effort at the excision and casting out of the other. Why? Because they are in possession. A man cannot be godly unless he casts out the ungodliness that cleaves to his nature; nor can he rule himself and seek after righteousness unless he ejects the desires that are in possession of his heart. You have to get rid of the bad tenant if you would bring in the good one. You have to turn the current, which is running in the wrong direction. And so it comes to be a very hard, painful thing for a man to acquire these graces of which my text speaks. People talk as if what was needed was the cultivation of what we have. Aye! that is needed; but there is something else than that needed. ‘You have to turn out a great deal of bad in order to make room for the good. Not that the evil can be expelled without the entrance of the good, as I shall have to say in a moment. But still the two things must go on side by side.

And so it is hard work for a man to grow better. If we had only to advance in practice, or knowledge, or sentiment, or feeling, that would not be so difficult to do; but you have to reverse the action of the machine; and that is hard. Can it be done? Who is to keep the keepers? It is difficult for the same self to be sacrifice and priest. It is a hard matter for a man to crucify himself, and we may well say, if there can be no progress in goodness without this violent and’ thorough mutilation and massacre of the evil that be in us, alas! for us all I am sure, as sure as I stand here, that there are plenty of young men and women among my hearers now who have tried once and again, and have failed once and again, to ‘live soberly, righteously, and godly,’ because the evil that is in them has been too strong for them.

III. I come, lastly, on the strength of that grand first word of my text, ‘in order that,’ to remind you of what God gives us to make such life possible.

‘The grace of God, that bringeth salvation to all men, hath appeared disciplining us,’ for this purpose, that the things which are impossible with men may be possible with God. Christ and His love; Christ and His life; Christ and His death; Christ and His Spirit; in these are new hopes, motives, powers, which avail to do the thing that no man can do. An infant’s finger cannot reverse the motion of some great engine. But the hand that made it can touch some little tap or lever, and the mighty masses of polished iron begin to move the other way. And so God, and God only, can make it possible for us to deny ourselves ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to ‘live soberly, righteously, godly, in this present world.’ That Jesus who comes to us to mould our hearts into hitherto unfelt love, by reason of His own great love, and who gives to us His own Spirit to be the life of our lives, gives us by these gifts new motives, new powers, new tastes, new affections. He puts the reins into our hands, and enables us to control and master our unruly tempers and inclinations. If you want to clear out a tube of any sort, the way to do it is to insert some solid substance, and push, and that drives out the clogging matter. Christ’s love coming into the heart expels the evil, just as the sap rising in the tree pushes off the old leaves that have hung there withered all the winter. As Luther used to say, ‘You cannot clean out the stable with barrows and shovels. Turn the Elbe into it.’ Let that great flood of life pour into our hearts, and it will not be hard to ‘live soberly.’

He comes to help us to live ‘righteously.’ He gives us His own life to dwell in our hearts, in no mere metaphor, but in simple fact. And they who trust in Jesus Christ are righteous by no mere fiction of a righteousness reckoned, but by the blessed reality of a righteousness imparted.

He comes to make it possible for us to live ‘godly.’ For He, and He alone, has the secret of drawing hearts to God; because He, and He alone, has opened the secret of God’s heart to us. As long as we think of that Father in the heavens as demanding and commanding, we shall not love Him, nor serve Him, nor live ‘godly.’ ‘I knew thee that thou wast an austere man…’therefore I was afraid, and hid my talent in the earth.’ But when we learn that ‘God’ and ‘Love’ spell with the same letters, and that He gives us in Christ the power to be what He commands us to become, then our spirits are stirred into thankful obedience.

So, dear friends, you that have been, as I am sure many of you have been, trying over and over again to mend yourselves, and have failed, listen to this gospel. You that have been sitting at the foot of the mountain, and seeing the shining towers of the fair palace-temple on its summit, and have made two or three feeble and foiled efforts to reach it, and then have fallen back again, do not despair or fancy that the heights are inaccessible. Trust yourselves to Christ, and let His life come into your spirits, and He will 'make your feet as hind's feet, to tread upon the high places.' He will be the path, and will show the path, and will give His angels charge concerning thee, to bear thee up in their hands, and to carry thee at last thither, whither He desires to bring thee.

'Say not in thy heart, Who shall ascend up into the heavens? The word is nigh thee.' Trust thyself to that Son of Man who came down from heaven, and was in heaven when He came, and He will become the ladder, with its foot on the earth, by which even your feeble steps may rise to God.

4) Titus 2:13

Titus

THE HAPPY HOPE

Tit. 2:13.

THERE are two appearances spoken of in this context - the appearance of 'the grace of God that bringeth salvation'; and parallel with that, though at the same time contrasted with it, as being in very important senses one in nature and principle, though diverse in purpose and diverse in manner, is what the Apostle here calls 'the glorious appearing of the great God.'

The antithesis of contrast and of parallel is still more striking in the original than in our version, where our translators have adopted a method of rendering of which they are very fond, and which very often obscures the full meaning of the text. Paul wrote, 'Looking for that blessed [or 'happy'] hope, even the appearing of the glory of the great God and our Saviour,' where you see he contrasts, even more sharply than our Bible makes him do, the past appearance of the grace, and the future appearance of the glory.

Then, further, this appearance of the glory; however bright with the terrible beauty and flashing lustre of divine majesty it may be, seems to the Apostle to be infinitely desirable, and becomes to him a happy hope. The reality, when it comes, will be pure joy. The irradiation of its approach shines from afar on his brightening face, and lightens his heart with a hope which is a prophetic joy. And the attitude of the Christian soul towards it is to be that of glad expectation, watching the dawning east and ready to salute the sun. And yet further, this attitude of happy expectation of the glory is one chief object to be attained by the grace that has appeared. It came ‘teaching,’ or rather [as the word more accurately means] ‘disciplining, that we should live looking for that happy hope.’

So, then, we have here for our consideration three points embodied in these words - The grace of God has appeared, the glory of God is to appear; the appearance of the glory is a blessed hope; the disciplining of the grace prepares us for the expectation of the glory.

I. First, then, take that thought - The appearance of the grace leads to the appearance of the glory.

The identity of the form of expression in the two clauses is intended to suggest the likeness of and the connection between the two appearances. In both there is a visible manifestation of God, and the latter rests upon the former, and completes and crowns it.

But the difference between the two is as strongly marked as the analogy; and it is not difficult to grasp distinctly the difference which the Apostle intends. While both are manifestations of the divine character in exercise, the specific phase [so to speak] of that character which appears is in one ease ‘grace,’ and in the other ‘glory.’ If one might venture on any illustration in regard to such a subject, it is as when the pure white light is sent through glass of different colours, and at one moment beams mild through refreshing green, and at the next flames in fiery red that warns of danger.

The two words which are pitted against each other here have each a very wide range of meaning. But, as employed in this place, their antithetical force is clear enough. ‘Grace’ is active love, exercised towards. inferiors, and towards those who deserve something else. So the grace of God is the active energy of His love, which stoops from the throne to move among men, and departing from the strict ground of justice and retribution, deals with us not according to our sins, nor rewards us according to our iniquities!

And then the contrasted word ‘glory’ has not only a very wide meaning, but also a definite and specific force, which the very antithesis suggests. The ‘glory of God,’ I believe, in one very important sense, is His ‘grace.’ The highest glory of God is the exhibition of forgiving and long-suffering love. Nothing can be grander. Nothing can be more majestic. Nothing, in the very profoundest sense of the word, can be more truly divine - more lustrous with all the beams of manifest deity, than the gentle raying forth of His mercy and His goodness.

But then, while that is the profoundest thought of the glory of God, there is another truth to be taken in conjunction with it. The phrase has, in scripture, a well marked and distinct sense, which may be illustrated from the Old Testament, where it generally means not so much the total impression of majesty and · power made upon men by the whole revealed divine character, but rather the visible light which shone between the cherubim and proclaimed the present God. Connected with this more limited sense is the wider one of that which the material light above the mercy-seat symbolised - and which we have no better words to describe than to call it the ineffable and inaccessible brightness of that awful Name. The contrast between the two will be suggested by a passage to which I may refer. The ancient lawgiver said, ‘I beseech thee show me thy glory.’ The answer was ‘I will make all my goodness pass before thee.’ The eye of man is incapable of apprehending the uncreated divine lustrousness and splendour of light, but capable of receiving some dim and partial apprehensions of the goodness, not indeed in its fulness, but in its consequences. And that goodness, though it be the brightest of ‘the glories that compose His Name,’ is not the only possible, nor the only actual manifestation of the glory of God. The prayer was unfulfilled when offered; for to answer it, as is possible for earth, would have been to antedate the slow evolution of the counsels of God. But answered it will be, and that on this globe. ‘Every eye shall see Him.’

The grace has appeared, when Divine Love is incarnate among us. The long-suffering gentleness we have seen. And in it we have seen, in a very real sense, the glory, for ‘we beheld His glory, full of grace.’ But beyond that lies ready to be revealed in the last time the glory, the lustrous light, the majestic splendour, the flaming fire of manifest Divinity.

Again, the two verses thus bracketed together, and brought into sharp contrast, also suggest how like, as well as how unlike, these manifestations are to be.

In both cases there is an appearance, in the strictest sense of the word, that is to say, a thing visible to men’s senses. Can we see the grace of God? We can see the love in exercise, cannot we? How? ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?’ The appearance of Christ was the making visible, in human form, of the love of God.

My brother, the appearance of the glory will be the same - the making visible in human form of the light of throned and sovereign Deity. The one was incarnation; the other will be incarnation. The one was patent to men’s senses - so will the other be. The grace has appeared. The glory is to appear. ‘Why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go.’ An historical fact, a bodily visibility, a manifestation of the divine nature and character in human form upon earth, and living and moving amongst men i As ‘ Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many, ‘so unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time without sin unto salvation.’ The two are strictly parallel. As the grace was visible in action by a Man among men, so the glory will be. What we look for is an actual bodily manifestation in a human form, on the solid earth, of the glory of God.

And then I would notice how emphatically this idea of the glory being all sphered and embodied in the living person of Jesus Christ proclaims His divine nature. It is ‘the appearance of the glory’ - then mark the next words - ‘of the great God and our Saviour.’

I am not going to enter upon the question of the interpretation of these words, which by many very competent authorities have been taken as all referring to Jesus Christ, and as being a singular instance in scripture of the attribution to Him directly, and without any explanation or modification, of the name, ‘the great God!’ I do not think that either grammar or dogma require that interpretation here. But I think that, if we take the words to refer distinctly to the Father and to the Son, the inference as to Christ’s true and proper divinity which comes from. them, so understood, is no less strong than the other interpretation would make it. For, in that case, the same one and indissoluble glory is ascribed to God the Father and to Christ our Lord, and the same act is the appearance of both. The human possesses the divine glory in such reality and fulness as it would be insanity if it were not blasphemy, and blasphemy if it were not absurdity, to predicate of any single man. The words coincide with His own saying, ‘The Son of Man shall come in His glory and of the Father,’ and point us necessarily and inevitably to the wonderful thought that the glory of God is capable of being fully imparted to, possessed by, and revealed through Jesus Christ; that the glory of God is Christ’s glory, and the glory of Christ is God’s. In deep, mysterious, real, eternal Union the Father and the Son, the light and the ray, the fountain and the source, pour themselves out in loving- kindness on the world, and shall flash themselves in splendour at the last, when the Son of Man ‘ shall be manifested in His own glory and of the Father!’

And then I must touch very briefly another remarkable and plain contrast indicated in our text between these two ‘appearings.’ They are not only unlike in the subject [so to speak] or substance of the manifestation, but also in the purpose. The grace comes, patient, gentle, sedulous, labouring for our training and discipline. The glory comes - there is no word of training there! What does the glory come for? The one rises upon a benighted world - lambent and lustrous and gentle, like the slow, silent, climbing of the silvery moon through the darkling sky. But the other blazes out with a leap upon a stormy heaven - ‘as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west,’ writing its fierce message across all the black page of the sky in one instant, ‘so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be.’ Like some patient mother, the ‘grace of God’ has moved amongst men, with entreaty, with loving rebuke, with loving chastisement. She has been counsellor and comforter. She has disciplined and fostered with more than maternal wisdom and love. ‘Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.’ But the glory appears for another purpose and in another guise - ‘Who is this that cometh with dyed garments? I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save. Wherefore art Thou red in thine apparel? I have trodden the winepress alone - for the day of vengeance is in Mine heart, and the year of My redeemed is come.’

II. But we have now to look at the second thought which is involved in these words, and that is, the appearing of the glory is a blessed hope.

The hope is blessed; or as we have already remarked, the word ‘happy’ may perhaps be substituted with advantage. Because it will be full of blessedness when it is a reality, therefore it is full of joy, while it is but a hope.

The characteristics of that future manifestation of glory are not such that its coming is wholly and universally a joy. There is something terrible in the beauty, something menacing in the brightness. But it is worth noticing that, notwithstanding all that gathers about it of terror, all that gathers about it of awful splendour, all that is solemn and heart shaking in the thought of judgment and retribution for the past, the irreversible and irrevocable past, yet to Paul it was the very crown of all his expectations of, and the very shining summit of all his desires for, the future - that Christ should appear.

The primitive Church thought a great deal more about the coming of Jesus Christ than about death - thought a great deal more about His coming than about ‘Heaven.’ To them the future was not so much a time of rest for themselves as the manifestation of their Lord. To them the way of passing out of life was not so much seeing corruption as being caught up together in the air.

And how far the darkness, which our Lord declared to be the divine counsel in regard to that future coming, enwrapped even those who, upon all other points, received the divine inspiration which made and makes them for evermore the infallible teachers and authorities for the Christian Church, is a moot question. If it were certain that the Apostle expected Christ's coming during his own lifetime, I do not know that we need be troubled at that as if it shook their authority, seeing that almost the last words which Christ spoke to His Apostles were a distinct declaration that He had not to reveal to them, and they were not to know' the times and the seasons which the Father has put in His own power,' and seeing that the office of that Holy Spirit, as whose organs Paul and the other writers of the New Testament are our authoritative teachers, is expressly declared to be the bringing all things to their remembrance, whatsoever Christ had revealed. If, then, He expressly excepts from the compass of His revelation this point, it can be no derogation from the completeness of an inspired writer's authority, if he knows it not.

And if one takes into account the whole of Paul's words on the subject, they seem to express rather the same double anticipation, which we too have to cherish, desiring and looking, on the one hand, for the Saviour from heaven; desiring on the other hand to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. The numerous places in which Paul speaks of his own decease, sometimes as longed for, sometimes as certain; and, latterly, as near, are inconsistent with the theory that he looked for Christ's coming as certain in his own lifetime. So, too, are other anticipations which he expresses as to the future course of the Church, and progress of the Gospel in the world. He, like us, would appear to have had before his expectations the alternative. He knew not when the glory might burst upon the world, therefore he was ever standing as one that waits for his Lord. He knew not when he might have to die, therefore he laboured that, 'whether present or absent, he might be pleasing to Him.'

But that is not the point upon which I want to say · a word. Dear brethren, the hope is a happy one. If we know the grace, we shall not be afraid of the glory.' If the grace has disciplined in any measure, we may be sure that we shall partake in its perfection They that have seen the face of Christ looking down, as it were, upon them from the midst of the great darkness of the cross, and beneath the crown of thorns, need not be afraid to see the same face looking down upon them from amidst the blaze of the light, and from beneath the many crowns of the kingdoms of the world and the royalties of the heavens. Whosoever hath learnt to love and believe in the manifestation of the grace, he, and he only, can believe and hope for the manifestation of the glory.

And, Christian men and women, whilst thus the one ground upon which that assurance, ‘The Lord cometh,’ can be anything to us except a dread, if it is a belief at all, is the simple reliance upon his past work - let me urge the further consideration upon you and myself, how shamefully all of us neglect and overlook that blessed expectation! We live by hope. God, indeed, is above all hope. To that infinite eye, before which all things that were, and are, and are to come, lie open and manifest, or, rather, are ensphered in His own person and self; to Him, who is the living past, the abiding present, the present future, there is no expectation. The animal creation is below hope. But for us that live on the central level - half-way between a beast and God, if I may so say - for us our lives are tossed about between memory and expectation.

We all of us possess, and most of us prostitute that wonderful gift - of shaping out some conception of the future. And what do we do with it? It might knit us to God, bear us up amid the glories of the abysses of the skies. We use it for making to ourselves pictures of fools’ paradises of present pleasures or of successful earthly joys. The folly of men is not that they live by hope, but that they set their hopes on such things.

‘They build too low
Who build beneath the stars!’

As for every other part of human nature, so for this strange faculty of our being, the gospel points to its true object, and the gospel gives its only consecration.

Dear brethren, is it true of us that into our hearts there steals subtle, impalpable, but quickening as the land breeze laden with the fragrance of flowers to the sailor tossing on the barren sea, a hidden but yet mighty hope of an inheritance with Him - when He shall appear? With eye lifted above and fixed upon the heavens do I look beyond the clouds to the stars? Alas! alas! the world drives that hope out of our hearts It is with us as with the people in some rude country fair and scene of riot, where the booths and the shows and the drinking-places are pitched upon the edge of the common, and one step from the braying of the trumpets brings you into the solemn stillness of the night; and high above the stinking flare of the oil lamps there is the pure light of the stars in the sky, and not one amongst the many clowns that are stumbling about in the midst of sensual dissipation ever looks up to see that calm home that is arched above them! We live for the present, do not we? And there, if only we would lift our eyes, there, even now, is the sign of the Son of Man in the heavens. My friend, it is as much an element of a Christian's character, and a part of his plain, imperative duty, to look for His appearing as it is to live' soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world!'

III. Well then, finally, one word about the last consideration here, viz., The grace disciplines us to hope for the glory.

The very idea of discipline involves the notion that it is a preparatory stage, a transient process for a permanent result. It carries with it the idea of immaturity, of apprenticeship, so to speak. If it is discipline, it is discipline for some condition which is not yet reached. And so if the grace of God comes 'disciplining,' then there must be something beyond the epoch and era within which the discipline is confined.

And that just runs out into two considerations, upon which I have not time to dwell Take the characteristics of the grace - clearly enough, it is preparing men for something beyond itself. Yield to the discipline and the hope will grow.

Take the characteristics of the grace. Here is a great system, based upon a stupendous and inconceivable act of divine sacrifice, involving a mysterious identification of the whole race of sinful men with the Saviour, embodying the most wonderful love of God, and being the propitiation for the sins of the whole world. Here is a life perfectly innocent, perfectly stainless, brought to the extremity of evil, and having never swerved one inch from the divine commandments, yet dying at last under a consciousness of separation and desertion from God! Here are a cross, a resurrection, an ascension, an omnipotent Spirit, an all-guiding Word, a whole series of powers and agencies brought to bear! Does any man believe that such a wealth of divine energy and resource would he put forth and employed for purposes that break short off when a man is put into his coffin, and that have nothing beyond this world for their field?

Here is a perfect instrument for making men perfect, and what does it do? It makes men so good and leaves them so bad that unless they are to be made still better and perfected, God's work on the soul is at once an unparalleled success and a confounding failure - a puzzle, in that having done so much it does not do more; in that having done so little it has done so much. The achievements of Christianity upon single souls, and its failures upon those for whom it has done most, when measured against, and compared with, its manifest adaptation to a loftier issue than it has ever reached here on earth, all coincide to say - the grace [because its purpose is discipline, and because its purpose is but partially achieved here on earth] demands a glory, when they whose darkness has been partially made 'light in the Lord,' by the discipline of grace, shall 'blaze forth as the sun' in the Heavenly Father's Kingdom of Glory.

Yield to the discipline, and the hope will be strengthened. You will never entertain in any vigour and operative power upon your lives the expectation of that coming of the glory unless you live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world.

That discipline submitted to is, if I may so say, like that great apparatus which you find by the side of an astronomer's biggest telescope, to wheel it upon its centre and to point 'its tube to the star on which he would look.

So our anticipation and desire, the faculty of expectation which we have, is wont to be directed along the low level of earth, and it needs the pinions and levers of that gracious discipline, making us sober, righteous, godly, in order to heave it upwards, full-front against the sky, that the stars may shine into it.

The speculum, the object-glass, must be polished and cut by many a stroke and much friction ere it will reflect ‘the image of the heavenly’; so grace disciplines us, patiently, slowly, by repeated strokes, by much rubbing, by much pain - disciplines us to live in self-restraint, in righteousness and godliness, and then the cleared eye beholds the heavens, and the purged heart grows towards ‘ the Coming’ as its hope and its life.

Dear brethren, let us not fling away the treasures of our hearts’ desires upon trifles and earth. Let us not set our hopes on that which is not, nor paint that misty wall that rings round our present with evanescent colours like the landscapes of a dream. We may have a hope which is a certainty, as sure as a history, as vivid as a present fact. Let us love and trust Him who has been manifested to save us from our sins, and in whom we behold all the grace and truth of God. If our eyes have learnt to behold and our hearts to love Him whom we have not seen, amid all the bewildering glares and false appearances of the present, our hopes will happily discern Him and be at rest, amid the splendours of that solemn hour when He shall come in His glory to render to every man according to His works.

With that hope the future, near or far, has no fears hidden in its depths. Without it, there is no real anchorage for our trembling hearts, and nothing to hold by when the storm comes. The alternative is before each of us, ‘having no hope,’ or ‘looking for that blessed hope.’ God help us all to believe that Christ has come for me! Then I shall be glad when I think that Christ will come again to receive me unto Himself!

5) Titus 2:14

Deuteronomy

GOD’S TRUE TREASURE IN MAN

Deu. 32:9 - Tit. 2:14.

I choose these two texts because they together present us with the other side of the thought to that which I have elsewhere considered, that man’s true treasure is in God. That great axiom of the religious consciousness, which pervades the whole of Scripture, is rapturously expressed in many a psalm, and never more assuredly than in that one which struggles up from the miry clay in which the Psalmist's 'steps had well-nigh slipped' and soars and sings thus: 'The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup; Thou maintainest my lot,' 'The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.'

You observe the correspondence between these words and those of my first text: 'The Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.' The correspondence in the original is not quite so marked as it is in our Authorised Version, but still the idea in the two passages is the same. Now it is plain that persons can possess persons only by love, sympathy, and communion. From that it follows that the possession must be mutual; or, in other words, that only he can say 'Thou art mine' who can say 'I am Thine.' And so to possess God, and to be possessed by God, are but two ways of putting the same fact. 'The Lord is the portion of His people, and the Lord's portion is His people,' are only two ways of stating the same truth.

Then my second text clearly quotes the well-known utterance that lies at the foundation of the national life of Israel: 'Ye shall be unto Me a peculiar treasure above all people,' and claims that privilege, like all Israel's privileges, for the Christian Church. In like manner Peter [1Pe. 2:9] quotes the same words, 'a peculiar people,' as properly applying to Christians. I need scarcely remind you that 'peculiar' here is used in its proper original sense of belonging to, or, as the Revised Version gives it, 'a people for God's own possession' and has no trace of the modern signification of 'singular.' Similarly we find Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians giving both sides of the idea of the inheritance in intentional juxtaposition, when he speaks [Eph. 1:14] of the 'earnest of our inheritance . . . unto the redemption of God's own possession.' In the words before us we have the same idea; and this text besides tells us how Christ, the Revealer of God, wins men for Himself, and what manner of men they must be whom He counts as His.

Therefore there are, as I take it, three things to be spoken about now. First, God has a special ownership in some people. Second, God owns these people because He has given Himself to them. Third, God possesses, and is possessed by, His inheritance, that He may give and receive services of love. Or, in briefer words, I have to speak about this wonderful thought of a special divine ownership, what it rests upon, and what it involves.

I. God has special ownership in some people.

‘The Lord’s portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.’ Put side by side with those other words of the Old Testament: ‘All souls are Mine,’ or the utterance of the 100th Psalm rightly translated: ‘It is He that hath made us, and to Him we belong.’ There is a right of absolute and utter ownership and possession inherent in the very relation of Creator and creature; so that the being made is wholly and altogether at the disposal, and is the property, of Him that makes him.

But is that enough for God’s heart? Is that worth calling ownership at all? An arbitrary tyrant in an unconstitutional kingdom, or a slave-owner, may have the most absolute right of property over his subject or his slave; may have the right of entire disposal of all his industry, of the profit of all his labour; may be able to do anything he likes with him, may have the power of life and death; but such ownership is only of the husk and case of a man: the man himself may be free, and may smile at the claim of possession. ‘They may ‘*own*’ the body, and after that have no more than they can do.’ That kind of authority and ownership, absolute and utter, to the point of death, may satisfy a tyrant or a slave-driver, it does not satisfy the loving heart of God. It is not real possession at all. In what sense did Nero own Paul when he shut him up in prison, and cut his head off? Does the slave-owner own the man whom he whips within an inch of his life, and who dare not do anything without his permission? Does God, in any sense that corresponds with the longing of infinite love, own the men that reluctantly obey Him, and are simply, as it were, tools in His hands? He covets and longs for a deeper relationship and tenderer ties, and though all creatures are His, and all men are His servants and His possession, yet, like certain regiments in our own British army, there are some who have the right to bear in a special manner on their uniform and on their banners the emblazonment, ‘The King’s Own.’ ‘The Lord’s portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance.’

Well, then, the next thought is that the special relationship of possession is constituted by mutual love. I said at the beginning of these remarks that as concerns men’s relations, the only real possession is through love, sympathy, and communion, and that that must necessarily be mutual. We have a perfect right to apply the human analogy here; in fact, we are bound to do it if we would rightly understand such words as those of my text; and it just leads us to this, that the one thing whereby God reckons that He possesses a man at all is when His love falls upon that man’s heart and soaks into it, and when there springs up in the heart a corresponding emotion and affection. The men who welcome the divine love that goes through the whole world, seeking such to worship it, and to trust it, and to become its own; and who therefore lovingly yield to the loving divine will, and take it for their law-these are the men whom He regards as His ‘portion’ and ‘the lot of His inheritance.’ So that God is mine, and that ‘I am God’s,’ are two ends of one truth; ‘I possess Him,’ and ‘I am possessed by Him,’ are but the statement of one fact expressed from two points of view. In the one case you look upon it from above, in the other case you look upon it from beneath. All the sweet commerce of mutual surrender and possession which makes the joy of our hearts, in friendship and in domestic life, we have the right to lift up into this loftier region, and find in it the last teaching of what makes the special bond of mutual possession between God and man.

And deep words of Scripture point in that direction. Those parables of our Lord’s: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, in their infinite beauty, whilst they contain a great deal besides this, do contain this in their several ways; the money, the animal, the man belong to the woman of the house, to the shepherd, to the father. Each is ‘lost’ in a different fashion, but the most clear revelation is given in the last parable of the three, which explains the other two. The son was ‘lost’ when he did not love the father; and he was ‘found’ by the father when he returned the yearning of the father’s heart.

And so, dear brethren, it ever is; the one thing that knits men to God is that the silken cord of love let down from Heaven should by our own hand be wrapped round our own hearts, and then we are united to Him. We are His and He is ours by the double action of His love manifested by Him, and His love received by us.

Now there is nothing in all that of favouritism. The declaration that there are people who have a special relationship to the divine heart may be so stated as to have a very ugly look, and it often has been so stated as to be nothing more than self-complacent Pharisaism, which values a privilege principally because its possession is an insult to somebody else that has it not.

There has been plenty of Christianity of that sort in the world, but there is nothing of it in the thoughts of these texts rightly looked at. There is only this: it cannot but be that men who yield to God and love Him, and try to live near Him and to do righteousness, are His in a manner that those who steel themselves against Him and turn away from Him are not. Whilst all creatures have a place in His heart, and are flooded with His benefits, and get as much of Him as they can hold, the men who recognise the source of their blessing, and turn to it with grateful hearts, are nearer Him than those that do not do so. Let us take care, lest for the sake of seeming to preserve the impartiality of His love, we have destroyed all in Him that makes His love worth having. If to Him the good and the bad, the men who fear Him and the men who fear Him not, are equally satisfactory, and, in the same manner, the objects of an equal love, then He is not a God that has pleasure in righteousness; and if He is not a God that ‘has pleasure in righteousness,’ He is not a God for us to trust to. We are not giving countenance to the notion that God has any step-children, any petted members of His family, when we cleave to this-they that have welcomed His love into their hearts are nearer to Him than those that have closed the door against it.

And there is one more point here about this matter of ownership on which I dwell for a moment, namely, that this conception of certain men being in a special sense God’s possession and inheritance means also that He has a special delight in, and lofty appreciation of, them. All this material creation exists for the sake of growing good men and women. That is the use of the things that are seen and temporal; they are like greenhouses built for the great Gardener’s use in striking and furthering the growth of His plants; and when He has got the plants He has got what He wanted, and you may pull the greenhouse down if you like. And so God estimates, and teaches us to estimate, the relative value and greatness of the material and the spiritual in this fashion, that He says to us in effect: ‘All these magnificences and magnitudes round you are small and vulgar as compared with this-a heart in which wisdom and divine truth and the love and likeness of God have attained to some tolerable measure of maturity and of strength.’ These are His ‘jewels,’ as the Roman matron said about her two boys. The great Father looks upon the men that love Him as His jewels, and, having got the jewels, the rock in which they were embedded and preserved may be crushed when you like. ‘They shall be Mine,’ saith the Lord, ‘My treasures in that day of judgment which I make.’

And so, my brother, all the insignificance of man, as compared with the magnitude and duration of the universe, need not stagger our faith that the divinest thing in the universe is a heart that has learnt to love God and aspires after Him, and should but increase our wonder and our gratitude that He has been mindful of man and has visited him, in order that He might give Himself to men, and so might win men for Himself.

II. That brings me, and very briefly, to the other points that I desire to deal with now. The second one, which is suggested to us from my second text in the Epistle to Titus, is that this possession, by God, of man, like man’s possession of God, comes because God has given Himself to man.

The Apostle puts it very strongly in the Epistle to Titus: ‘The glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us that He might purify unto Himself *a people for a possession*.’ Israel, according to one metaphor, was God’s ‘son,’ begotten by that great redeeming act of deliverance from the captivity of Egypt [Deu. 32:6 - Deu. 32:19]. According to another metaphor, Israel was God’s bride, wooed and won for His own by that same act. Both of these figures point to the thought that in order to get man for His own He has to give Himself to man.

And the very height and sublimity of that truth is found in the Christian fact which the Apostle points to here. We need not depart from human analogies here either. Christ gave Himself to us that He might acquire us for Himself. Absolute possession of others is only possible at the price of absolute surrender to them. No human heart ever gave itself away unless it was convinced that the heart to which it gave itself had given itself to it.

And on the lower levels of gratitude and obligation, the only thing that binds a man to another in utter submission is the conviction that that other has given himself in absolute sacrifice for him. A doctor goes into the wards of an hospital with his life in his hands, and because he does, he wins the full confidence and affection of those whom he treats. You cannot buy a heart with anything less than a heart. In the barter of the world it is not ‘skin for skin,’ but it is ‘self for self’; and if you want to own me, you must give yourself altogether to me. And the measure in which teachers and guides and preachers and philanthropists of all sorts make conquests of men is the measure in which they make themselves sacrifices for men.

Now all that is true, and is lifted to its superlative truth, in the great central fact of the Christian faith. But there is more than human analogy here. Christ is not only self-sacrifice in the sense of surrender, but He is sacrifice in the sense of giving Himself for our redemption and forgiveness. He has not only given Himself to us, He has given Himself for us. And there, and on that, is builded, and on that alone has He a right to build, or have we a right to yield to it, His claim to absolute authority and utter command over each of us.

He has died for us, therefore the springs of our life are at His disposal; and the strongest motives which can sway our lives are set in motion by His touch. His death, says this text, redeems us from iniquity and purifies us. That points to its power in delivering us from the service and practice of sin. He buys us from the despot whose slaves we were, and makes us His own in the hatred of evil and the doing of righteousness. Moved by His death, we become capable of heroisms and martyrdoms of devotion to Him. Brethren, it is only as that self-sacrificing love touches us, which died for our sins upon the Cross, that the diabolical chain of selfishness will be broken from our affections and our wills, and we shall be led into the large place of glad surrender of ourselves to the sweetness and the gentle authority of His omnipotent love.

III. The last thought that I suggest is the issues to which this mutual possession points. God owns men, and is owned by them, in order that there may be a giving and receiving of mutual services of love.

‘The Lord’s portion is His people.’ That in the Old Testament is always laid as the foundation of certain obligations under which He has come, and which He will abundantly discharge. What is a great landlord expected to do to his estate? ‘What ought I to have done to my vineyard?’ the divine Proprietor asks through the mouth of His servant the prophet. He ought to till it, He ought not to starve it, He ought to fence it, He ought to cast a wall about it, He ought to reap the fruits. And He does all that for His inheritance. God’s honour is concerned in His portion not being waste. It is not to be a ‘garden of the sluggard,’ by which people who pass can see the thorns growing there. So He will till it, He will plough it, He will pick out the weeds, and all the disciplines of life will come to us, and the ploughshare will be driven deep into the heart, that ‘the peaceable fruit of righteousness’ may spring up. He will fence His vineyard. Round about His inheritance His hand will be cast, within His people His Spirit will dwell. No harm shall come near thee if thy love is given to Him; safe and untouched by evil thou shalt walk if thou walk with God. ‘He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of Mine eye.’ The soul that trusts Him He takes in charge, and before any evil can fall to it ‘the pillared firmament must be rottenness, and earth be built on stubble.’ ‘He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day.’ ‘The Lord’s portion is His people,’ and ‘none shall pluck them out of His hand.’

And on the other side, we belong to God in Christ. What do we owe Him? What does the vineyard owe the husbandman? Fruit. We are His, therefore we are bound to absolute submission. ‘Ye are not your own.’ Life, circumstances, occupations, all-we hold them at His will. We have no more right of property in anything than a slave in the bad old days had in his cabin and patch of ground. They belonged to the master to whom he belonged. Let us recognise our stewardship, and be glad to know ourselves His, and all events and things which we sometimes think ours, His also.

We are His, therefore we owe absolute trust. The slave has at least this blessing in his lot, that he need have no anxieties; nor need we. We belong to God, and He will take care of us. A rich man’s horses and dogs are well cared for, and our Owner will not leave us unheeded. Our well-being involves His good name. Leave anxious thought to masterless hearts which have to front the world with nobody at their backs. If you are God’s you will be looked after.

We are His, therefore we are bound to live to His praise. That is the conclusion which one Old Testament passage draws. ‘This people have I formed for Myself; they shall show forth My praise’ [Isa. 43:21]. The Apostle Peter quotes these words immediately after those from Exodus, which describe Israel as ‘a people for God’s own possession,’ when he says ‘that ye should show forth the praise of Him who hath called you.’ Let us, then, live to His glory, and remember that the servants of the King are bound to stand to their colours amid rebels, and that they who know the sweetness of possessing God, and the blessedness of yielding to His supreme control, should acknowledge what they have found of His goodness, and ‘tell forth the honour of His name, and make His praise glorious.’ Let not all the magnificent and wonderful expenditure of divine longing and love be in vain, nor run off your hearts like water poured upon a rock. Surely the sun’s flames leaping leagues high, they tell us, in tongues of burning gas, must melt everything that is near them. Shall we keep our hearts sullen and cold before such a fire of love? Surely that superb and wonderful manifestation of the love of God in the Cross of Christ should melt into running rivers of gratitude all the ice of our hearts.

‘He gave Himself for me!’ Let us turn to Him and say: ‘Lo! I give myself to Thee. Thou art mine. Make me Thine by the constraint of Thy love, so utterly, and so saturate my spirit with Thyself, that it shall not only be Thine, but in a very deep sense it shall be Thee, and that it may be “no more I that live, but Christ that liveth in me.”‘

6) Titus 2:14

Titus

CHRIST’S GIFT OF HIMSELF

Tit. 2:14.

We have seen in former sermons on the preceding context that the Apostle has been setting forth the appearing of the grace of God as having for its great purpose the production of a holy and godly character and conduct. In these words which close the section he returns substantially to the same theme, only, as a great composer, will do with some favourite musical movement, he repeats it in a somewhat different key and with variations. The variations are mainly two. Instead of the more general and less definite expression, 'the grace of God hath appeared,' he now specifies the precise act in which that grace did appear. 'He gave Himself for us.' Christ's self-sacrifice is the 'appearing of the grace of God.' The diffused flame is gathered into a focus, and thus concentrated .it has appeared to melt hearts. Then there is a second variation in the treatment of the theme here, and that is that the actor is different. In the former case it was 'we' who, trained by 'the appearing of the grace,' were to deny ourselves and 'live soberly, righteously, and godly.' Here it is 'He' who redeems and purifies us by His gift of Himself. He and we, the human and the divine, cooperate. If we 'deny ourselves,' and 'live soberly, righteously, and godly,' it is because He 'has redeemed us.' If He has purified us, it is in the measure in which we deny ourselves and yield ourselves to His influences. And so the two views stereoscope and become a solid reality.

Now then, there are three points to which I would turn especially in the words before us - Christ's great self-bestowment, Christ's great emancipation, Christ's great acquisition. 'He gave Himself,' the great self-bestowment; 'that He might redeem us,' the great emancipation; 'and purify unto Himself a people for a possession,' the great acquisition.

I. First, then, the great self-bestowment.

'He gave Himself,' the supreme token of love every. where, the natural expression of love everywhere We know inferior instances of the same sort, and they make the very salt of life. The most self-engrossed recognizes their nobility, and the most cold-blooded thrills at the sight. We know what it is for benefactors, and well-wishers, and enthusiasts of all sorts to yield up themselves joyfully for some great cause not their own, or for some persons who appeal to their hearts. The one noble thing in the devilish trade of war is that there sometimes we can see men flinging their lives away gladly in the thrill of devotion to the cause for which they fight. In the narrower regions of our hearts and homes, happy husbands and wives, mothers to their children, know what it is joyfully to give themselves away. All these illustrations do help us, but they help us only a very little bit along the road to understand that supreme and transcendent gift of a self of which Paul is speaking here as the basis of all nobleness in the characters of men. After we have travelled as far as any human illustration or analogy will help us, we are still infinitely far from that great fact. They lead us along the road, but it is not only a question of travelling along a road, it is a question of springing from the furthest point attained up into the very heaven itself, for this gift is unique, and to be paralleled by naught beside.

It began earlier, the initial step was when 'the Word became flesh.' There was one Man who willed to be Man, and whose not being 'ashamed to call us brethren,' and taking upon Himself part of the children's flesh and blood, was the supreme instance of condescending self-abandonment and bestowment. It began earlier; it went deeper; for not only is His self-surrender unstained by the smallest self-regard, as is manifest by the records of His life, but it goes down deep and deep and deep into such an utter gift of Himself as no mere human beneficence can ever emulate or even approximate to. And it brought with it heavier burdens and deeper sorrows, which culminated in that great act which, by its very greatness, has sometimes led men to separate it from the life of which it was the climax and superlative degree, and to declare that only in His death does the Lord give Himself for the life of the world, whereas the life among men, with all its pains of contact, with all its pains Of sympathy, with all its self-oblivion, was as really a part of Christ's giving Himself to the world as was even that death upon the Cross, by which the gift was perfected and sealed. So then, brethren, whilst we thankfully accept the analogies which lead us a little way, let us never forget that in this matter degree is not the only difference, and quality as well as quantity are unlike.

But mark the other word. 'He gave Himself for us.' Now the Apostle here uses a word which does not imply 'instead of,' but 'for our behalf.' He is not for the moment dwelling upon the way in which that gift benefits - that comes in the next clause - but simply upon the fact that it does benefit. And

Christ gave Himself - in a way to be subsequently declared- for the advantage of whoever may be included in the 'us.' And who are the 'us'? Paul was talking to Titus, and was including with him these Cretan Christians, none of whom had ever been seen by or seen Jesus. So that 'us' is universal, and includes all humanity. But it does more than that. Jesus Christ's giving of Himself to us was no indefinite gift of a general beneficence, which had no knowledge of, or feeling towards, the individual units that make up the company, but as I venture to believe, and as I would press upon you to consider whether our Christian conception of Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Word does not necessarily carry with it, the human heart of Christ loved each unit of the mass, that the divine eye separated and distinguished. We cannot 'see the wood for the trees.' We generalize our beneficence, and we lose sight of the individuals that are to be benefited by it. Who of us can specify the single souls or bodies that may be helped by our contributions to a fund for dealing with some general disaster? But Jesus Christ takes men one by one, and 'He gave Himself for us' because 'He gave Himself for me,' and thee, and thee, and all the single souls that make up mankind. Each was in His loving desire a recipient of the gift.

Brethren, I venture to assert, though it is impossible for me to go on here at any length to establish the assertion, that this conception of a Christ who not merely spoke, and was gentle and gracious, and the type of excellence, and the realised ideal of human perfection, but who came to do and to give Himself for the behalf of every soul of man, is the heart of Christianity. This is the view which, like a key, will unlock the rusty gates of our wills and spirits. This is the conception which alone adequately represents the teaching of scripture, the requirements of the deepest reason, and what is even more authoritative, the instinctive needs of hungry, sin-laden hearts. Here is the lever that moves the world: 'He gave Himself for us.'

II. Now, secondly, notice Christ's great emancipation.

The Apostle states the object of the gift in a twofold fashion, 'That He might redeem us all from iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.' Let me deal now with the former of these two expressions. The object of Christ's gift is man's redemption. And what is redemption? Well, it is no doubt a metaphorical expression, and there lies beneath it the image of a slave set free by a ransom. That is in the word, and no fair interpretation of the word can strike that out of the depth of its meaning. So then we begin as the fundamental fact, without which we shall never come either to understand the meaning of Christ's whole appearance, or get the highest good out of it for our own souls, with this conception of our condition - that we are in bondage to what the Apostle here calls 'iniquity,' or lawlessness.

Now do not say that this is Pauline, and that the Christ of the gospels does not say so. He does. Do you remember what He said when the people, with that strange but yet universal forgetfulness or ignoring of the facts of their condition, said to Him, whilst the Roman garrison in the castle might have heard the boast: 'We were never in bondage to any man'? He answered: 'He that doeth sin is the slave of sin.' You may like it or not like it; you may believe that it is the deepest view of human nature; or you may brush it aside as being narrow and pessimistic and old-fashioned, and all the rest of it, but it is Christ's view. Do not say it is Paul's. It is Paul's; but he got it from Jesus, and you have Him to reckon with, and Him to contradict, if you do not. And, alas! a great many of us do not recognise that, after all is said and done, the fact of sin, considered as setting up myself as my own centre and law, in antagonism to, or in neglect of, God, who ought to be my centre, is the universal experience of humanity. The fetters are on our limbs. I remember a story of an English author in the early part of last century, who was put into prison for some imaginary offence, and who pleased himself in a puerile fashion by twisting flowers round the grating of his window, and making believe that he was a free man. Yes, that is what a great many of us do. We try to hide the fetters by putting silk handkerchiefs over them. We, too, like these presumptuous Jews, say: 'We were never in bondage to any man.' No, not in bondage to any man, but in bondage worse than that. What about those tendencies in yourself - these lusts and passions, these temptations to ignoring God and living for self, and to other sins that, like springing tigers, have fixed their talons in us and keep us down, in spite of our kicking and struggling? The root cause of almost all the inadequate conceptions of Christ and His work which depart from the plain teaching of Christ and Scripture, lies here, that men do not recognise the fact of their bondage to sin. Wherever that recognition is weak, you will have a maimed Christ and an impotent Christ. It is of small profit to argue about theological doctrines unless you can get a man to feel that he is a sinful man in God’s sight. And when he has learnt what sin means, what guilt means, what the tyranny of a committed transgression means, what the awful voice of a roused conscience means, he will be ready to fling aside all his superficial, easygoing thoughts about Jesus of Nazareth, and to clutch as his one hope the great word: ‘Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.’ ‘He gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us.’

And so we come to the conception that that giving Himself for us is more than a giving of Himself on behalf of us, in some vague way, and that the way in which Jesus Christ gives Himself for us is that He gives ‘Himself instead of us.

And there, as I humbly venture to believe, is the point of view at which we must stand, if we would give due weight either to His words or to His Cross. There is the point of view at which, as I humbly venture to believe, we must stand if we would receive into our hearts the greatest blessing that that Lord can give - emancipation from sin’s guilt by that great Sacrifice of His, emancipation from sin’s power by the presence within us of His own life and spirit. Christ came into the world ‘to give His life a ransom for many.’ Again I say, therefore, do not pooh-pooh such teaching as this of my text, or may I venture to say - I do it with all humility - such teaching as I am trying to give now, with the easy and superficial remarks that it is Pauline. It is Christ’s - ‘The Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for many.’ Oh, dear friends, there is the power. Christianity minus that Sacrifice is not a Christianity that the world or the flesh or the devil have ever been, or ever need to have been, much afraid of. We may gather metaphors in crowds to illustrate that Sacrifice, but they all fail, for it is unique and transcendent. Men have given themselves up to fetters that others might be made free. Men have given themselves up to the death that others might live. There was a Swiss soldier in one fight who gathered the spears of the enemy into a sheaf, and pointed them to his own breast, that a path might be cleared for the advance of his comrades. The angel that came into Peter’s cell touched him and the fetters fell from his limbs. Christ has come into the dark prison of our humanity, and a drop of His blood on the fetters that bind me to my sin, and my sin to me, corrodes them into dust, and my limbs are free. He fronts all our tyrants as He fronted the Roman soldiers, and says, ‘I am He; if ye seek Me, let these go their way.’ He ‘gave Himself for us that He might redeem us.’

III. And now your time will not allow me to speak, except very inadequately, about the last point that is here, and that is Christ’s great acquisition.

‘That He might purify unto Himself a people for a possession’ - as is the proper rendering - ‘zealous of good works.’ The Apostle is quoting, as I suppose we all know, from the ancient words which make the charter of the Israelitish nation, in which God declared that they were to Him a ‘people of a possession above all the nations that are on the earth,’ and he transfers these great words to Christ, and our relation to Him. He, too, has won a people for His very own. Christ wins us for His because He has given Himself to be ours. Mark how beautifully the reciprocalness of the relation is suggested by the former clause of our text, ‘He gave Himself for us,’ that He might win us for Himself ‘for a possession.’ Yes, in the commerce of love, nothing but a heart can buy a heart, nothing but a heart can pay for a heart. Jesus gives Himself to me, that I may give myself to Him. That is the only gift that satisfies Him. The only result which He recognizes as being the fruit of the travail of His soul, which is sufficient for Him, is that we poor men, delivered from our selfishness, emancipated from our sins, with our wills set free, should go to Him and say, ‘Lord, Thou art mine, and I, poor as I am, little as the gift is, I am Thine.’

We shall only be His in the measure in which we are ‘purified.’ And it is His love that purifies us, and His gift that purifies. For that gift sets in operation within us a multitude of new motives and new desires. And, more than that, He gave Himself that our sins might be taken away. But there is the present gift, as well as the past one, for He is giving Himself still, moment by moment, and hour by hour, to every one that cleaves to Him. And that gift of Himself comes into our hearts as, according to Luther’s old metaphor, the Elbe was turned into the stable to sweep out all the filth, and make all things clean.

So, dear friends, let us cleave to that Lord. Let us see to it that we have fathomed, and not only fathomed, but accepted, the great gift of Himself in its most transcendent form, in its mightiest efficacy, the gift by which, by His death, He has taken away the guilt, and by His life within us, breaks the power of our sins, and makes us eager zealots, enthusiasts for all manner of 'good works.'

7) Titus 2:14

Titus

ZEALOUS OF GOOD WORKS

Tit. 2:14.

WE have seen in previous sermons on the preceding context how emphatically the Apostle reiterates that the end of the gospel is the production of Christlike and Christ-pleasing character. For this purpose our Lord came, and in Him the grace of God broke through the clouds which wrapped men in dark folds of ignorance and sin. For this end Christ died, giving Himself for us, that 'He might redeem us from iniquity and purify unto Himself a people for a possession.' That insistence on practice as the upshot of doctrine is characteristic of the three last letters of the Apostle, which are called the Pastoral Epistles, and it is very natural in an old man. Just as tradition tells us that when John was too feeble to walk, and too old to say much, he was carried Sunday by Sunday into the assembly of the Church to say nothing more than 'Little children, love one another,' so Paul, having laid the foundations in the great doctrinal Epistles of his early time, now an old man, deals rather with practice than with doctrine. But the practice is, in his mind, the offshoot of, and inseparably connected with, the doctrine, and to pit the one against the other, as Some people do nowadays, is to say, 'I do not care much about root; fruit is what I want'; or, 'I make little account of what a man eats; what I look to is his muscle and his strength.' But will there be any fruit without a root, or any muscle and strength that is not nourished? Paul's gospel is ethical because it is a gospel.

Now these words of my text are a kind of appendix to what precedes them, in which the Apostle has been sketching the sort of people that Christ's mission and work are intended to make. He says they are to be redeemed, they are to be purified, they are to be won for Christ's own, and to be conscious that they are His; and then he adds this remarkable expression which I have not been able to deal with at length in former sermons, but which is too important to pass by - 'zealous' - what for? - 'good works.'

Now I think, if we will consider these words, we shall find that they convey, some lessons, always important, and, as it seems to me, extremely important for the Church of this generation.

I. A consistent Christian will be a zealous Christian. I do not need to waste your time in trying to define what zeal is.

We all know it. When we approve of its object we admire it and call it 'beautiful consecration'; when we are not in sympathy with its objects we call it 'ridiculous exaggeration' and 'fanaticism.' Its elements are threefold, an overmastering recognition of the greatness of some truth, or cause, or person, for which, or for whom, we are ' zealous ' - a glow of emotion arising from that recognition, and a consciousness of obligation to strain all our powers for the diffusion of the truth, or the advancement of the cause, or the honour of the person, for whom we are zealous. Now, of course, when a man gets hold of some truth that masters him, there is always the danger of his losing the sense of proportion, of his getting his perspective wrong, and being so swallowed up in the one thing that he sees, that, like a horse with blinkers, he does not see anything except that one narrow line that lies in front of him. And so zeal is always in danger of being deformed into fanaticism, but it is God's way in working the world onwards, to raise up successions of men, each of whom recognizes with overwhelming clearness some one little segment of the great orb of truth, and the world advances because there are men that believe in one thing, that see one thing, and that give themselves, body and soul, to the setting forth of that one thing. All the rest of us stand by and say, 'What ridiculous exaggeration! how entirely oblivious he is counter-balancing considerations; how he has narrowed himself down into being the instrument and the apostle of this one thing!' Yes; and if you want to bore a hole through a six-inch plank, you have to put a pretty sharp point upon your tool, and to make it very ‘narrow.’ The world never gets to see any truth, until it has been hammered into it by some man who did not see any other truth.

There will come, too, with that overwhelming conception of the greatness of the truth, or of the person, or of the cause, a glow of emotion. Argument may be worked in fire or in frost, and the arguments that melt are warm, or if I might go back to my former figure, your boring tool will penetrate more quickly and easily if it has been heated as well as pointed. And zeal glows, and it is the glow rather than reasoning that convinces men.

I need not dwell upon other characteristics of zeal, but my next thought is - Christianity is such as that, if a man really and fully accepts it, he cannot help being zealous. Look at the truths that we say we believe. We believe in ideas about the significance and issues of this earthly life, so solemn, so great, so transcending all present experience, that it is incredible that they can enter into a man’s mind in any deep sense, and leave him cold and indifferent. We believe in such truths about Sin and Judgment and Eternity that they might kindle a soul beneath the ribs of death, and burn up all indifference, so as that the extremist, enthusiastic grasp of them is only moderation and rational. We say that we believe that the infinite, divine nature was incarnated in a Man, and that that Man lived and died because He loved every soul, and that that death brings to the world emancipation, and that Life brings to the world life, and that these things are true for all men. What I maintain is, that if a man really believes these things, not with the mere conventional faith that characterizes multitudes of professing Christians, it is impossible that he should be left cold. If the sun is shining the temperature will go up; and if the thermometer does not rise it is because something or other has come between the sunbeam and the mercury. If the iceberg floats down into the warm oceans of the temperate or tropical zones it will melt into sweet water, and it cannot remain ice. If it continue grim and cold, it is because there is only the sun of the Arctic winter, which has a pale light, and scarcely any warmth at all, shining down upon it. An indifferent Christian, who believes in sin and in redemption and in an incarnate Christ and in a sacrifice on the Cross and in a Divine Spirit and in a future Judgment and remains cold, is all but an impossibility; he is a contradiction in terms, and a living monster.

Brethren, I venture to plead with you that there are few things which the conventional Christianity of this day needs more than to awake to the fact that the ‘sober standard of feeling in matters of religion,’ which some so much admire, is contrary to the genius of the gospel, and the importance of the truths which it con-rains. And when I say a sober standard I do not mean the sobriety which the New Testament enjoins, but I mean the sobriety which the conventional Christianity of this day so much admires, and which is scarcely distinguishable with a microscope from absolute indifference. We are frequently besought to beware of enthusiasm. I hear from quarters where one would not expect to hear it, the cynical politician’s advice, ‘Not too much zeal, I beg of you.’ And I venture to oppose to all that what the voice of the Master from heaven said, ‘I would thou were cold or hot.’ This Christianity that never turns a hair, that does not know what zeal means, seems to me uncommonly like no Christianity at all.

We all want to be roused from our torpor. This community, like every church of professing Christians, is weighted by a mass of loosely attached and halt-believing professing Christians who are nothing better than clogs on the wheel, and instruments for Bringing down the temperature of the whole mass. And what we want, I believe more than anything else, is that we should be zealous, as dominated by the overwhelming greatness and solemnity of the truths, and melted into a passion of love by the overwhelming greatness and love of the Person whom the gospel reveals to us. We are to be ‘zealous,’ and whilst I dare not say that a true Christian will be a zealous one, I dare not conceal my conviction that a consistent Christian will be.

II. Now notice that such zeal finds its best field in our personal character.

‘Zealous ‘ - the word suggests, I suppose, pictures of men, devoted to a cause, and going out into the world to try and persuade other people to believe it, becoming the apostles and missionaries of some truth, or of some movement, or of some great principle, religious or social But Paul suggests here another region in which zeal is to find exercise - ‘zealous for good works’

Now do not let us interpret these last two words in the narrow, conventional sense which they have come to bear in the Church. It is a very significant and a very sad thing that this wide expression ‘good works,’ which in the Apostle’s mind covered the whole ground of Christian morality, has been narrowed down to mean specific acts of beneficence, bits of charity, giving away blankets and soup, visiting the poor, and the like, which have got stamped on them, with just a soul. on of contempt in the expression, the name ‘good works.’ He means a great deal more than that. He means exactly the same thing which he has already twice described as being the end of the gospel, that we should ‘live soberly, righteously, godly,’ and again, that we should be redeemed from all iniquity, and purified. Within the four corners of this expression, ‘good works,’ lie ‘whatsoever things are lovely and of good report,’ every virtue and every praise. That is the width of the object which the Apostle here proposes for Christian zeal.

Now the word which he here employs, and which is rightly translated ‘zealous,’ is literally ‘a Zealot.’ In Jewish history the Zealots were a class of men who, from the days of the Maccabees downwards, were fanatically devoted to the ritual and law of Judaism, and vehemently opposed any relaxation of or departure from it. But their religious zeal, as they thought it, did not keep them from the blackest crimes, and there were no more turbulent and no more immoral men in the dying agonies of the Jewish State than these zealots who had a zeal for God, but neither according to knowledge nor according to morality. One of the apostles, Simon Zelotes - the Zealot - had probably belonged to that class, and had found out a better Object for his zeal, when he turned to Jesus Christ and became an apostle. Paul uses the word in reference to himself when he speaks about himself as having been exceedingly ‘zealous for the traditions of the fathers,’ and it is used in Acts of the many Jewish Christians who are spoken of as being all ‘zealous for the Law.’ That is one type of zeal - a zeal that fastens on externals, that tries to enforce specific acts of conduct, that is devoted to ceremonial and regulations and red tape. And Paul points us here to another type, ‘Zealous for good works.’ Jehu, with His hands carmined with wholesale slaughter, turned to the son of Rechab and said, ‘Come and see my zeal for the Lord.’ Yes, a little bit for the Lord, and a great deal for Jehu.

That is the sort of thing that goes about the world as zeal. A turbid river in spate picks up and carries along a great many foul elements; and zeal is always in danger of becoming passionate indignation against a man who will not believe what I want him to believe, not so much because it is true as because I think it is. A great many very impure elements mix themselves up with our zeal, when it is directed to amending the world. If we set to amend ourselves, and direct our zeal in that direction, we shall find ‘ample scope and verge enough’ for its operations. And, brethren, what different lives we should live if instead of feeling bound to the exercise of virtues and graces Which do not come sweet and easy to us, and instead of feeling that we ought to do so and so, and that we do not one bit wish to do it, we had this overmastering enthusiasm for holiness and passion for perfection which is involved in the words before us. To be’ zealous of good works’ is to be eagerly desirous of being beautiful and pure and true and noble and Christlike, to be panting after perfection, and casting ourselves with all the energy of our nature into the work of growing like Christ. That is what Paul wants us all to be. Let us ask ourselves, is it the least like what I am? Does my Christian zeal go all out in the work of amending other people, or do I begin with amending myself?

III. And now my last word is, that this passion for perfection will come to us just in the measure in which we let the gospel He upon our hearts and minds and influence us.

The truths will produce it, but not unless they are wrought into our minds and hearts. Christ, whom the truths reveal, will produce it, but not unless we keep ourselves by honest effort of mind and heart and will in close contact with Him. The upshot of all that i have been trying to say is this, that the one thing which the superficial half-and-half Christianity of this day needs is that it should come into closer contact with the truths of the gospel. I plead for no blind, unintelligent zeal, I plead for no worked-up, artificial fervour. I want no engine without a driver, I want no zeal that, like Phaeton, will upset the car and set everything on fire. I want that Christian men should believe what they believe, and that they should meditate on the truths of the gospel intelligently, systematically, as a whole, and that they should be in touch with Him whom the truths reveal. A ruminant belief that chews the cud of the truths it professes is what today’s Christianity sorely wants. And if we in such a fashion keep ourselves under the spell of these truths, .then the zeal will come; not else. The spurious zeal which is excited by other stimulants will do more harm than good, and will be not like the river that flows, bringing fertility and freshness, but like the furious torrents of the spring when the ice is melting and the snows running down, which sweep away the very soil where growth was possible, and leave behind only barren rock.

Fix in your hearts and minds, and God grant that they may influence your conduct, these two things - on the one hand, that your Christianity is very suspicious if it has no flow in it towards Jesus, and if it has no passion towards perfection; and, on the other hand, that the surest way to bring all beauties of a moral and spiritual sort into your character and out into your lives is to gaze believingly on the appearing of She grace which God has sent us for the very purpose even of Him who gave Himself for us. When we are moved thereby to give ourselves to Him, we shall ‘covet earnestly the best gifts,’ and be ‘zealous for,’ and not merely reluctant and grudging doers of, ‘good works.’

8) Titus 3:8

Titus

MAINTAINING GOOD WORKS

Tit. 3:8.

THERE is so much about ‘good works’ in the so-called Pastoral Epistles [the two to Timothy, and this to Titus], that some critics who think they have sharp eyes have concluded that Paul was not their author. But surely it is very natural that as a man gets older he shall get more practical, and it is equally natural that he should fight the enemies who are in front of him at the moment, and not thrice slay the slain. Obviously the churches whom he had in view in his letters to Timothy and Titus did not stand in need of the elaborate and far-reaching argumentation of the Epistle to the Romans, or of the great protest against Jewish ritualism in the Epistle to the Galatians, or of the profound teaching about the Church which is in the Epistle to the Ephesians. The foundation had been laid, and, like a sensible man, Paul proceeded to build upon it. So instead of the difference in tone between those more theological letters and this more practical one being a cause of suspicion as to the authorship of the latter, it seems to me to be an argument in favour of the identity of authorship. The variation in tone corresponds to what happens in the case of every thoughtful Christian teacher as he grows in years, and comes to feel more and more that all doctrine is for practice. Here, then, we have the Apostle's last will and testament, so to speak, left to all the churches, that 'they which believe in God might be careful to maintain good works.'

According to that, the hall-mark of a Christian is conduct - 'good works.' But we must beware of narrowing the meaning of that expression, as is too often done, so as to include in it mainly certain conventional forms of charity or beneficence, like 'slumming' or tract-distributing, or Sunday-school teaching, and the like. These and such as these are, no doubt, one form of good works, but by no means the whole, and their having all but monopolized the name is one reason why many Christian people fail to apprehend the full significance of New Testament teaching on the subject. These acts are but as a creek in a great sea. Paul tells us what he takes to be included in the designation, when he bids the Philippians think on 'whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honourable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure,' and having thought on them, do them.

I have omitted one word in that quotation, for Paul speaks also of 'whatsoever things are lovely.' Loveliness is an essential quality of the highest kind of good works. Many of us know that the Greeks, wise beyond many who have clearer light but duller eyes, used the same word to express goodness and beauty. The Apostle uses that pregnant word in our text, and we should well ponder the teaching given by that word. For it tells Christians that they are to take heed to make their goodness lovely, not to 'graft grace on a crab-stock,' nor to present a frowning goodness to the world. It is not enough that they who believe in God should be careful to exhibit conduct which commends itself to every man's conscience as right and pure. They should also commend themselves as being fair with a more than earthly beauty, and lustrous with a more than earthly radiance. There are many Christian people who spoil the effect of high-principled, self-sacrificing conduct by forgetting that beautifulness is an essential part of the highest goodness. Sour grapes are not the grapes that are intended to be grown on the true vine.

But now, will you notice, as a further light upon Paul's notion of how to go about growing these grapes, what goes before? 'These things. I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which believe in God might be careful to maintain good works.' What are 'these things'? They are a brief summary of what we call 'the Gospel'; the evangelical teaching that 'the kindness and love of God our Saviour' had 'appeared,' and that 'He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and the renewing of the Holy Ghost... that.. 'we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.' In effect Paul says to Timothy: 'Now keep on insisting upon that.' The word translated 'affirm constantly' is a very strong one. It means a forcible and continually repeated enunciation, and the plain English of Paul's injunction to Timothy is: Keep on preaching the gospel as the surest way to produce disciples full of good works. People say to us: 'Come down to daily life and conduct; never mind your dogmas.' If you leave out what these critics mean by dogma, and try to make daily life beautiful without it, you may as well hold your tongue. And the men who forget to 'affirm' these things 'constantly,' and preach morals without gospel, are like Builders who begin to build on the second story, whose baseless castles in the air are sure to come down in ruins. The true way to produce moral conduct is to bring into clear prominence evangelical truth.

But notice again, it is 'those which believe in God who will be careful to maintain good works.' That is to say, faith is the productive cause of good works, and good works are, as I said,' the hall-mark of faith.' If a man believes, then he will do 'good works.' The converse must also be true. If a man does not do good works, what, then, about his belief? 'Show me thy faith without thy works' - that is an impossible demand. The only way to show faith is by our works, and so all attempts to rend them apart, either in theory or in practice, are as absurd as it would be to take a piece of cloth, and try to tear away the inside from the outside. 'Faith' is the underside, ‘good works’ is the upper, and the web is one. Faith is the principle of works; works are the manifestation and making visible of faith.

So now turn for a moment to another point. The Apostle’s command here implies a principle, that Christian work should always, and will always, if the faith is genuine, be in advance of all other sorts of good work. That is implied in one of the words used here which means literally’ be foremost, stand in the front,’ and I see no reason why the literal meaning should not be retained here. If it is retained, we have the thought implied - if you are a Christian man you should be ahead of the world in your goodness. You should lead, and not follow, or keep step with those who are not Christians. The Church’s morality on the wide scale and individual practice on the narrow, ought to be, and will be, if we are true to the gospel, far in advance of the ordinary opinion and practice of the day in which we Bye. If we are Christians, we are meant to be leaders, and that means that we shall often, like other leaders, have to endure a great deal of obloquy and calumny from the people whom we are trying to lead, and who are loitering behind us. The Christian Church, as the Apostle James says, is meant to be a ‘kind of first fruits of God’s creatures,’ ripe before the others, riper than the others always. Does the Christian Church lead the conscience of England to-day? Does it even try to do it? Does it recognise that its function is not to re-echo the morality of the street or of the newspaper, but to peal out the morality of Jesus Christ? Is it enough that Christian people should be as good, as charitable, as beneficent, as much interested in social questions as others, or should have the better, the purer, and the happier lives of the community for their great aim, as much as other people have them? Would it be enough to say ‘the electric light is about as bright as a tallow candle?’ Is it enough to say, ‘Christian people keep abreast of the world’s morality?’ Let them go in advance, and if they go very far ahead sometimes, none the worse; the laggards will perhaps come up. But at all events, whether they do or not, ‘I will that these things thou affirm constantly, in order that they which believe in God may take the lead in good works.’

And now there is a last point to be noted, and that is the Apostle’s warning that, although thus the belief of the gospel, and the faith which springs from the belief, are the spring of good work, yet these will not become ours unless we are careful to stand in front.

What does that carefulness mean? The word implies two things, and the first of them may be put in the shape of an exhortation - bring your brains to bear on these truths that are being thus ‘constantly affirmed.’ Bring them into your hearts through your minds, that they may filter into and shape the life. I believe that one main reason why the morality of the Christian Church is not much further in advance of the morality of the world than it is, is because the individual members of the Church do not bring their minds into contact with the great truths of the gospel in such a fashion as they should. Christian practice is thin and poor and inconsistent, because Christian meditation on the gospel and on the Lord of the gospel, is shallow and infrequent. The truths that are to be ‘affirmed’ are the fuel that feeds the fire, and if there are no coals put on, the fire will very soon die down-And so there must be ‘carefulness,’ which means the occupation of the mind with the truths that produce holiness of life.

And there must be another thing, there must be a definite and direct and continuous effort to increase our faith. I have been saying that faith is the underside of all noble conduct; and in the measure in which it is strengthened, in that measure accurately will our ‘good works’ increase. Suppose Manchester had had two pipes from Thirlmere instead of one, during recent droughts, should we have been in such straits for water? There was plenty in the lake, but we could not get it into our houses because we had not piping enough. There is plenty of power in our gospel and in our God to make us rich in ‘good works.’ What is lacking is that we have not that connection, which is made by faith, through which the fulness of God will flow into our lives. If they want to grow crops in Eastern lands they have little to do but to sow the seed and to irrigate. Christ has sown the seed in His gospel. We have to look after the irrigation, and the crops will come of themselves. So our main effort should be to keep ourselves in touch with that great Lord, and to increase the faith by which we make all His power our very own.

Philemon

1) PHILEMON 1:1-3
2) PHILEMON 1:4-7

3) PHILEMON 1:8-11
4) PHILEMON 1:9
5) PHILEMON 1:12-14
6) PHILEMON 1:15-19
7) PHILEMON 1:20-25

1) Philemon 1:1-3

THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

I.

Phm. 1:1-3 [R.V].

THIS Epistle stands alone among Paul's letters in being addressed to a private Christian, and in being entirely occupied with a small though very singular private matter; its aim being merely to bespeak a kindly welcome for a runaway slave who had been induced to perform the unheard-of act of voluntarily returning to servitude. If the New Testament were simply a book of doctrinal teaching, this Epistle would certainly be out of place in it; and if the great purpose of revelation were to supply material for creeds, it would be hard to see what value could be attached to a simple, short letter, from which no contribution to theological doctrine or ecclesiastical order can be extracted. But if we do not turn to it for discoveries of truth, we can find in it very beautiful illustrations of Christianity at work. It shows us the operation of the new forces which Christ has lodged in humanity - and that on two planes of action. It exhibits a perfect model of Christian friendship, refined and ennobled by a half-conscious reflection of the love which has called us " no longer slaves but friends," and adorned by delicate courtesies and quick consideration, which divines with subtlest instinct what it will be sweetest to the friend to hear, while it never approaches by a hair-breadth to flattery, nor forgets to counsel high duties. But still more important is the light which the letter casts on the relation of Christianity to slavery, which may be taken as a specimen of its relation to social and political evils generally, and yields fruitful results for the guidance of all who would deal with such.

It may be observed, too, that most of the considerations which Paul urges on Philemon as reasons for his kindly reception of Onesimus do not even need the alteration of a word, but simply a change in their application, to become worthy statements of the highest Christian truths. As Luther puts it, "We are all God’s Onesimuses"; and the welcome which Paul seeks to secure for the returning fugitive, as well as the motives to which he appeals in order to secure it, do shadow forth in no uncertain outline our welcome from God, and the treasures of His heart towards us, because they are at bottom the same. The Epistle then is valuable, as showing in a concrete instance how the Christian life, in its attitude to others, and especially to those who have injured us, is all modelled upon God’’s forgiving love to us. Our Lord’s parable of the forgiven servant who took his brother by the throat finds here a commentary, and the Apostle’s own preoept, " Be imitators of God, and walk in love," a practical exemplification.

Nor is the light which the letter throws on the character of the Apostle to be regarded as unimportant. The warmth, the delicacy, and what, if it were not so spontaneous, we might call tact, the graceful ingenuity with which he pleads for the fugitive, the perfect courtesy of every word, the gleam of playfulness - all fused together and harmonized to one end, and that in so brief a compass and with such unstudied ease and complete self-oblivion, make this Epistle a pure gem. Without thought of effect, and with complete unconsciousness, this man beats all the famous letter-writers on their own ground. That must have been a great intellect, and closely conversant with the Fountain of all light and beauty, which could shape the profound and far-reaching teachings of the Epistle to the Colossians, and pass from them to the graceful simplicity and sweet kindliness of this exquisite letter; as if Michael Angelo had gone straight from smiting his magnificent Moses from the marble mass to incise some delicate and tiny figure of Love or Friendship on a cameo.

The structure of the letter is of the utmost simplicity. It is not so much a structure as a flow. There is the usual superscription and salutation, followed, according to Paul’s custom, by the expression of his thankful recognition of the love and , faith of Philemon and his prayer for the perfecting of these. Then he goes straight to the business in hand, and with incomparable persuasiveness pleads for a welcome to Onesimus, bringing all possible reasons to converge on that one request, with an ingenious eloquence bornof earnestness. Having poured out his heart in this pleasure adds no more but affectionate greetings from his companions and himself.

In the present section we shall confine our attention to the superscription and opening salutation.

I. We may observe the Apostle’s designation of himself, as marked by consummate and instinctive appreciation of the claims of friendship, and of his own position in this letter as a suppliant.

He does not come to his friend clothed with apostolic authority. In his letters to the Churches he always puts that in the forefront, and when he expected to be met by opponents, as in Galatia, there is a certain ring of defiance in his claim to receive his commission through no human intervention, but straight from heaven. Sometimes, as in the Epistle to the Colossians, he unites another strangely contrasted title, and calls himself also "the slave" of Christ; the one name asserting authority, the other bowing in humility before his Owner and Master. But here he is writing as a friend to a friend, and his object is to win his friend to a piece of Christian conduct which may be somewhat against the grain. Apostolic authority will not go half so far as personal influence in this case. So he drops all reference to it, and, instead, lets Philemon hear the fetters jangling on his limbs - a more powerful plea. "Paul, a prisoner," surely that would go straight to Philemon’s heart, and give all but irresistible force to the request which follows. Surely if he could do anything to show his love and gratify even momentarily his friend in prison, he would not refuse it. If this designation had been calculated to produce effect, it would have lost all its grace; but no one with any ear for the accents of inartificial spontaneousness, can fail to hear them in the unconscious pathos of these opening words, which say the right thing, all unaware of how right it is.

There is great dignity also, as well as profound faith, in the next words, in which the Apostle calls himself a prisoner "of Christ Jesus." With what calm ignoring of all subordinate agencies he looks to the true author of his captivity! Neither Jewish hatred nor Roman policy had shut him up in Rome. Christ Himself had riveted his manacles on his wrists, therefore he bore them as lightly and proudly as a bride might wear the bracelet that her husband had clasped on her arm. The expression reveals both the author of and the reason for his imprisonment, and discloses the conviction which held him up in it. He thinks of his Lord as the Lxjrd of providence, whose hand moves the pieces on the board - Pharisees, and Roman governors, and guards, and Caesar; and he knows that he is an ambassador in bonds, for no crime, but for the testimony of Jesus. We need only notice that his younger companion Timothy is associated with the Apostle in the superscription, but disappears at once. The reason for the introduction of his name may either have been the slight additional weight thereby given to the request of the letter, or more probably, the additional authority thereby given to the junior, who would, in all likelihood, have much of Paul’s work devolved on him when Paul was gone.

The names of the receivers of the letter bring before us a picture seen, as by one glimmering light across the centuries, of a Christian household in that Phrygian valley. The head of it, Philemon, appears to have been a native of, or at all events a resident in, Colossse; for Onesimus, his slave, is spoken of in the Epistle to the Church there as "one of you." He was a person of some standing and wealth, for he had a house large enough to admit of a " Church " assembling in it, and to accommodate the Apostle and his travelling companions if he should visit Colossae. He had apparently the means for large pecuniary help to poor brethren, and willingness to use them, for we read of the refreshment which his kindly deeds had imparted. He had been one of Paul’s converts, and owed his own self to him; so that he must have met the Apostle, - who had probably not been in Colossae, - on some of his journeys, perhaps during his three years’ residence in Ephesus. He was of mature years, if, as is probable, Archippus, who was old enough to have service to do in the Church [Col. 4:17], was his son.

He is called "our fellow-labourer." The designation may imply some actual co-operation at a former time. But more probably, the phrase, like the similar one in the next verse, "our fellow-soldier," is but Paul’s gracefully affectionate way of lifting these good people’s humbler work out of its narrowness, by associating it with his own. They in their little sphere, and he in his wider, were workers at the same task. All who toil for furtherance of Christ’s kingdom, however widely they may be parted by time or distance, are fellow-workers. Division of labour does not impair unity of service. The field is wide, and the months between seedtime and harvest are long; but all the husbandmen have been engaged in the same great work, and though they have toiled alone shall "rejoice together." The first man who dug a shovelful of earth for the foundations of Cologne Cathedral, and he who fixed the last stone on the topmost spire a thousand years after, are fellow-workers. So Paul and Philemon, though their tasks were widely different in kind, in range, and in importance, and were carried on apart and independent of each other, were fellow-workers. The one lived a Christian life and helped some humble saints in an insignificant, remote corner; the other flamed through the whole then civilized western world, and sheds light to-day : but the obscure, twinkling taper and the blazing torch were kindled at the same source, shone with the same light, and were parts of one great whole. Our narrowness is rebuked, our despondency cheered, our vulgar tendency to think little of modest, obscure service rendered by commonplace people, and to exaggerate the worth of the more conspicuous, is corrected by such a thought. However small may be our capacity or sphere, and however solitary we may feel, we may summon up before the eyes of our faith a mighty multitude of apostles, martyrs, toilers in every land and age as our - even our - workfellows. The field stretches far beyond our vision, and many are toiling in it for Him, whose work never comes near ours. There are differences of service, but the same Lord, and all who have the same master are companions in labour. Therefore Paul, the greatest of the servants of Christ, reaches down his hand to the obscure Philemon, and says, "He works the work of the Lord, as I also do."

In the house at Colossae there was a Christian wife by the side of a Christian husband; at least, the mention of Apphia here in so prominent a position is most naturally accounted for by supposing her to be the wife of Philemon. Her friendly reception of the runaway would be quite as important as his, and it is therefore most natural that the letter bespeaking it should be addressed to both. The probable reading "our sister" [R.V.], instead of "our beloved" [A.V.], gives the distinct assurance that she too was a Christian, and like-minded with her husband.

The prominent mention of this Phrygian matron is an illustration of the way in which Christianity, without meddling with social usages, introduced a new tone of feeling about the position of woman, which gradually changed the face of the world, is still working, and has further revolutions to affect. The degraded classes of the Greek world were slaves and women. This Epistle touches both, and shows us Christianity in the very act of elevating both. The same process strikes the fetters from the slave and sets the wife by the side of the husband, "yoked in all exercise of noble end," - namely, the proclamation of Christ as the Saviour of all mankind, and of all human creatures as equally capable of receiving an equal salvation. That annihilates all distinctions. The old world was parted by deep gulfs. There were three of special depth and width, across which it was hard for sympathy to fly. These were the distinctions of race, sex, and condition. But the good news that Christ has died for all men, and is ready to live in all men, has thrown a bridge across, or rather has filled up, the ravine; so the Apostle bursts into his triumphant proclamation, There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

A third name is united with those of husband and wife, that of Archippus. The close relation in which the names stand, and the purely domestic character of the letter, make it probable that he was a son of the wedded pair. At all events, he was in some way part of their household, possibly some kind of teacher and guide. We meet his name also in the Epistle to the Colossians, and, from the nature of the reference to him there, we draw the inference that he filled some "ministry" in the Church of Laodicea. The nearness of the two cities made it quite possible that he should live in Philemon’s house in Colossae and yet go over to Laodicea for his work.

The Apostle calls him "his fellow-soldier," a phrase which is best explained in the same fashion as is the previous " fellow-worker," namely, that by it Paul graciously associates Archippus with himself, different as their tasks were. The variation of soldier for worker probably is due to the fact of Archippus’ being the bishop of the Laodicean Church. In any case, it is very beautiful that the grizzled veteran officer should thus, as it were, clasp the hand of this young recruit, and call him his comrade. How it would go to the heart of Archippus!

A somewhat stern message is sent to Archippus in the Colossian letter. Why did not Paul send it quietly in this Epistle instead of letting a whole Church know of it? It seems at first sight as if he had chosen the harshest way; but perhaps further consideration may suggest that the reason was an instinctive unwillingness to introduce a jarring note into the joyous friendship and confidence which sounds through this Epistle, and to bring public matters into this private communication. The warning would come with more effect from the Church, and this cordial message of goodwill and confidence would prepare Archippus to receive the other, as rain showers make the ground soft for the good seed. The private affection would mitigate the public exhortation with whatever rebuke may have been in it.

A greeting is sent, too, to "the Church in thy house." As in the case of the similar community in the house of Nymphas [Col. 4:15], we cannot decide whether by this expression is meant simply a Christian family, or some little company of believers who were wont to meet beneath Philemon's roof for Christian converse and worship. The latter seems the more probable supposition. It is natural that they should be addressed; for Onesimus, if received by Philemon, would naturally become a member of the group, and therefore it was important to secure their good will.

So we have here shown to us, by one stray beam of twinkling light, for a moment, a very sweet picture of the domestic life of that Christian household in their remote valley. It shines still to us across the centuries, which have swallowed up so much that seemed more permanent, and silenced so much that made far more noise in its day. The picture may well set us asking ourselves the question whether we, with all our boasted advancement, have been able to realize the true ideal of Christian family life as these three did. The husband and wife dwelling as heirs together of the grace of life, their child beside them sharing their faith and service, their household ordered in the ways of the Lord, their friends Christ's friends, and their social joys hallowed and serene - what nobler form of family life can be conceived than that ? What a rebuke to, and satire on, many a so-called Christian household!

II. We may deal briefly with the apostolic salutation, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," as we have already had to speak of it in considering the greeting to the Colossians.

The two main points to be observed in these words are the comprehensiveness of the Apostle’s loving wish, and the source to which he looks for its fulfilment. Just as the regal title of the King, whose Throne was the Cross, was written in the languages of culture, of law, and of religion, as an unconscious prophecy of His universal reign; so, with like unintentional felicity, we have blended here the ideals of good which the East and the West have framed for those to whom they wish good, in token that Christ is able to slake all the thirsts of the soul, and that whatsoever things any races of men have dreamed as the chiefest blessings, these are all to be reached through Him and Him only.

But the deeper lesson here is to be found by observing that " grace " refers to the action of the Divine heart, and " peace " to the result thereof in man’s experience. As we have noted in commenting on Col. i. 2, " grace " is free, undeserved, unmotived, self-springing love. Hence it comes to mean, not only the deep fountain in the Divine nature, that His love, which, like some strong spring, leaps up and gushes forth by an inward impulse, in neglect of all motives drawn from the lovableness of its objects, such as determine our poor human loves, but also the results of that bestowing love in men’s characters, or, as we say, the "graces" of the Christian soul. They are "grace," not only because in the aesthetic sense of the word they are beautiful, but because, in the theological meaning of it, they are the products of the giving love and power of God. "Whatsoever things are lovely and of good report," all nobilities, tendernesses, exquisite beauties, and steadfast strengths of mind and heart, of will and disposition - all are the gifts of God’s undeserved and open-handed love.

The fruit of such grace received is peace. In other places the Apostle twice gives a fuller form of this salutation, inserting "mercy" between the two here named; as also does St. John in his second Epistle. That fuller form gives us the source in the Divine heart, the manifestation of grace in the Divine act, and the outcome in human experience; or as we may say, carrying on the metaphor, the broad, calm lake which the grace, flowing to us in the stream of mercy, makes, when it opens out in our hearts. Here, however, we have but the ultimate source, and the effect in us.

All the discords of our nature and circumstances can be harmonized by that grace which is ready to flow into our hearts. Peace with God, with ourselves, with our fellows, repose in the midst of change, calm in conflict, may be ours. All these various applications of the one idea should be included in our interpretation, for they are all included in fact in the peace which God’s grace brings where it lights. The first and deepest need of the soul is conscious amity and harmony with God, and nothing but the consciousness of His love as forgiving and healing brings that. We are torn asunder by conflicting passions, and our hearts are the battleground for conscience and inclination, sin and goodness, hopes and fears, and a hundred other contending emotions. Nothing but a heavenly power can make the lion within lie down with the lamb. Our natures are " like the troubled sea, which cannot rest," whose churning waters cast up the foul things that lie in their slimy beds; but where God’s grace comes, a great calm hushes the tempests, " and birds of peace sit brooding on the charmed wave."

We are compassed about by foes with whom we have to wage undying warfare, and by hostile circumstances and difficult tasks which need continual conflict; but a man with God’s grace in his heart may have the rest of submission, the repose of trust, the tranquillity of him who "has ceased from his own works": and so, while the daily struggle goes on and the battle rages round, there may be quiet, deep and sacred, in his heart.

The life of nature, which is a selfish life, flings us into unfriendly rivalries with others, and sets us battling for our own hands, and it is hard to pass out of ourselves sufficiently to live peaceably with all men. But the grace of God in our hearts drives out self, and changes the man who truly has it into its own likeness. He who knows that he owes everything to a Divine love which stooped to his lowliness, and pardoned his sins, and enriched him with all which he has that is worthy and noble, cannot but move among men, doing with them, in his poor fashion, what God has done with him.

Thus, in all the manifold forms in which restless hearts need peace, the grace of God brings it to them. The great river of mercy which has its source deep in the heart of God, and in His free, undeserved love, pours into poor, unquiet spirits, and there spreads itself into a placid lake, on whose still surface all heaven is mirrored.

The elliptical form of this salutation leaves it doubtful whether we are to see in it a prayer or a prophecy, a wish or an assurance. According to the probable reading of the parallel greeting in the second Epistle of John, the latter would be the construction; but probably it is best to combine both ideas, and to see here, as Bengel does in the passage referred to in John’s Epistle, "votum cum affirmatione" - a desire which is so certain of its own fulfilment, that it is a prophecy, just because it is a prayer.

The ground of the certainty lies in the source from which the grace and peace come. They flow “from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The placing of both names under the government of one preposition implies the mysterious unity of the Father with the Son; while conversely St. John, in the parallel passage just mentioned, by employing two prepositions, brings out the distinction between the Father, who is the fontal source, and the Son, who is the flowing stream. But both forms of the expression demand for their honest explanation the recognition of the divinity of Jesus Christ. How dare a man, who thought of Him as other than Divine, put His name thus by the side of God’s, as associated with the Father in the bestowal of grace? Surely such words, spoken without any thought of a doctrine of the Trinity, and which are the spontaneous utterance of Christian devotion, are demonstration, not to be gainsaid, that to Paul, at all events, Jesus Christ was, in the fullest sense. Divine. The double source is one source, for in the Son is the whole fullness of the Godhead; and the grace of God, bringing with it the peace of God, is poured into that spirit which bows humbly before Jesus Christ, and trusts Him when He says, with love in His eyes and comfort in His tones, " My grace is sufficient for thee"; "My peace give I unto you."

2) **Philemon 1:4-7**

THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

II.

Phm. 1:4-7 [R.V.].

PAUL'S was one of those regal natures to which things arc possible that other men dare not do. No suspicion of weakness attaches to him when he pours out his heart in love, nor any of insincerity when he speaks of his continual prayers for his friends, or when he runs over in praise of his converts. Few men have been able to talk so much of their love without betraying its shallowness and self-consciousness, or of their prayers without exciting a doubt of their manly sincerity. But the Apostle could venture to do these things without being thought either feeble or false, and could unveil his deepest affections and his most secret devotions without provoking either a smile or a shrug.

He has the habit of beginning all his letters with thankful commendations and assurances of a place in his prayers. The exceptions are 2 Corinthians, where he writes under strong and painful emotion, and Galatians, where a vehement accusation of fickleness takes the place of the usual greeting. But these exceptions make the habit more conspicuous. Though this is a habit, it is not a form, but the perfectly simple and natural expression of the moment's feelings. He begins his letters so, not in order to please, and to say smooth things, but because he feels lovingly, and his heart fills with a pure joy which speaks most fitly in prayer. To recognize good is the way to make good better. Teachers must love if their teaching is to help. The best way to secure the doing of aqy signal act of Christian generosity, such as Paul wished of Philemon, is to show absolute confidence that it will be done, because it is in accordance with what we know of the doer’s character. "It’s a shame to tell Arnold a lie: he always trusts us," the Rugby boys used to say. Nothing could so powerfully have swayed Philemon to grant Paul’s request, as Paul’s graceful mention of his beneficence, which mention is yet by no means conscious diplomacy, but instinctive kindliness.

The words of this section are simple enough, but their order is not altogether clear. They are a good example of the hurry and rush of the Apostle’s style, arising from his impetuosity of nature. His thoughts and feelings come knocking at " the door of his lips " in a crowd, and do not always make their way out in logical order. For instance, he begins here with thankfulness, and that suggests the mention of his prayers, v. 4. Then he gives the occasion of his thankfulness in v. 5, "Hearing of thy love and of the faith which thou hast," etc. He next tells Philemon the subject matter of his prayers in v, 6, "That the fellowship of thy faith may become effectual," etc. These two verses thus correspond to the two clauses of v, 4, and finally in v, 7 he harks back once more to his reasons for thankfulness in Philemon’s love and faith, adding, in a very lovely and pathetic way, that the good deeds done in far off Colossae had wafted a refreshing air to the Roman prison house, and, little as the doer knew it, had been a joy and comfort to the solitary prisoner there.

I. We have, then, here the character of Philemon, which made Paul glad and thankful.

The order of the language is noteworthy. Love is put before faith. The significance of this sequence comes out by contrast with similar expressions in Eph. 1:15 : "Your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints" [A.V.] and Col. 1:4 : "Your faith in Christ Jesus, and the love which ye have toward all the saints," where the same elements are arranged in the more natural order, corresponding to their logical relation; viz., faith first, and love as its consequence. The reason for the change here is probably that Onesimus and Epaphras, from whom Paul would be likely to hear of Philemon, would enlarge upon his practical benevolence, and would naturally say less about the root than about the sweet and visible fruit. The arrangement then is an echo of the talks which had gladdened the Apostle. Possibly, too, love is put first, because the object of the whole letter is to secure its exercise towards the fugitive slave; and seeing that the Apostle would listen with that purpose in view, each story which was told of Philemon’s kindness to others made the deeper impression on Paul. The order here is the order of analysis, digging down from manifestation to cause: the order in the parallel passages quoted is the order of production ascending from root to flower.

Another peculiarity in the arrangement of the words is that the objects of love and faith are named fn the reverse order to that in which these graces are mentioned, "the Lord Jesus" being first, and "all the saints" last. Thus we have, as it were, "faith towards the Lord Jesus" imbedded in the centre of the verse, while "thy love . . . toward all the saints," which flows from it, wraps it round. The arrangement is like some forms of Hebrew poetical parallelism, in which the first and fourth members correspond, and the second and third, or like the pathetic measure of In Memoriam, and has the same sweet lingering cadence; while it also implies important truths as to the central place in regard to the virtues which knit hearts in soft bonds of love and help, of the faith which finds its sole object in Jesus Christ.

The source and foundation of goodness and nobility of character is faith in Jesus the Lord. That must be buried deep in the soul if tender love toward men is to flow from it It is "the very pulse of the machine." All the pearls ofgoodness are held in solution in faith. Or, to speak, more accurately, faith in Christ gives possession of His life and Spirit, from which all good is unfolded; and it further sets in action strong motives by which to lead to every form of purity and beauty of soul; and, still further, it brings the heart into glad contact with a Divine love which forgives its Onesimuses, and so it cannot but touch the heart into some glad imitation of that love which is its own dearest treasure. So that, for all these and many more reasons, love to men is the truest visible expression, as it is the direct and necessary result, of faith in Christ. What is exhaled from the heart and drawn upwards by the fervors of Christ’s self-sacrificing love is faith; when it falls on earth again, as a sweet rain of pity and tenderness, it is love.

Further, the true object of faith and one phase of its attitude towards that object are brought out in this central clause. We have the two names which express, the one the divinity, the other the humanity of Christ. So the proper object of faith is the whole Christ, in both His natures, the Divine-human Saviour. Christian faith sees the divinity in the humanity, and the humanity around the divinity. A faith which grasps only the manhood is maimed, and indeed has no right to the name. Humanity is not a fit object of trust. It may change; it has limits; it must die. "Cursed be the man that maketh flesh his arm," is as true about faith in a merely human Christ as about faith in any other man. There may be reverence, there may be in some sense love, obedience, imitation; but there should not be, and I see not how there can be, the absolute reliance, the utter dependence, the unconditional submission, which are of the very essence of faith, in the emotions which men cherish towards a human Christ. The Lord Jesus only can evoke these. On the other hand, the far off splendor and stupendous glory of the Divine nature becomes the object of untrembling trust, and draws near enough to be known and loved, when we have it mellowed to our weak eyes by shining through the tempering medium of His humanity.

The preposition here used to define the relation of faith to its object is noteworthy. Faith is "toward" Him. The idea is that of a movement of yearning after an unattained good. And that is one part of the true office of faith. There is in it an element of aspiration, as of the soaring eagle to the sun, or the climbing tendrils to the summit of the supporting stem. In Christ there is always something beyond, which discloses itself the more clearly, the fuller is our present possession of Him. Faith builds upon and rests in the Christ possessed and experienced, and just therefore will it, if it be true, yearn towards the Christ unpossessed. A great reach of flashing glory beyond opens on us, as we round each new headland in that unending voyage. Our faith should and will be an ever increasing fruition of Christ, accompanied with increasing perception of unreached depths in Him, and increasing longing after enlarged possession of His infinite fullness.

Where the centre is such a faith, its circumference and outward expression will be a widely diffused love. That deep and most private emotion of the soul, which is the flight of the lonely spirit to the single Christ, as if these two were alone in the world, does not bar a man off from his kind, but effloresces into the largest and most practical love. When one point of the compasses is struck deeply and firmly into that centre of all things, the other can steadily sweep a wide circle. The widest is not here drawn, but a somewhat narrower, concentric one. The love is "toward all saints." Clearly their relation to Jesus Christ puts all Christians into relation with one another. That was an astounding thought in Philemon’s days, when such high walls separated race from race, the slave from the free, woman from man; but the new faith leaped all barriers, and put a sense of brotherhood into every heart that learned God’s fatherhood in Jesus. The nave of the wheel holds all the spokes in place. The sun makes the system called by its name a unity, though some planets be of giant bulk and swing through a mighty orbit, waited on by obedient satellites, and some be but specks and move through a narrow circle, and some have scarce been seen by human eye. All are one, because all revolve round one sun, though solemn abysses part them, and though no message has ever crossed the gulfs from one to another.

The recognition of the common relation which all who bear the same relation to Christ bear to one another has more formidable difficulties to encounter to-day than it had in these times when the Church had no stereotyped creeds and no stiffened organizations, and when to the flexibility of its youth were added the warmth of new conviction and the joy of a new field for expanding emotions of brotherly kindness. But nothing can absolve from the duty. Creeds separate, Christ unites. The road to "the reunion of Christendom" is through closer union to Jesus Christ. When that is secured, barriers which now keep brethren apart will be leaped, or pulled down, or got rid of somehow. It is of no use to say, "Go to, let us love one another." That will be unreal, mawkish, histrionic. "The faith which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus" will be the productive cause, as it is the measure, of "thy love toward all the saints."

But the love which is here commended is not a mere feeling, nor does it go off in gushes, however fervid, of eloquent emotion. Clearly Philemon was a benefactor of the brotherhood, and his love did not spend only the paper money of words and promises to pay, but the solid coin of kindly deeds. Practical charity is plainly included in that love of which it had cheered Paul in his imprisonment to hear. Its mention, then, is one step nearer to the object of the letter. Paul conducts his siege of Philemon’s heart skillfully, and opens here a fresh parallel, and creeps a yard or two closer up. "Surely you are not going to shut out one of your own household from that wide-reaching kindness." So much is most delicately hinted, or rather, left to Philemon to infer, by the recognition of his brotherly love. A hint lies in it that there may be a danger of cherishing a cheap and easy charity that reverses the law of gravity, and increases as the square of the distance, having tenderness and smiles for people and Churches which are well out of our road, and frowns for some nearer home. "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how shall he love" his brother "whom he hath not seen?"

II. In V, 6 we have the apostolic prayer for Philemon, grounded on the tidings of his love and faith.

It is immediately connected with "the prayers" of v, 4 by the introductory "that," which is best understood as introducing the subject matter of the prayer. Whatever then may be the meaning of this supplication, it is a prayer for Philemon, and not for others. That remark disposes of the explanations which widen its scope, contrary, as it seems to me, to the natural understanding of the context.

"The fellowship of thy faith" is capable of more than one meaning. The signification of the principal word and the relation expressed by the preposition may be variously determined. "Fellowship" is more than once used in the sense of sharing material wealth with Christ’s poor, or more harshly and plainly, charitable contribution. So we find it in Rom. 15:26 and 2Co. 9:13, Adopting that meaning here, the "of" must express, as it often does, the origin of Philemon’s kindly gifts, namely, his faith; and the whole phrase accords with the preceding verse in its view of the genesis of beneficence to the brethren as the result of faith in the Lord.

The Apostle prays that this faith-begotten practical liberality may become efficacious, or may acquire still more power; i.e., may increase in activity, and so may lead to "the knowledge of every good thing that is in us." The interpretation has found extensive support, which takes this as equivalent to a desire that Philemon’s good deeds might lead others, whether enemies or friends, to recognize the beauties of sympathetic goodness in the true Christian character. Such an explanation hopelessly confuses the whole, and does violence to the plain requirements of the context, which limit the prayer to Philemon. It is his "knowledge" of which Paul is thinking. The same profound and prognant word is used here which occurs so frequently in the other epistles of the captivity, and which always means that deep and vital knowledge which knows because it possesses. Usually its object is God as revealed in the great work and person of Christ. Here its object IS the sum total of spiritual blessings, the whole fullness of the gifts given us by, and, at bottom, consisting of, that same Christ dwelling in the heart, who is revealer, because He is communicator, of God. The full, deep knowledge of this manifold and yet one good is no mere theoretical work of the understanding, but is an experience which is only possible to him who enjoys it.

The meaning of the wliole prayer, then, put into feebler and more modern dress is simply that Philemon’s liberality and Christian love may grow more and more, and may help him to a fuller appropriation and experience of the large treasures "which are in us," though in germ and potentiality only, until brought into consciousness by our own Christian growth. The various readings "in us," or "in you" only widen the circle of possessors of these gifts to the whole Church, or narrow it to the believers of Colossae.

There still remain for consideration the last words of the clause, "unto Christ." They must be referred back to the main subject of the sentence, "may become effectual." They seem to express the condition on which Christian "fellowship," like all Christian acts, can be quickened with energy, and tend to spiritual progress; namely, that it shall be done as to the Lord. There is perhaps in this appended clause a kind of lingering echo of our Lord’s own words, in which He accepts as done, unto Him the kindly deeds done to the least of His brethren.

So then this great prayer brings out very strongly the goal to which the highest perfection of Christian character has still to aspire. Philemon was no weakling or laggard in the Christian conflict and race. His attainments sent a thrill of thankfulness through the Apostle’s spirit. But there remained "very much land to be possessed "; and precisely because he had climbed so far, does his friend pray that he may mount still higher, where the sweep of view is wider, and the air clearer still. It is an endless task to bring into conscious possession and exercise all the fullness with which Christ endows His feeblest servant. Not till all that God can give, or rather has given, has been incorporated in the nature and wrought out in the life, is the term reached. This is the true sublime of the Christian life, that it begins with the reception of a strictly infinite gift, and demands immortality as the field for unfolding its worth. Continual progress in all that ennobles the nature, satisfies the heart, and floods the mind with light is the destiny of the Christian soul, and of it alone. Therefore unwearied effort, buoyancy, and hope which no dark memories can dash nor any fears darken should mark their temper, to whom the future offers an absolutely endless and limitless irrcrease in the possession of the infinite God.

There is also brought out in this prayer the value of Christian beneficence as a means of spiritual growth. Philemon’s "communication of faith" will help him to the knowledge of the fulness of Christ. The reaction of conduct on character and growth in godliness is a familiar idea with Paul, especially in the prison epistles. Thus we read in his prayer for the Colossians, "fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God." The faithful carrying out in life of what we already know is not the least important condition of increasing knowledge.

If a man does not live up to his religion, his religion shrinks to the level of his life. Unoccupied territory lapses. We hold our spiritual gifts on the terms of using them. The practice of convictions deepens convictions; not that the exercise of Christian graces will make theologians, but it will give larger possession of the knowledge which is life.

While this general principle is abundantly enforced in Scripture and confirmed by experience, the specific form of it here is that the right administration of wealth is a direct means of increasing a Christian’s possession of the large store treasured in Christ. Every loving thought towards the sorrowful and the needy, every touch of sympathy yielded to, and every kindly. Christlike deed flowing from these, thins away some film of the barriers between the believing soul and a full possession of God, and thus makes it more capable of beholding Him and of rising to communion with Him. The possibilities of wealth lie, not only in the direction of earthly advantages, but in the fact that men may so use it as to secure their being " received into everlasting habitations." Modern evangelical teachers have been afraid to say what Paul ventured to say on this matter, for fear of obscuring the truth which Paul gave his life to preach. Surely they need not be more jealous for the doctrine of "justification by faith" than he was; and if he had no scruples in telling rich men to " lay up in store for themselves a good foundation for the time to come," by being "“ready to communicate," they may safely follow. There is probably no more powerful cause of the comparative feebleness of average English Christianity than the selfish use of money, and no surer means of securing a great increase in the depth and richness of the individual Christian life than the fuller application of Christian principle, that is, of the law of sacrifice, to the administration of property.

The final clause of the verse seems to state the condition on which Philemon's good deeds will avail for his own growth in grace, and implies that in him ' that condition is fulfilled. If a man does deeds of kindness and help to one of these little ones, as "unto Christ," then his beneficence will come back in spiritual blessing on his own head. If they are the result of simple natural compassion, beautiful as it is, they will reinforce it, but have no tendency to strengthen that from which they do not flow. If they are tainted by any self-regard, then they are not charitable deeds at all. What is done for Christ will bring to the doer more of Christ as its consequence and reward. All life, with all its varied forms of endurance' and service, comes under this same law, and tends to make more assured and more blessed and more profound the knowledge and grasp of the fulness of Christ, in the measure in which it is directed to Him, and done or suffered for His sake.

III. The present section closes with a very sweet and pathetic representation of the Apostle's joy in the character of his friend.

The "for" of v. 7 connects not with the words of petition immediately before, but with "I thank my God" [v. 4], and gives a graceful turn - graceful only because so unforced and true - to the sentence. "My thanks are due to you for your kindness to others, for, though you did not think of it, you have done me as much good as you did them." The "love which gives Paul such "great joy and consolation" is not love directed to himself, but to others; and the reason why it gladdened the Apostle was because it had "refreshed the hearts" of sorrowful and needy saints in Colossae. This tender expression of affectionate joy in Philemon's good deeds is made wonderfully emotional by that emphatic " brother " which ends the verse, and by its unusual position in the sentence assumes the character of a sudden, irrepressible shoot of love from Paul's heart towards Philemon, like the quick impulse with which a mother will catch up her child, and cover it with caresses. Paul was never ashamed of showing his tenderness, and it never repels us.

These final words suggest the unexpected good which good deeds may do. No man can ever tell how far the blessing of his trivial acts of kindness, or other pieces of Christian conduct, may travel. They may benefit one in material fashion, but the fragrance may reach many others. Philemon little dreamed that his small charity to some suffering brother in Colossae would find its way across the sea, and bring a waft of coolness and refreshing into the hot prison house. Neither Paul nor Philemon dreamed that, made immortal by the word of the former, the same transient act would find its way across the centuries, and would "smell sweet and blossom in the dust" today. Men know not who are their audiences, or who may be spectators of their works; for they are all bound so mystically and closely together, that none can tell how far the vibrations which he sets in motion will thrill. This is true about all deeds, good and bad, and invests them all with solemn importance. The arrow shot travels beyond the archer's eye, and may wound where he knows not. The only thing certain about the deed once done is, that its irrevocable consequences will reach much farther than the doer dreamed, and that no limits can be set to the subtle influence which, for blessing or harm, it exerts.

Since the diameter of the circle which our acts may fill is unknown and unknowable, the doer who stands at the centre is all the more solemnly bound to make sure of the only thing of which he can make sure, the quality of the influence sent forth; and since his deed may blight or bless so widely, to clarify his motives and guard his doings, that they may bring only good wherever they light

May we not venture to see shining through the Apostle's words the Master's face? "Even as Christ did for us with God the Father," says Luther, "thus also doth St. Paul for Onesimus with Philemon"; and that thought may permissibly be applied to many parts of this letter, to which it gives much beauty. It may not be all fanciful to say that, as Paul’s heart was gladdened when he heard of the good deeds done in far-off Colossae by a man who "owed to him his own self," so we may believe that Christ is glad and has "great joy in our love" to His servants and in our kindliness, when He beholds the poor work done by the humblest for His sake. He sees and rejoices, and approves when there are none but Himself to know or praise; and at last many, who did lowly service to His friends, will be surprised to hear from His lips the acknowledgment that it was Himself whom they had visited and succoured, and that they had been ministering to the Master’s joy when they had only known themselves to be succouring His servants need.

3) Philemon 1:8-11

THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

III.

Phm. 1:8-11

AFTER honest and affectionate praise of Philemon, the Apostle now approaches the main purpose of his letter. But even now he does not blurt it out at once. He probably anticipated that his friend was justly angry with his runaway slave, and therefore, in these verses, he touches a kind of prelude to his request with what we should call the finest tact, if it were not so manifestly the unconscious product of simple good feeling. Even by the end of them he has not ventured to say what he wishes done, though he has ventured to introduce the obnoxious name. So much persuading and sanctified ingenuity does it sometimes take to induce good men to do plain duties which may be unwelcome.

These verses not only present a model for efforts to lead men in right paths, but they unveil the very spirit of Christianity in their pleadings. Paul’s persuasives to Philemon are echoes of Christ’s persuasives to Paul. He had learned his method from his Master, and had himself experienced that gentle love was more than commandments. Therefore he softens his voice to speak to Philemon, as Christ had softened His to speak to Paul. We do not arbitrarily "spiritualize" the words, but simply recognize that the Apostle moulded his conduct after Christ’s pattern, when we see here a mirror reflecting some of the highest truths of Christian ethics.

I. Here is seen love which beseeches where it might command.

The first word, "wherefore," leads back to the preceding sentence, and makes Philemon’s past kindness to the saints the reason for his being asked to be kind now. The Apostle’s confidence in his friend’s character, and in his being amenable to the appeal of love, made Paul waive his apostolic authority, and sue instead of commanding. There are people, like the horse and the mule, who understand only rough imperatives, backed by force; but they are fewer than we are apt to think, and perhaps gentleness is never wholly thrown away. No doubt, there must be adaptation of method to different characters, but we should try gentleness before we make up our minds that to try it is to throw pearls before swine.

The careful limits put to apostolic authority here deserve notice. " I might be much bold in Christ to command." He has no authority in himself, but he has " in Christ." His own personality gives him none, but his relation to his Master does. It is a distinct assertion of right to command, and an equally distinct repudiation of any such right, except as derived from his union with Jesus.

He still further limits his authority by that noteworthy clause, "that which is befitting." His authority does not stretch so far as to create new obligations, or to repeal plain laws of duty. There was a standard by which his commands were to be tried. He appeals to Philemon’s own sense of moral fitness, to his natural conscience, enlightened by communion with Christ.

Then comes the great motive which he will urge, "for love’s sake" - not merely his to Philemon, nor Philemon’s to him, but the bond which unites all Christian souls together, and binds them all to Christ. "That grand, sacred principle," says Paul, "bids me put away authority, and speak in entreaty." Love naturally beseeches, and does not order. The harsh voice of command is simply the imposition of another’s will, and it belongs to relationships in which the heart has no share. But wherever love is the bond, grace is poured into the lips, and "I enjoin" becomes "I pray." So that even

where the outward form of authority is still kept, as in a parent to young children, there will ever be some endearing word to swathe the harsh imperative in tenderness, like a sword blade wrapped about with wool, lest it should wound. Love tends to obliterate the hard distinction of superior and inferior, which finds its expression in laconic imperatives and silent obedience. It seeks not for mere compliance with commands, but for oneness of will. The lightest wish breathed by loved lips is stronger than all stern injunctions, often, alas! than all laws of duty. The heart is so tuned as only to vibrate to that one tone. The rocking stones, which all the storms of winter may howl round and not move, can be set swinging by a light touch. Una leads the lion in a silken leash. Love controls the wildest nature. The demoniac, whom no chains can bind, is found sitting at the feet of incarnate gentleness. So the wish of love is all-powerful with loving hearts, and its faintest whisper louder and more constraining than all the trumpets of Sinai.
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There is a large lesson here for all human relationships. Fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, friends and companions, teachers and guides of all sorts, should set their conduct by this pattern, and let the law of love sit ever upon their lips. Authority is the weapon of a weak man, who is doubtful of his own power to get himself obeyed, or of a selfish one, who seeks for mechanical submission rather than for the fealty of willing hearts. Love is the weapon of a strong man who can cast aside the trappings of superiority, and is never loftier than when he descends, nor more absolute than when he abjures authority, and appeals with love to love. Men are not to be dragooned into goodness. If mere outward acts are sought, it may be enough to impose another’s will in orders as curt as a soldier’s word of command; but if the joyful inclination of the heart to the good deed is to be secured, that can only be done when law melts into love, and is thereby transformed to a more imperative obligation, written not on tables of stone, but on fleshy tables of the heart.

There is a glimpse here into the very heart of Christ’s rule over men. He too does not merely impose commands, but stoops to entreat, where He indeed might command. "Henceforth I call you not servants, but friends"; and though He does go on to say, "Ye are My friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you," yet His commandment has in it so much tenderness, condescension, and pleading love, that it sounds far liker beseeching than enjoining. His yoke is easy, for this among other reasons, that it is, if one may so say, padded with love. His burden is light, because it is laid on His servant's shoulders by a loving hand; and so, as St Bernard says, it is *onus quod portantem portat*, a burden which carries him who carries it.

II. There is in these verses the appeal which gives weight to the entreaties of love.

The Apostle brings personal considerations to bear on the enforcement of impersonal duty, and therein follows the example of his Lord. He presents his own circumstances as adding power to his request, and as it were puts himself into the scale. He touches with singular pathos on two things which should sway his friend. "Such a one as Paul the aged." The alternative rendering "ambassador," while quite possible, has not congruity in its favour, and would be a recurrence to that very motive of official authority which he has just disclaimed. The other rendering is every way preferable. How old was he "i Probably somewhere about sixty - not a very great age, but life was somewhat shorter then than now, and Paul was, no doubt, aged by work, by worry, and by the unresting spirit that "*o'er-informed his tenement of clay*." Such temperaments as his soon grow old. Perhaps Philemon was not much younger; but the prosperous Colossian gentleman had had a smoother life, and, no doubt, carried his years more lightly.

The requests of old age should have weight. In our days, what with the improvements in education, and the general loosening of the bonds of reverence, the old maxim that "the utmost respect is due to children," receives a strange interpretation, and in many a household the Divine order is turned upside down, and the juniors regulate all things. Other still more sacred things will be likely to lose their due reverence when silver hairs no longer receive theirs.

But usually the aged who are "such" aged "as Paul" was, will not fail of obtaining honour and deference. No more beautiful picture of the bright energy and freshness still possible to the old was ever painted than may be gathered from the Apostle's unconscious sketch of himself. He delighted in having young life about him - Timothy, Titus, Mark, and others, boys in comparison with himself, whom yet he admitted to close intimacy, as some old general might the youths of his staff, warming his age at the genial flame of their growing energies and unworn hopes. His was a joyful old age too, notwithstanding many burdens of anxiety and sorrow. We hear the clear song of his gladness ringing through the epistle of joy, that to the Philippians, which, like this, dates from his Roman captivity. A Christian old age should be joyful, and only it will be; for the joys of the natural life burn low, when the fuel that fed them is nearly exhausted, and withered hands are held in vain over the dying embers. But Christ’s joy "remains," and a Christian old age may be like the polar midsummer days, when the sun shines till midnight, and dips but for an imperceptible interval ere it rises for the unending day of heaven.

Paul the aged was full of interest in the things of the day; no mere "praiser of time gone by," but a strenuous worker, cherishing a quick sympathy and an eager interest which kept him young to the end. Witness that last chapter of the second Epistle to Timothy, where he is seen, in the immediate expectation of death, entering heartily into passing trifles, and thinking it worth while to give little pieces of information about the movements of his friends, and wishful to get his books and parchments, that he might do some more work while waiting for the headsman’s sword. And over his cheery, sympathetic, busy old age there is thrown the light of a great hope, which kindles desire and onward looks in his dim eyes, and parts "such a one as Paul the aged " by a whole universe from the old whose future is dark and their past dreary, whose hope is a phantom and their memory a pang.

The Apostle adds yet another personal characteristic as a motive with Philemon to grant his request: "Now a prisoner also of Christ Jesus." He has already spoken of himself in these terms in v. i. His sufferings were imposed by and endured for Christ. He holds up his fettered wrist, and in effect says, "Surely you will not refuse anything that you can do to wrap a silken softness round the cold, hard iron, especially when you remember for Whose sake and by Whose will I am bound with this chain." He thus brings personal motives to reinforce duty which is binding from other and higher considerations. He does not merely tell Philemon that he ought to take back Onesimus as a piece of self-sacrificing Christian duty. He does imply that highest motive throughout his pleadings, and urges that such action is "fitting" or in consonance with the position and obligations of a Christian man. But he backs up this highest reason with these others: If you hesitate to take him back because you ought, will you do it because I ask you and, before you answer that question, will you remember my age, and what I am bearing for the Master? If he can get his friend to do the right thing by the help of these subsidiary motives, still, it is the right thing; and the appeal to these motives will do Philemon no harm, and, if successful, will do both him and Onesimus a great deal of good.

Does not this action of Paul remind us of the highest example of a similar use of motives of personal attachment as aids to duty? Christ does thus with His servants. He does not simply hold up before us a cold law of duty, but warms it by introducing our personal relation to Him as the main motive for keeping it. Apart from Him, Morality can only point to the tables of stone and say: "There! that is what you ought to do. Do it, or face the consequences." But Christ says: "I have given Myself for you. My will is your law. Will you do it for My sake?" Instead of the chilling, statuesque ideal, as pure as marble and as cold, a Brother stands before us with a heart that beats, a smile on His face, a hand outstretched to help; and His word is, "If ye love Me, keep My commandments." The specific difference of Christian morality lies not in its precepts, but in its motive, and in its gift of power to obey. Paul could only urge regard to him as a subsidiary inducement. Christ puts it as the chief, nay, as the sole motive for obedience.

III. The last point suggested by these verses is the gradual opening up of the main subject matter of the Apostle’s request.

Very noteworthy is the tenderness of the description of the fugitive as "my child, whom I have begotten in my bonds." Paul does not venture to name him at once, but prepares the way by the warmth of this affectionate reference. The position of the name in the sentence is most unusual, and suggests a kind of hesitation to take the plunge, while the hurried passing on to meet the objection which he knew would spring immediately to Philemon’s mind is almost as if Paul laid his hand on his friend’s lips to stop his words, - "Onesimus then is it that good-for-nothing! "Paul admits the indictment, will say no word to mitigate the condemnation due to his past worthlessness, but, with a playful allusion to the slave's name, which conceals his deep earnestness, assures Philemon that he will find the formerly inappropriate name, Onesimus - i.e., profitable - true yet, for all that is past. He is sure of this, because he, Paul, has proved his value. Surely never were the natural feelings of indignation and suspicion more skillfully soothed, and never did repentant good-for-nothing get sent back to regain the confidence which he had forfeited, with such a certificate of character in his hand!

But there is something of more importance than Paul's inborn delicacy and tact to notice here. Onesimus had been a bad specimen of a bad class. Slavery must needs corrupt both the owner and the chattel; and, as a matter of fact, we have classical allusions enough to show that the slaves of Paul's period were deeply tainted with the characteristic vices of their condition. Liars, thieves, idle, treacherous, nourishing a hatred of their masters all the more deadly that it was smothered, but ready to flame out, if opportunity served, in blood-curdling cruelties - they constituted an ever-present danger, and needed an ever-wakeful watchfulness. Onesimus had been known to Philemon only as one of the idlers who were more of a nuisance than a benefit, and cost more than they earned; and he apparently ended his career by theft. And this degraded creature, with scars on his soul deeper and worse than the marks of fetters on his limbs, had somehow found his way to the great jungle of a city, where all foul vermin could crawl and hiss and sting with comparative safety. There he had somehow come across the Apostle, and had received into his heart, filled with ugly desires and lusts, the message of Christ's love, which had swept it clean, and made him over again. The Apostle has had but short experience of his convert, but he is quite sure that he is a Christian; and, that being the case, he is as sure that all the bad black past is buried, and that the new leaf now turned over will be covered with fair writing, not in the least like the blots that were on the former page, and have now been dissolved from off it, by the touch of Christ's blood.

It is a typical instance of the miracles which the gospel wrought as every-day events in its transforming career. Christianity knows nothing of hopeless cases. It professes its ability to take the most crooked stick and bring it straight, to flash a new power into the blackest carbon, which will turn it into a diamond. Every duty will be done better by a man if he have the love and grace of Jesus Christ in his heart. New motives are brought into play, new powers are given, new standards of duty are set up. The small tasks become great, and the unwelcome sweet, and the difficult easy, when done for and through Christ. Old vices are crushed in their deepest source; old habits driven out by the force of a new affection, as the young leaf-buds push the withered foliage from the tree. Christ can make any man over again, and does so re-create every heart that trusts to him. Such miracles of transformation are wrought to-day as truly as of old. Many professing Christians experience little of that quickening and revolutionizing energy; many observers see little of it, and some begin to croak, as if the old power had ebbed away. But wherever men give the gospel fair play in their lives, and open their spirits, in truth and not merely in profession, to its influence, it vindicates its undiminished possession of all its former energy; and if ever it seems to fail, it is not that the medicine is ineffectual, but that the sick man has not really taken it. The low tone of much modern Christianity and its dim exhibition of the transforming power of the gospel is easily and sadly accounted for without charging decrepitude on that which was once so mighty, by the patent fact that much modern Christianity is little better than lip acknowledgment, and that much more of it is woefully unfamiliar with the truth which it in some fashion believes, and is sinfully negligent of the spiritual gifts which it professes to treasure. If a Christian man does not show that his religion is changing him into the fair likeness of his Master, and fitting him for all relations of life, the reason is simply that he has so little of it, and that little so mechanical and tepid.

Paul pleads with Philemon to take back his worthless servant, and assures him that he will find Onesimus helpful now. Christ does not need to be besought to welcome His runaway good-for-nothings, however unprofitable they have been. That Divine charity of His forgives all things, and "hopes all things" of the worst, and can fulfil its own hope in the most degraded. With bright, unfaltering confidence in His own power He fronts the most evil, sure that He can cleanse; and that, no matter what the past has been. His power can overcome all defects of character, education, or surroundings, can set free from all moral disadvantages adhering to men’s station, class, or calling, can break the entail of sin. The worst needs no intercessor to sway that tender heart of our great Master whom we may dimly see shadowed in the very name of "Philemon," which means one who is loving or kindly. Whoever confesses to him that he has " been an unprofitable servant," will be welcomed to His heart, made pure and good by the Divine Spirit breathing new life into him, will be trained by Christ for all joyful toil as His slave, and yet His freedman and friend; and at last each once fugitive and unprofitable Onesimus will hear the "Well done, good and faithful servant I."

4) Philemon 1:9

Acts

THE YOUNG SAUL AND THE AGED PAUL 1

Act. 7:58. - Phm. 1:9.

A far greater difference than that which was measured by years separated the young Saul from the aged Paul. By years, indeed, the difference was, perhaps, not so great as the words might suggest, for Jewish usage extended the term of youth farther than we do, and began age sooner. No doubt, too, Paul’s life had aged him fast, and probably there were not thirty years between the two periods. But the difference between him and himself at the beginning and the end of his career was a gulf; and his life was not evolution, but revolution.

At the beginning you see a brilliant young Pharisee, Gamaliel’s promising pupil, advanced above many who were his equals in his own religion, as he says himself; living after its straitest sect, and eager to have the smallest part in what seemed to him the righteous slaying of one of the followers of the blaspheming Nazarene. At the end he was himself one of these followers. He had cast off, as folly, the wisdom which took him so much pains to acquire. He had turned his back upon all the brilliant prospects of distinction which were opening to him. He had broken with countrymen and kindred. And what had he made of it? He had been persecuted, hunted, assailed by every weapon that his old companions could fashion or wield; he is a solitary man, laden with many cares, and accustomed to look perils and death in the face; he is a prisoner, and in a year or two more he will be a martyr. If he were an apostate and a renegade, it was not for what he could get by it.

What made the change? The vision of Jesus Christ. If we think of the transformation on Saul, its causes and its outcome, we shall get lessons which I would fain press upon your hearts now. Do you wonder that I would urge on you just such a life as that of this man as your highest good?

I. I would note, then, first, that faith in Jesus Christ will transform and ennoble any life.

It has been customary of late years, amongst people who do not like miracles, and do not believe in sudden changes of character, to allege that Paul's conversion was but the appearance, on the surface, of an underground process that had been going on ever since he kept the witnesses' clothes. Modern critics know a great deal more about the history of Paul's conversion than Paul did. For to him there was no consciousness of undermining, but the change was instantaneous. He left Jerusalem a bitter persecutor, exceeding mad against the followers of the Nazarene, thinking that Jesus was a blasphemer and an impostor, and His disciples pestilent vermin, to be harried off the face of the earth. He entered Damascus a lowly disciple of that Christ. His conversion was not an underground process that had been silently sapping the foundations of his life; it was an explosion. And what caused it? What was it that came on that day on the Damascus road, amid the blinding sunshine of an Eastern noontide? The vision of Jesus Christ. An overwhelming conviction flooded his soul that He whom he had taken to be an impostor, richly deserving the Cross that He endured, was living in glory, and was revealing Himself to Saul then and there. That truth crumbled his whole past into nothing; and he stood there trembling and astonished, like a man the ruins of whose house have fallen about his ears. He bowed himself to the vision. He surrendered at discretion without a struggle. 'Immediately,' says he, 'I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,' and when he said 'Lord, Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' he flung open the gates of the fortress for the Conqueror to come in. The vision of Christ reversed his judgments, transformed his character, revolutionised his life.

That initial impulse operated through all the rest of his career. Hearken to him: 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. To me to live is Christ. Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; or whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Living or dying, we are the Lord's.' 'We labour that whether present or absent, we may be accepted of Him.' The transforming agency was the vision of Christ, and the bowing of the man's whole nature before the seen Saviour.

Need I recall to you how noble a life issued from that fountain? I am sure that I need do no more than mention in a word or two the wondrous activity, flashing like a flame of fire from East to West, and everywhere kindling answering flames, the noble self-oblivion, the continual communion with God and the Unseen, and all the other great virtues and nobleness which came from such sources as these. I need only, I am sure, remind you of them, and draw this lesson, that the secret of a transforming and noble life is to be found in faith in Jesus Christ. The vision that changed Paul is as available for you and me. For it is all a mistake to suppose that the essence of it is the miraculous appearance that flashed upon the Apostle's eyes. He speaks of it himself, in one of his letters, in other language, when he says, 'It pleased God to reveal His Son *in* me.' And that revelation in all its fulness, in all its sweetness, in all its transforming and ennobling power, is offered to every one of us. For the eye of faith is no less gifted with the power of direct and certain vision-yea! is even more gifted with this-than is the eye of sense. 'If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.' Christ is revealed to each one of us as really, as veritably, and the revelation may become as strong an impulse and motive in our lives as ever it was to the Apostle on the Damascus road. What is wanted is not revelation, but the bowed will-not the heavenly vision, but obedience to the vision. I suppose that most of you think that you believe all that about Jesus Christ, which transformed Gamaliel's pupil into Christ's disciple. And what has it done for you? In many cases, nothing. Be sure of this, dear young friends, that the shortest way to a life adorned with all grace, with all nobility, fragrant with all goodness, and permanent as that life which does the will of God must clearly be, is this, to bow before the seen Christ, seen in His word, and speaking to your hearts, and to take His yoke and carry His burden. Then you will build upon what will stand, and make your days noble and your lives stable. If you build on anything else, the structure will come down with a crash some day, and bury you in its ruins. Surely it is better to learn the worthlessness of a non-Christian life, in the light of His merciful face, when there is yet time to change our course, than to see it by the fierce light of the great White Throne set for judgment. We must each of us learn it here or there.

II. Faith in Christ will make a joyful life, whatever its circumstances.

I have said that, judged by the standard of the Exchange, or by any of the standards which men usually apply to success in life, this life of the Apostle was a failure. We know, without my dwelling more largely upon it, what he gave up. We know what, to outward appearance, he gained by his Christianity. You remember, perhaps, how he himself speaks about the external aspects of his life in one place, where he says ‘Even unto this present hour we both hunger and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwelling-place, and labour, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it; being defamed, we entreat. We are made as the filth of the world, and as the offscouring of all things unto this day.’

That was one side of it. Was that all? This man had that within him which enabled him to triumph over all trials. There is nothing more remarkable about him than the undaunted courage, the unimpaired elasticity of spirit, the buoyancy of gladness, which bore him high upon the waves of the troubled sea in which he had to swim. If ever there was a man that had a bright light burning within him, in the deepest darkness, it was that little weather-beaten Jew, whose ‘bodily presence was weak, and his speech contemptible.’ And what was it that made him master of circumstances, and enabled him to keep sunshine in his heart when winter bound all the world around him? What made this bird sing in a darkened cage? One thing-the continual presence, consciously with Him by faith, of that Christ who had revolutionised his life, and who continued to bless and to gladden it. I have quoted his description of his external condition. Let me quote two or three words that indicate how he took all that sea of troubles and of sorrows that poured its waves and its billows over him. ‘In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.’ ‘As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation aboundeth also by Christ.' 'For which cause we faint not, but though our outward man perish, yet our inward man is renewed day by day.' 'Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' 'I have learned in whatsoever state I am therewith to be content.' 'As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing all things.'

There is the secret of blessedness, my friends; there is the fountain of perpetual joy. Cling to Christ, set His will on the throne of your hearts, give the reins of your life and of your character into His keeping, and nothing 'that is at enmity with joy' can either 'abolish or destroy' the calm blessedness of your spirits.

You will have much to suffer; you will have something to give up. Your life may look, to men whose tastes have been vulgarised by the glaring brightnesses of this vulgar world, but grey and sombre, but it will have in it the calm abiding blessedness which is more than joy, and is diviner and more precious than the tumultuous transports of gratified sense or successful ambition. Christ is peace, and He gives His peace to us; and then He gives a joy which does not break but enhances peace. We are all tempted to look for our gladness in creatures, each of which satisfies but a part of our desire. But no man can be truly blessed who has to find many contributories to make up his blessedness. That which makes us rich must be, not a multitude of precious stones, howsoever precious they may be, but one Pearl of great price; the one Christ who is our only joy. And He says to us that He gives us Himself, if we behold Him and bow to Him, that His joy might remain in us, and that our joy might be full, while all other gladnesses are partial and transitory. Faith in Christ makes life blessed. The writer of Ecclesiastes asked the question which the world has been asking ever since: 'Who knoweth what is good for a man in this life, all the days of this vain life which he passeth as a shadow?' You young people are asking, 'Who will show us any good?' Here is the answer-Faith in Christ and obedience to Him; that is the good part which no man taketh from us. Dear young friend, have you made it yours?

III. Faith in Christ produces a life which bears being looked back upon.

In a later Epistle than that from which my second text is taken, we get one of the most lovely pictures that was ever drawn, albeit it is unconsciously drawn, of a calm old age, very near the gate of death; and looking back with a quiet heart over all the path of life. I am not going to preach to you, dear friends, in the flush of your early youth, a gospel which is only to be recommended because it is good to die by, but it will do even you, at the beginning, no harm to realise for a moment that the end will come, and that retrospect will take the place in your lives which hope and anticipation fill now. And I ask you what you expect to feel and say then?

What did Paul say? ‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.’ He was not self-righteous; but it is possible to have lived a life which, as the world begins to fade, vindicates itself as having been absolutely right in its main trend, and to feel that the dawning light of Eternity confirms the choice that we made. And I pray you to ask yourselves, ‘Is my life of that sort?’ How much of it would bear the scrutiny which will have to come, and which in Paul’s case was so quiet and calm? He had had a stormy day, many a thundercloud had darkened the sky, many a tempest had swept across the plain; but now, as the evening draws on, the whole West is filled with a calm amber light, and all across the plain, right away to the grey East, he sees that he has been led by, and has been willing to walk in, the right way to the ‘City of habitation.’ Would that be your experience if the last moment came now?

There will be, for the best of us, much sense of failure and shortcoming when we look back on our lives. But whilst some of us will have to say, ‘I have played the fool and erred exceedingly,’ it is possible for each of us to lay himself down in peace and sleep, awaiting a glorious rising again and a crown of righteousness.

Dear young friends, it is for you to choose whether your past, when you summon it up before you, will look like a wasted wilderness, or like a garden of the Lord. And though, as I have said, there will always be much sense of failure and shortcoming, yet that need not disturb the calm retrospect; for whilst memory sees the sins, faith can grasp the Saviour, and quietly take leave of life, saying, ‘I know in whom I have believed, and that He is able to keep that which I have committed to Him against that day.’

So I press upon you all this one truth, that faith in Jesus Christ will transform, will ennoble, will make joyous your lives whilst you live, and will give you a quiet heart in the retrospect when you come to die. Begin right, dear young friends. You will never find it so easy to take any decisive step, and most of all this chiefest step, as you do to-day. You will get lean and less flexible as you get older. You will get set in your ways. Habits will twine their tendrils round you, and hinder your free movement. The truth of the Gospel will become commonplace by familiarity. Associations and companions will have more and more power over you; and you will be stiffened as an old tree-trunk is stiffened. You cannot count on to-morrow; be wise to-day. Begin this year aright. Why should you not now see the Christ and welcome Him? I pray that every one of us may behold Him and fall before Him with the cry, ‘Lord! what wilt Thou have me to do?’

1 To the young.

5) **Philemon 1:12-14**

THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

IV.

Phm. 1:12-14

THE characteristic features of the Epistle are all embodied in these verses. They set forth, in the most striking manner, the relation of Christianity to slavery and to other social evils. They afford an exquisite example of the courteous delicacy and tact of the Apostle’s intervention on behalf of Onesimus; and there shine through them, as through a semi-transparent medium, adumbrations and shimmering hints of the greatest truths of Christianity.

I. The first point to notice is that decisive step of sending back the fugitive slave.

Not many years ago the conscience of England was stirred because the Government of the day sent out a circular instructing captains of men-of-war, on the decks of which fugitive slaves sought asylum, to restore them to their "owners." Here an Apostle does the same thing - seems to side with the oppressor, and to drive the oppressed from the sole refuge left him, the horns of the very altar. More extraordinary still, here is the fugitive voluntarily going back, traveling all the weary way from Rome to Colossae in order to put his neck once more beneath the yoke. Both men were acting from Christian motives, and thought that they were doing a piece of plain Christian duty. Then does Christianity sanction slavery ? Certainly not; its principles cut it up by the roots. A gospel, of which the starting-point is that all men stand on the same level, as loved by the one Lord, and redeemed by the one cross, can have no place for such an institution. A religion which attaches the highest importance to man's awful prerogative of freedom, because it insists on every man's individual responsibility to God, can keep no terms with a system which turns men into chattels. Therefore Christianity cannot but regard slavery as sin against God, and as treason towards man. The principles of the gospel worked into the conscience of a nation destroy slavery. Historically it is true that as Christianity has grown slavery has withered. But the New Testament never directly condemns it, and by regulating the conduct of Christian masters, and recognizing the obligations of Christian slaves, seems to contemplate its continuance, and to be deaf to the sighing of the captives.

This attitude was probably not a piece of policy or a matter of calculated wisdom on the part of the Apostle. He no doubt saw that the Gospel brought a great unity in which all distinctions were merged, and rejoiced in thinking that "in Christ Jesus there is neither bond or free"; but whether he expected the distinction ever to disappear from actual life is less certain. He may have thought of slavery as he did of sex, that the fact would remain, while yet "we are all one in Christ Jesus." It is by no means necessary to suppose that the Apostles saw the full bearing of the truths they had to preach, in their relation to social conditions. They were inspired to give the Church the principles. It remained for future ages, under Divine guidance, to apprehend the destructive and formative range of these principles.

However this may be, the attitude of the New Testament to slavery is the same as to other unchristian institutions. It brings the leaven, and lets it work. That attitude is determined by three great principles. First, the message of Christianity is primarily to individuals, and only secondarily to society. It leaves the units whom it has influenced to influence the mass. Second, it acts on spiritual and moral sentiment, and only afterwards and consequently on deeds or institutions. Third, it hates violence, and trusts wholly to enlightened conscience. So it meddles directly with no political or social arrangements, but lays down principles which will profoundly affect these, and leaves them to soak into the general mind. If an evil needs force for its removal, it is not ready fbr removal. If it has to be pulled up by violence, a bit of the root will certainly be left and will grow again. When a dandelion head is ripe, a child's breath can detach the winged seeds; but until it is, no tempest can move them. The method of violence is noisy and wasteful, like the winter torrents that cover acres of good ground with mud and rocks, and are past in a day. The only true way is, by slow degrees to create a state of feeling which shall instinctively abhor and cast off" the evil. Then there will be no hubbub and no waste, and the thing once done will be done for ever.

So has it been with slavery; so will it be with war, and intemperance, and impurity, and the miserable anomalies of our present civilization. It has taken eighteen hundred years for the whole Church to learn the inconsistency of Christianity with slavery. We are no quicker learners than the past generations were. God is patient, and does not seek to hurry the march of His purposes. We have to be imitators of God, and shun the "raw haste" which is "half-sister to delay."

But patience is not passivity. It is a Christian s duty to "hasten the day of the Lord," and to take part in the educational process which Christ is carrying on through the ages, by submitting himself to it in the first place, and then by endeavoring to bring others under its influence. His place should be in the van of all social progress. It does not become Christ's servants to be content with the attainments of any past or present, in the matter of the organization of society on Christian principles. "God has more light to break forth from His word." Coming centuries will look back on the obtuseness of the moral perceptions of nineteenth century Christians in regard to matters of Christian duty which, hidden from us, are sun-clear to them, with the same half-amused, half-tragic wonder with which we look back to Jamaica planters or South Carolina rice growers, who defended slavery as a missionary institution, and saw no contradiction between their religion and their practice. We have to stretch our charity to believe in these men's sincere religion. Succeeding ages will have to make the same allowance for us, and will need it for themselves from their successors. The main thing is, for us to try to keep our spirits open to all the incidence of the gospel on social and civic life, and to see that we are on the right side, and trying to help on the approach of that kingdom which does " not cry, nor lift up, nor cause its voice to be heard in the streets, "but has its coming" prepared as the morning," that swims up, silent and slow, and flushes the heaven with an unsetting light.

II. The next point in these verses is Paul's loving identification of himself with Onesimus.

The A.V. here follows another reading from the R.V.; the former has "thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels." The additional words are unquestionably inserted without authority in order to patch a broken construction. The R.V. cuts the knot in a different fashion by putting the abrupt words, "himself that is, my very own heart," under the government of the preceding verb. But it seems more probable that the Apostle began a new sentence with them, which he meant to have finished as the A,V. does for him, but which, in fact, got hopelessly upset in the swift rush of his thoughts, and does not right itself grammatically till the "receive him" of v. 1 7.

In any case the main thing to observe is the affectionate plea which he puts in for the cordial reception of Onesimus. Of course "mine own bowels" is simply the Hebrew way of saying "mine own heart." We think the one phrase graceful and sentimental, and the other coarse. A Jew did not think so, and it might be difficult to say why he should. It is a mere question of difference in localizing certain emotions. Onesimus was a piece of Paul's very heart, part of himself; the unprofitable slave had wound himself round his affections, and become so dear that to part with him was like cutting his heart out of his bosom. Perhaps some of the virtues, which the servile condition helps to develop in undue proportion, such as docility, lightheartedness, serviceableness, had made him a soothing and helpful companion. What a plea that would be with one who loved Paul as well as Philemon did! He could not receive harshly one whom the Apostle had so honoured with his love. "Take care of him, be kind to him as if it were to me."

Such language from an Apostle about a slave would do more to destroy slavery than any violence would do. Love leaps the barrier, and it ceases to separate. So these simple, heart-felt words are an instance of one method by which Christianity wars against all social wrongs, by casting its caressing arm around the outcast, and showing that the abject and oppressed are objects of its special love.

They teach too how interceding love makes its object part of its very self; the same thought recurs still more distinctly in v. 17, "Receive him as myself." It is the natural language of love; some of the deepest and most blessed Christian truths are but the carrying out of that identification to its fullest extent. We are all Christ’s Onesimuses, and He, out of His pure love, makes Himself one with us, and us one with Him. The union of Christ with all with all who trust in Him, no doubt, presupposes His Divine nature, but still there is a human side to it, and it is the result of His perfect love. All love delights to fuse itself with its object, and as far as may be to abolish the distinction of "I" and "thou." But human love can travel but a little way on that road; Christ’s goes much farther. He that pleads for some poor creature feels that the kindness is done to himself when the former is helped or pardoned. Imperfectly but really these words shadow forth the great fact of Christ’s intercession for us sinners, and our acceptance in Him. We need no better symbol of the stooping love of Christ, Who identifies Himself with His brethren, and of our wondrous identification with Him, our High Priest and Intercessor, than this picture of the Apostle pleading for the runaway and bespeaking a welcome for him as part of himself. When Paul says, " Receive him, that is, my very heart," his words remind us of the yet more blessed ones, which reveal a deeper love and more marvellous condescension, "He that receiveth you receiveth Me," and may reverently be taken as a faint shadow of that prevailing intercession, through which he that is joined to the Lord and is one spirit with Him, is received of God as part of Christ’s mystical body, bone of His bone, and flesh of His flesh.

III. Next comes the expression of a half-formed purpose which was put aside for a reason to be immediately stated.

"Whom I would fain have kepi with me "; the tense of the verb indicating the incompleteness of the desire. The very statement of it is turned into a graceful expression of Paul’s confidence in Philemon’s goodwill to him, by the addition of that "on thy behalf" He is sure that, if his friend had been beside him, he would have been glad to lend him his servant, and so he would have liked to have had Onesimus as a kind of representative of the service which he knows would have been so willingly rendered. The purpose for which he would have liked to keep him is defined as being, "that he might minister to me in the bonds of the Gospel." If the last words be connected with "me," they suggest a tender reason why Paul should be ministered to, as suffering for Christ, their common Master, and for the truth, their common possession. If, as is perhaps less probable, they be connected with "minister," they describe the sphere in which the service is to be rendered. Either the master or the slave would be bound by the obligations which the Gospel laid on them to serve Paul. Both were his converts, and therefore knit to him by a welcome chain, which made service a delight.

There is no need to enlarge on the winning courtesy of these words, so full of happy confidence in the friend’s disposition, that they could not but evoke the love to which they trusted so completely. Nor need I do more than point their force for the purpose of the whole letter, the procuring a cordial reception for the returning fugitive. So dear had he become, that Paul would like to have kept him. He goes back with a kind of halo round him, now that he is not only a good-for-nothing runaway, but Paul’s friend, and so much prized by him. It would be impossible to do anything but welcome him, bringing such credentials; and yet all this is done with scarcely a word of direct praise, which might have provoked contradiction. One does not know whether the confidence in Onesimus or in Philemon is the dominant note in the harmony. In the preceding clause, he was spoken of as, in some sense, part of the Apostle’s very self. In this, he is regarded as, in some sense, part of Philemon. So he is a link between them. Paul would have taken his service as if it had been his master’s. Can the master fail to take him as if he were Paul?

IV. The last topic in these verses is the decision which arrested the half-formed wish. " I was wishing indeed, but I willed otherwise."

The language is exact. There is a universe between "I wished" and "I willed." Many a good wish remains fruitless, because it never passes into the stage of firm resolve. Many who wish to be better will to be bad. One strong "I will" can paralyze a million wishes.

The Apostle’s final determination was, to do nothing without Philemon’s cognizance and consent. The reason for the decision is at once a very triumph of persuasiveness, which would be ingenious if it were not so spontaneous, and an adumbration of the very spirit of Christ’s appeal for service to us. "That thy benefit" - the good done to me by him, which would in my eyes be done by you - "should not be as of necessity, but willingly." That "as" is a delicate addition. He will not think that the benefit would really have been by constraint, but it might have looked as if it were.

Do not these words go much deeper than this small matter. And did not Paul learn the spirit that suggested them from his own experience of how Christ treated him? The principle underlying them is, that where the bond is love, compulsion takes the sweetness and goodness out of even sweet and good things. Freedom is essential to virtue. If a man "could not help it" there is neither praise nor blame due. That freedom Christianity honors and respects. So in reference to the offer of the gospel blessings, men are not forced to accept them but appealed to, and can turn deaf ears to the pleading voice, "Why will ye die?" Sorrows and sins and miseries without end continue, and the gospel is rejected, and lives of wretched godlessness are lived, and a dark future pulled down on the rejecters’ heads - and all because God knows that these things are better than that men should be forced into goodness, which indeed would cease to be goodness if they were. For nothing is good but the free turning of the will to goodness, and nothing bad but its aversion there from.

The same solemn regard for the freedom of the individual and low estimate of the worth of constrained service influence the whole aspect of Christian ethics. Christ wants no pressed men in His army. The victorious host of priestly warriors, which the Psalmist saw following the priest-king in the day of his power, numerous as the dewdrops, and radiant with reflected beauty as these, were all " willing " - volunteers. There are no conscripts in the ranks. These words might be said to be graven over the gates of the kingdom of heaven, "Not as of necessity, but willingly." "In Christian morals, law becomes love, and love, law." "Must" is not in the Christian vocabulary, except as expressing the sweet constraint which bows the will of him who loves to harmony, which is joy, with the will of Him who is loved. Christ takes no offerings which the giver is not glad to render. Money, influence, service, which are not offered by a will moved by love, which love, in its turn, is set in motion by the recognition of .the infinite love of Christ in His sacrifice, are, in His eyes, nought. An earthenware cup with a drop of cold water in it, freely given out of a glad heart, is richer and more precious in His sight than golden chalices swimming with wine and melted pearls, which are laid by constraint on His table. "I delight to do Thy will" is the foundation of all Christian obedience; and the servant had caught the very tone of the Lord’s voice when he said, "Without thy mind I will do nothing, that thy benefit should not be, as it were, of necessity, but willingly."

6) Philemon 1:15-19

THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

V.

Phm. 1:15-19 [R.V].

THE first words of these verses are connected with the preceding by the "for" at the beginning; that is to say, the thought that possibly the Divine purpose in permitting the flight of Onesimus was his restoration, in eternal and holy relationship, to Philemon, was Paul’s reason for not carrying out his wish to keep Onesimus as his own attendant and helper. "I did not decide, though I very much wished, to retain him without your consent, because it is possible that he was allowed to flee from you, though his flight was his own blamable act, in order that he might be given back to you, a richer possession, a brother instead of a slave."

I. There is here a Divine purpose discerned as shining through a questionable human act.

The first point to note is, with what charitable delicacy of feeling the Apostle uses a mild word to express the fugitive's flight. He will not employ the harsh naked word "ran away." It might irritate Philemon. Besides, Onesimus has repented of his faults, as is plain from the fact of his voluntary return, and therefore there is no need for dwelling on them. The harshest, sharpest words are best when callous consciences are to be made to wince; but words that are balm and healing are to be used when men are heartily ashamed of their sins. So the deed for which Philemon's forgiveness is asked is half veiled in the phrase "he was parted."

Not only so, but the word suggests that behind the slave's mutiny and flight there was another Will working, of which, in some sense, Onesimus was but the instrument He "was parted" - not that he was not responsible for his flight, but that, through his act, which in the eyes of all concerned was wrong, Paul discerns as dimly visible a great Divine purpose.

But he puts that as only a possibility: "Perhaps he departed from thee." He will not be too sure of what God means by such and such a thing, as some of us are wont to be, as if we had been sworn of God's privy council. "Perhaps" is one of the hardest words for minds of a certain class to say; but in regard to all such subjects, and to many more, it is the motto of the wise man, and the shibboleth which sifts out the patient, modest lovers of truth from rash theorists and precipitate dogmatizers. Impatience of uncertainty is a moral fault which mars many an intellectual process; and its evil effects are nowhere more visible than in the field of theology. A humble "perhaps" often grows into a "verily, verily" - and a hasty, over-confident "verily, verily," often dwindles to a hesitating " perhaps." Let us not be in too great a hurry to make sure that we have the key of the cabinet where God keeps His purposes, but content ourselves with " perhaps " when we are interpreting the often questionable ways of His providences, each of which has many meanings and many ends.

But however modestly he may hesitate as to the application of the principle, Paul has no doubt as to the principle itself: namely, that God, in the sweep of His wise providence, utilizes even men’s evil, and works it in, to the accomplishment of great purposes far beyond their ken, as nature, in her patient chemistry, takes the rubbish and filth of the dunghill and turns them into beauty and food. Onesimus had no high motives in his flight; he had run away under discreditable circumstances, and perhaps to escape deserved punishment. Laziness and theft had been the hopeful companions of his flight, which, so far as he was concerned, had been the outcome of low and probably criminal impulses; and yet God had known how to use it so as to lead to his becoming a Christian. "With the wrath of man Thou girdest Thyself," twisting and bending it so as to be flexible in Thy hands, and "the remainder Thou dost restrain." How unlike were the seed and the fruit - the flight of a good-for-nothing thief and the return of a Christian brother! He meant it not so; but in running away from his master, he was running straight into the arms of his Saviour. How little Onesimus knew what was to be the end of that day’s work, when he slunk out of Philemon’s house with his stolen booty hid away in his bosom! And how little any of us know where we are going, and what strange results may evolve themselves from our actions! Blessed they who can rest in the confidence that, however modest we should be in our interpretation of the events of our own or of other men’s lives, the infinitely complex web of circumstance is woven by a loving, wise Hand, and takes shape, with all its interlacing threads, according to a pattern in His hand, which will vindicate itself when it is finished!

The contrast is emphatic between the short absence and the eternity of the new relationship: "for a season" - literally an hour - and "for ever." There is but one point of view which gives importance to this material world, with all its fleeting joys and fallacious possessions Life is not worth living, unless it be the vestibule to a life beyond. Why all its discipline, whether of sorrow or joy, unless there be another, ampler life, where we can use to nobler ends the powers acquired and greatened by use here ? What an inconsequent piece of work is man, if the few years of earth are his all! Surely, if nothing is to come of all this life here, men are made in vain, and had better not have been at all. Here is a narrow sound, with a mere ribbon of sea in it, shut in between grim, echoing rocks. How small and meaningless it looks as long as the fog hides the great ocean beyond! But when the mist lifts, and we see that the narrow strait leads out into a boundless sea that lies flashing in the sunshine to the horizon, then we find out the worth of that little driblet of water at our feet. It connects with the open sea, and that swathes the world. So is it with "the hour" of life; it opens out and debouches into the "for ever," and therefore it is great and solemn. This moment is one of the moments of that hour. We are the sport of our own generalizations, and ready to admit all these fine and solemn things about life, but we are less willing to apply them to the single moments as they fly. We should not rest content with recognizing the general truth, but ever make conscious effort to feel that this passing instant has something to do with our eternal character and with our eternal destiny.

That is an exquisitely beautiful and tender thought which the Apostle puts here, and one which is susceptible of many applications. The temporary loss may be eternal gain. The dropping away of the earthly form of a relationship may, in God’s great mercy, be a step towards its renewal in higher fashion and for evermore. All our blessings need to be past before reflection can be brought to bear upon them, to make us conscious how blessed we were. The blossoms have to perish before the rich perfume, which can be kept in undiminished fragrance for years, can be distilled from them. When death takes away dear ones, we first learn that we were entertaining angels unawares; and as they float away from us ‘into the light, they look back with faces already beginning to brighten into the likeness of Christ, and take leave of us with His valediction, "It is expedient for you that I go away." Memory teaches us the true character of life. We can best estimate the height of the mountain peaks when we have left them behind. The softening and hallowing influence of death reveals the nobleness and sweetness of those who are gone. Fair country never looks so fair as when it has a curving river for a foreground; and fair lives look fairer than before, when seen across the Jordan of death.

To US who believe that life and love are not killed by death, the end of their earthly form is but the beginning of a higher heavenly. Love which is "in Christ" is eternal. Because Philemon and Onesimus were two Christians, therefore their relationship was eternal. Is it not yet more true, if that were possible, that the sweet bonds which unite Christian souls here on earth are in their essence indestructible, and are affected by death only as the body is? Sown in weakness, will they not be raised in power. Nothing of them shall die but the encompassing death. Their mortal part shall put on immortality. As the farmer gathers the green flax with its blue bells blooming on it, and throws it into a tank to rot, in order to get the firm fibre which cannot rot, and spin it into a strong cable, so God does with our earthly loves. He causes all about them that is perishable to perish, that the central fibre, which is eternal, may stand clear and disengaged from all that was less Divine than itself. Wherefore mourning hearts may stay themselves on this assurance, that they will never lose the dear ones whom they have loved in Christ, and that death itself but changes the manner of the communion, and refines the tie. They were as for a moment dead, but they are alive again. To our bewildered sight they departed and were lost for a season, but they are found, and we can fold them in our heart of hearts for ever.

But there is also set forth here a change, not only in the duration but in the quality of the relation between the Christian master and his former slave, who continues a slave indeed, but is also a brother. "No longer as a servant, but more than a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much rather to thee, both in the flesh and in the Lord." It is clear from these words that Paul did not anticipate the manumission of Onesimus. What he asks is, that he should not be received as a slave. Evidently then he is to be still a slave in so far as the outward fact goes - but a new spirit is to be breathed into the relationship. "Specially to me"; he is more than a slave to me. I have not looked on him as such, but have taken him to my heart as a brother, as a son indeed, for he is especially dear to me as my convert. But however dear he is to me, he should be more so to thee, to whom his relation is permanent, while to me it is temporary. And this Brotherhood of the slave is to be felt and made visible "both in the flesh" - that is, in the earthly and personal relations of common life, "and in the Lord" - that is, in the spiritual and religious relationships of worship and the Church.

As has been well said, "In the flesh, Philemon has the brother for his slave; in the Lord, Philemon has the slave for his brother." He is to treat him as his brother therefore both in the common relationships of every-day life and in the acts of religious worship.

That is a pregnant word. True, there is no gulf between Christian people now-a-days like that which in the old times parted owner and slave; but, as society becomes more and more differentiated, as the diversities of wealth become more extreme in our commercial communities, as education comes to make the educated man's whole way of looking at life differ more and more from that of the less cultured classes, the injunction implied in our text encounters enemies quite as formidable as slavery ever was. The highly educated man is apt to be very oblivious of the brotherhood of the ignorant Christian, and he, on his part, finds the recognition just as hard. The rich mill-owner has not much sympathy with the poor brother who works at his spinning-jennies. It is often difficult for the Christian mistress to remember that her cook is her sister in Christ. There is quite as much sin against fraternity on the side of the poor Christians who are servants and illiterate, as on the side of the rich who are masters or cultured. But the principle that Christian brotherhood is to reach across the wall of class distinctions is as binding to-day as it was on these two good people, Philemon the master and Onesimus the slave.

That brotherhood is not to be confined to acts and times of Christian communion, but is to be shown and to shape conduct in common life. "Both in the flesh and in the Lord" may be put into plain English thus : A rich man and a poor one belong to the same church; they unite in the same worship, they are " partakers of the one bread," and therefore, Paul thinks, "are one bread." They go outside the church door. Do they ever dream of speaking to one another outside? "A brother beloved in the Lord" - on Sundays, and during worship and in Church matters - is often a stranger "in the flesh" on Mondays, in the street and in common life. Some good people seem to keep their brotherly love in the same wardrobe with their Sunday clothes. Philemon was bid, and all are bid, to wear it all the week, at market as well as church.

II. In the next verse, the essential purpose for which the whole letter was written is put at last in an articulate request, based upon a very tender motive.

"If then thou countest me as a partner, receive him as myself." Paul now at last completes the sentence which he began in v, 12, and from which he was hurried away by the other thoughts that came crowding in upon him. This plea for the kindly welcome to be accorded to Onesimus has been knocking at the door of his lips for utterance from the beginning of the letter; but only now, so near the end, after so much conciliation, he ventures to put it into plain words; and even now he does not dwell on it, but goes quickly on to another point. He puts his requests on a modest and yet a strong ground, appealing to Philemon’s sense of comradeship - "if thou countest me a partner" - a comrade or a sharer in Christian blessings. He sinks all reference to apostolic authority, and only points to their common possession of faith, hope, and joy in Christ. "Receive him as myself." That request was sufficiently illustrated in the preceding chapter, so that I need only refer to what was then said on this instance of interceding love identifying itself with its object, and on the enunciation in it of great Christian truth.

III. The course of thought next shows - Love taking the slave’s debts on itself

"If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee aught." Paul makes an "if" of what he knew well enough to be the fact; for no doubt Onesimus had told him all his faults, and the whole context shows that there was no uncertainty in Paul’s mind, but that he puts the wrong hypothetically for the same reason for which he chooses to say, "was parted" instead of "ran away," namely, to keep some thin veil over the crimes of a penitent, and not to rasp him with rough words. For the same reason, too, he falls back upon the gentler expressions, "wronged" and "oweth," instead of blurting out the ugly word "stolen." And then, with a half playful assumption of lawyer-like phraseology, he bids Philemon put that to his account. Here is my autograph - "I Paul write it with mine own hand" - I make this letter into a bond. Witness my hand; "I will repay it." The formal tone of the promise, rendered more formal by the insertion of the name - and perhaps by that sentence only being in his own handwriting - seems to warrant the explanation that it is half playful; for he could never have supposed that Philemon would exact the fulfilment of the bond, and we have no reason to suppose that, if he had, Paul could really have paid the amount. But beneath the playfulness there lies the implied exhortation to forgive the money wrong as well as the others which Onesimus had done him.

The verb used here for *put to the account of* is, according to the commentators, a very rare word; and perhaps the singular phrase may be chosen to let another great Christian truth shine through. Was Paul’s love the only one that we know of which took the slave’s debts on itself? Did anybody else ever say, "Put that on mine account"? We have been taught to ask for the forgiveness of our sins as "debts," and we have been taught that there is One on whom God has made to meet the iniquities of us all. Christ takes on Himself all Paul’s debt, all Philemon’s, all ours. He has paid the ransom for all, and He so identifies Himself with men that He takes all their sins upon Him, and so identifies men with Himself that they are "received as Himself." It is His great example that Paul is trying to copy here. Forgiven all that great debt, he dare not rise from his knees to take his brother by the throat, but goes forth to show to his fellow the mercy which he has found, and to model his life after the pattern of that miracle of love in which is his trust. It is Christ’s own voice which echoes in "put that on mine account."

IV. Finally, these verses pass to a gentle reminder of a greater debt: "That I say not unto thee how that thou owest to me even thine own self besides."

As his child in the Gospel, Philemon owed to Paul much more than the trifle of money of which Onesimus had robbed him; namely his spiritual life, which he had received through the Apostle’s ministry. But he will not insist on that. True love never presses its claims, nor recounts its services. Claims which need to be urged are not worth urging. A true, generous heart will never say, "You ought to do so much for me, because I have done so much for you." To come down to that low level of chaffering and barter is a dreadful descent from the heights where the love which delights in giving should ever dwell.

Does not Christ speak to us in the same language? We owe ourselves to Him, as Lazarus did, for He raises us from the death of sin to a share in His own new, undying life. As a sick man owes his life to the doctor who has cured him, as a drowning man owes his to his rescuer, who dragged him from the water and breathed into his lungs till they began to work of themselves, as a child owes its life to its parent - so we owe ourselves to

Christ. But He does not insist upon the debt; He gently reminds us of it, as making His commandment sweeter and easier to obey. Every heart that is really touched with gratitude will feel, that the less the giver insists upon his gifts, the more do they impel to affectionate service. To be perpetually reminded of them weakens their force as motives to obedience, for it then appears as if they had not been gifts of love at all, but bribes given by self-interest; and the frequent reference to them sounds like complaint. But Christ does not insist on His claims, and therefore the remembrance of them ought to underlie all our lives and to lead to constant glad devotion.

One more thought may be drawn from the words. The great debt which can never be discharged does not prevent the debtor from receiving reward for the obedience of love. "I will repay it," even though thou owest me thyself, Christ has bought us for His servants by giving Himself and ourselves to us. No work, no devotion, no love can ever repay our debt to Him, From His love alone comes the desire to serve Him; from His grace comes the power. The best works are stained and incomplete, and could only be acceptable to a Love that was glad to welcome even unworthy offerings, and to forgive their imperfections. Nevertheless He treats them as worthy of reward, and crowns His own grace in men with an exuberance of recompense far beyond their deserts. He will suffer no man to work for Him for nothing; but to each He gives even here great reward in keeping His commandments," and hereafter " an exceeding great reward," of which the inward joys and outward blessings that now flow from obedience are but the earnest His merciful allowance of imperfections treats even our poor deeds as rewardable; and though eternal life must ever be the gift of God, and no claim of merit can be sustained before His judgment seat, yet the measure of that life which is possessed here or hereafter is accurately proportioned to and is, in a very real sense, the consequence of obedience and service. "If any man’s work abide, he shall receive a reward," and Christ’s own tender voice speaks the promise, "I will repay, albeit I say not unto thee how thou owest to Me even thine own self besides." Men do not really possess themselves unless they yield themselves to Jesus Christ. He that loveth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth himself, in glad surrender of himself to his Saviour, he and only he is truly lord and owner of his own soul. And to such an one shall be given rewards beyond hope and beyond measure - and, as the crown of all, the blessed possession of Christ, and in it the full, true, eternal possession of himself, glorified and changed into the image of the Lord who loved him and gave Himself for him.

7) Philemon 1:20-25

THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

VI.

Phm. 1:20-25 [R.V.]

WE have already had occasion to point out that Paul’s pleading with Philemon, and the motives which he adduces, are expressions, on a lower level, of the greatest principles of Christian ethics. If the closing salutations be left out of sight for the moment, there are here three verses, each containing a thought which needs only to be cast into its most general form to show itself as a large Christian truth.

I. Verse 20 gives the final moving form of the Apostle’s request.

Onesimus disappears, and the final plea is based altogether on the fact that compliance will pleasure and help Paul. There is but the faintest gleam of a possible allusion to the former in the use of the verb from which the name Onesimus is derived - "Let me have have help of thee"; as if he had said, "Be you an Onesimus, a helpful one to me, as I trust he is going to be to you."

"Refresh my heart" points back to v. 7, "The hearts of the saints have been refreshed by thee" and lightly suggests that Philemon should do for Paul what he had done for many others. But the Apostle does not merely ask help and refreshing; he desires that they should be of a right Christian sort "In Christ" is very significant. If Philemon receives his slave for Christ’s sake and in the strength of that communion with Christ which fits for all virtue, and so for this good deed - a deed which is of too high and rare a strain of goodness for his unaided nature, - then "in Christ" he will be helpful to the Apostle. In that case the phrase expresses the element or sphere in which the act is done. But it may apply rather, or even also, to Paul, and then it expresses the element or sphere in which he is helped and refreshed. In communion with Jesus, taught and inspired by Him, the Apostle is brought to such true and tender sympathy with the runaway that his heart is refreshed, as by a cup of cold water, by kindness shown to him. Such keen sympathy is as much beyond the reach of nature as Philemon’s kindness would be. Both are "in Christ." Union with Him refines selfishness, and makes men quick to feel another’s sorrows and joys as theirs, after the pattern of Him who makes the case of God’s fugitives His own. It makes them easy to be entreated and ready to forgive. So to be in Him is to be sympathetic like Paul, and placable Â« as He would have Onesimus. "In Christ" carries in it the secret of all sweet humanities and beneficence, is the spell which calls out fairest charity, and is the only victorious antagonist of harshness and selfishness.

The request for the sake of which the whole letter is written is here put as a kindness to Paul himself, and thus an entirely different motive is appealed to. "Surely you would be glad to give me pleasure. Then do this thing which I ask you." It is permissible to seek to draw to virtuous acts by such a motive, and to reinforce higher reasons by the desire to please dear ones, or to win the approbation of the wise and good. It must be rigidly kept as a subsidiary motive, and distinguished from the mere love of applause. Most men have some one whose opinion of their acts is a kind of embodied conscience, and whose satisfaction is reward. But pleasing the dearest and purest among men can never be more than at most a crutch to help lameness or a spur to stimulate.

If however this motive be lifted to the higher level, and these words thought of as Paul’s echo of Christ’s appeal to those who love Him, they beautifully express the peculiar blessedness of Christian ethics. The strongest motive, the very mainspring and pulsing heart of Christian duty, is to please Christ. His language to His followers is not, "Do this because it is right," but, "Do this because it pleaseth Me," They have a living Person to gratify, not a mere law of duty to obey. The help which is given to weakness by the hope of winning golden opinions from, or giving pleasure to, those whom men love is transferred in the Christian relation to Jesus. So the cold thought of duty is warmed, and the weight of obedience to a stony, impersonal law is lightened, and a new power is enlisted on the side of goodness, which sways more mightily than all the abstractions of duty. The Christ Himself makes His appeal to men in the same tender fashion as Paul to Philemon. He will move to holy obedience by the thought - wonderful as it is - that it gladdens Him. Many a weak heart has been braced and made capable of heroisms of endurance and effort, and of angel deeds of mercy, all beyond its own strength, by that great thought, "We labour that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to Him."

II. Verse 21 exhibits love commanding, in the confidence of love obeying.

"Having confidence in thine obedience I write unto thee, knowing that thou wilt do even beyond what I say." In v. 8 the Apostle had waived his right to enjoin, because he had rather speak the speech of love, and request. But here, with the slightest possible touch, he just lets the note of authority sound for a single moment, and then passes into the old music of affection and trust. He but names the word "obedience," and that in such a way as to present it as the child of love, and the privilege of his friend. He trusts Philemon’s obedience, because he knows his love, and is sure that it is love of such a sort as will not stand on the exact measure, but will delight in giving it "pressed down and running over."

What could he mean by "do more than I say"? Was he hinting at emancipation, which he would rather have to come from Philemon’s own sense of what was due to the slave who was now a brother, than be granted, perhaps hesitatingly, in deference to his request? Possibly, but more probably he had no definite thing in his mind, but only desired to express his loving confidence in his friend’s willingness to please him. Commands given in such a tone, where authority audibly trusts the subordinate, are far more likely to be obeyed than if they were shouted with the hoarse voice of a drill-sergeant. Men will do much to fulfill generous expectations. Even debased natures will respond to such appeal; and if they see that good is expected from them, that will go far to evoke it Some masters have always good servants, and part of the "secret is that they trust them to obey." England expects "fulfilled itself. When love enjoins there should be trust in its tones. It will act like a magnet to draw reluctant feet into the path of duty. A will which mere authority could not bend like iron when cold; - may be made flexible when warmed by this gentle heat. If parents oftener let their children feel that they had confidence in their obedience, they would seldomer have to complain of their disobedience.

Christ's commands follow, or rather set, this pattern. He trusts His servants, and speaks to them in a voice softened and confiding. He tells them His wish, and commits Himself and His cause to His disciples' love.

Obedience beyond the strict limits of command will always be given by love. It is a poor, grudging service which weighs obedience as a chemist does some precious medicine, and is careful that not the hundredth part of a grain more than the prescribed amount shall be doled out A hired workman will fling down his lifted trowel full of mortar at the firs' stroke of the clock, though it would be easier to lay it on the bricks; but where affection moves the hand, it is delight to add something over and above to bare duty. The artist who loves his work; put many a touch on it beyond the minimum which will fulfil his contract. Those who adequately feel the power of Christian motives will not be anxious to find the least that they durst, but the most that they can do. If obvious duty requires them to go a mile, they will rather go two, than be scrupulous to stop as soon as they see the milestone. A child who is always trying to find out how little would satisfy his father cannot have much love. Obedience to Christ is joy, peace, love. The grudging servants are limiting their possession of these, by limiting their active surrender of themselves. They seem to be afraid of having too much of these blessings. A heart truly touched by the love of Jesus Christ will not seek to know the lowest limit of duty, but the highest possibility of service.

"Give all thou canst; high heaven rejects the lore

Of nicely calculated less or more."

III. Verse 22 may be summed up as the language of love, hoping for reunion.

"Withal prepare me a lodging: for I hope that through your prayers I shall be granted unto you." We do not know whether the Apostle’s expectation was fulfilled. Believing that he was set free from his first imprisonment, and that his second was separated from it by a considerable interval, during which he visited Macedonia and Asia Minor, we have yet nothing to show whether or not he reached Colossae; but whether fulfilled or not, the expectation of meeting would tend to secure compliance with his request, and would be all the more likely to do so, for the very delicacy with which it is stated, so as not to seem to be mentioned for the sake of adding force to his intercession.

The limits of Paul’s expectation as to the power of his brethren’s prayers for temporal blessings are worth noting. He does believe that these good people in Colosse could help him by prayer for his liberation, but he does not believe that their prayer will certainly be heard. In some circles much is said now about "the prayer of faith" - a phrase which, singularly enough, is in such cases almost confined to prayers for external blessings, - and about its power to bring money for work which the person praying believes to be desirable, or to send away diseases. But surely there can be no "faith" without a definite Divine word to lay hold of. Faith and God’s promise are correlative; and unless a man has God’s plain promise that A. B. will be cured by his prayer, the belief that he will is not faith, but something deserving a much less noble name. The prayer of faith is not forcing our wills on God, but bending our wills to God’s, The prayer which Christ has taught in regard to all outward things is, "Not my will but Thine be done," and, "May Thy will become mine." That is the prayer of faith, which is always answered. The Church prayed for Peter, and he was delivered; the Church, no doubt, prayed for Stephen, and he was stoned. Was then the prayer for him refused? Not so, but if it were prayer at all, the inmost meaning of it was "be it as Thou wilt"; and that was accepted and answered. Petitions for outward blessings, whether for the petitioner or for others, are to be presented with submission; and the highest confidence which can be entertained concerning them is that which Paul here expresses: "I hope that through your prayers I shall be set free."

The prospect of meeting enhances the force of the Apostle's wish; nor are Christians without an analogous motive to give weight to their obligations to their Lord. Just as Paul quickened Philemon's loving wish to serve him by the thought that he might have the gladness of seeing him before long, so Christ quickens His servant's diligence by the thought that before very many days He will come, or they will go - at any rate, they will be with Him - and He will see what they have been doing in His absence. Such a prospect should increase diligence, and should not inspire terror. It is a mark of true Christians that they "love His appearing." Their hearts should glow at the hope of meeting. That hope should make work happier and lighter. When a husband has been away at sea, the prospect of his return makes the wife sing at her work, and take more pains or rather pleasure with it, because his eye is to see it. So should it be with the bride in the prospect of her bridegroom's return. The Church should not be driven to unwelcome duties by the fear of a strict judgment, but drawn to large, cheerful service, by the hope of spreading her work before her returning Lord.

Thus, on the whole, in this letter, the central springs of Christian service are touched, and the motives used to sway Philemon are the echo of the motives which Christ uses to sway men. The keynote of all is love. Love beseeches when it might command. To love we owe our own selves beside. Love will do nothing without the glad consent of him to whom it speaks, and cares for no service which IS of necessity. Its finest wine is not made from juice which is pressed out of the grapes, but from that which flows from them for very ripeness. Love identifies itself with those who need its help, and treats kindnesses to them as done to itself. Love finds joy and heart solace in willing, though it be imperfect, service. Love expects more than it asks. Love hopes for reunion, and by the hope makes its wish more weighty. These arc the points of Paul's pleading with Philemon, Are they not the elements of Christ's pleading with His friends.'

He too prefers the tone of friendship to that of authority. To Him His servants owe themselves, and remain for ever in His debt, after all payment of reverence and thankful self-surrender. He does not count constrained service as service at all, and has only volunteers in His army. He makes Himself one with the needy, and counts kindness to the least as done to

Him. He binds Himself to repay and overpay all sacrifice in His service. He finds delight in His people’s work. He asks them to prepare an abode for Him in their own hearts, and in souls opened by their agency for His entrance. He has gone to prepare a mansion for them, and He comes to receive account of their obedience and to crown their poor deeds. It is impossible to suppose that Paul’s pleading for Philemon failed. How much less powerful is Christ’s, even with those who love Him best."

IV. The parting greetings may be very briefly considered, for much that would have naturally been said about them has already presented itself in dealing with the similar salutations in the epistle to Colossae.

The same people send messages here as there; only Jesus called Justus being omitted, probably for no other reason than because he was not at hand at the moment Epaphras is naturally mentioned singly, as being a Colossian, and therefore more closely connected with Philemon than were the others. After him come the two Jews and the two Gentiles, as in Colossians.

The parting benediction ends the letter. At the beginning of the epistle Paul invoked grace upon the household "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Now he conceives of it as Christ’s gift. In him all the stooping, bestowing love of God is gathered, that from Him it may be poured on the world. That grace is not diffused like stellar light, through some nebulous heaven, but concentrated in the Sun of Righteousness, who is the light of men. That fire is piled on a hearth that, from it, warmth may ray out to all that are in the house.

That grace has man’s spirit for the field of its highest operation. Thither it can enter, and there it can abide, in union more close and communion more real and blessed than aught else can attain. The spirit which has the grace of Christ with it can never be utterly solitary or desolate.

The grace of Christ is the best bond of family life. Here it is prayed for on behalf of all the group, the husband, wife, child, and the friends in their home Church. Like grains of sweet incense cast on an altar flame, and making fragrant what was already holy, that grace sprinkled on the household fire will give it an odour of a sweet smell, grateful to men and acceptable to God.

That wish is the purest expression of Christian friendship, of which the whole letter is so exquisite an example. Written as it is about a common, every-day matter, which could have been settled without a single religious reference, it is saturated with Christian thought and feeling. So it becomes an example of how to blend Christian sentiment with ordinary affairs, and to carry a Christian atmosphere everywhere. Friendship and social intercourse will be all the nobler and happier, if pervaded by such a tone. Such words as these closing ones would be a sad contrast to much of the intercourse of professedly Christian men. But every Christian ought by his life to be, as it were, floating the grace of God to others sinking for want of it to lay hold of, and all his speech should be of a piece with this benediction.

A Christian’s life should be "an epistle of Christ" written with His own hand, wherein dim eyes might read the transcript of His own gracious love, and through all his words and deeds should shine the image of his Master, even as it does through the delicate tendernesses and gracious pleadings of this pure pearl of a letter, which the slave, become a brother, bore to the responsive hearts in quiet Colossae.

Hebrews

1) HEBREWS 2:1
2) HEBREWS 2:8-9
3) HEBREWS 2:10
4) HEBREWS 2:11-13
5) HEBREWS 2:17
6) HEBREWS 3:1
7) HEBREWS 4:3
8) HEBREWS 4:9-10
9) HEBREWS 4:11
10) HEBREWS 4:16
11) HEBREWS 5:7
12) HEBREWS 6:9
13) HEBREWS 6:19
14) HEBREWS 7:2
15) HEBREWS 7:26
16) HEBREWS 8:1-2

17) HEBREWS 8:5
18) HEBREWS 8:10
19) HEBREWS 8:11
20) HEBREWS 8:12
21) HEBREWS 8:18
22) HEBREWS 9:11-14
23) HEBREWS 10:12
24) HEBREWS 10:14
25) HEBREWS 10:30
26) HEBREWS 10:34
27) HEBREWS 11:6
28) HEBREWS 11:7
29) HEBREWS 11:9-10
30) HEBREWS 11:13
31) HEBREWS 11:14
32) HEBREWS 11:16
33) HEBREWS 11:24-27
34) HEBREWS 12:1
35) HEBREWS 12:1
36) HEBREWS 12:2
37) HEBREWS 12:2
38) HEBREWS 12:4
39) HEBREWS 12:10
40) HEBREWS 12:10
41) HEBREWS 12:17
42) HEBREWS 12:22-23
43) HEBREWS 12:23
44) HEBREWS 12:24
45) HEBREWS 12:25
46) HEBREWS 13:5-6
47) HEBREWS 13:8
48) HEBREWS 13:9
49) HEBREWS 13:10
50) HEBREWS 13:13-14
51) HEBREWS 13:15-16
52) HEBREWS 13:20
53) HEBREWS 13:21

1) Hebrews 2:1

Hebrews

DRIFTING

Heb. 2:1.

‘LET them slip’; that conveys a vivid picture of a man holding some treasure with limp fingers, and allowing it to drop from his nerveless grasp. But, striking as that picture is, the one which is really expressed by the original word is more striking still The Revised Version correctly renders, instead of, ‘we should let them slip,’ ‘we drift away from them’; and that is the real meaning.

‘Drifting’ is the thing to be afraid of. Just as some boat, not made fast to the bank, certainly glides down stream so quietly and with so little friction that her passengers do not know that they are moving until they come up on deck, and see new fields around them, so the ‘things which we have heard,’ and to which we ought to be moored or anchored, we shall drift, drift, drift away from, and, in nine eases out of ten, shall not feel that we are moving, till we are roused by hearing the noise of the whirlpools and the falls close ahead of us; and look round and see a strange country. ‘Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest, haply, we should drift away from them.’

I. So my text suggests, first, our danger.

We are in danger of drifting unconsciously from the anchorage of our faith - namely, the great words which we have heard. The currents that are brought to bear upon us run as strong as do any that are marked on charts and are the terror of sailors, and they need as careful steering and as great engine-power to resist them. Let us try to think of one or two of them. There is the current of years. Time changes us all; and there is many a professing Christian who all unconsciously has slid away from his early better self, and is not now as devout a man - or with his life as completely under the influence of Christ and His gospel as he was in the early days. He keeps up appearances, but they are deceptive, and years have carried him down the stream and away from his old self.

There is the current of familiarity with the truth-It is a sad illustration of the weakness of human nature that we all tend to think that the familiar is commonplace, and that it is almost impossible for us, without a very specific and continuous effort, to keep up as fresh and deep an interest in a truth that we have believed all our days as in one that comes to us with the attraction of novelty. It has been well said that the most certain truths too often lie 'in the dormitory of the soul, side by side with exploded errors.' We all know how silently and unconsciously we lose our hold of the things that we think to be most surely believed among us; and whilst we fancy that we are grasping them they are gone from us just because we had never doubted, and always 'believed' them. Conjurers will tell you that if you press a coin in a man's palm and shut the hand quickly, he does not know for a moment or two whether the coin remains there or not. There are many of us who have closed our hands on the precious gold coin of the gospel, and it has been filched away from us, and we do not know that it has been until we open our hand and see the empty palm. We drift away by time and by familiarity.

Then there is constantly acting upon us the current of the continual pressure of our daily cares and anxieties and duties and joys. All these in their minuteness and their multiplicity tend to weaken our possession of, and to carry us away from, the great central truths of the gospel. A snowflake is a very tiny thing, but when the air is full of them, minute as they are, their white multitudes will bring death and a grave to the creatures on which they fall. And so the thousand trifles of our daily lives are all acting upon us, whether we know it or not, to absorb interest and attention and effort, and to Withdraw all three from 'the truths which we have heard.' You may remember the story of the man in the Old Testament who had a prisoner put into his hands, with an injunction to guard carefully against his escape; and how, as he naively says, 'As thy servant was busy here and there, lo! he was gone. I had so many other things to do, on this side and that, and in front and behind, that I could not always keep my eyes on him; and he slipped through my fingers, and showed a clean pair of heels, and that is all I know.

I never knew that he had gone until I came to look for him in an interval of my business, and found his fetters were empty.'

Ah, dear friends, that is the history of the decline and fall of many a professing Christian's Christianity: 'Thy servant was busy here and there doing his day's work' - the legitimate things that we are bound to do, and which are not meant to be occasions for withdrawing our hold of the truths of the gospel, but for deepening it. We are busied about them. and that which was committed to our care sups away, and we never know it.

Yes, and it is not only 'secular' work that does that. It may be done by what is called Christian work too. I believe, for my part, that much as one rejoices in the continual calls for service and activity that are addressed to the Christian Church to-day, there is a distinct danger that there shall be so much work that there is no time for solitude, for contemplation, for reviewing and deepening our communion with Jesus Christ. And I sometimes feel as if I would like to say to all Sunday-school teachers, and visitors, and Christian Endeavourers, and all the host of 'Christian workers': 'Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place and rest awhile,' and then you will be ready for better work. At all events, it is quite possible - if we may so use a phrase which is, perhaps, done violence to in such a use - to water other people's vineyards, and leave our own vines to die for want of tending and irrigation.

There are other currents as well, about which I need not say much here, but no doubt they are running very strong to-day, all round us: tides of opinion and ways of thinking about the gospel which will rob us, if we do not take care, of the simplicity and depth of our faith in that Saviour. I just specify these four currents: time, familiarity, work, and the prevalent tone of the people round about us - all these forces are continually operating on the Christian men and women of this day, and in many cases are doing their deadly work.

II. So let me say that, secondly, my text suggests our security.

'Let us give the more earnest heed.' Just because these forces are in operation, therefore there is more need that the vessel shall Be very safely moored to the strong post on the quay, than there would he if it was lying in a tideless harbour where the water was motionless. ‘The more earnest heed’ - if we know the danger we have gone a long way to escape it. If we will open our eyes to the fact that all about us there are thieves lurking and waiting to steal away our possessions, then we shall have done something towards securing the possessions. As in Christ’s parable, there are light-winged flocks of birds filling the air about us, and ready to pounce down upon the seed the moment the sower’s back is turned, and with a dig and a peck to pick it up, and then with glancing whir of the wings to be off, bearing away their prey out of sight and out of shot. If we realise that that is the condition of things, we shall have boys with clappers in the field to keep off the birds, at all events. If we have a clear sight of the fact that the world is full of thieves, we shall be likely to get strong locks to our doors, and bars to the windows, and not go to sleep, lest the house should be broken into.

But let me say a word or two about what we ought to do. ‘Let us give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard.’ That word ‘give heed’ suggests that there must be a concentration of attention, and a distinct effort of will in the way of resisting the tendencies. If you hold a thing slackly it goes out of your hands. If you have flung a careless bight of the rope round the post, and then lie down to sleep, the force of the stream will do the rest. There must be resistance to the continually acting tendencies, or they will become facts and realities. I have already suggested in the previous remarks what seems to me to be the great thing wanted in our present average Christian character, and that is the honest occupation of mind and heart with the truths of the gospel. We read newspapers, books, and magazines of all sorts, and we do not read our Bibles as our fathers used to do. There are many professing Christian people who do not make the Word of God familiar by daily and prayerful perusal; and there are many who do not understand much more about the whole majestic orb of divine truth than the one bit of it that they beheld at first, when they turned from darkness to light. That Jesus Christ is your Saviour is, in one sense, the whole gospel, but that is no reason for your not trying to understand all that is involved in, and all that flows from, that great truth, and all on which it rests as upon rock pillars. If we had more honest occupation of thought with, and more quiet feeding like a ruminant animal upon, the truths of the gospel, we might bid defiance to all the currents to sweep us away.

There is another thing by which we may hold ourselves fast moored to these truths - that is, by bringing them habitually to bear upon and to shape and dominate the little things of our daily lives. One way by which we can freshen up the most familiar, common, place truth is by acting on it. If you will do that, you will find that the old truths have sap and vitality in them yet. People talk about 'toothless commonplaces.' Take the commonplaces of your Christian profession, and conscientiously try to shape your lives by them; and take my word for it, you will find that they are not toothless. There is a bite in them If s man wants to be confirmed in his creed, let him make it the law of his conduct. So if we will meditate upon the truth, and if we will live the truth, we may snap our fingers at all the currents that seek to draw us away from it.

III. And now one last word. - My text suggests the reasons for this exhortation.

You will notice that it begins with a 'therefore,' and that 'therefore' sums up all that has gone before in the epistle; and it is further expanded by a 'for' which follows. And what are the reasons thus suggested? I have no time to enlarge on them, and I do not know that they need it.

They are three, and the first of them is the dignity of the speaker. The writer has just been demonstrating the superiority of the Son by whom 'God hath, in these last times, spoken unto us,' over all former ministers and messengers of His Word, and over all angels before His throne. And he says, because such august lips have spoken, 'Let us give earnest heed to the things which we have heard.' For 'if the words spoken by angels' demanded attention, how much more the word spoken 'in these last times unto us by the Son,' 'whom He hath appointed heir of all things.' That is reason number one.

Reason number two is the steadfastness of the truth. I have been working perhaps till it is threadbare the metaphor underlying my text; I come back to it for a moment more. What is the good of a strong cable, which is my faith, unless it is wrapped round a strong post? Why should I give heed to a truth, unless it is an irrefragable and undeniable and important truth? And so says this writer, it is worth your while to give your whole attention to these truths, and to grapple yourselves to them with hooks of steel, for they stand fast, The word spoken by angels was steadfast, but the word of the gospel was at the first spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed by them that heard it. He fixed the post; they hammered it in; there it stands. You may hold on to it, and if your tackle does not give, nothing will sweep you away.

And reason number three is, what we lose if we let our moorings there slip. ‘For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received its just recompense of reward, how shall we escape if we neglect...’ - not reject; not fight against, simply ‘neglect’ - ‘so great salvation,’ and so let ourselves be drifted away from the things which we have heard?

2) Hebrews 2:8-9

Hebrews

MANHOOD CROWNED IN JESUS

Heb. 2:8-9

ONE of our celebrated astronomers is said to have taught himself the rudiments of his starry science when lying on the hill-side, keeping his father’s sheep. Perhaps the grand psalm to which these words refer had a similar origin, and may have come from the early days of the shepherd king, when, like those others of a later day, he abode in the field of Bethlehem, keeping watch over his flock by night. The magnificence of the Eastern heavens, with their ‘larger constellations burning,’ filled his soul with two opposite thoughts - man’s smallness and man’s greatness. I suppose that in a mind apt to pensive reflections, alive to moral truths, and responsive to the impressions of God’s great universe, the unscientific contemplation of any of the grander forms of nature produces that double effect. And certainly the grandest of them all, which is spread over our heads, little as we dwellers in cities can see the heavens for daily smoke and nightly lamps, forces both these thoughts upon us. They seem so far above us, they swim into their stations night after night, and look down with cold, unchanging beauty on sorrow, and hot strife, and shrieks, and groans, and death. They are so calm, so pure, so remote, so eternal. Thus David felt man’s littleness. And yet - and yet, bigness is not greatness, and duration is not life, and the creature that knows God is highest. So the consciousness of man’s separation from, and superiority to these silent stars, springs up strong and victorious over the other thought. Remember that, in David’s time, the nations near, who were believed to be the very centre of wisdom, had not got beyond the power of these impressions, but on Chaldean plains worshipped the host of heaven. The psalm then is a protest against the most fascinating, and to David’s age the most familiar form of idolatry. These great lights are not rulers, but servants; we are more than they, because we have spirits which link us with God.

Then, kindling as he contemplates man as God meant him to be, the poet bursts into rapturous celebration of man’s greatness in these respects - that he is visited by God, capable of divine communion, and a special object of divine care; that he is only lower than the loftiest. and that but in small degree and in one specific respect. because they, in their immortal strength, are not entangled in flesh as we; that over all others of God’s creatures on earth he is king.

‘Very fine words,’ may be fairly said; ‘but do they correspond to facts? What manhood are you talking about? Where is this being, so close to God, so lowly before Him, so firmly lord of all besides?’ That is the question which the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews deals with in our text. He has quoted the psalm as an illustration of his thesis that Christ, and we in Christ, are exalted above angels, and then he proceeds to admit that, as a matter of fact, men are not what David describes them as being. But the psalm is not, therefore, an exaggeration, nor a dream, nor a mere ideal of the imagination. True, as a matter of fact, men are not all this. But as a matter of fact Jesus Christ is, and in His possession of all that the psalm painted our possession is commenced and certified. It is an ideal picture, but it is realised in Jesus, and having been so in Him, we have ground to believe that it will be so in us. We see not yet all things put under man - alas no, but-we see Jesus crowned with glory and honour; and as He tasted death for every man, so in His exaltation He is prophecy and pledge that the grand old words shall one day be fulfilled in all their height and depth. The text, then, brings before us a threefold sight. It bids us look around, and if that sadden us, it bids us look up, and thence it bids us draw confidence to look forward. There is an estimate of present facts, there is a perception by faith of the unseen fact of Christ's glory, and there follows from that the calm prospect for the future for ourselves and for our brethren. Let us deal with these considerations in order.

I. Look at the sight around us.

'We see not yet all things put under man.' Where are the men of whom any portion of the psalmist's words is true? Look at them - are these the men of whom he sings? Visited by God I crowned with glory and honour! having dominion over the works of His hands! Is this irony or fact?

Let consciousness speak. Look at ourselves. If that psalm be God's thought of man, the plan that He hangs up for us His workmen to build by, what a wretched thing my copy of it has turned out to be! Is this a picture of me? How seldom I am conscious of the visits of God; how full I am of weaknesses and imperfections - the solemn voice within me tells me at intervals when I listen to its tones. On my brow there gleams no diadem; from my life, alas! there shines at the best but a fitful splendour of purity, all striped with solid masses of blackness. And as for dominion over creatures, how superficial my rule over them, how real their rule over me! I can tame animals or slay them; I can use the forces of nature for my purposes; I can make machinery, and bid the lightning do my errands and carry messages, the burden of which is mostly money, or power, or sorrow. But all these, and the whole set of things like them, are not ruling over God's creation. That consists in using all for God, and for our own growth in wisdom, strength, and goodness; and he only is master of all things who is servant of God. 'All are yours, and ye are Christ's.' If so, what are most of us but servants, not lords, of earth and its goods? We fasten our very lives on them, we tremble at the bare thought of losing them, we give our best efforts to get them - we say to the fine gold, 'Thou art my confidence.' We do not possess them, they possess us: and so, though materially we may have conquered the earth [and wonderfully proud of it we are now], spiritually, which is the same as to say really, the earth has conquered us.

The same impression of human incompleteness is made by all the records of human lives which we possess. Go into a library, and take down volume after volume-the biographies and autobiographies of the foremost men, the saints and sages whom we all reverence. Is there one on whose monument the old psalm could truthfully be written? Are not the honest autobiographies what one of the noblest of them is called, ‘Confessions’? Are not the memoirs the stories of flawed excellence, stained purity, limited wisdom? There are no perfect men in them - no men after the pattern of David’s words. Or if some enthusiastic admirer has drawn a picture without shadows, we feel that it is without life or likeness; and we look for faults and limitations that we may be sure of brotherhood.

And if we take a wider range, and listen to the sad voice of history chronicling the past, where in all her tragic story of bright hopes brought to nothing, of powers built up by force and rotted down by pride and selfishness, of war and wrong, of good painfully sought, and partially possessed, and churlishly treasured, and quickly lost - where on all her blotted pages, stained with tears, and sweat, and blood, do we find a record that verifies the singer’s rapture, and shows us men like this of the Psalm?

Or let observation speak. Bring Before your minds, by an exercise of imagination vivifying and uniting into one impression, the facts which we all know of the social and moral condition - to say nothing now of the religious state - of any country upon earth. Think of the men in all lands who are helpless, hopeless, full of animal sins and lusts, full of stupid ignorance. Take our psalm and read it in some gaol, or in a lunatic asylum, or at the door of some gin-palace, or at the mouth of a court in the back streets of any city in England, and ask yourselves, ‘Are these people, with narrow foreheads and villainous scowls, with sodden cheeks and foul hands, the fulfilment or the contradiction of its rapturous words?’ Or think of naked savages, who look up to bears and lions as their masters, who are stunted by cold or enervated by heat, out of whose souls have died all memories beyond yesterday’s hunger, and all hopes greater than a full meal to-morrow - and say if these are God’s men. So little are they like it that some of us are ready to say that they are not men at all.

What then? Are we to abandon in despair our hopes for our fellows, and to smile with quiet incredulity at the rhapsodies of sanguine theorists like David? If we are to confine our view to earth - yes. But there is more to see than the sad sights around us. All these men - these imperfect, degraded, half-brutified men - have their share in our psalm. They have gone out and wasted their substance in riotous living; but from the swine- trough and the rags they may come to the best robe and the feast in the father's house. The veriest barbarian, with scarcely a spark of reason or a flickering beam of conscience, sunken in animal delights, and vibrating between animal hopes and animal fears rote him may belong the wondrous attributes: to be visited by God, crowned with glory and honour, higher than all stars, and lord of all creatures.

It sounds like a wild contradiction, I know: and I do not in the least wonder that people pressed by a sense of all the misery that is done under the sun, and faintly realising for themselves Christ's power to heal their own misery and cleanse their own sins, should fling away their Bibles, and refuse to believe that 'God hath made of one blood all nations of men,' and that Christ has a message for the world. I venture to believe both the one and the other. I believe that though angels weep, and we should be smitten with shame, at the sight of what man has made of man, and we of ourselves, yet that God will be true though every man fail Him, and will fulfil unto the children the mercy which He has promised to the fathers.

'All the promises of God in Christ are yea,' And so against all the theories of the desperate school, and against all our own despondent thoughts, we have to oppose the sunny hopes which come from such words as those of our text. Looking around us, we have indeed to acknowledge with plaintive emphasis, 'we see not yet all things put under Him' - but, looking up, we have to add with triumphant confidence that we speak of a fact which has a real bearing on our hopes for men - 'we see Jesus.'

II. So, secondly, look upwards to Jesus.

Christ in glory appears to the author of this epistle to be the full realisation of the psalmist's ideal Our text deals only with the exalted dignity and present majesty of the ascended Lord; but before touching upon that, we may venture, for a moment, to dwell upon the past of Christ's life as being also the carrying out of David's vision of true manhood. We have to look backward as well as upward if we would have a firm hope for men. The ascended Christ upon the throne, and the historical Christ upon the earth, teach us what man may be, the one in regard to dignity, the other in regard to goodness.

Here is a fact. Such a life was verily once lived on earth; a life of true manhood, whatever more it was. In it we may see two things: first, we may see from His perfect purity what it is possible for man to become; and second, we may see from His experience who said, 'The Father hath not left Me alone, because I do always the things which please Him,' how close a fellowship is possible between the human spirit that lives for and by obedience, and the Father of us all. The man Christ Jesus was visited by God, yea, God dwelt with Him ever; whatever more He was - and He was infinitely more - He was also our example of communion, as He was our example of righteousness.

And that life is to be our standard. I refuse to take other men, the highest, as specimens of what we may become. I refuse to take other men, the lowest, as instances of what we are condemned to be. Here in Jesus Christ is the type; and, albeit it is alone in its beauty, yet it is more truly a specimen of manhood than the fragmentary, distorted, incomplete men are who are found everywhere besides. Christ is the power to conform us to Himself, as well as the pattern of what we may be. He and none lower, He and none beside, is the pattern man. Not the great conqueror, nor the great statesman, nor the great thinker, but the great Lover, the perfectly good - is the man as God meant him to be. As it has been said, with pardonable extravagance, 'Aristotle was but the rubbish of an Adam,' so in sober truth we may affirm that the noblest and fairest characters, approximating as they may to the picture in the psalm, and giving us some reason to hope that more is possible for us than we sometimes think, are after all but fragments of precious stones as compared with that one entire and perfect chrysolite, whose unflawed beauty and completeness drinks in, and flashes forth, the whole light of God. He is not ashamed to call us brethren. Therefore, if we would know what a man is, and what a man may become, let us not only look inward to our own faults, nor around us at these broken bits of goodness, but let us look back to Christ, and be of good cheer. We hear and see more than enough of men’s folly, stupidity, godlessness, and sin. Nevertheless - we see Jesus. Let us have hope.

But turn now to the consideration of what is more directly intended by our text, namely, the contemplation of Christ in the heavens, ‘crowned with glory and honour,’ as the true type of man. What does Scripture teach us to see in the exalted Lord?

It sets before us, first, a perpetual manhood. The whole force of the words before us depends on the assumption that, in all His glory and dominion, Jesus Christ remains what He was on earth, truly and properly man. There is a strong tendency in many minds to think of Christ’s incarnation and humanity as transitory. I do not mean that such a conception is thrown into articulate form as a conscious article of belief, but it haunts people none the less, and gives a feeling of unreality and remoteness to what the Scripture says of our Lord’s present life. Many believers in the eternal existence and divinity of our Lord think of His incarnation much after the fashion in which heathendom conceived that the gods came down in the likeness of men - as if it were a mere transitory appearance, the wearing of a garb of human nature but for a moment. Whereas the Biblical representation is that for evermore, by an indissoluble union, the human is assumed into the divine, and that ‘to-day and for ever’ He remains the man Christ Jesus. Nor is a firm grasp of that truth of small importance, nor is the truth itself a theological subtlety, without bearing upon human interests and practical life. Rather it is the very hinge on which turn our loftiest hopes. Without it, that mighty work which He ever carries on, of succouring them that are tempted, and having compassion with us, were impossible. Without that permanent manhood, His mighty work of preparing a place for us, and making heaven a home for men because a Man is its Lord, were at an end. Without it, He in His glory would be no prophecy of man’s dominion, nor would He have entered for us into the holy place. Grasp firmly the essential, perpetual manhood of Jesus Christ, and then to see Him crowned with glory and honour gives the triumphant answer to the despairing question that rises often to the lips of every one who knows the facts of life, ‘Wherefore hast Thou made all men in vain?’ Again, we see in Jesus, exalted in the heavens, a corporeal manhood. That thought touches upon very dark subjects, concerning which Scripture says little, and no other voice says anything at all. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ are our great reasons for believing that man, in his perfect condition, has body as well as spirit. And that belief is one chief means of giving definiteness and reality to our anticipations of a future life. Without the belief of a corporeal manhood, the unseen world becomes vague and shapeless, is taken out of the range of our faculties altogether, and soon becomes powerless to hold its own against the pressure of palpable, present realities. But we see Jesus - ascended up on high in man's body. Therefore He is somewhere now. Heaven is a place as well as a state; and however, for the present, the souls that sleep in Jesus may have to 'wait for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of the body,' and, being unclothed, may be wrapped about with Him and rest in His bosom, yet the perfect men who shall one day stand before the Lord, shall have body and soul and spirit - like Him Who is a man for ever, and for ever wears a human frame.

Further, we see in Jesus transfigured manhood. Once when He was on earth, as some hidden light breaks through all veils, the pent-up glory of the great 'God with us' seemed to stream through His flesh, and tinge with splendour even the skirts of His garments. 'He was transfigured before them,' not as it would appear by light reflected from above, hut by radiance up-bursting from within. And besides all its other lessons, that solemn hour on the Mount of Transfiguration gave some small hint and prelude of the possibilities of glory that lay hidden in Christ's material body, which possibilities become realities after [though not, in His case, be] death; when He ascended up on high, beautiful and changed, being clothed with 'the body of His glory.' For Him, as for us, flesh here means weakness and dishonour. For us, though not for Him, flesh means corruption and death. For Him, as for us, that natural body, which was adequate to the needs and adapted to the material constitution of this earth, must be changed into the spiritual body correspondent to the conditions of that kingdom of God which flesh and blood cannot enter. For us, through Him, the body of humiliation shall be changed into likeness of the body of His glory. We see Jesus, and in Him manhood transfigured and perfected.

Finally, we see in Jesus sovereign manhood. The psalmist thought of man as crowned with glory and honour, as having dominion over the works of

God’s hands. And here is his thought embodied in far higher manner than ever he imagined possible. Here is a man exalted to absolute, universal dominion. The sovereignty of Jesus Christ is not a metaphor, nor a rhetorical hyperbole. It is, it we believe the New Testament writers, a literal, prose fact. He directs the history of the world, and presides among the nations. He is the prince of all the kings of the earth. He wields the forces of nature, He directs the march of providence, He is Lord of the unseen worlds, and holds the keys of death and the grave. ‘ The government is upon His shoulders,’ and upon Him hangs ‘all the glory of His Father’s house.’ Angels served Him in His lowliness, and strengthened Him in His agony they watched His grave, and when He ascended on high, the multitudes of the heavenly hosts, even thousands of angels, were the chariot of the conquering Lord. Angels are His servants now, and all do worship Him. He holdeth the stars in His right hand, and all creatures gather obedient round His throne. His voice is law, His will is power. He says to this one ‘Go,’ and he goeth; He rebukes winds and seas, diseases and devils, and they obey; to all He says, ‘Do this,’ and they do it. He speaks, and it is done. ‘On His head are many crowns.’ Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ - and, seeing Jesus, we see man crowned with glory and honour.

III. Finally, then, look forward.

Though it be only too true that the vision seems to tarry, and that weary centuries roll on, and bring us but so little nearer its accomplishment; though the fair promise, at which the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy, seems to have faded away; though the hope of the psalmist is yet unfulfilled; though the strain of a yet higher mood, proclaiming peace on earth, which later shepherds of Bethlehem heard from amid the silent stars, has died away, and the war shout lives on; still, in the strength which flows from seeing Jesus exalted, we can look for a certain future, wherein men. shall be all that God proposed, and all that their Saviour is. Rolling clouds hide the full view, but through them gleams the lustrous walls of the city which hath the foundations. We look forward, and we see men sharing in Christ’s glory, and gathered together round His throne.

Christ is the measure of man’s capacities. He is the true pattern of human nature. Christ is the prophecy and pledge of man’s dominion. From Christ comes the power by which the prophecy is fulfilled, and the pattern reproduced in all who love Him. Whosoever is joined to Him receives into his soul that spirit of life in Christ which unfolds and grows according to its own law, and has for its issue and last result the entire conformity between the believing soul and the Saviour by whom it lives. It were a poor consolation to point to Christ and say, ‘Look what man has become and may become,’ unless we could also say, ‘A real and living oneness exists between Him and all who cleave to Him, so that their characters are changed, their natures cleansed, their future altered, their immortal beauty secured.’ He is more than pattern, He is power; more than specimen, He is source; more than example, He is redeemer. He has been made in the likeness of sinful flesh, that we may be in the likeness of His body of glory. He has been made ‘sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.’ His exaltation, if it were ever so much a fact, and ever so firmly believed, yields no basis for hope as to any beyond Himself, but on one supposition. To see man exalted and his glory ensured in Christ’s, the glory of Christ must be connected, as is done in our text, with His tasting death for every man. When I know that He has died for me, and for all my brethren who sit in darkness, and hear each other groan as the poison shoots through their veins, then I can feel that, as He has been in the likeness of our death, we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection. Brethren, the Cross, and the Cross alone, certifies our participation in the Crown. Unless Jesus Christ have and exercise that wondrous power of delivering from sin and self, and of quickening to a new life, which He exercises only as Sacrifice .and Saviour, there were nothing which were more irrelevant to the hopes of man’s future than the story of His purity and of His dominion. What were all that to men writhing with evil? What hope for single souls or for the world in the knowledge that He was good, or in the belief that He had gone up on high? If that were all, what would it all matter? The lack-lustre eyes that have grown wan with waiting will have no light of hope kindled in them by such a gospel as that. But bid them look, languid and weary as they are, to Him who is lifted up, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish - that vision will give to the still loftier sight of Christ on the throne its true meaning, as not a barren triumph for Himself alone, but as victory for us - yea, our victory in Him. If we can say, ‘God, who is rich in mercy for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together,' then we can add, 'and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Jesus Christ,' And what wonderful hopes, dimly discerned indeed, but firmly founded, we have a right to cherish, if what we see in Jesus we may predict for His brethren! We shall be like Him in all these points to which we have already referred. We, too, shall have a corporeal manhood transfigured and glorified. We, too, shall have perfect union and communion with the Father. We, too, shall be invested with all the unknown prerogatives which are summed up in that last promise of His, beyond which nothing more glorious can be conceived, 'To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me on My throne.' Then the ancient word will be fulfilled in manner beyond our dreams, 'Thou hast put all things under his feet.' Who can tell what accessions of power, what new faculties, what new relations to an external universe, what new capacity of impressing a holy will upon all things, what new capability of receiving from all things their -most secret messages concerning God their Maker, may be involved in such words? We see darkly. The hopes for the future lie around us as flowers in some fair garden where we walk in the night, their petals closed and their leaves asleep, but here and there a whiter bloom gleams out, and sweet, faint odours from unseen sources steal through the dewy darkness. We can understand but little of what this majestic promise of sovereign manhood may mean. But the fragrance, if not the sight, of that gorgeous blossom is wafted to us. We know that 'the upright shall have dominion in the morning.' We know that to His servants authority over ten cities will be given. We know that we shall be 'kings and priests to God.' The fact we know, the contents of the fact we wait to prove. 'It doth not yet appear what we shall be.' Enough that we shall reign with Him, and that in the kingdom of the heavens dominion means service, and the least is the greatest.

We, too, shall be exalted above all creatures-far above all principality and power, even as Christ is Lord of angels. What that may include, we can but dimly surmise. Nearness to God, knowledge of His heart and will, likeness to Christ, determine superiority among pure and spiritual beings. And Scripture, in many a hint and half-veiled promise, bids us believe that men who have been redeemed from their sins by the blood of Christ, and have made experience of departure and restoration, are set to be the exponents of a deeper knowledge of God to powers in heavenly places, and, standing nearest the throne, become the chorus leaders of new praises from lofty beings who have ever praised Him on immortal harps. They who know sin, who remember sorrow, who learned God by the Cross of Christ, and have proved His forgiving and sanctifying grace, must needs have a more wondrous knowledge, and be knit to Him by a tenderer bond than the elder brethren who never transgressed His commandments. The youngest brother of the king is nearer to him than the oldest servant who stands before his face. Our brother is Lord of all, and His dominion is ours.

But we can speak little, definitely, about such matters. It is enough for the servant that he be as his Lord. This confidence, which can be certain, though it be not accurate, should satisfy our minds without curious detail, and should quiet our hearts however they be tempted to cast it away. Many enemies whisper to us doubts. The devil tempted first to sin by insinuating the question, 'Shall ye surely die?' The devil often tempts now to sin by insinuating exactly the opposite doubt, 'Can it be that you will live?' It seems to us often incredible that such hopes of immortal life should be true about such poor creatures, such wretched failures, as we feel ourselves to be. It seems often incredible that they should have any connection with men such as we see them on the average to be. We are tempted, too, in these days, to think that our psalm belongs to an exploded school of thought, to a simple astronomy which made the earth the centre of the universe, and conceived of moon and stars as tiny spangles on the hem of light's garment. We are told that science lights us to other conclusions as to man's place in creation than such as David cherished. No doubt it does as to man physically considered. But the answer to my own evil conscience, to the sad inferences from man's past and present, to the conclusions which are illegitimately sought to be extended from man's material place in a material universe to man's spiritual place as an immortal and moral being, lies in that twofold sight which we have been regarding - Christ on the cross the measure of man's worth in the eyes of God, and of man's place in the creation; Christ on the throne the prophecy of man's dignity, and of his most sure dominion.

When bordering on despair at the sight of so much going wrong, so much ignorance, sorrow, and vice, so many darkened understandings and broken hearts, such wide tracts of savagery and godlessness, I can look up to Jesus, and can see far, far away - the furthest thing on the horizon - like some nebula, faint, it is true, and low down, but flickering with true starry light - the wondrous vision of many souls brought into glory, even a world redeemed.

When conscious of personal imperfection and much sin, no thought will bring peace nor kindle hope but this, that Christ has died to bring me to God, and lives to bring me to glory. Then, dear brethren, 'behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.'

Behold Jesus entered within the veil for us. Look away from the imperfect men, the partial teachers, the incomplete saints, the powerless helpers around you, to Him, the righteous, the wise, the strong. Look at no man any more, as the hope for yourself, as the pattern for your life, save Jesus only. The gaze will feed your triumphant hope, and will make that hope a partial reality. Here you will be visited by God, here you will in some degree have all things for yours, if you are Christ's. Here, from far beneath, look up through the heavens to Him who is 'made higher than' them all. And hereafter, from the supreme height and pinnacle of the throne of Christ, we shall look down on sun, moon, and stars that once shone so far above us; and conscious that His grace has raised us up on high, and put all things under our feet, shall exclaim with yet deeper thankfulness and more reverent wonder: 'What is man, that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?'

3) Hebrews 2:10

Hebrews

CHRIST'S PERFECTING BY SUFFERING

Heb. 2:10.

IT does not 'become' us to be hasty or confident in determining what 'becomes' God. We had need to know the divine nature more perfectly, and the bearings of His actions more comprehensively and clearly than we do, before it can be safe to reject anything on the ground that it is unworthy of the divine nature. Perhaps we have not quite got to the bottom of the bottomless; perhaps men's conceptions do not precisely constitute the standard to which God is bound to conform. It is unsafe to pronounce that a given thing is unworthy of Him. It is much safer to pronounce that a given thing is worthy of Him.

And that is what the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews does here, venturing upon ground on which the New Testament seldom enters, viz., the vindication of the doctrine of a suffering Christ, on the ground of its being congruous with the divine nature that He should suffer. Especially would such a thought be appropriate and telling to the audience to whom it was originally addressed. 'We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling-block,' says Paul And that doctrine of a suffering Messiah was the thing that stood in the way of the Jewish reception of the gospel, more perhaps than anything besides. So here we have the writer turning the tables upon the people, who might oppose it, on the ground of that discord and incongruity, and asserting that the whole of the sufferings of Jesus Christ do entirely harmonise with, are worthy of, and 'become' the supreme and absolute sovereignty of the God 'for whom are all things, and by whom are all things.'

There are three points, then, to which I desire to turn. There is first, the great sweep of the divine purpose. There is, secondly, the apparently paradoxical method of effecting it; and there is, finally, the assertion of the entire congruity between that method and the divine nature.

I. First of all, then, regard for a few moments the great sweep of the divine action in the gift of Christ as it is set forth here.

It is bringing many sons unto glory, wherein there lies, of course, a metaphor of a great filial procession, being led on through all changes of this lower life, steadily upwards into the possession of what is here called 'glory.' The same metaphor colours the other expression of our text, 'the Captain of our salvation.'

For the word translated 'Captain, which only occurs some four times in Scripture, literally means one who leads, or begins any course or thing; and hence comes to mean a commander, or a prince, as it is twice translated; and then again, with a very easy transition from the notion of leading to that of origination, it comes to mean ‘cause’ or ‘author,’ as it is once translated. The conception of ‘author’ is the dominant one here, but it is also coloured by the prolongation of the metaphor in the previous clause. This great procession of sons up into glory, which is the object and aim of God’s work, is all under the leadership of Him who is the Captain, the foremost, the Originator, and, in a profound sense, the Cause, of their salvation.

So, then, we have before us the thought that God brings, and yet Christ leads, and God’s bringing is effected through Christ’s leadership. Then we have other thoughts, upon which time will not allow me to dwell. Let me just indicate them to you for your own expansion.

Look at the extent of the divine act. ‘Many’ is used not in contrast to ‘all,’ as if there was proclaimed here a restricted application of Christ’s work in the divine idea; but ‘many’ is in opposition to ‘few,’ or, perhaps, in opposition to the One. There is One Leader, and there is an indefinite number of followers. The Connotation of the word ‘ many’ is the idea of uncounted number. This great procession, with its long and interminable files, sweeps onward under the guidance of the one Captain. So wide as to be universal is the sweep of God’s purpose to bring the ‘many,’ a ‘multitude that no man can number,’ into the possession of His glory. Then, note, the relationship which the members of that great company possess. The many are being brought as ‘sons’ under the leadership of the one Son. That opens out into the broad thought that the loftiest conception of God’s end in redemption is the making the ‘many’ like the One, and the investing of them all with every privilege and dignity which belongs to their Leader.

Then note, further, the end of the march. This great company stretching numberless away beyond the range of vision, and all exalted into the dignity of sons, is steadfastly pressing onwards to the aim of fulfilling that divine ideal of humanity, long since spoken in the psalm, which in its exuberant promises sounds liker irony than hope. ‘Thou crownest Him with glory and honour.’ They are not only steadily marching onwards to the realisation of that divine ideal, but also to the participation of the glory of the Captain who is the ‘brightness of the Father’s glory;’ as well as ‘the express image of His person.' So again, the underlying thought is the identity, as in fate here, so in destiny hereafter, of the army with its Leader. He is the Son, and the divine purpose is to make the 'many' partakers of His Sonship. He is the realisation of the divine ideal We see not yet all things put under man, but we see Jesus, and so we know that the ancient hope is not the baseless fabric of a vision, nor a dream which will pass when we awake to the realities, but is to be fulfilled in every one, down to the humblest private in that great army, all of whom shall partake in their measure and degree in the glory of the Lord.

This, then, being the purpose, - the leading up out of the world into the glory, of a great company of sons who are conformed to the image of the Son - we attain the point from which we may judge of the adaptation of the means to the end. We cannot tell whether a thing is congruous with the nature of the doer of it till we know what the doer intended by the act. Inadequate conceptions of God's purpose in Christ's mission are sure to lead, as they always have led, to inadequate conceptions of the means to be adopted, and doubts of their congruity with the divine nature. If Christ's mission is only meant to reveal to us a little more clearly truth concerning God and man, if He is only meant to stand before us as the ideal of conduct, and the pattern for our imitation, then there is no need for a Cross, which adds nothing to these; but if He has come to redeem, if He has come to turn slaves into sons, if He has come to lift men up from the mud and earthliness of their low and sensuous careers, and to set them upon the path that will lead them to share in the glory of God, then there is something more needed than would be adequate for the work of a Teacher howsoever wise, or than would be required for the work of an Example however beautiful and fair. The Cross is surplusage if Christ be a prophet only; it is surplusage and an incongruity if Christ be simply the foremost of the pure natures that have walked the earth, and shown the beauty of goodness. But if Christ has come to make men sons of God, by participation of His sonship, and to blanch and irradiate their blackness by the reflection and impartation of His own flashing glory, then it 'became Him, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.'

II. That leads me to the next point that is here, viz., the paradox of the method adopted to carry out this divine purpose.

Of course, I do not need to explain, I suppose, that the ‘perfecting through sufferings,’ which is here declared to take effect upon our Lord, does not mean the addition of anything to, or the purging away of anything from, His moral nature. You and I are refined by suffering; which purges out our dross, if we take it rightly. You and I are ennobled by suffering, which adds to us, if we rightly accept it, that which without it we could never possess. But Christ’s perfecting is not the perfecting of His moral character, but the completion of His equipment for His work of being the Captain of our salvation. That is to say, He Himself, though He learned obedience by the things that He suffered, was morally perfect, ere yet one shadow of pain or conflict had passed across the calm depths of His pure spirit. But He was not ready for His function of Leader and Originator of our salvation until He had passed through the sufferings of life and the agonies of death. Thus the whole sweep of Christ’s sufferings, both those which preceded the Cross, and especially the Cross itself, are included in the general expression of my text; and these equipped Him for His work.

So we learn this lesson, the Captain who comes to make the soldiers like Himself can only accomplish His purpose by becoming like the soldiers. The necessity for our Lord’s sufferings is mainly based in the text here upon the simple principle that He who is to deliver men must be a Man. The leader must have no exemption from the hardships of the company. If He is to be a leader, He and we must go by the same road. He must tramp along all the weary path that we have to tread. He must experience all the conflicts and difficulties that we have to experience. He cannot lift us up into a share of His glory unless He stoops to the companionship of our grief. No man upon a higher level can raise one on a lower, except on condition of Himself going down, with His hand at any rate, to the level from which He would lift. And no Christ will be able to accomplish the Father’s design, except a Christ that knows the fellowship of our sufferings, and is made conformable unto our death. Therefore because ‘He took not hold to help angels, but the seed of Abraham, it behooved Him to be made in all things like unto His brethren.’ And when the soldiers are weary on the march, footsore and tired, they bethink themselves

'Headquarters were here yesterday.'
'We can go through no darker rooms
Than He went through before.'

And where He has stretched Himself on the cold ground and bivouacked, we need not be ashamed or afraid to lie down. The Captain of our salvation has gone through and shared all our hardships, and plodded with bleeding feet over every inch of the ground over which He would lead us.

Again, we learn the necessity of His suffering in order to His sympathy. Before He suffers, He has the pity of a God; after He suffers He has learnt the compassion of a man. And though in the fight the general seems to have gone up the hill, and left the army to struggle in the plain, He has gone like Moses to the mount to lift all-powerful bands of intercession, and bearing in His heart tender compassion, a fellow-feeling of our pains. No Christ is worth anything to me, suffering and bleeding and agonizing here, unless He be a Christ of whom I know that His heart is full of sympathy because Himself has felt the same, and that He has learnt to run to the help of the miserable, because He Himself is not ignorant of misfortune.

Then we learn, further, the necessity of the Captain's suffering in order to emancipate us from the dominion of the evil that He bears. No doctrine of identification with our common infirmities, or sympathy in regard of our daily trials is adequate to explain, or to reach to the depths of this paradox of a crucified Commander. We need another thought than that, and it lies in this. 'He Himself bare our sins in His own body on the tree.' The necessity for knowing all our condition and sharing it was not the only necessity that brought Christ to suffer and to die. But upon Him was gathered the whole mass and Blackness of human sin, and in His separation from the Father, and in the outward fact of death, He bare our miseries, and by His stripes we were healed. No Christ is enough for me a sinner except a Christ whose Cross takes away the Burden and the penalty of my transgression. And thus 'it became Him to make the Captain of salvation perfect through suffering,' else the design of making men His sons and sharers of His glory could never come to pass.

III. Therefore, lastly, mark the harmony between the loftiest conception

of the divine character and nature and these sufferings of Jesus.

The writer dwells upon two aspects of God's relation to the universe. 'It became Him for whom are all things, and by or through whom are all things.' That is to say, the sufferings and death of the Christ, in whom is God manifest in the flesh, are worthy of that lofty nature to the praise and glory of which all things contribute. The Cross is the highest manifestation of the divine nature. The paradox remains that a dying man should more worthily set forth the deep heart of God, and should therefore more completely realise the divine purpose that all things should be for His glory, than all besides can do. Creation witnesses of Him, providence witnesses of Him, these marvellous spirits of ours proclaim His praise, but the deep heart of God, like some rich fruit, if I may so say, is cleft open by the Cross, and all its treasures laid bare, as they are displayed nowhere besides. So the purpose - which may be so stated as to be only Almighty selfishness, but which is really the expression of Almighty love - the purpose of God that all creation should redound to His honour, and be 'for Him,' reaches its end through the suffering of Jesus Christ, and in Him, and in His death God is glorified. 'It became Him, for whom are all things, to perfect through suffering the Captain of our salvation.'

Another aspect, closely connected with this, lies in that other clause. Christ's sufferings and death are congruous with that Almighty power by which the Universe has sprung into being and is sustained. His creative agency is not the highest exhibition of His power. Creation is effected by a word. The bare utterance of the divine will was all that was needed to make the heavens and the earth, and 'to preserve the stars from wrong.' But the bare utterance of will is not enough here. If men are to be brought to glory, they cannot be brought by the mere desire of God to bring them, or by the mere utterance of His will that they should be brought. This work needs a process, needs that something should be done. This work needs the humiliation, the suffering, the death, resurrection, ascension, and session at the right hand of God, of the Captain of our salvation and the Prince of our life.

So though by Him are all things, if we would know the full sweep and Omnipotence of His power, He points us away from creation, and its ineffectual fires that pale before this brighter Light in which His whole self is embodied, and says, ‘There, that is the arm of the Lord made bare in the sight of all the nations.’ Omnipotence has made the world, the Cross has redeemed it. From that Cross there come the loftiest conceptions of Him for whom all things are, but for whom men are not, unless the Cross has won them; by whom are all things, but by whom men are, through more wondrous exercise of divine power, when they are redeemed by the precious blood, than when they were made by the creative fiat.

Therefore, brethren, listen to God saying, ‘I have set Him for a witness to the people, for a Leader and a Commander to the people,’ and see to it that you enlist in this Captain’s army, and follow His banners and trust in His Cross, that your sufferings may be His, and the merit of His may be yours, and that in His sonship you may be sons, and the flashings of His glory may change your earthliness from glory to glory, into the image of the Son, made perfect through suffering and crowned with glory and honour, which He parts among all His soldiers.

4) Hebrews 2:11-13

Hebrews

THE BROTHERHOOD OF CHRIST

Heb. 2:11-13.

NOT ashamed to call them brethren. Why should He be? It is no condescension to acknowledge the fact of brotherhood, any more than it is humility to be born. And yet there is One who had to empty and humble Himself in becoming man; and for whom to call men His brethren is a depth of unimaginable condescension. We would say that a prince was not ashamed to call his subjects his friends, and to eat and drink with them, but we should not say it of a subject. This word ‘ashamed’ is meaningless in the present connection unless there underlies it the lofty conception of Christ’s person which is enfolded in the first chapter of this epistle. If He be, and only if He is, the ‘brightness of the Father’s glory, and the express image of His person,’ is it condescension in Him to enroll Himself amongst our fraternity.

The writer selects three Old Testament passages which he thinks exhibit in prophetic outline the Messiah as claiming brotherhood with men. If the writer had known the gospels, he could have found other words that would have been even more weighty, such as ‘Behold My mother and My brethren’; but probably he was ignorant of them; or possibly, writing to Jews, he may have felt that to use their own manner of exposition was the best way of reaching them.

It would lead us into discussions altogether unsuited to the pulpit to examine the relevance of these three prophetic quotations. My object is a different one. The three citations from the Old Testament, which are adduced in my text as proofs that the Messiah identifies Himself with His brethren, deal with three different aspects of our Lord’s manhood; and if we take them altogether, they afford, if not a complete, yet a very comprehensive answer to the question why God became man. It is from that point of view that I desire to consider them here.

There are, then, three points here; [1] Christ’s assumption of manhood in order to show God to men [2] Christ’s assumption of manhood in order to show the pattern of a godly life to men; and [3] Christ’s assumption of manhood in order to bring men into the family of sons.

I. First, then, here we have the declaration or manifestation of God as the great object of Christ’s brotherhood with us, ‘Saying, I will declare Thy name unto My brethren.’

Where do these words come from? They come from that psalm, the first words of which rang out from His lips amidst the darkness of eclipse upon the Cross, ‘My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ The psalm, springing directly from the heart of David, and expressing to his consciousness, I suppose, solely his own feelings in the midst of his own trials and humiliations, has yet been so moulded into language a world too wide for the writer’s sorrows, and so corresponding in minute and singular details, with the historical facts of Christ’s passion and death, that we cannot fail to perceive shimmering through the words of the earthly King who won His throne through persecutions and trials, the august figure of the loftier and true King, of whom the sovereign of Israel was, ex-officio, a type and a prophecy. Just as David felt that he, as monarch, must be the brother of his subjects, and that the meaning of his reign and of his deliverance was the declaration of the name of God to his brethren, so our King can only be King if He be brother; and the inmost purpose of His brotherhood and of His monarchy is that He may manifest to men the name of the Father.

What is that ‘name’? The syllables by which men call Him? Surely not. But the name of the Lord is the manifest character of God; and therefore the only possible way of declaring Him is not by words but by acts. A person can only be revealed by a person. God can only be shown to men by a life. Words will never do it; they may represent men’s thinkings, but they never can certify God’s fact. Words will never do it, they may suggest hopes, fears, peradventures; but unless we have a living Person whose deeds on the plain level of human history, and in this solid world of ours, are the manifestation of God, our thoughts of Him will neither be solid with certainty nor sweet with comfort. It must be a human life which is more than a human life, but yet is thoroughly and altogether man, that to men can manifest God. Our highest conceptions of the divine nature must be in the form Of man. Between the little sphere of the dewdrop and the great sphere of the sun that is reflected prismatically in it, there is absolute identity in the laws that shape their round. So limited humanity has such an analogy with unlimited divinity as that, in the mirror of manhood, the brilliancy and ineffable brightness of the Godhead can be manifested. That life, the life of Jesus Christ, is the making visible for men of the glory of the invisible God.

And what is the substance of the declaration? Men point us to His miracles, to the omniscience, to the power, to the other attributes of majesty, unlike to, and contradictory, of the attributes of finite humanity, and they say that these are the glory of God. Not so! That is a vulgar conception: high above all such as these towers the moral perfectness which is manifested in the purity of Jesus Christ. But when we have passed through what I may call the physical attributes revealed in the miracles which are the outer court, and the moral attributes of righteousness and stainlessness, which are the holy place, there is yet a veil to be lifted, and an inner sanctuary; and in it, there is nothing but a Mercy-seat, and a Shekinah above it. Which, being translated into plain English, is just this, the new-thing in Christ's declaration of the name of the Father is the love of God therein manifested. Other means of knowing Him give us fragmentary syllables of His name, and men do with the witness of nature, and the ambiguous witness of history, and the witness of our own intuitions, what antiquarians do with the broken, inscribed blocks which they find in ruins, piece them together, and try to make a sentence out of them. But the whole name is in Christ. God ' who hath spoken in divers manners' elsewhere, hath spoken the whole syllables of His manifest character in His Son. And this is the shining apex of all; the last utterances of Scripture, the culmination of all the long procession of self-manifestation - 'God is love.' You can only learn that when you look on your brother Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Dear brethren, more and more is it becoming certain, as the tendencies of modern thought unfold themselves, that we are brought to this fork in the road -Christ or nothing! Either God manifest in Him, or no manifestation of God at all Theism or Deism has not substance enough to sustain the assaults of the modern scientific spirit. Unless 'the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father He hath declared Him,' no man hath seen God at any time, or can see Him. It is Christ or darkness. Either the Father revealed in Him, or a God spelled with a little 'g,' who is an unverifiable and unnecessary hypothesis, or 'a stream of tendency not ourselves that makes for righteousness'; or a vague somewhat concerning whom we only know that He cannot be known. The cultivated mind of England has to make its choice this day between these two. And when we come back to Christ, declaring the name of the Father unto His brethren, the nebulous, doleful grey that veiled the sky disappears, and we feel the sun again, and regain a God whom we can love because He has an ear and a heart and a hand; a God of whom we can be sure, a God concerning whom we have not to say 'I think'; 'I hope'; 'I fear'; ' perhaps'; but a God whom we can know, and to know whom is life eternal.'

II. So much, then, for the first of the thoughts here. Secondly, we have Christ's brotherhood represented as intended to show to men the pattern of the religious life. 'I will put my trust in Him.'

These words came probably from the eighth chapter of the book of Isaiah, where the prophet, like the king in the former narrative, speaking altogether his own feelings, and with no consciousness of any prophetic or typical reference, expresses his personal dependence upon God. Our writer sees in Isaiah, as the chief of the prophetic order, which order in its totality was a prophecy or type of Jesus Christ, a dim shadow of Jesus, in so far as the prophet, though filled with the consciousness of a divine inspiration, and knowing that he stood before his brethren to make known to them the name of God, did not yet thereby feel himself absolved from the necessity of personal dependence and reliance on Him. And, says our writer, as it was with that foremost of the prophets, so is it with Him who is the Prophet by eminence. He, too, in His manhood and in His office of declaring the name of the Father, feels that for Him personally there must be the same faith in God which others exercise.

Now that is the point to which I want to turn for m moment. Jesus Christ is the object of our faith. Yes! but Jesus Christ is the example of our faith too. You orthodox people, who believe in the divinity of our Lord and Saviour, are far too much afraid of fronting such thoughts as this. They are not so familiar to us as they ought to be. We do not believe in His thorough manhood, some of us, nor in His real divinity, but in strange amalgam of the two, each destroying, to s certain extent, the quality of the other. And so the men who do know their own mind, and who know His simple manhood, will make wild work of the beliefs of some of those who call themselves orthodox believers.

A perfect manhood must needs be a dependent manhood. A reasonable creature who does not live by faith is either God or devil: Jesus Christ’s perfect manhood, sinless, stainless, did not absolve Him from, but obliged Him to, a life of continual dependence upon God; His divinity did not, in the smallest measure, interfere with the reality of the faith which, as man, He exercised, and which was the same in kind as ours.

His perfect manhood modifies and perfects His faith. In Him dependence had no relation to a consciousness of sinfulness, as it must have in us, but in Him it had relation to a consciousness of need of a continual derivation of life and power from the Father; His faith being the faith of a perfect manhood, was a perfect faith. Our hands tremble as they hold the telescope that looks into the far-off unseen. His hand was steady. Our faith wavers and is interrupted, an intermittent fountain. His was a perennial flow. His perfect faith issued in perfect results in His life; in a perfect obedience, ‘I do always the things that please Him,’ and in a perfect communion. Like two metal plates of which the surfaces are so true that when you bring them into contact they adhere, that perfect nature of Jesus Christ’s, by the exercise of its perfect faith, clung in unbroken fellowship to the Father - ‘He hath not left me alone, because I do always the things that please Him.’

And thus, dear brethren, our brother does not stand above us only to show us God, but comes down amongst us to show us men. Out of His example of faith we may take both shame and encouragement - shame when we Consider the awful disparity between our wavering and His fixed faith; encouragement when in Him we see what humanity has in it to become, and what by the path of faith it may become. The staff that He leaned on He has bequeathed to us. The shield that He carried in the conflict in the wilderness, when He said, ‘Man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God,’ and which He bore undinted by all the fiery darts through His earthly course, He has bequeathed to us His followers. The Captain, the Emperor, was once in the arena, and there He struggled. He, the Captain of the faith, the Leader of the hosts of believers, conquered because He said ‘I will put my trust in Him’; and He has left us the same weapon for ours, that we, too, may conquer. ‘This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.’ III. Lastly, we have our Lord’s manhood represented here as the means by which He brings us into a family of sons. ‘And again, behold, I and the children which God hath given Me.’

These words come from the immediate neighbourhood of the last quotation. In their original application the prophet regards his own family, and the little knot of disciples who had been drawn to him, as being associated with him in his prophetic office, set for ‘signs and wonders,’ and the salt of the nation, which without them was rotting to dissolution. So our writer sees in the prophet’s humility, which associates in his office, and admits to its prerogatives, the children to whom he had given natural life, and the little ones who through him had received spiritual life, the dim foreshadowing of that great Saviour who by His becoming our Brother, makes us God’s children.

For it is to be noticed that the unity referred to in the word ‘children,’ in this last quotation, does, not apply to the same sphere as the unity referred to in the former word ‘brethren’ ‘Brethren’ referred to the kindred which consisted of the common possession of humanity; ‘children’ refers to the kindred, consisting in the common possession of spiritual life. Thus, in this last quotation of our text we have presented the other side of Christ’s Incarnation and its effects. Here we have to deal, not so much with His becoming us, as with our becoming like Him.

The words open out into thoughts which I can only specify without attempting to enlarge upon them. Jesus Christ has become our Brother, that from Him we may each of us draw a life, stored in Him, though having its source in God, which will make us His brethren, and God’s children. The central blessing of the gospel is the communication to every trustful heart of an actual divine life which comes from Christ. Do not be satisfied with any more superficial conception of what God gives us in His Son than this, that He gives us a spark of Himself, that He comes into us through Christ, and bestows upon our deadness a real, mystical, spiritual life, which will unfold itself in forms worthy of its kindred, and like unto its source. For that gift of the life there is more than Incarnation needed. There is Crucifixion needed. The death of Death by death gives Death his death; and then, and then only, can He give us who were dead His life. The box must be broken, though it be alabaster very precious, that through its lustrous surface there may shine lambent the light of the indwelling spirit; the body must be broken, that the house may be filled with the odor of the ointment. Christ dies and life escapes from Him as it were, and passes into the world.

That life is a life of sonship. The children are God’s children, being Christ’s brethren. They are brought into a new unity; and the one foundation of true brotherhood amongst men is the common possession of a common relation to the One Divine Father.

And that life which leads thus to sonship leads likewise to a marvellous participation in the offices, functions and relations of the Christ who bestows it. Just as the prophet gathered his children and disciples into a family, and gave them to partake in his prophetic office, in his relation to God, and to the world, so Christ gathers us into oneness with Himself; having become like us, He makes us like Him and invests us with a similar relationship to the Father. Being the Son, He gives us the adoption of sons, and lays upon our shoulders the responsibilities and the honours of a similar relation to the world, making us kindled 'lights' derived from Himself the fontal source, making us, in our measure and degree, sons of God and Messiahs for the world.

This oneness of life - which thus leads to a participation in sonship, an identity of function, and of interest - remains for ever. If we love and trust Christ, He will never leave us until He 'presents us faultless before the presence of His glory, with exceeding joy.'

So, dear friends, it all comes to this; there is one way to know God and only one. 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.' All else is darkness. There is one life, noble, pure, worthy of humanity, and only one: the life of trust in Christ, who is at once the object and pattern of our faith; and believing in whom we believe in the Father also. There is but one fountain of life opened in the graveyard of this world, and that is in the Son, drinking of whom there shall be in us a fountain springing up to life everlasting. There is but one way by which we can become sons of God, through the elder Brother, who grudges the prodigal neither the ring nor the feast, but Himself has provided them both. So listen to Him declaring the name; say, 'I will put my trust in Him'; for you trust God when you have faith in Christ; and then be sure that He will give you of His own life; that He will invest you with the spirit of adoption and the standing of sons, that He will keep His hand about you, and never lose you. 'Them whom Thou hast given Me, I have kept,' He will say at last, pointing to us; and there we shall stand, 'no wanderer lost, a family in Heaven,' whilst our brother presents us to His Father and ours, with the triumphant words -

'Behold I and all the children whom Thou hast given Me.'

5) Hebrews 2:17

WHAT BEHOOVED CHRIST

Heb. 2:17

I BRING these words: ‘It behooved Him,’ into connection with similar words in an earlier verse of the chapter, on which I was lately preaching: ‘It became Him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.’

In the latter words the sufferings of Jesus Christ and His consequent perfecting for His work of Messiah are considered, in an aspect somewhat unusual with scripture writers, as being in accordance with the divine nature, and worthy of God. ‘He, by whom are all things,’ had no other way of electing His highest purpose of redemption than through the sufferings of Jesus Christ. ‘He, for whom are all things,’ could win men to be for Him only through these sufferings. And so the paradox of the Cross was worthy of God and like Him. In my text the same series of historical facts, the life of Jesus Christ and His death, considered as a whole, are regarded not as worthy of God, but as that which ‘behoved’ Christ, ‘It behooved’ is stronger than ‘it became.’ The one phrase points to the conformity of the thing in question with God’s character and nature; the other declares that the thing in question has in it a moral necessity or obligation, and that Christ’s assimilation to His fellows, especially in all the ills that flesh is heir to, was laid upon Him as a necessity, in view of His purpose of redemption and the helping of His fellows.

So then we have here, in the words which I have read, and in the context, three thoughts on which I touch now. First of all, the completeness of Christ’s assimilation to us, especially in regard to suffering; second, Christ’s sufferings as necessary for the fulfilment of Christ’s design; and lastly and more especially, Christ’s sufferings as indispensable for His priestly office. Now look at these three things briefly.

I. Note, first of all, the emphasis of that expression, 'it behooved Him to be made in all things like unto His brethren.'

And observe that the 'all things' here, concerning which our Lord's likeness to mankind is predicated, are not the ordinary properties of human nature, but emphatically and specifically man's sorrows.

That will appear, I think, if you notice that my text is regarded as being a consequence of our Lord's incarnation for the help of His fellows. 'He laid not hold upon angels, but He laid hold upon the seed of Abraham.' Wherefore, 'in all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren.'

Now, if the likeness here be the possession of true manhood, then my text is mere tautology, and it would simply be saying, 'He became a man, wherefore it behoved Him to become a man.' The same conclusion is, I think, fairly to be deduced from the last words of our chapter, where the fact of His suffering being tempted, is stated as His preparation to help, and as His qualification as a merciful and faithful High Priest. That is to say, the 'all things' of which our Lord became partaker like us His brethren, are here the whole mass - in all its variety of pressure and diversity of nauseousness and bitterness - the whole mass of human sorrow which has ever made men's hearts bleed and men's eyes weep.

Christ, in His single manhood, says the writer, gathered unto Himself every form of pain, of misery, of weariness, of burden, which can weigh upon and wear out a human spirit; and no single ingredient that ever made any man's cup distasteful was left out, in that dreadful draught which He emptied to the dregs ere He passed the chalice to our lips, saying, 'Drink ye all of it.'

This is the great lesson and blessed thought of our text that no suffering soul, no harassed heart, no lonely life, has ever been able to say, 'Ah! I have to bear this by myself, for Jesus Christ never knew anything like this.' All the pain and sorrow of adverse circumstances, that try some of us, He knows who had 'not where to lay His head'; who was a poor man all His days, to whom the women had to minister of their charity, and who depended upon others for His sustenance in life, and for cerements, and a grave in death. The sorrows that belong to a physical frame overwrought and crushed by excessive toil; the sorrows of weakness, of sickness, the pains of death - He understands them all. The sorrows that come from our relations to our fellows, whether they be the hopeless, quiet tears that fall for ever upon broken affections and lost loves, or whether they be the bitter griefs that come from unrequited affections and unappreciated aims, and benefits flung back, and hearts tortured by ingratitude - He knows them all. And the loftier and less selfish, more impersonal, griefs that make so large a portion of the weight and heaviness of the noblest spirits, they all cast their shadows across His pure soul, and the shadow was the deeper and the darker because of the very purity of the soul on which it fell. Purity is ever sad in the presence of foulness; and love is ever sorrowful when bowed with the burden of another’s sorrow; and both these sources of pain and grief, which diffuse their bitterness through the lives of the best men, weighed in all their gravity upon Him who felt the world’s sorrow and the world’s sin as a personal grief because His soul was perfectly unselfish, perfectly pure, perfectly united to God, and therefore perfectly clear-sighted. All the miseries of all men forced themselves into and filled Christ’s heart, Dear brother! you and I have but a drop given to us; He drank the whole cup. Our natures are not capable of sorrow as varied, as deep, as poignant as the sorrow of Jesus Christ; but for each of us surely the assurance comes with some subtle power of consolation and strength, ‘In all their afflictions He was afflicted’; and none of us can ever meet a sorrow with whose face Christ was not familiar, and which He Himself has not conquered for us.

II. So that brings me to the next point suggested here, viz., our Lord’s varied, all-comprehensive sorrow was a necessity imposed upon Him by the purpose which He had in view.

The context gives us that assertion in distinct language. Adopting the improved and accurate rendering of the Revised Version of the previous verse, we read, ‘Verily not of angels doth He take hold, but He taketh hold of the seed of Abraham; wherefore in all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren.’

Now the word rendered here, ‘taketh hold,’ is the same word which is employed in the narrative of a very striking incident in the gospels, where the Apostle Peter is ready to sink in the water; and Jesus Christ ‘stretched forth His hand and caught him.’ And that story may serve as an illustration for us of the meaning of the writer here. Here we are all, the whole race of us, exposed to the pelting of the pitiless storm, and ready to sink beneath the waters, and Jesus Christ stretches forth His strong, gentle hand and lays hold of our tremulous and feeble fingers, and keeps us up above the surges which else would overwhelm us.

Now, says my text, no man can help another unless he stand by the side of, and on the level of, that other. ‘He taketh hold, not of angels, but of the seed of Abraham’; and, therefore, He must have a hand like theirs, that can grasp theirs, and which theirs can grasp. Unless the Master had Himself been standing on the heaving surges, and Himself been subjected to the beating of the storm, He could not have revived and held up the sinking disciple.

And so our Lord’s bitter suffering, diffused through life and concentrated on the Cross, was no mere necessary result of His humanity, was not simply borne because, being a Teacher, He must stand to His principles whatever befell Him because of them; but it was a direct result of the purpose He had in view, that purpose being our redemption. Therefore to say, ‘It behoved Him to be made in all things like unto His brethren,’ is but to declare that Christ’s sufferings were no matter of physical necessity, but a matter of moral obligation. He must indeed suffer. But why must He? ‘It behoved Him to he made like unto His brethren’; but why was it obligatory upon Him so to take the bitter bread that we eat, and to drink the water of tears that we drink? For one reason, and for one reason only, because He loved us and willed to save us.

So I beseech you to feel that underlying the bitter necessity which my text speaks about there is the voluntary endurance of Jesus Christ. Ah! we do not think enough about the necessity, all through His life, for a continual repetition of the great act of self-surrender of which His incarnation was the first consequence. At the beginning of His earthly career He emptied Himself, out of love to us; and step by step, and moment by moment, all through His life, there was the continual repetition of the same act. Each one of His sufferings was the direct result of His will at the moment to perfect the work which He came to do. At any instant He might have abandoned it; and that He did not was solely owing to His perennial love. For His own determination to save and succour us was the one cord that bound this sacrifice to the horns of the altar. The Man Christ, at every moment of His life, gave Himself; and as each fresh billow of sorrow rolled above His bowed and compliant head, it rolled because He still willed to save and help His fellows.

This voluntary submission of our Lord to all the sufferings which befell Him because of His determination to come to the help of His brethren ought to make us feel how that whole life of His was one pure efflux of infinite and unspeakable love; and we ought to see in it the gift which 'became' the divine mercy indeed, but which also 'behoved' the Man Jesus, to the end that all our sorrows may be comforted and all our evil taken away.

We know not, nor ever can know, by what mysterious process the Son learned obedience by the things which He suffered, nor can we understand how it was that the High Priest, who would never have become the High Priest had He not been merciful, became yet more merciful by His own experience o£ human sorrow. But this we know, that somehow the pity, the sympathy of Christ, was deepened by His own life; and we can feel that it is easier for men to lay hold of His sympathy when they think of His sufferings, and to be sure that because in all points He was tempted like as we are, 'He is able to succour them that are tempted.' Comfort drops but coldly from lips that have never uttered a sigh or a groan; and for our poor human hearts it is not enough to have a merciful God far off in the heavens. We need a Christ who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities ere we can come boldly to the Throne of Grace, assured of there finding grace in time of need.

III. Lastly, we have here the specification of the main purpose of our Lord's sorrows - 'that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things appertaining to God to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.'

That defines more closely what He has to do, if He is to help us, and what He does do when He takes hold of the seed of Abraham. There are but two remarks that I would make on this part of my subject. The one is - let us learn what is the true nature of Christ’s help. It is the help of a priest who comes to offer a sacrifice which takes away the burden and the guilt o£ sin from the world.

Christ’s help is not merely the help of a wise Teacher. Men do not want only teaching. Their need goes far deeper than that. Christ’s help is not only the help of One who declares to His fellows what God is. Men’s needs go deeper than that. Christ’s help is not merely the help of One who sets forth in sweet attractive colours the beauty of holiness and the charm of purity. Men’s needs go deeper than that. We do not only need to know what God is, we need to have our relation to God altered. We do not only need to be told what we ought to do, we need that the past shall be cancelled, and the fatal bias and tendency towards evil within ourselves be taken away. Christ is not the Helper whose help goes down to the depths and the roots of men’s necessity, unless He is Priest as well as Prophet and King. He comes to do something as well as to say something; comes to alter our relations to God, as well as to declare God’s heart to us. In a word, we must say even to Christ, ‘Vain is Thy help, and impotent is Thy grasp, unless Thou dost bring by Thy sufferings reconciliation for the sins of the people.’

And then, notice again how here we have Christ’s priestly office extended over His whole life of suffering. The popular representations of the gospel, and the superficial grasp of it which many good people have, are accustomed to draw a broad line of demarcation between Christ’s life and Christ’s death, and to concentrate the whole of the sacrificial and expiatory character of His work in His death only. My text goes in the other direction. It says that all that long-drawn sorrow which ran through the whole life of Jesus Christ, whilst it culminated in His death, was His sacrifice for the sins of the world. For all sorrow, according to scriptural teaching, is the fruit of sin; and the sinless Christ, who bore the sorrows which He had not earned, in bearing them bore them away.

And though the shell of them and the outward appearance of them may be left, the inward reality and the bitterness of them is gone. It is exactly in reference to the ills of life as it is in reference to the other penalty of sin which consists in death. The outward fact continues, the inward nature is altered. For he who can say, ‘Christ my Lord suffered for me,’ finds that sorrows become solemn joys, and all things work together for good.

The Cross is the climax of His sacrifice, but His whole life is sacrifice and expiation, because His whole life is the life of a sinless ‘Man of sorrows acquainted with grief.’

So, then, we have to look to Him, in all the meek endurance of His life, and in all the mysterious darkness of His death, not merely as the pattern of patience, as the Teacher of the sanctity of sorrow, as the first of the martyrs; but we have to look to Him, and to feel that ‘the Lord hath made to meet on Him the iniquity of us all.’

Brother, He became like us in our sorrows that we might become like Him in His gladness. Each of us, singly, was in His mind and in His heart when He bowed Himself to the flood of sorrows, and yielded His soul to the Cross of shame. So let us stretch out our poor hands to Him who reaches His tender omnipotent one across the billows, and grasping the hands with the print of the nails, we shall find that we have exchanged portions, and that He who has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows has bestowed upon us His gladness, and crowned us with the glory of the blessedness which He had with the Father before the world was.

6) Hebrews 3:1

Hebrews

CONSIDER JESUS

Heb. 3:1

THE kinds of consideration enjoined in these two exhortations are somewhat different. The former of them is expressed by a word which means fixed attention and close scrutiny. It is employed, for instance, by our Lord in His injunctions to consider the ravens and the lilies, and by Peter in his account of his vision of the great sheet let down from heaven, upon which, when he had fixed his eye, he considered. Such a fastened gaze of awakened interest and steady contemplation, the writer would have all who are partakers of the heavenly calling to direct upon Jesus.

The other exhortation refers to a specific kind of contemplation. The word might almost be rendered ‘compare,’ for it means to weigh one thing in relation to another. It is the contemplation of comparison which is meant. What or whom is the comparison to be drawn between? Jesus, as the Leader of the great host of the faithful, and ourselves. The main point of comparison is to be found in the difficulties of the Christian life. Think what he has borne and what you have to bear; how He bore it and where, having borne it, He is now. The Captain has sustained the whole brunt of the assault and has conquered. Think of Him and be brave, and lift up the hands that hang down, and confirm the feeble knees.

So, then, throwing these two injunctions together, we may regard them as impressing upon us an all-important exercise of mind and heart, without which there can be no vigorous Christian life, and which, I fear me, is woefully neglected by the average Christian to-day.

I. I ask you to think first of this gaze of the Christian soul ‘Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus.’

I have said that the word implies an awakened interest, a fixed and steady gaze; and that is almost the Alpha and the Omega of the Christian life. So to live in the continual contemplation of Jesus our Pattern and our Redeemer is the secret of all Christian vitality and vigour. There must he no languid look, as between half-opened eyelids, as men look upon some object in which they have little interest, but there must be the sharpened gaze of interested expectancy, believing that in Him on whom we look there lie yet undiscovered depths, and yet undreamed-of powers, which may be communicated to us.

There must be not only the sharpened look of contemplation, but there must he a very considerable protraction of the gaze. You will never see Jesus Christ if you look at Him only by snatches for a moment, and then turn away the eye from Him, any more than a man who comes out from some brilliantly lighted and dazzling room into the darkness, as it at first appears, of the midnight heavens, can see their glories. The focus of the eye must be accommodated to the object of vision, before there can be any real sight of Him. We must sit before Him, and be content to give time to the gaze, if we are to get any good out of it. Nobody sees the beauties of a country who hurries through it in an express train. These passing glances, which are all that so many of us can spare for the Master, are of little use in revealing Him to us. You do not feel Mont Blanc unless you sit and gaze and let the fair vision soak into your souls, and you cannot understand Jesus Christ, nor see anything in Him, unless you deal with Him in like fashion.

But if there be this steady and protracted contemplation of the Lord, then, amidst all the bustle of our daily life, and the many distractions which we all have to face, there will come sudden flashes of glory and the clouds will lift often, and let us see the whole white range in its majesty and sublimity. They who know what it is to come apart into a solitary place, and rest awhile with Him, will know what it is to bear the vision with them amid all the distractions of duty and the noise of the world.

There is no way by which we can bring an unseen person to have any real influence upon our lives except by the direction of our thoughts to Him. So if you professing Christian men and women will give your thoughts and your affections and the run of your minds to everything and everybody rather than to your Master, there is no wonder that your religion is of so little use to you, and brings so little blessing or power or nobleness into your lives. The root of weakness lies in the neglect of that solemn and indispensable duty to consider Jesus, in patient contemplation and steadfast beholding.

Now such thoughts as these, as to the relation between the protracted gaze and a true realisation of the Master’s presence, cast light upon such a question as the observance of the Sunday. I do not care to insist upon anybody keeping this day sacred for devout purposes unless he is a Christian man. I would not talk about the obligation, but about the privilege., And this I say, that unless you have a reservoir you will have empty pipes, and the water supply in your house will fail And unless you Christian men and women use this blessed breathing time, which is given to us week after week, in order to secure that quiet, continuous contemplation of the Master, which is almost impossible for most of us amidst the rush and hurry of the week day, your religion will always be a poor thing.

I know, of course, that we may be taunted with concentrating and clotting, as it were, devout contemplations into one day in seven, and then leaving all the rest of the week void of Christ, and may be told how much better is worship diffused through all life. But I am sure that the shortest way to have no religion at all is to have it only as a diffused religion. If it is to be diffused it must first be concentrated; and no man will carry Jesus Christ with him throughout the distractions of daily life who does not know what it is to be often in the secret place of the Most High, there in the silence of fixed spirit, to ‘consider Jesus Christ.’

Then let me remind you, too, that such a gaze as this is not to be attained without decisive effort. You have to cut off sidelights; just as a man will twist up a roll of paper and put it to his eye and shut Out everything on either side, if he wants to see the depth of colour in a picture. So we have to look away from much if we would look unto Christ, and to be contented to be blind to a great deal that is fascinating and dazzling, if we would be clear sighted as to the things that are far off. The eye of nature must be closed if the eye of the Spirit is to be opened. And if we are to see the things that are, we must resolutely shut out the false glories of the things that only do appear. For these are perishable, and the others are real and eternal.

II. Secondly, notice here a little more particularly the object of the Christian gaze.

We may dwell briefly in this connection upon the predicates of our Lord in these two verses. According to the true reading of the first of them we are to consider Jesus. The first thing that is to rivet our interested and continuous contemplation is the manhood of the Lord. That name Jesus is never used in this epistle, and seldom in any part of the New Testament, without the intention of especially emphasizing the humanity of Christ. It is that fair life, as it is unrolled before us in the pages of the Gospels, to which we are to look for illumination, for inspiration, for pattern and motive of service, and for all companionship in suffering and victory in warfare. ‘Consider Jesus,’ our Brother, the Man that has lived our life and died our death.

Note that we have to consider Him in His offices, ‘the Apostle and High Priest of our profession.’ This is the only instance in scripture in which the name ‘Apostle’ is given to our Lord. And of course it is here employed not in its technical, but in its wider and etymological sense. It means ‘one who is sent.’ The contrast floating in the writer’s mind is apparently between Jesus and Moses; the two men both of whom, though in different fashion, were God’s messengers to found a polity. Perhaps another contrast is floating in his mind, such as he has drawn out at length in the first chapter of this great epistle, between those by whom ‘at sundry times and in divers manners God spake unto the fathers’; and Him ‘by whom in these last days, He has, once for all, spoken unto us.’ Possibly there is also a contrast between Jesus Christ the Lord of the angels, and the ministering spirits who, the previous context tells us, ‘are sent forth to minister to them that shall be heirs of salvation’ The name thus lifts Christ above Moses, prophets, angels, and sets Him on a pedestal, as the sole and single Revealer of the will of God to the world. The Father sanctified and sent Him into the world to be the one communicator of His perfect Name. The completeness and uniqueness of our Lord’s revealing mission are expressed in that title.

The other side of what is needful for communion between God and man is expressed in the other designation, ‘the High Priest.’ Two things go to make complete communion - God’s revelation to us and our approach to God. Christ is the Agent of both. As the subsequent context - where this idea of High Priest is more fully developed - distinctly shows, the main ideas connected with it in the writer’s mind here, are intercession and sympathy. So on the one hand, as Apostle, He brings God to us; and on the other hand, as Priest, He brings us to God; and makes the golden link by which heaven and earth are united, and God tabernacles with man.

It is this Christ - not merely in His manhood, but in that manhood interpreted as being the medium of all revelation possible to the world, and as being, on the other hand, the medium of all the access that sinful men can have to God - it is this Christ whom we are to consider, not merely in the sweetness and gentleness and holiness of His lovely Manhood as recorded in the gospels, but in these mighty offices of which that Manhood was the discharge and the expression, whereby God dwells with man, and sinful men can dwell with God.

We hear a great deal in these days about Christianity being Christ and not doctrines. I say, too, Christianity is Christ, but I say it is the Christ whom these great truths proclaim to us that we have to grasp. And it is not enough to consider Jesus from a mere humanitarian point of view, nor will the consideration of Him be peace and power and holiness and life to men, unless they consider Him as the 'Apostle and High Priest of their profession.'

And again, we have to consider not only the Manhood in itself, and the offices which that Manhood discharges, but also the sorrows through which it passes. That is the force of the second of my two texts. We have to think of that Lord, who is the Leader of all the great host of the faithful, whose praises have been sung in the magnificent roll-call of the eleventh chapter; and to turn away from their lesser struggles, and paler beauties, and less complete victories. We have to think of what Jesus Christ bore, of what was laid upon Him, of how He bore it, and of how He has been exalted now to the right hand of God. Compare our difficulties and trials with His, and think that these are the pattern for us; and that we have to tread the path which He trod. Then consider how insignificant ours are in comparison with His. The whole fury of the tempest broke upon Him. It is only the tail of the storm that comes to us. The whole force of the blow was sustained unfalteringly by the steadfast Christ. It is only the blunt sword which has glanced off His strong shoulder to smite us.

'We need not seek a resting place
Where He we loved had none.'

And if we will 'consider Him that endured,' sorrow and difficulty and opposition in our Christian life will dwindle into a very little thing, and will become a token that as is the Master so is the servant.

III. Lastly, notice the blessings of this gaze.

First, let us consider Him for calmness amidst a world full of noise and confusion. We live in a time and in a city where life is very crowded; and the pressure of every day is almost more than some of us can bear. There is no relief from the continual agitation about trifles, from the hurry and bustle of this community and this country, as continuous, and in the truest point of view as aimless and insignificant as the running of ants upon an ant hill - except we live in the daily contemplation of Jesus Christ. Nothing will quiet a man like that. It gives a certain sense of remoteness, and a very positive conviction of insignificance, to what else is intrusively and obtrusively near, and fallaciously appears to be important to us. Christ's voice quiets the storm.

'On my soul
Looks Thy fair face and makes it still.'

If you would have inward calmness, without which life is busy slavery, 'consider Jesus.'

Again, that gaze will help us to a fixed confidence amidst the fluctuations of opinion. We live in a day of unrest, when the foundations are being re-investigated, and the Tree of Life can scarcely grow because men are digging it up to look at its roots. Let us try to remember that the vital centre of all is Jesus, that faith is independent of criticism, and that if we can realise His presence in our lives in these great capacities of which I have been speaking, and as the Companion of our difficulties who has trodden the same path that we have to tread, then we can look very quietly upon all the unsolved questions which are important in their place, but which, however they are answered, do not touch that central fact and our possible relation to Him. 'Consider Jesus,' and then you will be able to say, 'The things which can he shaken are removed that the things which cannot be shaken may remain.' Ceremonies, churches, creeds, have all of them a human element, which will go. The divine Christ is the permanent in Christianity.

I might turn the word of my text in another direction for a moment, though it is a digression. After unbelieving theories have done their worst, I would say to the men who advocate them, 'Consider Christ.' Look at that fair vision. Where did it come from? Account for Him on any hypothesis but the truth of these four gospels. Account for His influence in the world on any hypothesis but His divine mission. You may talk till Doomsday, but you have to reckon with Jesus Christ, and to explain Him. Until you do, you have not established your negations. The reef on which so many goodly ships of unbelief have struck, and where their hulls lie broken and covered with the drifting sands of oblivion, is waiting for many a flaunting theory of today. ‘Consider Christ.’ That shatters anti-supernatural religion.

And, last of all, let us do it for diligence in service and patience in suffering. If we lay that fair image upon our hearts, it will lead to love, and love will make us toil in His service. If the sensitive plate be laid in the sunshine it will receive the image of the sun. If we consider Him, thereby, and not without such consideration, shall we become like Him.

As for our suffering and toils and difficulties, how they dwindle, and how easy patience is when we think of Him! Simon the Cyrenian had to carry the Cross after Christ, but we have only to carry a very little, light one, when compared with that which He bore and which bore Him. We compare our suffering with His, and are silent. We have to think of what He deserved and we deserve, and the blush comes to our cheeks. We have to remember how He bore, and how we have borne, and we are ashamed of our fretfulness and petulance. We have to think of Him at the right hand of God. The poor fighters in the arena can lift their eyes to the place where the Emperor sits between the purple curtains, and with the flashing axes of the guard round Him, and remembering that He, throned there, was once wrestling here as we are, and that we shall be throned with Him, the thought will make us bear the blows, and run the race, and face the lions. So, dear brother, the sure means of calmness amidst agitation, of confidence amidst the fluctuations of a restless age, of strenuous warfare, of diligent service, and patient endurance, lies here in the consideration of Christ. If we try to keep Him before our eyes life will be blessed. The secret of joy and peace on earth is the consideration of the Master by faith, and to see Him as He is will be the heaven of heaven. Here, the condition of holiness, joy, peace, power, is ‘consider Jesus’; and yonder the Charter of new felicities and new capacities will be, ‘Behold the Lamb.’ If we set Him at our right hand we shall not be moved, and shall walk in the light of His countenance on earth, and He will set us at His right hand in the heavens, where His servants shall serve Him and see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads.

7) **Hebrews 4:3**

Hebrews

THE REST OF FAITH

Heb. 4:3

‘Do enter’ - but on a hundred gravestones you will read ‘He entered into rest’ on such and such a day, as a synonym for ‘He died.’ It is strange that an expression which the writer of this Epistle takes pains to emphasise as referring to a present experience should, by common consent, in popular use, have been taken to mean a future blessing. If nominal Christians had found more frequently that their faith was strong enough to produce its natural effects, they would not have so often misunderstood our writer. He does not say, ‘We, when we die, shall enter into rest,’ but ‘We who have believed do enter.’

It is a bold statement, and the experience of the average Christian seems to contradict it. But if the fruit of faith is repose; and if we who say we have faith are full of unrest, the best thing we can do is not to doubt the saying, but to look a little more closely whether we have fulfilled its conditions. ‘We which have believed do enter into rest.’

I. So, then, the first thing to be noted here is the present rest of faith.

I say ‘faith’ rather than ‘belief,’ because I wish to emphasise the distinction between the Christian notion of faith, and the common notion of belief. The latter is merely the acceptance of a proposition as true; and that is not enough to bring rest to any soul, though it may bring rest to the understanding. It is a great pity, though one does not quite see how it could have been avoided, that so frequently in the New Testament, to popular apprehension, the depth of the meaning. of that one requirement of faith is obscured because it is represented in our version by the word ‘believe,’ which has come to be appropriated to the mere intellectual act. But if you will notice that the writer of this Epistle uses two other words as interchangeable with ‘belief,’ you will understand the depth of his meaning better. Sometimes he speaks of our ‘confidence’ - by which he means precisely the same thing. Sometimes he speaks of our ‘obedience ‘ - by which he means precisely the same thing. So there is an element of voluntary submission implied, and there is an element of outgoing confidence implied in the word. And when he says, ‘We which have believed do enter into rest,’ he does not mean ‘We which acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and the Saviour of the world, But we who, acknowledging, let our hearts go out to Him in trust, and our wills bow down before Him in obedience and submission. We thereby do enter into rest.’ Carry with you these two thoughts, then - ‘confidence’ and ‘obedience’ - as indispensable elements in the New Testament conception of faith, and then you can understand the great saying of my text.

Trust brings rest, for the trust which grasps Jesus Christ, not only intellectually, but with the reliance of the whole nature upon Him to do for me that which my understanding believes that He will do - that trust brings rest because it sweeps away, as the north wind does the banded clouds on the horizon, all the deepest causes of unrest. These are our perverted relation to God, and the alienation of our hearts from Him. Brother! there is no rest deep as life which does not flow from rejoicing confidence in Christ’s great sacrifice by which the innermost source of conflict and disturbance in our souls has been dealt with. Most of us are contented if there be a superficial appearance of calm, like the sunny vineyard on the slopes of a volcano, whilst-in the heart of it sulphurous fires are bubbling and boiling, and will burst out some day. What is the worth of a tranquillity which only survives on condition of our ignoring the most patent and most operative fact in our lives? It is only when you shuffle God out of your consciousness, and when you wink hard so as not to see the facts of your own moral condition and sinfulness, or when you sophisticate yourself into illogical and unreasonable diminution of the magnitude and gravity of your sins, that some of you know a moment’s rest. If the curtain were once drawn aside, and we were brought face to face with the realities of heaven and the realities of our own characters, all this film of apparent peace would break and burst, and we should be left to face the trouble that comes whenever a man’s relation with God is, consciously to himself, perverted and wrong. But trust brings rest; rest from the gnawing of conscience, rest from the suspicion of evil consequences resulting from contact with the infinite divine righteousness, rest from all the burden of guilt, which is none the less heavy because the man appears to be unconscious of it. It is there all the same. ‘We which have believed do enter into rest,’ because our trust brings about the restoration of the true relation to God and the forgiveness of our sins. Trust brings rest, because it casts all our burdens on another. Every act of reliance, though it does not deliver from responsibility, delivers from anxiety. We see this even when the object of our trust is but a poor creature like ourselves. Husbands and wives who find settled peace in one another; parents and children; patrons and protected, and a whole series of other relationships in life, are witnesses to the fact that the attitude of reliance brings the actuality of repose. A little child goes to sleep beneath its mother’s eye, and is tranquil, not only because it is ignorant but because it is trustful. So if we will only get behind the shelter, the blast will not blow about us, but we shall be in what they call on the opposite side of the Tweed, in a word that is music in the ears of some of us - a ‘lown place,’ where we hear not the loud winds when they call. Trust is rest; even when we lean upon an arm of flesh, though that trust is often disappointed. What is the depth of the repose that comes not from trust that leans against something supposed to be a steadfast oak, that proves to be a broken reed, but against the Rock of Ages? We which have ‘believed do enter into rests’ Trust brings repose, because it effects submission. The true reason for our restlessness in this world is not that we are ‘pelted by the pitiless storm’ of change and sorrow. A grief accepted loses most of its power to sadden, and all its power to perturb. It is not outward calamities, but a rebellious will that troubles us. The bird beats itself against the wires of its cage, and wounds itself, whereas if it sat still in its captivity it might sing. So when we trust we submit; and submission is the mother of peace. There is no other consolation worth naming for our sorrows, except the consolation that comes from submission. When we accept them, lie still, let him strike home and kiss the rod, we shall be at rest.

Trust brings repose, because it leads to satisfied desires. We are restless because each object that we pursue yields but a partial satisfaction, and because all taken together are inadequate to our needs. There is but one Person who can fill the heart, the mind, the will, and satisfy our whole nature. No accumulation of things, be they ever so precious, even if they are the higher or more refined satisfactions of the intellect, can ever satisfy the heart. And no endless series of finite persons is sufficient for the wants of any one of the series, who, finite as he is, yet needs an infinite satisfaction. It must be a person that shall fill all the cavities and clefts of our hearts, and, filling them, gives us rest. ‘My soul thirsteth for God,’ though I misinterpret its thirst, and, like a hot dog upon a road, try to slake my thirst by lapping at any puddle of dirty water that I come across in my path. There is no satisfaction there. It is in God, and in God only, that we can find repose.

Some of us may have seen a weighty acknowledgment from a distinguished biologist lately deceased which strikes me as relevant to this thought.

Listen to his confession: ‘I know from experience the intellectual distractions of scientific research, philosophical speculation, and artistic pleasures, but am also well aware that even when all are taken together, and well sweetened to taste, in respect of consequent reputation, means, social position, etc., the whole concoction is but as light confectionery to a starving man .... It has been my lot to know not a few of the foremost men of our generation, and I have always observed that this is profoundly true.’ That is the testimony of a man who had tried the highest, least material forms of such a trust. And I know that there is an ‘amen’ to it in every heart, and I lift up opposite to all such experiences the grand summary of Christian experience: ‘We which have believed do enter into rest.’

II. Note, secondly, the energy of work which accompanies the rest of faith.

There is a good deal said in the context - a difficult context, with which we are not concerned at present, about the analogy between a man’s rest in God and God’s own rest. That opens wonderful thoughts which I must not be tempted to pursue, with regard to the analogy between the divine and the human, and the possible assimilation, in some measure, of the experiences of the creature with those of the Creator. Can it be that, between a light kindled and burning itself away while it burns, and fire which burns and is not consumed, there is any kind of correspondence? There is, however dim the analogy may be to us. Let us take the joy and the elevation of that thought, ‘My peace I give unto you.’

But the main point for which I refer to this possible analogy is in order to remind you that the rest of God is dealt with in Scripture as being, not a cessation from work, but the accomplishment of a purpose, and satisfaction in results. ‘My Father worketh hitherto, and I work,’ said Jesus Christ. And modern speculation puts the same thought in a more heathenish fashion when it says ‘preservation is continual creation.’ Just as God rests from His creative work, not as if either needing repose or holding His hand from further operation, but as satisfied with the result; just as He rests in work and works in rest, so Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of God in eternal indisturbance and repose, in token that He has fulfilled His work on earth. But He is likewise represented as standing at the right hand of God in attitude to help His servants, and as evermore working with them in all their toils.

In like manner we shall much misconceive the repose of faith, if we do not carry with us the thought that that repose is full of strenuous toil Faith brings rest. Yes! But the main characteristic of Christian faith is that it is an active principle, which sets all the wheels of holy life in more vigorous motion, and breathes an intenser as well as calmer and more reposeful activity into the whole man. The work of faith is quite as important as the rest of faith. It works by love, and the very repose that it brings ought to make us more strenuous in our toil. We are able to cast ourselves without anxiety about ourselves, and with no distraction of our inner nature, and no weakening of power in consequence of the consciousness of sin, or of unconscious sin - into the tasks which devolve upon us, and so to do them with our might. The river withdrawn from all divided channels is gathered into the one bed that it may flow with power, and scour before it all impurities. So the man who is delivered from restlessness is quickened for work, and even ‘in his very motion there is rest.’ It is possible to blend together in secret, sweet, indissoluble union these two partial antitheses, and in the midst of the most strenuous effort to have a central calm, like the eye of the storm which whirls in its wild circles round a centre-point of perfect repose. It is possible, at one and the same time, to be dwelling in the secret place of the Most High, and feeding our souls with that calm that broods there, and to be up to the ears in business, and with our hands full of pressing duties. The same faith which ushers us into the quiet presence of

God in the centre of the soul, pushes us into the forefront of the battle to fight, and into the world's busy workshop to labour.

So the rest which is Christian is a rest throbbing with activity; and, further, the activity which is based on faith will deepen repose, and not interrupt it. Jesus Christ distinguished between the two stages of the tranquillity which is realised by His true disciples, for He said 'Come unto Me... and I will give you rest' - the rest which comes by approach to Him in faith from the beginning of the approach, rest resulting from the taking away of what I have called the deepest cause of unrest. There is a second stage of the disciples' action and consequent peace; 'Take My yoke upon you... and ye shall find rear' - not 'I will give' this time - 'ye shall find' - in the act of taking the yoke upon your necks - 'rest to your souls.' The activity that ensues from faith deepens the rest of faith.

III. Lastly, to consider the future perfecting of the present rest.

In a subsequent verse the writer uses a different word from that of my text to express this idea; and it is rather unfortunate for the understanding of the progress of the thought that our version has kept the same expression in both cases. 'There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God' -which follows a few verses after my text - had better have been rendered,'There remaineth the keeping of a Sabbath to the people of God'; although probably the writer is pointing to the same facts there as in my text, yet he introduces a metaphor which conveys more clearly than the text does the idea of an epoch of rest following upon a week of toil.

So I may venture to say that the repose of faith which is experienced here, because the causes of unrest are taken away, and a new ally comes into the field, and our wills submit, and our desires are satisfied, is but the germ of that eternal Sabbath day to which we look forward. I have said that the gift spoken of here is a present thing; but that present thing bears in all its lineaments a prophecy of its own completion. And the repose of a Christian heart in the midst of life's work and worry is the best anticipation and picture, because it is the beginning, of the rest of heaven.

That future, however it may differ from this present, and how much it differs none know except those who are wrapt in its repose, is in essence the same. Yonder, as here, we become partakers of rest through faith. There, as here, it is trust that brings rest. And no change of bodily environment, no change of the relations between body and spirit, no transference of the man into new conditions and a new world will bring repose, unless there is in him a trust which grasps Jesus Christ. Faith is eternal, and is eternally the minister of rest. Heaven is the perfecting of the highest and purest moments of Christian experience.

So, Christian men and women, the more trust the more rest. And if it be so that going through this weary world you have but little confirmation of the veracity of the great saying of my text, do not fancy that it is a mistake. Look. to your faith and see that it is deepened.

And let us all, dear friends, remember that not death but faith brings present repose and future perfecting. Death is not the porter that opens the gate of the kingdom. It is only the usher that brings us to the gate, and the gate is opened by Him 'who openeth and no man shutteth; and who shutteth and no man openeth.' He opens to them who have believed, and they enter in and are saved. 'Let us labour, therefore, to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.'

8) Hebrews 4:9-10

Hebrews

ENTRANCE INTO GOD'S REST

Heb. 4:9-10

WE lose much of the meaning of this passage by our superficial habit of transferring it to a future state. The ground of the mistake is in the misinterpretation of that word 'remaineth'; which is taken to point to the 'rest,' after the sorrows of this life are all done with. Of course there is such a rest; but if we take the context of the passage, we cannot but recognise this as the truth that is taught here, that faith, and not death, is the gate to participation in Christ's rest - that the rest remained over after Moses and

Judaism, but came into possession under and by Christ.

For the main scope of the whole passage is the elucidation of one of the points in which the writer asserts the superiority of Christ to Moses, of Christianity to Judaism. That old system, says he, had in it for its very heart a promise of rest; but it had only a promise.

It could not give the thing that it held forth. It could not, by the nature of the system. It could not, as is manifest from this fact - that years after they had entered into possession of the land, years after the promise had been first given, the Psalmist represents the entrance into that rest as a privilege not yet realised, but waiting to be grasped by the men of day whose hearts were softened to hear God's voice. David's words clearly, to the mind of the writer of the epistle, show that Canaan was not the promised 'rest.' David treats it as being obtained by obedience to God's Word; and as not yet possessed by the people, though they had the promised land. He treats it as then, in his own 'day,' still but a promise, and a promise which would not be fulfilled to his people if they hardened their hearts. All this carries the inference that the Mosaic system did not give the 'rest' which it promised. Hence, says the author of the Hebrews, that 'rest' held forth from the beginning, gleaming before all generations of the Jewish people, but to them only a fair vision, remains unpossessed as yet, but to be possessed. God's word has been pledged. He has said that there shall be a share in His rest for His people. The ancient people did not get it. What then? Is God's promise thereby cancelled? 'They could not enter in because of unbelief,' but the unbelief of man shall not make the faith of God without effect. Therefore, as the eternal promise has been given, and they counted themselves unworthy, the divine mercy which will find some to enter therein, and will not be balked of its purposes, turns to the Gentiles; and the 'rest' provided for the Jews first, but unaccepted by them, remains for all who believe to partake.

And, still further, the writer establishes the principle that the rest promised to the Jew remains yet to be inherited by the Christian, on a second ground: 'For,' says he, in the tenth verse of the chapter, 'for He that is entered into His rest, He also has ceased from His own works, as God did from His.' How is that a proof? It is not a proof that there is a rest for us, if you interpret it as people generally do. But it is so if you give to it what seems to be the correct interpretation - by referring it to Christ and Christ's heavenly condition. 'He that has entered into His rest - that is Jesus Christ, 'He has ceased from His own works' - His finished work of redemption - 'as God did from His' His finished work of creation. And there is the great proof that there is a rest for us: not only because Judaism did not bring it, but because Christ hath gone up on high. We have a great High Priest that is passed into the heavens. Christ our Lord has entered into His rest - parallel with the divine tranquillity after Creation. And seeing that He possesses it, certainly we shall possess it if only we hold fast by Him. 'There remains a rest' - proved by the fact that Christ hath gone into it, and carrying the inference, 'Let us labour, therefore, to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.'

We find here, then, three main points. First, the divine rest, God's and Christ's. Secondly, this divine rest, the pattern of what our life on earth may become. And lastly, this divine rest, the prophecy of what our life in heaven shall assuredly be.

I. In the first place, then, we have here the divine rest.

'He hath ceased from His own works, as God did from His.' The writer is drawing a parallel between God's ceasing from His creative work and entering into that Sabbath rest when He saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good; and Christ's ceasing from the work of redemption, and passing into the heavens to the Sabbath of His everlasting repose.

I need not dwell at any length upon a matter which, after all speech, remains for us but very dimly intelligible - the rest of God. 'My rest' - that rest belongs necessarily to the Divine Nature. It is the deep tranquillity of a nature self-sufficing in its infinite beauty, calm in its everlasting strength, placid in its deepest joy, still in its mightiest energy; loving without passion, willing without decision or change, acting without effort; quiet, and moving everything; making all things new, and itself everlasting; creating, and knowing no diminution by the act; annihilating, and knowing no loss though the universe were barren and unpeopled. God is, God is everywhere, God is everywhere the same, God is everywhere the same infinite, God is everywhere the same infinite love and the same infinite self- sufficiency; therefore His very Being is rest. And yet that image that rises before us, statuesque, still in its placid tranquillity, is not repellent nor cold, is no dead marble likeness of life. That great ocean of the Divine Nature which knows no storm nor billow, is yet not a tideless and stagnant sea. God is changeless and ever tranquil, and yet He loves. God is changeless and ever tranquil, and yet He wills. God is changeless and ever tranquil, and yet He acts. Mystery of mysteries, passing all understanding I And yet He says, ‘They shall enter into My rest!’ Now I believe, and I hope you believe, that the rest of Christ is like the rest of God, even in respect of this Divine and Infinite Nature. ‘He hath ceased from His works, as God did from His.’ Jesus Christ is ‘the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.’ Whatsoever you can predicate of the settled tranquillity, and stable, necessary, essential repose of a divine nature, that you can predicate of Christ our Redeemer, of Christ the Son of God.

But still further. Besides that deep and changeless repose which thus belongs to the Divine Nature, there is the other thought which perhaps comes more markedly out in the passage before us - that of a rest which is God’s tranquil ceasing from His work, because God has perfected His work. When we read in the Old Testament, that at the end of the creative act, God rested upon the Sabbath day, and blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, of course the thought that comes into view is not that of a divine nature wearied with toil and needing repose, but that of a divine nature which has fully accomplished its intent, expressed its purpose, done what it meant to do, and rests from its working Because it has embodied its ideal in its work. It is the proclamation, ‘This creation of Mine is all that I meant it to be - finished and perfect’; not the acknowledgment of an exhaustion of the creative energy which needs to reinvigorate its strength by repose after its mighty ,effort. The rest of God is the expression of the perfect divine complacency in the perfect divine work.

And, in like manner, as after that creative act there came the Sabbath, when He saw that it was all very good, and the morning stars sang together for joy;-so after the mightier new-creative act of redemption, the Christ, who is divine, ceased and held His hand, not because Bethlehem and Calvary had wearied Him, not because after pain He needed rest, not because the Cross had tasked His powers, and His suffering had strained His nature; but because all that had to be done was done, and He knew it-because redemption was completed. The Sabbath on which God rested from His work, and the new Sabbath on which Christ rose from the dead, the conqueror of death, the destruction of sin, are parallel in this, that in either case the work was done, that in either case the Doer needed no repose after His finished task. And just as God, full of all the energy of being, operated unspent after creation, needed not that rest for His refreshment, but took it as the pledge and proclamation to the universe that all was done; so Christ, unwearied and unwounded from His dreadful close and sore wrestle with sin and death, sprung from the grave to the skies, and rests - proclamation and token to the world that His work is finished, that the Cross is enough for the race for ever more, that all is complete, and man's salvation secured. As God hath ceased from His works, Christ hath ceased from His.

Still further: this divine tranquility - inseparable from the Divine Nature, the token of the sufficiency and completeness of the divine work - is also a rest that is full of work. When Christ was telling the Jews the principles of the Sabbath day, He said to them: 'My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.' The creative act is finished and God rests; but God, in resting, works; even as God, in working, rests. Preservation is a continued creation. The energy of the divine power is as mightily at work here now sustaining us in life, as it was when He flung forth stars and systems like sparks from a forge, and willed the universe into being. God rests, and in His rest, up to the present hour and for ever, God works. And, in like manner, Christ's work of redemption, finished upon the Cross, is perpetually going on. Christ's glorious repose is full of energy for His people. He intercedes above. He works on them, He works through them, He works for them. The rest of God, the divine tranquillity, is full of work. There, then, is a parallel: the rest of the Father, who ceased from His work of creation, and continueth His work of preservation, is parallel with that of the Son, who ceased from His work of sacrifice, and continueth His work of intercession and of sanctifying. These two are one. 'My rest' is the rest of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Father. That still communion and that everlasting repose are a prophecy for our lives, brethren. The ancient promise, long repeated, has come sounding down through the echoing halls of the centuries, and rings in our ears as fresh as when first it was spoken, ‘There remaineth a rest for the people of God,’ they shall enter into the stillness and the secret of His tranquillity!

II. Then, in the second place, the text gives us, The rest of God and of Christ as the pattern of what our earthly life may become.

Like Christ, like God - can it be? It can be, with certain differences; but oh! the differences drop into insignificance when we think of the resemblances. Whether a man is capable of knowing absolute truth or not, he is capable of coming into direct and personal contact with the absolute Reality, the Truth of Truth. And whether here below we can know anything about God as He is or not, this at all events the New Testament teaches us, that we can come to be like Him - like Him in the substance of our souls; like Him - copy of His perfections; like Him - shadow and resemblance of some of His attributes. And here lies the foundation for the belief that we can ‘ enter into His rest.’ We cannot possess that changeless tranquillity which knows no variations of purpose or of desire, but we can possess the stable repose of that fixed nature which knows one object, and one alone. We cannot possess that energy which, after all work, is fresh and unbroken; but we can possess that tranquillity which in all toil is not troubled, and after all work is ready for yet greater service. We cannot possess that unwavering fire of a divine nature which burns in love without flickering, which knows without learning, which wills without irresolution and without the act of decision; but we can come to love deeply, tranquilly, perpetually, we can come to know without questioning, without doubts, without darkness, in firm confidence of stable assurance, and so know with something like the knowledge of Him who knows things as they are; and we can come to will and resolve so strongly, so fixedly, so wisely, that there shall he no change of purpose, nor any vacillation of desire. In these ways, in shadow and copy, we can resemble even the apparently incommunicable tranquillity which, like an atmosphere that knows no tempests, belongs to and encircles the throne of God.

But, still further: faith, which is the means of entering into rest, will - if only you cherish it - make your life no unworthy resemblance of His who, triumphant above, works for us, and, working for us, rests from all His toil.

Trust Christ! is the teaching here. Trust Christ! and a great benediction of tranquil repose comes down upon thy calm mind and upon thy settled heart. Trust Christ! and so thy soul will no longer be like ‘the sea that cannot rest,’ full of turbulent wishes, full of passionate desires that come to nothing, full of endless meanings, like the homeless ocean that is ever working and never flings up any product of its work but yeasty foam and broken weeds; - but thine heart shall become translucent and still, like some land-locked lake, where no winds rave nor tempests ruffle; and on its calm surface there shall be mirrored the clear shining of the unclouded blue, and the perpetual light of the sun that never goes down. Trust Christ! and rest is thine - rest from fear, rest from toil and trouble, rest from sorrow, rest from the tossings of thine own soul, rest from the tumults of thine own desires, rest from the stings of thine own conscience, rest from seeking to work out a righteousness of thine own. Trust Christ, cease from ‘thine own works,’ forsake thine own doings, and abjure and abandon thine own righteousness; and though God’s throne be far above thee, and the depth of that Being be incommunicable to and uncopyable by thee, yet a divine likeness of His still, and blessed, and unbroken repose shall come down and lie - a solid and substantial thing - on thy pure and calmed spirit. ‘There remaineth a rest for the people of God.’ Say then, my Lord rests and my Father: I Will trust Him; I will rest in the Lord, and He shall keep me in perfect peace, because my mind is stayed on Him.

III. Finally: This divine rest is not only a pattern of what our earthly life may become, but it is a prophecy of what our heavenly life shall surely be.

I have said that the immediate reference of the passage is not to a future state. But that does not exclude the reference, unless, indeed, we suppose that the Christian’s life on earth and his condition in heaven are two utterly different things, possessing no feature in common. The Bible presents a directly reverse notion to that. Though it gives full weight to all the differences which characterise the two conditions, yet it says, There is a basis of likeness between the Christian life on earth and the Christian life in heaven, so great as that the blessings which are predicated of the one belong to the other. Only here they are in blossom, sickly often, putting out very feeble shoots and tendrils; and yonder transplanted into their right soil, and in their native air with heaven’s sun upon them, they burst into richer beauty, and bring forth fruits of immortal life. Heaven is the earthly life of a believer glorified and perfected. If here we by faith enter into the beginning of rest, yonder through death with faith, we shall enter into the perfection of it.

We cannot speak wisely of that future when we speak definitely of it. All that I suggest now as taught us by this passage is, that heaven will be for us, rest in work and work that is full of rest. Our Lord’s heaven is not an idle heaven. Christ is gone up on high, having completed His work on earth, that He may carry on His work in heaven; and after the pattern and likeness of His glory and of His repose, shall be the repose and glory of the children that are with Him. He rests from His labours, and His works do follow Him. He sitteth at the right hand of God ‘expecting’ - waiting patiently and in the confidence of assured triumph, ‘till His enemies become His footstool.’ But yet the dying martyr saw his Lord standing, not sitting, ready to help, and bending over him to welcome; and though He has ascended, and left the work of spreading the gospel to be done on earth, ‘the Lord works with us’ from His throne, nor is untouched by our troubles, nor idle in our toils. All the rest of that divine tranquillity, is rest in rapid, vigorous, perpetual motion. Ay, it is just as it is with physical things: the looker-on sees the swiftest motion as the most perfect rest. The wheel revolves so fast that the eye cannot discern its movements. The cataract foaming down from the hillside, when seen from half-way across the lake, seems to stand a silent, still, icy pillar. The divine work, because it is such work, is rest - tranquil in its energy, quiet in its intensity; because so mighty, therefore so still! That is God’s heaven, Christ’s heaven.

The heaven of all spiritual natures is not idleness. Man’s delight is activity. The loving heart’s delight is obedience. The saved heart’s delight is grateful service. The joys of heaven are not the joys of passive contemplation, of dreamy remembrance, of perfect repose; but they are described thus, ‘They rest not day nor night.’ ‘His servants serve Him, and see His face.’

Yes, my brother, heaven is perfect ‘rest.’ God be thanked for all the depth of unspeakable sweetness which lies in that one little word, to the ears of all the weary and the heavy laden. God be thanked, that the calm clouds which gather round the western setting sun, and stretch their unmoving loveliness in perfect repose, and are bathed through and through with unflashing and tranquil light, seem to us in our busy lives and in our hot strife like blessed prophets of our state when we, too, shall lie cradled near the everlasting, unsetting Sun, and drink in, in still beauty of perpetual contemplation, all the glory of His face, nor know any more wind and tempest, rain and change. Rest in heaven - rest in God! Yes, but work in rest! Ah, that our hearts should grow up into an energy of love of which we know nothing here, and that our hands should be swift to do service, beyond all that could be rendered on earth, - that, never wearying, we should for ever be honoured by having work that never becomes toil nor needs repose; that, ever resting, we should ever be blessed by doing service which is the expression of our loving hearts, and the offering of our grateful and greatened spirits, joyful to us and acceptable to God, - that is the true conception of 'the rest that remaineth for the people of God.' Heaven is waiting for us - like God's, like Christ's - still in all its work, active in all its repose. See to it, my friend, that your life be calm because your soul is fixed, trusting in Jesus, who alone gives rest here to the heavy laden. Then your death will be but the passing from one degree of tranquillity to another, and the calm face of the corpse, whence all the lines of sorrow and care have faded utterly away, will be but a poor emblem of the perfect stillness into which the spirit has gone. Faith is the gate to partaking in the rest of God on earth. Death with faith is the gate of entrance into the rest of God in heaven.

9) **Hebrews 4:11**

Hebrews

MAN'S SHARE IN GOD'S REST

Heb. 4:11.

WITH this simple, practical exhortation, the writer closes one of the most profound and intricate portions of this Epistle. He has been dealing with two Old Testament passages, one of them, the statement in Genesis that God rested after His creative work; the other, the oath sworn in wrath that

Israel should not enter into God’s rest. Combining these two, he draws from them the inferences that there is a rest of God which He enjoys, and of which He has promised to man a share; that the generation to whom the participation therein was first promised, and as a symbol of that participation, the outward possession of the land, fell by unbelief, and died in the wilderness; that the unclaimed promise continued to subsequent generations and continues to this day. All the glories of it, all the terrors of exclusion, the barriers that shut out, the conditions of entrance, the stringent motives to earnestness, are one in all generations. Surface forms may alter; the fundamentals of the religious life, in the promise of God, and the ways by which men may win or miss it, are unchangeable.

And so the reiterated appeal comes to us with its primeval freshness, saying, after so long a time, ‘Today, if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.’

We have, then, in the words before us, these three things - the rest of God; the barriers against, and the conditions of, entrance; and the labour to secure the entrance.

I. Note then, first, the rest of God.

Now it is quite possible that the Psalmist, in the passage on which our text foots itself, may have meant by ‘My rest’ nothing more than repose in the land, which rest was God’s since He was the giver of it. But it seems more probable that something of the same idea was floating in his mind, which the writer of this Epistle states so expressly and strongly - viz., that far beyond that outward possession there is the repose of the divine nature in which, marvellous as it may seem, it is possible for a man, in some real fashion, to participate.

What, then, is the rest of God? The ‘rest’ which Genesis speaks about was, of course, not repose that recruited exhausted strength, but the cessation of work because the work was complete, the repose of satisfaction in what we should call an accomplished ideal.

And, further, in that august conception of the rest of God is included, not only the completion of all His purpose, and the full correspondence of effect with cause, but likewise the indisturbance and inward harmony of that infinite nature whereof all the parts co-operant to an end move in a motion which is rest.

And, further, the rest of God is compatible with, and, indeed, but another form of, unceasing activity. ‘My Father worketh hitherto, and I work,’ said the Master; though the works were, in one sense, finished from the foundation of the world.

Now can we dare to dream that in any fashion that solemn, divine repose and tranquillity of perfection can be reproduced in us? Yes! The dewdrop is a sphere, as truly as the sun; the rainbow in the smallest drop of rain has all the prismatic colours blended in the same harmony as when the great iris strides across the sky. And if man be made in the image of God, man perfected shall be deiform, even in the matter of his apparently incommunicable repose. For they who are exalted to that final future participation in His life will have to look back, too, upon work which, stained as it has been in the doing, yet, in its being accepted upon the altar on which it was humbly laid, has been sanctified and greatened, and will be an element in their joy in the days that are to come. ‘They rest from their labours, and their works do follow them’ - not for accusation, nor to read to them bitter memories of incompleteness, but rather that they may contribute to the deep repose and rest of the heavens. In a modified form, but yet in reality, the rest of God may be possessed even by the imperfect workers here upon earth.

And, in like manner, that other aspect of the divine repose, in the tranquillity of a perfectly harmonious nature, is altogether, and without restriction, capable of being reproduced, and certain in the future to be reproduced in all them that love and trust Him, when the whole being shall be settled and centred upon Him, and will and desires and duty and conscience shall no more conflict. ‘Unite my heart to fear Thy name,’ is a prayer even for earth. It will be fully answered in heaven, and the souls made one through all their parts shall rest in God, and shall rest like God.

And further, the human participation in that divine repose will have, like its pattern, the blending without disturbance of rest with motion. The highest activity is the intensest repose. Just as a light, whirled with sufficient rapidity, will seem to make a still circle; just as the faster a wheel moves the more moveless it seems to stand; just as the rapidity of the earth's flight through space, and the universality with which all the parts of it participate in the flight, produce the sensation of absolute immobility. It is not motion, but effort and friction, that break repose; and when there is neither the one nor the other, there will be no contrariety between activity and rest; but we shall enjoy at once the delights of both without the wear and tear and disturbance of the one or the languor of the other.

This participation by man in the rest of God, which has its culmination in the future, has its germ in the present. For I suppose that none of the higher blessings which attach to the perfect state of man, as revealed in Scripture, do so belong to that state as that their beginnings are not realised here. All the great promises of Scripture, except those which may point to purely physical conditions, begin to be fulfilled here in the earnest of the inheritance. And so, though toil be our lot, and work against the grain, beyond the strength, and for merely external objects of passing necessity., may be our task here, and the disturbance of rest through sorrows and cares is the experience of all, yet even here, as this Epistle has it, 'we who have believed do enter into rest.' The Canaan of the Jew is treated by the writer of this Epistle as having only been a symbol and outward pledge of the deeper repose to which the first receivers of the promise were being trained, if they had been faithful, to look forward and aspire; and the heaven that awaits us, in so far as it is a place and external condition, is in like manner but a symbol and making manifest to sense of the spiritual verity of union with God and satisfaction and rest in Him.

II. So look, secondly, at the barriers against, and the conditions of, entrance into that rest.

My text says, 'Lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.' Now it is to be observed that in this section, of which this is the concluding hortatory portion, there is a double reason given for the failure of that generation to whom the promise was addressed to appropriate it to themselves; and that double representation has been unfortunately obscured in our Authorised Version by a uniform rendering of two different words. Sometimes, as here in my text, we find that the word translated ‘unbelief’ really means disobedience; and sometimes we find that it is correctly translated by the former term. For instance, in the earlier portions of the section, we find a warning against ‘an evil heart of unbelief.’ The word there is correctly translated, Then we find again, ‘To whom He ‘sware in His wrath that they should not enter into His rest; but unto them that believed not,’ where the word ought rather to be ‘them that were disobedient.’ And in the subsequent verse we find the ‘unbelief’ again mentioned. So there are not one but two things stated by the writer as the barriers to entrance - unbelief and its consequence and manifestation as well as root, disobedience.

And the converse, of course, follows. If the barrier be a shut door of unbelief, plated with disobedience, like iron upon an oak portal, then the condition of entrance is faith, with its consequence of submission of will, and obedience of life.

Notice the important lessons that are given by this alternation of the two ideas of faith and unbelief, obedience and disobedience. Disobedience is the root of unbelief. Unbelief is the mother of further disobedience. Faith is submission, voluntary, within a man’s own power. If it be not exercised the true cause lies deeper than all intellectual ones, lies in the moral aversion of his will and in the pride of independence, which says, ‘Who is Lord over us?’ Why should we have to depend upon Jesus Christ? And as faith is obedience and submission, so faith breeds obedience, and unbelief leads on to higher-handed rebellion. The two interlock each other, foul mother and fouler child; and with dreadful reciprocity of influence the less a man trusts the more he disobeys, the more he disobeys the less he trusts.

But, then, further, note the respective influence of these two - faith and unbelief; and the other couple, obedience and disobedience, in securing entrance to the rest. Now I desire to bring into connection with this duality of representation, which, as I have said, pervades this section of our letter, our Lord’s blessed words, ‘Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn’ of Me ‘and ye shall find rest.’ There again, we have the double source of rest, and by implication the double source of unrest. For the rest which is given, and the rest which is found, that which ensues from coming to Christ, and that which ensues from taking His yoke upon us and learning of Him, are not the same. But the one is the rest of faith, and the other is the rest of obedience.

So, then, consider the repose that ensues from faith, the unrest that dogs unbelief. When a man comes to Christ, then, because Christ enters into him, he enters into rest. There follow the calming of the conscience and reconciliation with God, there is the beginning of the harmonising of the whole nature in one supreme and satisfying love and devotion. These things still the storm and make the incipient Christian life in a true fashion, though in a small measure, participant of the rest of God.

People say that it is arbitrary to connect salvation with faith, and talk to us about the ‘injustice’ of men being saved and damned because of their creeds. We are not saved for our faith, nor condemned for our unbelief, but we are saved in our faith, and condemned in our unbelief. Suppose a man did not believe that prussic acid was a poison, and took a spoonful of it and died. You might say that his opinion killed him, but that would only be a shorthand way of saying that his opinion led him to take the thing that did kill him. Suppose a man believes that a medicine will cure him, and takes it, and gets well. Is it the drug or his opinion that cures him? If a certain mental state tends to produce certain emotions, you cannot have the emotions if you will not have the state. Suppose you do not rely upon the promised friendship and help of some one, you cannot have the joy of confidence or the gifts that you do not believe in and do not care for. And so faith is no arbitrary appointment, but the necessary condition, the only condition possible, in the nature of things, by which a man can enter into the rest of God. If we will not let Christ heal our wounds, they must keep on bleeding; if we will not let Him soothe our conscience, it must keep on pricking; if we will not have Him to bring us nigh, we must continue far off; if we will not open the door of our hearts to let Him in, He must stop without. Faith is the condition of entrance; unbelief bars the door of heaven against us, because it bars the door of our hearts against Him who is heaven.

And then, in like manner, obedience and disobedience are respectively conditions of coming into contact or remaining untouched by the powers which give repose. Submission is tranquillity. What disturbs us in this world is neither work nor worry, but wills unconformed to our work, and unsubmissive to our destiny. When we can say, ‘Thy will be done,’ then some faint beginnings of peace steal over our souls, and birds of calm sit brooding even on the yet heaving deep. The ox that kicks against the pricks only makes its hocks bloody. The ox that bows its thick neck to the yoke, and willingly pulls at the burden, has a quiet life. The bird that dashes itself against the wires of its cage bruises its wings and puts its little self into a flutter. When it is content with its limits, its song comes back. Obedience is repose; disobedience is disturbance, and they who trust and submit have entered into rest.

III. Now, lastly, a word about the discipline to secure the entrance.

That is a singular paradox and bringing together of opposing ideas, is it not, Let us labour to enter into rest? The paradox is not so strong in the Greek as here, but it still is there. For the word translated ‘labour’ carries with it the two ideas of earnestness and of diligence, and this is the condition on which alone we can secure the entrance, either into the full heaven above, or into the incipient heaven here.

But note, if we distinctly understand what sort of toil it is that is required to secure it, that settles the nature of the diligence. The main effort of every Christian life, in view of the possibilities of repose that are open to it here and now, and yonder in their perfection, ought to be directed to this one point of deepening and strengthening faith and its consequent obedience.

You can cultivate your faith, it is within your own power. You can make it strong or weak, operative through your life, or only partially, by fits and starts. And what is required is that Christian people should make a business of their godliness, and give themselves to it as carefully and as consciously and as constantly as they give themselves to their daily pursuits. The men that are diligent in the Christian life, who exercise that commonplace, prosaic, pedestrian, homely virtue of earnest effort, are sure to succeed; and there is no other way to succeed. You cannot go to heaven in silver slippers.

But although it be true that heaves is a gift, and that the bread of God is given to us by His Son, the old commandment remains unrepealed, and has as direct and stringent reference to the inward Christian life as to the outward. ‘In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat bread,’ though it be at the same time bread that is given thee. And how are we to cultivate our faith? By contemplating the great object which kindles it. Do you do that?

By resolving, with fixed and reiterated determinations, that we will exercise it. ‘I will trust and not be afraid.’ Do you do that? By averting our eyes from the distracting competitors for our interest and attention, in so far as these might enfeeble our confidence. Do you do that? Diligence; that is the secret - a diligence which focuses our powers, and binds our vagrant wills into one strong, solid mass, and delivers us from languor and indolence, and stirs us up to seek the increase of faith as well as of hope and charity. Then, too, obedience is to be cultivated. How do you cultivate obedience? By obeying - by contemplating the great motives that should sway and melt, and sweetly subdue the will, which are all shrined in that one saying.

‘Ye are not your own; ye are bought with a price,’ and by rigidly confining our desires and wishes within the limits of God’s appointment, and religiously referring all things to His supreme will. If thus we do, we shall enter into rest.

So, dear friends, the path is a plain enough one. We all know it. The goal is a clear enough one. I suppose we all believe it. What is wanted is feet that shall run with perseverance the race that is set before us. The word of my text which is translated ‘labour,’ is found in this Epistle in another connection, where the writer desires that we should show ‘the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end.’ It is also caught up by one of the other apostles, who says to us, ‘Giving all diligence, add to your faith’ the manifold virtues of a practical obedience, and so ‘the entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.’ A more authoritative voice points us to the same strenuous effort, for our Lord has said, ‘Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you,’ and when the listeners asked Him what works He would have them do, He answered, bringing all down to one, which being done would produce all others, ‘This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.’

So if we labour to increase our faith, and its fruits of obedience, with a diligence inspired by our earnestness which is kindled by the thought of the sublimity of the reward, and the perils that seek to rob us of our crown, then, even in the wilderness, we shall enter into the Promised Land, and though the busy week of care and toil, of changefulness and sorrow, may disturb the surface of our souls, we shall have an inner sanctuary, where we can shut our doors about us and enjoy a foretaste of the Sabbath-keeping of the heavens, and be wrapped in the stillness of the rest of God.

10)Hebrews 4:16

Hebrews

THE THRONE OF GRACE

Heb. 4:16

IN the context are three great exhortations which bear a very remarkable and distinct relation to each other: ‘Let us labour to enter into rest’; ‘Let us hold fast our profession’; Let us come boldly to the throne of grace.

It is a hard thing to labour to enter into rest. How is it to be done? The second exhortation helps us to answer, ‘Let us hold fast our profession,’ which being translated into other words, is this: our true way of labour is to cling in faith to Him whom we acknowledge; but knowing the weakness of our own hearts, and how they waywardly fluctuate and pass away from the one confidence and happiest trust, it is with profound wisdom that the ultimate injunction is held out for the foundation of all - ‘Let us come to the throne of grace.’ There we get the strength that will enable our slack and benumbed fingers to grasp again the thing we hold. There we shall get that fresh grip of Christ which will quicken us for the labour of entering into rest. And so this portion of exhortation interposed between the doctrinal and theological parts of this letter is addressed to every one in the Christian profession. I ask you, then, to look at this exhortation, which covers the whole ground of Christian duty and strength.

Now, first, here is a very remarkable and beautiful expression - ‘the throne of grace.’ Grace, of course, as I do not need to explain, is the New Testament word for the undeserved favour and loving regard of God to man considered as weak, sinful, and unworthy; it is love which has its own motive, apart from any regard to worthiness in the object upon which it falls. Grace is its own real impulse and motive, and grace is set in Scripture as the opposite of desert; it is of grace, not of works, and so forth. It is set as the antagonist of sin and unrighteousness and all evil, and so runs up to the idea that it expresses the unmerited, self-originated, loving regard of God to us poor miserable creatures, who, if dealt with on the ground of right and retribution, would receive something very different indeed. But my text says the throne of grace is the throne of God. I wonder if it is too picturesque to take that word grace here as a kind of synonym of God? Think of the figure that was in the writer’s mind, as being that grace itself was the occupant of the throne, that there she sits, regal, sovereign, enthroned in the heart of the universe, queen of all things, and giving from her full and generous hand to every creature all that which the creature requires. And then if we take the more prosaic notion - which perhaps is the safer one - and think that the metaphor is not that grace is queen and sovereign, but only that the throne is based and established, as it were, in grace, out of which this undeserved love flows in broad, full streams. Even if we take the metaphor thus, we come to the same thought, that whatever else there may he in the divine nature, the ruling sovereign element in Deity is unmerited love and mercy and kindly regard to us poor, ignorant, sinful creatures, which keeps pouring itself out over all the world. God is King, and the kingly thing in God is infinite grace.

Then we can scarcely but bring into connection with this grand idea the other phases which the Old Testament gives to the same thought. Read such words as these: - ‘Justice and judgment are the habitation of His throne’ - ‘God sitteth on the throne of His holiness’ - ‘The throne of Thy glory.’ Yes, the throne of justice and of judgment. White and sparkling - cold and repellent. The throne of glory - flashing and dazzling, coruscating and blinding, glittering and shimmering - ready to smite the diseased eye. The throne of Thy holiness. Yes, lofty, far up there, towering above us in its pure completeness, and we poor creatures, being ourselves blinded and dazed, and far away from Him, down amidst the lowlands and materialities, and all that majesty in the heavens - the justice and judgment, the holiness and glory - all that is only the envelope and wrappage, the living centre and heart of it is a pure, lambent glow of tenderness, and the throne is truly the throne of grace. The ‘throne’ gives us all ideas of majesty, sovereignty, dominion, infinitude, greatness. The thought that it is ‘the throne of grace’ sheathes all these in the softest, tenderest, most blessed folds of love - unmerited, free, spontaneous - simply because He is God, and not on account of any goodness in us. Bearing in mind this great conception of true love, ruling, dominant, the sovereign element in the divine nature, let us ask, How do we reach it? Are we warranted in believing it? Read the verses that come before: ‘For we have not a High Priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.’ Turn that doctrinal statement into a statement of principle and it just comes to this: that our certitude that God’s throne is a throne of love and grace, is all involved in, dependent upon, and built upon, the work of Christ, the High Priest of our profession. That is to say, not ‘thank God’ that His work makes God’s throne a throne of grace - that is not the teaching of the Scripture - but that He, as High Priest, and, therefore, as the revealer to us of God as He is, shows us in His life and death, in the gentleness of His character, in the tenderness of His compassion, in the depth of His sympathy on earth, in the tenderness that touched the little children in their innocence and the harlots in their filth, and in the death He died upon the Cross for the sake of the world - the very heart of God is cut open, as it were, and the two halves fall apart as when we cut some rich fruit to lay hare the inmost pulp. God is manifested to us, God declares Himself to us, in the sympathy of the humanity, in the life, in the death upon the Cross; and the Priest, in His sacrifice, and by His sacrifice, shows us that between the cherubim throned above the mercy-seat shimmers the Shekinah of power, with its white centre of love and peace. And then, on the other side, that same great thought of the priesthood of Christ influences this conception of the throne of God in another fashion still; for, as it seems to me, there is no understanding of the depth and meaning of the work of Jesus Christ, our Lord, unless we heartily accept this, that His great sacrifice for us, in which mainly He is the Priest of our profession, is the means and channel and medium and condition through which all the love of

God expresses itself to the world, and has communicated to sinful man all His goodness and all His pity and His tenderness, supplying all our necessities, and is all things to us through Christ our Lord. Seen through Him the throne is white with tenderness; flowing through Him from the throne proceeds the river of the water of life, and so, in both ways, the throne of grace is such by reason of the priesthood of Christ.

Look for a moment, in the next place, at the temper and disposition with which we come to this throne. ‘Let us come boldly.’ Now boldly is a somewhat incongruous word; it neither conveys the original, nor does it correspond to our sense of propriety. The thought would be far more beautiful and far more naturally represented by a more literal translation - ‘Let us come with frank confidence’ to the throne of grace. The word literally means, if we go to the etymology of it, speaking everything. You can easily understand how naturally that becomes an expression for the unembarrassed, unrestrained full out-pouring of a heart. You cannot pour out your heart in the fullest confidence to a person you do not respect, but if you get with some one you entirely trust, how swiftly the words flow. and how very easy it is to tell out the whole heart. Just so with this great word of the writer of this Epistle, descriptive of the temper and disposition with which men are to go to God - with confidence, full, cheerful, and unembarrassed, and which expresses itself in full trust, exactly as one of the old Psalms says - ‘Ye people, pour out your heart before Him.’ Yes, let it all flow out, just as you would do to husband or wife, or lover, or friend, or the chosen companion to whom we can tell everything. Ah, but there is no such person - there is nobody, not a soul, could stand the turning inside out of a man! There is no one able to do it to another, even supposing the other could bear it! But my text says ‘come,’ and is so gentle in its love, so strong in its grace, sweetly wooing us to the freest and frankest outpourings of all our hearts before the throne. Let us then come with confidence, because Jesus’ work as our High Priest is in the writer’s mind. You remember the vision in the Revelation where the seer beholds the angel coming with a censer, and he takes incense from off the golden altar, and he goes on to say, that this much incense was offered in the censer with prayers of saints. That is a picturesque and graphic representation of this same idea; my poor cry, the devotions of my trembling, unfaithful heart, the halting, limping approach of my sluggish spirit, these go along with, and are offered through, that Great High Priest.

‘Let the much incense of Thy prayer On my behalf ascend.’

Truly we have a loving High Priest; let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace. Let us not use as a mere empty form those words ‘for Christ’s sake,’ but let us remember that these words do hold the very secret of all acceptable approach to God, and that’ no man cometh to the Father but by Me. There is reason enough, God knows, in your heart and mine, and in our poor, miserable, wretched, conventional, formal chatterings called prayers, for diffidence and distrust. Well, then, let us fully look that fact in the face, entertain untremblingly the fullest consciousness of the insufficiency and unworthiness of all we do, and all we are, and all we feel, and all we seek, and then wrenching ourselves away as it were from the contemplation of our own selves, which only land us in diffidence and despair, let us turn to Him, that we may have boldness and confidence in our access to the feet of Him who is our Great High Priest, passed into the heavens, and who now sits on the ‘throne of grace.’

And now, lastly, a word about the issue and result of this confidence of access to the throne of grace, the throne of spontaneous love. ‘That we may obtain mercy,’ says the writer, ‘and find grace to help in time of need.’ It is noteworthy, I think, to consider that the writer here is evidently thinking, not about a communion with God which is not prayer, but a communion with God which, on our side, is the lifting up of an empty hand, and on His side the bestowing a large, full gift. There is no fellowship with God possible on the footing of what people call ‘disinterested communion.’ No, we have always to go to Him to get something from Him. The question is, What do we expect to get? My text tells us, not the temporal blessings, not the answers to foolish desires, not the taking away of thorns in the flesh, but mercy and grace to help - inward and spiritual blessings. But what are these? Well, I don’t know whether it is too nice or too microscopic criticism to say that I seem to see a difference between obtaining mercy and finding grace. I take it grace is used in what I call its secondary sense, not meaning so much the love of God unmerited, but rather signifying the consequences of that love in the gifts bestowed upon us, and you know that is a usage of the word common in the New Testament, thus making the word into a plural, ‘graces’ - the manifold gifts that love bestows upon us. So that, I take it, this word is here used in the secondary sense, and if that be so, we may shape a difference between the two phrases, ‘obtaining mercy’ and ‘finding grace.’

I do not think I can put that better than by using a metaphor. The one expresses the heart of God, the other expresses the hand of God. We may obtain mercy as a suppliant coming boldly, confidently, frankly, with faith in the Great High Priest, to the throne of grace. There we get the full heart of God. I stand before Him in my filth, in my weakness, with conscience gnawing at me in the sense of many infirmities, many a sin and shortcoming and omission, and on the throne, if I may so say, is a shoot of tender love from God’s heart to me, and I get for all my weakness and sin pity and pardon, and find mercy of the Lord in that day. And then in getting the full heart of God, with all its divine abundance and pardoning grace and tender, gracious pity, I get, of course, the full hand of God to obtain mercy, and find grace, the bestowment of the needful blessings, the obtaining of grace in time of need, the right grace No blunders in the equipment with which He supplies us. He does not give me the parcel that was meant for you; there is no error in the delivery. He does not send His soldiers to the North Pole equipped for warfare in Africa. He does not give this man a blessing that the man’s circumstances would not require. No, no; blessed be God, He cannot err. We fall back upon the words that precede my text, ‘And there is no creature concealed from His sight, for all things are naked, and open to the eyes Of Him to whom we must give an account.’ That may be, and is terrible, unless we take it along with the other word, ‘We have not a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weakness.’ We see a divine omniscience shining upon us through the merits of the great High Priest, full of light and hope, and because all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him who is our High Priest; therefore the right grace will be most surely given to me to help me in time of need, or, as the words may perhaps be more vigorously and correctly translated, find grace for timely aid, grace punctually and precisely at the very nick of time, at the very exact time determined by heaven’s chronometer, not by ours. It will not come as quickly as impatience might think it ought, it will not come so soon as to prevent an agony of prayer, it will not come in time enough for our impatience, for murmuring, for presumptuous desires; but it will come in time to do all that is needed. Ah, and it will come before Peter has gone below the water, though not until Peter has felt the cold waves rise to his knees, and has cried out, ‘Lord, save me, I perish.’ ‘Master, he whom Thou lovest is sick,’ and He abode still two days in the same place where He was, and when He came, ‘Lord, if Thou hadst been here my brother had not died.’ ‘Said I not unto thee, that if thou didst believe thou shouldest see the glory of God.’ ‘God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved, the Lord shall help her, and that right early.’ You remember the narrative of that great final battle on the plains of Waterloo. For long weary days brave men died by the thousands - the afternoon of the last day was wearing rapidly away, the thin red living line getting thinner and thinner, the squares smaller and smaller at each returning charge - but at last, just before the daylight faded, just before endurance could do no more, there comes old Blucher at last and gives the order, and the whole line bore down upon the enemy and scattered them. Ah, help came at the right time, not so soon but that the courage of our brave soldiers had been tested, but before despair had settled upon the ranks, and in time for a great and perfect victory. Oh, my friends, ‘Let us come boldly to the Throne of Grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace for every time of need.’

Through waves and clouds and storms
He gently clears thy way;
Wait thou His time - thy darkest night
Shall end in brightest day.’

11)Hebrews 5:7

Hebrews

GETHSEMANE

Heb. 5:7

WE may take these great and solemn words as a commentary on the gospel narrative of Gethsemane. It is remarkable that there should be here preserved a detail of that agony which is not found in our Gospels. The strong crying and tears find no record in our evangelists, and so it would appear as though the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews was not altogether dependent upon them for his knowledge of Christ's life. In any case here we have independent witness to the story of Christ's passion, and a very instructive hint as to the widespread and familiar knowledge of the story of our Lord's suffering, which existed at the very early date of this Epistle in the churches, so that it could be referred to in this far-off allusive way with the certainty that hearers would distinctly understand what the writer was speaking about. So we get a confirmation of the historical veracity of the narrative that is preserved in our Gospel. But the value of such words as these is their bearing upon far deeper things than that. They point to Gethsemane as showing us Christ, as the companion of our sorrows and supplications, as a pattern of our submissive, devout resignation, and as a lesson for us all how prayer is most truly answered. First, then, take that great thought of my text, the Christ as being our companion in sorrow and in supplication. 'In the days of His flesh - when He bore what I bear - in the days of His flesh He offered prayer and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death.' Now I do not dwell at any length upon the additional contribution to the vividness and solemnity of the picture given us in the detail of the text before us, but I want to refer for one moment, and I will do it as reverently as I can, to the unapproachable narrative, and to make this one remark about it, that all the three evangelists who are our source of knowledge of that scene in the garden of Gethsemane employ strange, and all but unexampled, words in order to express the condition of our Saviour's spirit then. Matthew, for instance, uses a word which, in our Bible, is translated 'He began to be very heavy.' Only once besides, as far as I know, is it employed in scripture, and it seems to mean something like 'On the very verge of despair.' And then Mark gives us the same singular expression, adding to it another one which is translated, 'sore amazed.' It has been suggested that a more adequate rendering would be 'began to be appalled,' and another suggestion has been, that it might be adequately rendered with the phrase 'that He began to be out of Himself.' Then comes Luke, with his word, which we have translated into English as 'agony.' And then there come Christ's own strange words, 'My soul is encompassed with sorrow almost up to the point of death.' That is not a proverb; I take that to be a literal fact that one more pang and the physical frame would have given way. Now, I do not point to these things in any spirit of curious investigation. I feel, I hope, ‘Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.’ And yet I cannot help feeling that there is a tendency nowadays to say too little about the Gospel story of Christ’s sufferings; it is a reaction, no doubt, and prompted by good motives; it is a reaction from the preaching of a former time, when men used these sacred narratives of our Lord’s last days in the coarsest possible manner, and the climax of it is that horrible kind of preaching that Roman Catholic preachers used to indulge in - Passion sermons. And yet I cannot but feel that we are in danger of going to the other extreme and losing much by not sufficiently dwelling on the facts.

Then there is another point.. What is the meaning of that-what is the explanation of all the passion, and paroxysm of agony, and fear. and bloody sweat, and horror-stricken appeal? Is it not a very, very unheroic picture that? Is it not strangely unlike the spirit in which many men and women, who drew all courage from Christ, have gone to their death? Is not the servant above his master here, if you will think of a Latimer at the stake, or of many a poor unknown martyr that went to his death as to his bed, and set that side by side with the shrinking of Christ? Well, dear brethren, I know the attempt to explain the flood of sorrow, of dread, and horror of great darkness that wrapt the soul of Jesus Christ in these last moments, on psychological principles, and say it is a pure and lofty end, shrinking from death; but it seems to me the only explanation of it all is the good old one:

‘The Lord hath made to meet upon Him the iniquity of us all.’

And so with the weight of the sins and the sorrows of the world, He began to be sorrowful and very heavy.

And then, passing on, let me deal with the matter from another point of view, and remind you that, whatsoever there may be all His own and beyond that reach of common humanity, experienced in the solemn and awful hour, yet it is also the revelation of a companionship that never fails us in all our struggles, tears, and prayers. Oh, how different that makes our passage through the lonely experience of our human life! There are times in every life when all human affection and all human voices fail in the presence of a great sorrow, and when you feel that you must tread this path alone. Although loving hands are stretched out to me through the darkness, and have grasped my own and helped me to stand, yet nothing will still the aching of the solitary heart except the thought of a Christ who has suffered it all already, and who, in the days of His flesh, offered up, with strong crying and tears, His prayer unto Him that was able to save. You remember the old Roman story - grand in its heroic simplicity - of the husband and the wife resolved to escape from the miseries of a tyrant-ridden world by suicide - which to them was less criminal than it is to us - and the wife first of all struck the dagger into her own heart, and drawing it out, embrued with her own blood, hands it to her husband, with the dying words ‘Paetus! it is not painful.’ The sharp edge that strikes into your heart, brethren, has cut into Christ’s first, and the blade tinctured with His blood inflicts only healing wounds upon us. He is our priest because He has gone before us on every road of sorrow and loss, and is ready to sustain us when it comes to our turn to tread it.

And so turn for a moment to the other conception that is here, viz., that the same solemn scene shows us Christ as being, not only our companion in sorrow and supplication, but our pattern of submissive reverence. The language of my text needs just one word of explanation in order to show where this lies. You observe it reads, ‘And was heard in that He feared.’ Now, these last words, ‘in that He feared,’ have always received two varying expositions, and, I suppose, always will receive them. The text fairly allows one or the other. They may either mean, ‘He was heard or delivered from the thing He dreaded’ - which you know is not true - or they may mean that He was heard by reason of His reverence and submission, or, if we may use such a word - a word that is not Scriptural and very modern - was heard because of His piety. And I suppose the latter was distinctly the meaning in the writer’s mind. Christ’s prayer was, ‘If it be possible,’ and His second prayer was, ‘If this cup may not pass from Me Thy will be done.’ He felt the reluctance of the flesh to enter upon the path of suffering, the perfectly natural human shrinking from all that lay before Him. But that shrinking never made His purpose falter, nor made Him lose His son-like dependence upon the Father’s will and submission to the Father’s will. And so there come out of that, large lessons that I can only just touch for a moment.

And the first of them is this: let us learn and be thankful for the teaching, that resignation, submission to all the burdens and pains and struggles and sorrows which life brings to us, does not demand the suppression of the natural emotions and affections of the flesh. Christ recoiled from the cup, but Christ's submission was perfect. And so for us there are two ways. Inclination and duty will often draw us two different ways. Tastes and weaknesses will often suggest one thing, and the high sense of the path we ought to travel upon will suggest another. But the inclination must never be allowed to mount up into the region of the will and to make our purpose falter, or make us abandon that which we feel will be the rough path-Then there will be no sin in the fact that the flesh shrinks, as shrink it must, from the thing which duty demands we should do. Christ, the example of a perfect resignation, is an example of a will that mastered flesh. That is full of encouragement and strength to us in our time of need and conflict.

And then there is the other side of the same thought Not only does there often come into our life the struggle of duty and inclination, but there comes into our life sometimes the other straggle between submission and sorrow. In like manner there is no sin in the tear, there is no sin in the strong crying. It is meet that when His hand is laid heavy upon my heart, my heart should feel the pressure; it is meet that I should take into my consciousness and into my feeling the pain; and then it is meet that if I cannot do anything more - and I don't think we can - I should at least try through my tears to say, 'Not my will, but Thine'; and if I cannot do anything more, at least, 'I was dumb, I opened not my mouth because Thou didst it.'

And the last point I touch upon is this, that according to the teaching of this commentary upon that solemn scene, our Lord in it sets before us the lesson of what the true answer to prayer is. 'He prayed unto Him that was able to save Him from death,' and says my text: 'He was heard.' Was He? How was He heard? He was heard in this. There appeared unto Him an angel from heaven strengthening Him. He was heard in this because His prayer was not 'Let this cup pass,' but His prayer was, 'Thy will be done,' and God's will was done.

And so there comes out the true heart of all true prayer, 'Thy will be done.' And the true answer that We get is, not the lifting away of the burden, but the breathing into our hearts strength to bear it, so that it ceases to be a burden. Let us make our prayers not petulant wishes to get our own way, but lowly efforts to enter into God’s way and make His will ours, so shall come to us peace and strength, and a power adequate to Our need. The cup will be sweetened, and our lips made willing to drink it. Christ was heard, and Christ was crucified.

Learn the lesson that if, in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, we make. our requests known unto God, whatsoever other answer may be sent, or not sent, the real and highest answer will surely’ be sent, and the peace of God, which passeth understanding, shall keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

12)Hebrews 6:9

Hebrews

THE QUEEN AND THE VIRGINS THAT FOLLOW HER

Heb. 6:9.

THE writer has been describing, in very stern and solemn words, the fate of apostates, and illustrating it by the awful metaphor of’ the earth which…’beareth thorns and briars,’ and which is, therefore, ‘rejected, and is nigh unto cursing, whose end is to be burned.’ Then he softens, and knowing that rebukes are never so pointed as when the arrow is feathered by love, he changes his voice. ‘But, beloved’ - they needed to be assured that all the thundering and lightning did not mean anger, but affection - ‘we are persuaded better things of you, and those things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak.’ Wherever, then, salvation is, certain other things will also be.

Now, of course, it is clear that the word salvation is not here used to mean the ultimate, complete deliverance from all evil of sorrow or sin, and the ultimate, complete endowment with all good of joy and holiness, but for that earlier stage of itself - which unfortunately, too often is supposed to be all that is needed, and to be sure to last, if once possessed, whether diligently tended or left neglected - the initial gifts which are received by a convert in the very beginning of his Christian career, viz., the assurance of divine forgiveness, and the establishment of a new relation between him and God. It is that initial and incomplete salvation of which the writer is here thinking. And, he says, it does not come alone. Like a planet set in the heavens, with moons that circle round it; like a diamond set in a cluster of precious stones; like some queen with her train of attendants, when that incipient salvation comes into a soul, it comes companioned by other blessings that are its natural and necessary attendants and accompaniments. And what are these? The whole context is full of instruction as to what they are. We can gather them all up into the one metaphor fruitfulness; or to put away the metaphor, we can gather them all up into the one phrase, 'a holy life.' That, or these - for the one phrase, 'a holy life,' will break up and effloresce into all manner of beautifulnesses and goodnesses - are 'the things that accompany salvation.'

It is plain that the possession of 'salvation' is sure to lead to that result. For it is something more than a judge's pardon; it is a Father's forgiveness, and even if it were nothing more than forgiveness, it would, as such, set in operation new emotions and aims in the child's heart and will. God's forgiveness does not only take away guilt, but breaks the power of sin. But surely the faintest dawn of salvation brings a new life which has affinities for all righteousness and every form of goodness, and brings the forgiven man under the influence of new motives, drawn from his blessed new experience of the 'mercies of God,' and strongly impelling him to that grateful, happy yielding of himself as a living sacrifice, from which whatsoever things are lovely and of good report are sure to spring, as naturally as rare exotics will, even in our northern cold, when the right temperature is maintained in the conservatory. The initial salvation sets us in new relations with God; it puts into us a new life, infantile and needing much care in its feebleness, no doubt, but still capable of growth to power and maturity, and even in infancy like the new-born Hercules, able to strangle the serpents. The initial salvation turns us in a new direction, changes our estimate of things to be pursued and avoided, gives new standards, new aims, new desires, new power to reach these aims, to satisfy these desires. 'If any man be in Christ' - even if he has but this moment entered, and has gone but a step or two in - 'he is a new creature; old things are passed away, all things have become new.' Simultaneous with the rapturous new assurance that God loves and forgives, come the inclination towards, and possibility of, a new life of holiness. It is for the most part an undeveloped possibility, and will need much careful tending, and much fencing off of infantile diseases, and much discipline, before it comes to a 'perfect man' after the pattern of Jesus; but the life is there, and, with fair play, will come to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. 'Salvation' never enters alone, but ever is attended by a train of fair virgins.

Now, from this thought of the primacy of salvation and the subordinate place of its certain accompaniments, important practical results follow. One of these is what we Christians need to have perpetually recalled to our minds, namely, that the way to increase our possession of the accompaniments is to increase our possession of the central blessing which they accompany, and therefore that the true course for us to pursue, if we would live that. holy life which accompanies salvation, is to seek to increase, first, our possession of those primary experiences that constitute salvation the sense of the divine favour, the consciousness of the forgiving and reconciling love of God, and to strive to increase that faith, by which a fuller tide of salvation will flow into our more widely opened hearts. Begin with that with which God begins; seek to have more of the divine salvation; that is the best way to get more of the graces that accompany it. Welcome the entrance of the queen, and her train of attendants, in all the variety of their sweet loveliness and feminine graces, will follow her. 'The things that accompany salvation' are best secured by making sure, and increasing our conscious possession of, the salvation which they accompany. To aim at possessing the graces of character which are the results of conscious enjoyment of salvation, without that enjoyment, is like the folly that would begin building a house at the rooftree. Such graces may be partially produced without 'salvation,' but they are but like artificial flowers in comparison with the sweet children of the dew and sun, and have no fragrance and no life.

But another needful lesson is that the best test and evidence of our being saved, men and women, is our manifesting in our lives these certain attendants on salvation. We should be very sceptical of the genuineness of any profession of being 'saved,' whether made by ourselves or by others, which is not manifestly accompanied by these, its inevitable consequences and attendants. The pure heart, the clean hands, the truth-speaking tongue, the loving disposition, the integrity in business, the control of one’s own dispositions and tempers and tastes and appetites, and all these other fair traits of character which are the constituents of a holy life, the manifold rays which melt into the one white light of holiness - these things are the only tokens for the world, and the principal tests for myself, of the reality of my salvation. They are not the only tests for us. Thank God, Christian men do not need to take only the indirect method of determining the genuineness of their faith and love by examining their outward lives. They can say, ‘I have felt, I know and Thou knowest, that I love Thee.’ As to others, our only way of knowing whether the watch is going, is to note whether the hands are travelling round the dial, but for ourselves, we may have direct consciousness of our emotions, being, as it were, inside the watch ease and aware of its working. Yet, since we can hoodwink ourselves about our inward state, and inspection of ourselves is always difficult, and its results apt to be biased by what we wish to find within, we have all much need to check our judgments of ourselves, especially in regard to our faith and love, which are the conditions of our possessing salvation, by the test of our actions, which we are less liable to misconstrue, and which will often tell us unwelcome, but wholesome truth.

We shall be wise if we habitually test our Christian emotion by our conduct in the rough road of daily life, and if we gravely suspect the depth and genuineness of all feeling, however sweet and lofty it seems, which does not come out into action. If our Christian experience is worth anything, it will drive the wheels of self-sacrificing duty. It takes tons of pitchblende to make a drachm of radium, and it needs much experience of the possession of salvation, and many precious and secret inward emotions in order to produce the life of self-sacrifice which is the ultimate test of the worth of our religion. If these certain accompaniments are wanting, or are sparse and lacking in radiance in our lives, it is high time that we asked ourselves very seriously what the worth to us is of a salvation that does not produce in us ‘the things that accompany salvation.’

But the text suggests another thought to which we may now turn. It is that where these accompaniments of initial salvation are present, further salvation will follow. The whole of the context, including my text itself, goes upon the principle that whilst a holy life, or, to put it into other words, ‘good works,’ is, or are, the accompaniments of the initial salvation, they are the causes of a fuller salvation. For look what follows, and look what preceded our text. ‘The earth which drinketh in the rain’ - that is step number one and that drinking in of the rain is the initial act of faith which opens thirstily for the entrance of the initial salvation. Then follows - ‘and bringeth forth herbs’ - that is the second step, and corresponds to the holy life of which I have been speaking; and finally comes ‘receiveth a blessing from God,’ which corresponds to a fuller salvation. After the text we read: ‘God is not unrighteous to forget your work of faith and labour of love’ which implies a promise of rich reward. That is to say, if we have these accompaniments, and do our very best to make them conspicuous and continuous and more thoroughly the mainsprings of our actions, then we shall receive a fuller salvation, just because we have thus sought to appropriate and re develop the consequences in our conduct of the partial salvation with which we were started at first. Salvation is a great word which in Scripture is presented in many aspects. Sometimes it is spoken of as a thing in the past experience of the Christian; sometimes it is spoken of as a thing which he is progressively realising throughout his life: ‘The Lord added to the Church daily such as were being saved’; sometimes it is spoken of as an experience which is reserved for the future, ‘receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls,’ in that life beyond.

Now, this experience or possession, call it which you like, or state of spirit and heart, which has its roots in the past, and is being developed all through the Christian life, and is to be perfected in the future world, has for one chief cause of its progressive increase in our own consciousness, a holy life. And if we, as good ground, are trying ‘to bring forth herbs meet for Him by whom it is dressed,’ we shall be like the earth softened by the rain, and smiling with harvest, on which God smiles down in the sunshine of His approval, and which He visits with His benediction. We shall possess a fuller salvation. A firmer grasp of the great truths which bring salvation when received, and of all their consequences of peace and joy, and spiritual elevation and calm, a closer union with Jesus, a larger endowment of the Spirit, will ‘follow our faithful attempts to ‘perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord,’ and so to possess, and to present, more of ‘the things that accompany salvation.’ Good works are a cause of a fuller salvation.

The most fruitful Christians need to be warned against possible barrenness and apostasy.

‘We are persuaded better things of you, beloved’ - but yet, though persuaded, the writer felt that he must ‘thus speak.’ For we never get beyond the risk of fruitlessness. We never get beyond the need of effort to resist the tendencies that draw us away. We never get beyond the need of warnings. It is always safe for us to look at the field that is bristling ‘with briars and thorns, and is nigh unto cursing.’ Therefore the warning note is sounded, and it is sounded, thank God! in order that what it points to as possible, may never be actual for any of us.

We all need warning, but those of us who, like myself, are set to give it sometimes, have to remember that it loses all its force unless it is manifestly the warning of love. ‘Beloved I persuaded,’ as we are, ‘of better things of you,’ it yet is our solemn duty thus to speak, that thus it may never be with any of you. And it is the less likely to be the case with any of us that we shall bear but ‘thorns and briars,’ the more we remember that it is possible for us all, and will be possible until the very end.

13)Hebrews 6:19

Hebrews

THE ANCHOR OF THE SOUL

Heb. 6:19

THERE is something very remarkable in the prominence given by Christianity to hope as an element in the perfect character. The New Testament is, one may say, full of exhortations to 'hope perfectly.' It is regarded as one of the three virtues which sum up all Christian goodness. Nay! In one place the Apostle Paul lays upon it the whole weight of our salvation, for he says 'we are saved by hope.'

Now this great prominence given to the exercise of this faculty seems to correspond with the will of God as expressed in our nature, for man is a creature obstinate in his hope. But it seems to be strangely at variance with the value of hope as attested by experience; for who does not know that most hopes are false; and that whether they be disappointed or fulfilled, they betray.

The world is full of complaints of the fallacies of hope. Poets and moralists are sure of a response when they touch that chord; and it sometimes seems to us as if elaborate provision were made in our nature for deluding us into activity and tempting us along toll-some paths, to gather a handful of mist at the end, and then to say in our bitterness, 'All is vanity and vexation of spirit.'

But yet 'God never sends mouths but He sends meat to feed them'; and if there be in a man a faculty so obstinate and strong as this, there must be somewhere a reality which it can grasp; and, grasping, can be freed from all its miseries and mistakes.

So my text tells us where that is, and tells us further how ennobling and steady an ally of all great and blessed things hope is in a man, when it is rightly fixed on the right objects. The metaphor of my text is unique in Scripture, though it be common in other places. Only here do we find the familiar thought that hope is 'the anchor of the soul.' I take that metaphor as the guiding thought in my words now; and ask you to consider the anchor; the anchorage, or holding-ground; the cable; and the steadfastness of the ship so anchored in all storms.

I. Consider, then, first, the force of this metaphor of the anchor.

Now it seems to me that the very figure requires us to suppose that hope here means, not the emotion but the object on which it is fixed. The same interpretation is necessarily suggested by the context; for the previous verse speaks about ‘a hope set before us,’ and about our ‘laying hold upon it.’ So that here, at all events, the hope is something external to ourselves which is proposed to us, and which we can grasp.

An anchor is outside the ship; and that which steadies us cannot be a part of ourselves, must be something external to us, on which our fluttering and mutable emotions can repose and be still.

Nor is it at all unusual, either in Scripture or in common speech, that we should employ the name of the emotion to express the object which the emotion grasps. For instance, people say to one another, ‘my love,’ ‘my comfort,’ and we talk about God as ‘our fear’ and ‘our dread,’ and Scripture speaks of Christ as our hope; in all which phrases the person who excites the emotion is described by the name of the emotion.

And so, I take it, is the ease here. The hope which we possess, and which, outside of us, we being fastened to it, makes us steadfast and secure, is, at bottom, Jesus Christ Himself. This hope, says my text, ‘has entered within the veil.’ Well l read on. ‘Whither the Forerunner is for us entered.’ When He passed within the veil our hope passed within it, and went with Him. For He is not only the foundation, but He is the substance of our hope. He is the thing hoped for, and in the deepest interpretation, all our future is the personal Christ; and every blessed anticipation that can fill a human heart with gladness is summed up in this, ‘that I may be found in Him,’ and made partaker of that Saviour whom to possess is fruition and eternal life. He is the anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, and entering within the veil Notice further the characteristics ascribed to this anchor and hope. ‘Sure and steadfast.’ These two words express diverse qualities of the hope. A sure anchor is one which does not drag. It is not too light for the ship that rides by it. It has found s firm ground, its flukes are all right, and it belch. It does not deceive. The ship’s crew may trust to it. An anchor which is steadfast, or, as the original word might be rendered, ‘firm,’ is one that will not break, but is strong in its own substance, made of good tough iron, so that there is no fear of the shank snapping, whatever strain may be put upon it. We may then say, generally, that this object of the Christian hope is free from all the weaknesses. and imperfections which cleave and cling to other objects. Take just a sentence or two in illustration of that.

Our earthly hopes, what are they? Only She products of our own imaginations, or the reflection of our wishes projected on the dim screen of the future, with no more substance in them than the shadows from a magic-lantern thrown on to the sheet. Or even if they be the reasonable result of calculation, they still have- no existence. But there, says my text, is a hope which is a real thing, and has a present existence. It has ‘entered into that within the veil,’ as the literal anchor is dropped through the depths of the sea and lost to sight, so by an incongruous and yet forcible blending of metaphor the text tells us this anchor is carried aloft, into the azure depths, and there lost to sight, is fastened as it were to the very throne of God. All the universe being the temple, and a thin veil being stretched between us in the outer court and that Holy of Holies, the Christ, who is our hope, has passed with.. in the veil, and is verily there, separated from us and yet close by. A veil is but a thin partition. We can hear the voices on the other side of a woollen curtain, we can catch the gleams of light through it, A touch will draw it aside. So we float in the midst of that solemn unseen present which is to us the future; and all the brightest and grandest objects of the Christian man’s anticipation have a present existence and are real; just on the other side of that thin curtain that parts us from them. A touch, and it rattles on its rings and we stand in the blaze of the fruition This hope is not an imagination, not the projection of wishes upon the dim curtain of the future, not the child of calculation, but a present reality within arm’s length of us all.

Then, again, earthly hopes are less than certainties. This one is a certainty, We may make the future as sure as the past. Hope may be as veracious as memory. It is not so with our ordinary anticipations; we all feel that when we say we hope we are admitting an element of dread as well as of hope into our anticipations. And so, however hope may smile there is always a touch of terror in her sweet eyes. As one of our great poets has described her, she carries a jewelled cup of richest wine, but coiled at the bottom of it a sleeping serpent. Possibilities that it may be otherwise are an integral part of all the uncertain hopes of earth, make it a torture often, and always dim its lustre and its gladness.

But certitude is a characteristic of the Christian hope. It is ‘sure,’ as my text has it, and we can say, not, ‘I trust it may,’ but, ‘I know it will.’ Is it not something to be able to look forward into the dim unknown, and to feel that whilst much there is mercifully hidden, far more and that the best in the future is manifest as history, and certain as the fixed past. To the Christian resting upon Christ it is no presumption, but the simplest duty to feel ‘tomorrow,’ and the to-morrow after that, and all the to-morrows, including the unsetting day of eternity ‘shall be as yesterday, and much more abundant.’

Then again, earthly hopes, whether disappointed or fulfilled, betray, or rather, I might say, are disappointed even whilst they are fulfilled. We paint the future as if it contained but the one thing on which for the time being we have set our hopes. And we do not remember that when we reach the accomplishment of the expectation, life will have a great many other things in it than the fulfilled expectation, and all the old commonplaces, and annoyances, and imperfections will still be there. So ever, the thing chased is more than the thing won. Like some bit of sea-weed, as long as it lies there in the ocean moving its filmy fronds to the wave, it expands and is lovely. Grasp it, and draw it out, and it is a bit of ugly slime in your hand. So possession never realises the dream of hope.

But here, the half hath not been told us. ‘Eye hath not seen it,.., neither hath entered into the heart of man,’ in his loftiest anticipations, the transcendent realisation of the things that God hath prepared for them that love Him.

II. And now turn to the other points in this text.

Look at the anchorage, or holding-ground, that is to say, the reasons or the grounds on which these great objects become objects of hope to us.

Why is it that I may without presumption, and that I must, unless I would fall beneath my obligations, expect to be for ever like Jesus Christ? Why, here is the anchorage. ‘God willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation.’ Or, to put it into other words, God’s solemn utterance of His will guaranteed to us by God’s putting all the majesty of His own being into pawn for the fulfilment of His promise is the ground on which we rest. There is the anchorage. Nothing can touch that. If we cleave to Jesus Christ we have anchored ourselves in the fastnesses of the divine nature. We have struck the roots of our hopes deep into the very being of God; and all that is majestic, all that is omnipotent, all that is tender, all that is immutable in Him goes to confirm to my poor heart the astounding expectation that whatsoever Christ is I shall become, and that wheresoever Christ is there will also His servant be. Oh! how this rock- foundation on which we may build makes all the other foundations upon which men rest their ruinable hopes seem wretched and transitory. Cursed be the man - and he is cursed, that is, wretched and miserable in the act - ‘Cursed be the man that maketh flesh his arm, and whose hope is in man. Blessed be the man whose hope is in the Lord his God, and whose trust the Lord is.’ This anchorage is safe in all weathers, and none that ever sheltered there have been driven on the iron-bound leeward rocks.

III. Again, still keeping the metaphor of the text, notice the cable.

The anchor is of no use unless it be fastened by a strong hawser or chain. All the faithfulness of the divine nature, and all the grandeur of the promises which Christ gives and is, are naught to us unless we attach ourselves to them by setting our hopes there. I have been speaking to you about the vanity, the disappointing misery of earthly hope. Those show that the obstinate faculty which, in spite of them all, persists is as plainly meant to be attached to Jesus Christ as the great iron chain that you see lying on the deck is obviously intended to be the anchor-chain. You are able to anticipate the future, and God has given you the ability in order that it may grapple you to your Lord and Master, by whom alone you will be lords of the future, and it be filled with peace. To do that, to attach yourselves thus to Jesus Christ by a persistent and triumphant hope is not an easy thing.

It means, first of all, detachment. You must get away from these lower and earthly anticipations of the paltry and immediate future on this side the grave, which fill so much of your onward gaze, if your eye is to see clearly that nobler future further ahead which is its legitimate and its only object. The habit of Christian hope needs diligent cultivation and strenuous effort. I think that there are few things that Christian men and women need to he exhorted to more earnestly than this that they should not waste upon the mean anticipations of to-morrow that wonderful faculty by which they may knit themselves to the most glorious and blessed realities in the remotest future. The wings of hope were given, not that we might flutter near the earth, but that we might rise to God. The clear eye that looks before was given us not that we should limit our vision to the near, But that we might send it forward to the most distant horizon. Do not let yourselves be so absorbed by anticipations of what you are going to do and where you are going to be tomorrow that you have no leisure to think of what you are going to do and where you are going to be through the eternities. We run our eyes along the low levels of earth, and we too seldom lift them to the great white summits that ring round the little plain on which our day is passed. Christian men and women, you are saved by hope. Live in the continual contemplation of that blessed future, and Him who makes it; and, according to the old exhortation sursum corda, ‘up with your hearts’ and your hopes, and fasten them to the anchor of your souls which hath entered within the veil.

IV. And now, lastly, a word as to the steadfastness of the ship that rides in any storm by thin anchor.

Hope is not usually a masculine faculty, nor one that on the whole is the ally of the stronger and nobler virtues. It does no doubt impel to action, and he that has ceased to hope has ceased to strive; but also, and quite as often, its effect is to disturb and flutter rather than to steady, to make impatient, to unfit for persistent application and toilsome service, to set the blood dancing through the veins, so that the hand can scarcely be kept steady. But this ‘Christian hope, if we rightly take the measure of it, and understand it, is an ally of all great, steadfast, calm, patient virtue.

For one thing it will put all the present in its true subordination. Just as when a man’s eye is fixed upon the reddening dawn of the morning sky, all the trees and objects between him and it are toned down into one uniform blackness, so when we have that great light shining beyond the earthly horizon all the colours of the objects between us and it will be less garish, and they will dwindle into comparative insignificance. It is not so hard to bear sorrow when the light of a great hope makes the endurance but for a little moment, and the exceeding and eternal weight of glory more conspicuous than it. It is not so hard to do duty when a great hope makes action for the time sublime, and makes difficulties dwindle and hardships sweet. It is not so hard to resist temptations when temptations have had their dazzling light dimmed by the greater brightness of the hope revealed. He that has anchored himself to Christ may be calm in sorrow and triumphant over temptation. Whatsoever winds may blow he may ride safe there, and however frowning may be the iron-bound rocks a cable’s length off, if he has cast out his anchor at the stern he may quietly wait for the day in the assurance that no shipwreck is possible for him. Your hope will be the ally of all, dignity, patience, victory, will steady the soul and make it participant, in some measure, of its own steadfastness and security.

And just as sailors sometimes send the anchor ahead that they may have a fixed point towards which to warp themselves, so, if our anchor is that Christ who has passed into the heavens, He will draw us, in due time, whither He Himself has gone. A calm steady hope fixed upon the enthroned Christ, our fore-runner, and the pattern of what we shall he if we trust Him, will make us steadfast and victorious in all our sorrows, Burdens, changes, and temptations. Without it life is indeed as ‘futile then as frail,’ and our only ‘hope of answer’ to its torturing problems, or of ‘redress’ of its manifold pains is ‘Behind the veil, behind the veil.’ Such a hope knits us to the true stay of our souls, and is a cord not easily Broken. As for men’s hopes fixed on earth, they are fragile and filmy as the spiders’ webs, which, in early autumn mornings, twinkle dewy in every copse, and are gone by midday.

My brother! you have this great faculty; what do you do with it, and where do you fix it? You have a personal concern in that future, whether you think about it and like it or not. What is your hope for that future, and what is the ground of your hope? Let me beseech you, fasten the little vessel of your life to that great anchor, Christ, who has died, and who lives for you. And then, though the thread between you and Him be but slender and fragile, it will not be a dead cable, but a living nerve, along which His own steadfast life will pour, making you steadfast like Himself, and at last fulfilling and transcending your highest hopes in eternal fruition of His own blessedness.

14)Hebrews 7:2

Hebrews

RIGHTEOUSNESS FIRST, PEACE SECOND

Heb. 7:2.

THAT mysterious, shadowy figure of the priest-king Melchizedec has been singularly illuminated and solidi-fled by recent discovery. You can see now in Berlin and London, letters written fourteen centuries before Christ, by a king of Jerusalem who describes himself almost in the very words which the Old and the New Testaments apply to Melchizedec. He says that he is a royal priest or a priestly king. He says that he derived his royalty neither from father nor mother, nor by genealogical descent; and he says that he owes it to 'the great King' - possibly an equivalent to the 'Most High God'; of whom Melchizedec is in Scripture said to have been a worshipper. The name of the letter-writer is not Melehizedec, but the fact that his royalty was not hereditary, like a Pharaoh's, may explain how each monarch bore his own personal appellation, and not one common to successive members of a dynasty.

And are not the names of King and city significant - 'King of righteousness... King of peace'? It sounds like a yearning, springing up untimely in those dim ages of oppression and strife, for a royalty founded on something better than the sword, and wielded for something higher than personal ambition. Such an ideal at such a date is like a summer day that has wandered into a cold March.

But the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews imposes a meaning not only on the titles, but on their sequence, of course therein he is letting a sanctified imagination play round a fact, and giving to it a meaning which is not in it. None the less in that emphatic expression ‘first King of righteousness, and after that also King of peace,’ he penetrated very deeply into the heart of Christ’s reign and work, and echoed a sentiment that runs all through Scripture. Hearken to one psalmist: ‘The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills, by righteousness.’ Hearken to another: ‘Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.’ Hearken to a prophet: ‘The work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance for ever.’ Hearken to the most Hebraistic of New Testament writers: ‘The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace.’ Hearken to the central teaching of the most Evangelical, if I may so say, of New Testament writers: ‘Being justified’ - made righteous ‘by faith, we have peace with God.’ So the ‘first’ and the ‘after that’ reveal to us the very depth of Christ’s work, and carry in them not only important teaching as to that, but equally important directions and guides for Christian conduct; and it is to this aspect of my text, and this only, that I ask your attention now.

The order which we have here, ‘first of all King of righteousness, and after that King of peace,’ is the order which I shall try to illustrate in two ways. First, in reference to Christ’s work on the individual soul; second, in reference to Christ’s work on society and communities.

First, then, here we have laid down the sequence in which

I. Christ comes with His operations and His gifts to the soul that clings to Him.

First ‘righteousness... after... peace.’ Now I need not do more than in a sentence remind you of the basis upon which the thoughts in the text, and all right understanding of Christ’s work on an individual, repose, and that is that without righteousness no man can either be at peace with God or with himself. Not with God - for however shallow experience may talk effusively and gushingly about a God who is all mercy, and who loves and takes to His heart the sinner and the saint alike; such a God drapes the universe in darkness, and if there are no moral distinctions which determine whether a man is in amity or hostility with God, then ‘the pillared firmament itself is rottenness, and earth’s base built on stubble.’ No, no, brethren; it sounds very tender and kindly; at bottom it is the cruellest thing that you can say, to say that without righteousness a man can please God. The sun is in the heavens, and whether there be mist and fog down here, or the bluest of summer skies, the sun is above. But its rays coming through the ethereal blue are warmth and blessedness, and its rays cut off by mists are dim, and itself turned into a lurid ball of fire. It cannot be - and thank God that it cannot - that it is all the same to Him whether a man is saint or sinner.

I do not need to remind you that in like manner righteousness must underlie peace with oneself. For it is true to-day, as it was long generations ago, according to the prophet, that 'the wicked is like the troubled sea which cannot rest, whose waters throw up mire and dirt,' and, on the other hand, the promise is true still and for ever; 'O that thou hadst hearkened unto me, then had thy peace been like a river,' because 'thy righteousness' will be 'like the waves of the sea.' For ever and ever it stands true that for peace with God, and for a quiet heart, and a nature at harmony with itself, there must be righteousness.

Well, then, Jesus Christ comes to bring to a man the righteousness without which there can he no peace in his life. And that is the meaning of the great word which, having been taken for a shibboleth and 'test of a falling or a standing Church,' has been far too much ossified into a mere theological dogma, and has been weakened and misunderstood in the process. Justification by faith; that is the battle-cry of Protestant communities. And what does it mean? That I shall be treated as righteous, not being sop That I shall be forgiven and acquitted? Yes, thank God! But is that all that it means, or is that the main thing that it means? No, thank God! for the very heart of the Christian doctrine of righteousness is this, that if, and as soon as, a man puts his trembling trust in Jesus Christ as his Saviour, then he receives not merely pardon, which is the uninterrupted flow of the divine love in spite of his sin, nor an accrediting him with a righteousness which does not belong to him, but an imparting to him of that new life, a spark from the central fire of Christ's life, 'the new man which, after God, is created in righteousness and true holiness.' Do not suppose that the great message of the gospel is merely forgiveness. Do not suppose that its blessed gift is only that a man is acquitted because Christ has died. All that is true.

But there is something more than that which is the basis of that other, and that is that by faith in Jesus Christ, I am so knit to Him - ‘He that is joined to the Lord’ being ‘one spirit’ - as that there passes into me, by His gift, a life which is created after His life, and is in fact cognate and kindred with it.

No doubt it is a mere germ, no doubt it needs cultivating, development, carefully guarding against gnawing insects and blighting frosts. But the seed which is implanted, though it be less than the least of all seeds, has in itself the promise and the potency of triumphant growth, when it will tower above all the poisonous shrubs and undergrowth of the forest, and have the light of heaven resting on its aspiring top. Here is the great blessing and distinctive characteristic of Christian morality, that it does not say to a man: ‘First aim after good deeds and so grow up into goodness,’ but it starts with a gift, and says,’ Work from that, and by the power of that. "I make the tree good,"‘ says Jesus to us, ‘do you see to it that the fruit is good.’ No doubt the vegetable metaphor is inadequate, because the leaf is wooed from out the bud, and ‘grows green and broad, and takes no care,’ but that effortless growth is not how righteousness increases in men. The germ is given them, and they have to cultivate it. First, there must be the impartation of righteousness, and then there comes to the man’s heart the sweet assurance of peace with God, and he has within him ‘a conscience like a sea at rest, imaginations calm and fair.’ ‘First, King of righteousness; after that, King of peace.’

Now if we keep firm hold of this sequence, a great many of the popular objections to the gospel, as if it were merely a means of forgiveness and escape, and a system of reconciliation by some kind of forensic expedient, fall away of themselves, and a great many of the popular blunders that Christian people make fall away too. For there are good folks to whom the great truth that ‘God is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing to them their trespasses,’ and welcoming them to all the fulness of an overflowing love, has obscured the other truth that there is no peace for a Christian man continuous through his life, unless equally continuous through his life are his efforts to work out in acts the new nature which he has received.

Thus my text, by the order in which it places righteousness and peace, not only illuminates the work of Christ upon each individual soul, but comes with a very weighty and clear direction to Christian people as to their course of conduct. Are you looking for comfort? Is what you want to get out of your religion mainly the assurance that you will not go to hell? Is the great blessing that Christ brings to you only the blessing of pardon, which you degrade to mean immunity from punishment? You are wrong. ‘First of all, King of righteousness’ - let that which is first of all in His gifts be first of all in your efforts too; and do not seek so much for comfort as for grace to know and to do your duty, and strength to ‘cast off the unfruitful works of darkness,’ and to ‘put on the armour of light.’ The order which is laid down in my text was laid down with a different application, by our Lord Himself, and ought to be in both forms the motto for all Christian people.

‘Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things’ - comfort, sense of reconciliation, assurance of forgiveness, joyful hope, and the like, as well as needful material good - ‘shall be added unto you.’

And now, secondly, my text gives the order of.

II. Christ’s work in the world, and of His servant’s work after Him.

Of course, our Lord’s work in the world is simply the aggregate of HIS work on individual souls. But for the sake of clearness we may consider these two aspects of it somewhat apart. In regard to this second part of my subject, I would begin, as I began in the former section, by reminding you that the only basis on which harmonious relations between men in communities, great or small, can be built, is righteousness, in the narrowest sense of the word, meaning thereby justice, equal dealing as between man and man, without partiality or class favouritism. Wherever you get an unjustly treated section or order of men, there you get the beginnings of war and strife. A social order built upon injustice, just in the measure in which it is so built, is based upon a quicksand which will suck it down, or on a volcano which will blow it to pieces. Injustice is the grit in the machine; you may oil it as much as you like with philanthropy and benevolence, but until you get the grit out, it will not work smoothly.

There is no harmony amongst men unless their association is based and bottomed upon righteousness.

Jesus Christ comes into the world to bring peace at the far end, but righteousness at the near end, and therefore strife. The herald angels sang peace upon earth. They were looking to the deepest and ultimate issues of His mission, but when He contemplated its immediate results He had to say, ‘Suppose ye that I bring peace on earth? I tell you nay, but rather division.’ He rode into Jerusalem ‘the King, meek, and having salvation,’ throned upon the beast of burden which symbolised peace. But He will come forth in the last fight, as He has been coming forth through all the ages, mounted on the white horse, with the sword girt upon His thigh in behalf of meekness and righteousness and truth. Christ, and Christianity when it keeps close to Christ, is a ferment, not an emollient. The full and honest application of Christ’s teaching and principles to any society on the face of the earth at this day is bound to result in agitation and strife. There is no help for it. When a pure jet of water is discharged into a foul ditch, there will be much uprising of mud. Effervescence will always follow when Christ’s principles are applied to existing institutions. And so it comes to pass that Christian men, in the measure in which they are true to their Master, turn the world upside down. There will follow, of course, the tranquillity that does follow on righteousness; but that is far ahead, and there is many a weary mile to be trod, and many a sore struggle to be undertaken, before the kingdoms of this world become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and strife ends for ever.

Now, if this be so, then in this necessary characteristic of Christ’s operation on the world, viz., disturbance arising from the endeavour to enthrone righteousness where its opposite has ruled ‘there results very plainly important teaching as to the duties of Christ’s servants to take their full share in the fight, to be the knights of the Holy Ghost, the champions of righteousness. The Church ought to lead in the van of all assaults on hoary wrongs or modern forms of unrighteousness in municipal, political, national life. And it is the disgrace of the Church that so largely it leaves that contest to be waged by men who make no pretence to be Christians. There is, unfortunately, a type of Christian thinking and life, of which in many respects one would speak with all sympathy and admiration, which warns the Christian Church against casting itself into this contest, in the alleged interest of a superior spirituality and a loftier conception of Evangelical truth. I believe, as heartily as any man can - and I venture to appeal to those who hear me Sunday by Sunday, and from year to year, whether it is not so - that the preaching of Jesus Christ is the cure for all the world's miseries, and the banishment of all the world's unrighteousness; but am I to be told that the endeavour to apply the person and the principles of Jesus Christ, in His life and death, to existing institutions and evils, is not preaching Christ? I believe that it is, and that the one thing that the Church wants to-day is not less of holding up the Cross and the Sacrifice, but more of pointing to the Cross and the Sacrifice as the cure of all the world's evils, and the pattern for all righteousness.

It is difficult to do, it is made difficult by our own desire to be what the prophet did not think a very reputable position, 'at ease in Zion.' It is also made difficult by the way in which, as is most natural, the world, meaning thereby godless, organised society, regards an active Church that desires to bring its practices to the test of Christ's word- Muzzled watchdogs that can neither bark nor bite are much admired by burglars. And a Church that confines itself to theory, to what it calls religion, and leaves the world to go to the devil as it likes, suits both the world and the devil. There was once a Prime Minister of England who came out of church one Sunday morning in a state of towering indignation because the clergyman had spoken about conduct. And that is exactly how the world feels about an intrusive Church that will push its finger into all social arrangements, and say about each of them, 'This must be as Christ commanded.'

Brethren! would God that all Christian men deserved the name of 'troublers of Israel.' There was once a prophet to whom the men of his day indignantly said, 'O sword of the Lord, how long will it be ere thou be quiet? Put up thyself in thy scabbard, rest and be still.' And the answer was the only possible one, 'How can it be quiet, seeing that the Lord hath appointed it?' If you and I are Christ's servants, we shall follow the sequence of His operations, and seek to establish righteousness first and then peace. The true Salem is above.

'My soul, there is a country
Afar beyond the stars.'

There 'sweet peace sits crowned with smiles.' The swords will then be wreathed with laurel and men 'shall learn war no more,' for the King has fought the great fight, 'and of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end... in righteousness and justice, from henceforth even for ever.' Let us take Him for 'the Lord our righteousness,' and we shall blessedly find that 'this Man is our peace.' Let us take arms in the Holy War which He wages, and we shall have peace in our hearts whilst the fight is sorest. Let us labour to 'be found in Him... having the righteousness which is of God by faith,' and then we shall 'be found in Him in peace, without spot, blameless.'

15)Hebrews 7:26

Hebrews

THE PRIEST WHOM WE NEED

Heb. 7:26

'IT became Him to make the Captain of our salvation perfect through sufferings.' 'In all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren.' 'Such an High Priest became us.' In these three sayings Of this Epistle the historical facts of the gospel are considered as corresponding to or in accordance and congruity with, respectively, the divine nature; Christ's character and purpose; and man's need. I have considered the two former texts in previous sermons, and now I desire to deal with this latter. It asserts that Jesus Christ, regarded as the High Priest, meets the deepest wants of every heart, and fits human necessity as the glove does the hand. He is the answer to all our questions, the satisfaction of all our wants, the bread for our hunger, the light for our darkness, the strength for our weakness, the medicine for our. sickness, the life for our death. 'Such a High Priest became us.'

But the other side is quite as true. Christianity is in full accordance with

men’s wants, Christianity is in sharp antagonism with a great deal which men suppose to be their wants. Men’s wishes, desires, readings of their necessities and conceptions of what is in accordance with the divine nature, are not to be taken without more ado as being the guides of what a revelation from God ought to be. The two characteristics of correspondence and opposition must both unite, in all that comes to us certified as being from God. There is an ‘offence of the Cross’; and Christ, for all His correspondence with the deepest necessities of human nature, and I might even say just by reason of that correspondence, will be ‘to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness.’ If a message professing to be from God had not the discord between man’s expectations and its facts, a message so like a man’s would bear upon its front the evidence that it was of man. It a message professing to be from God had not the correspondence with man’s deepest wants, a message so unlike
men would bear upon its front the evidence that it was not of God.

So then, remembering the necessary complementary thought to this of my text that ‘such a high priest became us,’ there are two or three considerations springing from the words that I desire to suggest.

I. The first of them is this - we all need a priest, and we have the priest we need in Jesus Christ.

The outstanding fact in reference to human nature in this connection is that it is a sinful nature. We have all departed from the path of rectitude and have nourished desires and tastes and purposes which do not rend us apart from God, and between us and Him do interpose a great barrier. Our consciences need a priest, or rather they say ‘Amen’ to the necessity born of our sins, that there shall stand between us and God ‘a great High Priest.’ I need not elaborate or enlarge upon this matter. The necessity of Christ’s sacerdotal character, and the adaptation of that character to men’s deepest wants, are not only to be argued about, but we have to appeal to men’s consciences, and try to waken them to an adequate and profound sense of the reality and significance of the fact of transgression. If once a man comes to feel, what is true about him, that he is in God’s sight a sinful man; to regard that fact in all its breadth, in all its consequences, in all its depth, there will not want any more arguing to make him see that a gospel which deals primarily with the fact of sin, and proclaims a priest whose great work is to offer a sacrifice, is the gospel that he needs.

In fair weather, when the summer seas are sunny and smooth, and all the winds are sleeping in their caves, the life-belts on the deck of a steamer may be thought to be unnecessary, but when she strikes on the black- toothed rocks, and all about is a hell of noise and despair, then the meaning of them is understood, When you are amongst the breakers you will need a life-buoy. When the flames are flickering round you, you will understand the use and worth of a fire-escape, and when you have learned what sort of a man you are, and what that involves in regard of your relations to God, then the mysteries which surround the thought of the high priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus Christ will be accepted as mysteries, and left where they are, and the fact will be grasped with all the tendrils of your soul as the one hope for you in life and in death.

I do not care to argue a man out of his imperfect apprehensions, if he have them, of the mission and work of Jesus Christ. But oh, dear friends! you for whose blood I am in some sense responsible, let me plead with you this one thought - you have not taken the point of view from which to judge of the gospel until you have stood in the perfect rectitude of heaven and contrasted your blackness with its stainless purity, and its solemn requirements; and have looked all round the horizon to see if anywhere there is a means by which a sinful soul can be liberated from the dragon’s sting of conscience, and from the crushing burden of guilt, and set upon a rock, emancipated and cleansed. We need a priest because we are sinful men, and sin means separation in fact and alienation in spirit, and the entail of dreadful consequences, which, as far as Nature is concerned, cannot be prevented from coming. And so sin means that if men are to be brought again into the fellowship and the family of God, it must be through One who, being a true priest, offers a real sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

The new science of comparative religion has been made by some of its adepts to bear witness unfavorably to the claims of Christianity. A far truer use of it would be this - Wherever men have worshipped, they have worshipped at an altar, there has been on it a sacrifice offered by a purged hand that symbol seal moral purity. And all these are witnesses that humanity recognises the necessity which my text Affirms has been met in Christ. Some people would say ‘Yes! and your doctrine of a Christ who is sacrifice and priest, has precisely the same origin as those altars, many smoking with sacrifices to tyrannical gods.’ But to me the relation between the faiths of the world and the gospel of Christ, in reference to this matter, is much rather this, that they proclaim a want, and that Christ brings the satisfaction of it; that they with one voice cry, ‘Oh! that I knew where I might find Him! How shall a man be just with God?’ and that the Cross of Christ answers their longings, and offers the means by which we may draw nigh to God. ‘Such a High Priest became us.’

II. We may take another consideration from these words, viz. - We need for a priest a perfect man, and we have the perfect priest whom we need, in Jesus Christ.

The writer goes on to enumerate a series of qualifies by which our Lord is constituted the priest we need. Of these five qualities which follow in my text, the three former are those to which I now refer. ‘He is holy, harmless, undefiled.’

Now I do not need to spend time in discussing the precise meaning of these words, but a remark or two about each of them may perhaps .be admissible. Taken generally, these three characteristics refer to the priest’s relation to God, to other men, and to the law of purity. ‘He is holy’; that is to say, not so much morally free from guilt as standing in a certain relation to God. The word here used for ‘holy’ has a special meaning. It is the representative of an old Testament word, which seems to mean ‘Devoted to God in love.’ And it expresses not merely the fact of consecration, but the motive and the means of that consecration, as being the result of God’s love or mercy which kindles self-surrendering love in the recipient. Such is the first qualification for a priest, that he shall be knit to God by loving devotion, and have a heart throbbing in unison with the divine heart in all its tenderness of pity and in all its nobleness and loftiness of purity.

And, besides being thus the earthly echo and representative of the whole sweetness of the divine nature, so, in the next place, the priest we need must, in relation to men, be harmless - without malice, guile, unkindness; a

Lamb of God, with neither horns to butt, nor teeth to tear, nor claws to wound, but gentle and gracious, sweet and compassionate; or, as we read in another place in this same letter, ‘a merciful High Priest in things pertaining to God.’ And the priest that we need to bridge over the gulf between us sinful and alienated men and God, must not only be one knit to God in all sympathy, and representing His purity and tenderness amongst us; nor must the priest that we need by reason of our miseries, our sorrows, our weaknesses, our bleeding wounds, our broken hearts, be only a priest filled with compassion and merciful, who can lay a gentle hand upon our sore and sensitive spirits, but the priest that we men, spattered and befouled with the mire and filth of sin, which has left deep stains upon our whole nature, need, must be one ‘undefiled,’ on whose white garments there shall be no speck; on the virgin purity of whose nature there shall be no stain; who shall stand above us, though He be one of us, and whilst ‘ it behoves Him to be made in all points like unto His brethren,’ shall yet be ‘without blemish and without spot.’

‘It behoved Him to be made like unto HIS brethren.’ The priest of the world must be like the world. My text says, ‘Yes! and He must be absolutely unlike the world.’ Now, is this not a strange thing - this is a disgression, but it may be allowed for one moment - is it not a strange thing that in these four little tracts which we call gospels, that might all be printed upon two sides of a penny newspaper, you get drawn; with such few strokes, a picture which harmonises, in a possible person, these two opposite requirements, the absolute unlikeness and the perfect likeness? Think of how difficult it would be if it was not a copy from life, to draw a figure with these two characteristics harmonised. What geniuses the men must have been that wrote the gospels, if they were not something much simpler than that, honest witnesses who told exactly what they saw! The fact that the life and death of Jesus Christ, as recorded in Scripture, present this strange combination of two opposite requirements in the most perfect harmony and beauty, is in my eyes no contemptible proof of the historical veracity of the picture which is presented to us. If the life was not lived I, for one, do not believe that it ever could have been invented.

But that, as I said, has nothing to do with my present subject. And so I pass on just to notice, in a word, how this assemblage of qualifications which, taken together, make up the idea of a perfect man, is found in Jesus Christ for a certain purpose, and a purpose beyond that which some of you, I am afraid, are accustomed to regard. Why this innocence; this God-devotedness; this blamelessness; this absence of all selfish antagonism?

Why this life, so sweet, so pure, so gentle, so running over with untainted and ungrudging compassion, so conscious of unbroken and perfect communion and sympathy with God? Why? That He might, ‘through the Eternal Spirit, offer Himself without spot unto God’; and that by His one offering He might perfect for ever all them that put their trust in Him.

Oh, brother! you do not understand the meaning of Christ’s innocence unless you see in it the condition of efficiency of His sacrifice. It is that He might be the priest of the world that He wears this fine linen clean and white, the righteousness of a pure and perfect soul.

I beseech you, then, ponder for yourselves the meaning of this admitted fact. We all acknowledge His purity. We all adore, in some sense of the word, His perfect manhood. If the one stainless and sinless man that the world has ever seen had such a life and such a death as is told in these gospels, they are no gospels, except on one supposition. But for it they are the most despairing proclamation of the old miserable fact that righteousness suffers in the world. The life of Christ, if He be the pure and perfect man that we believe Him to be, and not the perfect priest offering up a pure sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, is the most damning indictment that was ever drawn up against the blunders of a Providence that so misgoverns the world.

‘He did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.’ And, therefore, when we look upon His sufferings, in life and in death, we can only understand them and the relation of His innocence to the divine heart when we say: ‘Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him. He hath put Him to grief,’ ‘by His stripes we are healed. Such a priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled’; the sacrificial Lamb, without blemish and without spot.

III. Lastly, my text suggests that we need a priest in the heavens, and we have in Christ the heavenly priest whom we need.

The two last qualifications for the priestly office included in my text are, ‘separate from sinners; made higher than the heavens.’ Now, the ‘separation’ intended, is not, as I suppose, Christ’s moral distance from evil-doers, but has what I may call a kind of half-local signification, and is explained by the next clause. He is ‘separate from sinners’ not because He is pure and they foul, but because having offered His sacrifice He has ascended up on high.

He is ‘made higher than the heavens.’ Scripture sometimes speaks of the living Christ as at present in the heavens, and at others as having ‘passed through’ and being ‘high above all heavens’; in the former ease simply giving the more general idea of exaltation, in the latter the thought that He is lifted, in His manhood and as our priest, above the bounds of the material and visible creation, and ‘set at the right hand of the Majesty on high.’

Such a priest we need. His elevation and separation from us upon earth is essential to that great and continual work of His which we call, for want of any more definite name, His intercession. The High Priest in the heavens presents His sacrifice there for ever. The past fact of His death on the Cross for the sins of the whole world is ever present as an element determining the direction of the divine dealings with all them that put their trust in Him. That sacrifice was not once only offered upon the Cross, but is ever, in the symbolical language of Scripture, presented anew in the heavens by Him. No time avails to corrupt or weaken the efficacy of that blood; and He has offered one sacrifice for Sins for ever. Such a priest we need, to-day, presenting the sacrifice which, today, in our weakness and sinfulness, we require.

We need a priest who in the heavens bears us in His heart. As His type in the Old Testament economy entered within the veil with the blood; and when he passed within the curtain and stood before the Light of the Shekinah, had on his breast and on his shoulders, - the home of love, the seat of strength - the names of the tribes, graven on flashing stones, so our priest within the veil has your name and mine, if we love Him, close by His heart, governing the flow of His love, and written on His shoulders, and on the palms of His pierced hands, that all His strength may be granted to us.

‘Such a priest became us.’

And we need a priest separated from the world, lifted above the limitations of earth and time, wielding the powers of divinity in the hands that once were laid in blessing on the little children’s heads. And such a priest we have. We need a priest in the heavens, whose presence there makes that strange country our home; and by whose footstep, passing through the gates and on to the golden pavements, the gate is open for us, and our faltering poor feet can tread there. And such a priest we have, passed within the veil, that to-day, in aspiration and prayer; and to-morrow in reality and person, where He is, there we may be also. ‘Such a priest became us.’

We need no other; we do need .Him. Oh, friend! are you resting on that sacrifice? Have you given Tour cause into His hands to plead? Then the great High Priest will make you too His priest to offer a thank-offering, and Himself will present for ever the sacrifice that takes away your sin and brings you near to God. ‘It is Christ that died, yea I rather, that is risen again’; and whose death and resurrection alike led on to His ascension to the right hand of God, where for ever ‘He maketh intercession for us.’

16)Hebrews 8:1-2

Hebrews

THE ENTHRONED SERVANT CHRIST

Heb. 8:1-2

A LITTLE consideration will show that we have in these words two. strikingly different representations of our Lord’s heavenly state. In the one He is regarded as seated ‘on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty.’ In the other He is regarded as being, notwithstanding that session, a ‘minister of the sanctuary’; performing priestly functions there. This combination of two such opposite ideas is the very emphasis and force of the passage. The writer would have us think of the royal repose of Jesus as full of activity for us; and of His heavenly activity as consistent with deepest repose. Resting He works; working He rests. Reigning He serves; serving He reigns. So my purpose is simply to deal with these two representations, and to seek to draw from them and from their union the lessons that they teach.

I. Note, then, first, the seated Christ.

‘We have a high priest who’ - to translate a little more closely - ‘has taken His seat on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.’ ‘Majesty’ is a singular expression or periphrasis for God. It is used once again in this letter, and seems probably to have been derived by the writer from the Rabbinical usage of his times, when, as we know, a certain misplaced, and yet most natural, reverential or perhaps superstitious awe, made men unwilling to name the mighty name, and inclined rather to fall back upon other forms of speech to express it.

So the writer here, addressing Hebrews, steeped in Rabbinical thought, takes one of their own words and speaks of God as the ‘Majesty in the heavens’; emphasising the idea of sovereignty, power, illimitable magnificence. ‘At the right hand’ of this throned personal abstraction, ‘the Majesty,’ sits the Man Christ Jesus.

Now the teaching, both of this Epistle to the Hebrews and of the whole New Testament, in reference to the state of our exalted Lord, is that His manhood is elevated to this supreme dignity. The Eternal Word who was with the Father in the beginning, before all the worlds, went back to ‘the glory which He had with the Father.’ But the new thing was that there went, too, that human nature which Jesus Christ indissolubly united with divinity in the mystery of the lowliness of His earthly life. An ancient prophet foretold that ‘in the Messianic times there should spring from the cut-down stump of the royal house of Israel a sucker which, feeble at first, and in strange contrast with the venerable ruin from which it arose, should grow so swiftly, so tall and strong, that it should become an ensign for the nations of the world; and then, he adds, ‘and His resting-place shall be glory.’ There was a deeper meaning in the words, I suppose, than the prophet knew, and we shall not be chargeable with forcing New Testament ideas upon Old Testament words which are a world too narrow for them, if we say that there is at least shadowed the great thought that the lowly manhood, sprung from the humbled royal stock, shall grow up as a root out of a dry ground, without form or comeliness, and be lifted to find its rest and dwelling-place in the very central blaze of the divine glory. We have a High Priest who, in His manhood, in which He is knit to us, hath taken His seat on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.

Then, again, remember that whilst in such representations as this we have to do with realities set forth under the symbols of time and place, there is yet a profound sense in which that session of Jesus Christ at the right hand of God proclaims both the localisation of His present corporeal humanity and the ubiquity of His presence. For what is 'the right hand of God'? What is it but the manifestation of His energies, the forthputting of His power? And where is that but everywhere, where He makes Himself known? Wheresoever divine activity is manifested, there is Jesus Christ. But yet, though this be true, and though it may be difficult for us to hold the balance and mark the dividing line between symbol and reality, we are not to forget that the facts of Christ's wearing now a real though glorified body, and of His visible corporeal ascension, and the promise of a similar visible corporeal return to earth at the end of the days seem to require the belief that, above all the heavens, and filling all things, as that exalted manhood is, there is yet what we must call a place, wherein that glorified body now abides. And thus both the awful majestic idea of omnipresence, and the no less majestic idea of the present localisation in place of the glorified Christ, are taught us in the text.

And what is the deepest meaning of it all? What means that majestic session at 'the right hand of the throne'? Before that throne 'angels veil their faces.' If in action, they stand; if in adoration, they fall before Him.

Creatures bow prostrate. Who is He that, claiming and exercising a power which in a creature is blasphemy and madness, takes His seat in that awful presence? Other words of Scripture represent the same idea in a still more wonderful form when they speak of 'the throne of God and of the Lamb,' and when He Himself speaks from heaven of Himself as 'set down with My Father on His throne.'

If we translate the symbol into colder words, it means that deep repose, which, like the divine rest after creation, is not for recuperation of exhausted powers, but is the sign of an accomplished purpose and achieved task, a share in the sovereignty of heaven, and the wielding of the energies of deity - rest, royalty, and power belong now to the Man sitting at the right hand of the throne of God.

II. Note, secondly, the servant Christ.

A minister of the sanctuary; says my text. Now the word employed here for ‘minister,’ and which I have ventured variously to translate servant, means one who discharges some public official act of service either to God or man, and it is especially, though by no mean, exclusively, employed in reference to the service of a ministering priest.

The allusion in the second portion of my text is plainly enough to the ritual of the great day of atonement, on which the high priest once a year went into the holy place; and there, in the presence of God throned between the cherubim, made atonement for the sins of the people, by the offering of the blood of the sacrifice. Thus, says our writer, that throned and sovereign Man who, in token of His accomplished work, and in the participation of deity, sits hard by the throne of God, is yet ministering at one and the same time within the veil, and presenting the might of His own sacrifice.

Put away the metaphor and we just come to this, a truth which is far too little dwelt upon in this generation, that the work which Jesus Christ accomplished on the Cross, all sufficient and eternal as it was in the range and duration of its efficacy, is not all His work. The past, glorious as it is, needs to be supplemented by the present, no less wonderful and glorious, in which Jesus Christ within the veil, in manners all unknown to us, by His presence there in the power of the sacrifice that He has made, brings down upon men the blessings that flow from that sacrifice. It is not enough that the offering should be made. The deep teaching, the whole reasonableness of which it does not belong to us here and now to apprehend, but which faith will gladly grasp as a fact, though reason may not be able to answer the question of the why or how, tells us that the interceding Christ must necessarily take up the work of the suffering Christ. Dear brethren, our salvation is not so secured by the death upon the Cross as to make needless the life beside the throne. Jesus that died is the Christ ‘that is risen again, who is even at, the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.'

But, beyond that, may I remind you that my text, though not in its direct bearing, yet in its implication, suggests to us other ways in which the rest of Christ is full of activity. 'I am among you as He that serveth' is true for the heavenly glory of the exalted Lord quite as much as for the lowly humiliation of His life upon earth. And no more really did He stoop to serve when, laying aside His garments, He girded Himself with the towel, and wiped the disciples' feet, than He does to-day when, having resumed the garments of His glorious divinity, and having seated Himself in His place of authority above us, He comes forth, according to the wonderful condescension of His own parable, to serve His servants who have entered into rest, and those also who still toil. The glorified Christ is a ministering Christ. In us, on us, for us He works, in all the activities of His exalted repose, as truly and more mightily than He did when here He helped the weaknesses and healed the sicknesses, and soothed the sorrows and supplied the wants, and washed the feet, of a handful of poor men.

He has gone up on high, hut in His rest He works. He is on the throne, but in His royalty He serves. He is absent from us, but His power is with us. The world's salvation was accomplished when He cried, 'It is finished'! But 'My Father worketh hitherto, and I work,' and they who saw Him ascend into the heavens, and longingly followed the diminishing form as it moved slowly upward, with hands extended in benediction, as they turned away, when there was nothing more to be seen but the cloud, 'went everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following.'

So then, let us ever hold fast, inextricably braided together, the rest and the activity, the royalty and the service, of the glorified Son of Man.

III. And now, in the last place, let me point to one or two of the practical lessons of such thoughts as these.

They have a bearing on the three categories of past, present, future. For the past a seal, for the present a strength, for the future a prophecy.

For the past a seal. If it be true - and there are few historical facts the evidence for which is more solid or valid - that Jesus Christ really went up into the heavens, and abode there, then that is God's last and most emphatic declaration, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' The trail of light that He leaves behind Him, as He is borne onwards, falls on the Cross, and tells us that it is the centre of the world's history. For what can be greater, what can afford a firmer foundation for us sinful men to rest our confidence upon, than the death of which the recompense was that the Man who died sits on the throne of the universe? Brethren! an ascended Christ forces us to believe in an atoning Christ. No words can exaggerate, nor can any faith exalt too highly, or trust too completely, the sacrifice which led straight to that exaltation. Read the Cross by the light of the throne. Let Olivet interpret Calvary, and we shall understand what Calvary means.

Again, this double representation of my text is a strength for the present. I know of nothing that is mighty enough to draw men's desires and fix solid reasonable thought and love upon that awful future, except the belief that Christ is there. I think that the men who have most deeply realised what a solemn, and yet what a vague and impalpable thing the conception of immortal life beyond the grave is, will be most ready to admit that the thought is cold, cheerless, full of blank misgivings and of waste places, in which the speculative spirit feels itself very much a foreigner. There is but one thought that flashes warmth into the coldness, and turns the awfulness and the terror of the chilling magnificence into attractiveness and homelikeness and sweetness, and that is that Christ is there sitting at the right hand of God. Foreign lands are changed in their aspect to us when we have brothers and sisters there; and our Brother has gone whither we too, when we send our thoughts after Him, can feel that our home is, because there He is. The weariness of existence here is only perpetuated and intensified when we think of it as prolonged for ever. But with Christ in the heavens, the heavens become the home of our hearts.

In like manner, if we only lay upon our spirits as a solid reality, and keep ever clear before us, as a plain fact, the present glory of Jesus Christ and His activity for us, oh! then life becomes a different thing, sorrows lose their poison and their barb, cares become trivial, anxieties less gnawing, the weights of duty or of suffering less burdensome; and all things have a new aspect and a new aim. If you and I, dear friends, can sea the heavens opened, and Jesus on the throne, how petty, how unworthy to fix our desires, or to compel our griefs, will all the things hare below seem. We then have the true standard, and the littlenesses that swell themselves into magnitude when there is nothing to compare them with will shrink into their insignificance. Lift the mists and let the Himalayas shine out; and what then about the little molehills in the foreground, that looked so big whilst the great white mass was invisible? See Christ, and He interprets, dwindles, and yet ennobles the world and life.

Lastly, such a vision gives us a prophecy for the future. There is the measure of the possibilities of human nature. A somewhat arrogant saying affirms, 'Whatever a man has done, a man can do.' Whatever that Man is, I may be. It is possible that humanity may be received into the closest union with divinity, and it is certain that if we knit ourselves to Jesus Christ by simple faith and lowly, obedient love, whatever He is He will give to us to share. 'Even as I also overcame, and am set down with My Father on His throne,' is His own measure of what He will do for the men who are faithful and obedient to Him.

I do not say that there is no other adequate proof of immortality than the facts of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. I do not know that I should be far wrong if I ventured even on that assertion. But I do say that there is no means by which a poor sinful soul will reach the realisation of the possibilities that open to it, except faith in Jesus Christ. If we love Him, anything unreasonable and impossible is more reasonable and possible than that the Head shall be glorified and the members Left to see corruption. If I am wedded to Jesus Christ, as you all may be if you will trust your souls to Him and love Him, then God will take us and Him as one into the glory of His presence, where we may dwell with and in Christ, in indissoluble union through the ages of eternity.

My text is the answer to all doubts and fears for ourselves. It shows us what the true conception of a perfect heaven is, the perfection of rest and the perfection of service. As Christ's heaven is the fulness of repose and of activity, so shall that of His servants he. 'His servants shall serve Him ' -

there is the activity - ‘and see His face’ - there is the restful contemplation - ‘and His name shall be in their foreheads’ - there is the full participation in His character and glory.

And so, dear brethren, for the world and for ourselves, hope is duty and despair is sin. Here is the answer to the question, Can I ever enter that blessed land? Here is the answer to the question, Is the dream of perfected manhood ever to be more than a dream? ‘We see not yet all things put under Him, but we see Jesus,’ and, seeing Him, no hope is absurd, and anything but hope is falling beneath our privileges. Then, dear friends, let us look unto Him who, ‘for the joy that was set before Him, endured the Cross, despising the shame, and is now set down at the right hand of the Throne of God.’

17)Hebrews 8:5

Hebrews

THE TRUE IDEAL

Heb. 8:5

I DO not intend to deal with the original bearing of these words, nor with the use made of them by the writer of Hebrews. Primarily they refer to the directions as to the Tabernacle and its furniture, which are given at such length, and with such minuteness, in Leviticus, and are there said to have been received by Moses on Sinai. The author of this Epistle attaches an even loftier significance to them, as supporting his contention that the whole ceremonial worship, as well as the Temple and its equipment, was a copy of heavenly realities, the heavenly sanctuary and its altar and priest. I wish to take a much humbler view of the injunction, and to apply it, with permissible violence, as a maxim for conduct and the great rule for the ordering of our lives. ‘See that thou,’ in thy shop and office, and wherever thou mayst be, ‘make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount.’ A far-reaching, high-soaring commandment, not to be obeyed without much effort, and able to revolutionise the lives of most of us. There are three points in it: the pattern, its universal applicability, and the place where we get to see it.

I. The pattern.

The difference between noble and ignoble lives is very largely that the one has - and seeks, however partially and interruptedly, to follow - an ideal and the other has not. Or, to put it into plainer words, the one man regulates his life according to momentary inclinations and the obvious calls of sense, business and the like, and the other man has, far ahead and high up, a great light burning, to which he is ever striving to attain. The one has an aim to which he can only approximate, and the other largely lives from hand to mouth, as circumstances and sense, and the recurring calls of material necessities, or temptations that are put in his way every day, may dictate. And so, the one turns out a poor creature, and the other - God helping him - may turn out a saint. Which are you? Which we are depends very largely on the clearness with which we keep before us - like some great mountain summit rising above the mists, and stirring the ambition of every climber to reach the peak, where foot has never trod - the ideal, to use modern language, or to fall back upon the good old- fashioned Bible words, ‘the pattern shewed to us.’

You know that in mountain districts the mists are apt to gather their white folds round the summits, and that often for many days the dwellers in the plains have to plod along on their low levels, without a glimpse of the calm peak. And so it is with our highest ideal. Earth-born mists from the undrained swamps in our own hearts hide it too often from our eyes, and even when that is not the case, we are like many a mountaineer, who never lifts an eye to the sacred summit overhead, nor looks higher than his own fields and cattle-sheds. So it needs an effort to keep clear before us the pattern that is high above us, and to make very plain to ourselves, and very substantial in our thoughts, the unattained and untrodden heights. ‘Not in vain the distance’ should ‘beckon.’ ‘Forward, forward, let us range,’ should always be our word. ‘See that thou make all things after the pattern,’ and do not rule your lives according to whim, or fancy, or inclination, or the temptations of sense and circumstances.

To aim at the unreached is the secret of perpetual youth. No man is old as long as he aspires. It is the secret of perpetual growth. No man stagnates till he has ceased to see, or to believe in great dim possibilities for character, as yet unrealised. It is the secret of perpetual blessedness. No man can be desolate who has for his companion the unreached self that he may become. And so artist, poet, painter, all live nobler lives than they otherwise would, because they live, not so much with the commonplace realities round them, as with noble ideals, be they of melody or of beauty, or of musical words and great thoughts. There should be the same life with, and directed towards, attaining the unstrained in the moralist, and above all in the Christian.

But then, do not let us forget that we are not here in our text, as I am using it in this sermon, relegated to a pattern which takes its origin, after all, in our own thoughts and imaginations The poet's ideal, the painter's ideal, varies according to his genius. Ours has taken solidity and substance and a human form, and stands before us, and says: 'If any man serve Me, let him follow Me.' 'See that thou make all things according to the pattern,' and be thankful that we are not left to our own thoughts, or to our brethren's teachings, or to abstract ideas of the true and the beautiful and the good for our pattern and mould of life, but that we have the law embodied in a Person, and the ideal made actual, in our Brother and our Saviour. There is the joy and the blessedness of the Christian aim after Christian perfection. There is something unsubstantial, misty, shadowy, in an ideal which is embodied nowhere. It is ghost-like, and has little power to move or to attract. But for Christians the pattern is all gathered into the one sweet, heart. compelling form of Jesus, and whatever is remote and sometimes cold in the thought of an unattained aim, changes when we make it our supreme purpose to be like Jesus Christ. Our goal is no cold, solitary mountain top. It is the warm, loving heart, and companionable purity and perfectness of our Brother, and when we can, even in a measure, reach that sweet resting-place, we are wrapped in the soft atmosphere of His love.

We shall be like Him when we see Him as He is; we grow like Him here, in the measure in which we do see Him, even darkly. We reach Him most surely by loving Him, and we become like Him most surely by loving Him, for love breeds likeness, and they who live near the light are drenched with the light, and become lights in their turn.

There is another point here that I would suggest, and that is

II. The universal applicability of the pattern - 'See that thou make all things.'

Let us go back to Leviticus There you will find page after page that reads like an architect's specification. The words that I have taken as my text are given in immediate connection with the directions for making the seven-branched candlestick, which are so minute and specific and detailed, that any brass-founder in Europe could make one to-day 'after the pattern.' So many bowls, so many knops, so many branches; such and such a distance between each of them; and all the rest of it - there it is, in most prosaic minuteness. Similarly, we read how many threads and fringes, and how many bells on the high priest's robe. Verse after verse is full of these details; and then, on the back of them all, comes, 'See that thou make all things according to the pattern.' Which things are a parable - and just come to this, that the minutest pieces of daily life, the most commonplace and trivial incidents, may all be moulded after that great example, the life of Jesus Christ.

It is one of the miracles of revelation that it should be so. The life of Jesus Christ, in the fragmentary records of it in these four Gospels, although it only covered a few years, and is very imperfectly recorded, and in outward form was passed under conditions most remote from the strange complex conditions of our civilisation, yet fits as closely as a glove does to the hand, to all the necessities of our daily lives. Men and women, young men and maidens, old men and children, professional men and students, women in their houses, men of business, merchants, and they that sail the sea and they that dig in the mine; they may all find directions for everything that they have to do, in that one life.

And here is the centre and secret of it. 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone.' Therefore that which is the law for Jesus is the law for us, and the next verse goes on; 'he that loveth hie life shall lose it,' and the next verse hammers the nail farther in: 'If any man serve Me, let him follow Me.' - Take that injunction and apply it, in all the details of daily life, and you will be on the road to reproduce the pattern. But remember the ‘all things.’ It is for us, if we are Christian people, to bring the greatest principles to bear on the smallest duties, ‘Small duties?’ ‘ Great’ and ‘small’ are adjectives that ought never to be tacked on to ‘ duty.’ For all duties are of one size, and while we may speak, and often do speak, very mistakenly about things which we vulgarly consider ‘great,’ or superciliously treat as ‘small,’ the fact is that no man can tell what is a great thing, and what is a small one. For the most important crises in a man’s life have a strange knack of leaping up out of the smallest incidents; just as a whisper may start an avalanche, and so nobody can tell what are the great things and what the small ones. The tiniest pin in a machine drops out, and all the great wheels stop. The small things are the things that for the most part make up life. You can apply Christ’s example to the least of them, and there is very small chance of your applying it to the great things if you have not been in the way of applying it to the small ones. For the small things make the habits which the great ones test and require.

So ‘thorough’ is the word. ‘See that thou make all things according to the pattern.’

I remember once going up to the roof of Milan Cathedral, and finding there stowed away behind a buttress - where I suppose one man in fifty years might notice it, a little statuette, as completely chiselled, as perfectly polished, as if it had been of giant size, and set in the facade for all the people in the piazza to see. That is the sort of way in which Christian men should carve out their lives. Finish off the unseen bits perfectly, and then you may be quite sure that the seen bits will take care of themselves. ‘See that thou make all things’ - and begin with the small ones - ‘according to the pattern.’
Lastly,

III. Where we are to see the pattern. - ‘Shewed to thee in the mount.’

Ay, that is where we have to go if we are to see it. The difference between Christian men’s convictions of duty depends largely on the difference in the distance that they have climbed up the hill. The higher you go, the better you see the He of the land. The higher you go, the purer and more wholesome the atmosphere. And many a thing which a Christian man on the low levels thought to be perfectly in accordance with ‘the pattern,’ when he goes up a little higher, he finds to be hopelessly at variance with it. It is of no use to lay down a multitude of minute, red-tape regulations as to what Christian morality requires from people in given circumstances. Go up the hill, and you will see for yourselves.

Our elevation determines our range of vision. And the nearer, and the closer, and the deeper is our habitual fellowship with God in Christ, the more lofty will be our conceptions of what we ought to be and do. The reason for inconsistent lives is imperfect communion, mad the higher we go on the mountain of vision, the dearer will be our vision. On the other hand, whilst we see ‘the pattern’ in the mount, we have to come down into the valley to ‘make’ the ‘things.’ The clay and the potter’s wheels are down in Hinnom, and the mountain top is above. You have to carry your pattern-book down, and set to work with it before you. Therefore, whilst the way to see the pattern is to climb, the way to copy it is to descend. And having faithfully copied what you saw on the Mount of Vision, you will see more the next time you go back; for ‘to him that hath shall be given.’

18)Hebrews 8:10

Hebrews

THE ARTICLES OF THE NEW COVENANT: GOD’S WELTING ON THE HEART

Heb. 8:10

WE can scarcely estimate the shock to a primitive Hebrew Christian when he discovered that Judaism was to fade away. Such an earthquake might seem to leave nothing standing. Now, the great object of this Epistle is to insist on that truth, and to calm the early Hebrew Christians under it, by showing them that the disappearance of the older system left them no poorer but infinitely richer, inasmuch as all that was in it was more perfectly in Christ’s gospel. The writer has accordingly been giving his strength to showing that, all along the line, Christianity is the perfecting of

Judaism, in its Founder, in its priesthood, in its ceremonies, in its Sabbath. Here he touches the great central thought of the covenant between God and man, and he fall back upon the strange words of one of the old prophets. Jeremiah had declared as emphatically as he, the writer, has been declaring, that the ancient system was to melt away and be absorbed in a new covenant between God and man. Is there any other instance of a religion which, on the one side, proclaims its own eternal duration - 'the Word of the Lord endureth for ever' - and on the other side declares that it is to be abrogated, antiquated, and done away? The writer of the Epistle had learned from sacreder lips than Jeremiah's the same lesson, for the Master said at the most solemn hour of His career, 'This is the blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.'

These articles of the New Covenant go very deep into the essence of Christianity, and may well be thought. fully pondered by us all, if we wish to know what the specific differences between the ultimate revelation in Jesus Christ, and all other systems are. The words I have read for my text are the first of these articles.

I. Let us try to ascertain what exactly is the meaning of this great promise.

Now it seems to me that the two clauses which I have read for my text are not precisely parallel, but parallel with a difference. I take it, that 'mind' here means very much what we make it mean in our popular phraseology, a kind of synonym for the understanding, or the intellectual part of a man's nature; and that 'heart,' on the other hand, means something a little wider than it does in our popular phraseology, and indicates not only the affections, but the centre of personality in the human will, as well as the seat of love. So these two clauses will mean, you see, if we carry that distinction with us, two things - the clear perception of the will of God, and the coincidence of that will with our inclinations and desires.' In men's natural consciences, there is the law written on their minds, but alas! we all know that there is an awful chasm between perception and inclination, and that it is one thing to know our duty, and quite another to wish to do it. So the heart of this great promise of my text is that these two things shall coincide in a Christian man, shall cover precisely the same ground; as two of Euclid’s triangles having the same angles will, if laid upon each other, coincide line for line and angle for angle. Thus, says this great promise, it is possible - and, if we observe the conditions, it will be actual in us - that knowledge and will shall cover absolutely and exactly the same ground. Inclination will be duty, and duty will be inclination and delight. Nothing short of such a thought lies here.

And how is that wonderful change upon men to be accomplished? ‘I will put, I will write.’ Only He can do it. We all know, by our own experience, the schism that gapes between the two things. Every man in the world knows a vast deal more of duty than any man in the world does. The worst of us has a standard that rebukes his evil, and the best of us has a standard that transcends his goodness, and, alas! often transcends his inclination.

But the gospel of our Lord and Saviour comes armed with sufficient power to make this miracle an actuality for us all.

For it comes, does it not, to substitute for all other motives to obedience, the one motive of love? They but half understand the gospel who dwell upon its sanctions of reward and punishment, and would seek to frighten men into goodness by brandishing the whip of law before them, and uncovering the lid that shuts in the smoke of a hell And they misinterpret it almost as much, if there be any such, who find the chief motive for Christian obedience in the glories of the heavenly state. These are subordinate and legitimate in their secondary place, but the gospel appeals to men, not merely nor chiefly on the ground of self-interest, but it comes to them with the one appeal, ‘If ye love Me, keep My commandments.’ That is how the law is written on the heart. Wherever there is love, there is a supreme delight in divining and in satisfying the wish and will of the beloved. His lightest word is law to the loving heart; his looks are spells and commandments. And if it is so in regard of our poor, imperfect, human loves, how infinitely more so is it where the heart is touched by true affection for His own infinite love’s sake, of that ‘Jesus’ who is ‘most desired!’ The secret of Christian morality is that duty is changed into choice, because love is made the motive for obedience.

And, still further, let me remind you how this great promise is fulfilled in the Christian life, because to have Christ shrined in the heart is the heart of

Christianity, and Christ Himself is our law. So, in another sense than that which I have been already touching, the law is written on the heart on which, by faith and self-surrender, the name of Christ is written. And when it becomes our whole duty to become like Him, then He being throned in our hearts, our law is within, and Himself to His ‘darlings’ shall be, as the poet has it about another matter, ‘both law and impulse.’ Write His name upon your hearts, and your law of life is thereby written there.

And, still further, let me remind you that this great promise is fulfilled, because the very specific gift of Christianity to men is the gift of a new nature which is ‘created in righteousness and holiness that flows from truth.’ The communication of a divine life kindred with, and percipient of, and submissive to, the divine will is the gift that Christianity - or, rather, let us put away the abstraction and say that Christ - offers . to us all, and gives to every man who will accept it.

And thus, and in other ways on which I cannot dwell now, this great article of the New Covenant lies at the very foundation of the Christian life, and gives its peculiar tinge and cast to all Christian morality, commandment, and obligation.

But let me remind you how this great truth has to be held with caution. The evidence of this letter itself shows that, whilst the writer regarded it as a distinctive characteristic of the gospel, that by it men’s wills were stamped with a delight in the law of God, and a transcript thereof, he still regarded these wills as unstable, as capable of losing the sharp lettering, of having the writing of God obliterated, and still regarded it as possible that there should be apostasy and departure.

So there is nothing in this promise which suspends the need for effort and for conflict. Still ‘the flesh lusteth against the spirit.’ Still there are parts of the nature on which that law is not written. It is the final triumph, that the whole man, body, soul, and spirit is, through and through, penetrated with, and joyfully obedient to, the commandments of the Lord. There is need, too, not only for continuous progress, effort, conflict, in order to keep our hearts open for His handwriting, but also for much caution, lest at any time we should mistake our own self-will for the utterance of the divine voice.

‘Love, and do what thou wilt,’ said a great Christian teacher. It is an unguarded statement, but profoundly true as in some respects it is, it is only absolutely true if we have made sure that the ‘thou’ which ‘wills’ is the heart on which God has written His law.

Only God can do this for us. The Israelites of old were bidden ‘these things which I command thee this day shall be on thy heart,’ and they were to write them on their hand, and on the frontlet between their eyes, and on their doorposts. The latter commands were obeyed, having been hardened into a form; and phylacteries on the arm, and scrolls on the lintel, were the miserable obedience which was given to them. But the complete writing on the heart was beyond the power of unaided man. A psalmist said, ‘I delight to do Thy will, and Thy law is within my heart.’ But a verse or two after, in the same psalm, he wailed, ‘Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up. They are more than the hairs of my head. Therefore my heart faileth me.’ One Man has transcribed the divine will on His will, without blurring a letter, or omitting a clause. One Man has been able to say, in the presence of the most fearful temptations, ‘Not My will, but Thine, be done.’ One Man has so completely written, perceived, and obeyed the law of His Father, that, looking back on all His life, He was conscious of no defect or divergence, either in motive or in act, and could affirm on the Cross, ‘It is finished.’ He who thus perfectly kept that divine law will give to us, if we ask Him, His spirit, to write it upon our hearts, and ‘the law of the spirit of life which was in Christ Jesus shall make us free from the law of sin and death.’

II. Now, secondly, note the impassable gulf which this fulfilled promise makes between Christianity and all other systems.

It is a new covenant, undoubtedly-an altogether new thing in the world. For whatever other laws have been promulgated among men have had this in common, that they have stood over against the Will with a whip in one hand, and a box of sweets in the other, and have tried to influence desires and inclinations, first by the setting forth of duty, then by threatening, and then by promises to obedience. There is the inherent weakness of all which is merely law. You do not make men good by telling them in what goodness consists, nor yet by setting forth the bitter consequences that may result from wrong-doing. All that is surface work. But there is a power which says that it deals with the will as from within, and moves, and moulds, and revolutionises it. ‘You cannot make men sober by act of parliament,’ people say. Well! I do not believe the conclusion which is generally drawn from that statement, but it is perfectly true in itself. To tell a man what he ought to do is very, very little help towards his doing it. I do not under-estimate the value of a clear perception of duty, but I say that, apart from Christianity, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, that clear perception of duty is like a clear opening of a great gulf between a man and safety, which only makes him recoil in despair with the thought, ‘how can I ever leap across that?’ But the peculiarity of the gospel is that it gives both the knowledge of what we ought to be; and with and in the knowledge, the desire, and with and in the knowledge and the desire, the power to be what God would have us to be.

All other systems, whether the laws of a nation, or the principles of a scientific morality, or the solemn voice that speaks in our minds proclaiming some version of God’s law to every man- all these are comparatively impotent. They are like bill-stickers going about a rebellious province posting the king’s proclamation. Unless they have soldiers at their back, the proclamation is not worth the paper it is printed upon. But Christianity comes, and gives us that which it requires from us. So, in his epigrammatic way, St. Augustine penetrated to the very heart of this article when he prayed, ‘Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt.’

III. Note the freedom and blessedness of this fulfilled promise.

Not to do wrong may be the mark of a slave’s timid obedience. Not to wish to do wrong is the charter of a son’s free and blessed service. There is a higher possibility yet, reserved for heaven - not to be able to do wrong. Freedom does not consist in doing what I like - that turns out, in the long run, to be the most abject slavery, under the severest tyrants. But it consists in liking to do what I ought. When my wishes and God’s will are absolutely coincident, then and only then, am I free. That is no prison, out of which we do not wish to go. Not to be confined against our wills, but voluntarily to elect to move only within the sacred, charmed, sweet circle of the discerned will of God, is the service and liberty of the sons of God.

Alas! there are a great many Christians, so-called, who know very little about such blessedness. To many of us religion is a burden. It consists of a number of prohibitions and restrictions and commandments equally unwelcome. ‘Do not do this,’ and all the while I would like to do it. ‘Do that,’ and all the while I do not want to do it. ‘Pray, because it is your duty; go to chapel, because you think it is God’s will; give money that you would much rather keep in your pockets: abstain from certain things that you hunger for; do other things that you do not at all desire to do, nor find any pleasure in doing.’ That is the religion of hosts of people. They have need to ask themselves whether their religion is Christ’s religion. Ah! brethren! - ‘My yoke is easy and My burden light; not because the things that He bids and forbids are less or lighter than those which the world’s morality requires of its followers, but because, so to speak, the yoke is padded with the velvet of love, and inclination coincides, in the measure of our true religion, with the discerned will of God.

IV. Lastly, one word about the condition of the fulfilment of this promise to us.

As I have been saying, it is sadly far ahead of the experience of crowds of so-called Christians. There are still great numbers of professing Christians, and I doubt not that I speak to some such, on whose hearts only a very few of the syllables of God’s will are written, and these very faintly and blotted. But remember that the fundamental idea of this whole context is that of a covenant, and a covenant implies two parties, and duties and obligations on the part of each. If God is in covenant with you, you are in covenant with God. If He makes a promise, there is something for you to do in order that that promise may be fulfilled to you.

What is there to do? First, and last, and midst, keep close to Jesus Christ. In the measure in which we keep ourselves in continual touch with Him, will His law be written upon our hearts. If we are for ever twitching away the paper; if we are for ever flinging blots and mud upon it, how can we expect the transcript to be clear and legible? We must keep still that God may write. We must wait habitually in His presence. When the astronomer wishes to get the image of some far-off star, invisible to the eye of sense, he regulates the motion of his sensitive plate, so that for hours it shall continue right beneath the unseen Beam. So we have to still our hearts, and keep their plates - the fleshy tables of them - exposed to the heavens. Then the likeness of God will be stamped there.

Be faithful to what is written there, which is the Christian shape of the heathen commandment - ‘Do the duty that lies nearest thee; so shall the next become plainer.’ Be faithful to the line that is ‘written,’ and there will be more on the tablet to-morrow.

Now this is a promise for us all However blotted and blurred and defaced by crooked, scrawling letters, like a child’s copy-book, with its first pot-hooks and hangers, our hearts may be, there is no need for any of us to say despairingly, as we look on the smeared page, ‘What I have written I have written.’ He is able to blot it all out, to ‘take away the hand-writing’ - our own - ‘that is against us, nailing it to His Cross,’ and to give us, in our inmost spirits, a better knowledge of, and a glad obedience to, His discerned and holy will. So that each of us, if we choose, and will observe the conditions, may be able to say with all humility, ‘Lo! I come, in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do Thy will, yea! Thy law is within my heart.’

19)Hebrews 8:11

Hebrews

‘ALL SHALL KNOW ME’

Heb. 8:11

IN former sermons I have tried to bring out the force of the preceding two articles of ‘the New Covenant’ These two were the substitution of inward inclination and impulse for the rigid bonds of an external commandment, and the substitution of a real, spiritual, mutual possession of God and His people for the mere outward relationship that existed between Israel and Jehovah-My text is the third article of the New Covenant, It lays hold, like the other two, of something that characterised the ancient dispensation, declares its imperfection, recognises its prophetic aspect, and asserts that all which the former merely shadowed and foretold is accomplished in Jesus Christ.

In old days there had been some direct communication between God and a chosen few, the spiritual aristocracy of the nation, and they spake the things that they had heard of God to the multitude who had had no such communication. My text says that all this is swept away, and that the prerogative of every Christian man is direct access to, communication with, and instruction from, God Himself. The text has two things in it; the promise, which is the essence of it, and a consequence which is deduced from that promise, and sets forth its results in a graphic manner. 'They all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest'; that is the real promise. 'They shall no more teach every man his neighbour saying, 'Know the Lord,' is but a result thereof.

I. Now, I ask you to look with me at what this great promise means.

'They shall know Me.' Perhaps I can best explain what I take it to mean by commencing with an analogy or two which may help us to apprehend what is the significance of these words. We all know the difference between hearsay and sight. We may have read books of travel, and tell of some scene of great natural beauty or historic interest, and may think that we understand all about it, but it is always an epoch when our own eyes look for the first time at the snowy summit of an Alp, or for the first time at the Parthenon on its rocky height. We all know the difference between hearsay and experience. We read books of the poets that portray love and sorrow, and the other emotions that make up our throbbing, changeful life; but we need to go through the mill ourselves before we understand what the grip of the iron teeth of the harrow of affliction is, and we need to have had our own hearts dilated By a true and blessed affection, before we know the sweetness of love. Men may tell us about it, but we have to feel it ourselves before we know.

To come still closer to the force of my text, we all know the difference between hearing about a man and making his acquaintance. We may have been told much about him, and be familiar with his character, as we think, but, when we come face to face with him, and actually for ourselves experience the magnetism of his presence, or fall under the direct influence of his character, then we know that our former acquaintance with him, by means of hearsay, was but superficial and shadowy. ‘I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eyes see thee.’ Can you say that? If so, you understand my text - ‘They shall no more teach every man... his brother, saying, Know the Lord, and make acquaintance with Him’ as if He were a stranger - for ‘all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest.’ There is all the difference between knowing about God and knowing God; just the difference .that there is between dogma and life, between theology and religion. We may have all articles of the Christian creed clear in our understandings, and may owe our possession of them to other people’s teaching; we may even, in a sense, believe them, and yet they may be absolutely outside of our lives, and it is only when they pass into the very substance of our being, and influence the springs of our conduct - it is only then that we know God.

Now, I maintain that this acquaintance with Him is what is meant in our text. It may not include any more intellectual propositions about Him than a man had before he knew Him, but it has turned doctrines into fact, and instead of the mere hearsay and traditional religion, which is the only religion of millions, it has brought the true heart-grasp of Him, which is the only thing worth calling a knowledge of God. For let me remind you that, whilst we may know a science or proposition by the exercise of our understandings in appropriate ways, that is not how we know people. And God is a person, and to know Him does not mean to understand about Him, but to be on speaking terms with Him, to have a familiar acquaintance with Him, to ‘summer and winter’ with Him, and so, by experience, to verify the things that before were mere doctrines. Now, at least the large majority of you call yourselves believers in Christianity. I want you to ask yourselves, and I would ask myself, whether my religion is knowing about God or knowing Him; whether it is all made up of a set of truths which I assent to, mainly because I am not sufficiently interested in them to contradict them, or whether these truths have become the very substance of my life. I do not believe in a religion without a dogma - I was going to say, I believe still less in a dogma without religion; and that is the Christianity of hosts of professing Christians. It is as useless as are the dried seeds that rattle in the withered head of a poppy in the autumn, or as the shrivelled kernel that sounds in the hollowness of a half-empty nut. Remember, dear brethren, that to know God is to become acquainted with Him, and that only on the path of such familiar, friendly, loving intercourse and communion with Him, can men find the confirmation of the truths about Him which make up the eternal revelation of Him in the gospel. ‘We know’ - that is a valid certainty, arising from experience, and it has as good a right to call itself knowledge as have the processes by which men come to be sure about the physical facts of this material universe. Nay! I would even go further, and say that the fact that such a continual stream of witnesses, through all the generations, have been able to say, ‘I have tasted and I have seen that God is good,’ is to be taken into account by all impartial searchers after truth. And if men want to square their creeds with all the facts of humanity, let them not omit, in their consideration of the claims of Christian evidence, this fact, that from generation to generation men have said, and their lives have witnessed to its truths, ‘We know in whom we have believed, and that He is able to keep us. We know that we are of God. Dear brethren! the whole case for Christianity cannot be appreciated from outside. ‘Taste and see.’ My text shows us the more true way. If we will accept that covenant we shall know the Lord in the depths of our hearts.

II. Notice how far this promise extends.

They all, from the least to the greatest, shall know; There is to be no distinction of rank or age, or endowment, which shall result in some of the people of God having a position from which any of the others are altogether shut out.

The writer is, of course, contrasting in his mind, though he does not express the contrast, the condition of things of old, when, as I said, the spiritual aristocracy of the nation received communications which they then imparted to their fellows. In the morning dawn the highest summits catch the rays first, but as the sun rises it floods the lower levels, and at mid-day shines right down into the depths of the cavities. So the world is now flooded with the light of Christ; and all Christian men and women, by virtue of their Christian character, do possess the unction from the Holy One, in which lie the potency and the promise of the knowledge of all things that are needful to be known for life and godliness. This is the true democracy of the gospel-the universal possession of the life of Christ through the Spirit.

Now, if that be so, then it is by no means a truth to be kept simply for the purpose of fighting against ecclesiastical or sacerdotal encroachments and denials of it, but it ought to be taken as the candle of the Lord, by each of us, and in the light of it we ought to search very rigidly, and very often, our own Christian character and experiences. You, dear brethren, with whom I am most closely associated here, you professing Christians of this congregation - do you know anything about that inward knowledge of God which comes from friendship with Him, and speaks irrefragable certainties in the heart which receives it? ‘If any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of His.’ If you owe all your knowledge of, and your faith in, the great verities of the gospel, and the loving personality of God, to the mere report of others, if you cannot verify these by your own experience, if you cannot say, ‘Many things I know not; you can easily puzzle me with critical and philosophical subtleties, but this one thing I do know, that whereas I was blind, now I see’ - if you cannot say that, I pray you, bethink yourselves whether your religion is not mainly a form, and how far it has any life in it at all.

But whilst thus the great promise of my text, in its very blessedness and fulness, does carry with it soma solemn suggestions for searching self-examination, it also points in another direction. For consider what it excludes and what it permits, in the way of brotherly help and guidance. It certainly excludes on the one hand, all assumption of authority over the consciences and the understandings of Christian people, on the part either of churches or individuals, and, it makes short work of all claims that there continues a class of persons officially distinguished from their brethren, and having closer access to God than they. The true understanding of these words of my text, the recognition of the universality of the knowledge of God in all Christian people, has great revolutionary work yet to do amongst the churches of Christendom. For I do not know that there are any of them that have sufficiently recognised this principle. Not only in a church whore there is a priesthood and an infallible head of the Church on earth, nor only in churches that are bound by human creeds imposed on them by men, but also in churches like ours, where there is no formal recognition of either of these two errors, the practical contradiction of this article of the New Covenant is apt to creep in. It is a great deal more the fault of the people than of the priest, a great deal more the fault of the congregation than of the pastor, when they are lazily contented to take all their religion at second-hand from him, and to shuffle all the responsibility off their own shoulders on to his. If my text obliges me, and all men who stand in my position, to say with the Apostle, ‘Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy,’ it obliges you, dear brethren, to take nothing from me, or any man, on our bare words, nor to exalt any of us into a position which would contradict the great principle of my text, but yourselves, at first hand, to go to God, and get straight from Him the teaching which He only can give. Dominion and subjection, authority and submission to men, in any part of the church are shut out by such words as these.

But brotherly help is not shut out. If a party of men are climbing a hill, and one is in advance of his fellows, when he reaches the summit he may look down and call to those below, and tell them how fair and wide the view is, and beckon them to come and give them a helping hand up. So, because Christian men vary in the extent to which they possess and utilise the one gift of knowledge of God, and some of them are in advance of the others, it is all in accordance with the principle of my text that they that are in advance should help their brethren, and give them a brotherly hand. Not as if my brother’s word can give me the inward knowledge of God, but it may help me to get that knowledge for myself. We - I speak now as a member of the preaching class - we can but do what the friend of the bridegroom does; he brings the bride to her lover, and then he shuts the door and leaves the two to themselves That is all that any of us can do. You must yourself draw the water from the well of salvation. We can only tell you, ‘there is the well, and the water is sweet.’

III. Lastly, the means by which this promise is fulfilled.

I have already pointed out, in previous sermons, that the conception of the gospel as a new covenant was endorsed by Jesus Christ Himself in words which tell us how all these blessings that are set forth in this context are secured and brought to men, when in the institution of the Lord’s Supper, He spoke of ‘the New Covenant in His blood.’ So I set first and foremost, above all other means, this one great truth, that all this inward knowledge of God, which is the prerogative of every Christian man, is made possible and actual for any of us, only by and through the mission, and especially the death, of Jesus Christ our Lord. For therein does He set forth God to be known as nothing else but that supreme suffering and supreme self-surrender upon the Cross, ever can do or has done. We know God as He would have us know Him, only when we see Jesus suffering and dying for us; and then adoringly, as one in the presence of a mystery into which he can but look a little way, Bay that even there and then ‘he that hath seen that Christ hath seen the Father.’

Jesus Christ’s Mood, the seal of the Covenant, is the great means by which this promise is fulfilled, inasmuch u in that death He sweeps away all the hindrances which bar us out from the knowledge of God. The great dark wall of my sin rises between me and my Father. Christ’s blood, like some magic drops upon a fortification, causes all the black barrier to melt away like a cloud; and the access to the throne of God is patent, even for sinful creatures like us. The veil is rent, and by that blood we have access into the holiest of all.

Christ is the source of this knowledge of God, inasmuch, further, as by His mission and death there is given to the whole world, if it will receive it, and to all who exercise faith in His name, the gift of that Divine Spirit who teaches to our inmost spirit the true knowledge of His Son.

And so, dear brethren, since it is in the incarnate and dying Christ that all knowledge of God is brought to men, that all possibility of friendship and communion between men and God is rooted, and that the Divine Spirit who leads us into the deep things of God is granted to each of us, there follows the plain conclusion that the one way by which every man and woman on earth may find him and herself included within that ‘all, from the least to the greatest,’ is simply trust in Christ Jesus, in whom, in whose life, in whose death, God is made known, our alienation is swept away, and the Spirit of God, the Divine Teacher, is granted to us all.

Only, remember that my text stands in close connection with the preceding articles of this covenant, and that to delight in the law of the Lord is the sure way to know more of the Lord. One act of obedience from the heart will teach us more of God than all the sages can. It is more illuminating simply to do as He willed than to read and think and speculate and study.

'If any man wills to do His will, he shall know of the teaching.'

And mutual possession of God by us, and of us by God, leads to fuller knowledge. To possess God is to love Him; and 'he that loveth knoweth God, yea! rather is known of God.'

So, dear brethren, do not be content with traditional religion, with a hearsay Christianity. 'Acquaint now thyself with Him,' and be at peace. Oh! there is nothing sweeter to a true preacher of Christ and His salvation than that those to whom he preaches should be able to do without him. It is my business to point you away from myself, however much I prize your love and confidence, as I ought to do; and to beseech you, for your own soul's sake, that you would by faith in Christ attain that knowledge of the only true God which He is sent to give. Then you will be able to say, 'Now, we believe not because of thy saying, for we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is, indeed, the Christ, the Saviour of the world.'

20)Hebrews 8:12

Hebrews

FORGIVENESS THE FUNDAMENTAL BLESSING

Heb. 8:12

WE have been considering, in successive sermons, the great promises preceding my text, which are the articles of the New Covenant. We reach the last of theme in this discourse. It is last in order of enumeration because it is first in order of fulfilment. The foundation is dug down to and discovered last, because the stones of it were laid first. The introductory 'for' in my text shows that the fulfilment of all the preceding great promises depends upon and follows the fulfilment of this, the greatest of them.

Forgiveness is the keystone of the arch. Strike it out, and the whole tumbles' into ruin. Forgiveness is the first gift to be received from the great cornucopiae of blessings which the gospel brings for men. The writer is tracing the stream upwards, and therefore he comes last to that which first gushes out from the divine heart. All these previous promises of delight in the law of the Lord, mutual possession between God and His people, knowledge of God which is based upon love, are consequences of this final article, 'I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their iniquities will I remember no more.'

I. So, then, we remark, first, that forgiveness deals with man's deepest need.

It is fundamental, because it grapples with the true evil of humanity, which is not sorrow, but is sin. All men have 'come short of the glory of God,' and that fact, the fact of universal sinfulness, is the gravest fact of man's condition; for it affects his whole nature, and it disturbs and perverts all his relations to God. And so, if men would rightly diagnose the disease of humanity, they must recognise something far deeper than skin-deep symptoms, and discover that it is sin which is the source of all human misery and sorrow. To deal with humanity and to forget or ignore the true source of all the misery in the world - namely, the fact that we 'have all sinned and come short of the glory of God' - is absurd. 'Miserable comforters are ye all,' if pottering over the patient, you apply ointment to pimples when he is dying of cancer. I know, of course, that a great deal may be done, and that a great deal is to-day being done, to diminish the sum of human wretchedness; and I am not the man to say one word that shall seem to under-estimate or pour cold water upon any of these various schemes of improvement - philanthropic, social, economic, or political; but I do humbly venture to say that any of them, and all of them put together, if they do not grapple with this fact of man's sin, are dealing with the surface and leaving the centre untouched. Sin does not come only from ignorance, and therefore it cannot be swept away by knowledge. It does not come only from environment, and therefore it cannot be taken out of human history by improvement of circumstances. It does not come from poverty, and therefore economical changes will not annihilate it. The root of it lies far deeper than any of these things. The power which is to make humanity blessed must dig down to the root and grasp that, and tear it up, and eject it from the heart of man before society can be thoroughly healed. Now, what does Christianity do with this central part of human experience? My text tells us partly, and only partly, ‘I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.’ Of course, the divine oblivion is a strong metaphor for the treatment of man’s sins as non-existent. It is the same figure, in a somewhat different application, as is found in the great promise, ‘I will cast their sins behind My back into the depths of the sea.’ It is the same metaphor as is suggested in a somewhat different application, by the other saying, ‘Blessed is the man whoso sin is covered.’ And the fact that underlies the metaphors of forgetfulness or burying in the ocean depths, or covering over so as to-be invisible, is just this, that God’s love flows out to the sinful man, unhindered by the fact of his transgression.

If Christian people, and doubters about Christian truth, would understand the depth and loftiness of the Christian idea of forgiveness, there would be less difficulty felt about it. For pardon is not the same thing as the removal of the consequences of wrongdoing. It is so in regard of the mere outward judicial: procedure of nations, but it is not so in the family. A father often pardons, and says that he does so before he punishes, and it is the same with God. The true notion and essence of forgiveness, as the Bible conceives it, is not the putting aside of consequences, but the flow of the Father’s heart to the erring child.

Sin is a great black dam, built up across the stream, but the flood of love from God’s heart rises over it, and pours across it, and buries it beneath the victorious, full waters of the ‘river of God.’ Here is a world wrapped in mist, and high above the mist the unbroken sunshine of the divine love pours down upon the upper layer, and thins and thins and thins it until it disappears, and the full sunshine floods the rejoicing world, and the ragged fragments of the mist melt into the blue. ‘I have blotted out as a cloud thy sins and as a thick cloud thy transgressions,’ The outward consequences of forgiven sin may have to be reaped. If a man has lived a sensuous life, no. repentance, no forgiveness, will prevent the drunkard’s hand from trembling, or cure the corrugations of his liver. If a man has sinned, no divine forgiveness will ever take the memory of his transgressions, nor their effects, out of his character. But the divine forgiveness may so modify the effects as that, instead of past sin being a source of torment or a tyrant which compels to future similar transgressions, pardoned sin will become a source of lowly self-distrust, and may even tend to increase in goodness and righteousness. When bees cannot remove some corruption out of the hive they cover it over with wax, and then it is harmless, and they can build upon it honey-bearing cells. Thus it is possible that, by pardon, the consequences which must be reaped may be turned into occasions for good.

But the act of the divine forgiveness does annihilate the deepest and the most serious consequences of my sin; for hell is separation from God, the sense of discord and alienation between Him and me; and all these are swept away.

So here is the foundation blessing, which meets man’s deepest need. And be sure of this, that any system which cannot grapple with that need will never avail for the necessities of a sinful world. Unless our new evangelists can come to us with as clear an utterance as this of my text, they will work their enchantments in vain; and the world will be the old, sad, miserable world, after all that they can do.

II. This forgiveness is attained through Christ, and through Him only.

I have tried to show in former sermons, that the whole of these promises of what our writer calls ‘the New Covenant,’ are, as our Lord Himself said, sealed ‘in His blood.’ And that is especially true in reference to this promise of forgiveness. It is in Christ Jesus, and in Christ Jesus alone, that that pardon which my text speaks of is secured to men.

I need not dwell upon the Scriptural statements to this effect, but I desire to emphasize this thought, that the Christian teaching of forgiveness is based upon the conception of Christ’s work and especially of Christ’s death, as being the atonement for the world’s sin. It is because, and only because, ‘He bore our sins in His own body on the tree,’ that the full-toned gospel proclamation can be rung out to men, that God ‘remembers their transgressions no more.’ Unless that foundation be firmly laid in the New Testament conception of the meaning and power of the death of Christ, I know not where there is a basis for the proclamation to man of divine forgiveness.

Of course, my text itself does show that the very common misrepresentation of the New Testament evangelical teaching about this matter is a misrepresentation. It is often objected to that teaching that it alleges that Christ's sacrifice effected a change in the divine heart and disposition, and made God love men whom He did not love before. The mighty 'I will' of my text makes no specific reference to Christ's death, and rather implies what is the true relation between the love of God and the death of Jesus Christ, that God's love was the originating cause, of which Christ's death was the redeeming effect. 'He so loved the world that He gave His... Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should... have eternal life.' And no wise evangelical teacher ever has asserted, or does assert, anything else than that the mission of Jesus Christ is the consequence, and not the cause, of the Father's love to sinful men.

But that being kept distinctly in view, I suppose I need not remind you how, like the strand that runs through the cables of the Royal Navy, the red thread of Christ's sacrifice for the sins of the whole world runs through the whole of the New Testament. It it fashionable nowadays to say that no theory of the atonement is needed in order that men should receive the benefit Christ's work. That is partially true, in so far as that no human conceptions will exhaust the fulness of that great work, nor can penetrate to all its depths. But it is not true, as I humbly take it, inasmuch as if a man is to get the forgiveness that comes through Jesus Christ, he must have this theory, that 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.' And that is the teaching of the whole New Testament.

I need not remind you how all Paul's writing is saturated with it, but I may remind you that to people who were very lynx-eyed critics of him and of his teaching, he said, about that very statement that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures - 'whether it were they or I, so we preach.' And his appeal to the consensus and unanimity of the apostles is amply vindicated by the documents that still remain. We are told that there are types of teaching in the New Testament. There are, and very beautifully they vary, and very harmoniously they blend. But there are no diversities in regard to this matter. If Paul says, ‘In whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of our sins,’ Peter says, ‘He bare our sins in His own body on the tree’; and John says, ‘He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but also for the sins of the whole world.’ And if, as I believe, the Book of the Revelation is his, the vision that John saw in the heavens was the vision of ‘a Lamb as it had been slain’; and the song which he heard rising from immortal lips was of praise unto Him that ‘hath loosed us from our sins by His own blood.’

‘So they preached.’ God grant that it may be true of all of us; ‘so we Believe.’ For; Brethren, this clear, certain statement of the gospel of forgiveness through Jesus Christ is the characteristic glory of the whole revelation. Without it, apart from Him and His Cross, I do not know how the hope of forgiveness can be more than dim and doubtful I know not how any man that has once felt the grip of evil on his inclinations, and the responsibility and guilt which he has drawn down upon his head by his transgressions, can find a firm footing for his assurance of pardon, apart from the Cross of Jesus Christ. Without that, the divine forgiveness is but a peradventure, sometimes a hope, sometimes an illusion. The men that reject Christianity for the most part proclaim the gospel of despair.

‘Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap,’ in such a sense as to annihilate the possibility of pardon. But in Christ we understand that we may reap these fruits, and yet be pardoned. ‘Thou wast a God that forgavest them, and tookest vengeance of their inventions.’ Forgiveness apart from Christ stands, as it seems to me, in no intelligible relation to the divine character. And, apart from Christ, forgiveness is apt to dwindle down, and to be degraded into mere lazy tolerance of evil, and to make God a good-natured, indifferent Sovereign, who does not so very much mind whether His subjects do His will or not.

But when we can say, ‘He died for my sins,’ then we can see that the divine righteousness and the divine love are but two names for one thing, and forgiveness lifts us into a region of higher purity. Christianity alone teaches the loftiest ideal of human righteousness, the loftiest conception of the divine character, the absolute inflexibility of the divine law and withal full, free pardon. It stands alone in the sombre aspect under which it contemplates humanity, and the bound less hope of its possibilities which it entertains. It stands alone in that forgiveness is the means to higher holiness; and in that, pardoning, it heals, and whispers ‘Go thy way; sin no more, lest a worse thing befall thee.’ Therefore is it a gospel; therefore is it the New Covenant in His blood.

III. Lastly, this forgiveness is fundamental to all other Christian blessings.

As I have said, the very structure of our text shows that that was the writer’s idea. There can be no ‘delight in the law of the Lord,’ which is the first of the articles of the New Covenant, until there is the taking away of the sin which deepens aversion to God’s law, and until the Lawgiver has become beloved for the sake of His received forgiveness. Then we shall delight in the law when we love the lips that proclaim it, because before they issued commandments they decreed absolution, and declared ‘Neither do I condemn thee.’

Forgiveness precedes the second of these covenant blessings - viz., mutual possession between God and His people. For so long as there remains unforgiven sin in a man’s heart, it comes like a film of atmospheric air or grains of dust between two polished metal plates, forbidding their adhesion; and only when it is taken away will they come together and abide united. It lies at the foundation of, and must precede, all that true knowledge of God, which is the third of the articles of the covenant, and is a consequence of love and communion. ‘For how can two walk together except they be agreed?’ Until my sin is taken from me the eyes of my soul are dim; and I know not God in deep reciprocal possession and continual love. And so with all other of the blessings and the hopes which Christian men are entitled to cherish by reason of this covenant of God’s changeless love.

I need not dwell upon them, but I would leave with you these thoughts. A Christianity which does not begin with the proclamation of forgiveness is impotent. Again, a Christianity which does not base forgiveness on Christ’s sacrifice is also impotent. The history of the Church shows that preachers and teachers and churches that do not know what to say when a poor soul comes to them and asks, ‘What must I do to be saved?’ are of no use, or next to none The man in whom there are devils says to such maimed representations of the gospel, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are ye?’ and leaps upon them, and overcomes them. The whole experience of the past demonstrates that. And so one laments the vagueness and the faltering in proclaiming this truth so common in this day. Brethren, I, for my part, believe that the only type of Christianity which will win men’s hearts is that modeled on the pattern of the New Testament teaching, which begins with the fact of sin, and, having dealt with that, then goes on to bestow all other blessings.

But do not forget another thing, that a Christianity which does not build holiness, delight in God’s law, conscious possession of Him and possession by Him, and deep, blessed knowledge of Him, on forgiveness, is wofully imperfect. And that is the Christianity of a great many of us. Here is the first round of the ladder: ‘I will remember their iniquities no more.’ Put your foot upon that and then begin to ascend; and do not stop till you have reached the top, whence His face looks down, and whence you can step on to the stable standing-ground beside His very throne. Begin with forgiveness, and all these blessings: shall be added unto you, if you keep the covenant of your God.

21)Hebrews 8:18

Hebrews

THEIR GOD, MY PEOPLE

Heb. 8:18

Two mirrors set over against each other reflect one another and themselves in each other, in long perspective. Two hearts that love, with similar reciprocation of influence, mirror back to each other their own affections.

‘I am thine; thou art mine,’ is the very’ mother-tongue of love, and the source of blessedness. All loving hearts know that. That mutual surrender, and, in surrender, reciprocal possession, is lifted up here into the highest regions. ‘I will be their God, they shall be My people.’ That was the fundamental promise of the Mosaic dispensation, laid at Sinai - ‘Ye shall be unto Me a people for a possession.’ All through the Old Testament we find it re-echoed; and yet the interpenetration of God and the people was imperfect and external in that ancient covenant.

So the writer here, falling back upon the marvellous prophecy of Jeremiah, regards this as being one of the characteristics of Christianity, that what was shadowed in Israel’s possession of God and God’s possession of Israel, is, in substance, blessedly and permanently realised in the relations of God to Christian souls, and of Christian souls to God.

Not only is there this mutual possession, as expressed by the two halves of my text, but each half, when cleft and analysed, reveals the necessity for a similar reciprocity. For God’s giving of Himself to us is nothing to us without our taking of God for ours; and, in like manner, our giving of ourselves to God, would be all incomplete, unless in His strange love, He stooped from amidst the praises of Israel to accept the poor gifts that we bring.

So the duality of my text breaks up into a double dualism, and we have God giving Himself to us, and His gift realised in our acceptance of Him for ours; and then we have our giving of ourselves to God, and the gift realised and ratified in His acceptance of us for His. And to these four points, briefly, I wish to turn.

I. ‘I will be to them a God.’ That is God’s gift of Himself to us.

The words go far deeper than the necessary divine relation to all His creatures. He is a God to every star that burns, and to every worm that creeps, and to every gnat that dances for a moment. But there is a closer relation, and more blessed than that. He is a God to every man that lives, lavishing upon him manifestations of His divinity, and sustaining him in life. But besides these great and wondrous universal relations which spring from the very fact of creative power and creatural independence, there is a tenderer, a truer relationship of heart to heart, of spirit to spirit, which is set forth here as the prerogative of the men who trust in Jesus Christ. The special does not contradict or deny the universal, the universal does not exclude the special - ‘I will be a God to them,’ in a deeper, more blessed, soul-satisfying, and vital sense than to others around them.

And what lies in that great promise passes the wit of man and the tongues of angels fully to conceive and tell. All that lies in that majestic monosyllable, which is shorthand for life, and light, and all perfectness, lived in a living person who has a heart, that word God - all that is included in that name, God will be to you and me, if we like to have Him for such. ‘I will be a God to them’ - then round about them shall be cast the bulwark of the everlasting arm and the everlasting purpose. ‘I will be a God to them’ - then in all dark places there will be a light, and in all perplexities there will be a path, and in all anxieties there will be quietness, and in all troubles there will be a hidden light of joy, and in every circumstance life will be saturated with an almighty presence, which shall make the rough places plain and the crooked things straight. ‘I will be a God to them’ - then their desires, their hungerings after blessedness, their seekings after good, need no longer roam open-mouthed and empty, throughout a waste world where there is only scanty fodder enough to keep them from expiring but never food enough to satisfy them; but in Him longings and hopes will all find their appropriate satisfaction. And there will be rest in God, and whatsoever aspirations after loftier goodness may have to be cherished, and whatsoever base hankerings still lingering have to be fought, the strength of a present God will enable us to aspire, and not to be disappointed, and to cast ourselves into the conflict, and be ever victorious. ‘I will be to them a God,’ is the same as to say that everything which my complex nature can require I shall find in Him.

It says, too, that all that Godhood, in all the incomprehensible sweep of its attributes, is on my side, if I will. They tell us that there are rays in the spectrum which no eye can see, but which yet have mightier chemical and other influences than those that are visible. The spectrum of God is not all visible, but beyond the limits of comprehension there lie dark energies which are full of blessedness and of power for us. ‘I will be to them a God.’ We can understand something of what that name signifies; and all that is enlisted for us. There is much which that name signifies that we do not understand, and all that, too, is working on our side.

Now, remember, that this giving of God to us by Himself is all concentrated in one historical act. He gave Himself to us, when He spared not His only begotten Son. My text is one of the articles of the New Covenant. And what sealed and confirmed all the articles of that Covenant? The blood of Jesus Christ, It was when 'God spared not His own Son,' and when the Son spared not Himself, on that Cross of Calvary, that there came to pass the ratifying and filling out and perfecting of the ancient, typical promise, 'I will be to them a God.' There was the unspeakable gift in which God was given to humanity.

II. And now we have to take the giving God and make Him our God.

I need not do more than just glance for a moment at that thought, for it is familiar enough to us all. Here is a treasure of gold lying in the road. Anybody that picks it up may have it; the man who does not pick it up does not get it, though it is there for him to lay his fingers on. Here is a river flowing past your door. You may put a pipe into it, and bring all its wealth and refreshment into your house, and use it for the quenching of your thirst, for the cleansing of your person, for the cooking of your victuals, for the watering of your gardens. And here is all the fulness of God welling past us, but Niagara may thunder close by a man's door, and he may perish of thirst. 'I will be to them a God.' What does that matter if I do not turn round and say: 'O Lord! Thou art my God'? Nothing! Beggars come to your door, and you give them a bit of bread, and they go away, and you find it flung into the mud round the corner. God gives us Himself. I wonder how many of us have tossed the gift over the first hedge, and left it there. Yet all the while we are dying for want of it, and do not know that we are.

Brethren! you have to enclose a bit of the prairie for your very own, end put a hedge round it, and cultivate it, and you will get abundant fruits. You have to translate 'their' into the singular possessive pronoun, and say 'mine,' and put out the hand of faith, and make Him in very deed yours. Then, and only then, is this giving perfected.

III. In the third place, we have to give ourselves to God.

We begin - as our text, profoundly, with all its simplicity, begins - with an act of God to us. He enters into loving relations with me, and it is only when I am melted and encouraged by the perception and reception of these relations that there comes the answering throb in my heart. The mirror in our spirit has the other one reflected upon it; then it flings back its own reflection to the parent glass. God comes first with the love that He pours over us poor creatures, and when ‘ we have known and believed the love that God hath to us,’ then, and only then, do we throb back the reflected, ay, the kindred love. For love is the same thing in the divine heart and in my heart. In the other bonds that unite men to God, what is man’s corresponds to what is God’s. My faith corresponds to His faithfulness.

My dependence corresponds to His sufficiency. My weak clinging answers to His strong grasp; my obedience to His commanding. But my love not only corresponds to, as the concave does to the convex, but it assimilates to; and is the likeliest thing in the creature to, the love of the Creator. And so there is a parallel, wonderful and blessed, between the giving love which says ‘I will be to them a God,’ and the recipient love which responds, ‘We are to Thee a people.’

Remember, too, that not only is there this general resemblance, but that our love manifests itself to God - I was going to say, just as God’s love manifests itself to us, though, of course, there are differences that I do not need to touch upon here, in the act of self-surrender. He gave Himself to us, Ay! and we may use another form of speech still more emphatic, and say, He gave up Himself. For, surely, difficult as it may be for us to keep our footing in those lofty heights where the atmosphere is so rare, the gift of Jesus Christ was surrender; when the Father spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all.

And, brethren, what is the surrender of the man who, receives the love of God? In what region of my nature is that giving up of myself most imperative and blessed? In my will. The will is the man, The centre-point of every human being is. the will, and it is no use for us to talk about our having given ourselves to God, in response and in thankfulness to His gift of Himself to us, unless we come and say ‘ Lord! not my will, but Thine’; and bow ourselves in un-reluctant and constant submission to His commandments, and to all His will. Brethren, we give ourselves to God when, moved by His giving of Himself to us, we yield up our love to Him, and love never rests until it has yielded up its will to the beloved. He, indeed, gives, asking for nothing; but He gives in a still deeper sense, asking for everything; and that everything is myself. And I yield myself to Him in the measure in which I set my thankful love upon Him, and then bow myself as His servant, in humble consecration to Himself, with all my heart and soul and mind and strength.

IV. Lastly, God takes us for His.

‘They shall be My people.’ That is wonderful. It is strange that we can imitate God, in a certain fashion, in the gift of self; but it is yet more strange and blessed that God accepts that gift, and counts it as one of His treasures to possess us. One of the psalmists had a deep insight into the miracle of the divine condescension when he said ‘He was extolled with my tongue.’ Strange that the loftiest of creatures should be lifted higher by the poor tremulous lever of my praises! and yet He is so. He takes as His, such poor creatures, full of imperfection, and tremulous faith, and disproved love, as you and I know ourselves to be, and He says ‘My people.’ ‘They shall be Mine,’ My jewels, says He, ‘in the day which I make.’ Oh, brethren! it sometimes seems to me that it is more wonderful that God should take me for His, than that He should give me Himself for mine. Have you given yourself to Him? Have you begun where He begins, taking first the gift that is freely given to you of God, even Jesus Christ, in whom God dwells, and who makes all the Godhead yours, for your very own? Have you taken God for yours, by faith in that Lord’ who loved me, and gave Himself for me?’ And then smitten by His love and having the chains of self melted by the fire of His great mercy, have you said, ‘Lo! truly I am Thy servant. Thou hast loosed my bonds’? Dear brethren, you never own yourselves till you give yourselves away; and you never will give yourselves to God, to be His, unless with all your heart and strength you cling to the rock-truth, that God has given Himself to every man who will take Him, in Jesus Christ, to be that man’s God for ever and ever.

22)Hebrews 9:11-14

; Heb. 9:24-28

THE PRIEST IN THE HOLY PLACE

Heb. 9:11-14; Heb. 9:24-28.

SPACE forbids attempting full treatment of these pregnant verses. We can only sum up generally their teaching on the priesthood of Jesus.

I. Christ, as the high priest of the world, offers Himself. Obviously verse 14 refers to Christ’s sacrificial death, and in verse 26 His ‘sacrifice of Himself’ is equivalent to His ‘having suffered.’

The contention that the priestly office of Jesus begins with His entrance into the presence of God is set aside by the plain teaching of this passage, which regards His death as the beginning of His priestly work. What, then, are the characteristics of that offering, according to this Writer? The point dwelt on most emphatically is that He is both priest and sacrifice. That great thought opens a wide field of meditation, for adoring thankfulness and love. It implies the voluntariness of His death. No necessity bound Him to the Cross. Not the nails, but His, love; fastened Him there. Himself He would not save, because others He would save. The offering was ‘through the Eternal Spirit,’ the divine personality in Himself, which as it were, took the knife and slew the human life. That sacrifice was ‘without blemish,’ fulfilling in perfect moral purity the prescriptions of the ceremonial law, which but clothe in outward form the universal consciousness that nothing stained or faulty is worthy to be given to God. What are the blessings brought to us by that wondrous self-sacrifice? They are stated most generally in verse 26 as the putting away of sin, and again in verse 28 as being the bearing of the sins of many, and again in verse 14 as cleansing conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Now the first of these expressions includes the other two, and expresses the blessed truth that, by His death, Jesus has made an end of sin, in all its shapes and powers, whether it is regarded as guilt or burden, or taint and tendency paralysing and disabling. Sin is guilt, and Christ’s death deals with our past, taking away the burden of condemnation. Thus verse 28 presents Him as bearing the sins of many, as the scapegoat bore the sins of the congregation into a land not inhabited, as ‘the Lord made to meet’ on the head of the Servant ‘the iniquities of us all.’ The best commentary on the words here is, ‘He bare our sins in His own body on the tree.’ But sin has an effect in the future as in the past, and the death of Christ deals with that, So verse 14 parallels it not only with the sacrifice which made access to God possible, but with the ceremonial of the red heifer,’ by which pollution from touching a corpse was removed. A conscience which has been in contact with ‘dead works’ [and all works which are not done from ‘the life’ are so] is unfit to serve God, as well as lacking in wish to serve; and the only way to set it free from the nightmare which fetters it is to touch it with ‘the blood,’ and then it will spring up to a waking life of glad service. ‘The blood’ is shed to take away guilt; ‘the blood’ is the life, and, being shed in the death, it can be transfused into our veins, and so will. cleanse us from all sin. Thus, in regard both to past and future, sin is put away by the sacrifice of Himself. The completeness of His priestly work is further attested by the fact, triumphantly dwelt on in the lesson, that it is done once for all, and needs no repetition, and is incapable of repetition, while the world lasts.

II. Christ, as the high priest of the world, passes into heaven for us.

The priest’s office of old culminated in his entrance into the Holy of Holies, to present the blood of sacrifice. Christ’s priesthood is completed by His ascension and heavenly intercession. We necessarily attach local ideas to this, but the reality is deeper than all notions of place. The passage speaks of Jesus as ‘entering into the holy place,’ and again as entering ‘heaven itself for us.’ It also speaks of His having entered ‘through the greater and more perfect tabernacle,’ the meaning of which phrase depends on the force attached to ‘through.’ If it is taken locally, the meaning is as in chapter 4:14, that He has passed through the [lower] heavens to ‘heaven itself’; if it is taken instrumentally [as in following clause], the meaning is that Jesus used the ‘greater tabernacle’ in the discharge of His office of priest. The great truth underlying both the ascension and the representations of this context is, as verse 24 puts it, that He appears ‘before the face of God,’ and there carries on His work, preparing a place for us. Further. we note that Jesus, as priest representing humanity, end being Himself man, can stand before the face of God, by virtue of His sacrifice, in which man is reconciled to God. His sinless manhood needed no such sacrifice, but, as our representative, He could not appear there without the blood of sacrifice. That blood, as shed on earth, avails to ‘put away sin’; as presented in heaven, it avails ‘for us,’ being ever present before the divine eye, and influencing the divine dealings. That entrance is the climax of the process by which He obtained ‘eternal redemption’ for us. Initial redemption is obtained through His death, but the full, perfect unending deliverance from all sin and evil is obtained, indeed, by His passing into the Holy Place above, but possessed in fact only when we follow Him thither. We need Him who ‘became dead’ for pardon and cleansing; we need Him who is ‘alive for evermore’ for present participation in His life and present sitting with Him in the heavenly places, and for the ultimate and eternal entrance there, whence we shall go no more out.

III. Christ, as the high priest of the world, will come forth from the holy place.

The ascension cannot end His connection with the world. It carries in itself the prophecy of a return. ‘If I go,... I will come again.’ The high priest came forth to the people waiting for him, so our High Priest will come. Men have to die, and ‘after death,’ not merely as following in time, but as necessarily following in idea and fact, a judgment in which each man’s work shall be infallibly estimated and manifested. Jesus has died ‘to bear the sins of many.’ There must follow for Him, too, an estimate and manifestation of His work. What for others is a judgment,’ for Him is manifestation of His sinlessness and saving power. He shall be seen, no longer stooping under the weight of a world’s sins, but ‘apart from sir,’ He shall be seen ‘unto salvation,’ for the vision will bring with it assimilation to His sinless likeness. He shall be thus seen by those that wait for Him, looking through the shows of time to the far-off shining of His coming, and meanwhile having their loins girt and their lamps burning.

23)Hebrews 10:12

Hebrews

THE ENTHRONED CHRIST

Heb. 10:12

To that tremendous assertion the whole New Testament is committed. Peter, Paul, John, the writer of this book - all teach that the Jesus who died on Calvary now sits at the right hand of God. This is no case of distance casting a halo round the person of a simple teacher, for six weeks after Calvary, on the Day of Pentecost, Peter declared that Jesus, 'exalted at the right hand of God,' had 'shed forth this,' the gift of that Divine Spirit. This is no case of enthusiastic disciples going beyond their Master's teaching, for all the evangelists who record our Lord's trial before the Sanhedrin concur in saying that the turning-point of it, which led to His condemnation, was the declaration, 'Ye shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power.' The rulers interpreted the assertion to mean an assertion of divinity, and therefore condemned Him to death. Christ was silent, and the silence witnessed that they interpreted His meaning aright. So, then, for good or evil, we have Jesus making the tremendous assertion, which His followers but repeated. Let us try to look at these words, and draw from them some of the rich fulness of their meaning. Communion, calm repose, participation in divine power and dominion, and much besides, are implied in this great symbol. And I desire to dwell upon the various aspects of it for a-few moments now.

I. Here we have the attestation of the completeness, the sufficiency, and the perpetuity of Christ's sacrifice.

Look at the context. Mark the strong words which immediately precede the last clause of my text. 'This Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God.' The writer has just been arguing that all Jewish sacrifice, which he regarded as being of divine-appointment, was inadequate, and derived its whole importance from being a prophetic shadow of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And he points, first, in proof of his thesis, to the entire disparity of the two things - the taking away of sin, and the blood of bulls and of goats. And then he adds a subsidiary consideration, saying in effect, The very fact that day after day the sacrifices are continued, shows that they had no power to do the thing for which they were offered - viz. 'to quiet consciences.' For, if the consciences were quieted, then the sacrifice would cease to be offered. And so he draws a sharp contrast between the priests who stand daily ministering and 'offering oftentimes the same sacrifice,' which by their very repetition are demon-strafed to be inadequate to effect their purpose, and Jesus. Instead of these priests standing, offering, and doing over and over again their impotent sacrifices, ‘this Man’ offered His once. That was enough, and for ever. And the token that the one sacrifice was adequate, really could take away sin, would never, through all the rolling ages of the world’s history, lose its efficacy, lies here-He sits at the right hand of God. Brethren, in that session, which the Lord Himself commanded us to believe, is the divine answer and endorsement of the triumphant cry upon the Cross, ‘It is finished,’ and it is God’s last, loudest, and ever- reverberating proclamation to all the world, in all its generations, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’

Do you think of Christ’s mission and Christ’s work as this writer thought of it, finding the vital centre in its sacrificial efficacy, seeing it as being mainly a work caused by, in relation to, and victorious over, man’s sin and my sin, and as attested as sufficient for all sin, for the sins of the world, in all generations, by the fact that, having offered it once, the High Priest, as this same writer says in another place, sat at the right hand of God? These two things, the high Scriptural notion of the essential characteristic and efficacy of Christ’s work as being sacrificial, and the high Scriptural notion of His present session at the right hand of God; these two things are correlated and bound inseparably together. If you only think of Jesus Christ as being a great teacher, a blessed example, the very flower and crown of immaculate humanity, if you listen to His words, and rejoice over the beauty of His character, but do not see that the thing which He, and He alone, does, is to deal with the tremendous reality of human transgression, and to annihilate it, both in regard of its guilt and of its power, then the notion of His session at the right hand of God becomes surplusage and superstition. But if we see, as I pray God that we may each see for ourselves, that when He came, He ‘came not to be ministered unto, but to minister,’ and that even that does not. exhaust the significance of His Person, and the purpose of His mission, but that He came ‘to give His life a ransom for many,’ then, oh! then, when my conscience asks in agony, ‘Is there a way of getting rid of my transgressions?’ and when my weak will asks, in tremulous indecision, ‘Is there a way by which I can shake off the tyranny of this usurping evil power that has fixed its claws in my character and my habits?’ then I turn and look to the Christ enthroned at the right hand of power, and I say, ‘This Man has offered one sacrifice for sins for over'; and there, in that calm session at God's right hand, is the attestation that His sacrifice is complete, is sufficient, and is perpetual.

II. We have here the revelation of our Lord's calm repose.

That is expressed, of course, by the very attitude in which, in the symbol, He is represented. Away down in the Egyptian desert there sit, moulded in colossal calm, two giant figures, with hands laid restfully in their laps, and wide-open eyes gazing out over the world. There they have sat for millenniums, the embodiment of majestic repose. So Christ 'sitteth at the right hand of God' rapt in the fulness of eternal calm. But that tranquillity is parallel with the Scriptural representation of the rest of God after creation, which neither indicates previous exhaustion nor connotes present idleness, but expresses the completion of the work and the correspondence of the reality with the ideal which was in the Maker's mind.

In like manner, as I have been trying to point out to you, Christ's rest means the completeness of His finished work, and carries along with it, as that divine rest after creation does in its region, the conception of continuous activity, for just as little as the continuous phenomena of nature can be conceived of apart from the immanent activity of the ever-working God, and just as the last word of all physical science is that, beneath the so-celled causes and so-called forces there must lie a personal will, the only cause known to man, and preservation is a continuous creation, and the changes in nature are the result of the will of the active God, so the past work of Christ, of which He said, when He died, 'It is finished!' is prolonged into, and carried on through, the ages by the continuous activity of the ever-working Christ.

'He sitteth at the right hand of God'; and to that session may be applied in full truth what He said Himself, in the vindication of His work on the Sabbath day - 'My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.'

So the dying martyr looked up in the council chamber, and beyond the vaulted roof saw the heavens opened, and with a significant variation in the symbolical attitude, saw ‘the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ The seated Christ, we might say, had sprung to His feet, in answer to the dying martyr’s faith and prayer, and granted him the vision, not of calm repose, but of intensest activity for his help and sustaining.

The appendix to Mark’s Gospel, in like manner, unites these two conceptions of undisturbed tranquillity and of energetic work. For he says that the Lord ‘was received up into heaven, and sat at the right hand of God, and they went... everywhere preaching the word.’ Then did the Commander-in-chief send His soldiers out into the battlefield, and Himself retire to the safe shelter of the hill? By no means. For the two halves of the picture which look so unlike one another - the Lord seated there, and the servants wandering about and toiling here-are brought together into the one solid reality, ‘they went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord’ - seated up yonder - ‘working with them.’ So constant activity is the very essence and inseparable accompaniment of the undisturbed tranquillity of the seated Christ. In other places in Scripture we get the same blending together of the two ideas, as, for instance, when Paul says ‘It is Christ that died, yea, rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.’ And in like manner, in Peter’s utterance Upon Pentecost, already referred to, you find the same idea.

‘Being at the right hand of God exalted, He hath showed forth this which ye now see and hear.’ So, working with us, working in us, working for us, working through us, the ever active Christ is with His people, and seated at the right hand of God, shares in all their labours, in all their difficulties, in all their warfare.

III. Lastly, we have here the revelation of Christ’s participation in divine power and dominion.

There is a very remarkable and instructive variety in the forms of expression conveying this idea in various parts of the New Testament. We read from His own lips, ‘seated at the right hand of power.’ We read usually ‘at the right hand of God.’ We read in this Epistle ‘at the right hand of the Majesty of the Highest,’ and also ‘at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.’ So you see our Lord Himself dwelt mainly on the conception of participation in power. And these other passages which I have quoted deal mainly with the conception of the participation in royal authority and dominion. And these two go together.

Then there is another observation to be made, and that in that this sitting at God’s right hand is to be interpreted as purely symbolical. For you cannot localize ‘the right hand of God.’ That ‘right hand’ is everywhere, wherever the divine power is working. So that, though I, for my part, believe that the human corporeity of Jesus Christ, with which He ascended into the heavens, does abide in a locality, it is not that localization which is meant by this great symbol of my text, but it is the declaration of a state, rather than of a place - participation in the power that belongs to God, and not a session in a given locality.

There is another remark also to be made, and that is that, according to the full-toned belief of the Christian Church when Jesus Christ in His ascension returned to the Father, from whom He had come, He carried with Him this great difference between His then - that is to say, His present - state, and the pre-incarnate state, viz., that now He has carried into unity with the Father the glorified manhood which He assumed on earth, and there is no difference between the glory which He had with the Father before the world was, and the glory in which He now sits. Humanity is thus gathered into divinity.

Now, brethren, I am not going to dwell upon these thoughts, for they go far beyond the powers of my speech; but I am bound by my own conceptions of what Christ Himself has taught us, to reiterate that here we have the plainest teaching, founded on His own express statement, that He is participant of divine fellowship, so close as that it is represented either by being in the bosom of the Father, or by sitting at the right hand of God, and that ‘all power is given unto Him in heaven and on earth,’ so as that He is the Administrator of the universe. The hands that were pierced with the nails, and into one of which was thrust, in mockery, the reed for a sceptre, now carry the sceptre of the universe, and He is ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’ ‘He sitteth at the right hand of the Throne of the Majesty in the heavens.’

Now all this should have a very strong practical effect upon us. ‘If ye then be risen with Christ, seek the things where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.’ Oh, brethren! if we carried with us day by day into all our difficulties and struggles, and amidst the glittering fascinations and temptations of this earthly life that great thought, and if we kept the heavens open - for we can do so - and keep before our eyes that vision, how small the difficulties, what molehills the mountains, and how void of charm the seducing temptations would then be! Christ seen - like the popular idea of the sunshine streaming down upon a coal fire - puts out the fuliginous flame of earth’s temptations, and dims the kindled brightness of earth’s light. And if we really, and not as a mere dogma, had incorporated this faith into our lives, how different that last moment, and what lies beyond it, would look. I do not know how it may be with others, but to me the conception of eternity is chill and awful and repellent; it seems no blessing to live for ever. But if we people the waste future with the one figure of the living Christ exalted for us, it all becomes different, and, like the sunrise on snowy summits, the chill heights, not to be trodden by human foot, flash up into rosy beauty that draws men’s desires. ‘I go to prepare a place for you’; and He prepares it by being there Himself, for then, then it becomes Home. ‘And if I go to prepare a place for you I will come again, and receive you to Myself, that where I am there ye may be also’ - ‘sitting on My throne, as I overcame, and am sat down with My Father on His throne.’

24)Hebrews 10:14

Hebrews

PERFECTED AND BEING SANCTIFIED

Heb. 10:14

IN the preceding sentence there is another ‘for ever,’ which refers to the sacrifice of Christ, and declares its perpetual efficacy. It is one, the world’s sins are many, but the single sacrifice is more than all of them. It is a past act, but its consequences are eternal, and flow down through all the ages. The text explains wherein consists the perpetual efficacy of Christ's sacrifice, and the reason why it needs no repetition while the world lasts. It endures for ever, because it has perfected for ever them that are sanctified. Now, in looking at these words, two things are noteworthy. One is the double designation here of the persons whom Christ influences by His offering, in that they are 'perfected,' and in that they are 'sanctified.' Another is the double aspect of our Lord's work here set forth in regard to time, in that it is, in the first part of the sentence, spoken of as a past act whose consequences endure - 'He hath perfected' - and in the latter part of our text, according to the accurate rendering, it is spoken of as continuous and progressive, as yet incomplete and going on to perfection- For the text ought to read - 'He hath perfected for ever them that are being sanctified.' So there you have these two things, the double view of what Christ does, 'perfects' and 'sanctifies,' and the double view of His 'work, in that in one aspect it is past and complete, and in another aspect it is running on, continuous, and as yet unfinished.

I. First, then, look at the twofold aspect of the effect of Christ's sacrifice.

By it we are 'perfected,' 'sanctified.' Now, these two words, so to speak, cover the same facts, but they look at them from two different points of view. One of them looks at the completed Christian character from the human point of view, and the other looks at it from the divine. For, what does 'perfect' mean in the New Testament? It means, as many a passage might be quoted to show, 'mature,' 'full grown,' in opposition to 'babes in Christ.' This very Epistle uses the two phrases in that antithesis, but the literal meaning of the word is that which has reached its end, that which has attained what it was meant to be; and, according to the New Testament teaching, a man is perfected when he has all his capabilities and possibilities of progress and goodness and communion with God made into realities and facts in His life, when the bud has flowered, and the flower has fruited, When capacity is developed, privileges enjoyed, duties attended to,. relationships entered into and maintained - when these things have taken place the man is perfect. It is to be observed that there is no reference in the word to any standard outside of human nature. If a man has become all that

it is possible for him to be, he is, in the fullest sense, perfect. But Scripture also recognises a relative perfection, as we have already remarked, which consists in a certain maturity of Christian character, and has for its opposite the condition of ‘babes in Christ.’ So Paul exhorts ‘as many as be perfect’ to be ‘thus minded’ - namely, not to count themselves to have apprehended, but to stretch forward to the things which rare before, and to press towards the goal which still gleams far in advance. Consider, now, that other description of a Christian character as
‘sanctified.’

The same set of facts in a man’s nature is thought of in that word, only they are looked at from another point of view. I suppose I do not need to enlarge upon the fact which, however, I am afraid a great many good people do not realise as they should, that the Biblical notion of ‘saint’ and ‘sanctified’ does not begin with character, but with relation, or, if I might put it more plainly, it does not, primarily and to start with, mean righteous, but ‘belonging to God.’ The Old and the New Testament concur in this conception of ‘sanctity,’ or ‘holiness,’ which are the same thing, only one is a Latin word and the other a Teutonic one - namely, that it starts from being consecrated and given up to God, and that out of that consecration will come all manner of righteousness and virtues, beauties of character, and dispositions and deeds which all men own to be ‘lovely... and of good report.’ The saint is, first of all, a man who knows that he belongs to God, and is glad to belong to Him, and then, afterwards, he becomes righteous and pure and radiant, but it all starts with yielding myself to God.

So the same set of characteristics which in the word ‘perfected’ were considered as fulfilling the idea of manhood, as God has given it to us, are massed in this other word, and considered as being the result of our yielding ourselves to Him. That is to say, no man has reached the end which he was created and adapted to reach, unless he has surrendered himself to God. You never be ‘perfected’ until you are ‘sanctified.’

You must begin with consecration, and then holiness of character, and beauty of conduct, and purity of heart will all come after that. It is vain to put the cart before the horse, and to try to work at mending your characters, before you have set right your relationship to God. Begin with sanctifying, and you will come to perfecting. That is the New Testament teaching. And there is no way of getting to that perfection except, as we shall see, through the one offering.

II. In the next place notice here the completed work.

‘By one offering He hath "perfected"‘ us, the Christian people of this generation, the Christian people yet to be born into the world, the men that have not yet learned that they belong to Him, but who will learn it some day. Were they all ‘perfected’ eighteen centuries ago? In what sense can that perfecting be said to be a past act? Suppose you take some purifying agent, and throw it in at the headwaters of a river, and it goes down the stream, down and down and down, and by degrees purifies it all If you like to use long- winded words, you can say that ‘potentially’ the river was purified when the precipi-rating agent was flung into it, though its waves were still foul with impurity. Or you can put it into plainer English and say that the past act has its abiding consequences, for there has been thrown into the centre of human history, as it were, that which is amply adequate to the ‘perfecting’ and the ‘sanctifying’ of every soul of the race. And that is what the writer of this Epistle means when he says ‘He hath perfected,’ because that sacrifice, like the precipitating agent that I have spoken about, has been flung into the stream of the world’s history, and has power to make pure as the dew-drop, or as the water that flows from melting ice, every foul-smelling, darkly dyed drop of the filthy stream.

‘By one offering; Now the word that the writer employs there is a very unusual one in Scripture. He has just been using it in a previous verse, where he speaks about ‘the offering of the body of Jesus Christ.’ Did you ever notice that remarkable expression ‘the offering of the body,’ not as we usually read, the ‘blood.’ What does that mean? I think it means this, that the writer is contemplating not only the culminating sacrifice of Calvary, but Christ’s offering of Himself all through His earthly life; and knitting together in one the life and the death, the totality of His work, as that by which He has ‘perfected for ever all them that are being sanctified.’ And that, I think, is made quite certain, because he has just been speaking, and the words of my text refer back to the declaration in one of the psalms ‘Lo! I come to do Thy will, O God,’ as expressing the whole meaning of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That saying of the psalmist was fulfilled not only on the Cross but in all His daily life.

Jesus Christ, then, in His whole manifestation, in His life, but not only in His life; and in His death, but not only in His death, has offered Himself unto God, 'the Lamb without blemish, and without spot.' And in that offering culminating in the death upon the Cross, but not confined thereto, there does lie the power which is triumphantly more than adequate to deal with all the foulnesses and sins of the world, and to perfect for ever any man that attaches himself to it. It deals with our guilt as nothing else can. It speaks to our consciences as nothing else can. It takes away all the agony and the pain, or all the dogged deadness, of a seared conscience. It deals with character. In that great offering, considered as including Christ's life as well as His death, and considered as including Christ's death as well as His life, you have folded up in indissoluble unity the pattern, the motive, and the power for all righteousness of character; and he reaches the end for which God created him, who, laying his hand on the head of that offering, not only transfers his sins to it, but receives its righteousness into him. By one offering that dealt with guilt, and wiped it all out, and that deals with the tyranny of evil, and emancipates us from it, and that communicates to us a new life formed in righteousness after the image of Him that created us, we are delivered from the burden of our sins and perfected, in so far as we lay hold of the power that is meant to cleanse us.

There is no other way of being perfected. You will never reach the point which it is possible for you to attain, and you will never fulfil the purpose for which God made you, unless you have joined yourself by faith to Jesus Christ, and are receiving into your life, and developing in your character, the power which He has lodged in the heart of humanity for redemption and purifying.

III. Now one last word. We have here the continuous and progressive work of Christ, and the growing experience, of Christians.

As I have remarked, the last clause of my text would be more completely rendered if we read, 'them that are being sanctified.' The same idea is set forth by the apostle Paul in that solemn passage in the first Epistle to the

Corinthians, where he speaks about the double effect of the gospel upon 'them that are perishing; and on them that are being saved.' In both cases there is a process going on. The same idea is brought out, too, in the other expression in the Acts of the Apostles, about the 'Lord adding to the Church daily,' not, as the Authorised Version has it, 'such as should be saved,' but 'them that were being saved.' We may speak of salvation as past, as all included in the initial act by which we are knit to Jesus Christ through faith, when as guilty sinners we come to Him and east ourselves on Him. We may speak of salvation as being future, and lying beyond this vale of tears and battlefield of sins and sorrow. But we can speak of it more accurately than in either of these aspects, as a point in the past, prolonged into a line in the present, and running on into the future. For salvation is a process which is going on day by day, if we are right, and which I am afraid is not progressive in a very great many professing Christian people. Perfected, I said, meant full-grown. I wonder about how many of us it would need to be said, 'Ye are babes in Christ, and when for the time ye ought to be teachers ye have need that one teach you which be the first principles of the oracles of God.' Salvation is a progressive process. That is to say, if we are truly joined to Jesus Christ, we are growingly influenced by the powers of His Cross and the gift of His Spirit.

There is no limit to that growth. It is like a spiral which goes up and up and up, and in every convolution 'draws nearer to the centre, but never reaches it. Our hearts and spirits are wonderfully elastic. They can take in a great deal more of God than we think they can, or than they ever have taken in. We can receive just as much of that infinite Life into our finite spirits as we will. Let us each strive to get more and more of Jesus Christ in us, that we may know Him, and the 'power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings,' more fully, more deeply, and may keep it more constantly. Oh, brethren! if we are not ascending the ladder that reaches to heaven, which is Christ Himself, we are descending; and if we are not growing we are dwindling; and if we cannot say that we are being sanctified, we are being made more and more common and profane.

I am not going to say one word about whether absolute perfection or absolute sanctification can be reached in this life. If you and I were many hundreds of miles farther on the road, it would be worth discussing whether we could reach the goal or not. Never mind about the possibilities of abstract and perfect sanctification, we are a good long way off that.

Look after the next step in advance, and leave the ultimate one to take care of itself. Only remember, that whilst Christ's past work has in it perpetual and absolute power to make any man perfect, no man will be sanctified unless he is sanctified by 'faith that is in Me,' and by the effort to work into his life and character the gift of the Divine Spirit and of the life of Christ which he receives by faith. It is 'them that are being sanctified' to whom the large hopes of this great text apply, and who may be sure that one day they will be absolutely perfected.

25)Hebrews 10:30

Hebrews

HOW TO OWN OURSELVES

Heb. 10:30

THE writer uses a somewhat uncommon word in this clause, which is not altogether adequately represented by the translation 'saving.' Its true force will be apparent by comparing one or two of the few instances in which it occurs in the New Testament. For example, it is twice employed in the Epistles to the Thessalonians; in one case being rendered, 'God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain' [or, more correctly, to the obtaining of] 'salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ'; and in another, 'called to the obtaining of glory through Jesus Christ.' It is employed twice besides in two other places of Scripture, and in both of these it means 'possession.' So that, though practically equivalent to the idea of salvation, there is a very beautiful shade of difference which is well worth noticing.

The thought of the text is substantially this - those who believe win their souls; they acquire them for their possession. We talk colloquially about 'people that cannot call their souls their own.' That is a very true description of all men who are not lords of themselves through faith in Jesus Christ. 'They who believe to the gaining of their own souls' is the meaning of the writer here.

And I almost think that we may trace in this peculiar expression an allusion, somewhat veiled but real, to similar words of our Lord's. For He said, when, like the writer in the present context, He was encouraging His disciples to steadfastness in the face of difficulties and persecutions, 'In your patience' - in your persistent adherence to Me, whatever might draw you away, - 'ye shall win' - not merely possess, as our Bible has it, and not a commandment, but a promise - 'in your patience ye shall win your souls.' Whether that allusion be sustainable or no matters comparatively little; it is the significant and beautiful thought which underlies the word to which I wish to turn, and to present you with some illustrations of it.

I. First, then, if we lose ourselves we win ourselves.

All men admit in theory that a self-centred life is a blunder. Jesus Christ has all moralists and all thoughtful men wholly with Him when He says, 'He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life shall find it.' There is no such way of filling a soul with enlargement and blessedness and of evolving new powers and capacities as self-oblivion for some great cause, for some great love, for some great enthusiasm. Many a woman has found herself when she held her child in her arms, and in the self-oblivion which comes from maternal affections and cares has sprung into a loftier new life. Many a heart, of husband and wife, can set its seal to this truth, that the blessedness of love is that it decentralises the soul, and substitutes another aim for the wretched and narrow one that is involved in self-seeking. And even if we do not refer to these sacred heights of maternal or of wedded love, there are many other noble counterpoises to the do-grading influence of self- absorption, which all men recognise and some men practise. Whoever has once tasted the joy and rapture of flinging himself into some great enthusiasm, and has known how much fuller life is when so inspired than in its ordinary forms, needs no words to convince him that the secret of blessedness, elevation, and power, if it is to be put into one great word, must be put into this one, 'self-oblivion.'

But whilst all these counterpoises to the love of self are, in their measure and degree, great and noble and blessed, not one of them, nor all of them put together, will so break the fetters from off a prisoned soul and let it out into the large place of utter and glad self-oblivion as the course which our text enjoins upon us when it says: If you wish to forget yourselves, to abandon and lose yourselves, fling yourselves into Christ's arms, and by faith yield your whole being, will, trust, purposes, aims, everything - yield them all to Him; and when you can say, 'We are not our own,' then first will you belong to yourselves and have won your own souls.

There is nothing except that absolute departure from all reliance upon our own poor powers, and from all making of ourselves our centre and aim in life, which gives us true possession of ourselves. Nothing else is comparable to the talismanic power of trust in Jesus Christ. When thus we lose ourselves in Him we find ourselves, and find Him in ourselves.

I believe that, at bottom, a life must either spin round on its own axis, self-centred and self-moved, or else it must be drawn by the mass and weight and mystical attractiveness of the great central sun, and swept clean out of its own little path to become a satellite round Him. Then only will it move in music and beauty, and flash back the lustre of an unfading light. Self or God, one or other will be the centre of every human life.

It is well to be touched with lofty enthusiasms; it is well to conquer self in the eager pursuit of some great thought or large subject of study; it is well to conquer self in the sweetness of domestic love; but through all these there may run a perverting and polluting reference to myself. Affection may become but a subtle prolongation of myself, and study and thought may likewise be tainted, and even in the enthusiasm for a great cause there may mingle much of self-regard; and on the whole there is nothing that will sweep out, and keep out, the seven devils of selfishness except to yield yourselves to God, drawn by His mercies, and say, 'I am not my own; I am bought with a price.' Then, and only then, will you belong to yourselves.

II. Secondly it we will take Christ for our Lord we shall be lords of our own souls.

I have said that self-surrender is self-possession. It is equally true that self-control is self-possession; and it is as true about this application of my text as it was about the former, that Christianity only says more emphatically what moralists say, and suggests and supplies a more efficient means of accomplishing the end which they all recognise as good. For everybody knows that the man who is a slave to his own passions, lusts, or desire is not his own master. And everybody knows that the man who is the sport of circumstance, and yields to every temptation that comes sweeping round him, as bamboos bend before every blast; or the man who is guided by fashion, conventionality, custom, and the influence of the men amongst whom he lives, and whom he calls ‘the world,’ is not his own master. He ‘dare not call his soul his own.’

What do we mean by being self-possessed, except this, that we can so rule our more fluctuating and sensitive parts as that, notwithstanding appeals made to them By external circumstances, they do not necessarily yield to these? He possesses himself who, in the face of antagonism, can do what is right; who, in the face of temptation, will not do what is wrong; who can dare to be in the right with one or two; and who is not moulded By circumstances, howsoever they may influence him, but reacts upon them as a hammer, and is not as an anvil. And this superiority over the parts of my nature which are meant to be kept down, and this assertion of independent power in the face of circumstances, and this freedom from the dominion of cliques and parties and organs of opinion and loud voices round us, this is best secured in its fulness and completeness by the path which my text suggests.

Trust in Jesus Christ, and let Him be your Commander-in-chief, and you have won your souls. Let Him dominate them, and you can dominate them. If you will give your wills into His hands, He will give them back to you and make you able to subdue your passions and desires. Put the reins into Christ’s hands and say, ‘Here, O Lord, guide Thou the horses and the chariot, for I cannot coerce them, but Thou canst.’ Then He will come and bring a new ally in the field, and cast a new weight into the scale, and you will no longer be the slave of the servile and inferior parts of your nature; nor be kicked about, the football of circumstances; nor be the echo of some other body’s views, but you will have a voice of your own, and a will of your own, and a soul of your own, because you have given them to Christ, and He will help you to control them. Such a man - and I verily believe, from the bottom of my heart, such a man only - in the fullest sense, is

'Free from slavish bands,
Of hope to rise, or fear to fall;
Lord of himself, though not of lands;
And having nothing, yet hath all.'

What does some little rajah, on the edge of our great Indian Empire, do when troubled with rebels whom he cannot subdue? He goes and makes himself a feudatory of the great central power at Calcutta, and then down comes a regiment or two, and makes very short work of the rebellion that the little kinglet could do nothing with. If you go to Christ and say to Him, 'Dear Lord, I take my crown from my head and lay it at Thy feet. Come Thou to help me to rule this anarchic realm of my own soul,' you will win yourself.

III. Thirdly, if we have faith in Christ we acquire a better self.

The thing that most thoughtful men and women feel, after they have gone a little way into life, is not so much that they want to possess themselves, as that they want to get rid of themselves - of all the failures and shame and disappointment and futility of their lives. That desire may be accomplished. We cannot strip ourselves of ourselves by any effort. The bitter old past keeps living on, and leaves with us seeds of weakness and memories that sometimes corrupt, and always enfeeble: memories that seem to limit the possibilities of the future in a tragic fashion. Ah, brethren! we can get rid of ourselves; and, instead of continuing the poor, sin-laden, feeble creatures that we are, we can have pouring into our souls the gift most real -though people nowadays, in their shallow religion, call it mystical - of a new impulse and a new life. The old individuality will remain, but new tastes, new aspirations, aversions, hopes, and capacities to realise them may all be ours, so that 'if any man be in Christ he is a new creature'; and in barter for the old garment he receives the robe of righteousness. You can lose yourselves, in a very deep and earnest sense, if, trusting in Jesus Christ, you open the door of the heart to the influx of that new life which is His best gift. Faith wins a better self, and we may each experience, in all its fulness and Blessedness, the paradox of the apostle when he said, ‘I live’ now, at last, in triumphant possession of this better life: ‘I live’ now - I only existed before - ‘yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’ And with Christ in me I first find myself.

IV. Lastly, if by faith we win our souls here, we save them from destruction hereafter.

I have said that the word of my text is substantially equivalent to the more frequent and common expression ‘salvation’; though with a shade of difference, which I have been trying to bring Out. And this substantial equivalence is more obvious if you will note that the text is the second member of an antithesis of which the first is, ‘we are not of them which draw back into perdition.’

So, then, the writer sets up, as exact opposites of one another, these two ideas - perdition or destruction on the one hand, and the saving or winning of the soul on the other. Therefore, whilst we must give due eight to the considerations which I have already been suggesting, we shall not grasp the whole of the writer’s meaning unless we admit also the thought of the future. And that the same blending of the two ideas, of possession and salvation in the more usual sense of the word, was implied in the Lord’s saying, of which I have suggested there may be an echo here, is plain if you observe that the version in St. Luke gives the text which I have already quoted: ‘In your patience ye shall win your souls’; and that of St. Matthew, in the same connection, gives, instead, the saying, ‘he that endureth’ - which corresponds with patience - ‘he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.’

So, then, brethren, you cannot be said to have won your souls if you are only keeping them for destruction, and such destruction is clearly laid down here as the fate of those who turn away from Jesus Christ.

Now, it seems to me that no fair interpretation can eject from that word ‘perdition,’ or ‘destruction,’ an element of awe and terror. However you may interpret the ruin, it is ruin utter of which it speaks. And I am very much afraid that in this generation eager discussions about the duration of punishment, and the final condition of those who die impenitent, have had a disastrous influence on a great many minds and consciences in reference to this whole subject, by making it rather a subject of controversy than a solemn truth to be pondered. However the controversies be settled, there is terror enough left in that word to make us all bethink ourselves.

I lay it on your hearts, dear friends - it is no business of mine to say much about it, but I lay it on your hearts and on my own; and I beseech you to ponder it. Do not mix it up with wholly independent questions as to what is to become of people who never heard about Jesus Christ. ‘The Judge of all the earth will do right.’ What this verse says applies to people that have heard about Him - that is, to you and me - and to people that do not accept Him - and that is some of us; and about them it says that they ‘draw back unto perdition.’

Now, remember, the alternative applies to each of us. It is a case of ‘either-or’ in regard to us all. If we have taken Christ for our Saviour, and, as I said, put the reins into His hands and given ourselves to Him by love and submission and confidence, then we own our souls, because we have given them to Him to keep, ‘and He is able to keep that which is committed to Him against that day.’

But I am bound to tell you, in the plainest words I can command, that if you have not thus surrendered yourself to Jesus Christ, His sacrifice, His intercession, His quickening Spirit, then I know not where you are to find one foothold of hope that upon you there will not come down the overwhelming fate that is darkly portrayed in that one solemn word.

Oh, brethren! let us all ponder the question, ‘ What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?’

26)Hebrews 10:34

Hebrews

A BETTER AND AN ENDURING SUBSTANCE

Heb. 10:34

THE words ‘in heaven’ are probably no part of the original text, but have somehow or other crept in, in order to make more plain what some one supposed to be the reference of these words to the future inheritance of the saints. They, however, rather disturb than help the writer’s thought. He is speaking of a present and not of a future possession. ‘Ye have,’ and not ‘ye shall have,’ a better and an ‘enduring possession,’ not in heaven, but here and now.

But even if these words be expelled from the text as disturbing the writer’s thought, there still remains a variation in the reading of some importance. It is a very slight difference of form in the original, but the two meanings between which we have to choose are these: ‘Knowing that ye have yourselves as a better and an enduring possession’; or, ‘a better and an enduring possession for yourselves.’ I am inclined rather to the former of the two, both from external authority and internal congruity, though the choice between them is difficult. But, if we accept this as the meaning of these words, we can gather from them important lessons, of which I ask your consideration.

I. The true possession.

If we adopt the other reading, and take the words to mean that, in so far as we are truly resting on Jesus, we have for ourselves an inheritance or possession better than all external ones, the text will then be pointing to the old thought that God is the true joy and treasure of a man’s soul. If, on the other hand, we may venture to adopt the other meaning, there is great depth and beauty in it, representing, as it does, the Christian as having himself as a treasure. It may strike one as strange, but a little consideration will show its truth and perfect harmony with the other thought, that God is the treasure of every soul which is not poor and in need of all things. ‘A good man shall be satisfied from himself, says the Book of Proverbs, and that is no arrogant denial of the need for God, but completely accords with the devout acknowledgment, ‘All my springs are in Thee.’ In the very same chapter as our text we read: ‘We are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of their souls,’ which might be more accurately rendered, ‘to the acquisition as their own of their souls.’ Remember, too, our Lord’s words: ‘In your patience ye shall acquire possession of your souls.’ If we take these sayings into account, we need not hesitate to admit that, at all events, there is a great deal to be said for the somewhat remarkable expression in the text.

It just comes to this. No man possesses himself until he has given up himself. We only own ourselves when we have parted with ourselves. Until we have yielded ourselves in acts of dependent faith and rejoicing love and docile obedience unto God, we have no real possession of ourselves. He, and only he, who says, ‘I give myself away to Thee,’ gets himself back again sanctified, gladdened, ennobled, and on the way to be perfected by his surrender and God’s reception.

We own ourselves only on condition of being Christian men. For, under all other circumstances and forms of life, the true self is domineered over and brought into slavery and dragged away from its proper bearings by storms and swarms of lusts and passions and inclinations and ambitions and senses. A man’s flesh is his master, or his pride is his master, or some fraction of his nature is his master, and he himself is an oppressed slave, tyrannised over by rebellious powers. The only way to get the mastery of yourselves, to be able to keep a tight hand upon all inferior parts of your nature, and to have that self-command and self-possession without which there is nothing noble in life, is to go to God and say, ‘Oh, Lord! I cannot rule this anarchic being of mine. Do Thou take it into Thine hands. Here are the reins: do with me what Thou wilt.’ Then you will be your own masters, not till then. Then you will own yourselves; till then, the devil and the world and the flesh, and the pomps and prides and passions and lusts and lazinesses that are in your nature will own you. But if we have exercised the faith which casts itself wholly upon God, we therein and thereby win God and our own selves also, and that is one of the meanings of ‘saving our own souls.’

Or, to put it in another light, the only things worth calling treasures and possessions are true thoughts that we have learned from God; pure affections that go out to Him; yearning desires after Him, which, in their very yearning, bear the prophecy, and are to a large extent the foretaste, of their own fruition.

These are the things that make a man’s treasure. The inner life of obedience, of love, of trust, the conscience cleansed, the will made plastic and docile, the heart filled with all pure and heavenward affections, aspirations that lift us above self and time, and bring us into the sweet and calm light of the Eternal Love whose name is God - these are the possessions which are worth possessing. And he, and only he, has such who has found them in lowly submission of his sinful self to Christ who has died that our spirits might be cleansed and given back unto us.

Brethren, the realisation of this possession of ourselves depends on our faith. Stoics and moralists and lofty souled men in all ages have talked about the true possession of oneself, which comes by self-surrender and annihilation, but Christian faith realises the dream, and they only find the reality who pass towards it through the gate of trust in Jesus Christ. Then, and only then, will the old English poet’s lovely picture be fulfilled, and the man’s soul

> *Made free from slavish bands, Of hope to rise, or fear to fall; Lord of himself, though not of lands; And having nothing, yet hath all.’*

II. Note, again, how here we hear asserted the superiority of this possession.

It is ‘better’ in its essential quality. That does not need many words. Surely these possessions of heart and mind and will and desires all brought into fellowship with and filled by God are things more correspondent with the nature of man and his needs than any accumulation of outward possessions can ever be. And surely it is a plain piece of prose, and no exaggerated religious enthusiasm, which says, ‘Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and there is none upon earth that I desire besides Thee.’ Men call it mysticism. It is the very foundation of all true religion. The apprehension of union with God is the one thing that will satisfy the sold; the one thing that we need, width having, we cannot be wholly desolate, however dark may be our path, nor wholly solitary, however lonely may be our lot, nor utterly bereaved, however Blessings may be dragged from our hands; and without which we cannot be at rest, however compassed with stays and succours and treasures and friends; nor rich, however we may have Bursting coffers and all things to enjoy.

The possession which we tarry within us is better than any which we can gather round us. ‘Surely he is disquieted in vain, he heapeth up treasures’- and the very fact that they need to be ‘heaped,’ and that that is all that he can do with them, shows the vanity of the disquiet that raked them together. Not what a man has, but what a man is, is his wealth.

And the better treasure is an enduring possession. That is the second element of its excellence. These things, the calm joys, the pure delights of still fellowship with God in heart and mind and will - these things have in them no seed of decay. These cannot be separated from their possessor by anything but his own unfaithfulness. There will never come the time when they shall have to be left behind. Use does not wear these out, but strengthens and increases them. The things which are destined ‘to perish with the using’ belong to an inferior category. All the best things are intended and destined to increase with the using, and this treasure, the more it is expended the fuller is the coffer, and the more we exercise the love, the communion, the obedience which make our true riches, the more do the riches increase. And then, when all other things drop from their nerveless hands; and ‘His glory’ - whose glory was in outward things -’shall not descend after him,’ we shall carry these treasures with us wherever we go, and find that they were the pledge of immortality.

III. My text, lastly, suggests to us the quiet superiority to earthly loss and change which the possession of this treasure involves.

The writer is speaking to Christian men who have endured a great fight of afflictions, and he says of them, ‘Ye took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, because you knew that you had this Better and enduring substance.’ Joyfully! When you strike away the false props the strength of the real ones becomes more conspicuous. And many and many a time we may experience, unless we waste our discipline and our sorrows, that the surest way to become richer towards God is to lose the earthly stays and supports. But whether that be so or no, he who sits in the centre, and has the light round him, need not mind much what storms are raging without, and he whose inexpugnable fortress is within the depths of God may smile at all the hubbub and confusion down in the valley. If we possess this true treasure which lies at our doors, and may be had for the taking, we shall be like men in some strong fortress, with firm walls, abundant provisions, and a well in the courtyard, and we can laugh at besiegers 'His abiding place shall be the munitions of rooks; his bread shall be given him and his water shall be made sure.' We may be quiet and lofty, infinitely above the fear of chance and change, if we keep the firm hold which we may keep of the enduring riches which God brings with Him into our souls.

Some of you may be in circumstances which make such thoughts as these specially applicable, either because dark days may be threatening, or because the sunshine of prosperity may be dazzling some eyes and making them lose sight of their true wealth. To the one class the thought of my text is gathered up in the warning, 'Charge them that they trust not in the uncertainty of riches, but in the living God.' And, to the other class, the text should quicken and consolidate the resolve, 'What time I am afraid I will trust in Thee. Thou art the strength of my heart, and mine inheritance for ever.'

27)Hebrews 11:6

Hebrews

SEEKING GOD

Heb. 11:6

THE writer has been pointing to the patriarch Enoch as the second of these examples of the power of faith in the Old Covenant; and it occurs to him that there is nothing said in Genesis about Enoch's faith, so he set about showing that he must have had faith, because he 'walked with God,' and pleased Him, and no man could thus walk with God, and please Him, unless he had come to Him, and no man could come to a God in whom he did not believe, and whom he did not believe to be waiting to help and bless him, when he did come. So the facts of Enoch's life show that there must have been in him an underlying faith. That is all that I need to say about the context of the words before us. I am not going to speak of the writer’s argument, but only of this one aspect of the divine character which is brought out here. ‘He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.’

I. Now a word about the seeking.

Seek?’ Do we need to seek? Not in the way in which people go in quest of a thing that they have lost and do not know where to find. We do not need to search; we do not need to seek.

The beginning of all our seeking is that God has sought us in Jesus Christ, and so we have done for ever with: ‘Oh! that I knew where I might find Him.’ We have done for ever with ‘feeling after Him, if haply we might find Him.’ That is all past. We have to seek, but let us never forget that we must have been found of Him, before we seek Him. That is to say, He must have revealed Himself to us in the fulness and reality and solid certainty of His existence and character, before there can be kindled in any heart or mind the desire to possess Him. He must have flashed His light upon the eye before the eye beholds; and He must have stimulated the desire by the revelation of Himself which comes before all desires, ere any of us will stir ourselves up to lay hold upon God. Ours, then, is not to be a doubtful search, hut a certain seeking, that goes straight to the place whore it knows that its treasure is, just as a migratory bird will set out from the foggy and ice-bound shores of the north, and go straight through the mists and the night, over continents and oceans, to a place where it never was before, but to which it is led - God only knows how - by some deep instinct, too deep to be an error, and too persistent not to find its resting-place. That is how we are to seek. We are to seek as the flower turns its opening petals to the sunshine, making no mistake as to the quarter of the heaven in which the radiance is lodged. We have to seek, as the rootlet goes straight to the river, knowing where the water is, from which life and sap will come. Thus we have to seek where and what we know. Our quest is no doubtful and miserable hunting about for a possible good, but an earnest desire for a certain and a solid blessing. That is the seeking.

Let us put it into two or three plain words. The prime requisite of the

Christian's seeking after God is as the writer here says, faith, I need not dwell upon that. 'Must believe that He is' - yes; of course. We do not seek after negations or hypotheses; we seek after a living Being. 'And that He is the Rewarder of them that diligently seek Him' - yes; if we were not cure that we should find what we wanted, we should never go to look for it. But, beyond all that, let me put three things as included in, and necessary to, the Christian seeking - desire, effort, prayer. We seek what we desire. But too many of us do not wish God, and would not know what to do with Him if we had Him, and would be very much embarrassed if it were possible for the full blessings which come along with Him, to be entrusted to our slack hands and unloving .hearts. Brethren, we call ourselves Christians; let us be honest with ourselves, and rigid in the investigation of the thoughts of our own hearts. Is there a wish for God there? Is there an aching void in His absence, or do we shovel cartloads of earthly rubbish into our hearts, and thus dull desires that can be satisfied only with Him? These are not questions to which any one has a right to expect an answer from another; they are not questions that any Christian man can safely shirk answering to himself and to God. The measure of our seeking is actually settled by the measure of our desire.

Then effort, of course, follows desire as surely as the shadow comes after the substance, because the only purpose of our desires, in the constitution of our nature, is to supply the driving power for effort. They are the steam in the boiler intended to whirl round the wheels. And so for a man to desire a thing that he can do nothing whatever to bring about, is misery and folly. But for a man to desire, and not to. work towards fulfilling his desire, is greater misery and greater stupidity. One cannot believe in the genuineness of those devout aspirations that one hears in people's prayers, who get up and wipe the dust off their knees, and go out into the world, and do nothing to bring about the fulfilment of their prayers. There is a great deal of that sort of desire amongst professing Christians in all churches, conventional utterances which are backed up and verified by no corresponding conduct. If we are seeking after God, we shall not let all the seeking effervesce in pious aspirations; it will get consolidated into corresponding action, and operate to keep thought and love directed towards Him, even amidst the trivialities, and legitimate duties, and great things of life. There will be effort to bring Him into connection with all our work; effort to keep by Him as we go about our daily tasks, if we are truly seeking after God.

And then, desire and effort being pre-supposed, there will come honest prayers, genuine prayers. ‘Seek ye the Lord while He may be found,’ says the prophet, and immediately goes on to exhort us to ‘call upon Him while He is near,’ as one and the chief way of seeking Him. He is always near, closer to us than friends and lovers, closer to us than our eyes and hands, near in His Son and the Spirit, near to hear and to bless, near and desiring to be nearer, yea to be blended with our being and to dwell in us and we in Him. We have not only to desire His gift, and to work towards it, but to ask for it. Then, if we exercise these three activities of desire, effort, petition, we may truly say: ‘When Thou saidst, "Seek ye My face," my heart said unto Thee, "Thy face, Lord! will I seek,"‘ and may go on, as the psalmist did, to offer the consequent prayer: ‘Hide not Thy face from me,’ in full assurance that He is found by every seeking soul So much for the seeking.

II. Now a word about the diligence in seeking.

The writer uses a very strong expression, one word in the original, which is here adequately rendered, ‘them that diligently seek Him.’ Half-hearted seeking finds nothing. You sometimes say to your children, when you have set them to look for anything, and they come back and say they have not been able to find it, ‘You do not know how to seek.’ And that is true about a great many of us. Half and half desire, so that one eye is turned on earth, and the other lifted up now and then to heaven, does not bring us much. It will bring a little, but not the fulness of blessing which follows on whole-hearted, continuous, persevering seeking. If you hold a cup below a tap, in an unsteady hand, sometimes it is under the whole rush of the water, and sometimes is on one side, and it will be a long time before you get it filled. There will be much of the water spilled. God pours Himself upon us, and we hold our vessels with unsteady hands, and twitch them away sometimes, and the bright blessing falls on the ground and cannot be gathered up, and our cup is empty, and our lips parched. Interrupted seeking will find little; perfunctory seeking will find less. Conventional religion brings very little blessing, very little consciousness of the presence of God; and that is why so many who call themselves Christians, and are so, in a measure and in a sense, know so little of the joy of being found of God. They have sought but not sought diligently.

Now let us take the rebuke to ourselves, if we need it, and we all need it more or less. It is a very threadbare piece of Christian counsel, to be earnest in our seeking after God, but it is none the less needed because it is threadbare, and it would not be threadbare if it had not been so much needed. ‘They that search diligently’ - which is the real meaning of the words in the Book of Proverbs rendered, ‘they that seek Me early’ -’shall find Me.’

III. So this brings me to the last thing here, the Rewarder and the reward.

‘He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.’ The best reward of seeking is to find the thing that you are looking for. So the best reward that God, the Rewarder, gives is when He gives Himself. There are a great many other good things that come to the diligently seeking Christian soul, but the best thing is that God draws near. Enoch sought God, came to God, and so he walked with God. The reward of his coming was continuous, calm communion, which gave him a companion in solitude, and one to walk at his side all through the darkness and the roughnesses, as well as the joys and the smoothnesses, of daily life.

Ah, brethren! there is no reward comparable to the felt presence in our own quiet hearts of the God who has found us, and whom we have found. And if we have that, then He becomes, here and now, the reward of the diligent search, and the reward of it to, day carries in itself the assurance of the perfect reward of the coming time. ‘He walked with God, and... God took him.’ That will be true of all of us. There is only one seeking in life that is sure to result in the finding of what we seek. All other search - the quest after the chief good - if it runs in any other direction, is resultless and barren. But there is one course, and one only, in which the result is solid and certain. ‘I have never said to any of the seed of Jacob, seek ye My face in vain.’ If we seek He will be found of us, and so be our Rewarder and our reward.

28)Hebrews 11:7

NOAH'S FAITH AND OURS

Heb. 11:7

THE creed of these Old Testament saints was a very short one, and very different from ours. Their faith was the very same. It is the great object of the writer of this Epistle, in this magnificent catalogue of the heroes of the faith, the muster roll of God's great army, to establish the principle that from the Beginning there has only been one kind of religion, only one way to God and that, however rudimentary and brief the articles of belief in those early days, the faculty by which these far-away believers lay hold on them, and its practical issues, were identical in them and in us, And that is a principle well worth getting into our minds, that the scope of the creed has nothing to do with the essence of the faith.

So we may look at this instance and discern in it. beneath all superficial differences, the underlying identities, and take this dim, half-intelligible figure of Noah, as he stands almost on the horizon of history, as being an example for us, in very vivid fashion, of the true object of faith, its operation in a two-fold fashion, and its vindication.

I. Look first at Noah's faith in regard to its object.

If we think of the incident brought before us in these words, we shall see how the confidence with which Noah laid hold of a dim future, about which he knew nothing, except Because God had spoken to him, was, at bottom, identical with that great attitude of the soul which we call faith, as it is exercised towards Jesus Christ.

No doubt in this Epistle to the Hebrews, the aspect of faith by which it lays hold of the future and the unseen, is the one on which the writer's mind is mainly fixed. But notice, that whilst the near object, so to speak, to which Noah stretched out his hands, and of which he laid hold, was that coming catastrophe, with its certainties of destruction and of deliverance; there was only one reason why he knew anything about that, and there was only one reason why he knew or believed anything about it, and that was because he believed Him who had told him. So, at bottom, God who had revealed the unseen future to him was the object of his faith. He trusted the Person, therefore he believed in that Person’s word, and therefore he had the assured realisation of things not seen as yet; and the future, so dim and uncertain to unaided eyes, became to him as certain as the past, and expectation as reliable as memory. His faith grasped the invisible things to come, only because it grasped the Invisible Person, who was, is, and is to come, and who lifted for him the curtain and showed him the things that should be. So is it with our faith; whether it lays hold upon a past sacrifice on Calvary, or upon a present Christ dwelling in our hearts, or whether it becomes telescopic, and stretches forward into the future, and brings the distant near, all its various aspects are but aspects of one thing, and that is personal trust in the personal Christ who speaks to us. What he says is a matter of secondary importance in this respect. The contents of God’s revelation vary; the act by which man accepts them is always the same.

So the great question for us all is - do we trust God? Do we believe Him, and therefore accept His words, not only with the assent of the understanding, which of all idle things is the idlest, but do-we believe Him, revealing, commanding, promising, threatening, with the trust and affiance of our whole hearts? Then, and then only, can we look with quiet certainty into the dim future, which else is all full of rolling clouds, that sometimes shape themselves to our imaginations into the likeness of stable things, but alas! change and melt while we gaze. Only then can we front the solemn future, and say: ‘I do not expect only, I know what is there.’ My brother, if our faith is worth calling faith at all, it rests so absolutely and confidingly upon God, that His bare word becomes to us the infallible source of certitude with regard to all the shifting hours of time, and to the steadfast day of an eternity, whose change is blessed growth to an un-reached and undeclining noon.

And what was the future that loomed before this man? The coming of a destruction as certain as God, and the coming of a deliverance as complete as His love could make it. Never mind although Noah’s outlook related but to a temporary catastrophe, and ours has reference to an eternal condition of things. That is a difference of no real moment. We have what Noah had, a definite, divine utterance, as the source of all our knowledge of what is coming. Both are alike in having two sides, one dark and menacing with a certain destruction, the other radiant and lustrous with as certain a deliverance. And now the question for each of us is, do I so believe God that that future is to me what it was to this man - far more real than these fleeing illusions that lie nearer me?

When Noah walked the earth and saw his contemporaries busy with buying and selling, planting and building, marrying and giving in marriage, how fantastic and unreal their work must have seemed to him, when behind them he saw blazing a vision, which he alone of all that multitude believed.

Do not let us fancy that we have faith if these near trifles are to us the great realities, and the distance is dim, and unsubstantial, and doubtful, hidden in mist and forgotten. The years that stretched between the divine utterance and its fulfilment were to this man as nothing, and for him the unseen was the reality, and the seen was the shadowy and phantasmal. And that is what faith worth calling the name will always do for men. Ask yourselves the question if your dim apprehension of that future, in either of its aspects, is anything so vivid as the certitude which blazed ever before the eye of this man. One of our old English writers says, ‘If the felicities of another world were as closely apprehended as the joys of this, it were martyrdom to live.’ That may be an exaggeration, but surely, surely there is something wrong in men who call themselves believers in God and His word, to whom the things seen and temporal are all or nearly all important, and the trifles an inch from their eyes are big enough to shut out heaven and all its stars.

II. Still further, notice Noah’s faith in its practical effects.

If faith has any reality in us at all, it works. If it has no effect it has no existence. The writer points out two operations of this confidence in God which, through belief in His word, leads to a realisation of a remote and unseen future. The effects are two-fold; First on Noah’s disposition, faith produced appropriate emotion, excited by the belief in the coming deluge; he was ‘moved with fear.’ Then, secondly, through emotion, faith influenced conduct - he ‘prepared an ark.’ This is the order in which faith ever works.

If real and strong, it will first affect emotion. By ‘fear’ here we are not merely to understand, though possibly it is not to be excluded, a dread of personal consequences, but much rather the sweet and lofty emotion which is described in another part of this same book by the same word: ‘Let us serve Him with reverence and with godly fear.’ It is the fear of pious regard, of religious awe, of reverence which has love blended inseparably with it, and is not merely a tremulous apprehension of some mischief coming to me. Noah had no need for that serf-regarding ‘fear,’ inasmuch as one half of his knowledge of the future was the knowledge of his own absolute safety. But reverence, the dread of going against his Father’s will, lowly submission, and all analogous and kindred sentiments, are expressed by the word.

Such holy and blessed emotion, which has no torment, is the sure result of real faith. Unless a man’s faith is warm enough to melt his heart, it is worth very little. A faith unaccompanied by emotion is, I was going to say worse, at any rate it is quite as bad, as a faith which is all wasted in emotion. It is not a good thing when all the steam roars out through an escape pipe; it is perhaps a worse thing when there is no steam in the boiler to escape. It is easy for people that have not any religion to scoff at what they suppose to be the fanatical excess of emotion which some forms of religious belief develop, I, for my part, would rather have the extremest emotion than a dead cold orthodoxy, that believes everything and feels nothing. There is some hope in the one; the other is only fit to be buried. Do not be afraid of feeling which is the child of faith. Be very much more afraid of a religion that leaves your heart beating just exactly at the same rate that it did before you took the truth into it. I am very, very sure that there is no road, between a man’s faith and his practice, except through his heart, and that, as the Apostle has it in a somewhat different form of speech, meaning, however, the same thing that I am now insisting upon, ‘faith worketh by love.’ Love is the path through which creed travels outward to conduct.

So we come to the second and more remote effect of faith. Emotion will lead to action. ‘Moved with fear he prepared an ark.’ If emotion be the child of faith, conduct is the child of emotion. Noah’s faith, then, led him to a line of action that separated him from the men around him; and it led him to a protracted labour in preparation for a remote end, for the coming of which he had no guarantee except what he believed to be God’s word. Commentators calculate that there were a hundred and twenty years between the time of the divine command and the Flood. Think of how this man, for all that long while, set himself to his task, and how many clever speeches would be made, proving that he was a fool, and how many witty gibes would come showering around his head like hail. But he kept steadily on, on a line of conduct which made him singular, and which had regard only to that result a hundred and twenty years off.

Now, is that what you and I are doing? Does our faith so shape our lives that whatever we are about, there is still regard to that far-off future? If you meet a man in the street, hurrying somewhere to welcome a friend expected to arrive from a far-off land, and you detain him in conversation, as you speak he is impatient, keeps looking over your shoulder down the road to see if there is any sign of his coming. That is how we should be acting here - doing our work and sticking to our tasks, but ever letting expectation and desire carry us onwards to that great future, which has already set out from the throne in Eternity, and is speeding towards us even now. Let that future, dear brethren, stand so clear before each of us, that it shall shape our whole work in the present. We shall mould all our lives with reference to it, if we are wise. For what we make our present, that will our future be. The smaller ends for which men live, and the nearer futures which they struggle towards, lose no jot of their worth by being regarded as but means to that far greater end. Rather, time is only redeemed from triviality, when it is seen to be the preparation for eternity, and earth is never so fair and good as when we discern and use it as the vestibule of heaven Never mind being singular. He is the wise man whose vision reaches as far as his existence, and whose earthly life has for the end of its effort, to please Christ and be found in Him.

III. And so, lastly, let me point to Noah’s faith, in regard to its vindication.

‘He condemned the world.’ ‘The world’ thought him wasting life foolishly. No doubt there were plenty of witty and wise things said about him.

‘Prudent, far-sighted, practical men’ would say, ‘How fanatical! What a misuse of energies and opportunities’; and so forth. And then, one morning, the rain began, and continued, and for forty days it did not stop, and they began to think that perhaps, after all, there was some method in his madness. Noah got into his ark, and still it rained, and I wonder what the wits and’ practical men,’ that had treated the whole thing as moonshine and folly, thought about it all then, with the water up to their knees. How their gibes and jests would die in their throats when it reached their lips! And so, my dear friends, the faith of the poor, ignorant old woman that up in her garret lives to serve Jesus Christ, and to win an eternal crown, will get its vindication some day, and it will be found out then which was the

‘practical’ man and the wise man, and all the witty speeches and smart sayings will seem very foolish, even to their authors, when the light of that future shines on them. And the old word will come true once more, that the man who lives for the present, and for anything bounded by Time, will have to ‘leave it in the midst of his days,’ and ‘at his latter end shall be a fool,’ whilst the ‘foolish’ man who lived for the future, when the future has come to the present, and the present has dwindled away into the past, and sunk beneath the horizon, shall be proved to be wise, and shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars for ever and ever.

29)Hebrews 11:9-10

Hebrews

THE CITY AND THE TENT

Heb. 11:9-10

THE purpose of the great muster-roll of the ancient heroes of Judaism in this chapter is mainly to establish the fact that there has never been but one way to God. However diverse the degrees of knowledge and the externals, the essence of religion has always been the same. So the writer of this Epistle, to the great astonishment, no doubt, of some of the Hebrews to whom it was addressed, puts out his hand, and claims, as Christians before Christ, all the worthies of whom they were nationally so proud. He is speaking here about the three patriarchs. Whether he conceives them to have all lived on the earth at one time or no, does not trouble us at all ‘By faith,’ says he, ‘Abraham sojourned in the land of promise as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise,’ because, ‘he looked for the city which hath the foundations, whom builder’ - or rather Architect - ‘and maker’ - or rather Builder - ‘is God.’

Now, of course, the writer gives a considerable extension of the meaning to the word ‘faith’; and in his use one aspect of it is prominent, though by no means exclusively so - viz., the aspect which looks to the unseen and the future, rather than that which grasps the personal Christ. But this is no essential difference from the ordinary New Testament usage; it is only a variation in point of view, and in the prominence given to an element always present in faith. What he says here, then, is substantially this - that in these patriarched lives we get a picturesque embodiment of the essential substance of all true Christian living, and that mainly in regard of two points, the great object which should fill mind and heart, and the consequent detachment from transitory things which should be cultivated.

‘He looked for a city,’ and so he was contented to dwell in a movable tent. That is an emblem containing the essence of what our lives ought to be, if we are truly to be Christian. Let us, then, deal with these two inseparable and indispensable characteristics of the life of faith.

I. Faith will behold the Unseen City, and the vision will steadfastly fill mind and heart.

As I have remarked, the conception of faith presented in the Epistle is slightly different from that found in other parts of the New Testament. It is but slightly different, for, whether we say that the object of our faith is the Christ, ‘Whom having not seen we love; in whom, though now we see Him not, yet believing we rejoice,’ or whether we say that it is the whole realm and order of things beyond the grave and above the skies where He is and which He has made our native land, makes in reality very little difference. We come at last to the thought of personal reliance on Him by whose word and by whose resurrection and ascension only we apprehend, and by whose grace and power and love only we shall ever possess that unseen futurity. So we may fairly say that whilst, no doubt, it is true that the living Christ Himself - and no heaven apart from Him, nor any future apart from Him, nor any thing of His, apart from Him, though it be a cross, but the living Christ Himself is the true object of faith, yet that conception of its object includes the view of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the 'city which has the foundations,' should, because it is all clustered round Him who is its King, Be the object that fills our minds and hearts.

I am not going to discuss the details of what this writer supposes to have been the animating principle and aim of that ancient patriarch's life. It matters nothing at all for the power of his example whether we suppose that Abraham looked forward to the realisation of this unseen ideal city in this life or no, for the effect of it upon him would be exactly the same whichever of the two alternatives may have been the case. It matters nothing as to whether Abraham believed in the realisation in that land over which he wandered, of the perfect order of things, or whether he had caught some glimpse, which is very unlikely, of it as reserved for a future beyond the grave. In either case, he lived for and by an unseen and future condition of things. It is beautiful to notice how the writer here, in his picturesque and simple words, puts many blessed ideas as to that future. We may, perhaps, make these a little more clear, but I am afraid we shall make them much more weak, by taking them out of the metaphorical form.

'The City' - then there is only one. 'The City' - then the object of our hope, ought to be, and is, if we understand it aright, a perfect society, in which the 'sojourners and pilgrims,' like the patriarch, and his little band of children and attendants, who wandered lonely up and down the world, will all be gathered together at last; and, instead of the solitude of the march, and the undefended weakness of the frail encampment, there will be the conjoined gladness and security of an innumerable multitude. 'The City' is the perfection of society, and all of us who live in the world, alone after all communion, and separated from each other by the awful mystery of personal being, and by many another film beside, may hope to understand, as we never shall do here, what the meaning of the little word 'together' is when we get there. 'He looked for the city.'

‘The city which hath the foundations’ - then the object of faith is a stable thing, which knows no fluctuations, feels no changes, fears no assault, can never be subjected to violence, nor ever crumple into dust. ‘The city which’ hath the foundations’ - here and now we have to build, if we build at all, more or less like the foolish man in the Master’s parable, upon sand. It is the condition of our earthly life. We have to accept, and to make the best of it. But, oh! those who have learned most the agony of change and the misery of uncertainty are those who have been best disciplined to grasp at and lay up in their hearts the large consolation and encouragement hived in that designation, ‘the city which hath the foundations.’

The city, ‘whose Architect’ - for the word rendered ‘Builder’ should be so translated - ‘is God.’ It is the accomplishment of His plan, which, in modern language, is called the realisation of His ideal. I like the old- fashioned Biblical language better - ‘the city whose Architect is God.’ He planned, and, of course, there follows upon that ‘whose Maker or actual Builder is’ - the same as the Planner. Architects put their drawings into the hands of rude workmen, and no completed work of man’s hands corresponds to the fair vision that dawned on its designer when it took definite shape in His mind.

That is another of the laws of our earthly life which we have to make the best of - that we design grand buildings when we begin, and, when we have finished our lives, and look back upon what we have built, it is a mean and incomplete structure at the best. But God’s working drawings get built; His plans are all wrought out in an adequate material; and everything that was in the divine mind once exists in outward fact in that perfect future.

So, inasmuch as the city is a state of perfect society, of stability, is planned by God, and brought about by Him at last, it is to be possessed by us on condition of fellowship with Him. Does it not seem to you to be infinitely unimportant whether this old patriarch thought that what he was looking for was to be builded upon the hills and plains of Canaan or not? That he had the vision is the thing. Where it was to be accomplished was of small moment. We do not know where the vision is to be accomplished any more than Abraham did. We do not know whether here, on this old earth, renovated by some cosmic change, or whether in some region in space, though beyond the stars, perfected spirits shall dwell, and it does not matter.

That we should have the vision is the main thing. The where, the when, the how of its fulfilment are of no manner of practical importance, and people who busy themselves about such questions, and think that therefore they are cultivating the spirit that my text suggests, make a woful mistake.

But let me press on you, dear brethren, this one simple thought, that the average type of Christian life and experience to-day is wofully lacking in that clear vision of the future. Partly it comes, I suppose, from certain peculiarities in the trend of thought and way of looking at things that are fashionable in this generation. We hear so much about Christianity as a social system, and about what it is going to do in this world, which perhaps it was necessary should be stated very emphatically, in order to counterpoise the too great silence upon such subjects in past times, that preaching about the future life strikes a hearer as unfamiliar, and probably some Of my audience have been feeling as if I were carrying them into misty regions far away from, and little related to, the realities of life. But, dear brethren, from my heart I believe that one very operative cause of the undeniable feebleness of Christian life, which is so largely manifested round us - and it is for each of us to say whether we participate in it - is due to this, that, somehow or other, there has come in the mind of great masses of Christian people a fading away of that blessed vision of the city, for which we ought to live. You scarcely hear sermons nowadays about the blessedness of a future life. What you hear about it is, how well for this life it is to be a Christian man.

No doubt godliness ‘hath promise of the life that now is,’ and that side of the gospel cannot be too emphatically set forth. But it may be disproportionately presented, as I venture to think that, on the whole, it is being presented now. Therefore there is the more need for consciously endeavouring to cultivate the habit of looking beyond the mists Of the present to the gleaming battlements and spires of the city. Let us polish the glasses of our telescopes, and use them not only for distances on earth’s low levels, but to bring the stars nearer. So shall we realise more of the present good and power of faith, when it is allowed its widest and noblest range.

II. Faith consequently leads to willing detachment from the present order of offerings.

‘He dwelt in tabernacles,’ that is, he lived a nomad life in his tents. He and his son and grandson - three generations of long livers - proved the depth, solidity, and practical power of their faith in the promise of the city by the remarkable persistence of their refusal to be absorbed in the settled population of the land. Recent discoveries have shown us, and discoveries still to be made, I have no doubt, will show still more, what a highly organised and developed civilisation prevailed in Canaan when these wanderers from the East came into it, with their black camels’-hair tents. They were almost as much out of place, and as noticeably unique, by such a life in Canaan then, as gypsies are in England, and the reason why they would not go into Hebron, or any other of the populous cities which were closely studded in the land, was that ‘they looked for the City.’ It was better for them to dwell in tents than in houses.

The clear vision of that great future impresses on us the transiency of the present. We shall know that what we live in is but as a tent that is soon to be struck, even while some of our fellow-lodgers may fancy it to be a house that will last for ever.

The illusion of the permanence of this fleeting show creeps over us all, in spite of our better knowledge, and has to be fought against. The world, though it seems to be at rest, is going faster than any of the objects in it which are known to be in motion. We are deceived by the universality of the movement of which all things partake, and to us it seems rest. If there comes friction, and now and then a collision, we find out how fast we are going. And then there come misery, and melancholy, and lamentations about the brevity of life, and the awfulness of change, and all these other commonplaces that are the stock-in-trade of poetasters, but which cut with such surprise and agony into our own hearts when we experience them. But, brethren, to be convinced of the transiency of life, by reason of the clearness of the vision of the permanence of the heavens, is blessedness and not misery, and is the only way by which a man can bear to say to himself, ‘My days are as a hand-breadth,’ and not fling down his tools and fall into sadness, from feeling that life is as futile as frail. To recognise that nothing continues in one stay, and to see nothing else that is permanent, is the greatest misery that is laid upon man But to feel, ‘Thou art from everlasting to everlasting, and Thy kingdom endureth through all generations and I belong to it,’ makes us regard with equanimity, and sometimes with solemn satisfaction, the passing away of all the transient,’that the things which cannot be shaken may remain.’ ‘He looked for a city’; so, ‘he dwelt in tents.’

There is another side to that thought. The clear vision of that permanent future will detach us from the perishable present.

Now many difficult questions arise as to how far Christians should hold aloof from the order of things in which they dwell: and to a very large extent the application of the principle in detail must be left to each man for himself, in the presence of God. But this I am quite sure of, that in this generation the average Christian has a great deal more need to be warned against too great intermingling with than against too great separation from the present world. Abraham sets us an example beautifully comprehensive. He held cordial relations with the people amongst whom he dwelt. He was honoured by them as a prince; he was recognised by them as a servant of God. They knew his bravery. He did not scruple to draw the sword, and to fight in defence, not only of his kinsmen but of his heathen neighbours in Sodom. And yet nothing would induce him to come down from his tent, beneath the terebinth tree of Mamre, in the-uplands. Everybody knew that his name was Abraham the Hebrew - the man from the other side. He carried out that name in his life.

Now, I am not going to lay down hard and fast rules - conventional regulations are the ruin of principles. But let us ask ourselves, ‘Would anybody call me "the man from the other side," the man who belongs to another set of things altogether than this?’ We have to work in the world; to trade in the world; to try to influence the world; to draw many of our enjoyments from it, in common with those who have no other enjoyments than those drawn from it. Of course, there is a great tract of ground common to the men of faith and the men of sense, and I am not urging false aloofness from any occupation, interest, duty, or enjoyment. But what I say is that, if we have the vision of the city clear before us, there will be no need to tell us not to make our home in Hebron or in Sodom.

Lot went down there when he had his choice - and he got what he wanted, pasturage for his cattle. But he also got what he did not want, destruction, and he lost what he did not care to keep, his share in the city. Abraham stayed on the heights, and up there he kept God, and a good conscience. Probably he did not make so much money as Lot did. Very likely Lot's flocks and herds were larger than his uncle's. But the one man from his height, through the clear air, could see far away the sparkling of the turrets of the city; and the other, down in the hot, steaming plains of Sodom, could see nothing but Sodom and the mountains behind it, Better to live on the heights with Abraham and God than down below with Lot, and wealth, and subterranean brimstone, and naphtha fires ready to burst forth. 'He looked for the city,' 'he dwelt in tents.'

30)Hebrews 11:13

Hebrews

THE ATTACHMENTS AND DETACHMENTS OF FAITH

Heb. 11:13 [R.V.]

THE great roll-call of heroes of faith in this grand chapter goes upon the supposition that the living spirit of religion was the same in Old and in New Testament times. In both it was faith which knit men to God. It has often been alleged that that great word faith has a different signification in this Epistle from that which it has in the other New Testament writings. The allegation is largely true; in so far as the things Believed are concerned they are extremely different; but it is not true in so far as the person trusted, or in so far as the act of trusting are concerned. These are identical. It was no mere temporal and earthly promise on which the faith of these patriarchs was builded. They looked indeed for the land, but in looking for the land, they looked 'for the city which hath foundations'; and their future hopes had the same dim haze of ignorance, and the same questions unresolved about perspective and relative distances which our future hopes have; and their faith, whatever were its contents, was fundamentally the same out of a soul casting itself upon God, which is the essence of our faith in the Divine Son in whom God is made manifest So with surface difference there is a deep-lying absolute oneness in the faith of the Old Testament and ours, in essential nature, in the Object which they grasp, and in their practical effects upon life.

Therefore, these words of my text, describing what faith did for the world’s grey forefathers, have a more immediate bearing upon us than at first sight may appear, and may suggest for us some thoughts about the proper, practical issues of Christian faith in our daily lives.

I. I take two or three of the points which come most plainly out from the words before us, and ask you to notice, in the first place, how faith fills eye and heart with the future.

You will have observed that I have read my text somewhat differently from the form which it assumes in our Authorised Version. Observe that the words ‘And were persuaded of them,’ in our Old Version are a gloss, - no part of the original text. Observe, further, that the adverb ‘afar off’ is intended to apply to both the clauses: ‘Having seen them,’ and ‘embraced them.’ And that, consequently, ‘embraced’ must necessarily be an inadequate representation of the writer’s idea; for you cannot embrace a thing that is ‘afar off’; and to ‘embrace the promises’ was the very thing that these men did not do. The meaning of the word is here not embraced, but saluted or greeted; and the figure that lies in it is a very beautiful one. As some traveller topping the water-shed may see far off the white porch of his home, and wave a greeting to it, though it be distant, while his heart goes out over all the intervening, weary leagues; or as some homeward-bound crew catch, away yonder on the horizon, the tremulous low line that is home, and welcome it with a shout of joy, though many a billow dash and break between them and it, these men looked across the weary waste, and saw far away; and as they saw their hearts went out towards the things that were promised, because they ‘judged Him faithful that had promised.’ And that is the attitude and the act which all true faith in God ought to operate in us.

So, then, here are two things to think about for a moment. One, Faith’s vision; the other, Faith’s greeting.

People say, ‘Seeing is believing.’ I should be disposed to turn the aphorism right round, and to say, ‘Believing is seeing.’ For there is a clearer insight, and a more immediate, direct contact with the thing beheld, and a deeper certitude in the vision of faith than in the poor, purblind sight of sense, all full of illusions, and which has no real possession in it of the things which it beholds. The sight that faith gives is solid, substantial, clear, certain. If I might so say, the true exercise of faith is to stereoscope the dim ghostlike realities of the future, and to make them stand out solid in relief there before us. And he who, clasping the hand, and if I might so say, looking through the eyes, of God, sees the future, in humble acceptance of His great words of promise, in some measure as God sees it - has a source of knowledge, clear, immediate, certain, which sense with its lies and imperfections, is altogether inadequate even to symbolise. The vision of Faith is far deeper, far more real, far more correspondent to the realities, and far more satisfying to the eye that gazes, than is any of the sight of sense. Do not you be deceived or seduced by talk that assumes to be profound and philosophical, into believing that when you venture your all upon God’s word, and doing so say, ‘I know, and behold mine inheritance,’ you are saying more than calm reason and common-sense teaches us. We have the thing, and we see it, if we believe Him that in His word shows it to us,

Well, then, still further, there is suggested that this vision of faith, with all its blessed clearness and certitude and sufficiency, is not a direct perception of the things promised, but only a sight of them in the promise. And does that make it less blessed? Does the astronomer, who sits in his chamber, and when he would most carefully observe the heavens, looks downwards on to the mirror of the reflecting telescope that he uses, feel that he sees the starry lights less clearly and less really than when he gazes up into the abyss itself and sees them there? Is not the reflection a better and a more accurate source of knowledge for him than even the direct observation of the sky would be? And so, if we look down into the promise, we shall see, gleaming and glittering there, the starry points which are the true images adapted to our present sense and power of reception of the great invisible lights above. God be thanked that faith looks to the promises and not to the realities, else it were no more faith, and would lose some of its blessedness.

And then, still further, let me remind you that this vision of faith varies in the measure of our faith. It is not always the same. Refraction brings up sometimes, above the surface of the sea, a spectral likeness of the opposite shore, and men stand now and then upon our southern coasts, and for an hour or two, in some conditions of the atmosphere, they see the low sandhills of the French or the Belgian coast, as if they were at arm's length. So faith, refracting the rays of light that strike from the Throne of God, brings up the image, and when it is strong the image is clear, and when it flags the image 'fades away into the light of common day'; and where there glowed the fair outlines of the far-off land, there is nothing but a weary wash of waters and a solitary stretch of sea.

My brother! do you see to it that this vision of faith is cultivated by you. It is hard to do. The pressure of the present is terribly strong; the chains of sense that hold us are very adamantine and thick; but still it is possible for us to cultivate the faculty of beholding, and to train the eye to look into that telescope that pries into distant worlds, and brings eternal glories near. No pair of eyes can look the one at a thing near, and the other at a thing afar off; at least if they do the man squints. And no soul can look so as to behold the unseen glories if its eye be turned to all these vanities here. Do- you choose whether you shall, like John Bunyan's man with the muckrake, have your eyes fixed upon the straws and filth at your feet, or whether you will look upwards and see the crown that is glittering there just above your head, and ready to drop upon it. 'These all in faith saw the promises.'

Yes! And when they saw them they greeted them. Their hands and their hearts went out, and a glad shout came to their lips as they beheld the fair vision of all the wonder that should be. And so faith has in it, in proportion to its depth and reality, this going out of the soul towards the things discerned. They draw us when we see them,

One of our seventeenth-century prose writers says: - 'Were the happiness of the next world as closely apprehended as felicities of this, it were a martyrdom to live.' It is true. If we see, we cannot choose but love. Our vision will break into desire, and to behold is to yearn after. Oh, Christian men and women! do we know anything of that going out of the soul, in a calm transport of deliberate preference to the things that are unseen and eternal. It is a sharp test of the reality of our Christian profession; do not shrink from applying it to yourselves.

II. And now in the next place, we see here how faith produces a sense of detachment from the present, 'They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.'

The writer is, no doubt, referring to the words of Abraham when he stood up before the Hittites, and asked for a bit of ground to lay his Sarah in - 'I am a stranger and a sojourner with you'; and also to Jacob's words to Pharaoh, 'The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years.' These utterances revealed the spirit in which they looked upon the settled order in the midst of which they dwelt, They felt that they were not of it, but belonged to another.

Now there are two different kinds of consciousness that we are strangers and sojourners here. There is one that merely comes from the consideration of the natural transiency of all earthly things, and the shortness of human life. There is another that comes from the consciousness that we belong to another kingdom and another order. A 'stranger' is a man who, in a given constitution of things, in some country with a settled government, owes allegiance to another king, and belongs to another polity. A 'pilgrim' or a 'sojourner' is a man who is only in the place where he now is for a little while. So the one of the two words expresses the idea of belonging to another state of things, and the other expresses the idea of transiency in the present condition.

But the true Christian consciousness of being 'a stranger and a sojourner' comes, not from any thought that life is fleeting and ebbing away, but from the better and more blessed operation of the faith which reveals the things promised, and knits me so closely to them that I cannot but feel separated from the things that are round about me. Men who live in mountainous countries, be-it Switzerland, or the Highlands, or anywhere else, when they come down into the plains, pine and fade away sometimes, with the intensity of the 'Heimweh,' the homesickness which seizes them. And we, if we are Christians, and belong to the other order of things, shall feel that this is not our native soil, nor here the home in which we would dwell Abraham could not go to live in Sodom, though Lot went; and he and his son and grandson kept themselves outside of the organisation of the society in the midst of which they dwelt, because they were so sure that they belonged to another. Or, as the context puts it, they ‘dwelt in tents because they looked for the City.’ It is only sad, disheartening, cutting the nerve of much activity, destroying the intensity of much joy, drawing over life the pall of a deep sadness for a man to say, ‘Seventy years are a hand- breadth. I am a stranger and a sojourner.’ But it is an ally of all noble, intense, happy living that a man should say, ‘My home is with God. I am a stranger and a sojourner here.’ The one conviction is perfectly consistent with even desperate absorption in present things. ‘Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die,’ is quite as legitimate a conclusion from the consciousness of human frailty, as, ‘Let us live for heaven, for to-morrow we die.’ It all depends upon what is the source and occasion of this consciousness, whether it shall make us bitter, and shall make us cling to the perishable thing all the more because it is going so soon, or whether it shall lift us up above all these transient treasures or sorrows and fill our hearts with the glad conviction, ‘I am a citizen of no mean city, and therefore here I am but a stranger.’

My brother! does your faith lessen the bonds that bind you to earth? Does it detach you from the things that are seen and temporal, or is your life ordered upon the same maxims and devoted to the pursuit of the same objects, and gladdened by the same transitory and partial successes, and embittered by the same fleeting and light afflictions which rule and sway the lives that are rooted only in earth as the tempest sways the grass on the sandhills? If so, what business have we to call ourselves Christians? If so, how can we say that we live by faith when we are so blind, and so incapable of seeing afar off, that the smallest trifle beside us blots out from our vision, as a fourpenny piece held up against your eyeball might do the sun itself in the heavens there. True faith detaches a man from this present, If your faith does not do that, look into it and see where the falsity of it is. III. And, lastly, my text brings out the thought of how this same faith triumphs in the article of death. ‘These all died in faith.’

That is a very grand thought as applied to those old patriarchs, that just because all their lives long God had done nothing for them of what He had promised, therefore they died believing that He was going to do it. All their disappointments fed their faith. Because the words on which they had been leaning all their lives had not come to a fulfilment, therefore they must be true. That is a strange paradox, and yet it is the one which filled these men’s hearts with peace, and which made the dying Jacob break in upon his prophetic swan-song, at the close, with the verse which stands in no relation to what goes before it, or what comes after it. ‘I have waited for Thy salvation, O Lord.’ ‘These all died in faith’ just because they had not ‘received the promises.’

So, dear brethren, for us the end of life may have a faith nurtured by disappointments, made more sure of everything because it has nothing; certain that He calls into existence another world to redress the balance of the old, because here there has been so much of bitterness and weariness and woe. And our end like theirs may be an end beatified by a clear vision of the things that ‘no man hath seen, nor can see’; and into the darkness there may come for us, as there came of old to another, an open heaven and a beam of God’s glory smiting us on the face and changing it into the face of an angel And so there may come for us all in that article and act of death, a tranquil and cheerful abandonment of the life which has been futile and frail, except when thought of as the vestibule of heaven. Some men cling to the vanishing skirts of this earthly life, and say, ‘I will not let thee go.’ And others are able to say, ‘Lord, I have waited for Thy salvation.’ ‘Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace.’

‘These all died in faith’; and the sorrows and disappointments of the past made the very background on which the bow of promise spanned the sky, beneath which they passed into the Promised Land. ‘These all died in faith’; with a vision gleaming upon the inward sense which made the solitude of death bliss, and with a calm willingness ‘to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better.’

Choose whether you will live by sense and die in sorrow, or whether you will live by the faith of the Son of God, and die to enter ‘the City which hath foundations,’ which He has built for them that love Him, and which even now, ‘in seasons of calm weather,’ we can see shining on the hill top far away.

31)Hebrews 11:14

Hebrews

SEEK THE FATHERLAND

Heb. 11:14

WHAT things? Evidently those which the writer has just been saying that the patriarchs of old ‘said,’ as stated in the previous words - ‘They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims upon earth.’ The writer has in his mind, no doubt, some of the beautiful incidents of the Book of Genesis; especially, I suppose, that very touching one where Abraham is standing up by the side of his dead, in the presence of the sons of Herb, and begs from them for the first time a little piece of land that he could call his Own. He tells them that he is a stranger and a sojourner amongst them, and wants ‘the field and the cave that is therein’ in which to bury his dead. Or he may be thinking of the no less touching incident, when Jacob, in his extreme old age, tells the King of Egypt that the days of the years of his pilgrimage have been few and evil, not having attained to the years of his father.

The writer points to these declarations, and reads into them what he was entitled to read into them, something more than a mere acceptance of the external facts of the speakers’ condition, as wanderers in the midst of a civilization to which they did not belong. He sees gleaming through the primary force of the words the further hope which the patriarchs cherished, though it was, as it wore, latent in the nearer hope of an earthly inheritance - viz., that of the city which hath foundations, and the country which they could call their own.

Although the writer is not adducing those patriarchs as being patterns for us, but is only establishing his great thesis that they lived by faith in a future blessing, as we ought to do, still we may take the words of my text, with a permissible amount of violence, as appropriate to all of us who call ourselves Christians. ‘They who say such things do hereby declare plainly,’ and by their lives should declare more plainly still, ‘that they are seeking a country.'

I. Note, then, first of all, the remarkable representation here given of that future for which Christians look, as being their native land.

The word of our text is very inadequately rendered in our Authorized Version as merely 'a country.' Fully and etymologically rendered, it would be 'the fatherland.' Whether we choose to adopt that somewhat un-English expression or no, at all events, the idea conveyed is that these men, having come out from Mesopotamia, and being wanderers, in their goat's-hair tents, in the midst of the fenced cities of Canaan, were thereby seeking for a land which was their native land, their home, the place to which they felt that they belonged far more truly than to the land from which they came out, or to the land in which they were for the moment wandering. That is the idea that I would enforce as needful for all true and noble Christian living, the recognition that our true home, the country and the order with which we are connected by all our deepest and most real affinities, the land where, and where only, we shall feel at rest, and surrounded by familiar things and loved persons, is that land which lies beyond the flood.

We do not belong, and should feel that we do not belong, to the place and order where we happen to stand to-day. This present and the order of things here should be for us either like that Aram Naharaim, 'the Syria between the two rivers,' the dust of which Abraham had shaken from off his feet; or it should be like that rotten though splendid civilization into the midst of which He came, and of which He sternly refused to enrol Himself as a citizen. Our home is where Jesus Christ is, and there is something proroundly wrong in us unless we feel that that, and not this, is our native soil, and that there, and not here, is the place to which we belong.

Our colonists on the other side of the world, though they have never seen England, talk about 'going home.' And so we, inhabitants of this outlying colony of the great city, ought to look across the flood, and sometimes catch a sight of those bright realms beyond, and always feel that they are really our native land. 'They that say such things declare plainly' that they are not citizens here, but belong yonder.

II. Then, mark again, the other parallel which may be drawn between these men’s attitude and ours, in that their whole career was a seeking the true Fatherland.

Again, our translation is inadequate because it does not give the energetic force of the word that is rendered ‘seek.’ It was not a seeking, on the part of the patriarchs, in the sense of looking for an unseen thing, or searching about to find an undiscovered one. That was all done for them by God. They had not to seek in that unsatisfactory and disturbing sense, but they had to seek, in the sense of projecting their desires onwards to the blessing that God held out in His hand for them, and letting their faith grasp the promise and their thoughts expatiate in the future, which was as sure to them as the present, because God had made it. The word for seeking in the original is very emphatic. It implies the going out of longings and yearnings and thoughts to something which is there, to be grasped and laid hold of. Thank God we have not to seek our native soil as wanderers who may perchance fail in our quest, and die at last homeless. It is brought to us, and certified to us by the divine veracity, sealed to us by the divine faithfulness, reserved for us by the divine power, made possible for us by the divine forgiving mercy. But still we have to seek, letting our hearts go out towards that good land, letting our thoughts play about it and become familiar with it, letting our desires tend towards it, and ever, in all the dusty ways of daily life, and amidst all the distractions of monotonous and recurring duties, keeping our heads above the mist and looking into the clear blue, where we may see the vision of the certain future.

The management and discipline of our thoughts is included in that seeking, and I am afraid that that is a part of Christian culture woefully neglected by the average Christian of this day. If we consider the comparative magnitude of the future and the present, and the certain issue of the present in the future, are our thoughts of it such as common-sense would make them? Is that ‘land that is very far off’ a frequent ordinary subject of contemplation by us, in the midst of the hurry and bustle of our daffy life? Or have we let the glasses of the telescope of hope get all dimmed and dirty; and when we do polish them up, do we use them to look at the stars with, or at the earth and its beauties? Whither do my anticipations of the future tend? Is my hope shortsighted or longsighted? Is it only able to see the things on this side the river, or can it catch any of the glories beyond? Our fault is not in not living enough in the future, but in the selection of the future in which we live. 'We are saved by hope,' if we rightly direct the hope. We are ruined by hopes when they are cribbed, cabined, and confined to this miserable present. Brother! do you seek your home by the cultivation of the contemplation of it and the desire for it, and so almost emulate the divine prerogative and call things that are not as though they were?

Oh! how different our lives would be if we walked in the light of that great hope, and how different everything here would be if we regarded all here as auxiliary and subsidiary to that.

Above all, if it were true of us, as it ought to be in accordance with our profession of being Christians, that we seek a country, should we think about death as we do? Should we drape it in such ugly forms? Should we shrink from it as most of us, I fear, do as a dread and an enemy and a disaster? No doubt there is, and there always will be. a natural shrinking; but the man who can say that to die is to be with Christ, and who sets that thought ever before him, will be helped over the dark gulf; and the shrinking will be turned, if not into desire at least into calm scorn of the last enemy, the encounter with whom does not diminish his longing to be with his Lord.

These are heights, of Christian feeling so far above most of us that we are tempted to think them unreal and fantastic; but they are the heights to which we should naturally rise, if once we realised the greatness, the blessedness, the certainty of that hidden hope above. Dear friends, if we look onwards to our own end, are we only or chiefly conscious of a cold thrill of recoil and repulsion? Let us ask ourselves if our feeling corresponds to our profession that Christ is our life, and that where He is is our heaven and our hope.

III. Lastly, notice the unmistakable witness of profession and life which we are to bear.

'They declare plainly.' They make it absolutely and unmistakably manifest, says the writer, that they seek a country. It did not need that Abraham should stand up before the sons of Heth and say, ‘I am a pilgrim and a sojourner amongst you.’ They all knew it. There was his tent outside the city walls, and a strange life that little tribe of people, he and his followers, lived, wandering up and down the land and refusing to settle ,themselves anywhere. They lived a life unlike that of the people among whom they dwelt, We know that in these early days there were fenced cities, outside the walls of which they dwelt, and there all the evidences of a highly developed and advanced civilization existing in the land. These patriarchs lived like gypsies in the country, roaming everywhere but rooted nowhere; and the reason they so lived was that they ‘looked for a city which hath foundations.’

‘Yes! the man, before the eyes of whose faith there is ever shining that permanent state of blessed union with Jesus Christ and of sweet society with all the good, can afford to recognise the things that are seen as transient, as they must be. He will be in no danger of mistaking the fleeting shows for eternal realities. If we are looking for the city we shall dwell in tabernacles; and the more our faith grasps the permanent realities beyond, the more will our experience realise the transitoriness of the things here by our sides.

The very fact that men call themselves Christians is a declaration that they are seeking for a city. Do you act up to your declaration? Is your Christianity a matter of lip or of life? Have you pitched your tents outside the city to confirm your declaration that you do not belong to this community? And do you live as in it, but not of it?

Our outward lives ought to make most distinctly manifest that we are citizens of the heavens, and that will be made manifest by abstinence from a great deal There are many things, right enough in themselves, which are not expedient, and therefore not right, for a Christian man to do, if they fasten him down to this present. And you will have to cut yourselves loose from a good deal to which otherwise it would he permissible for you to be attached, if you intend to rise towards God; and whatever we do like other people, we shall have to do from a manifestly different temper or spirit. Two men may engage in precisely the same occupation. For instance, there may be two tellers at one side of a bank counter, or two depositors on the other, doing exactly the same things, and yet one of them may do them so as to ‘declare plainly,’ even in that act, ‘that he is seeking a country,’ and that he is not wholly swallowed up in the love and high estimate of worldly wealth. The motive from which, the end towards which, the help by which, the accompanying thoughts with which, we do our daily, secular work, may hallow it, and make it express our heavenly-mindedness, as completely as if we went apart on the mountain, and held communion in prayer and praise with God.

We do not want ‘plain’ declarations by so-called religious acts, still less by religious professions, half as much as we do plain declarations by an obviously Christian way of doing secular things, and living the daily life of men upon earth. Remember the illustration from the conduct of the very men of whom my text speaks. I said that they kept themselves aloof from the civilisation around them. That requires modification to be a full statement of the case. They threw themselves into it, when necessary, with all energy. Lot went down to Sodom because it offered good grazing land. He behaved just as many professing Christians handle the world, going down amongst the slime-pits and the scoundrels for the sake of making a little money out of them - whilst Abraham stopped on the. more barren pastures of the hills, with freedom, security, and holiness. When Lot got what he deserved, and was involved in the disaster of the city that he had made his home, Abraham did not say, ‘It is a very sad thing, but Lot must get himself out of the difficulty.’ He buckled on his sword and armed his followers, turning himself into a soldier for the time being, and promptly gave chase to the robbers, following them all through the night, along the whole length of the Holy Land, and pounced upon them, routing them, as they lay in fancied security, and liberating their prisoner, who was the captive of his own lust and covetousness much more sadly than of the Eastern marauders.

And so, the detachment from the present, which is needful for Christian men, is to be combined with the most energetic discharge of the duties which we owe to ourselves and to those around us, and especially to be combined with the most diligent work for those who have fallen captive to the snares of the world which we, by His mercy, have been able to escape. And he will best manifest, and most plainly declare, that he seeks a country who seeks most earnestly to hallow all ordinary life, and to do the work, here and now, which God prescribes for him: There is an old story about a question being put to some good man who was fond of playing chess.

‘What would you do if, when you were at the chess-board, you were told that Jesus Christ was coming?’ ‘Finish the game’ was the wise answer. There is another story about a scene in the American House of Representatives in its early time. A great darkness came on during the sitting, and some timid souls began to think that the last day was at band. The President said, ‘Bring candles and let us go on with the debate.’ If the Master is coming, we are best found doing our work. Yes! Best doing our work, if it is His work. And all our work may be His if it is done for His sake and in His strength.

Christian. men and women! see to it that there he no ambiguity about your position, no mistaking your nationality, and that in your life, without ostentation, without offensively forcing your religion upon peoples’ notice, you declare plainly that you, at any rate, seek your native home.

32)Hebrews 11:16

Hebrews

THE FUTURE WHICH VINDICATES GOD

Heb. 11:16

THESE are bold words. They tell us that unless God has provided a future condition of social blessedness for those whom He calls His, their life’s experience on earth is a blot on His character and administration. He needs heaven for His vindication. The preparation of the City is the reason why He is not ‘ashamed to be called their God.’ If there were not such a preparation, He had need to be ashamed. Then my text, further, by its first word ‘wherefore,’ carries our thoughts back to what has been said beforehand; and that is, ‘They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly.’ Therefore God ‘is not ashamed of them,’ as the Revised Version has it, with a fuller rendering, ‘to be called their God.’ That is to say, the attitude of the men who look ever forward, through the temporal, to the things unseen and eternal, is worthy of their relation with Him, and it alone is worthy. And if people professing to be His, and professing that He is theirs, do not so live, they would be a disgrace to God, and He would be ashamed to own them for His.

So there are two lines of thought suggested by our text; two sets of obligations which are deduced by the writer of this Epistle from that solemn name - ‘The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob.’ The one set of obligations refers to Him; the other to us. There are, then, three things here for our consideration - the name; what it pledges God to do; and what it binds men to seek. Let me ask you to look at these three things with me.

I. First of all, then, regard the significance of the name round which the whole argument of our verse turns.

The writer lays hold of that wonderful designation, by which the God of the whole earth knit Himself, in special relationship of unity and mutual possession, to these three poor men - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and he would have us ponder that name, as meaning a great deal more than the fact that these three were His worshippers, and that He was their God, in the sense in which Moloch was the God of the Phoenicians; Jupiter, the god of the Romans; or Zeus of the Greeks. There is a far deeper and sacreder relation involved than that. ‘The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob’ means not only that His name was in some measure known as a designation, and in some measure honoured by external worship, by the patriarchs, but it involved much in regard to Him, and much in regard to them. It is the name which He took for Himself, not which men gave to Him, and, therefore, it expresses what He had made Himself to these men. That is to say, the name implies a direct act of self-revelation on the part of God. It implies condescending approach and nearness of communion. It implies possession, mutual and reciprocal, as all possession of spirit by spirit must be. It implies still more wonderfully and profoundly that, just as in regard to the relations between ourselves, so, in regard to the loftiest of all relations, God owns men, and men possess God, because, on both sides of the relationship, there is the same love. Other forms of connection between men and God differ from this deepest of all in that the attitude on the one side corresponds to, but is different from, the attitude on the other. If we think of God as the object of trust, on His side there is faithfulness, on our side there is faith. If we think of Him as the object of adoration, on His side there is loftiness, on our side there is lowliness. If we think of Him as the Supreme Governor, His commandment is answered by our obedience. But if we think of Him as ours, and of ourselves as His, the bond is identical on either part. And though there be all the difference that there is between a drop of dew and the boundless ocean, between the little love that refreshes and bedews my heart, and the great abyss of the same that lies, not stagnant though calm, in His, yet my love is like God's, and God's love is like mine. And that is the deepest meaning of the name, 'the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob': - mutual possession based upon common and identical love.

And then, of course, in so far as we are concerned, the name carries with it the most blessed depths of the devout life, in all its sacredness of intimacy, in all its sweetness of communion, in all its perfectness of dependence, in all its victory over self, in all its triumphant appropriation, as its very own, of the common and universal good. It is much to be able to say 'Our God, our help in ages past.' It is more to be able to say 'My Lord and my God.' And that appropriation deprives no other of his possession of God. I do not rob you of one beam of the sunshine when it irradiates my vision. We take in of the common land that which belongs to us, and no other man is the poorer or has the less for his. My God is thy God; and when we each realise our individual and personal relation 'to Him, as expressed by these two little words, then we are able to say, in close union, 'Our God, the God and Father of us all.' So much, then, for the name.

II. Now a word or two, in the second place, as to what that name pledges God to do.

He is 'not ashamed' of it, 'for He hath prepared for them a city.' Now I do not need to enter at all upon the question as to whether the three patriarchs to whom my text has original reference had any notion of a future life. It matters nothing where .or how they thought that that coming blessing towards which they were ever looking was to be realised. The point of the text is that, in any case, they were servants of a future promised to them by

God, as they believed, and that that future shaped their whole life.

Think of what their life was. How all their days, from the moment when Abraham left his home, to the moment when the dying Jacob said, with a passion of unfilled expectancy, which yet had in it no hesitancy or doubt or rebuke, ‘I have waited for Thy salvation, O Lord,’ that future shaped their whole career! And then, if the end of all was that they lay down in the dust and died, having been lured on from step to step by dazzling illusions dangled before them, which were nothing but dreams, what about the God who did it? and what about their relation to Him! Would there be anything in such a God deserving to be worshipped, Might He not be ashamed of ‘being called their God’ if that was all that they got thereby? God needs the City for His own vindication.

Now that seems to be a daring way of putting it, hut it is only another form of expressing a very plain thought, that the facts of the religious life here on earth are such as necessarily do involve a future of blessedness, and a heaven.

I need not, I suppose, dwell for more than just in a sentence upon the first plain way in which this truth may be illustrated - namely, that nothing but a future life of blessedness, such as we usually connote by the simple name ‘heaven,’ saves God’s veracity and the truthfulness of His promises. If we believe that the awful silence of the universe has ever been broken by a divine voice; if we believe that God has said anything to men - apart, I mean, from the revelation of Himself made by our nature and in our daily experience - we must believe that He has promised a life to come. And unless such a life do await those who, humbly and with many faults and imperfections, have yet clung to Him as theirs, and yielded themselves to Him as His possession, then

‘The pillared firmament is rottenness,
And earth’s base built on stubble.’

Let God be true and every man a lie. Unless there is a heaven, He has flashed before us an illusion like that which has tempted many a wanderer into the bog to perish. He has fooled us with a mirage, which at the distance looked like palm-trees and cool, flashing lakes, and when we reach it is only burning sand, strewn with bleached bones of the generations that have been cheated before us. ‘God is not ashamed... for He hath prepared a city.’

But, then, there is another thought, closely con-netted with the preceding, and yet capable of being dealt with separately, and that is that there is a blot ineffaceable on the divine character unless the desires which He Himself has implanted have a reality corresponding to them. That is true, of course, in the most absolute sense, in regard to all the physical necessities and yearnings which the animal nature possesses. In all that region God never sends mouths but He sends meat to fill them; and need is the precursor and the prophecy of supply. So it is in regard to the whole creation; so it is in regard to that in us which we share in common with them. Care never irks the full-fed beast. No ungratified desires torture the frame of the short-lived creatures. ‘Foxes have holes, and the birds of air have their roosting-places’; and all beings dwell in an environment absolutely corresponding to their capacities, and fitted to satisfy their necessities. But amongst ‘them stalks the exile of creation, man; blessed, though he sometimes thinks he is cursed, with longings which the world has nothing to satisfy; and with ideals which are never capable of realisation amidst the imperfections and fleetingnesses of time. And is that to be all? If so, then God is a tyrant and not a god, and there is little to love in such a character, and He might be ashamed, if He is not, to have made men like that, so ill-fitted for their abode, and to have bestowed upon them the possibility of imagining that to which realisation shall be for ever denied.

And if that is true in regard of many of the desires of life, apart altogether from religion, it becomes still more manifestly and eminently true in regard of Christian experience and devout emotions. For if there is any one thing which an acceptance of Christianity in the heart and life is sure to do, it is to kindle and make dominant longings, yearnings rising sometimes to pain, which the world is utterly unable to satisfy. Is it ever to be so? Then, oh then, better for us that we should never have known that name; better for us that we had nourished a blind life within our brains; better for us that we had never been born. But ‘He hath prepared for them a city,’ where wishes shall be embodied, and the ideal shall be reality, and desires shall be fulfilled, and everything that has dwelt, silently and secretly, in the chambers of the imagination shall come forth into the sunlight. Morning dreams are proverbially true. ‘We are not of the night, nor of the darkness: we are the children of the day,’ and our dreams are one day to pass into the sober certainty of waking bliss.

Then there is another thought still, and that is that it would be a blot ineffaceable on the divine character if all the discipline of life were to have no field in the future on which its results could be manifested. These three poor men were schooled by many sorrows. What were they all for? For the City. And in like manner the facts of our earthly life and our Christian experiences are equally inexplicable and confounding unless beyond these dim and trifling things of time there lie the sunlit and solemn fields of eternity, in which whatsoever of force, valor, worthiness, manhood, we have made our own here shall expatiate for ever more.

I do not mean that life is so sad and weary that we need to call another world into existence to redress the iralante of the old. I think that is only very partially true, for we are always apt in such considerations to minimize the pleasures on the whole, and to exaggerate the pains on the whole, of the earthly life. But I mean that the one true view of all that befalls us here on earth is discipline; and that discipline implies an end for which it is applied, and a realm in which its results are to be manifested. And if God carefully trains us, passes us through varieties of condition, in order to evolve in us a character conformed to His will; puts us to the long threescore years and ten of the apprenticeship, and then has no workshop in which to occupy us afterwards, we are reduced to a state of utter intellectual bewilderment, and life is an inextricable tangle and puzzle.

You may go into certain prehistoric depots, where you will find lying by thousands flint weapons which have been carefully chipped and shaped and polished, and then, apparently, left in a heap, and never anything done with them. Is the world a great cemetery of weapons prepared and then tossed aside like that? We need a heaven where the faithfulness of the servant shall be exchanged for the joy of the Lord, and he that was faithful in a few things shall be made ruler over many things.

III. And now a word about my last thought; and that is, what this name

binds Christian people to seek.

My text in its former part says, ‘They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.’ If Abraham, instead of stopping under the oak tree at Mature, had gone down into Sodom with Lot, and taken up his quarters there; or if he had become a naturalized citizen of Hebron, and struck up alliances with the children of Heth, would the Sodomites or the Hebronites or the Hittites have thought any the better of him therefore? As long as he kept apart from them, he witnessed to the promise, and God looked upon him and blessed him. But if, professing to look for ‘the city which hath the foundations,’ he had not been content to dwell in tabernacles, God would have been ashamed of him to be called his God.

Translate that into plain English, and it is this. As long as Christian people live like pilgrims and strangers, they are worthy of being called God’s, and God is glad to be called theirs. And as long as they do so, the world will know a religious man when it sees him, and, though it may not like him, it will at least respect him. But a secularized Church or individuals who say that they are Christians, and who have precisely the same estimates of good and evil as the world has, and live by the same maxims, and pursue the same aims, and never lift their eyes to look at the City beyond the river, these are a disgrace to God and to themselves, and to the religion which they say they profess.

I cannot but feel - and feel, I think, in growing degree - that one main clause of the woful feebleness of our average Christianity is that our hopes and visions of the City which hath the foundations have become dim, and that, to a very large extent, the thoughts of ‘the rest that remaineth for the people of God’ is dormant in the minds of the mass of professing Christian people.

Oh, dear friends! if we will yield to that sweet, strong appeal that is made to us in the frame, and, feeling that God is ours and we are His, will turn our hearts and thoughts more than, alas! we have done, to that blessed hope, Jesus will not be ashamed to call us brethren, nor God be ashamed to be called our God. Let us beware that we are not ashamed to be called His, nor to ‘declare plainly that we seek a country.’

33)Hebrews 11:24-27

Hebrews

THE FAITH OF MOSES

Heb. 11:24-27

I HAVE ventured to take these verses as a text, not with the idea of expounding their details, or even of touching many of the large questions which they raise, but for the sake of catching their general drift. They are the writer's description of two significant instances in the life of the great Lawgiver of the power of faith. He deals with both in the same fashion. He first tells the act, then he analyses its spring in the state of feeling which produced it, and then he traces that state of feeling to certain external facts which were obvious to the faith of Moses. 'The Great Refusal,' by which he flung up his position at the court of Pharaoh, and chose to identify himself with his people, is the one. His flight from Egypt to the solitudes of Horeb is the other. The two acts are traced to the states of feeling or opinion in Moses. The former came from a choice and an estimate. 'He chose to suffer with the people of God'; and he 'esteemed the reproach... greater riches than the treasures in Egypt.' The latter in like manner came from a state of feeling. He 'forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king.' What underlay the choice, the estimate, the courage? 'He had respect,' or more literally and forcibly, 'he looked away to the recompense of the reward.' He saw 'Him who is invisible.' So, an act of vision which disclosed him a future recompense and a present God was the basis of all. And from that act of vision there came states of mind which made it easy and natural to choose a lot of suffering and humiliation, and to turn away from all the glories and treasures and wrath of Egypt.

That is to say, we have here two things - what this man saw, and what the vision did for his life, and I wish to consider these two. The same sight is possible for us; and, if we have it, the same conduct will certainly follow.

I. Note then, first, what this man saw.

Two things, says the writer. ‘He looked away to the recompense of the reward,’ and he saw God. Now I need not remind you, I suppose, that these two objects of real vision correspond to the two elements of faith which the writer describes in the first verse of our chapter, where he says that it is ‘the substance of things hoped for’; to which corresponds ‘the recompense of the reward,’ and ‘the evidence of things not seen; to which answers Him who is invisible.’

Now, that conception of faith, as having mainly to do with the future and the unseen, is somewhat different superficially from the ordinary notion of faith, set forth in the New Testament, as being trust in Jesus Christ. But the difference is only superficial, and arises mainly from a variety in the prominence given to the elements which both conceptions have in common. For the faith which is trust in Jesus Christ is directed towards the unseen, and includes in itself the realisation of the future. And the faith which is vivid consciousness of the invisible world, and realisation of a coming retribution, finds them both most clearly and most surely in that Lord ‘in whom, though now we wee Him not, yet believing we rejoice,’ and anticipate the future ‘end of our faith’ even the salvation of our souls. So we may take these two points that emerge from our text, and look at them as containing for our present purpose a sufficient description of what our faith ought to do for us.

There must be, first, then, a vivid and resolute realisation of future retribution. Now, note that this same expression, a somewhat peculiar one, ‘the recompense of the reward,’ is found again in this letter in directly the opposite reference from that which it has here. In the second chapter of the Epistle we read that ‘every transgression and disobedience shall receive its just recompense of reward.’ Both recompense by punishment and by blessedness are included in the word, so that its meaning is the exact requital of good or evil by a sovereign judge.

And that is the very purpose which faith has for one of its chief functions, to burn in the conviction on our slothful minds - that all that is round about us is at once cause and consequence; that life is a network of issues of past actions, and of progenitors of future ones; that nothing that a man does ever dies; that

'Through his soul the echoes roll,
And grow for ever and for ever'

that 'whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.' Character is the result of actions. Condition is largely, if not altogether, dependent upon conduct and upon character. And, just as the sandstone cliffs were laid down grain by grain by an evaporated ocean, and stand eternal when the waters have all vanished, so whatever else you and I are making of, and in, our lives, we are making permanent cliffs of character which will remain when all the waves of time have foamed themselves away.

That process, which is going on moment by moment all through our lives, Christian faith follows beyond the grave. It works right up to the edge of the grave as everybody can see, and many a man's last harvest of the seed that he sowed to the flesh is his, when laid a Corrupted corpse into his coffin. But does it stop there? The world may say, 'We know not.' Christian faith overleaps the gulf and sees the process going on more intensely and unhindered in the life yonder. We are like signalmen in their isolated boxes. They pull a lever, and the points a quarter of a mile away are shifted. The man does not see what he has done, but he has done it all the same. And when his time for travelling comes, he will find that he has determined the course on which he must run by the actions that were done here.

And so, brethren, this conviction, not merely as being a selfish looking for a peaceful and blessed heaven, as some people try to vulgarise the conception, but as being the thrilling consciousness that every deed has its issues, and is to be done, or refrained from, in view of these, this is what is meant by the word of my text: 'he looked away' to the recompense of reward.

Now remember that such a vision clear and definite before a man, substantial and solid and continuous enough to become a formative power in his life, and even to determine its main direction, is only realisable as the result of very special and continuous effort. The writer of the letter employs a singular and a strong word, which I have tried to English by the phrase ‘looking off unto the recompense.’ He turned away by a determined effort of resolution, averting his gaze from other things in order to fix it on the far off thing. One use of the tube of the telescope is to shut out cross lights, and concentrate the vision on the far off object, looked at undisturbed. Unless we can thus shut off on either side these dazzling and bewildering brilliances that dance and flicker round us, we shall never see clearly that solemn future and all its infinite possibilities of sorrow or of blessedness. The eye that is focused to look at the things on the earth cannot see the stars. When the look-out man at the bow wants to make sure whether that white flash on the horizon is a sun-smitten sail or a breaker, he knits his brows and shades his eyes with his hand, and concentrates his steady gaze till he sees. And you and I have to do that, or the most real things in the universe, away yonder in the extreme distance, will be problematical and questionable to us. Oh, brother! our Christian lives would be altogether different if we made the resolve and kept it, to fix our gaze on ‘the recompense of the reward.’

Then the next thing that this man saw, says my text, was ‘Him who is invisible.’

Now I do not suppose that there is any reference there to the miraculous manifestations of a divine presence which were given to the lawgiver, for these came long after the incidents which are being dealt with in my text. True! he saw God face to face amidst the solitudes and the sanctities of Sinai. But that is not at all what the writer is thinking about here. He is thinking about the vision which was given to Moses, in no other fashion than it may be given to us, if we will have it, the sight of God to the ‘inward eye, which is the bliss of solitude,’ and ministers strength to our lives, in solitude or in society. The conscious realisation of God’s presence in our minds and hearts and wills, and the whole trembling and yet rejoicing inner man, aware that God is near, are what is meant by this vision of Him. The realisation of His presence continually, the sight of Him in nature, so that every bush burns with a visible deity, and every cloud is the pillar in which He moves for guidance, the realisation of His presence, in history, in society, operating all changes and working round us, and in us, and on us - this is the highest result of a true religious faith.

And it is worthy to be called sight. For not the vision of the eye is the source of the truest certitude, but the vision of the inward spirit. A man may be surer of God than he is of the material universe that he touches and handles and beholds. The vision that a trustful heart has of God is as real, as direct, and, I venture to say, more assured, than the knowledge which is brought to us through sense.

And such a vision ought to be, and will be if we are right, no disturbing or unwelcome thought, but a delight and a strength. A prisoner in a solitary cell sometimes goes mad because he knows that somewhere in its walls there is a peep-hole at which, at any moment, the eye of a gaoler may be on the watch. But the loving heart that yearns after God has nothing but joy in the otherwise awful thought, ‘If I take the wings of the morning, Thou art there. If I fly to the uttermost parts of the west, there I meet Thee.’ ‘If I make my bed in the grave, Thou art there. Thou hast beset me behind and before.’ Brethren, either our ghastliest doubt or our deepest joy is, ‘Thou, God, seest me.’ ‘When I awake I am still with Thee.’

II. And now, secondly, notice what the vision did for this man.

I cannot do more than touch very lightly upon the various points that are involved here. But I would have you notice in general that the writer masses the enemies of a noble life, which Moses overcame by this sight, in three general classes - pleasures, treasures, dangers. The faith of Moses lifted him above ignoble pleasures, saved him from coveting fleeting possessions, armed him against mere corporeal perils. And these three - delights, rules, dangers, may be roughly said to be the triple-headed Cerberus that bars our way. Let us look how the vision will help to overcome them all.

This sight will take the brightness out of ignoble and fleeting pleasures. Moses had the ball at his foot, Jewish legends tell us that the very crown was intended to be placed on his head. However that may be, a life of luxurious ease, of command over men, accompanied by the half deification which in old days hedged a king, were his for the taking; and he turned from them all. He did not choose suffering: but he chose to be identified with the people of God, though he knew that thereby he was electing a life of sorrow and of pain. The world has seen no nobler act than that when he passed through the gates of Pharaoh's palace, the fragments of whose glorious architecture we still wonder at, and housed himself in the dark reed huts where the slaves dwelt.

Now that same spirit, both in regard to choice and to estimate, must be ours, and will be ours, if we have any depth and reality of vision of the recompense and of the invisible God. For if you once let the light of these two solemn thoughts in upon the delights of earth, how poor and paltry, how coarse and ignoble, they look! Did you ever see the scenes of a theatre by daylight? What daubs; what rents; what coarse work! Let the light of the 'recompense' and of God in upon earthly delights, and how they shrivel, and dwindle, and disappear! Ah, brethren! if we would only bring our earthly desires to the touchstone of these two great thoughts, we should find that many a thing that holds us would slacken its grasp, and the fair forms, with their tiny harps, and their sweet songs that tempt us on the flowery island, would be seen for what they are - ravenous monsters whose guests are in the depths of hell. 'He had respect to the recompense of the reward,' and spurned ignoble pleasures. If you see the things that are, you will not be tempted with the things that seem.

And then, further, such a vision will help us to appraise at their true value earthly possessions.. I cannot enter upon the question of what the writer means precisely by that singular phrase, attributing to Moses 'the reproach of Christ.' Whether it implies the reproach borne for Christ, or like Christ, or by Christ, all which interpretations are possible, and have been suggested, need not concern us now. The point is that the twofold vision of which the writer is speaking, let in upon worldly possessions, reveals their emptiness and dressiness, as compared with the true riches.

There are old stories of men who in the night received from fairy hands gifts of gold in some cave, and when the daylight came upon them what had seemed to be gold and jewels was a bundle of withered leaves and red berries, already half corrupted and altogether worthless. There are many things that the world counts very precious which are lille the fairy's gold. Nothing that can be taken from a man really belongs to him. The only real riches, corresponder with his necessities, are those which, once possessed, are inseparable from his being, the riches of an indwelling God, and of a nature conformed to His.

And that effect of the vision of the unseen and the future, as bringing down to their true value all the wealth of Egypt and of the world, is a lesson which no man needs more than do we whose lives, and habits of thinking, are passed and formed in a commercial community, in which success means a fortune, and failure means poverty; in which the poor are tempted to look upon the possession of wealth as the only thing to be coveted, and the rich are tempted to look upon it as the one thing to be rejoiced over. Let the light of the future, and of God, ever shine upon your estimates of the worth of the world's wealth.

Lastly, such a vision will arm a man against all perils. I take it that 'forsaking Egypt' in my text refers to Moses' flight to Horeb. Now, in the book of Exodus that flight is traced to his fear. In my text it is traced to his courage. So, then, there may dwell in one heart fearing and not fearing. There may be dread, as there was with Moses, sufficient to impel him to flight, though not sufficient to induce him to abandon the purpose which made flight necessary. He was afraid enough to shelter himself. He was not afraid enough, by reason of dangers and difficulties, to fling up his mission. That is to say, the vision will not take away from a man natural tremors, nor will it blind him to real dangers and difficulties, but it will steady his resolve, and make him determined, though he may have to bow before the blast, to yield no jot of his convictions, nor fling away any of his confidence. He will flee to Horeb, if need be, but he will not cease to labour for the redemption of Israel If we put our trust in God, and live in the continual realisation of future retribution, then, whilst we may prudently adapt our course so as to find a smooth bit of road to walk on, and to avoid dangers which may threaten, we shall never let these either shake our confidence in God, or alter our conviction of what He requires from us.

So I gather up all that I have been trying to say in the one word - the true way to make life noble is the old way, the way of faith. The sight of God, the vision of judgment will make earth's pleasures paltry, earth's treasures dross, earth's dangers contemptible. The way to secure that ennobling and strengthening vision to attend us everywhere, is to keep near to Jesus Christ, and to fix our hearts on Him. In communion with Him pleasures that perish will woo in vain, and possessions from which we must part will lose their worth, and perils that touch the body will cease to terrify; and through faith 'we shall be more than conquerors in Him that loved us.'

34)Hebrews 12:1

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE A RACE

Heb. 12:1

THE previous clauses of this verse bring before us the runner’s position as ‘compassed about with a cloud of witnesses,’ and his preparation as ‘laying aside every weight and.., sin.’ The text carries us a stage further in the metaphor, and shows us the company of runners standing ready, stripped, and straining at the starting-post, with the long course stretching before them.

The metaphor of the Christian life as a race is threadbare, so far as our knowledge is concerned, but it may be questioned if it has sunk deeply enough into the practice of any of us. It is a very noble one, and contains an ideal of the Christian life which it would do us all good to hold up by the side of our realisation of it. It might stimulate and it would shame us. What is the special note of that metaphor? Compare with the ‘kindred one, equally well-worn and threadbare, of a journey or a pilgrimage. The two have much in common. They both represent life as changeful, continuous, progressive, tending to an end; but the metaphor of the race underscores, as it were, another idea, that of effort. The traveller may go at his Leisure, he may fling himself down to rest under a tree, he may diverge from the road, but the runner must not look askance, must not he afraid of dust or sweat, must tax muscle and lungs to the utmost, if, panting, he is to reach the goal and win the prize, So, very significantly, our writer here puts forward only one characteristic of the race. It is to be ‘run with patience,’ by which great word the New Testament means, not merely passive endurance, noble and difficult as that may be, but active perseverance which presses on unmoved, ay, and unhindered, to its goal in the teeth of all opposition.

But, whilst that is the special characteristic of the metaphor, as distinguished from others kindred to it, and of the ideal which it sets forth, I desire in this sermon to take a little wider sweep, and to try to bring out the whole of the elements which lie in this well-worn figure. I see in it four things: a definite aim, clearly apprehended and eagerly embraced; a God-appointed path; a steady advance; and a strenuous effort. Now let us ask ourselves the question, Do they correspond to anything in my professing Christian life?

We have here, then

I. A definite aim, clearly apprehended and eagerly embraced.

Most men have aims, definite enough, in regard lower things, and if you ask the average man out of the ruck what he is living for, he will generally be able to answer curtly and clearly, or at any rate his life will show, even if he cannot put it into words. But all these are means rather than ends; ‘I am living to make a big business.’ ‘I am living to make a fortune.’ ‘I am living to found a family.’ ‘I am living to learn a science, an art, a profession.’ ‘I am living for enjoy-merit,’ etc., etc. Yes, and then suppose somebody perks up with the exceedingly inconvenient further question, ‘Well, and what then?’ Then, all that fabric of life-aims rushes down into destruction, and is manifest for what it is-altogether disproportionate to the man that is pursuing it. Such shabby, immediate’ aims’ are not worth calling so. But my text sets forth far beyond, and far above them, the one only goal which it is becoming, which it is natural which it is anything else than ludicrous, if it were not so tragical, that any man should be pursuing. And what is that mark? You can put it in a hundred different ways. Evangelical Christian people generally say salvation, and a great many so-called Evangelical Christian people have a very low, inadequate, and selfish idea of what they mean by the word. Let us put it in another form. The only aim that it is worthy of a man to live for, as his supreme and dominant one, is that he shall be completely moulded in character, disposition, nature, heart, and will into the likeness of Jesus Christ, who is the image of God, and that he shall pass into no Nirvana of unconsciousness, but into that blessed union with the divine nature, which is not absorption into it, or the Weakening of the individual, but the making a man tenfold more himself because he lives in God, as the taper plunged into the jar of oxygen, which burns the brighter for its surroundings, and unlike the taper, is unconsumed by burning. Thus the complete development of human character into the divine image, and the complete union of the human with the divine, is the aim that Christianity sets before us.

And that aim it becomes every one of us professing Christians clearly to apprehend, and keep ever in view as the thing to which we are not merely tending, but to which we are striving. Clearly apprehended, and eagerly embraced, this conception of the purpose of our lives must be if we are not to make them ignoble and conscious or unconscious hypocrisies. But remember that such an aim may be pursued through, and requires for its attainment, all those lower aims and ends which monopolise men's efforts without regard to anything beyond. What we want most is a Christianity which, recognising that great, supreme purpose, follows it persistently and doggedly through all nearer and lesser pursuits. We want our Christian principle to penetrate into all the tissues of our lives, and to bring there healing, purging, and quickening. And if we suppose that the greatest of all aims is contrary to any of these lesser ones, except such of them as are sinful, then we misapprehend both the highest blessedness and good of the nearest objects that are set before us, and still more fatally misapprehend the very genius and intention of that Christianity, which is not unworldliness but the secret of making the world and all its fading sweets subservient to this highest end.

Now, need I say one word as to the nobleness and blessedness of a life which is consistently and thoroughly ordered with a view to this great aim? Think of the unity that thus will be blessedly breathed over all the else bewildering diversity of earthly conditions and occupations. As the moon gathers into one great tidal wave the heaped waters of the shoreless ocean, and mastering currents, and laughing at the opposing powers of the tempest, carries the watery wall round the earth, so the white, pure beam of that aim shining down on the confused welter of our earthly life will draw it all after itself. Think, too, of the power that comes into a life from this unity. A man of one aim is always formidable, and high above all other aims in its absorbing power is this one that a Christian man only deserves his name if-he sets and keeps before him. Such a unity will, if I may so say, gather together the whole power of our nature, and bring it into a point, and it will heat it as well as concentrate it. If you take a bit of blunt iron, cold, and try to bore a hole in a ten-inch plank, you will make little progress; but if you sharpen it to a point, and heat it red-hot, then it will penetrate anything. So my life gathered up into one, and heated, by the very fact of its being concentrated, will pierce through all obstacles, and I shall be strong in the proportion in which ‘ this one thing I do,’ and do it through all other things.

I need not remind you, either, of the blessedness which is involved in this unity of aim, clearly apprehended and eagerly embraced, in so far as it will act as a test of all lower pursuits and objects Wherever there comes a little rill of fresh water down upon the coral reef the creatures that build it die, and the reef disappears, and thus a great aim will kill all lower ones that work in the dark, creeping and crawling, and that are contrary to itself.

Further, this supreme aim is supremely blessed, because it will shine ever before us. There is a blessedness in having an object of pursuit which we never reach. It is better to steer straight to the pole-star, though we never get there, than to creep like the old mariners, from headland to headland, and leave behind us sinking on the backward horizon, purpose after purpose, hope after hope, aim after aim. Better to have it shining ahead. Let me point out the second idea contained in this metaphor, that of

II. A God-appointed path.

The race is ‘ set before us.’ Set before us by whom? The course is staked out and determined by the Judge of the games. And that may well be applied in two directions. My duties are appointed by God, and if only we realise that, and bring the thought of His will continually into connection with the smallest of the sets which circumstance, relationships, occupations and the like constitute our duties, how different they all become! It is an entirely different thing to say, ‘Being where I am, I must do so-and-so’; or ‘Right and wrong being what it is, I must do so-and-so; or to say,’ This and that man prescribes ‘so, and-so for me’; and to say. ‘Thou hast prepared a path for us, and ordained that we should walk therein.’ That elevates, that sweetens, that calms us, that smooths the road, makes the rough places plain and the crooked things straight. We want with the clear vision of the aim the equally clear and abiding persuasion that God has appointed the path. A modern thinker said that religion was morality touched by emotion. No, religion is morality transfigured into obedience to the law of God. Bring your duties into connection with His appointment, and they will all be easy; and when the path stretches gloomy before you, and it seems that you are called upon to do some hard thing, say: ‘Created unto good works which

God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.'

Then there is the other thought that, as the duties are appointed by Him, so the circumstances are appointed, too. You know what they call an obstacle-race, in which the intention is to accumulate as many difficulties in the course as can be crowded into it; I fancy that is a good deal like the race that is set before all of us, by God's wisdom. There are many fences to be climbed, many barriers to be crept under, many deep ditches to be waded through, many bad bits of road studded with sharp points, through which we have to pick our way. We say as to ourselves, and as to our friends, 'What does it all mean?' And the answer is, 'He has set the race before for our profit that we might be partakers of His holiness.'

Again, we have here the notion of

III. A steady progress.

Continual advance is the very salt of the Christian life, and unless there be such progress there is something fatally wrong with the Christianity. An unprogressive Christianity is very apt to become a moribund and then a dead Christianity. Of course that is so because the aim of which I have been speaking is, in its very nature, inaccessible and yet capable of indefinite approximation. 'Alps upon Alps arise.' Neither in regard to the intellectual or spiritual apprehension of the deep things of God, nor in regard to the incorporation of His likeness into itself, will human nature ever be able to say, 'Lo, I have passed through the land, and know it all.' But an indefinite approximation to an eternally unreached point is a description of a geometrical figure, and it is the description of the Christian life. And, therefore, at no point must we stop, and at no point is it safe for us to say, 'I have apprehended and attained.' Our nature, quite as much as the divine nature towards which we tend, demands this continuous progress, for the human spirit is capable of an indefinite expansion, and the seed of the life kindred to God which is lodged in every believing soul, though it be at the beginning 'less than the least of all,' must grow into a great tree.

Ah, brethren! what a sad contrast to this unbroken progress our lives present to our own consciousness! How many Christian people there are who have almost lost sight of the notion, and have certainly ceased from the practice of an unbroken advance in either of the directions of which I have been speaking, likeness to God or communion with Him! Ask yourselves the question, ‘Am I further on than I was this day last year, this day ten years, this day twenty years?’ The Japanese gardeners pride themselves on having the secret of dwarfing forest trees, and they will put an oak into a flower-pot; and there it is, only a few inches high, in age a patriarch, in height a seedling. And that is what a great many of you Christian people are doing, dwarfing the tree; even if you are not distorting it. And now the last thing that I point out here is

IV. The strenuous effort, I have already said a word or two about that as being the differentia, the special characteristic, of this metaphor.

And I may just refer for one moment to the fact that the word rendered here ‘race,’ and quite rightly so rendered, literally means a contest - ‘Let us run the contest that is set before us.’ What does that say? Why, just this, that every foot of advance has to be fought; it is not merely ‘running,’ it is conflict as well. And then, pointing in the same direction, comes the selection in the text, which I have already touched upon, of the one qualification that is necessary - patient endurance, which suggests antagonism. Opposition - where does the opposition come from? The Apostle asked the Galatians that once. ‘Ye did run well; what did hinder you?’ And the answers are diverse: flowers by the roadside, golden apples flung across the course, siren voices tempting us, the force of gravity holding us back, the pressure of the wind on our faces. Yes, and my own self most of all That is what hinders, and that is what has to be fought against by myself. Effort, effort, effort is the secret of all noble life, in all departments, and it is the secret of advancing Christian life.

Now, let us understand aright the relations between the faith of which the New Testament makes so much and the effort of which this metaphor makes so much. A great many Christian people seem to fancy that faith supersedes effort. Not so! It stimulates and strengthens effort. If I trust, I receive the power to run, but whether I shall really run or not depends on myself. God gives the ability in Jesus Christ, and then we have to use the ability, and to turn it into an actuality. They have invented a movable platform at the Paris Exhibition, they tell me, on which a man steps, and having stepped upon it is lazily carried to his destination in the building without lifting a foot or moving a muscle. And some people seem to think that Christianity is a platform of that sort, a ‘living way,’ on which, if once they get, they may be as idle as they like, and they will reach their journey’s end. Not so! Not so! By faith we enter on the race; through faith we receive the power that will make us able to run and not be weary, and to walk and not faint. But unless we run we shall not advance, and unless we advance we shall not attain. Understand, then, that faith is the basis of effort, and effort is the crown of faith. If we will thus trust ourselves to that Lord, and draw from Him the power which He is infinitely willing to give, then the great vision of the prophet will be fulfilled in our case, and we shall find stretching across the low, swampy levels of this world ‘a highway,’ and it shall be ‘a way of holiness, and no ravenous beast shall come up therein, but the redeemed shall walk there, and the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.’

35)Hebrews 12:1

Hebrews

WEIGHTS AND SINS

Heb. 12:1

THERE is a regular series of thoughts in this clause, and in the one or two which follow it, ‘Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us; and let us run with patience the race that is set before us - looking unto Jesus.’ That is to say, If we would run well, we must run light; if we would run light, we must look to Christ. The central injunction is, ‘Let us run with patience’; the only way of doing that is the ‘laying aside all weights and sin’; and the only way of laying aside the weights and sins is, ‘looking unto Jesus.’

Of course the Apostle does not mean some one special kind of transgression when he says, ‘the sin which doth so easily beset us.’ He is speaking about sin generically - all manner of transgression. It is not, as we sometimes hear the words misquoted, ‘that sin which doth most easily beset us.’ All sin is, according to this passage, a besetting sin. It is the characteristic of every kind of transgression, that it circles us round about, that it is always lying in wait and lurking for us. The whole of it, therefore, in all its species, is to be cast aside if we would run with patience this appointed race. But then, besides that, there is something else to be put aside as well as sin. There is ‘every weight’ as well as every transgression- two distinct things, meant’ to be distinguished. The putting away of both of them is equally needful for the race. The figure is plain enough. We as racers must throw aside the garment that wraps us round - that is to say, ‘the sin that easily besets us’; and then, besides that, we must lay aside everything else which weights us for the race - that is to say, certain habits or tendencies within us.

We have, then, to consider these three points ; - First, There are hindrances which are not sins. Secondly, If we would run, we must put aside these. And lastly, If we would put them aside, we must look to Christ.

In the first place, there are hindrances which are not sins. The distinction which the writer draws is a very important one. Sin is that which, by its very nature, in all circumstances, by whomsoever done, without regard to consequences, is a transgression of God’s law. A ‘weight’ is that which, allowable in itself, legitimate, perhaps a blessing, the exercise of a power which God has given us - is, for some reason, a hindrance and impediment in our running the heavenly race. The one word describes the action or habit by its inmost essence, the other describes it by its accidental consequences. Sin is sin, whosoever does it; but weights may be weights to me, and not weights to you. Sin is sin in whatever degree it is done; but weights may be weights when they are in excess, and helps, not hindrances, when they are in moderation. The one is a legitimate thing turned to a false use; the other is always, and everywhere, and by whomsoever performed, a transgression of God’s law.

Then, what are these weights? The first stop in the answer to that question is to be taken by remembering that, according to the image of this text we carry them about with us, and we are to put them away from ourselves. It is fair to say then, that the whole class of weights are not so much external circumstances which may be turned to evil, as the feelings and habits of mind by which we abuse God’s great gifts and mercies, and turn that which was ordained to be for life into death. The renunciation that is spoken about is not so much the putting away from ourselves of certain things lying round about us, that may become temptations; as the putting away of the dispositions within us which make these things temptations. The other is, of course, included as well; but if we want to understand the true depth of the doctrine of self-denial and serf-sacrifice which is taught here, we must remember that the sin and the weights alike lie within our own hearts - that they are our feelings, not God’s perfect gifts - that they are our abuse of God’s benefits, not the benefits which are given to us for our use. We shall have to see, presently, that By the power which we possess of turning all these outward blessings of God’s hands into occasion for transgression, God’s most precious endowments may become weights - but let us observe that, accurately and to begin with, the text enjoins us to put away what cleaves to us, and is in us, not what is lying round about us. Then, if it be mainly and primarily, legitimate feelings and thoughts, abused and exaggerated, which make the weights that we are to lay aside, what are the things which may thus become weights? Oh, brethren! a little word answers that. Everything. It is an awful and mysterious power that which we all possess, of perverting the highest endowments, whether of soul or of circumstances, which God has given us, into the occasions for faltering, and falling back in the divine life. Just as men, by devilish ingenuity, can distil poison out of God’s fairest flowers, so we can do with everything that we have, with all the richest treasures of our nature, with the hearts which He has given us that we may love Him with them; with the understandings which He has bestowed upon us, that we may apprehend His divine truth and His wonderful counsel with them; with these powers of work in the world which He has conferred upon us, that by them we may bring to Him acceptable service and fitting offering; and, in like manner, with all the gladness and grace with which He surrounds our life, intending that out of it we should draw ever occasions for thankfulness, reasons for trust, helps towards God, ladders to assist us in climbing heavenward. Ah! and because we cleave to them too much, because we cleave to them not only in a wrong degree but in a wrong manner [for that is the deepest part of the fault], we may make them all hindrances. So, for instance, in a very awful sense is fulfilled that threatening, ‘A man’s foes shall be they of his own household,’ when we make those that we love best our idols, not because we love them too well, but because we love them apart from God; when instead of drawing from those that are dear to us - our husbands, and wives, and children, and parents, and friends, and every other tender name - lessons of God's infinite goodness, and reasons why our hearts should flow perpetually with love to Him - we stay with them, and hang back from God, and forget that His love is best, His heart deepest, and His sufficiency our safest trust. That is one single instance; and as it is in that sacredest of regions, so is it in all others. Every blessing, every gladness, every possession, external to us, and every faculty and attribute within us, we turn into heavy weights that drag us down to this low spot of earth- We make them all sharp knives with which we clip the wings of our heavenward tendencies, and then we grovel in the dust.

And now, if this be the explanation of what the Apostle means by 'weights' - legitimate things that hinder us in our course towards God - there comes this second consideration, If we would run we must lay these aside. Why must we lay 'them aside? The whole of the Christian's course is a fight. We carry with us a double nature. The best of us know that 'flesh lusts against spirit, and spirit against flesh.' Because of that conflict, it follows that if ever there is to be a positive progress in the Christian race, it must be accompanied, and made possible, by the negative process of casting away and losing much that interferes with it. Yes! that race is not merely the easy and natural unfolding of what is within us. The way by which we come to 'the measure of the stature of perfect men' in Christ, is not the way by which these material bodies of ours grow up into their perfectness. They have but to be nourished, and they grow. 'The blade and the ear, and the full corn in the ear,' come by the process of gradual growth and increase. That law of growth is used by our Lord as a description, but only as a partial description, of the way by which the kingdom of Christ advances in the heart. There is another side to it as well as that, The kingdom advances by warfare as well as by growth. It would Be easy if it were but a matter of getting more and more; but it is not that only. Every step of the road you have to cut your way through opposing foes. Every step of the road has to be marked with the blood that comes from wounded feet. Every step of the road is won by a tussle and a strife.

There is no spiritual life without dying, there is no spiritual growth without putting off ‘the old man with his affections and lusts.’ The hands cannot move freely until the bonds be broken. The new life that is in us cannot run with patience the race that is set before it, until the old life that is in us is put down and subdued. And if we fancy that we are to get to heaven by a process of persistent growth, without painful self-sacrifice and martyrdom, we know nothing about it. That is not the law. For every new step that we win in the Christian course there must have been the laying aside of something. For every progress in knowledge, there must have been a sacrifice and martyrdom of our own indolence, of our own pride, of our own blindness of heart, of our own perverseness of will. For every progress in devout emotion, there must have been a crucifying and slaying of our earthly affections, of our wavering hearts that are drawn away from God by the sweetness of this world. For every progress in strenuous work for God, there must have been a slaying of the selfishness which urges us to work in our own strength and for our own sake. All along the Christian course there must be set up altars to God on which you sacrifice yourselves, or you will never advance a step. The old legend that the Grecian host lay weather-bound in their port, vainly waiting for a wind to come and carry them to conquest; and that they were obliged to slay a human sacrifice ere the heavens would be propitious and fill their sails, may be translated into the deepest verity of the Christian life. We may see in it that solemn lesson - no prosperous voyage, and no final conquest until the natural life has been offered up on the altar of hourly self-denial. That self-denial must reach beyond gross and undoubted sins. They must be swept away, of course, but deeper than these must the sacrificial knife strike its healing wound. If you would ‚run with patience, ‘you must ‘lay aside every weight,’ as well as ‘the sin which so easily besets you.’

So much for the why; well, then, how is this laying aside to be performed? There are two ways by which this injunction of my text may be obeyed. The one is, by getting so strong that the thing shall not be a weight, though we carry it; and the other is that feeling ourselves to be weak, we take the prudent course of put-ring it utterly aside. Or, to turn that into other words: the highest type of the Christian character would be, that we should, as the Apostle says, ‘use the world without abusing it’ - that’ they who possess should be as though they possessed not; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not.' The noblest style of a Christian would be a man, who exercising all the faculties which God had given him, and enjoying all the blessings wherewith God had surrounded him, walked his Christian course like some of those knights of old, lightly bearing his heavy mail, not feeling it a burden, but strong enough to bear the massive breastplate and to wield the ponderous sword, and fitted for his rough warfare by it all. It would be possible, perhaps, some day for us to come to this - that inasmuch as it is the feelings within us which make the weights, and not the objects without us - we should keep and enjoy the blessings and the gladness that we possess, and yet never thereby be thwarted or stayed in our journey heavenward. It would be the highest condition. I suppose we shall come to it yonder, where there will no longer be any need to maim ourselves that we may ' enter into life,' but where all the maimings that were done in this world for the sake of entering into life shall be compensated and restored, and each soul shall stand perfect and complete, wanting nothing.

But, alas! though that course be the highest, the abstract best, the thing for which we ought to strive and try; it is not the course for which the weakness and inaptness of the most of us makes us strong enough. And therefore, seeing that we have a nature so weak and feeble, that temptations surround us so constantly, that so many things legitimate become to us harmful and sinful - the path of prudence, the safe path, is absolutely and utterly to put them away from us, and have nothing to do with them.

Of course, there are many duties which, by our own sinfulness, we make weights, and we dare not, and we cannot if we would, lay them aside. A man, for instance, is born into certain circumstances, wherein he must abide; he has 'a calling whereunto he is called.' Your trade is a weight, your daily occupations are weights. The spirit of this commandment before us is not, 'Leave your plough, and go up into the mountain to pray; Again, a man finds himself surrounded by friends and domestic ties. He dare not, he must not, he cannot, shake himself free from these. There are cases in which to put away the occupation that has become a weight - to sacrifice the blessing that has become a hindrance - to abstain from the circumstances which clog and impede our divine life, is a sin. Where God sets us, we must stand, if we die. What God has given us to do, we must do. The duties that in our weakness become impediments and weights, we must not leave.

But for all besides these, anything which I know has become a snare to me - unless it be something in the course of my simple duty, or unless it be some one of those relations of life which I cannot got rid of - I must have done with it! It may be sweet, it may he very dear, it may He very near thy heart, it may be a part of thy very being : - never mind, put it away! If God has said to you, There, my child, stand there, surrounded by temptations! - then, like a man, stand to your colours, and do not take these words as if they said I am to leave a place because I find myself too weak to resist - a place in which God, for the good of others or for the good of myself, has manifestly set me. But for all other provinces of life, if I feel myself weak I shall be wise to fly. As Christ has said, ‘If thy hand offend thee,’ put it down on the block there, and take the knife in the other, ‘and cut it off’: it is better, it is better for thee to go into life with that maimed and bleeding stump, an imperfect man, than with all thy natural capacities and powers to be utterly lost at the last! And some of us, perhaps, may feel that these solemn lessons apply not only to affection and outward business. I may be speaking to some young man to whom study, and thought, are a snare. I know that I am saying a grave thing, but I do say, In that region too, the principle applies. Better be ignorant, and saved, than wise, and lost. Better a maimed man in Christ’s fold, than a perfect man, if that were possible, outside of it.

I know that there is a large field for misconception and misapplication in the settlement of the practical question - Which of my weights arise from circumstances that I dare not seek to alter, and which from circumstances that I dare not leave unaltered? There is a large margin left for the play of honesty of purpose, and plain common-sense, in the fitting of such general maxims to the shifting and complicated details of an individual life. But no laws can be laid down to save us that trouble. No man can judge for another about this matter. It must be our own sense of what harms our spiritual life, and not other people’s notions of what is likely to harm either theirs or ours, that guides us. What by experience I find does me harm, let me give up! No man has a right to come to me and say, There is a legitimate thing, an indifferent thing; it is not a sin; there is not in it, in itself, the essential element of transgression; but you must forsake it, because it is a weight to other people! To my own master I stand or fall. The commandment is, Have no weights! But the way to fulfil that commandment - whether by rejecting the thing altogether, or by keeping it, and yet not letting it be a weight, that is a matter for every one’s own conscience, for every one’s own judgment and practical prudence, guided by the Spirit of God, to determine. The obedience to the commandment is a simple matter of loyalty to Christ. But the manner of obedience is to be fixed by Christian wisdom. And remember that on both sides of the alternative there are dangers. There is danger in the too great freedom which says, I am strong; I can venture to do this thing - another man cannot - and I will do it! There is a danger On the other side in saying, We are all weak, and we will forsake all these things together! The one class of moralists axe apt to confound their own unsanctified inclinations with the dictates of Christian freedom. The other class are apt to confound their own narrowness with the commandments of God. The one class are apt to turn their liberty into a cloak of licentiousness. The other class are apt to turn their obligation into a yoke which neither they nor their disciples are able to bear. The Apostle pointed out the evils which these two ways of dealing with things indifferent are apt to foster when he said to those who adopt the one, ‘Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not’; and to those who adopt the other ‘Let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth.’ That is to say, on the one hand, beware of the fancied superiority to the weaknesses and narrowness of your more scrupulous brother, which is prone to creep into the hearts of the more liberal and strong. Remember that perhaps the difference between you is not all in your favour. It may be that what you call over-scrupulous timidity is the fruit of a more earnest Christian principle than yours; and that what you call in yourself freedom from foolish scruples, is only the result of a less sensitive conscience, not of a more robust Christianity. Then for the other class, the lesson is, ‘Let not him which eateth not, judge him that eateth.’ Judge not from the height of your superior self-denial, your brother who allows himself what you avoid. Your besetting sin is self-righteous condemnation of those who perhaps, after all, are wiser as well as wider than you, and who in their strength may be able to walk as near to God on a road, which to you would be full of perils, as you are in the manner of life which you know to be needful for you. Let us all remember, besides, that a thing which to ourselves is no weight, may yet be right for us to forsake, out of true and tender brotherly regard to others who, weaker than we, or perhaps more conscientious than we, could not do the same thing without damaging their spirits and weakening their Christian life. ‘Him that is weak in the faith, receive.’ Him that is weak in the faith, help. And in all these matters indifferent, which are weights to one and not weights to another, let us remember, first, for ourselves, that a weight retained is a sin; and let us remember, next, for others, that they stand not by our experience, but by their own; and that we are neither to judge their strength, nor to offend their weakness.

And now, in the last place: This laying aside of every weight is only possible by looking to Christ. That self-denial of which I have been speaking has in it no merit, no worthiness. The man that practises it is not a bit better than the man that does not, except in so far as it is a preparation for greater reception of the spiritual life. Some people suppose that when they have laid aside a weight, conquered a hindrance, given up some bad habit, they have done a meritorious thing. Well, we are strengthened, no doubt, by the very act; but then, it is of no use at all except in so far as it makes us better fitted for the positive progress which is to come after it. What is the use of the racer betaking, himself to the starting-post, and throwing aside every weight, and then standing still? He puts aside his garments that he may run. We empty our hearts; but the empty heart is dull, and cold, and dark: we empty our hearts that Christ may fill them. That is not all: Christ must have begun to fill them before we can empty them. ‘Looking to Jesus’ is the only means of thorough-going, absolute self-deniaL All other surrender than that which is based upon love to Him, and faith in Him, is but surface work, and drives the subtle disease to the vitals. The man that tries, by paring off an excrescence here, and giving up a bad habit there, to hammer and tinker and cut himself into the shape of a true and perfect man, may do it outwardly. He will scarcely do that, but it is possible he may partially. And then, what has he made himself? ‘A whited sepulchre’; outside, - adorned, beautiful, clean; inside, - full of rottenness and dead men’s bones! The self that was beaten in the open field of outward life, retires, like a defeated army, behind broad rivers; and concentrates itself in its fortresses, and prepares hopefully for a victorious resistance in the citadel of the heart.

My brother, if you would ‘run with patience the race that is set before you,’ you must ‘lay aside, every weight.’ If you would lay aside every weight, you must look to Christ, and let His love flow into thy soul. Then, self-denial will not be self-denial. It will be blessing and joy, sweet and easy. Just as the old leaves drop naturally from the tree when the new buds of spring begin to put themselves out, let the new affection come and dwell in thy heart, and expel the old. ‘Lay aside every weight’ - ‘looking unto Jesus.’ Then, too, you will find that the sacrifice and maiming of the old man has been the perfecting of the man. You will find that whatever you give up for Christ you get back from Christ, better, more beautiful, more blessed, hallowed to its inmost core, a joy and a possession for ever. For He will not suffer that any gift laid upon His altar shall not be given back to us. He will have no maimed man in His service. So, the hand that is cut off, the eye that is plucked out, the possessions that are rendered up, the idols that are slain - they are all given back to us again when we stand in God’s own light in glory - perfect men, made after the image of Christ, and surrounded with all possessions transfigured and glorified in the light of God. ‘There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God’s sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting.

36)Hebrews 12:2

Hebrews

THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES AND THEIR LEADER

Heb. 12:1-2

WHAT an awful sight the rows above rows of spectators must have been to the wrestler who looked up at them from the arena, and saw a mist of white faces and pitiless eyes all directed on himself! How many a poor gladiator turned in his despair from them to the place where purple curtains and flashing axes proclaimed the presence of the emperor, on whose word hung his life, whose will could crown him with a rich reward!

That is the picture which this text brings before our eyes, as the likeness of the Christian life. We are in the arena; the race has to be run, the battle to be fought, All round and high above us, a mist, as it were, of fixed gazers beholds us, and on the throne is the Lord of life, the judge of the strife, whose smile is better than all crowns, whose downward-pointing finger seals our fate. We are compassed with a cloud of witnesses, and we may see Jesus the author and finisher of faith. Both of these facts are alleged here as encouragements to persevering, brave struggle in the Christian life. Hence we have here mainly two subjects for consideration, namely the relation between the saints who are gone and ourselves, and the encouragement derived from it; and the contrasted relation between Jesus and ourselves, and the encouragement derived from it.

I. The metaphor of the 'cloud of witnesses' is perhaps intended to express multitude, and also elevation.

It may have been naturally suggested by the thought of the saints of the Old Testament [of whom the previous chapter has been so nobly speaking] as exalted to heaven, and hovering far above and far away like the pure whitenesses that tower there. Raphael's great Sistine Madonna has for background just such a light mist of angel faces and adoring eyes all turned to the gentle majesty of the Virgin. There may also be blending in the writer's mind such a reference to the amphitheatre as we have already noticed, which certainly exists in the later portion of the context. But we must remember that tempting as it is to a hasty reader to deduce from the words the idea that the saints whose 'warfare is accomplished' look down on our struggles here, there is, at all events, no support to that idea in the word 'witnesses.' It is not used, as often in our speech, as equivalent to spectators, but means here exactly what it does in the previous chapter, namely, attesters or testifiers. They are not witnesses of us, but to us, as we shall see presently. It may, indeed, be that the thought of the heavenly spectators of our Christian course is implied in the whole strain of the passage, and of the imagery borrowed from the arena, which would certainly be incomplete if there were nothing to answer to the spectators, who, whether at Corinth or Rome, made so important a part in the scene.

We shall be going too far, I think, if we dogmatically assert, on the strength of a figure, that this context teaches a positive communion between earth and heaven of such a sort as that they who have ‘overcome by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of His testimony,’ know about the struggles of us down here in the arena. Still, one feels that such an idea is almost needed to give full force either to the figure or exhortation. It does seem somewhat lame to say, You are like racers, surrounded with a crowd of witnesses, therefore run, only do not suppose that they really see you. If this be so, the glowing imagery certainly seems to receive a violent chill, and the flow of the exhortation to be much choked. Still we can go no further than a modest ‘perhaps.’

But even as a ‘may be,’ the thought of such a knowledge stimulates. As all the thousand eyes of assembled Greece looked on at the runners, and all the dialects of its states swelled the tumult of acclaim which surged round the victor, so here the general assembly and Church of the firstborn, the festal gathering on Mount Zion, into relations with which this very chapter says we have come, may be conceived of as sitting, solemn and still, on the thrones around the central throne, and bending not unloving looks of earnest pity on the arena below where they too once toiled and suffered.

It may be that, before their eyes, who have been made wise by death, and who, standing within the ‘sanctuary of God, understand the end’ of life and life’s sorrows, are manifest our struggles, as with Weary feet and drooping limbs we blunder on in the race. Surely there is love in heaven, and it may be there is knowledge, and it may be there is care for us. It may be that, standing on the serene shore beside the Lord, who has already prepared a meal for us with His own hands, they discern, tossing on the darkened sea, the poor little boats of us downhearted, unsuccessful toilers, who cannot yet descry the Lord, or the welcome which waits on the beach.

At all events the thought may come with cheer to our hearts, that, whether conscious of one another’s mode of being or no, they in their triumph and we in our toils are bound together with real bonds The thought, if not the knowledge, of their blessedness may be wafted down to us, just as the thought, if not the knowledge, of our labour may be in their restful souls. The hope of their tranquil shore may strengthen us that are far off upon the sea, though we cannot see more of it than the dim lights moving about, and catch an occasional fragrance in the air that tells of land, just as the memory of their stormy voyage mingles in their experience with their gladness because the waves be quiet, and God has brought them to their desired haven. Such thoughts may come with encouragement for the conflict, even if we hesitate to assert that the cloud of witnesses is a cloud of spectators. What, then, is the sense in which these heroes of the faith which the previous chapter has marshalled in a glorious bede-roll, are 'witnesses'? The answer will be found by observing the frequent occurrence of the word, and its cognate words, in that chapter. We read there, for instance, that the elders 'had witness borne to them' [verse 2, Revised Version]; that Abel by the acceptance of his sacrifice, 'had witness borne to him that he was righteous,' 'God bearing witness in respect of his gifts' [verse 4, Revised Version]; that Enoch 'had witness borne to him that he had been well pleasing unto God' [verse 5, Revised Version], and that the whole illustrious succession 'had witness borne to them through their faith' [verse 39, Revised Version]. This witness borne to them by God is, of course, His giving to them the blessings which belong to a genuine faith, whether of conscious acceptance with God, or of inward peace and power, or of outward victory over sorrows and foes. But they become witnesses to us for God by the very same facts by which He makes Himself the witness of their faith, for they therein become proofs of the blessedness of true religion, visible evidences of God's faithfulness, and their histories shine out across the centuries testifying to us in our toils how good it is to trust in the Lord, and how small and transient are the troubles and hindrances that a life of faith meets. The calm stars declare the glory of God, and witness from age to age of His power, which keeps them every one from failing; and these bright names that shine in the heaven of His word proclaim His tender pity, and His rewarding love to all who, like them, fight the good fight. Like the innumerable suns that make up the Milky Way, they melt into one bright cloud that lies still and eternal above our heads and sheds a radiance on our dim struggles. So we have here brought out the stimulus to our Christian race from the faith and blessedness of these saints.

We have their history before us: we know what they were, and we have the 'end of their conversation' - that is, the issue or outcome of their manner of life - as the next chapter says. It was a hard fight, but it ended in victory. They had more than their share of sorrows and troubles, but 'the glory dies not, and the grief is past.' From their thrones they call to us words of cheer, and point us to their tears turned into diamonds, to their struggles stilled in depths of repose, to their wounded brows crowned with light and glory.

They witness to us how mighty and divine a thing is a life of faith. Their human weakness was filled with the power of God. Tremblings and self-distrust and all the ills that flesh is heir to dwelt in them. Black doubts and sore conflicts were their portion. They, too, knew what we know, how hard it is to live and do the right. But they fought through, because a mightier hand was upon them, and God's grace was breathed into their weakness - and there they stand, victorious witnesses to us, that
whosoever will put his trust in the Lord shall have strength according to his need inbreathed into his uttermost weakness, and have One by his side in every furnace, like unto the Son of Man. They witness to us of companions in suffering, and the thought of them may come to a lonely heart wading in dark, deep waters, with the assurance that there is a ford, and that others have known the icy cold, and the downward rush of the stream, and have not been carried away by it. It is not a selfish thought that sometimes brings encouragement to a solitary sufferer, 'the same afflictions have been accomplished in your brethren.' It helps us to remember the great multitude who before us have come through the great tribulation and are before the throne. The cloud of witnesses testify how impotent is sorrow to harm, how strong to bless those who put their trust in God.

They witness to us of the faithfulness of God, who has led them, and upheld them, through all their conflicts, and has brought them to His side at last. That wondrous power avails for us, fresh and young, as when it helped the world's grey fathers. God refers us to their experiences, and summons them as His witnesses, for they will speak good of His name, and each of them, as they bend down from their seats around the arena, calls to us, 'O love the Lord, all ye His saints. I was brought low and He helped me.' So that we, taking heart by their example, can set ourselves to our struggles with the peaceful confidence, 'This God is our God for ever and ever.'

The word rendered 'witnesses' has a narrower meaning in later usage, according to which it comes to signify those who have sealed their testimony with their blood, in which sense it is transferred, untranslated, into English, in 'martyr.' What an eloquent epitome of the early history of the Church lies in that one fact! So ordinarily had the faithful confessor to die for his testimony that the very name had the thought of a bloody death inextricably associated with it. And if we for a moment think of that meaning, and look back to the long series of martyrs from the days of Stephen to the last Malagasy Christian or missionary, what solemn scorn of soft delights, and noble contempt of life itself may be kindled in our souls. Easy paths are appointed to us. We 'have not yet resisted unto blood.' Let us run our smoother race with patience, as we think of those who ran theirs with bleeding feet, and through the smoke of Smithfield or the dust of the arena beheld the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing ready to help, and so went to their death with the light from His face changing theirs into the same image.

But let us not forget that all these witnesses for God were imperfect men, whose imperfections are full of encouragement for us. Look at the names in that great muster-roll - Noah with his drunkenness, Jacob with his craft, Samson with his giant strength and giant passion, Jephtha with his savage faithfulness to a savage vow, David with his too well-known sins, and in them all not one name to which some great evil did not cling. There are quickly reached limits to the veneration with which we are to regard the noblest heroes and saints, and none of them are to be to us patterns, however we may draw encouragement from their lives, and in some respects follow their faith. Thank God for the shameful stories told of so many of them in the unmoved narrative of Scripture! They were men of common clay. The saints' halo is round the head of men and women like ourselves. We look at our own sins and shortcomings, and are ready to despair. But we may lift our eyes to the cloud of witnesses and for every evil of ours find a counterpart in the earthly lives of these radiant saints. Thinking of our own evil we may hopefully say, as we gaze on them, 'Such were some of ye, but ye are washed, and ye are sanctified.' Therefore I will not doubt but that He is able to keep me, even me, 'from falling, and to present me faultless before the presence of His glory.'

II. But we are not left to draw encouragement from the remembrance of men of like passions with ourselves only.

The second of these clauses turns our thoughts to the contrasted relations between Christ and us, and the stimulus derived from it. ‘Looking unto Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.’

Our Lord is hero very emphatically set in a place by Himself apart from all that cloud of witnesses, who in their measure are held forth as noble examples of faith. All these, the greatest names of old, are in one class, and He stands above them in a class of which He is the only member. There we see no other man save Jesus only. Whatever be the inference from that fact, the fact itself is plain. He is something to all the fighters in the lists which none of these are. Our eyes may profitably dwell on them, but we have to look higher than their serene seats, even to His throne, and the relation between us and Him is altogether unlike that which binds us to the holiest of these.

The names He bears in this context are noteworthy, ‘the author and finisher of faith,’ the former being the same word which, in Act. 3:15, is rendered ‘prince’ [of life], and in this Epistle [Heb. 2:10], ‘captain’ [of salvation]. Its meaning may perhaps be best given as ‘leader.’ All these others are the long files of the great army, but Christ is the Commander of the whole array. ‘As Captain of the Lord’s host am I come up, said the man with the drawn sword, who stood before Joshua as he brooded outside the walls of Jericho over his task, and that armed angel of the Lord was He who, in the fulness of time, took our humanity that He might lead the many sons to glory. Not in order of time, but by the precedence of nature, is He the Leader and Lord of all who live by faith.

He is also the finisher, or more properly the perfecter of faith, inasmuch as He in His own life has shown it in its perfect form and power; inasmuch also as He gives to each of us, if we will have it, grace to perfect it in our lives; and inasmuch as, finally, He crowns and rewards it at last.

One more remark as to the force of the language here may be allowed. The word rendered ‘looking’ is an emphatic compound, and if full force be given to both its elements, we might read it ‘looking away,’ that is, turning our eyes from all other, even the grandest of these grand witnesses, to gaze on Christ alone.

All these details serve to bring out the unique position which our Lord holds, and the attitude in which we should stand to Him.

Christ is the one perfect example of faith. We are familiar with the rest of His perfect example in regard to other graces of the Christian character, but we dwell less frequently than we ought on Him as having Himself lived a life of faith. Many orthodox believers so believe in Christ's divinity as to weaken their sense of the reality of His manhood, just as, on the other hand, a vivid apprehension of His manhood obscures to many the rays of His divinity. We lose much by not making very real to our minds that Jesus lived His earthly life by faith, that for Him as for us dependence on God, and humble confidence in Him, were the secret of peace, and the spring of power. This very Epistle, in another place, quotes the words of the psalm, 'I will put my trust in Him,' as the very inmost expression of Christ's life, and as one of the ways in which He proves His brotherhood with us. He, too, knows what it is to hang on God; and is not only in His divine nature the object, but in His true manhood the pattern of our faith.

And His pattern is perfect. In all others, even the loveliest of saints and most heroic of martyrs, the gem is marred by many a streak of baser material, but in Him is the one 'entire and perfect chrysolite.' That faith never faltered, never turned its gaze from the things not seen, never slackened its grasp of the things hoped, nor degenerated into self-pleasing, nor changed its attitude of meek submission. We may look to others for examples, but they will all be sometimes warnings as well, only to Jesus we may look continually and find uusullied purity and perfect faith.

He is more than example. He gives us power to copy His fair pattern. The influence of heroic, saintly lives may be depressing as well as encouraging. Despondency often creeps over us when we think of them. It is not models that we want, for we all know well enough what we ought to be, and an example of supreme excellence in morals or religion may be as hurtful as the unapproachable superiority of Shake-spears or Raphael may to a young aspirant. Perfect patterns will not save the world. They do not get themselves copied. What we want is not the knowledge of what we ought to be, but the will and the power to be it. And that we get from Christ, and from Him alone. He stretches out His hand to hold us up in our poor struggles. His grace and His peace come into our hearts, Looking to Him, His Spirit enters our spirits, and we live, yet not we, but Christ liveth in us. Models will help us little. They stand there like statues on their pedestals, pure marble loveliness; but in Christ the marble becomes flesh, and the lovely perfection has a heart to pity and a strong hand stretched out to help. So let us look away from all others, who can only give us example, to Him who can give us strength. Turn from the circling thrones to the imperial throne in the centre. We are more closely bound to Him who sits on it than to them. Look away from the cloud of witnesses to the sun of uls, from whom, gazing, we receive warmth and light and life. They may teach us to fight, but He fights in us. They are patterns of faith. So is He, but He is also its object and its giver.

Christ is the imperial Rewarder of faith. At the last He will give the full possession of all which it has looked and hoped for, and will lift it into the nobler form in which, even in heaven, we shall live by faith. In that region where struggles cease, and sense and sight no longer lead astray, and we behold Him as He is, faith still abides, as conscious dependence and happy trust. It is perfected in manner, measure, and reward. And Christ is the giver of all that perfects it.

Let us, then, turn away our eyes from all beside, and look to Christ. He is the Reward as well as the Rewarder of our faith. As we look to Him we shall gain power for the fight, and victory and the crown. The gladiators in the arena lowered their swords to the emperor, before they fought, with the grim greeting ‘Hail, Caesar! the dying salute thee.’ So, in happier fashion, our Lord, who has Himself fought in the lists where we now strive. Then we shall have strength for the conflict, and when the conflict is drawing to its end and all else swims before our sight, and the din grows faint in our ears, we shall close our eyes in peace; and when we open them again, lo! the bloody field, and the broken sword, and the battered helm, have all disappeared, and we sit, crowned, and palm-bearing, at His side, hailed as victors, and lapped in sweetest rest for ever more!

37)Hebrews 12:2

Hebrews

THE PERFECTER OF FAITH

Heb. 12:2

ST. LUKE gives us two accounts of the Ascension, one at the end of his Gospel and one at the beginning of the Acts. The difference of position suggests delicate shades of colouring and of distinction in the two narratives, the one is the ending of the sweet intercourse on earth, the other is the beginning of a new era and a different type of companionship. So in that which closes the Gospel, emphasis is put upon our Lord’s ascension as being parted from; and all that is told us is of the final benediction befitting a farewell, and of the uplifted hands, which left upon their minds the last sweet impression of the departing friend. But if we turn to the Acts of the Apostles, where the incident is the same, the whole spirit of the narrative is altered. We see there the beginning of a new era, and so we read nothing about parting, but, instead of the indefinite expression, He blessed them, we hear of their promised investiture with a new power, and of there being laid upon them a new obligation - ‘Ye shall be clothed with the Spirit: ye shall be My witnesses.’ And the two men who stand by them, and are only mentioned in the Book of Acts, announce the great thought, that the departing Christ will return, ‘He shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go.’ All in that account has a forward aspect. It is a beginning with a new power, strengthened by a new duty, and having a far- off hope. Thus equipped, these eleven no more feel that their Lord is parted from them, nor that they are abandoned and forlorn; but they cast themselves into their new circumstances, and joyfully take up their new work. So the Ascension of Christ is represented in that second account as being the transition from the earthly to the heavenly life and type of communion with Him, and as the preparation for that great fact which my text enshrines in highly figurative language, as being the sitting at the right hand of the throne of God. The Ascension is no transient fact, it is the beginning of the permanent condition of the Church, and of the permanent present relations between Jesus Christ, God, the Church, and the world. So I desire to turn now to the various characteristics of the present and permanent relationship of Jesus Christ to these three - God, the Church, the world.

And first of all I wish to notice' we have here the thought of the Enthroned Christ. The attitude of sitting indicates repose. The position at the right hand of the throne of God indicates participation in the divine energies and in the administration of the divine providences. But the point to observe is that the Ascension is declared to be the prerogative of the Man Christ Jesus. And so with great emphasis and significance, in the verse with a part of which I am now dealing, we have brought together the name of the humanity, the name that was borne by many another Jew in the same era as Jesus bore it, we have brought together the name of the humanity and the affirmation of the divine dignity, 'We see Jesus... set down at the right hand of the throne of God.' And over and over again, not only in this Epistle, But in other parts of Scripture, we have the same intentional, emphatic juxtaposition of the two ideas which shallow thinkers regard as in some sense incompatible - the humanity and the divinity.

Remember, for instance, 'this same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go.' And remember the rapturous and wonderful exclamation which broke from the lips of the proto-martyr. 'Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' So then that exaltation and ascension is - according to New Testament teaching, which is not contradicted by the deepest thought of the affinities and resemblances of the divine and the human - the lifting up of the Man into the glory which the Incarnate Word had with the Father before the world was. And just as the earthly life of that Incarnate Word has shown how divine a thing a human life here may be, so the heavenly life of the still Incarnate Word shows us what our approximation to, and union with, the divine nature may be, when we are purged and perfected in the Kingdom of God, whither the Forerunner is for us entered.

But further, in addition to this thought, there comes another which is constantly associated with the teaching of this session of the Son of Man at the right hand Of God, namely, that it is intercessory. That is a word the history of which will take us far, and I dare not enter upon it now. But one thing I wish to make very emphatic, and that is that the ordinary notion of intercession is not the New Testament notion. We limit it, or tend to limit it, to prayer for others. There is no such idea in the New Testament use of the phrase. It is a great deal wider than any verbal expression of sympathy and desire. It has to deal with realities and not with words. It is not a synonym for asking for another that some blessing may come upon him; but the intercession of the great High Priest who has gone into the holiest of all for us covers the whole ground of the acts by which, by reason of our deep and true union with Jesus Christ through faith, He communicates to His children whatsoever of blessing and power and sweet tokens of ineffable love He has received from the Father. Whatsoever He draws in filial dependence from the Divine Father He in brotherly unity imparts to us; and the real communication of real blessing, and not the verbal petitions for forgiveness, is what He is doing there within the veil. 'He is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them.'

But still further in this great figure of my text, the Enthroned Christ, there lies a wondrous thought which He Himself has given us, 'I go to prepare a place for you.' What activities are involved in that wondrous idea it boots us not to inquire, nor would it become us to say. We know that never could we tread those pure pavements except our robes and our feet had been washed By Him. But that is the consequence of His earthly work, and not of His heavenly and present energy. Perhaps in our ignorance of all that lies behind the veil, we can get little further than to see that the very fact of His presence is the preparation of the place. For that awful thought, that crushing thought, of eternal life under conditions bewilderingly different from anything we experience here, would be no joy unless we could say we shall see Him and be with Him. I know not how it may be with you, but I think that the nearer we come to the end of the earthly life, and the more the realities beyond begin to press upon our thoughts and our imaginations as those with which we shall soon make acquaintance, we feel more and more how unquestionable the misery the thought of eternal life would bring if it were not for the fact that the world beyond is lighted up and made familiar by the thought of Christ's presence there. Can you fancy some poor clod-hopping rustic brought up from a remote village and set down all in a moment in the midst of some brilliant court? How out of place he would feel, how unhomelike it would appear, how ill at ease he would be; ay, and what an unburdening there would be in his heart, if amongst the strange splendour he detected beneath the crown and above the robes, sitting on the throne, one whom he had known in the far-off hamlet, and who there had taken part with him in all the ignoble toils and narrow interests of that rustic scene. Jesus said, ‘I go to prepare a place for you,’ and when I lift up my eyes to those far-off realities which overwhelm me when I try to think about them, I say, I am not dazzled by the splendour, I am not oppressed by the perpetuity of it, I do not faint at the thought of unlike conditions, for I shall be the same and He will be with me.

‘It is enough that Christ knows all, And I shall be with Him.’

And so the Enthroned Christ is preparing a place for us. Ay, brethren, and He is not preparing it for us only when we die, but He is preparing it for us whilst we live; for it is only by faith in Him that we have boldness of access and confidence. And neither for the prayers and desires of Christian men on earth nor for the spirits of just men made perfect hereafter will the eternal golden gates swing open except His hand is on the bolt, and by His power the way into the Holiest is made manifest. And so set your minds as well as your affections on the things above, where Christ is sitting on the right hand of God.

Now, secondly, we have here the Present Christ. Matthew, in his Gospel, does not tell of the Ascension, but he preserves the promise, ‘Lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the world,’ and that promise is not contradicted, but is realised by the fact of Christ’s ascension. He does tell us of the remarkable utterance to Mary on the morning of the Resurrection. ‘Touch Me not, for I am not yet ascended to My Father.’ The implication that we have plainly is, when I am ascended you may touch. And the contact of even her nervous and clutching hand round His feet is less than the touch and the presence for which that departure makes the way. ‘He was parted from them’ is the thought that ends the Gospel. He was parted for a season that thou mightest receive Him for ever, is the thought that begins the Acts and the history of the Church. And it is true of Him and His relation to us,, and because it is true about Him and about His relation to us, it is also true about all those who sleep in Jesus. Their relation towards the earthly form ceases, and there is an empty place where they once stood.

But there is a presence more real and capable of yielding finer influences, strengthening and sanctifying, than ever came from the earthly presence. It is blessed to clasp hands, it is blessed to link arms, it is blessed to press together the lips; but there is a higher touch than these, and sight is a less clear vision than faith; and they who can pass across the abyss of the centuries and the yet broader and deeper and blacker abyss between earth and heaven, and lay the hand of faith on the hand of Christ, have passed through the veil, that is to say His flesh, and have clasped His real presence. Yes, and the thing that calls itself such, is but a part of the general retrogression of Catholicism to heathenism and materialism. We have the real presence if we have the Christ in our heart by faith. He is present with us; enthroned on high above all heavens, He yet is near the humblest heart, the companion of the lonely, the solace of all that trust Him. 'He trod the winepress alone,' in order that none of us need ever live alone or die alone.

And there is another side to this presence. As I have said, He is present with us here, and you and I may be present with Him yonder; for one of the Epistles tells us that, 'we die with Him that we may live with Him, and that God has quickened us [if we are Christian people] together with Him and made us sit together with Him in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.' Your life, Christian men and women, is in its roots and sources, and ought to be in its flow and course, 'hid with Christ in God,' and you should not only seek to realise the presence of the Master with you, but to climb to Himself, being present with Him.

Thirdly, this great figure of my text sets before us the working Christ. The attitude of sitting at the right hand of God suggests repose; but that is a repose which is consistent with, and is accompanied by, the greatest energy for continuous operation. You remember, no doubt [although, perhaps, not in its full significance], the great words with which the close of St. Mark's Gospel points on to the future, 'So then, after the Lord had spoken unto them, He was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went everywhere preaching the word.' The Master gone, the servants left; the Master resting, the servants journeying and toiling. It is like the two halves of Raphael's great transfiguration picture. The Lord and the three are up there in the amber light, the demoniac boy writhing in his convulsions, and the disciples by him helpless, down here. The gap is great. Yes. 'They went everywhere preaching the Word, the Lord also working with them, and confirming the Word with signs following.' There is the true notion of the repose of Christ resting indeed at the right hand of God, yet working with His servants scattered over the face of the earth. And so in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, the keynote is struck when St. Luke says, ‘The former treatise have I made of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach until the day on which He was taken up’; and this treatise, O Theophilus, is the second volume of the one story, the history of all that Jesus Continued both to do and to teach after the day on which He was taken up. Acts of the Apostles? No; Acts of the Ascended Christ - that is the name of the book. Never mind about the apostles. They do come into the foreground; but the writer has little care about them. It is the Christ who is moving; and so we find it all through the book, the Lord did this, the Lord did that, the Lord did the other thing; and the apostles are, I was going to say, the pawns on the chess-board. And so you remember, too, that dying Stephen saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. He sprang to his feet, not breaking the eternal repose, to look down and to send down help and sustenance and blessing and good cheer to the man there at the foot of the old wall ready to die for Him.

And that is. the type of the whole history of the Church, I have said that Christ’s Ascension is the transition from the lower to the higher form of presence; and it is the transition to the wider form of work. He works for us, on us, in us, and with us, and as the apostle Peter said in expounding the significance of the Day of Pentecost, ‘Being to the right hand of God exalted He hath shed forth this,’ so the Christ is no longer tired, but is still working, working in us, with us, and for us.

And lastly, the metaphor of my text brings before us the returning Christ, It was not only the angel’s message that declared that departure and ascension were not the last that the worker was going to see of. Jesus. The necessities of the case, if I may say so, tell us the same message. The Incarnation necessarily involves the Crucifixion; the Crucifixion [if it is what we believe it to be] as necessarily involves the Resurrection, ‘for it was not possible that He should be holden of it,’ the grim death. The Resurrection and the Ascension are but as it were the initial point, which is produced into the line of His heavenly session. It cannot be that Ascension is the last word to be said The path of the King does not run into a cul de sac like that. The world has not done with Jesus Christ. He is coming, was the great thought around which all the past clustered. He will come, is the great hope around which all the future hopes for the Church and the world are piled and built, ‘He shall so come in like manner as ye havre seen Him go,’ corporeally, visibly, locally, in His manhood, in His divinity. ‘As He was once offered to bear the sin of many, so shall He come the second time without sin unto salvation.’ Brethren, that is the hope of the Church, discredited by many unworthy representations and mixed up with a great deal that does not commend it by the folly of those who believe in it; but standing out so distinct and so required by all that is gone before, that no Christian man can afford to relegate the expectation into the region of dimness, or to waver in his faith in it, without much imperilling his conception of his Master, and the blessedness of union with Him. You do not understand the Cross unless you believe in the throne; and you do not understand the throne unless you believe in the judgment-seat. The returning Christ shall judge the world. Brethren! Jesus is enthroned. Do you bow to His command? Do you trust His power? Do you see in Him the pattern of what you may be, and the pledge that you will be it if you put your confidence in your Lord? The enthroned Christ is present. Do you walk in blessed and continuous communion with Him? The enthroned and present Christ is working. Do you trust in His operation, peacefully, for yourself, for the Church, for the world? Do you open your heart to the abundant energies with which He is flooding His Church, and which His Church is so sadly and so much allowing to run to waste? The enthroned, present, working Christ is coming back, and you and I have to choose whether we shall be of ‘the servants whom the Lord, when He cometh, shall find watching,’ and obeying His command with girt loins and lit lamps, and so will sweep with Him into the festal hall, and sit down with Him, on His throne; or whether we shall wail because of Him, and shrink abashed from the judgment-seat of Christ.

38)Hebrews 12:4

Hebrews

RESISTING UNTO BLOOD

Heb. 12:4

‘Ye have not yet resisted’ - then others had done so; and the writer bids his readers contrast their own comparative immunity from persecution from the fate of such, in order that they may the more cheerfully do the easier task devolved upon them. Who were those others?

If the supposition of many is correct that this Epistle was addressed to the Mother Church at Jerusalem, the fate of Stephen the first martyr, and of James the brother of John, who had ‘had the rule over’ that Church, may have been in the writer’s mind. If the date assigned to the letter by some is accepted, the persecution under Nero, which had lighted the gardens of the Capitol with living torches, had already occurred; and the writer may have wished the-Jerusalem Church to Bethink themselves that they had fared better than their brethren in Rome. But whether these conjectures are adopted or no, there is another contrast evidently in the writer’s mind. He has Been speaking of the long series of heroes of the faith, some of whom had been ‘stoned and sawn asunder,’ and he would have the Christians whom he addresses contrast their position with that of these ancient saints and martyrs. And there is another contrast more touching still, more wonderful and impressive, in his mind; for my text follows immediately upon a reference to Jesus Christ, ‘who endured the Cross, despising the shame.’ So Himself ‘had resisted unto blood.’ And thus the writer bids his readers think of the martyrs in the Mother Church; of the blood that had deluged the Church at Rome; of the slaughtered saints in past generations; and, above all, of the great Captain of their salvation; and, animated by the thoughts, manfully to bear and mightily to resist in the conflict that is laid upon them. ‘Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against Sin.’

I. So then, we have here, to begin with, the permanent condition of the Christian life, as one of Warfare and resistance.

The imagery of the whole context is drawn from the arena. A verse or two before the writer was speaking about the race. Now he slightly shifts his point of view, and is speaking rather about the wrestling or the pugilistic encounters that were there waged. And his point is that always, and everywhere, however the forms may vary in which the conflict is carried on, there is inseparable from the Christian life an element of effort, endurance and antagonism. That is worth thinking about for a moment. It is all very Well to sing of green pastures and still waters, and to rejoice in the blessings, the consolations, the tranquillities, the raptures of Christian experience, and to rejoice in the thought of the many mercies for body and soul which come to men through faith. That is all true and all blessed, but it is only one side of the truth. And unless we have apprehended, and have reduced to practice and experience the other side of the Christian life, which makes it a toil and a pain to the lower self, and a continual resistance, I venture to say that we have no right to the soothing and sweet and tender side of it; and have need to ask ourselves whether we know anything about Christianity at all. It is not given to us merely - it is not given to us chiefly - to secure those great and precious things which it does secure, but it is given to us in order that, enriched and steadied and strengthened by the possession of them. we should be the better fit for the conflict, just as a wise commander will see that his soldiers are well fed before he flings them into the battle.

But then, passing from that, which is only a side issue, let me remind you of what our antagonist is ‘striving against sin.’

Now some people would take my text to mean solely the conflict which each of us has to wage with our own evils, meannesses and weaknesses. And some, guided by the context, would take the reference to be exclusively to the antagonisms with evils round about us, and with the embodiment of these in men who do not share Christian views of life or conduct. But I think that neither the one nor the other of these two exclusive interpretations can be maintained. For sin is one, whether embodied in ourselves or embodied in men or in institutions. And we have the same conflict to wage against precisely the same antagonist when we are occupied in the task of purging ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, and when we are occupied in the wider task of seeking to bring every man to recognise the power of Christ’s love, and to live in purity by obedience to Him.

And so, the first field on which every Christian is to win his spurs, to prove his prowess, and to exercise his strength is the field within, where the lists are very narrow, and where self wages war against self in daily conflict. Every man of us carries his own worst enemy inside his own waistcoat. We have all lusts, passions, inclinations, desires, faults, vices, meannesses, selfishnesses, indolences, - a whole host of evils lying there like a nest of vipers within us, and our first task and our lifelong task, is to take the sting and the poison out of these, and to throttle them and to east them out.

And then, and only after that, there comes the next thing - viz., the antagonism in which Christian men must permanently stand to a world which does not sympathise with their views, which is strange to the maxims that rule their lives, and which renders no fealty to the King whom they are sworn to obey. And that antagonism runs out into various forms. First of all, it is the solemn duty of every Christian to wage war so as to prevent himself from being caught up in the current of godless living which prevails round him. We have to fight to keep ourselves from being harmed by the world and the worldly communities amidst which we dwell What would become of the captain of a ship who did not take care to have his compass corrected so as to neutralize the effects of all the mass of iron in his vessel? You walk as in the wards of a hospital. If you do not take precautions you will catch the disease that is in the air. It is as certain that careless Christian people who do not ever keep on guard against impending and surrounding evil shall be infected by it, as it is certain that if an Englishman goes out, say to the United States, he will come back with the intonations of our brethren on the other side of the Atlantic slipping unconsciously from his tongue. The first duty, imperative upon Christian people, is to realise that they live in the midst of an order of things that is not in accordance with the Master's principles, and so to beware that they do not catch the infection.

I do not need to say a word about the other form of antagonism, which is equally imperative, and which will prevent us from caring much about the judgments that may be formed of us by the people round us. 'With me it is a very small matter that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment.' But the resistance against sin, which is the Christian man's merciful warfare in the world, is not completed either by his keeping himself from complicity with surrounding evils or by his refusing to let antagonism divert him from his course. There is something more that is plain duty, and that is, that every Christian should be Christ's soldier in the attempt to get Christ's commandments recognised, and the principles of His word obeyed, in the world.

Society is not organised on Christian principles. You have only to look around you to see that. I do not need to dwell upon the various discordances between the plain teachings of this Book and every community, and every nation, and every individual; but let me remind you that until the Sermon on the Mount is the law for individuals and communities, the Christian man, if he is loyal to his Lord, must be 'striving against sin' in the endeavour to get established Christ's kingdom, which is the kingdom of righteousness. That sermon does not contain all Christian truth, but it is the Magna Charta of an applied Christianity; the laws of the kingdom from the lips of the King Himself.

So, brethren, I come to you with this for my message, that no Christian man is doing his work as Christ's soldier, 'striving against sin,' until he is seeking, with the best of his strength, to get Christ's law, which is righteousness, established on the face of the earth.

Talk of dynamiters and explosives, why, there is explosive power enough in Christianity to shatter to pieces the corruptions which make so large a part of modern social life. But, alas! the Christian Church has too long and too generally been employed in damping down the gunpowder instead of firing it, and seeking to explain away the large and plain commandments of the Master, instead of seeking to apply them.

There is a new spirit springing up around us to-day, for which we should be devoutly thankful, whilst at the same time we must forget that, like all new move-merits, it is apt to be one-sided and exaggerated. Much harm is done, I believe, in many directions by Christian teachers seeking to apply the principles of Christ's commandments to various phases of social iniquity without a clear knowledge of the facts of the case. But that being fully admitted, I still rejoice to believe that Christ's men round about us are waking up, as they never did before, to the solemn obligation laid upon Christian churches, if they are not to perish of inanition and inactivity, to proclaim and seek to have recognised Christ's laws for the individual and Christ's law for the community.

Only remember the limitations and the antecedents about which I have already spoken a word. No man has any business to go crusading among other people until he has cleansed himself. And the first task of the Christian reformer is with his own heart. And again, it is useless to deal with institutions unless you deal with the men who live under them. The main work of the Christian Church must ever be with individuals, and through their improvement the improvement of society will be most fully secured. But the error of many good and earnest men to-day is in thinking that if you set the 'environment,' as they call it, right you will get the men right. It is a mistake. Take a pack of drunken wastrels out of the slums and put them into model lodging-houses, and in a fortnight the lodging-houses. will be as dirty, as the sties from which the men were dragged. Mend the men, and then you may hopefully Set them in new environment; mend the men, and society will be mended. And, mend yourselves first, and then you will be able to mend society. Resist your own sin, and then go out to fight with the sin of others.

II. Notice the brunt of the battle which has been borne by others.

I have already said that the immediate context suggests two contrasts between the comparative immunity from persecution of the readers of the letter and certain others.

The first is that suggested by all that glorious muster-roll of heroes and martyrs of the faith which precedes this chapter. And I may say without dealing in rhetoric, or dilating on the subject, that Christian men in this generation may well bethink themselves of what it was that their fathers bore, and did, that has won for them this ease.

I remember an old church, on the slopes of one of the hills of Rome, which is covered over on all its interior walls with a set of the most gruesome pictures of the martyrs. There may be an unwholesome admiration and adoration of these. I think modern Christianity, in its complacency with itself, and this marvellous nineteenth century, of which we are so proud, would be all the better if it went back sometimes to remember that there were times when 'young men and maidens, and old men and children,' had to resist to blood; and when they went to their deaths as joyfully as a bride to the altar.

Ah, brethren I you Nonconformists in this generation, who have an easy-going religion, do not always remember how it was worn Think of George Fox and the Friends. Think of the early Nonconformists, hunted and harried, their noses slit and ears cropped off, their pillories and exile, and then be ashamed to talk about the difficulties that you have to meet. ‘Ye have not resisted unto blood.’

There is a far more touching contrast suggested, and apparently mainly in the writer’s mind, because just before he has said, ‘Consider Him that endured such contradiction of sinners.’ The word that he employs for ‘consider’ might be rendered ‘compare, weigh in the balance,’ Christ’s sufferings and yours. He has borne the heavy end of the Cross of which He lays the light end upon our shoulders. Of course the more mysterious and profound aspects of Christ’s death, in which He is no pattern for us, but the propitiation for our sins, do not come into view in this contrast. They are abundantly treated in the rest of the letter. But here the writer is thinking of Jesus Christ in His capacity of the Prince of sufferers for righteousness’ sake, who could have escaped His Cross if He had chosen to abandon His warfare and His witness. Jesus Christ is a great deal more than that. And the differentia of His sufferings and death is not touched by such a consideration. But do not let us forget that He is that, and that whatever else His death is, it stands also as being the very climax of all suffering for righteousness. He is the King of the martyrs as well as the Sacrifice for the world’s sin. Let us turn to Him, and mark the heroic strength of character, hidden from hasty observation by the sweet gentleness in which it was enshrined, like the iron hand in a velvet glove.

Let us understand how His pattern is held forth to us, and how the Cross is our example, as well as the ground of all our hope. ‘Ye have not yet resisted ... Consider Him.’

III. And now, lastly, note the lighter warfare incumbent upon us.

The resistance changes its form, but in essence it continues. In old days warfare consisted in men bludgeoning each other, or engaging in hand-grips foot to foot and face to face. Nowadays it is artillery duels - a great deal more scientific, a great deal less coarse; but it is warfare all the same. The world used to burn Christians, to hang them, to stone them. It does not do that now, but it fights them yet. The world has become partially Christianised, and the principles of Christianity have, in a certain imperfect way, infiltrated themselves through the mass, so that the antagonism is not quite as hot as it once was. And the Church has weakened its testimony and largely adopted the maxims of the world. So why should the world persecute a Church which is only a bit of the world under another name? But let any man for himself honestly try to live a life modelled on Christ's maxims, and let him cast himself against some of the clamant evils round about him, and seek to subdue them, because Christ has bidden him, and he will see whether the old antagonism is not there yet. What a chorus of select epithets will immediately be discharged! 'Impracticable,' 'fanatical,' 'one-sided,' 'revolutionary,' 'sour visaged,' 'Pharisee,' 'hypocrite.' These will be the sweet, smelling flowers in the garland that will be woven Depend upon it, a Christian man who is bent on living out Christianity for himself, and on seeking to apply it around him, will have to fight and endure.

But all that is. as nothing - nothing - to what the front rank had to go through, and went through, joyfully. They fell in the trenches and filled them up, that the rear rank might pass across. They bore sword stabs; we have only to bear pin pricks. Stones were flung at them, as at Stephen outside the wall; handfuls of mud are all that we have to be afraid of.

So, brethren, accept thankfully to-day's form of the permanent conflict, and see that you do unmurmuringly, cheerfully, and thoroughly the task that is laid upon you. And do not think much of the discomforts and annoyances. For us to speak about sacrifices for Christ is as if a bargeman on a canal were to dilate on the perils of his voyage in the hearing of an Arctic explorer; or as if a man that went in a first-class carriage to London were to speak to an African traveller about 'the perils of the road.' 'Ye have not yet resisted unto blood. 'Consider Him'; and take up your cross, and follow Him.

39)Hebrews 12:10

Ecclesiastes

TWO VIEWS OF LIFE

Ecc. 1:13. - Heb. 12:10.

These two texts set before us human life as it looks to two observers. The former admits that God shapes it; but to him it seems sore travail, the expenditure of much trouble and efforts; the results of which seem to be nothing beyond profitless exercise. There is an immense activity and nothing to show for it at the end but wearied limbs. The other observer sees, at least, as much of sorrow and trouble as the former, but he believes in the 'Father of spirits,' and in a hereafter; and these, of course, bring a meaning and a wider purpose into the 'sore travail,' and make it, not futile but, profitable to our highest good.

I. Note first the Preacher's gloomy half-truth.

The word rendered in our text 'travail' is a favourite one with the writer. It means occupation which costs effort and causes trouble. The phrase 'to be exercised therewith,' rather means to *fatigue themselves*, so that life as looked upon by the Preacher consists of effort without result but weariness.

If he knew it at all, it was very imperfectly and dimly; and whatever may be thought of teaching on that subject which appears in the formal conclusion of the book, the belief in a future state certainly exercises no influence on its earlier portions. These represent phases through which the writer passes on his way to his conclusion. He does believe in 'God,' but, very significantly, he never uses the sacred name 'Lord.' He has shaken himself free, or he wishes to represent a character who has shaken himself free from Revelation, and is fighting the problem of life, its meaning and worth, without any help from Law, or Prophet, or Psalm. He does retain belief in what he calls 'God,' but his pure Theism, with little, if any, faith in a future life, is a creed which has no power of unravelling the perplexed mysteries of life, and of answering the question, 'What does it all mean?' With keen and cynical vision he looks out not only over men, as in this first chapter, but over nature; and what mainly strikes him is the enormous amount of work that is being done, and the tragical poverty of its results. The question with which he begins his book is, 'What profit hath a man of all his labour wherein he laboureth under the sun?' And for answer he looks at the sun rising and going down, and being in the same place after its journey through the heavens; and he hears the wind continually howling and yet returning again to its circuits; and the waters now running as rivers into the sea and again drawn up in vapours, and once more falling in rain and running as waters. This wearisome monotony of intense activity in nature is paralleled by all that is done by man under heaven, and the net result of all is ‘Vanity and a strife after wind.’

The writer proceeds to confirm his dreary conclusion by a piece of autobiography put into the mouth of Solomon. He is represented as flinging himself into mirth and pleasure, into luxury and debauchery, and as satisfying every hunger for any joy, and as being pulled up short in the midst of his rioting by the conviction, like a funeral bell, tolling in his mind that all was vanity. ‘He gave himself to wisdom, and madness, and folly’; and in all he found but one result-enormous effort and no profit. There seemed to be a time for everything, and a kind of demonic power in men compelling them to toil as with equal energy, now at building up, and now at destroying. But to every purpose he saw that there was ‘time and judgment,’ and therefore, ‘the misery of man was great upon him.’ To his jaundiced eye the effort of life appeared like the play of the wind in the desert, always busy, but sometime busy in heaping the sands in hillocks, and sometimes as busy in levelling them to a plain.

We may regard such a view of humanity as grotesquely pessimistic; but there is no doubt that many of us do make of life little more than what the Preacher thought it. It is not only the victims of civilisation who are forced to wearisome monotony of toil which barely yields daily bread; but we see all around us men and women wearing out their lives in the race after a false happiness, gaining nothing by the race but weariness. What shall we say of the man who, in the desire to win wealth, or reputation, lives laborious days of cramping effort in one direction, and allows all the better part of his nature to be atrophied, and die, and passes, untasted, brooks by the way, the modest joys and delights that run through the dustiest lives. What is the difference between a squirrel in the cage who only makes his prison go round the faster by his swift race, and the man who lives toilsome days for transitory objects which he may never attain? In the old days every prison was furnished with a tread-mill, on which the prisoner being set was bound to step up on each tread of the revolving wheel, not in order to rise, but in order to prevent him from breaking his legs. How many men around us are on such a mill, and how many of them have fastened themselves on it, and by their own misreading and misuse of life have turned it into a dreary monotony of resultless toil. The Preacher may be more ingenious than sound in his pessimism, but let us not forget that every godless man does make of life ‘Vanity and strife after wind.’

II. The higher truth which completes the Preacher’ s.

Of course the fragmentary sentence in our second text needs to be completed from the context, and so completed will stand, ‘God chastens us for our profit, that we should be partakers of His holiness.’ Now let us consider for a moment the thought that the true meaning of life is *discipline*. I say discipline rather than ‘chastening,’ for chastening simply implies the fact of pain, whereas discipline includes the wholesome *purpose* of pain. The true meaning of life is not to be found by estimating its sorrows or its joys, but by trying to estimate the effects of either upon us. The true value of life, and the meaning of all its tears and of all its joys, is what it makes us. If the enormous effort which struck the Preacher issues in strengthened muscles and braced limbs, it is not ‘vanity.’ He who carries away with him out of life a character moulded as God would have it, does not go in all points ‘naked as he came.’ He bears a developed self, and that is the greatest treasure that a man can carry out of multitudinous toils of the busiest life. If we would think less of our hard work and of our heavy sorrows, and more of the loving purpose which appoints them all, we should find life less difficult, less toilsome, less mysterious. That one thought taken to our hearts, and honestly applied to everything that befalls us, would untie many a riddle, would wipe away many a tear, would bring peace and patience into many a heart, and would make still brighter many a gladness. Without it our lives are a chaos; with it they would become an ordered world.

But the recognition of the hand that ministers the discipline is needed to complete the peacefulness of faith. It would be a dreary world if we could only think of some inscrutable or impersonal power that inflicted the discipline; but if in its sharpest pangs we give ‘reverence to the Father of spirits,’ we shall ‘live.’ Of course, a loving father sees to his children’s education, and a loving child cannot but believe that the father's single purpose in all his discipline is his good. The good that is sought to be attained by the sharpest chastisement is better than the good that is given by weak indulgence. When the father's hand wields the rod, and a loving child receives the strokes, they may sting, but they do not wound. The 'fathers of our flesh chasten us after their own pleasure,' and there may be error and arbitrariness in their action; and the child may sometimes nourish a right sense of injustice, but 'the Father of spirits' makes no mistakes, and never strikes too hard. 'He for our profit' carries with it the declaration that the deep heart of God doth not willingly afflict, and seeks in afflicting for nothing but His children's good.

Nor are these all the truths by which the New Testament completes and supersedes the Preacher's pessimism, for our text closes by unveiling the highest profit which discipline is meant to secure to us as being that we should be 'partakers of His holiness.' The Biblical conception of holiness in God is that of separation from and elevation above the creature. Man's holiness is separation from the world and dedication to God. He is separated from the world by moral perfection yet more than by His other attributes, and men who have yielded themselves to Him will share in that characteristic. This assimilation to His nature is the highest 'profit' to which we can attain, and all the purpose of His chastening is to make us more completely like Himself. 'The fathers of our flesh' chasten with a view to the brief earthly life, but His chastening looks onwards beyond the days of 'strife and vanity' to a calm eternity.

Thus, then, the immortality which glimmered doubtfully in the end of his book before the eyes of the Preacher is the natural inference for the Christian thought of moral discipline as the great purpose of life. No doubt it might be possible for a man to believe in the supreme importance of character, and in all the discipline of life as subsidiary to its development, and yet not believe in another world, where all that was tendency, often thwarted, should be accomplished result, and the schooling ended the rod should be broken. But such a position will be very rare and very absurd. To recognise moral discipline as the greatest purpose of life, gives quite overwhelming probability to a future. Surely God does not take such pains with us in order to make no more of us than He makes of us in this world.

Surely human life becomes ‘confusion worse confounded’ if it is carefully, sedulously, continuously tended, checked, inspired, developed by all the various experiences of sorrow and joy, and then, at death, broken short off, as a man might break a stick across his knee, and the fragments tossed aside and forgotten. If we can say, ‘He for our profit that we might be partakers of His holiness,’ we have the right to say ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’

40)Hebrews 12:10

Hebrews

A FATHER’S DISCIPLINE

Heb. 12:10

FEW words of Scripture have been oftener than these laid as a healing balm on wounded hearts. They may be long unnoticed on the page, like a lighthouse in calm sunshine, but sooner or later the stormy night falls, and then the bright beam flashes out and is welcome. They go very deep into the meaning of life as discipline; they tell us how much better God’s discipline is than that of the most loving and wise of parents, and they give that superiority as a reason for our yielding more entire and cheerful obedience to Him than we do to such.

Now, to grasp the full meaning of these words, we have to notice that the earthly and the heavenly disciplines are described in four contrasted clauses. which are arranged in what students call inverted parallelism - that is to say, the first clause corresponds to the fourth and the second to the third. ‘For a few days’ pairs off with ‘that we might be partakers of His holiness.’ Now, at first sight that does not seem a contrast; but notice that the ‘for’ in the former clause is not the ‘for’ of duration, but of direction. It does not tell us the space during which the chastisement or discipline lasts, but the end towards which it is pointed. The earthly parent’s discipline trains a boy or girl for circumstances, pursuits, occupations, professions, all of which terminate with the brief span of life. God’s training is for an eternal day. It would be quite irrelevant to bring in here any reference to the length of time during which an earthly father's discipline lasts, but it is in full consonance with the writer's intention to dwell upon the limited scope of the one and the wide and eternal purpose of the other.

Then, as for the other contrast - 'for their own pleasure,' or, as the Revised Version reads it, 'as Seemed good to them' - 'but He for our profit.' Elements of personal peculiarity, whim, passion, limited and possibly erroneous conceptions of what is the right thing to do for the child, enter into the training of the wisest and most loving amongst us; and we often make a mistake and do harm when we think we are doing good. But God's training is all from a simple and unerring regard to the benefit of His child. Thus the guiding principles of the two disciplines are contrasted in the two central clauses.

Now, these are very threadbare, commonplace, and old-fashioned thoughts; but, perhaps, they are so familiar that they have not their proper power over us; and I wish to try in this sermon, if I can, to get more into them, or to get them more into us, by one or two very plain remarks.

I. I would ask you to note, first, the grand, deep, general conception, here firmly laid hold of, of life as only intelligible when it is regarded as education or discipline.

God corrects, chastens, trains, educates. That is the deepest word about everything that befalls us. Now, there are involved in that two or three very obvious thoughts, which would make us all calmer and nobler and stronger, if they were vividly and vitally present to us day by day.

The first is that all which befalls us has a will behind it and is co-operant to an end. Life is not a heap of unconnected incidents, like a number of links flung down on the ground, but the links are a chain, and the chain has a staple. It is not a law without a law-giver that shapes men's lives. It is not a blind, impersonal chance that presides over it. Why, these very meteors that astronomers expect in autumn to be flying and flashing through the sky in apparent wild disorder, all obey law. Our lives, in like manner, are embodied thoughts of God's, in as far as the incidents which befall in them are concerned. We may mar, we may fight against, may contradict the presiding divine purpose; but yet, behind the wild dance of flashing and transitory lights that go careering all over the sky, there guides, not an impersonal Power, but a living, loving Will He, not it; He, not they, men, circumstances, what people call second causes - He corrects, and He does it for a great purpose.

Ah! if we believed that, and not merely said it from the teeth outwards, but if it were a living conviction with us, do you not think our lives would tower up into a nobleness, and settle themselves down into a tranquillity all strange to them to-day?

But, then, further, there is the other thought to be grasped, that all our days we are here in a state of pupilage. The world is God’s nursery. There are many mansions in the Father’s house; and this earth is where He keeps the little ones. That is the true meaning of everything that befalls us. It is education. Work would not be worth doing if it were not. Life is given to us to teach us how to live, to exercise our powers, to give us habits and facilities of working. We are like boys in a training ship that lies for most of the time in harbour, and now and then goes out upon some short and easy cruise; not for the sake of getting anywhere in particular, but for the sake of exercising the lads in seamanship. There is no meaning worthy of us - to say nothing of God - in anything that we do, unless it is looked upon as schooling. We all say we believe that. Alas! I am afraid very many of us forget it,

But that conception of the meaning of each event that befalls us carries with it the conception of the whole of this life, as being an education towards another. I do not understand how any man can bear to live here, and to do all his painful work, unless he thinks that by it he is getting ready for the life beyond; and that ‘nothing can bereave him of the force he made his own, being here.’ The rough ore is turned into steel by being

‘Plunged in baths of hissing tears, And heated hot with hopes and fears, And battered with the shocks of doom.’

And then - what then? Is an instrument, thus fashioned, and tempered and polished, destined to be broken and ‘thrown as rubbish to the void’?

Certainly not. If this life is education, as is obvious' upon its very face, then there is a place where we shall exercise the faculties that we have acquired here, and manifest in loftier forms the characters which here we have made our own.

Now, brethren, if we carry these thoughts with us habitually, what a difference it will make upon everything that befalls us! You hear men often maundering and murmuring about the mysteries of the pain and sorrow and suffering of this world, wondering if there is any loving Will behind it all. That perplexed questioning goes on the hypothesis that life is meant mainly for enjoyment or for material good. If we once apprehended in its all-applicable range this simple truth, that life is a discipline, we should have less difficulty in understanding what people call the mysteries of Providence. I do not say it would interpret everything, but it would interpret an immense deal. It would make us eager, as each event came, to find out its special mission and what it was meant to do for us. It would dignify trifles, and bring down the overwhelming magnitude of the so- called great events, and would make us lords of ourselves, and lords of circumstances, and ready to wring the last drop of possible advantage out of each thing that befell us. Life is a Father's discipline.

II. Note the guiding principle of that discipline.

'They... as seemed good to them.' I have already said that, even in the most wise and unselfish training by an earthly parent, there will -mingle subjective elements, peculiarities of view and thought, and sometimes of passion and whim and other ingredients, which detract from the value of all such training. The guiding principle for each earthly parent, even at the best, can only be his conception of what is for the good of his child; and oftentimes that is not purely the guide by which the parent's discipline is directed. So the text turns us away from all these incompletenesses, and tells us, 'He for our profit' - with no sidelong look to anything else, and with an entirely wise knowledge of what is best for us, so that the result will be always and only for our good. This is the point of view from which every Christian man ought to look upon all that befalls him.

What follows? This, plainly: there is no such thing as evil except the evil of sin. All that comes is good - of various sorts and various complexions, but all generically the same. The inundation comes up over the fields, and men are in despair. It goes down; and then, like the slime left from the Nile in flood, there is better soil for the fertilising of our land. Storms keep sea and air from stagnating. All that men earl evil in the material world has in it a soul of good.

That is an old, old commonplace; but, like the other one, of which I have been speaking, it is more often professed than realised, and we need to be brought back to the recognition of it more entirely than we ordinarily are. If it be that all my life is paternal discipline, and that God makes no mistakes, then I can embrace whatever comes to me, and be sure that in it I shall find that which will be for my good.

Ah, brethren, it is easy to say so when things go well; but, surely, when the night falls is the time for the stars to shine. That gracious word should shine upon some of us in to-day's perplexities, and pains, and disappointments, and sorrows - 'He for our profit.'

Now, that great thought does not in the least deny the fact that pain and sorrow, and so-called evil, are very real There is no false stoicism in Christianity. The mission of our troubles would not be effected unless they did trouble us. The good that we get from a sorrow would not be realised unless we did sorrow. 'Weep for yourselves' said the Master, 'and for your children.' It is right that we should writhe in palm It is right that we should yield to the impressions that are made upon us by calamities. But it is not right that we should be so affected as that we should fail to discern in them this gracious thought - 'for our profit.' God sends us many love-tokens, and amongst them are the great and the little annoyances and pains that beset our lives, and on each of them, if we would look, we should see written, in His own hand, this inscription: 'For your good.' Do not let us have our eyes so full of tears that we cannot see, or our hearts so full of regrets that we cannot accept, that sweet, strong message.

The guiding principle of all that befalls us is God's unerring knowledge of what will do us good. That will not prevent, and is not meant to prevent, the arrow from wounding, but it does wipe the poison off the arrow, and diminish the pain, and should diminish the tears.

III. Lastly, here we see the great aim of all the discipline.

The earthly parent trains his son, or her daughter, for earthly occupations. These last a little while. God trains us for an eternal end: 'that we should be partakers of His holiness.' The one object which is congruous with a man's nature, and is stamped on his whole being, as its only adequate end, is that he should be like God. Holiness is the Scriptural shorthand expression for all that in the divine nature which separates God from, and lifts Him above, the creature; and in that aspect of the word the gulf can never be lessened nor bridged between us and Him. But it also is the expression for the moral purity and perfection of that divine nature which separates Him from the creatures far more really than do the metaphysical attributes that belong to His infinitude and eternity; and in that aspect the great hope that is given to us is that we may rise nearer and nearer to that perfect whiteness of purity, and though we cannot share in His essential, changeless being, may 'walk' - as befits our limited and changeful natures - 'in the light, as He' - as befits His boundless and eternal being - 'is in the light.' That is the only end which it is worthy of a man, being what he is, to propose to himself as the issue of his earthly experience. If I fail in that, whatever else I have accomplished, I fail in everything. I may have made myself rich, cultured, learned; famous, refined, prosperous; but if I have not at least begun to be like God in purity, in will, in heart, then my whole career has missed the purpose for which I was made, and for which all the discipline of life has been lavished upon me. Fail there, and, wherever you succeed, you are a failure. Succeed there, and, wherever you fail, you are a success.

That great and only worthy end may be reached by the ministration of circumstances and the discipline through which God passes us. These are not the only ways by which He makes us partakers of His holiness, as we well know. There is the work of that Divine Spirit who is granted to every Believer to breathe into him the holy breath of an immortal and incorruptible life. To work along with these there is the influence that is brought to bear upon us by the circumstances in which we are placed and the duties which we have to perform. These may all help us to be nearer and liker to God.

That is the intention of our sorrows. They will wean us; they will refine us; and they will blow us to His breast, as a strong wind might sweep a man into some refuge from itself. I am sure that among my hearers there are some who can thankfully attest that they were brought nearer to God by some short, sharp sorrow than by many long days of prosperity. What Absalom, in his wayward, impulsive way, did with Joab is like what God sometimes does with His sons. Joab would not come to Absalom's palace, so Absalom set his corn on fire; and then Joab came. So God sometimes burns our harvests that we may go to Him.

But the sorrow that is meant to bring us nearer to Him may be in vain. The same circumstances may produce opposite effects. I dare say there are people listening to me now who have been made hard, and sullen, and bitter, and paralysed for good work, because they have some heavy burden or some wound that life can never heal, to be carded or to ache. Ah, brethren! we are often like shipwrecked crews, of whom some are driven by the danger to their knees, and some are driven to the spirit-casks. Take care that you do not waste your sorrows; that you do not let the precious gifts of disappointment, pain, loss, loneliness, ill-health, or similar afflictions that come into your. daily life, mar you instead of mending you. See that they send you. nearer to God, and not that they drive you farther from Him. See that they make you more anxious to have the durable riches and righteousness which no man can take from you, than to grasp at what may yet remain, of fleeting: earthly joys.

So, brethren, let us try to school ourselves into the habitual and operative conviction that life is discipline. Let us yield ourselves to the loving will of the unerring Father, the perfect love. Let us beware of getting no good from what is charged to the brim with good. And let us see to it that out of the many fleeting circumstances of life we gather and keep the eternal fruit of being partakers of His holiness. May it never have to be said of any of us that we wasted the mercies which were judgments too, and found no good in the things, that our tortured hearts felt to be also evils, lest God, should have to wail over any of us, 'In vain have I smitten your children; they have received no correction!'

41)Hebrews 12:17

Hebrews

ESAU'S VAIN TEARS

Heb. 12:17

THESE words have Been often understood as teaching a very ghastly and terrible doctrine, viz., that a man may earnestly and tearfully desire to repent, and be unable to do so. Such teaching has burdened many a heart, and has put obstacles before many feeble feet in the way of a return to God. It seems to me to be contradicted by a thousand places of Scripture, and to involve something very much like a contradiction in terms.

The Revised Version, by a very slight change, has dispelled that ugly dream. It has put the clause 'for he found no place of repentance' in a parenthesis. The effect of that is to bring the first and last clauses of the verse more closely together; and to show more clearly that what Esau is represented as seeking, and seeking with tears in vain, is not repentance, but the Father's blessing.

It may not, perhaps, be legitimate, regard being had to the construction of the sentence, to treat the clause in question as a parenthesis, because it is so closely connected with the succeeding clause by the antithesis of 'found' in the one and 'sought' in the other. But although that may be so, I have no doubt whatever that the truth intended to be conveyed by the parenthesis of the Revised Version is the true interpretation of the words before us; and that we are to find here simply the declaration that this man, at a given time of his life; 'would have inherited the blessing,' 'sought it carefully with tears,' and found it not.

Now the words, thus understood, teach a sufficiently grave and solemn lesson, though they do not teach the ghastly, and, as I believe, the erroneous thought that has been drawn from them. And it may he worth our while to consider for a moment the lessons that they do teach, and to try to lay them upon our hearts.

I. I begin then, first, with asking you to look at the history which is held up before us here as a solemn warning.

The character of Esau is a very simple one. In many respects he is much more attractive and admirable than his brother Jacob. He is frank, generous, quick to kindle into anger, but, as the story shows us too, quick to forgive; placable, easily to be entreated; with the wild Arab virtues of chivalry and generosity and bravery; and the vices Belonging to such a character, of almost utter incapacity to rise beyond the present, and of a great susceptibility to mere material and sensual gratification.

And so he comes in from the field hungry and faint. The pottage smells savoury there, as it smokes in the dish before him. The birthright is a long way off, very unsubstantial, very ideal, and the thing that is nearest him, though it be small, shuts out from his view the far greater thing that lies beyond. Therefore he elects to secure present gratification of a material character, whatever becomes of future satisfaction of a higher and more spiritual nature.

And are you going to throw stones at him for that? Is it such a very unusual thing to find men choosing paths that will yield some modicum of sufficiently hot and sufficiently savory pottage, whatever becomes of their birthright? Is there nobody here that believes more in wealth than in purity? Is there no young man here who would rather live to make a fortune than to cultivate his own nature into loftiest beauty? Are there none of you that despise the priceless things, the things that have no price in the market because they are beyond all its wealth to purchase? Are there none of us who are such fools that a spoonful of pottage to-day seems to us to be more real and more precious than a whole heaven hereafter?

Esau had a show of reason. He said: ‘I am ready to die, and what will my birthright do for me?’ Better a thousand times that he, or we, should die as animals that we may live as the sons of God, than that we should buy existence at the price of true life. And so the man of our text is sufficiently like the rest of you, for you to have a fellow feeling to him that should make you wondrous kind, and his faults are nothing at all extraordinary, but only putting in graphic form, and in such disproportion as to be almost absurd, the choice that the mass of men always make between present and future, between the material and the spiritual. And then the story goes on to tell us that, long years afterwards, we do not know how long, he found out what a fool he had been. Perhaps so much as thirty or forty years elapsed between the moment when he despised his birthright and the other moment that is set before us here. What are the points that come out in the narrative to which our text refers? ‘When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with a great and exceeding hitter cry, and said unto his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father’... and again, ‘Hast thou but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father. And Esau lifted up his voice and wept,’ These are the parts of the history which the writer of the Hebrews recalls to his Jewish hearers. There is nothing in them about Esau’s vainly seeking for repentance, but there is an account of his passionate weeping and loud entreaties that he yet might obtain a blessing from Isaac’s trembling lips. In the story there is no word of his vainly trying to repent, but there is a real repentance in the sense in which alone that word can be employed, in reference to such an incident and upon that plane of things, viz., there is in him a decided and fundamental change of view, of mind, as to the value of the birthright that he had despised, and that is repentance; and there is bitter sorrow for what had passed, and that is repentance; and there is earnest desire that it might be different, and that is a sign of repentance. There is no sign of sorrow for sin, of repentance, in that sense of the word, but if we take the word not in the, religious meaning, but in what may be called its secular significance, there are in Esau’s ease, as recorded in Genesis, both the elements of a decided alteration of mind and purpose, and of penitence and sorrow for the past. These, then, are the facts of the story, and these are the facts to which my text appeals, for it begins by saying, as to those to whom the whole narrative was familiar: ‘Ye know how that.’ Therefore all that follows must find its vindication in the story as it is Written in Genesis.

II. These, then, being the facts, let me now come, in the second place, to deal with the lesson which this story teaches us.

Remember what I have said as to points which come out in the narrative, that the man there seeks with tears for the blessing, that so far from vainly seeking to repent, in the lower sense of the word which alone is appropriate in the present ease, he does repent. Therefore that expression of our text ‘he found no place of repentance’ does not mean ‘he found no place where he could repent,’ but it means he found no field on which such repentance as he had could operate - so as to undo that which was past. His repentance did not alter the fixed destination of the blessing. His repentance, his change of mind as to the worth of the thing thrown away, and as to his own conduct in despising it, did not bring the thing back again to him. His tears did not obliterate what was done. He wished that it had been otherwise, but his wishes were vain.

And that is the lesson, my brethren, which this text as it stands is intended to teach us. We are pointed hack to that tragic picture of Esau there, weeping, wringing his hands in the wild passion of his uncultured nature, when the blessing, seen to be desirable too late, had vanished from his convulsive grasp. And the lesson that is taught us is just this old solemn one. There may come in your life a time when the scales will fall from your eyes, and you will see how insignificant and miserable are the present gratifications for which you have sold your birthright, and may wish the bargain undone which cannot be undone. You cannot wash out bitter memories, you cannot blot out habits by a wish. Tears will not alter the irrevocable, you cannot avert consequences that fall upon a man, the consequences of a lifetime, by any weeping and wringing of your hands, and by any wish that they might disappear. ‘What I have written I have written,’ said Pilate, and in tragic sense it is true about many a man who at the end looks back upon many ‘a line which dying he would wish to blot,’ but which stands ineffaceable, not to be scratched out by any of your penknives, unless you can cut out the substance of the soul on which it is written.

My brother! learn the lesson. You young men and women, do you begin right, that there may not be in your career deeds or a set of the life which one day you may wake to see has been all madness and misery! Oh! it is an awful thing for men to stand looking back upon a past life which to them appears as the vale of Sodom, on the morning after the eruption, did to Abraham as he looked on it from Mature, ‘and lo! the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace.’ So foul with slime-pits of boiling bitumen, the indulged lusts of the flesh, and dark with curling smoke-wreaths which tell of infernal fires wasting the fields that might have waved fruitful with harvests, the dark remembrances and blighting habits of sin set on fire of hell, does many a man's life lie spread out to his gaze. How fain would he cancel the record, if he could! How fain would he forget and reverse the history! How fain would he bring back his early innocence of these lusts and crimes! In vain! in vain!

The past stands - 'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.' I know, thank God for the knowledge, I know that - as we shall have to say presently - any man, at any moment of his earthly career, may find, if he seeks for it, the mercy of the Lord which bringeth salvation, but I know too that the salvation which comes to a man who has all his life been giving himself up to earth, and limiting his views and moulding his character by the present and its contemptible objects, will not be as large, as full, as blessed in many an aspect, as the salvation which might have been his if at an early stage in his life, with his character still to mould, and his memory still unwritten with evil, he had turned himself to his God, and found peace in the blood of Jesus Christ. Maimed and marred in a thousand ways, having memories which burn and sting, having habits which it will be hard to fight against; with the marks of thee gyves upon his wrists; and his eyes unaccustomed to the daylight, like the prisoner that came out of the Bastille after a lifetime of imprisonment there, and wanted to go back again because he could not bear freedom and sunshine: so many a man brought to God and saved yet so as by fire, near the end of his days, has to feel that it is not all the same whether a lifetime has been spent in the temple and priestly service, or in the foul haunts of vice and debauchery.

We shall always have as much of God as we can hold, and as much of salvation as we desire; but the tragic thing is that a life spent in living, Esau-like, for the world and for the present, lames our desires and limits our capacities, so that even if such a man afterwards become a Christian, it may be impossible even for the giving God to give us as large a bestowment of His mercy and grace as we might otherwise have possessed. On the other side it is not to be forgotten 'the publicans and the harlots shall go into the Kingdom of God before you,' Pharisees and Sadducees. And there is such a thing as the deep repentance and the passionate trust with which a soul, all spattered and befouled with fleshly sins, may cleave to the Master that may overcome even these disabilities of which I have spoken. But in the main it remains true that even if Esau at the last gets a blessing, he bears away a less blessing than he might have done had his earlier life been different.

III. And now let me turn last of all to what I venture to consider the misapprehension which these words do not teach.

They do not teach that a man may desire to repent with tears and be unable to do so. That, it seems to me, is to assert a staring, stark contradiction, for if a man desire to repent he must have changed his views as to the conduct of which he desires to repent, and that change of View is the repentance which he desires. And if a man desires to repent there must be in him some measure of regret and sorrow for the conduct Of which he desires to repent, considered as sin against God, and that is repentance.

Nor do the words teach, as it seems to me, the cognate thought which has sometimes been deduced from them, that a man may desire to receive the salvation of His soul from God, and may not receive it. To desire is to possess; to possess in the measure of the desire, and according to its reality. There is no such thing in the spiritual realm as a real longing unfulfilled. ‘Whosoever will, let him come and take of the water of life freely.’ And the awful pictures that have been drawn of men weeping because they could not repent, and of men with passionate tears imploring from the Father in heaven the blessing which does not come to them, are slanders upon God and misapprehensions of His gospel. That gospel proclaims that wheresoever and whosoever will ask shall receive, or rather that God has already given, and that nothing but obstinate determination not to possess prevents any man from being enriched with the fulness of God’s salvation.

Only remember, dear brethren, it is possible for a man to wish vagrantly, with half his will, to wish in a languid fashion, to wish while he is not prepared to surrender what stands in the way of his wish being gratified. And such wishing as that never got salvation, and never will. There are plenty of people that would like to Be saved as they understand it, and to be sure that they are so, who are not prepared to close with the terms of salvation. It is not wishing of that sort that I am talking about. Heaven may be had for the wishing, but it must be an honest wish, it must Be out-and-out wishing, it must be wishing which actuates the life, it must be wishing which drives you to the Cross of Christ. And then, in the measure of the desire shall be the gift; and the larger the petition, the larger the benediction which comes fluttering down from heaven on to your head and into your heart.

We have all sold our birthright, but we have a Brother in whom we may win it back, the elder Brother of us prodigals, who, instead of grudging us the fatted calf and the festival welcome, Himself has died that they may be ours; and that no penitence may be unavailing, nor any longing be unsatisfied for ever more.

Whatever we are, whatever has been our past, however embruted in sensual vice, however entangled in material gains, we have but to turn ourselves to that gracious Lord our Brother, in whom the Father blesses us with all heavenly blessings, and we shall share in the birthright of His firstborn Son, 'being heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.'

42)Hebrews 12:22-23

Hebrews

WITH WHOM FAITH LIVES

Heb. 12:22-23

The magnificent passage of which these words are part sums up the contrast between Judaism and Christianity which this whole Epistle has been illustrating and enforcing. The writer takes the scene on Sinai as expressive of the genius of the former revelation, whose centre was a law which evoked the consciousness of sin, and kindled terror; and which was embodied in sensible and material symbols. Far other and better are the characteristics of the latter revelation. That excites no dread; is given from no flashing mountain with accompaniments of darkness and trumpet blasts and terrible words; and it brings us into contact with no mere material and therefore perishable symbols, but with realities none the less real because they are above sense, and not remote from us though they be.

For, says my text, ‘Ye are come,’ not ‘Ye shall come.’ The humblest life may be in touch with the grandest realities in the universe, and need not wait for death to draw aside the separating curtain in order to be in the presence of God and in the heavenly Jerusalem.

How are these things brought to us? By the revelation of God in Christ. How are we brought to them? By faith in that revelation. So every believing life, howsoever encompassed by flesh and sense, can thrust, as it were, a hand through the veil, and grasp the realities beyond. The scene described in the first words of my text may verily be the platform on which our lives are lived, howsoever in outward form they may be passed on this low earth; and the companions, which the second part of our text discloses, may verily be our companions, though we ‘wander lonely as a cloud,’ or seem to be surrounded by far less noble society. By faith we are come to the unseen realities which are come to us by the revelation of God in Christ. ‘Ye are come unto Mount Zion.’

Now, looking generally at these words, they give us just two things - the scene and the companions of the Christian life. The remainder of the passage will occupy us on future occasions, but for the present I confine myself to the words which I have read. And I shall best deal with them, I think, if I simply follow that division into which they naturally fall, and ask you to note, first, where faith lives, and, second, with whom faith lives.

I. First, then, where faith lives.

‘Ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.’ There are two points here which carry us back to the topography of the ancient sacred city. In the literal Jerusalem, Zion was the lofty Acropolis, at once fortress and site of the king’s palace, and round it clustered the dwellings of the city.

The two symbols are thus closely connected, and present substantially the same idea, and perhaps it is pressing a figure too far to find a diversity of meaning in the separate parts of this closely connected whole. But still it seems to me that there is a substantial difference of aspect in the two clauses.

The first thought, therefore, that I would suggest to you is this, that the life of a man who has truly laid hold of Jesus Christ, and so is living by faith, is on its inward side - that is, in deepest reality - a life passed in the dwelling of the great King. All through this letter, the writer is recurring to the thought of access to God, unimpeded and continual, as being the great gift which Jesus Christ has brought to us. And here he gathers it into the noblest symbol. There, lifted high above all the humbler roofs, flash the golden pinnacles of the great palace in which God Himself dwells. And we, toiling and moiling down here, surrounded by squalid circumstances, and annoyed by many cares, and limited by many narrownesses which we often find to be painful, and fighting with many sorrows, and seeming to ourselves to be, sometimes, homeless wanderers in a wilderness, may yet ever more 'dwell in the house of the Lord, to behold His beauty and to inquire in His temple.'

The privilege has for its other side a duty; the duty has for its foundation a privilege. For if it be true that the real life of every believing soul is a life that never moves from the temple-palace where God is, and that its inmost secret and the spring of its vitality is communion with God, what shall we say of the sort of lives that most of us most often live? Is there any truth in such exalted metaphors as this in reference to us? Does it not sound far liker irony than truth to say of people whose days are so shuttlecocked about by trifling cares, and absorbed in fleeting objects, and wasted in the chase after perishable delights, that they 'are come unto Mount Zion,' and dwell in the presence of God? Is my 'life hid with Christ in God'? There is no possibility of Death being your usher, to introduce you into the house of God not made with hands, unless faith has introduced you into it even whilst you tarry here, and unless your habitual direction of heart and mind towards Him keeps you ever more at least a waiter at His threshold, if you do not pass beyond. 'I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord than dwell in the tents of wickedness.'

My brother! do we so knit ourselves to Him, by heartfelt acceptance of the good news of His loving proximity to us which Jesus Christ .brings, as that indeed we have left earth and care and sin at the foot of the mount, with the asses and the servants, and have our faces set to the lofty sweetnesses of our ‘Father’s house’? ‘Blessed are they that dwell in Thy house,’ and no less blessed are they ‘in whose hearts are the ways’ that lead to it.

Then let me remind you how Zion contrasts with Sinai, and thus suggests the thought that a true Christian life, based upon faith, has a communion with God which is darkened by no dread, nor disturbed by consciousness of unforgiven sin. We have set against each other the terrors of that theophany on Mount Sinai, attendant on, or rather precedent to, the giving of the law - the mountain wrapped in smoke; in the heart of the wreathing blackness the flashing fire; from out of the midst of it the long-drawn trumpet blasts, the proclamation of the coming of the King; and then. the voice which, divine as it was, froze the marrow of the hearers’ bones, that they entreated that no words like these should any more fall on their trembling ears.

That is the one picture. The other shows us the mount where the King dwells, serene and peaceful, the clouds far below the horizon; the flashing fire changed into lambent light; the blast of the trumpet stilled; the dread voice changed into a voice ‘that speaketh better things’ than were heard amidst the granite cliffs of the wilderness.

And so in vivid, picturesque form the writer gathers up the one great contrast between the revelation of which the message was law and its highest result the consciousness of sin and the shrinking that ensued, and the other of which the inmost heart is love, and the issue the attraction of hearts by the magnetism of its grace. The old fable of a mountain of loadstone which drew ships at sea to its cliffs is true of this Mount Zion, which is exalted above the mountains that it may draw hearts tossing on the restless sea of life to the’ fair havens’ beneath its sheltering height, There is no dread, though there is reverence, and no fear, though there is awe, in the approach of those who come through Jesus Christ, and live beneath the smile of their reconciled God and Father. ‘Ye are come unto Mount Zion,’ the dwelling-place of the living God, from whose lips there will steal into the ears and the hearts of those who keep near Him, gracious words of consolation, so thrilling, so soothing, so enlightening, so searching, so encouraging, that they which hear them shall say, ‘Speak yet again, that I may be blessed.’

And then there is the other aspect of this scene where faith lives. ‘Ye are come unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.’ I need not remind you of how much we hear in this Epistle in reference to that city. It is generally set forth as being yet to come, as being the object of seeking rather than of possession. But the fact is that there are two aspects of it. In one it is future, in the other it is present, The general idea to be attached to it is simply that of the order and social state of those who love and serve God. Here, in this part of my text, we have to deal with the city rather than with its inhabitants. They follow thereafter, but, so far as we can separate between the two, we have just this idea enforced in the words that I am now commenting upon - viz., that the lowliest life, knit, as it seems to be, by so many bonds to the perishable associations and affinities of earth, yet, if it be a life of faith in Jesus Christ, has its true affinities and relationships beyond, and not here. ‘We have our citizenship in heaven,’ says the Apostle, ‘from whence also we look for the Saviour.’ And every Christian man and woman is therefore hound to two or three very plain duties.

If you are living by faith, you do not belong to this order in the midst of which you find yourself. See that you keep vivid the consciousness that you do not. Cultivate the sense of detachment from the present, of not being absorbed by, or belonging to, things which are not coeval with yourself, and from all of which you will have to pass. Cultivate the sense of having your true home beyond the seas; and look to it as emigrants’ and colonists in a far-off land do to the old country, as being home. Live by the laws of your own city, and not by those that run in the community in which you dwell. You are under another jurisdiction. The examples, the maxims of low earthly prudence, or even of a somewhat higher earthly morality, are not your laws. You are not bound to do as the people round about you do.

‘I appeal unto Caesar.’ I take my orders from him. I send my despatches home, and report to headquarters, and if I get approbation thence, it does not matter what the people amongst whom I dwell think about me. Make your investments at home. The Jews invented banking and letters of credit in order that they might the more easily shift their wealth from one land to another as exigencies required. We are strangers where we are. Do not put your property into the country in which you live as an alien, and lock it up there; but remit, as you can do, to the land where you are going, and to which you belong. Home securities are a good deal better than foreign ones. ‘ Ye are come to the city of the living God.’ ‘Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth.’

II. And now let me turn to the other thought herewith whom does faith live.

I need not trouble you with merely expository remarks upon the diversity of arrangements which is possible in the second half of my text. Suffice it to say that just as the scene of the life of faith has been represented in a twofold and yet closely connected form as Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem, so the companions of that life are also represented in a twofold and yet closely connected form.

A slight alteration in the punctuation and order of the words in our text brings out, as it seems to me, the writer’s idea. Suppose you put a comma after ‘innumerable company,’ and substitute for that phrase the original Greek word, so reading ‘and to myriads’ and then pause there. That is the general definition, on which follows the division of the ‘myriads’ into two parts; one of which is ‘the general assembly of angels,’ and the other is the ‘Church of the firstborn which are written in heaven.’ So then, of companions for us, in our lonely earthly life, there he two sorts, and as to both of them the condition of recognising and enjoying their society is the same - via, the exercise of faith,

Now the word rendered ‘general assembly’ has a grander idea in it than that. It is the technical word employed in classic Greek for the festal meetings of a nation at their great games or other solemn occasions, and always carries in it the idea of joy as well as of society. And so here the writer would have us think of one part of that great city, the heavenly Jerusalem, as, if I may So say, the dwelling-place of a loftier race of creatures whose life is immortal and pure joy; and that we, even we, have some connection with them. In an earlier part of this letter we read that they are all ‘ministering spirits sent forth to minister to them that shall be heirs of salvation.’ But here the ministration is not referred to, simply the fact of union and communion.

I am not going to enter at any length upon that subject, concerning which we know but very little. But still it seems to me that our ordinary type of Christian belief loses a great deal because it gives so little heed to the numerous teachings of the New Testament in regard to the reality of the existence of such beings, and of the tie that unites them with lowly believers here. All the servants of the King are friends of one another. And howsoever many they may be, and howsoever high above us in present stature any may tower; and howsoever impossible it be for us to see the glancing and hear the winnowing of their silver wings, as they flash upon errands of obedience to Him, and rejoice to hearken to the voice of His word, there is joy in the true belief that the else waste places of the universe are filled with those who, in their loftiness, rejoice to bend to us, saying, 'I am thy fellow servant, and of them which worship God.' Brethren, we have a better face brightening the unseen than any angel face. But just because Jesus Christ fills the unseen for us, in Him we are united to all those of whom He is the Lord, and He is Lord of men as well as angels. So if the eyes of our hearts are opened, we, too, may see 'the mountain full of chariots of fire and horses of fire round about' the believing soul. And we, too, may come to the joyful assembly of the angels, whose joy is all the more poignant and deep when they, the elder brethren, see the prodigals return.

But the second group of companions is probably the more important for us. 'Ye are come,' says the text, not only to the angelic beings that cluster round His throne in joyful harmony, but also 'to the Church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven.' And, seeing that the names are in heaven, that means, evidently, men who themselves are here upon earth.

I have not time to dwell upon the great ideas which are here contained in the designation of the community of believing souls; I only remind you that probably the word 'church' is not so much employed here in its distinct ecclesiastical sense [for there are no ecclesiastical phrases in the Epistle to the Hebrews], as with allusion to the assembly of the Israelites beneath Mount Sinai, the contrast with which colours the whole of the context. It means, therefore, in general, simply the assembly of the firstborn. Can there be more than one firstborn in a family? Yes! In this family there can, for it is a name here not pointing to a temporary order, but to dignity and prerogative. The firstborn had the right of inheritance; the firstborn was sanctified to the Lord; the firstborn, by his ‘primogeniture, was destined in the old system to be priest and king. All Israel collectively was regarded as the firstborn of the Lord. We, if our hearts are knit to Him who is preeminently firstborn amongst many brethren, obtain, by virtue of our union with Him, the rights and privileges, the obligations and responsibilities, of the eldest sons of the family of God. We inherit; we ought to be sanctified. It is for us, as the ‘first fruits of His creatures,’ to bring other men to Him, that through the Church the world may reach its goal, and creation may become that which God intended it to be.

These firstborn have their names written in heaven - inscribed on the register of the great city. And to that great community, invisible like the other realities in my text, and not conterminous with any visible society such as the existing visible Church, all those belong and come who are knit together by faith in the one Lord.

So, dear friends, it is for us to realise, in the midst, perhaps, of loneliness, the tie that knits us to every heart that finds in Jesus Christ what we do. In times when we seem to stand in a minority; in times when we are tormented by uncongenial surroundings; when we are tempted by lower society; when we are disposed to say, ‘I am alone, with none to lean upon,’ it does us good to think that, not only are there angels in heaven who may have charge concerning us, but that, all over the world, there are scattered brethren whose existence is a comfort, though we have never clasped their hands.

Such, then, is the scene, and such is the society, in which we may all dwell. Christian men and women, do you make conscience of realizing all this by faith, by contemplation, by direct endeavors to pierce beyond the surface and shows of things to the realities that are unseen? See to it that you avail yourself of all the power, the peace, the blessing which will be yours in the degree in which your faith makes these the home and companions of your lives.

How noble the lowest life may become, like some poor, rough sea-shell with a gnarled and dimly coloured, exterior, tossed about in the surge of a stormy sea, or anchored to a rock, but when opened all iridescent with rainbow sheen within, and bearing a pearl of great price! So, to outward seeming, my life may be rough and solitary and inconspicuous and sad, but, in inner reality, it may have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, and have angels for its guardians, and all the firstborn for its brethren and companions.

43)Hebrews 12:23

Hebrews

FAITH’S ACCESS TO THE JUDGE, AND HIS ATTENDANTS

Heb. 12:23

THE principle of arrangement in this grand section of this letter is obscure, and I am afraid that I cannot east much, if any, light upon it. We might, at first sight, have expected that the two clauses of our present text should have been inverted, so as to bring all the constituent parts of ‘the city of the living God’ closely together - viz., ‘the angels,’ the members of the militant Church on earth, and those of the triumphant Church in heaven; and also to bring together ‘God the Judge of all,’ and ‘Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant.’ But the arrangement, as it stands in our text, may he compared profitably with that of the preceding verses, which we were considering in the last sermon. There, as here, the allusion to the immediate presence of God passed at once into the reference to the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. And just as there Zion, the palace, was immediately connected with the city of the living God, so here the writer, harking back, as it were, to his original starting-point, no sooner names ‘God the Judge’ than he passes on to set before us ‘the spirits of just men made perfect.’ In the earlier clauses we have had the more general reference to the palace and the city around it. Here, if I may so say, we pass within the palace gates, and the writer tells us what we find there. This interweaving of the presence of God with that of the creatures that live in His love witnesses to the great truth that our God dwells in no isolated supremacy, but in the midst of a blessed society; and that the solitary souls who find their way into His presence have a welcome, not only from Him, but from all their brethren Of

His great family.

So the arrangement may not be so inexplicable as, at first sight, it strikes us as being, if it suggests to us the close and indissoluble connection between God Himself and all those who, in every place, whether the place above or the place beneath, call upon the name of Him who is both their God and ours. In dealing with these words, I have simply to consider these two ideas thus set before us.

I. Faith plants us at the very bar of God.

'Ye are come to God the Judge of all.' Now, it is to be observed that, more accurately, the words might be rendered, 'Ye are come to the God of all as Judge'; for the point which the writer wishes to bring out is not so much the general idea of the divine presence, as that presence considered under a specific aspect, and referring to one mode of His action - viz., the judicial It is further to be noticed that the judgment which is here spoken about is not, as the very language, 'Ye are come to the Judge; implies, future, but present. The Old Testament, with continual reference to which this letter is saturated, has a great deal more to say about the present continuous judgment which God works all through the ages than about the final future judgment, And, in accordance, not only with the language of our text, which makes coming a present thing, but, in accordance also with the whole tone of the Old Testament, we should recognise here, not so much a reference to the final tribunal Before which all mankind must stand [at which the Judge is characteristically represented in the New Testament as being, not God the Father, But Jesus Christ], as to the continual judgment, both in the sense of decision as to character and infliction of consequences, which is being exercised now by the God of all.

So, then, the first thought that I would suggest from this idea is, Here is a truth which it is the office of faith to realise continually in our daily lives. Your loving access to God, Christian men and women, has brought you right under the eye of the Judge, and, though there be no terror in our approach to that tribunal, there ought to be a wholesome awe as the permanent attitude of our spirits, the awe which is the very opposite of the cowering dread which hath torment. He would be a bold criminal who would commit crimes in the very judgment-hall and before the face of his judge. And that must be a very defective Christian faith which, like the so-called faith of many amongst us, goes through life and sins in entire oblivion of the fact that it stands in the very presence of the Judge of all the earth. Oh, if we could rend the veil as death will rend it, and see the things which are, as faith will help us to see them - for it thins, if it does not tear, the envious curtain between - would it be possible that we should live the low, mean, selfish, earthly, sinful lives, devoured by anxieties, defaced by stains, depressed by trivial sorrows, which, alas! so many of us do live? 'Ye are come.., unto God the Judge of all.' 'If ye call Him Father, who, without respect of persons, judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.'

Then, again, notice that this judgment of God is one which a Christian man should joyfully accept. 'The Lord will judge His people,' says one of the psalms. 'You only have I known of all the inhabitants of the earth; therefore will I punish you for your iniquities,' says one of the prophets. Such sayings represent this present judgment as inevitable, just because of the close connection into which true faith brings a man with his Father in heaven. Inevitable, and likewise most blessed and desirable, for in the thought are included all the methods by which, in providence, and by ministration of His truth and of His Spirit, God reveals to us our hidden meannesses; and delivers us sometimes, even by the consequences which accrue from them, from the burden and power of our sin.

So, then, the office of faith in regard to this continuous judgment which God is exercising upon us because He loves us is, first of all, to open our hearts to it by confession, by frank communion, by referring all our actions to Him to court that investigation. That judgment is no mere knowledge by cold omniscience, such as a heathen conception of the divine eye might make it to be; but just as a careful gardener will go over his rose-trees, and the more carefully the more precious they are in his sight, to pick from each nestling-place at the junction of the leaves with the stem the tiny insects that are sucking out the sap and destroying them, so God will search our hearts in order to pluck from these the crawling evils which, microscopic and tiny as they may be, will yet, in their multitude innumerable, be destructive of our spirits' lives.

It is a gospel when we say, ‘The Lord will judge His people.’ Therefore in many a psalm we have the writers spreading themselves out before God, and beseeching Him to come and search them, and try them, and sift them through His sieve, and know them altogether, in the sure confidence that wheresoever He beholds an evil He will be ready to cure it, and that whosoever spreadeth out his sin before God will be lightened of the burden of his sin.

This merciful judgment, which is, in fact, all directed to the perfecting and sanctifying of its subjects, reaches its end in the measure in which we register its decisions in our consciences. God writes His mind about us on them, and when they speak they are only speaking an echo of the sentence that has been pronounced from that loftier tribunal. Therefore, whosoever professeth himself to be a Christian and does anything, be it great or small, which his conscience rebukes when done, and prohibited before it was done, that man is despising the judgment of God, and bringing down upon himself the condemnation which follows despised judgment. ‘If we should judge ourselves we should not be judged.’ Reverence your consciences: they are the echo of the Judge’s voice; peruse their records; they are the register of the Judge’s sentence; and whensoever that inward voice speaks, bow before it and say, ‘Lord! servant heareth.’

And then, further, remember that this judgment is one that demands our thankful acceptance of the discipline which it puts in force. If we knew ourselves we should bless God for our sorrows. These are His special means of drawing His children away from their evil. ‘When we are chastened, we are chastened of the Lord that we should not be condemned with the world.’ Oh! there would be less impatience, less blank amazement when suffering comes to us, less vain and impotent regrets for vanished blessings, if we saw in all the dealings of our Father’s hands the results of His judgment, and believed that it is better for us to be separated, though it be with violence and much bleeding of torn-away hearts, from our idols than that our idolatry should destroy us and mar them. ‘Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.’ This judgment is not only the merciful separation of us from our sins, but it is also a judgment on our behalf.

The office of the early Jewish judges was not only the judicial one which we mean by the word, but was much wider, and some trace of that wider idea runs through almost all the Old Testament references to the divine judgment. It comes to mean, not merely a decision adverse or favorable, as the ease may be, as to the moral character of its subjects, but it also substantially means pleading their cause, defending their right, intervening for them, and so in many a psalm you will find such petitions as this, 'Judge me, O Lord; for I am poor and needy. Plead my cause against them which rise up against me.' And the same conception of the Judge's office appears in one of our Lord's parables, familiar to us all, in which we are told that 'the Lord will judge His own elect though He bear long with them.'

Thus, another of the blessed thoughts that come out of this conception of our approach to 'the Judge of all' is that we may confidently commit our cause to Him, and leave our vindication in His hands. So, abstinence from self-assertion, from self-vindication, from vengeance or recompense, patience, courage, consolation, strength, all these virtues will be ours if we understand to whom we come by our faith, and can behold, on the throne of the universe, One who will plead our cause, and undertake for us whensoever we are burdened and oppressed.

II. Secondly, Faith carries us while living to the society of the living dead.

'The Judge of all, and the spirits of just men made perfect.' Immediately on the thought of God arising in the writer's mind, there rises also the blessed thought of the blessed company in the centre of whom He lives and reigns. We can say little about that subject, and perhaps the less we say the more we shall understand, and the more deeply we shall feel We get glimpses but no clear vision, as when a flock of birds turn in their rapid flight, and for a moment the sun glances on their white wings; and then, with another turn, they drift away, spots of blackness in the blue. So we see but for a moment as the light falls, and then lose the momentary glory, but we may at least reverently note the exalted words here.

'The spirits of... men made perfect.' That is to say, they dwell freed from the incubus and limitations, and absolved from the activities, of a bodily organisa-tion. We cannot understand such a condition. To us it may seem to mean passivity or almost unconsciousness, but we know, as another New Testament writer has told us, that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord; and that in some deep, and to us now undiscoverable, fashion, that which the corporeal frame does for men here, immersed in the material world, there the encircling Christ in whom they rest does for them. We know little more, but we have a glimpse of a land of deep peace in which repose is not passivity nor unconsciousness; any more than service is weariness. And there we have to leave it, knowing only this, that it is possible for a man to exist and to be, in a relative sense, perfected without a body. Then, further, these spirits are 'perfect.'

The writer has said, at the close of the preceding chapter, that the ancient saints 'without us should not be made perfect.' And here he employs the same word with distant reference, as I suppose, to his previous declaration. From which I infer that that old thought is true, that Jesus Christ shot some rays of His victorious and all-reconciling power from His Cross into the regions of darkness, and brought thence those who had been waiting for His coming through many a long age. A great painter has left on the walls of a little cell in his Florentine convent a picture of the victorious Christ, white-robed and banner-bearing, breaking down the iron gates that shut in the dark, rocky cave; and flocking to Him, with outstretched hands of eager welcome, the whole long series from the first man downwards, hastening to rejoice in His light, and to participate in His redemption.

So the ancient Church was 'perfected' in Christ; but the words refer, not only to those Old Testament patriarchs and saints, but to all who, up to the time of the writer's composition of his letter, 'slept in Jesus.' They have reached their goal in Him. The end for which they were created has been attained. They are in the summer of their powers, and full-grown adults, whilst we here, the maturest and the wisest, the strongest and the holiest, are but as babes in Christ.

But yet that 'perfecting' does not exclude progress, continuous through all the ages; and especially it does not exclude one great step in advance which, as Scripture teaches us, will be taken when the resurrection of the body is granted. Corporeity is the perfecting humanity. Body, soul, and spirit, these make the full-summed man in all his powers. And so the souls beneath the altar, clothed in white, and rapt in felicity, do yet wait ‘for the adoption, even the redemption of the body.’

Mark, further, that these spirits perfected would not have been perfected there unless they had been made just here. That is the first step, without which nothing in death has any tendency to ennoble or exalt men. If we are ever to come to the perfecting of the heavens, we must begin with the justifying that takes place on earth.

Let me point you to one other consideration, bearing not so much on the condition as on the place of these perfected spirits. It is very significant, as I tried to point out, that they should be closely associated in our text with ‘God the Judge of all.’ Is there any hint there that men who have been redeemed, who being unjust, have been made just, and have had experience of restoration and of the misery of departure, shall, in the ultimate order of things, stand nearer the throne than unfallen spirits, and teach angels? If the ‘just man made perfect,’ and not the festal assembly of the angels, that are brought into connection here with ‘the Judge of all.’ Is there any hint that in some sense these perfected spirits are assessors of God in His great judgment? ‘Ye shall sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel,’ seems to point in that direction. But the ground is precarious, and I only point to the words in passing as possibly affording a foothold for a ‘perhaps.’

But the more important consideration is the real unity between poor souls here who are knit to Jesus Christ, and the spirits of the just made perfect who stand so close to the judgment seat.

Ah, brethren! we have to alter the meaning of the words ‘present’ and ‘absent’ when we come to speak of spiritual realities. The gross localized conceptions that are appropriate to material space, and to transitory time, have nothing to do with that higher religion. It is no mere piece of rhetoric or sentiment to say that where our treasure is, there are our hearts, and where our hearts are there are we.

Love has no localities. It knits together two between whom oceans wide roll; it knits together saints on earth and saints in heaven. To talk of place is irrelevant in reference to such a union; for if our love, our aims, our hopes be the same, we are together. And if they on the upper side, and we on the lower, grasp each the outstretched hand of the same God, then we are one in Him, and the same life will tingle through our earthly frames and through their perfected spirits. He is the centre of the great wheel whose spokes are light and blessedness; and all who stand around Him are brought into unity by their common relation to the centre.

Our sorrows would be less sorrowful, our loss less utter, if we truly believed that while apart we are still together. Our courage and our hope would rise if we came closer in loving contemplation and believing thought to the present blessedness of those once our fellow-travelers, who, weak as we, have entered into rest. Heaven itself would gain some touch of true attractiveness if we more clearly saw, and more thankfully felt, that there is

'the Judge of all,' and there also 'the spirit of just men made perfect.' But howsoever great may be the encouragement, the consolation, the quieting that come from them, let us turn away our eyes from the surrounding and lower seats to fix them on the central throne. Let us ever realise that we are ever in our great Judge's eye. Let us spread out our hearts for His scrutiny and decision, for His discipline if need be. Let us commit to Him our cause, and, in the peace that comes therefrom, we may understand why it was that psalmists of old called upon earth to rejoice and the hills to be glad because He 'cometh to judge the earth, to judge the world with righteousness, and the people with His truth.'

44)Hebrews 12:24

Hebrews

THE MESSENGER OF THE COVENANT AND ITS SEAT

Heb. 12:24

IN previous sermons on the preceding context, we have had frequent occasion to remark on the parallel and contrast between Sinai and Zion, as expressive of the difference between the genius of Judaism and Christianity, which shapes the whole of this section That contrast and parallel are most obvious at its beginning and here at its close.

In the beginning we had the mountain of the Law, swathed in darkness, lit by flashing flame, contrasted with the sunny slopes of Zion, palace-crowned, and the wild desert set in opposition to the city of peace that clustered round the foot of Zion's Mount. Here at the close we have the key-words of the old revelation laid hold of and applied to the new. Judaism was a covenant in the form of a law, of which the terms were these: ‘Do, and thou shalt live!’ The gospel is a covenant in the form of a promise, of which the tenor is ‘Believe and live; live and do!’ The ancient covenant had Moses for its mediator, passing between the mountain and the plain. The gospel has a better and a truer link of union between God and man than any mere man, however exalted, can be. The ancient system had its sprinkled blood, by which the men on whom it fell entered into the covenant, and were ceremonially sanctified. The new covenant has its blood. An awful voice rolled amongst the peaks of Sinai. That ‘blood of sprinkling’ speaks too. And then the writer blends with that allusion another, to the voice of the blood of the first martyr, every drop of which cried to God for retribution, and points to the blood of the more innocent Abel, every drop of which appeals to the Father’s heart for pardon.

Now it may be said that thus to present Christian truth under the guise of the symbols of an ancient ceremonial and external system is a retrograde step. And some people, who think themselves very enlightened, tell us that the time is past for looking at Christianity from such a point of view. One great man has let himself talk about ‘Hebrew old clothes.’ I am very much mistaken if these old clothes will not turn out to be something like the raiment that the Hebrews. wore in the wilderness, ‘which waxed not old for forty years,’ and outlasted a great many suits that other people had cut for themselves. We have only to ponder upon these emblems until they become significant to us, in order to see that, instead of being antiquated and effete, they are throbbing with life, and fit as close to the needs of to- lay u ever they did. They came with a special message, no doubt, to these men to whom this letter was first addressed, who were by descent and habit Hebrews, and saturated with the law. But their message is quite as much to you and me; and I desire now simply to bring out the large and permanent meanings which lie beneath them.

I. First, then, note that God’s revelation to us is in the form of a covenant.

Now, of course, when we talk about a covenant or compact between two men, we mean a matter of bargaining on the terms of which both have been consulted, and which has assumed its final form after negotiations and perhaps compromise. But there are necessarily limitations to the transference of all human ideas to divine relations. One such limitation is expressed in the very language of the original. The word rendered 'covenant' suppresses the idea of conjunction, and emphasises that of appointment. By which we are to learn that the covenant which God makes with man is of His own settling and is not the result of mutual giving and taking; that men have nothing to do with the determining of these conditions; that He Himself has made them, and that He is bound by them, not because we have arranged them with Him, but because He has announced them to us. With that limitation we can take the idea and apply it to the relation between God and us, established in the great message of the gospel.

For what is the notion that underlies the old-fashioned, and to some of you obsolete and unwelcome word? Why, simply this, it is a definite disclosure of God's purpose as affecting you and me, by which disclosure He is prepared to stand and to be bound. It is a revelation, but a revelation that obliges the Revealer to a certain course of conduct; or, if you would rather have a less theological word, it is a system of promise under which God mercifully has willed that we should live. And just as when a king gives forth a proclamation, he is bound by the fact that he gave it forth, so God, out of all the infinite possibilities of His action, condescends to tell us what His line is to be, and He will adhere to it. He lets us see the works of the clock, if I may so say, not wholly, but in so far as we are affected by His action.

What, then, are the terms of this covenant? We have them drawn out, first, in the words of Jeremiah, who apprehended, when he was dwelling in the midst of that eternal system, that it could not be a final system; and next, by the writer of this letter quoting the prophet, who, in the midst of the vanishing of that which could be shaken, saw emerging, like the fairy form of the fabled goddess out of the sea-foam, the vast and permanent outlines of a nobler system. The promises of the covenant are, then, full forgiveness as the foundation of all, and built upon that, a knowledge of God inwardly illuminating and making a man independent of external helps, though he may sometimes be grateful for them; then a mutual possession which is based upon these, whereby I, even I, can venture to say, God is mine, and, more 'wonderful still, I, even I, can venture to believe that He bends down from heaven and says: 'And thou, thou art Mine!' and then, as the result of all - named first, but coming last in the order of nature - the law of His commandment will be So written upon the heart that delight and duty are spelt with the same letters, and His will is our will. These are the elements, or you can gather them all up into one, namely, the promise of eternal life-based upon forgiveness, operating through the knowledge of God, and issuing in perfect conformity to His blessed will.

If these, then, be the articles of the paction, think for a moment of the blessedness that lies hived in this ancient, and to some of us musty, thought of a covenant of God's. It gives a basis for knowledge. Unless He audibly and articulately and verifiably utters His mind and will, I know not There men are to go to get it. Without an actual revelation from heaven, of other nature, of clearer contents, of more solid certitude than the revelations that may have been written upon the tablets of our hearts, over which we have too often scrawled the devil's message, and over and above the ambiguous articles that may be picked out and pieced together, from reflection upon providence and nature, we need something better and firmer, more comprehensively and more manifestly authoritative, before we are entitled to say, 'Behold! I know that God loves me, and that I may put my trust in Him.' Brethren! I for my part believe that between agnosticism on that side, and the full evangeliced faith of the New Testament in a supernatural revelation on this side, all forms of so-called Christianity which shy at the idea of a supernatural 'revelation are destined to have the life squeezed out of them, and that what will be left will be the two logical positions; first, God, if there be a God, never spoke, and we do not know anything about Him; and, second, 'God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son.' If there be a God at all, and if there be in Him any love and any righteousness, it is infinitely more reasonable to suppose that He should have spoken His mind and heart to men, and given them a covenant on which they can reckon, than that He has been from the beginning a dumb God, that never opened His mouth with a word of guidance or of sympathy for the sons of men. Believe that who may; I cannot believe in a pure theism, which has no place for a supernatural revelation.

And then, again, let me remind you how here is the one foothold, if I may so say, for confidence. If God hath not spoken there is nothing to reckon upon. There are perhaps, probabilities if you like, possibilities, but nothing beyond, and no man can build a faith on a peradventure. There must be solid ground on which to rest; and here is solid ground: 'I make a covenant with you.' 'God is not a man that He should lie, nor the Son of Man that He should repent.' And armed with that great thought that He has verily rent the darkness and spoken words which commit Him and assure us, we, even the weakest of us, may venture to go to Him, and plead with Him that He cannot and dare not alter the thing that has gone forth out of His mouth; and so, in deepest reverence, can approach Him and plead the necessity of a great Must under which He has placed Himself by His own word. God is faithful, the covenant-making and the covenant- keeping God.

II. Secondly, mark that Jesus Christ is the Executor of this covenant.

Moses, of course, was a go-between, in a mere external sense; from the mountain to the plain and from the plain to the mountain, he passed, and in either case simply carried a message bearing God's will to man or man's submission to God. But we have to dig far deeper into the idea than that of a mere outward messenger who carries what is entrusted to him, as an errand boy might, if we are to get the notion of Christ's relation to these great promises, which, massed together, are God's covenant with us. Observe that the emphasis is here laid on the manhood of the Lord. It is Jesus who is the 'Mediator of the covenant': and observe, too, that that idea passes into the wider notion of His place as the link uniting God and man. The depth of the thought is only reached whoa we recognise His divinity and His humanity. He is the ladder with its foot on earth and its top in heaven.

Because God dwells in Him, and the word became flesh, He is able to lay His hand upon both, and to bring God to man and man to God.

He brings God to man. If what I have been saying is at all true, that for all solid faith we must have an articulate declaration of the divine mind and heart, it seems to me to be equally irrefragable that for any such declaration of the divine heart and mind we must have a human vehicle. God speaks through men. It is His highest way of making Himself known to mere And Jesus Christ in His Manhood declares God to us. Not by the mere words which He speaks, as a teacher and a wise man, a religious genius and a saint, a philosopher and a poet, a moralist and a judge; but by these, and also by His life, by His emotions of pity and gentleness and patience, and by everything that He does and everything that He endures, He speaks to us of God.

Brethren, where shall a poor man rest his soul outside of the direct or indirect influences of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ? Why I the very men who reject Him to-day, on the plea that they have learnt a nobler conception of God than they can find in Christianity, owe their conception of Him to the gospel which they reject. Where else is there certitude solid enough to resist the pressure of sorrow and of sin; confidence enough to maintain faith in the face of difficulty and conscious evil and death; or energy enough in a creed to make religion an all-controlling influence and an all-gladdening stay except in Jesus Christ? I venture to say, nowhere I Nowhere beyond the limits to which either the river of the water of life has manifestly flowed; or some rills and rivulets from it have crept underground to give strange verdure to some far-off pasture; nowhere else is there found the confidence in the Father's heart which is the property of the Christian man, and the result of the Christian covenant. Jesus Christ brings God to man by the declaration of His nature incarnate in humanity.

And, on the other hand, He brings man to God: for He stands to each of us as our true Brother, and-united to us by such close and real bends as that all which He has been and done may be ours if we join ourselves to Him by faith. And He brings men to God, because in Him only do we find the drawings that incline wayward and wandering hearts to the Father. And He seals for us that great Covenant in His own person and work, in so far as what He in manhood has done has made it possible that such promises should be given to us. And, still further, He is the Mediator of the covenant, in so far as He Himself possesses in His humanity all the blessings which manhood is capable of deriving from the Father, and He has them all in order that He may give them all. There is the great reservoir from which all men may fill their tiny cups.

Men tell us that they want no Mediator between them and God. Ah, my brother! go down into your own hearts; try to understand what sin is; and then go up as near as you can to the dazzling white light, and try partially to conceive of what God's holiness is, and tell us, Do you think you, as you are, could walk in that light and not be consumed? It seems to me that no man who has any deep knowledge of his own heart, and any, though it be inadequate, yet true, conception of the divine nature, dare take upon his lips that boast that we often hear, 'We need none to come between us and God.'

For me, I thankfully hear Him say, 'No man cometh to the Father but by Me'; and pray for grace to tread in that only way that leadeth unto God. III. Note the sprinkling of the blood which seals the covenant.

There is an allusion there, as I have already suggested, to the ceremonial at Sinai, when, in token of their entrance into the covenant, the Blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled upon the crowd; and also an allusion to the voice of the blood of the innocent Abel, which 'cried to God from the ground.' The writer has already referred to that in the earlier part of the letter; and here he weaves the two together because, with whatever differences of representation, the substantial meaning of both images is the same. The blood shed establishes the covenant; and the blood sprinkled brings us into it.

If Jesus had not died, there would have been no promises for us, beginning in forgiveness and ending in wills delighting in God's law. It is 'the new covenant in His blood.' The death of Christ is ever present to the divine mind and determines the divine action.

Hence the allusion to the voice, in contrast both to the dread voice that echoed among the grim peaks of Sinai, and to that which, as if each drop had a tongue, called from Abel's innocent blood for retribution. Christ's, too, has a voice, and that an all-powerful one. It cries for pardon with the same authority of intercession as we hear in His wondrous high-priestly prayer: 'Father, I will.'

Further, that sprinkling, which introduced technically and formally these people into that covenant, represents for us the personal application to ourselves of the power of His death and of His life by which we may make all God’s promises our own, and be cleansed from all sin. It is ‘sprinkled.’ Then it is capable of division into indefinitely small portions, and of the closest contact with individuals. That is but a highly metaphorical way of saying that Jesus Christ has died for each of us, that each of us may find acceptance and cleansing, and the inheritance of all the promises, if we put our trust in Him.

For remember, these words of my text are the end of a great sentence, which begins, ‘Ye are come.’

Faith is that coming. What did Christ say? ‘He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger. He that believeth on Me shall never thirst.’ There is His own interpretation of the metaphor. Whosoever trusts Him, comes to Him. If I put my tremulous faith on that dear Lord, though He be on the throne of the universe, and I down here, in this far-away dim corner of His creation, I am with Him where He is, and no film of distance need separate us. If we trust Him we come to Him. If we rest upon Him as our advocate and hope, then the loud voice of our sins will not be heard, accusing-tongued though they be, above the voice of His pleading blood.

And they who come to Christ, therein and thereby, come to all other glorious and precious persons and things in the universe. For, as I have already said, my text is the end of a long sentence, and is last named as being the foundation of all that precedes, and the condition of our finding ourselves in touch with all the other glories of which the writer has been speaking. He that comes to Christ is in the city. He that comes to Christ is - not will be - in the palace. He that comes to Christ is in the presence of the Judge. He that comes to Christ touches angels and perfected spirits, and is knit to all that are knit to the same Lord. He that comes to Christ comes to cleansing, and enters into the fulness of the promise, and lives in the presence and companionship of his present-absent Lord. If we come to Jesus by faith, Jesus will come at last to us to receive us to Himself; and join us to the choirs of the perfected spirits who ‘have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’

45)Hebrews 12:25

Hebrews

REFUSING GOD’S VOICE

Heb. 12:25

THE writer has finished his great contrast of Judaism and Christianity as typified by the mounts Sinai and Zion. But the scene at the former still haunts his imagination and shapes this solemn warning. The multitude gathered there had shrunk from the divine voice, and ‘entreated that it might not be spoken to them any more.’ So may we do, standing before the better mount of a better revelation. The parallel between the two congregations at the two mountains is still more obvious if we remark that the word translated in my text ‘refuse’ is the same as has just been employed in a previous verse, describing the conduct of the Israelites, where it is rendered ‘entreated.’ It may seem strange that after so joyous and triumphant an enumeration of the glorious persons and things with whom we are brought into contact by faith, there should come the jarring note of solemn warning which seems to bring back the terrors of the ancient law. But, alas I the glories and blessedness into which faith introduces us are no guarantees against its decay; and they who are ‘come unto Mount Zion and the city of the living God,’ may turn their backs upon all the splendour, and wander away into the gaunt desert.

I. So we have here, first of all, the solemn possibility of refusal.

Now, to gain the whole force and solemnity of this .exhortation, it is very needful to remember that it is addressed to professing Christians, who have in so far exercised real faith, as that by it ‘they are come to Mount Zion, and to the city o£ the living God.’ We are to keep that clear, or we lose the whole force and meaning of this exhortation before us, which is addressed distinctly, emphatically, and, in its true application, exclusively to Christian men - ‘See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh.’

Then, again, it is to be noted that the refusal here spoken about, and against which we professing Christians are thus solemnly warned, is not necessarily entire intellectual rejection of the gospel and its message. For the Israelites, who made the original 'refusal,' to which that against which we are warned is paralleled, recognised the voice that they would not listen to as being God's voice; and just because it was His voice, wanted to hear no more of it. And so, although we may permissibly extend the words before us to include more than is thereby originally meant, yet we must remember that the true and proper application of them is to the conduct of men who, recognising that God is speaking to them, do not want to hear anything more from Him. That is to say, this warning brings to us Christians the reminder that it is possible for us so to tamper with what we know to be the uttered will and expressed commandment of God, as that our conduct is tantamount to saying, 'Be silent, O Lord! and let me not hear Thee speak any more to me.' The reason for that refusal, which thus, in its deepest criminality and darkest sin, can only be made by men that recognise the voice to be God's, lies just here, 'they could not endure that which was commanded.' So, then, the sum of the whole thing is this, that it is possible for Christian people so to cherish wills and purposes which they know to be in diametrical and flagrant contradiction to the win and purpose of God, that obstinately they prefer to stick by their own desires, and, if it may be, to stifle the voice of God.

Then remember, too, that this refusal, which is reality is the rising up of the creature's will, tastes, inclinations, desires, against the manifest and recognised will of God, may, and as a matter of fact often does, go along with a great deal of lip reverence and unconsciously hypocritical worship. These men, from whom the writer is drawing his warning in the wilderness there, said, 'Do not let Him speak! We are willing to obey all that He has to command; only let it come to us through human lips, and not in these tremendous syllables that awe our spirits.' They thought themselves to be perfectly willing to keep the commandments when they were given, and all that they wanted was some little accommodation to human weakness in the selection of the medium by which the word was brought. So we may be wrenching ourselves away from the voice of God, because we uncomfortably feel that it is against our resolves, and all the while may never know that we are unwilling to obey His commandments. The unconscious refusal is the formidable and the fatal One.

It comes by reason, as I have said, fundamentally of the rising up of our own determinations and wishes against His commandments; but it is also due to other causes operating along with this. How can you hear God’s voice if you are letting your own yelping dog-kennel of passions speak so loudly as they do? Will God’s voice be heard in a heart that is all echoing with earthly wishes, loudly clamant for their gratification, or with sensual desires passionately demanding their food to be flung to them? Will God’s voice be heard in a heart where the janglings of contending wishes and earthly inclinations are perpetually loud in their brawling? Will it be heard in a heart which has turned itself into a sounding-board for all the noises of the world and the voices of men? The voice of God is heard in silence, and not amidst the Babel of our own hearts. And they who, unconsciously, perhaps, of what they are doing, open their ears wide to hear what they themselves in the lower parts of their souls prescribe, or bow themselves in obedience to the precepts and maxims of men-round them, are really refusing to hear the voice of God.

It is not to be forgotten, howsoever, that whilst thus the true and proper application of these words is to Christian men, and the way by which we refuse to listen to that awful utterance is by withdrawing our lives from the control of His will, and dragging away our contemplations from meditation upon His word, yet there is a further form in which men may refuse that voice, which eminently threatened the persons to whom this warning was first directed. All through this letter we see that the writer is in fear that his correspondents should fall away into intellectual and complete rejection of Christianity. And the reason was mainly this, that the fall of the ancient and ramrod system of the old covenant might lead them to distrust all revelation from God, and to east aside the gospel message. So the exhortation of my text assumes a special closeness of application to us whose lot has been east in revolutionary times, as was theirs, and who have, in our measure, something of that same experience to go through which made the sharp trial of these Hebrew Christians. To them, solid and permanent as they had fancied them, ancient and God-appointed realities and ordinances were melting away; and it was natural that they should ask themselves, ‘Is there anything that will not melt, on which we can rest?’ And to us in this day much of the same sort of discipline is appointed; and we, too, have to see, both in the religious and in the social world, much evidently waxing old and ready to vanish away which our fathers thought to be permanent. And the question for us is, Is there anything that we can cling to? Yes! to the 'voice that speaks from heaven' in Jesus Christ. As long as that is sounding in our ears we can calmly look out on the evanescence of the evanescent, and confidently rely on the permanence of the permanent. And so, brother, though this, that, and the other of the externals of Christianity, in polity, in form, in mode, may he passing away, be sure of this, the solid core abides; and that core lies in the first word of this letter. 'God... hath spoken unto us in His Son.' See that no experience of mutation leads you to falter in your confidence in that voice, and 'see that ye refuse not Him that speaketh.'

II. Again, note the sleepless vigilance necessary to counteract the tendency to refusal.

'See that ye refuse not.' A warning finger is, as it were, lifted. Take heed against the tendencies that lie in yourself and the temptations around you. The consciousness of the possibility of the danger is half the battle.

'Blessed is the man that feareth always,' says the psalm. 'The confident' - by which is meant the presumptuous, and not the trustful - 'goeth on and is punished.' The timid - by which I mean the self-distrustful - clings to God, because he knows his danger, and is safe. If we think that we are on the verge of falling, we are nearer standing than we ever are besides. To lay to heart the reality and the imminence and the gravity of the possibility that is disclosed here is an essential part of the means for preventing its becoming a reality. They who would say 'I cannot turn away because I have come,' have yet to learn the weakness of their own hearts and the strength of the world that draws them away. There is no security for us except in the continual temper of rooted self-distrust, for there is no motive that will drive us to the continual confidence in which alone is security but the persistent pressure of that sense that in ourselves we are nothing, and cannot but fall. I want no man to live in that selfish and anxious dread 'which hath torment,' but I am sure that the shortest road to the brave security which is certain of never being defeated is the clear and continual consciousness that 'In ourselves we nothing can, Full soon were we down-ridden; But for us fights the proper Man, Whom God Himself hath bidden.'

The dark underside of the triumphant confidence, which on its sunny side looks up to heaven and receives its light, is that self-distrust which says always to ourselves, 'We have to take heed lest we refuse Him that speaketh.'

If there is any need to dwell upon specific methods by which this vigilance and continuous self-distrust may work out for us our security, one would say - by careful trying to reverse all these conditions which, as we have seen, lead us surely to the refusal. Silence the passions, the wishes, the voices of your own wills and tastes and inclinations and purposes. Bring them all into close touch with Him. Let there be no voice in your hearts till you know God's will; and then with a leap let your hearts be eager to do it. Keep yourselves out of the babble of the world's voices; and be accustomed to go by yourselves and let God speak. Nature seems to be silent to the busy traveller who never gets away from the thumping of the piston of the engine and the rattle of the wheels of the train.

Let him go and sit down by himself on the mountain top, and the silence becomes all vocal and full of noises. Go into the lone place of silent contemplation, and so get near God, and you will hear His voice. But you will not hear it unless you still the beating of your own heart. Even in such busy lives as most of us have to live it is possible to secure some space for such solitary communion and meditation if we seriously feel that we must, and are ready to cut off needless distractions. He who thus has the habit of going alone with God will be able to hear His voice piercing through the importunate noises of earth, which drown it for others. Do promptly, precisely, perfectly, all that you know He has said. That is the way to sharpen your ears for the more delicate intonations of His voice, and the closer manifestations of His will. If you do not, the voice will hush itself into silence. Thus bringing your lives habitually into contact with God's word, and testing them all by it, you will not be in danger of 'refusing Him that speaketh.'

III. Lastly, note the solemn motives by which this sleepless vigilance is enforced.

‘If they escaped not who refused Him that spake on earth’ - or, perhaps, ‘who on earth refused Him that spake’ - ‘much more shall not we escape if we turn away from Him that speaketh from heaven.’ The clearness of the voice is the measure of the penalty of non-attention to it. The voice that spoke on earth had earthly penalties as the consequence of disobedience. The voice that speaks from heaven, by reason of its loftier majesty, and of the dearer utterances which are granted to us thereby, necessarily involves more severe and fatal issues from negligence to it.

Mark how the words of my text deepen and darken in their significance in the latter portion. In the first we had simply ‘refusal,’ or the desire not to hear the voice, and in the latter portion that has solidified and deepened itself into ‘turning away from Him.’ That is to say, when we once begin, as many professing Christians have begun, to be intolerant of God’s voice meddling with their lives, we are upon an inclined plane, which, with a sharp pitch and a very short descent, carries us down to the darker condition of ‘turning away from Him.’ The man who stops his ears will very soon turn his back and be in flight, so far as he can, from the voice. Do not tamper with God’s utterances. If you do, you have begun a course that ends in alienation from Him.

Then mark, again, the evils which fell upon these people who turned away from Him that speaketh on earth were their long wanderings in the wilderness, and their exclusion from the Land of Promise, and final deaths in the desert, where their bleaching bones lay white in the sunshine. And if you and I, dear friends, by continuous and increasing deafness to our Father’s voice, have turned away from Him, then all that assemblage of flashing glories and majestic persons and of reconciling blood to which we come by faith, will melt away, ‘and leave not a wrack behind.’ We shall be like men who, in a dream, have thought themselves in a king’s palace, surrounded by beauty and treasures, and awaken with a start and a shiver to find themselves alone in the desert. It will be loss enough if the fair city which hath foundations, and the palace-home of the king on the mountain, and the joyful assemblage of the angels, and the Church of the firstborn, and the spirits of the just made perfect, and the blood of sprinkling, all pass away from our vision, and instead of them there is nothing left but this mean, vulgar, fleeting world. They will pass if you do not listen to God, and that is why so many of you have so little conscious contact with the unseen and glorious realities to which faith gives access.

But then there are dark and real penalties to come in another life which the writer dimly shows to us. It is no part of my business to enlarge upon these solemn warnings. An inspired man may do it. I do not think that it is reverent for me to do it much. But at the same time, let me remind you that terror is a legitimate weapon to which to appeal, and unwelcome and unfashionable as its use is nowadays, it is one of the weapons in the armoury of the true preacher of God's Word. I believe we Christian ministers would do more if we were less chary of speaking out 'the terror of the Lord.' And though I shrink from anything like vulgar and rhetorical and sensational appeals to that side of divine revelation, and to what answers to it in us, I consider that I should be a traitor to the truth if I did not declare the fact that such appeals are legitimate, and that such terror is a part of the divine revelation.

So, dear friends, though I dare not dwell upon these, I dare not burke them. I remind you - and I do no more - of the tone that runs through all this letter, of which you have such instances as these, 'If the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression received its just recompense of reward, how shall We escape if we neglect so great salvation?' and 'Of how much sorer punishment, think you, shall they be thought worthy who have counted the blood of the Covenant wherewith they were sanctified a common thing?' 'See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh,' for the clearer, the tenderer, the more stringent the beseechings of the love and the warnings of Christ's voice, the more solemn the consequences if we stop our ears to it. Better to hear it now, when it warns and pleads and beseeches and comforts and hallows and quickens, than to hear it first when it rends the tombs and shakes the earth, and summons all to judgment, and condemns some to the outer darkness to which they had first condemned themselves

46)Hebrews 13:5-6

GOD’S VOICE AND MAN’S ECHO

Heb. 13:5-6.

‘HE hath said’; ‘we may... say.’ So, then, here are two voices; or, rather, a voice and an echo - God’s voice of promises, and man’s answering voice of confidence. God speaks to us that we may speak to Him; and when He speaks His promises, the only fitting answer is to accept them as true in all their fulness fixed confidence.

The writer quotes two passsges as from the Old Testament. The first of them is not found verbatim anywhere there; the nearest approach to it, and obviously the source of the quotation, occurs in a connection that is worth noting. When Moses was handing over the charge of his people to his successor, Joshua, he said first to the people and then to Joshua, ‘Be strong and of good courage .... He will not fail thee, neither forsake thee.’ The writer of the Epistle falls back upon these words with a slight alteration, and turns ‘He’ into’ I,’ simply because he recognised that when Moses spoke, God was speaking through him, and countersigning with His own seal the promise which His servant made in His name. The other passage comes from the 118th Psalm. So, then, let us listen to the divine voice and the human answer.

I. God’s voice of promise.

‘He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.’ Now, notice that there is a distinct parallel between the position of the people to whom this Epistle was addressed, and that of the Hebrews to whom the original promise was made. The latter were standing on the verge of a great change. They were passing from under the leadership of Moses, and going under the leadership of the untried Joshua. Is it fanciful to recall that Joshua and Jesus are the same name; and that the difficulty which Israel on the borders of Canaan had to face, and the difficulty which these Hebrew Christians had to encounter, were similar, being in each case a change of leaders - the ceasing to look to Moses and the beginning to take commands from another? To men in such a crisis, when venerable authority was becoming antiquated, it might seem as if nothing was stable. Very appropriate, therefore, and strong was the encouragement given by pointing away from the flowing river to the Rock of Ages, rising changeless above the changing current off human life. So Moses said to his generation, and the author of the Epistle says after him to his contemporaries you may change the leaders, but you keep the one Presence.

This letter goes on the principle throughout that everything which belonged to Israel, in the way of institutions, sacred persons, promises, is handed over to the Christian Church, and we are, as it were, served heirs to the whole of these. So, then, to every one of us the message comes, and comes in its most individual aspect, ‘I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.’ Now, ‘to leave’ and ‘to forsake’ are identical, and the promise, if we keep to the Authorised Version, is a repetition, in the two clauses, of the same thought. But whilst the two clauses are substantially identical, there is a very beautiful variation in the form in which the one assurance is given in them. With regard to the first of them, ‘I will never leave thee,’ both in the Hebrew and in the Greek the word which is employed, and which is translated ‘leave,’ means the withdrawing of a hand that sustains. And so the Revised Version wisely substitutes for ‘leave thee,’ ‘I will never fail thee.’ We might even put it more colloquially, and approach more nearly the original expression, if we said, ‘He will never drop thee’; never let His hand slacken, never withdraw its sustaining power, but will communicate for ever, day by day, not only the strength, but the conscious security that comes from feeling that great, strong, gentle hand, closing thee round and keeping thee tight. No man ‘shall pluck them out of My father’s hand.’

‘The Lord upholdeth all that fall,’ says one Psalm, and another of the psalmists puts it even more picturesquely; ‘When I said my foot slippeth, Thy mercy, O Lord, held me up,’ To Say ‘my foot slippeth,’ with a strong emphasis on the ‘my’ is the sure way to be able to say the other thing: ‘Thy mercy held me up.’ ‘He shall not fall, for the Lord is able to make him stand.’ Suppose a man on some slippery glacier, not accustomed to ice-work, as he feels his foot going out from under him, he gets nervous, and nervousness means a fall, and a fall means disaster and sometimes death.

So he grips the guide’s hand, and then he can walk. There is Peter, out on the sea that he had presumptuously asked leave to walk on, and as he feels the cold water coming above his ankle, and sees it rising higher and higher, he begins to fear, and his fear makes him heavier, so that he sinks the faster, till the very extremity of need and paroxysm of terror strike out a spark of faith, and faith and fear are strangely blended in the cry: ‘Lord, save me.’ Christ’s outstretched hand answered the cry, and its touch held Peter up, made him buoyant again, and as he rose, the water seemed to sink beneath his feet, and on that heaving pavement, glistening in the moonlight, he walked till he was helped into the boat again. So will God do for us, if we will, for He has said: ‘I will never relax My grasp. Nothing ‘shall ever come between My hand and thine.’ When a nurse or a mother is holding a child’s hand, her grip slackens unless it is perpetually repeated by fresh nervous tension. So all human helps tend to become less helpful, and all human love has its limits. But God’s hand never slackens its grip, and we may be sure that, as He has grasped He will hold, and ‘keep that which we have committed unto Him.’

But mark the other form of the promise. ‘I will never drop thee’ - that promises the communication of sustaining strength according to our need:’nor forsake thee’ - that is the same promise, in another shape.

The tottering limbs need to be held up. The lonely heart walking the way of life, lonely after all companionship, and which has depths that the purest human love cannot sound, and sometimes dark secrets that it durst not admit the dearest to behold - that heart may have a divine companion. Here is a word for the solitary, and we are all solitary. Some of us, more plainly than others, are called upon to walk a lonely read in a great darkness, and to live lives little apprehended, little sympathised with, by others, or perchance having for our best companion, next to God, the memories of those who are beside us no more. Moses died, Joshua took his place; but behind the dying Moses-buried in his unknown grave, and left far away as the ties crossed the Jordan - and behind the living Joshua, there was the Lord who liveth for ever. ‘I will not forsake thee.’ Dear ones go, and take half our hearts with them People misunderstand us. We feel that we dare not open out our whole selves to any. We feel that, just as scientists tell us that no two atoms of the most solid body are in actual juxtaposition, but that there is a film of air between them, and hence all bodies are more or less elastic, if sufficient pressure be applied, so after the closest companionship there is a film. But that film makes no separation between us and God. 'I will not drop thee' - there is the of strength according to our need. I will not forsake thee,' there is companionship in all our solitude.

But do not let us forget that all God's promises have conditions appended, and that this one has its conditions like all the rest. Was not the history of Israel a contradiction of that glowing promise which was given them before they crossed the Jordan? Does the Jew to-day look as if he belonged to a nation that God would never leave nor forsake? Certainly not. And why? Simply because God's promise of not dropping us, and of never leaving us, is contingent upon our not dropping Him, and of our never leaving Him.

'No man shall pluck them out of My Father's hand' No; but they can wriggle themselves out of their Father's hand. They can break the communion; they can separate themselves, and bring a film, not of impalpable and pure atmosphere, but of poisonous gases, between themselves and God. And God who, according to the grand old legend, before the Roman soldier flung his torch into the Holy of Holies, and' burnt up the beautiful house where our fathers praised Him with fire,' was heard saying, 'Let us depart hence,' does say sometimes, when a man has gone away from Him, 'I will go and return to My place until they seek Me. In their affliction, they will seek Me early.'

And now let me say a word about the second voice that sounds here.

II. The human answer, or the echo of the divine voice.

If God speaks to me, He waits for me to speak to Him. My answer should be immediate, and my answer should embrace as true all that He has said to me, and my answer should build upon His great faithful promise a great triumphant confidence. Do we speak to God in the strain in which He speaks to us? When He says, 'I will,' do our hearts leap up with joyful confidence, and answer, 'Thou dost'? Do we take all His promises for our trust, or do we meet His firm 'assurance with a feeble, faltering faith? We turn God's 'verily' into a peradventure, often, and at best when He says to us ‘I will,’ we doubtingly say ‘perhaps He may.’ That is the kind of faith, even at its highest, with which the best of us meet this great promise, building frail tabernacles on the Rock of Ages and putting shame on God’s faithfulness by our faithlessness. ‘He hath said,’ and then He pauses and listens, whether we are going to say anything in answer, and whether when He promises: ‘I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee,’ We are bold to say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not fear what man can do unto me.’ Now, I do not suppose that I am’ keeping too slavishly to the mere words of the text if I ask you to look at the beautiful sequence of thought in these three clauses which make the response of the man to the divine promise. There is a kind of throb of wonder in that word. ‘The Lord is my helper.’ That is the answer of faith to the divine promise, grasping it, never hesitating about it, laying it upon the heart, or on the fevered forehead like a cooling leaf, to subdue the hot pulsations there. And then what comes next? ‘I will not fear.’ We have the power of controlling our apprehension of peril, but it is Of no use to screw ourselves up to a fictitious courage which consists mainly in the ostrich’s wisdom of hiding its head from the danger, and in saying, ‘Who is afraid?’ Unless we can say ‘The Lord is my helper,’ it is folly to say, ‘I will not be afraid, I will brace myself up, and be courageous to meet these difficulties. That is all right, but it is not all right unless we have laid the right foundation for courage. Having our purged ears opened to hear the great, strong, sweet divine promise, we are able to coerce our terrors, and to Banish them from our minds By the assurance that, whatever comes, God is with us. ‘The Lord is my helper ‘ - that is the foundation, and built upon that - and madness unless it is built upon it- is the courage which says to all my fears,’ Down, down, you are not to get the mastery over me.’ ‘I will trust,’ says the Psalmist, ‘and not be afraid.’ Faith is the antagonist to fear, because faith grasps the fact of the divine promise.

Now, there is another thought which may come in here since it is suggested by the context, and that is, that the recognition of God thus, as always With us to sustain us, makes all earthly conditions tolerable. The whole of my text is given as the ground of the exhortation: ‘Be content with such things as ye have,’ for He hath said, ‘I will never leave thee.’ If Thou dost not leave me, then such things as I have are enough for me, and if Thou hast gone away, no things that I merely have are of much good to me. And then comes the last stage in our answer to what God says, which is better represented by a slight variation in translation, putting the last words of my text as a question: ‘What can man do unto me?’ It is safe to look at men and things, and their possibly calamitous action upon our outward lives, when we have done the other two things, grasped God and rested in faith on Him. If we begin with what ought to come last, and look first at what man can do unto us, then fear will surge over us, as it ought to do. But if we follow the order of faith, and start with God’s promise, grapple that to our heart, and put down with strong hand the craven dread that coils round our hearts, then we can look out with calm eyes upon all the appearances that may threaten evil, and say, ‘Come on, Come all, my foot is on the Rock of Ages, and my back is against it, No man can touch me,’ So we may boldly say, ‘What can man do unto me?’

47)Hebrews 13:8

Hebrews

THE UNCHANGING CHRIST

Heb. 13:8.

How far back does this ‘yesterday’ go? The limit must be found by observing that it is ‘Jesus Christ’ who is spoken of - that is to say, the Incarnate Saviour. That observation disposes of the reference of these words to the past eternity in which the eternal Word of God was what He is to-day. The sameness that is referred to here is neither the sameness of the divine Son from all eternity, nor the sameness of the medium of revelation in both the old and the new dispensations, but the sameness of the human Christ to all generations of His followers. And the epoch referred to in the ‘yesterday’ is defined more closely if we observe the previous context, which speaks of the dying teachers who have had the rule and have passed away. The ‘yesterday’ is the period of these departed teachers; the ‘to-day’ is the period of the writer and his readers.

But whilst the words of my text are thus narrowly: limited, the attribute, which is predicated of Christ in them, is something more than belongs to manhood, and requires for its foundation the assumption of His deity. He is the unchanging Jesus because He is the divine Son. The text resumes at the end of the Epistle, the solemn words of the first chapter, which referred the declaration of the Psalmist to ‘the Son’ - ‘Thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail.’ That Son, changeless and eternal by divine immutability, is Jesus Christ, the incarnate Redeemer.

This text may well be taken as our motto in looking forward, as I suppose we are all of us more or less doing, and trying to forecast the dim outlines of the coming events of this New Year. Whatever may happen, let us hold fast by that confidence, ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and for ever.’

I. I apply these words, then, as a New-Year’s motto, in two or three different directions, and ask you to consider, first, the unchanging Christ in His relation to our changeful lives.

The one thing of which anticipation may be sure is that nothing continues in one stay. True, ‘that which is to be hath already been’; true, there is ‘nothing new under the sun’; but just as in the physical world the infinite variety of creatures and things is all made Out of a few very simple elements, so, in our lives, out of a comparatively small number of possible incidents, an immense variety of combinations results, with the effect that, while we may be sure of the broad outlines of our future, we are all in the dark as to its particular events, and only know that ceaseless change with characterise it. So all forward looking must have a touch of fear in it, and there is only one thing that will enable us to front the else intolerable certainty of uncertainty, and that is, to fall back upon this thought’ of my text, ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.’

The one lesson of our changeful lives ought to be for each of us the existence of that which changes not. By the very law of contrast, and by the need of finding sufficient reason for the changes, we are driven from the contemplation of the fleeting to the vision of the permanent. The waves of this stormy sea of life ought to fling us all high and dry on the safe shore. Blessed are they who, in a world of passing phenomena, penetrate to the still centre of rest, and looking over all the vacillations of the things that can be shaken, can turn to the Christ and say, Thou who movest all things art

Thyself unmoved; Thou who changest all things, Thyself changest not. As the moon rises slow and silvery, with its broad shield, out of the fluctuations of the ocean, so the one radiant Figure of the all sufficient and immutable Lover and Friend of our souls should rise for us out of the billows of life's tossing ocean, and come to us across the seal Brother! let the fleeting proclaim to you the permanent; let the world with its revolutions lead you up to the thought of Him who is the same for ever. For that is the only thought on which a man can build, and, building, be at rest.

The yesterday of my text may either be applied to the generations that have passed, and then the 'to-day' is our little life; or may be applied to my own yesterday, and then the to-day is this narrow present. In either application the words of my text are full of hope and of joy. In the former they say to us that no time can waste, nor any drawing from the fountain can diminish the all-sufficiency of that divine Christ in whom eighteen centuries have trusted and been 'lightened, and their faces were not ashamed.' The yesterday of His grace to past generations: is the prophecy of the future and the law for the present. There is nothing that any past epoch has ever drawn from Him, of courage and confidence, of hope and wisdom, of guidance and strength, of love and consolation, of righteousness and purity, of brave hope and patient endurance, which He does not stand by my side ready to give to me too to-day, 'As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of Hosts,' and the old Christ of a thousand years ago is the Christ of to-day, ready to help, to succour, and to make us like Himself.

In the second reference, narrowing the 'yesterdays' to our own experiences, the words are full of consolation and of hope. 'Thou hast been my Help; leave me not, neither forsake me,' is the prayer that ought to be taught us by every remembrance of what Jesus Christ has been to us. The high-water mark of His possible sweetness does not lie in some irrevocable past moment of our lives. We never have to say that we have found a sufficiency in Him which we never shall find any more. Remember the time in your experience when Jesus Christ was most tender, most near, most sweet, most mysterious, most soul-sufficing for you, and be sure that He stands beside you, ready to renew the ancient blessing and to surpass it in His gift. Man's love sometimes wearies, Christ's never; man's basket may be emptied, Christ's is fuller after the distribution than it was before. This fountain can never run dry. Not until seven times, but Until seventy times seven - perfection multiplied into perfection, and that again multiplied by perfection once more - is the limit of the inexhaustible mercy of our Lord, and all in which the past has been rich lives in the present. Remember, too, that this same thought which heartens us to front the inevitable changes, also gives dignity, beauty, poetry, to the small prosaic present. ‘Jesus Christ is the same to-day.’ We are always tempted to think that this moment is commonplace and insignificant. Yesterday lies consecrated in memory; to-morrow, radiant in hope; but to-day is poverty- stricken and prose. The sky is farthest away from us right over our heads; behind and in front it seems to touch the earth. But if we will only that all that sparkling lustre and all that more than mortal tenderness of pity and of love with which Jesus Christ has irradiated and sweetened any past is verily here with us amidst the commonplaces and insignificant duties of the dusty to-day, then we need look back to no purple distance, nor forward to any horizon where sky and earth kiss, but feel that here or nowhere, now or never, is Christ the all-sufficient and unchanging Friend. He is faithful. He cannot deny Himself.

II. So, secondly, I apply these words in another direction. I ask you to think of the relation between the unchanging Christ and the dying helpers.

That is the connection in which the words occur in my text. The writer has been speaking of the subordinate and delegated leaders and rulers in the Church ‘who have spoken the word of God’ and who have passed away, leaving a faith to be followed, and a conversation the end of which is to be considered. And, turning from all these mortal companions, helpers, guides, he bids us think of Him who liveth for ever, and for ever is the teacher, the companion the home of our hearts, and the goal of our love. All other ties - sweet, tender, infinitely precious, have been or will be broken for you and me. Some of us have to look back upon their snapping; some of us have to look forward. But there is one bond over which the skeleton fingers of Death have no power, and they fumble at that knot in vain. He separates us from all others; blessed be God! he cannot separate us from Christ. ‘I shall lose Thee though I die’; and Thou, Thou diest never.

God’s changeful providence comes into all our lives, and ports dear ones, making their places empty, that Christ Himself may fill the empty places, and, striking away other props, though the tendrils that twine round them bleed with the wrench, in order that the plant may no longer trail along the ground, but twine itself round the Cross and climb to the Christ upon the throne. ‘In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne.’ The true King was manifested when the earthly, shadowy monarch was swept away. And just as, on the face of some great wooded cliff, when the leaves drop, the solemn strength of the everlasting rock gleams out pure, so when our dear ones fall away, Jesus Christ is revealed, ‘the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.’ ‘They tautly were many, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death.’ ‘This Man continueth ever.’ He lives, and in Him all loves and companionships live unchanged.

III. So, further, we apply, in the third place, this thought to the relation between the unchanging Christ and decaying institutions and opinions.

The era in which this Epistle was written was an era of revolution no great that we can scarcely imagine its apparent magnitude. It was close upon the final destruction of the ancient system of Judaism an external institution. The temple was tottering o its fall, the nation was ready to be scattered, and the writer, speaking to Hebrews, to whom that crash seemed to be the passing away of the eternal verities of God, bids them lift their eyes above all the chaos and dust of dissolving institutions and behold the true Eternal, the ever-living Christ. He warns them in the verse that follows nay text not to be carried about with divers and strange doctrines, bat to keep fast to the unchanging Jesus. And so these words may well come to us with lessons of encouragement, and with teaching of duty and steadfastness, in an epoch of much unrest and change - social, theological, ecclesiastical- such as that in which our lot is cast. Man’s systems are the shadows on the hillside. Christ is the everlasting solemn mountain itself, Much in the popular conception and representation of Christianity is in the act of passing. Let it go; Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever. We need not fear change within the limits of His Church or of His world. For change there means progress, and the more the human creations and embodiments of Christian truth crumble and disintegrate, the more distinctly does the solemn, single, unique figure of Christ the Same, rise before us. There is nothing in the world’s history to compare with the phenomenon which is presented by the unworn freshness of Jesus Christ after all these centuries. All other men, however burning and shining their light, flicker and die out into extinction, and but for a season can the world rejoice in any of their beams; but this Jesus dominates the ages, and is as fresh to-day, in spite of all that men say, as He was eighteen centuries ago. They toll us He is losing His power; they tell us that mists of oblivion are wrapping Him round, as He moves slowly to the doom which besets Him in common with all the great names of the world. The wish is father to the thought. Christ is not done with yet, nor has the world done with Him, nor is He less available for the necessities of this generation, with its perplexities and difficulties, than He was in the past. His sameness is consistent with an infinite unfolding of new preciousness and new powers, as new generations with new questions arise, and the world seeks for fresh guidance. 'I write no new commandment unto you'; I preach no new Christ unto you, 'again, a new commandment I write unto you,' and every generation will find new impulse, new teaching, new shaping energies, social and individual, ecclesiastical, theological, intellectual, in the old Christ who was crucified for our offences and raised again for our justification, and remains 'the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.' IV. Lastly, look at these words in their application to the relation between the unchanging Christ and the eternal life of heaven.

The 'for ever' of my text is not to be limited to this present life, but it runs on into the remotest future, and summons up before us the grand and boundless prospect of an eternal unfolding and reception of new beauties in the old earthly Christ. For Him the change between the 'to-day' of His earthly life and the 'for ever' of His ascended glory made no change in the tenderness of His heart, the sweetness of His smile, the nearness of His helping hand. The beloved apostle, when he saw Him for the first time after He was ascended, fell at His feet as dead, because the attributes of His nature had become so glorious. But when the old hand, the same hand that had been pierced with the nails on the Cross, though it now held the seven stars, was laid upon him, and the old voice, the same voice that had spoken to him in the upper room, and in feebleness from the Cross,' though it was now as the 'sound of many waters,' said to him, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last; I am He that liveth and was dead and am alive for ever more'; John learned that the change from the Cross to the throne touched but the circumference of his Master’s Being, and left the whole centre of His love and brotherhood wholly unaffected.

Nor will the change for us, from earth to the close communion of the heavens, bring us into contact with a changed Christ. It will be but like the experience of a man starting from the outermost verge of the solar system, where that giant, planet welters, away out in the darkness and the cold, and travelling inwards ever nearer and nearer to the central light, the warmth becoming more fervent, the radiance becoming more wondrous, as he draws closer and closer to the greatness which he divined when he was far away, and which he knows better when he is beside it. It will be the same Christ, the Mediator, the Revealer in heaven, whom we here dimly saw and knew to be the Sun of our souls through the clouds and mists of earth.

That radiant and eternal sameness will consist with continual variety, and an endless streaming forth of new lustres and new powers. But through all the growing proximity and illumination of the heavens He will be the same Jesus that we knew upon earth; still the Friend and the Lover of our souls. So, dear friends, if you and I have Him for our very own, then we do not need to fear change, for change will be progress; nor loss, for loss will be gain; nor the storm of life, which will drive us to His breast; nor the solitude of death, for our Shepherd will be with us there. He will be ‘the same for ever’; though we shall know Him more deeply; even as we shall be the same, though ‘changed from glory into glory.’. If we have Him, we may be sure, on earth, of a ‘to-morrow,’ which ‘shall be as this day, and much more abundant.’ If we have Him, we may be sure of a heaven in which the sunny hours of its unending day will be filled with fruition and ever new glories from the old Christ who, for earth and heaven, is ‘the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.’

48)Hebrews 13:9

Hebrews

AN ESTABLISHED HEART

Heb. 13:9.

This saying immediately follows the exhortation with which it is contrasted: ‘Be not carried away with divers and strange doctrines.’ Now, it is quite clear that the unsettlement and moving past some fixed point which are suggested in the word ‘carried away’ are contrasted with the fixedness which is implied in the main word of our text. They who are established, ‘rooted and grounded,’ are not apt to be swept away by the blasts of ‘divers and strange doctrines.’ But there is another contrast besides this, and that is the one which exists between doctrines and grace; and there is a still further subsequent contrast in the words that follow my text, ‘It is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats.

Now I need not trouble you with the question as to what was the original reference of either of these two expressions, ‘doctrines’ and ‘meats,’ or whether they both point to some one form of teaching. What I rather want to emphasise here, in a sentence, is how, in these three principal words of three successive clauses, we get three aspects of the religious life - two of them spurious and partial, one of them sufficing and complete -’teachings’; ‘grace’; ‘meats.’ Turned into modern English, the writer’s meaning is that the merely intellectual religion, which is always occupied with propositions instead of with Jesus Christ, ‘Who is the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever,’ is worthless, and the merely ceremonial religion, which is always occupied with casuistries about questions of meats, or external observance of any sort, is as valueless. There is no fixity; there is no rest of soul, no steadfastness of character to be found in either of these two directions. The only thing that ballasts and fills and calms the heart is what the writer here calls ‘grace,’ that is to say, the living personal experience of the love of God bestowed upon me and dwelling in my heart. You may have doctrines chattered to all eternity, and you may be so occupied about the externals of religion as that yon never come near its centre, and its centre is that great thing which is here called ‘grace,’ which alone has power to establish the man’s heart.

So, then, the main theme of these words is the possible stability of a fluctuating human life, the means of securing it, and the glory and beauty of the character which has secured it. Let us turn to then thoughts for a moment.

I. First, then, mark what this writer conceives to be the one source of human stability.

‘It is a good thing that the heart be established with grace.’ Now I have a strong suspicion that a great deal of preaching goes over the heads of the hearers, because preachers have not gauged the ignorance of their auditory, and that, howsoever familiar to the ear the key-words of Christian revelation may be, it by no means follows that there is any definite and clear idea attached to these. So I do not think that it will be a waste of time for just a minute or two to try and put, as plainly as I can, what the New Testament means by this familiar and frequently reiterated word ‘grace,’ which, I suspect, is oftener pronounced than it is understood by a great many people.

To begin with, then, the root meaning of that word, which runs all through the New Testament, is simply favour, benignity, kindness, or to put all into a better and simpler form, the active love of God. Now, if we look at the various uses of the expression we find, for instance, that it is contrasted with a number of other things. Sometimes it is set in opposition to sin - sin reigns to righteousness, grace reigns to life. Sometimes it is contrasted with ‘debt,’ and sometimes put in opposition to ‘works,’ as, for instance, by Paul when he says, ‘If it be of works then is it no more grace.’ Sometimes it is opposed to law, as in the same apostle’s words, ‘Ye are not under law, but under grace.’ Now, if we keep these various uses and contrasts in view we just come to this thought, that that active love of God is conditioned, not by any merit on our part - bubbles up from the depths of His own infinite heart, not because of what we are, but because of what He is, transcends all the rigid retributions of law, is not turned away by my sin, but continues to flood the world, simply because it wells up from the infinite and changeless fountain of love in the heart of God.

And then, from this central, deepest meaning of active love manifesting itself irrespective of what we deserve, there comes a second great aspect of the word. The cause gives its name to the effect, and the communicated blessings and gifts which flow to men from the love of God are designated by this great name. You know we have the same kind of idiom in our own tongue. ‘Kindness’ is the disposition; ‘a kindness’ is a single deed which flows from that disposition. ‘Favour’ is the way in which we regard a man; ‘a favour’ is the act or gift which manifests and flows from the regard. The water in the pitchers is the same as the water in the spring. The name of the cause is extended to all the lustrous variety of its effects. So the complex whole of the blessings and gifts which Jesus Christ brings to us, and which are sometimes designated in view of what they do for us, as salvation or eternal life, are also designated in view of that in God from which they come, as being collectively His ‘grace.’

All the gifts that Christ brings are, we may say, but the love of God made visible in its bestowal upon us. The meteor that rushes through space catches fire when it passes into our atmosphere. The love of God, when it comes into our manifold necessities, is made visible in the large gifts which it bestows upon them.

And then there is a final application of the expression which is deduced from that second one - viz., the specific and individual excellences of character or conduct which result from the communication to men of the blessings that flow to Him from the love of God.

So these three: first the fountain, the love undisturbed and unalterable; second, the stream, the manifold gifts and blessings that flow to us through Christ; and third, the little cupfuls that each of us have, the various beauties and excellences of character which are developed under the fertilising influences of the sunshine of that love-these three are all included in this great Christian word.

There are other phases of its employment in the New Testament which I do not need to trouble you with now. But thus far we just come to this, that the one ground on which all steadfastness and calm tranquillity and settlement of nature and character can be reared is that we shall be in touch with God, shall be conscious of His love, and shall be receiving into our hearts the strength that He bestows. Man is a dependent creature; his make and his relationships to things round him render it impossible that the strength by which he is strong and the calmness by which he is established can be self-originated. They must come from without. There is only one way by which we can be kept from being drifted away by the currents and blown away by the tempests that run and range through every life, and that is that we shall anchor ourselves on God. His grace, His love possessed, and the sufficing gifts for all our hungry desires which come through that love possessed, these, and these alone, are the conditions of human stability.

II. And so I come, in the second place, to look at some of the various ways in which this establishing grace calms and stills the life.

We men are like some of the islands in the Eastern Tropics, fertile and luxuriant, but subject to be swept by typhoons, to be shaken by earthquakes, to be devastated by volcanoes. Around us there gather external foes assailing our steadfastness, and within us there He even more formidable enemies to an established and settled peace. We are like men carrying powder through a conflagration; bearing a whole magazine of combustibles within us, upon which at any moment a spark may alight. How are such creatures ever to be established? My text tells us by drawing into themselves the love, the giving love of God; and in the consciousness of that love, and in the rest of spirit that comes from the true possession of its gifts, there will be found the secret of tranquillity for the most storm- ridden life.

I would note, as one of the aspects of the tranquillity and establishment that comes from this conscious possession of the giving love of God, how it delivers men from all the dangers of being ‘carried away by divers strange doctrines.’ I do not give much for any orthodoxy which is not vitalised by personal experiences of the indwelling love of God. I do not care much what a man believes, or what he denies, or how he may occupy himself intellectually with the philosophical and doctrinal aspect of Christian revelation. The question is, how much of it has filtered from his brain into his heart, and has become part of himself, and verified to himself by his own experience? So much, and not one hairbreadth more, of the Christian creed is your creed. So much as you have lived out, so much you are sure of because you have not only thought it but felt it, and cannot for a moment doubt, because your hearts have risen up and witnessed to its truth. About these parts of your belief there will be no fluctuation. There is no real and permanent grasp of any parts of religious truth except such as is verified by personal experience. And that sturdy blind man in the gospels had got hold of the true principle of the most convincing Christian apologetics when he said, ‘You may talk as long as you like about the question whether this man is a sinner or not; settle it anyhow you please. One thing I know, that whereas I was blind now I see.’ The ‘grace’ that had come to him in a purely external form established as a foundation axiom for his thinking, that the man who had done that for him was a messenger from God. That is the way by which you will come to a hold worth calling so of Christian truth, and unless you come to it by that hold it does not matter much whether you believe it or deny it all.

But, if there be such a living consciousness of the true possession of God’s love giving you these blessings, then with great equanimity and openness of mind you can regard the discussion that may be raging about a great many so-called ‘burning’ questions. If I know that Jesus Christ died for me, and that my soul is saved because He did, it does not matter very much to me who wrote the Pentateuch, or whether the Book of Jonah is a parable or a history. I can let all such questions-and I only refer to these as specimens - be settled by appropriate evidence, by the experts, without putting myself in a fluster, and can say, ‘I am not going to be carried away. My heart is established in grace.’

Still further, this conscious possession of the grace of God will keep a man very quiet amidst all the occasions for agitation which changing circumstances bring. Such there are in every life. Nothing continues in one stay. Thunder-claps, earthquakes, tempests, shocks of doom come to every one of us. Is it possible that amidst this continuous fluctuation, in which nothing is changeless but the fact of change, we can stand fixed and firm? Yes! As they say on the other side of the Border, there is a ‘low,’ place at the back of the wall. There is shelter only in one spot, and that is when we have God between us and the angry blast. And oh, brother, if there steal into a man’s heart, and be faithfully kept there, the quiet thought that God is with him, to bless and keep and communicate to him all that he needs, why should he be troubled? ‘He shall not be afraid of evil tidings.’ What?

In this world full of evil? Yes. ‘He shall not be afraid of evil tidings. His heart is fixed; trusting in the Lord.’ An empty heart is an easily agitated heart. A full heart, like a full sack, stands upright, and it is not so easy for the wind to whirl it about as if it were empty. They who are rooted in God will have a firm bole, which will be immovable, howsoever branches may sway and creak, and leaves may flutter and dance, or even fall, before the power of the storm. They who have no hold upon that grace are like the chaff which the wind drives from the threshing-floor. The storms of life will sweep you away unless the heart be 'established in grace.'

Further, another form of the stability communicated by that possessed love of God is in regard to the internal occasions for agitation. Passion, lust, hot desires, bitter regrets, eager clutching after uncertain and insufficient and perishable good, all these will be damped down if the love of God lives in our hearts. Oh, brethren, it is ourselves that disturb ourselves, and not the world that disturbs us. 'There is no joy hut calm'; and there is no calm but in the possession of the grace which is the giving love of God.

III. Lastly, my text suggests how beautiful a thing is the character of the man that is established in grace.

The word translated 'good' in my text would be better rendered 'fair,' or 'lovely,' or 'beautiful,' or some such expression conveying the idea that the writer was thinking, not so much about the essential goodness as about the beauty, in visible appearance, of a character which was thus established by grace. Is there anything fairer than the strong, steadfast, calm, equable character, unshaken by the storms of passion, unaffected by the blasts of calamity, un-devastated by the lava from the hellish subterranean fires that are in every soul; and yet not stolidly insensible nor obstinately conservative, but open to the inspiration of each successive moment, and gathering the blessed fruit of all mutability in a more profound and unchanging possession of the unchanging good? Surely the gospel which brings to men the possibility of being thus established brings to them the highest ideal of fair human character.

So do you see to it that you rectify your notions of what makes the beauty of character. There is many a poor old woman in a garret who presents, if not to men, at any rate to angels and to God, a far fairer character than the vulgar ideals which most people have. The beauty of meek patience, of persistent endeavour, of calm, steadfast trust, is fairer than all the 'purple patches' which the world admires because they are gaudy, and which an eye educated by looking at Jesus turns from with disgust, And do you see to it that you cultivate that type of excellence. It is a great deal easier to cultivate other kinds. It is hard to be quiet, hard to rule one's stormy nature, hard to stand 'foursquare to every wind that blows.' But it is possible - possible on one condition, that we drive our roots through all the loose shingle on the surface, 'the things seen and temporal,' and penetrate to the eternal substratum that lies beneath it all.

Then, my brother, if we keep ourselves near Jesus Christ, and let His grace flow into our hearts, then we, too, shall be able to say, 'Because I set Him at my right hand I shall not be moved,' and we may be able to carry, by His grace, even through the storms of life and amidst all the agitations of our own passions and desires, a steady light, neither blown about by tempests without, nor pulsating with alternations of brightness and dimness by reason of intermittent supplies from within, but blazing with the steadfast splendour of the morning star. ' He that believeth shall not make haste.'

49)Hebrews 13:10

Hebrews

OUR ALTAR

Heb. 13:10; Heb. 13:15

'We have an altar.' There is a certain militant emphasis on the words in the original, as if they were an assertion of something that had been denied. Who the deniers are is plain enough. They were the adherents of Judaism, who naturally found Christianity a strange contrast to their worship, of which altar and sacrifice were prominent features.

Just as to heathen nations the ritual of Judaism, its empty shrine, and temple without a God, were a puzzle and a scoff, so to heathen and Jew, the bare, starved worship of the Church, without temple, priest, sacrifice, or altar, was a mystery and a puzzle.

The writer of this letter in those words, then, in accordance with the central theme of his whole Epistle, insists that Christianity has more truly than heathenism or Judaism, altar and sacrifice.

And he is not content with alleging its possession o£ the reality of the altar, but he goes further, insists upon the superiority, even in that respect, of the Christian system.

He points to the fact that the great sin-offering of the Jewish ritual was not partaken of by the offerers, but consumed by fire without the camp, and he implies, in the earlier words of my text, that the Christian sacrifice differs from, and is superior to, the Jewish in this particular, that on it the worshippers feasted and fed.

Then, in the last words of my text, he touches upon another point of superiority - viz., that all Christian men are priests of this altar, and have to offer upon it sacrifices of thanksgiving.

And so he exalts the purely spiritual worship of Christianity as not only possessed of all which the gorgeous rituals round about it presented, but as being high above them even in regard to that which seemed their special prerogative. So, then, we have three things here - our Christian altar; our Christian feast on the sacrifice; and our Christian sacrifices on the altar. Let us regard these successively.

I. First, then, our Christian altar.

‘We have,’ says the writer, with a triumphant emphasis upon the word, ‘We have an altar’; ‘though there seems none visible in our external worship; and some of our converts miss the sensuous presentation to which they were accustomed; and others are puzzled by it, and taunt us with its absence.’

Now it is to be noticed, I think, that though in sacrificial religions the altar is the centre-point round which the temple is reared, it is of no moment in itself, and only comes into consideration as being that upon which the sacrifice is offered. So I do not suppose that any specific object was in the mind of the writer as answering to the altar in those sacrificial systems. He was thinking most of the sacrifice that was laid upon the altar, and of the altar only in connection therewith. But if we are not satisfied with such an explanation of the words, there are two interpretations open to us.

One is that the Cross is the altar. But that seems to me too gross and material, and savouring too much of the very error which this whole Epistle is written to destroy - viz., that the material is of moment, as measured against the spiritual. The other explanation is much to be preferred, according to which, if the altar has any special significance, it means the divine-human personality of Jesus Christ, on and in which the sacrifice is offered.

But the main thing to be laid hold of here is, I take it, that the central fact of Christianity is an altar, on which lies a sacrifice. If we are to accept the significance that I have suggested as possible for the emblem of my text, then the altar expresses the great mystery and gospel of the Incarnation, and the sacrifice expresses the great mystery and gospel of the passion of Christ's life and death, which is the atonement for our sins.

But that possibly is too much of a refinement, and so I confine myself here to the general ideas suggested - that the very living heart of the gospel is an altar and a sacrifice. That idea saturates the whole New Testament, from the page where John the forerunner's proclamation is, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,' to the last triumphant vision in which the Apocalyptic seer 'beheld a Lamb as it had been slain'; the eternal Co-Regnant of the universe, and the mediation through whom the whole surrounding Church for ever worships the Father.

The days are past, as it seems to me, when any man can reasonably contend that the New Testament does not teach - in every page of it, I was going to say - this truth of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Time was when violent contortions and effort were resorted to in order to explain its language as not necessarily involving that significance. But we have got beyond that now, and we oftener hear from deniers this: 'Oh yes! I admit that throughout the New Testament this sacrificial idea is present, but that is only a chip of the old shell of Judaism, and we are above that level of religious thought.'

Now, I am not going to enter upon a discussion, for which neither place nor time are suited; but I will just suggest that the relation between the ancient system of revelation, with its sacrifice, altar, priest, temple, and the new system of Christianity is far more profoundly, and, I believe, far more philosophically, set forth in this Epistle to the Hebrews, as being the relation between shadow and substance, between prophecy and fulfilment, than when the old is contemptuously brushed aside as 'Hebrew old clothes,' with which the true Christianity has no concern. Judaism teas because Christ was to be, and the ancient ritual [whether modern ideas of the date of its origin be accepted or no] was a God-appointed mirror, in which, the shadow of the coming event was presented. Jesus Christ is all which temple, priest, altar, sacrifice proclaimed should one day be. And just as the relation between Christ's work and the Judaic system of external ritual sacrifices is that of shadow and substance, prophecy and fulfilment, so, in analogous manner, the relation between the altar and sacrifice of the New Testament and all the systems of heathenism, with their smoking altars, is that these declare a want, and this affords its supply; that these are the confession of humanity that it is conscious of sin, separation, alienation, and that need of a sacrifice, and that Christ is what heathenism in all lands has wailed that it needs, and has desperately hoped that it might find.

There are many attempts made to explain on other grounds the universality of sacrifice, and to weaken the force of its witness to the deep necessities of humanity as rooted in the consciousness of sin, but I venture to affirm that all these are superficial, and that the study of comparative religions goes on wrong lines unless it recognises in the whole heathen world a longing, the supply of which it recognises in Jesus Christ and His work. I venture to say that that is a truer philosophy of religion than much that nowadays calls itself by the name.

And what lies in this great thought? I am not going to attempt a theory of the Atonement. I do not believe that any such thing is completely possible for us. But this, at least, I recognise as being fundamental and essential to the thought of my text; 'we have an altar,' that Christ in His representative relation, in His true affinity to every man upon earth, has in His life or death taken upon Himself the consequences of human transgression, not merely by sympathy, nor only by reason of the uniqueness-of His representative relation, but by willing submission to that awful separation from the Father, of which the cry out of the thick darkness of the Cross, ‘Why hast Thou forsaken Me?’ is the unfathomable witness. Thus, bearing our sin, He bears it away, and ‘we have an altar.’

Now notice that this great truth has a distinct teaching for those who hanker after externalities of ritual The writer of this Epistle uses it for the purpose of declaring that in the Christian Church, because of its possession of the true sacrifice, there is no room for any other; that priest, temple, altar, sacrifice in any material external forms are an anachronism and a contradiction of the very central idea of the gospel And it seems very strange that sections of Christendom should so have been blind to the very meaning of my text, and so missed the lesson which it teaches, and fallen into the error which it opposes, as that these very words, which are a protest against any materialisation of the idea of altar and sacrifice, should have been twisted to mean by the altar the table of the Lord, and by sacrifice the communion of His body and blood. But so it is. So strong are the tendencies in our weak humanity to grasp at some sensuous embodiment of the truth that the Christian Church, as a whole, has not been able to keep on the lofty levels of my text, and has hungered after some external signs to which it may attach notions of efficacy which attach only to the spiritual sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Thus we have got a strange contradiction, as it seems to me, of the spirit and letter of my text, and of the whole Epistle from which it comes, and there, has crept surreptitiously into, and been obstinately maintained in, large sections of the Christian Church the idea o£ a sacrificing priesthood, and of a true sacrifice offered upon a material altar. My text protests against all that, and said to these early Christians what it says to us: ‘Go into your upper rooms and there offer your worship, which to sense seems so bare and starved. Never mind though people say there is nothing in your system for sense to lay hold of. So much the better. Never mind though you can present no ritual with an altar, and a priest, and a sacrifice. All these are swept away for ever, because once Jesus Christ hath put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. Our temple is His body; our priest is before the throne. We rear no altar; He has died. Our sacrifice was offered on Calvary, and henceforward our worship, cleared from these materialities, rises unto loftier regions, and we worship God in the spirit, and have no confidence in the flesh.’

Still further, this truth has a bearing on the opposite pole of error, on those who would fain have a Christianity without an altar. I am not going to say how far genuine discipleship of Jesus Christ is possible with the omission of this article from the creed. It is no business of mine to determine that, but it is my business, as I think, to assert this, that a Christianity without an altar is a Christianity without power; impotent to move the world or to control the individual heart, inadequate to meet the needs and the cravings of men. Where are the decaying Christians? Where are the Christians that have let go the central fact of an incarnate sacrifice for the world’s sin? The answer to the two questions is the same. Wherever you find a feeble grasp of that central truth, or a faltering utterance of it on the part of the preachers, there you find deadness and formality.

Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ’s servants, I was going to say, obey the same law, and that law is, no cross, no crown. If Christ has not died, the world’s sacrifice, He will never reign, the world’s King. If His Cross be an altar it is a throne. If it be not, it is merely a gallows, on which a religious enthusiast, with many sweet and lovable qualities, died a long time ago, and it is nothing to me. ‘We have an altar,’ or else we have no religion worth keeping.

II. Mark here, secondly, our feast on the sacrifice.

From this altar, says the writer, the adherents of the ancient system have no right to partake. That implies that those who have left the ancient system have the right to partake, and do partake. Now the writer is drawing a contrast, which he proceeds to elaborate, between the great sacrifice on the Day of Atonement and the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The former was not, as many other sacrifices were, partaken of by priests and worshippers, but simply the blood was brought within the holy place, and the whole of the rest of the sacrifice consumed in a waste spot without the camp. And this contrast is in the writer’s mind. We have a sacrifice on which we feast.

That is to say, the Christ who died for my sins is not only my means of reconciliation with God, but His sacrifice and death are the sustenance of my spiritual life. We live upon the Christ that died for us. That this is no mere metaphor, but goes penetratingly and deep down to the very basis of the spiritual life, is attested sufficiently by many a word of Scripture on which I cannot now dwell. The life of the Christian is the indwelling Christ. For he whose heart hath not received that Christ within him is dead whilst he lives, and has no possession of the one true Hie for a human spirit, viz., the fife of union with God. Christ in us is the consequence of Christ for us; and that Christianity is all imperfect which does not grasp with equal emphasis the thought of the sacrifice or the cross, and of the feast or the sacrifice.

But how is that feeding on the sacrifice accomplished? ‘He that eateth Me, even he shall ‘live by Me.’ He that believeth, eateth. He that with humble faith makes Christ his very own, and appropriates as the nourishment and basis of his own better life the facts of the life and death of sacrifice, he truly lives thereby. To eat is to believe; to believe is to live.

I need not remind you, I suppose, how, though there be no reference in the words of my text, as I have tried to show, to the external rite of the communion of the Lord’s body and blood, and though the ‘altar’ here has no reference whatever to that table, yet there is a connection between the two representations, inasmuch as the one declares in words what the other sets forth in symbol, and the meaning of the feast on the sacrifice is expressed by this great word. ‘This is My body, broken for you.’ ‘This is the new covenant in My blood’: ‘Drink ye all of it.’ ‘We have an altar,’ and though it be not the table on which the symbols of our Lord’s sacrificial death are spread for us, yet these symbols and the words of my text, like the words of His great discourse in the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel, point to the same fact, that the spiritual participation of Christ by faith is the reality of ‘eating of Him,’ and the condition of living for ever.

III. And now, lastly, my text suggests our Christian offerings on the altar.

‘By Him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually.’

What are these offerings? Christ’s death stands alone, incapable of repetition, meeting no repetition, the eternal, sole, ‘sufficient obligation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.’ But there be other kinds of sacrifice. There are sacrifices of thanksgiving as well as for propitiation. And we, on the footing of that great sacrifice to which we can add nothing, and on which alone we must rest, may bring the offerings of our thankful hearts. These offerings are of a two-fold sort, says the writer. There are words of praise. There are works of beneficence. The service of man is sacrifice to God. That is a deep saying and reaches far. Such praise and such beneficence are only possible on the footing of Christ’s sacrifice, for only on that footing is our praise acceptable; and only when moved by that infinite mercy and love shall we yield ourselves, thank offerings to God. And thus, brethren, the whole extent of the Christian life, in its inmost springs, and in its outward manifestations, is covered by these two thoughts - the ‘feast on the sacrifice once offered, and the sacrifices which we in our turn offer on the altar. If we thus, moved by the mercy of God, ‘yield ourselves as living sacrifices, which is our reasonable service,’ then not only will life be one long thank-offering, but as the Apostle puts it in another place, death itself may become, too, a thankful surrender to Him. For He says, ‘I am ready to be offered.’ And so the thankful heart, resting on the sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ, makes all life a thanksgiving, ‘death God’s endless mercy seals, and makes the sacrifice complete.’ There is one Christ that can thus hallow and make acceptable our living and our dying, and that is the Christ that has died for us, and lives that in Him we may be priests to God. There is only one Christianity that will do for us what we will need, and that is the Christianity whose centre is an altar, on which the Son of God, our Passover, is slain for us.

50)Hebrews 13:13-14

Hebrews

WITHOUT THE CAMP

Heb. 13:13-14

CALVARY was outside Jerusalem. That wholly accidental and trivial circumstance is laid hold of in the context, in order to give picturesque force to the main contention and purpose of this Epistle. One of the solemn parts of the ritual of Judaism was the great Day of Atonement, on which the sacrifice that took away the sins of the nation was berne outside the camp, and consumed by fire, instead of being partaken of by the priests, as were most of the other sacrifices. Our writer here sees in these two roughly parallel things, not an argument but an imaginative illustration of great truths. Though he does not mean to say that the death on Calvary was intended to be pointed to by the unique arrangement in question, he does mean to say that the coincidence of the two things helps us to grasp two great truths-one, that Jesus Christ really did what that old sacrifice expressed the need for having done, and the other that, in His death on Calvary, the Jewish nation, as one of the parables has it, 'cast Him out of the vineyard.' In the context, he urges this analogy between the two things. But a Christ outside the camp beckons His disciples to His side. If any man serve Him, he has to follow Him, and the blessedness, as well as the duty, of the servant on earth, as well as in heaven, is to be where his Master is.

So the writer finds here a picturesque way to enforce the great lesson of his treatise, namely, that the Jewish adherent to Christianity must break with Judaism. In the early stages, it was possible to combine faith in Christ and adherence to the Temple and its ritual. But now that by process of time and experience the Church has learnt better who and what Christ is, that which was in part has to be done away, and the Christian Church is to stand clear of the Jewish synagogue.

Now it is to be distinctly understood that the words of my text, in the writer's intention, are not a general principle or exhortation, but that they are a special commandment to a certain class under special circumstances, and when we use them, as I am going to do now, for a wider purpose, we must remember that that wider purpose was by no means in the writer's mind. What he was thinking about was simply the relation between the Jewish Christian and the Jewish community. But if we take them as we may legitimately do - only remembering that we are diverting them from their original intention - as carrying more general lessons for us, what they seem to teach is that faithful discipleship involves detachment from the world.

This commandment, ‘Let us go forth unto Him without the camp,’ stands, if you will notice, between two reasons for it, which buttress it up, as it were, on either side. Before it is enunciated, the writer has been pointing, as I have tried to show, to the thought that a Christ without the camp necessarily involves disciples without the camp. And he follow, it with another reason, ‘here we have no continuing city, but we seek that which is to come.’ Here, then, is a general principle, supported on either side by a great reason.

Let me first try to set before you,

I. What this detachment is not.

The Jewish Christian was obliged utterly and outwardly to break his connection with Judaism, on the peril, if he did not, of being involved in its ruin, and, as was historically the case with certain Judaising sects, of losing his Christianity altogether. It was a cruel necessity, and no wonder that it needed this long letter to screw the disciples of Hebrew extraction up to the point of making the leap from the sinking ship to the deck of the one that floated. The parallel does not hold with regard to us. The detachment from the world, or the coming out from the camp, to which my text exhorts, is not the abandonment of our relations with what the Bible calls ‘the world,’ and what we call - roughly meaning the same thing - society. The function of the Christian Church as leaven, involves the necessity of being closely associated, and in contact with, all forms of human life, national, civic, domestic, social, commercial, intellectual, political. Does my text counsel an opposite course? ‘Go forth without the camp,’ - does that mean huddle yourself together into a separate flock, and let the camp go to the devil? By no means. For the society or world, out of which the Christian is drawn by the attraction of the Cross, like iron filings out of a heap by a magnet, is in itself good and God-appointed. It is He ‘that sets the solitary in families.’ It is He that gathers humanity into the bonds of civic and national life. It is He that gives capacities which find their sphere, their education, and their increase in the walks of intellectual or commercial or political life. And He does not build up with one hand and destroy with the other, or set men by His providence in circumstances out of which He draws them by His grace. By no means. To go apart from humanity is to miss the very purpose for which God has set the Church in the world. For contact with the sick to be healed is requisite for healing, and they are poor disciples of the ‘Friend of publicans and sinners’ who prefer to consort with Pharisees. ‘Let both grow together till the harvest’ - the roots are intertwined, and it is God that has intertwined them. Now, I know that one does not need to insist upon this principle to the average Christianity of this day, which is only too ready to mingle itself with the world, but one does need to insist that. in so mingling, detachment from the world is still to be observed; and it does need to be taught that Christian men are not lowering the standard of the Christian life, when they fling themselves frankly and energetically into the various forms of human, activity, if and only if, whilst they do so, they still remember and obey the commandment, ‘Let us go forth unto Him without the camp.’ The commandment misinterpreted so as to he absolutely impossible to be obeyed, becomes a snare to people who do not keep it, and yet sometimes feel as if they were to blame, because they do not. And, therefore, I turn in the next place to consider -

II. What this detachment really is.

Will you let me put what I have to say into the shape of two or three plain, practical exhortations, not because I wish to assume a position of authority or command, but only in’ order to give vividness and point to my thoughts?

First, then, let us habitually nourish the inner life of union with Jesus Christ. Notice the words of my text, and see what comes first and what comes second. ‘Let us go forth unto Him’ - that is the main thing: ‘Without the camp’ is second, and a consequence; ‘unto Him,’ is primary, which is just to say that the highest, widest, noblest, all-comprehensive conception of what a Christian life is, is that it is union with Jesus Christ, and whatever else it is follows from that. The soul is ever to be looking up through all the shadows and shows, the changes and circumstances, of this fleeting present unto Him, and seeking to be more closely united with Him. Union with Him is life, and separation from Him is death. To be so united is to be a Christian. Never mind about camps or anything else, to begin with. If the heart is joined to Jesus, then all the rest will come right. If it is not, then you may make regulations as many as you like, and they will only be red tape to entangle your feet in. ‘Let us go forth unto Him’; that is the sovereign commandment. And how is that to be done? How is it to be done but by nourishing habitual consciousness of union with Him and life in Him, by an habitual reference of all our acts to Him? As the Roman Catholics put it, in their hard external way, ‘the practice of the presence of God’ is the keynote to all real, vigorous Christianity. For, brethren, such an habitual fellowship with Jesus Christ is possible for us. Though with many interruptions, no doubt, still ideally is it possible that it shall be continuous and real. It is possible, perfectly possible, that it shall be a great deal more continuous than, alas! it is with many of us.

Depend upon it, this nourishing of an inward life of fellowship with Jesus, so that we may say, ‘our lives are hid’ - hid, after all vigorous manifestation and consistent action - ‘ with Christ in God,’ will not weaken, but increase, the force with which we act on the things seen and temporal. There is an unwholesome kind of mysticism which withdraws men from the plain duties of everyday life; and there is a deep, sane, wholesome, and eminently Christian mysticism which enables men to come down with greater force, and to act with more decision, with more energy, with more effect, in all the common deeds of life. The greatest mystics have been the hardest workers. Who was it that said, ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me’? That man had gone far, very far, towards an habitual consciousness of Christ’s presence, and it was the same man that said, ‘That which cometh upon me daily is the care of all the churches.’ The greatest mystic of the Middle Ages, the saint that rode by the lake all day long, and was so absorbed in contemplation that he said at night, ‘Where is the lake?’ was the man that held all the threads of European politics in his hands, and from his cell at Clairvaux guided popes, and flung the nations of the West into a crusade. John Wesley was one of the hardest workers that the Church has ever had, and was one of those who lived most habitually without the camp. Be sure of this, that the more our lives are wrapped in Christ, the more energetic will they be in the world. They tell us that the branches of a spreading tree describe roughly the same circumference in the atmosphere that its roots do underground, and so far as our roots extend in Christ, so far will our branches spread in the world. ‘Let us go forth unto Him, without the camp.’

Again, let me say, do the same things as other people, but with a difference. The more our so-called civilisation advances, the more, I was going to say, mechanical, or at least largely released from the control of the will and personal idiosyncrasy, become great parts of our work. The Christian weaver drives her looms very much in the same fashion that the non-Christian girl who is looking after the next sot does. The Christian clerk adds up his figures, and writes his letters, very much in the same fashion that the worldly clerk does. The believing doctor visits his patients, and writes out his prescriptions in the fashion that his neighbour who is not a Christian does. But there is always room for the personal equation - always! and two lives may be, superficially and roughly, the same, and yet there may be a difference in them impalpable, undefinable, and very obvious and very real and very mighty. The Christian motive is love to Jesus Christ and fellowship with Him, and that motive may be brought to bear upon all life -

'A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine.'

He that for Christ's sake does a common thing it outer the fatal region of the commonplace, and makes it great and beautiful We do not want from all Christian people specifically Christian service, in the narrow sense which that phrase has acquired, half so much as we want common things done from an uncommon motive; worldly things done because of the love of Jesus Christ in our hearts. And, depend upon it, just as, from some unseen bank of violets, there come odours in opening spring, so from the unspoken and deeply hidden motive of love to Jesus Christ, there will be a fragrance in our commonest actions which all men will recognise. They tell us that rivers which flow from lakes are so clear that they are tinged throughout with celestial blue, because all the mud that they brought down from their upper reaches has been deposited in the still waters of the lake from which they flow; and if from the deep tam of love to Jesus Christ in our hearts the stream of our lives flows out, it will be like the Rhone below Geneva, distinguishable from the muddy waters that run by its side in the same channel. Two people, partners in business, joined in the same work, marching step for step in the same ranks, may yet be entirely distinguishable and truly separate, because, doing the same things, they do them from different motives.

Let me say, still further, and finally about this matter, that sometimes we shall have to come actually out of the camp. The world as God made it is good; society is ordained by God. The occupations which men pursue are of His appointment, for the most part. But into the thing that was good there have crept all manner of corruptions and abominations, so that often it will be a Christian duty to come away from all outward connection with that which is incurably corrupt. I know very well that a morality which mainly consists of prohibitions is pedantic and poor. I know very well that a Christianity which interprets such a precept as this of my text simply as meaning abstinence from certain conventionally selected and branded forms of life, occupation, or amusement, is but a very poor affair. But 'Thou shalt not' is very often absolutely necessary as a support to 'Thou shalt.' If you go into an Eastern city, you will find the houses with their fronts to the street, having narrow slits of windows all barred, and a heavy gate, frowning and ugly. But pass within, and there are flower-beds and fountains. The frowning street front is there for the defence of the fountains and the flower-beds within, from the assaults of foes, and speaks of a disturbed state of society, in which no flowers can grow and no fountains can bubble and sparkle, unless a strong barrier is round them. And so 'thou shalt not, in a world like this, is needful in order that ' thou shalt' shall have fair play. No law can be laid down for other people. Every man must settle this matter of abstinence for himself. Things that you may do, perhaps I may not do; things that you may not do, I very likely may. 'A liberal Christianity,' as the world calls it, is often a very shallow Christianity. 'A sour Puritanical severity,' as loose-living men call it, is very often plain, Christian morality. An inconsistent Christian may he hailed as 'a good fellow,' and laughed at behind his back. Samson made sport for the Philistines when he was blind. The uncircumcised do often say of professing Christians, that try to be like them, and to keep step with them, 'What do these Hebrews here?' and God always says to such, 'What dost thou here, Elijah?'

Lastly -

III. Why this detachment is enforced.

'For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come.' That translation does not give the full force of the original, for it suggests the idea of a vague uncertainty in the seeking, whereas what the writer means is, not ‘one to come,’ but one which is coming. The Christian object of seeking is definite, and it is not merely future but present, and in process of being realised even here and now, and tending to completion. Paul uses the same metaphor of the city in one of his leisure, ‘Your citizenship is in heaven.’ He says that to the Philippians. Philippi was a colony; that is to say, it was a bit of Rome put down in a foreign land, with Roman laws, its citizens enrolled upon the registers of the Roman tribes, and not under the jurisdiction of the provincial governor. That is what we Christians are, whether we know it or not.’ We are here in an order to which we outwardly belong, but in the depths of our being we belong to another order of things altogether. Therefore the essentials of the Christian life may be stated as being the looking forward to the city, and the realising of our affinities to it and not to the things around us. In the measure in which, dear brethren, we realise to what community we belong, will the things here be seen to be fleeting and alive to our deepest selves. ‘Here we have no continuing city’ is not merely the result of the tran-siency of temporal things, and the brevity of our earthly lives, but it is much rather the result of our affinity to the other order of things beyond the seas.

Abraham dwelt in tents, because he ‘looked for a airy,’ and so it was better for him to stop on the breezy uplands, though the herbage was scant, than to go with Lot into the vale of Sodom, though it looked Hire the garden of the Lord. In like manner, the more intensely we realise that we belong to the city, the more shall we be willing to ‘go forth without the camp.’ Let these two thoughts dominate our minds and shape our lives; our union with Jesus Christ and our citizenship of the heavenly Jerusalem. In the measure in which they do, it will be no sacrifice for us to come out of the transient camp, because we shall thereby go to Him and come to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, ‘which hath the foundations.’

51)Hebrews 13:15-16

Hebrews

CHRISTIAN SACRIFICE

Heb. 13:15-16.

MUCH attention is given now to the Study of comparative religion. The beliefs and observances Of the rudest tribes are narrowly scrutinised, in order to discover the underlying ideas. And many a practice which seems to be trivial, absurd, or sanguinary is found to have its foundation in some noble and profound thought. Charity and insight have both gained by the study.

But, singularly enough, the very people who are so interested in the rationale of the rites of savages will turn away when anybody applies a similar process to the ritual of the Jews. That is what this Epistle to the Hebrews does. It translates altar, ritual festivals, priests, into thoughts; and it declares that Jesus Christ' is the only adequate and abiding embodiment of these thoughts. We are not dressing Christian truth in a foreign garb when we express the substance of its revelation in language borrowed from the ritualistic system that preceded it. But we are extricating truths, which the world needs to-day as much as ever it did, from the form in which they were embodied for one stage of religion, when we translate them into their Christian equivalents.

So the writer here has been speaking about Christ as by His death sanctifying His people. And on that great thought, that He is what all priesthood symbolises, and what all bloody sacrifices reach out towards, he builds this grand exhortation of my text, which is at once a lofty conception of what the Christian life ought to be, and a directory as to the method by which it may become so.

‘By Him let us offer sacrifices continually, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.’

Now, it seems to me that there are here mainly three points to be looked at. First, the basis of; second, the material of; and third, the divine delight in, the sacrifices of the Christian life. And to these three points I ask your attention.

I. First, then, note here the emphatic way in which the one basis of Christian sacrifice is laid down.

Anybody who can consult the original will see, what indeed is partially expressed in our translation, that the position of these two words ‘through’ [or by] ‘Him’ underscores and puts great emphasis upon them. There are two thoughts which may be in-eluded in them; the one, that Jesus is the Priest by whose mediation we come to God, and the other that He is the sacrifice, on the footing of which we can present our sacrifices. It seems to me, however, that it is the latter idea principally that is in the writer’s mind here. And on it I touch lightly in a few words.

Now, let me recall to you, as a world-wide fact which is expressed in the noblest form in the ancient Jewish ritual, that there was a broad line of distinction drawn between two kinds of sacrifices, differing in their material and in their purpose. If I wanted to use mere theological technicalities, which I do not, I should talk about the difference between sacrifices of propitiation and sacrifices of thanksgiving. But let us put these well-worn phrases on one side, as far as we can, for the moment. Here, then, is the fact that all the world over, and in the Mosaic ritual, there was expressed a double consciousness one, that there was, somehow or other, a black dam between the worshipper and his Deity, which needed to be swept away; and the other, that when that barrier was removed there could be an uninterrupted flow of thanksgiving and of service. So on one altar was laid a bleeding victim, and on another were spread the flowers of the field, the fruits of the earth, all things gracious, lovely, fair, and sweet, as expressions of the thankfulness of the reconciled worshippers. One set of sacrifices expressed the consciousness of sin; the other expressed the joyful recognition of its removal.

Now I want to know whether that world-wide confession of need is nothing more to us than a mere piece of interesting reminiscence of a stage of development beyond which we have advanced. I do not believe that there is such a gulf of difference between the lowest savage and the most cultivated nineteenth-century Englishman, that the fundamental needs of the one, in spirit, are not almost as identical as are the fundamental needs of the one and the other in regard to bodily wants. And sure I am that, if the voice of humanity has declared all the world over, as it has declared, that it is conscious of a cloud that has come between it and the awful Power above, and that it seeks by sacrifice the removal of the cloud, the probability is that

that need is your need and mine; and that the remedy which humanity has divined as necessary has some affinity with the remedy which God has revealed as provided.

I am not going to attempt theorising about the manner in which the life and death of Jesus Christ sweep away the battier between us and God, and deal with the consciousness of transgression, which lies coiled and dormant, but always ready to wake and sting, in human hearts. But I do venture to appeal to each man's and woman's own consciousness, and to ask, Is there not something in us Which recognises the necessity that the sin which stands between God and man shall be swept away? Is there not something in us which recognises the blessedness of the message, 'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin'? Oh, brethren! do not fancy that it is a mere theological doctrine of an atonement that is in question. It is the possibility of loving access to God, as made possible through Jesus, and through Him alone, that I want to press upon your hearts.

'Through Him let us offer.'

II. Secondly, notice the light which our text throws upon the material or contents of the Christian sacrifice.

I need not dwell at all, I suppose, upon the explanation of the words, which are plain enough. The writer seems to me to divide the sacrifice of praise, which he prescribes, into two parts, the praise of the lip and the praise of the life.

But before I deal with this twofold distribution of the thought, let me fix upon the main general idea that is expressed here, and that is that the highest notion, the noblest and purest of what a Christian life is, is that it is one long sacrifice. Have we risen to the height of that conception? I do not say, Have we attained to the fulfilment of it? The answer to the latter question one knows only too well. But has it ever dawned upon us that the true ideal of the Christian life which we profess to be living is this - a sacrifice?

Now, that thought involves two things. One is the continuous surrender of self, and that means the absolute suppression of our own wills; the bridling of our own inclinations and fancies; the ceasing obstinately to adhere to our own purposes and conceptions of What is good; the recognition that there is a higher will above us, ruling and guiding, to which we are to submit. Sacrifice means nothing if it does not mean surrender; and surrender is nothing if it is not the surrender of the will. It was a great deal easier for Abraham to take the knife in his hand, and climb the hill with the fixed intention of thrusting it into his son’s heart, than it is for us to take the sword of the Spirit in our hands and slay our own wills, and I am here to say that unless we do we have very little right to call ourselves Christians.

But, then, surrender is only half the conception of the sacrifice which has to be accomplished in our whole days and selves. Surrender to God is the full meaning of sacrifice. And that implies the distinct reference of all that I am, and all that I do, to Him, as not only commanding, but as being the aim and end of my life. We are to labour on as at His command. You in your counting-houses, and mills, and shops, and homes; and we students in our studies, and laboratories, and lecture-rooms, are to link everything with Him, with His will, and with the thought of Him. What vice could live in that light? What meanness would not be struck dead if we were connected with that great reservoir of electric force? What slothfulness would not be spurred into unhasting and unresting zeal if all our work were referred to God? Unless our lives be thus sacrifice, in the full sense of conscious surrender to Him. we have yet to learn what is the meaning and the purpose of the propitiatory sacrifice on which we say that our lives are built.

I need not, I suppose, remind you at any length of how our text draws broad and deep the distinction between the nature and the scope of the fundamental offering made by Christ, and the offerings made by us. The one takes away the separating barrier; the other is the flow of the stream where the barrier had stood. The one is the melting away of the cloud that hid the sun; the other is the flashing of the mirror of my heart when the sun shines upon it. Our sacrifice is thanksgiving. Then there will be no reluctance because duty is heavy. There will be no grudging because requirements are great. There will be no avoiding of the obligations of the Christian life, and rendering as small a percentage by way of dividend as the Creditor up in the heavens will accept. If the offering is a thank-offering, then it will be given gladly. The grateful heart does not hold the scales like a scrupulous retail dealer afraid of putting the thousandth part of an ounce more in than can be avoided.

'Give all thou canst, high heaven rejects the lore
Of nicely calculated less or more.'

Power is the measure of duty, and they whose offering is the expression of their thankfulness will heap incense upon the brazier, and cover the altar with flowers.

Ah, brethren, what a blessed life it would be for us, if indeed all the painfulness and harshness of duty, with all the efforts of constraint and restriction and stimulus which it so often requires, were transmuted into that glad expression of infinite obligation for the great sacrifice on which our life and hopes rest!

I do not purpose to say much about the two classes of sacrifice into which our writer divides the whole. Words come first, work follows. That order may seem strange, because we are accustomed to think more of work than words. But the Bible has a solemn reverence for man's utterances of speech, and many a protest against 'God's great gift of speech abused.' And the text rightly supposes that if there is in us any deep, real, abiding, life-shaping thankfulness for the gift of Jesus Christ, it is impossible that our tongues should cleave to the roofs of our mouths, and that we should be contented to live in silence. Loving hearts must speak. What would you think of a husband who never felt any impulse to tell his wife that she was dear to him; or a mother who never found it needful to unpack her heart of its tenderness, even in perhaps inarticulate croonings over the little child that she pressed to her heart? It seems to me that a dumb Christian, a man who is thankful for Christ's sacrifice and never feels the need to say so, is as great an anomaly as either of these I have described.

Brethren! the conventionalities of our modern life, the proper reticence about personal experience, the reverence due to sacred subjects, all these do prescribe caution and tact and many another thing, in limiting the evangelistic side of our speech; but is there any such limitation needful for the eucharistic, the thanksgiving side of our speech? Surely not. In some monasteries and nunneries there used to be a provision made that at every hour of the four and twenty, and at every moment of every hour, there should be one kneeling figure before the altar, repeating the psalter, so that night and day prayer and praise went up. It was a beautiful idea, beautiful as long as it was an idea, and, like a great many other beautiful ideas, made vulgar and sometimes ludicrous when it was put into realisation. But it is the symbol of what we should be, with hearts ever occupied with Him, and the voice of praise rising unintermittently from our hearts singing a quiet tune, all the day and night long, to Him who has loved us and given Himself for us.

And then the other side of this conception of sacrifice that my text puts forth is that of beneficence amongst men, in the general form of doing good, and in the specific form of giving money. Two aspects of this combination of word and work may be suggested. It has a message for us professing Christians. All that the world says about the uselessness of singing psalms, and praying prayers, while neglecting the miserable and the weak, is said far more emphatically in the Bible, and ought to be laid to heart, not because sneering, godless people say it, but because God Himself says it. It is vain to pray unless you work. It is sin to work for yourselves unless you own the bond of sympathy with all mankind, and live 'to do good and to communicate.' That is a message for others than Christians. There is no real foundation for a broad philanthropy except a deep devotion to God. The service of man is never so well secured as when it is the corollary and second form of the service of God.

III. And so, lastly - and only a word - note the divine delight in such sacrifice.

Ah! that is a wonderful thought, 'With such sacrifices God is well pleased.' Now I take it that that 'such' covers both the points on which I have been dwelling, and that the sacrifices which please Him are, first, those which are offered on the basis and footing of Christ's sacrifice, and, second, those in which word and work accord well, and make one music.

'With such sacrifices God is well pleased.'

We are sometimes too much afraid of believing that there is in the divine heart anything corresponding to our delight in gifts that mean love, because we are so penetrated with the imperfection of all that we can do and give; and sometimes because We are influenced by grand philosophic ideas of the divine nature, so that we think it degrading to Him to conceive Of anything corresponding to our delight passing across it. But the Bible is wiser and more reverent than that, and it tells us that, however stained and imperfect our gifts, and however a man might reject. them with scorn, God will take them if they are ‘such’ - that is, offered through Jesus Christ. I dare say there are many parents who have laid away amongst their treasures some utterly useless thing that one of their little children once gave them. No good in it at all! No; but it meant love. And, depend upon it, ‘if ye, being evil, know how to good gifts’ - though they are useless - ‘from your children, much more will your heavenly Father accept’ your stained sacrifices if they come through Christ.

Dear brethren, my text preaches to us what is the true sacrifice of the true priesthood in the Christian Church. There is one Priest who stands alone, offering the one sacrifice that has no parallel nor second. No other shares in His priesthood of expiation and intercession. But around, and deriving their priestly character from Him, and made capable of rendering acceptable sacrifices through Him, stand the whole company of Christian people. And besides these there are no priesthoods and no sacrifices in the Christian vocabulary or in the Christian Church. Would that a generation that seems to be reeling backwards to the beggarly elements of an official priesthood, with all its corruptions and degradations of the Christian community, would learn the lesson of my text! ‘Ye’ - all of you, and not any selected number amongst you - ‘ye, all of you are a royal priesthood.’ There are only two sacrifices in the Christian Church: the one offered once for all on Calvary, by the High Priest Himself; the sacrifice of ourselves, by ourselves, thank-offerings for Christ and His name, which are the true Eucharist.

52)Hebrews 13:20

Hebrews

GREAT HOPES A GREAT DUTY

Heb. 13:20.

A GREAT building needs a deep foundation; a leaping fountain needs a full spring. A very large and lofty prayer follows the words of my text, and these are the foundations on which it rests, the abundant source from which it soars heavenward. The writer asks for his readers nothing less than a complete, all-round, and thorough-going conformity to the will of God; and that should be our deepest desire and our conscious aim, that God may see His own image in us, for nothing less can be 'well-pleasing in His sight.' But does not such a dream of what we may be seem far too audacious, when we pursue the stained volume of our own lives, and remember what we are? Should we not be content with very much more modest hopes for ourselves, and with a vary partial attainment o£ them? Yes, if we look at ourselves; but to look at ourselves is not the way to pray, or the way to hope, or the way to grow, or the way to dare. The logic of Christian petitions and Christian expectations starts with God as the premiss, and thence argues the possibility of the impossible. It was because of all this great accumulation of truths, piled up in my text, that the .writer found it in his heart to ask such great things for the humble people to whom he was writing, although he well knew that they were far from perfect, and were even in danger of making shipwreck of the faith altogether. My purpose now is to let him lead us along the great array of reasons for his great prayer, that we too may learn to desire and to expect, and to work for nothing short of this aim - the entire purging of ourselves from all evil and sin and the complete assimilation to our Lord. There are three points here: the warrant for our highest expectations in the name of God; the warrant for our highest expectations in the risen Shepherd; the warrant for our highest expectations in the everlasting covenant.

I. The warrant for our highest expectations in the name of God.

'The God of peace' - the name comes like a benedict ion into our restless lives and distracted hearts, and carries us away up into lofty regions, above the mutations of circumstances and the perturbations and agitations of our earthly life. No doubt, there may be some allusion here to the special circumstances of the recipients of this letter, for it is clear from the rest of the Epistle that they had much need for the peace of God to calm their agitations in the prospect of the collapse of the venerable system in which they had lived so long. It is obvious also that there were divisions of opinion amongst themselves, so that the invocation of the God of peace may have had a special sanctity and sweetness to them, considering the circumstances in which they were placed. But the designation has a bearing not so much on the condition of those to whom the words are spoken, as upon the substance of the grand prayer that follows it. It is because He is know, to us as being ‘the God of peace’ that we may be quite sure that He will ‘make us perfect in every good work to do His will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in His sight.’

And how does that great name, sweet and strong as it is, bear with it the weight of such an inference as that? Plainly enough because it speaks, first of all, of that which I may call an immanent characteristic of the divine nature. He is the tranquil God, dwelling above all disturbance which comes from variableness and all ‘the shadows east by turning’; dwelling above all possibilities of irritation or agitation. And yet that great ocean is not stagnant, but through all its depths flow currents of love, and in all its repose is intensest energy. The highest activity coincides with the supremest rest. The wheel revolves so swiftly that it stands as if motionless.

Then, just because of that profound divine, repose, we may expect Him, by His very nature, to impart His own peace to the soul that seeks Him. Of course, it can be but the faintest shadow of that divine indisturbance which can ever fall, like a dove’s wing, upon our restless lives. Bat still in the tranquillity of a quiet heart, in the harmonies of a spirit all .concentrated on one purpose, in the independence of externals possible to a man who grasps God, in the victory over change which is granted to them who have pierced through the fleeting clouds and have their home in the calm blue beyond, there may be a quiet of heart which does not altogether put to shame that wondrous promise: ‘My peace I give unto you.’ It is possible that they ‘which have believed’ should ‘enter into the rest’ of God.

But if the impartation of some faint but real echo of His own great repose is the delight of the divine heart, how can it be done? There is only one way by which a man can be made peaceful, and that is by his being made good.

Nothing else secures the true tranquillity of a human spirit without its conformity to the divine will. It is submission to the divine commandments and appointments, it is the casting-off of self with all its agitations and troubles, that secures our entering into rest. What a man needs for pease is, that his relations with God should be set right, that his own nature should be drawn into one and harmonised with itself, and that his relations with men should also be rectified.

For the first of these, we know that it is 'the Christ that died,' who is the means by which the alienation and enmity of heart between us and God can be swept away. For the second of them, we know that the only way by which this anarchic commonwealth within can be brought into harmony and order, and its elements prevented from drawing apart from one another, is that the whole man shall be bowed before God in submission to His will. The heart is like some stormy sea, tossed and running mountains high, and there is only one voice that can say to it, 'Peace: be still,' and that is the voice of God in Christ. There is only one power that, like the white moon in the nightly sky, can draw the heaped waters round the whole world after itself, and that is the power of Christ in His Cross and Spirit, which brings the disobedient heart into submissions, and unites the discordant powers in the liberty of a common service: so, brethren, if we are ever to have quiet hearts, they must come, not from favourable circumstances, nor from anything external They can only come from the prayer being answered, 'Unite my heart to fear Thy name,' and then our inner lives will no longer be torn by contending passions - conscience pulling this way and desire that; a great voice saying within, 'you ought!' and an insistent voice answering, 'I will not'; but all within will be at one, and then there will be peace. 'The God of peace sanctify you wholly,' says one of the apostles, bringing out in the expression the same thought, that inasmuch as He who Himself is supreme repose must be infinitely desirous that we, His children, should share in His rest, He will, as the only way by which that rest can ever be attained, sanctify us wholly. When - and not till, and as soon as - we are thus made holy are we made at rest.

Nor let us forget that, on the other hand, the divine peace, which is 'shed abroad in our hearts' by the love of God, does itself largely contribute to perfect the holiness of a Christian soul. We read that 'the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly,' and also that 'the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds,' and again that the peace of God will sit as umpire in our hearts, detecting evil, judging actions, awarding the prizes. For, indeed, when that peace lies like a summer morning's light upon our quiet hearts there will be little in evil that will so attract us as to make us think it worth our while to break the blessed and charmed silence for the sake of any earthly influences or joys. They that dwell in the peace of God have little temptation to buy trouble, remorse perhaps, or agitation, by venturing out into the forbidden ground. So, brethren, the great name of the God of peace is itself a promise, and entitles us to expect the completeness of character which alone brings peace.

Then, further, we have here

II. The warrant for our highest expectations in the risen Shepherd.

'The God of peace who brought again' - or, perhaps, brought up - 'from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep.' Now, it is remarkable that this is the only reference in this Epistle to the Hebrews to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The book is full of references to that which presupposes the Resurrection, namely, the ascended life of Jesus as .the great High Priest within the veil, and the fact that only this once is the act of resurrection referred to, confirms the idea, that in the New Testament there is no division of thought between the point at which the line begins and the line itself, that the Ascension is but the prolongation of the Resurrection, and the Resurrection is but the beginning of the Ascension, But here the act, rather than the state into which it led, is dwelt upon as being more appropriate to the purpose in hand.

Then we may notice further, that in that phrase, 'the great Shepherd of the sheep;' there is a quotation from one of the prophets, where the words refer to Moses bringing up the people from the Red Sea. The writer of the Epistle adds to Isaiah's phrase one significant word, and speaks of 'that great Shepherd,' to remind us of the comparison which he had been running in an earlier part of the letter, between the leader of Israel and Christ.

So, then, we have here brought before us Jesus who is risen and ascended, as the great Shepherd of the sheep. Looking to Him, what are we heartened to believe are the possibilities and the divine purposes for each of those that put their trust in Him? Gazing in thought for a moment on that Lord risen from the grave, with the old love in His heart, and the old greetings upon His lips, we see there, of course, as everybody knows, the demonstration of the persistence of a human life through death, like some stream of fresh water holding on its course through a salt and stagnant sea, or plunging underground for a short space, to come up again flashing into the sunshine. But we see more than that. We see the measure of the power, as the Apostle has it, that works in us, ‘according to the energy of the might of the power which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead.’ As we gaze, we see what may be called a type, but what is a great deal more than a type, of the possibilities of the risen life, as it may be lived even here and now, by every poor and humble soul that puts its trust in Him. The Resurrection of Jesus gives us the measure of the power that worketh in us.

But more than that, the risen Shepherd has risen as Shepherd, for the very purpose of imparting, to every soul that trusts in Him, His own life. And unless we grasp that truth, we shall not understand the place of the Resurrection in the Christian scheme, nor the ground on which the loftiest anticipations are not audacious for the poorest soul, and on which anything beneath the loftiest is, for the poorest, beneath what it might and should aspire to. When the alabaster box was broken, the ointment was poured forth and the house was filled with the odour. The risen Christ imparts His life to His people. And nothing short of their entire perfecting in all which is within the possibilities of human beauty and nobleness and purity, will be the adequate issue of that great death and triumphant Resurrection, and of the mighty, quickening power of a new life, which He thereby breathed into the dying world. On His Cross, and from His Tomb, and from His Throne, He has set aging processes which never can reach their goal - and, blessed be God! never will stop their beneficent working - until every soul of man, however stained and evil, that puts the humblest trust in Him, and lives after His commandment, is become radiant with beauty, complete in holiness, victorious over self and sin, and is set for ever more at the right hand of God. Every anticipation that falls short of that, and all effort that lags behind that anticipation, is an insult to the Christ, and a trampling under foot of the blood of ‘the covenant wherewith ye are sanctified.’

So, brother, open your mouth wide, and it will be filled. Expect great things; believe that what Jesus Christ came into the world and died to do, what Jesus Christ left the world and lives to carry on, will be done in you, and that you too will be made complete in Him. For the Shepherd leads and the sheep follow - here afar off, often straying, and getting lost or torn by the brambles, and worried by the wolves. But He leads and they do follow, and the time comes when ‘they shall follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,’ and be close behind Him in all the good pastures of the mountains of Israel ‘We see not yet all things put under Him,’ but we see Jesus and that is enough.

III. The warrant for our highest expectations in the everlasting covenant.

Space will not allow of my entering upon the question as to the precise relation of these final words to the rest of the verse, but their relation to the great purpose of the whole verse is plain enough. It has come to be very unfashionable nowadays to talk about the covenant. People think that it is archaic, technically theological, far away from daily life, and so on and so on. I believe that Christian people would be a great deal stronger, if there were a more prominent place given in Christian meditations to the great idea that underlies that metaphor,. And it is just this, that God is under obligations, takes on Him by Himself, to fulfil to a poor, trusting soul the great promises to which that soul has been drawn to cleave. He has, if I might use such a metaphor, like some monarch, given a constitution to His people, He has not left us to grope as to what His mind and purpose may be. Across the infinite ocean of possibilities, He has marked out on the chart, so to speak, the line which He will pursue. We have His word, and His word is this: ‘After those days, saith the Lord, I will make a new covenant. I will write My law on their inward parts. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’ So the definite, distinct promise, in black and white, so to speak, to every man and woman on the face of the earth, is ‘Come into the bends of the covenant, by trusting Me, and you will get all that I have promised.’

And that covenant is, as my text says, sealed by ‘the blood.’ Which, being turned into less metaphorical English, is just this, that God’s infinite propension of beneficence towards each of us, and desire to clothe us in garments of radiant purity, are, by Christ’s death, guaranteed as extending to, and working their effects on, every soul that trusts Him. What does that death mean if it does not mean that? Why should He have died on the Cross, unless it were to take away sin?

But the blood of the covenant does not mean only the death by which the covenant is ratified. We shall much misapprehend and narrow New Testament teaching, if we suppose that. The ‘blood is the life.’ There is further suggested, then, by the expression, that the vital energy, with which Jesus Christ came from the dead as the Shepherd of the sheep, is the power by which God makes us ‘perfect in every good work to do His will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in His sight.’

So, two practical counsels may close my words. See that you aspire as high as God’s purpose concerning you, and do not be content with anything short of the, at least, incipient and progressive accomplishment in your characters and lives, of that great prayer. Again, see that you use the forces which, by the Cross and the Resurrection and the Ascension, are set in motion to make that wondrous possibility a matter-of-fact reality for each of us; and whoever you are, and whatever you have been, be sure of this, that He can lift you from the mud and cleanse you from its stains, and set you at His own right hand in the heavenly places. For the name, and the risen Shepherd, and the blood of the everlasting covenant, make a threefold cord, not to be quickly broken, and able to bear the weight of the loftiest hopes and firmest confidence that we can hang upon it.

53)Hebrews 13:21

Hebrews

GREAT PRAYER BASED ON GREAT PLEAS

Heb. 13:21.

Massive foundations prognosticate a great building. We do not dig deep, and lay large blocks, in order to rear some flimsy structure. We have seen, in a previous sermon, how the words preceding my text bring out certain great aspects of the divine character and work, and now we have to turn to the great prayer which is based upon these. It is a prophecy as well as a prayer; for such a contemplation of what God is and does makes certain the fulfilment of the desires which the contemplation excites. Small petitions to a great God are insults. He is 'the God of peace,' therefore we may ask Him to 'make us perfect,' and be sure that He will. He is the God 'that brought again from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep,' therefore we may ask Him and be sure. He is the God who has sealed an 'everlasting covenant' with us by the blood of the Shepherd, therefore we may ask Him and be sure.

This prayer is the parting highest wish of the writer for his friends. Do our desires for ourselves, and for those whom we would seek to bless, run in the same mould? How strange it is that Christian people, who believe in the God whom the previous verse sets before us, so imperfectly and languidly cherish the confidence which inspires desires, for themselves and their brethren, such as those of our text this morning! Let us look at these great petitions, then, in the light of the great name on which they are based.

I. And, first, I ask you to consider the prayer which the name excites.

'Make you perfect in every good work.' Now, I need only observe here, in regard to the language of the petition, that the word translated 'make perfect' is not the ordinary one employed for that idea, but a somewhat remarkable one, with a very rich and pregnant variety of significance. For instance, it is employed to describe the action of the fisherman apostles in mending their nets. It is employed to describe the divine action which 'by faith we understand' when He 'made the worlds.' It is employed to describe the action which the Apostle commends to one of his churches when he bids them 'restore such an one in the spirit of meekness.' It is the condition which he described when he desired another of his churches to be 'perfectly joined together, in one mind and in one judgment.' It is still again the expression employed when he speaks of 'filling up,' or 'perfecting that which is lacking in their faith.' The general idea of the word, then, is to make sound, or fit, or complete, by restoring, by mending, by filling up what is lacking, and by adapting all together in harmonious cooperation. And so this is what Christians ought to look for, and to desire as being the will of God concerning them. The writer goes on to still further deepen the idea when he says, 'make you perfect in every good work' where the word work is a supplement, and unnecessarily limits the idea of the text. For that applies much rather to character than to work, and the 'make you perfect in every good' refers rather to an inward process than to any outward manifestation. And this character, thus harmonised, corrected, restored, filled up where it is lacking, and that in regard of all manner of good - 'whatsoever things are fair, and lovely, and of good report' - that character is 'well-pleasing to God.'

So, brethren, you see the width of the hopes - ay! of the confidence - that you and I ought to cherish. We should expect that all the discord of our nature shall be changed into a harmonious co-operation of all its parts towards one great end. We bear about within us a warning anarchy and tumultuous chaos, where solid and fluid, warm and cold, light and dark, calm and storm, contend. Is there any power that can harmonise this divided nature of ours, where lusts and passions, and inclinations of all sorts, drag one away, and duty draws another, so as that a man is torn apart as it were by wild horses? There is one. 'The worlds' were harmonised, adapted, and framed together, and chaos turned into order and beauty, and the God of Peace will come and do that for us, if we will let Him, so that the long schism which affects our natures, and makes us say sometimes, 'I find a law in my members warring against the law of my mind.' 'Oh! wretched man that I am; who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' may be changed into perfect harmony, and the 'bear shall eat straw like the ox, and the lion shall lie down with the lamb; and a little child shall lead them' - the meekness of a patient love bridling all their ravening passions. It is possible that our hearts may be united to fear His name; and that one unbroken temper of whole-spirited submission may be ours.

Again, we should expect, and desire, and strive towards the correction of all that is wrong, the mending of the nets, the restoring of the havoc wrought in legitimate occupations and by any other cause. Again; we may strive with hope and confidence towards the supply of all that is lacking, 'In every good’ - an all-round completeness of excellence ought to be the hope, and the aim, as well as the prayer, of every Christian. Of course our various perfectings will be various. ‘Star differeth from star in glory; and the new man in many respects follows the lines of the old man, and temperament is permanent. But still, whilst all that, is true, and while each shall ray back the divine light and radiance at a different angle, and so with a different hue from that which his neighbour, standing beside him, may catch and reflect, on the other hand the gospel is given to us to correct temperament, and to make the most uncongenial types of grace and excellence ours. It is meant to make it possible that men should ‘gather grapes of thorns and figs of thistles’; and to correct and fill up what is wrong and what is defective in our natural dispositions, so as that the passionate man may be made meek, and the hesitating man may be made prompt, and the animal man may be sublimed into spirit, and all that is proper to my peculiar constitution and character may be curbed and limited, and much that is not congenial to it may be appropriated and made mine. We are all apt to grow one-sided Christians, and it is our business to try to make ours the things that are lacking in our faith, and to supplement, by the grace of God working in our hearts, the defects of our qualities and the failures of our disposition and temperament. Do not grow like a tree stuck in the middle of a shrubbery, which has only space to put forth branches on one side, and is all lop-sided and awry; but like some symmetrical growth out in the open, equal all round the strong hole, and rising in perfect completeness of harmonious beauty to the topmost twig. that looks up to the sky. God means to make us ‘perfect in every good’; to harmonise, to correct, to restore, to perfect us, that we, having all grace, may abound in all good to His glory.

Such is His purpose. Ah, brethren! has not the recognition of that as His purpose alarmingly died out of our minds; and do we live up to the height of this prayer? I would that we should all remember more, as defining our aims, and animating our courage, and directing our hopes, that ‘this is the will of God, even our sanctification’; and that, when faith is dim, and effort burns low, and we are ready to put all such hopes away as a fair dream, we might be stirred to more lofty expectations, and to open our mouths wider by the thought of the’ God of peace that brought again from the dead the Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the everlasting covenant’; and ask ourselves what result on us will correspond to that mighty name of the Lord.

II. And so, secondly, note the divine work which fulfils the prayer.

‘Working in you that which is well-pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ.’ Creation, Providence and all God’s works in the world are also through Jesus Christ. But the work which is spoken of here is yet greater and more wonderful than the general operations of the creating and preserving God, which also are produced and ministered through that eternal Word by whom the heavens were of old, and by whom the heavens are still, sustained and administered. There is, says my text, an actual divine operation in the inmost spirit of every believing man.

I suppose that everybody must believe that, who believes in a God having any real connection with His creatures. Surely He is not so imprisoned in His own majesty, or shut out from His own creation, by His own creation, as that He cannot touch the spirits which He has made. And surely we are not so walled up by our own separate individuality as that we cannot, if we will, open the door for Him to come in and dwell with us, and work on us. Surely if there be any reality in the gospel teaching at all there is this in it, that Christ in us, or God in Christ working in us by His divine spirit, is the crown of that hope and blessing of which Christ for us is the beginning and foundation.

I do not want men to think less of the Cross. God forbid! But I do feel, and feel growingly, that the Christianity of this generation has not a firm hold of this other aspect of Christ’s work. Do not think less of what He has done, but, oh I think more of what He is doing. The perspective of our Christian faith is wrong: not that we draw the Cross too large, but that we paint the dove too small. And I would for myself and for you, dear brethren, lay this thought upon our hearts, as a far more important one than the ordinary type of Christian thinking makes it out to be - the present dwelling of God in Christ, through the divine spirit, in the hearts of all who believe, and working there that which is well-pleasing in His sight.

If that has truth, surely these things follow as our plain duty. Expect that operation! Do you? You Christian men and women, do you believe that God will work in your hearts? Some of you do not live as if you did. Desire it! Do you desire it? Do you want Him to come and clear out that stable of filth that you carry about with you? Do you wish Him to come and sift and search, and bring the candle of the Lord into the dusty comers? Do you want to get rid of what is not pleasing in His sight? Would you like Him to come and search you, ‘to try you and see if’ - ah, it is not an if! - ‘there be any wicked way in you, and lead you’ - where alas! our feet are often not found - ‘in the way everlasting’? Expect it! desire it! pray for it! And when you have got it, see that you profit by it!

God does not work by magic. The Spirit of God which cleanses men’s hearts cleanses them on condition, first, of their faith; second, of their submission; and, third, of their use of His gift. If you fling yourselves into the roar of worldly life, the noise of the streets, and the whirring of the looms, and the racket of the children in the nursery, and the buzzing of temptations round about you, and the yelpings for ‘food of your own passions, will deafen your ears so as that you will never hear the still, small voice that speaks a present God. If God dwells in us and works in us, let us yield ourselves to the workings and open our hearts to the Guest, and say,

‘Into every corner, O Lord, I would that Thou wouldst go, to restore and complete.’

III. Lastly, notice the visible manifestation of this inward work.

Now the writer of our text employs the same word in the two clauses, in order to bring out the idea of a correspondence Between the human and the Divine Worker. ‘To work His will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in His sight.’

God works in order that you and I may work. Our action is to follow His. Practical obedience is the issue, and it is the test, of having this divine operation in our hearts. There are plenty of people who will talk largely about spiritual gifts, and almost vaunt their possession of such a divine operation. Let us bring them and ourselves to this test: Are you doing God’s will in daily life in the little things? In the monotonous grind of the dusty, level road with never a turn in it, and the same thing to be done to- morrow that was done to-day, and so on for indefinite weeks and months, are you, with the spirit that freshens the monotony, doing God’s will? If so, then you may believe that God is working in you. If not, it is no use talking about spiritual gifts. The test of being filled with the divine operation is that our actions shall be conformed to His will ‘As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the Sons of God.’ That is a pin prick that will empty many a swollen bladder, and bring it down to its real tenuity of substance.

Action is the end of all We get the truth, we get our souls saved, we have all the abundance and exuberance of divine revelation, we have the Cross of Jesus Christ, we have the gift of the Divine Spirit - miracles and marvels of all sorts have been done for the one purpose, to make us able to do what is right in God’s sight, and to do it because it is His will.

This practical obedience to God’s will is the perfection of human conduct. And, on the other hand, a man who does good things without reference to the highest - viz., the will of God - in the doing of them, lacks the fine gold that gilds his deed; and the violet of his virtue is scentless. A good thing may be done without reference to God - good from the point of view of morality and the self-sacrifice and generosity that are embodied in it. But no good thing reaches its supremest goodness unless it he an act of conscious obedience to God’s will.

And this doing of the will of God is perfect blessedness. All things are right for us if we submit to the will of our Father. No storms can blow us out of our course then. ‘Thou shalt make a league With the beasts of the field, and the stones of the field shall be at peace with thee,’ for all creatures being God’s servants, are in covenant with him who does the will of the Lord.

And how are we to do it, brother? The world says, ‘cultivate your own nature; correct your faults; strive to fill up your deficiencies.’ Christ says, ‘Cast away yourselves; and trust to Me; and I will give you new life, and a new spirit. Cultivate that!’ If we are to do God’s will we must have the spirit of Him who said, ‘I come to do Thy will, O Lord; and Thy law is within My heart.’ Let us open our hearts to Him; let us seek for Him to enter in. And then,’ the God of peace, that brought again from the dead the Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, shall make us perfect in every good; to do His will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ.’

James

1) JAMES 1:4
2) JAMES 1:5
3) JAMES 1:12
4) JAMES 1:18
5) JAMES 1:25
6) JAMES 1:27
7) JAMES 2:1
8) JAMES 2:14-23
9) JAMES 2:23
10) JAMES 3:1-15

1) James 1:4

James

PATIENCE AND HER WORK

Jam. 1:4

IT does not appear from the rest of this letter that the persons to whom it was addressed were under the pressure of any particular trouble or affliction. Seeing that they are ‘the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad,’ the width of that superscription makes it improbable that the recipients were undergoing any common experience. It is the more noteworthy, therefore, that at the very outset James gives this exhortation hearing upon trials and troubles. Clearly it is hot, as we often take it to be, a counsel only for the sorrowful, or an address only to a certain class of persons, hut it is a general exhortation applicable to all sorts of people in all conditions of life, and indispensable, as he goes on to say, for any progress in Christian character.

‘Let patience have her perfect work’ is an advice not only for sad hearts, or for those who may be bowed down under any special present trouble, but for us all. And it is the condition on which it is possible, and without which it is impossible, that any Christian man should be ‘perfect and entire, wanting nothing.’ So I want you to look with me, first at what is the scope of this counsel; and then at how it can be obtained; and then why it is so important: what - how - why.

I. First, then, what is the meaning of the counsel to ‘let patience have its perfect work’?

Notice that the very language of the text puts aside the common notion that patience is a passive grace. The ‘patience’ of my text does ‘work.’ It is an active thing, whether that work be the virtues that it produces, or, as is more probable, its own preservation, in unbroken activity. In any case, the patience that James would have us all cultivate is an intensely active energy, and not a mere passive endurance. Of course I know that it takes a great deal of active energy to endure passively. There is a terrible strain upon the nerves in lying still on the operating-table without wincing, and letting the surgeon’s knife cut deep without shrinking or screaming. There is much force that goes to standing motionless when the wind is blowing. But, for all that, the mere bearing of trouble by no means covers the whole ground of this royal and supreme virtue to which my text is here exhorting us. For, as I have often had occasion to say, the conception of ‘patience’ in the New Testament includes, indeed, that which is generally supposed to be its sole signification - viz., bearing unresistingly and unmurmuring, and with the full consent of a yielding will, whatever pains, sorrows, losses, troubles, or disappointments may come into our lives, but it includes more than that. It is the fixed determination to ‘bate not one jot of heart or hope, but still bear up, and steer right onwards,’ in spite of all hindrances and antagonisms which may storm against us. It is perseverance in the teeth of the wind, and not merely keeping our place in spite of it, that James exhorts us to here. The ship that lies at anchor, with a strong cable and a firm grip of the flukes in a good holding-ground, and rides out any storm without stirring one fathom’s length from its place, exhibits one form of this perseverance, that is patience. The ship with sails wisely set, and a firm hand at the tiller, and a keen eye on the compass, that uses the utmost blast to hear it nearer its desired haven, and never yaws one hairbreadth from the course that is marked out for it, exhibits the other and the higher form. And that is the kind of thing that the Apostle is here recommending to us - not merely passive endurance, but a brave, active perseverance in spite of antagonisms, in the course that conscience, illuminated by God, has bidden us to run.

And if you want instances of it I will give you two ‘He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem.’ All through Christ’s life the shadow of the Cross closed His view; and, unfaltering, unswerving, unresting, unreluctant, He measured every step of the path, and was turned aside by nothing; because ‘for that hour He came into the world,’ and could not blench because He loved.

I will give you another, lower, and yet like, caught from and kindled by, the supreme example of persistence in duty. ‘None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear to myself, that I might finish my course with joy.’ The Apostle, who was warned on all sides by voices of prophets, and by tears and by supplications of friends, had his path clearly marked out for him, by his own conscience responsive to the will of God. And that path, whatsoever happened, he was resolved to tread. And that is the temper that my text commands us all to cultivate.

Beautiful and hard as bearing sorrows rightly may be, that is only a little corner o£ the grace that my text enjoins.

And so, dear friends, will you let me put the two or three words more that I have to say about this matter into the shape of counsel, not for the sake of dictating, but for the sake of giving point to my words? I would say, then, to every man, bear unmurmuring the burdens and sorrows that each of you have to bear. There are some of us, no doubt, who have some special grief lying at our hearts. There are many of us, I doubt not, who know what it is to have for all the rest of our lives a wound that never can be healed, to carry a weight that never can be lessened, and to walk in a darkness that never can be lightened. Irremediable losses and sorrows are the portion of some of my hearers. Let, patience have her ‘perfect work’; and bow, bow to that supreme and loving will.

But, beyond that, do not let all your effort and energy be swallowed up in rightly enduring what you may have to endure. There are many of us who make some disappointment, some loss, some grief, the excuse for shirking plain duty. There is nothing more selfish than sorrow, and there is nothing more absorbing, unless we guard against its tendency to monopolise.

Work! Work for others, work for God is our best comforter next to the presence of God's Divine Spirit. There is nothing that so lightens the weight of a lifelong sorrow as to make it the stimulus to a lifelong devotion; and if our patience has its perfect work it will not make us sit with folded hands, weeping for the days that are no more, but it will drive us into heroic and energetic service, in the midst of which there will come some shadow of consolation or, at least, some blessed oblivion of sorrow.

Again, I weald say, on the wider view of the meaning of this great exhortation, let no antagonism or opposition of any sort come between us and the plain path of Christian service and duty. And remember that the patience of my text has to be applied, not only in reference to the unswerving prosecution of the course which God and our own consciences dictate to us in the face of dificulties, sorrows, and losses, but also to the unswerving prosecution of that same path in the face of the opposite things - earthly delights and pleasures, and the seductions of the world, as well as the darknesses and sorrows of the world. He that lets hie endurance have its perfect work will scorn delights as well as subdue sorrows. The clouds darken, but the sun dazzles. It is not only the rocks that threaten Ulysses and his crew, the sirens sit upon their island home, with their harps of gold, and trill their sweet songs, and no man understands what Christian endurance is who has not learned that he has to 'endure' in the face of joys as well as in the face of sorrows, and that persistence in the Christian course means that we shall spurn the one and turn our backs upon the other when either of them threaten to draw us aside from the path.

I might gather all that I have to say about this great queenly virtue of perseverance in the face of antagonisms into the one word of the Apostle, 'I count them but dung that I may win Christ.' 'Forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching forth unto those that are before, I press toward the mark.' 'Let patience have her perfect work.'

II. And now, secondly, a word as to how this preset may best be carried out. It is a precept.

The perfecting of Christian endurance is not a thing that comes without effort. And so the Apostle puts it into the shape of an exhortation or an injunction. He does not specify methods, but I may venture to do so, in a few sentences.

And I put first and foremost here, as in all regions of Christian excellence and effort, the one specific which makes men like the Master - keeping near Him. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, 'consider' [by way of comparison] Him that endured, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. 'Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.'

Oh, brethren! there is nothing that sucks the brightness out of earthly joys when they threaten to interrupt our course, and dazzle our eyes, like turning our attention to Christ, and looking at Him. And there is nothing that takes the poison-sting, and the irritation consequent on it, out of earthly sorrows like remembering the' Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.' Am I to grumble when I think of Him? Shall I make a moan and a mourning for my sorrows when I remember His? Am I to say, 'O Lord! Thou hast given me as much as I can manage in bearing this terrible blow which Thou hast aimed at me, without repining against Thee. I cannot do any work because I have got so much to bear'? Are we to say that when we remember how He counted not His life dear to Himself, and bore all, and did all, that He might accomplish the Father's will? Do not let us magnify our griefs, but measure them by the side of Christ's. Do not let us yield to our impatience, but rather let us think of Him. Consider Him, and patience will have her perfect work.

Again, let me say, if we would possess in its highest degree this indispensable grace of persistent determination to pursue the Christian course in spite of all antagonisms, we must cultivate the habit of thinking of life, in all its vicissitudes, as mainly meant to make character. That is what the Apostle is saying in the context. He says, 'Brethren, count it all joy when you fall into divers temptations.' That is a paradox. It bids a man to be glad because he has trouble and is sad. It seems ridiculous, but the next verse solves the paradox: 'Knowing this, that the trial of your faith worketh patience.' That is to say - if I rightly understand the meaning of this world in its bearing on myself, the intention of my whole life to make me what God would have me to be, then I shall not measure things by their capacity to delight and please taste, ambitions, desires, or sense, but only by their power to mould me into His likeness. If I understand that the meanings of sorrow and joy are one, that God intends the same when He gives and when He withdraws, that the fervid suns of autumn and the biting blasts of November equally tend to the production of the harvest, that day and night come from the same cause - the revolution of the earth; if I understand that life is but the scaffolding for building character, and that, if I take out of this world, with all its fading sweets and its fleeting sadnesses, a soul enlarged, ennobled by difficulties and by gladnesses, then I shall welcome them both when they come, and neither the one nor the other will be able to deflect me from my course.

And so, lastly, about this matter, I would say bring the future into immediate connection with the present, and that will illuminate the dark places, will minimise the sorrows, will make the crooked things straight and the rough places plain, will prevent joy from being absorbing, and anxiety from being corroding, and sorrow from being monopolising, and will enable us to understand how all that is here is but preparatory and disciplinary for that great and serene future. And so the light affliction, which is but for a moment, will not be so very hard to bear; and the efforts at likeness to Jesus Christ, the consequences of which will last through eternity, will not be so very difficult to keep up; and patience, fed by contemplation of the suffering Christ, and nurtured further by consideration of the purpose of life, and stimulated by the vision of the future to which life here is but the vestibule, will have ‘her perfect work.’

III. And, lastly, Why is this grace so important? James says, with his favourite repetition of the same word, ‘Let her work be perfect, that ye may be perfect.’

Such endurance is indispensable to growth in Christian character.

I do not need to enter, at this stage of my sermon, on the differences between ‘perfect’ and ‘entire.’ The one describes the measure of the individual graces belonging to the man; the other describes the completeness of the assemblage of such graces. In each he is ‘perfect,’ and, having all that belongs to complete humanity, he is ‘entire.’ That is the ideal to which we have to press.

That is an ideal to which we may indefinitely approximate. There are people now - as there always have been - who are apt to substitute emotion and passivity for effort in the path of Christian perfection. I would take James’s teaching. Let your perseverance have her perfect work, and by toil and by protracted effort, and by setting your teeth against all seductions,and by curbing and ruling your sorrows, you will reach the goal. God makes no man perfect without that man’s diligent and continuous struggle and toil, toil, indeed, based upon faith; toil, indeed, which receives the blessing, but toil all the same.

Nor need I remind you, I suppose, how, in both the narrower and the wider sense of this word, the perseverance of my text is indispensable to Christian character.

I dare say we all of us know some chronic invalid say, on whose worn face there rests a gleam like that of the Lawgiver when He came down from the mount, caused by sorrow rightly borne. If your troubles, be they great or small, do not do you good they do you harm. There is such a thing as being made obstinate, hard, more clinging to earth than before by reason of griefs. And there is such a thing as a sorrow rightly borne being the very strength of a life, and delivering it from many a sin. The alabaster sheet which is intended to be fitted into the lamp is pared very thin that the light may shine through. And God pares away much of our lives in order that through what is left there may gleam more clearly and lambently the light of an indwelling God.

There is nothing to be won in the perfecting of Christian character without our setting ourselves to it persistently, doggedly, continuously all through our lives. Brethren, be sure of this, you will never grow like Christ by mere wishing, by mere emotion, but only by continual faith, rigid self-control, and by continual struggle. And be as sure of this, you will never miss the mark if, ‘forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching forth to those that are before,’ you ‘let patience have her perfect work,’ and press towards Him who is Himself the Author and Finisher of our patience and of our faith.

2) James 1:5

James

DIVINE WISDOM, AND HOW TO GET IT

Jam. 1:5.

'IF any of you lack.' James has just used the same word in the previous verse, and it is to be regretted that the principle upon which our authorised translators went of varying the rendering of identical expressions, masks the repetition here. James has just been telling his brethren that their aim should be to be 'perfect and entire, lacking nothing.' And that thought naturally suggests the other one of how great the contrast is between that possible completeness and the actual condition of Christians in general. So he gently and courteously puts, as a hypothesis, what is only too certain a fact in those to whom he is speaking; and says, not as he might have done, 'since you all lack,' but, with gracious forbearance, 'if any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God.'

Now, it seems to me that, in this hypothetical exhortation there are three points to be noted, two of them being somewhat unlike what we should have looked for. One is the great deficiency in the average Christian character - wisdom; another is the great means of supplying it - ask; and the third is the great guarantee of the supply - the giving God, whose gifts are bestowed on all liberally and without upbraiding.

I. The great deficiency in the average Christian character - wisdom.

Now, that is not exactly what we should have expected to be named as the main thing lacking in the average Christian. If we had been asked to specify the chief defect we should probably have thought of something else than wisdom. But, if we remember who is speaking, we shall understand better what he means by this word. James is a Jew, steeped through and through in the Old Testament. We have only to recall the Book of Proverbs, and what it has to say about 'wisdom' and 'folly,' by which it means something a great deal deeper and more living than knowledge and ignorance or intellectual strength and feebleness, or practical sagacity and its opposite. That deeper conception of wisdom which bases it all on ‘the fear of the Lord,’ and regards it as moral and spiritual and not as merely or chiefly intellectual, pervades the whole New Testament. This Epistle is more of an echo of the earlier revelation than any other part of the New Testament, and we may be quite sure that James uses this venerable word with all the associations of its use there, and in all the solemn depth of meaning which he had learned to attach to it, on the lips of psalmists, prophets, and teachers of the true wisdom. If that were at all doubtful, it is made certain by his own subsequent description of ‘wisdom.’ He says that it is ‘from above,’ and then goes on to ascribe all manner of moral and spiritual good to its presence and working on a man. It is ‘pure, peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits.’ You cannot say such glowing things about the wisdom which has its seat in the understanding only, can you? These characteristics must apply to something a great deal more august and more powerful in shaping and refining character.

What, then, does James mean by ‘wisdom’? He means the sum of practical religion. With him, as with the psalmist, sin and folly are two names for the same thing, and so are religion and wisdom. He, and only he, has wisdom who knows God with a living heart-knowledge which gives a just insight into the facts of life and the bounds of right and wrong, and which regulates conduct and shapes the whole man with power far beyond that of knowledge however wide and deep, illuminating intellect however powerful. ‘Knowledge’ is poor and superficial in comparison with this wisdom, which may roughly be said to be equivalent to practical religion.

The use of this expression to indicate the greatest deficiency in the average Christian character, just suggests this thought, that if we had a clear, constant, certain, God-regarding insight into things as they are, we should lack little. Because, if a man habitually kept vividly before him the thought of God, and with it the true nature and obligation and blessedness of righteous, loving obedience, and the true foulness and fatalness of sin - if he saw these with the clearness and the continuity with which we may all see the things that are unseen and eternal, if he ‘saw life steadily, and saw it whole,’ if he saw the rottenness and the shallowness of earthly things and temptations, and if he saw the blessed issue of every God-pleasing act - why! the perfecting of conduct would be secured.

It would be an impossibility for him, with all that illumination blazing in upon him, not to walk in the paths of righteousness with a glad and serene heart. I do not believe that all sin is a consequence of ignorance, but I do believe that our average Christian life would be revolutionised if we each carried clear before us, and continually subjected our lives to the influence of, the certain verities of God's word.

And, brethren, I think that there is a practical direction of no small importance here, in the suggestion that the thing that we want most is clearer and more vivid conceptions of the realities of the Christian revelation, and of the facts of human life. These will act as tests, and up will start in his own shape the fiend that is whispering at our ears, when touched by the spear of this divine wisdom. So, brethren, here is our root-deficiency; therefore instead of confining ourselves to trying to cure isolated and specific faults, or to attain isolated and specific virtues, let us go deeper down, and realise that the more our whole natures are submitted to the power of God's truth, and of the realities of the future and of the present, of Time and Eternity, the nearer shall we come to being 'perfect and entire,' lacking nothing.

II. We have next to note the great means of supplying that great deficiency - 'let him ask.'

Thai direction might at first sight strike one as being, like the specification of the thing lacking, scarcely what we should have expected. Does James say, If any of you lack 'wisdom,' let him sit down and think? No! 'If any of you lack wisdom,' let him take a course of reading? No! 'If any of you lack wisdom,' let him go to pundits and rabbis, and get it from them? No! 'If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask.' A strange apparent disconnection between the issue and the means suggested! Very strange, if wisdom lives only up in the head! not so strange if it has its seat in the depths of the human spirit. If you want to learn theology you have to study. If you seek to master any science you have to betake yourself to the appropriate discipline. It is. of no use to pray to God to make you a good geologist, or botantist, or lawyer, or doctor, unless you also take the necessary means to become one. But if a man wants the divine wisdom, let him get down on his knees. That is the best place to secure it. 'Let him ask'; because that insight, so clear, so vivid, so constant, and so perfectly adequate for the regulation of the life, is of God. It comes to us from the Spirit of God that dwells in men's hearts.

I believe that in nothing is the ordinary type of Christian opinion amongst us, in this generation, so defective as in the obscurity into which it has pushed that truth, of the Spirit of God as actually dwelling in men's hearts. And that, I believe, is to a large extent the reason why the other truths of Christianity have so little power upon people. It is of little use to hold a Christianity which begins and ends with the fact of Christ's death on the Cross. It is of less use, no doubt, to hold a Christianity which does not begin with that death. But if it ends there, it is imperfect because, as the Apostle put it, our Christ, the Christ who sends wisdom to those who ask it, is the 'Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us,' and sends down His Spirit on us.

And to receive that spirit of wisdom, the one thing necessary is that we should want it. That is all. Nothing more, but nothing less. I doubt very much whether hosts of the average Christian people of this generation do want it, or would know what to do with it if they had it; or whether the gift of a heart purged from delusions, and of eyes made clear always to behold the God who is ever with us, and the real importance of the things around us, is the gift that most of us pray for most. 'If any man lack wisdom, let him ask.' It is a gift, and it is to he obtained from that Holy Spirit who dwells and works in all believers. The measure of their desire is the measure of their possession. That wisdom can be had for the asking, and is not to be won by proudly self-reliant effort.

But let us not think that any kind of 'asking' suffices to put that great gift into our hearts. The petition that avails must be sincere, intense, constant, and accompanied by corresponding conduct.

It is not dropping down on your knees for two minutes in a morning, before you hurry out to business, and scrambling over a formal petition; or praying after you have gone to bed at night, and perhaps falling asleep before you get to 'Amen.' It is not asking, and then not waiting long enough to get the answer. It is not faint and feeble desire, but one presented with continuity which is not shameless importunity, but patient persistence. It must breathe intense desire and perfect confidence in the willingness of the Giver and in the power of prayer.

If our vessels are empty or nearly so, while the stream is rolling its broad, flashing flood past our doors, if we sit shivering beside dying embers while the fire blazes high on the hearth, let us awake to recognise the tragic difference between what we might be and what we are, and let us listen to James's other word, 'Ye have not because ye ask not.' 'If any of you lack wisdom' - and, alas! how many of us do, and that how sorely! - 'let him ask of God.'

III. The great guarantee that such petitions shall be answered.

James has an arrangement of words in the original which can scarcely be reproduced in an English translation, but which may be partially represented thus: 'Let him ask of the giving God.' That represents not so much the divine giving as an act, but, if I may so say, as a divine habit. It is just what the Prayer-book says, 'His nature and property is to have mercy.' He is the giving God, because He is the loving God; for love is essentially the impulse to impart itself to the beloved, and thereby to win the beloved for itself. That is the very life-breath of love, and such is the love of God. There is a must even for that heavenly nature. He must bestow. He is the 'giving'; and He is the blessed God because He is the loving and the giving God. Just as the sun cannot but pour out his rays, so the very activity of the divine nature is beneficence and self-impartation; and His joy is to grant Himself to His creature, whom He has made empty for the very purpose of giving all of Himself that the creature is capable of receiving.

But not only does James give us this great guarantee in the character of God, but he goes on to say, ' He giveth to all men. 'I suppose that all' must be limited by what follows - viz., 'He gives to all who ask.'

'He gives to all men liberally. ' That is a beautiful thought, but it is not the whole beauty of the writer's idea. The word translated 'liberally,' as many of you know, literally means 'simply, without any by-ends,' or any underlying thought of what is to be gained in return. That is the way in which God gives. People have sometimes objected to the doctrine of which the Scripture is full from beginning to end, that God is His own motive, and that His reason in all His acts is His own glory, that it teaches a kind of almighty and divine selfishness. But it is perfectly consistent with this thought of my text, that He gives simply for the benefit of the recipient, and without a thought of what may accrue to the bestower. For why does God desire His glory to be advanced in the world? For any good that it is to Him, that you and I should praise Him? Yes! good to Him in so far as love delights to be recognised. But, beyond that, none. The reason why He seeks that men should know and recognise His glory, and should praise and magnify it, is because it is their life and their blessedness to do so. He desires that all men should know Him for what He is, because to do so is to come to be what we ought to be, and what He has made us to try to be; and therein to enjoy Him for ever. So 'liberally,' 'simply,' for the sake of the poor men that He pours Himself upon, He gives.

And 'without upbraiding.' If it were not so, who of us dare ask? But He does not say when we come to Him, ' What did you do with that last gift I gave you? Were you ever thankful enough for those other benefits that you have had? What is become of all those? Go away and make a better use of what you have had before you come and ask Me for any more.' That is how we often talk to one another; and rightly enough. That is not how God talks to us. Time enough for upbraiding after the child has the gift in his hand! Then, as Christ did to Peter, He says, having rescued him first, 'Oh! thou of little faith; wherefore didst thou doubt?' The truest rebuke of our misuse of His benefits, of our faithlessness to His character, and of the poverty of our askings, is the largeness of His gifts. He gives us these, and then He bids us go away, and profit by them, and, in the light of His bestowments, preach rebukes to ourselves for the poverty of our askings and our squandering of His gift.

Oh, brethren! if we only believed that He is not an austere man, gathering where He did not straw, and reaping where He did not sow, but a 'giving God!' If we only believed that He gives simply because He loves us and that we need never fear our unworthiness will limit or restrain His bestowments, what mountains of misconception of the divine character would he rolled away from many hearts! What thick obscuration of clouds would he swept clean from between us and the sun! We do not half enough realise that He is the 'giving God.' Therefore, our prayers are poor, and our askings troubled and faint, and our gifts to Him are grudging and few, and our wisdom woefully lacking.

3) James 1:12

James

THE CROWN

Jam. 1:12.

MY purpose is to bring out the elements of the blessed life here, by grouping together those New Testament passages which represent the future reward under the metaphor of the ‘crown,’ and so to gain, if not a complete, at all events a comprehensive view of the elements of the blessedness of the perfected life hereafter.

These passages are numerous. Paul speaks of ‘the incorruptible crown,’ the reward of the victorious athlete, and of ‘the crown of righteousness,’ the anticipation of which soothed and elevated his last solitary hours. Peter speaks of the ‘crown of glory,’ the reward of the faithful elders. James speaks in my text of the ‘crown of life’ which the man wins who is proved by trial and stands the proof. The martyr Church at Smyrna is encouraged to faithfulness ‘unto death’ by the promise of the ‘crown of life’ from the hands of the Lord of life. The angel of the Church at Philadelphia is stimulated to ‘hold fast what thou hast, that no man take thy crown.’ The elders ‘cast their crowns before the throne.’ If we throw all these passages together, and study their combined effect, we shall, I think, get some helpful and stimulating thoughts.

I. I ask you, then, first to look with me at the general idea conveyed by the symbol.

Now the word which is employed in the passages to which we have referred is not that which usually denotes a kingly crown, but that which indicates the garland or wreath or chaplet of festivity and victory. A twist of myrtle or parsley or pine was twined round the brows of the athlete flushed with effort and victory. The laurel is the ‘meed of mighty conquerors.’ Roses, with violets or ivy, sat upon the brows of revellers. And it is thoughts of these rather than of the kingly tiara which is in the mind of the New Testament writers; though the latter, as we shall see, has also to be included.

So we get three general ideals on which I touch very lightly, as conveyed by the emblem.

The first is that of victory recognised and publicly honoured. So Paul uses the symbol in this sense in both the instances of its occurrence to which we have already referred, the reward of the racer or athlete in the paloestrum, and the ‘crown of righteousness’ which was to follow his having ‘fought the good fight, and finished his course.’ That implies that the present is the wrestling ground, and that the issues of the present lie beyond the present.

We do not look for flowers on the hard-beaten soil of the arena; and the time of conflict is no time for seeking for delights. If the crown be yonder, then here must be the struggle; and it must be our task ‘to scorn delights and live laborious days’ if we are ever to find that blessed result and reward of life here. We have, then, the general idea of victory recognised and publicly honoured by the tumult of acclaim of the surrounding spectators. ‘I will confess His name before the angels of God.’

Then there is the other general idea of festal gladness. That, I suppose, is what was present particularly to Peter’s mind when he talked about ‘the wreath that fadeth not away.’ I think that there is in his words a probable reference to a striking Old Testament passage, in which the prophet takes the drooping flowers on the foreheads of the drunkards of Samaria at their feast as an emblem of the swift fading of their delights, and of the impending destruction of their polity. But, says Peter, this wreath fades never. The flowers of heaven do not droop. It is an emblem of the calm and permanent delights which come to those behind whom is change with its sadness, and before whom stretches progress with its blessedness. Festal gladness, society, and the satisfaction of all desires are included in the meaning of the wreathed amaranthine flowers that twine round immortal brows.

But the usage in the Book of the Apocalypse stands upon a somewhat different footing. There are no Gentile images there. We hear nothing about

Grecian games and heathen wrestlings in that book; but all moves within the circle of Jewish thought. That the word which is employed for ‘the crown,’ though it usually meant the victors ‘and the feasters’ chaplet, sometimes also meant the king’s crown of sovereignty, is obvious from one or two of its uses in Scripture. For the ‘crown of thorns’ was a mockery of royalty, and the ‘golden crowns’ which the elders wear in the vision are associated with the thrones upon which they sit, as emblems, not of festal gladness or of triumphant emergence from the struggles and toils of life, but as symbols of royalty and dominion. The characteristic note of the promises of the Revelation is that of Christ’s servants’ participation in the royalty of their Lord. So to the other two general ideas which I have deduced from the symbol we must add for completeness this third one, that it shadows, in some of the instances of its use at all events, though by no means in all, the royalty so mysterious, by which every one of Christ’s ‘brethren is like the children of a king,’ and all are so closely united to Him that they participate in His dominion over all creatures and things. Dominion over self, dominion over the universe, a rule mysterious and ineffable which is also service, cheerful and continuous, are contained in the emblem.

So these three general ideas, victory, festal gladness and abundance, royalty and sovereignty, are taught us by this symbol of the crown.

II. Now, secondly, note more particularly the constituent parts of that chaplet of blessedness.

There are two phrases as to these, amongst the passages with which we are now concerned. St. James and the Book of Revelation speak of the ‘crown of life,’ and Peter speaks of the ‘crown of glory.’ That is to say, the material of which the garland is composed is no perishable pine or myrtle, but it is woven, as it were, of ‘ life’ on the one hand, of glory on the other. Or, if we do not venture upon such a violent metaphor as that, we can at least say that the crown’s life and glory.

Now, as to the first of these - what dim and great thoughts are taught us in it! ‘Life,’ in the New Testament, does not mean bare existence, but in its highest sense pure and blessed existence in union with God. And such life - full, perfect, continual - is regarded as being in itself the crown and reward of faithful Christian living here below. In our experience life is often a burden, a weariness, a care. If it be a crown, it is a crown of thorns. But yonder, to live will be blessedness; being will be well-being. The reward of heaven will simply be the fact of living in God. Here life comes painfully trickling, as it were, in single drops through a narrow rift in the rock; yonder it will spread a broad bosom, flashing beneath the sunshine. Here the plant grows strugglingly in some dusty cleft, amidst uncongenial surroundings, and with only occasional gleams of sunlight; its leaves are small, its stem feeble, its blossoms pallid; yonder it will be rooted in rich soil and shone upon by an unclouded sun, and will burst into flowers and forms of beauty that we know nothing of here. Life is the crown.

Then it is a crown of glory. What is glory? The splendour of God’s character manifested to His creatures and become the object of their admiration. That is the full meaning of glory in the Old and in the New Testament. And all that is transferred to those who cleave to Him here and are perfected yonder. There will be complete perfection of nature. ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ The inmost and deepest beauty of redeemed and perfected souls will then be capable of being manifested fully. Here it struggles for expression, and what we seem to be, though it is often better, is just as often much worse than we really are. But there we shall be able to show ourselves as what in our deepest hearts we are. For the servants who, girt with priestly vestments, do Him sacerdotal service in the highest temple, have His name blazing upon their foreheads, and shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. The redeemed souls, transmuted into the likeness of the Lord, and made visible in the flashing splendour of their gentle radiance, shall be beheld with the wonder with which all other creatures gaze on Him who is the Lord and Source of their purity, and ‘ if so be that we suffer with Him, we shall be also glorified together.’

But why speak of what we know as little about as the unborn child does of the world, or the caterpillar of its future life when winged and painted and basking in the sunshine? Let us bow before the ignorance which is the prophecy and pledge of the transcendent greatness that lies behind the veil, and say, ‘It is enough for the servant that he be as his Lord.’

III. Now, thirdly, note the conditions of the crown.

These are variously put with a rich variety. Paul speaks, as you remember, of ‘the crown of righteousness,’ by which he means to imply that on impure brows it can never sit, and that, if it could, it would be there a crown of poisoned thorns. None but the righteous can wear it. That is the first and prime indispensable condition. But then there are others stated in the other passages to which we have referred. The wrestler must ‘strive lawfully,’ according to the rules of the arena, if he is to be crowned. The man that is tried must ‘endure his temptation,’ and come out of it ‘proved’ thereby, as gold is tried by the fire. The martyr must be willing to die, if need be, for fidelity to his Master. We must’ hold fast that which we have’ if we are ever to win that which, as yet, we have not, even the crown that ought to be ours, and so is by anticipation called ours.

But two of the passages to which I have referred add yet another kind of condition and requirement. Paul says, ‘Not to me only, but to all them also that love His appearing’; and James here says that the man who is tried will receive the crown ‘which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him.’ So it is not difficult to make out the sequence of these several conditions. Fundamental to all is love to Jesus Christ. That is the beginning of everything. Then, built upon that, for His dear sake, the manful wrestling with temptations and with difficulties, long-breathed running, and continual aspiration after the things that are before, fidelity, if need be, unto death, and a grim tenacity of grasp of the truth and the blessings already bestowed. These things are needed. And then as the result of the love that grasps Christ with hooks of flesh, which are stronger than hooks of steel, and will not let Him go, and as the result of the efforts and struggles and discipline which flow from that love to Him, there must be a righteousness which conforms to His image and is the gift of His indwelling Spirit. These are the conditions on which the crown may be ours.

Such righteousness may be imperfect here upon earth, and when we look upon ourselves we may feel as if there were nothing in us that deserves, or that even can bear, the crown to be laid upon our brows. But if the process have been begun here by love and struggling, and reception of His grace, death will perfect it, But death will not begin it if it have not been commenced in life. We may hope that if we have our faces set towards the Lord, and our poor imperfect steps have been stumbling towards Him through all the confusions and mists of flesh and sense, our course will be wonderfully straightened and accelerated when we ‘shuffle off this mortal coil.’ But there is no sanctifying in death for a man who is not a Christian whilst he lives, and the crown will only come to those whose righteousness began with repentance, and was made complete by passing through the dark valley of death.

IV. Lastly, note the giver of the crown.

‘Which the Lord hath promised,’ ‘which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me in that day.’ ‘I will give him a crown of life.’ So Jesus Christ, as Judge, as Brother, as Distributer of the eternal conditions of men, as indwelling in us and making us sharers of all that is His, bestows upon His servants the crown. Yet, let us remember that He does not give it in such a fashion as that the gift may be taken once for all and worn thereafter, independent of Him. It must be a continual communication, all through eternal ages, and right on into the abysses of celestial glories - a continual communication from His ever-opened hand. The energy of a present Christ bestowing at the moment [if there be moments in that dim future] is the condition of the crown’s continued gleaming on brows that have worn it for ages, to which geological periods are but as the beat of a pendulum. Like the rainbow that continues permanently above the cater-act, and yet at each moment is fed by new spray from the stream, so the crown upon our heads will be the consequence of the continual influx into redeemed souls of the very life of Christ Himself.

So, dear brethren, all ends as all begins, with cleaving to Him, and drawing from His fulness grace whilst we need grace, and glory when we are fit for glory. Strength for the conflict and the reward of the victory come from the same hand, and are ours on the same conditions. He who covers our heads in the day of battle is He who wreathes the garland on the conqueror’s brow and keeps its flowers unfading through eternal ages. ‘On His head are many crowns,’ which He bestows upon His followers, and all the heaven of His servants is their share in His heaven. If, then, we love Him, if for His dear sake we manfully strive in the conflict, patiently accept the ministry of trial, discipline ourselves as athletes are willing to do for a poor parsley wreath, hold fast that which we have, and by faith, effort, and prayer, receive of His righteousness here, then the grave will be but as the dressing-room where we shall put off our soiled raiment and on our white robe; and thus apparelled, even we, unworthy, shall hear from Him, ‘I will make thee ruler over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.’

4) James 1:18

James

‘FIRST-FRUITS OF HIS CREATURES’

Jam. 1:18.

ACCORDING to the Levitical ceremonial, the first sheaf of the new crop, accompanied with sacrifice, was presented in the Temple on the day after the Passover Sabbath. No part of the harvest was permitted to be used for food until after this acknowledgment, that all had come from God and belonged to Him. A similar law applied to the first-born of men and of cattle. Both were regarded as in a special sense consecrated to and belonging to God.

Now, in the New Testament, both these ideas of ‘the first-born’ and ‘the first-fruits,’ which run as you see parallel in some important aspects, are transferred to Jesus Christ. He is ‘become the first-fruits of them that slept’: and it was no mere accidental coincidence that, in this character, He rose from the dead on the day on which, according to the law, the sheaf was to be presented in the Temple. In His case the ideas attached to the expression are not only that of consecration, but that of being the first of a series, which owes its existence to Him. He makes men ‘the many brethren,’ of whom He is ‘the first-born’; and He, by the overflowing power of His life, raises from the dead the whole harvest of which He is the first-fruits.

Then that which Jesus Christ is, primarily and originally, all those who love Him and trust Him are secondarily and by derivation from Himself. Thus, both these phrases are further transferred in the New Testament to Christian people. They are the ‘first-fruits unto God and the Lamb’; or, as my text has it here, with a qualifying word, ‘a kind of first-fruits’; which expresses at once a metaphor and the derivation of the character: They are also ‘the Church of the first-born whose names are written in heaven.’

So, then, in this text we have contained some great ideas as to God’s purpose in drawing us to Himself. And I want you to look at these for a moment or two.

I. First, then, God’s purpose for Christians is that they should he consecrated to Him.

The sheaf was presented before God in the symbolical ceremonial, as an acknowledgment of His ownership of it, and of all the wide-waving harvest. It thereby became His in a special sense. In like manner, the purpose of God in bestowing on us the wondrous gift of a regeneration and new life by the word is that we should be His, yielding to Him the life which He gives, and all that we are, in thankful recognition and joyful consecration.

We hear a great deal about consecration in these days. Let us understand what consecration means. There is an inward and an outward aspect of it. In the inward aspect it means an entire devotion of myself, down to the very roots of my being, to God as Lord and Owner.

Man’s natural tendency is to make himself his own centre, to live for self and by self. And the whole purpose of the gospel is to decentralise him and to give him a new centre, even God, for whom, and by whom, and with whom, and in whom the Christian man is destined, by his very calling, to live.

Now, how can an inward devotion and consecration of myself be possible? Only by one way, and that is by the way of love that delights to give. The yielding of the human spirit to the divine is only accomplished through that sweet medium of love. Self-surrender is the giving up of self at the bidding of love to Him to whom my heart cleaves.

The will will yield itself. There will be no murmuring at hard providences; no regrets darkening a whole life and paralysing duty, and blinding to blessings, by reason of the greatest sorrow which He may have sent. The will will yield in submission; the will will yield in obedience. According to the dreadful metaphor of the founder of the Jesuits - dreadful when applied to the relations of a man to a man, but blessed when applied to the relation of a man to God, and of God to man - I shall be in His hands ‘like a staff’ in the hand of a man, only to be used as He desires.

Consecration means self-surrender; and the fortress of self is in the will, and the way of self-surrender is the flowery path of love.

To take the other metaphor of Scripture, by which the same idea is expressed - the consecration which we owe to God, and which is His design in all His dealings with us in the gospel, will be like that of a priestly offering of sacrifice, and the sacrifice is ourselves.

So much for the inward; what about the outward? All capacities, opportunities, possessions, are to be yielded up to Him as utterly as Christ has yielded Himself to us. We are to live for Him and work for Him; and set, as our prime object, conspicuously and constantly before us, and to be reached towards through all the trivialities of daily duty, and the commonplaces of recurring tasks, the one thing, to glorify God and to please Him. Consecration means the utter giving of myself away, in the inmost sanctuary of the spirit. And it means the resolute devotion of all that I have and all that I am in the outgoings of daily life to His service and to His praise.

That is what God meant for you and me when He made us Christians; that was His design when He sent His Son. And we thwart and counter-work Him, just in the measure in which we still make ourselves our own centre, our wills our own law, and our well-being our own aim.

Now, remember, such consecration is salvation. For the opposite thing, the living to self, is damnation and hell and destruction. And whosoever is thus consecrated to God is in process of being saved. The relation between the two ideas is not, as it often is put, that you are to he saved that you may be consecrated; but, you are being saved in being consecrated. And the measure in which we have ceased to be devoted to ourselves, and are devoted to Him, is the accurate measure in which we have received the true salvation that is in Jesus Christ.

That consecration is blessedness. There is no joy of which a human spirit is capable that is as lofty, as rare and exquisite, as sweet and lasting, as the joy of giving itself away to Him who has given Himself for us. And such consecration is the true possession of what we give, and the only way of really owning ourselves or our possessions. ‘He that loveth himself shall lose himself,’ and he that gives himself away to God, a weak, sinful man, gets himself back from God, a hero, strong, and a saint.

Such consecration, which is the root of all blessedness, and the true way of entering into the possession of all possessions, is only possessible in the degree in which we subject ourselves to the influence of these mighty acts which God has done in order to secure it. Our yielding of ourselves to Him is only possible when we are quite sure that He has given Himself to us. Our love which melts us, and bows us in willing, joy-fill surrender, can only be the echo of His love. The pattern is set us in the Christ, and set us that we may imitate it, and we imitate it in the measure in which we lie exposed to its mighty power. ‘He gave Himself for us, that He might purchase for Himself a people for His possession.’ My surrender is but the echo of the thunder of His; my surrender is but the flash on the polished mirror which gives back the sunbeam that smites it. We yield ourselves to God, when we realise that Christ has given Himself for us.

Christian men and women, behold your destiny! God’s purpose concerning you is that you might be not your own, because you are bought with a price. And measure against that mighty purpose the halting obedience, the reluctant wills, the half-and-half surrender which is no surrender at all, which make up the lives of the average Christians among us, and see whether any of us can feel that the divine purpose is accomplished in us, or that we have paid what we owe to our God.

II. Secondly, my text suggests that God’s purpose for Christians is that they should be specimens and beginnings of a great harvest.

The sheaf that was carried into the Temple showed what sun and rain and the sweet skyey influences had been able to do on a foot or two of ground, and it prophesied of the acres of golden grain that would one day be garnered in the barns. And so, Christian men and women to-day, and even more eminently at that time when this letter was written, are meant to be the first small example of a great harvest that is to follow. The design that God had in view in our being Christianised is that we should stand here as specimens of what He means the world to be, and as witnesses of what He, by the gospel, is able to make men.

If we strip that thought of its metaphor it just comes to this, that if Christianity has been able to take one man, pick him out of the mud and mire of sense and self, and turn him into a partially and increasingly consecrated servant of God, it can do that for anybody.

The little sheaf, though there be but a handful of nodding heads in it, is a sure pledge of the harvest on the great prairie yonder, as yet untilled and unsown, which will yet hear like fruit to His praise and honour.

‘We have all of us one human heart.’ Whatever may be men’s idiosyncrasies or diversities of culture, of character, of condition, of climate, of chronology, they have all the same deep primary wants, and the deepest of them all is concord and fellowship with God. And the path to that is by faith in His dear Son, who has given Himself for us. If, then, that faith in one case has given to a man the satisfaction of that which all men are hungering for, whether they know it or not, and are restless and miserable till they find it, then there is document and evidence that this gospel, which can do that for the individual, can do it for the race. And so the first-fruits are the pledge and the prophecy of the harvest.

What a harvest is dimly hinted at in these words of my text; the ‘first-fruits of His creatures!’ That goes even wider than humanity, and stretches away out into the dim distances, concerning which we can speak with but bated breath; but at least it seems to suggest to us that, in accordance with other teaching of the New Testament, ‘the whole creation’ which ‘groaneth and travaileth together in pain until now,’ will, somehow or other, be brought into the liberty and the glory of the children of God, and, as humble waiters and attenders upon the kings who are the priests of the Most High, will participate in the power of the redemption. At all events, there seem to me to gleam dimly through such words as those of my text, the great prospects of a redeemed humanity, of a renewed earth, of a sinless universe, in which God in Christ shall be all in all.

The possibility and the certainty of that issue lie in this comparatively humble fact, that some handful of poor men have found in Jesus Christ that which their finding of it in Him manifests to them, is the elixir viloe and the hope of the world. You are meant to be specimens, exhibitions of what God intends for mankind, and of what the gospel can do for the world. Do you think, Christian men and women, that anybody, looking at you, will have a loftier idea of the possibilities of human nature, and of the potentialities of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Because if they will not, then you have thwarted your Father's design when He sent you His Son.

III. Lastly, my text suggests that God's purpose for Christians is that they should help the harvest.

That does not lie in the Levitical ceremonial of the sheaf of the first-fruits, of course. Though even there, I may remind you, that the thing presented on the altar carried in itself the possibilities of future growth, and that the wheaten ear has not only 'bread for the eater but seed for the sower,' and is the parent of another harvest. But the idea that the first-fruits are not merely first in series, but that they originate the series of which they are the first, lies in the transference of the terms and the ideas to Jesus Christ; for, as I pointed out to you in my introductory remarks, when He is called ' the first-fruits of them that slept,' it is implied that He, by His power, will wake the whole multitude of the sleepers; and when it speaks of Him as' the first-born among many brethren,' it is implied that He, by the communication of His life, will give life, and a fraternal life, to the many brethren who will follow Him.

And so, in like manner, God's purpose in making us 'a kind of first-fruits of His creatures' is not merely our consecration and the exhibition of a specimen of His power, and the pledge and prophecy of the harvest, but it is that from us there shall come influences which shall realise the harvest of which our own Christianity is the pledge and prophecy. That is to say, all Christian men and women are Christians in order that they may make more Christians.

The capacity, the obligation, the impulse, are all given in the fact of receiving Jesus Christ for ourselves. If we have Him we can preach Him, if we have Him we ought to preach Him, if we have Him in any deep and real possession, we must preach Him, and His words will be like a fire in our bones, if we forbear; and we shall not be able to stay.

'Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
Not light them for themselves.'

What do you get Christ for? To feed upon Him. Yes! But to carry the bread to all the hungry as well.

Do not say you cannot. You can talk about anything that interests you. You can speak about anything that you know. And are your lips to be always closed about Him who has given Himself for you? Do not say that you need special gifts for it. We do need special gifts for the more public and conspicuous forms of what we call preaching nowadays. But any man and any woman that has Christ in his or her heart can go to another and say, 'We have found the Messiah,' and that is the best thing to say.

You ought to preach Him. Capacity involves obligation. To have anything, in this world of needy men who are all knit together in the solidarity of one family - to have any anything implies that you impart it. That is the true communism of Christianity, to be applied not only to wealth but to everything, all our possessions, all our knowledge, all our influence. We get them that they may fructify through us to all; and if we keep them, we shall be sure to spoil them. The corn laid up in storehouses is gnawed by rats, and marred by weevils. If you want it to be healthy, and your own possession of it to increase, put it into your seed-basket; and 'in the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand,' and it will come back to thee, 'seed for the sower and bread for the eater.'

Now this is a matter of individual responsibility. You cannot get rid of it. Every Christian has the obligation laid upon himself, and every Christian man has some sphere in which he can discharge it, and in which, if he discharge it not, he is a dumb dog lying down and loving to slumber. Oh! I wish I could get into you tongue-tied, cowardly Christian men and women who never open your mouths to a soul for the Master's sake, this conviction, that you are thwarting God's purposes, and that the blood of souls lies at your door by reason of your guilty silence.

If you believe these things which I have been saying to you, the application follows. ‘The field is the world.’ And neither criticisms about missionary methods nor allegations of the superior claims of the little hit of the field round about your own doors are a sufficient vindication before God, though they may be an excuse before men, for tepid interest in, or indifference to, or lack of help of, any great missionary enterprise.

We have to sow Beside all waters; and if any men in the world were ever debtors both to the Greek and to the barbarian, both to the Englishman and the foreigner, it is the members of this great nation of ours, which, ‘as a nest hath gathered the riches of the nations, and there were none that peeped or muttered or moved the wing.’ We are debtors to the heathen world, Because whether we will or no we come into contact with heathen lands; and whether we take Bibles or not, our countrymen will take rum and gunpowder, and send men to the devil if we do not try to draw them to God. We are debtors to them in a thousand cases by injuries inflicted. We are debtors by benefits received; and we are debtors most of all because Christ died for them and for us equally.

And so, I beseech you, give us your help, and remember in giving it that ‘God of His own will hath Begotten us by the word of truth, that we should Be a kind of first-fruits of His creatures.’

5) James 1:25

James

THE PERFECT LAW AND ITS DOERS

Jam. 1:25.

AN old tradition tells us that James, who was probably the writer of this letter, continued in the practice of Jewish piety all his life. He was surnamed ‘the Just.’ He lived the life of a Nazarite. He was even admitted into the sanctuary of the Temple, and there spent so much of his time in praying for the forgiveness of the people that, in the vivid language of the old writer, his ‘knees were hard and worn like a camel’s.’ To such a man the Gospel would naturally present itself as ‘a law,’ which word expressed the highest form of revelation with which he was familiar; and to him the glory of Christ's message would be that it was the perfecting of an earlier utterance, moving on the same plane as it did, but infinitely greater.

Now that, of course, is somewhat different from the point of view from which, for instance, Paul regards the relation of the Gospel and the Law. To him they are rather antitheses. He conceived mainly of the law as a system of outward observances, incapable of fulfilment, and valuable as impressing upon men the consciousness of sin.

But, though there is diversity, there is no contradiction, any more than there is between the two pictures in a stereoscope, which, united, represent one solid reality. The two men simply regard the subject from slightly different angles. Paul would have said that the gospel was the perfection of the law, as indeed he does say that by faith we do not make void, but establish, the law. And James would have said that the law, in Paul's sense, was a yoke of bondage, as indeed he does say in my text, that the gospel, in contrast with the earlier revelation, is the law of liberty.

And so the two men complement and do not contradict each other. In like manner, the earnest urging of work and insisting upon conduct, which are the keynote of this letter, are no contradiction of Paul. The one writer begins at a later point than the other. Paul is a preacher of faith, but of faith which works by love. James is the preacher of works, but of works which are the fruit of faith.

There are three things here on which I touch now. First, the perfect law; second, the doers of the perfect law; and third, the blessedness of the doers of the perfect law.

I. First, then, the perfect law.

I need not dwell further upon James's conception of the gospel as being a law; the authoritative standard and rule of human conduct. Let me remind you how, in every part of the revelation of divine truth contained in the gospel, there is a direct moral and practical bearing. No word of the New Testament is given to us only in order that we may know truth, but all in order that we may do it. Every part of it palpitates with life, and is meant to regulate conduct. There are plenty of truths of which it does not matter whether a man believes them or not, in so far as his conduct is concerned. Mathematical truth or scientific truth leaves conduct unaffected. But no man can believe the principles that are laid down in the New Testament, and the truths that are unveiled there, without their laying a masterful grip upon his life, and influencing all that he is.

And let me remind you, too, how in the very central fact of the gospel there lies the most stringent rule of life. Jesus Christ is the Pattern, and from those gentle lips which say, ‘If ye love Me, keep My commandments,’ law sounds more imperatively than from all the thunder and trumpets of Sinai.

Let me remind you, too, how in the great act of redemption, which is the central fact of the New Testament revelation, there lies a law for conduct. God’s love redeeming us is the revelation of what we ought to be, and the Cross, to which we look as the refuge from sin and condemnation, is also the pattern for the life of every believer. ‘Be ye imitators of God, as dear children, and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us.’ A revelation, therefore, of which every truth, to the minutest fibre of the great web, has in it a directly practical bearing; a revelation which is all centred and focused in the life which is example because it is deliverance; a revelation, of which the vital heart is the redeeming act which sets before us the outlines of our conduct, and the model for our imitation - is a law just because it is a gospel.

Such thoughts as these are needful as a counterpoise to one-sided views which otherwise would be disastrous. God forbid that the thought of the gospel of Jesus Christ as primarily a message of reconciliation and pardon, and providing a means of escape from the frightful consequences of sin, even separation from God, should ever be put in the background! But the very ardour and intensity of man’s recognition of that as the first shape which Christianity assumes to sinful men, has sometimes led, and is always in possible danger of leading, to putting all other aspects of the gospel in the background. Some of you, for instance, when a preacher talks to you about plain duties, and insists upon conduct and practical righteousness, are ready to say, ‘He is not preaching the gospel.’ Neither is he, if he does not present these duties and this practical righteousness as the fruits of faith, or if he presents them as the means of winning salvation. But if your conception of

Christianity has not grasped it as being a stringent rule of life, you need to go to school to James, the servant of God, and do not yet understand the message of his brother Paul The gospel is a Redemption. Yes I God be thanked; but because a Redemption, it is a Law.

Again, this thought gives the necessary counterpoise to the tendency to substitute the mere intellectual grasp of Christian truth for the practical doing of it. There will be plenty of orthodox Christians and theological professors and students who will find themselves, to their very great surprise, amongst the goats at last. Not what we believe, but what we do, is our Christianity: Only the doing must be rooted in belief. In like manner, take this vivid conception of the gospel as a law; as a counterpoise to the tendency to place religion in mere emotion and feeling. Fire is very good, but its best purpose is to get up steam which will drive the wheels of the engine. There is a vast deal of lazy selfishness masquerading under the guise of sweet and sacred devout emotion. Not what we feel, but what we do, is our Christianity.

Further, notice how this law is a perfect law. James's idea, I suppose, in that epithet, is not so much the completeness of the code, or the loftiness and absoluteness of the ideal which is set forth in the gospel, as the relation between the law and its doer. He is stating the same thought of which the Psalmist of old time had caught a glimpse. 'The law of the Lord is perfect; because it 'converts the soul.' That is to say, the weakness of all commandment - whether it be the law of a nation, or the law of moral textbooks, or the law of conscience, or of public opinion, or the like - the weakness of all positive statute is that it stands there, over against a man, and points a stony finger to the stony tables, 'Thou shalt!' 'Thou shalt not!' but stretches out no hand to help us in keeping the commandment. It simply enjoins, and so is weak; like the proclamations of some discrowned king who has no army at his back to enforce them, and which flutter as waste paper on the barn-doors, and do nothing to secure allegiance. But, says James, this law is perfect - because it is more than law, and transcends the simple function of command. It not only tells us what to do, but it gives us power to do it; and that is what men want. The world knows what it ought to do well enough. There is no need for heaven to be rent, and divine voices to come to tell men what is right and wrong; they carry an all but absolutely sufficient guide as to that within their own minds. But there is need to bring them something which shall be more than commandment, which shall be both law and power, both the exhibition of duty and the gift of capacity to discharge it.

The gospel brings power because it brings life. ‘If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness had been by the law.’ In the gospel that desideratum is supplied. Here is the law which vitalises and so gives power. The life which the gospel brings will unfold itself after its own nature, and so produce the obedience which the law of the gospel requires.

Therefore, says James further, this perfect law is freedom. Of course liberty is not exemption from commandment, but the harmony of will with commandment. Whosoever finds that what is his duty is his delight is enfranchised. We are set at liberty when we walk within the limits of that gospel; and they who delight to do the law are free in obedience; free from the tyranny of their own lusts, passions, inclinations; free from the domination of men and opinion and common customs and personal habits. All those bonds are burnt in the fiery furnace of love into which they pass; and where they walk transfigured and at liberty, because they keep that law. Freedom comes from the reception into the heart of the life whose motions coincide with the commandments of the gospel. Then the burden that I carry carries me, and the limits within which I am confined are the merciful fences put up on the edge of the cliff to keep the traveller from falling over and being dashed to pieces beneath.

II. Now notice, secondly, the doers of the perfect law.

James has a long prelude before he comes to the doing. Several things are required as preliminary. The first step is, ‘looketh into the law.’ The word employed here is a very picturesque and striking one. Its force may be seen if I quote to you the other instances of its occurrence in the

New Testament. It is employed in the accounts of the Resurrection to describe the attitude and action of Peter, John, and Mary as they ‘stooped down and looked into’ the empty sepulchre. In all these cases the Revised Version translates the word as I have just done, ‘stooping and looking,’ both acts being implied in it. It is also employed by Peter when he tells us that the ‘angels desire to look into’ the mysteries of Redemption, in which saying, perhaps, there may be some allusion to the silent, bending figures of the twin cherubim who, with folded wings and fixed eyes, curved themselves above the mercy-seat, and looked down upon that mystery of propitiating love. With such fixed and steadfast gaze we must contemplate the perfect law of liberty if we are ever to be doers of the same.

A second requirement is, ‘and continueth.’ The gaze must be, not only concentrated, but constant, if anything is to come of it. Old legends tell that the looker into a magic crystal saw nothing at first, but, as he gazed, there gradually formed themselves in the clear sphere filmy shapes, which grew firmer and more distinct until they stood plain. The raw hide dipped into the vat with tannin in it, and at once pulled out again, will never be turned into leather. Many of you do not give the motives and principles of the gospel, which you say you believe, a chance of influencing you, because so interruptedly, and spasmodically, and at such long intervals, and for so few moments, do you gaze upon them. Steadfast and continued attention is needful if we are to be ‘doers of the work.’

Let me venture on two or three simple practical exhortations. Cultivate the habit, then, of contemplating the central truths of the gospel, as the condition of receiving in vigour and fulness the life which obeys the commandment. There is no mystery about the way by which that new life is given to men. James tells us here, in the immediate context, how it is. He speaks of ‘God of His own will begetting us with the word of truth’; and of the ‘engrafted word, which,’ being engrafted, ‘is able to save your souls.’ Get that word - the principles of the gospel and the truths of revelation, which are all enshrined and incarnated in Jesus Christ - into your minds and hearts by continual, believing contemplation of it, and the new life, which is obedience, will surely spring. But if you look at the gospel of your salvation as seldom and as superficially and with as passing glances as so many of you expend upon it, no wonder that you are such weaklings as so many of you are, and that you find such a gulf between your uncircumcised inclinations and the commandment of the living God.

Cultivate this habit of reflective meditation upon the truths of the gospel as giving you the pattern of duty in a concentrated and available form. It is of no use to carry about a copy of the ‘Statutes at Large’ in twenty folio Volumes in order to refer to it when difficulties arise and crises come. We must have something a great deal more compendious and easy of reference than that. A man’s cabin-trunk must not be as big as a house, and his goods must be in a small compass for his sea voyage. We have in Jesus Christ the ‘Statutes at Large,’ codified and put into a form which the poorest and humblest and busiest amongst us can apply directly to the sudden emergencies and surprising contingencies of daily life, which are always sprung upon us when we do not expect them and demand instantaneous decision. We have in Christ the pattern of all conduct. But only those who have been accustomed to meditate upon Him, and on the truths that flow from His life and death, will find that the sword is ready when it is needed, and that the guide is at their side when they are in perplexity.

Cultivate the habit of meditating on the truths of the gospel, in order that the motives of conduct may be reinvigorated and strengthened. And remember that only by long and habitual abiding in the secret place of the Most High, and entertaining the thoughts of His infinite love to us, as the continual attitude of our daily life, shall we be able to respond to His love with the thankfulness which springs to obedience as a delight, and knows no joy like the joy of serving such a Friend.

These requirements being met, next comes the doing. There must precede all true doing of the law this gazing into it, steadfast and continued. We shall not obey the commandment except, first, we have received and welcomed the salvation. There must be, first, faith, and then obedience. Only he who has received the gospel in the love of it will find that the gospel is the law which regulates his conduct. ‘Faith without works is dead’; works without faith are rootless flowers, or bricks hastily and incompletely huddled together without the binding straw.

But, further, the text suggests that the natural crown of all contemplation and knowledge is practical obedience. Make of all your creed deed. Let everything you believe be a principle of action too; your crendenda translate into agenda. And, on the other hand, let every deed be informed by your creed, and no schism exist between what you are and what you believe.

III. Lastly, note the blessedness of the doers of the perfect law.

There is an echo in the words of my text, of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, the form in which the gospel was, perhaps, dearest to this Apostle. He uses the same word - 'Blessed.'

Notice the in; not 'after,' not 'as a reward for, ' but 'blessed in his deed.' It is the saying of the Psalmist over again, whose words we have already seen partly reproduced in the former portion of this text, who, in the same great psalm, says: 'In keeping Thy commandments there is great reward.' The rewards of this law are not arbitrarily Bestowed, separately from the act of obedience, by the will of the Judge, but the deeds of obedience automatically bring the blessedness. This world is not so constituted as that outward rewards certainly follow on inward goodness. Few of its prizes fall to the lot of the saints. But men are so constituted as that obedience is its own reward. There is no delight so deep and true as the delight of doing the will of Him whom we love. There is no blessedness like that of an increasing communion with God, and of the clearer perception of His will and mind which follow obedience as surely as the shadow does the sunshine. There is no blessedness like the glow of approving conscience, the reflection of the smile on Christ's face.

To have the heart in close communion with the very Fountain of all good, and the will in harmony with the will of the best Beloved; to hear the Voice that is dearest of all, ever saying, 'This is the way, walk ye in it'; to feel 'a spirit in my feet' impelling me upon that road; to know that all my petty deeds are made great, and my stained offerings hallowed by the altar on which they are honoured to lie; and to be conscious of fellowship with the Friend of my soul increased by obedience; this is to taste the keenest joy and good of life, and he who is thus 'blessed in his deed' need never fear that that blessedness shall be taken away, nor sorrow though other joys be few and griefs be many.

But, remember, first believe, then work. We must begin where Paul told the Philippian gaoler to begin 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved' - if we are to end where James leads us. Do not begin your building at the roof, but put in the foundations deep in penitence and faith. And then, let every man take heed how he buildeth thereon.

6) James 1:27

James

PURE WORSHIP

Jam. 1:27.

THIS is a text which is more often quoted and used than understood. The word ‘religion’ has somewhat shifted its meaning from that which it bore at the time of our translation. We understand by it one of two things. For instance, when we speak of the Mohammedan or the Brahminical religion we mean the body of beliefs, principles, and ceremonies which go to make up an objective whole. When we speak of an individual’s religion we generally mean, not that which he grasps, but the act, on his part, of grasping the consciousness of dependence, the attitude of reverence and aspiration and love and its consequences within. But when our translation was made the word meant rather worship than religion, or, to use an expression which has been recently naturalised among us, it meant the ‘cult’ of a God, and that mainly, though not exclusively, by ceremonials, or by oral and verbal praise and petition. Now, it is obvious that that is the meaning of the expression in my text, because otherwise you would have a patently absurd saying. If James meant by ‘religion’ here what we now mean by it, to say that benevolence and personal purity are religion would be just equivalent to and as absurd as saying that a mother’s love is washing and feeding her child, or that anger is a flushed face and a loud voice. The feeling is one thing, the expression of it is another. The feeling is religion, the expression of it is worship. And so if you take the true meaning, not only of the original Greek, but also of the word ‘religion’ at the beginning of the seventeenth century, then you will understand the passage a little better than some of the people that are so often quoting it do.

For the writer is not talking about religion, but about its expression, ‘worship.’ And he says that ‘ true worship, pure and undefiled... is to visit the widows and the fatherless in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.’ He has been, in the previous verses, striking at various forms of self-deception, such as that a man should conceive himself to be all right, because he listens to the law, and then goes away and forgets it, or that a man should think himself a real worshipper, while he does not bridle his tongue, and then he states the general principle of my text - worship has for its selectest manifestation and form these two things, beneficence and purity. Now I would deal with these words and seek to point out first -

I. The noble ideal of life that is set before us here.

You observe that there are two great departments into which all the forms of individual duty are, as it were, swept. To put these into plain words, the one is beneficence, as the sum and substance of all our duties to our fellows, and the other is keeping ourselves pure, as the sum and substance of all our duties to ourselves. Now I would notice, for it strikes me as being remarkable, that duties to other people are put first, and duties to ourselves second. I do not know that there is any question of practical morality more difficult for us to settle, with full satisfaction to ourselves, than the relative proportion, in our lives, of care for ourselves, for our own culture, for our own rectification, for our Own growth in grace and righteousness, and our obligations to our fellows. It is very hard for us to note how much we ought to give to the definite purpose of trying to make ourselves better, and how much we ought to give to the other purpose of forgetting ourselves, and seeking for the good of other people. But James, although he does not enter into the difficulties which clog the solution of that question for us individually, does seem to think that the first thing to be looked after is other people, and that in looking after such other people we shall be most efficiently keeping ourselves unspotted from the world. And it is so, for if we get around us, as it were, an atmosphere of sympathy, of unselfish regard, of unwearied effort for the benefit of other people, it is like the thin film or air that may surround some object, and prevent the fire from reaching it for a moment or two. We shall find that by no means the least powerful detergent to purge from us the spots of the world is an honest and thorough-going flinging of ourselves into the necessities and the sorrows of other people.

But I should like to put in a caution here. I believe that there are a great many good folk in this generation who have their hands so full of Christian work that they have no time at all for the development of their own Christian character in any other way, and that they lack an intelligent grasp of the principles of the gospel, and many things that would make their work upon other people a hundred times better, just because they are so busy helping other folk that they have no time at all to look after themselves. And so the Church as a whole to-day has, as I believe, not too much beneficent and religious machinery, for there never can be too much of that - but too much relatively to the strength of the Church to drive it.

Your engine is too big for your boiler, and to this busy generation, in which 'Christian worker' has all but blotted out the conception of 'Christian thinker' and 'Christian scholar,' I believe that it needs to be preached, not so much 'Look after other people' as 'Do not forget yourself.' 'Take heed to thyself, and to thy teaching,' was good counsel for Paul's young representative, and it is good counsel for us all. 'What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.' 'Visit the widows and the fatherless in their affliction,' by all means; and 'Keep yourselves unspotted from the world.'

I suppose that it is scarcely necessary to remark that James does not mean visiting the widows and fatherless to be taken as a complete statement of our duties to others. He Singles out that one form which sympathy and hopefulness will take, as a typical example of the whole class of actions in which love will express itself. Nor need I do more than say in passing that 'visiting' means more than calling on - namely, looking after and caring for. The sum of all Christian duties to others, then, is gathered up in hopeful and sympathetic love, and in regard to ourselves James sums them up in what looks, after all, rather an incomplete ideal: 'Keep yourselves unspotted from the world.' He does not say with any falsely ascetic twist, 'Keep yourselves out of the world.' No! He says, 'Fling yourselves into it, and when you are in the thickest of the muddy ways, see that no spots and splashes of filth come on your white garments.' That implies that it is very likely, unless we take very rigid care, that contact with the external world, and with the aggregate of Godless men which makes the world, in the New Testament sense of the phrase, will infect Christian men and women with evil, even when they are going on with their works of beneficence. And I suppose we all know that that is true.

But here you get a very negative view of the sum of Christian duty, Some people preach ‘culture’ James says, ‘Try to keep yourselves clean.’ He realises that there is something more to be done by each of us with ourselves than to develop or draw out and increase that which is in us, that there needs to be another process, and that is to get rid of a great deal that is within us. We must cease to be much of what we are before we can be that which we may be and ought to be. Slay self first that you may live. Cultivate? Yes! and crucify as well.

Nor does James think any the less nobly of the resulting self, because he says that you will form the noblest character mainly by the way of negation. I know, of course, that that is only one-sided; but do we not all know that by reason of the abounding evil around us, and the proclivities more or less dormant, but existing, to much of that evil, which are in our own hearts, we do need that the law of our life should very largely be east in the form ‘Do not.’ Any man who has honestly set himself to the task of moulding his life into the likeness which God would approve, must know that to walk through the wards of an hospital and catch no infection, to stand in a dung-heap and bring away no stench nor foulness clinging to the robes, is as easy as it is to plunge into the world and catch no contagion and no pollution there.

And yet, says James, you have to do that. He sum, up Christian duty in this negative form, that is remarkable, and he flings the whole weight and burden of it on the man himself, that is more remarkable still. And yet we have only to read the rest of the chapter to see that he is not forgetting that there must be a Divine Keeper to keep the keepers, and that we shall never keep ourselves ‘unspotted’ unless we trust to Him who has said ‘I will keep thy feet from falling.’ So we need not wonder at the emphasis that is placed on the human side of the energy that is to be put forth in order to mould men into this character. But I desire to say here what I think some tendencies of good people’s opinions in this day do especially need: that we do not get cleansed, hallowed, sanctified, by faith only, but that the office of faith is to bring into our possession the power which will sanctify us if we use our own efforts. ‘Having therefore these premises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit,’ and not trust to faith alone to make us pure.

II. We have here, secondly, the true and pure worship in such a life.

I need not repeat what I have already said at the beginning of these remarks as to the true bearing of the principle laid down here. Only let me remind you that the writer is not flouting, or putting away out of court, other forms of action which are more frequently called worship. True religion, which expresses itself, according to James, most nobly in the worship of life, must express itself by all the other means which men have for expressing their inmost selves, by the worship of words, by symbolical deed, by a ceremonial as well as by the visiting of the widows and the fatherless, and the keeping oneself unspotted from the world. But what is insisted upon here is that of these two ways - both of them equally natural and equally indispensable, if there be any religion to express - in some aspects the higher and the nobler is the dumb worship of a pure and beneficent life. Now, of course, we are accustomed as Nonconformists to think that texts of this sort hit the adherents of a more elaborate, sensuous, and ceremonial form of worship than finds favour in our eyes, very hard, and sometimes to forget that they hit us quite as hard. There may be quite as real ritualists amongst Nonconformists as there are amongst Anglicans or Roman Catholics - I was going to say amongst Quakers - as amongst the adherents of any form of Christian worship. For it is not the elaboration of the form, but it is the existence of it, that tempts men to trust too much to it. And the baldest - to use a modern term of opprobrium - Nonconformist worship may be just as productive of immoral reliance upon it, on the part of those who adhere to it, as the most elaborate and sensuous ceremonial that fills a cathedral with clouds of incense, and calls upon men to worship simply by looking on at a priest performing his miracle. Dear brethren, you and I need the warning as much as anybody ever did. There are people, I have no doubt, who leave their religion in their pews, and lock it up there in the box along with their hymn books, and whose notion of religion is very little more than coming to a so-called ‘place of worship’ and offering up verbal prayers. There creep in insincerity, unreality, unconscious hypocrisy; there creeps in mechanical, perfunctory utterance of the words of praise, or listening to the voice of the preacher. How many of you think about the hymns you sing, and make them the expression of your own feelings? How many of you fancy that you have spent the Sunday rightly when you go to church and listen more or less attentively to what your minister may have to say to you, and then go out and live a life in flat contradiction to the prayers, and the hymns, and the readings, and the preachings in which you have nominally taken part? Oh, Brethren! let us get into reality, and learn more and more than ever we have done that worship does not mean the external act, but the bowing of the spirit before God, and that amidst the many temptations to insincerity, unreality, and dead, fossil formalism, which adhere to all forms of oral and ceremonial worship, there is as much need to-day as ever there was that we should listen to him who says, 'What hath thy God required of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?' 'Lord! Lord! have we not prophesied in Thy name?' 'Depart from Me; I never knew you.'

III. And now let me say one last word as to the only possible foundation for such a life.

It is worship, it is the expression of religion, and only when it is the expression of religion will you find beneficence and purity in their highest and noblest forms. There are people that say, 'I do not understand the Psalms; they are far too rapturous and emotional for me. I do not care about Paul and his metaphysical theology. I cannot make much of John and his mysticism. Give me James. That is plain common-sense; that is good practical morality. No clouds of darkness, no fine-spun theories.' Yes, and James has for his fundamental principle that if you want morality you must begin with religion. He believes that visiting the widows and the fatherless in affliction, and keeping oneself unspotted from the world, or, in other words, the highest form of morality, is the body, of which religion is the soul.

I am not going to enter upon that thorny question of the possibility of having an independent theory of ethics without religion, but my point is this - theory or no theory, where will you get the practical power that will work the theory and bring it out of the region of theory into the region of daily life and fact? I know it is extremely narrow, extremely old-fashioned, extremely illiberal, and I believe it is profoundly true. Begin with Jesus Christ and the wish to please Him, and there is the root out of which all these self-regarding and other's regarding graces and beauties will most surely come. I have no doubt that you can make your model of a life without Christianity, though I fancy that a great deal of the model comes from the Christianity. But after you have got it, then one comes and says, 'Well! it is all very pretty - a beautiful model; do you think it will work?' If you want it to work, obtain the fire of the Holy Spirit to get up the steam and then it will work. You must begin with religion if you are to have a vigorous moral life, and your work in the world must be worship if it is to rise to the height of these two great forms of beautiful and noble life, the regard for others and the effort at purity for yourselves.

Do not run away with the perversion of this text which says, 'I do not frequent churches and chapels; that is not worship. The diffused worship of my life is what God wants.' Yes, that is what God wants. And you will be most likely to render the diffused worship of a life if you have reservoirs in the life - like Sundays, like hours of private devotion and prayer - from which will flow - and without which I doubt there will not deeply and perennially flow the broad streams of devotion all through your days. 'Work is worship' is a monastic motto that is very frequently quoted nowadays. Well, 'it depends; as they say. Work is worship if there is a reference to God in it, It is not worship unless there is. Brethren, begin where the New Testament begins, with faith in Jesus Christ, and you will end with a worship which harmonises the service of the lip and the service of the life. And if you do not begin so, you may flout the prayers of the Church, and look upon our gatherings together as of very little value, but I doubt extremely whether you will ever have in your life the all-present reference to God which will make common deeds worship, and I doubt whether you will ever succeed either in beneficence to others, or in keeping yourselves unspotted from the world.

7) James 2:1

James

FAITH IN HIS NAME

Jam. 2:1.

THE rarity of the mention of Jesus in this Epistle must strike every attentive reader; but the character of the references that are made is equally noticeable, and puts beyond doubt that, whatever is the explanation of their fewness, lower thoughts of Jesus, or less devotion to Him than belonged to the other New Testament writers, are not the explanation. James mentions Christ unmistakably only three times The first occasion is in his introductory salutation, where, like the other New Testament writers, he describes himself as the slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ'; thus linking the two names in closest union, and proffering unlimited obedience to his Master. The second ease is that of my text, in which our Lord is set forth by this solemn designation, and is declared to be the object of faith. The last is in an exhortation to patience in view of the coming of the Lord, to be our Judge.

So James, like Peter and Paul and John, looked to Jesus, who was probably the brother of James by birth, as being the Lord, whom it was no blasphemy nor idolatry to name in the same breath as God, and to whom the same absolute obedience was to be rendered; who was to be the object of men's unlimited trust, and who was to come again to be our Judge.

Here we have, in this remarkable utterance, four distinct designations of that Saviour, a constellation of glories gathered together; and I wish now, in a few remarks, to isolate, and gaze at the several stars - 'the faith of our Lord - Jesus - Christ - the Lord of glory.'

I. Christian faith is faith in Jesus.

We often forget that that name was common, wholly undistinguished, and borne by very many of our Lord's contemporaries. It had been borne by the great soldier whom we know as Joshua; and we know that it was the name of one at least of the disciples of our Master. Its disuse after Him, both by Jew and Christian, is easily intelligible. But though He bore it with special reference to His work of saving His people from their sins, He shared it, as He shared manhood, with many another of the sons of Abraham. Of course, Jesus is the name that is usually employed in the Gospels. But when we turn to the Epistles, we find that it is Comparatively rare for it to stand alone, and that in almost all the instances of its employment by itself, it brings with it the special note of pointing attention to the manhood of our Lord Jesus. Let me just gather together one or two instances which may help to elucidate this matter.

Who does not feel, for example, that when we read ‘let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith,’ the fact of our brother Man having trodden the same path, and being the pattern for our patience and perseverance, is tenderly laid upon our hearts? Again, when we read of sympathy as being felt to us by the great High Priest who can be ‘touched with a feeling of our infirmities, even Jesus,’ I think we cannot but recognise that His humanity is pressed upon our thoughts, as securing to us that we have not only the pity of a God, but the compassion of a Man, who knows by experience the bitterness of our sorrows.

In like manner we read sometimes that ‘Jesus died for us,’ sometimes that ‘Christ died for us’; and, though the two forms of the statement present the same fact, they present it, so to speak, from a different angle of vision, and suggest to us different thoughts. When Paul, for example, says to us, ‘If we believe that Jesus died and rose again,’ we cannot but feel that he is pressing on us the thought of the true manhood of that Saviour who, in His death, as in His resurrection, is the Forerunner of them that believe upon Him, and whose death will be the more peaceful, and their rising .the more certain, because He, who, ‘forasmuch as the children were partakers of flesh and blood likewise took part of the same,’ has thereby destroyed death, and delivered them from its bondage. Nor, with loss emphasis, and strengthening triumphant force, do we read that this same Jesus, the Man who bore our nature in its fulness and is kindred to us in flesh and spirit, has risen from the dead, hath ascended up on high, and is the Forerunner, who for us, by virtue of His humanity, hem entered in thither. Surely the most insensitive ear must catch the music, and the deep significance of the word which says, ‘We see not yet all things put under him [i.e., man], but we see Jesus crowned with glory and honour.’

So, then, Christian faith first lays hold of that manhood, realises the suffering and death as those of a true humanity, recognises that He bore in

His nature ‘all the ills that flesh is heir to,’ and that His human life is a brother’s pattern for ours; that, He having died, death hath no more terrors for, or dominion over, us, and that whither the Man Jesus has gone, we sinful men need never fear to enter, nor doubt that we shall enter, too.

If our faith lays hold on Jesus the Man, we shall be delivered from the misery of wasting our earthly affections on creatures that may be false, that may change, that must be feeble, and will surely die. If our faith lays hold on the Man Jesus, all the treasures of the human love, trust, and obedience, that are so often squandered, and return as pain on our deceived and wounded hearts, will find their sure, sweet, stable object in Him. Human love is sometimes false and fickle, always feeble and frail; human wisdom has its limits, and human perfection its flaws; but the Man Jesus is the perfect, the all-sufficient and unchangeable object for all the love, the trust, and the obedience that the human heart can pour out before Him.

II. Christian faith is faith in Jesus Christ.

The earliest Christian confession, the simplest and, sufficient creed, was, Jesus is the Christ. What do we mean by that? We mean, first and plainly, that He is the realisation of the dim figure which arose, majestic and enigmatical, through the mists of a partial revelation. We mean that He is, as the word signifies etymologically, ‘anointed’ with the Divine Spirit, for the discharge of all the offices which, in old days, were filled by men who were fitted and designated for them by outward unction - prophet, priest, and king. We mean that He is the substance of which ancient ritual was the shadow. We mean that He is the goal to which all that former partial unveiling of the mind and will of God steadfastly pointed. This, and nothing less, is the meaning of the declaration that Jesus is the Christ; and that belief is the distinguishing mark of the faith which this Hebrew of the Hebrews, writing to Hebrews, declares to be the Christian faith.

Now I know, and ‘I am thankful to know, that there are many men who earnestly and reverently admire and obey Jesus, but think that they have nothing to do with these old Hebrew ideas of a Christ. It is not for me to decide which individual is His follower, and which is not; but this I say, that the primitive Christian confession was precisely that Jesus was the Christ, and that I, for my part, know no reason why the terms of the confession should be altered. Ah, these old Jewish ideas are not, as one great man has called them, ‘Hebrew old clothes’; and I venture to assert that they are not to be discarded without woefully marring the completeness of Christian faith.

The faith in Jesus must pass into faith in Christ; for it is the office described in that name, which gives all its virtue to the manhood. Glance back for a moment to those instances which I have already quoted of the use of the name suggesting simple humanity, and note how all of them require to be associated with this other thought of the function of Christ, and His special designation by the anointing of God, in order that their full value may be made manifest.

For instance, ‘Jesus died.’ Yes, that is a fact of history. The Man was crucified. What is that to me more than any other martyrdom and its story, unless it derives its significance from the clear understanding of who it was that died upon the Cross? So we can understand that significant selection of terms, when the same Apostle, whose utterances I have already Been quoting in the former part of this sermon, varies the name, and says, ‘This is the gospel which I declared unto you, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.’

Again, suppose we think of the example of Jesus as the perfect realised ideal of human life. That may become, and I think often does become, as impotent and as paralysing as any other specimen without flaw, that can be conceived of or presented to man. But if we listen to the teaching that says to us, ‘Christ died for us, leaving us an example that we should follow His steps,’ then the ideal is not like a cold statue that looks down repellent even in its beauty, but is a living person who reaches a hand down to us to lift us to His own level, and will put His spirit within us, that, as the Master is, so may also the servants be.

Again, if we confine ourselves to the belief that the Man named Jesus has risen again, and has been exalted to glory, then, as a matter of fact, the faith in His Resurrection and Ascension will not long co-exist with the rejection of anything beyond simple humanity in His person. If, however, that faith could last, then He might be conceived of as filling a solitary throne, and there might be no victory over death for the rest of us in His triumph. But when we can ring out as the Apostle did, ‘Now is Christ risen from the dead,’ then we can also say, ‘and is become the first-fruits of them that slept.’

So, brethren, lift your faith in Jesus, and let it be sublimed into faith in Christ. ‘Whom say ye that I am?’ The answer is - may we all from our hearts and from our minds make it! - ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God:

III. Christian faith is faith in Jesus Christ the Lord.

Now, I take it that that name is here used neither in its lowest sense as a mere designation of politeness, as we employ ‘sir,’ nor in its highest sense in which, referred to Jesus Christ, it is not unfrequently used in the New Testament as being equivalent to the ‘Jehovah’ of the Old; but that it is employed in a middle sense as expressive of dignity and sovereignty.

Jesus is Lord. Our brother, a Man, is King of the universe. The new thing in Christ’s return to ‘the glory which He had with the Father before the world was’ is that He took the manhood with Him into indissoluble union with the divinity, and that a man is Lord. So you and I can cherish that wonderful hope: ‘I will give to him that overcometh to sit with Me on My throne.’ Nor need we ever fear but that all things concerning ourselves and our dear ones, and the Church and the world, will be ordered aright; for the hand that sways the universe is the hand that was many a time laid in blessing upon the sick and the maimed, and that gathered little children to His bosom.

Christ is Lord. That is to say, supreme dominion is based on suffering. Because the vesture that He wears is dipped in blood, therefore there is written upon it, ‘King of kings, and Lord of lords.’ The Cross has become the throne. There is the basis of all true rule, and there is the assurance that His dominion is an everlasting dominion. So our faith is to rise from earth, and, like the dying martyr, to see the Son of Man at the right hand of the majesty of the heavens.

IV. Lastly, Christian faith is faith in Jesus Christ, ‘the Lord of glory.’

Now, the last words of my text have given great trouble to commentators. A great many explanations, with which I need not trouble you, have been suggested with regard to them. One old explanation has been comparatively neglected; and yet it seems to me to be the true one. ‘The Lord’ is a supplement which ekes out a meaning, but, as I think, obscures the meaning. Suppose we strike it out and read straight on. What do we get? ‘The faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Glory.’

And is that not intelligible? Remember to whom James was writing - Jews. Did not every Jew know what the Shekinah was, the light that used to shine between the Cherubim, as the manifest symbol of the divine presence, but which had long been absent from, the Temple? And when

James falls back upon that familiar Hebrew expression, and recalls the vanished lustre that lay upon the mercy-seat, surely he would be understood by his Hebrew readers, and should be understood by us, as saying no more and no other than another of the New Testament writers has said with reference to the same symbolical manifestation - namely, ‘The Word became flesh tabernacled among us; and we beheld His glory, the glory as the only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.’ James’s sentence runs On precisely the same lines as other sentences of the New Testament, For instance, the Apostle Paul, in one place, speaks of ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, our hope.’ And this statement is constructed in exactly the same fashion, with the last name put in opposition to the others, ‘The Lord Jesus Christ, the Glory.’

Now, what does that mean? This - that the true presence of God, that the true lustrous emanation from, and manifestation of, the abysmal brightness, is in Jesus Christ, ‘the effulgence of His glory and the express image of His person.’ For the central blaze of God’s glory is God’s love, and that rises to its highest degree in the name and mission of Jesus Christ our Saviour. Men conceive of the glory of the divine nature as lying in the attributes which separate it most widely from our impotent, limited, changeable, and fleeting being. God conceives of His highest glory as being in that love, of which the love of earth is kindred spark; and whatever else there may be of majestic and magnificent in Him, the heart of the Divinity is a heart of love.

Brethren, if we would see God, our faith must grasp the Man, the Christ, the Lord, and, as climax of all names - the Incarnate God, the Eternal Word, who has come among us to reveal to us men the glory of the Lord.

So, brethren, let us make sure that the fleshy tables of our hearts are not like the mouldering stones that antiquarians dig up on some historical site, bearing has obliterated inscriptions and ‘fragmentary names of mighty kings of long ago, but bearing the many-syllabled Name written firm, clear, legible, complete upon them, as on some granite block from the stonecutter’s chisel. Let us, whilst we cling with human love to the Man ‘that was born in Bethlehem, discern the Christ that was prophesied from of old, to whom all altars point, of whom all prophets spoke, who was the theme end of all the earlier Revelation. Let us crown Him Lord of All in our own hearts, and let us, beholding in Him the glory of the Father, He in His Light until we are changed into the same image. Be sure that your faith is a fullorbed faith; grasp all the many sides of the Name that is above every name.

And let us, like the apostles of old, rejoice if we are counted worthy to suffer shame for the Name. Let us go forth into life for the sake of the Name, and, whatsoever we do in word or deed, let us do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Glory.

8) James 2:14-23

James

FAITH WITHOUT WORKS

Jam. 2:14-23.

JAMES thrice reiterates his point in this passage, and each repetition closes a branch of his argument. In verse 17 he draws the inference from his illustration of a worthy sympathy which does nothing; in verse 20 he deduces the same conclusion from the speech put into the mouth of an imaginary speaker; in verse 24 he draws it from the life of Abraham. We shall best get hold of the scope of these verse, by taking them three parts separately.

I. Now, most misconceptions of a writer's meaning are due to imperfect definition of terms.

James was no metaphysician, and he does not stop to put precisely what he means by' faith.' Clearly he meant by it the full evangelical meaning of trust when he used it in the earlier part of the letter [Jam. 1:3; Jam. 1:6; Jam. 2:1-5]. As clearly he here means a mere intellectual belief of religious truth, a barren orthodoxy. If that undeniable explanation of his terminology is kept steadily in view, much of the difficulty which has been found in bringing his teaching into harmony with Paul's melts away at once. There is a distinct difference of tone and point of view between the two, but they entirely agree in the worthlessness of such a 'faith,' if faith it can be called. Probably Paul would not have called it so, but James accepts the 'saying' of the man whom he is confuting, and consents to call his purely intellectual-belief faith. And then he crushes it to atoms as hollow and worthless, in which process Paul would gladly have lent a hand.

We may observe that verse 14 begins with supposing the case of a mere lip 'faith,' while verse 17 widens its conclusion to include not only that, but any 'faith,' however real, which does not lead to works. The logic of the passage would, perhaps, hang better together if verse 14 had run 'if a man have faith'; but there is keen irony as well as truth in the suggestion that a faith which has no deeds often has abundant talk. The people who least live their creeds are not seldom the people who shout loudest about them. The parslysis which affects the arms does not, in these cases, interfere with the tongue. James had seen plenty of that kind of faith, both among Pharisees and Jewish Christians, and he had a holy horror of loose tongues [Jam. 3:2-12]. That kind of faith is not extinct yet, and we need to urge James's question quite as much as he did: 'Can that faith save?' Observe the emphasis on ' that' which the Revised Version rightly gives.

The homely illustration of the very tender sympathy which gushes inwards, and does nothing to clothe naked backs or fill empty stomachs, perhaps has a sting in it, Possibly the very orthodox Jewish Christians with whom James is contending were less willing to help poor brethren than were the Gentile Christians.

But, in any case, there is no denying the force of the parallel. Sympathy, like every other emotion, is meant to influence action. If it does not, what is the use of it? What is the good of getting up fire in the furnace, and making a mighty roaring of steam, if it all escapes at the waste-pipe, and drives no wheels? And what is the good of a ‘faith’ which only rushes out at the escape-pipe of talk? It is ‘dead in itself.’ Rom. 2:17-29 shows Paul’s way of putting the same truth. Emotion and beliefs which do not shape conduct are worthless Faith, if it have not works, is dead.

II. The same conclusion is arrived at by another road in verses 18-20.

James introduces an imaginary speaker, who replies to the man who says that he has faith. This new interlocutor ‘says’ his say too. But he is not objecting, as has been sometimes thought, to James, but to the first speaker, and he is expressing James’s own thought, which the Apostle does not utter in his own person, perhaps because he would avoid the appearance of boasting of his own deeds. To take this speaker as opposing James brings hopeless confusion, What does the new speaker say? He takes up the first one’s assertion of having ‘faith’; he will not say that he himself has it, but he challenges the other man to show his, if he can, by any other way than by exhibiting the fruits of faith, while he himself is prepared and content to be tested by the same test. That is to say, talk does not prove the possession of faith; the only possible demonstration that one has it is deeds, which are its fruits. If a man has [true] faith, it will mould his conduct. If he has nothing to produce but his bare assertion, then he cannot show it at all; and if no evidence of its existence is forthcoming, it does not exist.

Motion is the test of life. A ‘faith’ which does nothing, which moves no limb, is a corpse. On the other hand, if grapes grow ruddy and sweet in their clusters, there must be a vine on which they grow, though its stem and root may be unseen. ‘What is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh.’ True faith will be fruitful. Is not this Paul’s doctrine too? Does not he speak of ‘faith that worketh by love?’ Is it not his principle, too, that faith is the source of conduct, the active principle of the Christian life, and that if there are no results of it in the life, there is none of it in the heart?

But the second speaker has a sharp dart of irony in his quiver [verse 13]. ‘You plume yourself on your monotheistic creed, do you, and you think that that is enough to make you a child of God’s? Well, that is good, as far as it goes, but it does not go very far. You have companions in it, for the demons believe it still more thoroughly than you do; and, what is more, it produces more effect on them than on you. You do nothing in consequence of your belief; they shudder, at any rate - a grim result, but one showing that their belief goes deeper than yours. The arrow gains in point and keenness if we observe that James quotes the very words which are contained in the great profession of monotheism which was recited morning and evening by every Jew [Deu. 6:4, etc.]. James seems, in verse 20, to speak again in his own name, and to reassert his main thought as enforced by this second argument.

III. He has been arguing from the very nature of faith, and the relation between it and conduct.

Now he turns to history and appeals to Abraham’s case. In these verses he goes over the same ground as Paul does in Romans 5., and there is a distinct verbal contradiction between verse 24 here and Rom. 3:28; but it is only verbal. Are the two apostles writing in ignorance of each other’s words, or does the one refer to the other, and, if so, which is the earlier? These are interesting questions, to deal with which satisfactorily would more than exhaust our space.

No doubt the case of Abraham was a commonplace in rabbinical teaching, and both Paul and James had been accustomed to hear his history commented upon and tortured in all sorts of connections. The mere reference to the patriarch is no proof of either writer having known of the other; but the manner of it raises a presumption in that direction, and if either is referring to the other, it is easier to understand Paul if he is alluding to James, than James as alluding to Paul.

Their apparent disagreement is only apparent. For what are the’ works’ to which James ascribes justifying power? Verse 22 distinctly answers the question. They are acts which spring from faith, and which in turn, as being its fruits, ‘perfect’ it, as a tree is perfect when it has manifested its maturity by bearing. Surely Paul’s doctrine is absolutely identical with this He too held that, on the one hand, faith creates work, and on the other, works perfect faith. The works which Paul declares are valueless, and which he calls ‘the works of the law,’ are not those which James asserts ‘justify.’ The faith which James brands as worthless is not that which Paul proclaims as the condition of justifying; the one is a mere assent to a creed, the other is a living trust in a living Person.

James points to the sacrifice of Isaac as ‘justifying’ Abraham, and has in mind the divine eulogium, ‘Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me,’ but he distinctly traces that transcendent act of an unquestioning devotion to the ‘faith’ which wrought with it, and was perfected by it. He quotes the earlier divine declaration [Gen. 15:6] as ‘fulfilled’ at that later time, By which very expression is implied, not only that the root of the sacrifice was faith, but that the words were true in a yet higher sense and completer degree, when that sacrifice had ‘perfected’ the patriarch’s faith.

The ultimate conclusion in verse 24 has to be read in the light of these considerations, and then it appears plainly that there is no contradiction in fact between the two apostles. ‘The argument.., has no bearing on St. Paul’s doctrine, its purport being, in the words of John Bunyan, to insist that "at the day of doom men shall be judged according to their fruit." It will not be said then, Did you believe? but, Were you doers or talkers only?’ [Mayor, Epistle of St.. James, LXXXVIII].

No doubt, the two men look at the truth from a somewhat different standpoint. The one is intensely practical, the other goes deeper. The one fixes his eye on the fruits, the other digs down to the root. To the one the flow of the river is the more prominent; to the other, the fountain from which it rises, But they supplement, and do not contradict, each other. A shrewd old Scotsman once criticised an elaborate ‘Harmony’ of the Gospels, by the remark that the author had ‘spent a heap of pains in making four men agree that had never cast [fallen] out.’ We may say the same of many laborious reconciliations of James, the urgent preacher of Christian righteousness, and Paul, the earnest proclaimer that ‘a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.’

9) James 2:23

James

GOD’S FRIENDS

Jam. 2:23.

When and by whom was he so called? There are two passages in the Old Testament in which an analogous designation is applied to the patriarch, but probably the name was one in current use amongst the people, and expressed in a summary fashion the impression that had been made by the history of Abraham’s life. A sweet fate to have that as the brief record of a character, and to be known throughout the ages by such an epitaph. As many of us are aware, this name, ‘the Friend,’ has displaced the proper name, Abraham, on the Lips of all Mohammedan people to this day; and the city of Hebron, where his corpse lies, is commonly known simply as ‘the Friend.’

‘My object in this sermon is a very simple one. I merely wish to bring out two or three of the salient elements and characteristics of friendship as exercised on the human level, and to use these as a standard and test of our religion and relation to God.

But I may just notice, for a moment, how beautiful and blessed a thought it is which underlies this and similar representations of Scripture - viz., that the bond which unites us to God is the very same as that which most sweetly and strongly ties men to one another, and that, after all, religion is nothing more or less than the transference to Him of the emotions which make all the sweetness of human life and society.

Now, I shall try to bring out two or three points which are included in that name, ‘the Friend of God,’ and to ask ourselves if they apply to our relations to Him.

I. First, friends trust and love one another.

Mutual confidence is the mortar which binds the stones in society together, into a building. It makes the difference between the herding together of beasts and the association of men. No community could keep together for an hour without mutual confidence, even in regard of the least intimate relationships of life. But it is the very life-blood of friendship. You cannot say, ‘A.B. is my friend, but I do not trust him.’ If suspicion creeps in, like the foul malaria of tropical swamps, it kills all friendship. Therefore ‘he was called the Friend of God’ is by James deduced from the fact that ‘he believed God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness.’ You cannot make a friend of a man that you do not know where to have. There may be some vague reverence of, or abject reluctant submission to, ‘the unknown God,’ the something outside of ourselves that perhaps makes for righteousness; but for any vivid, warm throb of friendship there must be, first, a clear knowledge, and then a living grappling of that knowledge to my very heart, by my faith. Unless I trust God I cannot be a friend of God’s. If you and I are His friends we trust Him, and He will trust us. For this friendship is not one-sided, and the name, though it may be ambiguous as to whether it means one whom I love or one who loves me, really includes both persons to the compact; and there are analogous, if not identical, emotions in each. So that, if I trust God, I may be sure that God trusts me, and, in His confidence, leaves a great deal to me; and so ennobles and glorifies me by His reliance upon me.

But whilst we know that this belief in God was the very nerve and centre of Abraham’s whole character, and was the reason why he was called the friend of God, we must also remember that, as James insists upon here, it was no mere idle assent, no mere intellectual conviction that God could not tell lies, which was dignified by the name of belief, but that it was, as James insists upon in the context, a trust which proved itself to be valid, because it was continually operative in the life. ‘Faith without works is dead.’ ‘And Abraham, our father, was he not justified by works?’

And so the Epistle to the Hebrews, if you will remember, traces up to his faith all the chief points in his life. ‘By faith he went out from the land where he dwelt; by faith he dwelt in tabernacles,’ in the promised land, believing that it should be his and his seed’s; ‘by faith’ he offered up his son on the altar.

Thus we come to this, that the heavenly and the earthly friend, like friends on the low levels of humanity, love each other because they trust each other, I have said that the words ‘My friend’ may either mean one whom I love or one who loves me, but that the two things are in the present connection inseparable. Only let us remember where the sweet reciprocation and interchange of love begins. ‘We love Him because He first loved us.’ ‘When we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son.’ And so we have to turn to that heavenly Friend, and feel that as life itself, so the love which is the life of life, has its beginning in Him, and that never would our hearts have turned themselves from their alienation, unless there had poured down upon them the attractive outflow of His great love. It was an old fancy that, wherever a tree was struck by lightning, all its tremulous foliage turned in the direction from which the bolt had come. When the merciful flash of God’s great love strikes a heart, then all its tendrils turn to the source of the life-giving light, and we love back again, in sweet reverberation to the primal and original love. Dear brethren, I lay upon your heart and mine this thought, that friends trust and love each other. Do we trust and love our God?

II. Friends have frank, familiar intercourse with one another.

Let us turn to the illuminatlve example in our text, and remember God’s frankness with Abraham. ‘Shall I hide from Abraham the thing that I will do?’ Let us cap that-as we can, marvellous and great as the utterance is - by another one, ‘I call you not servants, but friends; for all things that I have heard of My Father I declare unto you.’ So much for God’s frankness. What about Abraham’s frankness with God? Remember how he remonstrated with Him; how he complained to Him of His dealings; how he persisted with importunity, which would have been presumptuous but for the friendship which underlay it, and warranted the bold words. And let us take the simple lesson that if we are friends and lovers of God, we shall delight in intercourse with Him. It is a strange kind of religion that does not care to be with God, that would rather think about anything else than about Him, that is all unused to quiet, solitary conversation and communion with Him, but it is the religion of, I wonder, how many of us to-day. He would be a strange friend that never crossed your threshold if you could help it; that was evidently uncomfortable in your presence, and ill at ease till he got away from you, and that when he came was struck dumb, and had not a word to say for himself, and did not know or feel that he and you had any interests or subjects in common. Is that not a good deal like the religion of hosts of professing Christians? ‘He was called the friend of God,’ and he never, all his days, if he could help it, thought about Him or went near Him!

If we are friends of God, we shall have no secrets from Him. There are very few of those who are dearest to us to whom we could venture to lay bare all the depths of our hearts. There are black things down in the cellars that we do not like to show to any of our friends. We receive them upstairs, in the rooms for company. But you should take God all through the house. And if there is the trust and the love that I have been speaking about, we shall not be afraid to spread out all our foulness, and our meanness, and our unworthy thoughts of, and acts towards, Him, before His ‘pure eyes and perfect judgment,’ and say, ‘Nobody but my best friend could look at such a dungheap, but I spread it before Thee. Look at it, and Thou wilt cleanse it; look at it, and it will melt away. Look at it, and in the knowledge that Thou knowest, my knowledge of it will be less of a torment, and my bosom will be cleansed of its perilous stuff.’

Tell God all, if you mean to be a friend of His. And do not be afraid to tell Him your harsh thoughts of Him, and your complaints of Him. He never resents anything that a man who loves Him says about Him, if he says it to Him. What He resents - if I might use the word - is our huddling up grudges and murmurings and questionings in our own hearts, and saying never a word to the friend against whom they offend. Out with it all, brethren! Complaints, regrets, questionings, petitions, hot wishes, take them all to Him; and be sure that instead of their breaking, they will, if spoken, cement the friendship which is disturbed by secrecy on our parts.

If we are God’s lovers, He will have no secrets from us. ‘The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him; and He will show them His covenant.’ There is a strange wisdom and insight, sometimes amounting even to prophetic anticipation, which creeps into a simple heart that is knit closely to God. But whether the result of our friendship with Him be such communication of such kinds of insight or no, we may be sure of this, that, if we trust Him, and love Him, and are frank with Him, He will in so far be frank with us, that He will impart unto us Himself, and in the knowledge of His love we shall find all the knowledge that we need.

III. Friends delight to meet each other's wishes.

Let us go back to our story again. The humble, earthly friend of God did as God bade him, substantially all his life, from the day when he made the ' Great Refusal,' and left behind him home and kindred and all, until the day when he went up the sides of Moriah to offer there his son. Abraham met God's wishes because Abraham trusted and loved God.

And what about the Divine Friend? Did He not meet Abraham's wishes? You remember that wonderful scene, which presents, in such vivid and dramatic form, the everlasting truth that the man who bows his will to God, bows God's will to his, when he pleaded for Sodom, and won his case by persistence and importunity of lowly prayer. And these historical notices on both sides are for us the vehicles of the permanent truth that, if we are God's lovers and friends, we shall find nothing sweeter than bowing to His will and executing His commandments. As I dare say I have often said to you, the very mark and signature of love is that it delights to divine and fulfil the desires of the beloved, and that it moulds the will of each of the parties into conformity with the will of the other.

Ah, dear brethren I what a commentary our religion is. upon such thoughts! To how many of us is the very notion of religion that of a prohibition of things that we would much like to do, and of commands to do things that we had much rather not do? All the slavery of abject submission, of reluctant service, is clean swept away, when we understand that friendship and love find their supreme delight in discovering and in executing the will of the beloved. And surely if you and I are the friends of God, the cold words, 'duty,' 'must,' 'should,' will be struck out of our vocabulary and will be replaced by 'delight,' 'cannot but; 'will.' For friends find the very life - I was going to say the voice-of their friendship in mutual obedience.

And God, the heavenly Friend, will do what we wish. In that very connection did Jesus Christ put the two thoughts of friendship with Him and His executing His disciple's behests; saying in one breath, 'Ye are My friends if ye do whatsoever I command you,' and in the next, 'Ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.' This conformity of will, so that there is but one will in, the two hearts, which is the very consummation and superlative degree of human friendship and love, applies as truly to the friendship between man and God.

IV. Friends give gifts to each other.

Let us go back to our story. What did Abraham give God? ‘Forasmuch as he hath not withheld his only son from Me, I know that he fears Me.’ And what does God give to His friends? ‘He that spared not His own Son, but freely delivered Him up to the death for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?’ Abraham’s gift of his son to God was but a feeble shadow of God’s gift of His Son to men. And if the surrender on the part of the human friend was the infallible token of his love, surely the surrender on the part of the heavenly Friend is no less the infallible sign of His love to all the world. Generalise these thoughts and they come to this.

If we are God’s lovers God will give us Himself, in so far as we can receive Him; and all other gifts in so far as they are good and needful. If we are God’s friends and lovers we shall give Him, in glad surrender, our whole selves. And, remember, if you feel that you have separate interests from Him, if you keep things and do not let Him say, ‘These are mine’; if you grudge sacrifice, and will not hear of self-surrender, and are living lives centred in, ruled by, devoted to, self, you have little reason to call yourself a Christian. ‘Ye are My friends if ye’ - not only ‘do whatsoever I command you,’ but ‘if you give yourself to Me.’ Yield yourselves to God, and in the giving of yourselves to Him, you will get back yourselves glorified and blessed by the gift. There is no friendship if self shuts out the friend from participation in what is the other’s. As long as ‘mine’ lies on this side of a high wall, and ‘thine’ on the other, there is but little friendship. Down with the wall, and say about everything ‘Ours’; and then you have a right to say ‘I am the friend of God.’

V. Lastly, and but a word. Friends stand up for each other.

‘I am thy shield; fear not, Abraham,’ said God, when His friend was in danger from the vengeance of the Eastern kings whom he had defeated; and all through life the same strong arm was cast around him. Abraham, on his part, had to stand up for God amidst his heathen neighbours.

If we are God’s ‘friends and lovers He will take up our cause. Be sure that if God be for us, it matters not who is against us. If we are God’s friends and lovers we have to take up His cause. What would you think of a man who, in going away to a far-off country, said to some friend, ‘I wish you would look after so and so for me as long as I am gone’; and the friend would say ‘Yes!’ and never give a thought nor lift a finger to discharge the obligation? God trusts His reputation to you Christian people; He has interests in this world that you have to look after. You have to defend Him as really as He has to defend you. And it is the dreadful contradiction of religious people’s profession of religion that they often care so little, and do so little to promote the cause, to defend the name, to adorn the reputation, and to further what I may venture to call the interests, of their heavenly Friend in the world.

Dear brother, looking at these things, can you venture to say that you are a friend of God? If you cannot, what are you? Our relations to men admit of our dividing them into three - friends, enemies, nothings. We may love, we may hate, we may be absolutely indifferent and ignorant. I am afraid the three states cannot be transferred exactly to our relations to God. If not His friend, what are you? Have you only a far-off, bowing acquaintance with Him? Well, then, that is because you have neglected, if you have not spurned, His offered friendship. And, oh! how much you have lost! No human heart is a millionth part so sweet, and so capable of satisfying you as God’s. All friendship here has its limits, its changes, its end. God’s is boundless, immutable, eternal All things are the friends of God’s friend; and all things are arrayed against him who rejects God’s friendship.

I beseech you, let Him woo you to love Him; and yield your hearts to Him. ‘If when we were "enemies," we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son,’ much more, being friends, all the fulness of His love and the sweetness of His heart will be poured upon us through the living Christ.

10)James 3:1-15

James

A WATCH ON THE DOOR OF THE LIPS

Jam. 3:1-15

‘THERE is a recurrence to earlier teaching in Jam. 1:19; Jam. 1:26, which latter verse suggests the figure of the bridle. James has drunk deep into Old Testament teaching as to the solemn worth of speech, and into Christ’s declaration that by their words men will be justified or condemned.

No doubt, Eastern peoples are looser tongued than we Westerns are; but modern life, with its great development of cities and its swarm of newspapers and the like, has heightened the power of spoken and printed words, and made James’s exhortations even more necessary. His teaching here gathers round several images- the bridle, the fire, the untamed creature, the double fountain. We deal with these in order.

I. No doubt, in the infant Church, with its flexible organisation, there were often scenes very strange to our eyes, such as Paul hints at in 1Co. 14:26-33, where many voices of would-be teachers contended for a hearing.

James would check that unwholesome eagerness by the thought that teachers who do not practice what they preach will receive a heavier judgment than those who did not set up to be instructors. He humbly classes himself with the teachers. The ‘for’ of verse 2 introduces a reason for the advice in verse 1 - since it is hard to avoid falls, and harder in respect to speech than action, it is a dangerous ambition to be a teacher.

That thought leads on to the series of considerations as to the government of the tongue. He who can completely keep it under command is a ‘perfect’ man, because the difficulty of doing so is so great that the attainment of it is a test of perfection. James is like the Hebrew prophets, in that he does not so much argue as illustrate. His natural speech is imagery, and here he pours out a stream of it. The horse’s bridle and the ship’s rudder may be taken together as both illustrating the two points that the tongue guides the body, and that it is intended that the man should guide the tongue. These two ideas are fused together here. The bridle is put into the mouth, and what acts on the mouth influences the direction of the horse's course. The rudder is but a little bit of wood, hut its motion turns the great ship, even when driven by wild winds. 'So the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things,' which boasting is not false, for the whole point of the passage is that that little member has large power.

Is it true, as James says, that it governs our actions as the bridle does the horse, Or the rudder the ship? No doubt, many sins go straight from the inner chambers of the heart's desires out into the world of action without.going round by the way of speech; but still, if we think of the immense power of our own words and of others in setting our activities in motion, of the dreadful harvest of sin which has of ten sprung from one tempting word, of the ineffaceable traces of pollution which some vile book leaves in memory and heart, of the good and evil which have been wrought by spoken or printed words, and that never more truly than to-day, when a flood of talk all but drowns the world, we shall not think James exaggerating in the awful weight he gives to speech as the mother of action.

His other point is that this guiding power needs guidance. A firm yet gentle hand touches the rein, and the sensitive mouth yields to the light pressure. The steerman's hand pushes or draws the tiller an inch from or towards him, and the huge vessel yaws accordingly. Speech is often loose. Most men set less careful watch on the door of their lips than of their actions; but it would be wiser to watch the inner gate, which leads from thought to speech, than the outer one, which leads from speech to act. Idle words, rash words, unconsidered words, free-flowing words, make up much of our conversation. 'His tongue ran away with him' is too often true. It is hard but possible, and it is needful, to guide the helm, to keep a tight hand on the reins.

II. The next figure is that of the fire, suggested by the illustration of the small spark which sets a great forest ablaze.

Drop a match or a spark from a locomotive or a pipe in the prairie grass, and we know what comes. The illustration was begun to carry on the contrast between the small member and its great results; but James catches fire, and goes off after the new suggestion, 'The tongue is a fire.'

Our space forbids discussing the interpretation of the difficult verse 6, but the general bearing of it is clean It reiterates under a fresh figure the thought of the preceding verses as to the power of the tongue to set the whole body in motion. Only the imagery is more lurid, and suggests more fatal issues from an unhallowed tongue's influence. It 'defileth the whole body.' Foul speech, heard in schools or places of business, read in filthy books, heard in theatres, has polluted many a young life, and kindled fires which have destroyed a man, body and soul. Speech is like the axle which, when it gets heated, sets the wheel on fire. And what comes of the train then? And what set the axle ablaze? The sulphurous flames from the pit of Gehenna. No man who knows life, especially among young boys and young men, will think that James has lost the government of his tongue in speaking thus.

III. Next comes the figure of the untamable wild beast.

e need not pin James down to literal accuracy any more than to scientific classification in his zoology. His general statement is true enough for his purpose, for man has long ago tamed, and still continues to use as tamed, a crowd of animals of most diverse sorts, fierce and meek, noxious and harmless.

But, says James, in apparent contradiction to himself, there is one creature that resists all such efforts. Then what .is the sense of your solemn exhortations, James, if 'the tongue can no man tame'? In that case he who is able to bridle it must be more than a perfect man. Yes, James believed that, though he says little about it. He would have us put emphasis on 'no man.' Man's impossibilities are Christ's actualities. So we have here to fall back on James's earlier word, If any of you lack,... let him ask of God,... and it shall be given him.' The position of 'man' in the Greek is emphatic, and suggests that the thought of divine help is present to the Apostle.

He adds a characterisation of the tongue, which fits in with his image of an untamable brute: 'It is a restless evil,' like some caged but unsubdued wild animal, ever pacing uneasily up and down its den; 'full of deadly poison,' like some captured rattlesnake. The venom spurted out by a calumnious tongue is more deadly than any snake poison. Blasphemous words, or obscene words, shot into the blood by one swift dart of the fangs, may corrupt its whole current, and there is no Pasteur to expel the virus.

IV. The last image, that of the fountain, is adduced to illustrate the strange inconsistencies of men, as manifested in their speech.

Words of prayer and words of cursing come from the same lips. No doubt these hot tempered, and sometimes ferociously religious, Jewish Christians, to whom James speaks, had some among them whose portraits James is drawing here. ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth!’ is a strange sequel to ‘Blessed be he, the God of our fathers.’ But the combination has often been heard since. To Deums and anathemas have succeeded one another m strange union, and religious controversy has not always been conducted with perfect regard to James’s precepts.

Of course when the Apostle gibbets the grotesque inconsistency of such a union, he is not to be taken as allowing cursing, if it only keeps clear of ‘blessing God.’ Since the latter is the primary duty of all, and the highest exercise of the great gift of speech, anything inconsistent with it is absolutely forbidden, and to show the inconsistency is to condemn the act.

Further, the assertion that ‘salt water cannot yield sweet’ implies that the ‘cursing’ destroys the reality of the verbal ‘blessing God.’ If a man says both, the imprecation is his genuine voice, and the other is mere wind.

The fountain is deeper than the tongue. From the heart are the issues of life. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh, and clear, pure waters will not well out thence unless the heart has been cleansed by Christ entering into it. Only when that tree of life is cast into the waters are they made sweet. When Christ governs us, we can govern our hearts and our lips, and through these our whole bodies and all their activities.

1 Peter

1) 1 PETER 1:1
2) 1 PETER 1:5
3) 1 PETER 1:5
4) 1 PETER 1:6

5) 1 PETER 1:7
6) 1 PETER 1:8
7) 1 PETER 1:10-12
8) 1 PETER 1:13
9) 1 PETER 1:15
10) 1 PETER 1:17
11) 1 PETER 1:22
12) 1 PETER 2:4-5

13) 1 PETER 2:5
14) 1 PETER 2:9
15) 1 PETER 2:21
16) 1 PETER 3:14-15
17) 1 PETER 4:1-8
18) 1 PETER 4:2-3
19) 1 PETER 5:5
20) 1 PETER 5:12
21) 1 PETER 5:12
22) 1 PETER 5:13
23) 1 PETER 5:13

1) 1 Peter 1:1

1 Peter

SOJOURNERS OF THE DISPERSION

1Pe. 1:1

The words rendered ‘strangers scattered’ are literally ‘sojourners of the Dispersion,’ and are so rendered in the Revised Version. The Dispersion was the recognised name for the Jews dwelling in Gentile countries; as, for instance, it is employed in John’s Gospel, when the people in Jerusalem say, ‘Whither will this man go that we shall not find Him? Will he go to the Dispersion amongst the Greeks?’ Obviously, therefore the word here may refer to the scattered Jewish people, but the question arises whether the letter corresponds to its apparent address, or whether the language which is employed in it does not almost oblige us to see here a reference, not to the Jew, but to the whole body of Christian people, who, whatever may be their outward circumstances, are, in the deepest sense, in the foundations of their life, if they be Christ’s, ‘strangers of the Dispersion.’

Now if we look at the letter we find such words as these--’The times of your ignorance’--’your vain manner of life handed down from your fathers’--’in time past were not a people’--’the time past may suffice to have wrought the will of the Gentiles’--all of which, as you see, can only be accommodated to Jewish believers by a little gentle violence, but all of which find a proper significance if we suppose them addressed to Gentiles, to whom they are only applicable in the higher sense of the words to which I have referred. If we understand them so, we have here an instance of what runs all through the letter; the taking hold of Jewish ideas for the purpose of lifting them into a loftier region, and transfiguring them into the expression of Christian truth. For example, we read in it: ‘Ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation’; and again: ‘Ye are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices.’ These and other similar passages are instances of precisely the same transference of Jewish ideas as I find, in accordance with many good commentators, in the words of my text.

So, then, here is Peter’s notion of--

I. What the Christian Life is.

All those who really have faith in Jesus Christ are ‘strangers of the Dispersion’; scattered throughout the world, and dwelling dispersedly in an order of things to which they do not belong, ‘seeking a city which hath foundations.’ The word ‘strangers’ means, originally, persons for a time living in an alien city. And that is the idea that the Apostle would impress upon us as true for each of us, in the measure in which our Christianity is real. For, remember, although all men may be truly spoken of as being ‘pilgrims and sojourners upon the earth’ by reason of both the shortness of the duration of their earthly course and the disproportion between their immortal part and the material things amongst which they dwell, Peter is thinking of something very different from either the brevity of earthly life or the infinite necessities of an immortal spirit when he calls his Christian brethren strangers. Not because we are men, not because we are to die soon, and the world is to outlast us; not because other people will one day live in our houses and read our books and sit upon our chairs, and we shall be forgotten, but because we are Christ’s people are we here sojourners, and must regard this as not our rest. Not because our immortal soul cannot satisfy itself, however it tries, upon the trivialities of earth any more than a human appetite can on the husks that the swine do eat, but because new desires, tastes, aspirations, affinities, have been kindled in us by the new life that has flowed into us; therefore the connection that other men have with the world, which makes some of them altogether ‘men of the world, whose portion is in this life,’ is for us broken, and we are strangers, scattered abroad, solitary, not by reason of the inevitable loneliness in which, after all love and companionship, every soul lives; not by reason of losses or deaths, but by reason of the contrariety between the foundation of our lives, and the foundation of the lives of the men round us; therefore we stand lonely in the midst of crowds; strangers in the ordered communities of the world.

Ah, there is no solitude so utter as the solitude of being the only man in a crowd that has a faith in his heart, and there is no isolating power like the power of rending all ties that true attachment with Jesus Christ has. ‘Think not that I am come to bring peace on earth, but a sword’--to set a man against his own household, if they be not of the household of faith. These things are the inevitable issues of religion--to make us strangers, isolated in the midst of this world.

And now let us think of--

II. Some of the plain consequent duties that arise from this characteristic of the Christian Life.

Let me put them in the shape of one or two practical counsels. First let us try to keep up, vivid and sharp, a sense of separation. I do not mean that we should withdraw ourselves from sympathies, nor from services, nor from the large area of common ground which we have with our fellows, whether they be Christians or no--with our fellow-citizens; with those who are related to us by various bonds, by community of purpose, of aim, of opinion, or of affection. But just as Abraham was willing to go down into the plain and fight for Lot, though he would not go down and live in Sodom, and just as he would enter into relations of amity with the men of the land, and yet would not abandon his black camels’-hair tent, pitched beneath the terebinth tree, in order to go into their city and abide with them, so one great part of the wisdom of a Christian man is to draw the line of separation decisively, and yet to keep true to the bond of union. Unless Christian people do make a distinct effort to keep themselves apart from the world and its ways, they will get confounded with these, and when the end comes they will be destroyed with them.

Sometimes voyagers find upon some lonely island an English castaway, who has forgotten home, and duty, and everything else, to luxuriate in an easy life beneath tropical skies, and has degraded himself to the level of the savage islanders round him. There are professing Christians--perhaps in my audience--who, like that poor castaway, have ‘forgotten the imperial palace whence they came,’ and have gone down and down and down, to live the fat, contented, low lives of the men who find their good upon earth and not in heaven. Do you, dear brethren, try to keep vivid the sense that you belong to another community. As Paul puts it, with a metaphor drawn from Gentile instead of from Jewish life, as in our text, ‘Our citizenship is in heaven.’ Philippi, to the Christian Church of which that was said, was a Roman colony; and the characteristics of a Roman colony were that the inhabitants were enrolled as members of the Roman tribes, and had their names on the register of Rome, and were governed by its laws. So we, living here in an outlying province, have our names written in the ‘Golden Book’ of the citizens of the new Jerusalem. Do not forget, if I might use a very homely illustration, what parish your settlement is in; remember what kingdom you belong to.

Again, if we are strangers of the Dispersion, let us live by our own country’s laws, and not by the codes that are current in this foreign land where we are settled for a time. You remember what was the complaint of the people in Persia to Esther’s king? ‘There is a people whose laws are different from all the peoples that be upon the earth.’ That was an offence that could not be tolerated in a despotism that ground everything down to the one level of a slavish uniformity. It will be well for us Christian people if men look at us, and say, ‘Ah, that man has another rule of conduct from the one that prevails generally. I wonder what is the underlying principle of his life; it evidently is not the same as mine.’

Live by our King’s law. People in our colonies, at least the officials, set wonderful store by the approbation of the Colonial Office at home. It does not matter what the colonial newspapers say, it is ‘what will they say in Downing Street?’ And if a despatch goes out approving of their conduct, neighbours may censure and sneer as they list. So we Christians have to report to Home, and have so to live ‘that whether present or absent’--in a colony or in the mother country--’we may be well pleasing unto Him.’

Keep up the honour and advance the interests of your own country. You are here, among other reasons, to represent your King, and people take their notions of Him very considerably from their experience of you. So see to it that you live like the Master whom you say you serve.

The Russian Government sends out what are called military colonies, studded along the frontier, with the one mission of extending the empire. We are set along the frontier with the same mission. The strangers are scattered. Congested, they would be less useful; dispersed, they may push forward the frontiers. Seed in a seed-basket is not in its right place; but sown broadcast over the field, it will be waving wheat in a month or two. 'Ye are the salt of the earth'--salt is sprinkled over what it is intended to preserve. You are the strangers of the Dispersion, that you may be the messengers of the Evangelisation.

Lastly, let us be glad when we think, and let us often think, of--

III. The Home in Glory.

That is a beautiful phrase which pairs off with the one in my text, in which another Apostle speaks of the ultimate end as 'our gathering together in Christ.' All the scattered ones, like chips of wood in a whirlpool, drift gradually closer and closer, until they unite in a solid mass in the centre. So at the last the 'strangers' are to be brought and settled in their own land, and their lonely lives are to be filled with happy companionship, and they to be in a more blessed unity than now. 'Fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God.' If we, dwelling in this far-off land, were habitually to talk, as Australians do of coming to England of 'going home,' though born in the colony, it would be a glad day for us when we set out on the journey. If Christian people lived more by faith, as they profess to do, and less by sight, they would oftener think of the home-coming and the union; and would be happy when they thought that they were here but for awhile, and when they realised these two blessed elements of permanence and of companionship, which another Apostle packs into one sentence, along with that which is greater than them both, 'so shall we ever be with the Lord.'

2) 1 Peter 1:5

KEEPING AND KEPT

Pro. 4:23. - 1Pe. 1:5.

The former of these texts imposes a stringent duty, the latter promises divine help to perform it. The relation between them is that between the Law and the Gospel. The Law commands, the Gospel gives power to obey. The Law pays no attention to man’s weakness, and points no finger to the source of strength. Its office is to set clearly forth what we ought to be, not to aid us in becoming so. ‘Here is your duty, do it’ is, doubtless, a needful message, but it is a chilly one, and it may well be doubted if it ever rouses a soul to right action. Moralists have hammered away at preaching self-restraint and a close watch over the fountain of actions within from the beginning, but their exhortations have little effect unless they can add to their icy injunctions the warmth of the promise of our second text, and point to a divine Keeper who will make duty possible. We must be kept by God, if we are ever to succeed in keeping our wayward hearts.

I. Without our guarding our hearts, no noble life is possible.

The Old Testament psychology differs from our popular allocation of certain faculties to bodily organs. We use head and heart, roughly speaking, as being respectively the seats of thought and of emotion. But the Old Testament locates in the heart the centre of personal being. It is not merely the home of the affections, but the seat of will, moral purpose. As this text says, ‘the issues of life’ flow from it in all the multitudinous variety of their forms. The stream parts into many heads, but it has one fountain. To the Hebrew thinkers the heart was the indivisible, central unity which manifested itself in the whole of the outward life. ‘As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.’ The heart is the man. And that personal centre has a moral character which comes to light in, and gives unity and character to, all his deeds.

That solemn thought that every one of us has a definite moral character, and that our deeds are not an accidental set of outward actions but flow from an inner fountain, needs to be driven home to our consciences, for most of the actions of most men are done so mechanically, and reflected on so little by the doers, that the conviction of their having any moral character at all, or of our incurring any responsibility for them, is almost extinct in us, unless when something startles conscience into protest.

It is this shrouded inner self to which supreme care is to be directed. All noble ethical teaching concurs in this-that a man who seeks to be right must keep, in the sense both of watching and of guarding, his inner self. Conduct is more easily regulated than character-and less worth regulating. It avails little to plant watchers on the stream half way to the sea. Control must be exercised at the source, if it is to be effectual. The counsel of our first text is a commonplace of all wholesome moral teaching since the beginning of the world. The phrase 'with all diligence' is literally 'above all guarding,' and energetically expresses the supremacy of this keeping. It should be the foremost, all-pervading aim of every wise man who would not let his life run to waste. It may be turned into more modern language, meaning just what this ancient sage meant, if we put it as, 'Guard thy character with more carefulness than thou dost thy most precious possessions, for it needs continual watchfulness, and, untended, will go to rack and ruin.' The exhortation finds a response in every heart, and may seem too familiar and trite to bear dwelling on, but we may be allowed to touch lightly on one or two of the plain reasons which enforce it on every man who is not what Proverbs very unpolitely calls 'a fool.'

That guarding is plainly imposed as necessary, by the very constitution of our manhood. Our nature is evidently not a republic, but a monarchy. It is full of blind impulses, and hungry desires, which take no heed of any law but their own satisfaction. If the reins are thrown on the necks of these untamed horses, they will drag the man to destruction. They are only safe when they are curbed and bitted, and held well in. Then there are tastes and inclinations which need guidance and are plainly meant to be subordinate. The will is to govern all the lower self, and conscience is to govern the will. Unmistakably there are parts of every man's nature which are meant to serve, and parts which are appointed to rule, and to let the servants usurp the place of the rulers is to bring about as wild a confusion within as the Ecclesiast lamented that he had seen in the anarchic times when he wrote-princes walking and beggars on horseback. As George Herbert has it-

'Give not thy humours way;
God gave them to thee under lock and key.'

Then, further, that guarding is plainly imperative, because there is an outer world which appeals to our needs and desires, irrespective altogether of right and wrong and of the moral consequences of gratifying these. Put a loaf before a starving man and his impulse will be to clutch and devour it, without regard to whether it is his or no. Show any of our animal propensities its appropriate food, and it asks no questions as to right or wrong, but is stirred to grasp its natural food. And even the higher and nobler parts of our nature are but too apt to seek their gratification without having the license of conscience for doing so, and sometimes in defiance of its plain prohibitions. It is never safe to trust the guidance of life to tastes, inclinations, or to anything but clear reason, set in motion by calm will, and acting under the approbation of 'the Lord Chief Justice, Conscience.'

But again, seeing that the world has more evil than good in it, the keeping of the heart will always consist rather in repelling solicitations to yielding to evil. In short, the power and the habit of sternly saying 'No' to the whole crowd of tempters is always the main secret of a noble life. 'He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down and without walls.'

II. There is no effectual guarding unless God guards.

The counsel in Proverbs is not mere toothless moral commonplace, but is associated, in the preceding chapter, with fatherly advice to 'let thine heart keep my commandments' and to 'trust in the Lord with all thine heart.' The heart that so trusts will be safely guarded, and only such a heart will be. The inherent weakness of all attempts at self-keeping is that keeper and kept being one and the same personality, the more we need to be kept the less able we are to effect it. If in the very garrison are traitors, how shall the fortress be defended? If, then, we are to exercise an effectual guard over our characters and control over our natures, we must have an outward standard of right and wrong which shall not be deflected by variations in our temperature. We need a fixed light to steer towards, which is stable on the stable shore, and is not tossing up and down on our decks. We shall cleanse our way only when we 'take heed thereto, according to Thy word.' For even

God’s viceroy within, the sovereign conscience, can be warped, perverted, silenced, and is not immune from the spreading infection of evil. When it turns to God, as a mirror to the sun, it is irradiated and flashes bright illumination into dark corners, but its power depends on its being thus lit by radiations from the very Light of Life. And if we are ever to have a coercive power over the rebellious powers within, we must have God’s power breathed into us, giving grip and energy to all the good within, quickening every lofty desire, satisfying every aspiration that feels after Him, cowing all our evil and being the very self of ourselves.

We need an outward motive which will stimulate and stir to effort. Our wills are lamed for good, and the world has strong charms that appeal to us. And if we are not to yield to these, there must be somewhere a stronger motive than any that the sorceress world has in its stores, that shall constrainingly draw us to ways that, because they tend upward, and yield no pabulum for the lower self, are difficult for sluggish feet. To the writer of this Book of Proverbs the name of God bore in it such a motive. To us the name of Jesus, which is Love, bears a yet mightier appeal, and the motive which lies in His death for us is strong enough, and it alone is strong enough, to fire our whole selves with enthusiastic, grateful love, which will burn up our sloth, and sweep our evil out of our hearts, and make us swift and glad to do all that may please Him. If there must be fresh reinforcements thrown into the town of Mansoul, as there must be if it is not to be captured, there is one sure way of securing these. Our second text tells us whence the relieving force must come. If we are to keep our hearts with all diligence, we must be ‘kept by the power of God,’ and that power is not merely to make diversion outside the beleaguered fortress which may force the besiegers to retreat and give up their effort, but is to enter in and possess the soul which it wills to defend. It is when the enemy sees that new succours have, in some mysterious way, been introduced, that he gives up his siege. It is God in us that is our security.

III. There is no keeping by God without faith.

Peter was an expert in such matters, for he had had a bitter experience to teach him how soon and surely self-confidence became self-despair. ‘Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I,’ was said but a few hours before he denied Jesus. His faith failed, and then the divine guard that was keeping his soul passed thence, and, left alone, he fell.

That divine Power is exerted for our keeping on condition of our trusting ourselves to Him and trusting Him for ourselves. And that condition is no arbitrary one, but is prescribed by the very nature of divine help and of human faith. If God could keep our souls without our trust in Him He would. He does so keep them as far as is possible, but for all the choicer blessings of His giving, and especially for that of keeping us free from the domination of our lower selves, there must be in us faith if there is to be in God help. The hand that lays hold on God in Christ must be stretched out and must grasp His warm, gentle, and strong hand, if the tingling touch of it is to infuse strength. If the relieving force is victoriously to enter our hearts, we must throw open the gates and welcome it. Faith is but the open door for God's entrance. It has no efficacy in itself any more than a door has, but all its blessedness depends on what it admits into the hidden chambers of the heart.

I reiterate what I have tried to show in these poor words. There is no noble life without our guarding our hearts; there is no effectual guarding unless God guards; there is no divine guarding unless through our faith. It is vain to preach self-governing and self-keeping. Unless we can tell the beleaguered heart, 'The Lord is thy Keeper; He will keep thee from all evil; He will keep thy soul,' we only add one more impossible command to a man's burden. And we do not apprehend nor experience the divine keeping in its most blessed and fullest reality, unless we find it in Jesus, who is 'able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.'

3) 1 Peter 1:5

1 Peter

BY, THROUGH, UNTO

1Pe. 1:5

The Revised Version substitutes ‘guarded’ for ‘kept,’ and the alteration, though slight, is important, for it not only more accurately preserves the meaning of the word employed, but it retains the military metaphor which is in it. The force of the expression will appear if I refer, in a sentence, to other cases in which it is employed in the New Testament. For instance, we read that the governor of Damascus ‘kept the city with a garrison,’ which is the same word, and in its purely metaphorical usage Paul employs it when he says that ‘the peace of God shall keep’--guard, garrison--’your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.’ We have to think of some defenceless position, some unwalled village out in the open, with a strong force round it, through which no assailant can break, and in the midst of which the weakest can sit secure. Peter thinks that every Christian has assailants whom no Christian by himself can repel, but that he may, if he likes, have an impregnable ring of defence drawn round him, which shall fling back in idle spray the wildest onset of the waves, as a breakwater or a cliff might do.

Then there is another very beautiful and striking point to be made, and that is the connection between the words of my text and those immediately preceding. The Apostle has been speaking about ‘the inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away,’ and he says ‘it is reserved in Heaven for you who are kept.’ So, then, the same power is working on both sides of the veil, preserving the inheritance for the heirs, and preserving the heirs for the inheritance. It will not fail them, and they will not miss it. It were of little avail to care for either of the two members separately, but the same hand that is preparing the inheritance and making it ready for the owners is round about the pilgrims, and taking care of them till they get home.

So, then, our Apostle is looking at this keeping in three aspects, suggested by his three words ‘by,’ ‘through,’ ‘unto,’ which respectively express the real cause or power, the condition or occasion on which that power works, and the end or purpose to which it works. So these three little words will do for lines on which to run our thoughts now--’by,’ ‘through,’ ‘for.’

I. In the first place, what are we guarded for?

‘Guarded ... unto salvation.’ Now that great word ‘salvation’ was a new and strange one to Peter’s readers--so new and strange that probably they did not understand it in its full nobleness and sweep. Our understanding of it, or, at least, our impression of it, is weakened by precisely the opposite cause. It has become so tarnished and smooth-rubbed that it creates very little definite impression. Like a bit of seaweed lifted out of the sunny waves which opened its fronds and brightened its delicate colours, it has become dry and hard and sapless and dim. But let me try for one moment to freshen it for our conceptions and our hearts. Salvation has in it the double idea of being made safe, and being made sound. Peril threatening to slay, and sickness unto death, are the implications of the conditions which this great word presupposes. The man that needs to be saved needs to be rescued from peril and needs to be healed of a disease. And if you do not know and feel that that is you, then you have not learned the first letters of the alphabet which are necessary to spell 'salvation.' You, I, every man, we are all sick unto death, because the poison of self-will and sin is running hot through all our veins, and we are all in deadly peril because of that poison-peril of death, peril arising from the weight of guilt that presses upon us, peril from our inevitable collision with the Divine law and government which make for righteousness.

And so salvation means, negatively, the deliverance from all the evils, whether they be evils of sorrow or evils of sin, which can affect a man, and which do affect us all in some measure. But it means far more than that, for God's salvation is no half-and-half thing, contented, as some benevolent man might be, in a widespread flood or disaster, with rescuing the victims and putting them high up enough for the water not to reach them, and leaving them there shivering cold and starving. But when God begins by taking away evils, it is in order that He may clear a path for flooding us with good. And so salvation is not merely what some of you think it is, the escape from a hell, nor only what some of you more nobly take it to be, a deliverance from the power of sin in your hearts; but it is the investiture of each of us with every good and glory, whether of happiness or of purity, which it is possible for a man to receive and for God to give. It is the great word of the New Testament, and they do a very questionable service to humanity who weaken the grandeur and the greatness of the Scriptural conception of salvation, by weakening the darkness and the terribleness of the Scriptural conception of the dangers and the sicknesses from which it delivers.

But, then, there is another point that I would suggest raised by the words of my text in their connection. Peter is here evidently speaking about a future manifestation of absolute exemption from all the ills that flesh and spirit are heir to, and radiant investure with all the good that humanity can put on, which lies beyond the great barrier of this mortal life. And that complete salvation, in its double aspect, is obviously the end for which all that guarding of life is lavished upon us, as it is the end for which all the discipline of life is given to us, and as it is the end for which the bitter agony and pain of the Christ on the Cross were freely rendered. But that ultimate and superlative perfection has its roots and its beginning here. And so in Scripture you find salvation sometimes regarded as a thing in the past experience of every Christian man which he received at the very beginning of his course, and sometimes you have it treated as being progressive, running on continually through all his days; and sometimes you have it treated, as in my text, as laid up yonder, and only to be reached when life is done with. But just a verse or two after my text we read that the Christian man here, on condition of his loving Jesus Christ and believing in Him, rejoices because he here and now ‘receives the end of his faith, even the salvation of his soul.’ And so there are the two things--the incipient germ to-day, the full-foliaged fruit-bearing tree planted in the higher house of the Lord.

These two things are inseparably intertwined. The Christian life in its imperfection here, the partial salvation of to-day demands, unless the universe is a chaos and there is no personal God the centre of it, a future life, in which all that is here tendency shall be realised possession, and in which all that here but puts up a pale and feeble shoot above the ground, shall grow and blossom and bear fruit unto life eternal. ‘Like the new moon with a ragged edge, e’en in its imperfections beautiful,’ all the characteristics of Christian life on earth prophesy that the orb is crescent, and will one day round itself into its pure silvery completeness. If you see a great wall in some palace, with slabs of polished marble for most of its length, and here and there stretches of course rubble shoved in, you would know that that was not the final condition, that the rubble had to be cased over, or taken out and replaced by the lucent slab that reflected the light, and showed, by its reflecting, its own mottled beauty. Thus the very inconsistencies, the thwarted desires, the broken resolutions, the aspiration that never can clothe themselves in the flesh of reality, which belong to the Christian life, declare that this is but the first stage of the structure, and point onwards to the time when the imperfections shall be swept away, ‘and for brass He will bring gold, for iron He will bring silver,’ and then the windows shall be set ‘in agates, and the gates in carbuncles, and all the borders in pleasant stones.’ Perfect salvation is obviously the only issue of the present imperfect salvation.

That is what you are ‘kept’ for. That is what Christ died to bring you. That is what God, like a patient workman bringing out the pattern in his loom by many a throw of a sharp-pointed shuttle, and much twisting of the threads into patterns, is trying to make of you, and that is what Christ on the Cross has died to effect. Brethren, let us think more than we do, not only of the partial beginnings here, but of that perfect salvation for which Christian men are being ‘kept’ and guarded, and which, if you and I will observe the conditions, is as sure to come as that X, Y, Z follow A, B, C. That is what we are kept for.

II. Notice what we are guarded by.

‘The power of God,’ says Peter, laying hold of the most general expression that he can find, not caring to define ways and means, but pointing to the one great force that is sure to do it.

Now if we were to translate with perfect literality, we should read, not by the power of God, but in the power of God. And whilst it is quite probable that what Peter meant was ‘by,’ I think it adds great force and beauty to the passage, and is entirely accordant with the military metaphor, which I have already pointed out, if we keep the simple local sense of the word, and read, ‘guarded in the power of God.’ And that suggests a whole stream of Scriptural representations, both in the Old and in the New Testament. Let me recall one or two. ‘The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it and is safe.’ ‘He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.’ ‘Israel shall dwell safely,’ says one of the old prophets, ‘in unwalled villages, for I will be a wall of fire round about her.’ The psalmist said, ‘The Angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him.’ And all these representations concur in this one thought, that we are safe, enclosed in God, and that He, by His power, compasses us about. And so no foe can get at us who cannot break down or climb over the encircling wall of defence. An army in an enemy's country will march in hollow square, and put its most precious treasures, or its weaker members, its sick, its women, its children, its footsore, into the middle there, and with a line of lances on either side, and stalwart arms to wield them, the feeblest need fear no foe. We 'are kept in the power of God unto salvation.'

But do not forget how, far beyond the psalmist and prophet, and in something far more sublime and wonderful than a poetic figure, the New Testament catches up the same phrase, and gives us, as the condition of vitality, as the condition of fertility, as the condition of tranquillity, as the condition of security, the same thing--'in Christ.' Remember His very last words prior to His great intercessory prayer, in which He spoke about keeping those that were given Him in His name. And just before that He said to them, 'In the world ye shall have tribulation, but in Me ye shall have peace.' Kept, guarded as behind the battlements of some great fort, which has in its centre a quiet, armoured chamber into which no noise of battle, nor shout of foeman, can ever come. 'In Christ,' though the world is all in arms without, 'ye shall have peace.' 'Guarded in the power of God unto salvation.'

III. Lastly, what we are kept through.

'Through faith.' Now there we come across another of the words which we know so well that we do not understand them. You all think that it is the right thing for me to preach about 'faith.' I daresay some of you have never tried to apprehend what it means. And I daresay there are a great many of you to whom the utterance of the word suggests that I am plunging into the bathos and commonplaces of the pulpit. Perhaps, if you would try to understand it, you would find it was a bigger thing than you fancied. What is faith? I will give you another expression that has not so many theological accretions sticking to it, and which means precisely the same thing--trust. And we all know that we do not trust with our heads, but with our hearts and wills. You may believe undoubtedly, and have no faith at all, for it is the heart and the will that go forth, and clutch at the thing trusted; or, as I should rather say, at the person trusted; for, at bottom, what we trust is always a person, and even when we ‘trust to nature,’ it is because, more or less clearly, we feel that somehow or other at the back of nature there is a Will and an Intelligence that are working and trustworthy. However, that is a subject that I do not need to touch upon here. Faith is trust, trust in a Person, trust that, like the fabled goddess rising, radiant and aspiring to the heavens, out of the roll of the tempestuous ocean, springs from the depths of absolute self-distrust and diffidence. There is a spurious kind of faith which has no good in it, just because it did not begin with going down into the depths of one’s own heart, and finding out how rotten and hopeless everything was there. My friend, no man has a vigorous Christian faith who has not been very near utter despair. ‘Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee.’ The zenith, which is the highest point in the sky above us, is always just as far aloft as the nadir, which is the lowest point in the sky at the Antipodes, is beneath us. Your faith is measured by your self-despair.

Further, why is it that I must have faith in order to get God’s power at work in me? Many people seem to think that faith is appointed by God as the condition of salvation out of mere arbitrary selection and caprice. Not at all. If God could save you without your faith, He would do it. He does not, because He cannot. Why must I have faith in order that God’s power may keep me? Why must you open your window in order to let the fresh air in? Why must you pull up the blind in order to let the light in? Why must you take your medicine or your food if you want to be cured or nourished? Why must you pull the trigger if your revolver is to go off? Unless I trust God, distrusting myself, and the spark of faith is struck out of the rock of my heart by the sharp steel in the midst of the darkness of despair, God cannot pour out upon me His power. There is nothing arbitrary about it. It is inseparable from the very nature of the case. If you do not want Him, you cannot have Him. If you do not know that you need Him, you cannot have Him. If you do not trust that He will come to you and help you, you will not have Him.

So then, brother, your faith, my faith, anybody’s faith is nothing of itself. It is only the valve that opens and lets the steam rush in. It is only the tap you turn to let Thirlmere come into your basins. It is not you that saves yourself. It is not your faith that keeps you, any more than it is the outstretched hand with which a man, ready to stumble, grasps the hand of a stalwart, steadfast man on the pavement by his side that keeps him up. It is the other man's hand that holds you up, but it is your hand that lays hold of him. It is God that saves, it is God that guards, it is God that is able to keep us from falling, and to give us an inheritance among all them that are sanctified. He will do it if we turn to Him, and ask and expect Him to do it. If you will comply with the conditions and not else, He will fulfil His promise and accomplish His purpose. But my unbelief can thwart Omnipotence, and hinder Christ's all-loving purpose, just as on earth we read that 'He could there do no mighty works because of their unbelief.' I am sure that there are people here who all their lives long have been thus hampering Omnipotence and neutralising the love of Christ, and making His sacrifice impotent and His wish to save them vain. Stretch out your hands as this very Peter once did, crying, 'Lord, save, or I perish'; and He will answer, not by word only, but by act: 'According to thy faith be it unto thee.' Salvation, here and hereafter, is God's work alone. It cannot be exercised towards a man who has not faith. It will certainly be exercised towards any man who has.

Help us, O Lord, we beseech Thee, to live the lives which we live in the flesh by the faith of the Son of God. And may we know what it is to be in him, strengthened within the might of His spirit.

4) 1 Peter 1:6

1 Peter

SORROWFUL, YET ALWAYS REJOICING

1Pe. 1:6

You will remember the great saying of our Lord's in the Sermon on the Mount, in which He makes the last of the beatitudes, that which He pronounces upon His disciples, when men shall revile them and persecute them, and speak all manner of evil falsely against them for His sake, and bids them rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is their reward in Heaven.

Now it seems to me that in the words of my text there is a distinct echo of that saying of Christ's. For not only is the whole context the same, but a somewhat unusual and very strong word which our Lord employs is also employed here by Peter. ‘Rejoice and be exceeding glad,’ said Christ. ‘Ye rejoice greatly,’ said the Apostle, and he is echoing his Master’s word. Then with regard to the context; Christ proposes to His followers this exceeding gladness as evoked in their hearts by the very thing that might seem to militate against it--viz., men’s antagonism. Similarly, Peter, throughout this whole letter, and in my text, is heartening the disciples against impending persecution, and, like his Lord, he bids them face it, if not ‘with frolic welcome’ at all events with undiminished and undimmed serenity and cheerfulness. Christ based the exhortation on the thought that great would be their reward in Heaven. Peter points to the salvation ready to be revealed as being the ground of the joy that he enjoined. So in the words and in the whole strain and structure of the exhortation the servant is copying his Master.

But, of course, although the immediate application of these words is to Churches fronting the possibility and probability of actual persecution and affliction for the sake of Jesus Christ, the principle involved applies to us all. And the worries and the sorrows of our daily life need the exhortation here, quite as much as did the martyr’s pains. White ants will pick a carcass clean as soon as a lion will, and there is quite as much wear and tear of Christian gladness arising from the small frictions of our daily life as from the great strain and stress of persecution.

So our Apostle has a word for us all. Now it seems to me that in this text there are three things to be noticed: a paradox, a possibility, a duty. ‘In which ye rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.’ Look at these three points.

I. This paradox.

Two emotions diametrically opposed are to be contained within the narrow room of one disposition and temper. ‘Ye greatly rejoice.... Ye are in heaviness.’ Can such a thing be? Well! let us think for a moment. The sources of the two conflicting emotions are laid out before us; they may be constantly operative in every life. On the one hand, ‘in which ye greatly rejoice.’ Now that ‘in which’ does not point back only to the words that immediately precede, but to the whole complex clause that goes before.

And what is the ‘which’ that is there? These things; the possession of a new life--’Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who hath begotten us again!’--the springing up in a man’s heart of a strange new hope, like a new star that swims into the sky, and sheds a radiance all about it--’Begotten unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’; a new wealth--an ‘inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away; a new security--guarded by the power of God through faith unto salvation.’ These things belong, ipso facto, and in the measure of his faith, to every Christian man, a new life, a new hope, a new wealth, and a new security; and in their conjoint action, all four of them brought to bear upon a man’s temper and spirit, will, if he is realising them, make him glad.

Then, on the other hand, we have other fountains pouring their streams into the same reservoir. And just as the deep fountains which are open to us by faith will, if we continue to exercise that faith, flood our spirits with sweet waters, so these other fountains will pour their bitter floods over every heart more or less abundantly and continually. ‘Now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.’ There are confluent streams that one has sometimes seen, where a clear river joins, and flows in the same bed with, one all foul with half-melted ice, and the two run side by side for a space, scarcely mingling their waters. Thus the paradox of the Christian life is that within the same narrow banks may flow the sunny and the turbid, the clear and the dark, the sorrow that springs from earthly fountains, the joy that pours from the heavenly heights.

Now notice that this is only one case of the paradox of the whole Christian life. For the peculiarity of it is that it owns two;--it belongs to, and is exposed to, all the influences of the forces and things of time, whilst in regard to its depths, it belongs to, and is under the influence of, ‘the things that are unseen and eternal’; so that you have the external life common to the Christian and to all other people, and then you have the life ‘hid with Christ in God,’ the roots of it going down through all the superficial soil, and grappling the central rock of all things. Thus a series of paradoxes and perennial contradictions describes the twofold life that every believing spirit lives, ‘as unknown and yet well known, as dying and, behold we live, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making rich, as having nothing and yet possessing all things.’

Remember, too, that according to Peter’s conception neither of these two sources pours out a flood which obliterates or dams back the other. They are to co-exist. The joy is not to deprive the heaviness of its weight, nor the sorrow of its sting. There is no artificial stoicism about Christianity, no attempt to sophisticate one’s self out of believing in the reality of the evils that assail us, or to forbid that we shall feel their pain and their burden. Many good people fail to get the good of life’s discipline, because they have somehow come to think that it is wrong to weep when Christ sends sorrows, and wrong to feel, as other men feel, the grip and bite of the manifold trials of our earthly lives. ‘Weep for yourselves,’ for the feeling of the sorrow is the precedent condition to the benefit from the sorrow, and it yields ‘the peaceable fruit of righteousness to them that are exercised thereby.’

But, on the other hand, the black stream is not to bank up the sunny one, or prevent it from flowing into the heart, ay! and flowing over, the other. And so the co-existence of the joys that come from above, and the sorrows that spring from around, and some of them from beneath, is the very secret of the Christian life.

II. Further, consider the blessed possibility of this paradox.

Can two conflicting emotions live in a man’s heart at once? Rather, we might ask, are there ever emotions in a man’s heart that are not hemmed in by conflicting ones? Is there ever such a thing in the world’s experience as a pure joy, or as a confidence which has no trace of fear in it? Are there any pictures without shadows? They are only daubs if they are. Instead of wondering at this co-existence of joy and sorrow, we must recognise that it is in full accord with all our experience, which never brings a joy, but, like the old story of the magic palace, there is one window unlighted, and which never brings a sorrow so black and over-arching so completely the whole sky, but that somewhere, if the eye would look for it, there is a bit of blue. The possibility of the paradox is in accordance with all human experience.

But then, you say, ‘my feelings of joy or sorrow are very largely a matter of temperament, and still more largely a matter of responding to the facts round about me. And I cannot pump up emotions to order; and if I could they would be factitious, artificial, insincere, and do me more harm than good.' Perfectly true. There are a great many ugly names for manufactured emotions, and none of them a bit too ugly. Peter does not wish you to try to get up feeling to order. It is the bane of some type of Christianity that that is done. You cannot thus manufacture emotion. No; but I will tell you what you can do. You can determine what you will think about most, and what you will look at most, and if you settle that, that will settle what you feel. And so, though it is by a roundabout way, we can regulate our emotions. A man travelling in a railway train can choose which side of the carriage he will look out at, either the one where the sunshine is falling full on the front of each grass-blade and tree, or the side where it is the shadowed side of each that is turned to him. If he will look out of the one window, he will see everything verdant and bright, and if he will look out at the other, there will be a certain sobriety and dulness over the landscape. You can settle which window you are going to look out at. If the one--'in which ye greatly rejoice.' If the other--'ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.' You have seen patterns wrought in black and white, you may focus your eye so as to get white on a black ground, or black on a white ground, just as you like. You can do that with your life, and either fix upon the temptations and the heaviness as the main thing, or you can fix upon the new life, and the new wealth, and the new hope, and the new security as the main things. If you do the one, down you will go into the depths of gloom, and if you do the other, up you will spring into the ethereal heights of sober and Christian gladness.

So then, brethren, this possibility depends on these things, the choice of our main object of contemplation, and that breaks up into two thoughts about which I wish to say a word. The reason why so many Christian people have only religion enough to make them gloomy, or to weight them with a sense of burdens and unfulfilled aspirations and broken resolutions, and have not enough to make them glad, is mainly because they do not think enough about the four things in which they might 'greatly rejoice.' I believe that most of us would be altogether different people, as professing Christians, if we honestly tried to keep the mightiest things uppermost, and to fill heart and mind far more than we do with the contemplation of these great facts and truths which, when once they are beheld and cleaved to, are certain to minister gladness to men's souls. These great truths which you and I say we believe, and which we profess to live by, will only work their effect upon us, so long as they are present to our minds and hearts. You can no more expect Christian verities to keep you from falling, or to strengthen you in weakness, or to gladden you in sorrow, if you are not thinking about them, than you can expect the most succulent or most nutritive food to nourish you if you do not eat it. As long as Christ and His grace are present in our hearts and minds by thought, so long, and not one moment longer, do they minister to us the joy of the Lord. You switch off from the main current, and out go all the lights, and when you switch off from Christ out goes the gladness.

Then another thing I would point out is that the possibility of this co-existence of joy and of heaviness depends further on our taking the right point of view from which to look at the sources of the heaviness. Notice how beautifully, although entirely incidentally, and without calling attention to it, Peter here minimises the 'manifold temptations' which he does expect, however minimised, will make men heavy. He calls them 'temptations.' Now that is rather an unfortunate word, because it suggests the idea of something that desires to drag a man into sin. But suppose, instead of 'temptations,' with its unfortunate associations, you were to substitute a word that means the same thing, and is free from that association--viz.,'trial,'--you would get the right point of view. As long as I look at my sorrows mainly in regard to their power to sadden me, I have not got to the right point of view for them. They are meant to sadden me, they are meant to pain, they are meant to bring the tears, they are meant to weight the heart and press down the spirits, but what for? To test what I am made of, and by testing to bring out and strengthen what is good, and to cast out and destroy what is evil. We shall never understand, even so much as it is possible for us to understand, and that is not very much, of the mystery of pain until we come to recognise that its main purpose is to help in making character. And when you think of your sorrows, disappointments, losses, when you think of your pains and sickness, and all the ills that flesh is heir to, principally as being 'trials,' in the deep sense of that word--viz., a means of testing you, and thereby helping you, bettering you, and building up character--then it is more possible to blend the sorrow that they produce with the joy to which they may lead. The Apostle adds the other thought of the transitoriness of sorrow, and yet further, the other of its necessity for the growth of humanity. So they are not only to be felt, not only to be wept over, not only to make us sad, but they are to be accepted, and used as means by which we may be perfected. And when once you get occupied in trying to get all the good that is in it out of a grief, you will be astonished to find how the bitterness that was in it was diminished.

We may have the oil on the water, calming, though not ending, its agitation. We may carry our own atmosphere with us, and like the diver that goes down into depths of the sea, and cannot be reached by the hungry water around his crystal bell, and has communication with the upper air, where the light of the sun is, so you and I, down at the slimy bottom, and with the waste of water all around us, which if it could get at us would choke us, may walk at liberty, in peace and gladness. And so, ‘though the labour of the olive shall fail and the fig tree not blossom, though the flocks be cut off from the folds and the herd from the stalls,’ we may joy in the Lord, and ‘rejoice in the God of our salvation.’

III. Now lastly, we have here a duty.

Peter takes it for granted that these good people, who had persecution hanging over them, were still rejoicing greatly in the Lord. He does not feel it necessary to enjoin it upon them. It is a matter of course in their Christian life. And you will find that all through the New Testament this same tone is adopted which recognises gladness as being, on the one hand, an inseparable characteristic of the Christian experience, and on the other hand as being a thing that is a Christian man’s duty to cultivate. Now I do not believe that the most of Christian people have ever looked at the thing in that light at all. If joy has come to them, they have been thankful for it, but they have very, very seldom felt that, if they are not glad, there is something wrong. And a great many of us, I am sure, have never recognised the fact that it is our duty to ‘rejoice in the Lord always.’ Have you realised it? I do not mean have you tried to get up, as I have been saying, factitious emotions, but have you felt that if you are doing what, as Christian men or women, it is your plain duty to do, there will come into your hearts this joy of the Lord. I have told you why you are not happier Christians, why so many of us have, as I said, only got religion enough to make you gloomy and burdened. It is because you do not think enough about Jesus Christ, and what He has given you, and what He is doing for you and in you. It is because you have not the new life in strong experience and possession, and because you have not the new hope springing in your hearts, and because you have not the new wealth realised often in present possession, and because you have not the new security which He is ready to give you. It is your duty, Christian man and woman, to be a joyful Christian, and if you are not, then the negligence is sin.

It is a hard duty. It is not easy to turn away from that which is torturing flesh or sense or natural desires or human affections, and to realise the unseen. It is not easy, but it is possible. And, like all other difficult things, it is worth doing. For there is nothing more helpful, more recommendatory, of our Christianity to other people, and more certain to tell on the vigour and efficiency of our Christian service, than that we should be rejoicing in the Lord, and living in the possession of the experience of Christ's joy which He has left for us.

There is one other thing I must say. I have been talking about the co-existence of joy and sorrows. In one form or another that co-existence is universal. The difference is this. A Christian man has superficial sorrows and central gladness, and other men have superficial gladness and central sorrow. 'Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful.' Many of you know what that means--the black aching centre, full of unrest, grimly unparticipant of the dancing delights going on about it, like some black rock that stands up in the midst of a field flooded with sunshine, and gay with flowers. 'The end of that mirth is heaviness.' Better a surface sadness and a core of joy than the opposite, a skin of verdure over the scarcely cold lava. Better a transient sorrow with an eternal joy than the opposite, mirth, 'like the crackling of thorns under a pot,' which dies down into a doleful ring of black ashes in the pathless desert. Choose whether you will have joy dwelling with and conquering sorrow, or unrest and sorrow, darkening and finally shattering your partial and fleeting joys.

5) 1 Peter 1:7

1 Peter

THE TRUE GOLD AND ITS TESTING

1Pe. 1:7

The Apostle is fond of that word 'precious.' In both his letters he uses it as an epithet for diverse things. According to one translation, he speaks of Christ as 'precious to you which believe.' He certainly speaks of 'the precious blood of Christ,' and of 'exceeding great and precious promises,' and here in my text, as well as in the Second Epistle, he speaks about 'precious faith.' It is a very wide general term, not expressing anything very characteristic beyond the one notion of value. But in the text, according to our Authorised Version, it looks at first sight as if it were not the faith, but the trial of the faith that the Apostle regards as thus valuable. There are difficulties of rendering which I need not trouble you with. Suffice it to say that, speaking roughly and popularly, the 'trial of your faith' here seems to mean rather the result of that trial, and might be fairly represented by the slightly varied expression, 'your faith having been tried, might be found,' etc.

I must not be tempted to discourse about the reasons why such a rendering seems to express the Apostle's meaning more fully, but, taking it for granted, there are just three things to notice--the true wealth, the testing of the wealth, and the discovery at last of the preciousness of the wealth.

I. Peter pits against each other faith that has been tried, and 'gold that perisheth'; he puts away all the other points of comparison and picks out one, and that is that the one lasts and the other does not.

Now I must not be seduced into going beyond the limits of my text to dilate upon the other points of contrast and pre-eminence; but I would just notice in a sentence that everybody admits, yet next to nobody acts upon, the admission that inward good is far more valuable than outward good. 'Wisdom is more precious than rubies,' say people, and yet they will choose the rubies, and take no trouble to get the wisdom. Now the very same principles of estimating value which set cultivated understandings and noble hearts above great possessions and large balances at the bankers, set the life of faith high above all others. And the one thought which Peter wishes to drive into our heads and hearts is that there is only one kind of wealth that will never be separated from its possessor. Nothing is truly ours that remains outside of us.

"'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands.'

Nothing that is there whilst I am here is really mine. I do not own it if it is possible that I shall lose it. And so with profound meaning our Lord speaks about 'that which is another's' in comparison with 'that which is your own.' It is another's because it passes, like quicksilver under pressure, from hand to hand, and no man really holds it, but it leaps away from his grasp. And if a man retains it all his days, still, according to the grim old proverb, 'shrouds have no pockets,' and when he dies his hands open, or sometimes they clutch together, but there is nothing inside the palms, and they only close upon themselves. Dear brethren, if there is anything that can be filched away from us, anything about which it is true that, on the one hand, 'moth and rust'--natural processes--'do corrupt' it, on the other hand, 'thieves break through and steal'--accidents of human conduct can deprive us of it, then we may call it ours, but it is not ours. It possesses us, if we are devoted to it as our best good, and fighting and toiling, and sometimes lying and cheating, and flinging the whole fierce energy of our nature into first gripping and then holding it; it possesses us; we do not possess it. But if there is anything that can become so interwoven and interlaced with the very fibres of a man's heart that they and it cannot be parted, if there is anything that empty hands will clasp the closer, because they are emptied of earth's vanities, then that is truly possessed by its possessor. And our faith, which will not be trodden in the grave, but will go with us into the world beyond, and though it be lost in one aspect, in sight, it will be eternal as trust, will be ours, imperishable as ourselves, and as God. Therefore, do not give all the energy of your lives to amassing the second-best riches. Seek the highest things most. 'Covet earnestly the best gifts,' and let the coveting regulate your conduct. And do not be put off with wealth that will fail you sooner or later.

II. Note, again, the testing of the wealth.

I need not dwell upon that very familiar metaphor of the furnace for gold, and the fining-pot for silver, only remember that there are two purposes for which metallurgists apply fire to metals. The one is to test them, and the other is to cleanse them, or, to use technical words, one is for the purpose of assaying them, and the other is for the purpose of refining them. And so, linking the words of my text with the words of the previous verse, we find that the Apostle lays it down that the purpose of all the diverse trials, or 'temptations' as he calls them, that come to us, is this one thing, that our faith should be 'tried,' and 'found, unto praise and honour and glory.' The fire carries away the dross; it makes the pure metal glow in its lustre. It burns up the 'wood, hay, stubble'; it makes the gold gleam and the precious stones coruscate and flash.

And so note this general notion here of the intention of all life's various aspects being to test character is specialised into this, that it is meant to test faith, first of all. Of course it is meant to test many other things. A man's whole character is tested by the experiences of his daily life, all that is good and all that is evil in him, and we might speak about the effect of life's discipline upon a great many different sides of our nature. But here the whole stress is put upon the effect of life in testing and clarifying and strengthening one part of a Christian's character, and that is his faith. Why does Peter pick out faith? Why does he not say 'trial of your hope,' of your 'love,' of your 'courage,' of half a dozen other graces? Why 'the trial of your faith?' For this reason, because as the man's faith is, so is the man. Because faith is the tap-root, in the view of the New Testament, of all that is good and strong and noble in humanity. Because if you strengthen a man's trust you strengthen everything that comes from it. Reinforce the centre and all is reinforced. Your faith is the vital point from which your whole life as Christians is developed, and whatever strengthens that strengthens you. And, therefore, although everything that befalls you calls for the exercise of, and therefore tests, and therefore, rightly undergone, strengthens a great many various virtues and powers and beauties in a human character, the main good of it all is that it deepens, if the man is right, his simple trust in God manifested by his trust in and love to Jesus Christ: and so it reinforces the faith which works by love, and thus tends to make all things in life good and fair.

Now if thus the main end of life is to strengthen faith, let us remember that we have to give a wider meaning to the word 'trials' than 'afflictions.' Ah! there is as sharp a trial of my faith in prosperity as in any adversity. People say, 'It is easy to trust God when things are going well with us.' That is quite true. But it is a great deal easier to stop trusting God, or thinking about

Him, when things are going well with us, and we do not seem to need Him so much, as in the hours of darkness. You remember the old story about the traveller, when the sun and the wind tried which could make him take off his cloak; and the sun did it. Some of us, I daresay, have found out that the faith which gripped God when we felt we needed Him, because we had not anything else but Him, is but too apt to lose hold of Him when fleeting delights and apparent treasures come and whisper invitations in our hearts. There are diseases that are proper to the northern, dark, ice-bound regions of the earth. Yes! and there are a great many more that belong to the tropics; as there is such a thing as sunstroke, which is, perhaps, as dangerous as the cramping cold from the icebergs of the north. Some of us should understand what that Scripture means: ‘Because they have no changes, therefore they fear not God.’ Prosperity, untroubled lives, lives even as the lives of those of the majority of mankind now, have their own most searching trials of faith.

But on the other hand, if there are ‘ships that have gone down at sea, when heaven was all tranquillity,’ there come also dark and nights of wild tempest when we have to lay to and ride out the gale with a tremendous strain on the cable. Our sorrows, our disappointments, our petty annoyances, and the great irrevocable griefs that sooner or later darken the very earth, are all to be classified under this same purpose, ‘that the trial of your faith ... might be found unto praise and honour and glory.’ And so, I beseech you, open your eyes to the meaning of life, and do not suppose that you have found the last word to say about it when you say ‘I am afflicted,’ or ‘I am at ease.’ The affliction and the ease, like two wheels in some great machine working in opposite directions, fit with their cogs into one another and move something beyond them in one uniform direction. And affliction and ease cooperate to this end, that we might be partakers of His holiness.

I believe experience teaches the most of us, if we will lay its lessons to heart, that the times when Christian people grow most in the divine life is in their times of sorrow. One of the old divines says, ‘Grace grows best in winter’; and there are edible plants which need a touch of frost before they are good to eat. So it is with our faith. Only let us take care that the fire does not burn it up, as ‘wood, hay, stubble,’ but irradiates it and glorifies it, as ‘gold, silver, and precious stones.’

III. Now a word, lastly, about the ultimate discovery.

‘Might be found unto praise and honour and glory.’ Note these three words, which I think are often neglected, and sometimes misunderstood--’praise, honour, glory.’ Whose? People sometimes say ‘God’s,’ since His people’s ultimate salvation redounds to His praise; but it is much better to understand the praise as given to the Christians whose faith has stood the testing fires. ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’--is not that praise from lips, praise from which is praise indeed? As Paul says, ‘then shall every man have praise of God.’ We are far too much afraid of recognising the fact that Jesus Christ in Heaven, like Jesus Christ on earth, will praise the deeds that come from love to Him, though the deeds themselves may be very imperfect. Do you remember ‘She hath wrought a good work on Me,’ said about a woman that had done a perfectly useless thing, which was open to a great many very shrewd objections? But Jesus Christ accepted it. Why? Because it was the pure utterance of a loving heart. And, depend upon it, though we have to say ‘Unclean! unclean! We are unprofitable servants,’ He will say ‘Come! ye blessed of My Father.’ Praise from Christ is praise indeed.

‘Honour.’ That suggests bystanders, a public opinion, if I may so say; it suggests ‘have thou authority over ten cities,’ and that men will have their deeds round them as a halo, in that other world. As ‘praise’ suggests the redeemed man’s relation to his Lord, so ‘honour’ suggests the redeemed man’s relation to the fellow-citizens of the New Jerusalem. ‘Glory’ speaks of the man himself as transfigured and lifted up into the light and lustre of communion with, and conformity to, the image of the Lord. ‘Then shall we appear with Him in glory. Then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun in My heavenly Father’s Kingdom.’

‘Shall be found.’ Ah! there will be many surprises yonder. Do you remember that profound revelation of our Master when He represents those on whom He lavishes His eulogies as the Judge, as turning to Him and saying, ‘Lord! when saw we Thee in ... prison and visited thee?’ They do not recognise themselves or their acts in Christ’s account of them. They have found that their lives were diviner than they knew. There will be surprises there. As one of the prophets represents the ransomed Israel, to her amazement, surrounded by clinging troops of children, and asking, ‘These! Where have they been? I was left alone,’ so many a poor, humble soul, fighting along in this world, having no recognition on earth, and the lowliest estimate of all its own actions, will be astonished at the last when it receives ‘praise, and honour, and glory, at the appearing of Jesus Christ.’

6) 1 Peter 1:8

1 Peter

JOY IN BELIEVING

1Pe. 1:8

The Apostle has just previously been speaking about the great and glorious things which are to come to Christians on the appearing of Jesus Christ, and that naturally suggests to him the thought of the condition of believing souls during the period of the Lord’s absence and comparative concealment. Having lifted his readers’ hopes to that great Future, when they would attain to ‘praise and honour and glory’ at Christ’s appearing, he drops to the present and to earth, and recalls the disadvantages and deprivations of the present Christian experience as well as its privileges and blessings. ‘Whom having not seen, ye love,’ that is a very natural thought in the mind of one whose love to Jesus rested on the ever-remembered blessed experience of years of happy companionship, when addressing those who had no such memories. It points to an entirely unique fact. There is nothing else in the world parallel to that strange, deep personal attachment which fills millions of hearts to this Man who died nineteen centuries ago, and which is utterly unlike the feelings that any men have to any other of the great names of the past. To love one unseen is a paradox, which is realised only in the relation of the Christian soul to Jesus Christ.

Then the Apostle goes on with what might at first seem a mere repetition of the preceding thought, but really brings to view another strange anomaly. ‘In Whom, though now ye see Him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.’ Love longs for the presence of the beloved, and is restless and defrauded of its gladness so long as absence continues.

But this strange love, which is kindled by an unseen Man, does not need His visible presence in order to be a fountain of joy unspeakable and full of glory. Thus the Apostle takes it for granted that every one who believes knows what this joy is. It is a large assumption, contradicted, I am afraid, by the average experience of the people that at this day call themselves Christians.

We notice--

I. The All-sufficient Ground or Source of this Glad Emotion.

'In whom,' with all the disabilities and pains and absence, 'yet believing,' you can put out a long arm of faith across the gulf that lies, not only between to-day and eighteen centuries ago, but the deeper and more impassible gulf that lies between earth and heaven, and clasp Christ with a really firm grasp, which will fill the hand, and which we shall feel has laid hold of something, or rather has laid hold of a living person and a loving heart. That is faith. The Apostle uses a very strong form of expression here, which is only very partially represented by our English version. He does not say only 'in whom believing,' but 'towards whom'; putting emphasis upon the effort and direction of the faith, rather than upon the repose of the heart when it has found its object and rests upon Him. And so the conception of the true Christian attitude is that of a continual outgoing of Trust and its child Love; of Desire and its child Possession; and of Expectation and its child Fruition towards that unseen Christ. It is much to believe Him, it is more to believe in Him; it is--I was going to say--most of all to believe towards Him. For in this region, quite as much as, and I think more than, in the one to which the saying was originally applied, 'search is better than attainment.' Our condition must always be that of 'forgetting the things that are behind'; and however much we may realise the union with the unseen Christ in the act of resting upon Him, that must never be suffered to interfere with the longing for the larger possession of myself, and fuller consequent likeness to Him, which is expressed in that great though simple phrase of my text 'believing towards Him.' Such a continual outgoing of effort, as well as the rest and blessedness of reposing on Him, is indispensable for all true gladness. For the intensest activity of our whole being is essential to the real joy of any part of it, and we shall never know the rapture of which humanity, even here and now, is capable until we gather our whole selves, heart, will, and all our practical, as well as our intellectual, powers in the effort to make more of Christ our own, and to minimise the distance between us to a mere vanishing point, ‘Believing towards whom ye rejoice.’

That act of trust, however inadequate the object upon which it rests, and however mistaken may be our conceptions of that on which we lean, always brings a gladness which is real, until disappointment disillusionises and saddens us. There is nothing that so sheds peace over the heart as reliance, absolute and quiet, upon some object worthy of trust. It is blessed to trust one another until, as is too often the case, we find that what we thought to be an oak against which we leaned is but a broken reed that has no pith in it, and no possibility of support. So far as it goes, all trust is blessed, but the most blessed is simple reliance upon, and aspiration after, Jesus Christ. Ever to yearn for Him, not with the yearning of those who have no possession, but with that of those who, having a little, desire to have more, is to bring into our lives the one solid and sufficient good without which there is no gladness, and with which there can be no unmingled sorrow, wrapping the whole man in its ebon folds. For this Christ is enough for all my nature and for the satisfaction of every desire. In Him my mind finds the truth; my will the law; my love the answering love; my hope its object; my fears their dissipation; my sins their forgiveness; my weaknesses their strength; and, to all that I am, what He is answers, as fulness to emptiness, and as supply to need. So, ‘believing towards Him, we rejoice.’

But note that the joy is strictly contemporaneous with the faith. Tear away electric wire from the source of energy, and the light goes out instantly. It is as another Apostle says, ‘in believing’ that we have ‘joy and peace.’ And that is why so many of us know little of it. Yesterday’s faith will not contribute to to-day’s gladness, any more than yesterday’s meals will satisfy to-day’s hunger. Present joy depends upon present faith, and the measure of the one is the measure of the other.

Notice again--

II. The Characteristics of the Christian Gladness.

‘Unspeakable,’ and, as the word ought to be rendered, not ‘full of glory’ but ‘glorified.’ Unspeakable. Still waters run deep. It is poor wealth that can be counted; it is shallow emotion that can be crammed into the narrow limits of any human vocabulary. Fathers and mothers, parents and children, husbands and wives, know that. And the depths of the joy that a believing soul has in Jesus Christ are not to be spoken. Perhaps it is better that it should not be attempted to speak them.

‘Not easily forgiven

Are those, who, setting wide the doors that bar

The secret bridal chambers of the heart,

Let in the day.’

It is in shallow streams that the sunlight gleams on the pebbles at the bottom. The abysses of ocean are dark, and have never been searched by its light. I suspect the depth of the emotion which bubbles over into words, and finds no difficulty in expressing itself. The joy which can be manifested in all its extent has a very small extent. Christian joy is unspeakable, too, because just as you cannot teach a blind man what colour is like, and cannot impart to anybody the blessedness of wedded love, or parental affection, by ever so much talking--and, therefore, the poetry of the world is never exhausted--so there is only one way of conveying to a man what is the actual joy of trusting in Christ, and that is, that he himself should trust Him. We may talk till Doomsday, and then, as the Queen of Sheba said, when she came to Solomon, ‘the half hath not been told.’

‘He must be loved ere that to you

He will seem worthy of your love.’

It is unspeakable gladness springing from the possession of an unspeakable gift.

‘Glorified.’ There is nothing more ignoble than the ordinary joys of men. They are too often like the iridescent scum on a stagnant pond, fruit and proof of corruption. They are fragile and hollow, for all the play of colour on them, like a soap bubble that breaks of its own tenuity, and is only a drop of dirty water. Joy is too often ignoble, and yet, although it is by no means the highest conception of what Christ's Gospel can do for us, it is blessed to think that it can take that emotion, so often shameful, so often frivolous, so often lowering rather than elevating, and can lift it into loftiness, and transfigure it, and glorify it and make it a power, a power for good and for righteousness, and for 'whatsoever things are lovely and of good report' in our lives. And that is what trusting towards Christ will do for our gladnesses.

Lastly, in one word, let me lay upon your consciences, as Christian people

III. The Obligation of Gladness.

Peter takes it for granted that all these brethren to whom he is writing have experience of this deep and ennobled joy. He does not say, 'You ought to rejoice,' but he says, 'You do rejoice.' And yet a verse or two before he said, 'Ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.' So, then, he was not blinking the hard, painful facts of anybody's troubled life. He was not away upon the heights serenely contemptuous of the grim possibilities that lurk down in the dark valleys. He took in all the burdens and the pains and the anxieties and the harassments, and the losses, and the bleeding hearts and the cares that can burden any of us. And he said, in spite of them all, 'Ye rejoice.'

Do you? I am afraid there is no more irrefragable proof of the unreality of an enormous proportion of the Christian profession of this day than the joyless lives--in so far as their religion contributes to their joy--of hosts of us. We have religion enough to make us miserable, we have religion enough to make us uncomfortable about doing things that we would like to do. We are always haunted by the feeling that we are falling so far below our professions, and we are either miserable when we bethink ourselves, or, more frequently, indifferent, accordingly. And the whole reason of such experience lies here, we have not an adequately strong and continued trust in Jesus Christ working righteousness in our lives, nobleness in our characters, and so lifting us above the regions where mists and malaria lie. Let us get high enough up, and we shall find clear sky.

You call yourselves Christians. Does your religion bring any gladness to you? Does it burn brightest in the dark, like the pillar of cloud before the Israelites? 'Greek fire' burned below the water, and so was in high repute. Our gladness is a poor affair if it is at the mercy of temperaments or of circumstances. Jesus Christ comes to cure temperaments, and to enable us to resist circumstances. So I venture to say that, whatever may be our condition in regard to externals, or whatever may be our tendencies of disposition, we are bound, as a piece of Christian duty, to try to cultivate this joyful spirit, and to do it in the only right way, by cultivating the increase of our faith in Jesus Christ. 'Rejoice in the Lord always'; the man who said that was a prisoner, with death looking into his eyeballs. As he said it, he felt that his friends in Philippi might think the exhortation overstrained, and so he repeated it, to show that he recognised the apparent impossibility of obeying it, and yet deliberately enjoined it; 'and again I say, rejoice.'

7) 1 Peter 1:10-12

1 Peter

CHRIST AND HIS CROSS THE CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE

1Pe. 1:10-12

I have detached these three clauses from their surroundings, not because I desire to treat them fragmentarily, but because we thereby throw into stronger relief the writer's purpose to bring out the identity of the Old and the New Revelation, the fact that Christ and His sufferings are the centre of the world's history, to which all that went before points, from which all that follows after flows; and that not only thus does He stand in the midst of humanity, but that from Him there ran out influences into other orders of beings, and angels learn from Him mysteries hitherto unknown to them. The prophets prophesy of the grace which comes in the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow, and the same Spirit which taught them teaches the preachers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They that went before had for their deepest message the proclamation, 'He will come'; they that follow after have for their deepest message, 'He has come.' And angels listen to, and echo, the chorus, from all the files that march in front, and all that bring up the rear, ‘Hosanna! Blessed be Him that cometh in the name of the Lord.’

My purpose, then, is just to try to bring before you the magnificent unity into which these texts bind all ages, and all worlds, planting Jesus Christ and His Cross in the centre of them all. There are four aspects here in which the writer teaches us to regard this unity: Jesus and the Cross are the substance of prophecy, the theme of Gospel preaching, the study of angels, and presented to each of us for our individual acceptance. Now, let us look briefly at these four points.

I. First, then, Christ and His Cross is the substance of prophecy.

Now, of course, we have to remember that general statements have to be interpreted widely, and without punctilious adherence to the words; and we have also to remember that great mischief has been done, and great discredit cast, on the whole conception of ancient revelation by the well-meaning, but altogether mistaken, attempts of good people to read the fully developed doctrine of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice into every corner of the ancient revelation. But whilst I admit all that, and would desire to emphasise the fact, I think that in this generation, and to-day, there is a great deal more need to insist upon the truth that the inmost essence and deepest purpose of the whole Old Testament system is to create an attitude of expectance, and to point onwards, with ever-growing distinctness, to one colossal and mysterious figure in which the longings of generations shall be fulfilled, and the promises of God shall be accomplished. The prophet was more than a foreteller, as is being continually insisted upon nowadays. There were prophets who never uttered a single prediction. Their place in Israel was to be the champions of righteousness, and--I was going to say--the knights of God, as against law and ceremonial and externalism. But, beyond that, there underlie the whole system of prophecy, and there come sparkling and flashing up to the surface every now and then, bright anticipations, not only of a future kingdom, but of a personal King, and not only of a King, but a sufferer. All the sacrifices, almost all the institutions, the priesthood and the monarchy included, had this onward-looking aspect, and Israel as a whole, in the proportion in which it was true to the spirit of its calling, stood a-tiptoe, as it were, looking down the ages for the coming of the Hope of the Covenant that had been promised to the fathers. The prophets, I might say, were like an advance-guard sent before some great monarch in his progress towards his capital, who rode through the slumbering villages and called, ‘He comes! He comes! The King cometh meek and having salvation,’ and then passed on.

Now, all that is to be held fast to-day. I would give all freedom to critical research, and loyally accept the results of it, so far as these are established, and are not mere hypotheses, with regard to the date and the circumstances of the construction of the various elements of that Old Testament. But what I desire especially to mark is that, with the widest freedom, there must be these two things conserved which Peter here emphasises, the real inspiration of the prophetic order, and its function to point onwards to Jesus. And so long as you keep these truths, as long as you believe that God spoke through prophets, as long as you believe that the very heart of their message was the proclamation of Jesus Christ, and that to bear witness to Him was the function, not only of prophet, but of priest and king and nation, then you are at liberty to deal as you like with mere questions of origin and of date. But if, in the eagerness of the chase after the literary facts of the origin of the Old Testament, we forget that it is a unity, that it is a divine unity, that it is a progressive revelation, and that ‘the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy’ then I venture to say that the most uncritical, old-fashioned reader of the Old Testament that found Jesus Christ in the Song of Solomon, and in the details of the Tabernacle, and in all the minutiæ of worship and sacrifice, was nearer to the living heart of the thing than the most learned scholar that has been so absorbed in the inquiries as to how and when this, that, and the other bit of the Book was written, that he fails to see the one august figure that shines out, now more and now less dimly, and gives unity to the whole. ‘To Him gave all the prophets witness.’ And when Peter declared, as he did in my text, that ancient Israel, by its spokesmen and its organs, testified beforehand of the sufferings of Christ, he is but echoing what he had learned from his Master, who turns to some of us with the same rebuke with which He met His disciples after the Resurrection: ‘O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken.’ The Old and the New are a unity, and Christ and His Cross are the substance and the centre of both.

II. Note here Christ and His Cross, the theme of Gospel preaching.

If you will glance at your leisure over the whole context from which I have picked these clauses as containing its essence, you will find that the Apostle speaks of the things which the prophets foretold as being the same as ‘those which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the Gospel unto you, with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven.’ I must not take for granted that you are all referring to your Bibles, but I should like to point out, as the basis of one or two things that I wish to say, the remarkable variety of phrase employed in the text to describe the one thing. First, Peter speaks of it as ‘salvation,’ then he speaks of it in the next clause as ‘the grace that should come unto you.’ Then, in the next phrase, he designates it more particularly as ‘the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow.’ Now, if we put these designations together--salvation, grace, Christ’s sufferings, the subsequent glory--we come to this, that the facts of Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension are the great vehicle which brings to men God’s grace, that that grace has for its purpose and its effect man’s salvation, and that these facts are the Gospel which Christian preachers have to proclaim.

Now notice what follows from such thoughts as these. To begin with, the Gospel is not a speculation, is not a theology, still less a morality, not a declaration of principles, but a history of fact, things that were done on this earth of ours, and that the Apostle’s Creed which is worked into the service of the Anglican Church is far nearer the primitive conception of the Gospel than are any of the more elaborate and doctrinal ones which have followed. For we have to begin with the facts that Christ lived, died, was buried, rose again from the dead ... ascended into Heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God. Whatever else the Gospel is, that is the kernel and the basis of it all. Out of these facts will come all manner of doctrines, philosophies of religion, theologies, revelations about God and man. Out of them will come all ethics, the teaching of duty, the exhibition of a pattern of conduct, inspiration to follow the model that is set before us. Out of them will come, as I believe, guidance and light for social and economical and political questions and difficulties. But what we have to lay hold of, and what we preachers have to proclaim, is the story of the life, and eminently the story of the death.

Why does Peter put in the very centre here ‘the sufferings of Christ’? That suggests another thought, that amongst these facts which, taken together, make the Gospel, the vital part, the central and the indispensable part, is the story of the Cross. Now what Christ said, not what Christ did, not what Christ was, beautiful and helpful as all that is, but to begin with what Christ bore, is the fact that makes the life of the Gospel. And just as He is the centre of humanity, so the Cross is the centre of His work. Why is that? Because the deepest need of all of us is the need to have our sins dealt with, both as guilt and as power, and because nothing else in the whole story of Christ’s manifestation deals with men’s sins as the fact of His death on the Cross does, therefore the sacrifice and sufferings are the heart of the Gospel.

And so, brethren, we have to mark that the presentation of Christian truth which slurs over that fact of the Sacrifice and Atonement of Jesus Christ, has parted with the vital power which makes the story into a gospel. It is no gospel to tell a man that Jesus Christ died, unless you go on to say He ‘died for our sins according to the Scriptures.’ And it is no gospel to talk about the beauty of His life, and the perfectness of His example, and the sweetness of His nature, and the depth, the wisdom, and the tenderness of His words, unless you can say this is ‘the Lamb of God,’ ‘the Word made flesh,’ ‘who bare our sins, and carried our sicknesses and our sorrows.’ Strike out from the gospel that you preach ‘the sufferings of Christ,’ and you have struck out the one thing that will draw men’s hearts, that will satisfy men’s needs, that will bind men to Him with cords of love. ‘I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me.’ So, wherever you get what they call an ethical gospel which deals with moralities, and does not impart the power that will vitalise moralities, and make them into thankful service and sacrifices, in return for the great Sacrifice; wherever you get a gospel that falters in its enunciation of the sufferings of Christ, and wherever you get a gospel that secularises the Christian service of the Sabbath, and will rather discuss the things that the newspapers discuss, and the new books that the reviewers are talking about, and odds and ends of that sort that are thought to be popular and attractive, you get a gospel minus the thing that, in the Old Testament and in the New alike, stands forth in the centre of all. ‘We preach Christ crucified’; it is not enough to preach Christ. Many a man does that, and might as well hold his tongue. ‘We preach Christ crucified.’ And the same august Figure which loomed before the vision of prophets, and shines through many a weary age, stands before us of this generation; ay! and will stand till the end of the world, as the centre, the pivot of human history, the Christ who has died for men. The Christ that will stand in the centre of the development of humanity is the Christ that died on the Cross. If your gospel is not that, you have yet to learn the deepest secret of His power.

III. Once more, here we have Christ and His Cross as the study of angels.

‘Which things the angels desire to look into.’ Now, the word that Peter employs there is an unusual one in Scripture. Its force may, perhaps, be best conveyed by referring to one of the few instances in which it is employed. It is used to describe the attitude of Peter and John when they stooped down and looked into the sepulchre. Perhaps there may be a reference in Peter’s mind to that incident, when he saw the ‘two angels ... sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.’ Perhaps, also, there floats in his mind some kind of reference to the outspread wings and bended heads of the brooding cherubim who sat above the Mercy-seat, gazing down upon the miracle of love that was manifested beneath them there. But be that as it may, the idea conveyed is that of eager desire and fixed attention.

Now I am not going to enlarge at all upon the thought that is here conveyed, except just to make the one remark that people have often said, ‘Why should a race of insignificant creatures on this little globe of ours be so dignified in the divine procedure as that there should be the stupendous mystery of the Incarnation, and the Death for their sakes?’ Not for their sakes only, for the New Testament commits itself to the thought that whilst sinful men are the only subjects of the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ, other orders of creatures do benefit thereby, and do learn from it what else they would not have known, of the mystery and the miracle and the majesty of the Divine love. ‘To the principalities and the powers in heavenly places He hath made known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God.’ And we can understand how these other orders--what we call higher orders, which they may be or they may not--of being, learn to know God as we learn to know Him, by the manifestation of Himself in His acts, and how the crown of all manifestations consists in this, that He visits the sinful sons of men, and by His own dear Son brings them back again. The elder brethren in the Father’s house do not grudge the ring and the robe given to the prodigals; rather they learn therein more than they knew before of the loving-kindness of God.

Now all that is nowadays ignored, and it is not fashionable to speak about the interest of angels in the success of Redemption, and a good many ‘advanced’ Christians do not believe in angels at all, because they ‘cannot verify’ the doctrine. I, for my part, accept the teaching, which seems to me to be a great deal more reasonable than to suppose that the rest of the universe is void of creatures that can praise and love and know God. I accept the teaching, and think that Peter was, perhaps, not a dreamer when he said, ‘The angels desire to look into these things.’ They do not share in the blessings of redemption, but they can behold what they do not themselves experience. The Seer in the Revelation was not mistaken, when he believed that he heard redeemed men leading the chorus to Him that had redeemed them by His blood out of all nations, and then heard the thunderous echo from an innumerable host of angels who could not say ‘Thou hast redeemed us,’ but who could bring praise and glory to Him because He had redeemed men.

IV. And now my last point is that Christ and His Cross is, by the Gospel, offered to each of us.

Notice how emphatically in this context the Apostle gathers together his wider thoughts, and focusses them into a point. ‘The prophets have inquired and searched diligently ... of the grace that should come to you.... To them it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the Gospel unto you.’ And so he would take his wide thoughts, as it were, and gather all together, to a point, and press the point against each man’s heart.

Dear brethren, these wide views are of no avail to us unless we realise the individual relation which Christ bears to each one of us. He bears a relation, as I have been saying, to all humanity. All the ages belong to Him. ‘He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.’ From His Cross there flash up rays of light into the heavens above, and out over the whole rolling series of the centuries, from the beginning to the end. Yes; but from His Cross there comes a beam straight to your heart, and the Christ whom angels desire to look into, of whom prophets prophesy and Apostles proclaim His advent, who is the Lord of all the ages, and the Lover of mankind, comes to thee and says ‘I am thy Saviour,’ and to thee this wide message is brought. Every eye has the whole sunshine, and each soul may have the whole Christ. His universal relations in time and space matter little to you, unless He has a particular relation to yourself.

And He will never have that in its atoning power, unless you do for yourself and by yourself the most individual and solitary act that a human soul can do, and that is, lay your hand on the head of ‘the Lamb ... that takes away the sin of the world,’ and put your sins there. You must begin with ‘my Christ,’ which you can do only by personal faith. And then afterwards you can come to ‘our Christ,’ the Christ of all the worlds, the Christ of all the ages. Go to Him by yourself. You must do it as if there were not any other beings in the whole universe but you two, Jesus and you. And when you have so gone, then you will find that you have ‘come to the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly, and Church of the first born.’ Christ and His Cross are the substance of prophecy, the theme of the Gospel, the study of the angels. What are they to me?

8) 1 Peter 1:13

1 Peter

HOPE PERFECTLY

1Pe. 1:13.

Christianity has transformed hope, and given it a new importance, by opening to it a new world to move in, and supplying to it new guarantees to rest on. There is something very remarkable in the prominence given to hope in the New Testament, and in the power ascribed to it to order a noble life. Paul goes so far as to say that we are saved by it. To a Christian it is no longer a pleasant dream, which may be all an illusion, indulgence in which is pretty sure to sap a man’s force, but it is a certain anticipation of certainties, the effect of which will be increased energy and purity. So our Apostle, having in the preceding context in effect summed up the whole Gospel, bases upon that summary a series of exhortations, the transition to which is marked by the ‘wherefore’ at the beginning of my text. The application of that word is to be extended, so as to include all that has preceded in the letter, and there follows a series of practical advices, the first of which, the grace or virtue which he puts in the forefront of everything, is not what you might have expected, but it is ‘hope perfectly.’

I may just remark, before going further, in reference to the language of my text, that, accurately translated, the two exhortations which precede that to hope are subsidiary to it, for we ought to read, ‘Wherefore, girding up the loins of your mind, and being sober, hope.’ That is to say, these two are preliminaries, or conditions, or means by which the desired perfecting of the Christian hope is to be sought and attained.

Another preliminary remark which I must make is that what is enjoined here has not reference to the duration but to the quality of the Christian hope. It is not ‘to the end,’ but, as the Margin of the Authorised and the Revised Version concurs in saying, it is ‘hope perfectly.’

So, then, there are three things here--the object, the duty, and the cultivation of Christian hope. Let us take these three things in order.

I. The object of the Christian hope.

Now, that is stated, in somewhat remarkable language, as ‘the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.’ We generally use that word ‘grace’ with a restricted signification to the gifts of God to men here on earth. It is the earnest of the inheritance, rather than its fulness. But here it is quite obvious that by the expression the Apostle means the very same thing as he has previously designated in the preceding context by three different phrases--’an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled,’ ‘praise and honour and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,’ and ‘the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.’ The ‘grace’ is not contrasted with the ‘glory,’ but is another name for the glory. It is not the earnest of the inheritance, but it is the inheritance itself. It is not the means towards attaining the progressive and finally complete ‘salvation of your souls,’ but it is that complete salvation in all its fulness.

Now, that is an unusual use of the word, but that it should be employed here, as describing the future great object of the Christian hope, suggests two or three thoughts. One is that that ultimate blessedness, with all its dim, nebulous glories, which can only be resolved into their separate stars, when we are millions of leagues nearer to its lustre, is like the faintest glimmer of a new and better life in a soul here on earth, purely and solely the result of the undeserved, condescending love of God that stoops to sinful men, and instead of retribution bestows upon them a heaven. The grace that saved us at first, the grace that comes to us, filtered in drops during our earthly experience, is poured upon us in a flood at last. And the brightest glory of heaven is as much a manifestation of the Divine grace as the first rudimentary germs of a better life now and here. The foundation, the courses of the building, the glittering pinnacle on the summit, with its golden spire reaching still higher into the blue, is all the work of the same unmerited, stooping, pardoning love. Glory is grace, and Heaven is the result of God’s pardoning mercy.

There is another suggestion here to be made, springing from this eloquent use of this term, and that is not merely the identity of the source of the Christian experience upon earth and in the future, but the identity of that Christian experience itself in regard of its essential character. If I may so say, it is all of a piece, homogeneous, and of one web. The robe is without seam, woven throughout of the same thread. The life of the humblest Christian, the most imperfect Christian, the most infantile Christian, the most ignorant Christian here on earth, has for its essential characteristics the very same things as the lives of the strong spirits that move in light around the Throne, and receive into their expanding nature the ever-increasing fulness of the glory of the Lord. Grace here is glory in the bud; glory yonder is grace in the fruit.

But there is still further to be noticed another great thought that comes out of this remarkable language. The words of my text, literally rendered, are ‘the grace that is being brought unto you.’ Now, there have been many explanations of that remarkable phrase, which I think is not altogether exhausted by, nor quite equivalent to, that which represents it in our version--viz. ‘to be brought unto you.’ That relegates it all into the future; but in Peter’s conception it is, in some sense, in the present. It is ‘being brought.’ What does that mean? There are far-off stars in the sky, the beams from which have set out from their home of light millenniums since, and have been rushing through the waste places of the universe since long before men were, and they have not reached our eyes yet. But they are on the road. And so in Peter’s conception, the apocalypse of glory, which is the crowning manifestation of grace, is rushing towards us through the ages, through the spheres, and it will be here some day, and the beams will strike upon our faces, and make them glow with its light. So certain is the arrival of the grace that the Apostle deals with it as already on its way. The great thing on which the Christian hope fastens is no ‘peradventure,’ but a good which has already begun to journey towards us.

Again, there is another thought still to be suggested, and that is, the revelation of Jesus Christ is the coming to His children of this grace which is glory, of this glory which is grace. For mark how the Apostle says, ‘the grace which is being brought to you in the revelation of Jesus Christ.’ And that revelation to which he here refers is not the past one, in His incarnate life upon earth, but it is the future one, to which the hope of the faithful Church ought ever to be steadfastly turned, the correlated truth to that other one on which its faith rests. On these two great pillars, rising like columns on either side of the gulf of Time, ‘He has come,’ ‘He will come,’ the bridge is suspended by which we may safely pass over the foaming torrent that else would swallow us up. The revelation in the past cries out for the revelation in the future. The Cross demands the Throne. That He has come once, a sacrifice for sin, stands incomplete, like some building left unfinished with rugged stones protruding which prophesy an addition at a future day; unless you can add ‘unto them that look for Him will He appear the second time without sin unto salvation.’ In that revelation of Jesus Christ His children shall find the glory-grace which is the object of their hope.

So say all the New Testament writers. ‘When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall we also appear with Him in glory’ says Paul. ‘The grace that is to be brought unto you in the revelation of Jesus Christ,’ chimes in

Peter. And John completes the trio with his ‘We know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him.’ These three things, brethren--with Christ, glory with Him, likeness to Him--are all that we know, and blessed be God! all that we need to know, of that dim future. And the more we confine ourselves to these triple great certainties, and sweep aside all subordinate matters, which are concealed partly because they could not be revealed, and partly because they would not help us if we knew them, the better for the simplicity and the power and the certainty of our hope. The object of Christian hope is Christ, in His revelation, in His presence, in His communication to us for glory, in His assimilating of us to Himself.

‘It is enough that Christ knows all,

And we shall be with Him.’

‘The grace that is being brought unto you in the revelation of Jesus Christ.’

II. And now notice the duty of the Christian hope.

Hope a duty? That strikes one as somewhat strange. I very much doubt whether the ordinary run of good people do recognise it as being as imperative a duty for them to cultivate hope as to cultivate any other Christian excellence or virtue. For one man that sets himself deliberately and consciously to brighten up, and to make more operative in his daily life, the hope of future blessedness, you will find a hundred that set themselves to other kinds of perfecting of their Christian character. And yet, surely, there do not need any words to enforce the fact that this hope full of immortality is no mere luxury which a Christian man may add to the plain fare of daily duty or leave untasted according as he likes, but that it is an indispensable element in all vigorous and life-dominating Christian experience.

I do not need to dwell upon that, except just to suggest that such a vividness and continuity of calm anticipation of a certain good beyond the grave is one of the strongest of all motives to the general robustness and efficacy of a Christian life. People used to say a few years ago, a great deal more than they do now, that the Christian expectation of Heaven was apt to weaken energy upon earth, and they used to sneer at us, and talk about our ‘other worldliness' as if it were a kind of weakness and defect attached to the Christian experience. They have pretty well given that up now. Anti-Christian sarcasm, like everything else, has its fashions, and other words of reproach and contumely have now taken the place of that. The plain fact is that no man sees the greatness of the present, unless he regards it as being the vestibule of the future, and that this present life is unintelligible and insignificant unless beyond it, and led up to by it, and shaped through it, there lies the eternal life beyond. The low flat plain is dreary and desolate, featureless and melancholy, when the sky above it is filled with clouds. But sweep away the cloud-rack, and let the blue arch itself above the brown moorland, and all glows into lustre, and every undulation is brought out, and tiny shy forms of beauty are found in every corner. And so, if you drape Heaven with the clouds and mists born of indifference and worldliness, the world becomes mean, but if you dissipate the cloud and unveil heaven, earth is greatened. If the hope of the grave that is to be brought onto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ shines out above all the flatness of earth, then life becomes solemn, noble, worthy of, demanding and rewarding, our most strenuous efforts. No man can, and no man will, strike such effectual blows on things present as the man, the strength of whose arm is derived from the conviction that every stroke of the hammer on things present is shaping that which will abide with him for ever.

My text not only enjoins this hope as a duty, but also enjoins the perfection of it as being a thing to be aimed at by all Christian people. What is the perfection of hope? Two qualities, certainty and continuity. Certainty; the definition of earthly hope is an anticipation of good less than certain, and so, in all the operations of this great faculty, which are limited within the range of earth, you get blended as an indistinguishable throng, 'hopes and fears that kindle hope,' and that too often kill it. But the Christian has a certain anticipation of certain good, and to him memory may be no more fixed than hope, and the past no more unalterable and uncertain than the future. The motto of our hope is not the 'perhaps,' which is the most that it can say when it speaks the tongue of earth, but the 'verily! verily!' which comes to its enfranchised lips when it speaks the tongue of Heaven. Your hope, Christian man, should not be the tremulous thing that it often is, which expresses itself in phrases like 'Well! I do not know, but I tremblingly hope,’ but it should say, ‘I know and am sure of the rest that remaineth, not because of what I am, but because of what He is.’

Another element in the perfection of hope is its continuity. That hits home to us all, does it not? Sometimes in calm weather we catch a sight of the gleaming battlements of ‘the City which hath foundations,’ away across the sea, and then mists and driving storms come up and hide it. There is a great mountain in Central Africa which if a man wishes to see he must seize a fortunate hour in the early morning, and for all the rest of the day it is swathed in clouds, invisible. Is that like your hope, Christian man and woman, gleaming out now and then, and then again swallowed up in the darkness? Brethren! these two things, certainty and continuity, are possible for us. Alas! that they are so seldom enjoyed by us.

III. And now one last word. My text speaks about the discipline or cultivation of this Christian hope.

It prescribes two things as auxiliary thereto. The way to cultivate the perfect hope which alone corresponds to the gift of God is ‘girding up the loins of your mind, and being sober.’ Of course, there is here one of the very few reminiscences that we have in the Epistles of the ipsissima verba of our Lord. Peter is evidently referring to our Lord’s commandment to have ‘the loins girt and the lamps burning, and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord.’ I do not need to remind you of the Eastern dress that makes the metaphor remarkably significant, the loose robes that tangle a man’s feet when he runs, that need to be girded up and belted tight around his waist, as preliminary to all travel or toil of any kind. The metaphor is the same as that in our colloquial speech when we talk about a man ‘pulling himself together.’ Just as an English workman will draw his belt a hole tighter when he has some special task to do, so Peter says to us, make a definite effort, with resolute bracing up and concentration of all your powers, or you will never see the grace that is hurrying towards you through the centuries. There are abundance of loose, slack-braced people up and down the world, in all departments, and they never come to any good. It is a shame that any man should have his thoughts so loosely girt and vagrant as that any briar by the roadside can catch them and hinder his advance. But it is a tenfold shame for Christian people, with such an object to gaze upon, that they should let their minds be dissipated all over the trivialities of Time, and not gather them together and project them, as I may say, with all their force towards the sovereign realities of Eternity. A sixpence held close to your eye will blot out the sun, and the trifles of earth close to us will prevent us from realising the things which neither sight, nor experience, nor testimony reveal to us, unless with clenched teeth, so to speak, we make a dogged effort to keep them in mind.

The other preliminary and condition is ‘being sober,’ which of course you have to extend to its widest possible signification, implying not merely abstinence from, or moderate use of, intoxicants, or material good for the appetites, but also the withdrawing of one’s self sometimes wholly from, and always restraining one’s self in the use of, the present and the material. A man has only a given definite quantity of emotion and interest to expend, and if he flings it all away on the world he has none left for Heaven. He will be like the miller that spoils some fair river, by diverting its waters into his own sluice, in order that he may grind some corn. If you have the faintest film of dust on the glass of the telescope, or on its mirror, if it is a reflecting one, you will not see the constellations in the heavens; and if we have drawn over our spirits the film of earthly absorption, all these bright glories above will, so far as we are concerned, cease to be.

So, brethren, there is a solemn responsibility laid upon us by the gift of that great faculty of looking before and after. What did God make you and me capable of anticipating the future for? That we might let our hopes run along the low levels, or that we might elevate them and twine them round the very pillars of God’s Throne; which? I do not find fault with you because you hope, but because you hope so meanly, and about such trivial and transitory things. I remember I once saw a sea-bird kept in a garden, confined within high walls, and with clipped wings, set to pick up grubs and insects. It ought to have been away out, hovering over the free ocean, or soaring with sunlit wing to a height where earth became a speck, and all its noises were hushed. That is what some of you are doing with your hope, degrading it to earth instead of letting it rise to God; enter within the veil, and gaze upon the glory of the ‘inheritance incorruptible and undefiled.’

9) 1 Peter 1:15

THE FAMILY LIKENESS

1Pe. 1:15.

That is the sum of religion--an all-comprehensive precept which includes a great deal more than the world's morality, and which changes the coldness of that into something blessed, by referring all our purity to the Lord that called us. One may well wonder where a Galilean fisherman got the impulse that lifted him to such a height; one may well wonder that he ventured to address such wide, absolute commandments to the handful of people just dragged from the very slough and filth of heathenism to whom he spoke. But he had dwelt with Christ, and they had Christ in their hearts. So for him to command and for them to obey, and to aim after even so wide and wonderful an attainment as perfecting like God's was the most natural thing in the world. 'Be ye holy as He that hath called you is holy, and that in all manner of conversation.' The maximum of possible attainment, the minimum of imperative duty!

So, then, there are three things here--the pattern, the field, and the inspiration or motive of holiness.

I. The Pattern of Holiness.

'As He that hath called you is holy.' God's holiness is the very attribute which seems to separate Him most from the creatures; for its deepest meaning is His majestic and Divine elevation above all that is creatural. But here, of course, the idea conveyed by the word is not that, if I may so say, metaphysical one, but the purely moral one. The holiness of God which is capable of imitation by us is His separation from all impurity. There is a side of His holiness which separates Him from all the creatures, to which we can only look up, or bow with our faces in the dust; but there is a side of His holiness which, wonderful as it is, and high above all our present attainment as it is, yet is not higher than the possibilities which His indwelling Spirit puts within our reach, nor beyond the bounds of the duty that presses upon us all. 'As He which hath called you is holy.' Absolute and utter purity is His holiness, and that is the pattern for us.

Religion is imitation. The truest form of worship is to copy. All through heathenism you find that principle working. ‘They that make them are like unto them.’ Why are heathen nations so besotted and sunken and obstinate in their foulnesses? Because their gods are their examples, and they, first of all, make the gods after the pattern of their own evil imaginations, and then the evil imaginations, deified, react upon the maker and make him tenfold more a child of hell than themselves. Worship is imitation, and there is no religion which does not necessarily involve the copying of the example or the pattern of that Being before whom we bow. For religion is but love and reverence in the superlative degree, and the natural operation of love is to copy, and the natural operation of reverence is the same. So that the old Mosaic law, ‘Be ye holy as I am holy,’ went to the very heart of religion. And the New Testament form of it, as Paul puts it in a very bold word, ‘Be ye imitators of God, as beloved children,’ sets its seal on the same thought that we are religious in the proportion in which we are consciously copying and aspiring after God.

But then, says somebody or other, ‘it is not possible.’ Well, if it were not possible, try it all the same. For in this world it is aim and not attainment that makes the noble life; and it is better to shoot at the stars, even though your arrow never reaches them, than to fire it along the low levels of ordinary life. I do not see that however the unattainableness of the model may be demonstrated, that has anything to do with the duty of imitation. Because, though absolute conformity running throughout the whole of a life is not possible here on earth, we know that in each individual instance in which we came short of conformity the fault was ours, and it might have been otherwise. Instead of bewildering ourselves with questions about ‘unattainable’ or ‘attainable,’ suppose we asked, at each failure, ‘Why did I not copy God then; was it because I could not, or because I would not?’ The answer would come plain enough to knock all that sophisticated nonsense out of our heads, and to make us feel that the law which puts an unattainable ideal before the Christian as his duty is an intensely practical one, and may be reduced to practice at each step in his career. Imitation of the Father, and to be perfect, ‘as our Father in heaven is perfect,’ is the elementary and the ultimate commandment of all Christian morality. ‘Be ye holy as He that hath called you is holy.’

Then let me remind you that the unattainableness is by no means so demonstrable as some people seem to think. A very tiny circle may have the same centre as one that reaches beyond the suburbs of the universe, and holds all stars and systems within its great round. And the tiniest circle will have the same geometrical laws applied to it as the greatest. The difference between finite and infinite has nothing to do with the possibility of our becoming like God, if we believe that ‘in the image of God created He him’; and that men who have been not only made by original creation in the Divine image, but have been born again by the incorruptible seed of the Word into a kindred life with His, and derived from Him, can surely grow like what they have got, and unfold into actually possessed and achieved resemblance to their Father the kindred life that is poured into their veins.

So every way it is better indefinitely to approximate to that great likeness, though with many flaws and failures, than to say it cannot be reached, and so I will content myself down here, in my sins and my meannesses. No! dear brethren, ‘we are saved by hope,’ and one prime condition of growth in nobleness is to believe it possible that, by His blessing we may be like Him here on earth in the measure of our perception of His beauty and reception of His grace.

II. Again, notice the field of this Godlike holiness.

‘In all manner of conversation.’ Of course I do not need to remind you that the word ‘conversation’ does not mean talk, but conduct; that it applies to the whole of the outward life. Peter says that every part of the Christian man’s activity is to be the field on which his possession of the holiness derived from and like God’s is to be exhibited. It is to be seen in all common life. Here is no cloistered and ascetic holiness which tabooes large provinces of every man’s experience, and says ‘we must not go in there, for fear of losing our purity,’ but rather wherever Christ has trod before we can go. That is a safe guide, and whatever God has appointed there we can go and that we can do. ‘On the bells of the horses shall be written Holiness to the Lord.’ The horse-bells that make merry music on their bridles are not very sacred things, but they bear the same inscription as flamed on the front of the high priest’s mitre; and the bowls in every house in Jerusalem, as the prophet says, shall bear the same inscription that was written on the sacrificial vessels, and all shall belong to Him.

Only, whilst thus we maintain the possibility of exhibiting Godlike holiness in all the dusty fields of common life, let us remember the other side.

In this day there is very little need to preach against an ascetic Christianity. There has been enough said of late years about a Christian man being entitled to go into all fields of occupation and interest, and there to live his Christianity. I think the time is about come for a caution or two to be dropped on the other side, ‘Blessed is he that condemneth not himself in the thing which he alloweth.’ Apply this commandment vigorously and honestly to trade, to recreation--especially to recreation--to social engagements, to the choice of companions, to the exercise of tastes. Ask yourselves ‘Can I write Holiness to the Lord on them?’ If not, do not have anything to do with them. I wonder what the managers of theatres and music-halls would say if anybody proposed that motto to be put upon the curtain for the spectators to read before it is drawn up for the play. Do you think it would fit? Don’t you, Christian men and women, don’t you go into places where it would not fit. And remember that ‘in all manner of conversation’ has two sides to it, one declaring the possibility of sanctifying every creature of God, and one declaring the impossibility of a Christian man going, without dreadful danger and certain damage, into places where he cannot carry that consecration and purity with him.

Again the field is all trivial things. ‘In all manner of conversation.’ There is nothing that grows so low but that this scythe will travel near enough to the ground to harvest it. There is nothing so minute but it is big enough to mirror the holiness of God. The tiniest grain of mica, upon the face of the hill, is large enough to flash back a beam; and the smallest thing we can do is big enough to hold the bright light of holiness. ‘All’! Ah! If our likeness to God does not show itself in trifles, what in the name of common sense is there left for it to show itself in? For our lives are all made up of trifles. The great things come three or four of them in the seventy years; the little ones come every time the clock ticks. And as they say, ‘Take care of the pence, and the pounds will take care of themselves.’ If we keep the little things rigidly under the dominion of this principle, no doubt the big things will fall under it too, when they emerge. And if we do not--as the old Jewish book says:--'He that despiseth little things shall fall by little and little.' Whosoever has not a Christianity that sanctifies the trifles has a Christianity that will not sanctify the crises of his life. So, dear brother, this motto is to be written over every portal through which you and I go; and whatsoever we can put our hands to, in it we may magnify and manifest the holiness of God.

III. Now, lastly, note the motive or inspiration of holiness.

The language of my text might read like 'the Holy One who hath called you.' Peter would stir his hearers to the emulation of the Divine holiness by that thought of the bond that unites Him and them. 'He hath called you.' In which word, I suppose, he includes the whole sum of the Divine operations which have resulted in the placing of each of his auditors within the circle of the Christian community as the subjects of Christ's grace, and not only the one definite act to which the theologians attach the name of 'calling.' In the briefest possible way we may put the motive thus--the inspiration of imitation is to be found in the contemplation of the gifts of God. What He has said and done to me, calling me out of my darkness and alienation and lavishing the tokens of His love, the voice of His beseechings, the monitions of His Spirit, the message of His Son, the Incarnate Word, and invitation of God--all these things are included in His call. And all of them are the reasons why, bound by thankfulness, overcome by his forbearance, responding to His entreaties, and glued to Him by the strength of the hand that holds us, and the tenacity of His love, we should strive to 'walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called.'

And not only so, but in the thought of the Divine calling there lies a fountain of inspiration when we remember the purpose of the calling. As Paul puts it in one of his letters: 'God has not called us to uncleanness but to holiness.' That to which He summons, or invites [for you may use either word], is holiness like His own. That is the crown of all His purposes for men, the great goal and blessed home to which He would lead us all.

And so, if in addition to the fact of His 'gift and calling' and all that is included within it, if in addition to the purpose of that calling we further think of the relation between us and Him which results from it, so as that we, as the next verse says, call Him who hath called us, ‘Our Father,’ then the motive becomes deeper and more blessed still. Shall we not try to be like the Father of our spirits, and seek for His grace, to bear the likeness of sons?

My text speaks only of effort, let us not forget that the truest way to be partakers of His holiness is to open our hearts for the entrance of the Spirit of His Son, and possessing that--having these promises and that great fulfilment of them--then to perfect holiness in the fear and love of the Lord.

10)1 Peter 1:17

1 Peter

FATHER AND JUDGE

1Pe. 1:17.

‘If ye call on Him as Father,’ when ye pray, say, ‘Our Father which art in heaven.’ One can scarcely help supposing that the Apostle is here, as in several other places in his letter, alluding to words that are stamped ineffaceably upon his memory, because they had dropped from Christ’s lips. At all events, whether there is here a distinct allusion to what we call the Lord’s Prayer or no, it is here recognised as the universal characteristic of Christian people that their prayers are addressed to God in the character of Father. So that we may say that there is no Christianity which does not recognise and rejoice in appealing to the paternal relationship.

But, then, I suppose in Peter’s days, as in our days, there were people that so fell in love with one aspect of the Divine nature that they had no eyes for any other; and who so magnified the thought of the Father that they forgot the thought of the Judge. That error has been committed over and over again in all ages, so that the Church as a whole, one may say, has gone swaying from one extreme to the other, and has rent these two conceptions widely apart, and sometimes has been foolish enough to pit them against each other instead of doing as Peter does here, braiding them together as both conspiring to one result, the production in the Christian heart of a wholesome awe. If ye call on Him as Father ‘who, without respect of persons, judgeth according to every man’s work, pass the time of your sojourning in fear.’

So then, look at this twofold aspect of God’s character.

Both these conceptions ought to be present, flamingly and vividly, burning there before him, to every Christian man. ‘Ye call Him Father,’ but the Father is the Judge. True, the Judge is Father, but Peter reminds us that whatever blessed truths may be hived in that great Name of Father, to be drawn thence by devout meditation and filial love, there is not included in it the thought of weak-minded indulgence to His children, in any of their sins, nor any unlikelihood of inflicting penal consequences on a rebellious child. ‘Father’ does not exclude ‘Judge,’ ‘and without respect of persons He judgeth.’

‘Without respect of persons’--the word is a somewhat unusual New Testament one, but it has special appropriateness and emphasis on Peter’s lips. Do you remember who it was that said, and on what occasion he said it: ‘Now I perceive that God is no respecter of persons’? It was Peter when he had learned the lesson on the housetop at Joppa, looking out over the Mediterranean, and had it enforced by Cornelius’ message. The great thought that had blazed upon him as a new discovery on that never-be-forgotten occasion, comes before him again, and this unfamiliar word comes with it, and he says, ‘without respect of persons He judges.’ Mountains are elevated, valleys are depressed and sunken, but I fancy that the difference between the top of Mount Everest and the gorge through which the Jordan runs would scarcely be perceptible if you were standing on the sun. Thus, ‘without respect of persons,’ great men and little, rich men and poor, educated men and illiterate, people that perch themselves on their little stools and think themselves high above their fellows: they are all on one dead level in the eye of the Judge. And this question is as to the quality of the work and not as to the dignity of the doer. ‘Without respect of persons’ implies universality as well as impartiality. If a Christian man has been ever so near God, and then goes away from Him, he is judged notwithstanding his past nearness. And if a poor soul, all crusted over with his sins and leprous with the foulness of long-standing iniquity, comes to God and asks for pardon, he is judged according to his penitence, ‘without respect of persons.’ That great hand holds an even balance. And though the strictness of the judicial process may have its solemn and its awful aspect, it has also its blessed and its comforting one.

Now, do not run away with the notion that the Apostle is speaking here of that great White Throne and the future judgment that for many of us lies, inoperative on our creeds, on the other side of the great cleft of death. That is a solemn thought, but it is not Peter’s thought here. If any of you can refer to the original, you will see that even more strongly than in our English version, though quite sufficiently strongly there, the conception is brought out of a continuous Divine judgment running along, all through a man’s life, side by side with his work. The judgment here meant is not all clotted together, as it were, in that final act of judgment, leaving the previous life without it, but it runs all through the ages, all through each man’s days. I beseech you to ponder that thought, that at each moment of each of our lives an estimate of the moral character of each of our deeds is present to the Divine mind.

‘Of course we believe that,’ you say. ‘That is commonplace; not worth talking about.’ Ah! but because we believe it, as of course, we slip out of thinking about it and letting it affect our lives. And what I desire to do for you, dear friends, and for myself, is just to put emphasis on the one half of that little word ‘judgeth’ and ask you to take its three last letters and lay them on your minds. Do we feel that, moment by moment, these little spurs of bad temper, these little gusts of worldliness, that tiny, evanescent sting of pride and devildom which has passed across or been fixed in our minds, are all present to God, and that He has judged them already, in the double sense that He has appraised their value and estimated their bearing upon our characters, and that He has set in motion some of the consequences which we shall have to reap?

Oh! one sometimes wishes that people did not so much believe in a future judgment, in so far as it obscures to them the solemn thought of a present and a continuous one. ‘Verily, there is a God that judgeth in the earth,’ and, of course, all these provisional decisions, which are like the documents that in Scotch law are said to ‘precognosce the case,’ are all laid away in the archives of heaven, and will be produced, docketed and in order, at the last for each of us. Christian people sometimes abuse the doctrine of justification by faith as if it meant that Christians at the last were not to be judged. But they are, and there is such a thing as 'salvation yet so as by fire,' and such a thing as salvation in fulness. Do not let filial confidence drive out legitimate fear.

He 'judges according to every man's work.' I do not think it is extravagant attention to niceties to ask you to notice that the Apostle does not say 'works,' but 'work'; as if all the separate actions were gathered into a great whole, as indeed they are, because they are all the products of one mind and character. The trend and drift, so to speak, of our life, rather than its isolated actions and the underlying motives, in their solemn totality and unity, these are the materials of this Divine judgment.

Now, let me say a word about the disposition which the Apostle enjoins upon us in the view of these facts.

The Judge is the Father, the Father is the Judge. The one statement proclaims the merciful, compassionate, paternal judgment, the other the judicial Fatherhood. And what comes from the combination of these two ideas, which thus modify and illuminate one another? 'Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.' What a descent that sounds from the earlier verses of the letter: 'In whom, though now ye see Him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.' Down from those heights of 'joy unspeakable,' and 'already glorified,' the apostle drops plump into this dungeon: 'Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.' Of course, I need not remind you that the 'fear' here is not the 'fear which hath torment'; in fact, I do not think that it is a fear that refers to God at all. It is not a sentiment or emotion of which God is the object. It is not the reverent awe which often appears in Scripture as 'the fear of God,' which is a kind of shorthand expression for all modes of devout sentiment and emotion; but it is a fear, knowing our own weakness and the strong temptations that are round us, of falling into sin. That is the one thing to be afraid of in this world. If a man rightly understood what he is here for, then the only thing that he would be terrified for would be that he should miss the purpose of his being here and lose his hold of God thereby. There is nothing else worth being afraid of, but that is worth being afraid of. It is not slavish dread, nor is it cowardice, but the well-grounded emotion of men that know themselves too well to be confident and know the world too well to be daring and presumptuous.

Don’t you think that Peter had had a pretty rough experience in his life that had taught him the wisdom of such an exhortation? And does it not strike you as very beautiful that it should come, of all people in the world, from his lips? The man that had said, ‘Though all should forsake Thee, yet will not I.’ ‘Why cannot I follow Thee now?’ ‘Bid me come to Thee on the water.’ ‘This be far from Thee, Lord, it shall not be unto Thee’--the man that had whipped out his sword in the garden, in a spasm of foolish affection, now, in his quiet old age, when he has learnt the lesson of failures and follies and sins and repentance, says in effect: ‘Remember me, and do not you be presumptuous.’ ‘Pass the time of your sojourning here in fear.’ ‘If I had known myself a little better, and been a little more afraid of myself, I should not have made such a fool of myself or such shipwreck of my faithfulness.’

Dear friends, no mature Christian is so advanced as that he does not need this reminder, and no Christian novice is so feeble as that, keeping obedient to this precept, he will not be victorious over all his evils. The strongest needs to fear; the weakest, fearing, is safe. For such fearfulness is indispensable to safety. It is all very well to go along with sail extended and a careless look-out. But if, for instance, a captain keeps such when he is making the mouth of the Red Sea where there are a narrow channel and jagged rocks and a strong current, if he has not every man at his quarters and everything ready to let go and stop in a moment, he will be sure to be on the reefs before he has tried the experiment often. And the only safety for any of us is ever to be on the watch, and to dread our own weakness. ‘Blessed is the man that feareth always.’

Such carefulness over conduct and heart is fully compatible with all the blessed emotions to which it seems at first antagonistic. There is no discord between the phrase that I have quoted about ‘joy unspeakable and full of glory,’ and this temper, but rather the two help one another. And such blended confidence and fear are the parents of courage. The man that is afraid that he will do wrong and so hurt himself and grieve his Saviour, is the man that will never be afraid of anything else. Martyrs have gone to the stake ‘fearing not them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do,’ because they were so afraid to sin against God that they were not afraid to die rather than to do it. And that is the temper that you and I should have. Let that one fear, like Moses’ rod, swallow up all the other serpents and make our hearts impervious to any other dread.

‘Pass the time of your sojourning.’ You do not live in your own country, you are in an alien land. You are passing through it. Troops on the march in an enemy’s country, unless they are led by an idiot, will send out clouds of scouts in front and on the wings to give timeous warning of any attempted assault. If we cheerily and carelessly go through this world as if we were marching in a land where there were no foes, there is nothing before us but defeat at the last. Only let us remember that sleepless watchfulness is needed only in this time of sojourning, and that when we get to our own country there is no need for such patrols and advance guards and rearguards and men on the flank as were essential when we were on the march. People that grow exotic plants here in England keep them in glass houses. But when they are taken to their native soil the glass would be an impertinence. As long as we are here we have to wear our armour, but when we get yonder the armour can safely be put off and the white robes that had to be tucked up under it lest they should be soiled by the muddy ways can be let down, for they will gather no pollution from the golden streets. The gates of that city do not need to be shut, day nor night. For when sin has ceased and our liability to yield to temptation has been exchanged for fixed adhesion to the Lord Himself, then, and not till then, is it safe to put aside the armour of godly fear and to walk, unguarded and unarmed, in the land of perpetual peace.

11)1 Peter 1:22

1 Peter

PURIFYING THE SOUL

1Pe. 1:22.

Note these three subsidiary clauses introduced respectively by ‘in,’ ‘through,’ ‘unto.’ They give the means, the Bestower, and the issue of the purity of soul. The Revised Version, following good authorities, omits the clause, ‘through the Spirit.’ It may possibly be originally a marginal gloss of some scribe who was nervous about Peter’s orthodoxy, which finally found its way into the text. But I think we shall be inclined to retain it if we notice that, throughout this epistle, the writer is fond of sentences on the model of the present one, and of surrounding a principal clause with subsidiary ones introduced by a similar sequence of prepositions. For instance, in this very chapter, to pass over other examples, we read, ‘Kept by’ [or in] ‘the power of God through faith unto salvation.’ So, for my present purpose, I take the doubtful words as part of the original text. They unquestionably convey a true idea, whether they are genuine here or no.

One more introductory remark--’Ye have purified your souls’--a bold statement to make about the vast multitude of the ‘dispersed’ throughout all the provinces of Asia Minor whom the Apostle was addressing. The form of the words in the original shows that this purifying is a process which began at some definite point in the past and is being continued throughout all the time of Christian life. The hall-mark of all Christians is a relative purity, not of actions, but of soul. They will vary, one from another; the conception of what is purity of soul will change and grow, but, if a man is a Christian, there was a moment in his past at which he potentially, and in ideal, purified his spirit, and that was the moment when he bowed down in obedience to the truth. There are suggestions for volumes about the true conception of soul-purity in these words of my text. But I deal with them in the simplest possible fashion, following the guidance of these significant little words which introduce the subordinate clauses.

First of all, then, we have here the great thought that

I. Soul purity is in, or by, obedience.

Now, of course, ‘the truth’--truth with the definite article--is the sum of the contents of the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ, His life, His death, His Glory. For to Peter, as to us He should be, Jesus Christ was Truth Incarnate. ‘In Him were hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.’ The first thought that is suggested to me from this expression--obedience to the truth-

-is that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is, as its ultimate intention, meant to be obeyed. There are plenty of truths which have no influence on life and conduct, for which all is done that they can demand when they are accepted. But the truth is no inert substance like the element which recent chemical discoveries have found, which is named ‘argon,’ the do-nothing: the truth is, as physiologists say, a ferment. It is intended to come into life, and into character, and into the inmost spirit of a man, and grip them, and mould them, and transform them, and animate them, and impel them. The truth is to be ‘obeyed.’

Now that altogether throws over two card-castles which imperfect Christians are very apt to build. One which haunted the thoughts of an earlier generation of Christians more than it does the present, is that we have done all that ‘the truth’ asks of us when we have intellectually endorsed it. And so you get churches which build their membership upon acceptance of a creed and excommunicate heretics, whilst they keep do-nothing and uncleansed Christians within their pale. But God does not tell us anything that we may know. He tells us in order that, knowing, we may be and do. And right actions, or rather a character which produces such, is the last aim of all knowledge, and especially of all moral and religious truth. So ‘the truth’ is not ‘argon’, it is a ferment. And if men, steeped to the eyebrows in orthodoxy, think that they have done enough when they have set their hands to a confession of faith, and that they are Christians because they can say, ‘all this I steadfastly believe,’ they need to remember that religious truth which does not mould and transform character and conduct is a king dethroned; and for dethroned kings there is a short step between the throne from which they have descended and the scaffold on which they die.

But there is another--what I venture to call a card-castle, which more of us build in these days of indifference as to creed--and that is that a great many of us are too much disposed to believe that ‘the truth as it is in Jesus’ has received from us all which it expects when we trust to it for what we call our ‘salvation,’ meaning thereby forgiveness of sins and immunity from punishment. These are elements of salvation unquestionably, but they are only part of it. And the very truths on which Christian people rest for this initial salvation, which is forgiveness and acceptance, are meant to be the guides of our lives and the patterns for our imitation. Why, in this very letter, in reference to the very parts of Christ's work, on which faith is wont to rest for salvation,--the death on the Cross to which we say that we trust, and which we are so accustomed to exalt as a unique and inimitable work that cannot be reproduced and needs no repetition, world without end--Peter has no hesitation in saying that Christ was our 'Pattern,' and that, even when He went to the Cross, He died 'leaving us an example that we should follow in His steps.' So, brethren, the truth needs to be known and believed: the truth needs not only to be believed but to be trusted in; the truth needs not only to be believed and to be trusted in, but to be obeyed.

Still further, another thought following upon and to some extent modifying the preceding one, is suggested here, and that is that the faith, which I have just been saying is sometimes mistakenly regarded as being all that truth calls for from us, is itself obedience. As I have said, the language in the original here implies that there was a given definite moment in the past when these dispersed strangers obeyed, and, by obeying the truth, purified their souls. What was that moment? Some people would say the moment when the rite of baptism was administered. I would say the moment when they bowed themselves in joyful acceptance of the great Word and put out a firm hand of faith to grasp Jesus Christ. That is obedience. For, in the very act of thus trusting, there is self-surrender, is there not? Does not a man depart from himself and bow himself humbly before his Saviour when he puts his trust in Him? Is not the very essence of obedience, not the mere external act, but the melting of the will to flow in such directions as His master-impulse may guide it? Thus, faith in its depth is obedience; and the moment when a man believes, in the deepest sense of the word, that moment, in the deepest realities of his spirit, he becomes obedient to the will and to the love of his Saviour Lord, Who is the Truth as He is the Way and the Life. We find, not only in this Epistle, but throughout the Epistles, that the two words 'disobedience' and 'unbelief,' are used as equivalents. We read, for instance, of those that 'stumble at the word, being disobedient,' and the like. So, then, faith is obedience in its depth, and, if our faith has any vitality in it, it carries in it the essence of all submission.

But then, further, my text implies that the faith which is, in its depth, obedience, in its practical issues will produce the practical obedience which the text enjoins. It is no mere piece of theological legerdemain which counts that faith is righteousness. But, just as all sin comes from selfishness, so, and therefore, all righteousness will flow from giving up self, from decentralising, as it were, our souls from their old centre, self, and taking a new centre, God in Christ. Thus the germ of all practical obedience lies in vital faith. It is, if I might so say, the mother-tincture which, variously combined, coloured, and perfumed, makes all the precious things, the virtues and graces of humanity, which the believing soul pours out as a libation before its God. It is the productive energy of all practical goodness. It is the bottom heat in the greenhouse which makes all the plants grow and flourish. Faith is obedience, and faith produces obedience. Does my faith produce obedience? If it does not, it is not faith.

Then, with regard to this first part of my subject, comes the final thought that practical obedience works inwards as well as outwards, and purifies the soul which renders it. People generally turn that round the other way, and, instead of saying that to do right helps to make a man right within, they say ‘make the tree good, and its fruit good’--first the pure soul, and then the practical obedience. Both statements are true. For every act that a man does reacts upon the doer, just as, whether the shot hits the target or not, the gun kicks back on the shoulder of the man that fired it. Conduct comes from character, but conduct works back upon character, and character is largely the deposit from the vanished seas of actions. So, then, whilst the deepest thought is, be good and you will do good, it is not to be forgotten that the other side is true--do good, and it will tend to make you good. Obedience purifies the soul, while, on the other hand, a man that lives ill comes to think as he lives, and to become tenfold more a child of evil. ‘The dyer’s hand is subdued to what it works in.’ ‘Ye have purified your souls,’ ideally, in the act of faith, and continuously, in the measure in which you practically obey the truth.

We have here

II. Purifying through the Spirit.

I have already said that these words are possibly no part of the original text, but that they convey a true Christian idea, whether the words are here genuine or no. I need not enlarge upon this part of my subject at any length. Let me just remind you how the other verse in this chapter, to which I have already referred as cast in the same mould as our text, covers, from a different point of view, the same ground exactly as our text. Here there is put first the human element: ‘Ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth,’ and secondly the Divine element; ‘through the Spirit.’ The human part is put in the foreground, and God’s part comes in, I was going to say, subordinately, as a condition. The reverse is the case in the other text, which runs: ‘Kept in the power of God through faith’--where the Divine element is in the foreground, as being the true cause, and the human dwindles to being merely a condition--’Kept by’ [or in] ‘the power of God through faith.’ Both views are true; you may take the vase by either handle. When the purpose is to stimulate to action, man’s part is put in the foreground and God’s part secondarily. When the purpose is to stimulate to confidence, God’s part is put in the foreground and the man’s is secondary. The two interlock, and neither is sufficient without the other.

The true Agent of all purifying is that Divine Spirit. I have said that the moment of true trust is the moment of initial obedience, and of the beginning of purity. And it is so because, in that moment of initial faith, there enters into the heart the communicated Divine life of the Spirit, which thenceforward is lodged there, except it be quenched by the man’s negligence or sin. Thence, from that germ implanted in the moment of faith, the germ of a new life, there issue forth to ultimate dominion in the spirit, the powers of that Divine Spirit which make for righteousness and transform the character. Thus, the true cause and origin of all Christian nobility and purity of character and conduct lies in that which enters the heart at the moment that the heart is opened for the coming of the Lord. But, on the other hand, this Divine Spirit, the Source of all purity, will not purify the soul without the man’s efforts. ‘Ye have purified your souls.’ You need the Spirit indeed. But you are not mere passive recipients. You are to be active co-operators. In this region, too, we are ‘labourers together with God.’ We cannot of ourselves do the work, for the very powers with which we do it, or try to do it, are themselves in need of cleansing. And for a man to try to purify the soul by his own effort alone is to play the part of the sluttish house-wife who would seek to wipe a dish clean with a dirty cloth. You need the Divine Spirit to work in you, and you need to use, by your own effort, the Divine Spirit that does work in you. He is as ‘rushing, mighty wind’; but, unless the sails are set and the helm gripped, the wind will pass the boat and leave it motionless. He is Divine fire that burns up the dross and foulness; but, unless we ‘guard the holy fire’ and feed it, it dies down into grey cold ashes. He is the water of life; but, unless we dig and take heed to keep clear the channels, no refreshing will permeate to the roots of the wilting flowers, and there will be dryness, thirst, and barrenness, even on the river’s banks.

So, brethren, neither God alone nor man alone can purify the soul. We need Him, else we shall labour in vain. He needs us, else He will bestow His gift, and we shall receive ‘the grace of God in vain.’

Lastly, we have here--

III. Purifying ... unto ... love.

The Apostle was speaking to men of very diverse nationalities who had been rent asunder by deep gulfs of mutual suspicion and conflicting interests and warring creeds, and a great mysterious, and, as it would seem to the world then, utterly inexplicable bond of unity had been evolved amongst them, and Greek and barbarian, bond and free, male and female, had come together in amity. The ‘love of the brethren’ was the creation of Christianity, and was the outstanding fact which, more than any other, amazed the beholders in these early days. God be thanked! there are signs in our generation of a closer drawing together of Christian people than many past ages, alas, have seen.

But my text suggests solemn and great thoughts with regard to Christian love and unity. The road to unity lies through purity, and the road to purity lies through obedience. Yes; what keeps Christian people apart is their impurities. It is not their creeds. It is not any of the differences that appear to separate them. It is because they are not better men and women. Globules of quicksilver will run together and make one mass; but not if you dust them over. And it is the impurities on the quicksilver that keep us from coalescing.

So then we have to school ourselves into greater conformity to the likeness of our Master, to conquer selfishness, and to purify our souls, or else all this talk about Christian unity is no better than sounding brass, and more discordant than tinkling cymbals. Let us learn the lesson. ‘The unfeigned love of the brethren’ is not such an easy thing as some people fancy, and it is not to be attained at all on the road by which some people would seek it. Cleanse yourselves, and you will flow together.

Here, then, we have Peter’s conception of a pure soul and a pure life. It is a stately building, based deep on the broad foundation of the truth as it is in Jesus; its walls rising, but not without our effort, being builded together for a habitation of God through the Spirit, and having as the shining apex of its heaven-pointing spire ‘unfeigned love to the brethren.’ The measure of our obedience is the measure of our purity. The measure of our purity is the measure of our brotherly love. But that love, though it is the very aim and natural issue of purity, still will not be realised without effort on our part. Therefore my text, after its exhibition of the process and issues of the purifying which began with faith, glides into the exhortation: ‘See that ye love one another with a pure heart’--a heart purified by obedience--and that ‘fervently.’

12)1 Peter 2:4-5

5

1 Peter

LIVING STONES ON THE LIVING FOUNDATION STONE

1Pe. 2:4-5.

I wonder whether Peter, when he wrote these words, was thinking about what Jesus Christ said to him long ago, up there at Cæsarea Philippi. He had heard from Christ’s lips, ‘Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church.’ He had understood very little of what it meant then. He is an old man now, years of experience and sorrow and work have taught him the meaning of the words, and he understands them a great deal better than his so-called successors have done. For we may surely take the text as the Apostle’s own disclaimer of that which the Roman Catholic Church has founded on it, and has blazoned it, in gigantic letters round the dome of St. Peter’s, as meaning. It is surely legitimate to hear him saying in these words: ‘Make no mistake, it is Jesus Himself on whom the Church is built. The confession of Him which the Father in heaven revealed to me, not I, the poor sinner who confessed it--the Christ whom that confession set forth, He is the foundation stone, and all of you are called and honoured to ring out the same confession. Jesus is the one Foundation, and we all, apostles and humble believers, are but stones builded on Him.’ Peter’s relation to Jesus is fundamentally the same as that of every poor soul that ‘comes to’ Him.

Now, there are two or three thoughts that may very well be suggested from these words, and the first of them is this:--

I. Those that are in Christ have perpetually to make the effort to come nearer Christ.

Remember that the persons to whom the Apostle is speaking are no strangers to the Saviour. They have been professing Christians from of old. They have made very considerable progress in the Divine life; they are near Jesus Christ; and yet Peter says to them, ‘You can get nearer if you try,’ and it is your one task and one hope, the condition of all blessedness, peace, and joy in your religious life that you should perpetually be making the effort to come closer, and to keep closer, to the Lord, by whom you say that you live.

What is it to come to Him? The context explains the figurative expression, in the very next verse or two, by another and simpler word, which strips away the figure and gives us the plain fact--’in Whom believing.’ The act of the soul by which I, with all my weakness and sin, cast myself on Jesus Christ, and grapple Him to my heart, and bind myself with His strength and righteousness--that is what the Apostle means here. Or, to put it into other words, this ‘coming,’ which is here laid as the basis of everything, of all Christian prosperity and progress for the individual and for the community, is the movement towards Christ of the whole spiritual nature of a man--thoughts, loves, wishes, purposes, desires, hopes, will. And we come near to Him when day by day we realise His nearness to us, when our thoughts are often occupied with Him, bring His peace and Himself to bear as a motive upon our conduct, let our love reach out its tendrils towards, and grasp, and twine round Him, bow our wills to His commandment, and in everything obey Him. The distance between heaven and earth does part us, but the distance between a thoughtless mind, an unrenewed heart, a rebellious will, and Him, sets between Him and us a greater gulf, and we have to bridge that by continual honest efforts to keep our wayward thoughts true to Him and near Him, and to regulate our affections that they may not, like runaway stars, carry us far from the path, and to bow our stubborn and self-regulating wills beneath His supreme commandment, and so to make all things a means of coming nearer the Lord with whom is our true home.

Christian men, there are none of us so close to Him but that we may be nearer, and the secret of our daily Christian life is all wrapped up in that one word which is scarcely to be called a figure, 'coming' unto Him. That nearness is what we are to make daily efforts after, and that nearness is capable of indefinite increase. We know not how close to His heart we can lay our aching heads. We know not how near to His fulness we may bring our emptiness. We have never yet reached the point beyond which no closer union is possible. There has always been a film--and, alas! sometimes a gulf--between Him and us, His professing servants. Let us see to it that the conscious distance diminishes every day, and that we feel ourselves more and more constantly near the Lord and intertwined with Him.

II. Those who come near Christ will become like Christ.

'To Whom coming, as unto a living stone, ye also as living stones.' Note the verbal identity of the expressions with which Peter describes the Master and His servants. Christ is the Stone--that is Peter's interpretation of 'on this rock will I build My Church.' There is a reference, too, no doubt, to the many Old Testament prophecies which are all gathered up in that saying of our Lord's. Probably both Jesus and Peter had in mind Isaiah's 'stone of stumbling,' which was also a 'sure corner-stone, and a tried foundation.' And words in the context which I have not taken for consideration, 'disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God and precious,' plainly rest upon the 118th Psalm, which speaks of 'the stone which the builders rejected' becoming 'the head of the corner.'

But, says Peter, He is not only the foundation Stone, the corner Stone, but a living Stone, and he does not only use that word to show us that he is indulging in a metaphor, and that we are to think of a person and not of a thing, but in the sense that Christ is eminently and emphatically the living One, the Source of life.

But, when he turns to the disciples, he speaks to them in exactly the same language. They, too, are ‘living stones,’ because they come to the ‘Stone’ that is ‘living.’ Take away the metaphor, and what does this identity of description come to? Just this, that if we draw near to Jesus Christ, life from Him will pass into our hearts and minds, which life will show itself in kindred fashion to what it wore in Jesus Christ, and will shape us into the likeness of Him from whom we draw our life, because to Him we have come. I may remind you that there is scarcely a single name by which the New Testament calls Jesus Christ which Jesus Christ does not share with us His younger brethren. By that Son we ‘receive the adoption of sons.’ Is He the Light of the world? We are lights of the world. And if you look at the words of my text, you will see that the offices which are attributed to Christ in the New Testament are gathered up in those which the Apostle here ascribes to Christ’s servants. Jesus Christ in His manhood was the Temple of God. Jesus Christ in His manhood was the Priest for humanity. Jesus Christ in His manhood was the sacrifice for the world’s sins. And what does Peter say here? ‘Ye are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices.’ You draw life from Jesus Christ if you keep close to Him, and that life makes you, in derived and subordinate fashion, but in a very real and profound sense, what Jesus Christ was in the world. The whole blessedness and secret of the gifts which our Lord comes to bestow upon men may be summed up in that one thought, which is metaphorically and picturesquely set forth in the language of my text, and which I put into plainer and more prosaic English when I say--they that come near Christ become as Christ. As ‘living stones’ they, too, share in the life which flows from Him. Touch Him, and His quick Spirit passes into our hearts. Rest upon that foundation-stone and up from it, if I may so say, there is drawn, by strange capillary attraction, all the graces and powers of the Saviour’s own life. The building which is reared upon the Foundation is cemented to the Foundation by the communication of the life itself, and, coming to the living Rock, we, too, become alive.

Let us keep ourselves near to Him, for, disconnected, the wire cannot carry the current, and is only a bit of copper, with no virtue in it, no power. Attach it once more to the battery and the mysterious energy flashes through it immediately. ‘To Whom coming,’ because He lives, ‘ye shall live also.’

III. Lastly:

They who become like Christ because they are near Him, thereby grow together.

‘To whom coming, as unto a living stone, ye also, as living stones, are built up.’ That building up means not only the growth of individual graces in the Christian character, the building up in each single soul of more and more perfect resemblance to the Saviour, but from the context it rather refers to the welding together, into a true and blessed unity, of all those that partake of that common life. Now, it is very beautiful to remember, in this connection, to whom this letter was written. The first words of it are: ‘To the strangers scattered abroad throughout,’ etc. etc. All over Asia Minor, hundreds of miles apart, here one there another little group, were these isolated believers, the scattered stones of a great building. But Peter shows them the way to a true unity, notwithstanding their separation. He says to them in effect: ‘You up in Bithynia, and you others away down there on the southern coast, though you never saw one another, though you are separated by mountain ranges and weary leagues; though you, if you met one another, perhaps could not understand what you each were saying, if you "come unto the living Stone, ye as living stones are built up" into one.’ There is a great unity into which all they are gathered who, separated by whatever surface distinctions, yet, deep down at the bottom of their better lives, are united to Jesus Christ.

But there may be another lesson here for us, and that is, that the true and only secret of the prosperity and blessedness and growth of a so-called Christian congregation is the individual faithfulness of its members, and their personal approximation of Jesus Christ. If we here, knit together as we are nominally for Christian worship, and by faith in that dear Lord, are true to our profession and our vocation, and keep ourselves near our Master, then we shall be built up; and if we do not, we shall not.

So, dear friends, all comes to this: There is the Stone laid; it does not matter how close we are lying to it, it will be nothing to us unless we are on it. And I put it to each of you. Are you built on the Foundation, and from the Foundation do you derive a life which is daily bringing you nearer to Him, and making you liker Him? All blessedness depends, for time and for eternity, on the answer to that question. For remember that, since that living Stone is laid, it is something to you. Either it is the Rock on which you build, or the Stone against which you stumble and are broken. No man, in a country evangelised like England--I do not say Christian, but evangelised--can say that Jesus Christ has no relation to, or effect upon, him. And certainly no people that listen to Christian preaching, and know Christian truth as fully and as much as you do, can say it. He is the Foundation on which we can rear a noble, stable life, if we build upon Him. If He is not the Foundation on which I build, He is the Stone on which I shall be broken.

13)1 Peter 2:5

1 Peter

SPIRITUAL SACRIFICES

1Pe. 2:5.

In this verse Peter piles up his metaphors in a fine profusion, perfectly careless of oratorical elegance or propriety. He gathers together three symbols, drawn from ancient sacrificial worship, and applies them all to Christian people. In the one breath they are ‘temples,’ in the next ‘priests,’ in the third ‘sacrifices.’ All the three are needed to body out the whole truth of the relationship of the perfect universal religion--which is Christianity--to the fragmentary and symbolical religion of ancient time.

Christians individually and collectively are temples, inasmuch as they are ‘the habitation of God through the Spirit.’ They are priests by virtue of their consecration, their direct access to God, their function of representing God to men, and of bringing men to God. They are sacrifices, inasmuch as one main part of their priestly function is to offer themselves to God.

Now, it is very difficult for us to realise what an extraordinary anomaly the Christian faith presented at its origin, surrounded by religions which had nothing to do with morality, conduct, or spiritual life, but were purely ritualistic. And here, in the midst of them, started up a religion bare and bald, and with no appeal to sense, no temple, no altar, no sacrifice. But the Apostles with one accord declare that they had all these things in far higher form than those faiths possessed them, which had only the outward appearance.

Now, this conception of the sacrificial element in the Christian life runs through the whole New Testament, and is applied there in a very remarkable variety of forms. I have taken the words of my text, not so much to discourse upon them especially. My object now is rather to gather together the various references to the Christian life as essentially sacrificial, and to trace the various applications which that idea receives in the New Testament. There are four classes of these, to which I desire especially to refer.

I. There is the living sacrifice of the body.

‘I beseech you, by the mercies of God, that ye present’--which is a technical word for a priest’s action--’your bodies a living sacrifice,’ in contrast with the slaying, which was the presentation of the animal victim. Now, that ‘body’ there is not equivalent to self is distinctly seen when we notice that Paul goes on, in the very next clause, to say, ‘and be transformed by the renewing of your mind.’ So that he is speaking, not of the self, but of the corporeal organ and instrument of the self, when he says ‘present your bodies a living sacrifice.’

Of course, the central idea of sacrifice is surrender to God; and, of course, the place where that surrender is made is the inmost self. The will is the man, and when the will bows, dethroning self and enthroning God, submitting to His appointments, and delighting to execute His commandments, then the sacrifice is begun. But, inasmuch as the body is the organ of the man’s activity, the sacrifice of the will and of self must needs come out into visibility and actuality in the aggregate of deeds, of which the body is the organ and instrument. But there must first of all be the surrender of my inmost self, and only then, and as the token and outcome of that, will any external acts, however religious they may seem to be, come into the category of sacrifice when they express a conscious surrender of myself to God. ‘The flesh profiteth nothing,’ and yet the flesh profiteth much. But here is the order that another of the Apostles lays down: ‘Yield yourselves to God,’ and then, ‘your members as instruments of righteousness to Him.’

To speak of the sacrifice of the body as a living sacrifice suggests that it is not the slaying of any bodily appetite or activity that is the true sacrifice and worship, but the hallowing of these. It is a great deal easier, and it is sometimes necessary, to cut off the offending right hand, to pluck out the offending right eye, or, putting away the metaphor, to abstain rigidly from forms of activity which are perfectly legitimate in themselves, and may be innocuous to other people, if we find that they hurt us. But that is second best, and though it is better in the judgment of common sense to go into life maimed than complete to be cast into hell-fire, it is better still to go into life symmetrical and entire, with no maiming in hand or organ. So you do not offer the living sacrifice of the body when you annihilate, but when you suppress, and direct, and hallow its needs, its appetites, and its activities.

The meaning of this sacrifice is that the whole active life should be based upon, and be the outcome of, the inward surrender of self unto God. ‘On the bells of the horses shall be written, Holiness to the Lord, and every pot and vessel in Jerusalem shall be holy as the bowls upon the altar’--in such picturesque and yet profound fashion did an ancient prophet set forth the same truth that lies in this declaration of our Apostle, that the body, the instrument of our activities, should be a living sacrifice to God. Link all its actions with Him; let there be conscious reference to Him in all that I do. Let foot and hand and eye and brain work for Him, and by Him, and in constant consciousness of His presence; suppress where necessary, direct always, appetites and passions, and make the body the instrument of the surrendered spirit. And then, in the measure in which we can do so, the greatest cleft and discord in human life will be filled, and body, soul, and spirit will harmonise and make one music of praise to God.

Ah! brethren, these bad principles have teeth to bite very close into our daily lives. How many of us, young and old, have ‘fleshly lusts which war against the soul’? How many of you young men have no heart for higher, purer, nobler things, because the animal in you is strong! How many of you find that the day’s activities blunt you to God! How many of us are weakened still under that great antagonism of the flesh lusting against the spirit, so that we cannot do the things that we would! Sensuality, indulgence in animal propensities, yielding to the clamant voices of the beast that is within us--these things wreck many a soul; and some of those that are listening to me now. Let the man govern and coerce the animal, and let God govern the man. ‘I beseech you that you yield your bodies a living sacrifice.’

II. There is the sacrifice of praise.

Of course, logically and properly, this, and all the others that I am going to speak about, are included within that to which I have already directed attention. But still they are dealt with separately in Scripture, and I follow the guidance. We read in the Epistle to the Hebrews: ‘By Him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise unto God continually--that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks unto His name.’ There, then, is another of the regions into which the notion of sacrifice as the very essence of Christian life is to be carried.

There is nothing more remarkable in Scripture than the solemn importance that it attaches to what so many people think so little about, and that is words. It even sometimes seems to take them as being more truly the outcome and revelation of a man’s character than his deeds are. And that is true, in some respects. But at all events there is set forth, ever running all through the Scripture, that thought, that one of the best sacrifices that men can make to God is to render up the tribute of their praise. In the great psalm which lays down with clearness never surpassed in the New Testament the principles of true Christian worship, this is declared: ‘Whoso offereth praise glorifieth Me.’ The true offering is not the slaying of animals or the presentation of any material things, but the utterance of hearts welling up thankfulness. In the ancient ritual there stood within the Holy place, and after the altar of burnt-offering had been passed, three symbols of the relation of the redeemed soul to God. There was the great candlestick, which proclaimed ‘Ye are the light of the world.’ There was the table on which the so-called shewbread was laid, and in the midst there was the altar of incense, on which, day by day, morning and evening, there was kindled the fragrant offering which curled up in wreaths of blue smoke aspiring towards the heavens. It lay smouldering all through the day, and was quickened into flame morning and evening. That is a symbol representing what the Christian life ought to be--a continual thank-offering of the incense of prayer and praise.

Nor that only, brethren, but also there is another shape in which our words should be sacrifices, and that is in the way of direct utterances to men, as well as of thanksgiving to God. What a shame it is, and what a confession of imperfect, partial redemption and regeneration on the part of professing Christians it is, that there are thousands of us who never, all our lives, have felt the impulse or necessity of giving utterance to our Christian convictions! You can talk about anything else; you are tongue-tied about your religion. Why is that? You can make speeches upon political platforms, or you can discourse on many subjects that interest you. You never speak a word to anybody about the Master that you say you serve. Why is that? 'What is bred in the bone comes out in the flesh.' What is deep in the heart sometimes lies there unuttered, but more often demands expression. I venture to think that if your Christianity was deeper, it would not be so dumb. You strengthen your convictions by speech. A man's belief in anything grows incalculably by the very fact of proclaiming it. And there is no surer way to lose moral and spiritual convictions than to huddle them up in the secret chambers of our hearts. It is like a man carrying a bit of ice in his palm. He locks his fingers over it, and when he opens them it has all run out and gone. If you want to deepen your Christianity, declare it. If you would have your hearts more full of gratitude, speak your praise. There used to be in certain religious houses a single figure kneeling on the altar-steps, by day and by night, ever uttering forth with unremitting voice, the psalm of praise. That perpetual adoration in spirit, if not in form, ought to be ours. The fruit of the lips should continually be offered. Literally, of course, there cannot be that unbroken and exclusive utterance of thanksgiving. There are many other things that men have to talk about; but through all the utterances there ought to spread the aroma--like some fragrance diffused through the else scentless air from some unseen source of sweetness--of that name to which the life is one long thanksgiving.

III. There is the sacrifice of help to men.

The same passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews, to which I have already referred, goes on to bracket together the sacrifice of praise and of deeds. It continues thus:--'But to do good and to communicate forget not.' Again I say, logically this comes under the first division. But still it may be treated separately, and it just carries this thought--your praying and singing praises are worse than useless unless you go out into the world an embodiment and an imitation of the love which you hymn. True philanthropy has its roots in true religion. The service of man is the service of God.

That principle cuts two ways. It comes as a sharp test of their prayers and psalm-singing to emotional Christians, who are always able to gush in words of thankfulness, and it confronts them with the question, What do you do for your brother? That is a question that comes very close to us all. Do not talk about being the priests of the Most High God unless you are doing the priestly office of representing God to men, and carrying to them the blessings that they need. Your service to God is worthless unless it is followed by diligent, fraternal, wise, self-sacrificing service for men.

The same principle points in another direction. If, on the one hand, it crushes as hypocrisy a religion of talk, on the other hand it declares as baseless a philanthropy which has no reference to God. And whilst I know that there are many men who, following the dictates of their hearts, and apart altogether from any reference to higher religious sanctions, do exercise pity and compassion and help, I believe that for the basing of a lasting, wide, wise benevolence, there is nothing solid and broad except Christ and Him crucified, and the consciousness of having been--sinful and needy as we are--received and blessed by Him. Let the philanthropists learn that the surrender of self, and the fruit of the lips giving thanks to His name, must precede the highest kind of beneficence. Let the Christian learn that benevolence is the garb in which religion is dressed. ‘True worship and undefiled ... is this, to visit the widow and the fatherless in their affliction.’ Morality is the dress of Religion; Religion is the body of Morality.

IV. Lastly, there is the sacrifice of death.

‘I am ready to be offered,’ says the Apostle--to be poured out, as a libation. And again, ‘If I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice with you all.’ And so may

‘Death the endless mercies seal,

And make the sacrifice complete.’

It may become not a reluctant being dragged out of life whilst we cling to it with both our hands. It may be not a reluctant yielding to necessity, but a religious act, in which a man resignedly and trustfully and gratefully yields himself to God; and says, ‘Father! into Thy hands I commit my spirit.’

Ah! brethren, is not that a better way to die than to be like some poor wretch in a stream, that clutches at some unfixed support on the bank, and is whirled away down, fiercely resisting and helpless? We may thus make our last act an act of devotion, and go within the veil as priests bearing in our hands the last of our sacrifices. The sacrifice of death will only be offered when a life of sacrifice has preceded it. And if you and I, moved by the mercies of God, yield ourselves living sacrifices, using our lips for His praise and our possessions for man’s help, then we may die as the Apostle expected to do, and feel that by Christ Jesus even death becomes ‘an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well-pleasing unto God.’

14)1 Peter 2:9

1 Peter

MIRRORS OF GOD

1Pe. 2:9.

The Revised Version, instead of ‘praises,’ reads excellencies--and even that is but a feeble translation of the remarkable word here employed. For it is that usually rendered ‘virtues’; and by the word, of course, when applied to God, we mean the radiant excellencies and glories of His character, of which our earthly qualities, designated by the same name, are but as shadows.

It is, indeed, true that this same expression is employed in the Greek version of the Old Testament in Isaiah 43. in a verse which evidently was floating before Peter’s mind. ‘This people have I formed for Myself; they shall show forth My praise.’

But even while that is admitted, it is to be observed that the expression here does not merely mean that the audible praise of God should be upon the lips of Christian people, but that their whole lives should, in a far deeper sense than that, be the manifestation of what the Apostle here calls ‘excellencies of God.’

I. Here we get a wonderful glimpse into the heart of God.

Note the preceding words, in which the writer describes all God’s mercies to His people, making them ‘a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation’; a people ‘His own possession.’ All that is done for one specific purpose--’that ye should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness.’ That is to say, the very aim of all God’s gracious manifestations of Himself is that the men who apprehend them should go forth into the world and show Him for what He is.

Now that aim may be, and often has been, put so as to present an utterly hard and horrible notion. That God’s glory is His only motive may be so stated as to mean nearly an Almighty Selfishness, which is far liker the devil than God. People in old days did not always recognise the danger that lay in such a representation of what we call God’s motive for action. But if you think for a moment about this statement, all that appears hard and repellent drops clean away from it, and it turns out to be another way of saying, ‘God is Love.’ Because, what is there more characteristic of love than an earnest desire to communicate itself and to be manifested and beheld? And what is it that God reveals to the world for His own glory but the loftiest and most wondrous compassion, that cannot be wearied out, that cannot be provoked, and the most forgiving Omnipotence, that, in answer to all men’s wanderings and rebellions, only seeks to draw them to itself? That is what God wants to be known for. Is that hard and repellent? Does that make Him a great tyrant, who only wants to be abjectly worshipped? No; it makes Him the very embodiment and perfection of the purest love. Why does He desire that He should be known? for any good that it does to Him? No; except the good that even His creatures can do to Him when they gladden His paternal heart by recognising Him for what He is, the Infinite Lover of all souls.

But the reason why He desires, most of all, that the light of His character may pour into every heart is because He would have every heart gladdened and blessed for ever by that received and believed light. So the hard saying that God’s own glory is His supreme end melts into ‘God is Love.’ The Infinite desires to communicate Himself, that by the communication men may be blessed.

II. There is another thing here, and that is, a wonderful glimpse of what Christian people are in the world for.

‘This people have I formed for Myself,’ says the fundamental passage in Isaiah already referred to, ‘they shall show forth My praise.’ It was not worth while forming them except for that. It was still less worth while redeeming them except for that.

But you may say, ‘I am saved in order that I may enjoy all the blessings of salvation, immunities from fear and punishment, and the like.’ Yes! Certainly! But is that all? Or is it the main thing? I think not. There is not a creature in God’s universe so tiny, even although you cannot see it with a microscope, but that it has a claim on Him that made it for its well-being. That is very certain. And so my salvation--with all the blessedness for me that lies wrapped up and hived in that great word--my salvation is an adequate end with God, in all His dealing, and especially in His sending of Jesus Christ.

But there is not a creature in the whole universe, though he were mightier than the archangels that stand nearest God’s throne, who is so great and independent that his happiness and well-being is the sole aim of God’s gifts to him. For every one of us the Apostle means the word, ‘No man liveth to himself’--he could not if he were to try--’and no man dieth to himself.’ Every man that receives anything from God is thereby made a steward to impart it to others. So we may say--and I speak now to you who profess to be Christians--’you were not saved for your own sakes.’ One might almost say that that was a by-end. You were saved--shall I say?--for God’s sake; and you were saved for man’s sake? Just as when you put a bit of leaven into a lump of dough, each grain of the lump, as it is leavened and transformed, becomes the medium for passing on the mysterious transforming influence to the particle beyond, so every one of us, if we have been brought out of darkness into marvellous light, have been so brought, not only that we may recreate and bathe our own eyes in the flooding sunshine, but that we may turn to our brothers and ask them to come too out of the doleful night into the cheerful, gladsome day. Every man that Jesus Christ conquers on the field He sends behind Him, and says, ‘Take rank in My army. Be My soldier.’ Every yard of line in a new railway when laid down is used to carry materials to make the next yard; and so the terminus is reached. Even so, Christian people were formed for Christ that they might show forth His praise.

Look what a notion that gives us of the dignity of the Christian life, and of the special manifestation of God which is afforded to the world in it. You, if you love as you ought to do, are a witness of something far nobler in God than all the stars in the sky. You, if you set forth as becomes you His glorious character, have crowned the whole manifestation that He makes of Himself in Nature and in Providence. What people learn about God from a true Christian is a better revelation than has ever been made or can be made elsewhere. So the Bible talks about principalities and powers in heavenly places who have had nobody knows how many millenniums of intercourse with God, nobody knows how deep and intimate, learning from Christian people the manifold wisdom which had folds and folds in it that they had never unfolded and never could have done. ‘Ye are My witnesses,’ saith the Lord. Sun and stars tell of power, wisdom, and a whole host of majestic attributes. We are witnesses that ‘He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength.’ Who was it that said

“Twas great to speak a world from naught,

‘Tis greater to redeem?’

‘Ye are saved that ye may show forth the praise of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.’

III. Lastly, we have here a piece of stringent practical direction.

All that I have been saying thus far refers to the way in which the very fact of a man’s being saved from his sin is a revelation of God’s mercy, love, and restoring power. But there are two sides to the thought of my text; and the one is that the very existence of Christian people in the world is a standing witness to the highest glory of God’s name; and the other is that there are characteristics which, as Christian men, we are bound to put forth, and which manifest in another fashion the excellencies of our redeeming God.

The world takes its notions of God, most of all, from the people who say that they belong to God’s family. They read us a great deal more than they read the Bible. They see us; they only hear about Jesus Christ. ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image’ nor any likeness of the Divine, but thou shalt make thyself an image of Him, that men looking at it may learn a little more of what He is. If we have any right to say that we are a royal priesthood, a chosen nation, God’s ‘possession,’ then there will be in us some likeness of Him to whom we belong stamped more or less perfectly upon our characters; and just as people cannot look at the sun, but may get some notion of its power when they gaze upon the rare beauty of the tinted clouds that lie round about it, if, in the poor, wet, cold mistiness of our lives there be caught, as it were, and tangled some stray beams of the sunshine, there will be colour and beauty there. A bit of worthless tallow may be saturated with a perfume which will make it worth its weight in gold. So our poor natures may be drenched with God and give Him forth fragrant and precious, and men may be drawn thereby. The witness of the life which is Godlike is the duty of Christian men and women in the world, and it is mainly what we are here for.

Nor does that exclude the other kind of showing forth the praises, by word and utterance, at fit times and to the right people. We are not all capable of that, in any public fashion; we are all capable of it in some fashion. There is no Christian that has not somebody to whom their words--they may be very simple and very feeble--will come as nobody else’s words can. Let us use these talents and these opportunities for the Master.

But, above all, let us remember that none of these works--either the involuntary and unconscious exhibition of light and beauty and excellencies caught from Him; or the voluntary and vocal proclamations of the name of Him from whom we have caught them--can be done to any good purpose if any taint of self mingles with it. ‘Let your light so shine before men that they may behold your good works and glorify’--whom? you?--’your Father which is in heaven.’

The harp-string gives out its note only on condition that, being touched, it vibrates, and ceases to be visible. Be you unseen, transparent, and the glory of the Lord shall shine through you.

15)1 Peter 2:21

1 Peter

CHRIST THE EXEMPLAR

1Pe. 2:21.

These words are a very striking illustration of the way in which the Gospel brings Christ's principles to bear upon morals and duty. The Apostle is doing nothing more than exhorting a handful of slaves to the full and complete and patient acceptance of their hard lot, and in order to teach a very homely and lowly lesson to the squalid minds of a few captives, he brings in the mightiest of all lessons by pointing to the most beautiful, most blessed, and most mysterious fact in the world's history--the cross of Christ. It is the very spirit of Christianity that the biggest thing is to regulate the smallest duties of life. Men's lives are made up of two or three big things and a multitude of little ones, and the greater rule the lesser; and, my friends, unless we have got a religion and a morality that can and will keep the trifles of our lives right there will be nothing right; unless we can take those deepest truths, make them the ruling principles, and lay them down side by side with the most trivial things of our lives, we are something short. Is there nothing in your life or mine so small that we cannot bring it into captivity and lift it into beauty by bringing it into connection with saving grace? Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example. This is the first thing that strikes me, and I intend it also by way of introduction. Look how the Apostle has put the points together, as though there are two aspects which go together and cannot be rendered apart, like the under side and the upper side of a coin. 'Christ also suffered for us,' and so for us says all the orthodox. 'Leaving us an example'--there protests all the heretics. Yes, but we know that there is a power in both of them, and the last one is only true when we begin with the first. He suffered for us. There, there, my friends, is the deepest meaning of the cross, and if you want to get Christ for an example, begin with taking Him as the sacrifice, for He gave His life for you. Don’t part the two things. If you believe Him to be Christ, then you take Him at the cross: if you want to see the meaning of Christ as an example, begin with Him as your Saviour. ‘Because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that ye should follow His steps.’ These are the words, and what God hath joined together let no man put asunder. With these few remarks I shall deal with the words a little more exhaustively, and I see in them three things--the sufferings of Christ our gain, the sufferings of Christ our pattern, and the suffering of Christ our power to imitate.

And first of all that great proclamation which underlies the whole matter--Christ also suffered for us. The sufferings of Christ are thereby our gain. I shall not dwell on the larger questions which these words naturally open for us, and I shall content myself with some of the angles and side views of thought, and one to begin with is this: It is very interesting to notice how, as his life went on, and his inspiration became more full, this Apostle got to understand, as being the very living and heart centre of his religion, the thing which at first was a stumbling-block and mystery to him. You remember when Christ was here on earth, and was surrounded by all His disciples, the man who actually led antagonism to the thought of a saving Messiah, was this very Apostle Peter. How he displayed his ignorance in the words, ‘This shall not be unto Thee, O Lord’; and you remember also how his audacity rose to the height of saying, ‘Why cannot I follow Thee now, Lord? I will lay down my life for Thy sake,’ so little did he understand the purposes of Christ’s suffering and Christ’s death. And even after His resurrection we don’t find that Peter in his early preaching had got as far as he seems to have got in this letter from which my text is taken. You will notice that in this letter he speaks a great deal about the sufferings of Christ, which he puts side by side and in contrast with God’s glorifying of His Son. Christ’s cross, which at first had come to him as a rejection, has now come to him in all its reality, and to him there was the one grand thing, ‘He suffered for us,’ as though he realises Christ in all His beauty and purity, and not only as a beautiful teacher and dear friend. That which at first seemed to him as an astounding mystery and perfect impossibility, he now comes to understand. With those two little words, ‘for us,’ where there was before impossibility, disappointment, and anomaly, the anomaly vanishes, although the mystery becomes deeper. In one sense it was incomprehensible; in another sense it was the only explanation of the fact. And, my friends, I want you to build one thought on this. Unless you and I lay hold of the grand truth that Jesus Christ died for us, it seems to me that the story of the Gospel and the story of the cross is the saddest and most depressing page of human history. That there should have been a man possessed of such a soul, such purity, such goodness, such tenderness, such compassion, and such infinite mercy--if there were all this to do nothing but touch men's hearts and prick and irritate them into bitter enmity--if the cross were the world's wages to the world's best Teacher, and nothing more could be said, then, my friends, it seems to me that the hopes of humanity have, in the providence of God, suffered great disaster, and a terrible indictment stands against both God and man. Oh, yes, the death of Jesus Christ, and the whole history of the world's treatment of Him, is an altogether incomprehensible and miserable thing--a thing to be forgotten, and a thing to be wept over in tears of blood, and no use for us unless we do as Peter did, apply all the warmth of the heart to this one master key, 'for us,' and then the mystery is only an infinitude of love and mercy. What before we could not understand we now begin to see, and to understand the love of God which passeth all understanding. Oh, my friends, I beseech you never think of the cross of Christ without taking those two words. It is a necessary explanation to make the picture beautiful: 'for us,' 'for us'; 'for me, for me.' And then notice still further that throughout the whole of this Epistle the comparative vagueness of the words 'for me' is interpreted definitely. So far as the language of my text is concerned there can be nothing more expressive, more outspoken, or more intelligible, 'Christ also suffered for us,' for our realm. But that is not all that Peter would have us learn. If you want to know the nature of the work, and what the Saviour suffered on the cross for our behalf, advantage, and benefit, here is the definition in the following verse, 'Who His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we being dead to sins should live unto righteousness.' 'For us,' not merely as an example; 'for us,' not merely for His purity, His beautiful life and calm death; no, better than all that, though a glorious example it is. He has taken away our sins, we are sprinkled with the blood of Jesus Christ; 'for us' in the sense of the words in another part of the Epistle, 'Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot,' and if so, we are living examples of what Christ our Saviour has done for the whole world.

There is another point I want to speak about in dwelling on the first part of the text. If you will read this Epistle of Peter at your leisure, you will see that while with Paul both make the cross of Christ the centre of their teaching, Paul speaks more about His death, and Peter more about His sufferings. Throughout the letters of Peter the phrase runs, and the phrase has come almost entirely into modern Christian usage from this Apostle. Paul speaks about the death, Peter speaks of the sufferings. The eye-witness of a Loving Friend, the man who had stood by His side through much of His sufferings [though he fled at last], a vivid imagination of His Master's trials, and a warm heart, led Peter to dwell not only on the one fact of the death, but also on the accompaniments of that awful death, of the mental and physical pain, and especially the temper of the Saviour. I shall not dwell on this, except to make one passing remark on it, viz., that there is a kind of preaching which prevails among the Roman Catholic Church, and is not uncommon to many of the Protestant churches, which dwells unduly on the physical fact of Christ's death and sufferings. I think, for my part, we are going to the other extreme, and a great many of us are losing a very great source of blessing to ourselves and to those whom we influence, because we don't realise and don't dwell sufficiently on the physical and mental sorrows and agony He went through with the death on the cross; and one bad effect of all this is that Christ's atonement has become to be a kind of theological jungle, and I don't know that the popular mind can have in the ordinary way any better means of the deliverance of Christ's cross from this theological maze than a little more frankness and honesty in dwelling on the sorrows and pain of our dear Lord.

Now a word about the second part. The sufferings of Christ as represented here in the text are not only for our gain but our pattern, leaving us an example that we should follow His steps. We are not concerned here about the general principles of Christian ethics, and I don't think I need dwell on them at all as being great blessings to us; and passing from that I would rather dwell on the one specific thought before us--on the beautiful life, the gracious words, the gentle deeds, the wisdom, the rectitude, the tenderness, the submission to the Father and the oblivion to Himself, which characterises the whole life of Jesus Christ, from the very first up to the agony on the cross. We have looked to Him as our gain, and as the head and beginning of our salvation, and now we have to turn from that mysterious and solemn thought and look to Him as an ideal pattern by which our life should be moulded and shaped. ‘Leaving us an example.’ Just as Elijah’s mantle dropped from him as he rose, so Christ in going up to the Father fluttered down on the world a pattern which He had in His sufferings. He goes away, but the pattern abides with us. ‘Leaving us an example.’ The word used here is translated quite correctly. The word example is a very remarkable and unusual one; it means literally a thing to be retained. You put a copyhead before a child, and tell him to copy it, and trace it over till he retains it; or, to come to modern English, you put the copyhead on the top of a page. What blots, pothooks, and angles you and I make as we are trying to write on the top of the page of life. See, there is the pattern. Lo, another man hath written above, and you are asked to make your life exactly the same, the same angles and the same corners--to make your life in all respects coincide with that. My friends, we shall all have to take our copybooks to the Master’s desk some day. There will be a headline there which Christ hath written, and one which we have written, and how do you think we shall like to put the two side by side? My friends, we had better do it to-day than have to do it then. There is the pattern life; the copy is plain. I don’t think I need say any more about the other metaphor contained here. The Divine Exemplar has left us the headline that we should follow His footsteps, and it is a blessed thought to know that we are to follow in His own steps. ‘What, cannot I follow Thee now?’ said Peter once, and you remember when the Apostle had been restored to his office, the words of the Saviour were--’Feed My lambs; feed My sheep; feed My lambs, follow thou Me.’ This is also our privilege. As a guide going across a wet moor with a traveller calls out, ‘Step where I step, or else you will be bogged,’ so we must tread in the steps of the Saviour, and then we shall come safe on the other side. Tread in His steps, aye, in the steps which are marked with bleeding feet, for ‘He suffered and left us an example.’ I will just add one word, dear friends, to deepen the thought in its impressiveness, that the cross of Christ it to be the pattern of our lives. It stands alone, thank God, for mighty power in its relation to the salvation of the world, and it stands alone in awful terror. You and I are, at the very worst, but at the edge of the storm which broke in all its dreadful fury over His head; we love to go but a little way down the hillside, while He descended to the very bottom; we love to drink but very little of the cup which He drained the last drop of and held it up empty and reversed, showing that nothing trickled from it, and exclaimed, ‘The cup which My Father hath given Me have I drunk.’ But although alone in all its mighty power, and though alone in all its awful terror, it may be copied by us in two things--perfect submission to our Maker, and non-resistance and meekness with regard to man. There is only one way of carrying the cross of Christ, which God lays on us all, and that is bowing our back. If we resist, it will crush us, and if we yield we have something to endure; and there is but one thing which enables a man to patiently bear the sorrows and griefs which come to us all, and that is the simple secret, ‘Father, not as I will, but Thy will be done.’ Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example that we should follow in His footsteps, and when we patiently do this the rod becomes a guiding staff, and the crown of thorns a crown of glory.

But my text reminds me that the sufferings of Christ are not only our gain and our pattern, but they are also our power to imitate--the power to fight the battle for Christ. Example is not all. The world wants more than that. The reason for men’s badness is not because they have not plenty of patterns of good. If a copyhead could save the world it would have been saved long ago. Patterns of good are plenty; the mischief is we don’t copy them. There are footsteps in abundance, but then our legs are lame, and we cannot tread in them, and what is the use of copies if we have a broken pen, muddy ink, and soiled paper? So we want a great deal more than that. No, my friends, the world is not to be saved by example. You and I know that the weakness and the foolishness of men know a great deal better than the wisest of men ever did, so we want something more. Examples don’t give the power nor the wish to get it. Is not that true about you? Don’t you feel that if this is all which religion has given you it stops short? The gospel comes and says, ‘If you love Christ Jesus because you know that He died for you,’ then there will be something else than the copybook. That copy and pattern will be laid to your heart and transferred there. You will not have to go on trying to make a bungling imitation; you will get it photographed on your spirit, and on your character more distinctly and more clearly down to the very minutest shade of resemblance to the Master, and with simple loving trust you will go on from strength to strength glorifying God in your life. They that begin with the cross of Christ, and make the sacrifice their all in all, will advance heavenward joyously; the cross and the sacrifice will be the pattern of your pilgrimage here, and the perfectness of your characters unto the likeness of the Son. The cross is the agency of sanctification as well as the means of forgiveness--saving grace to save us from the world, saving grace to help us everywhere and in everything for our salvation, and saving grace to help us to conquer our self-will, and saving grace to bind us to Him, whose abundant goodness and gratitude no man can tell. If we love Him we shall keep His commandments; if we love them we shall grow in grace, and not else. None else, my brother, my sister, but the Eternal Exemplar stands there as our refuge; and if you want to be filled with this all-saving grace, deep down to the bottom of His tender heart, if you want to be good, and of pure mind, then you have to begin with that Saviour who died for you, and trust to the cross for your forgiveness. Then listen to Him saying, 'Any man who comes after Me, let him take up My cross'--take it up, mark--'and follow Me.'

16)1 Peter 3:14-15

1 Peter

HALLOWING CHRIST

1Pe. 3:14-15.

These words are a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, with some very significant variations. As originally spoken, they come from a period of the prophet's life when he was surrounded by conspirators against him, eager to destroy, and when he had been giving utterance to threatening prophecies as to the coming up of the King of Assyria, and the voice of God encouraged him and his disciples with the ringing words: 'Fear not their fear, nor be afraid. Sanctify the Lord of Hosts Himself, and let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread, and He shall be for a sanctuary.' Peter was in similar circumstances. The gathering storm of persecution of the Christians as Christians seems to have been rising on his horizon, and he turns to his brethren, and commends to them the old word which long ago had been spoken to and by the prophet. But the variations are very remarkable. The Revised Version correctly reads my text thus: ‘Fear not their fear, neither be troubled, but sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord.’

I. We have first to note the substitution, as a matter of course, without any need for explanation or vindication, of Jesus Christ in place of the Jehovah of the Old Testament.

There is no doubt that the reading adopted in the Revised Version is the true one, as attested by weighty evidence in the manuscripts, and in itself more probable by reason of its very difficulty. The other reading adopted in Authorised Versions is likely to have arisen from a marginal note which crept into the text, and was due to some copyist who was struck by Peter’s free handling of the passage, and wished to make the quotations verbally accurate.

Now, if we think for a moment of the Jew’s reverence for the letter of Scripture, and then think again of the Jew’s intense monotheism and dread of putting any creature into the place of God, we shall understand how saturated with the belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, and how convinced that it was the vital centre of all Christian teaching, this Apostle must have been when, without a word of explanation, he took his pen, and, as it were, drew it through ‘Lord God’ in Isaiah’s words, and wrote in capitals over it, ‘Christ as Lord.’

What does that mean? Some of us would, perhaps, hesitate to say that it means that He who was all through the growing ages of brightening revelation of old, named ‘Jehovah,’ is now named Jesus Christ. I believe that from the beginning He whom we call, according to the teaching of the great prologue of John’s Gospel, the ‘Word of God,’ was the Agent of all Divine revelation. But whether that be so or no, whether we have the right to say that the same Person who was revealed as ‘Jehovah’ is now revealed as ‘Jesus Christ,’ the ‘Word made flesh,’ or no, we distinctly fail to apprehend who and what Jesus Christ was to the writer of this epistle, and fail to sanctify Him in our hearts, unless we say: ‘To Thee belongeth all that belongs to God.’ That is the first great truth that comes out of these words, and I would commend it to any of you who may be hesitating about that

Christian fact of the true divinity of Jesus Christ. You cannot strike it out of the New Testament, and if you try to do so you tear the book to pieces, and reduce it to rags and tatters.

Further, mark here what the Apostle means by the Christian sanctifying of Christ.

That is a strange expression. How am I to sanctify Jesus Christ? Well, it is the same word that is used in the Lord's Prayer, and perhaps its use there may throw light on Peter's meaning here. 'Hallowed be Thy name'--explains the meaning of hallowing Christ as Lord in our hearts. We sanctify or hallow one who is holy already, when we recognise the holiness, and honour what we recognise. So that the plain meaning of the commandments here is: set Christ in your hearts on the pedestal and pinnacle that belongs to Him, and then bow down before Him with all reverence and submission. Be sure that you give Him all that is His due, and in the love of your hearts, as well as in the thinkings of your minds, recognise Him for what He is, the Lord. Let us take care that our thoughts about Jesus Christ are full of devout awe and reverence. I venture to think that a great deal of modern and sentimental Christianity is very defective in this respect. You cannot love Jesus Christ too much, but you can love Him with too little reverence. And if you take up some of our luscious modern hymns that people are so fond of singing, I think you will find in them a twang of unwholesomeness, just because the love is not reverent enough, and the approaching confidence has not enough of devout awe in it. This generation looks at the half of Christ. When people are suffering from indigestion, they can only see half of the thing that they look at, and there are many of us that can only see a part of the whole Christ: and so, forgetting that He is judge, and forgetting that He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and forgetting that whilst He is manifested in the flesh our brother He is also God manifest in the flesh, our Creator as well as our Redeemer, and our Judge as well as our Saviour, some do not enough hallow Him in their hearts as Lord.

Peter had heard Jesus say that 'all men should honour the Son as they honoured the Father.' I beseech you, embrace the whole Christ, and see to it that you do not dethrone Him from His rightful place, or take from Him the glory that is due to His name. For your love will suffer, and become a mere sentiment, inoperative and sometimes unwholesome, unless you keep in mind Peter's injunction.

But, further, there is included in this commandment, not only what Isaiah said, 'Let Him be your fear and your dread,' but also a reverent love and trust. For we do not hallow Christ as we ought, unless we absolutely confide in every word of His lips. Did you ever think that not to trust Jesus Christ is to blaspheme and profane that holy name by which we are called; and that to hallow Him means to say to Him, 'I believe every word that Thou speakest, and I am ready to risk my life upon Thy veracity'? Distrust is dishonouring the Master, and taking from Him the glory that is due unto His name.

Then there is another point to be noted: 'Sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord.' That is Peter's addition to Isaiah's words, and it is not a mere piece of tautology, but puts great emphasis into the exhortation. What is a man's heart, in New Testament and Old Testament language? It is the very centre-point of the personal self. And when Peter says, 'Hallow Him in your hearts,' he means that, deep down in the very midst of your personal being, as it were, there should be, fundamental to all, and interior to all, this reverential awe and absolute trust in Jesus Christ--an habitual thought, a central emotion, an all-dominant impulse. 'Out of the heart are the issues of life.' Put the healing agent into it, the fountain-head, and all the streams that pour out thence will be purified and sweetened. Deep in the heart put Christ, and life will be pure.

Now, in another part of this letter the Apostle says, 'Ye are a spiritual house.' I think some notion of the same sort is running in his mind here. He thinks of each man's heart as being a shrine in which the god is enthroned, and in which worship is rendered. And if we have Christ in our hearts, then our hearts are temples; and if we 'hallow' the Christ that dwells within us, we shall take care that there are no foul things in that sanctuary. We dishonour the indwelling Deity when into that same heart we allow to come lusts, foulnesses, meannesses, worldlinesses, passions, sins, and all the crew of reptiles and wild beasts that we sometimes admit there. If we hallow Christ in our hearts, in any true fashion, He will turn out the money-changers and overturn the tables. And if we desire to hallow Him in our hearts, we too, must by His Spirit's help, purge the temple that He may enter and abide.

And so I come to the next point, and that is the Christian courage and calmness that ensue from hallowing Christ in the heart.

The Apostle first puts his exhortation: 'Be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled,' and then he presents us an opposite injunction, obedience to which is the only means of obeying the first exhortation. If you do not sanctify Christ in your hearts, you cannot help being afraid of their terror, and troubled. If you do, then there is no fear that you will fall into that snare. That is to say, the one thing that delivers men from the fears that make cowards of us all is to have Christ lodged within our hearts. Sunshine puts out culinary fires. They who have the awe and the reverent love that knit them to Jesus Christ, and who carry Him within their hearts, have no need to be afraid of anything besides. Only he who can say, 'The Lord is the strength of my life' can go on to say, 'Of whom shall I be afraid?' There is nothing more hopeless than to address to men, ringed about with dangers, the foolish exhortations: 'Cheer up! do not be frightened,' unless you can tell them some reason for not being frightened. And the one reason that will carry weight with it, in all circumstances, is the presence of Jesus.

'With Christ in the vessel

I smile at the storm.'

The world comes to us and says: 'Do not be afraid, do not be afraid; be of good courage; pluck up your heart, man.' The Apostle comes and says: 'Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts; and then, and only then, will you be bold.' The boldness which fronts the certain dangers and calamities and the possible dangers and calamities of this life, without Christ, is not boldness, but foolhardiness. 'The simple passeth on, and is punished,' says the book of Proverbs. It is easy to whistle when going through the churchyard, and to say, 'Who's afraid?' But the ghosts rise all the same, and there is only one thing that lays them, and that is--the present Christ.

In like manner the sanctifying of Jesus Christ in the heart is the secret of calmness. 'Fear not their fear, neither be troubled.' I wonder if Peter was thinking at all of another saying: ‘Let not your heart be troubled; neither let it be afraid.’ Perhaps he was. At any rate, his thought is parallel with our Lord’s when He said, ‘Let not your heart be troubled. Believe in God, and believe in Me.’ The two alternatives are possible; we shall have either troubled hearts, or hearts calmed by faith in Christ. The ships behind the breakwater do not pitch and toss. The little town up amongst the hills, with the high cliffs around it, lies quiet, and ‘hears not the loud winds when they call.’ And the heart that has Christ for its possession has a secret peace, whatever strife may be raging round it.

‘Be not troubled; sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.’ Peter leaves out a clause of Isaiah’s, though he conveys the idea without reiterating the words. But Isaiah had added a sweet promise which means much the same thing as I have now been saying, when he went on to declare that to those who sanctify the Lord God in their hearts, He shall be for a sanctuary. ‘The sanctuary was an asylum where men were safe. And if we have made our hearts temples in which Christ is honoured, worshipped, and trusted, then we shall dwell in Him as in the secret place of the Most High’; and in the inner chamber of the Temple it will be quiet, whatever noises are in the camp, and there is light coming from the Shekinah, whatever darkness may lie around. If we take Christ into our hearts, and reverence and love Him there, He will take us into His heart, and we shall dwell in peace, because we dwell in Him.

17)1 Peter 4:1-8

1 Peter

CHRISTIAN ASCETICISM

1Pe. 4:1-8.

Christian morality brought two new things into the world--a new type of life in sharp contrast with the sensuality rife on every side, and a new set of motives powerfully aiding in its realisation. Both these novelties are presented in this passage, which insists on a life in which the spirit dominates the flesh, and is dominated by the will of God, and which puts forward purely Christian ideas as containing the motives for such a life. The facts of Christ's life and the prospect of Christ's return to judge the world are here urged as the reason for living a life of austere repression of 'the flesh' that we may do God's will.

I. We have, first, in verses 1 and 2, a general precept, based upon the broad view of Christ's earthly history.

'Christ hath suffered in the flesh.' That is the great fact which should shape the course of all His followers. But what does suffering in the flesh mean here? It does not refer only to the death of Jesus, but to His whole life. The phrase 'in the flesh' is reiterated in the context, and evidently is equivalent to 'during the earthly life.' Our Lord's life was, in one aspect, one continuous suffering, because He lived the higher life of the spirit. That higher life had to Him, and has to us, rich compensations; but it sets those who are true to it at necessary variance with the lower types of life common among men, and it brings many pains, all of which Jesus knew. The last draught from the cup was the bitterest, but the bitterness was diffused through all the life of the Man of Sorrows.

That life is here contemplated as the pattern for all Christ's servants. Peter says much in this letter of our Lord's sufferings as the atonement for sin, but here he looks at them rather as the realised ideal of all worthy life. We are to be 'partakers of Christ's sufferings' [5. 13], and we shall become so in proportion as His own Spirit becomes the spirit which lives in us. If Jesus were only our pattern, Christianity would be a poor affair, and a gospel of despair; for how should we reach to the pure heights where He stood? But, since He can breathe into us a spirit which will hallow and energise our spirits, we can rise to walk beside Him on the high places of heroic endurance and of holy living. Very beautifully does Peter hint at our sore conflict, our personal defencelessness, and our all-sufficient armour, in the picturesque metaphor 'arm yourselves.' The 'mind of Christ' is given to us if we will. We can gird it on, and if we do, it will be as an impenetrable coat-of-mail, which will turn the sharpest arrows and resist the fiercest sword-cuts.

The last clause of verse 1 is a parenthesis, and, if it is for the moment omitted, the sentence runs smoothly on, especially if the Revised Version's reading is adopted. The purpose of arming us with the same mind is that, whilst we live on earth, we should live according to the will of God, and should renounce ‘the lusts of men,’ which are in us as in all men, and which men who are not clad in the armour which Christ gives to us yield to.

But what of the parenthetical statement? Clearly, the words which follow it forbid its being taken to mean that dead men do not sin. Rather the Apostle’s thought seems to be that such suffering in daily life after Christ’s pattern, and by His help, is at once a sign that the sufferer has shaken off the dominion of sin, and is a means of further emancipating him from it.

But the two great thoughts in this paragraph are, that the Christian life is one in which God’s will, and not man’s desires, is the regulating force, and that the pattern of that life and the power to copy the pattern are found in Christ, the sufferer for righteousness’ sake.

II. More specific injunctions, entering into the details of the higher life, follow, interwoven, as in the preceding verses, with a statement of the motives which make obedience to them possible to our weakness.

The sins in view are those most closely connected with ‘the flesh’ in its literal meaning, amongst which are included ‘abominable idolatries,’ because gross acts of sensual immorality were inseparably intertwined with much of heathen worship. These sins of flesh were especially rampant among the luxurious Asiatic lands, to which this letter was addressed, but they flooded the whole Roman empire, as the works of poets like Martial and of moralists like Epictetus equally show. But New York or London could match the worst scenes in Rome or Ephesus, and perhaps would not be far behind the foul animalism of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lust and drunkenness are eating out the manhood of our race on both sides of the Atlantic, and, if we have ‘the same mind’ as the suffering Christ, we shall put on the armour for war to the knife with these in society, and for the rigid self-control of our own animal nature.

Observe the strong motives which Peter just touches without expanding. A sad irony lies in his saying that the time past may suffice. The flesh had had enough of time given to it,--had not God a right to the rest? The flesh should have had none; it had had all too much. Surely the readers had had enough of the lower life, more than enough. Were they not sick of it, ‘satisfied’ even to disgust? Let us look back on our wasted years, and give no more precious moments to serve the corruptible flesh. Further, the life of submission to the animal nature is characteristic of ‘the Gentiles,’ and in sharp contrast, therefore, to that proper to Christ’s followers. That is as true to-day, in America and England, as ever it was. Indeed, as wealth has increased, and so-called ‘civilisation’ has diffused material comforts, senseless luxury, gluttony, drunkenness, and still baser fleshy sins, have become more flagrantly common in society which is not distinctively and earnestly Christian; and there was never more need than there is to-day for Christians to carry aloft the flag of self-control and temperance in all things belonging to ‘the flesh.’

If we have the mind of Christ, we shall get the same treatment from the world which Peter says that the primitive Christians did from the idolaters round them. We shall be wondered at, just as a heathen stared with astonishment at this strange, new sect, which would have nothing to do with feasts and garlands and wine-cups and lust disguised as worship. The spectacle, when repeated to-day, of Christians steadfastly refusing to share in that lower life which is the only life of so many, is, perhaps, less wondered at now, because it is, thank God! more familiar; but it is not less disliked and ‘blasphemed.’ A total abstainer from intoxicants will not get the good word of the distiller or brewer or consumer of liquor. He will be called faddist, narrow, sour-visaged, and so on and so on. ‘You may know a genius because all the dunces make common cause against him,’ said Swift. You may know a Christian after Christ’s pattern because all the children of the flesh are in league to laugh at him and pelt him with nicknames.

Further, the thought of Christ as the judge should both silence the blasphemers and strengthen the blasphemed to endure. That judgment will vindicate the wisdom of those who sowed to the spirit and the folly of those who sowed to the flesh. The one will reap corruption; the other, life everlasting.

The difficult verse 6 cannot be adequately dealt with here, but we may note that introductory ‘for’ shows that it, too, contains a motive urging to life, ‘to the will of God,’ and that no such motive appears in it if it is taken to mean, as by some, that the gospel is preached after death to the dead. Surely to say that ‘the gospel was preached also [or, even] to them that are dead’ is not to say that it was preached to them when dead.

Peter’s letter is of late enough date to explain his looking back to a generation now passed away, who had heard it in their lifetime. Nor does one see how the meaning of ‘in the flesh,’ which belongs to the phrase in the frequent instances of its occurrence in this context, can be preserved in the clause ‘that they might be judged according to men in the flesh,’ unless that means a judgment which takes place during the earthly life.

We note, too, that the antithesis between being judged ‘according to men in the flesh,’ and living ‘according to God in the spirit’ recalls that in verse 2 between living in the flesh to the lusts of men and to the will of God. It would appear, therefore, that the Apostle’s meaning is that the very aim of the preaching of the gospel to those who are gone to meet the Judge was that they might by it be judged while here in the flesh, in regard to the lower life ‘according to men’ [or, as verse 2 has it, ‘to the lusts of men’], and, being so judged, and sin condemned in their flesh, might live according to God in their spirits. That is but to say in other words that the gospel is meant to search hearts, and bring to light and condemn the lusts of the flesh, and to impart the new life which is moulded after the will of God.

III. The reference to Christ as the judge suggests a final motive for a life of suppression of the lower nature,--the near approach of the end of all things.

The distinct statement by our Lord in Act. 1:7 excludes the knowledge of the time of the end from the revelation granted to the Apostles, so that there need be no hesitation in upholding their authority, and yet admitting their liability to mistake on that point. But the force of the motive is independent of the proximity of the judgment. Its certainty and the indefiniteness of the time when we each shall have to pass into the other state of being are sufficient to preserve for each of us the whole pressure of the solemn thought that for us the end is at hand, and to enforce thereby Peter’s exhortation, ‘Be ye therefore of sound mind.’

The prospect of that end will sweep away many illusions as to the worth of the enjoyments of sense, and be a bridle on many vagrant desires. Self-control in all regions of our nature is implied in the word. Our various faculties are meant to be governed by a sovereign will, which is itself governed by the Divine will; and, if we see plain before us the dawning of the day of the Lord, the vision will help to tame the subordinate parts of ourselves, and to establish the supremacy of the spirit over the flesh. One special form of that general self-control is that already enjoined,--the suppression of the animal appetites, especially the abstinence from intoxicants. That form of self-control is especially meant by the second of these exhortations, ‘Be sober.’ How could a man lift the wine cup to his lips, and drown his higher nature in a flood of drunken riot, if the end, with its solemnities of judgment, blazed before his inner eye? But this self-command is inculcated that we may be fit to pray. These lower appetites will take all desire for prayer and all earnestness in it out of us, and only when we keep the wings of appetites close clipped will the pinions grow by which we can mount up with wings as eagles. A praying drunkard is an impossible monster.

But exhortations to self-control are not all. We have to think of others, as well as of our own growth in purity and spirituality. Therefore Peter casts one swift glance to the wider circle of the brethren, which encompasses each of us, and gives the all-embracing direction, which carries in itself everything. ‘Fervent love’ to our fellow-Christians is the counterpoise to earnest government of ourselves. There is a selfishness possible even in cultivating our religion, as many a monk and recluse has shown. Such love as Peter here enjoins will save us from the possible evils of self-regard, and it will ‘cover the multitude of sins,’--by which is not meant that, having it, we shall be excused if we in other respects sin, but that, having it, we shall be more desirous of veiling than of exposing our brother’s faults, and shall be ready to forgive even when our brother offends against us often. Perhaps Peter was remembering the lesson which he had once had when he was told that ‘seventy times seven’ was not too great a multitude of sins against brotherly love to be forgiven by it in one day.

18)1 Peter 4:2-3

THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

Ecc. 1:9. - 1Pe. 4:2 - 1Pe. 4:3.

If you will look at these two passages carefully you will, I think, see that they imply two different, and in some respects contradictory, thoughts about the future in its relation to the past. The first of them is the somewhat exaggerated utterance of a dreary and depressing philosophy, which tells us that, as in the outer world, so in regard to man's life, there is an enormous activity and no advance, that it is all moving round like the scenes in some circular panorama, that after it has gone the round back it comes again, that it is the same thing over and over again, that life is a treadmill, so to speak, with an immense deal of working of muscles; but it all comes to nothing over again. 'The rivers run into the sea and the sea is not full, and where the rivers come from they go back to; and the wind goes to the south, turns to the north, and whirls about continually. Everything is full of labour, and it has all been done before, and there is nothing fresh; everything is flat, stale, and unprofitable.'

Well that is not true altogether, but though it be not true altogether-though it be an exaggeration, and though the inference that is built upon it is not altogether satisfactory and profound-yet the thought itself is one that has a great deal in it that is true and important, and may be very helpful and profitable to us now; for there is a religious way, as well as an irreligious way, of saying there is nothing new under the sun. It may be the utterance of a material, *blase*, unprofitable, spurious philosophy, or it may be the utterance of the profoundest, and the happiest, and the most peaceful religious trust and confidence.

The other passage implies the opposite notion of man's life, that however much in my future may be just the same as what my past has been, there is a region in which it is quite possible to make to-morrow unlike to-day, and so to resolve and so to work as that 'the time past of our lives' may be different from 'the rest of our time in the flesh'; that a great revolution may come upon a man, and that whilst the outward life is continuous and the same, and the tasks to be done are the same, and the joys the same, there may be such a profound and radical difference in the spirit and motive in which they are done as that the thing that has been is *not* that which shall be, and for us there *may* be a new thing under the sun.

And so just now I think we may take these two passages in their connection-their opposition, and in their parallelism-as suggesting to us two very helpful, mutually completing thoughts about the unknown future that stretches before us-first, the substantial identity of the future with the past; second, the possible total unlikeness of the future and the past.

First then, let us try to get the impress from the first phrase of that conviction, so far as it is true, as to the sameness of the things that are going to be with the things that have been. The immediate connection in which the words are spoken is in regard, mainly, to the outer world, the physical universe, and only secondarily and subordinately in regard to man's life. And I need not remind you how that thought of the absolute sameness and continuous repetition of the past and the future has gained by the advance of physical science in modern times. It seems to be contradicted no doubt by the continual emergence of new things here and there, but they tell us that the novelty is only a matter of arrangement, that the atoms have never had an addition to them since the beginning of things, that all stand just as they were from the very commencement and foundation of all things, and that all that seems new is only a new arrangement, so that the thing which has been is that which shall be. And then there comes up the other thought, upon which I need not dwell for a moment, that the present condition of things round about us is the result of the uniform forces that have been working straight on from the very beginning. And yet, whilst all that is quite true, we come to our own human lives, and we find there the true application of such words as these: to-morrow is to be like yesterday. There is one very important sense in which the opposite of that is true, and no to-morrow can ever be like any yesterday for however much the events may be the same, we are so different that, in regard even to the most well trodden and beaten of our paths of daily life, we may all say, 'We have not passed this way before!' We cannot bring back that which is gone-that which is gone is gone for good or evil, irrevocable as the snow or the perfume of last year's flowers. I dare say there are many here before me who are saying to themselves, 'No! life can never again be what life has been for me, and the only thing that I am quite sure about in regard to to-morrow is that it is utterly impossible that it should ever be as yesterday was!' Notwithstanding, the word of my text is a true word, the thing that hath been is that which shall be. I need not dwell on the grounds upon which the certainty rests, such, for instance, as that the powers which shape to-morrow are the same as the powers which shaped yesterday; that you and I, in our nature, are the same, and that the mighty Hand up there that is moulding it is the same; that every to-morrow is the child of all the yesterdays; that the same general impression will pervade the future as has pervaded the past. Though events may be different the general stamp and characteristics of them will be the same, and when we pass into a new region of human life we shall find that we are not walking in a place where no footprints have been before us, but that all about us the ground is trodden down smooth.

'That which hath been is that which shall be.' Thus, while this is proximately true in regard to the future, let me just for a moment or two give you one or two of the plain, simple pieces of well-worn wisdom which are built upon such a thought. And first of all let me give you this, 'Well, then, let us learn to tone down our expectations of what may be coming to us.' Especially I speak now to the younger portion of my congregation, to whom life is beginning, and to whom it is naturally tinted with roseate hue, and who have a great deal stretching before them which is new to them, new duties, new relationships, new joys. But whilst that is especially true for them it is true for all. It is a strange illusion under which we all live to the very end of our lives, unless by reflection and effort we become masters of it and see things in the plain daylight of common sense, that the future is going somehow or other to be brighter, better, fuller of resources, fuller of blessings, freer from sorrow than the past has been. We turn over each new leaf that marks a new year, and we cannot help thinking: 'Well! perhaps hidden away in its storehouses there may be something brighter and better in store for me.' It is well, perhaps, that we should have that thought, for if we were not so drawn on, even though it be by an illusion, I do not know that we should be able to live on as we do. But don't let us forget in the hours of quiet that there is no reason at all to expect that any of these arbitrary, and conventional, and unreal distinctions of calendars and dates make any difference in that uniform strand of our life which just runs the same, which is reeled off the great drum of the future and on to the great drum of the past, and that is all spun out of one fibre and is one gauge, and one sort of stuff from the beginning to the end. And so let us be contented where we are, and not fancy that when I get that thing that I am looking forward to, when I get into that position I am waiting for, things will be much different from what they are to-day. Life is all one piece, the future and the past, the pattern runs right through from the beginning to the end, and the stuff is the same stuff. So don't you be too enthusiastic, you people who have an eager ambition for social and political advancement. Things will be very much as they are used to be, with perhaps some slow, gradual, infinitesimal approximation to a higher ideal and a nobler standard; but there will be no jump, no breaks, no spasmodic advance. We must be contented to accept the law, that there is no new thing under the sun. As you would lay a piece of healing ice upon the heated forehead, lay that law upon the feverish anticipations some of you have in regard to the future, and let the heart beat more quietly, and with the more contentment for the recognition of that law.

And then I may say, at the same time, though I won't dwell upon it for more than a moment, let us take the same thought to teach us to moderate our fears. Don't be afraid that anything whatever may come that will destroy the substantial likeness between the past and the future; and so leave all those jarring and terrifying thoughts that mingle with all our anticipations of the time to come, leave them very quietly on one side and say, 'Thou hast been my Help leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.'

And then there are one or two other points I mean to touch upon, and let me just name them. Do not let us so exaggerate that thought of the substantial sameness of the future and the past as to flatten life and make it dreary and profitless and insignificant. Let us rather feel, as I shall have to say presently, that whilst the framework remains the same, whilst the general characteristics will not be much different, there is room within that uniformity for all possible play of variety and interest, and earnestness and enthusiasm, and hope. They make the worst possible use of this fixity and steadfastness of things who say, as the dreary man at the beginning of the Book of Ecclesiastes is represented as saying, that because things are the same as they will and have been, all is vanity. It is not true. Don't let the uniformity of life flatten your interest in the great miracle of every fresh day, with its fresh continuation of ancient blessings and the steadfast mercies of our Lord.

And let us hold firmly to the far deeper truth that the future will be the same as the past, because God is the same. God’s yesterday is God’s to-morrow-the same love, the same resources, the same wisdom, the same power, the same sustaining Hand, the same encompassing Presence. ‘A thousand years are as one day, and one day as a thousand years’; and when we say there is no new thing under the sun let us feel that the deepest way of expressing that thought is, ‘Thou art the same, and Thy steadfast purposes know no alteration.’

Turn to the other side of the thought suggested by the second passage of the text. It speaks to us, as I have said, of the possible entire unlikeness between the future and the past. To-morrow is the child of yesterday-granted; ‘whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap’-certainly; there is a persistent uniformity of nature, and the same causes working make the future much of the same general structure as all the past has been-be it so; and yet within the limits of that identity there may be breathed into the self-sameness of to-morrow such an entire difference of disposition, temper, motive, direction of life, that my whole life may be revolutionised, my whole being, I was going to say, cleft in twain, my old life buried and forgotten, and a new life may emerge from chaos and from the dead. Of course, the question, Is such an alteration possible? rises up very solemnly to men, to most of them, for I suppose we all of us know what it is to have been beaten time after time in the attempt to shake off the dominion of some habit or evil, and to alter the bearing and the direction of the whole life, and we have to say, ‘It is no good trying any longer my life must run on in the channel which I have carved for it; I have made my bed and I must lie on it; I cannot get rid of these things.’ And, no doubt, in certain aspects, change is impossible. There are certain limitations of natural disposition which I never can overcome. For instance, if I have no musical ear I cannot turn myself into a musician. If I have no mathematical faculty it is no good poring over Euclid, for, with the best intentions in the world, I shall make nothing of it. We must work within the limits of our natural disposition, and cut our coat according to our cloth. In that respect to-morrow will be as yesterday, and there cannot be any change. And it is quite true that character, which is the great precipitate from the waters of conduct, gets rocky, that habits become persistent, and man's will gets feeble by long indulgence in any course of life. But for all that, admitting to the full all that, I am here now to say to every man and woman in this place, 'Friend, you may make your life from this moment so unlike the blotted, stained, faultful, imperfect, sinful past that no words other than the words of the New Testament will be large enough to express the fact. "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature, old things are passed away."' For we all know how into any life the coming of some large conviction not believed in or perceived before, may alter the whole bias, current, and direction of it; how into any life the coming of a new love not cherished and entertained before, may ennoble and transfigure the whole of its nature; how into any life the coming of new motives, not yielded to and recognised before, may make all things new and different. These three plain principles, the power of conviction, the power of affection, the power of motive, are broad enough to admit of building upon them this great and helpful and hopeful promise to us all-'The time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles,' that 'henceforth we may live the rest of our time in the flesh according to the will of God.'

To you who have been living in the past with little regard to the supreme powers and principles of Christ's love and God's Gospel in Him, I bring the offer of a radical revolution; and I tell you that if you like you may this day begin a life which, though it shall be like yesterday in outward things, in the continuity of some habits, in the continuance of character, shall be all under the influence of an entirely new, and innovating, and renovating power. I ask you whether you don't think that you have had enough, to use the language of my text, in the part of obeying the will of the flesh; and I beseech you that you will let these great principles, these grand convictions which cluster round and explain the cross of Jesus Christ, influence your mind, character, habits, desires, thoughts, actions; that you will yield yourself to the new power of the Spirit of life in Christ, which is granted to us if only we submit ourselves to it and humbly desire it. And to you who have in some measure lived by this mighty influence I come with the message for you and for myself that the time to come may, if we will, be filled very much fuller than it is; 'To-morrow may be as this day, and much more abundant.’ I believe in a patient, reflecting, abundant examination of the past. The old proverb says that ‘Every man by the time he is forty is either a fool or a physician’; and any man or woman by the time they get ten years short of that age, ought to know where they are weakest, and ought to be able to guard against the weak places in their character. I do not believe in self-examination for the purpose of finding in a man’s own character reasons for answering the question, ‘Am I a Christian?’ But I do believe that no people will avail themselves fully of the power God has given them for making the future brighter and better than the past who have not a very clear, accurate, comprehensive, and penetrating knowledge of their faults and their failures in the past. I suppose if the Tay Bridge is to be built again, it won’t be built of the same pattern as that which was blown into the water last week; and you and I ought to learn by experience the places in our souls that give in the tempests, where there is most need for strengthening the bulwarks and defending our natures. And so I say, begin with the abundant recognition of the past, and then a brave confidence in the possibilities of the future. Let us put ourselves under that great renovating Power which is conviction and affection and motive all in one. ‘He loved me and gave Himself for me.’ And so while we front the future we can feel that, God being in us, and Christ being in us, we shall make it a far brighter and fairer thing than the blurred and blotted past which to-day is buried, and life may go on with grand blessedness and power until we shall hear the great voice from the Throne say, ‘There shall be no more death, no more sorrow, no more crying, no more pain, for the former things are passed away, ‘Behold! I make all things new.’

19)1 Peter 5:5

1 Peter

THE SLAVE’S GIRDLE

1Pe. 5:5.

The Apostle uses here an expression of a remarkable kind, and which never occurs again in Scripture. The word rendered in the Authorised Version ‘be clothed,’ or better in the Revised Version, ‘gird yourselves with,’ really implies a little more than either of those renderings suggests. It describes a kind of garment as well as the act of putting it on, and the sort of garment which it describes was a remarkable one. It was a part of a slave's uniform. Some scholars think that it was a kind of white apron, or overall, or something of that sort; others think that it was simply a scarf or girdle; but, at all events, it was a distinguishing mark of a slave, and he put it on when he meant work. And, says Peter, 'Do you strap round you the slave's apron, and do it for the same reason that He did it, to serve.'

So, then, there are three points in my text, and the first is what we have to wear; second, what we have to wear it for; and, third, why we should wear it.

I. What we have to wear.

'Gird yourselves with the slave's apron of humility.' Humility does not consist in being, or pretending to be, blind to one's strong points. There is no humility in a man denying that he can do certain things if he can do them, or even refusing to believe he can do them well, if God has given him special faculties in any given direction. That is not humility at all. But to know whence all my strength comes, and to know what a little thing it is, after all; not to estimate myself highly, and, still further, not to be always insisting upon other people estimating me highly, and to think a great deal more about their claims on me than fretfully to insist upon my due modicum of respect and attention from others, that is the sort of temper that Peter means here.

Now, that temper which may recognise fully any gift that God has given me, its sweep and degree, but that nevertheless takes a true, because a lowly, measure of myself, and does not always demand from other people their regard and assistance, that temper is a thing that we can cultivate. We can increase it, and we are all bound to try specifically and directly to do so. Now, I believe that a great part of the feeble and unprogressive character of so many Christian people amongst us is due to this, that they do not definitely steady their thoughts and focus them on the purpose of finding out the weak points to which special attention and discipline should be directed. It is a very easy thing to say, 'Oh, I am a poor, weak, sinful creature!' It would do you a great deal more good to say, 'I am a very passionate one, and my business is to control that quick temper of mine,' or, 'I am a great deal too much disposed to run after worldly advantage, and my business is to subdue that,' or, 'I am afraid I am rather too close-fisted, and I ought to crucify myself into liberality.' It would be a great deal better, I say, to apply the general confession to specific cases, and to set ourselves to cultivate individual types of goodness, as well as to seek to be filled with the all-comprehensive root of it all, which lies in union with Jesus Christ. We have often to preach, dear brethren, that the way of self-improvement is not by hammering at ourselves, but by letting God mould us, and to keep the balance right. We have also to insist upon the other side of the truth, and to press the complementary thought that specific efforts after the cultivation of specific virtues and all the more if they are virtues that are not natural to us, for the gospel is given to us to mend our natural tempers--is the duty of all Christian people that would seek to live as Christ would have them.

And how is this to be done? How am I to gird upon myself and to keep--if I may transpose the metaphor into the key of modern English--tightly buckled around me this belt which may hold in place a number of fine articles of clothing?

Well, there are three things, I think, that we may profitably do. Go down deep enough into yourself if you want to cure a lofty estimate of yourself. The top storeys may be beautifully furnished, but there are some ugly things and rubbish down in the cellar. There is not one of us but, if we honestly let the dredge down into the depths, as far down as the Challenger's went, miles and miles down, will bring up a pretty collection of wriggling monstrosities that never have been in the daylight before, and are ugly enough to be always shrouded in their native darkness. Down in us all, if we will go deep enough, and take with us a light bright enough, we shall discover enough to make anything but humility ridiculous, if it were not wicked. And the only right place and attitude for a man who knows himself down to the roots of his being is the publican's when 'he stood afar off, and would not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven, and said, God be merciful to me a sinner.' Ah, dear friends, it will put an end to any undue exaltation of ourselves if we know ourselves as we are.

Further, let us try to cultivate this temper, by looking at God, and having communion with Him. Think of Him as the Giver of anything in us that is good, and that annihilates our pride. Think of Jesus as our pattern; how that kills our satisfaction in little excellences! If you get high enough up the mountainside, the undulating country which when you were down amongst the knolls showed all variations of level, and where he who lived on the top of one little mound thought himself in a fine, airy situation as compared with his neighbour down in the close valley, is smoothed down, and brought to one uniform level; and from the hilltop the rolling land is a plateau.

I have heard of a child who, when she was told that the sun was ninety-five millions of miles off, asked if that was from the top or the bottom storey of the house! There is about as much difference between the great men and the little, between heroes and the unknown men, as measured against the distance to God, as there is difference in the distance to the sun from the slates and from the cellar. Let us live near God, and so aspiration will come in the place of satisfaction, and the unattained will gleam before us, and beckon us not in vain, and the man that sees what an infinite stretch there is before him will be delivered from the temptations of self-conceit, and will say, ‘Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfected, but I follow after.’

But there is another advice to be given--cultivate the habit of thinking about other people, their excellences, their claims on you. To be always trying to get a footing in a social grade above our own is a poor effort, but there is a sense in which it is good advice--live with your betters. We can all do that. A man writes a bit of a book, preaches a sermon, makes a speech--all the newspapers pat him on the back, and say what a clever fellow he is. But let him steep his mind and his heart in the great works of the great men, and he finds out what a poor little dwarf he is by the side of them. And so all round the circle. Live with bigger men, not with little ones. And learn to discount--and you may take a very liberal discount off--either the praises or the censures of the people round you. Let us rather say, ‘With me it is a very small matter to be judged of man’s judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord.’

There are plenty of hands, foremost among them a black one that is not so much a hand as a claw, ready to snatch the girdle of humility off

you! Buckle it tight about you, brother; and in an immovable temper of

lowly estimate of yourself live and work.

II. The second thought here is, What we are to wear the apron or girdle for?

The Revised Version makes a little alteration in the reading as well as in the translation of our text, the previous words to which, in the Authorised Version stand, ‘Yea, all of you be subject one to another.’ There is another reading which strikes out that clause, and adds a portion of it to the first part of my text, which then runs thus: ‘Yea, all of you gird yourselves with humility to serve one another.’ That is what Christian humility is for. The slave put on his garment, whatever it was, when he had work to do.

But perhaps there is a deeper thought here. I wonder if it is fanciful to see in the text one of the very numerous allusions in this epistle to the events in our Lord’s Passion. You remember that Jesus laid aside His garments, and took a towel, and girded Himself, and washed the disciples’ feet, and then said, ‘The servant is not above His master. I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.’ Probably, I think, there floated before the memory of the man who had said, ‘Lord, Thou shalt never wash my feet,’ and then, with the swift recoil to the opposite pole which makes us love Him so much, hurried to say, ‘Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head’--some reminiscence of that upper chamber, and of how the Master had girded Himself with the slave’s apron, or towel, in order that He might serve the disciples; and then had told them that that was the pattern for all Christian men, and for all Christian living till the very end.

Service coming from humility, and humility manifested in service, are the requirements laid down in the text. Humility is the preparation for service; and service is the test of humility. If a man does not feel himself to be needy and low, he will never be able, and he will never be willing, to help those that are. You must go down if you would lift up. Laces and velvets and the fine feathers that the peacocks of self-conceit in this world strut about in are terribly in the way of Christian work. Rough work needs rough dress; and the only garb in which we shall be able to do the deeds of self-sacrifice that are needed in order to help our brethren is humility, the preparation for all service.

But, further, service is the test of humility. Plenty of people will say, ‘I know that I have nothing to boast of,’ and so forth; but they never do any work. And there is a still more spurious kind of humility, that of a great many professing Christians [I wonder of how many of us] who, when we ask them for any kind of Christian service, say, ‘I do not feel myself at all competent. I am sure I could not take a class in the Sunday School. I do not feel sufficiently master of the subject. I cannot talk. I have no facilities for influencing other people,’ and so on. Too many of us are very humble when there is anything to be done, and never at any other time as far as anybody can see; and that sort of humility the Apostle does not commend. It is unfortunately very frequent amongst professing Christians. Christian humility is not particular about the sort of work it does for Jesus. Never mind whether you are on the quarter-deck, with gold lace on your coat and epaulettes on your shoulders as an officer, or whether you are a cabin-boy doing the humblest duties, or a stoker working away down fifty feet below daylight. As long as the work is done for the great Admiral, that is enough; and whoever does any work for Him will never want for a reward. There are some of us who like to be officers, but do not like carrying a musket in the ranks. Humility is the preparation for service, and service is the test of humility.

III. Lastly, why we should wear this girdle.

There is one reason given in my text, which Peter quotes from the Old Testament. ‘God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble.’ That is often true even in regard to outward life. Providence and man often seem to be in league together to lift up the lowly ones and thwart the proud. If a man walks with his head very high, in this low-roofed world, he is pretty sure to get it knocked against the rafters before he has done. But it is the spiritual region that the Apostle is thinking about, in which the one condition of receiving God’s grace is a lowly sense of my own character and nature, which is conscious of sin and weakness, and waits before Him. And the one condition of not receiving any of that grace is to keep a stiff upper lip and a high head. If I think that I am rich, ‘and increased with goods, and have need of nothing,’ that ‘nothing’ is exactly what I shall get from God, and if I have need of everything, and know that I have, that ‘everything’ is what I shall get from Him. ‘He resisteth the proud, and He giveth grace to the humble.’ On the high barren mountain-tops the dew and the rain slide off and find their way down to the lowly valleys, where they run as fertilising rivers. And the man that is humble and of a contrite heart, ‘with that man will I dwell, saith the Lord.’ If we gird ourselves with the slave’s dress of humility, then we shall one day have to say, ‘My soul shall rejoice in the Lord, for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation; and He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness; as a bridegroom decketh himself with his ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels.’

20)1 Peter 5:12

1 Peter

SYLVANUS

1Pe. 5:12 [R.V].

I adopt the Revised Version because, in one or two small points, it brings out more clearly the Apostle’s meaning. This Sylvanus is, beyond all reasonable doubt, the same man who is known to us in the Acts of the Apostles by the name of Silas. A double name was very common amongst Jews, whose avocations brought them into close connection with Gentiles. You will find other instances of it amongst the Apostles: in Paul himself, whose Hebrew name was Saul; Simon and Peter; and probably in Bartholomew and Nathanael. And there is no reasonable doubt that a careful examination of the various places in which Silas and Sylvanus are mentioned shows that they were borne by one person.

Now let me put together the little that we know about this man, because it will help us to some lessons. He was one of the chief men in the church at Jerusalem when the dispute arose about the necessity for circumcision for the Gentile Christians. He was despatched to Antioch with the message of peace and good feeling which the church at Jerusalem wisely sent forth to heal the strife. He remained in Antioch, although his co-deputy went back to Jerusalem; and the attraction of Paul--the great mass of that star--drew this lesser light into becoming a satellite, moving round the greater orb. So, when the unfortunate quarrel broke out between Paul and Barnabas, and the latter went sulkily away by himself with his dear John Mark, without his brethren’s blessing, Paul chose Silas and set out upon his first missionary tour. He was Paul’s companion in the prison and stripes at Philippi, and in the troubles at Thessalonica; and, though they were parted for a little while, he rejoined the Apostle in the city of Corinth. From thence Paul wrote the two letters to the Thessalonians, both of which are sent in the name of himself and Silas or Sylvanus. There is one more reference to Sylvanus in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, which mentions him as having been associated with Paul in the evangelisation of the church there.

Then he drops out of the book altogether, and we never hear anything more about him, except this one passing reference, which shows us to him in an altogether new relation. He is no longer attached to Paul, but to Peter. Paul was probably either in prison, or, possibly, martyred. At all events, Sylvanus now stood to Peter in a relationship similar to that in which he formerly stood to Paul. He was evidently acquainted with and known to the churches to whom this letter was addressed, and, therefore, is chosen to carry Peter’s message to them.

Now I would suggest, in passing, how Sylvanus’ relations to the two Apostles throws light upon the perfectly cordial alliance between them, and how it shatters into fragments the theory which was thought to be such a wonderful discovery some years ago, as to the ‘great schism’ in the early church between one section, led by Peter, and the more liberal party, headed by Paul. Instead of that, we find the two men working together, and the only division between them was not as to the sort of gospel they preached, but as to the people to whom they preached. This little incident helps us to realise how natural it was for a man steeped in Paul’s teaching to attach himself, if circumstances suggested it, to the person who has been said to have been antagonistic in the whole drift of his conceptions of Christianity to that Apostle.

But I do not wish to speak about that now. I take this figure of a man who so contentedly and continually took such a subordinate place--played second fiddle quite willingly all his days, and who toiled on without any notice or record, and ask whether it does not teach one or two things.

I. First, then, I think we may see here a hint as to the worth and importance of subordinate work.

Not a syllable that Silas ever said is recorded in Scripture. He had been a chief man among the brethren when he was in Jerusalem, but, like some other chief men in little spheres, he came to be anything but a chief man when he got alongside of Paul, and found his proper work. He did not say: ‘I have always pulled the stroke oar, and I am not going to be second. I do not intend to be absorbed in this man’s brilliant lustre. I would rather have a smaller sphere where my light may not suffer by comparison than be overshone by him.’ By no means! He could not do Paul’s work, but he could endure stripes along with him in the prison at Philippi, and he took them. He could not write as Peter could; it was not his work to do that. But he could carry one of Peter’s letters. And so, ‘by Sylvanus, a faithful brother, I have written to you.’ Perhaps Sylvanus was amanuensis as well as letter-carrier, for I daresay Peter was no great hand with a pen; he was better accustomed to haul nets. At all events, subordinate work was what God had set him to do, and so he found joy in it.

Well, then, is not that a pattern for us? People in the world or in the Church who can do prominent work are counted by units; and those who can do valuable subordinate work are counted by thousands--by millions. ‘Those members which seem to be more feeble are the more necessary,’ says Paul. It is a great truth, which it would do us all good to lay more to heart.

It is hard to tell what is superior and what is subordinate work. I suppose that in a steam engine the smallest rivet is quite as essential as the huge piston, and that if the rivet drops out the piston-rod is very likely to stop rising and falling. So it is a very vulgar way of talking to speak about A.’s work being large and B.’s work being small, or to assume that we have eyes to settle which work is principal and which subordinate.

The Athenians, who deemed themselves wisest in the world, thought there were few people of less importance than the fanatical Jew who was preaching a strange story about what they knew so little of that they took Jesus and Resurrection to be the names of a pair of gods, one male and one female. But in the eyes that see truly--the eyes of God--the relative importance of Apostle and Stoic was otherwise appraised.

We cannot tell, as the book of Ecclesiastes has it, 'which shall prosper--this or that.' And if we begin to settle which is important work, we shall be sure to make mistakes, both in our judgment about other people, and in our sense of the obligations laid upon ourselves. Let us remember that when a thing is to be done by the co-operation of a great many parts, each part is as important as the other, and each is indispensable. Although more glory may come to the soldiers who go to the front and do the fighting, the troops miles in the rear, that are quietly in camp looking after the stores and keeping open the lines of communication, are quite as essential to the success of the campaign. Their names will not get into the gazette; there will probably not be any honours at the conclusion of the war showered upon them; but, if they had not been doing their subordinate work, the men at the front would never have been able to do theirs. Therefore, the old wise law in Israel was: 'As his part is that goeth down into the battle, so shall his part be that tarrieth by the stuff; they shall part alike.'

And so it is good for people that have only one talent, and cannot do much, and must be contented to help somebody else that can do more, to remember this pretty little picture of Sylvanus, 'the faithful brother,' contented all his life to be a satellite of somebody; first of all helping Paul, and then helping Paul's brother Peter. Let us not be too lazy, or too proud with the pride that apes humility, to do the little that we can do because it is little.

II. Another lesson which is own sister to that first one, but which may be taken for a moment separately, is, the importance and obligation of persistently doing our task, though nobody notices it.

As I remarked, there is not one word of anything that Sylvanus said, or of anything that he did apart from Paul or Peter, recorded. And for all the long stretch of years--we do not know how many, but a very large number--that lie between this text of mine, where we find him in conjunction with Peter, and that day at Corinth, where we left him with Paul, the Acts of the Apostles does not think it worth while to mention his name. Was he sitting with his hands in his pockets all the while, do you think, doing no Christian work? Did he say, as some good people are apt to say now, ‘Well, I went to teach in Sunday School for a while, and I took an interest in this, that, or the other thing for a bit, but nobody took any notice of me; and I supposed I was not wanted, and so I came away!’

Not he. That is what a great many of us do. Though we sometimes are not honest enough to say it to ourselves, yet we do let the absence of ‘recognition’ [save the mark] influence us in the earnestness of our Christian work to far too great an extent. And I dare say there are good friends among us who, if they would be quite honest with themselves, would take the hint, and, if I may use such a word, the rebuke, to themselves.

Dear brethren, all the work that any of us do has to become unnoticed after a little while. It will not last. Nobody will know about you or me thirty years after we are dead. What does it matter whether they know anything about us, or say anything about us, or pat us on the back for anything that we do, or recognise our service whilst we live? Surely, if we are Christian men and women, we have a better reason for working than that. ‘I will never forget any of their works.’ That ought to be enough for us, ought it not? Whoever forgets, He remembers; and if He remembers, He will not remain in our debt for anything that we have done.

So let us keep on, noticed or unnoticed; it matters very little which it is. There is a fillip, no doubt--and we should not be men and women if we did not feel it--in the recognition of what we have tried to do. And sometimes it comes to us; but the absence of it is no reason for slackening our work. And this man, so patiently and persistently ‘pegging away’ at his obscure task during all these years which have been swallowed up in oblivion, may preach a sermon to us all.

Only let us remember that he also shows us that unnoticed work is noticed, and that unrecorded services are recorded. Here are you and I, nineteen centuries after he is dead, talking about him, and his name will live and last as long as the world, because, though written in no other history, it has been recorded here. Jesus Christ's record, the Book of Life, contains the names of 'fellow-labourers' whose names have dropped out of every other record; and that should be enough for us. Sylvanus did no work that Christ did not see, and no work that Christ did not remember, and no work of which he did not, eighteen hundred years since, enter into the enjoyment of the fruit, and which he enjoys up there, whilst we are thinking about him down here.

III. The last thing that I would suggest is--here is an example to us of a character which we can all earn, and which will be the best that any man can get.

A great genius, a wise philosopher, an eloquent preacher, a statesman, a warrior, poet, painter? No! 'A faithful brother.' He may have been a commonplace one. We do not know anything about his intellectual capacity. He may have had very narrow limitations and very few powers, or he may have been a man of large faculty and acquirements. But these things drop out of sight; and this remains--that he was faithful. I suppose the eulogium is meant in both senses of the word. The one of these is the root of the other; for a man that is full of faith is a man who may be trusted, is reliable, and will be sure to fulfil all the obligations of his position, and to do all the duties that are laid upon him.

You and I, whether we are wise or not, whether we are learned or not, whether we have large faculties or not, whether we have great opportunities or very small ones, can all equally earn that name if we like. If the perfect judgment, the clear eye, of Jesus Christ beholds in us qualities which will permit Him to call us by that name, what can we want better? 'A faithful brother.' Trust in Christ; let that be the animating principle of all that we do, the controlling power that restrains and limits and stimulates and impels. And then men will know where to have us, and will be sure, and rightly sure, that we shall not shirk our obligations, nor scamp our work, nor neglect our duties. And being thus full of faith, and counted faithful by Him, we need care little what men's judgments of us may be, and need desire no better epitaph than this--a faithful brother.

21)1 Peter 5:12

1 Peter

AN APOSTOLIC TESTIMONY AND EXHORTATION

1Pe. 5:12.

‘I have written briefly,’ says Peter. But his letter, in comparison with the other epistles of the New Testament, is not remarkably short; in fact, is longer than many of them. He regards it as short when measured by the greatness of its theme. For all words which are devoted to witnessing to the glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ, must be narrow and insufficient as compared with that, and after every utterance the speaker must feel how inadequate his utterance has been. So in that word ‘briefly’ we get a glimpse of the Apostle’s conception of the transcendent greatness of the Gospel which he had to proclaim. This verse seems to be a summary of the contents of the Epistle. And if we observe the altered translation of the latter portion of my text which is given in the Revised Version, we shall see that the verse is itself an example of both ‘testifying’ and exhorting. For the last clause is not, as our Authorised Version renders it, ‘Wherein ye stand’--a statement of a fact, however true that may be--but a commandment, ‘In which stand fast.’ And so we have here the Apostle’s all-sufficient teaching, and this all-comprehensive exhortation. He ‘witnesses’ that this is the true grace of God, and because it is, he exhorts, ‘stand fast therein.’ Let us look at these two points.

I. Peter’s testimony.

Now there is a very beautiful, though not, to superficial readers, obvious, significance in this testimony. ‘This is the true grace of God.’ What is meant by ‘this’? Not merely the teaching which he has been giving in the preceding part of the letter, but that which somebody else had been giving. Now these churches in Asia Minor, to whom this letter was sent, were in all probability founded by the Apostle Paul, or by men working under his direction: and the type of doctrine preached in them was what people nowadays call Pauline. And here Peter puts his seal on the teaching that had come from his brother Apostle, and says: ‘The thing that you have learned, and that I have had no part in communicating to you, this is the true grace of God.’ If such be the primary application of the words [and I think there can be little doubt that it is], then we have an interesting evidence, all the stronger because unobtrusive, of the cordial understanding between the two great leaders of the Church in apostolic times; and the figments that have been set forth, with great learning and little common sense, about the differences that divided these great teachers of Christianity, melt away into thin air. Their division was only a division of the field of labour. 'They would that I should go unto the Gentiles, and they unto the circumcision.' All the evidence confirms what Paul says, 'Whether it were they or I, so we preach, and so' all the converts 'believed.' Thus it is not without significance and beauty that we here see dimly through the ages Peter stretching out his hands to Paul's convert, and saying, 'This--which my beloved brother Paul taught you--this is the true grace of God.'

But, apart altogether from that thought, note two things; the one, the substance of this witness-bearing; and the other, Peter's right to bear it. As to the substance of the testimony; 'grace' which has become a threadbare word in the minds of many people, used with very little conception of its true depth and beauty of meaning, is properly love in exercise towards inferior and sinful creatures who deserve something else. Condescending, pardoning, and active love, is its proper meaning. And, says Peter, the inmost significance of the gospel is that it is the revelation of such a love as being in God's heart.

Another meaning springs out of this. That same message is not only a revelation of love, but it is a communication of the gifts of love. And the 'true grace of God' is shorthand for all the rich abundance and variety and exuberant manifoldness and all-sufficiency of the sevenfold perfect gifts for spirit and heart which come from faith in Jesus Christ. The truths that lie here in the Gospel, the truths which glow and throb in this letter of Peter's, are the revelation and the communication to men of the rich gifts of the Divine heart, which will all flow into that soul which opens itself for the entrance of God's word. And what are these truths? The main theme of this letter is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, that was slain. 'Ye were as sheep going astray, but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.' He dwells upon Christ's innocence, upon Christ's meekness; but most of all upon the Christ that died, 'whom, having not seen, we love, and in whom, though unseen, we, believing, receive the end of our faith'--and the end of the gospel--'even the salvation of our souls.'

Thus, dear brethren, this gospel, the gospel of the Divine Christ that died for our sins, and lives to give His Spirit to all waiting hearts; this is the true grace of God. It is very needful for us to keep in view always that lofty conception of what this gospel is, that we may not bring it down to the level of a mere theory of religion; nor think of it as a mere publication of dry doctrines; that we may not lose sight of what is the heart of it all, but may recognise this fact, that a gospel out of which are struck, or in which are diminished, the truths of the sacrifice of Christ and His ever-living intercession for us, is not the true grace of God, and is neither a revelation of His love to inferior and sinful men, nor a communication of His gifts to our weakness. Let us remember Peter's witness. This--the full gospel of incarnation, sacrifice, resurrection, ascension, and reign in glory, and return as Judge--this, and nothing else, 'is the true grace of God.' And this gospel is not exalted to its highest place unless it is regarded as such by our waiting and recipient hearts.

Further, what right had this man to take this position and say, 'I testify that this is the true grace of God'? He was no great genius; he did not know anything about comparative religion, which is nowadays supposed to be absolutely essential to understanding any one religion. He was not a scholar or a philosopher. What business had he to bring in his personality thus, as if he were an authority, and say, 'I testify that this is the true grace of God'?

Well there are two or three answers: one peculiar to him and others common to all Christian people. The one peculiar to him is, as I believe, that he was conscious, and rightly conscious, that Jesus Christ had bestowed upon him the power to witness, and the authority to impose his testimony upon men as a word from God. In the most inartificial and matter-of-course way Peter here lets us see the apostolic conception of apostolic authority. He had a right--not because of what he was himself, but because of the authority which Christ had conferred on him--to say to men, 'I do not ask you to give heed to me, Peter. I myself also am a man [as he said to Cornelius], but I call on you to accept Christ's word, spoken through me, His commissioned messenger, when I testify, and through me Christ testifies, that this is the true grace of God.’

Now no one but an apostle has the right to say that; but we Christian people have a right to say something like it, and if we have not apostolic authority, we may have what is very nearly as good, and sometimes as powerful in its effect upon other people, and that is authority based on personal experience. If we have plunged deep into the secrets of God, and lived closely and faithfully in communion with Him, and for ourselves have found the grace of God, His love and the gifts of His love, coming into our lives, and ennobling, calming, elevating each of us; then we, too, have a right to go to men and say, ‘Never mind about me; never mind about whether I am wise or foolish, I do not argue, but I tell you I have tasted the manna, and it is sweet. I have drunk of the water, and it comes cool and fresh from the rock. One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see. I believed, and therefore have I spoken, and on the strength of my own tasting of it, I testify that this, which has done so much for me, is the true grace of God.’ If we testify thus, and back up our witness with lives corresponding, some who are wholly untouched by a preacher’s eloquence and controversialists’ arguments, will probably be led by our attestation to make the experiment for themselves. ‘Ye are My witnesses,’ says God. He did not say, ‘Ye are my advocates.’ He did not bid us argue for Him, but He bid us witness for Him.

II. Further, notice Peter’s exhortation.

According to the right rendering the last clause is, as I have already said, ‘in which stand fast.’ The translation in the Authorised Version, ‘in which ye stand,’ gives a true thought, though not the Apostle’s intention here. For, as a matter of fact, men cannot stand upright and firm unless their feet are planted on the rock of that true grace of God. If our heels are well fixed on it, then our goings will be established. It is no use talking to men about steadfastness of purpose, stability of life, erect independence, resistance to antagonistic forces, and all the rest, unless you give them something to stand upon. If you talk so to a man who has his foot upon shifting sands or slippery clay; the more he tries the deeper will he sink into the one, or slide the further upon the other. The best way to help men to stand fast is to give them something to stand upon. And the only standing ground that will never yield, nor collapse, nor, like the quicksand with the tide round it, melt away, we do not know how, from beneath our feet, is ‘the grace of God.’ Or, as Dr. Watts says, in one of his now old-fashioned hymns:--

‘Lo! on the solid Rock I stand,

And all beside is shifting sand.’

However, that is not what the Apostle Peter meant. He says, ‘See that you keep firmly your position in reference to this true grace of God.’ Now I am not going to talk to you about intellectual difficulties in the way of hearty and whole-souled acceptance of the gospel revelation--difficulties which are very real and very widespread in these days, but which possibly very slightly affect us; at least I hope so.

But whilst these slay their thousands, the difficulties that affect us all in the way of keeping a firm hold on, or firm standing in [for the two metaphors coalesce] the gospel, which is the true grace of God, are those that arise from two causes working in combination. One is our own poor weak hearts, wavering wills, strong passions, unbridled desires, forgetful minds; and the other is all that army and babel of seductions and inducements, in occupations legitimate and necessary, in enjoyments which are in themselves pure and innocent, in family delights, in home engagements, in pursuits of commerce or of daily business--all that crowd of things that tempt us to forget the true grace and to wander away in a foolish and vain search after vain and foolish substitutes.

Dear brethren, it is not so much because there are many adversaries in the intellectual world as because we are such weak creatures ourselves, and the world around us is so strong against us, that we need to say to one another and to ourselves, over and over again, ‘Stand ye fast therein.’ You cannot keep hold of a rope even, without the act of grasping tending to relax, and there must be a conscious and repeated tightening up of the muscles, or the very cord on which we hang for safety will slip through our relaxed palms. And however we may be convinced that there are no hope and no true blessedness for us except in keeping hold of God, we need that grasp to be tightened up by daily renewed efforts, or else it will certainly become slack, and we shall lose the thing that we should hold fast. So my text exhorts us against ourselves, and against the temptations of the world, which are always present with us, and are far more operative in bringing down the temperature of the Christian Church, and of its individual members, than any chilling that arises from intellectual doubts.

And how are we to obey the exhortation? Well, plainly, if ‘this’ is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, ‘the true grace of God’ which alone will give stability to our feet, then we ‘shall not stand fast’ in it unless we make conscious efforts to apprehend, and comprehend, and keep hold of it in our minds as well as in our hearts. May I say one very plain word? I am very much afraid that people do not read their Bibles very much now [or if they do read them, they do not study them], and that anything like an intelligent familiarity with the whole sweep of the great system [for it is a system] of Divine truth, evolved ‘at sundry times and in divers manners’ in this Word, is a very rare thing amongst even good people. They listen to sermons, with more or less attention; they read newspapers, no doubt; they read good little books, and magazines, and the like; and volumes that profess to be drawn from Scripture. These are all right and good in their place. But sure I am that a robust and firm grasp of the gospel, ‘which is the grace of God,’ is not possible with a starvation diet of Scripture. And so I would say, try to get hold of the depth and width of meaning in the Word.

Again, try to keep heart and mind in contact with it amidst distractions and daily duties. Try to bring the principles of the New Testament consciously to bear on the small details of everyday life. Do you look at your day’s work through these spectacles? Does it ever occur to you, as you are going about your business, or your profession, or your domestic work, to ask yourselves what bearing the gospel and its truths have upon these? If my ordinary, so-called secular, avocations are evacuated of reference to, and government by, the Word of God, I want to know what of my life is left as the sphere in which it is to work. There is no need that religion and daily life should be kept apart as they are. There is no reason why the experience of to-day, in shop, and counting-house, and kitchen, and study, should not cast light upon, and make more real to me, ‘the true grace of God.’ Be sure that you desire, and ask for, and put yourself in the attitude of receiving, the gifts of that love, which are the graces of the Christian life. And when you have got them, apply them, ‘that you may be able to withstand in the evil day; and, having done all, to stand.’

22)1 Peter 5:13

1 Peter

THE CHURCH IN BABYLON

1Pe. 5:13.

We have drawn lessons in previous addresses from the former parts of the closing salutations of this letter. And now I turn to this one to see what it may yield us. The Revised Version omits ‘the church,’ and substitutes ‘she’; explaining in a marginal note that there is a difference of opinion as to whether the sender of the letter is a community or an individual. All the old MSS., with one weighty exception, follow the reading ‘she that is in Babylon.’ But it seems so extremely unlikely that a single individual, with no special function, should be bracketed along with the communities to whom the letter was addressed, as ‘elected together with’ them, that the conclusion that the sender of the letter is a church, symbolically designated as a ‘lady,’ seems the natural one.

Then there is another question--where was Babylon? An equal diversity of opinion has arisen about that. I do not venture to trouble you with the arguments pro and con, but only express my own opinion that ‘Babylon’ means Rome.

We have here the same symbolical name as in the Book of Revelation, where, whatever further meanings are attached to the designation, it is intended primarily as an appellation for the imperial city, which has taken the place filled in the Old Testament by Babylon, as the concentration of antagonism to the Kingdom of God.

If these views of the significance of the expression are adopted we have here the Church in Rome, the proud stronghold of worldly power and hostility, sending its greetings to the scattered Christian communities in the provinces of what is now called Asia Minor. The fact of such cordial communications between communities separated by so many contrarieties as well as by race and distance, familiar though it is, may suggest several profitable considerations, to which I ask your attention.

I. We have here an object lesson as to the uniting power of the gospel.

Just think of the relations which, in the civil world, subsisted between Rome and its subject provinces; the latter, with bitter hatred in their hearts to everything belonging to the oppressing city, having had their freedom crushed down and their aspirations ruthlessly trampled upon; the former, with the contempt natural to metropolitans in dealing with far-off provincials. The same kind of relationship subsisted between Rome and the outlying provinces of its unwieldly empire as between England, for instance, and its Indian possessions. And the same uniting bond came in which binds the Christian converts of these Eastern lands of ours to England by a far firmer bond than any other. There was springing up amidst all the alienation and hatred and smothered rebellion a still incipient, but increasing, and even then strong bond that held together Roman Christians and Cappadocian believers. They were both ‘one in Christ Jesus.’ The separating walls were high, but, according to the old saying, you cannot build walls high enough to keep out the birds; and spirits, winged by the common faith, soared above all earthly-made distinctions and met in the higher regions of Christian communion. When the tide rises it fills and unifies the scattered pools on the beach. So the uniting power of Christian faith was manifest in these early days, when it bound such discordant elements together, and made ‘the church that was in Babylon’ forget that they were to a large extent Romans by birth, and stretch out their hands, with their hearts in them, to the churches to whom this letter was sent.

Now, brethren, our temptation is not so much to let barriers of race and language and distance weaken our sense of Christian community, as it is to let even smaller things than these do the same tragical office for us. And we, as Christian people, are bound to try and look over the fences of our ‘denominations’ and churches, and recognise the wider fellowship and larger company in which all these are merged. God be thanked! there are manifest tokens all round us to-day that the age of separation and division is about coming to an end. Yearnings for unity, which must not be forced into acts too soon, but which will fulfil themselves in ways not yet clear to any of us, are beginning to rise in Christian hearts. Let us see to it, dear friends, that we do our parts to cherish and to increase these, and to yield ourselves to the uniting power of the common faith.

II. We note, further, the clear recognition here of what is the strong bond uniting all Christians.

Peter would probably have been very much astonished if he had been told of the theological controversies that were to be waged round that word 'elect.' The emphasis here lies, not on 'elect,' but on 'together.' It is not the thing so much as the common possession of the thing which bulks largely before the Apostle. In effect he says, 'The reason why these Roman Christians that have never looked you Bithynians in the face do yet feel their hearts going out to you, and send you their loving messages, is because they, in common with you, have been recipients of precisely the same Divine act of grace.' We do not now need to discuss the respective parts of man and God in it, nor any of the interminable controversies that have sprung up around the word. God had, as the fact of their possession of salvation showed, chosen Romans and Asiatics together to be heirs of eternal life. By the side of these transcendent blessings which they possessed in common, how pitiably small and insignificant all the causes which kept them apart looked and were!

And so here we have a partial parallel to the present state of Christendom, in which are seen at work, on one hand, superficial separation; on the other, underlying unity. The splintered peaks may stand, or seem to stand, apart from their sister summits, or may frown at each other across impassable gorges, but they all belong to one geological formation, and in their depths their bases blend indistinguishably into a continuous whole. Their tops are miles apart, but beneath the surface they are one. And so the things that bind Christian men together are the great things and the deepest things; and the things that part them are the small and superficial ones. Therefore it is our wisdom--not only for the sake of the fact of our unity and for the sake of our consciousness of unity, but because the truths which unite are the most important ones--that they shall bulk largest in our hearts and minds. And if they do, we shall know our brother in every man that is like-minded with us towards them, whatever shibboleth may separate us. I spoke a moment ago about the separate pools on the beach, and the tide rising. When the tide goes down, and the spiritual life ebbs, the pools are parted again. And so ages of feeble spiritual vitality have been ages of theological controversy about secondary matters; and ages of profound realisation by the Church of the great fundamentals of gospel truth have been those when its members were drawn together, they knew not how. Hence they can say of and to each other, ‘Elect together with you.’

Brethren, for the sake of the strength of our own religious life, do not let us fix our attention on the peculiarities of our sects, but upon the catholic truths believed everywhere, always, by all. Then we shall ‘walk in a large place,’ and feel how many there are that are possessors of ‘like precious faith’ with ourselves.

III. Then, lastly, we may find here a hint as to the pressing need for such a realisation of unity.

‘The church that is in Babylon’ was in a very uncongenial place. Thank God, no Babylon is so Babylonish but that a Church of God may be found planted in it. No circumstances are so unfavourable to the creation and development of the religious life but that the religious life may grow there. An orchid will find footing upon a bit of stick, because it draws nourishment from the atmosphere; and they who are fed by influx of the Divine Spirit may be planted anywhere, and yet flourish in the courts of our God. So ‘the church that is in Babylon’ gives encouragement as to the possibility of Christian faith being triumphant over adverse conditions.

But it also gives a hint as to the obligation springing from the circumstances in which Christian people are set, to cultivate the sense of belonging to a great brotherhood. Howsoever solitary and surrounded by uncongenial associations any Christian man may be, he may feel that he is not alone, not only because his Master is with him, but because there are many others whose hearts throb with the same love, whose lives are surrounded by the same difficulties. It is by no means a mere piece of selfish consolation which this same Apostle gives in another part of his letter, when he bids the troubled so be of good cheer, as remembering that the ‘same afflictions were accomplished in the brotherhood which is in the world.’ He did not mean to say, ‘Take comfort, for other people are as badly off as you are,’ but he meant to call to the remembrance of the solitary sufferer the thousands of his brethren who were ‘dreeing the same weird’ in the same uncongenial world.

If thus you and I, Christian men, are pressed upon on all sides by such worldly associations, the more need that we should let our hearts go out to the innumerable multitude of our fellows, companions in the tribulation, and patience, and kingdom of Jesus Christ. Precisely because the Roman believers were in Babylon, they were glad to think of their brethren in Asia. Isolated amidst Rome’s splendours and sins, it was like a breath of cool air stealing into some banqueting house heavy with the fumes of wine, or some slaughter-house reeking with the smell of blood, to remember these far-off partakers of a purer life.

But if I might for a moment diverge, I would venture to say that in the conditions of thought, and the tendencies of things in our own and other lands, it is more than ever needful that Christian people should close their ranks, and stand shoulder to shoulder. For men who believe in a supernatural revelation, in the Divine Christ, in an atoning Sacrifice, in an indwelling Spirit, are guilty of suicidal folly if they let the comparative trivialities that part them, separate God’s army into isolated groups, in the face of the ordered battalions that are assaulting these great truths.

Because persecution was beginning to threaten and rumble on the horizon, like a rising thundercloud, it was the more needful, in Peter’s time, that Christians parted by seas, by race, language, and customs, should draw together. And for us, fidelity to our testimony and loyalty to our Master, to say nothing of common sense and the instinct of self-preservation, command Christian men in this day to think more, and to speak more, and to make more, of the great verities which they all possess in common.

Thus, brethren, living in Babylon, we should open our windows to Jerusalem; and though we dwell here as aliens, we may say, ‘We are come unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; to an innumerable company of angels; to the spirits of just men made perfect; and to the Church of the first-born whose names are written in Heaven.’

23)1 Peter 5:13

1 Peter

MARCUS, MY SON

1Pe. 5:13.

The outlines of Mark’s life, so far as recorded in Scripture, are familiar. He was the son of Mary, a woman of some wealth and position, as is implied by the fact that her house was large enough to accommodate the ‘many’ who were gathered together to pray for Peter’s release. He was a relative, probably a cousin [Col. 4:10, Revised Version], of Barnabas, and possibly, like him, a native of Cyprus. The designation of him by Peter as ‘my son’ naturally implies that the Apostle had been the instrument of his conversion. An old tradition tells us that he was the ‘young man’ mentioned in his Gospel who saw Christ arrested, and fled, leaving his only covering in the captor’s hands. However that may be, he and his relatives were early and prominent disciples, and closely connected with Peter, as is evident from the fact that it was to Mary’s house that he went after his deliverance. Mark’s relationship to Barnabas made it natural that he should be chosen to accompany him and Paul on their first missionary journey, and his connection with Cyprus helps to account for his willingness to go thither, and his unwillingness to go further into less known ground. We know how he left the Apostles, when they crossed from Cyprus to the mainland, and retreated to his mother’s house at Jerusalem. We have no details of the inglorious inactivity in which he spent the time until the proposal of a second journey by Paul and Barnabas. In the preparations for it, the foolish indulgence of his cousin, far less kind than Paul’s wholesome severity, led to a rupture between the Apostles, and to Barnabas setting off on an evangelistic tour on his own account, which received no sympathy from the church at Antioch, and has been deemed unworthy of record in the Acts.

Then followed some twelve years or more, during which Mark seems to have remained quiescent; or, at all events, he does not appear to have had any work in connection with the great Apostle. Then we find him reappearing amongst Paul’s company when he was in prison for the first time in Rome; and in the letters to Colossæ he is mentioned as being a comfort to the Apostle then. He sends salutations to the Colossians, and is named also in the nearly contemporaneous letter to Philemon. According to the reference in Colossians, he was contemplating a journey amongst the Asiatic churches, for that in Colossæ is bidden to welcome him. Then comes this mention of him in the text. The fact that Mark was beside Peter when he wrote seems to confirm the view that Babylon here is a mystical name for Rome; and that this letter falls somewhere about the same date as the letters to Colossæ and Philemon. Here again he is sending salutations to Asiatic churches. We know nothing more about him, except that some considerable time after, in Paul's last letter, he asks Timothy, who was then at Ephesus, the headquarters of the Asiatic churches, to 'take Mark,' who, therefore, was apparently also in Asia, 'and bring him' with him to Rome; 'for,' says the Apostle, beautifully referring to the man's former failure, 'he is profitable to me for'--the very office that he had formerly flung up--'the ministry.'

So, possibly, he was with Paul in his last days. And then, after that, tradition tells us that he attached himself more closely to the Apostle Peter; and, finally, at his direction and dictation, became the evangelist who wrote the 'Gospel according to Mark.'

Now that is his story; and from the figure of this 'Marcus, my son,' and from his appearance here in this letter, I wish to gather two or three very plain and familiar lessons.

I. The first of them is the working of Christian sympathy.

Mark was a full-blooded Jew when he began his career. 'John, whose surname was Mark,' like a great many other Jews at that time, bore a double name--one Jewish, 'John,' and one Gentile, 'Marcus.' But as time goes on we do not hear anything more about 'John,' nor even about 'John Mark,' which are the two forms of his name when he is first introduced to us in the Acts of the Apostles, but he finally appears to have cast aside his Hebrew and to have been only known by his Roman name. And that change of appellation coincides with the fact that so many of the allusions which we have to him represent him as sending messages of Christian greeting across the sea to his Gentile brethren. And it further coincides with the fact that his gospel is obviously intended for the use of Gentile Christians, and, according to an old and reliable tradition, was written in Rome for Roman Christians. All of which facts just indicate two things, that the more a man has real operative love to Jesus Christ in his heart, the more he will rise above all limitations of his interests, his sympathy, and his efforts, and the more surely will he let himself out, as far as he can, in affection towards and toils for all men.

This change of name, though it is a mere trifle, and may have been adopted as a matter of convenience, may also be taken as reminding us of a very important truth, and that is, that if we wish to help people, the first condition is that we go down and stand on their level, and make ourselves one with them, as far as we can. And so Mark may have said, ‘I have put away the name that parts me from these Gentiles, for whom I desire to work, and whom I love; and I take the name that binds me to them.’ Why, it is the very same principle, in a small instance--just as a raindrop that hangs on the thorn of a rose-bush is moulded by the same laws that shape the great sphere of the central sun--it is a small instance of the great principle which brought Jesus Christ down into the world to die for us. You must become like the people that you want to help. ‘Forasmuch as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same, that He might deliver them.’ And so, not only the duty of widening our sympathies, but one of the supreme conditions of being of use to anybody, are set forth in the comparatively trifling incident, which we pass by without noticing it, that this man, a Jew to his finger-tips, finally found himself--or, rather, finally was carried, for it was no case of unconscious drifting--into the position of a messenger of the Cross to the Gentiles; and for the sake of efficiency in his work, and of getting close by the side of people whom he wanted to influence, flung away deliberately that which parted him from them. It is a small matter, but a little window may show a very wide prospect.

II. The history of Mark suggests the possibility of overcoming early faults.

We do not know why he refused to bear the burden of the work that he had so cheerily begun. Probably the reason that I have suggested may have had something to do with it. When he started he did not bargain for going into unknown lands, in which there were many toils to be encountered. He was willing to go where he knew the ground, and where there were people that would make things easy for him; but when Paul went further afield, Mark's courage ebbed out at his finger ends, and he slunk back to the comfort of his mother's house in Jerusalem. At all events, whatever his reason, his return was a fault; or Paul would not have been so hard upon him as he was. The writer of the Acts puts Paul's view of the case strongly by the arrangement of clauses in the sentence in which he tells us that the Apostle 'thought not good to take him with them who withdrew from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work.' If he thus threw down his tools whenever he came to a little difficulty, and said, 'As long as it is easy work, and close to the base of operations, I am your man, but if there is any sacrifice wanted you must look out for somebody else,' he was not precisely a worker after Paul's own heart. And the best way to treat him was as the Apostle did; and to say to Barnabas' indulgent proposal, 'No! he would not do the work before, and now he shall not do it.' That is often God's way with us. It brings us to our senses, as it brought Mark to his.

We do not know how long it took to cure Mark of his early fault, but he was thoroughly cured. The man that was afraid of dangers and difficulties and hypothetical risks in Asia Minor became brave enough to stand by the Apostle when he was a prisoner, and was not ashamed of his chain. And afterwards, so much had he won his way into the Apostle's confidence, and made himself needful for him by his services and his sweetness, that the lonely prisoner, with the gibbet or headsman's sword in prospect, feels that he would like to have Mark with him once more, and bids Timothy bring him with himself, for 'he is profitable to me for the ministry.' 'He can do a thousand things that a man like me cannot do for himself, and he does them all for love and nothing for reward.' So he wants Mark once more. And thus not only Paul's generosity, but Mark's own patient effort had pasted a clean sheet over the one that was inscribed with the black story of his desertion, and he became 'profitable for' the task that he had once in so petulant and cowardly a way, flung up.

Well, translate that from the particular into the general and it comes to this. Let no man set limits to the possibilities of his own restoration, and of his curing faults which are most deeply rooted within himself. Hope and effort should be boundless. There is nothing that a Christian man may not reach, in the way of victory over his worse self, and ejection of his most deeply-rooted faults, if only he will be true to Jesus, and use the gifts that are given to him. There are many of us whose daily life is pitched in a minor key; whose whole landscape is grey and monotonous and sunless; who feel as if yesterday must set the tune for to-day, and as if, because we have been beaten and baffled so often, it is useless to try again. But remember that the field on which the Stone of Help was erected, to commemorate the great and decisive victory that Israel won, was the very field on which the same foes had before contended, and then Israel had been defeated.

So, brethren, we may win victories on the very soil where formerly we were shamefully put to the rout; and our Christ with us will make anything possible for us, in the way of restoration, of cure of old faults, of ceasing to repeat former sins. I suppose that when a spar is snapped on board a vessel, and lashed together with spun yarn and lanyards, as a sailor knows how to do, it is stronger at the point of fracture than it was before. I suppose that it is possible for a man to be most impregnable at the point where he is naturally weakest, if he chooses to use the defences that Jesus Christ has given.

III. Take another lesson--the greatness of little service.

We do not hear that this John Mark ever tried to do any work in the way of preaching the gospel. His business was a very much humbler one. He had to attend to Paul’s comfort. He had to be his factotum, man of all work; looking after material things, the commissariat, the thousand and one trifles that some one had to see to if the Apostle’s great work was to get done. And he did it all his life long. It was enough for him to do thoroughly the entirely ‘secular’ work, as some people would think it, which it was in his power to do. That needed some self-suppression. It would have been so natural for Mark to have said, ‘Paul sends Timothy to be bishop in Crete; and Titus to look after other churches; Epaphroditus is an official here; and Apollos is a great preacher there. And here am I, grinding away at the secularities yet. I think I’ll "strike," and try and get more conspicuous work.’ Or he might perhaps deceive himself, and say, ‘more directly religious work,' like a great many of us that often mask a very carnal desire for prominence under a very saintly guise of desire to do spiritual service. Let us take care of that. This 'minister,' who was not a minister at all, in our sense of the word, but only in the sense of being a servant, a private attendant and valet of the Apostle, was glad to do that work all his days.

That was self-suppression. But it was something more. It was a plain recognition of what we all ought to have very clearly before us, and that is, that all sorts of work which contribute to one end are one sort of work; and that at bottom the man who carried Paul's books and parchments, and saw that he was not left without clothes, though he was so negligent of cloaks and other necessaries, was just as much helping on the cause of Christ as the Apostle when he preached.

I wonder if any of you remember the old story about an organist and his blower. The blower was asked who it was that played that great sonata of Beethoven's, or somebody's. And he answered, 'I do not know who played, but I blew it.' There is a great truth there. If it had not been for the unknown man at the bellows, the artist at the keys would not have done much. So Mark helped Paul. And as Jesus Christ said, 'He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet, shall receive a prophet's reward.'

IV. Take as the last lesson the enlarged sphere that follows faithfulness in small matters.

What a singular change! The man who began with being a servant of Paul and of Barnabas ends by being the evangelist, and it is to him, under Peter's direction, that we owe what is possibly the oldest, and, at all events, in some aspects, an entirely unique, narrative of our Lord's life. Do you think that Peter would ever have said to him: 'Mark! come here and sit down and write what I tell you,' if there had not been beforehand these long years of faithful service? So is it always, dear friends, 'He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.' That is not only a declaration that faithfulness is one in kind, whatever be the diameter of the circle in which it is exercised, but it may also be taken as a promise, though that was not the original intention of the saying.

For quite certainly, in God’s providence, the tools do come to the hand that can wield them, and the best reward that we can get for doing well our little work is to have larger work to do. The little tapers are tempted, if I may use so incongruous a figure, to wish themselves set up on loftier stands. Shine your brightest in your corner, and you will be ‘exalted’ in due time. It is so, as a rule, in this world; sometimes too much so, for, as they say is the case at the English bar, so it is sometimes in God’s Church, ‘There is no medium between having nothing to do and being killed with work.’ Still the reward for work is more work. And the law will be exemplified most blessedly when Christ shall say, ‘Well done! good and faithful servant. Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things.’

So this far-away figure of the minister-evangelist salutes us too, and bids us be of good cheer, notwithstanding all faults and failures, because it is possible for us, as he has proved, to recover ourselves after them all. God will not be less generous in forgiveness than Paul was; and even you and I may hear from Christ’s lips, ‘Thou art profitable to Me for the ministry.’

2 Peter

1) 2 PETER 1:1
2) 2 PETER 1:3
3) 2 PETER 1:4
4) 2 PETER 1:5
5) 2 PETER 1:11-15
6) 2 PETER 2:1
7) 2 PETER 3:14
8) 2 PETER 3:18

1) 2 Peter 1:1

2 Peter

LIKE PRECIOUS FAITH

2Pe. 1:1.

Peter seems to have had a liking for that word ‘precious.’ It is not a very descriptive one; it does not give much light as to the quality of the things to which it is applied; but it is a suggestion of one-idea value. It is interesting to notice the objects to which, in his two letters--for I take this to be his letter--he applies it. He speaks of the trial of faith as being ‘precious.’ He speaks [with a slight modification of the word employed] of Jesus Christ as being ‘to them that believe, precious.’ He speaks of the ‘precious’ blood of Christ. These instances are in the first epistle. In this second epistle we have the words of my text, and a moment after, ‘exceeding great and precious promises.’ Now look at Peter’s list of valuables; ‘Christ, Christ’s blood, God’s promises, our Faith, and the discipline to which that faith is subjected.’ These are things that the old man had found out to be of worth.

But then there is another word in my text that must be noted, ‘like precious.’ It brings into view two classes, to one of which Peter himself belongs--’us’ and ‘they.’ Who are these two classes? It may be that he is thinking of the immense difference between the intelligent and developed faith of himself and the other Apostles, and the rudimentary and infantile faith of the recent believers to whom he may be speaking. And, if so, that would be beautiful, but I rather take it that he is tacitly contrasting in his own mind the difference between the Gentile converts as a whole, and the members of the Jewish community who had become believers in Jesus Christ, and that he is repeating the lesson that he had learned on the housetop at Joppa, and had had further confirmed to him by the experience of Cæsarea, and that he is really saying exactly what he said when he defended himself before the Council in Jerusalem: ‘Seeing that God had given unto them the like gift that he did unto us, who was I, that I should withstand God?’ And so he looks out over all the Christian community, and ignores ‘the middle wall of partition,’ and says, ‘Them that have obtained like precious faith with us.’ I wish very simply to try to draw out the thoughts that lie in these words, and cluster round that well-worn and threadbare theological expression and Christian verity of ‘faith’ or ‘trust.’

I. And the first thing that I would desire to point you to is, what we learn here as to the object of faith.

Now those of you who are using the Revised Version will notice that there is a very slight, but important, alteration there, from the rendering in the old translation. We read in the latter: ‘Like precious faith with us through the righteousness, ...’ and that is a meaning that might be defended. But the Revised Version says, and says more accurately as far as the words go, and more truly as far as Christian thought goes, ‘them that have obtained like precious faith with us in the righteousness.’ Now, I daresay, it will occur to us all that that is a departure from the usual form in which faith is presented to us in the New Testament, because there, thank God! we are clearly taught that the one thing which faith grapples is not a thing but a Person. Christian faith is only human trust turned in a definite direction. Just as our trust lays hold on one another, so the object of faith is, in the deepest analysis, no doctrine, no proposition, not even a Divine fact, not even a Divine promise, but the Doer of the fact, and the Promiser of the promise, and the Person, Jesus Christ. When you say, ‘I trust so-and-so’s word!’ what you mean is, ‘I trust him, and so I put credence in his word.’ And Christianity would have been delivered from mountains of misconception, and many a poor soul would have felt that a blaze of light had come in upon it, if this had been clearly proclaimed, and firmly apprehended by preachers and by hearers, that the object of trust is the living Person, Jesus Christ, and that the trust which grapples us to Him is essentially a personal relation entered into by our wills and hearts far more than by our heads.

All that is being apprehended by the Christian Church to-day a great deal more clearly than it used to be when some of us were young. But we have the defects of our qualities. And this generation is accustomed far too lightly and superficially to say ‘Oh! I do not care about doctrines. I cleave to the living Christ!’ Amen! say I. But there is another question--What Christ is it that you are cleaving to? For our only way of knowing a person with whom we have no external acquaintance is by what we are told about him, and believe about him. And so, while we cannot assert too strongly that faith or trust in the living Christ, and not in a dogma, is the basis of real Christian life, we have need to be very definite and sure as to what Christ--which Christ--it is that we are trusting to? And there my text comes in, and tells us that faith is to grasp Christ as our righteousness; and another saying of the Apostle Paul’s comes in, who for once speaks of faith as being faith not only in the Christ, but in ‘His blood’:--

‘Jesus! Thy blood and righteousness,

My beauty are, my glorious dress.’

Brethren! you will not get beyond that. The Christ, trusting in whom we have life and salvation, is the Christ whose blood cleanses, whose righteousness clothes us poor, sinful men. So, while proclaiming with all emphasis, and rejoicing to press it upon all my brethren, that salvation comes by personal trust in the Person, I supplement and fill out, not contradict, that proclamation, when I further say that the Person by trusting in whom we are saved, is the Jesus whose blood cleanses and whose righteousness becomes ours. That righteousness is, in our text, contemplated as God’s, as being embodied in Christ’s, that from Him it may be imparted to us, if we will fulfil the condition on which alone it can be ours, viz., faith. It becomes ours, by no mere imputation which has not a reality at the back of it, but because faith brings us into such a vital union with Jesus Christ as that His righteousness, or at least a spark from the central flame, becomes ours, not only in reference to our exemption from the burden of our guilt, but in reference to our becoming conformed to the image of His dear Son, and created anew in righteousness and holiness. The object of faith is Christ, the Christ whose blood and righteousness cleanses and clothes sinful souls.

II. Let me ask you to look, in the next place, to what this text suggests to us about the worth of Christian faith.

Peter calls it precious. Consider its worth as a channel. There is a very remarkable expression used in the Acts of the Apostles, ‘The door of faith.’ A door is of little value in itself, worth a few shillings at the most, but if it opens the way into a palace then it is worth something. And all the preciousness that there is in faith comes, not from its intrinsic value, but from the really precious things which it gives into our hands. Just as the dyer’s hand may be tinged with royal purple, if he has been working in it, or a woman’s hand may be scented and made fragrant if she has been handling perfumes, so the hand of faith takes tint and fragrance from that with which it is conversant. It is precious because it is the channel by which all precious things flow into our hearts and lives. If Ladysmith is, as I suppose it is, dependent for its water supply on one lead pipe, the preciousness of that pipe is not measured by what it would fetch if it were put up to auction for its lead, but by that which flows through it, and without which Death would come. And my faith is the pipe by which all the water of life comes sparkling and rejoicing into my thirsty soul. It is the opening of the door 'that the King of Glory may come in'; it is the taking down of the shutters that the sunshine may blaze into the darkened chamber; it is the grasping of the electric wire that the circuit may be completed. God puts out His hand, and we lay hold of it. It is not the outstretched hand from earth, but the down-stretched hand from heaven that makes the tottering man stand. So, dear friends, let us understand that salvation does not come as the reward of faith, but that the salvation is in the faith, because faith is the channel by which all God's salvation pours into us. So there is nothing arbitrary in the way of salvation, as some shallow thinkers seem to propose, and there is no reason in the question, 'Why does God make salvation depend upon faith?' God could not but make salvation depend upon faith, because there is no other possible way by which the blessings which are gathered together into that one great pregnant word 'salvation' could find their way into a man's heart but through the channel of his trust. Have you opened that channel? If you have not, you need not wonder it cannot be otherwise--that salvation does not come unto you.

Consider its worth as a defence. The Apostle in one place speaks about 'the shield of faith.' But there is nothing in the belief that I am safe to make me safe. It is very often a fatal blunder. All depends upon that or Him, to which or whom I am trusting for my safety. Put yourself beneath the true Shield--'The Lord God is a sun and shield'--and then you will be safe. Your way of running into the strong tower which alone, with its massive walls, protects us from all danger and from all sin, is by trusting Him.

Just as light things on a ship's deck have to be lashed in order to be secured and lie still, you and I have to lash ourselves to Jesus Christ; then, not by reason of the lashings, but by reason of Him, we are fastened and secured.

Consider the worth of faith as a means of purifying. This very Apostle, in his great speech in Jerusalem, when vindicating the reception of the Gentiles into the Church, spoke of God as having 'purified their hearts by faith.' And here again, I say, there is no cleansing power in the act of trust.

Cleansing power is in that which, by the act of trust, comes into my heart. Faith is not simple receptivity, not mere passive absorbing of what is given, but it is the active taking by desire as well as by confidence. And when we trust in Jesus Christ, His blood and righteousness, there flows into our hearts that Divine life which, like a river turned into a dung-heap, will sweep all the filth before it. You have to get the purifying power by faith. Ay! and you have to utilise the purifying power by effort and by work. 'What God hath joined together, let not men put asunder.'

III. Now, lastly, note the identity of faith.

'Like precious,' says Peter, and, as I said, there may be defended a double application of the word, and two sets of pairs of classes may be supposed to have been in his mind. I do not discuss which of these may be the case, only I would suggest to you that from this beautiful gathering together of all the diversities of the Christian character, conception, and development into one great whole, we are taught that the one thing that makes a Christian is this trust. That is the universal characteristic; that is uniform, whatever may differ. Ah! how much and how little it takes to make a Christian. 'Only faith?' you say. Yes, thank God! not this, or that, not rites, not anything that a priest can do to you. Not orthodoxy; not morality; these will come, but trust in Christ and His blood and righteousness. England is a Christian country; is it? This is a Christian congregation; is it? You are a Christian; are you? Are you trusting in that Christ? If you are not; no! though you be orthodox up to the eyebrows, and though seven or seven hundred sacraments may have been given to you, and though you be a clean living man--all that does not make a Christian, but this does--'Like precious faith with us in the righteousness of God and our Saviour.'

Again, this great thought of the identity or uniformity of the one characteristic may suggest to us how Christian faith is one, under all varieties of form. There never has been in the Christian Church again, notwithstanding all our deplorable divisions and schisms, such a tremendous cleft as there was in the primitive Church between the Jewish and Gentile components thereof. But Peter flings this flying bridge across that abyss, and knits the two sides together, because he knows that away out yonder, amongst the Gentiles, and here in the little circle of the Jewish believers, there was the one faith that unifies all.

So, dear friends, there should be the widest charity, but no vagueness; for the Christian faith in Him which unifies and bridges over all differences, mental and theological, is the Christ by whose blood we are cleansed, with whose righteousness we are made righteous.

Again, from the same thought flows the other, of the identity of the uniform characteristic, at all stages of development or maturity. The mustard-seed and the tree, 'which is greater than all herbs,' have the same life in them. And the feeblest, tremulous little spark in some heart, just kindled, and scarcely capable of sustaining itself, is one with the flame leaping heaven-high, which lights up and cleanses the whole soul. So for those in advance, humility, and for those in the rear, hope. And something more than hope, for if you have the feeblest beginning of tremulous trust, you have that which only needs to be fostered to make you like Jesus Christ. Look at what follows our text: 'Add to your faith, virtue, and to virtue, knowledge,' and so on, through the whole linked series of Christian graces. They all come out of that trust which knits us to Him who is the source of them all. So you and I are responsible for bringing our faith to the highest development of which it is capable.

Alas! alas! are we not all like this very Apostle, who, in an ecstasy of trust and longing, ventured himself on the wave, and as soon as he felt the cold water creeping above his knees lost his trust, and so lost his buoyancy, and was ready to go down like a stone? He had so little faith, that he was beginning to sink; he had so much that he put out his hand--a desperate hand it was--and cried, 'Lord, save me!' And the hand came, and that steadied him, and bore him up till the water was beneath the soles of his feet again. 'Lord! I believe; help Thou my unbelief!'

2) 2 Peter 1:3

2 Peter

MAN SUMMONED BY GOD'S GLORY AND ENERGY

2Pe. 1:3.

‘I knew thee,’ said the idle servant in our Lord’s parable, ‘that thou wert an austere man, reaping where thou didst not sow, and gathering where thou hadst not strewed. I was afraid, and went and hid my talent in the earth.’ Our Lord would teach us all with that pregnant word the great truth that if once a man gets it into his head that God’s principal relation to him is to demand, and to command, you will get no work out of that man; that such a notion will paralyse all activity and cut the nerve of all service. And the converse is as true, namely, that the one thought about God, which is fruitful of all blessing, joy, spontaneous, glad activity, is the thought of Him as giving, and not of demanding, of bestowing, and not of commanding. Teach a man that he is, as the book of James has it,’the giving God,’ and let that thought soak into the man’s heart and mind, and you will get any work out of him. And only when that thought is deep in the spirit will there be true service.

Now that is the connection in which the words of my text come; for they are laid as the broad foundation of the great commandment that follows: ‘Beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, and to your virtue knowledge,’ and so on, all the round of the ladder by which the Apostle represents us as climbing up to God. The foundation of this injunction is--God has given you everything. You have got it to begin with, and so do you set yourselves to work, and see that you make the thing that is yours your own, and incorporate into your being and into the very substance of your soul, and work out in all the blessed activities of a Christian life, the gifts that His royal and kingly hand has bestowed upon you. Take for granted that God loves you and gives you His whole self, and work on in the fulness of His possessed gift.

That is the connection of the words before us. I take them just as they lie in our passage, dealing first of all with this question--God’s call to you and me; how it is done. Now I do not know if I can venture to indulge any remarks about Biblical criticism, but you will perhaps bear with me just for a moment whilst I say that the people who know a great deal more about such subjects than either you or I, agree with one consent that the proper way of reading this verse of my text is not as our Bible has it; ‘Him that has called us to glory and virtue,' but 'Him that hath called us by--by his own glory and virtue.' Do you see the difference? In one case the language expresses the things in imitation of the Divine nature to which God summons you and me when He calls us. That is how our Bible has taken it; but the deeper thought still is the things in that Divine nature and activity itself which constitute His great summons and invitation of men to His side; and these are the two, whatever they might be, which the Apostle here describes in that rather peculiar and unusual language for Scripture, 'Who has called us by His own glory and His own virtue.' I venture to dwell on these two points for a moment or two.

Now, first of all, God's glory. Threadbare and consequently vague as the expression is in the minds of a great many people who have heard it with their ears ever since they were little children, God's glory has a very distinct and definite meaning in Scripture, and all starts, as I think, from the Old Testament use of the expression, which was the distinct specific name for the supernatural light that lay between the cherubim, and brooded over the ark on the mercy-seat. The word signifies specifically and originally the glory of God, and irradiation of a material, though supernatural, symbol of His Divine and spiritual presence. Very well, lay hold of that material picture, for God teaches us as we do our children, with pictures. Take the symbol and lift it up into the spiritual region, and it is just this: the glory of God in its deepest meaning is the irradiation and the perpetual pouring out and out and out from Himself, as the rays of the sun stream out from its great orb, pouring out from Himself the light and the perfectness and the beauty of His own self revelation. And I think we may fairly translate and paraphrase the first words of my text into this: God's great way of summoning men to Himself is by laying out His love upon them and letting the fulness of that ineffable and uncreated light, in which is no darkness at all, stream into the else blinded and hopeless lives and hearts of men. Then the other side of the Apostle's thought seems to me--if we will only strip it of the threadbare technicalities associated with it--as great and wonderful, God's glory and God's virtue. A heathenish kind of smack lingers about that word, both as applied to men and as applied to God, and so seldom found in the New Testament; but meaning here, as I venture to say, without stopping to show it--meaning here substantially the same thing that we mean by that word energy or power. You know old women in country places talk about the virtues of plants. They do not mean by this the goodness of plants, but they mean the occult powers which they suppose them able to put forth. We read in one of the gospels that our Lord Himself said at one singular period of His life that virtue had gone out of Him, meaning thereby not goodness but energy. So I think we get a sufficient equivalent to the Apostle's meaning if for the second two words of my text we read, 'He hath called us by the glory, the raying out of his love, and He hath called us by the activity and the energy, the power in action of His great and illustrious Spirit.' So you see these two things, the light that streams out of an energy which is born of the streaming light. These two things are really at bottom but one, various aspects of one idea. Modern physicists tell us that all the activity in the system comes from the sun, and in the higher region all the activity comes from the sun, and there is no mightier force in the physical universe than the sunlight. Lightnings are vulgar, noisy, and limited in contrast. The all-conquering force is the light that streams out, and so says Peter in his vivid picturesque way--not meaning the mere talk of philosophy or theology--the manifestation of the glory of God is the mightiest force in the whole universe. It is not like the play of the moonbeam upon an iceberg, ineffectual, cold, merely touching the death without melting or warming it, but it rays out like the sun in the heavens, and the work done by the light is mightier than all our work. By His glory, and by the transcendent energies which reside in that illustrious manifestation of the uncreated light, God summons men to Himself. Well, if that is anything like fair exposition of the words before us, let me just ask you before I go further to stop on them for one moment. If I may venture to say so, put off your theological spectacles for a minute, and do not let us harden this thought down with any mere dogma that can be selected in the language of the creeds. Let us try and put it into words a little less hackneyed. Suppose, instead of talking about calling, you were to talk about inviting, summoning, beckoning; or I might use tenderer words still--beseeching, wooing, entreating; for all that lies in the thought. God summoning and calling, in that sense, men to Himself, by the raying out of His own perfect beauty, and the might with which the beams go forth into the darkness. Ah! is not that beautiful, dear brethren; that there is nothing more, indeed, for God to do to draw us to Himself than to let us see what He is? So perfectly fair, so sweet, so tender, so strong, so absolutely corresponding to all the necessities of our beings and the hunger of our hearts, that when we see Him we cannot choose but love Him, and that He can do nothing more to call wandering hearts back to the light and sweetness of His own heart than to show them Himself. And so from all corners of His universe, and in every activity of His hand and heart and spirit, we can hear a voice saying, ‘Son, give me thine heart.’ ‘Oh! taste and see that God is good.’ ‘Acquaint now thyself with Him and be at peace; thereby good shall come unto thee.’

But great and wonderful as such a thought seems to be when we look at it in the freshness which belongs to it, do you suppose that that was all that Peter was thinking about? Do you think that a wide, general, and if you leave it by itself, vague utterance like that which I have been indulging in, would give all the specific precision and fulness of the meaning of the word before us? I think not. I fancy that when this Apostle wrote these words he remembered a time long, long ago, when somebody stood by the little fishing-cobble there, and as the men were up to their knees in slush and dirt, washing their nets, said to them, ‘Follow Me.’ I think that was in Peter’s estimate God’s call to him by God’s glory and by God’s virtue. And so I pause there for a moment to say that all the lustrous pouring out of light, all that transcendent energy of active love, is not diffused nebulous through a universe; it is not even spread in that sense over all the deeds of His hand; but whilst it is everywhere, it has a focus and a centre and a fire. The fire is gathered into the Son, Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ in His manhood and in His Deity; Jesus Christ in His life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and kingly reign. The whole creation, as this New Testament proclaims Him to us, is God’s glory and God’s virtue, whereby He draws men to Himself. I cannot stay to dwell on that thought as I should be glad to do. Let me just remind you of the two parts into which it splits itself up; and I commend it, dogmatically as I have to state it in such an audience as this--I commend it to the multitudes of young men here present. The highest form of the Divine glory is Jesus Christ, not the attributes with which men clothe the Divinity, not those abstractions which you find in books of theology. All that is but the fringe of the glory. And I tell you, dear friends, the living white light at the centre and heart of all the radiance of the flame is the light of life which is conveyed into the gentle Christ. As the Apostle John has it, ‘We beheld His glory.’ Yes, and taking and binding together the two words which people have so often treated against each other, ‘We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth,’ the highest light in Him that says, ‘I am the light of the world’--very light of very light. As a much maligned document has it,’very light of very light,’ the brightness of His glory, the irradiation of His splendour, and the express image of His person. And as the light so the power. Christ the power; power in its highest, noblest form, the power of patient gentleness and Divine suffering; power in its widest sweep, ‘unto every one that believeth’; power in its most wondrous operation, ‘the power of God unto salvation.’ So I come to you, I hope, with one message on my lips and in my heart. If you want light, look to Christ. If you want to behold that unveiled face, the glory of the Lord, turn to Him, and let His sunshine smite you on the face as the light smote Stephen, and then you can say, ‘He that hath seen Him hath seen the Father.’ My brother, the highest, noblest, perfect, and, as I believe, final form in which all God’s glory, all God’s energy, are gathered together, and make their appeal to you and me, was when a Galilean peasant stood up in a little knot of forgotten Jews and said to them, and through them to you and me, ‘Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.’ He calls by His glory and by His virtue.

Now still further. Confining myself as before to the words as they lie here in this text, let me ask you to think, and that for a moment or two only, on the great and wondrous purpose which this Divine energy and light had in view in summoning us to itself. His Divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain to life and all things that pertain to godliness. Look at that! One of the old Psalms says: ‘Gather my saints together unto me, those who have made a covenant with me by sacrifice; assemble them all before my throne, and I will judge my people.’ Is that the last and final revelation of God’s purpose of drawing men to Him? Is that why He sends out His heralds and summons through the whole intelligent creation? Nay, something better. Not to judge, not to scourge, not to chastise, not to avenge. To give. This is the meaning of that summons that comes out through the whole earth, ‘Come up hither,’ that when we get there we may be flooded with the richness of His mercy, and that He may pour His whole soul out over us in the greatness of His gifts. This is God, and the perpetual activity summoning men to Himself that there He may bless them. He makes our hearts empty that He may fill them. He shapes us as we are that we may need Him and may recreate ourselves in Him. He says, ‘Bring all your vessels and I will fill them full.’ Now look in this part of my subject at what

I may venture to call the magnificent confidence that this Peter has in the--what shall I say?--the encyclopædical--if I may use a long word--and universal character of God. All things that pertain to life, all things that pertain to godliness. And somebody says, 'Yes, that is tautology, that is saying the same thing twice over in different language.' Never mind, says Peter, so much the better, it will help to express the exuberant abundance and fulness. He takes a leaf out of his brother Paul's book. He is often guilty when he speaks of God's gifts of that same sin of tautology, as for instance, 'Now unto Him who is able to do exceeding, abundantly, above all'--there are four of them--'all that we can ask or think.' Yes, in all forms language is but faint and feeble, weak and poor in the presence of that great miracle of a love that passeth knowledge and that we may know the heights and depths. And so says our Apostle, 'All things that pertain to life, all things that pertain to godliness.' The whole circle all round, all the 360 degrees of it, God's love will come down and lie on the top of it as it were, superimposed, so that there should not be a single gift where there is a flaw or a defect. Everything you want of life, everything you want for godliness. Yes, of course, the gift must bear some kind of proportion to the giver. You do not expect a millionaire to put down half a crown to a subscription list if he gives anything at all. And God says to you and me, 'Come and look at My storehouses, count if you can those golden vases filled with treasure, look at those massive ingots of bullion, gaze into the vanishing distances of the infiniteness of My nature and of My possessions, and then listen to Me. I give thee Myself--Myself, that ye may be filled with all the fulness of God. All things that pertain to life, all things that pertain to godliness. But I cannot pass on from this part of my subject without venturing one more remark. It is this: I do not suppose it is too minute, verbal criticism. This great encyclopædiacal gift is represented in my text, not as a thing that you are going to get, Christian men and women, but as a thing that you have gotten. And any of you that are able to test the correctness of my assertion will see I have thought the form of language used in the original is such as to point still more specifically than in our translation, to some one definite act in the past in which all that fulness of glory and virtue of life and godliness was given to us men. Is there any doubt as to what that is? We talk sometimes as if we had to ask God to give us more. God cannot give you any more than He gave you nineteen hundred years ago. It was all in Christ. Get a very vulgar illustration which is altogether inadequate for a great many purposes, but may serve for one. Suppose some man told you that there was a thousand pounds paid to your credit at a London bank, and that you were to get the use of it as you drew cheques against it. Well, the money is there, is it not? The gift is given, and yet for all that you may be dying, and half-dead, a pauper. I was reading a book only the other day which contained a story that comes in here. An Arctic expedition, some years ago, found an ammunition chest that Commander Parry had left fifty years ago, safe under a pile of stones. The wood of the chest had not rotted yet; the provisions inside of it were perfectly sweet, and good, and eatable. There it had lain all those years. Men had died of starvation within arm’s length of it. It was there all the same. And so, if I might venture to vulgarise the great theme that I try to speak about, God has given us His Son, and in Him, all that pertains to life and all that pertains to godliness. My brother, take the things that are freely given to you of God.

And so that leads me to one last word, and it shall only be a word, in regard to what our text tells us of the way by which on our side we can yield to this Divine call, and receive this Divine fulness of gifts, through the knowledge of Him that hath called us to glory. Through the knowledge! Yes, well there are two kinds of knowledge, are there not? There is the knowledge by which you know a book, for instance, on the subject of study, and there is the knowledge by which you know one another; and the kind of thing I mean when I say, ‘I know mathematics,’ is entirely different to what I mean when I say, ‘I know John, Thomas,’ or whoever he may be. And I venture to say that the knowledge, which is the condition of receiving the whole fulness of the glory and the whole fulness of the light, is a great deal more like the thing we mean when we talk of knowing one another than when we talk of knowing a book. That is to say, a man may have all the creeds and confessions of faith clear in his head, and yet none of the life, none of the light, none of the power, and none of the godliness. But if we know Him as our brother, know Him as our friend, our sacrifice, our Redeemer, Lord, all in all; know Him as our heaven, our righteousness, and our strength; if we know Him with the knowledge which is possession; if we know Him with the knowledge which, as the profoundest of the Apostles says, ‘hath the truth in life’; if we know Him, see then, ‘This is life eternal, to know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.’

Now, friends, my words are done. God is calling you. No, let us put it a little more definitely than that--God is calling thee. There is no speech nor language where His voice is not heard. His words are gone out to the end of the world, and have reached even thyself. He calls thee, oh! brother, sister, friend, that you and I may turn round to Him and say, ‘When Thou saidst, Seek ye my face, my heart said unto Thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek.’ Amen.

3) 2 Peter 1:4

2 Peter

PARTAKERS OF THE DIVINE NATURE

2Pe. 1:4.

‘Partakers of the Divine nature.’ These are bold words, and may be so understood as to excite the wildest and most presumptuous dreams. But bold as they are, and startling as they may sound to some of us, they are only putting into other language the teaching of which the whole New Testament is full, that men may, and do, by their faith, receive into their spirits a real communication of the life of God. What else does the language about being ‘the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty’ mean? What else does the teaching of regeneration mean? What else mean Christ’s frequent declarations that He dwells in us and we in Him, as the branch in the vine, as the members in the body? What else does ‘he that is joined to the Lord in one spirit’ mean? Do not all teach that in some most real sense the very purpose of Christianity, for which God has sent His Son, and His Son has come, is that we, poor, sinful, weak, limited, ignorant creatures as we are, may be lifted up into that solemn and awful elevation, and receive in our trembling and yet strengthened souls a spark of God? ‘That ye may be partakers of the Divine nature’ means more than ‘that you may share in the blessings which that nature bestows.’ It means that into us may come the very God Himself.

I. So I want you to look with me, first, at this lofty purpose which is here presented as being the very aim and end of God’s gift in the

gospel.

The human nature and the Divine are both kindred and contrary. And the whole Bible is remarkable for the emphasis with which it insists upon both these elements of the comparison, declaring, on the one hand, as no other religion has ever declared, the supreme sovereign, unapproachable elevation of the infinite Being above all creatures, and on the other hand, holding forth the hope, as no other religion has ever ventured to do, of the possible union of the loftiest and the lowest, and the lifting of the creature into union with God Himself. There are no gods of the heathen so far away from their worshippers, and there are none so near them, as our God. There is no god that men have bowed before, so unlike the devotee; and there is no system which recognises that, as is the Maker so are the made, in such thorough-going fashion as the Bible does. The arched heaven, though high above us, it is not inaccessible in its serene and cloudless beauty, but it touches earth all round the horizon, and man is made in the image of God.

True, that divine nature of which the ideal man is the possessor has faded away from humanity. But still the human is kindred with the divine. The drop of water is of one nature with the boundless ocean that rolls shoreless beyond the horizon, and stretches plumbless into the abysses. The tiniest spark of flame is of the same nature as those leaping, hydrogen spears of illuminated gas that spring hundreds of thousands of miles high in a second or two in the great central sun.

And though on the one hand there be finiteness and on the other infinitude: though we have to talk, in big words, of which we have very little grasp, about ‘Omniscience,’ and ‘Omnipresence,’ and ‘Eternity,’ and such like, these things may be deducted and yet the Divine nature may be retained; and the poor, ignorant, finite, dying creature, that perishes before the moth, may say, ‘I am kindred with Him whose years know no end; whose wisdom knows no uncertainty nor growth; whose power is Omnipotence; and whose presence is everywhere.’ He that can say, ‘I am,’ is of the same nature as His whose mighty proclamation of Himself is ‘I AM THAT I AM.’ He who can say ‘I will’ is of the same nature as He who willeth and it is done.

But that kindred, belonging to every soul of man, abject as well as loftiest, is not the ‘partaking’ of which my text speaks; though it is the basis and possibility of it; for my text speaks of men as 'becoming partakers,' and of that participation as the result, not of humanity, but of God's gift of 'exceeding great and precious promises.' That creation in the image and likeness of God, which is represented as crowned by the very breath of God breathed into man's nostrils implies not only kindred with God in personality and self-conscious will, but also in purity and holiness. The moral kindred has darkened into unlikeness, but the other remains. It is not the gift here spoken of, but it supplies the basis which makes that gift possible. A dog could not become possessor of the Divine nature, in the sense in which my text speaks of it. Any man, however bad, however foolish, however degraded, abject and savage, can become a partaker of it, and yet no man has it without something else than the fact of his humanity.

What, then, is it? No mere absorption, as extravagant mystics have dreamed, into that Divine nature, as a drop goes back into the ocean and is lost. There will always be 'I' and 'thou,' or else there were no blessedness, nor worship, nor joy. We must so partake of the Divine nature as that the bounds between the bestowing God and the partaking man shall never be broken down. But that being presupposed, union as close as is possible, the individuality of the giver and the receiver being untampered with is the great hope that all Christian men and women ought consciously to cherish.

Only mark, the beginning of the whole is the communication of a Divine life which is manifested mainly in what we call moral likeness. Or to put it into plain words, the teaching of my text is no dreamy teaching, such as an eastern mystic might proclaim, of absorption into an impersonal Divine. There is no notion here of any partaking of these great though secondary attributes of the Divine mind which to many men are the most Godlike parts of His nature. But what my text mainly means is, you may, if you like, become 'holy as God is holy.' You may become loving as God is loving, and with a breath of His own life breathed into your hearts. The central Divinity in the Divine, if I may so say, is the amalgam of holiness and love. That is God; the rest is what belongs to God. God has power; God is love. That is the regnant attribute, the spring that sets everything agoing. And so, when my text talks about making us all, if we will, partakers of a Divine nature, what it means, mainly, is this--that into every human spirit there may pass a seed of Divine life which will unfold itself there in all purity of holiness, in all tenderness and gentleness of love. ‘God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.’ Partakers we shall be in the measure in which by our faith we have drawn from Him the pure and the hearty love of whatever things are fair and noble; the measure in which we love righteousness and hate iniquity.

And then remember also that this lofty purpose which is here set forth is a purpose growingly realised in man. The Apostle puts great stress upon that word in my text, which, unfortunately, is not rendered adequately in our Bible, ‘that by these ye might become partakers of the Divine nature.’ He is not talking about a being, but about a becoming. That is to say, God must ever be passing, moment by moment, into our hearts if there is to be anything godly there. No more certainly must this building, if we are to see, be continually filled with light-beams that are urged from the central sun by its impelling force than the spirit must be receiving, by momentary communication, the gift of life from God if it is to live. Cut off the sunbeam from the sun and it dies, and the house is dark; cut off the life from the root and it withers, and the creature shrivels. The Christian man lives only by continual derivation of life from God; and for ever and ever the secret of his being and of his blessedness is not that he has become a possessor, but that he has become a partaker, of the Divine nature.

And that participation ought to, and will, be a growing thing. By daily increase we shall be made capable of daily increase. Life is growth; the Divine life in Him is not growth, but in us it does grow, and our infancy will be turned into youth; and our youth into maturity; and, blessed be His name, the maturity will be a growing one, to which grey hairs and feebleness will never come, nor a term ever be set. More and more of God we may receive every day we live, and through the endless ages of eternity; and if we have Him in our hearts, we shall live as long as there is anything more to pass from God to us. Until the fountain has poured its whole fulness into the cistern, the cistern will never be broken. He who becomes partaker of the Divine nature can never die. So as Christ taught us the great argument for immortality is the present relation between God and us, and the fact that He is the God of Abraham points to the resurrection life.

II. Look, in the second place, at the costly and sufficient means employed for the realisation of this great purpose. ‘He hath given to us exceeding great and precious promises, that by these ye might become partakers,’ etc.

Of course the mere words of a promise will not communicate this Divine life to men’s souls. ‘Promises’ here must necessarily, I think, be employed in the sense of fulfilment of the promises. And so we might think of all the great and wondrous words which God has spoken in the past, promises of deliverance, of forgiveness, and the like; but I am rather disposed to believe that the extreme emphasis of the epithets which the Apostle selects to describe these promised things now fulfilled suggests another interpretation.

I believe that by these ‘exceeding great and precious promises’ is meant the unspeakable gift of God’s own Son, and the gift therein and thereafter of God’s life-giving Spirit. For is not this the meaning of the central fact of Christianity, the incarnation--that the Divine becomes partaker of the human in order that the human may partake of the Divine? Is not Christ’s coming the great proof that however high the heavens may stretch above the flat, sad earth, still the Divine nature and the human are so kindred that God can enter into humanity and be manifest in the flesh? Contrariety vanishes; the difference between the creature and the Creator disappears. These mere distinctions of power and weakness, of infinitude and finiteness, of wisdom and of ignorance, of undying being and decaying life, vanish, as of secondary consequence, when we can say, ‘the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.’ There can be no insuperable obstacle to man’s being lifted up into a union with the Divine, since the Divine found no insuperable obstacle in descending to enter into union with the human.

So then, because God has given us His Son it is clear that we may become partakers of the Divine nature; inasmuch as He, the Divine, has become partaker of the children’s flesh and blood, and in that coming of the Divine into the human there was brought the seed and the germ of a life which can be granted to us all. Brethren! there is one way, and one way only, by which any of us can partake of this great and wondrous gift of a share in God, and it is through Jesus Christ. ‘No man hath ascended up into Heaven,’ nor ever will either climb or fly there, ‘save He that came down from Heaven; even the Son of man which is in Heaven.' And in Him we may ascend, and in Him we may receive God.

Christ is the true Prometheus, if I may so speak, who brings to earth in the fragile reed of his humanity the sacred and immortal fire which may be kindled in every heart. Open your hearts to Him by faith and He will come in, and with Him the rejoicing life which will triumph over the death of self and sin, and give to you a share in the nature of God.

III. Let me say, lastly, that this great text adds a human accompaniment of that Divine gift: 'Having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.'

The only condition of receiving this Divine nature is the opening of the heart by faith to Him, the Divine human Christ, who is the bond between men and God, and gives it to us. But that condition being presupposed, this important clause supplies the conduct which attends and attests the possession of the Divine nature.

Notice, here is human nature without God, described as 'the corruption that is in the world in lust.' It is like a fungus, foul-smelling, slimy, poisonous; whose growth looks rather the working of decay than of vitality. And, says my text, that is the kind of thing that human nature is if God is not in it. There is an 'either' and 'or' here. On the one hand we must have a share in the Divine nature, or, on the other, we have a share in the putrescence 'that is in the world through lust.'

Corruption is initial destruction, though of course other forms of life may come from it; destruction is complete corruption. The word means both. A man either escapes from lust and evil, or he is destroyed by it.

And the root of this rotting fungus is 'in lust,' which word, of course, is used in a much wider meaning than the fleshly sense in which we employ it in modern times. It means 'desire' of all sorts. The root of the world's corruption is my own and my brothers' unbridled and godless desires.

So there are two states--a life plunged in putridity, or a heart touched with the Divine nature. Which is it to be? It cannot be both. It must be one or the other. Which?

A man that has got the life of God, in however feeble measure, in him, will flee away from this corruption like Lot out of Sodom. And how will he flee out of it? By subduing his own desires; not by changing position, not by shirking duty, not by withdrawing himself into unwholesome isolation from men and men's ways. The corruption is not only 'in the world,' so that you could get rid of it by getting out of the world, but it is 'in the world in lust,' so that you carry the fountain of it within yourself. The only way to escape is by no outward flight, but by casting out the unclean thing from our own souls.

Depend upon it, the measure in which a man has the love of God in him can be very fairly estimated by the extent to which he is doing this. There is a test for you Christian people. There have been plenty of men and women in all ages of the Church, and they abound in this generation, who will make no scruple of declaring that they possess a portion of this Divine Spirit and a spark of God in their souls. Well then, I say, here is the test, bring it all to this--does that life within you cast out your own evil desires? If it does, well; if it does not, the less you say about Christ in your hearts the less likely you will be to become either a hypocrite, or a self-deceiver.

And so, brethren, remember, one last word, viz., that whilst on the one hand whoever has the life of God in his heart will be fleeing from this corruption, on the other hand you can weaken--ay! and you can kill the Divine life by not so fleeing. You have got it, if you have it, to nourish, to cherish, and to do that most of all by obeying it. If you do not obey, and if habitually you keep the plant with all its buds picked off one after another as they begin to form, you will kill it sooner or later. You Christian men and women take warning. God has given you Jesus Christ. It was worth while for Christ to live; it was worth while for Christ to die, in order that into the souls of all sinful, God-forgetting, devil-following men there might pass this Promethean spark of the true fire.

You get it, if you will, by simple faith. You will not keep it unless you obey it. Mind you do not quench the Holy Spirit, and extinguish the very life of God in your souls.

4) 2 Peter 1:5

2 Peter

THE POWER OF DILIGENCE

2Pe. 1:5.

It seems to me very like Peter that there should be so much in this letter about the very commonplace and familiar excellence of diligence. He over and over again exhorts to it as the one means to the attainment of all Christian graces, and of all the blessedness of the Christian life. We do not expect fine-spun counsels from a teacher whose natural bent is, like his, but plain, sturdy, common sense, directed to the highest matter, and set aglow by fervent love to his Lord. The Apostle paints himself, and his own way of Christian living, when he thus frequently exhorts his brethren to 'give all diligence.' He says in this same chapter that he himself will 'give diligence [endeavour, in Authorised Version] that they may be able after his decease to have these things always in remembrance.' We seem to see Peter, not much accustomed to wield a pen, sitting down to what he felt a somewhat difficult task, and pointing the readers to his own example as an instance of the temper which they must cherish if they are to make anything of their Christian life. 'Just as I labour for your sakes at this unfamiliar work of writing, so do you toil at perfecting your Christian graces.'

Now it strikes me that we may gain some instruction if we throw together the various objects to which in Scripture, and especially in this letter, we are exhorted to direct this virtue of diligence, and mark how comprehensive its range, and how, for all beauty of character and progress in the Divine life, it is regarded as an indispensable condition. Let us then look, first, at the homely excellence that is the master-key to all Christian maturity and grace, and then at the various fields in which we are to apply it.

I. Now as to the homely virtue itself, 'giving all diligence.'

We all know what 'diligence' means, but it is worth while to point out that the original meaning of the word is not so much diligence as haste. It is employed, for instance, to describe the eager swiftness with which the

Virgin went to Elizabeth after the angel's salutation and annunciation. It is the word employed to describe the murderous hurry with which Herodias came rushing in to the king to demand John the Baptist's head. It is the word with which the Apostle, left solitary in his prison, besought his sole trusty companion Timothy to 'make haste so as to come to him before winter.' Thus, the first notion in the word is haste, which crowds every moment with continuous effort, and lets no hindrances entangle the feet of the runner. Wise haste has sometimes to be content to go slowly. 'Raw haste' is 'half sister to delay.' When haste degenerates into hurry, and becomes agitation, it is weakness, not strength; it turns out superficial work, which has usually to be pulled to pieces and done over again, and it is sure to be followed by reaction of languid idleness. But the less we hurry the more should we hasten in running the race set before us.

But with this caution against spurious haste, we cannot too seriously lay to heart the solemn motives to wise and well-directed haste. The moments granted to any of us are too few and precious to let slip unused. The field to be cultivated is too wide and the possible harvest for the toiler too abundant, and the certain crop of weeds in the sluggard's garden too poisonous, to allow dawdling to be considered a venial fault. Little progress will be made if we do not work as feeling that 'the night is far spent, the day is at hand,' or as feeling the apparently opposite but really identical conviction, 'I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day. The night cometh when no man can work.' The day of full salvation, repose, and blessedness is near dawning. The night of weeping, the night of toil, is nearly past. By both aspects of this brief life we should be spurred to haste.

The first element, then, in Christian diligence is economy of time as of most precious treasure, and the avoidance, as of a pestilence, of all procrastination. ‘To-morrow and to-morrow’ is the opiate with which sluggards and cowards set conscience asleep, and as each to-morrow becomes to-day it proves as empty of effort as its predecessors, and, when it has become yesterday, it adds one more to the solemn company of wasted opportunities which wait for a man at the bar of God. ‘All their yesterdays have lighted’ such idlers ‘to dusty death,’ because in each they were saying, ‘to-morrow we will begin the better course,’ instead of beginning it to-day. ‘Now is the accepted time.’ ‘Wherefore, giving all haste, add to your faith.’

Another of the phases of the virtue, which Peter here regards as sovereign, is represented in our translation of the word by ‘earnestness,’ which is the parent of diligence. Earnestness is the sentiment, of which diligence is the expression. So the word is frequently translated. Hence we gather that no Christian growth is possible unless a man gives his mind to it. Dawdlers will do nothing. There must be fervour if there is to be growth. The heated bar of iron will go through the obstacle which the cold one will never penetrate. We must gather ourselves together under the impulse of an all-pervading and noble earnestness, too deep to be demonstrative, and which does not waste itself in noise, but settles down steadily to work. The engine that is giving off its steam in white puffs is not working at its full power. When we are most intent we are most silent. Earnestness is dumb, and therefore it is terrible.

Again we come to the more familiar translation of the word as in the text. ‘Diligence’ is the panacea for all diseases of the Christian life. It is the homely virtue that leads to all success. It is a great thing to be convinced of this, that there are no mysteries about the conditions of healthy Christian living, but that precisely the same qualities which lead to victory in any career to which a man sets himself do so in this; that, on the one hand, we shall never fail if in earnest and saving the crumbs of moments, we give ourselves to the work of Christian growth; and that on the other hand, no fine emotions, no select moments of rapture and communion will ever avail to take the place of the dogged perseverance and prosaic hard work which wins in all other fields; and wins, and is the only thing that does win, in this one too. If you want to be a strong Christian--that is to say, a happy man--you must bend your back to the work and ‘give all diligence.’ Nobody goes to heaven in his sleep. No man becomes a vigorous Christian by any other course than ‘giving all diligence.’ It is a very lowly virtue. It is like some of the old wives’ recipes for curing diseases with some familiar herb that grows at every cottage door. People will not have that, but if you bring them some medicine from far away, very rare and costly, and suggest to them some course out of the beaten rut of ordinary, honest living, they will jump at that. Quackery always deals in mysteries and rare things. The great physician cures diseases with simples that grow everywhere. A pennyworth of some familiar root will cure an illness that nothing else will touch. It is a homely virtue, but if in its homeliness we practised it, this Church and our own souls would wear a different face from what it and they do to-day.

II. Note the wide field of action for this homely grace.

I can do nothing more--nor is it necessary that I should--than put before your mind, in a sentence or two, the various applications of it which our letter gives.

First, note that in our text, ‘giving all diligence, add to your faith.’ That is to say, unless you work with haste, with earnestness, and therefore with much putting forth of strength, your faith will not evolve the graces of character which is in it to bring forth. If, on the other hand, we set ourselves to our tasks, then out of faith will come, as the blossoms mysteriously and miraculously do out of an apparently dead stump, virtue, manliness, and knowledge, and temperance, and patience, and godliness, and brotherly mindedness, and charity. All that galaxy of light and beauty will shine forth on the one condition of diligence, and it will not appear without that. Without it, the faith, though it may be genuine, which lies in a man who is idle in cultivating Christian character, will bear but few and shrivelled fruits. The Apostle uses a very remarkable expression here, which is rendered in our Bible imperfectly ‘giving all diligence.’ He has just been saying that God has ‘given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, and exceeding great and precious promises.’ The Divine gift, then, is everything that will help a man to live a high and godly life. And, says Peter, on this very account, because you have all these requisites for such a life already given you, see that you ‘bring besides into’ the heap of gifts, as it were, that which you and only you can bring, namely, ‘all diligence.’ The phrase implies that diligence is our contribution. And the very reason for exercising it is the completeness of God’s gift. ‘On this very account’--because He has given so much--we are to lay ‘all diligence’ by the side of His gifts, which are useless to the sluggard.

On the one hand there are all great gifts and boundless possibilities as to life and godliness, and on the other diligence as the condition on which all these shall actually become ours, and, passing into our lives, will there produce all these graces which the Apostle goes on to enumerate. The condition is nothing recondite, nothing hard either to understand or to practise, but it is simply that commonplace, humdrum virtue of diligence. If we will put it forth, then the gifts that God has given, and which are not really ours unless we put it forth, will pass into the very substance of our being, and unfold themselves according to the life that is in them; even the life that is in Jesus Christ Himself, in all forms of beauty and sweetness and power and blessedness. ‘Diligence’ makes faith fruitful. Diligence makes God’s gifts ours.

Then, again, the Apostle gives an even more remarkable view of the possible field for this all-powerful diligence when he bids his readers exercise it in order to ‘make their calling and election sure.’ Peter’s first letter shows that he believed that Christians were ‘chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.’ But for all that he is not a bit afraid of putting the other side of the truth, and saying to us in effect. ‘We cannot read the eternal decrees of God nor know the names written in the Book of Life. These are mysteries above us. But if you want to be sure that you are one of the called and chosen, work and you will get the assurance.’ The confirmation of the ‘call,’ of the ‘election,’ both in fact and in my consciousness depends upon my action. The ‘diligence,’ of which the Apostle thinks such great things, reaches, as it were, a hand up into heaven and binds a man to that great unrevealed, electing purpose of God. If we desire that upon our Christian lives there shall shine the perpetual sunshine of an unclouded confidence that we have the love and the favour of God, and that for us there is no condemnation, but only ‘acceptance in the beloved,' the short road to it is the well-known and trite path of toil in the Christian life.

Still further, one of the other writers of the New Testament gives us another field in which this virtue may expatiate, when the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews exhorts to diligence, in order to attain 'the full assurance of hope.' If we desire that our path should be brightened by the clear vision of our blessed future beyond the grave, and above the stars, and within the bosom of God, the road to that happy assurance and sunny, cloudless confidence in a future of rest and fellowship with God lies simply here--work! as Christian men should, whilst it is called to-day.

The last of the fields in which this virtue finds exercise is expressed by our letter, when Peter says, 'Seeing that we look for such things, let us be diligent, that we may be found of Him in peace without spot, and blameless.' If we are to be 'found in peace,' we must be 'found spotless,' and if we are to be 'found spotless' we must be 'diligent.' 'If that servant begin to say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and to be slothful, and to eat and drink with the drunken, the lord of that servant will come in an hour when he is not aware.' On the other hand, 'who is that faithful servant whom his lord hath set ruler over his household? Blessed is that servant whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing?' Doing so, and diligently doing it, 'he shall be found in peace.'

What a beautiful ideal of Christian life results from putting together all these items. A fruitful faith, a sure calling, a cloudless hope, a peaceful welcome at last! The Old Testament says, 'The hand of the diligent maketh rich'; the New Testament promises unchangeable riches to the same hand. The Old Testament says, 'Seest thou a man diligent in his business, he shall stand before kings.' The New Testament assures us that the noblest form of that promise shall be fulfilled in the Christian man's communion with his Lord here, and perfected when the diligent disciple shall 'be found of Him in peace,' and stand before the King in that day, accepted and himself a king.

5) 2 Peter 1:11-15

GOING OUT AND GOING IN

2Pe. 1:11-15

I do not like, and do not often indulge in, the practice of taking fragments of Scripture for a text, but I venture to isolate these two words, because they correspond to one another, and when thus isolated and connected, bring out very prominently two aspects of one thing. In the original the correspondence is even closer, for the words, literally rendered, are ‘a going in’ and ‘a going out.’ The same event is looked at from two sides. On the one it is a departure; on the other it is an arrival. That event, I need not say, is Death.

I note, further, that the expression rendered, ‘my decease,’ employs the word which is always used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to express the departure of the Children of Israel from bondage, and which gives its name, in our language, to the Second Book of the Pentateuch. ‘My exodus’--associations suggested by the word can scarcely fail to have been in the writer’s mind.

Further, I note that this expression for Death is only employed once again in the New Testament--viz., in St. Luke’s account of the Transfiguration, where Moses and Elias spake with Jesus ‘concerning His decease--the exodus--which He should accomplish at Jerusalem.’ If you look on to the verses which follow the second of my texts, you will see that the Apostle immediately passes on to speak about that Transfiguration, and about the voice which He heard then in the holy mount. So that I think we must suppose that in the words of our second text he was already beginning to think about the Transfiguration, and was feeling that, somehow or other, his ‘exodus’ was to be conformed to his Master’s.

Now bearing all these points in mind, let us just turn to these words and try to gather the lessons which they suggest.

I. The first of them is this, the double Christian aspect of death.

It is well worth noting that the New Testament very seldom condescends to use that name for the mere physical fact of dissolution. It reserves it for the most part for something a great deal more dreadful than the separation of body and soul, and uses all manner of periphrases, or what rhetoricians call euphemising, that is, gentle expressions which put the best face upon a thing instead of the ugly word itself. It speaks, for instance, as you may remember, in the context here about the ‘putting off’ of a tent or ‘a tabernacle,’ blending the notions of stripping off a garment and pulling down a transitory abode. It speaks about death as a sleep, and in that and other ways sets it forth in gracious and gentle aspects, and veils the deformity, and loves and hopes away the dreadfulness of it.

Now other languages and other religions besides Christianity have done the same things, and Roman and Greek poets and monuments have in like manner avoided the grim, plain word--death, but they have done it for exactly the opposite reason from that for which the Christian does it. They did it because the thing was so dark and dismal, and because they knew so little and feared so much about it. And Christianity does it for exactly the opposite reason, because it fears it not at all, and knows it quite enough. So it toys with leviathan, and ‘lays its hand on the cockatrice den,’ and my text is an instance of this.

‘My decease ... an entrance.’ So the terribleness and mystery dwindled down into this--a change of position; or if locality is scarcely the right class of ideas to apply to spirits detached from the body--a change of condition. That is all.

We do not need to insist upon the notion of change of place. For, as I say, we get into a fog when we try to associate place with pure spiritual existence. But the root of the conviction which is expressed in both these phrases, and most vividly by their juxtaposition, is this, that what happens at death is not the extinction, but the withdrawal, of a person, and that the man is, as fully, as truly as he was, though all the relations in which he stands may be altered.

Now no materialistic teaching has any right to come in and bar that clear faith and firm conclusion. For by its very saying that it knows nothing about life except in connection with organisation, it acknowledges that there is a difference between them. And until science can tell me how it is that the throb of a brain or the quiver of a nerve, becomes transformed into morality, into emotion, I maintain that it knows far too little of personality and of life to be a valid authority when it asserts that the destruction of the organisation is the end of the man. I feel myself perfectly free--in the darkness in which, after all investigation, that mysterious transformation of the physical into the moral and the spiritual lies--I feel perfectly free to listen to another voice, the voice which tells me that life can subsist, and that personal being can be as full--ay, fuller--apart altogether from the material frame which here, and by our present experience, is its necessary instrument. And though accepting all that physical investigation can teach us, we can still maintain that its light does not illumine the central obscurity; and that, after all, it still remains true that round about the being of each man, as round about the being of God, clouds and darkness roll,

‘Life and thought have gone away,

Side by side,

Leaving door and window wide.’

That, and nothing more, is death--’My decease ... an entrance.’

Then, again, the combination of these two words suggests to us that the one act, in the same moment, is both departure and arrival. There is not a pin-point of space, not the millionth part of a second of time, intervening between the two. There is no long journey to be taken. A man in straits, and all but desperation, is recorded in the old Book to have said: ‘There is but a step between me and death.’ Ah, there is but a step between death and the Kingdom; and he that passes out at the same moment passes in.

I need not say a word about theories which seem to me to have no basis at all in our only source of information, which is Revelation; theories which would interpose a long period of unconsciousness--though to the man unconscious it be no period at all--between the act of departure and that of entrance. Not so do I read the teaching of Scripture: ‘This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise.’ We pass out, and as those in the vestibule of a presence-chamber have but to lift the curtain and find themselves face to face with the king, so we, at one and the same moment, depart and arrive.

Friends stand round the bed, and before they can tell by the undimmed mirror that the last breath has been drawn, the saint is ‘with Christ, which is far better.’ To depart is to be with Him. There is a moment in the life of every believing soul in which there strangely mingle the lights of earth and the lights of heaven. As you see in dissolving views, the one fades and the other consolidates. Like the mighty angel in the Apocalypse, the dying man stands for a moment with one foot on the earth and the other already laved and cleansed by the waters of that ‘sea of glass mingled with fire which is before the Throne,’ ‘Absent from the body; present with the Lord.’

Further, these two words suggest that the same act is emancipation from bondage and entrance into royalty.

‘My exodus.’ Israel came out of Egyptian servitude and dropped chains from wrists and left taskmasters cracking their useless whips behind them, and the brick kilns and the weary work were all done when they went forth. Ah, brethren, whatever beauty and good and power and blessedness there may be in this mortal life, there are deep and sad senses in which, for all of us, it is a prison-house and a state of captivity. There is a bondage of flesh; there is a dominion of the animal nature; there are limitations, like high walls, cribbing, cabining, confining us--the limitations of circumstance. There is the slavery of dependence upon this poor, external, and material world. There are the tyranny of sin and the subjugation of the nobler nature to base and low and transient needs. All these fetters, and the scars of them, drop away. Joseph comes out of prison to a throne. The kingdom is not merely one in which the redeemed man is a subject, but one in which he himself is a prince. ‘Have thou authority over ten cities.’ These are the Christian aspects of death.

II. Now note, secondly, the great fact on which this view of death builds itself.

I have already remarked that in one of my texts the Apostle seems to be thinking about Jesus Christ and His decease. The context also refers to another incident in his own life, when our Lord foretold to him that the putting off his tabernacle was to be ‘sudden,’ and added: ‘Follow thou Me.’

Taking these allusions into account, they suggest that it is the death of Jesus Christ--and that which is inseparable from it, His Resurrection--that changes for a soul believing on Him the whole aspect of that last experience that awaits us all. It is His exodus that makes ‘my exodus’ a deliverance from captivity and an entrance upon royalty.

I need not remind you, how, after all is said and done, we are sure of life eternal, because Jesus Christ died and rose again. I do not need to depreciate other imperfect arguments which seem to point in that direction, such as the instincts of men’s natures, the craving for some retribution beyond, the impossibility of believing that life is extinguished by the fact of physical death. But whilst I admit that a good deal may be said, and strong probabilities may be alleged, it seems to me that however much you may argue, no words, no considerations, moral or intellectual, can suffice to establish more than that it would be a very good thing if there were a future life and that it is probable that there is. But Jesus Christ comes to us and says, ‘Touch Me, handle Me; a spirit hath not flesh and bones as I have. Here I am. I was dead; I am alive for evermore.’ So then one life, that we know about, has persisted undiminished, apart from the physical frame, and that one Man has gone down into the dark abyss, and has come up the same as when He descended. So it is His exodus--and, as I believe, His death and Resurrection alone--on which the faith in immortality impregnably rests.

But that is not the main point which the text suggests. Let me remind you how utterly the whole aspect of any difficulty, trial, or sorrow, and especially of that culmination of all men’s fears--death itself--is altered when we think that in the darkest bend of the dark road we may trace footsteps, not without marks of blood in them, of Him that has trodden it all before us. ‘Follow thou Me,’ He said to Peter; and it should be no hard thing for us, if we love Him, to tread where He trod. It should be no lonely road for us to walk, however the closest clinging hands may be untwined from our grasp, and the most utter solitude of which a human soul is capable may be realised, when we remember that Jesus Christ has walked it before us.

The entrance, too, is made possible because He has preceded us. ‘I go to prepare a place for you.’ So we may be sure that when we go through those dark gates and across the wild, the other side of which no man knows, it is not to step out of ‘the warm precincts of the cheerful day’ into some dim, cold, sad land, but it is to enter into His presence.

Israel’s exodus was headed by a mummy case, in which the dead bones of their whilom leader were contained. Our exodus is headed by the Prince of Life, who was dead and is alive for evermore.

So, brethren, I beseech you, treasure these thoughts more than you do. Turn to Jesus Christ and His resurrection from the dead more than you do. I may be mistaken, but it seems to me that the Christianity of this day is largely losing the habitual contemplation of immortality which gave so much of its strength to the religion of past generations. We are all so busy in setting forth and enforcing the blessings of Christianity in its effects in the present life that, I fear me, we are largely forgetting what it does for us at the end, and beyond the end. And I would that we all thought more of our exodus and of our entrance in the light of Christ’s death and resurrection. Such contemplation will not unfit us for any duty or any enjoyment. It will lift us above the absorbed occupation with present trivialities, which is the bane of all that is good and noble. It will teach us ‘a solemn scorn of ills.’ It will set on the furthest horizon a great light instead of a doleful darkness, and it will deliver us from the dread of that ‘shadow feared of man,’ but not by those who, listening to Jesus Christ, have been taught that to depart is to be with Him.

III. Now I meant to have said a word, in the close of my sermon, about a third point--viz., the way of securing that this aspect of death shall be our experience, but your time will not allow of my dwelling upon that as I should have wished. I would only point out that, as I have already suggested, this context teaches us that it is His death that must make our deaths what they may become; and would ask you to notice, further, that the context carries us back to the preceding verses. ‘An entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly.’ We have just before read, ‘If these things be in you and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus

Christ'; and just before is the exhortation, 'giving all diligence, minister to your faith virtue.'

So the Apostle, by reiterating the two words which he had previously been using, teaches us that if death is to be to us that departure from bondage and entrance into the Kingdom, we must here and now bring forth the fruits of faith. There is no entrance hereafter, unless there has been a habitual entering into the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus Christ even whilst we are on earth. There is no entrance by reason of the fact of death, unless all through life there has been an entrance into rest by reason of the fact of faith.

And so, dear brethren, I beseech you to remember that it depends on yourself whether departing shall be arrival, and exodus shall be entrance. One thing or other that last moment must be to us all--either a dragging us reluctant away from what we would fain cleave to, or a glad departure from a foreign land and entrance to our home. It may be as when Peter was let out of prison, the angel touched him, and the chains fell from his hands, and the iron gate opened of its own accord, and he found himself in the city. It is for you to settle which of the two it shall be. And if you will take Him for your King, Companion, Saviour, Enlightener, Life here, 'the Lord shall bless your going out and coming in from this time forth and even for evermore.'

6) 2 Peter 2:1

2 Peter

THE OWNER AND HIS SLAVES

2Pe. 2:1.

The institution of slavery was one of the greatest blots on ancient civilisation. It was twice cursed, cursing both parties, degrading each, turning the slave into a chattel, and the master, in many cases, into a brute. Christianity, as represented in the New Testament, never says a word to condemn it, but Christianity has killed it. 'Make the tree good and its fruit good.' Do not aim at institutions, change the people that live under them and you change them. Girdle the tree and it will die, and save you the trouble of felling it. But not only does Christianity never condemn slavery, though it was in dead antagonism to all its principles, and could not possibly survive where its principles were accepted, but it also takes this essentially immoral relation and finds a soul of goodness in the evil thing, which serves to illustrate the relation between God and man, between Christ and us. It does with slavery as it does with war, uses what is good in it as illustrating higher truths, and trusts to the operation, the slow operation of its deepest principles for its destruction.

So, then, we have one Apostle, in his letters, binding on his forehead as a crown the designation, ‘Paul,’ a slave of ‘Jesus Christ,’ and we have in my text an expanded allusion to slavery. The word that is here rendered rightly enough, ‘Lord,’ is the word which has been transferred into English as ‘despot,’ and it carries with it some suggestion of the roughness and absoluteness of authority which that word suggests to us. It does not mean merely ‘master,’ it means ‘owner,’ and it suggests an unconditional authority, to which the only thing in us that corresponds is abject and unconditional submission. That is what Christ is to you and me; the Lord, the Despot, the Owner.

But we have not only owner and slave here; we have one of the ugliest features of the institution referred to. You have the slave-market, ‘the Lord that bought them,’ and because He purchased them, owns them. Think of the hell of miseries that are connected with that practice of buying and selling human flesh, and then estimate the magnificent boldness of the metaphor which Peter does not scruple to take from it here, speaking of the owner who acquired them by a price. And not only that, but slaves will run away, and when they are stopped, and asked who they belong to, will say they know nothing about him. And so here is the runaway’s denial, ‘denying the Lord that bought them.’ Now I ask you to think of these three points.

I. Here we have the Owner of us all.

I do not need, I suppose, to spend a moment in showing you that this relationship, which is laid down in our text, subsists between Jesus Christ and men, and it subsists between Jesus Christ and all men. For the people about whom the Apostle is saying that they have ‘denied the Lord that bought them’ can, by no construction, be supposed to be true Christians, but were enemies that had crept into the Church without any real allegiance to Jesus Christ, and were trying to wreck it, and to destroy His work. So there is no reference here to a little elected group out of the midst of humanity, who especially belonged to Jesus Christ, and for whom the price has been paid; but the outlook of my text in its latter portion is as wide as humanity. The Lord--that is, Jesus Christ--owns all men.

Let me expand that thought in one or two illustrations which may help to make it perhaps more vivid. The slave’s owner has absolute authority over him. You remember the occasion when a Roman officer, by reflecting upon the military discipline of the legion, and the mystical power that the commander’s word had to set all his men in obedient activity, had come to the conclusion that, somehow or other, this Jesus whom he desired to heal his servant had a similar power in the material universe, and that just as he, subordinate officer though he was, had yet--by reason of the fact that he was ‘under authority,’ and an organ of a higher authority--the power to say to his servant, ‘Go,’ and he would go; and to another one, ‘Come,’ and he would come; so this Christ had power to say to disease, ‘Depart,’ and it would depart; and to health, ‘Come,’ and it would come; and to all the material forces of the universe, ‘Do this,’ and obediently they would do it. That is the picture, in another region, of the relation which Jesus Christ bears to men, though, alas, it is not the picture of the relation which men bear to Christ. But to all of us He has the right to say, wherever we are, ‘Come,’ the right to say, ‘Go,’ the right to say, ‘Do,’ the right to say, ‘Be this, that, and the other thing.’

Absolute authority is His; what should be yours? Unconditional submission. My friend, it is no use your calling yourself a Christian unless that is your attitude. My sermon to-night has something else to do than simply to present truths to you. It has to press truths on you, and to appeal not only to your feelings, not only to your understandings, but to your wills. And so I come with this question: Do you, dear friend, day by day, yield to the absolute Master the absolute submission? And is that rebellious will--which is in you, as it is in us all--tamed and submitted so as that you can say, ‘Speak, Lord! Thy servant heareth’? Is it?

Further, the owner has the right, as part of that absolute authority of which I have been speaking, to settle without appeal each man’s work. In those Eastern monarchies where the king was surrounded, not by constitutional ministers, but by his personal slaves, he made one man a shoeblack or a pipe-bearer, and the man standing next to him his prime minister. And neither the one nor the other had the right to say a word. Jesus Christ has the right to regulate your life in all its details, to set you your tasks. Some of us will get what the world vulgarly calls ‘more important duties’; some will get what the world ignorantly calls more ‘insignificant’ ones. What does that matter? It was our Owner that set us to our work, and if He tells us to black shoes, let us black them with all the pith of our elbows, and with the best blacking and brushes we can find; and if He sets us to work, which people think is more important and more conspicuous, let us do that too, in the same spirit, and for the same end.

Again, the owner has the absolute right of possession of all the slave’s possessions. He gets a little bit of land in the corner of his master’s plantation, and grows his vegetables, yams, pumpkins, a leaf of tobacco or two, or what not, there. And if his master comes along and says, ‘These are mine,’ the slave has no recourse, and is obliged to accept the conditions and to give them up. So Jesus Christ claims ours as well as us--ours because He claims us--and whilst, on the other hand, the surrender of external good is incomplete without the surrender of the inward will, on the other hand the abandonment and surrender of the inward life is incomplete, if it be not hypocritical, without the surrender of external possessions. All the slave’s goods belonged to the owner.

And the owner has another right. He can say, ‘Take that man’s child and sell him in the market!’ and he can break up the family ties and separate husband and wife, and parent and child, and not a word can be said. Our Master comes, not with rough authority, but with loving, though absolute authority, and He sometimes untwines the hands that are most closely clasped, and says to the one of the two that have grown together in love and blessedness, ‘Come!’ and he cometh, and to the other ‘Go!’ and she goeth. Blessed they who can say, ‘It is the Lord! Let Him do what seemeth Him good.’

Now, dear friends, this absolute authority cannot be exercised by any man upon another man, and this unconditional submission, which Jesus Christ asks from us all, ought not to be rendered by any man to a man. It is a degradation when a human creature is put even in the external relation of slavery and servitude to another human creature, but it is an honour when Jesus Christ says to me, 'Thou art Mine,' and I say to Him, 'I am Thine, O Lord, truly I am Thy servant; Thou hast loosed my bonds.' In the old Saxon monarchies, some antiquarians tell us, the foundation of our modern nobility or aristocracy is found in that the king's servants became nobles. Jesus Christ's slave is everybody else's master. And it is the highest honour that a man can have to bow himself before that Lord, and to take His yoke upon him and learn of Him. So much, then, for my first point; now a word with regard to the second.

II. The sale, and the price.

'The Lord that bought them.' You perhaps remember other words which say, 'Ye are bought with a price; be not the servants of men'; also other words of this Apostle himself, in which he speaks, in his other letter, of being 'bought with the precious blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot.' Now notice, Christ's ownership of us does not depend on Christ's Divinity, which I suppose most of us believe, but on Christ's sacrifice for us. It is perfectly true that creation gives rights to the Creator. It is perfectly true that if we believe, as I think the New Testament teaches, that He, who before His name was Jesus was the Eternal Word of God, was the Agent of all Creation, and therefore has rights. But Christ's heart does not care for rights of that sort. It wants something far deeper, far tenderer, far closer than any such. And He comes to us with the language that is the language of love over all the universe, as between man and woman, as between man and man, as between man and God, as between God and man, upon His lips, and says, 'Thou must love Me, for I have died for thee.' Yes, brother; the only ground upon which absolute possession of a man can be rested is the ground of prior absolute surrender to Him. Christ must give Himself to me before He can ask me to give myself to Him. So all that was apparently harsh in the relationship, as I have been trying to set it forth to you, melts away and disappears. No owner ever owned a slave as truly as a loving woman owns her husband, or a loving husband his wife, because the ownership is the expression of perfect love on both sides. And that is the golden bond that binds men’s souls to Christ in a submission which, the more abject it is, the more elevating it is, just because ‘He loved me, and gave Himself for me.’

I do not dwell upon any cold theological doctrine of an Atonement, but I wish you to feel that deep in this great metaphor of our text there lie the two things; first, the price that was paid, and, second, the bondage from which the slave was delivered. He belonged to another master before Christ bought him for Himself. ‘He that committeth sin is the slave of sin.’ Some of you are your own despots, your own tyrants. The worse half of you has got the upper hand. The mutineers that ought to have been down under hatches, and shackled, have taken possession of the deck and clapped the captain and the officers, and all the sextants and log-books, away into a corner, and they are driving the ship--that is, you--on to the rocks, as hard as they can. A man that is not Christ’s slave has a far worse slavery in submitting to these tyrant sins that have tempted him with the notion of how fine it is to break through these old-womanly restraints and conventional fads of a narrow morality, and to have his fling, and do as he likes and follow nature. Ay, some of you have been doing that, and could write a far better commentary than any preacher ever wrote, out of your own experience, on the great words, ‘Whilst they promised them liberty, they themselves are the slaves of corruption!’ Young men, is that true about any of you--that you came here into Manchester to a situation, and lonely lodgings, comparatively innocent, and that somebody said, ‘Oh, do not be a milksop! come along and see life,’ and you thought it was fine to shake off the shackles that your poor old mother used to try to put upon your limbs? And what have you made of it? I will tell you what a great many young men have made of it--I have seen scores of them in the forty years that I have been preaching here: ‘His bones are full of the iniquity of his youth, which shall lie down with him in the dust.’

There is a slavery which is blessedness, and there is a slavery which at first is delightsome to the worst part of us, and afterwards becomes bitter and deadly. And it is the bondage of sin, the bondage to my worst self, the bondage to my indulged passions, the bondage to other men, the bondage to the material world. Jesus Christ speaks to each of us in His great sacrifice, by which He says to us, ‘The Son will make you free, and you shall be free indeed.’ The Lord has bought us. Have you let Him emancipate you from all your bondage? Dear friends, bear with me if I press again upon you, I pray God that it may ring in your ears till you can answer that question, Jesus Christ having bought me, do I belong to Him?

III. And now, lastly, notice the runaways.

Did it ever occur to you what a pathetic force there is in Peter’s picking out that word ‘denying’ as the shorthand expression for all sorts of sins? Who was it that thrice denied that he knew Him? That experience went very deep into the Apostle; and here, as I take it, is a most significant illustration of his penitent remembrance of his past life, all the more significant because of its reticence. The allusion is one that nobody could catch that did not know his past, but which to those who did know it was full of meaning and of pathos:--’Denying the Lord, as I did on that dismal morning, in the High Priest’s palace. I am speaking about it, for I know what it comes to, and the tears that will follow after.’

But what I desire to press upon you, dear friends, is just this: That in that view of the lives of people who are not Christians there is suggested to us the essential sinfulness, the black ingratitude, and the absolute folly of refusing to acknowledge the claims of Him to whom we belong, and who has bought us at such a price. You can do it by word, and perhaps some of us are not guiltless in that respect. You can do it by paring down the character and office of Jesus Christ, and minimising the importance of His sacrifice from the world’s sins, and thinking of Him, not as the Owner that bought us, but as the Master that teaches us. You can do it by cowardly hiding of your colours and being too shamefaced, too sensitive to the curled lip of the man that works at the next bench, or sits at the next desk, or the student that is beside you, or somebody else whose opinion you esteem, which prevents you from saying like a man, ‘I belong to Jesus Christ, and whomsoever other people serve, as for me, I am going to serve Him.’ And you can do it, and many of you are doing it, by simply ignoring His claims, refusing to turn to Him, not yielding up your will to Him, not turning your heart to Him, not setting your dependence upon Him. Is it not a shame that men, whose hearts will glow with thankfulness when another man, especially if he is a superior, comes to them with some gift, valuable, but nothing as compared with the transcendent gift that Christ brings, will yet let Him die for them and not care anything about Him? I can understand the vehement antagonism that some people have to Christ and Christianity, but what I cannot understand is the attitude of the immense mass of people that come to services like this, who profess to believe that Jesus Christ's love for them brought Him to the cross, and yet will not even pay the poor tribute of a little interest and a momentary inclination of heart towards Him. 'Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by,' that Jesus Christ died for you? He bought you for His own. Let me beseech you to 'yield yourselves' servants, slaves of Christ, and then you will be free, and you will hear Him say in the very depth of your hearts, 'Henceforth I call you not slaves, but friends.'

7) 2 Peter 3:14

2 Peter

BE DILIGENT

2Pe. 3:14.

As we pass the conventional boundary of another year, most of us, I suppose, cast glances into the darkness ahead. To those of us who have the greater part of our lives probably before us, the onward look will disclose glad possibilities. To some of us, who have life mostly behind us, the prospect will take 'a sober colouring from an eye that hath kept watch over man's mortality,' and there will be little on the lower levels to attract. My text falls in with the mood which the season fosters. It directs our onward look to a blessed certainty instead of a peradventure, and it deduces important practical consequences from the hope. These three things are in the words of our text: a clear vision that should fill the future; a definite aim for life, drawn from the vision; and an earnest diligence in the pursuit of that aim, animated by that hope.

Now these three--a bright hope, a sovereign purpose, and a diligent earnestness--are the three conditions of all noble life. They themselves are strength, and they will bring us buoyancy and freshness which will prolong youth into old age, and forbid anything to appear uninteresting or small.

So I ask you to look at these three points, as suggested by my text.

I. First, then, the clear hope which should fill our future.

‘Seeing that ye look for such things.’ What things? Peter has been drawing a very vivid and solemn picture of the end, in two parts, one destructive, the other constructive. Anticipating the predictions of modern science, which confirm his prophecy, he speaks of the dissolution of all things by fervent heat, and draws therefrom the lesson: ‘What manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?’

But that dissolution by fire is not, as people often call it, the ‘final conflagration.’ Rather is it a regenerating baptism of fire, from which ‘the heavens and the earth that now are’--like the old man in the fable, made young in the flame--shall emerge renewed and purified. The lesson from that prospect is the words of our text.

Now I am not going to dwell upon that thought of a new heaven and a new earth renewed by means of the fiery change that shall pass upon them, but simply to remark that there is a great deal in the teaching of both Old and New Testaments which seems to look in that direction. It is, at least, a perfectly tenable belief, and in my humble judgment is something more, that this earth, the scene of man’s tragedy and crime, the theatre of the display of the miracle of redeeming love, emancipated from the bondage of corruption, shall be renewed and become the seat of the blessed. They who dwell in it, and it on which they dwell pass through analogous changes, and as for the individuals, the ‘new creation’ is the old self purified by the fire of the Divine Spirit into incorruption and righteousness, so the world in which they live shall, in like manner, be ‘that new world which is the old,’ only having suffered the fiery transformation and been glorified thereby.

But passing from that thought, which, however interesting it may be as a matter of speculation, is of very small practical importance, notice, still further, the essential part of the hope which the Apostle here sets forth--viz., that that order of things towards which we may look is one permeable only for feet that have been washed and made clean. ‘Therein dwelleth righteousness.’ Righteousness there, of course, is the abstract for the concrete; the quality is put for the persons that exhibit it. And just as the condition of being at home in this present material world is the possession of flesh and blood, which puts creatures into relationships therewith, and just as it is impossible for a finite, bodyless spirit to move amongst, and influence, and be influenced by, the gross materialities of the heavens and the earth that now are, so is it impossible for anything but purity to be at rest in, or even to enter into that future world. ‘The gates’ of the New Jerusalem ‘shall not be closed day nor night’; but through the ever-open gates none can pass except they who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. There stand at the gates of that Paradise unseen, the repulsions of the angel with the flaming sword, and none can enter except the righteous. Light kills the creatures of the darkness.

‘How pure that soul must be

Which, placed within Thy piercing sight,

Shall shrink not, but with calm delight

Can live, and look on Thee!’

Thus, then, brethren, an order of things free from all corruption, and into which none can pass but the pure, should be the vision that ever flames before us. Peter takes it for granted that the anticipation of that future is an inseparable part of the Christian character. The word which he employs, by its very form, expresses that that expectance is habitual and continuous. I am afraid that a great many so-called Christians very seldom send their thoughts, and still less frequently their desires, onwards to that end. In all your dreams of the future, how much space has been filled by this future which is no dream? Have you, in these past days, and do you, as a matter of habitual and familiar occupation of your mind, let your eyes travel on beyond and above the low levels of earth and peradventures, to fix them on that certainty?

Opticians make glasses with three ranges, and write upon a little bar which shifts their eyepieces, ‘Theatre,’ ‘Field,’ ‘Marine.’ Which of the three is your glass set to? The turn of a button determines its range. You can either look at the things close at hand, or, if you set the eyepiece right and use the strongest, you can see the stars. Which is it to be? The shorter range shows you possibilities; the longer will show you certainties. The shorter range shows you trifles; the longer, all that you can desire. The shorter range shows you hopes that are destined to be outgrown and left behind; the longer, the far-off glories, a pillar of light which will move before you for ever. Oh, how many of the hopes that guided our course, and made our objective points in the past, are away down below the backward horizon! How many hopes we have outgrown, whether they were fulfilled or disappointed. But we may have one which will ever move before us, and ever draw our desires. The greater vision, if we were only wise enough to bring our lives habitually under its influence, would at once dim and ennoble all the near future.

Let us then, dear friends, not desecrate that wondrous faculty of looking before as well as after which God has given to us, by wasting it upon the nothings of this world, but heave it higher, and anchor it more firmly in the very Throne of God Himself. And for us let one solemn, blessed thought more and more fill with its substance and its light the else dim and questionable and insufficient future, and walk evermore as seeing Him who is invisible, and as hasting unto the coming of the day of the Lord.

II. Then, secondly, note the definite aim which this clear hope should impress upon life.

If you knew that you were going to emigrate soon, and spend all your life on the other side of the world, in circumstances the outlines of which you knew, you would be a fool if you did not set yourself to get ready for them. The more clearly we see and the more deeply we feel that future hope, which is disclosed for us in the words of my text, the more it will prescribe a dominant purpose which will give unity, strength, buoyancy, and blessedness to any life. ‘Seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent.’ For what? ‘That ye may be found of Him in peace, without spot, and blameless.’

Now mark the details of the aim which this great hope impresses upon life, as they are stated in the words of my text. Every word is weighty here. ‘That ye may be found.’ That implies, if not search, at least investigation. It suggests the idea of the discovery of the true condition, character, or standing of a man which may have been hidden or partially obscured before--and now, at last, is brought out clearly. With the same suggestion of investigation and discovery, the same phrase is employed in other places; as, for instance, when the Apostle Paul speaks about being ‘found naked,’ or as when he speaks about being ‘found in Him, not having mine own righteousness.’ So, then, there is some process of examination or investigation, resulting in the discovery, possibly for the first time, of what a man really is.

Then note, ‘Found in Him,’ or as the Revised Version reads it, ‘in His sight.’ Then Christ is the Investigator, and it is before ‘those pure eyes and perfect judgment’ that they have to pass, who shall be admitted into the new heavens and the new earth, ‘wherein dwelleth righteousness.’

Then mark what is the character which, discovered on investigation by Jesus Christ, admits there: ‘without spot and blameless.’ There must be the entire absence of every blemish, stain, or speck of impurity. The purer the white the more conspicuous the black. Soot is never so foul as when it lies on driven snow. They who enter there must have nothing in them akin to evil. ‘Blameless’ is the consequence of ‘spotless.’ That which in itself is pure attracts no censure, whether from the Judge or from the assessors and onlookers in His court.

But, further, these two words, in almost the same identical form--one of them absolutely the same, and the other almost so--are found in Peter’s other letter as a description of Jesus Christ Himself. He was a Lamb ‘without blemish and without spot.’ And thus the character that qualifies for the new heavens is the copy of us in Jesus Christ.

Still further, only those who thus have attained to the condition of absolute, speckless purity and conformity to Jesus Christ will meet His searching eye in calm tranquillity and be ‘found of Him in peace.’

The steward brings his books to his master. If he knows that there has been trickery with the figures and embezzlement, how the wretch shakes in his shoes, though he may stand apparently calm, as the master's keen eye goes down the columns! If he knows that it is all right, how calmly he waits the master's signature at the end, to pass the account! The soldiers come back with victory on their helmets, and are glad to look their captain in the face. But if they come back beaten, they shrink aside and hide their shame. If we are to meet Jesus Christ with quiet hearts, and we certainly shall meet Him, we must meet Him 'without spot and blameless.' The discovery, then, of what men truly are will be like the draining of the bed of a lake. Ah, what ugly, slimy things there are down in the bottom! What squalor and filth flung in from the houses, and covered over many a day by the waters! All that surface work will be drained off from the hearts of men. Shall we show slime and filth, or shall we show lovely corals and silver sands without a taint or a speck?

These are the details of the life's aim of a Christian man. And they may all be gathered up into one. The end which we should seek as sovereign and high above all others is the conformity of our character to Jesus Christ our Lord. Never mind about anything else; let us leave all in God's hands. He will do better for us than we can do for ourselves. Let us trust Him for the contingent future; and let us set ourselves to secure this, that, whether joy or sorrow, whether wealth or poverty, whether success or failure, whether sweet companionship or solitary tears be our lot for the rest of our lives, we may grow in grace, and in the knowledge and likeness of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Make that your aim, and freshness, buoyancy, enthusiasm, the ennobling of everything in this world, and the bending of all to be contributory of it, will gladden your days. Make anything else your aim, and you fail of your highest purpose, and your life, however successful, will be dreary and disappointed, and its end will be shame.

III. Lastly, notice the earnest diligence with which that aim should be pursued, in the light of that hope.

Peter is fond of using the word which is here translated 'be diligent.' Hard work, honest effort, continuous and persevering, is His simple recipe for all nobleness. You will find He employs it, for instance, at least three times in this letter, in such connections as, ‘Besides this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue,’ and so on through the whole glorious series; and again, ‘Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure.’ So, then, there is no mystery about the way of securing the aim; work towards it, and you will get it.

Now, of course, there are a great many other considerations to be brought in in reference to the Christian man’s means of becoming Christlike. We should have to speak of the gifts of a Divine Spirit, of the dependence upon God for it, and the like; but for the present purpose we may confine ourselves to Peter’s own prescription, ‘be diligent,’ and that will secure it. But then the word itself opens out into further meanings than that. It not only implies diligence: there may be diligence of a very mechanical and ineffective sort. The word also includes in its meaning earnestness, and it very frequently includes that which is the ordinary consequence of earnestness--viz., haste and economy of time.

So I venture, in closing, just to throw my remarks into three simple exhortations. Be in earnest in cultivating a Christlike character. Half-and-half Christians, like a great many of us, are of no use either to God or to men or to themselves. Dawdling and languid, braced up and informed by no earnestness of purpose, and never having had enthusiasm enough to set themselves fairly alight, they do no good and they come to nothing. ‘I would thou wert cold or hot.’ One thing sorely wanted in the average Christianity of this day is that professing Christians should give the motives which their faith supplies for earnest consecration due weight and power. Nothing else will succeed. You will never grow like Christ unless you are in earnest about it any more than you could pierce a tunnel through the Alps with a straw. It needs an iron bar tipped with diamond to do it. Unless your whole being is engaged in the task, and you gather your whole self together into a point, and drive the point with all your force, you will never get through the rock barrier that rises between you and the fair lands beyond. Be in earnest, or give it up altogether.

Then another thing I would venture to say is, Make it your business to cultivate a character like that of Jesus Christ. If you would go to the work of growing a Christ-like spirit one-hundredth part as systematically as you will go to your business to-morrow, and stick at it, there would be a very different condition of things in most of our hearts. No man becomes noble and good and like the dear Lord ‘by a jump,’ without making a systematic and conscious effort towards it.

I would say, lastly, Make haste about cultivating a Christlike character. The harvest is great, the toil is heavy, the sun is drawing to the west, the evening shadows are very long with some of us, the reckoning is at hand, and the Master waits to count your sheaves. There is no time to lose, brother; set about it as you have never done before, and say, ‘This one thing I do.’

And so let us not fill our minds with vain hopes which, whether they be fulfilled or not, will not satisfy us, but lift our eyes to and stay our anticipations on those glories beyond, as real as God is real, and as certain as His word is true. Let these hopes concentrate and define for us the aims of our life; and let the aims, clearly accepted and recognised, be pursued with earnestness, with ‘diligence,’ with haste, with the enthusiasm of which they, and they only, are worthy. Let us listen to our Master, ‘I must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh.’ And let us listen to the words of the servant, which reverse the metaphor, and teach the same lesson in a trumpet call which anticipates the dawn and rouses the sleeping soldiers: ‘The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.’

8) 2 Peter 3:18

2 Peter

GROWTH

2Pe. 3:18.

These are the last words of an old man, written down as his legacy to us. He was himself a striking example of his own precept. It would be an interesting study to examine these two letters of the Apostle Peter, in order to construct from them a picture of what he became, and to contrast it with his own earlier self when full of self-confidence, rashness, and instability. It took a lifetime for Simon, the son of Jonas, to grow into Peter; but it was done. And the very faults of the character became strength. What he had proved possible in his own case he commands and commends to us, and from the height to which he has reached, he looks upwards to the infinite ascent which he knows he will attain when he puts off this tabernacle; and then downwards to his brethren, bidding them, too, climb and aspire. His last word is like that of the great Roman Catholic apostle to the East Indies: ‘Forward!’ He is like some trumpeter on the battlefield who spends his last breath in sounding an advance. Immortal hope animates his dying injunction: ‘Grow! grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour.’

So I think we may take these words, dear friends, as the starting-point for some very plain remarks about what I am afraid is a neglected duty, the duty of growth in Christian character.

I. I begin, first, with a word or two about the direction which Christian growth ought to take.

Now those of you who use the Revised Version will see in it a very slight, but very valuable alteration. It reads there: ‘Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour.’ The effect of that alteration being to bring out more clearly that whilst the direction of the growth is twofold, the process is one. And to bring out more clearly, also, that both the grace and the knowledge have connection with Jesus Christ.

He is the Giver and the Author of the grace. He is the Object of the knowledge. The one is more moral and spiritual; the other, if we may so say, more intellectual; but both are realised by one act of progress, and both inhere in, and refer to, and are occupied with, and are derived from, Jesus Christ Himself.

Let us look a little more closely at this double direction, this bifurcation, as it were, of Christian growth. The tree, like some of our forest trees, in its normal progress, diverges into two main branches at a short distance upwards from the root.

First, we have growth in the ‘grace’ of Christ. Grace, of course, means, first, the undeserved love and favour which God in Jesus Christ bears to us sinful and inferior creatures; and then it means the consequence of that love and favour in the manifold spiritual endowments which in us become ‘graces,’ beauties, and excellences of Christian character. So then, if you are a Christian, you ought to be continually realising a deeper and more blessed consciousness of Christ’s love and favour as yours. You ought to be, if I may so say, nestling every day nearer and nearer to His heart, and getting more and more sure, and more and more happily sure, of more and more of His mercy and love to you.

And if you are a Christian you ought not only thus to be realising daily, with increasing certitude and power, the fact of His love, but you ought to be drinking in and deriving more and more every day of the consequences of that love, of the spiritual gifts of which His hands are full. There is open for each of us in Him an inexhaustible store of abundance. And if our Christian life is real and vigorous there ought to be in us a daily increasing capacity, and therefore a daily increasing possession of the gifts of His grace. There ought to be, in other words, also a daily progressive transformation into His likeness. It is ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus,’ not only in the sense that He is the Author and the Bestower of it to each of us, but also in the sense that He Himself possesses and exemplifies it. So that there is nothing mystical and remote from the experience of daily life in this exhortation: ‘Grow in grace’; and it is not growth in some occult theological virtue, or transcendent experience, but a very plain, practical thing, a daily transformation, with growing completeness and precision of resemblance, into the likeness of Jesus Christ; the grace that was in Him being transferred to me, and my character being growingly irradiated and refined, softened and ennobled by the reflection of the lustre of His.

This it is to ‘grow into the grace of our Lord and Saviour’; a deeper consciousness of His love creeping round the roots of my heart every day, and fuller possession of His gifts placed in my opening hand every day; and a continual approximation to the beauty of His likeness, which never halts nor ceases.

‘Grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour.’ The knowledge of a person is not the same as the knowledge of a creed or of a thought or of a book. We are to grow in the knowledge of Christ, which includes but is more than the intellectual apprehension of the truths concerning Him. He might turn the injunction into--'Increase your acquaintance with your Saviour.' Many Christians never get to be any more intimate with Him than they were when they were first introduced to Him. They are on a kind of bowing acquaintance with their Master, and have little more than that. We sometimes begin an acquaintance which we think promises to ripen into a friendship, but are disappointed. Circumstances or some want of congeniality which is discovered prevent its growth. So with not a few professing Christians. They have got no nearer Jesus Christ than when they first knew Him. Their friendship has not grown. It has never reached the stage where all restraints are laid aside and there is perfect confidence. 'Grow in the knowledge of your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.' Get more and more intimate with Him, nearer to Him, and franker and more cordial with Him day by day.

But there is another side to the injunction besides that. We are to grow in the grasp, the intellectual grasp and realisation of the truths which lie wrapped up and enfolded in Him. The first truths that a man learns when he becomes a Christian are the most important. The lesson that the little child learns contains the Omega as well as the Alpha of all truth. There is no word in all the gospel that is an advance on that initial word, the faith of which saves the most ignorant who trusts to it. We begin with the end, if I may say so, and the highest truth is the first truth that we learn. But the aspect which that truth bears to the man when, first of all, it dawns upon him, and he sees in it the end of his fears, the cleansing of his heart, the pardoning of his sins, his acceptance with God, is a very different thing from the aspect that it ought to wear to him, after, say forty years of pondering, of growing up to it, after years of experience have taught him. Life is the best commentary upon the truths of the gospel, and the experience teaches their depths and their power, their far-reaching applications and harmonies. So our growth in the knowledge of Jesus Christ is not a growing away from the earliest lessons, or a leaving them behind, but a growing up to and into them. So as to learn more fully and clearly all their infinite contents of grace and truth. The treasure put into our hands at first is discovered in its true preciousness as life and trial test its metal and its inexhaustibleness. The child's lesson is the man's lesson. All our Christian progress in knowledge consists in bringing to light the deep meaning, the far-reaching consequences of the fact of Christ's incarnation, death, and glory. 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' The same truth which shone at first a star in a far-off sky, through a sinful man's night of fear and agony, grows in brilliance as we draw nearer to it, until at last it blazes, the central Sun of the Universe, the hearth for all vital warmth, the fountain of all guiding light, the centre of all energy. Christ in His manhood, in His divinity, Christ in His cross, resurrection, and glory, is the object of all knowledge, and we grow in the knowledge of Him by penetrating more deeply into the truths which we have long ago learned, as well as by following them as they lead us into new fields, and disclose unsuspected issues in creed and practice.

That growth will not be one-sided; for grace and knowledge will advance side by side--the moral and spiritual keeping step with the intellectual, the practical with the theoretical. And that growth will have no term. It is growth towards an infinite object of our aspiration, imitation, and affection. So we shall ever approach and never surpass Jesus Christ. Such endless progress is the very salt of life. It keeps us young when physical strength decays. It flames, an immortal hope, to light the darkness of the grave when all other hopes are quenched in night.

II. Now, for a moment, look at another thought, viz., the obligation.

It is a command, that is to say, the will is involved. Growth is to be done by effort, and the fact that it is a command teaches us this, that we are not to take this one metaphor as if it exhausted the whole of the facts of the case in reference to Christian progress.

You would never think of telling a child to grow any more than you would think of telling a plant to grow, but Peter does tell Christian men and women to grow. Why? Because they are not plants, but men with wills, which can resist, and can either further or hinder their progress.

'Lo! in the middle of the wood,

The folded leaf is wooed from out the bud,

... and there

Grows green and broad, and takes no care.'

But that is not how we grow. 'In the sweat of thy brow,' with pain and peril, with effort and toil, and not otherwise, do men grow in everything but stature. And especially is it so in the Christian character. There are other metaphors that need to be taken into consideration as well as this of growth, with all its sweet suggestions of continuous, effortless, spontaneous advance.

The Christian progress is not only growth, it is warfare. The Christian progress is not only growth, it is a race. The Christian progress is not only growth, it is mortifying the old man. The Christian progress is not only growth, it is putting off the old man with his deeds and putting on the new! 'First the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear,' was never meant for a complete account of how the Christian life is perfected.

We are bidden to grow, and that command points to hindrances and resistance, to the need for effort and the governing action of our own wills.

The command is one sorely needed in the present state of our average Christianity. Our churches are full of monsters, specimens of arrested growth, dwarfs, who have scarcely grown since they were babes, infants all their lives. I come to you with a very plain question: Have you any more of Christ's beauty in your characters, any more of His grace in your hearts, any more of His truth in your minds than you had a year ago, ten years ago, or at that far-off period when some of you greyheaded men first professed to be Christians? Have you experienced so many things in vain? Have the years taught you nothing? Ah, brethren! for how many of us is it true: 'When for the time ye ought to be teachers ye have need that one teach you which be the first principles of the oracles of God'? 'Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour.'

And we need the command because all about us there are hindrances. There is the hindrance of an abuse of the evangelical doctrine of conversion, and the idea that springs up in many hearts that if once a man has 'passed from death unto life,' and has managed to get inside the door of the banqueting-hall, that is enough. And there are numbers of people in our Nonconformist communities especially, where that doctrine of conversion is most distinctly preached, whose growth is stopped by the abuse that they make of it in fancying if they have once exercised faith in Jesus Christ they may safely and sinlessly stand still. 'Conversion' is turning round. What do we turn round for? Surely, in order that we may travel on in the new direction, not that we may stay where we are. There is also the hindrance of mere indolence, and there is the hindrance arising from absorption in the world and its concerns.

If all your strength is going thither, there is none left to grow with. Many professing Christians take such deep draughts of the intoxicating cup of this world's pleasures that it stunts their growth. People sometimes give children gin in order to keep them from growing. Some of you do that for your Christian character by the deep draughts that you take of the Circean cup of this world's pleasures and cares.

And not unfrequently, some one favourite evil, some lust or passion, or weakness, or desire, which you have not the strength to cast out, will kill all aspirations and destroy all possibilities of growth; and will be like an iron band round a little sapling, which will confine it and utterly prevent all expansion. Is that the case with any of us? We all need--and I pray you suffer--the word of exhortation.

III. Now, again, consider the method of growth.

There are two things essential to the growth of animal life. One is food, the other is exercise; and your Christian character will grow by no other means.

Now as to the first. The true means by which we shall grow in Christian grace is by holding continual intercourse and communion with Jesus Christ. It is from Him that all come. He is the Fountain of Life; He gives the life, He nourishes the life, He increases the life. And whilst I have been saying, in an earlier part of this discourse, that we are not to expect an effortless growth, I must here say that we shall very much mistake what Christian progress requires if we suppose that the effort is most profitably directed to the cultivation of specific and single acts of goodness and purity. Our efforts are best when directed to keeping ourselves in union with our Lord.

The heart united to Him will certainly be advancing in all things fair and lovely and of good report. Keep yourselves in touch with Christ; and Christ will make you grow. That is to say, occupy heart and mind with Him, let your thoughts go to Him. Do you ever, from morning to night, on a week-day, think about your Master, about His truth, about the principles of His Gospel, about His great love to you? Keep your heart in union with Him, in the midst of the rush and hurry of your daily life. Are your desires turning to Him? Do they go out towards Him and feel after Him? It will take an effort to keep up the union with Him, but without the effort there will be no contact, and without the contact there will be no growth. As soon may you expect a plant, wrenched from the soil and shut out from the sunshine to grow, as expect any Christian progress in the hearts which are disjoined from Jesus Christ. But rooted in that soil, smiled upon by that sun, watered by the perpetual dew from His Heaven, we shall 'grow like the lily, and cast forth our roots like Lebanon. The secret of real Christian progress and the direction in which the effort of Christian progress can most profitably and effectually be made, is simply in keeping close to our Lord and Master. He is the food of the Spirit. 'I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.'

Communion with Christ includes prayer. Desire to grow will help our growth. We tend to become what we long to be. Desire which impels to effort will not be in vain if it likewise impels to prayer. We may have the answer to our petition for growth in set ways; we may be but partially conscious of the answer, nor know that our faces shine when we go among men. But certainly if we pray for what is in such accordance with His will as 'growth in grace' is, we shall have the petition that we desire. That longing to know Him better and to possess more of His grace, like the tendrils of some climbing plant, will always find the support round which it may twine, and by which it may ascend.

The other condition of growth is exercise. Use the grace which you have, and it increases. Practice the truth which you know, and many things will become clearer. The blacksmith's muscles are strengthened by wielding the forge-hammer, but unused they waste. The child grows by exercise. To him that hath--truly possesses with that possession which only use secures--shall be given.

Communion with Christ, including prayer, and exercise are the means of growth.

IV. Lastly, observe the solemn alternative to growth.

It is not a question of either growing or not growing, and there an end; but if you will look at the context you will see that the exhortation of my text comes in in a very significant connection. ‘Behold! beware, lest being led away ... ye fall from your own steadfastness.’ ‘But grow in grace.’ That is to say, the only preventive of falling away from steadfastness is continual progress. The alternative of advance is retrogression. There is no standing still upon the inclined plane. If you are not going up, gravity begins to act, and down you go. There must either be continual advance or there will be certain decay and corruption. As soon as growth ceases in this physiology disintegration commences. Just as the graces exercised are strengthened, so the graces unexercised decay. The slothful servant wraps his talent in a napkin, and buries it in the ground. He may try to persuade his Master and himself with ‘There Thou hast that is Thine’; but He will not take up what you buried. Rust and verdigris will have done their work upon the coin; the inscription will be obliterated and the image will be marred. You cannot bury your Christian grace in indolence without diminishing it. It will be like a bit of ice wrapped in a cloth and left in the sun, it will all have gone into water when you come to take it out. And the truth that you do not live by, whose relations and large harmonies and controlling power are not being increasingly realised in your lives; that truth is becoming less and less real, more and more shadowy, and ghostlike to you. Truth which is not growing is becoming fossilized. ‘The things most surely believed’ are often the things which have least power. Unquestioned truth too often lies ‘bedridden in the dormitory of the soul side by side with exploded error.’ The sure way to reduce your knowledge of Jesus Christ to that inert condition is to neglect increasing it and applying it to your daily life. There are men, in all churches, and there are some whole communions whose creeds are the most orthodox, and also utterly useless, and as near as possible nonentities, simply because the creed is accepted and shelved. If your belief is to be of any use to you, or to be held by you in the face of temptations to abandon it, you must keep it fresh, and oxygenated, so to say, by continual fresh apprehension of it and closer application of it to conduct. As soon as the stream stands, it stagnates; and the very manna from God will breed worms and stink. And Christian truth unpractised by those who hold it, corrupts itself and corrupts them.

So Peter tells us that the alternative is growth or apostasy. This decay may be most real and unsuspected. There are many, many professing Christians all ignorant that, like the Jewish giant of old, their strength is gone from them, and the Spirit of God departed. My brother, I beseech you, rouse yourself from your contented slothfulness. Do not be satisfied with merely having come within the Temple. Count nothing as won whilst anything remains to be won. There is a whole ocean of boundless grace and truth rolling shoreless there before you. Do not content yourselves with picking up a few shells on the beach, but launch out into the deep, and learn to know more and more of the grace and truth and beauty of your Saviour and your God.

But remember dead things do not grow. You cannot grow unless you are alive, and you are not alive unless you have Jesus Christ.

Have you given yourselves to Him? have you taken Him as yours? given yourselves to Him as His servants, subjects, soldiers? taken Him for yours as your Saviour, Sacrifice, Pattern, Inspirer, Friend? If you have, then you have life which will grow if you keep it in union with Him. Joined to Him, men are like a ‘tree that is planted by the rivers of water,’ which spreads its foliage and bears its fruit, and year after year flings a wider shadow upon the grass, and lifts a sturdier bole to the heavens. Separated from Him they are like the chaff, which has neither root nor life, and which cannot grow.

Which, my friend, are you?

1 John

1) 1 JOHN 1:7
2) 1 JOHN 2:7-8
3) 1 JOHN 2:14
4) 1 JOHN 2:17
5) 1 JOHN 2:17
6) 1 JOHN 2:20

7) 1 JOHN 3:1
8) 1 JOHN 3:2
9) 1 JOHN 3:3
10) 1 JOHN 3:7
11) 1 JOHN 4:10
12) 1 JOHN 4:16
13) 1 JOHN 4:17
14) 1 JOHN 4:18
15) 1 JOHN 4:19
16) 1 JOHN 5:4
17) 1 JOHN 5:18
18) 1 JOHN 5:19
19) 1 JOHN 5:20
20) 1 JOHN 5:21

1) 1 John 1:7

1 John

WALKING IN THE LIGHT

1Jn. 1:7.

John was the Apostle of love, but he was also a ‘son of thunder.’ His intense moral earnestness and his very love made him hate evil, and sternly condemn it; and his words flash and roll as no other words in Scripture, except the words of the Lord of love. In the immediate context he has been laying down what is to him the very heart of his message, that ‘God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.’ There are spots in the sun, great tracts of blackness on its radiant disc; but in God is unmingled, perfect purity. That being so, it is clear that no man can be in sympathy or hold communion with Him, unless he, too, in his measure, is light.

So, with fiery indignation, John turns to the people, of whom there were some, even in the primitive Church, who made claims to a lofty spirituality and communion with God, and all the while were manifestly living in the darkness of sin. He will not mince matters with them. He roundly says that they are lying, and the worst sort of lie--an acted lie: ‘They do not the truth.’ Then, with a quick turn, he opposes to these pretenders the men who really are in fellowship with God, and in my text lays down the principle that walking in the light is essential to fellowship with God. Only, in his usual fashion, he turns the antithesis into a somewhat different form, so as to suggest another aspect of the truth, and instead of saying, as we might expect for the verbal accuracy of the contrast, ‘If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with God,’ he says, ‘we have fellowship one with another.’ Then he adds a still further result of that walk, ‘the blood of Jesus cleanses from all sin.’

Now there are three things: walking in the light, which is the only Christian walk; the companions of those who walk in the light; and the progressive cleansing which is given.

I. Note this ‘Walking in the light,’ which is the only Christian walk.

In all languages, light is the natural symbol for three things: knowledge, joy, purity. The one ray is broken into its three constituent parts. But just as there are some surfaces which are sensitive to the violet rays, say, of the spectrum, and not to the others, so John’s intense moral earnestness makes him mainly sensitive to the symbolism which makes light the expression, not so much of knowledge or of joy, as of moral purity. And although that is not exclusively his use of the emblem, it is predominately so, and it is so here. To ‘walk in the light’ then, is, speaking generally, to have purity, righteousness, goodness, as the very element and atmosphere in which our progressive and changeful life is carried on.

Note, too, before I go further, that very significant antithesis: we ‘walk’; He is--God is in the light essentially, changelessly, undisturbedly, eternally; and the light in which He is, His ‘own calm home, His habitation from eternity,’ is light which has flowed out from Himself as a halo round the midnight moon. It is all one in substance to say God is in light, or, as the Psalmist has it, ‘He covered Himself with light as with a garment,’ and to say, ‘God is light.’

But, side by side with that changeless abiding in the perfect purity, which is inaccessible, the Apostle ventures to put, not in contrast only, but in parallel [as He is], our changing, effortful, active, progressive life in the light [God is]; we walk.

So, then, the essential of a Christian character is that the light of purity and moral goodness shall be as the very orb, in the midst of which it stands and advances. That implies effort, and it implies activity, and it implies progress. And we are only Christians in the measure in which the conscious activities of our daily lives, and the deepest energies of our inward being, are bathed and saturated with this love of, and effort after, righteousness. It is vain, says John, to talk about fellowship with God, unless the fellowship is rooted in sympathy with Him in that which is the very heart of his Being, the perfect light of perfect holiness. Test your Christianity by that.

Then, still further, there is implied in this great requirement of walking in the light, not only activity and effort, and progress and purity, but also that the whole of the life shall be brought into relation with, and shall be moulded after, the pattern of the God in whom we profess to believe. Religion, in its deepest meaning, is the aspiration after likeness to the god. You see it in heathenism. Men make their gods after their own image, and then the god makes the worshippers after his image. Mars is the god of the soldier, and Venus goddess of the profligate, and Apollo god of the musical and the wise, etc., and in Christianity the deepest thing in it is aspiration and effort after likeness to God. Love is imitation; admiration, especially when it is raised to the highest degree and becomes adoration, is imitation. And the man that lies before God, like a mirror in the sunshine, receives on the still surface of his soul--but not, like the mirror, on the surface only, but down into its deepest depths--the reflected image of Him on Whom he gazes. 'We all with unveiled face, mirroring glory, are changed into the same image.' So to walk in the light is only possible when we are drawn into it, and our feeble feet made fit to tread upon the radiant glory, by the thought that He is in the light. To imitate Him is to be righteous. So do not let us forget that a correct creed, and devout emotions, ay! and a morality which has no connection with Him, are all imperfect, and that the end of all our religion, our orthodox creed and our sweet emotions and inward feelings of acceptance and favour and fellowship, are meant to converge on, and to produce this--a life and a character which lives and moves and has its being in a great orb of light and purity.

But another thing is included in this grand metaphor of my text. Not only does it enjoin upon us effort and activity and progress in the light and the linking of all our purity with God, but also, it bids us shroud no part of our conduct or our character either from ourselves or from Him. Bring it all out into the light. And although with a penitent heart, and a face suffused with blushes, we have sometimes to say, ‘See, Father, what I have done!’ it is far better that the revealing light should shine down upon us, and like the sunshine on wet linen, melt away the foulness which it touches, than that we should huddle the ugly thing up in a corner, to be one day revealed and transfixed by the flash of the light turned into lightning. ‘He that doeth the truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest.’

II. So much, then, for my first point; the second is: The companions of the men that walk in the light.

I have already pointed out that the accurate, perhaps pedantically accurate, form of the antithesis would have been: ‘If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with God.’ But John says, first, ‘we have fellowship one with another.’ Underlying that, as I shall have to say in a moment, there is the other thought: ‘We have fellowship with God.’ But he deals with the other side of the truth first. That just comes to this, that the only cement that perfectly knits men to each other is their common possession of that light, and the consequent fellowship with God. There are plenty of other bonds that draw us to one another; but these, if they are not strengthened by this deepest of all bonds, the affinity of souls, that are moving together in the realm of light and purity, are precarious, and apt to snap. Sin separates men quite as much as it separates each man from God. It is the wedge driven into the tree that rends it apart. Human society with its various bonds is like the iron hoop that may be put around the barrel staves, giving them a quasi-unity. The one thing that builds men together into a whole is that each shall be, as it were, embedded in the rock which is the foundation, and the building will rise into a holy temple in the Lord. Sin separates; as the prophet confessed, ‘All we like sheep have gone astray, every one to his own way,’ and the flock is broken up into a multitude of scattered sheep. Social enthusiasts may learn the lesson that the only way by which brotherhood among men can become anything else than a name, and probably end, as it did in the great French Revolution, in ‘brothers’ making the catacombs of their brethren under the guillotine, is that it shall be the corollary from the Fatherhood of God. If we walk in the light, not otherwise, we have 'fellowship one with another.'

Then, still further, in this fellowship one with another, John presupposes the fellowship with God for each, which makes the possibility and the certainty of all being drawn into one family. He does not think it necessary to state, what is so plain and obvious, viz., that unless we are in sympathy with God, in our aspiration and effort after the light which is His home and ours, we have no real communion with Him. I said that sin separated man from man, and disrupted all the sweet bonds of amity, so that if men come into contact, being themselves in the darkness, they come into collision rather than into communion. A company of travellers in the night are isolated individuals. When the sun rises on their paths they are a company again. And in like manner, sin separates us from God, and if our hearts are turned towards, and denizens of, the darkness of impurity, then we have no communion with Him. He cannot come to us if we love the darkness. He

'Can but listen at the gate,

And hear the household jar within.'

The tide of the Atlantic feels along the base of iron-bound cliffs on our western shores, and there is not a crevice into which it can come. So God moves about us, but is without us, so long as we walk in darkness. So let us remember that no union with Him is possible, except there be this common dwelling in the light. Two grains of quicksilver laid upon a polished surface will never unite if their surfaces be dusted over with minute impurities, or if the surface of one of them be. Clean away the motes, and they will coalesce and be one. A film of sin separates men from God. And if the film be removed the man dwells in God, and God in him.

III. That brings me to my last point: The progressive cleansing of those who dwell in the light.

'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.' Now if you will notice the whole context, and eminently the words a couple of verses after my text, you will see that the cleansing here meant is not the cleansing of forgiveness, but the cleansing of purifying. For the two things are articulately distinguished in the ninth verse: ‘He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’ So, to use theological terms, it is not justification, but sanctification that is meant here.

Then there is another thing to be noticed, and that is that when the Apostle speaks here about the blood of Christ, he is not thinking of that blood as shed on the Cross, the atoning sacrifice, but of that blood as transfused into the veins, the source there of our new life. The Old Testament says that ‘the blood is the life.’ Never mind about the statement being scientifically correct; it conveys the idea of the time, which underlies a great deal of Old and New Testament teaching. And when John says the blood of Jesus cleanses from ‘all sin,’ he says just the same thing as his brother Paul said, ‘the law of the spirit of life in Jesus Christ makes me free from the law of sin and death.’ That is to say, a growing cleansing from the dominion and the power of sin is granted to us, if we have the life of Jesus Christ breathed into our lives. The metaphor is a very strong one. They tell us--I know nothing about the truth of it--that sometimes it has been possible to revive a moribund man by transfusing into his veins blood from another. That is a picture of the only way by which you and I can become free from the tyranny that dominates us. We must have the life of Christ as the animating principle of our lives, the spirit of Jesus emancipating us from the power of sin and death.

So you see, there are two aspects of Christ’s great work set before us under that one metaphor of the blood in its two-fold form, first, as shed for us sinners on the Cross; second, as poured into our veins day by day. That works progressive cleansing. It covers the whole ground of all possible iniquity. Pardon is much, purifying is more. The sacrifice on the Cross is the basis of everything, but that sacrifice does not exhaust what Christ does for us. He died for our sins, and lives for our sanctifying. He died for us, He lives in us. Because He died, we are forgiven; because He lives, we are made pure. Only remember John’s ‘if.’ The ‘blood of Jesus will progressively cleanse us until it has cleansed us from all sin,’ on condition that we ‘walk in the light,’ not otherwise. If the main direction of our lives is towards the light; if we seek, by aspiration and by effort, and by deliberate choice, to live in holiness, then, and not else, will the power of the life of Jesus Christ deliver us from the power of sin and death.

Now, my text presupposes that the people to whom it is addressed, and whom it concerns, have already passed from darkness into light, if not wholly, yet in germ. But for those who have not so passed, there is something to be said before my text. And John says it immediately; here it is, ‘If any man sin we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He is the propitiation for our sins; and not for our sins only, but for the whole world.’ So we have to begin with the blood shed for us, the means of our pardon, and then we have the advance of the blood sprinkled on us, the means of our cleansing. If by humble faith we take the dying Lord for our Saviour, and the channel of our forgiveness, we shall have the pardon of our sins. If we listen to the voice that says, ‘Ye were sometime darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord. Walk as children of the light,’ we shall have fellowship with the living Lord, and daily know more and more of the power of His cleansing blood, making us ‘meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.’

2) 1 John 2:7-8

1 John

THE COMMANDMENT, OLD YET NEW

1Jn. 2:7-8.

The simplest words may carry the deepest thoughts. Perhaps angels and little children speak very much alike. This letter, like all of John’s writing, is pellucid in speech, profound in thought, clear and deep, like the abysses of mid-ocean. His terms are such as a child can understand; his sentences short and inartificial: he does not reason, he declares; he has neither argument nor rhetoric, but he teaches us the deepest truths, and shows us that we get nearer the centre by insight than by logic.

Now the words that I have taken for my text are very characteristic of this Apostle’s manner. He has a great, wide-reaching truth to proclaim, and he puts it in the simplest, most inartificial manner, laying side by side two artless sentences, and stimulates us by the juxtaposition, leading us to feel after, and so to make our own, the large lessons that are in them. Let me, then, try to bring these out.

I. And the first one that strikes me is--'the word' is 'a commandment.'

Now, by 'the word' here the Apostle obviously means, since he speaks about it as that which these Asiatic Christians 'heard from the beginning,' the initial truth which was presented for their acceptance in the story of the life and death of Jesus Christ. That was 'the word' and, says he, just because it was a history it is a commandment; just because it was the Revelation of God it is a law. God never tells us anything merely that we may be wise. The purpose of all divine speech, whether in His great works in nature, or in the voices of our own consciences, or in the syllables that we have to piece together from out of the complicated noises of the world's history, or in this book, or in the Incarnate Word, where all the wandering syllables are gathered together into one word--the purpose of all that God says to men is primarily that they may know, but in order that, knowing, they may do; and still more that they may be. And so, inasmuch as every piece of religious knowledge has in it the capacity of directing conduct, all God's word is a commandment.

And, if that is true in regard to other revelations and manifestations that he has made of Himself, it is especially true in regard to the summing-up of all in the Incarnate Word, and in His words, and in the words that tell us of His life and of His death. So whatever truths there may be, and there are many, which, of course, have only the remotest, if any, bearing upon life and conduct, every bit of Christian truth has a direct grip upon a man's life, and brings with it a stringent obligation.

Now, the Revelation of God in Jesus Christ, 'the Word which ye heard from the beginning,' which, I suppose, would roughly correspond with what is told us in our four Gospels; the word which these Asiatic Christians heard at first, the good news that was brought to them in the midst of their gropings and peradventures, commanded, in the first place, absolute trust, the submission of the will as well as the assent of the understanding. But also it commanded imitation, for Jesus Christ was revealed to them, as He is revealed to us, as being the Incarnate realisation of the ideal of humanity;

and what He is, the knowledge that He is that, binds us to try to be in our turn.

And more than that, brethren, the Cross of Christ is a commandment. For we miserably mutilate it, and sinfully as well as foolishly limit its application and its power, if we recognise it only--I was going to say mainly--as being the ground of our hope and of what we call our salvation, and do not recognise it as being the obligatory example of our lives, which we are bound to translate into our daily practice. Jesus Christ Himself has told us that in many a fashion, never more touchingly and wondrously than when in response to the request of a handful of Greeks to see Him, He answered with the word which not only declared what was obligatory upon Him, but what was obligatory upon us all, and for the want of which all the great endowments of the Greek mind at last rotted down into sensuousness, when He said, ‘Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die it bringeth forth much fruit’ and then went on to say, ‘he that loveth his life shall lose it.’

So, then, brethren, ‘the word which ye heard at the beginning,’ the story of Christ, His life and His death, is a stringent commandment. Now, this is one of the blessings of Christianity, that all which was hard and hopeless, ministering to despair sometimes, as well as stirring to fierce effort at others, in the conception of law or duty as it stands outside us, is changed into the tender word, ‘if ye love Me, keep My commandments.’ If any man serve Me, let him ... ‘follow Me.’ It is a law; it is ‘the law of liberty.’ So you have not done all that is needful when you have accepted the teaching of Christ in the Scriptures and the teaching of the Scriptures concerning Christ. Nor have you done all that is needful when clasping Him, and clinging simply to His Cross, you recognise in it the means and the pledge of your acceptance with God, and the ground and anchor of all your hope. There is something more to be done. The Gospel is a commandment, and commandments require not only assent, not only trust, but practical obedience. The ‘old commandment’ is the ‘word which ye heard from the beginning.’

II. The old Christ is perpetually new.

The Apostle goes on, in the last words of my text, to say, ‘Which thing’ [viz., this combination of the old and the new] ‘is true in Him and in you.’ ‘True in Him’--that is to say, Christ, the old Christ that was declared to these Asiatic Christians as they were groping amidst the illusions of their heathenism, is perpetually becoming new as new circumstances emerge, and new duties are called for, and new days come with new burdens, hopes, possibilities, or dangers. The perpetual newness of the old Christ is what is taught here.

Suppose one of these men in Ephesus heard for the first time the story that away in Judea there had lived the manifestation of God in the flesh, and that He, in His wonderful love, had died for men, that they might be saved from the grip of their sins. And suppose that man barely able to see, had yet seen that much, and clutched at it. He was a Christian, but the Christ that he discerned when he first discerned Him through the mists, and the Christ that he had in his life and in his heart, after, say, twenty years of Christian living, are very different. The old Christ remained, but the old Christ was becoming new day by day, according to the new necessities and positions. And that is what will be our experience if we have any real Christianity in us. The old Christ that we trusted at first was able to do for us all that we asked Him to do, but we did not ask Him at first for half enough, and we did not learn at first a tithe of what was in Him. Suppose, for instance, some great ship comes alongside a raft with ship-wrecked sailors upon it, and in the darkness of the night transfers them to the security of its deck. They know how safe they are, they know what has saved them, but what do they know compared with what they will know before the voyage ends of all the reservoirs of power and stores of supplies that are in her? Christ comes to us in the darkness, and delivers us. We know Him for our Deliverer from the first moment, if we truly have grasped Him. But it will take summering and wintering with Him, through many a long day and year, before we can ever have a partially adequate apprehension of all

that lies in Him.

And what will teach us the depths of Christ, and how does He become new to us? Well, by trusting Him, by following Him, and by the ministry of life. Some of us, I have no doubt, can look back upon past days when sorrow fell upon us, blighting and all but crushing; and then things that we had read a thousand times in the Bible, and thought we had believed, blazed up into a new meaning, and we felt as if we had never understood anything about them before. The Christ that is with us in the darkness, and whom we find able to turn even it, if not into light, at least into a solemn twilight not unvisited by hopes, that Christ is more to us than the Christ that we first of all learnt so little to know. And life’s new circumstances, its emerging duties, are like the strokes of the spade which clears away the soil, and discloses the treasure in all its extent which we purchased when we bought that field. We buy the treasure at once, but it takes a long time to count it. The old Christ is perpetually the new Christ.

So, brethren, Christian progress consists not in getting away from the original facts, the elements of the Gospel, but it consists in penetrating more deeply into these, and feeling more of their power and their grasp. All Euclid is in the definitions and axioms and postulates at the beginning. All our books are the letters of the alphabet. And progress consists, not in advancing beyond, but in sinking into, that initial truth, ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself.’

I might say a word here as to another phase of this perpetual newness of the old Christ--viz., in His adaptation to deal with all the complications and perplexities and problems of each successive age. It has taken the Church a long, long time to find out and to formulate, rightly or wrongly, what it has discovered in Jesus. The conclusions to be drawn from the simple Gospel truth, the presuppositions on which it rests, require all the efforts of all the Church through all the ages, and transcend them all. And I venture to say, though it may sound like unsupported dogma, that for this generation’s questionings, social, moral, and political, the answer is to be found in Him. He, and He only, will interpret each generation to itself, and will meet its clamant needs. There is none other for the world to-day but the old Christ with the new aspect which the new conditions require.

Did it ever strike you how remarkable it is, and, as it seems to me, of how great worth as an argument for the truth of Christianity it is, that Jesus Christ comes to this, as to every generation, with the air of belonging to it? Think of the difference between the aspect which a Plato or a Socrates presents to the world to-day, and the aspect which that Lord presents. You do not need to strip anything off Him. He committed Himself to no statements which the progress of thought or knowledge has exploded. He stands before the world to-day fitting its needs as closely as He did those of the men of His own generation. The old Christ is the new Christ.

III. Lastly, in the Christian life the old commandment is perpetually new.

‘Which thing is true ... in you.’ That is to say, ‘the commandment which ye received at the beginning,’ when ye received Christ as Saviour, has in itself a power of adapting itself to all new conditions as they may emerge, and will be felt increasingly to grow stringent, and increasingly to demand more entire conformity, and increasingly to sweep its circle round the whole of human life. For this is the result of all obedience, that the conception of duty becomes more clear and more stringent. ‘If any man will do His will’ the reward shall be that he will see more and more the altitude of that will, the length and breadth and depth and height of the possible conformity of the human spirit to the will of God. And so as we advance in obedience we shall see unreached advances before us, and each new step of progress will declare more fully how much still remains to be accomplished. In us the ‘old commandment’ will become ever new.

And not only so, but perpetually with the increasing sweep and stringency of the obligation will be felt an increasing sense of our failure to fulfil it. Character is built up, for good or for evil, by slow degrees. Conscience is quickened by being listened to, and stifled by being neglected. A little speck of mud on a vestal virgin’s robe, or on a swan’s plumage, will be conspicuous, while a splash twenty times the size will pass unnoticed on the rags of some travel-stained wayfarer. The purer we become, the more we shall know ourselves to be impure.

Thus, my brother, there opens out before us an endless course in which all the blessedness that belongs to the entertaining and preservation of ancient convictions, lifelong friends, and familiar truths, and all the antithetical blessedness that belongs to the joy of seeing, rising upon our horizon as some new planet with lustrous light, will be united in our experience. We shall at once be conservative and progressive; holding by the old Christ and the old commandment, and finding that both have in them endless novelty. The trunk is old; every summer brings fresh leaves. And at last we may hope to come to the new Jerusalem, and drink the new wine of the Kingdom, and yet find that the old love remains, and that the new Christ, whose presence makes the new heavens and the new earth, is ‘the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever,’ the old Christ whom, amid the shadows of earth, we tried to love and copy.

3) 1 John 2:14

1 John

YOUTHFUL STRENGTH

1Jn. 2:14.

‘What am I going to be?’ is the question that presses upon young people stepping out of the irresponsibilities of childhood into youth. But, unfortunately, the question is generally supposed to be answered when they have fixed upon a trade or profession. It means, rightly taken, a great deal more than that. ‘What am I going to make of myself?’ ‘What ideal have I before me, towards which I constantly press?’ is a question that I would fain lay upon the hearts of all that now hear me. For the misery and the reason of the failure of so many lives is simply that people have never fairly looked that question in the face and tried to answer it, but drift and drift, and let circumstances determine them. And, of course, in a world like this, such people are sure to turn out what such an immense number of people do turn out, failures as far as all God’s purposes with humanity are concerned. The absence of a clear ideal is the misery and the loss of all young people who do not possess it.

So here in my text is an old man’s notion of what young men ought to be and may be. ‘Ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one.’

So said the aged John to some amongst his hearers in these corrupt Asiatic cities. It was not merely a fair ideal painted upon vacancy, but it was a portrait of actual young Christians in these little Asiatic churches. And I would fain have some of you take this realised ideal for yours and see to it that your lives be conformed to it.

There are three points here. The Apostle, first of all, lays his finger upon the strength, which is something more than mere physical strength, proper to youth. Then he lets us see the secret source of that strength: ‘Ye have the word of God abiding in you.’ And then he shows the field on which it should be exercised, and the victory which it secures: ‘And ye have overcome the wicked one.’ Now let me touch upon these three points briefly in succession.

I. First, then, note here the strength which you young people ought to covet and to aim at.

It is not merely the physical strength proper to their age, nor the mere unworn buoyancy and vigour which sorrows and care and responsibilities have not thinned and weakened. These are great and precious gifts. We never know how precious they are until they have slipped away from us. These are great and precious gifts, to be preserved as long as may be, by purity and by moderation, and to be used for high and great purposes. But the strength that is in thews and muscles is not the strength that the Apostle is speaking about here, nor anything that belongs simply to the natural stage of your development, whether it be purely physical or purely mental. Samson was a far weaker man than the poor little Jew ‘whose bodily presence was weak and his speech contemptible,’ and who all his days carried about with him that ‘thorn in the flesh.’ It is not your body that is to be strong, but yourselves.

Now the foundation of all true strength lies here, in a good, strong will. In this world, unless a man has learned to say ‘No!’ and to say it very decidedly, and to stick to it, he will never come to any good. Two words contain the secret of noble life: ‘Resist!’ and ‘Persist!’ And the true strength of manhood lies in this mainly, that, in spite of all antagonisms, hindrances, voices, and things that array themselves against you, having greatly resolved, you do greatly do what you have resolved, and having said ‘I will!’ let neither men nor devils lead you to say, ‘I will not.’ Depend upon it, that to be weak in this direction is to be weak all through. Strong passions make weak men. And a strong will is the foundation, in this wicked and antagonistic world in which we live, of all real strength.

But then the strength that I would have you seek, and strive to cultivate, must be a strength of will founded upon strong reason. Determination unenlightened is obstinacy, and obstinacy is weakness. A mule can beat you at that: ‘Be ye not as the mule, which have no understanding.’ A determination which does not take into its view all the facts of the case, nor is influenced by these, has no right to call itself strength. It is only, to quote a modern saying--I know not whether true of the person to whom it was originally applied or no--is ‘only a lath painted to look like iron.’ Unintelligent obstinacy is folly, like the conduct of some man who sticks to his pick and his task in a quarry after the bugle has warned him of an impending explosion, which will blow him to atoms.

But that is not all. A strong will, illuminated by a strong beam of light from the understanding, must be guided and governed by a strong hand put forth by Conscience. ‘I should like’ is the weakling’s motto. ‘I will’ may be an obstinate fool’s motto. ‘I ought, therefore, God helping me, and though the devil hinders me, I will,’ is a man’s. Conscience is king. To obey it is to be free; to neglect it is to be a slave.

Is not this a better ideal for life than gathering any outward possessions, however you may succeed therein? A thousand things will have to be taken into account, and may help or may hinder outward prosperity and success. But nobody can hinder you working at your character and succeeding in making it what it ought to be; and to form character is the end of life. ‘To be weak is miserable, doing or suffering.’ Ay! that is true, though Milton put it into the devil’s mouth. And there is only one strength that will last, ‘for even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fail.’ But the strength of a fixed and illuminated and conscience-guided will, which governs the man and is governed by God, shall never faint or grow weak. This is the strength which we should seek, and which I ask you to make the conscious aim of your lives.

II. Now note, secondly, how to get it.

‘Ye are strong, and the Word of God abideth in you.’ Those young Asiatic Christians, that John had in his eye, had learned the secret and the conditions of this strength; and not only in limb and sinew, or in springy and elastic buoyancy of youthful, mental, and spiritual vigour were they strong, but they were so because ‘the Word of God abode in them.’ Now, there are two significations of that great expression, both of them frequent in John’s Gospel, and both of them, I think, transferred to this Epistle, each of which may yield us a word of counsel. By ‘the Word of God,’ as I take it, is meant--perhaps I ought to say both, but, at all events, either--the revelation of God’s truth in Holy Scripture, or the personal revelation of the will and nature of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Whichever of these two meanings--and at bottom they come to be one--we attach to this expression, we draw from them an exhortation. Let me put this very briefly.

Let me say to you, then, if you want to be strong, let Scripture truth occupy and fill and be always present to your mind. There are powers to rule and to direct all conduct, motive powers of the strongest character in these great truths of God’s revelation. They are meant to influence a man in all his doings, and it is for us to bring the greatest and solemnest of them to bear on the smallest things of our daily life. Suppose, now, that you go to your work, and some little difficulty starts up in your path, or some trivial annoyance ruffles your temper, or some lurking temptation is suddenly sprung upon you. Suppose your mind and heart were saturated with God’s truth, with the great thoughts of His being, of His love, of His righteousness, of Christ’s death for you, of Christ’s presence with you, of Christ’s guardianship over you, of Christ’s present will that you should walk in His ways, of the bright hopes of the future, and the solemn vision of that great White Throne and the retribution that streams thence, do you think it would be possible for you to fall into sin, to yield to temptation, to be annoyed by any irritation or bother, or overweighted by any duty? No! Whosoever lives with the thoughts that God has given us in His Word familiar to His mind and within easy reach of His hand, has therein an armlet against all possible temptation, a test that will unveil the hidden corruption in the sweetest seductions, and a calming power that will keep his heart still and collected in the midst of agitations. If the Word of God in that lower sense of the principles involved in the gospel of Jesus Christ, dwell in your hearts, the fangs are taken out of the serpent. If you drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt you, and you will ‘be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.’

Bring the greatest truths you can find to bear on the smallest duties, and the small duties will grow great to match the principles by which they are done. Bring the laws of Jesus Christ down to the little things, for, in the name of common sense, if our religion is not meant to regulate trifles, what is it meant to regulate? Life is made up of trifles. There are half a dozen crises in the course of your life, but there are a thousand trivial things in the course of every day. It would be a poor kind of regulating principle that controlled the crises, and left us alone to manage with the trifles the best way we could.

But in order that there shall be this continual operation of the motives and principles involved in the gospel upon our daily lives, we must have them very near our hand, ready to be laid hold of. The soldier that would march through an enemy’s country, having left his gun in the hands of some camp follower, would be very likely to be shot before he got his gun. I remember going through the Red Sea; at the mouth of it where the entrance is narrow, and the currents run strong, when the ship approaches the dangerous place, the men take their stations at appointed places, and the ponderous anchors are loosened and ready to be dropped in an instant if the swirl of the current sweeps the ship into dangerous proximity to the reef. It is no time to cut the lashings of the anchors when the keel is grating on the coral rocks. And it is no time to have to look about for our weapons when the sudden temptation leaps upon us like a strong man armed. You must have them familiar to you by devout meditation, by frequent reflection, prayer, study of God’s Word, if they are to be of any use to you at all. And I am afraid that about the last book in the world that loads of young men and women think of sitting down to read, systematically and connectedly, is the Bible. You will read sermons and other religious books; you will read newspapers, pamphlets, novels; but the Scripture, in its entirety, is a strange book to myriads of men who call themselves Christians. And so they are weak. If you want to be strong, ‘let the Word of God abide in your hearts.’

And then if we take the other view, which at bottom is not another, of the meaning of this phrase, and apply it rather to the personal word, Jesus

Christ Himself, that will yield us another exhortation, and that is, let Jesus Christ into your hearts and keep Him there, and He will make you strong. I believe that it is no piece of metaphor or an exaggerated way of putting the continuance of the influence of Christ's example and Christ's teaching upon men's hearts and minds, when He tells us that 'if any man open the door He will come in and sup with him.' I want to urge the one thought on you that it is possible, in simple literal fact, for that Divine Saviour, who was 'in Heaven' whilst He walked on earth, and walks on earth to-day when He has returned to His native Heaven, to enter into my spirit and yours, and really to abide within us, the life of our lives, 'the strength of our hearts, and our portion for ever.' The rest of us can render help to one another by strength ministered from without; Jesus Christ will come into your hearts, if you let Him, in His very sweetness and omnipotence of power, and will breathe His own grace into your weakness, strengthening you as from within. Others can help you from without, as you put an iron band round some over-weighted, crumbling brick pillar in order to prevent it from collapsing, but He will pass into us as you may drive an iron rod up through the centre of the column, and make it strong inside, and we shall be strong if Jesus Christ dwells within us. Open the door, dear young friends; let Christ come into your hearts, which He will do if you do not hinder Him, and if you ask Him. Trust Him with simple reliance upon Him for everything. Faith is 'the door'; the door is nothing of itself, but when it is opened it admits the guest. So do you let that Master come and abide, and you will hear Him say to you, as He said of old, 'Child! My grace is sufficient.' How modest He is. Sufficient!--an ocean enough to fill a thimble! 'My grace is sufficient for thee; and My strength is made perfect in weakness.'

III. Now, lastly, notice the field on which the strength is to be exercised, and the victory which it secures. 'Ye have overcome the wicked one.'

There is a battle for us all, on which I need not dwell, the conflict with evil around and with evil within, and with the prince of the embattled legions of the darkness, whom the New Testament has more clearly revealed to us. You young people have many advantages in the conflict; you have some special disadvantages as well. You have strong passions, you have not much experience, you do not know how bitter the dregs are of the cup whose foaming bubbles look so attractive, and whose upper inch tastes so sweet.

But on the other hand you have not yet contracted habits that it is misery to indulge in, and, as it would seem, impossible to break, and the world is yet before you.

You cannot begin too soon to choose your side. And here is the side on which alone victory is possible for a man--the side of Jesus Christ, who will teach your hands to war and your fingers to fight.

Notice that remarkable phrase, ‘Ye have overcome the wicked one.’ He is talking to young Christians before whom the battle may seem to lie, and yet He speaks of their conquest as an accomplished fact, and as a thing behind them. What does that mean? It means this, that if you will take service in Christ’s army, and by His grace resolve to be His faithful soldier till your life’s end, that act of faith, which enrols you as His, is itself the victory which guarantees, if it be continued, the whole conquest in time.

There used to be an old superstition that--

‘Who sheds the foremost foeman’s life

His party conquers in the strife’;

and whosoever has exercised, however imperfectly and feebly, the faith in Jesus Christ the Lord has therein conquered the devil and all his works, and Satan is henceforth a beaten Satan, and the battle, in essence, is completed even in the act of its being begun.

‘This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith’; not only because our confidence in Jesus Christ is the blowing of the bugle that summons to warfare and shakes off the tyrant’s yoke, but it is also the means by which we join ourselves to Him who has overcome, and make His victory ours. He has fought our antagonist in the wilderness once, in Gethsemane twice, on the Cross thrice; and the perfect conquest in which Jesus bound the strong man and spoiled his goods may become, and will become, your conquest, if you wed yourselves to that dear Lord by simple faith in Him.

What a priceless thing it is that you may begin your independent manhood with a conquest that will draw after it ultimate and supreme victory. You will still have to fight, but you will have only to fight detachments. If you trust yourselves to Jesus Christ you have conquered the main body of the army, and it is only the stragglers that you will have to contend with hereafter. He that loves Jesus, and has given himself to Him, has pinned the dragon to the ground by its head, and though it may 'swinge the scaly horror of its folded tail,' and twine its loathly coils around him, yet he has conquered, and he is conquering, and he will conquer. Only let him hold fast by the hand which brings strength into him by its touch.

Will you, dear young friends, take service in this army? Do you want to be weak or strong? Do you want your lives to be victorious whatever may happen to them in the way of outward prosperity or failure? Then give yourselves to this Lord. His voice calls you to be His soldiers. He will cover your heads in the day of battle. He will strengthen you 'with might by His Spirit in the inner man.' He will hide His Word in your heart that you offend not against Him. He will dwell Himself within you to make you strong in your extremest weakness and victorious over your mightiest foe; and in that sign you will conquer and 'be more than conquerors through Him that loved you.'

Oh, I pray that you may ask yourselves the question, 'What am I going to be?' and may answer it, 'I am going to be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might'; and to overcome, as He also hath overcome, the world and the flesh and the devil.

4) 1 John 2:17

Ecclesiastes

WHAT PASSES AND WHAT ABIDES

Ecc. 1:4. - 1Jn. 2:17.

A great river may run through more than one kingdom, and bear more than one name, but its flow is unbroken. The river of time runs continuously, taking no heed of dates and calendars. The importance that we attach to the beginnings or endings of years and centuries is a sentimental illusion, but even an illusion that rouses us to a consciousness of the stealthy gliding of the river may do us good, and we need all the helps we can find to wise retrospect and sober anticipation. So we must let the season colour our thoughts, even whilst we feel that in yielding to that impulse we are imagining what has no reality in the passing from the last day of one century to the first day of another.

I do not mean to discuss in this sermon either the old century or the new in their wider social and other aspects. That has been done abundantly. We shall best do our parts in making the days, and the years, and the century what they should be, if we let the truths that come from these combined texts sink into and influence our individual lives. I have put them together, because they are so strikingly antithetical, both true, and yet looking at the same facts from opposite points of view, But the antithesis is not really so complete as it sounds at first hearing, because what the Preacher means by 'the earth' that 'abideth for ever' is not quite the same as what the Apostle means by the 'world' that 'passes' and the 'generations' that come and go are not exactly the same as the men that 'abide for ever.' But still the antithesis is real and impressive. The bitter melancholy of the Preacher saw but the surface; the joyous faith of the Apostle went a great deal deeper, and putting the two sets of thoughts and ways of looking at man and his dwelling-place together, we get lessons that may well shape our individual lives.

So let me ask you to look, in the first place, at-

I. The sad and superficial teaching of the Preacher.

Now in reading this Book of Ecclesiastes-which I am afraid a great many people do not read at all-we have always to remember that the wild things and the bitter things which the Preacher is saying so abundantly through its course do not represent his ultimate convictions, but thoughts that he took up in his progress from error to truth. His first word is: 'All is vanity!' That conviction had been set vibrating in his heart, as it is set vibrating in the heart of every man who does as he did, viz., seeks for solid good away from God. That is his starting-point. It is not true. All is not vanity, except to some *blase* cynic, made cynical by the failure of his voluptuousness, and to whom ‘all things here are out of joint,’ and everything looks yellow because his own biliary system is out of order. That is the beginning of the book, and there are hosts of other things in the course of it as one-sided, as cynically bitter, and therefore superficial. But the end of it is: ‘Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter; fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.’ In his journey from the one point to the other my text is the first step, ‘One generation goeth, and another cometh: the earth abideth for ever.’

He looks out upon humanity, and sees that in one aspect the world is full of births, and in another full of deaths. Coffins and cradles seem the main furniture, and he hears the tramp, tramp, tramp of the generations passing over a soil honeycombed with tombs, and therefore ringing hollow to their tread. All depends on the point of view. The strange history of humanity is like a piece of shot silk; hold it at one angle, and you see dark purple, hold at another, and you see bright golden tints. Look from one point of view, and it seems a long history of vanishing generations. Look to the rear of the procession, and it seems a buoyant spectacle of eager, young faces pressing forwards on the march, and of strong feet treading the new road. But yet the total effect of that endless procession is to impress on the observer the transiency of humanity. And that wholesome thought is made more poignant still by the comparison which the writer here draws between the fleeting generations and the abiding earth. Man is the lord of earth, and can mould it to his purpose, but it remains and he passes. He is but a lodger in an old house that has had generations of tenants, each of whom has said for a while, ‘It is mine’; and they all have drifted away, and the house stands. The Alps, over which Hannibal stormed, over which the Goths poured down on the fertile plains of Lombardy, through whose passes mediaeval emperors led their forces, over whose summits Napoleon brought his men, through whose bowels this generation has burrowed its tunnels, stand the same, and smile the same amid their snows, at the transient creatures that have crawled across them. The primrose on the rock blooms in the same place year after year, and nature and it are faithful to their covenant, but the poet’s eyes that fell upon them are sealed with dust. Generations have gone, the transient flower remains. ‘One generation cometh and another goeth,’ and the tragedy is made more tragical because the stage stands unaltered, and ‘the earth abides for ever.’ That is what sense has to say-’the foolish senses'-and that is all that sense has to say. Is it all that can be said? If it is, then the Preacher's bitter conclusion is true, and 'all is vanity and chasing after wind.'

He immediately proceeds to draw from this undeniable, but, as I maintain, partial fact, the broad conclusion which cannot be rebutted, if you accept what he has said in my text as being the sufficient and complete account of man and his dwelling-place. If, says he, it is true that one generation comes and another goes, and the earth abides for ever, and if that is all that has to be said, then all things are full of labour. There is immense activity, and there is no progress; it is all rotary motion round and round and round, and the same objects reappear duly and punctually as the wheel revolves, and life is futile. Yes; so it is unless there is something more to be said, and the life that is thus futile is also, as it seems to me, inexplicable if you believe in God at all. If man, being what he is, is wholly subject to that law of mutation and decay, then not only is he made 'a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death,' but he is also inferior to that persistent, old mother-earth from whose bosom he has come. If all that you have to say of him is, 'Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,' then life is futile, and God is not vindicated for having produced it.

And there is another consequence that follows, if this is all that we have got to say. If the cynical wisdom of Ecclesiastes is the ultimate word, then I do not assert that morality is destroyed, because right and wrong are not dependent either upon the belief in a God, or on the belief in immortality. But I do say that to declare that the fleeting, transient life of earth is all does strike a staggering blow at all noble ethics and paralyses a great deal of the highest forms of human activity, and that, as has historically been the case, so on the large scale, and, speaking generally, it will be the case, that the man whose creed is only 'To-morrow we die' will very speedily draw the conclusion, 'Let us eat and drink,' and sensuous delights and the lower side of his nature will become dominant.

So, then, the Preacher had not got at the bottom of all things, either in his initial conviction that all was vanity, or in that which he laid down as the first step towards establishing that, that man passes and the earth abides.

There is more to be said; the sad, superficial teaching of the Preacher needs to be supplemented.

Now turn for a moment to what does supplement it.

II. The joyous and profounder teaching of the Apostle.

The cynic never sees the depths; that is reserved for the mystical eye of the lover. So John says: ‘No, no; that is not all. Here is the true state of affairs: “The world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”‘ The doctrine of the passing generations and the abiding earth is fronted squarely in my second text by the not contradictory, but complementary doctrine of the passing world and the abiding men. I do not suppose that John had this verse of Ecclesiastes in his mind, for the word ‘abide’ is one of his favourite expressions, and is always cropping up. But even though he had not, we find in his utterance the necessary correction to the first text. As I have said, and now need not do more than repeat in a sentence, the antithesis is not so complete as it seems. John’s ‘world’ is not the Preacher’s ‘earth,’ but he means thereby, as we all know, the aggregate of created things, including men, considered apart from God, and in so far as it includes voluntary agents set in opposition to God and the will of God. He means the earth rent away from God, and turned to be what it was not meant to be, a minister of evil, and he means men, in so far as they have parted themselves from God and make up an alien, if not a positively antagonistic company.

Perhaps he was referring, in the words of our text, to the break-up of the existing order of things which he discerned as impending and already begun to take effect in consequence of the coming of Jesus Christ, the shining of the true Light. For you may remember that in a previous part of the epistle he uses precisely the same expression, with a significant variation. Here, in our text, he says, ‘The world passeth away’; there he says, ‘The darkness has passed and the true light now shineth.’ He sees a process installed and going on, in which the whole solid-seeming fabric of a godless society is being dissolved and melted away. And says he, in the midst of all this change there is one who stands unchanged, the man that does God’s will.

But just for a moment we may take the lower point of view, and see here a flat contradiction of the Preacher. He said, ‘Men go, and the world abides.’ ‘No,’ says John; ‘your own psalmists might have taught you better: “As a vesture shalt Thou change them, and they shall be changed.”‘ The world, the earth, which seems so solid and permanent, is all the while in perpetual flux, as our later science has taught us, in a sense of which neither Preacher nor Apostle could dream. For just as from the beginning forces were at work which out of the fire-mist shaped sun and planets, so the same forces, continuing in operation, are tending towards the end of the system which they began; and a contracting sun and a diminished light and a lowered temperature and the narrower orbits in which the planets shall revolve, prophesy that ‘the elements shall melt with fervent heat,’ and that all things which have been made must one day cease to be. Nature is the true Penelope’s web, ever being woven and ever being unravelled, and in the most purely physical and scientific sense the world is passing away. But then, because you and I belong, in a segment of our being, to that which thus is passing away, we come under the same laws, and all that has been born must die. So the generations come, and in their very coming bear the prophecy of their going. But, on the other hand, there is an inner nucleus of our being, of which the material is but the transient envelope and periphery, which holds nought of the material, but of the spiritual, and that ‘abides for ever.’

But let us lift the thought rather into the region of the true antithesis which John was contemplating, which is not so much the crumbling away of the material, and the endurance of the spiritual, as the essential transiency of everything that is antagonism to the will of God, and the essential eternity of everything which is in conformity with that will. And so, says he, ‘The world is passing, and the lust thereof.’ The desires that grasp it perish with it, or perhaps, more truly still, the object of the desire perishes, and with it the possibility of their gratification ceases, but the desire itself remains. But what of the man whose life has been devoted to the things seen and temporal, when he finds himself in a condition of being where none of these have accompanied him? Nothing to slake his lusts, if he be a sensualist. No money-bags, ledgers, or cheque-books if he be a plutocrat or a capitalist or a miser. No books or dictionaries if he be a mere student. Nothing of his vocations if he lived for ‘the world.’ But yet the appetite is abiding. Will that not be a thirst that cannot be slaked?

‘The world is passing and the lust thereof,’ and all that is antagonistic to God, or separated from Him, is essentially as ‘a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanishes away,’ whereas the man who does the will of God abideth for ever, in that he is steadfast in the midst of change.

‘His hand the good man fastens on the skies,
And lets earth roll, nor heeds its idle whirl.’

He shall ‘abide for ever,’ in the sense that his work is perpetual. In one very deep and solemn sense, nothing human ever dies, but in another all that is not running in the same direction as, and borne along by the impulse of, the will of God, is destined to be neutralised and brought to nothing at last. There may be a row of figures as long as to reach from here to the fixed stars, but if there is not in front of them the significant digit, which comes from obedience to the will of God, all is but a string of ciphers, and their net result is nothing. And he ‘abideth for ever,’ in the most blessed and profound sense, in that through his faith, which has kindled his love, and his love which has set in motion his practical obedience, he becomes participant of the very eternity of the living God. ‘This is eternal life,’ not merely to know, but ‘to do the will’ of our Father. Nothing else will last, and nothing else will prosper, any more than a bit of driftwood can stem Niagara. Unite yourself with the will of God, and you abide.

And now let me, as briefly as I can, throw together-

III. The plain, practical lessons that come from both these texts.

May I say, without seeming to be morbid or unpractical, one lesson is that we should cultivate a sense of the transiency of this outward life? One of our old authors says somewhere, that it is wholesome to smell at a piece of turf from a churchyard. I know that much harm has been done by representing Christianity as mainly a scheme which is to secure man a peaceful death, and that many morbid forms of piety have given far too large a place to the contemplation of skulls and cross-bones. But for all that, the remembrance of death present in our lives will often lay a cool hand upon a throbbing brow; and, like a bit of ice used by a skilful physician, will bring down the temperature, and stay the too tumultuous beating of the heart. ‘So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.’ It will minister energy, and lead us to say, like our Lord, ‘We must work the works of Him that sent Me while it is day; the night cometh.’

Let me say again-a very plain, practical lesson is to dig deep down for our foundations below the rubbish that has accumulated. If a man wishes to build a house in Rome or in Jerusalem he has to go fifty or sixty feet down, through potsherds and broken tiles and triturated marbles, and the dust of ancient palaces and temples. We have to drive a shaft clear down through all the superficial strata, and to lay the first stones on the Rock of Ages. Do not build on that which quivers and shakes beneath you. Do not try to make your life’s path across the weeds, or as they call it in Egypt, the ‘sudd,’ that floats on the surface of the Nile, compacted for many a mile, and yet only a film on the surface of the river, to be swept away some day. Build on God.

And the last lesson is, let us see to it that our wills are in harmony with His, and the work of our hands His work. We can do that will in all the secularities of our daily life. The difference between the work that shrivels up and disappears and the work that abides is not so much in its external character, or in the materials on which it is expended, as in the motive from which it comes. So that, if I might so say, if two women are sitting at the same millstone face to face, and turning round the same handle, one of them for one half the circumference, and the other for the other, and grinding out the same corn, the one’s work may be ‘gold, silver, precious stones,’ which shall abide the trying fire; and the other’s may be ‘wood, hay, stubble,’ which shall be burnt up. ‘He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’

So let us set ourselves, dear friends! to our several tasks for this coming year. Never mind about the century, it will take care of itself. Do your little work in your little corner, and be sure of this, that amidst changes you will stand unchanged, amidst tumults you may stand calm, in death you will be entering on a fuller life, and that what to others is the end will be to you the beginning. ‘If any man’s work abide, he shall receive a reward,’ and he himself shall abide with the abiding God.

The bitter cynic said half the truth when he said, ‘One generation goeth, and another cometh; but the earth abides.’ The mystic Apostle saw the truth steadily, and saw it whole when he said, ‘Lo! the world passeth away, and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.’

5) 1 John 2:17

1 John

RIVER AND ROCK

1Jn. 2:17.

John has been solemnly giving a charge not to love the world, nor the things that are in it. That charge was addressed to ‘children,’ ‘young men,’ ‘fathers.’ Whether these designations be taken as referring to growth and maturity of Christian experience, or of natural age, they equally carry the lesson that no age and no stage is beyond the danger of being drawn away by the world’s love, or beyond the need of the solemn dehortation therefrom.

My text is the second of the reasons which the Apostle gives for his earnest charge. We all, therefore, need it, and we always need it; though on the last Sunday of another year, it may be more than usually appropriate to turn our thoughts in its direction. ‘The world passeth away, and the lust thereof.’ Let us lay the handful of snow on our fevered foreheads and cool our desires.

Now there are but two things set forth in this text, which is a great and wonderful antithesis between something which is in perpetual flux and passage and something which is permanent. If I might venture to cast the two thoughts into metaphorical form, I should say that here are a river and a rock. The one, the sad truth of sense, universally believed and as universally forgotten; the other, the glad truth of faith, so little regarded or operative in men’s lives.

I ask you, then, to look with me for a few moments at each of these thoughts.

I. First, then, the river, or the sad truth of sense.

Now you observe that there are two things in my text of which this transiency is predicated, the one ‘the world,’ the other ‘the lust thereof’; the one outside us, the other within us. As to the former, I need only, I suppose, remind you in a sentence that what John means by ‘the world’ is not the material globe on which we dwell, but the whole aggregate of things visible and material, together with the lives of the men whose lives are directed to, and bounded by, that visible and material, and all considered as wrenched apart from God. That, and not the mere external physical creation, is what he means by ‘the world,’ and therefore the passing away of which he speaks is not only [although, of course, it includes] the decay and dissolution of material things, but the transiency of things which are or have to do with the visible, and are separated by us from God. Over all these, he says, there is written the sentence, ‘Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return.’ There is a continual flowing on of the stream. As the original implies even more strongly than in our translation, ‘the world’ is in the act of ‘passing away.’ Like the slow travelling of the scenes of some moveable panorama which glide along, even as the eye looks upon them, and are concealed behind the side flats before the gazer has taken in the whole picture, so equably, constantly, silently, and therefore unnoticed by us, all is in a state of continual motion. There is no present time. Even whilst we name the moment it dies. The drop hangs for an instant on the verge, gleaming in the sunlight, and then falls into the gloomy abyss that silently sucks up years and centuries. There is no present, but all is movement.

Brethren, that has been the commonplace of moralists and poets and preachers from the beginning of time; and it would be folly for me to suppose that I can add anything to the impressiveness of the thought. All that I want to do is to wake you up to preach it to yourselves, for that is the only thing that is of any use.

‘So passeth, in the passing of an hour

Of mortal life, the leaf, the bud, the flower.’

But besides this transiency external to us, John finds a corresponding transiency within us. ‘The world passeth, and the lust thereof.’ Of course the word ‘lust’ is employed by him in a much wider sense than in our use of it. With us it means one specific and very ugly form of earthly desire. With him it includes the whole genus--all desires of every sort, more or less noble or ignoble, which have this for their characteristic, that they are directed to, stimulated by, and fed or starved on, the fleeting things of this outward life. If thus a man has anchored himself to that which has no perpetual stay, so long as the cable holds he follows the fate of the thing to which he has pinned himself. And if it perish he perishes, in a very profound sense, with it. If you trust yourselves in the leaky vessel, when the water rises in it it will drown you, and you will go to the bottom with the craft to which you have trusted yourselves. If you embark in the little ship that carries Christ and His fortunes, you will come with Him to the haven.

But these fleeting desires, of which my text speaks, point to that sad feature of human experience, that we all outgrow and leave behind us, and think of very little value, the things that once to us were all but heaven. There was a time when toys and sweetmeats were our treasures, and since that day how many burnt-out hopes we all have had! How little we should know ourselves if we could go back to the fears and wishes and desires that used to agitate us ten, twenty, thirty years ago! They lie behind us, no longer part of ourselves; they have slipped away from us, and

‘We all are changed, by still degrees,

All but the basis of the soul.’

The self-conscious same man abides, and yet how different the same man is! Our lives, then will zig-zag instead of keeping a straight course, if we let desires that are limited by anything that we can see guide and regulate us.

But, brethren, though it be a digression from my text, I cannot help touching for a moment upon a yet sadder thought than that. There are desires that remain, when the gratification of them has become impossible. Sometimes the lust outlasts the world, sometimes the world outlasts the lust; and one knows not whether is the sadder. There is a hell upon earth for many of us who, having set our affections upon some creatural object, and having had that withdrawn from us, are ready to say, ‘They have taken away my gods! And what shall I do?’ And there is a hell of the same sort waiting beyond those dark gates through which we have all to pass, where men who never desired anything, except what the world that has slipped out of their reluctant fingers could give them, are shut up with impossible longings after a for-ever-vanished good. ‘Father Abraham! a drop of water; for I am tormented in this flame.’ That is what men come to, if the fire of their lust burn after its objects are withdrawn.

But let me remind you that this transiency of which I have been speaking receives very strange treatment from most of us. I do not know that it is altogether to be regretted that it so seldom comes to men's consciousness. Perhaps it is right that it should not be uppermost in our thoughts always; but yet there is no vindication for the entire oblivion to which we condemn it. The march of these fleeting things is like that of cavalry with their horses' feet wrapped in straw, in the night, across the snow, silent and unnoticed. We cannot realise the revolution of the earth, because everything partakes in it. We talk about standing still, and we are whirling through space with inconceivable rapidity. By a like illusion we deceive ourselves with the notion of stability, when everything about us is hastening away. Some of you do not like to be reminded of it, and think it a killjoy. You try to get rid of the thought, and hide your head in the sand, and fancy that the rest of your body presents no mark to the archer's arrow. Now surely common sense says to all, that if there be some fact certain and plain and applying to you, which, if accepted, would profoundly modify your life, you ought to take it into account. And what I want you to do, dear friends, now, is to look in the face this fact, which you all acknowledge so utterly that some of you are ready to say, 'What was the use of coming to a chapel to hear that threadbare old thing dinned into my ears again?' and to take it into account in shaping your lives. Have you done so? Have you? Suppose a man that lived in a land habitually shaken by earthquakes were to say, 'I mean to ignore the fact; and I am going to build a house just as if there was not such a thing as an earthquake expected'; he would have it toppling about his ears very soon. Suppose a man upon the ice-slopes of the Alps was to say, 'I am going to ignore slipperiness and gravitation,' he would before long find himself, if there was any consciousness left in him, at the bottom of a precipice, bruised and bleeding. And suppose a man says, 'I am not going to take the fleetingness of the things of earth into account at all, but intend to live as if all things were to remain as they are'; what would become of him do you think? Is he a wise man or a fool? And is he you? He is some of you! 'So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.'

Then let me say to you, see that you take noble lessons out of these undeniable and all-important facts. There is one kind of lesson that I do not want you to take out of it. ‘Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die,’ or, to put it into a more vulgar formula, ‘A short life and a merry one.’ The mere contemplation of the transiency of earthly things may, and often does, lend itself to very ignoble conclusions, and men draw from it the thought that, as life is short, they had better crowd into it as much of sensual enjoyment as they can.

‘Gather ye roses while ye may’ is a very common keynote, struck by poets of the baser sort. And it is a thought that influences some of us, I have little doubt. Or there may be another consideration. ‘Make hay whilst the sun shines.’ ‘Hurry on your getting rich, because you have not very long to do it in’; or the like.

Now all that is supremely unworthy. The true lesson to be drawn is the plain, old one which it is never superfluous to shout into men’s ears, until they have obeyed it--viz., ‘Set not thine heart on that which is not; and which flieth away as an eagle towards heaven.’ Do you, dear brother, see to it, that your roots go down through the gravel on the surface. Do you see to it that you dig deeper than that; and thrusting your hand, as it were, through the thin, silk-paper screen that stands between you and the Eternal, grasp the hand that you will find on the other side, waiting and ready to clasp you, and to hold you up.

When they build a new house in Rome they have to dig down through sometimes sixty or a hundred feet of rubbish that runs like water, the ruins of old temples and palaces, once occupied by men in the same flush of life in which we are now. We too have to dig down through ruins, until we get to the Rock and build there, and build secure. Withdraw your affections and your thoughts and your desires from the fleeting, and fix them on the permanent. If a captain takes anything but the pole-star for his fixed point he will lose his reckoning, and his ship will be on the reefs. If we take anything but God for our supreme delight and desire we shall perish.

Then let me say, too, let this thought stimulate us to crowd every moment, as full as it can be packed, with noble work and heavenly thoughts. These fleeting things are elastic, and you may put all but infinite treasure into them. Think of what the possibilities, for each of us, of this dying year were on the 1st of January; and of what the realisation has been by the 28th of

December. So much that we could have done! so little that we have done! So many ripples of the river have passed, bearing no golden sand to pile upon the shore! ‘We have been’ is a sad word; but oh, the one sad word is, ‘We might have been!’ And, so, do you see to it that you fill time with that which is kindred to eternity, and make ‘one day as a thousand years’ in the elastic possibilities and realities of consecration and of service.

Further, let the thought help us to the conviction of the relative insignificance of all that can change. That will not spoil nor shade any real joy; rather it will add to it poignancy that prevents it from cloying or from becoming the enemy of our souls. But the thought will wondrously lighten the burden that we have to carry, and the tasks which we have to perform. ‘But for a moment,’ makes all light. There was an old rabbi, long ago, whose real name was all but lost, because everybody nick-named him ‘Rabbi Thisalso.’ The reason was because he had perpetually on his lips the saying about everything as it came, ‘This also will pass.’ He was a wise man. Let us go to his school and learn his wisdom.

II. Now let me say a word, and it can only be a word, about the second of the thoughts here, which I designated as the Rock, or the glad truth of Faith.

We might have expected that John’s antithesis to the world that passeth would have been the God that abides. But he does not so word his sentence, although the thought of the divine permanence underlies it. Rather over against the fleeting world he puts the abiding man who does the will of God.

Of course there is a very solemn sense in which all men, even they who have most exclusively lived for what they call the present, do last for ever, and in which their deeds do so too. After death is the judgment, and the issues of eternity depend upon the actions of time; and every fleeting thought comes back to the hand that projected it, like the Australian savage’s boomerang that, flung out, returns and falls at the feet of the thrower. But that is not what John means by ‘abiding for ever.’ He means something very much more blessed and lofty than that; and the following is the course of his thought. There is only one permanent Reality in the universe, and that is God. All else is shadow and He is the substance. All else was, is, and is not. He is the One who was, is, and is to come, the timeless and only permanent Being. The will of God is the permanent element in all changeful material things. And consequently he who does the will of God links himself with the Divine Eternity, and becomes partaker of that solemn and blessed Being which lives above mutation.

Obedience to God's will is the permanent element in human life. Whosoever humbly and trustfully seeks to mould his will after the divine will, and to bring God's will into practice in his doings, that man has pierced through the shadows and grasped the substance, and partakes of the Immortality which he adores and serves. Himself shall live for ever in the true life which is blessedness. His deeds shall live for ever when all that lifted itself in opposition to the Divine will shall be crushed and annihilated. They shall live in His own peaceful consciousness; they shall live in the blessed rewards which they shall bring to the doers. His habits will need no change.

What will you do when you are dead? You have to go into a world where there are no gossip and no housekeeping; no mills and no offices; no shops, no books; no colleges and no sciences to learn. What will you do there? 'He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.' If you have done your housekeeping, and your weaving and spinning, and your book-keeping, and your buying and selling, and your studying, and your experimenting with a conscious reference to God, it is all right. That has made the act capable of eternity, and there will be no need for such a man to change. The material on which he works will change, but the inner substance of his life will be unaffected by the trivial change from earth to heaven. Whilst the endless ages roll he will be doing just what he was doing down here; only here he was playing with counters, and yonder he will be trusted with gold, and dominion over ten cities. To all other men the change that comes when earth passes from them, or they from it, is as when a trench is dug across a railway, into which the express goes with a smash, and there is an end. To the man who, in the trifles of time, has been obeying the will of God, and therefore subserving eternity and his interests there, the trench is bridged, and he will go on after he crosses it just as he did before, with the same purpose, the same desires, the same submission, and the same drinking into himself of the fulness of immortal life.

Brother, John tells us that obedience to the will of God brings permanence into our fleeting years. But how are we to obey the will of God? John tells us that the only way is by love. But how are we to love God? John tells us that the only way to love--which love is the only way to obedience--is by knowing and believing the love that God hath to us. But how are we to know that God hath love to us? John tells us that the only way to know the love of God, which is the only way of our loving Him, which in its turn is the only way to obedience, which again is the only way to permanence of life, is to believe in Jesus Christ and His propitiation for our sins. The river flows on for ever, but it sweeps round the base of the Rock of Ages. And in Him, by faith in His blood, we may find our sure refuge and eternal home.

6) 1 John 2:20

Acts

THE FOURFOLD SYMBOLS OF THE SPIRIT

Act. 2:2 - Act. 2:3, Act. 2:17. - 1Jn. 2:20.

Wind, fire, water, oil,-these four are constant Scriptural symbols for the Spirit of God. We have them all in these fragments of verses which I have taken for my text now, and which I have isolated from their context for the purpose of bringing out simply these symbolical references. I think that perhaps we may get some force and freshness to the thoughts proper to this day [Footnote: Whit Sunday.] by looking at these rather than by treating the subject in some more abstract form. We have then the Breath of the Spirit, the Fire of the Spirit, the Water of the Spirit, and the Anointing Oil of the Spirit. And the consideration of these four will bring out a great many of the principal Scriptural ideas about the gift of the Spirit of God which belongs to all Christian souls.

I. First, ‘a rushing mighty wind.’

Of course, the symbol is but the putting into picturesque form of the idea that lies in the name. ‘Spirit’ is ‘breath.’ Wind is but air in motion. Breath is the synonym for life. ‘Spirit’ and ‘life’ are two words for one thing. So then, in the symbol, the ‘rushing mighty wind,’ we have set forth the highest work of the Spirit-the communication of a new and supernatural life.

We are carried hack to that grand vision of the prophet who saw the bones lying, very many and very dry, sapless and disintegrated, a heap dead and ready to rot. The question comes to him: ‘Son of man! Can these bones live?’ The only possible answer, if he consult experience, is, ‘O Lord God! Thou knowest.’ Then follows the great invocation: ‘Come from the four winds, O Breath! and breathe upon these slain that they may live.’ And the Breath comes and ‘they stand up, an exceeding great army.’ ‘It is the Spirit that quickeneth.’ The Scripture treats us all as dead, being separated from God, unless we are united to Him by faith in Jesus Christ. According to the saying of the Evangelist, ‘They which believe on Him receive’ the Spirit, and thereby receive the life which He gives, or, as our Lord Himself speaks, are ‘born of the Spirit.’ The highest and most characteristic office of the Spirit of God is to enkindle this new life, and hence His noblest name, among the many by which He is called, is the Spirit of life.

Again, remember, ‘that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’ If there be life given it must be kindred with the life which is its source. Reflect upon those profound words of our Lord: ‘The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh nor whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit.’ They describe first the operation of the life-giving Spirit, but they describe also the characteristics of the resulting life.

‘The wind bloweth where it listeth.’ That spiritual life, both in the divine source and in the human recipient, is its own law. Of course the wind has its laws, as every physical agent has; but these are so complicated and undiscovered that it has always been the very symbol of freedom, and poets have spoken of these ‘chartered libertines,’ the winds, and ‘free as the air’ has become a proverb. So that Divine Spirit is limited by no human conditions or laws, but dispenses His gifts in superb disregard of conventionalities and externalisms. Just as the lower gift of what we call ‘genius’ is above all limits of culture or education or position, and falls on a wool-stapler in Stratford-on-Avon, or on a ploughman in Ayrshire, so, in a similar manner, the altogether different gift of the divine, life-giving Spirit follows no lines that Churches or institutions draw. It falls upon an Augustinian monk in a convent, and he shakes Europe. It falls upon a tinker in Bedford gaol, and he writes *Pilgrim's Progress*. It falls upon a cobbler in Kettering, and he founds modern Christian missions. It blows 'where it listeth,' sovereignly indifferent to the expectations and limitations and the externalisms, even of organised Christianity, and touching this man and that man, not arbitrarily but according to 'the good pleasure' that is a law to itself, because it is perfect in wisdom and in goodness.

And as thus the life-giving Spirit imparts Himself according to higher laws than we can grasp, so in like manner the life that is derived from it is a life which is its own law. The Christian conscience, touched by the Spirit of God, owes allegiance to no regulations or external commandments laid down by man. The Christian conscience, enlightened by the Spirit of God, at its peril will take its beliefs from any other than from that Divine Spirit. All authority over conduct, all authority over belief is burnt up and disappears in the presence of the grand democracy of the true Christian principle: 'Ye are all the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ'; and every one of you possesses the Spirit which teaches, the Spirit which inspires, the Spirit which enlightens, the Spirit which is the guide to all truth. So 'the wind bloweth where it listeth,' and the voice of that Divine Quickener is,

'Myself shall to My darling be
Both law and impulse.'

Under the impulse derived from the Divine Spirit, the human spirit 'listeth' what is right, and is bound to follow the promptings of its highest desires. Those men only are free as the air we breathe, who are vitalised by the Spirit of the Lord, for 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there,' and there alone, 'is liberty.'

In this symbol there lies not only the thought of a life derived, kindred with the life bestowed, and free like the life which is given, but there lies also the idea of power. The wind which filled the house was not only mighty but 'borne onward'-fitting type of the strong impulse by which in olden times 'holy men spake as they were "borne onward"' [the word is the same] 'by the Holy Ghost.' There are diversities of operations, but it is the same breath of God, which sometimes blows in the softest *pianissimo* that scarcely rustles the summer woods in the leafy month of June, and sometimes storms in wild tempest that dashes the seas against the rocks. So this mighty lif-giving Agent moves in gentleness and yet in power, and sometimes swells and rises almost to tempest, but is ever the impelling force of all that is strong and true and fair in Christian hearts and lives.

The history of the world, since that day of Pentecost, has been a commentary upon the words of my text. With viewless, impalpable energy, the mighty breath of God swept across the ancient world and 'laid the lofty city' of paganism 'low; even to the ground, and brought it even to the dust.' A breath passed over the whole civilised world, like the breath of the west wind upon the glaciers in the spring, melting the thick-ribbed ice, and wooing forth the flowers, and the world was made over again. In our own hearts and lives this is the one Power that will make us strong and good. The question is all-important for each of us, 'Have I this life, and does it move me, as the ships are borne along by the wind?' 'As many as are impelled by the Spirit of God, they'-*they*-'are the sons of God.' Is that the breath that swells all the sails of your lives, and drives you upon your course? If it be, you are Christians; if it be not, you are not.

II. And now a word as to the second of these symbols-'Cloven tongues as of fire'-the fire of the Spirit.

I need not do more than remind you how frequently that emblem is employed both in the Old and in the New Testament. John the Baptist contrasted the cold negative efficiency of his baptism, which at its best, was but a baptism of repentance, with the quickening power of the baptism of Him who was to follow him; when he said, 'I indeed baptise you with water, but He that cometh after me is mightier than I. He shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.' The two words mean but one thing, the fire being the emblem of the Spirit.

You will remember, too, how our Lord Himself employs the same metaphor when He speaks about His coming to bring fire on the earth, and His longing to see it kindled into a beneficent blaze. In this connection the fire is a symbol of a quick, triumphant energy, which will transform us into its own likeness. There are two sides to that emblem: one destructive, one creative; one wrathful, one loving. There are the fire of love, and the fire of anger. There is the fire of the sunshine which is the condition of life, as well as the fire of the lightning which burns and consumes. The emblem of fire is selected to express the work of the Spirit of God, by reason of its leaping, triumphant, transforming energy. See, for instance, how, when you kindle a pile of dead green-wood, the tongues of fire spring from point to point until they have conquered the whole mass, and turned it all into a ruddy likeness of the parent flame. And so here, this fire of God, if it fall upon you, will burn up all your coldness, and will make you glow with enthusiasm, working your intellectual convictions in fire not in frost, making your creed a living power in your lives, and kindling you into a flame of earnest consecration.

The same idea is expressed by the common phrases of every language. We speak of the fervour of love, the warmth of affection, the blaze of enthusiasm, the fire of emotion, the coldness of indifference. Christians are to be set on fire of God. If the Spirit dwell in us, He will make us fiery like Himself, even as fire turns the wettest green-wood into fire. We have more than enough of cold Christians who are afraid of nothing so much as of being betrayed into warm emotion.

I believe, dear brethren, and I am bound to express the belief, that one of the chief wants of the Christian Church of this generation, the Christian Church of this city, the Christian Church of this chapel, is more of the fire of God! We are all icebergs compared with what we ought to be. Look at yourselves; never mind about your brethren. Let each of us look at his own heart, and say whether there is any trace in his Christianity of the power of that Spirit who is fire. Is our religion flame or ice? Where among us are to be found lives blazing with enthusiastic devotion and earnest love? Do not such words sound like mockery when applied to us? Have we not to listen to that solemn old warning that never loses its power, and, alas! seems never to lose its appropriateness: ‘Because thou art neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of My mouth.’ We ought to be like the burning beings before God’s throne, the seraphim, the spirits that blaze and serve. We ought to be like God Himself, all aflame with love. Let us seek penitently for that Spirit of fire who will dwell in us all if we will.

The metaphor of fire suggests also-purifying. ‘The Spirit of burning’ will burn the filth out of us. That is the only way by which a man can ever be made clean. You may wash and wash and wash with the cold water of moral reformation, you will never get the dirt out with it. No washing and no rubbing will ever cleanse sin. The way to purge a soul is to do with it as they do with foul clay-thrust it into the fire and that will burn all the blackness out of it. Get the love of God into your hearts, and the fire of His Divine Spirit into your spirits to melt you down, as it were, and then the scum and the dross will come to the top, and you can skim them off. Two powers conquer my sin: the one is the blood of Jesus Christ, which washes me from all the guilt of the past; the other is the fiery influence of that Divine Spirit which makes me pure and clean for all the time to come. Pray to be kindled with the fire of God.

III. Then once more, take that other metaphor, ‘I will pour out of My Spirit.’

That implies an emblem which is very frequently used, both in the Old and in the New Testament, viz., the Spirit as water. As our Lord said to Nicodemus: ‘Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.’ The ‘water’ stands in the same relation to the ‘Spirit’ as the ‘fire’ does in the saying of John the Baptist already referred to-that is to say, it is simply a symbol or material emblem of the Spirit. I suppose nobody would say that there were two baptisms spoken of by John, one of the Holy Ghost and one of fire,-and I suppose that just in the same way, there are not two agents of regeneration pointed at in our Lord’s words, nor even two conditions, but that the Spirit is the sole agent, and ‘water’ is but a figure to express some aspect of His operations. So that there is no reference to the water of baptism in the words, and to see such a reference is to be led astray by sound, and out of a metaphor to manufacture a miracle.

There are other passages where, in like manner, the Spirit is compared to a flowing stream, such as, for instance, when our Lord said, ‘He that believeth on Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water,’ and when John saw a ‘river of water of life proceeding from the throne.’ The expressions, too, of ‘pouring out’ and ‘shedding forth’ the Spirit, point in the same direction, and are drawn from more than one passage of Old Testament prophecy. What, then, is the significance of comparing that Divine Spirit with a river of water? First, cleansing, of which I need not say any more, because I have dealt with It in the previous part of my sermon. Then, further, refreshing, and satisfying. Ah! dear brethren, there is only one thing that will slake the immortal thirst in your souls. The world will never do it; love or ambition gratified and wealth possessed, will never do it. You will be as thirsty after you have drunk of these streams as ever you were before. There is one spring 'of which if a man drink, he shall never thirst' with unsatisfied, painful longings, but shall never cease to thirst with the longing which is blessedness, because it is fruition. Our thirst can be slaked by the deep draught of 'the river of the Water of Life, which proceeds from the Throne of God and the Lamb.' The Spirit of God, drunk in by my spirit, will still and satisfy my whole nature, and with it I shall be glad. Drink of this. 'Ho! every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters!'

The Spirit is not only refreshing and satisfying, but also productive and fertilising. In Eastern lands a rill of water is all that is needed to make the wilderness rejoice. Turn that stream on to the barrenness of your hearts, and fair flowers will grow that would never grow without it. The one means of lofty and fruitful Christian living is a deep, inward possession of the Spirit of God. The one way to fertilise barren souls is to let that stream flood them all over, and then the flush of green will soon come, and that which is else a desert will 'rejoice and blossom as the rose.'

So this water will cleanse, it will satisfy and refresh, it will be productive and will fertilise, and 'everything shall live whithersoever that river cometh.'

IV. Then, lastly, we have the oil of the Spirit.

'Ye have an unction,' says St. John in our last text, 'from the Holy One.' I need not remind you, I suppose, of how in the old system, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with consecrating oil, as a symbol of their calling, and of their fitness for their special offices. The reason for the use of such a symbol, I presume, would lie in the invigorating and in the supposed, and possibly real, health-giving effect of the use of oil in those climates. Whatever may have been the reason for the use of oil in official anointings, the meaning of the act was plain. It was a preparation for a specific and distinct service. And so, when we read of the oil of the Spirit, we are to think that it is that which fits us for being prophets, priests, and kings, and which calls us to, because it fits us for, these functions.

You are anointed to be prophets that you may make known Him who has loved and saved you, and may go about the world evidently inspired to show forth His praise, and make His name glorious. That anointing calls and fits you to be priests, mediators between God and man, bringing God to men, and by pleading and persuasion, and the presentation of the truth, drawing men to God. That unction calls and fits you to be kings, exercising authority over the little monarchy of your own natures, and over the men round you, who will bow in submission whenever they come in contact with a man all evidently aflame with the love of Jesus Christ, and filled with His Spirit. The world is hard and rude; the world is blind and stupid; the world often fails to know its best friends and its truest benefactors; but there is no crust of stupidity so crass and dense but that through it there will pass the penetrating shafts of light that ray from the face of a man who walks in fellowship with Jesus. The whole nation of old was honoured with these sacred names. They were a kingdom of priests; and the divine Voice said of the nation, ‘Touch not Mine anointed, and do My prophets no harm!’ How much more are all Christian men, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, made prophets, priests, and kings to God! Alas for the difference between what they ought to be and what they are!

And then, do not forget also that when the Scriptures speak of Christian men as being anointed, it really speaks of them as being Messiahs. ‘Christ’ means *anointed*, does it not? ‘Messiah’ means *anointed*. And when we read in such a passage as that of my text, ‘Ye have an unction from the Holy One,’ we cannot but feel that the words point in the same direction as the great words of our Master Himself, ‘As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.’ By authority derived, no doubt, and in a subordinate and secondary sense, of course, we are Messiahs, anointed with that Spirit which was given to Him, not by measure, and which has passed from Him to us. ‘If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.’

So, dear brethren, all these things being certainly so, what are we to say about the present state of Christendom? What are we to say about the present state of English Christianity, Church and Dissent alike? Is Pentecost a vanished glory, then? Has that ‘rushing mighty wind’ blown itself out, and a dead calm followed? Has that leaping fire died down into grey ashes? Has the great river that burst out then, like the stream from the foot of the glaciers of Mont Blanc, full-grown in its birth, been all swallowed up in the sand, like some of those rivers in the East? Has the oil dried in the cruse? People tell us that Christianity is on its death-bed; and the aspect of a great many professing Christians seems to confirm the statement. But let us thankfully recognise that ‘we are not straitened in God, but in ourselves.’ To how many of us the question might be put: ‘Did you receive the Holy Ghost when you believed?’ And how many of us by our lives answer: ‘We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.’ Let us go where we can receive Him; and remember the blessed words: ‘If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him’!

7) 1 John 3:1

1 John

THE LOVE THAT CALLS US SONS

1Jn. 3:1.

One or two points of an expository character will serve to introduce what else I have to say on these words.

The text is, I suppose, generally understood as if it pointed to the fact that we are called the sons of God as the great exemplification of the wonderfulness of His love. That is a perfectly possible view of the connection and meaning of the text. But if we are to translate with perfect accuracy we must render, not ‘that we should be called,’ but ‘in order that we should be called the sons of God.’ The meaning then is that the love bestowed is the means by which the design that we should be called His sons is accomplished. What John calls us to contemplate with wonder and gratitude is not only the fact of this marvellous love, but also the glorious end to which it has been given to us and works. There seems no reason for slurring over this meaning in favour of the more vague ‘that’ of our version. God gives His great and wonderful love in Jesus Christ, and all the gifts and powers which live in Him like fragrance in the rose. All this lavish bestowal of love, unspeakable as it is, may be regarded as having one great end, which God deems worthy of even such expenditure, namely, that men should become, in the deepest sense, His children. It is not so much to the contemplation of our blessedness in being sons, as to the devout gaze on the love which, by its wonderful process, has made it possible for us to be sons, that we are summoned here.

Again, you will find a remarkable addition to our text in the Revised Version--namely, ‘and such we are.’ Now these words come with a very great weight of manuscript authority, and of internal evidence. They are parenthetical, a kind of rapid ‘aside’ of the writer’s, expressing his joyful confidence that he and his brethren are sons of God, not only in name, but in reality. They are the voice of personal assurance, the voice of the spirit ‘by which we cry Abba, Father,’ breaking in for a moment on the flow of the sentence, like an irrepressible, glad answer to the Father’s call. With these explanations let us look at the words.

I. The love that is given.

We are called upon to come with our little vessels to measure the contents of the great ocean, to plumb with our short lines the infinite abyss, and not only to estimate the quantity but the quality of that love, which, in both respects, surpasses all our means of comparison and conception.

Properly speaking, we can do neither the one nor the other, for we have no line long enough to sound its depths, and no experience which will give us a standard with which to compare its quality. But all that we can do, John would have us do--that is, look and ever look at the working of that love till we form some not wholly inadequate idea of it.

We can no more ‘behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us’ than we can look with undimmed eyes right into the middle of the sun. But we can in some measure imagine the tremendous and beneficent forces that ride forth horsed on his beams to distances which the imagination faints in trying to grasp, and reach their journey's end unwearied and ready for their task as when it began. Here are we, ninety odd millions of miles from the centre of the system, yet warmed by its heat, lighted by its beams, and touched for good by its power in a thousand ways. All that has been going on for no one knows how many æons. How mighty the Power which produces these effects! In like manner, who can gaze into the fiery depths of that infinite Godhead, into the ardours of that immeasurable, incomparable, inconceivable love? But we can look at and measure its activities. We can see what it does, and so can, in some degree, understand it, and feel that after all we have a measure for the Immeasurable, a comparison for the Incomparable, and can thus 'behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed on us.'

So we have to turn to the work of Christ, and especially to His death, if we would estimate the love of God. According to John's constant teaching, that is the great proof that God loves us. The most wonderful revelation to every heart of man of the depths of that Divine heart lies in the gift of Jesus Christ. The Apostle bids me 'behold what manner of love.' I turn to the Cross, and I see there a love which shrinks from no sacrifice, but gives 'Him up to death for us all.' I turn to the Cross, and I see there a love which is evoked by no lovableness on my part, but comes from the depth of His own Infinite Being, who loves because He must, and who must because He is God. I turn to the Cross, and I see there manifested a love which sighs for recognition, which desires nothing of me but the repayment of my poor affection, and longs to see its own likeness in me. And I see there a love that will not be put away by sinfulness, and shortcomings, and evil, but pours its treasures on the unworthy, like sunshine on a dunghill. So, streaming through the darkness of eclipse, and speaking to me even in the awful silence in which the Son of Man died there for sin, I 'behold,' and I hear, the 'manner of love that the Father hath bestowed upon us,' stronger than death and sin, armed with all power, gentler than the fall of the dew, boundless and endless, in its measure measureless, in its quality transcendent--the love of God to me in Jesus Christ my Saviour.

In like manner we have to think, if we would estimate the 'manner of this love,' that through and in the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ there comes to us the gift of a divine life like His own. Perhaps it may be too great a refinement of interpretation; but it certainly does seem to me that that expression ‘to bestow His love upon’ us, is not altogether the same as ‘to love us,’ but that there is a greater depth in it. There may be some idea of that love itself being as it were infused into us, and not merely of its consequences or tokens being given to us; as Paul speaks of ‘the love of God shed abroad in our hearts’ by the spirit which is given to us. At all events this communication of divine life, which is at bottom divine love--for God’s life is God’s love--is His great gift to men.

Be that as it may, these two are the great tokens, consequences, and measures of God’s love to us--the gift of Christ, and that which is the sequel and outcome thereof, the gift of the Spirit which is breathed into Christian spirits. These two gifts, which are one gift, embrace all that the world needs. Christ for us and Christ in us must both be taken into account if you would estimate the manner of the love that God has bestowed upon us.

We may gain another measure of the greatness of this love if we put an emphasis--which I dare say the writer did not intend--on one word of this text, and think of the love given to ‘us,’ such creatures as we are. Out of the depths we cry to Him. Not only by the voice of our supplications, but even when we raise no call of entreaty, our misery pleads with His merciful heart, and from the heights there comes upon our wretchedness and sin the rush of this great love, like a cataract, which sweeps away all our sins, and floods us with its own blessedness and joy. The more we know ourselves, the more wonderingly and thankfully shall we bow down our hearts before Him, as we measure His mercy by our unworthiness.

From all His works the same summons echoes. They all call us to see mirrored in them His loving care. But the Cross of Christ and the gift of a Divine Spirit cry aloud to every ear in tones of more beseeching entreaty and of more imperative command to ‘behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us.’

II. Look next at the sonship which is the purpose of His given Love.

It has often been noticed that the Apostle John uses for that expression ‘the sons of God,’ another word from that which his brother Paul uses. John’s phrase would perhaps be a little more accurately translated ‘children of God,’ whilst Paul, on the other hand, very seldom says ‘children,’ but almost always says ‘sons.’ Of course the children are sons and the sons are children, but still, the slight distinction of phrase is characteristic of the men, and of the different points of view from which they speak about the same thing. John’s word lays stress on the children’s kindred nature with their father and on their immature condition.

But without dwelling on that, let us consider this great gift and dignity of being children of God, which is the object that God has in view in all the lavish bestowment of His goodness upon us.

That end is not reached by God’s making us men. Over and above that He has to send this great gift of His love, in order that the men whom He has made may become His sons. If you take the context here you will see very clearly that the writer draws a broad distinction between ‘the sons of God’ and ‘the world’ of men who do not comprehend them, and so far from being themselves sons, do not even know God’s sons when they see them. And there is a deeper and solemner word still in the context. John thinks that men [within the range of light and revelation, at all events] are divided into two families--’the children of God and the children of the devil.’ There are two families amongst men.

Thank God, the prodigal son in his rags amongst the swine, and lying by the swine-troughs in his filth and his husks, and his fever, is a son! No doubt about that! He has these three elements and marks of sonship that no man ever gets rid of: he is of a divine origin, he has a divine likeness in that he has got mind and will and spirit, and he is the object of a divine love.

The doctrine of the New Testament about the Fatherhood of God and the sonship of man does not in the slightest degree interfere with these three great truths, that all men, though the features of the common humanity may be almost battered out of recognition in them, are all children of God because He made them; that they are children of God because still there lives in them something of the likeness of the creative Father; and, blessed be His name! that they are all children of God because He loves and provides and cares for every one of them.

All that is blessedly and eternally true; but it is also true that there is a higher relation than that to which the name ‘children of God’ is more accurately given, and to which in the New Testament that name is confined. If you ask what that relation is, let me quote to you three passages in this Epistle which will answer the question. ‘Whoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God,’ that is the first; ‘Every one that doeth righteousness is born of God,’ that is the second; ‘Every one that loveth is born of God,’ that is the third. Or to put them all into one expression which holds them all, in the great words of his prologue in the first chapter of John’s Gospel you find this: ‘To as many as received Him to them gave He power to become the sons of God.’ Believing in Christ with loving trust produces, and doing righteousness and loving the brethren, as the result of that belief, prove the fact of sonship in its highest and its truest sense.

What is implied in that great word by which the Almighty gives us a name and a place as of sons and daughters? Clearly, first, a communicated life, therefore, second, a kindred nature which shall be ‘pure as He is pure,’ and, third, growth to full maturity.

This sonship, which is no mere empty name, is the aim and purpose of God’s dealings, of all the revelation of His love, and most especially of the great gift of His love in Christ. Has that purpose been accomplished in you? Have you ever looked at that great gift of love that God has given you on purpose to make you His child? If you have, has it made you one? Are you trusting to Jesus Christ, whom God has sent forth that we might receive the standing of sons in Him? Are you a child of God because a brother of that Saviour? Have you received the gift of a divine life through Him? My friend, remember the grim alternative! A child of God or a child of the devil! Bitter words, narrow words, uncharitable words--as people call them! And I believe, and therefore I am bound to say it, true words, which it concerns you to lay to heart.

III. Now, still further, let me ask you to look at the glad recognition of this sonship by the child’s heart.

I have already referred to the clause added in the Revised Version, ‘and such we are.’ As I said, it is a kind of ‘aside,’ in which John adds the Amen for himself and for his poor brothers and sisters toiling and moiling obscure among the crowds of Ephesus, to the great truth. He asserts his and their glad consciousness of the reality of the fact of their sonship, which they know to be no empty title. He asserts, too, the present possession of that sonship, realising it as a fact, amid all the commonplace vulgarities and carking cares and petty aims of life's little day. 'Such we are' is the 'Here am I, Father,' of the child answering the Father's call, 'My Son.'

He turns doctrine into experience. He is not content with merely having the thought in his creed, but his heart clasps it, and his whole nature responds to the great truth. I ask you, do you do that? Do not be content with hearing the truth, or even with assenting to it, and believing it in your understandings. The truth is nothing to you, unless you have made it your very own by faith. Do not be satisfied with the orthodox confession. Unless it has touched your heart and made your whole soul thrill with thankful gladness and quiet triumph, it is nothing to you. The mere belief of thirty-nine or thirty-nine thousand Articles is nothing; but when a man has a true heart-faith in Him, whom all articles are meant to make us know and love, then dogma becomes life, and the doctrine feeds the soul. Does it do so with you, my brother? Can you say, 'And such we are?'

Take another lesson. The Apostle was not afraid to say 'I know that I am a child of God.' There are many very good people, whose tremulous, timorous lips have never ventured to say 'I know.' They will say, 'Well, I hope,' or sometimes, as if that was not uncertain enough, they will put in an adverb or two, and say, 'I humbly hope that I am.' It is a far robuster kind of Christianity, a far truer one, ay, and a humbler one too, that throws all considerations of my own character and merits, and all the rest of that rubbish, clean behind me, and when God says, 'My son!' says 'My Father;' and when God calls us His children, leaps up and gladly answers, 'And we are!' Do not be afraid of being too confident, if your confidence is built on God, and not on yourselves; but be afraid of being too diffident, and be afraid of having a great deal of self-righteousness masquerading under the guise of such a profound consciousness of your own unworthiness that you dare not call yourself a child of God. It is not a question of worthiness or unworthiness. It is a question, in the first place, and mainly, of the truth of Christ's promise and the sufficiency of Christ's Cross; and in a very subordinate degree of anything belonging to you.

IV. We have here, finally, the loving and devout gaze upon this wonderful love. ‘Behold,’ at the beginning of my text, is not the mere exclamation which you often find both in the Old and in the New Testaments, which is simply intended to emphasise the importance of what follows, but it is a distinct command to do the thing, to look, and ever to look, and to look again, and live in the habitual and devout contemplation of that infinite and wondrous love of God.

I have but two remarks to make about that, and the one is this, that such a habit of devout and thankful meditation upon the love of God, as manifested in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and the consequent gift of the Divine Spirit, joined with the humble, thankful conviction that I am a child of God thereby, lies at the foundation of all vigorous and happy Christian life. How can a thing which you do not touch with your hands and see with your eyes produce any effect upon you, unless you think about it? How can a religion which can only influence through thought and emotion do anything in you, or for you, unless you occupy your thoughts and your feelings with it? It is sheer nonsense to suppose it possible. Things which do not appeal to sense are real to us, and indeed we may say, are at all for us, only as we think about them. If you had a dear friend in Australia, and never thought about him, he would even cease to be dear, and it would be all one to you as if he were dead. If he were really dear to you, you would think about him. We may say [though, of course, there are other ways of looking at the matter] that, in a very intelligible sense, the degree in which we think about Christ, and in Him behold the love of God, is a fairly accurate measure of our Christianity.

Now will you apply that sharp test to yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that, and decide how much of your life was pagan, and how much of it was Christian? You will never make anything of your professed Christianity, you will never get a drop of happiness or any kind of good out of it; it will neither be a strength nor a joy nor a defence to you unless you make it your habitual occupation to ‘behold the manner of love’; and look and look and look until it warms and fills your heart.

The second remark is that we cannot keep that great sight before the eye of our minds without effort. You will have very resolutely to look away from something else if, amid all the dazzling gauds of earth, you are to see the far-off lustre of that heavenly love. Just as timorous people in a thunder-storm will light a candle that they may not see the lightning, so many Christians have their hearts filled with the twinkling light of some miserable tapers of earthly care and pursuits, which, though they be dim and smoky, are bright enough to make it hard to see the silent depths of Heaven, though it blaze with a myriad stars. If you hold a sixpence close enough up to the pupil of your eye, it will keep you from seeing the sun. And if you hold the world close to mind and heart, as many of you do, you will only see, round the rim of it, the least tiny ring of the overlapping love of God. What the world lets you see you will see, and the world will take care that it will let you see very little--not enough to do you any good, not enough to deliver you from its chains. Wrench yourselves away, my brethren, from the absorbing contemplation of Birmingham jewellery and paste, and look at the true riches. If you have ever had some glimpses of that wondrous love, and have ever been drawn by it to cry, ‘Abba, Father,’ do not let the trifles which belong not to your true inheritance fill your thoughts, but renew the vision, and by determined turning away of your eyes from beholding vanity, look off from the things that are seen, that you may gaze upon the things that are not seen, and chiefest among them, upon the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If you have never looked on that love, I beseech you now to turn aside and see this great sight. Do not let that brightness burn unnoticed while your eyes are fixed on the ground, like the gaze of men absorbed in gold digging, while a glorious sunshine is flushing the eastern sky. Look to the unspeakable, incomparable, immeasurable love of God, in giving up His Son to death for us all. Look and be saved. Look and live. ‘Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed on you,’ and, beholding, you will become the sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty.

8) 1 John 3:2

1 John

THE UNREVEALED FUTURE OF THE SONS OF GOD

1Jn. 3:2.

I have hesitated, as you may well believe, whether I should take these words for a text. They seem so far to surpass anything that can be said concerning them, and they cover such immense fields of dim thought, that one may well be afraid lest one should spoil them by even attempting to dilate on them. And yet they are so closely connected with the words of the previous verse, which formed the subject of my last sermon, that I felt as if my work were only half done unless I followed that sermon with this.

The present is the prophet of the future, says my text: ‘Now we are the sons of God, and’ [not ‘but’] ‘it doth not yet appear what we shall be.’ Some men say, ‘Ah! now are we, but we shall be--nothing!’ John does not think so. John thinks that if a man is a son of God he will always be so. There are three things in this verse, how, if we are God’s children, our sonship makes us quite sure of the future; how our sonship leaves us largely in ignorance of the future, but how our sonship flings one bright, all-penetrating beam of light on the only important thing about the future, the clear vision of and the perfect likeness to Him who is our life. ‘Now are we the sons of God,’ therefore we shall be. We are the sons; we do not know what we shall be. We are the sons, and therefore, though there be a great circumference of blank ignorance as to our future, yet, blessed be His name, there is a great light burning in the middle of it! ‘We know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’

I. The fact of sonship makes us quite sure of the future.

I am not concerned to appraise the relative value of the various arguments and proofs, or, it may be, presumptions, which may recommend the doctrine of a future life to men, but it seems to me that the strongest reasons for believing in another world are these two:--first, that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and has gone up there; and, second, that a man here can pray, and trust, and love God, and feel that he is His child. As was noticed in the preceding sermon, the word rendered ‘sons’ might more accurately be translated ‘children.’ If so, we may fairly say, ‘We are the children of God now--and if we are children now, we shall be grown up some time.’ Childhood leads to maturity. The infant becomes a man.

That is to say, he that here, in an infantile way, is stammering with his poor, unskilled lips the name 'Abba! Father!' will one day come to speak it fully. He that dimly trusts, he that partially loves, he that can lift up his heart in some more or less unworthy prayer and aspiration after God, in all these emotions and exercises, has the great proof in himself that such emotions, such relationship, can never be put an end to. The roots have gone down through the temporal, and have laid hold of the Eternal. Anything seems to me to be more credible than that a man who can look up and say, 'My Father,' shall be crushed by what befalls the mere outside of him; anything seems to me to be more believable than to suppose that the nature which is capable of these elevating emotions and aspirations of confidence and hope, which can know God and yearn after Him, and can love Him, is to be wiped out like a gnat by the finger of Death. The material has nothing to do with these feelings, and if I know myself, in however feeble and imperfect a degree, to be the son of God, I carry in the conviction the very pledge and seal of eternal life. That is a thought 'whose very sweetness yieldeth proof that it was born for immortality.' 'We are the sons of God,' therefore we shall always be so, in all worlds, and whatsoever may become of this poor wrappage in which the soul is shrouded.

We may notice, also, that not only the fact of our sonship avails to assure us of immortal life, but that also the very form which our religious experience takes points in the same direction.

As I said, infancy is the prophecy of maturity. 'The child is father of the man'; the bud foretells the flower. In the same way, the very imperfections of the Christian life, as it is seen here, argue the existence of another state, where all that is here in the germ shall be fully matured, and all that is here incomplete shall attain the perfection which alone will correspond to the power that works in us. Think of the ordinary Christian character. The beginning is there, and evidently no more than the beginning. As one looks at the crudity, the inconsistencies, the failings, the feebleness of the Christian life of others, or of oneself, and then thinks that such a poor, imperfect exhibition is all that so divine a principle has been able to achieve in this world, one feels that there must be a region and a time where we shall be all which the transforming power of God's spirit can make us. The very inconsistencies of Christians are as strong reasons for believing in the perfect life of Heaven as their purities and virtues are. We have a right to say mighty principles are at work upon Christian souls--the power of the Cross, the power of love issuing in obedience, the power of an indwelling Spirit; and is this all that these great forces are going to effect on human character? Surely a seed so precious and divine is somewhere, and at some time, to bring forth something better than these few poor, half-developed flowers, something with more lustrous petals and richer fragrance. The plant is clearly an exotic; does not its obviously struggling growth here tell of warmer suns and richer soil, where it will be at home?

There is a great deal in every man, and most of all in Christian men and women, which does not fit this present. All other creatures correspond in their capacities to the place where they are set down; and the world in which the plant or the animal lives, the world of their surroundings, stimulates to activity all their powers. But that is not so with a man. ‘Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests.’ They fit exactly, and correspond to their ‘environment.’ But a man!--there is an enormous amount of waste faculty about him if he is only to live in this world. There are large capacities in every nature, and most of all in a Christian nature, which are like the packages that emigrants take with them, marked ‘Not wanted on the voyage.’ These go down into the hold, and they are only of use after landing in the new world. If I am a son of God I have much in me that is ‘not wanted on the voyage,’ and the more I grow into His likeness, the more I am thrown out of harmony with the things round about me, in proportion as I am brought into harmony with the things beyond.

That consciousness of belonging to another order of things, because I am God’s child, will make me sure that when I have done with earth, the tie that binds me to my Father will not be broken, but that I shall go home, where I shall be fully and for ever all that I so imperfectly began to be here, where all gaps in my character shall be filled up, and the half-completed circle of my heavenly perfectness shall grow like the crescent moon, into full-orbed beauty. ‘Neither life, nor death, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature’ shall be able to break that tie, and banish the child from the conscious grasp of a Father’s hand. Dear brother and sister, can you say, ‘Now am I a child of God!’ Then you may patiently and peacefully front that dim future.

II. Now I come to the second point, namely, that we remain ignorant of much in that future.

That happy assurance of the love of God resting upon me, and making me His child through Jesus Christ, does not dissipate all the darkness which lies on that beyond. ‘We are the sons of God, and,’ just because we are, ‘it does not yet appear what we shall be.’ Or, as the words are rendered in the Revised Version, ‘it is not yet made manifest what we shall be.’

The meaning of that expression, ‘It doth not yet appear,’ or, ‘It is not made manifest,’ may be put into very plain words. John would simply say to us, ‘There has never been set forth before men’s eyes in this earthly life of ours an example, or an instance, of what the sons of God are to be in another state of being.’ And so, because men have never had the instance before them, they do not know much about that state.

In some sense there has been a manifestation through the life of Jesus Christ. Christ has died; Christ is risen again. Christ has gone about amongst men upon earth after Resurrection. Christ has been raised to the right hand of God, and sits there in the glory of the Father. So far it has been manifested what we shall be. But the risen Christ is not the glorified Christ, and although He has set forth before man’s senses irrefragably the fact of another life, and to some extent given glimpses and gleams of knowledge with regard to certain portions of it, I suppose that the ‘glorious body’ of Jesus Christ was not assumed by Him till the cloud ‘received Him out of their sight,’ nor, indeed, could it be assumed while He moved among the material realities of this world, and did eat and drink before them. So that, while we thankfully recognise that Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension have ‘brought life and immortality to light,’ we must remember that it is the fact, and not the manner of the fact, which they make plain; and that, even after His example, it has not been manifested what is the body of glory which He now wears, and therefore it has not yet been manifested what we shall be when we are fashioned after its likeness.

There has been no manifestation, then, to sense, or to human experience, of that future, and, therefore, there is next to no knowledge about it. You can only know facts when the facts are communicated. You may speculate and argue and guess as much as you like, but that does not thin the darkness one bit. The unborn child has no more faculty or opportunity for knowing what the life upon earth is like than man here, in the world, has for knowing that life beyond. The chrysalis’ dreams about what it would be when it was a butterfly would be as reliable as a man’s imagination of what a future life will be.

So let us feel two things:--Let us be thankful that we do not know, for the ignorance is the sign of the greatness; and then, let us be sure that just the very mixture of knowledge and ignorance which we have about another world is precisely the food which is most fitted to nourish imagination and hope. If we had more knowledge, supposing it could be given, of the conditions of that future life, it would lose some of its power to attract. Ignorance does not always prevent the occupation of the mind with a subject. Blank ignorance does; but ignorance, shot with knowledge like a tissue which, when you hold it one way seems all black, and when you tilt it another, seems golden, stimulates desire, hope, and imagination. So let us thankfully acquiesce in the limited knowledge.

Fools can ask questions which wise men cannot answer, and will not ask. There are questions which, sometimes, when we are thinking about our own future, and sometimes when we see dear ones go away into the mist, become to us almost torture. It is easy to put them; it is not so easy to say: ‘Thank God, we cannot answer them yet!’ If we could it would only be because the experience of earth was adequate to measure the experience of Heaven; and that would be to bring the future down to the low levels of this present. Let us be thankful then that so long as we can only speak in language derived from the experiences of earth, we have yet to learn the vocabulary of Heaven. Let us be thankful that our best help to know what we shall be is to reverse much of what we are, and that the loftiest and most positive declarations concerning the future lie in negatives like these:--’I saw no temple therein.’ ‘There shall be no night there.’ ‘There shall be no curse there.’ ‘There shall be no more sighing nor weeping, for the former things are passed away.’

The white mountains keep their secret well; not until we have passed through the black rocks that make the throat of the pass on the summit, shall we see the broad and shining plains beyond the hills. Let us be thankful for, and own the attractions of, the knowledge that is wrapt in ignorance, and thankfully say, ‘Now are we the sons of God, and it doth not appear what we shall be!’

III. Now I must be very brief with the last thought that is here, and I am the less unwilling to be so because we cannot travel one inch beyond the revelations of the Book in reference to the matter. The thought is this, that our sonship flings one all-penetrating beam of light on that future, in the knowledge of our perfect vision and perfect likeness. ‘We know that when He shall be manifested, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’

‘When He shall be manifested’--to what period does that refer? It seems most natural to take the manifestation here as being the same as that spoken of only a verse or two before. ‘And now, little children, abide in Him, and when He shall be manifested, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before Him at His coming’ [2. 28]. That ‘coming’ then, is the ‘manifestation’ of Christ; and it is at the period of His coming in His glory that His servants ‘shall be like Him, and see Him as He is.’ Clearly then it is Christ whom we shall see and become like, and not the Father invisible.

To behold Christ will be the condition and the means of growing like Him. That way of transformation by beholding, or of assimilation by the power of loving contemplation, is the blessed way of ennobling character, which even here, and in human relationships, has often made it easy to put off old vices and to clothe the soul with unwonted grace. Men have learned to love and gaze upon some fair character, till some image of its beauty has passed into their ruder natures. To love such and to look on them has been an education. The same process is exemplified in more sacred regions, when men here learn to love and look upon Christ by faith, and so become like Him, as the sun stamps a tiny copy of its blazing sphere on the eye that looks at it. But all these are but poor, far-off hints and low preludes of the energy with which that blessed vision of the glorified Christ shall work on the happy hearts that behold Him, and of the completeness of the likeness to Him which will be printed in light upon their faces.

It matters not, though it doth not yet appear what we shall be, if to all the questionings of our own hearts we have this for our all-sufficient answer, ‘We shall be like Him.’ As good old Richard Baxter has it:--

‘My knowledge of that life is small,

The eye of faith is dim;

But, ‘tis enough that Christ knows all,

And I shall be like Him!’

‘It is enough for the servant that he be as his Lord.’

There is no need to go into the dark and difficult questions about the manner of that vision. He Himself prayed, in that great intercessory prayer, ‘Father, I will that these whom Thou hast given Me be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory.’ That vision of the glorified manhood of Jesus Christ--certain, direct, clear, and worthy, whether it comes through sense or through thought--to behold that vision is all the sight of God that men in Heaven ever will have. And through the millenniums of a growing glory, Christ as He is will be the manifested Deity. Likeness will clear sight, and clearer sight will increase likeness. So in blessed interchange these two will be cause and effect, and secure the endless progress of the redeemed spirit towards the vision of Christ which never can behold all His Infinite Fulness, and the likeness to Christ which can never reproduce all his Infinite Beauty.

As a bit of glass when the light strikes it flashes into sunny glory, or as every poor little muddy pool on the pavement, when the sunbeams fall upon it, has the sun mirrored even in its shallow mud, so into your poor heart and mine the vision of Christ’s glory will come, moulding and transforming us to its own beauty. With unveiled face reflecting as a mirror does, the glory of the Lord, we ‘shall be changed into the same image.’ ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’

Dear brethren, all begins with this, love Christ and trust Him and you are a child of God! ‘And if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.’

9) 1 John 3:3

1 John

THE PURIFYING INFLUENCE OF HOPE

1Jn. 3:3.

That is a very remarkable ‘and’ with which this verse begins. The Apostle has just been touching the very heights of devout contemplation, soaring away up into dim regions where it is very hard to follow,--’We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’

And now, without a pause, and linking his thoughts together by a simple ‘and,’ he passes from the unimaginable splendours of the Beatific Vision to the plainest practical talk. Mysticism has often soared so high above the earth that it has forgotten to preach righteousness, and therein has been its weak point. But here is the most mystical teacher of the New Testament insisting on plain morality as vehemently as his friend James could have done.

The combination is very remarkable. Like the eagle he rises, and like the eagle, with the impetus gained from his height, he drops right down on the earth beneath!

And that is not only a characteristic of St. John’s teaching, but it is a characteristic of all the New Testament morality--its highest revelations are intensely practical. Its light is at once set to work, like the sunshine that comes ninety millions of miles in order to make the little daisies open their crimson-tipped petals; so the profoundest things that the Bible has to say are said to you and me, not that we may know only, but that knowing we may do, and do because we are.

So John, here: ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ ‘And’--a simple coupling-iron for two such thoughts--’every man that hath this hope in Him’--that is, in Christ, not in himself, as we sometimes read it--’every man that hath this hope,’ founded on Christ, ‘purifies himself even as He is pure.’

The thought is a very simple one, though sometimes it is somewhat mistakenly apprehended. Put into its general form it is just this:--If you expect, and expecting, hope to be like Jesus Christ yonder, you will be trying your best to be like Him here. It is not the mere purifying influence of hope that is talked about, but it is the specific influence of this one hope, the hope of ultimate assimilation to Christ leading to strenuous efforts, each a partial resemblance of Him, here and now. And that is the subject I want to say a word or two about now.

I. First, then, notice the principle that is here, which is the main thing to be insisted upon, namely, If we are to be pure, we must purify ourselves.

There are two ways of getting like Christ, spoken about in the context. One is the blessed way, that is more appropriate for the higher Heaven, the way of assimilation and transformation by beholding--'If we see Him' we shall be 'like Him.' That is the blessed method of the Heavens. Yes, but even here on earth it may to some extent be realised! Love always breeds likeness. And there is such a thing, here on earth and now, as gazing upon Christ with an intensity of affection, and simplicity of trust, and rapture of aspiration, and ardour of desire which shall transform us in some measure into His own likeness. John is an example of that for us. It was a true instinct that made the old painters always represent him as like the Master that he sat beside, even in face. Where did John get his style from? He got it by much meditating upon Christ's words. The disciple caught the method of the Master's speech, and to some extent the manner of the Master's vision.

And so he himself stands before us as an instance of the possibility, even on earth, of this calm, almost passive process, and most blessed and holiest method of getting like the Master, by simple gazing, which is the gaze of love and longing.

But, dear brethren, the law of our lives forbids that that should be the only way in which we grow like Christ. 'First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear,' was never meant to be the exhaustive, all-comprehensive statement of the method of Christian progress. You and I are not vegetables; and the Parable of the Seed is only one side of the truth about the method of Christian growth. The very word 'purify' speaks to us of another condition; it implies impurity, it implies a process which is more than contemplation, it implies the reversal of existing conditions, and not merely the growth upwards to unattained conditions.

And so growth is not all that Christian men need; they need excision, they need casting out of what is in them; they need change as well as growth. ‘Purifying’ they need because they are impure, and growth is only half the secret of Christian progress.

Then there is the other consideration, viz., if there is to be this purifying it must be done by myself. ‘Ah!’ you say, ‘done by yourself? That is not evangelical teaching.’ Well, let us see. Take two or three verses out of this Epistle which at first sight seem to be contradictory of this. Take the very first that bears on the subject:--’The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin’ [1Jn. 1:7]. ‘If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ [1. 9]. ‘He that abideth in Him sinneth not’ [1Jn. 3:6]. ‘This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith’ [1Jn. 5:4].

Now if you put all these passages together, and think about the general effect of them, it comes to this: that our best way of cleansing ourselves is by keeping firm hold of Jesus Christ and of the cleansing powers that lie in Him. To take a very homely illustration--soap and water wash your hands clean, and what you have to do is simply to rub the soap and water on to the hand, and bring them into contact with the foulness. You cleanse yourselves. Yes! because without the friction there would not be the cleansing. But is it you, or is it the soap, that does the work? Is it you or the water that makes your hands clean? And so when God comes and says, ‘Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings, your hands are full of blood,’ He says in effect, ‘Take the cleansing that I give you and rub it in, and apply it: and your flesh will become as the flesh of a little child, and you shall be clean.’

That is to say, the very deepest word about Christian effort of self-purifying is this--keep close to Jesus Christ. You cannot sin as long as you hold His hand. To have Him with you;--I mean by that to have the thoughts directed to Him, the love turning to Him, the will submitted to Him, Him consciously with us in the day’s work. To have communion with Jesus

Christ is like bringing an atmosphere round about us in which all evil will die. If you take a fish out of water and bring it up into the upper air, it writhes and gasps, and is dead presently; and our evil tendencies and sins, drawn up out of the muddy depths in which they live, and brought up into that pure atmosphere of communion with Jesus Christ, are sure to shrivel and to die, and to disappear. We kill all evil by fellowship with the Master. His presence in our lives, by our communion with Him, is like the watchfire that the traveller lights at night--it keeps all the wild beasts of prey away from the fold.

Christ's fellowship is our cleansing, and the first and main thing that we have to do in order to make ourselves pure is to keep ourselves in union with Him, in whom inhere and abide all the energies that cleanse men's souls. Take the unbleached calico and spread it out on the green grass, and let the blessed sunshine come down upon it, and sprinkle it with fair water; and the grass and the moisture and the sunshine will do all the cleansing, and it will glitter in the light, 'so as no fuller on earth can white it.'

So cleansing is keeping near Jesus Christ. But it is no use getting the mill-race from the stream into your works unless you put wheels in its way to drive. And our holding ourselves in fellowship with the Master in that fashion is not all that we have to do. There have to be distinct and specific efforts, constantly repeated, to subdue and suppress individual acts of transgression. We have to fight against evil, sin by sin. We have not the thing to do all at once; we have to do it in detail. It is a war of outposts, like the last agonies of that Franco-Prussian war, when the Emperor had abdicated, and the country was really conquered, and Paris had yielded, but yet all over the face of the land combats had to be carried on.

So it is with us. Holiness is not feeling; it is character. You do not get rid of your sins by the act of divine amnesty only. You are not perfect because you say you are, and feel as if you were, and think you are. God does not make any man pure in his sleep. His cleansing does not dispense with fighting, but makes victory possible.

Then, dear brethren, lay to heart this, as the upshot of the whole matter: First of all, let us turn to Him from whom all the cleansing comes; and then, moment by moment, remember that it is our work to purify ourselves by the strength and the power that is given to us by the Master.

II. The second thought here is this: This purifying of ourselves is the link or bridge between the present and the future.-

‘Now are we the sons of God,’ says John in the context. That is the pier upon the one side of the gulf. ‘It doth not yet appear what we shall be, but when He is made manifest we shall be like Him.’ That is the pier on the other. How are the two to be connected? There is only one way by which the present sonship will blossom and fruit into the future perfect likeness, and that is,--if we throw across the gulf, by God’s help day by day here, that bridge of our effort after growing likeness to Himself, and purity therefrom.

That is plain enough, I suppose. To speak in somewhat technical terms, the ‘law of continuity’ that we hear so much about, runs on between earth and Heaven; which, being translated into plain English, is but this--that the act of passing from the limitations and conditions of this transitory life into the solemnities and grandeurs of that future does not alter a man’s character, though it may intensify it. It does not make him different from what he was, though it may make him more of what he was, whether its direction be good or bad.

You take a stick and thrust it into water; and because the rays of light pass from one medium to another of a different density, they are refracted and the stick seems bent; but take the human life out of the thick, coarse medium of earth and lift it up into the pure rarefied air of Heaven, and there is no refraction; it runs straight on. Straight on! The given direction continues; and in whatever direction my face is turned when I die, thither my face will be turned when I live again.

Do not you fancy that there is any magic in coffins and graves and shrouds to make men different from their former selves. The continuity runs clean on, the rail goes without a break, though it goes through the Mont Cenis tunnel; and on the one side is the cold of the North, and on the other the sunny South. The man is the same man through death and beyond.

So the one link between sonship here and likeness to Christ hereafter is this link of present, strenuous effort to become like Him day by day in personal purity. For there is another reason, on which I need not dwell, viz., unless there be this daily effort on our part to become like Jesus Christ by personal purity, we shall not be able to ‘see Him as He is.’ Death will take a great many veils off men’s hearts. It will reveal to them a great deal that they do not know, but it will not give the faculty of beholding the glorified Christ in such fashion as that the beholding will mean transformation. ‘Every eye shall see Him,’ but it is conceivable that a spirit shall be so immersed in self-love and in godlessness that the vision of Christ shall be repellent and not attractive; shall have no transforming and no gladdening power. And I beseech you to remember that about that vision, as about the vision of God Himself, the principle stands true; it is ‘the pure in heart that shall see God’ in Christ. And the change from life to the life beyond will not necessarily transform into the image of His dear Son. You make a link between the present and the future by cleansing your hands and your hearts, through faith in the cleansing power of Christ, and direct effort at holiness.

III. Now I must briefly add finally: that this self-cleansing of which I have been speaking is the offspring and outcome of that ‘hope’ in my text.

It is the child of hope. Hope is by no means an active faculty generally. As the poets have it, she may ‘smile and wave her golden hair’; but she is not in the way of doing much work in the world. And it is not the mere fact of hope that generates this effort; it is, as I have been trying to show you, a certain kind of hope--the hope of being like Jesus Christ when ‘we see Him as He is.’

I have only two things to say about this matter, and one of them is this: of course, such strenuous effort of purity will only be the result of such a hope as that, because such a hope will fight against one of the greatest of all the enemies of our efforts after purity. There is nothing that makes a man so down-hearted in his work of self-improvement as the constant and bitter experience that it seems to be all of no use; that he is making so little progress; that with immense pains, like a snail creeping up a wall, he gets up, perhaps, an inch or two, and then all at once he drops down, and further down than he was before he started.

Slowly we manage some little, patient self-improvement; gradually, inch by inch and bit by bit, we may be growing better, and then there comes some gust and outburst of temptation; and the whole painfully reclaimed soil gets covered up by an avalanche of mud and stones, that we have to remove slowly, barrow-load by barrow-load. And then we feel that it is all of no use to strive, and we let circumstances shape us, and give up all thoughts of reformation.

To such moods then there comes, like an angel from Heaven, that holy, blessed message, ‘Cheer up, man! "We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."‘ Every inch that you make now will tell then, and it is not all of no use. Set your heart to the work, it is a work that will be blessed and will prosper.

Again, here is a test for all you Christian people, who say that you look to Heaven with hope as to your home and rest.

A great deal of the religious contemplation of a future state is pure sentimentality, and like all pure sentimentality is either immoral or non-moral. But here the two things are brought into clear juxtaposition, the bright hope of Heaven and the hard work done here below. Now is that what the gleam and expectation of a future life does for you?

This is the only time in John’s Epistle that he speaks about hope. The good man, living so near Christ, finds that the present, with its ‘abiding in Him’ is enough for his heart. And though he was the Seer of the Apocalypse, he has scarcely a word to say about the future in this letter of his, and when he does it is for a simple and intensely practical purpose, in order that he may enforce on us the teaching of labouring earnestly in purifying ourselves.

My brother, is that your type of Christianity? Is that the kind of inspiration that comes to you from the hope that steals in upon you in your weary hours, when sorrows, and cares, and changes, and loss, and disappointments, and hard work weigh you down, and you say, ‘It would be blessed to pass hence’? Does it set you harder at work than anything else can do? Is it all utilised? Or if I might use such an illustration, is it like the electricity of the Aurora Borealis, that paints your winter sky with vanishing, useless splendours of crimson and blue? or have you got it harnessed to your tramcars, lighting your houses, driving sewing-machines, doing practical work in your daily life? Is the hope of Heaven, and of being like Christ, a thing that stimulates and stirs us every moment to heroisms of self-surrender and to strenuous martyrdom of self-cleansing?

All is gathered up into the one lesson. First, let us go to that dear Lord whose blood cleanseth from all sin, and let us say to Him, ‘Purge me and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.’ And then, receiving into our hearts the powers that purify, in His love and His sacrifice and His life, ‘having these promises’ and these possessions, ‘Dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord.’

10)1 John 3:7

1 John

PRACTICAL RIGHTEOUSNESS

1Jn. 3:7.

The popular idea of the Apostle John is strangely unlike the real man. He is supposed to be the gentle Apostle of Love, the mystic amongst the Twelve. He is that, but he was the ‘son of thunder’ before he was the Apostle of Love, and he did not drop the first character when he attained the second. No doubt his central thought was, ‘God is Love’; no doubt that thought had refined and assimilated his character, but the love which he believed and the love which he exercised were neither of them facile feebleness, but strong and radiant with an awful purity. None of the New Testament writers proclaims a more austere morality than does John. And just because he loved the Love and the Light, he hated and loathed the darkness. He can thunder and lighten when needful, and he shows us that the true divine love in a man recoils from its opposite as passionately as it cleaves to God and good.

Again, John is, par excellence, the mystic of the New Testament, always insisting on the direct communion which every soul may have with God, which is the essence of wholesome mysticism. Now that type of thinking has often in its raptures forgotten plain, pedestrian morality; but John never commits that error. He never soars so high as to lose sight of the flat earth below; and whilst he is always inviting us and enjoining us to dwell in God and abide in Christ, with equal persistence and force he is preaching to us the plainest duties of elementary morality.

He illustrates this moral earnestness in my text. The ‘little children’ for whom he was so affectionately solicitous were in danger, either from teachers or from the tendencies native in us all, to substitute something else for plain, righteous conduct; and the Apostle lovingly appeals to them with his urgent declaration, that the only thing which shows a man to be righteous--that is to say, a disciple of Christ--is his daily life, in conformity with Christ’s commands. The errors of these ancient Asiatics live to-day in new forms, but still substantially the same. And they are as hard to kill amongst English Nonconformists like us as they were amongst Asiatic Christians nineteen centuries ago.

I. So let me try just to insist, first of all, on that thought that doing righteousness is the one test of being a Christian.

Now that word ‘righteousness’ is a theological word, and by much usage the lettering has got to be all but obliterated upon it; and it is worn smooth like sixpences that go from pocket to pocket. Therefore I want, before I go further, to make this one distinct point, that the New Testament righteousness is no theological, cloistered, peculiar kind of excellence, but embraces within its scope, ‘whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are fair, whatsoever things are of good report’; all that the world calls virtue, all which the world has combined to praise. There are countries on the earth which are known by different names to their inhabitants and to foreigners. The ‘righteousness’ of the New Testament, though it embraces a great deal more, includes within its map all the territories which belong to morality or to virtue. The three words cover the same ground, though one of them covers more than the other two. The New Testament ‘righteousness’ differs from the moralist’s morality, or the world’s virtue, in its scope, inasmuch as it includes our relations to God as well as to men; it differs in its perspective, inasmuch as it exalts some types of excellence that the world pooh-poohs, and pulls down some that the world hallelujahs and adulates; it strips the fine feathers of approving words off some vices which masquerade as virtues. It casts round the notion of duty, of morality, of virtue, a halo, and it touches it with emotion. Christianity does with the dictates of the natural conscience what we might figure as being the leading out of some captive virgin in white, from the darkness into the sunshine, and the turning of her face up to heaven, which illuminates it with a new splendour, and invests her with a new attractiveness. But all that any man rightly includes in his notion of the things that are 'of good report' is included in this theological word, righteousness, which to some of you seems so wrapped in mists, and so far away from daily life.

I freely confess that in very many instances the morality of the moralist has outshone the righteousness of the Christian. Yes! and I have seen canoe-paddles carved by South Sea Islanders with no better tools than an oyster-shell and a sharp fish-bone, which in the minuteness and delicacy of their work, as well as in the truth and taste of their pattern, might put to shame the work of carvers with better tools. But that is not the fault of the tools; it is the fault of the carvers. And so, whilst we acknowledge that Christian people have but poorly represented to the world what Christ and Christ's apostles meant by righteousness, I reiterate that the righteousness of the gospel is the morality of the world plus a great deal more.

That being understood, let me remind you of two or three ways in which this great truth of the text is obscured to us, and in some respects contradicted, in the practice of many professing Christians. First, let me say my text insists upon this, that the conduct, not the creed, makes the Christian. There is a continual tendency on our part, as there was with these believers in Asia Minor long ago, to substitute the mere acceptance, especially the orthodox acceptance, of certain great fundamental Christian truths for Christianity. A man may believe thirty-nine or thirty-nine thousand Articles without the smallest intellectual drawback, and not be one whit nearer being a Christian than if he did not believe one of them. For faith, which is the thing that makes a man a Christian to begin with, is not assent, but trust. And there is a whole gulf, wide enough to drown a world in, between the two attitudes of mind. On the one side of the gulf is salvation, on the other side of the gulf there may be loss. Of course, I know that it is hard, though I do not believe it is impossible, to erect the structure of a saving faith on a very, very imperfect intellectual apprehension of Scripture truth. That has nothing to do with my present point. What I am saying is that, unless you erect that structure of a faith which is an act of your will and of your whole nature, and not the mere assent of your understanding, upon your belief, your belief is impotent, and is of no use at all, and you might as well not have it.

What is the office of our creed in regard to our conduct? To give us principles, to give us motives, to give us guidance, to give us weapons. If it does these things then it does its work. If it lies in our heads a mere acceptance of certain propositions, it is just as useless and as dead as the withered seeds that rattle inside a dried poppy-head in the autumn winds. You are meant to begin with accepting truth, and then you are meant to take that truth as being a power in your lives that shall shape your conduct. To know, and there an end, is enough in matters of mere science, but in matters of religion and in matters of morality or righteousness knowing is only the first step in the process, and we are made to know in order that, knowing, we may do.

But some professing Christians seem to have their natures built, like ocean-going steamers, with water-tight compartments, on the one side of which they keep their creed, and there is no kind of communication between that and the other side where their conduct is originated. ‘Little children, let no man deceive you; he that doeth righteousness is righteous.’

Again, my text suggests conduct and not emotion.

Now there is a type of Christian life which is more attractive in appearance than that of the hard, fossilised, orthodox believer--viz., the warmly emotional and fervent Christian. But that type, all experience shows, has a pit dug close beside it into which it is apt to fall. For there is a strange connection between emotional Christianity and a want of straightforwardness in daily business life, and of self-control and government of the appetites and the senses. That has been sadly shown, over and again, and if we had time one could easily point to the reasons in human nature, and its strange contexture, why it should be so. Now I am not disparaging emotion--God forbid--for I believe that to a very large extent the peculiarity of Christian teaching is just this, that it does bring emotion to bear upon the hard grind of daily duty. But for all that, I am bound to say that this is a danger which, in this day, by reason of certain tendencies in our popular Christianity, is a very real one, and that you will find people gushing in religious enthusiasm, and then going away to live very questionable, and sometimes very mean, and sometimes even very gross and sensual lives. The emotion is meant to spring from the creed, and it is meant to be the middle term between the creed and the conduct. Why, we have learnt to harness electricity to our tramcars, and to make it run our messages, and light our homes, and that is like what we have to do with the emotion without which a man's Christianity will be a poor, scraggy thing. It is a good servant; it is a bad master. You do not show yourselves to be Christians because you gush. You do not show yourselves to be Christians because you can talk fervidly and feel deeply. Raptures are all very well, but what we want is the grind of daily righteousness, and doing little things because of the fear and the love of the Lord.

May I say again, my text suggests conduct, and not verbal worship. You and I, in our adherence to a simpler, less ornate and æsthetic form of devotion than prevails in the great Episcopal churches, are by no means free from the danger which, in a more acute form, besets them, of substituting participation in external acts of worship for daily righteousness of life Laborare est orare--to work is to pray. That is true with explanations, commentaries, and limitations. But I wonder how many people there are who sing hymns which breathe aspirations and wishes that their whole daily life contradicts. And I wonder how many of us there are who seem to be joining in prayers that we never expect to have answered, and would be very much astonished if the answers came, and should not know what to do with if they did come. We live in one line, and worship in exactly the opposite. Brethren, creed is necessary; emotion is necessary; worship is necessary! But that on which these three all converge, and for which they are, is daily life, plain, practical righteousness.

II. Now let me say, secondly, that being righteous is the way to do righteousness.

One of the great characteristics of New Testament teaching of morality, or rather let me say of Christ's teaching of morality, is that it shifts, if I may so put it, the centre of gravity from acts to being, that instead of repeating the parrot-cry, 'Do, do, do' or 'Do not, do not, do not,' it says, 'Be, and the doing will take care of itself. Be; do not trouble so much about outward acts, look after the inward nature.' Character makes conduct, though, of course, conduct reacts upon character. 'As a man thinketh in his heart so is he,' and the way to set actions right is to set the heart right.

Some of us are trying to purify the stream by putting in disinfectants half-way down, instead of going up to the source and dealing with the fountain. And the weakness of all the ordinary, commonplace morality of the world is that it puts its stress upon the deeds, and leaves comparatively uncared for the condition of the person, the inward self, from whom the deeds come. And so it is all superficial, and of small account.

If that be so, then we are met by this experience: that when we honestly try to make the tree good that its fruit may be good we come full front up to this, that there is a streak in us, a stain, a twist--call it anything you like--like a black vein through a piece of Parian marble, or a scratch upon a mirror, which streak or twist baffles our effort to make ourselves righteous. I am not going, if I can help it, to exaggerate the facts of the case. The Christian teaching of what is unfortunately called total depravity is not that there is no good in anybody, but that there is a diffused evil in everybody which affects in different degrees and in different ways all a man's nature. And that is no mere doctrine of the New Testament, but it is a transcript from the experience of every one of us.

What then? If I must be righteous in order that I may do righteousness, and if, as I have found out by experience [for the only way to know myself is to reflect upon what I have done]--if I have found out that I am not righteous, what then? You may say to me, 'Have you led me into a blind alley, out of which I cannot get? Here you are, insisting on an imperative necessity, and in the same breath saying that it is impossible. What is left for me?' I go on to tell you what is left.

III. Union with Jesus Christ by faith makes us 'righteous even as He is righteous.'

There is the pledge, there is the prophecy, there is the pattern; and there is the power to redeem the pledge, to fulfil the prophecy, to make the pattern copyable and copied by every one of us. Brethren, this is the very heart of John’s teaching, that if we will, not by the mere assent of our intellect, but by the casting of ourselves on Jesus Christ, trust in Him, there comes about a union between us and Him so real, so deep, so vital, so energetic, that by the touch of His life we live, and by His righteousness breathed into us, we, too, may become righteous. The great vessel and the tiny pot by its side may have a connecting pipe, and from the great one there shall flow over into the little one as much as will fill it brim full. In Him we too may be righteous.

My friend, there are men and women who are ready to set to their seals that that is true, and who can say, ‘I have found it so. By union with Jesus Christ in faith, I have received new tastes, new inclinations, a new set to my whole life, and I have been able to overcome unrighteousnesses which were too many and too mighty for myself.’ It is so; and some of us to our own consciences and consciousness are witnesses to it, however imperfectly. God forgive us! We may have manifested the renewing power of union with Christ in our daily lives.

‘Even as He is righteous’--the water in the great vessel and the little one are the same, but the vase is not the cistern. The beam comes from the sun, but the beam is not the sun. ‘Even as’ does not mean equality, but it does mean similarity. Christ is righteous, eternally, essentially, completely; we may be ‘even as He is’ derivatively, partially, and if we put our trust in Him we shall be so, and that growingly through our daily lives. And then, after earth is done with, ‘we know that, when He shall be manifested, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’

May we each, dear brethren, ‘be found in Him, not having our own righteousness which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.’

11)1 John 4:10

CHRIST’S MISSION THE REVELATION OF GOD’S LOVE

1Jn. 4:10.

This is the second of a pair of twin verses which deal with substantially the same subject under two slightly different aspects. The thought common to both is that Christ’s mission is the great revelation of God’s love. But in the preceding verse the point on which stress is laid is the manifestation of that love, and in our text the point mainly brought out is its essential nature. In the former we read, ‘In this was manifested the love of God,’ and in the present verse we read, ‘Herein is love.’ In the former verse John fixes on three things as setting forth the greatness of that manifestation--viz., that the Christ is the only begotten Son, that the manifestation is for the world, and that its end is the bestowment of everlasting love. In my text the points which are fixed on are that that Love in its nature is self-kindled--’not that we loved God, but that He loved us’--and that it lays hold of, and casts out of the way that which, unremoved, would be a barrier between God and us--viz., our sin: ‘He hath sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.’

Now it is interesting to notice that these twin verses, like a double star which reflects the light of a central sun, draw their brightness from the great word of the Master, ‘God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ Do you not hear the echo of His voice in the three expressions in the verse before the text--’only begotten’ ‘world’ ‘live’? Here is one more of the innumerable links which bind together in indissoluble union the Gospel and the Epistle. So, then, the great thought suggested by the words before us is just this, that in the Incarnation and Sacrifice of Jesus Christ we have the great revelation of the love of God.

I. Now there are three questions that suggest themselves to me, and the first is this, What, then, does Christ’s mission say about God’s love?

I do not need to dwell on the previous question whether, apart from that mission, there is any solid revelation of the fact that there is love in Heaven, or whether we are left, apart from it, to gropings and probabilities. I need not refer you to the ambiguous oracles of nature or to the equally ambiguous oracles of life. I need not, I suppose, do more than just remind you that even the men whose faith grasps the thought of the love of God most intensely, know what it is to be brought to a stand before some of the dreadful problems which the facts of humanity and the facts of nature press upon us, nor need I remind you how, as we see around us to-day, in the drift of our English literature and that of other nations, when men turn their backs upon the Cross, they look upon a landscape all swathed in mists, and on which darkness is steadily settling. The reason why the men of this generation, some of them very superficially, and for the sake of being ‘in the swim’ and some of them despairingly and with bleeding hearts, are turning themselves to a reasoned pessimism, is because they will not see what shines out from the Cross, that God is love.

Nor need I do more than remind you, in a word, of the fact that, go where we will through this world, and consult all the conceptions that men have made to themselves of gods many and lords many, whilst we find the deification of power, and of vice, and of fragmentary goodnesses, of hopes and fears, of longings, of regrets, we find nowhere a god of whom the characteristic is love. And amidst that Pantheon of deities, some of them savage, some of them lustful, some of them embodiments of all vices, some of them indifferent and neutral, some of them radiant and fair, none reveals this secret, that the centre of the universe is a heart. So we have to turn away from hopes, from probability dashed with many a doubt, and find something that has more solid substance in it, if it is to be enough to bear up the man that grasps it and to yield before no tempests. For all that Bishop Butler says, probabilities are not the guide of life, in its deepest and noblest aspects. They may be the guide of practice, but for the anchorage of the soul we want no shifting sand-bank, but that to which we may make fast and be sure that, whatever shifts, it remains immovable. You can no more clothe the soul in ‘perhapses’ than a man can make garments out of a spider’s web. Religion consists of the things of which we are sure, and not of the things which are probable. ‘Peradventure’ is not the word on which a man can rest the weight of a crushed, or an agonising, or a sinking soul; he must have ‘Verily! verily!’ and then he is at rest.

How do we know what a man is? By seeing what a man does. How do we know what God is? By knowing what God does. So John does not argue with logic, either frosty or fiery, but he simply opens his mouth, and in calm, pellucid utterances sets forth the truths and leaves them to work. He says to us, ‘I do not relegate you to your intuitions; I do not argue with you; I simply say, Look at Him; look, and see that God is love.’

What, then, does the mission of Christ say to us about the love of God? It says, first, that it is a love independent of, and earlier than, ours. We love, as a rule, because we recognise in the object to which our heart goes out something that draws it, something that is loveable. But He whose name is ‘I am that I am’ has all the reasons of His actions within Himself, and just as He

‘Sits on no precarious throne,

Nor borrows leave to be,’

nor is dependent on any creature for existence, so He is His own motive, He is His own reason. Within that sacred circle of the Infinite Nature lie all the energies which bring that Infinite Nature into action; and like some clear fountain, more sparkling than crystal, there wells up for ever, from the depths of the Divine Nature, the love which is Himself. He loves, not because we love Him, but because He is God. The very sun itself, as some astronomers believe, owes its radiant brightness and ever-communicated warmth to the impact on, and reception into, it of myriads of meteors and of matter drawn from the surrounding system. So when the fuel fails, that fire will go out, and the sun will shrivel into a black ball. But this central Sun of the universe has all His light within Himself, and the rays that pour out from Him owe their being and their motion to nothing but the force of that central fire, from which they rush with healing on their wings.

If, then, God’s love is not evoked by anything in His creatures, then it is universal, and we do not need anxiously to question ourselves whether we deserve that it shall fall upon us, and no conscious unworthiness need ever make us falter in the least in the firmness with which we grasp that great central thought. The sun, inferior emblem as it is of that Light of all that is, pours down its beams indiscriminately on dunghill and on jewel, though it be true that in the one its rays breed corruption and in the other draw out beauty. That great love wraps us all, is older than our sins, and is not deflected by them. So that is the first thing that Christ’s mission tells us about God’s love.

The second is--it speaks to us of a love which gives its best. John says, ‘God sent His Son,’ and that word reposes, like the rest of the passage, on many words of Christ’s--such as, for instance, when He speaks of Himself as ‘sanctified and sent into the world,’ and many another saying. But remember how, in the foundation passage to which I have already referred, and of which we have some reflection in the words before us, there is a tenderer expression--not merely ‘sent,’ but ‘gave.’ Paul strengthens the word when he says, ‘gave up for us all.’ It is not for us to speculate about these deep things, but I would remind you of what I dare say I have had occasion often to point out, that Paul seems to intend to suggest to us a mysterious parallel, when he further says, ‘He that spared not His own Son, but freely gave Him up to death for us all.’ For that emphatic word ‘spared’ is a distinct allusion to, and quotation of, the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac: ‘Seeing thou hast not withheld from Me thine only son.’ And so, mysterious as it is, we may venture to say that He not only sent, but He gave, and not only gave, but gave up. His love, like ours, delights to lavish its most precious gifts on its objects.

Now there arises from this consideration a thought which I only mention, and it is this. Christian teaching about Christ’s work has often, both by its friends and its foes, been so presented as to lead to the conception that it was the work of Christ which made God love men. The enemies of evangelical truth are never tired of talking in that sense; and some of its unwise friends have given reason for the caricature. But the true Christian teaching is, ‘God so loved ... that He gave.’ The love is the cause of the mission, and not the mission that which evokes the love. So let us be sure that, not because Christ died does God love us sinful creatures, but that, because God loves us, Christ died for us.

The third thing which the mission of Christ teaches us about the love of God is that it is a love which takes note of and overcomes man’s sin. I have said, as plainly as I can, that I reject the travesty of Christianity which implies that it was Christ’s mission which originated God’s love to men. But a love that does not in the slightest degree care whether its object is good or bad--what sort of a love do you call that? What do you name it when a father shows it to his children? Moral indifference; culpable and weak and fatal. And is it anything nobler, if you transfer it to God, and say that it is all the same to Him whether a man is living the life of a hog, and forgetting all that is high and noble, or whether he is pressing with all his strength towards light and truth and goodness? Surely, surely they who, in the name of their reverence for the supreme love of God, cover over the fact of His righteousness, are mutilating and killing the very attribute that they are trying to exalt. A love that cares nothing for the moral character of its object is not love, but hate; it is not kindness, but cruelty. Take away the background because it is so black, and you lower the brilliancy of whiteness of that which stands in front of it. There is such a property in God as is fittingly described by that tremendous word 'wrath.' God cannot, being what He is, treat sin as if it were no sin; and therefore we read, 'He sent His son to be the propitiation for our sins.' The black dam, which we build up between ourselves and the river of the water of life, is to be swept away; and it is the death of Jesus Christ which makes it possible for the highest gift of God's love to pour over the ruined and partially removed barrier and to flood a man's soul. Brethren, no God that is worthy the name can give Himself to a sinful soul. No sinful soul that has not the habit, the guilt, the penalty of its sins swept away, is capable of receiving the life, which is the highest gift of the love. So our twin texts divide what I may call the process of redemption between them; and whilst the one says, 'He sent His Son that we should have life through Him,' the other tells us of how the sins which bar the entrance of that life into our hearts, as our own consciences tell us they do, can be removed. There must first be the propitiation for our sins, and then that mighty love reaches its purpose and attains its end, and can give us the life of God to be the life of our souls. So much for my first and principle question.

II. Now I have to ask, secondly, how comes it that Christ's mission says anything about God's love?

That question is a very plain one, and I should like to press the answer to it very emphatically. Take any other of the great names of the world's history of poet, thinker, philosopher, moralist, practical benefactor; is it possible to apply such a thought as this to them--except with a hundred explanations and limitations--that they, however radiant, however wise, however beneficent, however fruitful their influence, make men sure that God loves them? The thing is ridiculous, unless you are using language in a very fantastic and artificial fashion.

Christ’s mission reveals God’s love, because Christ is the Son of God. If it is true, as Jesus said, that ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father,’ then I can say, ‘In Thy tenderness, in Thy patience, in Thy attracting of the publican and the harlot, in Thy sympathy with all the erring and the sorrowful, and, most of all, in Thy agony and passion, in Thy cross and death, I see the glory of God which is the love of God.’ Brother, if you break that link, which binds the man Christ Jesus with the ever-living and the ever-loving God, I know not how you can draw from the record of His life and death a confidence, which nothing can shake, in the love of the Father.

Then there is another point. Christ’s mission speaks to us about God’s love, if--and I was going to say only if--we regard it as His mission to be the propitiation for our sins. Strike out the death as the sacrifice for the world’s sin, and what you have left is a maimed something, which may be, and I thankfully recognise often is, very strengthening, very helpful, very calming, very ennobling, even to men who do not sympathise with the view of that work which I am now setting forth, but which is all that to them, very largely, because of the unconscious influence of the truths which they have cast away. It seems to me that those who, in the name of the highest paternal love of God, reject the thought of Christ’s sacrificial death, are kicking away the ladder by which they have climbed, and are better than their creeds, and happily illogical. It is the Cross that reveals the love, and it is the Cross as the means of propitiation that pours the light of that blessed conviction into men’s hearts.

III. My last question is this: what does Christ’s mission say about God’s love to me?

We know what it ought to say. It ought to carry, as on the crest of a great wave, the conviction of that divine love into our hearts, to be fruitful there. It ought to sweep out, as on the crest of a great wave, our sins and evils. It ought to do this; does it? On some of us I fear it produces no effect at all.

Some of you, dear friends, look at that light with lack-lustre eyes, or, rather, with blind eyes, that are dark as midnight in the blaze of noonday. The voice comes from the Cross, sweet as that of harpers harping with their harps, and mighty as the voice of many waters, and you hear nothing. Some of us it slightly moves now and then, and there an end.

Brethren, you have to turn the world-wide generality into a personal possession. You have to say, ‘He loved me, and gave Himself for me.’ It is of no use to believe in a universal Saviour; do you trust in your particular Saviour? It is of no use to have the most orthodox and clear conceptions of the relation between the Cross of Christ and the revelation to men of the love of God; have you made that revelation the means of bringing into your own personal life the conviction that Jesus Christ is your Saviour, the propitiation for your sins, the Giver to you of life eternal? It is faith that does that. Note that, in the great foundation passage to which I have made frequent reference, there are two conditions put in between the beginning and the end. Some of us are disposed to say, ‘God so loved the world that every man might have eternal life.’ That is not what Christ said, ‘God so loved the world that’--and here follows the first condition--’He gave His Son that’--and here follows the second--’he that believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ God has done what it is needful for Him to do. His part of the conditions has been fulfilled. Fulfil yours--’He that believeth on Him.’ And if you can say, not He is the propitiation for our sin, but for my sin, then you will live and move and have your being in a heaven of love, and will love Him back again with an echo and reflection of His own, and nothing shall be able to separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

12)1 John 4:16

Isaiah

HOW TO DWELL IN THE FIRE OF GOD

Isa. 33:14 - Isa. 33:15. - 1Jn. 4:16.

I have put these two verses together because, striking as is at first sight the contrast in their tone, they refer to the same subject, and they substantially preach the same truth. A hasty reader, who is more influenced by sound than by sense, is apt to suppose that the solemn expressions in my first text, ‘the devouring fire’ and’ everlasting burnings,’ mean *hell*. They mean *God*, as is quite obvious from the context. The man who is to ‘dwell in the devouring fire’ is the *good* man. He that is able to abide ‘the everlasting burnings’ is ‘the man that walketh righteously and speaketh uprightly,’ that ‘despiseth the gain of oppression, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.’ The prophet has been calling all men, far and near, to behold a great act of divine judgment in which God has been manifested in flaming glory, consuming evil; now he represents the ‘sinners in Zion,’ the unworthy members of the nation, as seized with sudden terror, and anxiously asking this question, which in effect means: ‘Who among us can abide peacefully, joyfully, fed and brightened, not consumed and annihilated, by that flashing brightness and purity?’ The prophet’s answer is the answer of common-sense-like draws to like. A holy God must have holy companions.

But that is not all. The fire of God is the fire of love as well as the fire of purity; a fire that blesses and quickens, as well as a fire that destroys and consumes. So the Apostle John comes with his answer, not contradicting the other one, but deepening it, expanding it, letting us see the foundations of it, and proclaiming that as a holy God must be surrounded by holy hearts, which will open themselves to the flame as flowers to the sunshine, so a loving God must be clustered about by loving hearts, who alone can enter into deep and true friendship with Him.

The two answers, then, of these texts are one at bottom; and when Isaiah asks, ‘Who shall dwell with the everlasting fire?’-the perpetual fire, burning and unconsumed, of that divine righteousness-the deepest answer, which is no stern requirement but a merciful promise, is John’s answer, ‘He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.’

The simplest way, I think, of bringing out the force of the words before us will be just to take these three points which I have already suggested: the world’s question, the partial answer of the prophet, the complete answer of the Apostle.

I. The World’s Question.

I need only remind you how frequently in the Old Testament the emblem of fire is employed to express the divine nature. In many places, though by no means in all, the prominent idea in the emblem is that of the purity of the divine nature, which flashes and flames as against all which is evil and sinful. So we read in one grand passage in this book of Isaiah, ‘the Light of Israel shall become a fire’; as if the lambent beauty of the highest manifestation of God gathered itself together, intensified itself, was forced back upon itself, and from merciful, illuminating light turned itself into destructive and consuming fire. And we read, you may remember, too, in the description of the symbolical manifestation of the divine nature which accompanied the giving of the Law on Sinai, that ‘the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mountain,’ and yet into that blaze and brightness the Lawgiver went, and lived and moved in it.

There is, then, in the divine nature a side of antagonism and opposition to evil, which flames against it, and labours to consume it. I would speak with all respect for the motives of many men in this day who dread to entertain the idea of the divine wrath against evil, lest they should in any manner trench upon the purity and perfectness of the divine love. I respect and sympathise with the motive altogether; and I neither respect nor sympathise with the many ferocious pictures of that which is called the wrath of God against sin, which much so-called orthodox teaching has indulged in. But if you will only remove from that word ‘anger’ the mere human associations which cleave to it, of passion on the one hand, and of a wish to hurt its object on the other, then you cannot, I think, deny to the divine nature the possession of such passionless and unmalignant wrath, without striking a fatal blow at the perfect purity of God. A God that does not hate evil, that does not flame out against it, using all the energies of His being to destroy it, is a God to whose character there cleaves a fatal suspicion of indifference to good, of moral apathy. If I have not a God to trust in that hates evil because He loveth righteousness, then ‘the pillared firmament itself were rottenness, and earth’s base built on stubble’; nor were there any hope that this damnable thing that is killing and sucking the life-blood out of our spirits should ever be destroyed and cast aside. Oh! it is short-sighted wisdom, and it is cruel kindness, to tamper with the thought of the wrath of God, the ‘everlasting burnings’ of that eternally pure nature wherewith it wages war against all sin.

But then, let us remember that, on the other side, the fire which is the destructive fire of perfect purity is also the fire that quickens and blesses. God is love, says John, and love is fire, too. We speak of ‘the flame of love,’ of ‘warm affections,’ and the like. The symbol of fire does not mean destructive energy only. And these two are one. God’s wrath is a form of God’s love; God hates because He loves.

And the ‘wrath’ and the ‘love’ differ much more in the difference of the eyes that look, than they do in themselves. Here are two bits of glass; one of them sifts out and shows all the fiery-red rays, the other all the yellow. It is the one same pure, white beam that passes through them both, but one is only capable of receiving the fiery-red beams of the wrath, and the other is capable of receiving the golden light of the love. Let us take heed lest, by destroying the wrath, we maim the love; and let us take heed lest, by exaggerating the wrath, we empty the love of its sweetness and its preciousness; and let us accept the teaching that these are one, and that the deepest of all the things that the world can know about God lies in that double saying, which does not contradict its second half by its first, but completes its first by its second-God is Righteousness, God is Love.

Well, then, that being so, the question rises to every mind of ordinary thoughtfulness: ‘Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?’ A God fighting against evil; can you and I hope to hold familiar fellowship with Him? A God fighting against evil; if He rises up to exercise His judging and His punishing energies, can we meet Him? ‘Can thy heart endure and thy hands be strong, in the day that I shall deal with thee?’ is the question that comes to each of us if we are reasonable people. I do not dwell upon it; but I ask you to take it, and answer it for yourselves.

To ‘dwell with everlasting burnings’ means two things. First, it means to hold familiar intercourse and communion with God. The question which presents itself to thoughtful minds is-What sort of man must I be if I am to dwell near God? The lowliest bush may be lit by the divine fire and not be consumed by it; and the poorest heart may be all aflame with an indwelling God, if only it yield itself to Him, and long for His likeness. Electricity only flames into consuming fire when its swift passage is resisted. The question for us all is-How can I receive this holy fire into my bosom, and not be burned? Is any communion possible, and if it is, on what conditions? These are the questions which the heart of man is really asking, though it knows not the meaning of its own unrest.

'To dwell with everlasting burnings' means, secondly, to bear the action of the fire-the judgment of the present and the judgment of the future. The question for each of us is-How can we face that judicial and punitive action of that Divine Providence which works even here, and how can we face the judicial and punitive action in the future?

I suppose you all believe, or at least say that you believe, that there is such a future judgment. Have you ever asked yourselves the question, and rested not until you got a reasonable answer to it, on which, like a man leaning on a pillar, you can lean the whole weight of your expectations-How am I to come into the presence of that devouring fire? Have you any fireproof dress that will enable you to go into the furnace like the Hebrew youths, and walk up and down in the midst of it, well and at liberty? Have you? 'Who shall dwell amidst the everlasting fires?'

That question has stirred sometimes, I know, in the consciences of every man and woman that is listening to me. Some of you have tampered with it and tried to throttle it, or laughed at it and shuffled it out of your mind by the engrossments of business, and tried to get rid of it in all sorts of ways: and here it has met you again to-day. Let us have it settled, in the name of common-sense [to invoke nothing higher], once for all, upon reasonable principles that will stand; and do you see that you settle it to-day.

II. And now, look next at the prophet's answer.

It is simple. He says that if a man is to hold fellowship with, or to face the judgment of, the pure and righteous God, the plainest dictate of reason and common-sense is that he himself must be pure and righteous to match. The details into which hid answer to the question runs out are all very homely, prosaic, pedestrian kind of virtues, nothing at all out of the way, nothing that people would call splendid or heroic. Here they are:-’He that walks righteously,’-a short injunction, easily spoken, but how hard!-’and speaketh uprightly, he that despiseth the gain of oppression, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, that shutteth his eyes from seeing evil.’ Righteous action, righteous speech, inward hatred of possessions gotten at my neighbour’s cost, and a vehement resistance to all the seductions of sense, shutting one’s hands, stopping one’s ears, fastening one’s eyes up tight so that he may not handle, nor hear, nor see the evil-there is the outline of a trite, everyday sort of morality which is to mark the man who, as Isaiah says, can ‘dwell amongst the everlasting fires.’

Now, if at your leisure you will turn to Psa. 15:1 - Psa. 15:5 and Psa. 24:1 - Psa. 24:10, you will find there two other versions of the same questions and the same answer, both of which were obviously in our prophet’s mind when he spoke. In the one you have the question put: ‘Who shall abide in Thy tabernacle?’ In the other you have the same question put: ‘Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?’ And both these two psalms answer the question and sketch the outline [and it is only an outline] of a righteous man, from the Old Testament point of view, substantially in the same fashion that Isaiah does here.

I do not need to remark upon the altogether unscientific and non-exhaustive nature of the description of righteousness that is set forth here. There are a great many virtues, plain and obvious, that are left out of the picture. But I ask you to notice one very special defect, as it might seem. There is not the slightest reference to anything that we call religion. It is all purely pedestrian, worldly morality; do righteous things; do not tell lies; do not cheat your neighbour; stop your ears if people say foul things in your hearing; shut your eyes if evil comes before you. These are the kind of duties enjoined, and these only. The answer of my text moves altogether on the surface, dealing only with conduct, not with character, and dealing with conduct only in reference to this world. There is not a word about the inner nature, not a word about the inner relation of a man to God. It is the minimum of possible qualifications for dwelling with God.

Well, now, do you achieve that minimum? Suppose we waive for the moment all reference to God; suppose we waive for the moment all reference to motive and inward nature; suppose we keep ourselves only on the outside of things, and ask what sort of *conduct* a man must have that is able to walk with God? We have heard the answer.

Now, then, is that *me*? Is this sketch here, admittedly imperfect, a mere black-and-white swift outline, not intended to be shaded or coloured, or brought up to the round; is this mere outline of what a good man ought to be, at all like me? Yes or no? I think we must all say No to the question, and acknowledge our failure to attain to this homely ideal of conduct. The requirement pared down to its lowest possible degree, and kept as superficial as ever you can keep it, is still miles above me, and all I have to say when I listen to such words is, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’

My dear friends, take this one thought away with you:-the requirements of the most moderate conscience are such as no man among us is able to comply with. And what then? Am I to be shut up to despair? am I to say: Then nobody can dwell within that bright flame? Am I to say: Then when God meets man, man must crumble away into nothing and disappear? Am I to say, for myself: Then, alas for me! when I stand at His judgment bar?

III. Let us take the Apostle’s answer.

God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God.’ Now, to begin with, let us distinctly understand that the New Testament answer, represented by John’s great words, entirely endorses Isaiah’s; and that the difference between the two is not that the Old Testament, as represented by psalmist and prophet, said, ‘You must be righteous in order to dwell with God,’ and that the New Testament says, ‘You need not be.’ Not at all! John is just as vehement in saying that nothing but purity can bind a man in thoroughly friendly and familiar conjunction with God as David or Isaiah was. He insists as much as anybody can insist upon this great principle, that if we are to dwell with God we must be like God, and that we are like God when we are like Him in righteousness and love.

‘He that saith he hath fellowship with Him, and walketh in darkness, is a liar!’ That is John’s short way of gathering it all up. Righteousness is as essential in the gospel scheme for all communion and fellowship with God as ever it was declared to be by the most rigid of legalists; and if any of you have the notion that Christianity has any other terms to lay down than the old terms-that righteousness is essential to communion-you do not understand Christianity. If any of you are building upon the notion that a man can come into loving and familiar friendship with God as long as he loves and cleaves to any sin, you have got hold of a delusion that will wreck your souls yet,-is, indeed, harming, wrecking them now, and will finally destroy them if you do not got rid of it. Let us always remember that the declaration of my first text lies at the very foundation of the declaration of my second.

What, then, is the difference between them? Why, for one thing it is this-ISAIAH tells us that we must he righteous, John tells us how we may be. The one says, 'There are the conditions,' the other says, 'Here are the means by which you can have the conditions.' Love is the productive germ of all righteousness; it is the fulfilling of the law. Get that into your hearts, and all these relative and personal duties will come. If the deepest, inmost life is right, all the surface of life will come right. Conduct will follow character, character will follow love.

The efforts of men to make themselves pure, and so to come into the position of holding fellowship with God, are like the wise efforts of children in their gardens. They stick in their little bits of rootless flowers, and they water them; but, being rootless, the flowers are all withered to-morrow and flung over the hedge the day after. But if we have the love of God in our hearts, we have not rootless flowers, but the seed which will spring up and bear fruit of holiness.

But that is not all. Isaiah says 'Righteousness,' John says 'Love,' which makes righteousness. And then he tells us how we may get love, having first told us how we may get righteousness: 'We love Him because He first loved us.' It is just as impossible for a man to work himself into loving God as it is for a man to work himself into righteous actions. There is no difference in the degree of impossibility in the two cases. But what we can do is, we can go and gaze at the thing that kindles the love; we can contemplate the Cross on which the great Lover of our souls died, and thereby we can come to love Him. John’s answer goes down to the depths, for his notion of love is the response of the believing soul to the love of God which was manifested on the Cross of Calvary. To have righteousness we must have love; to have love we must look to the love that God has to us; to look rightly to the love that God has to us we must have faith. Now you have gone down to the very bottom of the matter. Faith is the first step of the ladder, and the second step is love and the third step is righteousness.

And so the New Testament, in its highest and most blessed declarations, rests itself firmly upon these rigid requirements of the old law. You and I, dear brethren, have but one way by which we can walk in the midst of that fire, rejoicing and unconsumed, namely that we shall know and believe the love which God hath to us, love Him back again ‘with pure hearts fervently,’ and in the might of that receptive faith and productive love, become like Him in holiness, and ourselves be ‘baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire.’ Thus, fire-born and fiery, we shall dwell as in our native home, in God Himself.

13)1 John 4:17

1 John

THE SERVANT AS HIS LORD

1Jn. 4:17.

Large truths may be spoken in little words. Profundity is often supposed to be obscurity, but the deepest depth is clear. John, in his gospel and epistles, deals with the deepest realities, and with all things in their eternal aspects, but his vocabulary is the simplest in the New Testament. God and the world, life and death, love and hate, light and darkness, these are the favourite words round which his thoughts gather. Here are nine little monosyllables. What can be simpler than, ‘As He is, so are we in this world?’ And what can go beyond the thought that lies in it, that a Christian is a living likeness of Christ?

But the connection of my text is quite as striking as its substance. John has been dwelling upon his favourite thought that to abide in love is to abide in

God, and God in us. And then he goes on to say that ‘Herein’--that is, in such mutual abiding in love--’is love made perfect with us’; and the perfection of that love, which is thus communion, is in order that, at the great solemn day of future trial, men may lift up their faces and meet His glance--which is not strange to them, nor met for the first time--with open-hearted and open-countenanced ‘boldness.’ But ‘love’ and ‘abiding’ are the source of confidence in the Day of Judgment, because love and abiding are the source of assimilation to Christ’s life. We have boldness, ‘because as He is, so are we in this world’; and we are as He is, because we love and abide in Him. So here are three thoughts, the assimilation of the Christian man to Christ; the frank confidence which it begets; and the process by which it is secured.

I. A Christian is Christ’s living likeness.

That is a startling thing to say, and all the more startling if you notice that John does not say ‘As He was,’ in this earthly life of humiliation and filial obedience, but ‘as He is,’ in His heavenly life and reign and glory. That might well repel us from all thought of possible resemblance, but the light, however brilliant it may be, is not blinding, and it is the Christ as He is, and not only--true as that is--the Christ as He was, who is the original of which Christian men are copies.

Now there is the difference between the teaching of such classes of religionists as represent Christ’s humanity as all in all, and preach to us that He, in His earthly life is the pattern to whom we are to seek to conform our lives, and the true evangelical teaching. That dead Man is living, and His present life has in it elements which we can grasp, and to which every Christian life is to be conformed.

Is there anything, then, within the glory to which I, in my poor, struggling, hampered, imperfect life here on earth, can feel that my character is being shaped? Yes, surely there is. I have no doubt that, in the words of my text, the Apostle is remembering the solemn ones of our Lord’s high-priestly prayer as recorded in the seventeenth chapter of his gospel, where the same antithesis of our being in the world, and His not being there, recurs; and where the analogy and resemblance are distinctly stated--’I in Thee, and Thou in Me, that they also may be in us.’

So, then, when we stand with our letter-writer in his Patmos island, and see the countenance ‘as the sun shining in his strength, and the eyes as a flame of fire,’ and the many crowns upon the head, and the many stars in the hand, though we may feel as if all resemblance was at an end, and aspiration after likeness could only fall at His feet and cover its face, yet there is within the glory something which may be repeated and reproduced in our lives, and that is, the indissoluble union of a Son with a Father, in all loving obedience, in all perfect harmony, in all mutual affection and outgoing of heart and thoughts. This is the centre of the life, alike of the Christ when He is glorified, and of the Christ when He was upon earth. So the very secret heart of the mysterious being of the Son is to be, and necessarily is, repeated in all those who in Him have received the adoption of sons.

Or to put the whole thing into plainer words, it is the religious and the moral aspects of Christ’s being, and not any one particular detail thereof; and these, as they live and reign on the Throne, just as truly as these, as they suffered and wept upon earth--it is these to which it is our destiny to be conformed. We are like Him, if we are His, in this,--that we are joined to God, that we hold fellowship with Him, that our lives are all permeated with the divine, that we are saturated with the presence of God, that we have submitted ourselves to Him and to His will, that ‘not my will, but Thine, be done’ is the very inmost meaning of our hearts and our lives. And thus ‘we,’ even here, ‘bear the image of the heavenly, as we have borne the images of the earthly.’ Now I am not going to dwell upon details; all these can be filled in by each of us for himself. The centre-point which I insist upon is this--the filial union with God, the filial submission to Him, and the consequent purity as Christ is pure, righteousness as Christ is righteous, and walking even as Christ walked, for ever in the light.

But then there is another point that I desire to refer to. I have put an emphasis upon the ‘is’ instead of the ‘was,’ as it applies to Jesus Christ. I would further put an emphasis upon the ‘are,’ as it applies to us--’So are we.’

John is not exhorting, he is affirming. He is not saying what Christian men ought to strive to be, but he is saying what all Christian men, by virtue of their Christian character, are. Or, to put it into other words, likeness to the

Master is certain. It is inevitably involved in the relation which a Christian man bears to the Lord. There may be degrees in the likeness, there may be differences of skill and earnestness in the artist. We have to labour like a portrait painter, slowly and tentatively approaching to the complete resemblance. It is 'a life-long task ere the lump be leavened.' This likeness does not reach its completeness by a leap. It is not struck, as the image of a king is, upon the blank metal disc, by one stroke, but it is wrought out by long, laborious, and, as I said, approximating and tentative touches. My text suggests that to us by its addition, 'So are we, in this world.' The 'world'--or, to use modern phraseology, 'the environment'--conditions the resemblance. As far as it is possible for a thing encompassed with dust and ashes to resemble the radiant sun in the heavens, so far is the resemblance carried here. Some measure of it, and a growing measure, is inseparable from the reality of a Christian life.

Now, you Christian people, does that plain statement touch you anywhere? 'So are we.' Well! you would be quite easy if John had said: 'So may we be; so should we be; so shall we be.' But what about the 'so are we'? What a ghastly contradiction the lives of multitudes of professing Christians are to that plain statement! 'Like Jesus Christ'--would anybody say that about anything in me? 'So are we'--no words of mine, dear brethren, can make the statement more searching, more impressive; but, I pray you, lay this to heart: 'If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.' You may take sacraments and profess Christianity, or, as we Nonconformists have it, 'join churches,' and do all manner of outward work for ever and a day; but if you have not the likeness of Christ, at least in germ, and growing to something more than a germ, in your characters, you had better revise your position, and ask whether, after all, you have not been walking in a vain show, and fancied yourselves the servants of Christ, while you bear the image of Christ's enemy.

A very tiny gully on a hillside, made by showers of rain, may fall into the same slopes, and has been created by the very same forces, working according to the same laws, as have scooped out valleys miles broad, bordered by mountains thousands of feet high. And in my little life, poor as it is, limited as it is, environed as it is by the world, and therefore often hampered and stained, as well as helped and brightened, by its environment, there may be, and there will be, in some degree, if I am a Christian man, the very same power at work by which Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father shines as the sun on the throne of the universe.

But then, notice further, how that limitation to which I have referred in this world carries with it another message. There is Christ in the heavens, veiled and unseen. Here are you on earth, his representative. There is a rage at present for putting pictures into all books, and folk will scarcely read unless they get illustrated literature. The world has for its illustrations of the gospel the lives of us Christian people. In the book there are principles and facts, and readers should be able to turn the page and see all pictured in us.

That is what you are set to do in this world. ‘As the Father sent Me, even so send I you.’ ‘As He is, so are we in this world.’ It may be our antagonist, but it is our sphere, and its presence is necessary to evoke our characters. Christ has entrusted His reputation, His honour, to us, and many a man that never cares to look at Him as He is revealed in Scripture, would be wooed and won to look at Him and love Him, if we Christian people were more true to our vocation, and bore more conspicuously on our faces and in our characters the image of the heavenly.

II. Look for a moment at the second thought that is here: such a likeness to Jesus Christ is the only thing that will enable a man to lift up his head in the Day of Judgment.

‘We have boldness,’ says John, because ‘as He is, so are we.’ Now that is a very strong statement of a truth that popular, evangelical theology has far too much obscured. People talk about being, at the last, ‘accepted in the beloved.’ God be thanked, it is true. A sweet old hymn that a great many of us learned when we were children, though it is not so well known in these days, says:--

‘Bold shall I stand in that great day,

For who aught to my charge shall lay,

While through Thy blood absolved I am

From sin’s tremendous curse and shame?’

I believe that, and I try to preach it. But do not let us forget the other side. My text is in full accordance with the principles of our Lord’s own teaching; and who knows the principles of His own words so well as the judge, who tells us, in His pictures of that great day, that the question put to every man will be, not what you believe, but what did you do, and what are you?

But this truth of my text has been not only wounded in the house of the friends of Christianity, but it has been overlooked by one of the very frequent objections that we hear made to evangelical teaching, that, according to it, a man is judged according to his belief and not according to his deeds. A man is judged according to his--not belief--but according to his faith. But he is judged according also to--not his work--but according to his character.

And I wish, dear friends, to lay this upon your hearts, because many of us are too apt to forget it, that whilst unquestionably the beginning of salvation, and the condition of forgiveness here, and of acceptance hereafter, are laid in trust in Jesus Christ, that trust is sure to work out a character which is in conformity with His requirements and moulded after the likeness of Himself. ‘The judgment of God is according to truth,’ and what a man is determines where a man shall be, and what he shall receive through all eternity. Remember Christ’s own teaching. Remember the teaching of that other apostle than John, according to which the ‘wood, hay, stubble,’ built by a man upon the foundation shall be burned up, and the builder himself be saved, yet so as by fire. And lay this to heart, that it is only when faith works in us, through love and communion, characters like Jesus Christ’s, that we shall be able to stand--though even then we shall have to trust to divine and infinite mercy, and to the sprinkling of His blood--before the Throne of God. Lay up in store for yourselves a good foundation unto eternal life. And take this as the preaching of my text; character, and character alone, will stand the judgment of that great day.

There is no real antagonism between such truths and the widest preaching of salvation by faith. It is the same man who, in his gospel, says, as from the lips of the Lord Himself, ‘He that believeth is not judged,’ and in his letter says, ‘We may have boldness in that day, because, as He is, so are we in this world.’

III. One word about the last point; the process by which this likeness is secured.

That is contained, as I tried to show in my introductory remarks, in the earlier part of the verse. Our love is made perfect by dwelling in God, and God in us; in order that we may be thus conformed to Christ’s likeness, and so have boldness in that great day. To be like Jesus Christ, what is needed is that we love Him, and that we keep in touch with Him. What is it to ‘abide’ in Him?--to direct the continual flow of mind and love and will and practical obedience to Him, to bear Him ever in the secret place of my heart whilst my hands are occupied with daily business, and my feet are running the sometimes rough race that is set before me. Think of Him ever, love Him ever. Let His name be like a perfume breathed through the whole atmosphere of your lives. Keep your wills in the attitude of submission, of acceptance, of indecision when necessary, and of absolute dependence upon Him. Let your outward acts be such as shall not bring a film of separation between Him and you. When thus our whole being is steeped and drenched with Christ, then it cannot but be that we shall be like Him. Even ‘clouds themselves as suns appear, when the sun pierces them with light.’ ‘Abide in Me, and I in you.’ You cannot make yourselves like Christ, but you can fasten yourselves to Christ, and He will give you power which shall make you like Him.

But, remember, such abiding is no idle waiting, no passive confidence. It is full of energy, full of suppression, when necessary, of what is contrary to your truest self, and full of strenuous cultivation of that which is in accord with the will of the Father, and with the likeness of the ‘first-born among many brethren.’

Dear friends, lie in the light and you will become light. Abide in Christ, and you will get like Christ; and, being like Him, you will be able to lift up your heads, and rejoice when you front Him on the Throne, and you are at the bar. Then, when you are no more in the world, the likeness will be perfected, because the communion is complete. ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’

14)1 John 4:18

1 John

LOVE AND FEAR

1Jn. 4:18.

John has been speaking of boldness, and that naturally suggests its opposite--fear. He has been saying that perfect love produces courage in the day of judgment, because it produces likeness to Christ, who is the Judge. In my text he explains and enlarges that statement. For there is another way in which love produces boldness, and that is by its casting out fear. These two are mutually exclusive. The entrance of the one is for the other a notice to quit. We cannot both love and fear the same person or thing, and where love comes in, the darker form slips out at the door; and where Love comes in, it brings hand in hand with itself Courage with her radiant face. But boldness is the companion of love, only when love is perfect. For, inconsistent as the two emotions are, love, in its earlier stages and lower degrees, is often perturbed and dashed by apprehension and dread.

Now John is speaking about the two emotions in themselves, irrespective, so far as his language goes, of the objects to which they are directed. What he is saying is true about love and fear, whatever or whosoever may be loved or dreaded. But the context suggests the application in his mind, for it is ‘boldness before him’ about which he has been speaking; and so it is love and fear directed towards God which are meant in my text. The experience of hosts of professing Christians is only too forcible a comment upon the possibility of a partial Love lodging in the heart side by side with a fellow-lodger, Fear, whom it ought to have expelled. So there are three things here that I wish to notice--the empire of fear, the mission of fear, and the expulsion of fear.

I. The empire of fear.

Fear is a shrinking apprehension of evil as befalling us, from the person or thing which we dread. My text brings us face to face with that solemn thought that there are conditions of human nature, in which the God who ought to be our dearest joy and most ardent desire becomes our ghastliest dread. The root of such an unnatural perversion of all that a creature ought to feel towards its loving Creator lies in the simple consciousness of discordance between God and man, which is the shadow cast over the heart by the fact of sin. God is righteous; God righteously administers His universe. God enters into relations of approval or disapproval with His responsible creature. Therefore there lies, dormant for the most part, but present in every heart, and active in the measure in which that heart is informed as to itself, the slumbering, cold dread that between it and God things are not as they ought to be.

I believe, for my part, that such a dumb, dim consciousness of discord attaches to all men, though it is often smothered, often ignored, and often denied. But there it is; the snake hibernates, but it is coiled in the heart all the same; and warmth will awake it. Then it lifts its crested head, and shoots out its forked tongue, and venom passes into the veins. A dread of God is the ghastliest thing in the world, the most unnatural, but universal, unless expelled by perfect love.

Arising from that discomforting consciousness of discord there come, likewise, other forms and objects of dread. For if I am out of harmony with Him, what will be my fate in the midst of a universe administered by Him, and in which all are His servants? Oh! I sometimes wonder how it is that godless men front the facts of human life and do not go mad. For here are we, naked, feeble, alone, plunged into a whirlpool, from the awful vortices of which we cannot extricate ourselves. There foam and swirl all manner of evils, some of them certain, some of them probable, any of them possible, since we are at discord with Him who wields all the forces of the universe, and wields them all with a righteous hand. ‘The stars in their courses fight against’ the man that does not fight for God. Whilst all things serve the soul that serve Him, all are embattled against the man that is against, or not for, God and His will.

Then there arises up another object of dread, which, in like manner, derives all its power to terrify and to hurt from the fact of our discordance with God; and that is ‘the shadow feared of man,’ that stands shrouded by the path, and waits for each of us.

God; God's universe; God's messenger, Death--these are facts with which we stand in relation, and if our relations with Him are out of gear, then He and all of these are legitimate objects of dread to us.

But now there is something else that casts out fear than perfect love, and that is--perfect levity. For it is the explanation of the fact that so many of us know nothing of this fear of which I speak, and fancy that I am exaggerating, or putting forward false views. There is a type of man, and I have no doubt there are some of its representatives among my hearers, who are below both fear and love as directed towards God; for they never think about Him, or trouble their heads concerning either Him or their relations to Him or anything that flows therefrom. It is a strange faculty that we all have, of forgetting unwelcome thoughts and shutting our eyes to the things that we do not want to see, like Nelson when he puts the telescope to his blind eye at Copenhagen, because he would not obey the signal of recall. But surely it is an ignoble thing that men should ignore or shuffle out of sight with inconsiderateness the real facts of their condition, like boys whistling in a churchyard to keep their spirits up, and saying, 'Who's afraid?' just because they are so very much afraid. Ah, dear friends, do not rest until you face the facts, and having faced them, have found the way to reverse them! Surely, surely it is not worthy of men to turn away from anything so certain as that between a sin-loving man and God there must exist such a relation as will bring evil and sorrow to that man, as surely as God is and he is. I beseech you, take to heart these things, and do not turn away from them with a shake of your shoulders, and say, 'He is preaching the narrow, old-fashioned doctrine of a religion of fear.' No! I am not. But I am preaching this plain fact, that a man who is in discord with God has reason to be afraid, and I come to you with the old exhortation of the prophet, 'Be troubled, ye careless ones.' For there is nothing more ignoble or irrational than security which is only made possible by covering over unwelcome facts. 'Be troubled'; and let the trouble lead you to the Refuge.

II. That brings me to the second point--viz., the mission of fear.

John uses a rare word in my text when he says 'fear hath torment.' 'Torment' does not convey the whole idea of the word. It means suffering, but suffering for a purpose; suffering which is correction; suffering which is disciplinary; suffering which is intended to lead to something beyond itself. Fear, the apprehension of personal evil, has the same function in the moral world as pain has in the physical. It is a symptom of disease, and is intended to bid us look for the remedy and the Physician. What is an alarm bell for but to rouse the sleepers, and to hurry them to the refuge? And so this wholesome, manly dread of the certain issue of discord with God is meant to do for us what the angels did for Lot--to lay a mercifully violent hand on the shoulder of the sleeper, and shake him into aroused wakefulness, and hasten him out of Sodom, before the fire bursts through the ground, and is met by the fire from above. The intention of fear is to lead to that which shall annihilate it by taking away its cause.

There is nothing more ridiculous, nothing more likely to destroy a man, than the indulgence in an idle fear which does nothing to prevent its own fulfilment. Horses in a burning stable are so paralysed by dread that they cannot stir, and get burnt to death. And for a man to be afraid--as every one ought to be who is conscious of unforgiven sin--for a man to be afraid and there an end, is absolute insanity. I fear; then what do I do? Nothing. That is true about hosts of us.

What ought I to do? Let the dread direct me to its source, my own sinfulness. Let the discovery of my own sinfulness direct me to its remedy, the righteousness and the Cross of Jesus Christ. He, and He alone, can deal with the disturbing element in my relation to God. He can ‘deliver me from my enemies, for they are too strong for me.’ It is Christ and His work, Christ and His sacrifice, Christ and His indwelling Spirit that will grapple with and overcome sin and all its consequences, in any man and in every man; taking away its penalty, lightening the heart of the burden of its guilt, delivering from its love and dominion--all three of which things are the barbs of the arrows with which fear riddles heart and conscience. So my fear should proclaim to me the merciful ‘Name that is above every name,’ and drive me as well as draw me to Christ, the Conqueror of sin, and the Antagonist of all dread.

Brethren, I said I was not preaching the religion of Fear. But I think we shall scarcely understand the religion of Love unless we recognise that dread is a legitimate part of an unforgiven man’s attitude towards God. My fear should be to me like the misshapen guide that may lead me to the fortress where I shall be safe. Oh, do not tamper with the wholesome sense of dread! Do not let it lie, generally sleeping, and now and then waking in your hearts, and bringing about nothing. Sailors that crash on with all sails set--stunsails and all--whilst the barometer is rapidly falling, and boding clouds are on the horizon, and the line of the approaching gale is ruffling the sea yonder, have themselves to blame if they founder. Look to the falling barometer, and make ready for the coming storm, and remember that the mission of fear is to lead you to the Christ who will take it away.

III. Lastly, the expulsion of fear.

My text points out the natural antagonism, and mutual exclusiveness, of these two emotions. If I go to Jesus Christ as a sinful man, and get His love bestowed upon me, then, as the next verse to my text says, my love springs in response to His to me, and in the measure in which that love rises in my heart will it frustrate its antagonistic dread.

As I said, you cannot love and fear the same person, unless the love is of a very rudimentary and imperfect character. But just as when you pour pure water into a bladder, the poisonous gases that it may have contained will be driven out before it, so when love comes in, dread goes out. The river, turned into the foul Augean stables of the heart, will sweep out all the filth and leave everything clean. The black, greasy smoke-wreath, touched by the fire of Christ’s love, will flash out into ruddy flames, like that which has kindled them; and Christ’s love will kindle in your hearts, if you accept it and apprehend it aright, a love which shall burn up and turn into fuel for itself the now useless dread.

But, brethren, remember that it is ‘perfect love’ which ‘casts out fear.’

Inconsistent as the two emotions are in themselves, in practice, they may be united, by reason of the imperfection of the nobler. And in the Christian life they are united with terrible frequency. There are many professing Christian people who live all their days with a burden of shivering dread upon their shoulders, and an icy cold fear in their hearts, just because they have not got close enough to Jesus Christ, nor kept their hearts with sufficient steadfastness under the quickening influences of His love, to have shaken off their dread as a sick man’s distempered fancies. A little love has not mass enough in it to drive out thick, clustering fears. There are hundreds of professing Christians who know very little indeed of that joyous love of God which swallows up and makes impossible all dread, who, because they have not a loving present consciousness of a loving Father’s loving will, tremble when they front in imagination, and still more when they meet in reality, the evils that must come, and who cannot face the thought of death with anything but shrinking apprehension. There is far too much of the old leaven of selfish dread left in the experiences of many Christians. ‘I feared thee, because thou wert an austere man, and so, because I was afraid, I went and hid my talent, and did nothing for thee’ is a transcript of the experience of far too many of us. The one way to get deliverance is to go to Jesus Christ and keep close by Him.

And my last word to you is, see that you resort only to the sane, sound way of getting rid of the wholesome, rational dread of which I have been speaking. You can ignore it; and buy immunity at the price of leaving in full operation the causes of your dread--and that is stupid. There is only one wise thing to do, and that is, to make sure work of getting rid of the occasion of dread, which is the fact of sin. Take all your sin to Jesus Christ; He will--and He only can--deal with it. He will lay His hand on you, as He did of old, with the characteristic word that was so often upon His lips, and which He alone is competent to speak in its deepest meaning. ‘Fear not, it is I,’ and He will give you the courage that He commands.

‘God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.’ ‘Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry Abba, Father,’ and cling to Him, as a child who knows his father’s heart too well to be afraid of anything in his father, or of anything that his father’s hand can send.

15)1 John 4:19

1 John

THE RAY AND THE REFLECTION

1Jn. 4:19.

Very simple words! but they go down into the depths of God, lifting burdens off the heart of humanity, turning duty into delight, and changing the aspect of all things. He who knows that God loves him needs little more for blessedness; he who loves God back again offers more than all burnt offering and sacrifices. But it is to be observed that the correct reading of my text, as you will find in the Revised Version, omits ‘Him’ in the first clause, and simply says ‘we love,’ without specifying the object. That is to say, for the moment John’s thought is fixed rather on the inward transformation effected, from self-regard to love--than on considering the object on which the love is expended. When the heart is melted, the streams flow wherever there is a channel. The river, as he goes on to show us, parts into two heads, and love to God and love to man are, in their essence and root-principle, one thing.

So my text is the summary of all revelation about God, the ultimate word about all our relations to Him, and the all-inclusive directory as to our conduct to one another. To know that God loves, and to love again--there is a little pocket encyclopædia in two volumes, which contains the smelted-down essence of all theology and of all morality. Let us look at these three points.

I. The ultimate word about God.

‘He first loved us.’ Properly and strictly speaking, that ‘first’ only declares the priority of the divine love towards us over ours towards Him. But we may fairly give it a wider meaning, and say--first of all, ere Creation and Time, away back in the abysmal depths of an everlasting and changeless heart, changeless in the sense that its love was eternal, but not changeless in the sense that love could have no place within it--first of all things was God’s love; last to be discovered because most ancient of all. The foundation is disclosed last when you come to dig, and the essence is grasped last in the process of analysis.

So one of the old psalms, with wondrous depth of truth, traces up everything to this, ‘For His mercy endureth for ever.’ Therefore, there was time; therefore, there were creatures--’He made great lights, for His mercy endureth for ever.’ Therefore, there were judgments--’He slew famous kings ... for His mercy endureth for ever.’ And so we may pass through all the works of the divine energy, and say, ‘He first loved us.’

It is no accident that there are but foregleams of this great thought brightening the words and the thoughts of psalmist and prophet, saint and sage, from the beginning onwards, while the articulate utterance of the simple sentence was first heard from the lips of Him who declared the Father, and stands in that part of the Book which, both in its position there, and in its date of composition is the last of the Apostolic utterances. ‘God is love’;--that is in one aspect the foundation of His being, and in another aspect the shining ruby set on the very sky-piercing summit of the completed process of the revelation of that Being to man. ‘He first loved us’; and thence, from that centre and germinal point, streams out the whole train of consequences in the divine activity, and in the divine self-revelation.

I need not ask you to contrast with this infinitely simple and infinitely deep utterance all other thoughts of a divine Being--the cold abstractions of Theism, the dim dreads of popular apprehension, the vague utterances of any mythology, the clouds that men’s thoughts have covered over the face of this great truth--and then, to set by the side of all these groping, these peradventures, these fears, these narrow, unworthy ideas, the clear simplicity, the infinite depth of ‘He first loved us.’

But I may ask you to consider, but for a moment, the relation which all the other perfection of the divine nature have to this central and foundation one. There are all those pompous names, ‘Omnipresence’ and ‘Omniscience’ and the like, which are but the negations of the limitations of humanity or of finite creatures. There are the more spiritual and moral thoughts of Wisdom and Righteousness and the like. These are but the fringes of the glory: I was going to venture to say that the divinest thing in God is love. There is the central blaze; the rest is but the brilliant periphery that encloses it. And that infinite love stands to all these other attributes in the relation of being their master and motive spring. They are Love’s instrument, and in the divine nature Love is Lord of all. They give it majesty; it gives them tenderness. We may reverently say, in regard to the divine nature, what the Apostle says about our humanity, that love is the ‘bond of perfectness’--the girdle which, braced round all the garments, keeps them in their place. For round these infinite, innumerable, unnameable, and named divine perfections, is that which brings them all into symmetry and keeps them all in harmonious action--Love. He has wisdom, and power, and eternal being, but He is Love.

But do not let us forget that whilst thus my text proclaims the ultimate truth, these other attributes, as they are called, are all smelted down, as it were, into, and present in, the love which is their crown. The same Apostle, who has thus the honour of ringing out to the world the good news that God is Love, declares that ‘this is the message’ which he has to tell, that ‘God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.’ So the light of righteousness, as well as the lambent flame of love, burn together on that central fire of the universe. We must not so conceive of the love of God, as to darken the radiance of His righteousness, or to obscure the brilliancy of that pure light which tolerates no admixture of darkness.

May I venture a step further, and ask whether we are not warranted in believing that in that which we call the love of God there do abide the same elements as characterise the thing that bears the same name in our human experience? The spectrum has told us that the constituents of the mighty sun in the heavens are the same as the constituents of this little darkened earth. And there are the same lines in the divine spectrum that there are in ours. So if we can venture to say of Him, He is Love, do not let us shrink from saying that then, like us, He delights in the companionship of His beloved;

that, like us, He rejoices in giving Himself to His beloved; that, like us, but infinitely, He desires the good of His beloved; and that, like us, He seeks only for the requital of an answering love. All these things, the joy of the Lord in man, the yielding of the Lord to man, the beneficent desire of the Lord for the good of man, and the hunger of the Lord for the response of love from man--all these things are affirmed when we affirm that God is Love.

Our Apostle would concur heartily in the great text which was the theme of a recent sermon. Paul said, ‘God establishes His love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’ John says, ‘Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.’

So the Cross of Christ is the one demonstration that God loved us. Looking to it we can say, with a great modern teacher:--

‘So the All-great were the All-loving too,

So through the thunder comes a human voice,

Saying "Oh! heart I made; a heart beats here,

Face, My hands fashioned, see it in Myself;

Thou hast no power, nor mayest conceive of Mine;

But love I gave thee, with Myself to love,

And thou must love Me, who have died for thee."‘

II. Here we have the ultimate word as to our religion.

‘We love Him, because He first loved us.’ There is a bridge wanted between these two, and the bridge is supplied abundantly in this letter, in entire harmony with the teaching of the rest of the New Testament. Much has been said, and profitably said, with reference to the modification of the general type of Christian teaching in the writings respectively of Paul, Peter, James, and John. I thankfully recognise the diversities. They are not divergencies;

they are perfectly complementary, and may all be made to harmonise. This Apostle of love has also declared to us how it comes that the love which burns at the centre of things, where there is a heart, kindles a responding love away out on the circumference of things, where there are men with hearts; and the bridge is--'We have known and believed the love that God hath to us.' So says John. And Paul, the Apostle of faith, who sometimes seems as if his only conception of the link of union between God and man was, on the part of man, faith, responds when he speaks of a faith which worketh, comes to energetic operation, through the love which it has kindled.

So we come to this, that a simple trust in the love of God, as manifested in Jesus Christ, our Lord, is the only thing which will so deal with man's natural self-regard and desire to make himself his own object and centre, as to substitute for that the victorious love to God. You cannot love God, unless you believe that He loves you. You will never be absolutely sure of that, unless you have learned it from the Cross of Christ. You will not respond with the love that He desires, but there will be a film between your ice and the fire that could melt it, until that is swept away by the simple act of confidence in God manifested to you in Jesus Christ. This is Christianity; this, nothing less, is religion--to love God, because I believe that in Jesus Christ God has loved me.

And that is the only thing that He desires or accepts. The Religion of Fear; what is it? 'Thou wert an austere man ... and I was afraid.' Yes! and what did you do when you were afraid? 'I hid my talent in the ground,' and was utterly idle. Here rise, on either side of the valley, two mountains--Ebal and Gerazim. From the one were thundered the curses, from the other broke the benediction of the blessings; the one is barren, the other is verdant--'which thing is an allegory.' The Religion of Fear does nothing, the Religion of Love does all. The Religion of Self-interest is narrow, poor, mostly inoperative of any lofty enthusiasm or high nobleness of character. The Religion of Duty; 'I ought to worship, I am bidden to do this, that, or the other thing, which I do not a bit like to do. I am forbidden to do this, that, and the other thing which I should very much like to do, if I durst'--that religion is the religion of a slave; and there are hosts of us that know nothing better. And so our Christianity is a feeble and an uncomfortable thing; and there are little joy, and little subjugation of the will, and little leaping up of the heart in glad obedience in it. I was talking to a good, aged man, not long ago, whose religion was of a very gloomy type. He said to me, ‘As to love, I know next to nothing about it.’ Ah! brethren, I am afraid that is true about a good many of us who call ourselves Christians.

Then let me say, too, that if we love Him, it will be the motive power and spring of all manner of obediences and glad services. Love is the mother-tincture, so to speak, which you can colour, and to which you can add in various ways, and produce variously tinted and tasted and perfumed commixtures. Love lies at the foundation of all Christian goodness. It will lead to the subjugation of the will; and that is the thing that is most of all needed to make a man righteous and pure. So St. Augustine’s paradox, rightly understood, is a magnificent truth, ‘Love! and do what you will.’ For then you will be sure to will what God wills, and you ought.

If this be the summing-up of all religion, a practical conclusion follows. When we feel ourselves defective in the glow and operative driving power of love to God, what is the right thing to do? When a man is cold, he will not warm himself by putting a clinical thermometer into his mouth, and taking his temperature, will he? Let him go into the sunshine and he will be warmed up. You can pound ice in a mortar, and except for the little heat generated by the impact of the pestle, it will keep ice still. But float the iceberg south into the tropics, and what has become of it? It has all run down into sweet, warm water, and mingled with the warm ocean that has dissolved it. So do not think about yourselves and your own loveless hearts so much, but think about God, and the infinite welling up of love in His heart to you, a great deal more. ‘We love Him, because He first loved us’; therefore, to love Him more, we must feel more that He does love us.

III. Lastly, here is the ultimate word about our conduct to men.

I said that John, by leaving out any specification of the object of love, as well as by the verses that immediately follow, shows that he regards the emotion as one, though its direction is two-fold. That just comes to the plain truth, that the only victorious antagonist to the self-regarding temperament of average men, and the only power which will change philanthropy from a sentiment into a self-denying and active principle of conduct, is to be found in the belief of the love of God in Jesus Christ, and in answering love to Him.

That is a lesson for many sorts of people to-day. What they call altruism is no discovery of Christianity, but its practice is. I freely admit that there is much honest and self-sacrificing beneficence and benevolence which are not connected, in the men who practice them, with faith in Jesus Christ. But I question very much whether these would have existed if the story of the Cross had been unknown. And sure I am that the history of non-Christian attempts to promote the brotherhood of man, and to diffuse a wide and operative love of mankind, teaches us, on the one side, that the emotion is not strong enough to last, and to work, unless it is based on God's love in Jesus Christ. And the history of Christianity, on the other side, though with many defects and things to be ashamed of, teaches us, conversely, that wherever there is a genuine love of God, its exterior form, so to say, the outside of it which is presented to the world, will be true love to man.

Christian people, lay this to heart; you are to be mirrors of the love to which you turn for all blessedness and peace. It is of no use to say, 'My religion is the love of God' unless the love of God is manifested in the love of man. If you love God, you will love those that God loves, those for whom Christ died, those who are just like what you were when you learned that God loved you. The service of God is the service of man.

One last word, 'We love Him, because He first loved us.' Do you? Or is it rather true of you: 'I do not love God, though He has loved me'? I saw not long since, up on the flank of a mountain, an obstinate patch of snow, that had fronted, in unmelted cold, months of the summer sun. There are some of us who lift a broad shield of thick-ribbed ice between ourselves and the radiance of the warm heart of God. Oh! brother; do not shut that love out of your heart; for if you do, you shut out peace and goodness, and shut in all manner of poisonous creatures and doleful shapes, whose companionship will be misery and death.

16)1 John 5:4

FAITH CONQUERING THE WORLD

1Jn. 5:4

No New Testament writer makes such frequent use of the metaphors of combat and victory as this gentle Apostle John. None of them seem to have conceived so habitually of the Christian life as being a conflict, and in none of their writings does the clear note of victory in the use of that word ‘ overcometh ‘ ring out so constantly as it does in those of the very Apostle of Love. Equally characteristic of John’s writings is the prominence which he gives to the still contemplation of, and abiding in, Christ. These two conceptions of the Christian life appear to be discordant, but are really harmonious.

There is no doubt where John learned the phrase. Once he had heard it at a time and in a place which stamped it on his memory for ever. ‘Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world,’ said Christ, an hour before Gethsemane. Long years since then had taught John something of its meaning, and had made him to understand how the Master’s victory might belong to the servants. Hence in this letter he has much to say about’ overcoming the wicked one,’ and the like; and in the Apocalypse we never get far away from hearing the shout of victory, whether we consider the sevenfold promises of the letters that stand at the beginning of the visions, or whether we listen to such sayings as this:-’ They overcame by the blood of the Lamb,’ or the last promise of all:-’ He that overcometh shall inherit all things.’

Thus bound together by that link, as well as by a great many more, are all the writings which the tradition of the Church has attributed to this great Apostle.

But to come to the words of my text. They appear in a very remarkable context here. If you read a verse or two before, you will get the full singularity of their introduction. ‘This is the love of God,’ says he, ‘that we keep His commandments: and His commandments are not grievous.’ They are very heavy and hard in themselves; it is very difficult to do right, and to walk in the ways of God, and to please Him. His commandments are grievous, per se; a heavy burden, a difficult thing to do-but let us read on:-'*They are not grievous, for whatsoever is born of God'*-keepeth the commandments? No!' Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world.' That, thinks John, is the same thing as keeping God's commandments. 'This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.' Notice, then, first, What is the true notion of conquering the world? secondly, How that victory may be ours.

I. What is the true notion of conquering the world?

Let us go back to what I have already said. Where did John learn the expression? Who was it that first used it? It comes from that never-to-be-forgotten night in that upper room; where, with His life's purpose apparently crushed into nothing, and the world just ready to exercise its last power over Him by killing Him, Jesus Christ breaks out into such a strange strain of triumph, and in the midst of apparent defeat lifts up that clarion note of victory:-'I have overcome the world I' He had not made much of it, according to usual standards, had He? His life had been the life of a poor man. Neither fame nor influence, nor what people call success, had He won, judged from the ordinary points of view, and at three-and-thirty is about to be murdered; and yet He says,' I have beaten it all, and here I stand a conqueror!' That threw a flood of light for John, and for all that had listened to Christ, on the whole conditions of human life, and on what victory and defeat, success and failure in this world mean. Not so do men usually estimate what conquering the world is. Not so do you and I estimate it when we are left to our own folly and our own weakness. Our notion of being victorious in life is when each man, according to his own ideal of what is best, manages to wring that ideal out of a reluctant world. Or, to put it into plainer words, a man desires, say, conspicuous notoriety and fame. He accounts that he has conquered when he scrambles over all his fellows, and writes his name, as boys do, upon a wall, higher than anybody else's name, with a bit of chalk, in writing that the next winter's storm will obliterate! That is victory! The ultra-commercial ideal says, 'Found a big business and make it pay.' That is to conquer! Other notions, higher and nobler than that, all partake of the same fallacy that if a man can get the world, the sum of external things, into his grip, and squeeze it as one does a grape, and get the last drop of sweetness out of it into his thirsty lips, he is a conqueror.

Well! and you may get all that, whatever it is, that seems to you best, sweetest, most needful, most toothsome and delightsome-you may get it all; and in a sense you may have conquered the world, and yet you may be utterly beaten and enslaved by it. Do you remember the old story-I make no apology for the plainness of it-of the man that said to his commanding officer, ‘I have taken a prisoner.’ ‘Bring him along with you.’ ‘He won’t let me.’ ‘Come yourself, then.’ ‘I can’t’? So you think you have conquered the world when it yields you the things you want, and all the while it has conquered and captivated you.

You say ‘Mine’! It would be a great deal nearer the truth if the possessions, or the love, or the wealth, or the culture, or whatever else it may be, that you have set your desire upon, were to rise up and say you are theirs! Utterly beaten and enslaved many a man is by the things that he vainly fancies he has mastered and conquered. If you think of how in the process of getting, you narrow yourselves; of how much you throw away; of how eyes become blind to beauty or goodness or graciousness; of how you become the slaves of the thing that you have won; of how the gold gets into a man’s blood and makes his complexion as yellow as jaundice-if you think of all that, and how desperate and wretched you would be if in a minute it was all swept away, and how it absorbs your thoughts in keeping it and looking after it, say, is it you that are its master, or it that is yours?

Now let us turn for a moment to the teaching of this Epistle. Following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ Himself, the poor man, the beaten man, the unsuccessful man, may yet say,’ I have overcome the world.’ What does that mean? Well, it is built upon this-the world, meaning thereby the sum total of outward things, considered as apart from God-the world and God we make to be antagonists to one another. And the world woos me to trust to it, to love it; crowds in upon my eye and shuts out the greater things beyond; absorbs my attention, so that if I let it have its own way I have no leisure to think about anything hut itself. And the world conquers me when it succeeds in hindering me from seeing, loving, holding communion with and serving my Father, God.

On the other hand, I conquer it when I lay my hand upon it and force it to help me to get nearer Him, to get liker Him, to think more often of Him, to do His will more gladly and more constantly. The one victory over the world is to bend it to serve me in the highest things-the attainment of a clearer vision of the Divine nature, the attainment of a deeper love to God Himself, and of a more glad consecration and service to Him. That is the victory-when you can make the world a ladder to lift you to God. That is its right use, that is victory, when all its tempting voices do not draw you away from listening to the Supreme Voice that bids you keep His commandments. When the world comes between you and God as an obscuring screen, it has conquered you. When the world comes between you and God as a transparent medium, you have conquered it. To win victory is to get it beneath your feet and stand upon it, and reach up thereby to God.

Now, dear brethren, that is the plain teaching of all this context, and I would lay it upon your hearts and upon my own. Do not let us be deceived by the false estimates of the men around us. Do not let us forget that the one thing we have to live for is to know God, and to love and to please Him, and that every life is a disastrous failure, whatsoever outward artificial apparent success it may be enriched and beautified with, that has not accomplished that.

You rule Nature, you coerce winds and lightnings and flames to your purposes. Rule the world! Rule the world by making it help you to be wiser, gentler, nobler, more gracious, more Christ-like, more Christ conscious, more full of God, and more like to Him, and then you will get the deepest delight out of it. If a man wanted to find a wine-press that should squeeze out of the vintage of this world its last drop of sweetest sweetness, he would find it in constant recognition of the love of God, and in the coercing of all the outward and the visible to be his help thereto.

There are the two theories; the one that we are all apt to fall into, of what success and victory is; the other the Christian theory. Ah! many a poor, battered Lazarus, full of sores, a pauper and a mendicant at Dives’ gate; many a poor old cottager; many a lonely woman in her garret; many a man that has gone away from Manchester, for instance, unable to get on in business, and obliged to creep into some corner and hide himself, not having succeeded in making a fortune, is the victor! And many a Dives, fettered by his own possessions, and the bond-slave of his own successes, is beaten by the world shamefully and disastrously! Pray and strive for the purged eyesight which shall teach you what it is to conquer the world, and what it is to be conquered by it.

II. And now let me turn for a moment to the second of the points that I have desired to put before you, viz., the method by which this victory over the world, of making it help us to keep the commandments of God, is to be accomplished.

We find, according to John’s fashion, a threefold statement in this context upon this matter, each member of which corresponds to and heightens the preceding. We read thus:-’ Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world.’ ‘This is the victory that overcometh the world,’ or more accurately, ‘hath overcome the world, even our faith.’ Who is he that overcometh the world? He that believeth that Jesus Christ is ‘the Son of God.’ Wherein there are, speaking roughly, these three statements, that the true victory over the world is won by a new life, born of and kindred with God; that that life is kindled in men’s souls through their faith; that the faith which kindles that supernatural life, the victorious antagonist of the world, is the definite, specific faith in Jesus as the Son of God. These are the three points which the Apostle puts as the means of conquest of the world.

The first consideration, then, suggested by these statements is that the one victorious antagonist of all the powers of the world which seek to draw us away from God, is a life in our hearts kindred with God, and derived from God.

Now I know that a great many people turn away from this central representation of Christianity as if it were mystical and intangible. I desire to lay it upon your hearts, dear brethren, that every Christian man has received and possesses through the open door of his faith, a life supernatural, born of God, kindred with God, therefore having nothing kindred with evil, and therefore capable of meeting and mastering all the temptations of the world.

It is a plain piece of common-sense, that God is stronger than this material universe, and that what is born of God partakes of the Divine strength. But there would be no comfort in that, nor would it be anything germane and relevant to the Apostle's purpose, unless there was implied in the statement what in fact is distinctly asserted more than once in this Epistle, that every Christian man and woman may claim to be thus born of God. Hearken to the words that almost immediately precede our text, ' Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.' Hearken to other words which proclaim the same truth, 'To as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, which were born, not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.' He does come with all the might of His regenerating power into our poor natures, if and when we turn ourselves with humble faith to that dear Lord; and breathes into our deadness a new life, with new tastes, new desires, new motives, new powers making us able to wrestle with and to overcome the temptations that were too strong for us.

Mystical and deep as this thought may be, God's nature is breathed into the spirits of men that will trust Him! and if you will put your confidence in that dear Lord, and live near Him, into your weakness will come an energy born of the Divine, and you will be able to do all things in the might of the Christ that strengthens you from within, and is the life of your life, and the soul of your soul. To the little beleaguered garrison surrounded by strong enemies through whom they cannot cut their way, the king sends reliefs, who force their passage into the fortress, and hold it against all the power of the foe. You are not left to fight by yourselves, you can conquer the world if you will trust to that Christ, trusting in whom God's own power will come to your aid, and God's own Spirit will be the strength of your spirit.

And then there is the other way of looking at this same thing, viz., you can conquer the world if you will trust in Jesus Christ, because such trust will bring you into constant, living, loving contact with the Great Conqueror. There is a beautiful accuracy and refinement in the language of these three clauses which is not represented in our Authorized Version. The central one which I have read as my text this morning might be translated as it is translated in the Revised Version-' This is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith.' By which I suppose the Apostle means very much what I am saying now, viz., that my faith brings me into contact with that one great victory over the world which for all time was won by Jesus Christ. I can appropriate Christ's conquest to myself if I trust Him. The might of it and some portion of the reality of it passes into my nature in the measure in which I rely upon Him. He conquered once for all, and the very remembrance of His conquest by faith will make me strong-will teach my hands to war and my fingers to fight.' He conquered once for all, and His victory will pass, with electric power, into my life if I trust Him. I am brought into living fellowship with Him. All the stimulation of example, and all that lives lofty and pure can do for us, is done for us in transcendent fashion by the life of Jesus Christ. And all that lives lofty and pure can never do for us is done in unique fashion by the life and death of Him whose life and death are alike the victory over the world and the pattern for us.

So if we join ourselves to Him by faith, and bring into our daily life, in all its ignoble effort, in all its little duties, in all its wearisome monotonies, in all its triviality, the thought, the illuminating thought, the ennobling thought, of the victorious Christ our companion and our Friend-in hoc signo vinces-in this sign thou shalt conquer! They that keep hold of His hand see over the world and all its falsenesses and fleetingnesses. They that trust in Jesus are more than conquerors by the might of His victory.

And then there is the last thought, which, though it be not directly expressed in the words before us, is yet closely connected with them. You can conquer the world if you will trust Jesus Christ, because your faith will bring into the midst of your lives the grandest and most solemn and blessed realities. Faith is the true anesthesia of the soul;-the thing that deadens it to the pains and the pleasures that come from this fleeting life. As for the pleasures, I remember reading lately of some thinker of our own land who was gazing through a telescope at the stars, and turned away from the solemn vision with one remark,-' I don't think much of our county families!' And if you will look up at Christ through the telescope of your faith, it is wonderful what Lilliputians the Brobdingnagians round about you will dwindle into, and how small the world will look, and how coarse the pleasures.

If a man goes to Italy, and lives in the presence of the pictures there, it is marvellous what daubs the works of art, that he used to admire, look when he comes back to England again. And if he has been in communion with Jesus Christ, and has found out what real sweetness is, he will not be over-tempted by the coarse dainties that people eat here. Children spoil their appetites for wholesome food by sweetmeats; we very often do the same in regard to the bread of God, but if we have once really tasted it, we shall not care very much for the vulgar dainties on the world's stall.

Dear brethren, set your faith upon that great Lord, and the world's pleasures will have less power over you, and as for its pains-

'There's nothing either good or bad,
But thinking makes it so.'

If a man does not think that the world's pains are of much account, they are not of much account. He who Bees athwart the smoke of the fire of Smithfield, the face of the Captain of his warfare, who has conquered, will dare to burn and will not dare to deny his Master or his Master's truth. The world may threaten in hope of winning you to its service, but if its threats, turned into realities, fail to move you, it is the world which inflicts, and not you who suffer, that is beaten. In the extremest case they 'kill the body and after that have no more that they can do,' and if they have done all they can, and have not succeeded in wringing the incantation from the locked lips, they are beaten, and the poor dead martyr that they could only kill has conquered them and their torments. So fear not all that the world can do against you. If you have got a little spark of the light of Christ's presence in your heart, the darkness will not be very terrible, and you will not be alone.

So, brethren, two questions:-Does your faith do anything like that for you? If it does not, what do you think is the worth of it? Does it deaden the world's delights? Does it lift you above them? Does it make you conqueror? If it does not, do you think it is worth calling faith?

And the other question is: Do you want to beat, or to be beaten? When you consult your true self, does your conscience not tell you that it were better for you to keep God's commandments than to obey the world? Surely there are many young men and women in this place to-day who have some desires high, and true, and pure, though often stifled, and overcome, and crushed down; and many older folk who have glimpses, in the midst of predominant regard for the things that are seen and temporal, of a great calm, pure region away up there that they know very little about.

Dear friends, my one word to you all is: Get near Jesus Christ by thought, and love, and trust. Trust to Him and to the great love that gave itself for you. And then bring Him into your life, by daily reference to Him of it all: and by cultivating the habit of thinking about Him as being present with you in the midst of it all, and so holding His hand, you will share in His victory; and at the last, according to the climax of His sevenfold promises, 'To Him that overcometh will I give to sit down with Me on My throne, even as I also overcame, and am sat down with My Father on His Throne.'

17)1 John 5:18

1 John

I.-TRIUMPHANT CERTAINTIES

1Jn. 5:18

John closes his letter with a series of triumphant certainties, which he considers as certified to every Christian by his own experience. 'We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not . . . we know that we are of God . . . and we know that the Son of God is come.' Now, that knowledge which he thus follows out on these three lines is not merely an intellectual conviction, but it is the outcome of life, and the broad seal of experimental possession is stamped upon it. Yet the average Christian reads this text, and shrugs his shoulders and says, 'Well! perhaps I do not understand it, but, so far as I do, it seems to me to say a thing which is contradicted by the whole experience of life.' 'We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not'; and some of us are driven by such words, and parallel ones which occur in other places, to a presumptuous over-confidence, and some of us to an equally unscriptural despondency; and a great many of us to laying John's triumphant certainty up upon the shelf where the unintelligible things are getting covered over with dust.

So I wish, in this sermon, to try, if I can, to come to the understanding, that in some measure I may help you to come to the joyful possession, of the truth which lies here, and which the Apostle conceives to belong to the very elements of the Christian character.

I. First, then, I ask the question-of whom is the Apostle speaking here?

‘We know that whosoever is born of God’-or, as the Revised Version reads it, ‘begotten of God’- ‘sinneth not.’ Now we must go back a little-and sometimes to go a long way from a subject is the best way to get at it. Let me recall to you the Master’s words with which He all but began His public ministry, when He said to Nicodemus, ‘Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ There is the root of all that this epistle is so full of, the conception of a regeneration, a being born again, which makes men, by a new birth, sons of God, in a fashion and in a sphere of their nature in which they were not the sons of the Heavenly Father before that experience. Jesus Christ laid down, as the very first principle which He would insist upon, to a man who was groping in the midst of mere legal conceptions of righteousness as the work of his own hands, this principle,-there must be a radical change, and there must be the entrance into every human nature of a new life-principle before there is any vision, any possession of, or any entrance into, that region in which the will of God is supreme, and where He reigns and rules as King. John is only echoing his Master when he here, and in other places of this letter, lays all the stress, in regard to practical righteousness and to noble character, upon being born again, subjected to that change which is fairly paralleled with the physical fact of birth, and has, as its result, the possession by the man who passes through it of a new nature, sphered in and destined to dominate and cleanse his old self.

Then there is a further step to be taken, and that is that this sonship of God, which is the result of being born again, is mediated and received by us through our faith. Remember the prologue of John’s Gospel, where, as a great musician will hint all his subsequent themes in his overture, he gathers up in one all the main threads and points of his teaching. There he says, ‘To as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God.’ Long years afterwards, when an old man in Ephesus, he writes down in this last chapter of his first epistle the same truth which he there set blazing in the forefront of his Gospel when he says, in the first verse of this chapter, ‘Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.’ On condition, then, of a man’s faith in Jesus Christ, there is communicated to him a new life direct from God, kindred with the Divine, and which dwells in him, and works in him precisely in the measure of his personal faith. That is the first point that I desire to establish.

You will remember, I suppose, that this same conception of the deepest result of the Christian faith being no mere external forgiveness of sins, nor alteration of a man’s position in reference to the Divine judgments, but the communication of a new life-power and principle to him, is not the property of the mystic John only, but it is the property likewise of the legal James, who says,’ Of His own will begat He us by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of His creatures’; and it is set forth with great emphasis and abundance in all the writings of the Apostle Paul, who insists that we are sons through the Son, who insists that the gift of God is a new nature, formed in righteousness ‘ after the image of Him that created Him,’ and who is ever dwelling upon the necessity that this new nature should be cultivated and increased by the faith and effort of its recipient.

Keeping these things in mind, I take the second step, and that is that this new birth, and the new Divine life which is its result, co-exist along with the old nature in which it is planted, and which it has to coerce and subdue, sometimes to crucify, and always to govern. For I need not remind you that if the analogy of birth is to be followed, we have to recognize that that Divine life, too, like the physical life, which is also God’s gift, has to pass through stages; and that just as the perfect man, God manifest in the flesh, ‘increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man,’ so the Divine life in a soul comes to it in germ, and has its period of infancy and growth up into youth and manhood. This Apostle puts great emphasis upon that idea of advancement in the Divine life. For you remember the long passage in which he twice reiterates the notion of the stages of children and young men and fathers. So the new life has to grow, grow in its own strength, grow in its sphere of influence, grow in the power with which it purges and hallows the old nature in the midst of which it is implanted. But growth is not the only word for its development. That new nature has to fight for its life. There must be effort, in order that it may rule; there must be strenuous and continuous diligence, directed not only to strengthen it, but to weaken its antagonist, in order that it may spread and permeate the whole nature. Thus we have the necessary foundation laid for that which characterizes the Christian life, from the beginning to the end, that it is a working out of that which is implanted, a working out, with ever widening area of influence, and a working in with ever deeper and more thorough power of transforming the character. There may be indefinite approximation to the entire suppression and sanctification of the old man; and whatsoever is born of God manifests its Divine kindred in this, that sooner or later it overcomes the world.

Now, if all that which I have been saying is true- and to me it is undeniably so-I come to a very plain answer to the first question that I raised: Who is it that John is speaking about? ‘Whosoever is born of God’ is the Christian man, in so far as the Divine life which he has from God by fellowship with His Son, through His own personal faith, has attained the supremacy in Him. The Divine nature that is in a man is that which is born of God. And that the Apostle does not mean the man in whom that nature is implanted, whether he is true to the nature or no, is obvious from the fact that, in another part of this same chapter, he substitutes ‘whatsoever’ for ‘whosoever,’ as if he would have us mark that the thing which he declares to be victorious and sinless is not so much the person as the power that is lodged in the person. That is ray answer to the first question.

II. What is asserted about this Divine life?

‘Whosoever is born of God sinneth not.’ That is by no means a unique expression in this letter. For, to say nothing about the general drift of it, we have a precisely similar statement in a previous chapter, twice uttered. ‘Whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not’; ‘whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin, for His seed remaineth in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.’ Nothing can be stronger than that. Yes, and nothing can be more obvious. I think, then, that the Apostle does not thereby mean to declare that, unless a man is absolutely sinless in regard of his individual acts, he has not that Divine life in him. For look at what precedes our text. Just before he has said, and it is the saying which leads him to my text, ‘If any man seeth his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life.’ So, then, he contemplated that within the circle of sons of God, who were each other’s brethren because they were all possessors of that Divine birth, there would exist ‘sin not unto death,’ which demanded a brother’s brotherly intercession and help. And do you suppose that any man, in the very same breath in which he thus declared that brotherhood was to be manifested by the way in which we help a brother to get rid of his sins, would have stultified himself by a blank, staring contradiction such as has been extracted from the words of my text? I say nothing about inspiration; I only say common-sense forbids it. The fact of the matter is that John, in his simple, childlike way, does not wait to concatenate his ideas, or to show how the one limits and explains the other, but he lays them down before us, and the fact of their juxtaposition limits, and he does not expect that his readers are quite fools. So he says in the one breath, 'If any man see his brother sin a sin,' and in the next breath, 'Whosoever is born of God sinneth not.' Surely there is a way to bring these two sayings into harmony. And it seems to me to be the way that I have been suggesting to you-viz., to take the text to mean-not that a Christian is, or must be, in order to vindicate his right to be called a Christian, sinless, but that there is a power in him, a life-principle in him which is sinless, and whatsoever in him is born of God overcometh the world and' sinneth not.'

Now, then, that seems to me to be the extent of the Apostle's affirmation here; and I desire to draw two plain, practical conclusions. One is, that this notion of a Divine life-power, lodged in, and growing through, and fighting with the old nature, makes the hideousness and the criminality of a Christian man's transgressions more hideous and more criminal. The teaching of my text has sometimes been used in the very opposite direction. I do not need to say anything about that. There have been people that have said 'It is no more I, but sin, that dwelleth in me; I am not responsible.' There have been types of so-called Christianity which have used this loftiest and purest thought of my text as a minister of sin. I do not suppose that there are any representatives of that caricature and travesty here, so I need not say a word about it. The opposite inference is what I urge now. In addition to all the other foulnesses which attach to any man's lust, or lechery, or drunkenness, or ambition, or covetousness, this super-eminent brand and stigma is burned in upon yours and mine, Christian men and women, that it is dead against, absolutely inconsistent with, the principle of life that is bedded within us. And whilst all men, by every transgression, flout God and degrade themselves, the Christian man who comes down to the level of living for flesh and sense and time and self, has laid the additional and heaviest of all weights of guilt upon his hack in that he has done despite to the Spirit of grace, and grieved and contradicted and thwarted the life of God that is within him. The deepest guilt and the darkest condemnation attach to the sins of the man who, with a Divine life in his spirit, obeys the flesh. 'To whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required.'

Another consideration may fairly be urged as drawn from this text and that is that the one task of Christians ought to be to deepen and to strengthen the life of God, which is in their souls, by faith. There is no limit, except one of my own making, to the extent to which my whole being may be penetrated through and through and ruled absolutely by that new life which God has given.

"Tis life, whereof our nerves are scant,
Oh life, not death, for which we pant;
More life, and better, that I want'

It is all very well to cultivate specific and sporadic virtues and graces. Get a firmer hold and a fuller possession of the life of Christ in your own souls, and all graces and virtues will come.

III. Now, I have one last question-what is the ground of John's assertion about him 'that is born of God'?

My text runs on, 'but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself.' If any of you are using the Revised Version, you will see a change there, small in extent, but large in significance. It reads,' He that is begotten of God keepeth him.' And although at this stage of my sermon it would be absurd in me to enter upon exegetical considerations, let me just say in a sentence that the original has considerable variation in expression in these two clauses, which variation makes it impossible, I think, to adopt the idea contained in the Authorized Version, that the same person is referred to in both clauses. The difference is this. In the first clause, 'He that is begotten of God' is the Christian man; in the second, 'He that is begotten of God' is Christ the Saviour.

There is the guarantee that ' Whosoever is begotten of God sinneth not,' because round his weakness is cast the strong defense of the Elder Brother's hand; and the Son of God keeps all the sons who, through Him, have derived into their natures the life of God. If, then, they are kept by the only begotten Son of the Father, who, that 'He might bring many sons unto glory,' has Himself worn the likeness of our flesh apart from sin, then the one thing for us to do, in order to nourish and deepen and strengthen, and bring to sovereign power in our poor natures that previous and enduring principle of life, is to take care that we do not run away from the keeping hand nor wander far from the only safety. When a little child is sent out for a walk by the parent with an elder brother, if it goes staring into shop windows, and gaping at anything that it sees upon the road, and loses hold of the brother's hand, it is lost, and breaks into tears, and can only be consoled and secured by being brought back. Then the little fingers clasp round the larger hand, and there is a sense of relief and of safety.

Dear brethren, if we stray away from Christ we lose ourselves in muddy ways. If we keep near Him, as merchantmen in time of war keep near the men-of-war convoy, or as pilgrims across a dangerous desert keep close to the heels of the horses of their escort, 'that wicked one toucheth us not.' And so we may be sure that ' that which is born of God' will come to the sovereign power within us, and He that was born of the Spirit will cast out him that was born of the flesh.

18)1 John 5:19

1 John

II.-TRIUMPHANT CERTAINTIES

1Jn. 5:19.

This is the second of the triumphant certainties which John supposes to be the property of every Christian. I spoke about the first of them in my last sermon. It reads,' We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not.' Now, there is a distinct connection and advance, as between these two statements. The former of them is entirely general. It is particularized in my text; the 'whosoever' there is pointed into ' we' here. The individuals who have the right to claim these prerogatives are none other than the body of Christian people.

Then there is another connection and advance. ‘Born of God’ refers to an act; ‘of God’ to a state. The point is produced into a line. There is still another connection and advance. ‘Whosoever is born of God sinneth not, ‘and that wicked one toucheth him not.’ That glance at a dark surrounding, from which he that is born of God is protected, is deepened in my text into a vision of the whole world as ‘lying in the wicked one.’

Now, I know that sayings like this of my text, which put into the forefront the Christian prerogative, and which regard mankind, apart from the members of Christ’s body, as in a dark condition of subjection under an alien power, have often been spoken of as if they were presumptuous, on the one hand, and narrow, uncharitable, and gloomy on the other. I am not concerned to deny that, on the lips of some professing Christian, they have had a very ugly sound, and have ministered to distinctly un-Christlike sentiments. But, on the other hand, I do believe that there are few things which the average Christianity of to-day wants more than a participation in that joyous confidence and buoyant energy which throb in the Apostle’s words; and that for lack of this triumphant certitude many a soul has been lamed, its joy clouded, its power trammeled, and its work in the world thwarted. So I wish to try to catch some of that solemn and joyous confidence which the Apostle peals forth in these triumphant words.

I. I ask you, then, to look first at the Christian certainty of belonging to God.

‘We know that we are of God.’ Where did John get that form of expression, which crops up over and over again in his letter P He got it where he got most of his terminology, from the lips of the Master. For, if you remember, our Lord Himself speaks more than once of men being ‘of God.’ As, for instance, when He says, ‘He that is of God heareth God’s words. Ye therefore hear them not because ye are not of God.’ And then He goes on to give the primary idea that is conveyed in the phrase when He says, in strong contrast to that expression, ‘Ye are of your father, and the lusts of your father ye will do.’ So, then, plainly, as I said, what was a point in the previous certitude, is here prolonged into a line, and expresses a permanent state.

The first conception in the phrase is that of life derived, communicated from God Himself. Fathers of the flesh communicate life, and it is thenceforth independent. But the life of the Spirit, which we draw from God, is only sustained by the continual repetition of the same gift by which it was originated. So the second idea that lies in the expression is that of a life dependent upon Him from whom it originally comes. The better life in the Christian soul is as certain to fade and die if the supply from Heaven is cut off or dammed back, as is the bed of a stream to become parched and glistering in the fierce sunshine, if the head-waters flow into it no more. You can no more have the life of the Spirit in the spirit of a man without continual communication from Him than a sunbeam can subsist if it be cut off from the central source. Therefore, the second of the ideas in this expression is the continual dependence of that derived life upon God. Christian people are ‘ of God,’ in so far as they partake of that new life, in an altogether special sense, which has a feeble analogy in the dependence of all creation upon the continual effluence of the Divine power. Preservation is a continual creation, and unless God operated in all physical phenomena and change there would neither be phenomena, nor change, nor substance, which could show them forth. But high above all that is the dependence of the renewed soul upon Him for the continual communication of His gifts and life.

If that life is thus derived and dependent, there follows the last idea in our pregnant phrase, viz., that it is correspondent with its source. ‘Ye are of God,’ kindred with Him and developing a life which, in its measure, being derived and dependent, is cognate with, and assimilated to, His own. This is the prerogative of every Christian soul.

Then there is another step to be taken. The man that has that life knows it. ‘We know,’ says the Apostle, ‘that we are of God.’ That word ‘know’ has been usurped, or at all events illegitimately monopolized by certain forms of knowledge. But surely the inward facts of my own consciousness are as much facts, and are certified to me as validly and reliably as are facts in other regions which are attested by the senses, or arrived at by reasoning.

Christian people have the same right to lay hold of that great word, ‘we know,’ and to apply it to the facts of their spiritual experience, as any scientist in the world has to apply it to the facts of his science. I do not for a moment forget the differences between the two kinds of knowledge, but I do feel that in regard of certitude the advantage is at least shared, and some of us would say that we are surer of ourselves than we are of anything besides. How do you know that you are at all? The only answer is,’ I feel that I am.’ And precisely the same evidence applies in regard to these lofty thoughts of a Divine kindred and a spiritual life. I know that I am of God. I have passed through experiences, and I am aware of consciousness which certify that to me.

But that is not all. For, as I tried to show in my last sermon, the condition of being ‘born of God’ is laid plainly down in this very chapter by the Apostle, as being the simple act of faith in Jesus Christ. So, then, if any man is sure that he believes, he knows that he is born of God, and is of God.

But you say, ‘Do you not know that men deceive themselves by a profession of being Christians, and that many of us estimate their professions at a very different rate of genuineness from what they estimate them at?’ Yes, I know that. And this whole letter of John goes to guard us against the presumption of entertaining inflated thoughts about ourselves as being kindred with God, unless we verify the consciousness by certain plain facts. You remember how continually in this epistle there crops up by the side of the most thorough-going mysticism, as people call it, the plainest, home-spun practical morality, and how all these lofty, towering thoughts are brought down to this sharp test, ‘Let no man deceive you; he that doeth not righteousness is not of God; neither he that loveth not his brother.’ That is a test which, applied to many a fanatical dream, shrivels it up.

There is another test which the Master laid down in the words that I have quoted already for another purpose, when He said, ‘He that is of God heareth God’s words. Te, therefore, hear them not because ye are not of God.’ Christian people, take these two plain tests-first, righteousness of life, common practical morality, the doing and the loving to do, the things that all the world recognizes to be right and true; and, second, an ear attuned and attend to catch God’s voice-and control your consciousness of being God’s son by these, and you will not go far wrong.

And now, before I go further, one word. It is a shame, and a laming and a weakening of any Christian life, that this triumphant confidence should not be clear in it. ‘We know that we are of God.’ Can you and I echo that with calm confidence? ‘I sometimes half hope that I am.’ ‘I am almost afraid to say it.’ ‘I do not know whether I am or not.’ ‘I trust I may be.’ That is the kind of creeping attitude in which hosts of Christian people are contented to live; and they stare at a man as if he was presumptuous, and soaring up into a region that they do not know anything about, when he humbly echoes the Apostle, and says, ‘We know that we are God’s.’ Why should our skies be as grey and sunless as those of a northern winter’s day when all the while, away down on the sunny seas, to which we may voyage if we will, there are unbroken sunshine, ethereal blue, and a perpetual blaze of light? Christian men and women it concerns the power of your lives, their progress in holiness, and their possession of peace, that you should be far more able than, alas! Many of us are, to say, and that without presumption, ‘ We know that we are of God.’

II. We have here the Christian view of the surrounding world.

I need not, I suppose, remind you that John learned from Jesus to use that phrase ‘the world,’ not as meaning the aggregate of material things, but as meaning the aggregate of godless men. If you want a modern translation of the word, it comes very near a familiar one with us nowadays, and that is ‘Society’; the mass of people that are not of God.

Now, the more a man is conscious that he himself, by faith in Jesus Christ, has passed into the family of God, and possesses the life that comes from Him, the more keen will be his sense of the evil that lies round him, and of the contrast between the maxims and prevalent practices and institutions and ways of the world, and those which belong to Christ and Christ’s people. Just as a native of Central Africa, brought to England for a while, when he gets back to his kraal, will see its foulnesses and its sordidnesses as he did not before, or as, according to old stories, those that were carried away into fairyland for a little while came back to the work-a-day life of the world, and felt themselves alien from it, and had visions of what they had seen ever floating before them; so the measure of our conscious belonging to God is the measure of our perception of the contrast between us and the ways of the men about us.

I am not concerned for a moment to deny, rather, I most thankfully recognize the truth, that a great deal of ‘the world’ has been ransomed by the Cross, by which its prince has been cast out, and that much of Christian morality, and of the Christian way of looking at things, has passed into the general atmosphere in which we live, so as that, between the true Christian community and the surrounding world in which it is plunged, there is less antagonism than there was when John in Ephesus wrote these words beneath the shadow of Diana’s temple. But the world is a world still, and the antagonism is there; and if a man will live true to the life of God that is in him, he will find out soon enough that the gulf is not bridged over. It never will be bridged. The only way by which the antagonism can be ended is for the kingdoms of this world to become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ. Society is not of God, and the institutions of every nation upon earth have still in them much of the evil one. Christian people are set down in the midst of these, and the antagonism is perennial.

III. Lastly, consider the consequent Christian duty.

Let me put two or three plain exhortations. I beseech you, Christian people; cultivate the sense of belonging to a higher order than that in which you dwell. A man in a heathen land loses his sense of home, and of its ways; and it needs a perpetual effort in order that we should not forget our true affinities. ‘We are of God’ may be so said as to be the parent of all manner of un-Christlike sentiments, as I have already remarked. It may be the mother of contempt and self-righteousness, and a hundred other vices; but, rightly said, it has no such tendency. But unless we are ever and anon seeking to renew that consciousness, it will fade and become dim, and we shall forget the imperial palace whence we came, and be content to live in the barren fields of the citizens of that country, and even to feed upon the husks that are in the swine’s trough. So I say, cultivate the sense of belonging to God.

Again, I say, be careful to avoid infection. Go as men do in a plague-stricken city. Go as our soldiers in that Ashanti expedition had to go, on your guard against malaria, the ‘pestilence that walketh in darkness,’ and smites ere we are aware, bringing down our notions, our views of life, our thoughts of duty, to the low level of the people around us. Go as these same soldiers did, on the watch for ambuscades and lurking enemies behind the trees. And remember that the only safety is keeping hold of Christ’s hand.

Look on the world as Christ looked on it. There must be no contempt; there must be no self-righteousness; there must be no pluming ourselves on our own prerogatives. There must no sorrow caught from Him, and tenderness of pity, like that which forced itself to His eyes as He gazed across the valley at the city sparkling in the sunshine, or such as wrung His heart when He looked upon the multitude as sheep without a shepherd.

Work for the deliverance of your brethren from the alien tyrant. Notice the difference between the two clauses in the text. ‘We are of God’; that is a permanent relation. ‘The world lieth in the wicked one’; that is not necessarily a permanent relation. The world is not of the wicked one; it is ‘in’ him, and that may be altered. It is in the sphere of that dark influence. As in the old stories, knights hung their dishonored arms upon trees, and laid their heads in the lap of an enchantress, so men have departed from God, and surrendered themselves to the fascinations and the control of an alien power. But the world may be taken out of the sphere of influence in which it lies. And that is what you are here for. ‘For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil’; and for that purpose He has called us to be His servants. So the more we feel the sharp contrast between the blessedness of the Divine life which we believe ourselves to possess, and the darkness and evils of the world that lies around us, the more should sorrow, and the more should sympathy, and the more should succour be ours. Brethren, for ourselves let us remember that we cannot better help the world to get away from the alien tyrant that rules it than by walking in the midst of men, with the aureola of this joyful confidence and certitude around us. The solemn alternative opens before every one of us-Either I am ‘of God,’ or I am ‘ in the wicked one.’ Dear friends, let us lay our hearts and hands in Christ’s care, and then that will be true of us which this Apostle declares for the whole body of believers: ‘Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome, because greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world.’

19)1 John 5:20

1 John

III.-TRIUMPHANT CERTAINTIES

1Jn. 5:20.

ONCE more John triumphantly proclaims ‘We know.’ Whole-souled conviction rings in his voice. He is sure of his footing. He does not say ‘ We incline to think,’ or even ‘We believe and firmly hold,’ but he says ‘ We know.’ A very different tone that from that of many of us, who, influenced by currents of present opinions, feel as if what was rock to our fathers had become quagmire to us! But John in his simplicity thinks that it is a tone which is characteristic of every Christian. I wonder what he would say about some Christians now.

This third of his triumphant certainties is connected closely with the two preceding ones, which have been occupying us in former sermons. It is so, as being in one aspect the ground of these, for it is because ‘the Son of God is come’ that men are born of God, and are of Him. It is so in another way also, for properly the words of our text ought to read not ‘And we know,’ rather ‘But we know.’ They are suggested, that is to say, by the preceding words, and they present the only thought which makes them tolerable. ‘The whole world lieth in the wicked one. But we know that the Son of God is come.’ Falling back on the certainty of the Incarnation and its present issues, we can look in the face the grave condition of humanity, and still have hope for the world and for ourselves. The certainty of the Incarnation and its issues, I say. For in my text John not only points to the past fact that Christ has come in the flesh, but to a present fact, the operation of that Christ upon Christian souls-’He hath given us an understanding.’ And not only so, but he points, further, to a dwelling in God and God in us as being the abiding issue of that past manifestation. So these three things -the coming of Christ, the knowledge of God which flows into a believing heart through that Incarnate Son, and the dwelling in God which is the climax of all His gifts to us-these three things are in John’s estimation certified to a

Christian heart, and are not merely matters of opinion and faith, but matters of knowledge.

Ah I brethren, if our Christianity had that firm strain, and was conscious of that verification, it would be less at the mercy of every wind of doctrine; it would be less afraid of every new thought; it would be more powerful to rule and to calm our own spirits, and it would be more mighty to utter persuasive words to others. We must know for ourselves, if we would lead others to believe. So I desire to look now at these three points which emerge from my text, and

I. I would deal with the Christian's knowledge that the Son of God is come.

Now, our Apostle is writing to Asiatic Christians of the second generation at the earliest, most of whom had not been born when Jesus Christ was upon earth, and none of whom had any means of acquaintance with Him except that which we possess-the testimony of the witnesses who had companied with Him. And yet, to these men-whose whole contact with Christ and the Gospel was, like yours and mine, the result of hearsay -he says, 'We know.' Was he misusing words in his eagerness to find a firm foundation for a soul to rest on? Many would say that he was, and would answer this certainty of his 'We know,' with, How can he know? You may go on the principle that probability is the guide of life, and you may be morally certain, but the only way by which you know a fact is by having seen it; and even if you have seen Jesus Christ, all that you saw would be the life of a man upon earth whom you believed to be the Son of God. It is trifling with language to talk about knowledge when you have only testimony to build on.

Well! there is a great deal to be said on that side, but there are two or three considerations which, I think, amply warrant the Apostle's declaration here, and our understanding of his words, 'We know,' in their fullest and deepest sense. Let me just mention these briefly. Remember that when John says 'The Son of God is come' he is not speaking-as his language, if any of you can consult the original, distinctly shows -about a past fact only, but about a fact which, beginning in a historical past, is permanent and continuous. In one aspect, no doubt, Jesus Christ had come and gone, before any of the people to whom this letter was addressed heard it for the first time, but in another aspect, if I may use a colloquial expression, when Jesus Christ came, He 'came to stay.' And that thought, of the permanent abiding with men, of the Christ who once was manifest in the flesh for thirty years, and

'Walked the acres of those blessed fields
For our advantage,'

runs through the whole of Scripture. Nor shall we understand the meaning of Christ's Incarnation unless we see in it the point of beginning of a permanent reality. He has come, and He has not gone-'Lo! I am with you alway'-and that thought of the fullness and permanence of our Lord's presence with Christian souls is lodged deep and all-pervading, not only in John's gospel, but in the whole teaching of the New Testament. So it is a present fact, and not only a past piece of history, which is asserted when the Apostle says 'The Son of God is come.' And a man who has a companion knows that he has him, and by many a token not only of flesh but of spirit, is conscious that he is not alone, but that the dear and strong one is by his side. Such consciousness belongs to all the maturer and deeper forms of the Christian life.

Further, we must read on in my text if we are to find all which John declares to be a matter of knowledge. 'The Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding.' I shall have a word or two more to say about that presently, but in the meantime I simply point out that what is here declared to be known by the Christian soul is a present operation of the present Christ upon his nature. If a man is aware that, through his faith in Jesus Christ, new perceptions and powers of discerning solid reality where he only saw mist before have been granted to him, the Apostle's triumphant assertion is vindicated.

And, still further, the words of my text, in their assurance of possessing something far more solid than an opinion or a creed, in Christ Jesus and our relation to Him, are warranted, on the consideration that the growth of the Christian life largely consists in changing belief that rests on testimony into knowledge grounded in vital experience. At first a man accepts Jesus Christ because, for one reason or another, he is led to give credence to the evangelical testimony and to the apostolic teaching: but as he goes on learning more and more of the realities of the Christian life, creed changes into consciousness; and we can turn round to apostles and prophets, and say to them, with thankfulness for all that we have received from them, ‘Now we believe, not because of your saying, but because we have seen Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world.’ That is the advance which Christian men should all make, from the infantile, rudimentary days, when they accepted Christ on the witness of others, to the time when they .accepted Him because, in the depth of their own experience, they have found Him to be all that they took Him to be. The true test of creed is life. The true way of knowing that a shelter is adequate is to house in it, and be defended from the pelting of every pitiless storm. The medicine we know to be powerful when it has cured us. And every man that truly grasps Jesus Christ, and is faithful and persevering in his hold, can set his seal to that which to others is but a thing believed on hearsay, and accepted on testimony.

‘We know that the Son of God is come.’ Christian people, have you such a first-hand acquaintance with the articles which constitute your Christian creed as that? Over and above all the intellectual reasons which may lead to the acceptance, as a theory, of the truths of Christianity, have you that living experience of them which warrants you in saying ‘We know’? Alas! Alas! I am afraid that this supreme ground of certitude is rarely trodden by multitudes of professing Christians. And so in days of criticism and upheaval they are frightened out of their wits, and all but out of their faith, and are nervous and anxious lest from this corner or that corner or the other corner of the field of honest study and research, there may come some sudden shock that will blow the whole fabric of their belief to pieces. ‘He that believeth shall not make haste,’ and a man who knows what Christ has done for him may calmly welcome the advent of any new light, sure that nothing that can be established can touch that serene centre in which his certitude sits enshrined and calm. Brother, do you seek to be able to say,’ I know in whom I have believed’?

II. Note the new power of knowing God given by the Son who is come.

John says that one issue of that Incarnation and permanent presence of the Lord Christ with us is that ‘He hath given us an understanding that we may know Him that is true.’ Now, I do not suppose that he means thereby that any absolutely new faculty is conferred upon men, but that new direction is given to old ones, and dormant powers are awakened. Just as in the miracles of our Lord the blind men had eyes, but it needed the touch of His finger before the sight came to them, so man, that was made in the image of God, which he has not altogether lost by any wandering, has therein lying dormant and oppressed the capacity of knowing Him from whom he comes, but he needs the couching hand of the Christ Himself, in order that the blind eyes may be capable of seeing and the slumbering power of perception be awakened. That gift of a clarified nature, a pure heart, which is the condition, as the Master Himself said, of seeing God- that gift is bestowed upon all who, trusting in the Incarnate Son, submit themselves to His cleansing hand.

In the Incarnation Jesus Christ gave us God to see; by His present work in our souls He gives us the power to see God. The knowledge of which my text speaks is the knowledge of ‘ Him that is true,’ by which pregnant word the Apostle means to contrast the Father whom Jesus Christ sets before us with all men’s conceptions of a Divine nature; and to declare that whilst these conceptions, in one way or another, fall beneath or diverge from reality and fact, our God manifested to us by Jesus Christ is the only One whose nature corresponds to the name, and who is essentially that which is included in it.

But what I would dwell on especially for a moment is that this gift, thus given by the Incarnate and present Christ, is not an intellectual gift only, but something far deeper. Inasmuch as the Apostle declares that the object of this knowledge is not a truth about God but God Himself, it necessarily follows that the knowledge is such as we have of a person, and not of a doctrine. Or, to put it into simpler words: to know about God is one thing, and to know God is quite another. We may know all about the God that Christ has revealed and yet not know Him in the very slightest degree. To know about God is theology, to know Him is religion. You are not a bit better, though you comprehend the whole sweep of Christ’s revelation of God, if the God whom you in so far comprehend remain a stranger to you. That we may know Him as a man knows his friend, and that we may enter into relations of familiar acquaintance with Him, Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, and this is the blessing that He gives us-not an accurate theology, but a loving friendship. Has Christ done that for you, my brother?

That knowledge, if it is real and living, will be progressive. More and more we shall come to know. As we grow like Him we shall draw closer to Him; as we draw closer to Him we shall grow like Him. So the Christian life is destined to an endless progress, like one of those mathematical spirals which ever climb, ever approximate to, but never reach, the summit and the centre of the coil. So, if we have Christ for our medium both of light and of sight, if He both gives us God to see and the power to see Him, we shall begin a course which eternity itself will not witness completed. We have landed on the shores of a mighty continent, and for ever and for ever and ever we shall be pressing deeper and deeper into the bosom of the land, and learning more and more of its wealth and loveliness. ‘We know that we know Him that is true.’ If the Son of God has come to us, we know God, and we know that we know Him. Do you?

III. Lastly, note here the Christian indwelling of God, which is possible through the Son who is come.

Friendship, familiar intercourse, intimate knowledge as of one with whom we have long dwelt, instinctive sympathy of heart and mind, are not all which, in John’s estimation, Jesus Christ brings to them that love Him, and live in Him. For he adds, ‘We are in Him that is true.’ Of old Abraham was called the Friend of God, but an auguster title belongs to us. ‘Know ye not that ye are the temples of the living God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?’ Oh brethren, do not be tempted, by any dread of mysticism, to deprive yourselves of that crown and summit of all the gifts and blessings of the Gospel, but open your hearts and your minds to expect and to believe in the actual abiding of the Divine nature in us. Mysticism? Yes! And I do not know what religion is worth if there is not mysticism in it, for the very heart of it seems to me to be the possible interpenetration and union of man and God-not in the sense of obliterating the personalities, but in the deep, wholesome sense in which Christ Himself and all His apostles taught it, and in which every man who has had any profound experience of the Christian life feels it to be true.

But notice the words of my text for a moment, where the Apostle goes on to explain and define how ‘we are in Him that is true,’ because we are ‘in His Son Jesus Christ.’ That carries us away back to ‘Abide in Me, and I in you.’ John caught the whole strain of such thoughts from those sacred words in the upper room. Christ in us is the deepest truth of Christianity. And that God is in us, if Christ is in us, is the teaching not only of my text but of the Lord Himself, when He said, ‘We will come unto him and make our abode with him.’

And will not a man ‘know’ that? Will it not be something deeper and better than intellectual perception by which he is aware of the presence of the Christ in his heart? Cannot we all have it if we will? There is only one way to it, and that is by simple trust in Jesus Christ. Then, as I said, the trust with which we began will not leave us, but will be glorified into experience with which the trust will be enriched.

Brethren, the sum and substance of all that I have been trying to say is just this: lay your poor personalities in Christ’s hands, and lean yourselves upon Him; and there will come into your hearts a Divine power, and, if you are faithful to your faith, you will know that it is not in vain. There is a tremendous alternative, as I have already pointed out, suggested by the sequence of thoughts in my text, ‘the whole world lieth in the wicked one’ but’ we are in Him that is true.’ We have to choose our dwelling-place, whether we shall dwell in that dark region of evil, or whether we shall dwell in God, and know that God is in us.

If we are true to the conditions, we shall receive the promises. And then our Christian faith will not be dashed with hesitations, nor shall we be afraid lest any new light shall eclipse the Sun of Righteousness, but, in the midst of the babble of controversy, we may be content to be ignorant of much, to hold much in suspense, to part with not a little, but yet with quiet hearts to be sure of the one thing needful, and with unfaltering tongues to proclaim ‘We know that the Son of God is come, and we are in Him that is true.’

20)1 John 5:21

1 John

THE LAST WORDS OF THE LAST APOSTLE

1Jn. 5:20-21

So the Apostle ends his letter. These words are probably not only the close of this epistle, but the last words, chronologically, of Scripture. The old man gathers together his ebbing force to sum up his life's work in a sentence, which might be remembered though much else was forgotten. Last words stick. Perhaps, too, some thought of future generations, to whom his witness might come, passed across his mind. At all events, some thought that we are here listening to the last words of the last Apostle may well be in ours. You will observe that, in this final utterance, the Apostle drops the triumphant 'we know,' which we have found in previous sermons reiterated with such emphasis. He does so, not because he doubted that all his brethren would gladly attest and confirm what he was about to say, but because it was fitting that his last words should be his very own; the utterance of personal experience, and weighty with it, and with apostolic authority. So he smelts all that he had learned from Christ, and had been teaching for fifty years, into that one sentence. The feeble voice rings out clear and strong; and then softens into tremulous tones of earnest exhortation, and almost of entreaty. The dying light leaps up in one bright flash: the lamp is broken, but the flash remains. And if we will let it shine into our lives, we shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.

I. Here we have the sum of all that we need to know about God.

'This is the true God.' The first question is, What or whom does John mean by 'this'?

Grammatically, we may refer the word to the immediately preceding name, Jesus Christ. But it is extremely improbable that the Apostle should so suddenly shift his point of view, as he would do if, having just drawn a clear distinction between 'Him that is true,' and the Christ who reveals Him, he immediately proceeded to apply the former designation to Jesus Christ Himself. It is far more in accordance with his teaching, and with the whole scope of the passage, if by ' this' we understand the Father of whom he has just been speaking. It is no tautology that he reiterates in this connection that He is ' true.' For he has separated now his own final attestation from the common consciousness of the Christian community with which he has previously been dealing. And when he says, ‘This is the true God’ he means to say, ‘ This God of whom I have been affirming that Jesus Christ is His sole Revealer, and of whom I have been declaring that through Jesus Christ we may know Him and dwell abidingly in Him,’’ this’-and none else-’ is the true God.’

Then the second question that I have to answer briefly is, what does John mean by ‘true’? I had occasion, in a previous sermon on the foregoing words, to point out that by that expression he means, whenever he uses it, some person or thing whose nature and character correspond to his or its name, and who is essentially and perfectly that which the name expresses. If we take that as the signification of the word, we just come to this, that the final assertion into which the old Apostle flings all his force, and which he wishes to stand out prominent as his last word to his brethren and to the world, is that the God revealed in Jesus Christ, and with whom a man through Jesus Christ may have fellowship of knowledge and friendship-that He and none but He answers to all that men mean when they speak of a God; that He, if I might use such an expression, fully fills the part.

Brethren, if we but think that, however it comes [no matter about that], every man has in him a capacity of conceiving of a perfect Being, of righteousness, power, purity, and love, and that all through the ages of the world’s yearnings there has never been presented to it the realization of that dim conception, but that all idolatry, all worship, has failed in bodying out a Person who would answer to the requirements of a man’s spirit, then we come to the position in which these final words of the old fisherman go down to a deeper depth than all the world’s wisdom, and carry a message of consolation and a true gospel to be found nowhere besides.

Whatsoever embodiments men may have tried to give to their dim conception of a God, these have been always limitations, and often corruptions, of it. And to limit or to separate is, in this case, to destroy. No pantheon can ever satisfy the soul of man who yearns for One Person in whom all that he can dream of beauty, truth, and goodness shall be ensphered. A galaxy of stars, white as the whitest spot in the Milky Way, can never be a substitute for the sun. ‘This is the true God’; and all others are corruptions, or limitations, or divisions, of the indissoluble unity.

Then, are men to go for ever and ever with ‘the blank misgivings of a creature, moving about in worlds not realized’? Is it true that I can fancy some one far greater than is? Is it true that my imagination can paint a nobler form than reality acknowledges? It is so, alas! unless we take John’s swan-song and last testimony as true, and say:-This God, manifest in Jesus Christ, on whose heart I can lay my head, and into whose undying and unstained light I can gaze, and in whose righteousness I can participate, this God is the real God; no dream, no projection from my own nature, magnified and cleansed, and thrown up first from the earth that it may come down from heaven, but the reality, of whom all human imaginations are but the faint transcripts, though they be the faithful prophets.

For, consider what it is that the world owes to Jesus Christ, in its knowledge of God. Remember that to us orphaned men He has come and said, as none ever said, and showed as none ever showed: ‘Ye are not fatherless; there is a Father in the heavens.’ Consider that to the world, sunk in sense and flesh, and blotting its most radiant imaginations of the Divine by some veil and hindrance, of corporeity and materialism, He comes, and has said, ‘God is a Spirit.’ Consider that, taught of Him, this Apostle, to whom was committed the great distinction of in monosyllables preaching central truths and in words that a child can apprehend, setting forth the depths that eternity and angels cannot comprehend, has said, ‘God is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all.’ And consider that he has set the apex on the shining pyramid, and spoken the last word when he has told us, ‘God is Love.’ And put these four revelations together, the Father; Spirit; unsullied Light; absolutely Love; and then let us bow down and say, ‘Thou hast said the truth, O aged Seer. This is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us. This-and none beside-is the true God,’ I know not what the modern world is to do for a God if it drifts away from Jesus Christ and His revelations. I know that it is always a dangerous way of arguing to try to force people upon alternatives, one of which is so repellent as to compel them to cling to the other. But it does seem to me that the whole progress of modern thought, with the advancement of modern physical science, and other branches of knowledge which perhaps are not yet to be called science, are all steadily converging on forcing us to this choice -will you have God in Christ, or, will you wander about in a Godless world, and for your highest certitude have to say,' Perhaps'? 'This is the true God,' and if we go away from Him I do not know where we are to go.

II. Here we have the sum of His gifts to us.

'This is the true God, and eternal life.' Now, let us distinctly and emphatically put first that what is here declared is primarily something about God, and not about His gift to men; and that the two clauses, 'the true God,' and 'eternal life,' stand in precisely the same relation to the preceding words, 'This is.' That is to say, the revelation which John would lay upon our hearts, that from it there may spring up in them a wondrous hope, is that, in His own essential self, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, and brought into living fellowship with us by Him, is 'eternal life.' By 'eternal life' he means something a great deal more august than endless existence. He means a life which not only is not ended by time, but which is above time, and not subject to its conditions at all. Eternity is not time spun out for ever. And so we are not lifted up into a region where there is little light, but where the very darkness is light, just as the curtain was the picture, in the old story of the painter,

That seems to part us utterly from God. He is 'eternal life'; then, we poor creatures down here, whose being is all 'cribbed, cabined, and confined' by succession, and duration, and the partitions of time, what can we have in common with Him? John answers for us. For, remember that in the earlier part of this epistle he writes that 'the life was manifested, and we shew unto you that eternal life which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us,' and 'we declare it unto you; that ye also may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son.' So, then, strange as it is, and beyond our thoughts as it is, there may pass into creatures that very eternal life which is in God, and was manifested in Jesus. We have to think of Him because we know Him to be love, as in essence self-communicating, and whatsoever a creature can receive, a loving Father, the true God, will surely give.

But we are not left to wander about in regions of mysticism and darkness. For we know this, that however strange and difficult the thought of eternal life as possessed by a creature may be, to give it was the very purpose for which Jesus Christ came on earth. ‘I am that Bread of Life.’ ‘I am come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly.’ And we are not left to grope in doubt as to what that eternal life consists in; for He has said:’ This is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.’ Nor are we left in any more doubt as to that bond by which the whole fullness of this Divine gift may flow into a man’s spirit. For over and over again the Master Himself has declared, ‘He that believeth hath everlasting life.’

Thus, then, there is a life which belongs to God on His throne, a life lifted above the limitations of time, a life communicated by Jesus Christ, as the waters of some land-locked lake may flow down through a sparkling river, a life which consists in fellowship with God, a life which may be, and is, ours, on the simple condition of trusting Him who gives it, and a life which, eternal as it is, and destined to a glory all undreamed of, in that future beyond the grave, is now the possession of every man that puts forth the faith which is its condition. ‘He that believeth hath’-not shall have, in some distant future, but has to-day-’everlasting life,’ verily here and now. And so John lays this upon our hearts, as the ripe fruit of all his experience, and the meaning of all his message to the world, that God revealed in Christ ‘is the true God,’ and as Himself the possessor, is the source for us all, of life eternal.

III. Lastly, we have here the consequent sum of Christian effort.

‘Little children, keep yourselves from idols,’ seeing that ‘this is the true God,’ the only One that answers to your requirements, and will satisfy your desires. Do not go rushing to these shrines of false deities that crowd every corner of Ephesus-ay, and every corner of Manchester. For what does John mean by an idol? Does he mean that barbarous figure of Diana that stood in the great temple, hideous and monstrous? No! He means anything, or any person, that comes into the heart and takes the place which ought to be filled by God, and by Him only. What I prize most, what I trust most utterly, what I should be most forlorn if I lost; what is the working aim of my life, and the hunger of my heart-that is my idol. We all know that.

Is the exhortation not needed, my brother? In Ephesus it was hard to have nothing to do with heathenism. In that ancient world their religion, though it was a superficial thing, was intertwined with daily life in a fashion that puts us to shame. Every meal had its libation, and almost every act was knit by some ceremony or other to a god. So that Christian men and women had almost to go out of the world, in order to be free from complicity in the all-pervading idol-worship. Now, although the form has changed, and the fascinations of old idolatry belong only to a certain stage in the world's culture and history, the temptation to idolatry remains just as subtle, just as all-pervasive, and the yielding to it just as absurd. You and I call ourselves Christians. We say we believe that there is nothing else, and nobody else, in the whole sweep of the universe that can satisfy our hearts, or be what our imagination can conceive, but God only. Having said that on the Sunday, what about Monday? They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living water, and hewed to themselves broken cisterns that can hold no water.' 'Little children'-for we are scarcely more mature than that-'little children, keep yourselves from idols.'

And how is it to be done? 'Keep yourselves.' Then you can do it, and you have to make a dead lift of effort, or be sure of this-that the subtle seduction will slide into your heart, and before you know it, you will be out of God's sanctuary, and groveling in Diana's temple. But it is not only our own effort that is needed, for just a sentence or two before, the Apostle had said: 'He that is born of God '-that is, Christ- 'keepeth us.' So our keeping of ourselves is essentially our letting Him keep us. Stay inside the walls of the citadel, and you need not be afraid of the besiegers; go outside by letting your faith flag, and you will be captured or killed. Keep yourselves by clinging 'to Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless.' Make experience by fellowship with Him who is the only true God, and able to satisfy your whole nature, mind, heart, will, and these false deities, the whole rabble of them, will have no power to tempt you to bow the knee.

Brethren! Here is the sum of the whole matter. There is one truth on which we can stay our hearts, one God in whom we can utterly trust, the God revealed in Jesus Christ. If we do not see Him in Christ, we shall not see Him at all, but wander about all our days in a world empty of solid reality.

There is one gift which will satisfy all our needs, the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ. There is one practical injunction which will save us from many a heartache, and which our weakness can never afford to neglect, and that is to keep ourselves from all false worship. These golden words of my text, in their simplicity, in their depth, in their certainty, in their comprehensiveness, are worthy to be the last words of Revelation; and to stand to all the world, through all ages, as the shining apex, or the solid foundation, or the central core of Christianity. ‘This’-this, and none else- ‘is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.’

2 John

1) 2 JOHN 1:8

1) 2 John 1:8

2 John

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE

2Jn. 1:8

We have here a very unusual form of the Apostolic salutation. ‘Grace, mercy, and peace’ are put together in this fashion only in Paul’s two Epistles to Timothy, and in this the present instance; and all reference to the Holy Spirit as an agent in the benediction is, as there, omitted.

The three main words, ‘Grace, mercy, and peace,’ stand related to each other in a very interesting manner. If you will think for a moment you will see, I presume that the Apostle starts, as it were, from the fountain-head, and slowly traces the course of the blessing down to its lodgment in the heart of man. There is the fountain, and the stream, and, if I may so say, the great still lake in the soul, into which its waters flow, and which the flowing waters make. There is the sun, and the beam, and the brightness grows deep in the heart of man. Grace, referring solely to the Divine attitude and thought: mercy, the manifestation of grace in act, referring to the workings of that great Godhead in its relation to humanity: and peace, which is the issue in the soul of the fluttering down upon it of the mercy which is the activity of the grace. So these three come down, as it were, a great, solemn, marble staircase from the heights of the Divine mind, one step at a time, down to the level of earth; and the blessings which are shed along the earth. Such is the order. All begins with grace; and the end and purpose of grace, when it flashes into deed, and becomes mercy, is to fill my soul with quiet repose, and shed across all the turbulent sea of human love a great calm, a beam of sunshine that gilds, and miraculously stills while it gilds, the waves.

If that be, then, the account of the relation of these three to one another, let me just dwell for a moment upon their respective characteristics, that we may get more fully the large significance and wide scope of this blessing. Let us begin at what may be regarded either as the highest point from which all the stream descends, or as the foundation upon which all the structure rests. ‘Grace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father.’ These two, blended and yet separate, to either of whom a Christian man has a distinct relation, these two are the sources, equally, of the whole of the grace.

The Scriptural idea of grace is love that stoops, and that pardons, and that communicates. I say nothing about that last characteristic, but I would like to dwell for a moment or two upon the other phases of this great word, a key-word to the understanding of so much of Scripture.

The first thing then that strikes me in it is how it exults in that great thought that there is no reason whatsoever for God’s love except God’s will The very foundation and notion of the word ‘grace’ is a free, undeserved, unsolicited, self-prompted, and altogether gratuitous bestowment, a love that is its own reason, as indeed the whole of the Divine acts are, just as we say of Him that He draws His being from Himself, so the whole motive for His action and the whole reason for His heart of tenderness to us lies in Himself. We have no power. We love one another because we apprehend something deserving of love, or fancy that we do. We love one another because there is something in the object on which our love falls; which, either by kindred or by character, or by visible form, draws it out. We are influenced so, and love a thing because the thing or the person is perceived by us as being worthy, for some reason or other, of the love. God loves because He cannot help it; God loves because He is God. Our love is drawn out-I was going to say pumped out-by an application of external causes.

God's love is like an artesian well, whensoever you strike, up comes, self-impelled, gushing into light because there is such a central store of it beneath everything, the bright and flashing waters. Grace is love that is not drawn out, but that bursts out, self-originated, undeserved. 'Not for your sakes, be it known unto you, O house of Israel, but for Mine own name's sake, do I this.' The grace of God is above that, comes spontaneously, driven by its own fullness, and welling up unasked, unprompted, undeserved, and therefore never to be turned away by our evil, never to be wearied by our indifference, never to be brushed aside by our negligence, never to be provoked by our transgression, the fixed, eternal, unalterable centre of the Divine nature. His love is grace.

And then, in like manner, let me remind you that there lies in this great word, which in itself is a gospel, the preaching that God's love, though it be not turned away by, is made tender by our sin. Grace is love extended to a person that might reasonably expect, because he deserves, something very different; and when there is laid, as the foundation of everything, 'the grace of our Father and of the Son of the Father,' it is but packing into one word that great truth which we all of us, saints and sinners, need-a sign that God's love is love that deals with our transgressions and shortcomings, flows forth perfectly conscious of them, and manifests itself in taking them away, both in their guilt, punishment, and peril. 'The grace of our Father' is a love to which sin-convinced consciences may certainly appeal; a love to which all sin-tyrannized souls may turn for emancipation and deliverance. Then, if we turn for a moment from that deep fountain, 'Love's ever-springing well,' as one of our old hymns has it, to the stream, we get other blessed thoughts. The love, the grace, breaks into mercy. The fountain gathers itself into a river, the infinite, Divine love concentrates itself in act, and that act is described by this one word, mercy. As grace is love which forgives, so mercy is love which pities and helps. Mercy regards men, its object, as full of sorrows and miseries, and so robes itself in garb of compassion, and takes wine and oil into its hands to pour into the wound, and lays often a healing hand, very carefully and very gently, upon the creature, lest, like a clumsy surgeon, it should pain instead of heal, and hurt where it desires to console. God's grace softens itself into mercy, and all His dealings with us men must be on the footing that we are not only sinful, but that we are weak and wretched, and so fit subjects for a compassion which is the strangest paradox of a perfect and divine heart. The mercy of God is the outcome of His grace.

And as is the fountain and the stream, so is the great lake into which it spreads itself when it is received into a human heart. Peace comes, the all-sufficient summing up of everything that God can give, and that men can need, from His loving-kindness, and from their needs. The world is too wide to be narrowed to any single aspect of the various discords and disharmonies which trouble men. Peace with God; peace in this anarchic kingdom within me, where conscience and will, hopes and fears, duty and passion, sorrows and joys, cares and confidence, are ever fighting one another; where we are torn asunder by conflicting aims and rival claims, and wherever any part of our nature asserting itself against another leads to intestine warfare, and troubles the poor soul. All that is harmonized and quieted down, and made concordant and co-operative to one great end, when the grace and the mercy have flowed silently into our spirits and harmonized aims and desires.

There is peace that comes from submission; tranquility of spirit, which is the crown and reward of obedience; repose, which is the very smile upon the face of faith, and all these things are given unto us along with the grace and mercy of our God. And as the man that possesses this is at peace with God, and at peace with himself, so he may bear in his heart that singular blessing of a perfect tranquility and quiet amidst the distractions of duty, of sorrows, of losses, and of cares. 'In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known unto God; and the peace of God which passeth all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' And he who is thus at friendship with God, and in harmony with himself, and at rest from sorrows and cares, will surely find no enemies amongst men with whom he must needs be at war, but will be a son of peace, and walk the world, meeting in them all a friend and a brother. So all discords may be quieted; even though still we have to fight the good fight of faith, we may do, like Gideon of old, build an altar to ‘ Jehovah-shalom,’ the God of peace.

And now one word, as to what this great text tells us are the conditions for a Christian man, of preserving, vivid and full, these great gifts,’ Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you,’ or, as the Revised Version more accurately reads,’ shall be with us in truth and love.’ Truth and love are, as it were, the space within which the river flows, if I may so say, the banks of the stream. Or, to get away from the metaphor, these are set forth as being the conditions abiding in which, for our parts, we shall receive this benediction-’In truth and in love.’

I have no time to enlarge upon the great thoughts that these two words, thus looked at, suggest; let me put it into a sentence. To ‘abide in the truth’ is to keep ourselves conscientiously and habitually under the influence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and of the Christ who is Himself the Truth. They who, keeping in Him, realizing His presence, believing His word, founding their thinking about the unseen, about their relations to God, about sin and forgiveness, about righteousness and duty, and about a thousand other things, upon Christ and the revelation that He makes, these are those who shall receive ‘ Grace, mercy, and peace.’ Keep yourselves in Christ, and Christ coming to you, brings in His hands, and is, the ‘grace and the mercy and the peace’ of which my text speaks. And in love, if we want these blessings, we must keep ourselves consciously in the possession of and in the grateful response of our hearts to, the great love, the incarnate Love, which is given in Jesus Christ.

Here is, so to speak, the line of direction which these great mercies take. The man who stands in their path, they will come to him and fill his heart; the man that steps aside, they will run past him and not touch him. You keep yourselves id the love of G,6d,’by communion, by the exercise of mind and heart and faith upon Him; and then be sure-for my text is not only a wish, but a confident affirmation-be sure that the fountain of all blessing itself, and the stream of petty benedictions which flow from it, will open themselves out in your hearts into a quiet, deep sea, on whose calm surface no tempests shall ever rave, and on whose unruffled bosom God Himself will manifest and mirror His face.

3 John

1) 3 JOHN 1:2
2) 3 JOHN 1:7
3) 3 JOHN 1:8
4) 3 JOHN 1:12

1) 3 John 1:2

3 John

A PROSPEROUS SOUL

3Jn. 1:2.

This little letter contains no important doctrinal teaching nor special revelation of any kind. It is the outpouring of the Christian love of the old Apostle to a brother about whom we know nothing else except that John, the beloved, loved him in the truth. And this prayer-for it is a prayer rather than a mere wish, since a good man like John turned all his wishes into prayers-this prayer in the original is even more emphatic and beautiful than in our version. ‘Beloved, I pray that in all things thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth,’ says the Revised Version, and that slight change in the position of one clause is at once felt to be an improvement. We can scarcely suppose an Apostle praying for anybody ‘above all things’ that he might get on in the world. But the wish that Gaius may prosper outwardly in all things, as his soul prospers, is eminently worthy of John. He sets these two types of prosperity over against one another, and says, ‘My wish for you is that you may be as prosperous and robust in spiritual matters as you are in bodily, and material things’.

I. Now note-in the; first place, What makes a prosperous soul?

That question might be answered in a great variety of ways, but I purpose for the present to answer it by confining myself to this letter, and seeing what we can find out about the man to whom it was addressed. ‘I rejoiced greatly when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee.’

There is the starting-point of true health of soul. That soul, and only that soul, is prosperous, in which what the Apostle calls here ‘ the truth’ is lodged and rooted; and by ‘ the truth’ he means, of course, the whole great revelation of God in Jesus Christ; and eminently Jesus Christ Himself who is the embodied Truth. Whether we take the phrase as meaning the abiding of Jesus Christ in the heart, or whether we take it as meaning more simply the incorporation into the very substance of the being, of the motives and principles that lie in the Gospel, comes to pretty much the same thing. The one thing which makes a man’s soul healthy is to get Jesus Christ into it. That acts like an amulet that banishes all diseases and corruptions. That is like the preserving salt which, rubbed into a perishable substance, arrests corruption and makes food sweet and savory. It is the engrafted word that is able to save the soul, and howsoever many other things may contribute to the inner well-being and prosperity of a man, such as intellectual acquirements, refined tastes, the gratification of pure affections, the fulfilment of innocent and legitimate hopes, and the like, the one thing that makes the soul prosperous is to have Christ in His word deeply planted and inseparably enshrined in its personality and being.

And how is that enshrining to be brought about? Alas, we all know the way a great deal better than we practice it. The prosperous soul is the soul that has opened itself in docile obedience for the entrance of the quickening and cleansing word. And just as a flower will open its calyx in the sunshine, and being opened by the sunshine playing upon its elastic filaments, will, because it is opened, receive into itself the sun that opened it and so grow; in like manner, that heart that disparts itself at the touch of Christ’s hand, and welcomes Him into the inner chambers and shrine of its being, will find that where He comes He brings warmth and fragrance and growth and all blessing. The prosperous soul is the Christ-inhabited soul. By willing reception, by patient waiting, by the study of God’s word, by the endeavour to bring ourselves more and more under the influence of the truth as it is in Jesus, does that truth that makes prosperity take up its abode within us.

But the letter gives another of the characteristics of the truly prosperous and healthy soul. ‘Thy brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth.’ The Apostle is not afraid of a confusion of metaphors which shocks sticklers for rhetorical propriety. The truth is, first of all, regarded as being in the man; and then it is regarded as being a road on which, and within the limits of which he walks, or an atmosphere in which he moves. The incongruity is no real incongruity, but it strikingly brings out the great and blessed fact of the Gospel that the man who has the grace of God, the truth as it is in Jesus, within him, thereby finds that there is prepared for him a path within the limits of that truth in which he can safely walk. There will be progress if there be prosperity. The prosperous spirit is the active and advancing spirit, not content merely with sitting and saying, ‘I have the truth in my soul. Thy word have I hid in my heart that I sin not against Thee’; but recognizing that that truth is the law of his life, and prescribes for him a course of conduct. The prosperous soul is the soul that confines its activity within the fence which ‘the truth as it is in Jesus,’ who is the pattern, and the motive, and the law, and the power, has laid down for us; and within those limits makes daily and hourly advance to a more entire conformity with the example of the Lord. The prosperous soul is the soul that walks-not that sits idle-for action is the end of thought, and the purpose of the truth is to make men good, and not merely wise-a soul that acts and advances, yet never passing out of the atmosphere of the Gospel, nor going beyond the principles and motives that are laid down there.

There is a third characteristic in this letter, which we may also take for an illustration of the Apostle’s idea. For he says: ‘Thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest.’

Now ‘faithfully’ is not here used in the sense of righteously discharging all obligations and fulfilling one’s stewardship, but it means something deeper than that. The root idea is ‘whatever thou doest thou doest as a work of Christian faith’; or, to put it into other words, the prosperous soul is the soul all whose activity is based upon that one great truth made its own by faith, that Jesus Christ loves it, and so is all the result of trust in Him. Faith in Christ is the mother-tincture, out of which every virtue can be compounded, according to the liquid to which you add it. The basis of all, the ‘stock’ from which all the rest is really made, is the act of faith in Jesus Christ. And so the prosperous soul is the soul that has the truth in it, and walks in the truth which it has, and does everything because it trusts in the living God and in Jesus Christ His Son.

Is that your notion of the ideal of human nature, of the true and noble prosperity of an immortal spirit? Unless it be you have yet to learn the loftiest elevation and the fairest beauty that are possible for men. The prosperous soul filled with Christ within, and walking with Christ by its side, and drawing laws and motives, pattern and power from Him, is the soul that truly has fulfilled its ideal, and is journeying on the right road. For that is the literal meaning of the word that is rendered here ‘prosper’; journeying on the right road to the true goal of human nature.

II. Look at the wished-for correspondence between this soul-prosperity and outward prosperity. ‘Beloved,’ says John, ‘I wish above all things,’ or rather, ‘I wish that in regard to all things, thou mayest prosper and be in health as thy soul prospereth.’

How would you like that standard applied to your worldly prosperity? Would you like not to get on any better in business than you do in religion? Would you be content that your limbs should be no more healthy than your soul, or that you should be making no more advances in worldly happiness and material prosperity than you are in the Divine life? Would you be content to have your worldly prosperity doled out to you out of the same spoon, of the same dimensions, with which you are content to receive your spiritual prosperity? ‘As thy soul prospereth’-that would mean a very Lenten diet for a good many of us, and a very near approach to insolvency for some commercial men. Brethren, there is a sharp test in these words. I suppose this good Gaius to whom the letter was written was very likely in humble circumstances, and not improbably in enfeebled health. And John was probably wishing for him more than he had, when he wished him to get on as well in the world as he did in his spiritual life, and desired that his soul might prosper as much as his body. It would be a bad thing for some of us if the same standard of proportion were applied to us.

Another consideration is suggested by this correspondence, and that is that it is always a disastrous thing for Christian people when outward prosperity gets ahead of inward. It is the ruin of a good many so-called Christian people. When a man gets on in the world he begins, too often, to decline in the truth. It is difficult for us to carry a full cup without spilling it. And the worst thing that could happen to many Christian people would be what they fret, and fume, and work themselves into a fever, and live careful days and sleepless nights in order to secure-and that is, outward prosperity. The best thing is that the soul should be more prosperous than the body, and the worst adversity is the outward prosperity that ruins or harms the inward life.

III. So, lastly, note the superiority of the inward prosperity.

There is no overstrained spiritualism here. John has set us an example that we need not be afraid to follow. If he that leaned upon Christ's bosom, and had drunk in more of the spirit of his Master than any of the Twelve, was not afraid to pray for this good brother that he might have worldly good and health, we need not doubt that for ourselves, and for those that are dear to us, it is perfectly legitimate and right that we should desire and pray for both things. There is no unnatural, artificial, hypocritical pretence of despising the present and the outward in the words here. Although the Apostle does put the two things side by side, he does not fall into the error of casting contempt upon either. He is a true disciple of the Master who said, ' Your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things.' And if your Father knows that you have need, then you may be quite sure that you will get them, and it is a lie to pretend that you do not want them when you do.

But then, that being admitted, look how the higher towers above the legitimate lower. It will always be the case that if a man seeks first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, there will be-in his simple devotion to the truth, and walking within the limits that it prescribes, and making all his life an act of faith-a direct tendency in a great many directions to secure the best possible use, and the largest possible enjoyment, from the things that are seen and temporal. 'Godliness hath promise of the life which now is'; and the first Psalm, which perhaps may have been in the Apostle's mind here, contains a truth that was not exhausted in the Old Testament days, because the man whose heart is set on the law of God, and who meditates upon that law day and night, all that he doeth shall prosper. There is in godliness a distinct and constant tendency to make the best of both worlds; but the best is not made of the present world unless we subordinate it and feel distinctly its insignificance in comparison with the future, which is also the present, unseen world.

And even when, as is often the case, the devout and inwardly prosperous soul is compassed about with sorrows that never can be stanched, with griefs through which anything but an immortal life would bleed itself away; or with poverty and want and anxiety arising from causes which no personal devotion can ever touch or affect-even then if the soul prospers it has the power, the magic power, of converting poison into food, and sorrow into a means of growth; and they whose spirits are joined to Jesus Christ, and whose souls ever move in harmony with Him-and therefore are prosperous souls-will find that there is nothing in this world that is really adverse to them. For 'all things work together for good to them that love God,' since he who loves God thinks nothing bad that helps him to love Him better; and since he who loves God finds occasion for loving and trusting Him more in every variety and vicissitude of earthly fortune.

Therefore, brethren, if we will follow the directions that this Apostle gives us as to how to secure the prosperity of our souls, God is faithful and He will measure to us prosperity in regard of outward things by the proportion which our faith in Him bears to His faithfulness. The more we love Him, the more certainly will all things be our servants. If we can say 'We are Christ's,' then all things are ours.

2) 3 John 1:7

3 John

FOR THE SAKE OF THE NAME

3Jn. 1:7.

The Revised Version gives the true force of these words by omitting the ' His,' and reading merely ' for the sake of the Name.' There is no need to say whose name. There is only One which could evoke the heroism and self-sacrifice of which the Apostle is speaking. The expression, however, is a remarkable one. The name seems almost, as it were, to be personified. There are one or two other instances in the New Testament where the same usage is found, according to the true reading, though it is obscured in our

Authorized Version, because it struck some early transcribers as being strange, and so they tried to mend and thereby spoiled it.

We read, for instance, in the true reading, in the Acts of the Apostles, as to the disciples, on the first burst of persecution, that ‘they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the Name.’ And again, in Philippians, that in recompense and reward for ‘His obedience unto death’- the Father hath given unto the Son-’the Name which is above every name.’ Once more, though less obviously, we find James speaking about ‘ the worthy name by which we are called.’

Then the other part of this phrase is quite as significant as this principal one. The word rendered ‘for the sake of,’ does not merely mean-though it does mean that-’ on account of,’ or ‘by reason of,’ but’ on behalf of,’ as if, in some wonderful sense, that mighty and exalted Name was furthered, advantaged, or benefited by even men’s poor services. So, you see, a minute study of the mere words of the Scripture, though it may seem like grammatical trifling and pedantry, yields large results. Men do sometimes ‘gather grapes of thorns’; and the hard, dry work of trying to get at the precise shade of meaning in Scriptural words always repays us with large lessons and impulses. So let us consider the thoughts which naturally arise from the accurate observation of the very language here.

I. And, first, let us consider the pre-eminence implied in ‘the Name.’

Now I need not do more than remind you in a sentence that eminently in the Old Testament, and also in the New, a name is a great deal more than the syllables which designate a person or a thing. It describes, not only who a man is, but what he is; and implies qualities, characteristics, either bodily or spiritual, which were either discerned in or desired for a person. So when the creatures are brought to Adam that he might give them names, that expresses the thought of the primitive man’s insight into their nature and characteristics. So we find our Lord changing the names of His disciples, in some cases in order to express either the deep qualities which His eye discerned lying beneath the more superficial ones, and to be evolved in due time, or declaring some great purpose which He had for them, official or otherwise.

So here the name substantially means the same thing as the Person Jesus. It is not the syllables by which He is called, but the whole character and nature of Him who is called by these syllables that is meant by ‘the Name.’ The distinction between it, as so used, and Person, is simply that the former puts more stress on the qualities and characteristics as known to us.

Thus ‘the Name’ means the whole Christ as we know Him, or as we may know Him, from the Book, in the dignity of His Messiahship, in the mystery of His Divinity, in the sweetness of His life, in the depth of His words, in the gentleness of His heart, in the patience and propitiation of His sacrifice, in the might of His resurrection, in the glory of His ascension, in the energy of His present life and reigning work for us at the right hand of God. All these, the central facts of the Gospel, are gathered together into that expression the Name, which is the summing up in one mighty word, so to speak, which it is not possible for a man to utter except in fragments, of all that Jesus Christ is in Himself, and of all that He is and does for us.

It is but a picturesque and condensed way of saying that Jesus Christ, in the depth of His nature and the width of His work, stands alone, and is the single, because the all-sufficient, Object of love and trust and obedience. There is no need for a forest of little pillars; as in some great chapter-house one central shaft, graceful as strong, bears the groined roof, and makes all other supports unnecessary and impertinent. There is one Name, and one alone, because in the depths of that wondrous nature, in the circumference of that mighty work, there is all that a human heart, or that all human hearts, can need for peace, for nobleness, for holiness, for the satisfaction of all desires, for the direction of efforts, for the stability of their being. The name stands alone, and it will be the only Name that, at last, shall blaze upon the page of the world’s history when the ages are ended; and the chronicles of earth, with the brief ‘ immortality’ which they gave to other names of illustrious men, are molded into dust. ‘The Name is above every name,’ and will outlast them all, for it is the all-sufficient and encyclopaedical embodiment of everything that a single heart, or the whole race, can require, desire, conceive, or attain.

So then, brethren, the uniqueness and solitariness of the name demands an equal and corresponding exclusiveness of devotion and trust in us. ‘Hear, O

Israel! The Lord thy God is one Lord. Therefore thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind.' And in like manner we may argue -There is one Christ, and there is none other but He. Therefore all the current of my being is to set to Him, and on Him alone am I to repose my undivided weight, casting all my cares and putting all my trust only on Him. Lean on none other. You cannot lean too heavily on that strong arm. Love none other except in Him; for His heart is wide enough and deep enough for all mankind. Obey none other, for only His voice has the right to command. And lifting up our eyes, let us see 'no man any more save Jesus only.' That Name stands alone.

Involved in this, but worthy of briefly putting separately, is this other thought, that the pre-eminent and exclusive mention of the Name carries with it, in fair inference, the declaration of His Divine nature. It seems to me that we have here a clear case in which the Old Testament usage is transferred to Jesus Christ, only, instead of the Name being Jehovah, it is Jesus. It seems to me impossible that a man saturated as this Apostle was with Old Testament teaching, and familiar as he was with the usage which runs through it as to the sanctity of 'the Name of the Lord,' should have used such language as this of my text unless he had felt, as he has told us himself, that 'the Word was God.' And the very incidental character of the allusion gives it the more force as a witness to the commonplaceness which the thought of the divinity of Jesus Christ had assumed to the consciousness of the Christian Church.

II. But passing from that, let me ask you to look, secondly, at the power of the Name to sway the life.

I have explained the full meaning of the preposition in my text in my introductory remarks. It seems to me to cover both the ground of 'on account of,' or ' by reason of,' and 'on behalf of.'

Taking the word in the former of these two senses, note how this phrase, 'for the sake of the Name,' carries with it this principle, that in that Name, explained as I have done, there lie all the forces that are needed for the guidance and the impulses of life. In Him, in the whole fullness of His being, in the wonders of the story of His character and historical manifestation, there lies all guidance for men. He is the Pattern of our conduct. He is the Companion for us in our sorrow. He is the Quickener for us in all our tasks. And to set Him before us as our Pattern, and to walk in the paths that He dictates, is to attain to perfection. Whosoever makes ‘for the sake of the Name’ the motto of his life will not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

And not only is there guidance, but there is impulse, and that is better than guidance. For what men most of all want is a power that shall help or make them to do the things that they see plainly enough to be right.

And oh, brother, where is there such a force to quicken, to ennoble, to lead men to higher selves than their dead past selves, as lies in the grand sweep of that historical manifestation which we understand by the Name of Jesus? There is nothing else that will go so deep down into the heart and unseal the fountains of power and obedience as that Name. There is nothing else that will so strike the shackles off the prisoned will, and ban back to their caves the wild beasts that tyrannize within, and put the chain round their necks, as the Name of Jesus Christ. That is the Talisman that ennobles everything, that evokes undreamed-of powers, that ‘out of these stones,’ the hard and unsusceptible and obstinate wills of godless men, will ‘raise up children unto Abraham.’ This is the secret that turns the heavy lead of our corrupt natures into pure gold.

And where does the impulsive power lie? Where, in that great continent, the whole life and work of Jesus Christ, is the dominant summit from which the streams run down? The Cross! The Cross! The Love that died for us, individually and singly, as well as collectively, is the thing that draws out answering love. And answering love is the untiring and omnipotent power that transmutes my whole nature into the humble aspiration to he like Him who has given Himself for me, and to render back myself unto Him for His gift. Brother, if you have not known the Name of Christ as the Name of the Divine Saviour who died on the Cross for you, you do not yet understand the power to transform, to ennoble, to energize, to impel to all self-sacrifice that lies in that Name. In the fact of His death, and in the consequent fact of the communication of life from Him to each of us if we will, lie the great impulses which will blessedly and strongly carry us along the course which

He marks out for us. And they who can say '.For the sake of the Name' will live lives calm, harmonious, noble, and in some humble measure conformed to the serene and transcendent beauty to which they bow and on which they rest. The impulse for a life-the only one that will last, and the only one that will lift-lies in the recognition of the Name. And so, let me remind you how our consequent simple duty is honestly, earnestly, prayerfully, always, to try to keep ourselves under the influence of that sweet compulsion and mighty encouragement which lie in the Name of Jesus Christ. How fragmentary, how interrupted, how imperfect at the best are our yieldings to the power and the sweetness of the motives and pattern given to us in Christ's Name! How much of our lives would be all the same if Jesus Christ never had come, or if we never had believed in Him! Look back over your days, Christian men, and see how little of them has borne that stamp, and how slightly it has been impressed upon them.

Our whole life ought to be filled with His Name. You can write it anywhere. It does not need a gold plate to carve His Name upon. It does not need to be set in jewels and diamonds. The poorest scrap of brown paper, and the bluntest little bit of pencil, and the shakiest hand, will do to write the Name of Christ; and all life, the trivialities as well as the crises, may be flashing and bright with the sacred syllables. Mohammedans decorate their palaces and mosques with no pictures, but with the name of Allah, in gilded arabesques. Everywhere, on walls and roof, and windows and cornices, and pillars and furniture, the name is written. There is no such decoration for a life as that Christ's Name should be inscribed thereon.

III. Lastly, notice the service that even we can do to the Name.

That, as I said, is the direct idea of the Apostle here. He is speaking about a very small matter. There were some anonymous Christian people who had gone out on a little missionary tour, and in the course of it, penniless and homeless, they had come to a city the name of which we do not know, and had been taken in and kindly entertained by a Christian brother, whose name has been preserved to us in this one letter. And, says John, these humble men went out 'on behalf of the Name ' to do something to further it, to advantage it! Jesus Christ, the bearer of the Name, was in some sense helped and benefited, if I may use the word, by the work of these lowly and unknown brethren.

Now there are one or two other instances in the New Testament where this same idea of the benefit accruing to the name of Jesus from His servants on earth is stated, and I just point to them in a sentence in order that you may have all the evidence before you. There is the passage to which I have already referred, recording the disciples' joy that they were 'accounted worthy to suffer shame on behalf of the Name.' There are the words of Christ Himself in reference to Paul at his conversion, 'I will shew him how great things he must suffer for My Name's sake.' There is the church's eulogium on Barnabas and Paul, as 'men that have hazarded their lives for the Name of our Lord Jesus.' There is Paul's declaration that he is 'ready, not only to be bound, but to die, on behalf of the Name of the Lord Jesus.' And in the introduction of the Epistle to the Romans he connects his apostleship with the benefit that thereby accrued to the Name of Christ. If we put all these together they just come to this, that, wonderful as it is, and unworthy as we are to take that great Name into our lips, yet, in God's infinite mercy and Christ's fraternal and imperial love, He has appointed that His Name should be furthered by the sufferings, the service, the life, and the death of His followers.

'He was extolled with my tongue,' says the Psalmist, in a rapture of wonder that any words of his could exalt God's Name. So to you Christians is committed the charge of magnifying the name of Jesus Christ. You can do it by your lives, and you can do it by your words, and you are sent to do both. We can 'adorn the doctrine'; paint the lily and gild the refined gold, and make men think more highly of our Lord by our exam pie of faithfulness and obedience. We can do it by our definite proclamation of His Name, which is laid upon us all to do, and for which facilities of varying degrees are granted. The inconsistencies of the professing followers of Christ are the strongest barriers to the world's belief in the glory of His Name. The Church as it is forms the hindrance rather than the help to the world's becoming a church. If from us sounded out the Name, and over all that we did it was written, blazing, conspicuous, the world would look and listen, and men would believe that there was something in the Gospel.

If you are a Christian professor, either Christ is glorified or put to shame in you, His saint; and either it is true of you that you do all things in the Name of the Lord Jesus and so glorify His Name, or that through you the Name of Christ is 'blasphemed among the nations.' Choose which of the two it shall be!

3) 3 John 1:8

3 John

FELLOW-WORKERS WITH THE TRUTH

3Jn. 1:8.

'Fellow-helpers to the Truth.' A word or two may be permitted as to the immediate occasion of the expression. There seems to have been, as we learn not only from occasional references in the New Testament, but from early Christian literature, and very frequent practice in the primitive churches, of certain members having, like our friends the Quakers, 'a concern' for some special ministry, and being loosed from their ordinary avocations, and sent out with the sanction of the Church. These traveling evangelists went from place to place, and sought the hospitality and help of the Christian communities to which they came. My text is an exhortation from the aged Apostle to treat such brethren as they deserved, seeing that they have 'come forth for the sake of the Name'; and should be welcomed and helped as brethren.

Now there are ambiguities about the words, on which I need not dwell. So far as the grammatical construction of the originals are concerned, they may either mean what our Authorized Version takes them to mean, 'fellow-helpers'-or rather 'fellow-workers'-for the Truth; the co-operation being regarded as confined to the two sets of men, the evangelists and their hospitable receivers-or they may mean, as the Revised Version takes them, 'fellow-workers with the Truth'- 'the Truth' and the two sets of human agents being all supposed as co-operating in one common end. The latter is, I presume, the real meaning of the Evangelist. 'The Truth' is supposed to be an active force in the world, which both the men who directly preach it, and the men who sustain and cheer those who do, are co-operating with. Then there is another question as to whether, by 'the Truth ' here, we are to understand the whole body of Christian revelation, or whether we are to see shining through the words the august figure of Him who is personally, as He Himself claimed,' the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.' I believe that the latter explanation is the truer one, and more in accordance with the intense saturation in all John's writings with the words of the Master. I can scarcely think that when he spoke thus about 'the Truth,' or when he spoke in another of his letters about the 'Truth which dwelleth in us, and shall be in us for ever,' he meant only a body of principles. I think he meant Jesus Christ Himself. And so with that sacred and auguster meaning attaching to his words, I wish to look at them with you.

I. The possessors of the Truth are to be workers with the Truth.

I do not say a word about the claim which is made in this expression, that Christian people possess the absolute truth in regard to all matters upon which the revelation made to them in Jesus Christ touches. That is a bold assumption, but I do not need to say a word about it here. I take it for granted that you professing Christians concur in the belief that what you have received about God and Christ and God's will concerning men, and the way of salvation, and the prospects for the future life, stands alone and complete, as 'the Truth,' to which all other conceptions of God and man and duty and destiny are related, but as fragmentary at the highest, and as often perversions, corruptions, and contradictions. Do not let any modern width of thought, or any impressions gathered from the new science of comparative religion, blur the distinctness and the joyousness of your confidence that in Christ we have not a peradventure of men, but the 'Verily! Verily!' of heaven: the Truth.

And then remember that, according to the representation of my text, this Truth, wherever it enters into a man's heart, lays hold upon him, and makes him its apostle. All moral and spiritual truth has that power. There are plenty of dry statements in various regions of science and thought the reception of which brings with it no compulsion whatever to say a word about them. No man is ever smitten with the conviction that it is his duty to go out into the world and proclaim that' two and two make four,' or truths of that sort. But once lodge in a man’s heart thoughts of a moral, religious, spiritual character, and as soon as he believes them he wakes up to feel’ Then I must-I must proclaim them, and get somebody else to share my convictions.’ It is the test of real, deep, vital possession of’ the Truth’ that it shall be as a fire shut up in our bones, burning its way necessarily out into the light; and that no man who has it dare wrap it in a napkin and bury it in the ground.

God forbid that I should say that a silent Christian is not a genuine Christian. I know too well how far beneath the ideal we all come, but sure I am that if men have never found that when ‘ the Truth as it is in Jesus ‘ drew back her veil, and let the lambent beauty of her face blaze in upon their hearts, it made them her slaves and knight-errants for evermore, they have seen very very little of that supreme loveliness. Brethren the truth that we believe is our mistress, and of the Christian truth that we profess to hold, we are sworn by the very fact to be the apostles and the missioners.

Nor let us forget the solemn and elevating thought which goes along with the imagery of my text; that the Truth, for all its majesty and dignity and divinity, needs men for its helpers. The only way by which it can spread is through us and our fellows. There is no magic by which it can divide and impart itself, apart from the agency of the men who already possess it. The torch has been brought from heaven, and the light with which it blazes is celestial, but in order to enlighten the darkness of the earth it must be passed from hand to hand by a linked chain of men. The lake lies full of possible fertility and promise to flush with green verdure the barren burning desert sands; but it will lie there, its possible good unrealized for ever, unless men with their spades and excavators dig the channels and lead the heaven-sent blessing that came from the clouds into all the barren places. The Truth needs us, but when the work is done that the workers with the Truth do, it is the Truth and not the workers that have done the work.

So, Christian men and women, I come to you with this message-recognize your dignity, the honour that is laid upon you in being allowed to be co-operators with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God. Recognize the obligation, solemn and heavy, which is laid upon you by the very nature of the truth which we believe, by the common bonds of fellowship between man and man, to impart the message that has brought life to us; and recognize it as at once our highest honour and our widest duty to be ‘fellow-workers with the Truth.’

II. The companions of Christ are to be workers with Christ.

He, as I have pointed out, is the Incarnate Truth. And here we come upon the especial peculiarity of Christianity as a system, considered in its relation to Jesus Christ, its Founder and its Giver. You can take Plato’s philosophy and do what you like with it, and treat Plato as a negligible quantity. You can do the same with all other great teachers, even those of them who have most impressed their own individuality upon their thinkings, and theorizings, and teachings, but you cannot do that with Christianity; you cannot say, ‘Never mind who it was that said it. Attend to what was said.’ For Jesus Christ, and His message, are so interwoven and interlaced in such a fashion as that you cannot get rid of Him, and keep it. He Himself is the Truth. Christ is Christianity; and any man that has ever tried to deal with the teachings of the New Testament as a body of principles, ignoring the lips from which they came, is left with what they call a caput mortuum, a dead mass of impotent generalities. Get Christ into them, and they are all palpitating, and living, and flaming, and have power.

So, then, when I call my brethren, and feel myself bound to the task of being ‘workers with the Truth,’ it is no mere devotion to the propaganda of a creed that I want to urge, but it is devotion to proclaiming the beloved hand of the person out of whom the creed is carved, and in whom all the truth is shrined and sphered. Every man that is Christ’s companion is thereby bound to be a worker with the incarnate Truth. He needs our help. True, he finds all the capital, but we are His partners, His representatives and agents here on earth, as He has taught us in more than one parable. The pound or the talent is His; it is given to me, but it is left with me to determine whether it shall increase and fructify or not. On the Cross He said, ‘It is finished,’ but all through the ages He is working, and all through the ages His mightiest means of working is through the men by whom He works. The Lord works with them, and they work with the Lord. They are His tools; He makes them, but He cannot do His work without them. And notwithstanding the Cross, notwithstanding the adequate powers for the regeneration of humanity, and the salvation of individuals, which lie in that message of the Gospel, the co-operation of the Church is needed if the world is to be saved. Surely it is constituted in order to fill up that which is behind of the sufferings of Christ, and to carry on the unfinished development of the finished work which, done once for all on the Cross, is not done until it has been applied to the world by Christ working through His people, and by His people working with Christ. If there is a flaw in the covering that enwraps the wire, there will be no message at the other end. If you and I are non-conductors, no matter how much power may be flashed into us, that which is beyond us will want the power. The medium between Christ and the world that He died and lives to save, the medium is we Christian people.

‘Workers with the Truth.’ That is parallel with what Paul says, in the great word which he ventures upon when, having just declared that neither he nor Apollos are anything, he rises to the thought which balances that of their nothingness: ‘We are labourers together with God.’

Is not that a dignity? And what shall we say of men who have so little consciousness of union with Jesus Christ as that they have next to no sympathy with the things that fill His heart? I plead for no narrow interpretation of the duties of the ‘fellow-workers with the Truth.’ He came to redress all human misery, sin, and evil. He came not only to speak the words that save the soul with the everlasting salvation of sin forgiven, and friendship restored between God and man, but to carry light and healing and peace and hope into every region where the darkness broods, to break every chain and let the oppressed go free. Social improvements, and all the wider outlooks which Christian benevolence takes in these late years, all come into the general category of being the carrying out of Christ’s sympathies and purpose, and being part of the work of those who are ‘ fellow-workers’ with Him in His toil, and who shall one day hear, ‘It is finished! The kingdoms of this world are the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ.’

III. Farther, the workers with Christ are to be workers with one another.

These traveling evangelists had one function. The people in the unknown church in Asia Minor, staying at home and following their secular callings, had another; and that was, to help and to further these peripatetic brethren. Co-operation means diversity of function and identity of aims and ends. For us there remains the duty still, as incumbent as it was in those early days, of recognizing our own special task, of cleaving to that, and yet of furthering and helping all our brethren who, in their diverse ways, are engaged in the same great end. The men that take care of the base of operations of that army that is pressing down upon the foe are as truly fighting the enemy as the men that are in the front. It was the old law in Israel, based upon a clear understanding that all who co-operated towards one end, in whatsoever divers ways, are united together; that 'as his part is that goes down into the battle, so shall his part be that abides by the stuff; they shall part alike.'

Brethren, learn your special work. Remember that you have each something to do that nobody can do as well as you. Learn your special work, and beware of narrowing your sympathies to your special work. Let them go out to embrace all, however far apart upon the wall and however different may be their tasks, they are still co-operant to one end. 'He that planteth and he that watereth are one.' Identity of purpose, and wide diversity of method, with as wide charity, and as wide sympathy, ought to mark all Christian workers.

All the thoughts that I have been trying to urge have a very direct bearing upon church as well as upon individual life. Although there is no intention, on our Apostle's part, of laying down anything like the constitution of a Christian church, in the incidental words of my text, yet the principles involved in these words do lie very deep down in the conception of what a Christian church ought to be. They make very short work of all sacerdotal assumptions. A priest doing a miracle there at the altar, and the people simple recipients of, and spectators-that, in many quarters, is the modern notion of the relation between pastor and people. John gives the truer one when he says-' fellow-helpers to the Truth.'

The words bear on a mistake that is more common in the audience, I suppose, than sacramentarian notion -namely, that a church is a place where people come to hear sermons and pay their pew-rents, and there an end. There is a dead-weight of idle people clogging the work of every Christian congregation in England. -Christian professors! what do you do for the

Truth, for your Lord, for your brethren? I, for my part, have to say with the Apostle,' not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy; for by faith ye stand.' I decline all responsibility for doing more than my own share of the evangelistic work of this church. The Chinese put up mud-forts in which there is one real cannon that can be fired, and make a noise, and all the rest are dummies; painted, wooden. That is a great deal too like what a great many Christian churches are-one piece to fire, and the others for show.

'Fellow-helpers.' That defines our mutual relation. But do not be too sure that your work is only the indirect work of sustaining ' them that are such.' There is some direct work for you to do. And you are shutting your souls out from a great blessing by not doing it. Sure I am that whoever is in union with Jesus Christ will have his lips touched to proclaim His Name somehow. And sure I am that whoever, smitten by love and loyalty to his Master, by the ardour of affection born of the grasp of the Truth, and by real love for his fellow-men that need it, opens his lips to make Christ known, will find that there is no surer way of increasing his own grasp of the Truth, and deepening his own union with Christ, than to seek to make others share in the blessings which are his life. 'Fellow-helpers to the Truth'-and with the Truth-I pray that we may be so more and more for the days or years that may yet remain to us.

4) 3 John 1:12

3 John

THE CHRISTIAN'S WITNESSES TO CHARACTER

3Jn. 1:12.

What a strange fate this Demetrius has had! He has narrowly escaped oblivion, yet he is remembered for ever and his name is known over all the world. But beyond the name nothing is certain. Who he was, where and when he lived, what he had done to earn the old Apostle's commendation are unknown. All his surroundings are swallowed up in darkness, and there shines out only that one little point of light that he 'hath a good report'-or, as the Revised Version better renders it,' he hath the witness of all men, and of the truth itself.' A great many brilliant reputations might be glad to exchange a fame that has filled the world for a little epitaph like that.

I said we did not know anything about him. What if he should be the Demetrius whose astute appeal to profit and religion roused the shrine-makers at Ephesus and imperiled Paul's life? Of course, that is mere conjecture, and the identity of name is not a strong foundation to build on, for it was a very common one. If this disciple, thus praised by John, is our old acquaintance in Acts, what a change had come over him! Truly, to him, ' old things had passed away, all things were become new.' If we remember John's long connection with Ephesus, the conjecture will perhaps seem reasonable. At all events, we do no harm if, perhaps led by sentiment, we give as much weight as we can to the supposition that here we have, reappearing within the Church, the old antagonist, and that 'this Paul' had 'persuaded' him, too, that 'they be no gods which are made with hands,' and so had turned him to Jesus Christ. I wonder what became of his craft, and his silver shrines, if this is the same man as he who mustered the Ephesian silversmiths.

But be that as it may, I desire-keeping in mind the alteration of rendering that I have suggested-'hath witness of all men,' and of the truth itself-to look at the sort of witnesses to character that a Christian man should be able to call.

I. The first witness is Common Opinion.

There is something wrong unless a Christian can put popular opinion into the witness-box in his favour. Of course there is a sense in which there is nothing more contemptible than seeking for that, and in which no heavier woe can come upon us, and no worse thing can be said about us, than that all men speak well of us. But, on the other hand, whether men speak well of us or not, there should be a distinctive characteristic plainly visible in us Christians which shall make all sorts of observers say to themselves, ' Well I that is a good man anyhow. I may not like him; I may not want to resemble him; but I cannot help seeing what sort of a man he is and that there is no mistake about his genuine goodness.' That is a testimony which Christians ought to be more ambitious of possessing than many of them are, and to lay themselves out more consciously to get, than most of them do. For bad men generally know a good one when they see him and a great many of them

'Compound for sins they are inclined to
By praising virtues they've no mind to,'

and substitute admiration of uncongenial goodness for imitation of it. It is nothing uncommon to find the drunkard praising the temperate man, and evil-livers of all sorts recognizing the beauty of their own opposites. The worst man in the world has an ideal of goodness in his conscience and mind, far purer and loftier than the best man has realized.

And, again, it is a very righteous and good thing that people who are not Christians should have such extremely lofty and strict standards for the conduct of people that are. We sometimes smile when we see in the newspapers, for instance, sensational paragraphs about the crime of some minister, or clergyman, or some representative religious man. No doubt a dash of malice is present in these; but they are an unconscious testimony to the high ideal of character which attaches to the profession of Christianity. No similar paragraphs appear about the immoralities or crimes of non-religious men. They are not expected to be saints. But we are, and it is right that we should be thus expected. The world does not demand of us more than it is entitled to do, or that our Lord has demanded. There is nothing more wholesome than that Christian people should feel that there are lynx eyes watching them, and hundreds who will have a malicious joy if they defile their garments, and bring discredit on their profession.

I have not the smallest objection to that; and I only wish that some of us who talk a great deal about the depth of our spiritual life could hear what is thought of us by our next-door neighbors, and our servants, and the tradesmen that we deal with, and all those other folk that have no sympathy with our religion, and are, therefore, rigid judges of our conduct.

Then there is another consideration which I suggest -that a great many good people think that it is their Christianity that makes folk speak ill of them, when it is their inconsistencies and not their Christianity that provoke the sarcasm. If you wrap up the treasure of your Christianity in a rough envelope of angularity, self-righteousness, sourness, censure, and criticism, you need not wonder that people do not think much of your Christianity. It is not because Christian professors are good, but because they are not better, that ninety-nine out of a hundred of the uncharitable things that are said about them are said, and truly said.

So, dear friends, let us-not in any cowardly spirit of trying to disarm censure, nor because we have an itch to be caressed, like a parrot to have its head scratched, nor because we are pleased that men shall think well of us, but because the judgment of the world is, in some degree, a more wholesome tribunal than the judgment of our own consciences, and is, in some sense, an anticipation, though with many mistakes, of the judgment of God-let us try to have a good report of ‘them that are without,’ and to he ‘living epistles, known and read of all men,’ who will recognize the handwriting, and say, ‘That is Christ’s.’

Remember Daniel in that court where luxury and vice and sensuality, and base intrigues of all sorts rioted, and how they said of him, ‘We shall find no occasion against him except it be concerning the law of his God.’ And let us try to earn the same kind of reputation; and be sure of this that, unless the world endorses our profession of Christianity, which it may do by disliking us-that is as it may be-there is grave reason to doubt whether the profession is a reality or not.

II. Then there is another witness here mentioned- ‘the truth itself.’

The Gospel of Jesus Christ witnesses for the man who witnesses for, and lives by it. A law broken testifies against the breaker; a law kept testifies for him. And so, if there be an approximation in the drift of our lives to the great ideal set forth in the law of God, that law will bear witness for us. But there must be in us the things that Christianity plainly requires before ‘the truth’ can be put into the witness box for us. There must be manifest self-surrender.

Let us go back to our supposition, which, of course, I freely admit is the only conjecture. If this is the Demetrius of the Acts, and he became a Christian, the first thing that ‘the truth’ required of him would be to shut up shop, to give up the lucrative occupation by which he had his wealth, and to cast in his lot with the men that were warring against idols. We, in our degree, will have, in some form or other, the same self-surrender to exercise.

I have a letter which tells me the story of a man, who for years has been trying to serve God, in the employ of some establishment where they sell wines and spirits, but now his conscience has smitten him, and he has had to give it up, and writes to ask me if I can find him a situation. Well! He is borne witness to by the truth itself, which he has loyally obeyed. We all, as Christians, have to do the like, and not only in the great acts of our lives to rid ourselves of everything that is contrary to the principles and commandments of the Word, but in the small things to be ever seeking to come nearer and nearer to the ideal which He requires.

When looking into the perfect law of liberty we see in its precepts our own characters reflected, if I may so say; because we keep these we may be sure that we are right. If we do not, we may be sure that we are wrong. The truth will bear witness against lives that are ordered in defiance of it and for those which are conformed to it. It is possible that even the lofty and perfect examples of conduct and character which are in the history of the Master, and the principles that are drawn from Him, may testify of us; and if so, what quiet blessedness will be ours!

III. But there is a last thought here. Christ Himself will be a witness.

I do not know that in these profound and mystical letters of the Apostle John, that great designation ‘the truth’ is ever employed to mean only the body of teaching contained in what we call the Gospel. I think that there is always trembling in the expression, and sometimes predominating in it, in these letters, the personal application of which our Lord, as reported by the same Apostle when he was playing the part of Evangelist, gives us the warrant, when He says, ‘I am the Truth.’ And if that personal meaning is, as I think it is, shimmering through these words, then we may venture to deal with it separately in conclusion, and to say that the third witness is Jesus Christ Himself.

‘With me,’ said Paul, ‘it is a very small matter to be judged of you, or of man’s judgment’; and that wholesome disregard of opinion is part of the attitude which we should bear towards popular or any human estimate-but' he that judgeth me is the Lord".'

Now, notice Paul's tenses. He does not say, 'He that is going to judge me,' away out yonder in the indefinite future, at some great Day of Judgment after death, but he says, 'He that judgeth me'; and he means us to feel that, step by step, all through our lives, and in reference to each individual action at the time of its commission, there is an act of Christ's judgment, in infallible determination by Him of the moral good or evil of our deed. So, moment by moment, we are at that tribunal, and act by act, we please or we displease Him; and of each feeling and thought, word, and deed, He says, 'Well,' or ' 111, is it done.'

We may have Him for our Witness as well as for our Judge. How does He witness? To-day, and all through our earthly days, He will witness by His voice in the inner man, enlightened and made sensitive to evil by His own gracious presence. I believe that conscience is always the irradiation of the 'Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world'; but I believe that the conscience of the man who is born again by faith in Jesus Christ is in a more special manner the voice of Christ Himself speaking within him. And when there rises in the heart that quiet glow which follows His approval, there is a Witness that no voices around, censuring or praising, have the smallest power to affect. Never mind what the world says if the voice within, which is the voice of Jesus Christ, testifies to integrity and to the desire to serve Him.

And covet this, dear friends, as by far the best and the happiest thing that we can possess in this world, when we hear Him, in the recesses of our hearts, saying to us, 'Well done, good and faithful servant,' then our thoughts are carried forward still further; and we may venture, with all our imperfections, to look onward to the day when again the Judge will be the Witness for us, even to the surprise of those whose acts He then attests. He Himself has taught us so, when He pictures the wondering servant saying, 'Lord, when did I do all these things, which Thou hast discovered in me?' And He has assured us that 'never will He forget any of our works,' and that at the last solemn hour, when we must be manifested before the Judgment-seat of Christ, He Himself will confess our deeds before the Father and before His holy angels. It is well to have the witness of man; it is heaven to have the witness of the Truth Himself.

Jude

1) JUDE 1:3
2) JUDE 1:20-21
3) JUDE 1:25

1) Jude 1:3

Jude

THE COMMON SALVATION

Jud. 1:3

'The common salvation.'- Jud. 1:3.

'The common faith.'- Tit. 1:4.

Jude was probably one of Christ's brothers, and a man of position and influence in the Church. He is writing to the whole early Christian community, numbering men widely separated from each other by nationality, race, culture, and general outlook on life; and he beautifully and humbly unites himself with them all as recipients of a 'common salvation.' Paul is writing to Titus, the veteran leader to a raw recruit. Wide differences of mental power, of maturity of religious experience, separated the two; and yet Paul beautifully and humbly associates himself with his pupil, as exercising a 'common faith.'

Probably neither of the writers meant more than to bring himself nearer to the persons whom they were respectively addressing; but their language goes a great deal further than the immediate application of it. The 'salvation' was 'common' to Jude and his readers, as 'the faith' was to Paul and Titus, because the salvation and the faith are one, all the world over.

It is for the sake of insisting upon this community, which is universal, that I have ventured to isolate these two fragments from their proper connection, and to bring them together. But you will notice that they take up the same thought at two different stages, as it were. The one declares that there is but one remedy and healing for all the world's woes; the other declares that there is but one way by which that remedy can be applied. All who possess 'the common salvation' are so blessed because they exercise 'the common faith.'

I. Note the underlying conception of a universal deepest need.

That Christian word 'salvation' has come to be threadbare and commonplace, and slips over people's minds without leaving any dint. We all think we understand it. Some of us have only the faintest and vaguest conception of what it means, and have never realized the solemn view of human nature and its necessities which lies beneath it. And I want to press that upon you now. The word 'to save' means either of two things-to heal from a sickness, or to deliver from a danger. These two ideas of sickness to be healed and of dangers to be secured from enter into the Christian use of the word. Underlying it is the implication that the condition of humanity is universally that of needing healing of a sore sickness, and of needing deliverance from an overhanging and tremendous danger. Sin is the sickness, and the issues of sin are the danger. And sin is making myself my centre and my law, and so distorting and flinging out of gear, as it were, my relations to God.

Surely it does not want many words to show that that must be the most important thing about a man. Deep down below all superficialities there lies this fundamental fact, that he has gone wrong with regard to God; and no amount of sophistication about heredity and environment and the like can ever wipe out the blackness of the fact that men willingly do break through the law, which commands us all to yield ourselves to God, and not to set ourselves up as our own masters, and our own aims and ends, independently of Him. I say that is the deepest wound of humanity.

In these days of social unrest there are plenty of voices round us that proclaim other needs as being clamant, but, oh, they are all shallow and on the surface as compared with the deepest need of all: and the men that come round the sick-bed of humanity and say, ‘Ah, the patient is suffering from a lack of education,’ or ‘the patient is suffering from unfavorable environment,’ have diagnosed the disease superficially. There is something deeper the matter than that, and unless the physician has probed further into the wound than these surface appearances, I am afraid his remedy will go as short a way down as his conception of the evil goes.

Oh, brethren, there is something else the matter with us than ignorance or unfavorable conditions. ‘The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.’ The tap-root of all human miseries lies in the solemn fact of human transgression. That is a universal fact. Wide differences part us, but there is one thing that we have all in common: a conscience and a will that lifts itself against disliked good. Beneath all surface differences of garb there lies the same fact, the common sickness of sin. The king’s robe, the pauper’s uniform, the student’s gown, the mill-hand’s fustian, the naked savage’s brown skin, each cover a heart that is evil, and because it is evil, needs salvation from sickness and deliverance from danger.

For do not forget that if it is true that men have driven their rebellious chariots through God’s law, they cannot do that without bringing down God’s hand upon them, and they ought not to be able to do it; and He would not be a loving God if it were not so. There are dangers; dangers from the necessary inevitable consequences, here and yonder, of rebellion against Him.

Now, do not let us lose ourselves in generalities. That is the way in which many of us have all our lives long blunted the point of the message of the Gospel to our hearts. That is what we do with all sorts of important moral truths. For instance, I suppose there never was a time in your lives when you did not believe that all men must die. But I suppose most of us can remember some time when there came upon us, with a shock which made some of us cower before it as an unwelcome thing, the thought, ‘And I must.’

The common sickness? Yes I ‘Thou art the man.’ Oh, brother, whatever you may have or whatever you may want, be sure of this: that your deepest needs will not be met, your sorest sickness will not be healed, your most tremendous peril not secured against, until the fact of your individual sinfulness and the consequences of that fact are somehow or other dealt with, stanched, and swept away. So much, then, for the first point.

II. Now a word as to the common remedy. One of our texts gives us that-' the common salvation.'

You all know what I am going to say, and so, perhaps, you suppose that it is not worth while for me to say it. I dare say some of you think that it was not worth while coming here to hear the whole, threadbare, commonplace story. Well! is it worth while for me to speak once more to men that have so often heard and so often neglected? Let me try. Oh, that I could get you one by one, and drive home to each single soul that is listening to me, or perhaps, that is not listening, the message that I have to bring!

‘The common salvation.’ There is one remedy for the sickness. There is one safety against the danger. There is only one, because it is the remedy for all men, and it is the remedy for all men because it is the remedy for each. Jesus Christ deals, as no one else has ever pretended to deal, with this outstanding fact of my transgression and yours.

He, by His death, as I believe, has saved the world from the danger, because He has set right the world’s relations to God. I am not going, at this stage of my sermon, to enter upon anything in the nature of discussion. My purpose is an entirely different one. I want to press upon you, dear brethren, this plain fact, that since there is a God, and since you and I have sinned, and since things are as they are, and the consequences will be as they will be, both in this world and in the next, we all stand in danger of death-death eternal, which comes from, and, in one sense, consists of, separation in heart and mind from God.

You believe in a judgment day, do you not? Whether you do or not, you have only to open your eyes, you have only to turn them inwards, to see that even here and now, every sin and transgression and disobedience does receive its just recompense of reward. You cannot do a wrong thing without hurting yourself, without desolating some part of your nature, without enfeebling your power of resistance to evil and aspiration after good, without lowering yourself in the scale of being, and making yourself ashamed to stand before the bar of your own conscience. You cannot do some wrong things, that some of you are fond of doing, without dragging after them consequences, in this world, of anything but an agreeable kind. Sins of the flesh avenge themselves in kind, as some of you young men know, and will know better in the days that are before you. Transgressions which are plain and clear in the eyes of even the world’s judgment draw after them damaged reputations, enfeebled health, closed doors of opportunity, and a whole host of such things. And all these are but a kind of premonitions and overshadowings of that solemn judgment that lies beyond. For all men will have to eat the fruit of their doings and drink that which they have prepared. But on the Cross, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, bore the weight of the world’s sin, yours and mine and every man’s. There is one security against the danger; and it is that He, fronting the incidence of the Divine law, says, as He said to His would-be captors in the garden, ‘If ye seek Me, let these go their way.’ And they go their way by the power of His atoning death.

Further, Jesus Christ imparts a life that cures the sickness of sin.

What is the meaning of this Whitsuntide that all the Christian world is professing to keep today? Is it to commemorate a thing that happened nineteen centuries ago, when a handful of Jews for a few minutes had the power of talking in other languages, and a miraculous light flamed over their heads and then disappeared? Was that all? Have you and I any share in it? Yes. For if Pentecost means anything it means this, that, all down through the ages, Jesus Christ is imparting to men that cleave to Him the real gift of a new life, free from all the sickness of the old, and healthy with the wholesomeness of His own perfect sinlessness, so that, however inveterate and engrained a man’s habits of wrong-doing may have been, if he will turn to that Saviour, and let Him work upon him, he will be delivered from his evil. The leprosy of his flesh, though the lumps of diseased matter may be dropping from the bones, and the stench of corruption may drive away human love and sympathy, can be cleansed, and his flesh become like the flesh of a little child, if only he will trust in Jesus Christ. The sickness can be cured. Christ deals with men in the depth of their being. He will give you, if you will, a new life and new tastes, directions, inclinations, impulses, perceptions, hopes, and capacities, and the evil will pass away, and you will be whole.

Ah, brethren, that is the only cure. I was talking a minute or two ago about imperfect diagnoses; and there are superficial remedies too. Men round us are trying, in various ways, to stanch the world’s wounds, to heal the world’s sicknesses. God forbid that I should say a word to discourage any such! I would rather wish them ten times more numerous than they are; but at the same time I believe that, unless you deal with the fountain at its head, you will never cleanse the stream, and that you must have the radical change, which comes by the gift of a new life in Christ, before men can be delivered from the sickness of their sins. And so all these panaceas, whilst they may do certain surface good, are, if I may quote a well-known phrase, like ‘pills against an earthquake,’ or like giving a lotion to cure pimples, when the whole head is sick and the whole heart faint. You will never cure the ills of humanity until you have delivered men from the dominion of their sin.

Jesus Christ heals society by healing the individual. There is no other way of doing it. If the units are corrupt the community cannot be pure. And the only way to make the units pure is that they shall have Christ on the Cross for their redemption, and Christ in the heart for their cleansing. And then all the things that men try to produce in the shape of social good and the like, apart from Him, will come as a consequence of the new state of things that arises when the individuals are renewed. Apart from Him all human attempts to deal with social evils are inadequate. There is a terrible disillusionising and disappointment awaiting many eager enthusiasts to-day, who think that by certain external arrangements, or by certain educational and cultivated processes, they can mend the world’s miseries. You educate a nation. Well and good, and one result of it is that your bookshops get choked with trash, and that vice has a new avenue of approach to men’s hearts. You improve the economic condition of the people. Well and good, and one result of it is that a bigger percentage than ever of their funds finds its way into the drink-shop. You give a nation political power. Well and good, and one result of it is that the least worthy and the least wise have to be flattered and coaxed, because they are the rulers. Every good thing, divorced from Christ, becomes an ally of evil, and the only way by which the dreams and desires of men can be fulfilled is by the salvation which is in Him entering the individual hearts and thus moulding society.

III. Now, lastly, the common means of possessing the common healing.

My second text tells us what that is-’ the common faith.’ That is another of the words which is so familiar that it is unintelligible, which has been dinned Into your ears ever since you were little children, and in the case of many of you excites no definite idea, and is supposed to he an obscure kind of thing that belongs to theologians and preachers, but has little to do with your daily lives. There is only one way by which this healing and safety that I have been speaking about can possibly find its way into a man's heart. You have all been trained from childhood to believe that men are saved by faith, and a great many of you, I dare say, think that men might have been saved by some other way, if God had chosen to appoint it so. But that is a clear mistake. If it is true that salvation is a gift from God, then it is quite plain that the only thing that we require is an outstretched hand. If it is true that Jesus Christ's death on the Cross has brought salvation to all the world, then it is quite plain that, His work being finished, we have no need to come in pottering with any works of ours, and that the only thing we have to do is to accept it. If it is true that Jesus Christ will enter men's hearts, and there give a new spirit and a new life, which will save them from their sins and make them free from the law of sin and death, then it is plain that the one thing that we have to do is to open our hearts and say ' Come in, Thou King of Glory, come in!' Because salvation is a gift; because it is the result of a finished work; because it is imparted to men by the impartation of Christ's own life to them: for all these reasons it is plain that the only way by which God can save a man is by that man's putting his trust in Jesus Christ. It is no arbitrary appointment. The only possible way of possessing 'the common salvation ' is by the exercise of 'the common faith.'

So we are all put upon one level, no matter how different we may be in attainments, in mental capacity -geniuses and blockheads, scholars and ignoramuses, millionaires and paupers, students and savages, we are all on the one level. There is no carriage road into heaven. We have all to go in at the strait gate, and there is no special entry for people that come with their own horses; and so some people do not like to have to descend to that level, and to go with the ruck and the undistinguished crowd, and to be saved just in the same fashion as Tom, Dick, and Harry, and they turn away.

Plenty of people believe in a 'common salvation,' meaning thereby a vague, indiscriminate gift that is flung broadcast over the mass. Plenty of people believe in a 'common faith.' We hear, for instance, about a 'national Christianity,' and a 'national recognition of religion,' and 'Christian nations,’ and the like. There are no Christian nations except nations of which the individuals are Christians, and there is no ‘common faith’ except the faith exercised in common by all the units that make up a community.

So do not suppose that anything short of your own personal act brings you into possession of ‘ the common salvation.’ The table is spread, but you must take the bread into your own hands, and you must masticate it with your own teeth, and you must assimilate it in your own body, or it is no bread for you. The salvation is a ‘ common,’ like one of the great prairies, but each separate settler has to peg off his own claim, and fence it in, and take possession of it, or he has no share in the broad land. So remember that ‘the common salvation’ must be made the individual salvation by the individual exorcise of ‘the common faith.’ Cry,’ Lord! I believe!’ and then you will have the right to say, ‘ The Lord is my strength; He also is become my salvation.’

2) Jude 1:20-21

Jude

KEEPING OURSELVES IN THE LOVE OF GOD

Jud. 1:20-21.

Jude has been, in all the former part of the letter, pouring out a fiery torrent of vehement indignation and denunciation against ‘certain men’ who had ‘crept’ into the Church, and were spreading gross immorality there. He does not speak of them so much as heretics in belief, but rather as evil-doers in practice; and after the thunderings and lightning, he turns from them with a kind of sigh of relief in this emphatic, ‘But, ye! beloved.’ The storm ends in gentle rain; and he tells the brethren who are yet faithful how they are to comport themselves in the presence of prevalent corruption, and where is their security and their peace.

You will observe that in my text there is embedded, in the middle of it, a direct precept: ‘Keep yourselves in the love of God’; and that that is encircled by three clauses, like each other in structure, and unlike it-‘building, ‘‘praying,’ ‘looking.’ The great diamond is surrounded by a ring of lesser jewels. Why did Jude put two of these similar clauses in front of his direct precept, and one of them behind it? I think because the two that precede indicate the ways by which the precept can be kept, and the one that follows indicates the accompaniment or issue of obedience to the precept. If that be the reason for the structure of my text, it suggests also to us the course which we had best pursue in the exposition of it.

I. So we hare, to begin with, the great direct precept for the Christian life.

‘Keep yourselves in the love of God.’ Now I need not spend a moment in showing that ‘ the love of God’ here means, not ours to Him, but His to us. It is that in which, as in some charmed circle, we are to keep ourselves. Now that injunction at once raises the question of the possibility of Christian men being out of the love of God, straying away from their home, and getting out into the open. Of course there is a sense in which His ‘tender mercies are over all His works.’ Just as the sky embraces all the stars and the earth within its blue round, so that love of God encompasses every creature; and no man can stray so far away as that, in one profound sense, he gets beyond its pale. For no man can ever make God cease to love him. But whilst that is quite true, on the other side it is equally true that contrariety of will and continuance in evil deeds do so alter a man’s relation to the love of God as that he is absolutely incapable of receiving its sweetest and most select manifestations, and can only be hurt by the incidence of its beams. The sun gives life to many creatures, but it slays some. There are crawling things that live beneath a stone, and when you turn it up and let the arrows of the sunbeams smite down upon them, they squirm and die. It is possible for a man so to set himself in antagonism to that great Light as that the Light shall hurt and not bless and soothe.

It is also possible for a Christian man to step out of the charmed circle, in the sense that he becomes all unconscious of that Light. Then to him it comes to the same thing that the love shall be non-existent, and that it shall be unperceived. If I choose to make my abode on the northern side of the mountain, my thermometer may be standing at ‘ freezing,’ and I may be shivering in all my limbs on Midsummer Day at noontide. And so it is possible for us Christian people to stray away out from that gracious abode, to pass from the illuminated disc into the black shadow; and though nothing is ‘ hid from the heat thereof,’ yet we may derive no warmth and no enlightening from the all-pervading beams. We have to ‘keep ourselves in the love of God.’

Then that suggests the other more blessed possibility, that amidst all the distractions of daily duties, and the solicitations of carking cares, and the oppression of heavy sorrows, it is possible for us to keep ourselves perpetually in the conscious enjoyment of the love of God. I need not say how this ideal of the Christian life may be indefinitely approximated to in our daily experiences; nor need I dwell upon the sad contrast between this ideal unbrokenness of conscious sunning ourselves in the love of God, and the reality of the lives that most of us live. But, brethren, if we more fully believed that we can keep up, amidst all the dust and struggle of the arena, the calm sweet sense of God’s love, our lives would be different. Nightingales will sing in a dusty copse by the roadside, however loud the noise of traffic may be upon the highway. And we may have, all through our lives, that song, unbroken and melodious. That sub-consciousness underlying our daily work, ‘like some sweet beguiling melody, so sweet, we know not we are listening to it,’ may be ever present with each of us in our daily work, like some ‘hidden brook in the leafy month of June,’ that murmurs beneath the foliage, and yet is audible through all the wood.

And what a peaceful, restful life ours would be, if we could thus be like John, leaning on the Master’s bosom. We might have a secret fortress into the central chamber of which we could go, whither no sound of the war in the plains could ever penetrate. We might, like some dwellers in a mountainous island, take refuge in a central glen, buried deep amongst the hills, where there would be no sound of tempest, though the winds were fighting on the surface of the sea, and the spindrift was flying before them. It is possible to ‘keep ourselves in the love of God.’ And if we keep in that fortress we are safe. If we go beyond its walls we are sure to be picked off by the well-aimed shots of the enemy. So, then, that is the central commandment for the Christian life.

II. Now let me turn to consider the methods by which we can thus keep ourselves in the love of God.

These are two: one mainly bearing on the outward, the other on the inward, life. By ‘ building up yourselves on your most holy faith’: that is the one. By ‘praying in the Holy Ghost’: that is the other. Let us look at these two.

‘Building up yourselves on your most holy faith.’ I suppose that ‘faith’ here is used in its ordinary sense. Some would rather prefer to take it in the latter, ecclesiastical sense, by which it means, not the act of belief, but the aggregate of the things believed.-’ Our most holy faith,’ as it is called by quotation-I think misquotation-of this passage. But I do not see that there is any necessity for that meaning. The words are perfectly intelligible in their ordinary meaning. What Jude says is just this: ‘Your trust in Jesus Christ has in it a tendency to produce holiness, and that is the foundation on which you are to build a great character. Build up yourselves on your most holy faith.’ For although it is not what the world’s ethics recognize, the Christian theory of morality is this, that it all rests upon trust in God manifested to us in Jesus Christ. Faith is the foundation of all supreme excellence and nobility and beauty of character; because, for one thing, it dethrones self, and enthrones God in our hearts; making Him our aim and our law and our supreme good; and because, for another thing, our trust brings us into direct union with Him, so that we receive from Him the power thus to build up a character.

Faith is the foundation. Ay! but faith is only the foundation. It is ‘the potentiality of wealth,’ but it is not the reality. ‘All things are possible to him that believeth’; but all things are not actual except on conditions. A man may have faith, as a great many professing Christians have it, only as a ‘fire-escape,’ a means of getting away from hell, or have it only as a band that is stretched out to grasp certain initial blessings of the spiritual life. But that is not its full glory nor its real aspect. It is meant to be the beginning in us of ‘all things that are lovely and of good report.’ What would you think of a man that carefully put in the foundations for a house, and had all his building materials on the ground, and let them lie there? And that is what a great many of you Christian people do, who ‘ have fled for refuge,’ as you say,’ to the hope set before you in the Gospel’; and who have never wrought out your faith into noble deeds. Remember what the Apostle says, ‘Faith which worketh ‘; and worketh ‘by love.’ It is the foundation, but only the foundation.

The work of building a noble character on that firm foundation is never-ending. ‘Tis a life-long task ‘ till the lump be leavened.’ The metaphor of growth by building suggests effort, and it suggests continuity; and it suggests slow, gradual rearing up, course upon course, stone by stone. Some of us have done nothing at it for a great many years. You will pass, sometimes, in our suburbs, a row of houses begun by some builder that has become bankrupt; and there are mouldering bricks and gaping empty places for the windows, and the rafters decaying, and stagnant water down in the holes that were meant for the cellars. That is like the kind of thing that hosts of people who call themselves Christians have built. ‘But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith . . . Keep yourselves in the love.’

Then the other way of building is suggested in the next clause, ‘praying in the Holy Ghost’-that is to say, prayer which is not mere utterance of my own petulant desires which a great deal of our ‘ prayer’ is, but which is breathed into us by that Divine Spirit that will brood over our chaos, and bring order out of confusion, and light and beauty out of darkness, and weltering sea:-

‘The prayers I make will then be sweet indeed,
If Thou the Spirit give by which I pray.’

As Michael Angelo says, such prayer inspired and warmed by the influences of that Divine Spirit playing upon the dull flame of our desires, like air injected into a grate where the fire is half out, such prayers are our best help in building. For who is there that has honestly tried to build himself up ‘for a habitation of God but has felt that it must be ‘through a Spirit’ mightier than himself, who will overcome his weaknesses and arm him against temptation? No man who honestly endeavors to reform his character but is brought very soon to feel that he needs a higher help than his own. And perhaps some of us know how, when sore pressed by temptation, one petition for help brings a sudden gush of strength into us, and we feel that the enemy’s assault is weakened.

Brethren, the best attitude for building is on our knees; and if, like Cromwell’s men in the fight, we go into the battle singing,

‘Let God arise, and scattered
Let all His enemies be,’

we shall come out victorious. ‘Ye, beloved, building and praying, keep yourselves.’

III. Now, lastly, we have here in the final clause the fair prospect visible from our home, in the love of God.

> *‘Looking for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.’*

After all building and praying, we need ‘the mercy.’ Jude has been speaking in his letter about the destruction of evil-doers, when Christ the Judge shall come. And I suppose that that thought of final judgment is still in his mind, coloring the language of my text, and that it explains why he speaks here of ‘ the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ’ instead of, as is usual in Scripture, the mercy of God.’ He is thinking of that last Day of Judgment and retribution, wherein Jesus Christ is to be the Judge of all men, saints as well as sinners, and therefore he speaks of mercy as bestowed by Him then on those who have ‘kept themselves in the love of God.’ Ah! we shall need it. The better we are the more we know how much wood, hay, stubble, we have built into our buildings; and the more we are conscious of that love of God as round us, the more we shall feel the unworthiness and imperfection of our response to it. The best of us, when we lie down to die, and the wisest of us, as we struggle on in life, realize most how all our good is stained and imperfect, and that after all efforts we have to cry ‘God be merciful to me a sinner.’

Not only so, but our outlook and confident expectation of that mercy day by day, and in its perfect form at least, depends upon our keeping ourselves ‘in the love of God.’ We have to go high up the hill before we can see far over the plain. Our home in that love commands a fair prospect. When we stray from it, we lose sight of the blue distance. Our hope of ‘the mercy of God unto eternal life’ varies with our present consciousness and experience of His love.

That mercy leads on to eternal life. We get many of its manifestations and gifts here, but these are but the pale blossoms of a plant not in its native habitat, nor sunned by the sunshine which can draw forth all its fragrance and colour.

We have to look forward for the adequate expression of the mercy of God to all that fullness of perfect blessedness for all our faculties, which is summed up in the one great word-' life everlasting.'

So our hope ought to be as continuous as the manifestation of the mercy, and, like it, should last until the eternal life has come. All our gifts here are fragmentary and imperfect. Here we drink of brooks by the way. There we shall slake our thirst at the fountainhead. Here we are given ready money for the day's expenses. There we shall be free of the treasure house, where lie the uncoined and uncounted masses of bullion, which God has laid up in store for them that fear Him. So, brethren, let us hope perfectly for the perfect manifestation of the mercy. Let us set ourselves to build up, however slowly, the fair fabric of a life and character which shall stand when the tempest levels all houses built upon the sand. Let us open our spirits to the entrance of that Spirit who helps the infirmities of our desires as well as of our efforts. Thus let us keep ourselves in the charmed circle of the love of God, that we may be safe as a garrison in its fortress, blessed as a babe on its mother's breast.

Jude's words are but the echo of the tenderer words of his Master and ours, when He said, 'As My Father hath loved Me, so have I loved you. Abide ye in My love. If ye keep My commandments ye shall abide in My love.'

3) Jude 1:25

Jude

WITHOUT STUMBLING

Jud. 1:21, Jud. 1:25

I Pointed out in a recent sermon on a former verse of this Epistle that the earlier part of it is occupied with vehement denunciations of the moral corruptions that had crept into the Church, and that the writer turns away from that spectacle earnestly to exhort the Christian community to ‘keep themselves in the love of God,’ by ‘building themselves upon their most holy faith, and praying in the Holy Ghost.’ But that is not all that Jude has to say. It is wise to look round on the dangers and evils that tempt; it is wise to look inward to the weaknesses that may yield to the temptations. But every look on surrounding dangers, and every look at personal weakness, ought to end in a look upwards ‘ to Him that is able to keep’ the weakest ‘from falling’ before the assaults of the strongest foes.

The previous exhortation, which I have discussed, might seem to lay almost too much stress on our own strivings- ‘Keep yourselves in the love of God.’ Here is the complement to it: ‘Unto Him that is able to keep you from falling.’ So denunciations, exhortations, warnings, all end in the peaceful gaze upon God, and the triumphant recognition of what He is able to do for us. We have to work, but we have to remember that ‘ it is He that worketh in us both to will and to do of His own good pleasure.’

I. So I think that, looking at these great words, the first thing to be noted is the solitary, all-sufficient stay for our weakness.

‘To the only wise God our Saviour.’ Now it is to be noticed, as those of you who use the Revised Version will observe, that the word ‘wise’ seems to have crept in here by the reminiscence of another similar doxology in the Epistle to the Romans, and was probably inserted by some scribe who had not grasped the great thought of which the text is the expression. It ought to read, ‘to the only God, our Saviour.’ The writer’s idea seems to be just this-he has been massing in a dark crowd the whole multitudinous mob of corruptions and evils that were threatening the faith and righteousness of professing Christians. And he turns away from all that rabble, multitudinous as they are, to look to the One who is all-sufficient, solitary, and enough. ‘The only God’ is the refuge from the crowds of evils that dog our steps, and from the temptations and foes that assail us at every point.

This is the blessed peculiarity of the Christian faith, that it simplifies our outlook for good, that it brings everything to the one point of possessing the one Person, beyond whom there is never any need that the heart should wander seeking after love, that the mind should depart in its search for truth, or that the will should stray in its quest after authoritative commands. There is no need to seek a multitude of goodly pearls; the gift of Christianity to men's torn and distracted hearts and lives is that all which makes them rich, and all which makes them blessed, is sphered and included in the one transcendent pearl of price, the 'only God."

I have been in Turkish mosques, the roofs of which are held up by a bewildering forest of slender pillars. I have been in cathedral chapter-houses, where one strong stone shaft in the centre carries all the beauty of the branching roof; and I know which is the highest work and the fairest. Why should we seek in the manifold for what we can never find, when we can find it all in the One? The mind seeks for unity in truth; the heart seeks for oneness in love; no man is at rest until he has all his heart's treasures in one person; and no man who foolishly puts all his treasures in one creature-person but is bringing down upon his own head sorrow.

Do you remember that pathetic inscription in one of our country churches, over a little child, whose fair image is left us by the pencil of Reynolds: 'Her parents put all their wealth in one vessel, and the shipwreck was total'? It is madness to trust to but one refuge, unless that refuge is the only God. If we, like the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, are wise, we shall lift up our eyes and 'see no man any more, save Jesus only.' He can be our solitary Stay, Refuge, Wealth, and Companion, because He is sufficient, and He abides for ever.

But there is another peculiarity that I would point out in these words, and that is the unusual attribution to God, the Father, of the name 'Saviour'-'the only God our Saviour.' The same various reading which strikes out 'wise' inserts here, as you will see in the Revised Version, through Jesus Christ our Lord.' But although the phraseology is almost unique, the meaning is in full harmony with the scope of New Testament teaching. It is a fault of evangelical and orthodox people that they have too often spoken and thought as if Jesus Christ's work modified and changed the Father's will, and as if God loved men because Christ died for them. The fact is precisely the converse. Christ died because God loved men; and the fontal source of the salvation, of which the work of Jesus Christ is the channel, bringing it to men, is the eternal, unmotived, infinite love of God the Father. Christ is 'the well-beloved Son,' because He is the executor of the Divine purpose, and all which He has done is done in obedience to the Father's will. If I might use a metaphor, the love of God is, as it were, a deep secluded lake amongst the mountains, and the work of Christ is the stream that comes from it, and brings its waters to be life to the world. Let us never forget that, however we love to turn our gratitude and our praise to Christ the Saviour, my text goes yet deeper into the councils of Eternity when it ascribes the praise ' to the only God our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

II. And now notice the possibility of firm standing in the slippery present.

'To Him that is able to keep us from falling.' Now the word that I rendered 'from falling' is even more emphatic, and carries a larger promise. For it literally means' without stumbling,' and stumbling is that which precedes falling. We are not only kept from falling, we are kept even from stumbling over the stumblingstones that are in the way. The metaphor, perhaps, was suggested by the words of Isaiah, who, in one of his lovely images, describes God as 'leading Israel [e 3 through the depths as a horse in the desert, that they stumble not.' Do you not see the picture? The nervous, susceptible animal, slipping and sliding over the smooth rock, in a sweat of terror, and the owner laying a kindly hand and a firm one on the bridle-rein, and speaking soothing words of encouragement, and leading it safely, that it stumble not. So God is able to lay hold of us when we are in perilous places, and when we cry, 'My foot slippeth,' His mercy will hold us up.

Is that rhetoric? Is that merely pulpit talk? Brethren, unless we lay firm hold of this faith, that God can and does touch and influence hearts that wait upon Him, so as by His Spirit and by His Word, which is the sword of the Spirit, to strengthen their feeble good, and to weaken their strong evil, to raise what is low, to illumine what is dark, and to support what is weak, we have not come to understand the whole wealth of possible good and blessedness which lies in the Gospel. This generation has forgotten far too much the place which the work of God's Holy Spirit on men's spirits fills in the whole proportioned scheme of New Testament revelation. It is because we believe that so little, in comparison with the clearness and strength of our faith in the work of Jesus Christ, the atoning sacrifice, that so many of us find it so foreign to our experience that any effluences from God come into our hearts, and that our spirits are conscious of being quickened and lifted by His Spirit! Ah! we might feel, far more than any of us do, His hand on the bridle-rein. We might feel, far more than any of us do, His strong upholding, keeping our feet from slipping as well as 'falling.' And if we believed and expected a Divine Spirit to enter into our spirits and to touch our hearts, the expectation would not be in vain.

I beseech you; believe that a solid experience and meaning lies in that word 'able to keep us from stumbling.' If we have that Divine Spirit moving in our spirits, molding our desires, lifting our thoughts, confirming our wills, then the things that were stumblingstones-that is to say, that appealed to our worst selves, and tempted us to evil-will cease to be so. The higher desires will kill the lower ones, as the sunshine is popularly supposed to put out household fires. If we have God's upholding help, the stumbling-stone will no more be a stumbling-stone, but a stepping-stone to something higher and better; or like one of those erections that we see outside old-fashioned houses of entertainment, where three or four steps are piled together, in order to enable a man the more easily to mount his horse and go on his way. For every temptation overcome brings strength to the overcomer.

Only let us remember 'Him that is able to keep.' Able! What is wanted that the ability may be brought into exercise; that the possibility of which I have spoken, of firm standing amongst those slippery places, shall become a reality? What is wanted? It is of no use to have a stay unless you lean on it. You may have an engine of ever so many horse-power in the engine-house, but unless the power is transmitted by shafts and belting, and brought to the machinery, not a spindle will revolve. He is able to keep us from stumbling, and if you trust Him, the ability will become actuality, and you will be kept from falling. If you do not trust Him, all the ability will lie in the engine house, and the looms and the spindles will stand idle. So the reason why-and the only reason why-with such an abundant, and over-abundant, provision for never falling, Christian men do stumble and fall, is their own lack of faith.

Now remember that this text of mine follows on the heels of that former text which bade us 'build ourselves,' and 'keep ourselves in the love of

God.’ So you get the peculiarity of Christian ethics, and the blessedness of Christian effort, that it is not effort only, but effort rising from, and accompanied with, confidence - in God’s keeping hand. There is all the difference between toiling without trust and toiling because we do trust. And whilst, on the one hand, we have to exhort to earnest faith in the upholding hand of God, we have to say on the other, ‘Let that faith lead you to obey the apostolic command, "Stand fast in the evil day . . . taking unto you the whole armour of God."‘

III. Further, we have here the possible final perfecting in the future.

‘To Him that is able ... to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.’ Now that word rendered ‘faultless’ has a very beautiful meaning. It is originally applied to the requirement that the sacrificial offerings shall be without blemish. It is then applied more than once to our Lord Himself, as expressive of His perfect, immaculate sinlessness. And it is here applied to the future condition of those who have been kept without stumbling; suggesting at once that they are, as it were, presented before God at last, stainless as the sacrificial lamb; and that they are conformed to the image of the Lamb of God ‘without blemish and without spot.’ Moral perfectness, absolute and complete; va standing ‘ before the presence of His glory,’ the realization and the vision of that illustrious light, too dazzling for eyes veiled by flesh to look upon, but of which hereafter the purified souls will be capable, in accordance with that great promise, ‘ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’]*’ with exceeding joy,’ which refers not to the joy of Him that presents, though that is great, but to the joy of them who are presented. So these three things are the possibilities held out before such poor creatures as we. And miraculous as it is, that all stains should melt away from our characters-though I suppose not the remembrance of them from our consciousness-and be shaken off as completely as the foul water of some stagnant pond drops from the white swan-plumage, and leaves no stain; that perfecting is the natural issue of the present being kept from stumbling.

You have seen sometimes in a picture-dealer’s shop window a canvas on which a face is painted, one half of which has been cleaned, and the other half is still covered with some varnish or filth. That is like the Christian character here. But the restoration and the cleansing are going to be finished up yonder; and the great Artist's ideal will be realized, and each redeemed soul will be perfected in holiness.

But as I said about the former point, so I say about this, He is able to do it. What is wanted to make the ability an actuality? Brethren, if we are to stand perfect, at last, and be without fault before the Throne of God, we must begin by letting Him keep us from stumbling here. Then, and only then, may we expect that issue.

Now I was going to have said a word, in the last place, about the Divine praise which comes from all these dealings, but your time will not allow me to dwell upon it. Only let me remind you that all these things, which in my text are ascribed to God,' glory and majesty, dominion and power,' are ascribed to Him because He is our Saviour, and able to keep us from stumbling, and to 'present us faultless before His glory.' That is to say, the Divine manifestation of Himself in the work of redemption is the highest of His self-revealing works. Men are not presumptuous when they feel that they are greater than sun and stars; and that there is more in the narrow room of a human heart than in all the immeasurable spaces of the universe, if these are empty of beings who can love and inquire and adore. And we are not wrong when we say that the only evil in the universe is sin. Therefore, we are right when we say that high above all other works of which we have experience is that miracle of love and Divine power which can not only keep such feeble creatures as we are from stumbling, but can present us stainless and faultless before the Throne of God.

So our highest praise, and our deepest thankfulness, ought to arise, and will arise-if the possibility has become, in any measure, an actuality, in ourselves-to Him, because our experience will be that of the Psalmist who sang, 'When I said, my foot slippeth, Thy mercy, O Lord, held me up.' Let us take the comfort of believing, 'He shall not fall, for the Lord is able to make him stand'; and lot us remember the expansion which another Apostle gives us when, with precision, he discriminates and says, 'Kept by the power of God through faith, unto salvation.'

Revelation

1) REVELATION 1:4
2) REVELATION 1:5
3) REVELATION 1:6
4) REVELATION 1:9
5) REVELATION 1:10-17
6) REVELATION 1:18
7) REVELATION 2:1
8) REVELATION 2:7
9) REVELATION 2:11
10) REVELATION 2:17
11) REVELATION 2:19
12) REVELATION 2:26-28
13) REVELATION 3:1
14) REVELATION 3:4
15) REVELATION 3:5
16) REVELATION 3:10
17) REVELATION 3:11
18) REVELATION 3:12
19) REVELATION 3:15
20) REVELATION 3:18
21) REVELATION 3:18
22) REVELATION 3:20
23) REVELATION 3:21
24) REVELATION 5:6
25) REVELATION 7:9
26) REVELATION 7:15
27) REVELATION 7:17
28) REVELATION 14:13
29) REVELATION 15:2-3
30) REVELATION 21:1-7
31) REVELATION 21:1
32) REVELATION 21:3
33) REVELATION 21:5
34) REVELATION 21:6
35) REVELATION 22:1-2
36) REVELATION 22:3-4
37) REVELATION 22:4

38) REVELATION 22:14
39) REVELATION 22:14
40) REVELATION 22:17
41) REVELATION 22:21

1) Revelation 1:4

Revelation

THE GIFTS OF CHRIST AS WITNESS, RISEN AND CROWNED

Rev. 1:4-5

So loftily did John in his old age come to think of his Lord. The former days of blessed nearness had not faded from his memory; rather he understood their meaning better than when he was in the midst of their sweetness. Years and experience, and the teaching of God's Spirit, had taught Him to understand what the Master meant when He said :-' It is expedient for you that I go away'; for when He had departed John saw Him a great deal more clearly than ever he had done when he beheld Him with his eyes. He sees Him now invested with these lofty attributes, and, so to speak, involved in the brightness of the Throne of God. For the words of my text are not only remarkable in themselves, and in the order in which they give these three aspects of our Lord's character, but remarkable also in that they occur in an invocation in which the Apostle is calling down blessings from Heaven on the heads of his brethren. The fact that they do so occur points a question: Is it possible to conceive that the writer of these words thought of Jesus Christ as less than divine? Could he have asked for ' grace and peace' to come down on the Asiatic Christians from the divine Father, and an Abstraction, and a Man? A strange Trinity that would be, most certainly. Rightly or wrongly, the man that said,' Grace and peace be unto you, from Him which is, and which was, and which is to come, and from the seven Spirits which are before His Throne, and from Jesus Christ,' believed that the name of the One God was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But it is not so much to this as to the connection of these three clauses with one another, and to the bearing of all three on our Lord's power of giving grace and peace to men's hearts, that I want to turn your attention now. I take the words simply as they lie here; asking you to consider, first, how grace and peace come to us 'from the faithful Witness'; how, secondly, they come 'from the first begotten from the dead'; and how, lastly, they come 'from the Prince of the kings of the earth.'

I. Now as to the first of these, 'the faithful Witness.'

All of you who have any familiarity with the language of Scripture will know that a characteristic of all the writings which are ascribed to the Apostle John, viz., his Gospel, his Epistles, and the book of the Revelation, is their free and remarkable use of that expression, 'Witness.' It runs through all of them, and is one of the many threads of connection which tie them all together, and which constitute a very strong argument for the common authorship of the three sets of writings, vehemently as that has of late been denied.

But where did John get this word? According to his own teaching he got it from the lips of the Master, who began His career with these words, 'We speak that we do know, and bear witness to that we have seen,' and who all but ended it with these royal words, 'Thou sayest that I am a King! For this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the Truth.' Christ Himself, then, claimed to be in an eminent and special sense the witness to the world.

The witness of what? What was the substance of His testimony? It was a testimony mainly about God. The words of my text substantially cover the same ground as His own words, 'I have declared Thy name unto My brethren,' and as those of the Apostle: 'The only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.' And they involve the same ideas as lie in the great name by which He is called in John's Gospel,' the Word of God.'

That is to say, all our highest and purest and best knowledge of God comes from the life and conduct and character of Jesus Christ. His revelation is no mere revelation by words. Plenty of men have talked about God, and said noble and true and blessed things about Him. Scattered through the darkness of heathenism, and embedded in the sinfulness of every man's heart, there are great and lofty and pure thoughts about Him, which to cleave to and follow out would bring strength and purity. It is one thing to speak about God in words, maxims, precepts; it is another thing to show us God in act and life. The one is theology, the other is gospel. The one is the work of man, the other is the exclusive prerogative of God manifested in the flesh.

It is not Christ's words only that make Him the 'Amen,' the 'faithful and true Witness,' but in addition to these, He witnesses by all His deeds of grace, and truth, and gentleness, and pity; by all His yearnings over wickedness, and sorrow, and sinfulness; by all His drawings of the profligate and the outcast and the guilty to Himself, His life of loneliness, His death of shame. In all these, He is showing us not only the sweetness of a perfect human character, but in the sweetness of a perfect human character, the sweeter sweetness of our Father, God. The substance of His testimony is the Name, the revelation of the character of His Father and our Father.

This name of 'witness' bears likewise strongly upon the characteristic and remarkable manner of our Lord's testimony. The task of a witness is to affirm; his business is to tell his story-not to argue about it, simply to state it. And there is nothing more characteristic of our Lord's words than the way in which, without attempt at proof or argumentation, He makes them stand on their own evidence; or, rather, depend upon His veracity. All His teaching is characterized by what would be insane presumption in any of us, and would at once rule us out of court as unfit to be listened to on any grave subject, most of all on religious truth. For His method is this: 'Verily, verily, I say to you! Take it on My word. You ask Me for proof of My saying: I am the proof of it; I assert it. That is enough for you! 'Not so do men speak. So does the faithful Witness speak; and instead of the conscience and common-sense of the world rising up and saying, 'This is the presumption of a religious madman and dictator,' they have bowed before Him and said, 'Thou art fairer than the children of men! Grace is poured into Thy lips.' He is the 'faithful Witness, who lays His own character and veracity as the basis of what He has to say, and has no mightier word by which to back His testimony than His own sovereign ‘Verily! verily!’

The name bears, too, on the ground of His testimony.

A faithful witness is an eye-witness. And that is what Christ claims when He witnesses about God. ‘‘We speak that we do know, we testify that we have seen.’ ‘I speak that which I have seen with My Father!’ There is nothing more remarkable about the oral portion of our Lord’s witness than the absence of any appearance, such as marks all the wisest words of great men, of having come to them as the result of patient thought. We never see Him in the act of arriving at a truth, nor detect any traces of the process of forming opinions in Him. He speaks as if He had seen, and His tone is that of one who is not thinking out truth or grasping at it, but simply narrating that which lies plain and clear ever before His eyes. I do not ask you what that involves, but I quote His own statement of what it involves: ‘No man hath ascended up into Heaven save He that came down from Heaven, even the Son of Man which is in Heaven.’

There have been plenty of great and gracious words about God, and there have been plenty of black and blasphemous thoughts of Him. They rise in our own hearts, and they come from our brothers’ tongues. Men have worshipped gods gracious, gods loving, gods angry, gods petulant, gods capricious; but God after the fashion of the God whom Jesus Christ avouches to us, we have nowhere else, a God of absolute love, who ‘so loved the world’-that is, you and me-’that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish.’

And now I ask, is there not grace and peace brought to us all from that faithful Witness, and from His credible testimony? Surely the one thing that the world wants is to have the question answered whether there really is a God in Heaven that cares anything about me, and to whom I can trust myself wholly; believing that He will lift me out of all my meannesses and sins, and make me clean and pure and blessed like Himself. Surely that is the deepest of all human needs, howsoever little men may know it. And sure I am that none of us can find the certitude of such a Father unless we give credence to the message of Jesus Christ our Lord.

This day needs that witness as much as any other; sometimes in our unbelieving moments, we think more than any other. There is a wave-I believe it is only a wave-passing over the cultivated thought of Europe at present which will make short work of all belief in a God that does not grip fast to Jesus Christ. As far as I can read the signs of the times, and the tendency of modern thinking, it is this:-either an absolute Silence, a Heaven stretching above us, blue and clear, and cold, and far away, and dumb; or else a Christ that speaks-He or none! The Theism that has shaken itself loose from Him will be crushed; I am sure, in the encounter with the agnosticism and the materialism of this day. And the one refuge is to lay fast hold of the old truth:-' The only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.'

Oh! you orphan children that have forgotten your Father, and have turned prodigals and rebels; you that have begun to doubt if there is any one above this low earth that cares for you; you that have got bewildered and befogged amidst the manifold denials and controversies of this day; come back to the one voice that speaks to us in tones of confident certainty as from personal knowledge of a Father. 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father,' says Jesus to us all: 'hearken unto Me, and know God, whom to know in Me is eternal life.' Listen to Him. Without His testimony you will be the sport of fears, and doubts, and errors. With it in your hearts you •will be at rest. Grace and peace come from the faithful Witness.

II. We have grace and peace from the Conqueror of Death.

The ' first begotten from the dead' does not precisely convey the idea of the original, which would be more accurately represented by 'the first born from the dead'-the resurrection being looked upon as a kind of birth into a higher order of life. It is, perhaps, scarcely necessary to observe that the accuracy of this designation, 'the first born from the dead,' as applied to our Lord, is not made questionable because of the mere fact that there were others who rose from the dead before His resurrection, for all of these died again. What a strange feeling that must have been for Lazarus and the others, to go twice through the gates of death; twice to know the pain and the pang of separation! But these all have been gathered to the dust, and lie now waiting 'the adoption, that is the resurrection of the body.' But this

Man, being raised, dieth no more, death hath no more dominion over Him. And how is it that grace and peace come to us from the risen Witness? Two or three words may be said about that.

Think how, first of all, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the confirmation of His testimony. In it the Father, to whom He hath borne witness in His life and death, bears witness to Christ, that His claims were true and His work well-pleasing. He is 'declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead.' If our Lord did not rise from the dead, as all Christendom to-day [1] has been declaring its faith that He did, then, as it seems to me, there is an end to His claims to be Son of God, and Son of Man, or anything other than a man like the rest of us. If He be no more and naught else than a man, altogether like the rest of us, then there is an end to any special revelation of the Divine nature, heart, purposes, and will, in His works and character. They may still be beautiful, they may still reveal God in the same sense in which the doings of any good man suggest a fontal source of goodness from which they flow, but beyond that they are nothing. So all the truth, and all the peace, all the grace and hope which flow to us from the witness of Jesus Christ to the Father, are neutralized and destroyed unless we believe in the resurrection from the dead. His words may still remain gracious, and true in a measure, only all dashed with the terrible mistake that He asserted that He would rise again, and rose not. But as for His life, it ceases to be in any real sense, because it ceases to be in any unique sense, the revelation to the world of the character of God.

And therefore, as I take it, it is no exaggeration to say that the whole fabric of Christianity and all Christ's worth as a witness to God, stand or fall with the fact of His resurrection. If you pull out that keystone, down comes the arch. There may still be fair carving on some of the fallen fragments, but it is no longer an arch that spans the great gulf, and has a firm pier on the other side. Strike away the resurrection and you fatally damage the witness of Jesus. You cannot strike the supernatural out of Christianity, and keep the natural. The two are so inextricably woven together that to wrench away the one lacerates the other, and makes it bleed, even to death. If Christ be not risen we have nothing to preach, and you have nothing to believe. Our preaching and your faith are alike vain: ye are yet in your sins. Grace and peace come from faith in the 'first begotten from the dead.'

And that is true in another way too. Faith in the resurrection gives us a living Lord to confide in-not a dead Lord, whose work we may look back upon with thankfulness; but a living one, who works now upon us, and by whose true companionship and real affection strength and help are granted to us every day. The cold frost of death has not congealed that stream of love that poured from His heart while He lived on earth; it flows yet for each of us, for all of us, for the whole world.

My brother, we cannot do without a living Christ to stand beside us, to sympathize, to help, to love. We cannot do without a living Christ with whom we may speak, who will speak to us. And that communion which is blessedness, that communication of power and righteousness which is life, are only possible, if it be true that His death was not the end of His relationship to us, or of His work in the world, but was only a transition from one stage of that work to another. We have to look to Christ, the 'faithful Witness,' the Witness who witnessed when He died; but we have to look to Him that is risen again and takes His place at the right hand of God. And the grace and peace flow to us not only from the contemplation of the past witness of the Lord, but are showered upon us from the open hands of the risen and living Christ.

In still another way do grace and peace reach us, from the 'first begotten from the dead,' inasmuch as in Him and in His resurrection-life we are armed for victory over that foe whom He has conquered. If He be the first born, He will have 'many brethren.' The 'first' implies a second. He has been raised from the dead; therefore death is not the destruction of conscious life. He has been raised from the dead, therefore any other man may be. Like another Samson, He has come forth from the prison-house, with the bars and gates upon His mighty shoulders, and has carried them away up there to the hill-top where He is. And the prison-house door stands gaping wide, and none so weak but he can pass out through the ever open portals. Christ has risen, and therefore if we will trust Him we have conquered that last and grimmest foe. And so for ourselves, when we are trembling, as we all do with the natural shrinking of flesh from the thought of that certain death; for ourselves, in our hours of lonely sorrow, when the tears come or the heart is numbed with pain; for ourselves when we lay ourselves down in our beds to die, grace and peace, like the dove that fell on His sacred head as it rose from the water of the baptism-will come down from His hands who is not only ‘the faithful Witness,’ but the ‘first begotten from the dead.’

III. Lastly, we have grace and peace from the King of kings.

The series of aspects of Christ’s work here is ranged in order of time, in so far as the second follows the first, and the third flows from both, though we are not to suppose that our Lord has ceased to be the faithful Witness when He has ascended His Sovereign Throne. His own saying, ‘I have declared Thy name, and will declare it,’ shows us that His witness is perpetual, and carried on from His seat at the right hand of God.

He is the ‘Prince of the kings of the earth,’ just because He is ‘ the faithful Witness.’ That is to say: -His dominion is the dominion of the truth; His dominion is a kingdom over men’s wills and spirits. Does He rule by force? No! Does He rule by outward means? No I By terror? No I but because, as He said to the astonished Pilate, He came ‘ to bear witness to the truth’; therefore is He the King not of the Jews only but of the whole world. A kingdom over heart and conscience, will and spirit, is the kingdom which Christ has founded, and His rule rests upon His witness.

And not only so, He is ‘ the Prince of the kings of the earth’ because in that witness He dies, and so becomes a ‘martyr’ to the truth-the word in the original conveying both ideas. That is to say, His dominion rests not only upon truth. That would be a dominion grand as compared with the kingdom of this world, but still cold. His dominion rests upon love and sacrifice. And so His Kingdom is a kingdom of blessing and of gentleness; and He is crowned with the crowns of the universe, because He was first crowned with the crown of thorns. His first regal title was written upon His Cross, and from the Cross His Royalty ever flows. He is the King because He is the sacrifice.

And He is the Prince of the kings of the earth because, witnessing and slain, He has risen again; His resurrection has been the step midway, as it were, between the humiliation of earth and death, and the loftiness of the Throne. By it He has climbed to His place at the right hand of God. He is King and Prince, then, by right of truth, love, sacrifice, death, resurrection.

And King to what end? That He may send grace and peace. Is there no peace for a man’s heart in feeling that the Brother that loves him and died for him rules over all the perplexities of life, the confusions of Providence, the sorrows of a world, and the corruptions of his own nature? Is it not enough to drive away fears, to anodyne cares, to disentangle perplexities, to quiet disturbances, to make the coward brave, and the feeble strong, and the foolish wise, and the querulous patient, to think that my Christ is king; and that the hands which were nailed to the Cross wield the sceptre, and that He who died for me rules the universe and rules me?

Oh, brethren! there is no tranquility for a man anywhere else but in the humble, hearty recognition of that Lord as his Lord. Crown Him with your reverence, with your loyal obedience, with your constant desires; crown Him with your love, the most precious of all the crowns that He wears, and you will find that grace and peace come to you from Him.

Such, then, is the vision that this seer in Patmos had of his Lord. It was to him a momentary opening of the heavens, which showed him his throned Lord; but the fact which was made visible to his inward eye for a moment is an eternal fact. To-day as then, to-morrow as to-day, for Asiatic Greeks and for modern Englishmen, for past centuries, for the present, and for all the future, for the whole world for ever, Jesus Christ is the only witness whose voice breaks the awful silence and tells us of a Father; the only Conqueror of Death who makes the life beyond a firm, certain fact; the King whose dominion it is life to obey. We all need Him. Your hearts have wants which only His grace can supply, your lives have troubles which only His peace can still. Sin and sorrow, change and trial, separation and death, are facts in every man’s experience. They are ranked against us in serried battalions. You can conquer them all if you will seek shelter and strength from Him who has died for you, and lives to succour and to save. Trust Him! Let your faith grasp the past fact of the Cross whose virtue never grows old, and the present fact of the Throne from which He bends down with hands full of grace; and on His lips the tender old words: ‘Peace I leave with you, My peace give I unto you I’

Footnotes

[1] Easter Sunday.

2) Revelation 1:5

Revelation

CHRIST’S PRESENT LOVE AND PAST LOOSING FROM SINS

Rev. 1:5

The Revised Version rightly makes two slight but important changes in this verse, both of which are sustained by preponderating authority. For ‘ loved’ it reads ‘loveth,’ and for ‘ washed’ it reads ‘loosed’; the whole standing ‘Unto Him that loveth us, loosed us from our sins by His blood.’ Now the first of these changes obviously adds much to the force and richness of the representation, for it substitutes for a past a present and timeless love. The second of them, though it seems greater, is really smaller, for it makes no change in the meaning, but only in the figure under which the meaning is represented. If we read ‘washed,’ the metaphor would be of sin as a stain; if we read ‘loosed,’ the metaphor is of sin as a ‘chain.’ Possibly the context may somewhat favour the alteration, inasmuch as there would then be the striking contrast between the condition of captives or bondsmen, and the dignity of ‘kings and priests unto God,’ into which Jesus brings those whom He has freed from the bondage. Taking, then, these changes, and noting the fact that our text is the beginning of a doxology, we have here three points, the present love of Christ, the great past act which is its outcome and proof, and the praise which should answer that great love.

I. We have here that great thought of the present love of Christ.

The words seem to me to become especially beautiful, if we remember that they come from the lips of him whose distinction it was that he was ‘the disciple whom Jesus loved.’ It is as if he had said, ‘I share my privilege with you all. I was no nearer Him than you may be. Every head may rest on the breast where mine rested. Having the sweet remembrance of that early love, these things write I unto you that ye also may have fellowship with me in that which was my great distinction. I, the disciple whom Jesus loved, speak to you as the disciples whom Jesus loves.’

Mark that he is speaking of One who had been dead for half a century, and that he is speaking to people, none of whom had probably ever seen Jesus in His lifetime, and most of whom had' not been born when He died. Yet to them all he turns with that profound and mighty present tense, and says, 'He loveth us.' He was speaking to all generations, and telling all the tribes of men of a love which is in active operation towards each of them, not only at the moment when John spoke to Asiatic Greeks, but at the moment when we Englishmen read his words, 'Christ that loveth us.'

Now that great thought suggests two things, one as to the permanence, and one as to the sweep of Christ's love. With regard to the permanence, we have here the revelation of One whose relation to life and death is altogether unique. For though we must believe that the dead do still cherish the love that lighted earth for them, we cannot suppose that their love embraces those whom on earth they did not know, or that for those who are still held in its grasp it can be a potence in active operation to bless them and to do them good. But here is a Man, to the exercise of whose love, to the clearness of whose apprehension and knowledge, to the outgoing of whose warm affection, the active energy of that affection life or death make no difference. The cold which stays the flow of all other human love, like frost laid upon the running streams which it binds in fetters, has no power over the flow of Christ's love, which rolls on, unfrozen and unaffected by it. But not only docs Christ's present love require that He should be lifted above death as it affects the rest of us, but it also demands for its explanation that we shall see in Him true Divinity. For this 'loveth' is the timeless present of that Divine nature, of which we cannot properly say either that it was or that it will be, but only that it for ever is, and the outgoings of His love are like the outgoings of that Divine energy of which we cannot properly say that it did or that it will do, but only that it ever does. His love, if I might use such a phrase, is lifted above all tenses, and transcends even the bounds of grammar. He did love. He does love. He will love. All three forms of speech must be combined in setting forth the ever present, because timeless and eternal, love of the Incarnate Word.

Then let me remind you too that this present love of Christ is undiminished by the glory to which Ho is exalted. We find clear and great differences between the picture of Jesus Christ in the four gospels and the picture of

Him drawn in that magnificent vision of this chapter. But the differences are surface, and the identity is deep-lying. The differences affect position much rather than nature, and as we look upon that revelation which was given to the seer in his rocky Patmos, and with him 'in the Spirit' behold 'the things that are,' we carry into all the glory the thought 'He loveth us'; and the breast girded with the golden girdle is as loving as that upon which John's happy head lay, and the hand that holds the seven stars is as tender as when it was laid on little children in blessing or on lepers in cleansing; or as when it held up the sinking Apostle, or lifted the sick from their couches, or as when it was stretched on the Cross and pierced with the nails; and the face,' which is as the sun shineth in his strength,' is as gracious as when it beamed in pity upon wanderers and sorrowful ones, and drew by its beauty and its sweetness the harlots and publicans to His pity. The exalted Christ loves as did the lowly Christ on earth.

How different this prosaic, worried present would be if we could carry with us, as we may if we will, into all its trivialities, into all its monotony, into all its commonplace routine, into all its little annoyances and great sorrows, that one lambent thought as a source of light and strength and blessing, 'He loveth us.' Ah! brethren, we lose tremendously of what we might all possess, because we think so of 'He loved,' and travel back to the Cross for its proof, and think so comparatively seldom 'He loveth,' and feel the touch of His hand on our hearts for its token.

But here we have not only the present and permanent love, but we have the sweep and extent of it. 'He loveth us.' And though John was speaking primarily about a little handful of people scattered through some of the seaboard towns of Asia Minor, the principle upon which he could make the assertion in regard to them warrants us in extending the assertion not only to men that respond to the love, and believe in it, but right away over all the generations and all the successive files of the great army of humanity, down to the very ends of time, 'He loveth us.'

That universality, wonderful as it is, and requiring for its basis the same belief in Christ's Divine nature which the present energy of His love requires, has to be translated by each of us into an individualizing love which is poured upon each single soul, as if it were the sole recipient of the fullness of the heart of Christ. When we extend our thoughts or our sympathies to a crowd, we lose the individual. We generalize, as logicians say, by neglecting the particular instances. That is to say, when we look at the forest we do not see the trees. But Jesus Christ sees each tree, each stem, each branch, each leaf, just as when the crowd thronged Him and pressed Him, He knew when the tremulous finger, wasted and shrunken to skin and bone, was timidly laid on the hem of His garment; as there was room for all the five thousand on the grass, and no man's plenty was secured at the expense of another man's penury, so each of us has a place in that heart; and my abundance will not starve you, nor your feeding full diminish the supplies for me. Christ loves all, not with the vague general philanthropy with which men love the mass, but with the individualizing knowledge and special direction of affection towards the individual which demands for its fullness a Divine nature to exercise it. And so each of us may have our own rainbow, to each of us the sunbeam may come straight from the sun and strike upon our eye in a direct line, to each of us the whole warmth of the orb may be conveyed, and each of us may say, 'He loved me, and gave Himself for me.' Is that your conception of your relation to Jesus Christ and of Christ's to you?

II. Notice the great proof and outcome of this present love.

Because it is timeless love, and has nothing to do with the distinction of past, present, and future, John lays hold of a past act as the manifestation of a present love. If we would understand what that love is which is offered to each of us in the present, we must understand what is meant and what is involved in that past act to which John points: 'He loosed us from our sins by His own blood.' Christ is the Emancipator, and the instrument by which He makes us free is 'His own blood.'

Now there underlies that thought the sad metaphor that sin is captivity. There may be some kind of allusion in the Apostle's mind to the deliverance from Egyptian bondage; and that is made the more probable if we observe that the next clause, 'hath made us kings and priests unto God,' points back to the great charter of Israel's national existence which was given immediately after the Exodus. But, be that as it may, the notion of bondage underlies this metaphor of loosing a fetter. If we would be honest with ourselves, in our account of our own inward experiences, that bondage we all know. There is the bondage of sin as guilt, the sense of responsibility, the feeling that we have to answer for what we have done, and to answer -as I believe and as I think men's consciences for the most part force them to believe-not only here but hereafter, when we appear before the judgment-seat of Christ. Guilt is a chain. And there is the bondage of habit, which ties and holds us with the cords of our sins, so as that, slight as the fetter may seem at first, it has an awful power of thickening and becoming heavier and more pressing, till at last it holds a man in a grip that he cannot get away from. I know of nothing in human life more mystically awful than the possible influence of habit. And you cannot break these fetters yourselves, brethren, any more than a man in a dungeon, shackled to the wall, can file through his handcuffs and anklets with a pin or a broken penknife. You can do a great deal, but you cannot deal with the past fact of guilt, and you can only very partially deal with the present fact of tyranny which the evil habit exercises on you.

'He loosed us from our sins by His own blood.' This is not the place to enter upon theological speculations, but I, for my part, believe that, although I may not get to the bottom of the bottomless, nor speak about the Divine nature with full knowledge of all that it is, Scripture is pledged to the fact that the death of Jesus Christ is the Sacrifice for the world's sin. I admit that a full theory is not within reach, but I do not admit that therefore we are to falter in declaring that Christ's death is indispensable in order that a man's sin may be forgiven, and the fetters broken, in so far as guilt and condemnation and Divine disapprobation are concerned.

But that is only one side of the truth. The other, and in some aspects a far more important one, is that that same blood which shed delivers them that trust in Jesus Christ from the guilt of their sin, imparted to men, delivers them from the power of their sin. 'The blood is the life,' according to the simple physiology of the Old and of the New Testament. When we read in Scripture that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin, as I believe we are intended to understand that word, the impartation of Christ's life to us purifies our nature, and makes us, too, in our degree, and on condition of our own activity, and gradually and successively free from all evil. So as regards both aspects of the thralldom of sin, as guilt and as habit: ‘He has loosed us from our sins in His own blood.’

That is the great token and manifestation of His love. If we do not believe that, how else can we have any real conviction and proof of anything worth calling love as being in the heart of Jesus Christ to any of us? To me it seems that unless a man accepts that great thought, ‘He loved me, and gave Himself for me,’ and is daily working in my nature to make it and me more like Himself, he has no real proof that Jesus Christ cares a jot for him, or knows anything about him. But I, for my part, venture to say that looking on Christ and His past as this text does, we can look up to Christ in the present as the seer did, and, behold, enthroned by the side of the glory, the Man, the Incarnate Word, who loves with timeless love every single soul of man.

III. So, lastly, let me point you to the praise which should answer this present love and emancipation.

‘Unto Him,’ says John, ‘be’-or is-’glory and dominion for ever and ever.’ That present love, and that great past act which is its vindication and manifestation, are the true glory of God. For His glory lies, not in attributes, as we call them, that distinguish Him from the limitations of humanity, such as Omniscience and Omnipresence and Eternal Being and the like; all these are great, but they are not the greatest. The divinest thing in God is His love, and the true glory is the glory that rays out from Him whom we behold ‘full of grace and truth,’ full of love, and dying on the Cross. When we look at that weak man there yielding to the last infirmity of humanity, and yet in yielding to it manifesting His dominion over it, there we see God as we do not see Him anywhere besides. To Him is the glory for His love, and His ‘loosing’ manifest the glory, and from His love and His loosing accrue to Him glory beyond all other revenue of praise which comes to Him from creative and sustaining acts.

‘Unto Him be dominion,’ for His rule rests on His sacrifice and on His love. The crown of thorns prepared for the ‘many crowns’ of heaven, the sceptre of reed was the prophecy of the sceptre of the universe. The Cross was the footstool of His Throne. He is King of men because He has loved us perfectly, and given everything for us.

And so, brethren, the question of questions for each of us is, Is Jesus Christ my Emancipator? Do I see in Him He that looses me from my sins, and makes me free indeed, because the Son has made me free and a son? Do I render to Him the love which such a love requires? Do I find in Him my ever-present Lover and Friend, and is His love to me as a stimulus for all service, an amulet against every temptation, a breakwater in all storms, a light in every darkness, the pledge of a future heaven, and the beginning of a heaven even upon earth? I beseech you, recognize your fetters, and do not say ‘ we were never in bondage to any man.’ Recognize your Liberator, put your trust in Him; and then you will be able to join, even here on earth, and more perfectly hereafter, in that great storm and chorus of praise which is in heaven and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, saying, ‘Blessing and honour and glory and power be unto Him that sitteth on the Throne and to the Lamb for ever and ever.’

3) Revelation 1:6

Revelation

KINGS AND PRIESTS

Rev. 1:6

There is an evident reference in these words to the original charter of the Jewish nation, which ran, ‘If ye will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then shall ye be to Me a kingdom of priests.’ That reference is still more obvious if we follow the reading of our text in the Revised Version, which runs, ‘He made us to be a kingdom, to be priests.’ Now it is unquestionable that, in the original passage, Israel is represented as being God’s kingdom, the nation over which He reigned as King. But in John’s use of the expression there seems to be a slight modification of meaning, as is obvious in the parallel passage to this, which occurs in a subsequent chapter, where we read in addition, ‘They shall reign with Him for ever.’ That is to say, in our text we should rather translate the word ‘kings lip’ than ‘kingdom,’ for it means rather the Royal dominion of the Christian community than its subjection to the reign of God.

So the two dignities, the chief in the ancient world, which as a rule were sedulously kept apart, lest their union should produce a grinding despotism from which there was no appeal, are united in the person of the humblest Christian, and that not merely at some distant future period beyond the grave, but here and now; for my text says, not ‘will make,’ but ‘hath made.’ The coronation and the consecration are both past acts; they are the sequel, certain to follow upon the previous act: ‘He hath loosed us from our sins in His own blood.’ The timeless love of Christ, of which that’ loosing’ was the manifestation and the outcome, is not content with emancipating the slaves; it enthrones and hallows them. ‘He lifts the beggar from the dunghill to set him among princes.’ ‘He hath loosed us from our sins,’ He hath therein made us ‘kings and priests to God.’

I. So, then, we have to consider, first, the Royalty of the Christian life.

Now as I have already observed, that royalty has two aspects, a present and a future, and therein the representation coincides with the whole strain of the New Testament, which never separates the present from the future condition of Christian people, as if they were altogether unlike, but lays far more emphasis upon the point in which they coincide than on the points in which they differ, and represents that future as being but the completion and the heightening to a more lustrous splendor, of that which characterizes Christian life in the present. So there is a present dominion, notwithstanding all the sorrows and limitations and burdens of life; and there is a future one, which is but the expansion and the superlative degree of that which is enjoined in the present. What, then, is the present royalty of the men that have been loosed from their sins?

Well, I think that the true kingship, which comes as the consequence of Christ’s emancipation of us from the guilt and power of sin, is dominion over ourselves. That is the real royalty, to which every man, whatever his position, may aspire, and may exercise. Our very nature shows that we are not, if I might so say, a republic or a democracy, but a monarchy, for there are parts of every one of us that are manifestly intended to be subjected and to obey, and there are parts that are as manifestly intended to be authoritative and to command. On the one side are the passions and the desires that inhere in our fleshly natures, and others, more refined and sublimated forms of the same, and on the other, there is will, reason, conscience. And these, being themselves the authoritative and commanding parts of our nature, observe a subordination also. For the will which impels all the rest is but a blind giant unless it be illumined by reason. And will and reason alike have to bow to the dictates of that conscience which is the vicegerent of God in every man.

But there is rebellion in the monarchy, as we all know, a revolt that spreads widely. And there is no power that will enable my will to dominate my baser part, and no power that will enthrone my reason above my will, and no power that will give to the empty voice of conscience force to enforce its decrees, except the power of Him that 'has loosed us from our sins in His own blood.' When we bow to Him, then, and, as I believe in its perfect measure, only then, shall we realize the dominion over the anarchic, rebellious self, which God means every man to exercise. Christ, and Christ alone, makes us fit to control all our nature. And He does it by pouring into us His own Spirit, which will subdue, by strengthening all the motives which should lead men to obedience, by setting before them the perfect pattern in Himself, and by the communication of His own life, which is symbolized by His blood cleansing us from the tyranny under which we have been held. We were slaves, He makes us free, and making us free He enthrones us. He that is king over himself is the true king.

Again, the present royalty of the Christian man is found in his sovereignty over the world. He commands the world who despises it. He is lord of material things who bends them to the highest use, the development of his own nature, and the formation in him of a God-pleasing and Christlike character. He is king of the material who uses it as men use the leaping-bars and other apparatus in a gymnasium, for the strengthening of the frame, and the bringing out of the muscles. He is the king of the world to whom it is all a mirror that shows God, a ladder by which we can climb to Him. And this domination over things visible and material is possible to us in its superlative degree only in the measure in which we are united by faith and obedience to Him who declared, with almost His dying breath, 'I have overcome the world,' and bade us therefore ' be of good cheer.' 'This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith,' and He is the master of all who has submitted himself to the monarchy of Jesus Christ. And so the royalty which begins with ruling my own nature goes on to be master of all things around me, according to that great saying, the depth of which can be realized only by experience, ‘All things are yours, and ye are Christ’s.’

There is another department in which the same kingship is at present capable of being exercised by us all, and that is that we may become, by faith in Jesus Christ, independent of men, and lords over them, in the sense that we shall take no orders from them, nor hang upon their approbation or disapprobation, nor depend upon their love for our joy, nor be frightened or bewildered by their hate, but shall be able to say, ‘We are the servants of Christ, therefore we are free from men.’ The King’s servant is everybody else’s master. In the measure in which we hold ourselves in close union with that Saviour we are set free from all selfish dependence on, and regard to, the judgments of perishable and fallible creatures like ourselves.

But the passage to which I have already referred as determining the precise meaning of the ambiguous expression in my text goes a little further. It not only speaks of being kings and priests here and now, but it adds they shall ‘reign with Him,’ and so points us onward to a dim future, in which all that is tendency here, and an imperfect kingship, shall be perfectly realized hereafter. I do not dwell upon that, for we see that future but ‘through a glass darkly’; only I remind you of such sayings as ‘have thou authority over ten cities,’ and the other phrase in one of the letters to the seven churches, in which ‘authority over the nations’ and ‘ruling them with a rod of iron’ is promised to Christ’s servants. These are promises as dim as they are certain, but they, at least, teach us that they who here, in lowly dependence on the King of kings, have bowed themselves to Him, and, emancipated by Him, have been made to share in some measure in His royalty here, shall hereafter, according to the depth of His own wonderful promise,’ sit with Him on His Throne, as He also hath sat down with the Father on His Throne.’

For indeed this kingship of all Christ’s children, like the priesthood with which it is associated in my text, is but one case of the general principle that, by faith in Jesus Christ, we are so united with Him as that where He is, and what He is, there and that ‘we shall be also.’ He has become like us that we might become like Him. He has taken part of the flesh and blood of which the children are partakers, that they might take part of the Spirit of which He is the Lord. He, the Son, has become the Son of Man that sons of men might in Him become the sons of God. The branches partake of the 'fatness' of the vine; and the King who is Priest makes all to trust Him, not only sons but kings through Himself.

II. We have here the priesthood of the Christian life.

Now that idea is but a symbolical way of putting some very great and wondrous thoughts, for what are the elements that go to make up the idea of a priest.

First, direct access to God and that is the prerogative of every Christian. All of us, each of us, may pass into the secret place of the Most High, and stand there with happy hearts, unabashed and unafraid, beneath the very blaze of the light of the Shekinah. And we can do that, because Jesus Christ has come to us with these words upon His lips, 'I am the Way; no man cometh to the Father but by Me.' The path into that Divine Presence is for every sinful soul blocked by an immense black rock, its own transgressions; but He has blasted away the rock, and the path is patent for all our feet. By His death we have the way made open into the holiest of all. And so we can come, come with lowly hearts, come with childlike confidence, come with the whole burden of our weaknesses and wants and woes, and can spread them all before Him, and nestle to the great heart of God the Father Himself. We are priests to God, and our prerogative is to pass within the veil by the new and living Way which Christ is for us.

Again, another idea in the conception of the priest is that he must have somewhat to offer; and we Christian people are in that sense priests. Christ has offered the 'one Sacrifice for sins for ever,' and there is no addition to that possible or requisite. But after the offering of the expiatory sacrifice, the ancient Ritual taught us a deep truth when it appointed that following it there should be the sacrifice of thanksgiving. And these are what we are to bring. You remember the words, 'I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present'-and that word is the technical one for the offering of sacrifice-' your bodies a living sacrifice, acceptable unto God.' You remember Peter's use of this same expression, 'Ye are a royal priesthood,' and his description of their function to offer up spiritual 'sacrifices.' You remember the other words of the great sacerdotal book of the New Testament, the Epistle to the Hebrews, which claims for Christians all that seemed to be disappearing with the dying Jewish economy, and says, ‘By Him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise unto God . . . that is the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His Name, and to do good, and to communicate forget not, for with such sacrifices God is well-pleased.’ So the sacrifice of myself, moved by the mercies of God as a great thank offering, and in detail the sacrifice of praise, of good gifts and good deeds, and a life devoted to Him, these are the sacrifices which we have to bring.

I need not remind you of yet another aspect in which the sacrificial idea inheres in the very notion of the Christian life, and that is not only access to God, and the offering of sacrifice, but mediation with man. For the function is laid upon all Christian people by Jesus Christ Himself, that they should represent God and Him in the world, and beseech men, in Christ’s stead, to be reconciled to God. And so the priesthood and the kingship both belong to the ideal of the Christian life.

III. In the last place, just a word or two as to the practical conclusions from this idea.

The first of them is one on which I touch very lightly, but which I cannot well omit, and that is the bearing of this thought on the relations of the members of the Christian community to one another. The New Testament knows of two kinds of priesthood, and no third. It knows of Christ as the High Priest who, by His great sacrifice for the sins of the world, has made all other expiation antiquated and impertinent, and has swept away the whole fabric of ceremonial and sacrificial worship; and it knows of the derived priesthood which belongs to every member of Christ’s Church. But it stops there; and there is not a word in the New Testament which warrants any single member of that universal priesthood monopolizing the title to himself, and so separating himself from the community of his brethren. I do not wish to elaborate that point, or to bring any mere controversial elements into my sermon, but I am bound to say that if that name of priest be given to a class, you elevate the class and you degrade the mass of believers. You take away from the community what you concentrate on the individual. And historically it has always been the case that wherever the name of priest has been allotted to the officials, the ministers of the Church, there the priesthood of the community has tended to be forgotten.

I do not dwell upon the other great error which goes along with that name as applied to an officer in any Christian community. But a priest must have a sacrifice, and you cannot sustain the sacerdotal idea except by the help of the sacramentarian idea which, I venture to say, travesties the simple memorial rite of the Lord's Supper into what it is called in Roman Catholic phraseology, 'the tremendous sacrifice.'

Brethren, the hand of the priest paralyses the life of the Church; and politically, intellectually, socially, and above all religiously, it blights whatsoever it touches. You free Churchmen have laid upon you this day the imperative duty of witnessing for the two things, the sole priesthood of Jesus Christ, and the universal priesthood of all His people.

Let me say again, these thoughts bear upon our individual duty. It is idle, as some of us are too apt to do, to use them as a weapon to fight ecclesiastical assumptions with, unless they regulate our own lives. Be what you are is what I would say to all Christian men. You are a king; see that you rule yourself and the world. You are a priest; see that the path into the Temple is worn by your continual feet. See that you offer yourselves sacrifices to God in the daily work and self-surrender of life. See that you mediate between God and man, in such brotherly mediation as is possible to us.

Above all, dear friends, let us all begin where Christ begins, where my text begins, and go to Him to have ourselves 'loosed from our sins in His own blood.' Then the king's diadem and the priest's mitre will meet on our happy heads. In plain English, if we want to govern ourselves and the world, we must let Christ govern us, and then all things will be our servants. If we would draw near to God-and to be distant from Him is misery; and if we would offer to Him the sacrifices-to refrain from offering which is sin and sorrow-we must begin with going to Jesus Christ, and trusting in Him as our Redeemer from sin. And then, so trusting, He will give us here and now, amid the sorrows and imperfections of life, and more perfectly amid the glories and unknown advances in power and beauty in the heavens, a share in His Royalty and His unchangeable Priesthood.

4) Revelation 1:9

Revelation

THE THREEFOLD COMMON HERITAGE

Rev. 1:9 [R.V.].

So does the Apostle introduce himself to his readers; with no word of pre-eminence or of apostolic authority, but with the simple claim to share with them in their Christian heritage. And this is the same man who, at an earlier stage of his Christian life, desired that he and his brother might' sit on Thy right hand and on Thy left in Thy Kingdom.' What a change had passed over him! What was it that out of such timber made such a polished shaft? I think there is only one answer-the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of God's good Spirit that came after it.

It almost looks as if John was thinking about his old ambitious wish, and our Lord's answer to it, when he wrote these words; for the very gist of our Lord's teaching to him on that memorable occasion is reproduced in compressed form in my text. He had been taught that fellowship in Christ's sufferings must go before participation in His throne; and so here he puts tribulation before the kingdom. He had been taught, in answer to his foolish request, that pre-eminence was not the first thing to think of, but service; and that the only principle according to which rank was determined in that kingdom was service. So here he says nothing about dignity, but calls himself simply a brother and companion. He humbly suppresses his apostolic authority, and takes his place, not by the side of the throne, apart from others, but down among them.

Now the Revised Version is distinctly an improved version in its rendering of these words. It reads 'partaker with you,' instead of 'companion,' and so emphasizes the notion of participation. It reads, 'in the tribulation and kingdom and patience,' instead of 'in tribulation and in the kingdom and patience'; and so, as it were, brackets all the three nouns together under one preposition and one definite article, and thus shows more closely their connection. And instead of 'in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ,' it reads, ‘which are in Jesus Christ,’ and so shows that the predicate, ‘in Jesus Christ,’ extends to all the three-the ‘tribulation,’ the ‘kingdom,’ and the ‘patience,’ and not only to the last of the three, as would be suggested to an ordinary reader of our English version. So that we have here a participation by all Christian men in three things, all of which are, in some sense, ‘ in Christ Jesus.’ Note that participation in ‘the kingdom’ stands in the centre, buttressed, as it were, on the one side by participation ‘in the tribulation,’ and on the other side by participation ‘ in the patience.’ We may, then, best bring out the connection and force of these thoughts by looking at the common royalty, the common road leading to it, and the common temper in which the road is trodden-all which things do inhere in Christ, and may be ours on condition of our union with Him.

I. So then, first, note the common royalty. ‘I John am a partaker with you in the kingdom.’

Now John does not say, ‘ I am going to be a partaker,’ but says, ‘Here and now, in this little rocky island of Patmos, an exile and all but a martyr, I yet, like all the rest of you, who have the same weird to dree, and the same bitter cup to drink, even now am a partaker of the kingdom that is in Christ.’

What is that kingdom? It is the sphere or society, the state or realm, in which His will is obeyed; and, as we may say, His writs run. His kingdom, in the deepest sense of the word, is only there, where loving hearts yield, and where His will is obeyed consciously, because the conscious obedience is rooted in love.

But then, besides that, there is a wider sense of the expression in which Christ’s kingdom stretches all through the universe, and wherever the authority of God is there is the kingdom of the exalted Christ, who is the right hand and active power of God.

So then the ‘kingdom that is in Christ’ it yours if you are ‘in Christ.’ Or, to put it into other words, whoever is ruled by Christ has a share in rule with Christ. Hence the words in the context here, to which a double meaning may be attached, ‘He hath made us to be a kingdom.’ We are His kingdom in so far as our wills joyfully and lovingly submit to His authority; and then, in so far as we are His kingdom, we are kings. So far as our wills bow to and own His sway, they are invested with power to govern ourselves and others. His subjects are the world’s masters. Even now, in the midst of confusions and rebellions, and apparent contradictions, the true rule in the world belongs to the men and women who bow to the authority of Jesus Christ. Whoever worships Him, saying, ‘Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ,’ receives from Him the blessed assurance, ‘and I appoint unto you a kingdom.’ His vassals are altogether princes. He is ‘King of kings,’ not only in the sense that He is higher than the kings of the earth, but also in the sense, though it be no part of the true meaning of the expression, that those whom He rules are, by the very submission to His rule, elevated to royal dignity.

We rule over ourselves, which is the best kingdom to govern, on condition of saying:-’Lord! I cannot rule myself, do Thou rule me.’ When we put the reins into His hands, when we put our consciences into His keeping, when we take our law from His gentle and yet sovereign lips, when we let Him direct our thinking; when His word is absolute truth that ends all controversy, and when His will is the supreme authority that puts an end to every hesitation and reluctance, then we are masters of ourselves. The man that has rule over his own spirit is the true king. He that thus is Christ’s man is his own master. Being lords of ourselves, and having our foot upon our passions, and conscience and will flexible in His hand and yielding to His lightest touch, as a fine-mouthed horse does to the least pressure of the bit, then we are masters of circumstances and the world; and all things are on our side if we are on Christ’s side.

So we do not need to wait for Heaven to be heirs, that is possessors, of the kingdom that God hath prepared for them that love Him. Christ’s dominion is shared even now and here by all who serve Him. It is often hard for us to believe this about ourselves or others, especially when toil weighs upon us, and adverse circumstances, against which we have vainly striven, tyrannize over our lives. We feel more like powerless victims than lords of the world. Our lives seem concerned with such petty trivialities, and so absolutely lorded over by externals, that to talk of a present dominion over a present world seems irony, flatly contradicted by facts. We are tempted to throw forward the realization of our regality to the future. We are heirs, indeed, of a great kingdom, but for the present are set to keep a small huckster’s shop in a back street. So we faithlessly say to ourselves; and we need to open our eyes, as John would have his brethren do, to the fact of the present participation of every Christian in the present kingdom of the enthroned Christ. There can be no more startling anomalies in our lots than were in his, as he sat there in Patmos, a solitary exile, weighed upon with many cares, ringed about with perils not a few. But in them all he knew his share in the kingdom to be real and inalienable, and yielding much for present fruition, however much more remained over for hope and future possession. The kingdom is not only ‘of but ‘in’ Jesus Christ. He is, as it were, the sphere in which it is realized. If we are ‘in Him’ by that faith which engrafts us into Him, we shall ourselves both be and possess that kingdom, and possess it, because we are it.

But while the kingdom is present, its perfect form is future. The crown of righteousness is laid up for God’s people, even though they are already a kingdom, and already [according to the true reading of Rev. 5:10] ‘reign upon the earth.’ Great hopes, the greater for their dimness, gather round that future when the faithfulness of the steward shall be exchanged for the authority of the ruler, and the toil of the servant for the joy of the Lord. The presumptuous ambition of John in his early request did not sin by setting his hopes too high; for, much as he asked when he sought a place at the right hand of his Master’s throne, his wildest dreams fell far below the reality, reserved for all who overcome, of a share in that very throne itself. There is room there, not for one or two of the aristocracy of heaven, but for all the true servants of Christ.

They used to say that in the days of the first Napoleon every French soldier carried a field-marshal’s baton in his knapsack. That is to say, every one of them had the chance of winning it, and many of them did win it. But every Christian soldier carries a crown in his, and that not because he perhaps may, but because he certainly will, wear it, when the war is over, if he stands by his flag, and because he has it already in actual possession, though for the present the helmet becomes his brow rather than the diadem. On such themes we can say little, only let us remember that the present and the future life of the Christian are distinguished, not by the one possessing the royalty which the other wants, but as the partial and perfect forms of the same kingdom, which, in both forms alike, depends on our true abiding in

Him. That kingdom is in Him, and is the common heritage of all who are in Him, and who, on earth and in heaven, possess it in degrees varying accurately with the measure in which they are in Christ, and He in them.

II. Note, secondly, the common road to that common royalty.

As I have remarked, the kingdom is the central thought here, and the other two stand on either side as subsidiary: on the one hand, a common 'tribulation'; on the other, a common 'patience.' The former is the path by which all have to travel who attain the royalty; the latter is the common temper in which all the travelers must face the steepnesses and roughnesses of the road.

'Tribulation' has, no doubt, primarily reference to actual persecution, such as had sent John to his exile in Patmos, and hung like a threatening thunder-cloud over the Asiatic churches. But the significance of the word is not exhausted thereby. It is always true that 'through much tribulation we must enter the kingdom.' All who are bound to the same place, and who start from the same place, must go by the same road. There are no short-cuts nor by-paths for the Christian pilgrim. The only way to the kingdom that is in Christ is the road which He Himself trod. There is 'tribulation in Christ,' as surely as in Him there are peace and victory, and if we are in Christ we shall be sure to get our share of it. The Christian course brings now difficulties and trials of its own, and throws those who truly out-and-out adopt it into relations with the world which will surely lead to oppositions and pains. If we are in the world as Christ was, we shall have to make up our minds to share 'the reproach of Christ' until Egypt owns Him, and not Pharaoh, for its King. If there be no such experience, it is much more probable that the reason for exemption is the Christian's worldliness than the world's growing Christlikeness.

No doubt the grosser forms of persecution are at an end, and no doubt multitudes of nominal Christians live on most amicable terms with the world, and know next to nothing of the tribulation that is in Christ. But that is not because there is any real alteration in the consequences of union with Jesus, but because their union is so very slight and superficial. The world 'loves its own' and what can it find to hate in the shoals of people, whose religion is confined to their tongues mostly, and has next to nothing to do with their lives? It has not ceased to be a hard thing to be a real and thorough Christian. A great deal in the world is against us when we try to be so, and a great deal in ourselves is against us. There will be ‘ tribulation’ by reason of self-denial, and the mortification and rigid suppression or regulation of habits, tastes, and passions, which some people may be able to indulge, but which we must cast out, though dear and sensitive as a right eye, if they interfere with our entrance into life. The law is unrepealed-’If we suffer with Him, we shall also reign with Him.’

But this participation in the tribulation that is in Christ has another and gentler aspect. The expression points to the blessed softening of our hardest trials when they are borne in union with the Man of Sorrows. The sunniest lives have their dark times. Sooner or later we all have to lay our account with hours when the heart bleeds and hope dies, and we shall not find strength to bear such times aright unless we bear them in union with Jesus Christ, by which our darkest sorrows are turned into the tribulation that is in Him, and all the bitterness, or, at least, the poison of the bitterness, taken out of them, and they almost changed into a solemn joy. Egypt would be as barren as the desert which bounds it, were it not for the rising of the Nile; so when the cold waters of sorrow rise up and spread over our hearts, if we are Christians, they will leave a precious deposit when they retire, on which will grow rich harvests. Some edible plants are not fit for use till they have had a touch of frost. Christian character wants the same treatment. It is needful for us that the road to the kingdom should often run through the valley of weeping. Our being in the kingdom depends upon the bending of our wills in submission to the King; then surely nothing should be more welcome to us, as nothing can be more needful, than anything which bends them, even if the fire which makes their obstinacy pliable, and softens the iron so that it runs in the appointed mould, should have to be very hot. The soil of the vineyards on the slopes of Vesuvius is disintegrated lava. The richest grapes, from which a precious wine is made, grow on the product of eruptions which tore the mountain-side and darkened all the sky. So our costliest graces of character are grown in a heart enriched by losses and made fertile by convulsions which rent it and covered smiling verdure with what seemed at first a fiery flood of ruin. The kingdom is reached by the road of tribulation. Blessed are they for whom the universal sorrows which flesh is heir to become helps heavenwards because they are borne in union with Jesus, and so hallowed into ‘ tribulation that is in Him.’

III. We note the common temper in which the common road to the common royalty is to be trodden.

‘Tribulation’ refers to circumstances-’patience’ to disposition. We shall certainly meet with tribulation if we are Christians, and if we are, we shall front tribulation with patience. Both are equally, though in different ways, characteristics of all the true travelers to the kingdom. Patience is the link, so to speak, between the kingdom and the tribulation. Sorrow does not of itself lead to the possession of the kingdom. All depends on the disposition which the sorrow evokes, and the way in which it is borne. We may take our sorrows in such a fashion as to be driven by them out of our submission to Christ, and so they may lead us away from and not towards the kingdom. The worst affliction is an affliction wasted, and every affliction is wasted, unless it is met with patience and that in Christ Jesus. Many a man is soured, or paralyzed, or driven from his faith, or drowned in self-absorbed and self-compassionating regret, or otherwise harmed by his sorrows, and the only way to get the real good of them is to keep closely united to our Lord, that in Him we may have patience as well as peace.

Most of us know that the word here translated ‘patience’ means a great deal more than the passive endurance which we usually mean by that word, and distinctly includes the notion of active perseverance. That active element is necessarily implied, for instance, in the exhortation, ‘Let us run with patience the race that is set before us.’ Mere uncomplaining passive endurance is not the temper which leads to running any race. It simply bears and does nothing, but the persistent effort of the runner with tense muscles calls for more than patience. A vivid metaphor underlies the word-that of the fixed attitude of one bearing up a heavy weight or pressure without yielding or being crushed. Such immovable constancy is more than passive. There must be much active exercise of power to prevent collapse. But all the strength is not to be exhausted in the effort to bear without flinching. There should be enough remaining for work that remains over and above the sorrow. The true Christian patience implies continuance in well-doing, besides meek acceptance of tribulation. The first element in it is, no doubt, unmurmuring acquiescence in whatsoever affliction from God or man beats against us on our path. But the second is continual effort after Christian progress, notwithstanding the tribulation. The storm must not blow us out of our course. We must still' bear up and steer right onward,' in spite of all its force on our faces, or, as ' birds of tempest-loving kind' do, so spread our pinions as to be helped by it towards our goal.

Do I address any one who has to stagger along the Christian course under some heavy and, perhaps, hopeless load of sorrow? There is a plain lesson for all of us in such circumstances. It is not less my duty to seek to grow in grace and Christlikeness because I am sad. That is my first business at all times and under all changes of fortune and mood. My sorrows are meant to help me to that, and if they so absorb me that I am indifferent to the obligation of Christian progress, then my patience, however stoical and uncomplaining it may be, is not the ' perseverance that is in Christ Jesus.' Nor does tribulation absolve from plain duties. Poor Mary of Bethany sat still in the house, with her hands lying idly in her lap, and her regrets busy with the most unprofitable of all occupations-fancying how different all would have been if one thing had been different. Sorrow is excessive and misdirected and selfish, and therefore hurtful, when for the sake of indulgence in it we fling up plain tasks. The glory of the kingdom shining athwart the gloom of the tribulation should help us to be patient, and the patience, laying hold of the tribulation by the right handle, should convert it into a blessing and an instrument for helping us to a fuller possession of the kingdom.

This temper of brave and active persistence in the teeth of difficulties will only be found where these other two are found-in Christ. The stem from which the three-leaved plant grows must be rooted in Him. He is the King, and in Him abiding we have our share of the common royalty. He is the forerunner and pathfinder, and, abiding in Him, we tread the common path to the common kingdom, which is hallowed at every rough place by the print of His bleeding feet. He is the leader and perfecter of faith, and, abiding in Him, we receive some breath of the spirit which was in Him, who, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the Cross, despising the shame. Abiding in Him, we shall possess in our measure all which is in Him, and find ourselves partakers with an innumerable company 'in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Christ Jesus,' and may hope to hear at last, 'Ye are they which have continued with Me in My temptations, and I appoint unto you a Kingdom, as My Father hath appointed unto Me.'

5) Revelation 1:10-17

Revelation

THE KING OF GLORY AND LORD OF THE CHURCHES

Rev. 1:9-20.

In this passage we have the seer and his commission [Rev. 1:9-11]; the vision of the glorified Christ [Rev. 1:12-16]; His words of comfort, self-revelation, and command [Rev. 1:17-20].

I. The writer does not call himself an apostle, but a brother and sharer in the common good of Christians. He does not speak as an apostle, whose function was to witness to the past earthly history of the Lord, but as a prophet, whose message was as to the future.

The true rendering of verse 9 [R.V.] brings all three words, 'tribulation,' 'kingdom,' and 'patience' into the same relation to 'in Jesus.' Sharing in afflictions which flow from union to Him is the condition of partaking in His kingdom; and tribulation leads to the throne, when it is borne with the brave patience which not only endures, but, in spite of sorrows, goes right onwards, and which is ours if we are in Christ.

Commentators tell us that John was banished to Patmos, an insignificant rock off the Asiatic coast, under Domitian, and returned to Ephesus in the reign of Nerva [A.D. 96]. No wonder that all through the book we hear the sound of the sea! It was common for the Romans to dispose of criminals in that fashion, and, clearly, John was shut up in Patmos as a criminal. 'For the word of God, and the testimony of Jesus,' cannot fairly bear any other meaning than that he was sent there as punishment for bearing witness to Jesus. Observe the use of 'witness' or testimony, as connecting the Apocalypse with the Gospel and Epistles of John.

In his rocky solitude the Apostle was ‘in the Spirit,’ -by which is, of course, not meant the condition in which every Christian should ever be, but such a state of elevated consciousness and communion as Paul was in when he was caught up to the heavens. No doubt John had been meditating on the unforgotten events of that long-past day of resurrection, which he was observing in his islet by solitary worship, as he had often observed it with his brethren in Ephesus; and his devout thoughts made him the more capable of supernatural communications. Whether the name of the first day of the week as ‘the Lord’s Day’ originated with this passage, or had already become common, is uncertain. But, at all events, it was plainly regarded as the day for Christian worship. Solitary souls, far away from the gatherings of Christ’s people, may still draw near to Him; and if they turn thought and love towards Him, they will be lifted above this gross earth, and bear that great voice speaking to them, which rose above the dash of waves, and thrilled the inward ear of the lonely exile. That voice, penetrating and clear like a trumpet, gave him his charge, and woke his expectation of visions to follow.

We cannot enter on any consideration of the churches enumerated, or the reasons for their selection. Suffice it to note that their number suggests their representative character, and that what is said to them is meant for all churches in all ages.

II. The fuller consideration of the emblem of the candlesticks will come presently, but we have reverently to gaze upon the glorious figure which flashed on John’s sight as he turned to see who spoke to him there in his loneliness.

His first glimpse told him that it was ‘one like to the Son of man’; for it can scarcely be supposed that the absence of the definite article in the Greek obliges us to think that all that John meant to say was that the form was manlike. Surely it was a more blessed resemblance than that vague one which struck on his heart. It was He Himself ‘ with His human air,’ standing there in the blaze of celestial light. What a rush of memories, what a rapture of awe and surprise would flood his soul, as that truth broke on him! The differences between the form seen and that remembered were startling, indeed, but likeness persisted through them all. Nor is it inexplicable that, when he had taken in all the features of the vision, he should have fallen as one dead; for the truest love would feel awe at the reappearance of the dearest invested with heavenly radiance.

The elements of the description are symbolical, and, in most instances, drawn from the Old Testament. The long robe, girdled high up with a golden girdle, seems to express at once kingly and priestly dignity. Girded loins meant work. This girdled breast meant royal repose and priestly calm. The whiteness of the hair [comp. Dan. vii. 9] may indicate, as in Daniel, length of days; but more probably it expresses 'the transfiguration in light of the glorified person of the Redeemer' [Trench]. The flaming eyes are the symbol of His all-seeing wrath against evil, and the feet of burning brass symbolize the exalted Christ's power to tread down His enemies and consume them. His voice was as the sound of many waters, like the billows that broke on Patmos, whereby is symbolized the majesty of His utterance of power, whether for rebuke or encouragement, but mainly for the former.

Flashing in His hand were seven stars. The seer does not stop to tell us how they were disposed there, nor how one hand could grasp them all; but that right hand can and does. What this point of the vision means we shall see presently.

The terrible power of the exalted Christ's word to destroy His foes is expressed by that symbol of the two-edged sword from His mouth, which, like so many prophetic symbols, is grotesque if pictured, but sublime when spoken. The face blazed with dazzling brightness unbearable as the splendors of that southern sun which poured its rays on the flashing waters round John's rocky prison.

Is this tremendous figure like the Christ on whose bosom John had leaned? Yes; for one chief purpose of this book is to make us feel that the exalted Jesus is the same in all essentials as the lowly Jesus. The heart that beats beneath the golden girdle is the same that melted with pity and overflowed with love here. The hands that bear the seven stars are those that were pierced with nails. The eyes that flash fire are those that dropped tears at a grave and over Jerusalem. The lips from which issues the sharp sword are the same which said, 'I will give you rest.' He has carried all His love, His gentleness, His sympathy, into the blaze of Deity, and in His glory is still our brother.

III. His gracious words to John tell us this and more. Soothingly He laid the hand with the stars in it on the terrified Apostle, and gentle words, which he had heard Him say many a time on earth, came soothingly from the mouth from which the sword proceeded. How the calming graciousness rises into majesty! ‘I am the first and the last.’ That is a Divine prerogative [Isa. 44:6]. The glorified Christ claims to have been before all creatures, and to be the end to which all tend.

Verse 18 should be more closely connected with the preceding than in Authorized Version. The sentence runs on unbroken, ‘and the Living one,’ which is equivalent to the claim to possess life in Himself [John v. 26], on which follows in majestic continuity, ‘and I became dead’-pointing to the mystery of the Lord of life entering into the conditions of humanity, and stooping to taste of death-’and, behold, I am alive for evermore’-the transient eclipse of the grave is followed by glorious life for ever-’ and I have the keys of death and of Hades’-having authority over that dark prison-house, and opening and shutting its gates as I will.

Mark how, in these solemn words, the threefold state of the eternal Word is set forth, in His pre-incarnate fullness of Divine life, in His submission to death, in His resurrection, and in His ascended glory, as Lord of life and death, and of all worlds. Does our faith grasp all these? We shall never understand His life and death on earth, unless we see before them the eternal dwelling of the Word with God, and after them the exaltation of His manhood to the throne of the universe.

The charge to the Apostle, which follows on this transcendent revelation, has two parts-the command to write his visions, and the explanation of the symbols of the stars and the candlesticks. As to the former, we need only note that it extends to the whole book, and that the three divisions of ‘what thou seest,’ ‘the things which are,’ and ‘the things which shall be hereafter,’ may refer, respectively, to the vision in this chapter, the letters to the seven churches, and the subsequent prophetic part of the book.

As to the explanation of the symbols, stars are always, in Scripture, emblems of authority, and here they are clearly so. But there is great difference of opinion as to the meaning of the 'angels,' which are variously taken as being guardian angels of each church, or the presiding officers of these, or ideal figures representing each church in its collective aspect. It is impossible to enter on the discussion of these views here, and we can only say that, in our judgment, the opinion that the angels are the bishops of the churches is the most probable. If so, the fact that they are addressed as representing the churches, responsible for and sharing in their spiritual condition, suggests very solemn thoughts as to the weight laid on every one who sustains an analogous position, and the inseparable connection between th« spiritual condition of pastor and people.

The seven candlesticks are the seven churches. The formal unity of the ancient church, represented by the one candlestick with its seven branches, is exchanged for the real unity which arises from the presence of Christ in the midst. The old candlestick is at the bottom of the Mediterranean. The unity of the Church does not depend on compression into one organization, but on all its parts being clustered around Jesus.

The emblem of the candlestick, or lamp-holder, may suggest lessons as to the Church's function. Each church should be light. That light must be derived. There is only one unkindled and unfed light-that of Jesus Christ. Of the rest of us it has to be said, ' He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.' Each church should be, as it were, a clustered light, like those rings of iron, pierced with many little holes, from each of which a tiny jet of gas comes, which, running all together, make one steady lustre. So we should each be content to blend our little twinkle in the common light.

6) Revelation 1:18

Revelation

THE LIVING ONE WHO BECAME DEAD

Rev. 1:18.

If we had been in ‘the isle which is called Patmos’ when John saw the glorified Lord, and heard these majestic words from His mouth, we should probably have seen nothing but the sunlight glinting on the water, and heard only the wave breaking on the shore. The Apostle tells us that he ‘was in the Spirit’; that is, in a state in which sense is lulled to sleep and the inner man made aware of supersensual realities. The communication was none the less real because it was not perceived by the outward eye or ear. It was not born in, though it was perceived by, the Apostle’s spirit. We must hold fast by the objective reality of the communication, which is not in the slightest degree affected by the assumption that sense had no part in it.

Further what John once saw always is; the vision was a transient revelation of a permanent reality. The snowy summits are there, behind the cloud-wrack that hides them, as truly as they were when the sunshine gleamed on their peaks. The veil has fallen again, but all behind it is as it was. So this revelation, both in regard of the magnificent symbolic image imprinted on the Apostle’s consciousness, and in regard of the words which he reports to us as impressed upon him by Christ Himself, is meant for us just as it was for him, or for those to whom it was originally transmitted. ‘He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.’ And as we meditate upon this proclamation by the kingly Christ Himself of His own style and titles, I think we shall best gain its full sublimity and force if we simply take the words, clause by clause, as they stand in the text.

I. First, then, the royal Christ proclaims His absolute life.

Observe that, as the Revised Version will show those who use it, there is a much closer connection between the words of our text and those of the preceding verse than our Authorized Version gives. We must strike out that intrusive and wholly needless supplement,’ I am,’ and read the sentence unbrokenly: ‘I am the first, and the last and the living One.’

Now that close connection of clauses in itself suggests that this expression, ‘the Living One,’ means something more than the mere declaration that He was alive. That follows appropriately, as we shall see, in the last clause of the verse, which cannot be cleared from the charge of tautology, unless we attach a far deeper meaning than the mere declaration of life to this first solemn clause. What can stand worthily by the side of these majestic words, ‘I am the first and the last’? These claim a Divine attribute and are a direct quotation from ancient prophecy, where they are spoken as by the great Jehovah of the old covenant, and appear in a connection which makes any tampering with them the more impossible. For there follow upon them the great words, ‘and beside Me there is no God.’ But this royal Christ from the heavens puts out an unpresumptuous hand, and draws to Himself, as properly belonging to Him, the very style and signature of the Divine nature, ‘I am the first’-before all creatural being, ‘and the last,’ as He to whom it all tends-its goal and aim. And therefore I say that this connection of clauses, apart altogether from other consideration, absolutely forbids our taking this great word, ‘the Living One,’ as meaning less than the similar lofty and profound signification. It means, as I believe, exactly what Jesus Christ meant when, in the hearing of this same Apostle, He said upon earth, ‘As the Father hath life in Himself so hath He given’- strange paradox-’ so hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself.’ A life which, considered in contrast with all the life of creatures, is underived, independent, self-feeding, and, considered in contrast with the life of the Father with whom that Son stands in ineffable and unbroken union, is bestowed. It is a paradox, I know, but until we assume that we have sounded all the depths and climbed all the heights, and gone round the boundless boundaries of the circumference of that Divine nature, we have no business to say that it is impossible. And this, as I take it, is what the great words that echoed from Heaven in the Apostle’s hearing upon Patmos meant-the claim by the glorified Christ to possess absolute fontal life, and to be the Source of all creation, ‘in whom was life.’ He was not only ‘the Living One,’ but, as Himself has said, He was ‘the Life.’ And so He was the agent of all creation, as Scripture teaches us.

Now I am not going to dwell upon this great thought, but I simply wish, in one sentence, to leave with you my own earnest conviction that it is the teaching of all Scripture, that it is distinctly the teaching of Christ Himself when on earth; that it is repeated in a real revelation from Himself to the recipient seer in this vision before us, that it is fundamental to all true understanding of Christ’s person and work, since none of His acts on earth shine in their full lustre of beauty unless the thought of His pre-incarnate and essential life is held fast to heighten all the marvels of His condescension, and to invest with power all the sweetness of His pity. ‘I am the first, and the last, and the Living One.’

II. Secondly, the royal Christ proclaims His submission to death.

The language of the original is, perhaps, scarcely capable of smooth transference into English, but it is to be held fast notwithstanding, for what is said is not ‘I was dead,’ as describing a past condition, but ‘I became dead,’ as describing a past act. There is all the difference between these two, and avoidance of awkwardness is dearly purchased by obliteration of the solemn teaching of that profound word ‘ became.’

I need not dwell upon this at any length, but I suggest to you one or two plain considerations. Such a statement implies our Lord’s assumption of flesh. The only possibility of death, for ‘ the Living One,’ lies in His enwrapping Himself with that which can die. As you might put a piece of asbestos into a twist of cotton wool, over which the flame could have power, or as a sun might plunge into thick envelopes of darkness, so this eternal, absolute Life gathered to itself by voluntary accretion the surrounding which was capable of mortality. It is very significant that the same word which the seer in Patmos employs to describe the Lord’s submission to death is the word which, in his character of evangelist, he employs to describe the same Lord’s incarnation: ‘The Word became flesh,’ and so the Life ‘became dead.’ And this expression implies, too, another thing, on which I need not dwell, because I was touching on it in a previous sermon, and that is the entirely voluntary character of our Lord’s submission to the great law of mortality. He ‘became ‘ dead, and it was His act that He became so.

Thus we are brought into the presence of the most stupendous fact in the world’s history. Brethren, as I said that the firm grasp of the other truth of Christ’s absolute life was fundamental to all understanding of His earthly career, so I say that this fundamental truth of His voluntarily becoming dead is fundamental to all understanding of His Cross. Without that thought His death becomes mere surplusage, in so far as His power over men is concerned. With it, what adoration can be too lowly, what gratitude can be disproportionate? He arrays Himself in that which can die, as if the sun plunged into the shadow of eclipse. Let us bow before that mystery of

Divine love, the death of the Lord of Life. The motive which impelled Him, the consequences which followed, are | not in view here. These are full of blessedness and of wonder, but we are now to concentrate our thoughts on the bare fact, and to find in it food for endless adoration and for perpetual praise.

But there is another consideration that I may suggest. The eternal Life became dead. Then the awful solitude-awful when we think of it for ourselves, awful when we stand by the bed, and feel so near, and yet so infinitely remote from the dear one that may be lying there-the awful solitude is solitary no longer. ‘All alone, so Heaven has willed, we die’; but as travelers are cheered on a solitary road when they see the footprints that they know belonged to loved and trusted ones who have trodden it before, that desolate loneliness is less lonely when we think that He became dead. He will come to the shrinking, single j soul as He joined Himself to the sad travelers on the I road to Emmaus, and ‘our hearts’ may burn within us, even in that last hour of their beating, if we can remember who has become dead and trodden the road before us.

III. The royal Christ proclaims His eternal life in glory.

‘Behold!’-as if calling attention to a wonder-’ I am alive for evermore.’ Again, I say, we have here a distinctly Divine prerogative claimed by the exalted Christ, as properly belonging to Himself. For that eternal life of which He speaks is by no means the communicated immortality which He imparts to them that in His love go down to death, but it is the inherent eternal life of the Divine nature.

But, mark, who is the ‘I’ that speaks? The seer has told us: ‘One like unto the Son of Man’-which title, whether it repeats the name which our Lord habitually used, or whether, as some persons suppose, it should be read ‘ a Son of Man,’ and merely declares that the vision of the glorified One was manlike, is equally relevant for my present purpose. For that is to ask you to mark that the ‘I’ of my text is the Divine human Jesus. The manhood is so intertwined with the Deity that the absolute life of the latter has, as it were, flowed over and glorified the former; and it is a Man who lays His hand upon the Divine prerogative, and says, ‘I live for evermore.’

Now why do I dwell upon thoughts like this? Not for the purpose merely of putting accurately what I believe to be the truth, but for the sake of opening out to you and to myself the infinite treasures of consolation and strength which lie in that thought that He who 'is alive for evermore' is not merely Divine in His absolute life, but, as Son of Man, lives for ever. And so,' because I live, ye shall live also.' We cannot die as long as Christ is alive. And if we knit our hearts to Him, the Divine glory which flows over His Manhood will trickle down to ours, and we, too, though by derivation, shall possess as immortal - and, in its measure, as glorious-a life as that of the Brother who reigns in Heaven, the Man Christ Jesus.

His resurrection is not only the demonstration of what manhood is capable and so, as I believe, the one irrefragable and all-satisfying proof of immortality, but it is also the actual source of that immortal life to all of us, if we will trust ourselves to Him. For it is only because 'He both died and rose and revived' that He, in the truest and properest sense, becomes the gift of life to us men. The alabaster box was broken, and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment. Christ's death is the world's life. Christ's resurrection is the pledge and the source of eternal life for us.

IV. And so, lastly, the royal Christ proclaims His authority over the dim regions of the dead.

Much to be regretted are two things in our Authorized Version's rendering of the final words of our text. One is the order in which, following an inferior reading, it has placed the two things specified. And the other is that deplorable mistranslation, as it has come to be, of the word hades by the word 'hell.' The true original does not read 'hell and death,' but 'death and hades,' the dim unseen regions in which all the dead, whatsoever their condition may be, are gathered. The hades of the New Testament includes the paradise into which the penitent thief was promised entrance, as well as the Gehenna which threatened to open for the impenitent.

Here it is figured as being a great gloomy fortress, with bars and gates and locks, of which that' shadow feared of man' is the warder, and keeps the portals. But he does not keep the keys. The kingly Christ has these in His own hand. So, brethren, He has authority to open and to shut; and death is not merely a terror nor is it altogether accounted for, when we say either that it is the fruit of sin, or that it is the result of physical laws. For behind the laws is the will-the will of the loving Christ. It is His hand that opens the dark door, and they who listen aright may hear Him say, when He does it,' Come! My people; enter thou into thy chamber until these calamities be over past.' 'He openeth, and no man shutteth; He shutteth, and no man openeth.' So is not the terror gone; and 'the raven plumes of that darkness smoothed until it smiles'?

If we believe that He has the keys, how shall we dread when ourselves or our dear ones have to enter into the portal? There are two gates to the prison house, and when the one that looks earthwards opens, the other, that gives on the heavens, opens too, and the prison becomes a thoroughfare, and the light shines through the short tunnel even to the hither side.

Because He has the keys, He will not leave His holy ones in the fetters. And for ourselves, and for our dearest, we have the right to think that the darkness is so short as to be but like an imperceptible wink of the eye; and ere we know that we have passed into it, we shall have passed out.

'This is the gate of the Lord, into which the righteous shall enter.' And it may be with us as it was with the Apostle who was awakened out of his sleep by the angel-only we shall be awakened out of ours by the angel's Master-and who did not come to himself, and know that he had been delivered, until he had passed through the iron gate 'that opened to him of its own accord'; and then, bewildered, he recovered himself when he found that, with the morning breaking over his head, he stood, delivered, in the city.

7) Revelation 2:1

Revelation

THE SEVEN STARS AND THE SEVEN CANDLESTICKS

Rev. 2:1

It is one of the obligations which we owe to hostile criticism that we have been forced to recognize with great clearness the wide difference between the representation of Christ in John’s Gospel and that in the Apocalypse. That there is such a contrast is unquestionable. The Prince of all the kings of the earth, going forth conquering and to conquer, strikes one at once as being unlike the Christ whom the Evangelist painted weeping at the grave of Lazarus. We can afford to recognize the fact, though we demur to the inference that both representations cannot have proceeded from one pen. Surely that is not a necessary conclusion unless the two pictures are contradictory. Does the variety amount to discordance? Unless it does, the variety casts no shadow of suspicion on the common authorship. I, for my part, see no inconsistency in them, and thankfully accept both as completing each other.

This grand vision, which forms the introduction to the whole Book of the Apocalypse, gives us indeed the Lord Jesus clothed with majesty and wielding supreme power, but it also shows us the old love and tenderness. It was the old voice which fell on John’s ear, in words heard from Him before, ‘Fear not.’ It was the same hand as he had often clasped that was lovingly laid upon him to strengthen him. The assurance which He gives His Apostle declares at once the change in the circumstances of His Being, and in the functions which He discharges, and the substantial identity of His Being through all the changes: ‘I am the first, and the last. ... I am the Living One, who was dead, and behold I am alive for evermore.’ This vision and the whole book calls to us, ‘ Behold the Lion of the Tribe of Judah’; and when we look, ‘Lo, in the midst of the throne, stands a Lamb as it had been slain’ ‘the well-known meek and patient Jesus, the suffering Redeemer ‘ the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world.’

Still further, this vision is the natural introduction to all that follows, and indeed defines the main purpose of the whole book, inasmuch as it shows us Christ sustaining, directing, dwelling, in His Churches. We are thus led to expect that the remainder of the prophecy shall have the Church of Christ for its chief subject, and that the politics of the world, and the mutations of nations, shall come into view mainly in their bearing upon that.

The words of our text, then, which resumes the principal emblem of the preceding vision, are meant to set forth permanent truths in regard to Christ’s Churches, His relation to them, and theirs to the world, which I desire to bring to your thoughts now. They speak to us of the Churches and their servants, of the Churches and their work, of the Churches and their Lord.

I. We have in the symbol important truths concerning the Churches and their servants.

The seven stars are the angels of the seven Churches. Now I need not spend time in enumerating all the strange and mystical interpretations which have been given to these angels of the Churches. I see no need for taking them to have been anything but men; the recognized heads and representatives of the respective communities. The word ‘angel’ means messenger. Those superhuman beings who are usually designated by it are so called, not to describe their nature, but their function. They are ‘God’s messengers,’ and their name moans only that. Then the word is certainly used, both in its Hebrew and Greek forms, in reference to men. It is applied to priests, and even in one passage, as it would appear, to an officer of the synagogue. If here we find that each Church had its angel, who had a letter addressed to him, who is spoken to in words of rebuke and exhortation, who could sin and repent, who could be persecuted and die, who could fall into heresies and be perfected by suffering, it seems to me a violent and unnecessary hypothesis that a superhuman being is in question. And the name by which he is called need not imply more than his function, that of being the messenger and representative of the Church.

Believing this as the more probable meaning of the phrase, I see in the relations between these men and the little communities to which they belonged an example of what should be found existing between all congregations of faithful men and the officers whom they have chosen, be the form of their polity what it may. There are certain broad principles which must underlie all Christian organizations, and are incomparably more important than the details of Church government.

Note then, first, that the messengers are rulers. They are described in a double manner by a name which expresses subordination, and by a figure which expresses authority. I need not do more than remind you that throughout Scripture, from the time when Balaam beheld from afar the star that should come out of Jacob and the sceptre that should rise out of Israel, that has been the symbol for rulers. It is so notably in this Book of Revelation. Whatever other ideas, then, are connected with its use here, this leading one of authority must not be lost sight of.

But this double representation of these persons as being in one aspect servants and in another rulers, perfectly embodies the very essential characteristic of all office and power in Christ's Church. It is a repetition in pictorial form of the great principle, so sadly forgotten, which He gave when He said, 'He that is greatest among you, let him be your servant.' The higher are exalted that they may serve the lower. Dignity and authority mean liberty for more and more self -forgetting work. Power binds its possessor to toil. Wisdom is stored in one, that from him it may flow to the foolish; strength is given that by its holder feeble hands may be stayed. Noblesse oblige. The King Himself has obeyed the law. 'Jesus, knowing the Father had given all things into His hands, took a towel, and girded Himself.' We are redeemed because He came to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many. He is among us 'as He that serveth.' God Himself has obeyed the law. He is above all that He may bless all. He, the highest, stoops the most deeply. His dominion is built on love, and stands in giving. And that law which makes the throne of God the refuge of all the weak, and the treasury of all the poor, is given for our guidance in our humble measure. Wheresoever Christian men think more of themselves and of their dignity than of their brethren and their work; wheresoever gifts are hoarded selfishly or selfishly squandered; wheresoever the accidents of authority, its baubles and signature, its worldly consequences, and its pride of place, bulk larger in its possessors' eyes than its solemn obligations; there the law is broken, and the heathen devilish notion of rule lays waste the Church of God.

The true idea is not certain to be held, nor its tempting counterfeit to be avoided, by any specific form of organization. Wherever there are offices, there will be danger of officialism. Where there are none that will not drive out selfishness. Quakerism and Episcopacy, with every form of Church government that lies between, are in danger from the same source our forgetfulness that in Christ's kingdom to rule is to serve. All Churches have shown that their messengers could become 'lords over God's heritage.' The true spirit of Christ's servants is not secured by any theory about the appointment or the duties of the servants, but only by fellowship and sympathy with the Master who helps us all, and cares nothing for any glory which He cannot share with His disciples.

But to be servant of all does not mean to do the bidding of all. The service which imitates Christ is helpfulness, not subjection. Neither the Church is to lord it over the messenger, nor the messenger over the Church. The true bond is broken by official claims of dominion; it is broken just as much by popular claims to control. All alike are to stand free from all men in independence of will, thought, and action; shaping their lives and moulding their beliefs, according to Christ's will and Christ's word; and repelling all coercion, from whatsoever quarter it comes. All alike are by love to serve one another; counting every possession, material, intellectual, and spiritual, as given for the general good. The one guiding principle is, 'He that is chiefest among you, let him be your servant,' and the other, which guards this from misconstruction and abuse from either side, 'One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren.'

Another point to be observed in this symbol is that the messengers and the churches have at bottom the same work to do.

Stars shine, so do lamps. Light comes from both, in different fashion indeed, and of a different quality, but still both are lights. These are in the Savior's hands, those are by His side; but each is meant to stream out rays of brightness over a dark night. So, essentially, all Christian men have the same work to do. The ways of doing it differ, but the thing done is one. Whatever be the difference between those who hold offices in God's Church and the bulk of their brethren, there is no difference here. The loftiest gifts, the most conspicuous position, the closest approach to the central sun, have no other purpose than that which the lowliest powers, in the obscurest corner, are meant to subserve. The one distributing Spirit divides to each man severally as He will; and whether He endows him with star like gifts, which soar above and blaze over half the world with lustre that lives through the centuries, or whether He sets him in some cottage window to send out a tiny cone of light, that pierces a little way into the night for an hour or two, and then is quenched it is all one. The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man for the same purpose to do good with. And we have all one office and function to be discharged by each in his own fashion namely, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus.

Again, observe, the Churches and their messengers are alike in their religious condition and character. The successive letters treat his strength or weakness, his fervor or coldness, his sin or victory over evil, as being theirs. He represents them completely. And that representative character seems to me to be the only reason worth considering for supposing that these angels are superhuman beings, inasmuch as it seems that the identification is almost too entire to be applicable to the relation of any man to the community. But, perhaps, if we think of the facts which every day's experience shows us, we may see even in this solemn paralleling of the spiritual state of the Churches and of their servants, a strong reason for holding to our interpretation, as well as a very serious piece of warning and exhortation for us all.

For is it not true that the religious condition of a Church, and that of its leaders, teachers, pastors, ever tend to the same, as that of the level of water in two connected vessels? There is such a constant interaction and reciprocal influence that uniformity results. Either a living teacher will, by God's grace, quicken a languid Church, or a languid Church will, with the devil's help, stifle the life of the teacher. Take two balls of iron, one red hot, and one cold, and put them down beside each other. How many degrees of difference between them, after half an hour, will your thermometer show? Thank God for the many instances in which one glowing soul, all aflame with love of God, has sufficed to kindle a whole heap of dead matter, and send it leaping skyward in ruddy brightness! Alas! for the many instances in which the wet, green wood has been too strong for the little spark, and has not only obstinately resisted, but has ignominiously quenched its ineffectual fire 1 Thank God, that when His Church lives on a high level of devotion, it has never wanted for single souls who have towered even above that height, and have been elevated by it, as the snowy Alps spring not from the flats of Holland, but from the high central plateau of Europe. Alas! for the leaders who have rayed out formalism, and have chilled down the Church to their own coldness, and stiffened to their own deadness!

Let us, then, not bandy reproaches from pulpit to pew, and from pew to pulpit; but remembering that the spiritual character of each helps to determine the condition of the whole, and the general condition of the body determines the vigor of each part, let us go together to God with acknowledgments of common faithlessness, and of our individual share in it, and let us ask Him to quicken His Church, that it may yield messengers who in their turn shall be the helpers of His people and the glory of God.

II. The text brings before us the Churches and their work.

Of course, you understand that what the Apostle saw was not seven candlesticks, which are a modern piece of furniture, but seven lamps. There is a distinct reference in this, as in all the symbols of the Apocalypse, to the Old Testament. We know that in the Jewish Temple there stood, as an emblem of Israel's work in the world, the great seven-branched candlestick, burning for ever before the veil and beyond the altar. The difference between the two symbols is as obvious as their resemblance. The ancient lamp had all the seven bowls springing from a single stem.

It was a formal unity. The New Testament seer saw not one lamp with seven arms rising from one pillar, but seven distinct lamps the emblems of a unity which was not formal, but real. They were one in their perfect manifoldness, because of Him who walked in the midst. In which difference lies a representation of one great element in the superiority of the Church over Israel, that for the hard material oneness of the separated nation there has come the true spiritual oneness of the Churches of the saints; one not because of any external connection, but by reason that Christ is in them. The seven-branched lamp lies at the bottom of the Tiber. There let it lie. "We have a better thing, in these manifold lights, which stand before the Throne of the New Temple, and blend into one, because lighted from one Source, fed by one Spirit, tended and watched by one Lord.

But looking a little more closely at this symbol, it suggests to us some needful thoughts as to the position and work of the Church, which is set forth as being light, derived light, clustered light.

The Church is to be light . That familiar image, which applies, as we have seen, to stars and lamps alike, lends itself naturally to point many an important lesson as to what we have to do, and how we ought to do it. Think, for instance, how spontaneously light streams forth. ‘Light is light, which circulates.’ The substance which is lit cannot but shine; and if we have any real possession of the truth, we cannot but impart it; and if we have any real illumination from the Lord, who is the light, we cannot but give it forth. There is much good done in the world by direct, conscious effort. There is perhaps more done by spontaneous, unconscious shining, by the involuntary influence of character, than by the lip or the pen. We need not balance the one form of usefulness against the other. We need both. But, Christian men and women, do you remember that from you a holy impression revealing Jesus ought to flow as constantly, as spontaneously, as light from the sun! Our lives should be like the costly box of fragrant ointment which that penitent, loving woman lavished on her Lord, the sweet, penetrating, subtle odour of which stole through all the air till the house was filled. So His name, the revelation of His love, the resemblance to His character, should breathe forth from our whole being; and whether we think of it or no, we should be unto God a sweet savour of Christ.

Then think again how silent and gentle, though so mighty, is the action of the light. Morning by morning God’s great mercy of sunrise steals upon a darkened world in still, slow, self-impartation; and the light which has a force that has carried it across gulfs of space that the imagination staggers in trying to conceive, yet falls so gently that it does not move the petals of the sleeping flowers, nor hurt the lids of an infant’s eyes, nor displace a grain of dust. Its work is mighty, and done without ‘speech or language.’ Its force is gigantic, but, like its Author, its gentleness makes its dependents great. So should we live and work, clothing all our power in tenderness, doing our work in quietness, disturbing nothing but the darkness, and with silent increase of beneficent power filling and flooding the dark earth with healing beams.

Then think again that heaven’s light is itself invisible, and, revealing all things, reveals not itself. The source you can see, but not the beams. So we are to shine, not showing ourselves but our Master not coveting fame or conspicuousness glad if, like one to whom He bore testimony that he was a light, it be said of us to all that ask who we are, ‘He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light,’ and rejoicing without stint or reservation that for us, as for John the Baptist, the necessity is, that we must decrease and Christ must increase.

We may gather from this emblem in the text the further lesson that the Church's light is derived light. Two things are needed for the burning of a lamp: that it should be lit, and that it should be fed. In both respects the light with which we shine is derived. We are not suns, we are moons; reflected, not self-originated is all our radiance. That is true in all senses of the figure: it is truest in the highest. It is true about all in every man which is of the nature of light. Christ is the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. Whatsoever beam of wisdom, whatsoever ray of purity, whatsoever sunshine of gladness has ever been in any human spirit, from Him it came, who is the Light and Life of men: from Him it came, who brings to us in form fitted for our eyes, that otherwise inaccessible light of God in which alone we see light. And as for the more special work of the Church [which chiefly concerns us now], the testimony of Christ to John, which I have just quoted in another connection, gives us the principle which is true about all. 'He was not that light,' the Evangelist said of John, denying that in him was original and native radiance. 'He was a lamp burning 'where the idea is possibly rather 'lighted' or made to burn and therefore shining, and in whose light men could rejoice for a little while. A derived and transient light is all that any man can be. In ourselves we are darkness, and only as we hold fellowship with Him do we become capable of giving forth any rays of light. The condition of all our brightness is that Christ shall give us light. He is the source, we are but reservoirs. He the fountain, we only cisterns. He must walk amidst the candlesticks, or they will never shine. He must hold the stars in His hand, or they will drop from their places and dwindle into darkness. Therefore our power for service lies in reception; and if we are to live for Christ, we must live in Christ.

But there is still another requisite for the shining of the light. The prophet Zechariah once saw in vision the great Temple lamp and by its side two olive trees from which golden oil flowed through golden pipes to the central light. And when he expressed his ignorance of the meaning of the vision, this was the interpretation by the angel who talked with him: 'Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts.' The lamp that burns must be kept fed with oil. Throughout the Old Testament the soft, gracious influences of God’s Spirit are symbolized by oil, with which therefore prophets, priests, and kings were designated to their office. Hence the Messiah in prophecy says, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me.’ Thus the lamp too must be fed, the soul which is to give forth the light of Christ must first of all have been kindled by Him, and then must constantly be supplied with the grace and gift of His Divine Spirit. Solemn lessons, my friends, gather round that thought. What became of those who had lamps without oil? Their lamps had gone out, and their end was darkness. Oh! let us beware lest by any sloth and sin we choke the golden pipes, through which there steals into our tiny lamps the soft flow of that Divine oil which alone can keep up the flame. The wick, untrimmed and unfed, may burn for a little while, but it soon chars, and smokes, and goes out at last in foul savour offensive to God and man. Take care lest you resist the Holy Spirit of God. Let your loins be girt and your lamps burning; and that they may be, give heed that the light caught from Jesus be fed by the pure oil which alone can save it from extinction.

Again, the text sets before us the Church’s light as blended or clustered light.

Each of these little communities is represented by one lamp. And that one light is composed of the united brightness of all the individuals who constitute the community. They are to have a character, an influence, a work as a society, not merely as individuals. There is to be co-operation in service, there is to be mingling of powers, there is to be subordination of individuals to the whole, and each separate man and his work is to be gladly merged in the radiance that issues from the community. A Church is not to be merely a multitude of separate points of brilliancy, but the separate points are to coalesce into one great orbed brightness. You know these lights which we have seen in public places, where you have a ring pierced with a hundred tiny holes, from each of which bursts a separate flame; but when all are lit, they run into one brilliant circle, and lose their separateness in the rounded completeness of the blended blaze. That is like what Christ’s Church ought to be. We each by our own personal contact with Him, by our individual communion with our Saviour, become light in the Lord, and yet we joyfully blend with our brethren, and, fused into one, give forth our mingled light. We unite our voices to theirs, knowing that all are needed to send out the Church’s choral witness and to hymn the Church’s full-toned praise. The lips of the multitude thunder out harmony, before which the melody of the richest and sweetest single voice is thin and poor.

Union of heart, union of effort is commended to us by this symbol of our text. The great law is, work together if you would work with strength. To separate ourselves from our brethren is to lose power. Why, half-dead brands heaped close will kindle one another, and flame will sparkle beneath the film of white ashes on their edges. Fling them apart and they go out. Rake them together and they glow. Let us try not to be little feeble tapers, stuck in separate sockets, and each twinkling struggling rays over some inch or so of space; but draw near to our brethren, and be workers together with them, that there may rise a glorious flame from our summed and collective brightness which shall be a guide and hospitable call to many a wandering and weary spirit.

III. Finally, the text shows us the Churches and their Lord.

He it is who holds the stars in His right hand, and walks among the candlesticks. That strong grasp of that mighty hand for the word in the original conveys more than ‘ holds,’ it implies a tight and powerful grip sustains and guards His servants, whose tasks need special grace, and whose position exposes them to special dangers. They may be of good cheer, for none shall pluck them out of His hand. That strengthening and watchful presence moves among His Churches, and is active on their behalf. The symbols are but the pictorial equivalent of His own parting promise, ‘Lo, I am with you always!’

That presence is a plain literal fact, however feebly we lay hold of it. It is not to be watered down into a strong expression for the abiding influence of Christ’s teaching or example, nor even to mean the constant benefits which flow to us from His work, nor the presence of His loving thoughts with us. All these things are true and blessed, but none of them, nor all of them taken together, reach to the height of this great promise. He is absent in body, He is present in person. Talk of a ‘real presence’! This is the real presence: ‘I will not leave you orphans, I will come unto you.’ Through all the ages, in every land wheresoever two or three are gathered in His name, there is He in the midst of them. The presence of Christ with His Church is analogous to the Divine presence in the material universe. As in it, the presence of God is the condition of all life; and if He were not here, there were no beings and no ‘here’: so in the Church, Christ’s presence constitutes and sustains it, and without Him it would cease. So St. Augustine says, ‘Where Christ, there the Church.’

I know what wild absurdities these statements appear to many men who have no faith in the true Divinity of our Lord. Of course the belief of His perpetual presence with His people implies the belief that He possesses Divine attributes. This mysterious Person, who lived among men the exemplar of all humility, departing, leaves a promise which is either the very acme of insane arrogance, or comes from the consciousness of indwelling Divinity. He declares that, from generation to generation. He will in very deed be with all who in every place call upon His name. Who does He thereby claim to be?

For what purpose is He there with His Churches?

The text assures us that it is to hold up and to bless. His unwearied hand sustains, His unceasing activity moves among them. But beyond these purposes, or rather included in them, the vision of which the text is the interpretation brings into great prominence the thought that He is with us to observe, to judge, and, if need be, to punish. Mark how almost all the attributes of that majestic figure suggest such thoughts. The eyes like a flame of fire, the feet glowing as if in a furnace, hot to burn, heavy to tread down all evil where He walks, from the lips a two-edged sword to smite, and, thank God, to heal, the countenance as the sun shineth in his strength this is the Lord of the Churches. Yes, and this is the same loving and forbearing Lord whom the Apostle had learned to trust on earth, and found again revealed from heaven.

Brethren! He dwells with us; He guards and protects His Churches to the end, else they perish. He rules all the commotions of earth, all the errors of His people, all the delusions of lies, and overrules them all for the strengthening and purifying of His Church. But He dwells with us likewise as the watchful observer, out of these eyes of flame, of all our faults; as the merciful destroyer, with the sword of His mouth, of every error and every sin. Thank God for the chastising presence of Christ. He loves us too well not to smite us when we need it. He will not be so cruelly kind, so foolishly fond, as in anywise to suffer Bin upon us. Better the eye of fire than the averted face. Better the sharp sword than His holding His peace as He did with Caiaphas and Herod. Better the Judge in our midst, though we should have to fall at His feet as dead, than that He should say, ‘I will go and return to My place.’ Pray Him not to depart, and submit to the merciful rebukes and effectual chastisement which prove that, for all our unworthiness, He loves us still, and has not cast us away from His presence.

Nor let us forget how much of hope and encouragement lies in the examples, which these seven Churches afford, of His long-suffering patience. That presence was granted to them all, the best and the worst the decaying love of Ephesus, the licentious heresies of Pergamos and Thyatira, the all but total deadness of Sardis, and the self-satisfied indifference of Laodicea, concerning which even He could say nothing that was good. All had Him with them as really as the faithful Smyrna and the steadfast Philadelphia. We have no right to say with how much of theoretical error and practical sin the lingering presence of that patient pitying Lord may consist. For others our duty is the widest charity for ourselves the most careful watchfulness.

For these seven Churches teach us another lesson the possibility of quenched lamps and ruined shrines. Ephesus and her sister communities, planted by Paul, taught by John, loved and upheld by the Lord, warned and scourged by Him where are they now ? Broken columns and roofless walls remain; and where Christ's name was praised, now the minaret rises by the side of the mosque, and daily echoes the Christless proclamation, 'There is no God but God, and Mahomet is His prophet.' 'The grace of God,' says Luther somewhere, 'is like a flying summer shower.' It has fallen upon more than one land, and passed on. Judaea had it, and lies barren and dry. These Asiatic coasts had it and flung it away. Let us receive it, and hold it fast, lest our greater light should bring greater condemnation, and here, too, the candlestick should be removed out of its place.

Remember that solemn, strange legend which tells us that, on the night before Jerusalem fell, the guard of the Temple heard through the darkness a voice mighty and sad, saying, 'Let us depart,' and were aware as of the sound of many wings passing from out of the Holy Place; and on the morrow the iron heels of the Roman legionaries trod the marble pavement of the innermost shrine, and heathen eyes gazed upon the empty place where the glory of the God of Israel should have dwelt, and a torch, flung by an unknown hand, burned with fire the holy and beautiful house where He had promised to put His name for ever. And let us learn the lesson, and hold fast by that Lord whose blood has purchased, and whose presence preserves through all the unworthiness and the lapses of men, that Church against which the gates of hell shall not prevail.

8) Revelation 2:7

Revelation

I. - THE VICTOR'S LIFE-FOOD

Rev. 2:7

The sevenfold promises which conclude the seven letters to the Asiatic Churches, of which this is the first, are in substance one. We may, indeed, say that the inmost moaning of them all is the gift of Christ Himself. But the diamond flashes variously coloured lights according to the angle at which it is held, and breaks into red and green and white. The one great thought may be looked at from different points of view, and sparkle into diversely splendid rays. The reality is single and simple, but so great that our best way of approximating to the apprehension of that which we shall never comprehend till we possess it is to blend various conceptions and metaphors drawn from different sources,

I have a strong conviction that the Christianity of this day suffers, intellectually and practically, from its comparative neglect of the teaching of the New Testament as to the future life. We hear and think a great deal less about it than was once the case and we are thereby deprived of a strong motive for action, and a sure comfort in sorrow. Some of us may, perhaps, be disposed to look with a little sense of lofty pity at the simple people who let the hope of heaven spur, or restrain, or console. But if there is a future life at all, and if the characteristic of it which most concerns us is that it is the reaping, in consequences, of the acts of the present, surely it cannot be such superior wisdom, as it sometimes pretends to be, to ignore it altogether; and perhaps the simplicity of the said people is more in accordance with the highest reason than is our attitude.

Be that as it may, believing, as I do, that the hope of immortality is meant to fill a very large place in the Christian life, and fearing, as I do, that it actually does fill but a very small one with many of us, I have thought that it might do us all good to turn to this wealth of linked promises and to consider them in succession, so as to bring our hearts for a little while into contact with the motive for brave fighting which does occupy so large a space in the New Testament, however it may fail to do so in our lives.

I. I ask you to look first at the Gift.

Now, of course, I need scarcely remind you that this first promise, in the last book of Scripture, goes back to the beginning, to the old story in Genesis about Paradise and the Tree of Life. We may distinguish between the substance of the promise and the highly metaphorical form into which it is here cast. The substance of the promise is the communication of life; the form is a poetic and imaginative and pregnant allusion to the story on the earliest pages of Revelation.

Let me deal first with the substance. Now it seems to me that if we are to pare down this word ‘ life ‘ to its merely physical sense of continuous existence, this is not a promise that a man’s heart leaps up at the hearing of. To anybody that will honestly think, and try to realize, in the imperfect fashion in which alone it is possible for us to realize it, that notion of an absolutely interminable continuance of being, its awfulness is far more than its blessedness, and it overwhelms a man. It seems to me that the ‘crown of life,’ if life only means conscious existence, would be a crown of thorns indeed.

No, brethren, what our hearts crave, and what Christ’s heart gives, is not the mere bare, bald, continuance of conscious being. It is something far deeper than that. That is the substratum, of course; but it is only the substratum, and not until we let in upon this word, which is one of the key-words of Scripture, the full flood of light that comes to it from John’s Gospel, and its use on the Master’s lips there, do we begin to understand the meaning of this great promise. Just as we say of men who are sunk in gross animalism, or whose lives are devoted to trivial and transient aims, that theirs is not worth calling life, so we say that the only thing that deserves, and that in Scripture gets, the august name of ‘life,’ is a condition of existence in conscious union with, and possession of, God, who is manifested and communicated to mortals through Jesus Christ His Son. ‘In Him was life, and the life was manifested.’ Was that bare existence? And the life was not only manifested but communicated, and the essence of it is fellowship with God through Jesus Christ. The possession of ‘ the Spirit of life which was in Christ,’ and which in heaven will be perfectly communicated, will make men ‘free,’ as they never can be upon earth whilst implicated in the bodily life of this material world, ‘from the law of sin and death.’ The gift that Christ bestows on him that ‘overcometh’ is not only conscious existence, but existence derived from, and, so to speak, embraided with the life of God Himself, and therefore blessed.

For such a life, in union with God in Christ, is the only condition in which all a man's capacities find their fitting objects, and all his activity finds its appropriate sphere, and in which, therefore, to live is to be blessed, because the heart is united with the source and fountain of all blessedness. Here is the deepest depth of that promise of future blessedness. It is not mainly because of any changes, glorious as these must necessarily be, which follow upon the dropping away of flesh, and the transportation into the light that is above, that heaven is a place of blessedness, but it is because the saints that are there are joined to God, and into their recipient hearts there pours for ever the fullness of the Divine life. That makes the glory and the blessedness.

But let us remember that all which can come hereafter of that full and perfect life is but the continuance, the development, the increase, of that which already is possessed. Here it falls in drops; there in floods. Here it is filtered; there poured. Here, the plant, taken from its native climate and soil, puts forth some pale blossoms, and grows but to a stunted height; there, set in their deep native soil, and shone upon by a more fervent sun, and watered by more abundant warm rains and dews, 'they that 'on earth' were planted in the house of the Lord shall, transplanted, 'flourish in the courts of our God.' The life of the Christian soul on earth and of the Christian soul in heaven is continuous, and though there is a break to our consciousness looking from this side the break of death the reality is that without interruption, and without a turn, the road runs on in the same direction. We begin to live the life of heaven here, and they who can say, 'I was dead in trespasses and sins, but the life which I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God,' have already the germs of the furthest development in the heavens in their hearts.

Notice, for a moment, the form that this great promise assumes here. That is a very pregnant and significant reference to the Tree of Life in the paradise of God, The old story tells how the cherub with the flaming sword was set to guard the way to it. And that paradise upon earth faded and disappeared. But it reappears. ' Then comes a statelier Eden back to man,' for Jesus Christ is the restorer of all lost blessings; and the Divine purpose and ideal has not faded away amidst the clouds of the stormy day of earth's history, like the flush of morning from off the plains. Christ brings back the Eden, and quenches the flame of the fiery sword; and instead of the repellent cherub, there stands Himself with the merciful invitation upon His lips: ‘Come! Eat; and live for ever.’

There never was one lost good; what was shall live as before.

On the earth the broken arcs; in heaven the perfect round.’

Eden shall come back; and the paradise into which the victors go is richer and fuller, by all their conflict and their wounds, than ever could have been the simpler paradise of which souls innocent, because untried, could have been capable. So much for the gift of life.

II. Notice, secondly, the Giver.

This is a majestic utterance; worthy of coming from the majestic Figure portrayed in the first chapter of this book. In it Jesus Christ claims to be the Arbiter of men’s deserts and Giver of their rewards. That involves His judicial function, and therefore His Divine as well as human nature. I accept these words as truly His words. Of course, if you do not, my present remarks have no force for you; but if you do not, you ought to be very sure of your reasons for not doing so; and if you do, then I see not how any man who believes that Jesus Christ has said that He will give to all the multitude of faithful fighters, who have brought their shields out of the battle, and their swords undinted, the gift of life eternal, can be vindicated from the charge of taking too much upon him, except on the belief of His Divine nature.

But I observe, still further, that this great utterance of the Lord’s, paralleled in all the other six promises, in all of which He is represented as the bestower of the reward, whatever it may be, involves another thing, viz., the eternal continuance of Christ’s relation to men as the Revealer and Mediator of God. ‘I will give’ and that not only when the victor crosses the threshold and enters the Capitol of the heavens, but all through its ceaseless ages Christ is the Medium by which the Divine life passes into men. True, there is a sense in which He shall deliver up the kingdom to His Father, when the partial end of the present dispensation has come. But He is the Priest of mankind for ever; and for ever is His kingdom enduring. And through all the endless ages, which we have a right to hope we shall see, there will never come a point in which it will not remain as true as it is at this moment: ‘No man hath seen God at any time, nor can see Him; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him.’ Christ is for ever the Giver of life in the heavens as on earth.

Another thing is involved which I think also is often lost sight of. The Bible does not know anything about what people call ‘natural immortality. ‘Life here is not given to the infant once for all, and then expended through the years, but it is continually being bestowed. My belief is that no worm that creeps, nor angel that soars, nor any of the beings between, is alive for one instant except for the continual communication from the fountain of life, of the life that they live. And still more certainly is it true about the. future, that there all the blessedness and the existence, which is the substratum and condition of the blessedness, are only ours because, wavelet by wavelet, throbbing out as from a central fountain, there flows into the Redeemed a life communicated by Christ Himself. If I might so say were that continual bestowment to cease, then heaven, like the vision of a fairy tale, would fade away; and there would be nothing left where the glory had shone. ‘I will give’ through eternity.

III. Lastly, note the Recipients.

‘To him that overcometh.’ Now I need not say, in more than a sentence, that it seems to me that the fair interpretation of this promise, as of all the other references in Scripture to the future life, is that the reward is immediately consequent upon the cessation of the struggle. ‘To depart ‘ is ‘to be with Christ,’ and to be with Christ, in regard of a spirit which has passed from the bodily environment, is to be conscious of His presence, and lapt in His robe, feeling the warmth and the pressure of His heart. So I believe that Scripture teaches us that at one moment there may be the clash of battle, and the whiz of the arrows round one’s head, and next moment there may be the laurel-crowned quiet of the victor.

But that does not enter so much into our consideration now. We have, rather, here to think of just this one thing, that the gift is given to the victor because only the victor is capable of receiving it; that future life, interpreted as I have ventured to interpret it in this sermon, is no arbitrary bestowment that could be dealt all round miscellaneously to everybody, if the Giver chose so to give. Here on earth many gifts are bestowed upon men, and are neglected by them, and wasted like water spilled upon the ground; but this elixir of life is not poured out so. It is only poured into vessels that can take it in and hold it.

Our present struggle is meant to make us capable of the heavenly life. And that is I was going to say the only, but at all events incomparably the chiefest, of the thoughts which make life not only worth living, but great and solemn. Go into a mill, and in a quiet room, often detached from the main building, you will find the engine working, and seeming to do nothing but go up and down. But there is a shaft which goes through the wall and takes the power to the looms.

We are working here, and we are making the cloth that we shall have to own and say, 'Yes, it is my manufacture!' when we get yonder. According to our life to-day will be our destiny in the great tomorrow. Life is given to the victor, because the victor only is capable of possessing it.

But the victor can only conquer in one way. 'This,' said John, when he was not an apocalyptic seer, but a Christian teacher to the Churches of Asia, 'this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.' If we trust in Christ we shall get His power into our hearts, and if we get His power into our hearts, then 'we shall be more than conquerors through Him that loved us.' Christ gives life eternal, gives it here in germ and yonder in fullness. In its fullness only those who overcome are capable of receiving it. Those only who fight the good fight by His help overcome. Those only who trust in Him fight the good fight by His help. He gives to eat of the Tree of Life; He gives it to faith, but faith must be militant. He gives it to the conqueror, but the conqueror must win by faith in Him who overcame the world for us, who will help us to overcome the world by Him.

Help us, O our God, we beseech Thee; 'teach our hands to war, and our fingers to fight.' Give us grace to hold fast by the life which is in Jesus Christ; and living by Him the lives which we live in the flesh, may we be capable, by the discipline of earth's sorrows, of that rest and fuller 'life which remaineth for the people of God.'

9) Revelation 2:11

Revelation

II. THE VICTOR'S LIFE-CROWN

Rev. 2:11

Two of the seven Churches, viz., Smyrna, to which our text is addressed, and Philadelphia offered nothing, to the pure eyes of Christ, that needed rebuke. The same two and these only, were warned to expect persecution. The higher the tone of Christian life in the Church, the more likely it is to attract dislike and, if circumstances permit, hostility. Hence the whole gist of this letter is to encourage to steadfastness, even if the penalty is death.

That purpose determined at once the aspect of Christ which is presented in the beginning, and the aspect of future blessedness which is held forth at the close. The aspect of Christ is 'these things saith the First and the Last, which was dead and is alive'; a fitting thought to encourage the men who were to be called upon to die for Him. And, in like manner, the words of our text naturally knit themselves with the previous mention of death as the penalty of the Smyrneans' faithfulness.

Now this promise is sharply distinguished from those to the other Churches by two peculiarities: one, that it is merely negative, whilst all the rest are radiantly positive; the other, that there is no mention of our Lord in it, whilst in all the others He stands forth with His emphatic and majestic 'I will give'; 'I will write upon him My new Name'; 'I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God.' The first peculiarity may partially account for the second, because the Giver is naturally more prominent in a promise of positive gifts, than in one of a merely negative exemption. But another reason is to be found for the omission of the mention of our Lord in this promise. If you will refer to the verse immediately preceding my text, you will find the missing positive promise with the missing reference to Jesus Christ: ' I will give thee a crown of life.' So that we are naturally led to link together both these statements when taking account of the hopes that were held forth to animate the Christians of Smyrna in the prospect of persecution even to the death; and we have to consider them both in conjunction now. I think I shall best do so by simply asking you to look at these two things: the Christian motive contained in the victor’s immunity from a great evil, and the Christian motive contained in the victor’s possession of a great good. ‘He shall not be hurt of the second death.’ ‘I will give thee a crown of life.’

I. The Christian motive contained in the victor’s immunity from a great evil.

Now that solemn and thrilling expression ‘the second death’ is peculiar to this book of the Apocalypse. The name is peculiar; the thing is common to all the New Testament writers. Here it comes with especial appropriateness, in contrast with the physical death which was about to be inflicted upon some members of the Smyrnean Church. But beyond that there lies in the phrase a very solemn and universally applicable meaning. I do not feel, dear brethren that such a thing ought to be made matter of pulpit rhetoric. The bare vagueness of it seems to me to shake the heart a great deal more than any weakening expansion of it that we can give.

But yet, let me say one word. Then, behind that grim figure, the shadow feared of man that waits for all at some turn of their road, cloaked and shrouded, there rises a still grimmer and more awful form, ‘ if form it can be called which form hath none.’ There is something, at the back of physical death, which can lay its grip upon the soul that is already separated from the body; something running on the same lines somehow, and worthy to bear that name of terror and disintegration ‘the second death.’ What can it be? Not the cessation of conscious existence; that is never the meaning of death. But let us apply the key which opens so many of the locks of the New Testament sayings about the future that the true and deepest meaning of death is separation from Him who is the fountain of life, and in a very deep sense is the only life of the universe. Separation from God; that is death. What touches the surface of mere bodily life is but a faint shadow and parable, and the second death, like a second tier of mountains, rises behind and above it, sterner and colder than the lower hills of the foreground. What desolation, what unrest, what blank misgivings, what pealing off of capacities, faculties, opportunities, delights, may be involved in that solemn conception, we never can tell here God grant that we may never know! Like some sea-creature, cast high and dry on the beach, and gasping out its pained being, the men that are separated from God die whilst they live, and live a living death. The second is the comparative degree, of which the first is the positive.

Now note again that immunity from this solemn fate is no small part of the victor's blessedness. At first sight we feel as if the mere negative promise of my text stands on a lower level than what I have called the radiantly positive ones in the other letters; but it is worthy to stand beside these. Gather them together, and think of how manifold and glorious the dim suggestions which they make of felicity and progress are, and then set by the side of them this one of our text as worthy to stand there. To eat of the Tree of Life; to have power over the nations; to rule them with a rod of iron; to blaze with the brightness of the morning star; to eat of the hidden manna; to bear the new name known only to those who receive it; to have that name confessed before the Father and His angels; to be a pillar in the Temple of the Lord; to go no more out; and to sit with Christ on His throne: these are the positive promises, along with which this barely negative one is linked, and is worthy to be linked: 'He shall not be hurt of the second death.'

If this immunity from that fate is fit to stand in line with these glimpses of an inconceivable glory, how solemn must be the fate, and how real the danger of our falling into it I Brethren, in this day it has become unfashionable to speak of that future, especially of its sterner aspects. The dimness of the brightest revelations in the New Testament, the unwillingness to accept it as the source of certitude with regard to the future, the recoil from the stern severity of Divine retribution, the exaggerated and hideous guise in which that great truth was often presented in the past, the abounding worldliness of this day, many of its best tendencies and many of its worst ones concur in making some of us look with very little interest, and scarcely credence, at the solemn words of which the New Testament is full. But I, for my part, accept them; and I dare not but, in such proportion to the rest of revelation as seems to me to be right, bring them before you. I beseech you, recognize the solemn teaching that lies in this thought that this negative promise of immunity from the second death stands parallel with all these promises of felicity and blessedness.

Further, note that such immunity is regarded here as the direct outcome of the victor’s conduct and character. I have already pointed out the peculiarities marking our text. The omission of any reference to our Lord in it is accounted for, as suggested, by that reference occurring in the immediately preceding context, but it may also be regarded as suggesting when considered in contrast with the other promises, where He stands forward as the giver of heavenly blessedness that that future condition is to be regarded not only as retribution, which implies the notion of a judge, and a punitive or rewarding energy on his part, but also as being the necessary result of the earthly life that is lived; a harvest of which we sow the seeds here.

Transient deeds consolidate into permanent character. Beds of sandstone rock, thousands of feet thick, are the sediment dropped from vanished seas, or borne down by long dried-up rivers. The actions which we often so unthinkingly perform, whatever may be the width and the permanency of their effects external to us, react upon ourselves, and tend to make our permanent bent or twist or character. The chalk cliffs at Dover are the skeletons of millions upon millions of tiny organisms, and our little lives are built up by the recurrence of transient deeds, which leave their permanent marks upon us. They make character, and character determines position yonder. As said the Apostle, with tender sparingness, and yet with profound truth, ‘he went to his own place,’ wherever that was. The surroundings that he was fitted for came about him, and the company that he was fit for associated themselves with him. So in another part of this book where the same solemn expression, ‘the second death,’ is employed, we read, ‘These shall have their part in . . . the second death’: the lot that belongs to them. Character and conduct determine position. However small the lives here, they settle the far greater ones hereafter, just as a tiny wheel in a machine may, by cogs and other mechanical devices, transmit its motion to another wheel at a distance, many times its diameter. You move this end of a lever through an arc of an inch, and the other end will move through an arc of yards. The little life here determines the sweep of the great one that is lived yonder. The victor wears his past conduct and character, if I may so say, as a fireproof garment, and if he entered the very furnace, heated seven times hotter than before, there would be no smell of fire upon him. ‘He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.’

II. Now note, secondly, the Christian motive contained in the victor’s reception of a great good.

‘I will give him a crown of life.’ I need not remind you, I suppose, that this metaphor of ‘the crown’ is found in other instructively various places in the New Testament. Paul, for instance, speaks of his own personal hope of ‘the crown of righteousness.’ James speaks, as does the letter to the Smyrnean Church, of ‘the crown of life.’ Peter speaks ‘of the crown of glory.’ Paul, in another place, speaks of ‘the crown incorruptible.’ And all these express substantially the one idea. There may be a question as to whether the word employed here for the crown is to be taken in its strictly literal acceptation as meaning, not a kingly coronal, but a garland. But seeing that, although that is the strict meaning of the word, it is employed in a subsequent part of the letter to designate what must evidently be kingly crowns viz., in the fourth chapter there seems to be greater probability in the supposition that we are warranted in including under the symbolism here both the aspects of the crown as royal, and also as laid upon the brows of the victors in the games or the conflict. I venture to take it in that meaning. Substantially the promise is the same as that which we were considering in the previous letter, ‘I will give him to eat of the Tree of Life’; the promise of life in all the depth and fullness and sweep of that great encyclopaedical word. But it is life considered from a special point of view that is set forth here.

It is a kingly life. Of course that notion of regality and dominion, as the prerogative of the redeemed and glorified servants of Jesus Christ, is for ever cropping up in this book of the Revelation. And you remember how our Lord has set the example of its use when He said, ‘Have thou authority over ten cities.’ What may lie in that great symbol it is not for us to say. The rule over ourselves, over circumstances, the deliverance from the tyranny of the external, the deliverance from the slavery of the body and its lusts and passions, these are all included. The man that can will rightly, and can do completely as he rightly wills, that man is a king. But there is more than that. There is the participation in wondrous, and for us inconceivable, ways, in the majesty and regality of the King of kings and Lord of lords. Therefore did the crowned elders before the throne sing a new song to the Lamb, who made redeemed men out of every tribe and tongue, to be to God a kingdom, and priests who should reign upon the earth.

But, brethren, remember that this conception of a kingly life is to be interpreted according to Christ's own teaching of that wherein royalty in His kingdom consists. For heaven, as for earth, the purpose of dominion is service, and the use of power is beneficence. 'He that is chiefest of all, let him be servant of all,' is the law for the regalities of heaven as well as for the lowliness of earth.

That life is a triumphant life. The crown was laid on the head of the victor in the games. Think of the victor as he went back, flushed and modest, to his village away up on the slopes of some of the mountain chains of Greece. With what a tumult of acclaim he would be hailed! If we do our work and fight our fight down here as we ought, we shall enter into the great city not unnoticed, not unwelcomed, but with the praise of the King and the paeans of His attendants. 'I will confess his name before My Father and the holy angels.'

That life is a festal life. The garlands are twined on the heated brows of revelers, and the fumes of the wine and the closeness of the chamber soon make them wilt and droop. This amaranthine crown fadeth never. And the feast expresses for us the felicities, the abiding satisfactions without satiety, the blessed companionship, the repose which belong to the crowned. Royalty, triumph, festal goodness, all fused together, are incomplete, but they are not useless symbols. May we experience their fulfilment!

Brethren, the crown is promised not merely to the man that says, 'I have faith in Jesus Christ,' but to him who has worked out his faith into faithfulness, and by conduct and character has made himself capable of the felicities of the heavens. If that immortal crown were laid upon the head of another, it would be a crown of thorns; for the joys of that future require the fitness which comes from the apprenticeship to faith and faithfulness here on earth. We evangelical preachers are often taunted with preaching that future blessedness comes as the result of the simple act of belief. Yes; but only if, and when, the simple act of faith, which is more than belief, is wrought out in the loveliness of faithfulness. ‘We are made partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end.’

Now, dear friends, I dare say that some of you may be disposed to brush aside these fears and hopes as very low motives, unworthy to be appealed to; but I cannot so regard them. I know that the appeal to fear is directed to the lower order of sentiments, but it is a legitimate motive. It is meant to stir us up to gird ourselves against the dangers which we wisely dread. And I, for my part, believe that we preachers are going aside from our Pattern, and are flinging away a very powerful weapon, in the initial stages of religious experience, if we are afraid to bring before men’s hearts and answering consciences the solemn facts of the future which Jesus Christ Himself has revealed to us. We are no more to be blamed for it than the signalman for waving his red flag. And I fancy that there are some of my present hearers who would be nearer the love of God if they took more to heart the fear of the Lord and of His judgment.

Hope is surely a perfectly legitimate motive to appeal to. We are not to be good because we thereby escape hell and secure heaven. We are to be good, because Jesus Christ wills us to be, and has won us to love Him, or has sought to win us to love Him, by His great sacrifice for us. But that being the basis, men can be brought to build upon it by the compulsion of fear and by the attraction of hope. And that being the deepest motive, there is a perfectly legitimate and noble sphere for the operation of these two other lower motives, the consideration of the personal evils that attend the opposite course, and of the personal good that follows from cleaving to Him. Am I to be told that Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who went to his martyrdom, and was ‘faithful unto death,’ with the words on his lips: ‘Eighty-and-six years have I served Him, and He has done me nothing but good; how shall I deny my King and my Saviour!’ was yielding to a low motive when to him the crown that the Master promised to the Church of which he was afterwards bishop floated above the head that was soon to be shorn off, and on whose blood-stained brows it was then to fall ? Would that we had more of such low motives! Would that we had more of such high lives as fear nothing because they ‘have respect to the recompense of the reward,’ and are ready for service or martyrdom, because they hear and believe the crowned Christ saying to them: ‘Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.’

10)Revelation 2:17

Revelation

III. - THE VICTOR’S LIFE-SECRET

Rev. 2:17.

The Church at Pergamos, to which this promise is addressed, had a sharper struggle than fell to the lot of the two Churches whose epistles precede this. It was set ‘where Satan’s seat is.’ Pergamos was a special centre of heathen worship, and already the blood of a faithful martyr had been shed in it. The severer the struggle, the nobler the reward. Consequently the promise given to this militant Church surpasses, in some respects, those held out to the former two. They were substantially promised that life eternal, which indeed includes everything; but here some of the blessed contents of that life are expanded and emphasized.

There is a threefold promise given: ‘the hidden manna,’ ‘the white stone,’ a ‘new name’ written. The first and the last of these are evidently the most important. They need little explanation; of the central one ‘the white stone,’ a bewildering variety of interpretations - none of them, as it seems to me, satisfactory - have been suggested. Possibly there may be an allusion to the ancient custom of dropping the votes of the judges into an urn - a white pebble meaning innocence and acquittal; black meaning guilty - just as we, under somewhat similar circumstances, talk about ‘blackballing.’ But the objection to that interpretation lies in the fact that the ‘white stone’ of our text is given to the person concerned, and not deposited elsewhere. There may be an allusion to a practice, which antiquarians have hunted out, of conferring upon the victors in the games a little tile with a name inscribed upon it, which gave admission to the public festivals. But all the explanations are so doubtful that one hesitates to accept any of them. There remains one other alternative, which seems to me to be suggested by the very language of the text, viz., that the ‘white stone’ is here named - with possibly some subsidiary thought of innocence and purity - merely as the vehicle for the name. And so I dismiss it from further consideration, and concentrate our thoughts on the remaining two promises.

I. We have the victor's food, the manna.

That seems, at first sight, a somewhat infelicitous symbol, because manna was wilderness food. But that characteristic is not to be taken into account. Manna, though it fell in the wilderness, came from heaven, and it is the heavenly food that is suggested by the symbol. When the warrior passes from the fight into the city, the food which came down from heaven will be given to him in fullness. It is a beautiful thought that as soon as the man, 'spent with changing blows,' and weary with conflict, enters the land of peace, there is a table spread for him; not, as before, in the presence of his enemies,' but in the presence of the companions of his repose. One moment hears the din of the battlefield, the next moment feels the refreshment of the heavenly manna.

But now there can be little need for dealing, by way of exposition, with this symbol. Let us rather try to lay it upon our hearts.

Now the first thing that it plainly suggests to us is the absolute satisfaction of all the hunger of the heart. It is possible, and for those that overcome it will one day be actual experience, that a man shall have everything that he wishes the moment that he wishes it. Here we have to suppress desires, sometimes because they are illegitimate and wrong, sometimes because circumstances sternly forbid their indulgence. There, to desire will be to have, and partly by the rectifying of the appetite, partly by the fullness of the supply, there will be no painful sense of vacuity, and no clamoring of the unsubdued heart for good that is beyond its reach. They - and you and I may be amongst them, and so we may say 'we' - 'shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more.' Oh, brethren! to us who are driven into activity by desires, half of which go to water and are never fulfilled - to us who know what it is to try to tame down the hungering, yelping wishes and longings of our souls - to us who have so often spent our 'money for that which is not bread, and our labour for that which satisfieth not,' it ought to be a Gospel: 'I will give him to eat of the hidden manna.' Is it such to you? Do you believe it possible, and are you addressing yourselves to make the fulfilment of it actual in your case?

Then there is the other plain thing suggested here, that that satisfaction does not dull the edge of appetite or desire. Bodily hunger is fed, is replete, wants nothing more until the lapse of time and digestion have intervened. But it is not so with the loftiest satisfactions. There are some select, noble, blessed desires even here, concerning which we know that the more we have, the more we hunger with a hunger which has no pain in it, but is only the greatened capacity for greater enjoyment. You that know what happy love is know what that means - a satisfaction which never approaches satiety, a hunger which has in it no gnawing. And in the loftiest and most perfect of all realms, that co-existence of perfect fruition and perfect desire will be still more wondrously and blessedly manifest. At each moment the more we have, the wider will our hearts be expanded by possession, and the wider they are expanded the more will they be capable of receiving, and the more they are capable of receiving the more deep and full and blessed and all covering will be the inrush of the river of the water of life. Satisfaction without satiety, food which leaves him blessedly appetized for larger bestowments, belong to the victor.

Another thing to be noticed here is what we have already had occasion to point out in the previous promises: I will give him.’ Do you remember our Lord’s own wonderful words: ‘Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that He shall gird Himself, and shall come forth and serve them’? The victor is seated at the board, and the Prince, as in some earthly banquet to a victorious army. Himself moves up and down amongst the tables, and supplies the wants of the guests. There was an old Jewish tradition, which perhaps may have influenced the form of this promise, to the effect that the Messiah, when He came, would bring again to the people the gift of the manna, and men should once more eat angels’ food. Whether there is any allusion to that poetic fancy or no in the words of my text, the reality infinitely transcends it. Christ Himself bestows upon His servants the sustenance of their spirits in the realm above. But there is more than that. Christ is not only the Giver, but He is Himself the Food. I believe that the deepest meaning of this sevenfold cluster of jewels, the promises to these seven Churches, is in each case Christ. He is the Tree of Life; He is the Crown of Life, He is - as well as gives - ‘the hidden manna.’ You will remember how He Himself gives us this interpretation when, in answer to the Jewish taunt, ‘Our fathers did eat manna in the wilderness. What dost Thou work?’ He said, ‘I am that Bread of God that came down from heaven.’

So, then, once more, we come back to the all-important teaching that, whatever be the glories of the perfected flower and fruit in heaven, the germ and root of it is already here. The man who lives upon the Christ by faith, love, obedience, imitation, communion, aspiration, here on earth, has already the earnest of that feast. No doubt there will be aspects and sweetnesses and savours and sustenance in the heavenly form of our possession of, and living on, Him, which we here on earth know nothing about. But no doubt also the beginning and positive degree of all these sweetnesses and savours and sustenances yet to be revealed is found in the experience of the man who has listened to the cry of that loving voice, ‘Eat, and your souls shall live’; and has taken Jesus Christ Himself, the living Person, to be not only the source but the nourishment of his spiritual life.

So, brethren, it is of no use to pretend to ourselves that we should like - as they put it in bald, popular language - to ‘go to heaven,’ unless we are using and relishing that of heaven which is here to-day. If you do not like the earthly form of feeding upon Jesus Christ, which is trusting Him, giving your heart to Him, obeying Him, thinking about Him, treading in His footsteps, you would not like, you would like less, the heavenly form of that feeding upon Him. If you would rather have the strong-smelling garlic and the savory leeks - to say nothing about the swine’s trough and the husks - than ‘this light bread,’ the ‘angels’ food,’ which your palates cannot stand and your stomachs cannot digest, you could not swallow it if it were put into your lips when you get beyond the grave; and you would not like it if you could. Christ forces this manna into no man’s mouth; but Christ gives it to all who desire it and are fit for it. As is the man’s appetite, so is the man’s food; and so is the life that results there from.

II. Note the victor’s new name.

I have often had occasion to point out to you that Scripture attaches, in accordance with Eastern habit, large importance to names, which are intended to be significant of character, or circumstances, or parental hopes or desires. So that, both in reference to God and man, names come to be the condensed expression of the character and the personality. When we read, 'I will give him a stone, on which there is a new name written,' we infer that the main suggestion made in that promise is of a change in the self, something new in the personality and the character. I need not dwell upon this, for we have no material by which to expand into detail the greatness of the promise. I would only remind you of how we are taught to believe that the dropping away of the corporeal and removal from this present scene carries with it, in the case of those who have here on earth begun to walk with Christ, and to become citizens of the spiritual realm, changes great, ineffable, and all tending in the one direction of making the servants more fully like their Lord. What new capacities may be evolved by the mere fact of losing the limitations of the bodily frame; what new points of contact with a new universe; what new analogues of what we here call our senses and means of perception of the external world may be the accompaniments of the disembarrassment from 'the earthly house of this tabernacle,' we dare not dream. We could not, if we were told, rightly understand. But, surely, if the tenant is taken from a clay hut and set in a royal house, eternal, not made with hands, its windows must be wider and more transparent, and there must be an inrush of wondrously more brilliant light into the chambers.

But whatsoever be these changes, they are changes that repose upon that which has been in the past. And so the second thought that is suggested by this new name is that these changes are the direct results of the victor's course. Both in old times and in the peerage of England you will find names of conquerors, by land or by water, who carry in their designations and transmit to their descendants the memorial of their victories in their very titles. In like manner as a Scipio was called Africanus, as a Jervis became Lord St. Vincent, so the victor's 'new name' is the concentration and memorial of the victor's conquest. And what we have wrought and fought here on earth we carry with us, as the basis of the changes from glory to glory which shall come in the heavens. 'They rest from their labors; their works do follow them,' and, gathering behind the laurelled victor, attend him as he ascends the hill of the Lord.

But once more we come to the thought that whatever there may be of change in the future, the main direction of the character remains, and the consolidated issues of the transient deeds of earth remain, and the victor’s name is the summing up of the victor’s life.

But, further, Christ gives the name. He changed the names of His disciples. Simon He called Cephas, James and John He called ‘Sons of Thunder.’ The act claimed authority, and designated a new relation to Him. Both these ideas are conveyed in the promise: ‘I will give him ... a new name written.’ Only, brethren, remember that the transformation keeps true to the line of direction begun here, and the process of change has to be commenced on earth. They who win the new name of heaven are they of whom it would be truly said, while they bore the old name of earth, ‘If any man be in Christ he is a new creature.’

‘Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.’

III. Lastly, note the mystery of both the food and the name.

‘I will give him the hidden manna ... a new name . . . which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.’ Now we all know that the manna was laid up in the Ark, beneath the Shekinah, within the curtain of the holiest place. And, besides that, there was a Jewish tradition that the Ark and its contents, which disappeared after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the first Temple, had been buried by the prophet Jeremiah, and lay hidden away somewhere on the sacred soil, until the Messiah should return. There may be an allusion to that here, but it is not necessary to suppose it. The pot of manna lay in the Ark of the Covenant, of which we hear in another part of the symbolism in this book, within the veil in the holiest of all. And Christ gives the victor to partake of that sacred and secret food. The name which is given ‘no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.’ Both symbols point to the one thought, the impossibility of knowing until we possess and experience.

That impossibility besets all the noblest, highest, purest, divinest emotions and possessions of earth. Poets have sung of love and sorrow from the beginning of time; but men must love to know what love means. Every woman has heard about the sweetness of maternity, but not till the happy mother holds her infant to her breast does she understand it. And so we may talk till Doomsday, and yet it would remain true that we must eat the manna, and look upon the white stone for ourselves, before we can adequately comprehend.

Since, then, experience alone admits to the knowledge, how vulgar, how futile, how absolutely destructive of the very purpose which they are intended to subserve are all the attempts of men to forecast that ineffable glory. It is too great to be understood. The mountains that ring us round keep the secret well of the fair lands beyond. There are questions that bleeding hearts sometimes ask, questions which prurient curiosity more often ask, and which foolish people today are taking illegitimate means of solving, about that future life, which are all left - though some of them might conceivably have been answered - in silence. Enough for us to listen to the voice that says,

‘In My Father’s house are many mansions ‘- room for you and me - ‘if it were not so I would have told you.’ For the silence is eloquent. The curtain is the picture. The impossibility of telling is the token of the greatness of the thing to be told. Hope needs but little yarn to weave her web with. I believe that the dimness is part of the power of that heavenly prospect. Let us be reticent before it. Let us remember that, though our knowledge is small and our eyes dim, Christ knows all, and we shall be with Him; and so say, with no sense of pained ignorance or unsatisfied curiosity,

‘It doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ Cannot our hearts add, ‘It is enough for the servant that he be as his master ‘?

An old commentator on this verse says, ‘Wouldst thou know what manner of new name thou shalt bear? Overcome. It is vain for thee to ask beforehand. Hereafter thou shalt soon see it written on the white stone.’

Help us, O Lord, to fight the good fight of faith, in the sure confidence that Thou wilt receive us, and refresh us, and renew us.

11)Revelation 2:19

THE FIRST AND LAST WORKS

Rev. 2:19

It is beautiful to notice that Jesus Christ, in this letter, says all He can of praise before He utters a word of blame. He is glad when His eye, which is as a flame of fire, sees in His children that which He can commend. Praise from Him is praise indeed; and it does not need that the act should be perfect in order to get His commendation. The main thing is, which way does it look? Direction, and not attainment, is what He commends. And if the deed of the present moment be better than the deed of the last, though there be still a great gap between it and absolute completeness, the commendation of my text applies, and is never grudgingly rendered. 'I know thy last done works to be more than the first.'

There is blame in plenty, grave, and about grave matters, following in this letter, but that is not permitted in the slightest degree to diminish the warmth and heartiness of the commendation.

I. So these words tell us, first, what every Christian life is meant to be.

A life of continual progress, in which each 'to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant,' in reference to all that is good and noble and true is the ideal after which every Christian man, by his profession, is bound to aim, because in the gospel that we say we believe there lie positively infinite powers to make us perfectly pure and noble and complete all round. And in it there lie, if we lay them upon our hearts, and let them work, positively omnipotent motives, to impel us with unwearied and ever-growing earnestness towards likeness to the Master whom we say we love and serve. A continuous progress towards and in all good of every sort is the very law of the Christian life.

The same law holds good in regard to all regions of life. Everybody knows, and a hundred commonplace proverbs tell us, that practice makes perfect, that the man who carries a little weight to-day will be able to carry a bigger one to-morrow; that powers exercised are rewarded by greater strength; that he that begins by a short march, though he is wearied after he has walked a mile or two, will be able to walk a great deal farther the next day. In all departments of effort it is true that the longer we continue in a course, the easier ought it be to do the things, and the larger ought to be the results. The fruit tree does not begin to bear for a year or two, and when it does come the crop is neither in size nor in abundance anything to compare with that which is borne afterwards.

In the same way, for the Christian course, continual progress and an ever-widening area of the life conquered for and filled with Christ, manifestly ought to be the law. ‘Forgetting the things that are behind, reaching forth toward the things that are before, we press toward the mark.’ Every metaphor about the life of the Christian soul carries the same lesson. Is it a building? Then course by course it rises. Is it a tree? Then year by year it spreads a broader shadow, and its leafy crown reaches nearer heaven. Is it a body? Then from childhood to youth, and youth to manhood, it grows. Christianity is growth, continual, all-embracing, and unending.

II. The next remark that I make is this, the commendation of Christ describes what a sadly large proportion of professedly Christian lives are not.

Do you think, brethren, that if He were to come amongst us now with these attributes which the context gives us, with His ‘eyes like unto a flame of fire’ to behold, and His ‘feet like unto fine brass’ to tread down all opposition and evil. He would find amongst us what would warrant His pure lips in saying this about us, either as a community or as individuals - ‘I know that thy last works are more than thy first ‘?

What is the ordinary history of the multitudes of professing Christians? Something which they call - rightly or wrongly is not the question for the moment - conversion,’ then a year or two, or perhaps a month or two, or perhaps a week or two, or perhaps a day or two, of profound earnestness, of joyful consecration, of willing obedience - and then back swarm the old ties, and habits, and associations. Many professing Christians are cases of arrested development, like some of those monstrosities that you see about our pavements - a full-grown man in the upper part with no under limbs at all to speak of, aged half a century, and only half the height of a ten-year-old child. Are there not multitudes of so-called Christian people, in all our churches and communities, like that? I wonder if there are any of them here to-night, that have not grown a bit for years, whose deeds yesterday were just the same as their deeds to-day, and so on through a long, dreary, past perspective of unprogressive life, the old sins cropping up with the old power and venom, the old weak bits in the dyke bursting out again every winter, and at each flood, after all tinkering and mending, the old faults as rampant as ever, the new life as feeble, fluttering, spasmodic, uncertain. They grow, if at all, by fits and starts, after the fashion, say, of a tree that every winter goes to sleep and only makes wood for a little while in the summer time. Or they do not grow even as regularly as that, but there will come sometimes an hour or two of growth, and then long dreary tracts in which there is no progress at all, either in understanding of Christian doctrine or in the application of Christian precept; no increase of conformity to Jesus Christ, no increase of realizing hold of His love, no clearer or more fixed and penetrating contemplation of the unseen realities, than there used to be long, long ago. How many of us are babes in Christ when we have grey hairs upon our heads, and when for the time we ought to be teachers have need that one should teach us again which be the first principles of the oracles of God?

Oh! dear friends, it seems to me sometimes that that notion of the continuous growth in Christian understanding and feeling and character, as attaching to the very essence of the Christian life, is clean gone out of the consciousness of half the professing Christians of this day. How far our notions about Church fellowship, and reception of people into the Church, and the like, have to do with it, is not for me to discuss here. Only this I cannot help feeling, that if Jesus Christ came into most of our congregations nowadays He would not, and could not, say what He said to these poor people at Thyatira, I know thy last works are more than thy first.’

Well, then, let us remember that if He cannot say that, He has to say the opposite. I take it that the words of my text are a distinct allusion to other words of His, when He spoke the converse, about the ‘last state of that man as worse than the first.’ The allusion is obvious, I think, and it is also made in the Second Epistle of Peter, where we find a similar description of the man who has fallen away from Jesus Christ. Let us learn the lesson that either to-day is better than yesterday or it is worse. If a man on a bicycle stands still, he tumbles. The condition of keeping upright is to go onwards. If a climber on an Alpine ice-slope does not put all his power into the effort to ascend, he cannot stick at the place, at an angle of forty-five degrees upon ice, but down he is bound to go. Unless, by effort, he overcomes gravitation, he will be at the bottom very soon. And so, if Christian people are not daily getting better, they are daily getting worse. And this will be the end of it, the demon that was cast out will go back to his house, which he finds 'swept and garnished' indeed, but 'empty,' because there is no all-filling principle of love to Jesus Christ living in it. He finds it empty. Nature abhors a vacuum; and in he goes with his seven friends; and 'the last of that man is worse than the first.'

There are two alternatives before us. I would that I could feel for myself always, and that you felt for yourselves, that one or other of them must describe us as professing Christians. Either we are getting more Christlike or we are daily getting less so.

III. Lastly, my text, in its relation to this whole letter, suggests how this commendation may become ours.

Notice the context. Christ says, according to the improved reading which will be found in the Revised Version: 'I know thy works, and love, and faith, and service' [or ministry], 'and patience, and that thy last works are more than the first.' That is to say, the great way by which we can secure this continual growth in the manifestations of Christian life is by making it a habit to cultivate what produces it, viz., these two things, charity [or love] and faith.

These are the roots; they need cultivating. A Christian man's love to Jesus Christ will not grow of itself any more than his faith will. Unless we make a conscience by prayer, by reading of the Scriptures, by subjecting ourselves to the influences provided for the purpose in His word, of strengthening our faith and warming our love, both will dwindle and become fruitless, bearing nothing but leaves of barren though glittering profession. You need to cultivate faith and love just as much as to cultivate any other faculty or any other habit. Neglected, they are sure to die. If they are not cultivated, then their results of ‘service’ [or ‘ministry’] and patience ‘are sure to become less and less.

These two, faith and love, are the roots; their vitality determines the strength and abundance of the fruit that is borne. And unless you dig about them and take care of them, they are sure to die in the unkindly soil of our poor rocky hearts, and blown upon by the nipping winds that howl round the world. If we want our works to increase in number and to rise in quality, let us see to it that we make an honest habit of cultivating that which is their producing cause - love to Jesus Christ and faith in Him.

And then the text still further suggests another thought. At the end of the letter I read: ‘He that overcometh and keepeth My works to the end, to him will I give,’ etc.

Now mark what were called ‘thy works’ in the beginning of the letter are called My works’ in its close. And it is laid down here that the condition of victory, and the prerequisite to a throne and dominion, is the persevering and pertinacious keeping unto the end of these which are now called ‘Christ’s works’ - that is to say, if we want that the Master shall see in us a continuous growth towards Himself, then, in addition to cultivating the habit of faith and love, we must cultivate the other habit of looking to Him as the source of all the work that we do for Him. And when we have passed from the contemplation of our deeds as ours, and come to look upon all that we do of right and truth and beauty as Christ working in us, then there is a certainty of our work increasing in nobility and in extent. The more we lose ourselves and feel ourselves to be but instruments in Christ’s hands, the more shall we seek to fill our lives with all noble service; the more shall we be able to adorn them with all beauty of growing likeness to Him who is their source.

There is still another thing to be remembered, and that is, that if we are to have this progressive godliness we must put forth continuous effort right away to the very close.

We come to no point in our lives when we can slack off in the earnestness of our endeavour to make more and more of Christ’s fullness our own. But to the very last moment of life there is a possibility of still larger victories, and the corresponding possibility of defeat. And, therefore, till the very last, effort built upon faith and made joyous by love and strong by the grasp of His hand, must be the law for us. It is the man that 'keeps His works' and persistently strives to do them 'to the' very 'end' that overcomes.' And if he slacks one moment before the end he loses the blessing that he otherwise would have attained.

'Forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching forth unto the things that are before,' must be our motto till the last. We must ever have shining far before us the unattained heights which it may yet be possible for our feet to tread. We must never let habit stiffen us in any one attitude of obedience, nor past failures set a bound to our anticipations of what it is possible for us to become in the future. We must never compare ourselves with ourselves, or with one another. We must never allow low thoughts, and the poor average of Christian life, in our brethren, to come between us and that lofty vision of perfect likeness to Jesus Christ, which should burn before us all as no vain dream, but as the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning us.

And if, smitten by its beauty, and drawn by its power, and daily honestly submitting ourselves to the accumulating influences of Christ's long experienced love, and enlisting habit upon the side of godliness, and weakening opposition and antagonism by long discipline and careful pruning, 'we press toward the mark for the prize of the higher calling of God in Jesus Christ,' we shall be like the wise householder that keeps the best wine until the last,

'And in old age, when others fade, We fruit still forth shall bring.'

And then death itself will but continue the process that has blessed and ennobled life, and will lead us up into another state, whereof 'the latest works shall be more than the first.'

12)Revelation 2:26-28

Revelation

IV.-THE VICTOR'S LIFE-POWER

Rev. 2:26-28.

This promise to the victors in Thyatira differs from the preceding ones in several remarkable respects. If you will observe, the summons to give ear to ‘what the Spirit saith to the churches’ precedes the promises in the previous letters; here it follows that promise, and that order is observed in the three subsequent epistles. Now the structure of all these letters is too careful and artistic to allow of the supposition that the change is arbitrary or accidental. There must be some significance in it, but I do not profess to be ready with the explanation, and I prefer acknowledging perplexity to pretending enlightenment.

Then there is another remarkable peculiarity of this letter, viz., the expansion which is given to the designation of the victor as ‘He that overcometh and keepeth My works unto the end.’ Probably not unconnected with that expansion is the other peculiarity of the promise here, as compared with its precursors, viz., that they all regard simply the individual victor and promise to him ‘partaking of the tree of life’; a ‘crown of life’; immunity from ‘the second death’; ‘the hidden manna’; the ‘white stone’; and the ‘new name written’; which, like all the rest of the promises there, belonged to Himself alone; but here the field is widened, and we have others brought in on whom the victor is to exercise an influence. So, then, we enter upon a new phase of conceptions of that future life in these words, which not only dwell upon the sustenance, the repose, the glory that belong to the man himself, but look upon him as still an instrument in Christ’s hands, and an organ for carrying out, by His activities, Christ’s purposes in the world. So, then, I want you to look with me very simply at the ideas suggested by these words.

I. We have the victor’s authority.

Now the promise in my text is moulded by a remembrance of the great words of the second psalm. That psalm stands at the beginning of the Psalter as a kind of prelude; and in conjunction with its companion psalm, the first, is a summing up of the two great factors in the religious life of the Hebrews, viz., the blessedness in the keeping of the law, and the brightness of the hope of the Messiah. The psalm in question deals with that Messianic hope under the symbols of an earthly conquering monarch, and sets forth

His dominion as established throughout the whole earth. And our letter brings this marvellous thought, that the spirits of just men made perfect are, somehow or other, associated with Him in that campaign of conquest.

Now, there is much in these words which, of course, it is idle for us to attempt to expand or expound. We can only wait, as we gaze upon the dim brightness, for experience to unlock the mystery. But there is also much which, if we will reverently ponder it, may stimulate us to brave conflict and persistent diligence in keeping Christ's commandments. I, for my part, believe that Scripture is the only source of such knowledge as we have of the future life; and I believe, too, that the knowledge, such as it is, which we derive from Scripture is knowledge, and can be absolutely trusted. And so, though I abjure all attempts at rhetorical setting forth of the details of this mysterious symbol, I would lay it upon our hearts. It is not the less powerful because it is largely inconceivable; and the mystery, the darkness, the dimness, may be, and are part of the revelation and of the light. 'There was the hiding of His power.'

And so, notice that whatever may be the specific contents of such a promise as this, the general form of it is in full harmony with the words of our Lord whilst He was on earth. Twice over, according to the gospel narratives - once in connection with Peter's foolish question, What shall we have therefore? 'and once in a still more sacred connection, at the table on the eve of Calvary - our Lord gave His trembling disciples this great promise:' In the regeneration, when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of His glory, ye also shall sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.' Make all allowance that you like for the vesture of symbolism, the reality that lies beneath is that Jesus Christ, the truth, has pledged Himself to this, that His servants shall be associated with Him in the activity of His royalty. And the same great thought, which we only spoil when we try to tear apart the petals which remain closed until the sun shall open them, underlies the twin parables of the pounds and the talents, in regard to each of which we have, 'Thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will make thee ruler over many things'; and, linked along with the promise of authority, the assurance of union with the Master, 'Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.' So this book of the Revelation is only following in the footsteps and expanding the hints of Christ's own teaching when it triumphs in the thought that we are made kings and priests to God; when it points onwards to a future wherein - we know not how, but we know, if we believe Him when He speaks, that it shall be so - they shall reign with Him for ever and ever.

My text adds further the image of a conquering campaign, of a sceptre of iron crushing down antagonism, of banded opposition broken into shivers, ‘as a potter’s vessel’ dashed upon a pavement of marble. And it says that in that final conflict and final conquest they that have passed into the rest of God, and have dwelt with Christ, shall be with Him, the armies of heaven following Him, clad in white raiment pure and glistening, and with Him subduing, ay! and converting into loyal love the antagonisms of earth. I abjure all attempts at millenarian prophecy, but I point to this, that all the New Testament teaching converges upon this one point, that the Christ who came to die shall come again to reign, and that He shall reign, and His servants with Him. That is enough; and that is all. For all the rest is conjecture and fancy and sometimes folly; and details minimize, and do not magnify, the great, undetailed, magnificent fact.

But all the other promises deal not with something in the remoter future, but with something that begins to take effect the moment the dust, and confusion, and garments rolled in blood, of the battlefield are swept away. At one instant the victors are fighting, at the next they are partaking of the Tree of Life, and on their locks lies the crown, and their happy lips are feeding upon ‘the hidden manna.’ And so, I think, that though, no doubt, the main stress of the promise of authority here points onwards, as our Lord Himself has taught us, to the time of ‘the regeneration, when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of His glory,’ the incidence of the promise is not to be exclusively confined thereto. There must be something in the present for the blessed dead, as well as for them in the future. And this is, that they are united with Jesus Christ in His present activities, and through Him, and in Him, and with Him, are even now serving Him. The servant, when he dies, and has been fitted for it, enters at once on his government of the ten cities.

Thus this promise of my text, in its deepest meaning, corresponds with the deepest needs of a man’s nature. For we can never be at rest unless we are at work; and a heaven of doing nothing is a heaven of ennui and weariness. Whatever sneers may have been cast at the Christian conception of the future, which find vindication, one is sorry to say, in many popular representations and sickly bits of hymns, the New Testament notion of what that future life is to be is noble with all energy, and fruitful with all activity, and strenuous with all service. This promise of my text comes in to supplement the three preceding. They were addressed to the legitimate, wearied longings for rest and fullness of satisfaction for oneself. This is addressed to the deeper and nobler longing for larger service. And the words of my text, whatever dim glory they may partially reveal, as accruing to the victor in the future, do declare that, when he passes beyond the grave, there will be waiting for him nobler work to do than any that he ever has done here.

But let us not forget that all this access of power and enlargement of opportunity are a consequence of Christ's royalty and Christ's conquering rule. That is to say, whatever we have in the future we have because we are knit to Him, and all our service there, as all our blessedness here, flows from our union with that Lord. So when He says, as in the words that I have already quoted, that His servants shall sit on thrones, He presents Himself as on the central throne. The authority of the steward over the ten cities is but a consequence of the servant's entrance into the joy of the Lord. "Whatever there lies in the heavens, the germ of it all is this, that we are as Christ, so closely identified with Him that we are like Him, and share in all His possessions. He says to each of us, 'All Mine is thine.' He has taken part of our flesh and blood that we may share in His Spirit. The bride is endowed with the wealth of the bridegroom, and the crowns that are placed on the heads of the redeemed are the crown which Christ Himself has received as the reward of His Cross - 'even as I have received of My Father.'

II. Note the victor's starry splendor.

The second symbol of my text is difficult of interpretation, like the first: 'I will give him the morning star.' Now, no doubt, throughout Scripture a star is a symbol of royal dominion; and many would propose so to interpret it in the present case. But it seems to me that whilst that explanation - which makes the second part of our promise simply identical with the former, though under a different garb- does justice to one part of the symbol, it entirely omits the other. For the emphasis is here laid on ‘morning’ rather than on ‘star.’ It is ‘the morning star,’ not any star that blazes in the heavens, that is set forth here as a symbolical representation of the victor’s condition. Then another false scent, as it were, on which interpretations have gone, seems to me to be that, taking into account the fact that in the last chapter of the Revelation our Lord is Himself described as ‘the bright and morning star,’ they bring this promise down simply to mean, ‘I will give him Myself.’ Now though it is quite true that, in the deepest of all views, Jesus Christ Himself is the gift as well as the giver of all these sevenfold promises, yet the propriety of representation seems to me to forbid that He should here say, I will give them Myself!’ So I think we must fall back upon what any touch of poetic imagination would at once suggest to be the meaning of the promise, that it is the dawning splendor of that planet of hope and morning, the harbinger of day, which we are to lay hold of. Hebrew prophets, long before, had spoken of Lucifer, ‘light bringer’ ‘the son of the morning.’ Many a poet sang of it before Milton with his

‘Hesperus, that led the starry host, Rode brightest.’

So that I think we are just to lay hold of the thought that the starry splendor, the beauty and the lustre that will be poured upon the victor is that which is expressed by this symbol here. What that lustre will consist in it becomes us not to say. That future keeps its secret well, but that it shall be the perfecting of human nature up to the most exquisite and consummate height of which it is capable, and the enlargement of it beyond all that human experience here can conceive, we may peaceably anticipate and quietly trust.

Only, note the advance here on the previous promises is as conspicuous as in the former part of this great promise. There the Christian man’s influence and authority were set forth under the emblem of regal dominion. Here they are set forth under the emblem of lustrous splendor. It is the spectators that see the glory of the beam that comes from the star. And this promise, like the former, implies that in that future there will be a sphere in which perfected spirits may ray out their light, and where they may gladden and draw some eyes by their beams. I have no word to say as to the sky in which the rays of that star may shine, but I do feel that the very essence of this great representation is that Christian souls in the future, as in the present, will stand forth as the visible embodiments of the glory and lustre of the unseen God.

Further, remember that this image, like the former, traces up the lustre, as that traced the royalty, to communion with Christ, and to impartation from Him. ‘I will give him the morning star.’ We shall shine as the ‘brightness of the firmament, and as the stars for ever,’ as Daniel said - not by inherent but by reflected light. We are not suns, but planets, that move round the Sun of Righteousness, and flash with His beauty.

III. Lastly, mark the condition of the authority and of the lustre.

Here I would say a word about the remarkable expansion of the designation of the victor, to which I have already referred: ‘He that overcometh, and keepeth My works unto the end.’ We do not know why that expansion was put in, in reference to Thyatira only, but if you will glance over the letter you will see that there is more than usual about works - works to be repented of, or works which make the material of a final retribution and judgment.

Whatever may be the explanation of the expanded designation here, the lesson that it reads to us is a very significant and a very important one. Bring the metaphor of a victor down to the plain, hard, prose fact of doing Christ’s work right away to the end of life. Strip off the rhetoric of the fight, and it comes down to this - dogged, persistent obedience to Christ’s commandments. ‘He that keepeth My works’ does not appeal to the imagination as ‘He that overcometh’ does. But it is the explanation of the victory, and one that we all need to lay to heart.

‘My works ‘: that means the works that He enjoins. No doubt; but look at a verse before my text: ‘I will give unto every one of you according to your works.’ That is, the works that you do, and Christ’s works are not only those which He enjoys, but those of which He Himself set the pattern. He will ‘give according to works’; He will give authority; give the morning star. That is to say, the life which has been moulded according to Christ’s pattern and shaped in obedience to Christ’s commandments is the life which is capable of being granted participation in His dominion, and invested with reflected lustre. If here we do His work we shall be able to do it more fully yonder. ‘The works that I do shall he do also.’ That is the law for life - ay and it is the promise for heaven. ‘And greater works than these shall he do, because I go to My Father.’ When we have come to partial conformity with Him here we may hope - and only then have we the right to hope - for entire assimilation to Him hereafter. If here, from this dim spot which men call earth, and amid the confusion and dust and distances of this present life, we look to Him, and with unveiled faces behold Him, and here, in degree and part, are being changed from glory to glory, there He will turn His face upon us, and, beholding it, in righteousness, ‘we shall be satisfied when we awake with His likeness.’

Brethren, it is for us to choose whether we shall share in Christ’s dominion or be crushed by His iron sceptre. It is for us to choose whether, molding our lives after His will and pattern, we shall hereafter be made like Him in completeness. It is for us to choose whether, seeing Him here, we shall, when the brightness of His coming draws near, be flooded with gladness, or whether we shall call upon the rocks and the hills to cover us from the face of Him that sitteth on the Throne. Time is the mother of Eternity. To-day moulds to-morrow, and when all the to-days and to-morrows have become yesterdays, they will have determined our destiny, because they will have settled our characters. Let us keep Christ’s commandments, and we shall be invested with dignity and illuminated with glory, and entrusted to work, far beyond anything that we can conceive here, though, in their farthest reach and most dazzling brightness, these are but the continuation and the perfecting and the feeble beginnings of earthly conflict and service.

13)Revelation 3:1

Revelation

THE LORD OF THE SPIRITS AND THE STARS

Rev. 3:1.

The titles by which our Lord speaks of Himself in the letters to the seven churches are chosen to correspond with the spiritual condition of the community addressed. The correspondence can usually be observed without difficulty, and in this case is very obvious. The church in Sardis, to which Christ is presented under this aspect as the possessor of ‘the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars,’ had no heresies needing correction. It had not life enough to produce even such morbid secretions. Neither weeds nor flowers grow in winter. There may be a lower depth than the condition of things when people are all thinking, and some of them thinking wrongly, about Christian truth. Better the heresies of Ephesus and Thyatira than the acquiescent deadness of Sardis.

It had no immoralities. The gross corruptions of some in Pergamum had no parallel there. Philadelphia had none, for it kept close to its Lord, and Sardis is rebuked for none, because its evil was deeper and sadder. It was not flagrantly corrupt, it was only - dead.

Of course it had no persecutions. Faithful Smyrna had tribulation unto death, hanging like a thundercloud overhead, and Philadelphia, beloved of the Lord, was drawing near its hour of trial. But Sardis had not life enough to be obnoxious. Why should the world trouble itself about a dead church? It exactly answers the world’s purpose, and is really only a bit of the world under another name.

To such a church comes flaming in upon its stolid indifference this solemn and yet glad vision of the Lord of the ‘seven Spirits of God,’ and of ‘the seven stars.’

I. Let us think of the condition of the church which especially needs this vision.

It is all summed up in that judgment, pronounced by Him who ‘knows its works’: ‘Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.’ No works either good or bad are enumerated, though there were some, which He gathers together in one condemnation, as ‘not perfect before God.’

We are not to take that word ‘dead’ in the fullest sense of which it is capable, as we shall see presently. But let us remember how, when on earth, the Lord, whose deep words on that matter we owe mainly to John, taught that all men were either living, because they had been made alive by Him, or dead - how He said, ‘Except ye eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of man, ye have no life in you,’ and how one of the main ideas of John’s whole teaching is, ‘He that hath the Son hath life.’ This remembrance will help us to give the words their true meaning. Death is the condition of those who are separated from Him, and not receiving from Him the better life into their spirits by communion and faith.

Into this condition the church in Sardis had fallen. People and bishop had lost their hold on Him. Their hearts beat with no vigorous love to Him, but only feebly throbbed with a pulsation which even His hand laid on their bosoms could scarcely detect. Their thoughts had no clear apprehension of Him or of His love. Their communion with Him had ceased. Their lives had no radiant beauty of self-sacrifice for Christ’s sake. Their Christianity was dying out.

But this death was not entire, as is seen from the fact that in the next verse ‘ready to die’ is the expression applied to some among them, or perhaps to some lingering works which still survived. They were at the point of death, moribund, with much of their spiritual life extinct, but here and there a spark among the ashes, which His eye saw, and His breath could fan into a flame. Some works still survived, though not ‘perfect,’ shrunken and sickly like the blanched shoots of a plant feebly growing in a dark cellar.

In some animals of low organization you may see muscular movements after life is extinct. So churches and individual Christians may keep on performing Christian work for a time after the true impulse that should produce it has ceased. A train will run for some distance after the steam has been shut off. Institutions last after the life is out of them, for use and wont keeps up a routine of action, though the true motive is dead, and men may go on for long, nominal adherents of a cause to which they are bound by no living conviction. How much of your Christian activity is the manifestation of life, and how much of it is the ghastly twitchings of a corpse under galvanism?

This death was unseen but by the flame-eyed Christ. These people in Sardis had ‘a name to live.’ They had a high reputation among the Asiatic churches for vigorous Christian character. And they themselves, no doubt, would be very much astonished at the sledgehammer blow of this judgment of their state. One can fancy them saying - ‘We dead! Do not we stand high among our brethren, have we not this and the other Christian work among us? Have we not prophesied in Thy name? ‘Yes, and the surest sign of spiritual death is unconsciousness. Paralysis is not felt. Mortification is painless. Frost-bitten limbs are insensitive. They only tingle when life is coming back to them. When a man says I am asleep, he is more than half awake.

One characteristic of their death is that they have forgotten what they were in better and happier times, and therefore need the exhortation, ‘Remember how thou hast received and didst hear.’ They have fallen so far that the height on which they once stood is out of their sight, and they are content to lie on the muddy flat at its base. No stings from conscious decline disturb them. They are too far gone for that. The same round of formal Christian service which marked their decline from their brethren hid it from themselves.

That is a solemn fact worth making very clear to ourselves, that the profoundest spiritual decline may be going on in us, and we be all unconscious of it. Samson wist not that his strength was departed from him,’ and in utter ignorance he tried to perform his old feats, only to find his weakness. So the life of our spirits may have ebbed away, and we know not how much blood we have lost until we try to raise ourselves and sink back fainting. Like some rare essence in a partially closed vessel, put away in some drawer, we go to take it out and find nothing but a faint odour, a rotten cork, and an empty phial. The sure way to lose the precious elixir of a Christian life is to shut it up in our hearts. No life is maintained without food, air, and exercise. We must live on the bread of God which came down from heaven, and breathe the breath of His life-giving Spirit, and use all our power for Him, or else, for all our name to live, and our shrunken, feeble imitations of the motions of life, the eyes which are as a flame of fire will see the sad reality, and the lips into which grace is poured will have to speak over us the one grim word - dead.

II. Notice now the thought of Christ presented to such a church. ‘He that hath the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars.’

The greater part of the attributes with which our Lord speaks of Himself in the beginnings of the seven letters to the churches are drawn from the features of the majestic vision of the Christ in the first chapter of this book. But nothing there corresponds to the first clause of this description, and so far this designation is singular. There are, however, three other places in the Apocalypse which throw much light on it, and to these we may turn for a moment. In the apostolic salutation at the beginning of the book [i. 4] John in yokes mercy and grace on the Asiatic churches from the Eternal Father, ‘and from the seven Spirits which are before the throne,’ and from Christ, the faithful witness. In the grand vision of heavenly realities [ch. iv.] the seer beholds burning before the throne seven lamps of fire, ‘which are the seven Spirits of God,’ and when, in the later portion of the same, he beholds the conquering Lamb, who looses the seals of the book of the world’s history, he sees Him having ‘seven eyes which are the seven Spirits of God, sent forth into all the earth,’ an echo of old words of the same prophet who had been John’s precursor in the symbolic use of the ‘candlestick,’ as representing the Church, and who speaks of ‘the seven eyes of the Lord which run to and fro throughout the whole earth’ [Zec. 4:10].

Clearly in all these passages we have the same idea presented of the Holy Spirit of God in the completeness and manifoldness of its sevenfold energies, conceived of as possessed and bestowed by the Lamb of God, the Lord of all the churches. The use of the plural and the number seven is remarkable, but quite explicable, on the ground of the sacred number expressing perfection, and not inconsistent with personal unity, underlying the variety of manifestations. The personality of the Spirit is sufficiently set forth by that refrain in each epistle, ‘Let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.’ The divinity of the Spirit is plainly involved in the triple benediction at the beginning of the letter, and by the sacred place in which there the Spirit is invoked, midmost between the Father and the Son. The seven lamps before the throne speak of the flaming perfection of that Spirit of burning conceived of as immanent in the Divine nature. The seven eyes sent forth into all the earth speak of the perfectness of the energies of that same Spirit, conceived of as flashing and gleaming through all the world. And the great words of our text agree with that vision of these seven as being the eyes of the Lamb slain, in telling us that that fiery Spirit is poured out on men by the Lord, who had to die before He could cast fire on earth.

This is the thought which a dead or decaying church needs most. There is a Spirit which gives life, and Christ is the Lord of that Spirit. The whole fullness of the Divine energies is gathered in the Holy Spirit, and this is His chiefest work - to breathe into our deadness the breath of life. Many other blessed offices are His, and many other names belong to Him. He is ‘the Spirit of adoption,’ He is ‘the Spirit of Supplication,’ He is ‘the Spirit of Holiness,’ He is ‘the Spirit of Wisdom,’ He is ‘the Spirit of Power and of Love and of a sound mind,’ He is ‘the Spirit of Counsel and Might’; but highest of all is the name which expresses His mightiest work, the Spirit of Life.’ The flaming lamps tell of His flashing brightness; the seven eyes of His watchful Omniscience and other symbols witness the various sides of His gracious activity on men’s hearts. The anointing oil was consecrated from gold to express His work of causing men’s whole powers to move sweetly and without friction in the service of God, and of feeding the flame of devotion in the heart. The ‘water’ spoke of cleansing efficacy, as ‘fire’ of melting, transforming, purifying power. But the ‘rushing mighty wind,’ blowing where it listeth, unsustained, and free, visible only in its effects, and yet heard by every ear that is not deaf, sometimes soft and low, as the respiration of a sleeping child, sometimes loud and strong as the storm, is His best emblem. The very name ‘the Spirit’ emphasizes that aspect of His work in which He is conceived of as the source of life. This is the thought of His working which comes with most glad yet solemn meaning to Christian people who feel how low their life has sunk. This is the true antidote to the deadness, so real and common among all communions now, however it is skimmed over and hidden by a kind of film of activity.

Christ has this sevenfold Spirit. That means first that the same peaceful dove which floated down from the open heavens on His meek head, just raised from the baptismal stream, fills now and for ever His whole humanity with its perfect energies. ‘God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him.’ How marvellous that there is a manhood to which the whole fullness of the Spirit of God can be imparted, an ‘earthen vessel,’ capacious enough to hold this ‘treasure’! How marvellous that there is a Son of man, who is likewise Son of God, and has the Spirit, not only for His own human perfecting, but to shed it forth on all who love Him! It is the slain Lamb, who has the seven Spirits of God. That is to say, it was impossible that the fullness of spiritual influence could be poured out quickening on men until

Christ had died, and by His death He has become the dispenser to the world of the principle of life. In His hands is the gift. He is the Lord of the Spirit, ascended up to give to men according to the measure of their capacity, of that Spirit which He has received, until we all come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. How unlike the relation of other teachers to their disciples! Their spirit is the very thing they cannot give. They can impart teaching, they can give a method and principles, and a certain direction to the mind. They can train imitators. But they are like Elijah, knowing not if their spirit will rest on their successors, and sure that, if it do, it has not been their gift. The departing prophet had to say to the petition for an elder son's legacy of his spirit, 'Thou hast asked a hard thing,' but Christ ascending let that gift fall from His uplifted hands of blessing, and the dove that abode on Him fluttered downwards from the hiding cloud, to rest on the Apostles' heads, as they steadfastly gazed up into heaven. Therefore they went back to Jerusalem with joy, even before the fuller gift of Pentecost.

Pentecost was but a transitory sign of a perpetual gift. The rushing wind died into calm, and the flickering tongues of fire had faded before the spectators reached the place. Nor did the miracle of utterance last either. But whilst all that is past, the substance remains. The fire of Pentecost has not died down into chilly embers, nor have the 'rivers of living water, promised by the lips of incarnate truth, been swallowed up in the sands or failed at their source. He is perpetually bestowing the Spirit of God upon His Church. We are only too apt to forget the present activity of our ascended Lord. We think of His mighty work as 'finished' on the Cross, and do not conceive clearly and strongly enough His continuous work which is being done, now and ever, on the throne. That work is not only His priestly intercession and representation of us in heaven, but is also His working on earth in the bestowal on all His followers of that Divine Spirit to be the life of their lives and the fountain of all their holiness, wisdom, strength, and joy. For ever is He near us, ready to quicken and to bless. He will breathe in silent ways grace and power into us, and when life if low, He will pour a fuller tide into our veins. He knows all our deadness and He can cure it all. He is Himself the life, and He is the Lord and giver of life, because the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth are the seven eyes of the slain Lamb.

One great channel through which spiritual life is imparted to a dying church is suggested by the other part of the description of our Lord here as having the seven stars.' The 'stars' are the 'angels of the churches,' by whom we are probably to understand their bishops and pastors. If so, then we have a striking thought, symbolized by the juxtaposition. Christ, as it were, holds in the one hand the empty vessels, and in the other the brimming cup, from which He will pour out the supply for their emptiness.

The lesson taught us is, that in a dead church the teachers mostly partake of the deadness, and are responsible for it. But, further, we learn that Christ's way of reviving a decaying and all but effete church is oftenest by filling single men full of His Spirit, and then sending them out to kindle a soul under the ribs of death. So Luther brought back life to the churches in his day. So the Wesleys brought about the great evangelical revival of last century. So let us pray that it may be again in our day when another century is drawing near its end, and the love of many has grown cold.

If we regard the 'angels' as being but ideal representatives of the churches themselves, then we may gather from the juxtaposition of the two clauses a lesson which is ever true. In Christ's one hand is the perfect supply for all our need, wisdom for our blindness, might to clothe our weakness, righteousness for our sin, life to flood our drooping souls. In Christ's other hand He holds us all, and surely He will not leave us empty while we are within His arm's length of such fullness. Let us look to Him alone for all we need, and rejoice to know that we, held in His grasp, are near His heart, the homo of infinite love, and near His hand, the source of infinite supply of strength and grace.

III. Consider, now, the practical uses of these thoughts.

That vision should shame us into penitent consciousness of our own deadness. When we contrast the little life we possess with the abundance waiting to be given, like the poor scanty supply in some choked millstream compared with the full-flashing store in the brimming river, we may well be stricken with shame. So much offered and so little possessed; such fiery energy of love possible, and poor tepid feeling, actual! Such a mighty breath of God blowing all about us, and we lying as if enchanted and becalmed, with scarce wind enough to keep our idle sails from flapping.

There in Jesus Christ is the measure of what we might possess and the pattern of what we should possess - does it not bow us in penitence, because of what we do possess?

But while ashamed and penitent, we should be kept by that vision from despondent thoughts, as if the future could never be different from the past. It is not good to think too much of our failure and emptiness, lest penitence darken into despair, and shame cut the sinews of our souls and unfit them for all brave endeavour. Let us think of Christ's fullness and hope, as well as repent.

Let it stir us too to seek for the reason why we have not more of Christ's life. What is the film which prevents the light from reaching our eyes? I remember once seeing by a roadside a stone trough for cattle to drink from empty, because the pipe from which it was fed was stopped by a great plug of ice. That is the reason why many of our hearts are so empty of Christ's Spirit. We have plugged the channel with a mass of ice. Close communion with Jesus Christ is the only means of possessing His Spirit. With penitence let us go back to Him, and let us hold fast by His hand. If we listen to Him, trust Him, keep our minds and hearts attent on Him, He will breathe on us as of old, and as we hear Him say, 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost,' a diviner life will pass into our veins, and the law of the Spirit of life in Christ will make us free from the law of sin and death.

14)Revelation 3:4

Revelation

WALKING IN WHITE

Rev. 3:4.

The fond fancy that the primitive Church was a better Church than todays is utterly blown to pieces by the facts that are obvious in Scripture. Here, in the Apostolic time, under the very eye of the fervent Apostle of Love, and so recently after the establishment of Christianity on the seaboard of Asia, was a church, a young church, with all the faults of a decrepit old one, and in which Jesus Christ Himself could find nothing to commend, and about which He could only say that it had a name to live and was dead. The church at Sardis suffered no persecution. It was much too like the world to be worth the trouble of persecuting. It had no heresy; it did not care enough about religion to breed heresies. It was simply utterly apathetic and dead. And yet there was a salt in it, or it would have been rotten as well as dead. There wore 'a few names, even in Sardis,' which, in the midst of all the filth, had kept their skirts white. They had 'not defiled their garments,' and so with beautiful congruity the promise is given to them - 'they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.' The promise, I said. It would have been wiser to have said the promises, for there are a great many wrapped up in germ in these quiet, simple words. Nearly all that we know, and all that we need to know, about that mysterious future is contained in them. So my purpose now is, with perfectly inartificial simplicity, just to take these words and weigh them as a jeweler might weigh in his scales stones which are very small but very precious.

I. We have here, then, the promise of continuous and progressive activity - 'they shall walk.'

In Scripture we continually find that metaphor of the 'walk' as equivalent to an outward life of action. To make that idea prominent in our conceptions of the future is a great gain, for it teaches us at once how imperfect and one-sided are the thoughts about it which come with such fascination to most of us wearied men. It is a wonderful, unconscious confession of the troubled, toilsome, restless lives which most of us live, that the sweetest and most frequently recurring thought about the great future is, 'There remaineth a rest for the people of God'; where the wearied muscles may be relaxed, and the tortured hearts may be quiet. But whilst we must not say one word to break or even to diminish the depth and sweetness of that aspect of the Christian hope, neither must we forget that it is only one phase of the complete whole, and that this promise of the text has to be taken with it. 'They shall walk,' in all the energies of a constant activity, far more intense than it was at its highest here, and yet never, by one hair's breadth, trenching upon the serenity and indisturbance of that perpetual repose. We have to put together the two ideas, which to all our experience are antagonistic, but which yet are not really so, but only complementary, as the two halves of a sphere may be, in order to get the complete round. We have to say, with this very book of the Apocalypse, which goes so deep into the secrets of heaven, ‘His servants serve Him and see His face’ - uniting together in one harmonious whole the apparent and, as far as earth’s experience goes, the real opposites of continual contemplation and continual activity of service. It is so hard for us in this life to find out practically for ourselves how much to give to each of these, that it is blessed to know that there comes a time for all of us, if we will, when that difficulty will solve itself, and Mary and Martha shall be one person, continually serving and yet continually sitting, no more troubled about many things, in the quiet of the Master’s presence, ‘They shall walk,’ harmonizing work and rest, contemplation and service.

And then there is the other thought, too, involved in that pregnant word, of continuous advancement, growing every moment, through the dateless cycles, nearer and nearer to the true centre of our souls, and up into the loftiness of perfection. We do not know what ministries of love and service may wait for Christ’s servants yonder, but of this we can be quite sure, that all the faculties for service which we see crippled and limited by the hindrances of earth will find in the future a worthier sphere. Do you think it likely that God should so waste His wealth as to take men and redeem them and sanctify them, and prepare them by careful discipline and strengthen their powers by work, and then, just when they are out of their apprenticeship and ready for larger service, should condemn them to idleness? Is that like Him? Must it not rather be that there is a wider field for the faculties that were trained here; and that, whatsoever there may be in eternity, there will be no idleness there?

II. Still further, here is the further promise of companionship with Christ. ‘They shall walk with Me’

‘How can two walk together except they be agreed?’ If there be this promised union, it can only be because of the completeness of sympathy and the likeness of character between Christ and His companions. The unity between Christ and His followers in the heavens is but the carrying into perfectness of the imperfect union that makes all the real blessedness of life here upon earth.

‘With Me.’ Why! that union with Christ is all we know about heaven. All the rest is imagery, that is reality. All the rest is material symbol, that is what it all means.

In the sweet, calm words of Richard Baxter’s simple, but deep song -

‘My knowledge of that life is small, The eye of faith is dim; But ‘tis enough that Christ knows all, And I shall be with Him.’

We ask ourselves and one another, and God’s Word, a great many questions about that unseen life; and sometimes it seems to us as if it would have been so much easier for us to bear the burdens that are laid upon us if some of these questions could have been answered. But we do not really need to know more than that we shall be ‘ever with the Lord.’ Two, who are ever with Him, cannot be far from one another. So we may thankfully feel that the union of all is guaranteed by the union of each with Him. And for the rest we can wait.

Only remember that to walk with Him implies that those who were but little children here have grown up to maturity. We try to tread in His footsteps here, but at the best we follow Him with tottering feet and short steps, as children trying to keep up with an elder brother. But there we shall keep step and walk in His company, side by side. For earth the law is, ‘leaving us an example that we should follow His steps.’ For heaven the law is ‘they shall walk with Me’; or, as the other promise of this book has it, ‘they shall follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth,’ No heights are so high to which He rises but He will make our feet like hind’s feet to tread upon the high places; no glories so great but we shall share them. Nothing in His divine nature shall part Him from us, but we shall be ever with Him. Let us comfort one another with these words.

III. Further, my text speaks a promise of the perfection of purity. ‘They shall walk with Me in white.’

The white garment, of course, is a plain metaphor for unsullied purity of moral character. And it is worth notice that the word employed by the Apocalyptic seer here for white, as indeed is the case throughout the manifold references to that heavenly colour which abound in this book, implies no dead ghastly white, but a flashing glistering whiteness, as of sunshine upon snow, which, I suppose, is the whitest thing that human eyes can look upon undazzled. So of the same radiant tint as the great White Throne on which He sits shall be the vestures of those that follow Him. The white robe is the conqueror's robe, the white robe is the priest's robe, the white robe is the copy of His who stood in that solitary spot on Mount Hermon, just below its snowy summit, with garments 'so as no fuller on earth could white them'; white as the driven and sunlit snow that sparkled above. Perhaps we are to think of a glorified body as being the white garment. Perhaps it may be rather that the image expresses simply the conception of entire moral purity, but in either case it means the loftiest manifestation of the most perfect Christlike beauty as granted to all His followers.

IV. And so, lastly, note the condition of all these promises.

'Thou hast a few names, even in Sardis, which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white: for they are worthy.' The only thing that makes it possible for any man to have that future life of active communion with Jesus Christ, in perfect beauty of inward character and of outward form, is that here he shall by faith keep himself 'unspotted from the world.' There is a congruity and proportion between the earthly life and the future life. Heaven is but the life of earth prolonged and perfected by the dropping away of all the evil, the strengthening and lifting to completeness of all the good. And the only thing that fits a man for the white robe of glory is purity of character down here on earth.

There is nothing said here directly about the means by which that purity can be attained or maintained. That is sufficiently taught us in other places, but what in this saying Christ insists upon is that, however it is got, it must be got, and that there is no life of blessedness, of holiness and glory, beyond the grave, except for those for whom there is the life of aspiration after, and in some real measure possession of, moral purity and righteousness and goodness here upon earth.

Do not be surprised at that word - 'They are worthy.' It is an evangelical word. It declares the perfect congruity between the life on earth and the issue and reward of the life in heaven. And it holds up to us the great principle that purity here is crowned with glory hereafter. If the white garments could be put upon a black soul they would be like the poisoned shirt on the demigod in the Greek legend, they would bite into the flesh, and burn and madden. But it is impossible, and for ever and ever it remains true that only those who have kept their garments undefiled here shall ‘walk in white.’ It does not need absolute cleanness from all spot, God be thanked! But it does need, first, that we shall have ‘washed our robes and made them white’ in the ‘blood of the Lamb.’ And then that we shall keep them white, by continual recourse to the blood that cleanses from all sin, and by continual effort after purity like His own and received from Him. They who come back as prodigals in rags, and have their filthy tatters exchanged for the clean garment of Christ’s righteousness, with which by faith they are invested, and who then take heed to follow Him, with loins girt and robes kept undefiled, and ever washed anew in His cleansing blood, shall be of the heavenly companions of the glorified Christ, joined to Him in all His dominion, and clothed in flashing whiteness like the body of His glory.

15)Revelation 3:5

Revelation

V. - THE VICTOR’S LIFE-ROBE

Rev. 3:5.

The brightest examples of earnest Christianity are generally found amidst widespread indifference. If a man does not yield to the prevailing tone, it is likely to quicken him into strong opposition. So it was in this Church of Sardis. It was dead. That was the summing up of its condition. It had a name to live, and the name only made the real deadness more complete. But there were exceptions: souls ablaze with Divine love, who in the midst of corruption had kept their robes clean, and whom Christ’s own voice declared to be worthy to walk with Him in white.

That great eulogium, which immediately precedes our text, is referred to in the first of its triple promises; as is even more distinctly seen if we read our text as the Revised Version does: ‘He that overcometh, the same shall thus be clothed in white raiment'; the 'thus 'pointing back to the preceding words, and widening the promise to the faithful few in Sardis so as to extend to all victors in all Churches throughout all time.

Now the remaining two clauses of our text also seem to be coloured by the preceding parts of this letter. We read in it, 'Thou hast a name that thou livest'; and again, 'Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments.' Our text catches up the word, and moulds its promises accordingly. One is more negative, the other more positive; both link on to a whole series of Scriptural representations.

Now all these declarations of the blessedness of the victors are, of course, intensely symbolical, and we can but partially translate them. I simply seek now to take them as they stand, and to try to grasp at least some part of the dim but certain hopes which they partly reveal and partly hide. There are, then, three things here.

I. The victor's robes.

'He that overcometh, the same shall [thus] be clothed in white raiment.' White, of course, is the festal colour. But it is more than that: it is the heavenly colour. In this book we read of white thrones, white horses, hairs 'white as snow,' white stones. But we are to notice that the word here employed does not merely mean a dead whiteness, which is the absence of colour, but a lustrous and glistering white, like that of snow smitten by sunshine, or like that which dazzled the eyes of the three on the Mount of Transfiguration, when they saw the robes of the glorified Christ 'whitened as no fuller on earth could white them.' So that we are to associate with this metaphor, not only the thoughts of purity, festal joy, victory, but likewise the thought of lustrous glory.

Then the question arises, can we translate that metaphor of the robe into anything that will come closer to the fact? Now I may remind you that this figure runs through the whole of Scripture. We find, for instance, in one of the old prophets, a vision in which the taking away of Israel's sin is represented by the high priest, the embodiment of the nation, standing in filthy garments, which were stripped off him and fair ones put on him. We find our Lord giving forth a parable of a man who came to the feast not having on a wedding garment. We find the Apostle Paul speaking frequently, in a similar metaphor, of putting off an ancient nature and putting on a new one. We find in this book, not only the references in my text and the context, but the great saying concerning those that have ‘washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,’ and the final benediction pronounced upon those who washed their robes, that they may ‘have a right to enter through the gate into the city.’

Putting all these things together - and the catalogue might be extended - we have to observe that the signification of this symbol is not that of something wholly external to or apart from the man, but that it is rather that part of his nature, so to speak, which is visible to beholders, and we may translate it very simply - the robe is character. So the promise of my text, brought down so far as we can bring it to its primary element, is of a purity and lustrous glory of personal character, which shall be visible to any eye that may look upon the wearer. What more there may be found in it when we are ‘clothed upon with our house which is from heaven,’ if so be that ‘being clothed we shall not be found naked,’ I do not presume to say. I do not speculate, I simply translate the plain words of Scripture into the truth which they represent.

But now I would have you notice that this, like all the promises of the New Testament in regard to a future life, lays main stress on what a man is. Not where we are, not what we have, not what we do or know, make heaven, but what we are. The promises are clothed for us, as they must needs be, in sensuous images, which sensuous men have interpreted in far too low a sense; or sometimes have not been even at the trouble of interpreting. But in reality there are but two facts that we know about that future, and they are smelted together, as cause and effect, in the great saying of the most spiritual of the Apostles: ‘We shall be like Him’ - that is what we shall be - ‘for we shall see Him as He is.’ So, then, purity of character, when all the stains on the garments, spotted by the flesh, shall have melted away; purity of character, when temptations shall have no more food in us and so conflict shall not be needful; purity like Christ’s own, and derived from the vision of Him, according to the great law that beholding is transformation, and the light we see is the light which we reflect - this is the heart of this great promise.

But notice that the main thing about it is that this lustrous purity of a perfected character is declared to be the direct outcome of the character, that was made by effort and struggle carried on in faith here upon earth. In this clause the familiar I will give 'does not appear; and the thought of the condition upon earth working itself out into the glory of lustrous purity in the heavens is made even more emphatic by the adoption of the reading to which I have referred: 'Shall thus be clothed,' which points us backwards to what preceded, where our Lord's own voice declares that the men who have not defiled their garments upon earth are they who 'shall walk with Him in white.' The great law of continuity and of increase, so that the dispositions cultivated here rise to sovereign power hereafter, and that what was tendency, and struggle, and imperfect realization upon earth becomes fact and complete possession in the heavens, is declared in the words before us.

What solemn importance that thought gives to the smallest of our victories or defeats here on earth! They are threads in the web out of which our garment is to be cut. After all, yonder as here, we are dressed in homespun, and we make our clothing and shape it for our wear. That truth is perfectly consistent with the other truth on which it reposes- that the Christian man owes to Christ the reception of the new garment of purity and holiness. The evangelical doctrine, 'not by works of righteousness which we have done,' and its complement in the words of my text, are perfectly harmonious. We cannot weave the web except Christ gives us yarn, nor can we work out our own salvation except Christ bestows upon us the salvation which we work out. The two things go together. Let us remember that, whilst in one aspect the souls that were all clad in filthy garments are arrayed as a bridegroom decketh his bride with a fair vesture, in another aspect we ourselves, by our own efforts, by our own struggles, by our own victories, have to weave and fashion and cut and sew the dress which we shall wear for ever.

II. Notice here the victor's place in the Book of Life.

'I will not blot out his name out of the Book of Life.' I have pointed out that in the former clause the characteristic 'I will give' is omitted, in order that emphatic expression might be secured for the thought that in one aspect the reward of the future is automatic or self working. But that thought is by no means a complete statement of the truth with regard to this matter; and so, in both of the subsequent clauses, we have our Lord representing Himself [for it is never to be forgotten that these promises are Christ's own words from heaven] as clothed with His judicial functions, and as determining the fates of men. 'I will not blot out his name out of the Book of Life.' 'That is a solemn and tremendous claim, that Christ's finger can write, and Christ's finger can erase, a name from that register.

Now I have said that all these clauses link themselves on to a whole series of Scriptural representatives. I showed that briefly in regard to the former; I would do so in regard to the present one.

You will remember, perhaps, in the early history of Israel, that Moses, with lofty self-devotion, prayed God to blot his name out of His book, if only by that sacrifice Israel's sin might be forgiven. You may recall too, possibly, how one of the prophets speaks of 'those that are written amongst the living in Jerusalem,' and how Daniel, in his eschatological vision, refers to those whose names were or were not written in the book. I need not remind you of how our Lord commanded His disciples to rejoice not in that the spirits were subject to them, but rather to rejoice because their names were written in heaven. Nor need I do more than simply refer to the Apostle's tender and pathetic excuse for not remembering the names of some of his fellow workers that it mattered very little, because their names were written in the Book of Life. Throughout this Apocalypse, too, we find subsequent allusions of the same nature, just as in the Epistle to the Hebrews we read of the 'Church of the first-born whose names are written in heaven.' Now all these, thus put together, suggest two ideas: one which I do not deal with here - viz., that of a burgess-roll - and the other that of a register of those who truly live. And that is the thought that is suggested here. The promise of my text links on to the picture in the letter of the condition of the Church at Sardis, which was dead, and says that the victor will truly and securely and for ever possess life, with all the clustered blessedness' which, like a nebula unresolved, gather themselves, dim yet radiant, round that great word.

But what I especially note here is, not so much this reiteration of the fundamental and all-embracing promise which has met us in preceding letters, the promise of a secure, eternal life, as that plain and solemn implication that a name may be struck out of that book. Theological exigencies compelled our fathers to deny that, but surely the words of our text are too plain to be neglected or misunderstood. It is possible that a name, like the name of a dishonest attorney, shall be struck off the rolls. Do not let any desire for theological symmetry blind you, brother, to that fact. Take it into account in your daily lives. It is possible for a man to 'cast away his confidence.' It is possible for him to make shipwreck of the faith. Some of you will remember that pathetic story of Cromwell's deathbed, when he asked one of his ghostly counselors whether it was true that 'once in the covenant, always in the covenant? 'He got the answer, 'Yes'; and then he said, 'I know I once was,' and so died. Brethren, it is the victors whose names are kept upon the roll. These people at Sardis had a name to live, and they thought that their names were in the Book of Life. And when it was opened, lo! a blot. Some of us have seen upon the granite of Egyptian temples the cartouches of a defeated dynasty chiseled out by their successors. The granite on which this list is written is not so hard but that a man, by his own sin, falling away from the Master, may chisel out his name. A student goes up for his examination. He thinks he has succeeded. The pass-lists come out, and his name is not there. Take care that you are not building upon past faith, but remember that it is the victor's name that is not blotted out of the Book of Life.

III. Lastly, the victor's recognition by the Commanding Officer.

'I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels.' There, too, we have a kind of mosaic, made up of previous Scripture declarations. Our Lord, twice in the Gospels - and on neither occasion in the Gospel according to St. John - has similar sayings; once about confessing the name of him who confesses His name 'before the Father'; once about confessing it 'before the holy angels.' Here these are smelted together into the one great recognition by Jesus Christ of the victor as being His.

Now I need not remind you of how emphatically, to this clause also, the remark which I have made with regard to the former one applies, and how tremendous and inexplicable, except on one hypothesis, is this same assumption by Christ of judicial functions which determine the fate and the standing of men.

But I would rather point to the thought that this promise carries with it, not only Christ's judicial recognition of the victor, but also the thought of loving relationship, of close friendship, of continual regard. He 'confesses the name' - that means that He takes to His heart, and loves and cares for the person.

Is it not the highest honour that can be given to any soldier, to have honorable mention in the general's despatches? It matters very little what becomes of our names upon earth, though there they be dark, and swift oblivion devours them almost as soon as we are dead, except in so far as they may live for a little while in the memory of two or three that loved us. That is the fate of most of us. And surely 'the hollow wraith of dying fame' may 'fade wholly,' and we exult, 'if Jesus Christ confess our name.' It matters little who forgets us if He remembers us. It matters even less what the judgments pronounced in our obituaries may be, if He says, 'That man is Mine, and I own him.' Ah! brethren, what a reversal of the world's judgments there will be one day; and how names that have been blown through a thousand trumpets, and had hosannas sung to them, and been welcomed with a tumult of acclaim through generations, will sink into oblivion and never be heard of any more, and the unseen and obscure men who lived by, and for, and with Jesus Christ, will come to the front I Praise from Him is praise indeed.

Now, brethren, the upshot of it all is that life here derives its meaning and its consecration from life hereafter. The question for us is, do we habitually realize that we are weaving the garment we must wear, be it a poisoned robe that shall eat into our flesh like fire, or be it a vesture clean and white? Do we brace ourselves for the obscure struggles of our little lives, feeling that they are not small because they carry eternal consequences? Are we content to be unknown because well known by Him, and to live so that He shall acknowledge us in the day when to be acknowledged by Him means glory and blessedness beyond all hopes and all symbols; and to be disowned by Him means ruin and despair? You know the conditions of victory. Lay them to heart, and its issues, and the tragical results of death; and then cleave, with mind and heart and will, to Him who can make you more than conquerors, who will change your frayed and dinted armour for the fine linen, clean and white, and will point to you, before His Father and the universe, and say, ‘This man was one of Thy faithful soldiers.’ That will be honour indeed. Do you see to it that you make it yours.

16)Revelation 3:10

Revelation

KEEPING AND KEPT

Rev. 3:10.

There are only two of the seven churches which receive no censure or rebuke from Jesus Christ; and of these two - viz., the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia - the former receives but little praise though much sympathy. This church at Philadelphia stands alone in the abundance and unalloyed character of the eulogium which Christ passes upon it. He doles out His praise with a liberal hand, and nothing delights Him more than when He can commend even our imperfect work. He does not wait for our performances to reach the point of absolute sinlessness before He approves them. Do you think that a father or a mother, when its child was trying to please him or her, would be at all likely to say, ‘Your gift is worth very little. I could buy a far better one in a shop’? And do you think that Jesus Christ’s love and delight in the service of His children are less generous than ours? Surely not.

So here we are not to suppose that these good souls in Philadelphia lived angelic lives of unbroken holiness because Jesus Christ has nothing but praise for them. Rather we are to learn the great thought that, in all our poor, stained service, He recognizes the central motive and main drift, and, accepting these, is glad when He can commend. ‘Thou hast kept the word of My patience,’ and, with a beautiful reciprocity, ‘I will keep those that keep My word from’ and ‘in the hour of temptation.’

I. Now notice, in the first place, the thing kept.

That is a remarkable phrase ‘the word of My patience.’ A verse or two before, our Lord had said to the same church, evidently speaking about the same thing in them, ‘Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept My word.’

This expression, ‘the word of My patience,’ seems to be best understood in the same general way as that other which precedes it, and upon which it is a commentary and an explanation. It refers, not to individual commandments to patience, but to the entire gospel message, the general whole of ‘the Word of Jesus Christ’ communicated therein to men. That is a profound and beautiful way of characterizing the sum of the revelation of God in Christ as ‘the word of His patience,’ and is one which yields ample reward to meditative thought.

The whole gospel, then, is so named, inasmuch as it all records the patience which Christ exercised.

What does the New Testament mean by ‘patience’? Not merely endurance, although, of course, that is included, but endurance of such a sort as will secure persistence in work, in spite of all the opposition and sufferings which may come in the way. The world’s patience simply means, ‘Pour on, I will endure.’ The New Testament patience has in it the idea of perseverance as well as of endurance, and means, not only that we bow to the pain or the sorrow, but that nothing in sorrow, nothing in trial, nothing in temptation, nothing in antagonism, has the smallest power to divert us from doing what we know to be right. The man who will reach his hand through the smoke of hell to lay hold of plain duty is the patient man of the New Testament. ‘Though there were as many devils in Worms as there are tiles on the housetops, I will go in.’ That speech of Luther’s, though uttered with a little too much energy, expressed the true idea of Christian patience. High above the stormy and somewhat rough determination of the servant towers, calm and gentle, and therefore stronger, the ‘patience’ of the Lord, and the whole story of His life on earth may well be regarded, from this point of view, as the record of His unfaltering and meek continuance in obedience to the Father’s will, in the face of opposition and suffering. His life, to use a secular word, was the most ‘heroic’ ever lived. Before Him was the thing to be done, and between Him and it were massed such battalions of antagonism and evil as never were mustered in opposition to any other saintly soul upon earth. And through all He went persistently, with ‘His face like a flint,’ of set purpose to do the work for which He came into the world.

But there was no fierce antagonism about Jesus Christ’s patience. His persistence, in spite of all obstacles and opposition, was the persistence of meekness, the heroism of gentleness. Patience in the lower sense of quiet endurance, as well as in the higher, of heroic scorn of all that opposition could do to hinder the realization of the Father’s will, is deeply stamped upon His life. We think of His gentleness, of His meekness, of His humility, of all the softer, and, as men insolently call them, the more feminine virtues in Christ’s character. But I do not know that we often enough think of what men, with equal insolence and shortsightedness, call the masculine virtues of which, too, He is the great Exemplar, that magnificent, unparalleled, and perfectly quiet and unostentatious invincibility of will and heroism of settled resolve with which He pressed towards the mark, though the mark was a cross.

This is the theme of the gospel story, and this Apocalypse of a gentle Christ, whose gentleness was the gentleness of inflexible strength, this story, or word ‘of My patience,’ is that which we are to lay upon our hearts. For that name is fitly applied to the gospel, inasmuch as it enjoins upon every one of us in our degree, and in regard of the far easier tasks and slighter antagonisms with which we have to do and \ which we have to meet, to make Christ’s persistence the model for our lives. So the whole morality of Christianity may almost be gathered up into this one expression, which sets forth at once the law and the supreme motive for fulfilling it. Unwelcome and hard tasks are made easy and delightsome when we hear Jesus say, ‘The record of My patience is thy pattern and thy power. Be like Me, and thou shalt be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.’

II. Notice, next, the keepers of this word.

The metaphor represents to us the action of one who, possessing some valuable thing, puts it into some safe place, takes great care of it, carries it very near to the heart, perhaps within the robe, and watches tenderly and jealously over it. So ‘thou hast kept the word of My patience.’

There are two ways by which Christians are to do that; the one is by inwardly cherishing the word and the other by outwardly obeying it. There should be both the inward counting it dear and precious, and treasuring it in mind and heart, as the Psalmist says, ‘Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I should not offend against Thee,’ and also the regulation of conduct which we more usually regard as keeping the commandment.

Let me say a word, and it shall only be a word, about each of these two things. I am afraid that the plain practical duty of reading their Bibles is getting to be a much neglected duty amongst professing Christian people. I do not know how you are to keep the words of Christ’s patience in your hearts and minds if you do not read them. I am afraid that most Christian congregations nowadays do their systematic and prayerful study of the New Testament by proxy, and expect their ministers to read the Bible for them and to tell them what is there. A mother will sometimes take a morsel of her child’s food into her mouth, and half masticate it first before she passes it to the little gums. I am afraid that newspapers, and circulating libraries, and magazines, and little religious books - very good in their way, but secondary and subordinate - have taken the place that our fathers used to have filled by honest reading of God’s Word. And that is one of the reasons, and I believe it is a very large part of the reason, why so many professing Christians do not come up to this standard; and instead of ‘running with patience the race that is set before them,’ walk in an extraordinarily leisurely fashion, by fits and starts, and sometimes with long intervals, in which they sit still on the road, and are not a mile farther at a year’s end than they were when it began. There never was, and there never will be, vigorous Christian life unless there be an honest and habitual study of God’s Word. There is no short-cut by which Christians can reach the end of the race. Foremost among the methods by which their eyes are enlightened and their hearts rejoiced are application to the eyes of their understanding of that eye-salve, and the hiding in their hearts of that sweet solace and fountain of gladness, the Word of Christ’s patience, the revelation of God’s will. The trees whose roots are laved and branches freshened by that river have leaves that never wither, and all their blossoms set.

But the word is kept by continual obedience in action as well as by inward treasuring. Obviously the inward must precede the outward. Unless we can say with the Psalmist, ‘Thy word have I hid in my heart,’ we shall not be able to say with him, ‘I have not hid Thy righteousness within my heart.’ If the Word of the Lord is to sound like a rousing trumpet-blast from our lives, it must first be heard in secret by us, and its music linger in our listening hearts.

We need this brave persistence in daily life if we are not to fail wholly. Very instructive in this aspect are many of the Scripture allusions to ‘patience’ as essential to the various virtues and blessednesses of Christian life.

For example, In your patience ye shall win your souls.’ Only he who presses right on, in spite of all that externals can do to hinder him from realizing his conviction of duty, is the lord of his own spirit. All others are slaves to something or some one. By persistence in the paths of Christian service, no matter what around or within us may rise up to hinder us, and by such persistence only, do we become masters of ourselves. Many a man has to walk, as in the old days of ordeal by fire, over a road strewn with hot ploughshares, to get to the place where God will have him to be. And if he does not flinch, though he may reach the goal with scorched feet, he will reach it with a quiet heart, and possess himself, whatever he may lose.

Again, the Lord Himself says to us, ‘These are those which bring forth fruit with patience.’ There is no growth of Christian character, no flowering of Christian conduct, no setting of incipient virtues into the mature fruit of settled habit, without this persistent adherence in the face of all antagonism, to the dictates of conscience and the commandment of Christ. It is the condition of bringing forth fruit, some thirty, some sixty, and some a hundredfold.

Again the Scripture says, demanding this same persistence, gentle abstinence, and sanctified stiffneckedness, ‘Run with perseverance the race that is set before you.’ There is no progress in the Christian course, no accomplishing the stadia through which we have to pass, except there be this dogged keeping at what we know to be duty, in spite of all the reluctance of trembling limbs, and the cowardice of our poor hearts.

III. We have here Christ keeping the keepers of His word.

‘Because thou hast kept the word of My patience I will keep thee from,’ and in, ‘the hour of temptation.’ There is a beautiful reciprocity, as I said. Christ will do for us as we have done with His word. Christ still does in heaven what He did upon earth. In the great high priest's prayer recorded by the evangelist who was also the amanuensis of these letters from heaven, Jesus said, 'I kept them in Thy name which Thou hast given Me, and I guarded them, and not one of them perished.' And now, speaking from heaven, He continues His earthly guardianship, and bids us trust that, just as when with His followers here, He sheltered them as a parent bird does its young, fluttering round them, bearing them up on its wings, and drew them within the sacred circle of His sweet, warm, strong, impregnable protection, so, if we keep the word of His patience, cherishing the story of His life in our hearts, and humbly seeking to mould our lives after its sweet and strong beauty, He will keep us in the midst of, and also from, the hour of temptation. The Christ in heaven is as near each trembling heart and feeble foot, to defend and to uphold, as was the Christ upon earth.

He does not promise to keep us at a distance from temptation, so as that we shall not have to face it, but from means, as any that can look at the original will see, that He will save us out of it, we having previously been in it, so as that 'the hour of temptation' shall not be the hour of falling. Yes! the man whose heart is filled with the story of Christ's patience, and who is seeking to keep that word, will walk in the midst of the fire-damp of this mine that we live in, as with a safety lamp in his hand, and there will be no explosion. If we keep our hearts in the love of God, and in that great word of Christ's patience, the gunpowder in our nature will be wetted, and when a spark falls upon it there will be no flash. Outward circumstances will not be emptied of their power to tempt, but our susceptibility will be deadened in proportion as we keep the word of the patience of the patient Christ. The lustre of earthly brightnesses will have no glory by reason of the glory that excelleth, and when set by the side of heavenly gifts will show black against their radiance, as would electric light between the eye and the sun.

It is great to wrestle with temptation and fling it, but it is greater to be so strong that it never grasps us.

It is great to be victor over passions and lusts, and to put our heel upon them and suppress them, but it is better to be so near the Master that they have crouched before Him, and 'the lion eats straw like the ox.'

To such blessed state we attain if, and only if, we draw near to Him and in daily communion with Him secure that the secret of His patient continuance in well-doing is repeated in us. So we shall be lifted above temptation. That great word of His patience, and the spirit which goes with the word, will be for us like the cotton wool that chemists put into the flask which they wish to seal hermetically from the approach of microscopic germs of corruption. It will let all the air through, but it will keep all the infinitesimal animated points of poison out. It will filter the most polluted atmosphere, and bring it to our lungs clean and clear. 'If thou keep the word of My patience I will keep thee from the hour of temptation.'

17)Revelation 3:11

Revelation

'THY CROWN'

Rev. 3:11.

The Philadelphian Church, to which these stirring words are addressed, is the only church of the seven in which there was nothing that Christ rebuked. It had no faults, or at least no recorded faults, either of morals or of doctrine. It had had no great storm of persecution beating upon it, although one was threatened. But yet, although thus free from blame and occasion for censure, it was not beyond the need of stimulating exhortation, not beyond the need of wholesome warning, not beyond the reach of danger and possible loss. 'That no man take thy crown' - as long as Christian men are here, so long have they to watch against the tendency of received truth to escape their hold because of its very familiarity; of things that are taken for granted to become impotent and to slip, and so for the crown to fall from the head, which is all unconscious of its discrowned shame.

We have here, then, three things: 'thy crown'; the possibility of losing it; the way to secure it.

I. Now, as to the first.

It contributes to the understanding of the meaning of the metaphor to remember that the crown spoken of here is not the symbol of royalty, not the golden or other circlet which kings and emperors wore, but the floral wreath or garland which in ancient social life played many parts: was laid on the temples of the victors in the games, was wreathed around the locks of the conquering general, was placed upon the anointed heads of brides and of f casters, was the emblem of victory, of festivity, of joy. And it is this crown, not the symbol of dominion, but the symbol of a race accomplished and a conquest won, an outward and visible sign of a festal day, with all its abundance and ease and abandonment to delight, which the apocalyptic vision holds out before the Christian man.

The crown is a common figure all through the New Testament, and it may help us to grasp the fullness of the meaning of the metaphor if we just recall in a sentence or two the various instances of its occurrence. It is spoken about under three designations, as a crown of ‘life,’ of righteousness,’ of ‘glory’; the first and last designating it in reference to that of which it may be supposed to consist, namely, life and glory; the centre one designating it rather in reference to that of which it is the reward. The righteousness of earth is crowned by the more abundant life and the more radiant glory of the future. The roses that were wreathed round the flushed temples of the revelers withered and faded, and their petals drooped in the hot atmosphere of the banqueting hall, laden with fumes of wine. The parsley wreath, that was twined round the locks of the young athlete who had been victorious in the games, was withered to-morrow and cast into the dust heap. ‘But,’ says one of the New Testament writers, ‘the crown of glory fadeth not away.’ And the other wreaths, intrinsically worthless, were only symbols of victory and honour, but this itself is full of preciousness and of substance and of power.

So the crown is the reward of righteousness, and consists of life so full that our present experience contrasted with it may almost be called an experience of death; of glory so flashing and wonderful that, if our natures were not strengthened, it would be an ‘exceeding weight of glory’ that would crush them down, and upon all the life and all the glory is stamped the solemn signature of eternity, and they are for ever. Now, says my text to each Christian, all this, the consequence and reward of gore toil, faithfully done, and of effort that strains every muscle in the race - the festal participation in life and glory for evermore - is ‘thy crown’; not because thou hast it now, but because, as sure as God is God and righteousness is righteousness, nothing can prevent the man who, holding by Jesus Christ, has become possessor of the righteousness, which is of God by faith, from receiving that great reward. It is his already in the Divine destination; his by the immutable laws of proprietorship in God’s kingdom; his upon the simple condition of his continuing to be what he is. Like Peter’s saying about the inheritance ‘reserved in heaven for you,’ this representation treats the perfect future blessedness of us who are toiling and struggling here as already in existence and waiting for us, beyond the dust of the wrestling-ground, and the fury of the battlefield. Of course that is not meant to be taken in prosaic literality. The place ‘may indeed be’ prepared ‘in which that blessedness is to be realized, but the blessedness itself can have no existence apart from those who possess it. The purpose of the representations is to put in the strongest possible way the absolute certainty of the heads that now are pressed by the helmet being then encircled with the crown, and of the strangers scattered abroad reaching and resting for ever in the Promised Land to which they journey. The reward is as sure as if each man’s crown, with his name engraved upon it, lay safely guarded in the treasure-house of God.

The light of that great certainty should ever draw our weary eyes, weary of false glitter and vulgar gauds. The assurance of that joy unspeakable makes the best joy here. Future blessedness, apprehended by the long arm of faith, brings present blessedness. The gladness and the power of the Christian life largely depend on the habitual beholding, with yearning and hope, of ‘the King in His beauty and of the land that is very far off,’ and yet so near, and of our own proper portion of the inheritance of the saints in light.’ Christian men, it much concerns the vigour of your Christianity that you should take time and pains to cultivate the habit of looking forward through all the mists and darkness of this petty and unsubstantial present, and of thinking of that future as a certainty more certain than the contingencies of earth and as a present possession, more real by far than any of the fleeting shadows which we proudly and falsely call our own. They pass from hand to hand. They are mine to-day, another’s tomorrow. I have no real possession of them while they were called mine. We truly possess but two possessions - God and ourselves. We possess both by the same way of giving ourselves to God in love and obedience; and of such surrender and possession the crown is the perfecting and the reward. ‘Thy crown’ will fit no temples but thine. It is part of thy perfected self, and certain to be thine, if thou hold fast the beginning of thy confidence firm unto the end.

II. Note next the grim possibility of losing the crown.

‘That no man take’ it. Of course we are not to misunderstand the contingency shadowed here, as if it meant that some other person could filch away and put on his own head the crown which once was destined for us, which is a sheer impossibility and absurdity. No man would think to win heaven by stealing another’s right of entrance there. No man could, if he were to try. The results of character cannot be transferred. Nor are we to suppose reference to the machinations of tempters, either human or diabolic, who deliberately and consciously try to rob Christians of their religion here and thereby of their reward hereafter. But it is only too possible that men and things round about us may upset this certainty that we have been considering, and that though the crown be ‘thine.’ it may never come to be thy actual possession in the future, nor ever be worn upon thine own happy head in the festival of the skies.

That is the solemn side of the Christian life, that it is to be conceived of as lived amidst a multitude of men and things that are always trying to make us unfit to receive that crown of righteousness. They cannot work directly upon it. It has no existence except as the efflorescence of our own character crowned by God’s approbation. It is an ideal thing; but they can work upon us, and if they stain our heads with foul dust, then they make them unfit for our crown. So here are we, Christian men and women! in a world all full of things that tend and may be regarded as desiring to rob us of our crowns. This is not the way in which we usually think of the temptations that assail us. For instance, there comes some sly and whispering one to us and suggests pleasant hours, bought at a very small sacrifice of principle; delights for sense or for ambition, or for one or other of the passions of our nature, and all looks very innocent, and the harm seems to be comparatively small. Ah! let us look a little bit deeper. That temptation that seems to threaten so little and to promise so much is really trying to rob us of the crown. If we would walk through life with this thought in our minds, how it would strip off the masks of all these temptations that buzz about us! If once we saw their purpose and understood the true aim of the flattering lies which they tell us, should we not see over the lies, and would not they lose their power to deceive us? Be sure - and oh! let us hold fast by the illuminating conviction when the temptations come - be sure that, with all their glozing words and false harlot kisses, their meaning is this, to rob us of the bright and precious thing that is most truly ours; and so let us put away the temptations, and say to them, ‘Ah I you come as a friend, but I know your meaning; and forewarned is forearmed.’

III. Lastly, note the way to secure the crown which is ours.

‘Hold fast that thou hast.’ For if you do not hold it fast, it will slip. The metaphor is a plain one - if a man has got something very precious, he grips it with a very tight hand. The slack hand will very soon be an empty hand. Anybody walking through the midst of a crowd of thieves with a bag of gold in charge would not hold it dangling from a finger-tip, but he would put all five round it, and wrap the strings about his wrist.

The first shape which we may give to this exhortation is - hold fast by what God has given in His gospel; hold fast His Son, His truth. His grace. Use honestly and diligently your intellect to fathom and to keep firm hold of the great truths and principles of the gospel. Use your best efforts to keep your wandering hearts and mobile wills fixed and true to the revealed love of the great Lover of souls, which has been given to you in Christ, and to obey Him. You have got a Christ that is worth keeping, see to it that you keep Him, and do not let Him slip away out of your fingers. When the storms come a wise captain lashes all the light articles, and then they are safe. You and I have to struggle through many a storm, and all the loose stuff on deck will be washed off or blown away long before we get into calm water. Lash it by meditation, by faithful obedience, and by constant communion, and hold fast the Christian gospel, and, in the Christ whom the gospel reveals, the spiritual life that you possess.

But there is another aspect of the same commandment which applies not so much to that which is given us in the objective revelation and manifestation of God in Christ, as to our own subjective degrees of progress in the appropriation of Christ, and in likeness to Him. And possibly that is what my text more especially means, for just a little before, the Lord has said to that Church, ‘Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept My word, and hast not denied My name.’ ‘Thou hast a little strength . . . hold fast that which thou hast.’ See to it that thy present attainment in the Christian life, though it may be but rudimentary and incomplete, is at least kept. Cast not away your confidence, hold fast the beginning of your confidence firm, with a tightened hand, unto the end. For if we keep what we have, it will grow. Progress is certain, if there be persistence. If we do not let it go, it will increase and multiply in our possession. In all branches of study and intellectual pursuit, and in all branches of daily life, to hold fast what we have, and truly to possess what we possess, is the certain means to make our wealth greater. And so it is in the Christian life. Be true to the present knowledge, and use it, as it is meant to be used, and it will daily increase. ‘Hold fast that thou hast.’ Thou hast the ‘strength’; thou hast not yet the crown. Keep what God has committed to you, and God will keep what He has reserved for you.

And so the sure way to get the crown is to keep the faith; and then the life and the glory, which are but the outcome and the fruit of the faithful, persistent life here, are as sure as the cycles of the heavens, or as the throne and the will of God. Men and things and devils may try to take your crown from you, but nobody can deprive you of it but yourself. Hold fast the present possession, and make it really your own, and the future crown which God has promised to all who love and thereby possess Him will, in due time, be twined around your head. He who has and holds fast Christ here cannot fail of the crown yonder.

18)Revelation 3:12

Revelation

VI. - THE VICTOR’S LIFE-NAMES

Rev. 3:12.

The eyes which were as a flame of fire saw nothing to blame in the Philadelphian Church, and the lips out of which came the two-edged sword that cuts through all hypocrisy to the discerning of the thoughts and intents of the heart, spoke only eulogium- ‘Thou hast kept My word, and hast not denied My name.’ But however mature and advanced may be Christian experience, it is never lifted above the possibility of temptation; so, with praise, there came warning of an approaching hour which would try the mettle of this unblamed Church. Christ’s reward for faithfulness is not immunity from, but strength in, trial and conflict. As long as we are in the world there will be forces warring against us; and we shall have to fight our worst selves and the tendencies which tempt us to prefer the visible to the unseen, and the present to the future. So the Church which had no rebuke received the solemn injunction: ‘Hold fast that thou hast; let no man take thy crown.’ There is always need of struggle, even for the most mature, if we would keep what we have. The treasure will be filched from slack hands; the crown will be stricken from a slumbering head. So it is not inappropriate that the promise to this Church should be couched in the usual terms, ‘to him that overcometh,’ and the conclusion to be drawn is the solemn and simple one that the Christian life is always a conflict, even to the end.

The promise contained in my text presents practically but a twofold aspect of that future blessedness; the one expressed in the clause, ‘I will make him a pillar’; the other expressed in the clauses referring to the writing upon him of certain names. I need not do more than again call attention to the fact that here, as always, Jesus Christ represents Himself as not only allocating the position and determining the condition, but as shaping, and moulding, and enriching the characters of the redeemed, and ask you to ponder the question. What in Him does that assumption involve?

Passing on, then, to the consideration of these two promises more closely, let us deal with them singly. There is, first, the steadfast pillar; there is, second, the threefold inscription.

I. The steadfast pillar.

Now I take it that the two clauses which refer to this matter are closely connected. ‘I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go no more out.’ In the second clause the figure is dropped, and the point of the metaphor is brought out more clearly. The stately column in the temples, with which these Philadelphian Christians, dwelling in the midst of the glories of Greek architecture, were familiar, might be, and often has been, employed as a symbol of many things. Here it cannot mean the office of sustaining a building, or pre-eminence above others, as it naturally lends itself sometimes to mean. For instance, the Apostle Paul speaks of the three chief apostles in Jerusalem, and says that they ‘seemed to be pillars’; by which pre-eminence and the office of maintaining the Church are implied. But that obviously cannot be the special application of the figure here, inasmuch as we cannot conceive of even redeemed men sustaining that temple in the heavens, and also inasmuch as the promise here is perfectly universal, and is given to all that overcome - that is to say, to all the redeemed. We must, therefore, look in some other direction. Now, the second of the two clauses which are thus linked together seems to me to point in the direction in which we are to look. ‘He shall go no more out.’ A pillar is a natural emblem of stability and permanence, as poets in many tongues and in many lands have felt it to be. I remember one of our own quaint English writers who speaks of men who are bottomed on the basis of a firm faith, mounting up with the clear shaft of a shining life, and having their persevering tops garlanded about, according to God’s promise, ‘I will give thee a crown of life.’ That idea of stability, of permanence, of fixedness, is the one that is prominent in the metaphor here.

But whilst the general notion is that of stability and permanence, do not let us forget that it is permanence and stability in a certain direction, for the pillar is ‘in the temple of My God.’ Now I would recall to you the fact that in other parts of Scripture we find the present relation of Christian men to God set forth under a similar metaphor: ‘Ye are the temple of the living God’; or again, ‘In whom ye are builded for a habitation of God through the Spirit’; or again, in that great word which is the foundation of all such symbols, ‘We will come and make our abode with Him.’ So that the individual believer and the community of all such are, even here and now, the dwelling-place of God. And whilst there are ideas of dignity and grace attaching to the metaphor of the pillar, the underlying meaning of it is substantially that the individual souls of redeemed men shall be themselves parts of, and collectively shall constitute, the temple of God in the heavens.

This book of the Apocalypse has several points of view in regard to that great symbol. It speaks, for instance, of there being no temple therein,’ by which is meant the cessation of all material and external worships such as belong to earth. It speaks also of God and the Lamb as themselves being ‘the Temple thereof.’ And here we have the converse idea that not only may we think of the redeemed community as dwelling in God and Christ, but of God and Christ as dwelling in the redeemed community. The promise, then, is of a thrilling consciousness that God is in us, a deeper realization of His presence, a fuller communication of His grace, a closer touch of Him, far beyond anything that we can conceive of on earth, and yet being the continuation and the completion of the earthly experiences of those in whom God dwells by their faith, their love, and their obedience. We have nothing to say about the new capacities for consciousness of God which may come to redeemed souls when the veils of flesh and sense, and the absorption in the present drop away. "We have nothing to say, because we know nothing about the new manifestations and more intimate touches which may correspond to these new capacities. There are vibrations of sounds too rapid or too slow for our ears as at present organized to catch. But whether these be too shrill or too deep to be heard, if the ear were more sensitive there would be sound where there is silence, and music in the waste places. So with new organs, with new capacities, there will be a new and a deeper sense of the presence of God; and utterances of His lips too profound to be caught by us now, or too clear and high to be apprehended by our limited sense, will then thunder into melody and with clear notes sound His praises. There are rays of light in the spectrum, at both ends of it, as yet not perceptible to human eyes; but then ‘we shall, in Thy light, see light ‘flaming higher and deeper than we can do now. We dwell in God here if we dwell in Christ, and we dwell in Christ if He dwell in us, by faith and love. But in the heavens the indwelling shall be more perfect, and transcend all that we know now.

The special point in regard to which that perfection is expressed here is to be kept prominent. ‘He shall go no more out.’ Permanence, and stability, and uninterruptedness in the communion and consciousness of an indwelling God, is a main element in the glory and blessedness of that future life. Stability in any fashion comes as a blessed hope to us, who know the curse of constant change, and are tossing on the unquiet waters of life. It is blessed to think of a region where the seal of permanence will be set on all delights, and our blessedness will be like the bush in the desert, burning and yet not consumed. But the highest form of that blessedness is the thought of stable, uninterrupted, permanent communion with God and consciousness of His dwelling in us. The contrast forces itself upon us between that equable and unvarying communion and the ups and downs of the most uniform Christian life here - to-day thrilling in every nerve with the sense of God, to-morrow dead and careless. Sometimes the bay is filled with flashing waters that leap in the sunshine; sometimes, when the tide is out, there is only a long stretch of grey and oozy mud. It shall not be always so. Like lands on the equator, where the difference between midsummer and midwinter is scarcely perceptible, either in length of day or in degree of temperature, that future will be a calm continuance, a uniformity which is not monotony, and a stability which does not exclude progress.

I cannot but bring into contrast with that great promise he shall go no more out 'an incident in the gospels. Christ and the Twelve were in the upper room, and He poured out His heart to them, and their hearts burned within them. But they went out to the Mount of Olives '- He to Gethsemane and to Calvary; Judas to betray and Peter to deny; all to toil and suffer, and sometimes to waver in their faith. 'He shall go no more out.' Eternal glory and unbroken communion is the blessed promise to the victor who is made by Christ 'a pillar in the temple of My God.'

II. Now, secondly, notice the threefold inscription.

We have done with the metaphor of the pillar altogether. We are not to think of anything so incongruous as a pillar stamped with writing, a monstrosity in Grecian architecture. But it is the man himself on whom Christ is to write the threefold name. The writing of a name implies ownership and visibility.

So the first of the triple inscriptions declares that the victor shall be conspicuously God's. 'I will write upon him the name of My God.' There may possibly be an allusion to the golden plate which flamed in the front of the high priest's mitre, and on which was written the unspoken name of Jehovah. But whether that be so or no, the underlying ideas are these two which I have already referred to - complete ownership, and that manifested in the very front of the character.

How do we possess one another? How do we belong to God? How does God belong to us? There is but one way by which a spirit can possess a spirit - by love, which leads to self-surrender and to practical obedience. And if - as a man writes his name in his books, as a farmer brands on his sheep and oxen the marks that express his ownership - on the redeemed there is written the name of God, that means, whatever else it may mean, perfect love, perfect self -surrender, perfect obedience, that the whole nature shall be owned, and know itself owned, and be glad to be owned, by God. That is the perfecting of the Christian relationship which is begun here on earth. And if we here yield ourselves to God and depart from that foolish and always frustrated attempt to be our own masters and owners, so escaping the misery and burden of self -hood, and entering into the liberty of the children of God, we shall reach that blessed state in which there will be no murmuring and incipient rebellions, no disturbance of our inward submission, no breach in our active obedience, no holding back of anything that we have or are; but we shall be wholly God's - that is, wholly possessors of ourselves, and blessed thereby. 'He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life, the same shall find it.' And that Name will be stamped on us that every eye that looks, whoever they may be, shall know 'whose we are and whom we serve.'

The second inscription declares that the victor conspicuously belongs to the City. Our time will not allow of my entering at all upon the many questions that gather round that representation of 'the New Jerusalem which cometh down out of heaven.' I must content myself with simply pointing to the possible allusion here to the promise in the preceding letter to Sardis. There we were told that the victor's name should not 'be blotted out of the Book of Life'; and that Book of Life suggested the idea of the burgess-roll of the city, as well as the register of those that truly live. Here the same thought is suggested by a converse metaphor. The name of the victor is written on the rolls of the city, and the name of the city is stamped on the forehead of the victor. That is to say, the affinity which, even here and now, has knit men who believe in Jesus Christ to an invisible order, where is their true mother-city and metropolis, will then be uncontradicted by any inconsistencies, unobscured by the necessary absorption in daily duties and transient aims and interests, which often veils to others, and renders less conscious to ourselves, our true belonging to the city beyond the sea. The name of the city shall be stamped upon the victor. That, again, is the perfecting and the continuation of the central heart of the Christian life here, the consciousness that we are come to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and belong to another order of things than the visible and material around us.

The last of the triple inscriptions declares that the victor shall be conspicuously Christ’s. ‘I will write upon him My new name.’ All the three inscriptions link themselves, not with earlier, but with later parts of this most artistically constructed book of the Revelation; and in a subsequent portion of it we read of a new name of Christ’s, which no man knoweth save Himself. "What is that new name? It is an expression for the sum of the new revelations of what He is, which will flood the souls of the redeemed when they pass from earth. That new name will not obliterate the old one - God forbid! It will not do away with the ancient, earth-begun relation of dependence and faith and obedience. ‘Jesus Christ is the same . . . for ever’: and His name in the heavens, as upon earth, is Jesus the Saviour. But there are abysses in Him which no man moving amidst the incipiencies and imperfections of this infantile life of earth can understand. Not until we possess can we know the depths of wisdom and knowledge, and of all other blessed treasures which are stored in Him. Here we touch but the fringe of His great glory; yonder we shall penetrate to its central flame.

That new name no man fully knows, even when he has entered on its possession and carries it on his forehead; for the infinite Christ, who is the manifestation of the infinite God, can never be comprehended, much less exhausted, even by the united perceptions of a redeemed universe; but for ever and ever, more and more will well out from Him. His name shall last as long as the sun, and blaze when the sun himself is dead.

‘I will write upon him My new name’ was said to a church, and while the eulogium was, ‘Thou hast not denied My name.’ If we are to pierce the heart and the glory there, we must begin on its edges here. If the name is to be on our foreheads then, we must bear in our body the marks of the Lord Jesus - the brand of ownership impressed on the slave’s palm. In the strength of the name we can overcome; and if we overcome. His name will hereafter blaze on our foreheads - the token that we are completely His for ever, and the pledge that we shall be growingly made like unto Him.

19)Revelation 3:15

Revelation

LAODICEA

Rev. 3:15; Rev. 3:19.

We learn from Paul's Epistle to the Colossians that there was a very close connection between that Church and this at Laodicea. It is a probable conjecture that a certain Archippus, who is spoken of in the former Epistle, was the bishop or pastor of the Laodicean Church. And if, as seems not unlikely, the 'angels' of these Asiatic churches were the presiding officers of the same, then it is at least within the limits of possibility that the 'angel of the Church at Laodicea,' who received the letter, was Archippus.

The message that was sent to Archippus by Paul was this: 'Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received of the Lord, that thou fulfill it.' And if thirty years had passed, and then Archippus got this message: 'Thou art neither cold nor hot,' you have an example of how a little negligence in manifest duty on the part of a Christian man may gradually grow and spread, like a malignant cancer, until it has eaten all the life out of him, and left him a mere shell. The lesson is for us all.

But whether we see an individual application in these words or no, certainly the 'angel of the church' is spoken of in his character of a representative of the whole Church. So, then, this Laodicean community had no works. So far had declension gone that even Christ's eye could see no sign of the operation of the religious principle in it; and all that He could say about it was, 'thou art neither cold nor hot.'

It is very remarkable that the first and the last letters to the seven Churches deal with the same phase of religious declension, only that the one is in the germ and the other is fully developed. The Church of Ephesus had still works abundant, receiving and deserving the warm-hearted commendation of the Master, but they had 'left their first love.' The Church at Laodicea had no works, and in it the disease had sadly, and all but universally, spread.

Now then, dear friends, I intend, not in the way of rebuke, God knows, but in the way of earnest remonstrance and appeal to you professing Christians, to draw some lessons from these solemn words.

I. I pray you to look at that loving rebuke of the faithful Witness: ‘Thou art neither cold nor hot.’

"We are manifestly there in the region of emotion. The metaphor applies to feeling. We talk, for instance, about warmth of feeling, ardour of affection, fervour of love, and the like. And the opposite, cold, expresses obviously the absence of any glow of a true living emotion.

So, then, the persons thus described are Christian people [for their Christianity is presupposed], with very little, though a little, warmth of affection and glow of Christian love and consecration.

Further, this defectiveness of Christian feeling is; accompanied with a large amount of self-complacency: - ‘Thou sayest I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.’ Of course it is so. A numbed limb feels no pain. As cold increases the sensation of cold, and of everything else, goes away. And a sure mark of defective religious emotion is absolute unconsciousness on the man’s part that there is anything the matter with him. All of you that have no sense that the indictment applies to you, by the very fact show that it applies most especially and most tragically to you. Self-complacency diagnoses spiritual cold, and is an inevitable and a constantly accompanying symptom of a deficiency of religious emotion.

Then again, this deficiency of warmth is worse than absolute zero. ‘I would thou wert cold or hot.’ That is no spurt of impatience on the part of the ‘true Witness.’ It is for their sake that He would they were cold or hot. And why? Because there is no man more hopeless than a man on whom the power of Christianity has been brought to bear, and has failed in warming and quickening him. If you were cold, at absolute zero, there would be at least a possibility that when you were brought in contact with the warmth you might kindle. But you have been brought in contact with the warmth, and this is the effect. Then what is to be done with you? There is nothing more that can be brought to bear on your consciousness to make you anything higher or better than you are, than what you have already had in operation in your spiritual life. And if it has failed, all God’s armoury is empty, and He has shot His last bolt, and there is nothing more left. ‘I would thou wert cold or hot.’

Now, dear friends, is that our condition? I am obliged sadly to say that I believe it is to a fearful extent the condition of professing Christendom to-day. ‘Neither cold nor hot!’ Look at the standard of Christian life round about us. Let us look into our own hearts. Let us mark how wavering the line is between the Church and the world; how little upon our side of the line there is of conspicuous consecration and unworldliness; how entirely in regard of an enormous mass of professing Christians, the maxims that are common in the world are their maxims; and the sort of life that the world lives is the sort of life that they live. ‘Oh! thou that art named the House of Israel,’ as one of the old prophets wailed out, ‘is the Spirit of the Lord straitened? Are these His doings?’ And so I would say, look at your churches and mark their feebleness, the slow progress of the gospel among them, the low lives that the bulk of us professing Christians are living, and answer the question: Is that the operation of a Divine Spirit that comes to transform and to quicken everything into His own vivid and flaming life? or is it the operation of our own selfishness and worldliness, crushing down and hemming in the power that ought to sway us? Brethren! it is not for me to cast condemnation, but it is for each of us to ask ourselves the question: Do we not hear the voice of the ‘faithful and true Witness’ saying to us, ‘I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot’?

II. And now will you let me say a word next as to some of the plain causes of this lukewarmness of spiritual life?

Of course the tendency to it is in us all. Take a bar of iron out of the furnace on a winter day, and lay it down in the air, and there is nothing more wanted. Leave it there, and very soon the white heat will change into livid dullness, and then there will come a scale over it, and in a short time it will be as cold as the frosty atmosphere around it. And so there is always a refrigerating process acting upon us, which needs to be counteracted by continual contact with the fiery furnace of spiritual warmth, or else we are cooled down to the degree of cold around us. But besides this universally operating cause there are many others which affect us.

Laodicea was a great commercial city, an emporium of trade, which gives especial point and appropriateness to the loving counsel of the context. ‘I advise thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire.’ And Manchester life, with its anxieties, with its perplexities for many of you, with its diminished profits, and apparently diminishing trade, is a fearful foe to the warmth and reality of your Christian life. The cares of this world and the riches of this world are both amongst the thorns which choke the Word and make it unfruitful. I find fault with no man for the earnestness which he flings into his business, but I ask you to contrast this entire absorption of spirit, and the willing devotion of hours and strength to it, with the grudging, and the partial, and the transient devotion of ourselves to the religious life; and say whether the relative importance of the things seen and unseen is fairly represented by the relative amount of earnestness with which you and I pursue these respectively.

Then, again, the existence among us, or around us, of a certain widely diffused doubt as to the truths of Christianity is, illogically enough, a cause for diminished fervor on the part of the men that do not doubt them. That is foolish, and it is strange, but it is true. It is very hard for us, when so many people round about us are denying, or at least are questioning, the verities which we have been taught to believe, to keep the freshness and the fervor of our devotion to these; just as it is very difficult for a man to keep up the warmth of his body in the midst of some creeping mist that enwraps everything. So with us, the presence, in the atmosphere of doubt, depresses the vitality and the vigor of the Christian Church where it does not intensify its faith, and make it cleave more desperately to the things that are questioned. Beware, then, of unreasonably yielding so far to the influence of prevailing unbelief as to make you grasp with a slacker hand the thing which still you do not say that you doubt.

And there is another case, which I name with some hesitation, but which yet seems to me to be worthy of notice; and that is, the increasing degree to which Christian men are occupied with what we call, for want of a better name, secular things. The leaders in the political world, on both sides, in our great commercial cities, are usually professing Christians. I am the last man to find fault with any Christian man for casting himself, so far as his opportunities allow, into the current of political life, if he will take his Christianity with him, and if he will take care that he does not become a great deal more interested in elections, and in pulling the strings of a party, and in working for ‘the cause,’ than he is in working for his Master. I grudge the political world nothing that it gets of your strength, but I do grudge, for your sakes as well as for the Church’s sake, that so often the two forms of activity are supposed by professing Christians to be incompatible, and that therefore the more important is neglected, and the less important done. Suffer the word of exhortation.

And, in like manner, literature and art, and the ordinary objects of interest on the part of men who have no religion, are coming to absorb a great deal of our earnestness and our energy. I would not withdraw one iota of the culture that now prevails largely in the Christian Church. All that I plead for, dear brethren, is this, ‘Ye are the salt of the earth.’ Go where you like, and fling yourselves into all manner of interests and occupations, only carry your Master with you. And remember that if you are not salting the world, the world is putrefying you.

There I think you have some, though it be imperfect, account of the causes which operate to lower the temperature of the Christian Church in general, and of this Christian Church, and of you as individual members of it.

III. Now, further, note the loving call here to deepened earnestness.

‘Be zealous, therefore.’ The word translated, and rightly translated, zealous means literally boiling with heat. It is an exhortation to fervor. Now there is no worse thing in all this world than for a man to try to work up emotion, nothing which is so sure, sooner or later, to come to mischief, sure to breed hypocrisy and all manner of evil. If there be anything that is worse than trying to work up emotion, it is attempting to pretend it. So when our Master here says to us, ‘Be zealous, therefore,’ we must remember that zeal in a man ought to be a consequence of knowledge; and that, seeing that we are reasonable creatures, intended to be guided by our understandings, it is an upsetting of the whole constitution of a man’s nature if his heart works independently of his head. And the only way in which we can safely and wholesomely increase our zeal is by increasing our grasp of the truths which feed it.

Thus the exhortation, ‘Be zealous,’ if we come to analyze it, and to look into its basis, is this - Lay hold upon, and meditate upon, the great truths that will make your heart glow. Notice that this exhortation is a consequence, ‘Be zealous, therefore,’ and repent. Therefore, and what precedes? A whole series of considerations - such as these: ‘I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire . . . and white raiment . . . and anoint thine eyes with eye salve.’ It is to say, lay hold of the truth that Christ possesses a full store of all that you can want. Meditate on that great truth and it will kindle a flame of desire and of fruition in your hearts. ‘Be zealous, therefore.’ And again, ‘As many as I love I rebuke and chasten.’ ‘Be zealous, therefore.’ That is to say, grasp the great thought of the loving Christ, all whose dealings, even when His voice assumes severity, and His hand comes armed with a rod, are the outcome and manifestation of His love; and sink into that love, and that will make your hearts glow. ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock.’ ‘Be zealous, therefore.’ Think of the earnest, patient, long-suffering appeal which the Master makes, bearing with all our weaknesses and our shortcomings, and not suffering His gentle hand to be turned away, though the door has been so long barred and bolted in His face. And let these sweet thoughts of a Christ that gives everything, of a Christ all whose dealings are love, of a Christ who pleads with us through the barred door, and tries to get at us through the obstacles which ourselves have fastened against Him, let them draw us to Him, and kindle and keep alight-a brighter flame of consecration and of devotion in our hearts to Him. ‘Be zealous.’ Feed upon the great truths of the Gospel which kindles zeal.

Brethren, the utmost warmth is reasonable in religion. If Christianity be true, there is no measure of ardor or of consecration which is beyond the reasonable requirements of the case. We are told that ‘a sober standard of feeling in matters of religion’ is the great thing to aim at. So I say. But I would differ, perhaps, with the people that are fond of saying so, in my definition of sobriety. A sober standard is a standard of feeling in which the feeling does not outrun the facts on which it is built. Enthusiasm is disproportionate or ignorant feeling; warmth without light. A sober, reasonable feeling is the emotion which is correspondent to the truths that evoke it. And will any man tell me that any amount of earnestness, of flaming consecration, of fiery zeal, is in advance of the great truths that Christ loves me, and has given Himself for me?

IV. And now, lastly, observe the merciful call to a new beginning: ‘Repent.’

There must be a lowly consciousness of sin, a clear vision of my past shortcomings, an abhorrence of these, and, joined with that, a resolute act of mind and heart beginning a new course, a change of purpose and of the current of my being.

Repentance is sorrow for the past, blended with a resolve to paste down the old leaf and begin a new writing on a new page. Christian men have need of these fresh beginnings, and of new repentance, even as the patriarch when he came up from Egypt went to the place where ‘he builded the altar at the first and then offered sacrifice. Do not you be ashamed, Christian men and women, if you have been living low and inconsistent Christian lives in the past, to make a new beginning and to break with that past. There was never any great outburst of life in a Christian Church which was not preceded by a lowly penitence. And there is never any penitence worth naming which is not preceded by a recognition, glad, rapturous, confident as self-consciousness, of Christ’s great and infinite love to me.

Oh! if there is one thing that we want more than another to-day, it is that the fiery Spirit shall come and baptize all the churches, and us as individual members of them. What was it that finished the infidelity of the last century? Was it Paley and Butler, with their demonstrations and their books? No! it was John Wesley and Whitefield. Here is a solution, full of microscopic germs that will putrefy. Expose it to heat, raise the temperature, and you will kill all the > germs, so that you may keep it for a hundred years, and there will be no putrefaction in it. Get the temperature of the Church up, and all the evils that are eating out its life will shrivel and drop to the bottom dead. They cannot live in the heat; cold is their region. So, dear brethren, let us get near to Christ’s love until the light of it shines in our own faces. Let us get near to Christ’s love until, like coal laid upon the fire, its fervors penetrate into our substance and change even our blackness into ruddy flame. Let us get nearer to the love, and then, though the world may laugh and say, ‘He hath a devil and is mad,’ they that see more clearly will say of us: ‘The zeal of Thine house hath eaten him up,’ and the Father will say even concerning us: ‘This is My beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.’

20)Revelation 3:18

Isaiah

FLIMSY GARMENTS

Isa. 59:6. - Rev. 3:18.

The force of these words of the prophet is very obvious. He has been pouring out swift, indignant denunciation on the evil-doers in Israel; and, says he, ‘they hatch cockatrice’s eggs and spin spiders’ webs,’ pointing, as I suppose, to the patient perseverance, worthy of a better cause, which bad men will exercise in working out their plans. Then with a flash of bitter irony, led on by his imagination to say more than he had meant, he adds this scathing parenthesis, as if he said, ‘Yes, they spin spiders’ webs, elaborate toil and creeping contrivance, and what comes of it all! The flimsy foul thing is swept away by God’s besom sooner or later. A web indeed! but they will never make a garment out of it. It looks like cloth, but it is useless.’ That is the old lesson that all sin is profitless and comes to nothing.

I venture to connect with that strongly figurative declaration of the essential futility of godless living, our second text, in which Jesus uses a similar figure to express one aspect of His gifts to the believing soul. He is ready to clothe it, so that ‘being clothed, it will not be found naked.’

I. Sin clothes no man even here.

Notice in passing what a hint there is of the toil and trouble that men are so willing to take in a wrong course. Hatching and spinning both suggest protracted, sedulous labour. And then the issue of it all is- *nothing*.

Take the plainest illustrations of this truth first-the breach of common laws of morality, the indulgence, for instance, in dissipation. A man gets a certain coarse delight out of it, but what does he get besides? A weakened body, a tyrannous craving, ruined prospects, oftenest poverty and shame, the loss of self-respect and love; of moral excellences, of tastes for what is better. He is not a beast, and he cannot live for pure animalism without injuring himself.

Then take actual breaches of human laws. How seldom these ‘pay,’ even in the lowest sense. Thieves are always poor. The same experience of futility dogs all coarse and palpable breaches of morality. It is always true that ‘He that breaketh a hedge, a serpent shall bite him.’

The reasons are not far to seek. This is, on the whole, God’s world, a world of retribution. Things are, on the whole, on the side of goodness. God is in the world, and that is an element not to be left out in the calculation. Society is on the side of goodness to a large extent. The constitution of a man’s own soul, which God made, works in the same direction. Young men who are trembling on the verge of youthful yieldings to passion, are tempted to fancy that they can sow sin and not reap suffering or harm. Would that they settled it in their thoughts that he who fires a fuse must expect an explosion!

But the same rule applies to every godless form of life. Take our Manchester temptation, money or success in business. Take ambition. Take culture, literary fame. Take love and friendship. What do they all come to, if godless? I do not point to the many failures, but suppose success: would that make you a happy man? If you won what you wanted, would it be enough? What ‘garments’ for your conscience, for your sense of sin, for your infinite longings would success in any godless course provide? You would have what you wanted, and what would it bring with it? Cares and troubles and swift satiety, and not seldom incapacity to enjoy what you had won with so much toil. If you gained the prize, you would find clinging to it something that you did not bargain for, and that took most of the dazzle away from it.

II. The rags are all stripped off some day.

Death is a becoming naked as to the body, and as to all the occupations that terminate with bodily life. It necessarily involves the loss of possessions, the cessation of activities, the stripping off of self-deceptions, and exposure to the gaze of the Judge, without defence. The godless soul will ‘be found naked’ and ashamed. All ‘works of darkness,’ laden with rich blossom or juicy fruit though they have seemed to be, will then be seen to be in tragic truth ‘fruitless.’ A life’s spinning and weaving, and not a rag to cover the toiler after all! Is that ‘productive labour’?

III. Christ will clothe you.

‘White raiment.’ Pure character. Covering before the Judge. Festal robe of Victory.

‘Buy’-how? By giving up self.

21)Revelation 3:18

Revelation

CHRIST’S COUNSEL TO A LUKEWARM CHURCH

Rev. 3:18

After the scathing exposure of the religious condition of this Laodicean Church its members might have expected something sterner than ‘counsel.’ There is a world of love and pity, with a dash of irony, in the use of that softened expression. He does not willingly threaten, and He never scolds; but He rather speaks to men’s hearts and their reason, and comes to them as a friend, than addresses Himself to their fears.

Whether there be any truth or not in the old idea that these letters to the seven churches are so arranged as, when taken in sequence, to present a fore-glimpse of the successive conditions of the Church till the second coming of our Lord, it is at least a noteworthy fact that the last of them in order is the lowest in spiritual state. That church was ‘lukewarm’; neither cold ‘- untouched by the warmth of the Spirit of Christ at all - ‘nor hot’ - adequately inflamed thereby.

That is the worst sort of people to get at, and it is no want of charity to say that Laodicea is repeated in a thousand congregations, and that Laodiceans are prevalent in every congregation. All our Christian communities are hampered by a mass of loose adherents with no warmth of consecration, no glow of affection, no fervor of enthusiasm; and they bring down the temperature, as snow-covered mountains over which the wind blows make the thermometer drop on the plains. It is not for me to diagnose individual conditions, but it is for me to take note of widespread characteristics and strongly running currents; and it is for you to settle whether the characteristics are yours or not.

So I deal with Christ’s advice to a lukewarm church, and I hope to do it in the spirit of the Master who counseled, and neither scolded nor threatened.

I. Now I observe that the first need of the lukewarm church is to open its eyes to see facts.

I take it that the order in which the points of this counsel are given is not intended to be the order in which they are obeyed. I dare say there is no thought of sequence in the succession of the clauses. But if there is, I think that a little consideration will show us that that which comes last in mention is to be first in fulfilment.

Observe that the text falls into two distinct parts, and that the counsel to buy does not extend- need, and it is ordinarily read as if it did - to the last item in our Lord's advice. These Laodiceans are bid to 'buy of Him' 'gold' and 'raiment,' but they are bid to use the 'eye salve' that they 'may see.' No doubt, whatever is meant by that 'eye salve' comes from Him, as does everything else. But my point is that these people are supposed already to possess it, and that they are bid to employ it. And, taking that point of view, I think we can come to the understanding of what is meant.

No doubt the exhortation, 'anoint thine eyes with eye salve, that thou mayest see,' may be so extended as to refer to the general condition of spiritual blindness which attaches to humanity, apart from the illuminating and sight-giving work of Jesus Christ. That true Light, which lighteneth every man that cometh into the world, has a threefold office as the result of all the parts of which there comes to our darkened eyes the vision of the things that are. He reveals the objects to see; He gives the light by which we see them; and He gives us eyes to see with. He shows us God, immortality, duty, men's condition, men's hopes, and He takes from us the cataract which obscures, the shortsightedness which prevents us from beholding things that are far off and the obliquity of vision which forbids us to look steadily and straight at the things .which it is worth our while to behold. 'For judgment am I come into the world,' said He, 'that they which see not might see.' And it is possible that the general illuminating influence of Christ's mission and work, and especially the illuminating power of His Spirit dwelling in men's spirits, may be included in the thoughts of the eye salve with which we are to anoint our eyes as, whence context seems to me rather to narrow the age of the meaning of this part of our Lord's counsel. For these Laodiceans had the conceit of their own sufficing wealth, of their own prosperous religious condition, and were blind as bats to the real facts that they were miserable and poor and naked.' Therefore our Lord says: Anoint thine eyes with eye salve, that thou mayest see - recognize your true state; do not live in this dream that you are satisfactorily united to Myself, when all the while the thread of connection is so slender that it is all but snapped. Behold Me as I am, and the things that I reveal to you as they are; and then you will see yourselves as you are.'

So, then, there comes out of this exhortation this thought, that a symptom constantly accompanying the lukewarm condition is absolute unconsciousness of it. In all regions the worse a man is the less he knows it. It is the good people that know themselves to be bad; the bad ones, when they think about themselves, conceit themselves to be good. It is the men in the van of the march that feel the prick of the impulse to press farther: the laggards are quite content to stop in the rear. The higher a man climbs, in any science, or in the practice of any virtue, the more clearly he sees the unsealed peaks above him. The frost-bitten limb is quite comfortable. It is when life begins to come back into it that it tingles and aches. And so these Laodiceans were like the Jewish hero of old, who prostituted his strength, and let them shear away his locks while his lazy head lay in the harlot's lap: he went out 'to shake himself' as of old times, and knew not that the Spirit of God had departed from him. So, brethren, the man in this audience who most needs to be roused and startled into a sense of his tepid religionism is the man that least suspects the need, and would be most surprised if a more infallible and penetrating voice than mine were to come and say to him, 'Thou - thou art the man.' 'Anoint thine eyes with eye salve, that thou mayest see'; and let the light, which Christ pours upon unseen things, pour itself revealing into your hearts, that you may no longer dream of yourselves as 'rich, and increased with goods, and having need of nothing'; but may know that you are poor and blind and naked.

Another thought suggested by this part of the counsel is that the blind man must himself rub in the eye salve. Nobody else can do it for him. True! it comes, like every other good thing, from the Christ in the heavens; and, as I have already said, if we will attach specific meanings to every part of a metaphor, that 'eye salve' may be the influence of the Divine Spirit who convicts men of sin. But whatever it is, you have to apply it to your own eyes. Translate that into plain English, and it is just this, by the light of the knowledge of God and duty and human nature, which comes rushing in a flood of illumination from the central sun of Christ's mission and character, test yourselves. Our forefathers made too much of self-examination as a Christian duty, and pursued it often for mistaken purposes. But this generation makes far too light of it. Whilst I would not say to anybody, 'Poke into the dark places of your own hearts in order to find out whether you are Christian people or not,' for that will only come to diffidence and despair, I would say, 'Do not be a stranger to yourselves, but judge yourselves rigidly, by the standard of God's Word, of Christ's example, and in all your search, ask Him to give you that 'candle of the Lord,' which will shine into the dustiest corners and the darkest of our hearts, and reveal to us, if we truly wish it, all the cobwebs and unconsidered litter and rubbish, if not venomous creatures, that are gathered there. Apply the eye salve; it will be keen, it will bite; welcome the smart, and be sure that anything is good for you which takes away the veil that self-complacency casts over your true condition, and lets the light of God into the cellars and dark places of your souls.

II. The second need of the lukewarm church is the true wealth which Christ gives.

'I counsel thee to buy of Me gold tried in the fire.' Now there may be many different ways of putting the thought that is conveyed here, but I think the deepest truth of human nature is that the only wealth for a man is the possession of God. And so instead of, as many commentators do, suggesting interpretations which seem to me to be inadequate, I think we go to the root of the matter when we find the meaning of the wealth which Christ counsels us to buy of Him in the possession of God Himself, who is our true treasure and durable riches.

That wealth alone makes us paupers truly rich. For there is nothing else that satisfies a man's craving and supplies a man's needs. 'He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver, nor he that loveth abundance, with increase'; but if we have the gold of God, we are rich to all intents of bliss; and if we have Him not, if we are 'for ever roaming with a hungry heart,' and though we may have a large balance at our bankers, and much wealth in our coffers, and 'houses full of silver and gold,' we are poor indeed.

That wealth has immunity from all accidents. No possession is truly mine of which any outward contingency or circumstance can deprive me. But this wealth, the wealth of a heart enriched with the possession of God, whom it knows, loves, trusts, and obeys, this wealth is incorporated with a man's very being, and enters into the substance of his nature; and so nothing can deprive him of it. That which moth or rust can corrupt; that which thieves can break through and steal; that which is at the mercy of the accidents of a commercial community or of the fluctuations of trade; that is no wealth for a man. Only something which passes into me, and becomes so interwoven with my being as is the dye with the wool, is truly wealth for me. And such wealth is God.

The only possession which we can take with us when our nerveless hands drop all other goods, and our hearts are untwined from all other loves, is this durable riches. 'Shrouds have no pockets,' as the grim proverb has it. But the man that has God for his portion carries all his riches with him into the darkness, whilst of the man that made creatures his treasure it is written: 'His glory shall not descend after him.' Therefore, dear brethren, let us all listen to that counsel, and buy of Jesus gold that is tried in the fire.

III. The third need of a lukewarm church is the raiment that Christ gives.

The wealth which He bids us buy of Him belongs mostly to our inward life; the raiment which He proffers us to wear, as is natural to the figure, applies mainly to our outward lives, and signifies the dress of our spirits as these are presented to the world.

I need not remind you of how frequently this metaphor is employed throughout the Scriptures, both in the Old and the New Testament - from the vision granted to one of the prophets, in which he saw the high priest standing before God, clothed in filthy garments, which were taken off him by angel hands, and he draped in pure and shining vestures - down to our Lord's parable of the man that had not on the wedding garment; and Paul's references to putting off and putting on the old and the new man with his deeds. Nor need I dwell upon the great frequency with which, in this book of the Revelation, the same figure occurs. But the sum and substance of the whole thing is just this, that we can get from Jesus Christ characters that are pure and radiant with the loveliness and the candour of His own perfect righteousness. Mark that here we are not bidden to put on the garment, but to take it from His hands. True, having taken it, we are to put it on, and that implies daily effort. So my text puts this counsel in its place in the whole perspective of a combined Christian truth, and suggests the combination of faith which receives, and of effort which puts on, the garment that Christ gives. No thread of it is woven in our own looms, nor have we the making of the vesture, but we have the wearing of it.

There is nothing in the world vainer than effort after righteousness which is not based on faith. There is nothing more abnormal and divergent from the true spirit of the New Testament than faith, so-called, which is not accompanied with daily effort. On the one hand we must be contented to receive; on the other hand we must be earnest to appropriate. ‘Buy of Me gold,’ and then we are rich. ‘Buy of Me raiment,’ and then - listen to the voice that says, Put off the old man with his deeds, and put on the new man of God created in righteousness and holiness of truth.’

IV. Lastly, all supply of these needs is to be bought.

‘Buy of Me.’ There is nothing in that counsel contradictory to the great truth that ‘the gift of God is eternal life.’ That buying is explained by the great gospel invitation, long centuries before the gospel - ‘Ho! every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, . . . buy, and eat, . . . without money and without price.’ It is explained by our Lord’s twin parables of the treasure hid in a field, which, when a man had found, he went and sold all that he had and bought the field; and of the pearl of great price which, when the merchantman searching had discovered, he went and sold all that he had that he might possess the one.

For what is all that we have? Self! and we have to give away self that we may buy the riches and the robes. The only thing that is needed is to get rid, once and for all, of that conceit that we have anything that we can offer as the equivalent for what we desire. He that has opened his eyes, and sees himself as he is, poor and naked, and so comes to sue *in forma pauperis*, and abandons all trust in self, he is the man who buys of Christ the gold and the vesture. If we will thus rightly estimate ourselves, and estimating ourselves, have not only the negative side of faith, which is self-distrust, but the positive, which is absolute reliance on Him, we shall not ask in vain. He counsels us to buy, and if we take His advice and come, saying, ‘Nothing in my hand I bring,’ He will not stultify Himself by refusing to give us what He has bid us ask. ‘What things were given to me; those I counted loss for Christ. Yea! doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.’ If we, with opened eyes, go to Him thus, we shall come away from Him enriched and clothed, and say, ‘My soul shall be joyful in my God, for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation; He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness.’

22)Revelation 3:20

Revelation

CHRIST AT THE DOOR

Rev. 3:20.

Many of us are familiar, I dare say, with the devoutly imaginative rendering of the first part of these wonderful words, which we owe to the genius of a living painter. In it we see the fast shut door, with rusted hinges, all overgrown with rank, poisonous weeds, which tell how long it has been closed. There stands, amid the night dews and the darkness, the patient Son of man, one hand laid on the door, the other bearing a light, which may perchance flash through some of its chinks. In His face are love repelled, and pity all but wasted; in the touch of His hand are gentleness and authority.

But the picture pauses, of course, at the beginning of my text, and its sequel is quite as wonderful as its first part. ‘I will come in to him, and sup with him, and he with Me.’ What can surpass such words as these? I venture to take this great text, and ask you to look with me at the three things that lie in it; the suppliant for admission; the door opened; the entrance, and the feast.

I. Think, then, first of all, of that suppliant for admission.

I suppose that the briefest explanation of my text is sufficient. Who knocks? The exalted Christ. What is the door? This closed heart of man. What does He desire? Entrance. What are His knockings and His voice? All providences; all monitions of His Spirit in man's spirit and conscience; the direct invitations of His written or spoken word; in brief, whatsoever sways our hearts to yield to Him and enthrone Him. This is the meaning, in the fewest possible words, of the great utterance of my text.

Here is a revelation of a universal truth, applying to every man and woman on the face of the earth; but more especially and manifestly to those of us who live within the sound of Christ's gospel and of the written revelations of His grace. True, my text was originally spoken in reference to the unworthy members of a little church of early believers in Asia Minor, but it passes far beyond the limits of the lukewarm Laodiceans to whom it was addressed. And the 'any man' which follows is wide enough to warrant us in stretching out the representation as far as the bounds of humanity extend, and in believing that wherever there is a closed heart there is a knocking Christ, and that all men are lightened by that Light which came into the world.

Upon that I do not need to dwell, but I desire to enforce the individual bearing of the general truth upon our own consciences, and to come to each with this message: The saying is true about thee, and at the door of thy heart Jesus Christ stands, and there His gentle, mighty hand is laid, and on it the flashes of His light shine, and through the chinks of the unopened door of thy heart comes the beseeching voice, Open! Open unto Me.' A strange reversal of the attitudes of the great and of the lowly, of the giver and of the receiver, of the Divine and of the human! Christ once said, Knock and it shall be opened unto you.' But He has taken the suppliant's place, and, standing by the side of each of us. He beseeches us that we let Him bless us, and enter in for our rest.

So, then, there is here a revelation, not only of a universal truth, but a most tender and pathetic disclosure of Christ's yearning love to each of us. What do you call that emotion which more than anything else desires that a heart should open and let it enter? We call it love when we find it in one another.

Surely it bears the same name when it is sublimed into all but infinitude, and yet it is as individualizing and specific as it is great and universal, as it is found in Jesus Christ. If it be true that He wants me, if it be true that in that great heart of His there are a thought and a wish about His relation to me, and mine to Him, then, then, each of us is grasped by a love that is like our human love, only perfected and purified from all its weaknesses.

Now we sometimes feel, I am afraid, as if all that talk about the love which Jesus Christ has to each of us was scarcely a prose fact. There is a woeful lack of belief among us in the things that we profess to believe most. You are all ready to admit, when I preach it, that it is true that Jesus Christ loves us. Have you ever tried to realize it, and lay it upon your hearts, that the sweetness and astoundingness of it may soak into you, and change your whole being? Oh! listen, not to my poor, rough notes, but to His infinitely sweet and tender melody of voice, when He says to you, as if your eyes needed to be opened to perceive it, ‘Behold! I stand at the door and knock.’

There is a revelation in the words, dear friends, of an infinite long-suffering and patience. The door has long been fastened; you and I have, like some lazy servant, thought that if we did not answer the knock, the Knocker would go away when He was weary. But we have miscalculated the elasticity and the unfailingness of that patient Christ’s lore. Rejected, He abides; spurned, He returns. There are men and women who all their lives long have known that Jesus Christ coveted their love, and yearned for a place in their hearts, and have steeled themselves against the knowledge, or frittered it away by worldliness, or darkened it by sensuality and sin. And they are once more brought into the presence of that rejected, patient, wooing Lord, who courts them for their souls, as if they were, which indeed they are, too precious to be lost, as long as there is a ghost of a chance that they may still listen to His voice. The patient Christ’s wonderfulness of long-suffering may well bow us all in thankfulness and in penitence. How often has He tapped or thundered at the door of your heart, dear friends, and how often have you neglected to open? Is it not of the Lord’s mercies that the rejected or neglected love is offered you once more? and the voice, so long deadened and deafened to your ears by the rush of passion, and the hurry of business, and the whispers of self, yet again appeals to you, as it does even through my poor translation of it.

And then, still further, in that thought of the suppliant waiting for admission there is the explanation for us all of a great many misunderstood facts in our experience. That sorrow that darkened your days and made your heart bleed, what was it but Christ's hand on the door? Those blessings which pour into your life day by day 'beseech you, by the mercies of God, that ye yield yourselves living sacrifices.' That unrest which dogs the steps of every man who has not found rest in Christ, what is it but the application of His hand to the obstinately closed door? The stings of conscience, the movements of the Spirit, the definite proclamation of His Word, even by such lips as mine, what are they all except His appeals to us? And this is the deepest meaning of joys and sorrows, of gifts and losses, of fulfilled and disappointed hopes. This is the meaning of the yearning of Christless hearts, of the stings of conscience which come to us all. 'Behold! I stand at the door and knock.' If we understood better that all life was guided by Christ, and that Christ's guidance of life was guided by His desire that He should find a place in our hearts, we should less frequently wonder at sorrows, and should better understand our blessings. /^ The boy Samuel, lying sleeping before the light in the inner sanctuary, heard the voice of God, and thought it was only the grey-bearded priest that spoke. We often make the same mistake, and confound the utterances of Christ Himself with the speech of men. Recognize who it is that pleads with you; and do not fancy that when Christ speaks it is Eli that is calling; but say, 'Speak, Lord! for Thy servant heareth.' 'Lift up your heads, O ye gates, even lift them up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.'

II. And that leads me, secondly, to ask you to look at the door opened.

I need not enlarge upon what I have already suggested, the universality of the wide promise here - 'If any man open the door'; but what I want rather to notice is that, according to this representation, 'the door' has no handle outside, and is so hinged that it opens from within, outwards. Which, being taken out of metaphor and put into fact, means this, you are the only being that can open the door for Christ to come in. The whole responsibility, brother, of accepting or rejecting God's gracious Word, which comes to you all in good faith, lies with yourself.

I am not going to plunge into theological puzzles, but I appeal to consciousness. You know as well as I do - better a great deal, for it is yourself that is in question - that at each time when your heart and conscience have been brought in contact with the offer of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, if you had liked you could have opened the door, and welcomed His entrance. And you know that nobody and nothing kept it fast except only yourselves. ‘Ye will not come to Me,’ said Christ, ‘that ye might have life.’ Men^ indeed, do pile up such mountains of rubbish against the door that it cannot be opened, but it was they that put them there; and they are responsible if the hinges are so rusty that they will not move, or the doorway is so clogged that there is no room for it to open. Jesus Christ knocks, but Jesus Christ cannot break the door open. It lies in your hands to decide whether you will take or whether you will reject that which He brings.

The door is closed, and unless there be a definite act on your parts it will not be opened, and He will not enter. So we come to this, that to do nothing is to keep your Saviour outside; and that is the way in which most men that miss Him do miss Him.

I suppose there are very few of us who have ever been conscious of a definite act by which, if I might adhere to the metaphor, we have laid hold of the door on the Inside, and held it tight lest it should be opened. But, I fear me, there are many who have sat in the inner chamber, and heard the gracious hand on the outer panel, and have kept their hands folded and their feet still, and done nothing. Ah! brethren, to do nothing is to do the most dreadful of things, for it is to keep the shut door shut in the face of Christ. No passionate antagonism is needed, no vehement rejection, no intellectual denial of His truth and His promises. If you want to ruin yourselves, you have simply to do nothing! All the dismal consequences will necessarily follow.

‘Well,’ you say, ‘but you are talking metaphors; let us come to plain facts. What do you want me to do? ‘I want you to listen to the message of an infinitely loving Christ who died on the Cross to bear the sins of the whole world, including you and me; and who now lives, pleading with each of us from heaven that we will take by simple faith, and keep by holy obedience, the gift of eternal life which He offers, and He alone can give. The condition of His entrance is simple \ trust in Him, as the Saviour of my soul. That is opening the door, and if you will do that, then, just as when you open the shutters, in comes the sunshine; just as when you lift the sluice in flows the crystal stream into the slimy, empty lock, so - I was going to say by gravitation, rather by the diffusive impulse that belongs to light, which is Christ - He will enter in, wherever He is not shut out by unbelief and aversion of will.

III. And so that brings me to my last point, viz., the entrance and the feast.

My text is a metaphor, but the declaration that ‘if any man open the door’ Jesus Christ ‘will come in to him,’ is not a metaphor, but is the very heart and centre of the Gospel, ‘I will come in to him,’ dwell in him, be really incorporated in his being, or inspirited, if I may so say, in his spirit. Now you may think that that is far too recondite and lofty a thought to be easily grasped by ordinary people, but its very loftiness should recommend it to us. I, for my part, believe that there is no more prose fact in the whole world than the actual dwelling of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who is in heaven, in the spirits of the people that love Him and trust Him. And this is one great part of the Gospel that I have to preach to you, that into our emptiness He will come with His fullness; that into our sinfulness He will come with His righteousness; that into our death He will come with His triumphant and immortal life; and He being in us and we in Him, we shall be full and pure and live for ever, and be blessed with the blessedness of Jesus. So remember that embedded in the midst of the wonderful metaphor of my text lies the fact, which is the very centre of the Gospel hope, the dwelling of Jesus Christ in the hearts even of poor sinful creatures like you and me.

But it comes into view here only as the basis of the subsequent promises, and on these I can only touch very briefly, ‘I will come in to him and sup with him, and he with Me.’ Well, that speaks to us in lovely, sympathetic language of a close, familiar, happy communication between Christ and my poor self, which shall make all life as a feast in company with Him. We remember who is the mouthpiece of Jesus Christ here. It is the disciple who knew most of what quietness of blessedness and serenity of adoring communion there were in leaning on Christ’s breast at supper, casting back his head on that loving bosom; looking into those deep sad eyes, and asking questions which were sure of answer. And John, as he wrote down the words ‘I will sup with him, and he with Me,’ perhaps remembered that upper room where, amidst all the bitter herbs, there was such strange joy and tranquility. But whether he did or no, may we not take the picture as suggesting to us the possibilities of loving fellowship, of quiet repose, of absolute satisfaction of all desires and needs, which will be ours if we open the door of our hearts by faith and let Jesus Christ come in?

But, note, when He does come He comes as guest. ‘I will sup with him.’ ‘He shall have the honour of providing that of which I partake.’ Just as upon earth He said to the Samaritan woman, ‘Give Me to drink,’ or sat at the table, at the modest village feast in Bethany, in honour of the miracle of a man raised from the dead, and smiled approval of Martha serving, as of Lazarus sitting at table, and of Mary anointing Him, so the humble viands, the poor man’s fare that our resources enable us to lay upon His table, are never so small or poor for Him to delight in. This King feasts in the neatherd’s cottage, and He will even condescend to turn the cakes. ‘I will sup with Him.’ We cannot bring anything so coarse, so poor, so unworthy, if a drop or two of love has been sprinkled over it, but that it will be well-pleasing in His sight, and He Himself will partake thereof. ‘He has gone to be a guest with a man that is a sinner.’

But more than that, where He is welcomed as guest. He assumes the place of host. ‘I will sup with him, and he with Me.’ You remember how, after the Resurrection, when the two disciples, moved to hospitality, implored the unknown Stranger to come in and partake of their humble fare, He yielded to their importunity, and when they were in the guest chamber, took His place at the head of the table, and blessed the bread and gave it to them. You remember how, in the beginning of His miracles, He manifested forth His glory in this, that, invited as a common guest to the rustic wedding, He provided the failing wine. And so, wherever a poor man opens his heart and says, ‘Come in,’ and I will give Thee my ‘best,’ Jesus Christ comes in, and gives the man His best, that the man may render it back to Him. He owes nothing to any man. He accepts the poorest from each, and He gives the richest to each. He is Guest and Host, and what He accepts from us is what He has first given to us.

The promise of my text is fulfilled immediately when the door of the heart is opened, but it shadows and prophesies a nobler fulfilment in the heavens. Here and now Christ and we may sit together, but the feast will be like the Passover, eaten with loins girt and staves in hand, and the Red Sea and wilderness waiting to be trodden. But there comes a more perfect form of the communion, which finds its parallel in that wonderful scene when the weary fishers, all of whose success had depended on their obedience to the Master's direction, discerned at last, through the grey of the morning, who it was that stood upon the shore, and, struggling to His side, saw there a fire of coals, and fish laid thereon, and bread, to which they were bidden to add their modest contribution in the fish that they had caught; and the meal being thus prepared partly by His hand and partly by theirs, ennobled and filled by Him, His voice says, 'Come and dine.' So, brethren, Christ at the last will bring His servants to His table in His kingdom, and there their works shall follow them; and He and they shall sit together for ever, and for ever 'rejoice in the fatness of Thy house, even of Thy holy temple.'

I beseech you, listen not to my poor voice, but to His that speaks through it, and when He knocks do you open, and Christ Himself shall come in. 'If any man love Me he will keep My commandments, and My Father will love him, and We will come and make Our abode with him.'

23)Revelation 3:21

Revelation

VII. - THE VICTOR'S SOVEREIGNTY

Rev. 3:21.

The Church at Laodicea touched the lowest point of Christian character. It had no heresies, but that was not because it clung to the truth, but because it had not life enough to breed even them. It had no conspicuous vices, like some of the other communities. But it had what was more fatal than many vices - a low temperature of religious life and feeling, and a high notion of itself. Put these two things together - they generally go together - and you get the most fatal condition for a Church. It is the condition of a large part of the so-called ‘Christian world’ to-day, as that very name unconsciously confesses; for ‘world’ is the substantive, and ‘Christian’ only the adjective, and there is a great deal more ‘world’ than ‘Christian’ in many so-called ‘Churches.’

Such a Church needed, and received, the sharpest rebuke. A severe disease requires drastic treatment. But the same necessity which drew forth the sharp rebuke drew forth also the loftiest of the promises. If the condition of Laodicea was so bad, the struggle to overcome became proportionately greater, and, consequently, the reward the larger. The least worthy may rise to the highest position. It was not to the victors over persecution at Smyrna, or over heresies at Thyatira, nor even to the blameless Church of Philadelphia, but it was to the faithful in Laodicea, who had kept the fire of their own devotion well alight amidst the tepid Christianity round them, that this climax of all the seven promises is given.

In all the others Jesus Christ stands as the bestower of the gift. Here He stands, not only as the bestower, but as Himself participating in that which He bestows. The words beggar all exposition, and I have shrunk from taking them as my text. We seem to see in them, as if looking into some sun with dazzled eyes, radiant forms moving amidst the brightness, and in the midst of them one like unto the Son of man. But if my words only dilute and weaken this great promise, they may still help to keep it before your own minds for a few moments. So I ask you to look with me at the two great things that are bracketed together in our text; only I venture to reverse the order of consideration, and think of -

I. The Commander-in-Chiefs conquest and royal repose.

‘I also overcame, and am set down with My Father in His throne.’ It seems to me that, wonderful as are all the words of my text, perhaps the most wonderful of them all are those by which the two halves of the promise are held together - ‘Even as I also.’ The Captain of the host takes His place in the ranks, and, if I may so say, shoulders His musket like the poorest private. Christ sets Himself before us as pattern of the struggle, and as pledge of the victory and reward. Now let me say a word about each of the two halves of this great thought of our Lord’s identification of Himself with us in our fight, and identification of us with Him in His victory.

As to the former, I would desire to emphasize, with all the strength that I can, the point of view from which Jesus Christ Himself, in these final words from the heavens, directed to all the Churches, looks hack upon His earthly career, and bids us think of it as a true conflict. You remember how, in the sanctities of the upper room, and ere yet the supreme moment of the crucifixion had come, our Lord said, when within a day of the Cross and an hour of Gethsemane, ‘I have overcome the world.’ This is an echo of that never-to be-forgotten utterance that the aged Apostle had heard when leaning on his Master’s bosom in the seclusion and silence of that sacred upper chamber. Only here our Lord, looking back upon the victory, gathers it all up into one as a past thing, and says, ‘I overcame,’ in those old days long ago.

Brethren, the orthodox Christian is tempted to think of Jesus Christ in such a fashion as to reduce His conflict on earth to a mere sham fight. Let no supposed theological necessities induce you to weaken down in your thoughts of Him what He Himself has told us - that He, too, struggled, and that He, too, overcame. That temptation in the wilderness, where the necessities of the flesh and the desires of the spirit were utilized by the Tempter as weapons with which His unmoved obedience and submission were assailed, was repeated over and over again all through His earthly life. We believe - at least I believe - that Jesus Christ was in nature sinless, and that temptation found nothing in Him on which it could lay hold, no fuel or combustible material to which it could set light. But, notwithstanding, inasmuch as He became partaker of flesh and blood, and entered into the limitations of humanity, His sinlessness did not involve His incapacity for being tempted, nor did it involve that His righteousness was not assailed, nor His submission often tried. We believe - or at least I believe - that He ‘did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.’ But I also reverently listen to Him unveiling, so far as may need to be unveiled, the depths of His own nature and experience, and I rejoice to think that He fought the good fight, and Himself was a soldier in the army of which He is the General. He is the Captain, the Leader, of the long procession of heroes of the faith; and

He is the ‘perfecter’ of it, inasmuch as His own faith was complete and unbroken.

But I may remind you, too, that from this great word of condescending self-revelation and identification, we may well learn what a victorious life really is. ‘I overcame’; but from the world’s point of view He was utterly beaten. He did not gather in many who would listen to Him or care for His words. He was misunderstood, rejected; lived a life of poverty; died when a young man, a violent death; was hunted by all the Church dignitaries of His generation as a blasphemer, spit upon by soldiers, and execrated after His death. And that is victory, is it? Well, then, we shall have to revise our estimates of what is a conquering career. If He, the pauper-martyr, if He, the misunderstood enthusiast, if He conquered, then some of our notions of a victorious life are very far astray.

Nor need I say a word, I suppose, about the completeness, as well as the reality, of that victory of His. From heaven He claims in this great word just what He claimed on earth, over and over again, when He fronted His enemies with, Which of you convinceth Me of sin? ‘and when He declared in the sanctities of His confidence with His friends, ‘I do always the things that please Him.’ The rest of us partially overcome, and partially are defeated. He alone bears His shield out of the conflict undinted and unstained. To do the will of God, to dwell in continual communion with the Father, never to be hindered by anything that the world can present or my sins can suggest, whether of delightsome or dreadful, from doing the will of the Father in heaven from the heart - that is victory, and all else is defeat. And that is what the Captain of our salvation, and only He, did.

Turn for a moment now to the other side of our Lord’s gracious identification of Himself with us. ‘Even as I also am set down with My Father in His throne.’ That points back, as the Greek original shows even more distinctly, to the historical fact of the Ascension. It recalls the great words by which, with full consciousness of what He was doing, Jesus Christ sealed His own death-warrant in the presence of the Sanhedrim when He said: ‘Henceforth ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power.’ It carries us still further back to the psalm which our Lord Himself quoted, and thereby stopped the mouths of Scribes and Pharisees: ‘The

Lord said unto My Lord, sit Thou at My right hand till I make Thine enemies Thy footstool.' He laid His hand upon that great promise, and claimed that it was to be fulfilled in His case. And here, stooping from amidst the blaze of the central royalty of the Universe, He confirms all that He had said before, and declares that He shares the Throne of God.

Now, of course, the words are intensely figurative and have to be translated as best we can, even though it may seem to weaken and dilute them, into less concrete and sensible forms than the figurative representation. But I think we shall not be mistaken if we assert that, whatever lies in this great statement far beyond our conception in the present, there lie in it three things - repose, royalty, communion of the most intimate kind with the Father.

There is repose. You remember how the first martyr saw the opened heavens and the ascended Christ, in that very hall, probably, in which Christ had said, 'Henceforth ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power.' But Stephen, as he declared, with rapt face smitten by the light into the likeness of an angel's, saw Him standing at the right hand. We have to combine these two images, incongruous as they are in prose, literally, before we reach the conception of the essential characteristic of that royal rest of Christ's. For it is a repose that is full of activity. 'My Father worketh hitherto,' said He on earth, 'and I work.' And that is true with regard to His unseen and heavenly life. The verses which are appended to the close of Mark's gospel draw a picture for us - 'They went everywhere preaching the Word ': He sat at 'the right hand of God.' The two halves do not fuse together. The Commander is in repose; the soldiers are bearing the brunt of the fight. Yes! but then there comes the word which links the two halves together. 'They went everywhere preaching, the Lord also working with them.'

Christ's repose indicates, not merely the cessation from, but much rather the completion of. His work on earth, which culminated on the Cross; which work on earth is the basis of the still mightier work which He is doing' in the heavens. So the Apostle Paul sets up a great ladder, so to speak, which our faith climbs by successive stages, when he says, 'He that died - yea, rather that is risen again - who is even at the right hand of God- who also maketh intercession for us.’ His repose is full of beneficent activity for all that love Him.

Again, there is set forth royalty, participation in Divine dominion. The highly metaphorical language of our text, and of parallel verses elsewhere, presents this truth in two forms. Sometimes we read of ‘sitting at the right hand of God’; sometimes, as here, we read of ‘sitting on the throne.’ The ‘right hand of God’ is everywhere. It is not a local designation. ‘The right hand of the Lord’ is the instrument of His omnipotence, and to speak of Christ as sitting on the right hand of God is simply to cast into symbolical words the great thought that He wields the forces of Divinity. When we read of Him as enthroned on the Throne of God, we have, in like manner, to translate the figure into this overwhelming and yet most certain truth, that the Man Christ Jesus is exalted to supreme, universal dominion, and that all the forces of omnipotent Divinity rest in the hands that still bear, for faith, the prints of the nails.

But again that session of Christ with the Father suggests the thought, about which it becomes us not to speak, of a communion with the Father - deep, intimate, unbroken, beyond all that we can conceive or speak. We listen to Him when He says, ‘Glorify Thou Me with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was.’ We bow before the thought that what He asked in that prayer was the lifting of one of ourselves, the humanity of Jesus, into this inseparable unity with the very glory of God. And then we catch the wondrous words: ‘Even as I also.’

II. That brings me to the second of the thoughts here, which may be more briefly disposed of after the preceding exposition, and that is, the private soldier’s share in the Captain’s victory and rest. ‘I will grant to sit with Me in My throne, even as I also.’

Now with regard to the former of these, our share in Christ’s triumph and conquest, I only wish to say one thing, and it is this. I thankfully recognize that to many who do not share with me in what I believe to be the teaching of Scripture, viz., the belief that Christ was more than example, their partial belief, as I think it, in Him as the realized ideal, the living Pattern of how men ought to live, has given strength for far nobler and purer life than could otherwise have been reached. But, brethren, it seems to me that we want a great deal more than a pattern, a great deal closer and more intimate union with the Conqueror than the mere setting forth of the possibility of a perfect life as realized in Him, ere we can share in His victory. What does it matter to me, after all, except for stimulus and for rebuke, that Jesus Christ should have lived the life? Nothing. But when we can link the words in the upper room, ‘I have overcome,’ and the words from heaven, ‘Even as I also overcame,’ with the same Apostle’s words in his epistle, ‘This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith,’ then we share in the Captain’s victory in an altogether different manner from that which they do who can see in Him only a pattern that stimulates and inspires. For if we put our trust in that Saviour, then the very life which was in Christ Jesus, and which conquered the world in Him, will pass into us; and the law of the spirit of life in Christ will make us more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

And then the victory being secured, because Christ lives in us and makes us victorious, our participation in His throne is secure likewise.

There shall be repose, the cessation of effort, the end of toil. There shall be no more aching heads, strained muscles, exhausted brains, weary hearts, dragging feet. There will be no more need for resistance. The helmet will be antiquated, the laurel crown will take its place. The heavy armour, that rusted the garment over which it was braced, will be laid aside, and the trailing robes, that will contract no stain from the golden pavements, will be the attire of the redeemed. We have all had work enough, and weariness enough, and battles enough, and beatings enough, to make us thankful for the thought that we shall sit on the throne.

But if it is a rest like His, and if it is to be the rest of royalty, there will be plenty of work in it; work of the kind that fits us and is blessed. I know not what new elevation, or what sort of dominion will be granted to those who, instead of the faithfulness of the steward, are called upon to exercise the activity of the Lord over ten cities. I know not, and I care not; it is enough to know that we shall sit on His throne.

But do not let us forget the last of the thoughts: ‘They shall sit with Me.’ Ah! there you touch the centre - ‘To depart and to be with Christ, which is far better’; ‘Absent from the body; present with the Lord.’ We know not how. The lips are locked that might, perhaps, have spoken; only this we know, that, not as a drop of water is absorbed into the ocean and loses its individuality, shall we be united to Christ. There will always be the two, or there would be no blessedness in the two being one; but as close as is compatible with the sense of being myself, and of His being Himself, will be our fellowship with Him. ‘He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit.’

Brethren, this generation would be a great deal the better for thinking more often of the promises and threatenings of Scripture with regard to the future. I believe that no small portion of the lukewarmness of the modern Laodicea is owing to the comparative neglect into which, in these days, the Christian teachings on that subject have fallen. I have tried in these sermons on these seven promises to bring them at least before your thoughts and hearts. And I beseech you that you would, more than you have done, ‘have respect unto the recompense of reward,’ and let that future blessedness enter as a subsidiary motive into your Christian life.

We may gather all these promises together, and even then we have to say, ‘the half hath not been told us.’ ‘It doth not yet appear what we shall be.’ Symbols and negations, and these alone, teach us the little that we know about that future; and when we try to expand and concatenate these, I suppose that our conceptions correspond to the reality about as closely as would the dreams of a chrysalis as to what it would be when it was a butterfly. But certainty and clearness are not necessarily united. ‘It doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him.’ Take ‘even as I also’ for the key that unlocks all the mysteries of that glorious future. ‘It is enough for the servant that he be as his Master.’

24)Revelation 5:6

Revelation

THE SEVEN EYES OF THE SLAIN LAMB

Rev. 5:6

John received a double commission, to write the things which are and the things which shall be. The things which are signify, I suppose, the unseen realities which flashed upon the inward eye of the solitary seer for a moment in symbol when the door was opened in Heaven. All that is here is seeming and illusion; the only substantial existences lie within the veil. And of all those ‘things which are,’ in timeless, eternal being, this vision of the throned ‘Lamb, as it had been slain’ is the centre.

Between the Great White Throne and the outer ring of worshippers, representing in the ‘living creatures’ the crown and glory of creatural life, and in the elders, the crown and glory of redeemed humanity, stands the Lamb slain, which is the symbolical way of declaring that for ever and ever, through Christ and for the sake of His sacrifice, there pass to the universe all Divine gifts, and there rise from the universe all thankfulness and praise. His manhood is perpetual, the influence of His sacrifice in the Divine administration and government never ceases.

The attributes with which this verse clothes that slain Lamb are incongruous; but, perhaps, by reason of their very incongruity all the more striking and significant. The ‘seven horns’ are the familiar emblem of perfect power; the ‘seven eyes’ are interpreted by the seer himself to express the fullness of the Divine Spirit.

The eye seems a singular symbol for the Spirit, but it may be used as suggesting the swiftest and subtlest way in which the influences of a human spirit pass out into the external universe. At all events, whatever may have been the reason for the selection of the emblem, the interpretation of it lies here, in the words of our text itself. The teaching of this emblem, then, is: ‘He, being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received the promise of the Father, sheds forth this.’ The whole fullness of spiritual Divine power is in the hand of Christ to impart to the world.

I. The ‘slain Lamb’ is the Lord and Giver of the Spirit.

He ‘hath the seven Spirits of God’ in the simplest sense of all, that the manhood of our Brother who died on the Cross for us, lifted up to the right hand of God, is there invested and glorified with every fullness of the Divine Spirit, and with all the mysteries of the life of God. Whatsoever there is, in Deity, of spirit and power; whatsoever of swift flashing energy; whatsoever of gentleness and grace; whatsoever of holiness and splendor;

all inheres in the Man Christ Jesus; unto whom even in His earthly lowliness and humiliation the Spirit was not given by measure, but unto whom in the loftiness of His heavenly life that Spirit is given in yet more wondrous fashion than in His humiliation. For I suppose that the exaltation with which Christ is exalted is not only a change of position, but in some sense His manhood is progressive; and now in the Heavens is yet fuller of the indwelling Spirit than it was here upon earth.

But it is not as the recipient, but as the bestower of the Spirit, that He comes before us in the great words of my text. All that He has of God, He has that He may give. Whatsoever is His is ours; we share in His fullness and we possess His grace. He gives His own life, and that is the very central idea of Christianity.

There are very many imperfect views of Christ’s work afloat in the world. The lowest of them, the most imperfect, so imperfect and fragmentary as scarcely to be worth calling Christianity at all, is the view which recognizes Him as being merely Example, Guide, Teacher. High above that there comes the view which is common amongst orthodox people of the more superficial type - the view which is, I am afraid, still too common amongst us - which regards the whole work of Jesus Christ as terminated upon the Cross. It thinks of Him as being something infinitely more than Teacher and Guide and Example, but it stops at the thought of His great reconciling death as being the completion of His work, and hears Him say from the Cross, ‘It is finished,’ with a faith which, however genuine, cannot but be considered as imperfect unless it is completed with the remembrance that it was but one volume of His work that was finished when He died upon the Cross. His death was really a transition to a form of work which if not loftier was at all events other than the work which was completed upon Calvary. His earthly life finished His perfect obedience as Pattern and as Son; His death on the Cross finished His mighty work of self-surrender and sacrifice, which is propitiation and atonement for the sins of the whole world. His life on earth and His death on the Cross taken together finished His great work of revealing the Father in so far as that revelation depended upon outward, objective facts. But His life on earth and His death on the Cross did not even begin the work, but only laid the foundation for it, of communicating to men the life which was in Himself. He lived that He might complete obedience and manifest the Father. He died that He might 'put away sin' and reveal the Father still more fully. And now, exalted at the right hand of God, He works on through the ages in that which is the fruit of His Cross and the crown of His sacrifice, the communication to men, moment by moment, of His own perfect life, that they too may live for ever and be like Him.

He died that we might not die; He lives that the life which we live in the flesh may be His life and not ours. We may not draw comparisons between the greatness of the various departments of our Master's work, but we can say that His earthly life and His death of shame are the foundation of the work which He does to-day. And so, dear brethren, whilst nineteen centuries ago His triumphant words, 'It is finished,' rang out the knell of sin's dominion, and the first hope for the world's emancipation, another voice, far ahead still in the centuries, waits to be spoken; and not until the world has been filled with the glory of His Cross and the power of His life shall it be proclaimed: 'It is done !'

The interspace between these two is filled with the activity of that slain Lamb who, by His death, has become the Lord of the Spirit; and through His blood is able to communicate to all men the life of His own soul. The Lord of the Spirit is the Lamb that was slain.

II. Then let me ask you to look, secondly, at the representation here given of the infinite variety of gifts which Christ bestows.

Throughout this Book of the Revelation we find this remarkable expression, in which the Spirit of God is not spoken of as in His personal unity, but as in sevenfold variety. So at the beginning of the letter we find the salutation, 'Grace and peace from Him which is and was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before His Throne.' And again we read, in one of the letters to the churches: 'These things saith He that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars'; the correspondence being marked between the number of each. And again we read in the earlier part of this same vision, in the preceding chapter, that before the throne there were seven torches flaming, 'which are the seven Spirits of God.' And so, again, in my text, we read, 'seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.'

Now it is obvious that there is not any question here of the personality and unity of the Divine Spirit, which is sufficiently recognized in other parts of the Apocalypse, such as 'the Spirit and the Bride say: "Come!"' and the like; but that the thing before the Evangelist's mind is the variety of the operations and activities of that one Spirit.

And the number 'seven,' of course, at once suggests the idea of perfection and completeness.

So that the thought emerges of the endless, boundless, manifoldness, and wonderful diversity of the operations of this great life-spirit that streams from Jesus Christ.

Think of the number of designations by which that Spirit is described in the New Testament. In regard to all that belongs to intellectual life, He is 'the Spirit of wisdom' and of 'illumination in the knowledge of Christ,' He is 'the Spirit of Truth.' In regard to all that belongs to the spiritual life. He is 'the Spirit of holiness,' the 'Spirit of liberty'; the Spirit of self-control, or as rendered in our Bible, 'of a sound mind'; the 'Spirit of love.' In regard to all that belongs to the practical life, He is 'the Spirit of counsel and of might,' the 'Spirit of power.' In regard to all that belongs to the religious life, He is 'the Spirit of Adoption, whereby we cry, Abba! Father!'; the 'Spirit of grace and of supplication,' the 'Spirit of life.' So over the whole round of man's capacity and nature, all his intellectual, moral, practical, and religious being, there are gifts which fit each side and each part of it.

Think of the variety of the symbols under which He is presented: 'the oil,' with its soft, gentle flow; 'the fire,' with its swift transmuting, purifying energy; the water, refreshing, fertilizing, cleansing; the breath, quickening, vitalizing, purifying the blood; the wind, gentle as the sigh of an infant, loud and mighty as a hurricane, sometimes scarcely lifting the leaves upon the tender spring herbage, sometimes laying the city low in a low place. It is various in manifestation, graduating through all degrees, applying to every side of human nature, capable of all functions that our weakness requires, helping our infirmities, making intercession for us and in us, with unutterable groanings, sealing and confirming our possession of His grace; searching the deep things of God and revealing them to us; guiding into all truth, freeing us from the law of sin and death. There are diversities of operation, but the same Spirit. It is protean, and takes every shape that our necessities require.

Think of all men’s diverse weaknesses, miseries, sins, cravings - every one of them an open door through which God’s grace may come; every one of them a form provided into which the rich molten ore of this golden Spirit may flow. Whatsoever a man needs, that he will find in the infinite variety of the spiritual help and strength which the Lamb slain is ready to give. It is like the old fable of the manna, which the Rabbis tell us tasted upon each lip precisely what each man chose. So this nourishment from above becomes to every man what each man requires. "Water will take the shape of any vessel into which you choose to pour it; the Spirit of God assumes the form that is imposed upon it by our weaknesses and needs. And if you want to know the exhaustless variety of the seven Spirits which the Lamb gives, find out the multiplicity and measure, the manifoldness and the depth, of man’s necessities, of weakness, of sorrow, and sin, and you will know how much the Spirit of God is able to bestow and still remain full and unexhausted.

III. Still further, my text suggests the unbroken continuity of the gifts which the slain Lamb has to give.

The language of the original, for any of you that can consult it, will show you that the word ‘sent’ might be rendered ‘being sent,’ expressive of a continual impartation.

Ah! God’s Spirit is not given once in a way and then stops. It is given, not by fits and starts. People talk about ‘revivals,’ as if there were times when the Spirit of God came down more abundantly than at other times upon the world, or upon churches, or upon individuals. It is not so. There are variations in our receptiveness; there are no variations in its steady efflux. Does the sun shine at different rates, are its beams cut off sometimes, or poured out with less energy, or is it only the position of the earth that makes the difference between the summer and the winter, the days and the nights, whilst the great central orb is raying out at the same rate all through the murky darkness, all through the frosty days? And so the gifts of Jesus Christ pour out from Him at a uniform continuous rate, with no breaks in the golden beams, with no pauses in the continual flow. Pentecost is far back, but the fire that was kindled then has not died down into grey ashes. It is long since that stream began to flow, but it is not yet shrunken in its banks. For ever and for ever, with unbroken continuity, whether men receive or whether they forbear. He shines on, communicating Himself and pouring out the Spirit of grace, ay! even into a non-receiving world! How much sunshine seems to be lost, how much of that Spirit's influence seems lost, and yet it pours on for ever.

Men talk about Christianity as being effete. People to-day look back upon the earlier ages, and say: 'Where is the Lord God of Elijah?' The earlier ages had nothing that you and I have not, and Christianity will not die out, and God's Church will not die out, until the sun that endureth for ever is shorn of its beams and forgets to shine. The seven Spirits are streaming out as they were at the beginning, and as - blessed be God! - they shall do to the end.

IV. And, lastly, my text suggests a universal diffusion of these gifts. 'Seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.' The words are a quotation from a remarkable prophecy in the book of Zechariah, which speaks about the 'seven eyes of God,' running - 'To and fro over all the earth.'

There are no limitations of these gifts to any one race or nation as there were in the old times, nor any limitations either to a democracy. 'On My servants and on My handmaidens will I pour out of My Spirit.' In olden days the mountain-tops were touched with the rays, and all the lowly valleys lay deep in the shadow and the darkness. Now the risen sunshine pours down into the deepest clefts, and no heart so poor, so illiterate, so ignorant but that it may receive the full sunshine of that Spirit.

Of course, in the very widest of all senses the words are true of the universal diffusion of spiritual gifts from Christ; for all the light with which men see is His light; and all the eyes with which they have ever looked at truth, or beauty, or goodness, come from Him who is 'the Master-light of all our seeing.' And poet, and painter, and thinker, and teacher, and philanthropist, and every man that has helped his fellows or has had any glimpse of any angle or bit of the Divine perfection, has seen because the eye of the class or order. Christianity as the true Lord has been in some measure granted to him, and ‘the inspiration of the Almighty has given him understanding.’

But the universal diffusion of spiritual gifts of this sort is not what is meant in my text. It means the gifts of a higher religious character. And I need not remind you of how over broad lands that were heathen when John in his rocky Patmos got this vision, there has now dawned the glory of Christ and the knowledge of His name. Think of all the treasures of the literature of the Christian Church in Latin and African and Teutonic lands that have come since the day when this chapter was written. Think of what Britain was then and of what it is to-day. Remember the heroisms, holinesses, illuminations that have shone over these then barbarous lands since that time; and understand how it has all come because from the Lamb by the Throne there has been sent out over all the earth the Spirit that is wisdom and holiness and life.

And think how steadily down through layers of society that were regarded as outcast and contemptible in the time of the founding of the Church, there has trickled and filtered the knowledge of Himself and of His grace; and how amongst the poor and the humble and the outcast, amongst the profligate and the sinful, there have sprung up flowers of holiness and beauty all undreamed of before; and we shall understand how all classes in all lands may receive a portion of the sevenfold Spirit.

Every Christian man and woman is inspired, not to be a teacher of infallible truth, but inspired in the true and deep sense that in them dwells the Spirit of Jesus Christ. ‘If any man have not the Spirit he is none of His.’ All of us, weak, sinful as we are, ignorant and bewildered often, may possess that Divine life to live in our hearts.

Only, dear brethren, remember it is the slain Lamb that gives the Spirit. And unless we are looking to that Lamb slain as our hope and confidence, we shall not receive it. A maimed Christianity that has a Christ, but no slain Lamb, has little of His Spirit; but if you trust to His Sacrifice, and rest your whole hopes on His Cross, then there will come into your hearts His own mighty grace, and ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus will make you free from the law of sin and death.’

25)Revelation 7:9

Revelation

THE PALM-BEARING MULTITUDE

Rev. 7:9

The Seer is about to disclose the floods of misery which are to fall upon the earth at the sound of the seven trumpets, like avalanches set loose by a noise. But before the crash of their descent comes there is a lull.

He sees angels holding back the winds, like dogs in a leash, lest they should blow, and all destructive agencies are suspended. In the pause before the storm he sees two visions: one, that of the sealing of the servants of God, the pledge that, amidst the world-wide calamities, they shall be secure; and one, this vision of my text, the assurance that beyond the storms there waits a calm region of life and glory. The vision is meant to brace all generations for their trials, great or small, to draw faith and love upwards and forwards, to calm sorrow, to diminish the magnitude of death and the pain of parting, and to breed in us humble desires that, when our time comes, we too may go to join that great multitude.

It can never be inappropriate to look with the eyes of the Seer on that jubilant crowd. So I turn to these words and deal with them in the plainest possible fashion, just taking each clause as it lies, though, for reasons which will appear, modifying the order in which we look at them. I think that, taken together, they tell us all that we can or need know about that future.

I. Note the palm-bearing multitude.

Now the palm, among the Greeks and Romans, was a token of victory. That is usually taken to be the meaning of the emblem here, as it was taken in the well-known hymn -

‘More than conquerors at last.’

But it has been well pointed out that there is no trace of such a use of the palm in Jewish practice, and that all the emblems of this Book of the Revelation move within the circle of Jewish ideas. Therefore, appropriate as the idea of victory may be, it is not, as I take it, the one that is primarily suggested here. Where, then, shall we look for the meaning of the symbol?

Now there was in Jewish practice a very significant use of the palm-branches, for it was the prescription of the ritual law that they should be employed in the Feast of Tabernacles, when the people were bidden to take palm-branches and rejoice before the Lord seven days.' It is that distinctly Jewish use of the palm branch that is brought before our minds here, and not the heathen one of mere conquest.

So then, if we desire to get the whole significance and force of this emblem of the multitude with the palms in their hands, we have to ask what was the significance of that Jewish festival. Like all other Jewish feasts, it was originally a Nature-festival, applying to a season of the year, and it afterwards came to have associated with it the remembrance of something in the history of the nation which it commemorated. That double aspect, the natural and the historical, are both to be kept in view. Let us take the eldest one first. The palm-bearing multitude before the Throne suggests to us the thought of rejoicing reapers at the close of the harvest. The year's work is done, the sowing days are over, the reaping days have come. 'They that gather it shall eat it in the courts of the Lord.' And so the metaphor of my text opens out into that great thought that the present and the future are closely continuous, and that the latter is the time for realizing, in one's own experience, the results of the life that we have lived here. To-day is the time of sowing; the multitude with the palms in their hands are the reapers. Brother! what are you sowing? Will it be for you a glad day of festival when you have to reap what you have sown? Are you scattering poisoned seed? Are you sowing weeds, or are you sowing good fruit that shall be found after many days unto praise and honour and glory? Look at your life here as being but setting in motion a whole series of causes of which you are going to have the effects punctually dealt out to you yonder in the time to come. That great multitude reaped what they had sown, and rejoiced in the reaping. Shall I? We are like operators in a telegraph office, touching keys here which make impressions upon ribbons in a land beyond the sea, and when we get there we shall have to read what we have written here. How will you like it, when the ribbon is taken out of the machine and spread before you, and you have to go over it syllable by syllable and translate all the dots and dashes into what they mean? It will be a feast or a day of sadness. But, festival or no, there stands plain and irrefragable the fact that ‘whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,’ and he will not only have to reap it, but he will have to eat it, and be filled with the fruit of his own doings. That is the first thought.

Turn to the other one. That palm-bearing multitude keeping their Feast of Tabernacles reminds us of the other aspect of the festival in its original intention, which was the commemoration of all that God had done for the people as they passed through the wilderness, and the rejoicing, in their settled abode, over ‘the way by which the Lord their God had led them,’ and over the rest to which He had led them. So the other idea comes out that they who have passed into that great Presence look back on the darkness and the dreariness, on the struggles and the change, on the drought and the desert, on the foes and the fears, and out of them all find occasions for rejoicing and reasons for thankfulness. There can be no personal identity without memory and the memory of sorrows changes into joy when we come to see the whole meaning and trend of the sorrow. The desert was dreary, solitary, dry, and parched as they passed through it. But like some grim mountain-range seen in the transfiguring light of sunrise, and from the far distance, all grimness is changed into beauty, and the long dreary stretch looks, when beheld from afar, one unbroken manifestation of the Divine love and presence. What was grim rock and cold ice when we were near it is clothed with the violets and the purples that remoteness brings, and there shines down upon it the illuminating and interpreting light of the accomplished purpose of God. So the festival is the feast of inheriting consequences, and the feast of remembering the past.

There is one other aspect of this metaphor which I may just mention in a sentence. Later days in Judaism added other features to the original appointments of the Feast of Tabernacles, and amongst them there was one which our Lord Himself used as the occasion of setting forth one aspect of His work. ‘On the last day, that great day of the feast,’ the priests went down from the Temple, and filled their golden vases at the fountain, brought back the water, and poured it forth in the courts of the Temple, chanting the ancient song from the prophet, ‘With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.’ And our Lord in His earthly life used this last day of the feast and its ceremonial as the point of attachment for His revelation of Himself, as He who gave to men the true living water. In like manner, the expansion of my text, which occurs in the subsequent verses, refers, as it would seem, to the festival, and to our Lord’s own use of it, when we read that the ‘Lamb which is in the midst of the Throne shall be their Shepherd, and shall lead them to the fountains of living waters.’

So the emblem of the feast brings to our mind, not only the thought of retribution and of repose, but also the thought of the abundant communication of all supplies for all the desires and thirsts of the dependent and seeking soul. Whatsoever human nature can need there, it receives in its fullness from Jesus Christ. The Rabbis used to say that he who had not seen the joy of the Feast of Tabernacles did not know what joy meant; and I would say that until we, too, stand there, with the palms in our hands, we shall not know of how deep, fervent, calm, perpetual a gladness the human heart is capable.

II. Note their place and attitude.

They stand before the Throne, and before the Lamb. Now it would take me too far away from my present purpose to do more than point, in a sentence, to that remarkable and tremendous juxtaposition of the ‘Throne’ and the ‘Lamb,’ which Lamb is the crucified Christ. What did the man that ventured upon that form of speech, bracketing together the ‘Throne’ of the Divine Majesty and the slain Lamb ‘who is Christ, think about Christ that he should sever Him from all the multitude of men, and unite Him with the solitary God? I only ask. I leave you to answer.

But I turn to the two points - ‘before the Throne and the Lamb,’ and ‘standing’; and these two suggest, as it seems to me, the two thoughts which, though we cannot do much to fill them out, are yet all-sufficient for illumination, for courage, and for hope. These two are the thought of nearness and the thought of service. ‘Before the Throne and the Lamb’ is but a picturesque way of saying ‘to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better.’ I do not enter upon any attempt to expound the manner of such nearness. All that I say is that it is a poor affair if we are to let flesh and sense interpret for us what is meant by ‘near’ and ‘far.’ For even here, and whilst we are entangled with this corporeal existence and our dependence upon the conditions of time and space, we know that there is nearness mediated by sympathy and love which is independent of, which survives and disregards, external separation in space. Every loving heart knows that where the treasure is, there the heart is, and where the heart is, there the man is. And the very same thing that knits us together, though oceans wide between us roll, in its highest form will knit the souls that love Jesus Christ to Him, wherever in space they and He may be. Here we have five senses, five windows, five gates. If our ears were different we should hear sounds, shrill and deep, which now are silence to us. If our eyes were different we should see rays at both ends of the spectrum which now are invisible. The body hides as much as it reveals, and we may humbly believe that when the perfect spirit is clothed with its perfect organ, the spiritual body - that is to say, the body that answers to all the needs of the spirit, and is its fit instrument, then many of those melodies which now pass by us unheard will fill our senses with sweetness, and many of these flashing lustres which now we cannot gather into visual impressions will then blaze before us in the perfect light. We shall be near Him, and to be with Christ, however it is mediated [and we cannot tell how], is all that you need, for peace, for nobleness, for blessedness, for immortality. Brethren! to have Christ with me here is my strength; to be with Christ yonder is my blessedness. They are ‘before the Throne of God and the Lamb.’ I do not believe that we know much beyond that, and I am sure that we need nothing beyond it, if we rightly understand all that it means.

But I said there was another idea here, and that is implied by the words, they stood before the Throne,’ and is further drawn out in the expansion of my text which follows it as interpretation: ‘Therefore are they before the Throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His Temple.’ What the nature of the service may be it boots not to inquire, only let us remember that the caricature of the Christian heaven which has often been flung at Christian people as a taunt, viz., that it is an eternity of idleness and psalm-singing, has no foundation in Scripture, because the New Testament conception unites the two thoughts of being with Christ and of service for Christ. Remember, for instance, the parable of the pounds and the talents, in which the great law is laid down. ‘Thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will make thee ruler over many things,’ and mark how here ‘these . . . that came out of great tribulation’ are not only in His presence, but active in His service. We have the same blending still more definitely set forth in the last chapter of this book, where we read of ‘those who serve Him, and see His face’; where the two ideas of the life of contemplation and rapt vision, and of the life of active service and joyful employment are welded together as being not only not incompatible, but absolutely necessary for each other’s completeness.

But remember that if there is to be service yonder, here is the exercising ground, where we are to cultivate the capacities and acquire the habitudes which there will find ampler scope and larger field. I do not know what we are here in this world for at all, unless it is to apprentice us for heaven. I do not know that there is anything that a man has to do in this life which is worth doing unless it be as a training for doing something yonder that shall more entirely correspond with his capacities. So what kind of work are you doing, friend? Is it the sort of work that you will be able to carry on when you pass beyond all the trivialities of this life? I beseech you, remember this, that life on earth is a bewilderment and an enigma for which there is no solution, a long piece of irony, unless beyond the grave there lie fields for nobler work for which we are being trained here. And I pray you see to it that your life here on earth is such as to prepare you for the service, day and night, of the heavens. How can I drive that home to your hearts and consciences? I cannot; you must do it for yourselves.

III. Lastly, note their dress.

‘ Clothed with white robes’ - the robe is, of course, in all languages, the character in which, as the result of his deeds, a man drapes himself, that of him which is visible to the world, the ‘habit’ of his spirit, as we say [and the word ‘habit’ means both custom and costume]. ‘White’ is, of course, the heavenly colour; ‘white thrones,’ ‘white horses’ are in this book, and the white is not dead but lustrous, like our Lord’s garments on the Mount of Transfiguration, such white as sunshine smiting a snowfield makes. So, then, the dress, the habit of the spirits is of lustrous purity, or glory, to put it all into one word. But more important than that is this question: How came they by such robes? The expansion of our text, to which I have already referred more than once, and which immediately follows, answers the question. ‘They washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’ ‘They washed’; then there is something for them to do.

‘The blood of the Lamb’ was the means of cleansing; then cleansing was not the result of their own effort. The cleansing is not the mere forgiveness, but includes also the making of the character, pure, white, lustrous. And the blood of the Lamb does that. For Christ by His death has brought to us forgiveness, and Christ by His imparted life brings to each of us, if we will, the cleansing which shall purify us altogether. Only we have something to do. We cannot indeed cleanse ourselves. There is no detergent in any soap factory in the world that will take the stains out of your character, or that will take away the guilt of the past. But Jesus Christ by His death brings forgiveness, and by His life imparted to us, will change the set of a character, and make us gradually pure. He has ‘washed us from our sins in His own blood.’ We have to wash our garments, and make them ‘white in the blood of the Lamb.’ He has brought the means; we have to employ them. If we do, if we not only trust Him for pardon, but accept Him for purifying, and day by day honestly endeavour to secure greater and greater whiteness of garments, our labour will not be in vain. If, and only if, we do that, and see stain after stain gradually fade away from the garment, under our hands, we may humbly hope that when we die there will be one more added to the palm-bearing, white-robed multitude who stand before the Throne and before the Lamb. ‘Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may have right to the Tree of Life,’ and may enter in through the gate into the City.

26)Revelation 7:15

John

‘THREE TABERNACLES’

Joh. 1:14. - Rev. 7:15. - Rev. 21:3.

The word rendered 'dwelt' in these three passages, is a peculiar one. It is only found in the New Testament-in this Gospel and in the Book of Revelation. That fact constitutes one of the many subtle threads of connection between these two books, which at first sight seem so extremely unlike each other; and it is a morsel of evidence in favour of the common authorship of the Gospel and of the Apocalypse, which has often, and very vehemently in these latter days of criticism, been denied.

The force of the word, however, is the matter to which I desire especially to draw attention. It literally means 'to dwell in a tent,' or, if we may use such a word, 'to tabernacle,' and there is no doubt a reference to the Tabernacle in which the divine Presence abode in the wilderness and in the land of Israel before the erection. In all three passages, then, we may see allusion to that early symbolical dwelling of God with man. 'The Word tabernacled among us'; so is the truth for earth and time. 'He that sitteth upon the throne shall spread His tabernacle upon' the multitude which no man can number, who have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb; that is the truth for the spirits of just men made perfect, the waiting Church, which expects the redemption of the body. 'God shall tabernacle with them'; that is the truth for the highest condition of humanity, when the Tabernacle of God shall be with redeemed men in the new earth. 'Let us build three tabernacles,' one for the Incarnate Christ, one for the interspace between earth and heaven, and one for the culmination of all things. And it is to these three aspects of the one thought, set forth in rude symbol by the movable tent in the wilderness, that I ask you to turn now.

I. First, then, we have to think of that Tabernacle for earth. 'The Word was made flesh, and dwelt, as in a tent, amongst us.'

The human nature, the visible, material body of Jesus Christ, in which there enshrined itself the everlasting Word, which from the beginning was the Agent of all divine revelation, that is the true Temple of God. When we begin to speak about the special presence of Omnipresence in any one place, we soon lose ourselves, and get into deep waters of glory, where there is no standing. And I do not care to deal here with theological definitions or thorny questions, but simply to set forth, as the language of my text sets before us, that one transcendent, wonderful, all-blessed thought that this poor human nature is capable of, and has really once in the history of the world received into itself, the real, actual presence of the whole fulness of the Divinity. What must be the kindred and likeness between Godhood and manhood when into the frail vehicle of our humanity that wondrous treasure can be poured; when the fire of God can burn in the bush of our human nature, and that nature not be consumed? So it has been. 'In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.'

And when we come with our questions, How? In what manner? How can the lesser contain the greater? we have to be content with the recognition that the manner is beyond our fathoming, and to accept the fact, pressed upon our faith, that our hearts may grasp it and be at peace. God hath dwelt in humanity. The everlasting Word, who is the forthcoming of all the fulness of Deity into the realm of finite creatures, was made flesh and dwelt among us.

But the Tabernacle was not only the dwelling-place of God, it was also and, therefore, the place of Revelation of God. So in our text there follows, 'we beheld His glory.' As in the tent in the wilderness there hovered between the outstretched wings of the silent cherubim, above the Mercy-seat, the brightness of the symbolical cloud which was expressly named 'the glory of God,' and was the visible manifestation of His real presence; so John would have us think that in that lowly humanity, with its curtains and its coverings of flesh, there lay shrined in the inmost place the brightness of the light of the manifest glory of God. 'We beheld His glory.' The rapturous adoration of the remembrance overcomes him, and he breaks his sentence, reckless of grammatical connection, as the fulness of the blessed memory floods into his soul. 'That glory was as of the Only Begotten of the Father.' The manifestation of God in Christ is unique, as becomes Him who partakes of the nature of that God of whom He is the Representative and the Revealer.

And how did that glory make itself known to us? By miracle? Yes! As we read in the story of the first that Christ wrought, 'He manifested forth His glory and His disciples believed upon Him.' By miracle? Yes! As we read His own promise at the grave of Lazarus: 'Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?' But, blessed be His name, miracle is not the highest manifestation of Christ's glory and of

God’s. The uniqueness of the revelation of Christ’s glory in God does not depend upon the deeds which He wrought. For, as the context goes on to tell, the Word which tabernacled among us was ‘full of grace and truth,’ and therein is the glory most gloriously revealed.

The lambent light of stooping love that shone forth warning and attracting in His gentle life, and the clear white beam of unmingled truth that streamed from the radiant purity of Christ’s life, revealed God to hearts that pine for love and spirits that hunger for truth, as no others of God’s self-revealing works have done. And that revelation of the glory of God in the fulness of grace and truth is the highest possible revelation. For the divinest thing in God is love, and the true ‘glory of God’ is neither some symbolical flashing light nor the pomp of mere power and majesty; nor even those inconceivable and incommunicable attributes which we christen with names like Omnipotence and Omnipresence and Infinitude, and the like. These are all at the fringes of the brightness. The true central heart and lustrous light of the glory of God lie In His love, and of that glory Christ is the unique Representative and Revealer, because He is the only Begotten Son, and ‘full of grace and truth.’

Thus the Word tabernacled amongst us. And though the Tabernacle to outward seeming was covered by curtains and skins that hid all the glowing splendour within; yet in that lowly life that was lived in the body of His humiliation, and knew our limitations and our weaknesses, ‘the glory of the Lord was revealed; and all flesh hath seen it together’ and acknowledged the divine Presence there.

Still further the Tabernacle was the place of sacrifice. So in the tabernacle of His flesh Jesus offered up the one sacrifice for sins for ever. In the offering up of His human life in continuous obedience, and in the offering up of His body and blood in the bitter Passion of the Cross, He brought men nigh unto God.

Therefore, because of all these things, because the Tabernacle is the dwelling-place of God, the place of revelation, and the place of sacrifice, therefore, finally is it the meeting-place betwixt God and man. In the Old Testament it is always called by the name which our Revised Version has accurately substituted for ‘tabernacle of the congregation,’ namely ‘tent of meeting.' The correctness of that rendering and the meaning of the name are established by several passages in the Old Testament, as for instance, 'There I will meet with you, to speak there unto thee, and there I will meet with the children of Israel.' So in Christ, who by His Incarnation lays His hand upon both, God touches man and man touches God. We who are afar off are made nigh, and in that 'true tabernacle which the Lord pitched and not man' we meet God and are glad.

'And so the word was flesh, and wrought
With human hands the creed of creeds,
In loveliness of perfect deeds.'

The temple for earth is 'the temple of His body.'

II. We have the Tabernacle for the Heavens.

In the context of our second passage we have a vision of the great multitude redeemed out of all nations and kindreds, 'standing before the Throne and before the Lamb, arrayed in white robes, and palms in their hands.' The palms in their hands give important help towards understanding the vision. As has been often remarked, there are no heathen emblems in the Book of the Apocalypse. All its metaphors move within the circle of Jewish experiences and facts. So that we are not to think of the Roman palm of victory, but of the Jewish palm which was borne at the Feast of Tabernacles. What was the Feast of Tabernacles? A festival established on purpose to recall to the minds and to the gratitude of the Jews settled in their own land the days of their wandering in the wilderness. Part of the ritual of it was that during its celebration they builded for themselves booths or tabernacles of leaves and boughs of trees, under which they dwelt, thus reminding themselves of their nomad condition.

Now what beauty and power it gives to the word of my text, if we take in this allusion to the Jewish festival! The great multitude bearing the palms are keeping the feast, memorial of past wilderness wanderings; and 'He that sitteth on the throne shall spread His tabernacle above them,' as the word might be here rendered. That is to say, He Himself shall build and be the tent in which they dwell; He Himself shall dwell with them in it. He

Himself, in closer union than can be conceived of here, shall keep them company during that feast.

What a thought of that condition-the condition as I believe represented in this vision-of the spirits of the just made perfect, ‘who wait for the adoption, to wit, the resurrection of the body,’ is given us if we take this point of view to interpret the whole lovely symbolism. It is all a time of glad, grateful remembrance of the wilderness march. It is all a time in which festal joys shall be theirs, and the memory of the trials and the weariness and the sorrow and the solitude that are past shall deepen to a more exquisite poignancy of delight, the rest and the fellowship and the felicity of that calm Presence, and God Himself shall spread His tent above them, lodge with them, and they with Him.

And so, dear brethren, rest in that assurance, that though we know so little of that state, we know this: ‘Absent from the body, present with the Lord,’ and that the happy company who bear the palms shall dwell in God, and God in them.

III. And now, lastly, look at that final vision which we have in these texts, which we may call the Tabernacle for the renewed earth.

I do not pretend to interpret the scenery and the setting of these Apocalyptic visions with dogmatic confidence, but it seems to me as if the emblems of this final vision coincide with dim hints in many other portions of Scripture; to the effect that some cosmical change having passed upon this material world in which we dwell, it, in some regenerated form, shall be the final abode of a regenerated and redeemed humanity. That, I think, is the natural interpretation of a great deal of Scriptural teaching.

For that highest condition there is set forth this as the all-sufficing light upon it. ‘Behold, the Tabernacle of God is with men, and He will tabernacle with them.’ The climax and the goal of all the divine working, and the long processes of God’s love for, and discipline of, the world, are to be this, that He and men shall abide together in unity and concord. That is God’s wish from the beginning. We read in one of the profound utterances of the Book of Proverbs how from of old the ‘delights’ of the Incarnate Wisdom which foreshadowed the Incarnate Word ‘were with the sons of men.’ And, at the close of all things, when the vision of this final chapter shall be fulfilled, God will say, settling Himself in the midst of a redeemed humanity, 'Lo! here will I dwell, for I have desired it. This is My rest for ever.' He will tabernacle with men, and men with Him.

We know not, and never shall know until experience strips the bandages from our eyes, what new methods of participation of the divine nature, and new possibilities of intimacy and intercourse with Him may be ours when the veils of flesh and sense and time have all dropped away. New windows may be opened in our spirits, from which we shall perceive new aspects of the divine character. New doors may be opened in our souls, from out of which we may pass to touch parts of His nature, all impalpable and inconceivable to us now. And when all the veils of a discordant moral nature are taken away, and we are pure, then we shall see, then we shall draw nigh to God. The thing that chiefly separates man from God is man's sin. When that is removed, the centrifugal force which kept our tiny orb apart from the great central sun being withdrawn, we shall, as it were, fall into the brightness and be one, not losing our sense of individuality, which would be to lose all the blessedness, but united with Him in a union far more intimate than earth can parallel. 'The Tabernacle of God shall be with men, and He will tabernacle with them.'

Do not let us forget that this highest and ultimate hope that is held forth here, of the union and communion, perfect and perpetual, of humanity with God, does not sweep aside Jesus Christ. For through all eternity the Everlasting Word, the Christ who bears our nature in its glorified form, or, rather, whose nature in its glorified form we shall bear, is the Medium of Revelation, and the Medium of communication between man and God.

'I saw no Temple therein,' says this final vision of the Apocalypse, but 'God Almighty and the Lamb,' and these are the Temples thereof. Therefore through eternity God shall tabernacle with men, as He does tabernacle with us now through Him, in whom dwelleth as in its perennial habitation, 'all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.'

So we have the three tabernacles, for earth, for heaven, for the renewed earth; and these three, if I may say so, are like the triple division of that ancient Tabernacle in the wilderness: the Outer Court; the Holy Place; the

Holiest of all. Let us enter into that outer court, and abide and commune with that God who comes near to us, revealing, forgiving, in the person of His Son, and then we shall pass from court to court, ‘and go from strength to strength, until every one of us in Zion appear before God’; and enter into the Holiest of all, where ‘within the veil’ we shall receive splendours of revelation undreamed of here, and enjoy depths of communion to which the selectest moments of fellowship with God on earth are shallow and poor.

27)Revelation 7:17

Psalms

TWO SHEPHERDS AND TWO FLOCKS

Psa. 49:14. - Rev. 7:17.

These two verses have a much closer parallelism in expression than appears in our Authorised Version. If you turn to the Revised Version you will find that it rightly renders the former of my texts, ‘Death shall be their shepherd,’ and the latter, ‘The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their Shepherd.’ The Old Testament Psalmist and the New Testament Seer have fallen upon the same image to describe death and the future, but with how different a use! The one paints a grim picture, all sunless and full of shadow; the other dips his pencil in brilliant colours, and suffuses his canvas with a glow as of molten sunlight. The difference between the two is partly due to the progress of revelation and the light cast on life and immortality by Christ through the Gospel. But it is much more due to the fact that the two writers have different classes in view. The one is speaking of men whose portion is in this life, the other of men who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. And it is the characters of the persons concerned, much more than the degree of enlightenment possessed by the writers, that makes the difference between these two pictures. Life and death and the future are what each man makes of them for himself. We shall best deal with these two pictures if we take them separately, and let the gloom of the one enhance the glory of the other. They hang side by side, like a Rembrandt beside a Claude or a Turner, each intensifying by contrast the characteristics of the other. So let us look at the two-first, the grim picture drawn by the Psalmist; second, the sunny one drawn by the Seer. Now, with regard to the former,

I. The grim picture drawn by the Psalmist.

We too often forget that a psalmist is a poet, and misunderstand his spirit by treating his words as matter-of-fact prose. His imagination is at work, and our sympathetic imagination must be at work too, if we would enter into his meaning. Death a shepherd-what a grim and bold inversion of a familiar metaphor! If this psalm is, as is probable, of a comparatively late date, then its author was familiar with many sweet and tender strains of early singers, in which the blessed relation between a loving God and an obedient people was set forth under that metaphor. 'The Lord is *my* Shepherd' may have been ringing in his ears when he said, 'Death is *their* shepherd.' He lays hold of the familiar metaphor, and if I may so speak, turns it upside down, stripping it of all that is beautiful, tender, and gracious, and draping it in all that is harsh and terrible. And the very contrast between the sweet relation which it was originally used to express, and the opposite kind of one which he uses it to set forth, gives its tremendous force to the daring metaphor.

'Death is their shepherd.' Yes, but what manner of shepherd? Not one that gently leads his flock, but one that stalks behind the huddled sheep, and drives them fiercely, club in hand, on a path on which they would not willingly go. The unwelcome necessity, by which men that have their portion in this world are hounded and herded out of all their sunny pastures and abundant feeding, is the thought that underlies the image. It is accentuated, if we notice that in the former clause, 'like sheep they are laid in the grave,' the word rendered in the Authorised Version 'laid,' and in the Revised Version 'appointed,' is perhaps more properly read by many, 'like sheep they are *thrust down*.' There you have the picture-the shepherd stalking behind the helpless creatures, and coercing them on an unwelcome path.

Now that is the first thought that I suggest, that to one type of man, Death is an unwelcome necessity. It is, indeed, a necessity to us all, but necessities accepted cease to be painful; and necessities resisted-what do they become? Here is a man being swept down a river, the sound of the falls is in his ears, and he grasps at anything on the bank to hold by, but in vain. That is how some of us feel when we face the thought, and will feel more when we front the reality, of that awful ‘must.’ ‘Death shall be their shepherd,’ and coerce them into darkness. Ask yourself the question, Is the course of my life such as that the end of it cannot but be a grim necessity which I would do anything to avoid?

This first text suggests not only a shepherd but a fold: ‘Like sheep they are thrust down to the grave.’ Now I am not going to enter upon what would be quite out of place here: a critical discussion of the Old Testament conception of a future life. That conception varies, and is not the same in all parts of the book. But I may, just in a word, say that ‘the grave’ is by no means the adequate rendering of the thought of the Psalmist, and that ‘Hell’ is a still more inadequate rendering of it. He does not mean either the place where the body is deposited, or a place where there is punitive retribution for the wicked, but he means a dim region, or, if I might so say, a localised condition, in which all that have passed through this life are gathered, where personality and consciousness continue, but where life is faint, stripped of all that characterises it here, shadowy, unsubstantial, and where there is inactivity, absolute cessation of all the occupations to which men were accustomed. But there may be restlessness along with inactivity; may there not? And there is no such restlessness as the restlessness of compulsory idleness. That is the main idea that is in the Psalmist’s mind. He knows little about retribution, he knows still less about transmutation into a glorious likeness to that which is most glorious and divine. But he conceives a great, dim, lonely land, wherein are prisoned and penned all the lives that have been foamed away vainly on earth, and are now settled into a dreary monotony and a restless idleness. As one of the other books of the Old Testament puts it, it is a ‘land of the shadow of death, without order, and in which the light is as darkness.’

I know, of course, that all that is but the imperfect presentation of partially apprehended, and partially revealed, and partially revealable truth. But what I desire to fix upon is that one dreary thought of this fold, into which the grim shepherd has driven his flock, and where they lie cribbed and huddled together in utter inactivity. Carry that with you as a true, though incomplete thought.

Let me remind you, in the next place, with regard to this part of my subject, of the kind of men whom the grim shepherd drives into that grim fold. The psalm tells us that plainly enough. It is speaking of men who have their portion in this life, who 'trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches . . . whose inward thought is that their house shall continue for ever . . . who call their lands after their own names.' Of every such man it says: 'when he dieth he shall carry nothing away'-none of the possessions, none of the forms of activity which were familiar to him here on earth. He will go into a state where he finds nothing which interests him, and nothing for him to do.

Must it not be so? If we let ourselves be absorbed and entangled by the affairs of this life, and permit our whole spirits to be bent in the direction of these transient things, what is to become of us when the things that must pass have passed, and when we come into a region where there are none of them to occupy us any more? What would some Manchester men do if they were in a condition of life where they could not go on 'Change on Tuesdays and Fridays? What would some of us do if the professions and forms of mental activity in which we have been occupied as students and scholars were swept away? 'Whether there be knowledge it shall cease; whether there be tongues they shall vanish away,' and what are you going to do then, you men that have only lived for intellectual pursuits connected with this transient state? We are going to a world where there are no books, no pens nor ink, no trade, no dress, no fashion, no amusements; where there is nothing but things in which some of us have no interest, and a God who 'is not in all our thoughts.' Surely we shall be 'fish out of water' there. Surely we shall feel that we have been banned and banished from everything that we care about. Surely men that boasted themselves in their riches, and in the multitude of their wealth, will be necessarily condemned to inactivity. Life is continuous, and all on one plane. Surely if a man knows that he must some day, and may any day, be summoned to the other side of the world, he would be a wise man if he got his outfit ready, and made some effort to acquire the customs and the arts of the land to which he was going. Surely life here is mainly given to us that we may develop powers which will find their field of exercise yonder, and acquire characters which shall be in conformity with the conditions of that future life. Surely there can be no more tragic folly than the folly of letting myself be so absorbed and entangled by this present world, as that when the transient has passed, I shall feel homeless and desolate, and have nothing that I can do or care about amidst the activities of Eternity. Dear friend, should *you* feel homeless if you were taken, as you will be taken, into that world?

Turn now to

II. The sunny landscape drawn by the Seer.

Note the contrast presented by the shepherds. ‘Death shall be their shepherd.’ ‘The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their Shepherd.’ I need not occupy your time in trying to show, what has sometimes been doubted, that the radiant picture of the Apocalyptic Seer is dealing with nothing in the present, but with the future condition of certain men. I would just remind you that the words in which it is couched are to a large extent a quotation from ancient prophecy, a description of the divine watchfulness over the pilgrim’s return from captivity to the Land of Promise. But the quotation is wonderfully elevated and spiritualised in the New Testament vision; for instead of reading, as the Original does: ‘He that hath mercy on them shall lead them,’ we have here, ‘the Lamb which is in the midst of the Throne shall be their Shepherd,’ and instead of their being led merely to ‘the springs of water,’ here we read that He ‘leads them to the fountains of the water of life.’

We have to think, first, of that most striking, most significant and profound modification of the Old Testament words, which presents the Lamb as ‘the Shepherd.’ All Christ’s shepherding on earth and in heaven depends, as do all our hopes for heaven and earth, upon the fact of His sacrificial death. It is only because He is the ‘Lamb that was slain’ that He is either the ‘Lamb in the midst of the Throne,’ or the Shepherd of the flock. And we must make acquaintance with Him first in the character of ‘the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world,’ before we can either follow in His footsteps as our Guide, or be compassed by His protection as our Shepherd.

He is the Lamb, and He is the Shepherd-that suggests not only that the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ is the basis of all His work for us on earth and in heaven, but the very incongruity of making One, who bears the same nature as the flock to be the Shepherd of the flock, is part of the beauty of the metaphor. It is His humanity that is our guide. It is His continual manhood, all through eternity and its glories, that makes Him the Shepherd of perfected souls. They follow Him because He is one of themselves, and He could not be the Shepherd unless he were the Lamb.

But then this Shepherd is not only gracious, sympathetic, kin to us by participation in a common nature, and fit to be our Guide because He has been our Sacrifice and the propitiation of our sins, but He is the Lamb 'in the midst of the throne,' wielding therefore all divine power, and standing-not as the rendering in our Bible leads an English reader to suppose, on the throne, but-in the middle point between it and the ring of worshippers, and so the Communicator to the outer circumference of all the blessings that dwell in the divine centre. He shall be their Shepherd, not coercing, not driving by violence, but leading to the fountains of the waters of life, gently and graciously. It is not compulsory energy which He exercises upon us, either on earth or in heaven, but it is the drawing of a divine attraction, sweet to put forth and sweet to yield to.

There is still another contrast. Death huddled and herded his reluctant sheep into a fold where they lay inactive but struggling and restless. Christ leads His flock into a pasture. He shall guide them 'to the fountains of waters of life.' I need not dwell at any length on the blessed particulars of that future, set forth here and in the context. But let me suggest them briefly. There is joyous activity. There is constant progression. He goeth before; they follow. The perfection of heaven begins at entrance into it, but it is a perfection which can be perfected, and is being perfected, through the ages of Eternity, and the picture of the Shepherd in front and the flock behind, is the true conception of all the progress of that future life. 'They shall follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth'-a sweet guidance, a glad following, a progressive conformity! 'In the long years liker must they grow.'

Further, there is the communication of life more and more abundantly. Therefore there is the satisfaction of all desire, so that 'they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more.' The pain of desire ceases because desire is no sooner felt than it is satisfied, the joy of desire continues, because its satisfaction enables us to desire more, and so, appetite and eating, desire and fruition, alternate in ceaseless reciprocity. To us, being every moment capable of more, more will be given; and 'to-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.'

There is one point more in regard to that pasture into which the Lamb leads the happy flock, and that is, the cessation of all pains and sorrows. Not only shall they 'hunger no more, neither thirst any more'; but 'the sun shall not smite them, nor any heat, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.' Here the Shepherd carried rod and staff, and sometimes had to strike the wandering sheep hard: there these are needed no more. Here He had sometimes to move them out of green pastures, and away from still waters, into valleys of the shadow of death; but 'there,' as one of the prophets has it: 'they shall lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed.'

But now, we must note, finally, the other kind of men whom this other Shepherd leads into His pastures, 'They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.' Aye! that is it. That is why He can lead them where He does lead them. Strange alchemy which out of two crimsons, the crimson of our sins and the crimson of His blood, makes one white! But it is so, and the only way by which we can ever be cleansed, either with the initial cleansing of forgiveness, or with the daily cleansing of continual purifying and approximation to the divine holiness, is by our bringing the foul garment of our stained personality and character into contact with the blood which, 'shed for many,' takes away their sins, and infused into their veins, cleanses them from all sin.

You have yourselves to bring about that contact. '*They* have washed their robes.' And how did they do it? By faith in the Sacrifice first, by following the Example next. For it is not merely a forgiveness for the past, but a perfecting, progressive and gradual, for the future, that lies in that thought of washing their robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Dear brethren, life here and life hereafter are continuous. They are homogeneous, on one plane though an ascending one. The differences there are great-I was going to say, and it would be true, that the resemblances are greater. As we have been, we shall be. If we take Christ for our Shepherd here, and follow Him, though from afar and with faltering steps, amidst all the struggles and windings and rough ways of life, then and only then, will He be our Shepherd, to go with us through the darkness of death, to make it no reluctant expulsion from a place in which we would fain continue to be, but a tranquil and willing following of Him by the road which He has consecrated for ever, and deprived for ever of its solitude, because Himself has trod it.

Those two possibilities are before each of us. Either of them may be yours. One of them must be. Look on this picture and on this; and choose-God help you to choose aright-which of the two will describe your experience. Will you have Christ for your Shepherd, or will you have Death for your shepherd? The answer to that question lies in the answer to the other-have you washed your robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb; and are you following Him? You can settle the question which lot is to be yours, and only you can settle it. See that you settle it aright, and that you settle it soon.

END OF VOL. I.

28)Revelation 14:13

Ecclesiastes

NAKED OR CLOTHED?

Ecc. 5:15. - Rev. 14:13.

It is to be observed that these two sharply contrasted texts do not refer to the same persons. The former is spoken of a rich worldling, the latter of ‘the dead who die in the Lord.’ The unrelieved gloom of the one is as a dark background against which the triumphant assurance of the other shines out the more brightly, and deepens the gloom which heightens it. The end of the man who has to go away from earth naked and empty-handed acquires new tragic force when set against the lot of those ‘whose works do follow them.’ Well-worn and commonplace as both sets of thought may be, they may perhaps be flashed up into new vividness by juxtaposition; and if in this sermon we have nothing new to say, old truth is not out of place till it has been wrought into and influenced our daily practice. We shall best gather the lessons of our text if we consider what we must leave, what we must take, and what we may take.

I. What we must leave.

The Preacher in the context presses home a formidable array of the limitations and insufficiencies of wealth. Possessed, it cannot satisfy, for the appetite grows with indulgence. Its increase barely keeps pace with the increase of its consumers. It contributes nothing to the advantage of its so-called owner except ‘the beholding of it with his eyes,’ and the need of watching it keeps them open when he would fain sleep. It is often kept to the owner’s hurt, it often disappears in unfortunate speculation, and the possessor’s heirs are paupers. But, even if all these possibilities are safely weathered, the man has to die and leave it all behind. ‘He shall take nothing of his labour which he can carry away in his hand’; that is to say, death separates from all with whom the life of the body brings us into connection. The things which are no parts of our true selves are ours in a very modified sense even whilst we seem to possess them, and the term of possession has a definite close. ‘Shrouds have no pockets,’ as the stern old proverb says. How many men have lived in the houses which we call ours, sat on our seats, walked over our lands, carried in their purses the money that is in ours! Is ‘the game worth the candle’ when we give our labour for so imperfect and brief a possession as at the fullest and the longest we enjoy of all earthly good? Surely a wise man will set little store by possessions of all which a cold, irresistible hand will come to strip him. Surely the life is wasted which spends its energy in robing itself in garments which will all be stripped from it when the naked self ‘returns to go as he came.’

But there are other things than these earthly possessions from which death separates us. It carries us far away from the sound of human voices and isolates us from living men. Honour and reputation cease to be audible. When a prominent man dies, what a clatter of conflicting judgments contends over his grave! and how utterly he is beyond them all! Praise or blame, blessing or banning are equally powerless to reach the unhearing ear or to agitate the unbeating heart. And when one of our small selves passes out of life, we hear no more the voice of censure or of praise, of love or of hate. Is it worth while to toil for the ‘hollow wraith of dying fame,’ or even for the clasp of loving hands which have to be loosened so surely and so soon?

Then again, there are other things which must be left behind as belonging only to the present order, and connected with bodily life. There will be no scope for material work, and much of all our knowledge will be antiquated when the light beyond shines in. As we shall have occasion to see presently, there is a permanent element in the most material work, and if in handling the transient we have been living for the eternal, such work will abide; but if we think of the spirit in which a sad majority do their daily tasks, whether of a more material or of a more intellectual sort, we must recognise that a very large proportion of all the business of life must come to an end here. There is nothing in it that will stand the voyage across the great deep, or that can survive in the order of things to which we go. What is a man to do in another world, supposing there is another world, where ledgers and mills are out of date? Or what has a scholar or scientist to do in a state of things where there is no place for dictionaries and grammars, for acute criticism, or for a careful scientific research?

Physical science, linguistic knowledge, political wisdom, will be antiquated. The poetry which glorifies afresh and interprets the present will have lost its meaning. Half the problems that torture us here will cease to have existence, and most of the other half will have been solved by simple change of position. ‘Whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away’; and it becomes us all to bethink ourselves whether there is anything in our lives that we can carry away when all that is ‘of the earth earthy’ has sunk into nothingness.

II. What we must take.

We must take *ourselves*. It is the same ‘he’ who goes ‘naked as he came’; it is the same ‘he’ who ‘came from his mother’s womb,’ and is ‘born again’ as it were into a new life, only ‘he’ has by his earthly life been developed and revealed. The plant has flowered and fruited. What was mere potentiality has become fact. There is now fixed character. The transient possessions, relationships, and occupations of the earthly life are gone, but the man that they have made is there. And in the character there are predominant habits which insist upon having their sway, and a memory of which, as we may believe, there is written indelibly all the past. Whatever death may strip from us, there is no reason to suppose that it touches the consciousness and personal identity, or the prevailing set and inclination of our characters. And if we do indeed pass into another life 'not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness,' but carrying a perfected memory and clothed in a garment woven of all our past actions, there needs no more to bring about a solemn and continuous act of judgment.

III. What we may take.

'Their works do follow them.' These are the words of the Spirit concerning 'the dead who die in the Lord.' We need not fear marring the great truth that 'not by works of righteousness but by His mercy He saved us,' if we firmly grasp the large assurance which this text blessedly contains. A Christian man's works are perpetual in the measure in which they harmonise with the divine will, in the measure they have eternal consequences in himself whatever they may have on others. If we live opening our minds and hearts to the influx of the divine power 'that worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure,' then we may be humbly sure that these 'works' are eternal; and though they will never constitute the ground of our acceptance, they will never fail to secure 'a great recompence of reward.' To many a humble saint there will be a moment of wondering thankfulness when he sees these his 'children whom God hath given him' clustered round him, and has to say, 'Lord, when saw I Thee naked, or in prison, and visited Thee?' There will be many an apocalypse of grateful surprise in the revelations of the heavens. We remember Milton's noble explanation of these great words which may well silence our feeble attempts to enforce them-

'Thy works and alms and all thy good endeavour

Stood not behind, nor in the grave were trod,

But as faith pointed with her golden rod,

Followed them up to joy and bliss for ever.'

So then, life here and yonder will for the Christian soul be one continuous whole, only that there, while 'their works do follow them,' 'they rest from their labours.'

29)Revelation 15:2-3

Revelation

THE SONG OF MOSES AND THE LAMB

Rev. 15:2-3

The form of this vision is moulded partly by the circumstances of the Seer, and partly by reminiscences of Old Testament history. As to the former, it can scarcely be an accident that the Book of the Revelation abounds with allusions to the sea. We are never far from the music of its waves, which broke around the rocky Patmos where it was written. And the ‘sea of glass mingled with fire’ is but a photograph of what John must have seen on many a still morning, when the sunrise came blushing over the calm surface; or on many an evening when the wind dropped at sundown, and the sunset glow dyed the watery plain with a fading splendor. - Nor is the allusion to Old Testament history less obvious. We cannot but recognize the reproduction, with modifications, of that scene when Moses and his ransomed people looked upon the ocean beneath which their oppressors lay, and lifted up their glad thanksgivings. So here, by anticipation, in the solemn pause before the judgment goes forth, there are represented the spirits that have been made wise by conquest, as gathered on the bank of that steadfast ocean, lifting up as of old a hymn of triumphant thankfulness over destructive judgments, and blending the song of Moses and of the Lamb, in testimony of the unity of spirit which runs through all the manifestations of God’s character from the beginning to the end. Ever His judgments are right; ever the purpose of His most terrible things is that men may know Him, and may love Him; and ever they who see deepest into the mysteries, and understand most truly the realities of the universe will have praise springing to their lips for all that God hath done.

I. Notice the Triumphant Choir.

‘I saw them that had gotten the victory over the beast and over his image, and over the number of his name.’ Now I am not going to plunge into Apocalyptic discussions. It is no part of my business now either to ask or answer the question as to whether this Beast of the Revelation is a person or a tendency. I do not care, for my present purpose, whether, supposing it to be a person, an embodiment of certain tendencies, it is a person in the past or in the future; whether it was a veiled designation of the Emperor Nero, or whether it is a prophecy of some yet unborn human embodiment of transcendent wickedness. The question that I would ask is rather this, - Whoever the beast is, what makes him a beast? And if we will think about that, we may get some good out of it. What is the bestial element in him, whoever he be? And the answer is not far to find - Godless selfishness, that is ‘the mark of the beast.’ Wherever a human nature is self-centered, God-forgetting, and, therefore, God opposing [for whoever forgets God defies Him], that nature has gone down below humanit3% and has touched the lower level of the brutes. Men are so made as that they must either rise to the level of God or certainly go down to that of the animal. And wherever you see men living by their own fancies, for their own pleasure, in forgetfulness and neglect of the sweet and mystic bonds that should knit them to God, there you see the image of the beast and the number of his name.’

But besides that godless selfishness, we may point to simple animalism as literally the mark of the beast. He who lives not by conscience and by faith, but by fleshly inclination and sense, lowers himself to the level of the instinctive brute-life, and beneath it, because he refuses to obey faculties which they do not possess, and what is nature in them is degradation in us. Look at the unblushing sensuality which marks many ‘respectable people’ nowadays. Look at the foul fleshliness of much of popular art and poetry. Look at the way in which pure animal passion, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eye, and the love of good things to eat, and plenty to drink, is swaying and destroying men and women by the thousand among us. Look at the temptations that lie along every street in our great cities, for every young man, after dusk. Look at the thin veneer of culture over the ugliest lust. Scratch the gentleman, and you find the satyr. Is it much of an exaggeration, in view of the facts of English life to-day, to say that all the world wonders after and worships this beast?

Further, notice that to escape from the power of the beast it is needful to fight one’s way out. The language of my text is remarkably significant. This

Apocalyptic writer does not mind about grammar or smoothness so long as he can express his ideas; and he uses a form of speech here that makes the hair of grammatical purists stand on end, because it vigorously expresses his thought. He calls these triumphant choristers ‘conquerors out of the beast,’ which implies that victory over him is an escape from a dominion in which the conquerors, before their victory, were held. They have fought their way, as it were, out of the land of bondage, and, like revolted slaves, have won their liberty, and marched forth triumphant. The allusion to Israel’s exodus is probable. ‘Egypt was glad when they departed.’ So the bondsmen of this new Pharaoh recover freedom by conflict, and the fruit of their victory is entire escape from the tyrant.

That victory is possible. The Apocalypse shows us that there are two opposing Powers - this said ‘beast’ on the one side, and ‘the Lamb’ on the other. In the Seer’s vision these two divide the world between them. That is to say, Jesus Christ has conquered the bestial tendencies of our nature, the selfish godlessness which is apt to cast its spells and weave its chains over us all. The Warrior-Lamb, singular and incongruous as the combination sounds, is the Victor. He conquers because He is the Lamb of sacrifice; He conquers because He is the Lamb of innocence; He conquers because He is the Lamb of meekness, the gentle and, therefore, the all-victorious. By Christ we conquer. Through faith, which lays hold on His power and victory, we too may conquer. ‘This is the victory which overcometh the world, even our faith.’

Young men and women, may I make my appeal specially to you? Do not let yourselves be led away captives, like cattle to the shambles, by the fascinations and seductions of this poor, fleeting present. Keep your heel on the neck of the animal that is within you; take care of that selfish godlessness into which we all are tempted to fall. Listen to the trumpet-call that ought to stir your hearts, and summons you to freedom and to victory through the blood of the Lamb. And by humbly clasping Him as your Sacrifice, your Leader, and your Power, enroll yourselves amongst those who, in His own good time, shall come victorious out from the beast and from his image.

II. Still further, notice the position of this victorious chorus.

‘I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire; and they stand on the sea of glass.’ Of course the propriety of the image, as well as the force of the original language, suggests at once that by ‘on the sea of glass’ here, we must understand, on the firm bank by its side. As Moses and the ransomed hosts stood on the shore of the Red Sea, so these conquerors are represented as standing on the safe beach, and looking out upon this sea of glass mingled with fire, which, calm, crystal, clear, stable, and yet shot through and through with the red lines of retributive judgment, sleeps above the buried oppressors.

Observe that besides its picturesque appropriateness and its historical allusion, this sea of glass has a distinct symbolical meaning. "We find it appearing also in the great vision in the fourth chapter, where the Seer beholds the normal and ideal order of the universe, which is - the central throne, the ‘Lamb that was slain’ in the interspace between the Throne and the creatures as mediator; and round about, the four living beings, who represent the fullness of creation, and the four and-twenty elders, who represent the Church in the Old and the New Covenants as one whole. Then follows, ‘before the Throne was a sea of glass,’ which cannot be any part of the material creation, and seems to have but one explanation, and that is that it means the aggregate of the Divine dealings. ‘Thy judgments are a mighty deep.’ Oh! the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God; how unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out.’ Such a signification fits precisely our present passage, for the sea here represents that beneath which the tyrant lies buried for evermore.

That great ocean of the judgment of God is crystalline-clear though deep. Does it seem so to us? Ah I we stand before the mystery of God’s dealings, often bewildered, and not seldom reluctant to submit. The perplexity arising from their obscurity is often almost torture, and sometimes leads men into Atheism, or something like it. And yet here is the assurance that that sea is crystal clear, and that if we cannot look to its lowest depths, that is not because there is any mud or foulness there, but partly because the light from above fails before it reaches the abysses, and partly because our eyes are uneducated to search its depths. In itself it is transparent, and it rises and falls without mire or dirt,’ like the blue Mediterranean on the marble cliffs of the Italian coast. If it is clear as far as the eye can see, let us trust that beyond the reach of the eye the clearness is the same.

And it is a crystal ocean as being calm. They who stand there have gotten the victory and bear the image of the Master. By reason of their conquest and by reason of their sympathy with Him they see that what to us, tossing upon its surface, appears such a troubled and tempestuous ocean, as calm and still. As from some height, looked down upon, the ocean seems a watery plain, and all the agitation of the billows has subsided into a gentle ripple on the surface, so to them looking down upon the sea that brought them thither, it is quiet - and their vision, not ours, is the true one.

It is a ‘sea of glass mingled with fire.’ Divine acts of retribution as it were flash through it, if I may so say, like those streaks of red that are seen in Venice glass, or like some ocean smitten upon the one side of every wave by a fiery sunlight, while the other side of each is dark. So through that great depth of God’s dealings there flashes the fire of retribution. They who have conquered the animal, the godless self, see into the meaning and the mercifulness of God’s dealings with the world; and we here, in the measure in which we have become victors over the rude animalism and the more subtle selfishness that tend to rule us all, and in the measure in which we bear the image of Jesus Christ, and therefore have come into sympathy with Him, may come to discern with some clearer understanding, and to trust with more unfaltering faith, the righteousness and the mercy of all that God shall do.

III. Lastly, notice the occasion of the song, and the song itself.

‘They sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb.’ The Song of Moses was a song of triumph over destructive judgment; the Song of the Lamb, says the text, is set on the same key. The one broad, general lesson to be drawn from this, is one on which I have no time to touch, viz., the essential unity, in spite of all superficial diversities, of the revelation of God in the Old Covenant by law and miracle and retributive acts, and the revelation of God in the New Covenant by the Cross and Passion of Jesus Christ. Men pit the Old Testament against the New; the God of the Old Testament against the God of the New. They sometimes tell us that there is antagonism. Modern teachers are wanting us to deny that the Old is the foreshadowing of the

New, and the New the fulfilment of the Old. My text asserts, in opposition to all such errors, the fruitful principle of the fundamental unity of the two; and bids us find in the one the blossom and in the other the fruit, and declares that the God who brought the waters of the ocean over the oppressors is the God that has mercy upon all, in Jesus Christ, His dying Son.

And there is another principle here, upon which I need not do more than touch, for I have already anticipated much that might have been said about it, and that is the perfect harmony of the retributive acts of God's destructive dealings in this world, and the highest conception of His love and mercy which the gospel brings us. 'When the wicked perish,' says one of the old proverbs, 'there is shouting.' And so there ought to be. When some hoary oppression that has been deceiving mankind for centuries, with its instruments and accomplices, is swept off the face of the earth, the more men have entered into the meaning of Jesus Christ's mission and work, and the more they feel the pitying indignation which they ought to feel at seeing men led away by evil, and made miserable by oppression, the more they will rejoice. God's dealings are meant to manifest His character and that in order that all men may know and love Him. We may, therefore, be sure, and keep firm hold of the confidence, that whatever He doeth, however the methods may seem to vary, comes from one unalterable and fixed motive, and leads to one unalterable and certain end. The motive is His own love; the end the glory of His Name, in the love and knowledge of men whose life and blessedness depend on their knowing and loving Him.

So, dear friends, do not let us be too swift in saying that this, that, and the other thing are inconsistent with the highest conceptions of the Divine character. I believe, as heartily as any man can believe, that God has put His witness in our consciences and minds, and that all His dealings will comply with any test that man's reason and man's conscience and man's heart can subject them to. Only we have not got all the materials; we look at half - finished work; our eyes are not quite so educated as that we can pronounce infallibly, on seeing a small segment of a circle, what are its diameter and its sweep.

I am always suspicious of that rough-and-ready way of settling questions about God’s revelation, when a man says: I cannot accept this or that because it contradicts my conception of the Divine nature.’ Unless you are quite sure that your conceptions are infallibly accurate, unless you deny the possibility of their being educated, you must admit that agreement with them is but a leaden rule. And it seems to me a good deal wiser, and more accordant with the modesty which becomes us, to be cautious in pronouncing what does or does not befit God to do, and, until we reach that loftier point of vision, where being higher up we can see deeper down, to say ‘the Judge of all the earth must do right. If He does this, then it is right.’ At any rate let us lay hold of the plain truth: ‘O Lord! Thou preservest man and beast,’ and then we may venture to say, ‘Thy judgments are a mighty deep,’ and beneath that deepest depth, as the roots of the hills beneath the ocean, is God’s righteousness, which is like the great mountains.

The last thought that I would suggest is that, according to the teaching of my text, we may take that old, old story of the ransomed slaves and the baffled oppressor and the Divine intervention and the overwhelming ocean, as prophecy full of radiant hope for the world. That is how it is used here. Pharaoh is the beast, the Red Sea is this ‘sea of glass mingled with fire,’ the ransomed Israelites are those who have conquered their way out of the dominion of the beast, and the song of Moses and of the Lamb is a song parallel to the cadences of the ancient triumphant chorus, and celebrating the annihilation of that power which drew the world away from God. So we may believe that as Israel stood on the sands, and saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore, humanity will one day, delivered from all its bestiality and its selfishness, lift up a song of thanksgiving to the conquering King who has drowned its enemies in the depths of His own righteous judgments.

And as for the world, so for individuals. If you take the Beast for your Pharaoh and your task-master, you will ‘sink’ with him ‘like lead in the mighty waters.’ If you take the Lamb for your sacrifice and your King, He will break the bonds from off your arms, and lift the yoke from your neck, and lead you all your lives long; and you will stand at last, when the eternal morning breaks, and see its dawn touch with golden light the calm ocean, beneath which your oppressors lie buried for ever, and will lift up glad thanksgivings to Him who has washed you from your sins in His own blood, and made you victors over ‘the beast, and his image, and the number of his name.’

30)Revelation 21:1-7

Revelation

THE NEW JERUSALEM ON THE NEW EARTH

Rev. 21:1-7; Rev. 21:22-27

The ‘new Jerusalem’ can be established only under a ‘new heaven’ and on a ‘new earth.’ The Seer naturally touches on these before he describes it. And the fact that they come into view here as supplying the field for it makes the literal interpretation of their meaning the more probable. If ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ means a renovated condition of humanity, what difference is there between it and the New Jerusalem planted in it? We have to remember the whole stream of Old and New Testament representation, according to which the whole material creation is ‘subject to vanity,’ and destined for a deliverance. Modern astronomy has seen worlds in flames in the sky, and passing by a fiery change into new forms; and the possibility of the heavens being dissolved, the elements melted with fervent heat, and a new heavens and new earth emerging, cannot be disputed. In what sense are they ‘new’? ‘New’ here, as the application of it to Jerusalem may show, does not mean just brought into existence, but renovated, made fresh, and implies, rather than denies, the fact of previous existence. So, throughout Scripture, the re-constitution of the material world, by which it passes from the bondage of corruption into ‘the liberty of the glory of the children of God’ is taught, and the final seat of the city of God is set forth as being, not some far-off, misty heaven in space, but ‘that new world which is the old.’

‘And the sea is no more’ probably is to be taken in a symbolic sense, as shadowing forth the absence of unruly power, of mysterious and hostile forces, of estranging gulfs of separation. Into this renovated world the renovated city floats down from God. It has been present with Him, before its manifestation on earth, as all things that are to be manifested in time dwell eternally in the Divine mind, and as it had been realized in the person of the ascended Christ. When He comes down from heaven again, the city comes with Him. It is the ‘new Jerusalem,’ inasmuch as the ideas which were partially embodied in the old Jerusalem find complete and ennobled expression in it. The perfect state of perfect humanity is represented by that society of God’s servants, of which the ancient Zion was a symbol. In it all the glowing stream of prophecy dealing with the ‘bridal of the earth and of the sky,’ the marriage of perfect manhood with the perfect King, is fulfilled.

II. The vision is supplemented by words explanatory to the Seer of what he beheld [vs. 3, 4], and all turns on two great thoughts - the blessed closeness of union now perfected and made eternal between God and men, and the consequent dawning of a new, unsetting day in which all human ills shall be swept away.

The former promise is cast in Old Testament mould, as are almost all the symbols and prophecies of this Book of Revelation. In outward form the tabernacle had stood in the centre of the wilderness encampment, and in the symbol of the Shekinah, God had dwelt with Israel, and they had been, in name, and by outward separation and consecration, His people. In the militant state of the Church on the old earth, God had dwelt with His people in reality, but with, alas! many a break in the intercourse caused by His people defiling the temple. But in that future all that was symbol shall be spiritual reality, and there will be no separation between the God who tabernacles among men and the men in whom He dwells. The mutual relation of possession of each other shall be perfect and perpetual. That is the brightest hope for us, and from it all other blessedness flows. His presence drives away all evils, as the risen moon clears the sky of clouds. How can sorrow, or crying, or pain, or death, live where He is, as He will be in the perfected city? The undescribable future is best described by the negation of all that is sad and a foe to life. Reverse the miseries of earth, and you know something of the joys of heaven. But begin with God’s presence, or you will know nothing of their most joyful joy.

III. The great voice speaks again, proclaiming the guarantees of the vision, and the conditions of possessing its fruition [vs. 5-7].

How can we be sure that these radiant hopes are better than delusions, lights thrown on the black curtain of the unknown future by the reflection of our own imaginations? Only because He that sitteth on the throne,' and is therefore sovereign over all things, has declared that He will 'make all things new.' His power and faithful word are the sole guarantees. Therefore seers may write, and we may read, and be sure that when heaven and earth pass away His word shall not only not pass away, but bring the new heavens and the new earth. So sure is the fulfilment, that already, to the divine mind, these things 'are come to pass.' Faith may share in the divine prerogative of seeing things that are not as though they were, and make the future present. He who is Alpha, the beginning, from whom are all things, is Omega, the end, to whom are all things. There lies the security that the drift of the universe is towards God, its source, and that at last man, who came from God, will come back to God, and Eden be surpassed by the new Jerusalem.

The conditions of entering the city are gathered up in words which recall many strains of prophecy and promise. Thirst is the condition of drinking of the water of life - as John the Evangelist delights to tell that Jesus said by the well at Samaria and in the temple court. Conflict and victory make His children heirs of these things, as the Christ had spoken by the Spirit to the churches. The Christian victory perfects the paternal and filial relation between God and us. And all three promises are but variations of the answer to the question: How can I become a citizen of that city of God?

IV. A fuller description, highly symbolical in colouring, of the city, comes next [vs. 22-27], on which space will only allow us to remark that we have, first, two representations, in each of which the city's glory is expressed by the absence from it of a great good, occasioned by the presence of a greater, of which the lesser was but a shadowy similitude.

There is no temple, no outward shrine, no place of special communion, no dependence on externals, because the communion with God and the Lamb is perfect, continuous, spiritual. There is no sun, moon, nor artificial light, for far brighter than their feeble beams is the light in which the citizens see light. That light is perpetual, and no night ever darkens the sky. That light draws all men to it. Possibly the Seer thinks of kings and nations as still subsisting, but more probably he carries over the features of the old earth into the new, in order to express the great hope that all shall be drawn to the light, and royalties and nations be merged in citizenship. One solemn word limits the universality of the vision. Nothing excludes but uncleanness, but that does exclude. The roll of citizens is the Lamb’s book of life, and we may all have our names written there. Only we must be pure, thirsty for the water of life, and fight and conquer through Jesus.

31)Revelation 21:1

Revelation

NO MORE SEA

Rev. 21:1

‘I John,’ says the Apocalypse at its commencement, ‘was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the testimony of Jesus.’ In this, the one prophetic book of the New Testament, we find the same fact that meets us in the old prophecies, that the circumstances of the prophet colour, and become the medium for, the representation of the spiritual truths that he has to speak. All through the book we hear the dash of the waves. There was ‘a sea of fire mingled with glass before the throne.’ The star Wormwood fell ‘upon the sea.’ Out of the sea the beast rises. When the great angel would declare the destruction of Babylon, he casts a mighty stone into the ocean, and says, ‘Thus suddenly shall Babylon be destroyed.’ And when John hears the voice of praise of the redeemed, it is ‘like the voice of many waters,’ as well as like the voice of ‘harpers harping on their harps.’ And then, when there dawns at the close of the vision, the bright and the blessed time which has yet to come, the ‘new heavens and the new earth’ are revealed to him; and that sad and solitary and estranging ocean that raged around his little rock sanctuary has passed away for ever. I suppose I need not occupy your time in showing that this is a symbol; that it does not mean literal fact at all; that it is not telling us anything about the geography of a future world, but that it is the material embodiment of a great spiritual truth.

Now what is meant by this symbol is best ascertained by remembering how the sea appears in the Old Testament. The Jew was not a sailor. All the references in the Old Testament, and especially in the prophets, to the great ocean are such as a man would make who knew very little about it, except from having looked at it from the hills of Judea, and having often wondered what might be lying away out yonder at the point where sky and sea blended together. There are three main things which it shadows forth in the Old Testament. It is a symbol of mystery, of rebellious power, of perpetual unrest. And it is the promise of the cessation of these things which is set forth in that saying, There was no more sea.' There shall be no more mystery and terror. There shall be no more 'the floods lifting up their voice,' and the waves dashing with impotent foam against the throne of God. There shall be no more the tossing and the tumult of changing circumstances, and no more the unrest and disquiet of a sinful heart. There shall be the 'new heavens and the new earth.' The old humanity will be left, and the relation to God will remain, deepened and glorified and made pure. But all that is sorrowful and all that is rebellious, all that is mysterious and all that is unquiet, shall have passed away for ever.

I. Let us then, by way of illustrating this great and blessed promise, consider it first as the revelation of a future in which there shall be no more painful mystery.

'Thy way is in the sea, and Thy path in the great waters, and Thy footsteps are not known.' 'Thy judgments are a mighty deep.' 'O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! 'Such is the prevailing tone of expression when the figure appears either in the Old or in the New Testament.

Most natural is it. There are, too, sources of obscurity there. We look out upon the broad ocean, and far away it seems to blend with air and sky. Mists come up over its surface. Suddenly there rises on the verge of the horizon a white sail that was not there a moment ago; and we wonder, as we look out from our hills, what may be beyond these mysterious waters. And to these ancient peoples there were mysteries which we do not feel. Whither should they come, if they were to venture on its untried tides? And then, what lies in its sunless caves that no eyes have seen? It swallows up life and beauty and treasure of every sort, and engulfs them all in its obstinate silence. They go down in the mighty waters and vanish as they descend. What would it be if these were drained off? What revelations - wild sea-valleys and mountain-gorges; the dead that are in it, the power that lies there, all powerless now, the wealth that has been lost in it! What should we see if depth and distance were annihilated, and we beheld what there is out yonder and what there is down there?

And is not our life, brethren, ringed round in like manner with mystery? And, alas! wherever to a poor human heart there is mystery, there will be terror.

The unknown is ever the awful. Where there is not certain knowledge, imagination works to people the waste places with monsters. There is a double limitation of our knowledge. There are mysteries that come from the necessary limitation of our faculties; and there are mysteries that come from the incompleteness of the revelation which God has been pleased to make. The eye is weak and the light is dim. There is much that lies beyond the horizon which our eyes cannot reach. There is much that lies covered by the deeps, which our eyes could reach if the deeps were away. We live - the wisest of us live - having great questions wrestling with us like that angel that wrestled with the patriarch in the darkness till the morning broke. We learn so little but our own ignorance, and we know so little but that we know nothing. There are the hard and obstinate knots that will not be untied; we bend all our faculties to them, and think they are giving a little bit, and they never give; and we gnaw at them, like the viper at the file, and we make nothing of it, but blunt our teeth!

Oh! to some hearts here, surely this ought to come as not the least noble and precious of the thoughts of what that future life is - ‘there shall be no more sea’; and the mysteries that come from God’s merciful limitation of our vision, and some of the mysteries that come from God’s wise and providential interposition of obstacles to our sight, shall have passed away. It is no dream, my brethren I Why, think how the fact of dying will solve many a riddle! how much more we shall know by shifting our position! ‘There must be wisdom with great Death,’ and he ‘keeps the keys of all the creeds.’ Try to conceive how some dear one that was beside us but a moment ago, perhaps but little conscious of his own ignorance, and knowing but little of God’s ways, thinking as we did, and speaking as we did, and snared with errors as we were, has grown at a bound into full stature, and how a flood of new knowledge and Divine truth rushes into the heart the moment it passes the grave I If they were to speak to us, perhaps we should not understand their new speech, so wise have they become who have died.

What mysteries have passed into light for them? I know not. Who can tell what strange enlargement of faculty this soul of ours is capable of? Who can tell how much of our blindness comes from the flesh that clogs us, from the working of the animal nature that is so strong in us? Who can tell what unknown resources and what possibilities of new powers there lie all dormant and unsuspected in the beggar on the dunghill, and in the idiot in the asylum? This, at least, we are sure of: we shall ‘know, even as also we are known.’ God will not be fathomed, but God will be known. God will be incomprehensible, but there will be no mystery in God, except that most blessed mystery of feeling that the fullness of His nature still surpasses our comprehension. Questions that now fill the whole horizon of our minds will have shrunk away into a mere point, or been answered by the very change of position. How much of the knowledge’s of earth will have ceased to be applicable, when the first light-beam of heaven falls upon them! Those problems which we think so mysterious - why God is doing this or that with us and the world; what is the meaning of this and the other sorrow - what will have become of these? We shall look back and see that the bending line was leading straight as an arrow-flight, home to the centre, and that the end crowns and vindicates every step of the road. Something of the mystery of

God will have been resolved, for man hath powers undreamed of yet, and ‘we shall see Him as He is.’ Much of the mystery of man, and of man’s relation to God, will have ceased; for then we shall understand all the way, when we have entered into the true sanctuary of God.

Men that love to know, let me ask you, where do you get the fulfilment, often dreamed of, of your desires, except here? Set this before you, as the highest truth for us: Christ is the beginning of all wisdom on earth. Starting thence I can hope to solve the remaining mysteries when I stand at last, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, in the presence of the great light of God.

Not that we shall know everything, for that were to cease to be finite. And if ever the blasphemous boast come true that tempted man once, ‘Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil,’ there were nothing left for the soul that was filled with all knowledge but to lie down and pant its last. It needs, by our very nature, and for our blessedness, that there should be much unknown. It needs that we should ever be pressing forward. Only, the mysteries that are left will have no terror nor pain in them. ‘There shall be no more sea,’ but we shall climb ever higher and higher up the mountain of God, and as we climb see farther and farther into the blessed valleys beyond, and ‘shall know, even as we are known.’

II. Secondly, the text tells us of a state that is to come, when there shall be no more rebellious power.

In the Old Testament the floods are often compared with the rage of the peoples, and the rebellion of man against the Will of God. ‘The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice. The Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters; yea, than the mighty waves of the sea.’ ‘Thou stillest the noise of the waves, and the tumult of the people.’ In like manner that symbolic reference surely supplies one chief meaning of Christ’s miracle of stilling the tempest; the Peace-bringer bringing to peace the tumults of men. Here, then, the sea stands as the emblem of untamed power. It is lashed into yeasty foam, and drives before it great ships and huge stones like bulrushes, and seems to have a savage pleasure in eating into the slow-corroding land, and covering the beach with its devastation.

‘There shall be no more sea.’ God lets people work against His kingdom in this world. It is not to be always so, says my text. The kingdom of God is in the earth, and the kingdom of God admits of opposition. Strange! But the opposition, even here on earth, all comes to nothing. ‘Thou art mightier than the noise of many waters’; the floods ‘have lifted up their voice’; but Thou ‘sittest upon the floods, yea, Thou sittest king for ever.’ Yes, it is an experience repeated over and over again, in the history of individuals and in the history of the world. Men, fancying themselves free, resolved to be rebellious, get together and say, mutteringly at first, and then boldly and loudly, ‘Let us break His bands asunder, and cast away His cords from us.’ And God sits in seeming silence in His heavens, and they work on, and the thing seems to be prospering, and some men’s hearts begin to fail them for fear. The great Armada comes in its pride across the waters - and the motto that our England struck upon its medal, when that proud fleet was baffled, serves for the epitaph over all antagonism to God’s kingdom, ‘The Lord blew upon them, and they were scattered.’ The tossing sea, that rages against the will and purpose of the Lord, what becomes of all its foaming fury? Why, this becomes of it - the ark of God ‘moves on the face of the waters,’ and though wild tempests howl to beat it from its course, yet beneath all the surface confusion and commotion there is, as in the great mid-ocean, a silent current that runs steady and strong, and it carries the keel that goes deep enough down to rest in it, safely to its port. Men may work against God’s kingdom, the waves may rave and rage; but beneath them there is a mighty tidal sweep, and God’s purposes are wrought out, and God’s ark comes to ‘its desired haven,’ and all opposition is nugatory at the last.

But there comes a time, too, when there shall be no more violence of rebellious wills lifting themselves against God. Our text is a blessed promise that, in that holy state to which the Apocalyptic vision carries our longing hopes, there shall be the cessation of all strife against our best Friend, of all reluctance to wear His yoke whose yoke brings rest to the soul. The opposition that lies in all our hearts shall one day be subdued. The whole consent of our whole being shall yield itself to the obedience of sons, to the service of love. The wild rebellious power shall be softened into peace, and won to joyful acceptance of His law. In all the regions of that heavenly state, there shall be no jarring will, no reluctant submission. Its ‘solemn troops and sweet societies’ shall move in harmonious consent of according hearts, and circle His throne in continuousness of willing fealty. There shall be One will in heaven. ‘There shall be no more sea’; for ‘His servants serve Him,’ and the noise of the waves has died away for ever.

Before I pass on, let me appeal to you, my friend, on this matter. Here is the revelation for us of the utter hopelessness and vanity of all opposition to God. Oh! what a thought that is, that every life that sets itself against the Lord is a futile life, that it comes to nothing at last, that none hardens himself against God and prospers! It is true on the widest scale. It is true on the narrowest. It is true about all those tempests that have risen up against God’s Church and Christ’s Gospel, like ‘waves of the sea foaming out their own shame,’ and never shaking the great rock that they break against. And it is true about all godless lives; about every man who carries on his work, except in loving obedience to his Father in heaven. There is one power in the world, and none else. When all is played out, and accounts are set right at the end, you will find that the power that seemed to be strong, if it stood against God, was weak as water and has done nothing, and is nothing! Do not waste your lives in a work that is self-condemned to be hopeless! Rather ally yourselves with the tendencies of God’s universe, and do the thing which will last for ever, and live the life that has hope of fruit that shall remain. Submit yourselves to God! Love Christ! Do His will! Put your faith in the Saviour to deliver you from your sins; and when the wild tossing of that great ocean of ungodly power and rebellious opposition is all hushed down into dead silence, you and your work will last and live hard by the stable throne of God.

III. Lastly, the text foretells a state of things in which there is no more disquiet and unrest.

The old, old figure which all the world, generation after generation in its turn, has spoken, is a Scriptural one as well, and enters into the fullness of the meaning of this passage before us. Life is a voyage over a turbulent sea; changing circumstances come rolling after each other, like the undistinguishable billows of the great ocean. Tempests and storms rise. There is wearisome sailing, no peace, but ‘ever climbing up the climbing wave.’ That is life! But for all that, friends, there is an end to it some day;

and it is worth while for us to think about our island home, far, far beyond the sea.' Surely some of us have learned the weariness of this changeful state, the weariness of the work and voyage of this world. Surely some of us are longing to find anchorage whilst the storm lasts, and a haven at the end. There is one, if only you will believe it, and set yourselves towards it. There is an end to all 'the weary oar, the weary wandering fields of barren foam.' On the shore stands the Christ; and there is rest there. There is no more sea, but unbroken rest, unchanging blessedness, perpetual stability of joy, and love in the Father's house. Are we going there? Are we living for Christ? Are we putting our confidence in the Lord Jesus? Then, 'He brings us to the desired haven.'

One thing more: not only does unrest come from the chaos of changing circumstances, but besides that, there is another source of disquiet, which this same symbol sets forth for us. 'The wicked is like the troubled sea which cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. That restless, profitless working of the great homeless, hungry, moaning ocean - what a picture it is of the heart of a man that has no Christ, that has no God, that has no peace by pardon! A soul all tossed with its own boiling passion, a soul across which there howl great gusts of temptation, a soul which works and brings forth nothing but foam and mire! Unrest, perpetual unrest is the lot of every man that is not God's child.

Some of you know that. Well, then, think of one picture. A little barque pitching in the night, and one figure rises quietly up in the stern, and puts out a rebuking hand, and speaks one mighty word, 'Peace be still.' And the word was heard amid all the hurly-burly of the tempest, and the waves crouched at His feet like dogs to their master. It is no fancy, brethren, it is a truth. Let Christ speak to your hearts, and there is peace and quietness. And if He do that, then your experience will be like that described in the grand old Psalm, 'Though the waters roar and be troubled, and though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof, yet will we not fear,' for the city stands fast, in spite of the waves that curl round its lowest foundations. Death, death itself, will be but the last burst of the expiring storm, the last blast of the blown-out tempest. And then, the quiet of the green inland valleys of our Father's land, where no tempest comes any more, nor the loud winds are ever heard, nor the salt sea is ever seen; but perpetual calm and blessedness; all mystery gone, and all rebellion hushed and silenced, and all unrest at an end for ever! ‘No more sea,’ but, instead of that wild and yeasty chaos of turbulent waters, there shall be ‘the river that makes glad the city of God,’ the river of water of life, that ‘proceeds out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.’

32)Revelation 21:3

John

‘THREE TABERNACLES’

Joh. 1:14. - Rev. 7:15. - Rev. 21:3.

The word rendered ‘dwelt’ in these three passages, is a peculiar one. It is only found in the New Testament-in this Gospel and in the Book of Revelation. That fact constitutes one of the many subtle threads of connection between these two books, which at first sight seem so extremely unlike each other; and it is a morsel of evidence in favour of the common authorship of the Gospel and of the Apocalypse, which has often, and very vehemently in these latter days of criticism, been denied.

The force of the word, however, is the matter to which I desire especially to draw attention. It literally means ‘to dwell in a tent,’ or, if we may use such a word, ‘to tabernacle,’ and there is no doubt a reference to the Tabernacle in which the divine Presence abode in the wilderness and in the land of Israel before the erection. In all three passages, then, we may see allusion to that early symbolical dwelling of God with man. ‘The Word tabernacled among us’; so is the truth for earth and time. ‘He that sitteth upon the throne shall spread His tabernacle upon’ the multitude which no man can number, who have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb; that is the truth for the spirits of just men made perfect, the waiting Church, which expects the redemption of the body. ‘God shall tabernacle with them’; that is the truth for the highest condition of humanity, when the Tabernacle of God shall be with redeemed men in the new earth. ‘Let us build three tabernacles,’ one for the Incarnate Christ, one for the interspace between earth and heaven, and one for the culmination of all things. And it is to these three aspects of the one thought, set forth in rude symbol by the movable tent in the wilderness, that I ask you to turn now.

I. First, then, we have to think of that Tabernacle for earth. 'The Word was made flesh, and dwelt, as in a tent, amongst us.'

The human nature, the visible, material body of Jesus Christ, in which there enshrined itself the everlasting Word, which from the beginning was the Agent of all divine revelation, that is the true Temple of God. When we begin to speak about the special presence of Omnipresence in any one place, we soon lose ourselves, and get into deep waters of glory, where there is no standing. And I do not care to deal here with theological definitions or thorny questions, but simply to set forth, as the language of my text sets before us, that one transcendent, wonderful, all-blessed thought that this poor human nature is capable of, and has really once in the history of the world received into itself, the real, actual presence of the whole fulness of the Divinity. What must be the kindred and likeness between Godhood and manhood when into the frail vehicle of our humanity that wondrous treasure can be poured; when the fire of God can burn in the bush of our human nature, and that nature not be consumed? So it has been. 'In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.'

And when we come with our questions, How? In what manner? How can the lesser contain the greater? we have to be content with the recognition that the manner is beyond our fathoming, and to accept the fact, pressed upon our faith, that our hearts may grasp it and be at peace. God hath dwelt in humanity. The everlasting Word, who is the forthcoming of all the fulness of Deity into the realm of finite creatures, was made flesh and dwelt among us.

But the Tabernacle was not only the dwelling-place of God, it was also and, therefore, the place of Revelation of God. So in our text there follows, 'we beheld His glory.' As in the tent in the wilderness there hovered between the outstretched wings of the silent cherubim, above the Mercy-seat, the brightness of the symbolical cloud which was expressly named 'the glory of God,' and was the visible manifestation of His real presence; so John would have us think that in that lowly humanity, with its curtains and its coverings of flesh, there lay shrined in the inmost place the brightness of the light of the manifest glory of God. ‘We beheld His glory.’ The rapturous adoration of the remembrance overcomes him, and he breaks his sentence, reckless of grammatical connection, as the fulness of the blessed memory floods into his soul. ‘That glory was as of the Only Begotten of the Father.’ The manifestation of God in Christ is unique, as becomes Him who partakes of the nature of that God of whom He is the Representative and the Revealer.

And how did that glory make itself known to us? By miracle? Yes! As we read in the story of the first that Christ wrought, ‘He manifested forth His glory and His disciples believed upon Him.’ By miracle? Yes! As we read His own promise at the grave of Lazarus: ‘Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?’ But, blessed be His name, miracle is not the highest manifestation of Christ’s glory and of God’s. The uniqueness of the revelation of Christ’s glory in God does not depend upon the deeds which He wrought. For, as the context goes on to tell, the Word which tabernacled among us was ‘full of grace and truth,’ and therein is the glory most gloriously revealed.

The lambent light of stooping love that shone forth warning and attracting in His gentle life, and the clear white beam of unmingled truth that streamed from the radiant purity of Christ’s life, revealed God to hearts that pine for love and spirits that hunger for truth, as no others of God’s self-revealing works have done. And that revelation of the glory of God in the fulness of grace and truth is the highest possible revelation. For the divinest thing in God is love, and the true ‘glory of God’ is neither some symbolical flashing light nor the pomp of mere power and majesty; nor even those inconceivable and incommunicable attributes which we christen with names like Omnipotence and Omnipresence and Infinitude, and the like. These are all at the fringes of the brightness. The true central heart and lustrous light of the glory of God lie In His love, and of that glory Christ is the unique Representative and Revealer, because He is the only Begotten Son, and ‘full of grace and truth.’

Thus the Word tabernacled amongst us. And though the Tabernacle to outward seeming was covered by curtains and skins that hid all the glowing splendour within; yet in that lowly life that was lived in the body of His humiliation, and knew our limitations and our weaknesses, ‘the glory of the

Lord was revealed; and all flesh hath seen it together' and acknowledged the divine Presence there.

Still further the Tabernacle was the place of sacrifice. So in the tabernacle of His flesh Jesus offered up the one sacrifice for sins for ever. In the offering up of His human life in continuous obedience, and in the offering up of His body and blood in the bitter Passion of the Cross, He brought men nigh unto God.

Therefore, because of all these things, because the Tabernacle is the dwelling-place of God, the place of revelation, and the place of sacrifice, therefore, finally is it the meeting-place betwixt God and man. In the Old Testament it is always called by the name which our Revised Version has accurately substituted for 'tabernacle of the congregation,' namely 'tent of meeting.' The correctness of that rendering and the meaning of the name are established by several passages in the Old Testament, as for instance, 'There I will meet with you, to speak there unto thee, and there I will meet with the children of Israel.' So in Christ, who by His Incarnation lays His hand upon both, God touches man and man touches God. We who are afar off are made nigh, and in that 'true tabernacle which the Lord pitched and not man' we meet God and are glad.

'And so the word was flesh, and wrought
With human hands the creed of creeds,
In loveliness of perfect deeds.'

The temple for earth is 'the temple of His body.'

II. We have the Tabernacle for the Heavens.

In the context of our second passage we have a vision of the great multitude redeemed out of all nations and kindreds, 'standing before the Throne and before the Lamb, arrayed in white robes, and palms in their hands.' The palms in their hands give important help towards understanding the vision. As has been often remarked, there are no heathen emblems in the Book of the Apocalypse. All its metaphors move within the circle of Jewish experiences and facts. So that we are not to think of the Roman palm of victory, but of the Jewish palm which was borne at the Feast of Tabernacles. What was the Feast of Tabernacles? A festival established on purpose to recall to the minds and to the gratitude of the Jews settled in their own land the days of their wandering in the wilderness. Part of the ritual of it was that during its celebration they builded for themselves booths or tabernacles of leaves and boughs of trees, under which they dwelt, thus reminding themselves of their nomad condition.

Now what beauty and power it gives to the word of my text, if we take in this allusion to the Jewish festival! The great multitude bearing the palms are keeping the feast, memorial of past wilderness wanderings; and 'He that sitteth on the throne shall spread His tabernacle above them,' as the word might be here rendered. That is to say, He Himself shall build and be the tent in which they dwell; He Himself shall dwell with them in it. He Himself, in closer union than can be conceived of here, shall keep them company during that feast.

What a thought of that condition-the condition as I believe represented in this vision-of the spirits of the just made perfect, 'who wait for the adoption, to wit, the resurrection of the body,' is given us if we take this point of view to interpret the whole lovely symbolism. It is all a time of glad, grateful remembrance of the wilderness march. It is all a time in which festal joys shall be theirs, and the memory of the trials and the weariness and the sorrow and the solitude that are past shall deepen to a more exquisite poignancy of delight, the rest and the fellowship and the felicity of that calm Presence, and God Himself shall spread His tent above them, lodge with them, and they with Him.

And so, dear brethren, rest in that assurance, that though we know so little of that state, we know this: 'Absent from the body, present with the Lord,' and that the happy company who bear the palms shall dwell in God, and God in them.

III. And now, lastly, look at that final vision which we have in these texts, which we may call the Tabernacle for the renewed earth.

I do not pretend to interpret the scenery and the setting of these Apocalyptic visions with dogmatic confidence, but it seems to me as if the emblems of this final vision coincide with dim hints in many other portions of Scripture; to the effect that some cosmical change having passed upon this material world in which we dwell, it, in some regenerated form, shall be the final abode of a regenerated and redeemed humanity. That, I think, is the natural interpretation of a great deal of Scriptural teaching.

For that highest condition there is set forth this as the all-sufficing light upon it. ‘Behold, the Tabernacle of God is with men, and He will tabernacle with them.’ The climax and the goal of all the divine working, and the long processes of God’s love for, and discipline of, the world, are to be this, that He and men shall abide together in unity and concord. That is God’s wish from the beginning. We read in one of the profound utterances of the Book of Proverbs how from of old the ‘delights’ of the Incarnate Wisdom which foreshadowed the Incarnate Word ‘were with the sons of men.’ And, at the close of all things, when the vision of this final chapter shall be fulfilled, God will say, settling Himself in the midst of a redeemed humanity, ‘Lo! here will I dwell, for I have desired it. This is My rest for ever.’ He will tabernacle with men, and men with Him.

We know not, and never shall know until experience strips the bandages from our eyes, what new methods of participation of the divine nature, and new possibilities of intimacy and intercourse with Him may be ours when the veils of flesh and sense and time have all dropped away. New windows may be opened in our spirits, from which we shall perceive new aspects of the divine character. New doors may be opened in our souls, from out of which we may pass to touch parts of His nature, all impalpable and inconceivable to us now. And when all the veils of a discordant moral nature are taken away, and we are pure, then we shall see, then we shall draw nigh to God. The thing that chiefly separates man from God is man’s sin. When that is removed, the centrifugal force which kept our tiny orb apart from the great central sun being withdrawn, we shall, as it were, fall into the brightness and be one, not losing our sense of individuality, which would be to lose all the blessedness, but united with Him in a union far more intimate than earth can parallel. ‘The Tabernacle of God shall be with men, and He will tabernacle with them.’

Do not let us forget that this highest and ultimate hope that is held forth here, of the union and communion, perfect and perpetual, of humanity with God, does not sweep aside Jesus Christ. For through all eternity the Everlasting Word, the Christ who bears our nature in its glorified form, or, rather, whose nature in its glorified form we shall bear, is the Medium of Revelation, and the Medium of communication between man and God.

‘I saw no Temple therein,’ says this final vision of the Apocalypse, but ‘God Almighty and the Lamb,’ and these are the Temples thereof. Therefore through eternity God shall tabernacle with men, as He does tabernacle with us now through Him, in whom dwelleth as in its perennial habitation, ‘all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.’

So we have the three tabernacles, for earth, for heaven, for the renewed earth; and these three, if I may say so, are like the triple division of that ancient Tabernacle in the wilderness: the Outer Court; the Holy Place; the Holiest of all. Let us enter into that outer court, and abide and commune with that God who comes near to us, revealing, forgiving, in the person of His Son, and then we shall pass from court to court, ‘and go from strength to strength, until every one of us in Zion appear before God’; and enter into the Holiest of all, where ‘within the veil’ we shall receive splendours of revelation undreamed of here, and enjoy depths of communion to which the selectest moments of fellowship with God on earth are shallow and poor.

33)Revelation 21:5

Revelation

AN IMPOSSIBILITY MADE POSSIBLE

Jer. 13:23. - 2Co. 5:17. - Rev. 21:5.

Put these three texts together. The first is a despairing question to which experience gives only too sad and decisive a negative answer. It is the answer of many people who tell us that character must be eternal, and of many a baffled man who says, ‘It is of no use-I have tried and can do nothing.’ The second text is the grand Christian answer, full of confidence. It was spoken by one who had no superficial estimate of the evil, but who had known in himself the power of Christ to revolutionise a life, and make a man love all he had hated, and hate all he had loved, and fling away all he had treasured. The last text predicts the completion of the renovating process lying far ahead, but as certain as sunrise.

I. The unchangeableness of character, especially of faults.

We note the picturesque rhetorical question here. They were occasionally accustomed to see the dark-skinned, Ethiopian, whether we suppose that these were true negroes from Southern Egypt or dark Arabs, and now and then leopards came up from the thickets on the Jordan, or from the hills of the southern wilderness about the Dead Sea. The black hue of the man, the dark spots that starred the skin of the fierce beast, are fitting emblems of the evil that dyes and speckles the soul. Whether it wraps the whole character in black, or whether it only spots it here and there with tawny yellow, it is ineradicable; and a man can no more change his character once formed than a negro can cast his skin, or a leopard whiten out the spots on his hide.

Now we do not need to assert that a man has no power of self-improvement or reformation. The exhortations of the prophet to repentance and to cleansing imply that he has. If he has not, then it is no blame to him that he does not mend. Experience shows that we have a very considerable power of such a kind. It is a pity that some Christian teachers speak in exaggerated terms about the impossibility of such self-improvement.

But it is very difficult.

Note the great antagonist as set forth here-Habit, that solemn and mystical power. We do not know all the ways in which it operates, but one chief way is through physical cravings set up. It is strange how much easier a second time is than a first, especially in regard to evil acts. The hedge once broken down, it is very easy to get through it again. If one drop of water has percolated through the dyke, there will be a roaring torrent soon. There is all the difference between once and never; there is small difference between once and twice. By habit we come to do things mechanically and without effort, and we all like that. One solitary footfall across the snow soon becomes a beaten way. As in the banyan-tree, each branch becomes a root. All life is held together by cords of custom which enable us to reserve conscious effort and intelligence for greater moments. Habit tends to weigh upon us with a pressure ‘heavy as frost, and deep almost as life.’ But also it is the ally of good.

The change to good is further made difficult because liking too often goes with evil, and good is only won by effort. It is a proof of man’s corruption that if left alone, evil in some form or other springs spontaneously, and that the opposite good is hard to win. Uncultivated soil bears thistles and weeds. Anything can roll downhill. It is always the least trouble to go on as we have been going.

Further, the change is made difficult because custom blinds judgment and conscience. People accustomed to a vitiated atmosphere are not aware of its foulness.

How long it takes a nation, for instance, to awake to consciousness of some national crime, even when the nation is ‘Christian’! And how men get perfectly sophisticated as to their own sins, and have all manner of euphemisms for them!

Further, how hard it is to put energy into a will that has been enfeebled by long compliance. Like prisoners brought out of the Bastille.

So if we put all these reasons together, no wonder that such reformation is rare.

I do not dwell on the point that it must necessarily be confined within very narrow limits. I appeal to experience. You have tried to cure some trivial habit. You know what a task that has been-how often you thought that you had conquered, and then found that all had to be done over again. How much more is this the case in this greater work! Often the efforts to break off evil habits have the same effect as the struggles of cattle mired in a bog, who sink the deeper for plunging. The sad cry of many a foiled wrestler with his own evil is, ‘O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’ We do not wish to exaggerate, but simply to put it that experience shows that for men in general, custom and inclination and indolence and the lack of adequate motive weigh so heavily that a thorough abandonment of evil, much more a hearty practice of good, are not to be looked for when once a character has been formed. So you young people, take care. And all of us listen to-

II. The great hope for individual renewal.

The second text sets forth a possibility of entire individual renewal, and does so by a strong metaphor.

‘If any man be in Christ he is a new creature,’ or as the words might be rendered, ‘there is a new creation,’ and not only is he renewed, but all things are become new. He is a new Adam in a new world.

Now [a] let us beware of exaggeration about this matter. There are often things said about the effects of conversion which are very far in advance of reality, and give a handle to caricature. The great law of continuity runs on through the change of conversion. Take a man who has been the slave of some sin. The evil will not cease to tempt, nor will the effects of the past on character be annihilated. ‘Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap,’ remains true. In many ways there will be permanent consequences. There will remain the scars of old wounds; old sores will be ready to burst forth afresh. The great outlines of character do remain.

[b] What is the condition of renewal?

‘If any man be in Christ’-how distinctly that implies something more than human in Paul’s conception of Christ. It implies personal union with Him, so that He is the very element or atmosphere in which we live. And that union is brought about by faith in Him.

[c] How does such a state of union with Christ make a man over again?

It gives a new aim and centre for our lives. Then we live not unto ourselves; then everything is different and looks so, for the centre is shifted. That union introduces a constant reference to Him and contemplation of His death for us, it leads to self-abnegation.

It puts all life under the influence of a new love. ‘The love of Christ constraineth.’ As is a man’s love, so is his life. The mightiest devolution is to excite a new love, by which old loves and tastes are expelled. ‘A new affection’ has ‘expulsive power,’ as the new sap rising in the springtime pushes off the lingering withered leaves. So union with Him meets the difficulty arising from inclination still hankering after evil. It lifts life into a higher level where the noxious creatures that were proper to the swamps cannot live. The new love gives a new and mighty motive for obedience.

That union breaks the terrible chain that binds us to the past. ‘All died.’ The past is broken as much as if we were dead. It is broken by the great act of forgiveness. Sin holds men by making them feel as if what has been must be-an awful entail of evil. In Christ we die to former self.

That union brings a new divine power to work in us. ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.’

It sets us in a new world which yet is the old. All things are changed if we are changed. They are the same old things, but seen in a new light, used for new purposes, disclosing new relations and powers. Earth becomes a school and discipline for heaven. The world is different to a blind man when cured, or to a deaf one,-there are new sights for the one, new sounds for the other.

All this is true in the measure in which we live in union with Christ.

So no man need despair, nor think, ‘I cannot mend now.’ You may have tried and been defeated a thousand times. But still victory is possible, not without effort and sore conflict, but still possible. There is hope for all, and hope for ME.

III. The completion in a perfectly renewed creation.

The renovation here is only partial. Its very incompleteness is prophetic. If there be this new life in us, it obviously has not reached its fulness here, and it is obviously not manifested here for all that even here it is.

It is like some exotic that does not show its true beauty in our greenhouses. The life of a Christian on earth is a prophecy by both its greatness and its smallness, by both its glory and its shame, by both its brightness and its spots. It cannot be that there is always to be this disproportion between aspiration and performance, between willing and doing. Here the most perfect career is like a half-lighted street, with long gaps between the lamps.

The surroundings here are uncongenial to the new creatures. ‘Foxes have holes’-all creatures are fitted for their environment; only man, and eminently renewed man, wanders as a pilgrim, not in his home. The present frame of things is for discipline. The schooling over, we burn the rod. So we look for an external order in full correspondence with the new nature.

And Christ throned ‘makes all things new.’ How far the old is renewed we cannot tell, and we need not ask. Enough that there shall be a universe in perfect harmony with the completely renewed nature, that we shall find a home where all things will serve and help and gladden and further us, where the outward will no more distract and clog the spirit.

Brethren, let that mighty love constrain you; and look to Christ to renew you. Whatever your old self may have been, you may bury it deep in His grave, and rise with Him to newness of life. Then you may walk in this old world, new creatures in Christ Jesus, looking for the blessed hope of entire renewal into the perfect likeness of Him, the perfect man, in a perfect world, where all old sorrows and sins have passed away and He has made all things new. Through eternity, new joys, new knowledge, new progress, new likeness, new service will be ours- and not one leaf shall ever wither in the amaranthine crown, nor ‘the cup of blessing’ ever become empty or flat and stale. Eternity will be but a continual renewal and a progressive increase of ever fresh and ever familiar treasures. The new and the old will be one.

Begin with trusting to Him to help you to change a deeper blackness than that of the Ethiopian’s skin, and to erase firier spots than stain the tawny leopard’s hide, and He will make you a new man, and set you in His own time in a ‘new heaven and earth, where dwelleth righteousness.’

34)Revelation 21:6

CHRIST’S FINISHED AND UNFINISHED WORK

Joh. 19:30. - Rev. 21:6.

One of these sayings was spoken from the Cross, the other from the Throne. The Speaker of both is the same. In the one, His voice ‘then shook the earth,’ as the rending rocks testified; in the other, His voice ‘will shake not the earth only but also heaven’; for ‘new heavens and a new earth’ accompanied the proclamation. In the one, like some traveller ready to depart, who casts a final glance over his preparations, and, satisfied that nothing is omitted, gives his charioteer the signal and rolls away, Jesus Christ looked back over His life’s work, and, knowing that it was accomplished, summoned His servant Death, and departed. In the other, He sets His seal to the closed book of the world’s history, and ushers in a renovated universe. The one masks the completion of the work on which the world’s redemption rests, the other marks the completion of the age-long process by which the world’s redemption is actually realised. The one proclaims that the foundation is laid, the other that the headstone is set on the finished building. The one bids us trust in a past perfected work; the other bids us hope in the perfect accomplishment of the results of that work. Taken singly, these sayings are grand; united, they suggest thoughts needed always, never more needful than to-day.

I. We see here the work which was finished on the Cross.

The Evangelist gives great significance to the words of my first text, as is shown by his statement in a previous verse: ‘Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, said, I thirst,’ and then-’It is finished.’ That is to say, there is something in that dying voice a great deal deeper and more wonderful than the ordinary human utterance with which a dying man might say, ‘It is all over now. I have done,’ for this utterance came from the consciousness that all things had been accomplished by Him, and that He had done His life’s work.

Now, there, taking the words even in their most superficial sense, we come upon the strange peculiarity which marks off the life of Jesus Christ from every other life that was ever lived. There are no loose ends left, no unfinished tasks drop from His nerveless hands, to be taken up and carried on by others. His life is a rounded whole, with everything accomplished that had been endeavoured, and everything done that had been commanded. ‘His hands have laid the foundation; His hands shall also finish.’ He alone of the sons of men, in the deepest sense, completed His task, and left nothing for successors. The rest of us are taken away when we have reared a course or two of the structure, the dream of building which brightened our youth. The pen drops from paralysed hands in the middle of a sentence, and a fragment of a book is left. The painter’s brush falls with his palette at the foot of his easel, and but the outline of what he conceived is on the canvas. All of us leave tasks half done, and have to go away before the work is completed. The half-polished columns that lie at Baalbec are but a symbol of the imperfection of every human life. But this Man said, ‘It is finished,’ and ‘gave up the ghost.’ Now, if we ponder on what lies in that consciousness of completion, I think we find, mainly, three things.

Christ rendered a complete obedience. All through His life we see Him, hearing with the inward ear the solemn voice of the Father, and responding to it with that ‘I must’ which runs through all His days, from the earliest dawning of consciousness, when He startled His mother with ‘I must be about My Father’s business,’ until the very last moments. In that obedience to the all-present necessity which He cheerfully embraced and perfectly discharged, there was no flaw. He alone of men looks back upon a life in which His clear consciousness detected neither transgression nor imperfection. In the midst of His career He could front His enemies with ‘Which of you convinceth Me of sin?’ and no man then, and no man in all the generations that have elapsed since-though some have been blind enough to try it, and malicious enough to utter their attempts,-has been able to answer the challenge. In the midst of His career He said, ‘I do always the things that please Him’; and nobody then or since has been able to lay his finger upon an act of His in which, either by excess or defect, or contrariety, the will of God has not been fully represented. At the beginning of His career He said, in answer to the Baptist’s remonstrance, ‘It becometh us to fulfil all righteousness,’ and at the end of His career He looked back, and knowing that He had thus done what became Him-namely, fulfilled it all-He said, ‘It is finished!’

The utterance further expresses Christ's consciousness of having completed the revelation of God. Jesus Christ has made known the Father, and the generations since have added nothing to His revelation. The very people, to-day, that turn away from Christianity, in the name of higher conceptions of the divine nature, owe their conceptions of it to the Christ from whom they turn. Not in broken syllables; not 'at sundry times and in divers manners,' but with the one perfect, full-toned name of God on His lips, and vocal in His life, He has declared the Father unto us. In the course of His career He said, 'He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father'; and, looking back on His life of manifestation of God, He proclaimed, 'It is finished!' And the world has since, with all its thinking, added nothing to the name which Christ has declared.

The utterance farther expresses His consciousness of having made a completed, atoning Sacrifice. Remember that the words of my first text followed that awful cry that came from the darkness, and as by one lightning flash, show us the waves and billows rolling over His head. 'My God! My God! why hast Thou forsaken Me?' In that infinitely pathetic and profound utterance, to the interpretation of which our powers go but a little way, Jesus Christ blends together, in the most marvellous fashion, desolation and trust, the consciousness that God is His God, and the consciousness that He is bereft of the light of His presence. Brethren! I know of no explanation of these words which does justice to both the elements that are intertwined so intimately in them, except the old one, which listens to Him as they come from His quivering lip, and says, 'The Lord hath made to meet on Him the iniquity of us all.'

Ah, brethren! unless there was something a great deal more than the physical shrinking from physical death in that piteous cry, Jesus Christ did not die nearly as bravely as many a poor, trembling woman who, at the stake or the block, has owed her fortitude to Him. Many a blood-stained criminal has gone out of life with less tremor than that which, unless you take the explanation that Scripture suggests of the cry, marred the last hours of Jesus Christ. Having drained the cup, He held it up inverted when He said 'It is finished!' and not a drop trickled down the edge. He drank it that we might never need to drink it; and so His dying voice proclaimed that 'by one offering for sin for ever,' He 'obtained eternal redemption' for us.

II. Now, secondly, note the work which began from the Cross.

Between my two texts lie untold centuries, and the whole development of the consequences of Christ’s death, like some great valley stretching between twin mountain-peaks on either side, which from some points of view will be foreshortened and invisible, but when gazed down upon, is seen to stretch widely leagues broad, from mountain ridge to mountain ridge. So my two texts, by the fact that millenniums have to interpose between the time when ‘It is finished!’ is spoken, and the time when ‘It is done!’ can be proclaimed from the Throne, imply that the interval is filled by a continuous work of our Lord’s, which began at the moment when the work on the Cross ended.

Now it has very often been the case, as I take leave to think, that the interpretation of the former of these two texts has been of such a kind as to distort the perspective of Christian truth, and to obscure the fact of that continuous work of our Lord’s. Therefore it may not be out of place if, in a sentence or two, I recall to you the plain teaching of the New Testament upon this matter. ‘It is finished!’ Yes; and as the lower course of some great building is but the foundation for the higher, when ‘finished’ it is but begun. The work which, in one aspect, is the close, in another aspect is the commencement of Christ’s further activity. What did He say Himself, when He was here with His disciples? ‘I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you.’ What was the last word that came fluttering down, like an olive leaf, into the bosoms of the men as they stood with uplifted faces gazing upon Him as He disappeared? ‘Lo! I am with you alway, even to the end of the ages.’ What is the keynote of the book which carries on the story of the Gospels in the history of the militant Church? ‘The former treatise have I made. . . of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach, until the day in which He was taken up’-and, being taken up, continued, in a new form, both the doing and the teaching. Thus that book, misnamed the Acts of the Apostles, sets Him forth as the Worker of all the progress of the Church. Who is it that ‘adds to the Church daily such as were being saved?’ The Lord. Who is it that opened the hearts of the hearers to the message? The Lord. Who is it that flings wide the prison-gates when His persecuted servants are in chains? The Lord. Who is it that bids one man attach himself to the chariot of the eunuch of Ethiopia, and another man go and bear witness in Rome? The Lord. Through the whole of that book there runs the keynote, as its dominant thought, that men are but the instruments, and the hand that wields them is Christ's, and that He who wrought the finished work that culminated on Calvary is operating a continuous work through the ages from His Throne.

Take that last book of Scripture, which opens with a view of the ascended Christ 'walking in the midst of the seven candlesticks, and holding the stars in His right hand;' which further draws aside the curtains of the heavenly sanctuary, and lets us see 'the Lamb in the midst of the Throne,' opening the seven seals-that is to say, setting loose for their progress through the world the forces that make the history of humanity, and which culminates in the vision of the final battle in which the Incarnate Word of God goes forth to victory, with all the armies of heaven following Him. Are not its whole spirit and message that Jesus Christ, the Lamb who is the Antagonist of the Beast, is working through all the history of the world, and will work till its kingdoms are 'become the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ?'

Now, that continuous operation of Jesus Christ in the midst of men is not to be weakened down to the mere continued influence of the truths which He proclaimed, or the Gospel which He brought. There is something a great deal more than the diminishing vibrations of a force long since set in operation, and slowly ceasing to act. Dead teachers do still 'rule our spirits from their urns'; but it is no dead Christ who, by the influence of what He did when He was living, sways the world and comforts His Church; it is a living Christ who to-day is working in His people, by His Spirit. Further, He works on the world through His people by the Word; they plant and water, He 'gives the increase.' And He is working in the world, for His Church and for the world, by His wielding of all power that is given to Him, in heaven and on earth. So that the work that is done upon earth He doeth it all Himself; and Christian people unduly limit the sphere of Christ's operations when they look back only to the Cross, and talk about a 'finished work' there, and forget that that finished work there is but the vestibule of the continuous work that is being done to-day.

Christian people! The present work of Christ needs working servants. We are here in order to carry on His work. The Apostle ventured to say that he was appointed ‘to fill up that which is behind of the sufferings of Christ’; we may well venture to say that we are here mainly to apply to the world the benefits resulting from the finished work upon the Cross. The accomplishment of redemption, and the realisation of the accomplished redemption, are two wholly different things. Christ has done the one. He says to us, ‘You are honoured to help Me to do the other.’ According to the accurate rendering of a great saying of the Old Testament, ‘Take no rest, and give Him no rest, till He establish and make Jerusalem a praise in the earth, Christ’s work is finished; there is nothing for us to do with it but trust it. Christ’s work is going on; come to His help. Ye are fellow-labourers with and to the Incarnate Truth.

III. I need not say more than a word about the third thought, suggested by these texts-viz., the completion of the work which began on the Cross.

‘It is done!’ That lies, no man knows how far, ahead of us. As surely as astronomers tell us that all this universe is hastening towards a central point, so surely ‘that far-off divine event’ is that ‘to which the whole creation moves.’ It is the blaze of light which fills the distant end of the dim vista of human history. Its elements are in part summed up in the context-the tabernacle of God with men, the perfected fellowship of the human with the divine, the housing of men in the very home and heart of God; ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ a renovated universe; the removal of all evil, suffering, sorrow, sin, and tears. These things are to be, and shall be, when He says ‘It is done!’

Brethren! nothing else than such an issue can be the end of Creation, for nothing else than such is the purpose of God for man, and God is not going to be beaten by the world and the devil. Nothing else than such can be the issue of the Cross; for ‘He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied,’ and Christ is not going to labour in vain, and spend His life, and give His breath and His blood for nought.

Nothing but the work finished on the Cross guarantees the coming of that perfected issue. I know not where else there is hope for mankind, looking on the history of humanity, except in that great message, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come, has died, lives for ever, and is the world’s King and Lord.

So for ourselves, in regard to the one part of the work, let us listen to Him saying ‘It is finished!’ abandon all attempts to eke it out by additions of our own, and cast ourselves on the finished Revelation, the finished Obedience, the finished Atonement, made once for all on the Cross. But as for the continuous work going on through the ages, let us cast ourselves into it with earnestness, self-sacrifice, consecration, and continuity, for we are fellow-workers with Christ, and Christ will work in, with, and for us if we will work for Him.

35)Revelation 22:1-2

Revelation

THE CITY, THE CITIZENS, AND THE KING

Rev. 22:1-11

Is the vision of the New Jerusalem to be realized in the present or in the future? Such features as the existence of ‘nations’ and ‘kings of the earth’ outside of it [vs. 21, 24], and leaves of the tree of life being ‘for the healing of the nations,’ favour the former reference, while its place in the book, after the first and second resurrections and the judgment and at the very end of the whole, seems to oblige us to hold by the latter. But the question must be answered in the light of the fact that the Christian life is one in essence in both worlds, and that the difference between the conditions of the society of the redeemed here and there is only one of degree. The city ‘has already come down from heaven; its perfect form waits to be manifested.

The passage is partly the close of that vision [vs. 1-5], and partly the beginning of the epilogue of the whole book [vs. 6-11]. The closing description of the city is saturated with allusions to Old Testament prophecy.

It is like the finale of some great concerto, in which the themes that have sounded throughout it are all gathered up in the last majestic, melodious crash. Here at the farthest point to which mortal eyes are allowed to pierce, the ‘tree of life’ that the first of mortal eyes had looked on waves its branches again. The end has circled round to the beginning. But now there is no more prohibition to pluck and eat, and now it grows, not in a garden, but in a city where the perfection of human society is entered into.

Here, on the last page of Scripture, the river, the music of whose ripple had been heard by Ezekiel and Zechariah bringing life to everything that it laved, and by the Psalmist making glad the city of God,’ flows with a broader, fuller stream, and is fouled by no stains, but is ‘clear as crystal.’ River and tree have the same epithet, and bring the same gift to the citizens. All the blessings which Jesus gives are summed up, both in John’s Gospel and in the Apocalypse, as life.’ The only true life is to live as God’s redeemed servants, and that life is ours here and now if we are His. It is but a ‘stream’ of the river that gladdens us here, the fruit has not yet its full flavor nor abundance.’ It is life, more life, for which we pant,’ and the desire will be satisfied there when the river runs always full, and every month the fruit hangs ripe and ready to be dropped into happy hands from among the healing leaves.

In verses 3 and 4 we pass from the city to the citizens. Perfect purity clothes them all. There shall be no more anything accursed’; that is, any unclean thing drawing down necessarily the divine ‘curse,’ and therefore there shall be no separation, no film of distance between the King and the people, but ‘the throne of God and the Lamb shall be therein.’ The seer has already beheld the Lamb close by the throne of God, but now he sees Him sharing it in indissoluble union. Perfect purity leads to perfect union with God and [or rather in] Christ, and unbroken, glad submission to His regal rule. And that perfect submission is the occupation and delight of all the citizens. They are His bond-servants,’ and their fetters are golden chains of honour and ornament. They ‘do Him service,’ ministering as priests, and all their acts are ‘begun, continued, and ended in Him.’ Having been faithful over a few things, they are made rulers over many things, and are yet bond-servants, though rulers.

In that higher service the weary schism between the active and the contemplative life is closed up. Mary and Martha end their long variance, and gazing on His face does not hinder active obedience, nor does doing Him service distract from beholding His beauty. His name shall be in their foreheads,' conspicuous and unmistakable, no longer faintly traced or often concealed, but flaming on their brows. They are known to be His, because their characters are conformed to His. They bear 'the marks of Jesus' in complete and visible assimilation to Him.

The vision closes with an echo of Old Testament prophecy [Isa. 60:19]. 'No night' - perhaps the most blessed of all John's negative descriptions of the future state, indicating the removal for ever of all the evil and woe symbolized by darkness, and pointing to a state in which no artifices of ours are needed to brighten our gloom with poor, man-made candles, nor any created light, though mighty and resplendent as the sun, whose beams fade into invisibility before the immortal radiance that pours out for ever from the throne, brightening every glorified face that is turned to its lustre. Thus seeing, serving, and being like 'God and the Lamb,' they, as a consequence, shall reign for ever and ever,' for they are as He is, and while He lives and reigns they also live and reign.

With verse 6 begins the epilogue. An angel speaks, the same as in chapter 1:1 - is represented as 'signifying' the 'revelation' to John. He now, as it were, sets his seal on his completed roll of prophecy. To discriminate between the words of the angel and of Jesus is impossible. Jesus speaks through him. 'Behold, I come quickly' cannot be merely the angel's voice. As in verse 12, a deeper voice speaks through his lips. The purpose of that solemn announcement is to impress on the Asiatic churches and through them on the whole Church through all time, the importance of keeping 'the words of the prophecy of this book.' 'Quickly' - and yet nineteen hundred years have gone since then? Yes; and during them all Jesus has been coming, and the words of this book have progressively been in process of fulfilment.

Again, the speedy coming is enforced as a reason for not sealing up the prophecy, as had been commanded in chapter x. 4, and elsewhere in the Old Testament. And a very solemn thought closes our lesson - that there is a moment, the eve of any great day of the Lord,' when there is no more time or opportunity for change of moral or spiritual disposition. 'Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now.’ Let us ‘redeem the time,’ buy back the opportunity while yet it is within our grasp.

36)Revelation 22:3-4

Revelation

THE TRIPLE RAYS WHICH MAKE THE WHITE LIGHT OF HEAVEN

Rev. 22:3-4

One may well shrink from taking words like these for a text. Their lofty music will necessarily make all words of ours seem thin and poor. The great things about which they are concerned are so high above us, and known to us by so few channels, that usually he who says least speaks most wisely about them. And yet it cannot be but wholesome if in a reverent spirit of no vain curiosity, we do try to lay upon our hearts the impressions of the great, though they be dim, truths which gleam from these words. I know that to talk about a future life is often a most sentimental, vague, unpractical form of religious contemplation, but there is no reason at all why it should be so. I wish to try now very simply to bring out the large force and wonderful meaning of the words which I have ventured to read. They give us three elements of the perfect state of man - Service, Contemplation, Likeness. These three are perfect and unbroken.

I. The first element, then, in the perfect state of man is perfect activity in the service of God. Now the words of our text are remarkable in that the two expressions for ‘servant’ and ‘serve’ are not related to one another in the Greek, as they are in the English, but are two quite independent words; the former meaning literally ‘a slave,’ and the latter being exclusively confined in Scripture to one kind of service. It would never be employed for any service that a man did for a man; it is exclusively a religious word, and means only the service that men do for God, whether in specific acts of so-called worship or in the wider worship of daily life. So that if we have not here the notion of priesthood, we have one very closely approximating towards it; and the representation is that the activity of the redeemed and perfected man, in the highest ideal condition of humanity, is an activity which is all worship, and is directed to the revealed God in Christ.

That, then, is the first thought that we have to look at. Now it seems to me to be a very touching confession of the weariness and unsatisfactoriness of life in general that the dream of the future which has unquestionably the most fascination for most men, is that which speaks of it as Rest. The religion which has the largest number of adherents in the world - the religion of the Buddhists - formally declares existence to be evil, and preaches as the highest attainable good, something which is scarcely distinguishable from annihilation. And even though we do not go so far as that, what a testimony it is of burdened hearts and mournful lives, and work too great for the feeble limits of our powers, that the most natural thought of a blessed future is as rest! It is easy to laugh at people for singing hymns about sitting upon green and flowery mounts, and counting up the labors of their feet: but oh! it is a tragical thought that whatsoever shape a life has taken, howsoever full of joy and sunshine and brightness it may be, deep down in the man there is such an experience as that the one thing he wants is repose and to get rid of all the trouble and toil.

Now this representation of my text is by no means contradictory, but it is complementary, of that other one. The deepest rest and the highest activity coincide. They do so in God who ‘worketh hitherto’ in undisturbed tranquility; they may do so in us. The wheel that goes round in swiftest rotation seems to be standing still. Work at its intensest, which is pleasurable work, and level to the capacity of the doer, is the truest form of rest. In vacuity there are stings and torment; it is only in joyous activity which is not pushed to the extent of strain and unwelcome effort that the true rest of man is to be found. And the two verses in this Book of Revelation about this matter, which look at first sight to be opposed to each other, are like the two sides of a sphere, which unite and make the perfect whole. ‘They rest from their labors’ ‘They rest not, day nor night.’

From their labors - yes; from toil disproportioned to faculty - yes! from unwelcome work - yes! from distraction and sorrow - yes! But from glad praise and vigorous service - never! day nor night. And so with the full apprehension of the sweetness and blessedness of the tranquil Heaven, we say: It is found only there, where His servants serve Him. Thus the first thought that is presented here is that of an activity delivered from all that makes toil on earth burdensome and unwelcome; and which, therefore, is coincident with the deepest and most perfect repose.

It may seem strange to think of a blessed life which has no effort in it, for effort is the very salt and spice of life here below, and one can scarcely fancy the perfect happiness of a spirit which never has the glow of warmth that comes from exercise in overcoming difficulties. But perhaps effort and antagonism and strain and trial have done their work on us when they have moulded our characters, and when ‘school is over we burn the rod’; and the discipline of joy may evolve nobler graces of character than ever the discipline of sorrow did. At all events, we have to think of work which also is repose, and of service in which is unbroken tranquility.

Then there is further involved in this first idea, the notion of an outer world, on which and in which to work; and also the notion of the resurrection of the body, in which the active spirit may abide, and through which it may work.

Perhaps it may be that they who sleep in Jesus, in the period between the shuffling off of this mortal coil and the breaking of that day when they are raised again from the dead, are incapable of exertion in an outer sphere. Perhaps, it may be, that by reason of the absence of that glorified body of the Resurrection, they sleep in Jesus in the sense that they couch at the Shepherd’s feet within the fold until the morning comes, when He leads them out to new pastures. It may be. At all events, this we may be sure of, that if it be so they have no desires in advance of their capacities; and of this also I think we may be sure, that whether they themselves can come into contact with an external universe or not, Christ is for them in some measure what the body is to us here now, and the glorified body will be hereafter; that being absent from the body they are present with the Lord, and that He is as it were the Sensorium by which they are brought into contact with and have a knowledge of external things, so that they may rest and wait and have no work to do, and have no effort to put forth, and yet be conscious of all that befalls the loved ones here below, may know them in their affliction, and not be untouched by their tears.

But all that is a dim region into which we have not any need to look. What I emphasize is, the service of Heaven means rest, and the service of Heaven means an outer universe on which, and a true bodily frame with which, to do the work which is delight.

The next point is this: such service must be in a far higher sphere and a far nobler fashion than the service of earth. That is in accordance with the analogy of the Divine dealings. God rewards work with more work. The powers that are trained and exercised and proved in a narrower region are lifted to the higher. As some poor peasant-girl, for instance, whose rich voice has risen up in the harvest-field only for her own delight and that of a handful of listeners, heard by some one who detects its sweetness, may be carried away to some great city, and charm kings with her tones, so the service done in some little corner of this remote, rural province of God's universe, apprehended by Him, shall be rewarded with a wider platform, and a nobler area for work. Thou hast been faithful in a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things.' God sends forth His children to work as apprentices here, and when they are 'out of their time,' and have 'got a trade,' He calls them home, not to let their faculties rest unused, but to practice on a larger theatre what they have learned on earth.

One more point must be noticed, viz., that the highest type of Heaven's service must be service for other people. The law for Heaven can surely not be more selfish than the law for earth, and that is, 'He that is chiefest amongst you let him be your servant.' The law for the perfect man can surely not be different from the law for the Master, and the law for Him is, 'Even Christ pleased not Himself.' The perfection of the child can surely not be different from the perfection of the Father, and the perfection of the Father is: 'He maketh His sun to "shine," and His blessings to come - on the unthankful and on the good.'

So then the highest service for man is the service for others; - how, where, or whom, we cannot tell. We too may be ministering spirits, sent forth to minister [Heb. 1:14], but at all events not on ourselves can our activities centre; and not in self -culture can be the highest form of our service to God.

The last point about this first matter is simply this - that this highest form of human activity is all to be worship; all to be done in reference to Him; all to be done in submission to Him. The will of the man in His work is to be so conformed to the will of God as that, whatsoever the hand on the great dial points to, that the hand on the little dial shall point to also. Obedience is joy and rest. To know and to do His will is Heaven. It is Heaven on earth in so far as we partially attain to it, and when with enlarged powers and all imperfections removed, and in a higher sphere, and without interruptions we do His commandments, hearkening to the voice of His word, then the perfect state will have come. Then shall we enter into the liberty of the glory of the children of God, when, as His slaves, we serve Him in the unwearied activities done for Him, which make the worship of Heaven.

II. Next, look at the second of the elements here: - 'They shall see His face.'

Now that expression 'seeing the face of God' in Scripture seems to me to be employed in two somewhat different ways, according to one of which the possibility of seeing the face is affirmed, and according to the other of which it is denied.

The one may be illustrated by the Divine word to Moses: 'Thou canst not see My face. There shall no man see Me and live.' The other may be illustrated by the aspiration and the confidence of one of the psalms: 'As for me, I shall behold Thy face in righteousness.'

A similar antithesis, which is apparently a contradiction, may be found in setting side by side the words of our Saviour: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,' with the words of the Evangelist: 'No man hath seen God at any time.' I do not think that the explanation is to be found altogether in pointing to the difference between present and possible future vision, but rather, I think, the Bible teaches what reason would also teach: that no corporeal vision of God is ever possible; still further, that no complete comprehension and knowledge of Him is ever possible, and, as I think further, that no direct knowledge of, or contact with, God in Himself is possible for finite man, either here or yonder. And the other side lies in such words as these, which I have already quoted: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' 'As through a glass darkly, but then face to face.’ Where is the key to the apparent contradiction? Here, I think. Jesus Christ is the manifest God, in Him only do men draw near to the hidden Deity, the King Invisible, who dwelleth in the light that is inaccessible.

Here on earth we see by faith, and yonder there will be a vision, different in kind, most real, most immediate and direct, not of the hidden Godhood in itself, but of the revealed Godhood manifest in Jesus Christ, whom in His glorified corporeal Manhood we shall perceive, with the organs of our glorified body; whom in His Divine beauty we shall know and love with heart and mind, in knowledge direct, immediate, far surpassing in degree, and different in kind from, the knowledge of faith which we have of Him here below. But the infinite Godhood that lies behind all revelations of Deity shall remain as it hath been through them all - the King invisible, whom no man hath seen or can see. They shall see His face in so far as they shall hold communion with, and through their glorified body have the direct knowledge of Christ, the revealed Deity.

Whether there be anything more, I know not; I think there is not; but this I am sure of, that the law for Heaven and the law for earth alike are, ‘He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.’

But there is another point I would touch upon in reference to this second thought of our text, viz., its connection with the previous representation, ‘They shall serve Him’ - that is work in an outer sphere; ‘they shall see His face’ - that is contemplation. These two, the life of work and the life of devout communion - the Martha and the Mary of the Christian experience - are antagonistic here below, and it is hard to reconcile their conflicting, fluctuating claims and to know how much to give to the inward life of gazing upon Christ, and how much to the outward life of serving Him. But, says my text, the two shall be blended together. ‘His servants shall serve Him,’ nor in all their activity shall they lose the vision of His face. His servants ‘shall see His face’; nor in all the still blessedness of their gaze upon Him shall they slack the diligence of the unwearied hands, or the speed of the willing feet. The Rabbis taught that there were angels who serve, and angels who praise, but the two classes meet in the perfected man, whose services shall be praise, whose praise shall be service. They go forth to do His will, yet are ever in the House of the Lord. They work and gaze;

they gaze and work. Resting they serve, and serving they rest; perpetual activity and perpetual vision are theirs. ‘They serve Him, and see His face.’

III. The last element is, ‘His name shall be in their foreheads.’ That is, as I take it - a manifest likeness to the Lord whom they serve is the highest element in the perfect state of redeemed men.

We hear a good deal in this Book of the Revelation about writing the names and numbers of persons and of powers upon men’s faces and foreheads; as for instance, you remember we read about the ‘number of the beast’ written upon his worshippers, and about ‘the name of the new Jerusalem, and the name of my God ‘being written as a special reward, upon him that overcomes.’ The metaphor, as I suppose, is taken from the old, cruel practice of branding a slave with the name of his master. And so the primary idea of this expression: ‘His slaves shall bear His name upon their foreheads,’ is that their ownership shall be conspicuously visible to all that look.

But there is more than that in it. How is the ownership to be made visible? By His name being in their foreheads. What is ‘His name ‘? Universally in Scripture ‘His name’ is His revealed character, and so we come to this: the perfect men shall be known to belong to God in Christ, because they are like Him. The ownership shall be proved by the likeness, and that likeness shall no longer be hidden in their hearts, no longer be difficult to make out, so blurred and obliterated the letters of the name by the imperfections of their lives and their selfishness and sin; but it shall flame in their foreheads, plain as the inscription on the high priest’s mitre that declared him to be consecrated to the Lord.

And so that lovely and blessed thought is here of a perfect likeness in moral character, at all events, and a wonderful approximation and resemblance in other elements of human nature to the glorified humanity of Jesus Christ our Lord, which shall be the token that we are His.

Oh! what a contrast to the partial ownership, proved to be partial by our partial resemblance here on earth! We say, as Christian men and women, that we bear His name. Is it written so that men can read it, or is it like the name of some person traced in letters of gas jets over a shop-front - half blown out by every gust of wind that comes? Is that the way in which His name is written on your heart and character? My brother, a possibility great and blessed opens before us of a nobler union with Him, a closer approximation, a clearer vision, a perfecter resemblance. ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is’!

One last word. These three elements, service, contemplation, likeness; these three are not different in kind from the elements of a Christian man’s life here. You can enjoy them all sitting in these pews; in the bustle and the hurry of your daily life, you can have every one of them. If you do not enjoy them here you will never have them yonder. If you have never served anybody but yourself how shall death make you His servant? If all the days of your life you have turned away your ear when He has been saying to you ‘Seek ye My face,’ what reason is there to expect that when death’s hammer smashes the glass through which you have seen darkly, ‘the steady whole of that awful face’ will be a pleasant sight to you? If all your life you have been trying, as some of you men and women, old and young, have been trying, and are trying now, to engrave the name of the beast upon your foreheads, what reason have you to expect that when you pass out of this life the foul signs shall disappear in a moment, and you will bear in your brow ‘the marks of the Lord Jesus’ in their stead? No! No! These things do not happen; you have got to begin here as you mean to end yonder. Trust Him here and you will see Him there. Serve Him here and you will serve Him yonder. Write His new Name upon your hearts, and when you pass from the imperfections of life you will bear His name in your foreheads.

And if you do not - I lay this upon the consciences of you all - if you do not you will see Christ; - and you will not like it! And you will bear, not the Image of the Heavenly, which is life, but the image of the earthy, which is death and hell.

37)Revelation 22:4

Revelation

THREE INSCRIPTIONS WITH ONE MEANING

‘HOLINESS TO THE LORD.’ - Exo. 28:36.

‘HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD.’ - Zec. 14:20.

‘HIS NAME SHALL BE IN THEIR FOREHEADS.’ - Rev. 22:4.

You will have perceived my purpose in putting these three widely separated texts together. They all speak of inscriptions, and they are all obviously connected with each other. The first of them comes from the ancient times of the institution of the ceremonial ritual, and describes a part of the high priest’s official dress. In his mitre was a thin plate of gold on which was written, ‘Holiness to the Lord.’ The second of them comes from almost the last portion recorded of the history of Israel in the Old Testament, and is from the words of the great Prophet of the Restoration-his ideal presentation of the Messianic period, in which he recognises as one feature, that the inscription on the mitre of the high priest shall be written on ‘the bells of the horses.’ And the last of them is from the closing vision of the celestial kingdom, the heavenly and perfected form of the Christian Church. John, probably remembering the high priest and his mitre, with its inscription upon the forehead, says: ‘His servants shall do Him priestly service’-for that is the meaning of the word inadequately translated ‘serve Him’-’and see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads.’

These three things, then-the high priest’s mitre, the horses’ bells, the foreheads of the perfected saints-present three aspects of the Christian thought of holiness. Take them one by one.

I. The high priest’s mitre.

The high priest was the official representative of the nation. He stood before God as the embodied and personified Israel. For the purposes of worship Israel was the high priest, and the high priest was Israel. And so, on his forehead, not to distinguish him from the rest of the people, but to include all the people in his consecration, shone a golden plate with the motto, ‘Holiness to the Lord.’ So, at the very beginning of Jewish ritual there stands a protest against all notions that make ‘saint’ the designation of any abnormal or exceptional sanctity, and confine the name to the members of any selected aristocracy of devoutness and goodness. All Christian men, *ex* *officio*, by the very fact of their Christianity, are saints, in the true sense of the word. And the representative of the whole of Israel stood there before God, with this inscription blazing on his forehead, as a witness that, whatsoever holiness may be, it belongs to every member of the true Israel.

And what is it? It is a very unfortunate thing-indicating superficiality of thought-that the modern popular notion of 'holiness' identifies it with purity, righteousness, moral perfection. Now that idea *is* in it, but is not the whole of it. For, not to spend time upon mere remarks on words, the meaning of the word thus rendered is in Hebrew, as well as in Greek and in our own English, one and the same. The root-meaning is 'separated,' 'set apart,' and the word expresses primarily, not moral character, but relation to God. That makes all the difference; and it incalculably deepens the conception, as well as puts us on the right track for understanding the only possible means by which there can ever be realised that moral perfection and excellence which has unfortunately monopolised the meaning of the word in most people's minds. The first thought is 'set apart to God.' That is holiness, in its root and germ.

And how can we be set apart for God? You may devote a dead thing for certain uses easily enough. How can a man be separated and laid aside?

Well, there is only one way, brethren, and that is by self-surrender. 'Yield yourselves to God' is but the other side, or, rather, the practical shape, of the Old and the New Testament doctrine of holiness. A man becomes God's when he says, 'Lord, take me and mould me, and fill me and cleanse me, and do with me what Thou wilt.' In that self-surrender, which is the tap-root of all holiness, the first and foremost thing to be offered is that most obstinate of all, the will that is in us. And when we yield our wills in submission both to commandments and providences, both to gifts and to withdrawals, both to gains and to losses, both to joys and to sorrows, then we begin to write upon our foreheads 'Holiness to the Lord.' And when we go on to yield our hearts to Him, by enshrining Him sole and sovereign in their innermost chamber, and turning to Him the whole current of our lives and desires, and hopes and confidences, which we are so apt to allow to run to waste and be sucked up in the desert sands of the world, then we write more of that inscription. And when we fill our minds with joyful submission to His truth, and occupy our thoughts with His mighty Name and His great revelation, and carry Him with us in the hidden corners of our consciousness, even whilst we are busy about daily work, then we add further letters to it. And when the submissive will, and the devoted heart, and the occupied thoughts are fully expressed in daily life and its various external duties, then the writing is complete. ‘Holiness to the Lord’ is self-surrender of will and heart and mind and everything. And that surrender is of the very essence of Christianity.

What is a saint? Some man or woman that has practised unheard-of austerities? Somebody that has lived an isolated and self-regarding life in convent or monastery or desert? No! a man or woman in the world who, moved by the mercies of God, yields self to God as ‘a living sacrifice.’

So the New Testament writers never hesitate to speak even of such very imperfect Christians as were found in abundance in churches like Corinth and Galatia as being all ‘saints,’ every man of them. That is not because the writers were minimising their defects, or idealising their persons, but because, if they are Christians at all, they are saints; seeing that no man is a Christian who has not been drawn by Christ’s great sacrifice for him to yield himself a sacrifice for Christ.

Of course that intrusive idea which has, in popular apprehension, so swallowed up the notion of holiness-viz. that of perfection of moral character or conduct-is included in this other, or rather is developed from it. For the true way to conquer self is to surrender self; and the more entire our giving up of ourselves, the more certainly shall we receive ourselves back again from His hands. ‘By the mercies of God, I beseech you, yield yourselves living sacrifices.’

II. I come to my next text-the horses’ bells.

Zechariah has a vision of the ideal Messianic times, and, of course, as must necessarily be the case, his picture is painted with colours laid upon his palette by his experience, and he depicts that distant future in the guise suggested to him by what he saw around him. So we have to disentangle from his words the sentiment which he expresses, and to recognise the symbolic way in which he puts it. His thought is this,-the inscription on the high priest’s mitre will be written on the bells which ornament the harness of the horses, which in Israel were never used as with us, but only either for war or for pomp and display, and the use of which was always regarded with a certain kind of doubt and suspicion. Even these shall be consecrated in that far-off day.

And then he goes on with variations on the same air, ‘In that day there shall be upon the bells of the horses, "Holiness unto the Lord,"‘ and adds that ‘the pots in the Lord’s house’-the humble vessels that were used for the most ordinary parts of the Temple services-’shall be like the bowls before the altar,’ into which the sacred blood of the offerings was poured. The most external and secular thing bearing upon religion shall be as sacred as the sacredest. But that is not all. ‘Yea! every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holiness unto the Lord of hosts, and all they that sacrifice shall come and take of them,’ and put their offerings therein. That is to say, the coarse pottery vessels that were in every poverty-stricken house in the city shall be elevated to the rank of the sacred vessels of the Temple. Domestic life with all its secularities shall be hallowed. The kitchens of Jerusalem shall be as truly places of worship as is the inner shrine of the Most High.

On the whole, the prophet’s teaching is that, in the ideal state of man upon earth, there will be an entire abolition of the distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’; a distinction that has wrought infinite mischief in the world, and in the lives of Christian people.

Let me translate these words of our prophet into English equivalents. Every cup and tumbler in a poor man’s kitchen may be as sacred as the communion chalice that passes from lip to lip with the ‘blood of Jesus Christ’ in it. Every common piece of service that we do, down among the vulgarities and the secularities and the meannesses of daily life, may be lifted up to stand upon precisely the same level as the sacredest office that we undertake. The bells of the horses may jingle to the same tune as the trumpets of the priests sounded within the shrine, and on all, great and small, may be written, ‘Holiness to the Lord.’

But let us remember that that universally diffused sanctity will need to have a centre of diffusion, else there will be no diffusion, and that all life will become sacred when the man that lives it has ‘Holiness to the Lord’ written on his forehead, and not else. If that be the inscription on the driver's heart, the horses that he drives will have it written on their bells, but they will not have it unless it be. Holy men make all things holy. 'To the pure all things are pure,' but unto them that are unclean and disobedient there is nothing pure. Hallow thyself, and all things are clean unto thee.

III. And so I come to my third text-the perfected saints' foreheads.

The connection between the first and the last of these texts is as plain and close as between the first and the second. For John in his closing vision gives emphasis to the priestly idea as designating in its deepest relations the redeemed and perfected Christian Church. Therefore he says, as I have already explained, 'His servants shall do Him *priestly* service, and His name shall be in their foreheads.' The old official dress of the high priest comes into his mind, and he paints the future, just as Zechariah did, under the forms of the past, and sees before the throne the perfected saints, each man of them with that inscription clear and conspicuous.

But there is an advance in his words which I think it is not fanciful to note. It is only the *name* that is written in the perfected saint's forehead. Not the 'Holiness unto the Lord,' but just the bare name. What does that mean? Well, it means the same as your writing your name in one of your books does, or as when a man puts his initials on the back of his oxen, or as the old practice of branding the master's mark upon the slave did. It means absolute ownership.

But it means something more. The name is the manifested personality, the revealed God, or, as we say in an abstract way, the character of God. That Name is to be in the foreheads of His perfected people. How does it come to be there? Read also the clause before the text-'His servants shall see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads.' That is to say, the perfected condition is not reached by surrender only, but by assimilation; and that assimilation comes by contemplation. The faces that are turned to Him, and behold Him, are smitten with the light and shine, and those that look upon them see 'as it had been the face of an angel,' as the Sanhedrim saw that of Stephen, when he beheld the Son of Man 'standing at the right hand of God.'

My last text is but a picturesque way of saying what the writer of it says in plain words when he declares, ‘We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’ The name is to be ‘in their foreheads,’ where every eye can see it. Alas! alas! it is so hard for us to live out our best selves, and to show to the world what is in us. Cowardice, sheepishness, and a hundred other reasons prevent it. In this poor imperfect state no emotion ever takes shape and visibility without losing more or less of its beauty. But yonder the obstructions to self-manifestation will be done away; and ‘when He shall be manifested, we also shall be manifested with Him in glory.’

‘Then shall the righteous blaze forth like the sun in My heavenly Father’s Kingdom.’ But the beginning of it all is ‘Holiness to the Lord’ written on our hearts; and the end of that is the vision which is impossible without holiness, and which leads on to the beholder’s perfect likeness to his Lord.

38)Revelation 22:14

Revelation

EDEN LOST AND RESTORED

Gen. 3:24. - Rev. 22:14.

Better is the end of a thing than the beginning.’ Eden was fair, but the heavenly city shall be fairer. The Paradise regained is an advance on the Paradise that was lost. These are the two ends of the history of man, separated by who knows how many millenniums. Heaven lay about him in his infancy, but as he journeyed westwards its morning blush faded into the light of common day-and only at eventide shall the sky glow again with glory and colour, and the western heaven at last outshine the eastern, with a light that shall never die. A fall, and a rise-a rise that reverses the fall, a rise that transcends the glory from which he fell,-that is the Bible’s notion of the history of the world, and I, for my part, believe it to be true, and feel it to be the one satisfactory explanation of what I see round about me and am conscious of within me.

1. ***Man had an Eden and lost it.***

I take the Fall to be a historical fact. To all who accept the authority of Scripture, no words are needed beyond the simple statement before us, but we may just gather up the signs that there are on the wide field of the world's history, and in the narrower experience of individuals, that such a fall has been.

Look at the condition of the world: its degradation, its savagery-all its pining myriads, all its untold millions who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. Will any man try to bring before him the actual state of the heathen world, and, retaining his belief in a God, profess that these men are what God meant men to be? It seems to me that the present condition of the world is not congruous with the idea that men are in their primitive state, and if this is what God meant men for, then I see not how the dark clouds which rest on His wisdom and His love are to be lifted off.

Then, again-if the world has not a Fall in its history, then we must take the lowest condition as the one from which all have come; and is that idea capable of defence? Do we see anywhere signs of an upward process going on now? Have we any experience of a tribe raising itself? Can you catch anywhere a race in the act of struggling up, outside of the pale of Christianity? Is not the history of all a history of decadence, except only where the Gospel has come in to reverse the process?

But passing from this: What mean the experiences of the individual-these longings; this hard toil; these sorrows?

How comes it that man alone on earth, manifestly meant to be leader, lord, etc., seems but cursed with a higher nature that he may know greater sorrows, and raised above the beasts in capacity that he may sink below them in woe, this capacity only leading to a more exquisite susceptibility, to a more various as well as more poignant misery?

Whence come the contrarieties and discordance in his nature?

It seems to me that all this is best explained as the Bible explains it by saying: [1] Sin has done it; [2] Sin is not part of God's original design, but man has fallen; [3] Sin had a personal beginning. There have been men who were pure, able to stand but free to fall.

It seems to me that that explanation is more in harmony with the facts of the case, finds more response in the unsophisticated instinct of man, than any other. It seems to me that, though it leaves many dark and sorrowful mysteries all unsolved, yet that it alleviates the blackest of them, and flings some rays of hope on them all. It seems to me that it relieves the character and administration of God from the darkest dishonour; that it delivers man's position and destiny from the most hopeless despair; that though it leaves the mystery of the origin of evil, it brings out into clearest relief the central truths that evil is evil, and sin and sorrow are not God's will; that it vindicates as something better than fond imaginings the vague aspirations of the soul for a fair and holy state; that it establishes, as nothing else will, at once the love of God and the dignity of man; that it leaves open the possibility of the final overthrow of that Sin which it treats as an intrusion and stigmatises as a fall; that it therefore braces for more vigorous, hopeful conflict against it, and that while but for it the answer to the despairing question, Hast Thou made all men in vain? must be either the wailing echo 'In vain,' or the denial that He has made them at all, there is hope and there is power, and there is brightness thrown on the character of God and on the fate of man, by the old belief that God made man upright, and that man made himself a sinner.

2. *Heaven restores the lost Eden*.

'God is not ashamed to be called their God, *for* He hath prepared them a *city*.'

The highest conception we can form of heaven is the reversal of all the evil of earth, and the completion of its incomplete good: the sinless purity-the blessed presence of God-the fulfilment of all desires-the service which is *blessed*, not toil-the changelessness which is progress, not stagnation.

3. *Heaven surpasses the lost Eden*.

[1] Garden-City.

The perfection of association-the *nations* of the saved. Here 'we mortal millions live alone,' even when united with dearest. Like Egyptian monks of old, each dwelling in his own cave, though all were a community.

[2] The richer experience.

The memory of past sorrows which are understood at last.

Heaven’s bliss in contrast with earthly joys.

Sinlessness of those who have been sinners will be more intensely lustrous for its dark background in the past. Redeemed men will be brighter than angels.

The impossibility of a fall.

Death behind us.

The former things shall no more come to mind, being lost in blaze of present transcendent experience, but yet shall be remembered as having led to that perfect state.

Christ not only repairs the ‘tabernacle which was fallen,’ but builds a fairer temple. He brings ‘a statelier Eden,’ and makes us dwell for ever in a Garden City.

39)Revelation 22:14

Revelation

THE LAST BEATITUDE OF THE ASCENDED CHRIST

Rev. 22:14

The Revised Version reads: ‘Blessed are they that wash their robes that they may have the right to come to the Tree of Life.’

That may seem a very large change to make, from ‘keep His commandments,’ to ‘wash their robes,’ but in the Greek it is only a change of three letters in one word, one in the next, and two in the third. And the two phrases, written, look so like each other, that a scribe, hasty, or for the moment careless, might very easily mistake the one for the other. There can be no doubt whatever that the reading in the Revised Version is the correct one. Not only is it sustained by a great weight of authority, but also it is far more in accordance with the whole teaching of the New Testament than that which stands in our Authorized Version.

‘Blessed are they that do His commandments, that they may have right to the Tree of Life,’ carries us back to the old law, and has no more hopeful a sound in it than the thunders of Sinai. If it were, indeed, amongst Christ’s last words to us, it would be a most sad instance of His ‘building again the things He had destroyed.’ It is relegating us to the dreary old round of trying to earn Heaven by doing good deeds; and I might almost say it is ‘making the Cross of Christ of none effect.’ The fact that that corrupt reading came so soon into the Church and has held its ground so long, is to me a very singular proof of the difficulty which men have always had in keeping themselves up to the level of the grand central Gospel truth: Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by His mercy. He saved us.’

‘Blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may have right to the Tree of Life,’ has the clear ring of the New Testament music about it, and is in full accord with the whole type of doctrine that runs through this book; and is not unworthy to be almost the last word that the lips of the Incarnate Wisdom spoke to men from Heaven. So then, taking that point of view, I wish to look with you at three things that come plainly out of these words: - First, that principle that if men are clean it is because they are cleansed; ‘Blessed are they that wash their robes.’ Secondly, It is the cleansed who have unrestrained access to the source of life. And lastly, It is the cleansed who pass into the society of the city. Now, let me deal with these three things: -

I. If we are clean it is because we have been made so. The first beatitude that Jesus Christ spoke from the mountain was, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit.’ The last beatitude that He speaks from Heaven is, ‘Blessed are they that wash their robes.’ And the act commended in the last is but the outcome of the spirit extolled in the first. For they who are poor in spirit are such as know themselves to be sinful men; and those who know themselves to be sinful men are they who will cleanse their robes in the blood of Jesus Christ.

I need not remind you, I suppose, how continually this symbol of the robe is used in Scripture as an expression for moral character. This Book of the Apocalypse is saturated through and through with Jewish implications and allusions, and there can be no doubt whatever that in this metaphor of the cleansing of the robes there is an allusion to that vision that the Apocalyptic seer of the Old Covenant, the prophet Zechariah, had when he saw the high priest standing before the altar clad in foul raiment, and the word came forth, 'Take away the filthy garments from him.' Nor need I do more than remind you how the same metaphor is often on the lips of our Lord Himself, notably in the story of the man that had not on the wedding garment, and in the touching and beautiful incident in the parable of the Prodigal Son, where the exuberance of the father's love bids them cast the best robe round the rags and the leanness of his long-lost boy. Nor need I remind you how Paul catches up the metaphor, and is continually referring to an investing and a divesting - the putting on and the putting off of the new and the old man. In this same Book of the Apocalypse we see, gleaming all through it, the white robes of the purified soul: 'They shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.' 'I beheld a great multitude, whom no man could number, who had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

And so there are gathered up into these last words, all these allusions and memories, thick and clustering, when Christ speaks from Heaven and says, 'Blessed are they that wash their robes.'

Well then, I suppose we may say roughly, in our more modern phraseology, that the robe thus so frequently spoken of in Scripture answers substantially to what we call character. It is not exactly the man - and yet it is the man. It is the self- and yet it is a kind of projection and making visible of the self, the vesture which is cast round 'the hidden man of the heart.'

This mysterious robe, which answers nearly to what we mean by character, is made by the wearer.

That is a solemn thought. Every one of us carries about with him a mystical loom, and we are always weaving - weave, weave, weaving - this robe which we wear, every thought a thread of the warp, every action a thread of the weft. We weave it as the spider does its web, out of its own entrails, if I might so say. We weave it, and we dye it, and we cut it, and we stitch it, and then we put it on and wear it, and it sticks to us. Like a snail that crawls about your garden patches, and makes its shell by a process of secretion from out of its own substance, so you and I are making that mysterious, solemn thing that we call character, moment by moment. It is our own self, modified by our actions. Character is the precipitate from the stream of conduct which, like the Nile Delta, gradually rises solid and firm above the parent river and confines its flow.

The next step that I ask you to take is one that I know some of you do not like to take, and it is this: All the robes are foul. I do not say all are equally splashed, I do not say all are equally thickly spotted with the flesh. I do not wish to talk dogmas, I wish to talk experience; and I appeal to your own consciences, with this plain question, that every man and woman amongst us can answer if they like - Is it true or is it not, that the robe is all dashed with mud caught on the foul ways, with stains in some of us of rioting and banqueting and revelry and drunkenness; sins of the flesh that have left their mark upon the flesh; but with all of us grey and foul as compared with the whiteness of His robe who sits above us there?

Ah I would that I could bring to all hearts that are listening to me now, whether the hearts of professing Christians or no, that consciousness more deeply than we have ever had it, of how full of impurity and corruption our characters are. I do not charge you with crimes; I do not charge you with guilt in the world’s eyes, but, if we seriously ponder over our past, have we not lived, some of us habitually, all of us far too often, as if there were no God at all, or as if we had nothing to do with Him? and is not that godlessness practical Atheism, the fountain of all foulness from which black brooks flow into our lives, and stain our robes?

The next step is. The foul robe can be cleansed. My text does not go any further in a statement of the method, but it rests upon the great words of this Book of the Revelation, which I have already quoted for another purpose, in which we read ‘they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’ And the same writer, in his Epistle, has the same paradox, which seems to have been, to him, a favorite way of putting the central Gospel truth: ‘The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin.’ John saw the paradox, and saw that the paradox helped to illustrate the great truth that he was trying to proclaim, that the red blood whitened the black robe, and that in its full tide there was a limpid river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the Cross of Christ.

Guilt can be pardoned, character can be sanctified. Guilt can be pardoned! Men say: No! We live in a universe of inexorable laws; "What a man soweth that he must also reap." If he has done wrong he must inherit the consequences.’

But the question whether guilt can be pardoned or not has only to do very remotely with consequences. The question is not whether we live in a universe of inexorable laws, but whether there is anything in the universe but the laws; for forgiveness is a personal act, and has only to do secondarily and remotely with the consequences of a man’s doings. So that, if we believe in a personal God, and believe that He has got any kind of living relation to men at all, we can believe- blessed be His name! - in the doctrine of forgiveness; and leave the inexorable laws full scope to work, according as His wisdom and His mercy may provide. For the heart of the Christian doctrine of pardon does not touch those laws, but the heart of it is this: ‘O Lord! Thou wast angry with me, but Thine anger is turned away, Thou hast comforted me!’ So guilt may be pardoned.

Character may be sanctified and elevated. Why not, if you can bring a sufficiently strong new force to bear upon it? And you can bring such a force, in the blessed thought of Christ’s death for me, and in the gift of His love. There is such a force in the thought that He has given Himself for our sin. There is such a force in the Spirit of Christ given to us through His death to cleanse us by His presence in our hearts. And so I say, the blood of Jesus Christ, the power of His sacrifice and Cross, cleanses from all sin, both in the sense of taking away all my guilt, and in the sense of changing my character into something loftier and nobler and purer.

Men and women! Do you believe that? If you do not, why do you not? If you do, are you trusting to what you believe, and living the life that befits the confidence?

One word more. The washing of your robes has to be done by you. ‘Blessed are they that wash their robes.’ On one hand is all the fullness of cleansing, on the other is the heap of dirty rags that will not be cleansed by you sitting there and looking at them. You must bring the two into contact. How? By the magic band that unites strength and weakness, purity and foulness, the Saviour and the penitent; the magic band of simple affiance, and trust and submission of myself to the cleansing power of His death and of His life.

Only remember, ‘Blessed are they that are washing,’ as the Greek might read. Not once and for all, but a continuous process, a blessed process running on all through a man’s life.

These are the conditions as they come from Christ’s own lips, in almost the last words that human ears, either in fact or in vision, heard Him utter. These are the conditions under which noble life, and at last Heaven, are possible for men, namely, that their foul characters shall be cleansed, and that continuously, by daily recurrence and recourse to the Fountain opened in His sacrifice and death.

Friends, you may know much of the beauty and nobleness of Christianity, you may know much of the tenderness and purity of Christ, but if you have not apprehended Him in this character, there is an inner sanctuary yet to be trod, of which your feet know nothing, and the sweetest sweetness of all you have not yet tasted, for it is His forgiving love and cleansing power that most deeply manifest His Divine affection and bind us to Himself.

II. The second thought that I would suggest is that these cleansed ones, and by implication these only, have unrestrained access to the source of life: ‘Blessed are they that wash their robes, that they may have right “to the Tree of Life.” ‘That, of course, carries us back to the old mysterious narrative at the beginning of the Book of Genesis.

Although it does not bear very closely upon my present subject, I cannot help pausing to point out one thing, how remarkable and how beautiful it is that the last page of the Revelation should come bending round to touch the first page of Genesis. The history of man began with angels with frowning faces and flaming swords barring the way to the Tree of Life. It ends here with the guard of Cherubim withdrawn; or rather, perhaps, sheathing their swords and becoming guides to the no longer forbidden fruit, instead of being its guards. That is the Bible’s grand symbolical way of saying that all between - the sin, the misery, the death - is a parenthesis. God’s purpose is not going to be thwarted, and the end of His majestic march through human history is to be men’s access to the Tree of Life from which, for the dreary ages - that are but as a moment in the great eternities - they were barred out by their sin.

However, that is not the point that I meant to say a word about. The Tree of Life stands as the symbol here of an external source of life. I take ‘life’ to be used here in what I believe to be its predominant New Testament meaning, not bare continuance in existence, but a full, blessed perfection and activity of all the faculties and possibilities of the man, which this very Apostle himself identifies with the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ. And that life, says John, has an external source in Heaven as on earth.

There is an old Christian legend, absurd as a legend, beautiful as a parable, that the Cross on which Christ was crucified was made out of the wood of the Tree of Life. It is true in idea, for He and His work will be the source of all life, for earth and for Heaven, whether of body, soul, or spirit. They that wash their robes have the right of unrestrained access to Him in whose presence, in that loftier state, no impurity can live.

I need not dwell upon the thought that is involved here, of how, whilst on earth and in the beginnings of the Christian career, life is the basis of righteousness: in that higher world, in a very profound sense, righteousness is the condition of fuller life.

The Tree of Life, according to some of the old Rabbinical legends, lifted its branches, by an indwelling motion, high above impure hands that were stretched to touch them, and until our hands are cleansed through faith in Jesus Christ, its richest fruit hangs unreachable, golden, above our heads. Oh! brother, the fullness of the life of Heaven is only granted to them who, drawing near Jesus Christ by faith on earth, have thereby cleansed themselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit.

III. Finally, those who are cleansed, and they only, have entrance into the society of the city.

There again we have a whole series of Old and New Testament metaphors gathered together. In the old world the whole power and splendor of great kingdoms were gathered in their capitals, Babylon and Nineveh in the past, Rome in the present. To John the forces of evil were all concentrated in that city on the Seven Hills. To him the antagonistic forces which were the hope of the world were all concentrated in the real ideal city which he expected to come down from Heaven - the New Jerusalem. And he and his brother who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, whoever he was - trained substantially in the same school - have taught us the same lesson that our picture of the future is not to be of a solitary or self -regarding Heaven, but of ‘a city which hath foundations.’

Genesis began with a garden, man’s sin sent him out of the garden. God, out of evil, evolves good, and for the lost garden comes the better thing, the found city. ‘Then comes the statelier Eden back to man.’ For surely it is better that men should live in the activities of the city than in the sweetness and indolence of the garden; and manifold and miserable as are the sins and the sorrows of great cities, the opprobria of our modern so-called civilization, yet still the aggregation of great masses of men for worthy objects generates a form of character, and sets loose energies and activities which no other kind of life could have produced.

And so I believe a great step in progress is set forth when we read of the final condition of mankind as being their assembling in the city of God. And surely there, amidst the solemn troops and sweet societies, the long loved, long-lost will be found again. I cannot believe that, like the Virgin and Joseph, we shall have to go wandering up and down the streets of Jerusalem when we get there, looking for our dear ones. ‘Wist ye not that I should be in the Father’s house?’ We shall know where to find them.

‘We shall clasp them again,

And with God be the rest.’

The city is the emblem of security and of permanence. No more shall life be as a desert march, with changes which only bring sorrow, and yet a dreary monotony amidst them all. We shall dwell amid abiding realities, ourselves fixed in unchanging but ever-growing completeness and peace. The tents shall be done with, we shall inhabit the solid mansions of the city which hath foundations, and shall wonderingly exclaim, as our unaccustomed eyes gaze on their indestructible strength, ‘What manner of stones and what buildings are here!’ - and not one stone of these shall ever be thrown down.

Dear friends! the sum of all my poor words now is the earnest beseeching of every one of you to bring all your foulness to Christ, who alone can make you clean. ‘Though thou wash thee with nitre, and take thee much soap, yet thine iniquity is marked before

Me, saith the Lord.’ ‘The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin.’ Submit yourselves, I pray you, to its purifying power, by humble faith. Then you will have the true possession of the true life today, and will be citizens of the city of God, even while in this far-off dependency of that great metropolis. And when the moment comes for you to leave this prison-house, an angel ‘mighty and beauteous, though his face be hid,’ shall come to you, as once of old to the sleeping Apostle. His touch shall wake you, and lead you, scarce knowing where you are or what is happening, from the sleep of life, past the first and second ward, and through the iron gate that leadeth unto the city. Smoothly it will turn on its hinges, opening to you of its own accord, and then you will come to yourself and know of a surety that the Lord hath sent His angel, and that he has led you into the home of your heart, the city of God, which they enter as its fitting inhabitants who wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb.

40)Revelation 22:17

Revelation

CHRIST’S LAST INVITATION FROM THE THRONE

Rev. 22:17

The last verses of this last book of Scripture are like the final movement of some great concerto, in which we hear all the instruments of the orchestra swelling the flood of triumph. In them many voices are audible alternately. Sometimes it is the Seer who speaks, sometimes an angel, sometimes a deeper voice from the Throne, that of Christ Himself. It is often difficult, therefore, amidst these swift transitions, to tell who is the speaker; but one thing is clear that, just before the verse from which my text is taken, our Lord has been proclaiming from the Throne His royalty and His swift coming ‘to render to every man according’ to his work, and to gather His own into the city.

After that solemn utterance He is silent for the moment, and there is a great hush. Then a voice is heard saying, ‘Come! ‘It is the voice of the Bride in whom the Spirit speaks. What should she say, in answer to His promise, but pour out her wish for its fulfilment? How should the Bride not long for the bridegroom? Then apparently the Seer breaks in, summoning all who have heard Christ’s promise, and the Church’s prayer, to swell her cry of longing. For, indeed. His coming is the Divine ‘event to which the whole Creation moves’; and in it all the world’s dreams of a golden age are fulfilled, and all the world’s wounds are healed. ‘Let him that heareth say. Come!’

But who speaks my text? Apparently Christ Himself, though its force would not be materially modified if it were the voice of John, the Seer. It is His answer to the cry of the Church. He delays His coming; for this among other reasons that all the world may hear His gracious invitation. Then there are two comings in this verse - the final coming of Christ to the world; the invited coming of the world to Christ.

Now, it is obvious, I think, that such a way of understanding our text, with its vivid interchange of speakers and subjects, gives a far richer meaning to it than the interpretation which is so common amongst us, which recognizes in all these ‘Comes’ only a reference to one and the same subject, the approach of men to Jesus Christ through faith in Him.

Let us, then, listen to this Voice from the Throne, almost the last recorded words of the ascended Jesus, in which are gathered all His love for men and His longing to bless them.

I. Now, first let me suggest the question - To whom Christ from the Throne thus calls?

The persons addressed are designated by two descriptions: they that are ‘athirst,’ and those that ‘will.’ In one aspect of the former designation it is universal; in another aspect it is by no means so. The latter designation is, alas! anything but universal, because there are many men that thirst; and, strange as it seems, will not to be satisfied. But we take these two apart, and look at them separately.

The first qualification is need, and the sense of need. These two things, alas! do not go together. One is universal, the other by no means so. When a man is thirsty he knows that he is. But it is quite possible that your soul's lips may be cracking and black with thirst, and you may be all unconscious of it. There is a universal need stamped upon men, by the very make of their spirits, which declares that they must have something or someone external to themselves, on whom they can rest, and from whom they can be satisfied. The heart yearns for another's love; the mind is restless till it grasps reality and truth. The will longs to be mastered, even though it rebels against the Master, and the whole nature of man proclaims, 'My soul thirsteth for God; for the living God.' No man is at rest unless he is living in conscious amity with, and in possession of, the Father's heart and the Father's strength.

But, brethren, half of you do not know what ails you. You recognize the gnawing discontent, the urging restlessness, the continual feeling after something more than you have, and it often impels you on the wrong road. There is such a thing as misinterpreting the cry of the Spirit, and that misinterpretation is the crime and the misery of millions of men and of many in this building this evening. That they shall stifle their true need under a pile of worldly things, that they shall direct their longings to what can never satisfy them, that they shall put away all thoughts of the one sufficient anchorage, and hold, and nourishment, and refreshment, and gladness of the spirit, is indeed the state and the misery of many of us.

Perverted tastes are by no means confined to certain forms of disease of the body. There is the same perversion of taste in regard of higher things. You and I are made to feed upon God, and we feed upon ourselves, and one another, and the world, and all the trash, in comparison to our immortal desires and capacities, which we find around us. It seems to me sometimes, looking upon the busy life in the midst of which we live, and the way in which, from Monday morning to Saturday night, each man is hurrying after his chosen pursuits, as if we were all stricken with insanity, and chasing after dreams; or as if, if I might take such an illustration, we were like the actors upon a stage, at some banquet in a play, pretending with great gusto to be drinking nothing, out of cups tinseled to look like gold, but which are only wood. Do you interpret aright the immortal thirst of your soul? Having the need, brother, are you conscious of the need; and, if conscious, do you know where the fountain bubbles up that will supply it? I fear- I fear that there are many who, if they would interrogate their own hearts honestly, and look this question in the face, would have to answer. No! It is 'as when a thirsty man drearaeth, and behold! he drinketh; but he awaketh; and, behold! he is faint, and his soul within him hath appetite.'

Now, I dare say there are many who are not aware of this thirst of the soul. No! you have crushed it out, and for a time you are quite satisfied with worldly success, or with the various objects on which you have set your hearts. It will not last! It will not last! It is not likely to last even the length of your life. It will not last any longer. Some of us may be like the cactus that grows in hot, light soil in eastern lands, having a considerable store of moisture in the fleshy spike that will help it through a long time of drought, but the store gets used up. Be sure of this, that, until you go to Jesus Christ, you dwell in 'a dry and thirsty land where no water is.' So far as the sense of need goes this text may not appeal to you. So far as the reality of the need goes it certainly does.

Then, look at the other designation of the persons to whom Christ's merciful summons comes: 'Whosoever will let him take.' Now, I said that the former designation, in one view of it, covered the whole ground of humanity. We cannot say that of this other one, for we are brought face to face with that strange and most inexplicable and yet most certain and tragic of all facts in regard to men, that they do turn away their wills from the merciful call of God, and that some of them, gnawing their very tongues with thirst, yet put away with impatient hand the sparkling cup that He offers to them freely. There is nothing sadder, there is nothing more certain, than that we poor little creatures can assert our will in the presence of the Divine lovingkindness, and can thwart, so far as we are concerned, the council of God against ourselves, 'How often would I have gathered,' said the foiled, long-suffering Christ - 'how often would I have gathered . . . and ye would not!’ Oh! brethren, it is an awful thing to think that with this universal need there is such a partial yielding of the will to Him.

I do not enter here and now upon the various reasons or excuses which men offer to themselves and one another for this disinclination to accept the Divine mercy, but I do venture to say that the solid core of unwillingness to be saved upon Christ’s conditions underlies a vast deal- not all, but a vast deal - of the supposed intellectual difficulties of men in regard to the Gospel. The will bribes the understanding, in a great many regions. It is a very common thing all round the horizon of thought and knowledge that a man shall believe or disbelieve largely under the influence of prejudice or inclination. So let no man be offended if I say that what we have to guard against, in all regions of thought, we have also to guard against in our relation to the truths of the Gospel, and make very sure that, when we think we are being borne along by pure, impartial reason, the will has not put a bridle in the nose of the steed, and is guiding it astray.

But for the most of you who stand apart from Jesus Christ this is the truth, that your attitude is a merely negative one. It is not that you will not to have Him but that you do not will to have Him. But that negative attitude, that passive indifference which largely comes from a heart that does not like to submit to the conditions that Christ imposes, makes a positive hindrance to your getting between your lips the water of life. You know the old proverb: One man can take a horse to the water, ten cannot make him drink. We can bring you to the water, or the water to you, but neither Christ nor His servants can put the refreshing, life-giving liquid into your mouth if you lock your lips so tight that a bristle could not go in between them. You can thwart Christ, and when He says, ‘Take, drink!’ you can shake your head and mumble, ‘I will not.’ So, dear friends, I beseech you to take this solemnly into consideration, that the operative cause why most of us who are not Christians are not, is simply disinclination. Wishing is one thing; willing is quite another. "Wishing to be delivered from the gnawing restlessness of a hungry heart, and to be satisfied, is one thing; willing to accept the satisfaction which Christ gives on the terms which Christ lays down is, alas! quite another.

Seeing that to know our need and to be willing to let Him supply it in His own fashion are the only qualifications, then how magnificently from this last word of the Christ from the Throne comes out the universality of His Gospel. ‘Whosoever will,’ that is all. If you choose you may. No other conditions are laid down. If there had been any which were beyond the power of every soul of man upon earth, then Christianity would have dwindled to a narrow, provincial, sectional thing. But, since it only demands the need, which is universal; the sense of need, which every man may feel; and willingness, which every man ought to, and can, exercise, it is the Gospel for the world, and it is the Gospel for me, and it is the Gospel for each of you. See that ye refuse not the offered draught.

II. That brings me, secondly, to say a word about what Christ from heaven thus offers to us all.

This book of Revelation, as I have already remarked, in another connection, is the close of the great Revelation of God; and it is full of the echoes of His earlier words. The river of the water of life has been rippling and tinkling from the first chapter of Genesis to the last of Revelation. It is the river that flowed through Eden; the river which makes glad with its streams the City of God, the river of the Divine pleasures, of which God makes His children drink; the river which the prophet saw stealing out from under the Temple doors, and carrying life whithersoever it came; the river which Christ proclaimed should flow from because it had flowed into, all that should believe upon Him, ‘the river of the water of life, clear as crystal,’ which the Seer had just seen proceeding from the Throne of God and of the Lamb. Our Lord’s words to the Samaritan woman, and His words on that last great day of the feast, when He stood and cried, ‘If any man thirst let him come to Me and drink,’ and many another gracious utterance, are all gathered up, as it were, in this last Voice from the Throne.

The water of life is not merely living water, in the sense that it flashes and sparkles and flows; but it is water which communicates life. ‘Life’ here is to be taken in that deep, pregnant, comprehensive sense in which the Apostle John uses it in all his writings. It is his shorthand symbol for the whole aggregate of the blessings which come to men through Jesus Christ, and which, received by men, make them blessed indeed.

The first thought that emerges from this ‘water of life,’ considered as being the sum of all that Christ communicates to humanity is - then, where it does not run or is not received, there is death. Ah, brother, the true death is separation from God, and the true separation from God is not brought about because He is in heaven, and we are upon earth; or because He is infinite and incomprehensible, and we are poor creatures of an hour, but because we depart from Him in heart and mind, and, as another Apostle says, are dead in trespasses and sins. Death in life, a living death, is far more dreadful than when the poor body is laid quiet upon the bed, and the spirit has left the pale cheeks. And that death is upon us, unless it has been banished from us by a draught of the water of life. Dear brethren, that is not pulpit rhetoric; it is the deepest fact about human nature. It is not a mere metaphor. I take it that the death of the body is metaphor, so to speak, the embodiment in material form, as a parable of the far grimmer thing which goes on in the region of the spirit. And I beseech you to remember that according to the whole teaching of Scripture, which I think is countersigned by the verdict of an awakened conscience, death is the separation from God by sin; and the only quickening potion is the water which Christ gives; or rather, as He Himself said, ‘He that drinketh of My blood hath life indeed.’

But, then, besides all these thoughts, there come others, on which I need not dwell, that in that great emblem of the water that gives life is included the satisfaction of all desires, meeting and over-answering all expectations, filling up every empty place in the heart, in the hopes, in the whole inward nature of man, and lavishing upon him all the blessings which go to make up true gladness, true nobleness, and dignity. Nor does the eternal life cease when physical death comes. The river - if I might modify the figure with which I am dealing, and regard the man himself in his Christian experience as the river - flows through a narrow, dark gorge, like one of the canons on American streams, and down to its profoundest depths no sunlight can travel. But the waters are not diminished though they are confined, nor are they arrested by the black rocks, but at the other end of the defile they come out into flashing sunset and sparkle and flow. And away somewhere in the dark gorge mighty tributaries have poured in, so that the stream is broader and deeper, and pours a more majestic volume towards the great ocean from which it originally came.

Brother, here is the offer - life eternal, deliverance from the death of sin both as guilt and power; the pouring out upon us of all the blessing that our thirsty spirits can desire, and the perpetuity of that blessed existence and endless satisfaction through the infinite ages of timeless being. These are the offers that Christ makes to each of us.

III. Lastly, what Christ from heaven calls us to do.

‘He that is athirst let him come; and whosoever will let him take!’ The two things, coming and taking, as it seems to me, cover substantially the same ground. You often hear earnest, evangelical preachers reiterate that call - ‘Come to Jesus! come to Jesus!’ with more fervor than clearness of explanation of what they mean. So, I would say, in one sentence emphatically, and as plainly as I can put it, that Jesus Christ Himself has told us what He means. Because when He was here upon earth He stood and cried, ‘If any man thirst let him come to Me and drink.’ And He explained Himself when He said, ‘He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst.’ So let us put away the metaphors of ‘coming’ and ‘taking’ and lay hold of the Christ-given interpretation of them, and say the one thing that Christ asks me to do is to trust my poor, sinful self wholly and confidently and constantly and obediently to Him. That is all.

Ah! All! And that is just where the pinch comes. ‘My father! my father!’ remonstrated Naaman’s servants, when he was in a towering passion because he was told to go wash in the Jordan; ‘if the prophet had bidden thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it? How much rather then when he saith to thee, Wash and be clean?’ Naaman’s strange reluctance to do a little thing in order to produce a great effect whilst he was willing to take a mint of trouble in order to produce it, is repeated over and over again amongst us. You will see men buy damnation dear who will not have salvation because it is a gift and they have nothing to do. I do believe that great multitudes of people would rather, like the Hindoos, stick hooks in the muscles of their backs, and swing at the end of a rope if that would get heaven for them, than simply be content to come *in forma pauperis*, and owe everything to Christ’s grace, and nothing to their own works.

Why! what is the meaning of all this new vitality of sacerdotal notions amongst us to-day, and of the efficacy of sacraments, and all the rest of it, except the pur-blindness to the flashing glory of the central truth of the Gospel that not by anything that we do, but simply by His Cross and passion received by faith into our hearts, are we saved? Brethren, it is not theology about Christ's sacrifice, but it is the Christ whom the theology about His sacrifice explains that you must get hold of. And if you trust Him you have come to Him in a very real sense, and have His presence with you, and you are present with Him far more really than were the men who companied with Him all the time that He went in and out amongst them here on this earth. So much for the 'come.'

'Let him take.' Well, that being translated, too, is but the exercise of lowly trust in Him. Faith is the hand that, being put out, grasps this great gift. You must make the universal blessing your own. The river flows past your door, broader and deeper and more majestic than the 'father of waters' itself. But all that is naught to you unless you take your own little pitcher to the brink and fill it, and take it home. 'He loved me, and gave Himself for me.' Do you say that? Dear brother! are you athirst? I know you are. Do you know it? Are you willing to take Christ's salvation on Christ's terms, and to live by faith in Him, communion with, and obedience to Him? If you are, then earth may yield or deny you its waters, but you will not be dependent on them. When all the land is parched and baked, and every surface well run dry, you will have a spring that fails not, and the water that Christ 'will give you will be in you a fountain of water leaping up into everlasting life.' Nor will your supplies fail when death cuts off all that flow from earthly cisterns, for they who here drink of the river will hereafter go up to the Source, and 'they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more, for the Lamb that is in the midst of the Throne shall feed them, and shall lead them to living fountains of water, and God the Lord shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.'

41)Revelation 22:21

Malachi

THE LAST WORDS OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

Mal. 4:6. - Rev. 22:21.

It is of course only an accident that these words close the Old and the New Testaments. In the Hebrew Bible Malachi’s prophecies do not stand at the end; but he was the last of the Old Testament prophets, and after him there were ‘four centuries of silence.’ We seem to hear in his words the dying echoes of the rolling thunders of Sinai. They gather up the whole burden of the Law and of the prophets; of the former in their declaration of a coming retribution, of the latter in the hope that that retribution may be averted.

Then, in regard to John’s words, of course as they stand they are simply the parting benediction with which he takes leave of his readers; but it is fitting that the Book of which they are the close should seal up the canon, because it stands as the one prophetic book of the New Testament, and so reaches forward into the coming ages, even to the consummation of all things. And just as Christ in His Ascension was taken from them whilst His hands were lifted up in the act of blessing, so it is fitting that the revelation of which He is the centre and the theme should part from us as He did, shedding with its final words the dew of benediction on our upturned heads.

I venture, then, to look at these significant closing words of the two Testaments as conveying the spirit of each, and suggesting some thoughts about the contrast and the harmony and the order that subsist between them.

I. I ask you, first, to notice the apparent contrast and the real harmony and unity of these two texts.

‘Lest I come and smite the land with a curse.’ That last awful word does not convey, in the original, quite the idea of our English word ‘curse.’ It refers to a somewhat singular institution in the Mosaic Law according to which things devoted, in a certain sense, to God were deprived of life. And the reference historically is to the judgments that were inflicted upon the nations that occupied the land before the Israelitish invasion, those Canaanites and others who were put under ‘the ban’ and devoted to utter destruction. So, says my text, Israel, which has stepped into their places, may bring down upon its head the same devastation; and as they were swept off the face of the land that they had polluted with their iniquities, so an apostate and God-forgetting Judah may again experience the same utter destruction falling upon them. If instead of the word ‘curse’ we were to substitute the word ‘destruction,’ we should get the true idea of the passage.

And the thought that I want to insist upon is this, that here we have distinctly gathered up the whole spirit of millenniums of divine revelation, all of which declare this one thing, that as certainly as there is a God, every transgression and disobedience receives, and must receive, its just recompense of reward.

That is the spirit of law, for law has nothing to say, except, ‘Do this, and thou shalt live; do not this, and thou shalt die.’

And then turn to the other. ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.’ What has become of the thunder? All melted into dewy rain of love and pity and compassion. Grace is love that stoops; grace is love that foregoes its claims, and forgives sins against itself. Grace is love that imparts, and this grace, thus stooping, thus pardoning, thus bestowing, is a universal gift. The Apostolic benediction is the declaration of the divine purpose, and the inmost heart and loftiest meaning of all the words which from the beginning God hath spoken is that His condescending, pardoning, self-bestowing mercy may fall upon all hearts, and gladden every soul.

So there seems to emerge, and there is, a very real and a very significant contrast. ‘I come and smite the earth with a curse’ sounds strangely unlike ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.’ And, of course, in this generation there is a strong tendency to dwell upon that contrast and to exaggerate it, and to assert that the more recent has antiquated the more ancient, and that now the day when we have to think of and to dread the curse that smites the earth is past, ‘because the true Light now shineth.’

So I ask you to notice that beneath this apparent contrast there is a real harmony, and that these two utterances, though they seem to be so diverse, are quite consistent at bottom, and must both be taken into account if we would grasp the whole truth. For, as a matter of fact, nowhere are there more tender utterances and sweeter revelations of a divine mercy than in that ancient law with its attendant prophets. And as a matter of fact, nowhere, through all the thunderings and lightnings of Sinai, are there such solemn words of retribution as dropped from the lips of the Incarnate Love.

There is nothing anywhere so dreadful as Christ’s own words about what comes, and must come, to sinful men. Is there any depth of darkness in the Old Testament teaching of retribution half as deep, half as black, and as terrible, as the gulf that Christ opens at your feet and mine? Is there anything so awful as the threatenings of Infinite Love?

And the same blending of the widest proclamation of, and the most perfect rejoicing confidence in, the universal and all-forgiving love of God, with the teaching of the sharpest retribution, lies in the writings of this very Apostle about whose words I am speaking. There are nowhere in Scripture more solemn pictures than those in that book of the Apocalypse, of the inevitable consequences of departure from the love and the faith of God, and John, the Apostle of love, is the preacher of judgment as none of the other writers of the New Testament are.

Such is the fact, and there is a necessity for it. There must be this blending; for if you take away from your conception of God the absolute holiness which hates sin, and the rigid righteousness which apportions to all evil its bitter fruits, you have left a maimed God that has not power to love but is nothing but weak, good-natured indulgence. Impunity is not mercy, and punishment is never the negation of perfect love, but rather, if you destroy the one you hopelessly maim the other. The two halves are needed in order to give full emphasis to either. Each note alone is untrue; blended, they make the perfect chord.

II. And now, let me ask you to look with me at another point, and that is, the relation of the grace to the punishment.

Is it not love which proclaims judgment? Are not the words of my first text, if you take them all, merciful, however they wear a surface of threatening? ‘Lest I come.’ Then He speaks that He may not come, and declares the issue of sin in order that that issue may never need to be experienced by us that listen to Him. Brethren! both in regard to the Bible and in regard to human ministrations of the Gospel, it is all-important, as it seems to me at present, to insist that it is the cruellest kindness to keep back the threatenings for fear of darkening the grace; and that, on the other hand, it is the truest tenderness to warn and to proclaim them. It is love that threatens; ‘tis mercy to tell us that the wrath will come.

And just as one relation between the grace and the retribution is that the proclamation of the retribution is the work of the grace, so there is another relation-the grace is manifested in bearing the punishment, and in bearing it away by bearing it. Oh! there is no adequate measure of what the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is except the measure of the smiting destruction from which He frees us. It is because every transgression receives its just recompense of reward, because the wages of sin is death, because God cannot but hate and punish the evil, that we get our truest standard of what Christ's love is to every soul of us. For on Him have met all the converging rays of the divine retribution, and burnt the penal fire into His very heart. He has come between every one of us, if we will, and that certain incidence of retribution for our evil, taking upon Himself the whole burden of our sin and of our guilt, and bearing that awful death which consists not in the mere dissolution of the tie between soul and body, but in the separation of the conscious spirit from God, in order that we may stand peaceful, serene, untouched, when the hail and the fire of the divine judgment are falling from the heavens and running along the earth. The grace depends for all our conceptions of its glory, its tenderness, and its depth, on our estimate of the wrath from which it delivers.

So, dear brethren, remember, if you tamper with the one you destroy the other; if there be no fearful judgment from which men need to be delivered, Christ has borne nothing for us that entitles Him to demand our hearts; and all the ascriptions of praise and adoration to Him, and all the surrender of loving hearts, in utter self-abandonment, to Him that has borne the curse for us, fade and are silent. If you strike out the truth of Christ's bearing the results of sin from your theology, you do not thereby exalt, but you fatally lower the love; and in the interests of the loftiest conceptions of a divine loving-kindness and mercy that ever have blessed the world, I beseech you, be on your guard against all teachings that diminish the sinfulness of sin, and that ask again the question which first of all came from lips that do not commend it to us-'*Hath* God said?' or advance to the assertion-'Ye shall *not* surely die.' If 'I come to smite the earth with a curse' ceases to be a truth to you, 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ' will fade away for you likewise.

III. Now, still further, let me ask you to consider, lastly, the alternative which these texts open for us.

I believe that the order in which they stand in Scripture is the order in which men generally come to believe them, and to feel them. I am old-fashioned enough and narrow enough to believe in conversion; and to believe further that, as a rule, the course through which the soul passes from darkness into light is the course which divine revelation took: first, the unveiling of sin and its issues, and then the glad leaping up of the trustful heart to the conception of redeeming grace.

But what I seek briefly to suggest now is, not only the order of manifestation as brought out in these words, but also the alternative which they present to us, one branch or other of which every soul of you will have to experience. You must have either the destruction or the grace. And, more wonderful still, the same coming of the same Lord will be to one man the destruction, and to another the manifestation and reception of His perfect grace. As it was in the Lord's first coming, 'He is set for the rise and the fall of many in Israel.' The same heat softens some substances and bakes others into hardness. A bit of wax and a bit of clay put into the same fire-one becomes liquefied and the other solidified. The same light is joy to one eye and torture to another. The same pillar of cloud was light to the hosts of Israel, and darkness and dismay to the armies of Egypt. The same Gospel is 'a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death,' by the giving forth of the same influences killing the one and reviving the other; the same Christ is a Stone to build upon or a Stone of stumbling; and when He cometh at the last, Prince, King, Judge, to you and me, His coming shall be prepared as the morning; and ye 'shall have a song as when one cometh with a pipe to the mountain of the Lord'; or else it shall be a day of darkness and not of light. He comes to me, to you; He comes to smite or He comes to glorify.

Oh, brethren! do not believe that God's threatenings are wind and words; do not let teachings that sap the very foundations of morality and eat all the power out of the Gospel persuade you that the solemn words, 'The soul that sinneth it shall die,' are not simple verity.

And then, my brethren, oh! then, do you turn yourselves to that dear Lord whose grace is magnified in this most chiefly, that 'He hath borne our sins and carried our sorrows'; and taking Him for your Saviour, your King, your

Shield, your All, when He cometh it will be life to you; and the grace that He imparts will be heaven for ever more.

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